

Glacier Trail – 1550

An early modern Icelandic trade route



Image: Fishing site & final stop on the glacial path from Skriðuklaustur, c. 1550 (Credit: Open Virtual Worlds).

In the year 1550, the monastery of Skriðuklaustur owned farms in the East-fjords in Iceland. Some were bought while others were donated to save the souls of relatives that passed away. One of the monastery's estates was in the Southeast of Iceland, on the other side of the great Vatnajökull glacier. To get there from Skriðuklaustur you had to travel for more than 100 kilometres and cross the glacier.

This estate was one of the most important for the monastery because it was a fishing site for the Icelandic cod. The monastery sent their men there to fish for part of the year, and the catch was dried for storage. The men brought back some of the fish to the Fljotsdalur valley where it provided important nutrition for the patients and people of the cloister. However, the majority of the catch was probably exported to Europe with Hanseatic ships as a financial resource for the monastery.

This reconstruction takes you along the glacier trail from Skriðuklaustur to Hálsahöfn and Borgarhöfn, the route that the fishermen travelled centuries ago. Along the path you'll see farms, a stave church, longhouses, the peak of the glacial, and the fishing site. In the 16th century, the Vatnajökull glacier was not the same hindrance that it is today, but one can wonder if climate change will make this area passable again.

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.

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). Research on the glacial path and the sites along the way were undertaken by Skúli Björn Gunnarsson. Potential crossings were explored through the use of aerial footage, land surveys, and on-foot trekking.

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

Sarah Kennedy (University of St Andrews), Skúli Björn Gunnarsson (Skriðuklaustur), Iain Oliver (University of St Andrews), Catherine Anne Cassidy (University of St Andrews), Bess Rhodes (University of St Andrews), Alan Miller (University of St Andrews).

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](#).

Discover More

You can watch a re-enactment of the multi-day journey to collect and bring back fish [here](#). You can see what the glacial site looks like today on [Google Maps](#).

You can also view a reconstruction of Skriðuklaustur Monastery on [Vimeo](#).

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

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

Date Reconstruction Published: The digital representation of the glacial trail was produced in 2021.

The project is funded by the Northern and Arctic Periphery Programme (ERDF).