

Human Response to environmental Change in North Atlantic Insular Situations

Menniskjaligar reaktiúnir til umhvørvisbroytingar í oyggjasamfelögum í Norðuratlantshavi

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Úrtak

Mentanarligar reaktiúnir til miðalstórar veðurlagsbroytingar kunnu skifta alt eftir, hvussu umhvørvið er. Her fer viðgerðin at savna seg um oyggjar, sum vóru lutfalsliga avbyrgdar í havinum, og hetta avmarkaði valmøguleikarnar sera nógv. Bøndur og fiskimenn bygdu Føroyar, Ísland og Suðurgønland. Teir royndu at bøta um samfelagsstöðu sína við at rýma úr Evropa, har farið var undir at tvingsilsmiðsavna landøki í ríki við oyðileggjandi ávirkan á siðbundnar miðspjaddar samfelagsskipanir.

Tá ið teir fyrst høvdu sett seg niður í oyggjum í Norðuratlantshavi og seinni í øllum støðum, sum vóru eignað til búseting, vendist ikki aftur. Tey vóru ov nógv til at flyta aftur til meginlandið, og tey vóru ov nógv til at broyta búskapin til eina minni orkukrevjandi skipan. Ein týðandi meinbogi var eisini tann stíglagaða samfelagsskipanin hjá teimum, sum má hava verið grundað á samansavning av yvirskoti, ið var neyðugt fyri at vísa á materiella tign.

Her viðgeri eg hesar innlendis-/subjektivu grundir, sum gjørdur tað ómøguligt at laga seg munadygt til versnandi umhvørviskor. Av serligum áhuga eru norðbúgvarnir í Grønlandi, sum høvdu móguleika at taka við læru frá teimum innfóddu norðuramerikanarunum, men teir brúktu ikki henda móguleika. Skulu vit skilja hetta, mugu vit hyggja at norrønu búsetingini í Grønlandi úr einum hugmyndafrøðiligum heldur enn einum materiellum sjónarhorni. Av avgerandi týðningi var tað, at kristindómurin styrkti teirra evropeisku mentanarligu siðvenju. Nøkur praktisk viðurskifti áttu tí eisini at verið umhugsað. Norðbúgvur vóru bøndur, og landbúnaður hevur so stórt árin á mannalýndi, at talan var ikki um at

fara frá landbúnaðarjörð, um eingi líknandi støð vóru at fara til.

Norðbúgvarnir í Grønlandi doyðu sostatt út orsakað av kristnu hugmyndafrøðini hjá bóndum, sum ímóti øllum líkindum royndu at halda fram við síni mentanarligu siðvenju.

Abstract

Cultural responses to the middle-range climatic changes may be of a various character which depends very much on the type of environment. However, this volume is concentrated on islands that were relatively isolated in the ocean which limited very much the spectrum of possible choices. Faroes, Iceland and Southern Greenland were settled by immigrant farmers/fishermen seeking improvement of their social situation by escaping from Europe where centralising processes of organising coercive territorial states started with devastating effect on traditional decentralised social organisation.

Once they colonised North Atlantic islands and, subsequently, filled all suitable localities they were trapped in situation of no-return. They were too many to re-immigrate back to the continent and they were too many to change their economy to some less intensive energy extraction model. An important obstacle was also their hierarchical organisation that must have been based on surplus accumulation necessary for material manifestation of status.

I discuss here those internal/subjective reasons that made impossible an effective adaptation to deteriorating environmental conditions. Especially interesting is the case of Norse Greenlanders who had an opportunity to

learn from the native North Americans but they did not take that chance. To understand it we must turn our attention to the ideological rather than material aspects of the Norse presence in Greenland. Decisive was their European culture tradition reinforced by Christianity. However, also some more practical aspects should be considered. The Norse were farmers and agriculture has such a strong impact on human mentality that there was no question of abandonment of agricultural land if there was no other similar locality available.

The extinction of the Norse Greenlanders, then, was due to the Christian ideology of farmers who tried to continue with their cultural tradition against any odds.

Human impact on local environment is a factor that has been recognised for a long time by geographers and biologists. Their studies concentrated usually on negative results of human activity, e.g. draining bogs, cutting peat, overgrazing meadows, removing turf for construction purposes, introducing new species of plants and animals, etc. Some of these changes result from pre-meditated actions while others are just side-effects of human presence in the landscape.

Obviously enough, human beings are subject to many natural constraints, even if they are, at the same time, very active geomorphological agents. Most of environmental determinants are of a very stable character when considered from a human point of view. People can adapt to them rather easily by slow gathering of knowledge of how to effectively extract energy from a given environment. There are, usually, various possible adaptation solutions/strategies which in conflict situations may cause fierce competition.

However, the subject of this volume is the dynamics of nature leading to more or less substantial changes in environment.

Not all of these changes must be taken into account when studying the history of mankind. These that are measured by the millennia (e.g. eustatic raising of the Scandinavian Peninsula) are invisible from the human perspective although their results may be realised after many generations. Also events of a locally catastrophic character (e.g. floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, landslides, etc.) may be omitted because their results are relatively easy to overcome even though their momental impact may be extremely dangerous. Thus rejecting both extreme ends of the scale we are left with some middle-range processes that develop steadily or, at least, that are statistically distinct in a few generations' perspective. And, obviously, climatic fluctuations offer the best example for discussion of human response to environmental change.

Responses to the middle-range changes may be of a various character which depends very much on the type of environment. However, this volume is concentrated on insular situations that limit very much the spectrum of possible choices. The further limitation is that we speak of specific situations of islands that are relatively isolated in the ocean – like Faroes, Iceland and southern Greenland. They were rather quickly settled by immigrant inhabitants. All these circumstances offer laboratory-like conditions for studying interactions between culture and nature.

I will concentrate here on the farming populations leaving aside native North-American peoples. Their hunter-gatherer subsistence strategy makes them rather flexible and mobile and allows relatively

easy adjustment to the environmental changes. For they may solve crisis situations by following preferred resources, changing energy extraction methods or, ultimately, by deserting areas that became disadvantageous. For this discussion it is not important whether some relative deterioration of the given environment resulted from natural processes or it was caused by their own activity like e.g. extinction of some important animal species.

Norse settlers of Faroes, Iceland and Greenland were farmers and fishermen/hunters. If we are to believe the sagas their mass arrival was not the result of some random choice but of well planned colonising expeditions. They were preceded by careful penetration by the refugees who lost their social position at home due to some »homicide« crimes. Ingolf Arnarson in Iceland and Eirik Thorvaldsson/Raude in Greenland sought new lands to use them to re-establish themselves in the society. Later they managed to persuade their friends and supporters to resettle with their families and all their belongings (including animals) to these new lands that offered natural conditions allowing continuation of their traditional way of life. They did not expect radical improvement of their living condition as much as improvement of their social situation by escaping from Europe where centralising processes of organising coercive territorial states started with devastating effect on traditional decentralised power structure.

Once they colonised North Atlantic islands and, subsequently, filled all suitable localities they were trapped in situation of

no-return. They were too many to re-immigrate back to the continent and they were too many to change their economy to some less intensive energy extraction model. An important obstacle was also their hierarchical organisation that must have been based on surplus accumulation necessary for material manifestation of status. It was the social elite that controlled those populations much more than may be suggested by the nostalgic picture recorded later in the sagas. And the primary aim of almost any man of prestige is to sustain his privileged position and to reproduce it through the generations change.

Such processes are well studied in Iceland by Ion Haukur Ingimundarson (1995) and by Orri Vesteinsson (1996). Some of their general conclusions may be also applied to Faroes. Different was the development in Greenland. The tragic end of that Norse colony provoked many scholars to look for the key solution to this problem. Well known and repeated arguments point to some coincidence of the worsening climatic conditions with changes in European economy and imperial policy of the Norwegian kings.

While accepting the importance of such exogenous/independent factors I would like, however, to discuss rather those internal/subjective reasons that made impossible an effective adaptation to deteriorating environmental conditions. It was those reasons that were especially important because the process of worsening of natural, economic and political circumstances was very much similar for each of the three insular populations in question. Of course the

effects of different distances from the motherland Europe cannot be neglected and in the Greenland case it was a real disadvantage.

But, on the other hand, Norse Greenlanders had an opportunity to learn from the native North Americans whom they met frequently in Vinland and in north-west Greenland. However, they did not take that chance and, as we clearly learn from the archaeological studies, they were extremely stubborn to continue with their European way of life until the termination point.

I think that what might seem for us a chance for finding some way out of the dead end, in fact worked in opposite direction – the presence of Skraelings made the situation of the Norse more difficult. To understand it we must turn our attention to the ideological rather than material aspects of the Norse presence in Greenland. For ideology is an indispensable element for survival of any human population as a culturally recognisable group. It is ideology connected to what Pierre Bourdieu (1990: 112ff) called a symbolic capital that determines the self-identity of any society.

From such a perspective the most important was that the Norse Greenlanders were Christians. There is no place here to discuss in detail the basic differences between monotheistic Christianity and polytheistic pagan beliefs as I did elsewhere (Urbanczyk 1997). For the purpose of this paper it is enough to conclude that generally pagan societies are ideologically very flexible. Their deities are immersed in nature and their worship is of a very practical character – the better I respect my God the

more prosperous should be my daily life. It is a part of a magic mentality characteristic of people who believe that nature may be manipulated by some privileged relations with the transcendental sphere.

Monotheistic religions, at least in their early stages, did not leave a man any other choice than following very clear instructions given in a form of Revealed Truth. They divided people into those who believed the Word and all others who were of some inferior kind. They also taught their faithful followers that the world had been given to human beings and that it should serve their needs. In addition to this, medieval Christianity developed under the influence of an apocalyptic philosophy which pointed to human sins as the reason for any misfortunes. Penance, prayer and following the Church were the only suggested solutions. Medieval Christianity was also very much Rome-centred which caused all its functionaries to look there for advice, example and support, sending in return Saint Peter's Pennies. Pagans were not tolerated and their only destiny was conversion as an alternative to extermination which was so clearly stated by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153).

All this found its extreme expression in such an extreme outpost of Christianity as Norse Greenland. Historical tradition recorded in writing under the control of Icelandic church functionaries shows deepening aversion towards the pagans. Analysis of Greenland/Vinland sagas shows clearly growing distrust and fear of those ugly, aggressive and treacherous Skraelings (Urbanczyk unpublished). Such an attitude

was surely supported by the local social elite which had its cultural background in Christian Europe. Therefore, Norse Greenlanders just could not respond to the worsening of environmental and economic conditions by using the experience offered potentially by the Palaeo-Indians and Palaeo-Eskimo. Such an option was blocked ideologically.

However, also some more practical aspects should be considered. The Norse were farmers and agriculture has such a strong impact on human mentality that there are no(?) examples in history of farmers who voluntarily turn back to hunting-gathering while totally abandoning tillage and/or herding. It is not only a psychological problem but also a practical one. Agriculture is an economy based on a delayed-return model. This means that large investment of labour does not give immediate gains – crops must grow and ripe, and animals must be fed and cared for before any food is obtained. There is no place for any free competition over access to agricultural resources for it must be regulated and the rules must be executed. For the Faroes we have the famous Seyðabrævið (Sheep letter) issued in 1298 (Norges gamle Love, IV, p. 353f). It gave royal sanction to local regulations concerning agriculture.

Farming involves settlement stability which implies building durable houses that need some infrastructure like paths, fences, water supplies, etc. It also needs numerous heavy tools that are often made of imported materials. All this caused that a farmer would not give up farming. There is always some margin of possible adjustments by

specialisation and/or supporting activities like fishing, hunting and gathering but, generally, there is no question of abandonment of agricultural land if there is no other similar locality available.

My conclusion, then, is that the extinction of the Norse Greenlanders was due to the Christian ideology of farmers who tried to continue with their cultural tradition against any odds. Their will to survive as civilised Europeans was stronger than their fear to disappear physically for, in return for following their religion they were promised a happier afterlife. Their leaders were vitally interested in keeping their people under ideological pressure. In such a situation even obvious environmental signals would be ignored.

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