Extinction and Survival in the Norse North Atlantic - the Archaeology of Resilience in Greenland and Iceland

George Hambrecht*1 and Konrad Smiarowski2

1University of Maryland (UMD) – University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, USA, United States
2North Atlantic Biocultural Organization (NABO) – United States

Abstract

Iceland can be argued to be an example of resilience in the face of extreme climatic, geological, geographical and even at times epidemiological conditions. Norse Greenland on the other hand disappeared by the end of the 15th century and is often shown as an example of societal collapse in the face of changing climate conditions. In the last decade archaeological data from both areas has problematized both narratives. The archaeological data from Greenland has, contrary to the popular interpretations of their demise, shown a society that was in fact very conscious of the climatic conditions they were facing and was able and willing to adapt to new conditions. Archaeological data suggests that the Norse Greenlanders instituted and applied, over multiple generations, practices that were in fact very resilient in the face of harsh and increasingly variable climate conditions. Norse Greenland seemed to have had a fairly centralized and well organized society that conserved food resources and managed labor efficiently. Yet they ultimately went extinct. The very characteristics that made it resilient in the face of the harsh and changing climate conditions of the 13th and 14th centuries were in 15th century contexts fatal. Archaeological data from Iceland on the other hand shows a society that did not change many of its basic components or subsistence strategies at the regional scale for much of the medieval and early modern periods. In the archaeological data adaptations to harsher conditions appear at the local and household scale. The archaeological data suggests a society that was less centralized and cohesive in terms of collective responses to harsher conditions than Norse Greenland. While the reaction of Iceland to changing conditions at the legal and governmental level during these periods was from a modern point of view counterintuitive with its emphasis on social stability at the expense of infrastructure investment, maritime exploitation or agricultural improvement, the local scale archaeological records shows consistent, diverse, and informal adaptation. The different pathways taken by each society in the face of similar hazards and their very different outcomes raise questions regarding effective long-term approaches to mitigating the effects of climate change based threats to food supplies and to the resilience of contemporary societies. Session - Archaeological Studies of the Long-Term Resilience of Food Supplies to Climatic Shocks in Arid North America and the North Atlantic

Keywords: adapting to climate change, history, hierarchy, resilience, socio, ecological systems

*Speaker