CHAPTER 6

From Independent Traders to Dependent Tenants: Reflections of an Economic Landscape in Skagafjörður

The distribution of farmstead and activity area sites in the Hjaltadalur-Víðvíkursveit valley system confirms that the economy of medieval Iceland in the north centered on pastoral-agrarian pursuits, but these data also warn against the view of a farmstead system geared only towards smallholders and sustainability and hint that this rural economy could have held additional commercial pursuits. The colonization process described in medieval texts, however, makes no mention of the establishment of cities or villages, and instead emphasizes the ability of chieftains to provide agricultural lands for their retinue. This settlement strategy would seem to support the primacy of agricultural production for an economy of sustainable subsistence rather than for one engaged in the types of commercialism and overseas trade that were so widespread throughout Norse society during the Viking Age. Are these differences between the settlement trends documented in the archaeological and the written record contradictory or are they are implicitly describing two sides of the same economic system? This presumed tension between text and archaeology speaks to a thornier concern over our ability to gauge the actual extent and importance of both local and long-distance trade in medieval Iceland, a concern that is underscored by methodological challenges and analytical assumptions about what a commercial economy should look like.

One important outcome of my own research and development of the Skagafjörður Landscape Project (SLP) is an innovative methodological approach towards incorporating existing datasets with new regional settlement pattern analysis. My research approach, grounded in landscape and social network theory, focuses on site distribution as a reflection of the potential range of activities supported by a society’s political economy, enabling researchers to examine the degree of influence specific economic enterprises exerted on the creation, maintenance, or collapse of a cultural system. With its focus on the structure of a network rather than on a list of traits, social network theory avoids the pitfalls of narrow categorization and permits researchers to consider social action with fewer preconceptions.

1 Hines (1997, 264).
This chapter seeks to provide an interdisciplinary perspective on the nature of the medieval Icelandic economy, testing the hypothesis that despite the absence of urbanism, the endeavors of trade, exchange, and surplus production played a larger role in the economy than has previously been assumed. The results from the archaeological survey of Hjaltadalur and Viðvíkursveit suggest a diversified economy, with a well-developed household provisioning system alongside a potential surplus industry capable of managing both agrarian and non-agrarian goods. To further test and better understand these results, I have designed the Multiregional Site Registry (msr) for Skagafjörður, a comprehensive database covering an area of roughly 5,500 km² that includes 610 sites spanning the 9th through 20th centuries (see Figure 55 and Table 30 as well as chapter 4 for a discussion on how the ecological categories were defined in this study). The msr database allows highly integrated forms of analysis as it facilitates research concurrently along multiple lines of evidence, from environmental conditions to textual descriptions.

6.1 Models for Understanding the Medieval Economy in Iceland

Data from the archaeological coring survey discussed in chapter 5 demonstrate that site distribution in the Hjaltadalur-Viðvíkursveit valley system conforms to a scale-free rather than a clustered network. Scale-free networks are characterized by a site distribution that is hierarchical but also scalar, permitting several possible avenues of interaction among sites (see also Chapter 4). Contrary to the commonly held opinion that the highlands were the preferred location for the first wave of settlement,2 domestic sites of varying size were established in all ecological zones located along a continuum of geographic elevations that range from sea level to nearly 300 masl. As each ecological zone provides only some of the crucial resources necessary for the survival of any farmstead, the settlement pattern suggest a landscape organization capable of facilitating a network of cooperation, or at the very least an effort of suppressed hostility, that would ensure the exchange of goods between households. While some degree of local trade and exchange was necessary and may have even included occasional negotiations for acquiring luxury goods from abroad, the data from one valley alone cannot adequately support the assertion that production for non-local markets was ever a vital component in the totality of Icelandic enterprise. Research of this kind requires both micro (site-specific) and macro (regional) levels of analysis, which are best accommodated by the integration

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