

# Skriðuklaustur – 1550

## An Icelandic monastery at the end of the Middle Ages



**Image:** Reconstructed interior of the church at Skriðuklaustur, c. 1550 (Credit: Open Virtual Worlds).

Skriðuklaustur was the last Catholic monastery to be founded in Iceland before the Reformation. In June 1500 the farm of Skriða (in the valley of Fljótsdalur in eastern Iceland) was given to a community of Augustinian canons. However, there had already been religious activity on the site for some years before the official grant.

According to local legend, a fifteenth-century priest was going to visit a dying man in the valley of Fljótsdalur when he realised he had lost the bread and wine needed for the sacrament. A boy was sent out to look and miraculously found a full chalice of wine, and a paten holding the bread, standing on the grass by the farm at Skriða. A chapel was built on the site where the bread and wine were found. Later, the Augustinians located their church in the same place.

During the mid-sixteenth century religious change was imposed on Iceland by Christian III of Denmark. The Danish government forcibly introduced Protestantism, and in 1554 the monastery at Skriðuklaustur was closed and the lands given to a Lutheran pastor. The buildings occupied by the Augustinians fell into ruins, although the church continued in use for some generations. The site was eventually deconsecrated in 1792.

In the early twentieth century the writer Gunnar Gunnarsson bought Skriðuklaustur and built a house not far from the monastic remains. Both the monastic site and the house are now part of a [cultural institute](#) which is open to the public.

This digital reconstruction shows the monastery at Skriðuklaustur just before its closure in the 1550s. Both the exterior and interior have been reconstructed, revealing the probable appearance of spaces such as the dormitory, infirmary, kitchen, store-rooms, chapter-house and church.

### How Did We Know What to Reconstruct?

The remains of the monastery at Skriðuklaustur were found during [archaeological excavations](#) led by Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir between 2000 and 2012. The digs revealed both the foundations of the monastic buildings, and a wealth of wider information about life at Skriðuklaustur (including almost 300 burials). The majority of the buildings seem to have been constructed during the 1490s, although the church itself appears to have been completed around 1512. Excavations revealed that the walls were a combination of rocks, soil, and turf, which were then lined with wood. It is thought that wood was also used to support the roofs (which were probably covered in turf), although none of the roof supports have been found. In total over 13,000 artefacts and bones were excavated at Skriðuklaustur. Remarkably several fragments of sculpture were discovered, including most of a statue of [St Barbara](#). A number of documents also survive from the monastery, providing invaluable details on the chronology of the site and the names of people connected to the religious community.

### How Was the Reconstruction Created?

The buildings were originally modelled using SketchUp. They were then imported into Unreal Engine 4 (a platform for creating 3D virtual worlds). Videos and other media were created from the landscape in Unreal, including a museum exhibit for use with an Oculus VR headset.

### How Has the Reconstruction Been Used?

The reconstruction is part of a virtual reality exhibit in the [cultural centre](#) at Skriðuklaustur.

### Authors

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### Specialist Advisors

Skúli Björn Gunnarsson (Director of Skriðuklaustur).

### Project Funding

This reconstruction was part of the [CINE](#) project for digital heritage in northern environments. The project received funding from the European Union's [Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme](#).

### How to Access the Reconstruction?

There is a video preview of the reconstruction on [Vimeo](#).

A 360° tour of the reconstruction can be found on [Roundme](#).

There is also an associated [app](#) for the monastery site.

### Discover More

You can view 3D models of a number of objects found at Skriðuklaustur on [Sketchfab](#).

More information about the history of the monastery and how to visit the site can be found on the Skriðuklaustur [website](#).

You can see what the monastery site looks like today on [Google Maps](#).

**Date Reconstruction Published:** An initial digital representation of the monastery was produced soon after the excavations were completed. A fully revised and extended reconstruction was published in 2020.

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