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Rescue Excavation of a Kuml-like Feature in Bakki, Viðvíkursveit, Skagafjörður.

Byggðasafn Skagfirðinga

Rannsóknaskýrslur

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Cover Photo: Kuml-like feature, facing northeast.

Acknowledgements

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Summary

In July 2021, a rescue excavation took place of an eroding pagan grave-like feature on the property of Bakki in Viðvíkursveit, Skagafjörður. The excavation was a joint effort by The Skagafjörður Heritage Museum (Byggðasafn Skagfirðinga) and The Cultural Heritage Agency of Iceland (Minjastofnun Íslands). The aim of the excavation was to research the feature before further erosion took place and to determine its nature. The results of the excavation are unclear. The working hypothesis was that the feature was a Viking Age pagan grave (kuml). However, no human remains surfaced nor any other indications that a human had been buried in this location. Mammal and bird bones were found, though, along with some quartz manuports. Radiocarbon dating of two mammal bones yeilded dates for both the early Viking Age and the late Middle Ages, which poses more questions than answers. More research is required at this site as there are several other similar features that appear intact.

Introduction

The farm of Bakki in Viðvíkursveit is situated on the southeastern coast of Skagafjörður with the sea to the west. Much of the western borders of Bakki are high sea cliffs but there are some beaches, as well. The farm of Brimnes is to the north, with farms Kýrholt and Lækur to the east, and Lón to the south. Bakki owns 381 hectares of land whereof34.4 hectares are cultivated (National Registers of Iceland). About 85% of the land has good grass growth with the remaining 15% with little to no grass (Pálsson 2010:286).

The first historical source that mentions Bakki is a land survey from AD 1351. A church official from Hólar was surveying lands owned by the church and wrote about the property line between Bakki and Lækur. Bakki is mentioned again in AD 1395 when a bishop from Hólar bought it together with Lækur (Íslenzkt fornbréfasafn III:54-55, 602). It is likely that Bakki had its own family chapel at one point, but no sources mention it nor have archaeological remains been located, as of yet. Bakki was owned by the Church of Hólar until AD 1802 when it was purchased by a lay citizen (Jarða- og búendatal 1949:80). Bakki also had at least two tenant farms, Bakkakot (possibly the same as one called Gröf) and Nýjagrund.

In early May 2021, while Dr. Brenda Prehal was visiting the farm of Bakki, a Viking Age pagan grave-like feature, called a “kuml” was spotted on a long ridge that runs northeast-southwest parallel to the coastline (see fig. 1). Several of these features speckle the area. The feature in question was a low, oblong mound with a stone setting and was heavily eroded to the west. Bakki farmer Felicia Anfuso informed Dr. Prehal that the mound was being eroded by rams who liked to shelter there. Minjastofnun Íslands was contacted and it was decided that the feature should be excavated with emergency rescue funds. Dr. Prehal and Guðmundur Stefán Sigurðarson from Minjastofnun Íslands fully excavated the feature from July 21st to 26th, 2021.

Figure 1. Kuml-like feature marked with a red star.

Aims and Methods

The main aim of the excavation was first to rescue the archaeological feature before further damage took place. The secondary goal was to determine the nature and date of the feature.

The total area under excavation was 5m by 6m and 30m^2. The excavation and removal of the archaeological deposits was done by hand and was conducted stratigraphically and in chronological sequence utilizing a single context system. The single context excavation, planning, and recording system used is from the Museum of London Archaeology (MoLA) that has been adapted for Iceland (Spencer 1994, Lucas 2003). All layers were sieved with a 4mm mesh and recorded with a combination of hand drawings, photographs, and drone photographs. Individual records, finds, and samples correspond to the units that they describe, were found in, and taken from. After the completion of the excavation, the soil and turf taken from the excavation area were replaced. All data from the excavation (physical and digital) presently are stored at Byggðasafn Skagfirðinga to be sent to the National Museum of Icealand (Þjóðminjasafn Íslands).

Results

On the surface, before excavation took place, the feature measured approximately 2.6m x 5.6m and lay northwest-southeast. The feature appeared to be comprised of a low oblong mound encircled by large stones that had fallen away to the west.

Figure 2. Kuml-like feature before excavation showing the ram disturbance, facing NNE.

As rams had previously dug out the feature to the west, a profile was inadvertently created (see fig. 2). Before excavation began, the ram-created profile was cleaned and recorded. The profile was not very clear even after cleaning as it was not desirable to cut back too much soil from the mound. While recording the profile, four main layers were identified (see fig. 3). After excavation, more layers came to light that were not reflected in the profile. During cleaning, a singular sheep phalange fell out of the profile. The phalange was sun-bleached, suggesting it had been exposed to the elements for some time and it is not clear from which context it originated.

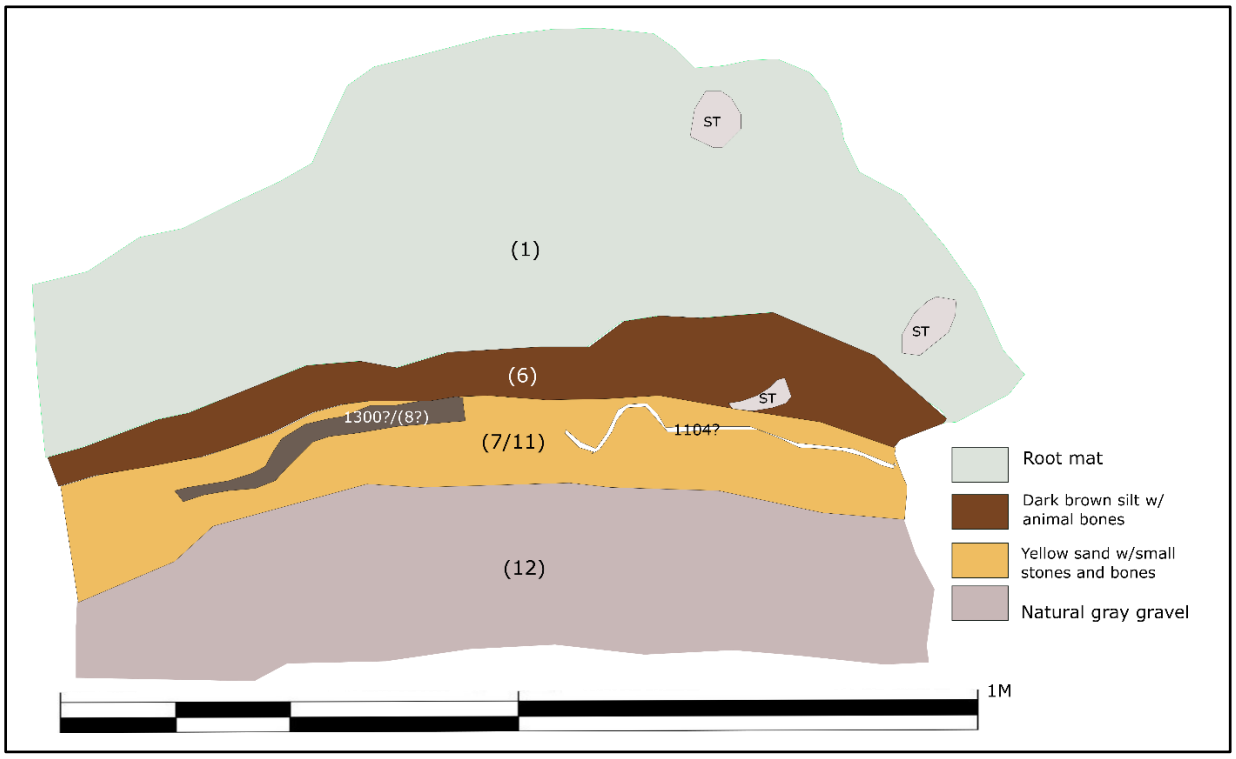

Figure 3. East profile

After cleaning and recording the profile, a 5m x 6m area around the feature was opened to expose any associated features that possibly laid hidden under the surface. After deturfing, barely 10cm under the turf, was a layer of sporadically placed medium to large stones (context 2). In the southwest and north, some of the stones appeared to form post settings, but this is speculation. Some bird bones, a fragment of a green glass bottle, and a white quartz manuport were found during surface cleaning.

Figure 4. Possible stone post setting, facing NE.

Several layers of soil made up the mound as well as several layers of stone pavings that did not all show up in the profile (contexts 2-5).

Figure 5. Flat stone pavings (context 2)

Context (6) was a dark brown silt and contained several poorly preserved mammal and bird bones. Context (7) was a yellowish sand that contained mammal bones and a white quartz manuport.

Figure 6. Mammal bones in context (6)

Figure 7. Mammal bones in context (6)

Two possible tephra layers were below context (7), which were sampled but require analysis (contexts 8 possible 1300, 9 possible 1104). Context (10) was a sterile reddish-dark brown silt that contained three manuports and context (11) was a layer of sterile yellow sand. Excavation closed when the natural grey gravel was reached (context 12). No definable cuts or fills were found during excavation, leaving the question of the nature of this feature unanswered. However, the mammal

bones and manuports found only add to the questions. Some bird bones were found as well, but these were in the cracks between the rocks and in the root mat and are thus likely modern remains from birds that died on or near the feature.

Figure 8. Possible in-situ 1104 tephra context (9)

Figure 9. End of excavation, down to natural gravel (12)

Discussion

Ultimately, the excavation created more questions than answers. The nature of the feature remains unclear. The accumulation of soil in the mound is perplexing as it appears natural with no noticeable cuts or fills. However, the stone pavings within it and surrounding it are man-made. The

soil deposition itself, at least the upper contexts, is man-made as well, as some of them contain mammal bones and quartz manuports. Radiocarbon dating of an unidentified mammal possible sesmoid bone from context (6) and a sheep carpal/tarsal from context (7) also further complicates the picture. The sheep tarsal yielded a result dating to the 13th-14th century while the unidentified mammal sesmoid is from very early in the Landnám settlement period (early 9th cen.). The radiocarbon analyses were performed by Beta Analytic.

Given the similarities to pagan Viking Age graves in Iceland, it is possible that this feature was originally a pagan grave (a kuml) that had been disturbed/robbed by humans for unknown purposes at least once in the medieval period and possibly again in early modern times before the erosion made by the rams. Perhaps the original medieval disturbance was due to the relocation of the pagan skeleton to a nearby Christian cemetery. The reburial of pagan skeletons into nearby medieval Christian cemeteries has been speculated at other sites across Iceland, such as at Keldudalur just 13km away (Zoëga 2013) and at Stöng (Vilhjálmsson 1996) and Hrísbrú (Byock 2005) in the southwest. This is also a practice that is mentioned in the medieval Icelandic sagas, such as *Egil´s Saga*. However, the nature of the feature remains unknown and thus more excavations on similar stone features in the area are desired.

Samantekt

Í júlí 2021 fór fram björgunaruppgröftur á meintu kumli í landi Bakka í Viðvíkursveit, Skagafirði. Jarðvegseyðing hefur átt sér stað á svæðinu sem hefur haft áhrif á minjar. Uppgrösturinn var samstarfsverkefni Byggðasafns Skagfirðinga og Minjastofnunar Íslands. Markmiðið var að rannsaka meint kuml áður en frekari jarðvegseyðing á sér stað og ákvarða eðli minjanna. Niðurstöður uppgraftarins eru óljósar. Lagt var upp með að um heiðna gröf frá víkingaöld væri að ræða, þ.e. kuml. Hins vegar fundust engar mannabein né aðrar vísbendingar um að manneskja hefði verið greftruð á þessum stað. Spendýra- og fuglabein fundust hins vegar ásamt nokkrum kvarssteinum. Niðurstöður geislakolefnisaldursgreiningar á tveimur spendýrabeinum benda til þess að beinin séu frá því snemma á víkingaöld og frá síð-miðöldum og vekur upp fleiri spurningar en svör. Frekari rannsókna er þörf til þess að varpa ljósi á hlutverk þessara minja en fleiri möguleg kuml eru á svæðinu sem virðast ósnert.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Context Units

No.	Type	Description	Date	ID
1	Deposit	Topsoil w/large stones; tough roots	22.07.21	BP
2	Deposit	Med. brown silt w/medium stones	22.07.21	BP
3	Deposit	Med. brown silt w/out stones; sterile	22.07.21	BP
4	Deposit	Med. brown silt w/medium stones	22.07.21	BP
5	Deposit	Med. brown silt w/ small stones	26.07.21	BP
6	Deposit	Dark brown silt w/animal bones	26.07.21	BP
7	Deposit	Yellow sand w/small stones and bones	26.07.21	BP
8	Deposit	Red-brown silt w/stones, 1300 tephra?	26.07.21	BP
9	Deposit	White 1104 tephra? w/stones	26.07.21	BP
10	Deposit	Red-dark brown silt	26.07.21	BP
11	Deposit	Yellow gravel/Sand	26.07.21	BP
12	Deposit	Natural gray gravel	26.07.21	BP

Appendix 2- Finds

No.	Context	Material	Object Type	Description	Qty	Date	ID
1	Cleaning	Stone	Manuport	White quartz	1	22.07.21	GSS
2	7	Stone	Manuport	White quartz	1	26.07.21	BP
3	10	Stone	Manuport	White quartz and possible opal	3	26.07.21	BP
4	Cleaning	Glass	Bottle	Shard of modern green glass bottle	1	21.7.21	GSS

Appendix 3- Bones

No.	Context	Qty	Description	Date	ID
Bakki 2021-1	7	1	Unindent. mammal sesmoid?; destroyed for C14	26.07.21	BP
Bakki 2021-2	6	1	Sheep carpal/tarsal?; destroyed for C14	26.07.21	BP
Bakki-2021-3	Profile	1	Sheep phalange; sun-bleached white	26.07.21	BP

Bakki-2021-4	6	4 frags	Unindent. bird	26.07.21	BP
Bakki-2021-5	6	1sm bag	Unindent. mammal frags	26.07.21	BP

Appendix 4- Samples

No.	Context	Qty Bags	Description	Date	ID
1	9	1 sm	Possible 1104 white tephra from profile	21.07.21	BP
2	8	1 sm	Possible 1300 black tephra from profile	21.07.21	GSS
3	6	1 sm	Possible unknown tephra found in soil	26.07.21	BP
4	9	1 sm	1104 tephra?	26.07.21	GSS
5	9	1 sm	1104 tephra?	26.07.21	GSS

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