

The Viking Age walls of Iceland

Einarsson, Á.

A recent project describes an extensive system of turf walls in north-east Iceland, most of which date from the Viking Age. This involves exploring their geographical extent, their time and way of construction, their purpose and historical significance. It also reveals how people perceived these mysterious earthworks in the sagas, in folklore, and in modern times. The project has recently been extended to the South of Iceland where a number of interesting sites has been located. Many hitherto little known Viking Age farm sites have also been recorded.

The turf walls are the most prominent archaeological feature of the landscape of north-east Iceland. They run long distances (about 700 km have been mapped to date), criss-crossing the moorlands and heaths. The walls have collapsed, and most can only be seen now as low-profile earthworks.

The turf walls form a basic pattern of enclosures, each one corresponding to an individual farm with internally subdivided enclosures, presumably for local management of grazing, stock manipulation and protection of growing grass crops. The geometry of the fence patterns contains much information about the Viking Age farming system and its resources.

Dating with the aid of volcanic ash-layers places the majority of the walls in the mid 10th to 11th centuries. They were a major component of the economy of Iceland for two centuries. Their maintenance was discontinued sometime before the 13th century. The wall system collapsed around the time of other large-scale changes in settlement, such as widespread abandonment of farms in both marginal and core farmlands, and a rapid increase in tenant farming. There may have been a short-lived revival of hayfield fences in the late 13th century. After that, however, the grazing system must have relied primarily on shepherding.

The pattern of walls across the landscape suggests a network of fences preventing livestock movement across boundaries of farm ownership, and also between lowland and upland pastures. The use of walls to prevent trespassing of livestock at farm boundaries was encouraged by detailed legislation. The other common use of walls was to protect hayfields.

The walls of north-east Iceland have suspended in time the pattern of first settlement. They show how Viking Age people carved out a virgin landscape into functional units.