



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

Hugvísindasvið

**Þingvellir:**

*Archaeology of the Althing*

**Ritgerð til MA-prófs í  
Íslenskri Fornleifafræði**

**Aidan Bell**

**Haust 2010**

**Háskóli Íslands**

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**Fornleifafræði**

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**Kt. 120686-3729**

**Leiðbeinandi: Gavin Lucas**

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“A man who owned land in Bláskógar had been outlawed for the murder of a slave; he was called Þórir kroppinskeggi. ...The land afterwards became public property, and the people of the country set it apart for the use of the Althing. Because of that, there is common land there to provide the Althing with wood from the forests and pasture for grazing horses on the heaths.”

*Íslendingabók*  
*The Book of Icelanders*

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## Glossary

*Allsherjargoði* – The Supreme Chieftain, who was responsible for certain ceremonies at the Althing. This was a hereditary role that was held by the descendents of the first settler, Ingólfur Arnarson.

*Blót* – The Old Norse term for the pagan ritual sacrifice of animals.

*Búð* – Booths built of turf and stone, with a temporary roof of cloth over a timber frame, provided accommodation for people of high status and their followers at the meetings of thing assemblies.

*Byrgisbúð* – The archaeological structure that is the focus of this study.

*Goði* (pl. *Goðar*) – The Norse pagan priest-chieftain, who held both religious and political roles.

*Goðorð* – The name of a Chieftaincy over which the Goðar ruled, however power was held in authority over people, not territory.

*Hólmgangr* – A ritual duel that was presided over by the gods in order to resolve disputes.

*Lögberg* – The Law Rock, where announcements were made at the Althing.

*Lögsögumaður* – The Law Speaker, who was the only official of the Commonwealth.

*Lögrétta* – The legislative Law Council, where laws were made and amended.

*Spöngin* – The neck of land between two water-filled fissures where Byrgisbúð is situated.

*Vé* – A demarcated sanctuary where ritual activities could take place, which could also be established for legal protection. Sanctuary ropes, *Vébönd*, were often used to mark out the court circles that were held at thing assemblies.

*Þing* – A Norse assembly, pronounced as ‘thing’.

*Þinghelgi* – The sanctified area in which thing assemblies were held.

## **Abstract**

The Norse General Assembly of Iceland, called the Althing at Þingvellir, was central to early Icelandic society in the Viking Age. Not only was it the high point of the annual social calendar, but it was also the focus of their ideals of justice and law-making, which the early Icelanders refined into an art. Here a description is given of the character of the Þingvellir site and how Geology is affecting the Archaeology; an overview is given of how the Althing and other assembly sites in Iceland were organised, and the significance of the relationship between Religion and Politics is also discussed. An important aspect of this study is an up-to-date summary of key archaeological research so far undertaken at Þingvellir.

This study will focus upon the Althing during the period of the Icelandic Commonwealth from c.930-1262. The aim of this research is to focus upon one aspect of the archaeology of the Althing by re-analysing the as-yet unidentified Byrgisbúð structure. It is located on the neck of land called Spöngin, between two water-filled fissures on the eastern edge of the assembly area. This unusual structure has been excavated and studied previously, but has yet to be satisfactorily interpreted. The re-analysis will be carried out in three parts, firstly to re-evaluate the excavation evidence in order to reconstruct the form and character of Byrgisbúð, and secondly looking at the existing theories surrounding the interpretation of the structure. Thirdly, this will then be placed into the context of the Althing through a comparison with other assembly sites. The hypothesis presented here is that Spöngin acted as a pagan sanctuary, and that the Lögrétta was originally located on Spöngin when the Althing was established in 930, but that it was later moved after the constitutional reforms of 965.

## Útdráttur á Íslensku

Alþingisstaðurinn forni á Þingvöllum er mjög mikilvægur vettvangur rannsókna í íslenskri fornleifafræði af því að hann var miðstöð þjóðarinnar á víkingaöld. Þingvellir hafa verið brennidepill rannsókna frá því fyrstu kortin af staðnum voru útbúin á 18. öld til upphafs íslenskrar fornleifafræði á 19. öld sem leiddi til þróaðri fornleifafræðilegri rannsókna og uppgraftra á 20. öldinni. Enda þótt þessar rannsóknir hafi aukið þekkingu og lagt grunninn að vitneskju um Alþingisstaðinn, þá eru þær eingöngu byrjunin, og þörf á fleiri rannsóknum til þess að skilja betur fornleifafræðilegan bakrunn Alþingis hið forna. Markmið þessarar rannsóknar er að auka framlag á þessu sviði og bæta við þekkinguna um hið óþekkta mannvirki Byrgisbúð á Spönginni.

Spöngin líkist hálsi á austurhluta Alþingisstaðarins. Hún er staðsett á enda hraunbreiðunnar og er umlukin tveimur vatnsgjám sem heita Flosagjá og Nikulásargjá. Sýnt er fram á í þessari rannsókn að Spöngin fellur vel að þeirri hugmynd að hún sé norræn lagastaður, einkum vegna þess að hún líkist hólma í miðju vatni. Trú og stjórnmál voru óaðskiljanleg á víkingaöld og er það lykillinn að þeim skilningi hvernig fundir voru skipulagðir á Alþingi til forna. Spöngin getur verið auðkennd sem norrænn lagastaður af því að útlit hólmanes vísar til hugmyndarinnar um helgistað sem er umlukinn 'helgu vatni' og mikilvægi innávið/útávið aðskilnaðar, á milli helgidóms (helgra vé) og þess sem er óguðlegt. Slíkur staður var vettvangur manna til lagalegs ágrennings og tilbeiðslu heiðinna guða.

Byrgisbúð er þyrping af fornleifafræðilegum rústum sem eru staðsettar í miðri Spönginni á breiðasta oddanum. Þetta mannvirki hefur oft verið grafið upp og kortlagt, en fullnægjandi túlkun hefur ekki enn komið fram. Í þessari rannsókn var farið yfir fyrri athuganir og sýnt fram á með nýrri rannsókn að Byrgisbúð samanstendur af fjórum aðskildum mannvirkjum, frá tveimur tímaskeiðum. Fyrstu þrjú mannvirkin eru hringlaga en það fjórða er rétthyrnt og aðskilið frá hinum mannvirkjunum með öskulögum og viðarkolum sem bendir til að þau hafi ekki verið samtengd.

Tilgátan sem sett er fram í rannsókn þessari er að upprunalega Lögréttan hafi verið staðsett á Spönginni þegar Alþingi var stofnsett árið 930. Mikilvægi hringlaga mannvirkjanna koma fram í staðsetningu þeirra, sem líkist hólma umlukinn vatni, og hringlaga formi þeirra. Fyrsta hringlaga mannvirkið hafi verið heiðinn helgistaður. Það var þá notað eins og undirstaða fyrir samsetninginu Lögréttu, sem samanstóð af þremur sammiðja hringlaga bekkjum, nægjanlega stórum til þess að 36 Goðar og ráðgjafar þeirra gátu setið saman. Þegar Lögrétta var stækkuð árið 965, fyrir 39 Goðar og síðar fyrir 48, var stærð hringjanna á Spönginni of lítil og því hafi Lögréttan verið flutt niður að Öxará, á Neðrivelli eða á hólmann við Öxará. Þrátt fyrir að Lögréttan hafi flust þá hélt Spöngin áfram að vera heiðinn helgistaður þar til Ísland tók upp kristni árið 1000.

# 1

## Introduction

### *The Significance of Þingvellir*

The basic component of governance throughout Scandinavia during the Viking Age was the Germanic parliamentary tradition of the thing (*þing*) and these open-air assemblies have long been recognised as an essential element of Norse political systems (Lugmayr, 2002; Darvill, 2004:229), which the Norse settlers then brought to Iceland. A Thing was a public assembly for free men who met to discuss matters of common importance in their area, as well as to legislate laws and administer justice. Each province was divided into smaller thing-districts, based upon population or area (Toyne, 1970:46). In addition, each region had its own thing, which in time became of greater importance than the district things, resulting in a pyramidal structure (Graham-Campbell, 2001:196), with the general assembly, the Althing, at the top. Similar assembly sites are known from many locations across the Viking world from the Gulaping in Norway, to the Tynwald on the Isle of Man. Although the Althing in Iceland survived for many centuries, and the modern parliament holds the same name, the Isle of Man is the only Norse colony to have continuously maintained their thing tradition (Arbman, 1961:56). The Althing in Iceland was therefore not unique, but the area that it governed was unusually large (Thorláksson, 2000:178). The Icelanders developed the concept of things further and created a system of law that was distinctly different from what had previously existed in Scandinavia (Byock, 2001:170). Throughout the period of the Icelandic Commonwealth (AD930-1262) neither the Norwegians, Swedes or Danes had succeeded in creating a unified law in their own nations (Jóhannesson, 2006:37) and so the establishment of the Althing, the symbol of a national unified law in Iceland, was of great significance.

In Iceland, some of the early chieftains had established local assemblies (*héraðsþing*) in order to settle local problems and disputes, the first ones being at Kjalarnes to the north of Reykjavík and Þórsnes on Snæfellsnes. However, as Iceland's population increased, it became inevitable that disputes between members of different districts would arise. Iceland was not a static community (Magnusson, 1973:98) and so it was necessary to organise a national thing on a larger scale (Brønsted, 1986:84). It was therefore necessary to expand the thing system of governance, and the largest of them all was the Althing general assembly at Þingvellir.

In Icelandic, the name Þingvellir means 'Assembly Fields'. The name Þingvellir is the plural of Þingvöllur, which was the original name for the site, although Þingvellir has become the generally accepted name today (Guðjónsson, 1985:86). The name in the original Old Norse form of Þingvölr is not unique to Iceland, and other names deriving from this Old Norse word can be found in other Viking areas. These include Tingvoll in Norway, the Tynwald on the Isle of Man and the names

Dingwall and Tingwall that appear in Shetland, Orkney and Scotland. Place-names indicative of thing-sites are interesting because they often refer to areas of land that have been adapted for a common purpose (Sanmark, 2009:209), as was the case at Pingvellir. Although assembly sites were common across the western Norse Viking world, the only one that is a direct descendent of that at Pingvellir is the Althing at Garðar in Greenland, which was similar in form but smaller than the Icelandic version (Guðjónsson, 1985:27,33).

The founding of the Althing in AD930 marked the beginning of the Commonwealth period in Iceland, which lasted until 1262-4 when Iceland came under the sovereignty of the Norwegian crown (Thorláksson, 2000:175). The Althing is often cited as the oldest parliament in Europe, although it was not a parliament in the modern meaning of elected representatives (Magnusson, 1973:99). The strength of the chieftains (Goðar) as a ruling class meant that early Iceland was never truly a democracy in the modern sense (Jones, 1986:56). The Althing continued to remain in existence at Pingvellir until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, although its roles changed over time with the changes in political rule. The last meeting of the Althing at Pingvellir was in 1798; it was later relocated and re-established again as an advisory body in Reykjavík in 1845.

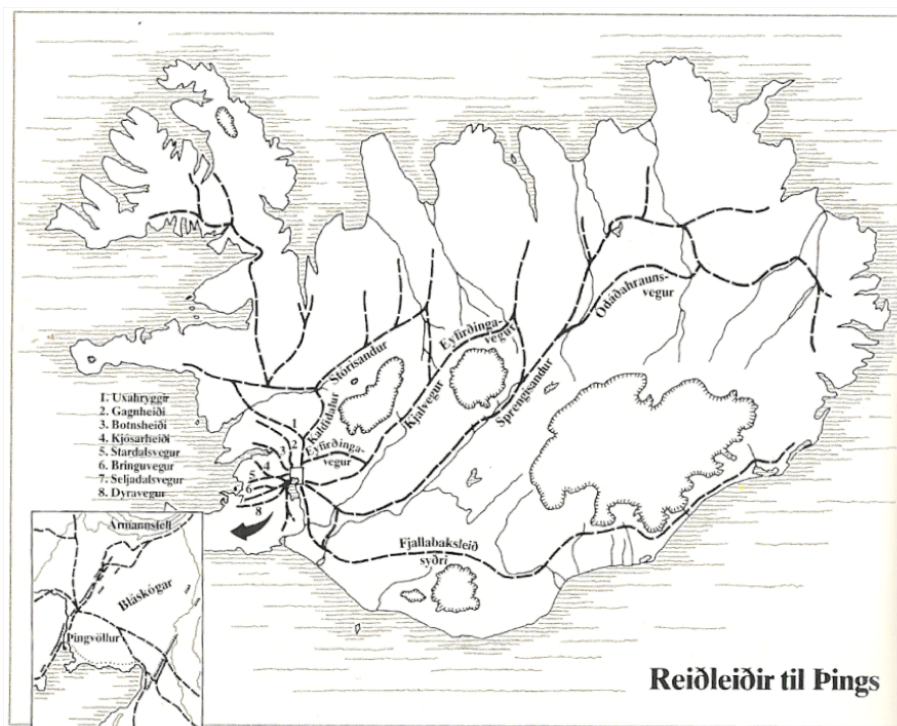


**Figure 1:** Location of Pingvellir

Pingvellir is located at the northern end of lake Þingvallavatn, close to the highlands (**Figure 1**). The location of Pingvellir is significant in understanding why the Althing was held there because the selection of this location was the result of three main factors. In the Book of Icelanders, *Íslendingabók* (Grønlie, 2006), written by Ari the Wise around 1125, he states that the land around Bláskógar was confiscated from a man who was outlawed for murder and so the land came into public ownership. Secondly, this land had suitable resources for the meetings of the Althing, and thirdly, Pingvellir was accessible from the most populated areas of Iceland (Lugmayr, 2002).



During the Commonwealth period, overland travel by horse or foot was the most common mode of communication. Even those from the West Fjords, who were expert seafarers and had very poor overland routes, still rode to the Althing (Nordal, 1990:59). It was easier to travel through the highlands, as the lowlands were largely covered in Birch forest. One particular route through the highlands called Kjölur ('The Keel') was at that time covered in vegetation, which made it much easier to traverse than today, as well as providing fodder for travellers' horses. This made it much easier for people to travel to the Althing from the southern, western and northern quarters of the country (Thorláksson, 2000:178) (**Figure 2**) and some of these routes are still discernable, including traces of riding tracks at Þingvellir (Friðriksson & Vésteinsson, 1999:9). Despite the advantage of riding routes through the interior, it was still a great distance to travel from the East, and according to the Saga of Hrafnkell, it could take up to 17 days each way to travel from Fljótsdalur in the Eastern Fjords (Magnusson, 1973:98). Overall, the location of Þingvellir in the south-west of Iceland, in the most populated part of the country, made it an ideal location to hold the meetings of the Althing.



**Figure 2:** Routes to the Althing

The general assembly, or *Alþingi* in Icelandic, met for two weeks every summer and was the central point of legal and business affairs. For a scattered population, the Althing provided a central meeting place, and so it also fulfilled social and cultural functions (Roesdahl, 1998:268). The nature of markets is generally little known, but it is likely that they were often held at assemblies (Arthur & Sindbæk, 2007:308) and so there would have been a lot of activity with merchants, craftsmen, carpenters, cobblers, sword cutlers and brewers all present (Thorláksson, 2000:179), along with many other members of Icelandic society. This made the Althing a strong unifying force in Iceland, which influenced the customs and cultures of the Icelanders and was a high point on the Icelandic social calendar.

The significance of Þingvellir as a place symbolising the Icelandic national identity cannot be over emphasised, as throughout Iceland's history many of the most important events and decisions have taken place there. The Althing at Þingvellir is a rare example of where a society tried to preserve law and order without an overall ruler, either as a remnant of a previous social system or as a new development (Karlsson, 2000:21). In this respect, several national festivals have been held at Þingvellir, particularly during the 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In 1874 there was a festival to celebrate 1,000 years since the settlement of Iceland (Guðjónsson, 1985:89), and in 1930 there were further celebrations to mark one thousand years since the establishment of the Althing (**Fig. 3**) (Jónsson, 1943).



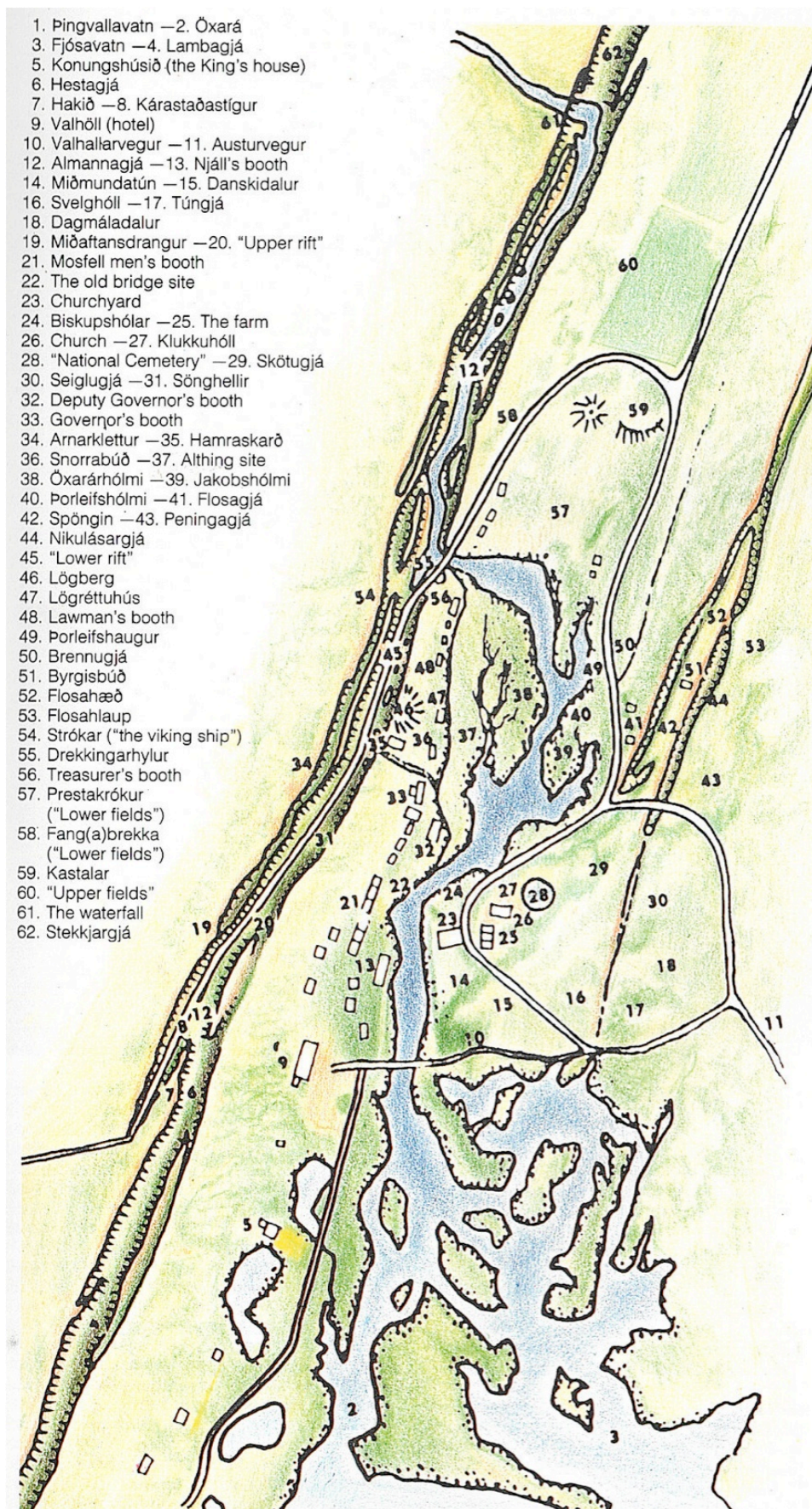
**Figure 3:** A Commemorative Stamp Issued in 1930 Depicting the Law Speaker at the Althing

The most significant event to take place at Þingvellir in modern times was the proclamation of Icelandic independence from Denmark in 1944 (**Figure 4**). One quarter of the Icelandic population attended the ceremony on 17<sup>th</sup> June of that year to hear the declaration of the new Republic of Iceland. This was later followed by another festival in 1974 to mark 1,100 years since the settlement of Iceland (Guðjónsson, 1985:90). Throughout Icelandic history, the Althing as a meeting place for the national population prevented regional divisions into separate groups or language variations into dialects. It has therefore acted as a symbol of national unity and the birthplace of the Icelandic national culture (Jóhannesson, 1959:124) and so Þingvellir was made Iceland's first National Park in 1928. The significance of Þingvellir can therefore be summed up by the fact that the Althing was an important cultural centre, providing the basis for the Icelandic national identity.



**Figure 4:** The Proclamation of the New Republic at Lögberg, June 17<sup>th</sup> 1944





**Figure 5:** The Assembly Site of the Althing

### Aspects of the Althing Assembly Site

The assembly site at Þingvellir consists of various aspects relating to the operation of the outdoor meetings held there every summer. These are labelled on the map in **figure 5**, but it is important to note that not all of the features are contemporary.

- Lögrétta – The Law Council

The Law Council was arguably the most important aspect of the Althing. This was where the Goðar (chieftains) discussed and voted upon new laws and made amendments to existing ones. At first it consisted of 36 Goðar, as was the case in Norway, although the significant difference in Iceland was that no individual overpowered the others (Guðjónsson, 1985:35). After later reforms, it consisted of 39 and then 48 Goðar, each with two non-voting advisors, the Law Speaker and the two Bishops of Iceland, totalling 147 members altogether. Accounts from the 13<sup>th</sup> century indicate that Lögrétta was located on the plains either to the north or east of the river Öxará, however text in the law code *Grágás* (Grey Goose) implies that it was located in a different place in earlier times (Jóhannesson, 2006:64). Lögrétta appears to have been originally situated on the eastern side of the river and to the east of the present Law Rock, at a regular site on Neðrivellir (Lower fields), although its location moved over the centuries (Thorláksson, 2000:178; Þórsteinsson, 1987:42). The Lögrétta was a physical construction of turf and stone in a defined location. The benches were made of wood, but these are not likely to have survived once the original site was abandoned (Þórsteinsson, 1987:42). In addition, the course of the river Öxará has changed over time, which has further removed traces of archaeological evidence. Indeed, it was this factor that caused the location of Lögrétta to be moved several times over the course of the Althing's history. Up until 1400, Lögrétta was situated on the eastern side of the river, but further variations in the course of the river resulted in Lögrétta being situated on an island in the river. In 1594 the Lögrétta was moved to the area just below Lögberg, where it remained until the final meeting of the Althing at Þingvellir in 1798. From 1750 the Lögrétta was housed in a timber building, which was only intended to be temporary, but nonetheless remained in use until 1798. This was to replace an earlier turf booth from 1691 (Þórsteinsson, 1987:43-4).

While the Lögrétta had a fixed site (**Figure 6**), the other courts did not (Friðriksson, 1994:105) and therefore have left very little, if any, trace in the archaeological record. The term Vébönd, in the *Jónsbók* lawcode, originally meant 'Sanctuary Bands' and so the area inside was regarded as inviolate. These were ropes that were hung from posts around the Lögrétta and courts (Þórsteinsson, 1987:30), although these were particularly used for marking out the court circles.

*Egil's Saga* contains a description of the Norwegian Gulaping, in which it describes the court as being placed on flat ground, with Hazel rods being used to hold a rope in a circle around the court. These were called 'Sanctuary Ropes' and the judges sat inside the circle (Friðriksson, 1994:108). It would appear likely that the courts at Þingvellir were arranged in a similar way.



**Figure 6:** Model of the Lögrétta



- Lögberg – The Law Rock

The Law Rock was the central point of the Althing, where sessions were opened and closed, announcements were made, and the Law Speaker (Lögsögumaður) spoke the laws of the land. The Law Speaker was the only official of the Commonwealth and he was elected by the chieftains (Goðar) for a term of three years. Among his roles, he was required to recite the laws from memory over a period of three years, with one third each year, including the Assembly Procedures ever year. The Law Rock was also the place where the Law Speaker assembled and led the chieftains and judges to the courts (Thorláksson, 2000:178). The Amphitheatre effect provided by the backdrop of Almannagjá ensured that the Law Speaker could be easily heard (**Figure 7**).



**Figure 7:** 'The Parliament of Ancient Iceland' by W.G. Collingwood

- Almannagjá – 'All Men's Gorge'

A particularly distinctive feature of Þingvellir is the Almannagjá gorge, which provides the backdrop to the Law Rock, creating an amphitheatre effect. There are several examples of thing booths here, although the majority of these are also thought to date to the latter centuries of the Althing. The use of Almannagjá for the meetings of the Althing is also evident in **figure 7**. The geological formations added to the dramatic nature of the assembly site.

- Þingbúðir – Thing Booths

The thing booths were where the chieftains and people of high status would stay while attending the Althing and these are the most numerous archaeological remains still visible at Þingvellir. The majority of people would however stay in tents, and so leave little or no trace of their presence. The booths were constructed from turf and stone, and had a timber frame over the top supporting a canvas of Vaðmál, homespun twill, to provide shelter (Thorláksson, 2000:179), as shown in **figure 8**. Most of the booth remains are located on the western side of the river on Hallurinn ('The Slope'), which extends from Almannagjá and most of those that are visible date to the latter centuries of the Althing. It is important to understand thing-booths in order to understand how the meetings of the Althing operated. It was the obligation of the Goðar to provide shelter for their thing-men, and so they owned a thing booth for this purpose. It was however the duty of the thing men to each bring a length of Vaðmál to use as an awning over the booth. As such, booths are an important source of information about the social, rather than the legal, aspect of the Althing.



**Figure 8:** How the thing booths were prepared before each assembly

- Biskupshólar – ‘The Bishop’s Mounds’

Biskupshólar lies on the eastern side of the river, to the north-west of the church and churchyard. It is thought that the early Bishops of Iceland had their thing-booths here. The grass here was reserved for the Bishop’s horses and so the farmer was not allowed to cut it (Þórsteinsson, 1987:32).

- Þingvallakirkja – The Church

The Norwegian king Óláfr Tryggvason, who reigned from 995 to 1000, provided timber and a bell for a church to be built at Þingvellir for missionary purposes. Later, his half-brother King Haraldr Harðráði (reigned 1047-1066) gave another bell, which may have been used to summon people to the various meetings of the Althing (Guðjónsson, 1985:17). When the weather was unfavourable, laws were proclaimed inside the church, rather than at Lögberg (Jóhannesson, 2006:47). Such an arrangement was common and also took place at the thing at Tingwall on Shetland (Coolen & Mehler, 2010:6). After the Conversion, services were always held on the first Sunday of the session of the Althing. The church was also used for meetings of the clergy of the Skálholt diocese and was used as a clerical court when required (Þórsteinsson, 1987:54).

There were two churches that stood on the site of the Althing (Byock, 2001:175). The first church, the 'Assembly Men's Church', was probably built in the Norwegian Stave style and it is likely that it stood in the same location as the present church (Þorsteinsson, 1987:53). Repairs were made to the 'Assembly Men's Church' during the 11<sup>th</sup> century, using timber sent by King Haraldr Harðráði, who also sent a second bell to be hung in the church. There was a storm in 1118, in which the church collapsed, leaving only the church belonging to the farm and so timber salvaged from the collapsed church was probably used to enlarge the latter. In 1523 it had to be moved due to flooding, which resulted in the church being separated from the churchyard (Þorsteinsson, 1987:54). There was also a farm at Þingvellir, to which one of these churches is thought to have belonged along with the churchyard, but that is not discussed in detail here, as it did not directly relate to the functions of the Althing.

- Öxará – The 'Axe River'

When the Althing was established, the river Öxará only flowed through Þingvellir when in flood, however the river Öxará was later artificially diverted in order to provide water for the Althing. Fluctuations in the course of the river eventually settled so that it ran along the bottom of Hallurinn (The Slope) on the eastern side of Almannagjá. It is not known when exactly this happened, although a bridge providing access between each riverbank was in place before the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. This was located with one end on the riverbank just below Biskupshólar. The bridge is thought to have been built before AD999, as *Kristni Saga* from the 13<sup>th</sup> century tells how the court, which outlawed Hjalti Skeggjason for blasphemy, was held on the bridge itself (Þorsteinsson, 1987:42-3). The name Öxará means 'Axe River' in Icelandic, and this may refer to a ritual where an axe was thrown into the river possibly to signify that no weapons were allowed at the assembly (Thorláksson, 2000:176). Weapons were prohibited from being carried at the Althing from 1154, however this was not usually observed (Þorsteinsson, 1987:18) and there are many accounts in the sagas (e.g. *Njáls Saga*) where weapons were used to resolve arguments. During the late 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries the Althing became a scene of heightening tensions as chieftains with armed men often came close to battle at Þingvellir.

An Icelandic scholar of the 19<sup>th</sup> century called Guðbrandur Vigfússon believed that three landscape or architectural features were required at an assembly site. These were 1) A slope, hill or 'law rock' – for announcements and the recitation of laws, 2) A Court Circle, either loosely marked out or built of solid material – for judicial proceedings and decisions about the laws, and 3) A field for the audience – where the other assembly participants could stand (Guðjónsson, 1985:29). As can be seen from the above description, Þingvellir has all of these features, plus the many others above, which made it a suitable site for the General Assembly of Iceland.

*The Changing Landscape and the Threat to Archaeology*

Iceland is a geologically young and active island and this is particularly evident at Þingvellir, where the rift between the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates tears the land apart. There are many geological features at Þingvellir which have influenced how the land there was utilised for the Althing, and these are most readily seen in the names attached to various features there. The majority of features associated with tectonic activity at Þingvellir are tensile fractures and fissures, which form when the bedrock splits. Typical examples of this are Flosagjá and Nikulásargjá (otherwise known as Peningagjá, due to the coins which people throw into it), which surround Spöngin. Springs are also sometimes associated with tectonic fissures, and these two at Þingvellir are also good examples of this (Guðmundsson, 2007:119,289).

The Þingvellir Graben (rift valley) is part of the Hengill volcanic system, which lies in the Western Volcanic Zone of Iceland. This has often been cited as an example of plate divergence in Iceland, which is caused by crustal stretching and normal faulting (Einarsson, 2008:44). The best known example of a normal fault is the Almannagjá at Þingvellir. In normal faulting, one of the crustal blocks subsides relative to the other. At Almannagjá, the subsidence has equated to approximately 40 metres in the past 10,000 years (Guðmundsson, 2007:120). Geological processes such as these have created the distinctive landscape of Þingvellir, which influenced the meetings of the Althing there. The great wall of rock in Almannagjá provides an amphitheatre effect around the Law Rock, which greatly enhances the way sound travels and therefore enables speakers to be heard with greater clarity.

The lava at Þingvellir is approximately 9,000 years old, and the graben floor is sinking at a rate of 1-2mm per year. Tectonic activity occurs a few times each millennium, which is accompanied by earthquakes (Guðmundsson, 2007:137). In 1789 there was significant tectonic activity in the form of earthquakes, which lowered the ground level in the rift valley by approximately half a metre. The sinking of the Þingvellir plain over time has caused the Þingvallavatn lake to encroach onto the old assembly site (Þórsteinsson, 1987:17), affecting the archaeological remains. As a consequence of this geological activity, the land between Almannagjá on the western side of the rift valley and Hrafnagjá on the eastern side has subsided since the 10<sup>th</sup> century, so that the landscape is no longer in its original form. Therefore, originally the land would have been higher, the river Öxará would have flowed with a stronger current and the edge of the lake Þingvallavatn would have been further away (UNESCO, 2004:39).

The nature of the changing landscape at Þingvellir means that the archaeological remains are at risk of damage or even loss. As such, the site of the Althing is not the same as it was when it was established in the tenth century, and this must be considered when interpreting the archaeological record. The loss of the archaeological remains means that today we can only see a fraction of the evidence of the Althing.



### *Pingvellir as a Case for Further Archaeological Research*

The study of assembly sites in Iceland is a field of research in Icelandic archaeology that is arguably still in its infancy, despite previous work. Research at Pingvellir in particular has laid some important foundations for our understanding of the site, but there is still much that is unknown about the meetings of the Althing at Pingvellir. The site of the Althing is very complex with many archaeological remains from different time periods, all of which are affected by the changing geology of the site, as described above. These points highlight the need for further archaeological research into the site before the forces of nature remove the opportunity, through erosion and other destructive natural processes that threaten the archaeological remains. Due to the complexity of the Althing site, only one aspect of this will be selected as the focus of this research. The site of Byrgisbúð on Spöngin (see **fig.5**) has been chosen because it represents an as-yet undefined element of the Althing assembly site, and the characteristics and setting appear to be almost unique among all of the identified remains at Pingvellir.

In order to understand the context in which to carry out this further research, it is necessary to first look at how assemblies were organised, both at the Althing and at the smaller regional assemblies. A key part of understanding the role and function of the *þing* assemblies is to look at the relationship between religion and politics, which played a significant role in Viking-Age Iceland. Further to this, an up-to-date overview is given of archaeological research that has taken place at Pingvellir so far. This is of importance in order to place the new research of this project into context, but it is also necessary because such an overview does not exist in one volume at present, and much of the previous research has not yet been published. Here an integrated approach will combine these various sources of information in order to provide a basis for a better understanding of the archaeology of the Althing, as well as making an additional contribution to this important aspect of Icelandic archaeology.

## 2

## Organisation of the Althing & The *Ping* System in Iceland

*'With law must our land be built, or with lawlessness laid waste.'*

*Njál's Saga, Ch.70.*

The Althing as an institution was the flagship of the Icelandic legal system. As the name can be translated as 'All-Men's-Assembly', it represented the freedom and justice of the ideology that was the foundation of Icelandic society, that being freedom governed by law (Sveinsson, 1958:75). Indeed, the social and political conditions in early Iceland provided the opportunity for equality and independence to an unusually large number of people (Nordal, 1990:57), by comparison to Scandinavia. Nonetheless, society was in reality not so equal as this ideology, because the social system was based upon concepts of property and unequal access to resources, although there was no state authority to enforce claims of ownership (Durrenberger, 1992:53). At this time, Iceland effectively only became a unified nation for the two weeks that the Althing met, because beyond this there was no executive power above the elite in society.

Thing assemblies were a key part of Icelandic society (Vésteinsson *et al*, 2004:171) and for the purpose of this research, the main focus will be upon the period of the Icelandic Commonwealth, from the establishment of the Althing in c.AD930 until the submission to the Norwegian crown in 1262. Although the Althing remained in existence at Þingvellir until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, its role changed considerably after that time. Here an explanation of how the Althing was organised is given, as this is an important basis for the interpretation of the archaeological remains there.

### The Establishment of the Althing

At the time of the Settlement, the *Landnám*, no organised effort was required to take the land, as it was uninhabited at that time, with the exception of a few Irish hermits. As such, each settlement was organised separately and so each farm enjoyed an independent status (Nordal, 1990:57). From the beginning, the chieftains (Goði, pl. Goðar) were the people who held power in Iceland, in the form a chieftaincy (Goðorð). A Goðorð was not a geographically defined area, but rather a loose political association of independent farmers, led by a chieftain (Friðriksson, 1994:106). The size of a Goðorð was determined by the ease of communication between a Goði and his followers, which also restricted the concentration of power (Sigurðsson, 1999:13). Indeed, a Goðorð was a type of property and power, but was not a form of wealth as such (Durrenberger, 1992:54) and when a Goðorð

changed ownership, the þingmenn, the Goði's supporters at the Althing, went with it (Lugmayr, 2002). Normally a Goðorð passed from father to son, although it could also be given away by gift, sale and loan, or divided and shared. Consequentially, although the Law Council at the Althing initially consisted 36 and later 39 and 48 goðar (see below), it has been estimated that in reality there were probably more goðar and goðorð than this, particularly between the 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. As such, it is almost impossible to use these 36/39/48 figures as a means of calculating the number of goðorð in existence at that time, although it has been estimated at being around 50-60 during the Saga Age. This uncertainty is due to the unstable nature of the chieftaincy system, which resulted from the rivalry between the goðar for power and prestige. Chieftaincies therefore often did not always survive for long, perhaps only two or three generations in some cases. Others could be created, but this appears to have ceased around the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Sigurðsson, 1999:40-1,55,59,61). This system was conceptually clear, but was not so neat in practice (Durrenberger, 1992:56). The Goðorð formed the basis for the þing system, and a brief examination of this enables an understanding of how the Althing and wider thing system was organised.

The purpose of the settlement of Iceland was in part to escape the rule of Haraldr Hárfagri (Fine-Hair), who was the first king of Norway (reigned 872-930), so that the chieftains could maintain their status and power. The aim in establishing the Althing and associated regional things was to create a law whereby the settlers could live free from outside interference. However there were exceptions to this, for example in the amount of land that could be claimed by new settlers. There appears to have been a case where such a dispute was settled by king Harald Fine-Hair, thereby indicating that the Icelanders could refer to Norwegian law, despite otherwise not acknowledging the rule of the Norwegian King (Nordal, 1990:58).

Some of the early Goðar had established local assemblies, the first of which is thought to have been at Kjalarnes, in Kjósarsýsla to the north of Reykjavík (Jóhannesson, 2006:35). This was established by Þorsteinn, the son of the first settler Ingólfur Arnarson, and according to Ari the Wise, the author of *Íslendingabók*, this happened around AD900 (Roesdahl, 1998:268). By the early part of the tenth century the Settlement of Iceland (*Landnám*) was almost complete, with the majority of good-quality land taken. With the population at an estimated level of 60,000 (Byock, 1988:82), it was decided that a common law was required for the new inhabitants of the island. In the 920s plans were made for the creation of a national assembly and national law; an idea initiated by the Goðar of the Kjalarnes þing (Foote & Wilson, 1970:56). This is significant on two counts: Firstly, the Kjalarnes þing was associated with the family of Ingólfur Arnarson (Guðmundsson, 2004:58), traditionally regarded as the first settler of Iceland and therefore whose family was very influential. Ingólfur's land-claim was the oldest and the largest, and therefore the first assembly of significance was held there, however the Kjalarnes þing did not have a legislative role, only judiciary (Jóhannesson, 2006:36). Secondly, the estate of Ingólfur is relevant to the location of the Althing, which was chosen on the boundaries of his land. As in Anglo-Saxon England, the location of assembly sites on territorial boundaries was not so much for neutrality, but rather to benefit the community as a place to which everyone had access (Pantos, 2004:174), which in the case of Þingvellir, served the most populated areas of the country.

During this time a man named Grímr Goat-Shoe (Geitskór) travelled around Iceland to gather support for the proposal to establish a national assembly (Magnusson, 1973:98). Meanwhile, his foster-brother Úlfljótr, of Lón in eastern Iceland, travelled to Norway for three years, in which time he studied the law with the help of his Uncle, Thorleif the Wise. He adapted the law of which the newly-established Gulapíng was based, for application to Iceland's circumstances (Jones, 1968:283; Foote & Wilson, 1970:56). From literary sources, it is estimated that around half of the settlers in Iceland were from the area of the modern town of Bergen in Norway, which was the area of the Gulapíng law (Wilson, 1976:78). Perhaps more significantly, Þorsteinn Ingólfsson and his associates also came from this area (Jóhannesson, 2006:38) and therefore this is probably why the Gulapíng was used as a basis for the establishment of Icelandic law. However, it has been suggested that the Gulapíng law was established after the Althing and that, due to the family and political ties of Ari the Wise, he may have exaggerated the importance of the Norwegian influence (Byock, 1988:58) in his *Book of Icelanders, Íslendingabók*.

According to tradition, the Althing was established at Þingvellir in AD930 and adopted Úlfljótr's law code. Hrafn Haingsson of southern Iceland then became the first Law Speaker of Iceland (Brønsted, 1986:84; Guðjónsson, 1985:51). In accordance with Úlfljótr's law, there were initially 12 district assemblies throughout Iceland, each overseen by three Goðar (Jones, 1986:55). The Althing was where all of the Goðar met and where any unresolved disputes from the local assemblies could be brought. All of the Icelandic things were called *skapthing*, meaning that they were controlled by an established procedure and met at regular times at prearranged meeting places (Byock, 2001:171).

Once the Althing had been established, the first law that the Lögrétta passed prohibited ships from displaying warheads or other symbols of aggression when in the seas off the coast of Iceland, known as the 'land-sight' seas. This acted as a means of preventing invasion, and indeed during the time of the Commonwealth, no invasions were ever attempted against Iceland (Guðjónsson, 1985:47,49). As such, the establishment of this law effectively made Iceland an independent nation, because it was a unified law in the interests of Iceland as a nation. The establishment of laws turned the Lögrétta into a legislative body, creating the Republic of the Commonwealth period (Guðjónsson, 1985:37-8), although it is unclear whether or not the Court of Legislature was an independent institution before the reforms of 965 (see below) (Jóhannesson, 2006:63).

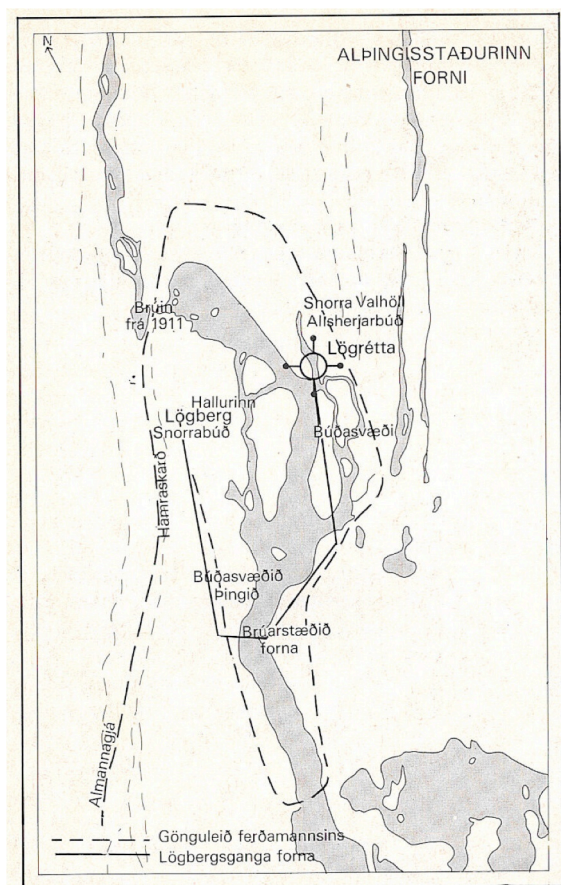
To summarise, the likely chronology of events in the establishment of the Althing began with Úlfljótr returning to Iceland from Norway with his adapted law code around the year 920. After reciting this law code at the Kjalarnesþíng, this was then discussed and the location of the new General Assembly was decided. Following this, Grímr went on his journey around Iceland, lasting two or three summers, gathering support from other chieftains. The first General Assembly may have been held around 925, where Úlfljótr continued to recite the law until the Lögrétta could be established to appoint an official Law Speaker around 930 (Nordal, 1990:68).

### The Organisational Structure of the Althing

The Althing was held when ten weeks of summer had passed, for a period of two weeks convening between 18<sup>th</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> June, at the time of Midsummer. From the year 999 it was altered to the eleventh week, and this arrangement continued until the end of the Commonwealth period (Hastrup, 1985:122; Jóhannesson, 2006:45; Guðjónsson, 1985:63). Prior to the beginning of the meeting, some people would arrive earlier in order to prepare firewood, repair booths and set trout nets in the lake (Nordal, 1990:98). As Iceland was heathen at this time, the Norse god Thor presided over the Althing and so the sessions opened on his day, Thursday (Allan, 2002:51). It is interesting to note that the Gulaping assembly in Norway also opened on a Thursday until 1164 (Jóhannesson, 2006:45). The opening ceremony of the annual session of the Althing was called the Hallowing of the Althing, which took place on the Thursday evening. It was conducted by the Supreme Chieftain, *Allsherjargoði*, who held the hereditary Goðorð of Þórsteinn Ingólfsson and his descendents. The role of *Allsherjargoði* remained in the family of the Reykjavík descendents until the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Guðjónsson, 1985:47). The role of the *Allsherjargoði* was to establish the boundaries of the Althing area, and to declare the area as a sanctuary, which was referred to as *þinghelgi*. It is not known exactly how the Hallowing ceremony was performed, but during heathen times it involved a sacrificial feast in the open air (Jóhannesson, 2006:46). During the Settlement Age, a new land-claim was marked by carrying fire around the perimeter, as in *Eyrbyggja Saga* (DuBois, 1999:5) and so a similar act would be logical here too. The boundaries of the area in which the Althing took place were marked as; to the north, the so-called 'Castles'; to the east, Flosagjá and the gorge extending from it into lake Þingvallavatn; to the south, the lake itself; and to the west, the higher side of Almannagjá. These boundaries would have provided an internal area of approximately 400,000 square metres (Jóhannesson, 2006:46).

On the first Friday of the annual meeting of the Althing, after the Hallowing ceremony had taken place, the Law Speaker declared the procedures of the assembly. Following this, a new Law Speaker was elected, if required. Judges were then appointed to the judicial courts. As described in the 12<sup>th</sup> C. law code *Grágás* (Dennis *et al*, 2006:54), there was a particular rock-cleft, called Hamraskarð (Hammer Pass), to the south of Lögberg near the remains of Snorrabúð, where the judges were each placed by their goði in order to be appointed. Each goði appointed a judge from his own thing district (Guðjónsson, 1985:38,65; Jóhannesson, 2006:67).

On the following day, Saturday, people met at Lögberg, where judges were challenged as to their suitability. Challenges could be made until the sun was in line with the cliffs of Almannagjá and Lögberg (Jóhannesson, 2006:67). Challenges could be made on the grounds of kinship, or other bias (Dennis *et al*, 2006:60-61). Following this, the Law Speaker summoned people with a bell, and then led people to where the courts would sit, in a formal procession called the *Lögbergsganga* (Figure 9).



**Figure 9:** The Route of the procession from Lögberg to Lögrétta is shown with a solid line, as proposed by Guðjónsson (1985).

It appears that the courts were situated to the north or east of the Öxará river. The sessions of the courts dealing with the qualifications of the judges lasted through the night until the next morning and according to *Grágás*, all of the court sessions were held at night (Jóhannesson, 2006:67,68; Nordal, 1990:99). It is important to remember that the 24 hour daylight at that time of year would not hinder this. This is also important from a religious perspective (see ch.3), where nightfall was seen as the meeting of two worlds (Ellis-Davidson, 1988:26).

The Middle Day of the Althing (Wednesday, 7<sup>th</sup> day of the session) was when payments were made for personal and official debts. This took place in the churchyard of the Farmer's Church, which was located close to the original bridge (Guðjónsson, 1985:65).

The last day of the meeting of the Althing, on the second Wednesday, was called *þinglausnadr* (Thing closing day), otherwise known as *vápnatak* ('weapon taking'). Following the old Germanic custom of thing assemblies, men attended fully armed. In Scandinavia, this term referred to attendees clashing their weapons in consent to decisions of the assembly. Agreement to decisions was voiced by the clashing of weapons, however in Iceland the attendees did not have such an input into the decision-making process, although such announcements perhaps received weapon clashing in response. It is most likely that *vápnatak* was the remnants of an ancient custom, which was mainly used for the ceremonial closure of the Althing meeting (Nordal, 1990:99). However, from 1154 it was prohibited to use weapons at the Althing, although this only applied to the courts because of the threat of the use of force and there is plenty of evidence to demonstrate that this ban was not widely adhered to (Þórsteinsson, 1987:18). As it was the role of the Allsherjargoði to open the Althing, it was also his duty to announce the closing of the Althing (Jóhannesson, 2006:46-7).

The Procedures of the Althing meetings were called *þingskapabáttir* (Nordal, 1990:80) and are summarised below in **Table A**.

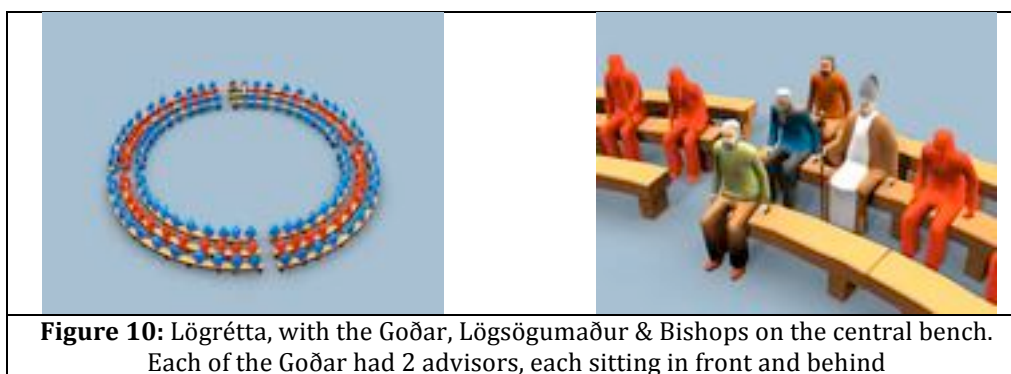
**Table A****The Procedures of the Althing during the Commonwealth Age**

(Allowing for minor differences between the Heathen &amp; Christian Periods)

Thursday (June 18-24)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Assembly gathers at Midsummer on Þór's day</li> <li>• All chieftains must arrive before the sun leaves Þingvellir – approx. 20:30</li> <li>• The Hallowing of the Althing ceremony was then performed by the Allsherjargoði</li> </ul>
Friday (June 19-25)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Law Speaker arrived and proclaimed the procedures of the Althing</li> <li>• Judges to the Quarter Courts are nominated or decided</li> <li>• Chieftains must place their nominated judges in Hamraskarð</li> </ul>
Saturday (June 20-26)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Judges are available for challenging until sunrise on Sunday (approx. 02:00)</li> <li>• Publishing at Lögberg of all suits to go before a Quarter Court</li> <li>• Bell rung &amp; Procession from Lögberg to move the courts out for the challenging of judges by 13:30 at the latest, when the sun was on a specific point on the western cliff of Almannagjá</li> <li>• The Law Speaker decided where each Court will sit</li> </ul>
Sunday (June 21-27)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publishing of suits continued</li> <li>• Lögrétta holds first session</li> </ul>
Monday (June 22-28)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Courts went out in procession to hear cases, not later than 13:30 (as above)</li> <li>• Procession from Lögberg consisted of Law Speaker, Chieftains, Judges and men who conducted the cases</li> </ul>
Wednesday (June 24-30)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On the Middle Day of the Althing (Wednesday, 7<sup>th</sup> day of the session), was when payments were made for personal and official debts. This took place in the churchyard of the Farmer's Church, which was located close to the original bridge.</li> <li>• A portion of the fines was used to pay the Law Speaker</li> </ul>
Sunday (June 28-4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lögrétta holds second session</li> </ul>
Wednesday (July 1-7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lögrétta holds final session</li> <li>• Prorogation of the Assembly, called <i>þinglausnadaðr</i> – performed by the Allsherjargoði</li> <li>• Acquittals were announced</li> <li>• In the Christian period, changes to the calendar were announced</li> </ul>

Initially, the three key elements of the Althing were the Law Rock (Lögberg), Court of Legislature (Lögrétta) and the Judicial Court (Dómr). The Law Rock was the centre of the the Althing, where the annual assembly was opened and closed, announcements were made and where laws were proclaimed.

The Lögrétta was the Court of Legislature, which was the most important institution of the Althing (Jóhannesson, 2006:63). It was responsible for the amending of existing laws and permitting exemptions, as well as the creation of new laws. As laws were a covenant between free individuals, it was therefore of great importance that the best agreement was met, as no-one was considered bound by anything that he had not agreed to (Lugmayr, 2002). Originally, the Lögrétta consisted of 36 goðar, who each sat with two non-voting advisors in order to debate and discuss the making of new laws (Brent, 1975:198), as shown in **figure 10**. Although Goðorð could be divided and shared between different Goðar, only one Goði could represent a Goðorð at the thing meetings (Nordal, 1990:82). Therefore there were likely to be more Goðar than the 36 that sat in the Lögrétta.



The Dómr, or Alþingsdómr, was the judicial court, which also sat in Lögrétta. Individuals could bring their cases to the 36 judges, each of whom were a nominee of a Goði (Brent, 1975:198). The selection of judges to hear cases at the forthcoming meeting of the Althing took place at the spring assemblies. Each of the three Goðar of a spring assembly chose 12 judges (Guðjónsson, 1985:39). At the Althing, each judge then had two advisors, and with the addition of the Law Speaker, the total number of members in the court was brought to 109. Very little is known about the composition of this early judicial court, but it appears to have been an ancient Norse custom for judicial institutions to be composed of three dozen judges (Jóhannesson, 2006:63,66) and the significance of the number 12 is discussed in chapter 3.

The Althing was not so much intended for prosecutions and sentences, but rather for negotiations and the balance of power (Thorláksson, 2000:182). As such, these three elements, the Law Rock, Law Council and the Courts, provided the means for providing compromise and agreement. They were not however an overall authority and so the legal decisions only supported personal solutions (Durrenberger, 1992:57). Therefore, the verdicts of the courts could only be

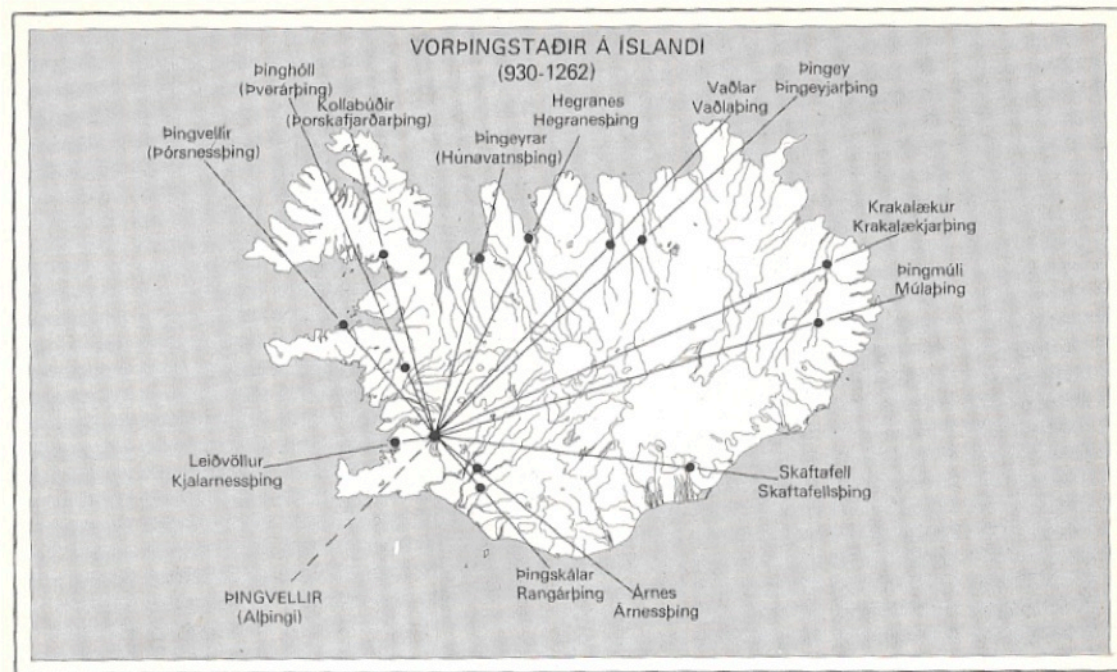


implemented by the winning side, if they had the strength to do so. This lack of an executive role for the Althing was a fundamental flaw in the organisation of the thing system that undermined its authority and ultimately created a power vacuum (Magnusson, 2005:137). The Althing was not responsible for the punishment of individuals who broke the law. It was viewed that criminal acts were private affairs and that it was up to the injured and offending parties to resolve issues based upon the decisions of the Althing. The laws and structure of the Icelandic thing system acknowledged the legal rights of farmers, but it did not provide a means of enforcing those rights (Byock, 2001:184-5). As such, other methods were used, such as duels.

A small islet (hólm) in the river was used for single combat duels (*hólmgánger* – ‘island-goings’) as another means of settling disputes (Hastrup, 1985:122). Duels were a very formal and ritualised event, which were not usually fought to the death, but rather to the first drawing of blood. This is a good example of the relationship between politics and religion (Ch.3), as it was regarded as an ordeal, where the gods decided what the courts had been unable to resolve (Magnusson, 2005:136). However, duels were outlawed at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, shortly after the introduction of Christianity, as it was not seen to be compatible with the system of negotiation and compromise through which the Althing operated (Byock, 2001:183).

Very little is known about the structure of the assembly system before the reforms of the 960s (see below), however it is known that the Goðar were responsible for the maintenance and operation of the early things (Byock, 2001:171). An assembly district consisted of three Goðorð, and their Goðar acted jointly at the Althing. This was particularly important in the early stages of the Commonwealth, while they were securing their positions (Nordal, 1990:79). Of this earlier part of the history of the thing system in Iceland, the most important aspect the thing system on a local level was the várping, or Spring Assembly. This was held in May and lasted for around a week, in which local cases were brought for discussion. Three Goðar were responsible for each várping, and all the þingmenn of each Goði were required by law to attend. The várping consisted of two parts, the court of prosecution (sóknarþing) and the court of payment (skuldaþing). The sóknarþing would always take place first (Byock, 2001:171). After the establishment of the Althing there were 12 várping assemblies, although this was increased to 13 when the country was divided into Quarters (**Figure 11**). Evidence from the 13<sup>th</sup> C. indicates that some of the spring assemblies were abolished by increasingly powerful chieftains, resulting in the collapse of the thing assembly structure in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by the time that Iceland came under the sovereignty of Norway in 1262 (Vésteinsson *et al*, 2004:172).

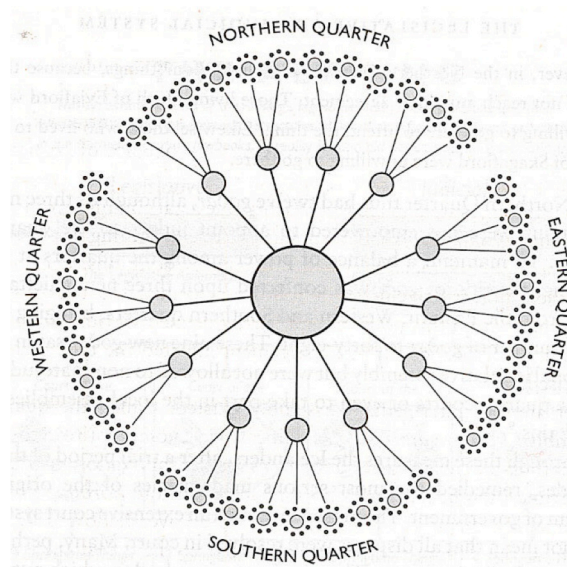
The number 12 was a common numerical unit for assemblies and courts in Norway and the Norse colonies, which probably relates to the earliest assemblies in Norway. Therefore it would be logical for the Icelandic thing system to also be based on 12 local assemblies. The number of Goðar chosen to participate at the Althing, three dozen – 36 (3 for each várping), would enable power to be most fairly distributed among the prominent people of early Iceland (Jóhannesson, 2006:55).



**Figure 11:** The 13 Spring Assemblies of Iceland, in Relation to the Althing

At meetings of the district assemblies, Goðar were able to request from the assembly hill (equivalent to the Law Rock at the Althing) for one in nine of his þingmenn to accompany him to the Althing. It is likely that many travelled to the Althing, as a Goði's prestige was partly displayed through the number of his followers (Nordal, 1990:100). The importance of the number 9 is discussed in chapter 3. Those farmers who were self-supporting and owned a particular amount of property had to pay *þingfarakaup* (Thing-going-tax) to their Goði. It is from this group that one in nine were chosen to travel to the Althing (Sigurðursson, 1999:120). Therefore, the chieftain with the largest number of followers would have the largest number of thingmen. The *þingfarakaup* was then paid to these one in nine men, the amount of which was probably determined by the distance being travelled (Jóhannesson, 2006:61). As a consequence, it is unlikely that the Goðar gained any profit from this tax (Nordal, 1990:78). In this respect, the sources of wealth for a Goði are important in understanding the nature of their power. The source of a Goði's wealth was similar to that of wealthy farmers (*bóndi/bændur*), in terms of how much land they owned. However, their wealth was rather generated by the way in which the Goðar controlled and exploited the wealth that was generated by others (Samson, 1992:168,173).

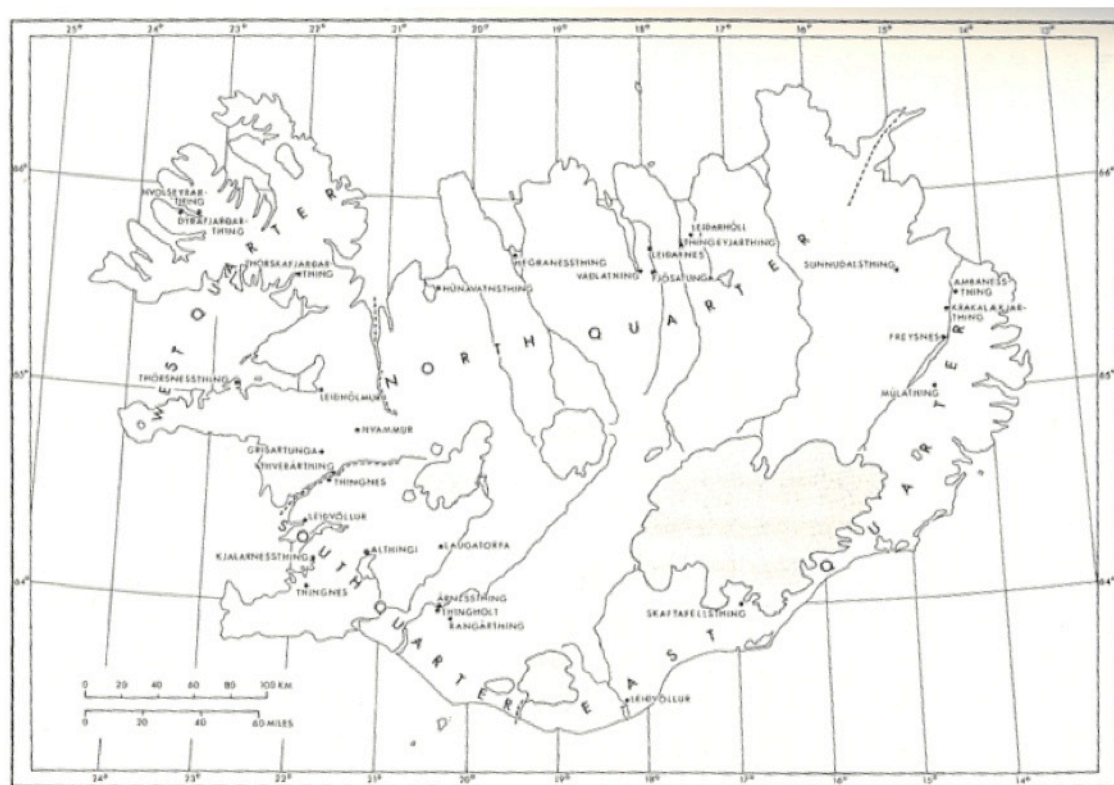
Another aspect of the Icelandic thing system was the *leið*, or autumn assembly. This was held in August, and was for the purpose of reporting to those who had not attended the Althing what had taken place and what new laws had been passed. The other function of the *leið* was to publicly define which þingmenn held allegiance to which Goði and to count the current membership (Byock, 2001:174). Further aspects of the *Leið* included the announcement of new laws from the Althing, as well as explanations of the Icelandic and Christian calendars, such as feast days (Guðjónsson, 1985:66).



**Figure 12:** The Icelandic Thing Structure

The Althing can perhaps best be described as being a hub at the centre of a wider system of smaller assemblies across the country (Byock, 2001:180) (**Figure 12**). From the beginning, a problem for Iceland was the potential for regional fragmentation, due to the difficult geography, although the central nature of the Althing avoided this (Byock, 2001:127). Around the year 965, various reforms were made to the constitution to further prevent fragmentation. A major confrontation between two chieftains, Thord Gellir and Tungu-Odd, resulted from short-comings in the existing system and so the judicial system was reorganised in order to better deal with feud (Byock, 2001:176). Iceland was divided into four Quarters (fjórðungar), with three district assemblies in the East, South & West Quarters, and four in the North (**Figure 13**).

Initially after the reforms, the original 12 thing districts became 13, each of which were overseen by 3 Goðar, thus totalling 39 who attended the Althing (Logan, 1983:68). However, this then gave the Northern Quarter an advantage with four assemblies and therefore more Goðar. In order to maintain political balance, this was adjusted through each of the other Quarters appointing three extra Goðar, each who had a seat at the Althing, although they did not attend local assemblies (Brent, 1975:198). This resulted in the final number of 48 Goðar. As so little is known about the constitution before the reforms of 965, it is difficult to know how significant these changes were, although the reforms are the first instance where geographical boundaries were used in Iceland for administrative purposes. However, the introduction of the Quarter courts did not enhance democracy in Iceland (Jóhannesson, 2006:50,63).



**Figure 13:** The Quarter Boundaries (---)

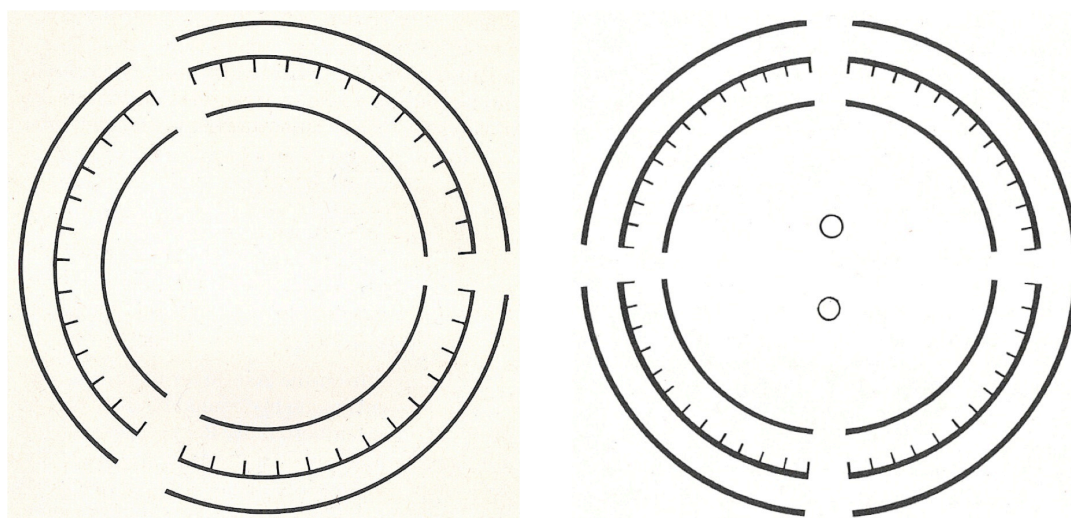
As part of the reforms, the Althing's legislative and judicial functions were separated, and the legislature remained as the Lögrétta (Law Council) and the judicature was divided into four courts, for the four Quarters of the country (Foote & Wilson, 1970:57). Indeed, it is a remarkable feature of the Althing that legislative and judicial aspects were kept separate (Jóhannesson, 2006:66), as the separation of legislative and judiciary power was unprecedented in the Middle Ages (Guðjónsson, 1985:38).

Another adaptation to the wider thing system was to introduce Quarter Assemblies in each part of the country in order to hear cases concerning people from different districts. These were intended as an intermediate stage between the local assemblies (várping) and the Althing (Rafnsson, 2001:128), where people of the same Quarter, but different districts, could bring cases to an assembly of which they were both members. The Quarter assemblies only functioned as judicial courts (Jóhannesson, 2006:50-2). However, the Quarter Assemblies appear to have been seldom used and may have only met as and when required, as the division into Quarters was reflected in the four judicial courts that were also established at the Althing as part of the 965 reforms (Foote & Wilson, 1970:57). Each Quarter Court at the Althing had 36 judges, each of whom were nominated by each of the Goðar of that Quarter. The Quarter Courts were expected to reach a unanimous decision, unanimity being if the minority vote was less than six (Jones, 1968:284).

The reforms also changed the structure of the Lögrétta, which now included 48 Goðar, consisting of an additional three from each of the other three Quarters, to



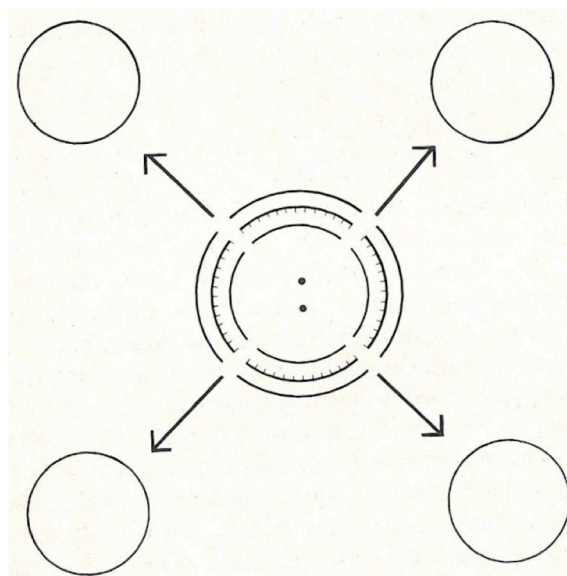
balance the advantage of four assemblies in the North (**Figure 14**). As well as the Goðar, the Law Speaker also had a seat in Lögrétta. After the founding of the two episcopal sees, the two Bishops of Iceland were also provided with seats there, but without the privilege of two advisors. The number of members then reached a total of 147. The Lögrétta was organised in three concentric circles of benches and each could seat four dozen men. The middle platform was occupied by the Goðar, Law Speaker and, later, the two Bishops of Iceland. The outer and inner benches were for the advisors, so that each Goði had one advisor in front and one behind him. Only those sat on the middle bench had the rights to vote and have full participation in the business of Lögrétta (Jóhannesson, 2006:63,64).



**Figure 14:** Changes to the Lögrétta, originally with 36 & later 48 Goðar

Around the year 1005 the Court of Appeal was established, called the Fifth Court (Fimtardómr), which was to be the last major amendment to the constitution of the Icelandic Commonwealth (Nordal, 1990:75). As the Quarter courts required a unanimous decision, which was not often met, then the Fifth Court provided another chance for agreement. This court consisted of 48 judges, each appointed by the Goðar. This change was made by the then-Law Speaker Skapti Þóroddsson, and was the last major change to the constitution before the end of the Commonwealth in 1262 (Jones, 1968:284). This was an effective means of solving disputes, as verdicts depended upon a majority vote (Foote & Wilson, 1970:58). As such, shortly after the establishment of the Fifth Court, the tradition of settling disputes by duels (*hólmgangr*) was prohibited (Nordal, 1990:81).

The judges of the Fifth Court were appointed at the same time as those in the Quarter Courts. Although the extra Goðar appointed to the Lögrétta to balance the Quarters (see above) could not appoint judges to the Quarter Courts, they could do so for the Fifth Court. There were 48 judges in the Fifth Court, but only 36 could make judgements and give sentences. This reduction was the result of the right of both the plaintiff and defendant to remove six judges each from the court. The sessions of the Fifth Court were held in the Lögrétta (**Figure 15**) – this may hold indications of the original arrangement before the 965 reforms, in that the judicial and legislative courts may have been connected, as was the case in Norway (Jóhannesson, 2006:70-73).



**Figure 15:** The Fifth Court, which sat in Lögrétta, in relation to the Quarter Courts

The key events that took place at the Althing during the Commonwealth period are summarised in **Table B** below. Perhaps the most important development in the laws of the Althing was the codification of the law in 1117. Entries in Grágás state that the law books held at the two cathedrals Skálholt and Hólar were to have the priority over ambiguities in the law, indicating that there were many versions of the written law codes in Iceland in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Foote, 2003:9).

- |  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AD 930 – Establishment of the Althing</li> <li>• AD 965 – Reforms introducing the Quarter Courts</li> <li>• AD 1000 – Conversion to Christianity</li> <li>• AD 1005 – Establishment of the Fifth Court</li> <li>• AD 1006 – Abolition of Duels</li> <li>• AD 1056 – Establishment of Bishopric at Skálholt (&amp; Hólar 1106)</li> <li>• AD 1096 – Establishment of Tithes</li> <li>• AD 1117 – Codification of the Law</li> <li>• AD 1262 – Gamli Sáttmáli (The ‘Ancient Covenant’)</li> </ul> |
|--|

**Table B:** Some of the Most Important Events at the Althing during the Commonwealth Period (Þórsteinsson, 1987:19; Lugmayr, 2002)

### People & Power

Various groups of people held power and influence at the meetings of the Althing.

Goðar - Initially there were 36 Goðar, three representing each of the original 12 districts into which Iceland was divided (Magnusson, 1973:99). The term Goði refers partly to their role as a chieftain, but also as a temple-priest during heathen times who conducted sacrificial ceremonies, although their authority was based on other factors too, such as lineage and wealth. They were responsible for the temples as well as being involved in the organisation of local assemblies and the Althing. However, it is difficult to determine how much authority they had before the Althing was created with an established system of law (Jóhannesson, 2006:53-55). Normally the role of the Goðar passed from father to son, although it could also be given away by gift, sale and loan, or divided and shared. There is no evidence that the Goðar were elected. As a consequence of this transfer and acquisition of power, without any over-ruling authority, this later led to political problems, culminating in the power struggles of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Jones, 1986:57), which caused Iceland to submit to the Norwegian crown in 1262. The Goðar were not linked by a formal hierarchy and therefore were as equals. Their power relied upon their relationship with their thing men, however this was only upheld by a voluntary public contract, and the Goðar were only regulated by limited legal guidelines and public opinion. As such, the power of a Goði largely depended upon the consent of his followers (Byock, 2001:75,119-20). As the relationship between a Goði and his thing men was based upon a balance of rights and responsibilities, the fact that a Goðorð was not a defined territory meant that a Goði had to be careful not to lose thing men to other Goðar, as their loss would diminish his prestige. It was therefore a costly and demanding role that a Goði held, but the relationship between a Goði and his thing men was such that it was advantageous for both to strengthen it (Nordal, 1990:84,91). The weakest Goðar risked losing their followers who may defect to another, if he could not represent his followers satisfactorially (Sigurðsson, 1999:12). In this way, the power of a Goði was dependent upon the number of people who had consented to their authority, which in turn relied upon the ability and personality of the Goði (Jóhannesson, 1959:122). The Goðar were in a more advantageous position than farmers, as they were closer to the inner workings of the legal system (Byock, 2001:185) and this contributed to their power and authority.

The Goðar were required to be at the Althing before sunset on the first day of the annual meeting. Once seated in the Lögrétta, they appointed members to the judicial courts and also convened a group of arbitrators called *tylfarkviðr* ('dozen-oath'), which included the Goði himself. In addition, the other duties of the Goðar were to appoint juries for the district assemblies, convene the autumn assemblies (*leið*) and also to hold courts of confiscation (*féránsdómar*). Aside from participating in the various assemblies, it was the duty of the Goðar to maintain the peace and watch over the activities in their Goðorð (Jóhannesson, 2006:62).

The power and influence of the Goðar rested on the strength and favour of public opinion, as a Goði who was righteous and sincere would gain the most respect. In turn, the power of a Goði was also restricted in that his Goðorð could only comprise of a number of clients with whom he could maintain personal ties. The

problems of the 13<sup>th</sup> century stemmed from the Goðorðs becoming so large that this Goði-client relationship suffered. This occurred from the Goðorðs coming into the ownership of a few of the most influential families of the time, including the Sturlungs, Haukdalir, Svinfellings, Vatnsfirðings, Oddaverjar and Asbirnings, which led to a great power struggle between 1229 and 1262 (Guðjónsson, 1985:57,71).

Law Speaker – The Law Speaker (Lögsögumaður) was the only employed official of the Commonwealth and was elected by the Goðar for a renewable term of three years, on the first Friday of the annual meetings, at the time when his predecessor had announced the proceedings for the new session (Jóhannesson, 2006:48). It was the Law Speaker's role to recite one third of the law each year (Jones, 1986:55) and this was of particular importance, as the laws were not written down until the year 1117. The existing lawcodes show traces of the rhythmic alliterative phrasing that helped the Law Speakers to memorise the laws correctly (Simpson, 1967:156). If the Law Speaker required assistance in his recitation, he could consult five or more Lögmenn (Law Men, see below). Another of his duties was to assist anyone who requested his advice upon clarification of the law. Although the Law Speaker was the most important person at the Althing, he held no effective power outside of these meetings (Nordal, 1990:80). As the Law Speaker was the only official servant of the state, his office was formed at the establishment of the Althing, and lasted until 1271. In return for his services, the Law Speaker received 200 ells of homespun cloth (Vaðmál) per year from the treasury of the Lögrétta, as well as a proportion of the fines paid to the Althing (Jóhannesson, 2006:48). The treasury received its income from fees for licences, called Leyfi. Surplus funds were spent on the upkeep and maintenance of the assembly site (Nordal, 1990:80).

When a new Law Speaker was elected, his duties at the Althing began on the first Friday of the session, after his predecessor had announced the legal procedures for the assembly, in order to ensure that everybody in attendance understood how the business of the Althing should be conducted. Except for the Hallowing of the Althing (see above), the Law Speaker was responsible for all official activities of the Althing. He summoned people to Lögberg with a bell, although this must have been a later development in Christian times, as *Íslendingabók* describes how word had to be sent to individual booths. The Law Speaker led a formal procession from Lögberg when the courts convened, and decided where the Judicial Courts should sit. He presided over the sessions of Lögrétta, where he also had a vote in decisions (Jóhannesson, 2006:47-8).

The Law Speaker was the embodiment of the constitution, but he did not rule the country or the courts; he held influence but not power, which was held by the Goðar (Jones, 1968:283). It is not certain whether the Law Speaker was allowed to hold the position of Goði or not. If he did and owned a Goðorð, then he may have been required to appoint a representative during his time in office (Jóhannesson, 2006:48). Although the Law Speaker was an important figure in the Althing, there are no references to such a position in the Norwegian assemblies, but the role may have been carried out by the Lögmenn (law men) (Jóhannesson, 2006:49). With regards to the claim that the laws of the Althing were based upon those of the Norwegian Gulapting, it is interesting that such an important element should differ between the two.



The role of Law Speaker was not unique to Iceland, but it did however gain new meaning and importance in Iceland, which was primarily due to the fact that Iceland did not have an overall ruler, as in other countries (Guðjónsson, 1985:51).

Judges - The 36 judges who sat in the judicial courts were each a nominee of a Goði. These were initially selected at the preceeding spring assemblies, where the three Goðar of each assembly chose 12 men for this role (Guðjónsson, 1985:39).

Advisors - When the Goðar met in the Lögrétta, they each sat with two non-voting advisors. The Goðar sat on the middle bench, with one advisor in front and behind. The advisors had to have sufficient knowledge of the laws to be able to offer sound advice.

Þingmenn - All free farmers who owned property of a minimum amount were obliged to attend the Althing with their Goði, if he required, and so were called þingmenn. The Goði would make a payment to those þingmenn who accompanied him to the Althing in order to cover the costs of travel. Although not everyone was required to participate, the Althing was open to anyone who wanted to attend. By the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century there were around 4,560 þingmenn-farmers in Iceland (Lugmayr, 2002). Any individual who was an able-bodied free man not only had the right to vote, but also to bring cases to the judicial courts. (Byock, 1988:82). Every free-farmer was required to swear allegiance to a Goði and support him at the Althing. Originally, this relationship was quite loose, but became more formal over time. The Goði would protect his farmers, and in return the þingmenn accompanied their Goði to the Althing and also into battle if required. If a farmer/thing-man became dissatisfied with his Goði, then he could renounce his allegiance and choose another instead (Lugmayr, 2002). This could be done on one designated day per year at the autumn assembly (leið), which demonstrates how unstable the Goðar/þingmenn relationship was (Sigurðsson, 1999:120). It was advantageous for a thing man to be associated with the most influential Goði in his district (Sigurðsson, 1999:12) in order to be sure of sufficient representation at thing meetings.

Law men - If the Law Speaker required assistance or advice when proclaiming the laws at the Lögberg, then he could call upon five or more law men (Lögmenn) (Byock, 2001:175).

Women - It is clearly indicated in Grágás that women did not take part in the workings of the judicial system (Byock, 2001:316) and so the numbers of women involved in thing meetings were small. This was in part to protect women from the violence often associated with legal matters and women were not allowed to carry weapons (*ibid*). Women could however become assembly members if they they were a widow who managed their own farm (Sigurðsson, 1999:121).

Case Study: The Adoption of Christianity at the Althing

The effectiveness of the Althing as a means of reaching agreements is most readily displayed in the way in which Iceland became a Christian nation. Eloquence of speech is often seen as having been a key to success at the Althing. In part, this was because speeches had to be intelligible to all those in attendance, but clarity of argument was also important. This is demonstrated in the case of the decision at the Althing for Iceland to become a Christian nation. At the meeting of the Althing in 984, the missionary Þorvaldr attempted to preach Christianity, although the eloquence of his opponent led to the case being dropped. However, when Christianity was adopted 16 years later, the eloquence of speech was of such quality that the case was won. This demonstrates the decisive role of the eloquence of speech at the Althing (Guðjónsson, 1985:60). This is further demonstrated with regards to the power and influence of the Goðar, where the skills of rhetoric and political persuasion were required to enhance their name and influence, which was also achieved through the eloquence of their speeches (Þórsteinsson, 1987:19).

The conversion to Christianity in Iceland has been referred to as “the most important single event in the history of Iceland” (Fell, 1999:16) and was the most important event to take place at the Althing at Þingvellir (Þórsteinsson, 1987:49). Indeed, it was perhaps the most controversial issue to face the early Icelanders, and the closest matters came to a division on a national scale (Foote & Wilson, 1984:59). As paganism was polytheistic, it was not averse to other religions (Olrik, 1971:144) and so opposition to Christianity is likely to have been based more on political grounds rather than religious matters. In Iceland, the conversion had a significant political background. The Goðar, who held power in the Althing, had to be heathen as their other duties included officiating at heathen sacrifices. Therefore, those who were excluded from this political system, by faith or otherwise, may have been in support of a cause that would bring about reform and change (Fell, 1999:25).

Around 997 a missionary called Þangbrandr travelled to Iceland, but the missionary work was tainted by several killings; a story that is recounted in *Njáls Saga* (Cook, 2001:ch.100,p172). At the meeting of the Althing, there were great divisions that rose when Þangbrandr had preached Christianity. Among the consequences of this was that Hjalti Skeggjason was prosecuted for blasphemy for speaking against the Norse gods. The circumstances became so heated that the court in which Hjalti was convicted as a lesser outlaw had to be held on the bridge over the Öxará, with an armed guard at each end. Consequently, Hjalti went abroad to meet with King Ólafr of Norway, at the same time as his father-in-law Gissur the White (*Kristni Saga* – Grønlie, 2006:45).

Having failed to convert the Icelanders, Þangbrandr returned to Norway in 999. King Ólafr, in his anger, imprisoned Icelanders who were in Norway at the time, some of whom were the sons of influential pagans in Iceland, and threatened to kill them if the Icelanders did not submit to the Christian faith. This brought about the desired changes in Iceland, primarily because of the importance for Iceland to maintain good relations with Norway, for trade and also due to family ties (Byock, 1988:141). In AD1000, the two Icelandic chieftains Gissur Teitsson and Hjalti

Skeggjason, who had been in Norway then returned to Iceland, having met with King Óláfr Tryggvason. They brought with them a priest called Þormóðir and travelled to Þingvellir, in time for the meeting of the Althing (Strömbäck, 1975:13). Before arriving at the site of the assembly, they gathered with their friends and followers at Vellankatla, close to Ölfusvatn (the previous name for Þingvallavatn). On hearing that their enemies planned to bar them from the Althing, they rode into the assembly as a large group and the tensions came close to a battle (*Kristni Saga* – Grønlie, 2006:48). Gissur and Hjalti both gave speeches at Lögberg, which appears to be significant in that a convicted outlaw (Hjalti) was allowed to do so, when usually people who renounced their pagan faith were then excluded from taking part in public affairs (Aðalsteinsson, 1999:89). The Christian chieftain Síðu-Hallr Þorsteinsson was asked to announce the laws for the Christians, but he instead persuaded Þorgeir the Law Speaker, who was a heathen, to decide upon the matter. Trouble appeared imminent, as both Christians and heathens vowed not to live along side each other under the same law. A disastrous split between the two parties was avoided by the agreement that all would abide by the decision of the Law Speaker, *Lögsögumaður*. Christianity was officially accepted by Iceland at this meeting of the Althing at Þingvellir in AD1000 (some sources suggest 999, although 1000 is generally accepted). Þorgeir announced that everyone was to become Christian, but allowed for certain pagan traditions to continue in private, although these were later abolished.

The circumstances in which Christianity became the religion of Iceland are regarded with interest because of the limited conflict between heathens and Christians, particularly considering that the Christians were in the minority. Whereas the conversion in Norway had been a long and bloody affair, the official conversion of Iceland was relatively peaceful. A similar situation surrounding conversion also prevailed in Denmark, and as with Iceland, this may be as a result of cultural links with the Norse colonies in the British Isles (Olsen, 1992:154). Arbitration and direct negotiations were most often used as a means of settling disputes in the Commonwealth Period and this was applied in the case of the Conversion, where the Law Speaker Þorgeir was chosen to act as arbitrator. This in itself resolved the conflict, because a religious and political split would have been disastrous due to the social connections between both politics and religion (see chapter 3) (Sigurðsson, 1999:188). In this respect, the conversion can be argued to have been a political rather than a religious move. The official missionary activities were aimed primarily at the leaders of the higher classes. Chieftains saw where power was going to lie, converted as a means of securing their positions (Magnusson, 1973:101) and so the opportunities to enhance personal power were not missed. As with the heathen temples previously, the Goðar made the churches into their source of wealth. However, during the 13<sup>th</sup> century the church steadily undermined the foundations of the power of the Goðar, until circumstances became such that Iceland finally submitted to Norwegian rule (Guðjónsson, 1985:41). The economic benefits of maintaining good relations with Norway enabled Iceland to trade for imports, and the necessity to maintain this connection was great. In adopting the new faith, this immediately made contacts with Europe closer and more extensive (Jones, 1973:287). If Iceland did not convert, then they risked being left behind in European development, only to their own disadvantage.

### Later Developments of the Althing

From 1235 a civil war existed in Iceland when there was a power struggle between the most prominent chieftains, which ultimately culminated in Iceland submitting to the Norwegian crown, bringing the Commonwealth period to an end (Thorláksson, 2000:185) and the Althing was never quite so powerful an institution again. In the centuries after Iceland lost its independence, the role of the Althing changed significantly.

In response to the growing civil unrest in Iceland during the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Icelanders met at various local assemblies during the years 1262-64 and agreed to come under the sovereignty of the Norwegian crown, which they did through the agreement of the Old Covenant, *Gamli Sáttmáli* (Byock, 1988:75). In the initial period of Norwegian rule, Iceland was able to continue under quite free terms. Iceland continued to have its own laws, and the Althing maintained its legislative power, although the Norwegian king could alter existing laws or propose new ones (Byock, 1988:42,76).

After Iceland came under the sovereignty of the Norwegian Crown, a new law code of Norwegian influence was introduced in 1271, called *Járnsíða*, although this proved to be unpopular. This was followed by another Norwegian law code called *Jónsbók*, which, while originally opposed, was similar to the original *Grágás*. However, punishments were much more severe in *Jónsbók* than in *Grágás*, (Guðjónsson, 1985:82), but this was approved at the Althing in 1281 by a majority vote of the Lögrétta (Byock, 1988:76). Once Iceland became a dependency, the role of the Althing changed from a general assembly to becoming a representative body, which was more similar to the Norwegian 'lagting', which had judicial functions (Þórsteinsson, 1987:19). During this period the Goðar disappeared, and were replaced by representatives of the King, who in the earlier part constituted two lawmen and twelve sheriffs (*sýslumenn*), who were responsible for the administration. They were also joined by a Governor (*Hirðstjórar*), who was appointed by the King (Guðjónsson, 1985:81). These were usually Icelanders from the old families which used to own the Goðorðs, and they selected participants from each county (*sýsla*), who were called *nefndarmenn* (nominated men) of which there were 84 in total. By this point the assembly at Þingvellir was often referred to as the Öxaráþing or Lögbing, and the session was reduced to only 3-4 days (Þórsteinsson, 1987:19). The most important events to take place at Þingvellir after the end of the Commonwealth are listed below.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Járnsíða Lawcode (1271)</li> <li>• The Church Law of Bishop Árni Þorláksson (1275)</li> <li>• The Jónsbók Lawcode (1281)</li> <li>• Requirement for Lawmen &amp; Sheriffs to come from Goðorð families who had surrendered the chieftaincies to the Crown (1302)</li> <li>• Landless men must serve house-holding farmers (1404)</li> <li>• Free trade granted (1419)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foreigners forbidden to Winter in Iceland (1431)</li> <li>• Pining Edict (1490)</li> <li>• Foreign Fishing Boats Outlawed (1500)</li> <li>• Lutheran Reformation (1541)</li> <li>• The 'Great Edict' (1564)</li> <li>• Establishment of the High Court (1593)</li> <li>• Iceland trade a Crown monopoly (1602/3)</li> </ul>
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**Table C:** Important Events at the Althing between 1271 & 1662 (Þórsteinsson, 1987:20)

The office of Law Speaker had been abolished with the introduction of the *Járnsíða* lawcode in 1271 and he was replaced by a *Lögmaður* (Lawman), who was appointed by the King to overlook the activities of the *Lögrétta*. In addition, the other old constitutional procedures became obsolete, and the Law Rock no longer held a role in the assembly and a general reduction in the status of the Althing followed. In the later period of the Althing, between 1271 & 1798, the *Lögrétta* functioned as the assembly court, although from 1593 there was also a High Court. The High Court was most active in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and was formed from 24 men who were chosen by the Governor or his representatives, which he then presided over. Until 1662, appeals could be made to the King, and after that to the Danish Supreme Court (Þórsteinsson, 1987:20,23,30).

Punishments became even more severe in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and whereas the Althing had originally been a sanctuary, it now had become a very different place. This is demonstrated in many place-names at Þingvellir, such as *Drekkingarhylur* (Drowning Pool). This was principally brought about by the introduction of the 'Great Judgement' of 1564, making punishments of family laws much more severe (Guðjónsson, 1985:82). There are no records of executions taking place at Þingvellir before this law came into effect (Þórsteinsson, 1987:20). From 1380, power over Iceland was passed to Denmark and by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Danish royal authority had moved towards absolute rule, which became formal absolutism in 1662 and removed the legislative power from the Althing.

From 1662 to 1798, the Þingvellir assembly only held a judicial role, but remained the official place for public announcements. During this period, the duration of the assembly was lengthened to 10-14 days. The focus was mainly upon lawsuits, judgements and, until 1734, executions. From 1734, the Icelanders followed the Norwegian lawcode of the Danish King Christian V, which in turn reduced the number of executions (Þórsteinsson, 1987:17,20). The Althing continued to meet in its original surroundings until 1798, bringing the history of the Althing at Þingvellir to an end.

## 3

## The Relationship Between Politics & Religion in Viking-Age Iceland

When studying the archaeology of past societies it can be easy to regard Religion and Politics as separate entities, which in turn affects our interpretation of the archaeological record accordingly. In the case of early Iceland in the Viking Age however, a closer study of the organisation of the Althing indicates that the politics of early Iceland was influenced by an important and underlying role of religion. The purpose of this chapter is not to undertake an exhaustive and in-depth study into the relationship between politics and religion, but rather to highlight the significance of this subject in relation to the study of *þing* assemblies, the importance of which has often been overlooked.

Old Norse paganism prior to AD1000 was not static, but a dynamic religion that changed gradually over time. Their beliefs were heavily integrated into all aspects of life, although these were not organised into a fixed system (Nordahl, 1990:112). There was no specific word for religion in the Old Norse language, the closest term being *Siður*, which meant ‘ways & customs’, or in modern terms ‘Culture’, which in this case included religion. This indicates how integrated religion was in daily life as a natural part of all occupations (Gräslund, 2000:55-6; Sørensen, 2001:222). Religion in Old Norse society was not controlled by a central organisation and therefore different variations of religious ritual occurred in different areas. As such, it is not always possible to directly transfer information of cult activities from one area to another (Olsen, 1966:278) however nonetheless, it does provide a wider understanding of religion in the Viking world as a whole.

The pagan religion and laws were intimately linked, and as such, the Goðar were bound by both of these elements, as they held both religious and secular roles (Aðalsteinsson, 1999:177), although it has been argued that their religious role was secondary to their political role (Sigurðsson, 1999:185). Societies across Scandinavia during the Viking Age were not all the same with regards to law and legal practices. Iceland however had quite a different legal system, without a king but with several Goðar, resulting in a different form of legal society to that in Scandinavia. Although there are risks in imposing legal practices from Scandinavia directly onto Iceland and vice versa (Brink, 2002:105), there are sufficient similarities that can inform our understanding of the relationship between religion and politics in early Iceland. Religious cult activities occurred on different levels in society; the farms of individuals on a local level; chieftain’s farms on a regional level; and on a supra-regional level at larger sites (Gräslund, 2000:56). Ancient ritual sites are referred to in many place-names in Iceland, such as farms called Hof or Hofstaðir and places called Hörgá or Hörgsdalur (Friðriksson, 1994:49). The relationship between politics and religion will be described here in the context of three cult places of Hof, Hörgr & Vé.



- *Hof*

The term 'Hof' has traditionally been taken to mean 'temple', although this is not an accurate translation in this context. Southern Germanic Languages, of which Old Norse is similar, did not have a specific native word for 'temple', indicating that a true temple cult *per se* did not exist in these areas (Olsen, 1966:279). In early Iceland, a Hof was the home of a chieftain, a Goði. In this role it also functioned as a feasting hall for sacrificial feasts and festivities hosted by the Goði. The Goði received a tax called *Hoftollr* for maintaining the Hof and conducting sacrifices, however these activities probably brought a Goði more expense than profit (Nordal, 1990:79). Feasting was an important means for a Goði to maintain relationships with the people of his Goðorð, which was particularly important at a time of political instability, as was the case in the first centuries after the Settlement (Lucas, 2009:406). As such, the availability of high-quality food is reminiscent of elite households in Sweden, including the religious site at Gamla Uppsala (see below) (*ibid*:404) and highlights the importance of the connection between a Hof and social & political relations.

According to *Landnámabók*, when Iceland was divided into Quarters it was law that there must be three assemblies in each Quarter and three main 'temples' (Hof) in each thing district (Page, 1995:174). One of the roles of the Goði was to provide a link between his people and the gods (Olsen, 1966:278) and so seasonal sacrificial feasts called *blót*, which were held in honour of the pagan gods, were usually held at a Hof (Roesdahl, 1998:152). The provision of a memorable event was of great importance to a Goði in order to maintain his status. Ritual was associated with these sacrifices and feasts and so drama and conspicuous consumption were important aspects of this (McGovern in Lucas, 2009:252). The relationship between a Goði and his thing men was of great importance and relied on social relations, focused in this case on feasting and gathering (Lucas, 2009:404). These sacrifices were primarily held at the beginning of winter, mid-winter and the beginning of summer. Other sacrificial feasts would have been held at other times during the year too, although these are likely to have been more minor ceremonies, or held for a particular occasion (Aðalsteinsson, 1998:42). The timing of these sacrificial feasts is important when considering the relationship between sacrifices, Hof sites and assemblies, and therefore the role of the Goðar. A study of the distances between þing and Hof sites in each Quarter showed that there was a considerable distance between them, ranging from 4-20kms. It was therefore argued that there was not a close connection between Hof and þing sites, indicating that there was not a strong connection between religion and politics (Lárusson, 1958). However, this study did not take into account that some sacrificial feasts held at Hof sites were held in winter, whereas the þing assemblies were held in summer. In winter, frozen waterways would provide different routes of communication compared to summer, where more inland routes could be used (Aðalsteinsson, 1998:42-4). A later study into this relationship between þing and Hof sites has instead shown that most are actually within 10km of each other, supporting the importance of a Hof as a central place (Vésteinsson, 2006). As a consequence, it is apparent that the distance between Hof and þing sites is not indicative of a division between religious and political activity, but rather has a more seasonal focus.

The relationship between Hof and thing sites is further seen in that both Hof and þing sites were used as a type of sacred place, which were also used for ritual purposes (Ślupecki & Valor, 2007:374). Sacred places that were used for ritual activity were part of a larger system of sites, and Hofs were one element of this system. Excavations in Sweden at a Medieval church in Frösö ('island of Freyr'), on land belonging to a farm called Hov, unearthed a Viking Age sacrificial open-air site dating to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, with animal bones lying around a charred Birch stump, indicating that animals had been sacrificed there. Significantly, the island of Frösö was also an assembly place in the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Lucas, 2009:405; Gräslund, 2000:59), again demonstrating a connection between religion and politics.

A Hof can be traced in the Icelandic archaeological record as being a large farmhouse, larger than most, where great feasts and gatherings were held. The best example of a Hof site in Iceland is Hofstaðir (Lucas, 2009), near Mývatn in north-eastern Iceland. The archaeological evidence from Hofstaðir shows that ritual and religion were closely integrated into everyday life. The ritual activities at Hofstaðir were related to the political, economic and religious status of the chieftain's farmstead in the regional landscape (Lucas, 2009:400). Hof sites therefore formed part of a religious-political system, whereby the Goðar could exercise the two elements of their power.

- *Hörgr*

In Iceland many place-names of rivers and valleys have Hörgr as a prefix, for example Hörgá or Hörgsdalur (Friðriksson, 1994:49). The Old Norse word Hörgr denotes a place of pagan worship, referring to open-air cult places. Their form is not always clear, but they are often described as being a natural or artificially constructed pile of stones, or a stony hill (Friðriksson, 1994:48). In its original form, a Hörgr may have been like an altar; a heap of stones, originally in the open-air and later inside a building (Roesdahl, 1998:153). Archaeological finds in Scandinavia from the Early Iron Age have shown that images of the gods on pieces of wood were raised on the pile of stones and that later a shelter was often constructed over this in order to turn it into a dwelling of the gods. This structure may have had walls and a roof, or a roof with four corner posts (Gräslund, 2000:59). However, this shelter was not a spacious temple large enough to accommodate people, but rather a small shrine for the gods, in front of which the people gathered. The shrine was closed to people and even priests had limited access (Ślupecki & Valor, 2007:375). It is not clear whether all Hörgrs had shelters, or whether this was common practice in the North, but both the original open-air and later sheltered versions did exist during the Viking Age. Of cult sites, only Hörgrs indicate a course of development from an open-air holy place, to one that was under cover.

One of the biggest problems regarding Hörgr sites is that there are few confirmed examples in the archaeological record, despite references in literature. In Iceland in 1883 Sigurður Vigfússon investigated a site called Sæból in the West Fjords, which was a square ruin surrounded by a square fence. Test holes provided nothing indicative of a dwelling or an outhouse (Friðriksson, 1994:59), suggesting that it did not have a domestic function. However its identification as a Hörgr has

been challenged as instead being a Medieval farm chapel or even a stable (Olsen, 1966:283). In 1888 Vigfússon also investigated another site in the West Fjords at a farm called Bakki in Tálknafjörður. He found an unusual and large stone enclosure, measuring 90 feet long, square in shape and constructed of boulders and in the centre was a large rock with a pointed top edge. This Vigfússon thought to be a Hörgr, an ancient sacrificial site. A third site which may fit the criteria for a Hörgr is at Hvammur in Barðastrandarsýsla in western Iceland. This was a circular enclosure measuring approximately 30 feet in diameter, with a doorway facing south. When Vigfússon excavated it in 1889, he found an interior stone wall as well as black ash and peat ash, but there was no trodden earth or other signs indicating a floor layer (Friðriksson, 1994:60), which further suggests that it did not have a domestic function. By looking at these possible Hörgr sites collectively, it appears that a form of ritual activity took place, probably sacrifice, due to the ash deposits and animal remains such as teeth and bones found at some sites in Scandinavia (Gräslund, 2000:60). This highlights Hörgr sites as places of cult activity and sacrifice and the possible Hörgr at Gamla Uppsala in Sweden is described below with regards to politics and religion.

- Vé

The pagan gods were often worshipped outdoors in specially consecrated places called Vé (Roesdahl, 1998:153). The term Vé also has Germanic origins and refers to a sacred place, sanctuary or an outdoor ritual site, which was enclosed by stones or poles (Olsen, 1966:282; Gräslund, 2000:59). The spelling varies between Vi (Old Swedish), Væ (Old Danish) and Vé (Old Western Norse) (Brink, 2002:106).

A Vé was commonly also a place of protection in legal situations. For example, if a person was guilty of a crime then providing that they publicly announced the crime, then they could then create a Vé around an area in which they could not be harmed. An example of a Vé being used for legal protection can be seen in the Oklunda runic inscription, carved onto a rock in Östergötland in Sweden, which is a legal text that dates to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. It describes how a man called Gunnar, who had committed a homicide, escaped to a Vi (an assembly site), where he marked out a protected area in which he was safe (Brink, 2002:96). The inscription reads:

“Gunnar cut this, cut these runes. And he fled guilty [of homicide], sought this pagan cult site [Vi]. And he has a clearance thereafter, and he tied vi-finn.”

This demonstrates that a Vé was a sanctuary that could be established for the purpose of protection. Significantly, it appears that a Vé was not always a pre-determined place, but a space that could be marked out as and when required. Although Brink suggests above that the Vé in this inscription was an assembly site, this was not always the case because a Vé could also be used to mark out sanctuaries at a wider range of places, for either cult or legal purposes. In this way, a sanctuary could be established providing inviolable land around a Hof (DuBois, 1999:208) as well as a thing site. The legal role of a Vé at a þing assembly is further supported by the inscriptions on the Forsa Ring, which comes from the Hälsingland region of northern Sweden (**Figure 16**). It is an iron ring measuring 45cm in diameter, with a runic inscription consisting of nearly 250 runes of the

Norwegian-Swedish type, and is dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century (Brink, 2002:96-7). The inscription reads:

“One ox and two aura [in fine] to the staf for the restoration of a Vi,  
in a valid state for the first time;  
two oxen and four aura for the second time;  
but for the third time four oxen and eight aura;  
and all property in suspension, if he doesn’t make right.  
That, the people are entitled to demand, according to the law of  
the people, that was decreed and ratified before.  
But they made themselves this [ring], Anund from Tåsta  
and Ofeg from Hjortsta.  
But Vibjörn carved.”

Here in this inscription is a legal text from the early Viking Age, which related to the maintenance of a Vé, in this case at an assembly site. The Forsa Ring originally came from a place called Hög, a neighbouring parish of Forsa, which was known in the Middle Ages as the Alþing assembly site for all of the people of Hälsingland. The place-name Hög relates to a large mound dating to the early Iron Age, which was situated next to the church. This was probably the assembly *þing* mound and it is to this thing that the Forsa Ring can be connected (the location of the church next to the thing mound is also similar to Gamla Uppsala, described below). As such, the Forsa ring may have been an Oath Ring that was used at the Alþing for the people of Hälsingland at Hög. There is an evident similarity between the inscription on the Forsa Ring and that on the Oklunda rock in describing a Vé (Brink, 2002:97-8). It is also interesting to note that the person who carved the runes on the Forsa Ring had the element ‘Vi’ in his name, Vibjörn (Old Swedish spelling of Vé). In Icelandic, there are also examples of names such as Vémundr and Vélaug (Nordal, 1990:72), which also contain the element ‘Vé’.

The significance of the Forsa ring to the archaeological study of Norse assembly sites is that it provides a tangible link between the enactments of politics and religion. Literature indicates that there was an ‘altar-ring’, which lay in the ‘temples’ and was used for the swearing of oaths, and this ring was also worn by the Goðar when they attended þing assemblies. It is unclear whether the Forsa ring is an exact example of such a ring, but it is probable that the rings that were worn by the Goðar were of a slightly different form. A ring was a powerful symbol of power and allegiance and archaeological finds from graves in Scandinavia, such as swords, had an image of two rings forged together engraved on the hilt, symbolising an alliance between a king and his warrior (Jørgensen, 2000:73-4). In this way, Kings in Scandinavia gave valuable and symbolic gifts such as rings to their followers in return for their allegiance.

These three types of cult sites of Hof, Hörgr and Vé have been described here because they demonstrate the integrated connection between political and religious power that existed in heathen times in Viking Age Iceland (Aðalsteinsson, 1999:36). Most importantly, these site types appear to form part of a wider system of sites related to both political and religious activity.

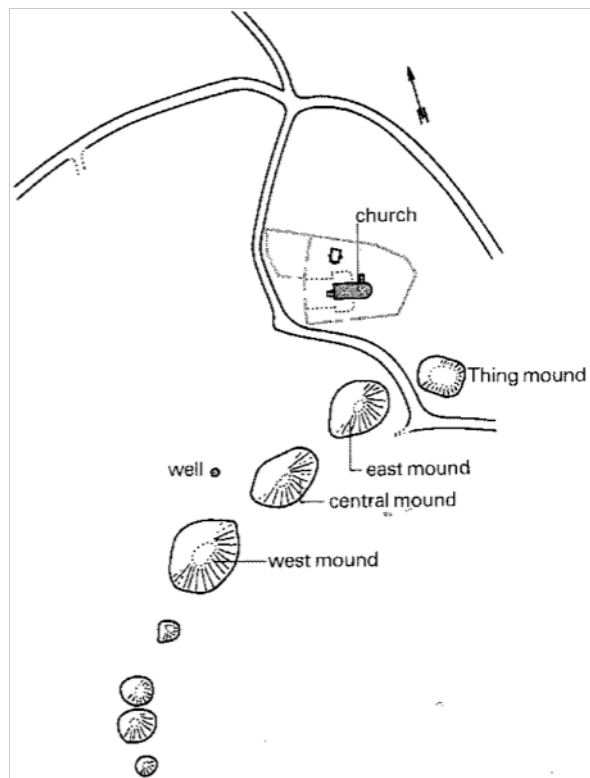


**Figure 16:** The Forsa Ring

*Religion & Power – A Case Study of Gamla Uppsala, Sweden*

The greatest difference between paganism and Christianity was that the pagan cults were not part of a central organisation like the church, because in the heathen Viking world religion was not a separate organisation with temples and priests, but rather it was a part of everyday life. Individuals in society maintained their religion, and rituals were performed by farmers and chieftains. Although the gods were usually worshipped on a local scale, there are also records of major public rituals (Sørensen, 2001:213), which required large and central places.

A study of the famous ‘Temple of Gamla Uppsala’ in Sweden provides an interesting insight into the relationship between religion and politics, thing sites and sacred sites. As can be seen from the map in **figure 17**, the site consists of a thing mound, burial mounds and a church. Adam of Bremen described Gamla Uppsala in c.1075 as a centre of pagan worship, and although his account is based upon sources of varying reliability, it is thought that there was a ‘temple’ at Gamla Uppsala containing idols of probably Þór, Óðinn and Freyr. The cult activity at Gamla Uppsala was focused upon these idols, and so the ‘temple’ is best interpreted as a shelter for them (Olsen, 1966:282), which is comparable with a Hörgr (as described above). Although archaeologists have had little confidence in Adam of Bremen’s description of the magnificent temple itself at Gamla Uppsala (Gräslund, 2000:59), it provides interesting details in amongst the elaborate picture of cult places and activities in the Old Norse Viking world. Excavations at Gamla Uppsala by Sune Lindqvist in 1926 found up to three layers of previous archaeological activity underneath the church. These features indicated that the church stood on the site of the old sanctuary. The oldest layer contained traces of cobbles and burning and the penultimate layer contained post-holes. It is unclear whether any such ‘temple’ on the site may have belonged to this later layer, although it is also possible that these post-holes belonged to the remains of a wooden church within an enclosure (Olsen, 1966:282-3). Nonetheless, the oldest layer is of greater interest and appears to compare with similar finds in the Icelandic archaeological record, such as Hegranes in northern Iceland, where traces of burnt stones were found (Friðriksson, 1994:128). Aage Roussell thought that the ‘Icelandic temple’ was of a similar form to a small enclosure, which strongly resembled the temple at



**Figure 17:** Gamla Uppsala, Sweden



Uppsala. He supported this argument with the Sæból site, but admitted the difficulty of definitively identifying Hörgr sites (*ibid*:70), as discussed above.

Archaeological excavations at Gamla Uppsala have also identified a palisade that enclosed the ritual area, which was not included in Adam of Bremen's description. The excavation has dated this palisade enclosure to the early Viking Age. The size of the enclosure was too small to support a defensive function as an explanation, and therefore it has been interpreted as a symbolic demarcation. This has parallels with the Norse mythical world, where fences enclosed different parts of the cosmos (Sundqvist, 2010:479), such as Ásgarðr and Miðgarðr.

In the late 1980s the remains of a hall, which burnt down around 800, were found to the north of the church at Uppsala. This was probably replaced by another hall, which may have stood where the present church is. A terrace here indicates that there was a structure c.70m long, which Lindqvist's post-holes may be related to. It may have been knowledge of this hall from Adam's informants that formed the basis of his description (Sundqvist, 2010:476). At a similar site at Tissø in Denmark, the remains of a hall were connected to a cult-enclosure, which was thought to be a sacrificial place next to a lake (Ślupecki & Valor, 2007:373), indicating parallels with the building and sacred enclosure at Gamla Uppsala.

What is significant about these excavations at Gamla Uppsala in relation to the present topic is that the church, and evidently the pagan cult site, were located in close proximity to a thing mound, as well as royal burial mounds from the 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> centuries (**Figure 17**; Graham-Campbell, 2001:175). These burial mounds at Gamla Uppsala, and also at Borre in Norway, displayed the status and continuity of the royal dynasties (Sørensen, 2001:217). The presence of the þing mound shows that Gamla Uppsala was an important political and economic centre, as well as a cult site, and the relationship between the thing mound, sacred site and burial mounds enabled the rulers of Gamla Uppsala to use mythical traditions to gain power and legitimacy (Sundqvist, 2010:474). It is noticeable from the map in **figure 17** that all of the mounds are orientated in an arc in relation to each other, displaying deliberate planning and use of the monuments as a whole. What is remarkable is that the thing mound has been especially constructed, whereas at many assembly sites burial mounds are reused for this purpose. Such specially constructed thing-mounds have a characteristic flat top, such as another example at Fornsigstuna (Brink, 2004:207).

The symbolism of these combined features of sacred site, thing mound and burial mounds had both religious and political functions. In the religious role, Gamla Uppsala acted as a place where man could connect with the gods by performing rituals such as sacrifices. The political role involved creating the appearance that the political authority of the rulers came ultimately and directly from the gods (Sundqvist, 2010:480). A description of a meeting of the Gamla Uppsala þing was written by Snorri Sturluson (Brink, 2002:89):

"On the first day, when the þing was opened, King Olafr sat in his chair with his hirð [military escort] around him. On the other side of the þing-site sat Rögnvaldr jarl (from Västergötland) and Thorgny in a chair, and in front of them sat the hirð of the jarl and the housecarls of Thorgny. Behind the chair and around in a circle stood the peasant congregation..."

This supports the description of the organisation of the Althing in chapter 2, where the Goðar took their places in the centre of the Althing (the Lögrétta) and the other assembly participants were gathered around the circle. This potentially further links with the description of a Vé, where particular places were considered as sacred, both features of general sanctity as well as specific cult sites, which could be groves, islands, pastures and rivers (Fell, 2001:177). At Gamla Uppsala it is evident that religion was part of everyday life and interconnected with politics, and that politico-religious activities took place in designated places.

It must however be stressed that not all thing sites performed such an explicit role as at Gamla Uppsala, which only represents a relatively rare example of multi-focal, long-lived cultic assembly sites. Sites such as these evolved in special circumstances and they do not represent a common model at regional or local levels (Sanmark & Semple, 2008:255). That is not to say that religious activities did not take place at other types of assembly sites, but nonetheless, it is important to consider assembly sites such as Gamla Uppsala because they help to demonstrate the importance of the connection between religion and politics. An understanding of this then can help to influence the interpretation of the Althing.

### *Implications for the Study of the Althing*

The relationship between religion and politics is also noticeable when looking at specific aspects and events of the Althing. The relationship between religion and politics, cult and law, was so close that the two were interlinked and inseparable. For example, the guilt of a person was not only decided by the judges in a court, but also procedures were associated with taking established oaths and invoking the gods, as recorded in the early Västgöta law of Sweden (Brink, 2002:95). The Christianisation of Iceland was a largely political process, and initially did not greatly affect pagan religious practices (Lucas, 2009:407), however the Icelandic law code Grágás does not include direct references to heathen practice because it was written at a later time long after Iceland had become Christian. Nonetheless, the practices of the Althing indicate underlying religious aspects that affect how the archaeology of the Althing must be approached and interpreted.

- The Hallowing of the Althing

The role of the Goðar included priestly functions at seasonal observances and public rites, such as the hallowing of assemblies, which were important formal ceremonies (Byock, 2001:294). The marking of the Althing was a sacred ceremony, where the exact location of the Althing at Þingvellir was demarcated, fixed and measured (Pálsson, 1993:17,83). The important role of the Goðar highlights the significance of the Hallowing of the Althing ceremony. As the *Allsherjargoði* conducted the Hallowing ceremony, it was also his responsibility to close the annual session on the last day, the prorogation of the Althing (Jóhannesson, 2006:47). This highlights the religious aspect of the Althing, where the supreme chieftain had to create and then nullify the Vé in which the Althing took place.

Everything relating to the law was ruled over by the gods, which therefore made the thing assembly a hallowed place (Ellis-Davidson, 1988:16). Originally, the opening of the annual meetings of the Althing was marked by the 'Hallowing of the Althing' ceremony. This was carried out in the evening of the first day, Thursday (Þór's Day), by the *Allsherjargoði*, the supreme chieftain. It is interesting to note that the Gulaping in Norway also met on a Thursday until 1164. The role of the *Allsherjargoði* in the Hallowing ceremony was to establish the enclosed area of the Althing and to declare the area as a sanctuary. This area was known as the *þinghelgi*, the sanctuary of the assembly. It is not known exactly what the Hallowing ceremony involved, but it is likely that in heathen times it involved sacrificial feasts in the open-air (Jóhannesson, 2006:45-6) and the marking of the boundary with fire. After the introduction of Christianity, the *Allsherjargoði* retained his position and it was he, not the Bishop of Skálholt, who continued to open the meetings of the Althing each year (Cleasby & Vigfússon, 1874:17).

Animal sacrifice was frequently undertaken at large gatherings, such as assemblies. The selection of male animals may have a cultural link to the fact that it was men who took part in the Icelandic thing assemblies (Lucas, 2009:405-6). It was one of the duties of Scandinavian kings to perform sacrifices to bring peace and prosperity to his people, and kings were regarded as the most effective intermediaries between the people and the gods (Nordal, 1990:74). During the Hallowing ceremony, which took place at Lögberg, sacrifices were made for peace and prosperity in conjunction with the consecration of the Althing (*ibid*:98). The mound was seen as the dwelling place of the supernatural, and so it was the location where communication could be established between men and it was linked with continuing kingship through the generations (Ellis-Davidson, 1988:131). In relation to this, the Icelandic Goðar were equivalent to the petty kings of Norway before the reign of Harald Fine-Hair (*ibid*:74) and so in combination with their dual political and religious roles, it was they who carried out such sacrifices in Iceland.

There are accounts from the Settlement Age of Iceland that describe that settlers circled their newly-claimed territory with fire, in order to hallow the land. An example is in *Eyrbyggja Saga*, where a new settler called Þórólfr, who was a farmer of status in Norway as a chieftain and owner of a temple, threw the timbers of his high seat overboard and allowed Þór to decide where he should land. He then used fire to lay claim to the land, reserving part of it as a sacred site dedicated to Þór. This demonstrates the political and religious influence of his authority in Iceland (DuBois, 1999:5). This ritual, which had its roots in ancient Nordic religion, is sometimes described in relation to heathen worship, and on occasion areas of land were hallowed to 'temples' (Aðalsteinsson, 1999:137).

In Scandinavia and Britain it was common for meeting places to be located around burial mounds (e.g. Sanmark & Semple, 2008), but in Iceland no such burial mounds existed to distinguish holy sites. This therefore presents an opportunity to observe how sites became hallowed. When Iceland was settled, certain natural sites were selected as sacred places, such as the story of Þórólfr above, but these were not marked by buildings, enclosed walls or boundaries (Ellis-Davidson, 1988:13,16), but were defined by natural features. This use of natural features is particularly visible at Þingvellir.

- The Sanctity of the Althing

The Hallowing ceremony created a sanctuary in which the proceedings of the Althing could take place. Scandinavian sanctuaries often situated by lakeshores and waterfalls, and fissures going down into the earth were seen as a means of communication with the underworld (Ellis-Davidson, 1988:26) and all of these features are evident at Þingvellir. Further evidence that Þingvellir itself was regarded as a sacred place is seen in the presence of fissures throughout the area, a waterfall to the north of the site, the water-filled fissures to the east and the lake shore to the south.

The societies of Viking Age Scandinavia were based upon a legal framework that was implemented through legal institutions such as the þing, which were enclosed with Vébönd, the 'Hallowed Ropes' (Brink, 2002:88). As described above on the Forsa Ring, the Vébönd and the sanctified areas within þing assemblies were of great significance. In *Egil's Saga* (Ch.56; *ibid*:87) there is a passage that describes this in more detail, in relation to the Gulaping in Norway, around AD946:

"Where the court was established there was a level field, with hazel poles set down in the field in a ring, and ropes in a circuit all around. These were called the Hallowed bands. Inside the ring sat the judges, twelve out of Firthafylki, twelve out of Sognfylki and twelve out of Hördafylki. It was for these three twelves to reach a verdict in men's lawsuits. ... Askman and the men of his troop ran to the court, cut through the hallowed bands and broke down poles, scattering the judges. A great uproar broke out at the Thing, but everyone was weaponless there."

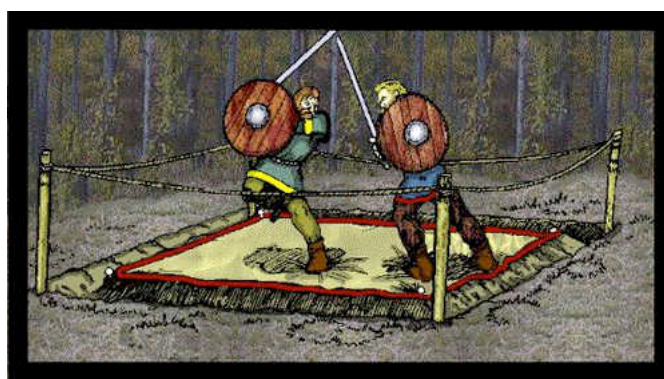
The ceremony of '*Að strengja vébönd*', to cordon off sanctuaries (Pálsson, 1993:92), demonstrates the importance of the sanctified area of the þing, as well as hinting at the consequences as described on the Forsa Ring. The use of Hazel poles is interesting to note because the extract above specifically states that Hazel was used. Hazel was used in these contexts because it was seen as a source of wisdom (Ellis-Davidson, 1988:26), which could therefore aid the proceedings and outcomes of the court sessions.

The matter of weapons at *þing* assemblies is interesting on the points of a sanctified area and also the customs of clashing weapons in order to convey agreement, called *Vápnatak*. After a persuasive speech had been made, the people in the congregation showed agreement by clashing their weapons. Here there are two recognisable aspects of a thing meeting, as outlined in chapter 2; the chieftains were surrounded in a circle by the onlookers, who then voiced their agreement by clashing their weapons. Therefore people must have been allowed to carry weapons at the þing, although this extract from *Egil's Saga* above shows that no weapons were allowed (Brink, 2002:89). A likely explanation is that general participants of the Althing carried weapons, although these were not permitted within the sanctified area of the Vé where the courts were held.

- Hólmgangr

When cases could not be agreed or settled in a court, a final means of resolution was found in a duel, called a hólmgangr (lit. 'Island-going'). All hólmgangr were held inside an enclosed area, which was usually on an island, and at the Althing duels took place on an island in the river Öxará, until their abolition in 1006. A boundary was used to enclose a sacred area and establish a Vé, separating it from the outside world, and this boundary was marked with Vébönd that was used to enclose both law courts and hólmgangr duels (Ellis-Davidson, 1988:27). The enclosed area in which a duel was held was called a Hólmring (**figure 18**), and duels were governed by a set of rules called *hólmgangulög*. These duels were seen as an opportunity for the gods to resolve a dispute where the courts had been unable (Magnusson, 2005:136), so this is a good example of the interrelation between religion and politics.

A detailed description of the procedures of a hólmgangr can be found in chapter 10 of *Kormák's Saga*. A cloak measuring 5 ells (9 feet) square was laid, which were held down with pegs in the corners called tiösnur. A sacrifice called tiösnuþlót was carried out, and according to *Egil's Saga* (Ch.65) the winner of a Hólmgang sacrificed an ox as a thank-offering to the gods (Ellis-Davidson, 1988:53). Three borders each measuring a foot wide were set out around the cloak, and in the outer corners of these were placed four Hazel stakes called Höslur. This gave a fighting area of 12 feet square (see discussion of symbolic numbers below). The resulting enclosed area was said to then be 'Hazelled' (völlr haslaðr). Each contestant had the use of three shields, and had a person to hold them, but they had to continue with just their weapon if these became destroyed. The challenger had the first move and fighting ceased upon the first drawing of blood. If either of the contestants stepped with one foot outside of the 'Hazelled' area then this was called 'yielding ground', whereas if a contestant stepped out of the area with both feet, then 'he flees'. The contestant who was wounded the most had to pay a fee (*hólmlausn*), which was 3 marks of silver.



**Figure 18:** A Hólmring, in which duels took place

A point of interest is that the area was marked out with Hazel stakes because Hazel was used in these contexts as it was seen as a source of wisdom (Ellis-Davidson, 1988:26). Hazel is not native to Iceland, and it has only rarely been found in studies of artefacts here (Dawn Mooney, pers. comm.). Consequentially, either another species of wood must have been used in Iceland as a substitute, or the significance of the Hazel must have been great enough to warrant importing it.

- The Role of the Goðar

It is evident that the religious and political roles of the Goðar were closely connected in all aspects of society. The Danish Glavenstrup stone, which was carved at the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, commemorated a Goði and the inscription called for Þór to hallow the runes, thereby emphasising the connection between the Goði and his god (DuBois, 1999:65). The religious importance for a Goði and his connection to politics is further indicated in an extract from *Landnámabók*, which states that:

“Each Goði was to wear the ring on his arm at all meetings he took part in. Before holding court, he must redden the ring in the blood of the beast that the Goði himself sacrificed at the assembly. Everyman who had legal duties to perform at court in the assembly must first take an oath on this ring.”

The connection between politics and religion is also indicated in that every man who was involved in a sentence or judgement at the Althing had to swear an oath on that ring saying: “...*I swear on the ring a lawful oath, so help me Freyr/Freyja, Njörðr and the almighty god [Óðinn?].*...”; these three were the Vanir gods. The Vanir were associated with farming, husbandry and the ability to see the future, whereas the Æsir gods were associated with warriors (Magnusson, 2005:103). Although there is a recurring theme of three gods, the specific gods named seems to vary. In this extract, Pálsson (1993:44) claims that ‘the almighty god’ was Óðinn, but Magnusson (2005:108) suggests the term to mean Þór. The latter is most likely, as Óðinn was not common in Iceland, but is also possible that it is a modification of Christian influence. The importance of three gods is again referred to in Adam of Bremen’s description of Uppsala, where the images of three gods were displayed (DuBois, 1999:43). Indeed, when a man had a lawsuit at a þing, he had to swear an oath at three temple sanctuaries in the area, an act associated with the three major sky gods, Óðinn, Þór and Freyr (DuBois, 1999:190). Þór was the most popular god in Iceland, which is logical as he was associated with farmers and fishermen (Magnusson, 2005:104); both essential occupations in Iceland. It is clear that the Oath-ring played an important part in the proceedings of the Althing, but after the conversion to Christianity, the Cross replaced the ring as the sacred emblem of the constitution (Pálsson, 1993:46).

It has been argued that practical and symbolic mathematics were not separate in early Iceland (Pálsson, 1993:167) and it is clear that there was a specific and deliberate method to the organisation of the Althing, with a strong numerical role. The number 12 was the basic numerical unit for the courts and other assemblies in Norway and the Norse colonies, and therefore when the Althing was founded, it was natural that the number of chieftaincies should have this numerical unit of 12 as its basis (Jóhannesson, 2006:55). The number 12 is also evident in a special group of arbitrators called *tylftarkviðr* (lit. ‘dozen-oath’), of which a chieftain was a part (Jóhannesson, 2006:62). In its very original form, the Lögrétta consisted of 36 Goðar of the ‘ancient chieftaincies’, three from each of the original 12 þing-districts, and the 36 Goðar constituted one ‘kingship’ when assembled at the Althing (Pálsson, 1993:86). The basis of 12 and 36 members is also seen at the Gulaping in the extract from *Egil’s Saga* above. When the Lögrétta increased in the size, this was also on the basis of 12, to a total of 48 Goðar from 13 þing-districts. The Lögrétta was then constructed in such a way as to accommodate four-dozen



men (Jóhannesson, 2006:64). Further evidence of the importance of the number 12 can be found in Sweden, where many thing-sites are furnished with 12 standing rune stones, often with references to the establishment of that particular thing (see Sanmark, 2009). The number 9 appears in the number of extra Goðar that were added to the Lögrétta when the country was divided into Quarters. A chieftain could also request that one in nine farmers in his chieftaincy should accompany him to the Althing (Jóhannesson, 2006:61/63; Sigurðsson, 1999:120), meaning that the chieftain with the largest number of followers also had the most thing men. Indicating a religious aspect of 9, Adam of Bremen's description of Uppsala includes a major sacrifice every 9 years, of 9 males of each type of animal, including humans, the bodies of which were then hung in a grove. Everyone was obliged to take part and Christians had to pay to be exempted (Sørensen, 2001:203). The number 9 is also evident in the hólmgangr discussed above. It was an ancient Norse custom that the highest judicial institutions, the courts at the Althing, were composed of three-dozen judges. The Goðar nominated these 36 judges (Jóhannesson, 2006:66). The Fifth Court consisted of 48 judges, although this was reduced to 36 by the removal of 6 by the prosecution and defence (Jóhannesson, 2006:71). It is interesting to note that the basic unit of 12 was used in the Quarter and Fifth courts, but that uneven numbers were used for the juries, called *kviðdómar* (Jóhannesson, 2006:74). All of the meetings of the courts were held at night (after midnight) and on the following nights until all the cases had been dealt with (Jóhannesson, 2006:68). This is interesting because it has been argued that the Norse world-view associated law with the winter solstice (Pálsson, 1993:42). Although there is 24-hour daylight in the summer when the Althing met, the reason for holding the courts at night may have been a symbolic act connecting law with the darkness of winter.

### Conclusion

The power structure of the Commonwealth favoured paganism because the chieftains based their authority on a religious foundation (Hjálmarsson, 2009:28) and so the pagan religion appears to have grown stronger after the unification of Iceland through the establishment of the Althing. Pagan temples and sacred sites were publicly recognised and their maintenance was considered a public duty (DuBois, 1999:42). Hof sites were supported by the *hoftollr* tax, but this may also attest for the claim in *Íslendingabók* that when Grímr Geitskór travelled around Iceland to find a suitable site for the Althing, that he paid his earnings 'to the temples' (Grønlie, 2006:5), so it is very likely that this also applied to the Althing. The name 'Althing' has been interpreted as meaning 'All-Men's Assembly' (ch.2), although it also had a more religious-political meaning. A place with the element 'al' in the name should be understood as a protected area, with a connection between 'al' and gathering places, where the name also refers to 'a fenced protected area' or a 'legally protected place' (Myrberg, 2008:139). Such an interpretation is supported by the relationship between religion and politics discussed in this chapter, as well as by specific examples, such as the use of a Vé to demarcate sanctified areas. This is in line with the findings in this chapter, where locations of legal proceedings took place in a protected, sanctified area called a Vé.

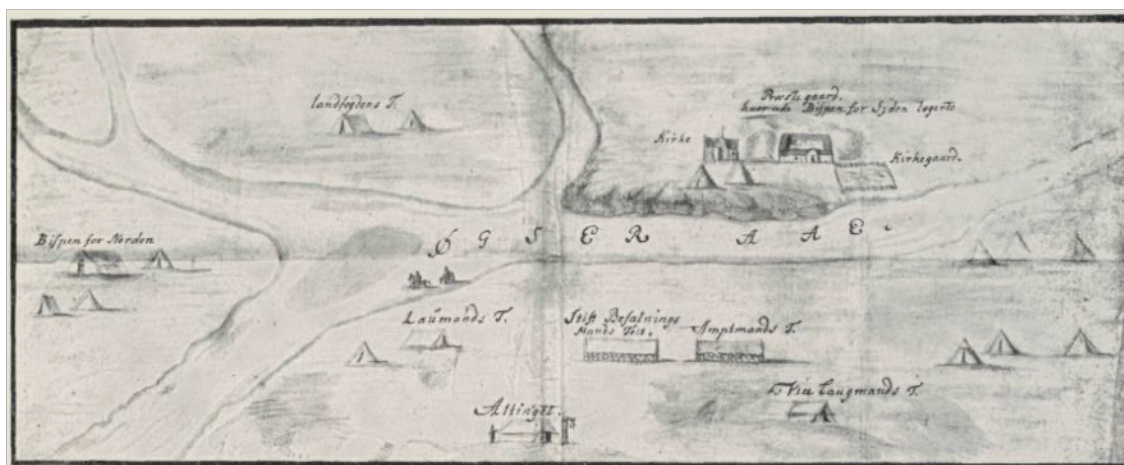
## 4

## History of Archaeological Research at Þingvellir

Archaeological research of the Althing at Þingvellir can be divided into two parts; the early work of the pioneers of Icelandic Archaeology, and the significant developments of modern research in the past 25 years. The key artefacts that have been found during excavations are also discussed below.

### The Early Pioneers

Descriptions of the historical remains at Þingvellir began to appear during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the first of which dates from 1700, which described the remains of the Law Council and also the remains of 18 booths. Notably, other descriptions from this period include the locations of the booths belonging to leading officials of the time. Three maps of Þingvellir exist from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and one from the 19<sup>th</sup>. The oldest of these (reproduced in Þórðarson, 1922 and shown below in **fig. 19**), dates from around 1782 (UNESCO, 2004:29). These are of particular significance to the later history of the Althing, as they represent primary and contemporary sources of the last century in which the Althing was held at Þingvellir.



**Figure 19:** An early sketch of Þingvellir, from around 1782

Although these early maps show a contemporary image of the Althing, it was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that detailed archaeological maps began to appear (e.g. Vigfússon, 1881 & Þórðarson, 1945). These later maps are of particular relevance as they record specific archaeological remains from all periods. Archaeological research in the 19<sup>th</sup> century began when Sigurður Guðmundsson made a study of the assembly site at Þingvellir. He was the first director of the Antiquities collection, which was established in 1863 and later became the National Museum of Iceland (Vésteinsson *et al*, 2004:172; Guðmundsson, 1878).

### Sigurður Vigfússon

Sigurður Vigfússon, who was a pioneer of Icelandic Archaeology, carried out the first archaeological excavations at Þingvellir in 1880. Assembly sites, particularly the Althing, were a priority of research for the Icelandic Archaeological Society (Íslenzka Fornleifafélagið), which was established in 1879. As the agent of this society, it was one of Vigfússon's first tasks to undertake excavations at Þingvellir, which was funded by the Society. However, while his work confirmed his ideas about the form and age of the site, the excavations were small-scale and not very informative (Vésteinsson *et al*, 2004:172). Nonetheless, his work was very significant in this early period of research of the Althing, which was published in the Society journal (Vigfússon, 1881). He excavated six areas of the assembly site:

1. **Spöngin** – Vigfússon surveyed and excavated a rectangular structure measuring approximately 10 x 7 metres and a circular structure or enclosure measuring around 17 x 20 metres. The entrance to the rectangular building was situated in the longitudinal southern wall. He found what he believed to be the traces of several structures, as well as two or three circular wall structures set in a concentric pattern. In addition, he found a layer of charcoal and ash, which separated the concentric circles around a structure and the visible surface remains above. This therefore demonstrated that the remains were not from the same period.
2. **Turf Wall** – He excavated a turf wall that was located adjacent to Peningagjá, to the west of Spöngin, in a place called *Lögbergssporðurinn* (Law Rock Tail). The turf structure was not clearly defined, but it had steps below it. He concluded that there had been a fireplace there, due to the presence of ash in the soil, however there were no further traces of a building.
3. **Biskupabúð** – An investigation of features in the field next to the farm, known as the Bishop's Booth, identified a large structure approximately 33m long and 7m wide. He found a doorway towards the northern end of the western wall of the structure and on the eastern side there was a connected building. The size of the structure allows a possible interpretation as a longhouse, predating the bishops, from the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> centuries.
4. **Njálsbúð** – The excavation of this thing-booth, which measured approximately 29x8m, identified clearly defined turf walls, although they had become rather distorted. A doorway was found in the eastern longitudinal wall near the northern end of the building, which faced the river. It was also found that the wall at the northern end had later been moved closer into the structure.
5. **Snorrabúð** – Vigfússon excavated another booth in Hamraskarð, close to Lögberg. He examined both end walls of the booth and concluded that there were three phases of construction, each within and above the other. The original walls appeared to no longer survive. Measuring 23x10m, it was of similar proportions to Njálsbúð. Underneath this structure, he identified the remains of a bulwark, which he connected with Virkisbúð (Bulwark Booth) in Njáls Saga.
6. **Lögberg** – Vigfússon excavated a trench across the Law Rock, measuring 1.5 metres wide, from the edge of the gorge to the rock below. In the southern end of the trench he identified a significant amount of ash, which he concluded was a fireplace from activities there before the man-made structure there was built (UNESCO, 2004:30-31).

An important point to emphasise is that at the time, Sigurður was of the opinion that Spöngin was in fact the Law Rock, and that the accepted location today of Lögberg next to Almannagjá was to him only questionable. This variation in opinion must be considered when reading his account (Vigfússon, 1881) and interpreting his work. Another inconsistency is in his excavations of Snorrabúð, where he found remains of an earlier booth underneath, which he interpreted as Virkisbúð from Njál's Saga. There appears to be some confusion here, as the structure on Spöngin has also been called Virkisbúð (Þórðarson, 1945:260). His excavations at Lögberg (Almannagjá) provided very interesting results, which can contribute to our current understanding of the site. In this respect, the large quantities of ash and animal bone that were found with a fireplace at Lögberg are of particular interest. Literary and other sources cited in chapters 2 & 3 have shown that the opening ceremony of the Althing was carried out by the Allsherjargoði at Lögberg, and that it was very likely that this included animal sacrifice in pagan times. Here this archaeological research suggests a connection with this important part of the Althing, although this cannot be confirmed without detailed analysis of this ash.

The early work of Sigurður Vigfússon has been significant in laying foundations for archaeological research at Þingvellir. The fact that his investigations targeted the key features of the Althing site means that it was possible to build a wider understanding of the assembly from early on in the history of Icelandic Archaeology.

### Brynjúlfur Jónsson

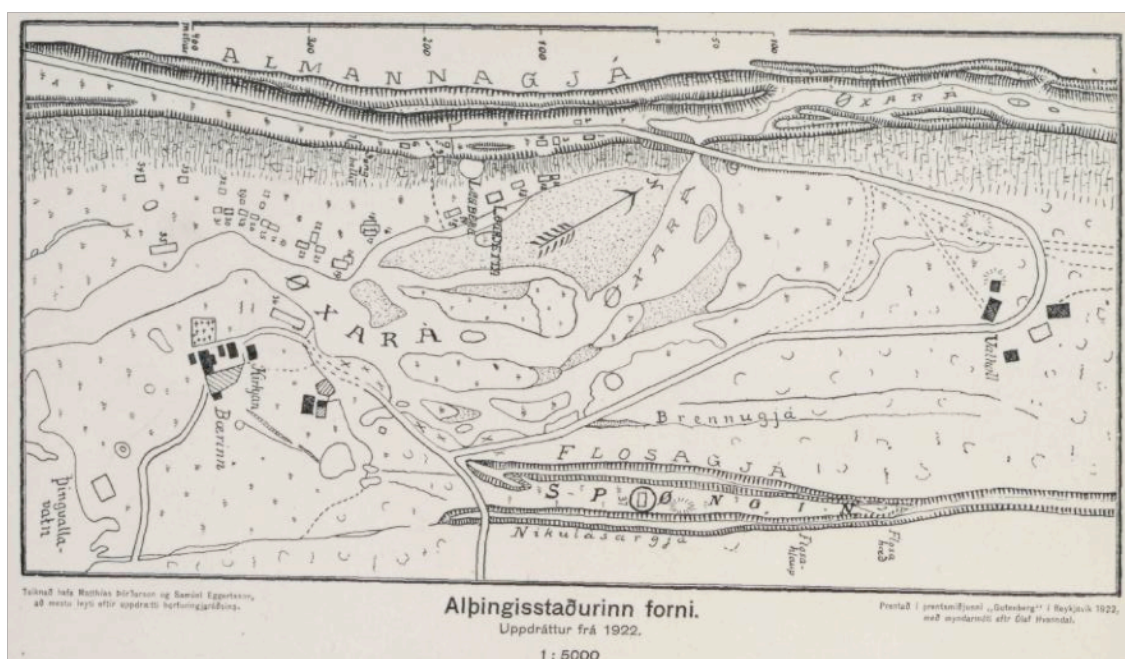
When Vigfússon died in 1892, Brynjúlfur Jónsson replaced him in the Archaeological Society. He was particularly interested in spring assembly sites (chapter 2) rather than the Althing and he and Daniel Bruun mapped, but did not excavate, many spring assembly sites in Iceland around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Vésteinsson *et al*, 2004:172).

### W.G. Collingwood

The Englishman W.G. Collingwood made a journey around parts of Iceland in 1897, and travelling with the Icelander Jón Stefánsson, they visited key sites from the Icelandic Sagas. The two principle aims of Collingwood's expedition were to paint various watercolours of the Icelandic landscape and saga sites, as well as to write a travel book, but he also undertook a couple of excavations, most notably at the Þórsnes assembly site on the Snæfellsnes peninsular (Townend, 2009:96). At Þingvellir, Collingwood spent two days photographing and sketching the site of the Althing, as well as the surrounding geology (Ingólfsson, 2010,116-121; Townend, 2009:104). Collingwood's most famous painting of Iceland is of the Althing, as shown in **Figure 7** in chapter 1.

### Matthías Þórðarson

Archaeological research into the Althing at Þingvellir continued from 1920 when Matthías Þórðarson, then director of the National Museum of Iceland, conducted an extensive study of the old assembly site, publishing various articles (e.g Þórðarson, 1922; **figure 20** below) and a book (Þórðarson, 1945). His investigations included an excavation of Þórleifshaugur (Thorleif's Barrow) in 1920. According to tradition, this barrow is the burial place of Þórleifur Jarlaskald (Poet of the Earls), who was killed at Þingvellir and buried "North of the Law Council". It was evident that the barrow had been disturbed, but that it was of considerable age. It contained a large quantity of rock, as well as traces of charcoal and ash, in addition to fragments of bone, iron nails and also a silver coin of King Sverrir of Norway, dating to the 12<sup>th</sup> century (UNESCO, 2004:29,32). Another result of Þórðarson's work was that he was able to establish that the majority of archaeological remains at Þingvellir dated from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and not from the Medieval period (Vésteinsson *et al*, 2004:172).



**Figure 20:** A Map from 1922 Showing Archaeology at Þingvellir

The work of the early pioneers did much to lay the foundations of research and understanding of the Althing at Þingvellir, but it was not until the commencement of later research with modern techniques that the significance and complexity of the archaeology of the Althing at Þingvellir became more apparent.

## Modern Research

- Topographic Survey

The 1980s saw the beginning of significant modern archaeological research taking place at Þingvellir that began with a field survey of all visible archaeological remains, which was carried out between 1986 and 1992. The survey was done using a Total Station and plans were drawn to a scale of 1:100. Although the site had been surveyed before, this method of surveying and recording the archaeology created a much more accurate picture of the site than had been possible previously. In addition, the archaeology could then be categorised chronologically. The results of the survey demonstrated that the archaeological remains were much more extensive and complex than had been previously thought, recording the ruins of 50 booths and other structures. This survey was done by the National Museum of Iceland and formed the basis for the planning map of the Þingvellir Commission, around 1990 (UNESCO, 2004:29,33). This resulted in new pathways being built, which have reduced the amount of erosion by visitors that was causing damage to the archaeological remains. The timber walkways have been designed in such a way so that they could be removed in the future without causing further damage. At the same time as the survey, a series of cores were taken on the field next to the river, which showed that there was a layer of sand, which may have covered over further archaeological remains (Guðmundur Ólafsson, pers. comm.). This highlights the complications of interpreting the site due to the changing landscape. The topographic surveys provide an important basis for future research, as they provide a record of the condition, form and complexity of the archaeological remains.

## Fornleifastofnun Íslands

A long-term research project was carried out by the Institute of Archaeology (Fornleifastofnun Íslands) to study the archaeology of the Alþing in more detail, as well as to give attention to other thing sites around Iceland.

- 1999 Field Season

The Institute of Archaeology (Fornleifastofnun Íslands) and the National Museum of Iceland (Þjóðminjasafn Íslands) excavated an area to the northwest side of the church in 1999. This excavation revealed the foundations and part of the structure of a 16<sup>th</sup> century church, as well as an assembly booth nearby. In addition, other evidence from the excavation suggested that a farm was not established here until after it became an assembly site (UNESCO, 2004:29,34). The excavation revealed finds of five fragmented sherds of pottery. Four of the sherds appeared to belong to the same vessel, probably a jar. This seems to date to the 12<sup>th</sup> century and similar sherds had until that time not been found elsewhere in Iceland. The other, fifth, sherd came from a jug which was made in eastern England. The fragment resembled Grimston-ware and dates to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Similar sherds of this pottery have been found in other parts of Iceland as well. In combination, the five sherds found in this excavation belonged to the oldest finds of pottery in Iceland at that time (Mehler, 1999:27).



While this excavation was taking place in 1999, a number of geophysical surveys were also carried out as part of a wider project at various sites across Iceland. The aim of this project was to test the effectiveness of such techniques in relation to Icelandic geology and archaeology. The fact that the surveys could be undertaken in relation to excavations enabled the results of the survey to be verified. The archaeology of Iceland presents an unusual situation, in that geology may both predate and post-date archaeological remains, such as in cases where volcanic tephra may create a blanket layer over archaeological remains (Horsley & Dockrill, 2002:13). This was not the first time that geophysical survey techniques had been tried, as a radar survey had been undertaken at Biskupshólar by Línuhönnun around 1993. The 1999 survey was in two parts, one on the northern side of the church and including the area of Biskupshólar, and the second was to the west of the farm and included part of the cemetery (Horsley, 1999:30). The Magnetometer results detected several intense anomalies ( $>\pm 200$  nanoTesla), but these were geological not archaeological features (*ibid*, 33). The Resistivity results on the other hand provided anomalies in the area of Biskupshólar, which coincided with visible surface remains. The excavation trench next to the church had revealed a robbed-out wall, but the geophysical survey did not definitively detect this beyond the trench (*ibid*, 36). The outcome of the surveys was that there are limitations to the application of geophysical survey techniques in Iceland due to the nature of the geology, which particularly adversely affected the Magnetometry survey. However, the Resistivity survey was much more successful in detecting anomalies (*ibid*, 44). The survey demonstrated that Resistivity can be applied to many situations, as it can positively identify features where surface remains are no longer visible. Some limitations in relation to peri-glacial features and wet ground were noted, but the main advantage of Resistivity over Magnetometry is that the instrument is not severely affected by the effects of the geology. However, although the fluxgate gradiometer did suffer problems in the Magnetometry survey, it was shown to identify discrete rocks in archaeological deposits, even though natural anomalies dominated the data (Horsley & Dockrill, 2002:29).

Another significant result of the Geophysical survey experiment was the identification of turf structural remains. These were shown in the geophysical survey data as low resistance anomalies, however, these features were expected to be well drained and therefore to have shown high resistance readings. It may be possible to apply the characteristic of these remains retaining moisture to identify other buried turf remains, such as booths. Such booth remains produced distinct anomalies in both Resistivity and Magnetometry surveys, at both Þingvellir and Gásir (Horsley & Dockrill, 2002:30,31).

- 2002 Field Season

The Institute of Archaeology carried out a mapping and evaluation exercise of Biskupshólar, an evaluation of the Miðmundatún area, an investigation of two potential features on the eastern bank of the river, as well as the further evaluation of two structures on the western side of the river. These works (Friðriksson, 2002) included the excavation of the Njálshúð and Biskupabúðir thing-booths, as well as re-excavating the 1957 trench where the Crozier was found. This work

identified archaeological remains in each area, as well as revealing previously unknown remains, although these were found to be deteriorating due to erosion from the Öxará river. In addition, some archaeological features were found in the river itself, where remains of a structure were found, which appeared to have the same type of walls as other booth remains elsewhere at the Þingvellir site (Adolf Friðriksson, pers. comm.; Friðriksson, 2002:49). Next to Biskupsbúðir, a cluster of remains were found which date back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Roberts, 2004(a):13; UNESCO, 2004:29,35), demonstrating that the archaeology here is very complex and not yet fully understood.

- 2003 Field Season

Excavations by Fornleifastofnun Íslands continued at Þingvellir in 2003, when investigations began in the north-eastern end of the Biskupshólar group of ruins. This excavation identified a series of temporary structures, which are thought to have been used by the Bishop of Iceland and his entourage during the meetings of the Althing. It is likely that these various structures were repaired many times, and although dating evidence was limited, it is thought that they date from the post-Medieval period. Five evaluation trenches were opened in the area of Biskupshólar, all of which revealed complex structural remains, consisting mainly of stone-built walls. Further results of the excavation included the identification of a simple rectangular structure, which may have enclosed the Biskupshólar area (Roberts, 2004(a):11,13,20). There were various finds from this excavation, which are discussed in the sub-section *Artefacts*.

The 2003 season of fieldwork also included coring, where a series of cores were taken at the north-western edge of the Biskupshólar area, as well as the area surrounding the church and farm. The purpose of this was to identify the soil profiles and determine whether or not there were midden deposits, which might contain organic remains. Traces of charcoal were found in many instances, particularly in the lower soil levels. The presence of charcoal in these layers may indicate that archaeological remains could be found deeper underground, where they have become covered by later soil and turf deposits. In addition, fragments of calcined bone were found just above the bedrock, at a depth of about 60cm. Traces found in the streambed indicated that these materials had either been deposited in the water, or archaeological deposits were being eroded by the flow of the water. Despite these trace finds, no obvious evidence for middens were found to match those found at permanent farmsteads elsewhere in Iceland, although several areas of cultural debris accumulation, on a smaller scale, were identified (Woollett, 2004:29-36).

- 2004 Field Season

The research of Fornleifastofnun Íslands continued in 2004, which extended excavations at the northern end of Biskupshólar. The excavation revealed many stone alignments, a stone filled trench and parts of stone-faced turf walls, as well as floor surfaces and patches of burning, indicating temporary hearths. These

features have been interpreted as representing several temporary structures. The small number of artefacts that were found indicated a post-Medieval date (Roberts, 2004(b):11). Further to this, an excavation was made of Miðmundatún, where trial trenching in 2002 had identified structural remains and floor layers. The excavation revealed the uppermost parts of a stone and turf structure, which appeared to extend southwards into the small plantation of trees, as well as possibly northwards. The remains gave the appearance of a building measuring 4-5 metres wide, but of unknown length. This is the area where the crosier was found in 1957 (see below), and structural remains and floor layers were also noted then (Roberts, 2004b:25).

The excavations of the Biskupshólar area have added greatly to our understanding of the archaeology of the Althing. The subtlety and complexity of the remains inform us about the nature of the activities that took place there, with regards to the temporary and informal structures, with only very thin floor layers and relatively little use of turf. Evidence suggests that the earlier structures were much larger than the later ones, and that the same locations were used repeatedly. By contrast, the archaeology in the Miðmundatún area consists of substantial stone walls, with a much more clearly defined floor, which suggests a more permanent structure with longer periods of use. This raises the possibility that this was related to agriculture rather than the Althing, and that it may indicate a change in the location of the farm (Roberts, 2004b:26).

- 2005 Field Season

The fieldwork season of 2005 consisted of investigations of Lögberg, Þórleifshaugur, Spöngin and Miðmundatún (Friðriksson, 2005). It is interesting to note that these excavations did not locate the layer of ash and charcoal at Lögberg and Spöngin, which Vigfússon had found in 1880 (Adolf Friðriksson, pers. comm.). Other fieldwork of the 2005 season included a Ground Penetrating Radar survey (GPR), which was carried out with the aim of testing the effectiveness of this technique in detecting archaeological features in shallow bedrock (Damiata, 2005:7). This was the final field season to date of work associated with this particular research project by Fornleifastofnun Íslands.

- Þingvallakirkja, 2009

In 2009 further excavations were made around the western and southern sides of the church (Þingvallakirkja), prior to the laying of a new path and steps (**Fig. 21**). This investigation found evidence of an earlier church dating to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, traces of which were also found by Fornleifastofnun Íslands on the north side of the church in 1999.



**Figure 21:** Excavations at Þingvallakirkja, 2009

The excavations in front of the church, on the western side, exposed the remains of a thing-booth, although almost all of the stones had been removed from the structure. This was found much deeper, underneath the AD1500 tephra layer from Katla. Despite the lack of stonework, a fireplace and floor were still discernable. In this feature, a copper weight, weighing 283g, and other smaller lead weights were found, indicating that trade took place in this booth. Overall, the excavation found many artefacts, especially nails. The most significant find was a gold ring, which was found in front of the church. It was found in a context much younger than the others, and was probably brought there accidentally when repairs were made to the church steps.

The excavations on the southern side of the church identified many parts of buildings, a doorway and a large post-hole. It is also in this area that an Otto Adelhide silver coin from 983-1003 was found. From these excavations, it appears that the first church on this spot was built in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, and that prior to that the area was covered with thing-booths, as structural remains are widely visible (Margrét Hrönn Hallmundsdóttir, pers. comm.).

## Artefacts

Various artefacts have been discovered at Þingvellir, a selection of which are discussed here.

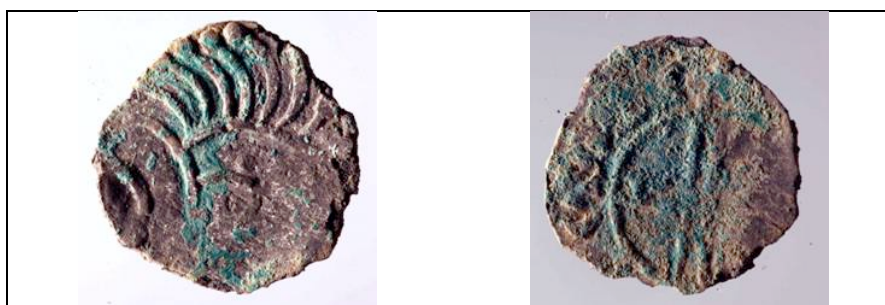
**Tau Cross** – One of the most remarkable artefacts was found in 1957, on the eastern side of the river in Miðmundatún, when an electricity cable was being laid to Hótel Valhöll. The Tau Cross or Crosier (**Figure 22**) measures 7.1cm in height, is made from Bronze and has been cast in one piece, with no trace of gilding (Eldjárn, 1970). The remains of the wooden shaft are still in place and it is made from Dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea* L.), which does not grow in Iceland. The cross has no direct parallels and probably had an ecclesiastical function. Related Tau crosses are however known from England, and versions carved from wood have been found in Dublin, which date to the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> centuries (Vilhjálmsson, 1992:314). It has been dated to c.1050-75, but although it does not cover the very first period of Christianity in Iceland, it may have belonged to a visiting missionary Bishop (Þorsteinsson, 1987:53), as they are known to have been in Iceland during the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The date loosely matches the term of office of the first Bishop of Iceland, Bishop Ísleifr Gizurarson, between 1056 and 1080 (Eldjárn, 1970).



**Figure 22:** Illustration of the Tau Cross

**Biskupshólar** – Finds from the 2003 excavations in Biskupshólar included structural nails, as well as nails with a flat section and elongated heads, which were identified as horse-shoe nails. The presence of horse-related artefacts, such as a part of a horseshoe and a buckle for a harness, was not unexpected because horses were the main mode of transport to the Althing, and so repairs are likely to have been required at the site. Other items found included a hook, as well as the teeth of sheep and cattle, and cattle-sized bones. All of these artefacts appear to date to the post-Medieval period (Batey, 2004:24-7).

**Coins** – When Matthías Þórvarðson excavated Þórleifshaugur in 1920, he found a coin dating to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately this deteriorated and so no longer exists. The two coins shown below in **figure 23** were found during excavations at Þingvellir in 2006, which were analysed by Anton Holt as dating most likely Norwegian from mid-11<sup>th</sup> century (Guðrún Alda Gísladóttir, pers. comm.). During the 1999 excavations by the Institute of Archaeology, a Norwegian silver coin was found, dating to 1065-80. This was an imitation of an English coin of Æthelred II (UNESCO, 2004:34).



**Figure 23:** Two Norwegian Coins from Þingvellir, mid-11<sup>th</sup> Century (Fornleifastofnun Íslands)

The artefacts that have been found during research at Þingvellir have enabled a much greater amount of detail to be added to our understanding of the activities that were taking place here. The variation in finds, from the high-status crosier to the more mundane items of horse equipment, highlight the diversity of people and activities at Þingvellir.

### Summary

The research so far undertaken at Þingvellir has greatly furthered our understanding of the Archaeology of the Althing in various categories:

- The thing-booths appear to have become smaller over time, and in several instances newer booths have been built on top of older structures.
- Excavations around Biskupshólar and the church have indicated that thing booths were more common on the eastern side of the river than was previously thought.
- Coring has demonstrated that areas of Þingvellir are covered in sediment from the river, which could be covering other archaeological features. In addition, coring has also shown that traces of charcoal are frequently found across the site, which may refer to clearance practices.
- The range of artefacts found demonstrate the diversity of the people who attended the Althing and the activities that took place there.

The history of research into the Althing at Þingvellir has provided an initial basis from which to work, as well as enabling a great amount of detail to be gained in relation to specific features of this complex archaeological site. The research has demonstrated that the archaeology of the Althing is very complex, and that we have only begun to scratch the surface in our attempts to understand the realities and developments of the Althing at Þingvellir.



## 5

## Byrgisbúð on Spöngin

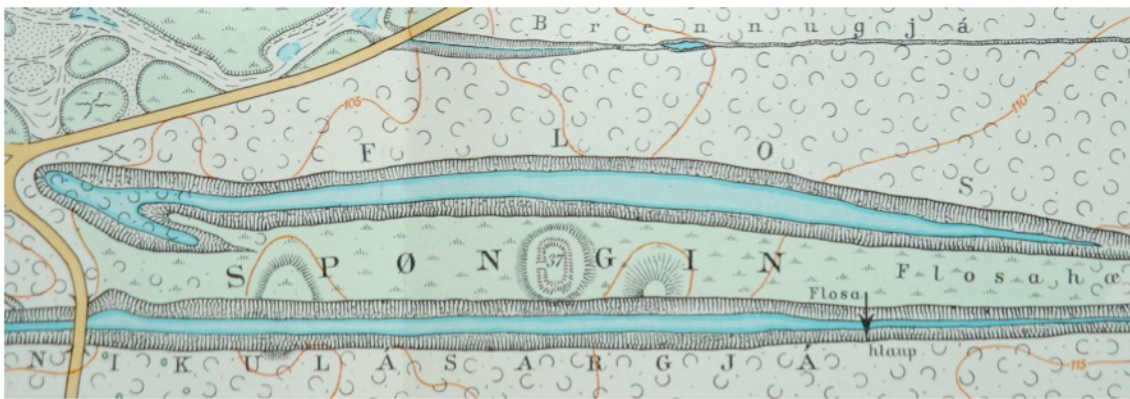
To the north-east of the church at Þingvellir is a stretch of land called Spöngin between two water-filled fissures, Flosagjá and Nikulásargjá (formerly called Njálsgjá – Pálsson, 1991:48). It lies on the edge of the lava field on the eastern boundaries of the *þinghelgi* area of the Althing (**Figure 24**). The word ‘Spöng’ can be translated as meaning a “bridge across water” in Icelandic (Cleasby & Vigfússon, 1874:585). Such a name is appropriate in this context, as this neck of land does appear to form a ‘bridge’ over the water on either side. There is one particular feature of archaeological interest on Spöngin, being the remains of a structure known as Byrgisbúð, as well as a natural mound, the so-called ‘Law Speaker’s Hillock’, *Lögsögumannshóll*. The Byrgisbúð structure is situated in an area deliberately separate from the main assembly site and, in addition to its form and character, is therefore unlike other archaeological remains at Þingvellir. As such, no satisfactory conclusions have yet been drawn so far as to its interpretation, and it is this structure that will be the focus of this study.



**Figure 24:** Spöngin, as painted by W.G. Collingwood in 1897



In 1880, Sigurður Vigfússon excavated 'Byrgisbúð' (**Figure 25**), which consists of an oval structure measuring just under 17x20m, within which is a rectangular structure measuring approximately 10x7m (Vigfússon, 1881). The most common theory surrounding the general interpretation of Spöngin has been that this was the original location of Lögberg. However, it is unclear as to whether this theory refers to Byrgisbúð, or the nearby 'Law Speaker's Hillock', but most likely it is a combination of the two. Archaeological research so far has provided a starting point for the interpretation of the Byrgisbúð structure, however these indications have not yet provided definitive conclusions about the nature of these archaeological remains. It is therefore the aim of this research to re-analyse the existing archaeological evidence and re-evaluate the theories surrounding the interpretation of this structure.



**Figure 25:** Detail of Spöngin, showing Byrgisbúð as '37' (from Þórðarson, 1945)

### Aims & Objectives

The Byrgisbúð structure is of great interest because it is of a different form to the thing-booths that are found on the western side of the river, and its location is unique in the wider setting of the Althing. The aims of this research are to investigate the Byrgisbúð structure on Spöngin through a re-analysis of the archaeological evidence, in order to provide some conclusions as to the function and nature of the remains, and to enable Spöngin to be accurately placed into the wider context of the archaeology of the Althing. These aims are more clearly defined in the research questions below:

### Research Questions

- To what date do the Byrgisbúð remains belong?
- Do the remains consist of multiple structures from different periods?
- What was the possible function & purpose of Byrgisbúð?
- Does its structural morphology relate to other buildings from similar sites?
- How does Spöngin fit into the wider context of the archaeology of the Althing?

These research questions will be answered in three parts, through the following objectives:

- To re-analyse the archaeological evidence from previous fieldwork, including excavations and surveys, in order to create a fresh, new and objective view of the Byrgisbúð structure
- To re-evaluate the existing theories surrounding the interpretation of Byrgisbúð and Spöngin, in light of the re-analysed field evidence and the new conclusions relating to the archaeological evidence, in order to evaluate the plausibility and likelihood of these existing theories
- To study aspects of the Althing and other assembly sites in order to place the role of Byrgisbúð and Spöngin into the wider context of the Althing

### 1. Re-Analysis of the Fieldwork Evidence for Byrgisbúð on Spöngin

The excavations made by Sigurður Vigfússon in 1880 have provided some interesting and valuable insights into the nature of the Byrgisbúð remains (Vigfússon, 1881). Vigfússon dug trenches into the North, South, East & Western sides of the structure and his results showed, in particular, that there are multiple phases to the site. Broadly, there was an earlier phase consisting of a circular enclosure and a later phase including a rectangular structure. A black layer of plant remains, as well as traces of ash and charcoal, separates the earlier and later phases of the structure, which demonstrate that the phases are from different periods. Vigfússon was convinced that this was the site of the original Law Rock, and this heavily influenced his interpretation of the site. However, this interpretation appears to be based upon popular tradition, and so it is necessary to study his excavation report again in order to identify the key elements of archaeological fact and to separate this from his interpretation, so as to arrive at a fresh analysis and conclusion. This is of great importance, as his excavations have provided the most detailed information relating to the site to date.

Another aspect of evidence, which may possibly relate to Byrgisbúð and may be of relevance, is that in 1970 some divers found a large number of animal bones in Nikulásargjá, at the point next to Byrgisbúð (Þorsteinsson, 1987:38). One line of research will be to investigate any potential connection between these bones and the Byrgisbúð structure. The topographical survey that was carried out by the National Museum of Iceland between 1986 and 1991 has provided a detailed plan of visible archaeological remains at Þingvellir. A study of this survey will also aid the understanding and interpretation of the Byrgisbúð structure, as this will help to identify differences in the structural morphology of the site. The southern excavation trench made by Vigfússon into the Byrgisbúð structure was re-excavated by the Icelandic Institute of Archaeology (Fornleifastofnun Íslands) in 2005. This provided very useful data for confirming and clarifying points from Vigfússon's excavations of 1880. Re-analysis of the 2005 excavation evidence, in the context of those from 1880 and other fieldwork evidence, will be very useful in reconstructing and understanding the nature and chronology of the site.

The intention of this research is to reanalyse the evidence outlined above, which will provide valuable information to re-interpret the archaeological ruins. The re-analysis of the data in relation to answering the specific research questions outlined above should provide some conclusive answers in order to interpret the archaeological remains of Byrgisbúð.

## 2. Re-analysis of the Existing Theories for the Interpretation of Byrgisbúð & Spöngin

There has been a lot of confusion surrounding the interpretation of Byrgisbúð and Spöngin, which has resulted in various theories emerging relating to their role at the Althing. However, no satisfactory or conclusive interpretation has yet been put forward. Many of the theories surrounding Byrgisbúð on Spöngin appear to be based upon popular tradition and information from the sagas. This, for example, appears to have led Vigfússon to be convinced that this was the location of the original Law Rock even before he excavated it. It has also been common to associate the Byrgisbúð structure as the assembly booth of various saga characters. The key theories that have resulted from research into the site will be discussed in light of the re-analysis of the archaeological evidence, so that a fresh and objective view can be put forward, based upon archaeological fact, evaluating the relative merits of these theories.

## 3. The Interpretation of Spöngin in the Context of the Althing

Having re-analysed the Byrgisbúð structure, it will be necessary to place this understanding into the wider context of the archaeology of the Althing. However, it is important to state that it is not yet certain whether or not Byrgisbúð and Spöngin were directly associated with the Althing, and that waits to be proven or disproven. The background information contained in the preceding chapters becomes important and relevant at this point, in order to understand how the Althing operated. Further to this, any gaps in our understanding can then be identified, which may aid the interpretation of the role of Byrgisbúð and Spöngin.

The study of other assembly sites, both in Iceland and abroad, will provide further useful information that can be used to understand and interpret how the role of Spöngin may fit into the wider context of the Althing.

## 6

# Re-Analysis of the Fieldwork Evidence for Byrgisbúð on Spöngin

The existing research that has been undertaken into the Byrgisbúð structure on Spöngin has provided some interesting points from which to base further research and analysis. It is fortunate that the fieldwork and excavation of Byrgisbúð is relatively comprehensive in that it conveys many details about the nature of the archaeological structure. However, the fieldwork so far has either been lacking in specific conclusions, or has been uncertain in its interpretations. In order to achieve a new interpretation in this study, it is first necessary to re-analyse the existing research that has already taken place. The existing interpretations of Byrgisbúð will be re-evaluated in the next chapter, so as not to cause bias in allowing a more objective re-analysis of the fieldwork evidence.

### Vigfússon's Excavations of 1880

When Sigurður Vigfússon conducted his extensive fieldwork at Þingvellir in the summer of 1880, he focused one of his six excavations on the structure on Spöngin, excavating there between 1<sup>st</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> June. Here he inserted trenches across the site, running North-South and another two trenches in the Eastern & Western sides of the structure. The results of his work were published (Vigfússon, 1881), detailing the findings of his excavations. It must be emphasised at this point that Vigfússon believed that Spöngin was the location of the original Law Rock, so he referred to this site as Lögberg in his report, and in his opinion “Byrgisbúð” was located elsewhere to the north-east further along Flosagjá (see ch.7). In this present description of his excavations however, the structure on Spöngin is here referred to as Byrgisbúð for the benefit of consistency in this study.

Vigfússon's excavations indicated that there were multiple phases of construction at Byrgisbúð by the identification of the rectangular structure as well as the concentric circular walls (UNESCO, 2004:23). These multiple phases suggest that activity at the site extended over a long period of time, and indeed Vigfússon did consider the structure to be in some respects very old (Vigfússon, 1881:11). However, it is only possible to estimate the lifespan of a turf structure if other sources of dating evidence are included, such as artefacts or tephra, from which the feature can be dated (Guðmundur Ólafsson, pers. comm.). Therefore it is difficult to translate these multiple phases into a specified period of use, based upon elements of construction alone.

The structure can essentially be identified in two parts, the outer circles and the inner rectangular building. Vigfússon wrote in his diary entry for June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1880 in his article that he took photographs of his excavations on Spöngin (Vigfússon, 1881:11), showing details of the circle and ruins, although unfortunately these were not published in the article. The rectangular structure that Vigfússon found, which measured just under 10x7 metres and was preceded by an oval structure measuring 17x20 metres, was built of stone and had an entrance in the southern longitudinal wall (UNESCO, 2004:23). Vigfússon commented that the structure was very distinct, with an oval wall measuring 60 feet in diameter, with a raised platform with the rectangular structure on the top (Vigfússon, 1881:12). It was apparent to Vigfússon that the rectangular ruins did not stand in connection with the outer circle, and he did not consider the structure to have been an inhabited area (Vigfússon, 1881:12). Under the outer circle of the structure, Vigfússon found traces of a ridge of small stones, which appeared in two of his excavated sections, but was unclear in the third. There were also traces of another stone ridge inside the area in two of the sections, and Vigfússon believed that the ridge lay under another circle with a shortened radius inside the main outer circle. The evidence gave the appearance that the stone ridge formed a circle itself (Vigfússon, 1881:12), although this cannot be stated for certain.

In his excavations, Vigfússon observed a scattering of stones near to the surface, which he thought to be from the foundations of walls. The main characteristic of the structure is that the stones were found in the higher (i.e. younger) layers of the archaeological stratigraphy, and that there was mainly earth below, but with stone scattered in the earth (Vigfússon, 1881:11). This therefore indicates that stone-built phases of the structure belong to the later period of activity at the site.

Only one artefact was found during his excavations, which was an unidentified item made from iron, measuring 45cm in length (Friðriksson, 2005:12). Vigfússon described it as being flat, with a wide hole in one end (Vigfússon, 1881:12), but it was otherwise unidentifiable.

The excavations also identified a thin black plant layer, which could be traced almost everywhere at the site; on top of this were light traces of ash and charcoal, especially at one place, but still distributed widely (Vigfússon, 1881:12). It is these layers that Vigfússon used to identify chronological differences in the stratigraphy, in order to observe that the circular features were below, and therefore separate from, the rectangular structure, which was above the layers. From this chronological information gained from the excavation, Vigfússon concluded that the rectangular ruins were probably some type of booth remains from later times, and that the Law Council (*Lögrétta*) had been there, as the folklore indicated. He also stated that Spöngin had sometimes been called Lögréttuspöng ('Law Council Neck') in later times. In his view, the dimensions of the structure also supported this interpretation, and he also suggests that, based on folklore, the booth was used by the Law Speaker Þorgeir Ljósvetningagoði (Vigfússon, 1881:13), who oversaw and decided upon the Iclander's conversion to Christianity in 1000.

His claim that the rectangular structure was a booth, despite his previous notes that it did not resemble other thing-booths, is interesting. However, it is likely that he meant that the structure did not resemble a 'standard' thing-booth, and

therefore must have fulfilled some other, similar function. It is also true to observe that other thing-booths at Þingvellir did become smaller in size over the centuries, as this is evident from studying the topographic surveys that were carried out by the National Museum of Iceland (chapter 4), which show how smaller booths are often constructed on top of older, larger booths. Further to this, the details and findings of Vigfússon's excavations of other booths such as Njál's Booth demonstrate how complex the archaeological remains are.

In this respect, the excavations carried out by Sigurður Vigfússon have provided the basis for further research of the Byrgisbúð structure because it is interesting to compare the construction with other structures at Þingvellir. The majority of these are thing-booths, in which people of high status and their entourage would stay for the duration of the annual meetings of the Althing. The use of turf as a building material in Iceland has been studied mainly in the context of farmhouses (cf. Ólafsson & Ágústsson, N.D.), although the essential techniques can be used to aid our understanding of thing-booth construction. The thing-booths were usually relatively simple structures, built of turf and stone, with a temporary covering of homespun cloth called *Vaðmál*. The comparison between Byrgisbúð and the other thing booths is of interest in interpreting this structure.

#### *Is Byrgisbúð different from other thing booths?*

Vigfússon concluded that Byrgisbúð was never a substantially large building and that in some ways it was not comparable to other thing booths that he had excavated at Þingvellir (Vigfússon, 1881:11). At first, due to the rectangular shape, this structure in many ways does appear to resemble other thing booths at Þingvellir, with the exception of its location and landscape setting. However, when the topographic surveys carried out by the National Museum of Iceland are studied, this shows that other thing booths of a similar length at Þingvellir commonly measure 10-12 metres in length, but are only approximately 3 or 4 metres in width. These measurements are also comparable with other thing booths that have been studied at Skuldaþingsey in north-eastern Iceland, where booths there had average dimensions of 10x4.3 metres (Vésteinsson *et al*, 2004:175). The dimensions of the rectangular structure of Byrgisbúð are 10x7 metres and so it is therefore particularly noticeable that the rectangular structure here is twice the width of other booths of a similar length. However, when the structure is studied in terms of its width, at 7 metres, it is comparable with the very early thing booths, such as Njál's booth and Biskupsbúð, which are of similar widths. These dimensions, along with the different phases of construction, demonstrate the complexity of the site, supporting the notion that this was not a normal thing-booth. These facts show that Byrgisbúð does not directly correspond with any other booth remains covered in these topographic surveys, which implies that this rectangular structure served a different function, which is as yet unidentified, to those other booths found at Þingvellir.

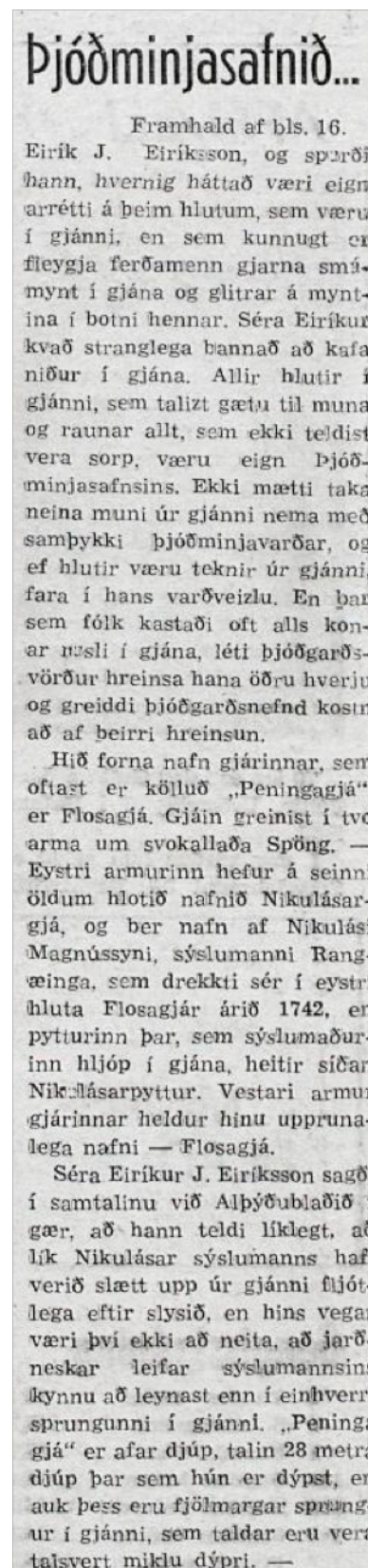


### Discovery of Animal Bones in 1970

In 1970 divers found large quantities of animal bones while exploring Nikulásargjá, next to Spöngin, at the point in the fissure next to Byrgisbúð. There were reported to have been many cattle bones, with more to be seen in places where the divers could not reach (Þorsteinsson, 1987:38), but these have also been said to be sheep bones (Einar Sæmundsen, pers. comm.). It appears from the reports to be beyond mere coincidence that the quantities of animal bones were found in Nikulásargjá right next to Byrgisbúð, and they appear to be too many and too focused in their deposition to be due to accidental loss.

The fissures on either side of Spöngin are very deep, in places reaching a depth of 28 metres at least. Over the last two centuries particularly, there have been large quantities of rubbish accumulating in the fissures Nikulásargjá and Flosagjá, as discussed in **figure 26**. As such, it is difficult to gain definite information from these deposits for interpreting the Byrgisbúð structure. However, as such large quantities of bones were reported in such a specific location (next to Byrgisbúð), then it seems unlikely to be coincidence that they appeared there by chance alone. Indeed, it has been noted that the fissures would have provided a convenient place to dispose of these discarded bones (Guðmundur Ólafsson, pers. comm.). The importance of this find is unclear, but the quantity of the bones and their proximity to Byrgisbúð is of interest nonetheless.

A possible explanation may be found from the study of animal bones from cult sites, as discussed in chapter 3. Excavations at Hofstaðir in north-eastern Iceland uncovered many cattle bones, as well as a female sheep that had been killed but not butchered and so remained articulated. This sheep has been interpreted as a ritual killing, which appeared to be associated with the abandonment of the building. The cattle appeared to have been killed over many years, indicating recurring ritual activity (McGovern in Lucas, 2009:237,246). The method of killing the cattle would have resulted



**Figure 26:** *Alþýðublaðið*, Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> August 1970, p.3



in a blood fountain (*ibid*:249) and the importance of blood in ritual activity associated with thing assemblies has been noted in chapter 3. Ritual activity was associated with seasonal feasts or ritual occasions, requiring drama and conspicuous consumption. Analysis of the Hofstaðir cattle bones indicated that feasting took place in early summer in mid-late June (*ibid*:252), which is also the same time as when the annual meeting of the Althing convened.

Sacrifice was closely related to the opening of assemblies and the arrival at a holy place (Ellis-Davidson, 1988:37; Lucas, 2009:405), again demonstrating the close connection between religion and politics in chapter 3. It is therefore not surprising to find such quantities of animal bones deposited at Þingvellir. Most sacrificial animals were male, which may be a cultural link to the fact that it was men who took part in thing assemblies (Lucas, 2009:406). It is thought that a bull was sacrificed at Þingvellir and that the sacred ring on which oaths were sworn was immersed in the blood of the sacrificed animal. However, in some instances in Scandinavia a male horse was used instead of a bull to symbolise power (Ellis-Davidson, 1988:53), so it is possible that the bones found in Nikulásargjá were of either sheep, cattle, or horse but this cannot be determined without detailed analysis. In addition, animals may themselves have been regarded as representatives of the gods (DuBois, 1999:54). At the opening of an assembly the Goði (Allsherjargoði at the Althing) had to sacrifice an ox within the sacred area of the thing before he opened the assembly and then redden the altar ring in its blood. At Icelandic assemblies, the sacrificial blood on the ring made the ceremony legal and binding. This type of sacrifice has been termed an ‘oath-sacrifice’ due to the connections with the oaths that were sworn on the ring. Following this sacrifice, the proceedings of the thing could begin (Aðalsteinsson, 1999:165-6).

In the context of an oath-sacrifice, an animal was slain in order to ratify the oath. The flesh was never eaten, but was often either buried or cast into the sea (Aðalsteinsson, 1999:166). In the context of Spöngin, the casting of animal bones from the ‘Byrgisbúð’ structure into the water of Nikulásargjá fits the context of oath-sacrifices. In addition, the large quantities of bones reported would suggest that this oath-sacrifice ritual was repeated many times, as would be expected from successive occasions when the assembly was convened. The fact that the Byrgisbúð structure is off-set towards Nikulásargjá supports why the bones were found there and not in Flosagjá.

Although it is not possible to say whether or not the animals were articulated when they were deposited in Nikulásargjá, the killing of animals in a ritual context and the association of such killings at assemblies implies a strong potential connection between Byrgisbúð and the bones in Nikulásargjá. Unfortunately these bones do not appear to have been studied (e.g. not in Amorosi, 2004) and there is no record of these bones in the database of the National Museum of Iceland (Guðmundur Ólafsson, pers. comm.), so it is not possible to study these bones in more detail. Crucially therefore, it cannot be determined whether these bones are contemporary with the structure or not, and an interpretation through the oath-sacrifice can only be circumstantial, and therefore must be used with caution. Nonetheless, the hypothesis presented here does appear to be a feasible explanation in the context of the other information relating to the site and the role of religion and politics of the Viking Age.

### The Topographic Survey from 1988

A topographic survey of Byrgisbúð was carried out by the National Museum of Iceland in 1988. The original survey, which was drawn in colour, is shown in **figure 27** in black & white. This drawing is very useful for differentiating between the different phases of the archaeological remains and so this topographic survey is of great importance in understanding the complex sequence of construction at the site.

It is interesting to observe that the rectangular structure is situated within the circular wall, but it is not exactly in the centre, suggesting (along with the chronology/stratigraphy) that the two were not built in relation to each other at the same time. This supports the interpretation that the rectangular structure is later, as it is not contemporary with the circular feature. This is because if the two were contemporary, then they would have been constructed in relation to each other, and so it would be expected that their positioning and shape would be made to suit or match the other. The fact that the two do not match in this way demonstrates and supports the notion that the two were not constructed at the same time as one entity, but that nonetheless there must have been an importance in locating all phases on the same site.

The fact that Byrgisbúð is located at the widest point on Spöngin makes sense from a practical point of view. This would allow the largest area to be enclosed, while maintaining a circular/oval shape; the importance of which is evident from chapters 2 & 3 in terms of legal sites and enclosed sacred spaces. It is clear that activity has taken place on this site for a great length of time, as the build-up of earth has created a mound and a palimpsest of different phases of activity. This has resulted in the ground here being higher than the immediate surroundings, with the exception of the adjacent so-called Law Speaker's Hillock. The prominence of the location in these two respects of the widest point and on the highest ground implies an important role for the structure.

The results of the survey confirm Vigfússon's account, in that the structural remains in the centre appear to be younger in date and therefore not contemporary with the apparent circular enclosures around the outside (Guðmundur Ólafsson, pers. comm.). These observations that can be made from the topographic survey are very interesting because they highlight the complexity of the archaeological remains. The trenches of part of Vigfússon's excavations from 1880 are also visible in the survey, as the eastern and western trenches can clearly be seen on the plan in **figure 27**.

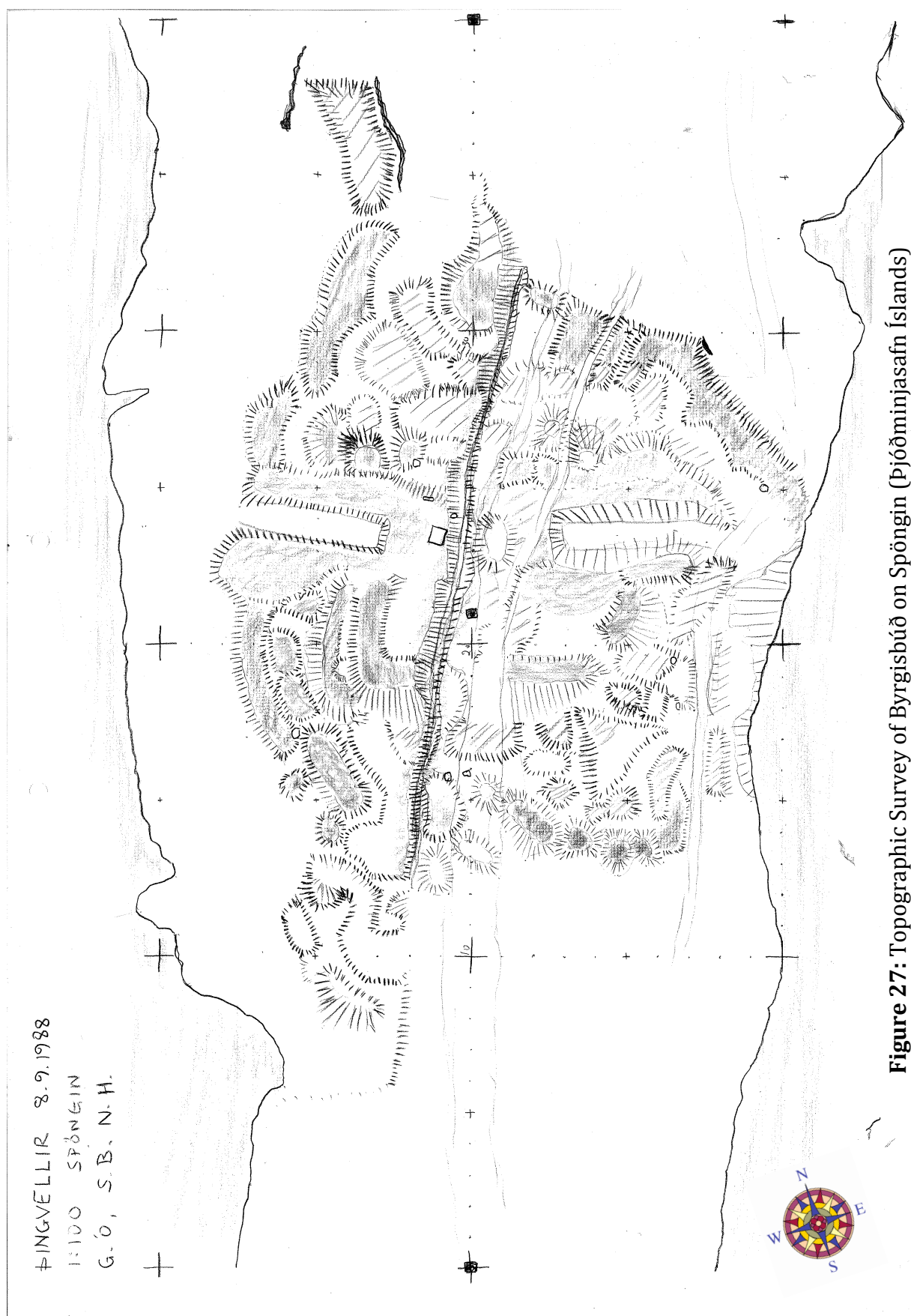
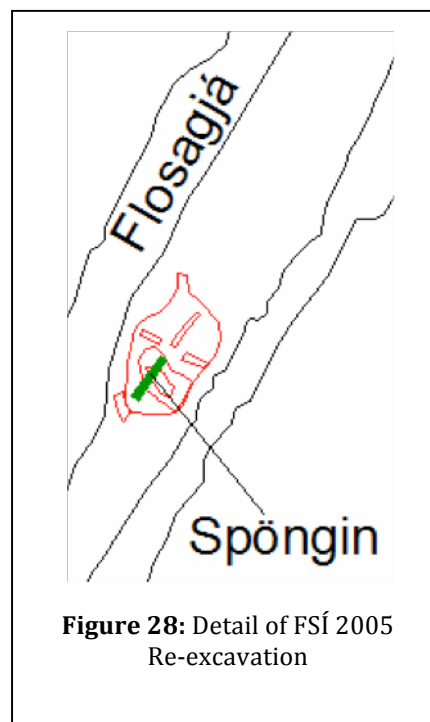


Figure 27: Topographic Survey of Byrgisbúð on Spöngin (Þjóðminjasafn Íslands)

### Re-Excavation by Fornleifastofnun Íslands in 2005

The north-south aligned trench of Vigfússon's investigation from 1880 was re-excavated by the Icelandic Institute of Archaeology (Fornleifastofnun Íslands) in June 2005, as part of a wider study into the Althing assembly site (**Figure 28**). The trench measured 1x10 metres and was recorded in two parts, as shown in **figures 29 & 30**. Although the archaeology was clearly disturbed from the original excavation, the re-excavation was valuable for clarifying points from Vigfússon's excavations and there are some notable points of interest, which are set out in **Table D**. The purpose of the re-excavation was to record the trench and to investigate the position of the tephra layers, which are important as a means of dating the site. The Settlement Layer was preserved in the soil, beneath the structure, showing that the Structure post-dated 871, as would be expected. Other tephra layers were not identified with certainty, however there were traces of a tephra within the stratigraphy. In the sides of the trenches there were the remains of a turf and stone wall, however it was not possible to determine the age or the function of the structure (Friðriksson, 2005). The table below lists the hand-written excavation notes from the field plans.



**Figure 28:** Detail of FSÍ 2005 Re-excavation

Northern Part	Southern Part
<p>C[462]. Supposed stone wall. Badly disturbed by earlier trench.</p> <p>C[465]. Brown deposit covering most of the area. — mid brown soil. Thickness up to 30cm. Very clear and homogeneous. Contains almost no inclusions. Roots disturbance and — — earlier trench.</p> <p>C[466]. Very compacted light brown deposit. Silty soil containing inclusions of charcoal. Possible patches of a greyish tephra ?in situ? Stratigraphically under 462.</p>	<p>C[463]. Turf debris. Possible turf collapse. Brown soil, dark brown turf. Homogeneous, disturbed by earlier excavation. The boundaries are unclear in the northern part of the deposit.</p> <p>C[464]. Turf Deposit. Possible turf wall. Brown to red with brown and green patches. Boundaries are not clear in the south-west corner of the trench. It seems to be quite homogeneous. Disturbed by earlier excavation ... Partially eroded away.</p>

**Table D:** Excavation notes from the 2005 re-excavation

The 2005 excavation adds valuable details to the information in Vigfússon's report of his original excavations. For example, it is possible to confirm that the site is indeed in multiple and complex phases, and that the earlier circular parts were built of turf, while the later rectangular feature was built of stone. The fact that the grey tephra is separate to the charcoal, despite being in the same context is of interest because it enables a more refined interpretation that may have a bearing on our understanding of activity at the site.

The northern part of the re-excavated trench, as shown in **figure 29**, is located towards the centre of the structure. Context 462 was recorded as a supposed stone wall, which corresponds to Vigfússon's findings previously. Context 466 appears to be the traces of volcanic ash and charcoal that was observed by Vigfússon, however it has not been possible to identify to which eruption this tephra belongs. These layers of ash and charcoal are situated beneath the stone wall, demonstrating that the stone structure was later, confirming the conclusions from Vigfússon's excavations and the topographic survey from 1988.

The southern part of the re-excavated trench shows evidence of a possible turf wall (Context 464), beneath a layer of collapsed turf (Context 463). The details from the Southern trench show that the circular features were constructed from turf, in contrast to the central structure in the northern part, which was built from stone. The turf debris appears to indicate that the turf wall collapsed, suggesting the point when the circular structure was abandoned. However, dating the structure is very difficult because the main problem with the 2005 excavations is that while plans of the trenches are available, there appear to be no section drawings relating to the excavation. This causes problems for interpretation because it is difficult to fully understand the chronology of the site; in particular, how the tephra layers relate to the stratigraphy of the archaeological remains.

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Figure 30: Southern part of the re-excavated southern trench (FS1 2005)

SITE CODE: <i>FS1</i>		UNIT:
GROUP:	TYPE:	
INTERPRETATION: <i>Living Strata</i>		
DEPOSITION:		DEPOSIT
		1. Compaction 2. Colour 3. Composition 4. Inclusions 5. Thickness 6. Boundary 7. Homogeneity 8. Disturbance
TEPHRA (identification and relation to unit)		
MATRIX		
FINDS		
Type (specify):		
Comments:		
METHOD OF EXCAVATION		Sample No:
Hand <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Sieve <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Percent:		Mesh size:
ID: <i>QB.8.17</i>		Volume:
DATE: <i>08.06.05</i>		
PLAN MATRIX		Scale: <i>1:20</i>
No. 2 OF 2		



### Summary

Here a re-analysis enables the archaeological evidence to be re-structured in order to interpret the remains more accurately. As the function and purpose of Byrgisbúð is as yet unknown, it is necessary to break down the archaeological evidence into basic facts, and then reconstruct them in such a way as to understand and interpret it from a new perspective. Based on the existing research studied above, the current state of knowledge and understanding of the Byrgisbúð structure on Spöngin can be summarised in these facts:

- Rectangular structure and oval enclosures
  - Oval enclosure/circular wall measuring 17x20 metres
  - Rectangular structure, 10x7 metres
  - Rectangular structure is situated on a raised platform
- Multiple phases of construction of Byrgisbúð
  - The structural remains in the centre are much younger in date, and therefore not contemporary with the circular enclosures around the outside
  - This is supported by the fact that the rectangular structure does not directly correspond with the circles because it is not exactly in the centre
- The layer of black plant remains
  - Divides the circle and rectangular aspects into two broad phases
- Traces of Volcanic Ash & Charcoal
  - Only found in the central area of the structure, in the northern part of the re-excavation trench
- Circular structure built of turf
- Rectangular structure built of stone – stone wall towards centre
  - South-facing doorway – Entrance in southern longitudinal wall
- A scattering of rocks and other stones near to the surface. These had soil underneath them, giving the impression that the stones had been used as a filling and then scattered over the area, however they were not evenly spread and were least in the middle – probably used for wall construction
- Two ridges of small stones under the circular walls
- Remains indicating two further turf circular features within the main circular enclosure
- Unidentified iron object, measuring about 45cm in length

### Other Points of Interest

- Surrounded by natural boundaries of water-filled fissures
- Unique location in the assembly area
- Structure is different in form to other Thing-Booths – Not a comparable thing booth to others at Þingvellir

## Discussion

### • *Sequencing*

The archaeological facts from the summary above can be used to create a probable sequence showing the development, construction and use of Byrgisbúð. The key elements from the summary are integrated with this sequence in the bullet points below.

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| Phase 1 | Two ridges of stones, which were present under the outer and inner circular structures. It is uncertain whether or not they continued in a complete circle themselves, but the evidence gave that impression. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Two ridges of small stones under the circular walls</li> </ul>  |
| Phase 2 | The three concentric circles, built of turf. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Remains indicating two further circular features within the main circular enclosure</li> </ul>   |
| Phase 3 | The Outer Circle appears to have been rebuilt, as it is recorded as being more obvious than the inner two. Also built of turf. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Circular structure built of turf – context 464 in the 2005 excavation</li> </ul>   |
| Phase 4 | The outer turf circle collapsed. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Context 463 in the 2005 excavation</li> </ul>  |
| Phase 5 | Black layer of plant remains, and traces of charcoal and volcanic ash. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The layer divides the site into two broad chronological phases</li> <li>▪ The Charcoal and tephra are in context 466 of the 2005 excavation, stratigraphically beneath the stone wall in C.462</li> </ul>  |
| Phase 6 | A raised platform was constructed. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Evident on the topographic survey</li> </ul>   |
| Phase 7 | Construction of the rectangular structure, built from stone <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Stone wall in context 462 of the 2005 excavation</li> <li>▪ Rectangular structure built from stone on a raised platform</li> </ul>  |
| Phase 8 | The scattering of stones near to the surface appear to be collapse from, or from the foundations of, this rectangular stone structure. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A scattering of rocks and other stones near to the surface. These had soil underneath them, giving the impression that the stones had been used as a filling and then scattered over the area, however they were not evenly spread and were least in the middle – probably used for wall construction</li> </ul> |

This sequence of constructional phases is not definite, however, based upon evidence from the excavation reports, it does help to organise the facts about the construction of Byrgisbúð as they are so far known. It is clear that the way in which the site was constructed changed dramatically over time, ranging from apparent circular turf enclosures, to a rectangular stone building. This difference indicates a significant change in the way in which the site was used.

- *Dating*

No artefacts or other evidence that were able to provide an exact date were recovered during the excavations of Byrgisbúð. One artefact was found by Vigfússon, but its poor state of preservation did not allow any specific information to be gained from it. However, Icelandic archaeology has the unusual benefit of being able to use layers of volcanic ash to date the stratigraphy of an archaeological site. These layers of volcanic ash, called tephra, can often be identified with a particular eruption from a particular volcano, based on knowledge from historical records or scientific analysis. In the absence of artefacts or other datable materials, volcanic tephra layers can provide very specific dates at particular points in the soil profile. Layers of tephra therefore often provide a useful method for dating archaeological remains, through their relational stratigraphy in the soil profiles.

The excavation has demonstrated that Byrgisbúð was constructed above (i.e. after) the Landnám (settlement) tephra (Friðriksson, 2005:12). However, this is to be expected, as it is traditionally accepted that the Althing was established around 930, approximately 60 years after that eruption and ash fall. The only other tephra visible in the archaeology at Byrgisbúð is a tephra in the centre of the stratigraphic sequence, which could potentially be used to identify a date after the construction of the circular features and before the construction of the rectangular building. Unfortunately however, it has not yet been possible to identify it and so this cannot yet provide this important date.

Up to 12 historical eruptions have left traces of tephra that has fallen at Þingvellir, however in all instances the ash fall was relatively minor and sometimes may have only covered part of the study area. For example, the 'Miðaldalag' (Medieval) tephra which came from a sub-aqueous eruption near Reykjanes in the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century, has been traced to the west of the lake, whereas the tephra from the Eldgjá eruption from AD934±2 has been traced on the eastern side of Þingvallavatn. The two most distinctive tephra layers in the Þingvellir sequence are the Katla 1500, which is black, 0.5cm thick and in the southern part of the area, and also the Landnám (Settlement) layer, also known as the Vatnaöldur ~900 tephra. This 'Settlement layer' consists of two parts and is identified by a yellow-grey lower part (<0.5cm) and a greenish brown upper part, also measuring <0.5cm (Hafliðason *et al*, 1992:81-2).

**Table E** below shows the tephra layers that are most often found at Þingvellir (Magnus Sigurgeirsson, pers. comm.; Hafliðason *et al*, 1992). There are also, in places, traces of the 1104 Hekla eruption, which was for example found when excavating a booth at Biskupshólar next to the present-day church, although this is

not uniformly distributed across the area (Adolf Friðriksson, pers. comm.). Although it has not been possible to date Byrgisbúð so far, this information about the various tephra found at Þingvellir may inform future research into the site.

Volcano & Eruption/Ash Fall Date	Description in a Soil Profile
Katla-1918	
Hekla-1766	
Katla-1721	(black, very thin)
Katla-1500	(black)
Hekla-1341	(grey, very thin)
Miðaldalag from 1226	(grey, rather fine/thin)
Hekla-1104	
Katla- early 10 <sup>th</sup> C.	
Landnám Tephra from 870-880 AD	(two-coloured, with lower light coloured part and upper dark coloured part)

**Table E:** Sequence of Volcanic Tephra Layers at Þingvellir

- *The Ash & Charcoal and the Black Plant Layer*

Previously, a key aspect regarding the interpretation of Byrgisbúð has been the notion that the two main phases of construction are divided by a “black layer of ash and charcoal” (UNESCO, 2004:30). However, this in fact comprises three separate elements. The details of Vigfússon’s account show that he identified a thin black layer of plant remains, which could be traced almost everywhere across the site, and that there were merely traces of ash and charcoal on top of this layer. This black plant layer was approximately 12-18 inches from the bedrock at the point in the middle of the raised platform on which the rectangular structure stands. He described this layer as having become ‘plant and grass wax’ and it is this layer that he used to divide the circular and rectangular features of the site chronologically. The implication was that the black plant layer almost chronologically formed part of the circular features (Vigfússon, 1881:12). It is unclear what processes would result in such a black layer of plant remains, but it is important to correct this misconception of the ash and charcoal as being one entity, that they were actually separate from the black plant layer, as it is important for the accurate interpretation of the site.

With regards to the traces of ash and charcoal, these are still of importance, as the key questions are firstly, whether or not the ash was burnt ash or volcanic ash (tephra) and secondly, whether or not the ash and charcoal are combined as one entity or whether they are separate, despite being apparently closely related stratigraphically. The first question is important because the presence of burnt ash would be indicative of activity at the site, whereas volcanic ash could be used to refine the date of the structure. The 2005 re-excavation states that there were possible patches of a greyish tephra in the northern part of the trench (**Figure 29 & Table D**), suggesting an interpretation that the ash was volcanic and not the result of burning. The second question is important to the interpretation of this aspect of the site because if the ash and charcoal are combined as one context, then it must be regarded in a different way to if they are separate. In Vigfússon’s excavation report it is apparent that there were light traces of ash and charcoal,

especially in one place, but that this was also widely distributed (Vigfússon, 1881:12). The evidence from the 2005 re-excavation states that in the northern part of the trench, in the centre of the structure, there was a silty soil with inclusions of charcoal. In addition, the possible patches of a greyish tephra, possibly in situ (**figure 29 & Table D**), indicate that the two elements are separate. These were both in the same context, stratigraphically beneath and therefore earlier than, the stone wall. This shows that while the two features were closely related, they were nonetheless separate entities. Therefore, overall there is not merely one contextual layer separating the circular and rectangular structures, but three elements of the black plant layer, the volcanic tephra and the charcoal.

- *Different types of construction above and below the black plant layer*

The two points of multiple phases of construction and the layers dividing the site combine to provide an interesting basis for interpretation. The concentric circles, with the rectangular structure in the centre, are beneath the layer of plant remains, whereas the visible surface remains are above (UNESCO, 2004:23). This not only demonstrates that there are archaeological remains from distinctly different periods, but also that the style of construction changed dramatically too. It is interesting to observe that the earlier phases of construction, the circular turf features, are of a distinctly different form to the later rectangular stone structure. This indicates that while the function of the site changed, the significance of the site did not. This is highlighted by the fact that the later rectangular structure was built directly on the site of the circular features, rather than anywhere else. In addition, Byrgisbúð is the only structure to have been built on Spöngin, suggesting a special significance of the space and therefore the meaning associated with the structure.

- *Other points of interest*

The report that quantities of ash and charcoal were found both at Byrgisbúð and Lögberg (UNESCO, 2004:31) indicates that this was an important find, although it is difficult to tell how significant this is for the interpretation of the structure. The ash found at Lögberg is thought to have been from the burning of animal bones, but it is not possible to determine whether there is any connection between both the ash deposits at Lögberg and Spöngin (Guðmundur Ólafsson, pers. comm.). However, as the ash at Byrgisbúð appears to be volcanic, then this suggests that there is not a direct relationship on that count, although the question about the charcoal remains to be answered.

Having identified and re-analysed the key archaeological elements of Byrgisbúð, it is necessary to compare this with a re-evaluation of the existing theories surrounding the structure, in order to make an accurate interpretation.

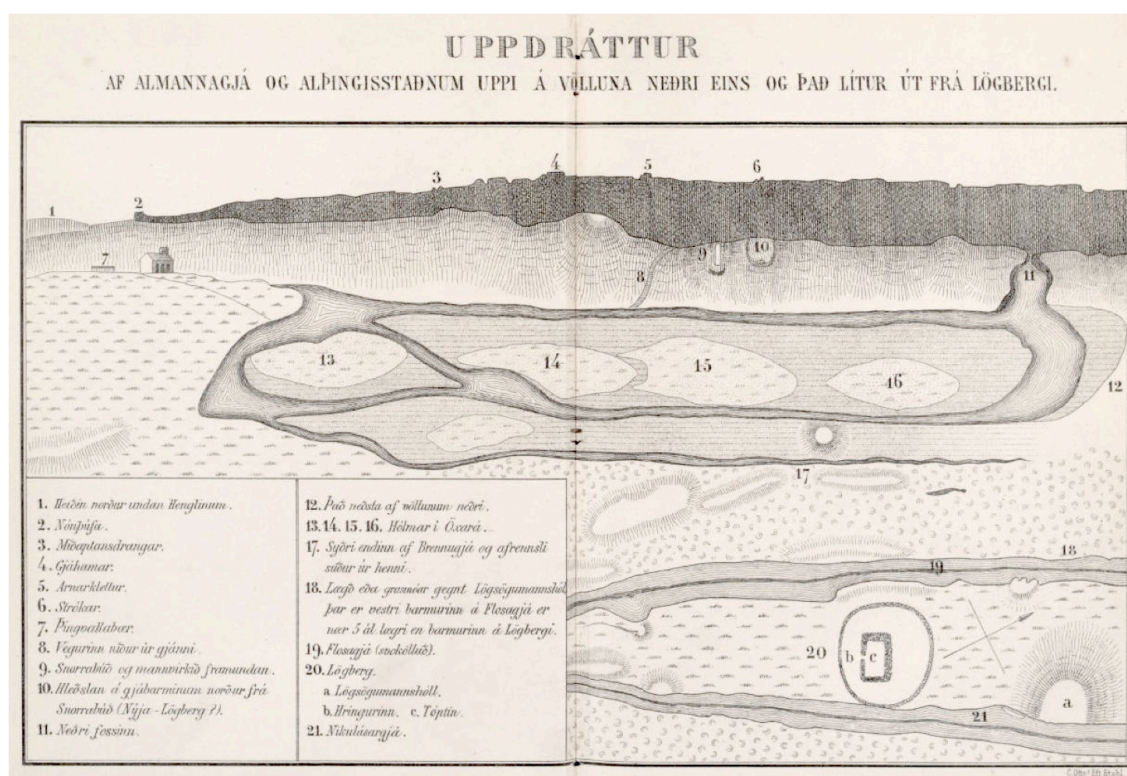
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## Re-Evaluation of the Existing Theories for the Interpretation of Spöngin

There has been a lot of confusion surrounding the interpretation of Spöngin, which has resulted in various theories emerging relating to the role of Spöngin at the Althing. However, no satisfactory or conclusive interpretation has yet been put forward. Here the key theories are discussed and revisited in light of the re-analysed fieldwork evidence.

### *Spöngin as the Pagan Lögberg*

Traditionally, Spöngin has been regarded as the original location of the Law Rock from when the Althing was established c.930. This is most readily seen in this 19<sup>th</sup> century map of Þingvellir (Vigfússon, 1881), where features 20 A, B & C are collectively labelled as 'Lögberg' (**Figure 31**). It is also interesting to note that the present-day location of the 'new' Law Rock, next to Almannagjá, (feature no.10) is merely questioned and is not accepted as a certainty.



**Figure 31:** Vigfússon's Map of Þingvellir, showing features 20 A, B & C as 'Lögberg'

It is interesting to observe in Vigfússon's diary entry for Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> June 1880 that he appears to accept that Spöngin was the original Lögberg even before he has begun his excavation. In Vigfússon's map of Þingvellir above, he combines the different features on Spöngin as 'Lögberg' and sub-labels *Lögsögumannshóll* (Law Speaker's Hillock), *Hringurinn* (The Circle) and *Tóptin* (The Ruins) as individual elements of this. The theory that this had been the original Lögberg is however very weak, because when scholars have attempted to match written sources with the landscape, they found that a location on the western side of the river would have been more likely (Adolf Friðriksson, pers. comm.). In addition, when observing the geographical setting of the assembly site, it appears logical to have situated Lögberg in its current western location by Almannagjá from the beginning, so as to take advantage of the amphitheatre effect from the cliff face, the elevated mound from which to speak, as well as the plain directly below for the audience to assemble. Indeed, elements such as these have been described by the 19<sup>th</sup> century scholar Guðbrandur Vigfússon (brother of Sigurður) as being essential to, and characteristic of, any assembly site (Guðjónsson, 1985:29). In this sense, the acoustic and practical benefits of the present, western, location of Lögberg would be logical for it to be situated there in the first instance.

Spöngin is surrounded by water and beyond that lava. The claim that the hillock on Spöngin was where the original Lögberg was located is problematic because the area of land which constitutes Spöngin is very narrow, around 20 metres at its widest point, and the surrounding water-filled fissures and lava mean that there is not a suitable area in the immediate vicinity to accommodate an audience of sufficient size. Therefore, it does not appear probable that the Law Rock would have been located on Spöngin, when a much better site was available on the western side of the assembly site by Almannagjá. It is unclear as to what this Spöngin/Lögberg theory is based upon and why it refers to both the hillock and the structure called Byrgisbúð, although overall the theory of the original Lögberg on Spöngin appears to be a product of popular tradition and lacks any credible basis.

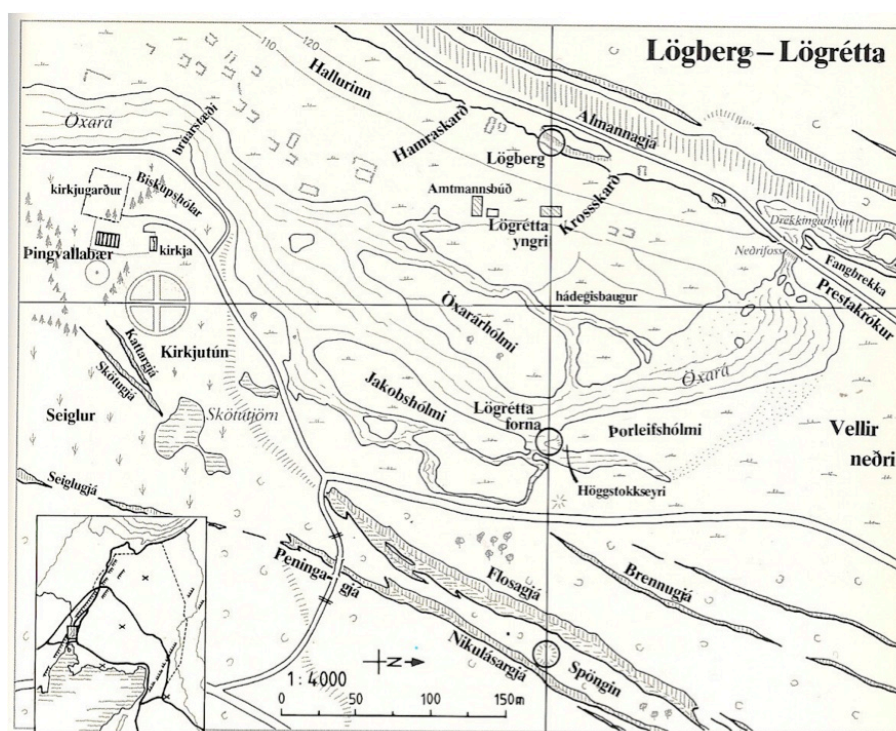
The 'Law Rock' on Spöngin is often referred to as Heiðna-Lögberg or Gamla-Lögberg (pagan/old Law Rock), and the present location next to Almannagjá is often referred to as Kristna-Lögberg (Christian Law Rock). It is unclear where this classification originates from, but it appears that a distinction between the Kristna-Lögberg (Christian) and Heiðna-Lögberg (pagan) dates from the 18<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Þorsteinsson, 1986:42). It is also unclear whether the 'Christian' and 'pagan' labels given to the different Law Rocks relate directly to the event of the conversion of Iceland to Christianity in AD1000 or not, but the 18<sup>th</sup> century distinction appears to be most likely. This theory that Lögberg was originally sited on Spöngin when the Althing was first established is also linked to the notion that it has been thought that it was later moved to its present location under Almannagjá when the Öxará river was diverted to flow through the assembly site, thereby cutting off Spöngin from the Lögrétta. However, a bridge was built over the river at the point next to Biskupshólar in the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Þorsteinsson, 1987:43), so the reason given that the Law Rock was moved because of the river does not appear to be supported. In addition, the theory that Lögrétta has also been thought to have been situated on Spöngin initially (see below), also does not support this interpretation relating to the diversion of the river.



Byrgisbúð has long been considered to be a booth of some sort, and indeed when Einar dean Einarsen was at Þingvellir between 1821 and 1828, he reported that it was called Skaptabúð, which was probably named after the famous Law Speaker, Skafti Þóroddsson. He was Law Speaker for 27 years from 1004-1030 and is most famous for his leading role in the establishment of the Fifth Court (Nordal, 1990:80). However, this named association with Byrgisbúð most likely stems from the traditional theory at that time of the Law Rock being situated on Spöngin (Þórðarson, 1945:258).

### Byrgisbúð as Lögrétta

There has been much debate over the original location of Lögrétta. It is generally accepted that Lögrétta was situated on Neðrivellir (Lower Plains), to the north or east of the river Öxará, but there has been much debate over the unknown specific location of this early site of Lögrétta (for example, note that on the map in **figure 33** it is marked as being located to the north of the river). Björnsson (1984:41) has suggested that the location of the Lögborg may be connected to the early location of the Lögrétta as shown below in **figure 32**, in that the key elements of the Althing appear to have been situated on an Easterly alignment.



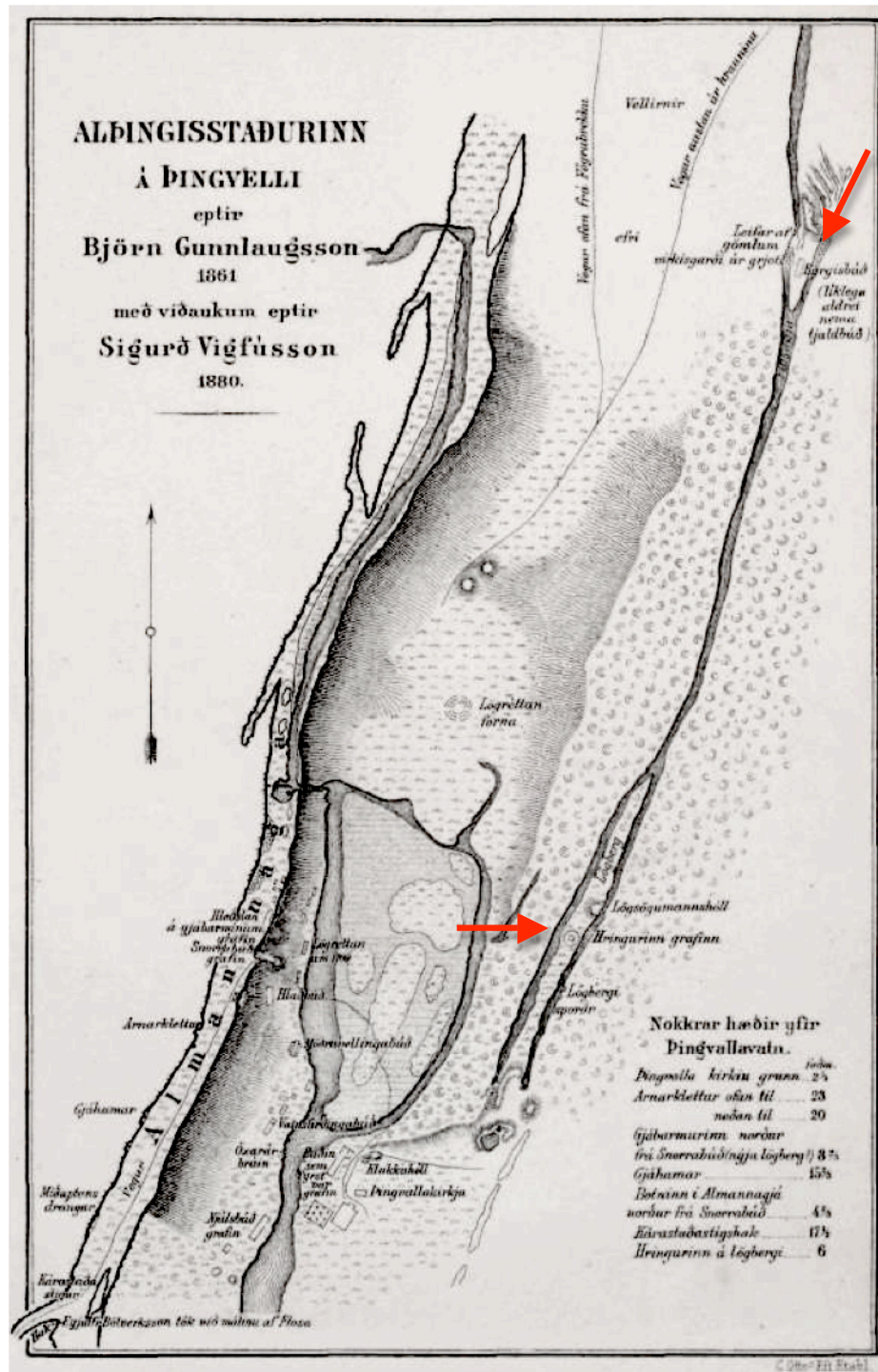
**Figure 32:** The Location of Lögrétta in relation to Lögberg & Spöngin, on an East-West alignment, as proposed by Björnsson (1984)

The map above uses Byrgisbúð as the reference point on Spöngin, although it is not yet known whether this structure was directly associated with the role of the Althing. Nonetheless, it is still very interesting to observe that all of the key features of the Althing, the Lögberg & Lögrétta, including the most recent location of Lögrétta (directly below Lögberg, marked on this map as Lögrétta Yngri), are all situated on this easterly alignment. The fact that the Byrgisbúð structure on Spöngin is also on this easterly alignment with the other key features of the Althing may hint at the potential importance of Spöngin in the archaeology of the Althing.

In his description and discussion of Byrgisbúð on Spöngin, Matthías Þórðarson noted that folklore indicated that Spöngin had sometimes been called *Lögréttuspöng* in later times (Þórðarson, 1945:258). Accounts from the 13<sup>th</sup> century suggest that the Lögrétta was on the plains to the north or east of the river Öxará, although the wording in the law code Grágás indicates that it was located elsewhere originally (Jóhannesson, 2006:64). The Lögrétta was a physical construction consisting of three concentric circular benches, as opposed to the courts, which were only marked out by stakes and ropes (Jóhannesson, 2006:64). It is this point on which the theory of Byrgisbúð as Lögrétta appears to stem from, as the excavations by Vigfússon identified two or three concentric circular structures in the Byrgisbúð ruins on Spöngin. The layer of black plant remains and the traces of the ash and charcoal that were found in the excavations can be used to divide the constructional phases of the site into two key parts, with the concentric circles in the earlier phase and the rectangular structure in the later phase (Friðriksson, 2005:12). In that respect, it can be seen how the theory of the original Lögrétta being located here came about, as the circles are from the earlier phase, although Þórðarson did not accept this interpretation (Þórðarson, 1945:258). The concentric circles that Vigfússon identified do not appear to be directly comparable, in that the outer was much more obvious than those inside (ch.6), implying that they do not comprise one entity, but this appearance is rather due to the outer circle being rebuilt at a later date. If the circular features of Byrgisbúð had originally been the Lögrétta, then it would be expected that each of the three circles would have been of equal construction and therefore be equally apparent in the archaeological record, however the amendments of later phases of construction may explain this discrepancy.

### Two Locations for Byrgisbúð

Later maps (e.g. Þórðarson, 1945 & Þorsteinsson, 1987) show Byrgisbúð as being situated on Spöngin. However, on an earlier map of Þingvellir dating from 1861 (reproduced and adapted in Vigfússon, 1881), Spöngin is labelled as 'Lögberg' and in this instance 'Byrgisbúð' is marked as being situated approximately 450 metres further north-east along Flosagjá, as shown below (**Figure 33**).



**Figure 33:** Map of Þingvellir from 1861, showing ‘Byrgisbúð’ as lying to the north east of Spöngin, further along Flosagjá



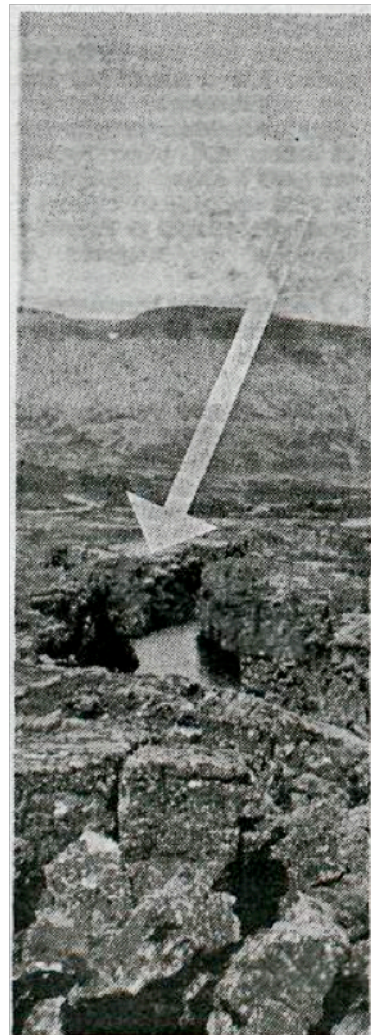
This other structure that was also known as Byrgisbúð stands alone, away from the main assembly area, on a V-shaped piece of land where Flosagjá forks into two parts. As with the structure on Spöngin, this also appears to have been deliberately constructed on this spot, deliberately separate from other aspects of the assembly site, according to the description by Vigfússon (1881:35).

When acquainting himself with the assembly site on the first day of his investigations at Þingvellir on Friday 28<sup>th</sup> May 1880, Sigurður Vigfússon gave a short description of this structure, which he included in his report, although he did not excavate it (Vigfússon, 1881:8). He describes the location as being on a point in the lava where Flosagjá splits into two (**Figure 34**), and that 'Byrgisbúð' is located on a level area in between this fork in the fissure, with possible evidence of stone foundations being visible. Vigfússon's notes on the map in **figure 33** state that there are the remains of old ramparts from earthworks there, but that it was probably never anything other than a camping booth.

It is possible that Vigfússon labelled Byrgisbúð as being in a different location in order to support the theory that Spöngin was the Lögberg (Adolf Friðriksson, pers. comm.) as it is evident from his report that Vigfússon was convinced that Spöngin was the original site for the Lögberg.

Sigurður Vigfússon was of the opinion, based upon saga evidence, that Byrgisbúð was situated to the east of the assembly site, on the edge of the lava field, and he associated it with the lawsuit of the burning of Njál in *Njál's Saga*. However, he appears to have been of a different opinion to his brother Guðbrandur and the Danish archaeologist Kristian Kålund, who both thought Byrgisbúð to be on Spöngin, as Sigurður thought it to be situated further north along the fissure at the point he called *Byrgisbúðartanganum*, 'Shelter-Booth-Spit' (Vigfússon, 1881:35).

There is not enough space here to study this other site in detail, but this structure is of great interest, not least because of its location. It has clearly been deliberately situated on this V-shape of land, which is surrounded by water in the same way as Byrgisbúð on Spöngin. This is reminiscent of the Vé as discussed in chapter 3, in relation to the theory of Ejnar Dyggve of a V-shaped Vé, with the apex pointing south (Olsen, 1966:245,287).



**Figure 34:** Vigfússon's location of Byrgisbúð, as discussed in *Morgunblaðið*, 20<sup>th</sup> Sept. 1970

### *Byrgisbúð as the Booth of the Allsherjargoði*

Þórðarson considered the later rectangular ruins to be the remains of a small booth, but he did not think that it was a booth from the Middle Ages or the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, in other accounts Byrgisbúð is claimed to date from later times, but yet was called *Allsherjarbúð*, the Booth of the Supreme Chieftain (Þórðarson, 1945:258), who was associated with the early period of the Althing. The Allsherjargoði was instrumental in the procedures of the Althing from the very beginning, particularly during the heathen period. Therefore, since the booth elements of Byrgisbúð post-date the circular features and so are of a later relative date, then it cannot be interpreted as *Allsherjarbúð*, because such a structure would have been required from the beginning of the establishment of the Althing.

### *Byrgisbúð as the Booth of Saga Characters*

The imagination and creativity inspired by the Sagas has often influenced popular tradition when it comes to interpreting archaeological remains in Iceland (see Friðriksson, 1994), and Byrgisbúð is no exception. The Danish archaeologist Kristian Kålund thought it to be the booth of the people of Svínafell, and so named it *Svínafellingabúð* and associated it with the Saga characters Orm and Þórarinn, who appear in *Sturlunga Saga*, although it is by no means certain that this booth was in this location. In addition, in chapter 136 of *Njáls Saga*, Flosi Þórðarson of Svínafell apparently had his camp at Byrgisbúð when attending the Althing for the lawsuit against the burning of Njál (see also Vigfússon's interpretation of the other location of Byrgisbúð above). However, the saga account does not say where this booth was (Þórðarson, 1945:259), but it also appears likely that the names of nearby Flosagjá and Flosahlaup are associated with this legend.

Along similar lines, Byrgisbúð has also been interpreted according to folklore as the booth of the Law Speaker Þorgeir Ljósvetningagoði (Vigfússon, 1881:13), who oversaw and decided upon the Icelander's conversion to Christianity in 1000, as well as the booth of another Law Speaker, the famous Skapti Þóroddsson (Þórðarson, 1945:258; Jóhannesson, 2006:70). As outlined above, it seems that these theories are based upon the notion that this was the location of the original Law Rock. However, it is clear from all of these accounts that any claim of a connection between Byrgisbúð and Saga characters can only be based upon speculation and not upon archaeological fact.

### *Agricultural Use*

According to a 19<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic-English dictionary, compiled by Richard Cleasby and enlarged and completed by Guðbrandur Vigfússon (the brother of Sigurður – Adolf Friðriksson, pers. comm.), the term 'Byrgi' translates as meaning "an enclosure or fence" (Cleasby & Vigfússon, 1874:90). This would then give the name Byrgisbúð the meaning 'Enclosed-Booth'. This can be interpreted in two ways; firstly, that the booth element was built on top of a known and previously used enclosure or fence; or secondly, that the name was given to the structure at a

much later date, when it was not known that the two elements were not contemporary, but gave the impression that the structure was a booth surrounded by an enclosure or fence.

To follow the former interpretation, if the circular features themselves were known and used as a type of enclosure, then this raises the question of what it provided shelter for, such as possibly a sheep shelter. There was a farm nearby at Þingvellir, near to the modern church and houses, so therefore sheep would have been kept nearby. However, the situation of Spöngin is not ideal for the keeping of sheep, as the neck of land has very steep sides into the water-filled fissures. The quantities of animal bones found in Nikulásargjá (ch.6) appear to be too many and too focused in their deposition to be due to accidental loss. It would be highly illogical to keep sheep in such an area, particularly when more suitable ground is available nearby elsewhere. In addition, the excavations have not identified evidence suggesting the presence of animals there. Therefore, the use of the earlier phases of Byrgisbúð as an animal shelter does not appear to be a logical interpretation.

#### *A Defensive or Military Role in Conflict*

The natural defences offered by Spöngin and the water-filled fissures surrounding it would make it an ideally defensible site, which might indicate a defensive or military use in times of conflict. According to historical records, the structure on Spöngin was apparently called Virkisbúð in the summer of 1012, and there had been a fortress around 'Byrgisbúð' in 1120. However, it is unlikely that Virkisbúð was an accurate name and it is probable that the name is younger than the booth itself (Þórðarson, 1945:260). Virkisbúð means approximately 'fortress booth', or a "fortification around a booth" (Cleasby & Vigfússon, 1874:88) implying that both the booth and circle elements of the structure were visible at that time when the name was applied. This in turn may account for why one of the three concentric circles is much more evident than the others. However, the excavation evidence suggests that the circular features are not contemporary with the rectangular element. Therefore, the name Virkisbúð was probably attributed to the structure at a later date, once it had ceased to be used and it was assumed that the structure consisted of a rectangular building surrounded by a contemporary rampart or circular enclosure. Another point that requires clarification is that a booth adjacent to the present-day location of Lögberg next to Almannagjá also had the name Virkisbúð (see ch.4), which further weakens this interpretation.

Military or defensible structures are not common in the Icelandic archaeological record, however there are situations where defence has been required in other situations. An account in Sturlunga Saga says that a court was held near Byrgisbúð on Spöngin in 1120 (Þórðarson, 1945:259), in a similar way to the occasion when a court had to be held on the bridge over the river, defended by armed guards. This demonstrates the convenience of Spöngin as a defensible location. When Hjalti Skeggjason was sentenced to outlawry for blasphemy at the Althing in 999, the court had to be held on the bridge over Öxará, with armed men to defend it at either end. Sturlunga Saga describes this scene at Byrgisbúð 100 years later at the Burning of Njál lawsuit, and it describes Byrgisbúð as being fenced at the Althing in



the year 1120. The court was moved east to the lava beside Byrgisbúð, guarded by the fissures and the ramparts (Þórðarson, 1945:259). It was Thorgils Oddason who was convicted by this court that had to be convened near Byrgisbúð on Spöngin (Jóhannesson, 2006:67). The evidence suggests that Spöngin was not used for military purposes in a context of conflict as may be found in other countries, but it does appear to have served a role as a defensible site in other legal situations.

### Summary

The various theories outlined here commonly run along similar themes, either associating Spöngin and Byrgisbúð with the original Law Rock, or interpreting the remains in connection with various saga characters. Both of these interpretations appear to be heavily based upon popular tradition, despite the information yielded by the excavations.

It is not clear why Byrgisbúð has been given this name, nor which 'Byrgi' it has been named after (Þórðarson, 1945:260). It is certainly an interesting point that the structure on Spöngin has been given various different names over time, and that the name 'Byrgisbúð' has been given to two different structures, in separate locations. However, without a more detailed study of the other, northern, structure, it is not possible to accurately evaluate its importance.

All of the above theories either focus on only one aspect of the site, or take the standpoint of interpreting Byrgisbúð as one structure, with one role or function. However, the fieldwork evidence has clearly demonstrated that there are many different phases and types of construction within this site. For example, Þórðarson was of the opinion that the booth element of Byrgisbúð was not younger than from the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but he also considered whether or not the booth had been rebuilt later (Þórðarson, 1945:260). In light of the complex sequencing in chapter 6, it is clear that it is necessary to interpret several different structures, each with apparently different uses, as opposed to relying upon one single theory of interpretation and so it is clear why none of the above theories provide a satisfactory interpretation of Byrgisbúð. In order to reach a new, fresh and objective interpretation, it is necessary to study each of these phases of construction separately, and this is best done by placing all of the existing evidence into the wider context of the Althing and other assembly sites.

## 8

## Interpretation

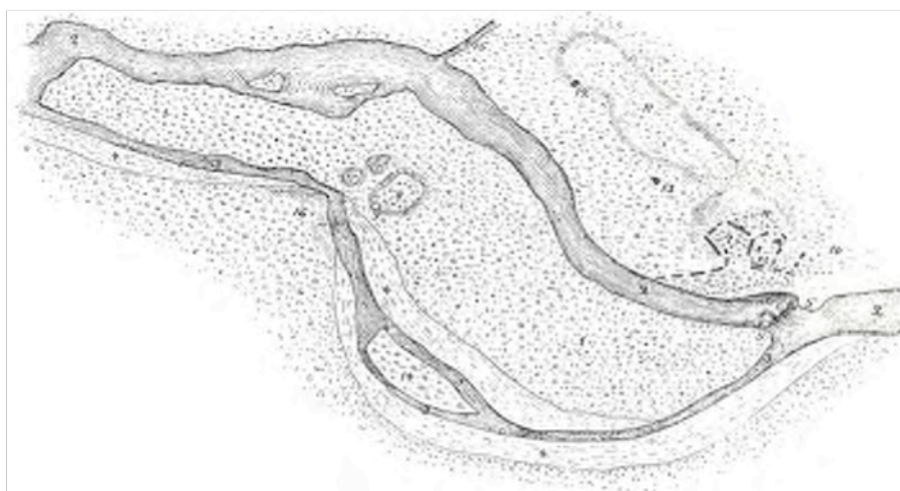
It is particularly noticeable from the fieldwork evidence that the way in which the Byrgisbúð site was used changed dramatically over time. This is demonstrated by the three facts that the structural elements comprising Byrgisbúð changed from being circular to rectangular in form; both remained in exactly the same location; and there are no other known traces of archaeological activity elsewhere on Spöngin. This suggests that the importance of the selection of the site on Spöngin appears to have remained because the later structures were not relocated with a change in use, but remained in the same location. In order to attempt to interpret the archaeological remains, it is necessary to regard what has been named 'Byrgisbúð' as in fact four separate structures in at least two broad and separate phases, each of which were significantly different in form. Further to this, it is necessary to understand the aforementioned importance of how the use of the site changed so dramatically and why the significance of the site remained constant. An understanding and interpretation of Byrgisbúð on Spöngin can be found in two parts: the landscape setting and the structure itself.

### The Landscape Setting of Spöngin

The location in which Byrgisbúð is situated, the landscape setting of Spöngin itself, is of great interest and relevance to the interpretation of the site. The most notable characteristic of the landscape setting is that Spöngin is a 'bridge' or 'island' of land that is surrounded by water. Many thing sites in Iceland, Scandinavia and Britain were situated next to waterways, such as lakes and rivers, and this has often been explained from a practical point of view in terms of communication and transport (e.g. Aspa Löt, Sweden – Sanmark & Semple, 2008:7). The two key elements of a thing site were the the Law Rock/Mound and the Law Council, and it is also evident that the Law Council circles at many assembly sites were situated on headlands, or in some instances on islands, with the result that the site was surrounded by water. Examples of assembly sites with probable Law Council circles located on headlands include Þórsnes (Friðriksson, 1994:111) and Þingnes (Ólafsson, 1987) in Iceland. The location of a thing site on an island is occasionally evident in place names, such as Þingey (lit. 'Assembly Island') in north-eastern Iceland (Vésteinsson *et al*, 2004:173). Other examples of thing sites located on an island include Árnesþing (Friðriksson, 1994:122) and Skuldaþingsey (Vésteinsson *et al*, 2004) in Iceland, Law Ting Holm in Loch Tingwall on Shetland (Coolen & Mehler, 2010), as well as the island of Frösö in Sweden (which was also a 10<sup>th</sup> C. open-air cult site – Lucas, 2009:405) and a probable example in Gotland (Myrberg, 2009). Other Scandinavian examples that are particularly relevant to the study of Þingvellir include other major *Althing* sites in Norway such as Frosta, which was held on a peninsular in the middle of a fjord (*Frostaping*), as well as an Althing held on the island of Gula (*Gulaping*), to the south of Sognefjord (Woolf, 2009:51-2). At

Pingvellir, the Law Council of the Althing itself [Lögrétta] was held on an island in the river Öxará (Shoemaker, 2009:18) and remained there until 1594, when erosion of the island by the river caused it to be moved (Guðjónsson, 1985:22). So far, islands have not been widely studied in Scandinavia as potential sites for Law Councils at thing assemblies, however further evaluation of islets or small peninsulas may provide further information in the search for Viking Age thing sites (Myrberg, 2009:108). This forms an interesting line of inquiry into whether Spöngin was a potential site for a Law Council, due to the observation above that Spöngin also has the appearance of an island between the water-filled fissures.

Studying examples of island thing sites can draw further comparisons with Spöngin. Þingey and Skuldapíngsey in north-eastern Iceland are both examples of assemblies being held on islands, and therefore being surrounded by water. Despite both being large islands where the assembly site is only situated in one part, both Þingey and Skuldapíngsey are similar to Spöngin because in each case the assembly is situated on a stretch of lava, each creating islands in the river Skjálfandafljót (Vésteinsson *et al*, 2004:173). The site of the Árnesþing assembly in the Þjórsádalur valley in southern Iceland is another relevant example of a thing site held on an island (**Figure 35**). In this instance, the main elements of the thing assembly, the Law Council and Mound, were located on an island in the river, while the thing booths were situated on the riverbank; this is a noticeably similar arrangement, in principle, to that at Pingvellir.



**Figure 35:** The Árnesþing assembly on an island in the river Þjórsá

As the key elements of the thing were situated on the island, they were distinctly separate from the rest of the assembly site where the thing booths were. This highlights the idea of a sacred site, through the notion of separation and sanctuary, as discussed in chapter 3. This is also demonstrated by the high regard in which thing sites were held, as seen in the procedures of thing assemblies in chapter 2.

The role of islands often appears in relation to both cult and assembly sites; for example, the 11<sup>th</sup> century chronicle written by the German Bishop Thietmar of

Merseberg includes an account of the sacrifice of humans and animals to the gods at Lejre on the Danish island of Sjælland (Sørensen, 2001:214). In Britain, the assembly of the 'Council of the Isles' was held on an island called Eilean na Comhairle ('Council Isle') at Finlaggan in Islay in the southern Hebrides. This assembly was held on an island that was reached by a causeway, as was the case at Law Ting Holm (below) and this also matches the characteristics of Spöngin. Although this assembly dates from the Middle Ages, it is thought to relate back to an earlier, Norse assembly site (Crawford, 1987:208-9). At thing assembly meetings it was also common to resolve disputes with a duel, called a *hólmgang* (lit. 'island going' – see also chapter 3), which took place on an island, as was the case at the Althing at Þingvellir until they were abolished in 1006.



**Figure 36:** Law Ting Holm, Shetland

The location of a Law Council on an island with the importance of accessing the site by crossing water is clearly seen at Law Ting Holm ('Law Assembly Island') in Shetland, although now only during times of heavy rain (**Figure 36**). Here the stone causeway can still be seen, allowing access to the site. The manner in which this separates the site and restricts access is very similar to Spöngin, and is in keeping with the ideas behind assembly sites and the relationship between religion and politics as studied in chapter 3. The action of crossing water in order to enter such an assembly site had a symbolic function, through the ritual crossing of 'holy waters'. Such an arrangement, as shown above in **figure 36**, is also evident on Spöngin in the approach from the South side. According to Norse mythology, the boundary between the worlds of the dead and the living were symbolised and marked by these watercourses, which in turn can be linked to the location of thing sites adjacent to them. The combination of thing sites adjacent to watercourses therefore served as a ritual boundary to the sites in both pre-Christian and Christian times (Sanmark, 2009:232). With reference to the Tynwald on the Isle of Man, Christianisation did not eliminate the old rituals and traditions, but instead this added to the layers of tradition that hallowed the most important site on the

island (Shoemaker, 2009:30). This is also applicable to the Althing at Þingvellir, because it is known from *Íslendingabók* that some heathen practices did continue after the official conversion to Christianity in 1000 (see Grønlie, 2006:9).

The locations where thing assemblies were held were very complex places, where legal actions were combined with cult and ritual elements (Myrberg, 2009:111). Written sources such as the Icelandic sagas indicate that the main activities of a thing assembly took place within a sanctified, demarcated area and that most of the other people attending the thing remained outside of this area. These ideas of sanctuary and inside/outside were associated with a thing assembly meeting in the same way as with the sanctified area of the Vé (*ibid*), discussed in chapter 3. The word Vé refers to a legally protected area where cultic activities could take place within a sanctuary. A Vé is often interpreted as a meeting place that was consecrated to super-natural powers for protection over cult and ritual activities, and thing sites were also an example of this (Myrberg, 2008:140). In this way, the deliberate choice of Spöngin as the location for Byrgisbúð indicates that the natural setting of Spöngin and the enclosed area that it provided was of importance to the activities that took place there.

The thing assembly was a sacred space, which was often connected to other spiritually-charged sites or elements, such as ancient burial mounds (Shoemaker, 2009:9), as was frequently the case in Scandinavia & Britain. Burial mounds were not associated with assembly sites in Iceland, although a stronger link with natural features is evident; in this case the water-filled fissures surrounding Spöngin. The locations of assemblies in Scandinavia and Britain were often determined by landscape settings with suitable monumental characteristics, which were required to enhance the status and power of the site and those who ruled there. Assembly sites were closely linked to the expression of community through collective authority, and so it is highly likely that the places where assemblies were convened held ideological associations for the people who used them, which may have influenced the choice of location in the beginning (Pantos, 2004:170). In Scandinavia, assembly sites were often connected with locations used for pagan religious practice, which indicates a strong unity between administration and ritual, as administration and cult practice at that time were 'two sides of the same coin'. In reference to the characteristics of assembly sites, these provided a stage for religious and political events (Semple, 2004:136) and the natural setting of Spöngin and also the Law Rock at Þingvellir provided such a stage.

A comparison of the landscape setting of Spöngin with other thing sites highlights similarities between the choice of location for the holding of assemblies and the selection of Spöngin as the site for Byrgisbúð. The nature of activities that took place at assembly sites required an imposing site for the purpose of display. This can be seen at many known assembly sites, such as the Tynwald on the Isle of Man and Law Ting Holm in Shetland. The placement of Byrgisbúð on Spöngin appears to have been a deliberate choice, selecting the site on the basis of the natural features in relation to the cultic requirements and symbolic importance associated with such a setting. The importance of the landscape setting in the choice for the location of Byrgisbúð can be further understood by connecting these findings to the constructional sequence of Byrgisbúð.

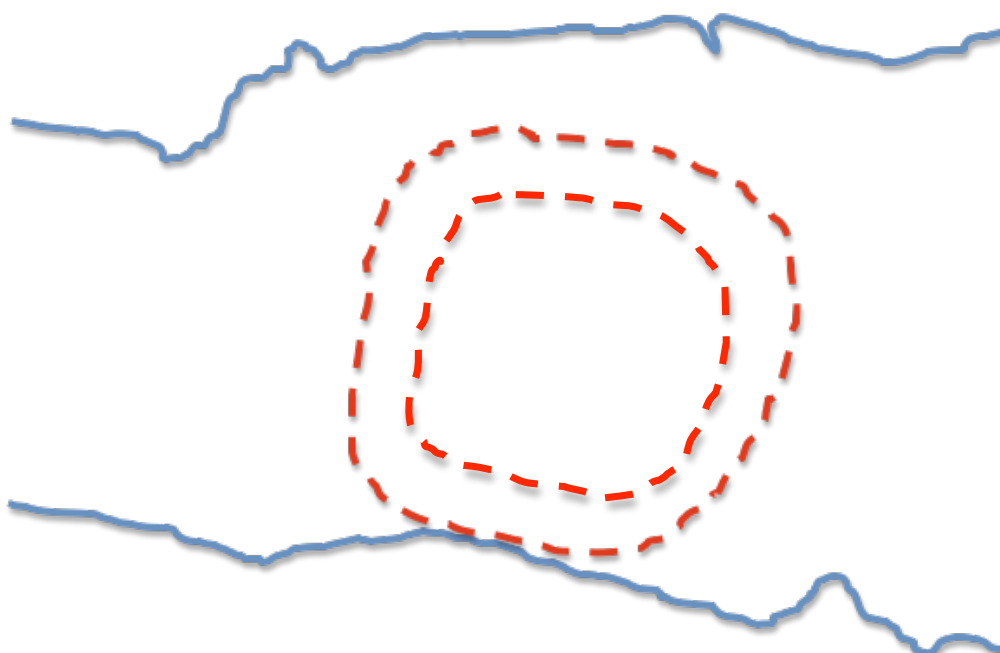
### The Structure of Byrgisbúð

There are essentially four separate structures in the constructional sequence of Byrgisbúð, as identified in chapter 6, with the earlier phases broadly being circular in shape and the latter rectangular.

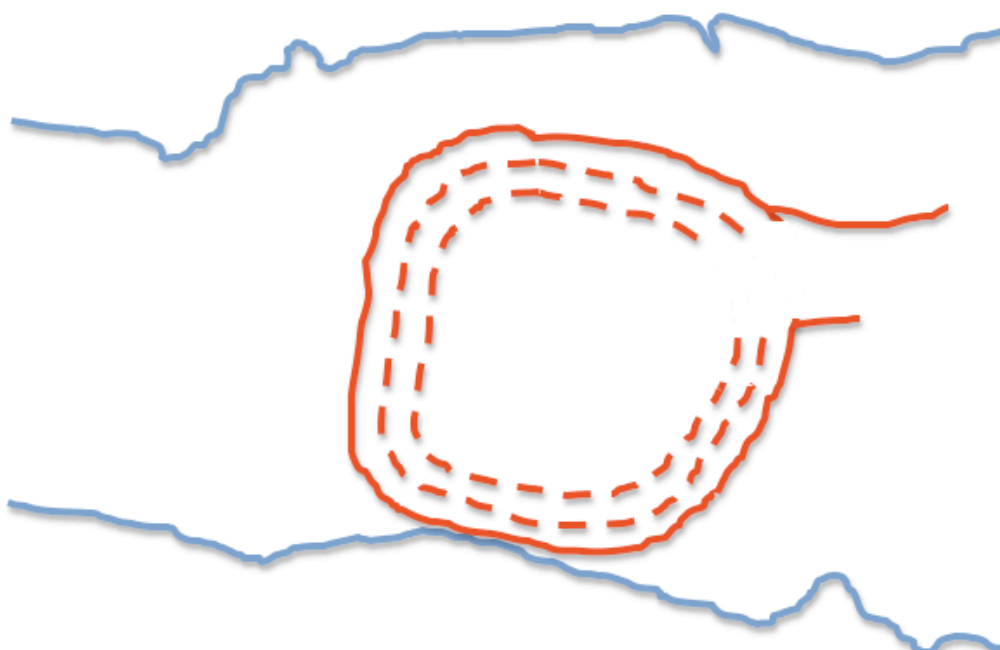
The water-filled fissures and the circular elements of Byrgisbúð appear to act as an enclosure, both physical and symbolic. It is common for the Law Council elements of assembly sites in Iceland, Scandinavia and Britain to be enclosed in various ways, further enhancing the idea of sanctity and an inside/outside separation. This is further demonstrated by archaeological evidence from the Tynwald on the Isle of Man, where people were contained within an enclosure that bounded the assembly site (Darvill, 2004:224). Although the character of law and legal procedures changed between pagan and Christian times in Scandinavia, the physical assembly structures survived (Brink, 2004:215) because the importance of the sites remained despite the change in their usage. In a similar way, it is clear from the archaeological evidence that while the way in which the Byrgisbúð site was used changed considerably, the importance of the site remained, due to the continued focus of using this particular site, rather than relocating the later structures elsewhere. If the archaeological record showed a development of the same structure, then a continued use of the site would be expected. However, as four separate structures have been built on exactly the same site, rather than being relocated when the way in which the site was used changed, then this suggests that the importance of the location on Spöngin remained.

On the following pages are illustrations showing the four structures that constitute 'Byrgisbúð'. The solid red lines represent standing remains that are visible and were recorded in the topographic survey in 1988. These were traced over the topographic survey. The dashed red lines show the probable layout of features that were identified in the excavations. In the illustration of structure 4, the green line surrounding the feature represents the edge of the platform on which the structure is standing. The blue lines represent the edge of the water-filled fissures. The excavation reports indicate that an entrance to Structure 4 was located in the southern longitudinal wall, although this has not been included in these plans because the exact location of the entrance is unclear. The only entrance that is clear in the archaeological record is the entrance to Structure 2 on the north side.

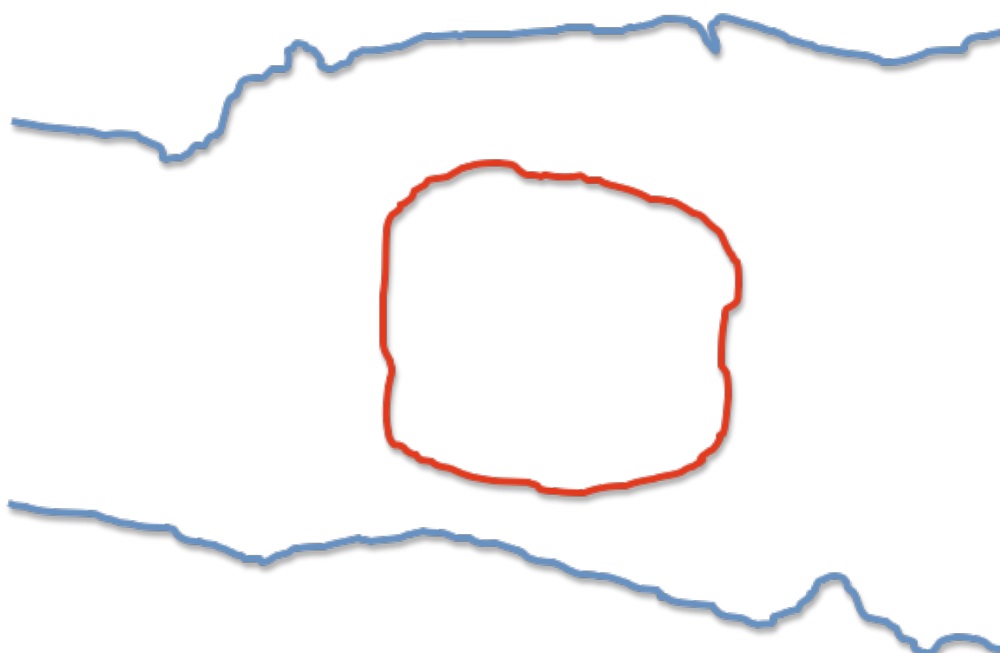




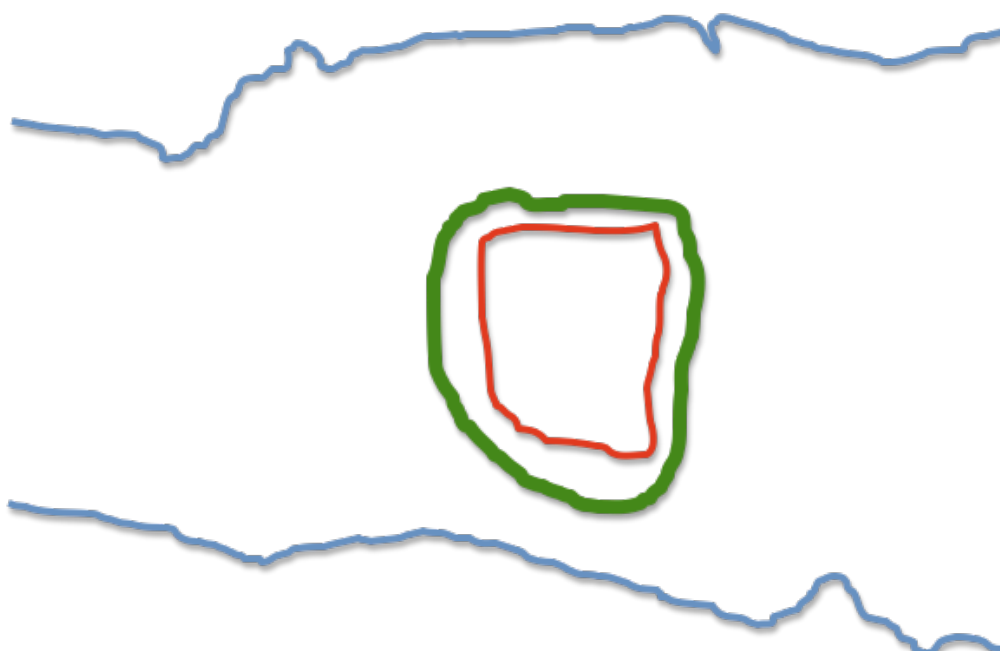
**Structure 1**



**Structure 2**



**Structure 3**



**Structure 4**

### The Earlier Phases

- Structure 1 (Phase 1)

The excavation reports show that the earliest phase of activity consisted of two ridges of small stones forming an apparent circle, one of which lay underneath the visible outer circle. The second ridge of stones lay underneath another circle within the outer, which was of a smaller diameter (Vigfússon, 1881:12). The relatively unsubstantial nature of this construction, with no evidence of robbing, gives the impression of merely demarcating an area, rather than being a standing structure. This bears a resemblance to the demarcating and enclosing of sacred areas, as discussed in chapter 3. It is therefore possible that this structure was intended to mark out the area in order to aid the layout and construction of structure 2, as the dimensions of each correspond. In the site-plan above, this structure is depicted as a dashed red line because although it is not visible in the topographic survey, it is described as being of this form in the excavation reports.



**Figure 37:** 11<sup>th</sup> C. Thing Site of Bällsta, Sweden: A Square Enclosure Demarcated with Stones

The stone-lined enclosure in **figure 37** suggests another function for Structure 1. Norse pagan enclosures could either be circular, rectangular or square in shape, enclosing an area where ritual activity took place (Ellis-Davidson, 1988:27). This photograph and illustration of an enclosure at the thing site of Bällsta in Uppland, Sweden (Sanmark & Semple, 2008:251) is of interest because the enclosure is demarcated with a ridge of stones, as is the case with Structure 1. In the illustration there is a large stone in the centre, and although such a stone has not yet been identified at Byrgisbúð, other similar stones have been reported elsewhere, such as at Bakki in Tálknafjörður where there was a large stone square enclosure with a large rock within, which was thought to be a Hörgr (Friðriksson, 1994:60). In addition, there was also the so-called ‘sacrifice stone’ at Þórsnes on Snæfellsnes, which was also associated with a thing site (Ingólfsson, 2010:124; Friðriksson, 1994:111,113). These examples are relevant to the example of a possible Hörgr at the thing site of Gamla Uppsala (ch.3). Also of note are the standing stones next to the enclosure in **figure 37**, which although none are found at Icelandic thing sites, are similar to those often found at other Swedish thing sites, such as Aspa Löt (Sanmark, 2009:215), which was marked by rune-stones, as in the illustration above, to commemorate their establishment. This all suggests that Structure 1 could have had two functions, both hosting ritual and thing activities itself, as well as forming the basis for the construction of Structure 2.

- Structure 2 (Phase 2)

The second structure in the sequence consists of an outer circle and entranceway that are visible in the topographic survey, and two probable inner concentric circles that are described in the excavation reports. Structure 2 in the Byrgisbúð sequence, in combination with the landscape setting of Spöngin, matches many characteristics of a Viking/Norse legal site, as found at other *þings*:

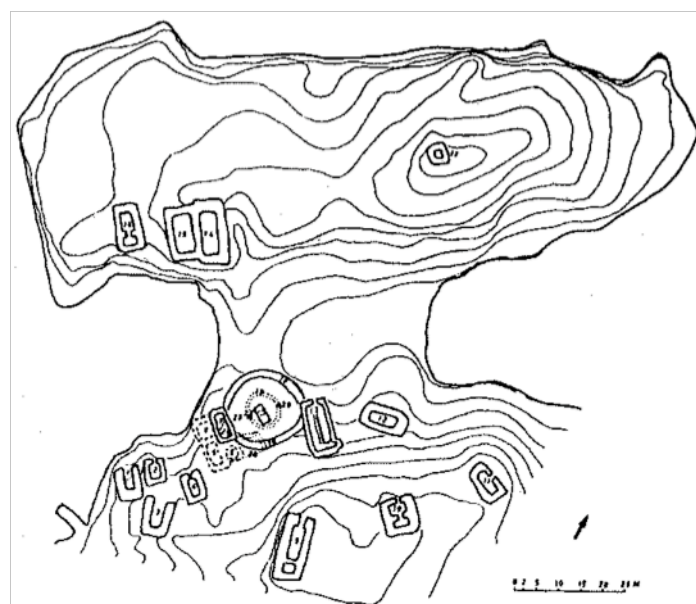
- The site is surrounded by water
- It is on an Easterly alignment from the Law Rock/mound (Lögborg)
- The structure is circular in shape
- The concentric circles correspond with a Viking court circle
- The circle has a northerly entrance
- The site is enclosed both by the natural boundaries of the water-filled fissures, as well as the circular construction itself.
- The site is accessed along a 'causeway' over the water.

It must be acknowledged that no two thing sites are exactly the same, and as such there is not a fixed template for identifying these sites. However, they often have the same pattern of characteristics and although thing sites are found widely across Iceland, Britain and Scandinavia, these are nonetheless comparable because they are all of the same essential form. Each of these characteristics listed above are comparable with other confirmed thing sites, which strongly aids the interpretation of this structure. The three characteristics of the circular structure, surrounded by water and accessed by a causeway, are all strikingly similar to Law Ting Holm in Shetland, to name but one example. The Easterly alignment corresponds with the orientation of the court and mound of the Tynwald on the Isle of Man and the location of Byrgisbúð on an 'island' is comparable to Icelandic thing sites such as Árnesþing, supporting the theories that Lögrétta was originally situated here (chapter 7).

The identification of Structure 2 as a potential site for the Lögrétta lies firstly in the location of Spöngin in relation to the orientation of the thing site. The two main elements of any assembly site were the Mound or Law Rock (Lögborg) from where announcements were made, and the Law Council Circle (Lögrétta), where laws were discussed, made and amended. The Tynwald on the Isle of Man is in many ways similar to the Althing in that it consisted of a plain with a Mound and a Court-circle on an East-West alignment (Moore, 1977:152), which were connected by a path that was 'fenced' (i.e. Vébönd, ch.3). Within this enclosed area, the procession called *Lögborgisganga* went between them, as was the case at the Althing (see **fig.9**, ch.2). This processional path can also be seen at other thing sites, such as the island of Law Ting Holm in Loch Tingwall, Shetland, where a stone causeway connects the enclosure/court circle with the rest of the assembly site, in a similar way to assembly sites in Sweden and Norway (Shoemaker, 2009:41). At the Tynwald, the Mound (Althing – Lögborg) was situated to the West of the Court-circle, and the king would take his place upon the mound, facing to the East (Moore, 1977:150-2) towards the court circle. In this context, the similarities between the orientation of the Tynwald and the Law Rock and Structure 2 on Spöngin at the Althing are particularly noticeable, as illustrated in **figure 32** in chapter 7.

The modifications and developments between Structures 1 & 2 have similarities with other sites. Although thing sites in general do not fit a standard model, specific elements such as a Law Council did conform to a known standard circular model. Geophysical surveys at the assembly site of Law Ting Holm at Tingwall, Shetland, have shown that the natural features of the islet on which the Law Council is thought to have been held may have been artificially modified in order to emphasise the significance of the site. Further to this, traces of a stone enclosure that encircled the island (Crawford, 1987:206) match descriptions of stone benches at the site for the officials to sit upon, which were detected in the geophysical survey (Coolen & Mehler, 2010:26). It is known from written records that the Law Council at the Althing was also a physical structure, which consisted of benches laid out in a circular shape. This corresponds with the concentric circles of Structure 2 above. Artificial modification of the landscape such as this did take place to an extent, but sites were primarily chosen for either their natural characteristics, or due to an existing importance in the landscape, such as an ancient burial mound.

It is interesting to note in the topographic survey in **figure 27** and the drawing of Structure 2 above that there is an entrance to the enclosure on the northern side, and that in addition the whole structure appears to have been deliberately set off-centre to allow people to pass around the western edge from the approach on the southern side, in order to reach the entrance to the north. Similarities may be seen between Spöngin and Pingnes (Ólafsson, N.D.:2, 1987), where a similar northern entrance to a circular enclosure can be seen, as shown in **figure 38** below. A northern entrance must have been of significance, to warrant moving Structure 2 to one side of Spöngin to allow this passage. Indeed, all four structures in the sequence are off-centre to the edge in this way; so much so that some of the structure has collapsed into the water, as can be seen from the topographic survey.



**Figure 38:** Pingnes, Elliðavatn

Further similarities can be seen between Structure 2 of Byrgisbúð and the circular structures excavated at Pingnes in Elliðavatn (**Figure 38**) because this is comparable not only in the shape and form of the structure, but also because the site is located on a headland, and thus surrounded by water – the significance of which was discussed above. The circular structure at Pingnes is similar to Structure 2 of Byrgisbúð because of its shape, dimensions and location. The outer circle at Pingnes measures 18 metres in diameter, which is similar to structure 2, which measures 15 metres in diameter. However, a significant difference is that the outer circle is built of stone, with a smaller circle inside, measuring 8 metres in diameter and built of turf. The circular shape is like how a thing court circle would be expected to appear, and so has been suggested to be the site of the original Kjalarnes assembly (Ólafsson, 1987), which was the predecessor of the Althing.

The precise location of the Lögrétta at the Althing has been a point of deliberation for many years (Pálsson, 1991:47), especially as it is known that its location moved at various times throughout the history of the Althing (see Chapter 2). The apparent concentric circular shapes of Structure 2 are particularly noticeable in this context, because these concentric circles conceivably indicate the Lögrétta (Law Council Circle), where the chieftains and their advisors sat to discuss and amend laws. This is one factor that appears to support suggestions that the Lögrétta was at one time situated on Spöngin (e.g. Pálsson, 1991:48). In Sigurður Vigfússon's discussion of his excavations on Spöngin in 1880, he suggests that the Lögrétta had at one time been situated on Spöngin, although he does not elaborate upon the point except to mention that the site had at some time in the past been known as *Lögréttuspöng* (Vigfússon, 1881:13). The probability of these concentric circles being the Lögrétta depends upon the dimensions of the ruins.

The size of the Lögrétta is important to consider in order to establish whether or not it could have been situated on Spöngin in the beginning. As stated in chapter 2, it is known that the Lögrétta originally consisted of 36 Goðar and that this later increased ultimately to 48. The Lögrétta could seat 36 chieftains, their advisors and the Law Speaker, but because there were probably more than 36 chieftains in total (Ch.2), only one could represent each Goðorð in the Lögrétta. The size of the Lögrétta can therefore be indicated by estimating the amount of space required around the circumference of the circle, and then by calculating the diameter. Bearing in mind that the Lögrétta consisted of three concentric circles, it is necessary to calculate the size of the *innermost* circle, as this would require the minimum diameter. Each Goði sat on the middle circle and had two advisors, who each sat in front and behind. The law code *Grágás* states that there should be enough space for men to sit *commodiously* on each bench (Dennis *et al*, 2006:189), so if each person had a seating width of 1 metre, this would require 36 metres. With the addition of space for an entranceway and the Law Speaker, this could be rounded to a circumference of approximately 40 metres. Such a circle would have a diameter of 12.73 metres, the minimum diameter for the inner circle. The width of Spöngin is 20 metres, thereby limiting the size of the outer circle. In addition, study of the topographic survey shows that the outermost circle in Structure 2 measures approximately 15 metres in diameter, allowing the innermost circle to measure ~12m, as per the calculations above. This suggests that there would have been enough space to locate Lögrétta here in its original form, and these measurements match the archaeology (**Table F**). Significantly, these dimensions

are also comparable with the archaeological remains on Law Ting Holm in Shetland, which is also thought to be a Law Council. These circular features also measure c.15-20 metres in diameter, and the site was also entered from the northern side (Coolen & Mehler, 2010), as with Structure 2.

No. of Goðar	Circumference	Diameter		Width of Spöngin	Diameter of Structure 2
36	40 metres	12.73 m		20 metres	15 metres
48	60 metres	19.20 m			

**Table F:** Dimensions relating to Lögrétta

When the capacity of the Lögrétta was changed in AD965 to accommodate 39 and then 48 Goðar, also with the later addition of two Bishops, then, again with a seating width of 1 metre and allowing extra space for entrances, this would result in an approximate circumference of 60 metres. This would give a diameter of 19.10 metres for the inner circle. When also allowing for the outer circles, it is clear from **Table F** that the enlarged Lögrétta would not fit into the restricted area on Spöngin. These measurements therefore suggest that if the Lögrétta was originally located on Spöngin, then the reforms of 965 would explain why it was relocated – either to Neðrivellir or an island in Öxará, as is known from later times.

- Structure 3 (Phase 3)

If the Lögrétta had been relocated from Spöngin around 965, then it would be logical that the symbolic and ritual significance of Spöngin would continue for as long as paganism was active in Iceland. Therefore, the remodelling of Structure 2 into Structure 3 would enclose the area, as in Structure 1, although it is uncertain whether it was enclosing a physical entity or a symbolic space. This would allow ritual activities to continue there, considering that the conversion to Christianity did not take place until 35 years after the reforms of 965. The change from the old to new religions was a slow process, which probably took around 150 years to become fully established in society (Sigurðsson, 1999:189), so the role of 'Byrgisbúð' may have continued despite the Conversion (cf. Continuity of Cult, Kristjánsdóttir, 2004). The fact that the way in which the site was used changed, but the importance of the location remained, indicates that, as in Europe, there was a continuation between the old and new religions (Sigurðsson, 1999:193). This was largely a political decision, and therefore initially had very little impact on pagan religious practices (Lucas, 2009:407) and it is known that pagan practices did continue for a while in Iceland after the official conversion in AD1000.



### The Later Phases

- Structure 4 (Phase 7)

The rectangular stone-built Structure 4 is located on a raised platform and although it is within the circular features, it is not central to them, indicating that they were not constructed in direct relation to each other, although the importance of the site may have influenced its construction there. Through his excavations, Vigfússon found that there was an entrance in the southern longitudinal wall (ch.6), facing the approach onto Spöngin, although it is unknown whether this was a symbolic orientation, as with the earlier phases, or purely practical in that it faced the direction of approach. In terms of construction, at Þingnes by Elliðavatn the archaeological remains that were built of turf are of an earlier date than those that were built from stone (Ólafsson, 1987:349) and this is a similar chronology, in terms of building materials, to that identified in Byrgisbúð.

The name of Byrgisbúð undoubtedly refers to Structure 4, because the 'booth' element matches with the rectangular shape of the structure. In this way, the rectangular and latest structure in many ways appears to resemble other thing booths at Þingvellir, with the exception of its location and landscape setting. Thing booths were integral to the assembly site, and were not only used for accommodation, but also for activities and trades, such as the preparation of food, leather workers, weapon smiths and other dealers (Þorsteinsson, 1987:32). Some of the booths that are believed to be among the oldest at Þingvellir were built like longhouses, in the same way as normal farmhouses of the time (Ólafsson, 1987:346), and booths were used to their greatest extent in the earlier part of the history of the Althing. Later in the time when Iceland was under foreign rule between 1262-1662, the Althing meeting was only held for 3-4 days and so booth construction almost ceased. It was not until the period 1662-1798 under Absolutism, when the Althing meetings again lasted for around two weeks, that thing-booth construction began once again. The majority of visible booth remains date from the 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, as few dating from the Medieval period can readily be seen (Þorsteinsson, 1987:32). Recent excavations around the church at Þingvellir have uncovered remains of more thing booths (Margrét Hrönn Hallmundsdóttir, pers. comm.), changing the traditional understanding that the booths were mainly only located on the western side of the river. The complexity of the booth remains means that their interpretation must be taken with care due to the fact that they are not all of a similar form or contemporary date.

The dimensions of Structure 4 are 10x7 metres. A study of the topographic surveys carried out by the National Museum of Iceland (see chapter 4) show that many other thing booths at Þingvellir commonly measure a similar 10-12 metres in length, but notably are only approximately 3 or 4 metres in width. These measurements are comparable with other thing booths that have been studied at Skuldaþingsey, where booths there had average internal dimensions of 10x4.3 metres (Vésteinsson *et al*, 2004:175). It is therefore particularly noticeable that Structure 4 is twice the width of other booths of a similar length. However, the very early thing booths that are thought to date from the Commonwealth period, some of which have been excavated such as Njál's Booth (see chapter 4), measured up to 25 metres in length and around 8 metres in width. By comparison, the width

of Structure 4 is therefore similar to these early booths, although the length is much shorter. The latest booths, from the 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, are significantly smaller and Byrgisbúð is distinctly larger than these booths from the latter period of the Althing at Pingvellir. These facts show that Structure 4 does not directly correspond with any other booth remains covered in the topographic survey. This therefore implies that Structure 4 served a different function to those other booths found at Pingvellir.



**Figure 39:** An 18<sup>th</sup> Century map showing a rectangular structure on Spöngin

This map from the 18<sup>th</sup> century (**Figure 39**), which was probably drawn by Sæmundur Hólm in 1789 (Þorsteinsson, 1987:30), shows a structure on Spöngin that is distinctly rectangular in shape and without an apparent circular structure enclosing it, indicating that the rectangular structure was of importance but that the circular structures were not by this time. Also, the water-filled fissures and Spöngin must have still held some significance even as late as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, for the fact that they are drawn so prominently and much larger than scale, in relation to other aspects of the assembly site. The structure is accurately located slightly to the eastern side of the neck of land, as is the case in structure 4 of Byrgisbúð, as shown above and in the topographic survey. The accuracy of the drawing in relation to the archaeological record suggests that the rectangular structure was still clearly visible, although not necessarily still in use, when this map was drawn in the latter years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in the final decade before the final meeting of the Althing at Pingvellir in 1798. The key difference between this map (**Figure 39**) and others such as in **figures 25 & 31** is that the others were drawn as archaeological maps, accurately recording specific archaeological features from all periods, whereas this map was drawn to record the contemporary landscape, including features of historical interest. On this map Byrgisbúð is labelled by the letter 'O' and is described as the Old Law Rock. Adjacent to this, the letter 'P' denotes Flosahlaup, or 'Flosi's Leap', referring to the character in Njál's Saga. Both of these terms appear to derive from popular tradition; the influence of which was discussed in chapter 7.

On the basis of the interpretations presented here, it is possible to further our understanding of the role of Byrgisbúð on Spöngin in the context of the Althing.

## 9

## The Role of Byrgisbúð on Spöngin In the Context of the Althing

In this project it has been highlighted that the Althing at Þingvellir was a key and central part of Viking-Age society in Iceland, and that great care and attention was given to its organisation and procedures. The importance of the relationship between religion and politics has often been overlooked in the study of assembly sites, and here it has been demonstrated how this important connection influenced the activities that took place at Þingvellir. The study of *þing* assembly sites has developed since its beginnings in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, followed by the Antiquarian interest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and leading to the more archaeologically-advanced research of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, despite this, the archaeology of thing sites in Iceland is a field of research that is still in its infancy. It has been the aim of this research to address some of the gaps in our understanding of the archaeology of the Althing through a re-analysis of some of the archaeological evidence. The original research questions that were set out in chapter 5 are, as far as possible, answered below and an understanding of these following points will be key to identifying the role of Byrgisbúð on Spöngin in the context of the Althing.

### Answers to the Research Questions

- *To what date do the Byrgisbúð remains belong?*

Due to the lack of dateable artefacts and reliable tephra layers, it is very difficult to date the site based on the existing archaeological evidence. Beyond stating that the structure is above and therefore later than the Settlement tephra layer, which is to be expected, it is not possible at this stage to say with certainty when the different structures that comprise 'Byrgisbúð' were in use.

- *Do the remains consist of multiple structures from different periods?*

The archaeological record suggests that there are four separate structures, which belonged to broadly two different periods, rather than one structure with four phases of development. The three circular features belong to one period and the rectangular structure to a later period. This is demonstrated by the chronological division of the site by the layers of plant remains and the volcanic ash and charcoal, which in turn makes it more difficult to interpret Structure 4 because it cannot be directly related to the circular structures. These first three structures appear to comprise one overall phase of activity, based on the fact that they are not only all circular in form and of matching dimensions, but also that the function of each appear to be interconnected, as discussed in the main hypothesis below.

- *What was the possible function & purpose of Byrgisbúð?*

The relationship between structures 1, 2 & 3 is of importance in identifying their function and purpose. Structure 1 is quite an unsubstantial feature consisting of two circular stone ridges, one inside the other. The nature of this feature gives the impression of merely demarcating the area as a symbolic enclosure, and also as a means of setting out the layout of Structure 2, as the dimensions of both structures do appear to correspond. Structure 2 has all of the characteristics of a Law Council, as discussed below, and it is the most substantial of the three. While the substantial nature of Structure 2 does not itself alone imply significance, it does appear to have held the most important role, due to the combination of factors set out in chapter 8. The concentric circles conceivably match the form of a Law Council, which was arguably the most important aspect of the Althing (chapter 1). Structure 3, being more substantial in nature than Structure 1, appears to form an enclosure, either for a physical entity or a symbolic space.

It appears that the site developed from the demarcating of an area, to the establishment of the Lögrétta, to the enclosure of the area, which was then followed by the construction of a booth-type structure. The progression connecting the circular features is indicated by the fact that the layout of the structures correspond, as demonstrated in chapter 8. The layers of volcanic ash and charcoal chronologically separate the rectangular structure from the others, demonstrating that it came later in the sequence. While the way in which the site was used changed over time, the significance of the site remained. In the earlier phases it is likely that the site had a religious pagan importance because as demonstrated in chapter 3, the demarcation of sacred sites, in various ways, was common in the Viking Age. The connection between religion and politics, and the comparisons with other similar sites, all support the interpretation that this site was selected as the original site of the Lögrétta. Although the reforms of 965 appear to have resulted in the relocation of the Lögrétta, the religious significance of the natural features of Spöngin would have remained important for as long as paganism was active in Iceland and at the Althing. Therefore, it is logical that Structure 3 would provide an enclosed sanctuary on the site, similar to Structure 1, after the Lögrétta had been moved.

The last phase with the rectangular structure is harder to interpret. Structure 4 was clearly chosen to be constructed on that same site, however a lack of datable material means that it is not possible at this stage to say when it was built, and therefore whether or not it was built during the Christian period. If so, then the pagan significance of the site would appear to be of lesser importance to the interpretation of structure 4. It is however clear that Byrgisbúð was not a permanent dwelling, as not only were no floor layers detected, but there was also a lack of artefacts that would support such an interpretation.

- *Does its structural morphology relate to other buildings from similar sites?*

The nature of the archaeological remains of Byrgisbúð on Spöngin does appear to be rather unique, in that a directly comparable example has not been found elsewhere. However, this is largely due to the fact that there are four separate

structures built on the same site, rather than one structure with different phases of development. When 'Byrgisbúð' is studied as four separate structures, then similarities do appear. These are mainly found in comparison with other thing sites such as the enclosure of Bällsta in Sweden and also where court circles appear to have been found, such as Árnesþing and Þingnes in Iceland and Law Ting Holm in Shetland. However, the distinct differences between Structure 4 and the other thing booths at Þingvellir and Skuldapíngsey do imply that the traditional interpretation of thing booths does not directly apply in this case.

- *How does Spöngin fit into the wider context of the archaeology of the Althing?*

The orientation of Spöngin on the same east-west alignment as other key features of the Althing (chapter 7), along with the distinct natural features that characterise its setting, indicate that Spöngin appears to have been an important aspect of the Althing assembly. This importance derived from the identification of Spöngin as fitting the characteristics of a Norse legal and religious site (chapter 8), as well as the fact that religion and politics were so interconnected that sites of ritual importance were also used for political activities (chapter 3). As such, Byrgisbúð on Spöngin conceivably had the role of a religious-political site with the importance that can be most readily described as the probable role of the original Lögrétta, as discussed below.

### **Hypothesis: The Original Lögrétta on Spöngin**

The suggestion that the Lögrétta was originally situated on Spöngin has been proposed previously (e.g. Vigfússon, 1881:13; Pálsson, 1991:48), but without clear evidence to support this and it appears to have been based upon popular tradition. However, this idea became overlooked and forgotten by the distraction of the interpretation of Spöngin as the original Lögberg, as discussed in chapter 7. After a re-analysis of the existing evidence, the hypothesis presented here is that the Lögrétta was originally situated on Spöngin, as set out in chapter 8, from when the Althing was established in 930, until the reforms of 965 caused it to be moved. Here the key elements of the research in this project are combined and summarised to support and explain this hypothesis.

### **Establishment & Orientation of the Althing**

The two main elements of any assembly site were the Mound or Law Rock (Lögberg) from where announcements were made, and the Law Council/Court-Circle (Lögrétta), where laws were discussed, made and amended. The Lögrétta was a physical construction of turf and stone in a defined location (ch.1) and when the Althing was established around 930, both the Law Council and the Courts were combined and convened in the same place, but the Law Rock was in a separate location (ch.2). Text in the law code *Grágás* (Grey Goose) implies that the Lögrétta

was located in a different place in earlier times (Jóhannesson, 2006:64) and so the Lögrétta is thought to have been originally situated on the eastern side of the river and to the east of the present Law Rock. This highlights the significance of the east-west alignment of key elements of the Althing, as discussed in chapter 7. It is significant that these two elements were located on an east-west alignment at Þingvellir because this orientation remained through the centuries, as all of the known locations of the Lögrétta were on this alignment, from the probable earliest phase on Spöngin, to the later location on neðrivellir, to the latest phase in the 16<sup>th</sup> century located directly below the Law Rock (Fig 32, ch.7). This same east-west alignment is also evident at the Tynwald on the Isle of Man (see Darvill, 2004). As a starting point, this east-west alignment therefore helps to identify Byrgisbúð on Spöngin as a potential site for the Lögrétta.

#### *Area marked as a sanctuary and laid out for the construction of Lögrétta*

The importance of ritual sites in a political context is clear from chapter 3 in demonstrating how religion and politics were inseparably linked during the Viking Age. Pagan sanctuaries were often in the open-air in various locations such as on islands (Ellis-Davidson, 1988:13), and as these are the characteristics of the circular structures of 'Byrgisbúð', the evidence supports the interpretation that Spöngin acted as a pagan sanctuary. The earliest Norse enclosures of sacred spaces consisted of earthworks or a ditch that were either square, rectangular or circular, to demarcate the area in which ritual activities took place. These places also contained features such as springs, hearths or standing stones (Ellis-Davidson, 1988:27). This particularly relates to Structure 1, and later Structure 3, of Byrgisbúð, where a circular earthwork (built from stone in the first and turf in the second) enclosed an area surrounded by spring water. This is further supported by the term Vé, referring to a sacred place, sanctuary or an outdoor ritual site, which was enclosed by stones or poles and was a place of protection in legal situations (Ch.3).

In the first instance, Structure 1 was conceivably created to form a pagan enclosure at the thing site, similar to Bällsta in Sweden (ch.8), for the purpose of religious-political activities. As discussed in chapter 3, the very term 'Althing' has both religious and political connotations. In many instances the element 'al' referred to natural features relating to a cultic or sacred meaning, such as the Althing on Gotland (Myrberg, 2008:139). The pagan gods represented the natural and supernatural forces in the land, sea and sky (Magnusson, 2005:103) and this is evident at Þingvellir, in terms of its setting in a geological rift valley, and more specifically Spöngin. The landscape setting of Spöngin comprised an open-air site under the sky on an 'island' of land surrounded by the natural features of the water-filled fissures. In some cases, pagan sacred sites were publicly recognised and their maintenance was regarded as a public duty (DuBois, 1999:42) and as such, it is likely that the sacred sites of the Althing were also maintained in this way. The term 'al' is found where there was a building of social importance and distinction (Myrberg, 2008:139), and again this is of relevance to Þingvellir and Spöngin, where this was also apparently the case.



Structure 1 then conceivably formed the basis for the construction of the Lögrétta due to their corresponding layouts and setting. The sacred nature of Norse legal sites supports an interpretation of Structure 2 as the Lögrétta, as this was regarded as 'holy', as a sacred sanctuary (Pálsson, 1991:47). The consecration of assemblies by sacrifices, the roles of Goðar and Goðorð, the altar rings as a symbol of a Goði's status and the oath formula all suggest that religious beliefs constituted an important element of the earliest Icelandic laws. The linking of legal and religious matters in this way would enhance the inviolability of these laws (Nordal, 1990:62) and by emphasising this connection, this would strengthen the position of the newly-formed legal thing system in Iceland. This also relates to the religious/political relationship between Hof and thing sites, because both Hof and þing sites were used as a type of sacred place, which were also used for ritual purposes and the relationship between sacrifices, Hof sites and assemblies relates to the role of the Goðar (Ch.3).

### *Islands and the crossing of 'holy waters'*

In Norse paganism an island was viewed in early times as an entrance to the underworld (Ellis-Davidson, 1988:26) and in the context of the relationship between religion and politics, it is clear why islands were so often selected as thing sites, such as Þingey, Skuldapíngsey and Árnesþing in Iceland and Law Ting Holm in Shetland. In this way, there was a religious link with the depths of earth and water, which is seen in the importance of a spring or well, which are often found in or beside holy places. In Scandinavian tradition, the gods had a spring next to the World Tree, which was regarded as a place of assembly, and these waters brought inspiration and knowledge to those who drank from it (*ibid*:25). In the case of Spöngin, the importance of the natural features of the water-filled fissures around it and the resulting resemblance of an island identifies Spöngin as a potential political-ritual site in this context.



**Figure 40:** The 'island' of Spöngin

As can be seen from the satellite image in **figure 40**, the natural setting of Spöngin has the resemblance of an island. The site can be accessed via the 'causeway' in the lava in the lower left corner of the image, which could symbolise the crossing of



'holy waters' and the passage between the worlds of the sacred and profane, further enhancing the idea of seclusion and inside/outside separation. The most important aspect of the use of islands for political-ritual sites is in this idea of separation and inside/outside, where the legal proceedings were enclosed in a sacred area, separated from the profane world around. In this sense, the crossing of 'holy waters' over a causeway or bridge marked the transition from the profane to the sacred. As discussed in chapter 3, the term Vé denotes a sanctuary. This term comes from the verb *að vígja*, meaning 'to consecrate' and was often applied to a consecrated place that was separated from the profane world around it (Aðalsteinsson, 1999:17). This idea of inside/outside and a sanctified area is apparent at Spöngin and the importance of the inside/outside element is seen in the fact that the chieftains and other law men were allowed restricted access to the legal site, while the other participants of the thing had to remain outside and spectate from a distance.

### *Animal Bones in Nikulásargjá and the Oath-Sacrifice*

Animal sacrifice took place on special occasions, such as the arrival at a holy place and the opening of assemblies (Ellis-Davidson, 1988:37; Lucas, 2009:405) and so it is not surprising that such quantities of animal bones were found deposited in Nikulásargjá at Þingvellir. However, as discussed in chapter 6, the bones remain undated and unexamined, so are a problematic source and an accurate interpretation of these bones cannot be achieved without a detailed analysis. But although the evidence is admittedly circumstantial, it does nonetheless provide a plausible explanation for the presence of these bones in the following way. It is thought that a bull was sacrificed at Þingvellir and the sacred ring on which oaths were sworn was immersed in the blood of the sacrificed animal (Ellis-Davidson, 1988:53). At the opening of an assembly the Goði (Allsherjargoði at the Althing – ch.2) had to sacrifice an ox within the sacred area of the thing before he opened the assembly and then redden the altar ring in its blood. At Icelandic assemblies, the sacrificial blood on the ring made the ceremony legal and binding. This type of sacrifice has been termed an 'oath-sacrifice' due to the connections with the oaths that were then sworn on the ring. Following this sacrifice, the proceedings of the thing could then begin (Aðalsteinsson, 1999:165-6).

In the context of an oath-sacrifice, an animal was slain in order to ratify the oath. The flesh was never eaten, but was often either buried or cast into the sea (Aðalsteinsson, 1999:166). On Spöngin, the casting of the animal carcass from the 'Byrgisbúð' structure into the water of Nikulásargjá would fit the context of these oath-sacrifices. In addition, despite the problems regarding the interpretation of the large quantities of bones reported (ch.6), these potentially suggest that this oath-sacrifice ritual was repeated many times, as would be expected from successive occasions when the assembly was convened and this relates to the interpretation of Structure 2 as a key element of the Althing. The fact that the Byrgisbúð structure is off-set towards Nikulásargjá would support why the bones were found there and not in Flosagjá. The killing of animals in a ritual context and the association of such killings with assemblies implies a strong connection between religion and politics in the interpretation of this site.

### *The Reforms of 965 and the Relocation of Lögrétta*

If the Lögrétta was originally situated on Spöngin, then an indication of a date for Byrgisbúð can only be based upon the reforms of 965 that appear to have resulted in this relocation. The calculated dimensions of the Lögrétta, both for the original 36 and ultimately 48 chieftains, show the size of the area required for such a structure (chapter 8). The dimensions for the 36-chieftain circle fits within the dimensions of Spöngin and matches the dimensions of Structure 2 of Byrgisbúð. However, the larger circle for 48 chieftains suggests that the enlarged Lögrétta would no longer fit on Spöngin. Therefore, it appears that Structure 2 was in use for a period of c.35 years from 930 at the establishment of the Althing, until the reforms and subsequent relocation in 965.

### *The Continuation of Spöngin as a Pagan Sanctuary*

After structure 2 was no longer in use, the archaeological evidence suggests that the site was remodelled to create Structure 3, which was a circular turf wall forming an enclosure. As discussed above in relation to Structure 1, the religious connotations of Spöngin identify it as a key site for pagan religious activity. If the Lögrétta was relocated from Spöngin to Neðri-vellir around the year 965, then there were still another c.35 years until the conversion to Christianity in 1000. Therefore, as paganism was still in existence, it would be logical that the religious significance of Spöngin would continue in the form of a pagan sanctuary for as long as paganism was a prominent force in Iceland.

### *Conclusion*

The notion that Byrgisbúð may have been a location of the Lögrétta has been considered before by Vigfússon (1881:13) who supported the idea and Þórðarson (1945:258) who did not. However, this theory has often been overlooked by the distraction of interpreting Spöngin as the original Lögberg. In this, Vigfússon was partly right by identifying Spöngin as a Norse legal site, but incorrect in interpreting it as the Law Rock. Although it does not appear to have been the original Law Rock, it does nonetheless appear to have been an important element of the Althing. The combination of the evidence presented in this project demonstrates that the identification of Spöngin as a Viking/Norse legal site was correct and the evidence conceivably supports the interpretation and hypothesis presented here that the Lögrétta was held on Spöngin originally.

The hypothesis presented here only covers the interpretation of structures 1, 2 & 3 of 'Byrgisbúð'. It has not been possible to satisfactorily interpret the layers of black plant material, volcanic ash and charcoal, or to sufficiently understand the role of Structure 4, so these unanswered questions are addressed in a framework for future research in chapter 10.

## 10

# Recommendations for Further Research

Although the interpretation and hypothesis in chapters 8 & 9 have presented a revised understanding of the archaeological remains on Spöngin, there are a number of key questions that remain about Byrgisbúð that have not been possible to answer in this study. These are outlined below with the aim of providing a framework for future research, which would help to place Byrgisbúð more accurately into the context of the Althing at Þingvellir.

### *Dating*

It is necessary to obtain an accurate date for the four structures identified in the sequence in chapter 6. This would help to confirm or disprove the hypothesis of the Lögrétta, as well as to interpret the rectangular Structure 4. The most important task that must be done in this regard is to acquire section drawings of the existing excavation trenches, both from the 1880 and 2005 excavations. It would also be of great importance to ask a tephra specialist to visit the site during excavations in order to identify the known tephra layer that is in the middle of the stratigraphic sequence. In addition, C14 dating of the charcoal would further help to date the site to gain a further understanding of the developmental sequence set out in chapter 6.

### *Environmental Analysis*

It is unclear what processes, human or natural, would result in the forming of the black layer of plant material that was reported from the 1880 excavations. It is of importance to understand this layer, so as to place this accurately into the interpretational narrative of the site. Other environmental sources such as the traces of charcoal that were found during the excavations also need to be properly identified and interpreted. It will be important to establish by distribution and concentration whether or not the charcoal was from a fireplace, or whether it was the result of potential clearance burning, as indicated by similar finds of charcoal across the assembly site (Ch.4). However, this depends upon the density of the charcoal, indicating how close it was to the source of the fire or how concentrated the fire was (Lucas, pers. comm.). The most ideal means of analysing the charcoal would be through C14 dating, which, in an overlap with the above, would help to establish a more accurate date for the site.

### *Analysis of the Animal Bones*

If possible, an analysis of some of the animal bones from Nikulásargjá would be of great importance in understanding and confirming or disproving their association with Byrgisbúð. Knowledge of the species, sex and age of the animals, along with any presence of butchery marks, would be of great assistance in interpreting these reported finds. Again, the use of C14 dating would be an excellent way to establish whether or not the bones are contemporary in date with the archaeological remains of Byrgisbúð.

### *Later Activity at the Site*

The role of the rectangular structure 4 is of particular importance because it is so different to the other structures in the sequence. It must be understood how and why it was used in such a different way, while it was also deliberately located on exactly the same site, with no other visible archaeological remains elsewhere on Spöngin. This could be achieved for example by the use of micromorphology, which would help to identify the presence and nature of floor layers that could then be used to indicate how the structure was used.

This additional research would aim to answer these questions and provide further evidence to either corroborate or disprove the interpretation and hypothesis presented in this project. These points would provide a basis for valuable future research into the site, which in turn would enable a better and wider understanding of the archaeology of the Althing.

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