

Interdisciplinary Explorations in the Climate, History and Human Ecology of Northern Iceland

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In the spirit of the life and work of Vilhjálmur Stefánsson, the theme of this presentation will be “exploration”. The geographical focus is not the high Arctic of Canada and Alaska, as it was for Vilhjálmur, but the region where his journeys may be said to have begun: northern Iceland. Although the writings of travellers to this region will be mentioned, the focus will not be on exploration in the strict sense of the word. Rather it will take the form of an exploration into a number of scholarly disciplines including archaeology, soil science, and climate history, in order to chart our knowledge of the environmental and social history of the region. Information from historical records, in particular certain diaries, and also the unpublished reports written by Icelandic district officials, *bréf sýslumanna og amtmanna*, which form a goldmine of environmental and economic observations, will be discussed. The presentation will highlight variations in the climate and sea-ice record of Iceland over the past 1000 years, as well as changes in economic practices. Recent research suggests that most serious difficulties occurred, not in medieval times, as has sometimes been suggested, but in the eighteenth century. Major problems included epidemics and the general effects of the Lakagígar volcanic eruption, as well as unfavourable political and economic conditions. In these harsh times, however, the Icelandic population were not mere passive recipients of disaster, and strategies for dealing with these difficulties were developed. While northern Iceland as a whole is considered, the exploratory emphasis of this presentation will be placed on two specific regions, Eyjafjarðarsýsla, the district where Vilhjálmur’s father was born, and Mývatnssveit in Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla, the focus of a current interdisciplinary research project led by Astrid Ogilvie.