

Atlantic Peoples between Fire, Ice, River and Sea.
Past Environments in Southern Iceland.

Collected and Co-edited by

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Collected Articles:

Kristján Ahronson, One North Atlantic Cave
Settlement: Preliminary Archaeological and
Environmental Investigations at Seljaland, Southern
Iceland.

Kate T. Smith and Kristján Ahronson, Dating the Cave?
The Preliminary Tephra Stratigraphy at Kverkin,
Seljaland.

*Donald I. Ashburn, Martin P. Kirkbride and Andrew J.
Dugmore*, Post-Settlement Land Disturbance
Indicated by Magnetic Susceptibility of Aeolian Soils
at Seljaland.

Alan Macniven, Where are Eyjafjallasveit's Earliest
Settlement Sites? A Review of the Documentary
Evidence.

Introduction

Atlantic Peoples outlines a fresh approach to first publication of research on the North Atlantic coasts and islands, here focusing on the Markarfljót and Eyjafjallasveit region of southern Iceland. The ideal expressed here is of accessibility. New research is framed to highlight the potential of interdisciplinary study, especially between the natural and cultural sciences. A powerful natural environment bounds this area of southern Iceland. Active volcanoes ring the Eyjafjallasveit region – Katla to the east, Hekla to the north, Eldfjall and Surtsey to the southwest on the Westmen Islands. The glaciers Eyjafjallajökull, Mýrdalsjökull and Tindfjallajökull hang over the area while the glacial river Markarfljót cuts a channel to the nearby seacoast. Concentrating on this clearly defined area, the studies contained in this collection focus on the late prehistoric to late medieval periods – with special emphasis upon the early settlement of Iceland. Earliest settlement establishes patterns of social organisation, land use, and impacts upon the environment, setting in place historical legacies of landownership and environmental exploitation. Iceland was settled very late, thus impacts of natural change previous to human settlement can be separated out from human-induced changes.

The island was transformed over these centuries: birch woodland was cleared, domesticated animals and crops introduced, native mammal, bird and fish populations overexploited, natural vegetation cover stripped, and consequently the soils destabilised. Amanda Thomson describes modern-day Iceland's heavily eroded landscape as "Europe's worst environmental disaster".

The Markarfljót highlights environmental change over this period, today flowing through one powerful channel while, at the time of early settlement, the river was a slow-moving many-branched *living* waterway. Chronological precision is possible for many events, such as floods, river course changes, and episodes of cave construction, because of a technique unfamiliar to many outside Iceland. In this instalment to *Northern Studies*, several researchers use the numerous layers of ash (*tephra*) deposited by volcanic eruptions for chronological precision. The Eyjafjallasveit ash deposits include an historical sequence of twelve layers from the Hekla AD 1947 eruption to

the Landnám tephra of AD 871±2, all clearly separated by windblown sediments.

Each article follows the same structure. An accessible abstract prefaces while the introduction and conclusion summarise the relevance of the study to a wider audience. Emphasis is placed upon language that allows conversation between disciplines. Every paper is the first publication of new research and the main text presents specialist data and discussion.

Kristján Ahnson presents a preliminary report on archaeological and environmental investigations at Seljaland, West Eyjafjallasveit. The results of his fieldwork have the potential of challenging the generally held view of Viking Age settlement. Southern Iceland's caves may be part of the earliest settlement of the North Atlantic. Preliminary investigations date an artificial cave site to before the Norse period of settlement in Iceland. In parallel with Kerry-Anne Mairs' (*in prep*) tephra record of the area's prehistoric woodland, this article outlines the *tephra contour*, a new technique for investigating the tephra record of past land surfaces.

Following the preliminary report, Kate T. Smith and Kristján Ahnson append a specialist analysis of the tephra deposits at Kverkin, Seljaland. This article provides the chronological framework for the Seljaland investigations.

Working alongside the archaeological investigations at Seljaland, Donald Ashburn, Martin Kirkbride and Andrew J. Dugmore study variations in the magnetic susceptibility of tephra-dated sediments. They observe what may be a magnetic record of the introduction of domesticated animals in the period AD 870 – AD 920 and the clearing by fire of woodland after AD 920. Ashburn, Kirkbride and Dugmore also call for further investigation of anomalous magnetic readings before AD 870.

Alan Macniven focuses upon the documentary records for Eyjafjallasveit in his article on early settlement sites. He summarises the data provided by early sources including the 'Book of Land-taking', *Landnámabók*, and provides a suitable context for discussion of the documentary, place-name, archaeological and environmental material.

As is readily seen, *Atlantic Peoples* advances the fresh approach of a number of young scholars. The collection is the product of an innovative academic *milieu* for North Atlantic research, a *milieu* based in Scotland but drawing upon an international pool of scholars from Germany, England, Iceland, Wales and Canada. The North Atlantic coasts and islands

provide an excellent arena for study of human-environmental interactions, a human legacy of environmental mismanagement that has resulted in the highly eroded unstable soils of Iceland today. The sampling of North Atlantic research in this collection expresses the ideal of publishing work-in-progress: new data and preliminary interpretations are presented in order to encourage dialogue and inform discussion. The studies contained here owe a special debt to tephrochronology – this collection is inspired by the tephra work of Andrew J. Dugmore.

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