

A medieval merchants' church in Gásir, North Iceland

By Orri Vésteinsson

1. Introduction

In 1359 a storm broke a church at Gásir,¹ the principal port-of-trade in north Iceland. The annalistic record of this mishap is the only mention of the church in contemporary sources but trading at Gásir is well documented between 1163 and 1391 and the 14th century remains of the trading site have recently been the subject of a major campaign of excavations.² So far no Viking age remains have been found at the site and there is nothing to suggest that it was in operation before the 12th century, although the possibility cannot be ruled out. It is conceivable that Gásir operated well into the 15th century but at present it seems that the demise of the site should be set around 1400.

The results of the excavation are consistent with a view of the site as a seasonal camp of foreign merchants, who quartered there in summertime for a matter of days or weeks rather than months. Written sources suggest that the traders sojourned in Iceland for a year, only returning back the following summer, and that most of that time they would have lodged in Icelandic households. Much of the actual exchange seems to have taken place during the winter months, far away from ports such as Gásir. The excavations at Gásir support this view in that direct evidence for on-site trading is limited. Not one certain coin has been found; the number of arte-

facts is small and most of these can be attributed to the merchants themselves and their own consumption. What evidence there is for trading suggests an emphasis on luxury items, with sulphur and falcons among the exports. Activities at Gásir relate more to the temporary sheltering of passengers; storing of goods and industry than exchange as such. In this the site is analogous more to a modern airport than a shopping-mall. It was a transit point for goods and passengers and a temporary base for the merchants; for maintenance of the ships; processing of export goods; packing and unpacking; loading and unloading. Although some direct exchange undoubtedly took place it was of limited volume and was clearly not the primary function of the site.³

Gásir can therefore not be viewed as a marketplace, let alone a town. Yet it has some characteristics which justify its consideration as a proto-urban site. Among these are indications that it was divided into more or less evenly sized plots, presumably controlled by individual merchants or shipping concerns. Another such characteristic is the church, the only permanent building at the site and the subject of this presentation.

The church ruin is mentioned in antiquarian reports from the late 18th century onwards⁴ and was partially excavated in 1907⁵ and 1986.⁶ A complete excavation of the church and churchyard was how-

ever not carried out until 2004 and 2006.⁷ The results are outlined below but these should be considered as preliminary as the post-excavation analysis is ongoing and may throw further light on important issues, especially the dating.

2. *The setting*

Gásir is located on the southern side of the estuary of river Hörgá which drains one of three main valley systems that make up the region of Eyjafjörður in central north Iceland. The site is centrally located in relation to the region as well as to the whole of the north of Iceland, but in its micro-setting it is somewhat liminal, located more than 10 kms from any of the economic, political or ecclesiastical centres of the region. The temporary structures, basically sunken tent-bases, are down by the water table, facing a small lagoon, sheltered on the western side by a low slope (fig. 1). The site would have been

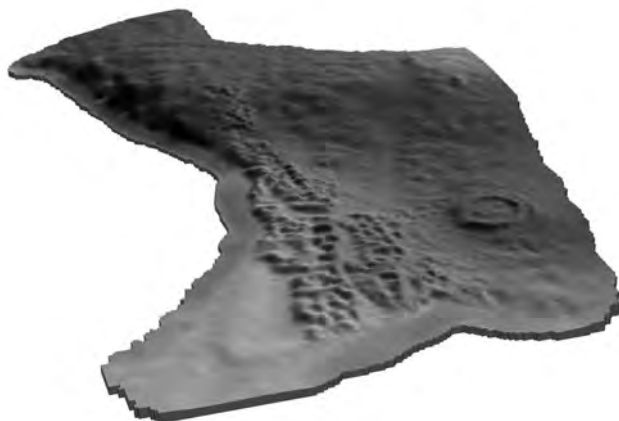


Fig. 1. Digital elevation model of the Gásir site, looking south. The merchants' camp is to the left and the church is within the circular enclosure to the right.

clearly visible to those approaching it by sea, but not from any of the neighbouring settlements on the same side of the fjord. The location was therefore clearly not selected to impress the local populace. In fact it seems to have been as much out-of-sight as it was possible to be while still being close to the main transport arteries and centres of population. The church is inside a circular churchyard on a platform fashioned on the slope some 2 m above the merchants' camp, 30 m from the nearest structures. It therefore dominates the site, and will have been an impressive sight from the sea, but it may be significant that it was not situated higher still, at the break of the slope where it would have been visible from the surrounding countryside.

The churchyard is not quite circular, c. 25 m in diameter, enclosed by a turf wall, which was originally 1,8 m wide. This wall had an 8,5 m long stone facing on the inside of the western side but this may be a secondary feature and the original enclosure seems to have been built of turf only. The entrance to the churchyard is on the east side, facing the merchants' camp. It is 2,2 m wide and probably had a wooden gate. Two steps made of large natural stone-slabs lead up to the gate, framed by large boulders on either side lending the entrance a monumental aspect when approached from the merchants' camp (fig. 3). The churchyard is on a partly man-made platform which was constructed along with the enclosure relatively late in the history of the Gásir church, in the second half of the 13th century. The original church seems to have been built on a small natural ledge in the slope but when the churchyard was designed a circular area of some 500 m² was levelled by excavating an estimated 150 m³ of soil to lower the western part



Fig. 2. The church ruin after excavation, looking east. The merchants' camp can be seen in the background, the ongoing excavation partially obscured by tents of similar construction as those used by the medieval traders. Photo: Orri Vésteinnsson 2006.



Fig. 3. The entrance to the churchyard under excavation, looking west. Photo: Orri Vésteinnsson 2006.

and transporting it to the eastern part where it was used to build up an artificial platform. Even so the churchyard is not quite level, sloping downwards from the junction of nave and chancel towards the entrance (fig. 4).

The churchyard was excavated down to natural or, in the eastern part, to the platform base. No graves were found and while there were a number of features and deposits inside the enclosure (fig. 5) none of them seem to relate to the religious function of the church. There were a number of pit-hearths, some with signs of repeated use, and large and small pits some of which had evidence of industrial processes, e.g. processing of sulphur, while others may have been for cooking. Apart from turf collapse from the enclosure wall there was a series of ash and midden deposits which had washed up against the enclosure wall, principally on the western side. The ash residues suggest burning by a variety of fuel types, including peat, charcoal and fresh wood. The majority of these deposits and features post-date a layer of volcanic tephra identified as originating from the eruption of Mt Hekla in 1300. Both the enclosure wall and the final phase of the church predate this event however, albeit probably only by a matter of decades. A small number of artefacts (53) and animal bones (246 NISP) were retrieved. None of the artefacts can be related to the religious function of the church and in general the assemblage has the same characteristics as the artefacts from the merchants' camp. A baking plate of Norwegian schist and two pieces of 13th-14th century pottery confirm the general dating bracket of the site. A small midden deposit from below the enclosure wall confirms activity at this site predating the building of the enclosure.

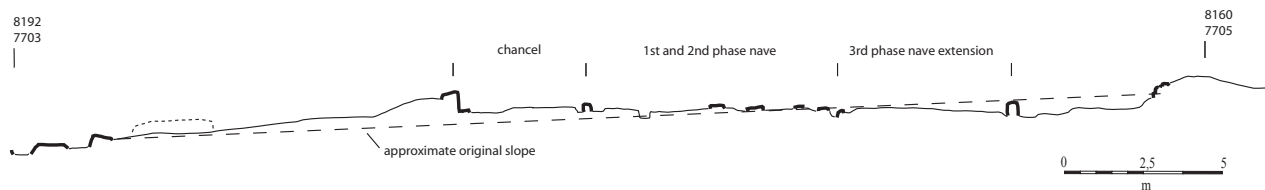


Fig. 4. Elevation through the churchyard.

3. The earliest church

The earliest phase of the church is represented by two large pits at the base of the stratigraphic sequence. It is suggested that these are the foundation pits for the north-western and south-western corner posts of the first church at this site. A truncation observed below the later wall between nave and chancel could be the foundation pit for the south-eastern corner post. This truncation is stratigraphically at the same level as the two pits and is at right angles to them. A fourth feature that could be associated with this earliest phase is a post-hole inside the chancel which can be suggested to have held the south-eastern corner post of the chancel of this first phase church.

The nave of this first church would have measured approximately 6,5x4,5 m, and the chancel 3,2x2,5, making a total length of 9,7 m. It must be stressed however that the argument for the chancel in this first phase is weak and there is no way of knowing if it was built at the same time as the original structure or added later. This building is aligned almost exactly east-west, more so than its successors.

Foundation pits, large pits (+ 1 m in diameter) filled with stones, have been observed at several other early Icelandic church sites, most clearly at Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit,⁸ but also Þórarinsstaðir⁹ and Stóraborg.¹⁰ The two former have 11th century dates but Stóraborg is most likely later. The constructional

technique may therefore not have any implications for the dating of the structure. These large stone-filled pits are not post-holes but rather stone packing to support, presumably substantial, corner posts, and they may be indicative of an exaggerated height of these buildings (figs. 6 and 7). This earliest church at Gásir was a stave-church in the sense that it did not have earth-fast foundations, but apart from its dimensions little else can be said about its construction or appearance. Even less can be said about its dating. None of the deposits in these pits contained anything that could be dated and therefore only a date relative to the second phase can be hoped for. At present even this is not in hand. However it would not be too hazardous to guess that the first church was built before 1200 as the two later phases predate 1300.

4. The second phase church

The principal evidence for the second phase of the church comes in the form of two very large flat boulders outside the row of foundation stones in the southern side of the last church. Both sit in truncations that are earlier than the final phase, and the more westerly of the two sits in a cut that postdates the large pit suggested to be from the south-western corner of the first phase. It is also stratigraphically at the same level as a foundation trench with a row of stones running northwards from the more westerly of these boulders.

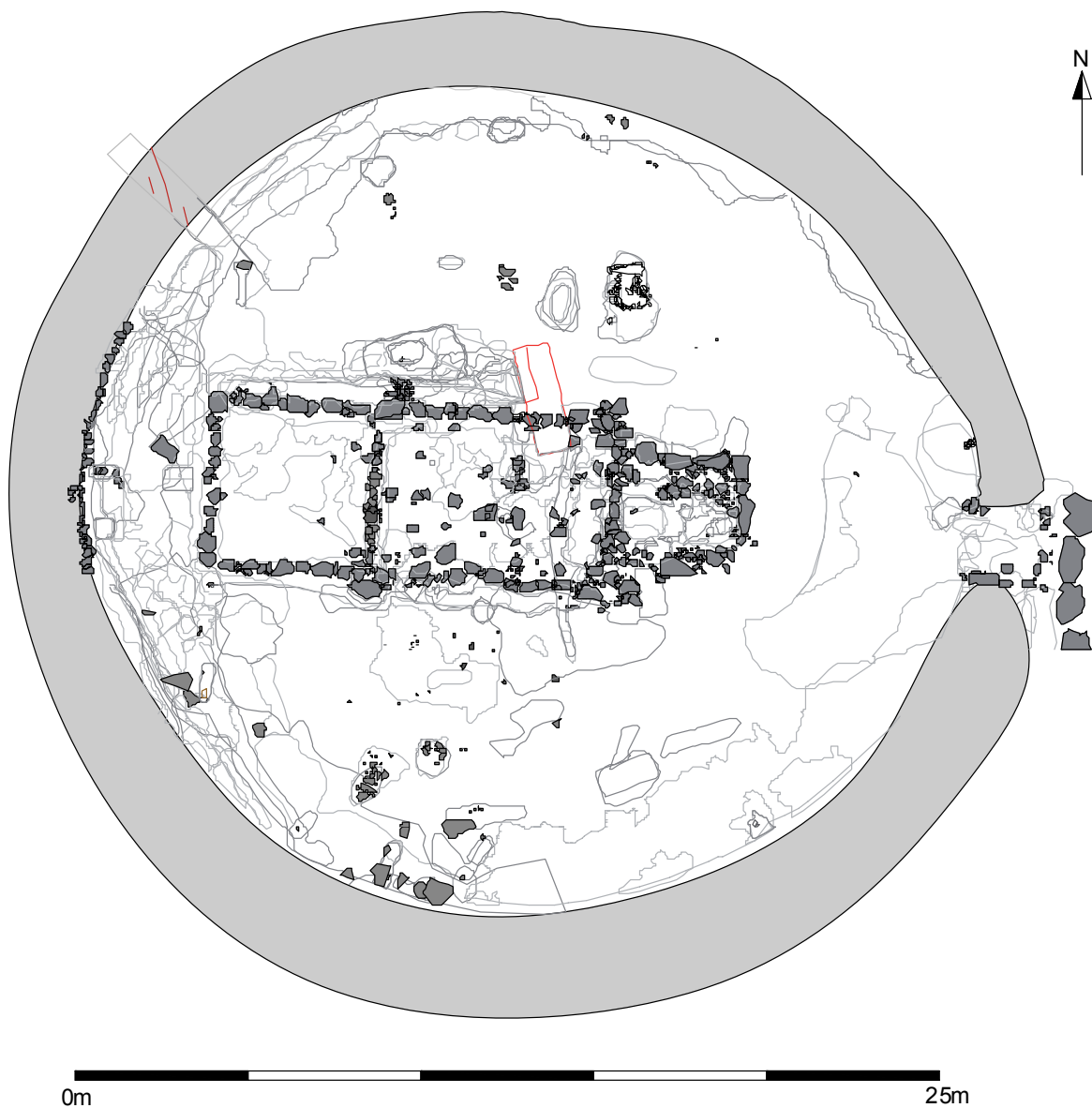


Fig. 5. Plan of the Gásir church showing all excavated contexts.



Fig. 6. Stone packing in foundation pit of the Hofstaðir church. Photo: Hildur Gestsdóttir 2004.

It is suggested that this was the foundation for the western gable of the second phase church and that the two boulders represent post-pads for the south-western and south-eastern corners of that building. The width of the nave of this building is suggested by an eastwards extension of a robber's trench into the aforementioned foundation trench, but the boulders supporting the two northern corner posts have been moved and incorporated into the foundations of the third phase church. In both cases it is possible to identify the stones and in neither case have they been moved far at all. Indeed the north-eastern post pad seems only to have been tilted to align it to the other stones in the foundation for the northern side of the chancel. It is also possible that rows of stones inside the nave, interpreted as supports for floor-beams, belong to this phase. Their east-west orientation aligns best with this phase and the absence of such stones in the western extension of the final phase suggests that

in that phase there was some other arrangement for supporting the timber floor. This however is circumstantial and the stones could have been used in both phases. There is no direct evidence for a chancel in this phase but it can be suggested that a truncation within the later chancel relates to the north-eastern corner of a second phase chancel. Again there is no support for this apart from that it would fit the proposed dimensions and alignment of the nave.

The nave of this second phase church was slightly larger than its predecessor or 7,7x4,8 m but the putative chancel was smaller, or 2,4x2,2 m, suggesting a total length of 10,1 m. It was situated more than a metre further south than the first phase church and aligned differently with a significantly greater orientation towards the southeast.

The post pads supporting the corner posts of the second phase church suggest a similarly monumental architecture with emphasis on firm support for the corners. In addition this church seems to have had foundation stones sitting in shallow trenches supporting the walls in the same way as in the final phase church. This is unequivocal for the western gable while the earlier trenches have been dug away by later activity along the northern and southern sides of the nave. Unlike the final phase there does not however seem to have been a foundation trench at the junction of nave and chancel in this one. Again it must be stressed that the evidence for the chancel in this phase is very circumstantial. There is no direct dating possible on this phase either although it can be suggested that it lasted until the second half of the 13th century when the third and final phase was built.

The building of the platform and circular enclosure is suggested to have taken place towards the end of the existence of the second phase church. A

number of radiocarbon dates, consistent with the tephrochronology, suggest that the platform construction took place in the late 13th century. The location of the circular enclosure is more likely to have been decided with reference to an object in its centre (which could be either the first or second phase church) rather than the third phase church which is considerably west off centre. That only a short time can have lapsed between the building of the platform and enclosure on the one hand and the third phase church on the other is suggested by the near complete absence of remains which could predate the third phase church in the area west of it where the stratigraphical sequence is most substantial. There is only a single pit-hearth which could conceivably predate the third phase church, and it could just as well be contemporary with it. This only makes sense if the digging into the slope at the western side of the churchyard occurred very shortly before the construction of the third phase church. It may therefore be that the building of the final phase and the construction of the platform and enclosure belong to the same spate of renovation, but that the decision to make the church considerably larger was not reached until after the enclosure had been built.

5. *The third and last church*

The third, and final, phase church is the only one which can be described in some detail. Its nave is 11,6 x 5,0 m and the chancel is 3,8 x 3,1 m. It is 0,5-1 m further north than its predecessor and oriented closer to compass east-west. Unlike its predecessors this church did not have any particular arrangements for the foundations of the corner posts. The walls of the nave rested on stone foundations, mostly a single, but in places two, courses of large (0,5 m+) stones, sit-

ting in a trench, typically 0,2 m deep and 0,6 m wide. The foundations of the chancel are made of larger stones placed directly on the natural, with loose earth piled up around them on the outside. The chancel foundations are some 0,3 m higher than those of the nave, suggesting, along with the eastern wall of the nave which is supported in the same way as the others, that the chancel was a structurally separate unit, possibly with a higher floor level than the nave. The nave was supported by wooden buttresses at each corner (three of the foundations survive – fig. 8) suggesting that the weight of the roof rested entirely on the walls, requiring buttressing to keep them from falling apart. There is no evidence for buttressing of the earlier phases, which were more or less of equal width, but neither is there of internal supports (unless the stones suggested as supports for floor beams in the second phase are interpreted as such). It seems there-



Fig. 7. Partially robbed foundation pit of the northwestern corner of the earliest Gásir church, looking south. The pit is partially filled with the foundations for the third and final phase. Photo: Orri Vésteinsson 2006.

fore that structurally the main difference between the third phase and the earlier phases was that the latter had very substantial corner posts which supported most of the weight of the roof, whereas in the third phase the weight was distributed more evenly along the length of the, possibly more substantial, walls with added support given by the buttresses.

The main entrance to the church seems to have been by the western end of the northern side and there may have been an additional entrance by the western end of the south side of the chancel. In the absence of any sort of earthen floor it is postulated that the whole church had a wooden floor. Very few objects were found inside the church and none of them are associated with ecclesiastical functions.

The foundations of this final phase were laid before 1300 but there is evidence for repairs taking place after 1300, probably on more than one occasion and it is possible that this amounted to fairly substantial rebuilding. The floor of the nave must have been taken up at one point and some redesign may be indicated by the displacement of a large regular block of stone which had sat in its own trench by the middle of the western gable and an empty southwards extension of the foundation trench by the south-western corner. It is this church which was broken in 1359 but we do not know if it was rebuilt after that. The evidence for repairs may be consistent with a scenario whereby the church was rebuilt after 1359 although



Fig. 8. Buttress foundation at the northeastern side of the church, looking west. Photo: Orri Vésteinsson 2006.

the repairs could equally well have occurred earlier on in the 14th century. Even so there is no particular reason to consider 1359 as the end-date for the Gásir church but a radiocarbon-date from the final cultural layer in the churchyard suggests that activity had ceased there before 1400. There are indications that the church may have become dilapidated before its eventual collapse, with floor-boards being robbed and a large hole in the northern wall and also that the wreck of the church was burnt in the southern side of the churchyard, presumably after usable timbers had been salvaged.

	Length of nave in m	Width of nave in m	Length of chancel in m	Width of chancel in m	Total area in m ³
Phase 1	6,5	4,5	3,2	2,5	37,25
Phase 2	7,7	4,8	2,4	2,2	42,25
Phase 3	11,6	5,0	3,8	3,1	69,75

Approximate dimensions of the three phases of church foundations at Gásir.

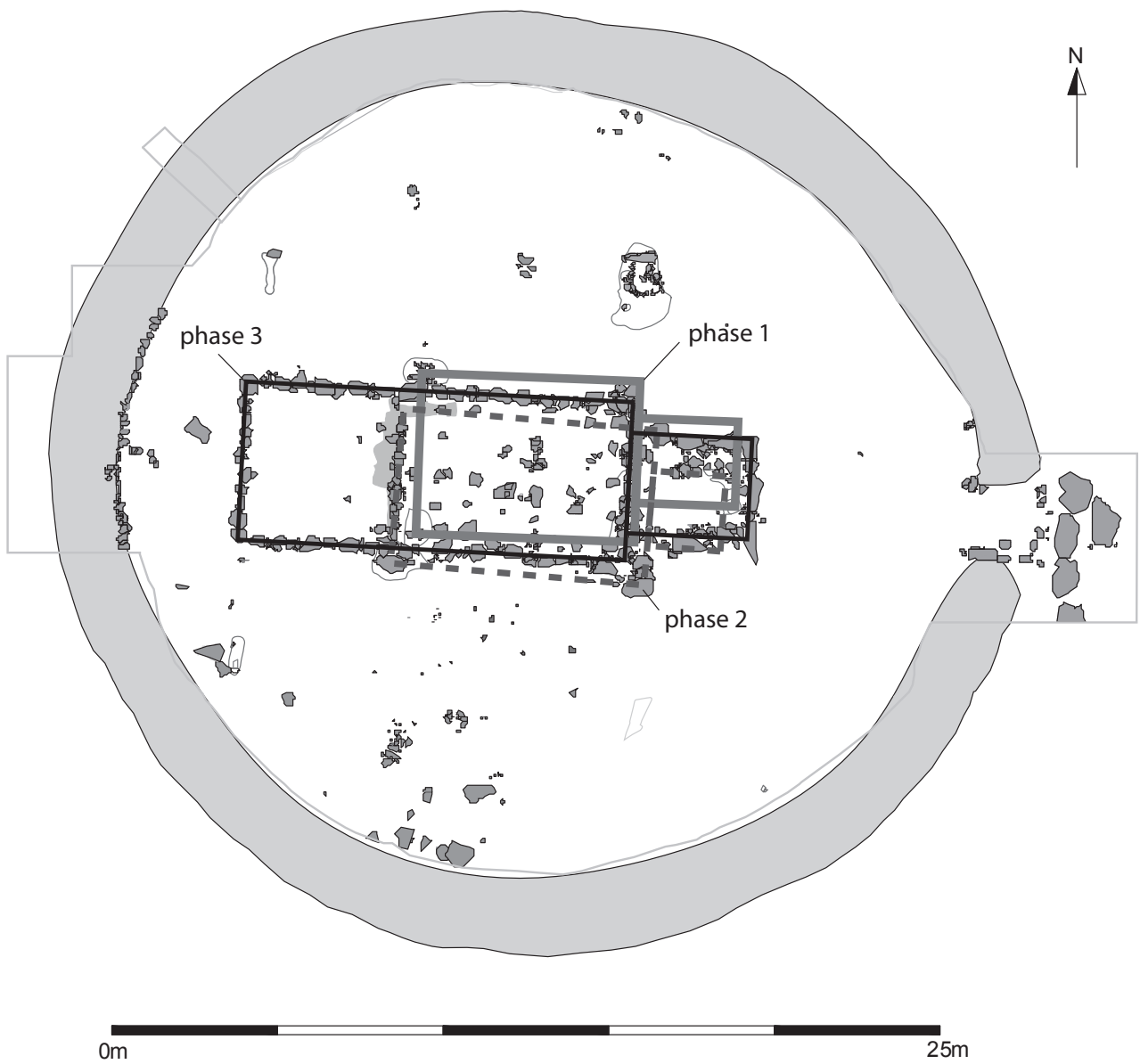


Fig. 9. Plan showing the suggested dimensions of the three phases of the Gásir church.

As we have already seen there is no evidence for burial within the churchyard and in fact there may not have been any defined churchyard before the building of the enclosure towards the end of the second phase. The evidence for activities within the churchyard belongs primarily to the final phase and suggests that a variety of tasks were carried out there, some of them industrial. Some of the hearths are consistent with ordinary cooking and it may be that this suggests temporary dwelling in or near to the church, possibly in the context of guarding goods stored inside it. The midden preserved under the turf wall in the enclosure suggests that non-ecclesiastical activities were also associated with the earlier phases but the limited amount of comparable evidence from the wedge of the churchyard which was neither truncated nor buried in course of the construction of the platform suggests that such activities may have been less frequent than in the final phase.

6. Discussion

There were clearly sustained and repeated efforts to maintain a large church at Gásir for more than 200 years, and possibly considerably longer. The church-building was therefore no fluke, it is not a symbol of boom-time extravagance, but rather indicates the seriousness of the commitment of its owners to Gásir. That it was built and owned by the merchants operating at Gásir is beyond doubt. That it was not a part of the Icelandic parish system is most clearly demonstrated by the fact that burial was not allowed there, but the lack of any mention of it in the records of the local parish church at Glæsibær also suggests this.¹¹ The symbolism of the eastern entrance to the churchyard, facing the camp and the harbour but away from the farms in the hinter-

lands, speaks volumes about where the congregation of this church came from.

The complete lack of artefacts which could be associated with religious functions and the generally limited evidence for traffic within the churchyard and church suggests that this was a church which saw very limited use, probably only a few days a year. Furthermore, the use it was put to relates more to the primary activity of Gásir, commerce, than to religious services. The artefacts; the industrial waste and outdoor cooking debris found within the churchyard are of the same type as in the camp, suggesting that the churchyard did at times function as an extension of the activity area in the camp. It is quite possible that the church was used for storage of merchandise and some of the debris may be related to this, e.g. re-packing and repairs as well as everyday activities of guards posted to look after the goods.

The Gásir church is therefore rightly described as a merchants' church. It is one of only two such known in Iceland – the other being a German Lutheran church built in Hafnarfjörður by 1532.¹² There are no signs of church ruins at preserved medieval trading sites (e.g. Gautavík¹³ or Maríuhöfn¹⁴), but the absence of evidence is less conclusive at other major ports such as Eyrar in the south and there may well have been more such churches. They were certainly common in neighbouring countries, not only in towns but also associated with seasonal markets like those at Skanör¹⁵ and Sebbarsund.¹⁶ Considering this and how ubiquitous churches and chapels were in the Icelandic late medieval landscape¹⁷ the building of a church at Gásir cannot have been considered as a strikingly symbolic act but it certainly bore witness to the piety of the merchants and it suggests a degree of independence from their Icelandic hosts.

The merchants' church made Gásir more firmly a merchants' place, more like a terrestrial extension of their ships than a neutral middle-ground, let alone a place controlled by Icelanders. The nonintrusive setting of Gásir adds to this sense of separateness from Icelandic society.

In this context it would be interesting to know to what extent the architecture of the church added to the sense of foreignness of the site. Unfortunately there is not much to go on. Parallels can be sought in Norway where surviving stave-churches such as those in Kvernes and Rødven in Møre og Romsdal fylke seem to have had originally comparable dimensions and are also supported by buttresses.¹⁸ The question is however not so much whether the Gásir churches were of Norwegian design – it seems likely that they were – but whether Icelandic churches of the same period would have looked significantly different. At present there is only one contemporary Icelandic church which can be compared to Gásir. This is in Reykholt where several phases of a major parish church dating from the 11th century to the 19th have been excavated. The project is not completed but preliminary results suggest that the Reykholt churches which may have been contemporary with the ones at Gásir were significantly smaller (phases 2 and 3, at most 3,8 m wide and 9,2 m long) and in fact they seem to have been of a completely different construction altogether.¹⁹ If the Reykholt churches were typical for Icelandic parish churches then the Gásir churches would indeed have looked unfamiliar to Icelanders. That the Reykholt churches may not be typical may however be suggested by the only available example from the Faeroes. The churches heima á Sandi share a number of characteristics with the Gásir churches, especially the plan and dimensions of

the 13th century church there (phase 2) which had a nave measuring 6,8x5,3 and a chancel measuring 3,7x3,1,²⁰ making it comparable in that respect to the first and second phase churches at Gásir. This highlights the need for further investigations of late medieval churches in the North Atlantic.

Notes

- 1 *Íslandske Annaler indtil 1578*, s. 225.
- 2 Roberts 2006.
- 3 Vésteinsson et al. forthcoming. See also Harrison et al. 2008.
- 4 Olavíus 1780, vol. 2, s. 56. Kaalund 1877-82, vol. 2, s. 107-108. Jónsson 1901, s. 18.
- 5 Jónsson 1908, s. 7. Jónsson & Bruun 1908, s. 109-10. Bruun 1928, s. 124-25.
- 6 Hermanns-Auðardóttir 1987.
- 7 Vésteinsson 2008.
- 8 Gestsdóttir 2003, s. 27.
- 9 Kristjánsdóttir 2004, s. 45-52.
- 10 Snæsdóttir 1987.
- 11 *Diplomatarium islandicum* II, s. 454. III, s. 520-21. V, s. 89, 91, 318-19.
- 12 Piper 1969.
- 13 Capelle 1982.
- 14 Þorkelsson 1984.
- 15 Otto Rydbeck ath
- 16 Nielsen 2004.
- 17 Vésteinsson 2000, s. 55.
- 18 Ahrens 2001, s. 302-303, 317. Anker 1997, s. 171-74, 175-77.
- 19 Sveinbjarnardóttir og Aldred 2008.
- 20 Krogh 1975, s. 35.

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