

# SKRIÐUKLAUSTUR MONASTERY MEDICAL CENTRE OF MEDIEVAL EAST ICELAND?

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Skriðuklaustur monastery was the youngest of nine cloisters operated in Iceland during the Catholic period of the Middle Ages (figure 1). The first one was founded at Þingeyrar in 1133 and the last one three and a half centuries later in 1493 at Skriðuklaustur. The monastic institutions were seven in number, four in the bishopric at Skálholt and three in the bishopric at Hólar. There were two nunneries, one in each bishopric. Icelandic cloisters were all either Augustinian or Benedictine, and Skriðuklaustur monastery is commonly thought to have belonged to the Augustinian order. Other religious orders were not represented in Iceland during the Catholic period. All of Iceland's nine Medieval cloisters were dissolved during the Lutheran Reformation (Gunnar F. Guðmundsson 2000: 212 f).

Despite the fact that the cloisters in Iceland were equally divided between the two bishoprics, Hólar and Skálholt, their geographical distribution within the country was rather unequal. One monastery, Helgafellsklaustur, was located in West Iceland. There were three monasteries and one nunnery in North Iceland: Þingeyraklaustur, Reynistaðaklaustur (nunnery), Möðruvallaklaustur and Munkaþverárklaustur. Two monasteries and one nunnery were located in South Iceland: Viðeyjarklaustur, Þykkvabæjarklaustur and Kirkjubæjarklaustur (nunnery). There was neither a monastery nor a nunnery in the West Fjords. East Iceland was without cloisters as well until the last phase of the Catholic period, when Skriðuklaustur monastery was founded during the reign of Bishop Stefán Jónsson (Björn Þorsteinsson and Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1990: 152-153; Gunnar F. Guðmundsson 2000: 217).

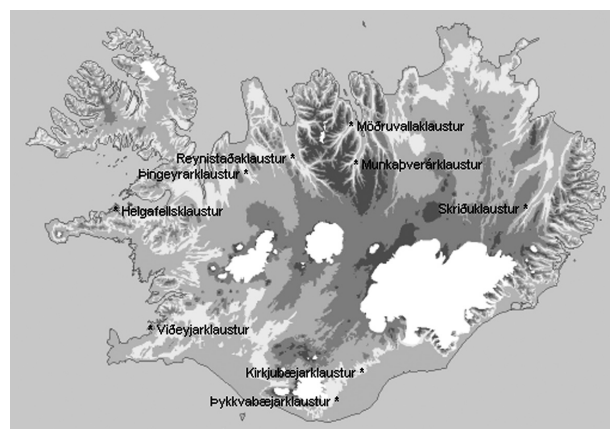


Figure 1. Nine cloisters operated in Iceland during the Catholic period of the Middle Ages. They were all dissolved during the Lutheran Reformation.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL, ORAL AND WRITTEN SOURCES ON SKRIÐUKLAUSTUR MONASTERY

The excavation of the ruins of Skriðuklaustur monastery began in 2002. Before archaeological investigation commenced, it was not known exactly where on the farm Skriða the buildings of the monastery had stood. Though no ruins were visible on the surface, oral sources and various written documents about monastic activities at Skriðuklaustur dispelled all doubt about their existence. Despite its short tenure, the monastery acquired a large amount of land, and its library seems to have been comparable to that of other Icelandic cloisters. It was known that

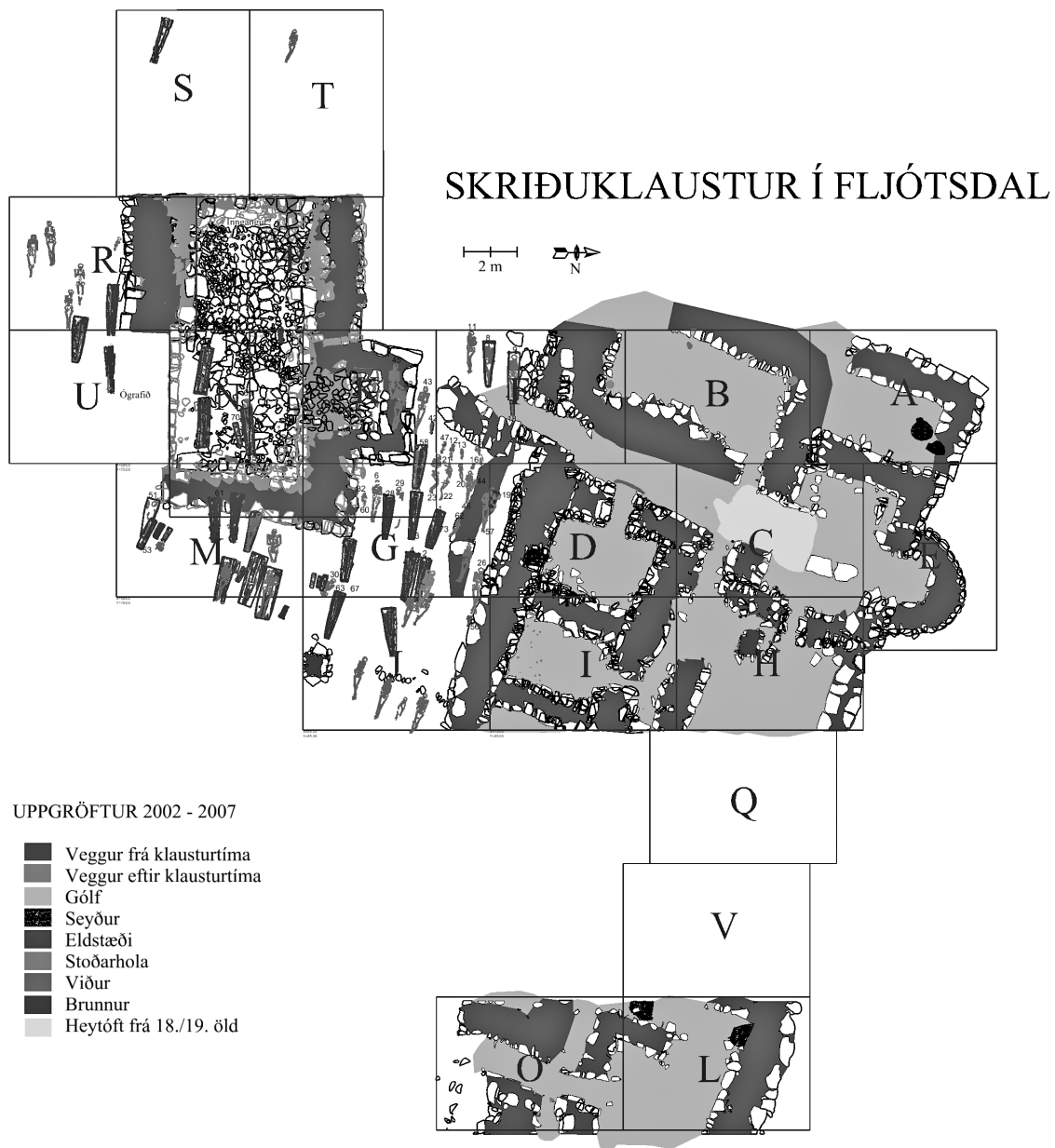


Figure 2. The ruins of Skriðuklaustur monastery. Despite the excavation's being only half finished, the parts of the monastic buildings that have been uncovered show that it did not resemble the medieval farmhouses in Iceland, as it consisted of several small cells, a church, and a cloister garden with a well.

a children's school was operated there, as well as an outer school; i.e., *schola exterior*. Furthermore, it is known that the cloister was dedicated to God the Father, the Virgin Mary, and the holy blood of Jesus Christ, in accordance with a legend about the founding of the Skriðuklaustur monastery in the fifteenth century. Skriðuklaustur is Ice-

land's only example of a cloister so dedicated (Gunnar F. Guðmundsson 2000: 223, 324).

The ancient sacred legend of the dedication tells of the occurrence of a miracle when a cleric from Valþjófsstaður parish church, located a few kilometres away from the monastic site, went down to the valley to visit a dying pa-

rishioner. Along the way, he lost his chalice and paten. A man was sent to look for them and found them on a knoll on the field called Kirkjutún, below the farm at Skriða. The chalice was filled with wine and the paten laid neatly on top, with bread on it. This event was viewed as a miracle and was commemorated with the construction of a chapel whose altar was placed on the knoll where the holy items were found. According to the legend, a cloister dedicated to the Virgin Mary and the blood of Christ was founded on the site (Helgi Hallgrímsson 1999: 34-35).

A cemetery was consecrated at Skriðuklaustur in 1496, and a monastic church in 1512. The church deteriorated after the closing of the monastery but was rebuilt around the year 1670. The church, called Skriðukirkja, was finally discontinued in 1792, nearly three centuries after the founding of the monastery. The cemetery was closed at the same time. During the period from 1554 until its closing, it was used by the farm's post-monastic inhabitants (Heimir Steinsson 1965).

The ruins of this church and a churchyard around it are clearly visible on Kirkjutún, one of Skriða's cultivated fields. Despite this, it was commonly thought that the monastery itself had stood by the farmhouses at Skriða, rather than on Kirkjutún field with the monastic church (Daniel Bruun 1974; Helgi Hallgrímsson 1999; Heimir Steinsson 1965, 1966). The farmhouses at Skriða farm were nonetheless located approximately 150 metres away from Kirkjutún field.

## THEORIES ABOUT ICELANDIC CLOISTERS

The hypothesized location of the Skriðuklaustur monastery was based on a commonly held theory about Icelandic cloisters in general: namely, that their buildings were fundamentally different from other contemporary cloisters as regards architecture, purpose, and function. This commonly held view supposes that the Icelandic cloisters were either operated in the farmhouses themselves or that their buildings did not differ considerably from contemporary farm houses in Iceland, although the cloisters are considered to have been more sophisticated than the homes of common farmers (Hörður Ágústsson 1989; Björn Þorsteinsson and Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1990; Guðrún Harðardóttir 1998, 2006).

Though this deeply rooted theory is supported primarily by the supposed isolation of Icelandic society during

Medieval times, it is also bolstered by the limited building resources in Iceland. The available building materials – mainly turf, stones and driftwood – are usually not regarded as suitable for the construction of large and complex buildings. In fact, buildings of turf and stones do not last long, and they usually need to be rebuilt frequently. Furthermore, older buildings or structures are commonly used again and again, and in most cases the foundations of older structures are reused for new buildings if possible.

There are several reasons for the wide acceptance of this theory about Icelandic cloisters' similarity to Medieval farmhouses, chief among them the general lack of archaeological investigations of Icelandic monastic sites. In addition, although non-archaeological resources have contributed substantially to this field of research, Medieval written sources contain minimal information about activities other than economic or political ones. These sources may also have contributed to this unverified and stagnant view of the form, purpose, and function of the Icelandic Medieval cloisters. Last but not least, the historical memory of Medieval Iceland as being isolated from foreign influence during the pre-independent times of the 13th -20th centuries may have shaped the image of Icelandic cloisters.

For these reasons, it has generally been believed that Icelandic cloisters functioned primarily as seats of power for Medieval chieftains and that their activities centred on the accumulation of economic wealth, as well as prayer, writing, and the education of clerics. Indeed, Icelandic scholars have maintained that the Catholic Church in Iceland was inactive, if not indifferent, as regards providing social assistance (Helgi Þorláksson 2003). The findings from the excavation at Skriðuklaustur, however, provide compelling evidence to the contrary.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS OF OTHER ICELANDIC CLOISTERS

Archaeological investigations have been performed at two monastic sites in Iceland apart from Skriðuklaustur. These are the investigation of the ruins of a monastery located on the island of Viðey, outside Reykjavík, and a nunnery at Kirkjubæjarklaustur on the south coast of Iceland. The excavation at Viðey lasted for eight years, from 1987-1995 (Margrét Hallgrímsdóttir 1993; Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir 1995). The excavation of the Kirkjubæ-



Figure 3. Syphilis has been identified in three cases from the cemetery at Skriðuklaustur monastery.

jarklaustur nunnery began in 2002 and is still underway (Kristján Mímisson and Bjarni F. Einarsson 2005).

Both of these sites are known for a long history of diverse settlements, including monastic activities and farming lasting from the 10th to the 20th century. The monastic ruins at both Viðey and Kirkjubæjarklaustur are therefore intertwined with the ruins of various phases of common farmhouses built both before and after the monastic institutions. As is explained above, because building materials in Iceland consist mainly of turf and stones, the foundations of older buildings were commonly used in the construction of new ones. This has frequently built up of special mounds of buildings at both sites, caused by a long and complicated history of various activities. Moreover, this situation makes the interpretation of each building phase in the mounds very difficult, as the ruin at the top is usually the only one that has lain undisturbed.

Unfortunately, neither of these cloisters has, as yet, been excavated fully enough to produce evidence of architectural plans or inner function. Nevertheless, the excavation at Viðey monastery has been used to support the simplified picture of Icelandic monasteries and nunner-

ies because a large farmhouse, whose different phases of construction have obviously been mixed with monastic buildings through the ages, has been excavated at the site (Margrét Hallgrímsdóttir 1993).

Furthermore, investigations based on written resources describing the form and function of Icelandic cloisters can be criticized for several reasons. Most importantly, contemporary written sources describing Icelandic monastic buildings are limited in number. The vast majority of the written resources used in this context – mainly registers, appraisals and agreements of various kinds – date to the period following the Lutheran Reformation; i.e., the late 16th century or later. Therefore, these documents most likely describe the farmhouses then standing on the sites but not the monastic buildings that had already been abandoned or even demolished.

In short, large farms were situated at monastic sites both before and after the Lutheran Reformation because of the political and economic power the cloisters gained through their activities. To confuse matters further, monastic farmsteads also retained the names of the abandoned monasteries or nunneries after the Reformation.

## THE EXCAVATIONS AT SKRIÐUKLAUSTUR

Before the excavation of the Skriðuklaustur ruins commenced in 2002, a pre-excavation was performed on two sites on the land belonging to the farmstead Skriða. The aim was to search for the ruins of the monastic building. The two sites were the immediate vicinity of the farmstead's living quarters, in accordance with the commonly held view presented above, and the area around the old church ruin located on the Kirkjutún field. During the pre-excavation, both sites were surveyed geophysically and several test-pits were dug (Steinn Kristjánstóttir 2001).

The pre-excavation indicated a long history of activity, from the 10th century onward, in the area near the farmstead living quarters, and did not rule out the possibility that monastic buildings might have stood there. However, the pre-excavation of Kirkjutún indicated strongly that the monastic building had been attached to the ruin of the old, abandoned church. The test-pits proved that an advanced building had stood on the site during the monastic period, and the geophysical survey indicated that this building had covered an area of at least 1200 m<sup>2</sup>, which included the ruin of the church. The ruins were very well preserved, and more importantly, no younger structures appeared to have been built on top of the ruins from the monastic period, except for the church because of its longer history of active use (Steinn Kristjánstóttir 2001).

This is the first time a monastic building from the Catholic period has been uncovered in Iceland, and after several years of excavation, the layout of the monastic building and the monastery's multi-functional activities during late Medieval times are becoming clearer (Steinn Kristjánstóttir 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007). The excavation at Skriðuklaustur has revealed a monastic building that does not resemble any Medieval farmhouse in Iceland. In fact, the building is laid out in a manner similar to that of most Medieval monastic buildings in Europe. Despite the excavation's being only half finished, the parts of the monastic buildings that have been uncovered show that it consisted of several small cells, a church, and a cloister garden with a well.

The building itself is much larger than anticipated. Steps found in two of the cells indicate that the building was two stories high, or a single story and a cellar. A corridor connects the church and a room that has been

interpreted as a chapter house. Midway between them is an entrance to a small cell with a stove and a bookshelf. One of the cells has been interpreted as a refectory and the one beside it as a kitchen. In the latter, two cooking pits were found, but these may have been used partially or exclusively for cooking ink. Artefacts such as sulphur, colouring stones, wax, and pimp-stones have been found inside the ruins, and they indicate that, in addition to writing, parchment- and ink-making may have been a part of the work done in the monastery.

## SKRIÐUKLAUSTUR MONASTERY'S INTERFERENCE WITH SOCIAL MATTERS

The skeletons from the site, together with surgical equipment and the cultivation of some healing plants, have also broadened the view of the central function of the monastery at Skriða, as they indicate strongly that the monastery may have functioned as a hospice. The skeletal material indicates that sick, needy and even poor people sought healing or a resting place at the monastery. Some of them may have died of their diseases, while others might have been unable to work because of illness or disability of some kind.

Approximately 90 graves have been identified from the surface inside the cloister garden and the church, and 70 of these have been exhumed. Identification of the human bones shows clearly that the monastic cemetery differs greatly from other contemporary cemeteries in Iceland. Bones of fetuses, neonates, adolescents and, in particular, young females have been discovered in the graves (Elsa Pacciani 2006; Guðný Zoëga 2007). Five graves of males have been unearthed so far, but three of these were located inside the church. This social division according to sex and age differs from what can be found in the cemeteries of other Medieval parish churches. Furthermore, the majority of the youngest children were buried together in the northern corner of the cloister garden. The remains of progressively older individuals take up larger areas towards the east.

Most of the adult skeletons bear clear signs of various chronic diseases, such as syphilis (figure 3), tuberculosis, lung infection, cleft palate, echinococcus granulosus, gum diseases of various kinds, broken bones, and some unidentified infections (Elsa Pacciani 2006; Guðný Zoëga 2007). In addition, several lancets have been exca-

vated from two cells and the church area. In the church's choir an effigy of St. Barbara was found but is known she belonged to a group of fourteen saints that were venerated together in Roman Catholicism, as their intercession was thought to protect against diseases.

Finally, pollen analysis of samples from the site shows that gardening was carried out at the monastery and that both healing plants and vegetables were cultivated there during the monastic period. Ten species of healing plants were discovered, including three that do not belong to the Icelandic fauna: *Allium*, *Urtica major* and *Plantago major* (Hákon Jansson 2005). These findings may be regarded as an indication of intentional gardening in the monastery, similar to that practiced in contemporary monasteries outside Iceland (Samson B. Harðarson 2007). This evidence for the existence of a horticultural garden of healing plants at the site supports the theory that a hospice was operated in the monastery.

#### STANDARD FORM AND FUNCTION

Although it can be stated that, in general, no two Catholic monasteries and nunneries looked the same architecturally, they were arranged in accordance with a standard plan where the monastic rooms and the church were arranged around a cloister garden, forming a cluster of houses. The garden, which was regarded as the central place in the building, was meant to be free from structures other than a well and was used either as a horticultural garden, or a cemetery, or both (Gilchrist, Roberta and Sloane, Barney 2005).

The outer walls of the monastic buildings formed a visible boundary between the sacred world inside the monastery and the secular world outside it. The religious aims of the Catholic monasteries and nunneries are therefore regarded as having profoundly affected their architectural form. Cloisters were places of introversion and religious intercession, isolated from the secular world in spite of the worldly existence of those who lived in them. As portals to heaven, cloisters were also societies of men and women who sought spiritual shelter by abandoning the secular world in order to save their souls (Gilchrist, Roberta 2000; Gunnar F. Guðmundsson 2000; Gilchrist, Roberta and Sloane, Barney 2005).

Although European monasteries and nunneries have been regarded as powerful cultural and educational institutions whose existence was founded on both on political

and economic strength, one of the fundamental aims of the Catholic Church was to provide social care in a broad sense, beyond spiritual matters. Charity and mercy were well known bywords in the cloisters, where altruistic gestures were visible. Indeed, cloisters met the very real need of Medieval societies for hospitals for sick, needy, poor, and aged people (Vilborg Ísleifsdóttir 1997: 99 f, 2003: 32; Dahlerup Koch, Hanne and Lynnerup, Niels 2003: 11 f; Jón Ólafur Ísberg 2005; Gilchrist, Roberta and Sloane, Barney 2005: 37 f).

#### FOUNDING OF SKRIÐUKLAUSTUR MONASTERY

Cloisters' ultimate purpose of acting on the basis of charity and mercy has not been regarded as one of the underlying reasons for the late foundation of Skriðuklaustur. Traditionally, Icelandic monasteries have been regarded merely as institutions of education and of political and economic power. It is commonly thought that the reason for the late foundation of the Skriðuklaustur monastery was the lack of such an institution in East Iceland (Heimir Steinsson 1965, 1966). Still, the traditional emphasis on economic and political matters certainly shaped the history of cloisters in Iceland, although it can be stated that many important decisions often had roots other than the merely economic or political.

Perhaps one of the reasons for the founding of Skriðuklaustur monastery can be found, after all, in the history of Cecília Þorsteinsdóttir, the woman who gave the farm Skriða for the founding of the monastery. Although written documents from the monastery had previously been examined rather thoroughly, this woman has been given any attention at all. Cecília was a well-born and wealthy woman who married her second cousin, although such marriages were prohibited in Iceland at the time (Agnes Arnórsdóttir 2003). Cecília gave birth to seven children with her husband, who died while she carried their youngest child. Because of their illegal marriage, their children were treated as a burden to God and to other people. Cecília then began to fight for their rights, both in life and in death, and repeatedly begged the bishop, Stefán Jónsson, for a special dispensation in her case. She even sought an exemption from the Pope, but without success. Her last attempt in this campaign was to donate the farm at Skriða for the founding of a monastery (Margrét Gestsdóttir 2008). Stefán Jónsson may have

been involved in her decision, for it would certainly have increased his political and economic power. Nonetheless, this decision was informed directly by the emotions of a mother who was fighting for her children's rights.

### SKRIÐUKLAUSTUR MONASTERY AS AN INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTION

Stefán Jónsson, the bishop who founded the monastery at Skriðuklaustur, was educated in France, and one of his first actions in office was to found the ninth Icelandic monastery at Skriða (Gunnar F. Guðmundsson 2000: 174). He must have been familiar with other Catholic monasteries and their function and distinctive buildings. The lack of a hospice in East Iceland at the time of a series of disasters like the 1477 eruption in Vatnajökull glacier may also have affected his decision to accept Cecilia Þorsteinsdóttir's charitable gift. Furthermore, the fifteenth century is known for a number of serious diseases and natural catastrophes that may have exacerbated the short-

age of hospices all over the country. This is supported by the findings from the excavation at Skriðuklaustur monastery, as it demonstrates that the monastery there was built in accordance with the standard plan of monastic buildings. Its purpose as a charitable institution may have been fulfilled through the operation of a hospice, as the skeletal material indicates strongly that sick and needy people may intentionally have sought physical and spiritual comfort there. Furthermore, these findings from the excavation of Skriðuklaustur monastery confirm that the Church interfered with social matters during the Catholic period in Iceland, as it did in neighbouring countries.

Despite the fact that Skriðuklaustur monastery was founded late and was only in operation for roughly half a century, it made a niche for itself in Medieval Icelandic society, as did other cloisters in contemporary societies in Europe. The business of Skriðuklaustur monastery, its mission, and its assignments were obviously shaped by the spirit of the Medieval times in which the Catholic Church played a profoundly important part.

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