



NATIONALMUSEET

Challenges and solutions



NORDLIGE
VERDENER

**Northern Worlds – Report from workshop 2
at the National Museum, 1 November 2011**

**Edited by Hans Christian Gulløv, Peter
Andreas Toft and Caroline Polke Hansgaard**



Challenges and solutions

Report from workshop 2 at the National Museum,
1 November 2011

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Edited by Hans Christian Gulløv, Peter Andreas
Toft and Caroline Polke Hansgaard

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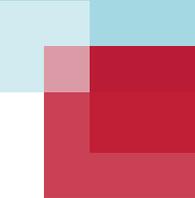
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Rødøy in Flatøysund, Alstahaug area,
Helgeland, South Nordland
Photo: Flemming Kaul



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Copenhagen 2012**

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Close-up of a string of beads on an amaut, a woman's jacket, combining large worn 18th-century glass beads with unworn seed beads produced in the 19th century. Photo: Peter Andreas Toft.





Pinhoulland
seen from the
north west down
towards Voe of
Browland. Photo:
D. Mahler.

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Churches, Christianity and magnate farmers in the Norse Eastern Settlement

Jette Arneborg

Danish Middle Ages and Renaissance

The written sources give the impression that the Christianization of the Norse Greenlanders was an element in the Crown-initiated Christianization of western Scandinavia around the year 1000 AD. However, AMS datings of skeletons from “*Tjodhilde’s Church*” in Qassiarsuk – *Brattahlid* – show that at least some of the Icelandic colonists must already have been Christian when they settled in Greenland (Arneborg et al. 1999). The early Christianization of the Greenland population does not however preclude the possibility that there were also attempts from the centre – the Norwegian King and later the Roman Church organization – to influence the development of the Church in Greenland.

The Greenland Norse churches are always related to a farm. The ruins of the larger, striking churches are clearly traceable in the landscape, and their

datings were established by Aage Roussell’s dissertation *Farms and Churches in the Medieval Norse Settlements of Greenland* from 1941. It is the general consensus that the large churches functioned as a kind of public (parish) churches, but after the find of “*Tjodhilde’s Church*” in 1961 the researchers became aware of a group of smaller and more unassuming churches whose dating and function were less clear.

There is no doubt that “*Tjodhilde’s Church*” is from the early Norse period (Krogh 1982; Arneborg et al. 1999), and indeed some scholars regard the difference between the large churches and the small ones as chronologically determined, such that the smaller churches represent an early phase in the church-building (Keller 1989). Another theory takes its point of departure in the different functions of the churches, viewing

the small churches as private prayer-houses or chapels on the medieval Icelandic model with privately owned churches (Krogh 1982).

The project “Church, Christianity and magnate farmers in the Norse Eastern Settlement” was launched in 2001, and archaeological investigations were conducted at selected small churches in the field seasons 2001, 2002, 2007, 2008 and 2010. The aim of the archaeological investigations has been to gather material for dating and to gain insight into the Christian life of the Norse Greenlanders. The overall goal of the project is to elucidate the function and role of the Christian churches in Norse-Greenlandic society.

The AMS datings of the small churches ascribe them to the *landnam* period around the year 1000. The size of the church building, the number of churches and the number of burials in the related churchyards seem to indicate that the small churches were built by the individual *landnam* families and functioned as ‘family churches’. In time several of these ‘family churches’ were closed down, while others developed into public (parish) churches which, against a fee to the farmer-owner, served the surrounding churches. This process should be viewed in a social and economic perspective and reflects a development towards fewer but richer magnate farmers. The Norse community became more hierarchical, and it is assumed that the fees to the church-owning



Figure 1. Excavation of mass grave, 2010. Jade De La Paz, CUNY, USA, Pauline Knudsen, Greenland National Museum & Archives, and Christian Koch Madsen, National Museum of Denmark. Photo: Jette Arneborg.



Figure 2. Cross-section I of the mass grave. The burials are positioned side by side in the dug grave and covered with the side of a ship. The lateral 'stripes' show where the joins between the individual ships' planks were. The planks were joined with iron rivets. Note the dark area around the middle of the picture where a small child had been placed between two adults. Photo: Jette Arneborg.

farmers played a not insignificant role in this development.

After minor investigations at all the small churches in the central part of the Eastern Settlement, the fieldwork in 2008 and 2010 was concentrated on a single church, the one at the ruin group Ø64 in Igaliku Fjord, where a small trial investigation of the actual church building was conducted, and a number of burials in the churchyard were excavated, including a large mass grave containing at least nine adults, women and men, and three small children. The material from the investigations is now being processed. Among other things genetic analyses of the skeletons are being done. There is much to indicate that the deceased in the mass grave were first-

generation immigrants to Greenland, and strontium analyses of their teeth will reveal where they came from. Carbon and nitrogen isotope analyses will reveal the dietary habits of the dead, and anthropological studies will elucidate living conditions in the early years of the Norse settlement in Greenland.

The intention is to continue the project with a focus on the concentration of power in the Greenlandic community and the development of the church landscape from many small to fewer larger churches. There will be a further focus on the way life was lived. The project will be funded by the Ministry of Science, the Commission for Scientific Investigations in Greenland and the US National Science Foundation.

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Back cover illustration:

View of modern sheep farm and hayfields in the central Vatnahverfi region, South Greenland.

Photo: Christian Koch Madsen.



National Museum
Frederiksholms Kanal 12
DK-1220 Copenhagen
Denmark



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