NO PREP

The Norse in Greenland and Iceland

Climate and Collapse

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

The Norse in Greenland and Iceland: Climate and Collapse

Into the North Atlantic

The Viking expansion across the North Atlantic produced some of the most daring settlements in medieval history. Norse voyagers moved from Norway to the Faroe Islands, then to Iceland, Greenland, and eventually North America. These migrations were not random drift. They depended on accumulated sailing knowledge, strong ships, and the willingness of families to gamble on new land. The story of Erik the Red is central to Greenland's settlement. After being outlawed from Iceland, he explored and promoted Greenland, giving it a name that may have encouraged colonists by making the place sound more appealing. Whether or not the

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Iceland, Law, and a New Norse Society

Iceland became one of the most successful Norse colonies, and its development shaped later Viking memory more than almost any other Atlantic settlement.

Colonized in the late ninth century, Iceland offered pasture, fishing grounds, and relative political freedom for settlers willing to endure isolation and a challenging landscape. Unlike Greenland, it could support a larger and more durable population. It also developed the Icelandic Commonwealth, a society famous for its assemblies, law speaking, and negotiated politics rather than centralized kingship. The Althing, established around 930, is often celebrated as an early parliamentary institution, though it was not democratic in the modern sense. Power still rested with chieftains and landholding families. Even so, Iceland demonstrates that Viking expansion did not always produce kingdoms built by conquest. It could also produce legal and social systems adapted to frontier conditions. Archaeology shows how settlers transformed the island. They cleared land, grazed sheep and cattle, built turf houses, and created farm networks that supported both daily life and long-distance exchange. But Icelandic success came at environmental cost. Deforestation, soil erosion, and pressure on fragile ecosystems began early. This is important because it shows that Norse adaptation was not always sustainable. People could survive and even flourish for generations while still damaging the land they depended on. Iceland therefore provides both a success story and a warning. It became a center of literature, law, and Norse identity, yet its archaeology also reveals how thin the margin for error could be in North Atlantic environments.

Greenland at the Edge of Habitability

Greenland was more precarious. The Norse settlements there relied on a narrow ecological strategy centered on pastoral farming, especially cattle, sheep, and goats, combined with hunting seals, caribou, and other local resources. Archaeological excavations show churches, farmsteads, byres, storage spaces, and imported goods, indicating that Greenland was fully tied into the Christian Norse world rather than existing as an isolated survival camp. Some farms were substantial, and elite households participated in trade networks, especially through exports such as walrus ivory, hides, and perhaps luxury goods from Arctic animals. Yet Greenland always sat at the edge of what was possible. The growing season was short, the sea could be blocked by ice, and the colony depended on ships from Iceland and Norway for iron, timber, and many essential goods. When communication weakened, life became harder. The Norse in Greenland were not simply stubborn Europeans refusing to adapt, as older narratives sometimes claimed. Zooarchaeology shows that they

hunted extensively and adjusted diet over time, especially by increasing reliance on marine resources such as seals. They also built in turf, managed livestock carefully, and organized social life around church and farm. But they remained committed to a pastoral and Christian identity that tied them culturally to Europe. That commitment may have limited flexibility when conditions worsened. Greenland's archaeology is compelling because it captures a society trying hard to remain itself while the world around it became less forgiving.

Climate, Trade, and the End of the Colonies

The decline of the Greenland colonies probably resulted from several pressures that reinforced one another rather than from one simple catastrophe. Climate change is a major factor. The onset of cooler conditions associated with the Little Ice Age made hay production more difficult, increased sea ice, and shortened the window for safe travel. Longer winters and harsher conditions would have strained both people and animals. Trade decline also mattered. Walrus ivory had once been valuable in Europe, but changing markets and new supplies of elephant ivory reduced Greenland's importance. If fewer ships arrived, the colonies lost access to iron, timber, and outside support. Demography was another problem. Small populations are vulnerable to disease, marriage limitations, and social fragmentation. Contact with Inuit groups in Greenland adds another layer. Archaeological evidence shows that Inuit communities were highly skilled Arctic adaptors, but Norse and Inuit ways of life were different, and there is limited evidence for deep integration. Whether relations were hostile, distant, or mixed by region, the Norse did not fully adopt Inuit technologies that may have improved survival under worsening conditions. That does not necessarily mean they were irrational. Cultural identity shapes what people see as acceptable change. The final written record from Greenland dates to the early fifteenth century, and after that the settlements disappear from history. Archaeology takes over where documents end, showing deserted churches, empty farms, and a colonial world slowly falling silent.

Collapse, Adaptation, and Archaeological Lessons

The Norse in Greenland and Iceland are often used as examples of collapse, but archaeology encourages a more careful interpretation. Collapse is real in the sense that the Greenland colonies ended, yet the process was gradual and human. People adapted for centuries before failure became final. They changed diet, hunted more

seals, adjusted farming practices, and maintained social institutions under difficult conditions. Iceland, meanwhile, survived by adapting within its own environmental limits, even though it also faced hardship and ecological stress. These cases teach archaeologists to think about resilience and vulnerability together. A society can be highly skilled and still fail if climate, trade, and population pressures stack up too heavily. The North Atlantic Norse also remind us that identity matters. People do not respond to environmental change as pure calculators. They respond through tradition, religion, status, and ideas about who they are. Greenland's settlers may have needed to change more radically than they were willing or able to do. Archaeology reveals this not as moral failure, but as historical reality. In a modern world concerned with climate change, the Norse Atlantic has become especially relevant because it shows how communities negotiate stress over generations. The lesson is not that climate automatically destroys societies. It is that environmental change interacts with economy, culture, and politics in ways that can either widen or close the paths to survival. The archaeological record keeps those choices visible long after the people themselves are gone.

Key Information: Greenland and Iceland

Detail	Information
Atlantic Expansion	Norse settlers moved from Norway to Iceland, Greenland, and beyond.
Erik the Red	He is closely associated with promoting and leading settlement in Greenland.
Icelandic Commonwealth	Iceland developed a law-centered society with assemblies rather than a single king.
Greenland Economy	Greenland relied on pastoral farming, hunting, and trade links to the wider Norse world.
Climate Stress	Cooler conditions linked to the Little Ice Age made survival and travel more difficult.
Trade Problems	Declining markets and fewer ships weakened Greenland's access to essential goods.

Detail	Information
Archaeological Lesson	Collapse was gradual and shaped by environment, economy, culture, and identity together.

Case Study: The Last Winter in the Eastern Settlement

The hay had run short before the first deep snows, and now Thora counted every bundle twice before cutting a third. Their byre held fewer animals than it had five winters earlier. Sea ice lingered longer in the fjord, and no ship from Iceland had arrived that summer with iron, timber, or news. Her husband still spoke hopefully about spring hunting, but the farm felt smaller every month. At supper their son asked whether they could trade with the Inuit families rumored to be farther north. Thora looked at the fire and did not answer immediately. "We know our ways," her husband said at last. "Those ways are failing," she replied. No one spoke after that. Outside, the wind pushed hard against the turf wall. The family still had a church nearby, storehouses, animals, and memories of better years. Nothing seemed broken in a single dramatic moment. That was what frightened Thora most. The settlement was not ending in a battle or a storm. It was narrowing—season by season, choice by choice—until the old life no longer fit the world around it.

1. How does Thora's experience show that Greenland's collapse was gradual rather than sudden?

2. Why does the case study suggest that culture and identity mattered alongside climate and trade?

Multiple Choice

1. Why was Iceland more durable than Greenland as a Norse colony?

    a) It was untouched by environmental strain.

    b) It was located next to Constantinople.

    c) It never depended on agriculture of any kind and relied only on animal herding instead.

    d) It had a larger and more sustainable population base with workable local institutions.

2. What was one major economic problem for late Norse Greenland?

    a) Its desert caravans stopped arriving from nearby trade centers and foreign lands.

    b) The value of exports such as walrus ivory declined and outside support weakened.

    c) It lost all access to fish.

    d) Its gold mines ran out.

3. What does archaeology suggest about the end of the Greenland colonies?

    a) They vanished overnight without warning signs.

    b) They were conquered by Rome.

    c) They ended through a long interaction of climate stress, trade decline, and social limits on adaptation.

    d) They were abandoned immediately after Erik the Red died, with no leadership to keep the colony together.

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Greenland	A) The breakdown or ending of a society's settlement system over time
2. ___ Iceland	B) The Norse leader associated with promoting settlement in Greenland
3. ___ Erik the Red	C) The North Atlantic colony where Norse settlements eventually disappeared
4. ___ Little Ice Age	D) The island colony that developed the Commonwealth and preserved many sagas
5. ___ collapse	E) A period of cooler climate conditions that increased environmental stress in the North Atlantic

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The Norse colonies in _____ eventually disappeared from the historical record.

2. Cooler climate conditions associated with the _____ increased stress on North Atlantic settlements.

3. A famous law-centered Viking-age society developed in _____.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why does archaeology present Greenland's end as a complex process instead of a single disaster?

_____

_____

_____

2. How could Iceland be both a success story and an environmental warning?

3. Why is the Norse Atlantic often discussed in modern conversations about climate change?