

The Tip of the Iceberg: The Material of Skriðuklaustur Monastery and Hospital

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Material objects from distant societies and cultures have long been an axis for archaeological research. In recent research, however, growing attention has been drawn to exploring simultaneously the conceptual meaning of material substances as the products of humans. The visual appearance of material is in this respect no more than the tip of an iceberg, where only a small part of something largely hidden is evident. In this article, Skriðuklaustur, an Augustinian monastery which operated in Eastern Iceland from AD 1493 to 1554 will thus be approached as embracing the remains of an internationally based society that flourished on the outskirts of the medieval monastic world. An excavation of its ruins has revealed residues of a society whose material is both domestic and international but still reflects the universally based meaning of monasticism. The Catholic Church is in this manner regarded as having fabricated phenomena through its pervasive institutions, upholding a distinct monastic identity. This view does not though involve a general denial of cultural or social changes as it rather underlines the hybrid character of everything that is and, at the same time, the significance of examining the materiality of past cultures as the creation of humans in their relational context.

INTRODUCTION

As with all other human products, monasteries universally appear through material buildings and artefacts that yet convey a certain meaning. While it can thus fairly be stated that no two monasteries look materially the same, they were predominantly arranged in accordance with a uniform plan independent of their geographical or temporal location. In fact, these traits are consistent across different orders and may therefore be interpreted as constructing a distinct monastic identity. The different material appearances of monasteries may, on the contrary, be observed as the consequences of the non-static nature of all human societies and cultures that constantly evolve within their own context. Thus, by

crossing artificial as well as natural borders, monasteries, like other human products, went steadily through the process of hybridization, negotiation and reconstruction in accordance with their diverse contexts in time and space.

Although they are ephemeral, fragmented residues of human life, material substances from past or present societies, such as monasteries, nonetheless provide the opportunity to seek their materiality. In fact, the material substance is merely the tip of the iceberg, where only a small part or aspect of something largely hidden is visible. Therefore, in this paper, the author will permit a view of the whole iceberg, examining the association between the material and the social construction of monasticism as it appeared on the

outskirts of the medieval monastic world. This will be done by exploring buildings, artefacts and graves excavated from the late medieval monastic site at Skriðuklaustur in Eastern Iceland. The material there demonstrates in fact the hybrid character of the international monastic movement, including the active provision of hospitality and medical treatment for the wider community, even women and children. The graves in the cemetery display, furthermore, a spatial organization of burials according to categories of age, status and disease in interplay with the architecture of the monastic complex. Here, the underlying aim is to shed light on how the bond between humans and material culture became the inseparable carrier of monastic identity in both life and death.

THE BACKGROUND

In her research on nunneries in medieval Britain, Gilchrist (1994) elucidated monastic architecture as one of the central features in the creation and maintenance of the identity of monasticism. Based on Bourdieu's (1977) theory of *habitus*, she furthermore pointed out the fact that neither architecture nor identity is a static product, as they are constantly modified by different contextual factors, such as gender, temporal or local variations (cf. Thomas 1997).

Nevertheless, in spite of the constant adaptability of all human products, Catholic monasteries and nunneries constituted a sacred enclosure wherein a distinct society resided (Gilchrist 1994). Commonly, the monastic complex included a church and separate rooms which all projected particular meanings. These rooms comprised four wings of a building, grouped contiguously around an enclosed space, a cloister-garden. This uniform layout of the monastic buildings, together with the inhabitants, their roles and attributes, functioned thus as a mnemonic device that constantly reproduced the monastic identity. In this manner, the Catholic Church fabricated phenomena through the

monastic institutions that maintained their specific cosmology but existed without any certain temporal, cultural or geographical borders.

Besides being a home for priests, monks or nuns and in most instances a residence for sick, poor and aged people, the monastic houses were above all centres of Christian knowledge, contemplation and the physical work of healing, gardening and seclusion from the secular world. Most importantly, their enclosure symbolized the regulated access between the lay people and the religious class. They were thus portals to heaven but open to those who sought spiritual shelter or curative help, notably in both life and death, by abandoning the secular world and enjoying the monastic society.

Nine such monastic institutions operated during the Catholic period in Iceland (c. AD 1000–1550), the earliest of which was founded in 1133 (Fig. 1). Skriðuklaustur monastery was founded last, in 1493, and operated therefore only for approximately 60 years (Steinsson 1965). Of these nine, seven were monasteries and two were nunneries. They all belonged to either the Augustinian or the Benedictine order, and Skriðuklaustur monastery is commonly thought to have belonged to the former. All of Iceland's nine medieval monasteries and nunneries were dissolved during the Lutheran Reformation in the mid-16th century (Ísleifsdóttir 1997, Guðmundsson 2000).

A cemetery was consecrated at Skriðuklaustur in 1496 and, specifically, a monastic church as late as 1512. The church deteriorated after the closing of the monastery but was rebuilt as an annex for Valþjófsstaður parish church, in approximately the mid-17th century. The church was finally discontinued in 1792, nearly three centuries after the founding of the monastery itself. During the period from the Reformation in 1550 until the church's closing, it was used by official sheriffs and their families who resided there after its dissolution (Steinsson 1965, 1966:74–103).

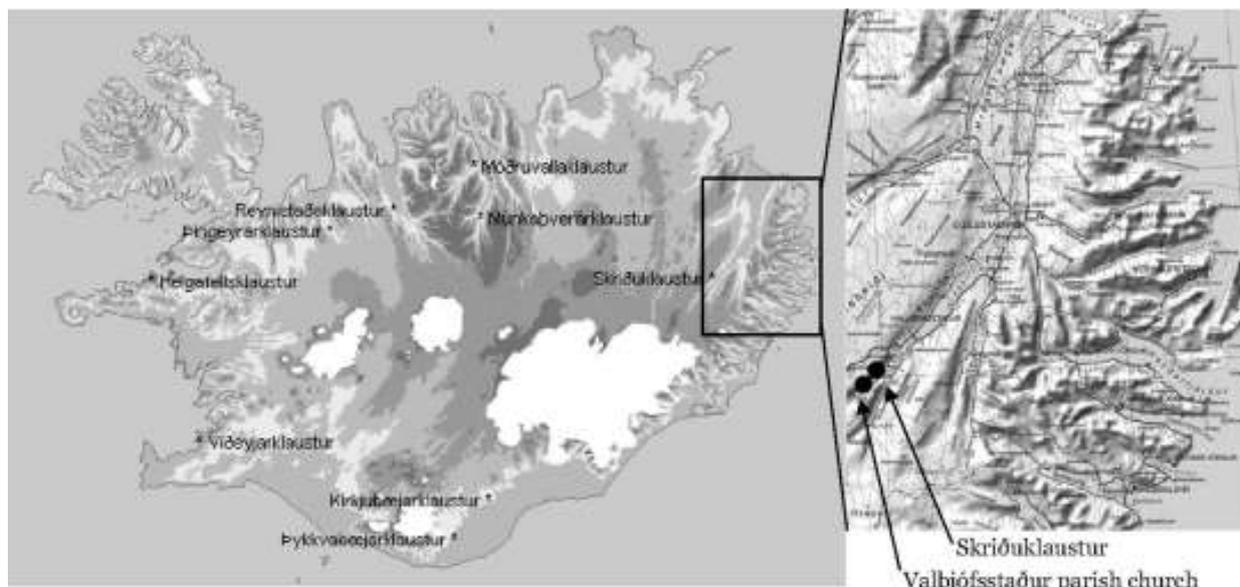


Fig. 1. *Distribution of the monastic institutions during medieval times in Iceland.*

An evaluation performed at Skriða farm in 2000 to locate the monastic ruin and measure its dimensions showed that its buildings had covered an area of at least 1300m². No later structures appeared to have been built on top of them, except for the church that was rebuilt because of its longer history of active use (Kristjánsdóttir 2001). After eight years of excavation, the layout of the monastic complex and the related multi-functional activities are becoming quite clear. Basically, excavation has revealed a turf- and stone-built monastery in line with the general characteristics of most medieval monastic buildings outside Iceland (see, for example, Alttoa 1993, Hiekkanen 1993, Karlsson 1993, Lidén 1993, Olsen 1996, Gram 1998, Eide 2006). Furthermore, there is evidence for the existence of a garden of imported healing plants at the site (Kristjánsdóttir 2008).

Basically, these findings demonstrate that the use of locally available materials from Iceland did not prevent the monastic society there from following the internationally based codes and principles of the Catholic Church. Furthermore, the results highlight the importance of exploring the material substances simultaneously with the concepts

embodied in them, as in this case they give meaning to the existence of specific monastic identity only when taken together. While crossing geographical and artificial borders, monasteries and nunneries became hybrid mimics at each time and in every place that they appeared, as the result of encountering different ideologies and practices. This underlines additionally the importance of synchronously investigating all material products as the results of human creation in their own context. This signifies, furthermore, that it is basically impossible to compare one monastery to another materially, although their materiality may, on the other hand, be approached through universally based evaluations.

THE HYBRIDIZATION OF MONASTICISM

Regardless of the international movement of monasticism, it has generally been maintained that the monastic buildings in Iceland differed fundamentally from uniform monastic planning. This incorporates also their operation, mission, role and function. This deeply rooted theory about monastic institutions in

Iceland is based on an entrenched notion about the limited building resources on the island. The naturally available building materials – turf, stones and driftwood – are not regarded as suitable for the construction of large and complex buildings, such as monasteries or nunneries (Ágústsson 1989:293–295). In addition, the supposed isolation of the island during the period when Iceland was brought under the Norwegian crown and later Denmark with the Kalmar Union, lasting from AD 1262 to 1944, is believed to have kept Icelandic society dormant and sequestered from foreign influences (Karlsson 2001). Written sources contain in fact only minimal information about monastic activities in Iceland other than those strictly related to their economic or political affairs, such as the sale and purchase of farms. Inevitably, the silence of written sources concerning monasteries in Iceland has been taken to confirm the superficial monastic presence in the country (Þorsteinsson & Grímsdóttir 1990:141–158).

Based on this theory, the monastic institutions in Iceland were believed to function at their own discretion, operating in farmhouses or in buildings that did not much differ from the existing farmhouses in Iceland, though perhaps more advanced than the homes of common farmers (Bruun 1974:193, Ágústsson 1989:293–295, Þorsteinsson & Grímsdóttir 1990:141–158, Harðardóttir 2006:108–113). Indeed, the theory has even gone so far as to say that the Catholic Church in Iceland was inactive with regard to providing social assistance (Þorláksson 2003:126–128).

However, there are several other reasons for the wide and prolonged acceptance of these theories about Icelandic monastic institutions, such as the general lack of archaeological investigations. Only two of the nine monastic sites in Iceland, apart from Skriðuklaustur, have been partially excavated but neither of them has, as yet, been investigated fully enough to produce evidence of their monastic architectural plan or

internal function. These are the studies of the ruins of a monastery located on the island of Viðey, off the coastline of Reykjavík, and a nunnery at Kirkjubæjarklaustur on the south coast of Iceland (Hallgrímsdóttir 1993, Kristjánsdóttir 1995:29–52, Mímisson & Einarsson 2009:86–98). The partial excavation at Viðeyjarklaustur, however, revealed mainly artefacts and buildings of domestic origin. Consequently, these remains were at that point interpreted as supportive of the theory that monasteries in Iceland were the result of an indigenous form (Hallgrímsdóttir 1993:162). Still, it is worth noting that, although sporadic, the research on the ruins at Kirkjubæjarklaustur indicated that the nunnery there was built and run in accordance with the international regulations of the Catholic Church (Mímisson & Einarsson 2009:90).

At this point, a strong criticism regarding investigations of monastic institutions in Iceland is the general neglect of the universally based meaning behind their buildings and artefacts. Both the historical and archaeological investigations have, on the contrary, been based almost exclusively on the institutions' material appearances but not simultaneously the conception they carry. Architecture is not merely a material construction. It is always the creation of culture which appears in the variety of man-made material productions. At the same time it carries symbolic significance that is perceived and maintained reciprocally by the users. However, culture is not a static creation as it constantly responds to various contextual changes. The material substance does therefore not alone reflect the reality nor does its conception, as these must always be observed simultaneously as the residues of humanly organized circumstances that go through the process of constant reorganization in accordance with their social and cultural landscape (Pauls 2006). While looking at the monastic institution outside Iceland, it is evident that these institutions kept their monastic identity through their buildings and attributes

independently from their geographical location and the material they were constructed of.

As Fahlander points out in his studies on hybridism and the emerging of mimics, in the archaeological record there are endless examples of material objects ‘that are “almost the same but not quite”’ (2008:28). Similarly, Andrén (2007) has demonstrated how Norse mythology during the Viking period integrated certain features that could in fact be traced back to the Bronze Age. Even the prototype of the Virgin Mary has been exemplified as the hybrid mimicry of the myth of the goddess Frigg in Norse mythology; both represent the mother, grieving a lost son (Ásdísardóttir 2007).

The encounter of two cultures does not necessitate the survival of one and the demise of the other or that both continue to maintain their separate identities or characteristics. They can be visualized as a hybrid form of a society that is mutually foreign and local (Bhabha 2004, cf. Gosden 2004, Fahlander 2008). The integration of monasticism into medieval societies must have involved socio-cultural encounter wherever it came about, but occurred, nonetheless, in accordance with the regulations of the Catholic Church. Indeed, such integration cannot have resulted in the creation of monastic buildings in Iceland on a scale that may be expected in other Catholic societies. They were, rather, established on the scale and in the context appropriate to medieval Icelandic society.

This emphasizes how essential it is to view monastic institutions, wherever they are located, in their actual social context and on their own terms independent of the notion of whether they are constructed of domestic or foreign material. Skriðuklaustur monastery, although partly constructed of local material, was undoubtedly an impressive building in its own way as it appeared in the valley of Fljótsdalur during the medieval period. Similarly, the alleged inactivity of the monastic institutions in Iceland may have been suited to other affairs in the country in the medieval age.

THE MATERIAL OF SKRIÐUKLAUSTUR

Sørensen rightly emphasized in her work on the materiality of gender that ‘[s]ymbolic meaning does in fact often use objects as its “container”, exploring how their physicality means that the symbol is materially experienced’ (2000:82). This statement may even be amended with the notion that material substances must at all times be explored as man-made evidences of a humanly constructed past. Thus the importance of dealing with the past as a human-object relation has explicitly been pointed out by recent scholars, implying that people and material culture should not be regarded as separable entities (Miller 2005:7–10, Pinney 2005:256 f, Olsen 2003:102f, Webmoor & Witmore 2008:54f.).

Therefore, in research on past societies, the essential task is to explore the intertwined and contextual relationship between humans, the material and its meaning. This declaration underlines moreover the statement that material substances should preferably not be the sole central subject of investigations but rather investigated concurrently with their social meaning, which is constantly modified by their context, agents and structure. In what follows, the material from Skriðuklaustur monastery and hospital will thus be analysed as a man-made container of monasticism. For the material appearances of the building, the artefacts and the burials from the site functioned synchronously as the messenger of the universally based monastic identity.

The parts of the monastic complex at Skriðuklaustur that have been uncovered so far include the church, abbot’s lodging, dormitory, chapter house, refectory, kitchen, infirmary hall, storage room and stables. These formed an enclosure, arranged around a cloister-garden, comprising a courtyard of houses wherein the religious community resided. In it the artefacts appeared as the diverse attributes of the household as much as of the more specialized monastic activities, and were either homemade or imported.

Similarly, the human bones from the graves indicate that the place did act as a stopover for sick and healthy visitors of diverse ranks, all ages and both sexes.

THE MONASTIC COMPLEX

Over 1100m² have been dug up of the approximately 1300m² of the monastic complex area at Skriðuklaustur, including its cemetery. Because of the monastery's short tenure, the layout of its building is rather straightforward and easy to interpret. It consists of only one building phase, lasting for nearly 60 years, except for the church that was in use for about 250 years.

The monastic complex at Skriðuklaustur, as it can be reconstructed from its ruins, may in fact be interpreted as being more sophisticated than anticipated, considering the stagnant view of monasteries and nunneries in Iceland being run at their own discretion in farmstead-like houses. As previously noted, the monastic building at Skriðuklaustur appears to have contained most of the elements that are common to other religious institutions of the Augustinian Order. Although built of turf, stones and driftwood, the interior plan of the structures is typical, constructed around a well-defined cloister-garden forming an enclosed quadrangle. The south side was formed by the church, the western by the brethren's living quarters, the northern by the kitchen and the refectory area, and the storage rooms and stables were located in the eastern part of the complex and farthest away from the sacred space of the brethren. The square was fully enclosed by a thick wall in the south east (Fig. 2).

Inevitably, some clear local variations may be traced from the monastic complex, such as the fact that the church itself was located on the south side and therefore the kitchen and the refectory on the north. Usually, the church forms the northern side of monastic complexes. However, this kind of arrangement is not unknown, especially in the northern countries of Europe (Møller-Christensen

1982 [1958]:26). Here, environmental factors may be the modifying reason for this placement of the church building, as such planning can be regarded as an attempt to shield the open cloister-garden from the harsh northern winds by using the monastic complex itself. The cloister-garden was not strictly rectangular but was situated as the core of the monastery. It measured over 100m² in size, with a well in its approximate centre. However, the cloister-garden was also used as the main cemetery for the monastery, as will be described later.

Some of the locally determined variations may also be traced to socio-cultural or strictly economic modifications. Although the largest and the most important space of the whole building, the church is in fact smaller than monastic churches generally were at that time. Several reasons may underlie this. One is that the church was not consecrated until roughly a decade after the founding of the monastery, i.e. in 1512, and may thus not have been completed by the time of its final dissolution during the Reformation in the 1550s. It is also known from written resources that around the time of the church's consecration the monastery was in the process of a most far-reaching business of buying lands and possessions. In fact, it probably never recovered economically from this (Steinsson 1966:100). Moreover, as early as in 1539 all the monastic institutions in Iceland started to decline because of the growing strength of the Lutheran invasion in the country that ended with the Reformation (Ísleifsdóttir 2000:40–45).

The ground plan of the monastic church measured 8m wide and 16m long internally. The church itself was situated east–west, with the main entrance, open to the public, located on the western gable. Another entrance was located on the northern gable, exclusively for the brethren to enter directly from the monastic rooms during day and night. The post-monastic church was rebuilt from the former church around the mid-17th century. It measured only 6m wide and 8m

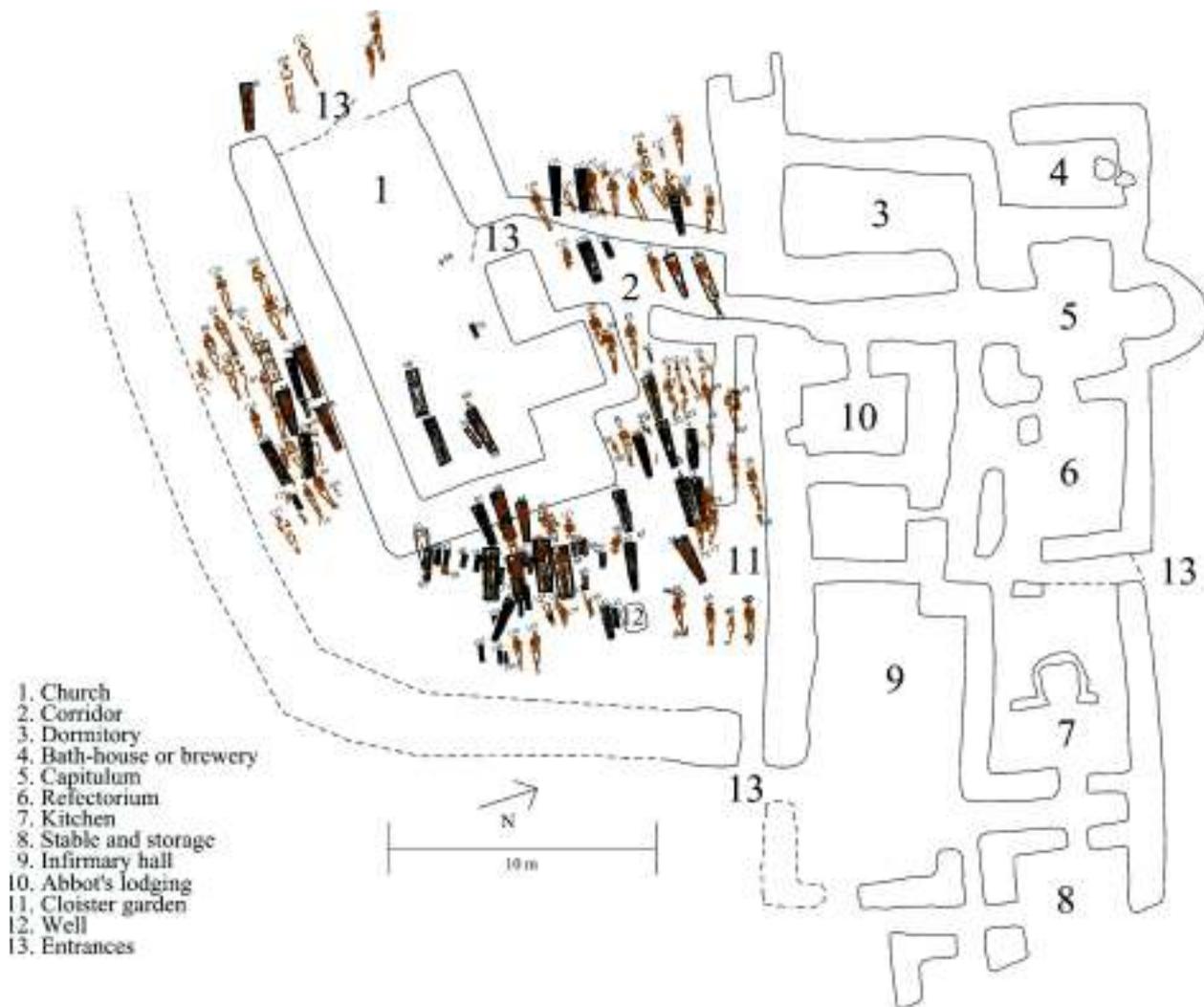


Fig. 2. *The excavated parts of the ruins at Skriðuklaustur monastic site* (© Margrét Valmundsdóttir).

long. This church was deconsecrated in 1793, after having been in disrepair for some time. As previously mentioned, this was the only part of the monastic complex that was reused after its dissolution. The rest of the rooms were left to disintegrate from the time the last brethren left them, most likely as early as the 1550s.

Otherwise, the monastic rooms correspond to the intimate daily life of the Augustinian brethren: their praying, sleeping, dining, gardening and extensive services to visitors, such as medical treatment and residential care. Still, in accordance with the international coding of monasticism, the spatial organization of the rooms was obviously based on a separation of the religious inhabitants from the secular ones. There was therefore interplay between

the dissimilar positions of the residents and the architecture of the monastic complex.

The rooms were all similar in size, *c.* 8–12m², except for the infirmary hall that measured three times as much. Closest to the church there was the dormitory and from it a roofed passage leading to the church. On the opposite side of the passage, the abbot's lodging was located. Another passage led from the entrance to the dormitory into the infirmary hall. Next to the dormitory on the right side along the western range of the monastery, there was a separate room with two cooking hearths. This room could be entered only from the outside and may have functioned as a brewery or perhaps as a bath-house. This western range of the complex seems to have

been accessible only to the brethren, as was the chapter house that was located at the end of the passage running from the church.

The chapter house consisted of a rectangular building, furnished with wooden benches along the walls and originally built with a round extension on the northern side. The extension may have functioned as a chancel, as this room could have been used as a preliminary church until the final one was consecrated in 1512. Beside the chapter house on the northern side there was the refectory with a kitchen area and in the eastern side of the buildings the storage and stables were located. These were also accessible from the kitchen area through a short, narrow entrance. The infirmary hall was attached to the kitchen area at the south, as a part of the monastic complex but accessible from there only through small hatches, perhaps just for the delivery of food. Next to the infirmary hall there was a room three times smaller. In both these rooms some surgical equipment has been found, such as two lancets.

The infirmary hall was notably located inside the monastic complex itself, although accessible only from a south-facing entrance and therefore not through the closed space designated exclusively for the brethren. In his study of the Augustinian monastery and hospital in Denmark, Møller-Christensen (1982 [1958]:48–61) points out that across the medieval Catholic world the hospitalized inhabitants resided in a separate hall. However, at later stages the infirmary halls were in some cases connected to the dormitory or appeared as a separate building parallel with the main clustered complex, wherein the sick brethren could themselves get physical assistance. Such an evolution has been underlined by Miller and Saxby (2007:122–127) but, according to their study of infirmary halls in monastic institutions of the different orders in England, this pertains mainly to the larger religious houses. They underline though that, particularly in Augustinian monasteries, the religious houses and the hospital were shared, although located in separated rooms. Still, in a small monastery as at Skriðuklaustur,

a clearer separation of the infirmary may not have been needed or perhaps the Augustinian Order did not particularly demand it.

Two other entrances to the monastery besides the one leading to the infirmary hall have been excavated at Skriðuklaustur. The main one was located between the kitchen and the refectory in the complex's northern gable and the other one leads into the cloister-garden from the south. This position of the main entrance between the refectory and the kitchen is well known, as there the poor and needy could temporarily have shelter and food.

Although the location of Skriðuklaustur itself may at present seem remote, deep in the valley of Fljótsdalur, it was situated in a well-beaten track open during the late medieval period, as was common for monastic institutions world-wide. The general route between the southern and eastern part of Iceland was located through the valley but closed down in the 1640s as the result of a colder climate spell that caused drastic changes in the glacier (Guttormsson 1993:145). The monastery must therefore have been the last stopover before heading to the south by crossing the Vatnajökull glacier, presumably heralding a wide range of visitors.

FINDINGS

Identification of vertebrate remains and the various kinds of insects from samples taken during the excavation has improved the understanding of the different rooms inside the monastic complex, as explained above (Pálsdóttir 2006, Konráðsdóttir 2008, 2009, Hamilton-Dyer 2010). As mentioned before, pollen analysis of samples shows furthermore that gardening was carried out at the site and that healing plants were cultivated there during the monastic period. Ten species of healing plants were discovered, including three not native to the medieval Icelandic flora. These three are *Allium*, *Urtica major* and *Plantago major*, all internationally well-known monastic plants. Above all, in spite of being sparse, the results from the pollen analyses suggest that

gardening may have been a part of the monastic activities, similar to that practised in contemporary monastic sites outside Iceland (Harðarson 2008:109). Importantly, the gardening there was apparently adjusted to the inherent challenges of raising foreign plants in Iceland.

Among the findings from the site are 18 lancets, scalpels and pins that may have been used for surgical purposes (Frölich forthcoming). Most of them are homemade but were used for both suturing, i.e. closing wounds, or possibly for surgical purposes, although no definite evidence of trepanation has been identified so far on skeletons from Skriðuklaustur. Beside this, two vessels for medication were found, both imported, one a vial and the other a ceramic bottle. Also, the effigy of St Barbara was discovered in the church's chancel (Fig. 3). St Barbara was

known as one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers, a group of saints that was venerated in Roman Catholicism because their intercession was thought to protect against disease. The mission of St Barbara was to protect against fever and her presence in the church at Skriðuklaustur, where it was found, may have served the same purpose. The effigy found was made in Utrecht in Holland during the first half of the 15th century (Kristjánsdóttir, Þ 2008:147).

According to the findings described above, Skriðuklaustur monastery's mission as a charitable institution may have been fulfilled through the operation of a hospital with medical treatment and caring functions, besides its being a centre of Christian worship (Kristjánsdóttir, S. 2008, Ísleifsdóttir 2008). Still, certainly not all monasteries and nunneries ran hospitals or almshouses, although hospitality for the poor and travellers was the obligation of all the religious houses of the Catholic Church. This was meant for the healing of physical illnesses but also for the care of souls (Miller & Saxby 2007:123, 127). However, along with the findings, the skeletal evidence indicates strongly that sick and needy people may have sought physical and spiritual comfort there. The hospital activity of Skriðuklaustur was an unknown aspect before the excavation started there in 2002, as the Catholic Church was not believed to have interfered with social matters in Iceland (see Þorláksson 2003).

In 2009 the skeletal assemblage from Skriðuklaustur amounted in total to 154 skeletons, preserved from the 157 graves. Of these at least 110 belong to the monastic period at the site, the rest most likely to the period when the sheriffs resided at Skriðuklaustur after the dissolution of the monastery up to the late 18th century. Of the 110 monastic graves, approximately 70 individuals exhibited pathological lesions and most likely came there for treatment during the 60 years of the hospital's duration. Roughly 47 were lay people that may have bought their last resting place in the cemetery south of the monastic church.



Fig. 3. An effigy of St. Barbara was discovered in the church's chancel. It was made in Utrecht in Holland during the first half of the 15th century (© Jónas Hallgrímsson, National Museum of Iceland).

In terms of the spatial division within the cemetery, those exhumed in the cloister-garden and the closest area north of the church bear signs of pathological alteration caused by diverse traumatic injuries and chronic illnesses. These are symptomatic of syphilis, tuberculosis, hydatid disease, non-specific infection, congenital disorders (e.g. cleft palate), periodontal disease, metabolic insult and fractures.¹ In addition, graves of foetuses, neonates, young children, adolescents and, in particular, young females have been discovered (Hawtin 2006, Kristjánsdóttir 2006, 2008, Kristjánsdóttir & Collins 2010, Pacciani 2006, 2007, Zoëga 2007b, 2008).

BURIAL CUSTOMS

The body in the grave does not merely contain skeletal remains or material manifestations of the customs used during burial, it also signals the diverse identities of the contextual society (cf. Sofaer 2006). In recent years, several studies have been conducted on the different aspects of identity appearing through the Christian burial customs in medieval Europe. In fact, all of them indicate a clear division of graves in accordance to the deceased's age, gender and social status. This evidently includes burials in hospital cemeteries as well as in other churchyards (Kieffer-Olsen 1993, Graves 2000, Gilchrist & Sloane 2005, Jonsson 2009).

In their intensive study on medieval graves in Britain, Gilchrist and Sloane (2005), for example, were able to trace clear trends in burying infants clustered together in the cemeteries. Other similar groupings were also visible, with regard to social status and gender (2005:223–225). Jonsson (2009) reaches a similar conclusion in her research on medieval graves in Scandinavia. Still, in both studies the apparent regional and chronological differences between cemeteries is expressly underlined with regard to the criteria of sex, gender, social status, the use of coffins and the arrangements of the body or the placing of objects in the graves. Yet, most importantly,

the common result in both studies is that the markings of the wide ranges of medieval identity seem almost exclusively to have been related to the location of the graves (Gilchrist & Sloane 2005, Jonsson 2009).

In fact, this statement highlights further the importance of the contextual analysis of humanly constructed material, as can also be emphasized by referring to the burial customs at Skriðuklaustur cemetery. In total, wooden coffins have been discovered in half of the 157 graves exhumed from the cemetery; six of them were located inside the church. These belonged to both children and adults, sick and healthy. Comparatively few coffins have been unearthed outside the walls of the monastic church, but these were nevertheless distributed among individuals of all ages and both sexes. Furthermore, diseased skeletons have been found there with and without coffins with equal frequency. On the whole, this may be interpreted as an indication that labelling such as age and sex did not exclusively affect the choice concerning coffin use any more than sickness did.

Local context may be the reason behind the use of coffins, as in other all other socio-cultural habits. In a largely treeless country such as Iceland, the access to wood for making coffins strongly affected their use. All the coffins from Skriðuklaustur monastery for which the wood has been identified are made of larch, notably the most common type of driftwood in Iceland (Eggertsson 1993:13–23). The monastery amassed extensive property at the shoreline during its operation and such ownership included access to driftwood (Steinsson 1966:74–103). This means that the monastery had an abundance of wood which could be used for anyone wishing so, independent of age, sex and social status, and assuming that those buried in the monastic cemetery did live there for a short or longer period. It is also possible that some of those buried at the cemetery at Skriðuklaustur were brought to the site already dead in ready-made coffins.

In burial of the corpses themselves, six main types of arm position have been observed from

the monastery at Skriðuklaustur but with no obvious connection to sex, age or location inside the cemetery. Surprisingly though, three different positions of the deceased's feet were observed as well. These bodies were equally as often laid to rest with their legs straight or crossed. In the instances where the legs were crossed, the left foot was more often laid over the right, but in only four graves the opposite was observed. The crossed legs may refer to Christ in this position on the cross as it was a common image of him during late medieval times. Local variations may in fact have been a decisive fact at Skriðuklaustur monastery in the case of the crossed legs; however, the positioning of the arms or legs has not yet been investigated systematically in Iceland.

It must be underlined here that, in some cases, it is very difficult to differentiate with certainty between the monastic and post-monastic graves from the cemetery at Skriðuklaustur. The monastic cemetery was in use just for about 60 years but the post-monastic one for nearly 250 years. As previously noted, the post-monastic cemetery was available only for the sheriffs and their families residing at the farm, perhaps because of its continuous status as a centre of administration. The lay people of the county were buried, as had been the case from *c.* AD 1000 onwards, at the Valþjófsstaður parish church that is located approximately three kilometres away from Skriðuklaustur. (see Fig. 1.).

Obviously, the changes caused by the Reformation were part of a gradual process rather than an abrupt one. At least it seems not to have resulted in any prominent changes in burial customs, as in the use of coffins or arm positions, in the Roman Catholic countries (Harding 2003, Regner 2005). Still, a family related zoning of graves seems at first apparent after the closing of the monastery at Skriðuklaustur. As will be described later in the paper, this is in line with the results of the investigation performed by Jonsson (2009) on medieval and post-Reformation graves in Scandinavia, where the division of graves in common church

graveyards was clearly based on familial connections for lay people of all classes (cf. Graves 2000). According to another study performed by Regner (2005) on the roles of Cistercian monasteries in Sweden, the isolation of the religious houses during the Reformation and post-dissolution period gradually faded away and the lay people were allowed to access all their buildings. Burials of lay people were therefore allowed after the Reformation in a more sacred space than before, resulting in different spatial division of the graves themselves although the burial customs did not show any significant changes.

THE SPATIAL DIVISION OF THE BURIALS AT SKRIÐ UKLAUSTUR

As previously emphasized, the burial customs traced at the cemetery at Skriðuklaustur cannot themselves as a single entity indicate any general trends as markers of identity but may rather do so in their spatial location inside the monastic complex.

In fact, the monastic building at Skriðuklaustur, together with the human bodies in their graves, represents a distinct identity which intersects reciprocally with the religious and secular emphasis of its context. The spatial division of the graves occurs to be woven with the monastic building and may symbolize, at the same time, segmented society while also constructing a cosmology of a monastic act. Apparently, the spatial zoning of the burials interacted with the architecture, symbolizing a monastic identity for both the living and the dead. The clients of the monastery were all buried inside its clearly framed boundaries but yet distributed in accordance to their age, disease, and religious and secular status in negotiation with the different purpose of visit, as residents or only for the care of their souls.

According to the separation of graves in the cemetery at Skriðuklaustur, there are four visible burial areas that, as mentioned above, have different meanings in accordance with their placement in regard to the

monastic complex itself. These areas are: first, the cloister-garden together with the area immediately north of the church designated for the patients; second, the area east of the chancel for the brethren and later the sheriffs; third, the area south of the church for the lay people; and, finally, inside the church building itself chosen for the benefactors (Fig. 4).

The two areas mentioned first, i.e. the cloister-garden together with the area north of the church and the area east of the chancel, are notably located *inside* the main core of the monastery itself, and therefore open exclusively to the brethren and those that resided there in their care. On the contrary, the area south of the church was clearly sited

inside its frame but *outside* its core, as it was most likely open to lay people who could buy their burial. Finally, the fourth area may not have had any such boundaries, as the church was after all open to both the public and the inhabitants of the monastery. Those buried there had, as benefactors, inherited a more privileged final resting place than the others buried at the site.

Before giving a more detailed description of the four areas, it is necessary to point out that burials in the cemetery, dating to the monastic period, have generally been arranged in accordance with the individual's age, rather than social relationships such as marriage, which reflects the results of the research performed by Gilchrist and Sloane



Fig. 4. The four areas of the cemetery at Skriðuklaustur (© Margrét Valmundsdóttir).

(2005) and Jonsson (2009). In contemporary and later parish churchyards, burials are commonly arranged as uniting family members in death (Jonsson 2009:158f.); children are buried with their parents or other close relatives. This may in fact, along with the different location of burials inside the cemetery, underline the basics of individually based monastic identity as this division is decidedly no longer visible among the post-monastic graves.²

As regards the division of burials inside the whole cemetery at Skriðuklaustur, it is apparent that patients who died in the care of the monastery were mainly buried in the cloister-garden and even in the nearest vicinity on the northern side of the church. This interpretation is based on the various pathological alterations identified on the skeletons found there. Moreover, this is the largest group of skeletons in one area, 70 of the 154 identifiable ones. The presence of young people and children is also prominent in this area, as more than half of the skeletons are of individuals under the age of 25 (Table 1). As a well-known historical fact, people did either die at a very young age or survived until adulthood during the medieval times in Iceland, usually with a peak in the mortality profile of

females of child-bearing age (Garðarsdóttir 2002, Ísberg 2005, Zoëga 2007a).

In addition, the majority of the youngest children were buried together in the northern corner of the cloister-garden but the graves of progressively older individuals take up larger areas towards the east in the cloister-garden. Older individuals were buried north of the church. Oddly enough, in this area, the graves of sick individuals were arranged according not only to their age but also their diseases. The same kind of cases were found in certain quarters inside this particular area, for example eight cases of hydatism all found close together in the area at the northern side of the church. This may indicate that certain ailments did have their own classification in medieval Iceland and perhaps consequently distinct treatments at the monastery (Kristjánsdóttir & Collins 2010).

Conversely, the area east of the chancel may exclusively have been designated to the clerics during the monastic period and, most likely, to the sheriffs and their families during the post-monastic period. The burials in this area belong obviously to a longer period than those found in the other areas at the site, as newer graves have in some cases cut through previous ones. Furthermore, the graves located east of the chancel are predominantly more luxurious than those found in the other areas, with rosary beads, traces of pillows, carvings on the coffin lids and a gold ring that had slipped off of a skeleton's finger in an elaborate coffin grave. These more richly furnished graves are nearly all of adult or mature men; only one is of an adult woman. These are likely to represent the patrons or the founding families of the monastery. The holiness of the chancel may have caused this obvious continuity of locating those of the highest status in this particular area at each time: the brethren during the monastic period and after that the sheriffs and their families.

As described above, the individuals buried in the cloister-garden and the area north of

Table 1. Age and sex composition of skeletons from graves in the area inside the cloister-garden and the area north of the church.

Cloister-garden/north cemetery Age composition	No.	% of sample
Foetus	1	1
Newborn to one year	10	14
Children 1–6 years	7	10
Children 7–12 years	5	7
Children 13–16 years	4	6
Young adults 17–25 years	14	20
Adults 26–45 years	18	26
Mature adults 45+ years	9	13
Old adults	2	3
Summary	70	100

the church seem to have been interred in graves in accordance with their age, or diseases if relevant, rather than any kind of family patterns, such as when couples and their children are buried together. However, it is noteworthy that family-related zoning becomes partly visible again among the graves dating to the post-monastic period east of the chancel. This may indicate that the monastic identity, resting upon individualism, is here replaced by familial relationships, as Regner (2005) pointed out. A high percentage of very young children and adults is apparent in this area, as may be expected from a common parish cemetery (Table 2).

In the area south of the church, the lay people most probably had their burials. The percentage of very young children and mature individuals is relatively high in that area, as is typical for medieval cemeteries in Iceland (Zoëga 2007a:145). In addition, the skeletons found there do not show any unusual pathological alterations, such as can be identified from those exhumed in the cloister-garden and north of the church. Nonetheless, even here it is prominent that the burials have been arranged in accordance to individually based criteria rather than social, such as family ties or marriages. The children are thus not necessarily buried beside the adults but rather together, as a single entity, demonstrating a certain monastic identity

Table 2. Age and sex composition of skeletons from graves in the area east of the chancel.

East of chancel Age composition	No.	% of sample
Foetus	0	0
Newborn to one year	19	43
Children 1–6 years	1	2
Children 7–12 years	1	2
Children 13–16 years	0	0
Young adults 17–25 years	1	2
Adults 26–45 years	12	28
Mature adults 45+ years	7	16
Old adults	3	7
Summary	44	100

Table 3. Age and sex composition of skeletons from graves in the area south of the church.

South of church Age composition	No.	% of sample
Foetus	0	0
Newborn to one year	4	12
Children 1–6 years	0	0
Children 7–12 years	0	0
Children 13–16 years	0	0
Young adults 17–25 years	3	9
Adults 26–45 years	4	12
Mature adults 45+ years	21	64
Old adults	1	3
Summary	33	100

that required singularity in life and death (Table 3).

Last but not the least, the benefactors of the monastery are likely to have been buried inside the church. The spatial division there was not necessarily indicative of family-related patterning; rather the burials of young children may have belonged to the family of the benefactors. At least it may be suggested that they had a special relationship to the monastery, religious or secular. Five of the seven graves exhumed in this particular area were located in the chancel, one containing the remains of a 6–7-year-old child and the other four containing the remains of adults. Two other babies were buried inside the church but these were located in two different areas in the nave; one was a burial of a 6–7-month-old foetus and another of a 3–4-year-old child (Table 4).

The three adults, including the female, were buried in coffins with books lying open on their chests. The books were written in Latin on parchment with Gothic lettering. Their covers were made of imported wood, including European beech, and leather decorated in Byzantine style (Jónsson 2008:83). Furthermore, one of these adults had been laid to rest dressed in a full-length woollen cloak with clear patterns made of bronze threads. The fourth adult located in the chancel was the only one buried without either a book or coffin.

Table 4. Age and sex composition of skeletons from graves inside the church.

Inside the church Age composition	No.	% of sample
Foetus	1	14
Newborn to one year	0	0
Children 1–6 years	1	14
Children 7–12 years	1	14
Children 13–16 years	0	0
Young adults 17–25 years	1	14
Adults 26–45 years	3	44
Mature adults 45+ years	0	0
Old adults	0	0
Summary	7	100

Considering the individual assignments of those buried in the cemetery at Skriðuklaustur, it may be stated that, according to the different sanctity of areas inside the monastic complex, the foetus buried inside the church's chancel probably had a different hereditary status from the foetus that was interred in the cloister-garden. Instead of claiming that the placement of the one inside the church was based solely on religious considerations, it can be argued that elevated secular social status played a role in determining its last resting place. Its relation to the benefactors may explain why it was buried there but not in the cloister-garden with other children of a similar age. Similarly, the 6–7-year-old child that was buried in the chancel had probably not attained a clerical post at that age but may have inherited a certain social status that was considered sufficient to merit a prestigious resting place.

This possibility is also open for the graves where books were found, as they may be interpreted as symbolizing possession of a certain status. The woman buried inside the church with a book must thus have had different position than the women of similar age buried in the cloister-garden, if the labelled codes of identity, such as age and sex, are used for identifying similarities and differences. The presence of the woman inside the church chancel also indicates

either religious or secular social superiority on her part, as she is set apart from the other women who were buried in the cloister-garden. In any case, the fact is that the church was the only part inside the monastic complex that was equally open to the public as to those who resided under the protection of the brethren. However, the monastery had somewhat different obligations to the benefactors than to the lay people or those that died in their care. All of them may have inherited a certain monastic identity in death.

MONASTIC IDENTITY AND ARCHITECTURE

As described above, identity can become visible through aspects other than just the body, such as by means of artefacts, places, buildings, cultures or societies. As places of introversion and religious intercession, monasteries were separated from the secular world in spite of the worldly existence of those who lived in them. The outer walls of their buildings formed a visible boundary between the sacred world inside the monastery and the secular world outside it in both life and death, although open to both the religious class and the lay people. The monastic architecture embraced thus a certain identity that, at the same time, became some sort of an instrument for the reproduction of belonging and sameness of a distinct kind.

Regarding the encoding of identity, either in life or in death, it is essential to ask why all these individuals wished to be buried in the monastic cemetery at Skriðuklaustur instead of at the parish church at Valþjófsstaður, located approximately three kilometres away in the valley of Fljótisdalur. During medieval times, burials in a parish churchyard were carried out free of charge, and those who preferred a resting place in a monastic cemetery had to pay for that privilege or earn the right to it. Hospitals were though obliged to bury those who died in their care, and of course their own brethren (Gilchrist & Sloane 2005:56–57, 63).

The general division of burials inside the cemetery at Skriðuklaustur indicates that this was the case there; moreover, it challenges deeply held convictions about monasticism in Iceland. It was long assumed that women and children were forbidden access to monastic institutions. But the large number of both children and women who had their last resting place at Skriðuklaustur demonstrates the opposite. Furthermore, the high percentage of young women and newborn babies in the cemetery suggests that they may have come there to give birth, although no skeletons have yet been found with foetuses *in utero*. Importantly, graves belonging to individuals of all ages indicate at least that the monastery was open to most social groups.

In fact, excavations of burials at monasteries generally imply that both women and children were accepted into their societies, as certain areas seem often to have been designated for their interments. Monastic institutions are in this manner considered to have had no lesser sympathy for the lowborn than those members of higher classes. All social groups in need of comfort or help because of an unexpected situation, for instance a disease or a child conceived out of wedlock, seem to have been welcome (Møller-Christensen 1982 [1958]:140f., Gilchrist & Sloane 2005:67, Miller & Saxby 2007:148f.). Such situations indicate, however, a strong relationship between the religious inhabitants and the secular members of the surrounding society. Both the spiritual and physical protection the monastery at Skriðuklaustur could provide must above all have affected the individual decision to become a part of its sanctuary and, what is more, at the same time signal a certain monastic identity.

Appearing in its diverse manifestations, identity is an important part of human life, past or present. As social beings, humans seek to belong to certain groups or to find a place within their own society where they can individually or collectively share their mutual feelings, interests or views. The spirit of the medieval Catholic Church played a profoundly

important part, locally and internationally, and obviously shaped the monasteries' social memory, business, mission and assignments, created and carried on by their residents. They thus constructed their everyday practices and ceremonies that were interactively validated and manifested simultaneously by their social and material landscape. Although the constructors of the monastic institutions certainly encountered different choices at each time and in each place while crossing artificial as well as natural borders, they even so constantly reproduced their monastic identity.

THE BORDERS OF MONASTICISM

The excavation that has been under way since 2002 on the ruins of the late medieval monastery at Skriðuklaustur has yielded important data on monasticism during medieval times in Iceland. Contrary to the prevailing view that monastic institutions located there operated in buildings similar to farmhouses, it has been possible to demonstrate that Skriðuklaustur was built in accordance with the conventional plan of monastic buildings. Even the findings from the site indicate that its operation did not differ from that of other contemporary monastic institutions outside Iceland. Its purpose as a charitable institution may thus have been fulfilled through the operation of a hospital, as the skeletal material indicates strongly that sick and needy people may have sought physical and spiritual comfort there. The evidence for the existence of a garden of healing plants at the site, possible surgical equipment recovered there, as well as the use of naturally available building materials, shows that the indigenous environment did not preclude the use of internationally based codes and principles. Furthermore, the spatial organization of the burials was apparently based on the age, status and disease of the deceased but, most importantly, in interplay with the architecture symbolizing a distinct monastic identity for both the living and the dead.

In fact, the excavation on the ruins of Skriðuklaustur has revealed remains that may be interpreted as both domestic and international in nature. However, these residues at the same time make visible that the ambivalent nature of the material is unavoidably dependent on the symbolic function given by its creator. It exemplifies indeed the hybrid character of every human product, a nature that provides an ability to negotiate, associate or blend in accordance with the contextual meaning. The monastery should therefore be approached as a hybridized form of an internationally based society that nevertheless flourished on the outskirts of the monastic medieval world. This equates, accordingly, with any other human construction.

Monasteries can never merely reflect their past through their tangible appearances, as they must in addition always encompass meaning specific to their socio-cultural context. To understand the conceptual components of the visible material from Skriðuklaustur, as demonstrated here, it was necessary to submerge for the view of more than just the tip of the iceberg. In this way it was possible to approach the creation of the architecture as the carrier of information on the constant reconstruction of the distinctive monastic identity. The Catholic religion was thereby regarded as having fabricated a phenomenon of monasticism that lacked certain geographical borders but that steadily went through a constant hybridization, depending on its diverse contexts in time and space.

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NOTES

¹It is worth noting that no leprosy cases have been identified so far in the assemblage.

²It must be noted here that in the earliest cemeteries excavated in Iceland, dating to approximately the period AD 1000–1100, women were buried on the northern side of churches, men on the southern and children around the chancel. This custom disappeared with the regulation of the Icelandic church as an official institution during the 12th century (see, for example, Kristjánsdóttir 2004:54f).

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