

THE EARLY MEDIEVAL NORTH ATLANTIC

Val Dufeu

Fish Trade in Medieval North Atlantic Societies

An Interdisciplinary Approach
to Human Ecodynamics

Amsterdam
University
Press

Fish Trade in Medieval North Atlantic Societies

The Early Medieval North Atlantic

This series provides a publishing platform for research on the history, cultures, and societies that laced the North Sea from the Migration Period at the twilight of the Roman Empire to the eleventh century.

The point of departure for this series is the commitment to regarding the North Atlantic as a centre, rather than a periphery, thus connecting the histories of peoples and communities traditionally treated in isolation: Anglo-Saxons, Scandinavians / Vikings, Celtic communities, Baltic communities, the Franks, etc. From this perspective new insights can be made into processes of transformation, economic and cultural exchange, the formation of identities, etc. It also allows for the inclusion of more distant cultures – such as Greenland, North America, and Russia – which are of increasing interest to scholars in this research context.

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I Introduction

This research started years ago, while I was a history undergraduate student. History and especially medieval history has always been part of my life but it took me years to start seriously studying it at university. While in my third year and though I enjoyed nearly all the history modules, I felt that reading books and archives would never fulfil my thirst for learning and I wanted to 'touch' the past, to be more connected. When I expressed these feelings to one of my history lecturers, his answer was clear: I had to embark on doing some archaeology and by chance he knew a professor always keen to take on board new students. I must admit that I was very impressed by the professor whose reputation was very well established, making him one of the leading researchers in his field. Our first meeting went smoothly and he gave me a week to come up with a research proposal on Iceland that would justify my integration to the international team he belonged to. It did not take long to find my topic: try to date the emergence of commercial fishing in Iceland, since all I read on that topic had not convinced me. Since the mid-twentieth century, the history of the North Atlantic World has been the target of interdisciplinary studies undertaken by archaeologists and environmental scientists. Within those studies, however, early medieval Icelandic history has received little recent academic analysis from traditional historians. This is particularly evident regarding the historical evidence for the domestic economies and external trade relations of Iceland, where principally geo-archaeologists and environmental scientists have led research. Yet, in 1981, it was an economic historian, Bruce Gelsinger, who published the most recent and detailed research on medieval Icelandic trade and economic development. Whereas it could be argued that no one work can provide a thorough study of all aspects of a chosen topic, Gelsinger provides an in-depth study of Iceland's overseas trade which remains, to date, unparalleled. Furthermore, while some historians have researched on Iceland's past (Byock, Þorláksson and Jóhannesson amongst others) the historical literature shows that particular research questions, especially those regarding the function of fish in the economy of Iceland, remain unsettled. The lack of primary sources about Iceland's trade and traders, mode of subsistence, and the development of a non-subsistence economy led to the general acceptance of a view of Iceland's reliance on Norway as well as one of its minor participation in North European and Atlantic trade. This school of thought led, inevitably, to various assumptions such as Iceland's political dependency on Norway and its incapacity to elaborate

and develop trade – domestic and overseas – and particularly a specialised fish trade prior to the Norwegian take-over of the 1260s. The shortage of primary sources in addition to the lack of towns, currency, and executive government in Viking Age and early medieval Iceland might have played a key role in forming this perception of early Iceland.

Comprehension of past economic activities depends largely on our ability to identify whether the environment and/or social structures serve as basis for the development of economic patterns.¹ Since the 1980s, the history of the North Atlantic World has been the target of interdisciplinary studies, and both Iceland and the Faeroes have been in the foreground as ‘international laboratories’ for archaeological and paleo-environmental research. Yet, the use of paleo-environmental studies tends to remain marginal, and this has led inevitably to a considerable gap in the historical narratives of early medieval societies and especially for Iceland and the Faeroes’ environmental and economic histories. If the non-exploitation of environmental studies by medieval historians lies with the very nature of the discipline – written record is the historian’s tool *par excellence* rather than scientific empirical data – environmental history as an approach to the understanding and explanation of historical processes has become increasingly fashionable amongst scholars since ‘historians have always known that the natural environment plays a significant role in how humans behave’.² In 1998, Jón Thór stated that Icelandic scholars have paid little interest to the country’s fishing history, stressing that ‘few publications on fisheries can be deemed scholarly as they are not based on thorough research and relatively few contain bibliographies or references’.³ Furthermore, Thór suggested that those publications that concern localities and focus on the development of towns and villages are based on archival material, and that only four studies covered the period prior to 1800: S. Jonsen’s history of Westman Islands, G. Jónsson’s history of Stokkseyri fishing village, E. Gumðmundsson’s Fróðárhreppur history and Thór’s own research on the fishing community of Grindavík.⁴ Yet, two studies offered ‘general’ histories of Iceland’s fishing communities, Ludvík Kristjánsson’s *Íslenzkir*

1 Recker, ‘Economic Archaeology in the German Low Mountain Ranges’, in Helming, Scholkmann, and Untermann, (eds.), *Centre. Region. Periphery. Medieval Europe Basel 2002. Vol. 1: Keynote-Lectures to the Conference Sections 1-3*, p. 215.

2 Fay, ‘Environmental History: Nature at Work’ In *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 42, 1.

3 Thór, ‘Icelandic Fishing History Research. A Survey’, in Holm and Starkey, (eds.), *North Atlantic Fisheries*, p. 13.

4 Thór, ‘Icelandic Fishing History Research. A Survey’, in Holm and Starkey, (eds.), *North Atlantic Fisheries*, p. 13.

sjávarhættir (Icelandic sea venture) and Jón Jónsson's *Útgerð og aflbrögð við Íslands, 1300-1900* (*Fishing and catch of Iceland, 1300-1900* (my translation)).⁵ Ludvík Kristjánsson's work on Icelandic fishing communities, *Íslenzkir sjávarhættir*, based on archival and ethnographical research, presented a detailed narrative for those communities, while Jón Jónsson's research offered a view on the Icelandic fisheries within a wider European context, with, however, an emphasis on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. More recently, Louis Sicking and Darlene Breu-Ferreira published a series of papers under the umbrella title *Beyond the Catch, Fisheries of the North Atlantic, The North Sea and the Baltic, 900-1850*. Within this publication, Sophia Perdikaris and Thomas McGovern stressed that there remain gaps within the history of the North Atlantic, especially concerning what they described as the 'undocumented pre-fish event horizon, pre-Hanseatic Nordic maritime economy'. The difference between 'pre-fish horizon' and 'fish-horizon event' in archaeological deposits corresponding to increase of fish remains in archaeological deposits.

Fishing in the North Atlantic Scandinavian World: A Human-Environment Approach to the Role and Place of Iceland and the Faeroes

In the writing of Icelandic history, it seems that scholarship is marked chiefly by interest in modes of consciousness and of political development and overlook the settlers' earliest economic patterns. However, because humans cannot be dissociated from their natural surroundings and that, though this environment may appear passive, it clearly plays a key role in the development of human culture, religion, politics and economy, it seemed that research with an environmental perspective would help understanding of past economic and societal organisation in Viking Age and High Medieval Iceland. An interdisciplinary approach seemed likely to be more effective in the understanding and explanation of historical processes for it allows a shift from a theoretical methodology to an empirical one. Such an approach permits the maximising of data from other fields and to grasp how Iceland's settlers' behaviour had been shaped by the environment and *vice-versa* and how they understood and valued their seascape and landscape and their respective resources.

5 Kristjánsson, Íslenzkir sjávarhættir, Bókaútgáfa Mennigarsjóð (Reykjavík, 1980-1986). The five volumes were published as follow: Vol.1, 1980; Vol.2, 1981; Vol.3, 1983; Vol. 4, 1985; Vol. 5, 1986; Jónsson, J., *Útgerð og aflbrögð við Íslands, 1300-1900*.

While Iceland's natural environment allowed the development of economic activities based on farming and fishing, our understanding of the way exploitation of aquatic resources developed and worked within an existing economic system is incomplete. Written evidence for the domestic economies and external trade relations of both Iceland and the Faeroes is limited; recent archaeological and environmental data open the way for a re-assessment of the exploitation of marine resources and especially the function of fish in the socio-economic development of the two communities.

Historical enlightenment usually occurs by linking facts and processes to the wider historical context, national and/or international, in which they originated. The identified need for historical enquiry on the origin of Iceland's commercial fisheries established by Perdikaris *et al.* offered the opportunity to investigate and to define the timescale in which the research would take place, from the ninth to the late fifteenth centuries. The motive behind using this early historical period as a starting point was triggered by the fact that although the permanent settlement of Iceland and the first wave of Scandinavian colonists settling in the Faeroes are widely recognised as occurring from the ninth century, little or no research exists covering the period from this time up to the late thirteenth century. With specific regards to Iceland, it appeared interesting to understand how people adapt to a pristine environment. Meanwhile, the Faeroese research would be used as a rational analogy between both lands. It is imperative to understand the separate economic developments of both communities and how this could be investigated through the prism of environmental history, to further understanding of these communities' social economic development. Thór's analysis of academic research on Icelandic fisheries highlighted that these studies used annals and archival research, which limited their scope of investigation since there are no written sources prior to the twelfth century. Indeed, most textbooks which include discussion of fishing in Iceland, focus on post-late thirteenth century developments. This focus is due to the greater availability of archives; the dearth of Icelandic primary documents as well as the absence of references to Iceland in foreign sources prior to that period, which led to the view that Iceland did not participate in the economy of early medieval Europe, and hence had nothing of value to trade. As stated above, pre-1300 primary sources are scarce, and the materials that can be used to formulate any hypothesis are archaeological and paleo-environmental in nature. This limited survival of written sources requires the adoption of an innovative strategy, which employs an interdisciplinary approach. The introduction of archaeology and environmental sciences into an environmental historical research

project offers a unique opportunity to produce a thorough study grounded in the integration of 'hard' scientific evidence with 'softer', more qualitative historical data-sources. However, it must be noted that the level of academic knowledge regarding Scandinavian settlements and economic patterns in the North Atlantic is quite considerable. Anthropologists, historical geographers, economists, environmental scientists, medieval historians and antiquarians have provided studies on Viking and Norse political and economic expansion in which all recent studies are grounded. International teams of scientists and social scientists formed collaborative research groups on programmes built around undergraduates, post-graduates and senior academics whose aims were to increase both academic and public knowledge. While it has been recently claimed that archaeology and environmental science can reveal the early history of the cod trade and the 'critical transition from a local to a global product', I always thought that environmental history with its interdisciplinary idiosyncrasy was the best field of inquiry to address such questions, and over the past two decades, environmental history as an approach to the understanding and explanation of historical processes has become increasingly fashionable amongst scholars. Crossing the boundaries of various research fields enables me to present a pioneering work and the present book is based on my doctoral research on the emergence of commercial fishing in Iceland and the Faeroe islands, c. 800-1480. The complexity of the question requires a specific interpretative structure and for this very reason, each chapter uses specific materials to propose a coherent narrative about the emergence of commercial fishing in Iceland and the Faeroes. The chapter devoted to historiography presents the most important works in connection with our question, to set the stage for a meaningful understanding of the complexity involved by multidisciplinary work and to allow readers to familiarise themselves with the Scandinavian world of the Viking Age and Middle Ages. Then comes the interdisciplinary methodology chapter that presents the founding theories and the various fields used in the present work. In order to understand the dynamic relationships between Scandinavians and the ecosystem of the Faeroes and Iceland in which they lived, theoretical and empirical data are used in a holistic approach. Sagas and Archives are reviewed and presented for they shed light on aspects of past human exploitation of marine and riverine resources in Iceland, the Faeroes, and the wider North Atlantic Realm. The next chapter presents the theoretical approach to settlement patterns, economic activity, and social organisation of the Viking Age and early medieval Iceland and the Faeroes. It develops a chronological framework for fish trade from the permanent settlement of

Iceland in the late ninth century to the advent of the Newfoundland fisheries in the late fifteenth century and the consequent disinterest in Icelandic waters by European fishermen and traders. The final chapter, integrates archaeology, but essentially soil micromorphology and zooarchaeological data are integrated within an environmental framework. Case studies, two in the Faeroes and four in Iceland, are presented as tests to the hypothesis developed in the previous chapter.

If no history of Iceland's fisheries from the earliest historical period exists and while undertaking such a narrative would be a monumental task, the aims of the present study are to establish what the key features of Iceland's economic patterns were and to produce models for socio-economic developments based mainly on the development of a specialised fish trade within a definite historical framework. By researching the interaction between places of production, distribution, and consumption of fish, I will identify networks of exchange and locate cultural and economic spaces.