



Rannsóknasetur Háskóla
Íslands á Vestfjörðum

Archaeological Excavations on the Island of Strákey in Strandir, Iceland

Ragnar Edvardsson

Janúar 2013

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1. Introduction

A 17th century whaling station was discovered in 2005 at Strákatangi in Strandasýsla and the subsequent excavation revealed extensive remains of whaling. The excavations from 2005 – 2010 unearthed two tryworks, cooperage, storage and living quarters of the station crew. Further analysis of the data showed that the station had been in use for at least 50 years, from the early to mid 17th century (Edvardsson, Ragnar. and Rafnsson, Magnús. 2012).

The discovery of the Strákatangi whaling station provoked new questions about 17th century commercial whaling in the north Atlantic and indicated the possibility of other stations in the vicinity. Subsequent archaeological surveys identified two potential whaling stations the area. These stations were located on two islands, Kóngsey and Strákey, in the north part of the Kaldrananes district. In 2011 the stations were surveyed with a differential gps and in 2012 test trenches were excavated into two of the structures on the island of Strákey.

This report discusses the fieldwork carried out in 2012 on Strákey. The project is a cooperative effort by the University of Iceland, Research Center of the Westfjords and Strandagaldur SES. The authors wish to thank all those that participated in the project or assisted in any way. Special thanks go to the rescue unit at Hólmavík, Dagrenning, which supplied transport to and from the island. We also would like to thank the owners of the islands for permitting the archaeological work both the surveying in 2011 and the excavations in 2012.

2. Whaling stations in 17th century Iceland

The origin of commercial whaling can be traced to the Basque countries in France and Spain. It seems that the Basques were hunting whales as early as the 11th century, primarily targeting right whales (*Eubalaena sp*). In the 16th century this species had been over-hunted in the Bay of Biscay and whalers began looking for new hunting grounds (Tuck, James A., 1989, Kurlansky, Mark. 2000).

In the early part of the 16th century Basque whalers established seasonal settlements in the New World. The main settlements were in Labrador and Newfoundland and there the Basques built large whaling stations. As before the whalers targeted right- and especially bowhead whales who at the time migrated through the Strait of Belle Isle, between Newfoundland and Labrador (Tuck, James A. 1989, 2005). By the end of the 16th century the whalers had again overhunted these species in the area and turned their attention further north.

In the early 17th century Basques whalers appeared in Iceland and at the same time whaling stations were established in north Norway and Svalbard. Other nations began whaling at this time, especially the English and the Dutch, who became the dominating whaling nations in the North Atlantic (Hacquebord, Louwrens, Vroom, Wim (ed.), 1988).



Pic. 1. Structure C prior to excavation.

The extent of foreign whaling settlements in Iceland are unknown as the discovery of foreign whaling stations is recent and only limited areas have been systematically surveyed for whaling station remains. Only in Vestfirðir that whaling stations from the 17th century have been surveyed and excavated.

Archaeological remains of foreign whaling stations have, so far, only been identified in Strandasýsla on the east part of the Vestfirðir peninsula. The two main sites are Strákatangi, in the south and Eyjar in the north (map). Limited surveys have been carried out north of the Eyjar site but they have not revealed any new sites. It cannot be concluded that no more stations are to be found in Strandasýsla, as these

surveys have only covered small areas. A large, systematic survey might reveal other stations.

The Strákatangi site is located in the south part of the Kaldrananes district. It lies in a small bay called Reykjarvík, on the northern shores of the Steingrímsfjörður fjord. The remains of whaling are primarily limited to a small peninsula in the western part of the bay of Reykjarvík. The peninsula, Strákatangi, is about 500 x 100 meters in size and the shoreline on the eastern is shallow, giving an excellent opportunity for processing whale carcasses.

This whaling station is not mentioned in the written sources but one source from the late 18th century mentions the site but without realizing its function.

“In Reykjarvík, a small bay in the northern part of Steingrímsfjörður, ruins of four old trade houses, a circular fireplace made of bricks and used for processing blubber, are still visible. People believe that these remains belonged to the Irish and an old booth made of stone, in the so called Spönskuvík (Spanish bay), close to Reykjarvík, belonged to Spanish whalers. It is also believed, that foreign merchants sailed into the harbor at Paradís and as a proof for that, people say that a ship sunk there ... and wreckage washes still onto the shore during South, west, and Southwest gales” (Transl. Author) (Olavius, Ólafur, 1964).

It seems that only about 100 years after the abandonment of the station its function had already been forgotten by the local populace. It is interesting how quickly the function of the site was forgotten as it is not located far from the nearest farms and that such an industrial activity would have been difficult to hide. It still remains an

unanswered question why the Icelandic written sources are so silent about the presence of foreign whalers on Icelandic grounds.

On the Strákatangi peninsula and nearby a total of eleven archaeological sites have been recorded. Of the eleven sites five have positively been identified as foreign whaling sites. Four of the sites are clustered together on the northeast part of the peninsula, about 5 meters from the shore and consist of three houses and tryworks. Further out on the Strákatangi peninsula another tryworks have been identified.

In the north part of the Kaldrananes district, about 19 km from Strákatangi, as the bird flies, is a farm called Eyjar (map). About 200 meters off shore are two small islands, Kóngsey and Strákey and on these islands a number of archaeological sites have been recorded.

The written sources do not mention a whaling station on these islands but local folklore tell of a French whaling crew spending a winter on the islands. The reason for their stay is not quite clear but the author probably recorded it because of an incident between the captain of the whaler and the farmer at Eyjar (Örnefnaskrá Eyja).

Both islands are flat, oblong in shape and point in a northeast/southwest directions. Kóngsey is 406 x 70 meters and Strákey is 272 x 70 meters in size and the shortest distance between land and the islands is about 250 meters. On both islands 13 archaeological sites have positively been identified, 3 on Strákey and 10 on Kóngsey. On Strákey there are three large buildings and two irregular ones. The large buildings are somewhat similar to the ones recorded and excavated at Strákatangi. On Kóngsey three boathouses were recorded and some of them are probably Icelandic. There are five structures on the island that probably are remains of houses and two irregular ones of an unknown type. There are also five mounds that could be archaeological sites, making the total number of sites on both islands 18.

There are certain features suggesting that the ruins on the islands are of a foreign type, especially the similarity with the ruins at Strákatangi and the size of some of the structures as it is quite uncommon in an Icelandic context to find so many houses of a substantial size on small islands like Kóngsey and Strákey.

3. Aims and Methods

The aim of the 2012 season was to assess the nature of these structures. To this aim test trenches were excavated into two structures on Strákey. The first trench was excavated into a circular structure on the northwest side of the island and the second was excavated into a large structure just south east of the circular one.

The methodology of the excavations at Eyjar was *open area* excavation and *single context* recording. This method has been used now for over 10 years on various sites in the North Atlantic and has proved an excellent method of excavating both structures and midden sites

With this method a large area is opened, preferably an area of a 10 x 10 meters and each archaeological unit (context), i.e. deposits, cuts, structures, etc., are excavated in a

reversed order, starting with the youngest. All units are cleaned, photographed, planned, and finally removed. The whole area is excavated at the same time, which gives the archaeologists a view of all phases of the site until the whole area is excavated to the undisturbed phase before occupation. Ideally all archaeological units are removed, i.e. structures, midden deposits, and other units and at the end of excavation nothing remains except the soil prior to occupation of the site. This gives a complete understanding of the history of the site and any changes it has gone through.

As this excavation was limited and only aimed at testing the site, the excavation only dug down to the archaeological deposits and no archaeological material, except finds, were removed.

4. The excavation in 2012

The excavation at Strákey was carried out in late August and the excavation team consisted of Ragnar Edvardsson, Frigg Ragnarsdóttir and Leifur Þór Þórsson. For this season Strákey was selected for testing and the three structures on the south part of the island were given codes. The western most structure was given the code A, the structure in the center B and the largest structure to the east C. Structures A and C were selected for testing, A being a small circular structure, 6 meters in diameter and open to the north and C a large structure, 20 x 8 meters, with three rooms. One trench was excavated in each and both were about 2 x 1,50 meters.

4.1 List of archaeological units



Pic 2. Trench 1. Burned brick deposit.

[1] Surface.

[2] Dark Aeolian soil with sand lenses. Recorded in both trenches.

[3] Black compact soil mixed with sand, charcoal and burned bones. Floor in Structure C.

[4] Light Aeolian sand. Recorded in trench 1.

[5] Coarse gray sand. Recorded in trench 1.

[6] Light red burnt layer, mixed with small brick fragments and whole bricks. Recorded in trench 1.

4.2 Trench 1

After the removal of turf surface [1] a dark Aeolian soil was recorded [2]. The deposit was dry, loose and easily excavated and had accumulated after the structure had been abandoned. After the removal of



Pic 3. Trench 2. Floor deposit and a post-hole.

unit [2] three deposits were recorded. In the east corner, extending outside the trench, was a light Aeolian sand deposit [4] and below it was a coarse gray sand deposit [5]. Below [5] was a red burned deposit [6] that consisted mostly of burned brick fragments. This deposit was recorded everywhere in the trench and it extended outside the edges of the trench. This burned deposit is almost identical to the deposits recorded within the trywork at Strákatangi. Everywhere in the trench whole bricks were recorded and each showed that they had been exposed to high temperatures.

4.3 Trench 2

The same dark Aeolian soil was recorded in trench 2 and after it had been removed a black compact [3] deposit was recorded.

This deposit was in lenses, mixed with sand and is the floor of building C. In the east end of the trench an oval cut [7] in the floor was recorded. This cut was lined with 3 small upright stones and 1 flat stone was lying beside it. This feature was a center posthole holding up the roof of the building and it is likely that others are situated along the center axis of this structure. The composition of the floor is very similar to the floor excavated in the crew quarters at Strákatangi and similar finds were recorded in it as at Strákatangi (see below).

4.4. Finds

The number of finds during the 2012 season was 19 recorded numbers with the total of 24 objects, 10 samples, 7 artifacts, 6 lignite fragments and 2 stones. Of the 19 finds numbers 10 were bone samples and most of them came from the floor [3] in trench 2. The bones were fish-, bird- and mammal bones and a few of the bones were identified as belonging to gadoid familiae and ovis generis. Two of the bones were large whalebones and they came from deposit [4] in trench 1. Both whalebones showed evidence of butchering as a number of cut marks were identified on both bones but neither could be identified to a species level.

Of the total number of finds 7 artifacts were recorded, 1 white ware with a blue decoration, 2 undecorated clay pipe stems and 4 badly corroded small nails. The clay pipes, 1 nail and the ceramic fragment were all found in unit [3]. One nail was unstratified and other artifacts were found in units [2] and [4] in trench 1. Other finds were 6 lignite fragments and 2 unidentified stones that are not indigenous to the island.

Even though the find assemblage is small and none of the artifacts can give a precise dating, a few remarks can be made on the overall composition of the assemblage. The artifacts excavated from the floor in trench 2 are similar to those excavated in the floor at the crew quarters at Strákatangi which suggest that both are from the same period. This also suggests that the large building (structure C) is the crew quarters for the whaling crew at Strákey.

5. Discussion

The 2012 test excavation at Strákey was successful in identifying the archaeological remains on the island. It is now clear that foreign whalers built not only one but three whaling stations in the 17th century in Strandasýsla. This new discovery raises the question about the extent of foreign industrial activity and the possibility of other whaling stations from this period in Iceland.

The original plan for the 2012 season had been to excavate test trenches on both islands but due to the lack of funding the excavation was limited to the island of Strákey. However, detailed survey was carried out on Kóngsey with the idea of attempting to identify the structures on the island. This survey suggest that not all structures on Kóngsey are remains of whaling but some are probably of an Icelandic origin. These structures are towards the center of the island and show some similarities to fishing booths recorded on fishing stations in different places on the Vestfirðir peninsula (Edvardsson, Ragnar 2010). The boathouses clustered on the east side of the island probably belong to these booth type structures and are Icelandic in origin. However, two structures on the southern tip of the island show differences. One is circular in shape and surface inspection of this structure revealed both burned brick fragments and whole bricks. When this structure is compared with the tryworks at Strákatangi and the trywork on Strákey as well as the presence of brick fragments, it is likely that this structure is also the remains of tryworks. Just south of this circular structure lies a square building but the surface inspection did not reveal anything to suggest function but it is likely that it is also remains of whaling based on its shape and similarity to buildings excavated at Strákatangi.

The excavation in structure A on Strákey strongly suggest that it is the remains of tryworks. Even though it shows similarities to the large trywork at Strákatangi it is somewhat smaller and does not have any ramps leading up to the furnace as on Strákatangi. It is difficult to assess with certainty the function of structure C but the thick floor deposits and the central post suggest that it was habited and therefore could be house for the station crew during the whaling season. Structure B was not excavated during the 2012 season and therefore not much can be said about its function. However with comparison with Strákatangi it is likely that could be the remains of a cooperage but only further excavation will positively establish its function. The finds from the 2012 season do not give a date for the structures on Strákey, however the presence of clay pipes, 17th century ceramics and whalebones suggest that the buildings belong to the same period as the buildings on Strákatangi.

The project “Foreign whaling in Iceland in the 17th century” has shown that at the beginning of commercial whaling whalers considered Iceland as an important hunting

grounds for right and bowhead whales and were obviously keen to establish whaling stations in the country. It seems that they were successful in establishing permanent stations in the beginning, however these settlements did only last and had completely disappeared by the end of the century. The question of why commercial whaling did not establish itself in Iceland as it did in Svalbard and north Norway and elsewhere in the north Atlantic remains unanswered.

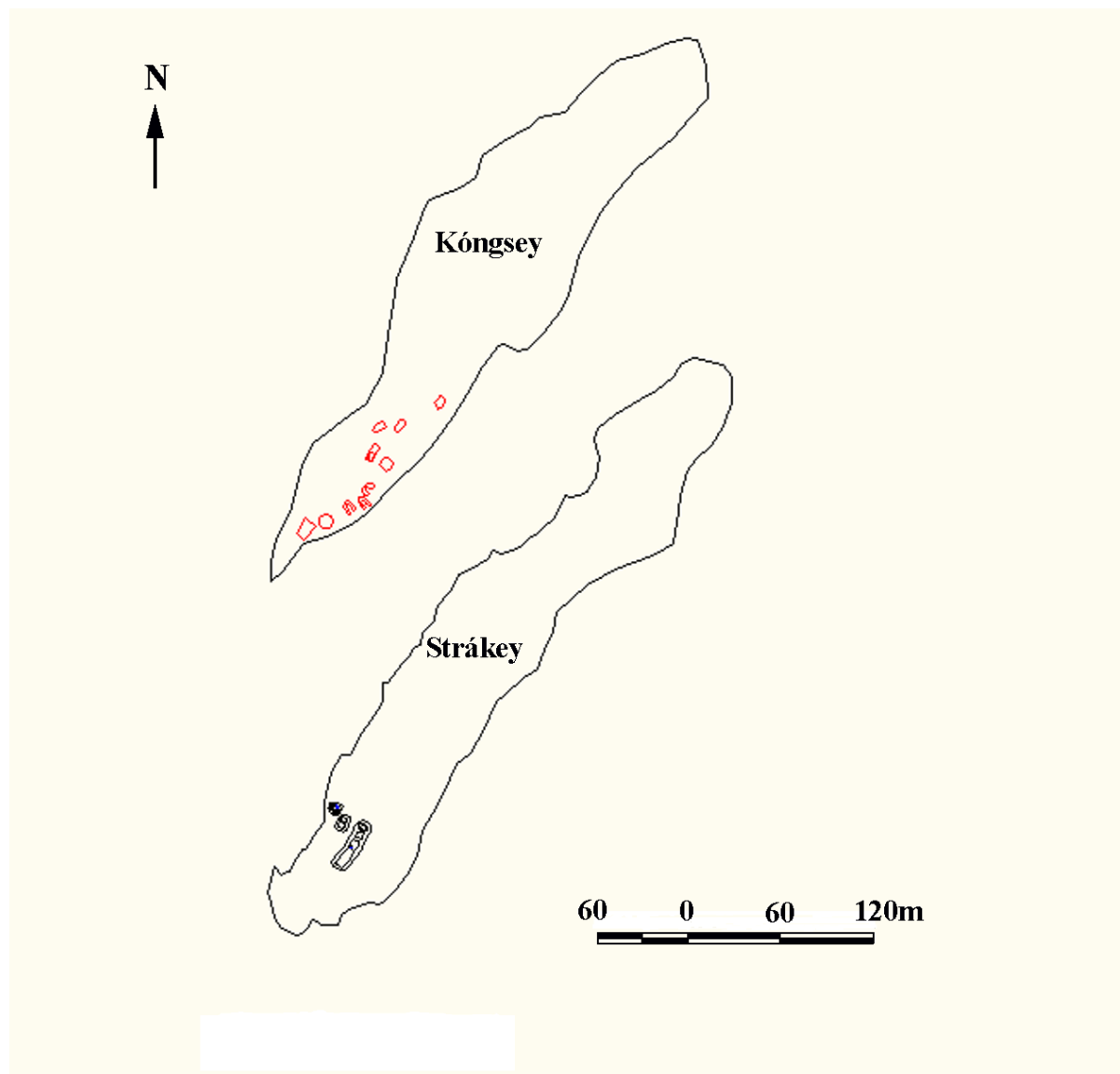
6. Cost

| 2012 | | |
|--------|----------------------------|-----------|
| | | |
| 1 | Strandagaldur..... | 200.000 |
| 2 | Fornleifasjóður..... | 600.000 |
| 3 | Rannsóknasetur | 200.000 |
| Total: | | 1.000.000 |
| | | |
| 1 | Project manager | 236.000 |
| 2 | Specialist 1..... | 172.000 |
| 3 | Specialist 2..... | 172.000 |
| 4 | Travel, accomod.,food..... | 420.000 |
| 5 | Sample..... | 0 |
| Total: | | 1.000.000 |

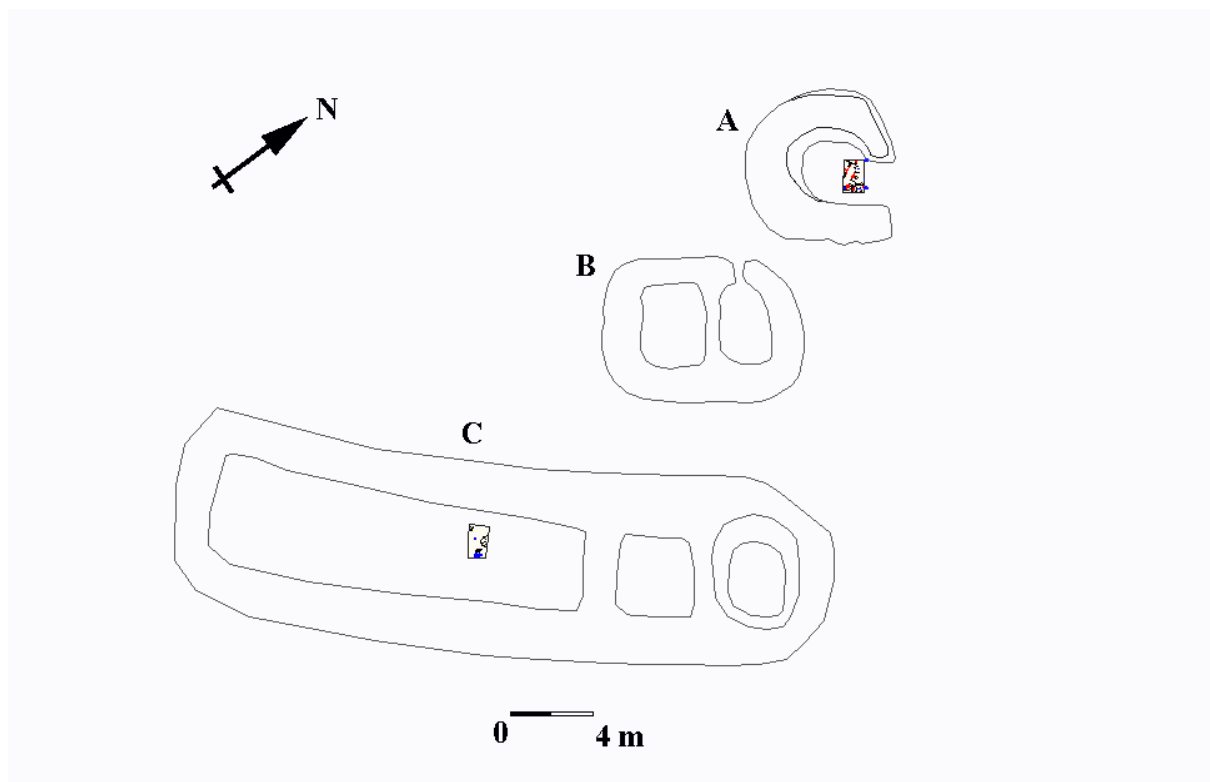
7. Maps and Drawings



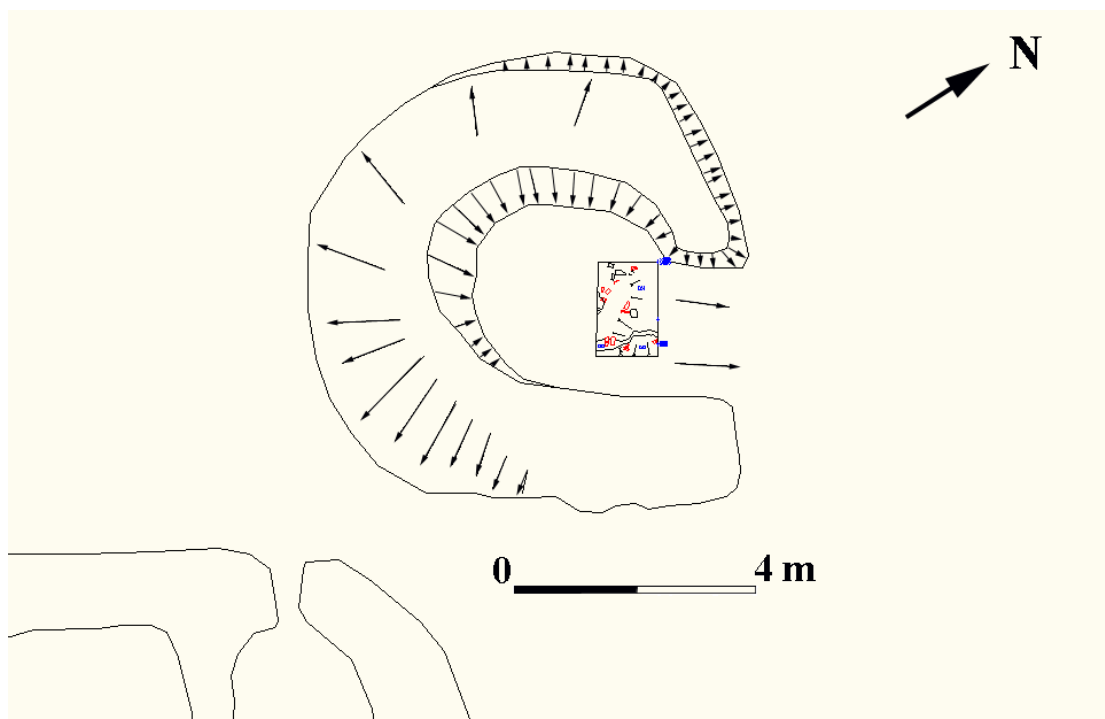
Map 1. Known 17th century whaling stations in Kaldrananeshreppur.



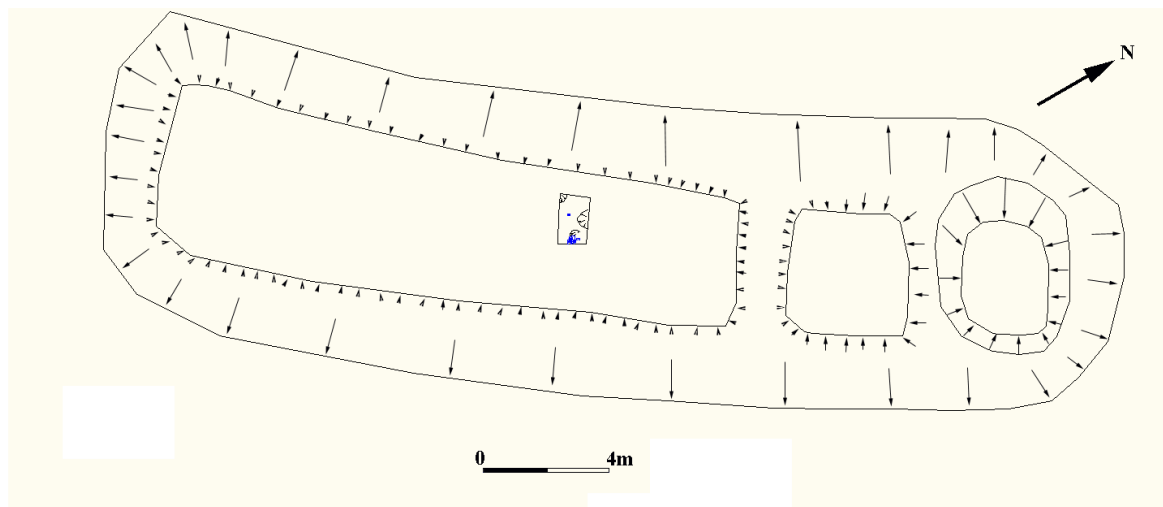
Map 2. Archaeological remains on Kóngsey and Strákey.



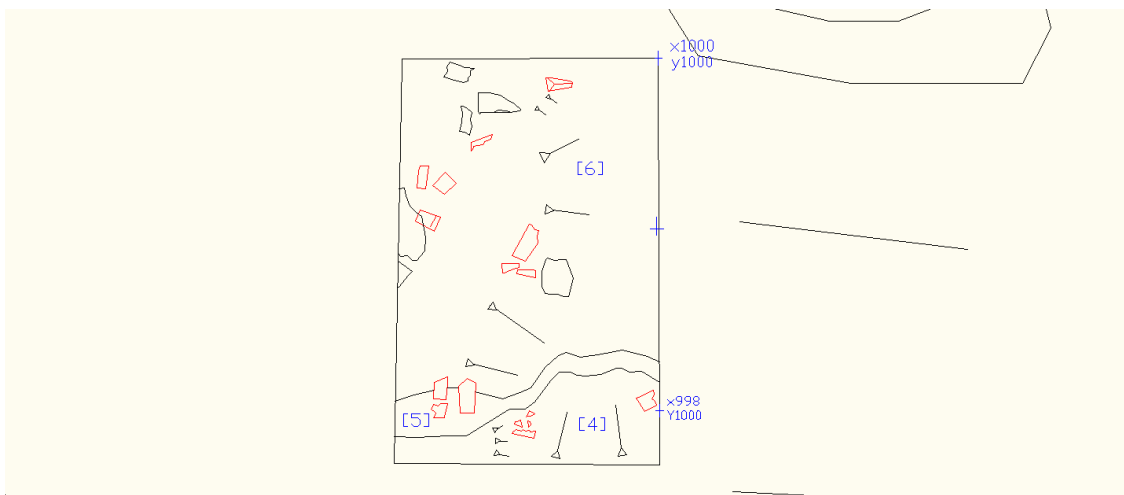
Plan 1. The structures on Strákey.



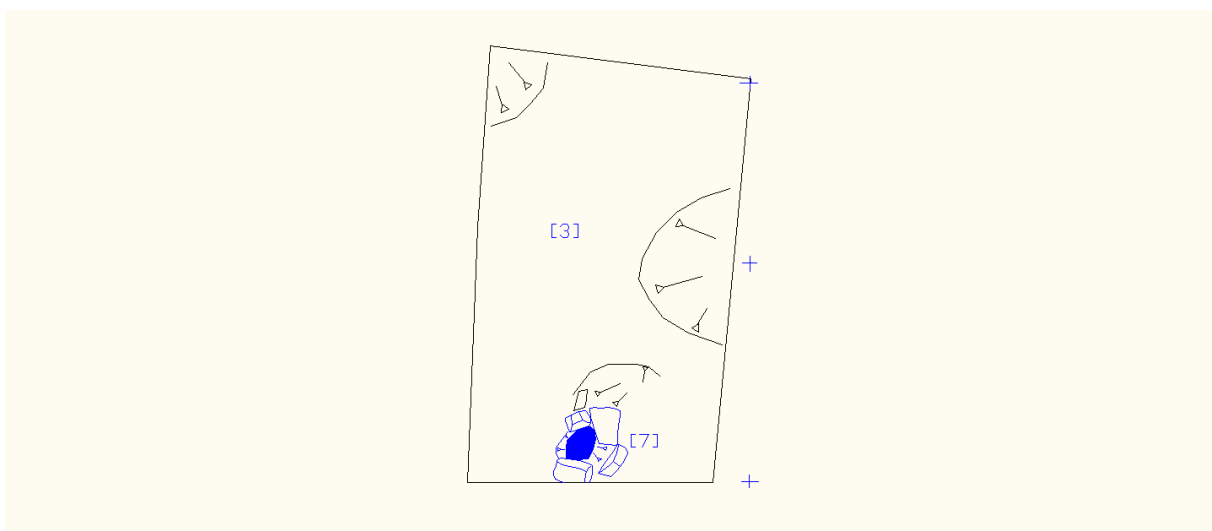
Plan 2. Structure A, trywork.



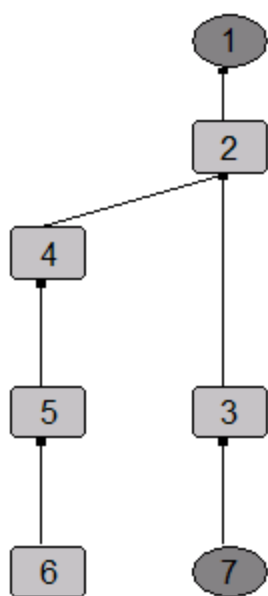
Plan 3. Structure C. Dwelling of the station crew.



Plan 4. Trench 1.



Plan 4. Trench 2.



Pic. Stratigraphic matrix for trenches 1 and 2.

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