

Archaeology at Europe's Edge

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Iceland's stunning landscapes attracted Norse settlers over a millennium ago. Now, every summer, it attracts archaeologists and students from all over the world who are eager to learn about its fascinating history.

The Institute of Archaeology, Iceland, established the international Field School in North Atlantic Archaeology in 1997 to serve as a focal point for interdisciplinary research and teaching. Since then, over 140 students from nearly 20 countries have gone to Iceland for hands-on instruction and experience in Icelandic archaeology, field survey, and the archaeological sciences. Their practical work is placed in context through a lecture series in Nordic archaeology, which is taught by Institute of Archaeology staff and visiting scholars from Iceland, the United States, Norway and the United Kingdom. Participation in an important research project and contact with world-class archaeologists and natural scientists has inspired many students to pursue graduate studies in archaeology, and nearly 20 of them have gone on to write MA and PhD dissertations in North Atlantic archaeology.

Since its foundation, the field school has operated in partnership with the North Atlantic Biocultural Organization (NABO), an international research cooperative that sponsors interdisciplinary research throughout the North Atlantic region. The headquarters of NABO are at the City University of New York, the first university to offer the field school as a credit course. Now the field school is also accredited with the University of Oslo and with the University of Iceland, which established an archaeology program in 2002. North American students apply to the field school through the City University of New York, while European students apply through the University of Oslo, and are given the option of earning 10 ECTS credits.

For its first eight years, the field school was based at Hofstaðir and other Viking Age sites in the beautiful volcanic region around Lake Mývatn, in northeast Iceland. In 2005 it moved to the more rugged northwest, to the site of Vatnsfjörður, where there are stunning views over the fjord and distant white cap of the Drangajökull glacier. This farm is mentioned in historical texts and sagas dating as far back as the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, in which it is home to colourful characters with names like 'Vermundur the Lean' and his strong-willed wife, 'Porbjörg the Stout'. The Vatnsfirðingar clan, named after the farm that was its main seat of power, was one of the richest and most powerful families in Iceland in the Middle Ages. They owned farms all over northwest Iceland, from which they received rents in the form of dried fish and other marine products. As on other wealthy farms in Iceland, a church was built at Vatnsfjörður in the twelfth century. It remained the site of a parish church until the retirement of its last priest in the late twentieth century, and is still a productive farm.

Archaeological surveys and large, open-area excavations have been undertaken at Vatnsfjörður by the Institute of Archaeology since 2003. The farm contains ruins of tenth

century buildings and a 100 m by 50 m 'farm mound', an artificial mound made up of many overlying turf and stone buildings dating to the eleventh to twentieth centuries. Two turf buildings excavated in 2004 contained tenth-century glass beads, spindle whorls, whetstones, worked whale bone, loom weights, and iron objects such as locks and nails. In 2005, a smithy was found a short distance away from these houses. Between the buildings were outdoors hearths, a cooking pit, and midden deposits rich in bones, charred plant remains, and tenth-century artefacts—including numerous imported glass beads and a gold pendant that had once been part of an Irish brooch. The 2006 excavation at Vatnsfjörður saw the exciting discovery of three new outhouses belonging to the Viking Age farm, all of which were new types unseen before in Iceland.

During the four weeks of the field school, students participate in all aspects of the dig, from the initial deturfing to the final returfing and preparation of the site for public viewing. Most days are dedicated to the excavation, recording, and sampling of the archaeological remains, but students also spend a couple of days walking through the beautiful countryside in the vicinity of the site, learning the principles of archaeological survey. They also spend half a day with an archaeobotanist in order to learn how to recover botanical remains from soil samples by floating them in water.

Students and staff are housed at Hótel Reykjanes, a former school on a narrow peninsula a short drive away from the site. After working outside from 8:00-17:00, many enjoy a soak in the large outdoor pool, which is heated by the natural hot springs that gave Reykjanes its name ('smoke peninsula'). After a dinner catered by the hotel, everyone goes back to work on the records, artefacts and bones recovered from the site that day. Lectures also take place on evenings, and during the last two weeks of the field school, there are practical workshops on the analysis of botanical remains, bones, artefacts, and sediments from the site. Students are evaluated on the basis of their participation in the field- and post-excavation work, their attendance at lectures, a field journal, and an oral presentation of a practical group project.

It is not all work and no play. On weekends, there are guided excursions to nearby museums, towns, and interesting sites, including a hike up the Drangajökull glacier. There is also time for walks to the seal colony close to the hotel, dipping into the sea and dancing in the hotel bar. The Field School in Icelandic Archaeology is an intensive learning experience, but it also gives students from all over the world a unique opportunity to experience Iceland's fascinating culture and exceptional beauty.

For more information on the Field School in North Atlantic Archaeology, see <http://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/middelaldersenteret/MAS2300/index-eng.html>. European students interested in applying should send a letter of application, CV and two letters of reference to Prof. Christian Keller at the University of Oslo (christian.keller@iakh.uio.no) by 1 April 2007.



Karen Milek, Field School Director (centre) teaching Ella Ussher, from New Zealand, and Sébastien Martel, from Canada, how to excavate the floor of a Viking Age smithy at Vatnsfjörður.



Professor Christian Keller, from the University of Oslo, teaching students how to survey building ruins at Sveinhús, near Vatnsfjörður.



In the laboratory, students learn how to process artefacts, bones, botanical remains and sediments from the site.



Student excursion to the historic Ósvör fishing station, near Bolungarvík, where they learn about traditional fishing methods in northwest Iceland.