COD FISH, WALRUS, AND CHIEFTAINS:
Economic intensification in the Norse North Atlantic

Sophia Perdikaris and Thomas H. McGovern*

INTRODUCTION

Just over a thousand years ago, Scandinavian voyagers crossed the grey waters of the North Atlantic to briefly explore the coast of North America. These now well-publicized transatlantic trips were part of larger economic, environmental, and social developments of the Viking Age, and were the product of an Iron Age chiefly society with a complex economy incorporating both classic “prestige goods” and “staple goods” components. The Viking Age expansion was the result of linked factors of economic intensification, military and technological advances, climate change, and intense competition among chiefly elites and between elites and commoners. The period saw escalating Nordic impact upon North-West Europe and a dramatic expansion of European settlement into the offshore islands of the North Atlantic. This paper will focus upon the economic development of two of the most western of the Norse Atlantic settlements, Iceland and Greenland, and seeks to bring fresh data to bear on the knotty problem of pre-state economics. In both examples, complex political and economic structures were supported through intensification in both domestic consumption and export to European markets. The particular resources, terrestrial and marine, domestic and wild, that were the subject of intensified economic effort differed in Iceland and Greenland. We examine the production and utilization of these resources and effects that changing demand for these products entailed for the fortunes of the Norse settlements of Iceland and Greenland, and for their would-be magnates. We are fortunate to be able to draw upon new work by many scholars.

* Sophia Perdikaris, Department of Archaeology & Anthropology, Brooklyn College, CUNY, CUNY Northern Science and Education Center. Thomas H. McGovern, Department of Anthropology, Hunter College, CUNY, CUNY Northern Science and Education Center.
in several disciplines through the research cooperative of the North Atlantic Biocultural Organization (NABO), as well as new zooarchaeological and locational evidence.

BACKGROUND: THE VIKING AGE

The Viking Age traditionally begins with the well documented raids on monastic centers of early medieval literacy in the late 8th century AD, but Scandinavian merchants, mercenaries, and pirates had long been active in the North Sea, Baltic, and the river routes to the steppe khanates of central Asia (Jones 1985). For at least a century before the first recorded attacks on the monasteries of Northumbria and Ireland, wealth had flowed into South Scandinavia. Massive amounts of silver were being deposited in graves and hoards all over Scandinavia which lacks any local sources. Trading emporia in what is now South Norway, Denmark, and South Sweden attracted literate visitors from Latin, Byzantine, and Muslim worlds, and rich burials in the lake Malaren area (South-Central Sweden) provide archaeological confirmation of the written accounts picture of prosperous, turbulent, and adventurous, if uncouth and heathen, entrepreneurial society awash in imported goods (Sawyer 1982). Central Asian silver, Baltic amber, Mediterranean glass ware, Irish bronze and gold as well as a small bronze Buddha probably from North-West India, all appear as grave goods in burials of well traveled elites in these pre-Viking entrepots (Hedeager 2000). As several art historians have noted, Viking age jewelry and ornamental metal work is both more widespread and often also less technically precise in its craftsmanship than the limited distribution high quality work of the earlier Vendel age (Graham-Campbell 1996). Some commonly occurring ornaments like brooches and belt hardware were clearly mass produced from common moulds- lower priced knock offs of the designer interlace decorating royal objects. A wider range of consumers were able to afford items of decorative metalwork and were bold enough to flaunt these highly visible marks of wealth and status. Late Iron Age Scandinavia was enjoying an economic boom, probably further enhanced by a period of relatively warm and stable climate punctuated however by some colder episodes (Hughes & Diaz 1994, Ogilvie, Barlow & Jennings 2000, Ogilvie & McGovern 2000, Ogilvie & Jonsson 2001, and McGovern 1991). Settlements appear to have expanded in many areas, moving up mountain valleys and into former woodlands, and surplus labor was clearly available for the construction of massive earthworks, roads, bridges, and causeways across marshes (Randsborg 1981). At the same time, steady improvements in ship building produced the wide range of elegantly designed sea going ships now well documented by maritime archaeology (Christensen 2000). Less well understood advances in Scandinavian navigational skills allowing for long voyages out of sight of land had probably an even greater impact, a breakthrough in seamanship with both peaceful and warlike applications (Víhjalmsisson 2001).

In arctic Norway, powerful chieftainships grew up on the Lofoten and Vesterålen islands during the late Iron Age, creating a power center that was to long contest primacy with the expanding petty kingdoms of Western and Southern Norway. These northern islands held huge boat houses, extensive farms, and at least one