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## The Case of the Greenlandic Assembly Sites

Alexandra Sanmark\*

**Abstract** - In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars identified two possible Greenlandic assembly sites at Brattahlíð and Garðar, respectively. Later scholars, with one exception, have neither refuted nor corroborated this, and research on this topic has therefore not significantly moved forward in the last 100 years. In this article, the two proposed assembly sites are examined in the light of recent research. It is demonstrated that there are striking similarities between the Greenlandic and Scandinavian and Icelandic assembly sites, which strongly support the identification of the former as assembly sites. Further archaeological fieldwork is, however, needed in order to clarify the issues raised in this paper as well as providing new evidence, particularly for dating.

### Introduction

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, two “booth” sites in Greenland were identified, one at Brattahlíð (Qassiarsuk) and another at Garðar (Igaliku), which, after some debate, were accepted by leading scholars as the remains of thing (assembly) sites (Clemmensen 1911, Nørlund 1929, Nørlund and Stenberger 1934). Later scholars, with the exception of H.C. Gulløv (2008), have avoided discussing the function of these sites, and, as a result, the early reports have not been properly evaluated. The existence of a thing organization is inferred by a letter dated 1389 mentioning an alþing (general assembly) in Greenland, although without further specification (Barnes 1974:383, Huitfeldt-Kaas et al. 1919:29–31, Seaver 1996:62). There are also written references to thing sites and thing-related activities at both Brattahlíð and Garðar.

The presence of thing organizations across the Scandinavian homelands as well as in the Norse colonies demonstrates their significance to Norse society. Medieval sources from Iceland and Scandinavia show a well-organized administrative system, where each district had its own assembly, although the nature of this system varied slightly between areas. Thing sites have been identified in the Viking settlements of the Orkney Islands<sup>1</sup>, the Shetland Islands<sup>2</sup>, the Faeroe Islands<sup>3</sup>, Iceland<sup>4</sup>, the Hebrides<sup>5</sup>, the Isle of Man<sup>6</sup>, Ireland<sup>7</sup>, mainland Scotland<sup>8</sup>, and England.<sup>9</sup> Naturally, not all of these sites have been identified in the landscape, but by place-name evidence only.<sup>10</sup>

If the thing system had not fulfilled its role, or was unpopular, the settlers would not have reproduced it in their new homelands. Anthropological evidence makes it clear that assemblies are important tools for conflict resolution, the everyday functioning of society, and the long-term prevention of feuds and warfare, and they therefore tend to be present in all societies (Moore 2005). Crucially, however, there is no secure dating evidence for any of the identified thing sites in the settlement areas, and it is therefore

not known how soon after colonization they were established. It would, however, be incorrect to assume that if there were no assembly sites, there were no thing meetings. Written sources show that meetings did not have to take place at an established assembly site, but could legally be held at a variety of places, such as in churches, fully manned ships, or ale houses (Sanmark 2006, 2009). Moreover, meetings do not necessarily have to leave traces of any kind, or be manifested in the landscape. It has been noted that for village meetings in Gambia, chairs placed in a circle formed the site (Þorgeirsson 2009). When the meeting was finished the chairs were removed and any lasting traces of the site were gone.

In general, there has been very little research on Norse assembly sites in terms of their location, features, and characteristics. Existing publications contain some information on the major assembly sites, such as Þingvellir (Iceland) or the Gulathing (Norway) (Campbell 1980, Campbell and Kidd 1980:69, Foote and Wilson 1970:91–92, Roesdahl 1998:268). Thing sites lower down in the hierarchy have, however, rarely been mentioned (see however Brink 2004a, b; Friðriksson 1994; Larsson 1997, 1998). Norse assemblies were first studied more than 100 years ago, mainly on the basis of medieval written sources and place-name evidence. Scholars in Sweden and Norway produced lists of local meeting sites for various districts, although at this time, very few sites were identified in the landscape (e.g., Ahlberg 1946, Bugge 1920, Wildte 1931). In Iceland, on the other hand, a number of sites were identified from saga evidence, and a certain amount of typological analyses of assemblies was carried out, but very little further interpretation occurred (Friðriksson 1994:105–145). More recently, with the breakthrough of landscape archaeology, a renewed interest in thing sites has emerged, most notably regarding Sweden (Brink 2004a, b; Larsson 1997, 1998) and Iceland (Friðriksson 1994; A. Whitmore, Cambridge University, Cambridge, UK, unpubl.

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data). However, with the exception of Iceland, publications still focused on a small number of sites, usually the ones that are most easily identifiable on the ground.

The overriding problem in the field of assembly studies is the difficulty of pinpointing the sites. This issue has been addressed by my own work on district meeting-places in the county of Södermanland in Sweden, suggesting that thing sites can be securely identified, with varying degrees of accuracy, by combining archaeological evidence, written sources (medieval and early modern), rune stones, and topographical analysis (Sanmark 2009). The problem of locating assembly sites on the ground was exacerbated by the lack of a methodology for archaeological investigation. A program of excavation was started in Iceland in 2002, and a number of sites have been investigated there, providing valuable insights, particularly into the construction of “thing booths” (see, e.g., Friðriksson 1994:104–145, 2004; Friðriksson et al. 2005a, 2005b, 2007). Since 2004, Sarah Semple and I have developed and implemented a method for field investigation of assembly sites, involving full-scale geophysical and topographical surveys and targeted trial-trenching, with successful results from sites in Sweden and England (Sanmark and Semple 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Sanmark et al., in press). Using these results, it is now time to revisit and re-examine the Greenlandic administrative organization and the proposed assembly sites.

### The “Booth Sites” at Brattahlíð and Garðar

The two potential assembly sites at Brattahlíð in Eiríksfjörður and Garðar in Einarsfjörður have been identified through a combination of written and archaeological evidence (Clemmensen 1911, Nørlund 1929, Nørlund and Stenberger 1934). Both sites are located in the Eastern Settlement, and it is possible that there were other Greenlandic thing sites as well, perhaps most likely at the high-status farm of Herjólfssnes (Ikigaat) in the southernmost area of the Eastern Settlement, and somewhere in the Western Settlement.

The Brattahlíð and Garðar sites share a number of characteristics that together support the identification of these as assemblies. The characteristics have been identified through the study of assembly sites in the Scandinavian homelands and Iceland (Brink 2004a, b; Friðriksson 1994; Larsson 1998; Sanmark 2009; Sanmark and Semple 2008b, 2010; A. Whitmore, Cambridge University, Cambridge, UK, unpubl. data). It is important to note that not all identified “assembly features” occur at every single site and that there also are other characteristics that have not been recorded in Greenland (such as rune stones, standing stones, route ways, and “thing” mounds).

We should not therefore envisage a uniform model of assembly sites across the areas of Norse settlement and a case against such a model on a northwest European scale has indeed been presented (Sanmark 2009; Sanmark and Semple 2008b, 2010). What can be expected, however, is that sites located within the same region, as demonstrated for Iceland and parts of Sweden, share a larger number of traits (Friðriksson 1994; Sanmark 2009; Sanmark and Semple 2008b, 2010) than do sites from entirely different regions. An overarching study of assembly sites across the areas of Norse settlement in the west is currently underway and will provide a thorough review of this issue.<sup>11</sup> The list below contains features previously linked to assembly sites, which have also been recorded at the Greenlandic booth sites.

- Written evidence
- Presence of “thing booths”
- Presence of hearths
- Closeness to harbours/water routes
- Closeness to fresh water
- Delimitation from settlements

### Thing booths

So far, these temporary turf structures have only been recorded in Iceland. These booths are where the participants stayed during the meetings of both the district assemblies and the *alþing* at Þingvellir (Friðriksson 1994:106, Fig. 4.1.). One reason why the booths were needed was presumably that participants had far to travel to the sites, as the thing districts appear to have been rather large (Friðriksson 1994:106, Fig. 4.1.). This should be contrasted to the situation in Viking/early medieval Sweden, where no booths or other temporary structures are known from assemblies. Here, administrative districts were rather small, and most settlements seem to have been located less than a day’s walk, or a few hours by horse, from the thing sites (Sanmark 2009). The only Scandinavian parallel to the booths is the structures used for temporary occupation at the Norwegian Iron Age “courtyard sites” (*tunanlegg*), which since 2005 have been interpreted as thing sites (Olsen 2005, Storli 2006).<sup>12</sup>

Overall, the Greenlandic evidence suggests that booths would also have been needed for thing meetings there. Firstly, the thing districts in Greenland were presumably rather large, in the same way that the parishes in the Eastern Settlement seem to have been significantly larger than parishes in even the most sparsely populated areas of Iceland (Vésteinson 2010:145–48). Secondly, due to the low population density, assemblies may well have served a variety of purposes, and participants may therefore have spent more time at the sites than what was needed just for the thing meetings. Vésteinson (2010:148) asserted that social occasions in Greenland must

have been “separated by long periods of isolation”, and gatherings of all kinds are therefore likely to have been important to the population.

One difference between the Icelandic and the Greenlandic booths is that the Greenlandic ones are much lighter in structure (Friðriksson 1994:128–129, 2004:49–51; Friðriksson et al. 2004:32–34; Nørlund and Stenberger 1934:113–114). A similarity, on the other hand, is the variations in booth sizes and construction methods within sites. These most likely mirror the hierarchy of society, which would have been particularly important to visualize at the assembly meetings. Such differentiation has been observed at Icelandic sites, most notably at Þingvellir, where the large bishop’s booth has been excavated (Roberts 2004). In connection to this point, it is important to mention that booths for temporary/seasonal occupation have also been recorded at medieval trading sites in Iceland, such as Gásir in Eyjafjörður and Gautavík in Berufjörður (Gardiner and Mehler 2007).

The proposed Greenlandic assembly sites are located very close to the farms, in contrast to assemblies in Iceland and Scandinavia. This proximity means that the most influential people may have stayed at the farms during meetings rather than in the booths. It is, however, unlikely that there would have been room for everyone at the farms. The absence of written sources means that it is not known who was obliged to attend the assembly meetings. Regulations in other Norse areas vary greatly; in Norway, all freemen were required to attend the district assemblies, while other members of society could do so if they wished (The Law of the Gulathing 131, The Law of the Frostathing I; Larson 1935). The few surviving regulations in Iceland for the district assemblies are rather vague and only state that three chieftains (*goði*) should attend these meetings (Dennis et al. 1980:2, 53). It is clear, though, that other people would also have been required to be present at the meetings, or would have had an interest in attending, such as “defendants”, “prosecutors”, and witnesses (Dennis et al. 1980:53–54). If the Greenlandic booth sites functioned as *alþings* (which will be discussed below), only select representatives would have been called. The number would have depended on population levels, and it would be rather precarious to provide an estimate, as the numbers of representatives from other Norse areas are highly variable. In Iceland, 39 chieftains were to attend the *alþing*, but as with the district assemblies, it is clear that other people attended the meetings, since “assembly participants” at Þingvellir had the right to stay in the booth belonging to their chieftain (Dennis et al. 1980:53–54, 57; Friðriksson 1994:106). In the Gulathing district of Norway, the number of representatives at the lawthing varied over time be-

tween ca. 375 and 148 (Helle 2001:65). Regardless of whether the sites functioned as district assemblies or *alþings*, it cannot be assumed that everyone would have attended the meetings. Sources from Norway suggest that low attendance was at times a problem (Helle 2001:68–69). It is difficult to approximate the population in Norse Greenland, but it was probably around a few thousand at any time (Arneborg et al. 2002:77). In the Eastern Settlement, the number of farms has been estimated to between 190 and 265 (Vésteinsson 2010:144–145). If we take a low estimate of one person from every third farm, this amounts to between 63 and 88 people, plus any participants from the Western Settlement, which would have been too many to house at the farms. An even lower estimate of one person from every five farms would result in between 38 and 53 people from just the Eastern Settlement, which still would be too many to accommodate on the farms.

### Hearths

Hearths and cooking pits in large numbers have been excavated at several assembly sites, such as Anundshögen, Västmanland in Sweden, Bommestad, Vestfold in Norway, and the courtyard sites (Johansen and Søbstad 1978; Samdal and Björkan Bukkemoen 2008; Sanmark et al., in press; Storli 2001, 2006).<sup>13</sup> Bommestad is particularly interesting, despite its early date, as a total of 485 cooking pits and 64 hearths from the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age were recorded there (Samdal and Björkan Bukkemoen 2008:259–262).<sup>14</sup>

### Harbors and water routes

Previous mapping of assembly sites in Scandinavia suggests that access and communication both in terms of land and water routes was central to the selection of the sites (Brink 2004a, b; Larsson 1998; Sanmark 2009). The importance of proximity to routes can be most clearly illustrated by the example of Södermanland, where the oldest recorded site within each district was located at the convergence of a number of different communications routes, most often a combination of land and water (Sanmark 2009).

### Freshwater

All medieval sites in Södermanland are located in the close vicinity of streams or lakes, where there also are fords or crossing points (Sanmark 2009). In Iceland too, the general pattern is for thing sites to be located near a freshwater source, often a large or tributary river (A. Whitmore, unpubl. data). These bodies of water would have been sources of drinking water, but may also have functioned as boundaries, as special regulations applied at the sites (Sanmark 2009:231–233). Written sources refer to the *vébönd*,

i.e., the sacred enclosure that according to some written sources was erected at thing sites, and there may also have been other types of boundaries (see, e.g., Brink 2004a:205, Dennis et al. 1980:58).

Brattahlíð is interesting in that the site is enclosed on one side by an earthwork boundary. Physical enclosures have only rarely been observed at assembly sites elsewhere; one of the few possible examples is the newly excavated 180-m-long row of upright posts at Anundshög (Sanmark and Semple 2008a; Sanmark et al., in press). As many sites in Scandinavia are now surrounded by heavily ploughed fields, this rarity may not be surprising. The favorable circumstances for preservation in Greenland may be the reason why earthwork delimitations can be identified there in particular.

### Delimitation from settlements

This criteria is rather hard to define. What seems clear is that thing sites in Scandinavia and Iceland were not located very close to farms, although a major farm was generally located in the wider area (Johansen and Søbstad 1978; Sanmark 2009:233; Storli 2001, 2006; Vésteinsson 2006; A. Whitmore, unpubl. data). I am currently investigating this issue across the areas of Norse settlement, and a more detailed study is forthcoming.<sup>15</sup> As will be demonstrated below, although circumstances in Greenland are rather different from those in Iceland and Scandinavia, this criterion can still be seen to apply here.

### Evidence of a Thing Site at Brattahlíð

There is no direct reference to a thing site or meeting at Brattahlíð, but according to the written

sources, this location was where the lawmen resided. The sources are of varying quality, with some being more questionable than others. *Grænlandinga þáttir* reports that Sokki Þórisson, chieftain at Brattahlíð around 1123 and presumably also lawspeaker<sup>16</sup>, summoned and presided over a thing meeting concerning the need for an episcopal seat in Greenland. There is no mention of where this meeting was held (Krogh 1967:93, Nørlund and Stenberger 1934:115, Seaver 1996:62–63, Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1935:273). The mid-14<sup>th</sup>-century text by the Norwegian priest Ivar Bardarson stated that the lawmen always lived at Brattahlíð (Halldórsson 1978:136). Finally, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century poem, *Skáld-Helga rímur*, supposedly based on a lost saga, claim that Helgi Þórðarson was a lawspeaker who lived at Brattahlíð in the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Grove 2009:46, Jónsson 1905–1912 I:161, Seaver 1996:62–63).

The Brattahlíð site as a whole had four Norse farms (Ø28, Ø29, Ø29A, and Ø29B), each of which consisted of a number of buildings. Apart from dwelling houses, there were a range of ancillary structures including byres, storehouses, and animal pens (Fig. 1; Arneborg 2006:23–41). Both written and archaeological evidence suggests that Brattahlíð was a chieftain's farm from the time of settlement (Arneborg 2000:310–11, Meldgaard 1964).

In 1932, ruin group Ø28A was investigated, less than one km from the dwelling houses of farms Ø28 and Ø29. At the site, 13 booths were recorded (ruins 31–36 and 38–44), of which some were excavated. It was these finds that first led scholars to suggest that an assembly site had been identified. The booths were built directly on the shingle, with low turf walls on light stone foundations, over which tents were

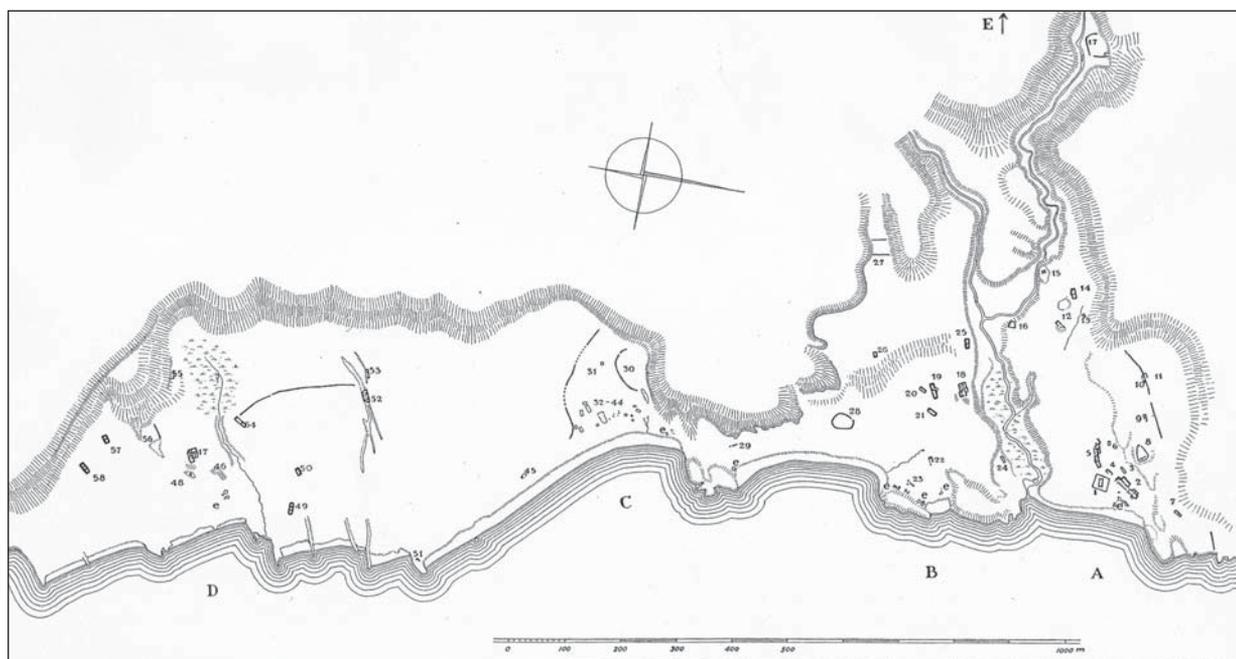


Figure 1. Site plan of Brattahlíð with the assembly site. From Nørlund and Stenberger 1934: Plate 1.

presumably erected when the structures were in use (Fig. 2; Arneborg 2006:37, Friðriksson 1994:107, Nørlund and Stenberger 1934:107). The structures were so faint that they “had been made almost unrecognizable by the blowing away of the surface soil” (Nørlund and Stenberger 1934:107). They varied greatly in size, the smallest ones (34–35) had internal measurements of ca. 3 x 2 m, while others were much larger, with the biggest one (38) measuring 20 x 9 m. No floor layers, fire places, middens, or indeed any evidence of human habitation were found, apart from the largest booth, which possibly had a fire place in the corner (Arneborg 2006:3, Nørlund and Stenberger 1934:109–101). The sites may have housed more people over time than indicated by the present evidence. The ephemeral nature of the structures means that many other structures may have completely eroded. It is also possible that people stayed at the site in “proper” tents, which would have left no traces at all (cf. Clemmensen 1911:340).

Amongst the booths, an area (37) of ca. 25 x 15 m was excavated, revealing 12–15 hearths, including two ember pits. Two of the hearths were typical long fires, while others were less structured, and some only identifiable as burnt stones and ash. Many of these hearths were so close together that they cannot have been in use at the same time. It is possible that the long fires were once inside booths, which have not been preserved, but it is also possible that, as with the rest of the hearths, they were always open-air features (Arneborg 2006:31, Nørlund and Stenberger 1934:110–113). Whatever interpretation is offered for ruin group Ø28A, the hearths must be the remains of gatherings of people assembled in this place for short periods of time (Nørlund and Stenberger 1934:113).

An interesting feature is the harbor, where the water was deep enough for ships to dock (Fig.3). This possible landing place was situated approximately 200 m from the booths. At this site, a warehouse

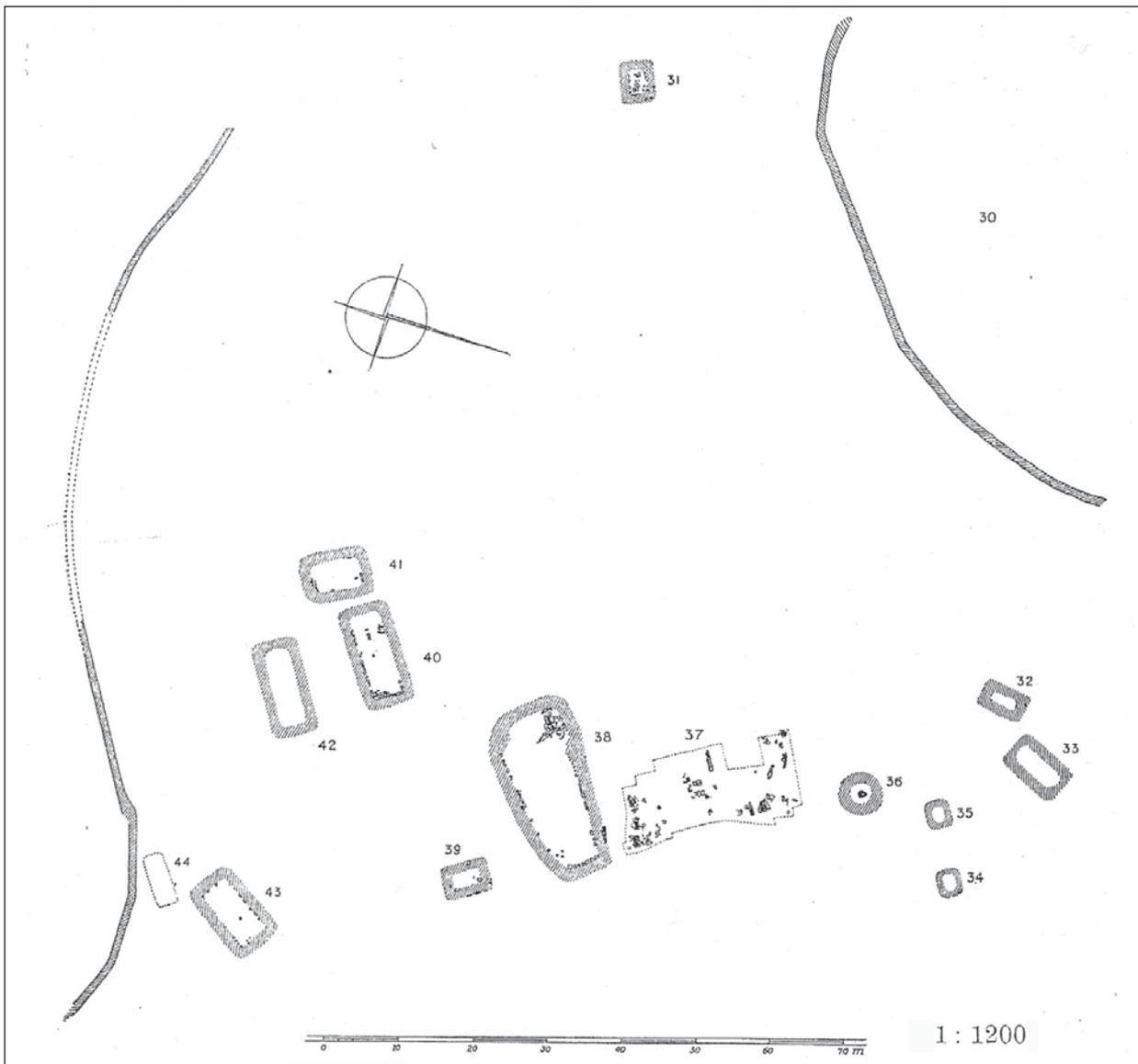


Figure 2. The booths at Brattahlíð (ruin group Ø28 A). From Nørlund and Stenberger (1934:107).

has been documented, which is interesting since the written sources refer to a trading site at Brattahlíð (Arneborg 2006:34, Nørlund and Stenberger 1934:116).<sup>17</sup> It is important to note, however, that this building could just as well have belonged to farm Ø29. Research on the connection between trade and assembly is only in its infancy and will be examined by Natascha Mehler as part of The Assembly Project.<sup>18</sup> Initial analyses in Scandinavia and Iceland suggest at least some degree of overlap, as demonstrated at, e.g., Komnes (Buskerud) in Norway and Gamla Uppsala, Folklandstingstad (Uppland), Strängnäs (Södermanland), and Roma (Gotland) in Sweden. Evidence of activities at these sites is mostly found in written sources and place-names, such as the “Disting” market that is said to have been held during the thing meetings at Gamla Uppsala. There is also archaeological data, perhaps most clearly seen at Folklandstingstad and Roma (Beronius Jörpeland and Bäck 2003, Callissendorff 1966, Fønnebø 2008:101, Granlund 1958, Myrberg 2008).

Another feature of possible significance is the animal pen (30), located immediately north of the booths. This pen, with a diameter of 70 m, was the largest at Brattahlíð (Nørlund and Stenberger 1934:102, 106), and may have been for the thing participants’ horses. That special arrangements for

horses were made is indicated by evidence from Tingwall, Shetland, where thing participants from different districts were obliged to leave their horses at two different farms (Brand 1883:184, Smith 2009:41).<sup>19</sup>

Finally, the booth site was separated from farm Ø28 by a dyke that curves down from the hillside to the shore. At the northern end, the site was demarcated by natural features, as below the pen there was a rocky outcrop and a small watercourse (Fig. 1; Nørlund and Stenberger 1934:106–7).<sup>20</sup> In this way, the site was more or less enclosed, and its location between the two farms (Ø29 and Ø28) accentuated, providing the site with a sense of neutrality, even if it was under the authority of the Brattahlíð chieftain families and/or lawmen.

### Evidence of a Thing Site at Garðar

For Garðar, the written evidence is stronger, as both *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Grænlendinga þáttur* state that thing meetings were held here (Krogh 1967:167, Røkke 1933:89–103, Seaver 1996:62, Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1935:273, Þórólfsson and Jónsson 1943:229). The Garðar site as a whole consisted of the bishop’s farm (Ø47) with a large number of ancillary structures, including the cathedral and churchyard.



Figure 3. View from the harbor of Brattahlíð thing site. Photograph © Jennica Einebrant Svensson.

Written evidence suggests that Garðar was a large and wealthy farm, established during the first settlement period, although there is no archaeological evidence to confirm this (Krogh 1967:10, Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1935:245). Two other farms (Ø48 and 49) are recorded ca. 1–1.5 km northwest of the episcopal farm (Fig. 4; Arneborg 2006:45–59; Clemmensen 1911:328, 340; Gulløv 2008:95).

In 1910, a number of “thing booths” were recorded by Mogens Clemmensen (1911:334–41) ca. 100 m north of the episcopal farm’s infield boundary (Fig. 4). Poul Nørlund was not convinced by Clemmensen’s interpretation until his own excavation

of the Brattahlíð booths, after which he agreed with Clemmensen (Nørlund 1929:127). Four of the booths (30–33) were of similar size, had walls made of a single row of stones placed directly on the ground, with no traces of turf walls or cultural layers either inside or around them. The fifth structure was larger and consisted of three rooms. The turf walls were higher and stood on a stone foundation. Below this structure, the ground was “uneven, through the depositing of rubbish”, which suggests the building was used as a dwelling (Nørlund and Stenberger 1934:115).

Knut Krogh at first agreed with Clemmensen’s and Nørlund’s interpretation, but later changed his

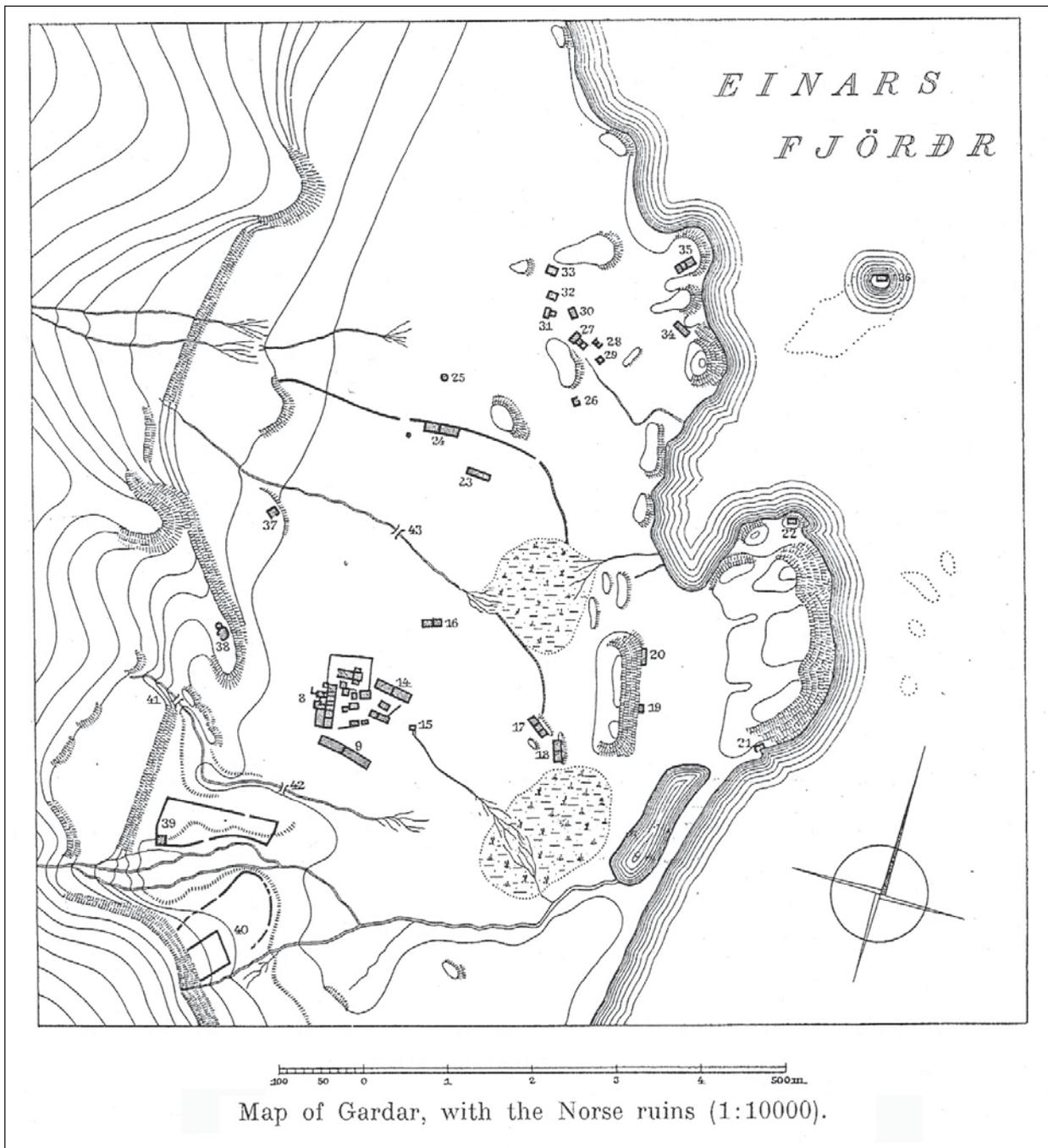


Figure 4. Site plan of Gardar. From Nørlund (1929:9).

mind and argued that structures 30–33 were “possibly” byres, while 27 was “possibly” a dwelling. It is important to note that Krogh did not provide any basis for his new interpretation (Gulløv 2008:99–100, Krogh 1974:72–73). He suggested that the thing booths were instead located on a promontory ca. 1 km, as the crow flies, north of the episcopal residence (No. 4 on Fig. 5). Here, Krogh identified five structures close to the shore, of which one (structure 3) has been subject to a trial excavation (Gulløv 2008). This intervention revealed 11<sup>th</sup>-century turf and stone walls and a flagstone floor. There were no bones or faunal remains to suggest the building had been a byre, and a rivet head was seen to rule out Palaeo-Eskimos. Gulløv (2008:95 and 99) concluded, mostly through analogies with the Icelandic material, that the five structures were presumably thing booths. Despite this identification and Krogh’s doubts about Clemmensen’s booths, Gulløv argued that the Garðar thing was located next to the episcopal farm, on the site originally identified (Gulløv 2008:99–100). Based on the accounts in *Fóstbræðra saga*, he suggested that the newly investigated booths were for thing participants from another district, possibly Eiríksfjörður (Gulløv 2008:101). The saga reads: “The summer after these events, people gathered at the Gardar Assembly in Einarsfjord. Those who came from Eiríksfjord had covered their booths, and they were separated from

the place where the Einarsfjord people had their camp by the higher ground that lay between them.” (Hreinsson 1997:376).<sup>21</sup>

Gulløv’s suggestion is interesting, particularly as there is written evidence from Iceland suggesting that chieftains and the people who belonged to their “assembly group” all stayed in different areas at Þingvellir (e.g., Dennis et al. 1980:57). Beyond this, however, Gulløv’s idea fails to convince, as it seems unlikely that some people would have stayed more than a 1.5-km walk from the assembly proceedings. So far, survey and archaeological investigations of the very large Þingvellir site have revealed a significant number of potential booths, the majority of which are to be found within an area measuring ca. 425 x 175 m (Roberts 2004:12, fig.1). Another difference is the flagstone floor in structure 3, as this has not been recorded in any of the excavated Icelandic thing booths (Friðriksson 2004; Friðriksson et al. 2005a, 2005b, 2007) and may indicate a different function.

Turning back to the site originally suggested by Clemmensen, there are several other interesting features. The first is a fireplace, 70 cm long, which was found ca. 100 m east of booth 27 (Clemmensen 1911:338, Nørlund 1929:127), and there may well be other such features here.<sup>22</sup> The Brattahlíð hearths were found as a result of the deturfing of a large area for excavation after features had been discerned on



Figure 5. Overview of Garðar and Einarsfjörður. 1. Garðar. 2. Garðar þing. 3. The point referred to in the *Fóstbræðra saga* as *leití* (higher ground). 4. The suggested booths for visitors. 5. Eiði. Photograph © Jeppe Møhl. From Gulløv (2008:102).

the surface (Nørlund and Stenberger 1934:110–13). No such investigation has been carried out at Garðar, but this would be an interesting focus for future fieldwork.

The Garðar booths are located in the immediate vicinity of a good natural harbor, ca. 100–150 m southeast of the structures (Clemmensen 1911:340). On the harbor promontory, as well as on the nearby island, possible warehouses/boathouses have been identified (Arneborg 2006:56, Krogh 1974:73). As at Brattahlíð, the link between the possible warehouses and the booth site is not clear and they may have been for the use of the episcopal farm.

The circular pen (25) located ca. 100 m away from the booths has, in the same way as the pen at Brattahlíð, been linked to the horses of the assembly participants (Gulløv 2008:100). There are some important differences between the two pens, however. The pen at Garðar is characteristically located just outside the farm's infield boundary, and could easily be linked to the episcopal estate (Arneborg 2006:56, Krogh 1982:93). It is also very small, hence the usefulness of this for the assembly meetings is questionable, and its presence near the booths may be coincidental.

A more interesting feature is that the episcopal farm's infield boundary means that the proposed assembly site was delimited from the bishop's residence. As shown above, the other two farms (Ø48 and 49) were located more than one km away (Fig. 4; Clemmensen 1911:328, 340). Thus, the Garðar thing site was clearly separated from settlements. This delimitation was further enhanced by the watercourse that appeared by structure 27 (Fig. 4; Clemmensen 1911:335). As with the Brattahlíð site, this does not mean that the site was located on neutral ground. The proximity to the farm and cathedral could also suggest that the booths were used as accommodation for churchgoers attending Mass in the cathedral, rather than assemblies.

It has been suggested that the Garðar thing site was moved slightly over time. This suggestion is based on the reference to a meeting at *Eiði* found in *Grænlandinga þátttr*. This meeting took place after a prolonged inheritance dispute, which remained unsolved after several attempts at the thing. Einar Sökkason then offered to act as an arbitrator between the parties, and a midsummer arbitration was held at *Eiði* (Krogh 1967:177–78, Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1935:285). The name *Eiði* is not known from the Norse place-names in Greenland, but Finnur Jónsson has demonstrated that this name refers to the isthmus between Einarsfjörður and Eiríksfjörður (No. 5 on Fig. 5; Gulløv 2008:101, Jónsson 1898:290–299). Gulløv suggested that by this time, the visitors' booths must have been moved to *Eiði*, as Garðar had now been established as the episcopal seat (Gulløv 2008:101). This may be the case, but since

the meeting at *Eiði* is described as an “arbitration”, not a “thing”, this meeting was most likely a private settlement, held away from the thing site (Sanmark 2006, with references).

A final issue that needs to be addressed is arrangements for lawmen and other people giving oral presentations at the assembly sites. Icelandic law contains references to the “law rock” (*lögberg*), i.e., the platform for the speakers at the thing, best known from Þingvellir (Dennis et al. 1980:59, Lárusson 1966). It could be argued that there is no point in searching for features which, according to written sources, should be present at thing sites. While keeping this point in mind, it is also important to consider certain aspects that would be crucial for the functioning of the assembly meetings, such as acoustics and speaker arrangements. Greenlandic meetings most likely took place outside, close to the booths, although in cases of extreme weather, they may have been held at the farms or in church (Sanmark and Semple 2010:107).<sup>23</sup> In Sweden, no meetings are recorded to have taken place inside until the 16<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when “thing cottages” came into use (Sanmark 2009:230). Outdoor speaker arrangements have been discussed for assemblies in other geographical areas, perhaps most strikingly evidenced by the “amphitheatre” at the royal site of Yeavinger, Northumbria, England (Hope-Taylor 1977:119–21,161). There are also examples of smaller-scale arrangements, such as “the Stone of Destiny” at Scone, Perth, and Kinross, Scotland (Driscoll 2004) and “benches” or “stalls” at Anglo-Saxon assemblies. In Anglo-Saxon England, as well as in Sweden, assembly mounds have been seen as platforms for speakers (Lindqvist 1921:96, Meaney 1995:36). Without making too much of this, it is worthwhile pointing out that just above the possible thing booths at Garðar, there is a noticeable rock, which would function well for a person addressing an audience below. It is ca. 1 m high with a very flat surface, and the eastern edge is facing the level area around the booths (Figs. 6 and 7). At Brattahlíð, there is a rocky outcrop just north of the booths, which, although much less striking, could possibly have had a similar function. It must, of course, be pointed out that a variety of other arrangements could have been made, perhaps in line with the comparative evidence presented above.

### Herjólfssnes (Ikigaat)

There is no written or archaeological evidence of an assembly site at Herjólfssnes in Herjólfssfjörður. It can, however, be postulated that a district assembly site was established also

by this farm. Herjólfssnes was situated ca. 120 km southeast of Garðar, as the crow flies. A total of ten Norse ruins have been recorded: a church and churchyard with at least 200 burials, a dwelling house with a “banqueting hall”, plus various ancillary buildings. Herjólfssnes was clearly a high-status farm, which according to written sources was settled by contemporaries of Erik the Red (Arneborg 2006:74–75). Its location is atypical, as the farm was built in an exposed position right on the Atlantic coast. This situation may, however, be exactly the reason why Herjólfssnes became so important; it was the first stopping point in Greenland and the starting point for Atlantic voyages. Herjólfssnes may also have functioned as an important trading site and collection place for hunting products from the surrounding area (Arneborg 2006:79–87). Altogether, the evidence provides good reason for the need of an assembly site here.

### Conclusion

After thorough review of all available evidence, we are left with at least five different options for the two booth sites:

1. The Garðar booths were used as a camp for church visitors.

2. The two sites were used for trading only.
3. Garðar, with written evidence of thing meetings, was an assembly site and Brattahlíð, with written evidence of trade, was a trading site.
4. Both Garðar and Brattahlíð were assembly sites.
5. Both Garðar and Brattahlíð were thing sites where trade also took place.

The striking similarities between the two sites at Brattahlíð and Garðar, both in terms of archaeological features and landscape characteristics, strongly suggest that they were indeed Greenlandic assemblies. The absence of written evidence of thing meetings at Brattahlíð does not mean that this site should be dismissed, as we are dealing with an area and a time period for which written evidence is extremely sparse. Another issue which goes against the identification of Brattahlíð as an assembly is that the lawmen seem to have lived here. Proximity between the lawman’s farm and assemblies has not been observed anywhere else and could indeed suggest that Brattahlíð was *not* an assembly. It is, however, important to point out that both these Greenlandic booth sites were located close to high-status farms. The reason for this may be the structure of society, as Norse Greenlandic society, in contrast to that of the Viking homelands, appears to have been a “two-tier society”. In Greenland, there were a few powerful



Figure 6. The possible “law rock” at Garðar, seen from the east. Photograph © Alexandra Sanmark.

chieftains at the top and a rather homogenous lower class (Vésteinsson 2010:147). The chieftains may therefore have been in a more powerful situation, where they could more openly take charge of the assembly sites, and a location close to their farm may not have been as problematic as in other areas.

As demonstrated above, there is Scandinavian evidence of trade taking place alongside thing meetings, which lends credence to the suggestion that this may have been the case in Greenland as well. Considering the distance between farms and the relative scarcity of social interaction, it seems even more plausible that such opportunities for trade and exchange would have been taken. The evidence however suggests that the sites were primarily assemblies. Trading activities are unlikely to have been allowed in the designated area where the meetings were held, but rather some distance away (cf. Myrberg 2008:138).

The presence of two thing sites so close to each other is not in itself surprising. Comparative evidence shows that Viking Age assemblies were often established by neighboring chieftains (Norr and Sanmark 2008:385–95, Sanmark and Semple 2008b:250–51). As time went on, sites went out of use and/or were moved when power relations and

settlement patterns changed (Sanmark 2009). In Greenland, there could be several reasons for having two assembly sites in such close proximity. Without any archaeological dating evidence, I would like to suggest four possible models of development:

1. The sites were contemporary and used for different types of meetings.
2. Both sites were established by chieftains living in each fjord and were contemporary and competing.
3. Both sites were established by chieftains living in each fjord and were contemporary and competing. Garðar was the most long-lived due to the establishment of the bishopric.
4. Brattahlíð is the older of the two. Garðar was established at the same time as the bishopric, and Brattahlíð was gradually abandoned in favor of Garðar.

By analogy with Scandinavia, the ideas of competing or successive sites seem the most plausible. It would be unlikely to have two sites that were so close together, and so similar, for different types of meetings. The creation of thing sites must be seen as a sign of a chieftain taking control, or attempting to take control, of the judicial system in the area. An added attraction for chieftains was that they could presumably take a portion of the fines, in the same



Figure 7. View of the harbor from the possible “law rock” at Garðar. Photograph © Alexandra Sanmark.

way that medieval kings did (Helle 2001:150–51). Early thing sites could have been established at either Garðar or Brattahlíð, although the written evidence is slightly more in favor of Brattahlíð, as they attribute the farm with a number of powerful chieftains. If the meeting mentioned by *Grænlandinga þáttr*, where Sokki Þórisson discussed the need for an episcopal seat in Greenland, actually took place, this may have been held at Brattahlíð.

It is difficult to determine at what point in time thing sites with buildings and other features at a designated spot would have been established. It is clear that some degree of cohesive community structure must first have been present. Some clues regarding this can be found in the use of the churchyards. “Tjodhild’s church” at Brattahlíð, which, although very small, is one of the earliest churches in Greenland, erected more or less at settlement. In this churchyard, there were 143 burials dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It could therefore be argued that during this century, when at least some people brought their dead to Brattahlíð for burial, the assembly site may have been created as well. It is not possible to carry out a similar analysis for Garðar, as there are no dates for the earliest burials. According to *Grænlandinga þáttr*, the bishopric was established around 1123, although it cannot be ascertained when the first bishop arrived in Greenland (Arneborg 2006:42, Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1935:273). The bishop’s grave from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps of Olaf (1246–1280), shows they were in place at least by this time (Arneborg 2006:50).

By analogy with developments in other Norse areas, it seems most likely that Garðar was the most successful thing site in the long run (i.e., option 3 or 4). In order to determine which of the two is more likely, fieldwork with a clear sampling strategy to obtain dating evidence, would need to be carried out. In the absence of this, we need to rely on comparative evidence. A clear pattern has been demonstrated in Scandinavia, where assembly sites gradually moved away from the old traditional sites to parish churches. The main reason was presumably that the churches were taking over the as the natural meetings places (Sanmark 2009). It is therefore possible that the Garðar site, some time after the establishment of the bishopric, perhaps in the course of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, became the Greenlandic alþing, and it is presumably this site that is referred to in the letter of 1389.<sup>24</sup> The lawmen most likely continued to live at Brattahlíð. A situation like this is unknown for the homelands, where the general assemblies were firmly located at places with significant history and attachments in the landscape. However, in relatively newly settled Greenland, with few human-made features and/or little history to relate to, there was more room for competition and shifts in the political geography.

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Tingwall in Rendall and Dingieshowe (ON *Tings-haugr*, i.e. Thing Mound) in Deerness (Barnes 1974:383-84, Crawford 1987:206-7, Fellows-Jensen 1996:23).
- <sup>2</sup>Tingwall in Mainland Shetland is the most easily identifiable from the written evidence and place-names. Parish names such as Sandsting, Aithsting, Nesting, and Delting indicate the existence of local things (Fellows-Jensen 1996:22-23, Smith 2009).
- <sup>3</sup>Tinganes, a peninsula by Tórshavn, served as the Altþing (Barnes 1983:383, Smith 2009:38).
- <sup>4</sup>Friðriksson 1994:108-45.
- <sup>5</sup>E.g., *Tiongal*, now Cnoc an Tiongalairidh, Isle of Lewis, and *Tinwhil*, Isle of Skye (Fellows-Jensen 1996:23).
- <sup>6</sup>Tynwald Hill, Isle of Man (Fellows-Jensen 1996:23, Griffiths 2010:62-3).
- <sup>7</sup>“Thingmote” or “Thengmotha”, Dublin (Griffiths 2010:64).
- <sup>8</sup>Dingwall, Ross-Shire and Tinwald, Dumfriesshire (Fellows-Jensen 1996:24).

<sup>9</sup>E.g., Dingbell Hill, Northumberland, Thingwall, Wirral, *Thingwala*, Yorkshire North Riding, and Thingwall, Lancashire (Fellows-Jensen 1996: 24-25, Griffiths 2010:64).

<sup>10</sup>No assembly sites are known from the areas of Viking settlement in Eastern Europe, but this is most likely due to differences in research traditions, rather than an unequivocal testament to the complete absence of such sites.

<sup>11</sup>This is the focus of my study “Assembly and Colonisation”, which forms parts of The Assembly Project, funded by HERA, see [http://www.khm.uio.no/prosjekter/assembly\\_project/assembly\\_and\\_colonisation.html](http://www.khm.uio.no/prosjekter/assembly_project/assembly_and_colonisation.html). Accessed 28 August 2010.

<sup>12</sup>These structures are however of a much more substantial nature than the Icelandic thing booths and arranged in different fashions. Previous interpretations of the courtyard sites have varied mostly from military barracks to farms (Johansen and Søbstad 1978, Storli 2001). The administrative districts relating to the courtyard sites are currently being assessed by Frode Iversen in his research for The Assembly Project ([http://www.khm.uio.no/prosjekter/assembly\\_project/creating\\_kingdoms.html](http://www.khm.uio.no/prosjekter/assembly_project/creating_kingdoms.html). Accessed 5 September 2010).

<sup>13</sup>The hearths at Anundshög have previously been interpreted as settlement remains, although Stig Welinder suggested they may be traces of rituals connected to the burials at the site (Welinder 1990:62).

<sup>14</sup>These features have been <sup>14</sup>C-dated to 1210 BC-AD 430, with a particular emphasis on AD 0-200 (Samdal and Björkan Bukkemoen 2008:259-62).

<sup>15</sup>The Assembly Project, see [http://www.khm.uio.no/prosjekter/assembly\\_project/](http://www.khm.uio.no/prosjekter/assembly_project/). Accessed 30 August 2010.

<sup>16</sup>The lawspeaker was the head of the legislature, an office replaced by a royally appointed lawman after Iceland’s union with Norway in 1264 (Lárusson 1965).

<sup>17</sup>Nørlund and Stenberger, however, argued that this was not a good harbor site, and that the written sources indicated that the harbor was further away from Brattahlíð. They also suggested that ruin 38 may have been a warehouse (Nørlund and Stenberger 1934:116). This seems rather unlikely if the hearth found in association with the walls was indeed inside this structure.

<sup>18</sup>“The Thing in the North”, see [http://www.khm.uio.no/prosjekter/assembly\\_project/the\\_thing.html](http://www.khm.uio.no/prosjekter/assembly_project/the_thing.html). Accessed 7 July 10

<sup>19</sup>This tradition was recorded in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and is of unknown antiquity (Smith 2009:41, Brand 1883:184).

<sup>20</sup>The watercourse is no longer visible.

<sup>21</sup>*Um sumarit eptir þessa atburði fóru menn til þings í Garða í Einarsfjorð. Þeir ór Eiríksfirði höfðu tjaldat búðir sínar. ok var leiti á meðal ok þess, er þeir höfðu tjaldat ór Einarsfirði* (Þórólfsson and Jónsson 1943:229).

<sup>22</sup>This was Clemmensen’s structure XIV, which Nørlund reinterpreted as a hearth (Clemmensen 1911:338, Nørlund 1929:127).

<sup>23</sup>One example of a meeting held inside is that of May 1307 held in the archdeacons’ kirk, just above Tingwall (Ballantyne and Smith 1999:2, Smith 2009:41).

<sup>24</sup>This has also been suggested by Michael Barnes and Kirsten Seaver, but without supporting evidence (Barnes 1974:383, Seaver 1996:62).