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II

DOCUMENTATION STANDARDS FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD SURVEYS IN ICELAND

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Documentation standards for Archaeological Field Surveys in Iceland

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In this paper I will give a short historical background to the present situation and legislation in Iceland but my main subject will be a survey project that was started in 1978 and what standards and working methods were set out and used for the field survey. Finally I will mention some results of the survey and the present situation.

History

The Icelandic Sagas have always played an important role in the history of Iceland. For centuries they have dominated our view about the settlement of Iceland in the 9th century and the society that was established by the Vikings.

Because of this strong historical tradition Archaeology has had difficulties to maintain an independent position in Iceland. Until quite recently the common view has been that the Sagas told us everything we needed to know about our past, and the only reason for excavations or surveys was to confirm the Sagas.

Subsequently the only ruins that were considered being worthy of a survey, were the ones that could be linked to the Sagas and preferably to certain characters in the Sagas.

The need for registration of archaeological remains in Iceland was however first recognized and discussed almost two hundred years ago. It was probably awakened by a rising interest for the Icelandic Sagas and a growing nationalism of the time. It was followed up by a questionnaire about remains of Ancient monuments in Iceland which was sent to all officials in Iceland in 1817 and collected in the next few years by the *Committee for Protection of Ancient Monuments* in Copenhagen. As a result of the committee's enquiries ten monuments were put on a protection list, where of three were archaeological sites.

The Icelandic Archaeological Society

In 1879 *The Icelandic Archaeological Society* was founded, and it had registration and research of archaeological remains as its main purpose. The early surveyors interest was mostly focused on sites that could be connected to events or famous characters of the Icelandic Sagas. For almost 30 years surveyors traveled all over Iceland on behalf of the *Archaeological Society* and mapped and described a large number of sites that since then have been destroyed by erosion or human activities. Their enthusiastic and important pioneer work was regrettably not followed up until 15 years ago.

Antiquity law

In 1907 the first antiquity law was set in Iceland for protection and registration of ancient monuments. The first state Antiquarian served also as the director of the National Museum and for decades he was the only official in Iceland handling all cultural and archaeological remains. He started a register over sites he believed to be of historic importance, but he had to rely mostly on earlier documentation and written descriptions as he seldom had the time to undertake any archaeological field surveys of his own.

According to the Antiquity law, The National Museum of Iceland is not only the centre for Icelandic archaeological research but also of registration and protection of all archaeological sites in Iceland. The Museum has however never been given the financial means or the manpower to fulfill its obligations. Consequently time passed for years without any organized archaeological field survey taking place.

Systematic archaeological field survey

In the late 1970s the first attempt was made to start a systematic archaeological field survey project in Iceland by the National Museum. It was initiated and organized by the author of this paper who since 1978 has been employed as an archaeologist at the museum. This project and its results is the main subject of this paper.

The field survey program was originally based on Swedish survey standards and methods that had been used there for a very long time.

As the Icelandic circumstances are different to - for example the ones in Sweden - the system was developed further and adapted for Icelandic environment and needs during the first years.

Since a systematic field survey was a completely new concept in Iceland 15 years ago, it proved necessary in the beginning to establish a new definition for what should be recognized as archaeological remains and consequently what should be registered in the field survey.

According to the antiquity law of that time (nr. 52, 19/5 1969) *all ancient man-made remains* were defined as archaeological sites, and only a site that had been declared as a protected site with a special certificate of registration was protected by the law.

In a country with history that begins in the Viking age little more than 1100 hundreds years ago "ancient" meant traditionally remains from the Viking- and early medieval period. When it comes to field survey this is not very practical as the first major change in the development of the Icelandic society, its land-use and its building tradition occurred first during the Second World War Until then Iceland was indeed basically an Iron age farming society.

Consequently I considered this old definition to be too limited and a new definition was established as a standard for the field survey for what should be included in the field survey and mapped.

What should be listed in a field survey?
That is:
1 All man-made structures over 100 years old.
2 Some structures younger than 100 years old, for example remains of sod-houses and even constructions from the Second World War
3 Sites that are not visible on the surface if information still exists about them.
4 Old horse tracks and paths. (No roads are over 100 years old in Iceland).
5 Important Historical sites. (For example sites that are mentioned in the sagas without archaeological support).
6 Traditional folklore sites, like dwellings of the hidden people or trolls and sites with some taboo or curse attached to them.
7 Boundary marks and other markers such as fishing marks or day-marks.
8 Place-names that indicate an old settlement.

This new definition was approved in a revision of the Antiquity law in 1989 and now all man-made structures over 100 years old and some younger remains are defined as archaeological sites and protected by law. According to the same law all known archaeological remains within a region must now be registered before a regional plan can be accepted and approved.

This 100 years rule means in reality that it's illegal to destroy any old ruin without it first being evaluated by archaeologists. Of course it may not be possible, realistic or even desirable to protect all remains that are more than 100 years old, but the law provides us now with a certain protection so the really important ruins are less likely to be destroyed by mistake, since it's often impossible for an untrained eye to tell whether a ruin is from the 19th century or the 9th century.

The purpose of the field survey
The main purpose of the survey is to:
1 Find all ruins within a selected area and put them on a map.
2 Collect basic information about each site such as location, size, appearance and condition.
3 Measure and map the site.
4 Preliminary estimates the function, age and archaeological value of each site.
5 Get a clear view of the amount of archaeological remains within each area.
6 Prevent archaeological sites from being destroyed by accident, mistake or lack of knowledge.
7 Be able to make an archaeological and cultural evaluation of sites within each area, based on the collected information.

Survey routines
From the beginning in 1980 the National Museums standard survey has been divided into three main parts; preparatory work, fieldwork and a report.

1. *Preparatory work* includes collecting information from written documents, sending out questionnaires, planning the fieldwork and establishing local contacts. The most important written sources have been land- and place-name registers, the yearbooks of the Archaeological Society and old home field maps of farms in Iceland.

2. *Fieldwork* is the main part of the survey. It is normally carried out in a following way. The surveyor visits every farm in the area and makes enquiries about archaeological remains that are known to the landowner. This has proven to give excellent results, as Icelandic local farmers know their land very well and can usually point out most of the visible archaeological sites on their land. They also often possess valuable information about sites that have been bulldozed and are no longer visible on the surface. This saves time as you don't have to waste valuable time searching for the sites. After the surveyor has received the information on the farm, he sets off and walks systematically over the land (often accompanied by the proud farmer). He carries (in a bag) a special survey book; maps and aerial photographs of the surroundings; cameras, measure tape and a compass.

Every structure he comes across is registered in his survey book, given a number, description and measurements. If possible a sketch drawing is made based on pacing, or sometimes with a help of a measure tape. Additional information is also listed, such as location, surroundings, type and condition of the site. Often a picture is taken instead of writing down long descriptions. Oral history, any stories and legends about the site are also listed. It is emphasized that all information is registered and written down on location.

The Survey Book

The survey book is in A5 format. It has waterproof cover and a pocket for a map. Every survey book contains pre-printed fill-in forms for 50 sites, two pages for each site plus 20 pages for additional information and 20 pages for drawings. It has proved to be an excellent form for smaller sites, but when mapping large and complex sites, drawings are made on A4 or even A3 drawing paper.

Evaluation of Sites.

One important factor for turning the field-survey data into a useful and practical working and planning tool is the archaeological evaluation of the sites. For estimating the age and the cultural value of the structures a simple evaluation system has been used. All structures are preliminary evaluated on location. The evaluation is based on the registrators judgment of the condition and his estimated age of the structure. The system has three main categories (A, B and C) for cultural value and four categories (1 - 4) for estimated age.

Category A includes structures that are considered to be of high cultural value and should be protected.

Category B includes structures that may hold much more information than can be gathered from the surface, but could be of general interest if excavated. Ruins in this category should not be removed before a prior investigation.

Category C includes structures that are obviously of no significance and do not have any special cultural value.

Estimated age is divided into four categories:
1 the pagan period from 870 - 1000.
2 the catholic period 1000 - 1550.
3 the reformation period from 1550 - 1800.
4 the period from 1800.

Report

3. To make the field survey available to planning boards, communities and contractors the survey results should be published in a report. Since 1980 field survey has been carried out by the National Museum or other parties in 20 communities out of roughly 200. Reports exist only for 7 of the 20 survey projects so obviously we are behind in that matter. The total number of listed sites is now about 3500. The sites differ very much in size, age, type and appearance. About 70-80 % of the sites belong to the last phase of the old farming society, from the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. But often the farms and the outhouses are built on top of an older settlement, so without an excavation it can be difficult to determine how important a site is or how old it is.

The aim is to link all surveyed sites with an Icelandic GIS (Geographic Information System) mapping system where contractors, communities and others connected to the system will have on-line information about all surveyed archaeological remains. This is still only in the planning stage but may become a reality within the next few years.

Documentation standards

The intention with the survey - in addition to above mentioned goals - is that it will in the future contain a completely new database for all archaeological, cultural and historical research that is not available at present. But to make it become this powerful database the survey has to fulfill necessary standards and a larger percentage of the country has to be surveyed. It is still to early to make any meaningful comparisons with the already listed sites.

The ordinary field survey routines have been described above but less detailed surveys have been carried out in few areas as an experiment and in other areas high-tech equipment have been used including EDM, (Electronic Distance Measurer), computers and GPS-satellite location system for making detailed digital sitemaps and localizations. Valuable experience has been gained through these different methods and comparison between different survey techniques have led to the conclusion that field survey can be carried out in many different ways, depending on your goals and the time and money available. In my opinion our routines contain the necessary standards mentioned above. They are fast and yet so detailed that it is possible for the Museum to base an evaluation on it f. ex. for a contractor who wants to know whether a site has to be excavated, and it will also be the source of unlimited research possibilities.

Archaeological field survey is at present the most important task in Icelandic archaeology, as Iceland is probably far behind other European countries in this matter. In the last 4-5 years regrettably very little has been done to follow up the survey that started 15 years ago but now the Icelandic Antiquity Council has decided that archaeological field survey shall be given priority.

Accordingly a new temporary position at the archaeological department of the National Museum of Iceland has just been established for a supervisor to plan, coordinate and lead the field survey program to a new flying start.

Finally I would like to emphasize that although not as many areas have been

surveyed as one would have hoped for during the last 15 years, the survey program has radically changed the general attitude towards field survey. Instead of being considered a ridiculous waste of time and money, the field survey and the documentation standards are now accepted as an essential and a necessary part in the preservation of archeological sites in Iceland.