



Life and Death in Viking Age Iceland

Course ID: ARCH 365CB

June 2nd – July 4th 2026

Academic Credits: 8 Semester Credit Units

FIELD SCHOOL DIRECTOR(S)

Dr. Brenda Prehal, Associated Researcher, University of Maryland, College Park, Adjunct Lecturer, Jacksonville State University (brenda.prehal@gmail.com)

Dr. George Hambrecht, Department of Anthropology, University of Maryland, College Park (ghambrec@umd.edu)





OVERVIEW

This field school and research project investigates the daily life and afterlife of wealthy Viking Age people who settled on a farm in the north of Iceland, called Reynistaður. Iceland was initially settled around 871 CE and within just a few decades, most of the best land had been claimed. Reynistaður was one of the earliest farms to have been founded and held substantial power in the region for centuries. Why was Reynistaður so powerful for so long? Was it strictly access to resources or was something else at play, as well, like religion? Not much is known about Icelandic pagan religion in the Viking Age or how it was practiced. What we know comes from a handful of archaeological sites with evidence of ritual activity and medieval Icelandic literature, which were written centuries after Iceland officially converted to Christianity. Reynistaður was a powerful medieval Christian center that housed a prosperous nun's cloister. Did Reynistaður's Viking Age past have a direct influence on its medieval Christian power? Archaeological evidence seems to suggest so, as a potentially large intact burial mound was found in 2024. At present, large intact burial mounds are unknown in Iceland, unlike in Norway or Sweden, thus indicating Reynistaður's importance in answering questions about pagan religion in Iceland, its relation to power dynamics, and the conversion process to Christianity.

The goal of the field school is to determine the nature and function of the Viking Age and early medieval activity on the large burial mound area as well as gather important data from the middens. Participants will engage with both midden-based archaeology with an emphasis on both material culture and zooarchaeology as well as with mortuary archaeology and an emphasis on burial practices, ritual activity and landscape archaeology. Reynistaður has roots that go back to the first settlement of Iceland in the 9th and 10th centuries CE and is an ideal site to investigate the political economy and historical ecology of the settlement of this region of Iceland and the dynamics of the following periods.

The field school is situated in idyllic Skagafjörður, Iceland, where students will live, learn, and work in the countryside. This region has been the subject of archaeological activity for many years and we will be building on a strong foundation of scholarship. We will investigate the site and place our work in local, regional and global scales. As we have two areas of concentration, the middens and the burial mound, students will get a strong background in both the environmental archaeological as well as mortuary archaeology traditions in the archaeology of the Norse. In the case of environmental archaeology students will be introduced to zooarchaeology, in the form of excavation as well as preliminary analysis, archaeobotany and geoarchaeology, in the form of sampling and theory, tephrochronology, in the form of identification of volcanic layers in archaeological sections, and finally stable isotope and aDNA analysis in the form of sampling and theory.

Students will learn how to excavate in single-context using a modified Museum of London Archaeological Service method in both midden and mortuary contexts; how to record archaeological data with both hand drawings and GIS systems; how to identify and use tephrochronology for dating; and about historical and contemporary Icelandic culture. Students will also visit historic locations in the north of Iceland, such as Glaumbær Turf Farm, the ruins of Hegranesþing and Gásir, and the Grettislaug Hot Pool.

ACADEMIC CREDIT UNITS & TRANSCRIPTS

Credit Units: Attending students will be awarded 8 semester credit units through our academic partner, Connecticut College. Connecticut College is a highly ranked liberal arts institution with a deep commitment to undergraduate education. Students will receive a letter grade for attending this field school (see assessment, below). Students are encouraged to discuss the transferability of credit units with faculty and registrars at their home institution prior to attending this field school.

Transcripts: An official copy of transcripts will be mailed to the permanent address listed by students on their online application. One more transcript may be sent to the student's home institution at no cost. Additional transcripts may be ordered at any time through the [National Student Clearinghouse](#).

PREREQUISITES

No prerequisites are required though students with at least some archaeology classes in their record will be prioritized (i.e. Introduction to Archaeology)

COURSE OBJECTIVES

This archaeological fieldschool provides undergraduate students with hands-on experience in excavation and analysis techniques while investigating Iceland's Settlement (870-930 CE) and Commonwealth (930-1262 CE) periods. Working at a multi-component site in Skagafjörður, northern Iceland, students will engage directly with both domestic midden deposits and a Viking Age burial mound, gaining practical skills in stratigraphic excavation, artifact processing, and archaeological documentation while exploring the lived experiences of Iceland's early inhabitants.

The program emphasizes two complementary approaches to understanding past societies: environmental archaeology and mortuary archaeology. Students will learn to identify and interpret ecofacts such as animal bones, plant remains, and soil samples from midden contexts to reconstruct subsistence strategies, land use patterns, and human-environment interactions during Iceland's early settlement. Simultaneously, through careful excavation of the burial mound, students will explore how mortuary practices reveal social organization, belief systems, and cultural identity in Viking Age communities.

By the end of the fieldschool, students will have developed core competencies in archaeological field methods, contextual analysis, and interdisciplinary interpretation. They will engage in field excavation as well as post-excavation curation and analysis. They will understand how material culture from both ritual and domestic contexts can be integrated to create nuanced narratives about Iceland's formative centuries, while gaining appreciation for the ethical responsibilities and collaborative nature of archaeological practice in a modern research environment.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will gain basic competency in the following skills and be able to:

- Understand how sedimentology, both natural and cultural, impacts the formation of archaeological sites and landscapes in general.
- Develop a strong foundation in how dynamics between people, climate and animals form past and present landscapes.
- Discuss the impacts of human settlement on empty virgin landscapes.
- have an understanding of the complex ways in which historical landscapes are used by contemporary populations.
- Develop robust experience working within a team in a remote area.
- Utilize multiple lines of evidence, including both quantitative and qualitative data through deductive and inductive methods.

TECHNICAL AND FIELD SKILLS

- Demonstrate Single-context archaeological excavation
- Demonstrate Archaeological recording, both analog and digital
- Perform Basic GPS data collection
- Understand basic tephrochronology
- Conduct Environmental archaeological sampling
- Conduct Basic curation of archaeological material

DURABLE SKILLS

Students gain basic competency in the following widely applicable skills:

- Working and living in a team in a remote and climatically challenging environment
- Developing and executing an archaeological research project, including developing research questions and protocols
- Navigating different communities and infrastructures and demonstrate cultural competency
- Understanding collaborative scientific work ethics of research

ASSESSMENT

Field Work Participation (40%)

Hands-on fieldwork represents the core component of this program, requiring active engagement in excavation activities, data gathering, and other practical tasks. Field participation will be evaluated based on the following:

1. Fieldwork and excavation:

Criteria	Description	Points
Engagement and Initiative	Extent of student involvement in excavation processes, recovery of artifacts and organic materials, mapping, and survey work. Shows proactive approach to accepting responsibilities and advancing team objectives.	10
Quality of Work + Field Notebook	Exhibits precision and thoroughness in excavation methods, record-keeping, and material conservation. Meticulous and careful execution is anticipated. A field notebook rubric will be supplied and directions of how to use this notebook will be discussed on the first day. This notebook is not just an exercise but an important data point for the project. It is expected that you record all your activities in this notebook and that they will be a necessary and useful part of the project archive.	10
Teamwork and Collaboration	Makes positive contributions to group dynamics, shares duties equitably, and collaborates productively with fellow team members both on-site and in shared accommodations (including participation in meal preparation and cleanup). Exhibits effective communication, mutual respect, and cooperative spirit.	10
Adherence to Safety and Ethical Practices	Complies with safety procedures, site conservation requirements, and professional fieldwork ethics (e.g., protecting site authenticity).	10

2. Assigned Reading and Knowledge of Materials (20%)

This element evaluates students' comprehension of required readings, implementation of these ideas in practical work, and capacity to participate in scholarly dialogue.

Criteria	Description	Points
Reading Completion	Shows evidence of completing assigned readings prior to group discussions. Active engagement with course materials is apparent during fieldwork and laboratory sessions.	10
Integration of Material	Capacity to implement theoretical concepts from readings (e.g., Icelandic local and regional history and archaeology, broader Norse archaeological studies, funerary archaeology, and environmental archaeology) into field and lab work. Shows comprehension through discussion participation.	10

3. Participation in Discussions (20%)

Group discussions form an essential part of the educational experience, offering theoretical context and facilitating research dialogue. Discussion participation will be evaluated on:

Criteria	Description	Points
Active Participation	Student contributes meaningfully to discussions through insightful questions, observations, and input.	10
Application of Knowledge	Shows capability to link discussion content with hands-on fieldwork and research undertakings. Establishes clear, pertinent connections between theoretical concepts and practical application.	10

4. Final Project or Presentation (20%)

Upon completion of the field school, students will produce a final project or presentation that integrates their practical fieldwork experience with the theoretical concepts explored during the program.

Criteria	Description	Points
Research Quality	Project shows comprehensive examination and utilization of field data. Student effectively synthesizes results in a logical and substantive manner.	10
Presentation Skills	Well-structured, articulate, and compelling presentation of fieldwork results. Strategic use of visual materials (e.g., maps, photographs, datasets) enhances communication.	10

COURSE SCHEDULE

All IFR field schools begin with an orientation that addresses local and program protocols concerning student behavior, appropriate attire, local practices and sensibilities that may be unfamiliar, potential fauna and flora hazards, IFR harassment and discrimination policies, and the student Code of Conduct.

Please note that the schedule outlined in this syllabus can be disrupted by unforeseen circumstances, including weather, revisions by local permitting agencies, or conditions onsite. While this schedule represents the intentions of the program, adaptability is an intrinsic part of all field research, and necessary alterations to the schedule may happen at any time.

We will also keep weather conditions in mind. Very bad weather will lead us to close down excavation early – though be aware that working in the rain in Iceland is a normal activity. If things get muddy and dangerous then we will close down early. We will also try to include as many trips to the local baths and hot springs as possible.

All weeks:

Monday/Tuesday/Thursday/Friday Schedule

7:30am – Depart for site from house.

8am-10am – daily meeting (15min max) and excavation

10-10:15am – coffee break (please bring a thermos for coffee, tea or hot chocolate, etc.) we will supply biscuits and snacks
10:15-12:15 – excavation
12:15-1:00 – lunch
1-3:00pm – excavation
3:00-3:15 – coffee break
3:15-5pm excavation and clean-up/shut-down
5-7:30pm get home and dinner team prepares dinner
7:30 – dinner

Wednesday Schedule

7:30am – Depart for site from house.
8am-10am – daily meeting (15min max) and excavation
10-10:15am – coffee break (please bring a thermos for coffee, tea or hot chocolate, etc.) we will supply biscuits and snacks
10:15-12:15 – excavation
12:15-1:00 – lunch
1-3:00pm – excavation
3:00-3:15 – coffee break
3:15-4pm excavation and clean-up/shut-down
5:30 – 6:30pm Lecture and discussion
6:30-8pm Dinner preparation and dinner

Weekend Schedules

Saturday – excursions and evening lecture and discussion
Sunday – free time and non-required excursions (trips to town, the baths, etc.)

Week One Lectures:

- 1 – Background – What motivated the Norse to colonize Iceland? What were the cultural, economic, ideological and environmental variables behind this colonization? (Hambrecht)
- 2 – Background – The context of Northern Iceland and early settlement sites – Hofstaðir, Hrísheimar, Aðalstraeti, Skútastaðir (Hambrecht)

Readings:

Hambrecht, G. (2020). Crashes, Collapse and Conjuncture: Archaeological Perspectives. In I. Krupnik (Ed.), *Arctic Crashes*. Smithsonian Publications.

McGovern, Thomas, et al. (2007). Landscapes of Settlement in Northern Iceland: Historical Ecology of Human Impact and Climate Fluctuation on the Millennial Scale. *American Anthropologist*, 109(1), 27–51. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2007.109.1.27>.

Week Two Lectures:

- 1 – Archaeology in Skagafjorður (Prehal)
- 2 – Archaeology in Northern Iceland (Hambrecht)

Readings:

Bolender, D., Steinberg, J. M., & Durrenberger, E. P. (2008). Unsettled Landscapes: Settlement patterns and the development of social inequality in Northern Iceland. In L. Cliggett & C. A. Pool (Eds.), *Economies and the Transformation of Landscape* (pp. 217–238). Society for Economic Anthropology.

Bolender, D., Steinberg, J., & Damiata, P. (2011). Farmstead Relocation at the end of the Viking Age. Results of the Skagafjordur Archaeological Settlement Survey. *Archaeologia Islandica*, 9, 77–101.

Steinberg, J. (2002). *Report of the Skagafjörður Archaeological Settlement Survey* (pp. 1–86). Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA.

Zoëga, G. (2014). Early church organization in Skagafjörður, North Iceland. The results of the Skagafjörður Church Project. *Collegium Medievale*, 27, 23–62.

Week Three Lectures:

- 1 – Norse Mortuary Archaeology (Prehal)
- 2 – Magic and Ritual in Norse Archaeology (Prehal)

Readings:

Friðriksson, A., & Vésteinsson, O. (2011). Landscapes of Burial: Contrasting the Pagan and Christian Paradigms of Burial in Viking Age and Medieval Iceland. *Archaeologia Islandica*, 9, 50–64.

Week Four Lectures:

- 1 – Environmental Archaeology in Iceland (Hambrecht)
- 2 – Land and Sea in Icelandic Archaeology – and the Environmental Archaeology of fish in Iceland, how can data from the past inform present day natural resource management. (Hambrecht)

Readings:

Campana, S. E., et al. (2025). Mortality drives production dynamics of Atlantic cod through 1100 years of commercial fishing. *Science Advances*, 11(6). <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adt4782>

Dugmore, A. (2020). Continuity in the Face of a Slowly Unfolding Catastrophe: The Persistence of Icelandic Settlement Despite Large-Scale Erosion. In F. Riede & P. Sheets (Eds.), *Going Forward by Looking Back, Archaeological Perspectives on Socio-Ecological Crisis, Response and Collapse* (pp. 162–199). Berghahn Books.

REQUIRED READINGS

PDF files of all mandatory readings will be provided to enrolled students. Program participants are expected to be prepared to engage in discussions led by facilitators, all of whom will be looking for compelling evidence that students have read and thought about the assigned readings prior to the scheduled day on which they are first discussed.

Background: (read before project starts)

Price, N. (2021). *Children of Ash and Elm: A History of the Vikings*. Penguin Books.

Hicks, M., et al. (2025). Across the Gray Waters: Diaspora, Biogeography, and Early Globalization in the North Atlantic. In S. M. Fitzpatrick & J. M. Erlandson (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Island and Coastal Archaeology*. Oxford University Press.

Icelandic Archaeology:

Hambrecht, G. (2020). Crashes, Collapse and Conjuncture: Archaeological Perspectives. In I. Krupnik (Ed.), *Arctic Crashes*. Smithsonian Publications.

McGovern, Thomas, et al. (2007). Landscapes of Settlement in Northern Iceland: Historical Ecology of Human Impact and Climate Fluctuation on the Millennial Scale. *American Anthropologist*, 109(1), 27–51. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2007.109.1.27>.

Skagafjodur Archaeology:

Bolender, D., Steinberg, J. M., & Durrenberger, E. P. (2008). Unsettled Landscapes: Settlement patterns and the development of social inequality in Northern Iceland. In L. Cliggett & C. A. Pool (Eds.), *Economies and the Transformation of Landscape* (pp. 217–238). Society for Economic Anthropology.

Bolender, D., Steinberg, J., & Damiata, P. (2011). Farmstead Relocation at the end of the Viking Age. Results of the Skagafjordur Archaeological Settlement Survey. *Archaeologia Islandica*, 9, 77–101.

Steinberg, J. (2002). *Report of the Skagafjörður Archaeological Settlement Survey* (pp. 1–86). Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA.

Zoëga, G. (2014). Early church organization in Skagafjörður, North Iceland. The results of the Skagafjörður Church Project. *Collegium Medievale*, 27, 23–62.

Mortuary Archaeology:

Friðriksson, A., & Vésteinsson, O. (2011). Landscapes of Burial: Contrasting the Pagan and Christian Paradigms of Burial in Viking Age and Medieval Iceland. *Archaeologia Islandica*, 9, 50–64.

Environmental Archaeology in Iceland and Marine Historical Ecology:

Campana, S. E., et al. (2025). Mortality drives production dynamics of Atlantic cod through 1100 years of commercial fishing. *Science Advances*, 11(6). <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adt4782>

Dugmore, A. (2020). Continuity in the Face of a Slowly Unfolding Catastrophe: The Persistence of Icelandic Settlement Despite Large-Scale Erosion. In F. Riede & P. Sheets (Eds.), *Going Forward by Looking Back, Archaeological Perspectives on Socio-Ecological Crisis, Response and Collapse* (pp. 162–199). Berghahn Books.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Price, N., & Brink, S. (2008). *The Viking World*. Routledge.

Adolf Friðriksson. (1994). *Sagas and Popular Antiquarianism in Icelandic Archaeology*. Avebury.

ACADEMIC EQUIPMENT LIST

A Marshalltown archaeological pointing trowel

A Rite-in-the-Rain N° 363 - Side Spiral Notebook – metric field -
<https://www.riteintherain.com/4-625x7-side-spiral-notebook>