

Skálholt. Excavations of A Bishop's Residence And School c. 1650-1790.
Volume 1: The Site.
Gavin Lucas and Mjöll Snæsdóttir with a contribution by Birna Lárusdóttir
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Review by James Symonds, University of Amsterdam.

Over the last 25 years Gavin Lucas has established himself as a pre-eminent scholar in archaeological theory. If you teach archaeology in the English language, as I do, it is a fair bet that you will have several of his textbooks on your office shelves dealing with conceptions of time, approaches to fieldwork and the archaeological record, and ways of writing about archaeology. Without wishing to embarrass Gavin, I would say that his many valiant engagements with archaeological theory have surely secured him a prime seat beside the hearth in Valhalla. But here's the thing, unlike some other would-be icons of archaeological theory, Gavin is an accomplished field archaeologist. Before moving 'up North' he served his time at the trench face working on several major projects, most notably in the low-lying fields of eastern England with the Cambridge Archaeology Unit. So here we have a rare thing, a man who can expound upon the theories of Paul Ricoeur or Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who has also spent time on his knees in the service of archaeological investigation and is accustomed to having dirt under his fingernails.

For this reason, it was an absolute pleasure when a jiffy back landed on my doormat holding a chunky hard-backed excavation report by Lucas, Snæsdóttir, and Lárusdóttir, with a request for a review. Skálholt is an impressive book. The first of three volumes to report on excavations at the Bishop's residence and school, it runs to 228 pages, with 223 figures and 17 tables, and has been handsomely laid out by Guðrún Finnbjarnardóttir. The volume is written in English, with a 1-page Icelandic summary, and examines the stratigraphy and the architectural development of the site. The two future volumes will report upon the rich artefactual, faunal, and botanical samples that has been recovered from the 17th and 18th century buildings.

So, what can I tell you about this impressive volume to encourage you to read it? First and foremost, this book offers remarkable insights into the life of the upper stratum of 17th and 18th century Icelandic society. This will be of primary interest to historians and archaeologists within Iceland, Denmark, and Norway, but will also be of value international scholars elsewhere who have an interest in cultural, economic, and religious changes in the North Atlantic, and the material manifestations of modernity (Lucas, 2010). In the 1990s Charles Orser implored modern historical archaeologists to 'dig locally, think globally' (Orser 1996, 183). Orser's rallying call anticipated the current vogue for studies of mobilities (Beaudry and Parno 2013). A more recent material turn in history has widened the appeal

of transnational histories, encouraging historians to follow the flow of early modern objects (Findlen, 2021) and the global lives of things ().

In Chapter 1, Lucas and Snæsdóttir set out the long history of archaeological investigations at Skálholt, which began in the 1950s, prior to the construction of a new cathedral, and introduce the major excavations which they conducted between 2002-7. These excavations and the following lengthy programme of post-excavation analysis were supported by a total budget of c.100 million ISK. It is a remarkable achievement to bring a project of this size to full publication and Skálholt will undoubtedly take its place as a landmark project for Icelandic, and indeed global historical archaeology.

In framing this major investigation Lucas and colleagues were careful to move beyond the trope of the ‘big dig’ as a major excavation conducted in relative isolation to its surroundings. The excavated buildings are skillfully placed within their landscape context by Birna Lárusdóttir, backed up by reference to an extensive corpus of project related publications (pp.7-19). Two important points emerge from this analysis. First, while the scale of the Skálholt farmhouse perhaps unsurprisingly differs from the more usual farm pattern in Iceland in terms of size and numbers of buildings, this grandiosity is not reflected in the size of the homefield or outfield land surrounding the complex. Instead, numerous *stekkur* and round hay storage structures, along with shielings, may be found in the surrounding landscape. These structures demonstrate the bishop’s firm control over the locality, with land being prioritized for grazing and haymaking to support his residential complex.

Chapter 2 offers a detailed overview of the archaeological investigations which were undertaken in six seasons between 2002-2007. The overall aims and methods are clearly set out, as is the excavation recording methodology which adopted, not unreasonably at the time, a modified version of the now ageing British single-context planning system, thereby ‘straddling the analogue-digital divide” (p.24-25). The value of integrating archival material, including maps, photographs, and historical documents is discussed at length and was found to be highly beneficial to the project. In this instance, the project was fortunate to inherit the personal archive of the late Hörður Ágústsson, who had spent many years researching the architectural history of Skálholt. An historical site of this size and economic importance will always have an abundance of archival material, including descriptions of buildings, and inventories of furniture, fittings, and other goods, and given its political importance, descriptions of Skálholt may also be found in the accounts of foreign visitors from many parts of northern and central Europe. One name that stood out for me was the British naturalist and botanist Joseph Banks, who visited the bishop and schoolmaster in Skálholt on 22nd September 1772, less months after returning to England from his three-year voyage to the Pacific with Captain James Cook. Bank’s journal records that he ate rice porridge, roast mutton and fruits with curry sauce for dinner, that the schoolmasters and priests got drunk, and that his duvet was too small (p. 32). One can only

wonder if the 28-year-old Banks bored or scandalized his fellow diners with tales of Māori warriors, and the young women of Tahiti. Chapter 2 concludes with a short tribute to the many individuals who took part in the fieldwork between 2002-7 with fulsome thanks, and a gallery of photo portraits of the Field Team (pp. 35-36).

Chapter 3 presents a detailed description of the excavated structures. This is the meat at the heart of the volume, comprising 138 pages of text, with 175 illustrations. Given the complexity of the site no overall site phasing is attempted (although an attempt is made in Chapter 4). Individual buildings are assigned Latin numerals from I-XXXV and described in turn, with supporting plans and or photographs. I must admit that the use of Latin numerals reminded me of the way in which early 20th century excavators of Roman villas in the south of England might choose to number their buildings and rooms. But thinking on, the buildings at Skálholt also served as an elite residence and farm (albeit without a bathhouse and vomitorium), so perhaps this system, which is transparent and logical, is not entirely inappropriate.

I was struck by the similarity of some of the structures at Skálholt to those that I have excavated from the same period in the Western Isles of Scotland. A shortage of timber in both locations led to a reliance on turf and stone for walling and roofing. Both locations are also prone to waterlogging, as can be seen from the photos of muddy days on site, and the excavated remains of once sticky floor surfaces of peat and trampled ash. Thinking about the power invested in this Bishop's seat, it is interesting that other than the size and massing of the structures few attempts were made at ostentatious architectural display. The high-status individuals in residence were, however, afforded a degree of comfort in rooms with wooden floors and wall paneling, and glass windows. I can only presume that evidence of high-status personal privileges will also be shown in terms of diet, and possessions in the future volumes.

The volume concludes with Chapter 4, in which Lucas provides an overview of the 'Architectural Assemblage.' At 44 pages, this chapter is succinct, however, to my mind, it offers some of the most interesting insights into the ways in which the buildings were inhabited and modified through time. I particularly enjoyed Lucas's reflections on the rhythms and durations evident in the various structures; repairs and remodeling could, for example, in some cases be correlated with the inauguration of a new bishop, such as *Pordur Þorláksson* in 1670, and *Jon Arnason* in 1722 (p.182).

A further analytical innovation, which reflects Lucas's longstanding theoretical interests in materiality and temporality is his concept of multi-temporal structures. In his discussion of the temporality of individual buildings (pp.197- 206) Lucas breaks down the compositional elements of buildings into layers which have potentially different life spans. Beyond the site itself (the slowest to change), the five key elements are the structure, the skin (interior and exterior finishing, roof, floors), the services

(drainage and heating systems), and the stuff (mobile furnishings, such as chairs, tables). Through this scheme it is possible to suggest that while the footprint or site of a building might last 100-150 years, the buildings themselves might have their walls repaired at intervals of 50-70 years, while less specialized living areas, might be re-modelled every quarter to half century, and floors replaced (unless they were wooden) every two to three decades, and drains every 50 years.

A discussion on the spatial anatomy of Skálholt takes the investigation of movement further, with an analysis of how individual areas were accessed, or kept private through the use of specialized corridors and locked doors. Finally, a thorough discussion of construction materials and techniques (pp.211-223), goes far beyond description to explore how the interiors of buildings such as the school refectory may have been perceived by residents, with a consideration of the overall atmosphere of the structure, along with the roll played by heat and light, the provision of water, and pre-modern attitudes to cleanliness.

To conclude my review, I would simply offer my congratulations to Gavin Lucas and Mjöll Snæsdóttir and the whole team. The publication is a triumph and can only be praised. I trust that the volume will be widely distributed and read especially as, being locally published by the Institute of Archaeology in Reykjavik, there does not seem to be any open access for digital downloads, as might be the case with a larger international publishing house. It would be a great shame if a small print run, or limited availability diminished the reception and use of this fine report.

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