

## VIKING AGE ROUTES, LANDSCAPE, AND POWER IN THE MOSFELL REGION

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Afhvarf mikit  
er til ills vinar,  
þótt á brautu búí,  
en til góðs vinar  
liggja gagnvegir,  
þótt hann sé firr farinn.

It's a long way 'round  
to a bad friend's home,  
though he lives along the path,  
but to a good friend's home  
the way is straight,  
far removed though he may be.

Veiztu ef þú vin átt |  
þann er þú vel trúir,  
farðu at finna oft,  
því at hrísi vex  
og hávu grasi  
vegur er vætcki treður.

If you've a friend you trust,  
go and find him often,  
for brushwood grows,  
and tall grass, too,  
on trails that no men tread.

*Hávamál*, verses 34 and 119<sup>1</sup>

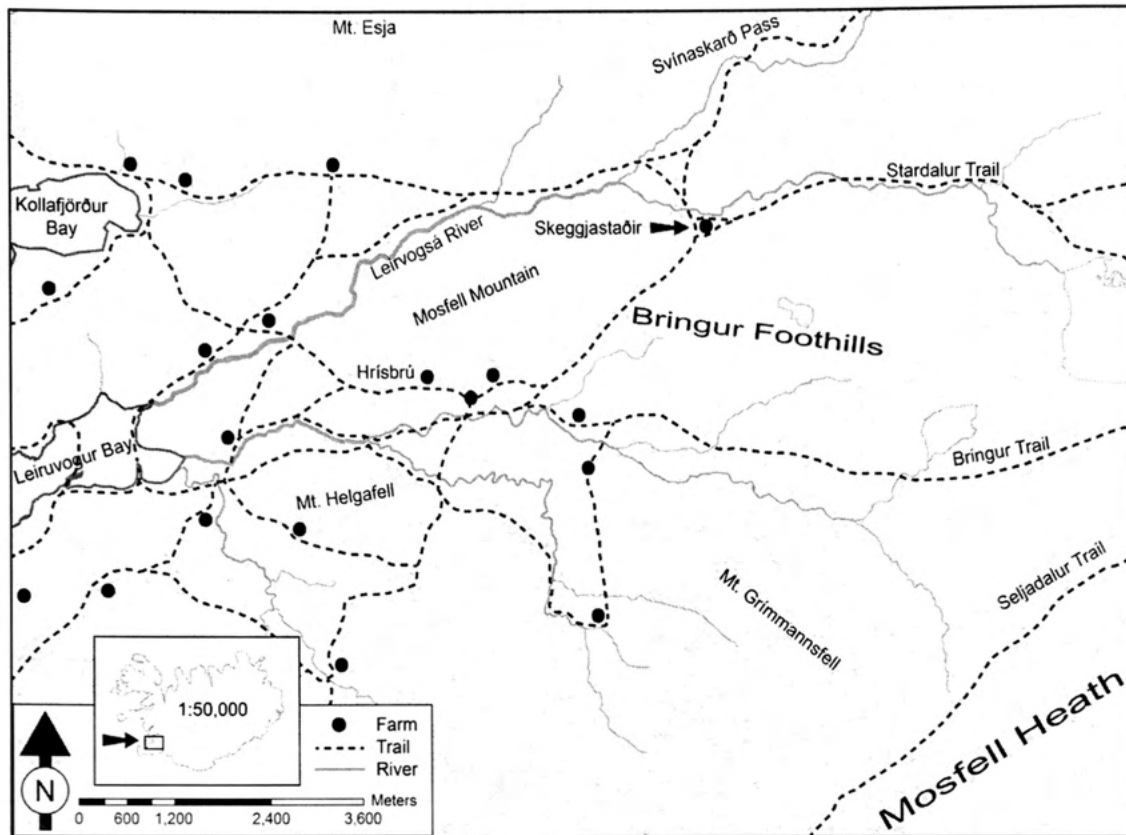
When the literary culture of saga writing in Iceland emerged in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, men and women, dead for over two hundred years, were still alive in the nation's collective memory. The memory of these renowned individuals of the Viking Age fuelled medieval saga writing, inspiring numerous sagas that feature wealthy and important figures from Mosfell in southwest Iceland. These often substantial references to characters or events in the Mosfell Valley during the Viking Age contrast sharply with the relative absence of such attention in sources that relate the contemporary political events of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, such as the *Sturlunga saga* collection. During these centuries, political power in Iceland was concentrated into the hands of six prominent families, none of which resided at Mosfell. The leaders of Mosfell had all but vanished from the national stage, while the renown of their antecedents lived on. Archaeological evidence from the Hrísbú excavations confirms the wealth of Mosfell's early inhabitants, but how might an archaeological approach evaluate the site's fading prominence over the course of the Free State Period?

In this chapter I demonstrate the importance of Mosfell's location through an examination of the surrounding land routes and landscape, which would have placed the farm's leaders in a position to exploit human resources to political advantage. Hrísbú and Mosfell were located on two main routes and close to a Viking Age ship's landing, which afforded ambitious individuals opportunities to increase their power. This position was only useful so long as these routes were frequented, and a change in the flow of traffic in the early twelfth century may have weakened the political fortunes of Mosfell's late Free State Period leaders, who failed to achieve the renown of their predecessors.

The Viking Age longhouse and church excavated at Hrísbú are located at the southern base of Mosfell Mountain in the Mosfell Valley, which is bordered to the south by the mountain ridge between the peaks of Helgafell and Grímmannsfell. Two small rivers, Kaldakvísl and Suðurá, run east-west through the valley to Leiruvogur Bay. A larger river, Leirvogsa, runs around the northern side of Mosfell Mountain and empties into the same bay. Leirvogsa River traverses a nameless and parallel valley that is contained to the north by Mt Esja and its eastward-leading mountain ridge. These two valleys lead east up the Bringur Foothills onto the Mosfell Heath, which stretches far to the east and south. This landscape represents a geographically distinct unit, called the Mosfell Region (*Mosfellssveit*); it will limit the examination of Viking Age land routes in this chapter (see Map 15.1).

Hrísbú and Mosfell lie in south-western Iceland, approximately twenty kilometres east of the modern capital, Reykjavík, and thirty kilometres west of the old

<sup>1</sup> *Eddukvæði (Sæmundar Edda)*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, I, 31, 51. All translations in this chapter are my own.



Map 15.1.  
The Mosfell Region. Farms are based on sixteenth-century or earlier historical documentation. Trails are based on historical maps, descriptions, and field survey (Colin Connors and Jakob Stakowski).

National Assembly, the Althing (*Alþing*) at Thingvellir (*Þingvellir*). A modern highway cuts east-west through Mosfell Valley connecting these sites, and a second highway runs north-south across the mouth of the valley that connects the southern and western regions of Iceland.<sup>2</sup> While these roads follow old routes, they do not accurately reflect the flow of traffic in ages past. Reykjavík was a mere settlement in the Viking Age, albeit the first on the island and home to the *allherjargóði*, the chieftain with the honorific title and responsibility for consecrating and opening the National Assembly's annual proceedings. Reykjavík's population at this time was of no national consequence to traffic in comparison to the modern city. Unrestrained by the necessity of carriages and automobiles to travel on surfaced roads, pre-modern traffic was freer to pursue trails that have fallen out of use today.

The network of routes in the Mosfell Region has adapted to changing means of travel. Before the introduction of wheeled carts and carriages in the late nineteenth century, land travel was either on horseback or on foot.<sup>3</sup> Until the first bridges and surfaced roads built for

carriages and then automobiles made it possible to cut across the terrain, horse trails followed the contours of the landscape. While the modern road through Mosfell Valley runs straight across treacherous bogs, the old trail followed a drier and easier route along the banks of the Kaldakvísl River.<sup>4</sup>

As a general rule, drier routes were preferable to wetter routes, even if they were longer. Distances were commonly measured by the number of rest stops required for horses, instead of by kilometre; difficult terrain that required frequent breaks would have seemed to the medieval mind longer than an equal stretch of easy terrain.<sup>5</sup> A passage from *Hrafnkels saga Freysgöða* describes the challenges of such travel and the preferences that guided riders.

Eyvindr ríðr þar til, er hann kom vestr á miðja heidina. Þar heita Bersagötur. Þar er svarðlauss mýrr, ok er sem ríði í efju eina fram, ok tók jafnan í kné eða miðjan legg,

<sup>2</sup> Routes 36 and 1, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> Lacking an abundant timber source, medieval Icelanders did not commonly construct carts or carriages.

<sup>4</sup> For a history of Route 36 and other modern roads, see Jón Guðnason, 'Vegamál', p. 18; Petersen, 'Samgöngur til Reykjavíkur að fornu og nýju', p. 92; or Bjarki Bjarnason and Magnús Guðmundsson, *Mosfellsbær*, p. 193. The older route is attested in the following: Magnús Grímsson, 'Athugasemdir við Egil sögu Skallagrímssonar', p. 262; and Björn Gunnlaugsson, *Gullbringu og Kjósar Sýsla með nockrum part af Árnassýslu*.

<sup>5</sup> Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland*, p. 58.

stundum í kvið, þá er undir svá hart sem hölkn [...] Þá er fyrir þeim öunnur mýrr, er heitir Oxamýrr. Hon er grösug mjök. Þar eru bleytur, svá at eru þær jafnlangar yfir at fara. Er þó sú því verri, at hon er blautari, ok verða menn janfnan at leggja af. Af því lagði Hallfreðr karl inar efri götur, þó at þær væri lengri.<sup>6</sup>

Eyvindr rode west until he came to the middle of the heath. There Bersi's Trail goes through a barren moor. It is like riding through pure mud, which comes up to the horse's knee or mid-thigh, and sometimes its belly, but underneath it is as hard as stone [...] There was another bog ahead of them, which is called Uxamyri. It is very grassy, but so muddy that the bog is just as long to cross, but worse because it is wetter, and men must take the packs off the horses. Old Hallfreðr made the higher trails for this reason, even though they were longer.

This description is unlikely to have exaggerated real difficulties for the sake of narrative art. Several nineteenth-century foreigners' travel accounts contain similar passages that mention the dangers of bogs, the constant need to adjust packsaddles, and the perils of crossing swift rivers.<sup>7</sup>

The coastal route that crossed the mouth of the Mosfell Valley presented such challenges to travellers. It was one of many that connected the southern and western quarters of Iceland, but it was longer than the dry inland routes east of Þingvellir in terms of both distance and obstacles. Although this old coastal route is now part of Route 1, the main conduit today between southern and western Iceland, the old route did not have such importance. Travellers coming from and faring to places farther afield in the southern and western quarters would have preferred the inland routes and avoided the Mosfell Region, unless they had a special reason to take a longer route.

In order to reconstruct the land routes of the Viking Age one must assume significant continuity between the trails of the Viking Age and those of the nineteenth century, when the first detailed descriptions and maps of Iceland were produced. The assumption is that trails, once formed, would exist unchanged until the means of travel or geography and concomitant settlement pattern changed. Iceland's geography changed most substantially after the initial settlement, when soil erosion caused by

deforestation and highland grazing silted up and dried out many wetlands.<sup>8</sup> Soil profiles from the Hrísbú excavation at Kirkjuhóll illustrate the long history of soil erosion and settlement, where two distinct strata above the settlement tephra, composed of a mixture of cultural debris, organic-rich loess, tephra, and silty and/or sandy debris flows, extended over one metre deep in some places.<sup>9</sup> The continuous habitation at Hrísbú suggests that the effects of soil erosion did not upset settlements in the Mosfell Valley nor, therefore, routes. One exception was Leiruvogur Bay, which became so silted that later, larger medieval ships from overseas were forced to land instead at nearby Þerneyjarsund Channel.<sup>10</sup> However, this geological change affected sea routes more than the local land routes that were mapped and described in the nineteenth century.

Certain routes undoubtedly changed in importance according to historical processes; unfortunately, an archaeological approach offers limited benefit to understanding and dating these changes. It is nearly impossible to date any physical remains of a dirt trail and difficult still to define its period of use. Christopher Taylor has neatly summarized this limitation in Britain:

There is no actual proof that one is a prehistoric track and the other a medieval highway. They could be of any date. Once tracks are made, even if they were produced in the first instance by wandering animals, they tend to be used by succeeding generations often for hundreds if not thousands of years. Their importance may vary across the ages: a track between two prehistoric villages might become part of a major road between towns in the Roman period, decline to a farm lane in Saxon times, be developed as a national trade route in the fourteenth century and then become an over-grown footpath by the present day. Even if we could ascertain all these changes, which is doubtful, what 'date' do we say it is?<sup>11</sup>

Such dilemmas can be illustrated in Iceland. Archaeologists working in the Mosfell Region have identified stone and gravel remains of the old coastal route leading toward Kollafjörður Bay (see Figure 15.1).<sup>12</sup> This road

<sup>8</sup> Edwards and others, 'Landscapes of Contrast in Viking Age Iceland and the Faroe Islands', pp. 65–81. Margrét Hallsdóttir, 'Pollen Analytical Studies of Human Influence on Vegetation.'

<sup>9</sup> Byock, 'Findings from the Mosfell Archaeological Project's Seminal 2002 Excavations', pp. 103–04.

<sup>10</sup> Kristján Eldjárn, 'Leiruvogur og Þerneyjarsund', p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, *Roads and Tracks of Britain*, pp. x–xi.

<sup>12</sup> Ragnheiður Traustadóttir and Anna Lís Guðmundsdóttir, *Fornleifaskráning jarðanna Mogilsár og Kollafjarðar*, pp. 17–18; Zori,

<sup>6</sup> *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, pp. 127–29; 128, n. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Dillon, *A Winter in Iceland and Lapland*, i, 233–34; Baring-Gould, *Iceland: Its Scenes and Sagas*, p. 63; Kälund, *Bidrag til en historisk-topografisk Beskrivelse af Island*, i, 54.





Figure 15.1. NW view of the old coastal route towards Kollafjörður Bay and Mt Esja. Remains of an overgrown, nineteenth-century road are visible in the foreground, where large flagstones ford a tiny creek. A metre stick points N-S. Arrows mark the edges of the gravel road, lined with cleared cobblestones. The circle identifies remains of an artificial mound, believed to contain a pagan burial. (Colin Gioia Connors).

runs around an artificial mound, believed to be a pagan burial mound from the Viking Age, and is truncated by a turf-cutting event; these relationships date the stone and gravel remains to during or after the Viking Age, and before the second half of the twentieth century, when turf was abandoned as a building material in Iceland. Historical sources are necessary to narrow this dating. The remains of this road are consistent with other late nineteenth-century road amendments for carriages, and would not have been built before 1892, when Leirvogsa River was first bridged.<sup>13</sup> This bridge was rebuilt in 1922, when a new gravel road was built for automobiles.<sup>14</sup> This new road was built approximately fifty metres to the west and was completed in 1926.<sup>15</sup> This historical information dates the stone and gravel remains of the carriage road to between 1892 and 1926. The route, however, is older, and the carriage road was built upon or close to an older trail that is documented in historical maps and *Kjalnesinga saga*.<sup>16</sup> The fact that this road goes around

an artificial mound is irrelevant. If the mound is a pagan burial site, it may have been erected there to mark the boundary of the Mosfell Region, and the trail later developed to lead past the monument. Conversely, the trail may have existed first, and the mound was built after to be visible from the road. Consequently I must favour the retrogressive method of other scholars,<sup>17</sup> valuing historical sources over the 'often dubious physical remains, for virtually the only way to confirm field evidence of a medieval road is to demonstrate from the historical record that it was in use during that period'.<sup>18</sup>

The most detailed sources of pre-modern land routes come from just before and immediately after the appearance of wheeled carts and surfaced roads. Prior to the nineteenth century, maps of Iceland were largely limited to coastal surveys. This changed in 1831 when Björn Gunnlaugsson surveyed and mapped Gullbringu- and Kjósarsýslur Counties, which included the Mosfell Region, detailing settlements, major routes, bodies of water, mountains, and vegetation.<sup>19</sup> The Mosfell

<sup>12</sup> 'From Viking Chiefdoms to Medieval State in Iceland', pp. 498–500.

<sup>13</sup> Jón Guðnason, 'Vegamál', p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Jón Guðnason, 'Vegamál', p. 22.

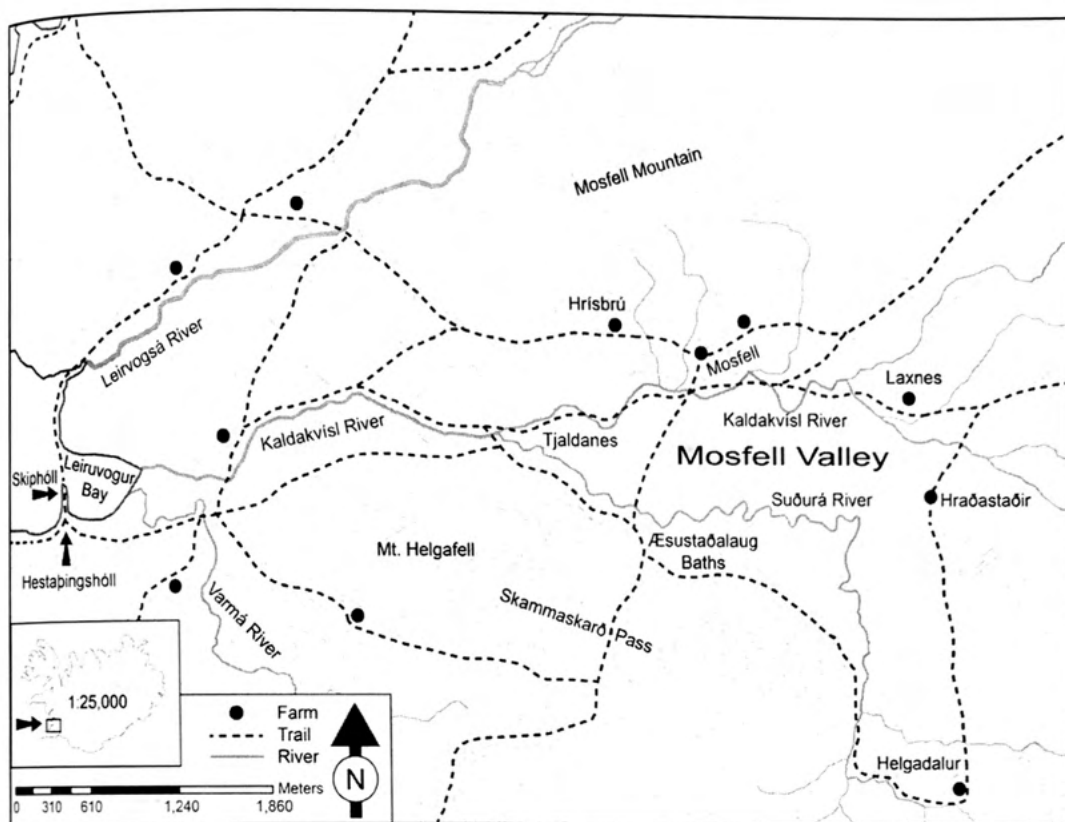
<sup>15</sup> Jón Guðnason, 'Vegamál', p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Björn Gunnlaugsson, *Gullbringu og Kjósar Sýsla með nockrum part af Árnessýslu; Kjalnesinga saga*, ed. by Johannes Hallórdsson, p. 20. In chapter eight of *Kjalnesinga saga*, Kolfiðr walks the stretch of trail under discussion from Kollafjörður Bay toward Leirvogsa River on his way to Korpúlfsstaðir.

<sup>17</sup> Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir and Gísli Kristjánsson, 'Skreiðin á Skriðu', pp. 94–108. Hindle, *Medieval Roads and Tracks*. Helgi Þorláksson, *Gamlar götur og goðavald*. Taylor, *Roads and Tracks of Britain*.

<sup>18</sup> Hindle, *Medieval Roads and Tracks*, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Haraldur Sigurðsson, *Kortasaga Íslands*, pp. 269–70. Björn Gunnlaugsson, *Gullbringu og Kjósar Sýsla með nockrum part af Árnessýslu*.



Map 15.2.  
The Mosfell Valley. Farms are based on sixteenth-century or earlier historical documentation. Trails are based on historical maps, descriptions, and field survey (Colin Connors and Jakob Stakowski).

Region was next surveyed in 1908 for the Danish *Herforinjaráðskort* series, which mapped local horse trails – distinguished from newly created, surfaced roads – not included in Björn Gunnlaugsson's 1831 map. When combined, these two maps provide an accurate, albeit not complete, source for pre-modern land routes in the Mosfell Region.<sup>20</sup>

Place-names are a valuable source of information, and the name *Hrisbrú* means 'Brushwood Bridge', referring to a causeway through wet, marshy ground. Before the 1950s when many wetlands in Mosfell Valley were drained for new agricultural production, there would have been sufficient need for a causeway through these bogs. Such a causeway would have connected Hrisbrú and Mosfell to the main route through the valley and to the hot springs and baths on the opposite side of the val-

ley (see Map 15.2). These baths are mentioned in *Egils saga*, in an episode when Egill is said to have hidden his treasure of silver somewhere in this valley. The medieval writer describes Egill's journey from the farm when he was last seen with his silver, and mentions all of the contemporary theories regarding where the silver was hidden. This episode in chapter eighty-eight contains geographical details of the landscape, mentioning both baths and bogs:

Egill kallaði til sín þræla tvá, er Grímr átti; hann bað þá taka sér hest, – 'vil ek fara til laugar'. Ok er Egill var búinn, gekk hann út ok hafði með sér silfrkistur sínar; hann steig á hest, fór síðan ofan eptir túninu fyrir brekku þá, er þar verðr, er menn sá síðast [...] Fyrir austan garð at Mosfelli gengr gil ofan ór fjalli [...] Geta menn sumir, at Egill muni þar féit hafa fólgit. Fyrir neðan tún at Mosfelli eru fen stór ok furðuliga djúp; hafa þat margir fyrir satt, at Egill muni þar hafa kastat í fé sínu. Fyrir sunnan ána eru laugar ok þar skammt frá jarðholur stórar, ok geta þess sumir, at Egill mundi þar hafa fólgit fé sitt.<sup>21</sup>

Egill called upon two slaves, which Grímr owned. He told them to get his horse, – 'I want to go to the baths'. And when Egill was ready, he walked outside and had his silver chests with him; he mounted his horse, and went

<sup>20</sup> Maps, in general, can only record and display limited information. For example, the 1908 Danish survey mapped a single trail along the Kaldakvisl River that ran alternatively along the north and south banks, crossing the water several times, so as to cut the corner of each bend in the snaking river. Horse riders can and do follow this direct route when the river level is low. When it is not, or when travelling on foot, it is possible to follow trails on either bank of the river without crossing. Had the Danish surveyors added the trails along both banks, the result would have undoubtedly been visually distracting. I have therefore drawn my maps in this chapter with a similar editorial preference.

<sup>21</sup> *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, pp. 297–98.

down along the hayfield before the slope, which is there, where he was last seen [...] East of the yard at Mosfell a canyon comes down the mountain [...] Some men guess that Egill would have hidden his silver there. Below the hayfield at Mosfell are large and amazingly deep marshes; many believe that Egill threw his silver into them. South of the river there are baths and near to there are large pits in the earth, and some suspect that Egill would have hidden his silver there.

The medieval writer was apparently very familiar with the landscape. In an article from 1856, Priest Magnús Grímsson of Mosfell evaluated the information in this episode to find the likeliest resting place of Egill's treasure.<sup>22</sup> He identified the slope where Egill was last seen at Mosfell, the baths that he was heading toward at Æsustaðalaug, and the marshes, pits, and canyon that Egill may have passed. This affirms that the medieval writer understood the local landscape and did not invent these geographical details. Magnús demonstrates that here – as in other sections of the saga – the medieval writer was aware that the medieval farm of Mosfell previously stood at Hrísrú.<sup>23</sup> Identifying the slope at Mosfell, Magnús argues that it would be impossible for Egill to disappear from sight beneath this slope unless he left from Hrísrú.<sup>24</sup> Magnús mentions an old causeway, visible in his day, that crossed the bogs on the valley floor from Mosfell to the Æsustaðalaug hot springs. According to this reading of *Egils saga*, the medieval writer must have envisioned Egill leaving from Hrísrú, descending east along the hayfield, and disappearing from sight below the slope at Mosfell, before turning south and crossing the valley on this causeway to the baths at Æsustaðalaug.

The Mosfell farm originally stood at Hrísrú, while the causeway that Magnús Grímsson believes Egill used to reach the baths crossed the valley approximately five hundred metres to the east. In the twelfth century, the Mosfell farmstead and church were moved east, close to the causeway. When the household moved, the family moved the place-name Mosfell with them to preserve their identity. The estate was then divided and the name Hrísrú given to the western plot, where the Viking Age longhouse once stood.

It seems counterintuitive that the name Hrísrú was given to the farm farther from the causeway, though it may be possible that a second causeway existed that connected the two farms, and Hrísrú was named for this causeway. The bogs below Hrísrú and Mosfell ran almost all the way up to the base of Mosfell Mountain. Therefore, there may have been need for a causeway from Hrísrú to Mosfell. Magnús Grímsson does not resolve this issue. He believes that Hrísrú was named for a causeway across the bog, but in which direction he does not specify.<sup>25</sup> He seems adamant that no causeway existed directly from Hrísrú to Kaldakvísl River or the baths because by going over the causeway from Mosfell, Egill went 'rakleiðis' ('directly') to the baths.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Magnús states that the bogs below these farms were naturally divided below Mosfell by a dry strip of land that extended almost to Kaldakvísl River, whereupon the visible ruins of the old causeway continued across the valley.<sup>27</sup> A causeway built from Hrísrú along the base of the mountain toward Mosfell and then south across the valley would have crossed drier ground and required less investment and maintenance than a causeway built directly through the wettest bogs to cross the valley from Hrísrú. Therefore it seems most likely to my mind that Hrísrú was named for a causeway that stretched from Hrísrú to Mosfell and across the valley to Æsustaðalaug Baths.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to direct access to the Æsustaðalaug baths, the causeway connected Hrísrú to a network of trails. The causeway crossed Kaldakvísl River, along which the main route through the valley followed. This route led west to Tjaldanes, a crossroads at the meeting of the two rivers Kaldakvísl and Suðurá. From there the main route

<sup>25</sup> Magnús Grímsson, 'Athugasemdir við Egil sögu Skallagrímssonar', p. 262.

<sup>26</sup> Magnús Grímsson, 'Athugasemdir við Egil sögu Skallagrímssonar', p. 267.

<sup>27</sup> Magnús Grímsson, 'Athugasemdir við Egil sögu Skallagrímssonar', pp. 262–63.

<sup>28</sup> Brushwood footpaths connecting Viking Age structures through swampy ground to a nearby pond were excavated in Reykjavík at Suðurgata 3–5 and Alþingisreiturrinn. For the Reykjavík excavations, see, for example, Vala Gaðarsdóttir, *Alþingisreiturrinn 2008–2009*. Nordahl, *Reykjavík from the Archaeological Point of View*, pp. 39, 45, 57. The Viking Age longhouse at Hrísrú may have required a similar footpath to access the nearby freshwater spring below Hulduhóll Hill, although no supportive evidence has been excavated. Many Viking Age farms may have had such footpaths, and it is therefore unlikely that Hrísrú was named for such an indistinguishing feature that would have appeared insignificant compared with a causeway to Mosfell or across the valley.

<sup>22</sup> Magnús Grímsson, 'Athugasemdir við Egil sögu Skallagrímssonar', pp. 251–76.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Byock and others, 'A Viking-Age Valley in Iceland', pp. 198–215.

<sup>24</sup> Magnús Grímsson, 'Athugasemdir við Egil sögu Skallagrímssonar', p. 266.



led westward to the ship's landing at Leiruvogur Bay, southward to Skammaskarð Pass, and eastward along the southern side of the valley to Helgadalur.

The name *Tjaldanes* means 'Tents Peninsula', denoting a camping site, and most likely had the same meaning in the Viking Age.<sup>29</sup> The place-name is mentioned in chapter eighty-eight of *Egils saga* as the location where Egill was first buried, but no explanation is given regarding the place-name's meaning.<sup>30</sup> Magnús Grímsson stated that the name was no longer in use in his time, yet to him the *Tjaldanes* mentioned in *Egils saga* must belong to the peninsula between these two rivers, based on the geographical description in the saga – which states that Egill's body was buried 'ofan í' ('down on') *Tjaldanes* from Hrísbú – and his claim that 'þar hafi frá aldaðli verið áfanga- og tjaldstaðr ferðamanna' ('there has been a rest stop and camping ground for travellers since time immemorial').<sup>31</sup>

Camping with tents was only sensible during the summer, suggesting that travellers regularly passed through the Mosfell Valley during summer months. The leaders of Hrísbú/Mosfell would have owned *Tjaldanes*, and the access provided by the causeway would have enabled them to stop travellers and ask or interrogate those crossing their land about their plans. Moreover the causeway provided them a convenient opportunity to offer travellers hospitality if they wished to hear or illicit news, as well as show off their wealth and fine dwelling.

Such interactions with travellers could be turned to political advantage by a capable leader. Helgi Þorláksson has argued this idea in connection with the people of Oddi and the establishment of twelfth-century church estates (*staðir*).<sup>32</sup> He explains:

What prominent and ambitious men everywhere always want is to be talked about for something positive. They want people to see their residence and acknowledge that they are doing well. Travellers, even paupers, were welcome, because they were the ones who brought and

spread news. An attractive place for paupers who would be grateful for food and shelter and spread some praising remarks was very important for such ambitious men.<sup>33</sup>

For the negligible cost of sheltering vagabonds, hosts gained opportunities to access and disseminate useful information. Essentially, prosperous farmers who received more visitors had an advantage over potential rivals and could control others more easily.

*Harðar saga ok hólmerjar* provides evidence for such an environment at Mosfell. In chapter twenty-seven, the slave Bolli seeks to recover his master Ormr's stolen chest from Hörðr and his outlaws. Bolli disguises himself and infiltrates Hörðr's gang: 'Bolli býst nú; hann hafði slitna skó ok vöruváðarkufl. Hann [...] sagðist vera sekr maðr' ('Bolli introduced himself. He was wearing worn-out shoes and a cheap hooded cloak. He said he was an outlaw').<sup>34</sup> When he tries to convince the thieves that Ormr's locked chest contains no valuables and they would be better off returning it, the thieves become suspicious of him and ask how he came across this knowledge. Bolli answers them: "en ek var þá", segir hann, "at Mosfelli, er ránit spurðist" ("I was then", he said, "at Mosfell, where the robbery was learned of").<sup>35</sup> This answer gave Bolli credibility, and the thieves allowed him to return the chest to Ormr. For this ruse to make sense to the medieval audience, Hrísbú/Mosfell must have been well-known in the Middle Ages as a place where regional news had once commonly circulated among its guests, who could have included vagabonds and beggars.

Despite being written a few centuries after the Viking Age, *Harðar saga* accurately represents the significance of Mosfell in a pre-Christian era. Following the conversion to Christianity, the addition of a church at Mosfell may have inspired travellers to stop. Mosfell's church is not listed in the medieval charters from the Viðey monastery, suggesting that their church was independent, and possibly a church estate.<sup>36</sup> Helgi Þorláksson has argued that many twelfth-century church estates were

<sup>29</sup> *Tjaldanes*, variously spelled *Tjaldnes*, has another literal meaning in either form: 'Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*) Peninsula'. Place-names with bird elements are not uncommon in Iceland, but the use of *tjaldur* (oystercatcher) in compounds is relatively unknown, while the use of *tjald* (tent) in compounds is quite common, suggesting the *Tjaldanes* mentioned in *Egils saga* denotes a camping site. See Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 635.

<sup>30</sup> *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, p. 298.

<sup>31</sup> Magnús Grímsson, 'Athugasemdir við *Egil sögu Skallagrímssonar*', p. 271.

<sup>32</sup> Helgi Þorláksson, *Gamlar götur og godavald*.

<sup>33</sup> Helgi Þorláksson, 'Why Were the Twelfth-Century *Staðir* Established?', p. 148.

<sup>34</sup> *Harðar saga*, ed. by Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, p. 69.

<sup>35</sup> *Harðar saga*, ed. by Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson.

<sup>36</sup> Magnús Stefánsson argues that Mosfell became a church estate at an early date based on the absence of a medieval charter, and the exchange of Mosfell's property by Sigurður Jónsson with Ólöf Loptsdóttir for Hraungerði, which was an incorporated church. See Magnús Stefánsson, *Staðir og staðamál*, pp. 167–68.

established to obtain sacred protection and to make their farms more attractive to travellers. Church estates were dedicated to patron saints, whose protection forbade violence.<sup>37</sup> Such safety would have appealed to outlaws, such as Bolli pretended to be. Some might argue therefore that Bolli's alibi is anachronistic, but it does not depend on Mosfell being a place of Christian sanctuary. Mosfell was a wealthy farm, able to offer hospitality and baths, and was conveniently located close to several main routes and a ship's landing that was in use during the Viking Age. For these secular reasons it was an attractive stop for travellers and paupers in the pre-Christian era, who would have exchanged news, and this is represented in *Harðar saga*.

Hrísbrú and Mosfell were only a short ride from Leiruvogur Bay, which was a popular ship's landing in the Viking Age.<sup>38</sup> A trail leading from the main route from Skeggjastaðir hugged the northern side of the valley, connecting Mosfell and Hrísbrú to Leirvogstunga, where riders could ford Kaldakvísl River and continue down to the bay. Alternatively, the bay could be reached by taking the causeway and crossing Kaldakvísl River further upstream at Tjaldanes.

Of the seven possible locations to land a ship along the coast in this region – Elliðaárvogur, Grafarvogur, Gufunes, Blikastaðanes, Leiruvogur, Þerneyjarsund, and Kollafjörður – only four are mentioned in medieval writings and only Leiruvogur Bay is mentioned more than once in a Viking Age context. Leiruvogur Bay is mentioned in eight sources a total of twelve times, and ten of these instances specify the bay's use as a ship's landing for ocean-going vessels.<sup>39</sup> In *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, the bay's name is variously spelled in singular and plural forms.<sup>40</sup>

The plural spelling should not be mistaken for a scribal error. A county description from 1785 clarified that 'Leervogene den østere og vestere, adskildte ved den Huk Skibshool, ere trygge saavel Sommer som Vinter-Havne for smaae eller fladgaende Skibe' ('the eastern and western Leiruvogur Bays, separated by Skiphóll Spit, are safe harbours in either summer or winter for small or

flat-bottomed boats').<sup>41</sup> There are two such spits of land in the bay, but only the eastern spit has a knoll at the end to match the name *Skiphóll*, 'Ship's Knoll', which is not mentioned in any earlier sources. This spit divides the bay from an estuary that could have served as the eastern bay and ship's landing before it silted up. Guðlaugur R. Guðmundsson places the name *Skiphóll* with this spit and knoll on a place-name map of Varmá that he drew in 1976, based on an interview from 1951 by Ari Gíslason with Magnús Sveinsson, the farmer at Leirvogstunga.<sup>42</sup>

This identification, however, is contested by Magnús Guðmundsson, grandson of the farmer interviewed by Ari Gíslason, who claims *Skiphóll* was the knoll at the mouth of Varmá River.<sup>43</sup> Although the Mosfellsbær Township has embraced this identification and erected a plaque at this location, the grandson's identification disagrees with the description based upon his grandfather's interview:

Þá er þar tangi fram í sjóinn og voginn. Þar eru tveir hólar. Heitir sá neðri *Skiphóll*, en sá sem er ofar, er með þúfu á, og heitir hann *Hestaþingshóll*. Bendir nafn hans á forn hestaöt þarna niður við sjóinn.<sup>44</sup>

Then there is a spit that juts into the sea and the bay. There are two knolls. The lower one is called *Skiphóll*, and the upper one has a tussock on it and is called *Hestaþingshóll*, 'Horse Arena Hill'. The latter knoll was named for the horse fights that used to take place down there by the sea.

Guðlaugur R. Guðmundsson's map of *Hestaþingshóll* agrees with this interview. As horse fights were often held beside public gatherings, the place-name probably dates back to at least the late fourteenth century, when the local spring assembly was held at Varmá.<sup>45</sup> Though admittedly speculative, it is possible that the name dates back to the Viking Age, when people may have rowed into the bay to watch a fight, or gathered when trading ships arrived.

The proximity of Leiruvogur Bay to Hrísbrú and Mosfell would have held mutual benefit for traders sailing from abroad and for the people of Mosfell. Hrísbrú/Mosfell was the wealthiest farm near Leiruvogur Bay and

<sup>37</sup> Helgi Þorláksson, 'Why Were the Twelfth-Century Staðir Established?', pp. 140–45.

<sup>38</sup> For more on Leiruvogur ship's landing and its importance in the Viking period, see Byock, Chapter 3 in this volume, and Thórðarson, Chapter 2 in this volume.

<sup>39</sup> Connors, 'Movement at Mosfell', pp. 57–60.

<sup>40</sup> 'í Leiruvág' and 'í Leiruvágum'. *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 81, 85, 98.

<sup>41</sup> Skúli Magnússon, 'Beskrivelse af Gullbringu og Kjósar sýslur (1785)', p. 112.

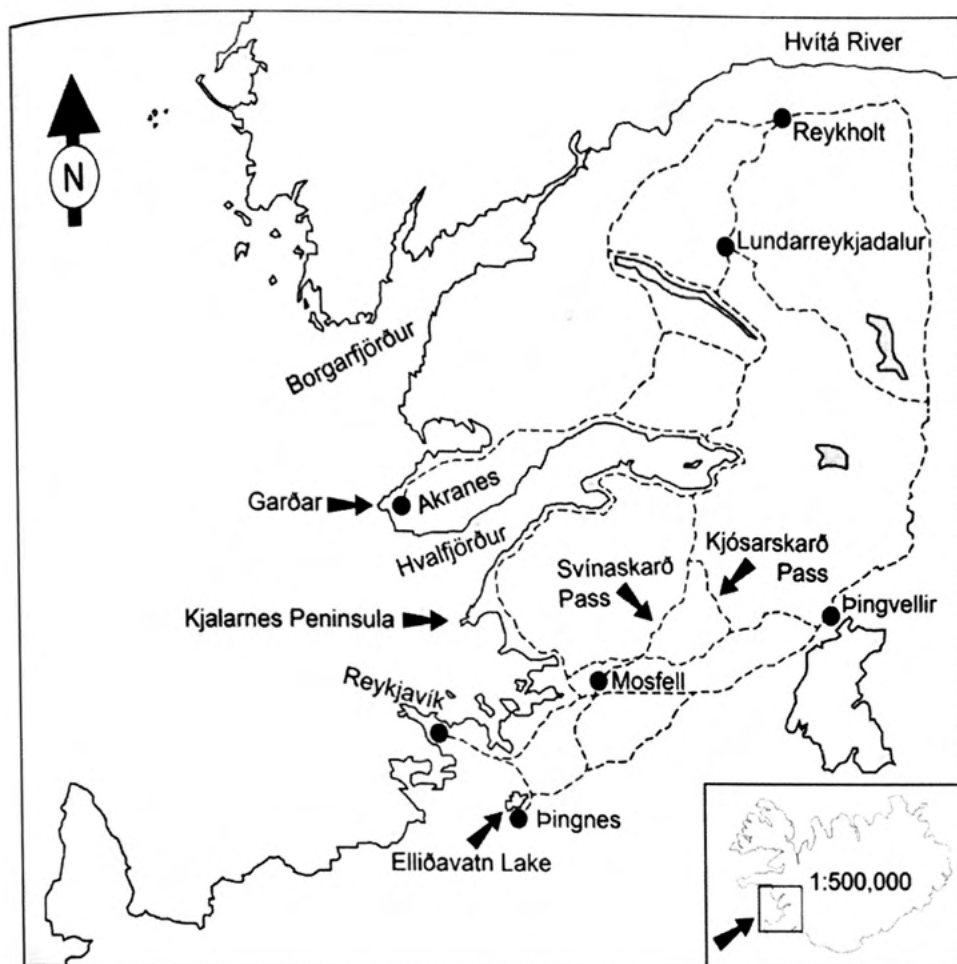
<sup>42</sup> Guðlaugur R. Guðmundsson, ed., *Örnefnalýsing Varmár*.

<sup>43</sup> Magnús Guðmundsson, personal communication, 5 January 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Ari Gíslason, ed., *Örnefnalýsing Varmár*.

<sup>45</sup> *Diplomatarium islandicum*, ed. by Jón Sigurðsson and others, III (1896), 598; Bjarki Bjarnason and Magnús Guðmundsson, *Mosfellsbær*, p. 92.





Map 15.3.  
Trails in south western Iceland. Chieftains from Lundarreykjadalur/Garðar, and Reykholt would have ridden over Svinaskarð Pass and past Mosfell when attending the spring assembly at Þingnes by Elliðaavatn Lake (Colin Connors).

had access to baths. Any offer of hospitality at Hrísbú/Mosfell would have been attractive to seasonal traders who required winter lodgings. In return, the people of Mosfell stood to gain precious gifts, which were valuable status symbols in Iceland's gift-based prestige economy.

The people of Mosfell may have offered other services to indebted sailors. Byock and colleagues state that the people of Mosfell controlled the ship's landing and were, when necessary, 'ready to extract dues by force from travellers'.<sup>46</sup> This statement is based on an episode from chapter eleven of *Hallfreðar saga*, which is also told in chapter ten of *Gunnlaugs saga*, in which a conflict ensues when Hallfreðr refuses to pay half a mark of silver that he owed to Hrafn of Mosfell's farmhand.<sup>47</sup> The farmhand then involves Hrafn, who prevents Hallfreðr from sailing out of Leiruvogur Bay by force, until the two are reconciled and Hrafn receives a sum twice the original debt. Byock and colleagues interpret from this episode

an 'economic connection between this port and the chieftains at Mosfell'.<sup>48</sup> The importance of this connection was based upon privileged access to trade goods and income received for services rendered to sailors, such as housing ships over the winter. Neither saga explains the reason for Hallfreðr's debt, but the people of Mosfell had the greatest means and motive to build and maintain boathouses for this purpose.

The fee for such services, called a harbour toll (*hafnartollr*), was set by law in the thirteenth-century text *Grágás* at one ell of homespun cloth for each crew member plus nine more for the ship.<sup>49</sup> If this law were in effect at the time of this eleventh-century episode and if, for argument's sake, Hallfreðr had a crew of twenty, then his legally stipulated harbour toll would have amounted to 16.7 per cent of the debt owed to the farmhand. It is possible Hallfreðr refused to pay because he was outrageously overcharged, and that medieval Icelanders valued this story because it represented a real problem and

<sup>46</sup> Byock and others, 'A Viking-Age Valley in Iceland', p. 199. See also Jesse Byock, Chapter 3, this volume.

<sup>47</sup> *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, p. 85. *Hallfreðar saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 196.

<sup>48</sup> Byock and others, 'A Viking-Age Valley in Iceland', p. 200.

<sup>49</sup> *Grágás*, ed. by Gunnar Karlsson, Kristján Sveinsson, and Mörður Árnason, p. 150.

demonstrated the need for such legislation as found in *Grágás* and its proper enforcement. However, the enormous difference in value and the character of the narrative suggest to my mind that the debt was more likely a personal debt owed to the farmhand than a debt owed to Hrafn for services rendered by the farmhand. The narrative has a typical structure for a feud chain, and Hrafn is involved as a third-party advocate who takes on the risk and lucrative reward of collecting the debt.<sup>50</sup> While a harbour toll would not have provided a lucrative or stable income in Iceland, sheltering trading ships would have indebted wintering sailors and may have obliged them further to take lodgings with the boathouse's owner. If the people of Mosfell could control the access to such boathouses, they could gain more from this influence over wealthy merchants than from any income received for such services. With their close proximity to the ship's landing, the leaders of Mosfell were likely to obtain non-monetary benefits from merchants, such as privileged access to trade goods or social prestige gained from hosting sailors throughout the winter, that were even more important than the harbour toll income.

The main route that led along the Kaldakvísl River connected Hrísrú and Mosfell to regions around Akranes and Borgarfjörður to the north (see Map 15.3). Heading east, the route turned north before Laxnes, crossed Leirvogsa River by Skeggjastaðir, and led over Svinaskarð Pass into Hvalfjörður, where routes continued to Akranes and Borgarfjörður. This was the preferred route during summer when travel conditions were best. When flooding or ice prevented riders from crossing Leirvogsa River at Skeggjastaðir and entering Mosfell Valley, they could follow the river to Leiruvogur Bay and cross the mud flats at low tide.<sup>51</sup> This detour was a viable alternative in winter, as long as snow and ice did not close the pass to travellers. Þórður Jónasson described the route in 1852:

Alfaravegur í Kjósarsýslu liggur frá Hvalfjarðarbotni [...] til Laxár í Kjós hjá Möðruvöllum, fram Svinadal

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic saga*.

<sup>51</sup> Þórður Jónasson does not mention the mud flats that are exposed at low tide in his description, but this has always been the safest way to cross Leirvogsa River and is still used by horse riders today. At high tide, the river could be forded near its mouth at Kirkjugil, but this crossing is more dangerous than at Skeggjastaðir. For historical references, see Björn Gunnlaugsson, *Gullbringu og Kjósar Sýsla með nockrum part af Arnessýslu*; Dillon, *A Winter in Iceland and Lapland*, 1, 157–58; Kålund, *Bidrag til en historisk-topografisk Beskrivelse af Island*, 1, 45–46; Sigurður Hreðar Hreiðarsson, *Saga bilsins á Íslandi, 1904–2004*, p. 195.

og yfir Svinaskarð, fram hjá Mosfelli í Mosfellssveit og yfir Elliðaár til Reykjavíkur.<sup>52</sup> Þetta er sumarvegur, en á vetrum og um haust, þegar rigningar eru, er farið inn yfir Leirvogsa og vestan um Esju [...] Torfærur eru engar á þessum vegi, nema ef telja skyldi það, að norðan til á Svinaskarði er illt yfirferðar að því leyti, að vegurinn liggur tæpt og er mjög brattur utan í fjallinu og er á vetrum því oft ófær af svellalögum, því djúpt gil er á aðra hönd.<sup>53</sup>

A major route in Kjósarsýsla County lies from the inner end of Hvalfjörður [...] to Laxá River in the Kjós Region near Möðruvellir, through Svinadalur Valley and over Svinaskarð Pass, past Mosfell in the Mosfell Region, and over Elliðaár River to Reykjavík.<sup>54</sup> This is a summer route, but in winter and autumn, when it is raining, the route goes in over Leirvogsa River and east along Mt Esja [...] This route is easy to travel, unless one counts the northern side of Svinaskarð Pass, which is hard to cross because the trail is hazardous and very steep, and is often impassable during the winter because of icy surfaces and the deep ravine to the side of the trail.

When Svinaskarð Pass became impassable, a traveller's only options to cross Mt Esja were to ride east to the Kjósarskarð Pass or west around the mountains on the coast of Kjalarnes Peninsula. These seasonal detours would have reduced the traffic passing through Mosfell Valley.

The summer route over Svinaskarð Pass and through Mosfell Valley led southwest to the spring assembly site at Þingnes by Elliðavatn Lake and then to the coastal headlands around Reykjavík. This route was travelled each spring for part of the Viking Age by assembly attendees from farther north. After AD 965, when the boundary between the southern and western quarters of Iceland was defined at Hvítá River in Borgarfjörður, the chieftains south of this border from Lundaarreykjadalur/Garðar and Reykholt could no longer attend the local assembly north of the river. They and their followers would have attended a spring assembly to the south, until sometime before AD 1140, when a new assembly was established in Borgarfjörður south of Hvítá River at Þingey in Þverá.<sup>55</sup> Assembly site locations were often

<sup>52</sup> See the corresponding footnote in the English translation below.

<sup>53</sup> Þórður Jónasson, 'Stutt lýsing á Gullbringu- og Kjósarsýslu', pp. 22–23.

<sup>54</sup> The Kjós Region in Kjósarsýsla County lies immediately north of the Mosfell Region, across Mt Esja and Svinaskarð Pass. This route continues north from Hvalfjörður to the aforementioned Akranes and Borgarfjörður.

<sup>55</sup> Jón Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth*, p. 51.

subject to change, so it cannot be said with certainty that these chieftains rode south to attend the assembly at Þingnes by Elliðavatn, but archaeological evidence suggests that it was an active site between AD 965 and 1140.<sup>56</sup> Unless these chieftains and their followers attended an active assembly on Kjalarnes Peninsula or elsewhere, they would have ridden through Mosfell Valley every spring. Therefore the leaders of Hrísbú/Mosfell would have had a convenient opportunity to hold an annual feast to entertain important guests as they travelled to or from the Þingnes Assembly.<sup>57</sup> Such a feast would have enabled ambitious individuals at Hrísbú/Mosfell to build new, or solidify existing, political alliances with lavish entertainment and precious gifts in anticipation or celebration of the assembly.

The main route that connected Mosfell Valley to the Þingnes Assembly and Reykjavík also led east to Þingvellir, where the national assembly was held in the middle of summer. This route continued east from Kaldakvísl River, past Laxnes and Hraðastaðir, up the Bringur Foothills, and over Mosfell Heath to Þingvellir. This was one of three main routes open to the chieftain of Reykjavík and others when traveling to the national assembly. Þórður Jónasson described the three routes in 1852:

Frá Reykjavík til Þingvallasveitar í Árnessýslu. Þessi vegur liggur inn yfir Elliðaár, yfir seljadal and Mosfellsheiði (Seljadalsvegur), eður og fram hjá Mosfelli og þaðan yfir heiðina (Bringnavegur), eður og up hjá Stardal (Stardalsvegur). Stardalsvegurinn er oftast farinn á vetrum, því þar er skemmst byggða á milli, en Seljadalsvegurinn á sumrum.<sup>58</sup>

From Reykjavík to the Þingvellir Region in Árnessýsla County: The route leads inland over Elliðaár River, through Seljadalur Valley, and over Mosfell Heath (the Seljadalur Trail), or else past Mosfell and from there over the heath (the Bringur Trail), or else up past Stardalur Valley (the Stardalur Trail). The Stardalur Trail is most often travelled in winter, because there is the least distance between settlements, but the Seljadalur Trail is most often travelled during the summer.

<sup>56</sup> Archaeological excavation at the Viking Age Þingnes assembly site unearthed associated structures that were built shortly after the volcanic eruption of AD 871 and abandoned well before another layer of volcanic tephra covered the site in AD 1226. Guðmundur Ólafsson, 'Þingnes by Elliðavatn', p. 348.

<sup>57</sup> For archaeological evidence of feasting from Hrísbú, see Zori and others, 'Feasting in Viking Age Iceland', pp. 150–65.

<sup>58</sup> Þórður Jónasson, 'Stutt lýsing á Gullbringu- og Kjósarsýslu', p. 23.

The Seljadalur Trail, which was the fastest route between Reykjavík and Þingvellir, ran south of Grímmannsfell Mountain, completely avoiding Mosfell Valley. People attending the national assembly would probably not have taken the Bringur Trail through Mosfell Valley unless they had someone to visit. The Bringur Trail allowed ambitious individuals at Hrísbú/Mosfell another political opportunity to invite and then ride together with the chieftain from Reykjavík or important farmers from the nearby headlands on their way to the national assembly.

If the wealth and location of Hrísbú and Mosfell predisposed their leaders to political success, their power depended primarily upon their leaders' personal abilities. When leaders lacked the industriousness to productively manage their estates, the charisma to maintain useful relationships, the wit to successfully conduct their legal affairs, and the ambition to increase their own power, then the benefits and opportunities presented by passing travellers and incoming merchants were squandered. Medieval writers depicted Mosfell's Viking Age leaders as important, which was related to Mosfell's location and interconnectivity. Characters of similar repute did not appear in narratives concerning Mosfell in the later Free State Period, suggesting that they failed to maintain their predecessors' power, let alone expand it to compete on a political scale with the enormously powerful chieftains of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries. While many factors may have affected this development, the twelfth-century loss of assembly-related traffic coupled with fewer trading ships landing in Leiruvogur Bay must surely have limited the opportunities of leaders at Mosfell to meet and entertain influential and important guests. These external changes would thus have crippled an already tenuous political legacy, whatever the personal talents and ambitions of later Mosfell leaders.

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