

# English and Hanseatic Trading and Fishing Sites in Medieval Iceland: Report on Initial Fieldwork

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*Schlagwörter:* Island / England / Deutschland / Spätmittelalter / Frühe Neuzeit / Hanse / Handel, Tausch / Fischerei / Schiffe, Boote / Hafenanlagen / Gewerbe-, Wirtschaftsbauteile

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The Icelandic historian, Gunnar Karlsson has described the settlement conditions of his homeland appositely: 'From a strictly physical point of view, it seems as if it would have been possible for iron-age pastoralists, such as the early Icelanders, to survive in the country without any trade with the external world'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Viking Age and medieval Icelanders produced the most of the important foodstuffs, artefacts and tools in their own homesteads.<sup>2</sup> Vigorous trading activity with Norway, Germany and England opened the route to Iceland for goods which provided an improved standard of living. But trade also operated in the other direction. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century Europe to the south of Scandinavia had become aware of the existence of Iceland. Iceland was able to offer goods and natural products that other north European lands did not have, or did not have in sufficient quantities. The rich fishing grounds provided a natural resource of considerable importance for the European market, and together with other important export goods, such as wool, *vaðmál* – a tightly woven and tough cloth – animal skins and fleeces, and sulphur formed the basis of a vibrant trade between Icelanders, the English, the Hanse, the Dutch and the Norwegians. Luxury items, such as walrus-ivory and falcons completes the repertoire of goods.<sup>3</sup> The representation of Iceland in the *Carta Marina* by Swedish scholar Olaus Magnus, published in 1531, clearly summarizes the economic interests and perceptions of the north Europeans (Fig. 1). The focus is on the peculiarities – the natural dangers, merchant ships off the south coast and export goods, such as fish and sulphur depicted stored near tents, which are perhaps seasonal trading posts.

In 2006 an international research project began which over the next few years will investigate Iceland's trade with England and the Hanse during the late Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup> The period from about 1412 to 1602 is marked by the presence of English and Hanseatic merchants, fisherman and sailors, and thereby it is not only a history of

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<sup>1</sup> KARLSSON 2000, 48.

<sup>2</sup> Some authors have argued that Icelanders could not survive without trade with the external world because they lacked essential raw materials that were indispensable to life (see, for example, EBEL 1977, 3). This is certainly not true, as many archaeological excavations have shown; see MEHLER 2007a.

<sup>3</sup> MARCUS 1957, 408.

<sup>4</sup> See also introductory statements by GARDINER 2006 and MEHLER 2007b.



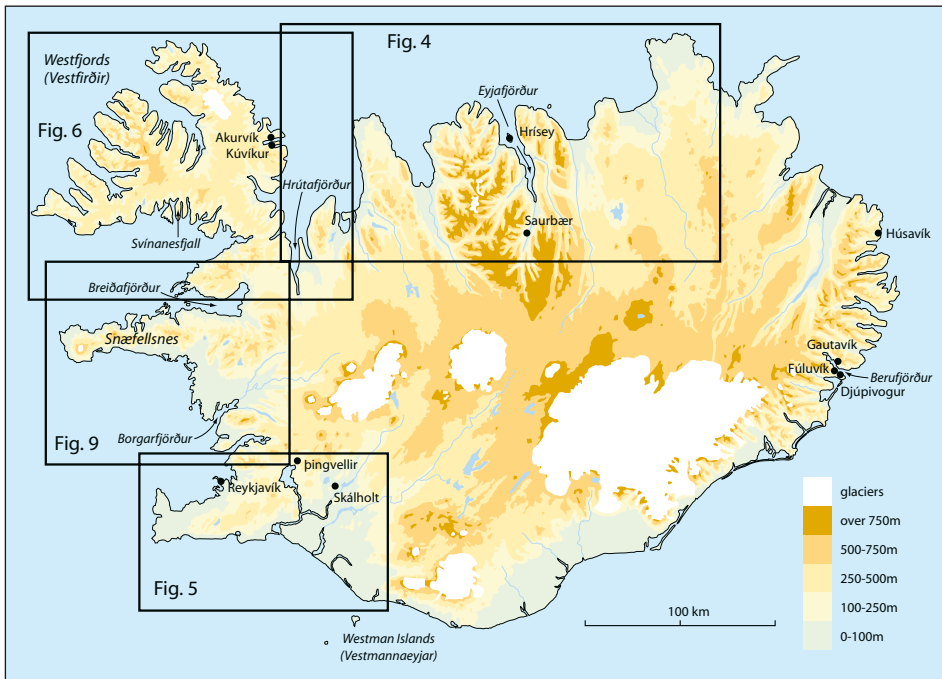


Fig.2. Map of Iceland with places mentioned in the text. See also location of detailed maps, *Figs 4, 5, 6* and *9*. – Scale 1: 4 000 000.

(*brennisteinshöfn*), at Húsavík and Reykjarfjörður, and also a harbour for fish oil (*lysishöfn*) at Kúvíkur (see below and *Fig. 2*).<sup>5</sup> In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Danish historian, Peder Hansen Resen (1625–1688), drew up a list of Icelandic harbours which had been in use during the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century or had already fallen out of use by that time. Resen's description of Iceland was not printed in his time but was eventually published 200 years later.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, between 1775 to 1777, Ólafur Olavius (1741–1788), an Icelandic scholar, travelled around the coasts of Iceland to investigate the potential for economic development. As part of that work, he studied harbours and landing sites in the north to locate places suitable to establish fishing settlements. The results of his survey were published in 1780 and included a map of these sites.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century German historian Ernst Baasch published a thorough study of the voyages of Hamburg merchants to Iceland during the period from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. His work was based on the many documents stored at the archives of Hamburg, Lübeck and Bremen, and using these he was able to present a German perspective on the extensive trade of that period. His book offered a detailed insight into the many types of traded goods, the historical background, and the quar-

<sup>5</sup> AÐILS 1971, 260.

<sup>6</sup> The list was first published in KÅLUND 1879–1882, 376–378 and later in HANSEN RESEN 1991.

<sup>7</sup> OLAVIUS 1780.

rels and difficulties the sailors had to overcome. He also gives a list of Icelandic ports that were frequented by merchants of the Hanse. This remains an extremely valuable source for this subject.<sup>8</sup>

There have been numerous historical studies of trading sites during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and these have adopted a number of approaches (see below). The dissertation of Björn Þorsteinsson on the impact of English trade on Iceland in the 15<sup>th</sup> century was ground-breaking, and he introduced the concept of the 'English Age' into Icelandic historiography.<sup>9</sup> He published several contributions on the subject of trade in the late Middle Ages,<sup>10</sup> located the ruins of the trading site at Búðasandur (see below) and encouraged his students to continue his work. It is also worth mentioning the research of the German historian, Else Ebel, who examined trade in Iceland in the period 950 to the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. She used the evidence from the many sagas written down between the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> and the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, and the *Grágás* (the Grey Goose Laws), a collection of civil laws dating to the early 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup> Ebel covers a period before the arrival of the English and the Germans, but the results of her research are also relevant to the later Middle Ages (see below).

Trade in coarse cloth (*vaðmál*) during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries was considered in a doctoral thesis by Helgi Þorláksson. He also examined the role of trade in urban formation in Iceland.<sup>12</sup> Other important doctoral studies are those by Jón Aðils and Gísli Gunnarsson, examining the operation of trade in the period subsequent to that studied here, during the Danish trade monopoly from 1602 to 1787. Gunnarsson was able to show how the monopoly was not so much an entirely new measure, but had developed out of the increasing restrictions that the Danish crown had imposed upon foreign merchants operating in Iceland. He provides a list of ports which had to be used by Danish traders, all of which had been established since at least the period of Hanseatic and English commerce.<sup>13</sup>

The subject of fishing, particularly in the Middle Ages, has not generally received the scholarly attention from historians which has been accorded to trade. Studies of English fishing off Iceland by Wendy Childs and Evan Jones are particularly noteworthy in discussing the development and operation to foreign vessels, and Jones has contributed a useful study of the knowledge of fishermen of the geography and place-names of Iceland in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>14</sup> Important studies have also been made on Icelandic fishing activity, notably those by Jón Jónsson. Although it is primarily a work of ethnography and concerned largely with a more recent period, the five-volume study of all aspects of Icelandic fishing by Lúðvík Kristjánsson contains a great deal that is of interest about traditional practices.<sup>15</sup> Finally, an important study

<sup>8</sup> BAASCH 1889, especially the list of ports p.106 f.

<sup>9</sup> ÞORSTEINSSON 1970.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example THORSTEINSSON 1972. – ÞORSTEINSSON / GRÍMSDÓTTIR 1989.

<sup>11</sup> EBEL 1977. See also DENNIS / FOOTE / PERKINS 1980.

<sup>12</sup> ÞORLÁKSSON 1977; IDEM 1978; IDEM 1992a.

<sup>13</sup> GUNNARSSON 1983, 54, 58–59. – AÐILS 1971.

<sup>14</sup> CHILDS 2000. – JONES 2000; IDEM 2004.

<sup>15</sup> JÓNSSON 1994a; IDEM 1994b. – KRISTJÁNSSON 1980–1986.



of the impact of climate on fish stocks has been published using documentary evidence from 1600 onwards to chart the incidence of sea-ice around Iceland.<sup>16</sup>

### The archaeology of trading and fishing sites

The history of archaeological research into medieval Icelandic trading sites is almost as old as Icelandic archaeology itself. The Icelandic antiquarians, Sigurður Vigfússon and Brynjúlfur Jónsson, had surveyed the possible trading site at Stakkhamar (see below) by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Danish scholar, Daniel Bruun travelled around Iceland and undertook ethnographical studies, also recording a number of archaeological sites.<sup>17</sup> The first excavation of a trading site took place at Gásir in 1907, by Bruun and his Icelandic colleague, philologist Finnur Jónsson. These two also excavated the church of Gásir, and a group of structures at the eastern edge of the site (*Fig. 3*).<sup>18</sup> Their results were used over 50 years later by German archaeologist, Detlev Ellmers, who was able to set Bruun's excavations at Gásir in a northern European context.<sup>19</sup>

Gásir (or Gásar, Gæsir, Gáseyrr, etc.), well known from written sources, is located on the western shore of Eyjafjörður at the mouth of the river Hörgá, about 11 km north of the present city of Akureyri (*Fig. 4*). A great number of archaeological remains are still visible. The sub-rectangular earthworks up to 2 m in width called booths (*búðir*, see below) cover a large area to the west of an area of salt marsh, itself protected from the sea by a large sandbar. The site name is mentioned in connection with trade and transport in various sagas and annals dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest known source dates to 1163 (*Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*), and the latest reference, a quotation from the *Gottskálks annals*, dates to 1391. All documents refer to Gásir as a trading site where ships landed. The imports were mainly grain, timber, wine, beer and cloth, goods which were exchanged for stockfish. The business seems to have been largely in the hands of Norwegian traders and took place on a seasonal basis.<sup>20</sup> Gásir finally lost its role as major trading site when the coast silted up.<sup>21</sup>

A second excavation at Gásir was undertaken in the summer of 1986 by Margrét Hermanns-Auðardóttir and Bjarni Einarsson. Again the church formed part of the investigation, and few trial trenches were made.<sup>22</sup> Larger-scale work took place between 2001 and 2006 when the Icelandic Institute of Archaeology<sup>23</sup> undertook an interdisciplinary project on Gásir directed by Howell Roberts.<sup>24</sup> The results will be published in the future and will provide a solid basis for the project which is described below.

<sup>16</sup> OGILVIE/JÓNSDÓTTIR 2000.

<sup>17</sup> VIGFÚSSON 1893. – JÓNSSON 1897. – BRUUN 1928.

<sup>18</sup> JÓNSSON 1908. – BRUUN/JÓNSSON 1908. – BRUUN 1928, 114–125.

<sup>19</sup> ELLMERS 1972, 215 ff.

<sup>20</sup> For more details, see ROBERTS 2003, 24–26.

<sup>21</sup> JÓNSSON 1908, 3 f. – AÐILS 1971, 292.

<sup>22</sup> HERMANNSDÓTTIR 1987, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Fornleifastofnun Íslands, referred to hereafter as FSÍ.

<sup>24</sup> See the annual excavation reports by the FSÍ: ROBERTS 2002; IDEM 2003; IDEM 2004; IDEM 2005.

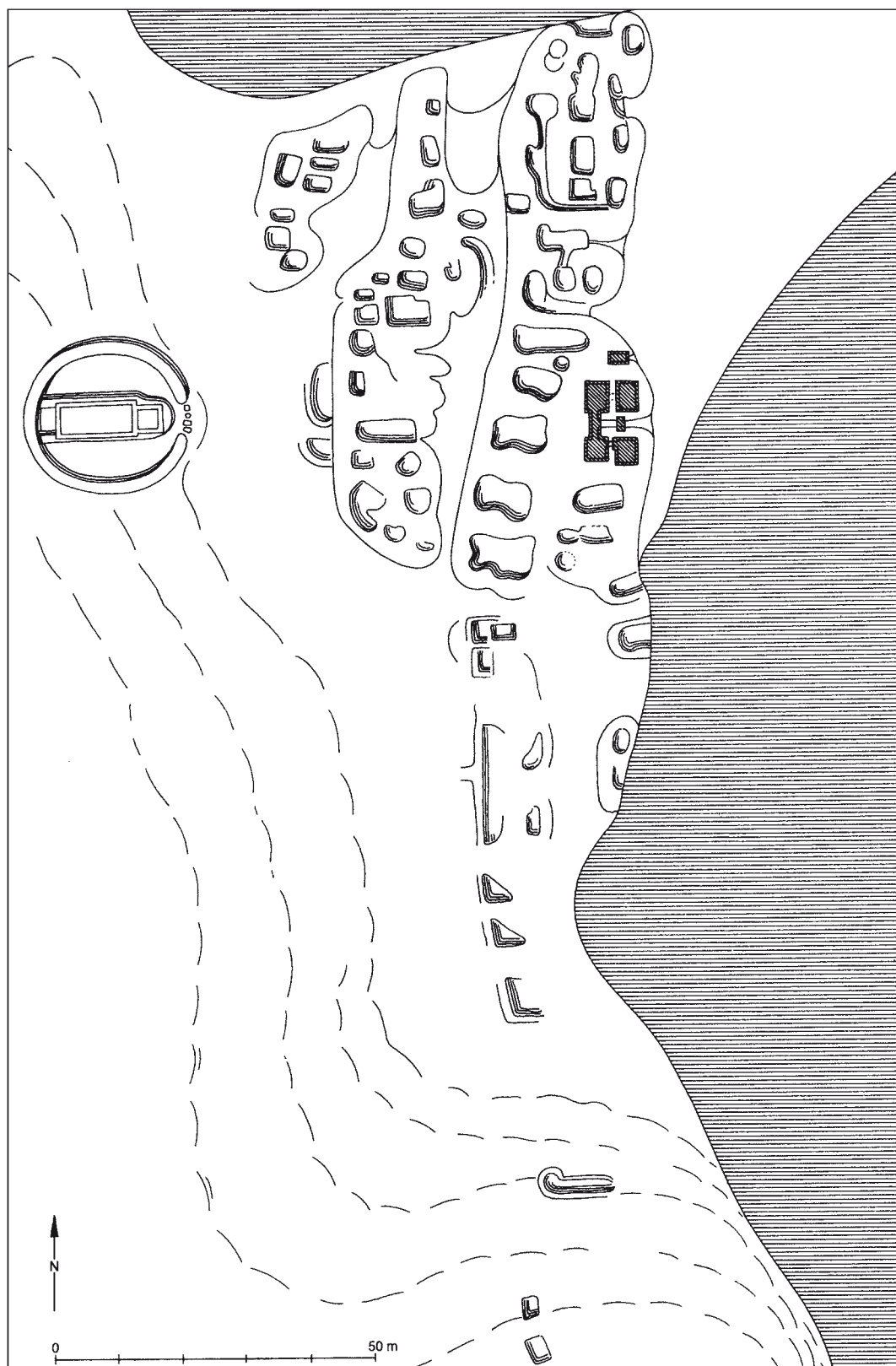


Fig. 3. Excavation plan of the trading site Gásir in Eyjafjörður, northern Iceland, surveyed in 1907 by Daniel Bruun and Finnur Jónsson; after ELLMERS 1972, 215. – Scale 1:1 000.

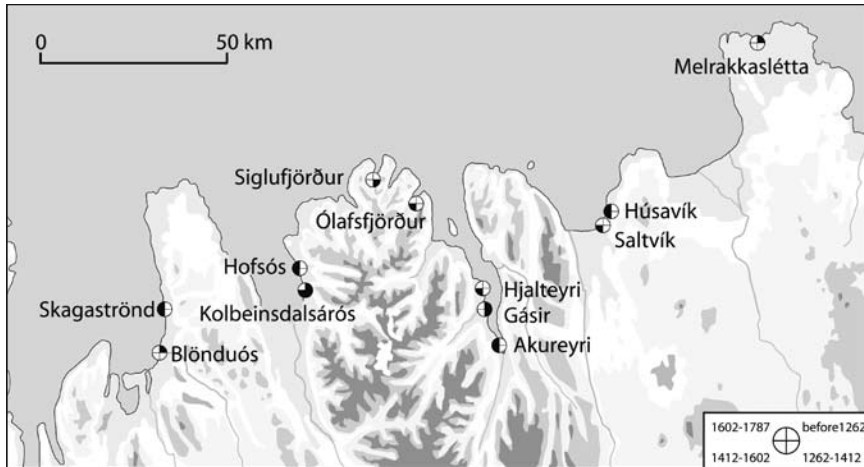


Fig. 4. Map of sites in northern Iceland. – Scale 1 : 2 000 000.

Gásir revealed very different finds from contemporary settlement sites in Iceland. The ceramics were particularly noteworthy, because there was no local pottery production in Iceland from the period of the first settlement until the later early modern period and all sherds found, therefore, come from imported vessels. Thus, pottery provides a very good indicator for trading activity. Gásir revealed ceramics both from eastern England and northern Germany. While the site appears to go out of use, according to written sources, at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, finds such as Siegburg stoneware retrieved during recent excavations suggest that it could have continued until the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>25</sup>

The first interest by German archaeologists in Icelandic trade is marked by the fieldwork of Torsten Capelle who travelled to the country in the years 1978 to 1982 and looked at different sites. He examined some ruins in the south of Iceland around Grindavík, went to the ruins of Búðasandur in Hvalfjörður (see below) which he found ‘characteristic of a seasonally occupied Icelandic trading site’,<sup>26</sup> and then later at Gautavík in the east part of Iceland. Gautavík, another important trading site, had also been visited by Daniel Bruun during his extensive journeys on Iceland at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bruun surveyed the site that – like Gásir – was known from many written sources, and made drawings of the ruins.<sup>27</sup> Capelle re-surveyed the site in the summer of 1978 and published a first report.<sup>28</sup> In the following summer an excavation took place as a joint project between the University of Münster and the Archaeological Department of the Icelandic National Museum.

Gautavík is situated at the northern shore of the Berufjörður, the most southerly fjord of eastern Iceland (see Fig. 2). The site also goes by the topographic name of

<sup>25</sup> MEHLER 2000, 28–30; IDEM 2002; IDEM 2004, 167.

<sup>26</sup> See CAPELLE 1982, 91–95, especially 93.

<sup>27</sup> BRUUN 1928, 125f.

<sup>28</sup> CAPELLE 1978.

Búðamelur or Búðaa, describing a mountain ridge and a little river close to booths (*búðir*, see below).<sup>29</sup> A number of written sources mention Gautavík as a trading site, but they are not very informative. Mostly they tell us that boats either left from Gautavík to sail to Norwegian towns, such as Trondheim, or arrived from Norway.<sup>30</sup>

The site consisted of four groups of ruins: the western complex (*Westkomplex*), the shore complex (*Uferkomplex*), the boat houses (*Bootschuppen*) and the eastern complex (*Ostkomplex*). The excavations revealed earthen structures very similar to the ones at Gásir: an eastern complex of small booths, all adjacent to one another and thus forming a larger complex of ruins.<sup>31</sup> The evidence of tephrochronology suggests that this complex was built between 1370 and 1400, and remained in use until the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>32</sup> The western complex and ruins of boat houses were also excavated.<sup>33</sup> Here, one of the strangest buildings in Iceland was excavated: a round structure made of bricks, a building material not native to Iceland, and interpreted as kiln.<sup>34</sup> Recently, a new interpretation for this building has been proposed, suggesting it was a storage building for sulphur, erected by foreign (Hanseatic ?) merchants.<sup>35</sup> Finds from this excavation included imported pottery and iron artefacts.<sup>36</sup> The Gautavík pottery was later studied as part of an extensive review of Icelandic pottery. The material is exclusively of continental origin. It consisted of northern German or southern Scandinavian redwares, dating from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and 13<sup>th</sup>-/14<sup>th</sup>-century proto-stoneware and late medieval stoneware from the Rhineland and Lower Saxony. Pottery of English origin, found at Gásir, was completely absent from Gautavík.<sup>37</sup>

Gautavík ceased operating as a trading site probably in the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, mainly because the beach had silted up.<sup>38</sup> Another reason for Gautavík's end is suggested by Ólafur Olavíus: drift-ice prevented the sea traffic entering Berufjörður and reaching Gautavík.<sup>39</sup> During the 16<sup>th</sup> century merchants from Bremen relocated trade first to Fúlúvík, and later, further out of the fjord to Djúpivogur (see Fig. 2).<sup>40</sup>

The third important trading site investigated by archaeologists was Búðasandur, which is also known by the name Maríuhöfn, and is located on a promontory on the southern shore of the Hvalfjörður, the 'Whale fjord', in south-west Iceland (see below) (Fig. 9). The site is mentioned in written sources between 1339 and 1413, mostly either

<sup>29</sup> IDEM 1982, 26.

<sup>30</sup> IBID., 26–29.

<sup>31</sup> ÓLAFSSON 1982 Fig. 43.

<sup>32</sup> IBID., 68.

<sup>33</sup> CAPELLE 1982, 31 f. and Fig. 10.14.19.

<sup>34</sup> IBID., 39–60.

<sup>35</sup> MEHLER 2007a, 239.

<sup>36</sup> CAPELLE 1982, 69–87.

<sup>37</sup> MEHLER 2000, 67–73.

<sup>38</sup> CAPELLE 1982, 87 f.

<sup>39</sup> OLAVIUS 1780, 552.

<sup>40</sup> BAASCH 1889, 108.



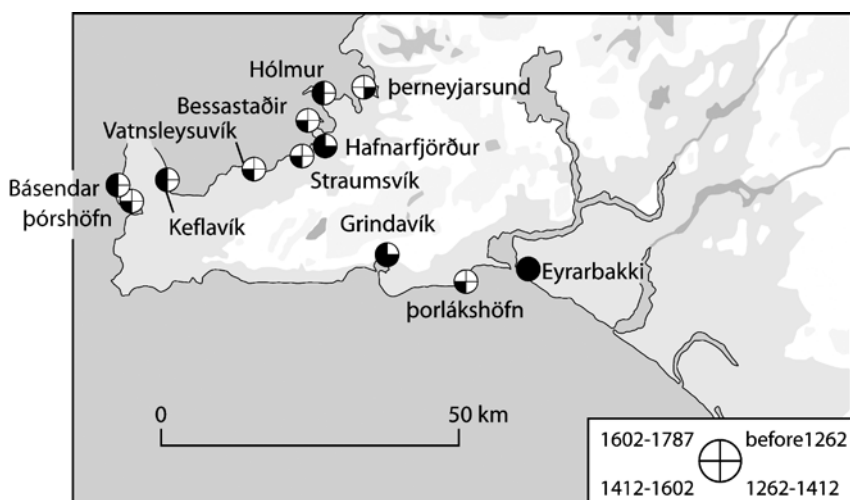


Fig. 5. Map of sites at Reykjanes peninsula. – Scale 1 : 1 250 000.

in connection with the bishop's see at Skálholt or the *Alþing* close by at Þingvellir. It is most famous for being the port where in 1402 the Plague arrived in Iceland on-board a ship.<sup>41</sup> Björn Þorsteinsson had looked at the ruins in 1975 and encouraged his student, Magnús Þorkelsson to investigate it further. He excavated several trenches in the summers of 1982 to 1985. As at Gásir and Gautavík, several earthworks, booths and possibly also a smithy or a workshop, were found to lie adjacent to one another in a band stretching north-south.<sup>42</sup> While Gásir and Gautavík revealed a substantial amount of imported pottery, none was found at Búðasandur and finds consisted only of bone, charcoal, fragments of iron nails, copper fragments and a spindle whorl.<sup>43</sup>

Despite of the early interest of researchers in medieval trading sites, these three are the only ones to have been investigated thoroughly by archaeologists and have always been considered to be 'typical Icelandic trading sites' due to the similarity of their buildings or booths. These sites were very well known from written sources and their ruins were conspicuous and thus easy to locate. While Gásir's occupation lasted roughly from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century, Búðasandur operated mostly during the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Both were frequented by Norwegian vessels. Gautavík is of later date and the archaeological remains fall into the period from the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century until the late 16<sup>th</sup> / early 17<sup>th</sup> century. It appears that its visitors were mainly Hanseatic merchants.

Other trading sites or harbours were surveyed, but further archaeological investigation has not been possible so far. In 1978 Kristján Eldjárn surveyed the sites of Leiruvogur in Mosfellssveit and Þerneyjarsund at Kjalarnes, both located east of Reykjavík (Fig. 5). Both places are known from written medieval and post-medieval

<sup>41</sup> ÞORSTEINSSON / GRÍMSDÓTTIR 1989, 147f. – ÞORKELSSON 1984, 110–112.

<sup>42</sup> IDEM 2004, 36–44 and Fig. 6.

<sup>43</sup> IBID., 109–111.

sources as very good mooring places for even larger vessels. Eldjárn's map shows four ruins of possible buildings or enclosures that had partly already been eroded by the sea.<sup>44</sup> The ruins were re-surveyed in 2002 by Kristinn Magnússon and have been declared as a protected site.<sup>45</sup> A more detailed survey took place at the site of Básendar, located on a lava field at the western shore of the Reykjanes peninsula, close to Ke-flavík. Básendar, with a harbour in the form of a long, narrow inlet was an important port during the Danish trade monopoly, but its history goes back to the Middle Ages when it was frequented by English and Hanseatic ships. The site was destroyed on January 9<sup>th</sup> 1799 by one of the worst storms and floods in Icelandic history. Ragnheiður Traustadóttir's information on the many ruins of the houses, workshops and enclosures is very detailed, but the remains have not been mapped.<sup>46</sup> Of more recent date is the trading station at Kúvíkur in Reykjarfjörður in the Westfjords which recently was surveyed and partly excavated. The station was established at the beginning of the Danish trade monopoly in 1602 and continued to be in use until the 20<sup>th</sup> century when it was abandoned. During the period of the trade monopoly there were no permanent buildings, but later a small settlement was erected there including a merchant's house. During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Kúvíkur was a *lýsishöfn* and served as port for the export of shark liver oil.<sup>47</sup>

While the sites of Leiruvogur and Perneyjarsund are rather small and their identification with the places mentioned in the written sources is not assured, there is no doubt about the ruins of Básendar and Kúvíkur, which today are clearly visible.<sup>48</sup>

Fishing sites, especially the ones in the Vestfirðir peninsula, the Westfjords, have only just been brought into focus in Icelandic archaeology (Fig. 6). Recently, Viking Age, medieval and early post-medieval settlement remains in the Westfjords, which were part of this early fishing industry, have been examined, showing that the economy of that region was primarily based on marine resources.<sup>49</sup> Investigations have produced the remains of specialized facilities, ranging from medieval fishing stations to early post-medieval whaling stations. It has been possible to ascertain whether fish had been consumed at the find spot, or whether it had been prepared on a larger scale for trade. Fishing stations such as Akurvík (Fig. 2) usually consisted of a small group of rectangular fishing booths that were used seasonally. From these stations fishermen worked both the inshore and offshore fishing grounds, the former for local use, the latter for export. Zooarchaeological studies show clearly that the fishermen who worked the offshore grounds concentrated on catching one or two species from the dominance of these in the archaeological record. The method of slaughter or preparation also was apparent from whether certain types of fish bones were either absent or excessively abundant (so-called body-part representation). The Akurvík data collected from the levels dating to the 12<sup>th</sup> century have shown that during that period there

<sup>44</sup> ELDJÁRN 1980 esp. map on p. 28.

<sup>45</sup> MAGNÚSSON 2002.

<sup>46</sup> TRAUSTADÓTTIR 2000, 28–50.

<sup>47</sup> LÁRUSDÓTTIR ET AL. 2005.

<sup>48</sup> TRAUSTADÓTTIR 2000, 28–50.

<sup>49</sup> EDVARDSSON 2005. – EDVARDSSON / RAFNSSON 2006.

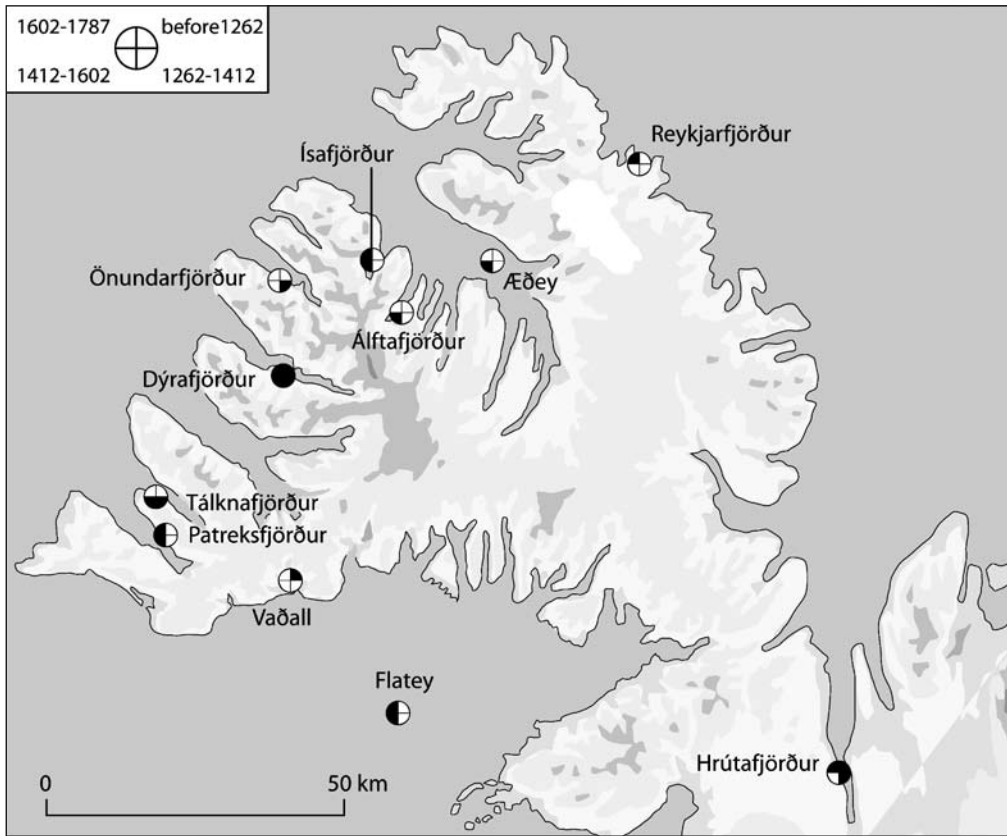


Fig. 6. Map of sites at Vestfirðir, the Westfjords. – Scale 1 : 1 250 000.

was a mixed economy, while during the 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century people primarily fished for export. The medieval homestead in Gjögur, situated only 3 km from Akurvík processed fish for household use, as well as preparing further fish for trade. By contrast, at the trading post of Gásir much less fishing took place. The results of the analysis show that ready prepared fish were brought there.<sup>50</sup>

### The changing character of trade

It is useful to take a long-term view of Icelandic trade in order to set the period between 1412 and 1602 into context. Iceland has a long coastline, but there are a limited number of sites which offer protection for ships against the storms of the north Atlantic. The sandy coast on the south of the country provides few sheltered bays suitable for mooring or anchoring. The best harbours in Iceland are found within sheltered

<sup>50</sup> EDVARDSSON 2005, 53 f., 59–64. – KRIVOGORSKAYA/PERDIKARIS/MCGOVERN 2005, 36 ff., 43–45. See the forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation of Ragnar Edvardsson: *The Development of Fishing and Marine Societies in Vestfirðir during the Medieval period*, to be submitted in 2008 at the City University of New York.

fjords and particularly in small bays behind natural spits. The suitability of the anchorage was not, of course, the only consideration. The ports had to be located in places frequented by merchants who were willing to exchange Icelandic produce for goods brought from abroad. The relationship of trading sites to the meeting places or *þing* sites, where much trade was conducted, and to ecclesiastical centres may also have been important. Few of the trading places were permanently inhabited before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They had no permanent installations and their persistence was entirely dependent upon their continuing use as places where incoming merchants and local traders found it worthwhile to come to exchange goods. It is, perhaps, surprising that some of the trading sites persisted for many hundreds of years. A number of the harbours from the period preceding the advent of the English continued in use into the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Equally, harbours used by German, Dutch and English ships in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century were also employed by Danish trading vessels during the period of monopoly trade from 1602 onwards.

Initially, that is from the late 9<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, much of the trade was in the hands of Icelanders themselves who built ships and sailed eastwards to Norway, but by 1200 almost all trade had fallen into the hands of foreigners and Icelanders had withdrawn from this activity.<sup>51</sup> This shift almost certainly contributed to the collapse of the price-fixing system which had prevailed in Iceland. Prices for goods had been fixed by chieftains or *goðar*, but this had provoked growing opposition from the only remaining merchants, Norwegians, who resented their intervention. Eventually, by the late 1210s, this even led to the verge of war. The change in the structure of trade may also have been responsible for the apparent fall in the number of havens used by trading vessels from about forty to only ten in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>52</sup> Foreign merchants were keen to exchange goods at known market centres and return home as soon as possible. It served their interests that commerce was concentrated in a small number of places. However, the decline in the number of trading sites may also reflect the increasing concentration of power in the hands of a smaller number of *goðar* or *höfðingjar*, for whom control could be more easily exerted in a more restricted number of places. Trade languished in the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and, for this reason, one of the clauses in the agreement of 1262–1264, which placed Iceland under the authority of the Norwegian king, was that six ships should sail each year for trade.<sup>53</sup>

The evidence for the location of trading sites in the Commonwealth period (up to 1262) is largely drawn from incidental references in sagas. There are a number of problems in using these as a source for historical evidence which are discussed further below. However, in the absence of other information, it is necessary to employ these to identify the location of landing places. As already mentioned, a list of harbours with evidence for trade has been compiled by Ebel.<sup>54</sup> The evidence for later

<sup>51</sup> GELSINGER 1981, 29–31. – ÞORLÁKSSON 1992b, 234–235.

<sup>52</sup> SIGURÐSSON 1999, 204.

<sup>53</sup> GELSINGER 1981, 43–44; 178–180.

<sup>54</sup> EBEL 1977, 8–10.

centuries is supplemented by information in annals for the period 1262–1412 and has been collected by Gelsinger, Marcus and Þorsteinsson.<sup>55</sup> These records of harbours are unlikely to be complete, but they do indicate that there were three main landing places, Eyrar, later called Eyrarbakki on the south coast, Hvítá to the east of Borgarfjörður on the west of Iceland and Gásir on Eyjafjörður on the north. In addition, Búðasandur on Hvalfjörður appears to have been an important port for a brief period in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (see Fig. 4, 5 and 9).<sup>56</sup> The picture becomes more difficult to understand after the arrival of English traders in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century and again with the growth in trade with German ships in the second half of the same century. Records of landing sites occur in annals, particular the New Annal (*Nýi Annáll*) which cover the period 1392 to 1430, and in a variety of other records, many of which have been printed in *Diplomatarium Islandicum*.<sup>57</sup> The sites of Hvítá and Gásir, which had been major centres of trade seem to become much less important at this time, as does the site of Búðasandur. All these places may have fallen into disuse. Conversely, the ports of Hafnarfjörður and Grindavík seem to develop in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and, with the advent of English fishing vessels, they became major centres of trade.<sup>58</sup> As we have already noted, a record of trading ports, or at least of those used by German trading vessels in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, is provided by a list compiled by Resen (see above). Most of these continued in use after the imposition of the monopoly in 1602, though Kumbaravogur on the north coast of Snæfellsnes operated as a port only until ca. 1662 and Hrútafjörður ceased sometime after that.<sup>59</sup> The records of ports used by vessels during the Danish monopoly will exclude, for obvious reasons, the sites of illegal transactions and the volume of this must have varied over time and from place to place.

The changes which took place in the trading sites in the period up to 1787 were a consequence of developments in the commodities traded, the character of the trading systems and the nature of landing places required by ships. It is necessary to examine each of these in turn. The largest export of Iceland before the 14<sup>th</sup> century was *vaðmál*, or coarse cloth. However, as Iceland became drawn into the wider networks of European trade, the cloth exports became less important than fish. The demand for dried fish (stockfish, *Flachfisch*, *fungia* (Latin) or *skreið*) had been partly met by Norwegian fishermen from the Lofoten islands and Finnmark, but Iceland offered a further source and one which during the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century was increasingly exploited by Hanseatic merchants.<sup>60</sup> Hanseatic control over Scandinavian trade grew during the 14<sup>th</sup> century and their position was consolidated first by a grant of 1343 which gave German merchants privileged trading rights in Norway, and in 1361 by a grant of monopoly on trade with Iceland.<sup>61</sup> The access to the wider markets, which

<sup>55</sup> GELSINGER 1981, 214 Nr. 36. – MARCUS 1957. – ÞORSTEINSSON / GRÍMSDÓTTIR 1989.

<sup>56</sup> ÞORKELSSON 1984; IDEM 2004.

<sup>57</sup> ANNÁLAR 1, 1–27. – DÍ 1–16.

<sup>58</sup> ÞORKELSSON 2004, 82–84. – SKÚLASON 1938. – ÞORSTEINSSON / GRÍMSDÓTTIR 1989, 145–148.

<sup>59</sup> GUNNARSSON 1983, 59.

<sup>60</sup> GELSINGER 1981, 183–184. – PERDIKARIS 1999.

<sup>61</sup> GJERSET 1923, 9. – GADE 1951, 51. – GELSINGER 1981, 184.



the Hanseatic merchants provided, stimulated the production of dried fish during the 14<sup>th</sup> century so that it became by far the largest export from northern Scandinavia. However, the growth of the supply from the Norwegian coast took place at the expense of Iceland whose trade experienced a sharp decline in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, so that, according to written sources, in some years not a single ship made the voyage to that country.<sup>62</sup>

The distribution of trading sites reflects the changing character of the exports. Before the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when the exports were largely of *vaðmál*, trading sites were found around most of the Icelandic coast. Sheep could be grazed in all coastal districts around the whole of the island and *vaðmál* was widely produced on many farms.<sup>63</sup> The change in the emphasis of exports from *vaðmál* to *skreið* in 14<sup>th</sup> century may have been a contributory factor to changes in the location of trading places. The richest fishing waters are to be found in the south-west of Iceland, particularly around Reykjanes; in the west, including Snæfellsnes and the Westfjords; and also to the north. Trade was increasingly concentrated in these areas, and this trend continued with the arrival of English vessels from around 1412. English vessels sailed to Iceland with the twin purposes of fishing, as well as trading for locally caught fish. The first entry recording the appearance of the English in Iceland mentions that they were fishermen, but the subsequent year a merchant vessel also arrived, together with thirty fishing vessels.<sup>64</sup>

The operation of trade in medieval Iceland remains largely obscure, but we cannot hope to understand it separately from the society in which it took place. Anthropological research teaches us that traded goods do not have an absolute value, but have an exchange value which is negotiated by the buyer and seller. Viewed in this way, it is clear that trade only is possible within the structures of the social institutions of the buyer and sellers and is not governed by universal economic rules. Most historians who have written on the subject of medieval trade in Iceland have agreed that it cannot be viewed purely as an economic transaction, but it is necessary to appreciate the social context. There is, however, a considerable divergence in the approaches to the way in which the economy is perceived. Some, and particularly Helgi Þorláksson, have adopted the substantivist perspective developed by Karl Polanyi. This sees trade in primitive societies taking place as much for the purposes of social prestige as for economic gain.<sup>65</sup> Other historians have adopted a view which is much closer to the culturalist perspective of social anthropology. They have attempted to look at the operation of trade entirely in terms of the cultural values of the participants without preconception.<sup>66</sup> This is, however, more complicated when we look at the trade between Icelanders on the one hand and those from German and England on the other where

<sup>62</sup> GADE 1951, 63. – DOLLINGER 1970, 242. – GELSINGER 1981, 191.

<sup>63</sup> NIELSON 1999, 266.

<sup>64</sup> ANNÁLAR 1, 18–19.

<sup>65</sup> POLANYI 1944. – ÞORLÁKSSON 1978; IDEM 1992b.

<sup>66</sup> MILLER 1986, 22–25. For a more detailed discussion of the substantivist and culturalist perspectives, see GUDEMAN 2001, 15–20.

Indirect trade	Wandering salesmen (or women) ( <i>mangari</i> )	Travelling by horse or on foot from farm to farm to sell items, mostly those he had made himself, for example blacksmith's goods and dairy products.	Njáls saga, cap. 49
	Wandering merchants	Worked by buying goods from the merchants that arrived from abroad by ship and then sold these goods by travelling from farm to farm. He also bartered items that he had obtained at the farms.	Hænsa-Þóris saga, cap. 1
Direct trade at the port	Direct trade with foreign merchants ( <i>kaupmaðr, farmaðr</i> )	Direct trade at the port between the foreign traders and the Icelandic farmers.	Grettis saga, cap. 59; Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu, cap. 2; Eyrbyggja saga, cap. 45 and 50; Egils saga, cap. 78; etc.
Direct trade on farms		Trade between farmers and merchants at the quarters where the traders stayed in Iceland.	Valla-Ljóts saga, cap. 6; Ljósvetninga saga, cap. 1; Vápnfirðinga saga, cap. 4.

Tab. 1. Forms of trade in Iceland during the Saga period (ca. 950–1250), based on saga literature and the *Grágás*; produced after EBEL 1977, 4.

there were two very different sets of value systems operating. One saw stockfish in terms of the labour costs of fishing and drying the fish, and the other considered the monetary value of stockfish when sold in the markets of Germany and England.

According to saga literature, two types of trade can be distinguished, namely indirect trade by travelling salesmen, who bought the goods from foreign traders and then travelled through the country and sold the items or self-made goods to the farmers and the direct trade between the farmers and the foreign merchants which took place at ports or farms (see *Table 1*). The latter was far more common and of far more importance. Once foreign traders reached Icelandic ground, they erected booths at the shore and sold their goods to people that came from the surrounding areas. Trade was conducted by barter, since there was no coinage in Iceland during the Middle Ages, and people either paid in goods, such as *vaðmál* and fish, or established credit. Many Icelandic sagas mention markets at ports, but their descriptions are rather stereotyped: *ok var þar mikil kaupstefna* (there was a big market) and *var þar kaupstaðr mikill* (there was a large trading place) are the most common formulas. Markets were also held during the *þing*-meetings.<sup>67</sup>

Several chapters of the *Grágás* deal with trade and business. The *Grágás*, cap. 166, states: people should use ports that have been in use for a while, if that was possible, and that it was allowed to use water and pasture for both the traders and their

<sup>67</sup> EBEL 1977, 1–8. – DENNIS/FOOTE/PERKINS 1980.

clients who came there. People were not allowed to stay with their horses for longer than three days. Everyone (except the Norwegians, who by the time the chapter was written down were ruling Iceland) had to pay harbour custom, which was given to the owner of the land on which the port was sited, who then was obliged to allocate space for the traders' and clients' goods. Owner of ships also had to pay for landing at the port.<sup>68</sup>

We have already noted that the sagas contain numerous references to trading places and to the arrival of traders in Iceland. Few would now treat the sagas as records of specific historical events, but it remains difficult to know how far this source type may be pressed to provide historical information. While the debate on the historicity of sagas continues, the best approach for us is that recommended by Wyatt who suggest that, 'any saga landscape reference should be examined for its narrative potential before considering its possible locative function'.<sup>69</sup> With this in mind we may consider one of the most informative description of a trading place and, by inference, the way trade operated in this period in the Life of Bishop Gudmund (*Saga Guðmundar biskups Arasonar*), probably written by Lambkár Þorgilsson shortly after the bishop's death in 1237. In 1219 the bishop had been captured and was being kept in a booth at the trading site of Hvítárvellir before he was banished to Norway. The booth was in that part of the site occupied by traders from the north of Iceland, an interesting detail which suggests something of the arrangement of such trading places. His captors were awaiting the arrival of a ship, and the bishop and his guards were sleeping in the booth when his rescuers arrived. The friends of the bishop unfastened the edges of the tent raised over the turf structure of the booth, so allowing him to escape.<sup>70</sup>

The exact site of Hvítárvellir, described as on the west of the river Hvítá and situated beneath Þjóðólfsholt, is now lost (*Fig. 9*). It was presumably similar in appearance to the trading site at Gásir which has been recently examined and that at Búðasandur discussed below. The site would have comprised a series of separate booths loosely arranged along trackways. The written evidence indicates that Gudmund was kept in a wing of a booth, which evidently consisted of interconnected rooms similar to those recorded in excavation at Gásir.<sup>71</sup> During the period of Gudmund's imprisonment, the site of Hvítárvellir was used for the summer only, but the author adds that the location of the booths was subsequently occupied by cottages. This seems to suggest that the impermanent buildings had been replaced by ones occupied all year round, though it is possible that these were not associated with trading. The clear impression of such trading sites is that, while they were temporary market places in which goods might be exchanged between Icelanders, their main purpose was to barter local produce with traders from abroad.

<sup>68</sup> EBEL 1977, 9–16.

<sup>69</sup> WYATT 2004, 282. – CLOVER 1986.

<sup>70</sup> TURVILLE-PETRE/OLSZEWSKA 1942, §§ 68–69.

<sup>71</sup> ROBERTS 2005, 9–24.

### The English

The arrival of English fishing and merchant vessels in about 1412 reinvigorated the Icelandic export trade which had sharply declined in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>72</sup> The goods exported from Iceland were mainly dried fish, as the English customs accounts make clear. These were obtained in exchange for basic goods, such as ground corn, beer and clothing; manufactured items, such as horseshoes, kettles, scissors and knives; various luxury items, such as haberdashery; and even religious icons.<sup>73</sup> Most of the English vessels making the Iceland voyage were *doggers* or *farcosts*, types of ships generally used for fishing, but which were also suitable for taking cargo.<sup>74</sup> From the outset, it seems that there was no sharp distinction between those ships coming to trade and those coming to fish. A list of the rates of exchange drawn up in 1420 sets the rates for goods brought from England in terms of their value in dried fish.<sup>75</sup> A vessel might bring goods to trade for dried fish to augment the fish caught while in Icelandic waters. The customs accounts show ships returning to English ports with both stockfish obtained in exchange with Icelanders and salt fish which was caught at sea and preserved in the barrels of salt brought for the purpose. For example, a ship named the *Christopher* returned to Hull in 1430 with 5400 salted fish, 60 stockfish, some fish oil and *vaðmál*.<sup>76</sup>

One of the crucial developments affecting the operation of English fishing vessels was the adoption of a process which allowed fresh fish to be processed onboard ships. The method, which has been incorrectly attributed to William Beukels, was rapidly taken up throughout Europe during the late 14<sup>th</sup> or early 15<sup>th</sup> century. The process involved the gutting of fish, splitting them open and packing them with salt in layers within sealed barrels. Its particular importance was that it enabled ships to stay in the fishing grounds for prolonged periods without returning to port to land their catch. This form of fish-processing is not specifically mentioned before a law of 1482, but it is likely to have been practised earlier. Certainly, in the 1540s when the Dunwich ship called the *James* was sent to sea, it was equipped with ‘heading knives’, ‘gutting knives’ and ‘splitting knives’ for cod.<sup>77</sup> This form of processing would have allowed fishing vessels in Iceland to be more productive, and, indeed, those ships in Icelandic water which were not engaged in trade needed only come inshore to seek shelter during stormy weather, and to land to obtain fresh water and food, and also supplies of fuel.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>72</sup> GELSINGER 1981, 184–186.

<sup>73</sup> DI 16, *passim*.

<sup>74</sup> HEATH 1968, 57–60.

<sup>75</sup> DI 4, 337. – DN 20, 753.

<sup>76</sup> CHILDS 2000, 22.

<sup>77</sup> UNGER 1978. – STATUTES OF THE REALM, 470–471. – COOPER 1939, 173. – JONES 2000, 109. – WEBB 1962, 81–82.

<sup>78</sup> JONES 2004, 402.

We do not know exactly how trading operated during the period between 1412 and 1602 and it may have been rather different for the English who were trading and fishing, and for the German vessels which were only trading. We have already seen that it is likely that places of trade were established wherever there were stocks of dried fish and it seems probable that agreed trading sites would have emerged very rapidly, so that both buyers and sellers could readily find each other. It would not have been efficient for foreign vessels to have put in at every place along the coast where there were fishing huts, and therefore stockfish must have been brought from the fishing stations to the market sites, where it was stored, perhaps in the great piles as high as houses which were described by early travellers.<sup>79</sup> Many of the established trading sites continued in use, most notably those on the Vestmannaeyjar (Westman Islands) and at Hafnarfjörður (*Fig. 2 and 5*). At the former, the merchants constructed turf-walled houses in Icelandic fashion in order to store goods for sale, buildings which English visitors described as ‘caves’. The implication seems to be that the trading process extended over some weeks or months.<sup>80</sup> Merchants and fishermen formed partnerships to fund English ships on the Iceland voyage. For example, one of the members of the crew of the *James* in 1545–1546 was Geoffrey Smith, a merchant, who took goods on the voyage to trade.<sup>81</sup> It seems likely that such merchants were left at a port to stay there and exchange goods for stockfish before being collected by their ship for the return journey. However, another type of less formal trade also took place. The crew on ships also took the opportunity when going ashore to exchange some of the excess stores for stockfish, a practice which the English king initially tried to prevent by limiting the stores carried on Iceland-bound ships to that necessary for the crew.<sup>82</sup> We can therefore suggest that trade by the English was carried out in two ways: more formal commerce by which merchants ‘set up shop’ in temporary buildings at established ports and waited until Icelanders arrived to barter stockfish for goods. A second type of commerce took place whenever the vessels put into port, sometimes at recognized trading places and other times at any place where there was a suitable anchorage.<sup>83</sup>

### The Germans

The arrival of German traders in Iceland in the 1430s did not initially have any significant impact on English ships, but within thirty years traders from the two countries were competing for supplies of stockfish. The competition for dried fish finally reached a crisis point in 1532 when sailors from the two countries fought openly in the harbours of Hafnarfjörður, Bäsendar and Grindavík (*Fig. 5*).<sup>84</sup> The following year, in order to prevent similar problems, fishing in Icelandic waters was made free to

<sup>79</sup> HAKLUYT 1903–1905, 4, 136. – MAGNUS 1998, 1084.

<sup>80</sup> WEBB 1962, 83. – BORDE 1870, 141–142. – DN 20, 757.

<sup>81</sup> COOPER 1939, 175–176. – CARUS-WILSON 1954, 133. – WEBB 1962, 84. – LITTLER 1979, 170.

<sup>82</sup> DAVIS 2004/2005 no. 824.

<sup>83</sup> For a later example of informal trade, see JONES 2006, 137f. where the naval ship, *Marigold* attempted to buy goods at Dýrafjörður.

<sup>84</sup> MAGNUS 1998, 1084–1085. – ÞORSTEINSSON 1957–1961, 81–82.



everyone, and merchants were warned not to mark stockfish before they had paid for them, as this was a cause of disputes.<sup>85</sup>

German ships made the voyage to Iceland with the sole intention of trading and were not evidently equipped to fish. The vessels usually left their home ports in the second half of March or the beginning of April. The journey from northern Germany to Iceland lasted about four weeks. The sailors stayed in Iceland for about two months and then returned to their home ports, particularly Bremen and Hamburg, arriving in July or August. The price of traded goods was each year determined in Iceland by a local representative and was confirmed by the following *Alþing*. Trade in Iceland began each year with the fixing of prices, and did not start before the 1<sup>st</sup> May.<sup>86</sup>

From 1562 the Danish king sold licences for Icelandic harbours to foreign merchants, with the result that permissions were continually issued to trade at specified Icelandic harbours or landing places. This system led to rivalries between German traders from different cities, for example, when a merchant from Bremen claimed to have the licence for a port also claimed by a merchant from Hamburg.<sup>87</sup> The recently discovered debt register of two merchants from Bremen, the brothers Cort and Clawes Monnickhusen, dating to 1557/1558 provides much detail of the structure and organization of trade. It contains about 110 names of Icelanders, such as Haldur Gisselsen and Sten Ereksone, all of them clients of the merchants who owned them fish which they had to pay the following year upon the return of the brothers to Iceland. This debt system worked in several ways: clients were driven into dependence, but on the other hand merchants had to return to Iceland the following year in order to redeem their debt, which again ensured the supply with goods from abroad. According to the document, the brothers bought a storehouse in Iceland in 1557 together with a booth, which they then sold the following year.<sup>88</sup>

Hanse traders probably never erected permanent buildings on Iceland, unlike the ones constructed, for example, in Bergen, Norway. If they did, they were torn down in 1608 on instruction by the Danish king Christian IV who ordered the destruction of all buildings that were owned by the Germans. But Baasch believes, that almost every port around Iceland's coastline had booths erected by merchants.<sup>89</sup> If we look at Olaus Magnus' *Carta Marina* (see *Fig. 1*), we see tents especially at the south coast of Iceland, next to a pile of stockfish. In his *History of the Northern People*, Magnus also gives another illustration of tents erected by merchants (*Fig. 7*).

The booths were mostly rectangular structures made of turf, forming earthworks generally of about 2 to 3 square metres in size, which formed the basis for a superstructure of tents (see *Fig. 3*). They were used during the summer season and left breached in the winter, so that they had to be renewed each year.<sup>90</sup> Evidence does ex-

<sup>85</sup> HASTRUP 1990, 39.

<sup>86</sup> BAASCH 1889, 63. – HOFMEISTER 2000, 41. – ELLMERS 1972, 250 table 1a.

<sup>87</sup> BAASCH 1889, 43 ff.

<sup>88</sup> HOFMEISTER 2001.

<sup>89</sup> BAASCH 1889, 108 f.

<sup>90</sup> ELLMERS 1972, 215. Tents and similar booths have also been in use in other northern European trading sites; see *IBID.* 215–217.



Fig. 7. Illustration by Olaus Magnus produced in the 16<sup>th</sup> century showing tents and a pile of stockfish at the coast of Iceland; after MAGNUS 1998, 1084.

ist that German merchants, like the English traders, erected and owned such booths made of earth with a tent on top. A document dating 1590 says that merchants from Bremen had houses and booths at a place called Fulwick for more than 80 years, a place which might be identified with Fúluvík close to Gautavík (see above).<sup>91</sup> The aforementioned register of two merchants from Bremen states that the merchants had bought and subsequently sold a storage house and a booth in 1557. It is very likely that those booths served to store, either the goods that were imported, or goods, such as fish, that were bartered by the Icelanders. At the three excavated trading sites of an earlier period, Gásir, Gautavík and Búðasandur, we can note that most of the earth-works are arranged in different groups. Ellmers suggested that each group belonged to a certain ship or merchant and that those booths had to be renewed each year again and were occupied by the same merchants again.<sup>92</sup>

We can identify other characteristics of the trading places used by the English, German and other foreign merchants. Some new trading sites may have been established, but many places had served a similar function in earlier centuries. For example, Búðir on the south side of Snæfellsnes was certainly visited by ships in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. This site was close to that known as Hraunhöfn which was mentioned in the Eyrbyggja Saga, a story apparently taking place in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century. Merchants were not encouraged to establish permanent settlements in Iceland and were periodically

<sup>91</sup> IBID.: '... ihre Kaufmansz heuser unnd Bodenn daselbst bey der Ladelstede, Fulwick genand, aufgeschlagenn gehabt unnd noch habenn.'

<sup>92</sup> IBID.

forbidden from spending the winter there by decree made by the *Alþing*, to prevent them creating trading communities of the type established by the Hanse at Bergen in Norway. However, the German merchants did build a church at Hafnarfjörður before 1537, and if the Danish monopoly on trade had not been established in 1602, this settlement might have developed into a foreign trading town.<sup>93</sup> Trading sites were entirely coastal and foreign traders did not generally attempt to venture inland markets, partly no doubt because the dried fish they sought was to be obtained on the coast. Exceptionally, in 1424 a group of English men took horses and rode inland '30 leagues' (actually, about 30km) to the church of Saurbær south of Eyjafjörður; their purpose was not to trade, but to capture the Danish officials there.<sup>94</sup>

### The ships

The final matter to consider in examining the development of the trading sites is the changing character of the ships. The terminology used for ships in the Middle Ages was not very precise and covered vessels of very different sizes. The main type of ships used by the English were *farcosts* and *doggers*, mentioned above. The size of these varied; the smallest were less than 16 tons burden, but they might be up to 80 tons.<sup>95</sup> A list of ships returning from Iceland to London and ports on the east coast of England in 1533 indicates that most vessels were in the region of 40 to 60 tons burden. We may use a simple formula proposed by Pawley that a ship of 20 tons burden carried a crew of five to eight sailors, and this should be increased by two for every additional 10 tons. A ship of 60 tons would therefore have needed a crew of around fifteen. An alternative figure suggested by Oppenheim is that eight men and a boy were required on fishing vessels for every 20 ton burden, giving a higher figure for a 60-ton ship of twenty-seven crew.<sup>96</sup> In fact, the Dunwich ship called the *James*, which has already been mentioned, carried a crew of 30, though we do not know the size of the vessel.

The English ships used for the Iceland voyage were relatively small by European standards and indeed the total number of large English ships, that is those over 100 tons, declined in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>97</sup> The Hanse merchants by contrast were using the ship type known as *cogs* (*Kogge*) which could carry between 80 and 200 tons. The almost right-angled stem of the cogs made it impossible to land on shallow beaches because they would have been stuck in the mud, but they were very suitable for tidal flats. They sailed as close as possible to the land at high tide and the vessels came to rest on the mud as the tide went out. It was thus easy to unload them, and the cogs did not need quays or harbour constructions.<sup>98</sup> By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup>

<sup>93</sup> SKÚLASON 1938, 194.

<sup>94</sup> DN 20, 757.

<sup>95</sup> CALENDAR 261. – MARCUS 1954. – LITTLER 1979, 125.

<sup>96</sup> LETTERS AND PAPERS no. 1380. – PAWLEY 1984, 107–108. – OPPENHEIM 1905, 218.

<sup>97</sup> SCAMMELL 1961, 331–334. – FRIEL 1995, 34, 202.

<sup>98</sup> ELLMERS 1972, 149.

century the cogs had been replaced by *hulk* (*Holk*) ships for the voyage to Iceland, a ship type similar to the cogs but with more masts and which could carry up to 300 tons. At about this time the Hanseatic shipyards were also beginning to construct much larger caravel-built (*Kraweel*) vessels which used planks set edge to edge. The story of the abandonment at Danzig in 1462 of the French ship, Saint Pierre of La Rochelle, is well known. This ship, which may have carried as much as 700 tons, was left by its captain as the result of a dispute, and the Danzig shipbuilders took the opportunity to study its method of construction closely, and then to copy it. Ships of this type, though not as large, were rapidly adopted for trade between Lübeck and Bergen. Other ship types in use were the *Balinger*, *Bojer*, and *Rahsegel* (square rig).<sup>99</sup>

Shallow-draught vessels might be pulled ashore, or alternatively might come to rest on the mud when the tide receded, as we have noted was the common practice for the flat-bottomed cogs. However, by the 15<sup>th</sup> century, larger vessels required water-fronts in order to dock, or had to be anchored in deeper water and then loaded from small boats or lighters which brought goods from the shore. By this date the main requirement for a port was that it offered a deep and well-protected anchorage for ships and a sheltered beach from which small boats could ferry goods to the larger ships at anchor.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century most German or Hanseatic ships sailing to Iceland departed from Hamburg. A society of *Icelandfarers* was established there around 1500 and subsequently dominated trade with Iceland.<sup>100</sup> Several merchants and sailors formed partnerships to travel to Iceland in a similar manner to those in England.<sup>101</sup> The accounts of the *Icelandfarers* tell us, that the larger ships carried about 40 to 60 persons: 10 to 15 of them merchants, 15 to 30 servants or helpers for the merchants, and 10 to 20 sailors. Smaller vessels sailed with 12 to 21 men. About 25 ships each year sailed from Hamburg to Iceland in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which means that between May and July about 750 people from the Hanse towns stayed in Iceland.<sup>102</sup>

#### New evidence for places of trade and the problems of identification

During the 1960s and 1970s the Örnefnastofnun Íslands, or Icelandic place-name institute made a collection of the local names from farms within the country. The records that were compiled are not fully computerized and so it is not possible yet to provide a complete account of relevant place-name elements. Nevertheless, the place-names do provide a useful preliminary guide to places associated with foreigners (see Table 2 and Fig. 8). It is necessary to distinguish three types of names. First are those indicating settlements, particularly those including the element *búð*, meaning ‘booth, small house or camp’, such as *Englendingabúðir*, ‘English men’s booths’. The element can refer to either a fishing booth or a booth used for trading. A second type

<sup>99</sup> UNGER 1978, 224–225. – HOFMEISTER 2000, 43.

<sup>100</sup> THORSTEINSSON 1972, 181. – HOFMEISTER 2000, 35.

<sup>101</sup> IDEM 2001, 22.

<sup>102</sup> IDEM 2000, 41 ff. – ELLMERS 1972, 75, 262.

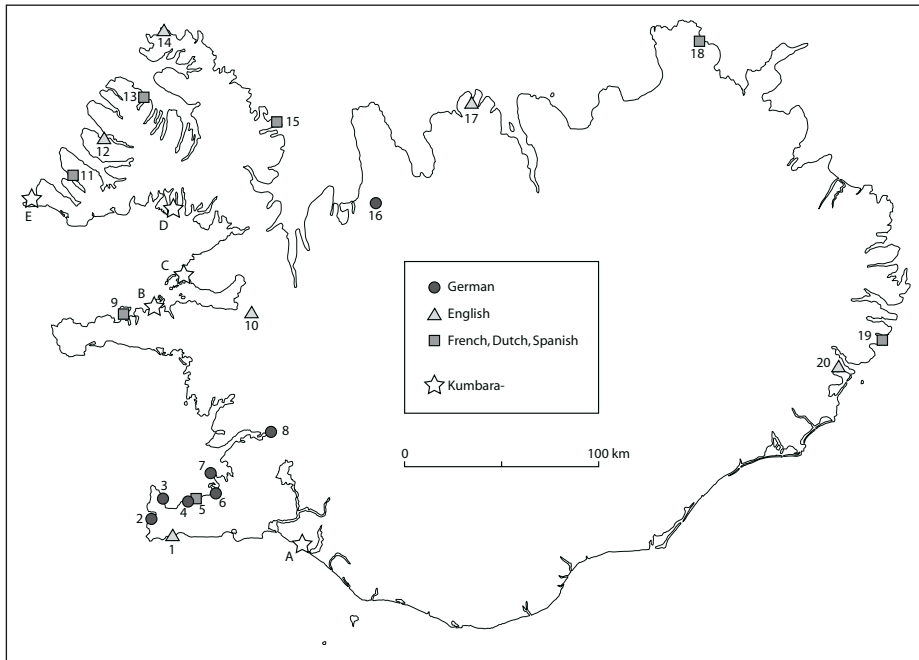


Fig. 8. Map of place-names incorporating the names of foreigners (for key, see Table 2), and names with the element Kumbara-: A – Kumbaravogur near Stokkseyri, B – Kumbaravogur near Bjarnarhöfn, C – Kumbaravogur in Skarðsströnd, D – Kumbaravogur in Svínanes, E – Kumbarapollur near Breiðavík. Scale 1:4 000 000.

are those indicating a harbour (*höfn*) or landing place (*vör*). One example is *Pýskavör* near to Keflavík which means ‘the landing place of Germans’. A final category comprises names which imply the presence of foreigners, but do not necessarily indicate a trading site, and therefore are the least useful for the present survey. *Pýskihvammur*, ‘German vale’, which lies 3 km inland from the head of Hvalfjörður is not certainly a place of trade. *Pýskalaut*, which means ‘German hollow’, and lies about 20 km from the sea on the north of Iceland, is also unlikely to be a trading settlement.

The elements *Pýsk-* or *Pýzk-*, meaning ‘German’, and the borrowed element *Junk-ara-* (young German fisherman) indicate the presence of Hanseatic traders. It is significant that most of these are found around the Reykjanes peninsula where historical sources indicate that Hanseatic merchants were most active. For example, *Pýskabúð*, ‘German hut’ is found close to the bay at Straumur where it is recorded in 1491 that there were ‘Easterling’ or German traders.<sup>103</sup>

Place-names associated with the English, those containing the elements *Ensk-* or *Englendinga-*, are more widely scattered. *Englendingabúðir* on Siglufjörður on the north coast of Iceland seems a promising guide to a trading site. *Engelskalág*, ‘English hollow’ near Grindavík is significant because it is close to the possible 16<sup>th</sup>-century harbour at Stórabót. This is supposed to have been the place where the English were attacked by German merchants in June 1532 and close to which is thought to have

<sup>103</sup> DI 11, 43.



## Þýsk- / Þýzk- (German, and other place-name mentioning Germans or Hanse)

2. *Junkaragerði* (young men's fence), Hafnahreppur. The element Junkara- is borrowed from Middle Low German (mittelpaltdeutsch) and probably refers to young fisherman of German origin
3. *Þýskavör* (German landing-place), Keflavík, Keflavíkurhreppur
4. *Þýskubúðir* / *Búðirnar* (German booths, the booths), *Þýskubúðarflatir* (the German booth's flat land), Vatnsleysa, Vatnsleysustrandarhreppur
6. *Þýskabúð* or *Þýskubúð* (German booth), and many derived names: *Þýskubúðarstígur*, *Þýskubúðarkampur*, *Þýskubúðarvör*, *Þýskubúðartún*, *Þýskubúðargarður*, Straumur, Gullbringusýsla
7. *Þýskhús* (German house), Nes, Seltjarnarneshreppur
8. *Þýskihvammur* (German vale), Stóri-Botn, Hvalfjarðarstrandarhreppur
16. *Þýskalaut* (German hollow), Æsustaðir, Bólstaðarhlíðarhreppur

## Ensk- / Englendinga- (English)

1. *Engelskalág* (English hollow), Járngerðarstaðir, Grindavíkurhreppur
10. *Engelskalág* (English hollow), Breiðabólstaður, Miðdalahreppur
12. *Engelskabót* (English cove) Sveinseyri, Þingeyri. This name may derive from the activity of the English (British) navy in the Second World War, or may be of earlier origin
14. *Engelskur* (English), Atlastaðir, Snæfjallahreppur
17. *Englendingabúðir* (Englishmen's booths), Höfn, Siglufjörður
20. *Engelskatjörn* (English lake), Búlandsnes, Geithellnahreppur

## Fransk- (French)

5. *Franskmannakríki* (Frenchmen's creek), Vatnsleysustrandarhreppur
9. *Franskavík* (French cove), Búðir, Eyrarsveit
13. *Franskabúð* (French booth), Ísafjörður

## Holland- (Dutch)

11. *Hollenskiblettur* (Dutch place), *Hollenskíteigur* (Dutch paddock), Krossadalur, Tálknafjarðarhreppur
18. *Hollendingabúðir* (Dutch booths), Raufarhöfn, Raufarhafnarhreppur

## Spán- / Spánsk- (Spanish)

15. *Spanski sjórinn* (Spanish sea), Nes, Selvogshreppur
19. *Spanskivogur* (Spanish bay), Heyklif, Stöðvarhreppur

Tab.2. Icelandic place names referring to foreigners, based on information from Örnefnastofnun Íslands (Icelandic Place-Name Institute). The numbers refer to the sites marked on Fig. 8.

been the site of booths belonging to merchants from King's Lynn in England.<sup>104</sup> Other names are more problematic. *Engelskabót*, 'English cove', in the Westfjords might take its name from naval activity during the Second World War, though this is very uncertain. Another instance of the place-name *Engelskalág*, 'English hollow', in this case some 16 km from the east end of Breiðafjörður, poses the same problems as the 'German' names in a similar inland locations.

It is not certain whether place-names associated with the Irish, Dutch, French and Spanish originated during the period between ca. 1412 and 1602. Problems of linguis-

<sup>104</sup> HREIÐARSDÓTTIR / ÞÓR 1994, 246–247.

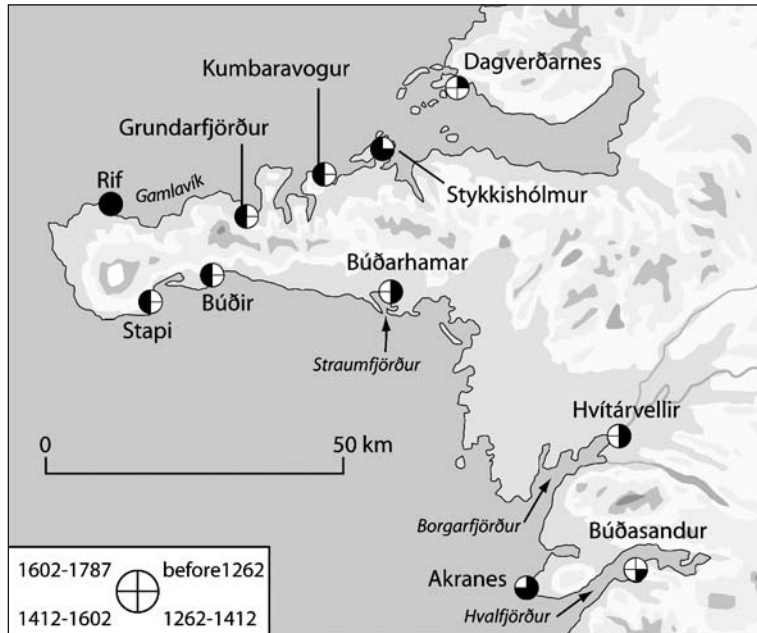


Fig. 9. Map of sites at Snæfellsnes peninsula. – Scale 1 : 1 250 000.

tic communication between Icelanders and Europeans, and a poor knowledge of the geography of Europe may mean that foreigners were ascribed the wrong nationality. Place-names with *Íra*- pose further difficulties because, though they may indicate places which were connected with peoples perceived as Irish, the element can be confused with *Ýra*-, meaning ‘water spray’. Furthermore, the *Íra*- place-names may not be connected with trading in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, but with Irish settlers from the Landnám period, or even with Irish hermits pre-dating the Norse settlement of Iceland. These names are widely scattered, although there are few on the south coast, but here suitable places for landing ships are rare. Some of the place-names associated with the Spanish and French almost certainly originated in the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century when whaling ships from those countries were operating in Icelandic waters.<sup>105</sup>

Place-names containing reference to foreigners do not exhaust the possible toponymic guides to trading and fishing. Near the farm of Bjarnarhöfn on Snæfellsnes peninsula is a headland named Kaupstaðartangi, ‘traders foreland’. The adjoining bay named Kumbaravogur between the headland and an island to the east provided a sheltered, deep-water anchorage for ships. Names containing the element *Kumbara*- are difficult to understand. The presence of medial *-b-* suggests that it might come from the English element *Cumbre* meaning ‘Briton’; it is rather less likely to come from *Cymry* suggesting the presence of Welsh sailors, something which in any case is not very likely on historical grounds. These names were thought to be derived from traders from Cumberland in England, but this is an area without any notable ports and hardly likely to be connected with Icelandic fishing or trade. However, an alternative

<sup>105</sup> EDVARDSSON / RAFNSSON 2006, 10.

and perhaps more likely interpretation given later usage is that the element refers to ships with masts and more specifically (foreign) trading vessels or cogs.<sup>106</sup> It is noteworthy that the element is persistently found compounded with the element *vogur*, 'bay'. Most of these names occur around Breiðafjörður, with a single further example on the south coast near Stokkseyri (see Fig. 8).

These different place-names and elements used both in historical and current sources make clear that the localization of trading sites is very difficult.<sup>107</sup> Even when a site is identified on the ground, there is no certainty that such a place is connected with the place-names meaning. In 2005 the FSÍ conducted a rescue excavation at Búðatangi at Hrísey in Eyjafjörður (Fig. 8). The place-name means 'foreland of the booths'. The structures turned out to be remains of concrete from 20<sup>th</sup>-century buildings, and no older remains were found.<sup>108</sup>

### Surveyed sites

During the first year of work a number of sites were visited to examine the state and character of the earthworks and three of those were chosen for detailed survey. The chosen sites were not necessarily those used for trade in the period between 1412 and 1602: examples were selected also of earlier and later date. The sites were recorded using differential Geographical Position by Satellite (GPS). A fixed receiver is set up on a tripod and the mobile receiver mounted on a backpack. The surveyor walks regularly spaced transects across the site to record the contours of the ground. This method of survey is a compromise between greater accuracy and speed of survey. Its rapidity of survey allows not only the site itself to be surveyed, but also its wider setting. However, the use of a backpack produces slight inaccuracies since the receiver is not always directly above the surveyor's feet. The inaccuracies are relatively small and still allow a clear picture of the earthworks to be obtained. The resulting plans, plus those from other sites which it is intended to survey in future years, and the study of the results from excavated sites, will allow a comparative analysis of the location and character of trading places. The results from the first year of work permit some preliminary conclusions to be drawn about the character of trading sites.

### Búðarhamar near Stakkhamar, Snæfellsnes

One of the sites surveyed lies on the farm of Stakkhamar which is situated on the south side of the Snæfellsnes peninsula. A long coastal bar, Stakkhamarsnes, projects eastwards from near the farmstead and cuts off a tidal lagoon known as Löngufjörur or Straumfjörður. A river, known as Straumfjarðará, flows into the lagoon from the north. An outcrop of rock stands at the point the river enters the fjord and on it is the possible trading site of Búðarhamar (Fig. 10). This place is mentioned in the Eyr-

<sup>106</sup> HALLDÓRSSON 1992 *sub verba* Kumbari.

<sup>107</sup> See also HOFMEISTER 2000, 40.

<sup>108</sup> See also Annual Report 2005 of Fornleifastofnun Íslands, 49.

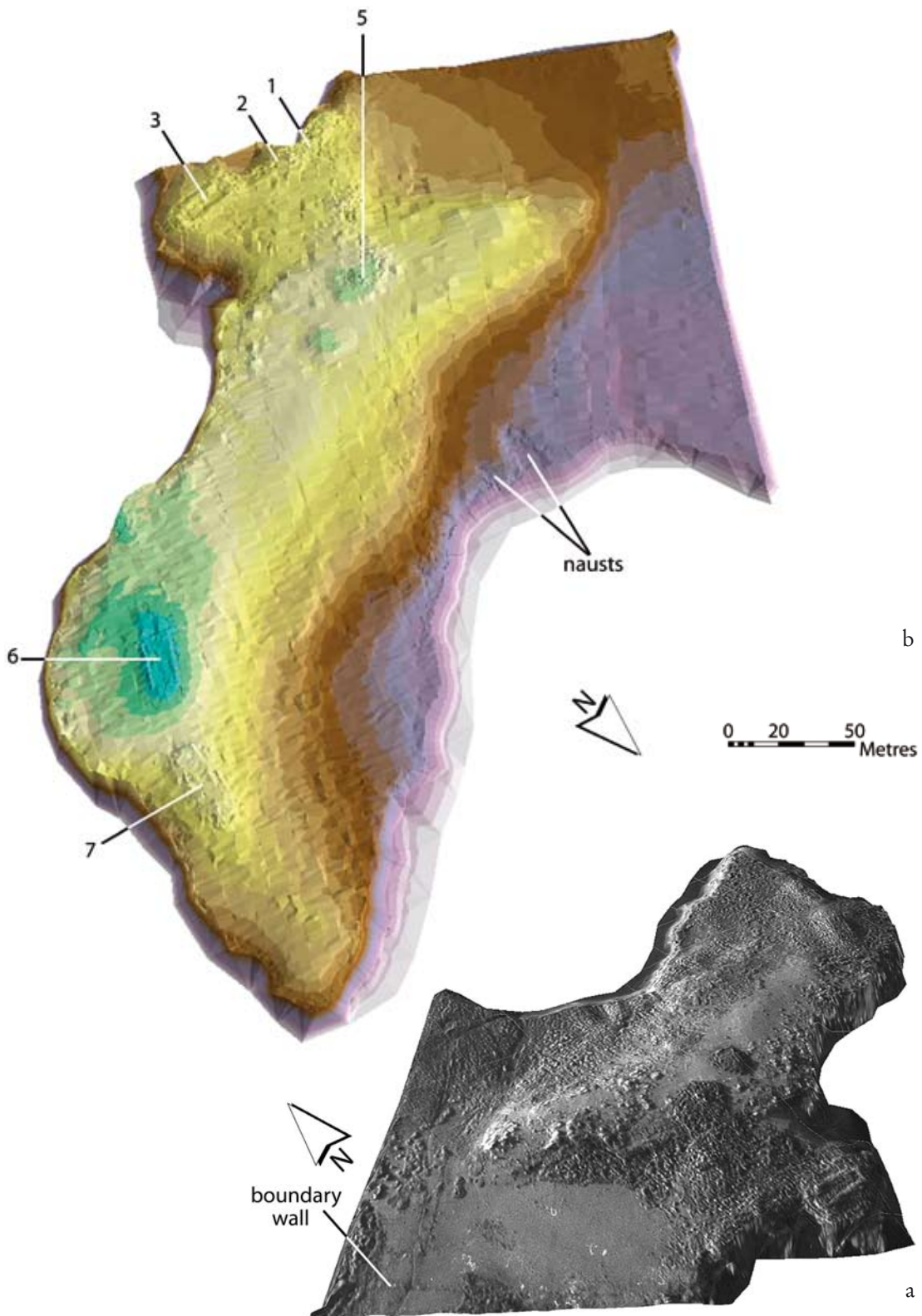


Fig. 10. Búðarhamar near Stakkhamar, south coast of Snæfellsnes peninsula. Rectified aerial photograph with ruins of a possible trading site, looking south-east (a), and digital terrain model looking east (b). The buildings are numbered and described in text. Vertical exaggeration  $\times 1.5$ . – Scale 1:2500.





Fig. 11. The prominent cliff of Búðarhamar, photographed at low tide looking south-west, with the path-way down to the beach (centre-left).

byggja Saga where Norwegian merchants who occupied booths on the site prepared their ship for the voyage. The Skálholt Annals record that in 1347 a ship came from Greenland and landed in Straumfjörður but it is unclear where exactly in the fjord this happened.<sup>109</sup>

Búðarhamar is surrounded on two sides by low cliffs which give the site its name (*hamar*, cliff). It is on a tongue of land with the fjord to the south, the river to the east, an inlet to the north and the limits of the site on the west are marked by traces of a wall. The wall runs across the tongue from the cliff as far as the bog on the north side. A steep path leads down from close by the wall to a beach and possible landing point (*Fig. 11*). A deeper water anchorage might be found on the east of the site in the river, and the inlet to the north provides a further place for mooring boats. Above this inlet are one, and possibly two hollows marking the positions of naust-type boat houses. On the top of the rock which forms the site is a cairn built of stone. There are a number of buildings on the south side of the site, all of which had a clear view of the entrance into Straumfjörður from the open sea. The numeration of the buildings follows that of Sigurður Vigfússon, who first located the ruins in 1893, and Sædís Gunnarsdóttir, who again in 2005 mapped the ruins.<sup>110</sup> In 1897 also Brynjúlfur Jónsson had looked at the ruins and he speculated whether the remains could belong to either

<sup>109</sup> ÍSLENZK FORN RIT 4, cap. 39. – GUNNARSDÓTTIR 2005.

<sup>110</sup> VIGFÚSSON 1893, 66 f. – GUNNARSDÓTTIR 2005.



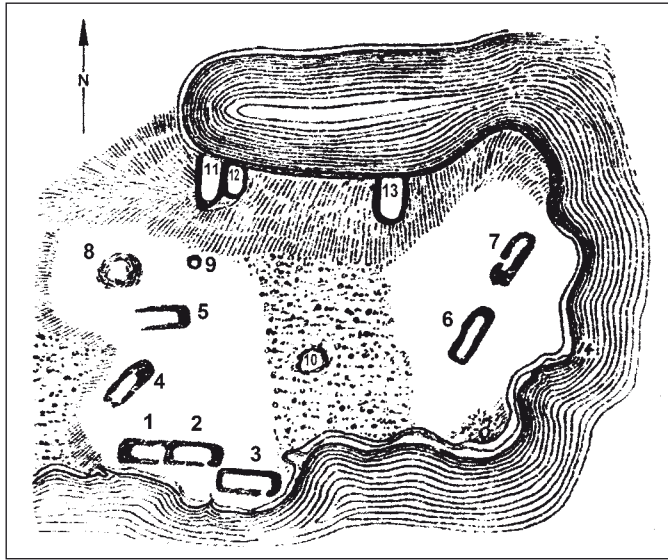


Fig. 12. The ruins of Búðarhamar, recorded in 1897 by Brynjúlfur Jónsson; after JÓNSSON 1897.

a trading or assembly site or both (*Fig. 12*).<sup>111</sup> Buildings 1 and 2 are contiguous and stand on the very edge of the cliff. Building 3 is long with well-defined turf walls and some evidence of stone facing on the west wall. Building 5 is smaller and set higher up the mound and may have a separate room to the north-east. Building 6 is long, but not well-defined and runs parallel to the cliff edge, but is set back from it by about 15 metres. Building 7 which lies close by is similar in character and possibly has an out-building immediately to the north.

#### Búðasandur / Maríuhöfn in Hvalfjörður

The second site is that of Búðasandur or Maríuhöfn (see above) which lies on the landward side of a storm beach to the west of the mountain of Reynivallaháls on Hvalfjörður. The inlet behind the beach is now very shallow, but it may have been deep enough during the Middle Ages to allow it to be used for boats (*Fig. 13*). The documentary evidence for the site is supported by the results of excavations by Þorkelsson. A sample from one of the buildings gave a calibrated radiocarbon date of 1245 and 1375 at one sigma. The work also showed that the buildings were buried beneath a tephra layer (K-1500) dating to about 1490.<sup>112</sup>

Þorkelsson divided the area of earthworks into eight parts. He excavated three narrow cuttings across the mounds and dug one larger area over a period from 1983–1985. The first cutting was dug across a deep mound. Cutting 2 was made across a stone wall between two groups of booths. Cutting 3 was dug across a building identified as

<sup>111</sup> JÓNSSON 1897, 12f.

<sup>112</sup> ÞORKELSSON 2004, 48–50.



Fig. 13. Búðasandur/Maríuhöfn in Hvalfjörður, south-west Iceland. View over the site looking north-west. The ruins are situated in front of the trees in the centre of the picture.

a naust from the central depression for the keel which was 12.5 m in length. The excavated area identified three contiguous booths separated by walls of turf. In the corner of the western booth was a small depression used for cooking.<sup>113</sup> Few artefacts were discovered and none could be particularly associated with trade and so it remains possible that the whole settlement could have been a fishing station.

The new survey confirmed the pattern of buildings identified by Þorkelsson and located the trenches which he had excavated. The booths occupy a long strip which run parallel to the inlet, with a few buildings on the north side cut into the spur of land lying to the north-west (*Fig. 14*). They are sited, insofar as possible, to be on high land, partly no doubt to avoid the type of storm surges which took place in August 1982 and is illustrated by Þorkelsson.<sup>114</sup> Events of this type may explain why the building thought to be a naust or boat house was orientated along the ridge and at right angles to the inlet, rather than facing it, since it would have reduced the chance that a boat might be swept away.

<sup>113</sup> *IBID.* 26–43.

<sup>114</sup> *IDEM* 1984, 104.

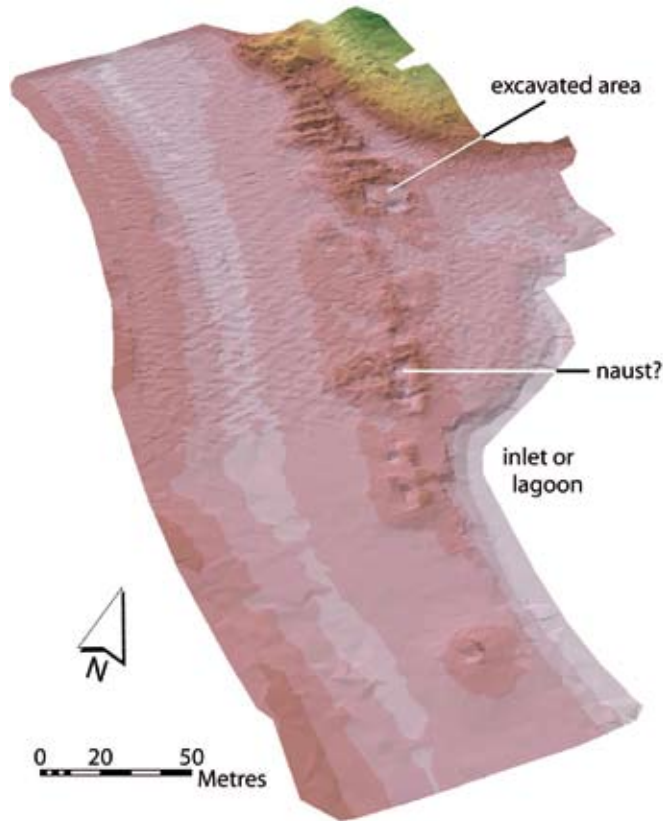


Fig. 14. Digital terrain model of Búðasandur/Maríuhöfn. The remains of the booths stretch south-east besides the lagoon to the east. The trench excavated by Þorkelsson is also visible. Vertical exaggeration  $\times 1.5$ . – Scale 1:2 500.

#### Kumbaravogur near Bjarnarhöfn, Snæfellsnes

The third site examined in detail lay on the north side of Snæfellsnes near to the church and farmstead of Bjarnarhöfn. The farmstead takes its name from a nearby harbour. The harbour used by German and English traders, however, was called Kumbaravogur, a place-name discussed above. The place is mentioned in the late 16<sup>th</sup>-century list compiled by Resen (see above) and is marked on the first accurate map of Iceland by Abraham Ortelius published in 1590, but probably based upon information obtained from Guðbrandur Þorláksson, bishop of Hólar. During the Danish trade monopoly, licences for the trading sites at Kumbaravogur and the nearby village of Grundarfjörður were issued as a set together, and it is most likely that this was also the case in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. We do not know of all the licences issued for Kumbaravogur, but in 1585 Count Hans von Oldenburg got the licence for *Kummerwage* from the Danish king. Until that time, Kumbaravogur had been visited mostly by merchants from Bremen.<sup>115</sup> While Grundarfjörður was always a settlement, Kumbaravogur was

<sup>115</sup> HOFMEISTER 2000, 39. – DI 15, 12.



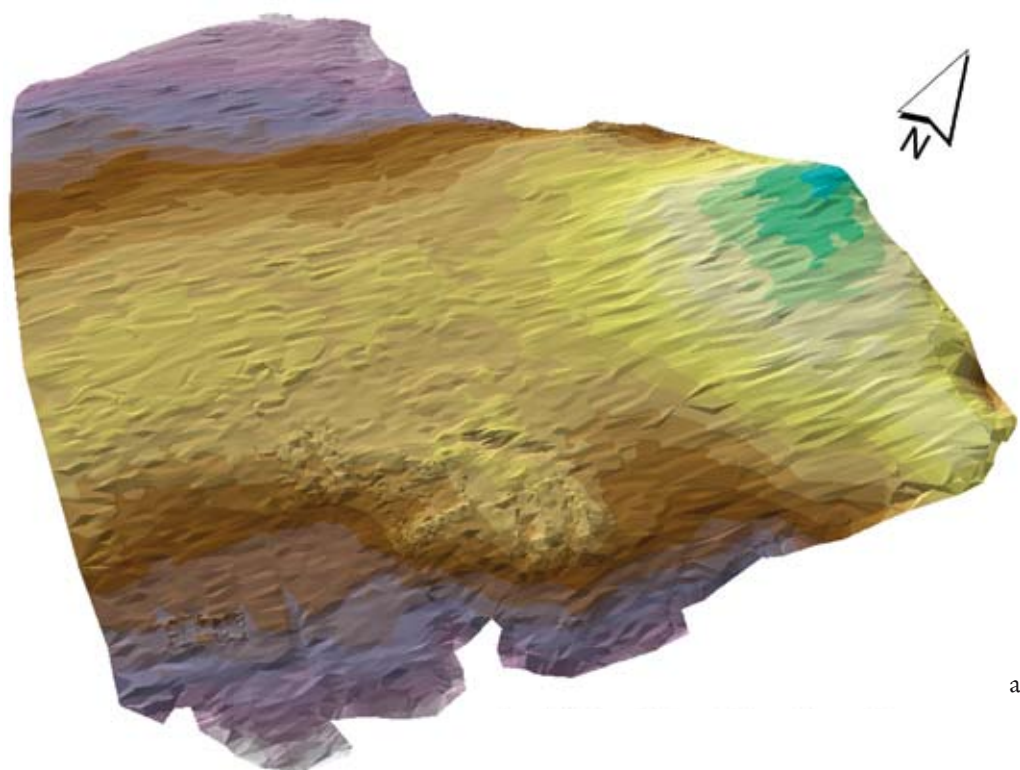
Fig. 15. The bay of Kumbaravogur near Bjarnarhöfn, northern coast of Snæfellsnes. Photograph taken at low tide, facing south-west. The ruins are located to the right. The prominent mountain Guðnýjarsstaðahyrna was a good landmark for sailors.

a landing place without any people living there continuously. The close-by farm Bjarnarhöfn was the place where people lived. According to written sources, trade at Kumbaravogur was considerable. The harbour was abandoned in 1662 and trade went on at Grundarfjörður, but despite that Kumbaravogur continues to be mentioned in connection with either Grundarfjörður or Stykkishólmur through most of the period of the trade monopoly. After 1733 Kumbaravogur is not mentioned further.<sup>116</sup>

The anchorage lies in a bay formed by the headland of Kaupstaðartangi to the west and the tidal island of Landey on the east (*Fig. 15*). There is a beach on the south side of the bay, while the north opens into Breiðafjörður. The site of the trading settlement is likely to be the remains lying on Kaupstaðartangi, but the farmer also noted that there were other remains on Landey, though it was not possible to examine these. The remains on Kaupstaðartangi are situated both to overlook the bay and also to have views westwards down the fjord (*Fig. 16*). There is one building with a width of about 2.2m and walls of turf faced with stone. The entrance in the side wall faces south-east to the bay. A short distance to the north-east is a square enclosure marked by three sides which are clear and a possible fourth side on the south-west which is less clear (*Fig. 17*). There is a possible small square annex to the enclosure on the north-west marked by an area without tussocks of grass. The enclosure is located just

<sup>116</sup> AÐILS 1971, 280f.





0 5 10 20 30 40 50 Metres

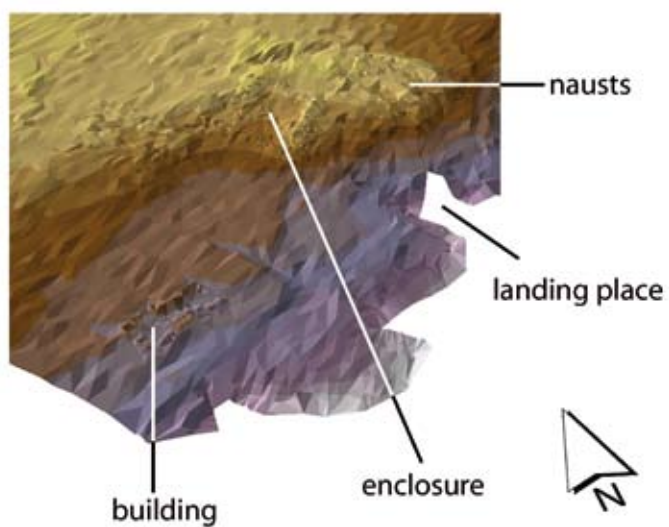


Fig. 16. Digital terrain model of Kumbaravogur showing the surveyed areas (a) and a detail with the ruins (b). Vertical exaggeration  $\times 1.5$ . – Scale 1:1 000.



Fig. 17. The earthworks of the enclosure at Kumbaravogur.

above a very small cove which could have been used for drawing up boats. We might speculate that the purpose of the enclosure was to store stockfish for exchange. To the north-west of the enclosure are two further adjoining buildings with stone and turf walls. The south-east ends of both buildings were open suggesting that they may have been nausts.

#### A comparison of the sites

All three sites are very different in character. Búðasandur on Hvalfjörður is most similar to the trading site at Gásir with its numerous booths arranged parallel to the shore and occupying a sheltered site protected by a spit from the main fjord. Gásir and Búðasandur provided safe anchorages for ships to be moored and also gently shelving beaches on which they could be drawn up. Both these sites are evidently similar to the descriptions of trading sites in *Saga Guðmundar biskups Arasonar* which indicates there were a large number of small, temporary buildings occupied by those buying and selling goods. The trading site at Búðarhamar is different both in its location and the character of the buildings. It was set at the back of a lagoon which in the Middle Ages may have been shallow and only navigable at high tide: certainly, its tidal character is suggested by its name – Straumfjörður (*straumur*, tide). The buildings on the site were less numerous and they were generally larger than the booths of, for example, Gásir, in spite of the name of the site. Furthermore, the site was not open in



the manner of those at Gásir and Búðasandur, but was separated from the adjoining land with a low wall. It is uncertain whether this had a symbolic importance or practical value.

The setting of the third site at Kumbaravogur is much more like the location we might expect for a modern port. It is a deep-water anchorage which was not set behind a coastal barrier, but was located in a sheltered bay at the edge of the fjord. The substantial depth of water required for the larger ships used in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries was a crucial factor and may go a considerable way to explain why earlier sites fell out of use. Conversely, many of the later sites have continued to serve as maritime ports until the present day. The deep-water anchorages of Heimaey on the Vestmannaeyjar or Grindavík, amongst others, have meant that they have had a continuing history of use since at least the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

### Discussion and future work

A preliminary survey, such as this, can only outline the problem and suggest the key questions which need to be investigated. It cannot attempt to answer all the problems which it has raised. The study has begun to address the location of trading sites as a first step to explaining the character of trade. There are a number of problems in identifying trading sites which have been outlined above. Historical sources rarely provide sufficient details to locate the site precisely. At the best, they may indicate its location, but often they only identify the fjord in which it was situated. We cannot always be certain whether the two names refer to a single trading site, or two separate ones. It seems reasonable clear that 'Gamelwick' (Gamlavík in Snæfellsnes), which was the preferred name of English sailors, was the same as Ríf, the name that Hanseatic merchants used, but it is not always so straightforward.<sup>117</sup> The identification of Icelandic place-names from the corrupt forms adopted by English and German sailors can also present problems. Much useful work has been done by Jones on the names used for the coastal features by English fishermen, but difficulties still remain.<sup>118</sup> For example, the identification of 'Clayshewyck', mentioned in a 16<sup>th</sup>-century source is still uncertain.

We have treated the evidence from historical sources, from place-names and from archaeology as three complementary strands. Often the three types of evidence do support each other, as at Kumbaravogur near Bjarnarhöfn in Snæfellsnes, where the presence of a trading site is indicated by historical records, implied by the place-names and the earthworks can be identified on the ground. However, this is not always the case, and we should be aware of relying too heavily upon written evidence. It is very likely that there were more 16<sup>th</sup>-century trading sites than those identified by Baasch from documentary sources, or recorded by Resen. For example, a tradition recorded in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century suggested that German merchants had used a

<sup>117</sup> DI 16, 285.

<sup>118</sup> JONES 2004.

site at Sigmundareyri on the north side of Svínanesfjall in the Westfjords for trade.<sup>119</sup> Aerial photographs show the earthworks of booths which were apparently used by them. It may also be significant that there is the place-name Kumbaravogur on the south end of Svínanesfjall, although some distance from the site of the booths. All these fragments of evidence point to the presence of a trading site in this location, though none is recorded in historical records.

It is unfortunate that we cannot yet recognize trading sites from the form of their earthworks alone. The 'typical Icelandic trading sites' identified from their groups of booths may not, in fact, be a very common type, and even if they turn out to be characteristic of the period before ca. 1412, it is not certain that the sites used by German and English traders had a similar pattern. Equally, we cannot yet distinguish temporary houses used by traders from the seasonal buildings (*verbúðir*) used by fishermen and which became increasingly common from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The problem is also not clear when we consider the site of Búðarhamar, for its ruins that do not fit into the pattern of contemporary trading settlements. The question whether this was a trading site or not needs to be investigated further. One of the aims of the future fieldwork must be to attempt to establish the characteristic features of late medieval trading sites, starting first with the documented examples. It is hoped that in this way it will be possible to recognize other examples of earthworks of trading settlements, even when they are not recorded in written records.

The task of identifying trading sites is not an end in itself, but the means to an end. The more significant question which will need to be addressed is that of the operation of trade. At present we have very little understanding of the way in which trade was managed, both in assembling stockfish for sale to German and English merchants, and in distributing the imported goods. A site such as Kumbaravogur in Snæfellsnes, which has remarkably few buildings presents a very strong contrast for example, to the earlier site of Gásir. This may be due to the scale of commerce in the two places, but it is just as likely to be the result of the rather different character of trade in the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The numerous small booths at Gásir, like those at Hvítárvellir, were presumably occupied by Icelandic merchants hoping to exchange goods and also by foreign merchants seeking to exchange their wares. These were true market places, even though the price of goods had been fixed by chieftains and later by *sýslumenn* or local sheriffs. The absence of similar buildings at Kumbaravogur seems to indicate that exchange was operating in a rather different manner. Instead of widespread participation, we may speculate that the business of trade may have been handled by a single Icelandic merchant or even farmer who gathered together stockfish for sale and then distributed the foreign goods obtained in exchange. Clearly, it would be unwise to argue this too strongly on the evidence of two sites which might not be strictly comparable, but it is worth raising this for future consideration.

Trading sites are important not merely because of their economic importance, but because they mark the places where different cultures came together to negotiate and

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<sup>119</sup> SKÚLASON 1974, 245.

exchange goods. The economic effects of the exchange are not seen in the trading places themselves, but in the markets of England and north Germany where the merchants sold the stockfish and *vaðmál* and amassed their wealth, and on the farms of Iceland where foreign goods were used and consumed. The effects of the exchanges made at the trading sites spread outwards like ripples on a pond effecting profound changes. It is for this reason that the activities which took place on desolate Icelandic shores deserve careful archaeological study.

### Acknowledgements

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### Zusammenfassung: Englische und Hanseatische Handelsplätze und Fischerei-Siedlungen im mittelalterlichen Island. Ein erster Untersuchungsbericht

Im Sommer 2006 begann ein mehrjähriges internationales Forschungsprojekt, das den Handel Islands mit England und der Hanse während des späten Mittelalters untersucht. Um die Handelsplätze und Fischerei-Siedlungen im Gelände identifizieren zu können, bilden Schriftquellen, Ortsnamen und die Archäologie die Grundlage. Drei Handelsplätze, die sich in ihrer Bebauung deutlich voneinander unterscheiden, wurden im Mai 2006 prospektiert und dreidimensionale Geländemodelle davon angefertigt: Búðarhamar bei Stakkhamar an der Südküste der Snæfellsnes-Halbinsel, Búðasandur bzw. Maríuhöfn im Hvalfjörður und Kumbaravogur bei Bjarnarhöfn an der Nordküste der Snæfellsnes-Halbinsel.

### **Abstract: English and Hanseatic Trading and Fishing Sites in Medieval Iceland: A preliminary report**

In 2006 an international research project began which over the next few years will investigate Iceland's trade with England and the Hanse during the late Middle Ages, namely the period from about 1412 to 1602. Historical sources, place-names and archaeology are used for identifying trading sites in the landscape. The paper provides both an introduction into the subject and a report on initial fieldwork undertaken in May 2006. In addition, it points out the problems of identifying trading sites in the field. Three rather different sites were surveyed. All of them are supposed to be trading sites, and their structural remains are different from each other: Búðarhamar at Stakkhamar at the south side of the Snæfellsnes peninsula, Búðasandur or Maríuhöfn in Hvalfjörður in south-west Iceland, and Kumbaravogur near Bjarnarhöfn at the north side of the Snæfellsnes peninsula.

### **Resumé: Places commerciales et pêcheries anglaises et hanséatiques en Islande médiévale. Un premier compte-rendu des recherches**

Pendant l'été 2006 a débuté un projet de recherche international de plusieurs années consacré au commerce de l'Islande avec l'Angleterre et la Hanse au cours du Bas Moyen-Âge. Les sources écrites, les toponymes et l'archéologie sont les bases de la localisation des places commerciales et des pêcheries dans le paysage. En Mai 2006, trois places commerciales, qui se distinguent nettement les unes des autres dans leur aménagement, ont fait l'objet de prospections, à partir desquelles des modèles en trois dimensions ont été réalisés: Búðarhamar à Stakkhamar, sur la côte sud de la presqu'île de Snæfellsnes, Búðasandur ou plutôt Maríuhöfn à Hvalfjörður et Kumbaravogur à Bjarnarhöfn, sur la côte nord de la presqu'île de Snæfellsnes.

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### **Abbildungsnachweis:**

*Fig. 1:* The James Ford Bell Library, University of Minnesota. URL: <http://bell.lib.umn.edu/map/OLAUS/indexo.html> (23.10.2007). – *Figs. 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9:* Maps by Libby Mullqueeney, Queen's University Belfast. – *Fig. 3:* after ELLMERS 1972, 215. – *Fig. 7:* after MAGNUS 1998, 1084. – *Fig. 10:* DTM by Conor Graham, Queen's University Belfast, aerial photograph by Garðar Guðmunsson, FSÍ. – *Figs. 11, 13, 15, 17:* photographs by Natascha Mehler. – *Fig. 12:* after JÓNSSON 1897. – *Figs. 14, 16:* DTM by Conor Graham, Queen's University Belfast. – *Tab. 1:* Natascha Mehler, *Tab. 2:* Mark Gardiner.

