



Northern Scholars Scheme

The University of Edinburgh

Northern Scholars Lecture by Professor Christian Keller

Date of Lecture: Monday 11 October 2010 at 5.15 pm

Lecture venue: Room 2.13, Geography, Drummond Street, Edinburgh

Title of Lecture: "Celtic and Norse cultural synergy as a precondition for the colonization of the North Atlantic"

Abstract

The Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland were settled by Norse people during the 9th to 11th centuries AD. Recent analyses of ancient DNA suggests the immigrants harboured a strong Celtic component, suggesting that the colonization was driven from Norse and Celtic communities in the British Isles.

The author suggests that the colonization could not have happened without the synergy of Norse and Celtic culture which happened when the Norse colonized parts of Scotland and Ireland from the 8th century onwards. The Norse came from a wooded coastland and brought marine technology, navigation skills, and a capacity for deep water fishing. The Celts came partly from treeless islands; they brought skills in utilizing turf for house-building, peat for fuel, hoe agriculture, and spectacular harvesting of bird cliffs. Both cultures were big in animal husbandry.

The Norse brought colonists to the Islands, the Celts made them survive. It is a paradox that while the Icelandic population has obvious Celtic genetic elements, the language, early architecture, and historical identity is Norse. Icelandic medieval literature reveals a collective obsession with the Norse ancestry of Icelanders. The author suggests that such excessive 'Norseness' must have developed in an area where Norse settlers experienced ethnic stress from the population majority, and suggests this took place in the Norse settlements in the British Isles.

The 'hybrid elements' in the North Atlantic islands continued to display their dual cultural origins; it is up to present-day scholars to interpret them.