HOUSES AND DOMESTIC LIFE IN THE VIKING AGE AND MEDIEVAL PERIOD: MATERIAL PERSPECTIVES FROM SAGAS AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Teva Vidal, MA.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the representations of houses as physical structures in the *Íslendingasögur* with specific emphasis on the material aspect of housing culture in the Viking Age and medieval period, as well as the interactions between material culture and text. The *Íslendingasögur* were written in Iceland as of the thirteenth century, but look back onto the Viking Age (c. 800-1100 AD). Comparison with the archaeology of domestic space reveals that the house in the *Íslendingasögur* generally corresponds with medieval housing models, contemporary with the period of saga writing. However, there are also examples of structures which correspond to the models of the Viking Age. Descriptions of antiquated buildings are sometimes framed in statements that make explicit reference to the chronological separation between the Viking Age and the writer's present time, suggesting a familiarity with the evolution of housing culture.

Detailed analysis of buildings in the sagas reveals domestic space in its context of use, and demonstrates how the physical nature of the house and farm framed the productive and social activities that went on within. The materiality of domestic life has particular importance for the dispensing of hospitality. Demonstrations of domestic space in use also allow for a better understanding of the relationship between objects and language, and elucidate some difficulties in translation and academic usage both in archaeology and literary studies. Material culture can itself influence the processes of composition in oral/written narratives such as the sagas, by inspiring the formation of narrative episodes. The built environment can also provide a contextual framing for narratives, acting as a mnemonic device facilitating the preservation and transmission of saga narratives.

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CONTENTS

List of Abbreviations

See Bibliography for full citations.

C&V	Cleasby and Vigfusson, eds., *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*
F	Fritzner, ed., *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog*
HST	Hólmarsson, Sanders and Tucker, eds. *Concise Icelandic-English Dictionary/Íslenzk-ensk orðabók*
IEO	Sigurðsson, ed. *Íslenzk-ensk orðabók*
KLNM	*Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*
ODEE	*The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*
OED	*The Oxford English Dictionary*
ONP	*Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*
Z	Zoëga, ed. *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*

Introduction

Aims of the Thesis

Looking back into the Viking Age (c.800 – c.1100)[1] is a task which requires the input of many types of sources, and many different disciplines of study. It is a period that is both historical and pre-historical. Accounts from outside Scandinavia and native material such as runic inscriptions, skaldic and Eddic poetry, and archaeological remains provide a glimpse into the earlier part of this period. Scandinavian texts however only make their appearance towards the end of the Viking Age. Indeed, the great flourishing of Old Norse literary production in Iceland did not occur until the thirteenth century. Sagas, especially the *Íslendingasögur*, are among the most cherished vestiges of the medieval Icelandic and Scandinavian past. Yet the chronological distance of several centuries which separates the recording of these medieval narratives from the Viking Age settings which they depict has made them a contentious and difficult source to use as witnesses to this period.

The subjective interpretations of the past, especially the national-romantic ideals of the nineteenth century which promoted the sagas as a truthful account of the Viking Age, have been rejected by modern scholarship. As a result, serious doubt has been cast on the historicity of sagas. In recent years, archaeology, especially in Iceland, has asserted itself as an independent and more objective medium for accessing the heritage of the Viking Age, no longer dictated by a romanticised antiquarian reading of the sagas as 'history'.[2] It would however be a hasty and uncritical position universally to brand saga

[1] See the Note on Chronology at the end of this chapter.
[2] For a "manifesto" of this archaeological mission, see Friðriksson 1994. For more on the debate surrounding the historicity of sagas, see Sørensen 1993.

literature as ahistorical and without a place in historical research. These great literary works are still important cultural artefacts of a society which grew out of the Viking Age and immediately followed it. The sagas provide valuable insights into a medieval society looking back on its Viking Age antecedents from a far greater cultural and chronological proximity than is possible to achieve from a twenty-first century perspective. This gives them the potential to provide a privileged glimpse into the Viking Age they depict.

Saga literature presents us with a fleshed-out world, fully inhabited, in which the great (and perhaps ahistorical or pseudo-historical) deeds of their exceptional protagonists take place against a very realistic background, in real locations and landscapes that are still, in many cases, recognisable today. The level of detail and description that the saga writers employed demonstrates their desire to represent a 'real' world, one that would be familiar and believable to their intended audiences (Sørensen 2003: 265, 267). One element of setting which benefits from this attention to realistic detail is the depiction of houses and the material culture of domestic life. In a society that was mostly rural, the farm, with the house at its centre, constituted the core not only of everyday domestic life but also of the wider social world.

The objective of this thesis is to contribute to the study of domestic life in Viking Age and medieval Iceland and Scandinavia by examining the way that houses are represented in the *Íslendingasögur*. Houses will be studied primarily in terms of their physical presence, both as the delimited space within which domestic life was lived, and as objects with which their inhabitants interacted. This will illuminate how the houses' materiality shaped the activities that went on within them, and affected their importance on a

social and ideological level. By examining the descriptions of houses as structures with close comparison to the archaeology of Viking Age and medieval housing culture in Iceland and Scandinavia, the accuracy of the saga descriptions can be measured. This will allow for the 'historicity' of the sagas to be tested, in terms of their reflection of material culture.

In his research on the fourteenth-century farm at Gröf in the 1950s, archaeologist Gísli Gestsson determined that saga literature (with specific reference to *Grettis saga*) had the potential accurately to represent the material culture of medieval Iceland (Gestsson 1959: 52-53; see also Friðriksson 1994: 190-191). By ensuring a close comparison between the literary material, with particular attention to language, and the results of archaeological research, this thesis provides an opportunity to see in which ways these two disciplines, so often seen as incompatible and at times even antagonistic, can actually interact positively. It also provides a means of demonstrating how material culture can itself play a role in the composition of literature and the transmission of narrative.

Research Context and General Literature Review

While little scholarly attention has been devoted specifically to the topic of domestic life in Viking Age and medieval Scandinavia, it is a topic which is beginning to generate more interest among researchers. The study of settlements has otherwise proven central to the study of the Viking Age, both in terms of its Scandinavian origins and of the great migrations which characterise the age. What follows is not an exhaustive examination of studies on Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian housing culture and settlement, but

a select overview of those studies which proved most useful to the understanding of the subject for the purposes of this thesis.

The study of Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian housing culture has, understandably, been mostly the purview of archaeology. In the urban context, the great mercantile centres of Hedeby (Schietzel 1969-2002), Ribe (Bencard 1981-2004), Birka (Ambrosiani et al. 1992-2003), Kaupang (Skre 2007a), York (Hall 1984; Hall et al. 2004) and Dublin (Smyth 1975-78; P. Wallace 1992) have received much attention, but without focussing specifically on houses. Non-urban settlements, mostly in Denmark, have also been studied, such as the fortified centres at Fyrkat, Trelleborg and Eketorp (Roesdahl 1987), and the nucleated villages of Vorbasse (Hvass 1980, 1992) and Lindholm Høje (Ramskou 1953-57).

The archaeology of urban sites is, of course, part of the wider context of research on Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian housing culture. These sites were however excluded from the present study to allow for a more accurate comparison with the rural settlements which dominate the sampled sagas. There may furthermore be a structural differentiation between rural and urban houses, with urban houses tending, in many contexts, to be rectangular but straight-walled and shorter in overall length than rural buildings, with entrances frequently placed in the gable-ends, and most often placed close together in small regular plots on planned streets (see Skre 2007b, 2008). These urban settings, as can be seen in the reconstructed layouts of Dublin (**Figure 0.2**), Kaupang (**Figure 0.3**) and Hedeby (**Figure 0.4**), contrast with the general characteristics of rural settlements and houses (**Figure 0.1**).[3]

[3] These figures are at the end of this introduction, pages 23-24.

For the study of rural dwellings, useful general overviews of the characteristics of housing throughout the Scandinavian world of the Viking Age are offered by Else Roesdahl and Barbara Scholckmann's chapter 'Housing Culture' in *The Archaeology of Medieval Europe* (2007), and especially Helena Hamerow's compilation *Early Medieval Settlements* (2002).[4] More significant contributions are provided by focussed, regional studies particularly in Denmark, Norway and Iceland. While Denmark falls outside the range of direct study for this thesis, due to the saga samples being essentially limited to Iceland and Norway, some Danish studies are extremely useful for understanding the characteristics of Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian buildings. The most important of these are Holger Schmidt's compilation *Building Customs in Viking Age Denmark* (1994), and the volumes edited by Else Roesdahl, *Dagligliv i Danmarks middelalder – en arkæologisk kulturhistorie* (1999) and *Bolig og familie i Danmarks middelalder* (2003).

In Norway, much work has been done on pre-Viking Age settlements (Bårdseth 2009; Johansen 1982; 2003; Myhre 1973; Storli 2000), which may in some cases contribute to a better understanding of rural sites in the Iron Age, which precedes the Viking Age in Norwegian historical periodisation (Fallgren 2008: 67). While there is a relative dearth of extensively-studied Viking Age house sites in Norway (Johansen 1982: 45-46; Myhre 1998: 11-13, 2000: 35-37), the work of Bjørn Myhre stands out as making the greatest contribution to our understanding of the evolution of housing culture from the (pre-Viking) Iron Age until the (post-Viking) medieval period (Myhre 1973, 1982a,b, 1985, 1993, 1998, 2000). The compilations *Grindbygde hus i Vest-*

[4] On the general development of Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian housing culture, see also Weinmann 1994: 355-360.

Norge (Schjelderup and Storsletten, 1999) and *Middelaldergården i Trøndelag* (Skevik 2003) have provided important contributions to the field by presenting the most comprehensive and concentrated collections of studies on the evolution of housing culture in Norway.

Holding a privileged position in the archaeology of Viking Age Norway, the exceptional high-status house at Borg has been the object of detailed study and dedicated publication, led by Gerd Stamsø Munch (Munch, Johansen and Larssen 1987; Munch and Johansen 1988; Munch 2007). The monograph on Borg (Munch, Johansen and Roesdahl 2003), and that on Kaupang (the first of a series) which followed a few years later (Skre 2007a), are among a new generation of archaeological publications. These make widely available the comprehensive archaeological reports and detailed post-excavation analysis of settlement sites within their wider archaeological and historical contexts. As a result, these publications have vastly improved the dissemination of archaeological research on the Viking Age.[5]

Though it was published over thirty years ago, the important compilation *Vestnordisk byggeskikk gjennom to tusen år: Tradisjon og forandring fra romertid til det 19. århundre* (Myhre, Stoklund and Gjærder, 1982) remains unmatched in its exploration of the development of housing culture in Norway and its North Atlantic descendants. One of its editors and main contributors, Bjarne Stoklund, has made significant contributions to our understanding of the evolution and export of Norwegian building customs throughout the North Atlantic (particularly the Faroe Islands) in the medieval

[5] Similar publications have placed Viking Age Scandinavian migration within a wider settlement pattern in the Northern Isles, particularly Shetland. See the monographs on Papa Stour edited by Crawford and Smith (1999), and on Old Scatness, edited by Dockrill, Bond, Turner et al (2010).

period (Stoklund 1982a,b, 1993, 1999, 2002, 2003). A similar contribution, in topic and scope, has been made by Steffen Stummann Hansen (1989, 1990, 2000, 2003, 2003a,b). At the extreme extent of Viking Age settlement in the North Atlantic, the well-documented temporary settlement at l'Anse-aux-Meadows provides the only confirmed Viking site in North America (Ingstad 1970, 1977, 1985; Wallace 2000; 2003a,b). An important review of the dwellings of the Greenlandic colonies, with implications for the understanding Scandinavian housing culture in Iceland and throughout the Western expansion of the Viking diaspora, has also been recently been conducted by Mogens Skaaning Høegsberg (2009).

A thorough understanding of the housing culture of Viking Age Iceland was particularly important to this thesis. It is therefore fortunate that Iceland has a long tradition of interest in the archaeology of Viking Age and medieval settlements, albeit originally fuelled by the romantic antiquarian mindset so reviled by current archaeologists (see for example Friðriksson 1994; Lucas 2004). Iceland's first major concerted series of modern scientific excavations of Viking Age and medieval farms, *Forntida gårdar i Island: Nordiska arkeologiska undersökningen i Island 1939*, edited by Mårten Stenberger, was published in 1943 and remains an important foundation to modern archaeological practice. Hörður Águstsson (1978, 1979, 1982a,b), Kristján Eldjárn (1965) and Gísli Gestsson (1959, 1982) are among the other pioneers of modern Icelandic archaeology whose work has had a lasting impact.

Since the 1990s, new interest has been generated in the discipline, building on a retrospective of past work (Vésteinsson 2000, 2004: 74-75, 79-81) and focussing on a wide dissemination of archaeological publications.

Beginning in 1998, the publication of *Archaeologia Islandica* by the Icelandic Institute of Archaeology, Fornleifastofnun Íslands (FSÍ), has contributed significantly to this mission. The FSÍ also publishes its recent interim archaeological reports online, through the website of the North Atlantic Biocultural Organization (NABO).[6]

In the last decade, several important studies directly relevant to the study of the Viking Age and medieval house have been produced. Karen Milek's doctoral thesis *Houses and Households in Early Icelandic Society: Geoarchaeology and the Interpretation of Social Space* (2006) provides an overview of the state of archaeological research on Viking Age houses. It also provides a helpful re-evaluation of the dating of all known Viking Age (and some early-medieval) house sites in Iceland. Two recent monographs follow the trend set in Norway by the reports on Borg and Kaupang by providing comprehensive analyses of entire settlement sites: *Hofstaðir: Excavations of a Viking Age Feasting Hall in North-Eastern Iceland* edited by Gavin Lucas (2009) and *Reykholt: Archaeological Investigations at a High Status Farm in Western Iceland*, edited by Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir (2012). A similar study was produced for the site of Quoygrew in Orkney (Barrett 2012).

Interdisciplinary Studies

There has of course been interest in using interdisciplinary approaches to bring together material culture and text in the study of the Viking Age.[7] Most germane to this thesis is the study of the interaction between archaeology and

[6] http://www.nabohome.org/cgi_bin/fsi_reports.pl [accessed 30/10/2012]

[7] A general plea for the rehabilitation of material culture in text-based studies in the social sciences (or rather a condemnation of the denigration of material culture in those same studies), beyond the field of Viking Studies, can be found in Olsen 2003.

literature. John Hines (2000, 2003) and Helena Victor (2009), for example, have looked at certain aspects of the archaeological reality behind Old Norse/Icelandic myth and saga literature. Though focussing on English literature, Hines' *Voices in the Past: English Literature and Archaeology* (2004) provides an interesting methodological experiment, exploring the scope of possible interactions between literature and archaeology. Focussing on high-status buildings, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, in his posthumous chapter 'The Hall in Norse Literature' (2003), provides an excellent introduction to the manifestations of the domestic building as a physical space, as it is represented both in Old Norse poetry and prose.

This focus on high-status buildings in archaeology and literature is also the subject of a study currently being undertaken by Lydia Carstens (Pers. Comm., 2012), revisiting the definition, archaeological form, and function of the high-status 'hall'[8]. Moreover the compilation *Beowulf and Lejre* edited by John D. Niles and Marijane Osborn (2007), aims to present an entire spectrum of interdisciplinary thought on the high-status site at Lejre in Denmark through the collected studies relating the archaeological, literary, historical and antiquarian research.

Also aiming at an interdisciplinary study, Frands Herschend (1997, 1998 esp. 12-62, 2000, 2003) has attempted to compare literary material (mainly poetry) with archaeology and iconography to define the house, or more specifically the high-status 'hall', as an interactive space where certain social ideas, ideals and attitudes (i.e. Herschend's 'idea of the good') are perpetuated. Herschend's approach has merit, and presents an excellent

[8] The use of the word 'hall' in relation to Viking Age buildings is discussed further in chapter 6, section 6.2.3.

hypothesis to study the cognitive shaping of material culture as a cultural artefact. However, he relies on a subjective interpretation of disparate archaeological and textual sources which he unconvincingly attempts to quantify (Herschend 1998: 9-11, 14, 31, 167-179).[9] For these reasons, the results of Herscehend's work have not proven as convincing as the other studies on domestic life and housing culture in the Viking Age.

Kirsten Hastrup's research on Icelandic anthropology is a necessary landmark for any study of settlements in a more social-historical perspective (1985, 1990a,b). Inspired by some of Hastrup's ideas on space (Hastrup 1998: 34-36, 111), Katrina Burge (2009) provides a useful and insightful exploration of gendered and socially stratified space within the farmstead in saga literature, as well as the farm's place in a wider cosmology. Two recent doctoral studies have also focussed directly on the social implications of house archaeology in the Viking Age: Rebecca Boyd's doctoral thesis *Viking Houses in Ireland and Western Britain, AD 850 – 1100: A Social Archaeology of Dwellings, Households and Cultural Identities* (University College Dublin: 2012) and Sarah Croix's doctoral thesis *Work and Space in Rural Settlements in Viking-Age Scandinavia – Gender Perspectives* (Århus University: 2012). The preliminary results of my own research for this thesis have also generated

[9] Herschend uses a diverse array of literary sources (including *Beowulf*) to create a portrait of aristocratic modes of behaviour, whose moral code is declared to be the model for social behaviour on a large scale. Artefact deposits within high-status house ruins are also considered to give an empirical and complete material record of activities within these spaces (Herschend 1998:32). His view that the moral principles described in literature dictate the form and function of objects and spaces seals the 'halls' he studies into a cognitively predetermined role (Herschend 1998: 42-43, 167). Thus, by an analogy of form, any main room of a house could be confined, in function, to the model of aristocratic use of the 'hall' as the seat of social morality and governance. This model of aristocratic behaviour, including the importance of religious outlook, resembles that which motivates social display in the later medieval context of the 'hall', and makes his argument seem somewhat anachronistic (Herschend 1998:12, see Chapter 6, section 6.2.3).

interest in the field of wider medieval European housing culture in a historical and cultural perspective (Vidal forthcoming (a)).

Sample and Methodology

The inspiration to study the representation of houses in the *Íslendingasögur* stems from the enormous potential they offer to access elements of social history in medieval Iceland and Scandinavia. Housing culture, and the physical construction of the house as a space for domestic life, can itself be intimately linked to cultural identity (Hines 2011: 22-38; Komber 2001: 13-14; Rapoport 1969). The thought that sagas might contain reliable references to medieval, and even Viking Age, domestic material culture came from a reading of *Grettis saga* which, in Chapter 14, gives a detailed description of the form and usage of the house's main room prefaced by the words *Þat var háttr í þann tíma*, 'That was the custom in that time' (see the full passage quoted in Chapter 1, section 1.4.1).[10] The close attention which the unknown author/compiler of the saga paid to the construction of domestic space, as well as the explicit acknowledgement of a chronological remove with the description given, inspired further investigation into the potential accuracy of architectural descriptions in saga literature. The results of this investigation, including a greater discussion on the importance of this passage, are featured in Section 1 (Chapters 1, 2 and 3).

[10] All translations, unless otherwise stated, are mine. *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit vol. 7 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936), chapter 14. All subsequent references to *Grettis saga*, or excerpts of *Grettis saga* in Old Norse will refer to this edition unless otherwise stated, and will be referred to by chapter in the body of the text.

Few researchers have previously turned their attention to the representations of houses in saga literature. The first was Valtýr Guðmundsson, in his doctoral thesis *Privatboligen på Island i sagatiden*, published in 1889. Guðmundsson provided a nearly exhaustive overview of the descriptions of houses in saga literature in an attempt to give a comprehensive outline of the housing culture of the 'Saga Age' (*söguöld*). His extensive survey was unsupported by archaeology, which was still in its infancy in Iceland (as elsewhere in Scandinavia) and not yet aided by a reliable scientific methodology (Friðriksson 1994: 147). The most significant work to re-examine this topic in the light of a reliable corpus of domestic archaeology in Iceland was Arnheiður Sigurðardóttir's master's thesis, *Híbýlahættir á miðöldum*, published in 1966. In this critical and meticulous work, Sigurðardóttir re-examines some of Guðmundsson's analyses and conclusions, and deals with the representation of houses in both the *Íslendingasögur* and the *samtíðarsögur* against an increasing body of archaeological data for both the Viking Age and medieval period. While Sigurðardóttir's work is truly fundamental in this area, it has become somewhat dated.

Fortunately the interpretation of houses in sagas was taken up more recently in the context of a wider analysis of medieval and pre-medieval Scandinavian housing culture, by Cornelia Weinmann in her doctoral thesis *Der Hausbau in Skandinavien vom Neolithikum bis zum Mittelalter*, published in 1994. Her overview of the characteristics of houses in sagas is extensive and comes close to being a comprehensive survey. While it is an excellent treatment of the topic, it leaves a critical assessment of the interactions

between material culture and text somewhat wanting, and adds little to the detailed analysis and conclusions of Sigurðardóttir's work.[11]

These more recent treatments of the topic, as well as the advances in both archaeology and saga studies since Guðmundsson's time, have rendered his study obsolete, except perhaps as a catalogue of references to housing culture. The fact that even some recent archaeological research on the Viking Age house appears to consider Guðmundsson's study as the final word on the matter, inasmuch as literary studies are concerned (Milek 2006: 88, 234-240; Milek 2012: 89), indicates that it needs urgently to be revisited, and that a closer analysis of the relation between material culture and the mechanisms of literary composition and transmission is required.

For the purposes of this thesis, it was determined that a truly exhaustive analysis of every representation and description of houses in the *Íslendingasögur* (some 40 separate sagas with approximately 50 additional *þættir*), while desirable, would have proven unwieldy and beyond the possibility of the current study. A significantly restricted sample of three sagas was therefore selected for close analysis. *Grettis saga* was included because of the aforementioned passage in chapter 14. This was followed by *Gísla saga*,[12] thanks primarily to its thematic similarities with *Grettis saga* as an outlaw saga, and the presence of intriguing architectural features such as underground

[11] I only became aware of Weinmann's work in the later stages of my thesis, when my primary analysis of my sources had been completed. Some of the salient examples of house construction as seen through saga texts which I have collected in this thesis are also contained in Weinmann's work; however they are not derived from it. It is in a sense gratifying to see that independent analysis can come to similar results in different studies, thus lending credence to the usefulness of saga texts for this kind of comparative study with archaeological material.

[12] *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Björn Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit vol. 6 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1943). All subsequent references to *Gísla saga*, or excerpts of *Gísla saga* in Old Norse will refer to this edition unless otherwise stated, and will be referred to by chapter in the body of the text.

passages (see Chapter 1, section 1.1). Finally, *Eyrbyggja saga* was selected by virtue of some additional explicit references to constructions (such as the bath-house in chapter 28), as well as its narrative and thematic links with *Gísla saga* (see also Foote 1963: 128; Ólason 2003: vii-viii, xxiv-xxv).[13] This selection thus provides comparable material in sagas of varying lengths, and from slightly different periods of composition.[14]

These three sagas were subjected to a close reading where every occurrence of a domestic site was recorded and analysed. Particular attention was given to architectural vocabulary, which revealed general architectural trends and details of construction. The domestic sites in question usually consist of a farmstead with its collected buildings, although occasionally individual structures or 'alternative' domestic settings like outlaws' huts and caves and booths at *þing*-sites also occur. In addition, focused attention was given to the activities that constituted daily life within the domestic sphere, especially where they elucidated the use of the various spaces, rooms and physical features of the buildings on the farmstead. Finally, the house and farmstead were looked at in relation to their position in the wider world, in the natural and social landscape.

The occurrences of domestic space are not always concentrated in convenient descriptions. Often, in order to understand the material reality of domestic structures (their construction and their spatial relationship with other

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[13] *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. by Einar Ó. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, Íslenzk fornrit vol. 4 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1935). All subsequent references to *Eyrbyggja saga*, or excerpts of *Eyrbyggja saga* in Old Norse will refer to this edition unless otherwise stated, and will be referred to by chapter in the body of the text.

[14] *Grettis saga* is thought to have been composed as late as the early fifteenth century, *Gísla saga* in the mid-to late thirteenth century, and *Eyrbyggja saga* in the mid-thirteenth century. See *Grettir's Saga* trans. Byock 2009: 242-248; *The Saga of Grettir the Strong* trans. Scudder 1998: 49 and 2005: xxxv-xxxvi; *Gisli Sursson's Saga* trans. Regal 1998: 1; *The Saga of the People of Eyri* trans. Quinn 1998: 131.

structures and objects) as well as their use, a much wider reading had to be undertaken to situate the spaces within a broader narrative context. As a result, representations of structures are contained within long quotations showing scenes of use, which describe the actions of the saga's protagonists within these spaces and their interactions with objects (this will be discussed further in Section 3, Chapters 6 and 7).[15] The understanding of spaces, structures and objects must often be compiled from numerous occurrences, and only a cumulative approach can supply the necessary details.

The reason why the house was studied within the context of the farmstead is that the farm constitutes the fundamental unit of social organisation in Viking Age and medieval Iceland (and much of the Scandinavian homelands). The house cannot be separated from the context of the farmstead; while the house may be a building unto itself, it forms, with the farmstead, a single cultural entity. Thus, the analysis of all the farm's buildings and structures, including the house, the agricultural or industrial outbuildings, and even the farm's boundary wall delimiting the meadow or 'homefield' adjacent to the house, are all relevant to understanding the nature of domestic life and the use of domestic space in the sagas (Croix 2012: 161; Hreinsson et al 1997: 399-401).

With a basic understanding of the ways in which domestic space was manifested in the sagas, a grid was established into which occurrences of houses and domestic environments were recorded, according to seven categories of information:

[15] An example of particularly poignant description of space, tightly interwoven with narrative action, is Gísli's murder of his brother-in-law Þorgrímr in *Gísla saga* Ch. 16. The full passage is quoted and discussed in Chapter 1, section 1.4.2.

1) Physical Construction, describing the physical characteristics of the buildings;
2) Inhabitants, describing household and guests in the domestic space;
3) Property and Ownership, describing any details of ownership and of transactions relating to immovable property;
4) Use and Function, describing the daily productive and leisure activities that took place within the house and farmstead;
5) Social Uses, describing the social functions accomplished by, and taking place within, the domestic space;
6) Wider Geography, describing the interaction of the house and farmstead with their wider geographical context;
7) Subjective Expression, seeking out any sentimental or qualitative information given by characters in the narrative with regards to domestic space and buildings.

For the purposes of this study, categories 1, 4 and 5 were the most useful, the others contributing mostly to a general understanding of the contextual representations and uses of domestic space in the sagas. House and farm sites that are simply named and not described, or whose existence can be inferred through a reference to an inhabitant, were not retained. Using this method, 82 separate sites were recorded in *Grettis saga*, 18 in *Gísla saga*, and 30 in *Eyrbyggja saga*,[16] with most sites occurring several times within the same saga.

The sites mentioned are primarily located in Iceland, with the second most frequent occurrences being in Norway. The overwhelming majority of

[16] The different numbers of individual sites recorded reflect, to a degree, the different lengths of the narratives as they are presented in the Íslenzk fornrit editions, with *Grettis saga* at 93 chapters, *Gísla saga* at 39 chapters, and *Eyrbyggja saga* at 65 chapters.

domestic occurrences in both locations were rural, and this thesis therefore focuses mainly on farmsteads. While many of the farms described in the narratives are high-status, owned by wealthy families, they remained within the order of functional farmsteads and none could be seen explicitly to equate with the exceptional aristocratic sites such as Hofstaðir in northern Iceland (Lucas 2009),[17] Lejre in Denmark (Christensen 2007) and Borg in Lofoten, Norway (Munch, Johansen and Roesdahl 2003). Thus, the sites remained largely within a comparable context of rural settlement, as single, self-contained farmsteads.

The intention of this thesis is to subject saga literature to rigorous source criticism with regards to the representation of material culture in the field of domestic architecture. The theoretical approach adopted would best be described as a study in materiality, giving primacy to the physical construction of the house and buildings on the farmstead and acknowledging the importance of this physical reality in shaping the lives of the farm's inhabitants. This materiality is recognised not only in the archaeological remains of Viking Age and medieval houses in Iceland and Scandinavia, but also in saga literature. This thesis asserts that through the medium of text, the physical nature of housing culture can be read and understood through observations of the inhabitants' interactions with their built environment. Reading the evidence of physical structures is necessarily a process that is informed by a previous corpus of archaeological research that has permeated the field of Viking studies (see for example Hreinsson et al. 1997). Similarly, defining the architectural spaces uncovered by archaeology borrows from the vocabulary

[17] The house at Hofstaðir is further discussed in chapter 1, section 1.3.2, and in the conclusion to chapter 3.

and social context provided by Old Norse literature. These processes are, at the very outset, mutually informative.

From this basis, descriptions of housing culture and of the use of structures and spaces were read in the sagas, and certain architectural features were considered to be particularly significant in defining this housing culture as it is presented in the sampled texts. These were then compared, where possible, with archaeological analogues, to determine the validity and accuracy of the descriptions, and also to see which elements could be broadly placed in time and attributed either to the Viking Age, or later to the evolution of housing culture in the medieval period.

The study of materiality as a theoretical approach to archaeology has recently seen a significant rise in interest and dedicated application (see Olsen 2003, DeMarrais, Gosden and Renfrew 2004). Other theoretical and methodological approaches that might also guide and inform the understanding of people's interactions with their built environment notably include phenomenology (the embodiment of experience through the sensory preception of the world, see Merleau-Ponty 1945 and trans. by Landes 2012, and Bender, Hamilton and Tilley 1997, 2007) and space syntax analysis (the understanding of movement through the delimited spaces of an enclosed building, see Price 1995; Milek 2006: 20-31, 140-146; Boyd 2012: 19-20; 25-27; 157-182). These theoretical approaches to social archaeology are revisited and further discussed in chapter 5, section 5.4. However, while acknowledging a materialist approach to this thesis, no particular pre-existing external methodology was adopted to inform the research and analysis. It was thought that a firm, descriptive base anchored in the understanding of the material aspects of

housing culture as it is represented in the sagas, with a consideration of possible correspondence to archaeological vestiges, was needed before further theoretical and methodological tools could be fruitfully applied. This remains, therefore, an avenue for expansion in future work.

The physical remains of actual Viking Age and medieval Icelandic and Scandinavian housing culture, as revealed through archaeological research, are a logical and indispensible standard against which to evaluate the references from literary sources. This approach will elucidate how the physical reality of material culture is translated into literature, a medium perhaps more ephemeral than the physical vestiges of the past, but no less charged with meaning. In this way, this thesis will also contribute to understanding the range of interactions that are possible between the study of material culture and the study of literature in Viking Studies.

Structure

The thesis is separated into three sections: 1) The Physical House, 2) The Living House and 3) Transmission. The first section, The Physical House, deals with the description of houses, and the farmsteads to which they belong, as physical objects, both in their literary incarnations in the sampled sagas and in archaeological research. Chapter 1 relates the results of the analysis of house occurrences in the sampled *Íslendingasögur*, looking at architectural vocabulary, construction and details of spatial layout. Chapter 2 offers an overview of the archaeology of houses in Viking Age and medieval Iceland and Scandinavia, and subjects the findings from the saga material to a critical comparison, focussing on the chronology of any correspondences in house

construction between the written and archaeological material. As mentioned previously, since the analysis of housing culture in the sagas focussed on rural sites, these were also preferred in the survey of archaeological material. While much research has been done on Viking urban or proto-urban settlements, the added social, commercial and industrial dynamics of the town provided many additional factors which differentiate urban housing culture from the rural models observed in the sagas.[18]

Since the historicity of the sagas is a question of such weight in the debates between archaeology and saga scholarship, Chapter 3 gives a similar analysis of a contemporary saga, Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga.*[19] As the longest of the *samtíðarsögur* (200 chapters) in the compilation *Sturlunga saga,* it was chosen to provide an adequate base for comparison with the three collected *Íslendingasögur* and yielded 92 occurrences of individual domestic sites. Since the contemporary sagas are meant to relate events which happened within living memory of their recording, the analysis of *Íslendinga saga* should present results compatible with the housing culture contemporary with its late-thirteenth century composition (Thomas 1970: 18-20). These results will be compared with the analysis of the *Íslendingasögur*.

The second section, The Living House, looks at the importance of the house and farmstead as a physical space to the unfolding of daily life within it. Chapter 4 examines the daily activities and usage of the house and farmstead, as described in the sampled sagas. Chapter 5 looks at the house within its

[18] See Boyd 2012 for a comprehensive analysis of such urban houses in Viking Age Ireland.

[19] *Íslendinga saga*, in *Sturlunga saga*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946), vol. 1, pp. 229-534. All subsequent references to *Íslendinga saga,* or excerpts of *Íslendinga saga* in Old Norse will refer to this edition unless otherwise stated, and will be referred to by chapter in the body of the text.

spatial context, firstly as an isolated entity within the physical landscape, and the interaction of the physical house with its environment. This leads to a discussion of the social ramifications of this relation to space, particularly in relation to hospitality. In this chapter, additional insight into the importance of the house in concepts of hospitality is sought in an analysis of the Eddic poem *Hávamál,*[20] with particular emphasis on its relevance to material culture. The links between *Hávamál* and saga literature will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 5 (see also Andersson 1970). In chapters 4 and 5, contributions from the comparisons with archaeology will also be explored.

The final section, Transmission, looks at the relationship between language, literature and material culture, and the ways in which the material culture of the saga world is made intelligible through the studied texts. This chapter looks at how words are used to represent 'real' things. While previous chapters will necessarily deal with vocabulary in examining the sagas' representations of domestic space, chapter 6 will discuss several problems in the usage of language, such as difficulties of interpretation, historical changes in meaning and the challenges posed by the differences between Old Norse and present-day Icelandic and English. Chapter 7 explores the role that material culture may have had in the shaping of narrative, in influencing narrative and inspiring methods of composition. Acting as both an anchoring point around which narrative develops and as a medium facilitating the recollection and transmission of narrative, material culture may indeed be more tightly

[20] *Hávamál*, ed. by David A. H. Evans, Text Series Vol. 7 (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1986). All subsequent references to *Hávamál*, or excerpts of *Hávamál* in Old Norse will refer to this edition unless otherwise stated, and will be referred to by stanza in the body of the text.

interwoven with the processes of textual composition in narratives such as the *íslendingasögur* than is commonly thought.

A Note on Chronology

The date range of c.800 to c.1100 AD to represent the Viking Age is a conventional approximation, used for convenience, though others are certainly possible. This range is meant to represent the period when 'Vikings' – Scandinavians before widespread Christianisation brought increased contact and cultural proximity with the rest of medieval Europe – were most active in their international explorations and settlements (see Jesch 2001: 6). This diaspora saw the settlement of the North Atlantic, most particularly Iceland, in the late ninth century. Widespread Christianisation after c.1100 can mark one end of this range but, as mentioned above, this is also the time when Scandinavian (primarily Icelandic) literary production truly gains momentum. This is indeed one of the most remarkable cultural consequences of Christianisation in the post-Viking world (Perkins 1989: 241, 259 note 5).

While European convention tends to have the medieval period begin around the time of the fall of the Western Roman Empire, rounded off to c.500 AD, Scandinavian scholarship considers the Viking Age as a distinct period which precedes the medieval period. The Scandinavian medieval period thus only begins at the end of the eleventh century (Croix 2012: 13). If by 'medieval' one considers a certain cultural homogeneity in Western Europe, the Scandinavian periodisation is indeed appropriate to reflect Scandinavia's increasing cultural proximity to Europe.

This periodisation is retained in relation to the study of house archaeology. Although archaeological developments are certainly discernible from the Viking Age into the medieval period, boundaries are fluid and indistinct. Transformation of housing culture is to be seen more as a gradual evolution, with few rigid chronological benchmarks marking the advent of architectural innovations and transformations.

A Note on Spelling

Trying to make the spelling of modern Scandinavian languages and Old Norse conform to English conventions can prove challenging, and several measures have been taken to accommodate this. With regards to Old Norse, all quotations have been given in the standardised form found in the editions used. In the quotations from *Íslendinga saga*, I have substituted the accepted hooked-'o' (**ǫ**) for the '**ö**' preferred by this edition. All Old Norse words referred to in the body of the English text will be given in their nominative singular forms (as they would be in their 'dictionary' definitions), or plurals as the case may be, in standardised spelling.

Scandinavian and Icelandic names in the bibliography include characters which make alphabetisation difficult, and an order of substitution has been followed: 'å'/ 'Å' corresponds to 'aa'; 'æ'/'Æ' corresponds to 'ae'; 'ö'/'Ö', 'ø'/'Ø' and 'œ'/'Œ' correspond to 'oe'; 'ð'/'Ð' and 'þ'/'Þ' correspond to 'th'. All other diacritics used in Icelandic (á, é, í, ó, ú, ý and their upper-case equivalents) are considered equivalent to the un-accented letter. Contrary to the Icelandic practice of listing names by forename, Icelandic names are integrated alphabetically in the bibliography by their patronyms, equivalent to other

languages' surnames, with all other conventions of alphabetic listing otherwise respected.

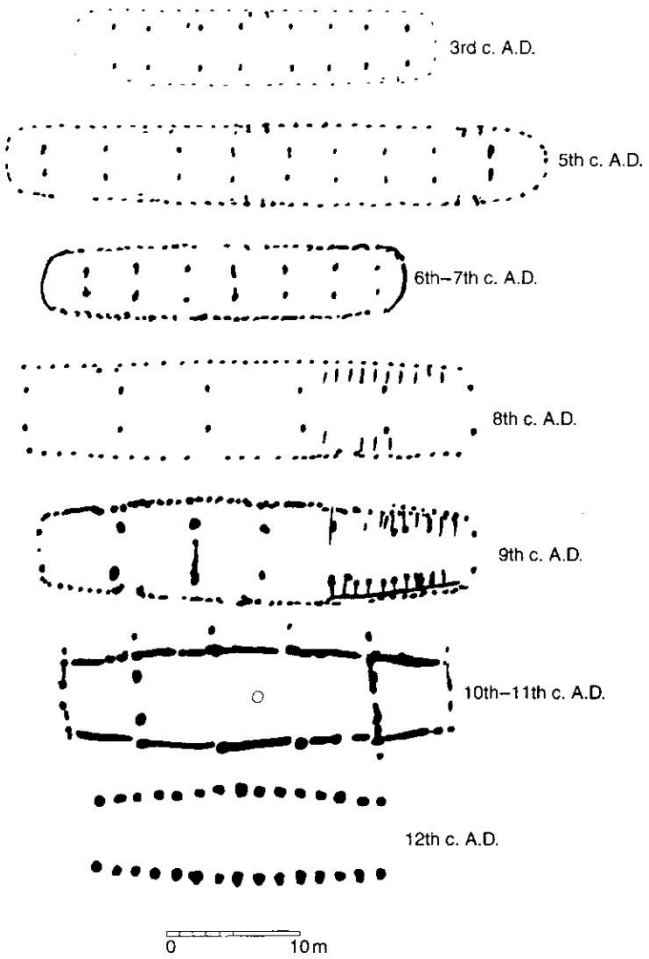

Figure 0.1: Danish examples of the typical Scandinavian longhouse floor-plan (adapted from Hvass 1993: 189).

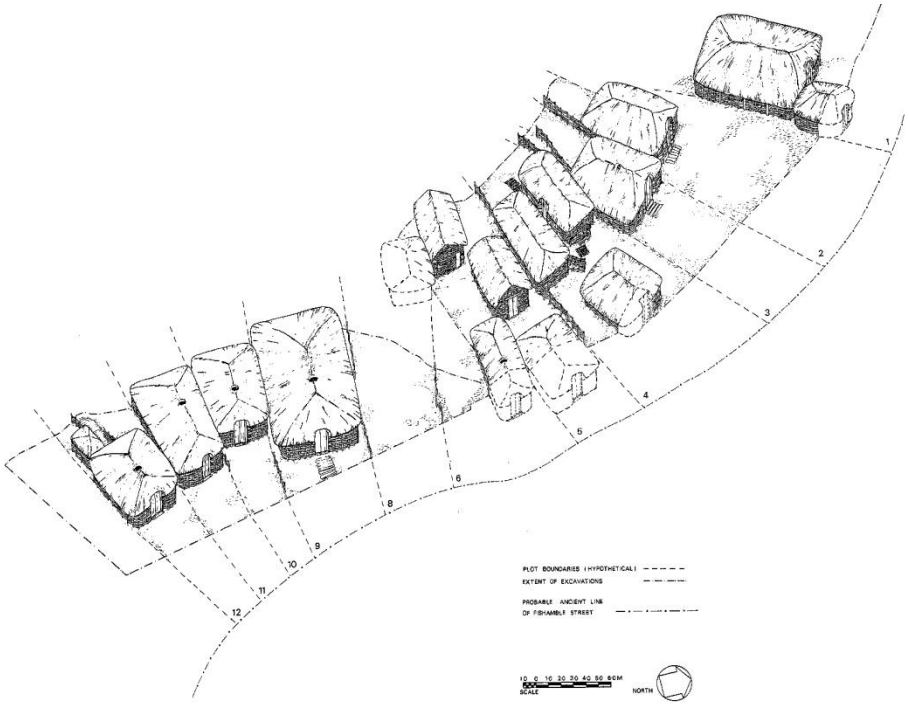

Figure 0.2: Possible reconstruction of Viking Age Dublin level 8 (from Wallace 1992 part 2, fig. 16)

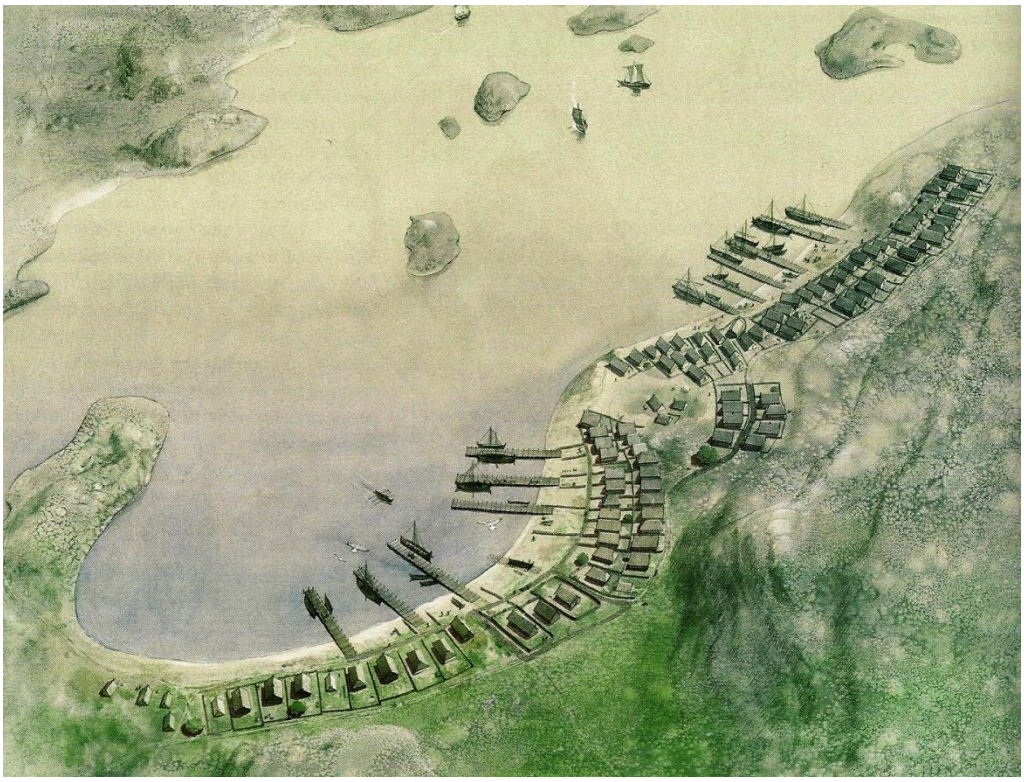

Figure 0.3: Possible reconstruction of Kaupang in theninth century, by Flemming Bau (from Skre 2007c, fig. 5)

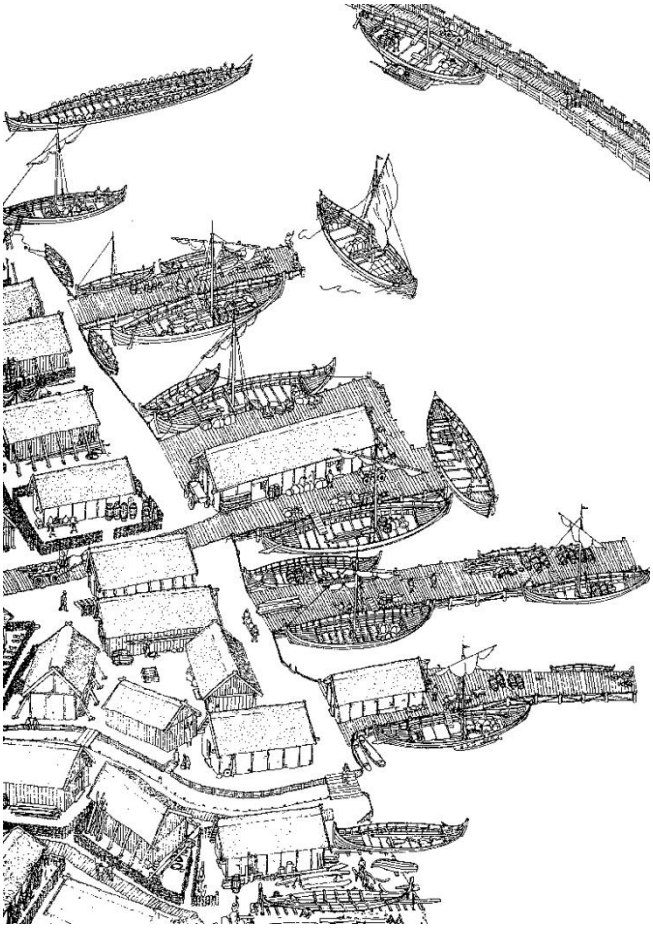

Figure 0.4: Possible reconstruction of Hedeby in theninth-tenth century (from Elsner 1994 in Schofield and Sauer 2007, box 4.3, fig. 2)

SECTION 1
THE PHYSICAL HOUSE

Chapter 1: The House in the *Íslendingasögur*

Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to reveal the characteristics of the house as it is represented in the *Íslendingasögur*, and to explore how domestic space is understood in the world of these narratives. The first step in understanding this material is to present a synthesis of the occurrences of the representations of houses as physical structures in *Grettis saga, Gísla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, and to translate these descriptions into a schema of the saga house. This chapter is thus descriptive by necessity, but it is essential to understand how domestic architecture is represented in the sampled sagas before more critical and comparative analyses can begin.

Domestic life in the rural Icelandic and Norwegian landscape of the sagas involves not only the main dwelling, but also all the ancillary buildings and spaces of a functioning farm. The house and farmstead as they are represented in the *Íslendingasögur* do not simply exist as an abstract concept of domestic residence, refuge, shelter, or even a 'base of operations' for daily activities, such as might be associated with the modern English term 'home'. While these ideas are indeed present in the conception of the residential building, the house is represented first and foremost as a tangible physical object and space with which human beings are in a state of constant interaction. In short, saga narratives acknowledge the concrete physical reality of the house.

However, not all houses or domestic buildings are represented equally, and there is indeed no consistency in how much detail is provided about the layout or construction of any given site. Buildings are described within the

dynamic context of the saga's narrative, and the sites which are described in most detail tend to have more significance for the plot. The sagas' style eschews description for its own sake: the layout of a farm's grounds or the internal construction of a house will not be described unless a segment of the narrative takes place there and detailed description becomes necessary to understand the narrative's progression (see Foote 1963: 105-106). This concept will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 6.

There are a select few sites in each saga that have a particular importance to the story and thus gather many descriptive details throughout their multiple occurrences in the text. This is the case with Grettir's family farm at Bjarg and the haunted farms at Þórhallsstaðir and Sandhaugar in *Grettis saga*, the farms at Hól and Sæból in *Gísla saga*, and the farm at Fróðá in *Eyrbyggja saga*. What emerges from these collected descriptions is a basic portrait of the saga house and its immediate surroundings, including the buildings and grounds of the farmstead. This chapter will examine the features of the various spaces and structures of the farmstead as they are written into the narratives, beginning with the general farm grounds, its various outbuildings, and finally the main dwelling house itself.

1.1 The Farmstead and Its Grounds

The modern English words 'farm' and 'farmstead' do not refer to any one specific building, but rather a delimited area of land designated for agricultural exploitation as well as a collection of buildings built in proximity to one another. Farm buildings are used both for agricultural work and for the maintenance and well-being of the inhabitants and workers of the farmstead.

These same ideas define the Icelandic and Norwegian farms as they appear in the *Íslendingasögur*. At this point it is important to note that farms in Iceland and in Norway both operate along the same principles and logic of organisation, and therefore represent the same practical and cultural realities in both contexts. The generic arrangement of the farm, as well as certain differences in arrangement and construction between Icelandic and Norwegian farms, will be described in this chapter.

The main terms used to designate the farmstead as a whole are *bú* and the closely related *bœr*, though the latter is more often used specifically to designate the farmhouse itself.[1] *Bú* is not used to refer to any specific building, but is a term more closely related to agricultural activity. For example, the term *gera bú* can designate the taking up of farming activity on previously settled land, in addition to the establishment of a new farmstead: *Um várit fekk Þórhallr sér hjón ok gerði bú á jǫrðu sinni...* ('In the spring, Þórhallr got servants for himself, and established a farmstead on his land…' *Grettis saga* Ch. 33). The derivative *bústaðr* is also used to designate the farmstead as a whole (for example in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Ch. 8). Less frequently used is the word *garðr*, which in the sagas can also designate urban dwellings, such as at Tønsberg in Norway and Byzantium in *Grettis saga* (Chs. 24, 88). *Garðr* can also be used to designate a boundary wall or enclosure surrounding the

[1] Basic definitions of terms are derived from consultations of various dictionaries, notably the Arnamagnæan Institute's Dictionary of Old Norse Prose (henceforth abbreviated ONP), consulted online at http://www.onp.ku.dk/; Richard Cleasby, Gudbrand Vigfusson and W.A. Craigie's *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (2nd ed., 1957), abbreviated as C&V; Johan Fritzner's *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog* (reprint 1972), abbreviated as F; and Geir T. Zoëga's *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (reprint 2004), abbreviated as Z. This thesis itself contributes to informing the usage of vocabulary in context, which in some cases adds significantly to clarifying the proper usage and nuances of architectural vocabulary. This informs the analysis of domestic space throughout the thesis.

homefield, and thus physically delimiting the boundary between the farm proper and the outside world, or between one farm's property and another's.[2] *Eyrbyggja saga* also provides two conspicuous examples of farms being surrounded not by these property-dividing barriers, but with high fortifications. These fortifications, at the farms of Eyri and Þaralátrsfjǫrðr (*Eyrbyggja saga* Chs. 57, 59, 60, 62) will be examined in greater detail, along with other examples of fortifications, in chapter 3, section 3.4.3 and conlcusion.

The immediate surroundings of the farmstead are seldom described in great detail, and very little is usually said about the landscape surrounding places of habitation unless the narrative action taking place there requires it. One such example is the episode at the farm of Þórhallsstaðir in *Grettis saga*, where the ill-humoured and ill-fated shepherd Glámr is killed by a monster before coming back to haunt the farm himself as a revenant. The search for Glámr's corpse, and its subsequent problematic and aborted transportation towards a church for burial, leads to a description of the valley in which the farm is situated (Ch. 32). Similarly, at the farm of Hraun in *Eyrbyggja saga*, the farmer Styrr gives his *berserkir* tenants heavy manual labour to improve access through the barren lava-field surrounding his farm, in an episode ultimately leading to their treacherous (but convenient) execution and disposal:

> *"Þú skalt ryðja," segir Styrr, "gǫtu yfir hraunit út till Bjarnarhafnar ok leggja hagagarð yfir hraunit milli landa várra ok gera byrgi hér fyrir innan hraunit..."...Síðan lét Styrr veita umbúnað líkum þeira; váru þeir færðir út í hraunit ok kastaðir í dal þeim, er þar er í hrauninu.*
> '"You shall clear a path," said Styrr, "over the lava field to Bjarnarhǫfn and build a boundary wall on over the lava field between our lands, and build an enclosure here on the inner part of the lava field…"… Then Styrr arranged the burial of their corpses. They were carried out into the lava field and thrown into a valley that was there in the lava field.' (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 28)

[2] For the general layout of the typical saga farm, see also Hreinsson et al 1997: 399-401.

This also illustrates another possible source of information concerning the farm's surroundings in the form of descriptive toponyms. The name *Hraun* itself refers to the lava-field on which the farm is built, and many other place-names in the sagas might give an indication of some defining geographical feature of the area of settlement. For example, toponyms containing the element *reykr* and derivative forms, designating smoke or steam, are often named for the steaming pools and hot springs (*laugar*, pl.) that occur naturally in the Icelandic landscape. These convenient resources provided attractive settlement locations. At the farm of Reykir in *Grettis saga*, a hot spring near the house is indeed enjoyed by the residents for bathing and relaxation:

> *Hann gekk til bœjar at Reykjum ok fór í laug, því at honum var kalt orðit nǫkkut svá, ok bakaðisk hann lengi í lauginni um nóttina ok fór síðan í stofu.*
> 'He went to the farm at Reykir and went into the hot spring, because he was quite cold, and warmed himself for a long time in the pool at night, and then went into the main room.' (*Grettis saga*, Ch. 75)[3]

The principal feature in the immediate vicinity of the farmstead's collected buildings is the 'homefield' (*tún*, *túnvǫllr* or *túngarðr*), an enclosed field used either for the growing of hay as animal fodder, or for the grazing of the animals themselves. Pastureland and hayfields could also be located at some distance from the farm: *Þeir Þórólfr ok Úlfarr áttu engi saman upp á hálsinn...* ('Þórólfr and Úlfarr jointly owned a meadow up on the hill…', *Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 30). These fields are not, strictly speaking, part of the farmstead's grounds, and might make use of land otherwise considered unsuitable for human habitation. The significance of these outfield pastures will be revisited in chapter 4. The *tún* can also be demarcated with some kind

[3] Another hot spring occurs at the farm of Reykjahólar (*Grettis saga* Ch. 50).

of barrier, a wall or a fence, or natural features might also serve to delimit a farm's territory, such as the stream (*lækr*) that runs between the farms of Hól and Sæból in *Gísla saga* (where there is also a property-dividing wall, Chs. 5, 16). The word *tún*, while used in the sampled sagas to designate the homefield specifically, can also designate an enclosure, like a fence, probably originally surrounding the farm grounds (see also David Evans' commentary to his edition of *Hávamál*, 1986, pp. 139-140, and Weinmann 1994: 346). Similarly, the word *garðr* can mean both a building and farmstead (see below), or a fence, wall or other such enclosure.

There are also some structures which, while located on the farm grounds, can hardly be considered among the ancillary buildings of the farm complex. Burial mounds are among such structures, and while they are described as being built on the farm grounds, their spatial relation to the inhabited buildings is not well described. One possible exception in *Gísla saga* is Vésteinn's mound, built in a sandy area near a mere on the periphery of the grounds at Sæból:

> *Gísli býsk nú til at heygja Véstein með allt lið sitt í sandmel þeim, er á stenzk ok Seftjǫrn, fyrir neðan Sæból.*
> 'Gísli and all his men prepared to bury Vésteinn in a mound, in the sandbank which stood opposite from Seftjǫrn ['rush-pond'], down from Sæból' (*Gísla saga*, Ch. 14).

This could indicate that mounds were preferably built on agriculturally non-productive land. *Gísla saga* also shows other rather ambiguous constructions in the form of underground hiding places, called *járðhús*, meaning literally 'earth-house', or *fylgsni*, from *fólginn*, the past participle of the verb *fela*, which means to hide or conceal. There are at least five examples in three locations (Ingjaldr's house, Auðr's house Chs. 29, 33, and Þorgerðr's house,

Ch. 23); these are sometimes built directly adjacent to or beneath a house (*var þar jarðhús undir niðri*, 'there was an underground chamber down under there,' *Gísla saga* Ch. 29), and sometimes at some distance from the house but within the farm's grounds. These distinctive features of *Gísla saga*'s narrative are not described in any great detail, and are simply indicated as being dug into the ground or placed beneath other buildings, without providing details of their construction.[4]

Another type of building on farmsteads which finds fairly frequent mention, and is a marker of cultural change in the Icelandic social landscape, is the church. These too are mentioned with very little detail, in most cases being simply indicated as existing on the farm's grounds (*...lét Snorri goði gera kirkju at Helgafelli, en aðra Styrr, mágr hans, undir Hrauni...*, '…Snorri goði had a church built at Helgafell, and Styrr, his kinsman, had another built near Hraun…', *Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 49). Less frequently, farms are also said to have a *hof*, or (pagan) sanctuary, such as at the farms of Helgafell (before the construction of the church) and Hofstaðir in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Chs. 4, 15). Whether this was a dedicated separate building, or integrated into the body of the main house or of an existing outbuilding, is uncertain (see below).

Other man-made features of farm grounds are described, in the form of roads and bridges. As mentioned previously, at the farm of Hraun in *Eyrbyggja saga*, the ill-fated *berserkir* were tasked with clearing a road through the lava-field (Ch. 28), and at Geirríðr's farm at Borgardalr, also in *Eyrbyggja saga*, the main dwelling house is built in the path of the main road running through the grounds, in order to facilitate the dispensation of lavish hospitality to all

[4] The nature of the *jarðhús* will be further discussed in chapter 2, sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2, and in chapter 6, section 6.2.1.

travellers (Ch. 8). Finally, the bridge built by the farmer Þorsteinn on the farm of Ljárskogar in *Grettis saga* is described with a high level of detail:

> *Hann lét brú gera heiman frá bœnum; hon var gǫr með hagleik miklum. En útan í brúnni undir ásunum, þeim er upp heldu brúnni, var gǫrt með hringum ok dynbjǫllur, svá at heyrði yfir til Skafrsstaða, hálfa viku sjávar, ef gengit var um brúna; svá hristusk hringarnir.*
> 'He had a bridge built on the farm, away from the house; it was built with great skill. And on the outside, under the beams which held up the bridge, were set rings and bells which could be heard at Skafrsstaðir half a sea-mile away, if someone passed over the bridge; then the rings would shake.' (*Grettis saga*, Ch. 53)

1.2 Outbuildings

Moving in from the peripheral grounds, one comes to the farmstead proper and its collected buildings. In the centre, the most important building is the main dwelling house, which will be described in section 1.3. Around it are clustered a varying number of outbuildings which, together with the house, create the farm complex. Following the principle of plot-dependent description, not all of the numerous farms mentioned in the sagas are depicted with outbuildings. However, their presence is frequent enough that it is safe to declare them ubiquitous.

Outbuildings are generally flexible spaces that can fulfil any function of storage or shelter that is required. The frequently-used generic term *búr* designates an ancillary building, but does not specify its function. Compounds frequently provide more information on the possible uses of a *búr*. The equally frequent *útibúr*, for example, helps to confirm the *búr*'s status as a separate, secondary building located away (*úti*, 'out', 'outside') from the main dwelling. Function-specific compounds such as *fatabúr* ('clothing-*búr*', 'wardrobe') help

to determine any particular use to which outbuildings may have been put,[5] and other compounds might give precision regarding the material nature or construction of the building. In one Norwegian example, an outbuilding called a *stokkabúr*, built of wooden logs or planks (*stokkar*), is located on the grounds of a farm which is itself called Stokkar, hinting that there may have been something conspicuous about the wooden construction of this farmstead (*Gísla saga* Alternate Ch. 9).[6] Other nonspecific names for outbuildings include *hlaða* (*kornhlaða* is a grain-barn) and *skemma*. Distinctly function-specific buildings can, however, have specific names, such as the boat-houses, *naust*, found on Norwegian farms in *Grettis saga* (Chs 11, 19, 20).

Among the outbuildings fulfilling the role of storage or shelter, those devoted to the housing of livestock take on a prominent role. Foremost among these is the byre, *fjós*. Its main distinguishing feature, the stalls (*básir*) which are used to separate the cows that are housed within, are frequently mentioned and while we can assume they most frequently take the form of wooden partitions, *Grettis saga* informs us that they could also be constructed of stone slabs (*báshellir*, pl.):

> *Hann sá, hvar lá nautamaðr ok hafði hǫfuðit í ǫðrum básí, en fœtr í ǫðrum; hann lá a bak aptr… var hann brotinn um báshelluna.*
> 'He saw how the cowherd lay, with his head in one stall and his feet in another; he lay on his back… [his back] was broken over the stone partition-slab.' (*Grettis saga*, Ch. 33).

Other buildings for housing animals, stables (*hrossahús*, *Grettis saga* Ch. 14) and goat-sheds (*geitarhús*, *Grettis saga* Ch. 78), are mentioned, though they are not described in any detail. Shielings are also mentioned (*sel*, *Grettis saga*

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[5] While one might assume that a 'wardrobe', or clothing-storage, would be a storage space within the main dwelling house, an example in chapter 19 of *Grettis saga*, at Þorfinnr's farm in Norway, is explicitly stated as being outside, in a separate outbuilding. See below.

[6] The Íslenzk fornrit edition of *Gísla saga* (1943) gives an alternate version of the first 10 chapters of the saga, which are referenced here as 'alternate chapter (number)'.

Ch. 28), associated with more distant pastureland away from the farmstead, and livestock pens (*grind*, *Grettis saga* Ch. 21), while not buildings, are other structures related to the pastoral activities of the farm.

Rather than being devoted to storage and shelter, some outbuildings are reserved for the undertaking of specific activities related to regular farm practices, or additional productive activities. Smithies (*smiðjur*, pl.), for example, are mentioned but never described in terms of their construction (*Gísla saga* Chs. 8, 11). Still, this is enough to surmise their existence as important, function-specific buildings on the farmstead.

Quite a contrast is provided by the well-described bath-house (*baðstofa*) on the aforementioned farm at Hraun in *Eyrbyggja saga*, where the farmer Styrr has his *berserkir* followers killed. The construction of the bath-house is central to the episode's progression, and it is thus described in detail. The bath-house is built partially dug into the ground, and the entrance is through a trap-door or hatch. Inside is a closed flueless stove (*ofn*) above which is placed an opening, so that water can be poured onto the fire-heated stones of the stove's construction in order to generate steam. All these elements of physical construction contribute to the method by which the *berserkir* are killed:

> *En meðan þeir váru at þessu verki, lét Styrr gera baðstofu heima undir Hrauni, ok var grafin í jǫrð niðr, ok var gluggr yfir ofninum, svá at útan mátti á gefa, ok var þat hús ákafliga heitt... Styrr gekk þá í mót þeim ok þakkaði þeim verk ok bað þá fara í bað ok hvíla sik eptir þat. Þeir gerðu svá; ok er þeir kómu í baðit, lét Styrr byrgja baðstofuna ok bera grjót á hlemminn, er var yfir forstofunni, en hann lét breiða niðr nautshúð hráblauta hjá uppganginum; síðan lét hann gefa útan á baðit í glugginn, er yfir var ofninum; var þá baðit svá heitt, at berserkirnir þolðu eigi í baðinu ok hljópu á hurðirnar; fekk Halli brotit hlemminn ok komsk upp ok fell á húðinni...*
> 'And while they were occupied with this work, Styrr had a bath-house built at home, near Hraun. It was dug down into the ground, there was a

> window over the stove, so that water might be added from outside, and that house was exceedingly hot… Styrr then went to meet them and thanked them for their work, and invited them to go to the bath and rest themselves after that. They did so, and when they came to the bath, Styrr had the bath-house shut and stones piled onto the trap-door, which was over the antechamber, and had a wet cow's hide spread down next to the stairs [out of the bath-house]. Then he had water added to the bath from outside, through the window that was over the stove. The bath was then so hot that the berserkers could not stand to stay there, and they rushed at the door. Halli broke down the trap-door and came up and slipped on the [wet] hide…' (*Eyrbyggja saga*, Ch. 28)[7]

Another essential outbuilding is the latrine or privy (*salerni*, *kamarr*). The saga texts are quite explicit in stating that privies were located outside the main dwelling house:

> *Í þann tíma váru útikamrar á bœjum. En er þeir Snorri gengu frá eldinum, ætluðu þeir til kamarsins...'*
> 'In that time there were external privies on farms. And when Snorri and his men went from the fire, they headed for the privy...' *(Eyrbyggja saga*, Ch. 26)

The necessity to leave the main house to answer the call of nature is politely and euphemistically alluded to as accomplishing one's 'necessary business' or literally, 'necessities': *Þat var eina nótt, at Þórir viðleggr gekk út nauðsynja sinna...* ('It happened one night, that Þórir wood-leg went out to his necessities…', *Eyrbyggja saga*, Ch. 53).[8] That Snorri and his companions all venture to the privy together in the evening at the farm of Helgafell in *Eyrbyggja saga* suggests that privies could be large enough to accommodate several people (Ch. 26). This is supported by the magnificently well-described privy at Þorfinnr's farm in Norway, in *Grettis saga* (Ch. 19). This large privy

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[7] The entire description in this passage, both of the *baðstofa*'s construction and its usage, is significant, and will be further discussed in chapter 2, section 2.2.2, chapter 3, section 3.3.2, and chapter 6, section 6.2.1.

[8] Another example of an exterior privy, very significant to the story's plot, occurs in chapter 47 of *Laxdœla saga*. *Laxdœla saga,* ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit vol. 5 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1934). All subsequent references to *Laxdœla saga* will refer to this edition unless otherwise stated, and will be referred to by chapter in the body of the text. See also Byock 2001: 39-40.

is combined with a storehouse (which includes a wardrobe), and also represents one of the most descriptive passages in terms of building construction, and needs to be considered in its entirety:

> *Berserkir kómu fram í þessu. Grettir mælti: "Gǫngum út, ok mun ek sýna yðr fatabúr Þorfinns." Þeir létu þat leiðask; kómu þeir at útibúri ákafliga stóru. Þar váru á útidyrr ok sterkr láss fyrir, þat var allsterkt hús. Þar var hjá salerni mikit ok sterkt ok eitt skjaldþili milli húsanna; húsin stóðu hátt, ok var nǫkkut rið upp at ganga. Berserkir gerðusk nú umfangsmiklir ok skotruðu Gretti. Hann fór undan í fleymingi, ok er þeim var minnst ván, hljóp hann ut ór húsinu ok greip í hespuna ok rekr aptr húsit ok setr lás fyrir. Þórir ok hans félagar ætluðu fyrst, at svarfazk myndi aptr hafa hurðin, ok gáfu sér ekki at. Þeir hǫfðu ljós hjá sér, þvi at Grettir hafði sýnt þeim marga gripi, þá er Þorfinnr átti; litu þeir þar á um stund... Hlaupa þeir á hurðina ok finna, at hon var læst; treysta nú á timbrveggina, svá at brakar í hverju tré. Hér kemr um síðir, at þeir fá brotit skjaldþilit, ok kómusk svá fram í gangrúmit ok þar út á riðit...*
> 'The berserkers came forward at that [statement]. Grettir said: "Let us go out, and I will show you Þorfinnr's store of clothes." At that they let themselves be led, and they came to an exceedingly large outbuilding. There was also a strong lock on the outer door; it was a very sturdy house. Next to it was a large and sturdy privy, and there was a wooden partition wall between these houses. The houses[9] stood high, and there were some steps to go up to them... [Grettir] ran out of the house, seized the latch, slammed the door and set the lock on it. Þórir and his comrades thought at first that the door must have been knocked back, and they paid it no mind. They had a light with them, because Grettir had been showing them many treasures that Þorfinnr owned, and they looked around there for a while... They [the berserkers] ran to the door and found that it was locked. They now tried the strength of the timber [partition] wall, so that every board creaked. In the end, they managed to break down the partition wall, and so they came forward into the gallery and from there out to the stairs...' (*Grettis saga* Ch. 19)

Here we see that the outbuilding is built 'high', most likely on pillars, requiring steps (*rið*) to access it (there is no mention of a ground floor). These lead up to a kind of entrance passage (*gangrúm*), probably an exterior gallery or porch. Both the storage room and the privy have doors which lead onto this

[9] In the Old Norse, the plural *húsanna* and *húsin* refer to the two main sections that make up this outbuilding: the clothing storage and the privy. *Hús* can designate an enclosed space that is part of a building (of which there are two in this case) and need not always designate an entire separate building, as would be the case with the moden English 'house'. When Grettir later runs out of the *húsinu*, the singular is used because, in this case, only the clothing storage is designated.

passage, the storage room's door being equipped with a latch and a lock (*hespa*, *láss*). The privy, described as large, is separated from the storage room by a partition of wooden planks (*skjaldþili*). The entire building appears to be made of wood, and is described as sturdy (*sterkr*).

Many of the examples of outbuildings mentioned above are designated by the word *hús* or by a *–hús* compound. While *hús* is at times used to designate the main residential building on the farmstead, the farmhouse proper, it is a versatile word that can be used to designate buildings that are not necessarily dwellings for humans. When several types of *hús* are present, the main dwelling can itself receive its own specifying compound, *mannhús* (*Gísla saga* Ch. 16), to help distinguish it from others. All the buildings referred to as *hús* accomplish the function of secure containment, be it for people, livestock or goods of various kinds. This is similar to the modern English usage of the noun 'house' in compounds such as storehouse and warehouse, as well as the verb 'to house', which can mean, in a broad sense, to keep or store something securely within a building (OED 'house' v^1: I/1a, b, esp. c and e; 3a).

1.3 The Farmhouse

Moving towards the main dwelling house, one travels *heim*. The directional adverb *heim*, translated most succinctly in modern English as 'homeward', indicates that the destination of travel is a place of residence, a domestic building or a farmstead in its entirety. It does not, however, need to be the residence of the person or creature that is travelling, and there is no qualitative element of *belonging* such as could be suggested in the modern English usage of the word 'home'. In *Grettis saga* this is illustrated by the fact that both

Glámr, the monstrous revenant, and Grettir's enemy Þorbjǫrn and his company, are said to go *heim* to the residence of their intended victims: *Jafnan kom Glámr heim ok reið húsum,* ('Glámr always came "home" and rode the house,' Ch. 33); *...þeir gengu heim til skálans.* ('…They [Þorbjǫrn and his men] went homeward to [Grettir's] hut.' Ch. 82). Similarly, Þórólfr's walking corpse is said to come *heim á bœnum,* 'home to the farm' of Hvammr, in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 34). The one moving 'homeward' need not be human, as is demonstrated by the calf Glæsir going *heim* to the milking pen at the farm of Kársstaðir in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 63), and Grettir's pet ram going *heim* to the outlaw's hut on Drangey (*Grettis saga* Ch. 74). Furthermore, movement homeward need not even be intentional: in another example from *Eyrbyggja saga* at the farm of Fróðá, Þórir wood-leg is accosted by the revenant of a dead shepherd and thrown against the outer door of the house:

> *...vildi Þórir undan leita, en sauðamaðr sótti eptir ok fekk tekit hann ok kastaði honum heim at durunum...*
> '…Þórir tried to escape, but the shepherd pursued him and took hold of him and threw him homeward against the door…' (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 53).

Heim, then, indicates movement towards the residential building at the most basic level.

1.3.1 From Outside: the Roof, the Door and the Antechamber

While travel towards the house is frequent enough, descriptions of the house from the outside are essentially nonexistent. The roof is referred to as *rjáfr* (*ráfr, ræfr,* related to the English 'roof') or *þekja* (related to the Latin *tectum,* and the modern English 'thatch', see F, OED). Indeed, this latter meaning appears in usage to refer both to the roof as a structural element of the house,

and also to the material used as a covering for the house. Being one of the house's main defences against the elements, it does receive some description, especially in episodes involving its damage or destruction. In *Gísla saga,* a storm rips apart the covering from an entire section of the roof at the farm of Hól, exposing the people and stored goods within to the elements:

> *...kemr bylr á húsit svá mikill, at af tekr þekjuna alla ǫðrum megin af húsinu... ok tóku húsin at drjúpa, sem líkligt var, er þakit tók at rofna.*
> '…There came such a powerful gust of wind that it took off the whole roof on one side of the house… As was to be expected, the house began to leak, when the roof began to break.' (*Gísla saga* Ch. 13)

In *Grettis saga*, the revenant Glámr has the habit of 'riding the house' (*at ríða húsum*), at the farm of Þórhallsstaðir, evoking the image of a person straddling the roof's peak. The banging of his heels against the roof makes the entire house shake, carrying the vibrations through the rafters and the house's wooden armature. Grettir ambushes Glámr in the main room of this same farm, fighting with him and eventually forcing him outside through the door. Glámr's shoulders tear off the lintel and carry off pieces of the roof above, both the frozen covering (*þekjan frørin*) and the rafters/beams (*ræfr, viðir*) that support it (*Grettis saga* Ch. 35. See the passage quoted in its wider context further in section 1.4.1).

The roof covering is frozen, *þekjan frørin*, but the type of covering is not specified. It is simply a *ræfr*, roof, and although it might be tempting to exploit the etymological relationship with the modern English 'thatch', in an Icelandic context the frozen material in question can be inferred to be turf. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, a structure used for the storage of hay is said to be built using 'earth-turves', *jarðartorfar*, which are similarly frozen in the winter:

> *...meiðrinn kom á garðinn, ok gekk ór garðinum upp fyrir jarðartorfa frosin, en sleðmeiðrinn brotnaði í fjǫtraraufinni…*

> '…the sledge-runner hit the wall, and went out of the enclosure up over the frozen turves, and the sledge-runner broke at the strap-holes…' (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 37)

The section of roof that was destroyed in Grettir's fight at Þórhallsstaðir was a kind of porch, probably gabled, which was situated over the doorway. A similar porch is mentioned in *Eyrbyggja saga* when Svartr the thrall attempts to win his freedom by slaying Snorri goði. Svartr breaks through the roof into a loft space in the porch over the outer door, and lies in wait for Snorri to exit the house at Helgafell, planning to kill him with a spear thrust through the porch ceiling:

> *"Þú [Svartr] skalt fara til Helgafells ok ganga í lopt þat, er þar er yfir útidurum, ok rýma fjallir í gólfinu, svá at þú fáir þar lagt atgeiri í gegnum; en þá er Snorri gengr til kamars, þá skaltu leggja atgeirinum í gegnum loptsgólfit í bak Snorra... hlaup síðan út á ræfrit ok svá ofan fyrir vegginn ok lát náttmyrkit gæta þín." Ok með þessu ráði fór Svartr til Helgafells ok rauf ræfit yfir útidurum ok gekk þar inn í loptit...*
> '"You [Svartr] shall go to Helgafell and go into that loft, that is there over the outer door, and move aside the boards in the floor, so that you can put your halberd through it; and when Snorri goes to the privy, then you shall thrust your halberd through the loft floor into Snorri's back… Jump out afterwards onto the roof and over the wall and let the darkness of the night conceal you." And with this counsel, Svart went to Helgafell and broke open the roof over the outer door and went into the loft there… (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 26)

From this we understand that the entranceway consisted of a covered space between the door leading to the outside world (*útidyrr*), and the actual entrance into the body of the house, and thus probably jutted out from the house proper. The door itself is a complicated structure which receives quite a lot of description. Its parts are named: *dyristafr* (door-post), *þreskǫldr* (threshold), *uppdyrr* (lintel). The door panel itself that constitutes the closure of the doorway is the *hurð*, and the slotted space into which it fits within the doorframe is the *hurðarklofi*. The *hurð* could be equipped with a latch (*hespa*),

or a lock (*láss, loka*). The locking of doors seems to have been of particular importance to secure storage spaces and outbuildings:

> *[Katla] bað matselju bera ljós fyrir þeim ok lúka upp búri; – "þat eitt er hús læst á bœnum."*
> '[Katla] asked the housekeeper to carry a light before them and to unlock the storehouse; – "That is the only locked house on the farm."'
> (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 20)

Other locked outbuildings appear, such as the aforementioned storage loft on Þorfinnr's farm in Norway, in *Grettis saga* (Ch. 19). Dwellings are usually shown to be unlocked, but in Chapter 16 of *Gísla saga*, when Gísli goes out to murder Þorgrímr, his plan requires that the doors both at his own farm of Sæból, and his destination of Hól, be left unlocked.

The word *dyrr*, which exists only in plural form, is used to designate the door in a more abstract sense: it is the entire doorway, both the opening through which one passes, and the complete door structure comprised of all the aforementioned elements. The fact that the door consists of multiple elements might explain why the noun is plural, although this is by no means a firm conclusion, and it remains open to debate. It is interesting to note that the stock phrase for knocking on the door is the alliterating *drepa á dyrr*, despite the fact that it is the door panel, *hurð*, that is the most likely place for a knock to be administered. In most modern English translations of saga literature, *hurð* and *dyrr* are both translated as 'door'. However, there is no synonymy between *dyrr* and *hurð* in Old Norse usage. *Hurð* is used consistently and specifically when referring to the door panel, which closes the opening of the door. References to the *dyrr*, the entire door structure, might indeed encompass the *hurð*, but the *hurð* will be designated specifically as an object in its own right.

Thus, the terms do not appear to be interchangeable, and they refer to different material realities.

It is uncertain how many doors the typical house possessed. There appears to be usually one main door to enter the house, usually in the side wall (*hliðveggr*) near one of the gable-ends of the house (*gaflhlað, gaflveggr*): *...váru dyrr á hliðvegginum ok nær ǫðrum endanum.* ('…there was a door at the gable wall, near one of the ends [of the house].' *Eyrbyggja saga*, Ch. 4). This door is specified as the *útidyrr*, the outer door, and is thus differentiated from any other doors that may be within the house (*útihurð* also appears, when referring to the panel of the outer door, *Eyrbyggja saga*, Ch. 36). Additional doors are occasionally mentioned as well: Grettir enters his family's farmhouse at Bjarg through a secondary door in the back of the house ('*á bak húsum',* Ch. 47), and in *Eyrbyggja saga*, the farmer Álfr is said to escape an attack on his house through a secret back door (*'laundyrr',* Ch. 60, see also Weinmann 1994: 306). Access may also be gained through a house's annexes (see below), such as Gísli's entry into the farm at Sæból through its attached byre (*Gísla saga*, Ch. 16).

Entry into the house is usually accomplished through an antechamber or vestibule, the *anddyrr* or *ǫnd* (also sometimes called the *forstofa* or *forskáli*). The antechamber is most likely a separate space, constituting a proper room standing between the outer door with its entranceway, and the innermost, inhabited parts of the house. The progression through this type of antechamber can be seen in *Grettis saga* during Grettir's fight with the revenant Glámr, at Þórhallsstaðir. The grappling foes can be seen to go from

the main room, through the antechamber, here called *anddyrr*, where they continue fighting, to finally crash through the front door, landing outside:

> *Vildi Glámr leita út, en Grettir færði við fætr, hvar sem hann mátti, en þó gat Glámr dregit hann fram ór skálanum. Áttu þeir þá allharða sókn, því at þrællinn ætlaði at koma honum út ór bœnum... Glámr færðisk í aukana ok kneppði hann at sér, er þeir kómu í anddyrit... ok þvi kiknaði Glámr á bak aptr ok rauk ǫfugr út á dyrrnar, svá at herðarnar námu uppdyrit, ok ræfrit gekk í sundr, bæði viðirnir ok þekjan frørin; fell hann svá opinn ok ǫfugr út ór húsunum, en Grettir á hann ofan.*
> ‘Glámr wanted to get out. Grettir tried to stay on his feet as best he could, but Glámr managed to drag him forward out of the main room. They then engaged in a fierce fight, because the thrall [Glámr] intended to get outside the house… Glámr’s strength increased and he grasped [Grettir] to himself, when they came to the antechamber…and then Glámr fell backwards, and was thrust backward out the door, so that his shoulders took off the lintel, and the roof was broken apart, both the beams and the frozen roof-covering; he fell flat on his back out of the house, and Grettir fell on top of him.’ (*Grettis saga* Ch. 35)

That the antechamber could be large enough to accommodate several people and be used as a space within which to conduct domestic activities is suggested by the episode at the farm of Mávahlíð in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Here, in a scene which similarly shows the progression through the entrance spaces, a party of men led by Arnkell enters though the outer door. They encounter Katla in the antechamber (which is called *ǫnd* in this passage) grooming her son Oddr who is magically disguised as a goat. The party then proceeds, from the antechamber, into the main room of the house:

> *En er þau koma fram um dyrr, gekk hon í ǫndina gegnt útidurum ok kembir þar Oddi, syni sínum, ok skerr hár hans. Þeir Arnkell hljópu inn í dyrrnar ok sá, hvar Katla var ok lék at hafri sínum ok jafnaði topp hans ok skegg ok greiddi flóka hans. Þeir Arnkell gengu í stofu...*
> ‘And when they came forward to the door, she went to the antechamber facing the outer door and combed Oddr, her son, and cut his hair. Arnkell and his men ran into the room and saw where Katla was, playing with her goat, trimming his forelock and his beard, and combing his wool. Arnkell and his men went into the main room…’ (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 20)

Furthermore, the space might be large enough to contain designated storage spaces, as can be seen at the farm of Fróðá: *útar af eldaskálanum váru klefar tveir, á sína hǫnd hvárr* (‘out from the main room there were two storage rooms, on either side’ *Eyrbyggja saga*, Ch. 52). Here, there are said to be two storage rooms, *klefar* (singular *klefi*),[10] ‘on either side’ (but still within the house), suggesting that there might be two antechambers, at either end of the main room (see below), or perhaps one antechamber with two storage spaces, on either side of the access to the main room. The possible layouts for this room will be expanded upon in section 1.4.3 and in chapter 2, section 2.2.1, with a diagram in **Figure 2.13**.

Departing from this model, the farm at Sandhaugar in *Grettis saga* is described as having its entrance leading directly into the main room of the house, near the gable end: *Gengit var í hliðvegginn stofunnar inn við gaflhlaðit...* (‘The entrance was in the side-wall of the main room, by the gable end…’ *Grettis saga* Ch. 64). In context, this fact is seen as conspicuous, suggesting that the presence of an antechamber might otherwise be considered the norm (there is, however, a structure called *anddyrr* at Sandhaugar, which will be discussed in section 1.4.1).

1.3.2 The Main Room

As can be seen from the description of the spaces above, the spatial organisation of the house is centred, above all, on the main room. Where an antechamber was present, the main room was separated from it by a transverse partition (*þili*, *skjaldþili*, *þverþili*) built of wood, with a doorway providing

[10] Weinmann’s hypothesis that *klefar* (pl.) act as additional sleeping places is inapplicable to the situation at Fróðá, where these spaces are explicitly described as storage rooms (see the full passage quoted in this chapter, section 1.4.3. See also Weinmann 1994: 31).

access.[11] This is the room where the majority of domestic activities took place, as shall be seen in greater detail in chapters 4 and 5. The main room is referred to synonymously as *stofa* or *skáli*, along with the frequently-used compound *eld(a)skáli*. *Skáli* is itself a versatile term that can be used to designate a range of structures, from the main room of the house to an entire building such as a house or even a shack, hut, or other such humble or temporary structure, such as the hut built by Grettir and his followers on Drangey (*Grettis saga* Chs. 74, 82). Within the context of the ordinary farmhouse, however, the use of *skáli* refers unambiguously to the main room.

The word *stofa* carries connotations of heating, as does its modern English relative 'stove'. Along with the frequent compound *eld(a)skáli,* or 'fire-room', this indicates that one of the principal features of the main room was that it was heated (the term *eldhús,* 'fire-house', is also used, and is discussed further below). Indeed, one of its main construction features was the fire, situated in the centre of the room. This was a *langeldr*, or long fire, consisting of an open hearth (or, in one instance, a sunken fire pit, *eldgróf*, as in *Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 53). Stones could be placed in proximity to the fire and be used as portable heating in other sections of the house (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 53). There is no mention of a chimney or any other means to help with the extraction of smoke, and it is not inconceivable that the smoke generated by the fire, if improperly managed, could be fatal. This is demonstrated by an insulting falsehood told in *Grettis saga* about Ásmundr, Grettir's father, who is said to have choked in his fire's smoke: ...*hann kafnaði í stofureyk sem hundr*...

[11] *Þili* refers to any panel made of wooden boards, either as a full or partial partition wall, or as wooden cladding on a surface, such as the panelling on the inside of rooms and passageways. See also Weinmann 1994: 306.

(‘he choked like a dog in the smoke of his main room’s fire’ *Grettis saga* Ch. 37).

The plan of the main room is rectangular and the majority of its space was taken up by low, wide platforms built against the long walls of the room. These platforms, most often called *set*, or less frequently *bekkr*, were built of wooden planks. When the platform went crosswise against the back wall of the room (see below), it was called a *þverpallr* (‘cross-platform’) or simply *pallr*, and appears to have been identical in construction to the *set* or *bekkr* placed against the long walls of the room. These platforms could conceivably be left hollow to use as storage spaces. This is the case in *Eyrbyggja saga* where such a storage space is used by Oddr as a hiding place at his mother Katla’s farm at Mávahlíð:

> *Stóð hon þá upp af pallinum ok tók hægindin undan sér; var þar hlemmr undir ok holr innan pallrinn...*
> ‘She [Katla] got up from the cross-platform and took the pillow from under her; there was a trap-door underneath and the platform [was] hollow inside… (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 20)

The boards or timbers used in the construction of the *set* were called *setstokkar* (pl.), although the *setstokkr* (sg.) could also refer specifically to the board that edged the *set*, and which might have protruded beyond the level of the *set*’s surface: *Setstokkr var fyrir framan setit mjǫk sterkr, ok spyrndi hann þar í.* (‘The board on the edge of the platform was very sturdy, and he [Grettir] braced his feet against it.’ *Grettis saga* Ch. 35). These timbers were considered a precious enough resource to be dismantled and taken on journeys of settlement, as is said to be the case with Eirik the Red: ...Eiríkr sótti setstokkana á Breiðabólstað... (‘Eiríkr went to retrieve the platform-timbers at Breiðabólstaðir…’ *Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 24).

Between the two *set*, there is a long open hearth (*langeldr*), and there is enough floor space (*gólf*) around it to allow for comings and goings within the room. As mentioned, the platforms were called *þverpallr* or *pallr* when they were built across the room's axis, against a transverse wall, instead of against the long walls like the *set*. This could be done if there was no entrance or through-passage that required the transverse wall to be kept free, such as at the farm of Sandhaugar in *Grettis saga* (Ch. 64). As mentioned previously, this farm has its entrance leading directly into the main room through the long wall, near the gable end. When the main room is built in the middle of a house, its extremities are occupied by partitions separating it from antechambers or other rooms. In the case of Sandhaugar, there is no such partition, requiring open access, between the *set*-platforms, to reach the other rooms. The extremity of the room is made up of the gable wall of the house. Without need for a through-way, the space can be occupied by an additional platform, the *þverpallr: Gengit var í hliðvegginn stofunnar inn við gaflhlaðit, ok þar þverpallr hjá...* ('The entrance was in the side-wall of the main room, by the gable end, and there was a cross-platform next to it…' *Grettis saga* Ch. 64).

As far as can be seen, the remaining internal construction of the main room in addition to the *set* is also wooden. The importance of wood in the construction of the house might be alluded to in the phrase *innan stokks*, meaning 'indoors', literally 'inside the (wooden) boards'. The interior walls are indeed lined with wooden boards, *veggþili* (wainscoting), literally 'wall panel'. While it is difficult precisely to reconstruct the internal arrangement of the main room, it would appear that supporting beams, pillars and rafters (*viðir, stokkar, tré*) are also visible:

> *Fór Grettir þá undan í ýmis setin; gengu þá frá stokkarnir, ok allt brotnaði sem fyrir varð.*
> 'Grettir dodged from one platform to the other; the beams then went from there, and everything that was before them was broken up. *'Grettis saga*, Ch. 35)

The main room was open all the way to the apex of the roof, and thus its internal armature would have been visible from within. This can be seen in *Grettis saga*, during Grettir's battle with Glámr, where the partition wall between the main room and the antechamber is said to be entirely broken 'both above and below the cross-beam':

> *Þverþilit var allt brotit fra skálanum, þat sem þar fyrir framan hafði verit, bæði fyrir ofan þvertréit ok neðan.*
> 'The partition wall was entirely broken away from the main room, in front of which it had been, both above and below the cross-beam.'
> (*Grettis saga*, Ch. 35)

The cross-beam, *þvertré*, is the main transversal supporting timber located at the juncture of the walls and the sloping roof. In order for Grettir to see this from within the main room, there could not have been a floor built to separate the room into an upper space, at the level of the cross-beam. This fits in logically with the method of heating the main room, using an open hearth. Without a chimney, the smoke needs to be able to rise, either to gather away from the inhabited space, or to escape through an opening (though no smoke-holes appear in the three sampled *Íslendingasögur*).[12] This could not be achieved if there was an upper level, whose floor would interrupt the rising of the smoke. Thus, it would appear that the farmhouse did not contain an upper

[12] The Old Norse word for a smoke-hole or roof opening, *ljóri*, is conspicuously infrequent in the prose material dealing with narratives set in the Viking Age. It does not appear in the *Íslendingasögur*, and only once in a related tale (*þáttr*), *Hrómundar þáttr halta* ('The Tale of Hromund the Lame'), Ch. 5, and once in *Landnámabók* (Ch. S168/H137). *Hrómundar þáttr halta* in *Vatnsdœla saga,* ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit vol. 8 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1939); *Íslendingabók; Landnámabok*, ed. by J. Benediktsson Íslenzk fornrit vol. 1 (2vols) (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1968). All subsequent references to *Landnámabók* refer to this edition. See ONP, '*ljóri*'.

level. Yet, at Þorfinnr's farm in Norway, in *Grettis saga*, a loft (*lopt*) is specifically mentioned, [13] and it is there that a light is left burning in a window (*gluggr*), to act as a beacon for Grettir's return:

> *Húsfreyja lét kveikja ljós í inum efstum loptum við gluggana, at hann hefði þat til leiðarvísis; var ok svá, at hann fat af því heim, er hann sá ljósit.*
> 'The mistress of the house had a light lit in the upper loft, next to the windows, so that he [Grettir] could have that as a guide; and it happened thus, that he found his way home, because he saw the light.' (*Grettis saga* Ch. 19)

The space where the thrall Svartr hides, above the outer door at the farm of Helgafell in *Eyrbyggja saga*, is also designated as a loft (Ch. 26). While descriptions of the heated main room make it fairly clear that it was open to the roof, there is nothing to indicate that other parts of the house, especially unheated sections with no need to provide for the management of smoke, could not have featured upper levels, though the construction of these is not stated in detail.[14]

Apart from the full partition wall dividing the main room from the antechamber, sections of the main room could also be divided by partial partitions. This can be seen in an episode from *Gísla saga*, at Ingjaldr's farm on Hergilsey in Iceland, where a guest, Helgi (who is meant to be convalescing), climbs up a partition overlooking a pantry or kitchen, and, upon being discovered, falls back onto the *set* in the main room where he was meant to be resting:

> *Nú er sagt, at Þorgerðr gengr til járðhússins ok ætlar at gefa Gísla dǫgurð, en þili er á millum búrsins ok þess, er Helgi lá í. Þorgerðr*

[13] The most frequent usage of the Old Norse *lopt*, 'loft', in the sampled sagas, is simply as a chamber or space on an upper level of a building.

[14] Sleeping lofts are also mentioned in *Grettis saga* in the urban settings of Tønsberg, in Norway, and the fanciful episode in Byzantium (Chs. 7, 41, 88) although the character of the houses in these settings appears to follow a different logic of construction and organisation to the rural farmhouses that concern this study.

> *gengr í brott ór búrinu. Klífr Helgi upp á þilit ok sér, at þar var manni matr deildr, ok í því kemr Þorgerðr inn, ok vizk Helgi við fast ok fellr ofan af þilinu. Þorgerðr spyrr, hví hann lætr svá at klífa í ræfr upp ok vera eigi kyrr.*
> 'It is now said that Þorgerðr went to the underground chamber in order to give Gísli his breakfast. There was a partition between the workspace and the [main room] where Helgi lay. Þorgerðr went away out of the workspace. Helgi climbed up onto the partition and saw that a portion of food for one person had been set aside, and at that moment Þorgerðr came in, and Helgi turned around so fast that he fell down off the partition. Þorgerðr asked why he was climbing up into the roof and not lying still.' (*Gísla saga*, Ch. 25)

It is interesting to note here that the service area where the food is being prepared, is referred to as a *búr*. This is a generic name usually used for outbuildings that are separate from the main dwelling. Yet in this case, the *búr* is used to designate a demarcation of space within the main dwelling house. It is only separated from the main room, where Helgi is resting, by a partition which does not reach to the roof, and can thus be scaled and peered over. This could indicate that the word *búr* might designate any type of ancillary space, regardless of its construction. The *búr* can be within the main house, differentiated from the areas of main habitation like the *stofa* or *skáli*, and need not necessarily be located in an outbuilding. A similar usage is made of the word *afhús*, which can either mean an outbuilding or a section within a building, in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 4). Other rooms are occasionally mentioned in addition to the main room, such as another pantry or cellar, *kjallari*, on Þorfinnr's farm in Norway (*Grettis saga*, Ch. 19), and the aforementioned storage rooms (*klefar*) at the farm of Fróðá in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 52).

The division of space could also include the *dyngja*, an area of the house reserved for the use of women. This too could be both a section of the main room or, as is the case of the farm of Hól in *Gísla saga*, an entirely

separate building: *...útan ok sunnan undir eldhúsinu stóð dyngja…* ('…out from the main room, and to its south, stood the *dyngja*' *Gísla saga* Ch. 9). When discussing the layout of buildings, the preposition *undir*, 'under' can indicate something that is in proximity to a building, but external to it (as one might say, in modern English, that something is 'in the shadow of' a building). Thus the *dyngja* here is not located underneath the main room (*eldhús*) but is external to it, and furthermore located to the south of it (and the main dwelling house). The uses of the *dyngja* and the activities that went on within will be discussed further in chapter 4, section 4.3, and in chapter 6, section 6.2.1.

An episode in *Grettis saga*, where Grettir visits his family farm by night, illustrates that various parts of the house could be connected by the use of passages (*gǫng*):

> *Hann gekk á bak húsum ok þær dyrr, er þar váru, því at honum váru þar kunnig gǫng, ok svá til skála ok at rekkju móður sinnar ok þreifaðisk fyrst fyrir.*
> 'He [Grettir] went to the back of the house and to the door that was there, because the passage there was known to him. And so he went to the main room and to his mother's bed, feeling his way with his hands first.' (*Grettis saga* Ch. 47)

Eyrbyggja saga provides an interesting description of a very peculiar, differentiated space within the farm of Hofstaðir, in the form of a pagan sanctuary or temple (*hof*):

> *Þar lét hann reisa hof, ok var þat mikit hús; váru dyrr á hliðvegginum ok nær ǫðrum endanum; þar fyrir innan stóðu ǫndvegissúlarnar, ok váru þar í naglar; þeir hétu reginnaglar; þar var allt friðarstaðr fyrir innan. Innar af hofinu var hús í þá líking, sem nú er sǫnghús í kirkjum, ok stóð þar stalli á miðju gólfinu sem altari… Umhverfis stallann var goðunum skipat í afhúsinu.*
> 'He [Þórólfr Mostrarskegg] had a temple built there, and it was a great building. There was a door in the side-wall near one of the [gable] ends. The high-seat pillars stood inside [the door], and there were nails in them, which were called holy nails. All of the space inside was a sanctuary. Further into the temple was a structure that was like the

> choir in a church nowadays and there stood a platform in the middle of the floor, like an altar…All around the platform the gods stood arrayed in this section of the building.' (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 4)

Though it is likened to the choir within a church (*sǫnghús*), within which an altar stands, surrounded by 'the gods' (carved representations?), the detailed description of the place conjures the image of a very concrete, tangible physical building that is made believable through detail, regardless of how fantastical such a description might be. There is another *hof* in *Eyrbyggja saga*, at the farm of Helgafell (Ch. 15). Its form, however, is not described and it is not known whether it is set within a separate dedicated building, like a church would be, or integrated into another building on the farmstead (see further discussion in the conclusion of chapter 3).

Few furnishings are described in the main room of the house, with tables (*borð*) occurring most frequently, appearing as removable (trestle?) tables that are put in place at meal times (*Þar váru borð sett fyrir men...*, 'There were tables set up in front of people…' *Grettis saga* Ch. 14). Otherwise, the occasional chest (*ǫrk, kista*) also appears. Beds (*rekkja, sæng, beðr*) are mentioned (with bedclothes), but it would appear that these words refer simply to designated sleeping spots, on the *set*, which is explicitly stated as an area of sleeping (*...ok síðan sváfu menn upp frá eldunum...*, '…and afterwards people slept [on the set] up from the fire…' *Grettis saga* Ch. 14). The word *rúm* is also used, but unlike its meaning in modern Icelandic, specifically as a bed, in the usage of the sampled sagas it means, specifically, the space that one occupies on the *set*. *Rúm* is therefore not so much a 'bed' in the sense of a specific piece of furniture, but rather one's designated sleeping

spot, among all the others, on the *set*-platforms, where the household sleeps communally. In fact, the word *rúm* can be extended to indicate one's designated spot within the room, on the *set* or elsewhere, regardless of the way it is being occupied (sitting, working, or sleeping):

> *Katla sat á palli ok spann garn... Hon bað konur sitja í rúmum sínum, – "ok verið hljóðar... Enn skulu þér sitja í rúmum yðrum..."*
> 'Katla sat on the platform and spun yarn… She bade the women to sit in their places, – "and be quiet… And you should sit in your places…"' (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 20)

> *...lá Þóroddr inni í rúmi sínu...*
> '…Þóroddr lay inside, in his [sleeping] place…' (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 63)

It is possible though that sleeping could occur in another room and not in the *skáli* or *stofa*. In an episode in *Grettis saga*, on the farm at Reykir, the household is seen to enter the *stofa* in the morning after rising, indicating that they had slept elsewhere:

> *En er á leið morgininn, stóðu heimamenn upp, ok kómu konur tvær í stofu fyrst; þat var griðkona ok dóttir bónda.*
> 'And when the morning came, the household got up and two women, a servant woman and the householder's daughter, were the first to come into the main room.' (*Grettis saga* Ch. 75)

In *Gísla saga*, the farm of Hvammr is said to have a specifically designated sleeping chamber, the *svefnhús* (Ch. 23), and it is uncertain whether this is the same as the *skáli* or *stofa*, another specialised room or even an independent building.

The only distinct sleeping structures that are mentioned are the bed-closets (*lokrekkja*, *lokhvíla*, *hvílugólf*), closed wooden boxes, equipped with footboards (*fótborð*) and doors, usually reserved for the household's leading couple. Few details are given as to their construction:

> *...hann átti lokrekkju sterka gǫrva af timbrstokkum ok brutu berserkirnir þegar upp, svá at af gengu nafarnar fyrir útan …'*

> ‘…He [Þorbjǫrn] owned a strong bed-closet built of timber planks, and the berserkers broke it up immediately, so that the clasps [joining the timbers] on the outside came off…’ (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 25)

It is uncertain if these bed-closets were independent, movable pieces of furniture, or if they were built into another structure such as the *set*:

> *At Fróðá var eldaskáli mikill ok lokrekkja innar af eldaskálanum, sem þá var siðr...*
> ‘At Fróðá there was a large fire-room and a bed closet farther inside it, as was the custom then…’ (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 52)

> *Nú líðr dagrinn, ok er menn skyldu fara til svefns... [Grettir] lagðisk niðr í setit gegnt lokrekkju bónda...*
> ‘Now the day was past, and when it was time for people to go to sleep... [Grettir] lay down on the platform across from the householder’s bed-closet...’ (*Grettis saga* Ch. 35).

Similar uncertainty reigns with regard to the construction of the high seat, (*ǫndugi, ǫndvegi, hásæti*), whose form is never explicitly described. While it is seen to be used as the seat of predilection of the head of the household, a place of honour and dominant social ranking, it is perhaps most famously known by the use of ‘high-seat pillars’ (*ǫndvegisulur*). These pillars were said to be part of the oft-discussed land-settlement ritual wherein the pillars are cast overboard, and their owner settles where they make landfall (Wellendorf 2010: 1-11), referred to most often in *Landnámabók* (ed. Benediktsson 1968, Chs. S/H8, S/H9, S85/H73, S123/H95, S179/H145, S197/H164, S289, H250, S307, H268, S310/H270) and significantly in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 4). The use of these pillars in the high seat’s construction is not described with precision. Nevertheless, there are cumulative representations of the high seat in *Eyrbyggja saga* that may contribute to elucidating this matter somewhat:

> *Þórólfr kastaði þá fyrir borð ǫndvegissúlum sínum, þeim er staðit hǫfðu í hofinu; þar var Þórr skorinn á annarri.*

> ‘Þórólfr then threw his high-seat pillars overboard, which had stood in the temple. There was Þórr carved on one of them.’ (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 4)
>
> *Þar lét hann reisa hof, ok var þat mikit hús; váru dyrr á hliðvegginum ok nær ǫðrum endanum; þar fyrir innan stóðu ǫndvegissúlarnar, ok váru þar í naglar; þeir hétu reginnaglar…*
> ‘He [Þórólfr Mostrarskegg] had a temple built there, and it was a great building. There was a door in the side-wall near one of the [gable] ends. The high-seat pillars stood inside [the door], and there were nails in them, which were called holy nails.’ (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch.4)
>
> *Vermundr heilsar þeim ok rýmði þegar ǫndvegit fyrir þeim Þórarni.*
> ‘Vermundr greeted Þorarinn and his company and immediately made room for them on the high seat.’ (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 19)
>
> *Þórólfr bægifótr kom heim um kveldit ok mælti við engan mann; hann settisk niðr í ǫndvegi sitt ok mataðisk eigi um kveldit; sat hann þar eptir, er menn fóru at sofa. En um morguninn, er menn stóðu upp, sat Þórólfr þar enn ok var dauðr. Þá sendi húsfreyja mann til Arnkels ok bað segja honum andlát Þórólfs; reið þá Arnkell upp í Hvamm ok nǫkkurir heimamenn hans; ok er þeir kómu í Hvamm, varð Arnkell þess víss, at faðir hans var dauðr ok sat í hásæti...Gekk Arnkell nú inn í eldaskálann ok svá inn eptir setinu á bak Þórólfi...*
> ‘Þórólfr lame-foot came home in the evening and spoke with no-one. He sat down on the high seat and did not eat in the evening. He sat there after the people had gone to sleep. And in the morning, when the people got up, Þórólfr sat there still, and he was dead. Then the mistress of the house sent a man to Arnkell and asked him to announce Þórólfr’s death. Arnkell then rode up to Hvammr with a few men of his household. And when they had come to Hvammr, Arnkell ascertained that his father was dead and sat in his high seat… Arnkell now went in to the fire-room and in along the platform behind Þórólfr…’ (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 33)

The high seat thus appears to be a fairly substantial structure: it has pillars as part of its construction, and these, when re-used, can be integrated into the supporting structure of a house. The high seat is therefore probably not a movable object, but integrated into the *set*-platforms in the main room. The high seat is set forward on these platforms, as there is room to walk behind it, between it and the wall (as Arnkell does, *Eyrbyggja saga*, Ch. 33). Finally, the high seat does not appear to be an individual seat, but has room to accommodate several people: Þorarinn *and his band* are given room on the

high seat when they visit Vermundr (*Eyrbyggja saga*, Ch. 19). In all, this seems to indicate that the high seat is a variation of the *set* or *pallr*, a kind of platform and not a movable seat. The only feature which clearly differentiates the high seat from the other *set* is the presence of pillars, substantial enough to be structural timbers in a house, which either simply delimit the high-seat's area, or support it in some way (see also Lucas 2009: 395).

1.4 Discussion and Overview

1.4.1 *Grettis saga*

The examples given above, when selected individually, can illustrate the different constituent elements of the house as it appears in saga literature. When these passages are reassembled into longer, coherent narrative sections, a better understanding is gained of the house's spatial arrangement and overall layout. Each of the three sagas studied has particularly salient passages in this regard. In *Grettis saga*, the pithy and deliberately antiquarian passage describing the main room of Grettir Ásmundarson's home farm at Bjarg provides us with an interesting glimpse of the *eldaskáli* in use:

> *Þat var háttr í þann tíma, at eldaskálar váru stórir á bœjum; sátu menn þar við langelda á ǫptnum. Þar váru borð sett fyrir menn, ok síðan sváfu menn upp frá eldunum; konur unnu þar ok tó á daginn. Þat var eitt kveld, at Grettir skyldi hrífa bak Ásmundar, at karl mælti: "Nú muntu verða af þér at draga slenit, mannskræfan," segir hann. Grettir segir: "Illt er at eggja óbilgjarnan." Ásmundr mælti: "Aldri er dugr í þér." Grettir sér nú, hvar stóðu ullkambar í setinu, tekr upp kambinn ok lætr ganga ofan eptir baki Ásmundar.*
> 'That was the custom in that time, that there were large fire-rooms on farms; people sat there near the long fires in the evening. There were tables placed there in front of the people, and afterwards people would go to sleep up from the fire; women also worked the wool there during the day. It was one evening, when Grettir was to scratch Ásmundr's back, that the old man spoke: "Now you should drag the laziness from yourself, you good-for-nothing," he said. Grettir said: "It's a bad thing to goad the stubborn." Ásmundr said: "There is never any spirit in

> you." Grettir saw where the wool-combs were lying on the platform, took one up and ran it down Ásmundr's back.' (Ch. 14)

Nothing is said here about the rest of the house, but the main elements of the *skáli*, the open hearth and the *set*-platforms, are shown in explicit detail in the midst of daily use. The main room of the house is essentially the only space worth mentioning here: it is where the bulk of everyday life takes place. The aforementioned passage in *Grettis saga* Ch. 47 provides a little more information. In this passage, Grettir enters the house through the back door and feels his way down a familiar passage to the main room where he finds his mother, lying in bed, that is, on the *set* (no bed-closet is mentioned). The main room is still, here, the living core of the farm, and despite the added detail of parts of the house being linked together with passages, little else but the *skáli* matters in terms of domestic structures. The main features of the house at Bjarg are further discussed in chapter 2, section 2.2.2, with a diagram of its possible layout in **Figure 2.18**.

During Grettir's fight with the revenant Glámr at the farm of Þórhallsstaðir, the battered house yields many details about its wooden armature, and a more longitudinal plan to the house emerges. This is one of the richest passages describing in detail both the internal construction of the house, and also the characters' progression through its space, and must be considered in its entirety:

> *Nú líðr dagrinn, ok er menn skyldu fara til svefns, vildi Grettir eigi fara af klæðum ok lagðisk niðr í setit gegnt lokrekkju bónda; hann hafði rǫggvarfeld yfir sér ok kneppði annat skautit niðr undir fætr sér, en annat snaraði hann undir hǫfuð sér ok sá út um hǫfuðsmáttina. Setstokkr var fyrir framan setit mjǫk sterkr, ok spyrndi hann þar í. Duraumbúningrinn allr var frá brotinn útidurunum, en nú var þar fyrir bundinn hurðarflaki ok óvendiliga um búit. Þverþilit var allt brotit fra skálanum, þat sem þar fyrir framan hafði verit, bæði fyrir ofan þvertréit ok neðan. Sængr allar váru ór stað færðar; heldr var þar óvistuligt.*

Ljós brann í skálanum um nóttina. Ok er af myndi þriðjungr af nótt, heyrði Grettir út dynur miklar; var þá farit upp á husin ok riðit skálanum ok barit hælunum, sva at brakaði í hverju tré; þvi gekk lengi. Þá var farit ofan af húsunum ok til dura gengit; ok er upp var lokit hurðunni, sá Grettir, at þrællinn rétti inn hǫfuðit, ok syndisk honum afskræmiliga mikit ok undarliga stórskorit. Glámr fór seint ok réttisk upp, er hann kom inn í dyrrnar; hann gnæfði ofarliga við rjáfrinu, snýr at skálanum ok lagði handleggina upp á þvertréit ok gnapði inn yfir skálann... Grettir spyrndi í stokkinn… ...hann rétti Gretti upp ór setinu... Fór Grettir þá undan í ýmis setin; gengu þá frá stokkarnir, ok allt brotnaði, þat sem fyrir varð. Vildi Glámr leita út, en Grettir færði við fætr, hvar sem hann mátti, en þó gat Glámr dregit hann fram ór skálanum. Áttu þeir þá allharða sókn, því at þrællinn ætlaði at koma honum út ór bœnum... Glámr færðisk í aukana ok kneppði hann at sér, er þeir kómu í anddyrit... ok þvi kiknaði Glámr á bak aptr ok rauk ǫfugr út á dyrrnar, svá at herðarnar námu uppdyrit, ok ræfrit gekk í sundr, bæði viðirnir ok þekjan frørin; fell hann svá opinn ok ǫfugr út ór húsunum, en Grettir á hann ofan.'

'Now the day was past, and when it was time for people to go to sleep, Grettir did not want to get undressed, and lay down on the platform across from the householder's bed-closet. He had a cloak of shaggy fur over him, and pressed one corner of it under his feet and twisted another under his head, and looked out through the head-hole. The board on the edge of the platform was very sturdy, and he braced his feet against it. The frame of the outer door was entirely broken, and there was now a poorly-built hurdle tied in its place. The partition wall was entirely broken away from the main room, in front of which it had been, both above and below the cross-beam. The beds had all been moved out of place, and it was rather unlivable. A light burned in the main room during the night. And when about one third of the night was past, Grettir heard a great din outside, [something] had then gone up onto the house and rode [the roof over] the main room and struck it with [its] heels, so that every timber creaked. This went on for a long time. Then it came down off the house and went to the door. And when the door was opened, Grettir saw that the thrall reached its head inside, and it seemed to him hideously big with extraordinarily large features. Glámr moved slowly and straightened himself up, when he came into the door. He towered high up into the roof-space. He turned to the main room, rested his arm on the cross-beam and stooped in over the main room… Grettir braced his feet against the board [at the edge of the platform]… [Glámr] raised Grettir up off the platform… Grettir dodged from one platform to the other; the beams were gone from there, and everything that was before them was broken up. Glámr wanted to get out. Grettir tried to stay on his feet as best he could, but Glámr managed to drag him forward out of the main room. They then engaged in a fierce fight, because the thrall [Glámr] intended to get outside the house… Glámr's strength increased and he grasped [Grettir] to himself, when they came to the antechamber…and then Glámr fell backwards, and was thrust backward out the door, so that his shoulders took off the lintel, and the roof was broken apart, both the beams and the frozen

> roof-covering; he fell flat on his back out of the house, and Grettir fell on top of him.' (*Grettis saga*, Ch. 35).

The interior spatial arrangement is given particular attention. Grettir positions himself on the *set* across from the farmer's bed-closet. When the monstrous Glámr makes his way into the house, he looms into the upper parts of the open space beneath the roof, and he has to stoop, supporting himself on the cross-beam, to see inside the main room from the antechamber. All the details of the house's inner construction are visible, and the extensive damage to all the boards, rafters, and beams, is given emphasis. The ensuing grappling between Grettir and Glámr gives us a spatial progression from the inside of the main room, where Grettir hops from platform to platform, evading Glámr, out past the partition into the antechamber, and out again, crashing through the outer door causing more damage, out into the open air. The house here chiefly consists of the main room, but the presence of the antechamber is made explicit, as an intermediate area between the inner sanctum of domestic space, and the outside world. The main features of the house at Þórhallsstaðir are further discussed in chapter 2, section 2.2.2, with a diagram of its possible layout in **Figure 2.19**.

. Grettir's monster fight at the farm of Sandhaugar is very similar to that at Þórhallsstaðir, and the passage provides a similar richness of detail:

> *…bað hann [Grettir] heimafólk fara innar í stofu. Hann tók þá borð ok lausa viðu ok rak um þvera stofuna ok gerði bálk mikinn, svá at engi heimamaðr komsk fram yfir… Gengit var í hliðvegginn stofunnar inn við gaflhlaðit, ok þar þverpallr hjá; þar lagðisk Gestr [Grettir] niðr ok fór ekki af klæðunum. Ljós brann í stofunni gegnt durum... þá er dró at miðri nótt, heyrði hann út dynur miklar. Þvi næst kom inn í stofuna trollkona mikil: hon hafði í hendi trog, en annarri skálm heldr mikla. Hon litask um, er hon kom inn, ok sá, hvar Gestr lá, ok hljóp at honum, en hann upp í móti, ok reðusk á grimmliga ok sóttusk lengi í stofunni. Hon var sterkari, en hann fór undan kœnliga, en allt þat, sem fyrir þeim varð, brutu þau, jafnvel þrverþilit undan stofunni. Hon dró hann fram*

> *yfir dyrrnar ok svá í anddyrit; þar tók hann fast í móti. Hon vildi draga hann út ór bœnum, en þat varð eigi, fyrr en þau leystu frá allan útiduraumbúninginn ok báru hann út á herðum sér; þæfði hon þá ofan til árinnar ok allt fram at gljúfrum.*
> '…he [Grettir] asked the members of the household to go farther into the main room. He then took the tables and loose timbers and secured them across the room and made such a large partition that none of the household could get over it… The entrance was in the side-wall of the main room, by the gable end, and there was a cross-platform next to it. Gestr [Grettir] lay down there and did not get undressed. A light burned in the main room across from the door… when the middle of the night drew near, he heard a great din outside. Next, a huge troll-woman came into the main room. She had a trough in one hand, and a rather large blade in the other. She looked around her when she came in, and saw where Gestr [Grettir] lay, and leapt at him. He rose up to meet her and they fought fiercely in the main room for a long time. She was stronger, but he evaded her skilfully, and everything that stood before them was broken including the cross-platform at the end of the room. She dragged him over [through] the door into the entrance-porch, and there he resisted firmly. She wanted to drag him out of the house, but that did not happen until they tore off the whole frame of the outer door and carried it out on their shoulders. She fought [him] over to the river and all the way into the ravine.' (*Grettis saga* Chs. 64-65)

When the she-troll enters, she behaves like Glámr, looking around and filling the room with her enormous bulk. Grettir grapples with her and, as happens with Glámr, the outer door-frame is torn apart when their battle carries them out of the house. Added details here include the construction of a protective barrier (*bálkr*), using all the movable wooden resources in the main room (including tables), in order to isolate and protect the house's inhabitants at one end of the main room. This suggests that there is no other room for them to hide in, not even an antechamber. Indeed, the house's entrance is conspicuous in that it enters directly into the main room. This too gives us an idea of spatial arrangement: the logic of movement here is different than at Þórhallsstaðir, and, without the need to connect with an antechamber set on end with the main room, the transverse wall is free to accommodate another *set*-platform across the width of the house, the *þverpallr*. There is, however, a structure called

anddyrr, one of the main words used to designate the antechamber. But since there is obviously no larger antechamber placed on the end of the main room, as seen elsewhere, the *anddyrr* at Sandhaugar appears to be more of a porch, or small entrance chamber, placed perpendicular to the house to accommodate the door leading directly into the main room. The main features of the house at Sandhaugar are further discussed in chapter 2, section 2.2.2, with a diagram of its possible layout in **Figure 2.20**.

The farmstead model in *Grettis saga* appears to be fairly basic, and only the farms of Þórhallstaðir in Iceland, with its separate byre (Ch. 33), and Þorfinnr's farm in Norway (Ch. 19) with its remarkable storage loft, are shown to have ancillary buildings of any importance. The inhabited houses in *Grettis saga* appear to have a relatively simple plan: a long, rectangular main room is the main element, with or without an antechamber or access to a few other parts by the use of passages.

1.4.2. *Gísla saga*

Two passages in *Gísla saga* are particularly helpful in illustrating ideas of domestic construction. The first of these takes place at the farm of Hól, where Þorkell is sleeping in the *eldhús*, which appears to be the main room (compare with the usage of *eldhús* at the farm of Fróðá in *Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 54, discussed in section 1.4.3. below). Upon waking, he overhears the conversation between Auðr and Ásgerðr in the women's *dyngja*, and exits the main room to spy on them:

> *Þat var einn góðan veðrdag, at Gísli lét alla menn vinna heyverk, nema Þorkell, hann var einn heima karla á bœnum ok hafði lagizk niðr í eldhúsi eptir dǫgurð sinn. Eldhúsit var tírœtt at lengð, en tíu faðma breitt, en útan ok sunnan undir eldhúsinu stóð dyngja þeira Auðar ok*

> *Ásgerðar, ok sátu þær þar ok saumuðu. En er Þorkell vaknar, gengr hann till dyngjunnar, því at hann heyrði þangat mannamál, ok leggsk þar niðr hjá dyngjunni... ok gengr inn eptir þat.*
> 'It happened one day of fine weather, that Gísli had all the men go to the haymaking except Þorkell. He was the only man left on the farm and he had lain down in the main room after his breakfast. The main room was a hundred [fathoms] in length, and ten fathoms wide. Out from the main room, and to the south, stood Auðr's and Ásgerðr's *dyngja*, and they sat there and sewed. And when Þorkell awoke, he went to the *dyngja*, because he heard the sound of people talking there, and he lay down there near the *dyngja*… and went in after that.' (*Gísla saga* Ch. 9)

The enormous dimensions of the *eldhús* are explained in a note to the Íslenzk fornrit edition of *Gísla saga* (Þórólfsson and Jónsson 1943: 30, note 1), stating that the description fits more closely with an ostentatious high-status building, used explicitly for celebration. [15] In actual usage the *eldhús* here corresponds to the main room of the house, elsewhere called the *skáli* or the *stofa*, and the details of its incongruously large and bizarre proportions (with a ratio of 10:1) seem somewhat random and gratuitous. There is no follow-up in the narrative to demonstrate any reason for the room's size, nor does its usage actually suggest it is particularly large. For these reasons, this quantification of the room's dimensions has been disregarded as unreliable and incongruous.

This passage brings up another interesting characteristic of *Gísla saga*, which is that it seems to present a rather different model of homestead than *Grettis saga*. The descriptions of homesteads in *Gísla saga* seem to present

[15] Even so, the dimensions are exaggerated. A fathom (*faðmr*) is defined as the distance between the fingertips with arms widespread, measured at between 3.5 and 4 cubits (ONP), which translates to approximately 160cm to 183cm. The *eldhús* in *Gísla saga* would therefore measure approximately 160m to 183m by 16m to 18.3m. This does not include the total dimensions of the putative house in which it would have been located. These are hardly realistic dimensions, as the largest excavated Viking Age building in Iceland, at Hofstaðir, had a total length of 38m (Lucas 2009: 376-377), and the largest excavated Viking Age building in Scandinavia, at Borg in Lofoten, Norway, had a total length of 83m (Herschend and Mikkelsen 2003: 51. See also this thesis, chapter 2, section 2.1.1). These dimensions might suggest that *faðmr* refers here to a different measurement, or a different concept entirely, but its meaning is not clear in the passage in *Gísla saga*.

more evidence both of clustered function-specific buildings, as well as more complex buildings divided into specific areas (rather than having all daily activities within large, multi-function rooms). This is seen not only with the women's *dyngja,* which is clearly a separate structure and not simply a part of the *eldhús*, but also with the subdivision of the house into ancillary spaces, as with the *búr* on Ingjaldr's farm on Hergilsey (Ch. 25). The use of the word *eldhús* in *Gísla saga* is also interesting. This word is absent from *Grettis saga,* though it occurs in *Eyrbyggja saga* at Fróðá (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 54), and a second time (as '*eldahús'*) in *Gísla saga* at the farm of Vaðil (*Gísla saga* Ch. 23). It is unclear exactly what it means here, though it is most likely equivalent to (*elda*)*skáli* or *stofa*, as the main room of the house. Later usage of the word *eldhús* would however come to define, more specifically, a kitchen, as opposed to the main room. These examples taken together could hint at an increasing differentiation of space according to function in *Gísla saga.*

Another very rich description comes from the episode in Chapter 16 when Gísli travels from his farm of Hól to the neighbouring farm of Sæból to kill his brother-in-law Þorgrímr in his sleep. Indeed, so rich is the description of space and action in this passage, that it has been praised by Richard Perkins as "one of the most effective scenes in saga-literature" (Perkins 1989: 250). The quality of description in this passage warrants its consideration in its entirety:

> *...gengr hann [Gísli] síðan til lækjar þess, er fellr á milli bæjanna ok tekit var neytingarvatn af hvárumtveggja bœnum. Hann gengr gǫtu til lækjarins, en veðr síðan lækinn til gǫtu þeirar, er lá til hins bœjarins. Gísla var kunnig húsaskipan á Sæbóli, því at hann hafði gǫrt þar bœinn. Þar var innangengt í fjós. Þangat gengr hann. Þar stóðu þrír tigir kúa hvárum megin; hann knýtir saman halana á nautunum ok lýkr aptr fjósinu ok býr svá um, at eigi má upp lúka, þó at innan sé til komit.*

Síðan ferr hann til mannhúsanna, ok hafði Geirmundr geymt hlutverka sinna, því at loka var engi fyrir hurðum. Gengr hann nú inn ok lýkr aptr hurðinni sem um aptaninn hafði verit um búit. Nú ferr hann at ǫllu tómliga. Eptir þat stendr hann ok hlýðisk um, hvárt nǫkkurir vekið, ok verðr hann þess varr, at allir menn sofa. Þrjú váru log í skálanum. Síðan tekr hann sefit af gólfinu ok vefr saman, kastar síðan í ljósit eitt, ok slokknar þat. Eptir þat stendr hann ok hyggr at, hvárt nǫkkurr vaknar við, ok finnr hann þat ekki. Þá tekr hann aðra sefvisk ok kastar í þat ljós, er þar var næst, ok sløkkvir þat. Þá verðr hann þess varr, at eigi munu allir sofa, því at hann sér, at ungs manns hǫnd kemr á it þriðja ljósit ok kippir ofan kolunni ok kæfir ljósit. Nú gengr hann innar eptir húsinu ok at lokhvílunni, þar er þau Þorgrímr hvíldu ok systir hans, ok var hnigin hurð á gátt, ok eru þau bæði í rekkju. Gengr hann þangat ok þreifask fyrir ok tekr á brjósti henni, ok hvíldi hon nær stokki... Gísli tekr þá klæðin af þeim annarri hendi, en með annarri leggr hann í gegnum Þorgrím með Grásíðu, svá at í beðinum nam stað. Nú kallar hon Þórdís ok mælti: "Vaki menn í skálanum. Þorgrímr er veginn, bóndi minn." Gísli snýr í brott skyndiliga til fjóssins, gengr þar út, sem hann hafði ætlat, ok lýkr aptr eptir sér rammliga, snýr heim síðan ina sǫmu leið, ok má hvergi sjá spor hans. Auðr lætr lok frá hurðu, er hann kom heim, ok ferr hann í sæng sína ok lætr sem ekki sé í orðit eða hann eigi um ekki at vera. En menn allir váru ǫlærir á Sæbóli ok vissu eigi, hvat at skyldi ráða...

'... [Gísli] then went to the brook which lay between their farms and from which they both took their supply of water. He went on the path to the brook, and then waded through the brook until he was on the path that led to his neighbour's farm. Gísli knew the layout of the buildings on this farm because he had built it. There was a way in through the byre. He went there. Thirty cows stood on either side. He tied their tails together and closed the byre door so that it could not be unlocked, even from the inside. Then he went into the people's dwelling, and Geirmundr had done his work, because there were no locks on the doors. Gísli went in then, and closed the doors again as they had been set up in the evening. He went in very slowly, and afterwards stood still and listened to hear if anyone was awake, and he found that everyone was asleep. There were three lights in the main room. He took some rushes from the floor and wove them together, and threw them onto one light, and put it out. After that he stood still to see if anyone had been woken up by this, and found that no-one had. He then took another bundle of rushes and threw it onto the next light, and put it out. And then he discovered that not everyone was sleeping, because he saw a young man's hand reach for the third light, take down the lamp and snuff out the light. Gísli then walked farther into the house to the bed-closet where Þorgrímr slept, and his sister [Þórdís]. The door was shut, and they were both in the bed. He went there, and felt around with his hands, and touched her breast; she was sleeping near the [edge-] board [of the bed]… Gísli then took the bedclothes off

> them with one hand, and with the other thrust [the spear] Grásíða through Þorgrímr so that it got lodged in the bed. Then Þórdís called out, saying "Awake, all you men in the main room. Þorgrímr, my husband, has been killed." Gísli quickly turned away to the byre. He went out there as he had planned, and shut [the doors] securely behind him. He then turned towards home in the same way, so that his tracks could not be seen. Auðr loosed the lock from the door when he came home. He went to his bed and behaved as if nothing had happened, or he had been up to nothing. And all the men at Sæból were drunk and did not know what should be done ...' *(Gísla saga,* Ch. 16)

Gísli's journey takes him through the grounds of Hól and Sæból and into the farmhouse through an adjacent byre.[16] He proceeds into the main room filled with sleeping guests after a celebration. It is not made explicit whether this room was usually used for sleeping (this would seem contextually plausible), or if this is just a provision to accommodate numerous guests. After extinguishing the lights that were left burning, Gísli advances farther into the house to where the main couple, Gísli's sister Þórdís and her husband Þorgrímr, sleep in a closed bed-closet (itself described in some detail). It is not said whether this area, 'farther into the house' (*innar eptir húsinu*), is in another room, or simply farther into the main room. It is here that Gísli kills Þorgrímr. The description of spaces is extremely detailed, and allows for an understanding of Gísli's passage through them. The house model presented is quite complex, clearly indicating that the house and byre are connected structures, and suggesting that the house itself might have multiple areas and possibly separate rooms. There is a progression of movement from the outside, into the byre, then into the house's main room, and thence to the innermost area, where the head couple is sleeping in their bed-closet. With every passage, Gísli is getting 'deeper' into the house, passing another threshold of

[16] The detail of tying the cows' tails together is unexplained in the saga, and given no follow-up. One logical interpretation is that it may be a measure intended to hinder the pursuit of Gísli once Þorgrímr's murder is discovered, and may be related to (possibly comical) elements of recitation in previous oral incarnations of the saga. See Danielsson 2008: 33.

containment, from the unprotected exterior to the increasingly protected, domestic and intimate interior. The main features of the house at Sæból are further discussed in chapter 2, section 2.2.1, with a diagram of its possible layout in **Figure 2.15.**

The houses in *Gísla saga*, then, still have an important main room, but their plan has expanded to include multiple attached sections which are important in their own right, or even fragmenting the house's functional space into separate buildings.

1.4.3 *Eyrbyggja saga*

In *Eyrbyggja saga*, the descriptions of the farm at Fróðá are particularly illustrative. The farm is much harassed by the revenants of its erstwhile residents, though these are not nearly as destructive as the monsters of *Grettis saga*:

> *At Fróðá var eldaskáli mikill ok lokrekkja innar af eldaskálanum, sem þá var siðr; útar af eldaskálanum váru klefar tveir, á sína hǫnd hvárr; var hlaðit skreið í annan, en mjǫlvi í annan. Þar váru gǫrvir máleldar hvert kveld í eldaskála, sem siðr var til; sátu menn lǫngum við eldana, áðr menn gengu til matar. Þat kveld, er líkmenn kómu heim, þá er menn sátu við málelda at Fróða, þá sá menn á veggþili hússins, at komit var tungl hálft...*
> 'At Fróðá there was a large fire-room and a bed closet farther inside it, as was the custom then. Out from the main room there were two storage rooms, on either side; there was dried fish stored in one, and flour in the other. There were cooking fires lit every evening in the fire-room, as was the custom. People would sit for a long time by the fires, before taking their meal. That evening when the revenants came to the house, when people were sitting by their cooking fire at Fróðá, then the people saw, on the wooden panelling of the house, that a half moon had come…' (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 52)
>
> *Þeir Þóroddr gengu eptir endilǫngum setaskálanum, en hann var tvídyrðr; þeir gengu til eldaskála ok tóku einskis manns kveðju, settusk þeir við eldinn, en heimamenn stukku ór eldaskálanum, en þeir Þóroddr sátu þar eptir, þar til er eldrinn var fǫlskaðr... heimamenn stukku ór eldhúsinu, sem ván var at, ok hǫfðu hvárki á því kveldi ljós né*

> *steina ok enga þá hluti, at þeir hefði neina veru af eldinum. Annat kveld eptir var máleldr gǫrr í ǫðru húsi... It þriðja kveld gaf Kjartan þat ráð til, at gera skyldi langeld mikinn í eldaskála, en máleld skyldi gera í ǫðru húsi; ok svá var gǫrt; ok þá endisk með því móti, at þeir Þóroddr sátu við langeld, en heimamenn við inn litla eld, ok svá fór fram um ǫll jólin.*
> 'Þóroddr and his company went down the whole length of the sleeping chamber, and it had two doors. They went to the fire-room and responded to no-one's greeting. They sat by the fire, and the members of the household rushed stumbling out of the fire-room. Þóroddr and his company sat there afterwards, until the fire had turned to ashes… The members of the household rushed stumbling out of the fire-room, as could be expected, and they had neither light in the evening, nor [heated] stones, nor any of the those things which they had as comforts from the fire. On the second night the cooking fire was made in another building… On the third night Kjartan decided that they should prepare a great long-fire in the fire-room, but that the cooking fire should be made in another building. This was done, with the result that Þóroddr and his company sat at the long-fire, and the household by the small fire, and it went on like this for the entire duration of Yule.' (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 54)

The revenants, Þóroddr and company, simply wish to warm themselves by the fire as they had done in life, to the great consternation of the remaining, living inhabitants of the farm. Unable to escape the undead visitors, the living relocate their evening fire to another building, making sure to leave a larger, more attractive fire to lure the revenants away.

The main heated room, here called both *eldaskáli* and *eldhús*, and the *setaskáli* (translated previously as 'sleeping chamber'), obviously furnished with *set*-platforms for sitting or sleeping, are not the same. They are, however, adjacent. The *set*-room has two doors (it is *tvídyrðr*), likely at both ends, since the deceased party walk along the whole length (*endilǫngum*) of this room to get to the heated room beyond. This could suggest that the heated room has two doors as well, because in the former passage (Ch. 52), the bed-closet (*lokkrekja*) is said to be 'farther in' from the *eldaskáli* (*innar af eldaskálanum*). This might place the bed-closet in the *setaskáli*, the most likely sleeping

chamber. This would imply an entry from the other direction, going through the *eldaskáli* and 'farther in' to the *setaskáli*. The aforementioned storage rooms, *klefar*, would be outside the *eldaskáli*, but still inside the house, on either side of the entrance to the room. The plan thus appears to be a longitudinal one, comprised of the apparently unheated *setaskáli*, the heated *eldaskáli*, outside of which are located the storage spaces. If there are entrances to the outside on both gable ends of the house, it is likely that a kind of antechamber was also present, and that this is where the storage spaces were contained. The logic of movement here appears to be direct: in one end, through the entire length of the house comprised of two main rooms set end-to-end, and out the other end. The comparative adverbs *innar* and *útar* appear to determine position based on the points of access to a room, with *innar*, 'farther in', representing a position away from the point of access, and *útar*, 'farther out', a position near the point of access with the 'outside' of the room.

Another possible layout (perhaps more likely) is that the bed-closet is 'farther in' ('*innar af eldaskálanum*') because it is farthest from the door into this room, and is thus located in the fire-room, the *eldaskáli*, and not the sleeping room, the *setaskáli*. The storage rooms, *klefar*, are 'farther out' ('*útar af eldaskálanum*'), possibly meaning they are closer to the access to this room; still inside the *eldaskáli*, but nearer to the doorway to the 'outer' spaces beyond the room. In this model, the *setaskáli* would still have two doors (*tvídyrðr)*, and a through-way, but the *eldaskáli* could have only one door, and be accessed through the *setaskáli*. If the storage spaces, *klefar*, are located within the *eldaskáli*, which is itself accessed only through the *setaskáli*, there would therefore be no implied presence of an antechamber to house the *klefar*. The

main features of the house at of Fróðá are further discussed in chapter 2, section 2.2.1, with a diagram of both possible layouts in **Figure 2.13**.

Besides this longitudinal plan for the main house, there are other buildings on the farmstead that can accommodate shelter for the living inhabitants of the farm, as can be seen by their transfer of the evening fire into another house, *'í ǫðru húsi'*. This farmstead, like the ones in *Gísla saga*, thus appears to have a more complex arrangement with a fragmented distribution of functional space. An added detail is that the *eldaskáli* appears to be equated with the *eldhús* here as well, perhaps helping to alleviate the confusion over the domestic nomenclature in *Gísla saga*.

Conclusion: The Materiality of Domestic Space

The level of detail in in the description of domestic buildings in saga literature creates an image of a concrete, material world, where the structures and spaces described through text correspond to tangible physical examples that both the sagas' authors and audience would be familiar with. The realism of the stories' material setting, the fact that these buildings are believable, could be a major factor contributing to the transmission and reception of the stories themselves: this concept will be explored in further detail in chapter 6.

However, there is an essential question that must be asked: does this impression of a believable physical world actually correspond to a verifiable architectural reality connected to the sagas' contexts? If so, what material reality or realities are translated through the written word in these medieval stories, written about the Viking Age? It is only by looking at the archaeology of domestic space that these questions can be explored in greater depth.

Chapter 2: Comparisons with Arcaheology

Introduction

The previous chapter has established that the descriptions of houses and buildings as physical spaces and objects are rich and replete with details of construction and usage. The objective of this current chapter is to examine the archaeology of housing culture in order to evaluate the realism and validity of the material descriptions in the sagas. Because the *Íslendingasögur* present us with the problematic chronological displacement between the Viking Age setting of the narratives and the medieval period of writing, this chapter will first present an overview of the evolution of housing culture from the Viking Age to the early modern period both in Iceland and in Norway (these being the areas in which most of the narrative action takes place in the sampled sagas), as well as relevant developments in Greenland and the North Atlantic Scandinavian expansion. Housing culture changed over time and several phases or models of house construction, internal organisation and layout of buildings on the farm complex can be seen both in the Viking Age and the post-Viking medieval period. While it might be difficult to read a strict chronology in this sequence of change, there are broad trends that differentiate Viking Age housing culture from its medieval successors. Reading the description of the houses in the sampled sagas with an understanding of this evolution in housing culture can allow us to see how both contemporary medieval house-forms, and material memories of the Viking Age, are represented.

2.1 Overview of Housing Culture in Iceland and Scandinavia from the Viking Age to the Early Modern Period

2.1.1 The Viking Age

While allowing for slight regional variation, the housing culture of the Viking Age in the Scandinavian homelands and the North Atlantic expansion follows the remarkably consistent model of the three-aisled longhouse. This building type was not limited to Scandinavia, but was common throughout much of the area settled by Germanic-speaking peoples in continental Europe, long before the Viking Age (c. 3rd century onwards). These buildings had in common an elongated shape combining habitation for both humans and livestock (usually consisting of a byre at one end of the house), and an internal organisation divided into three 'aisles' by two parallel rows of roof-supporting posts (Hamerow 2002: 14-26; Hvass 1983: 130-143; Løken 1999: 52-61; Myhre 1982a: 195-200; see also **Figure 0.1**). In Viking Age Scandinavia, these buildings took on further culturally-specific characteristics. They were of greatly varying lengths and rectangular, with their long walls bowed slightly outward, and their main entrance in one of the long walls near the gable end. Their internal arrangement was dominated by a larger main room, which featured a central open hearth, and raised platforms lining the long walls and occasionally across one of the gable walls (these platforms have been attested archaeologically; see Milek 2006: 88-163 esp. 98-99). Along the edge of these platforms ran the two parallel rows of posts supporting the weight of the roof, in keeping with the three-aisled construction in common usage since before the Viking Age (Croix 2012: 146-156; Johansen 1982: 51-53; Magnus 2002: 11-21; Milek 2006: 89-98, 113-123, 201; Myhre 2000: 37; Schmidt 1994: 45-88).

It was not unusual for these buildings to be divided into several rooms by the addition of partitions through the width of the house. The presence of a byre at one end of the house is more common in the earlier part of the Viking Age in the Scandinavian homelands. This feature is much less frequent in Viking Age houses in Iceland, where the byre was usually contained in a separate building. Karen Milek reports only one Viking Age house in Iceland connected to a byre, at Herjólfsdalur (tenth to eleventh century. Milek 2006: 154. See also overview in Berson 2002). However, houses did frequently have internal divisions of space most often delimiting rooms at the gable ends (Milek 2006: 98-99, 123-125; Vésteinsson 2007: 157).

The construction of the roof and upper spaces of the house is difficult to determine, as very few archaeological remains of the upper portions of Viking Age houses have been found. However, the placement of post-holes, wall-bases and other structural elements at and below ground level on Viking Age house sites allows for educated hypotheses regarding roof-supporting timbers, and thus the shape of the roof itself (Komber 2001: 13-15; Schmidt 1994: 122-126). In Iceland, ethnographic examples of extant turf-built houses have been studied in the hopes of providing functional analogues to elucidate the possible roof-structure of Viking Age and medieval houses (Águstsson 1982a: 173-181; Nilsson 1943: esp. 295-306). The roof of the Viking Age longhouse thus appears to have had a double convex curvature, both following the outline of the bowed long walls of the house, and having a curved ridge.[1] This curvature of the roof is furthermore attested by the few visual

[1] Such pronounced curvature has even led to inconclusive speculation that boats may have been used as roofing structures for Viking Age buildings. For this hypothesis and discussion, see Maiorano 2004.

representations of houses from the Viking Age. In his description of these pictorial and sculptural representations, Holger Schmidt (1994: 129-169) has singled out the hogback monuments of Northern England and Scotland as a particularly important representation of the Viking Age house's overall appearance. While these monuments, whose exact function is difficult to determine, are recognisably house-shaped, they are still artistic creations that cannot be used empirically to determine features of house construction. They do, however, support the idea of a roof with a curved ridge, following the curvature of the house's long walls. The hogbacks' roofs are, furthermore, quite clearly integumented (covered with shingles), and the presence of wooden shingles as a roofing material has been confirmed archaeologically, at least in Southern Scandinavia, by the discovery of shingles at the fortress site of Trelleborg in Denmark (Schmidt 1994: 122-126, 137-156, esp. 140. See also **Figure 2.1**).

Figure 2.1: Hogbacks from Gosforth, Cumbria, England. The monument in the foreground shows a clearly-defined integumented roof. Photo: Teva Vidal.

The basic design of the bow-walled, three-aisled longhouse was prevalent throughout the Viking Age Scandinavian world and proved remarkably adaptable to the different local building materials and climatic conditions encountered throughout the North Atlantic migrations. The same housing models found in the Scandinavian homelands (see **Figure 2.2**) are also found in Shetland (see Small 1982 and overview in Hansen 2000), in the Faroe islands (**Figure 2.3 A**; see Hansen 1989, 1990, 2002, 2003b), in Greenland (Høegsberg 2009) and of course in Iceland.[2] In Iceland, this model could be manifest with utmost simplicity in the most basic structures, such as at the early (tenth century) house at Aðalstræti in Reykjavík (**Figures 2.3 B** and **2.17**; see Roberts 2001; Milek 2006: 314) and the mid-Viking Age house (tenth – eleventh century) at Snjáleifartóttir (**Figure 2.3 C**, see Stenberger 1943b; Milek 2006: 99, 327-328). There was of course individual variation from one building to another, and regional adaptation to available building materials: timber and lighter materials such as wattle and daub were available and suitable to the climate of Southern Scandinavia and parts of Norway, versus stone and turf over a wooden armature being used in the North Atlantic expansion, especially in the Faroe islands and Iceland (Gestsson 1982: 162-171).

Some Viking Age housing sites do differ from this model, such as the farm at Ytre Moa in Sogn, Norway, which featured a cluster of smaller, near-square buildings with their entrances in the gable-ends. These follow an altogether different model of house construction (Bakka 1965; Løken 1999: 59-60; Myhre 1982a: 203-204; Croix 2012: 153-154). However, the longhouse

[2] The 'black-houses' of the Hebrides also appear to owe their shape to the Scandinavian longhouse of the Viking Age. See Stoklund 1982b: 15-18, 26-28.

model was by far the dominant form in Viking Age Scandinavia and its westward expansion. Even buildings of an exceptional character, such as the late-tenth century houses from the Trelleborg-type ring fortresses in Denmark and southern Sweden (see **Figure 2.2 B** and Schmidt 1994: 28-36), and the enormous, 83-metre long, high-status site at Borg in Lofoten, Norway (7th to late tenth century; Munch and Johansen 1988: 119; see the complete report in Munch, Johansen and Roesdahl 2003), are built along the model of the three-aisled longhouse. Indeed, so prevalent is this model that other buildings in the repertoire of Scandinavian vernacular architecture in the Viking Age, such as byres and barns (see **Figure 2.3 A**) and boat-houses (see **Figure 2.4**; Løken 1999: 59-60; Myhre 1985: 36-45), are also built along models recognisably based on the domestic longhouse.

The archaeology of Viking Age farmsteads has focussed mostly on the main domestic buildings, and few farmsteads have had their entire grounds excavated, especially in Iceland (Hjaltalín 2009: 256; Milek 2006: 8-9; 2012: 85 note 2). The Icelandic farm of the Viking Age (as, indeed, in later periods) was enclosed by a boundary wall, within which the farm buildings and the homefield were located (Lucas 2009: 155; Milek 2006: 8-9). In Iceland and elsewhere in the North Atlantic settlements, such boundary walls, primarily earthworks, could also be found farther from the house, and appear to have constituted an important feature for the management of livestock and the delimitation of property (see Aldred et al 2007; Einarsson et al 2002; Stylegar 2004). Despite the relative lack of excavation of farmstead grounds, the presence of outbuildings is far from unknown. Farmsteads would have been composed of the main dwelling, possibly with some auxiliary dwelling spaces

and several ancillary buildings and designated areas for open-air work. One particular building type, the sunken-featured building or pit-house, is among the most abundant in the archaeological record of the Viking Age.[3] These buildings were dug into the ground to varying depths with only short walls and a roof protruding above the surface, and were usually accessed via steps or a ladder. Far from being specific to Scandinavian or even Germanic societies, they could be found throughout Europe in a great variety of shapes and styles of construction (Hamerow 2002: 31-35; Milek 2012b: 91-92). In Iceland these took on a more specific form, and were usually near-square in construction, with a closed oven, or stove, built of stone slabs located in one corner or along one wall of the building (see **Figure 2.5**). Comparable sunken-featured buildings have been found in other areas of Scandinavian settlement in the North Atlantic, such as the high-status farm at The Biggins, Papa Stour, Shetland (see Crawford and Smith 1999: 71-76, 207-213). This arrangement differs significantly from that of the main dwelling house, and it is unlikely that sunken-featured buildings would have been used as primary residential spaces. They are more likely to have been among the various types of outbuilding located on the Icelandic (or Scandinavian) farm, as a versatile, multi-functional space (the possible specific uses of these buildings will be examined further in Section 2.2.2. See also Milek 2012b: 85-92, 99-102). It is interesting to note, however, that this type of building ceased entirely to be used in Iceland by the beginning of the twelfth century and that some were deliberately destroyed and filled in at this time (Crawford and Smith 1999:

[3] Sunken-featured buildings are frequently referred to by the German name, *Grubenhaus* or the Danish *grubehus* or Swedish *grophus*. While modern Icelandic archaeological terminology refers to these buildings as *jarðhús* (Milek 2012:85), the use of this term in the context of Viking Age buildings may be problematic. This will revisited in sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2.

214; Milek 2012b: 86, 120-122).

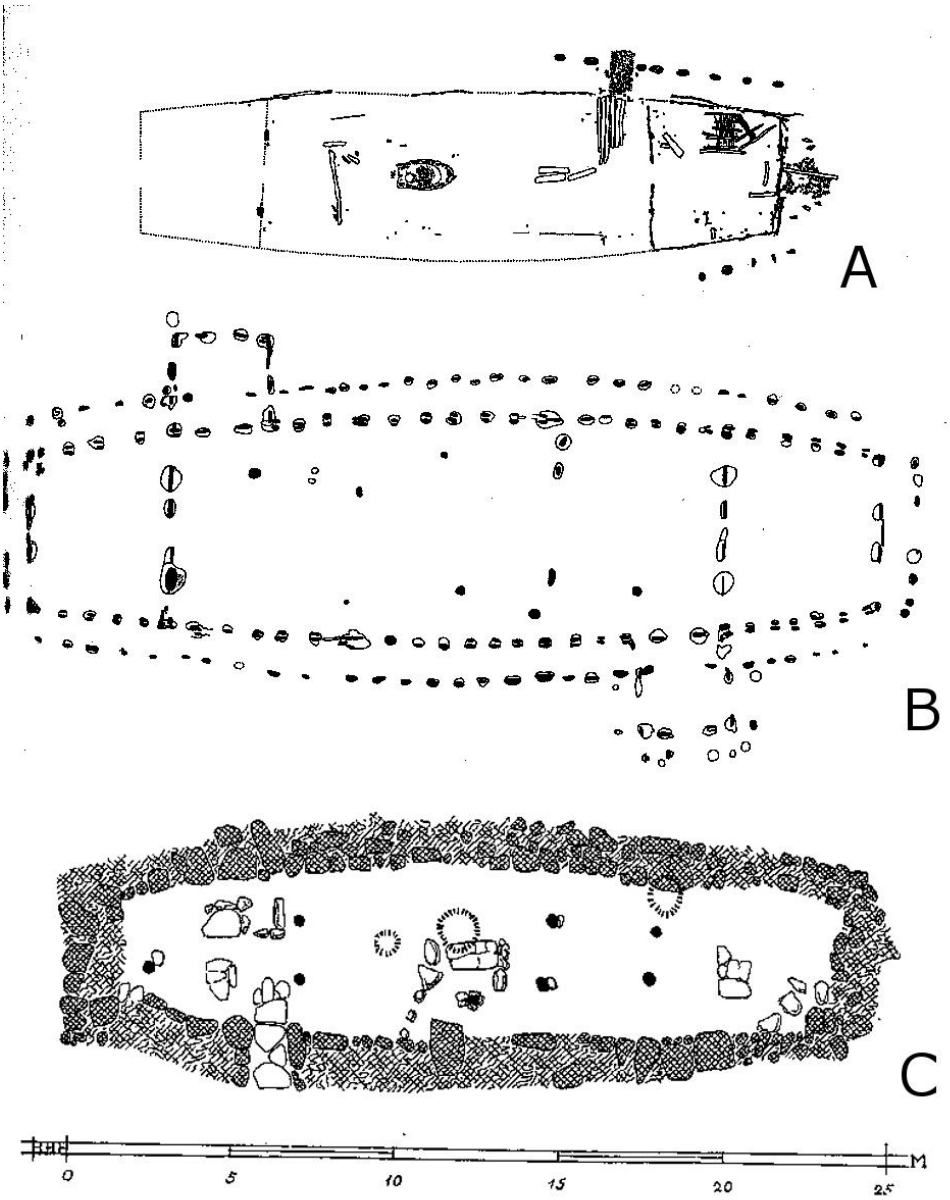

Figure 2.2: Examples of three-aisled longhouse construction in the Viking Age from the Scandinavian homelands A: Lund, Sweden. B: Fyrkat, Denmark (A and B from Schmidt 1994, fig. 18). C: Oma, Norway (from Roussell 1943a, fig. 136). Plans are not to scale.

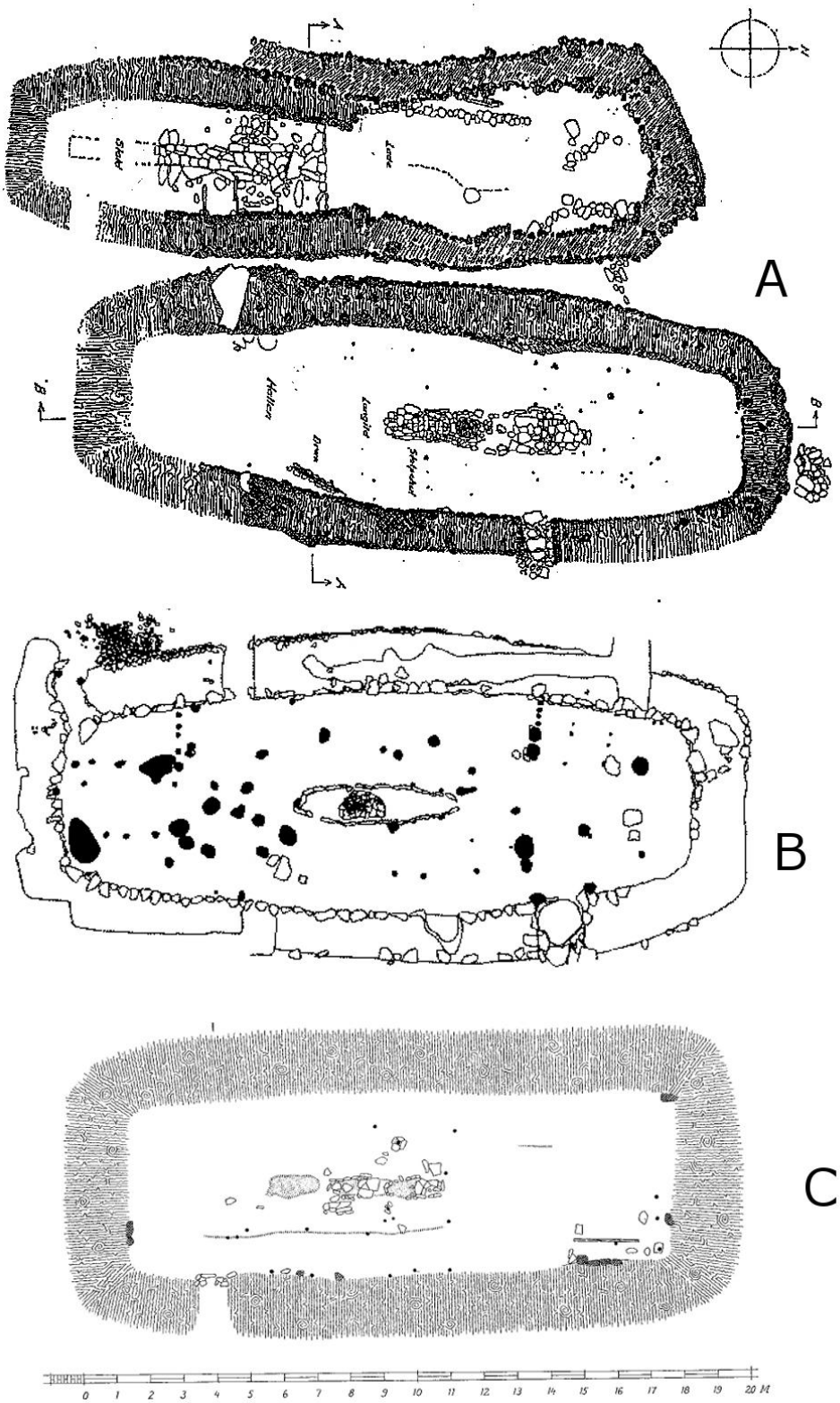

Figure 2.3: Examples of typical three-aisled longhouse construction in the Viking Age from the North Atlantic expansion. A: *Niðri á Toft* in Kvívík, Faroe Islands. Above: a byre and barn. Below: the longhouse (fom Hansen 2002, fig. 7.1). B: Aðalstræti 14-18 in Reykjavík, Iceland (adapted from Roberts 2001, fig. 5.3). C: Snjáleifartóttir (from Stenberger 1943b, fig. 63). Plans are not to scale.

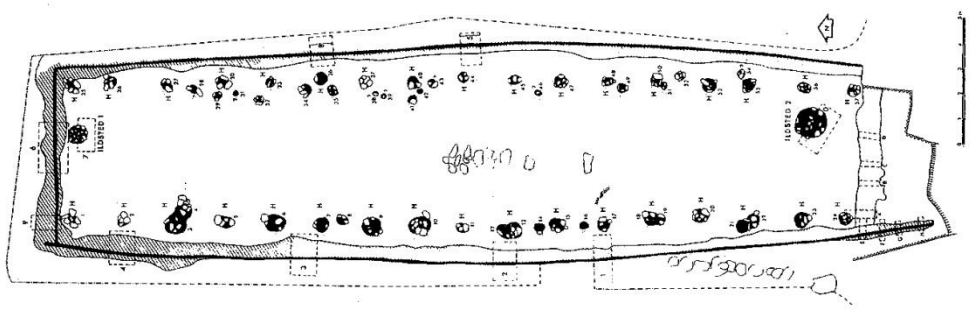

Figure 2.4: Viking Age boathouse built along the same principles as the domestic longhouse, from Stend, Norway (from Myhre 1985, fig. 2).

Figure 2.5: A relatively shallow (c. 30cm) sunken-featured building reconstructed *in situ* at the Viking Age farm of Vatnsfjörður, Iceland. The layout is typical of Icelandic sunken-featured buildings. Excavation and reconstruction undertaken by Fornleifastofnun Íslands. Photo: Teva Vidal.

2.1.2 Developments from the Medieval to the Early Modern Period: Iceland and Greenland

The disappearance of sunken-featured buildings from Icelandic farms around the turn of the twelfth century is part of a long sequence of change in the construction of houses and in the organisation of farmsteads which started well within the Viking Age, not only in Iceland but also more widely throughout the Viking world. As early as the tenth century and into the eleventh, the interior

space of the longhouse in the Scandinavian homelands, particularly in Southern Scandinavia, began to be cleared up by gradually eliminating the interior rows of roof-supporting posts. Weight-bearing timbers were incorporated into the walls, which supported the entire weight of the roof (Hamerow 2002: 26; Hansen 2002: 221; Schmidt 1994: 90-110).

The modification of houses in this form did not imply an entirely new housing model, but incorporated structures recognisably inherited from Viking Age models of housing culture. This includes the main room of the house which, while having lost its double row of roof-supporting posts, still retained a tripartite organisaiton in the presence of platforms along the long walls with a central aisle running between them. This close descendant of the Viking Age house was also widely distributed in the North Atlantic area of the Scandinavian diaspora, and can be seen, for example, in the early phases (House 5, eleventh to early thirteenth century) of occupation at Quoygrew in Orkney (Barrett and Gerrard 2012: 59).

The removal of roof supports had the consequence of requiring a smaller average size for individual rooms. In Iceland, at the end of the Viking Age transitioning into the medieval period (eleventh to twelfth century), one of the earliest responses to this requirement was the appearance of houses which, while still maintaining a longitudinal form reminiscent of the ‘classic’ Viking Age Scandinavian model, incorporated several separate rooms or spaces within one house. These spaces were not merely internal divisions of a wider space through the use of partition walls, as in the Viking Age house, but separate (though connected or adjacent) structures with full weight-bearing walls, allowing for the support of the roof. In his re-evaluation of Scandinavian house

typology in Iceland and Greenland, Mogens Skaaning Høegsberg termed these ‘row-houses’ to reflect the longitudinal alignment of the separate spaces (Høegsberg 2009: 87-94, see **Figure 2.6**).

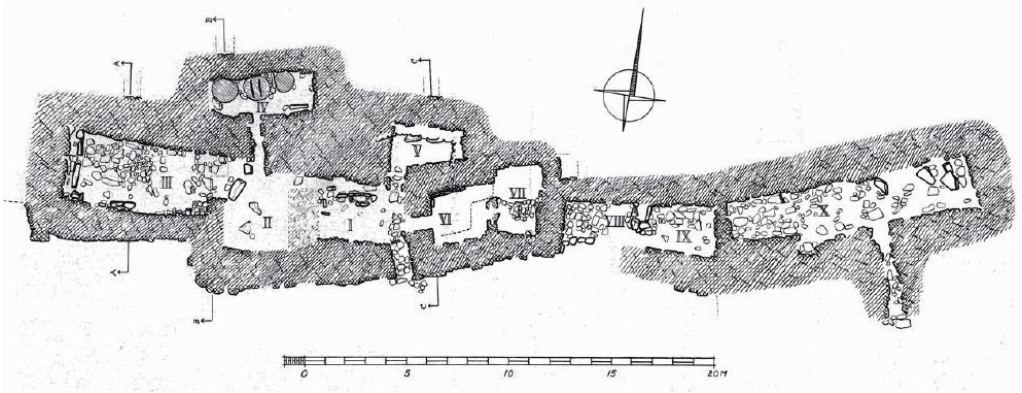

Figure 2.6: The dwelling at ruin Ø71, Greenland. The left side of the complex represents a Grennlandic example of Høegsberg’s medieval ‘row-house’, reminiscent of the layout of Stöng in Iceland (see **Figure 2.7**) (from Høegsberg 2009, fig. 12).

The row-house model could be used as an expansion of previous structures and shows a persistence of the main room, still recognisable from its Viking Age antecedents, but with an accretion of additional spaces both along the axis of the house and also perpendicular to it. These new spaces stood in for various work, storage and residential spaces previously contained in outbuildings such as the disused sunken-featured buildings. The spaces within these houses, both the main room and the new annexes (both aligned and perpendicular to the house’s axis), were often interconnected with short passageways through the thickness of the supporting turf walls (Croix 2012: 171; Milek 2006: 130-134, 306).[4] While these spaces interconnected to form one house, they did in fact each support an independent roof structure, resting

[4] The large, high-status building at Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit, Iceland (tenth – eleventh centuries), has some additional spaces attached to it, including a unique example of a privy accessed from the main house by a long tunnel, which suggests that this accretion of ancillary spaces may have started well within the Viking Age (Lucas 2009: 137-138, 397).

on the walls that delimited the spaces (Høegsberg 2009: 89). The row-house model appeared at the end of the Viking Age and the beginning of the medieval period, and was well established by the twelfth century (Høegsberg 2009: 87-89, 98). An excellent example of this type of house is the late-Viking Age house of Stöng (**Figure 2.7**), long thought to have been abandoned due to the eruption of Hekla in 1104, but whose latest phases of occupation have been recently re-dated to the twelfth-thirteenth centuries (Vilhjálmsson 1989: 75; Milek 2006: 328-329. See the archaeological report in Roussell 1943b).

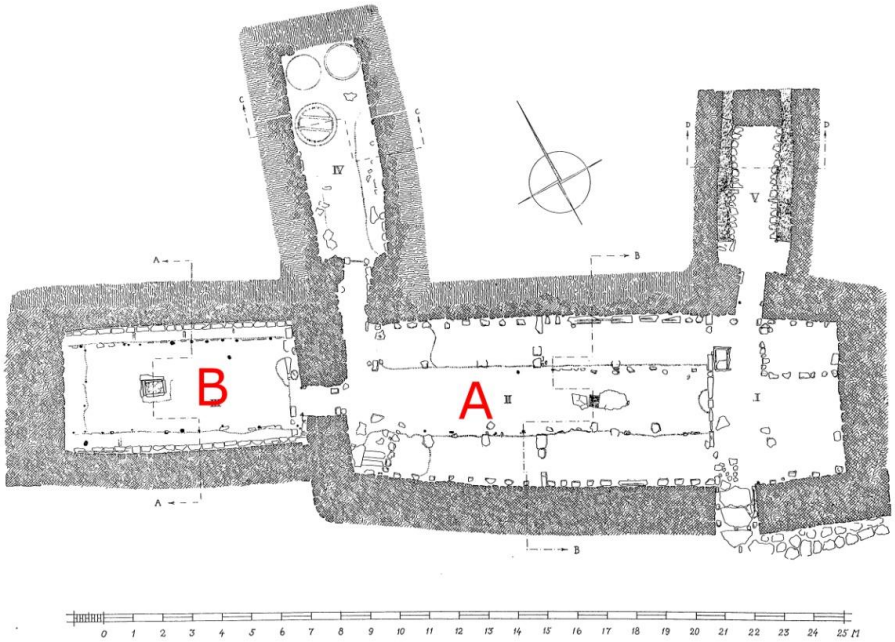

Figure 2.7: The late Viking Age house at Stöng, Iceland (from Roussell 1943b, fig. 7). A and B designate the main rooms. See section 2.2.

The addition of rooms continued after the Viking Age into the medieval period, from the twelfth century on. A second, later type of row-house is mentioned by Høegsberg, showing a new concept of internal organisation where the areas of the house are connected by a central vestibule. This vestibule is usually flanked by two larger main rooms (which might still retain the recognisable layout of previous periods) and connects to two smaller

ancillary ‘back rooms’. This model is demonstrated by the layout of the late-fourteenth century house at Gröf (**Figure 2.8**. Høegsberg 2009: 92-94. See the archaeological report and discussion in Gestsson 1959).

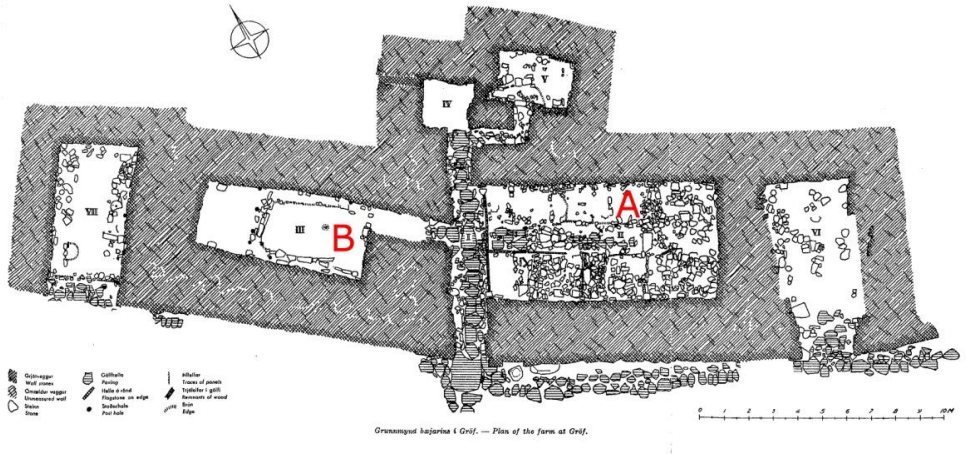

Figure 2.8: The fourteenth century house at Gröf, Iceland (from Gestsson 1959, plate 2). A and B designate the main rooms. See section 2.2.

The vestibule in the Gröf-type house demonstrates a new understanding of the internal division of space that is based on access and movement: the spaces in the house, used either for occupation, storage or other ancillary purposes, are connected by spaces whose principal function is to facilitate movement. This development, whose genesis can be seen as of the twelfth century, represents a true departure from the Viking Age models, whose internal space was dominated by the large, multifunctional main room, and whose ancillary spaces were dispersed in a constellation of outbuildings. The medieval focus on accessibility would lead, in Iceland, to the development of the ‘passage-house’ (Icelandic *ganghús*), a complex of increasingly function-specific rooms linked by a central passageway. The first appearance of this type of house is difficult to date, but it probably took form form in the transition from the late medieval period to the early modern period (fifteenth century), and would continue well into the modern period (from the sixteenth

century onward. See **Figure 2.9**. Ágústsson 1979: 63; Albrethsen 1982: 269-278; Andreasen 1981: 179-184; Høegsberg 2009: 94-97; Milek 2006: 46; Stoklund 1982b: 24-27; Vésteinsson 2007: 157; Weinmann 1994: 356).

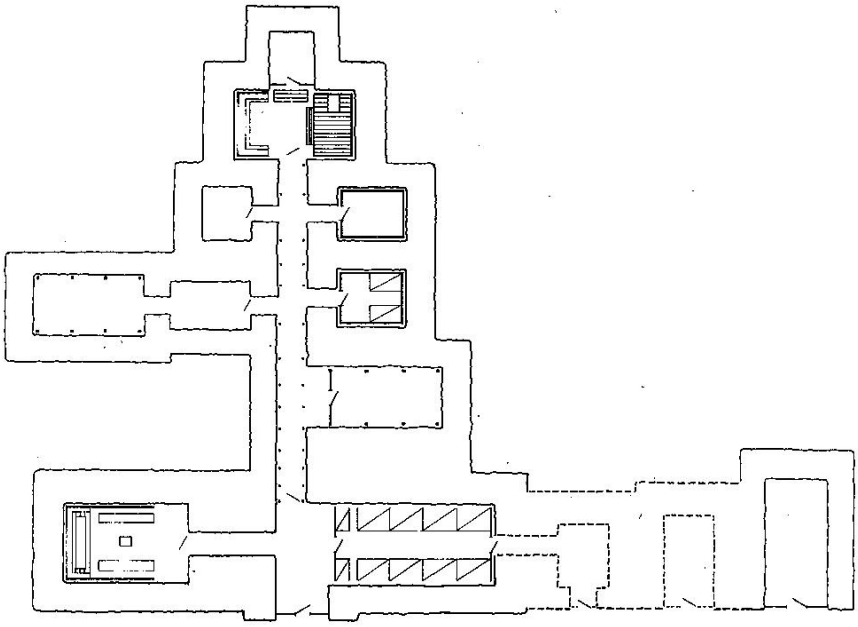

Figure 2.9: The reconstruction of the layout of the farm at Laufás, Iceland, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, showing the development of the Icelandic 'passage house' with its well-defined central corridor, in the early modern period (from Ágústsson 1982, fig. 10).

While the accretion of ancillary spaces fundamentally changed the arrangement of the main house, medieval Icelandic farmsteads were not entirely devoid of outbuildings and outside work areas. After Christianisation, churches were also built on farm grounds and constituted one of the most important elements of a farmstead's built environment, especially at high-status sites. One interesting feature of these medieval farmsteads in Iceland is the presence of subterranean or semi-subterranean passageways connecting the house proper with other important locations on the farm grounds, such as the church, or simply acting as a means of egress (Hjaltalín 2010: 153-170). Of several such archaeologically-attested passages, the most well-known is undoubtedly the one at the high-status farm at Reykholt, which connected the

hot spring Snorralaug to the housing complex, belonging to the site's second phase of occupation (twelfth to fourteenth centuries. Sveinbjarnardóttir 2012: 69-73).

In Greenland, a growing corpus of recent research indicates that the development of housing showed trends that closely followed those in Iceland and Scandinavia. The early phases of archaeological research on Greenlandic farmsteads, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (led mostly by Danish archaeologists Daniel Bruun and Aage Roussell), working with incomplete comparative data, considered Greenland to have seen the apogee of the Icelandic-type passage-house. Excavations of what appeared to be extensive, warren-like complexes of interconnected rooms appeared to show the passage-house model pushed to the extreme (with the term 'centralised farm' applied to those examples which incorporated housing for livestock). However, in his re-evaluation of the house typology produced by Aage Roussell, Høegsberg suspects that the complex house plans produced were the result of excavation techniques which did not take into account the startigraphic relationship between various phases of occupation on farm sites which were used, rebuilt and changed over long periods of time. Thus, Høegsberg proposes that only part of these extensive Greenlandic 'passage-houses' were ever used at the same time, and that the model of used space closely resembles (in concept if not in superficial appearance) the Gröf-type house seen in Iceland in the medieval period (post-twelfth century). While these houses were first labelled as 'passage-houses', they do not fit the medieval and early-modern Icelandic models which are, unambiguously, built around a central connecting passageway. Thus, Høegsberg prefers to refer to

the previous Greenlandic ‘passage-houses’ (without animal housing) and ‘centralised farms’ (with animal housing) by the term ‘conglomerate building’ (see **Figure 2.10**. Høegsberg 2009: 94-97).

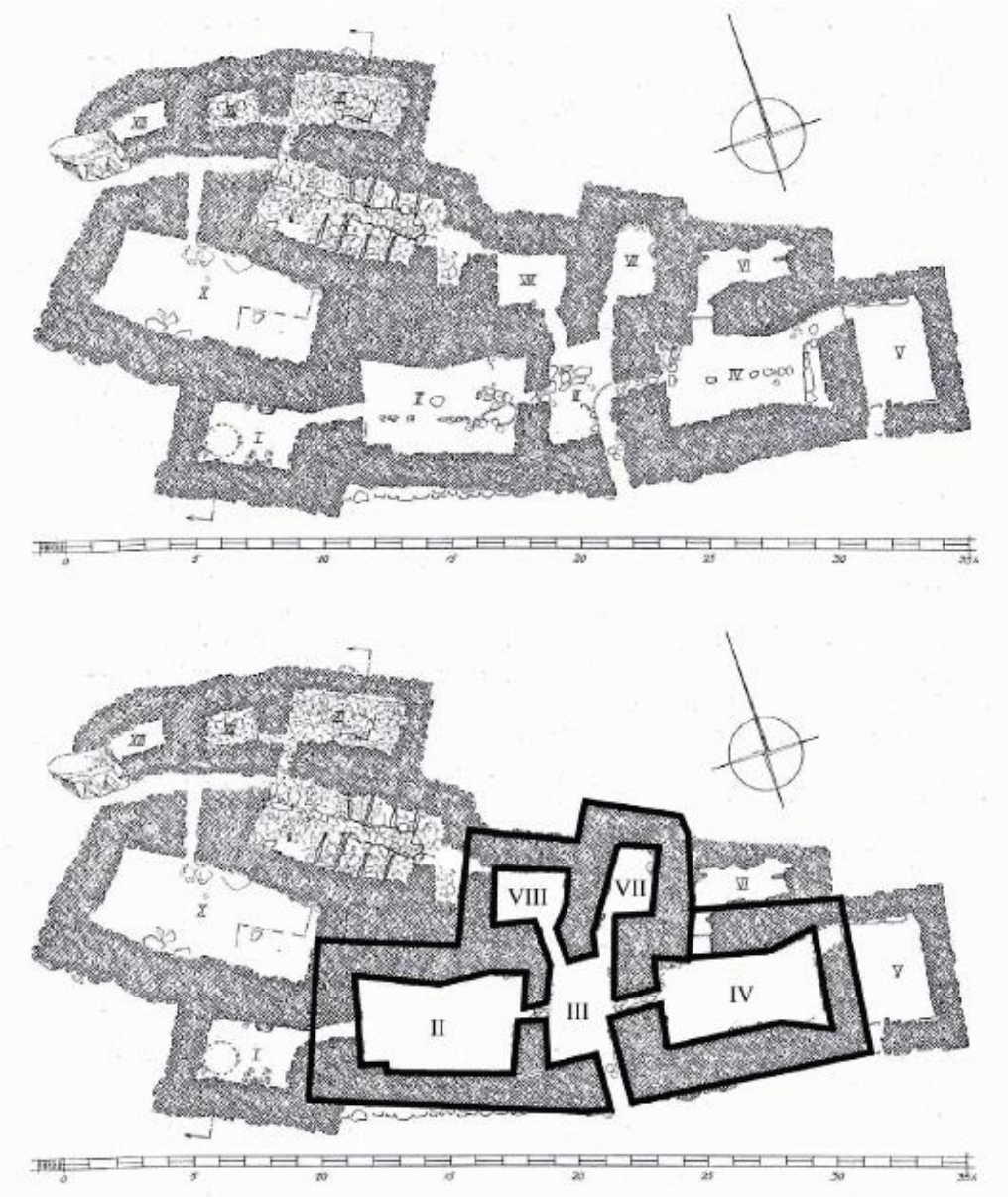

Figure 2.10: Høegsberg’s putative reconstruction of the original core dwelling of the ruin group V53c, Greenland, outlined in black in the bottom image over Aage Roussell’s plan of the entire group. Høegsberg’s outline would give the original dwelling a layout similar to that of Gröf in Iceland, with its central vestibule (see **Figure 2.8**) (from Høegsberg 2009, fig. 13).

The example of the misinterpretation of Greenlandic house ruins based on outdated techniques of archaeological excavation serves as a cautionary tale

and an appropriate reminder that many habitation sites all over the Viking world are subject to similar complex chronologies. Various phases of habitation may succeed each other and see significant changes in house construction and farm layout (see for example the changes to the farm at Quoygrew, Orkney, described in Barrett and Gerrard 2012). However, individual structures may themselves see considerable modification during their periods of use. The progression of housing models described above should not be seen as a strict chronology and typology, but as a general trend within which considerable overlap between construction styles is possible (Klemensen 2003: 144-145). In Greenland for example, the basic row-house model established by the twelfth century continued to be used well into the late medieval period, up until the abandonment of the Greenlandic settlements in the mid-fifteenth century, and thus coexisted with later models and phases of house construction (Høegsberg 2009: 98). It is therefore important to conduct proper stratigraphic analysis of house phases during excavation, in order to elucidate, with the greatest precision possible, the various phases of construction and occupation at any given site.

2.1.3 Developments from the Medieval to the Early Modern Period: Norway and the North Atlantic Expansion

The changes in post-Viking Age housing culture which occurred in Iceland and Greenland were part of a larger trend in the change of internal space which probably originated in Scandinavia and made its way across the North Atlantic. As mentioned previously, the elimination of the internal roof-supporting posts occurred in Scandinavia as early as the tenth century.

However, the changes to housing culture in the medieval and early modern period followed a different model in Norway and than in Iceland and Greenland.[5]

As in these areas, the elimination of the roof-supporting posts proved unsuitable for the large longhouse model and led to the adoption of a new 'standard' house plan, established as of the twelfth century. This dwelling house featured a smaller square or rectangular main room, built of wood in either vertical stave or horizontal log construction, and heated with an open hearth or a closed flueless stove placed in one corner of the room or along a side-wall. The room's upper space was open to the roof-ridge, where a hole allowed smoke to escape and also served as the main source of light for the room. This house model adopted one of the former Viking Age names for the main room, the *stofa*, and is known by its derivative in various Scandinavian languages: s*tofa* (Icelandic) *stova* (Faroese, Nynorsk), *stue* (Danish, Norwegian), *stuga* (Swedish), and the German *Stube*. Though mostly associated with Norway, the medieval *stofa*-type building could be found elsewhere and may have originated in Sweden through contact with the log-built housing culture of Slavic peoples in the Eastern part of the Viking world (see Olofsson 2003: 141-145; Weber 2002: 72-81).

The medieval *stofa*-type building (predominantly its stave-built version) was exported from Norway throughout the North Atlantic. This contributed to the primacy of stave construction for the interior of medieval Icelandic buildings, both secular and religious. Some medieval staves, mostly thought to be re-used from churches, remain extant in older Icelandic farms

[5] Although some trends, like the longitudinal accretion of space in the Icelandic/Greenlandic row-house, and the Gröf-type of row-house with a vestibule, may have had their antedecents in Norwegian urban architecture (Høegsberg 2009: 94, 98)

(Rafnsson 1979: 81-82; see also Ágústsson 1978: 135-149; Stoklund 1999: 82, 86). The main building of the medieval phase of occuptation of the high-status farm at The Biggins on Papa Stour in Shetland also corresponds to this Norwegian type of *stofa* (Christie 2002: 127; Crawford and Smith 1999: 58-61, 216-229; Stoklund 2002: 142), and this same building type persisted in Faroese construction well into the eighteenth, and even nineteenth centuries (Christie 2002: 137-139, Stoklund 1993: 215, 1999: 83-86, 2003: 25-28).

The open upper space in the main room was necessary for rising smoke from the open hearth to gather and escape through the smoke-hole. Indeed, the association of this type of house with smoke is indicated by their Faroese and Norwegian name of *røykstova* (smoke-*stofa*). This meant that heated rooms could not be divided by floors to incorporate upper levels. This feature of the medieval *stofa* seems to have remained unchanged even after the introduction of chimneys in the later medieval period (Kristensen 2003: 170-171, Stoklund 1993: 212-214, 2002: 145, 2003: 25). Indeed, the use of open hearths or closed stoves seems to have had little impact on building customs in the Scandinavian homelands even in the Viking Age, as they can be seen to coexist from the tenth century onwards. Houses were sometimes equipped with both types of heating, and examples of open hearths are attested into the fifteenth century (Klemensen 2003: 144-145).[6]

The medieval *stofa*-type house often did have upper storeys built over unheated rooms adjacent to the main room, where rising smoke was not a problem (Christie 2002: 136-139). These lofts became more frequent in the early modern period, spreading into Southern Scandinavia as of the sixteenth

[6] Of related interest though beyond the purview of this chapter, Sørheim 2003 provides a discussion on the relationship between fireplaces and house construction in medieval urban log-built dwellings in Norway.

century (Kristiansen 2003: 96). At this time, the introduction of metal stoves whose smoke was evacuated outside the living area allowed for the innovation of the *glasstova*, a heated room which featured windows (*glas*-) and an upper storey (**Figure 2.11** and Stoklund 1993: 214). Viking Age houses would have had to contend with the same problem of smoke in their heated rooms, and while it is not impossible that larger Viking Age longhouses may have had upper levels built over their unheated parts, especially at the gable ends away from the central hearth, there is no conclusive archaeological proof of this (Mikkelsen 2003: 80). It does appear that the technique of building up within the house was largely a medieval innovation which gains its most distinct manifestations in the early modern period (from the mid-fifteenth century onwards).

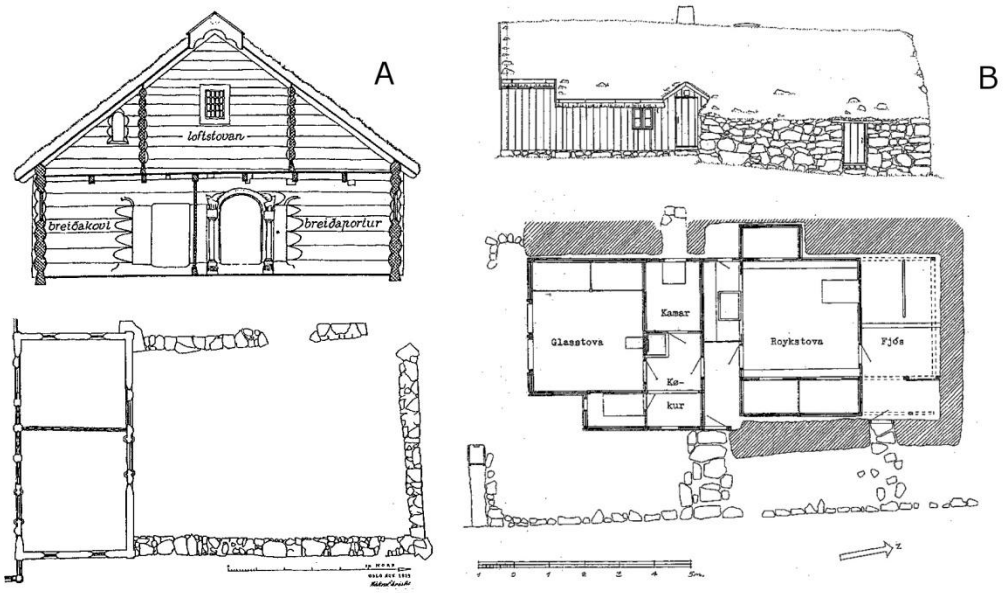

Figure 2.11: A: Plan and elevation of the medieval 'Stokkstovan' from Kirkjubø, Faroe Islands, by Håkon Christie (from Christie 2002, fig. 8.10). Compare with B: Plan and elevation of the nineteenth-century *stofa*-type house from Múla, Borðoy, Faroe Islands, used by Bjarne Stoklund to demonstrate the persistence of medieval traditions in *stofa*-construction into the nineteenth century in the Faroe islands (from Stoklund 1982a, fig. 1). Plans are not to scale.

Even though a certain technological continuity can be seen throughout the North Atlantic in the medieval period with the exportation of Norwegian stave construction and *stofa*-type architecture, the medieval change in housing culture which can be seen in Norway seems to function almost in an opposite direction to that occurring in Iceland at the same period. While Icelandic housing culture, in the row-house model established by the twelfth century, concentrates the ancillary spaces of the farm complex in the same (increasingly complex) building as the main dwelling, the Norwegian model, relying on smaller-timber built houses, led instead to an increasing fragmentation of space into a cluster of function-specific buildings (Hansen 2002: 121-122).

One of the most remarkable innovations coinciding with this reorganisation of space is the appearance, from the beginning of the thirteenth century, of multi-level storage buildings or 'lofts' (Norwegian *stabbur*), sometimes also used as unheated lodgings. The construction of these buildings was limited to the regions of coniferous growth where abundant timber allowed for their construction. While widely used in Norway, the construction of these buildings continued with very little change until the eighteenth century (Gjærder 1982: 47-60; Stoklund 2003: 21-25). An example of such a storehouse can be seen in the early-fifteenth century loft from Heierstad, currently at the Vestfold folk museum at Slottsfjellet, Tønsberg, Norway, seen in **Figure 2.12**. This type of building was entirely absent in Iceland, which lacked the timber resources to build such wooden structures.

Figure 2.12: The early-fifteenth century loft from Heierstad, currently at the Vestfold folk museum at Slottsfjellet, Tønsberg, Norway. Photo: Teva Vidal.

2.2 Discussion: Sagas and Archaeology

2.2.1 The Medieval Model

With the archaeological models described above, it is possible to establish a list of basic diagnostic features of house construction which help to establish a direct comparison with the descriptions of houses in the sampled *Íslendingasögur*.

Thus, a medieval house is one that:

- has lost its internal roof-supporting posts.
- shows a conspicuous multiplication of internal rooms and spaces.

- shows passages connecting at least some of its internal spaces, and perhaps even between the main house and other buildings on the farm grounds (especially in the case of high-status farms).

To this list can be added such temporally-specific constructions as the Norwegian *stabbur*. Another feature which appears to indicate a later type of construction, also in Norway, is the presence of lofts and house sections built high. This, however, cannot be considered a diagnostic feature because of the absence of archaeological evidence excluding the presence of upper storeys in Viking Age buildings.

With these features taken into consideration, the majority of house descriptions in the sampled sagas, as shown in chapter 1, appear to reflect a model of housing culture compatible with that at the very end of the Viking Age, leading into the medieval period, such as might be seen in the Icelandic row-houses of Stöng and Gröf (**Figures 2.7** and **2.8**).[7] The absence of roof-supporting posts is not actually mentioned in the sample sagas, but their presence does, at times, appear conspicuous. This will be revisited below in section 2.2.2.

Multiple internal spaces: References to multiple spaces in the house are ubiquitous in the three sampled sagas. The most revealing example comes from the house at Fróðá in *Eyrbyggja saga*. In describing the haunting of the farm by revenants and the reaction of the house's unfortunate inhabitants, we

[7] Indeed, the excavator of Gröf, Gísli Gestsson, found the descriptions of houses in *Grettis saga* to agree with the layout of the structure he had excavated (Gestsson 1959: 52-53). The house at Gröf dates to the latter half of the fourteenth century, which would place it only a few decades before the estimated time of composition of *Grettis saga* at the beginning of the fifteenth century (see introduction, note 12).

are given a portrait of a house with two main rooms, one (apparently unheated) used for sleeping and the other containing the main cooking fire, with internal divisions for storage spaces. When the house's residents are forced to flee the main room, we are told they are able to establish the evening fire in other parts of the house or farming complex. Considering the house at Fróðá in the model of the medieval Icelandic row-house, two possible layouts for the spaces described in *Eyrbyggja saga* are presented in **Figure 2.13**. The two possible layouts account for the different possible placement of the storage spaces, *klefar* (*Eyrbyggja saga* Chs. 52, 54; see discussion in chapter 1, section 1.4.3).

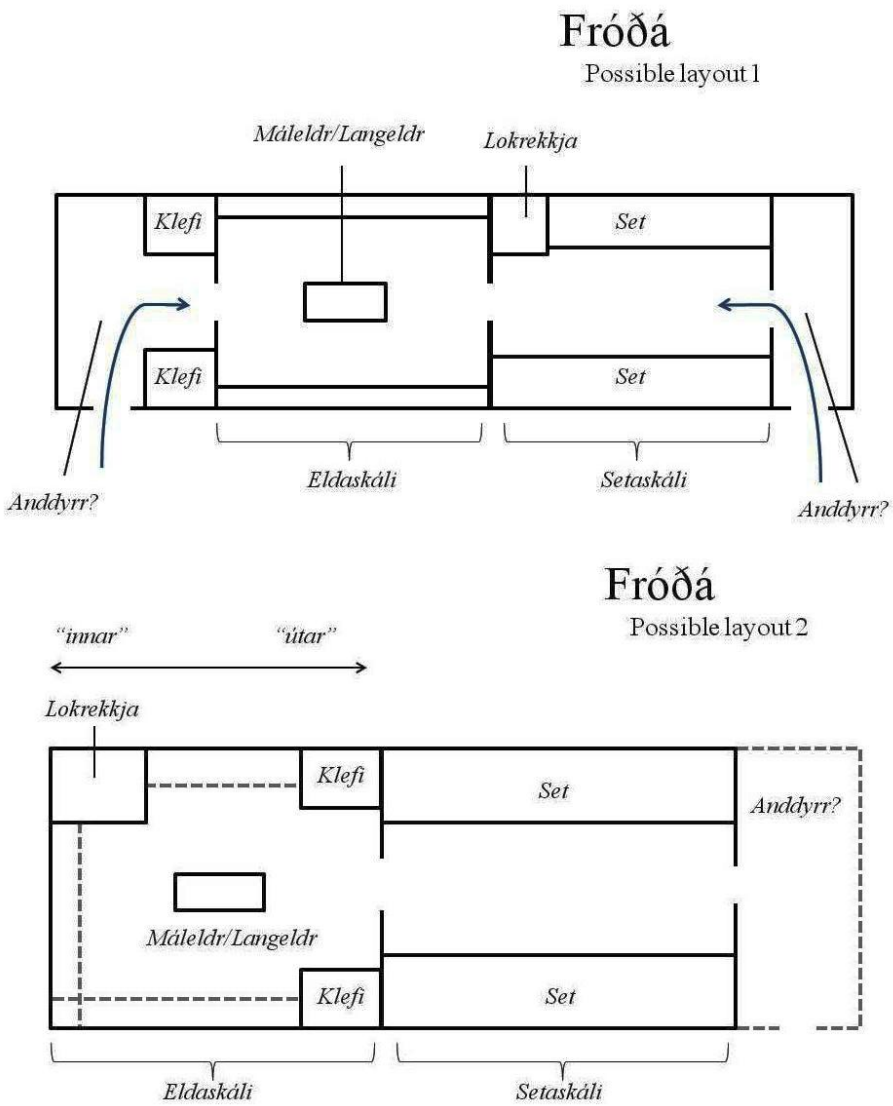

Figure 2.13: Diagram of the features and two possible layouts of Fróðá, as described in *Eyrbyggja saga*.

The presence of two main rooms is evident in the layouts of Stöng and Gröf (labelled 'A' and 'B' in **Figures 2.7** and **2.8**). As seen in chapter 1, the main room, in the *Íslendingasögur*, is designated most frequently by the words *skáli* and *stofa*, with the former being the most common term. The usage of these two words is hard to distinguish, and indeed they appear, in all practical aspects, to be synonymous and to designate the same space (Sigurðardóttir 1966: 9-19, see also Águstsson 1979: 63-66, Stoklund 1993: 215. The term *eldhús* is also used in *Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 54 and *Gísla saga* Ch. 9 to refer to the main room). However, the meanings of the two words are differentiated in archaeological usage.

As was seen in chapter 1, *skáli* can also refer to the entire domestic building or even temporary structures such as shacks and huts, and it has been adopted as the generic term for a Viking Age house in modern Icelandic archaeology (Milek 2006: 88-89). The *stofa*, however, refers to a distinct structure, seen in Stöng and Gröf as the second main room (designated by 'B' in **Figures 2.7** and **2.8**). The *stofa* appears as an 'inner' space: it has a single point of access and cannot be reached directly from the outer door, so that other parts of the house must be traversed before it is reached.[8] Being thus arranged, the *stofa* usually has one gable wall free from any passages and is equipped with platforms on three sides. The distinction of the *stofa* as a label for this specific type of space was essentially cemented as archaeological canon by Gísli Gestsson's report on the excavations at Gröf (1959; see also Sigurðardóttir 1966: 18).

[8] The analysis of points of access and a person's progression through a house's spaces are fundamental principles of the analysitical tool of space syntax analysis, which will be revisited in chapter 5, section 5.4.

It is important here to distinguish between the *stofa* as used in the *Íslendingasögur* and in the archaeology of Icelandic houses in the late-Viking Age and medieval period, and the timber-built *stofa*-type house emerging in medieval Norway described in section 2.1.3. Arnheiður Sigurðardóttir speculates that the term *stofa* would in fact originate with the change in architecture happening in the Scandinavian homelands, and only make its way, in a modified sense, to describe new structures in Icelandic architectural understanding. *Stofa* would therefore represent a 'newer' term for domestic spaces whose similarity to the *skáli*, in the context of usage represented by the *Íslendingasögur*, would make the two nearly impossible to distinguish (Sigurðardóttir 1966: 11-13).

Despite the syonymy of *skáli* and *stofa* as the main room of the house in the *Íslendingasögur* sampled for this thesis, it is possible that the archaeological distinction made by Gestsson, and accepted since his time, is reflected in the sagas themselves. An 'inner' room, accessible only by transit through other parts of the house (in this case the main room), corresponds with the second proposed layout (**Figure 2.13**) for the farm of Fróðá in *Eyrbyggja saga* (see also chapter 1, section 1.4.3). Furthermore, Arnheiður Sigurðardóttir signals a preference for the terms *pallr* and *bekkr* to designate the platforms of the *stofa*, as opposed to the *set* more frequently found in the *skáli* (Sigurðardóttir 1966: 53-55; also compare the *setskáli* as the main sleeping chamber at Fróðá, *Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 54). *Pallr* is usually a shortened form of *þverpallr*, designating the platform that occupies a gable wall through (*þver-*) the main axis of a house or room, such as would be found in the *stofa* as seen by Gestsson. The only house explicitly stated as having a *þverpallr* in the

sampled sagas is that of Sandhaugar in *Grettis saga*, and, quite interestingly, its main room is referred to most frequently as a *stofa*, as opposed to a *skáli* (*Grettis saga* Ch. 64). It may therefore be that while the function of the main room was similar or identical in both cases, the usage of the words *stofa* and *skáli* might reflect an actual difference in construction. The house at Sandhaugar will be further discussed below in section 2.2.2 (see also **Figure 2.20**).

Other spaces also offer an image of a more complex housing model. At the farm of Reykir in *Grettis saga*, for example, the household is also said to have been sleeping in a room that is not the house's main room (*Grettis saga* Ch. 75). More revealing is the farm of Sæból in *Gísla saga*. Gísli, the saga's hero, enters the house through the byre on the way to kill his brother-in-law Þorgrímr (*Gísla saga* Ch. 16). While byres in the Scandinavian homelands are often incorporated into longhouses in the earlier part of the Viking Age,[9] it is more likely to see in the example of Sæból the accretion of ancillary spaces in the medieval Icelandic row-house, such as at the farm of Þórarinsstaðir (possibly abandoned as late as the thirteenth century, Milek 2006: 332. See **Figure 2.14**). Interpreted as a similar type of structure, the diagram of the basic possible layout of Sæból is presented in **Figure 2.15** (see also discussion in chapter 1, section 1.4.2).

[9] The separation of the byre from the dwelling house occurs as of the mid-tenth century in South Scandinavia, with the Trelleborg-type houses representing the first major architectural examples of three-aisled houses without habitation for livestock (Hansen 2003b: 249).

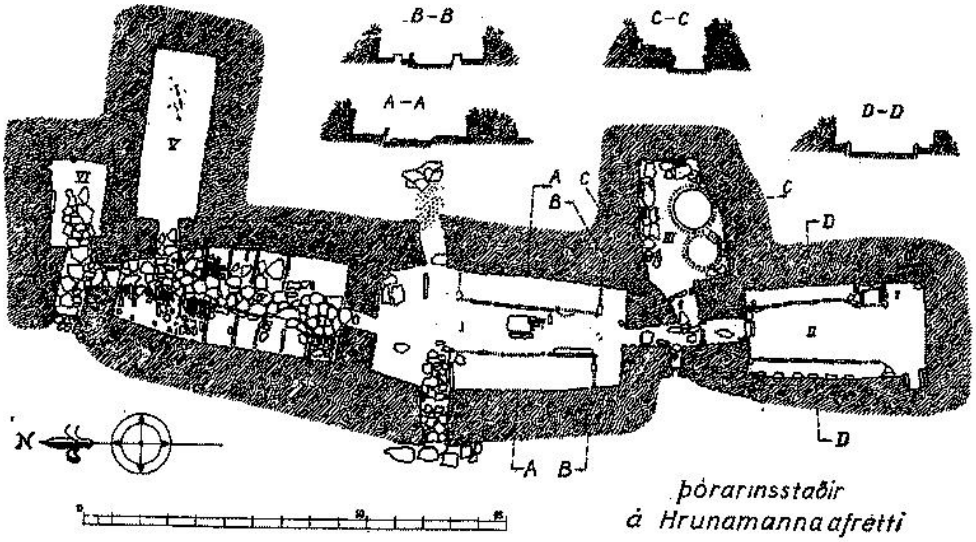

Figure 2.14: Plan of the medieval row-house at Þórarinsstaðir, Iceland, showing an attached byre, to the left of the plan, with access to the main habitation (from Eldjárn 1949, fig. 7).

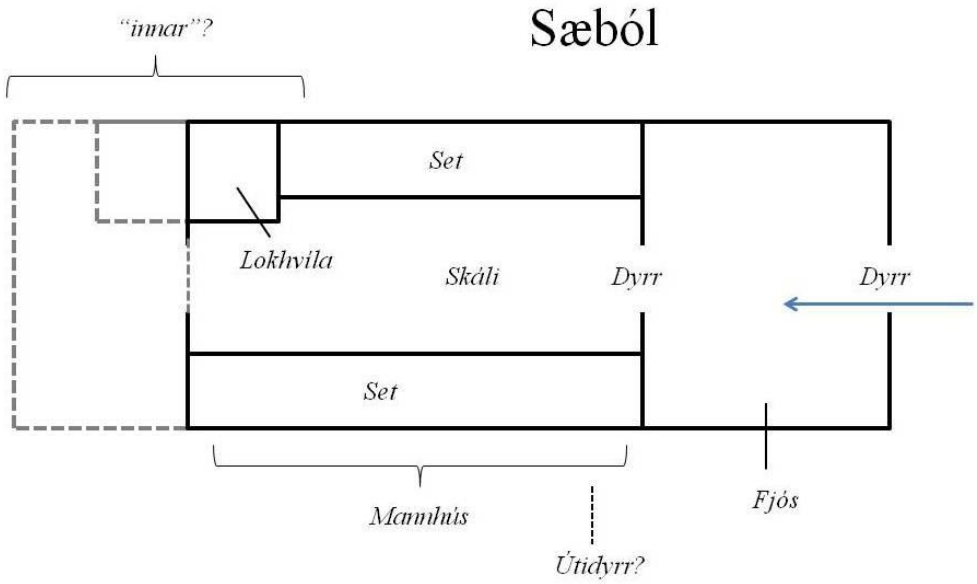

Figure 2.15: Diagram of the possible layout and features of Sæból, as described in *Gísla saga*.

Internal and external passages: While the multiplicity of rooms in the houses of the sampled *Íslendingasögur* is explicit and ubiquitous, the only specific mention of actual passages connecting various sections inside the house is at the farm of Bjarg in *Grettis saga* (*Grettis saga* Ch. 47, see also **Figure 2.18**). More specialised structures that are specific to medieval

constructions are shown in the presence of underground passages in *Gísla saga*. These are so conspicuous in the story, and so directly linked to the saga's plot as a means for Gísli's continual evasion of his pursuers, that their presence seems to be fictious and contrived to suit the narrative. However, as Þór Hjaltalín's study (2010) demonstrates, such underground passages, both subterranean and semi-subterranean, exist on medieval Icelandic farms.

It is important to understand the language used to describe these underground passages. In *Gísla saga*, they are referred to as *jarðhús* and *fylgsni*, and Hjaltalín confirms *jarðhús* as the proper Old Norse term to designate such a structure (Hjaltalín 2010: 141-145). Despite this, modern archaeological usage in Iceland uses the word *jarðhús* ('earth-house', see Milek 2012b: 85) to describe sunken-featured outbuildings with stone slab ovens, and designates underground passages as *jarðgöng* ('earth-passage'). This could lead to confusion as the modern Icelandic archaeological terminology ignores the usage of medieval vocabulary in context. Sunken-featured buildings, which will be further discussed in section 2.2.2, are never referred to as *jarðhús* in medieval Icelandic literature (see also chapter 6, section 6.2.1). This term is used, specifically, to designate subterranean passages, which are never designated by the modern term *jarðgöng* (Hjaltalín 2012: 145). Since there is evidence for these structures in the Viking Age and medieval period, perhaps it would be advisable to implement a modern use of vocabulary that reflects the medieval understanding of these physical realities.

Building up: lofts and upper levels: What is perhaps the most explicit example of medieval housing culture in the sampled sagas is to be found not in Iceland, but in Norway, at Þorfinnr Kársson's farm on Haramsøy (*Grettis saga* Ch. 19). This farm features a raised outbuilding, described in magnificent detail, accessible by stairs and featuring an exterior gallery and at least two separate spaces (a storage space and a latrine), closed off with doors leading on to the gallery (see full description in chapter 1, section 1.2. *Grettis saga* Ch. 19). This is an unmistakable description of a medieval Norwegian timber-built *stabbur* or loft, demonstrating that the author/compiler of *Grettis saga* was aware of the developments of housing culture not only in Iceland but in Norway as well (see **Figure 2.12**). Since these buildings only make their appearance around the turn of the thirteenth century when Norwegian housing culture undertook a change away from the longhouse model to the smaller timber *stofa* model, such an explicitly accurate description in *Grettis saga* provides a useful material *terminus post quem* for the composition at least of this episode in the saga.

This same farm also features another loft, in the main house. We are told that Þorfinnr's wife places a light in a window in the loft, so that it would be visible by Grettir from far away so he could find his way home in the dark after routing a marauding band of berserkers (see chapter 1, section 1.3.1., *Grettis saga* Ch. 19). Once again, this description could follow the construction elements of the medieval timber-built Norwegian *stova*, already well-established by the fifteenth-century time of composition of *Grettis saga*, which could have upper levels built over its unheated sections. Let us remember, however, that while this same feature would not have been

impossible at the non-heated gable ends of a Viking Age longhouse, there is no positive archaeological proof for this (Mikkelsen 2003: 80). Þorfinnr's farm therefore appears to be a properly medieval, and not Viking Age, farmstead.

Another loft appears at the farm of Helgafell where the slave Svartr is sent to murder Snorri goði, in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 26. See chapter 1 section 1.3.1). The construction of this 'loft' is difficult to interpret, and while it is possible that this is a space over a gable-end antechamber at the entrance of the house, it appears to fit the image of an entrance porch, jutting out from the house proper. This kind of entrance porch existed already in the Viking Age, and can be seen clearly in the floor-plans of the late-ninth century houses at Trelleborg and Fyrkat in Denmark (see **Figure 2.2 B**, and **Figure 2.16**). Another such porch can be seen in a second phase of construction at the house at Aðalstræti 14-18 in Reykjavík, which saw considerable expansion of the basic Viking Age longhouse model (**Figure 2.17**). While this feature is not chronologically diagnostic, it can at least be confirmed archaeologically as a possible feature of the house's construction.

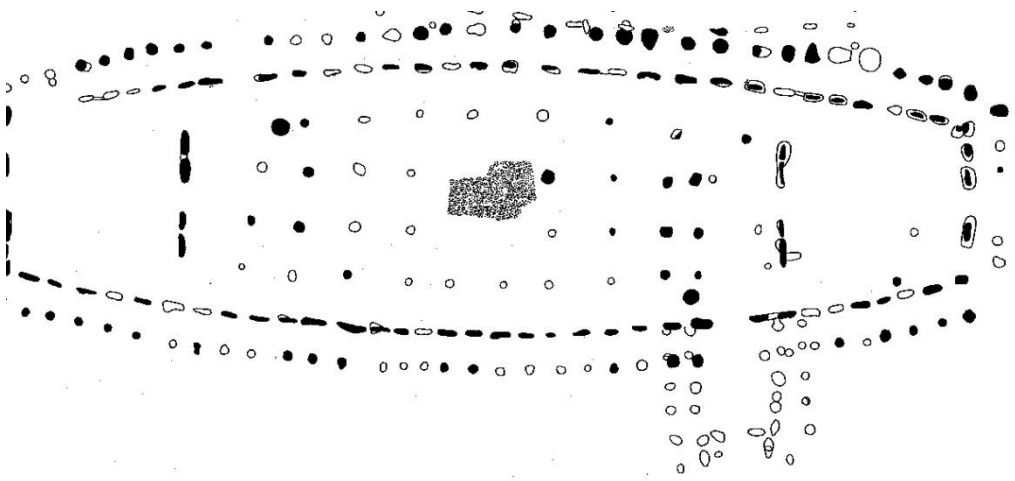

Figure 2.16: Plan of one of the houses from the circular fortress at Trelleborg, Denmark, showing a porch structure perpendicular to the main house (from Schmidt 1994, fig. 20). Compare with the house fom the fortress at Fyrkat in Figure 2.2 B.

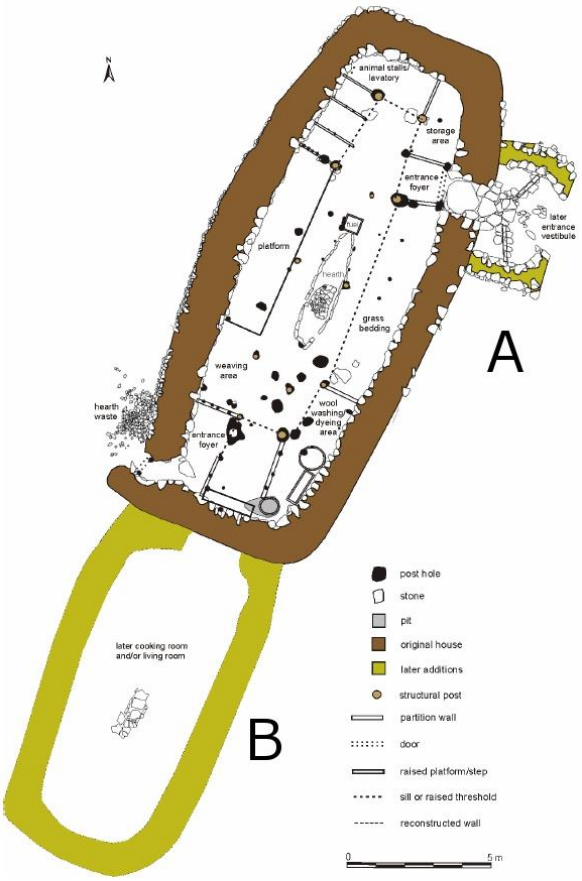

Figure 2.17: Plan of the Viking Age house at Aðalstræti 14-18 in Reykjavík, showing in A and B later additions to the first phase of house construction. A shows a porch structure perpendicular to the house (form Milek 2006, fig. 4.42).

2.2.2 The Viking Age Model

While the representation of housing models compatible with the medieval developments in housing culture, both in Iceland and in Norway, agree with the medieval period of composition of the sagas (mid-thirteenth century for *Eyrbyggja saga*, mid- to late-thirteenth century for *Gísla saga*, and early fifteenth century for *Grettis saga*), there are some descriptions which differ from these models and do in fact appear to reflect older, Viking Age structures. In contrast with the medieval house model presented above, some conspicuous Viking Age features to be found are:

- the layout and usage of the main room.

- the presence of weight-bearing posts.
- the methods of dividing internal space (with partitions and not separate rooms linked by passages).

As is the case with the medieval Norwegian *stabbur*, to this list can also be added chronologically-specific outbuilding types, specifically the Viking Age sunken-featured building shown in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 28, see below).

The arrangement of the main room: The most salient description of an older type of layout occurs in chapter 14 of *Grettis saga*, where a young Grettir, sitting by the fire in his house's main room, is given the task of scratching his father's back. The mischievous Grettir seizes the opportunity to assault his father by scraping him with a carding-comb (see chapter 1, section 1.4.1). The passage situates the action very precisely within the main room of the house, here the *eldaskáli*, describing its main features in the form of the long open hearth (*langeldr*) and its plafrorms (*set*) along the walls. This is a communal space, and eating (on movable tables), sleeping, domestic industry (represented by woolwork) and simply sitting by the fire and resting at the end of day's work are all said to take place there.

Here, it is relevant to look not only at the material descriptions in the passage, but also the way it is introduced: *Þat var háttr í þann tíma* ('That was the custom in that time'). By specifying that this section describes the way houses were built and their internal arrangement in bygone times, the author/compiler is explicitly expressing a chronological distance with the narrative's setting. The placement of the fire is especially singled out as unusual and needing explanation, and the detailed explanation of *how* the

internal features of the *skáli* were used by its occupants suggests that such a physical layout and its use might have been unfamiliar to a potential audience or reader at the time of the saga's writing, or at least at the time when the story was crystallised in the form we now have it.

However, even considering a greater overall familiarity with a medieval housing model in *Grettis saga* (as in *Gísla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*), the type of house that is most likely represented in the saga descriptions, the medieval row-house, still featured a main room that was largely based, in form, on its Viking Age antecedent. While it is not unlikely that its usage may have changed over time, the unfamiliarity with the layout itself appears strange. It could be that the exceptionally late date of composition for *Grettis saga*, in the early-fifteenth century, might place it even further in the chronology of house evolution, in the first period of the appearance of the Icelandic passage house, and thus in the transition to an early modern model of housing culture. *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Gísla saga*, composed in the mid- to late-thirteenth century and thus a hundred years or more before *Grettis saga*, do not appear to show this unfamiliarity, and might thus have been composed at a time before the main room's layout had changed to the point of unfamiliarity.

Significantly, the descriptions which appear to reflect post-Viking Age housing culture, while detailed, do not feature explanations of usage or explicit markers of chronological distance. This suggests that the later medieval house model was more contemporary, or at least more familiar, to both the saga writer and potential audience at the time of writing, in the thirteenth century (*Eyrbyggja saga*, *Gísla saga*) or, more significantly, in the early-fifteenth century (*Grettis saga*).

Those material details that are stated as unfamiliar in this episode, the layout of the *skáli* and its features such as the central open hearth and the *set*-platforms lining the walls, are all required by the narrative's plot, where Grettir assaults his father. It would appear that the plot sealed these architectural details into the story at an earlier stage, perhaps closer to the Viking Age events depicted, and that this material setting is therefore part of the genesis of the *Grettis saga* narrative. The medieval saga writer cannot eliminate these unfamiliar elements, but is nevertheless able to explain them to a contemporary audience. This would appear to demonstrate a conscious awareness on the part of the writer of the evolution in housing culture over time, between the Viking Age setting of the narrative and the later, medieval period of recording (see further in chapter 7). For all these supposedly antiquarian references however, the portrait of the house at Bjarg is not consistent, and as mentioned above, Bjarg is also the only place where internal passages are mentioned in the sampled *Íslendingasögur* (*Grettis saga* Ch. 47). The diagram of the possible layout of Bjarg is given in **Figure 2.18** (see also the discussion in chapter 1, section 1.4.1).

Such explicit markers of chronlogical distance with the Viking Age setting of the narrative are rare in the sampled *Íslendingasögur*, and in fact there are only two other examples, both from *Eyrbyggja saga*. In a description similar to that in *Grettis saga*, the farm of Fróðá in *Eyrbyggja saga* is said to have a large *eldaskáli* and a bed-closet in its inner areas, *sem þá var siðr* ('as was the custom then', Ch. 52). Chapter 26 mentions the presence of external privies on farms *í þann tíma* ('in that time'). While both these descriptions lack the impact of the contextual explanation of antiquated usage in the passage

from *Grettis saga*, both might still represent a material memory, in the narrative, of disused architectural features.

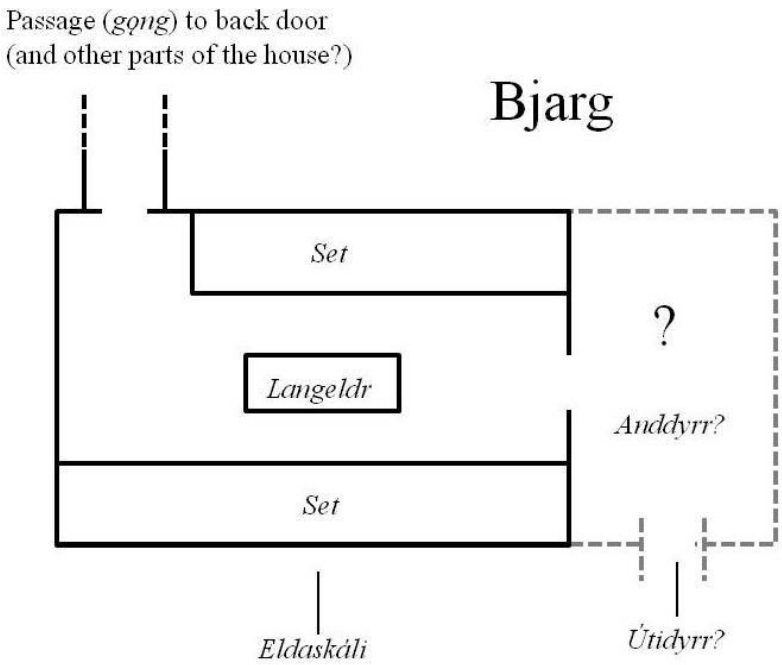

Figure 2.18: Diagram of the possible layout and features of Bjarg, as described in *Grettis saga*.

Internal organisation: posts and partitions: The description of the farm of Þórhallsstaðir, in *Grettis saga*, is particularly rich in detail, describing all the pieces of the house that are destroyed in Grettir's battle with the revenant Glámr (*Grettis saga* Ch. 35). The internal arrangement of the house, and especially the main room, show some conspicuous features. In addition to the expected *set*-platforms and the householder's bed-closet, the room has a conspicuous wooden armature which includes beams, possibly roof-supporting posts visible on the inside of the main room (see the full passage quoted in chapter 1, section 1.4.1). Furthermore, the house appears to be of a large and rather open construction, with the divisions of space achieved by a timber partition wall which, when it is broken, leaves an unobstructed view from the

main room to the antechamber. The house is therefore not divided by substantial weight-bearing walls. The diagram of the possible layout of Þórhallsstaðir is shown in **Figure 2.19**. Another example of such partitions is found in *Gísla saga*, where the inquisitive Helgi is shown to fall from a partial partition wall between the main room and an ancillary space at Ingjaldr's farm on Hergilsey (*Gísla saga*, Ch. 25. See the full passage quoted in chapter 1, section 1.3.2).

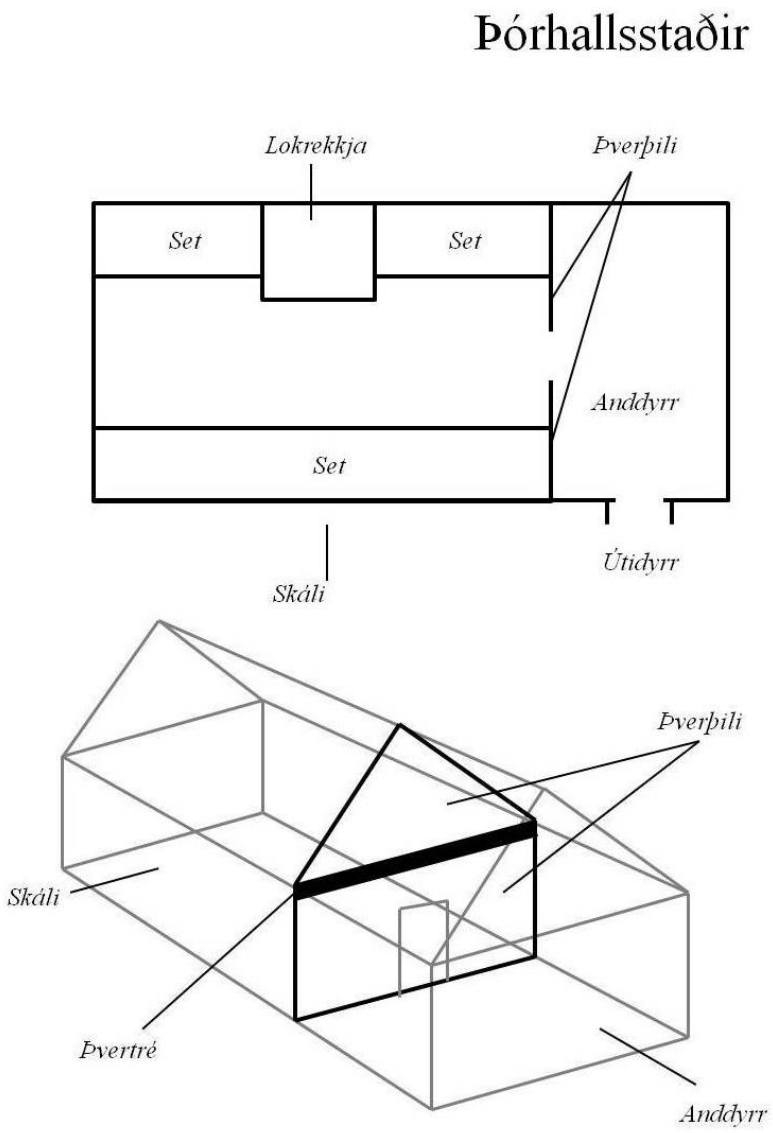

Figure 2.19: Diagram (plan and perspective) of the possible layout and features of Þórhallsstaðir, as described in *Grettis saga*.

There is another house, at Sandhaugar in *Grettis saga*, which is conspicuous by its simplicity. Although it is mostly interesting for the presence of its *þverpallr*, or cross-platform, relevant in the discussion of the identity of the *stofa* discussed above in section 2.2.1, it is otherwise rather poorly described. Still, the diagram which can be drawn of its putative layout, based on the information given, appears to show a simple house whose internal structure is undeniably dominated by the main room (see diagram in **Figure 2.20**, and the discussion in chapter 1, section 1.4.1).

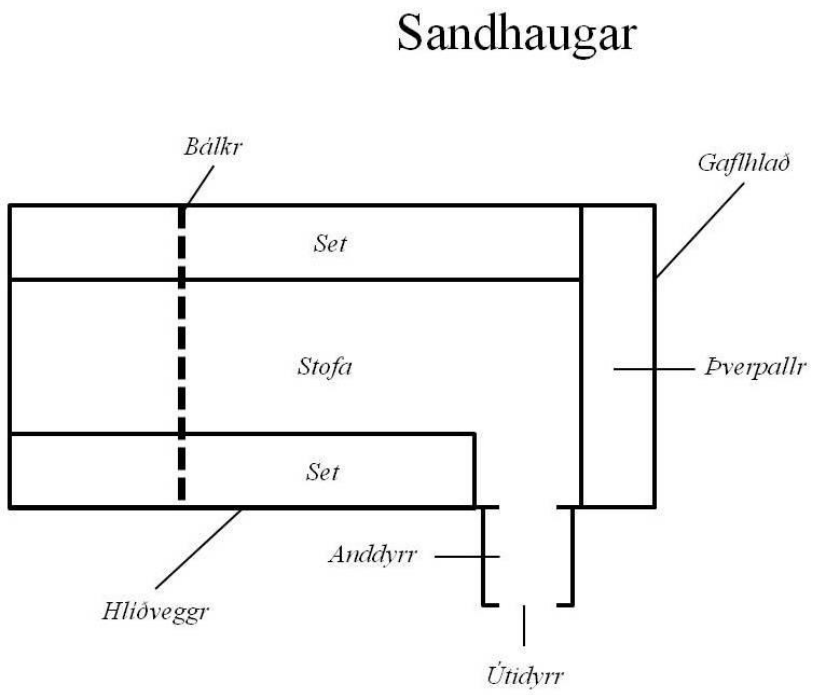

Figure 2.20: Diagram of the possible layout and features of Sandhaugar, as described in *Grettis saga*.

An Explicitly Viking Age Building: Another unmistakable antiquarian reference is the sunken-featured building on the farm of Hraun in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 28). The description of the building, dug into the ground, with an oven (*ofn*) suitable for the production of steam (and thus probably a closed oven of stone slabs as opposed to an open hearth), accessible via steps or a ladder, accords perfectly with the ubiquitous sunken-featured buildings found

on farms of the Viking Age. Much has been written about this building, especially with regards to its description as a *baðstofa*, or bath-house (Hjaltalín 2010: 143-144; Milek 2012b: 89; Sigurðardóttir 1966: 69-79). While some archaeologists support the possible usage of this building as a bath-house, suggesting some archaeological analogues (Crawford and Smith 1999: 210-212; Hjaltalín 2010: 143-144; Milek 2012b: 89; Weinmann 1994: 318), Karen Milek has desmonstrated that textile work is the most likely activity to be carried out on a widespread basis within sunken-featured buildings, and for which there is the most conclusive archaeological evidence in these spaces (Milek 2012b: 93-119). This has led to the hypothesis that sunken-featured buildings were the location of the *dyngja*, the space reserved for use by women, frequently associated with textile work (Crawford and Smith 1999: 71-76, 207-213; Milek 2012b: 120-121).

The *dyngja* which appears at the farm of Hól in *Gísla saga* (Ch. 9) is quite clearly located in a building or area entirely separate from the main room of the house. However, while its location within a sunken-featured building is not impossible, there is no indication of this whatsoever. Another *dyngja* is mentioned on the farm of Hrossholt in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 56), but it is not given any physical description and is mentioned just in passing: [*Snorri goði*] *gekk í dyngjuna* ('[Snorri goði] went into the dyngja'). The *dyngja* is a designation of function and not of form, and the physical characteristics of the building containing the *dyngja* are not described.

One of Milek's main arguments against the use of sunken-featured buildings as bath-houses focusses on the use of the term *baðstofa* in the description of the building at Hraun in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 28). Relying on an

article by Nanna Ólafsdóttir, 'Baðstofan og böð að fornu' (1974), Milek concludes that the word *baðstofa* is entirely dissociated from the concept of bathing (meaning full-body immersion or a steam-bath) and relates instead to an interior domestic space in the medieval house, akin to the modern Icelandic meaning of *baðstofa* as a living-room (Milek 2012b: 89). However, this rapid dismissal of the *baðstofa*'s functions leaves out the nuances of Ólafsdóttir's article. While a wide range of examples are collected, demonstrating that the *baðstofa*, in its context of usage, is a social space, it is far from entirely dissociated with bathing. Ólafsdóttir reveals that the *bað-* element itself is ambiguous, and its appearance in various contexts hints towards ritual ablutions before religious ceremonies or performances (Ólafsdóttir 1974: 67-75, 81). The *bað-* element may not refer to full immersion of the body in water for the purposes of personal hygiene, but its association with ritual ablutions still connects it to the idea of washing with water.[10]

The dissociation of the *baðstofa* from all kinds of 'bathing' and its connection to an etymologically-ambiguous modern domestic space is therefore not conclusive, and caution should be taken before equating an Old Norse term with its modern Icelandic descendant. Anrheiður Sigurðardóttir suggests that the word *baðstofa* was in current usage long before the medieval period of saga-writing, even though the kind of structure it represents is far from clear (Sigurðardóttir 1966: 69-72). The fact that the term *baðstofa* is very comfortably used to describe the usage of a recognisable sauna in *Eyrbyggja saga* suggests that the association of this term with (steam-)bathing was not at

[10] The definitions given for *bað* and related words in Zoëga's, Fritzner's and Cleasby and Vigfusson's dictionaries as well as the Dictionary of Old Norse Prose confirm this, while Cleasby and Vigfusson (in the entry for *bað*) mention the primacy of *laug* (spring) and related words in connection with washing.

all problematic in the thirteenth century period of the saga's writing. The manifestations of the word collected by Ólafsdóttir (Ólafsdóttir 1974 *passim* esp. 82-84) certainly seem to indicate that medieval usage of the word *baðstofa* already begins to designate a domestic space, eventually leading to the modern meaning of living-room dissociated with bathing, despite the clear association with bathing in *Eyrbyggja saga.* This suggests that the cognitive dissociation of the *bað-* element with the functions of washing may have begun before the recording of the word in the medieval saga literature, but was not complete. What is certain is that the identity of the *baðstofa*, in the medieval context, is far from clear.

While originating with the designation of the building at Hraun in *Eyrbyggja saga* as a *baðstofa* and its usage as a sauna, this debate has left the building itself far behind. What is perhaps most remarkable about this debate is what it implicitly acknowledges, but never explicitly remarks upon: the building in *Eyrbyggja saga* is clearly recognisable as an Icelandic sunken-featured building, with all its principal diagnostic features. *Eyrbyggja saga* was composed in the mid-thirteenth century, and yet the archaeological evidence points to this type of building being entirely disused (and some deliberately obliterated from the landscape) by the turn of the twelfth century (Milek 2006: 210-211; 2012b: 121-122).

This passage in *Eyrbyggja saga* is therefore an explicit antiquarian reference to an obsolete architectural form that had quite possibly left no physical trace by the time of the saga's writing. Yet the physical description of the building is undeniably accurate, and the debate over the usage of the *baðstofa* as a steam-bath implicitly acknowledges this accuracy while taking

issue with the description of a practice unsubstantiated by archaeological evidence. Perhaps this confusion in the usage of the *baðstofa* in *Eyrbyggja saga* stems, precisely, from the building's status as a cultural 'fossil': it is no longer used and might not be extant in the physical landscape, and while a material memory of this building type has survived in the narrative, its function is no longer understood. The only firm conclusion that can be reached in this case is, however, significant: the narrative of *Eyrbyggja saga* has preserved the accurate physical description of a building type which had disappeared at least a century before the story's recording.

Conclusion

The *Íslendingasögur*, as represented by *Grettis saga, Gísla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, do not show a homogeneous or consistent portrait of the house which would enable the reader to clearly define the house of the Saga age. Yet the examples presented in this chapter demonstrate that the domestic material culture represented in the sampled sagas is not a random or fictional fabrication. The descriptions of houses, both for Iceland and Norway, appear to accurately reflect a medieval architectural context. These descriptions, given almost in passing without need for explanation of the usage of domestic space, appear to give a portrait of an ordinary reality that would have been familiar to the sagas' potential audience. All the descriptions of space in the sagas are dependent upon the narrative: something has to happen within a building, space or area for it to warrant description at all. The result is a great inconsistency in the quality and detail of description, even with regards to

individual house sites. The overall understanding of the representation of domestic space is cumulative.

While the model which agrees with medieval housing culture is most frequent, the few salient examples of earlier, Viking Age housing culture are clear. They, too, are governed by the narrative's plot. The mechanisms by which these written artefacts of an obsolete material culture might be preserved in narrative, and the roles they might play in the process of composition, will be explored in Section 3: Transmission.

The inconsistency of the representation of houses in the *Íslendingasögur* makes sense if it is understood as an overall accurate portrait of the housing culture contemporary with the medieval period of saga writing (mid-thirteenth to early-fifteenth centuries for the sagas concerned), to which are added accurate, but infrequent, antiquarian references to Viking Age housing culture. These hint at a material memory of the past, agreeing with the Viking Age setting of the narratives. It is the fact that the composition of the sagas straddles this chronological divide which sows doubt as to the sagas' accuracy and 'historicity'. However, it is clear that, in terms of the housing culture as a material background to the narrative, a measure of accuracy is demonstrated by the sagas.

It remains to be seen how the description of domestic space is manifested in the context of narratives which do not feature such a chronological divide between their setting and their time of composition. In chapter 3, the same method of analysis used on the three sampled *Íslendingasögur* will be applied to a sample saga, *Íslendinga saga*, from the repertoire of contemporary sagas, or *Samtíðarsögur*, set in the late thirteenth

century. If the same level of accuracy is maintained, the descriptions of domestic space should explicitly reflect the housing culture of medieval Iceland. The representation of housing culture in the sampled *Íslendingasögur* will be revisited in the light of this new investigation.

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Chapter 3: The House in *Íslendinga saga*

Introduction

As the previous chapter revealed, the representation of housing culture in the three sampled *Íslendingasögur*, *Grettis saga*, *Gísla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, is affected by the chronological distance between the Viking Age setting of the events depicted in the narratives, and the medieval period of saga composition and writing. One might expect whatever accurate depiction of housing culture which might appear in the *Íslendingasögur* to reflect the architectural trends of its medieval period of composition. Yet upon critical examination, as carried out in chapter 2, the houses in the texts appear to be an amalgam of Viking Age and medieval forms, recognisable in different proportions depending on the passages in which they appear. The overall portrait of the house that is presented is generally a simple one that appears to agree with, or at least not to contradict, a generic late Viking Age form moving into the first phases of development of more complex forms in the early medieval period, starting around the twelfth century. These medieval forms are frequent, and generally appear in casual descriptions of the house in passages where the physical form of the building has less of a narrative role to play. However, there also exist descriptions of an explicitly antiquarian nature, where forms corresponding very closely to Viking Age housing culture are evident.

The argument regarding these differing representations is that the 'antiquarian passages' manage to transmit a genuine material memory of Viking Age housing culture that is sufficiently accurate to be recognisable as such. These Viking Age examples are exceptions contained within a general context of descriptions which reflect medieval developments in housing

culture. If the narrative does not require specific (antiquated) house forms, then the houses described in the bulk of the narrative reflect the material reality of an author writing from a medieval standpoint. Therefore, both medieval and Viking Age housing culture can be found represented within the texts, and the *Íslendingasögur* manage accurately to describe elements of material culture that correspond, broadly, to the chronological setting of their Viking Age narratives.[1]

While this interpretation already has some support among archaeologists (Águstsson 1982b: 255-257, 267; Hjaltalín 2010: 141, 145; Sigurðardóttir 1966: *passim*), this chapter aims to submit this argument to critical evaluation. If the narratives of the *Íslendingasögur*, set in the Viking Age, represent at least in part a recognisably Viking Age material culture despite their medieval period of composition, it would stand to reason that a *samtíðarsaga*, or 'contemporary' saga, where the events of the narrative are approximately contemporary to the time of writing in the medieval period, would represent an unambiguous, medieval model of housing culture. If such is the case, then the argument for accuracy in the representation of period-specific housing culture is reinforced.

The Sample

The *samtíðarsaga Íslendinga saga* (Jóhannesson, Finnbogason and Eldjárn, eds., 1946) was selected as a sample to compare with the three previously sampled *Íslendingasögur*. It is the longest of the individual sagas that are

[1] This view is supported by Weinmann who sees the explicit differences between the *Íslendingasögur* and *Sturlunga saga* as a deliberate marker of historical differentiation by the re-creation of the past, and calls for a dedicated interdisciplinary examination of this situation. Weinmann 1994: 360. This thesis is a first step to fulfilling this need.

included in the compilation *Sturlunga saga*, or 'Saga of the Sturlungs', named after the influential family which rose to power in Iceland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and whose most famous scion, Snorri Sturluson, has made an incomparable contribution to our understanding of Old Norse poetics and mythology, and Norwegian history. *Sturlunga saga* was written by another member of this illustrious family, Sturla Þórðarson (1214-1284), Snorri's nephew, who also wrote a version of another text fundamental to our understanding of Icelandic history, *Landnámabók*, or the Icelandic Book of Settlements (Thomas 1970: 40; Edwards and Pálsson 1972: 7-8). *Íslendinga saga* covers a period from 1183 to 1262, and was probably written a mere ten to twenty years after the latter date, in the last decade of Sturla's life (Faulkes 2007: 23; Thomas 1970: 13-23, 31-45). This means that the latter events of the saga narrative, occurring around the mid-thirteenth century, would be very nearly contemporary to the time of writing, and would have occurred in the lifetime of the author. The choice of a work by Sturla Þórðarson is all the more apt in that he may have written a version of *Grettis saga*, and therefore is presumed to have been thoroughly acquainted with that saga's narrative and may arguably be associated with its context of production (Faulkes 2007: 23; Thomas 1970: 32). As the longest part of *Sturlunga saga*, *Íslendinga saga* was considered to give the widest base of evidence, in a single saga, for the appearance of houses within the context of a twelfth to thirteenth century narrative, and therefore the most material for comparison with the findings from the *Íslendingasögur*. The vast majority of *Íslendinga saga*'s narrative takes place in Iceland, with only brief passages in Norway. Among these there is only one occurrence of domestic buildings, at the bishop's palace and royal

court at Kristkirkja near Bergen (Ch. 79). There is therefore little opportunity to compare the representation of contemporary Norwegian buildings. Analysis of *Íslendinga saga* was done using the same methodology as the three other sample sagas, and the results are presented in similar fashion.

3.1 The House in *Íslendinga saga*: Overview

The circumstances of the house's appearance within the narrative of *Íslendinga saga* differs somewhat from its appearances in the other sampled sagas. There is still a correlation between the level of detail in descriptions of material culture (and especially the built environment) with the importance of these material spaces to the progression of the narrative. Much of the narrative action still happens on farms, but there is a far greater proportion of the narrative that also occurs in open spaces, during transit, or in liminal or temporary places such as shorelines and landing places, mountains, agricultural structures at a distance from farms, and booths at the *þing*.

As is the case with the *Íslendingasögur*, scenes of attack and destruction provide some of the most detailed descriptions of houses. Houses are however less frequently entirely destroyed, with the notable exception of the high-status farm of Flugumýrr (Chs. 171-174), and, to a lesser extent, Bakki (we are only told that *var þar hǫggvit bú allt*, 'the entire farmstead was destroyed,' Ch. 175), and feature most prominently in scenes of battle or invasion where prisoners or goods are taken, or specific individuals targeted and slaughtered. The house is sometimes used as a defensive structure, with the battle occurring in and around the house. This gives ample opportunity for detailed description of the house's construction and especially its internal

layout. These house-battle scenes are so similar in their overall narrative sequence (though varying in particular details) as to become stereotypical:

- Attackers approach the farm at some quiet moment.
- A member of the household gives warning.
- The household prepare themselves for attack and organise defensive structures within, above or around the house.
- A pitched battle ensues, during which the attackers, often aided by fire, achieve their objective.
- Most household members are spared, especially if they have reached the church (the role of the church will be explored in greater detail in section 3.4.2).
- Some plundering ensues.

There are twenty-three scenes of attack on houses throughout the saga, involving both short-lived, violent invasions and full-scale pitched battles (see Table 3.1). These exclude scenes of clandestine murder where an individual is surreptitiously killed, and the killer escapes. Even though the house is indeed invaded in these situations, it is not actually subjected to an attack. Among the remaining scenes of attack, eleven feature the curious action of climbing onto the house's roof to keep watch or defend, and six farms are equipped with specialised defensive structures. Both features will be discussed in further detail in sections 3.2 and 3.4.3, respectively.

Farm name	Chapter(s)	Presence of Fortifications?	Climbing up on the roof?
Bakki	175-176	-	-
Bær	124	-	-
Einarsstaðir	37	Y	-
Espihóll	176	-	-
Eyr in Arnarfjǫrðr	94	-	Y
Flugumýrr	171-174	(fortifications are built at the farm after the major attack, in Ch. 183)	Y
Gillastaðir	67	-	-
Grund	29	Y	-
Hafsteinsstaðir	188	-	Y
Hallgilsstaðir	176	-	Y
Hólar	24, 36, 42	-	Y
Hvamm	61	Y	-
Miklabær	137-138	-	Y
Mǫðruvellir	176	-	-
Ǫxnahól	176	-	-
Reykjafjǫrðr	150	-	Y
Reykjaholt	110-115, 153	Y	Y
Sauðafell	71, 84-85	Y	Y
Saurbær	33	Y	Y
Skálaholt	155-156	-	Y
Þrandarhólt	200	-	-
Tunga	154	-	-
Vatnsfjǫrðr	46	-	-

Table 3.1: Farm buildings subjected to attack or invasion in *Íslendinga saga* (excluding clandestine murders)

Less violent scenes also take place in the rooms of the house, from grand feasts to more modest scenes of mundane domestic activities such as sleeping, bathing, eating ordinary meals, using latrines, quiet conversation and even other domestic pastimes, such as games of *tafl* (Ch. 117). These activities are located within the house and also often give an idea of the spatial arrangement of various parts of the house in relation to each other. The general portrait of the house and its internal features, as well as the other constructions on the farmhouse grounds, is presented here.

3.2 General Characteristics and External Aspect

The general description of the house in *Grettis saga*, *Gísla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga* was of a building dominated by the large, multi-purpose main room, the

skáli or *stofa* (and the *eldhús*, in *Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 54 and *Gísla saga* Chs. 9 and 23). Additional internal spaces and passageways were only tentatively described, or even just alluded to. The main divisions of space appeared to be partitioned from the main room itself, or from the ubiquitous antechamber (*anddyrr*). Function-specific spaces, especially for agricultural use (byre, sheep-house, etc.) were mostly confined to outbuildings. The house as it appears in *Íslendinga saga* is conspicuously different: a complex structure replete with separate, function-specific rooms with equally specific names, separated by doors and internal passageways. It must be said however that the complexity of the house model that is presented might be heavily influenced by the fact that the narrative of *Íslendinga saga* favours high-status sites, such as the religious centres of Hólar and Skálaholt, as well as the luxurious Sauðafell, the ill-fated Flugumýrr and Snorri Sturluson's famous headquarters at Reykjaholt.[2] It is probable that simpler house forms also existed, but they do not benefit from the same attention as the larger, more complex high-status farms where *Íslendinga saga*'s stage is set.

The house will usually have several doors to the outside (*útidyrr*, *húsdyrr*), equipped with locks (*lokur*, pl.), sometimes connecting to antechambers but also exiting directly from some of the ancillary spaces of the house (see for example a door in a *búr* or storage space at Flugumýrr, Ch. 173, and one from the kitchen or *eldhús* at the farm of Hafsteinsstaðir, Ch. 188). Outer doors never directly access the main domestic living spaces of the house. One house, at Miklabær, is even equipped with a secret door, *laundyrr* (Ch. 138).

[2] The edition of *Íslendinga saga* (Jóhannesson, Finnbogason and Eldjárn, eds., 1946) used for this research retains this spelling for Skálaholt and Reykjaholt, as opposed to the modern usage Skálholt and Reykholt.

The house will always have one main door, most often called the *brandadyrr,* referring to the *brandar*, which were the potentially decorated portions of the top strake of a ship, which curved upwards to form the stem and stern (Jesch 2001: 147-148; ONP). These curved timbers seem to have been incorporated as either decorative or structural elements above the door. In front of the house's main door there will often be a pavement (*hlað* or *stétt*), and the front wall of the house, the one in which the main door is situated, might be designated by a specific name: *kampr* (Ch. 55). In one instance, at the farm of Sauðafell, there is also a *dýrshǫfuðsdyrr*, literally 'animal's head door', in addition to the main *brandadyrr*. This might imply a carved decoration of an animal's head set as ornamentation in the door structure. Such decoration would appear to mark the *dýrshǫfuðsdyrr* as an entrance with a higher status than a simple point of ingress into the house, perhaps a second 'main' door. The farm at Sauðafell is described as being conspicuously rich (*At Sauðafelli váru þá hýbýli góð…*, 'At Sauðafell there was at that time a well-appointed residence...', Ch. 71), perhaps explaining why it has two separate 'main' doors:

> *Þeir hljópu inn í dyrrnar, Þórðr Þorvaldsson í dýrshǫfuðsdyrr með tólfta mann, en Snorri ok þeir Hjálmssynir í brandadyrr fimmtán saman.*
> 'They ran into the doors, Þórðr Þorvaldsson into the animal's-head-door with eleven men, and Snorri and the sons of Hjálmr in the *brandar*-door [main door] with fifteen men altogether.' (Ch. 71)

Amongst the most conspicuously different features of the houses in *Íslendinga saga* is the presence of windows (*gluggar*, pl.). In the attack on the house at Flugumýrr, tar-soaked sheepskins and hay are stuffed into windows to set the house ablaze:

> *…þá tóku þeir gærur af þǫnum, er þar váru úti, ok báru þar í eld ok tjǫruna. Sumir tóku tǫðu ok tráðu í gluggana ok lǫgðu þar eld í…*

> ‘Then they took sheepskins from frames that were outside, and covered them with tar and set them on fire. Some took hay and stuffed it into the windows, and set fire to it…’ (Ch. 172)

In this same attack, the ten-year-old Þórlákr escapes the burning house by jumping onto the field and running to safety:

> *Sveinninn (Þorlákr) hafði út hlaupit áðr, ok loguðu um hann línklæðin, er hann kom ofan á vǫllinn.*
> ‘The boy (Þórlákr) had jumped out earlier, and his linen clothes were burning when he came down onto the field.’ (Ch. 173)

In order for him to jump *down onto* the field, he cannot have exited through a door, and one can infer that his means of egress is a window, perhaps even located at an upper level.

Another window, this time situated specifically within the long wall of the *stofa*, appears at the farm of Valshamar, where a certain Eiríkr birkibeinn (‘birch-leg’) spies on a conversation going on within: *En hliðskjár var á stofunni, ok lagði hann þar við hlustina* (‘And there was a side-window in the stofa, and he lay there with his ear against it.’ Ch.55). The word *hliðskjár* designates, specifically, a window covered by a membrane of skin (*skjár*), located in a side-wall (*hlið-*, as opposed to the gable-wall), helping to position it in the house’s construction. The skin covering of the window would thus be translucent and not fully transparent, and Eiríkr remains unseen by the *stofa*’s occupants on whom he is spying. Whatever coverings the windows might have had, it is highly improbable that they would have had panes of glass in thirteenth century Iceland. One *glergluggr*, unambiguously a glass window, does however appear. It is not in a house, but is designated as the eastern window of a church at Saurbær: *Eyjólfr komst út um glerglugg austr ór kirkjunni…*(‘Eyjólfr got himself out of the church by the glass window in the east [of the church]…’, Ch. 33). Since the eastern end of the church contains

the altar and is where the ritual is performed, it would make sense, in context, for the church of this high-status farm to have its eastern window endowed with the luxury of glass.

Other windows appear in more humble outbuildings. The farm of Hallgilsstaðir (ch. 176) has a *baðstofugluggr*, a window in its bath-house (*baðstofa*),[3] and a *hlǫðuvindauga* (from *hlaða*, outbuilding and *vindauga*, window) appears at Reykjafjǫrðr in a byre (Ch. 150). The presence of windows in a byre reveals that they are not restricted to the main dwelling house, and suggests that their presence was common.

Another opening in the house that is not present in the sampled *Íslendingasögur* is the hole in the roof, *ljóri*.[4] The need for a point of egress for the smoke of an open hearth was speculated on but never confirmed in the previous samples. Here, there is the definite presence of specific openings in the roof, used for ventilation, lighting and the escape of smoke (although as shall be discussed in section 3.3, the presence of a *ljóri* might not signify egress of smoke in an unheated *stofa* or *skáli*). Roof-openings appear in a dream in Skagafjǫrðr, letting in a rain of blood onto the house's occupants:

> *Þat dreymði mann í Skagafirði, at hann þóttist koma í hús eitt mikit. Þar sátu inni konur tvær blóðgar ok reru áfram. Honum þótti rigna blóði í ljórana.*
> 'A man in Skagafjǫrðr dreamed that he came into a great house. Inside were sitting two bloody women, who were rocking back and forth. It seemed to him that it was raining blood from the openings in the roof.' (Ch. 23)

We also find a more mundane example at Reykjaholt, where attackers use the roof openings to spy on conversations going on within: *Fóru þeir Sturla þá*

[3] See also chapter 2, section 2.2.2, this chapter, section 3.3.2, and chapter 6, section 6.2.1, regarding the difficulty of identifying the type of structure designated by the *baðstofa*.
[4] See the brief discussion on the use of the word *ljóri* in chapter 1, section 1.3.2, especially note 12.

upp á húsin ok sáu inn í ljórana. (‘Sturla and his men went up onto the house then, and looked in through the roof openings,’ Ch. 153). In both these examples, there appears to be more than one opening in the roof, although the number, arrangement and details of construction of these openings are not given.

In the previous example at Reykjaholt, the men are seen to be climbing up onto the house (*upp á húsi*). As mentioned previously, this is a curiously frequent occurrence in this saga in situations of attack either to keep watch, defend or attack (see Table 3.1). At Saurbær, there is even an entire defensive structure built on top of the roof during an attack:

> *…hǫfðu þeir Gísli fyrir búizt á húsum uppi ok gert sér þar gott vígi með viðum.*
> ‘Gísli and his men prepared themselves [for the fight] on top of the house and made for themselves a good fortification out of logs.’ (Ch. 33)

The description of the scaling of roofs in times of attack does not give the impression that this action was remarkable or difficult in any way; it appears, on the contrary, to be quite frequent, even habitual. This would suggest that roof was built low, or that structures or implements were in place to allow easy access. However, the level of detail in the description of material culture in the saga and especially during episodes of attack leads one to expect these means of ascension to be described, yet they are absent. Ladders (*stigar*, pl.) are elsewhere described as being used to gain access to structures, such as the scaling of defensive walls during the attack on Reykjaholt in Chapter 153, making their absence from the usual roof-scaling more conspicuous.

Another alternative is that the roof was built in such a way that its slope and the height of the eaves above the ground allowed for easy access and a

relatively unprecarious movement on the roof itself. There is one curious detail which does mention something of roof construction, though saying nothing about possible access to the roof: at the farm of Gillastaðir there is a *roftorfsveggr*, literally a wall of roof-turves, piled outside (Ch. 67). This confirms that the roof is covered in turf, and is most likely to be a pile of used turves resulting from roof maintenance and the replacement of its turf covering.

The physical characteristics of the external features of the house are difficult to confirm archaeologically, as the upper portions of medieval Scandinavian houses seldom leave more than the most minimal traces (Schmidt 1994: 122-126). Attempts have been made in Iceland to understand the superstructure of Viking Age and medieval turf houses by looking at extant, modern analogues of vernacular turf architecture, though how relevant these modern ethnographic examples are to the housing cultures of the past remains a matter of debate (see chapter 2, section 2.1.1 and Águstsson 1982a: 173-181; Komber 2001: 13-15; Milek 2006: 34-45; Nilsson 1943 esp. 295-306). Among these modern analogues, studies by Karen Milek of the standing turf-built farm buildings at Þverá suggest, for example, that Icelandic turf buildings would not have been equipped with smoke-holes (Milek 2006: 53 and personal communication 2012; for more results of these modern ethnographical comparisons see Milek 2012a). However, the development of housing culture in the North Atlantic, following the Norwegian model, contributed to the spread of Norwegian stave and timber construction and especially the smaller, timber-built *stofa*-type building. These houses are archaeologically attested to have had smoke-holes in their main heated rooms,

acting both as egress for the smoke and as a source of light (Hamerow 2002: 26, Hansen 2002: 221, Schmidt 1994: 90-110). While these cannot be directly equated with contemporary Icelandic houses, they nevertheless demonstrate that smoke-holes were known, and used, within the medieval North-Atlantic Scandinavian world. The appearance of smoke holes in *Íslendinga saga* does not appear culturally or technologically incongruous. The houses otherwise agree with known building customs for the medieval period, as attested by the presence of turf as a building material (Gestsson 1982: 162-171).

While the Norwegian *stofa*-type building was not equipped with glass windows until the sixteenth century (Stoklund 1993:214), it is possible that this development too has its roots in an earlier medieval period. *Íslendinga saga*'s examples suggest domestic window-openings left uncovered or covered with a more mundane material, such as the skin membrane in the *hliðskjár* mentioned previously (Ch.55). Glass windows appear only in churches, if at all.

3.3 Rooms and Internal Organisation

3.3.1 *Skáli* and *Stofa*: The Main Rooms

It is difficult to designate which room now fills the function of main room. The terms *stofa* and the *skáli*, which were synonymous terms for the main room in the *Íslendingasögur*, can now confidently be ascribed to different rooms, and both are present in the houses in *Íslendinga saga*. Their functions are sometimes difficult to distinguish, but the *skáli* has certainly become the main sleeping chamber for the household. This is confirmed by one instance at the farm on Fagrey, where the *skáli* is also referred to as the *svefnhús*, or sleeping-house (Ch. 107). The *skáli*'s form is still essentially the same as it was in the

Íslendingasögur, following the three-aisled format with the *set*-platforms on the side, and a central passage between them. This central aisle runs the entire length of the *skáli*, which appears to have entrances at both gable ends, so that it can be traversed from end to end. No central hearth is mentioned in this central aisle, however, and contrary to the *skáli* of the *Íslendingasögur,* that of *Íslendinga saga* appears to be unheated.

Sleeping in the *skáli* takes place on the *set*-platforms, as it did in the *Íslendingasögur,* with what appear to be regular sleeping places, *rúm,* and people sleeping two or three abreast:

> *En þeir Bjǫrn lágu í innanverðum skála báðir í einni hvílu, en Jóreiðr Konálsdóttir, frilla Bjarnar, lá í milli þeira.*
> 'And Bjǫrn [and his companion Þorkel] lay in the inner part of the skáli, both in one bed, and Jóreiðr Konálsdóttir, Bjǫrn's mistress, lay between them.' (Fagrey, Ch. 107)

Other types of sleeping structures are also more frequent than in the *Íslendingasögur.* The use of bed-closets (*lokrekkja* or *lokhvíla*), for example, is much more frequent and there are multiple such structures in the house (as opposed to the single bed-closet usually reserved for the householder in the *Íslendingasögur*). The bed-closet still has the same construction as its earlier incarnations, built like a box with walls of wooden boards (*þili*), with a lockable door-panel (*hurð*), and it is shown to contain up to three people at a time: *[Þorvaldr] lá í lokhvílu ok tvær frillur hans…*('[Þorvaldr] lay in the bed-closet with two of his mistresses…', Vatnsfjǫrðr, Ch. 46).

The *skáli* might be separated into gendered spaces, with a *kvennaskáli* (women's *skáli*) and a *karlaskáli* (men's *skáli*) appearing as either simply designated spaces for men and women, or actually being separated by a partition wall and a door:

> *Gizurr glaði hljóp í kvennaskáladyrrin…*
> *Gizurr Þorvaldsson lá ok þau Gróa inum vestra megin í skála innar við þili þat, er næst var kvennaskála.*
> 'Gizurr glaði [the glad] ran into the door to the women's skáli…'
> 'Gizurr Þorvaldsson lay with Gróa in the western part of the skáli, near the partition wall that was next to the women's skáli.'(Flugumýrr, Chs. 171/172)

The existence of these partition walls also help to understand a particularly intriguing sleeping structure which appears in *Íslendinga saga*, but is entirely absent from the *Íslendingasögur:* the 'gable-bed', *stafnrekkja* or *stafnhvíla.* It is necessary to read the following passages carefully and to pay close attention to the use of space in order to understand the physical nature of this most singular construction. The *stafnrekkja* is a bed that is built up against a partition wall in the *skáli*, either at the outer extremities of the room, or against the partition separating the *kvennaskáli* from the *karlaskáli*:

> *Þeir Bjǫrn Óláfsson ok Gizurr glaði hǫfðu brotit fengit nǫkkur spjót ór krókum, er stóðu fyrir framan stafnrekkju í kvennaskáladurum…*
> 'Bjǫrn Óláfsson and Gizurr glaði had got some spears from the hooks which were in front of the gable-beds at the door to the women's skáli…' (Flugumýrr, Ch. 172)

There is one *stafnrekkja* on either *set*, against the partition wall: they are thus across from one another, with the central aisle between them: *Þorsteinn Skeggjason varði stafnrekkju gegnt rúmi því, er Hallr hafði legit í…* ('Þorsteinn Skeggjason defended the gable-bed across from the bed in which Hallr had lain…', Flugumýrr, Ch. 172). The *stafnrekkja* is also separated from the other regular sleeping places on the *set*, designating a more permanent, delineated sleeping space without being fully enclosed like the bed-closet (*lokrekkja*). In this example from Flugumýrr, the demarcation is achieved by the use of bed-curtains or hangings, which are hanging from a rod: *tjaldsproti* ('tapestry/hanging-stick'):

> *Þat sá Gizurr, er hann var í stafnrekkjunni, ok ætlaði at hǫggva tveim hǫndum á handlegg Eyjólfi með Brynjubít, en blóðrefillinn sverðins kom upp í tjaldsprotann, ok kom þat hǫgg ekki á Eyjólf.*
> 'Gizurr saw that, when he was in the gable-bed, and made to give a two-handed blow onto Eyjólfr's lower arm with [his sword] Brynjubít, but the sword's point came up against the bed-curtain-rod, and the blow didn't strike Eyjólfr.' (Flugumýrr, Ch. 172)

The example from Flugumýrr also gives an interesting detail of construction, and we see that the partition wall between the gendered halves of the *skáli*, against which the gable-beds (*stafnrekkjur*, pl.) are built, is cut by a circular opening, or 'window' (*kringlóttr gluggr*):

> *En Hallr, sonr hans, ok þau Ingibjǫrg lágu þar fyrir útan þilit næst í stafnrekkju, ok var gluggr kringlóttr á þilinu milli rúmanna…*
> 'But Hallr, his [Gizurr Þorvaldsson's] son and Ingibjǫrg lay out there, next to the partition in the gable-bed, and there was a round window in the partition between the beds…' (Flugumýrr Ch. 172)

It would appear then that the separation of genders in this particular *skáli* was only partial (see **Figures 3.1** and **3.2**).

While the *skáli* is never entered directly from the outside, and there is always a kind of antechamber (*anddyrr* or *forskáli*), the *stofa* is located even farther in: *[Þorvaldr] hljóp fram á gólfit ok innar eftir skálanum til stofu…* ('[Þorvaldr] ran forward along the floor of the skáli, further in towards the stofa…', Vatnsfjǫrðr, Ch. 46).

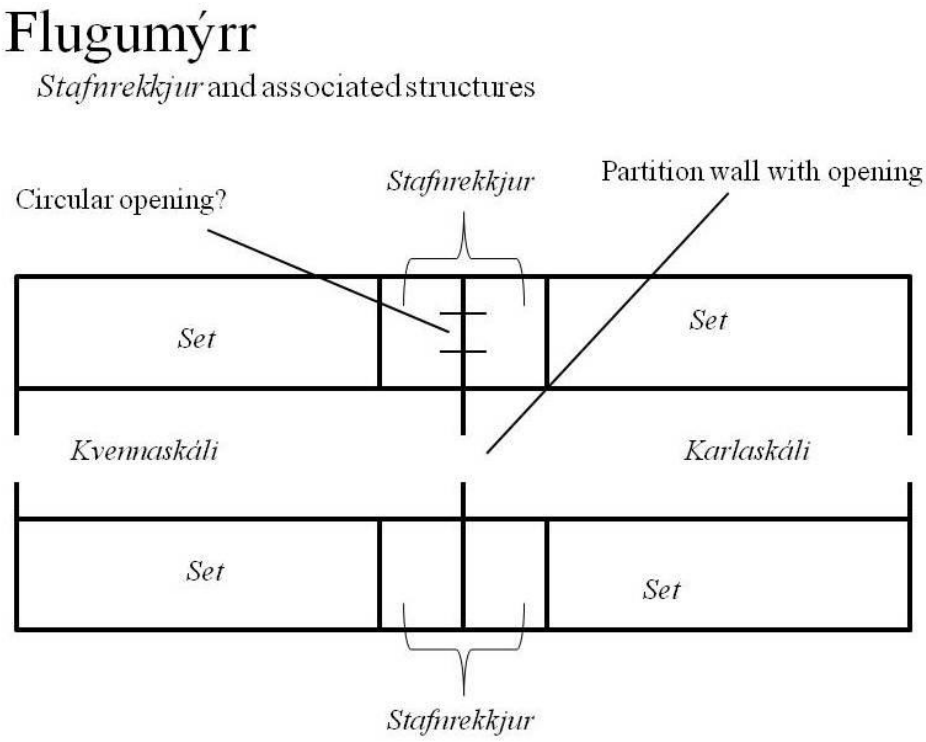

Figure 3.1: Diagram of the possible layout of the women's *skáli* (*kvennaskáli*) and men's *skáli* (*karlaskáli*) at Flugumýrr, with the probable position of the gable-beds (*stafnrekkjur*).

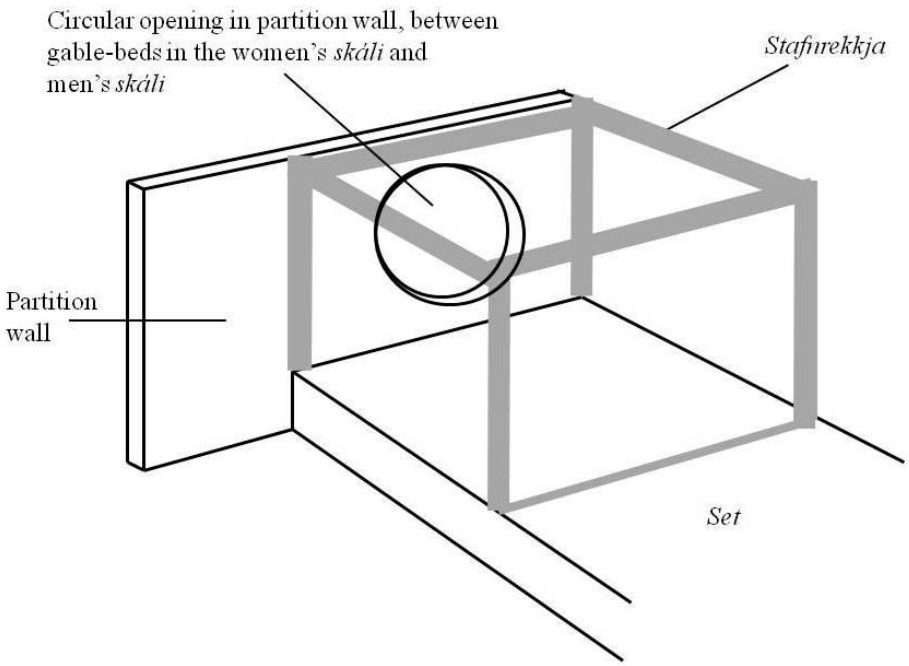

Figure 3.2: Diagram of the possible arrangement of the *set*-platform, gable-bed (*stafnrekkja*), partition wall and circular opening as described at Flugumýrr.

The *stofa* has become the main public room of the house: it is here that meals are taken throughout the saga, and this is also where most visitors are received and where both casual socialising and larger public celebrations take place. The wedding which takes place at Flugumýrr, shortly before the farm's tragic destruction, gives us many details of the construction of an admittedly large *stofa*:

> *Nú kómu menn til brúðlaups laugarkveldit á Flugumýri… Gizurr sat á inn eystra langbekk miðjan ok Hrafn innar frá honum it næsta…Á inn vestra bekk miðjan sat Sturla, innar frá honum Snorri prestr… Forsæti váru fyrir endilǫngum bekk hvárum tveggja. Kirkjustólar váru settir eftir miðju gólfi, ok var þar setit á tveim megin. Ketilbjǫrn, sonr Gizurar, sat á þeim stóli innar mjǫk við pall… Ok er mǫnnum var i sæti skipat, varu log upp dregin... Sexfalt var setit í stofunni.*
> 'Now people came to the wedding on Saturday evening at Flugumýrr… Gizurr sat in the middle of the eastern long-platform[5] and Hrafn was next to him further in… In the middle of the western platrform sat Sturla, and Snorri the priest further in from him… There were movable benches in front of the whole length of the two long-platforms. Church pews were placed in the middle of the floor, in two rows. Ketilbjǫrn, Gizurr's son, sat on a seat farther in, right near the cross-platform… And when people were arranged in their seats, the lights were drawn up… People were seated in six rows in the *stofa*.'(Flugumýrr, Ch. 170)

The *stofa* has inherited, like the *skáli*, the main features of the earlier main room. It is three-aisled, with platforms (*langbekkir*, pl.) along its long walls. Two additional rows each of movable benches (*forsæti*) and church pews (*kirkjustólar*, pl.) have been placed in the central aisle: there is no room here either for the central hearth that was present in the *stofa* of the *Íslendingasögur*. Despite this lack of hearth, however, the *stofa* appears to be more conspicuously lit than the *skáli*, and other instances in addition to the

[5] *Bekkr* is a difficult word to translate. While the usual translation is 'bench', this might not be the most appropriate word, since one of the principal meanings of the the modern 'bench' is as a long movable seat. Here, the structure to which *bekkr* refers, especially in the compound *langbekkr*, is analogous to the *set*, and so the 'fixed' *bekkr* has been likewise translated as 'platform'. *Forsæti* or 'fore-seats' indicate movable benches, closer to the meaning of a modern bench, placed in front of the platforms on this occasion. See also chapter 6, section 6.2.2.

passage above (Chs. 76, 141) indicate the presence of lighting fixtures which can be raised into the upper reaches of the *stofa*.

Most importantly however, the *stofa* has a *þverpallr* (sometimes called simply *pallr*), or cross-platform. This occupies the far gable wall, across the axis of the room, and appears to be built in the same way as the *set* or *bekkir* (pl.) along the long walls. The *stofa* has no throughway, and is closed off at its far end by the gable wall and *þverpallr*. Apart from the apparent difference in their principal functions, this difference in form appears to be the main distinction between the *stofa* and the *skáli*, which lacks the *þverpallr*.

In addition to this public *stofa*, sometimes called the *almannastofa* or 'common' *stofa*, there appears a *litlastofa*, which is a clearly smaller, more private chamber, located even farther into the house than its larger counterpart. It shares all the features of the *stofa* but differs mainly in its usage, appearing to be the preferred location for more private conversation and other activities (Chs. 95, 96, 150, 170). It is interesting to note, however, that despite this more 'private' nature, there is a *litlastofa* at Flugumýrr which appears to have a door leading directly to the outside, although it is not one of the main doors of the house (Ch. 172). This multiplication of *stofur* (pl.) seems to indicate a certain increasing flexibility of the meaning for the word, and indeed, one occurrence seems to indicate that a *stofa* can also be any unspecified room within a house:

> *Kolbeinn lét biskup fara heim til Hóla. Ok er hann þá tekinn í varðhald með því móti, at hann var í einni stofu ok klerkarnir í hjá honum.*
> 'Kolbeinn had the bishop go home to Hólar. And then he was taken into custody, with the condition that he be in one room (*stofa*) and [his] clerics near him.' (Hólar, Ch. 76)

The *skáli* and *stofa* are clearly separate rooms in the house, coexisting in nearly every described house. However, their functions as described above

are not exclusive, and sleeping does occur in the *stofa.* One salient example of this is on the farm of Sauðafell, where a certain Solveig has just risen from childbed and has moved her sleeping quarters to the *stofa*, with some other women, while the newborn has remained with a nurse in the *skáli* (Ch. 71). Both the *skáli* and the *stofa* can be highly decorated, with tapestries and weapons and shields suspended from the walls, with the level of decoration appearing as a mark of prestige (Chs. 71, 171, 174, 176, 188).

Attempts have been made to understand the internal arrangement of the houses in *Íslendinga saga*, reading the layout of rooms as both longhouses more akin to Viking Age models, or as passage-houses of a more medieval type (see **Figure 3.3**). The multiplicity of rooms and passages described in *Íslendinga saga* presents a conspicuously different housing model than that of the *Íslendingasögur.* The accretion of rooms into the arrangement of the main dwelling house, as seen in the late Viking Age and medieval houses at Stöng, Gröf and Þórarinsstaðir (see **Figures 2.7, 2.8** and **2.14**), is evident in the houses of *Íslendinga saga.* These same archaeological examples also clearly demonstrate that two main rooms are present (see also Weinmann 1994: 313). The material distinction between the more accessible *skáli* with its throughway, and the inner *stofa,* with its *þverpallr* against the gable wall, was enshrined in archaeological usage by Gísli Gestsson's work on Gröf (1959). With their platforms along the walls (*set* or *bekkir*, pl.) and the floor space between them, the *skáli* and *stofa* still retain a three-aisled arrangement, though this is no longer the case for the house's construction overall. Also, the lack of a central hearth hints at the increasing specialisation of spaces and rooms in the house: only one dedicated room, the *eldhús*, contains a fire and is used as a

kitchen (see section 3.3.2). Without a hearth, the space within the *skáli* and *stofa* has also been opened up, as can be seen in the development of the Norwegian-style medieval *stofa*, indicating a new understanding of the use of domestic space. However, the huge size of the *stofa* at Flugumýrr, where the wedding takes place (Ch. 170) should not be considered uncritically as an objective account of a real room; while it may illustrate mentalities surrounding the use of such space, one must not neglect the impact of literary embellishment to suit the narrative in describing a particularly opulent farm (see below in this chapter's conclusion).

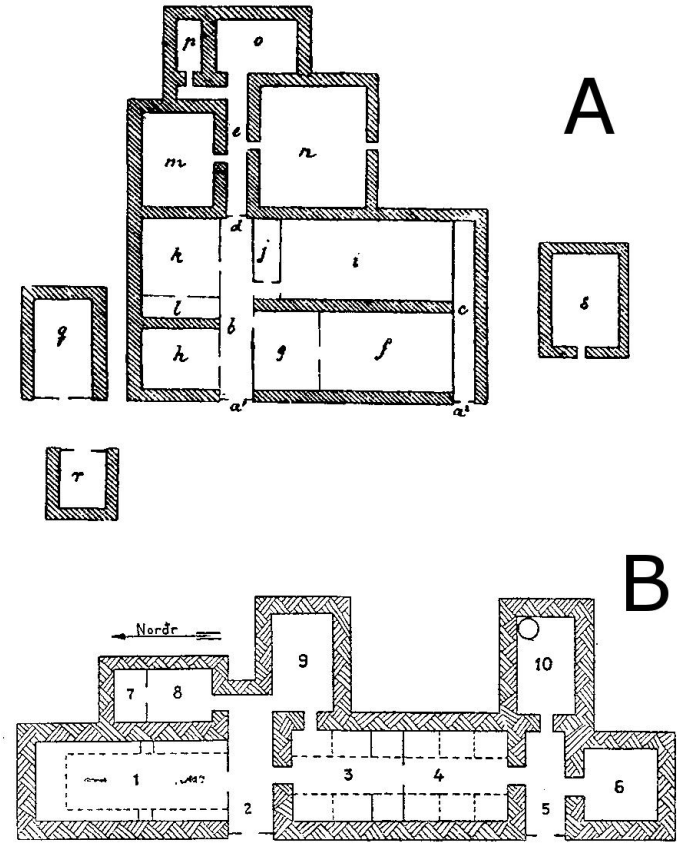

Figure 3.3: Two interpretations of the layout of the farm at Flugumýrr in the year 1253, as inspired by its description in *Íslendinga saga*. **A** is Valtýr Guðmundsson's interpretation of the farm as a fully developed medieval passage-house (from Guðmundsson 1889, fig. 10). **B** is from the 1946 edition of *Íslendinga saga* in *Sturlunga saga*, and interprets the farm as a row-house type from the late Viking Age in transition to the early medieval period (from Jóhannesson, Finnbogason and Eldjárn, 1946: 486).

3.3.2 Other Rooms (Lodging, Storage, Hygiene and Maintenance)

A multiplicity of other rooms also occupies the space within the house. Lodging does not only occur within the *skáli* and *stofa*, and we see at Flugumýrr the presence of a *gestahús* (guest-house), incorporated into the body of the main dwelling house, which was occupied at the time of the house's destruction. No details as to the construction of the *gestahús* are given, however (Ch. 173). Equally unspecified is the *biskupsbúr* ('bishop's quarters') on the episcopal farm of Hólar, where *búr* here simply designates a differentiated space or apartment within a house, as opposed to its usual usage as an ancillary building or storage space (Ch. 42).

The *eldhús*, or 'fire-house', which had been synonymous with the *skáli* and *stofa* as the multi-function main room in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Gísla saga* (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 5, *Gísla saga* Chs. 9, 23), is now a kitchen, though *Íslendinga saga* shows no food being prepared there. It is the only room in the house to possess a fire, as befits its name. Gone is the *langeldr* or 'long-fire' of the *Íslendingasögur*. In its place, an unspecified *arinn* or *eldstó* (fireplace) supplies the main source of heat and light in the house (Ch. 67).

Storage spaces are also mentioned. The farm of Flugumýrr has a *búr*, simply a generic storage space (not to be confused with the type of inhabited space represented by the *biskupsbúr* at Hólar), and likewise a *klefi*, or closet, wherein more unfortunates met their end in the house-fire (Ch. 173). This same farm also famously features a very well-described *skyrbúr*, or dairy (from *skyr*, a kind of curdled milk product), where the householder Gizurr hides from his attackers. This is one of the richer passages describing the material

arrangement of space, and people's movements within it, and needs to be considered in its entirety:

> *Nú er at segja frá Gizuri Þorvaldssyni, at hann kom at skyrbúri... Gizurr Þorvaldsson gekk í búrit. Hann sá, hver skyrker stóð á stokkum í búrinu….Gizurr sá, at þat var ker í jǫrðu hjá lítit, ok var í sýra, en skyrkerit stóð þar yfir ofan ok hulði mjǫk sýrukerit, þat er í jǫrðunni var. Þar var rúm þat, er maðr mátti komast í kerit, ok fór Gizurr þar í kerit, þat er í jǫrðunni var, ok settist niðr í sýruna í línklæðum einum, ok tók honum sýran í geirvǫrtur... Nú kómu þeir í búrit með ljósi ok leituðu allt. Þeir kómu at kerinu, er Gizurr sat í kerinu, ok lǫgðu í kerit þrír menn með spjótum eða fjórir... Svá herfir Gizurr sagt sjálfr, áðr þeir kæmi í búrit, at hann skalf af kulda, svá at svaglaði í kerinu, en er þeir kómu í búrit, þá skalf hann ekki. Tvisvar leituðu þeir um búrit, ok fór svá í hvárt tveggja sinn. Eftir þat gengu þeir í brott út ok bjuggust í braut... Gizurr hafði þá gengit til kirkju sem Ǫrn ætlaði, því at svá var honum kalt orðit, at hann þolði eigi lengr þar at vera.*
> 'It is now time to speak of Gizurr Þorvaldsson. He came to the *skyr*-storage… Gizurr Þorvaldsson went into the storage room. He saw where a cask of *skyr* stood on some wooden supports in the storage room…Gizurr saw that there was a cask sunk into the ground close by, and that there was sour whey in it. The cask of sour whey, sunk into the ground, was much hidden by the *skyr*-cask, which stood over it. There was enough room for a man to fit into the cask of sour whey, and Gizurr went into it and sat inside in it, wearing only his linen undergarments, and the sour whey came up to his nipples… Now they [Gizurr's pursuers] came into the storage room with a light and searched everything. They came to the cask in which Gizurr was sitting, and three or four men thrust into it with spears… So Gizurr said himself, that before they came into the storage room, he was shaking from the cold, so that the sour whey rippled, but that as soon as they came into the storage room he did not shake. They searched the storage room twice, and things happened this way both times. After that they left and prepared to leave [the farm]… Gizurr had gone to the church as Ǫrn had suspected he would do, because he had become so cold that he dared not stay there [in the sour whey] any longer.' (Ch. 174)

We can see from this passage that the room contains huge vats for dairy products, including one, containing sour whey, which is partially sunk into the ground. It is a room that is kept cold, which is appropriate for the storage of dairy products, and therefore has no lights or openings (the attackers need to bring their own fire to see by). The presence of such large vats for dairy storage corresponds to circular depressions found in the ancillary spaces of the

houses at Stöng and Þórarinsstaðir (Eldjárn 1949: 24-26, Roussell 1943b: 87-90; Weinmann 1994:315, and see **Figures 2.7** and **2.14**).[6]

Another very function-specific storage space to appear is the *sǫðlabúr*, or saddle-room, at Skálaholt (Ch. 156). Yet another dedicated storage space, contained as a partitioned space within the *stofa* at Flugumýrr, is the *borðhús*, possibly a room or space in which the trestle-tables (*borð*), and by extension other utensils, plate and serving paraphernalia, might be kept. This also lends further support to the *stofa* being designated as the space where meals are taken (Ch. 173).

The presence of bath-houses (*baðstofur*, pl.) and latrines (*salerni*, *kamarr*, *náðhús*, the latter meaning, literally, 'relief- or rest-house') on farms is evident in the saga, but it is not easy to determine if these are always part of the house proper. As discussed in chapter 2 (section 2.2.2),[7] there is some confusion as to the precise physical nature and usage of the *baðstofa*. As Nanna Ólafsdóttir suggests, while this room was becoming associated with a social space throughout Sturlunga saga, the *baðstofa* is still used in the context of ablutions, though the precise nature of this bodily cleansing is never explained in detail (Ólafsdóttir 1974: 67-75, 81).

Latrines do appear to be contained within the main dwelling. During the aforementioned attack at the farm of Gillastaðir, for example, it is suggested that escape from the house, which has been set alight, can be achieved by using a wall of roof turves as cover. Since this wall is said to be situated next to the latrines, it is possible to interpret that the latrines are attached to the house, and situated near the point of egress that will allow for

[6] Buckland et al (1993) alternatively propose that these depressions contained receptacles for stale urine, used in the processing of wool (Buckland et al 1993: 517).
[7] See further discussion in chapter 6, section 6.2.1.

cover from the turf wall: *Skeggi sagði, at roftorfsveggr væri undir kamri, sá er ekki væri fyrir undan at ganga* ('Skeggi said that there was a wall of roof turves near the latrines, so that it would be no problem to escape from there.', Ch. 67).

At the farm of Þóroddsstaðir, news is brought to the house, for the attention of the visiting Bishop Guðmundr, that an attack has been committed against a certain Knútr, who has just arrived on the farm grounds. The Bishop, however, is sitting in the latrines at the time, and therefore unable to give his immediate attention to the matter. Instead he sends one of his clerics to attend. This scenario would suggest that the latrines are part of the house proper:

> *Nú er hlaupit inn ok sagt biskupi, at unnit var á Knúti nýkomnum. Biskup sat í kamri ok sendi út Ketil prest.*
> 'Now [people] ran in and told the bishop that an attack had been made on Knútr who was newly arrived. The bishop was sitting in the latrines, and sent out Ketil the priest.' (Ch. 76)

Finally, during an attack on the farm of Miklabær, the inhabitants who have escaped to the church are being held captive there, and a group asks to be allowed to relieve themselves. This is granted, and they must travel from the church, through the house and specifically through the *skáli* before reaching the latrines. This strongly suggests that the latrines are indeed within the house:

> *Þá bað Kolbeinn, at þeir skyldi leyfa, at þeir gengi til náðhúss, ok var því játat. Þá var rǫkkvit, er þeir gengu út ór kirkjunni. Þeir gengu um skálann…En er þeir hǫfðu setit í kamri sem þeir vildu, þá gengu þeir út.*
> 'Then Kolbeinn asked that they be allowed to go to the latrines, and this was agreed to. Night had fallen when they went out of the church. They went along the main room… And when they had sat in the latrines as they wanted, then they went out.' (Ch. 138)

The circumstances described in the episode at the farm of Eyrr, where the household is humiliated and tortured by being confined in a room in the house

and prevented from accessing the latrines, still do not preclude the possibility that the latrines are within the house itself (Ch. 7).[8]

With regards to bath-houses, the farm of Hallgillsstaðir mentions one which is unambiguously attached to the house proper. During an attack on the house, one attacker climbs on top of the roof during the battle and is specifically stated to be over the *baðstofa* (Ch. 176). Whatever type of bathing or ablutions took place within these bath-houses, they are not to be confused with hot springs, which are always designated by their proper name of *laugar* (pl.; *laug* sg.). Snorri Sturluson's famous hot spring at his farm of Reykjaholt, now called the Snorralaug, indeed makes an appearance (Chs. 64, 65, 110)

The auxiliary spaces in the houses of *Íslendinga saga* are most remarkable, however, by the presence of cellars and lofts. Cellars occur both at Flugumýrr and at Reykjaholt. In the former (Ch. 95), a certain Kolbeinn is stationed in a cellar directly beneath the *litlastofa* in order to overhear a secret conversation. This would also indicate that the floor of the *litlastofa* is thin enough to hear through, and can only have been built of boards and not stone or earth. The cellar at Reykjaholt is the memorable location of Snorri Sturluson's murder:

> *Réðu þeir þat, at Snorri gekk í kjallarann, er var undir loftinu þar í húsunum. Þeir Gizurr fóru at leita Snorra um húsin… Eftir þat urðu þeir varir við, hvar Snorri var. Ok gengu þeir í kjallarann… Símon knútr bað Árna hǫggva hann. "Eigi skal hǫggva," sagði Snorri. "Hǫgg þú," sagði Símon. "Eigi skal hǫggva," sagði Snorri. Eftir þat veitti Árni honum banasár, ok báðir þeir Þorsteinn unnu á honum.*
> 'They decided that Snorri would go into the cellar, which was under the loft there in the house. Gizurr and his men went to search for Snorri in the house… After that, they became aware of where Snorri was, and they went into the cellar. Símon knútr [knot] asked Árni to strike

[8] This is akin to the aforementioned episode in *Laxdœla saga*, Ch. 47, where the household is similarly prevented from accessing the latrines for several days. In the case of the *Laxdœla saga* episode however, the latrines are unambiguously located in a separate building outside the house proper. See chapter 1, section 1.2, page 37, note 7.

> Snorri. “You shall not strike,” said Snorri. “Strike, you,” said Símon. “You shall not strike,” said Snorri. After that Árni gave Snorri his death wound, and both he and Þorsteinn injured him.’ (Ch. 151, see also Ch. 153)

Interestingly, Reykjaholt is also said to have a loft directly over the location of this cellar (one presumes the loft is located over an intermediate ground-level space above the cellar). Flugumýrr also indicates the presence of a loft, whose fatal collapse during the house fire leads to the destruction of most of the house. This loft is said to extend over only part of the *skáli*, and indeed other passages reveal that the *skáli* could be open to the ridge of the roof above the level of the cross-beam (*þvertré*), and this space used for storage (Ch. 173).

The means of vertical passage between the upper and lower spaces of the house, whether by stair or ladder, are not described. Spaces at ground-level though are connected by passages (*forskáli*), and it is shown as a sign of wealth and prestige to have these passages panelled in wood (Ch. 174). Separate rooms are also closed off and isolated by doors.

With regards to archaeology, the internal arrangement of the houses in *Íslendinga saga* broadly corresponds with the model of the medieval (established by the twelfth century) row-house such as at Gröf, where the accretion of additional, function-specific spaces within the house proper, connected by passages, is the norm (Ágústsson 1979: 63; Albrethsen 1982: 269-278; Andreasen 1981: 179-184; Høgsberg 2009: 87-94; Milek 2006: 46; Stoklund 1982b: 24-27; Vésteinsson 2007: 157). Few traces remain of Viking Age structures, such as the internal divisions of the *stofa* and *skáli*, though even these display an opening of internal space characteristic of medieval changes in housing culture. The presence of lofts is impossible to confirm in Iceland, but constructions in Norway and elsewhere in the north Atlantic such

as the Faroe islands, following the *stofa* model, indicate that building up over the unheated portions of the house was definitely entering into housing culture. Much attention is given to the high-status farmstead of Reykholt, and it has been suggested that Snorri Sturluson, who had his main residence there, had been highly influenced by the long periods he spent in Norway and imported Norwegian fashions and building customs to create structures whose character and construction were unique in Iceland (Sveinbjarnardóttir 2012: 84-87, 95-96; see also Sigurðardóttir 1966: 42-43, 53, Þorláksson 1979: 57-62l and Høegsberg 2009: 87, 94, 98). It is possible then that the high-status sites mentioned in *Íslendinga saga* are following a fashion among élites for the emulation of Norwegian construction.

3.4 Grounds and Outbuildings

3.4.1 Agricultural and Ancillary Spaces and Buildings

Íslendinga saga allows for more narrative action to take place away from farms in the wilderness and in liminal spaces. The landscapes described are on a grand, natural scale, depicting topography, mountains, passes, rivers and the like: the uninhabited wilds. Relatively little action actually takes place on the grounds of the farm, away from the house, but still within its immediate environs. Contrary to the *Íslendingasögur*, there are no scenes of agricultural exploitation or animal husbandry, and these processes are only alluded to in the context of other narrative events which require passage through the farm grounds (usually travel between farms for the purposes of attack, diplomacy or celebration). *Sturlunga saga* as a whole is concerned with the activities and

machinations of the social élite, which explains this focus away from the mundane realities of agricultural production.

The homefield, *tún* or *vǫllr*, is mentioned and encloses the house and an immediately adjacent area used for hay production. The homefield will usually be surrounded by some kind of enclosure or boundary wall, *garðr*, as was the case for the farms of the Viking Age (Lucas 2009: 155; Milek 2006:8-9). In one occurrence at the farm of Miklabær, we are told that the house is not contained by the homefield, but that its boundary wall is a short distance from the house: *[Sturla] kom suðr um húsit á milli ok garðsins* ('[Sturla] came south between the house and the enclosed field.' Ch. 138). Another example, at the farm of Hvammr, also shows that there might be other boundary walls built within the landscape of inhabited districts beyond the limit of the individual boundary wall of a farm's homefield: *Þeir sáu eigi fyrr en þeir Sturla riðu í Hvammdalsgerði* ('They saw nothing before Sturla and his men rode into the enclosure of Hvammdalr [valley].' Ch. 61).

In the few instances when agricultural buildings and spaces are mentioned, it is not in the context of their actual agricultural usage. Rather, they usually appear in scenes of battle or when people are traversing them towards other destinations. Prominent among these are the stack-yards, *stakkgarðar* (pl.), special enclosures for the stacking of hay, which appear in a battle at the farm of Eyðihús (Ch. 55). Another example at Sauðafell is called a *hornagarðr*, and specifies a square ('cornered') enclosure (Ch. 84). Other than these, there are two sheep-houses (*sauðahús*, Chs. 55, 138), two byres (*fjós*, *nautahlaða*, Chs. 33, 141), a milking-pen (*stǫðull*, Ch. 156) and a livestock pen (*trǫð*, found in the compounds *eiðtrǫð* ('ruined livestock pen') and *traðagarðr*

(‘livestock pen enclosure or wall’, Ch. 134), which appear in a dream at the farm of Keldur. These represent the full extent of agricultural constructions in *Íslendinga saga*. Another building connected with resource-collection, though not strictly agricultural, is the boat-house (*naust*), of which there is a single example (Ch. 55).

As was noted previously, most ancillary spaces in *Íslendinga saga* have become part of the house itself, connected to the living spaces by passageways rather than being located in separate outbuildings. Examples of multi-purpose (or unspecified-purpose) outbuildings are limited to a *skemma* at the farm of Mǫðruvellir (Ch. 176),[9] an *útibúr* used to store meal at the farm of Borg (Ch. 15) and another at the farm of Hafsteinsstaðir (Ch. 188), and a *búr* at Flugumýrr, which was used to store the shields of the household’s male inhabitants and guests (Ch. 171). Other *búr* are located as storage spaces inside the house proper. Also, during the attack on Hvammr, we are told that Sturla and his men removed a ridge-pole (*áss*) from an outbuilding (*hlaða*, the word used is the compound *hlǫðuáss*) to use as a battering ram against a fortified enclosure. It is intriguing that this outbuilding is located *outside* the fortification. It is uncertain if this fortified enclosure is itself within, without or identical to the boundary wall of the farm’s homefield (Ch. 61). Fortifications will be discussed further in section 3.4.3.

It is interesting to note two occurrences of separate lofts (*lopt*), indicating not the upper sections of the house proper as was seen previously, but elevated, multi-storey outbuildings. One is at this same farm of Hvammr,

[9] Two other *skemmur* (pl.), described further in this section, also appear as more refined domestic buildings and not as generic outbuildings.

located near the fortified boundary wall whose gate is demolished by the attackers. Here, it almost appears to act as a (rather ineffective) watch-tower:

> *Páll vakti ok annarr maðr ok sátu á virkisvegg fyrir loftsdurum. Þeir sáu eigi fyrr en þeir Sturla riðu í Hvammdalsgerði. Vǫktu þeir menn upp ok ráku aftr hurðir. Þeir Sturla kǫlluðu at loftinu… En er þeir Sturla fengu engi svǫr, tóku þeir einn hlǫðuás ok báru at durum ok brutu upp hurðina.*
> 'Páll and another man were on watch, and they sat on the fortification wall in front of the loft door. They saw nothing before Sturla and his men rode into the enclosure of Hvammdalr [valley]. They woke the men up and pulled back the doors. Sturla and his men called to the loft... But when Sturla and his men got no answer, they took a beam from an outbuilding and bore it against the gates and broke up the doors.' (Ch. 61)

The second loft is located at the bishop's palace at Kristkirkja near Bergen, in Norway and is used as lodging for guests (Ch. 79). This is the only occurrence in *Íslendinga saga* of domestic buildings in Norway, and the presence of a loft on the grounds of a high-status establishment in thirteenth century Norway is hardly surprising. Indeed, as was described in chapter 2 section 2.1.3, the presence of multi-storey outbuildings can even be seen as a diagnostic feature of the medieval evolution of Norwegian rural housing culture (Gjærder 1982: 47-60; Stoklund 2003: 21-25). Lodging can also occur in outbuildings that are less precisely defined, such as an *útihús* at the farm of Gillastaðir (Ch. 66). Another separate building used for lodging, referred to as the *litla hús* (little house), is part of the farmstead at Reykjaholt (Chs. 115, 151). It is not sufficiently described to determine if it too is a loft or a single-storey building, but it appears to have domestic, rather than ancillary or storage functions. Another *skemma* also appears at Reykjaholt, though this one differs from the usual storage function of its kind by being specifically designated as a lodging for Snorri Sturluson himself (Ch. 151). Indeed, the multiplicity and complexity of domestic spaces appears to be a feature of Reykjaholt, and we

are even told of the construction of a second *stofa* on the farmstead (Ch. 90). Whether this is a 'regular' *stofa* (*almannastofa* or *storastofa*) or a *litlastofa* is not mentioned.

Another *skemma* at the farm of Garðr can be interpreted as a more opulent outbuilding. It is singled out as having been well-built, and is transported to another location after an attack on Garðr:

> *Tekin var ok ór Gǫrðum skemma góð ok færð út í Geirshólm.*
> 'A good *skemma* was taken out of the farmstead of Garðr and carried out to Geirshólm.' (Ch. 124)

This suggests that the *skemma* was built of timber and could be dismantled and transported, something which could not have been done with a turf construction (there would furthermore be no use hauling this ubiquitous Icelandic material over any great distance). It is possible that what was transported was an interior structure that was surrounded by a turf and earth shell, however with no further indications from the saga this can only remain speculation.

While these outbuildings might be located at any distance from the house within the boundary of the farm grounds, they are shown in some instances to be so close together that the space between them forms only a narrow passage (*sund*) which can itself be closed off with a door (*sunddyrr*), as at Sauðafell (Ch. 71, see also Eyr, Ch. 94).

The presence of lofts, while expected in Norway, is unusual in Iceland and may result from the ostentatious imitation of Norwegian housing culture (among other elements of Norwegian fashion) in aristocratic farms in Iceland (Sigurðardóttir 1966: 42-43, 53; Sveinbjarnardóttir 2012: 84-87, 95-96; Þorláksson 1979: 57-62). However, there is a possibility that entire buildings

themselves may have been exported and assembled far from their Norwegian places of origin. The aforementioned transportation of an entire wood-built outbuilding from Garðr to Geirshólm in Iceland (Ch. 124) fits within the context of the archaeologically-attested spread of Norwegian stave-construction in the medieval period, which led not only to the presence of recognisably Norwegian wooden buildings throughout the North Atlantic, but also to the ubiquity of stave construction in the wooden interiors of medieval Icelandic buildings (Rafnsson 1979: 81-82; see also Ágústsson 1978: 135-149; Christie 2002: 127; Crawford and Smith 1999: 58-61, 216-229; Stoklund 1999: 82, 2002: 142).

3.4.2 The Church

By far the most important building on the farmstead in *Íslendinga saga*, other than the house, is the church. While churches do appear on farms in the *Íslendingasögur*, and might have some importance to the narrative, they are never described in any detail and are not the setting for any narrative episodes. Most of the high-status farms in *Íslendinga saga* have their own churches, and Iceland's episcopal centres themselves, Hólar and Skálaholt, figure prominently in the saga. In this setting, churches have acquired a considerable importance as settings for narrative, in a way that is completely incomparable to the *Íslendingasögur* studied. Following the general trend of the saga, they receive the most attention during scenes of attack on farms. Here, they act mostly as a place of sanctuary for both people and goods. During battle sequences, escape from the house and transit to the church occurs frequently.

In most instances, the inviolate sanctuary of the church provides the protection that is expected:

> *Þeir báru eld at húsum. En þá var fylgt konum ok bǫrnum til kirkju...*
> 'They set fire to the house. And then the women and children were led to the church…' (Eyrr in Arnarfjǫrðr, Ch. 94)

> *Er nú þat ráðs tekit, at menn bera í kirkju gripi sína ok allt þat, er laust var.*
> 'It was now decided that people were to carry their valuable belongings to the church, and all movable property.' (Tunga, Ch. 154)

The battle at Flugumýrr (Chs. 172-174) is replete with additional references to the church as a place of sanctuary. In some cases, the unfortunate occupants of the house are not granted the quarter they seek, and are slaughtered before they reach the church:

> *Halldórr Ǫgmundarson gekk út suðrdyrr af búrinu, ok var þar fyrir Eyjólfr Þorsteinsson ok gaf honum grið. Ok er hann kom mjǫk at kirkjunni, var þar fyrir sá maðr, er Þorgils smiðr hét, er síðan var veginn á Mǫðruvǫllum. Hann tók til hans ok kvað honum eigi annt í kirkjuna, en annarr hjó til hans með sverði við forkirkjuna, ok kom framan á hálsinn inum hægra megin, ok hraut blóðit allt á kirkjuna.*
> 'Halldórr Ǫgmundarson went out by the southern door from the storage space, and Eyjólfr Þorsteinsson was there and gave him quarter. And when [Halldór] had almost come to the church, there was a man before him, called Þorgils the smith, who was later killed at Mǫðruvellir. [Þorgils] seized [Halldór] and told him not to be eager to reach the church, and another man struck at him with a sword near the church porch, and [the blow] struck his neck on the right side, and the blood spattered all over the church.' (Flugumýrr, Ch. 173)

In still other cases, the assailants threaten to disregard the church's immunity and attack the building and its refugees, such as the threatened church-burning at Miklabær (Ch. 138). This same passage at Miklabær shows that the church might itself be used as a defensive structure, with men at arms stationed within it, or fighting taking place on its roof, just as with the house: *Þeir váru á kirkju uppi…* ('They were up on the church…', Ch. 138).

The same correlation between narrative importance and material description that applies to houses is also visible in the representation of the church as a structure, and its many appearances can help us draw a portrait of its structure: it has a narthex[10] (*forkirkja*, Chs. 39, 119, 134), and nave (*aðalkirkja*, Ch. 39), aisles (*stúkur*, pl., *stúka* sg. Ch. 119) and a choir or chancel (*sǫnghús* Chs. 39, 76) where, as was seen previously at the farm of Saurbær, the rare luxury of a glass window (*glergluggr*) might be found (Ch. 33). The nave and narthex (*aðalkirkja* and *forkirkja*) can be separated by a door, and their joining is a conspicuous architectural feature designated by the word *húsamót* (Ch. 39), literally the 'meeting of houses'. The church has bells, housed in a designated 'bell-house' (*klukknahús*, Ch. 76), whose sound was apparently pleasing and prompted some visitors to play upon them: *Kolbeinn var í klukknahúsi ok lék sér at klukkum…* ('Kolbeinn was in the bell-house playing on the bells…', Hólar, Ch. 76). The 'bell-house' is perhaps located in the steeple (*stǫpull*) which can, as in the case of the church at Skálaholt, be a sufficiently substantial construction to act as temporary lodgings (Ch. 155). On two occasions, it is demonstrated that the church has columns (*stoð*) on the outside, suggesting that the structure might resemble a Norwegian stave church more than an Icelandic turf construction (much attention is given, moreover, to the spatial description of the church as a physical structure):

> *… Stóð hann [Jón Birnuson] fyrir framan kirkju…Hann verr sik ok hopar undan norðr um kirkjuna ok svá austr um ok síðan suðr um sǫnghúsit ok fell þar í hjá stoðinni ok vildi upp standa.*
> '…[Jón Birni's son] stood in front of the church… He defended himself and escaped north around the church, and thus eastward and then southward around the choir, and fell there next to the pillar, and wanted to stand up.' (Hólar, Ch. 76)

[10] Narthex: the vestibule or entrance chamber of a church, before entering the nave.

And again, at Loftr's farm, where a defensive structure is built using the church's outer pillars as supports:

> *Þeir Bjǫrn hǫfðu búizt um fyrir sunnan kirkju, hǫfðu lagt stórviðu frá stoðum þeim, er váru við húsamótin forkirkjunnar ok aðalkirkjunnar, ok aðra þar, er mættust sǫnghúsit ok kirkja, ok suðr á kirkjugarðinn ok skipuðu sér þar á milli, ok horfðu sumir austr, en sumir vestr.*
> 'Bjǫrn and his men had prepared themselves to the south of the church, and laid large timbers from those pillars which were next to the joining of the narthex and nave, and others where the choir meets the [main part of the] church, and [others] south at the church-yard. They arranged themselves there between [the timbers], and some turned to the east, and some to the west.' (Ch. 39)

Indeed, Icelandic churches of the medieval period were among the most frequent structures to be built using Norwegian stave construction (Rafnsson 1979: 81-82; see also Ágústsson 1978: 135-149; Stoklund 1999: 82, 86).

Churches appear to have been long-established on the farms and despite the high status of the locations in *Íslendinga saga*, some church structures appear to have fallen into disrepair because of their great age. One folkloristic retelling of a miracle occurring at the funeral of Bishop Guðmundr at Hólar illustrates this in a rather entertaining way:

> *Þá er lík herra Guðmundar biskups var til kirkju borit til graftar, báðu formenn kirkjunnar hringja sem flestum klukkum. Var þá hringt tvennum, ok skalf mjǫk kirkjan, er hon var gǫmul. Þá bað Jón prestr hringja ǫðrum tvennum, ok var svá gert. Þá fundu þeir mun á, at kirkjan var þá fastari en áðr. Þá bað hann hringja ǫllum klukkum, ok svá var gert. Ok hafa svá þeir menn sagt, at þar váru við, at þá skalf kirkjan ekki, ok þótti þat minniligr hlutr.*
> 'When the body of lord bishop Guðmundr was carried to the church for burial, the leaders of the church bade ring as many bells as possible. Two bells were then rung, and the church shook greatly, because it was old. Then Jón the priest bade ring two more, and this was done. Then they found a difference, that the church was sturdier than before. Then he bade ring all the bells, and this was done. And people who were there have thus said that the church did not shake, and this was considered a memorable thing.' (Ch. 119)

One last feature of the church's construction, and arguably the most fascinating from an architectural point of view, is the covered passage that

connected it to the house on high-status farms. Called a *skot* (Ch. 33) and more often a *forskáli*, its name does not really describe its physical structure, or even its function, in an intuitive manner. As seen previously, *forskáli* also has the meaning of an antechamber, which corresponds logically to the construction of the word itself, which leads one to expect an entrance passage or chamber, an intermediate space (*for*-) before entering a *skáli*. Yet its use as a passage to the church is unambiguous (Chs. 124, 156). To connect the church and the house, it must have been a passage, or corridor, of some length. Its extremities are closed by lockable doors, and it appears to be roofed with turf, like the other structures on the farmstead: *Þeir Gizurr hǫfðu borit vatn á forskálann, ok var hált á þekjunni* ('Gizurr and his men had poured water on the covered passageway, and it was slippery on the roof.' Skálaholt, Ch. 156).

Fortunately, as discussed in chapter 2 (section 2.2.1), the archaeological remains of several *forskálar* (pl.) from medieval Icelandic farms help to determine its structural properties: it would have been a semi-subterranean construction with a roof visible above the surface (somewhat like a sunken-feature building in this respect). Indeed, while a semi-subterranean construction may have had certain technical advantages such as economy of materials, the presence of a covered passage to the church was a sign of prosperity and prestige, and the visible roof would have helped to highlight its presence (Hjaltalín 2010: 154-155, 164-167, 182). *Forskáli* is also the word used to describe the archeologically-attested passage that leads from the house to the hot spring at Reykjaholt (Ch. 110), which would suggest that the word indicates any such passage, or indeed any corridor, either between rooms inside the house, or connecting the house to external structures of any nature,

and not exclusively the church (see Hjaltalín 2010: 164-167 and Sveinbjarnardóttir 2012: 69-73).

3.4.3 Fortifications

Another type of structure located on the farm grounds whose details of construction are difficult to describe are fortifications, conspicuously numerous in *Íslendinga saga.* As shown in Table 3.1, fortifications are involved in six battle scenes, and are also described on five occasions around farms when no conflict is taking place (Chs. 33, 56, 74, 115, 183). Known as *virki* (fortification), *virkisveggr* (fortification wall) or *kastali* (castle, stronghold), the fortifications are nevertheless not castles or specialised fortified buildings, but more likely defensive walls built around the house (as *virkisveggr* would suggest). At Reykjaholt, watchmen are said to be stationed on the fortification, suggesting a kind of palisade or rampart: *Var þar skipat mǫnnum í virki um allan bœinn* ('Men were stationed on the fortifications around the entire farm.' Ch. 110). Again at Reykjaholt (Ch. 153), the fortifications are said to be scaled with ladders. In this same passage, we are told that a defender exiting the house is driven back inside by the spear thrust by an attacker on the fortification. The walls are thus relatively close to the house:

> *...kómu þeir jafnsnemma at uppgǫngunni í virkit Ingjaldr Geirmundarson ok Klængs menn þeir, er út ætluðu. Ok lagði Ingjaldr spjóti til þess, er fyrstr gekk, ok hrǫkk sá inn í húsin…*
> '...At the same moment, Ingjaldr Geirmundr's son climbed up onto the fortification wall, and those of Klængr's men who intended to go out [came out of the house]. And Ingjaldr thrust his spear at that man who first went [out], and he fell back into the house...' (Ch. 153)

One curious scene at the farm of Víðimýrr might provide some details of the construction of these defensive works:

> *Á Víðimýri var kastali sá, er Snorri Sturluson lét gera… Þeir Kolbeinn ok Sturla hǫfðu þat skemmtan at renna skeið at kastalavegginum ok vita, hverr lengst gæti runnit í vegginn. En er Sturla rann í vegginn, gengu í sundr sinarnar aftan í fætinum...*
> 'At Víðimýrr was that fortification which Snorri Sturluson had had built… Kolbeinn and Sturla had a game in which they ran a race at the fortification's wall to see who could run farthest into [up] the wall. And when Sturla ran into [up] the wall, the sinews in the back of his leg ruptured…' (Ch. 74)

This curious game appears to show the two men running up a tall, steep slope, such as that of an earthwork, which arguably suits the term 'wall' (*veggr*) and agrees with the image of an earthen rampart. At the farm of Grund, during an attack, we are told that:

> *Guttormr hljóp at virkinu ok langt upp í vegginn, svá at ǫxin náði á virkit, ok las sik svá upp.*
> 'Guttormr leapt at the fortification and high up the wall, so that his axe caught in the fortification, and so he hauled himself up.' (Ch. 29)

Unless the axe is catching the edge of the wall, this passage suggests that the axe blade has bitten into a substance that allows it to hold fast. This could suggest the presence of a wooden structure, either a stockade, or more likely a palisade surmounting an earthwork.

Fortifications also occurred in the sampled *Íslendingasögur*, specifically in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Two farms are fortified, Þaralátrsfjǫrðr and Eyri, and both are used by a band of marauders led by a certain Óspakr. Few details of construction are given, but the fortifications at the farm of Eyri are said to be of superior quality:

> *Þetta sumar áðr hafði Óspakr látit gera virki á bœ sínum á Eyri; þat var øruggt vígi, ef menn væri til varnar.*
> 'Previously that summer, Óspakr had had a fortification built at his farm at Eyri. That was a secure stronghold, if there were men to defend it.' (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 57)

This fortified enclosure is also large enough to accommodate two boats (presumably in addition to the farm buildings), apparently used as cisterns:

> *...fóru [þeir] þá heim á Eyri með hlaðin bæði skipin ok færðu fǫng þessi í virkit; þeir færðu ok skipin í virkit ok fylldu þau bæði vatns ok læstu síðan virkit – þat var bezta vígi, – ok sátu þar síðan um vetrinn.*
> '[Óspakr and his men] went home then to Eyri with the cargo from both ships and carried these goods into the fortification. They also took the ships into the fortification and filled them both up with water, then they shut the fortification securely (that was the best stronghold) and stayed there afterwards over the winter.' (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 60)

The descriptions of the fortification wall are similar to those in *Íslendinga saga*, and evoke an earthwork surmounted by a wooden palisade. There is even a similar description of an attacker climbing over the fortification using an axe, although in the case of Eyri in *Eyrbyggja saga*, this is done by hooking the blade of the axe over wall as opposed to imbedding it within:

> *Þeir Óspakr hǫfðu mest grjót til varnar... Þá gerði Þrándr stígandi skeið at vegginum ok hljóp svá langt í upp, at hann fekk krækt øxi sinni á virkit, en síðan las hann sik upp eptir øxnarskaptinu, þar til at hann kom upp á virkit.*
> 'Óspakr and his men had many stones for the defence... Then Þrándr stígandi [Strider] made a run at the wall and jumped so high up that he hooked his axe onto the fortification, and then he hauled himself up along the axe-shaft until he came up onto the fortification.' (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 62)

The second fortification (*virki*) in *Eyrbyggja saga* is mentioned at the farm of Þaralátrsfjǫrðr (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 59), but no details are given as to its physical construction. The overall similarity in the descriptions of fortifications in the *Íslendingasögur* and the *samtíðarsögur* suggests that such scenes of attack of fortified farms may have been literary convention, or else that both saga genres refer to the same type of structure.

Reliable studies or evidence of fortified medieval or Viking Age farms in Iceland are nearly nonexistent, and despite the ubiquity of boundary walls surrounding the farmstead and homefield, no Viking Age farm has been archaeologically attested as being fortified with the type of earthworks and palisade described in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Íslendinga saga* (Milek pers. comm. 2011).[11] Defensive earthworks of a similar description are however found elsewhere in the Viking world, particularly in Denmark with the Danevirke and Trelleborg-type circular fortresses (Raffield 2010: 74-102). In Iceland and the North Atlantic, in addition to the boundary walls of farmsteads, extensive networks of earthworks are found in the heathland, probably used for the management of summer pasturage. While studies on these earthworks strongly suggest that they were not used as defensive structures but strictly for pastoral purposes, it is evident that the practice of building earthworks was common and widespread in the North Atlantic (Aldred et al 2007: 11-22; Einarsson 2002: 61-65, 69; Stylegar 2004: 48-58). Could the fortifications in the sagas be modified versions of the more common farmstead boundaries? The archaeological interpretation of the boundary walls in *Íslendinga saga* does not, in fact, appear to be problematic. Specifically in the case of the heavily-fortified site at Reykjaholt, recent excavations have identified structures which have been interpreted as a possible stone foundation for a fortified boundary wall. Without being able to confirm that the fortifications mentioned in *Íslendinga saga* reflect archaeologically-attested structures, the presence of these fortifications is not incompatible with the results of archaeological

[11] However, what appears to be a fortified structure, possibly dating to the medieval period, is found at the northern Icelandic site of Borgarvirki, though it does not seem to fit the description of fortified farms mentioned in *Íslendinga saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*. See KLNM vol 4, col. 514 and Perkins 1989: 246.

excavations (Sveinbjarnardóttir 2012: 82-84 and see **Figure 3.4**, see also this chapter's conclusion).

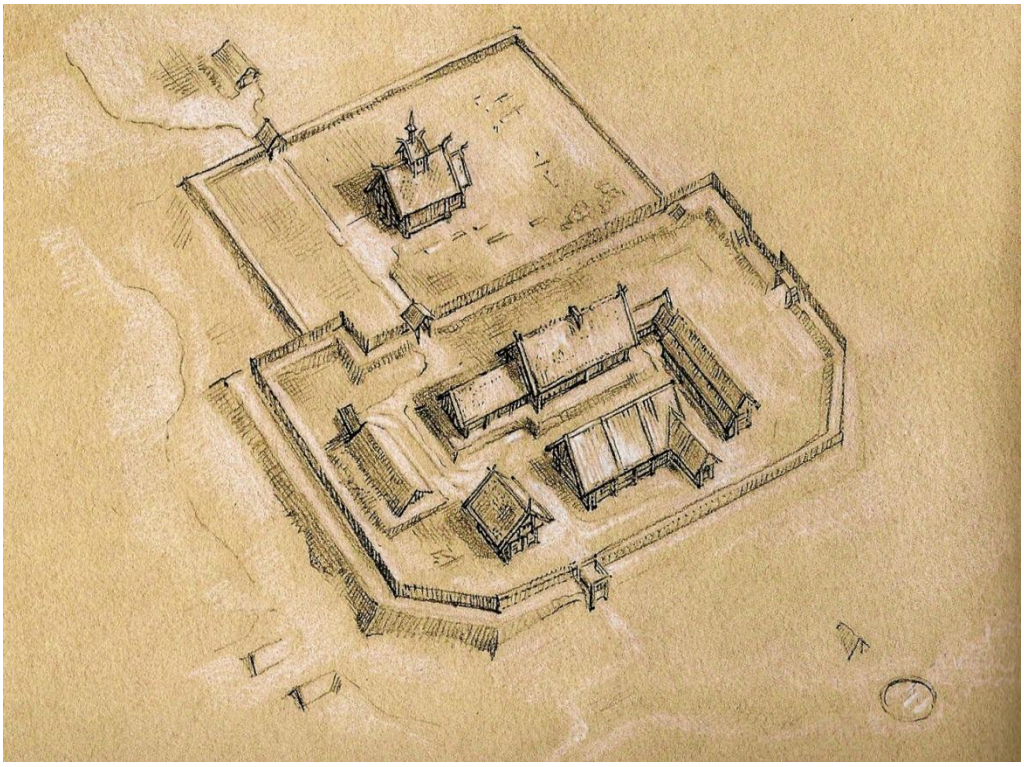

Figure 3.4: Possible reconstruction of the layout of Reykholt in its second phase of occupation (c. twelfth to fourteenth century), including fortification/boundary wall. Drawing by Þórhallur Þráinsson (from Sveinbjarnardóttir 2012, fig. 33).

One final defensive structure is mentioned, that of the fortified cave of Surtshellir at Hellisfitjar (Ch. 115). This lava cave, about 30km from Reykjaholt in Western Iceland, does indeed exist and there is a stone fortification wall and structures built within it, which have been dated to a tenth-century (therefore Viking Age) occupation (Ólafsson et al 2010: 285-295). The habitable structures in the cave at Surtshellir would have been abandoned by the time *Íslendinga saga* was written, but its appearance in the saga confirms that the site and its built features were known in the thirteenth century (they are, indeed, still visible today).

Conclusion: Reflections on Sources of Inspiration

As was the case with *Grettis saga, Gísla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga,* the descriptions of houses in *Íslendinga saga* are highly influenced by the importance of the physical structure of the buildings to the progression of the narrative sequences in which they appear. Since *Íslendinga saga* mainly focuses on the interactions between élite aristocratic families, the house-sites that receive the most attention, and the most detailed descriptions of material construction, are high-status sites often conspicuous in their opulence. Nevertheless, the overall portrait of the house appears to agree with developments in medieval Icelandic housing culture, showing multiple spaces and rooms linked by passageways within the expanded space of the house proper. Outbuildings are seldom mentioned, with the notable exception of the church which has taken a role of considerable importance in the activities of the high-status farm. The structures that are mentioned, the various rooms and passages within the house and on the farm grounds, agree with the archaeological evidence for the medieval period. Some specific sites, such as Snorri Sturluson's headquarters at Reykjaholt and the nearby cave at Surtshellir, have been the subjects of detailed archaeological investigation whose results confirm or, at the least, do not contradict the representation of physical space in *Íslendinga saga*.

The portrait of the house that emerges, resembling the medieval Icelandic row-house, with internal passages, is far more consistent than in the *Íslendingasögur.* One significant reason for this is that references to structures resembling Viking Age housing culture (except the three-aisled internal arrangement of the *stofa* and *skáli*, though much modified) are conspicuously

absent, as are the deliberately antiquarian passages referring to structures and their usage in bygone times. *Íslendinga saga* is set in the author's present, or at least within living memory: there is no need to explain a housing culture and patterns of usage which are no longer current.

This example, provided by *Íslendinga saga*, confirms the hypothesis that the housing culture of Icelandic sagas tends towards realism and towards an accurate reflection of the material qualities of the houses and buildings on Icelandic (and Norwegian) farmsteads. These detailed descriptions of housing culture are indeed dependent on the progression of the narrative's plot, but their agreement with archaeological models suggests that there is no reason to doubt that the spaces described could derive from the writer/compiler's lived experience.

While contemporary models are more easily accepted as accurate, it would appear that the earlier, Viking Age models are also remembered by the authors with some degree of accuracy. There is a material memory of the past which makes its way into the narratives as they are recorded in the medieval period. These antiquarian references in the *Íslendingasögur* appear to be literary artefacts of a different kind, one that derives from outside the medieval writer/compiler's experience. The form of obsolete structures might be remembered, such as that of the sunken-featured building in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 28), but an understanding of its function might become blurred by chronological distance. This, too, might be the case for the main room at Bjarg in *Grettis saga* (Ch. 14), where the writer/compiler's fifteenth-century standpoint might be so removed from this previously familiar type of space as to require an explanation of use. Carfeul observation therefore reveals a

contrast between those forms within and without the writer/compiler's lived experience, between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

Other factors beyond chronology may also affect the perception of space, and should be given some consideration. As demonstrated especially in the case of *Íslendinga saga*, and to a lesser degree in the sampled *Íslendingasögur*, the narrative focuses on aristocratic families and their farmsteads might lead to a potential misrepresentation of the overall character of housing culture in medieval Iceland. The particular influence of Norwegian architectural styles among the élite might further widen this gap (Sveinbjarnardóttir 2012: 84-87, 95-96; see also Sigurðardóttir 1966: 42-43, 53, Þorláksson 1979: 57-62l and Høegsberg 2009: 87, 94, 98). It is possible that some variations in the representation of domestic structures might derive from differences in social status and material means, instead of, or in addition to, chronological remove.

Another factor which might influence the representation of material culture is the knowledge of architectural forms deriving from learned or cultural exemplars known to the writer/compiler. This was mentioned briefly in section 3.4.3 with regards to fortifications which, when they appear in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Chs. 4, 15), appear incongruous to the point of semming extraneous, and perhaps borrowed from European literary tradition. The *ríddarasögur*, or 'knights' sagas', based on European courtly romances, could indeed act as an influence in shaping the narratives ofthe *Íslendingasögur* (Hjaltalín 2009: 250). However, the fact that the fortifications in *Íslendinga saga* are archaeologically and architecturally plausibile could mean that their appearance in the *Íslendingasögur* is merely anachronism and not invention.

A feature that has proven more contentious is the presence of a pagan sanctuary, or *hof*, on some farms. The case of the temple at Hofstaðir in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Chs. 4, 15) can be seen in the context of a wider line of inquiry regarding the presence of pagan sites of worship. While the areas in which pagan religion was practiced remain a matter of debate and an avenue of research, there is no conclusive evidence that pre-Christian Scandinavians built any specific, dedicated buildings for the purpose of religious observance (Hjaltalín 2009: 259-260; see also Olsen 1966). The farm of Hofstaðir in *Eyrbyggja saga* is located in Snæfellsness near Helgafell, which is not the same as the Viking Age farm of Hofstaðir in northern Iceland (in Mývatnssveit, see Lucas 2009). This latter house has long had connotations of ritual function. Like its saga namesake, it bears the element *hof*, 'temple', in its name. It is also exceptional in size, and the more recent discovery of twenty-three cattle skulls deposited in and around the farm's main building adds to the site's unusual character. The bones show evidence of unusual methods of slaughter and subsequent exposure to the elements for prolonged periods, before being deposited at the time of the main building's closure in the eleventh century (see Lucas and McGovern 2007; Lucas 2009: 236-252). However, despite the size of the main building and the possible attestation of cult activities, Hofstaðir is comparable in form to other Viking Age Icelandic farmsteads. This does not preclude the possibility that ritual activity took place within domestic or ancillary buildings, but it does support the conclusion that no specialised buildings were constructed for pre-Christian religious worship (see Croix 2012: 112, 119). The source of inspiration for the type of structure

seen at Hofstaðir in *Eyrbyggja saga* appears to be very much within the lived experience of the writer/compiler, who used Christian churches as a model to suppose a similar usage of religious buildings in the pagan Viking Age. Indeed, the sanctuary itself is described as a direct parallel to the choir (*sǫnghús*) of a Christian church, making the conceptual equation of these spaces explicit (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 4. See also Olsen 1966).

While this thesis only briefly touches upon these questions, they remain avenues of research for future work. Some of the mechanisms through which material culture and text interact, including the resons for the survival of antiquarian knowledge as well as the integration of extraneous material culture in the narrative, will be discussed in chapter 7.

SECTION 2
THE LIVING HOUSE

Chapter 4: Activities in the House and Farm

Introduction

In addition to describing the physical characteristics of the saga house and outbuildings, this thesis is also interested in seeing what the sagas can tell us about the living house and farm, populated by its inhabitants who worked and interacted with the buildings as objects and physically defined spaces. While the sampled *Íslendingasögur – Grettis saga, Gísla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga* – are obviously full of human activity and much of the narrative action does indeed take place on farmsteads, this activity is usually focussed on the interactions between people, and not between people and their material environment. It is in trying to relate this activity to the setting of the house and farm that the limitations of the sources become most evident. Just as with the descriptions of houses as physical objects, the descriptions of the activities that go on within are entirely dependent on the narrative, and the individual variation from one saga to another has an enormous impact on the quality, and quantity, of descriptions of daily life. As was the case in the previous chapters, the sagas were subjected to a critical reading and then compared with the findings of archaeological research to attempt to substantiate some of the behaviours recorded in the narratives. Social archaeology or the archaeology of the processes of daily life has benefitted from direct, explicit application to the study of Viking Age houses in Iceland and Scandinavia (Croix 2012; Milek 2006, 2012b).[1] These studies, and other archaeological modes of investigation, will be explored in section 4.5.

[1] Similar research has been conducted for Viking Age buildings in the Irish Sea region. See Boyd 2012.

4.1 Households and Property

Whatever information is given about the inhabitants of houses in the sampled *Íslendingasögur* is entirely subordinate to the narratives' plot. There is no consistency in the description of households, but there are certain general trends that can be determined from a reading of the sample as a whole.

Characters that have an active role in the narrative are almost always identified with their place of residence, usually the name of the farmstead and sometimes its approximate geographical location (valley, district, etc.). This does not necessarily lead to any additional information about the farmstead, and usually it is only the property as a whole that is identified without any focus on the houses or buildings that comprise the farmstead. Such characters, when they are named, may make their appearance in the narrative far from their home farm. If the farm in question is not acting as a setting for a sequence of narrative action, saga style will not usually grant it any description beyond simply naming it: *Kálfr Ásgeirsson bjó á Ásgeirsá ok Þorvaldr, bróðir hans.* ('Kálfr Ásgeirsson and his brother Þorvaldr lived at Ásgeirsá.' *Grettis saga* Ch. 15). Such brief introductions are ubiquitous.

This interest in identifying characters with their place of residence is extended more broadly into a fascination with the distribution of ownership and properties in Iceland (and, also to an extent in Norway, as can be seen in the description of land ownership on Haramsøy in Norway in *Grettis saga* Ch. 18).[2] Frequently, the way by which a character came to possess his farmstead is described, representing a variety of strategies for the acquisition of landed property: initial settlement, purchase, inheritance from parents or

[2] The question of identifying land ownership is a frequent concern in Old Norse literature, as demonstrated, for example, by the capital importance of this concern in *Landnámabók*.

siblings, confiscation, co-ownership, and so on. It is not in the purview of this thesis to make a detailed analysis of these various property transactions, but it is clear that the sagas are replete with examples that demonstrate a preoccupation with the recording of land ownership and the administration of landed wealth. In *Grettis saga*, for example, Grettir's father Ásmundr carefully arranges his succession by his son Atli, not only as heir to his material wealth, but as the administrator of his estate (*fjárvarðveizla, Grettis saga* Ch. 42). Joint ownership of farmsteads or other immovable resources is not uncommon (*Grettis saga,* Ch. 70; *Gísla saga* Chs. 4-5, 9-10; *Eyrbyggja saga* Chs. 30-31, 35). While property ownership and farmstead administration necessarily involves the buildings and material resources of the farmstead itself, these do not feature in the descriptions of property ownership.

When a segment of the narrative takes place on a farmstead, the householder will, as expected, be named. Various members of the householder's family might also be named, especially if they have a role to play in the narrative. Children are conspicuous by their near absence, although some boys are mentioned as being raised at their home farm, as opposed to being sent off for fosterage (*Grettis saga* Ch. 14; *Gísla saga* Chs. 1, 2; *Eyrbyggja saga,* Ch. 12). While children may be mentioned in passing when describing a householder's family, they seldom act with any agency as characters (although a character mentioned as a child may return later as an adult to play a part in the narrative). An exception can be made for sagas such as *Grettis saga* and *Egils saga,*[3] which follow the life of their protagonist from

[3] *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar,* ed. by Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit vol. 2 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1933). All subsequent references to *Egils saga* will refer to this edition unless otherwise stated, and will be referred to by chapter in the body of the text.

childhood until death. But heroes such as Grettir and Egill are not portrayed objectively and their childhood is usually as exceptional as their adult life later will be, and usually serves to prefigure future events (see Vidal: Forthcoming (b)).[4]

In addition to the householder and his family, a farm's household will be composed of a variable number of servants and followers, both free and unfree, and occasional or temporary residents such as visiting guests and seasonal workers. Just as with family members, servants are occasionally named, especially if they have a role to play in the narrative, such as the slave Svartr, sent to kill Snorri goði at the farm at Helgafell in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 26). However, there is no logic or consistency in the naming of servants or followers, as demonstrated by this enumeration of followers in *Grettis saga*:

> *Nú fekk Halldórr þeim sex menn til ferðar. Hét einn Kárr, en annarr Þorleifr, þriði Brandr; eigi váru nefndir fleiri.*
> 'Now Halldorr and his group acquired six men for the expedition. One was called Kárr, a second Þorleifr, a third Brandr. No more were named.' (*Grettis saga* Ch. 81)

Descriptions of household numbers are also highly inconsistent, usually conveniently rounded off by tens:

> *En þau Gísli fara, unz þau koma í Friðarey til Styrkárs, ok eflask þaðan at liði ok fá fjóra tigu manna…*
> 'Then Gísli and his group travelled until they came to Styrkár's [farm] on Friðarey. They reinforced their troop from there and received forty men…' (*Gísla saga* Ch. 3)

One episode in *Eyrbyggja saga* is conspicuous in mentioning quite precisely the dwindling members of a household following a devastating illness and a series of hauntings:

[4] For a more complete overview of the appearance of children in Old Norse sources, see Jakobsson and Tulinius 2005.

> *Um haustit hǫfðu þar verit þrír tigir hjóna, en átján ǫnduðusk, en fimm stukku í bróttu, en sjau váru eptir at gói.*
> 'In the autumn there had been thirty [people] in the household, but eighteen died, then five ran away, and seven were left at the end of the winter.' (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 54)

Such precise numbers are however exceptional, and there is no reason to consider this enumeration as an objective reflection of household numbers either in the Viking Age setting of the narrative or in the medieval period of the sagas' writing.

A few more qualitative details are sometimes given about the relations between certain members of the household. A householder may, for example, be described as exacting in his expectations concerning his domestic labourers: *Arnkell var starfsmaðr mikill ok lét þræla sína vinna alla daga milli sólsetra* ('Arnkell was a formidable worker and had his thralls work every day between [sunrise and] sunset.' *Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 37). Conversely, cordial relations between the household's main family and their servants might also exist, as is suggested in *Grettis saga* at the farm of Reykir, where the householder's daughter and a female servant speak to each other in affectionate (or at least familiar) terms:

> *En er á leið morgininn, stóðu heimamenn upp, ok kómu konur tvær í stofu fyrst; þat var griðkona ok dóttir bónda... Þá mælti griðkona: "Svá vil ek heil, systir, hér er kominn Grettir Ásmundarson…"*
> 'And when the morning came, the household got up and two women, a servant woman and the householder's daughter, were the first to come into the main room… Then the servant woman said: "Oh my, sister, here has come Grettir Ásmundarson…"' (*Grettis saga* Ch. 75)

Also in *Grettis saga*, scenes of affectionate behaviour in the family are demonstrated by Þorfinnr's wife, in Norway, tending to her grown daughter who is ill (*Grettis saga* Ch. 19). Examples of the intimate conversations and habits of the household's main couple are frequent, as demonstrated by scenes

of the couple sharing (or refusing to share) a bed (*Gísla saga* Chs. 9, 16; *Eyrbyggja saga*, Chs. 46). Intimacy in the form of sexual relations, however, is mostly referred to euphemistically, with the notable exception of Grettir's rape of the aforementioned female servant at the farm of Reykir in *Grettis saga* (Ch. 75, see also Vidal: Forthcoming (b)).

On the whole, however, there is no consistency in the naming and description of peripheral characters and members of the household. Whatever glimpses of the intimate inner workings of the household which sagas present are fascinating, but difficult to interpret objectively since all interactions between characters are absolutely subordinate to the narrative's plot. Sagas therefore cannot serve independently as reliable sources for family and household composition.

4.2 Agricultural and Productive Activities

Despite the paucity of details concerning the general composition of properties and households, the sampled *Íslendingasögur* can still provide some information regarding the interaction of a farmstead's inhabitants with its buildings, structures and spaces. Just as these interactions provide a description of the physical characteristics of the farmstead's buildings and spaces, as detailed in chapters 1 and 3, so too can they describe the usages to which they were put.

The *Íslendingasögur* reflect the economic reality of Viking Age and medieval Iceland in representing a settlement pattern that is entirely rural (Croix 2012: 12, 167; Milek 2006: iii, 9-11). Every settlement is a working farm, and so agricultural activities appear frequently in the course of the saga

narratives (these are particularly frequent in *Eyrbyggja saga* Chs. 15, 18, 20, 23, 30, 37, 50-53, 57, 63). Animal husbandry is the most frequent of these activities, and the keeping of sheep, cattle, geese, goats and horses is mentioned. Much of this activity is alluded to, for example by the identification of a household member as a shepherd or cow-herd (*sauðamaðr, smalamaðr, nautamaðr*). A slightly humorous episode in *Eyrbyggja saga* also shows Katla's son Oddr at the farm of Mávahlíð, who has been magically transformed into a goat. When hostile visitors arrive at the farm, the presence of a goat in the antechamber of the house arouses no suspicion and appears to be entirely inconspicuous, suggesting that goats were not an unusual feature of the saga farm (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 20, see also chapter 1, section 1.3.1).

Direct references to animal husbandry are also frequent, such as Grettir's depraved childhood slaughter of the goslings and maiming of geese on his home farm of Bjarg in *Grettis saga*:

> *Síðan tók Grettir við heimgásunum; þær váru fimm tigir ok með kjúklingar margir... Nǫkkuru síðar fundu fǫrumenn kjúklinga dauða úti ok heimgæss vængbrotnar...*
> 'Then Grettir took charge of the farm's geese. There were fifty, with many goslings… A little while later some vagrants found the goslings all dead outside, and the geese had their wings broken…' (*Grettis saga* Ch. 14)

Occasionally detailed information is given about certain processes regarding the keeping of animals, such the stabling of cattle, the arrangement of the byre, and the daily routines of pasturage and milking, and autumn slaughter. One passage in *Eyrbyggja saga* is particularly rich in details regarding cattle-farming:

> *...er Þóroddr kom heim á Kársstaði, váru þá konur at mjǫltum; ok er Þóroddr reið á stǫðulinn, hljóp kýr ein undan honum ok fell, ok brotnaði í fótrinn... en er fótrinn kýrinnar var festr, var hon færð út í Úlfarsfell til feitingar, því at þar var hagi góðr... Er skammt var til jóla,*

> *var þat einn morgun snimma þar á Kársstǫðum, at nautamaðr gekk til fjóss eptir vanða, att hann sá naut fyrir fjóssdurum ok kenndi, at þar var þá komin kýrin in fótbrotna, er vant hafði verit; leiddi hann kúna á bás ok batt ok sagði síðan Þóroddi; hann gekk til fjóss, sá kúna ok hafði á hendr; þeir kenndu kálf í kúnni, ok þótti þeim þá eigi dræp. Hafði Þóroddr þá ok skorit í bú sitt, sem honum bar nauðsyn til.*
> '…when Þoroddr came home to Kársstaðir, the women were attending to the milking. And when Þóroddr rode to the milking pen, one cow escaped from him and fell, and broke her leg… And when the cow's leg was set, she was driven out to Úlfarsfell for fattening, because there was good pasture there… A short time before Yule, it happened one early morning there at Kárrstaðir that the cow-herd went to the byre as per usual. He saw a cow in front of the byre door and recognised that it was the cow with the broken leg that had come there; she had been missing. He led the cow to a stall and tied [her], and later told Þóroddr. He went to the byre, saw the cow and felt her with his hand, and they realised that she was pregnant and it occurred to them that she should not be killed. Þóroddr had already slaughtered [as much] as he needed to meet his [farm's] needs.' (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 63)

Most of the buildings used to house animals appear to be separate from the main dwelling house, except for the noteworthy example of the farm of Sæból in *Gísla saga*, where the byre, attached to the house, plays an important role in Gísli's clandestine entry and escape from the house when he murders his brother-in-law Þorgrímr (*Gísla saga*, Ch. 16, see the full passage quoted in chapter 1, section 1.4.2).[5]

In addition to pasturage in the homefield, there is summer pasturage of sheep, cattle and horses, further afield on the heath and common land, including islands: *Nú líðr fram at sólhvǫrfum. Þá bjuggusk bœndr at sækja slátrfé sitt í eyna.* ('Now the solstice approached, and the farmers prepared to retrieve their livestock from the island [of Drangey] for slaughter.' *Grettis saga* Ch. 71). The seasonal conclusion of this pasturage process is also

[5] See the full passage quoted in chapter 1, section 1.4.2, and the discussion on the byre as a possible element in a medieval Icelandic row-house in chapter 2, section 2.2.1, and **Figures 2.14** and **2.15**.

mentioned in *Eyrbyggja saga*, when sheep are collected from the heath and sorted to be returned to their respective farms for the winter (the practice is called *rétt*): *Þetta sama haust áttu menn rétt fjǫlmenna í Tungu milli Laxá upp frá Helgafelli…* (‘That same autumn the men had a large sheep-sorting in Tunga, between the Laxá river and [the land] up from Helgafell.’ *Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 23).

Horses are ubiquitous as means of transportation, but were also bred for fighting, and for eating in the pre-Christian period before the prohibition of eating horseflesh:[6]

> *Þorbjǫrn digri átti ok stóðhross mǫrg saman, er hann lét standa í fjallhǫgum, ok valði af hross um haustum til slátrs.*
> ‘Þorbjǫrn digri [the stout] also owned many horses for breeding, which he left in the mountain pasture, and from [these] he chose horses to slaughter in the autumn.’ (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 18)

Plant cultivation in the sampled *Íslendingasögur* is limited exclusively to the growing and harvesting of hay as fodder for animals, reflecting the emphasis on pastoral economy which is demonstrated by the animal husbandry. *Eyrbyggja saga*, in particular, has several scenes that describe the process of haymaking in late summer, including the drying, raking, collecting and transport of hay from the hayfields to the farm buildings:

> *...var þá svá komit heyverkum at Fróðá, at taða ǫll var slegin, en fullþurr nær helmingrinn; kom þá góðr þerridagr, ok var veðr kyrrt ok þunnt, svá at hvergi sá ský á himni. Þóroddr bóndi stóð upp snimma um morguninn ok skipaði til verks; tóku þá sumir til ekju, en sumir hlóðu heyvinu, en bóndi skipaði konum til a þurrka heyit, ok var skipt verkum með þeim, ok var Þórgunnu ætlat nautsfóðr til atverknaðar...en Þórgunna rifjaði þá sem óðast sitt hey; tók hon eigi at raka upp, þótt þat væri mælt."*

[6] The eating of horseflesh is prohibited in medieval Icelandic law: *Grágás: Konungsbók*, ed. by Vilhjálmur Finsen (Copenhagen: 1852, reprint Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag 1974), ch. 16. All subsequent references to *Grágás* refer to this edition unless otherwise stated, and will be referred to by chapter in the body of the text

> '… The time for haymaking had come at Fróðá, and the entire homefield was mown, and nearly half was entirely dry. There came a good drying day, and the weather was still and clear, so that no cloud could be seen in the sky. The farmer Þóroddr got up early in the morning and arranged the [day's] work. Some took to carting the hay, and some to piling it up, and the farmer assigned the women to dry the hay. The work was divided among them, and Þórgunna was tasked with preparing a cow's fodder [for the winter]… Þórgunna rushed to turn over her hay, but she did not rake it up though she had been told to do so.' (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 51)

Where this hay is kept is not mentioned specifically. However, the aforementioned passage in *Gísla saga*, where the roof of the farm of Hól is damaged during a storm, mentions the need to protect the hay from getting wet. This suggests that the hay could be, as in this case, kept in a storage area in the house proper (*Gísla saga* Ch. 13, see also chapter 1, section 1.3.1). No other cultivation, such as cereals for human or animal consumption, is mentioned in the sampled sagas, although this does occur in the wider corpus of the *Íslendingasögur* (for example in *Njáls saga*, Ch. 110, where Hǫskuldr of Hvítanes is shown to sow grain).[7] The farm of Fróðá in *Eyrbyggja saga* also mentions a storage room (*klefi*) which contains stocks of flour (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 52). Whether the flour was produced from grain grown on the farm itself, ground at home from purchased grain, or purchased as ground flour, is not mentioned. Interestingly, as the examples above demonstrate, both animal husbandry and haymaking are described in the sampled *Íslendingasögur* as activities in which both men and women participate, often together, and there does not seem to be a gendered division of labour for these particular activities.

[7] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit vol. 12 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1954). All subsequent references to *Njáls saga* will refer to this edition unless otherwise stated, and will be referred to by chapter in the body of the text.

Few other productive activities are mentioned in the sampled *Íslendingasögur*. Most of these involve the acquisition of additional food resources, through fishing (*Grettis saga* Ch. 55; *Gísla saga* Ch. 25), the purchase of dried fish (implying the collection and processing of the fish, *Eyrbyggja saga* Chs. 52-53), and the flensing of beached whales, which was a highly regulated activity (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 57).[8] In the final section of *Grettis saga*, where Grettir, his brother Illugi and their servant Glaumr are exiled on a hut on the island of Drangey, they are shown several times engaging in the subsistence gathering of firewood, seabirds and their eggs (*Grettis saga* Chs. 74, 79-80). Another example of a planned productive activity, not a result of desperate circumstances, is the gathering of firewood and the burning of charcoal in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Chs. 26, 35).

These productive activities are seldom connected directly to house and the farm buildings, as are, for example, the animals housed in special outbuildings or spaces within the house. The storage of food products is mentioned directly (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 52), or alluded to (there is a pantry or cellar, *kjallari*, on Þorfinnr's farm in Norway, *Grettis saga* Ch. 19); and in one instance at the farm of Kársstaðir in *Eyrbyggja saga* there is a pile of wood (*viðarbulungr*, perhaps firewood?) stacked outside near the byre (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 63). It is obvious that the *Íslendingasögur*, following the needs of the narrative, present only an incomplete picture of the types of productive

[8] The regulation of whale harvesting was extensive and precise, and covered such aspects as the location of a whale's beaching, division of shares in whale flesh between landowners, tenants and neighbours, provisions if a harpoon contributed to the whale's demise, sharing out blubber, securing the carcass against being washed out by the tide, and others. These prescriptions are codified in medieval Icelandic law. *Grágás* devotes no fewer than five chapters to this subject (*Grágás* Chs. 213-217).

activities that constituted the daily routine of a working Viking Age or medieval farm.

4.3 Domestic Industry

A more direct demonstration of the interaction between the house and farmstead and their occupants is to be found in the few examples of domestic industry revealed by the sampled *Íslendingasögur*. While these are not frequent, they are interesting testimonies to the use of space. The most explicit example of domestic industry is that of textile work, which in the sampled sagas, is an activity that is firmly gendered as female. The carding of wool, indicated by the presence of wool-combs, and general unspecified wool-work, is mentioned in *Grettis saga* as a female activity which took place within the main room of the house (at the farm of Bjarg), the *eldaskáli* (*Grettis saga* Ch. 14, see also chapter 1, section 1.4.1). Similarly, spinning is seen to be performed by several women in the main room (here called *stofa*), under the command of Katla, mistress of the farm of Mávahlíð in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 20). Further textile work is attested when this same Katla makes a shirt for her son Oddr, at the farm of Holt (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 18). As opposed to carding or spinning wool, this indicates final production of finished goods from processed materials. There is only one reference to weaving in the sampled *Íslendingasögur*, at the farm of Fróðá in *Eyrbyggja saga*, where it is referred to as *váðverk* (Ch. 50). The primary harvesting of wool from sheep and other processes such as cleaning are not mentioned in the sampled sagas.

Clothes are also being made by Auðr and Ásgerðr at the farm of Hól in *Gísla saga* (Ch. 9). This occurrence is interesting, and conspicuous, because

the textile work is being undertaken in the *dyngja*, a word taken to mean a space reserved for use by women, either as part of the house or in a separate building (ONP). While the physical characteristics of this *dyngja* are impossible to determine, it is clear that the word does indeed designate a separate space which is shown to be used by women for female-specific domestic industry (see further in section 4.5 below, and chapter 1, section 1.4.2, chapter 2, section 2.2.2, and chapter 6, section 6.2.1). This is the sole example, in the sampled *Íslendingasögur*, of a specified gendered space shown in use (another *dyngja* is only mentioned on the farm of Hrossholt in *Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 56). Despite its occurrence, it appears that textile work, as demonstrated by the previous examples, also took place in communal areas of the house, such as the main room.

Other instances of domestic industry are scant, and involve the working of wood and metal for the construction of tools and structures. These activities are also gendered as male, although less explicitly than textile work is gendered female. Blacksmithing is explicitly indicated at the farms of Sæból and Hól in *Gísla saga* (Chs. 8, 11). The farm of Sæból is said to have a smithy, although its physical characteristics are not given (*Gísla saga* Ch. 11). At this location, the householder Þorgrímr Nef is designated as being an accomplished smith. The same is said of Þorsteinn at the farm of Ljárskógar in *Grettis saga*, who used his skill to construct a bridge on the approach to his property, equipped with metal rings that would sound to warn of a visitor's approach (*Grettis saga* Ch. 53, see also chapter 1, section 1.1).

In addition to this bridge, other occurrences of woodworking include the building of a coffin for the deceased Þórgunna at the farm of Fróðá, by the

men of the household (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 51), and in *Gísla saga*, the outlawed Gísli, seeking refuge at Ingjaldr's farm on the island of Hergilsey, builds boats with great skill to thank his host for the shelter he is given (*Gísla saga* Ch. 25).

4.4 Other Activities Within the House

The interaction of the people with the house they live in is not limited to the performance of domestic industry, and the sampled *Íslendingasögur* do show some of the activities which constituted the everyday life of its residents. The most frequent domestic activities involve the preparation, service and consumption of food and drink. Food preparation takes place both in the main room of the house and in ancillary spaces. In the main room (*eldaskáli*) of the farm of Fróðá in *Eyrbyggja saga* there is said to be a *máleldr*, or 'meal-fire', lit every evening, suggesting that this is the location of the preparation of food (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 52). In this same saga however, the revenant of the departed Þórgunna, unsatisfied with the welcome given to the bearers of her corpse at the farm of Nes it neðra, rises from the dead to prepare a meal in an outbuilding, simply designated as a *búr*. This passage is replete with detail not only for the preparation of food, but also for the use of space and the dispensing of hospitality, and will be revisited in chapter 5, sections 5.1.2 and 5.1.3. It is therefore important to consider it in its entirety:

> *Þeir tóku þar af hestum sínum ok báru líkit í hús eitt fyrir durum úti, gengu síðan til stofu ok fóru af klæðum sínum ok ætluðu at vera þar um nótt matlausir, en heimamenn fóru í dagsljósi í rekkju. Ok er menn kómu í rekkjur, heyrðu þeir hark mikit í búrit; var þá farit at forvitnask, hvárt eigi væri þjófar inn komnir; ok er menn kómu til búrsins, var þar sén kona mikil; hon var nǫkvið, svá at hon hafði engan hlut á sér; hon starfaði at matseld... Ok er hon hafði þar unnit slíkt er hon vildi, þá bar*

> *hon mat í stofu. Eptir þat setti hon borð ok bar þar á mat. Þá mæltu líkmenn við bónda: "Vera má, at svá lúki við, áðr vér skilim, at þér þykki alkeypt, at þú vildir engan greiða gera oss." Þá mæltu bæði bóndi ok húsfreyja: "Vit viljum víst gefa yðr mat ok gera yðr annan greiða, þann er þér þurfuð." Ok þegar er bóndi hafði boðit þeim greiða, gekk Þórgunna fram ór stofunni ok út eptir þat, ok sýndisk hon eigi síðan.*
> ‘They dismounted from their horses there and took the corpse into an outbuilding out in front of the door [of the house], and then went into the main room and took off their clothes. They intended to stay there throughout the night without food, because the men of the household had gone to bed [when it was still] daylight. And when the men had gone to bed, they heard a great din in the outbuilding. They went to investigate to see whether it might not be a thief that had come in. And when the men came to the outbuilding, they saw there a large woman. She was naked, and had not a shred of clothing on her. She was busy at a cooking fire… and when she had done as she wanted, then she carried food into the main room. After that she set [up] the tables and carried the food onto them. Then the corpse-bearers spoke with the farmer: “It may be, to put an end to this before we part, that you will find it will cost you dearly that you did not wish to provide us with hospitality.” Then both the farmer and the mistress of the house spoke: “Certainly, we wish to give you food and offer whatever hospitality you need.” And as soon as the farmer had offered them hospitality, Þórgunna went forth out of the main room and afterwards outside, and she was not seen afterwards.’ (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 51)

Another ancillary space is used for the preparation of food at Ingjaldr’s farm on Hergilsey in *Gísla saga*, and a certain Þorgerðr prepares a meal for the concealed Gísli (*Gísla saga* Ch. 25, and see chapter 1 section 1.3.2). This space is also designated by the word *búr*, but it is clearly a space within the main dwelling house, separated from the house’s main room by a partial partition.

Drinking is also attested, and the brewing of ale is alluded to in the presence of Yule-ale (*jólaǫl*) at the farm of Fróðá in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 54), although it is not explicitly mentioned whether this ale was brewed at home or purchased pre-made, nor where the materials for its production originated.

Both food and drink are conspicuously said to be taken at table (*borð*), located in the main room of the house (*Grettis saga* Chs. 14, 18, 19; *Gísla saga* Ch. 37; *Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 13). It is interesting to note that even when meals are taken away from home, the preparation of food is referred to as preparations *til borða*, 'for the tables' (*Grettis saga* Ch. 35). The tables themselves are most probably mobile and not fixed, and are said to be 'set up' in front of people (*Grettis saga* Ch. 14). In *Gísla saga*, an attempt is made on the life of Eyjólfr, Gísli's killer, while he is sitting at such a table at the farm of Sæból. It is said that he had a sword lying on the floor at his feet *í milli stokks ok fóta sér*, 'between the boards and his legs', suggesting that people sat on the edge of the *set* platforms in the main room with the trestle tables set in front of them, rather than having both seats and tables set up on the *set* platforms themselves (*Gísla saga* Ch. 37).

This incident, which is mentioned both in *Gísla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga* (although here it is located at the farm of Helgafell, *Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 13), imply that it was the duty of the mistress of the house to serve food and drink to visitors. Similarly, the aforementioned Þorgerðr prepares food for Gísli on Ingjaldr's farm (*Gísla saga* Ch. 25), and the revenant of Þórgunna takes it upon herself to provide a meal for the men of her 'household' who are accompanying her corpse (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 51). In *Grettis saga*, the heathen shepherd Glámr (before his death and transformation into a monstrous revenant), demands that the mistress of the house at the farm of Þórhallsstaðir prepare him a meal before he goes about his business, on the morning of a Christian fast day (the day before Yule, *Grettis saga* Ch. 32). However, despite the implication that food preparation and presentation is primarily a female

activity, in situations where men are left to their own devices they appear to be perfectly capable of tending to their own needs. Such a situation is implied during Grettir's exile on the island of Drangey in *Grettis saga* (Chs. 74-80), but also shown explicitly in *Eyrbyggja saga* during a mercantile expedition where the necessary tasks for the preparation of the meal are allotted to members of the party:

> *Þenna dag hlutu þeir búðarvǫrð…ok skyldi Bjǫrn gera eld, en Þórðr taka vatn.*
> That day they drew lots for the cooking [tasks]… and Bjǫrn had to prepare the fire, and Þórðr fetch the water. (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 43)

It would appear that men could, even if reluctantly, provide for themselves, and that the preparation of food was an activity that was undertaken by both genders.

Other uses of rooms and spaces in the house have been introduced in the discussion on the physical characteristics of the farmsteads' buildings in chapter 1, although an overview is appropriate here. The main room (*skáli* or *stofa*), already described in this section as the location of domestic industry and of food preparation and consumption, was a versatile, multipurpose space that dominated the internal arrangement of the house. All of the main room's principal characteristics are succinctly enumerated in the previously quoted antiquarian passage from chapter 14 in *Grettis saga* (see chapter 1, section 1.4.1). The most frequent use of the main room was for sleeping. This was done either in closed bed-closets (*lokrekkja* or *lokhvíla*) usually reserved for the leading couple of the household, or most frequently in designated sleeping spaces on the *set* platforms, equipped with bedclothes and even perhaps elements of comfort such as cushions, *hægindi* (*Gísla saga* Ch. 30; *Eyrbyggja*

saga Ch. 20). The luxurious and ostentatious bedclothes brought over by the visiting Þórgunna at the farm of Fróðá in *Eyrbyggja saga*, seen as cursed after her untimely death and subsequently burned, are exceptional (*Eyrbyggja saga* Chs 50-51). Beds, understood as sleeping places on the *set*, are also shown to be the place where the sick, injured and infirm recover and convalesce (*Grettis saga* Chs. 19, 37, 59; *Eyrbyggja saga* Chs. 16, 51).

As mentioned in chapter 1, the house and farmstead were also equipped with storage spaces either located within the house (*klefi, kjallari*), or in outbuildings (*búr, skemma, hlaða*). The most notable example of these is the elevated storage building on Þorfinnr's farm in Norway in chapter 19 of *Grettis saga*, reminiscent of medieval Norwegian *stabbur* (see chapter 1, section 1.2), which contains not only a store of clothing, but an adjacent privy. Other occurrences confirm that latrines were located outside the main house, and that exiting the house to relieve oneself was common practice (*Eyrbyggja saga* Chs. 26, 53). Many Icelandic farms were also built to take advantage of the convenience of natural hot springs, used for bathing (see chapter 1, section 1.1). While this does not designate the use of space within the house itself, such natural baths must be considered as playing part in the spatial organisation of the farmstead and as part of the spaces which featured in the domestic interactions of the farm's inhabitants. Grettir's use of the hot spring at the farm of Reykir, and his subsequent slumber in the main room, still naked from his bath, demonstrate the direct relation of these spaces in their usage by occupants of the house (*Grettis saga* Ch. 75). The semi-subterranean steam-bath built at the farm of Hraun in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 16), represents a unique example of a bespoke structure for the purposes of bathing or ablutions, and its

problematic interpretation prevents such bath-houses from being interpreted as a common feature on Icelandic farms of the Viking Age (see chapter 1, section 1.2; chapter 2, section 2.2.2).

One final activity which, curiously, receives nearly no mention, is religious observance. Pagan practice is indicated by the presence of pagan temples or sanctuaries (*hof*) at Helgafell and Hofstaðir in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Chs. 4, 15), and the general practice of heathenism is mentioned in *Grettis saga* (Ch. 78). While churches are mentioned on several farms, the farms' inhabitants seldom interact with them. This is seen mostly in instances of church burials (*Grettis saga* Chs. 42, 84; *Eyrbyggja saga* Chs. 51, 53, 63, 65). Christian practice is otherwise shown actively only in the observance of religious service at Yule on the farms of Þórhallsstaðir and Eyjardalsá in *Grettis saga* (Chs. 32, 64), and the performance of a Christian blessing and exorcism at the farm of Fróðá in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 55). The aforementioned seasonal festivities occurring at Yule at this same farm may have also involved religious celebrations (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 54). The infrequency of religious activity in the sampled *Íslendingasögur* is conspicuous, especially when read in comparison to the ubiquity of references to religious observance in *Íslendinga saga*, as seen in section 4.6 below.

4.5 Comparison with Archaeology

Because the level of detail regarding activities in houses and on farmsteads presented in the sagas is not quite as rich as that provided for the understanding of the spaces and structures themselves, finding bases for comparison with archaeology is not as straightforward a task. Determining the use of space and

the activities on occupation sites is, however, one of the principal purviews of the archaeology of settlements, arguably more important than the morphology and construction of the buildings themselves. Some of the activities described in the sampled *Íslendingasögur* do indeed correspond to processes which have left physical traces revealed by archaeological research. One of the most basic, but most important, ways of determining the activities on a site is through the distribution of artefacts, the remains of objects used by humans in any given settlement. Care must be taken in interpreting these objects, since the circumstances of their deposition might not represent a direct reflection of their contexts of use in life (Croix 2012: 23-26). Nevertheless, the description of artefact assemblages remains one of the fundamental sources of information on the occupation of settlements, and represents a significant proportion of the content of recent site-specific publications (Borg: Munch et al. 2003; Hofstaðir: Lucas 2009; Kaupang: Skre 2007a; Old Scatness: Dockrill et al. 2010; Papa Stour: Crawford and Smith 1999; Quoygrew: Barrett 2012a; Reykholt: Sveinbjarnardóttir 2012).

Artefact distribution can confirm, for example, that the main room of the house was indeed a multifunctional space, as it is described in the *Íslendingasögur*. Textile production has notably been attested in the main room, thanks to the presence of textile instruments (wool combs, loom weights, spindle whorls). Another of the principal activities within the main room, cooking, has also left traces in bone fragments from cooking residue and the remains of cooking equipment around the central hearth. Cooking has also been confirmed in the ancillary spaces in the gable ends and annexes of some

Viking Age and early medieval houses in Iceland (Croix 2012: 157; Milek 2006: 118-119, 121, 123-126, 132-133, 163).

Another activity shown in the *Íslendingasögur* which was fundamental to the daily life and upkeep of a functional farmstead was metalwork. The relatively infrequent mentions of metalworking in the sagas are at odds with the ubiquity of the activity as it is represented in the archaeological record on Viking Age farmsteads. Evidence of metalworking, in the form of tools but also of metalworking residue such as slag and half-finished products, are found notably in separate smithies built apart from the house (Croix 2012: 179-183). However, curiously, certain mainland Scandinavian examples, as well as Hofstaðir in Iceland, also attest to metalwork in the main room of the house (Croix 2012: 70-71, 85, 115). This activity is not mentioned in this space in the sampled *Íslendingasögur*.

In addition to artefacts, natural materials (sometimes called ecofacts or biofacts) may be recovered from archaeological sites, which can help inform our understanding of activities on a settlement. Archaeobotany, or the study of plant remains, for example, can attest to eating habits and cooking customs by studying the seeds of plants consumed by both humans and livestock Zooarchaeology, or the study of animal remains, can do the same by revealing the animal species consumed or otherwise used, or acquired, for the benefit of the household's activities. Archaeobotany can also attest to textile work, and the production and use of linen is also represented by the remains of flax in the archaeological record of some Viking Age settlements, most notably at Old Scatness in Shetland (Bond and Dockrill 2007: 5; Dockrill et al 2010: 88, 96, 166, 193, 195, 204).

Closely linked to archaeobotany and zooarchaeology, archaeoentomology, or the study of insect remains, can also attest to other alimentary processes (such as the stockpiling of hay for consumption by livestock over the winter) by the presence of parasites which fed on, or lived within, specific plants and materials (grain beetles, hay parasites, see Buckland et al 1993: 519-522). The presence of humans and the animals they kept can also be indicated by the remains of species-specific parasites, such as the human louse, the human flea, the sheep ked and the sheep louse. Since these parasites tended to stay with their hosts, large concentrations of them found in soil archaeology are more likely to represent specific events which saw their removal, such as delousing in humans, or the cleaning of fleeces in wool processing in the case of sheep (Buckland et al 1993:511, 516-517). Archaeoentomology can thus reveal some of the processes and activities that went on within the house. The same can be said for sanitary conditions. Privies were indeed often external buildings on Viking Age farms, and the presence of a large privy connected to the house by a passageway at Hofstaðir is unique and, possibly, an ostentatious display of a useful domestic feature (Lucas 2009: 137-138; Milek 2006: 153; Croix 2012: 121). However, archaeoentomological evidence also suggests, by the remains of flies that fed mostly on human faeces, that the interior of Viking Age houses could be rather unsanitary (Buckland et al 1993: 518).

Soil archaeology, which focuses on the microscopic physical composition and chemical residues in floor deposits, can also reveal processes and activities within the house. The chemical residue of large quantities of urine in some archaeological contexts, both in the main room of the house and

in ancillary spaces, might not indicate poor sanitation, but rather the cleaning of wool, for which stale urine was frequently used in pre-industrial processes (Milek 2006: 196, 291; 2012b: 117). This aspect of textile work would have been universal, and yet is absent from the sampled sagas (note also the near-absence of weaving).

Soil archaeology can further inform us about the structure of the house itself. The variations of soil compaction, for example, can indicate areas of passage and occupation. In the main room, loose soil compaction and the lack of significant chemical deposition confirms the presence of raised platforms along the long walls, covering the ground and protecting the soil from the effects of human activity as seen in other areas. These platforms are the *set* of the sagas (Milek 2006: 98-99, 119-121, 188-189).

In addition to the recovery of artefacts and ecofacts, archaeological excavation can also contribute to our knowledge of processes and activities on the Viking Age farmstead by revealing structures that are not included from the saga accounts. One such structure is the outdoor cooking pit (Milek 2006: 210). While absent from the *Íslendingasögur*, this type of arrangement for outdoor cooking, *seyðir* in Old Norse, does occur elsewhere in Old Norse literature, such as in the introduction to *Skáldskaparmál* in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (*Skáldskaparmál* Ch. G56),[9] and in *Landnámabók* (Ch. H5). Usage in context suggests that meat was placed over a fire built in shallow pit dug into the ground, and then covered and left to smoulder until the food was cooked (see also *Laxdœla* saga, Sveinsson 1934:144, note 2). That the use of outdoor

[9] *Skáldskaparmál* (from Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*), ed. by Anthony Faulkes, part 1 (2 vols), (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), Ch. G56. All subsequent references to *Skáldskaparmál* refer to this edition unless otherwise stated, and will be referred to by chapter in the body of the text.

cooking pits was a common practice is suggested by the use of the expression *Þann seyði raufar þú…* (‘You are breaking up the cooking-pit…’, *Laxdœla saga* Ch. 46), meaning to stir up trouble or to revive old grievances (C&V, ‘*seyðir*’).

The interpretation of the use of space based on archaeological evidence is a point of particular interest, especially with regards to the gendered use of space. Some activities such as agricultural work and food production can safely be considered gender neutral in the archaeological record, as attested by the presence of agricultural tools and cooking equipment in both male and female graves in Scandinavia. Others, namely the expected textile work and metal work and other crafts, gendered respectively female and male, are indeed confirmed as gendered activities in the burial record (Croix 2012: 59-61, 64-66). The archaeological attestation of cooking, either in the main room or in ancillary spaces (or outside) cannot be considered evidence of gender-specific use of space (Croix 2012: 159-160). In the Icelandic context, the only firmly male-gendered activity to be confirmed archaeologically on farmsteads is that of metalwork. While specified spaces exist for this work, they are also frequently included in domestic space in Scandinavia. Sarah Croix rightly observes that there may be practical reasons to separate this work beyond an ideology of gendered segregation of space (risk of fire, noise and mess, control of light for various work processes; Croix 2012: 179-183).

More contentious is the association of female-gendered textile work with segregated space. Karen Milek strongly upholds the concept of the *dyngja* as a firmly segregated female space, and supports its association with sunken-featured buildings (despite a caveat regarding the applicability of the term

dyngja, Milek 2006: 238). This conclusion is supported by a large number of textile-related finds in the sunken-featured buildings of Viking Age Iceland (Milek 2006: 226-227, 232-233; 2012b: 100-105, 119). Less convincing, and indeed difficult to support, is Milek's argument for a Viking Age psychological association of subterranean space with feminine activity. This is based on an equation of the supposed function of sunken-featured buildings as dedicated spaces for textile production with the mythological activity of Norns (Milek 2006: 302; 2012b:120-121). As Croix contends, the presence of textile activity in sunken-featured buildings does not conclusively transform these spaces into function-specific workshops, nor into gender-specific female spaces. Most sunken-featured buildings demonstrate a variety of uses, and furthermore, textile activity is well-attested within other multipurpose, non-segregated spaces such as the main room of the house (Croix 2012: 156-157, 168-178; Milek 2012b: 94, 99). Textile work, while conclusively gendered as female, does not take place exclusively in gender-segregated spaces, nor does the practice of this activity equate to a segregation of space based on gender (Croix 2012: 175, 178).

The nature of the *dyngja* contributes to the problem of identifying gendered space. While the example in *Gísla saga* (Ch. 9) does indicate that it is a separate space located away from the main room, and thus most likely a separate building on the farmstead, its form is not specified, and therefore it cannot automatically be equated with a sunken-featured building. As mentioned in chapter 2, section 2.2.2, the *dyngja*, while associated with women, is a designation of function, and not of form. A *dyngja* could easily be a part of the main house, and a sunken-featured building might well be

designated as a *dyngja*, but our understanding of the use of this term in context is insufficient to determine how it would be applied to built spaces. Milek is not the only archaeologist to support the equation of the *dyngja* with the sunken-featured building, despite the impossibility of limiting these buildings to female-gendered (textile) activity (Crawford and Smith 1999:71-76, 207-213; Weinmann 1994: 331-338). The only building in the sagas conspicuously recognisable as a sunken-featured building, based on its physical form, is on the farm of Hraun in *Eyrbyggja saga*, where it is unambiguously designated as a steam bath and not as a textile workshop (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 16). The function of the *dyngja*, as it appears in the sagas, therefore does not equate with the form or putative use of the sunken feature building within the same corpus. It could be argued that insisting on a synonymy between these concepts in other areas of research is equally imprudent.

By combining the evidence from archaeological research and saga material, the case of gendered activity appears to agree with Croix's conclusions that gendered activities, such as textile work, were performed in multifunctional and gender-neutral spaces. The most important of these was the main room of the house, which remained in use by all members of a household. The performance of certain gender-specific activities did not necessarily lead to a firm segregation of space in the house and farmstead (Croix 2012: 188-189, 243).

4.6 Comparison with *Íslendinga saga*

The narrative of *Íslendinga saga* functions along a conspicuously different model than that of the sampled *Grettis saga*, *Gísla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga.* It

concerns itself mostly with the political interactions (alliances, feuds and battles, commercial and property transactions) between aristocratic families and their leading members. Less attention is given to the exercise of ordinary domestic life, and the portrayal of the house moves away from the primarily pastoral agrarian model of the isolated farmstead.

Households are generally presented in the same way as they are in the sampled *Íslendingasögur,* consisting of the head of the household and a rather large retinue of unnamed servants. However, considerably fewer women are mentioned or appear as characters with any significant action in the plot. While women are present in households, nearly no attention is given to their activities. Not a single instance of textile industry is mentioned, despite the centrality of this trade to Icelandic economy and its ubiquity in the *Íslendingasögur*. Children are also absent except for two notable exceptions. At the farm of Sauðafell, the mistress of the house, Solveig, has just given birth and has risen from childbed and tends to her daughter Þuríðr, while a certain Arngerðr Torfadóttir saves the life of her foster-daughter Guðný by concealing the girl amongst bedclothes during an attack (Ch. 71). At the farm of Eyðihús, it is reported that the farm's water supplies have run out, and that the household's children are requesting water to drink (Ch. 55). In this episode, the presence of the unnamed children is a merely a plot device (though their behaviour is plausible as dependents unable to care for themselves): their request results in their father Sigmundr leaving the house to collect water, and being killed by his enemies immediately upon exiting.

Even though the narrative of *Íslendinga saga* is more interested in political interactions, some traces of more mundane activities find their way

into the saga. Agrarian work is represented mostly by animal husbandry and the pasturage of cattle and horses (Chs. 113, 129). Sheep are also mentioned by the presence of a shepherd at the farm of Lundr and a sheep-house at the farm of Valshamar (Chs. 5, 55), by the use of a sheepskin on the farm of Flugumýrr (Ch. 173), and by the theft of lambs, which are subsequently eaten, from their pasture on the farm of Bjarnarhǫfn (Ch. 103). Arable farming is alluded to by the presence of a plough-ox (*arðuxi*) amongst a herd on the Landeyjar islands (Ch. 129). In contrast with the sampled *Íslendingasögur*, particularly *Eyrbyggja saga*, no agricultural processes are described, and there are only three instances where agricultural work is seen to be performed: hay is harvested at the farm of Hvammr (Ch. 69) and stored in stack-yards at the farm of Eyðihús (Ch. 55), and at the farm of Saurbær a cow-herd is seen to be tending cattle in the byre (*fjós*, Ch. 33).

With its focus on social links, however, *Íslendinga saga* shows a particular reliance on trade for the procurement of resources. The purchase of food, in the form of dried and fresh fish and meal, appears to be an important, if not necessary, supplement to the domestic food production of farms (Chs. 80, 113, 125). Quite a different strategy of provisioning is demonstrated by the bishop Guðmundr of Hólar, who embarks on an expedition to Qxarfjǫrðr to collects tithes in the form of substantial quantities of whale flesh and other types of meat (Ch. 76). Beyond subsistence, alcoholic beverages are also procured for the use of aristocratic households, such as at Kallaðarnes (Ch. 193), and the mead (*mjǫðr*) and light ale (*mungát*) served at a wedding feast at Flugumýrr (Ch. 170).

Far less frequent is the collection of resources directly from the landscape, as is the case of the collection of willow (*víðirif*), perhaps as fuel, from the hills around Oddsstaðir (Ch. 5), and of timber from woods near Leirubakki (Ch. 39). As is the case with the sampled *Íslendingasögur*, the resources that are mentioned are seldom shown in direct relation with the house, despite the understanding that they are ultimately meant for use in a domestic context. Notable exceptions are the storage of Bishop Guðmundr's tithes at the farm Skinnastaðr (Ch. 76), and the notorious *skyrbúr* and its stored dairy products at the farm of Flugumýrr (Ch. 174, see also chapter 3, section 3.3.2.).[10] Timbers collected at Skagafjǫrðr are also used at Reykjaholt in the construction of a new *stofa* (Ch. 90). Whether the timbers were purchased, whether they were imported or collected as driftwood, is not mentioned.[11]

The example of construction at Reykjaholt is also one of the few occurrences of domestic industry in *Íslendingasaga.* It is accompanied only by the presence of two brewers (*heitumaðr, ǫlgerðarmaðr,* Chs. 34, 172-173), a blacksmith who shoes horses at the farm of Víðidalr (Ch. 112), and by the repair or construction of a boat in a boat-house (*naust*) at the farm of Geirþjófsfjarðareyri (Ch. 55).

Scenes within the house are mostly concentrated in the main rooms, the *skáli* and *stofa*, which are, in the context of *Íslendinga saga*, clearly differentiated, separate rooms (see chapter 3, section 3.3.1). As mentioned in chapter 3, the *skáli* is mainly a sleeping room, and has retained the *set* platforms along the long walls, on which beds (designated sleeping places) are

[10] Dairy is also shown to be part of the diet on the farm of Miklabær, *Íslendinga saga* Ch. 96.
[11] Other piles of timber, apparently for trade, appear at the Þing, *Íslendinga saga* Ch. 34.

set up and shared by several people (Chs. 43, 46, 71, 107, 137, 154, 171). Bed-closets (*lokrekkja* or *lokhvíla*) are still used, and the gable-bed (*stafnrekkja* or *stafnhvíla*, see chapter 3, figures **3.1** and **3.2**) makes its appearance. The *stofa* has become a room for social interaction, where meals are taken (Chs. 107, 183), celebrations held (Chs. 168, 170) and other leisure activities performed, including games (Ch. 117) and dances (Ch. 76). It too has retained its platforms along the long walls (*set* or *bekkir*, pl.), and its platform along the gable wall across the axis of the room (*pallr* of *þverpallr*). Just as in the sampled *Íslendingasögur*, meals are taken on movable tables that are set up in front of these platforms (Ch. 183). The *set* and *bekkir* also allow the *stofa* to be used as a spare sleeping chamber despite its primarily social functions, especially for visiting guests, (Chs. 71, 108).

In *Íslendinga saga* the house has acquired a diversified collection of function-specific rooms and, indeed, when Bishop Guðmundr is confined to one room (called *stofa*) with his clerics, the fact that every function of daily life must be performed in one space is considered sufficiently abnormal to merit explicit mention (Ch. 76). Among the other specialised activities which may have their own dedicated rooms in the house are those related to personal hygiene. Thus bathing appears to take place both indoors and in natural hot springs outside (*laugar*, pl., Chs. 65, 76, 154), and latrines are likely located within the house, though these spaces are difficult to locate with certainty (Chs. 76, 138. See also chapter 3, section 3.3.2).

Perhaps the most conspicuous departure from the model of domestic activity presented in the sampled *Íslendingasögur* is the observance of religion in *Íslendinga saga*. There are no references to pagan sanctuaries and practice,

and Christian churches have become ubiquitous on the type of high-status farm represented in the saga (and, of course, in the episcopal centres of Hólar and Skálaholt). The church is seen as an ideally inviolate sanctuary in times of violence (Chs. 138, 154, 199), and in times of peace, the attendance of household members at religious services and the observance of holy days is not uncommon (Chs. 43, 55, 117, 168). There is even an occurrence of a shrine for the private observance of religious office and the storage of religious paraphernalia within the house, at the farm of Mǫðruvellir (Ch. 21).

Overall, the domestic model presented in *Íslendinga saga* is conspicuously different from that presented in the sampled *Íslendingasögur*. The increased focus on social relations in the saga translates to a preoccupation with the management of estates, which is well demonstrated by a curiously gnomic passage concerning the necessary attributes of the well-managed estate:

> *"Margs þarf búit við, frændi," segir Sighvatr. "Ráðamann þyrftir þú ok ráðakonu. Þessir menn skyldi vel birgir ok kunna góða fjárhagi… Þá þarftu, frændi, smalamann at ráða í fyrra lagi," segir Sighvatr. "Hann skyldi vera lítill ok léttr á baki, kvensamr ok liggja lǫngum á kvíagarði... En fylgðarmenn skal ek fá þér, þá er gangi út ok inn eftir þér... Þá menn þyrftir þú ok, sem hefði veiðifarir ok væri banghagir nǫkkut, kynni at gera at skipum ok því ǫðru, er búit þarf... þá menn þarftu, er vel kunnu hrossa at geyma ok hafa ætlan á, hvat í hverja ferð skal hafa... en þá menn þarftu, er hafi atdráttu ok fari í kaupstefnur ok til skipa, skilvísa ok skjóta í viðbragði ok kunni vel fyrir mǫnnum at sjá ok til ferða at skipa.*
>
> '"An estate needs much, kinsman," said Sighvatr. "You will need a steward and a housekeeper. These people should be well equipped and know well the management of money…Then you need, kinsman, to hire a shepherd rather early," said Sighvatr. "He should be small and light on horseback, well-disposed towards women and to lying for a long time in the sheepfold… And I will get followers for you, who will go in and out after you… Then you also need men who have been on fishing expeditions and who know somewhat how to use a hammer, who know what to do on ships and such other things as the estate needs… you then need men who know well how to keep horses and who have a reckoning of what every expedition must have… And then

> you need men who can supply your household and go to markets and to ships, [who are] trustworthy and alert, and [who] know men well and to see to the arrangement of journeys.' (*Íslendingasaga* Ch. 125)

Conclusion

Attempting to reconstruct the activities on the Viking Age and medieval house and farm reveals the limitations of sagas as a source. Even more than the descriptions of the physical construction of domestic buildings, the occurrences of domestic activities are dictated by the vagaries of the narrative. Variations in style between sagas, and especially between the *Íslendingasögur* and the *samtíðarsaga, Íslendinga saga* (note particularly the conspicuous lack of textile work), seem to indicate that whatever details of domestic and productive activity occur in the narratives are there solely by chance.

Some of the most fundamental activities which do occur in the sagas, primarily the *Íslendingasögur*, such as agricultural work and textile industry, and the indications of the multifunction use of the main room, are indeed supported by archaeological analogues. This multifunction use also appears to align with the arguments presented by Croix (2012) against a rigid segregation of space based on gender-specific activities. However, the archaeology of domestic space, as carried out in the context of Viking Age Iceland and Scandinavia, reveals differences in the evidence of activities carried out on domestic sites. Some important activities, such as metalwork, weaving, and the primary processing of resources are under-represented in the sagas, as is the use of spaces outside but adjacent to the house. The input of archaeology suggests that there are many more activities central to domestic life which have not made their way into the saga material.

The interpretation of *Íslendingasaga* is also difficult. Chapter 3 demonstrated that the structural changes in the construction of the house, such as the accretion of auxiliary spaces and the emergence of the medieval row-house (see Høegsberg 2009: 87-94), were accompanied by changes in the use of space. Indeed, the change in housing models between the Viking Age and medieval period are thought to have represented a fundamental change in social organisation and domestic life (Croix 2012: 171). Despite the fact that saga accounts and archaeology sometimes provide different levels of information and detail regarding domestic activities, there is a vast corpus of archaeological material which would undoubtedly lead to a fruitful, dedicated comparative study with saga descriptions. Some interesting and important early steps to this approach can be seen in the interpretation of the early medieval phase at Reykholt (Sveinbjarnardóttir 2012: 64-96).

However, caution must be exercised in using the sagas as a representation of domestic activity, and it must be recognised that the portrait of daily life that is presented is incomplete. In this perspective, the critical analysis of this source supports Karen Milek's contention that it is appropriate to derive an understanding of the use of domestic space through archaeological evidence independent from the influence of literary sources (Milek 2006: 3-7). A more fruitful analysis of domestic activity in the sagas can be derived by an observation of the morphology of the house, which necessarily influences the activities within. This area also provides a more conclusive and reliable comparison with archaeology.

Chapter 5: The House in Social Space

Introduction

One of the most fundamental characteristics of the house, as it is depicted in the sagas, is that it functions as the main venue for social organisation. The concept of social space is a vast one that can have any number of interpretations. For the purposes of this chapter, the focus will be directed towards the role of the house and farmstead, as physical objects and built spaces, with regards to the social interactions within them, or at a local and national scale in the context of Iceland and Norway. The main manifestation of this interaction is in the practice of hospitality, which will itself be interpreted from a predominantly material point of view, focussing on pragmatic considerations.

In addition to the activities that went on within the house and farmstead, the portrait of the living house requires an examination of how these spaces insert themselves within the social landscape of the saga world. In the case of Viking Age and medieval Iceland, social space and geographical space interact in interesting ways. Uninhabited before the Scandinavian migration, pre-modern Iceland was characterised by a settlement pattern devoid of towns or villages, or any sizeable conglomerations of dwellings. Instead, the population was concentrated in individual farmsteads, isolated and spread widely in a landscape that remained mostly empty. The farmstead thus became the focal point of social organisation, and the world of human society was placed in a dichotomy with the uninhabited wilds. This distinction may however be nuanced. Kirsten Hastrup, for example, has proposed a model of concentric gradation from social to wild, with the house at its centre

representing the core of social life, passing through intermediate zones such as the homefield with its outbuildings, to liminal property boundaries and finally the wilderness beyond, devoid of human settlement (Hastrup 1985: 60, 136-144; 1990b: 48-51).

Social interactions and exchanges in the sagas involve the constant exchange of people, information, and goods between farms. The overall depiction of the farmstead in the sampled sagas, both the *Íslendingasögur* and in *Íslendinga saga*, generally agrees with Hastrup's model and farmsteads appear as active nodes in an elaborate and far-reaching social network, set in a vast and mostly empty geographical landscape. The objective of this chapter is not to describe at length the nature of these social exchanges, but to examine the role played by the house and farmstead, as physical structures and defined spaces, within the narratives' social landscape. Social activity in the sagas appears very much dependent on the house and farmstead not only as centres of population but as the anchors of sedentary living. The patterns of sociability, represented most explicitly by the conventions of hospitality, are highly influenced by the material setting of daily life and the dichotomy of domestic versus wild. Thus, while the dispensation of hospitality in the sagas cannot be described without mentioning the lavish feasts given to mark seasonal celebrations and special occasions (some of which play important roles in the progression of the saga narratives), an exploration of the mechanisms of hospitality reveals that its practical realities were much more mundane and focussed on the physical aspects of human maintenance, and isolation from the outside world. With the notable exception of seasonal assemblies held in

specific open-air locations, it is essentially within the house that society operates.

While it might be difficult to directly equate the manifestations of hospitality and social behaviour relating to the house, as they are described in the sampled sagas, with archaeological analogues, there nevertheless exists a growing corpus of theoretical approaches and methodologies in social archaeology which can help understand the use of space from a material point of view. Beyond what the physical layout and arrangement of the houses themselves can tell us, approaches such as space syntax analysis can elucidate the logic of internal movement within Viking Age buildings. Theories of materiality and phenomenology provide a framework to understand the interaction of people with the physical and built environment around them. Finally, network analysis, applied to various artefact assemblages, can shine a light on the types of long-distance exchanges that left material traces in individual settlements. These approaches will be explored in section 5.4.

This chapter also relies on another type of literary source, the Eddic poem *Hávamál*, to help with the understanding of Viking Age norms of sociality and hospitality, also from a primarily material and pragmatic point of view. Though it may at first seem incompatible with the saga material which forms the main body of literary evidence in this study, some important justifications for the use and applicability of *Hávamál* will be discussed in section 5.3.1.

The pragmatic concerns of hospitality in the sagas and *Hávamál* can help us to understand the material dimensions of social behaviours which are still difficult to ascertain through archaeology. Sagas, with their enlightening

depiction of material culture in use, can thus contribute to our understanding of how domestic space was used in a social perspective, and how the 'living house' in the social world of Viking Age and medieval Iceland was very much a tangible, physical place.

5.1 The Social House in the *Íslendingasögur*

5.1.1 Travel and Geographical Space

In all the sampled sagas, maintaining far-reaching social networks involves constant and frequent travel between farmsteads. These exchanges can happen on the very local scale, between neighbouring farms in the same valley, to wider travel within larger geographical districts, or even national or international travel. It is interesting to note that the examples of travel between farms are represented in very much the same way in Iceland and in Norway in *Grettis saga*, *Gísla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*. Furthermore, travel between Iceland and Norway is so frequently mentioned or alluded to that it appears to be a common occurrence. Thus, Iceland and Norway, however distant, are portrayed in the sagas as being very much part of the same social world. Social networks are seen to extend widely not only within these countries, but between them as well.

Although travel between farms is paramount to the maintenance of social links, transit between them is seldom described in detail. Journeys often start in one location and end up in another without expending any narrative space on the travel itself. Narrative sequences that take place in the wilderness or in scenes of transit between farms do in fact occur, but the bulk of the action in the sagas takes place within the context of the farmstead. This includes the

farm's grounds, and not only the house. Although a farm's grounds are 'outside', they are in direct association with the house and constitute part of the physical setting of the farm as a social node.[1] This situation applies even to the outlaw sagas (*Grettis saga* and *Gísla saga*), where, because of their outlawry, the protagonists are excluded from regular social interaction. While the outlaw protagonists Grettir and Gísli do in fact end up spending more time in the wilderness and liminal spaces, much of their movements still involves poorly-described transit between centres of population. The significance of domestic space in relation to these scenarios of outlawry will be explored further, in section 5.1.5, below.

The ubiquity of travel between centres of population and the potentially long distances involved might appear at odds with the fact that travel and transit through the liminal spaces between farms receives so little attention in saga narratives. What matters most, it would appear, is achieving contact between farmsteads, regardless of distance and the requirements of travel. The journey itself appears to be relatively unimportant. The interaction of people with wild spaces and their management of travel and movement, appear to be principally dictated by the requirements of maintaining social ties. Thus, physical geography becomes subordinate to social geography.

5.1.2 Hospitality: Protection From the Outside World

However, the realities of travel and distance are not unacknowledged, and one of the most important mechanisms for the maintenance of social ties in the saga world is the display of hospitality by householders towards those who

[1] See the description of the schematic farm in the saga world, described in the introduction (esp. Sample and Methodology). See also Hreinsson et al 1997: 399-401.

make the journey to visit their farmsteads. The most explicit manifestation of hospitality, where a host's ability to entertain guests is put on ostentatious display, is that of the feast. Often held on the occasion of seasonal celebrations, or to mark special occasions such as weddings or funerals, these feasts involve the generous dispensing of food, drink and entertainment by the host at his farmstead to guests travelling in from near or far. In these situations, travel is deliberately instigated for the purpose of displaying hospitality on a grand scale, and the resulting encounters often involve an exchange of gifts (especially to departing guests) as a further display of material wealth.

These feasts are relatively frequent in the sagas (*Grettis saga* Chs. 7, 19, 36, 43; *Gísla saga* Chs. 5, 10, 15, 16, 18).[2] One passage in *Grettis saga* shows these seasonal feasts being held by various householders in turn:

> *...ok fóru síðan á brott ok inn í Súrnadal til Eiríks ǫlfúss, lends manns; hann tók við þeim ǫllum um vetrinn. Þá hǫfðu þeir samdrykkju um jólin við þann mann, er Hallsteinn hét ok kallaðr hestr, ok veitti Eiríkr fyrr vel ok trúliga. Síðan veitti Hallsteinn...*
> '… and then [they] went away and into Súrnadalr to chieftain Eirík Ǫlfúss's ('Ale-Eager's') [farm]; he took them all in over the winter. Then during Yule they had a drinking party with that man who was called Hallsteinn and was known as *hestr* ['horse']. Eiríkr hosted [them] first, well and faithfully, then Hallsteinn hosted [them]… (Súrnadalr, Norway, *Grettis saga* Ch. 7)

Instances of hospitality between kin also occur, and are especially frequent in *Grettis saga* (Chs. 16, 30, 34, 41, 53, 61, 67, 69). This situation can be assumed to have been common practice, and the added attachments and affections of family ties would prompt travel for visitation.

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[2] *Eyrbyggja saga* departs from the model by having conspicuously few representations of feasting (see *Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 19). Other examples of celebratory public gathering are games, held outside in proximity to one or more host farms. Though the house is less directly involved with this kind of event, it can be assumed that visiting participants receive hospitality. See *Grettis saga* Ch. 15, *Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 43. Another notable occurrence of such games is in *Egils saga* (Ch. 40), where young Egill proves his ability with weapons, and displays his volatile temper, by killing another child.

However, most instances of hospitality involve the unexpected guest, the traveller who, whilst travelling, seeks shelter for the night along the way. Here, the reality of travel is acknowledged, even if the traveller's journey is not given narrative explanation. The farm where hospitality is sought along the way, even if it is not the traveller's final destination, is nevertheless an oasis of human society in the landscape and can also be considered a 'destination' of sorts. Far from being focused on a display of wealth, or as a consequence of familial duty or affection, the hospitality extended during these episodes is of a very practical nature: the traveller, having endured the hardships of the road and the wilds, is to be given the necessities of shelter, sustenance and comfort to restore an optimum physical state before resuming the journey.

At its furthest remove from the extravagant liberality of the seasonal feast, hospitality can occur as a matter of emergency. On two occasions in *Grettis saga*, both in Norway, shipwrecked sailors are given emergency lodgings (*Grettis saga* Chs. 12, 18). The former instance demonstrates some attention to the practical aspects of daily domestic life by acknowledging the limitations of individual farms' resources. No single farm can accommodate all the rescued sailors, and they are divided amongst the farms of the district:

> *Á einu hausti urðu þangat sæhafa kaupmenn á hafskipi ok brutu þar í Víkinni. Flosi tók við þeim fjórum eða fimm… Víða vistuðusk þeir þar um Víkina...*
> It happened one autumn that merchants were driven off course in Vík and were shipwrecked there. Flosi took in four or five of them… They [the shipwrecked crew] took shelter in many places around Vík… (*Grettis saga* Ch. 12)

Another similar and very practical demonstration of this kind of 'public-mindedness' with regards to shelter in *Grettis saga* can be seen with the construction, also in Norway, of a shelter for the unrestricted use of coastal

sailors waiting for good weather (*Grettis saga* Ch. 38). Shelter is thus seen as a very real and practical necessity, and as one of the primary objectives of functional hospitality.

In between the extremes of feasting and emergency shelter, there appears to have been certain expectations regarding the hospitality offered to ordinary guests and travellers. The episode in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 51) where the bearers of the deceased Þórgunna's corpse stop at the farm of Nes it neðra offers an insight into the mechanisms of hospitality and helps to illustrate what constituted a proper reception (see the full passage quoted in Capter 4, section 4.4). The householders at Nes it neðra give a poor welcome to the corpse-bearers, allowing them only to stay indoors, in the main room, the *stofa*, no less. But they are given no food, and they prepare to spend the night without taking an evening meal. This appears to be what angers Þórgunna's ghost, and prompts her (as a revenant) to prepare a meal for her party. When the terrified householders agree to provide the group with full hospitality, the mollified Þórgunna desists and returns to being a properly lifeless corpse, bothering no-one from then on.

Since Þórgunna's first preoccupation was to provide her party with a meal, food appears to have been one of the central elements of hospitality. In another intriguing demonstration of hospitality in *Eyrbyggja saga*, a certain Geirríðr has built her farm, at Borgardalr, across a main road specifically in order to encourage travellers to stop and refresh themselves. Her reputation was primarily built on her liberality with food:

> *...þar stóð jafnan borð ok matr á, gefinn hverjum er hafa vildi; af slíku þótti hon it mesta gǫfugkvendi.*

> ‘There always stood a table there, laden with food, given to anyone who wanted to have it. Because of this she was thought to be the greatest of ladies.’ (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 8)

Similarly, a householder named Þorgils at the farm of Reykjahólar, in *Grettis saga*, is renowned for his exceptional hospitality. Þorgils’ generosity with food is considered as important as his willingness to provide physical shelter to those who seek it (including outlaws like Grettir), for as long as they like (*Grettis saga* Chs. 27, 50). Another direct equation of good hospitality with providing food comes again from *Eyrbyggja saga*, where a certain Þórólfr visits Snorri goði at Helgafell on matters of business. Snorri invites him to stay, but this offer is refused by Þórólfr who declares that he has no need to eat Snorri’s food (…*Þórólfr kvazk eigi þurfa at eta mat hans*… *Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 31). Finally, the importance of food in the proper observance of hospitality is demonstrated by the episode at Sæból in *Gísla saga* (repeated in *Eyrbyggja saga* with its location changed to Helgafell, Ch. 13) in which Bǫrkr commands his wife Þórdís to properly receive Eyjólfr, her brother Gísli’s killer. Þórdís does not want to observe social convention in this case, and declares that porridge (as opposed to a proper meal) is a sufficient welcome for her brother’s killer (*Gísla saga* Ch. 37). Thus, not only the availability of food, but the type of food served, could carry socially significant meaning.

In addition to food, the episode with Þórgunna’s coffin-bearers indicates other elements that are required for good hospitality, notably fire for light and heat and a chance to recover from the effects of harsh weather. Even though the coffin-bearers had removed their clothing to sleep, when proper hospitality is offered, their wet outer clothes are taken from them and dry ones are provided (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 51). The removal of a guest’s wet clothes

also occurs at the farm of Tunga in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 61), and at Þorfinnr's farm in Norway and Gilsbakki in *Grettis saga* (Chs. 16, 47). This very conspicuous gesture appears to be linked with the practice, often described or alluded to, of people removing their outer clothing to sleep naked or in their linen underclothes (*línklæði*, *Grettis saga* Chs. 35, 64, 75; *Eyrbyggja saga* Chs. 16, 30, 37, 51, 60). In both cases, the removal of outer clothing is linked with a demarcation of interior domestic space from the outside world. In the case of the removal of wet clothing in a hospitality scenario, this function is explicit. Bad weather only happens outdoors: the house exists, as a physical structure, to isolate its inhabitants and protect them from the elements. Therefore, the inside world is dry and warm, and this is also where another consequence of outdoor activity, hunger, can be remedied. Similarly, outside clothes, or the clothes worn during the day, are associated with the performance of daily tasks, of activity and work. If they are dry, they can be worn inside without the need to change, but they are still removed to sleep. Sleep, especially in a bed (here understood as a sleeping place on the *set* platform, except in the case of bed-closets), is the most passive of a person's states, and consequently the most vulnerable, but also the one most associated with comfort and inactivity. Protection and comfort are, along with sustenance, the hallmarks of the interior domestic world. Outside clothing, as a necessary layer of protection for the body, is also a marker of the active world outside the house, and its removal can be seen as a marker of a complete transition from the outside world to the innermost core of domestic living.

That the social world is contained indoors is also demonstrated in *Gísla saga*, in perhaps less material ways. When the servant Rannveig is sent from

the farm or Sæból to the neighbouring farm of Hól basically as a spy, Gísli, the householder at Hól (before his outlawry), greets her and invites her inside. When she refuses to enter, Gísli sends her back home to Sæból. When Rannveig is in transit between farms, her status is aberrant and she is, in a sense, excluded from the social world taking place indoors. Gísli is willing to integrate her, but does not accept her desire to remain outdoors: she must either come inside at Hól, or go home to Sæból: *Gísli bað hana gera annathvárt, vera þar eða fara heim* (*Gísla saga* Ch. 12). She is not permitted to occupy a liminal, exterior place between the two houses: human society happens indoors.

5.1.3 Hospitality: Practical Responsibilities

In scenarios of hospitality, it is evident then that the host had a duty of care to provide shelter and the necessary resources to sustain and comfort his guests. It appears however that a host might not only be expected to protect his guests from natural elements, but from human or social threats as well. In *Grettis saga*, three householders recognised for their hospitality, Þorkell of Saltfjǫrðr in Norway, Þorgils of Reykjahólar and Bjǫrn of Holm in Iceland, are also shown to provide sanctuary and protection to their charges. These three hosts impose restrictions upon their guests to ensure that harmony reigns (or at least that violence is avoided) between difficult charges who have been placed under their protection (*Grettis saga* Chs. 21, 50, 58). In *Gísla saga*, the householder Ingjaldr on Hergilsey also promises similar protection to the outlawed Gísli (*Gísla saga* Ch. 25).

This inclination to protect those under one's roof might even extend to unwanted guests. In *Grettis saga*, a conflict arises between Þorbjǫrn øxnamegin ('Oxen-strength') and Atli of Bjarg over the servant Áli (*Grettis saga* Ch. 45). The servant Áli has fled the abusive Þorbjǫrn and sought shelter at Bjarg. While this situation is undeniably problematic for Atli, he has received Áli, albeit grudgingly, and has taken up the duty of sheltering him, refusing to cast him out without reason: *"...ekki nenni ek at draga hann ór húsum út."* ('"I am not inclined to drag him out of the house."'*Grettis saga* Ch. 45). Although Áli is not an ordinary guest and explicitly intends to enter into Atli's service, he has also sought protection at Bjarg. Atli's dedication to his role of host and householder and his commitment to protecting those (literally) under his roof eventually leads to his death at Þorbjǫrn's hand.

While a host's responsibilities towards his guests are easy to understand, guests are also seen to have responsibilities towards their host. This is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of hospitality in the sampled *Íslendingasögur*, because it brings the idea of regular, functional shelter and maintenance even further from the extravagance of feasts and high-status gatherings. Two instances show quite explicitly that long-term guests, those who have chanced upon hospitality at a farm and who have not come for a special occasion, were expected to earn their keep by becoming full, if temporary, members of the household and thus contribute to the economic activity of the farmstead. One of these instances occurs in *Grettis saga*, where the householder Þorsteinn at Ljárskógar casts out the lazy Grettir from his farm, and withdraws his hospitality, after Grettir's refusal to contribute to the household's work during a prolonged stay:

> *...sagdi [Þorsteinn] Gretti, at hann leitaði sér annars hælis en vera þar, – "því at ek sé, at þú vill ekki starfa, en mér henta ekki þeir men, sem eigi vinna."*
> '… [Þorsteinn] said to Grettir that he should seek out another shelter rather than stay there, – "because I see that you will not work, and men who do not work are not suitable for me."' (*Grettis saga* Ch. 53)

The second instance involves the haughty Þórgunna, who takes up prolonged residence at Fróðá in *Eyrbyggja saga*, declaring that she is in no way afraid of domestic work, although she imposes her conditions:

> *"Gott þykki mér at fara til vistar með þér, en vita skaltu þat, at ek nenni lítt at gefa fyrir mik, því at ek em vel verkfær; er mér ok verkit óleitt, en þó vil ek engi vásverk vinna…"*
> '"It seems good to me to take lodgings with you, but you will know that I am little inclined to give [pay] for myself [for my upkeep], because I am well able to work; and I do not despise work, though I do not want to do any wet work…"' (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 50)

True to her word, the difficult Þórgunna contributes actively to the household's work, applying herself to domestic industry (textile work) and agricultural work (haymaking), before her untimely demise (*Eyrbyggja saga* Chs. 50-51). This is the same Þórgunna who returns as a revenant in the aforementioned passage where her corpse-bearers are denied hospitality at Nes it neðra (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 51, see the full passage quoted in chapter 4, section 4.4). This episode in itself could be seen as a perversion of Þórgunna's active participation in her adopted household's upkeep. In any respect, Þórgunna clearly accepts her responsibility as a long-term guest, and de-facto member of the household, to contribute to the farmstead's economic activity in exchange for hospitality.

5.1.4 The House and Legal Matters

In addition to the primordial function of the house as a physical shelter against the elements and the resulting importance of hospitality, the role of farmsteads as centres of population and social oases in a comparatively empty landscape also has consequences for the administration of social affairs. This could be tied, like hospitality, with the figure of the householder: the leading farmer in a district, for example, was expected to help his lesser neighbours with their legal disputes, just as the farmers of Snæfelsnes turn to Snorri goði at Helgafell (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 31). More often, it is based on the place itself, on the house or farmstead as an active node in the social (and legal) landscape. Other than organised assemblies, the Alþing or other regional assemblies, farmsteads are the main venue where everyday business of social importance is conducted. Despite their relative geographical isolation, farmsteads, as the only concentrations of population, are considered 'public' space. Various types of social contract and proclamations are given legitimacy by the presence of witnesses, and therefore need to be conducted in public. Thus farmsteads play an important role in publicising and legitimating such transactions.

For example, when a killing has taken place, the killer has a social responsibility to declare the killing at a farmstead which, as a centre of population, has the effect of making the killing public knowledge. The killing, thus declared, becomes legal, and the killer can be held accountable in legal proceedings and responsible for any subsequent compensation required. An undeclared murder is considered a far more serious crime (*Grágás* Chs. 87,

88).[3] Four such declarations of killings occur in *Grettis saga* (Chs. 43, 45, 48, 49), of which the killing of Atli of Bjarg can serve as a representative example:

> *Síðan fell hann [Atli] fram á þreskǫldinn. Þá kómu fram konur, er í stofunni hǫfðu verit; þær sá, at Atli var dauðr. Þá var Þorbjǫrn á bak kominn ok lýsti víginu á hendr sér ok reið heim eptir þat.*
> 'Afterwards [Atli] fell forward on the threshold. Then the women, who had been in the main room, came forward: they saw that Atli was dead. Þorbjǫrn had mounted his horse and declared that the killing was by his hand, and he rode home after that.' (*Grettis saga,* Ch. 45)

Also with regard to killings, the compensation for the killing of a slave must also be declared, paid and witnessed at the slave owner's house (*Eyrbyggja saga* Chs. 43, 44). Failure to properly compensate the death of a slave within an appropriate timeframe would, in fact, result in a charge of lesser outlawry for the killer (*Grágás* Ch. 111).

Apart from matters of killing, other public transactions are seen in *Gísla saga* through two instances of divorce, one merely threatened (Ásgerðr to Þorkell at Hól, *Gísla saga* Ch. 9) and one realised (Þórdís from Bǫrkr at Sæból, *Gísla saga* Ch. 37; this same episode takes place in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Ch. 14). In both cases, the declaration must be public to be valid: Ásgerðr threatens to call witnesses, and Þórdís announces her separation from Bǫrkr to the assembled household and guests at Sæból. In another type of public transaction in *Grettis saga*, the ailing Ásmundr calls his kinsmen over to his farm at Bjarg to witness the succession of the farm's ownership and administration to his son Atli (*Grettis saga* Ch. 42). This is as much to avoid

[3] The chronology of saga writing poses a similar problem with law codes as with archaeology, in that it is difficult to ascertain which legal system is being followed. The codes of *Grágás* were in use during the Icelandic Commonwealth period, before the imposition of Norwegian rule in Iceland in the 1260s. In approximately 1280 a new code was adopted, *Jónsbók*, which replaced *Grágás* (see *Grágás* trans. Dennis, Foote and Perkins, 1980: 5-6). It is beyond the focus of this thesis to unravel this question of historicity in the sagas, but it is a factor in the composition of saga narratives which is worth considering. All legal examples here are taken from *Grágás*.

any confusion regarding the succession amongst Ásmundr's kin, as to make the property transaction public, and legal.

Legal transactions performed at the home can also overlap with, or be connected to, the wider-reaching setting of legal administration conducted at assemblies. Official accusations and summonses to attend public trials held at assemblies must be delivered at the defendant's or intended recipient's house, as is the case in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 16) when Geirríðr is publicly accused of being a witch (*kveldriða*), although the fact of simply ensuring the summons was heard could suffice:

> *...þat váru þá lǫg, at stefna heiman vígsǫk svá at vegendr heyrði eða at heimili þeira...*
> … it was then the law that a summons in the case of manslaughter be delivered away from home so that the killers heard it, or at their home… (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 22)

Although public assemblies had a greater stamp of authority and were the venue for proper legal judgement, legal proceedings could also be initiated at the homestead if waiting for an assembly proved impossible or inadvisable. Thus an ad-hoc trial, called a 'door-court' (*duradómr*) could be called (provided witnesses could be found) to decide on legal issues and pass sentences. Door-courts are called twice in *Eyrbyggja saga*, once at Mávahlíð where Þórarinn is accused of horse-theft (Chs. 18-19) and, entertainingly, at Fróðá where an entire party of revenants led by the deceased Þórir viðleggr ('wood-leg'), whose habit is to sit by the main room's fire as in life, is prosecuted for trespassing and spreading disease:[4]

> *...hann [Snorri goði] gaf þau ráð til, at… sækja þá menn alla í duradómi... Eptir þat stefndi Kjartan Þóri viðlegg, en Þórðr kausi Þóroddi bónda, um þat, at þeir gengi þar um hýbýli ólofat ok firrði menn bæði lífi ok heilsu; ǫllum var þeim stefnt, er við eldinn sátu.*

[4] Another passage describing the haunting at Fróðá is quoted in Chapter 1, section 1.4.3.

> *Síðan var nefndr duradómr ok sagðar fram sakar ok farit at ǫllum málum sem á þingadómum…*
> '… he [Snorri goði] counselled that… all the [dead] men be prosecuted in a door-court… After that Kjartan summoned Þórir wood-leg, and Þórðr kausi ('cat') [summoned] the farmer Þóroddr, at that time, because they walked about the homestead without permission and deprived people of both life and health; all of those who sat by the fire were summoned. Afterwards a door was called and charges brought forth and the entire affair happened as at a court at an assembly…' (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 55)

Similarly, Snorri goði initiates a confiscation court (for the administration of an outlaw's forfeited property) at the home of the outlaw Óspakr, even if he isn't there: the presence of witnesses is sufficient to make the whole matter legal, and Óspakr's property is confiscated to distribute to the victims of his depredations (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 60). The term 'door-court' for this type of legal proceeding taking place at a farmstead suggests that the material reality of the house, represented by the door acting as the threshold between the inner (social) world and the outer (wild, or socially neutral) world, is fundamental to the cognitive understanding of the house and farm as centres of social activity on all levels, including legal transactions.

The importance of homesteads in a social/legal perspective is further illustrated by another episode involving Snorri goði in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 31). Snorri is acting in defence of a certain Þórólfr, whose slaves have been killed for attempting to burn down the farm at Úlfarsfell. However, when they were captured in the midst of their attempted arson, they were not kept at Úlfarsfell (the scene of the crime), but taken over to the farm of Vaðilshöfð where they were killed. Snorri argues that because of their misdeed, the slaves had forfeited their legal immunity, but only at Úlfarsfell. Therefore, they could have legally been killed for the crime had they remained there. But because

they were killed in a different location, where their legal immunity still applied, their killing is illegal and requires compensation:

> *Þá færði Snorri þat fram, at þrælarnir váru óhelgir á þeim vættvangi, – "en þat, at þér færðuð þá inn í Vaðilshǫfða ok drápuð þá þar, þat hygg ek, at þeir væri þar eigi óhelgir."*
> 'The Snorri declared that the slaves were without [legal] immunity in the place where the crime was committed – "and that, because they were taken to Vaðilshöfð and killed there, I believe, that they were not without [legal] immunity there." (*Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 31)

Snorri is being promised the woods of Krákuness by Þórólfr for his assistance in this matter, and so his judgement is hardly disinterested. Still, this defence suggests that individual farmsteads, even while being in constant social relation, were in a sense self-contained social and legal worlds, and that they could function autonomously. This further reinforces the importance of the homestead as the fundamental unit of social organisation.

This importance of the house in legal matters is supported by Iceland's earlier medieval law code, *Grágás* (ed. Finsen 1852).[5] The need for witnesses and for the publication of all stages of legal transactions, from the declaration of wrongdoings and the initiation of legal suits to summonses and the passing of judgements, is universal throughout the entire law (*Grágás*, passim). Unless witnesses are found at organised public events such as assemblies, they are logically to be found at farmsteads as centres of population, and among neighbouring farms in a district. This is the case, for example, with the dissolution of a marriage by either party (*Grágás* Ch. 149).[6] Some prescriptions specifically require declarations to be made at a farm: a killing, especially if committed in the wilderness away from centres of population, must be declared at the nearest house (*Grágas* Ch. 87), and confiscation courts

[5] See page 199, note 3.
[6] *Grágás* Ch. 150, however, states that the dissolution must be ratified by a bishop.

must take place at the home of the outlaw whose property is being confiscated and distributed (*Grágás* Chs. 48-51, 52, 54, 20, 62). While not required to take place in a domestic context, it appears that summonses were usually delivered at the home of the defendant (*Grágás* Ch. 72). It is difficult to pinpoint precisely which legal framework constituted the norm in the saga authors' context (see this chapter, note 3). However, it does appear that these authors and compilers were aware of proper legal procedures and concerned with representing them accurately in the narratives. The narrative episodes, taking place in a populated, social world, furthermore help to understand how the social house fitted within the administration of these legal affairs.

5.1.5 Outlawry

Grettis saga and *Gísla saga* provide an interesting opportunity to see how social networks function, in the Iceland of the saga world, when the main characters become outlaws: both Grettir and Gísli see themselves increasingly excluded from society and from the world of communal exchange which takes place, primarily, in the domestic environment. Even though hospitality to travellers appears to have been ubiquitous, it did function within certain boundaries. Even the aforementioned Þorgils of Reykjahólar in *Grettis saga,* renowned for his open-handedness, bestows his generosity and hospitality upon free men only: *...hann gaf hverjum frjálsum manni mat, svá lengi sem þiggja vildi...* ('…he gave every free man food, [for] as long as wanted to receive [it]…'*Grettis saga* Ch. 27). The distinction of status is important here. If the mechanisms of social cohesion, such as hospitality, are meant to operate only between free inhabitants and exclude those of servile status (already seen

as being regarded more as property than as individuals), it can be assumed that they also excluded those who were outside the law.[7]

As the saga narratives progress, both Grettir and Gísli are increasingly refused hospitality, and multiple passages in *Grettis saga* explicitly mention the harm that can befall those who are known to harbour outlaws (*Grettis saga* Chs. 47, 49, 52, 65, 69). A certain Grímr specifically mentions the legal implications of sheltering the outlawed Grettir:

> *Grímr bað hann vitja sín, ef hann þyrfti ásjár við, – "en forðask mun ek lǫg, at verða sekr um bjargir við þik."*
> 'Grímr invited him [Grettir] to visit him, if he needed help – "but I must avoid that law, [by which one] becomes outlawed for helping you."' (*Grettis saga* Ch. 47)

This prescription was in fact enshrined in law, and *Grágás* confirms that assisting and sheltering an outlaw was indeed punishable by lesser outlawry (*Grágas* Chs. 70, 73).[8]

Even when Grettir is welcome, harbouring him is risky. When, disguised as the traveller Gestr, he receives hospitality at the troll-haunted farm at Sandhaugar and proceeds to slay the monster, he is subsequently sheltered but in secret (his identity having been guessed), due to the social risk posed by his outlawry (*Grettis saga* Ch. 65). When he is sheltered by his mother Ásdís at the family farm of Bjarg, he refuses to stay because of the risk this represents for her: *Grettir kvað hana engar ónáðir af sér skyldu hafa...* ('Grettir told her she should suffer no unrest on his account…' *Grettis saga* Ch. 69). For some, like Grímr, the first impulse towards shelter and hospitality is still intact despite the danger of harbouring an outlaw, and beyond familial

[7] Another, perhaps more unusual limitation of hospitality is demonstrated by Arnkell of Bólstað, in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 36), who refuses to offer hospitality to anyone from outside his own district.
[8] The social significance of various types of vagrants and social outcasts, and their use as plot devices in the narratives of the *Íslendingasögur*, are explored in Cochrane 2012.

ties and gratitude for services rendered such as at Sandhaugar. For most others, Grettir is entirely unwelcome. Though examples of such exclusion are less frequent in *Gísla saga*, it is significant that Gísli's outlawry is considered a sufficient threat to transcend even family ties, and Gísli's brother Þorkell refuses to shelter him (*Gísla saga* Chs. 23, 24).

Both heroes must, in the end, resort to using temporary shelters which serve the purpose of protecting them, but that are aberrant forms of housing bereft of all the social activity normally associated with the domestic environment. Grettir stays in a cave shelter at Fagraskogafjall (*Grettis saga* Ch. 58), and builds huts in the wilderness at Arnarvatnsheiðr, Þórisdalr and finally Drangey (*Grettis saga* Chs. 55, 61, 74, 80, 82). For his part, Gísli must resort to staying in specially constructed underground passages designed for the purpose of concealment (*jarðhús* or *fylgsni*, see Chapter 1, section 1.1, and Chapter 2, section 2.2.1), at Þorgerðr's house at Vaðil (*Gísla saga* Ch. 23), at Ingjaldr's house on Hergilsey (*Gísla saga* Ch. 25), and at his wife Auðr's farm at Geirþjófsfjǫrðr (*Gísla saga* Chs. 29, 33).

Grettir's first deliberate attempt to live without society, on Arnarvatnsheiðr, has the curious and ironic consequence of drawing to him other outlaws who, recognising his exceptional strength, hope to find shelter and protection with him (*Grettis saga* Ch. 55). Though the idea is never developed, Grettir in a sense acts as a catalyst for those cast out of society to attempt to build their own, aberrant social organisation. It is interesting to note, as well, that Grettir's hut fulfils the same role in this aberrant context as the house normally would in the regular social environment.

In both *Grettis saga* and *Gísla saga*, the characters' general exclusion from society because of their outlawry is given a tangible illustration through their increasing exclusion from domestic hospitality. By being refused access to hospitality and the material shelter and comfort of the domestic environment, they are pushed farther and farther away from the only population centres, and the only venues for proper social interaction and inclusion, which Iceland has to offer. The prevailing conventions of hospitality, however, appear to be quite solidly anchored in the social fabric and both outlaws do find intermittent shelter during their social exile. Both Grettir and Gísli find shelter with figures renowned specifically for harbouring outlaws: Grettir with Bjǫrn of Holm (*Grettis saga* Ch. 58), and Gísli with Þorgerðr, at Vaðil (*Gísla saga* Ch. 23). In the end though, only family members (Grettir's brother Illugi, Gísli's wife Auðr) stand by them. It is perhaps indicative of the prevalence of hospitality that both outlaws meet their end partly as a result of magical forces that are specifically designed to exclude them from social networks of inclusion and assistance (*Grettis saga* Ch. 35; *Gísla saga* Ch. 18). It could be said that the breakdown of the social propensity for hospitality can only be achieved through such supernatural intervention. In an interesting twist, Gísli's social exclusion is seen to be mirrored by his pursuers, who on two occasions are forced to sleep outdoors in their quest to track him down (*Gísla saga* Chs. 29, 31).

The general view of the house in the social landscape of the sampled *Íslendingasögur* reveals a certain material preoccupation with the house as a place of shelter from the outside world and the seat of social life. Hospitality is, for the most part, a very practical concern, aimed at fulfilling the material

needs of guests and travellers. This necessary focus on the materiality of shelter and sustenance translates into an understanding of the social world as operating indoors. Exclusion from social order, such as occurs in outlawry, is also deliberate removal from the material benefits of shelter and hospitality.

5.2 The Social House in *Íslendinga saga*

The significant differences in the representation of the house in *Íslendinga saga*, previously discussed, as well as the narrative's focus on the political machinations of social élites, predictably result in a different portrait of the house in a social context. Despite these differences however, some fundamental elements remain unchanged in the house's integration into Iceland's social landscape. Most significantly, Iceland's settlement pattern is the same as in the *Íslendingasögur*, with individual farmsteads scattered widely in a mostly empty landscape. Travel over potentially long distances is still a paramount factor in the maintenance of social communications and networks, and the realities of travel still generate the same material needs for shelter, sustenance and comfort. Occurrences of regular hospitality are rare in *Íslendinga saga*. At the farm of Hvammr, the householder Bǫðvarr offers hospitality to a party travelling with a certain Þorvaldr. Bǫðvarr specifically offers to provide food, which, as has been seen, is one of the fundamental elements of proper hospitality. While his offer is refused, he is thanked and his generosity is praised (*Íslendinga saga* Ch. 3). Later in the saga, Hvammr is also among the locations to shelter Norwegian sailors who have just arrived with a ship carrying bishop Guðmundr (*Íslendinga saga*, Ch. 58). At the farm of Eyðihús, a certain Starkaðr asks for hospitality from the householder

Sigmundr. While this is in fact part of a ruse to get Sigmundr to leave the protection of the house so that he can be killed, his attackers are employing familiar mechanisms of hospitality, as seen in the *Íslendingasögur* (*Íslendinga saga* Ch. 55).

These mechanisms of hospitality are, however, mostly thrown into disarray by the belligerent interactions of the factions in the saga. Requested hospitality is refused as often in the saga as it is granted (*Íslendinga saga* Chs. 90, 101, 141), and one example at the farm of Egilsstaðir leads to a deadly altercation:

> *Jón… vildi eigi gefa þeim mat. En þeir hǫfðu eigi at síðr. En um nóttina gekk hann í skála ok veitti Vigfúsi banasár…*
> 'Jón… did not want to give them [Vigfús and his band] food, but they took it nonetheless. And in the night he went into the main room and gave Vigfús his death blow…' (*Íslendinga saga* Ch. 90)

This subversion of the regular conventions of hospitality is manifested on several occasions through the depredations of marauding bands who, like Vigfús and his men, help themselves to resources as they please and invade domestic spaces for shelter (*Íslendinga saga* Chs. 111, 165, 177). Even when the context is not one of violence, the space and resources of a farmstead can be diverted away for the benefit of an unwanted guest. This occurs at the farm of Skinnastaðr, where bishop Guðmundr stops with his followers to store tithes he was collecting. He and his men stay there during the winter, at the cost, and dismay, of the tenants Jón and Guðleif (*Íslendinga saga* Ch. 76).

Among these numerous examples of social discord, one example reveals the more material aspect of the house and farmstead's inclusion in wider social networks. When Sturla Sighvatsson and a certain Þorleifr have a falling out, it is revealed that the latter no longer conveys supplies to the

former, leading to shortages of food at the farm of Eyrr in Arnarfjǫrðr (*Íslendinga saga* Ch. 116). The breakdown of this arrangement is, in fact, the first intimation of its existence, but it provides an interesting insight into the type of social-geographical exchanges along the networks described in the *Íslendingasögur*. That model, based on the movements and visitations of people, is augmented with direct reference to the transportation of goods and resources in *Íslendinga saga.*

More conspicuous in *Íslendinga saga* are scenes of exceptional hospitality, most notably in the form of seasonal feasts and celebrations. Reflecting the saga's preoccupation with social status, the feasts at a certain Sæmundr's farm (*Íslendinga saga* Ch. 39), at Mǫðruvellir (*Íslendinga saga* Ch. 168), and at Flugumýrr (*Íslendinga saga* Ch. 170) all describe in detail the seating arrangements and positions of guests on the side-benches (*bekkr* or *langbekkr*), the platform against the gable wall (*pallr*), and high seat (*ǫndvegi*) in the *stofa* where the feast is held. The lavish wedding feast at Flugumýrr is a striking example of a particularly opulent event.[9] However, other gatherings are also shown which may be more related to actual entertainment than displays of social hierarchy, such as the dance in the *stofa* at Fjall and the games (*leikr*) mentioned at Víðmýrr (*Íslendinga saga* Chs. 76, 111).

The description of the placement of guests in the aforementioned feast scenes, for example, shows that the physical layout of the *stofa* was directly relevant to the intricacies of social interactions played out within the house. The usage of internal space is thus given more attention than in the *Íslendingasögur*. The *stofa* does appear to be a room of predilection for various

[9] See also the quoted passage and description of the physical layout of the room for this episode in Chapter 3, section 3.3.1.

types of social activity, and the *stofa* at Sauðafell is shown to be the preferred space for private conversation (*Íslendinga saga* Ch. 150).[10] The construction of a new *stofa* at Reykjaholt might indeed be an indication of the importance of the farm in a social perspective (*Íslendinga saga* Ch. 90). Indeed, the multiplication of rooms and the availability of space appears to have been an important feature in the demarcation of the high-status house, whose social importance was demonstrated by material means. At the episcopal farm of Hólar, there even appears to be a spare *stofa* available for the confinement of bishop Guðmundr without interrupting the other activities within the house (*Íslendinga saga* Ch. 76). Two other occurrences specifically mention the material wealth and arrangements of the well-appointed house:

> *Þat var mælt, at þeira hýbýla væri mestr munr, hversu gnóglig váru ok góð fyrir klæða sakir ok annars, áðr þeir kómu um nóttina, ok hversu órækilig ok fátæk váru, er þeir fóru á brott.*
> 'It was said that no homestead had become so changed, how rich it had been and well-equipped in terms of clothing and other things, before they came in the night, and how diminished and poor it was when they left.' (at Sauðafell, *Íslendinga saga* Ch. 72)

> *Á Flugumýri brann mikit fé… dúnklæða ok annara gripa… Þar váru ǫll hús mjǫk vǫnduð at smið, forskálar allir alþilðir til stofu at ganga, skáli altjaldr ok stofa.*
> 'At Flugumýrr burned much wealth… eider-down bedclothes and other treasures… All the houses were built with great skill, all the passages leading to the *stofa* were entirely panelled, and the *skáli* and *stofa* entirely hung with tapestries.' (*Íslendinga saga* Ch. 174)

Both passages describe the loss suffered by great high-status houses after violent, devastating attacks. Part of the prestige of both homesteads was the accumulation of wealth, and both passages conspicuously mention textiles as

[10] Although at the farm of Grund it is the *skáli* which is used for this purpose (*Íslendinga saga* Ch. 111). It is important to remember that in *Íslendinga saga* the *skáli* and the *stofa* are distinct rooms.

significant markers of wealth,[11] as is the wooden panelling of the internal spaces of Flugumýrr. The wider context of both passages clearly indicates that the physical destruction of the houses, and their contents of movable wealth, results in the social obliteration of the households themselves.

Decorative panelling in the main rooms of high status houses also occurs in the *Íslendingasögur*. Most famously, in *Laxdœla saga*, the poet Úlfr Uggason is inspired by the carved wooden panels and rafters in the main room (*eldhús*) of the house at Hjarðarholt to compose a poem, *Húsdrápa*, describing the mythological scenes depicted on the woodwork (*Laxdœla saga* Ch. 29).[12] Generally however, the sampled *Íslendingasögur*, *Grettis saga*, *Gísla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, demonstrate that the basic requirements of hospitality as a mechanism of social cohesion were heavily influenced by the material needs of shelter, comfort and sustenance. The aristocratic farms of *Íslendinga saga* however clearly show that material wealth, reflected in the very structure and arrangement of domestic space, was seen as a direct reflection and ostentatious manifestation of a household's social status.

5.3 The House and Hospitality in *Hávamál*

5.3.1. Justification for the Use of *Hávamál*

In order to try to understand the role played by the house in the social landscape of the saga world, a certain departure from saga texts can prove particularly enlightening. The Eddic poem *Hávamál*, in particular, is replete

[11] Tapestries also appear as decorations for the main room of Þorfinnr's farm in Norway in *Grettis saga* (Ch. 19), and at Hól and Sæból in *Gísla saga* (Ch. 15).

[12] Several disconnected stanzas of the poem survive in the *Skáldskaparmál* ('The language of poetry') section in Snorri Sturulson's *Edda*. See *Skáldskaparmál* Chs. 2 (verses 8, 14, 19), 3 (verse 39), 4 (verses 54, 55, 56), 7 (verse 63), 16 (verse 64), 47 (verse 2012), 49 (verse 242), 54 (verse 303) and 57 (verse 316).

with gnomic prescriptions specifically relating to the proper dispensation of hospitality in the domestic setting, and can augment and support the literary evidence for hospitality derived from the saga texts.[13] *Hávamál* is not a single homogeneous poem but appears to contain parts of several separate gnomic compositions. Its origins and dating are much debated, and while acknowledging the difficulty in ascribing any homogeneity to its composition, David Evans, the poem's most recent editor, proposes an early date of composition (c. 960) and a potential Norwegian origin for at least part of it (Evans 1986: 13). While Evans' position is not universally accepted (see for example von See 1987 and Evans 1989), recent scholars of the Poetic Edda tend to agree with his conclusions. In particular, Carolyne Larrington, while she does not firmly support a Norwegian origin for *Hávamál* (Larrington 1993: 16), does agree with a potentially early, pre-Christian date of composition (Larrington 1993: 19). She furthermore provides a systematic analysis of proposed exterior sources for the poem's ideas, concluding that the evidence is insufficient to mark *Hávamál* as the product of external literary and moral (particularly Christian) influx into early medieval Scandinavia (Larrington 1992, esp. 155).

It is in this perspective that Theodore Andersson (1970) proposes the most succinct justification for the validity of comparing *Hávamál* to saga material. Andersson proposes that *Hávamál* represents the most complete expression of a social ideal of moderation which was subsequently echoed in the morals of saga literature (Andersson 1970, esp. 69). The poem is, in his

[13] Translations from *Hávamál* for this sections are my own but heavily aided by David Evans' 'Commentary' on his edition of *Hávamál* (Evans, ed. 1986), pp. 75-143, and Anthony Faulkes' *Glossary and Index* to Evans' edition (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1987).

words, 'the closest we can come to a moral treatise' in medieval Iceland (Andersson 1970: 58). Andersson's demonstration of continuity in the transfer of social ideas between *Hávamál* and later saga literature suggests that it is possible to seek a similar continuity in the perception of houses and domestic life, particularly relating to the concept of hospitality.

5.3.2. The House and Domestic Space in *Hávamál*

Hávamál is mostly concerned with dispensing practical wisdom applicable to the daily lives of people in the real world. This world, in its social and physical aspects, appears to be very much the same one as in the sampled sagas, where places of habitation are scattered widely in the landscape. The necessity for travel to maintain social ties between farmsteads in this landscape, regardless of distance, is explicitly prescribed in two stanzas in *Hávamál:*

(Stanza 34)

Afhvarf mikit	It is a great detour
er til ills vinar,	to a bad friend's [house],
þótt á brautu búi;	though [he] live on the way;
en til góðs vinar	but to a good friend's [house]
liggja gagnvegir,	lies a short way
þótt hann sé firr farinn.	though he has gone farther away.

(Stanza 119)[14]

...

veiztu, ef þú vin átt,	You know, if you have a friend,
þanns þú vel trúir,	one whom you trust well,
farðu at finna opt,	travel to see [him] often,
því at hrísi vex	because brushwood grows
ok hávu grasi	and high grass
vegr er vættki trøðr.	[on] the way which no-one treads.

[14] This stanza is from the 'Loddfáfnismál' section of *Hávamál* (stanzas 111-137), wherein advice is given to a certain Loddfáfnir, supposedly by the god Oðinn. Most of the stanzas in this section begin with an address to Loddfáfnir and an admonition that he should heed the advice given. It has been omitted here, and marked with an ellipsis.

Whereas the spaces between farmsteads were merely ignored, to a large extent, in the sampled sagas, the wild world out of doors is described in *Hávamál* as a dangerous place, where a traveller needs to keep his wits about him (stanzas 10, 11), and travel armed to face any eventuality (stanza 38).

But the wild world is also devoid of human society and companionship (stanzas 47, 50). Human existence is depicted as undeniably social, and the main setting for the enactment of this social life in *Hávamál* is the communal meal (stanzas 4, 7, 13, 14, 17, 19, 32, 33, 66, 67). While drinking is frequent in *Hávamál* and many of the meals depicted appear to be large public gatherings, these are not explicitly stated to be feasts or ostentatious special occasions, especially in relation to social hierarchical display (Larrington 1992: 149). The hospitality that they describe could therefore be within the context of daily domestic life. Indeed, the occurrences of social gathering reflect a certain conservative use of resources and the need for moderation in consumption and behaviour (stanzas 1, 6, 7, 17, 19, 24, 30, 31, 33, 35, 66, 67, 133). Generosity and hospitality need not be lavish, and *Hávamál* indeed advocates social exchange at the most humble level, where sharing of even meagre resources serves as a foundation for friendship:

(Stanza 52)

Mikit eitt	Not only large gifts
skala manni gefa:	should one give:
opt kaupir sér í litlu lof;	often one buys praise for himself with little;
með hálfum hleif	with half a loaf
ok með hǫllu keri	and with a tilted cup
fekk ek mér félaga.	I got myself a comrade.

Since meals take place in houses, the domestic space takes on a prominent role in the maintenance of social networks. Social space is clearly

set indoors (stanzas 1, 2, 3, 133, 136), and the context of welcome and hospitality involves isolation from the harsh conditions of the outside world. This is particularly evident in stanzas 3 and 4, where the traveller, coming in from a long journey, is taken care of and given all he needs to restore a level of comfort and ease after his exterior trials:

(Stanza 3)	
Elds er þǫrf	Fire is needed
þeims inn er kominn	for him who has come inside
ok á kné kalinn;	and is cold to the knee;
matar ok váða	food and clothes
er manni þǫrf,	are needed for the man
þeim er hefir um fjall farit.	who has travelled in the mountains.
(Stanza 4)	
Vatns er þǫrf	Water is needed
þeim er til verðar kømr,	for him who has come to a meal,
þerru ok þjóðlaðar,	towels and a friendly invitation,
góðs um æðis,	a good disposition,
ef sér geta mætti,	if he can get it,
orðs ok endrþǫgu.	conversation and silence in return.

These prescriptions precisely echo the preoccupations of the sampled *Íslendingasögur* with the practical realities of hospitality and the need to undo the effects of the elements and the hardships of the outside world. Even the specific requirement of removing a traveller's wet clothes and providing dry ones, finds expression in *Hávamál*. The material requirements of hospitality, with emphasis on fire and warmth, on being dry and clothed, and provided with food and drink, are directly associated with the social requirements of

good conversation and a friendly welcome.[15] Material sustenance and shelter is thus inextricably linked with maintenance of proper social relations.

Guests in scenarios of hospitality are specifically described as *sitting* together (stanzas 5, 24, 133), a posture that might help to demarcate the interior world of domestic comfort and social companionship, where one's needs can be met without much movement, with the harsher exterior world of work and travel. The importance of sitting as a social marker can further be seen in the term *sessmǫgr* (stanza 152), meaning a companion, friend or comrade, but literally a 'bench-companion'. Here the link is direct between sitting together with someone, and forming a social bond with them. This behavioural distinction between the inside and outside worlds echoes the conspicuously frequent habit, seen in the *Íslendingasögur*, of removing one's outside or daytime clothing when resting or sleeping.

Hávamál also shows that social networks could be put to the test in less pleasant circumstances. There is evidence of social assistance in times of need (stanzas 39, 67), and stanza 135 prescribes that one should behave properly towards the indigent, suggesting their (perhaps reluctant) inclusion in wider social networks. Stanzas 36 and 37 describe a minimum level of desired domestic prosperity, linked to the house as a physical structure and marker of material self-sufficiency. That the stanzas also decry the potential need for begging indicates that social networks could conceivably provide assistance to those whose (domestic) resources were insufficient:

[15] *Endrþaga* in the last line of Stanza 4 is interpreted as 'silence in return' or 'reciprocal silence'. While still somewhat ambiguous, this makes sense if this is considered as silence from the host to allow the guest to say what he has to say, or alternatively, silence from the host in order not to pester a guest who would rather stay silent. See Evans' commentary to his edition (1986), p. 77.

(Stanza 36)

Bú er betra	A farm is better
þótt lítit sé;	though it be small;
halr er heima hverr;	everyone is a freeman at home;
þótt tvær geitir eigi	though he own two goats
ok taugreptan sal,	and a hut roofed with ropes,
þat er þó betra en bœn.	That is nevertheless better than begging.

(Stanza 37)

Bú er betra	A farm is better
þótt lítit sé;	though it be small;
halr er heima hverr;	everyone is a freeman at home;
blóðugt er hjarta	bloody is the heart
þeim er biðja skal	of him who must beg
sér í mál hvert matar.	for food for himself at every meal.

More importantly, in looking down on dependence, these stanzas betray an acute sense of pride in material self-sufficiency, even if one's means are humble. This suggests that the social ideal was the ownership and operation of one's own farmstead, therefore forming one's own node in the social network anchored, materially, on the house as a place of residence.

Thus, the portrait of the house and domestic space that is drawn by *Hávamál* agrees very closely to that of the sampled sagas, particularly the *Íslendingasögur*. In both cases the constant need for travel in order to maintain social ties gives a predominantly material dimension to the practical considerations of hospitality.

5.4 Comparisons with archaeology

The use of archaeology to inform the use of domestic space in a social perspective can pose a challenge, if only that this field is faced with the problem of looking for material vestiges of behaviours and actions which may have left no material traces, or whose remains cannot be attributed to specific

lifestyles and motivations. For example, confusion exists when considering the archaeological traces of food production. Providing a guest with food was one of the most fundamental aspects of hospitality in the sampled *Íslendingasögur*, and it might be that some of the archaeological evidence for food preparation in Viking Age and medieval Icelandic and Scandinavian houses is associated with the practice of hospitality. However, is it possible to differentiate between this practice, and the preparation of food for domestic consumption? Indeed, in regular scenarios of hospitality the food and shelter provided would have been entirely within the bounds of regular household usage, and therefore it might not be possible to attribute the function of such archaeological material with certainty.

As this thesis has shown, most of the examples of hospitality in the sagas and *Hávamál*, and the overall social understanding of hospitality itself, appear to have operated on a mundane level and most of the time did not involve displays of high-status splendour. Outside of Iceland however, in Scandinavia, there do exist large concentrations of high-status artefacts found on some aristocratic Viking Age farms, such as Tissø in Denmark and Borg in Lofoten in Norway (Croix 2012: 78-92; 93-103). These types of artefacts could indeed be interpreted as evidence of high-status feasting and ostentation, displaying a farm's (and its householders') status within a social hierarchy.

The form of the house itself may also provide some support for the performance of hospitality. The gradual opening of internal space, starting with the removal of inner roof-supporting posts as early as the tenth century, prefigured the change in housing culture at the end of the Viking Age, around the twelfth century (Chapter 2, sections 2.1.2 and 2.1.3). This opening of

internal spaces, as well as their multiplication in the increasingly complex house models of the late Viking Age and early medieval period, could be seen as a precondition for large social gatherings. Other activities such as the dance in the *stofa* at Fjall (*Íslendinga saga* Ch. 76), would also have required a lot of space. The *stofa* itself, as a second main room available for social activity (as seen mostly in *Íslendinga saga*), also becomes archaeologically distinguishable from the *skáli* at the end of the Viking Age (Chapter 2, section 2.2.1).

Within this context, Karen Milek has interpreted the archaeological vestiges of wooden panelling in the main rooms of Viking Age houses in Iceland as a suggestion that these spaces were primarily destined for social usage and display to visitors (Milek 2006: 30, 109). Some carved wooden staves used as wall-panels have also survived from the medieval period in Iceland, although they were originally located in churches and eventually integrated into the wooden armature of early modern houses (Rafnsson 1979: 81-82; see also Ágústsson 1978: 135-149; Stoklund 1999: 82, 86). The multiple descriptions of panelling as an ostentatious decorative element in *Íslendinga saga* and the *Íslendingasögur* do lend credence to the interpretation of these remains as signs of social display. However, while it is safe to conclude that some high status farms did indeed have lavish interior decorations, it is also important to take a moderate approach to the social interpretation of the artefactual material. As Sarah Croix argues, it cannot be inferred that all remnants of interior arrangements such as wooden panelling were necessarily meant to impress visitors. There may have also been more practical imperatives, such as insulation, which prompted the use of wooden panelling inside turf houses, quite removed from a directive of social

ostentation (Croix 2012: 22-23; *contra* Milek 2006: 30, 109). The sagas themselves do not mention internal arrangements of more humble dwellings. A cautious interpretation, while still considering the presence of wooden panelling as a sign of a certain material comfort, should not exclude the possibility that fixtures in houses of a lower status, which might have differed only in a qualitative manner (appearance, arrangement, decoration) might have left similar physical traces.[16]

In the archaeological interpretation of the use of internal space, the analytical methodology known as spatial syntax analysis, or access analysis, originally developed for use in architecture, has become a promising tool for the study of Viking Age and medieval domestic interiors. The method proposes to analyse the paths of movement within buildings, defining how spaces are accessed and the routes taken to get from one place to another within the built environment, in order to distinguish patterns of use and the possible social implications and motivations for the organisation of space. The logic behind internal layouts and the control of movement and usage inside buildings can be particularly elucidating of social attitudes, and also reveal patterns of similar usage even in houses whose layouts may seem at first to be superficially and visually dissimilar (or, conversely, differences in usage despite similar appearnce. Price 1995: 114, 118-124).

[16] The association of textile decorations with high status houses, also mentioned in *Íslendinga saga,* appears to be confirmed by the presence of rich tapestries in Oseberg burial. However, these were not found in a domestic context, and the context of their use cannot be firmly determined archaeologically. For a description of the Oseberg tapestries and a discussion on the use of textiles in Viking Age Scandinavia, see Christensen and Nockert 2006: 15-72, 73-131. See also Jesch 1991: 124-127.

The application of this methodology to Viking Age buildings was introduced by Neil Price (1995) and enthusiastically taken up by Milek (2006: 20-31, 140-146) and, most recently, by Rebecca Boyd for the Viking Age houses of the Irish Sea region (Boyd 2012: 19-20; 25-27; 157-182). While Boyd's study falls outside the purview of the present thesis, it is important for its contribution to the overall understanding of the cultural significance of the house and of social archaeology throughout the Viking World. Sarah Croix (2012: 21-23, 186-187) revisits these and other examples of the use of spatial syntax analysis in relation to the archaeology of the Viking Age and quite rightly brings up important caveats and limitations to its current use as a theoretical and methodological framework. She cites, for example, the risk of the method itself being overly informed by modern preconceptions on the significance of space and its arrangement. She also identifies the need to consider multiple possible motivations for the spatial organisations that are found in the archaeological record of Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian houses (Croix 2012: 21-23, 186-187). With these warnings taken into consideration, it does seem that spatial syntax analysis provides an intriguing avenue for future research on the social use of domestic space in the Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian context, and one which could provide fruitful comparison and even application to the study of domestic space in saga literature.

Spatial syntax analysis inserts itself within a wider movement which recognises the need to reinterpret the relationship between people and space in the analysis of archaeological evidence. Two main currents of theoretical and philosophical thought appear to be inspiring this outlook. The first is

phenomenology, basing itself in the groundbreaking work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945, see also trans. by Landes 2012), which explores the idea that all human experience, especially social, is perceived through the physical senses of the body. Seen through the phenomenological lens, material settings therefore acquire a primary significance by providing one of the main interfaces for our sensory understanding of the world around us. This approach appears quite well-suited to being applied to archaeological thought, whose purview is explicitly the study of material culture. A phenomenological approach was most famously adopted as the guiding theoretical framework for the archaeological interpretation of Neolithic habitation sites on Bodmin Moor, Cornwall (Bender, Hamilton and Tilley 1997, 2007).

Quite closely related to phenomenology, materiality seeks to acknowledge the importance of the physical world as being directly intelligible by human understanding and not separate from more abstract realms of thought. Objects have meaning by virtue of their very physical reality, their presence in the material world, and not simply as bearers of an abstract mental concept.

The need to rehabilitate the material world in the social sciences was expressed by Bjørnar Olsen (2003). More importantly, the materiality of archaeology was the topic of a dedicated volume edited by Elizabeth DeMarrais, Chris Gosden and Colin Renfrew (2004). Within this collected study, the individual studies of DeMarrais, Renfrew, Nicole Boivin and Lambros Malafouris (2004) are particularly relevant to shaping a new understanding of the interaction of human cognition with the material world.

The studies also touch on the importance of the object as a carrier of social meaning. The idea that objects carry significance and importance to the social life of the saga world is the primary premise behind the exploration of the pragmatic materiality of hospitality expressed in this chapter. With regards to phenomenology, the potential for rich phenomenological expression in the sagas was previously expressed with regards to Gísli's progression through the house at Sæból to murder his brother Þórgrímr, in *Gísla saga* (Ch. 16, see the full passage quoted in chapter 1, section 1.4.2). This is an indication that other scenes of use and interaction between people and the built environment might provide similar levels of detail, and that a phenomenological understanding of the relation between people and material culture in the sagas might significantly add to our understanding of the social use of space in the Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian and Icelandic world.

Finally, network analysis is a theoretical outlook in archaeology which has the potential to fruitfully compare with the depiction of the saga house in the social world as depicted in this chapter. One way of determining the extent of networks of trade and social exchange on archaeological sites is to determine the provenance of both artefacts and ecofacts, to see how far they have travelled before coming into the possession of the people whose vestiges compose a given archaeological assemblage. At the Scandinavian site of Quoygrew in Orkney (Barrett 2012a), settled in the late Viking Age, for example, various types of artefacts and ecofacts, such as combs and other items of worked bone and antler (Ashby 2012), and worked stone (Batey et al. 2012) were used to establish a portrait of the long-distance and local networks

that connected the Quoygrew site to its wider world (see overview in Barrett 2012b: 275-285).

On an even wider scale, at Quoygrew and elsewhere, the analysis of chemical isotopes in fish bones have been used to determine the extent of medieval maritime supply and trade networks in commercial fishing, stretching over considerable distances throughout the North Sea, the Baltic and beyond (Barrett et al. 2011; Harland and Barrett 2012; Orton et al. 2011). While the direct equivalence of such long-distance social and trade networks (as seen through archaeology) with the model present in the saga material is not the purview of this thesis, archaeological network theory certainly does substantiate the presence of active lines of cultural contact and communication throughout the areas of the North Atlantic Scandinavian Diaspora. Future dedicated research might be able to further elucidate the material representation of these long-distance networks, as depicted in the saga texts.

Conclusion

The house and farmstead in Viking Age and medieval Iceland, as revealed by the sampled *Íslendingasögur* and *Íslendinga saga*, have an undeniably central role to play in the island's social landscape. Because of Iceland's settlement pattern of sparse population concentrated in farmsteads (the same can be said of Norway at the same period, see Øye 2005: 359-363), constant travel was required to maintain social ties and hospitality became one of the main elements of social cohesion. This meant that geographical space was subordinate to social space, but the material considerations of long-distance travel were not ignored. The deleterious effects of life outdoors meant that the

act of bestowing hospitality on a traveller was a fundamentally material affair, providing food, warmth, and dry shelter to restore comfort and optimum well-being. Feasting at seasonal celebrations and special occasions did occur, involving displays of wealth and status through the dispensation of exceptional hospitality. These situations undoubtedly played an important role in maintaining social ties on a wider scale, but the overall mechanism of hospitality remained more practical and mundane.

Despite the increased occurrences of ostentatious displays in *Íslendinga saga,* whose thirteenth century setting focuses on the interactions of aristocratic families, the overall portrait of the house as the physical centre of human society, and the importance of material hospitality displayed in the *Íslendingasögur*, prevails. The attitudes of these medieval texts are found almost intact, displaying the same concerns, in the tenth-century Eddic poem *Hávamál*. As a gnomic text concerned with dispensing wisdom and advice on how to live a good life, it can be seen as both reflecting and prescribing social behaviour. The material concerns of hospitality and the administration of human society within the home, therefore, appear to have been at the core of the Scandinavian antecedents of the society depicted in the saga narratives.

The archaeology of social space, from the local intra-site level to the long range inter-site networks of exchange, can provide fascinating avenues of comparative research with the portrait of the social house presented in the sagas. Perhaps more promising even is a greater focus on materiality and phenomenology to guide thoughts of the embodiment of space the material experience of daily life in the sagas. It is important to use these approaches in concert because, as rich as archaeological assemblages can be, care must be

taken when using archaeological remains alone to interpret the social usage of space. The pragmatic concerns of domestic life in the sagas, demonstrated so vividly in the case of hospitality, provide an important witness to the material dimensions of social behaviours in Viking Age and medieval Iceland and Scandinavia.

SECTION 3
TRANSMISSION

Chapter 6: Words and Objects

Introduction

The previous sections focused on the physical structures of the saga house and farmstead and their role in their inhabitants' productive and social activities, in comparison with archaeological research. This third section shifts the focus to look at the interface through which the material world is made intelligible in the sagas, namely the words and processes of composition which create the narratives themselves. Analysing the house in saga literature as a physical object and comparing its representations with the findings of archaeology requires an understanding of Old Norse architectural vocabulary. However, this is not simply a question of translating the words that designate physical structures. It also requires an understanding of how the spaces and objects were used, and how they themselves existed in a physical sense (e.g. their construction, their shape, the space they occupied or circumscribed, their spatial and functional relationship with other objects, etc.). As has been demonstrated in the previous sections of this thesis, saga narratives constitute a rich and revealing source to show domestic spaces and structures in the context of their use. Often this understanding can only be gained through a cumulative interpretation of numerous occurrences of an object or structure shown in various circumstances. The understanding of both the vocabulary and the material culture are codependent and essential. Words represent objects, things which have a definite physical form, a mass, a texture, an appearance, and a purpose. Narrative sequences show the actions that people performed in relation to these objects, how they moved within spaces, how they touched and interacted with structures, how they handled and used objects.

While this might seem to point out the obvious, it is in fact an important reminder. In dealing with narratives such as sagas, which are separated from a twenty-first century perspective, and especially the *Íslendingasögur*, whose overall historicity is questioned, it is easy for modern readers to lose sight of the fact that these narratives refer to real things. The intention here is not to revive or support the claim that sagas constitute a factual account of events in the Viking Age, but rather, that they are genuine cultural artefacts of the society that created them.[1]

The genesis of saga narratives is not simple to describe, but generally inserts itself into a dialogue on the interactions between oral and written narrative. However, the mechanisms by which oral literature passes into writing, the exchange between oral and written forms of composition, the similarities and differences between the putative oral and written narratives, and the nature of the sagas themselves as complete and self-contained narratives, are matters of continuing debate (see for example Andersson 2008; Lönnroth 2008; Mundal 2010; Sørensen 1993; Tucker 1989).[2] The 'saga world' may indeed have recognisable tropes, themes, archetypes and behaviours which guide the actions of their protagonists within the confines of a literary narrative. Nonetheless, they are not set within a fictitious world. Both the *Íslendingasögur* and the *samtíðarsögur* provide a glimpse at the social structures and physical world of the medieval Icelanders who wrote them, and may indeed carry cultural memories of the Viking Age. As Chris Callow and others have argued (Callow 2006: 299, 322; Sørensen 1993: 174), it is important to realise that whatever our modern opinion of what constitutes

[1] On the debate regarding the sagas' historicity, see Sørensen 1993.
[2] The work of Gísli Sigurðsson (1997, 2005, 2008) tends to offer a more outspokenly critical account of the debate between oral and written composition in saga literature.

trustworthy historicity, sagas were considered believable and accurate by their composers and their intended audiences.

Even among the collective body of saga scholarship sympathetic to this view, material culture is seldom included as part of the analysis and understanding of these 'saga age' circumstances.[3] Historical literature like the sagas does not exist in a closed cultural bubble constituted solely of immaterial ideas. The physical world exists. While texts can tell us something of the thought of their authors by using words to shape situations and narrative action, it is important to remember that artefacts and objects, too, carry the intention of their creators (see reflections on materiality in chapter 5, section 5.4). Artefacts and structures are constructed, shaped, and used in specific ways that are culturally significant, reflecting social relationships and modes of behaviour in the physical nature of the objects themselves. Understanding these manifestations of *meaning* in objects allows for the identification of distinct material cultures, and is at the core of archaeology as a discipline aiming to study past societies. In the case of the Viking Age this can be seen, for example, in the consistent model of the elongated, bow-sided house and the ubiquitous arrangement of the main room with its *set*-platforms and long hearth. These vestiges exist in the ground and are revealed by archaeological excavation and interpretation, but as has been demonstrated, they can also be seen in text, where the physical form of the buildings takes on an added layer of meaning by shaping the interactions of the characters that populate the narratives. The interaction of any society with this material world, as shaped

[3] Indeed, as Bjørnar Olsen has pointed out, there is, in the whole of social sciences, what can be at best described as a casual ignorance, and at worst an active disdain, of material culture and the physicality of the world (Olsen 2003: 87-95).

by their historical context and circumstances, is expressed both by their material culture and by the texts they write (Andrén 1998: 149-150, 155).

The analysis of the saga house in the previous sections operates on a firm belief in this premise, which is indeed validated by the demonstrations of the interaction between text and archaeology. This chapter seeks to clarify the relationship between objects and words. This is mainly done by examining a few examples from among the descriptions of housing culture outlined in previous chapters. These demonstrate how the meaning of architectural vocabulary can be elucidated through analysis of its use in context in the sampled sagas. This assessment will highlight some salient problems in the translation of the sagas which might be corrected through a proper understanding of the relationship between words and the objects they represent.

6.1 Elucidations of Function and Form

6.1.1 Mutual Clarification

Understanding the relationship between objects and words is fundamental to elucidating the portrait of the physical world presented by text. At its most basic level, this relationship can be understood from two perspectives. Firstly, objects are cultural entities, and they have specific words to describe and designate them, which make them intelligible in the written world of narrative. Or, to put it more simply, *things* have *labels*. Secondly, words are not nebulous immaterial concepts. Architectural and material vocabulary represent real, tangible objects and structures, which may no longer exist but represent types

of objects that did exist in the material culture of the society which produced the text in which they appear. Or, *labels* attach themselves to specific *things*.

Most textual depictions of material culture in the sampled sagas, and specifically of housing culture, are not particularly problematic. Contextual descriptions will be sufficiently clear and straightforward to identify the object or structure. For example, at a basic level, there is no doubt that in a house's construction, *veggr* refers to a wall, or *golf* to a floor, or *langeldr* to a long open hearth in the main room of the older houses portrayed in the *Íslendingasögur*. The word *þvertré*, or 'cross-beam', refers unambiguously to the structural beam that stretches across the main room, perpendicular to its main axis, at the height of the top of the walls (where they meet the slanting roof), most often seen as part of the structural separation between the main room and an antechamber (see the diagram of the farm of Þórhallsstaðir in *Grettis saga* in **Figure 2.19**. See also chapter 1, section 1.4.1). Collective descriptions in context can also help us to understand far more arcane structures, such as the *stafnrekkja* or *stafnhvíla*, 'gable-bed', of which no examples survive in archaeology. These nevertheless become intelligible as objects through the level of detail and quality of description of the written passages in which they occur (see diagrams of the farm of Flugumýrr and the *stafnrekkja* in *Íslendinga saga*, chapter 3, **Figures 3.1** and **3.2** and section 3.3.1).

Many descriptions of objects and structures can, fortunately, be positively identified with their physical remains as revealed by the archaeological record. Most significantly, this is the case with the main room of the Viking Age and early medieval house, with its characteristic

longitudinal form, central open hearth, *set*-platforms along the walls, partitions, etc. Structures such as the *set* are so specific in their description, and so ubiquitous in the literature, that the material form to which they correspond is unambiguous. The presence of structures in archaeology which nearly perfectly match the descriptions of both specific features and the internal layout allows us to positively ascribe a name, a function and usage to a specific object.

This fruitful comparison between literature and archaeology can also help to tease out some minute nuances in the written description of material structures which might be otherwise missed. In the *Íslendingasögur,* the two most common words for the main room, *skáli* and *stofa*, appear to be synonymous both in terms of their physical construction and features, and also in their contexts of use. The *skali* and the *stofa* are for all practical purposes the same room, used for the same activities in the same way. In terms of literary occurrences, it is only in the *samtiðarsögur,* as seen in *Íslendinga saga,* that they become clearly differentiated as separate spaces, with separate functions. However, archaeological research had identified the second principal living room on medieval farms such as Gröf and Stöng as the *stofa* (see chapter 2, section 2.2.1 and Gestsson 1959; Sigurðardóttir 1966: 18). These *stofur* (pl.) were, in fact, differentiated materially from the other main rooms, designated as *skálar* (pl.): they did not feature a through-way and were closed off at one gable-end, and against this wall was an additional platform. This material distinction is not evident, at first, in either the *Íslendingasögur* or in *Íslendinga saga*. However, a closer reading of the saga material reveals that a particular type of structure, the *pallr* or *þverpallr*, occurs only in the rooms designated as

stofa. This *pallr*, ‘platform’, is identical to the *set* in form, but its position is different: the name *þverpallr,* with the *þver-* (‘cross-’) prefix, confidently places it along the gable wall, across the room’s main axis (see chapter 1, section 1.3.2; chapter 2, section 2.2.1). Therefore, despite being essentially identical in their descriptions of usage and function in the *Íslendingasögur*, archaeological comparison provides insight that allows for the identification of subtle differences in form between the *skáli* and *stofa*, and to identify a form-, or position-specific structure, the *þverpallr*.

6.1.2 Basic Problems in Translation

However, the association of objects to words is not always so straightforward and elucidating. Problems in the understanding of material vocabulary are frequent. One of the areas where they are most likely to arise is in the translation of Old Norse into both modern English and even modern Icelandic, in literary studies and archaeology. These problems stem on the one hand from the predictable difficulty in perfectly matching different languages, but also in understanding the material realities to which the words refer. This is the case even with some fairly usual features of the house, like doors. The two main words used in the sagas to designate doors are *dyrr*, cognate to the modern English ‘door’, and *hurð*, related to the modern English ‘hurdle’ (OED). Both of these words are most often given as ‘door’ in English translations of sagas, which usually causes no problems in interpretation. However, there is a difference in the physical objects or structures represented by both words. *Dyrr* would be more properly understood as a ‘doorway’, the opening in a wall or structure through which one can pass. *Hurð*, on the other hand, is the actual

door, the movable panel which can be opened or closed in order to permit or block access through the doorway. The relationship of *hurð* with 'hurdle' as an obstacle or impediment makes sense in this perspective, but a modern English speaker would hardly describe, or easily associate, a 'hurdle' with a 'door'.

The differences in the understanding of 'door' in modern English are subtle. While designating something as a 'doorway' removes the ambiguity, the word 'door' on its own can easily designate both the doorway and the panel that closes it. Often the difference between the two is unimportant in context. However, occurrences of *dyrr* and especially *hurð* in the sagas, when read in their wider context of use, clearly show that a cognitive difference between the two objects exists and is expressed in Old Norse. For example, the scene in *Grettis saga*, Chapter 19, where Grettir traps a band of berserkers in a raised outbuilding on Þorfinnr's farm in Norway (see Chapter 1, section 1.2), shows him pushing back the *hurð* to the room where the raiders are gathered, and setting a lock upon it from the outside. While it is obvious in context that structure Grettir is interacting with is a 'door', it is a *hurð*, specifically a door panel, which is being moved in order to close the opening of the doorway, and the lock is being set on a fixture on the *hurð* itself. A translation as 'door' does not quite represent the material subtleties which, in this passage, clearly indicate that the *hurð* is the moving object that closes the opening of the *dyrr*.[4]

While the differences and subtleties between *dyr* [sic] and *hurð* in modern Icelandic are essentially the same as in Old Norse (HST, IEO), this is not the case with many words related to structures or objects. Two rather straightforward examples are *rúm* and *eldhús*. *Rúm* in Old Norse, as shown in

[4] For the nature of *dyrr* as a plural noun, see chapter 1, section 1.3.1.

the sagas, designates the place that one occupies, usually on the *set*-platforms in the main room of the house. This can be a designated sleeping place, but also a place occupied while sitting and engaging in domestic industry (see Chapter 1, section 1.3.2, *Eyrbyggja saga* Chs. 20, 63). While *rúm* in modern Icelandic can indeed have these connotations of occupied space, one of its most frequent modern meanings, that of a bed, is definitely excluded by the Old Norse. This is reinforced by the fact that the bed as a separate, movable object is also absent from the sagas. Other words for bed, *sængr, hvíla, rekkja*, and *beðr*, also designate the sleeping arrangements on the *set*-platforms of the main room.[5] The cognitive connection between *rúm* as a designated sleeping place, and later as a separate, movable bed, is not difficult to see. However, this similarity of concepts does not mean that the Old Norse *rúm* is synonymous with the modern Icelandic *rúm* as a bed. The object or space to which the word refers, in both cases, is different, and the vocabulary must be used (and understood) with care.

The example of *eldhús*, 'fire-house', is similar. In the Old Norse of the *Íslendingasögur*, it is one of the words, along with *(eld)skáli* and *stofa*, which designate the main room of the house (see chapter 1, sections 1.4.2, 1.4.3). The presence of a fire in the room is explicit. However, as of the later medieval period, as shown in the *samtíðarsögur*, *eldhús* starts to refer to a separate room where the fire was kept, and as a specific location for the preparation of meals, leading to its modern Icelandic definition as a kitchen. However, such a function-specific structure does not reflect the reality of housing culture in the Viking Age, nor the usage of *eldhús* in the *Íslendingasögur*. Here, meal

[5] Differentiated bed structures such as the bed-closet, *lokrekkja* or *lokhvíla*, and the gable-bed, *sfanrekkja* or *stafnhvíla*, are also possible, but they are not beds in the modern understanding of the movable object. See Chapter 3, section 3.3.1 and **figures 3.1** and **3.2**.

preparation was integrated into the multiple functions performed in the main room. Even other ancillary spaces where meals are prepared, which could conceivably fit more closely with the idea of a kitchen, are not designated as *eldhús* (chapter 1, section 1.3.2; chapter 4, section 4.4; *Gísla saga*, Ch. 25; *Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 51). Thus, a modern understanding of *eldhús* should not lead to a misidentification of the *eldhús* of the *Íslendingasögur* as a kitchen.

Even in cases such as these where differences might be subtle and problems of translation fairly innocuous, careful reading of material and architectural vocabulary in context is essential to elucidating its proper meaning. Scenes of use help to refine the description of an object's physical nature. This is especially valuable when modern languages lack the resources to translate the full range of meaning designated by object-words in Old Norse, or to clear up misunderstandings caused by preconceptions about the vocabulary itself. It is important to give the proper labels to the proper things.

6.2 Function and Form Dissociated

6.2.1 *Baðstofa*, *Dyngja* and Sunken-Featured Buildings

A misunderstanding of words and the objects or structures they refer to can sometimes lead to more serious disagreements in the scholarship on the domestic world of Viking Age and medieval Iceland and Scandinavia. One salient example is the aforementioned debate surrounding the interpretation of the word *baðstofa*, especially in the context of the *Íslendingasögur* (see chapter 2, section 2.2.2). The disagreement stems from a contention by archaeologists and other scholars that the *baðstofa* refers to a room within the house whose main function was social, akin to the modern Icelandic meaning of *baðstofa* as

a living room or sitting room (HST, IEO, see Milek 2012b: 89; Ólafsdóttir 1974). This appears to be mostly a reaction against the description of the sunken-featured building in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 28), which is called a *baðstofa* and whose function is clearly that of a steam-bath or sauna. This is contested on the grounds that there is insufficient evidence in archaeology to positively associate sunken-featured buildings with steam-baths or other bathing-related uses (Milek 2012b: 89).

The real problem here involves a confusion of form and function. The archaeologists' criticism is valid in the sense that one cannot positively ascribe the name of *baðstofa* and the function of steam-bathing to the type of structure that is known, archaeologically, as a sunken-featured building. There is, in fact, no Old Norse word that can be positively ascribed to such a structure. Archaeologists use the modern Icelandic *jarðhús*, 'earth-house', but this word in its Old Norse usage refers to quite a different type of structure, namely subterranean or semi-subterranean passageways.[6]

The word *baðstofa* does not refer to the form of a structure, rather to its function. Even the extensive survey of the occurrences of *baðstofa* and *bað*-element words in their context of use, compiled by Nanna Ólafsdóttir (1974), clearly indicates numerous associations with washing, despite the fact that it argues for a functional definition of the Old Norse *baðstofa* as a living room (Ólafsdóttir 1974: 67-75, 81, 82-84). Thus, a *baðstofa*, in its original meaning, appears to be exactly what its name describes, a 'bath-room' in which the

[6] These feature prominently in *Gísla saga*, and have been confirmed archaeologically on medieval Icelandic farms. These passageways (*jarðhús*) are themselves subjected to erroneous naming in modern archaeology, and are referred to by the modern Icelandic *jarðgöng*, or 'earth passage', which does not occur in Old Norse (ONP, see chapter 2, section 2.2.1; Hjaltalín 2010: 141-145; Milek 2012b: 85).

function of bathing or washing of some kind takes place. However, it does not associate it with a structure with the form of a sunken-featured building.

Eyrbyggja saga does nothing more than provide an example where these bathing functions took place within such a structure, which itself is not identified by name but whose characteristic construction is described. The definition of function is derived not simply from a facile etymological reading of word *baðstofa* at face value, but by a contextual description of this space being used, unambiguously, as a steam-bath. If *baðstofa* were strictly a social space within the house and not a word designating a room or space in which bathing took place, why would this word be used at all, in this case?

The debate regarding whether or not bathing took place within sunken-featured buildings may have been prompted by the *baðstofa* in *Eyrbyggja saga*, and it is a worthy line of investigation in archaeological research. However, this is entirely separate from the question of whether the function of bathing occurred in the space known by the word *baðstofa*. There is room for ambiguity, or multiplicity, in the range of meanings for *baðstofa*, allowing for its evolution into a social space unrelated to bathing. However, the very lack of ambiguity in the functional description of a steam-bath designated by this word in *Eyrbyggja saga* strongly suggests that this is indeed the right word for such a space, whether it was located within a sunken-featured building, or any other domestic space or structure.

The obvious difficulty in attaching the right words to the right objects and structures that this situation reveals, makes it surprising that archaeologists should be so eager to associate sunken-featured buildings with another word which designates space in terms of function but not of form: the *dyngja*

(Crawford and Smith 1999: 71-76, 207-213; Milek 2012b: 120-121). As mentioned previously (chapter 2, section 2.2.2; chapter 4, section 4.5), the *dyngja* is only known as a room or space designated for use by women. However, archaeologists have positively identified it with sunken-featured buildings by virtue of the large number of artefacts related to textile work (a strongly female-gendered activity) which have been found within these structures (Milek 2006: 226-227, 232-233; 2012b: 100-105, 119).

It is important to remember that the *dyngja* is never described in the sagas as a fixed physical structure, nor does it have any necessary association with textile work as its principal use.[7] Just as is the case with the *baðstofa*, the functions of the *dyngja*, of which we know remarkably little, could have taken place in any suitable domestic space. A sunken-featured building is therefore not a *dyngja*, any more than it is a *baðstofa*, although the functions represented by both these words could conceivably have taken place within it.

Both these cases reveal a misunderstanding of material vocabulary in its context of use. We see an attempt to relate spaces which are designated in terms of function to an unrelated structure described in terms of form. These are, in essence, cases of 'mistaken identity'. *Baðstofa*, and also *jarðhús* and *jarðgöng* (see note 6 above), all suffer from an attempt to impose a modern definition of the words' function or form onto the same words which represent different concepts in Old Norse (or are not attested at all in the case of *jarðgöng*). The case of *dyngja* is an attempt to force an existing Old Norse word, which is very specific but remarkably uninformative, to conform to concepts of function and form which are derived only through modern

[7] Some archaeologists have, fortunately, taken this fact into account (Croix 2012: 156-157, 168-178).

archaeological scholarship and not through contemporary examples of use in literature. Neither of these situations accurately represents the physical world of the sagas in terms of the words that are used to describe it. The only way to understand the Old Norse material vocabulary is to read what Old Norse sources we have at our disposal, with material culture in mind, and to see how words and objects behave and relate in contexts that demonstrate their use, function and physical form.

6.2.2 Misrepresenting Objects and Structures

While the examples above mostly demonstrate a misunderstanding of Old Norse vocabulary in attributing the right words to objects and structures, the reverse problem is also true. A misunderstanding of material culture can also lead to problems in translation and the misrepresentation of objects when the Old Norse contextual descriptions are, in fact, clear.

One example is the nearly ubiquitous translation of *set*, the fixed, multi-function platforms along the long walls of the main room, with the word 'bench'. In the passage in *Grettis saga*, Ch. 14, where Grettir assaults his father Ásmundr with a wool comb, this comb is said to be located, with others, *í setinu* ('on the *set*', see chapter 1, section 1.4.1). Three separate English translations of *Grettis saga* consulted (Byock 2009: 35; Fox and Pálsson 1974: 25; Scudder 1997: 65, 2005: 25) all translated *set* to 'bench' in this case. This is not in itself a particularly misleading interpretation, but it does run the risk of misrepresenting the material culture designated by the text through the primary association, in modern English, of a bench with a long, movable seat. The possible understanding of 'bench' as a *fixed* structure designed

specifically, and only, as a seat, is also incompatible with the versatile nature of the *set*, which could be used for sitting, but also for sleeping and as the location for all of the domestic activities taking place within the main room.

A similar confusion is found in the case of the 'high seat', *ǫndvegi* or *ǫndugi*, which might be interpreted as a single movable chair, sort of a throne, reserved for the leader of a household. Contextual descriptions of the 'high seat' however reveal that it was more likely a section of the *set*, capable of accommodating several people, delimited by its carved pillars so favoured in narratives of land-claiming, which were in fact capable of acting as weight-bearing, structural timbers in a house (see chapter 1, section 1.3.2). The awkwardness of considering both the *set* and the *ǫndvegi* as movable seats is demonstrated by the passage in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Ch. 33, where Þórólfr lame-foot of Hvammr dies in his 'high seat', *í ǫndvegi sitt*, and his son Arnkell later must walk on the *set* behind his father, *eptir setinu á bak Þórólfi*, in order to remove the body. This makes sense if the *set* and *ǫdvegi* take the shape of the platform we expect to find on the side wall of the main room, but is awkward if they are seen as a collection of movable seats. And yet, in translation, Arnkell still 'walked up along the benches behind Thorolf' (trans. Quinn 1997: 173).

A further example demonstrating an awkward interpretation of material culture comes not from the sagas, but from *Hávamál*. The poem's first stanza reads:

Gáttir allar	All the door-openings
áðr gangi fram,	before going forward,
um skoðask skyli,	one should spy around,
um skyggnask skyli,	one should look around,
því at óvíst er at vita	because one cannot know for certain
hvar óvinir	where foes

sitja á fleti fyrir.	are sitting on the platforms. (My translation)

Carolyne Larringon's translation of this stanza reads:

> All the entrances, before you walk forward,
> you should look at,
> you should spy out;
> for you can't know for certain where enemies are sitting
> ahead in the hall. (trans. Larrington 1996: 14)

In *A Store of Common Sense*, Larrington also comments on this stanza: 'The entrances, also serving as exits in case of trouble, are to be checked before the traveller even enters the hallway.' (Larrington 1993: 21) There is no description of a hallway of any kind in this stanza and Larrington's interpretation supplies material details that are not present in the actual poem. The *flet*, equivalent to the *set*-platforms,[8] are indeed usually contained within the main room, and are the only feature that actually identifies this passage as taking place within a house. However, Larrington's translation also supplies a 'hall' where there is none in the poem, and removes the *flet*-platforms (see section 6.1.5 below regarding the use of the word 'hall' in translation).

Once again, this example does not constitute a drastic mistranslation or a departure from the Old Norse likely to cause significant confusion. It does however demonstrate unfamiliarity with material culture, or at worst a disregard for precision in representing material culture in translation, for the sake of facilitating a chosen interpretation. The material details that are

[8] *Flet*, like *set* and *bekkr*, refers to the platforms in the main room. However, it appears only once in the *Íslendingasögur*, in *Svarfdæla saga*, Ch. 2 (ed. Kristjánsson 1966). It appears most frequently in poetry (particularly Eddic, as is the case here). Despite frequent definitions of *flet* as a type of flooring (C&V; F; Z), examples of the usage of *flet* in context appear to refer to the same structure as the *set*, raised above the floor and used for sitting or sleeping (see Faulkes' glossary to *Hávamál*, 1987: 10; Kellogg 1988: 188; LaFarge and Tucker 1992: 62-63; Sigurðardóttir 1966: 84; ONP). It is also used as a *pars pro toto* to refer to the house in general (C&V; ONP). Karen Milek argues for a usage of *flet* similar to that of the *set* as identified in this thesis, while rejecting the term *set* itself (Milek 2006: 120-121). The multiple examples in this thesis are however more than sufficient to attest to the nature of the *set* as the platforms in the main room.

supplied, implied, or removed, however innocuous, misrepresent material culture and could conceivably lead to errors in the understanding of narrative situations. Words designate tangible objects and structures, which have a physical reality. This correspondence should be taken into account in the translation and representation of material culture in text. Where the labels exist, it is important to ensure that they are attached to the right things.

6.2.3 The Use of the Word 'Hall'

The misrepresentation of material culture in modern interpretations and translations of Old Norse texts does not represent a mere inconvenience for the casual reader, but can lead to more serious misunderstandings when used in scholarly research. One of the most widespread and prevalent mistranslations is the nearly universal use, in English scholarship, of the word 'hall' as a direct translation for *skáli*.[9] One salient example which promotes this usage as a norm is the description of the saga farm in the Reference Section of the *Complete Sagas of the Icelanders* collection (Hreinsson et al 1997: 399-401, 410). Like *skáli*, 'hall' is used mainly to designate the main room of the house, but also occasionally the entire house itself. The question of whether 'hall' is the appropriate term to use arises when trying to determine what the word actually means in modern English. Aside from the use of 'hall' to designate an entrance room, vestibule, lobby or entrance passage (to which can be added 'hall' as the abbreviation of 'hallway', for a corridor), most of the meanings for the word in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED, consulted 13/04/2013) refer to large covered spaces that are mostly destined for use by people gathered in a

[9] See also the dictionary definitions in C&V: *skáli* II; Z: *skáli* (2).

public setting. Definition 7a, 'A large room or building for the transaction of public business […]', is arguably the most frequent and versatile use of the word 'hall' in everyday speech, referring to such spaces as town halls, music halls, dance halls, lecture halls, convention halls, or even the North American legion halls and bingo halls.[10] Some of these public spaces associate notions of residence to the word 'hall', such as dining halls, university halls of residence, or large reception rooms in high-status houses. However, the residential element these terms imply is not properly domestic, since their usage is detached from the business of ordinary daily life: they are located in large buildings catering to the needs of a large number of individuals gathered for specific and finite purposes. In the case of high-status residences, 'hall' can also come to mean the entire residence itself, which is differentiated from the more mundane residences of lower classes.

These are important definitions to bear in mind when considering that 'hall' is meant to designate the multi-purpose main room of the Viking Age and medieval house, as described in the sagas. For most of these definitions the discrepancy is obvious. The *skáli*, while being a large room, is not a vast, open space destined for public use by large gatherings of people. The question remains as to why 'hall' is considered such a universally acceptable translation for *skáli*. In English-language scholarship, this usage most likely stems from a conflation of the *skáli* with the hall of the later medieval English house.[11] Both the *skáli* and the hall are indeed the main room, constituting the largest single

[10] The succinct definitions from the Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology emphasise this even more: 'hall: spacious roofed place […]; large public room […]; building for residence of students, business of a guild etc. […]; large dining-room in a college, etc. […]' (ODEE 1966: 424).

[11] Meaning 2 in the OED's definitions: 'The large public room in a mansion, palace, etc., used for receptions, banquets, etc., which till nearly 1600 greatly surpassed in size and importance the private rooms […]; a large or stately room in a house.'

space in the house and featuring a central open hearth, around which meals are taken. The similarity, however, ends there. Upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that the medieval hall refers not only to an entirely different structure, but also to a different mental concept than the *skáli*.

The 'hall' as it is understood as the main room of a medieval house, relates to a development in housing culture which was, indeed, specific to medieval England. As of the twelfth century, and manifesting clearly in the thirteenth century, housing culture in England began to display a remarkable uniformity across all social classes. The house plan that was adopted would dominate English domestic architecture well into the early modern period. It featured an entrance passage with opposing doors, flanked on one side by (usually) two small service rooms for storage or the preparation of food, and on the other side by the hall. Beyond the hall there might be a private chamber, accessible by a small passage, and an additional storey might contain rooms above this ground-floor arrangement (See **Figure 6.1**). The hall itself was the most significant room, and its internal features were arranged along a strict logic of social display. The entrance from the passageway was located at the 'low' end of the hall, towards the outside world, and the ancillary spaces. It was the space for those of lesser status. It was placed in opposition to the 'high' end of the hall, to which a visitor's gaze was necessarily directed upon entering. The 'high' end was usually more brightly illuminated, by windows or other means, and the table and seats of the householder, the householder's family and important guests were located on a raised dais perhaps additionally framed within a canopy. The 'high' end of the hall also tended to be decorated. Structural elements and items of furniture were ornamented, carved and

painted (within the means of the householder's income and social position). Thus, the two ends of the hall created a social gradation from inferior to superior status (Gardiner 2000: 159-162, 169-170; 2008: 37-38; Johnson 2010: 67-84; Thompson 1995: 1-15; Wood 1965: 16-66 and see **Figure 6.2** on page 245).

For all this however, the hall was not meant to be visually crowded. One of the most impressive visual elements was that of space: the hall's arrangement left its floor plan largely unobstructed, leaving a clear view to the high end. Most significantly, the hall conveyed an impressive notion of spaciousness by being open to the roof. This effect was further increased in buildings featuring an upper storey, which did not interrupt the rise of the hall's open space. On the contrary, the higher elevation of the roof made for a taller and more open hall. This had a practical purpose as well, to allow for the smoke of the open hearth to escape, but had the fortuitous advantage of being visually impressive (Johnson 2010:67-68; Thompson 1995:2, 9). This design and the insistence on hierarchical placement and display were linked to the ideals of social, moral and spiritual stratification promulgated by the Church and the dominant echelons of feudal society. The demarcation of the high and low ends of the hall and the trappings of ostentatious display were necessarily more explicit in the houses of a higher status. In these higher-status houses, including castles and palaces, the hall could indeed be an extremely impressive room: the 'great hall'. It was spacious and meant to display the status and authority of its owner to a large company of guests. However, this housing plan was prevalent throughout all levels of society, and can be found repeated, in simpler fashion, in smaller, lower-status houses throughout England. The

ubiquity of this plan suggests that the model of social organisation it reflected was deeply ingrained.

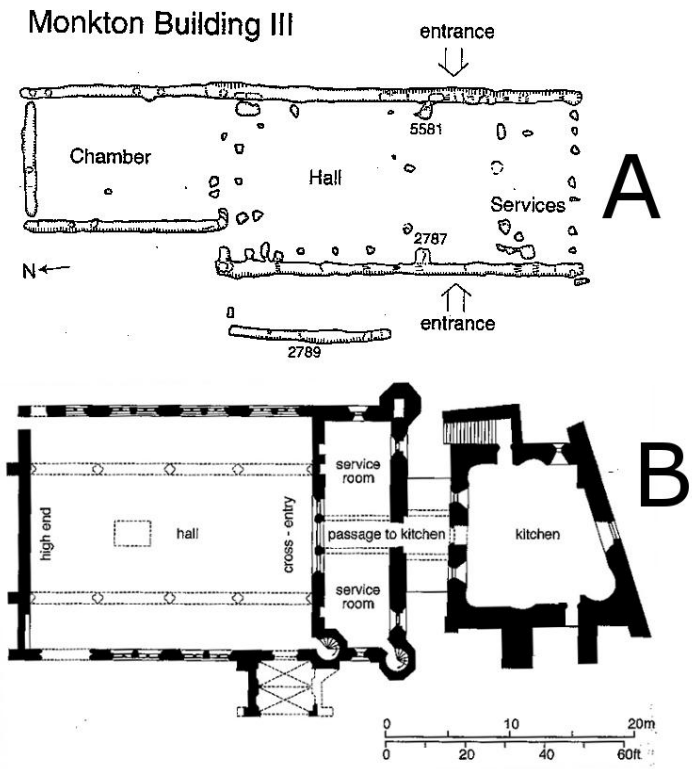

Figure 6.1: A: an early (twelfth century?) example of the late medieval English domestic plan at Monkton (from Gardiner 2000, fig. 2); B: a high-status example of the same type of plan from the thirteenth century phase of the Bishop's Palace at Lincoln (from Gardiner 2008, fig. 3.1). Plans are not to scale.

Figure 6.2: View towards the high end of the reconstructed hall of the fourteenth/fifteenth century merchant's house at Barley Hall, York. Photo: Teva Vidal.

Michael Thompson, whose research has focussed specifically on this space and its social significance (Thompson 1995), points out that this development was specific to England. The concept and words associated with the hall (mainly *hal* and *sal*) exist in other Germanic languages. However, the medieval halls of continental Europe, while still being large enclosed spaces open to the roof, tended to have slightly more mundane functions of public gathering and mass storage (Thompson 1995: 8-9, 21-27, see also Garrigou Grandchamp 1996: 78-79). The hall of the English medieval house was furthermore not an architectural or conceptual descendant of the main room of the Germanic (Anglo-Saxon) longhouses that preceded the Norman invasion in the eleventh century, nor is it related to the Scandinavian cognates of the Viking Age (Gardiner 2000: 163, 167-168; Johnson 2010: 79; Thompson 1995: 2). Within the English medieval house, the hall's unmistakable purpose was social display, and the assertion of the status of its owner to visitors. While the hall was a large room, potentially accommodating many people, it was not public: it was a space controlled by the householder, regardless of the number of guests who might find themselves gathered. Also, even though meals were taken in the hall, this in itself was more a gesture of social display than the practice of ordinary domesticity. No other regular domestic functions were meant to take place there (Johnson 2010: 71-72; Thompson 1995: 2-5). In the later medieval context, it is this idea of social stratification, ostentation and display that is inextricably bound in the usage of the word 'hall'.

It is clear that the portrait of the *skáli* in Viking Age and medieval Icelandic and Scandinavian houses does not correspond to the 'hall' as it is understood in the English medieval context. Physical similarities, such as the

open hearth and the associated open roof space for the gathering of smoke, are superficial. While the internal space of the Scandinavian house was increasingly open towards the medieval period, leading to the emergence of the medieval *stofa* model in Norway (see Chapter 2, section 2.1.3), the manifestations of the *skáli* in the sagas show that its arrangement is a consistent, three-aisled plan with its space dominated by the *set*-platforms along the long walls.

More important, however, is the difference in cognitive understanding of the space. The overt preoccupation with social display demonstrated in the medieval hall, rooted in the religiously coded social stratification of feudal Europe, is entirely incompatible with the usage of the *skáli* as demonstrated by the sagas. While special occasions did involve instances of social display, for example at seasonal feasts and drinking parties, the preoccupations of hospitality and visitation were predominantly mundane and practical (see Chapter 5, sections 5.1.2 and 5.1.3). Furthermore, the most detailed scenes of social display come from the *samtíðarsaga Íslendinga saga*, whose narrative is clearly preoccupied with the activities of aristocratic families. At their gatherings, such as the feasts at Sæmundr's farm (*Íslendinga saga* Ch. 39), Mǫðruvellir (*Íslendinga saga* Ch. 168), and Flugumýrr (*Íslendinga saga* Ch. 170), seating arrangements are described in great detail, with a social-spatial understanding which could be compared to that of the medieval hall. Higher-status guests appear to be sitting further inside the room, *innar* (at the 'high' end?), and those of lesser status further out, *útar*, nearer to the door (at the 'low' end?). While this is a genuine cognitive similarity in the use of the room which can provide valid comparison with the medieval hall, these

occasions do not take place in the *skáli*. Rather, they take place within the *stofa*, which has become, in *Íslendinga saga*, the main social room. *Stofa* tends to be translated by the less precise, but more appropriate, 'living room'. And so, the room most resembling the 'hall' is not the one which is subjected to nearly ubiquitous inappropriate translation as a 'hall'.

The cumulative representation of the *skáli* in the *Íslendingasögur* is as the multi-function main room of the house, where domestic activities of vastly varied natures find themselves concentrated into one space: sleeping, food preparation and consumption, domestic industry and social interaction. The presence of a high seat might demarcate an area of particular social significance, but this is still, structurally, nearly identical to the other spaces demarcated on the *set*-platforms. The presence of social activity within the main room, and even the instances of display in the form of decoration (*Grettis saga* Ch. 19; *Gísla saga* Ch. 15, see also Chapter 5, section 5.2), do not supersede the predominantly domestic nature of the *skáli*. In *Íslendinga saga* the *skáli* has become marginally less-multifunctional, but its new specific function is as the main sleeping room of the house. Thus, none of the *skáli*'s incarnations can be properly equated, materially or conceptually, with the medieval 'hall'.

Vast enclosed spaces which could accomplish the function of a hall, gathering a large number of people for occasions of ostentatious display in a high-status setting far removed from the everyday banalities of domestic life, do however exist in Viking Age buildings. Several large, high-status houses have been found in Scandinavia, for example at Lejre (Christensen, T. 2007: 42-48, 56-74) and Tissø (Croix 2012: 78-92; Jørgensen 2008) in Denmark, and

most significantly at Borg in Lofoten, Norway (Croix 2012: 93-103; Herschend and Mikkelsen 2003: 65-66). These contain rooms of a relatively open plan with distributions of artefacts which suggest high-status usage in contexts such as feasts. Though these rooms might, by their form, be confused with the main room of the majority of Viking Age houses, their function is distinct and corresponds with the concepts associated with the medieval hall. Such rooms, however, are not the *skálar* (pl.) of ordinary houses, but fortunately Old Norse has words to describe them: *hǫll,* appropriately cognate to 'hall', and *salr,* related to the other main Germanic word for a 'hall'-type space (Sørensen 2003: 268-269).[12] Used mostly in poetry, these words refer to large spaces for gathering and social display in warrior-aristocratic residences (and indeed, the residences of the gods), or, like *skáli,* to the entire buildings themselves. *Hǫll* is always a high-status space, though *salr* can mean a more humble type of dwelling, such as the *taugreptan sal* ('hut roofed with ropes') in stanza 36 of *Hávamál* (see chapter 5, section 5.3.2; Sørensen 2003: 268-271).

No more fitting description of the use of *hǫll* for a high-status building can be found in Old Norse literature than the most high-status building of them all, Valhǫll, the mythical hall of the gods. Standing near the tree that supports the worlds of Old Norse cosmology, Valhǫll is entirely bedecked with riches both inside and out. It is roofed with golden shields (*Gylfaginning* Ch. 2),[13] and the gleaming swords decorating its walls shine brightly enough that no other illumination is needed (*Skáldskaparmál* Ch. 33). This is indeed impressive, as

[12] C&V acknowledge that 'höll [sic] is only used for a king's hall', while still defining *skáli* as 'a hall' (C&V *skáli* II).
[13] *Gylfaginning* (from Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*), ed. by Anthony Faulkes, 2nd edition (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005). All subsequent references to *Gylfaginning* refer to this edition unless otherwise stated, and will be referred to by chapter in the body of the text.

it is a huge building, with five hundred and forty doors each large enough for eight hundred warriors to pass through at once (*Gylfaginning* Ch. 40). These warriors, fallen in battle in the world of humans, are recruited by the chief god Óðinn to fight at the battle at the end of the world, Ragnarǫk. In the meantime, they fight and kill each other each day (for their amusement), and rise again in the evening, returning to Valhǫll to feast upon the flesh of an ever-regenerating boar. They are served mead by the goddesses (*Ásynjur*), sourced from an endless stream of mead flowing from the udders of the goat Heiðrúnn, who eats the leaves of the World Tree (*Gylfaginning* Chs. 20, 38-42). Everything about this *hǫll* relates to the preoccupations and trappings of an aristocratic warrior élite, with its cycle of fighting and feasting continually repeated and exaggerated in a setting of utmost wealth and ostentatious display. While no earthly *hǫll* reaches this apogee, it demonstrates the understanding of aristocratic ideals that are attached the word *hǫll* itself. Clearly, this is no ordinary domestic setting. The quintessential hall of Valhǫll is as far removed from the main room of an ordinary Viking Age or medieval farm, the *skáli*, as it is possible to be.

While the form of the medieval hall is not comparable with the structures of the Viking Age or anything found in the sagas, its function has certain parallels in the *hǫll* and *salr* of poetry, and in the vast rooms of some exceptionally large, high-status Scandinavian houses. We are faced once again with the necessity to attach the right labels to the right things. The *skáli* does not describe such spaces in literature, but *hǫll* does. While certain aristocratic houses could certainly contain a room that acted as a 'hall', which was perhaps even its main room, similar in structure to the main room of ordinary houses,

this does not justify the mistaken identification of every house's main room with a space of public display such as the high-status hall. This problem is compounded when the social concepts associated with the aristocratic hall are promoted in scholarship as constituting a prescribed moral ideal for social behaviour on a broader scale (Herschend 1998 *passim*, esp. 13-31, 167-179; 2000). While these might be valid for the idealised representation of gods and aristocrats in poetry, or even in the exceptional high-status buildings revealed by archaeology, they do not correspond to the literary representation of the domestic reality of the majority of Viking Age and medieval houses in saga literature, nor their equivalents in the archaeological record.

Fortunately, modern scholarship appears to be turning away from the gratuitous use of 'hall'. Some more recent translators of the *Íslendingasögur* have chosen to eschew it, for example Martin Regal in his translation of *Gísla saga*, where *eldhús* (one of the words for the main room, synonymous with *skáli* in the *Íslendingasögur*) is translated as 'fire-room' (*Gísla saga* Ch. 9; Regal 1997: 9).[14] The unsuitability of the term 'hall' has also been noticed in archaeological scholarship, and Karen Milek justly questions the propriety of its use in English scholarship while mentioning the practice, in Icelandic archaeology, of using the Old Norse term *skáli* for both the main room and the entire structure of Viking Age houses in Iceland (Milek 2006: 88-89). There is also a growing dissatisfaction with the gratuitous misuse of the word 'hall' among emerging scholars working on the archaeological and literary study of Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian domestic life (Carstens, Pers. Comm. 2012; Croix, Pers. Comm. 2013), which may indeed lead to a future call for

[14] Compare with George Johnston's use of the ubiquitous 'hall' for the same word in his translation of *Gísla saga* (*Gísla saga* Ch. 9; Johnston 1963: 11).

redefinition of the vocabulary of research. The Icelandic usage mentioned by Milek (2006: 88-89) is laudable, and in a field which is concerned with the study of the Viking Age and early medieval period in the Viking world (particularly Iceland), there is perhaps incentive to introduce, or rehabilitate, native (Old Norse) vocabulary to express native concepts. Thus, *skáli* is itself an apt label to designate both the main room of the Viking Age house, and the house itself, even in English scholarship. In literary scholarship and translation, it might be appropriate to label a room, or a building, as a 'hall' only when it is referred to as a *hǫll*, or when, in literature or archaeology, it fits the definition of a large room, with a relatively open plan, capable of accommodating large numbers of people for high-status activities clearly differentiated from the exercise of ordinary domestic life.

Conclusion

The relationship between words and objects is sometimes difficult to grasp, especially since modern scholarship finds itself at a considerable material, linguistic, and even social, cognitive and conceptual remove from the Viking Age and medieval world represented in sagas and archaeology. However, the link between things and their labels is a concrete one. Material culture and language interact. Structures, objects and spaces are referred to using specific words that describe their form, function and usage. The vocabulary of material culture is, in turn, anchored to specific objects. That is not to say that the process of translating and understanding the material world through an ancient language like Old Norse is straightforward. Descriptions of the usage and form of objects, structures and spaces can sometimes only be elucidated through the

cumulative interpretation of numerous descriptions of this material culture in use and close readings of extended passages such as those carried out above.

These difficulties make it tempting to seek easier interpretations, either through the use of conventional modern vocabulary, or through the assumed understanding of cognate words in modern Icelandic or modern English. However, such compromises can lead to misrepresentations of material culture and a misunderstanding of the cultural world represented by both sagas and archaeology. Old Norse is precise enough to give us the words to use in their proper contexts. While some mistakes in interpretation are normal in any evolving field of scholarship, perhaps the use of native medieval vocabulary to represent material culture would help avoid some of the confusion that results from treating objects and words as separate and dissociated concepts in the research on the Viking world.

Chapter 7: Material Memory

Introduction

The previous chapters of this thesis have demonstrated that saga literature is capable of accurately portraying the housing culture of its medieval Icelandic writers/compilers, and even retaining accurate portrayals of Viking Age structures. Material culture and text exist in a dynamic relationship, constantly interacting as related cultural artefacts of the society that created them (see Andrén 1998: 149-150, 155; Hines 2003: 21). That the material culture in the sampled *Íslendingasögur* should take a form contemporaneous with their medieval period of writing (thirteenth to fifteenth century) is appropriate. While the narratives, in their context of composition, were considered genuine portrayals of the medieval society's Viking Age antecedents, their composers and audience would have viewed and portrayed their past in terms of their present circumstances. Thus, material culture would have been one among many cultural markers (such as social and political institutions) from the medieval present to be transposed on more or less plastic narratives about the Viking Age (Callow 2006: 322; Ranković 2010a: 17-18). The question remains as to why earlier Viking Age house forms can be identified in the medieval texts, how they got there in the first place, and how they survived to be recorded in the form of the saga we now have.

This final chapter will look at certain processes of composition to elucidate some of the reasons why material culture might appear in text at all, and the various functions it can have in shaping narrative episodes. This discussion is mainly inspired by theories on composition put forward by Richard Perkins (1989) and Slavica Ranković (2010a).

7.1 'Kernels': Anchors for Composition

Within the context of the ongoing debate regarding oral versus written composition in the genesis of the *Íslendingasögur* (see Chapter 6, Introduction), Richard Perkins proposed, in his 1989 article 'Objects and Oral Tradition in Medieval Iceland', a hypothesis exploring the processes which lead to the initial creation of narrative episodes. Perkins identified various cultural phenomena that could act as anchoring points, which he called 'kernels', about which stories about the Viking Age (or *söguöld*, 'saga-age') are first written, and which would remain the stories' focal points over time. Narrative elements would then grow around these 'kernels', sometimes changing, sometimes losing the original context of composition, but remaining attached to the central idea expressed by the 'kernel'. Among the elements that Perkins identified as suitable 'kernels' for the growth of narratives were poetry (skaldic or otherwise), genealogies and place-names, but also objects both movable and immovable, natural or man-made (Perkins 1989: 241-242).

Perkins provides a fairly exhaustive list of the various types of objects, either real or imagined, which might give rise to a diverse range of stories. For example, objects endowed with what is considered an historical pedigree, whether they are extant or at least plausibly real at the time of writing, might be used as material legitimation of the stories told. This is the case with heirlooms and famous or mystical weapons, for example, even if such objects might have to be specially created to fill in their 'antiquarian' role.[1] The narratives might otherwise be aetiological, created to explain certain

[1] One object in this category, from among the sampled *Íslendingasögur* mentioned by Perkins as a 'kernel' for narrative is the spear *Grásíða*, whose history is featured in *Gísla saga* where it notably appears as Gísli's weapon during his murder of his brother-in-law Þorgrímr (*Gísla saga* Ch. 16; see also Chs. 5-13, 37-38, 43-44, 52-54). *Grásíða* later reappears as an heirloom in *Íslendinga saga* (Chs. 39, 138). See Perkins 1989: 243, 250-254.

mysterious built or natural features in the landscape. Perkins cites a wall near the farm of Hraun in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 28), supposedly built by Víga-Stýrr's two ill-fated Swedish berserkers before he has them killed in the oft-discussed *baðstofa* (Perkins 1989: 245, 249, 264 note 17; see also chapter 1, section 1.2; chapter 2, section 2.2.2.; chapter 6, section 6.2.1). Here, the wall is probably extant in the landscape but its origins are unknown to the writer/compiler of this narrative episode. The writer might then create this narrative sequence to provide an explanation for an obvious, but mysterious, feature in the landscape.

Perkins mentions ruins as possible physical features which can become 'kernels' for narratives (Perkins 1989: 244). Since the evolution of Viking Age housing culture into its medieval forms was gradual, starting first with an accretion of ancillary spaces onto existing houses, it is quite possible that structures with architectural links to the Viking Age were still present in the cultural memory of the saga writers. This is in fact explicitly indicated by the few overtly antiquarian passages, mentioning the details of housing culture *í þann tíma* ('in that time', *Grettis saga* Ch. 14; see also *Eyrbyggja saga* Ch. 52). Furthermore, modern ethnographic research on the decay of traditional Icelandic turf-built architecture suggests that, even if older structures of this type of construction fell into ruin, their structural decay would take decades (Milek 2006: 39-45; 2012a: 121-124). Thus, they might conceivably remain identifiable within the landscape for longer still, perhaps centuries. It is precisely within this model that the presence of the controversial *baðstofa* in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 28) makes sense (see Chapter 2, section 2.2.2). Even though sunken-featured buildings were disused toward the turn of

the twelfth century (Milek 2006: 210-211; 2012b: 121-122), about a century and a half before the inception of the saga-writing age, it is possible that extant examples were still visible in the landscape, or survived in cultural memory. While structural details may have been retained, the building's function may have been forgotten. Thus, an ætiological narrative might arise around the 'kernel' of the sunken-featured building, interpreting its forgotten function as that of a steam-bath.

Other 'kernels' which appear in the *Íslendingasögur* include the main room of the house at Bjarg, described as so conspicuous in *Grettis saga* (Ch. 14), in particular its long hearth and layout which, as discussed in chapter 2, section 2.2.2, might have become unfamiliar by the fifteenth-century date of the saga's writing. This could be the case as well of the layout of the farm at Þórhallsstaðir, with its conspicuous open construction, light wooden partition wall, and visible beams and posts (*Grettis saga* Ch. 35. See also sction 7.2 below). Some 'kernels' might also be inspired by architectural forms which are conspicuous, but contemporary to the medieval period of saga writing, such as the underground passages in *Gísla saga* (Chs. 23, 29, 33) and the Norwegian *stabbur* in *Grettis saga* (Ch. 19), perhaps conspicuous because of its specifically Norwegian character.

7.2 Buildings as Mnemonic Devices

One mechanism that goes further still in explaining why material culture might play an important role in narrative composition was proposed by Slavica Ranković, also within the context of the debate on the interaction between oral and written literature (Ranković 2010a; see also 2010b: 46-47). She describes

the genesis of composition of traditional literature such as the *Íslendingasögur*, which exist as both oral and written literature, as being the product of a 'distributed author': a creative amalgamation of numerous, varied sources (oral or written) into a coherent narrative which is eventually transmitted in the version(s) known to modern scholarship (Ranković 2010a: 9-10). The 'distributed author' is a dynamic force, creating narrative by composing, remembering, recording and accessing cultural memories (among which one could conceivably include Perkins' 'kernels'), adapting the amalgam through time in order to maintain the 'currency' of the narrative as the social purpose of remembering it changes (Ranković 2010a: 13-19). This contributes to the debate on the historicity of the sagas, suggesting that the creation of a narrative about the Viking Age past serves a purpose for the present. The result is a narrative that is not set within uniform 'present' time, but a multiplicity of 'presents' brought together through the collection of cultural memories by the distributed author.

Cultural memories, however, require a supportive medium if they are to survive the successive permutations, additions and recombination of elements of the narrative to which they belong. These supports come in the form of mnemonic devices, which, like Perkins' 'kernels', can be any number of culturally-significant phenomena to which a narrative idea, or cultural memory, can be attached: linguistic artefacts such as poetic metre or place-names, material setting such as landscape, and material culture such as movable objects and artefacts (Ranković 2010a: 21-22). Unlike Perkins' 'kernels', however, Ranković's mnemonic devices need not be the object of the narrative or narrative episode to which they are attached, but exist solely to

frame and stimulate the memory of the story's progression and salient details. The role of these mnemonic devices applies equally whether the compositions are oral or written, or, as is the case with the *Íslendingasögur*, a probable mixture of both.

Though she does not elaborate much on the use of material culture, Ranković does mention landscape, physical setting and objects as potential mnemonic devices that might be integrated into narrative (see also Hines 2003: 21). Seen in this perspective, the material reality of the house, which is both object and setting, might represent a feature integrated into the saga's composition, helping to commit to memory the narrative episodes in which it occurs. This is indeed an attractive explanation of why such specific details of housing culture are offered in certain narrative sequences in the sagas, and why such details are so unevenly distributed. Gísli's murder of Þórgrímr at Sæból in chapter 16 of *Gísla saga*, for example, is a passage of such phenomenological force, so effectively embodied in Gísli's movements through the house's space, that the reader is transported into that space with him and would have no trouble re-enacting the scene in its most minute details (see the full passage in Chapter 1, section 1.4.2 and the discussion on phenomenology in chapter 5, section 5.4). Similarly, the two great monster fights in *Grettis saga*, at Þórhallsstaðir (Ch. 35) and Sandhaugar (Chs. 64-65), give very similar accounts of Grettir and the monsters systematically demolishing the interior of these unfortunate houses during their struggles (see chapter 1, sections 1.3.1. and 1.4.1). Both fights start in the main room and make their way outside, enumerating every piece of the house that gets broken, stumbled over or otherwise abused in the process. Their physical progression through the

house's space is nearly as evocative as Gísli's at Sæból in *Gísla saga*. These scenes show that the concepts of 'kernels' (conspicuous features) and of material setting as a mnemonic device can work in tandem.

This richness of spatial and material detail is of course useful to the modern scholar of housing culture in the sagas, providing what is almost a catalogue of house construction (or destruction as the case may be). But for a contemporary scribe, storyteller or audience, whose daily domestic reality took place in a setting very similar to that portrayed in the sagas, the action in these narrative episodes could have been very easily situated, and thus effectively, remembered, transmitted and even enacted.[2] Since so much of the narrative action in the *Íslendingasögur* occurs within the confines of domestic space, the appearance of realistic descriptions might have an entirely practical purpose. Material setting might even become necessary to the narrative, in order to remember and frame the sequence of events in episodes such as the ones described above. Material culture could find itself irrevocably enmeshed with the process of composition, in such a way that it can no longer be removed or dissociated from the narrative.

This possible mechanism of composition provides insight into some of the more interesting manifestations of housing culture in the sagas: not those of contemporary medieval house forms (which are certainly interesting in their own right), but those which reflect an earlier Viking Age reality (see chapter 1, sections 1.4.1 and 1.4.3; chapter 2, section 2.2.2). In the episode in chapter 14 of *Grettis saga*, which opens with an explicit marker of chronological distance

[2] The practice of *sagnaskemmtun*, the recitation of sagas in the Icelandic house, is well-attested from the medieval period in self-referential passages in sagas themselves, up until the early modern period (Andersson 2008: 9-10; Driscoll 2005: 203; Mundal 2010: 163-181 esp. 167-170; Pálsson 1962; Tucker 1989: 14-15).

(*Þat var háttr í þann tíma*, 'That was the custom in that time'), the writer-compiler of the saga (in the form we now have it) feels the need to explain the layout and use of the main room. This suggests that the intended audience might no longer be familiar with this setting. Why then would such an artefact survive in the narrative? Why, for that matter, does the Viking Age sunken-featured building survive as a 'kernel' in the form of the *baðstofa* in *Eyrbyggja saga*? If such descriptions functioned as mnemonic devices, and if they were in turn enmeshed into the narrative composition, it is possible that an earlier incarnation of the narrative episodes, integrated into the complicated genesis of the oral/written saga through the 'distributed author', had sealed outdated architectural realities into what would become the sagas we now know. The writer-compilers who produced the forms of the sagas which have come down to us may have been confronted with this potentially problematic setting. Unable to extricate the antiquated structures from their place in the narratives, these latest contributors to the saga's form may have been compelled to explain them instead, more or less effectively. It might, furthermore, suggest an avowed awareness on the part of these putative writer-compilers of earlier house forms that had not yet passed out of cultural memory, but were sufficiently removed that they could not be considered common knowledge (see discussion in chapter 2, section 2.2).

Conclusion

The strong link between material culture and text, as products of the same culture, goes beyond the description of objects and structures through language. The material setting that framed the daily existence and experiences

of the various contributors to a saga's final form, in the multiplicity of sources both oral and written, may in fact have played an important role in the process of composition itself. Either as 'kernels' around which narrative grew, or as mnemonic devices helping to remember the story's progression, descriptions of material culture, and specifically housing culture, entered into the sagas at various stages in the 'prehistory' of their composition, and were attached to individual episodes. These would become enmeshed into the sagas, displaying various degrees of detail and exactitude in their descriptions. Their importance in framing and contextualising the narrative would guarantee the survival of at least some antiquated elements of housing culture. In studying the sagas in a material perspective there is no dichotomy between objects and structures and the texts in which they are represented: material culture and literature are both necessary to properly understand the other, and to complete the portrait of the Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian culture they represent. In this respect, this thesis can provide a starting point for future contributions regarding the place of text in discussions of materiality as a theoretical approach to the study of material culture (see chapter 5, section 5.4). This kind of analysis could also contribute to a better understanding of the evolution of individual sagas, particularly those which rely heavily on specific elements of material setting. For the sample used in this thesis, this is the case, for examples, with *Gísla saga* and its underground passages (see chapter 2, section 2.2.1), or *Eyrbyggja saga* with its contentious *baðstofa* (see chapter 6, section 6.2.1). This methodology could be put to practical use within the wider corpus of the *Íslendingasögur* as well, and thus contribute to the scholarship on the

formation of saga narratives. This thesis represents a first step in explicitly recognising the usefulness of such an approach.

General Conclusion

As this thesis has shown, establishing a portrait of the house in the sagas is not a straightforward task. Sagas, as literary texts, are preoccupied with the narrative actions and interactions of their characters and the other elements which make up the description of their social world, such as the deeds of heroes, genealogies, and the vicissitudes of land claiming, ownership and management. As demonstrated in the sampled *Íslendingasögur* or sagas looking back on the Viking Age, *Grettis saga*, *Gísla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, as well as the *samtíðarsaga*, or 'contemporary' medieval saga, *Íslendingasaga*, the material world appears as an element of background, the setting against which the narrative takes place. It is, by consequence, seldom given any narrative importance in its own right, and sagas mostly eschew description of the material world for its own sake. Thus, houses are not given any gratuitous description regarding their form, construction or usage. Rather, they are in most cases described only when the physical setting they provide has some importance in framing the action of the narrative episodes in which they appear, and in helping the story progress.

To find the house as a physical entity in this context, one has to 'read between the lines' into this material background. The portrait of the house is a cumulative endeavour, compiled from numerous separate occurrences of the domestic context, with uneven levels of descriptive detail and precision. These occurrences are often inserted within much broader narrative sequences which, by following the actions of the story's characters, allow us to see how objects and structures are used and interacted with. This process is fundamental to understanding the proper use of Old Norse architectural vocabulary, revealing

material details of the form, layout and function of domestic structures which might otherwise be overlooked. Developing this methodology and demonstrating its use are among the important contributions of this thesis to saga scholarship and research into Viking Age and medieval housing culture.

Though descriptions of the house as a physical structure are scattered throughout the narratives, they can reveal a considerable amount of detail regarding the use of domestic space. The buildings, rooms and spaces of the house and farmstead, in their material form, construction, layout and arrangement, have considerable importance for daily life. They frame all the activities of the pastoral society that was Viking Age and medieval Iceland and Scandinavia. In particular, Iceland's population model up until the early modern period, without towns or villages, made the farmstead the main unit of population distribution. Since farms represent the only concentrations of people, it is on the farm, and in particular in the house, that human society operates. Houses and farmsteads are thus active, living nodes in a social landscape spread widely over a mostly empty and uninhabited landscape. But physical isolation in this landscape does not equate to social isolation. Social links are actively maintained through constant travel and visitation, making the physical landscape effectively subordinate to the social landscape.

However, the importance of the house in social interactions maintains a fundamentally material dimension. While social gatherings can take the form of ostentatious feasting and celebrations gathering large numbers of people for special occasions, such as seasonal feasts, weddings and funerals, these do not represent the usual exercise of visitation and contact between farms. In these cases, the realities of travel and distance in the physical landscape place shelter

and hospitality among the most important social responsibilities. Hospitality is an overwhelmingly material concern, addressing basic needs of shelter and sustenance to undo the effects of physical exertion and the elements, and to restore physical comfort to the traveller. The fact that these mundane needs are shown clearly in the earlier (tenth-century) Eddic poem *Hávamál* suggests that these concerns had been present in the native Scandinavian mindset for a long time before being manifested in the sagas.

The physical structures of the domestic world thus take on considerable importance in the sagas, and with a compilation of its various occurrences, this space can be reconstructed. The question remains, however, as to whether or not these written descriptions represent a *real* space. The sagas are, after all, narratives, and their chronology, particularly that of the *Íslendingasögur*, is problematic. Written as of the thirteenth century, and possibly up until the turn of the fifteenth as is the case with *Grettis saga*, the *Íslendingasögur* took the written form we now know several centuries after the ninth- and tenth-century setting of the events they describe. The debate about the 'historicity' of the *Íslendingasögur* continues, but the view that sagas represent factual accounts of the events of the Viking Age has long been abandoned. The forms of the sagas we now have are certainly products of a post-Viking Age medieval culture, from the thirteenth century onward. They reflect the concerns of their medieval present, its social institutions, and politics. But they are looking towards their own past to anchor their present, and the narratives are, most importantly, believed and intended to be real. The medieval Icelanders who produced the sagas were not ignorant of the time and change which separated

them from their past, and cultural memories do survive in their antiquarian outlook.

Finding the physical house in the midst of this cultural memory, a mix of past and present, is aided by archaeology. Thanks to the ever expanding collection of artefactual material and building remains, archaeology gives us an increasingly detailed picture of the material culture of Viking Age and medieval Scandinavia and Iceland. In comparison with these finds, the *Íslendingasögur* show us, on the one hand, a reflection of medieval housing culture reflecting the material context of their writer-compilers. The house boasts a collection of increasingly function-specific rooms, interlinked with passageways and centred on the core of the house, the *skáli* (main room), whose functions have become differentiated form those of the *stofa*, now the main room for social interaction. Other structures in the built landscape of the farmstead, such as the unmistakable Norwegian *stabbur*, or raised storage loft in chapter 19 of *Grettis saga*, help to confirm a genuine reflection of medieval housing culture. But the *Íslendingasögur* also contain descriptions of buildings more akin to those of the Viking Age which their narratives depict. The house is of a simpler model, with fewer spaces, centred on the multi-function main room (where the *skáli* and *stofa* are essentially indistinguishable).

Outbuildings can also help pinpoint constructions dating back to the Viking Age, such as the sunken-featured building in chapter 28 of *Eyrbyggja saga*, a type of construction that was obsolete over a century before the start saga writing in the thirteenth century. Archaeological comparison with the *samtíðarsaga Íslendinga saga*, dealing with events nearly contemporary with the time of writing, shows that antiquated house forms are absent. This

comparison acts as a ‘control group’ and suggests that the medieval writers of the *Íslendingasögur* did manage to retain, or have access to, material memories of the housing culture of times past, and that they had reason to associate these forms to their narratives about the Viking Age.

The mechanisms by which such antiquated Viking Age forms of housing culture find their way into medieval saga texts demonstrate the interconnectedness of material culture and text. Sagas have a complicated genesis. They did not exist as complete, self-contained stories recorded in the medieval versions we now know. Rather, they stem from collections of various separate narratives and narrative episodes, composed at various times in various ways (written and oral), relating to a connecting theme. These were later compiled into the versions we know, but each hand or voice that led to this compilation had agency in shaping the form the saga would ultimately take.

Material culture can play a role in this process. Narrative can build up around descriptions of objects, buildings and natural features, and material elements of background and setting, such as the houses found in the sagas, frame narrative action. They can act as mnemonic devices, helping with the recollection, preservation, recitation and expression of a narrative episode. These material anchors can even become integral to the narrative in the form it has taken, and thus become sealed within the story. Some of these material elements, contained in earlier components of the saga’s complicated formation, may have carried, intact, descriptions of antiquated housing culture into the medieval sagas we now know.

Despite the occasional disciplinary antagonism between archaeology and textual, particularly literary studies, both offer complementary insights into the study of Viking Age and medieval Scandinavia that is far from being incompatible. It is important to remember that medieval Icelanders lived in a world far closer to the Viking Age, chronologically and culturally, than we do. The words they used in the composition of their sagas, in Old Norse, refer to real objects and spaces in the material world as they knew it. This correspondence between words and objects has not faded over time, but perhaps our understanding has.

The modern languages used to translate these sagas, and the concepts they carry, sometimes lack the resources to express the material realities reflected by the texts, especially when our own understanding is incomplete. It is therefore necessary to undertake a close reading of the saga texts with archaeology in mind. Peering into the background of the narratives and looking at descriptions of material objects and spaces with a knowledge of material culture, and examining them in their context of use as described by the texts, can be an extremely enlightening exercise for both the disciplines of archaeology and literary studies. Both must beware of preconceived ideas and focus on what is actually contained in the texts (including the language used to describe it), and what was actually found in the ground. This thesis has demonstrated how these relationships work on a functional level within the text, and has contributed an important elucidation of several significant words in the area of housing culture (notably *baðstofa*, *dyngja*, *jarðhús*, *ǫndvegi* and *stofa*), and their use in a narrative context.

The concerted awareness of material culture in both archaeology and in text, can contribute to a better understanding of an important facet of the culture of the Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian world. Functional interdisciplinarity in these fields can indeed help us look beyond the limitations of individual, and conflicting, outlooks on research into the Viking world.

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