Movement at Mosfell

Routes, Traffic, and Power in a Viking Age Icelandic Valley

Ritgerð til M.A.-prófs

Colin Gioia Connors

Mái 2010
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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the Mosfell Archaeological Project unearthed a Viking Age long house, church, graveyard, and cremation burial mound at the site Hrisbrú in the Mosfell Valley. Medieval place names suggest that this site was attractive for travelers and situated adjacent to a campsite. Two main routes to the Reykjavik area converged on the site, although there were other routes which bypassed Hrisbrú and led to the same destinations. Local routes connected to the site to the nearby Viking Age ship’s landing at the bay Leiruvogur. Travelers brought and spread news, and an ambitious individual could turn such visits into a political advantage. Medieval texts state that the family of Hrisbrú/Mosfell was led by prominent individuals in the Viking Age and that the site was a place where travelers and even vagabonds were welcome. The leaders of Hrisbrú/Mosfell most likely encouraged such visits and would use them to improve their own reputation and political power when possible, although it is difficult to estimate the amount of such traffic.

KEYWORDS: landscape archaeology, roads, trails, Norse, Early Middle Ages
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.1 Overview and Context ................................................................. 3
1.2 Sagas as Sources ........................................................................... 7
1.3 Sources and Method ................................................................. 11
1.4 Terms and Translation ................................................................. 17

2 TRACING THE TRAILS ................................................................. 19
2.1 Travel and Mobility: Errors and Amendments ................................. 19
2.2 Historical Settlement in the Mosfell Region ....................................... 25
2.3 Main Routes Around Mosfell .......................................................... 28
  2.3.1 The Coastal Route ................................................................. 28
  2.3.2 East Over the Heath ................................................................. 31
  2.3.3 North to Kjós ................................................................. 42
2.4 Local Routes Around Mosfell .......................................................... 44
2.5 Places and Place Names ................................................................. 47
  2.5.1 Skeggjastaðir ................................................................. 47
  2.5.2 Hrisbrú and Tjaldanes ................................................................. 48
  2.5.3 Leiruvogur and Þerneyjarsund .................................................. 52

3 TRAFFIC AND POWER AT MOSFELL ........................................... 57
3.1 Utilizing Traffic as a Means to Power ................................................ 58
3.2 Evaluating Traffic Near Mosfell ...................................................... 66
3.3 Reexamining Mosfell’s Political Legacy ........................................... 68

4 CONCLUSIONS .................................................................................. 70

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..................................................................... 73

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..................................................................................... 74

APPENDIX A: Maps .............................................................................. 86
APPENDIX A: GPS Data and Archaeological Features .............................. 92
OVERVIEW AND METHODS

1.1 Overview and Context

This thesis is a study of the Viking Age land routes through the Mosfell region, which attempts to reconstruct that network of trails and then discuss the socio-historical aspect of traffic through this landscape. My research was conducted in collaboration with the Mosfell Archaeological Project (hereafter ‘MAP’), a multidisciplinary research effort begun in 1995 to study the Viking Age valley system of Mosfell. The region of study includes the Mosfell Valley (Mosfellsdalur), the surrounding highlands—the mountains and the Mosfell Heath (Mosfellsheiði)—and the lowland coastal areas. MAP refers to this landscape as a ‘valley system,’ defined as an interlocking series of natural and man-made elements which, beginning with the late ninth-century settlement of Iceland, evolved into a functioning Viking Age community (Byock 2009: 97; Byock et al. 2005: 202). To fully appreciate the former possibilities of travel through the Mosfell Valley, I have expanded this area of study north to Kjós (the region immediately north of Mt. Esja) and south to the river Korpúlfsstaðaá. This geographic area extends beyond the area called Mosfellssveit in Icelandic, and I shall henceforth refer my area of study with a general term: the Mosfell region. Routes over land, as common lines of travel, interconnect people and resources and thus are one expression of the interaction between humans and nature, which document the movement of people, goods, and ideas across space. A local study of the Viking Age routes in this valley system is an integral part of MAP’s research objectives of studying human habitation and landscape interaction in the Mosfell region.

Since 2001, MAP’s archaeological field excavations have focused on a few adjacent sites at the farm Hrísbrú in the Mosfell Valley. These excavations have unearthed a number of Viking Age finds: a cremation grave on a ship-shaped mound, a conversion age timber church and surrounding graveyard, and a turf long house. According to tephrachronology dating, the long house was built some time between 871 and 920/940 AD. It is not yet known how long the house was occupied, but based on find typologies of glass beads recovered from the long house and the style of the house itself, the house was probably abandoned sometime during the 11th century. The church and longhouse were contemporary structures, though the construction of the longhouse preceded that of the church (Byock et al. 2009, unpublished: 15). C14 dates, stratigraphic relationships,
tephrachronology and burial associations from the cremation grave and church graveyard support the conclusion that these sites at Hrísbrú spanned the Viking Age conversion in Iceland from paganism to Christianity, ca. 1000 AD (Byock 2009: 97).

Archaeological evidence suggests that these sites were intentionally abandoned. When occupation and use of the long house and church ceased, the inhabitants removed the timber from each construction, presumably to be reused on a new site. At least 2 of the 18 excavated graves from the churchyard were found emptied (Zori, pers. comm.). Presumably, the graves were emptied at the same time that the church was taken down to be reburied in consecrated ground, in accordance with contemporary law (Byock et al. 2005: 208).

An account of such an exhumation is related in Egils saga Skalla-Grimsonar.

Hrísbrú stands directly under Mt. Mosfell and 500 m west of the farm named Mosfell. Grímr Svertingsson of Mosfell was Iceland’s lawspeaker from 1002-1003 AD. According to Egils saga he built a church after the conversion to Christianity in Iceland (1000 AD). The saga states that later a church was built at Mosfell and the church at Hrísbrú, which Grímr had built, was taken down. The graveyard was excavated, and one skeleton was identified as Egill’s and reinterred at the new church:

Grímr at Mosfelli var skriðr, þá er kristni var i lög leidd á Íslandi; hann lét þar kirkju gera...síðan er kirkja var gör at Mosfelli, ofan tekin at Hrísbrú sú kirkja, er Grímr hafði gera látit, þá var þar grafinn kirkjugarðr...Þar var þá Skapti prestr Pórarinsson, vitr maðr....Bein Egills våru lögð niðr í utanverðum kirkjugarði at Mosfelli. (Íf 2: 298-9)

Grímr of Mosfell was baptized when Christianity was accepted in Iceland. He had a church built there....later when a church was built at Mosfell, that church, which Grímr had built, was taken down at Hrisbrú and the graveyard was excavated...Priest Skapti Þórarinsson, a wise man, was present...Egill’s bones were laid to rest in the outer part of the graveyard at Mosfell.¹

This passage has been interpreted to mean that the original landholding of Mosfell was divided when the new church was built and the older farmstead was given the name Hrísbrú, while the new site of the church retained the old name (Byock et al. 2005: 199; Kálund 1877: 49-50). A priest named Skapti Þórarinsson oversaw the exhumation of

¹ All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.
human remains from the graveyard as they were moved to the new church at Mosfell for reburial. Skapti is mentioned in Þorgils saga ok Haflíða (Stu 1: 50), appearing at the Althing, the annual general assembly of Icelanders, in 1121 AD. His name is also documented in the Nafnaskrá íslenska presta, a register of priests in Iceland from 1143 AD (DI 1: 186). Skapti was thus alive in the 12th century, which suggests that the episode paraphrased from Egils saga took place in the first half of the 12th century (Byock 1993: 26). These interpretations are aligned with the archaeological evidence concerning the abandonment of the Hrísbrú site.

The excavated long house appears to have been a particularly wealthy establishment. It is one of the largest excavated Viking Age long houses in Iceland, measuring 29 m in length from the outside of each wall. The interior walls were finished with timber staves, and the western end of the long house had a wooden floor. Over thirty glass, silver, and gold beads were recovered from the house, which is a significantly higher number than is typically found in other Viking Age excavations in Iceland. The majority of these beads originated from both the Eastern Mediterranean and Central Asia (Byock et al. 2009, unpublished). Each of these features suggest that the inhabitants at Hrísbrú/Mosfell had considerable wealth.

Saga sources describe the wealth and power of the late 10th and early 11th century inhabitants of Hrísbrú/Mosfell. The aforementioned Grímr Svertingsson lived at Hrísbrú/Mosfell in the latter half of the 10th century (d. 1003), and is described in Egils saga as wealthy and well-born, ‘auðigr ok ættstórr’ (Íf 2: 241). Önundr, Grímr’s kinsman, presumably took possession of Hrísbrú/Mosfell after Grímr’s death, and his family figures prominently in the early 11th century events of Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu. He is described: ‘hann var auðmaðr inn mesti ok hafði goðorð suðr þar um nesin’ (Íf 3: 61). ‘He was an extremely rich man and had a chieftaincy there in the south across the peninsulas.’ Önundr’s chieftaincy is contended issue among scholars, and will be readdressed in Section 1.2. By contrast, Grímr was never described as a chieftain, although the possibility existed. Both in Egils saga and in Íslendingabók, a medieval text concerning Iceland’s history, Grímr is said to have been Iceland’s lawspeaker (Íf 1: 19; Íf 2: 241), a respected position in Althing. Lawspeakers were not necessarily chieftains, although the two preceeding lawspeakers were: Þorgeir Ljósvetningagoði Þorkelsson and Þorkell máni Þorsteinsson, who was the allsherjargoði (the chieftain who held an honorary task of opening the Althing each year). Lawspeakers did not even need to be
powerful individuals, though they were most often at least connected to a powerful
family. Grímr gave his position on account of illness to his kinsman, Skapti Þóroddsson,
who appears to have been a powerful individual, holding his position for 27 years,
overseeing many reforms to the Althing, and most importantly convicting many
powerful men: ‘Á hans [Skapta] dögum urðu margir höfðingar ok ríkismenn sekir eða
landflóttu of vig eða barsmiðir af ríkis sökum hans ok landstjórn’ (Íf 1: 19). If Grímr
lacked the political might of his kinsman, which seems likely when he is compared to
the accomplished Skapti, Grímr seems at least to have been well connected. *Egils saga*
says that he was married to Þórdís Þórólfsdóttir, the beloved step-daughter of the saga’s
eponymous hero and chieftain in Borgarfjord, Egill Skalla-Grimsson.² If Grímr was
wealthy, well-born, well-married, and additionally the nation’s lawspeaker, then it is at
least feasible that he was a chieftain as well, albeit not a strong one.

Regardless of whether Grímr was a chieftain or merely a prominent man, what is
significant is the agreement between the medieval accounts and the interpretation of
archaeological evidence regarding the wealth of the long house’s inhabitants. This
relationship does not seem very surprising, because the large ruins of the long house
were visible in the Middle Ages. Following the house’s abandonment and before the
Katla tephra ca. 1500 AD fell, the interior space between the ruined walls of the
structure were used periodically as a trash midden pit (Byock et al. 2008, unpublished;
Byock et al. 2007, unpublished). The impressive size of these visible ruins most likely
preserved and shaped the memory of the inhabitants’ wealth, and influenced the writers
of *Egils saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*.

It is in this context of the wealth and political affluence of the Hrísbrú/Mosfell
people that routes will later be discussed. Was this site on a major route? How much
traffic passed by the site? And what factor did this traffic contribute to the wealth and
power of chieftains at Hrísbrú/Mosfell like Önundr? While this line of inquiry is most
concerned with the Hrísbrú/Mosfell site and its period of its occupancy, it will
eventually become necessary to broaden the discussion to include the political
developments during the later Free State Period in order to best understand the
relationship between traffic and power at Mosfell.

² *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* tells that Þórdís was married to a different man, Þormóðr Bjóstarsson.
However, *Landnámabók* tells that this Þormóðr was married to a different woman, Púrðr Pórleifsdóttir.
For the sake of this contradiction, the genealogy in *Egils saga* is considered to be more reliable of the
two (Íf 11: 112).
This thesis is divided into three main chapters. This first chapter is intended to give a brief overview of MAP’s previous excavations at Hrísbrú and to discuss the methods and sources used in this thesis. The second chapter works through the evidence to recreate a map of the network of routes which traversed the Mosfell region. The third chapter discusses the relationship between these routes and the inhabitants of Hrísbrú/Mosfell.

1.2 Sagas as Sources

A few words of discussion must be given to the use of medieval Icelandic texts in archaeological and historical research, since they have long been the source of debate regarding their historicity and possible application in such studies. Considerable use of these textual sources has already been made in the preceding section to give an adequate background of MAP’s own research and further context of the Hrísbrú/Mosfell site. The reason for this is that saga studies have been one integral facet in the multi-disciplinary approach of MAP (Byock et al. 2005; Byock 2009). Nevertheless, it is necessary to emphasize the way in which I intend to use these sources and briefly address the problems traditionally raised with their use in archaeological and historical work.

Certain scholars have long disregarded the historical and anthropological value of medieval texts, especially the Family Sagas, treating them as mere literary inventions.\(^3\) Even in light of recent anthropological and especially oral culture theory, the elapse of time between event and inscription continues to give reason to doubt the authenticity of these texts. While historical falsities have been found in the medieval texts (and I will go nowhere near so far as to argue that these texts are ‘factual’ in the modern sense of the word), by and large there has been a tendency in medieval scholarship to ‘pour the baby out with the bathwater’ and reject the testimony of oral sources \textit{en bloc}, rather than face up to the questions they present and that demand solution’ (Sigurðsson, G. 2008: 25). That the sagas spring from an oral culture background means that the information they contain is both ancient and contemporary, and scholars cannot wholly reject nor wantonly pick and choose material from the sagas without careful scrutiny. The challenge then is to distinguish what may be considered reliable or representative information from what is distorted or pure fiction.

\(^3\) For a discussion of this school of thought, see Byock 2001: 149-156.
Anthropologists and social historians have circumvented this challenge by focusing on the cultural values and social systems manifest in the sagas. These scholars have agreed that it is possible to reconstruct the social context of the sagas through internal and comparative evidence (Durrenberger 1989: 231; Þorláksson 1987). In a review on his own and other anthropologists’ work, Paul Durrenberger quotes Knut Odner (1974), stating that it is legitimate to ‘distinguish between ‘historical’ and ‘sociological’ situations and persons, ... the historical Hænsa-Þórir is not the same person as the Hænsa-Þórir of the sagas carrying his name.’’ The account of Hænsa-Þórir has anthropological interest then so far as it can provide insight into the development of a commercial economy in medieval Icelandic society (Durrenberger 1989: 231-232). Individual accounts may not offer much on their own, but the sagas offer a breadth of varied cultural and social information which collectively illustrate a detailed picture of the social and cultural world which they represent.

To analyze these cultural systems and progress to topics of more specific inquiry, scholars must address cultural continuity and temporal distance between the events and their record. There is legitimate reason to regard the temporal distance as problematic. Over time, memories can fade or intensify, altering the perception of the original event or experience. Likewise memories can be reshaped or find new meaning when viewed in a different cultural context. However, these changes do not happen at a fixed rate over time, like a mathematical function. Consequently, I do not believe that an older medieval text is necessarily more reliable or closer to the truth than a younger medieval text. Gíslason reminded us that ‘the truth is that all these sources are based on oral tradition’; ‘everything that the oldest text has to say came to it originally from oral tradition, and additional information found in younger manuscripts may well have been put in simply to fill the picture using other material from the same tradition—making it just as reliable, and just as unreliable, in both cases’ (2008: 26). While certain younger manuscripts have been found to contain historical anachronisms, the estimated age of a text is no reason to ignore the contents of the text and remove them from discussion.

What is relevant is the degree of cultural continuity which existed between the events and their record. To the best of our knowledge, the overall degree of cultural continuity was high. It is surprising how stable Iceland was throughout the Free State Period compared to its European neighbors. There were no foreign wars, rebellions, or radical technological developments. Even the conversion to Christianity did not uproot...
the cultural foundation. There was generally little or no change in this period regarding social structures and cultural values, such as kinship systems, modes of feuding and feud resolution, standards and expectations of proper behavior, and modes of travel. However, there was a low degree of continuity regarding religion, economics, and politics, and this is where we must be especially critical. Scholars have identified clear historical anachronisms in the sagas, such as Oddr’s foreign trade in dried fish in *Bandamanna saga* (Sigurðsson, J.V. 1999: 57) or Búi’s need to be pardoned by the Norwegian king for crimes he committed in Iceland in *Kjalnesinga saga* (Þorlákssson 2005: 151; Þorlákssson 1997: 255).

Beyond such anachronisms, scholars must also be wary of political motives behind texts. For example, Friðriksson and Vésteinsson, among other scholars, have argued recently that the *Hauksbók* and *Sturlubok* versions of *Landnámabók* contain exaggeratedly large land claims to reinforce the rights of powerful chieftains to control large domains (2003: 147-149). With such problems in mind, let us revisit the previously quoted passage which claimed that Önundr at Mosfell had the chieftaincy over the Peninsulas. The Peninsulas (*Nes*) generally refers to a geographically discrete region over the coastline that was divided into the Inner and Outer Peninsulas (*Innnes* and *Útnes*). This passage most likely refers to the Inner Peninsulas, which stetch the coastline from Akranes to Álftanes, which included Reykjavík, the modern capital, and Mofell. It is rather unlikely that Önundr had sole political dominance over a geographical territory at this time, especially one so large. Önundr certainly faced competition from contemporary chieftains within this region; chieftaincies were not based on territorial dominance in this period. Instead, political power was built on strong relationships with kinsmen, friends, and assembly followers (*þingmenn*) who were often dispersed over a wide geographic area, living among the supporters and allies of other chieftains (Byock 2001; 126-133). It was not until the late 12th and early 13th century

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4 Such as Einarsson 1995; Rafnsson 1974; and Björn M. Ólsen’s ‘Landnáma’ series of articles in *Årbøger for nordisk oldkyndighed og historie*, 1904, 1905, 1908, and 1910.

5 The word *Nes* is slightly ambiguous, and did not necessarily refer to the entire region defined here. Without a definite article or adjective to identify the number of the noun, *Nes* could be singular, in which case it is thought most often to refer to Suðurnes or Seltjarnarnes, two peninsulas close to Reykjavík. My definition of the Inner Peninsulas is based on Skúli Magnússon 1785, p. 10: I almindelig Tale, mest i Hensigt til Fiskeriet, kaldes Byeskærs Tingsogn Sudurnes, samt dette og Jerngerderestads tingsogn Utvær; ligesaa Hausastads Tingsogn Alftanes, Reikiavigs Tingsogn Seltjarnanes, samt Kialarneset i Kiose-Syssel og Akraneset i Borgefiords-syssel, alt under eet Navn Indnes; saa og Guvenes- og Mosfelds-Kirkesogner Mosfelsveit, samt Reinevalle Medalfells og endeel af Saurbær kirkesogn Kios.
that chieftains succeeded in acquiring many chieftaincies, thereby creating territorially based, political domains. Consequently, the literal text, which suggests a territorial control, more likely reflects a political situation closer to that of the writer’s own time.

Önundr’s chieftaincy has been controversial among scholars. Lúðvík Ingvarsson pointed out that a chieftaincy at Mosfell was one too many for the region, if judged by the traditional number of chieftaincies defined in the medieval lawbook, Grágás (Ingvarsson 1986: vol 2, 319-20). Where this chieftaincy came from or belonged within this system is uncertain, and it has been suggested that Önundr was a chieftain in the Grindavík area to the south and brought the chieftaincy with him (Íf 3: 61, footnote 1), although this seems unlikely to me. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson argued that the excess chieftains found throughout the sagas demonstrate that the system did not operate strictly according to Grágás; the system of chieftaincies was flexible, and many were created and others disappeared in the Viking Age (1999). According to Sigurðsson’s arguments, there would seem nothing unusual with Önundr’s chieftaincy, which could have easily begun and ended with him. It seems to me that Önundr either held a petty chieftaincy at this time or else the medieval writer of Gunnlaugs saga invented his chieftaincy, perhaps based on a memory of wealth and ambition at Hrísbrú and shaped by the ruins of a grand long house. While I tend to favor the former interpretation, based on the large number of ‘extra’ chieftaincies found in the sagas, I cannot overlook the latter interpretation, since Önundr’s chieftaincy is mentioned nowhere outside of Gunnlaugs saga.

A critical and comparative approach with other disciplines is clearly necessary with medieval Icelandic texts. Scholars can no longer take an ‘either/or’ view of these sources, arguing either the sources are credible, or they are not. There is plentiful cultural, social, and historical information to be gained from them. This information comes steeped in the problems and promise of oral traditions, but our studies may stagnate if we do not take on these challenges. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson wrote: ‘The heart of the matter is that we can never get any closer to the Saga Age than the Sagas of Icelanders permit us to’ (1999: 36). This is indeed true for some types of information, yet there are other disciplines which can get closer to the Saga Age, such as archaeology, which focuses on the physical expression and material culture of the people under study. Archaeology may not be able to identify the farms which represented the supporters of particular chieftains (Smith & Parsons 1989: 187), but this discipline has its own methods for studying the past and objectives, which can be used together with textual
studies to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the Viking Age in Iceland. Recent archeological research has proved the potential of such an integrated approach and I hope that my work will be judged a valuable addition to this developing tradition.

1.3 Sources and Method

The first scholar to attach such political importance to the study of routes in Iceland’s Free State Period was perhaps Hegli Þorláksson, and my thesis follows his method. Þorláksson’s principle study (1989) established the contemporary routes across southern Iceland and argued that the position and creation of a church estate (staðr) at Oddi the main routes of travel and communication helped bring importance and power to the people of Oddi. Placing these routes is not a straightforward matter, and Þorláksson’s method (1989: 27-30) assumes a great degree of continuity regarding routes between the Free State Period and the 19th century, when the first detailed map of Iceland with routes was created.

There are two reasons which support a high level of continuity regarding land routes in Iceland over time. First, the modes of transportation did not change during this period. From the time of settlement until the end of the 19th century, travel by land was limited to riding on horseback or walking on the soles of one’s own feet. Trails were generally poorly maintained until official improvement projects were first organized in the latter half of the 19th century. Roads were not built until carriages came into use in Iceland toward the end of the 19th century (Bjarnason & Guðmundsson 2005: 186, 190; Petersen 1977: 82, 90). However, some trails were most likely cleared at the time of settlement, for example through forests or across lava fields, and some causeways were laid across swampy ground. In addition, cairns were erected to mark trails over heaths. These methods and associated technologies did not change until the late 19th century, when roads with surfaces in the modern sense were built. Second, geography limits the boundaries of traffic flow. While it may be theoretically possible to ride or walk anywhere over land, geography does limit when and where travel is safe and easy. Routes are therefore unlikely to have changed, so long as the geography has not changed. I will examine this in detail later on.

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6 For a general discussion of textual archaeological theory and its practice regarding Late Iron Age Scandinavia, see Price 2002: 27-37.
As Þorláksson and others have observed (1989: 27; Hindle 1998; Taylor 1979), archaeology is rather limited in its methods and ability to contribute to the study of historical routes. The main problem is that most of the physical remains of roads and tracks are either undated or undatable. An archaeological approach does not benefit the study of roads which were neither engineered nor constructed. Roman roads in Britain and elsewhere are an exception, since they were carefully engineered and constructed. In most cases, attempting to assign a date to a particular road or track is impossible and of little value. Even if there existed identifiable cultural layers—for example, a gravel surface—it would be nearly impossible to date such a layer, and more impossible to define its period of use. Christopher Taylor nimbly summarized this frustration with dating the roads in his native Britain, and this passage is worth quoting at length:

...there is no actual proof that one is a prehistoric track and the other a medieval highway. They could be of any date. Once tracks are made, even if they were produced in the first instance by wandering animals, they tend to be used by succeeding generations often for hundreds if not thousands of years. Their importance may vary across the ages: a track between two prehistoric villages might become part of a major road between towns in the Roman period, decline to a farm lane in Saxon times, be developed as a national trade route in the fourteenth century and then become an over-grown footpath by the present day. Even if we could ascertain all these changes, which is doubtful, what ‘date’ do we say it is? (1979: xi-xii)

Fortunately for this study Iceland did not undergo such varied settlement distribution changes as Britain over its history. Therefore the importance of any one route in Iceland was more likely to remain constant when compared to its British counterpart. Nevertheless, Taylor’s statements concerning the impossibility of dating and defining period of use generally hold true for routes in Iceland.

In Britain, the process of surfacing roads did not begin until the 18th century, excepting, once again, the Roman roads (Taylor 1979: xi). In Iceland, this process did not begin until the end of the 19th century. Trails and tracks came into existence by use. Sometimes trees or rocks were cleared when the terrain was too rough, or turf or stones placed when the crossing became too wet. But overall, there was little physical modification to trails, and if they fell out of use, as many have today, then they
disappeared, taking all evidence of their existence with them. In many cases, trails existed more in name than in reality.

There is a dangerous tendency to try to date a trail by the settlements which the trail connects. In Britain it is not uncommon to encounter a road built in the modern era which passes by historic and/or prehistoric sites. Once again, I turn to Christopher Taylor to neatly explain the danger:

_On the whole roads are virtually impossible to date on the ground. The fact that they run from A to B means nothing. It may be that A and B, whether they are prehistoric circles, Roman villages or medieval cities, were placed where they are centuries before the route was established or, conversely, that the road or track was developed to or past the circle, village or city long after these were built._ (1979: xii)

Parallel observations can be made in Iceland today, where the current road, Route 36, which connects Reykjavik, home of Iceland’s first settlers, to Þingvellir, the site of the Althing, is not even one century old (Bjarnarson & Guðmundsson 2005: 193; Petersen 1977: 92; Guðnason 1975: 18). There is no connection between the historical ages of these sites and the age of Route 36. Before the construction of Route 36, and even the Old Þingvellir Road (Gamli Þingvallavegurinn), there were several different routes connecting these two sites, and it would not be possible to determine the relative temporal importance of each route based on field observations alone.

Archaeology does have some benefit, however. When detailed historical maps are either lacking in sufficient detail or contain conflicting evidence, fieldwork can potentially solve these problems. Nevertheless, fieldwork is limited by the aforementioned obstacles. Consequently I am content to favor the retrogressive method of other scholars, valuing historical sources (from the 19th century and working backwards) over ‘the often dubious physical remains, for virtually the only way to confirm field evidence of a medieval road is to demonstrate from the historical record that it was in use during that period’ (Hindle 1998: 7).

The earliest descriptions of travel come from the sagas and other medieval Icelandic texts. Although the sagas are often very terse regarding travel, they occasionally give very vivid descriptions of the conditions of travel and of the location of particular routes.

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These descriptions are likely to be accurate when the writers had good knowledge of the terrain they were describing. To evaluate the accuracy of the medieval writer’s knowledge and familiarity with the landscape, it is necessary to check these accounts against later descriptions.

Travellers’ accounts and county (sýsla) and parish descriptions from the 18th and 19th centuries are the first accurate and precise descriptions of the routes in Iceland. Medieval charters and later documents have little to say about routes, but occasionally mention bridges and fords. Some of the 18th and 19th century accounts are accompanied by maps, but these often lack sufficient detail to be of much use.

The first map which displays routes in great enough detail to be considered useful was made by Björn Gunnlaugsson in 1831. An Icelandic mathematician and grammar teacher at Bessastaðir with experience surveying abroad, Björn Gunnlaugsson began a survey of the the Gullbringu and Kjósar counties. Previous mapping was largely limited to coastal surveys, so this map marked a huge advance for Icelandic cartography. The map shows settlements, routes, bodies of water, mountains, and vegetation. The map’s quality was evident to the Danish government, who later gave Björn an annual grant to map the entire country. Björn surveyed every county, and his data was complied into four quarter-maps of the country in 1844 and a complete map in 1849. Björn was unable to survey all of the interior because he was limited by time and resources, so he had to rely on personal accounts and descriptions of the land in some cases (Sigurðsson, H 1978: 269-70). Nevertheless, the maps are reasonably accurate, and there is little inconsistency between the publications.

In 1908, Danish cartographers surveyed the Mosfell region and published the corresponding maps in the Herforingjararðskort series in 1909, which became the basis for most subsequent Icelandic maps. The map is remarkably accurate, and contains numerous routes not included in Björn Gunnlaugsson’s map. Although the modern roads were beginning to be built by this date, the map clearly distinguishes surfaced roads from old trails.

In 1916, a series of drawings were made of farm properties, including all of the farms in the Mosfell region. These property maps are called Túmakort. As these maps are limited to the features of properties, they only show trails where they led through a farm. These maps are useful for corroborating older evidence, and many of the trails shown on these properties were never developed into modern roads.
Place name are an additional source of valuable evidence. Þorláksson gives certain examples of the value of placenames, such as those place names containing the element -vað, meaning ‘ford.’ Such names identify river crossings and thus routes (1989: 27). He also makes an example of the farm Brautarholt, which means ‘a road cleared through a forest’ (1989: 30). One relevant example to this thesis would be that of Hrísbrú, meaning ‘a brushwood bridge.’ This example will be taken up in detail in Chapter 2.

In order to assert that all of these historical sources are relevant to the Viking Age, it is necessary to first establish the existence of a high degree of geographical continuity between these time periods in the Mosfell region. Changes over time in local geography could affect certain routes. For example, if a river changed course, that change may have necessitated the relocation of fords and likewise routes. I have discussed this matter over with Egill Erlendsson, an historical ecologist at the University of Iceland, and he does not believe there is evidence for any such changes in the natural geography of the Mosfell region which would drastically alter the results of this thesis (2010: pers. comm.). This is not to say that there existed a high level of geographical or ecological continuity from the time of Iceland’s settlement. A number of drastic changes occured following the settlement and these are worth discussing.

Iceland’s vegetation was quite different at the time of settlement. There were trees. Birch was the only native tree and grew in the drier areas of the lowlands, perhaps up to an elevation of 400-500m. Shrubs, like dwarf birch and willow, grew on less fertile and more exposed ground, while communities of sedges populated the wetlands and bogs (Hallsdóttir 1987: 36). Erlendsson stated that the tree line was lower, 250-300 m (Edwards et al. 2005: 76). This estimate is more suitable to the Mosfell region, since the heath begins at about 250m, and it is less likely that birch would have grown in this exposed environment. The foothills (Bringur) east of the Mosfell Valley would have likely been most densely covered with birch, due to the advantages of good soil accumulation and water drainage in this area. Trees and shrubs would have extended down into the valley (Erlendsson 2010: pers. comm.) Erlendsson’s estimations are reinforced by local placenames. One of the names connected with the foothills is Skógarbringur, ‘Forest-Foothills.’ Down in the Mosfell Valley, the area between the two rivers, Kaldakvísl and Suðurá, is called Víðir, ‘Willow.’ On the peninsula Álfsnes stand the farm and smaller peninsula both named Viðines, ‘Willow Peninsula.’ In the earliest document mentioning this site, from around 1220 AD, the name is spelled Viðnes (DI 1:}
413), which if not just a variation in spelling, would mean ‘Woods Peninsula.’ These place names suggest that trees existed in this region according to the iconic description from Íslendingabók, ‘á miðli fjalls ok fjöru’ (Íf 1: 5), ‘between the mountains and the sea.’

In addition to trees, the wetlands were more extensive at the time of settlement. The bedrock beneath the valley floor is not very porous, and the Mosfell Valley is the basin of a large watershed. Prior to the digging in the 1950s of drainage canals to extend cultivatable land, the valley bottom was covered in wetlands and bogs. It is quite certain that the valley bottom was wet and boggy at the time of settlement, too. High concentrations of inorganic matter in layers above the 871 settlement tephra layer in bog peat from around Iceland suggest that a very rapid soil erosion took place after the settlement, filling in and drying out wetlands (Erlandsson 2010: pers. comm.; Hallsdóttir 1987: 37). The wetlands would have been much more extensive than they are today, and Erlandsson expects that the land around the floor of the Mosfell Valley would have been ‘one sloping bog’ at the time of settlement (2010: pers. comm.).

These environmental changes must have been very rapid following Iceland’s settlement. Deforestation happened very rapidly indeed, with major forest loss within just the first couple or few generations. Using pollen samples of birch from layers dated by tephra chronology, Hallsdóttir estimated that the woodlands surrounding farms disappeared before 950 AD (1987; 37). Erlandsson’s research suggests that these woods disappeared before 920 AD (Edwards et al. 2005: 74). Forests farther away from farms continued to be exploited for fuel in the production of bog iron, and it is expected that all of Iceland’s trees, excepting those which were specially managed and conserved, disappeared by 1100 AD. Deforestation coupled with animal grazing resulted in a dramatic increase in soil erosion in the delicate sub-arctic ecology. Dated by tephra chronology, this increase happened soon after the settlement, with the largest difference occurring in the highlands, which was likely a result of animals grazing above the tree line (Edwards et al. 2005: 76).

Soil profiles from the excavation at Hrísbrú illustrate the long history of soil erosion in Iceland. The stratigraphy from the excavation of the church on Kirkjuhóll revealed two distinct strata above the settlement layer, composed of a mixture of cultural debris, organic-rich eolian loess, tephra, and/or silty and sandy debris flows, which in places are together over one meter deep (Byock 2009: 103-104; Byock et al. 2003, unpublished:
15). The Mosfell Valley is a catchment basin for wind blown soils and sands and these profiles bear witness to the accumulation of eroded soils following the settlement.

These changes occurred so rapidly that without a detailed study of geographic and ecological change in the Mosfell region, it is difficult to understand the precise effects of these changes. If wetlands and bogs extended further up hill slopes, then it is likely that the very first dwellings and paths were higher at first, and then later as the wetlands silted up, they were moved lower. Such changes likely occurred quickly and were of little overall significance, since trails are bound to vary seasonally and over time on a small scale.

The bay at the mouth of the Mosfell Valley, named Leiruvogur (or Leirvogur), meaning ‘Mudflat Bay’ (or ‘Clay Bay’), has undoubtedly accumulated large amounts of sediment in the past 1,100 years, and consequently the coast line was likely different from what it was today. The effects of sediment deposition are complicated by the historical rise of the ocean level, and without a focused geological study of the entire bay, it would be very difficult to estimate the coast line at the time of settlement and map its changes throughout the Free State Period. While these changes lower the historical geographical continuity of the Mosfell region, they are not significant enough to have greatly altered the routes under study.

The main fascination in studying old routes is not in dating or mapping the trails to exactitude, but in discussing how those routes connect people to one another and affect the flow of resources and ideas. Consequently, I am not much concerned with small variations in the routes which do not significantly affect these connections or movement in general. The third chapter of this thesis is dedicated to understanding the type and quantity of traffic which traveled over these routes, and how this traffic might have influenced the power of the inhabitants at Hrisbrú/Mosfell. This discussion will draw on historical and archaeological evidence to evaluate such topics as the economic importance of the areas which the Mosfell region connected.

1.4 Terms and Translation

*The word road would convey a wrong notion, for nothing worthy of that name is to be found in Iceland. Where the ground is rocky, a path is made by removing the stones, and this track is kept up by each farmer in the Hrepp giving up a day in summer to the business of clearing it of any stones that have fallen into it. Where the*
land is swampy, little is done to make it passable, except occasionally a rude causeway is thrown over a few yards of the most dangerous part. (Dillon 1840: 190-191)

As previously stated, trails in Iceland had no proper surface until the major road building and improvement projects began in the late 19th century. For this reason, I have followed Dillon’s century and a half old objection and avoided using the word road because it often conjures up an image of something with a contructed surface. I have attempted to consistently use the word route when referring to a customary line of travel and the word trail when referring specifically to the physical manifestation of that line of travel in an historical Icelandic context. When discussing examples in Britain, I have followed Taylor (1979) and Hindle (1998) in using road and track, which they seem to have preferred.

As in English, Icelandic has many words to describe roads or routes, each with many common meanings. The words gata and leið both refer to trails which are formed by use. These words can refer trails for hiking or horseriding, but also to the trails formed and used chiefly by animals, for example, fjár-gata, ‘a sheep-path.’ The words vegur and braut often refer to trails for which the path necessitated some clearing, such as the aforementioned example, Brautar-holt, a cleared trail through a forest. Vegur appears to have come into more popular use later in the medieval period (Þorláksson 1989: 29-30). As previously mentioned, each of these words have many common uses, such as leið and vegur, which can mean ‘way’ or ‘route.’ My definitions are not meant to be absolute.

I have used Icelandic spellings of names in this thesis. The exception is Mosfellsdalur, for which I have substituted ‘the Mosfell Valley,’ following Byock et al. (2005). There are two common spellings of the bay closest to Mosfell in Icelandic, either Leirvogur or Leiruvogur. Byock et al. uses the former variant, but I have chosen the latter spelling for this thesis, which appears to be the convention among Icelandic scholars, such as Bjarnason & Guðmunsson (2005) and Eldjárn (1981), and mapmakers like the National Land Survey of Iceland (Landmælingar Íslands). The river Elliðaá is commonly referred to in the plural form in Icelandic, Elliðaár. I have used the plural form in Icelandic spellings, but referred to it in the singular for in English, thus ‘the river Elliðaár.’ Unlike place names, for which I have adopted modern spellings, personal names are spelled in their nominative forms as they appear in original standardized texts. Below is a list of geographical place name element, which I hope will be useful to the
English-speaking reader. I have attempted to redundantly precede place names with a geographical designation in English, such that the reader hopefully need not memorize this list.

á    river, stream  lækur    stream
bringur    foothills  nes    peninsula
dalur    valley  skarð    mountain pass
ey    island  sund    channel
fell    mountain  tangi    spit of land
fjörður    fjord  tunga    tongue of land
foss    waterfall  vatn    lake
gil    gully  vik    cove
heiði    heath  vogur    bay
kvísl    river, stream

2 TRACING THE TRAILS

2.1 Travel and Mobility: Errors and Amendments

*The roads in Iceland are generally very bad, and not infrequently exist only in name. To say that there is a road from one place to another is simply a form of speech, and need mean nothing more than that it is possible to get from one place to another. In mountain districts and on the dreary heiði to keep in the road is to go as straight as possible from one cairn to another. In valleys and low lands one or two narrow paths form the road. In some places where the soil is soft and where there is much traffic these paths gradually become too deep to ride along with comfort; they are then abandoned and fresh ones are commenced close to them. Paths are thus multiplied. I have counted as many as sixteen running side by side, some of the being very deep. Ponies rush down these narrow gullies regardless of the corns of their riders whose feet bang, first on one side, then on the other, against mounds and rocks, or perchance are caught in some twisted willow roots which have been laid bare by the formation of the path. In rainy seasons most of the paths are used by the superfluous water as a means of escape, and those on the hill sides then become young torrents.*

*(Shepherd 1867: 20)*
The goal in this chapter is to examine all of the previously discussed sources of evidence to best recreate the routes of the Viking Age in the Mosfell region. It is perhaps best to begin with a discussion of the conditions of travel in Iceland at that time to provide a proper perspective on the realities undertaken by travelers in previous ages. Conditions of travel and mobility affected the choice by travelers of which routes to take and the course which those routes took. Armed with this knowledge, we will be in a better position to review and amend the errors made in previous research by MAP into routes and travel.

Dry, level terrain is almost always preferable to wet, uneven terrain when traveling on horseback or foot. The previous quote of Dillon in Section 1.4 suggests that whatever humble attempts had been made to rid trails of their worst dangers were considerably insufficient as witnessed by him in the 19th century. This lack of sufficient trail maintenance was also apparent to Sveinn Pálsson in 1792, who then described the way over Mosfellsheiði thus:

‘Vegurinn er hvarvetna gersamlega òruddur. Þó er hann allgóður sums staðar, en lengstum alitof grýttur, og væri þó létt verk að bæta hann’ (Ferðabók Sveins Pálsonar 1983: 104).

‘The trail is everywhere completely uncleared. Even though the way is fine in some plaes, it is much too stony in most places, and it would take little work to improve it.’

Before the improvement projects of the late 19th century, the trails in Iceland were considerably rough and travel over land was a difficult, combersome, and often dangerous affair. People occasionally drowned when crossing rivers, and the rivers in the Mosfell region were no exception to this (Bjarnason & Guðmundsson 2005: 185). Almost every foreign traveler’s account from the 18th and 19th centuries has something to say about the difficulties of travel, and make it decidedly clear that dry, level terrain with fewest river crossings was most expedient for travelers. Baring-Gould wrote the following description of difficult travels from what is most likely the farm Stardalur, riding past the lake, Leirvogsvatn, and up onto Mosfellsheiði:

After leaving the byre, we wound round the north side of a small lake, and became so involved in bogs, that it was with great difficulty we got the pack-horses safely through; and on reaching the sandy banks of a little river which fed the farm, they lay down one after another and rolled, snapping ropes and girths, smashing bottles,
and severly trying the Icelandic boxes. After the damage was repaired to the best of our abilities, we ascended the heithi, or moor...These heithies\(^9\) are very awkward things to cross, as the ground is thoroughly broken up. (Baring-Gould 1863: 63)

Descriptions such as this one are relatively common in such accounts, emphasizing the extreme difficulties in crossing bogs and wetlands, and the need to constantly adjust the saddle bags on pack horses and help the horses themselves from getting stuck in mud. It should be added that these travel accounts are rife with descriptions of similar hazards in winter travel, of horses getting stuck in snow drifts, and rivers congested with too much ice to cross.\(^{10}\)

It is probable that the difficulties suffered by foreign travelers in the 18th and 19th centuries were brought upon themselves to various degrees and then sensationalized in their journals. It is quite likely that these foreign travelers were unaccustomed to such traveling conditions and were traveling with unnecessarily burdensome cargo, either for collecting scientific samples or for their own comfort and well-being. For example on one hand, Dillon reported the loss of cargo and specifically sediment samples when crossing the river Öxará, before returning across Mosfellshéidi (1840: 233-234). On the other hand, Baring-Gould noted the size of his traveling party—25 horses for 6 men—and the indulgence of his traveling companion, Mr. Briggs, who needed an entire horse to carry his enormous bed (1863: 44). Excepting cargo size, these foreign travelers were dependent on local guides to see them through safely. Kålund wrote about Kjalarnes, ‘Vejen over det flade land er på mange steder næsten ufremkommelig uden kyndig ledsagelse på grund af mosens blødhed; i reglen holder man sig tæt under Esja’ (1877: 54). In this example, Kålund wrote that the way across Kjalarnes would be impassible without the help of knowledgeable local guides to help navigate the dangerous mire of the bogs. For this reason, it was preferable to travel on higher and drier ground, right up against the base of Mt. Esja. Kålund’s account is unlikely to be unduely sensationalized. As a Dane, he was likely familiar with the danger posed by bogs to travelers, due to the large number of bogs in Denmark and popularity of tales about people disappearing in bogs when caught by sudden, dense fogs.

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\(^9\) Heaths. Baring-Gould has attempted to make an English plural form of the Icelandic heiði.
\(^{10}\) For two such example of challenging winter travel, see Dillon 1840: 196; and Lock 1879: 95.
Even if the foreigners felt the tribulations of their travels more acutely than their Icelandic counterparts, their descriptions of travel are rather similar to those made by native medieval writers. In general, the prose of the sagas are remarkably terse, omiting as much information as would have been common knowledge to the audience. The realities of travel would certainly fit into the category, yet occasionally vivid descriptions occur when they are integral to the plot. The best descriptions of the conditions of travel are perhaps to be found in Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða regarding a chase across a heath. In this passage, the difficulties of crossing wet terrain are explicitly described to highlight the advantage gained by those pursued by coming out of the bogs first.

Variations in the text by manuscript are given in brackets.

Eyvindr riðr þar til, er hann kom vestr á miðja heiðina. Þar heita Bersagötur. Þar er svarðlauss mýrr, ok er sem riði í efju eina fram, ok tök jafnán í kné eða miðjan legg, stundum í kvíð, þá er undir svá hart sem hölkn....Pá er fyrir þeim önnur mýrr, er heitir Oxamýrr. Hon er grósig mjök. Þar eru bleytur, svá at nálíga er öfært yfir [ókunnnum mönnnum er ilfaert / jafnlægar yfir at fara. Er þó síu því verri, at hon er blautari, ok verða menn jafnán at leggia af]. Af því lágði Hallfreðr karl inar efri götur, þó at þær væri lengri. (Íf 11: 127-129)

Eyvindr rode west until he came to the middle of the heath. There Bersagötur (Bersi’s Trails) lie through a barren moor. It is like riding through pure mud, which comes up to the horse’s knees or mid-thigh, and sometimes its belly, but underneath it is as hard as stone...There was another bog ahead of them, which is called Oxamýri. It is very grassy, but so muddy that it is almost impossible to cross [difficult to cross by those who do not know the way / just as long to cross, but worse because it is more wet, and men must take the packs off of the horses]. For this reason old Hallfreðr made the higher routes, even though they were longer.

The similarity between this passage and the previous quote of Kålund is striking. It is significant that both writers mention that trails through certain bogs are nearly impassible for those who are not intimately familiar with the area. This suggests that the foreign travelers of a later age were not exaggerating the hazards of such trails, which could be equally dangerous for certain Icelanders. Additionally, the medieval description suggests that a higher route might sometimes be preferable to a boggy route, albeit longer. Hallfreðr’s trail is explained earlier in the saga:
Fljótsdalsheiði is difficult to cross and very stony and wet. Even so, both father and son always rode to see the other because of their good relationship. Hallfreðr thought that route was rather difficult to travel and searched for a new way above the mountains, which are on Fljótsdalsheiði. He found a drier but longer way, which is called Hallfreðr’s Trail. Only those who know the heath best take this trail.

This passage emphasizes the desirability of drier trails and echoes the importance of local knowledge in travel. To avoid the challenges of the main route which passed through two bogs, locals used a higher and drier trail, which although preferable in this respect, did not become a major route presumably because it was longer or else because there were other unmentioned dangers which only the most experienced travelers could safely navigate. Consequently Kålund’s statement that the popular trail through Kjalarnes lay above the bogs and tight up against the base of the mountains makes sense, because this route was both shorter and drier, and therefore more easily traversed.

‘Shorter’ is a somewhat relative term when used in the context of Viking Age travel because space was not always measured by the same means as today. Space was often measured by to the amount of time taken to travel between two points instead of distance, i.e. how many times one needed to stop to rest one’s horses (Hastrup 1985: 58). Hallfreðargata is not known today, but we might imagine that it traversed a much greater distance if this route took longer and more rests in crossing than the common and taxing route through the bogs.

The mutual agreement between the descriptions from the 18th and 19th centuries and those of medieval writers provides a reliable picture of the realities and conditions of travel within Iceland in past ages. First, traveling by land was often a difficult and sometimes dangerous undertaking for those who were unfamiliar with the terrain. Second, drier routes were more comfortable to travel, and these routes often ran at higher altitudes, close up against the bases of mountains. Third, cargo and lives were sometimes lost when crossing rivers. Therefore the fewer rivers crossed, the more
preferrable the route. Last, distance was measured by the difficulty of the terrain, not by the kilometer. What appears close on a map may not necessarily be.

Previous studies by MAP into the routes through the Mosfell region may have been made without a complete understanding of the previously discussed realities and conditions of travel, and therefore necessitate review. The only summary of MAP’s research and knowledge in this field is succinct and easily repeated here.

The valley and its coastal region were partly a self-contained social and economic unit, but they were also connected to the rest of Iceland through a network of extensive horse-paths, as there were no roads for wheeled carts in Iceland until modern times. The major route connecting western and southern Iceland ran through the Mosfell Valley. It also led to the nearby annual meeting of the Althing at Þingvellir, 30 km to the east of Mosfell. Close to some of the best marine fishing grounds in Iceland, the economy of the Mosfell Valley system was mixed terrestrial and marine....In Viking and later medieval times, trade, travel and immigration played important roles in the lives of the inhabitants of Mosfellsveit. With its coastal port at Leiruvogur, The Mofell valley was in commercial and cultural contact with Scandinavians the rest of medieval Europe. (Byock et al, 2005: 204-205)

This passage is correct in its assessment of the nature of routes as horse-paths and the lack of surfaced roads or wheeled cart in Iceland at this time, as discussed in Chapter 1. The statements concerning the routes and their connections, however, appear to be based upon the modern roads in Iceland, without concern for the nature of travel in past ages. The connection between Mosfell and fishing grounds will be addressed in Chapter 3, and the connection between Mosfell and the ship’s landing at Leiruvogur later in this chapter.

The most important road in Iceland today is Route 1, the ‘Ring Road,’ which circles the island and connects all of its inhabitants. Route 1 travels south along the coast of western Iceland, along Kjalarnes, past the mouth of the Mosfell Valley, south over Hellisheiði, and along the coast of southern Iceland. This route clearly existed in old times (Gunnlaugsson 1831: map; Magnússon 1785: map), but considering the realities of travel, it was very unlikely to have been the ‘major route connecting western and southern Iceland’ as it certainly is today. Traveling along the coastline always takes a greater distance when more direct, inland routes are available, and it takes more time and effort, because the coastal areas are most often wetter and more difficult to cross than the inland routes, excepting suitable beaches and shorelines, which can be quite good for
riding. It is most likely that travelers coming from farther afield in the western or southern Iceland would follow the main inland routes. This may be witnessed in a map from 1780, which only contains inland routes, perhaps indicating their relative importance over coastal routes (Ólafsson Olavius 1964: vol. 1, map between 144-5). These inland routes were far east of Mosfellsheiði, such that travelers would not come through Mosfell Valley unless they had business along the coast.

Preference for inland routes is testified in the sagas. Passing by Mosfell would have been a considerable detour for anyone going between regions farther west and south. When trying to emphasize the intentional detours taken by the beggar Sigmundr in Harðar saga ok Hólmverjar between Breiðabólstaður in Borgarfjörður in the west and Ólfusvatn in the south, it says that he traveled along the coast the entire way in order to prolong his journey. In the story, Sigmundr is given charge of a cute baby girl, and as a result he is given good hospitatily everywhere he goes. ‘Þvi vildi Sigmundr fara inn lengsta veg; hann för út um Andakíl ok Melahverfi ok allt it ytra um Nes öll, en utan um Grindavík ok Ólfus’ (Íf 13 1991: 23). ‘Thus Sigmundr wanted to take the longest route. He went out around Andakill and Melahverfi, and along the coast around all of the Peninsulas and back through Grindavik and Ólfus.’ The context of Sigmundr’s journey is quite out of the ordinary, which demonstrates that such a lengthy route was atypical for most travelers.

If Mosfell lay well off the best routes connecting the distant regions of the west and south, then travelers were only likely to pass through the valley when they had business nearby. Today, Route 1 is most directly connected to Þingvellir through the Mosfell Valley and consequently receives a sizable portion of traffic. Yet this cannot be used as an indicator for traffic through the valley in previous times, when there existed more main routes to serve local needs. As we shall see in Section 2.3, this route was not the only one which connected Þingvellir to the Peninsulas, and emphasis must be placed on the conditions of travel discussed here to properly understand who was moving where and why.

2.2 Historical Settlement in the Mosfell Region

To further avoid the problems of confusing modern patterns of travel with older ones, it is best to begin by eliminating modern and early modern settlements from the study area, in an effort to get closer to the settlement pattern of the Viking Age. Detailed and
complete information regarding the settlement pattern of the Mosfell region in the Viking Age unfortunately does not exist, either in historical writing or archaeological study. MAP is currently in the process of collecting such data to better understand the history of human habitation in the Mosfell Valley. As discussed in Chapter 1, the earliest layers of cultural activity from Hrísbrú date to around 900 AD. During the 2009 field season, systematic coring of Skeggiastaðir revealed medieval cultural layers, dated by the presence of the Settlement tephra (871 AD, landnámgjóska) and survey at Helgadalur revealed the same tephra in cut turf in an eroding bank close to the modern farm, suggesting that these sites were inhabited in the Viking Age or early Middle Ages (Byock et al. 2010, forthcoming). Independent of MAP’s research, archaeological surveys along the shore of Álfsnes have revealed structures, possibly for a ship’s landing and fishing station, which face the inlet, Þerneyjarsund. The 1226 AD medieval tephra was present in turfs walls, dating these structures to post-1226 AD (Pálsdóttir, S.U. 2008). Rescue excavations at Leirvogstunga found several, possibly medieval, farm structures. The excavators were not confident enough in their findings to assign a date to the structures without further research (Pálsdóttir, L.B. et al. 2008: 78-9). In 1968 and 1969, archaeologists excavated at Varmá. The oldest remains from this excavation were of a late medieval church (Stefánsdóttir et al. 2006: 197).

Historical documents reveal which farms existed in the Mosfell region within the Middle Ages (ca. 871-1550 AD), usually giving account when properties changed ownership, but unfortunately they are not comprehensive nor do they record when certain farms were established. They cannot alone recreate the settlement pattern of the Viking Age, but they can at least bring us closer by giving account of significant properties before 1552 AD. The earliest datable documentary evidence is the church charter of Suður-Reykir from 1180 AD (máldagi kirkjunnar að Reykjum) (Stefánsdóttir et al. 2006: 169; DI 1: 268). A second charter comes from Suður-Reykir in 1367, which contains the first mention of the farm Úlfarsfell (Stefánsdóttir et al. 2006: 188; DI 3: 220). Hrísbrú, Mosfell, and the place name Tjaldanes are all found in Egils saga (Íf 2: 298). Mosfell is named in other sagas and also in the church register of Bishop Páll Jónsson (kirknaskrá Páls biskups Jónssonar) around 1200 AD (Stefánsdóttir et al. 2006: 120; DI 7: 9). The church charter from Þerney (máldagi kirkjunnar í Þerney), dated close to 1220 AD, states that the church owned half of the island Þerney, an unidentified cove,
the farms Álfsnes, Háfaheiði, and Viðines, and rights to half of the shieling produce from Stardalur:

'hvn a þessi fiogvr [lond. half þerney. Olfnes. hafva heiði. Viðnes. ok er j þerney Tivund ok grofr af þessvm baivm. / Kirkja a at helmingi selfór j Stardal ok sva afreit. ok sva þess hlutar fiorv j krossa vik er þerney fylger. (DI 1: 413)

Háfaheiði was most likely abandoned in the late 16th or early 17th century (DI 1: 412), and survives in the place name Háheiði on Álfsnes. Stardalur is the name of the valley and a farm today, although there may not have been any farm but only shielings there during the Middle Ages. Blikastaðir is first mentioned in the church charter of Viðey from 1234 (máldagi Mariu kirkjunnar í Viðey frá árinu 1234), where it was stated that the church owned land on ‘Blackastodum.’ This charter also contains the first mention of Þormóðsdalur, which appears to have been used for shielings at this time. The charter states that ‘Magnvs Gvðmvndarson gaf til staðar selfór j Þormoðsdal enn efra. oc alls fiar beit bæði vetr oc svmar’ (Stefánsdóttir et al. 2006: 9, 200; DI 1: 507-8).

Helgadalur is mentioned in 1395 under the properties which came into Viðey’s possessions under Abbot Páll Magnússon (1378-1403) (Stefánsdóttir et al. 2006: 35; DI 3: 598), and based on the aforementioned archaeological evidence, was certainly occupied in earlier medieval periods. With Helgadalur and other farms, this document states that Viðey took posession of Lágafell, Varmá, and the aforementioned Skeggjastaðir. Skeggjastaðir is also mentioned in Landnámabók and Kjalnesinga saga as the farm of the settler Þórðr skeggi (Íf 1 48-9; Íf 14: 6). The following farms are also listed as belonging to Viðey in the 1395 document: Fitjakot (then called Fitjar), Hraðastaðir, Korpúlfstaðir, Mógilsa, Vellir, and the aforementioned Blikastaðir. The rivers Mógilsá and Úlfarsá (also named Korpúlfstaðaá), which are associated with the farms Mógilsá and Korpúlfstaðir, are mentioned in Landnámabók (Íf 1: 48-9).

Kjalnesinga saga claims that the farms Korpúlfstaðir and Kollafjörður were established by settlers (Íf 14: 5, 20), though these characters are not known from other sources. Helgafell, Laxnes, Leirvogstunga, Miðdalur, and Minna Mosfell were probably possessions of the Viðey monastery before they were mentioned for the first time in the Fögeareikningar documents, 1547-1552 AD, when those possessions were transferred to
the king (Stefánssdóttir et al. 2006: 43, 74, 86, 92, 112; DI 12). Grafir (Norður-Gröf)\textsuperscript{11} and Varmidalur are also mentioned for the first time in the Fógetareikningar (DI 12). The Fógetareikningar documents were written after the Reformation in Iceland, three centuries after the end of the period under study. These farms are not mentioned in any earlier documents, which raises the concern that those farms mentioned therein may not have been established until after the end of the Free State Period and therefore not relevant to this study. The historical evidence does not answer whether these farm were in existence during the Free State Period. For the purposes of this study, I have decided to include these farms, since their absence from the map would not appear to greatly alter the routes between farms mentioned in older documents and their inclusion will be relevant to orientation with the modern landscape.

2.3 Main Routes Around Mosfell

2.3.1 The Coastal Route

As previously discussed, Route 1 generally follows the older coastal route shown in Gunnlaugsson’s map from 1831. The first construction of Route 1 through the Mosfell region (called Mosfellssveitarvegur or Vesturlandsvegur) was begun in 1905 and completed through to Kollafjörður in 1926. It has since been rebuilt parallel to this construction, less than 50m to the west. The bridge across the river Leirvogsá was originally built in 1892, but was rebuilt during this construction period and finished in 1922 (Guðnason 1975: 22) This road was constructed parallel to the previous way. Sections of a causeway and stone ford belonging to an older road 50m east of where Route 1 crosses the stream Flóalækur have been identified in archaeological survey near Kollafjörður, although no age has been assigned to them (Traustadóttir & Guðmundsdóttir 2001:17-8). The causeway is constructed with gravel and lined with medium sized stone cobbles, similar in construction to other late 19th century road improvements (Guðmundsdóttir 2010: pers. comm.). It is likely that the causeway and

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\textsuperscript{11} Grafir is plural in Icelandic. The singular form is Gröf and is a common place name for farms. It is most likely that Grafir refers to two farms in the area with the name Gröf. One of these two farms stands against the southern face of Mt. Esja, east of the farm Vellir. Today, the name Norður-Gröf (North-Gröf) is used to distinguish this farm from the other Gröf, known today as Grafarholt, which stood by the bay Grafavogur and today has become a suburb to the eastern end of Reykjavík. ‘[Norður-Gröf] hét aður fyrir Gröf. Norður-Gröf er seinni tíma aðgreining frá Gröf (nú Grafarholt) í Mosfellssveit, sem nú er innan lögstagnarumdeimis Reykjavikur’ (Jónsson 1998: 474). Grafarholt lies outside the present area of study, so Grafir will only be mentioned henceforth in relation to Norður-Gröf.
ford were built close in time to the 1892 bridge over Leirvogsá. The 1892 bridge crossed Leirvogsá by the farm Varmidalur, which is the most likely location for the old ford. From there the route ran south to the farm Leirvogstunga and joined with a route coming from the east along the river Kaldakvísl. The joined route skirted southwest around the farm’s hayfield down to a ford below a few eddies in the river. Route 1 crosses the river just upstream, above a small waterfall and gorge. ‘Neðan [Sauðhústúns] er foss í ánni, sem heitir Tungufoss, og undir honum er hylur... Við fossinn norðanverðan er Hallberg. Þar var þjóðvegurinn áður fyrr um túníð og að vaðinu.... Neðan [hyljanna] er gamalt Vað’ (Ö Leirvogstungu: 1). Archaeologists surveying Leirvogstunga have since used this description and mapped the old ford and main route around the farm (Hreiðarsdóttir 2006: 12). This ford and route can also be seen on the 1909 map Herforingjaráðskort, which was surveyed in 1908, two years before the new bridge was built over the river Varmá and four years before the first bridge was built over Kaldakvísl, upstream of the aforementioned gorge. From there the route lay south, crossing the stream Varmá and leading to the farm of the same name and then the farm Lágafell, as is described in a report which predates the beginning of the 1905 road construction, called ‘bréf hreppsnefndar Mofellshrepps’ and dated March 10th, 1886 (Bjarnason & Guðmundsson 2005: 127). From there the route lead to Blikastaðir, over the ford Blikastaðavað to Korpúlsstaðir, Reykjavík and the surrounding peninsulas.

The earliest mention of this main route along the coast is in Kjalnesinga saga. After emerging victorious, although wounded, from an ambush at Kollafjörður, Kolfiðr walks south across several cold rivers to seek aid from his uncle at Korpúlsstaðir. Leirvogsá, the largest of these rivers, is named in the passage:

*Nú er at segja frá ferð Kolfinns. Hann var sárr mjök, sem sagt var. Ár stórar váru á leið hans; en er hann kom af Leirvogsá, þá gerði honum kalt mjök ok stirðnaði hann. Frost var á nokkut. Maðr hét Korpúlfjör; hann bjó á Korpúlsstöðum.... Pangat snéri Kolfiðr sinni ferð. (Íf 14: 20)*

This passage highlights the challenges overcome by Kolfiðr, namely traveling wounded while alone and on foot, through strong and icy rivers. However, there may have been a second route available at this time which would have avoided the dangerous and unpleasant river crossings. Such a route would have been decidedly preferrable, yet
it may be that the medieval writer chose the most challenging route for Kolfiðr, giving the character the most opportunity for heroic display.

At low tide, it is possible to ride across the bay Leiruvogur, thereby avoiding the danger and discomfort of a few river crossings. This way was first indicated on Gunnlaugsson’s 1831 map. There the coastal route is shown across the bay, approximately from the mouth of Leirvogsá to the shore by the farm Varmá. This appears to be the more important of the two ways, since the land route over the rivers is not on this map. In 1840 the possibility of such a route is encouraged by Dillon, who writes concerning the route from Reykjavík to Kjalarnes: ‘the journey to it by land is twenty good miles, and at high water even more, as the mouths of several rivers have to be crossed on the way’ (157-8). In 1877, Kålund confirms this route with a description, which states that the route north from the river Elliðaár went over Leiruvogur, a name which means ‘Mudflat Bay.’ At low tide, it was a simple matter to ride across the mud flats and river channels:

*Ved ebbetid er vågen aldeles tør og frembyder da en fast flad lerbund, hvorover vejen ligger kun afbrudt ved åernes smalle grøftformige lejer, over hvilke der dog med lethed rides; ellers er den daglige vandstand to til tre fod....Fra Ellidaæerne fører den almindelige vej nord på over Lerevågen. (Kålund 1877: 45-6)*

From Varmidalur it is possible to ride along the northern bank of Leirvogsá to the mouth of the river, where the farm Fitjar stood on the northern side, or along the southern bank down the tongue of Leirvogstunga. From there one may enter the bay, and ride south onto Skiphóll and then to the farm Varmá. From either the mouth of Leirvogsá or Skiphóll, one can alternatively follow the exposed shore to Langitangi, where it is also possible to cross the bay at low tide to the farm Viðines. From Langitangi one can travel west along the coast and cross over the peninsula Blikastaðanes and cross the river Korpúlfstaðaá by the shore at the ford Króarvað and onward. Following this same route in reverse direction, Hreiðarsson gives recent testimony, stating that the route lay ‘þvert yfir Blikastaðanes undir Hrossaskjólfshálsi, inn með Leiruvogi að Langitanga. Þaðan var farið yfir að Viðinesi á vaði yfir Leiruvog á fjörú.... Þeir sem ætluðu á innanvert Kjalarnesið eða í Mosfellsdal þróu áfram inn yfir Leirurnar og upp hjá Leirvogstungu’ (2005: 195). ‘Leirurnar’ is a place name which means ‘the Mud Flats’ and refers to this crossing and the opposite bank just under Fitjar.
where the route led up the northern bank of Leirvogsá, with Leirvogstunga on the southern bank. As Kálund describes, these mudflats are hard and therefore good for riding. Indeed, the bedrock of Skiphóll and Langitangi are formed from ridges of Holocene deposits (Kristjánsson et al. 1991: 54), which lead across the bay. These routes exist today and continue to be used for horse riding.

2.3.2 East Over the Heath

Today, Route 36 is the only road which crosses Mosfellsheiði, but in previous ages there were trails leading from every valley in the Mosfell region east over the heath. Route 36, also called Nýi Þingvallavegurinn (‘The New Road to Þingvellir’) leads from Route 1 through the floor of Mosfell Valley and up over Mosfellsheiði to Þingvellir. The first construction of this road was begun in 1928 and completed in 1930 for the millennial celebration of the Althing at Þingvellir (Bjarnason & Guðmundsson 2005: 193; Petersen 1977: 92; Guðnason 1975: 18). With this construction, Gamli Þingvallavegurinn (‘The Old Road to Þingvellir’) fell out of use. Construction on Gamli Þingvallavegurinn was begun in 1890 and completed in 1896, and was the first route from Reykjavík to Þingvellir traversable by carriage, later to be used by automobiles (Bjarnason & Guðmundsson 2005: 190; Guðnason 1975 18). This road lay outside of the Mosfell Valley, south of Mt. Grímmannsfell, northeast over the heath to the rest stop Vilborgarkelda, and on to Þingvellir. The road was a new construction, built south of and parallel to an older trail called Seljadalsvegur, which was one of three routes over the heath to Þingvellir.

The three routes which brought travelers from the Peninsulas across Mosfellsheiði to Þingvellir before the construction of Gamli Þingvallavegurinn are called Seljadalsvegur, Bringnavegur (or Bringuvegur), and Stardalsvegur. These routes are first named in an Icelandic travel account by Sveinn Pálsson from 1792: ‘Yfir heiðina eru þrjár leiðir. Nyrzt er Stardalsvegur, Bringuvegur í miðið – hann er greiðfærastur –, en syðstur er Seljadalsvegur’ (Ferðabók Sveins Pálssonar 1983: 103). ‘Over the heath are three trails. Stardalsvegur is the northernmost, Bringuvegur is in the middle—this is the easiest to traverse—, and Seljadalsvegur is the southernmost.’ The next description of the three routes together is in a district-description by Þórður Jónasson from 1852:

Frá Reykjavík til Þingvallaveitar í Árnessýslu. Þessi vegur liggur inn yfir Ellíðaáár, yfir Seljadal og Mosfellsheiði (Seljadalsvegur), eður og fram hj[á] Mosfelli og þaðan
A description of the Mosfell and Gufunes parishes by Stefán Þorvaldsson from 1855 only names Seljadalsvegur, adding that this route passed by the farms Þormóðsdalur and Miðdalur: ‘Sá [þjóðvegur liggur um sóknirnar], er liggur austan yfir Mosfellsheiði og fram Seljadal, niður hjá bæjunum Þormóðsdal, Miðdal og Reynisvatni og Árbæ’ (Þorvaldsson 1855: 158). There is no mention of other routes across Mosfellsheiði in these parish descriptions, which suggests that Seljadalsvegur was preeminent in Þorvaldsson’s mind. Kålund acknowledged the multiplicity of routes over the heath, but stated that Seljadalsvegur was the usual route for travelers from Reykjavík: ‘Op på heden kommer man fra enhver af Mosfellssvejtens dale, dog er den sædvanlige vej gennem den sydligste af disse, den såkaldte Seljadals vej. Her drager man—med Reykjavig tænkt som udgangspunkt’ (1877: 66). Kålund’s observation regarding the popularity of Seljadalsvegur must be accepted with a grain of salt because he wrote considerably late in the 19th century and may have been describing contemporary trends. In 1874, the first efforts at improving Seljadalsvegur were undertaken in anticipation of a visit from the Danish king that same year for the millenial celebration of Iceland’s settlement. This was one of the first trail improvement projects in the region, and was the start of many more to come (Bjarnason & Guðmundsson 2005: 186-7). Pálsson’s and Þorvaldsson’s descriptions appear to be the most reliable and meaningful, and when taken together suggest that Stardalsvegur was the safest, Bringnavegur the easiest to traverse, and Seljadalsvegur the most popular.

Despite the popularity of Seljadalsvegur, it was not necessarily the most traveled of these three routes during the 19th century. It certainly saw a large number of travelers, but based on travel accounts from that century it seems that a substantial if not equal or
greater number of travelers took Bringnavegur or Stardalsvegur. However, these accounts may not accurately reflect the general pattern of Icelandic travel, as those travelers who published travel accounts were often interested in visiting famous saga sites, which would have led them to Mosfell. Certainly weather conditions and safety were important considerations, which would have made Bringnavegur and Stardalsvegur more preferable because there was the least distance between settlements. On March 6, 1857, 14 men left Þingvellir to cross Mosfellsheiði. They became lost in the cold after passing Vilborgarkelda, and only 8 remained of the party when they were found coming down the foothills into Mosfell Valley (*An 3*: 12-4). Had they aimed south of Mt. Grimmannsfell to follow Seljadalsvegur after the weather turned bad, they would have had to cross a much longer distance before any hope of rescue, and it is more likely that fewer men would have survived. But even with summer weather, a visit to the Mosfell church may have given traveleres reason to take either Bringnavegur or Stardalsvegur.

Baring-Gould makes two stops on his journey from Reykjavík to Þingvellir. The first is Mosfell, and the second is an unnamed farm. Baring-Gould gives a detailed account of the landscape, and from this description it is clear that he was traveling Stardalsvegur. After leaving Mosfell:

*The track led along the brink of a gorge of great wildness and beauty, down which the river thundered in a succession of leaps from shelf to shelf of basalt, and then, busting through a portal of crag, slipped calmly round a tongue of grassland, on which smoked a little byre. High above stood the purple battlements of Skúlafell [Skálafell], composed of fluted rocks ranged like the reeds in a Pan-pipe...After leaving the byre, we wound round the north side of a small lake...[After that,] we ascended the heithi*13.' (*Baring-Gould 1863*: 57-63)

The gorge described here most likely belongs to the river Leirvogsá, and Tröllafoss to the waterfalls descibed as well. Baring-Gould’s vivid description of Mt. Skálafell

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12 Of the handful of 19th century travel accounts surveyed in this research, the following travelers before 1874 mention riding through Seljadalur, indicating that they took Seljadalsvegur: Shepherd in 1862 (Shepherd 1867: map), Baring-Gould in 1863? (Baring-Gould 1863: 389-90), and Morris in 1871 (Bjarnason &Guðmundsson 2005: 187); the following travelers mention stopping at Mosfell on their routes across the heath, indicating that they took either Bringnavegur or Stardalsvegur: Holland in 1810 (Holland 1987: 230), Mackenzie in 1810 (Mackenzie 1842: 51), Henderson in 1814 (Henderson 1818: vol. 1, p. 26), Dillon in 1834 (Dillon 1840: 192-6), and Baring-Gould in 1863? (Baring-Gould 1863: 44-7, 57-63).

13 Heath: Icelandic sg. *heiði*. 
leaves little doubt that the farm in question is Stardalur, which makes it almost certain
that the small lake is Leirvogsvatn, from which one must round on either the north or
south side to ascend the heath. It is most likely then that this route described here is none
other than Stardalsvegur, which gives evidence that this route was not only traveled in
winter when the weather posed most danger, but also in summer time when
Seljadalsvegur would have supposedly been prefered.

These three routes have not been definitively mapped. The earliest maps showing
routes around the Mosfell region were made by Skúli Magnússon (1785), Henry Holland
(1810), and George Steuart Mackenzie (1810). However, these maps are not detailed
enough to identify which routes are shown with any confidence. The first map which
shows three routes across the heath and is precise enough to be useful is Björn
Gunnlaugsson’s map from 1831. From the coastal route, one route leads east through
Mosfell Valley along the northern bank of the river Kaldakvísl to Laxness. From
Laxness, the route splits, one way going north near Mosfell to Skeggjastaðir. The
northern route follows the route described by Baring-Gould, except that it goes around
the southern side of Leirvogsvatn. The middle route is labeled ‘Bringna vegr’ and leaves
the northern route at Laxnes, runs south of the lakes Geldingatjörn and Leirvogsvatn
where it joins the northern route on top of the cliff Illaklif and they proceed east together
over the heath directly to Þingvellir. The southern route is labeled ‘Seljadals vegr’ and
follows Seljadalur along the southern side of Mt. Grimmannsfell, and then joins
Bringnavegur between Geldingatjörn and Leirvogsvatn. The northern route passes
through Stardalur on the map, but the name Stardalsvegur does not appear. The map
which Egill Stardal made gave the name Stardalsvegur (or more accurately, Stardalsleið)
to a route which goes northeast from the farm Stardalur (1985b: 116-7). This trail was
first mapped on the Herforingjaráðskort, and continues to be used today by horse riders.
The trail leads to Fellsendi, beneath the mountain pass Kjósarskarð to the lake
Stíflisdalsvatn, past Stíflisdalur, up over Kjósarheiði, and then back down to Þingvellir
(Suðvesturlandskort 2007). This route is alternatively known by the name Hálsavegur.
Bringnavegur and Seljadalsvegur never appeared again on maps (excepting historical
reconstructions) after Björn Gunnlaugsson’s maps, except for the name Bringnavegur,
which now appears with a hiking trail on modern maps which follows Kaldakvísl
through a bog from Laxness to the waterfall Helgufoss (Suðvesturlandskort 2007). This
hiking trail exists today more in concept than reality.
There does not seem to be clear consensus among the scholars\textsuperscript{14} who have tried to locate these trails. Björn Bjarnarson (1914) named a certain Mosfellsheiðarvegur, which is most likely Bringnavegur. Bjarnason argued that this route, which lay along Illaklif south of Leirvogsvatn, was used before the route was moved to Seljadalur. It is most likely that he was referring to Gamli Þingvallavegurinn, which was relatively new when he was writing, but it is not exactly clear what he meant by ‘[Stefnan] Mossfellsheiðarvegarins var breytt og hann lagður um Seljadal’ (Bjarnarson 1914: 14) since Gamli Þingvallavegurinn was not built in Seljadalur, but adjacent to the valley. Bjarki Bjarnason & Magnús Guðmundsson (2005: 177) agreed with Egill Stardal (1985b: 116-7), who mapped Bringnavegur along Illaklif, but placed this route north of Geldingatjörn, whereas Gunnlaugsson’s maps placed the route south of this lake. Bjarnason & Guðmundsson also followed Stardal’s identification of Stardalsvegur with Hálsavegur. Björn Th. Björnsson (1993: 137) resolved Gunnlaugsson’s northern route from Stardalur with the Stardalsvegur/Hálsavegur route by simply explaining that the name Stardalsvegur applied to both routes. The Stardalsvegur/Hálsavegur route would have had a few settlements along the way and therefore best match the Stardalsvegur of Þórður Jónasson’s description and must be quite old. It is unclear to me why Gunnlaugsson’s map does not include the Stardalur/Hálsavegur route.

Björn Th. Björnsson believed that Bringnavegur and Seljadalsvegur met at Vilborgarkelda (1993: 137). I disagree. Following Egill Stardal, Vilborgarkelda was where Bringavegur and Gamli Þingvallavegurinn met. Gamli Þingvallavegurinn was built east of Seljadalur. Consequently, Seljadalsvegur met Bringavegur farther to the west, as can be seen on Egill Stardal’s map between the ridge Þrivörðuhryggur and the cliff Illaklif (1985b: 116-7). However, Egill Stardal does not place this connection as far west as Gunnlaugsson, who mapped the connection just west of Illaklif, south of Leirvogsvatn.

Egill Stardal made further diversions from Gunnlaugsson. Stardal gave no name to the route on his map which matches Gunnlaugsson’s Bringnavegur. These two routes match each other except at the lake Geldingatjörn. Stardal’s route rounds the north side of the lake and ends at the farm Bringnabær while Gunnlaugsson’s route rounds the southern side and proceeds direct to Laxnes. In the preceding paragraph I referred to

Stardal’s unnamed route as Bringnavegur for simplicity of reference. However, Stardal gave the name Bringnaleið to a route which led from the farm Bringnabær up Kaldakvísl to Seljadalsvegur. This route is on the map *Herforingjaráðskort* from Bringnabær to Gamli Þingvallagurinn. This would give the name Bringna-vegur or -leið to two routes. Stardal’s Bringnaleið seems to be associated with the farm Bringnabær, which was established in 1857 (Stardal 1985b: 133). Sveinn Pálsson, Björn Gunnlaugsson, and Þórður Jónasson use the name Bringnavegur before this date, which I believe reinforces Gunnlaugsson’s identification. Nevertheless, there are many place names across the foothills with the element –bringur, which naturally means ‘foothills,’ such as Skógarbringur which was mentioned in Section 1.3. Consequently the name Bringnavegur or –leið may have applied to several routes concurrently, as with the case of the two Stardalsvegur names.

The oldest description of a route across Mosfellsheiði comes from *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, and takes the southern Stardalsvegur across the heath to Vilborgarkelda. In this passage, Illugi travels from Akranes to Ölfus, collecting men from Hvalfjörður and Kjalarnes on his way. They ride across Kjalarnes, up Kollafjörður and through the valley north of Mt. Mosfell, and then to Vilborgarkelda, where they ride to the cliff Jórukleif and the cove Hagavík along the southern side of lake Þingvallavatn (Ölfusvatn): ‘Þeir föru yfir [Hvalfjörð] til Kjalarness ok fyrir norðan Mosfell ok svá upp hjá Vilborgarkeldu, þaðan til Jórukleifar ok svá til Hagavíkr ok svá heim til Ölfusvatns ok kómu snemma dags’ (Íf 13: 29-30). Pingvellir, the site of the Althing, is located on the northern shore of the lake Þingvallavatn while the farm Ölfus is close to the southern shore. Apparently, the route east split at Vilborgarkelda, either going north to Pingvellir or south down Jórukleif to the southern side of Þingvallavatn (Ölfusvatn). Historians have used this passage to argue that Vilborgarkelda was at a crossroads (Bjarnason & Guðmundsson 2005: 177). While there is no reason to doubt this, such a route between Vilborgarkelda and Jórukleif is not known anymore, and nor is it described by Sveinn Pálsson, who traveled by Vilborgarkelda in 1792 and calls it a rest stop, but not a crossroads. He writes:

...komum við í fyrsta áfangastaðinn, sem heitir Vilborgarkelda...Frá Vilborgarkeldu liggar leiðin að Axará, sem fellur um Þingvallasveit og út í Þingvallavatn. (Ferðabók Sveins Pálssonar 1983: 104)
...we arrived to the first rest stop, which is called Vilborgarkelda...From Vilborgarkelda the trail lies to the river Öxará, which flows through Þingvelliasveit and south into the lake Þingvallavatn.

It would be possible, albeit longer, to ride on towards Þingvellir (and Öxará, as Pálsson describes) from Vilborgarkelda and turn south at Heiðibær and ride along the western shore of Þingvallavatn to Ölfusvatn. However, the crossroad alluded to in Harðar saga probably lay just west of Vilborgarkelda. There Egill Stardal mapped a crossroad on Þrivörðuhryggur, meaning ‘Three Cairn Ridge.’ The crossroad led from the pass Kjósarskarð south across the heath. The ridge runs north-south and is the logical place for a crossroad; to the east of the ridge lies Þrivörðulautir, meaning ‘Three Cairn Hollows,’ which marks the beginning of the moors of Vilborgarkelda east. Stardal does not show this crossroad turning toward Jórukleif. Instead the route leads farther south across the heath. Navigating towards Jórukleif, which descended behind the hill Hæðir, should not have been difficult for travelers, even though Stardal neglects this connection.

In an effort to reduce the confusion generated by the multiplicity of routes summarized above, I endeavored to survey Mosfellsheiði, hoping to find stone cairns which would provide physical evidence of these routes’ existence. In the MAP summer 2009 field season, I surveyed and mapped cairns atop mountains Mosfell and Helgafell and close to Skeggjastaðir with MAP partner and field excavations director Davide Zori. Our hope was to be able to identify older cairns by typology and identify old routes or understand patterns of use from that typology. With the exception of three large cairns near Skeggjastaðir along the route between that farm and Mosfell, our results were disappointing. The only cairns which appeared to be of substantial age were those which were already known to be boundary markers or time-of-day markers (Stefánsdóttir 2006), while the rest appeared to be recent constructions by hikers (Byock et al. 2010: forthcoming, unpublished). I was aware that there were more cairns on Mosfellsheiði, and I believed it less likely for these to be boundary markers or time-of-day markers, as there are no farms on the heath, and less likely for these to be cairns made by hikers, as there are no peaks upon which a proud hiker might feel deserving enough to commemorate his or her self-achievement in cairn-building. I was hopeful that the cairns upon the heath might mark old the routes in question if surveyed and mapped.

This hope was somewhat diminished by learning that cairns were sometimes constructed out of turf, which is susceptible to decomposition and therefore unlikely to
leave archaeological remains. Trails would not survive unless they continue to be used, so I did not expect to find any trails. Stone cairns could fall and topple if not maintained, but their remains would at least survive, leaving a trace of the trail. Turf cairns, however, would not survive, leaving no trace of themselves or the trail. Baring-Gould wrote about the fragility of trails and existence of such turf cairns:

Of roads, there is not one in the whole island; tracks are all that mark a vegr or way, and these are obliterated at every thaw. The routes are, consequently, indicated by vöður and occasional kerlingar. The former are heaps of turf, or simply a stone or two placed on a rock, in a manner which the eye will recognize as artificial. The latter are stone pyramids, bearing a fanciful resemblance to old women. (1863: xxix)

Baring-Gould is making a general statement about routes in Iceland, but Kålund writes specifically about turf cairns on Mosfellsheiði. Keep in mind that he is writing about Seljadalsvegur after trail improvements began in 1874, which most likely explain why he wrote that the trail was clear across the whole heath, whereas Sveinn Pálsson wrote in 1792 that the trail was stony and in need of clearing, as previously quoted. Kålund wrote:

Over hele heden er der ved den stadige færdsel dannet en bred jordvej, og langs vejen møder øjet de så nyttige varder, et par alen høje, kegleformige sten- eller græstørvsstabler, der ved vintertid eller i tåge er den rejsendes eneste vejledning. (Kålund 1877: 67)

Continuous traffic has made a wide dirt trail across the whole heath, and one can see very useful cairns—cone shaped stacks of stone or turf, about two ells high— which in winter or in a fog are the only trail-markers for the traveler.

If there were more turf cairns than stone cairns on Mosfellsheiði, then it might not be possible to confidently trace the routes, or certain routes might be completely undetected.

In fall 2009, I carried out this survey, beginning at Illaklif, a known waypoint from Gunnlaugsson’s map and place where cairns were visible from Route 36. On the

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15 vöður. The singular form in Icelandic is varða and means ‘cairn.’
16 Approximately 126 cm.
approach to Illaklif from Stardalsvegur, no cairns were found which could constitute a
route. One cairn was found south of Leirvogsvatn, which is the midday marker for the
farm Stardalur, and one cairn was found north of the lake, although no association could
be made for this cairn. Upon Illaklif, a line of cairns runs roughly east to west.
Following the line west, the cairns lead down the foothills, leading south of
Geldingatjörn. Cairns are frequently placed along this trail.

From Illaklif east, cairns were built less frequently and the way was sometimes
marked by prominent rock outcrops. These outcrops appeared in the manner described
by Baring-Gould, with mere a stone or two placed on top that might be recognized as
artificial. This line of cairns led to Þrívörðuhryggur, where I had to end my survey on
account of rough fall weather. There were six cairns in the locality of the ridge, although
three did stand out more prominently than the rest, well built to 150 cm and taller. The
remains of a small stone and turf structure (6 x 4 m) humbly stood by.

Along the way between Illaklif and Þrívörðuhryggur there was one cairn unlike the
others, Cairn 81, constructed with two holes in the center, allowing light to pass through
like a window. For the sake of this similarity, cairns of similar construction are called
gluggavörður in Icelandic (window cairns). While Icelanders today believe that these
windows were constructed to spot the next cairn on one’s journey, much like using a
telescope fixed in a certain direction, Aldred believes that the primary function of these
windows was to create a contrast between light and shadow, visible from a great
distance (2009: pers. comm.). The benefit of this contrast was apparent in the field, as
this cairn was much easier to spot than others from a great distance. The window did not
aim toward the next cairn, as held in Icelandic belief, but instead aimed between two
cairns, where the route split here. Returning west from Þrívörðulautur, the route split to
the southwest, heading toward Mt. Grimmannsfell. In this context, the purpose of this
highly visible window cairn would be to mark a crossroads for travelers needing to know
when to shift direction.

The second route, running southwest from the window cairn toward Mt.
Grimmannsfell, consisted of a line of well built stone cairns. Along a small stretch of
this route there was evidence of trail improvement, where stones had been cleared from
the way and lined the trail on both sides. The cairns stopped before reaching the base of
Mt. Grimmannsfell, where it would be easy to follow the mountain base to the entrance
of Seljadalur, or follow the source of Kaldakvísl down into Mosfell Valley.
The remains of Gamli Þingvallavegurinn were mapped where encountered during the survey. The road is a massive construction with a gravel surface, and wooden and concrete bridges, which today are broken. This has not prevented jeeps from driving the road, as tracks are many and obvious both on the road and at stream and river crossings. Massive cairns line the road, although most are only base type. The history of these stone piles is uncertain, but perhaps further research on the construction of Gamli Þingvallavegurinn would reveal this.

It was not possible to date these cairns using archaeological methods. Bergman et al. convincingly dated a trail in the highlands between Norway and Sweden to the Viking Age by dating the growth of lichens on stone markers (2007). This was possible since the trail was marked by single stones and thus the erection of these stones could be dated, It would not be possible to apply the same approach in this situation, even though certain lichens are to be found growing over parts of the cairns, because cairns are necessarily built of many smaller stones, likely to have been modified and remodified over their history, thus obscuring the date of first construction. The presence of large lichens may indicate significant age, but the lack of lichens does not necessarily indicate a young age; when looking at cairns, it can be just as difficult to date the addition of a stone to the top of the cairn from 500 years ago as from 5 minutes ago.

According to the previously discussed historical evidence, I believe that two cairn trails found in the survey are the physical remains of Seljadalsvegur and Bringnavegur. The line of cairns from Geldingatjörn to Cairn 81, the window cairn, was an even mixture of various types (see Appendix B for a description of the cairn typology I developed). One of the base type is worth mentioning, Cairn 48. This feature did not show any signs of collapse, suggesting that it was constructed purposefully as a stone base, perhaps for stacking turf as might fit the descriptions of Baring-Gould and Kålund. All of the cairns along the route from Mt. Grimmannsfell to Cairn 81 and on to Þrívörðuhryggur were tower type cairns. This type is marked by sturdy construction, suggesting a greater investment in labor and planning. In addition, evidence of trail clearing was observed on this route between Mt. Grimmannsfell and Cairn 81. These two factors suggest that this route was improved by well organized and directed labor, which is consistent with the history of Seljadalsvegur. This line of cairns follows the route of Seljadalsvegur, mapped by Egill Stardal. The route between Geldingatjörn and
Cairn 81 is consistent with the layout of Bringnavegur as mapped by Björn Gunnlaugsson, aiming south of Geldingatjörn.

The 3-6 cairns running roughly north-south along the ridge Þrivörðuhryggur reinforce Egill Stardal’s assertion that this was the location of a crossroad. The ruins of the small structure may have once (18th century?) been a shelter hut (sæluhús, in Icelandic). Such a structure would be naturally located in a place where routes met.

It did not surprise me not to find a line of cairns between Stardalur and Illaklif. From Stardalur, it is simple enough to follow the river Leirvogsá to the lake Leirvogsvatn, from where the cairns atop Illaklif become visible. Traveling in the opposite direction, the same landmarks would be immediately obvious, and negate the need for a unique cairn to alert the traveler to change trails, such as the window cairn at the merger of Seljadalsvegur and Bringnavegur.

The connection between the first cairn of Bringnavegur and Laxnes remains unsolved. The cairns lead south of Geldingatjörn, whereas the land may be drier and better for riding north of the lake, as Egill Stardal placed the route. The map Herföringjaráðskort shows a route leading up the foothills from Laxnes and then disappears. There is no connection on this map between Laxnes and Bringnabær. However, there is a trail from Bringnabær to Gamli Þingvallavegurinn along the river Kaldakvísl. It is unclear whether the trail from Laxnes which ends abruptly on the foothills might have led to the north or south side of Geldingatjörn. In 1910, a road was built connecting Laxnes to Gamli Þingvallavegurinn by way of Bringnabær. Remains of the gravel road are still visible today (Stefánsdóttir et al. 2006: 132), though only in stretches because erosion has washed away much of the road. I encountered one stretch of this road when walking once from Seljadalur to Route 36 and mapped those remains. While this road served a contemporary need, it is likely that it followed an old path. There is a nearby place name, Lestarófur, which means ‘a rest stop for pack horses.’ This place name is very descriptive for the type of traffic which passed through here, though the ultimate age of the name is unknown. Consequently the description of pack horses, most likely referring to trade caravans, cannot be temporally referenced. The ground in this area is higher and better drained than in the surrounding bogs, and might match Gunnlaugsson’s map, on which the Bringnavegur departs from the river Kaldakvísl to head up the foothills. However, the river Kaldakvísl is an easy feature to navigate by and must not be overlooked as one route across the foothills. The remains of
an old shieling called Helgusel stand on the banks of the river next to the waterfall Helgufoss. However, the people who used this shieling may not have come by way of the river, which at this high elevation has cut a deep ravine that can prove difficult to follow. I have mapped the connection between the last cairn of Bringnavegur and Laxnes to my best judgement, though due to my uncertainty and the assertion of other maps (Suðvesturlandskort 2007; Stardal 1985b: 116-7; Herföringjaráðskort 1909), I have also included the route along Kaldakvisl.

2.3.3 North to Kjós

Mosfell lay along a main route to the north, connecting the Peninsulas, especially the Reykjavík area, to Borgarfjörður. This route avoided the distance added from the Coastal Route around Kjalarnes by taking a mountain pass over Esja, Svinaskarð, into the region Kjós at Hvalfjörður. This mountain trail is called either Svinaskarðsvegur or Svinaskarðsleið. It was a popular trail in the 19th century for people coming from or through the Borgarfjörður area to Reykjavík (Bjarnason & Guðmundsson 2005: 195) and is mentioned in both foreign and native travel accounts from that period.17

Historical descriptions of Svinaskarðsvegur state that this route was the shortest route between the Mosfell region and Kjós, but often impassible in winter. The earliest description of this trail is from 1785 by Skúlí Magnússon:

...den anden [vej] til Kiosen eller Reinevalle tingsogn gaar enten udenom Esien, eller og over det Field, som stækker sig fra Esien indi mod Mosfelsheiðen og adskiller Kiosen fra Mosfellssveiten, kaldet Svinaskard, som vel er meget kortere, men derhos baade steil og høi, og kan sielde reises om Vinteren. (112-3)

...the other [way] to the Kjós or Reynivellir Thing-parish runs either around Mt. Esja, or over that mountain that stretches from Esja in towards Mosfellsheiði and divides Kjós from Mosfellssveit, called Svinaskarð, that is apparently much shorter, but also both steep and high, and can seldom be travelled during the winter.18

Stefán Þorvaldsson listed this route as one of the main routes through the region and that it was the shorter mountain trail into Kjós (the other lying over Kjósarskarð, east of

17 Of the handful of 18th and 19th century travel accounts surveyed in this study, the following accounts mention the route over Svinaskarð: Ferðabók Magnússar Grímssonar 1988: 6; Ferðabók Sveins Pálssonar 1983: 104; Lock 1882: 162; Oswald 1882: 60; Burton 1875: 68; Henderson 1818: vol. 2, 156.

18 Translation by Davide Zori, revised by Colin Connors.
Mt. Skálafell on Kjósarheiði): ‘...Vegur sá, er liggur norðan yfir Svinaskarð, sem er stuttur fjallvegur milli Kjósar of Kjalarness og Mosfellssveitar’ (1855: 158). Magnús Grimsson also described this route as a main route in his travel account, but highlighted the difficult nature of the pass: ‘Svinaskarð er hátt, og illviðrasamt; þar liggur alfaravegur um og niður með Skarðsá’ (Ferðabók Magnúsar Grimssonar 1988; 6) Þórður Jónasson described the route in great detail, beginning from the innermost point of Hvalfjörður, and how the route changed in bad weather:

Alfaravegur í Kjósarsýslu liggur frá Hvalfjarðarbotni...til Laxár í Kjós hjá Möðruvöllum, fram Svinadal og yfir Svinaskarð, fram hjá Mosfelli í Mosfellssveit og yfir Eliðaá til Reykjavíkur. Þetta er sumárvegur, en á vetrum og um haust, þegar rigningar eru, er farið inn yfir Leirvogsár og vestan um Esja...Torfærur eru engar á þessum vegi, nema ef telja skyldi það, að norðan til á Svinaskarði er illt yfirferðar að því leyti, að vegurinn liggur tæpt og er mjög brattur utan í fjallinu og er á vetrum því oft ófær af svellalögum, þvi djúpt gil er á aðra hönd. (1852: 22-3)

A main route in the district Kjósarsýsla lies from Hvalfjarðarbotn...to the river Laxá in Kjós past Möðruvellir, onward to Svinadalur and over Svinaskarð, passing by Mosfell in Mosfellssveit and over the river Eliðaá to Reykjavík. This is a summer route, but in the winter and autumn, when it is raining, the route goes in along the river Leirvogsá and west along Mt. Esja...This route is easy to traverse, unless one counts the northern side of Svinaskarð, which is hard to cross because the trail is hazardous and very steep, and often during the winter is impassible because of the icy surface, and deep ravine is on the other side.

This description is significant because it states that the preferable route lay directly past Mosfell, but also because it draws attention to the detours sometimes required by weather. When there was a lot of rain (or ice in the rivers) during winter and autumn, it was more dangerous if impossible to cross Leirvogsá by Skeggjastaðir on the way to Mosfell. Apparently it was safer to follow the river to its mouth, where one could more safely cross the bay at low tide. It stands to reason, though, that it would be easier to cross the bay at low tide than Leirvogsá by Skeggjastaðir at any time of year, and one would only take the route past Mosfell if he or she desired to stop at or near Mosfell. Indeed, Lock recommends to contemporary 19th century travelers to take the ‘detour’ when riding north (1882: 162). When the pass became impassible during winter, it may have been possible to take the pass Kjósarskarð over the mountains and then to Stardalur
by way of Hálsavegur, but in such conditions it is likely that the only safe route to take would be the Coastal Route.

Svínadalsvegur would have been the preferred route from Borgarfjörður to Mosfell and onto the Peninsulas. From Hvalfjarðarbotn, the route continued north to Borgarfjörður. Svínaskarð is not mentioned in the sagas, yet there was a close family relationship through marriage between Egill Skallagrímsson’s family in Borgarfjörður and Grímr Sveringsson at Hrísfjörður/Mosfell. These characters found reason to visit one another and send messengers between them, as expressed in the following passage:

Þorsteinn stefndi engum sökum í möt, ok litlu síðar sendi Þorsteinn menn suðr á Nes; kómú þeir til Mosfells til Gríms ok sögðu þar þessi tíðendi. Egill lét sér fátt um finnask ok sparði þó at í hljóði vandliga um skipti þeira Þorsteins ok Steinars ok svá at þeim mónnnum, er Steinar höfðu styrkt til þessa máls; síðan föru sendimenn heim, ok lét Þorsteinn vel yfir þeira ferð. (Íf 2: 282)

Þorsteinn took no action against this, but a little while later he sent men south to the Peninsulas; they came to Mosfell and told Grím the news. Egill pretended not to care, but nevertheless inquired in detail, and without others hearing, about the dealings between Þorsteinn and Steinar, and so also about the men who were backing Steinar in the case; after that, the messengers went home, and Þorsteinn was pleased with their journey.

These characters and their historical counterparts were most likely to have traveled between Borgarfjörður and Mosfell by way of Svínaskarð. From Mosfell, this route led out to Reykjavík and beyond to the peninsulas Seltjarnarnes, Álftanes, and Suðurnes among others places. Any travelers from the north seeking these destinations were likely to pass by Mosfell.

2.4 Local Routes Around Mosfell

The routes within the Mosfell Valley and surrounding local region are not well documented in early sources and the first records of these routes appear in the late 19th century with projects intended to surface these trails. In 1886, a tally was made of all the local routes within the Mosfells commune. Among these routes were the route from Varmá to Lágafell and farther toward Elliðaárdalur, previously mentioned in connection with the Coastal Route; the route from Lerivogstunga to Mosfell; the route from Mosfell past Reykir to Þormóðsdalur; the route from Reykir to Úlfarsfell; and the route from
Þormóðsdalur west toward Elliðaáр (Bjarnason & Guðmundsson 2005: 180-1; Bréjabók Mosfellshreppss). These routes are not to be seen on Gunnlaugsson’s map, but they can be located on the map Herfordingjaráðskort, surveyed in this region in 1908 and published in 1909.

While the Herfordingjaráðskort shows these routes, it lacks other routes which certainly must have existed. For example, there are no routes to or from Helgadalur, which I imagine would have been most inconvenient for its residents if this map reflected reality. Only one route is shown on this map running west to east through the Mosfell Valley along the river Kaldakvísl, and then turns northeast between Mosfell and Laxnes toward Skeggjastaðir. The aforementioned route from Leirvogstunga to Mosfell has been claimed in archaeological survey to have been a main route to Reykjavik and Suðurnes (Stefánsdóttir 2006: 72, based on Georgsson, unpublished), but this route is incomplete on the map Herfordingjaráðskort, shown as a mere path stopping at Hrísbrú and not connecting to Mosfell. The property maps, Túnakort, from 1916 show a road running west to east through the properties Hrísbrú and Mosfell, which supports the existence of this route, but also demonstrates that it extended east past Mosfell, where the most likely connection would have been with the route toward Skeggjastaðir. These maps support the geographical assumption that people would have traveled close to the bases of mountains where the land would have been drier and better for riding. On the southern side of the valley against mountains, there exists on the Herfordingráðskort a path from Tjaldanes to the pass Skammaskarð to the south. Although not present on this map, this route extends east along the mountains to Helgadalur. This route survives today and is included in the 1988 and more recent editions of the map Stadfræðikort.

From Helgadalur, the route returned to Kaldakvísl via Hraðastaðir, as is visible on the respective Túnakort. From this route’s geographical placement up against the southern mountains of the valley, we might assume that this route is quite old.

There are two local place names which indicate the routes taken by parishoners to the Mosfell church. While the churches of the 11th century were mostly built and used privately, these routes which were later named for an association with church attendance may be much older than this association. Kirkjutunga, meaning ‘Church Tongue,’ is the name of a tongue of land stretching south below the hayfield at the farm Vellir: ‘Niður af bæ er stórt stykki, sem heitir Kirkjutunga. Dregur hún nafn af því, að farið var niður hana, þegar farið var til kirkju að Mosfellí’ (Örnefnalýsing Valla). This led to the ford by
Varmidalur, whereupon crossing the river Leirvogsá one would ascend up Kirkjugil, meaning ‘Church Ravine’ which led over to Hrísbrú/Mosfell: ‘...er svo gil sem heitir Kirkjugil. Um það gil hefur fólkið farið af Kjalarnesi í kirkjuferðum að Mosfelli’ (Örnefnalýsing Leirvögstungu).

Kirkjugil is especially important because it lies close to a broad point in the river, close to the farm Varmidalur, which must have been the old ford across Leirvogsá on the Coastal Route. The Herforingjaráðskort mapped the contemporary route to the bridge constructed in 1892. This bridge was built where the river is narrower, and less ideal for fording. Thus it is more likely that the Coastal Route crossed at the shallow, broad, and slow moving part of the river next to the farm Varmidalur and the gully Kirkjugil.

It is likely that more paths existed in the valley than can presently be reconstructed. Without extensive survey and excavations, it is not possible to locate and date the Viking Age and medieval shielings, and subsequently reconstruct routes to these locations. For this reason, I left shieling routes out of the present study. Interaction between neighboring farms could not have been too uncommon, and Chris Callow has identified passages in Guðmundar saga dýra which show that the idea of ‘neighboring’ farms could indeed be quite spatially distant (2006: 75). Individuals may have had their own routes between certain farms, which they favored for personal reasons, and we are not likely to ever come close to reconstructing such variations as were actually practiced.

Survey and interviews at Skeggjastaðir by MAP’s research team in the summer of 2009 recorded the seasonal variation of routes on a local level at this site. Such seasonal variation has been previously discussed in relation to Svinaskarð, where weather could force travelers to make dramatic changes in their routes. Such changes have been testified in the sagas, both for the effect on travelers19 and in the use of words like ‘vetrgata,’20 meaning ‘winter-trail.’ At Skeggjastaðir, the river Leirvogsá is crossed west beneath the farm, where the trail runs along the western border of the farm, south to Mosfell. From the ford, the trail leads east to Stardalur along the southern bank of the river, on the northern side of the farm. Skeggjastaðir’s equestrian residents informed me

19 For example, Egils saga, Chapter 71, states that Egill and his men had to change their route for the sake of heavy snow. After one night of especially heavy snowfall while traveling, the trail became difficult to follow and they lost much time each time they left the trail and entered the deep snow drifts: ‘þá váru snjóvar milkir ok breyttir vegar allir...þá var þat á einni nótt, at fell snjór mikill, sva at ógörla sá vegana; fórsk þeim þá seint um daginn eptir, því at kafhlaup váru, þegar af fór veginum’ (Íf 2: 222-3).
20 For example, Egils saga, Chapter 83, mentions that that men were seen in the woods above the winter trail: ‘...i skóinum fyrir ofan vetrgötu...’ (Íf 2: 289).
that this route to the east sometimes becomes covered in ice from the river in winter time, making the trail unusable. In such circumstances, a trail south of the farm, almost invisible in the landscape, allows riders to proceed east to Stardalur.

This example from Skeggjastaðir reinforces effects of seasonal variation on local routes described by Þórður Jónasson. When the trail below Skeggjastaðir along Leirvogsá becomes clogged with drift ice from the river, there must be no hope of fording the river there. This illustrates why Þórður Jónasson might have called the route over Leirvogsá to the farm Mosfell a summer trail and why W.M. Geo. Lock recommended his readers to take the winter trail north around Mt. Mosfell to the coast (Lock 1882: 162; Jónasson 1852: 22-3). This would diminish the importance of the main route from Svinaskarð to the farm Mosfell and strengthen the importance of local routes depending on seasonal and weather conditions.

2.5 Places and Place Names

2.5.1 Skeggjastaðir

Skeggjastaðir is often thought to be the oldest farm in the valley because medieval sources state that the settler, Þórðr skeggi, lived at this farm. The name of the farm presumably comes from Þóðr’s nickname, skeggi (meaning ‘beard’), and means ‘Skeggi’s places,’ and for this reason created the medieval tradition that this farm was the original residence of the settler.

There are reasons to doubt this tradition. Friðriksson & Vésteinsson (2003) and Rafnsson (1974) have argued that Landnámabók, the Book of Settlements, is remarkably formulaic and medieval writers were mostly likely to follow the formula when credible information was lacking. Following their argument, Landnámabók (and by extension, Kjalnesinga saga, too) affixed Þórðr skeggi to Skeggjastaðir based only on the match between the two names. The implication that this raises is that Þórðr may well have lived someplace else, while giving his name, or at least nickname, to Skeggjastaðir.

Sigmundsson has argued that the place name element -staðir previously ‘meant part of a property, land and livestock which rich farmers gave to their associates, possibly for rent, when Iceland was settled... In the beginning, then, the staðir may not have been farms at all although they later developed into farms... The staðir were named after those who owned or rented them’ The word staðir later referred to church estates, used in the singular, staðr (1979: 248). This argument suggests Skeggjastaðir would not have been
Skeggjastaðir is not located in a place typically expected for a settler to establish himself or herself. The farm lies at the base of the foothills, which is about as far from the coast as could be. The area was likely covered in forest at the time of settlement, and there would have been preferrable land for grazing animals and establishing a farm closer to the coast. In addition, the farm lies at the extremity of Þóðr skeggi’s land claim, which extended from the river Leirvogsá to Korpúlfstaðaá (Íf 1: 48-9). In this regard, Hrísbrú/Mosfell was more centrally located and was within sight of the shore. The earliest archaeological remains from Hrísbrú date to within the Settlement Period (ca. 870-930 AD) and the long house at Hrísbrú was arguably large and grand enough to suit an important settler such as Þóðr skeggi. While it is a circumstantial point, it is perhaps worth considering the coincidence that the settler Ketilbjörn enn gamli gave the name Mosfell to his settlement, after spending a winter with Þóðr skeggi and marrying Þóðr’s daughter, Helga (Stu 1: 57; Íf 1: 384-5). In my opinion, it is more likely that Ketilbjörn was uncreative when it came to place names and named his farm after Þóðr’s settlement at Hrísbrú/Mosfell.

Skeggjastaðir had much to offer its owner in resources and advantages, which was partially derived from its location in relation to routes. Skeggjastaðir likely provided initially good access to the woods of the foothills, and lay along the banks of the river Leirvogsá, where there continues to be good salmon fishing to this day. The farm stands along a crossroads, where it would have been possible to see whether travelers coming down from Svínaskarð turned west along the river or crossed the river at Skeggjastaðir on their way to Mosfell. Additionally, travelers heading toward or coming from Stardalur would have passed by Skeggjastaðir on their way. Skeggjastaðir was well situated to monitor passing traffic and was in a position to relay such information back to Hrísbrú/Mosfell.

2.5.2  Hrísbrú and Tjaldanes

The name Hrísbrú means ‘Brushwood Bridge’ and most likely referred to a causeway through wet, marshy ground. To my mind, there are two likely applications of this name. In the first case, there is a cold water spring at the farm below the knoll, Hulduhóll. As a result, the surroundings are quite wet and could have been much improved by a path of
brushwood laid down onto the soggy ground, giving the farm better access to the fresh water source. In the second case, a more substantial causeway across the valley floor to Tjaldanes would have provided the inhabitants of Hrísbrú with a way to directly cross the valley and easy access the hot springs on the other side.

Paths of brushwood through marshy ground have been excavated on Viking Age sites in Reykjavík. Excavations at Suðurgata 3-5 in Reykjavík revealed a several ‘birch logs’ laid in a row, which were interpreted as part of an old pathway in the swampy area which led to the pond, Tjörnin (Nordahl 1988: 39, 45, 57). A more complete path, perhaps a continuation of that same path found at Suðurgata 3-5, was unearthed at Alþingisreiturinn in Reykjavík. This wooden path is 15 m long and 70-170 cm wide. It was built along a boundary wall next to a marshy pit and likely connected other buildings to the smithy houses excavated at Alþingisreiturinn. The path itself is made of brushwood and lies just above the settlement tephra in stratigraphy, and consequently has been dated to 871-880 AD. The surface beneath the brushwood does not appear to have been completely level and was evened out with layers of turf (Garðarsdóttir 2009). These archaeological finds fit the meaning of word ‘hrísbrú,’ as a ‘brushwood-bridge,’ though they more accurately represent the former conception which I have postulated than the latter. The wooden path at the two sites in Reykjavík appear to have been used as a walking path between structures and to the pond. It may not have been substantial enough to support horse riders across a bog, as would have been needed to cross from Hrisbrú/Mosfell to Tjaldanes, but there is no reason to suppose that the inhabitants of Hrisbrú/Mosfell could not have built a larger causeway sturdy enough to support such needs.

There would have been sufficient need to construct a causeway from Hrisbrú/Mosfell to Tjaldanes. The bog between Hrisbrú and the river Kaldakvísl was apparently very treacherous and the inhabitants at Hrisbrú would have likely appreciated a safe way to cross the bog toward the hot springs and baths on the opposite side of the valley. In Egils saga, Egil is said to have crossed this way, and while the saga records many details of the landscape (in an attempt to locate where Egill hid his silver), no description is given of Egil’s journey except that he was heading straight across the valley on horseback toward the baths when he was last seen leaving the farm.

_Egill kallaði til sín þræla tvá, er Grímr átti; han bað þá taka sér hest, — ’vil ek fara til laugar.’ Ok er Egill var búinn, gekk hann út ok hafóti með sér sílfkistur sínar;_
Egill called upon two slaves, which Grímr owned; he told them to get his horse, — ‘I want to go to the baths.’ And when Egill was ready, he walked outside and had his silver chests with him; he mounted his horse, and went down along the hayfield before the slope, which is there, where he was last seen...below the hayfield at Mosfell are large and amazingly deep marshes; many believe that Egill threw his silver into them. South of the river there are baths and near to there are large pits in the earth, and some suspect that Egill would have hidden his silver there.

There is no mention of a causeway in this passage, though we might imagine that one would have been necessary to cross the valley safely, based on the description given of the bog, where medieval Icelanders believed the ‘amazingly deep marshes’ could have swallowed two treasure chests whole and left no trace. Kålund wrote about the same issue in 1877, and came to the same conclusion:

... i Hrísbrú (risbro), idet gården er bleven benævnt efter en med ris brolagt vej; for en sådan kunde der vere god brug over mosen neden for gården. (50)
...at Hrísbrú (Brushwood Bridge), where the farm was named after a way of laid brushwood, and there would have been considerable need for brushwood on a way over the bog below the farm.

Kålund does not mention whether any kind of causeway across the bog existed at Hrisbrú at the time he wrote his account. Presumably, there was a causeway in Kålund’s time, since a path is shown leading from the farm in this direction on the 1916 Túnakort of Hrisbrú. Kålund may not have mentioned the contemporary causeway because there would not have been any brushwood there. He does, however, mention a causeway which extended from Mosfell across the bog to the bath Æsustaðalaug (Kålund 1877: 51), remains of an older causeway running in the same direction are documented by Siguður Vigfússon in 1884 (Stefánsdóttir et al. 2006: 125; Vigfússon 1884-5: 71). Vigfússon’s observations would suggest that there was a history of building causeways across the valley floor. Wood was a scarce and valuable resource following the first few generations of settlement in Iceland and a brushwood bridge would have been a costly
investment and obvious display of wealth, making such a construction remarkable in the Middle Ages and worth remembering in a place name.

In addition to direct access to baths, a causeway across the bog would have also given the inhabitants of Hrisbrú a connection to the peninsula Tjaldanes. Tjaldanes stands at the meeting of the two rivers, Kaldakvísl and Suðurá. This was a crossroads, where the main route which followed the banks of the river Kaldakvísl met two other local routes: one which wound around the southern edge of the Mosfell Valley to Helgadalur and the other which went south over the pass Skammaskarð.

This connection was important for the additional reason that Tjaldanes was a campsite for travelers. Tjaldanes most commonly means ‘Camping Peninsula.’ The name literally means ‘Tents’ Peninsula,’ and it would be incorrect to interpret the name as a place for changing booths for the baths. I do not care to speculate on the attitude of Viking Age Icelanders toward nudity, but the two sites are located too far from each other to justify such a modern interpretation. This name is variously spelled Tjaldnes. Both the genitive plural form, tjalsa, and the accusative singular form, tjald, of ‘tent’ (nominitive singular ‘tjalð’), belong to another word such that it is also possible that the peninsula was named after a bird, the Eurasian Oystercatcher, *Haematopus ostralegus*, which is common in Iceland and called Tjaldur in its nominative singular form. Place names with bird elements are not uncommon in Iceland, but the use of tjaldur in compounds is relatively unknown, while the use of tjald in compounds is quite frequent (Cleasby &Vigfusson 1874: 635). This evidence makes it more likely that this place was named for camping, which it was certainly used for in the 19th century, when a man was caught stealing from travelers who were camping at Tjaldanes (Bjarnason & Guðmundsson 2005: 94). Place name traditions record that this was the campsite for travelers coming from Borgarfjörður to Reykjavík: ‘Neðst er oddinn á Viðinum nefndur Tjaldnes. Þegar Borgfirðingar föru landveg til Reykjavíkur, tjölduð þeir þarna í nesinu’ (Órnenálýsing Hrisbrúar). One other camping spot is known from place names in Mosfell Valley. This is Tjaldhóll by Hraðastaðir, where according to tradition travelers also camped: ‘Nær bæ er melhóll, sem heitir Tjaldhóll. Þar tjölduðu ferðamenn’ (Órnenálýsing Hraðastaða). Tjaldanes is the older of these two names, and is first mentioned in *Egils saga*, as the place where Egil’s body was first buried (Íf 2: 298). In addition, it had more amenities than Tjaldhóll, such as ready access to both fresh water and baths, and area for grazing.
Camping with tents was only sensible during the summer. This indicates that travelers were regularly coming through the Mosfell Valley during the summer time as early as the Middle Ages. It is most likely that these people were traveling the route across Svínaskarð, which was a summer trail. It is less likely that traffic would have stopped here on route to or from Þingvellir without a specific reason, since Seljadalsvégar appears to have been the summer trail in this direction.

A direct connection to Tjaldanes would have given the inhabitants of Hríbrú/Mosfell means to obtain and share news with travelers. They would have had the option of easily visiting the camping ground and also inviting travelers home to enjoy hospitality at the long house. One passage in Harðar saga suggests that Mosfell was a place to where travelers came and could expect to swap news. In this passage, the slave Bolli seeks to recover his master Ormr’s stolen chest. He puts on a disguise of worn-out shoes and a cheap hooded cloak, and claims to be an outlaw. ‘Bolli býst nú; hann hafði slitna skó ok vöruváðarkufl. Hann...sagðist vera sekr maðr’ (Íf 13: 69). His intentions, no doubt, are to look as if he has been traveling a long distance on foot and to gain acceptance from the thieves as a fellow outlaw. Bolli meets the thieves and convinces them that there is nothing of value in the chest and they would be better off returning it. When the thieves question how he came by this knowledge, he responds: ‘—‘en ek var þá,’ segir hann, ‘at Mosfelli, er ránit spurðist’ (Íf 13: 69), ‘—‘I was then,’ said he, ‘at Mosfell, where the robbery was learned of.’ This was proof enough to fool the thieves into thinking that Bolli was honest, and the gave him the chest to return to Ormr. In order for this rouse to succeed, it must have been common knowledge that traveling men came by Mosfell, and this was a place where news was shared and received. In order then that this hold true, Hríbrú/Mosfell would have needed safe and direct access to the traveler’s camping ground at Tjaldanes to facilitate this flow of information. It seems quite likely then that a causeway existed between the two places.

2.5.3 Leiruvogur and Þerneyjarsund

There are seven ship’s landings in the Mosfell region. These are Elliðaárvogur, Grafarvogur, Guðunes, Blikastaðanes, Leiruvogur, Þerneyjarsund, (Bjarnason & Guðmundsson 2005: 138) and Kollafjörður. Of these, only Elliðaárvogur, Leiruvogur, Þerneyjarsund, and Kollafjörður are mentioned as ship’s landings in medieval writings, and only Leiruvogur and Þerneyjarsund are mentioned more than once in this context.
According to Landnámabók, Ketilbjörn enn gamli landed his ship (which he called Elliði) at the mouth of the river Elliðaár: ‘hann hafði skip þat, er Elliði hét; hann kom í Elliðaárós fyrir neðan heiði’ (Íf 1: 384). Kjalnesinga saga contains the only mention of Þerneyjarsund and Kollafjörður as ship’s landing in the sagas. There it is written that Órlygr landed his ship at Þerneyjarsund and that the brothers Helgi and Vakr took passage in Kollafjörður to go abroad: ‘[Órlygr] tók í Þerneyjarsundi höfn’ (Íf 14: 4); ‘Þeir bræór, Helgi ok Vakr, töku sér fari um sumarit í Kollafirði ok föru utan báðir’ (Íf 14: 27). This reference to Þerneyjarsund is generally held to be an anachronism, since this place is known to have been a ship’s landing in later medieval times (Íf 14: 4, footnote 5; Bjarnason & Guðmundsson 2005: 144; Eldjár 1981). To my knowledge, scholars have not reviewed this mention of Kollafjörður as a ship’s landing, though Kålund described that the fjord was a suitable location for ships to land and may have been used for this purpose in previous ages (1877: 45).

Leiruvogur is mentioned in many medieval writings and most often as a ship’s landing. The following passages give evidence to the ship’s landing at Leiruvogur, and were first compiled by Eldjár (1981), though he included some passages which did not give evidence of a ship’s landing. He also neglected to include a relevant passage from Kjalnesinga saga. For these reasons I have recompiled the relevant passages with translations in English, and expanded passages from Gunnlaugs saga and Hallfreðar saga here for later discussion.

Egils saga:
Pat var eitt sumar at skip kom út í Leiruvági, ok stýrði sá maðr er Þormóðr hét. (Íf 2: 275)
One summer a ship came to Leiruvogur, captained by a man named Þormóðr.

Flóamanna saga:
Þorgils kaupir nú skip í Leiruvági. (Íf 13: 276-7)
Then Þorgils purchased a ship in Leiruvogur.

Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu:
Hrafn fór austan um várit ok kom til Brændheims ok bjó skip sitt ok sigldi til Íslands um sumarit ok kom skipi sinu í Leiruvág fyrir neðan heiði. (Íf 3: 81)
Hrafn went west during the spring and came to Trondheim. He equipped his ship and sailed to Iceland during the summer and brought his ship into Leiruvogur below the heath.
Hallfreðr mælti: ‘Þess þyrfti, félagi, at þér veitti betr mér málin við Hrafn. Ek kom skipi minu í Leiruvág fyrir neðan heiði fyrir fám vetrum, ok átti ek at gjalda hálfa mörk sílfurs húsKarli HrafnS ok hét ek því fyrir honum; en Hrafn reið til várr með sex tigu manna ok hjó strengina, ok rak skipit upp á Leirur ok búit við skipbroti. Varð ek þá at selja HrafnS sjálfdaemi, ok galt ek mörk.’ (Íf 3: 85)

Hallfreðr spoke: ‘You will need, friend, that things go better for you with Hrafn. I brought my ship into Leiruvogur below the heath a few winters ago. I had to pay half a mark of silver to Hrafn’s farmhand, but I thought myself superior to him. Hrafn rode down to us with sixty men and cut the anchor cable. The ship drifted up onto Leirur21 and could have been wrecked. I ended up granting him self-judgement and paid a whole mark.

Nú er at segja frá Hrafn, at hann bjó skip sitt í Leiruvágum. (Íf 3: 98)

There is this to tell of Hrafn: he prepared his ship in Leiruvogur.

Hallfreðar saga:

Ok at sumri fór Hallfreðr út til Íslands ok kom skipi sínu í Leiruvág fyrir neðan heiði. Þá bjó Önundr at Mosfelli faðir Skáld-HrafnS. Hallfrðr átti at [gjalda] hálfa mörk sílfS húsKarli Önundar ok svaraði heldr harðliga. Kom húsKarlinn heim of sagði sín vandræði. Hrafn kvað sliks van, at hann myndi lægra hlut bera í þeria skiptum. Ok um morgininn eptir reið Hrafn til skips ok aetlaði at höggva strengina ok stöðva brottferð þeira Hallfreðar. Síðan átti menn hlut í at sætta þá, ok var goldit hálfu meira en húskarl átti, ok skilðu at því. (Íf 8: 196)

During the summer Hallfreðr went out to Iceland and brought his ship into Leiruvogur below the heath. Önundr, the father of Skáld-Hrafn (Poet-Hrafn), lived at Mosfell at that time. Hallfreðr owed half a mark of silver to Önundr’s farmhand and refused to pay. The farmhand came home and reported his troubles. Hrafn said he expected that the farmhand would get the shorter end of the stick and the next morning Hrafn rode to the ship and intended to cut the anchor cable and prevent Hallfreðr and the rest from departing. Men took part then in reconciling them, with the result that half a mark more was paid than the farmhand was owed, and they parted on these terms.

Kjalnesinga saga:

Á ofanverðum dögum Konofogors kom skip í Leiruvág; þar váru á írskir menn. (Íf 14: 5)

Toward the end of King Konofogor’s days there came a ship to Leiruvogur with Irish people on board.

Landnámabók:

21 The place name Leirur means ‘Mud Flats.’ See the end of Section 2.3.1.
Hrollaugr fór til Íslands með ráði Haralds konungs...hann rak vestr fyrir land...þeir tóku
land vestr í Leiruvági á Nesjum. (Íf 1: 317)
Hrollaugr went to Iceland with King Haraldr’s advice...he drifted west around the land...they
landed west in Leiruvogur in the Peninsulas.

Hrolleifr son Einars Ölvissonar barnakarls kom í Leiruvág, þá er byggt var allt með sjó. (Íf
1: 389)
Hrolleifr, son of Einar barnakarl Ölvisson, arrived in Leiruvogur when everything along the
coast was settled.

Orms þáttir Stórólfssonar:
Fór Ormr til Íslands með Özuri hörzka; urðu þeir vel reiðfara, kómu skipi sínu í Leiruvág
fyrir neðan Heiði. (Íf 13: 408)
Ormr went to Iceland with Özurr hörzki; they had a good voyage and brought their ship into
Leiruvogur below the heath.

Leiruvogur is also mentioned in ’Landnámabók (Íf 1: 312) and Þorsteins þáttir
uxafóts (Íf 13: 341) as the place where Þórðr skeggi found his high-seat pillars and thus
chose where to settle. These passages do not necessarily give evidence that there was a
ship’s landing at the bay, merely that predestined driftwood landed here. Nevertheless,
the frequent mention of the bay as a ship’s landing in medieval writings suggests that the
bay was well known as a popular ship’s landing within the region during the Viking
Age.

In the previous passages, Leiruvogur is spelled either in singular or plural forms,
Leiruvágr and Leiruvágar, respectively in their old nominative forms. The plural form,
‘Mudflat Bays,’ is repeated in later writings but first explained by Skúli Magnússon,
who states that the bay was split into east and west bays by a peninsula called Skiphól,
which means ‘Ship’s Knoll,’ where small or flat bottomed boats were brought ashore
year-round: ‘Hverken sommer eller Vinter-Værtids-Fiskeri kan her anføres, hvorimod
Leervogene den østere og vestere, adskildte ved den Huk Skibshool, ere trygge saavel
Sommer som Vinter-Havne for smaae eller fladgaaende Skibe’ (1785: 112). Nearly one
century later, Kålund upheld Magnússon’s description (1877: 45).

Attempts in the 20th century to locate Skiphól based on local place name traditions
have produced different results. Ari Gislason wrote the first place name description for
Varmá based on interviews he conducted in 1951 with Magnús Sveinsson of
Leirvogstunga and Árni Jónsson from Varmá. Gislason wrote that there were two knolls
atop a spit of land which protruded into the bay. The lower knoll was Skiphóll and the upper knoll Hestaþingshóll, where horse fights were once held. He wrote: ‘Ef við höldum með sjó inn, þá er þar tangi fram í sjóinn og voginn. Þar eru tveir hólar. Heitir sá neðri Skiphóll, en sá sem er ofar, er með þúfu á, og heitir hann Hestaþingshóll. Bendir nafn hans á forn hestaöt þarna niður við sjóinn’ (Örnefnalysing Varmár). Svavar Sigmundsson revised this description in 1967, correcting information regarding the location of Skiphóll, though upon reviewing his own writing in 2010, he was unable to make sense of his own writings (Sigmundsson 2010; pers. comm.). Guðlaugur R. Guðmundsson drew a map in 1976 of the place names by Varmá, which appears to be based on Gíslason’s original description. This map places Skiphóll on the end of the spit which divides the bay from the estuary of the rivers Kaldakvísl and Varmá. MAP has upheld this identification based on personal interviews (Byock 2010; pers. comm.). Various other locations have been proclaimed as Skiphóll, though not without some confusion and conflict (Stefánsdóttir et al. 2006:199). Magnús Guðmundsson, grandson of Magnús Sveinsson who informed Ari Gíslason, was raised on Leirvogstunga and contends that Skiphóll was located farther east on a knoll at the mouth of the river Varmá (Guðmundsson 2010; pers. comm.). Today, a plaque stands at this knoll in support of his identification, raised by the township of Mosfellsbær. I disagree with this identification mostly because it is not compatible with the description given by Skúli Magnússon, since it is not on a peninsula which divides the bay. I follow Ari Gíslason, Guðlaugur R. Guðmundsson, and MAP previous identification because there is Skiphóll situated on a spit of land which divides the bay from the estuary, which may have been the eastern and western bays described by Skúli Magnusson.

Hestaþingshóll is an interesting place name, because the tradition of horse fighting goes back to the times of settlement. However, there are no mentions of this place name from medieval documents, and it is possible that the location did not develop into a spot for horsefights until the later Middle Ages, when the spring assembly was moved to Varmá (Bjarnason & Guðmundsson 2005: 36). This draws the temporality of the name Skiphóll into question, which may have only been used by locals coming in boats to attend the assembly or horsefights. Skiphóll is naturally located at the head of a good beach for landing ships. Without an exhaustive geological study to establish the historical coastline, it is hard to say that there is a better place to land a ship than
Skiphóll. Based on the available evidence, it remains highly probably that these names stretch back to the Viking Age.

Leiruvogur is not mentioned in medieval annals, whereas Þerneyjarsund is mentioned several times. References are made to the ship’s landing at Þerneyjarsund in 1391, 1409, 1411, 1419, and 1492 (Eldjárni 1981: 31). For this reason, it is generally accepted that Leiruvogur was more frequently used as a ship’s landing during the Viking Age and that Þerneyjarsund came into more frequent use in the 14th century (Bjarnason & Guðmundsson 2005: 144; Eldjárni 1981). Eldjárni has suggested that this shift was brought about by Leiruvogur silting up beyond the point of accessibility for later medieval ships, which had a larger draft than Viking Age ships (1981; 25). This explanation fits, especially if the silted up estuary was once the ‘western bay.’

Like the word Leiruvogur, Þerneyjarsund refers to a body of water and not a landing spot. Þerneyjarsund means ‘the Channel of the island Þerney’ and belongs to the channel between that island and Álfsnes. The archaeological survey mentioned in Section 2.2 documented medieval structures postdating 1226 AD which appear to have been associated with the ship’s landing on the shores of Álfsnes opposite Þerney. Without excavations nothing can be said about the earliest use of these structures or their exact function. The church charter of around 1220 from Þerney names a cove with a shoreline which belonged to the church, as previously quoted in Section 2.2: ‘ok sva þess hlutar fiorv j krossa vik er þerney fylger’ (DI 1: 413), ‘and so also this part of the shore in Krossvík which belongs to Þerney.’ The pair ‘krossa vik,’ which I have transcribed here as ‘Krossvík,’ was rewritten ‘Krossvyk’ when the medieval charter was copied in 1553 (DI 12: 665). This place name is not known in other sources and has not survived to the present. The name itself means ‘Cross Cove’ or ‘Crucifix Cove.’ This name may have come from its association with the newly established church, or the name could have been older, perhaps given by the Christian settlers in this area according to that tradition in Kjalnesinga saga. There are several possible locations for this place name, and it is tempting to place this as on the opposite shore, where the ship’s landing was.

3 TRAFFIC AND POWER AT MOSFELL

This chapter discusses the interplay between traffic and the political power of the people of Hrisbrú/Mosfell. Helgi Þorláksson has argued on several occasions (2006; 2005;
that the control of routes of communication was important for the growth of political power of the ‘big chieftains’ (stórgoðar) in the late 12th century and for all others who aspired to power. I support this argument on a more general level, and argue that the people of Hrísbú/Mosfell attempted to use these principles to strengthen their political position. The political legacy of this family appears to have dissolved over the Free State Period, despite the likely increase in traffic. This suggests that there were more variables involved in the maintainance of political power at Mosfell than being well located on main routes and/or Mosfell was not as well located as assumed.

3.1 Utilizing Traffic as a Means to Power

One’s position on main routes and ability to attract travelers to oneself appears to have been an important means to political power during the Free State Period. Þorláksdóttir (1989) argued that the people of Oddi (Oddaverjar) established their domain over the Rangárfing area in the late 12th and early 13th centuries through the aquisition of large farms on main routes. He also argued (2006) that the 12th century church estates (staðir22) were established to attract travelers and thereby strengthen the owner’s political and religious positions. The relationship between traffic and power was founded upon the gathering of information and spreading of reputation via travelers. Political power was largely based on reputation. Therefore, Þorláksdóttir explained:

> What prominent and ambitious men everywhere always want is to be talked about for something positive. They want people to see their residence and acknowledge that they are doing well. Travellers, even paupers, were welcome, because they were the ones who brought and spread news. An attractive place for paupers who would be grateful for food and shelter and spread some praising remarks was very important for such ambitious men. (2006: 148)

Wealth and charisma were requisite qualities for political success. Chieftains needed both to secure the support of their assembly men, friends, kinsmen, and in-laws (Sigurðsson, J. V. 1999: 84). Leaders could not demonstrate their wealth except through displays of generosity and hospitality (Gurevich 1968: 129). Every display requires a stage and an audience. In the present case, an attractive location on or near a main route

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22 This meaning of staðir as ‘church estates’ is different from the previously discussed and earlier meaning, ‘parcels of property.’ See Section 2.4.1 to review the earlier meaning of the word.
provided the stage and traffic supplied the audience. Those audiences which received good hospitality were indebted to their hosts and would likely have been inclined to sing the praises of the host to others they met along their way. Hosts did not need to shower wealth exuberantly upon each vagabond who passed their way to get a fair word in return. In this kind of a drama, a warm meal and a place to sleep would likely have been enough to win praise, which was a price every well-establish farmer could support. Lavish display and gifts were to be reserved for distinguished and powerful men, who could promise loyal support in addition to influential praise.

With regards to guests in general, hosts would be readily willing to accept travelers to hear what they had to say. Not only might a host listen to his guest sing the praises of other hosts (thereby learning who his political rivals might be), but travelers brought other information and news from other regions. Hosts who heard the news first could react faster than their rivals. The main routes facilitated communication and the dissemination of information, which aspiring leaders desired. Þorláksson stated:

> [Ambitious individuals] could gain news and information from travellers, inform themselves about their errands, see to it that they would spread some useful information and news and so on—in other words, control people more easily. (2006: 151)

Information was critical for chieftains and ambitious individuals to operate successfully. In the execution of justice, such as the hunting down of outlaws, to take a dramatic example, lives depended on the acquisition of accurate information. Such individuals should have been eager therefore to receive travelers and the news they brought and sought to attract travelers to themselves.

Þorláksson has most often argued within the context of the later political developments of the Free State Period, when church estates were established and chieftains began to vastly expand their power and establish domains, but his arguments apply more broadly to the whole period. The same cultural forces which governed generosity, hospitality, reputation, and political power existed during the Viking Age, which means that the argued relationship between traffic and power should have been consistent. One criticism of Þorláksson (1989) which has been raised on these grounds asks why it took so long for the people of Oddi to establish their domain (Sigurðsson, J. V. 1999: 64-5). The criticism has value but overlooks the importance which Þorláksson
attached to church estates, which were a development of the 12th century. This example reminds us that there were more factors than placement in relation to main routes which determined the power and potential for expansion in Free State Period politics. To reduce this issue beyond the relevant socio-political developments of the 12th century, wealth and charisma were the basis of power in the Viking Age, while position on a main route was merely a tool for maintaining (or in the right hands, increasing) political power. Without sufficient wealth or charisma to take advantage of one’s position on a main route, the potential benefits offered by passing travelers were lost. To what extent then, could the Viking Age leaders of Hrísbrú/Mosfell attempt to utilize this tool to their advantage?

One option would have been to construct or maintain quality trails to attract travelers. This may have taken the form of clearing obstructed trails, marking routes with cairns, or constructing short causeways over swampy ground. Any one of these improvements might have been undertaken with the intended result that travelers would find the way more attractive for travel. However, such were serious undertakings and required organized labor.

The ability of Viking Age Icelandic chieftains to coerce labor was considerably limited in comparison to their Scandinavian counterparts. In Norway, for example, there existed a much greater degree of social and political stratification. There were strict class distinctions among freemen and between aristocrats, whereas there appears to have been no rigid division between Icelandic farmers and chieftains, who were both treated as höldr, a high rank of yeoman, in Norwegian law (Byock 2001: 134-7). Such increased political stratification was part of the political structure which allowed Scandinavian aristocrats to organize labor for such projects. Evidence of such organized labor can be observed in various examples of road and trail constructions from archaeological excavations in Scandinavia (Bergman et al. 2007; Price 1995: Damell 1985; Roesdahl 1977: 208, 211-2). In Iceland, however, the political structure operated quite differently, and farmers were likely to switch their political allegiance if their chieftains became overbearing and too demanding. Icelandic chieftains were thus limited with regards to what they could demand of their followers. Whereas it has been convincingly argued that Norwegian chieftains organized labor to construct waymarkers on a trading route which increased their profits (Bergman et al. 2007), it is less likely that the leaders of Hrísbrú/Mosfell could have mustered such labor, for example, as would have been
necessary to construct and maintain cairns along the Bringavegur to attract and lead travelers into the Mosfell Valley.

The construction and maintenance of trails and causeways was most likely organized by the communal units (hreppar). Farmers were legally responsible for maintaining trails on their own land, insofar as they could not obstruct main routes by building walls across them without gates (Grágás: 313). The building of bridges or causeways was undertaken by the owner of the land or organized between two owners if the river divided two properties (Grágás: 314). While these laws suggest that trail maintenance was largely an individual affair on one’s own property, it has been suggested that the communal units oversaw such work, as certainly must have been necessary where trails lay on no individual’s property (Sigurðsson, J. V. 1999: 196). The communal units were organized by the farmers themselves and chieftains had no hierarchical authority over them (Byock 2001: 137). Nevertheless, it is likely that influential and ambitious men such as the chieftains would have had the greatest say in the communal units, and it is plausible that a charismatic leader could bend the decisions of the communal unit to his own agenda (Sigurðsson, J. V. 1999; 197). There is no evidence to support that the leaders of Hrísbrú/Mosfell did so, but this may have been one means for ambitious individuals to improve routes leading toward their own properties.

One example from medieval texts of an Icelander organizing labor to create a trail comes from a tradition concerning the trail over the lava field between Hraun and Bjarnarhöfn on the peninsula Snæfellsnes. In this case an ambitious leader called Styrr used labor from his own farm to clear a trail from his farm at Hraun to his brother’s neighboring farm at Bjarnarhöfn. The trail seems to have been impressively made at the time, which may have something to do with the medieval tradition that the trail was made by berserkers. This tradition appears to have given the name Berserkjahraun, meaning ‘Berserkers’ Lava Field,’ to this place. The story is told in Heiðarvíga saga:

Styrr mælti: ‘Hér er hraun hjá bæ mínun, íllt yfirreiðar; hefi ek opt hugsat, at ek vilda látu gera veg þar um ok ryðja þat, en mik hefir skort mannstyrk; nú vilda ek, þú gerðir þat. ’...Taka nú berserkirnir at ryðja hraunit at kveldi dags, ok at þeiri sysslur eru þeir um nöttina; vega þeir stór björg upp, þar þess þurfti, ok færa út fyrir brautina, en sums stadar koma þeir stórum steinum í gryfjurnar, en gera slétta yfir, sem enn má sjá; var á þeim inn mesti berserksgangr. Um morginin höfðu þeri því
Styrr spoke: ‘There is a lava field, which is difficult to ride across, here next to my farm. I have often thought that I would like to have a trail made and cleared there, but I have lacked the manpower. Now I would like that you do it.’...Then the berserkers began to clear the lava at the end of the day and worked throughout the night. They lifted large boulders, where necessary, and moved them out of the way, but in other places they brought large stones to fill in holes and made the surface smooth, as one can still see; it was one monumental piece of work, as people know, and that trail will forever survive with those reminders which are there, until the end of time.

This text is somewhat unreliable in its description, as it was written by a copyist from notes he took of the original text after the original was consumed in the fire in Copehagen in 1728 (Íf 3). Nevertheless, a similar account is given in Eyrbyggja saga, which is more reliable in this respect:

‘Þú skalt ryðja,’ segir Styrr, ‘götu yfir hraunít út til Bjarnarhafnar ok leggia hagagarð yfir hraunít milli landa várra ok gera byrgi hér fyrir innan hraunít.’...Eptir þetta tóku þeir at ryðja götuna, ok er þat it mesta mannvirki. (Íf 4: 72)

‘You shall clear,’ said Styrr, ‘a trail over the lava field out to Bjarnarhöfn, build a field-wall across the lava between our lands and make an enclosure on our side of the lava field.’...After that the berserkers began to clear the trail, and that was a monumental piece of work.

This tradition is significant because the medieval writer and their audiences presumably believed that this trail was such a significant construction that it must have been built by organized labor which was not commonly available. We need not take the tradition at its word that the trail was cleared by berserkers. However, it is significant that these berserkers served Styrr and lived on his farm, which suggests that chieftains were limited to their own labor base if attempting such constructions. Although this passage may be a rare example of such constructions, it is significant because it demonstrates an instance in which an ambitious leader organized labor from his own farm to clear a trail to an adjacent farm, to which he had personal connections.

The motive behind the construction of this trail was apparently to improve communications between Styrr and his brother at Bjarnarhöfn, but it may have also been
to attract travelers and merchants. The place name Bjarnarhöfn means ‘Björn’s Harbor’ and suggests that it was used as a ship’s landing. However, it apparently was not one of the popular Viking Age ports in Iceland (Byock 2001: 257). While improving communications between kinsman may have been one motive in the construction of this trail, I believe there were more motives behind such investment of time and labor, and argue that those who organized this labor wished to improve the land access to the ship’s landing at Bjarnarhöfn. In theory, the trail would have made this harbor more accessible and appealing to Icelanders, which in turn might bring more merchants to land their ships at Bjarnarhöfn, attracted by the prospect of being well connected to local customers. This theory need not have worked in reality, but only been believed by those who decided to organize the clearing of the trail. The privilege of hosting merchants was much desired by ambitious individuals, who could hope for the first pick of the merchant’s wares, which was extremely important in a prestige economy such as existed in Viking Age Iceland. Such prospects may have given political and economic motives to the leaders at Bjarnarhöfn and Hraun to substantially improve the trail between their farms.

By contrast, Leiruvogur was a popular ship’s landing during the Viking Age and there was relatively good access between Hríðbrú/Mosfell and Skiphóll. There was trail from Hríðbrú to Leirvogstunga, from where one might ride down on the mud flats or else over land and cross the rivers Kaldakvísl and Varmá to Skiphóll.

While there are no textual sources on merchants lodging at Hríðbrú/Mosfell, the tradition of Hrafn and Hallfreðr’s conflict suggests that the leaders at Hríðbrú/Mosfell had a definite interest in the movement of sailors at the port. In the passages quoted from Gunnlaugs saga and Hallfreðar saga in Section 2.4.3, conflict developed because Hallfreðr refused to pay money owed to a farmhand of the chieftain Önundr. After the farmhand reported home, Önundr’s son, Hrafn, rode to Hallfreðr’s ship where he intimidated his debtor into paying by preventing his departure. Byock et al. interpreted the passage from Hallfreðar saga to mean that there was an economic connection between Mosfell and Leiruvogur, but they did not add details beyond that statement (2005: 200). Explicit details are absent from the story, and Byock et al. appears to interpret Hallfreðr’s debt as a service fee to be paid to Önundr for having his farmhand care for Hallfreðr’s ship. However, the legally stipulated fee for such services, called a harbor toll (hafnartollr) was merely 10 ells of homespun cloth (Grágás: 150). By
comparison, half a mark of silver was worth 180 ells of homespun cloth, 18 times the value of a harbor toll. This means that Hallfreðr’s debt was far too large to to be a harbor toll, and was more likely a personal debt owed to Hrafn. Hrafn is said to have owned a ship, and leaders from Hrísbrú/Mosfell may have owned ships at various times, and should have been able to offer the services of the harbor toll to incoming sailors, though this was apparently a very small source of revenue. The most that can be concluded from these passages is that the leaders at Hrísbrú/Mosfell, who lived very close to the bay Leiruvogur, could be expected to have met incoming sailors, inspected their business, and attempted to establish friendships with or show off in front of rich merchants who drew a lot of attention.

As previously argued in Section 2.4.2, it is quite likely that there existed a causeway across the valley from Hrísbrú, which may have given the farm its name. The inhabitants would have had a definite self-interest in constructing this causeway, which would have given them direct access to baths on the opposite side of the valley. Ambitious leaders were not likely to have been able to organize labor except within their own farms for such constructions. In this case, constructing this causeway would have been a feasible project for the leaders at Hrísbrú/Mosfell, and a desirable one too. Access to baths must have been an attractive amenity for travelers, and if the leaders of Hrísbrú/Mosfell wished to contend with other farms for hosting merchants that sailed into Leiruvogur, then it would have been a smart political move to build and maintain this causeway. Two other early farms in the region had baths on site, Suður-Reykir and Kollafjörður, and Kjalnesinga saga contains a story of a merchant choosing to lodge for the winter at Kollafjörður, and mentions the baths which existed at that farm (Íf 14: 16-20, 23). Consequently, it would have been politically necessary for the leaders at Hrísbrú/Mosfell to maintain convenient access to their baths if they were to compete with their neighbors for the privilege of hosting merchants.

While rendering services to sailors may have provided the leaders at Hrísbrú/Mosfell with a small if not trivial income, hosting a merchant would have been the real prize. As previously discussed, the opportunity to host a merchant offered the host the best opportunity to trade for prestige goods. At a time when trade between Iceland and foreign countries was both infrequent and unpredictable (Þorláksson 2005: 137), the prospect of hosting a merchant would have been extremely desirable and very competitive. Merchants would have additionally provided entertainment to a household
and information to an ambitious individual with news from outside Iceland, and helped to promote the reputation of the host.

In a similar respect, the leaders of Hrisbrú/Mosfell may have been able to earn a small income from the use of their causeway, but the advantage of this construction was more political than directly economic. The law stated that the builder of a bridge or causeway had the right to set conditions for its use so long as the builder publically announced the conditions or any changes therefrom at an assembly (Grágás: 314). These conditions might include setting tolls. If tolls were ever charged on bridges or causeways in general, it is most likely that they were small and only successful where there were few or no other opportunities for travel. There are no example of tolls on causeways in the sagas, and I find it unlikely that one could be successfully charged at Hrisbrú, given that there were other routes open for travel. When one could gain so much more political advantage by receiving travelers, why should one risk losing traffic at the instigation of a toll? The most important advantage of maintaining a causeway at Hrisbrú was the prospect of attracting travelers to the site who would have otherwise bypassed Hrisbrú on their routes though the Mosfell region.

The best political opportunity open to the leaders of Hrisbrú based on their position may have come from the movement of politically important men to the annual spring assembly. This assembly was held at Þingnes, meaning ‘Assembly Peninsula,’ by the lake Elliðavatn during the Viking Age; excavated structures related to an assembly site on Þingnes were built shortly after the settlement tephra fell, ca. 900 AD, and were no longer in use well before the 1226 AD medieval tephra fell (Ólafsson, G. 1987: 348). The chieftains of Rekjavík would have attended this spring assembly site, and Helgi Þorlákssson has brought to my attention that Lúðvik Ingvarsson suspected that two families of chieftains from north of Kjós would have attended this assembly as well, certainly after the quarter boundary was defined at the river Hvítá in Borgarfjörður ca. 965 AD. These two families were the Lundarmenn from Lundarreykjadalur and Gardar in Akranes and the Reykhyltingar from Reykholt. We know that Svinaskarð was traveled during the summer time past Hrisbrú and was the shortest route between Kjós and Þingnes. This would have placed the leaders of Hrisbrú in an excellent position to hold an annual feast (veisla) for the chieftains on their way between Hvalfjörður/Borgarfjörður and Þingnes. We might expect lavish display and expensive gifts at such feasts, at which the leaders of Hrisbrú could attempt to gain powerful
political alliances, thus strengthening their own position. This opportunity lasted from the latter half of the 10th century until some time around 1100 AD. Around 1140 AD, there was a common assembly site at Þverá in Borgarfjörður, near Hvítá. The Lundarmenn and Reykhyltingar would have most likely attended this assembly at this time. This switch of assembly sites would match the general interpretation of the abandonment of the Þingnes site according to the archaeological dating.

3.2 Evaluating Traffic Near Mosfell

Even without banquets featuring chieftains, the leaders of Hríðbrú may have received many travelers going to Þingnes. But what other kinds of regular travelers might they have received? Hríðbrú/Mosfell lay along two main routes, but this location does not establish that the site received many travelers. Not only were there main routes which bypassed Hríðbrú/Mosfell, but there may not have been much traffic in general. Travelers were not likely to pass so close to the coast unless they had business in the area. Such business would include journeys to visit kinsmen, errands to trade for coastal/marine products or to trade with foreign merchants, and the general wanderings of vagabonds. The example from Harðar saga previously quoted in Section 2.4.2 suggests that medieval audiences expected that vagabonds were likely to come to Mosfell and receive hospitality, and that it was a place where travelers might exchange information. Visits to kinsmen which passed Mosfell may have been infrequent or seasonal. Foreign trade was irregular and unpredictable, but trade for coastal/marine resources may have established a regular, although possibly seasonal, trade and flow of traffic.

In the 19th century, Icelanders traveled through the Mosfell area to Reykjavík with increasing frequency as the capital grew, yet there is little indication that Reykjavík was an important destination during the Viking Age. It is rarely mentioned in medieval sources. One passage from Harðar saga mentions the journey of one to Reykjavík seeking advice from the respected 10th century lawspeaker, Þorkell máni, who lived there (Íf 13: 26). While there may have been others making similar journeys, such reasons would not have brought regular traffic to the area for any sustained length of time.

The best reason for regular traffic to pass through the Mosfell region would have been domestic trade, seeking goods from the coast. According to archaeological
evidence, the Reykjavík area was rich in marine resources, such as fish, birds, and walrus at the time of settlement (Pierce 2009; McGovern et al. 2007; Vésteinsson et al. 2006; Vésteinsson et al. 2002). Archaeofauna data of wild animals from the Viking Age site at Tjarnagata 4 in Reykjavík is dominated by bird species over fish (Vésteinsson et al. 2002: 111). There is no archaeological evidence which might suggest birds were hunted beyond subsistence purposes in this area. We known that fowl were hunted on the island Lundey and eiderdown was collected on the island Viðey (DI 1: 496-7) and a domestic trade may have been based on these commodities. Walrus hunting and trade existed on a small scale in Iceland and may have been exhausted within the first few generations of settlement (Pierce 2009; McGovern 2007: 30). Garðarsdóttir found large collections of fish bones in Viking Age layers at the Alþingisreiturinn site in Reykjavík, and believes that the site was processing fish for a developing domestic trade. The amount of fish bones increases in post 1226 AD medieval layers, suggesting a well developed fishing station in this period. However, Garðarsdóttir admits that these interpretations are purely speculative and require archaeofaunal analysis to draw any satisfactory conclusions (2010). The archaeological data from Reykjavík establish the regional exploitation of marine resources for subsistence purposes. While more research is needed and may alter the traditional understanding, the existant data indicate that if any domestic trade existed at this time, it was relatively underdeveloped.

While direct evidence is lacking from Reykjavík for Viking Age domestic trade in marine resources, there is archaeological evidence of such trade in other regions of Iceland. Excavations from Viking Age inland sites in northeastern Mývatnssveit at Sveigakot, Hofstaðir, and Hrísheimar revealed substantial amounts of marine fish bones and careful analysis demonstrated that these fish were processed at remote sites before being consumed on site. The bone collections suggest that the fish were being prepared at coastal fishing stations for trade as either round-dried or flat-dried products which could then be transported (Lucas 2009: 226-34; McGovern et al. 2007: 42-4). Marine fish bones have also been recovered from the Viking Age site at Granastaðir, located 50 km from the sea and 250 m above sea level in northern Iceland (Einarsson, B. F. 1995: 99). In addition, an excavated site from Akurvík in the West Fjords has been convincingly interpreted as a medieval fishing and processing station, revealing activity in the 11th century and possibly earlier (Amundsen et al. 2005; Krivogorskaya et al. 2005: 46). These examples suggest a developing domestic fish trade in Iceland during
the Viking Age. However, the examples are few and from regions distant to Reykjavík. There were regional differences in economy in Iceland, which arguably existed from the time of settlement (Edvardsson 2005). Despite the abundance of marine resources around Reykjavík and existence of inter-regional trade of fish products elsewhere in Iceland, it is not possible with the current data from Reykjavík to convincingly argue for the existence of domestic trade in marine resources in the Rekjavík area. The possibility, nevertheless, remains and is worth bearing in mind.

3.3 Reexamining Mosfell’s Political Legacy

Medieval Icelandic texts document and narrate the lives of leaders at Mosfell during the late 10th and early 11th centuries, but there are few references to this site which would indicate that it was a place of wealthy or powerful men in the 13th century. Skapti Þórarinsson, a prominent 12th century priest at Mosfell, is the only individual connected with the site after Önundr and Hраfn. There is no mention of the site from the 13th century. This suggests that the political height of the people at Mosfell was during the Viking Age and that their power dissolved in the late 12th and 13th centuries.

Although the overall level of traffic through the region may not have been large, there are indications which might suggest that traffic to the Reykjavík area had increased in the 13th century. Excavations at Alþingisreiturinn in Reykjavík revealed a dramatic increase in the number of fish bones in the 13th century, suggesting a growing fish trade. This archaeological evidence would also strengthen Þorláksson’s argument that Hafrbjörn Styrkársson, who lived at nearby Seltjarnarnes in the 13th century, gained his wealth through fishing (1991: 446). He and his wife are told to have been ‘stórauðig at peningum,’ ‘extremely wealthy in riches,’ in Árna saga biskups (Íf 17: 83). A developing fishing economy near Reykjavík should have increased the traffic passing by Mosfell. Snorri Sturluson, one of the ‘big chieftains’ of the 13th century, acquired Bessastaðir on Álftanes, which apparently was a valuable possession, and contended with the chieftain Magnús Guðmundarson for the inheritance of Jórunn in auðga, Jórunn ‘the wealthy,’ a widow from Gufunes (Stu 1: 268). Magnús was apparently an important leader, since he was the allherjagoði—the chieftain who performed the opening ceremony at the Althing—and a candidate for bishop. He was the son of a noble chieftain, Guðmundr griss, who lived at Þingvellir when he married his daughters to Jón Sigmundarson and Þorvaldr Gizurarson (Stu 1 1946: 60-2). In the legal case between
Snorri and Magnús, Snorri serves a legal summons to Magnús at Seltjarnarnes, which apparently was Magnús’s residence, though this is nowhere directly stated. With the exception of Snorri, who was accustomed to taking his ferry from Borgarfjöður to Álftanes and Seltjarnarnes, there should have been increasing traffic through the Mosfell region to the Reykjavík area according to the increased amount of economic and political activity there in the early 13th century.

If traffic were linked to political power, then we might assume that the people of Mosfell were less successful at attracting visitors or less capable of utilizing travelers for political ends in the 13th century. Traffic passing through the Mosfell region to the Reykjavík area did not necessarily stop at Mosfell. A traveler’s route was much determined by the time of year and weather conditions. If there was an increase in travel during a particular season, as might have developed with increasing fish trade, the perhaps only certain routes underwent an increase in traffic. If travelers went south around Mt. Grímmannsfell or north around Mt. Mosfell, then there is no reason that increased traffic would equal increased political opportunities for the people of Mosfell. However, if they were successful in attracting travelers and received an increase in visitors from the traffic, then it is still possible that they lacked the wealth and personal skills to take advantage of their position.

The people of Mosfell were not in an excellent position to profit by fishing, and it is possible that this handicapped their economic station. If men like Hafrbjörn at Seltjarnarnes were rising to wealth and importance through fishing, then the people of Mosfell may have fallen behind if they were unable to profit with the rest of the competition. The same qualities which made Leiruvogur an excellent ship’s landing in the Viking Age—its position deep in the land, well protected from the open sea by peninsulas and islands—may have made it a rather unprofitable base for a fishing operation. The most profitable bases for fishing needed to be located close to the offshore fishing grounds where quality fish could be found, for example on an outlying peninsula, whereas fishing bases which only had access to inshore fishing would have caught fish for subsistence, but less likely trade (Edvardsson 2005: 54-5). Þerneyjarsund would not have given better access to offshore fishing than Leiruvogur, but fishermen from peninsulas like Seltjarnarnes would have had a decided advantage in reaching better fishing grounds. This may explain why these outlying sites became so wealthy in the 13th century and worthy of mention in medieval texts. However, Jórunn of
Gufunes’s wealth cannot be explained by this reasoning. Gufunes is closer to Leiruvogur and Þerneyjarsund, and consequently at a disadvantage for commercial fishing. This suggests that her wealth came from another, unnamed source.

Personal skill was equally important as wealth for achieving and maintaining power and Mosfell’s apparent decline in political importance may be explained by a lack of talent to lead. Without the necessary personal skills to be a leader, wealth might be squandered, as well as opportunities afforded by a position along a main route, without political gain. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson argued that there were more chieftaincies in existence than stated by the lawbook *Grágás* in the Viking Age. This difference, he argued, resulted from more flexibility in the creation, transfer, and dissolution of chieftaincies than suggested by the rigid system outlined in *Grágás*. According to this argument, chieftaincies may have often had very short life spans, lasting perhaps only two or three generations, or have been managed from different locations at different times in history (1999: 59). He argued that the number of chieftaincies in existence decreased considerably in the 12th century, which probably resulted from individual economic difficulties and problems with producing candidates qualified for leadership within families (1999: 64). Hrafn is described in *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Hallfreðar saga* as the sort of character suitable to succeed his father Önundr as chieftain, yet he is killed in a dramatic duel before he can fulfill this destiny. Önundr is told to have had two other sons, whom are named described as ‘efniligir menn,’ (*Íf* 3: 61) ‘promising men.’ Despite this description, they are never mentioned again, taking no action against Illugi’s attack on Mosfell. Nothing more is recorded of this family’s political legacy. According to Sigurðsson’s argument, the chieftaincy may have disappeared or moved away from Mosfell if Önundr’s other sons were either not inclined nor suited to manage the chieftancy after their father. It is quite possible that this chieftaincy began and ended with Önundr.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Hrísbrú/Mosfell lay along two main routes, if the Reykjavík area was either the destination or the origin. One route lay north over Svínaaskarð into Kjós and the other east over Mosfellsheiði by way of Bringnavegur, Stardalsvegur, or Hálsavegur. However, there were other routes which bypassed Hrísbú/Mosfell in these directions,
and whether a traveler rode past this site or not entirely depended on the origin and
destination and season and weather conditions. Whether the traveler stopped at
Hrisbrú/Mosfell was another matter entirely.

Archaeological evidence has demonstrated that the Viking Age site at Hrisbrú was
significantly wealthy. The wealth of Hrisbrú residents Grímr and Önundr was
remembered in *Egils saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*. Such an establishment would have
likely attracted visitors in hopes of sumptuous hospitality and entertainment, as seems to
have been the message of Bolli’s charade in *Harðar saga*, in which the characters and
audience apparently recognized Hrisbrú/Mosfell as a place sought by travelers and a
place where information was exchanged. The place name Tjaldanes is very old, first
recorded in *Egils saga*, which suggests that this land was used as a campsite by travelers
from an early start. Camping was only sensible in the summer, which suggests that these
campers were traveling the summer trail over Svínaskarð. Although the Mosfell region
was criss-crossed by other routes which had more practical reasons for choosing them
based on the season and weather, it seems that a fair and regular number of travelers
might have been expected to visit the Mosfell Valley.

I have attempted to argue that the place name Hrisbrú was given to this site based on
the construction of a brushwood causeway across the swampy valley bottom to
Tjaldanes and the baths, which was both a feasible and politically advantageous
undertaking. This construction did not need any more motive than a purely selfish desire
to access the baths easily on the other side of the valley. However, this causeway would
have had apparent political value to its builders and their descendants, allowing them to
offer better amenities to their guests, and giving them an easy means of communication
with travelers camping at Tjaldanes.

Interaction with camping travelers at Tjaldanes and hosting travelers at
Hrisbrú/Mosfell was an important means for political operation and maintaining power.
Travelers brought news and spread fame, giving ambitious men the ability to control
others more easily. Archaeological and saga evidence suggest the leaders of
Hrisbrú/Mosfell had sufficient wealth to host general travelers, and it seems that they
had both sufficient wealth and opportunity to host chieftains traveling from
Hvalfjarðar/Borgarfjarðar to Þingnes during the Viking Age. We lack the archaeological
evidence to evaluate the wealth of the later inhabitants of Mosfell. Evidence from the
sagas suggests that they had disappeared from the political scene by the 13th century,
and may have resulted from the lost opportunity of political gain from traffic to Þingnes after that site was abandoned. It may have also depended on a lack of wealth to match their rivals, stemming from their inability to capitalize on a developing fishing trade.

Even though the routes in the Mosfell region did not funnel travelers to the doorstop of Hrísbrú/Mosfell, this site appears to have been a favorable stop for travelers in Viking Age Iceland. It seems most important to conclude then by suggesting that it was not always the routes which brought travelers to the place, but that it was the place which brought travelers along the route. Seljadalsvegur was more likely to be traveled by the Reykjavík chieftains and their supporters to the Althing in the summer, since this was the more popular summer trail. But as long as the leaders at Hrísbrú/Mosfell could offer an attractive campsite or good hospitality, then it is quite likely that they would be sought out by travelers (I personally would have forsaken Seljadalsvegur if a stop at Hrísbrú/Mosfell would have given me wise company, well versed in law like Grímr or talented in poetry like Egill or Poet-Hrafn). In the right hands, generous display could turn into political might, binding powerful guests to their hosts for the hospitality and gifts received. These political interests and friendships formed would lead travelers back to Hrísbrú/Mosfell and potentially attract new visitors in hope of establishing such alliances. Although there may have been more practical reasons for taking Seljadalsvegur in the summer time, visiting a chieftain or wealthy leader may have been more important than a speedy trip. Maintaining good friendships and political alliances through regular visits were socially and politically necessary in the Viking Age. To close with the wisdom of Hávamál, this Eddaic poem contains two verses dedicated to the virtue of traveling long distances for good friends. These verses remind their audience that it is important to visit one’s friends often and never let distance or difficulty of passage deter one. It was the places which brought travelers along the routes, and Viking Age Hrísbrú appears to have been such a place.

34. Afhvarf mikit
er til ills vinar,
þótt á brautu búi,
en til góðs vinar
leggja gagnvegir,
þótt hann sé firr farinn.
119. Veiztu ef þú vin átt
þann er þú vel trúir,
farðu at finna oft,
því at hrísi vex
og hávu grasi
vegur er vættki treður.23

34. It’s a great detour to a bad friend’s house, even though he lives on the route; But to a good friend’s the ways lie straight, even though he lives far off.

34. You know, if you’ve a friend, one whom you trust, go to see him often; For brushwood grows, and tall grass, on the road which no man treads.24

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to give special thanks to RANNÍS (the Icelandic Research Council) for their financial support from the Research Fund of Sigrún Á. Sigurðardóttir and Haraldur Sigurðsson. I would also like to thank the following people, in no particular order: Jesse Byock, Helgi Þorláksson, Torfi Tulinus, Svarar Sigmudsson, Bjarki Bjarnason, Oscar Aldred, Davide Zori, Kristján Hrannar Pálsson, Guðrún Jóna Þráinsdóttir, Jakob Stakowski, Lisbeth Heidemann, and all of the staff members and and scholars at various institutions who helped me along my way.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


*An = Annáll nítjándu aldar*


Byock, Jesse. (2010) *personal communication*. General Director of the Mosfell Archaeological Project. Professor in the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology and Old Norse/Icelandic Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.


DI = Diplomatarium Islandicum


*ÍF = Íslenzk fornrit*


Stu = *Sturlunga saga*


Zori, Davide, personal communication. Mosfell Archaeological Project Field Director. Cotsen Institute of Archaeology and Old Norse/Icelandic Studies, University of California in Los Angeles.


APPENDIX A: MAPS

The following maps show the Viking Age routes based on the research and arguments presented in this thesis. **Mapped Trails** mark the routes for which cartographic or archaeological evidence exists. **Unmapped Trails** mark the routes for which I have argued their existence based on historical, place name, or circumstantial evidence. **Archaeological Features** are catalogued in Appendix B.

The map of Skeggjastaðir was produced by Davide Zori for the Mosfell Archaeological Project, and I am grateful to him for his excellent work and permission to use this image in my thesis. This map shows the results of the MAP Summer 2009 survey at Skeggjastaðir, showing both modern roads and trails. I have marked the roads and trails on this map to distinguish between the two.
APPENDIX B: GPS Data and Archaeological Features

The table on the following pages lists all archaeological features surveyed in Fall 2009 and those other features which have been mapped in with the associated GPS data. This data sheet builds upon two previous surveys:


The primary goal of the Fall 2009 survey was to document cairns (abbreviated *Crn*) across Mosfellsheiði which might be associated with Bringnavegur or Seljadalsvegur. **Feature ID** lists the archaeological feature by the short name with which it was entered into the GPS device. **Longitude and Latitude** are recorded on ISNET93 coordinates. **Associations** have been made to historical roads or geographical features for easy reference on the map. Cairns are each given a **Type**, which describes the shape (*pyramid, tower* (both cylinders and rectangular prisms), *cone*) or the form (*base*: one or two layers of stone forming the foundation for a cairn; *stack*: a vertical stack of single stones; *window*: a tower cairn with holes through the center, resembling windows). **Height and Base** are measured in centimeters, and are approximate geometric measurements, intended to allow comparison within and between Types. **Layers of stone** records how many layers of stone were stacked atop one another in the cairn. **Description/Interpretation** records any other data or thoughts of value.

The features are ordered in the table by **Association**.
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<th>Association</th>
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<th>Height (cm)</th>
<th>Base (cm)</th>
<th>Layers of stone</th>
<th>Description/Interpretation</th>
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**Report for additional data**
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