

## Basque Whaling Around Iceland Archeological Investigation in Strákatangi, Steingrímsfjörður

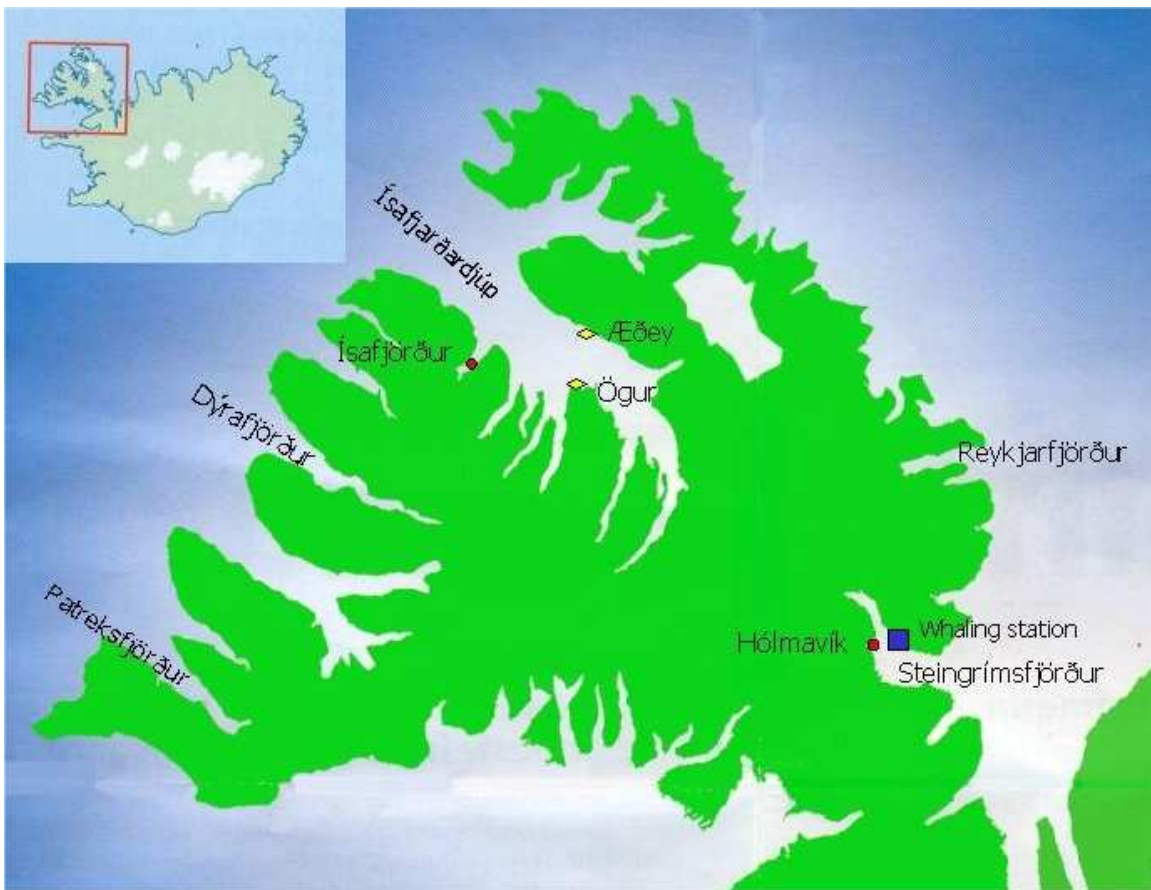


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1. Introduction .....	2
2. Aims and Methodology.....	3
3. 17 <sup>th</sup> century Foreign Whaling in the Written Sources .....	4
4. Archaeological Excavation .....	10
5. Artifacts.....	12
6. Conclusions .....	13
7. Appendices .....	16
8. Maps and drawings .....	19
9. Bibliography.....	24



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## ***1. Introduction***

The autumn of 2005 saw the beginning of preliminary testing on the presumed remains of a Basque whaling station at the site Strákatangi, Strandasýsla. The site is located on a small peninsula in the bay of Hveravík at the mouth of the fjord of Steingrímsfjörður. The site consists of four structures, three of which are grouped together with the fourth at some distance from the main group.

The research was funded by the Icelandic Archaeological Fund and the project was a cooperative effort of the Natural History Institute of Vestfirðir and Strandagaldur ses, a local research institution. The main aim of the research was to examine the remains left by foreign whalers in Iceland with a multidisciplinary approach. In the two northernmost districts of Strandasýsla, Kaldrananeshreppur and Árneshreppur, are a number of place names that are connected to French, Spanish and Basque whalers but these sites have never been tested with archaeological methods.

Little is known about these foreign whalers, both their interaction with Icelanders and especially about their settlements on land. Most scholars seem to believe that foreign whalers did not have shore stations in Iceland but processed the whales on board their ships. They also seem to think that interaction between the whalers and Icelanders were little or none and their presence never influenced Icelandic society.

This report presents the findings of the preliminary testing, which was done in September and October 2005. The first part of the report discusses the main aim of the project and methodology, then the foreign whaling in the written sources. Finally, the archaeological excavation and its main conclusions are described.

The authors of this report want to thank all the people that showed interest in this project. Kaldrananeshreppur gets special thanks as it has for many years supported archaeological research in the district. The people who helped out during the excavation also get special thanks.

## ***2. Aims and Methodology***

The aim of the project was to test with archaeological methods the presumed Basque whaling station at Strákatangi in Kaldrananeshreppur, Strandasýsla. The main aims were to examine the nature of the structures, their age and condition, with further research on the site in mind.

Archaeological survey had already been done in Kaldrananeshreppur (Edvardsson, R., 1999, 2000, 2001) and the remains at Strákatangi were recorded in 1999. The 2005 project was divided into two parts. 1) The structures at Strákatangi were measured and mapped, then the area close to the site was surveyed in detail to see if there were any unknown structures and if some of the structures recorded in 1999 – 2001 could be connected with the site. 2) In the second part two structures were selected and a trench was excavated into both of them. Each trench was 2 x 4 meters in size.

The research uses the so-called single context methodology, i.e. each archaeological unit is drawn, measured, recorded, photographed and excavated. The idea behind the

single context excavation is that each cultural layer is removed in reversed order, from top to bottom. This gives the opportunity to record the history of the site in detail from the beginning of the settlement until its final abandonment, giving a detailed record of the excavated areas and the changes that have occurred throughout time. Samples from all cultural layers were sieved with a 5mm mesh, to check for animal bones and other smaller finds.

As this was only a preliminary testing, only a small portion of the structures were excavated, it was expected to be difficult to keep control over the archaeological units (cultural layers), especially if they increased in number and many occupational phases would be recorded. It was decided only to remove cultural layers if the relationship between them was clear and the structures themselves.

### ***3. 17<sup>th</sup> century Foreign Whaling in the Written Sources***

#### **Magnús Rafnsson**

The presence of foreign whalers in Icelandic waters is mentioned in Icelandic sources from the beginning of the 17th century and well into the 18th. Various nationalities are mentioned, at the beginning mainly Spanish and Basque, and occasionally Gascones but during the second half of the century the majority of the sources mention French whalers and occasionally Dutch ones. Written sources, however, are limited and therefore a description of them seems appropriate.

Most of what has been written about Icelandic 17th century history concerns political and ecclesiastical aspects. Only two sources cover the whole period. On the one hand we have the records of *alþingi*, the general assembly held annually at Þingvellir.<sup>1</sup> By this time the former parliament of the Commonwealth period (930-1262) functioned mainly as a supreme court and a venue where decrees from the Danish government were read, and, with very few exceptions, approved. Occasionally sentences from the county courts were read at the *alþingi* for approval, often after punishments had been carried out. Events that some part of the judicial system had not dealt with are therefore rare in the records. Only remnants of court records from the minor courts in different parts of the country have been preserved though copies of some court decision can be found in manuscripts from the era.

For newsworthy events the best source are annals of which several were written in the 17th century.<sup>2</sup> This medieval tradition was discontinued in 1430 but during the 1630's Björn Jónsson at Skarðsá (1574-1655) started documenting events for an annal which covers the period from 1400 to 1640. Others followed in Björn's footsteps and a dozen other annals written in the north and west of Iceland record events from all parts of the country.

These two sources provide most of the information we have about whaling around Iceland in the 17th century. The annal-writers usually restrict their covering of events to one or two sentences so detailed descriptions are rare in 17th century sources. The

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<sup>1</sup> *Alþingisbækur Íslands (Acta Comitiorum Generalium Islandiae)* XVII volumes. Reykjavík 1912-1990.

<sup>2</sup> *Annálar 1400-1800 (Annales Islandici)* VIII volumes. Reykjavík 1922-2002.

wrecking of three Spanish ships and the killing of 32 whalers in 1615 is a major exception, since it is covered in three narratives.

Following the Reformation, which was enforced in the middle of the 16th century, Danish influence was greatly increased in Iceland. All church property was transferred to the Crown, which became the largest landowner in the country. In 1602 King Christian IV granted exclusive rights of trade to Danes as a part of his attempt to make the North Atlantic exclusively a Danish territory. Icelanders were more or less forbidden to deal with foreigners and hence trade with foreigners is rarely mentioned in our sources. In 1662 absolute rule was introduced. The 17th and 18th centuries have been called the Danish Age in Iceland, and to many this was the lowest point in the country's history, partly because of colder climate and partly because of decreasing autonomy.

According to two annals whaling started around the Westfjords (the north-western peninsula) in 1610. One of these is by Björn Jónsson, mentioned above, and the second an early annal from the Westfjords. A third annal, written in the neighborhood, says that in 1608 three Basque ships came to Strandir and started whaling from there.<sup>3</sup> Strandir or Strandasýsla is the county stretching along eastern half of the Westfjords. According to Jón Guðmundsson who was brought up in Strandir and moved back there shortly before 1615, Spanish Basques started whaling in the area in 1613.<sup>4</sup> That date is consistent with a map of Iceland, published in Leyden in 1706 by Pieter van der Aa. Beside an illustration showing a fishing station it says: "Anno 1613 by de Biscayers beseylt."



The story of the three Spanish ships that went down in a storm in Reykjafjörður in Strandir in 1615 is exceptional for the period in that it is better documented than most events of the times. Two verse narratives written in the west where the whalers were killed are very hostile to the Basques and one was probably commissioned by the local sheriff, Ari Magnússon, who governed the area and whose decision it was to kill the whalers.<sup>5</sup> Jón Guðmundsson the Learned wrote twice about the Basques in Strandir. Right after the events of 1615 he wrote an essay, "Sönn frásaga af spanskra mann skipbroti og slagi" (A True Account of the Spaniards' Shipwrecks and Deaths) where he criticizes sheriff Ari for killing innocent men.<sup>6</sup> This work is similar to modern journalism, an essay, which is partly an eyewitness account and partly based on accounts by others present at the events. In Jón's old age he wrote an autobiography in verse, *Fjölmóður*, where he recounts the events anew, especially the Basques' earlier visits to Strandir. According to Jón the first whaling ship arrived in Strandir in 1613, causing fear among

<sup>3</sup> *Annálar 1400-1800*, vol. I, p. 198-9, vol. III, p. 53, 191.

<sup>4</sup> "Fjölmóður" *Safn til sögu Íslands*, vol. V, p. 38-9.

<sup>5</sup> "Spönsku vísur" *Tímarit Bókmenntafélagsins* 16, 1895, p. 133-156; "Víkingsrímur" *Spánverjavígin 1615*, Kaupmannahöfn 1950, p. 29-76.

<sup>6</sup> Jón Guðmundsson: "Sönn frásaga", *Spánverjavígin 1615*, p. 1-28.

the inhabitants who were not used to seeing ocean-going vessels. Jón states categorically that they were sent from “Viscaien ... Hispanie, not far from the border, and among them were a few French”<sup>7</sup> The local pastor arrived on the scene and pointed the Spaniards to a suitable harbor in Steingrímsfjörður, near his abode, all with the consent of the sheriff, Ari Magnússon, according to Jón. The Basques caught 17 whales and the next year 26 ships set out though only 10 reached Iceland, the others had been scattered or robbed by the English. Most of the Spanish ships spent the summer in Steingrímsfjörður and a few French ones a little farther north along the coast. Jón says that dealings between the whalers and the people of Strandir were friendly, thanks to the priest, who unfortunately died that year. This meant that young men started stealing from the Basques and refusing to pay their debts. The sheriff’s attitude also changed. Jón accuses him of trying to get the French to fight the Spaniards, and he also says that if treated honestly the Basques answered with good trade and friendly communication. Jón says that four ships were whaling farther north, in Reykjarfjörður close to where he lived.

At the general assembly at Þingvellir in June 1615 a letter from the Danish King was read stating that the Spanish and others that plunder in Iceland should be captured and harmed.<sup>8</sup> This was probably the result of some plundering by corsairs or pirates, since two ships had been captured in Norway and very probably some pirates had also plundered in the west of Iceland.

That same summer Jón tells of sixteen ships by Strandir, most of which sailed east to Russia but four ships spent the summer whaling from Reykjarfjörður in Strandir. Jón had considerable dealings with the whalers, and probably acted as an interpreter at times. He says that in 1614 he had struck up a friendship with one of the whalers named Marteinn de Argaratte and that one of the three ships was owned by his brother Jóhann (Juan or Jean). When the ship was ready to sail from San Sebastian at the end of April this owner of the ship got another man, named Martinus Billa de Franca, to captain the ship and that the pilot was a Frenchman named Pétur. The captains of the other ships were Pedro de Argvirre and Stephan de Tellaria. Much of Jón’s description of the stay in Strandir is obviously intended to disprove accusations of bad behavior by the Basques and prove that most of the bad feelings were the result of attempts to cheat in trade.

The whalers caught 11 large whales but in September while the ships were preparing to sail off a combination of a sudden storm and drift ice broke all three of them in Reykjarfjörður. The 82 whalers decided to row around the Westfjords in 8 chalupas to try to find bigger vessels. When arriving in Ísafjarðardjúp they split up, around 50 sailed south to Patreksfjörður and a group of 32 split into two groups. Fourteen sailed to Dýrafjörður and robbed the unoccupied Danish trading station (foreign traders were not allowed to stay the winter in Iceland). On their way back all but one, were killed while spending a night in a seasonal fishing station. Eighteen men settled in Æðey-island and prepared for winter. On the 8th of October the sheriff called a session of the local court, which decided that a campaign against the Basques was necessary to protect the livelihood of the inhabitants. As an extra incentive to join the campaign those who refused to come were made responsible for all possible damage that would result from the

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<sup>7</sup> “Fjölmóður”, p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> Jónas Kristjánsson: *Spánverjavígin 1615*, p. xxv.

whalers stay.<sup>9</sup> 18 whalers were killed in the campaign in Ísafjarðardjúp while the fifty in Patreksfjörður managed to kidnap an English fishing boat in the spring of 1616 and sail off.

At the next general assembly at Þingvellir Ari's decisions and the killings were approved although he had undoubtedly sold some whalers permissions to ply their trade and it is possible that his actions were to some extent a way to hide that fact. Icelanders expected some retaliation but no source mentions any foreign whaling ships around Iceland for almost a decade after the massacre.

An annal by a writer with strong connections to Strandir says that in 1626 French whalers came to Strandir and caught 20 whales.<sup>10</sup> 1627 is known in Icelandic history as the year when a band of pirates from North Africa arrived in the south and east and killed around 50 people and abducted another 350. That same summer two English warships captured a French whaling ship a short way from Ísafjarðardjúp. 18 whalers rowed landwards with a permit signed by the Danish King and put their case to the same sheriff that instigated the massacre of 1615, Ari Magnússon in Ögur. The permit was some years old and Ari decided that this was a case that should be handled by the Danish governor and sent three of the men and an Icelandic guide, Jón Ólafsson, a former soldier in the Danish military, to the Danes' residence at Bessastaðir. By coincidence these men manned the few guns at Bessastaðir when the pirates tried to land there. The North-African ship struck bottom and after freeing their ship they left without trying to land. Two of these French whalers are named in an addition to an account of the scout's travels to India, Jóhannes Suan and Dominigo the captain of the vessel. Eventually the Danish King decided that the English had been wrong and the whalers were free to continue their whaling.<sup>11</sup>

French and Dutch whalers in Strandir are mentioned in annals in 1656 and a letter from bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson to the local pastor indicates that the people of the same area where the three ships went down in 1615 were busy working for the whalers.<sup>12</sup>

For the second half of the century our knowledge of whalers around Iceland is limited to short sentences in the annals and lists of salvage in the records of alþingi. The annals mention French and Dutch whalers more often than the Spanish. Many of the events mentioned concern shipwrecks on Icelandic coasts or the landing of whalers who had lost their ships in the ice along the coast of Greenland.<sup>13</sup> Their reception seems to have been much better than in 1615. Thus an annal written by the successor and relative of Ari Magnússon says that in 1663 a ship ran aground near the northernmost point of the Westfjord. Some of the sailors left with a trading ship from Skagaströnd while the others

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<sup>9</sup> *Alþingisbækur Íslands*, vol. IV, p. 311-313.

<sup>10</sup> *Annálar 1400-1800*, vol. III, p. 196.

<sup>11</sup> Jón Ólafsson: *Reisubók*, vol. II, Reykjavík 1946, p. 245-256. This book, which includes a description of Basque whalers in the service of the Danish king in Spitzbergen was translated into English as *The Life of the Icelander Jón Ólafsson*. Transl. by B. Phillpotts, ed. by R. Temple and L.M. Anstey. II. London 1932.

<sup>12</sup> *Úr bréfabók Brynjólfs biskups Sveinssonar*, Kaupmannahöfn 1942, p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> French ships, mainly whaling ships are mentioned in various annals in 1656, 1662, 1663, 1673, 1677, 1678, 1683, 1685, 1689, 1690, 1691, 1695, 1698, 1699, 1701. Dutch ships are mentioned in 1656 and 1685 and Spanish ships twice also, one was a ship lost in ice in 1673 and the other was burnt by the French in Ísafjarðardjúp in 1690.

were found lodgings for the winter on different farms in the area.<sup>14</sup> An interesting letter from this time tells of a Basque who found it necessary to make a public declaration that a certain girl was more interested in him than he, a married man in Viscaya, in her.<sup>15</sup> It is also likely that one of the Basque-Icelandic glossaries (see below) was the result of the sailors' stay in 1663-4. Ten years later 30 men came on shore in small boats in the northeastern part of Iceland and were able to get abroad.<sup>16</sup> According to various annals many French and Spanish ships perished in ice, one ran aground in Dýrafjörður and several men were found on drift ice.<sup>17</sup> In 1695 two French ships sank in the southwest and the sailors traveled all the way to the Westfjords to find room on other French ships "because many whaling ships were around the western coast of the country that spring and summer."<sup>18</sup>

The records of the general assembly include lists of salvage, which had drifted ashore. All man-made goods that came ashore were the property of the king and therefore recorded and evaluated. Some of the salvage listed has to do with whaling. Several whales had been found dead with foreign harpoons in them and sometimes with other tools connected with whaling. Also mentioned are barrels of oil, barrelstaves, and pieces from a broken boat. All of these examples are from the second half of the century as well as an announcement from a pastor in Arnarfjörður that a foreigner had left a boat in bad conditions close to his farm and never returned for it.<sup>19</sup> This kind of flotsam is mentioned in the records of the assembly well into the eighteenth century.

These bits of information indicate activity by whalers off the north and western coasts of Iceland throughout the second half of the seventeenth century. Whalers on Strandir in 1656 have already been noted and Frenchmen on the coasts of Strandir are further mentioned in the annals in 1663 and 1677.<sup>20</sup> Flotsam from whalers is recorded three times on the shores of the area, 1668, 1669, and 1687.<sup>21</sup> This indicates that Húnaflói bay was the scene of whaling throughout the seventeenth century and communications between the whalers and the people of Strandir must have been substantial. Additional proof of this can be found in the records of the general assembly. In 1666 a person from Strandir had been found guilty of illegally buying tobacco and other unnecessary goods and the assembly emphasized that such behavior must be punished according to the law.<sup>22</sup> Trading with the foreign whalers was tempting in spite of the monopoly, especially since the people of Strandir were supposed to deal with a Danish station in Skagaströnd, across Húnaflói bay, and sometimes they complained that the trader did not sail across the bay. Jón Guðmundsson says that in addition to whale meat the whalers could supply the inhabitants with "hammers, axes, iron, and burlap" and were paid with dairy products, meat, hand-knitted garments, and even dogs. Tobacco seems a likely good from the Basques if one keeps in mind the remark by Pierre de Lancre, the witch-hunter, that they

<sup>14</sup> *Annálar 1400-1800*, vol. III, p. 271.

<sup>15</sup> Helgi Guðmundsson: *Land úr landi*, Reykjavík 2002, p. 1-5.

<sup>16</sup> *Annálar 1400-1800*, vol. III, p. 300.

<sup>17</sup> *Annálar 1400-1800*, vol. II, p. 268-9; vol. III, p. 342.

<sup>18</sup> *Annálar 1400-1800*, vol. III, p. 383-4.

<sup>19</sup> *Alþingisbækur Íslands*, vol. VIII, p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> *Annálar 1400-1800*, vol. III, p. 271, 309.

<sup>21</sup> *Alþingisbækur Íslands*, vol. VII, p. 127, 151; vol. VIII, p. 172.

<sup>22</sup> *Alþingisbækur Íslands*, vol. VII, p. 79.



were very found of smoking. This could also be connected to a reprimand for smoking during mass that the bishop gave a priest in Strandir in 1643.<sup>23</sup>

Stories about foreign sailors kidnapping children are known in Icelandic folk tales from different centuries but with the exception of the aforementioned North-African pirates in 1627 these are not proved by reliable sources. Jón Guðmundsson mentioned that an English pilot sailing with Basques in 1614 had imprisoned him but he escaped with the help of the captain. The Englishman remarked that he wanted to take some youngsters with him to teach them the Catholic faith. With Jón's help this was averted and instead 30 sheep were sold to the whalers.<sup>24</sup> Possibly this was a way to force the Icelanders to sell them provisions in spite of the trade monopoly. Some Icelanders did sail with the Basques, captive or not. A note by a Danish royal envoy to Spain, England, and Holland states that, in 1647 he had gotten five Icelanders, three women and two men, released from Basques in Spain.<sup>25</sup> No Icelandic sources mention this.

Relations between the two peoples for so many decades must have been varied in the latter part of the century although most mentions in official records are negative. Some of these are illogical to a modern mind although they may not have been so to the 17th century mind. One annal says that in 1662 sheep on the eastern coast of Strandir suddenly became blind. The farmers suspected that Frenchmen with some knowledge of magic were responsible since young men had stolen whale meat from them.<sup>26</sup> In 1688 the King's representative at the general assembly inquired about possible increase in fishing for the benefit of the King. The assembly answered by complaining of poverty and harsh climate and that fish don't bite on their hooks for the whalers throw too much food for them into the sea.<sup>27</sup>

Foreign whalers are mentioned in annals in 1701 but flotsam from them in 1717. No sources mention whalers on land after 1712 when a lawman stopped an attempt by Spanish ships to trade in Grundarfjörður in the west.<sup>28</sup> A few other indications of whaling can be found scattered throughout the 18th century.

Icelandic manuscript collections preserve two Basque-Icelandic glossaries from the 17th century and a few words copied from a third now lost.<sup>29</sup> The writers are not known but one is written by a 17th century hand unknown from other manuscripts and contains 519 Basque words with Icelandic translation. The second is preserved in an 18th century copy by a well-known antiquary and contains 216 words and 12 sentences in a pidgin or trade language. This could be written in 1663-4 as mentioned above. Finally 11 words were copied from a manuscript, which still existed in the first half of the 19th century. The words in the glossaries cover many aspects of human life and show that communication with the Basques must have been worthwhile. Two men have been mentioned as possible authors of the glossaries, both of them knew Basque whalers. One

<sup>23</sup> *Guðs dýrð og sálnanna velferð*. Reykjavík 2005, p. 381.

<sup>24</sup> "Fjölmóður", p. 42.

<sup>25</sup> Printed in *Spánverjavígin 1615*, p. xxxix and in "Um þrjú basknesk-íslensk orðasöfn frá 17. öld" *Íslenskt mál* 1. árg. Reykjavík 1979.

<sup>26</sup> *Annálar 1400-1800*, vol. I, p. 359.

<sup>27</sup> *Alþingisbækur Íslands*, vol. VIII, p. 205-6.

<sup>28</sup> Helgi Þorláksson: "Frá kirkjuvaldi til konungsvalds" *Saga Íslands*, vol. V, Reykjavík 2003, p. 100.

<sup>29</sup> Bakker, Gidor, Deen, Hualde: *Basque Pidgins in Iceland and Canada*, Donostia, 1991.

is Jón Guðmundsson the Learned, who seems unlikely to have written either of the complete glossaries since the Basque words are from Labourd in France and according to his writings the Basques he knew were from San Sebastian. The other is Jón Ólafsson who spent years in the Danish army and describes Basques whaling for the Danish king in 1618 and who accompanied the three Basques from the French ship caught by the English in 1627. He is also likely to have had dealings with the shipwrecked Basques who spent the winter 1663-4 on different farms in the Westfjords.<sup>30</sup>

In the 1770's Ólafur Olavius traveled along the coasts of the Westfjords looking for suitable places for fishing stations. He sailed to Steingrímsfjörður and in his report describes the little bay of Reykjarvík which today is named Hveravík:

“In this little bay in Steingrímsfjörður one can still see the remains of four old trading houses and a circular fireplace used for making oil. It is believed that they were built by the Irish and an old ruin in Spanskavík (Spanish cove) close by belonged to Spanish whalers. It is also believed that foreigners had sailed into Paradís, a tiny cove, and that a ship had gone down there after some sailors had troubled an old widow, and that in certain weathers timber from the ship still drifts ashore.<sup>31</sup>

The reference to the Irish is not understandable. Legends about the Spanish are still known in the area and are mostly connected with the name of Spanskavík. Paradís is on the headland to the west of Hveravík and from the headland there is an excellent view over most of Steingrímsfjörður. Olavius mentions that whales are common in the fjord and that was true well into the 20th century when over-fishing meant that herring no longer came into Húnaflói bay. Fish stock has been increasing in the bay and now flocks of whales visit the fjord several times a year.

Written sources and legends indicate that the people of Strandir had more knowledge of whalers in the 17th century than has commonly been believed. None of the contemporary 17th century sources derive from Strandir. The annals are all written in other areas and the records of the general assembly at Þingvellir are limited to cases the assembly had to deal with. All those that served Strandir as sheriffs lived outside the county and it is difficult to find nationally influential people who lived in the area apart from the pastors who served in Steingrímsfjörður. In all probability communications with foreign whalers were not advertised since trade outside the Danish monopoly was a punishable offence. The numerous times that whaling is mentioned by contemporary sources indicate that relations between the people of Strandir and foreigners are more than likely, though maybe not mentioned outside the area. This makes it more interesting to find out whether the visitors from mainland Europe have left other evidence of their activities.

#### ***4. Archaeological Excavation***

##### **Ragnar Edvardsson**

The ruins at Strákatangi are located approximately 10 m from the shoreline on the northern part of a small peninsula. The site consists of 4 structures, 3 are clustered

<sup>30</sup> Helgi Guðmundsson: *Land úr landi*, Reykjavík 2002, p. 1-5.

<sup>31</sup> Ólafur Olavius: *Ferðabók*, vol. I, p. 239.

together with about 2 – 4 m intervals but the fourth is approximately 30 m south of the main cluster. Prior to the excavation the structures were given codes, the northernmost structure was given the code A, next B, C and finally the southernmost structure D.

The northernmost structure (A) was smallest 7 x 5 m, and it consisted of one room. The next structure (B) was the largest, 14 x 7 m and had three rooms. The largest room was 5 x 5 m, next 3 x 3 m, and the smallest room was 2 x 1,50 m. The south structure in the main cluster was 7 x 7 m and consisted of one room. On the south and west side of this structure two rows of foundation stones were visible. The structure itself resembles a platform of some sort and an access ramp had been built on the north side of the structure. The structure that was furthest away from the main cluster was 16 x 9 m and had an entrance on the southeast part.

#### *Structure A (group 32)*

A trench, 2 x 4 m, was excavated into the structure and it was aligned from north to south. After removal of topsoil [1] a hole [2] became visible in the southern part of the trench and it had been dug through the cultural deposits. This hole had been dug by the present farmer at the Hveravík farm when he intended to construct a drying rack for fish but had abandoned the idea because of difficulties of digging holes for the support beams.

Under the topsoil were a few cultural deposits, brick fragments [4], which was in the eastern part of the trench and a mixed deposit [3] on the western part. The brick fragments showed signs of burning and extensive heat. The mixed deposit was a mixture of windblown material and turf. Outside the structure a windblown material was recorded that had accumulated against the structure. This deposit was not excavated.

Under deposit [3] were two other deposits [5, 11] that were similar in composition as [3], except that there were more gravel and small brick fragments. After the removal of the brick fragments in the eastern part, larger bricks fragments [8] and whole bricks became visible and it was clear that they were collapse from some structure. Under deposit [8] a structure appeared that was made of a row of bricks, which form a part of a larger structure [6] that is unexcavated east of the trench. All the bricks in this structure showed signs of burning and heat and are probably remains of a furnace. In the northern part of the trench was a stone structure [7] which disappeared into the sections on the east and west sides.

#### *Structure B (group 31)*

Trench B was excavated into structure B and as A it was 2 x 4 m and was aligned from the east to west. The trench was excavated into the largest room of the structure and extended from the east wall and almost to the west wall of the structure.



Pic. 1. Brick remains in the tryworks.

After the removal of topsoil [13] a midden deposit became visible [10]. This deposit was only recorded in the northwestern part of the structure and in it both modern ceramics and plastic were excavated. This deposit is probably midden from the Hveravík farm which probably was thrown into structure B sometime late in the 20th century.

Under this midden deposit was a light brown, and windblown material [15], which was recorded in the whole trench. This windblown deposit did not have the same thickness everywhere but was thickest where it had accumulated against the east wall. This deposit was sterile and no traces of cultural material were recorded in it. Under deposit [15] was a deposit [14] that was a mix of earth and turf and is probably collapse from the walls of the structure. The eastern wall [23] of the structure seems to be made of earth and stones but the manner of construction was not clear at the end of excavation as the wall was not removed.

Once the collapse had been removed a compact, black, organic deposit [9] became visible. This deposit was visible in the whole trench except where it disappeared by the east wall. Almost all artifacts, 148, that were recorded during the excavation were found in this deposit. This deposit was the floor of the structure and in the sections it was clear that it consisted of thin floor layers with layers of sand in between. This suggests that the



Pic. 2. The floor in structure B.

structure was used seasonally, i.e. the black floor layers formed during occupation and the sand accumulated between occupational phases. The thickness of the floor deposit and the number of floor and sand layers suggest that the structure was in use for a long time, possibly decades. The floor deposit that was in the trench was completely excavated. About 17% of it was sampled and the rest was sieved with a 5mm sieve.

Partially under the floor on the northern part of the trench, was a circular fireplace [28]. Only a portion of the fireplace was excavated as the north section cut it in half and the remainder has to wait another season. The fireplace consisted of burned bones, charcoal, brick fragments and one whole brick. A number of postholes were recorded, 4 [29] of them were in a line in a east to west direction and 2 [30] were close to the south section. The 4 postholes were all similar in size, 15 cm, and the other 2 were a little larger and had post pads in the bottom. All the postholes had been dug into sterile subsoil [33], which is probably prehistoric beach sand.



Pic 3. Fireplace in structure B.

## 5. Artifacts

During the excavation 62 finds numbers were recorded and the total number of finds was 148. All finds, except one, were recorded in structure B. Find number 1 was recorded

in structure A, unit [3]. In structure B, two artifacts, 6 and 7 were recorded in unit [10], nine in unit [10], 36 – 44, and the remainder in unit [9].

Of the total number of artifacts, 87 (59%) are made of ceramics, 58 (39%) of iron, 1 (1%) of lead and 1 (1%) of copper alloy. The ceramic artifacts are pottery and clay pipes, 59 (41,1%) clay pipes, 28 (19%) pottery fragments. Most of the clay pipe fragments are stem pieces but there are also a few bowl pieces in the assemblage. The pottery shards are mostly small pieces, but there are also larger fragments in the assemblage. Of the total number of iron artifacts 52 (19%) are unidentifiable, 4 (2%) are nails, and 2 (1%) iron buttons. In unit [9] 1 (0,3%) lead musket ball was recorded and an unidentified artifact made of copper alloy.

### *Clay pipes*

Of the total number of clay pipes it was possible to identify 12 pieces, 6 bowls and 5 stems. There are 3 whole pipe bowls in the assemblage, which are all of the same type, small and the opening measuring 10 mm. All the bowls have a milling around the rim and the sides of the bowls are curved. Only one had a stamp on the heel. These bowls belong to the so-called “dwarf” pipes which are Dutch in origin and date to the 1610 – 1640. Other smaller fragments of bowls that was possible to identify belong to pipes of the same type (Duco, D.H., 1987).



Pic 4. 17th century clay pipe bowl.

In the assemblage there are 6 pipe stems that come from the upper part of the stem, i.e. where the stem connects with the bowl. In these cases the pipe heel came with the stem and some of them had a stamp that could be dated to the 17th century. Three of the stem fragments were decorated and two had a flower decoration and other two had the writing BON on the side. Stamps and decorations do not become common on Dutch clay pipes until the 1640.

### *Pottery*

Of the 28 pottery shards in the assemblage 12 could be identified, 4 are stoneware, 6 are red ware and 2 are modern white ware. The stoneware shards are all of the same type, glazed on the outside and on one traces of blue glazing was visible. One of the shards has a decoration. The stoneware shards probably belong to the Rhenish stone ware type from the 17th century. The red ware shards are all similar, glazed both on the inside and outside. Few of the shards have a greenish hue and pottery shards of this type have been dated to the 17th century (David R.M. Gaimster 1997).



Pic. 6 Decorated pipe stem.

All the evidence suggests that the clay pipe and pottery assemblage date to the period 1610 – 1650. The clay pipes and pottery shards were all recorded in units [9, 28], which is the floor deposit and the fireplace in structure B. It is therefore likely that the

floor deposit formed in the early part of the 17th century and that the building was finally abandoned around 1650.

### *Metal*

Quite a finds made of metal were recorded during the excavation and most of them are iron objects. Most of the iron objects were badly corroded and impossible to identify without x-ray. Of the metal objects that can be identified in the assemblage are 3 iron nails, 2 iron buttons and 1 musket ball made of lead. The iron nails are both smaller and of a different type than is usually found on Icelandic archaeological sites.

## **6. Conclusions**

The main aim of the excavation at Strákatangi was to assess the function and age of the site. It was hoped that the excavation would throw light on who had occupied the site, wether Icelandic or of another nationality. It was quite possible that the site was a previously unrecorded Icelandic fishing site.

A certain inconsistency is obvious between the structures at Strákatangi and known fishing sites in the Vestfirðir area. Icelandic fishing sites are usually situated close to the fishing grounds and often on a peninsula. Fishing sites are never found in the bottom of bays or fjords and individual booths are almost never larger than 5 x 5 m in size. The ruins at Strákatangi are somewhat larger than the average fishing station and its position in the bottom of a bay at the mouth of the fjord Steingrímsfjörður suggests that it is not an Icelandic fishing site.



Pic 7. Decorated ston-ware fragment.

When the structures at Strákatangi are compared with structures at whaling stations from the 17th century in the North Atlantic region, especially Red Bay in Labrador, many similarities become apparent.

A number of tryworks have been excavated at the Basque whaling station in Red Bay in Labrador and they all are similar in construction, i.e. furnaces for melting blubber and in front of them a platform where the workers stood (James A. Tuck et al., 2005). The shape of structure A at Strákatangi suggests that it is a trywork of a similar type. The excavation shows that structure A is a platform with a ramp on the north side to facilitate access to the furnaces. The furnaces themselves were built with bricks and on top of them large cauldrons stood where the whale blubber was melted. On the east side of structure A is a large mound, which probably is the midden from the trywork.

Many other structures have been excavated at Red Bay and among them the so-called cooperage, i.e. a structure where the barrels were manufactured for transporting the whale oil. These buildings were usually the largest ones and had a fixed roof (James A. Tuck et al., 2005).

It is likely that structure B is of this type as it was the largest structure and a lot of work was put into its construction. Postholes were recorded during the excavation, which show

that the structure had a fixed roof. The floor deposit was thick and many artifacts were found in it which suggest that it was a living quarter and also a working place. The fireplace in structure B also suggests that it was living quarters for humans not animals.

The artifacts found during the excavation suggest that structure B was occupied in the 17th century. The artifacts give us a relative date for the occupation of the site, which indicate a occupation in the period 1610 – 1650. No animal bones were recovered during the excavation and sieving of cultural deposits with a 5 mm sieve did neither produce animal nor fish bones. Once the samples taken from the cultural layers have been analyzed it is possible that useful samples for radiocarbon dating will be found.

The floor deposit also showed that the occupation of the site was seasonal and the site probably remained abandoned between whaling seasons. The floor deposit suggested an occupation for a long time but how long is impossible to say without further research of all the structures on the site.

The results of the excavation strongly suggest that the site is a foreign whaling station from the 17th century. It is impossible to say from the archaeological material which nationality occupied the station but local tales suggest that the whalers at Strákatanga were Basques that came from the Basque regions in North Spain and South France.

If the remains at Strákatangi prove to be a Basque whaling station from the 17th century then they are the oldest remains of foreign occupation on Icelandic soil. These remains suggest that foreign whalers built stations on land and used them during the whaling season, which probably was during autumn. This excavation opens up a new chapter in Icelandic archeology as there is little or nothing known about foreign settlements in Iceland. The written sources cannot give us a good picture of the settlement and especially the relationship between the whalers and Icelanders. The excavation suggests that this relationship may have been over a long period of time and probably was closer than the sources suggest. The whalers came from France and Spain and created connections, both in trade and culture, between these areas and Strandir. It is important for future research into whaling around Iceland to examine this connection in more detail as we know little about European influence on the common Icelander in the 17th century.

From a cultural point of view the remains at Strákatangi have an international cultural importance as the structures were probably built and occupied by foreigners and are of the same type as the whaling stations at Red Bay and in other places around the North Atlantic. The whaling station at Strákatangi is an important part of the history of whaling in the North Atlantic and an important link in the history of the expansion into the North Atlantic by European nations. Further research into this field will without a doubt increase our understanding of the beginning of commercial whaling in the North Atlantic and what influence the occupation on Icelandic soil did have on Icelandic society.

## 7. Appendices

FindsNo	Unit	Object	Material	Count	Notes
1	3	Nail	Iron	1	Possibly later.
2	9		Copper alloy	1	
3	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1	Stem.
4	9		Iron	2	Unknown
5	9	Nail	Iron	1	
6	10	Vessel	Ceramic	2	Modern white ware.
7	10	Vessel	Ceramic	3	Modern white ware.
8	9		Iron	1	Corroded
9	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1	stem
10	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1	head
11	9	Vessel	Ceramic	1	red ware
12	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1	stem
13	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1	head
14	9		Iron	1	corroded
15	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1	stem
16	9		Iron	1	corroded
17	9	Button	Iron	2	Corroded iron button?
18	9	Vessel	Ceramic	3	red ware/ 17th century?
19	9	Vessel	Ceramic	1	red ware/ 17th century?
20	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1	stem
21	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1	stem/decorated
22	9	Vessel	Ceramic	1	Red ware/17th century.
23	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1	bowl.
24	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1	Stem
25	9		Iron	2	Corroded
26	9		Iron	1	Corroded stem. Stamped with letters:
27	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1	"BON"
28	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1	stem
29	9		Iron	2	Unknown
30	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1	stem
31	9	Vessel	Ceramic	1	Grey ware/small piece.
32	9		Iron	1	Corroded large piece.
33	9		Iron	1	Corroded large piece. Corroded large piece. Broken in
34	9		Iron	2	two.
35	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1	Stem
36	16		Iron	13	Small corroded pieces
37	16		Iron	1	small corroded piece.
38	16		Iron	1	small corroded piece.
39	16	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	5	6 different pieces of stems.
40	16	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1	bowl, stamped.
41	16	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1	bowl, stamped.
42	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1	Stamped. Stem.
43	16	Vessel	Ceramic	1	red ware
44	16	Vessel	Ceramic	1	Stone ware.
45	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1	Decorated stem
46	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	20	stem pieces and small bowl



				fragments.
47	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1 stem
48	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1 stem. Stamped
49	9		Iron	17 small corroded pieces
50	9	Vessel	Ceramic	3 Three different fragments
51	9	Nail	Iron	3 corroded pieces
52	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	5 stem
53	9	Vessel	Ceramic	1 red ware
54	9	bullet	Lead	1 musket ball
55	9	Pottery	Ceramic	1 stone ware
56	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1 bowl
57	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	6 3 pieces from the same pipe.
58	9		Iron	5 small corroded pieces.
59	9	Vessel	Ceramic	9 Various small pieces of redware
60	16	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1 Stem. Decorated
61	9	Tobacco Pipe	Ceramic	1 Stem. Stamped "BON"
62	9	Gunflint	Flint	1 Possible gunflint.

Table. 1. Artifacts.

Unit no.	Type	Area	Description
1	Deposit	A	Surface deposit
2	Cut	A	Cut made by farmer for building posts.
3	Deposit	A	Mixed deposit on western side.
4	Deposit	A	Collapse from furnace.
5	Deposit	A	Mixed deposit, turf + gravel.
6	Group	A	Brick furnace for whale oil.
7	Group	A	Turf/stone wall in north end.
8	Deposit	A	Mixed brick fragments.
9	Deposit	B	Floor layer in trench B.
10	Deposit	B	Modern burnt layer.
11	Deposit	A	Mixed turf debris (same as 5)
12	Deposit	A	Mixed windblown/turf. Outside structure.
13	Deposit	B	Surface. Same as 1.
14	Deposit	B	Wall material.
15	Deposit	B	Windblown material under (10)
16	Group	B	Fill of fireplace
17	Cut	B	Cut for fireplace
18	Cut	B	Posthole in south end of trench
19			No number
20	Cut	B	Posthole in south end/partially excavated
21			No number
22	Cut	B	Posthole just south of fireplace.
23	Group	B	East wall.
24	Cut	B	Posthole west of wall.
25	Cut	B	Posthole between fireplace and eastern postholes
26	Cut	B	Posthole east of western trench edge.
27	Deposit	B	Bricks in west part. Probably collapse.
28	Group	B	Hearth. Units 16, 17.
29	Group	B	Central posts. Units 22, 24, 25, 26.
30	Group	B	Larger Posts. Units 18 og 20.

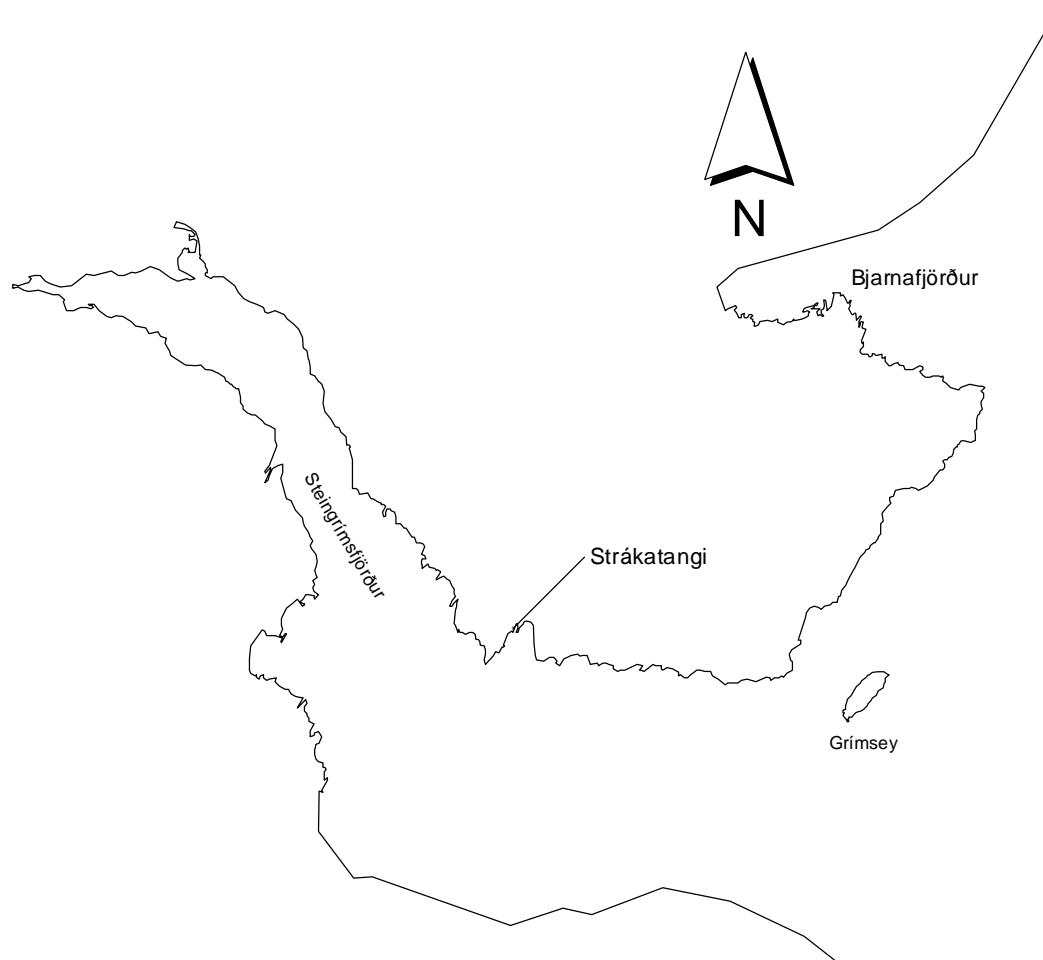
31	Group	B	Structure B.
32	Group	A	Structure A.
33	Deposit	B	Sterile sand deposit. (Undistrubed under structures)

Table 2. Archaeological units.

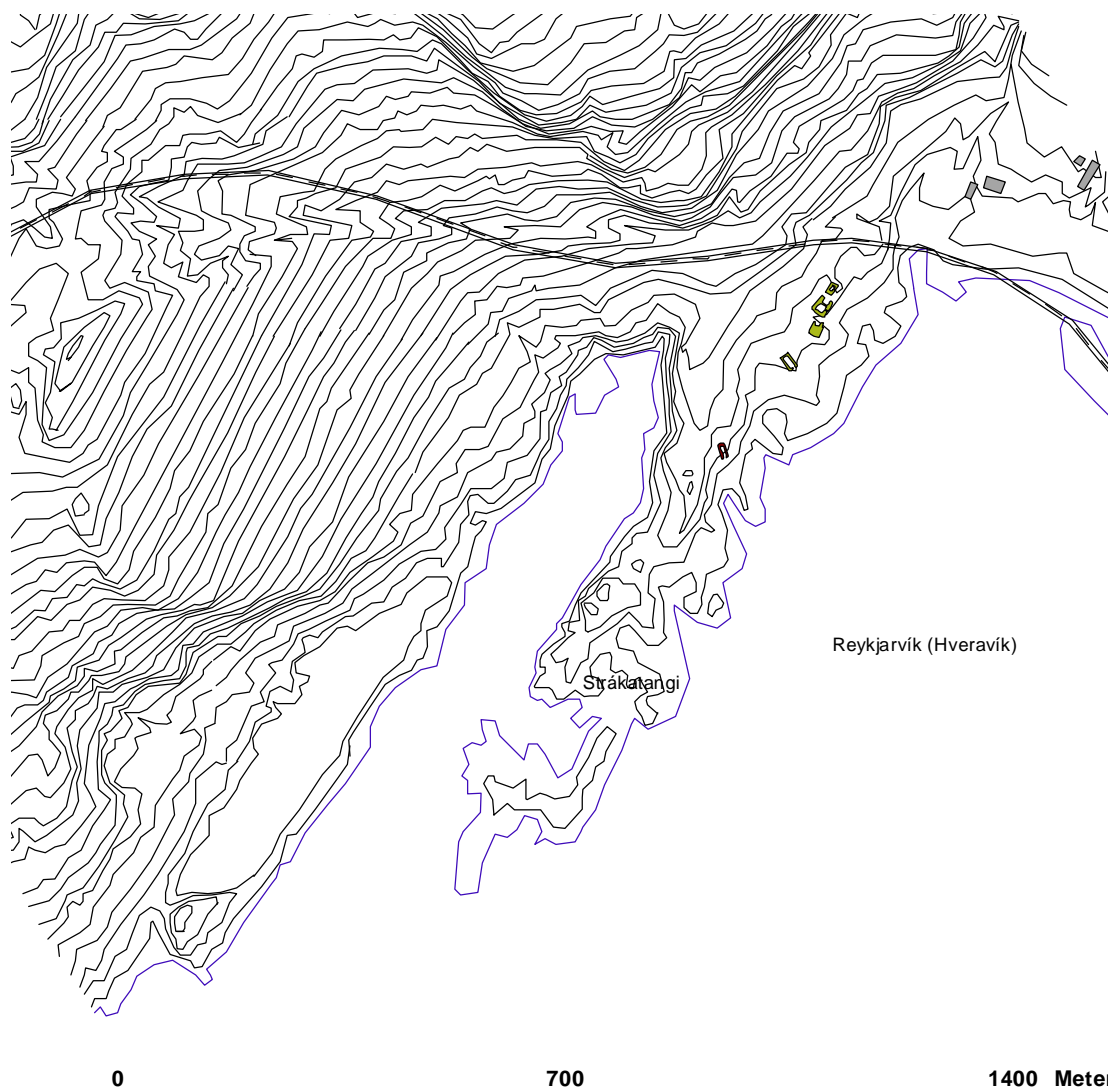
Sample	Unit	Grid	SampleType	SampleMethod	Vol_est	Count	Notes
1	4	A	Bulk	Macro	1	1	1 bag
2	16	B	Bulk	Macro	1	1	1/3
3	16	B	Bulk	Macro	1	1	2/3
4	16	B	Bulk	Macro	1	1	3/3
5	19	B	Bulk	Macro	1	1	1/1
6	9	B	Bulk	Macro	1	1	1/2
7	9	B	Bulk	Macro	1	1	2/2

Table 3. Soil samples.

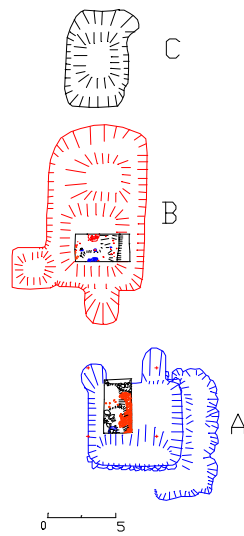
## 8. Maps and drawings.



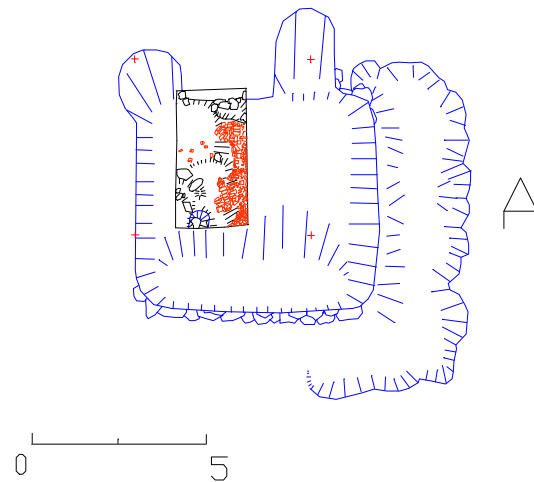
Map 1. The location of Strákatangi in Kaldrananeshreppur, Strandasýsla.



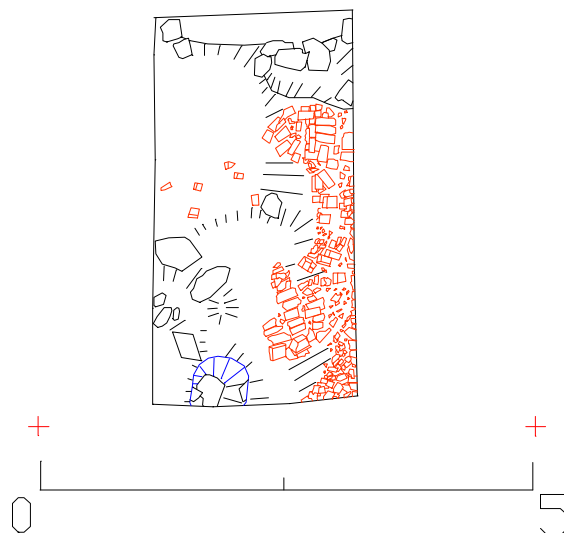
Map 2. The whaling station at Strákatangi.



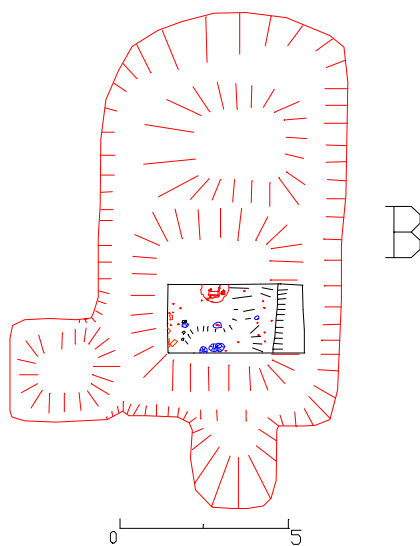
Drawing. 1. The main ruin group at Strákatangi and location of test trenches.



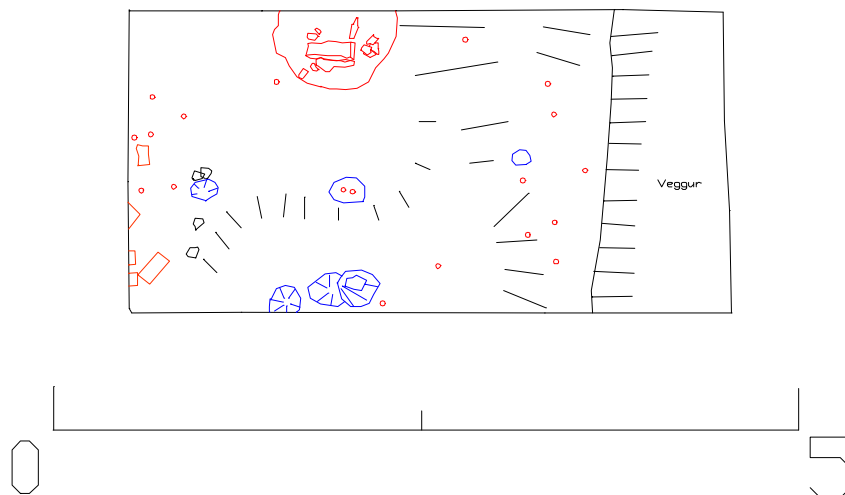
Drawing 2. Structure A, Tryworks. On the east side there are possible some midden remains.



Drawing 3. Test trench A. The brick remains from the tryworks are clearly visible on the east side.



Drawing 4. Structure B.



Drawing 5. Test trench B. A circular fireplace is visible (red) in the north part of the trench. Postholes (blue) are visible in the center and in the south part of the trench.

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