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Medieval Iceland, Greenland, and the New Human Condition: A case study in integrated environmental humanities

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### Abstract

This paper contributes to recent studies exploring the *longue durée* of human impacts on island landscapes, the impacts of climate and other environmental changes on human communities, and the interaction of human societies and their environments at different spatial and temporal scales. In particular, the paper addresses Iceland during the medieval period (with a secondary, comparative focus on Norse Greenland) and discusses episodes where environmental and climatic changes have appeared to cross key thresholds for agricultural productivity. The paper draws upon international, interdisciplinary research in the North Atlantic region led by the North Atlantic Biocultural Organization (NABO) and the Nordic Network for Interdisciplinary Environmental Studies (NIES) in the Circumpolar Networks program of the Integrated History and Future of People on Earth (IHOPE). By interlinking analyses of historically grounded literature with archaeological studies and environmental science, valuable new perspectives can emerge on how these past societies may have understood and coped with such impacts. As climate and other environmental changes do not operate in isolation, vulnerabilities created by socioeconomic factors also beg consideration. The paper illustrates the benefits of an integrated environmental-studies approach that draws on data, methodologies and analytical tools of environmental humanities, social sciences, and geosciences to better understand long-term human ecodynamics and changing human-landscape-environment interactions through time. One key goal is to apply previously unused data and concerted expertise to illuminate human responses to past changes; a secondary aim is to consider how lessons derived from these cases may be applicable to environmental threats and socioecological risks in the future, especially as understood in light of the New Human Condition, the concept transposed from Hannah Arendt's influential framing of the human condition that is foregrounded in the present special issue. This conception admits human agency's role in altering the conditions for life on earth, in large measure negatively, while acknowledging the potential of this self-same agency, if effectively harnessed and properly directed, to sustain essential planetary conditions through a salutary transformation of human perception, understanding and remedial action. The paper concludes that more long-term historical analyses of cultures and environments need to be undertaken at various scales. Past cases do not offer perfect analogues for the future, but they can contribute to a better understanding of how resilience and vulnerability occur, as well as how they may be compromised or mitigated.

### Keywords

Environmental Humanities, Global Change, Historical Climatology, Historical Ecology, Icelandic Sagas, Medieval Iceland, Zooarchaeology, Political Ecology

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