

Findings at Viking archaeological site show power trumping practicality

December 4 2014



Baylor archeologist Davide Zori and assistant at Viking farmstead

Vikings are known for raiding and trading, but those who settled in Iceland centuries ago spent more time producing and consuming booze and beef—in part to gain political clout in a place very different from their Scandinavian homeland, says a Baylor University archaeologist.

The seafaring warriors wanted to sustain the "big man" society of

Scandinavia—a political economy in which chieftains hosted huge feasts of beer and beef served in great halls, says Davide Zori, Ph.D., a Denmark native and archeological field director in Iceland, who conducted National Science Foundation-funded research in archeology and medieval Viking literature.

But instead, what Zori and his team discovered is what happened when the Vikings spent too long living too high on the hog—or, in this case, the bovine.

"It was somewhat like the barbecue here. You wanted a big steak on the grill," said Zori, assistant professor in the Baylor Interdisciplinary Core. He co-edited the book *Viking Archaeology in Iceland: Mosfell Archaeological Project* with Jesse Byock, Ph.D., professor of Old Norse and medieval Scandinavian studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.

"It made it really showy—if you could keep it up."

The Viking chieftains used such wealth and cultural displays to flex political muscle with equals or rivals—plus to cement good relations with local laborers, Zori said.

Zori and Byock's team excavated a farmstead called Hrísbú in Iceland's Mosfell Valley. The farm—inhabited by some of the most famous Vikings of the Icelandic sagas—included a chieftain's longhouse nearly 100 feet long with a "feast-worthy" great hall, a church and a cemetery of 26 graves indicating a mix of pagan and Christian traditions. Males sometimes were buried with ship remnants rather than in the simpler Christian manner of leaving earthly possessions behind.

Carbon dating and studies of volcanic layers indicate the longhouse was built in the late ninth or early 10th century and abandoned by the 11th.

The archeological team uncovered 38 layers of floor ash, including refuse dumped atop the abandoned house, also discovering bones, barley seeds and valuable glass beads imported from Asia.

"By applying anthropology and medieval texts, we can excavate and compare," Zori said.

Viking sagas, first written in the 13th century and based on oral accounts, included such details as where people sat at feasts, "which shows your ranking . . . These texts read almost like novels. They're incredible sources. They talk about daily life," Zori said.



Imported glass beads discovered by archeologists at a Viking farmstead were a sign of wealth.

"Yes, the Vikings may have put axes to one another's heads—but these accounts also describe milking cows."

High Times and Hard Times

When the Vikings arrived in uninhabited Iceland, they found forested lowlands, ample pastures and sheltered sea inlets. Excavations show that choice cattle were selected for feasts, with ritual slaughter and display of skulls, according to research published by Zori and others in the journal *Antiquity*. Barley seeds unearthed from floors or refuse heaps indicate barley consumption, and pollen studies demonstrate barley cultivation. Barley could have been used for bread or porridge, but beer's social value makes it very likely barley was used mainly to produce alcohol, Zori said.

Over centuries, as temperatures in the North Atlantic dropped during the "Little Ice Age," being a lavish host got tougher.

"Nine months of winter—and three months that are only a little less than winter," Zori said.

While sheep could find food free range most of the year and were suited for cold, prized cattle had to be kept indoors in large barns during the winter. Savvy supply-and-demand reckoning was crucial to be sure the food lasted—both for cattle and humans—and could be preserved.

"They had to decide how many to slaughter and store," Zori said. "They didn't have salt, so they had to use big vats of curdled milk as a preservative."

As the landscape changed due to erosion, climate shifts and cleared

forests, it became harder to rear larger numbers of cattle.

High-status households also struggled to grow enough grain for beer-making, based on historical accounts and confirmed by a growing body of archeological data. With a shorter growing season and colder climate than in their homelands, Icelandic Vikings would have needed more laborers to improve the soil—and as the chieftains' power waned, they would have had trouble attracting workers. As barley cultivation stopped, the local chieftains are no longer mentioned in the Viking sagas.

Changing Directions

"You can see in the archeological evidence that they adjusted their strategy and gave it up eventually," Zori said. "It got harder and harder to keep up that showiness – and when that collapsed, you didn't have that power, that beer and big slabs of beef to show off."

When barley was abandoned, the pollen record shows native grasses for grazing increased. Archeological findings show that the proportion of cattle to sheep bones declined, as Hrísbú residents shifted to more practical, less laborious sheep-herding.

"You wonder what came first for the chieftains at Hrísbú: Were they no longer powerful and didn't need barley and beef? Or could they just not keep it up and so they lost power? I favor the second explanation," Zori said.

"What we're doing now is to let the archaeology speak, both for itself and for proof to verify (the texts)," he said. "Investigating politics breathes life into it, instead of just saying, 'Here are three rocks.' You can ask deeper questions."

Zori argues that Viking chieftains' drive to produce expensive beef and

beer caused them to put their political aspirations above the greater good of the community.

"Maybe we don't need the Vikings to prove this," he said. "But it shows you that politics can become more important than creating a productive society."

Provided by Baylor University

Citation: Findings at Viking archaeological site show power trumping practicality (2014, December 4) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-12-viking-archaeological-site-power-trumping.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.