

Val Dufeu, *Fish Trade in Medieval North Atlantic Societies. An Interdisciplinary Approach to Human Ecodynamics*. [The Early Medieval North Atlantic Series.] (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018). 254 p. ISBN 9789462983212.

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Understanding the development of medieval regional and long-distance trading in fish around the North Atlantic is essential for historical grasp of the place this economic and ecological system held in Europe's medieval 'commercial revolution' and its long-term sequel, first the 'Europeanization' and eventually 'globalization' of environmental exploitation. Central to this issue is the role in commerce, local markets, and human diets of dried cod (so-called 'stockfish') during the half-millennium before European discovery of the Grand Banks off Newfoundland.

Presented as coming from a new ecological perspective, Dufeu's study of Iceland's fishery and trade promises important insights. It would investigate the place of fisheries in Iceland and the Faeroes prior to the appearance about 1300 of Icelandic stockfish on the market in Bergen and hence in the northwest European network of commerce in marine fishes. The book's chapters treat successively the place of Iceland in Viking and post-Viking Atlantic societies; the state of the scholarly literature on Viking and post-Viking archaeology; interdisciplinary and environmental history methods; the Icelandic sagas and other written archives; potential models for exploitation of aquatic resources and the emergence of commercial fishing in medieval Iceland; and geoarchaeological tests of reconstructions in four Icelandic and two Faeroe excavated sites. The principal model is zooarchaeologists' well-known distinction between evidence of fish processing and of fish consumption here applied to Icelandic farmsteads; Dufeu would take the former as signifying 'commercial' fishing. The concluding chapter summarizes this discussion and the limited ability of the test sites to confirm the model and thus to do more than sustain the possibility that some Icelanders did engage in commercial fishing some centuries before hitherto thought.

The promise is largely disappointed and in several ways. As detailed only at the end of the book (chapter 6) the slim data sets recovered from soil micromorphology and zooarchaeological finds (fish bones) at the six sites make a plausible case for Icelanders fishing beyond immediate local subsistence needs some time before appearance of Icelandic stockfish on the international market. Earlier review and summary of the sparse written record (chapter 4) hints at eleventh-thirteenth century Icelanders making regular voyages to Norway for cereals, timber, and other European goods, but provides little evidence of what they offered in

return: some falcons, wool, walrus ivory, sulfur, but no mention of fish. Chapters 2 and 3 provide elaborate overviews of literally dozens of conceptual or general works on northern environments, fish archaeology, community anthropology, environmental history, anthropological theory, archaeological soil studies, and other topics, all in search of interpretive frameworks for what at that point is still undisclosed evidence regarding early Icelandic trade in fish. Much there covered is obsolete social science; most of it remains irrelevant to the problem at hand. Not explicitly explored is what 'fish trade' might entail in operational or evidentiary terms, namely the different implications of local/regional/internal trade (or exchange) in Europe of the ninth-eleventh centuries as compared to the international commerce well-documented for Norway since the early twelfth century and for Icelandic fish products by the early fourteenth. Nor, indeed, has the book any perceptible identification of its expected audience, any explanation of pairing the poorly-recorded Faeroes with Iceland, or any rationale for treating these regions apart from the larger context of trade in fish products.

Some problems with methods and historical reasoning need mention. Best archaeozoological practice does not use numbers of bones as proxies for the dietary contribution of fish and domestic livestock (see pp. 178-216, notably 185, 188-189, 193, 202-214) because weights of individuals in each class are very unequal (cow vs. cod) and fish and mammal bones survive differently in most archaeological contexts. Anachronistic and erratic reasoning are common. Sometimes modern conditions prove a similar past and elsewhere necessarily mean it was different. There is some curious reasoning from silence: 'If descriptions found in sagas are contemporaneous to the time of writing [i.e. thirteenth century], it cannot be asserted that these events and activities did not take place earlier' (p. 101). Wishful emphasis on the possible is ubiquitous: 'Indeed, it is postulated here, that such availability of resources and the subsequent economic exploitation of them could be at the origin of an economic commonwealth developed by the Icelanders, and to a certain extent by the Faeroese, which benefited the inhabitants of the North Atlantic, including the Norwegians.' (p. 132).

Fish Trade originated as a PhD thesis accepted at the University of Stirling in 2011 and seemingly remains little revised. Some passages still refer to 'this thesis' and only two bibliographic references post-date 2010. This matters because the ensuing decade has seen major new publications in the field of medieval North Atlantic fisheries history, most notably J. Barrett and D. Orton, eds., *Cod and Herring: The Archaeology and History of Medieval Sea Fishing* (Oxford/Philadelphia: 2016), where several chapters directly engage Norwegian and Icelandic fisheries and related socio-economic structures. None of this recent work informs this book. PhD dissertations are infamous for excessive name-dropping of secondary references – to prove the candidate has read 'everything' – and for turgid prose.

Editorial advice and careful revision commonly remedy these conditions before the dissertation becomes a book. Sadly readers and editors for Amsterdam University Press brought about no detectable improvement. Even in simple mechanical matters the book contains numerous typographic and other errors (e.g. pp. 107, 117, 121, 128-129, 221 note 4) and even repetitions or duplications of entire passages (e.g. pp. 143-144).

A good editor and attentive author could have transformed a clumsy manuscript into a solid tale synthesizing a genuine problem of environmental economic history (the role of Icelandic fisheries *before* ca.1300), an intriguing array of interdisciplinary evidence (soils, settlement structures, fish remains, sagas, teasing scraps of administrative and narrative sources) to be handled with critical care, and then a well-grounded set of legitimate interpretations. It might have been a springboard for more and well-targeted archaeological and comparative analysis. But rather than interrogating the data and acknowledging ambiguity and silences, the author builds structures of might have beens.

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Peer Vries, *Averting a Great Divergence. State and Economy in Japan, 1868-1937* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2019). 320 p. ISBN 9781350121676.

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In his previous books, Peer Vries wrote extensively about the Great Divergence and the insights that we can get from the Great Divergence-debate about the origins of modern economic growth (*Escaping Poverty* was published in 2013 and reviewed in this journal in 2015 by Jan de Vries,² *State, Economy and the Great Divergence Great Britain and China, 1680s-1850s* was published in 2015. Since then, Peer Vries has shifted his attention to Japan, which, as a sovereign state, was much more comparable to the European states than China.

Averting the Great Divergence is not so much about the Great Divergence, but rather about the laying of economic and institutional foundations for post-World War II catch-up growth, which ultimately prevented further divergence. Japan is an interesting case, argues Vries, because Japan was the only non-western country that managed, at least partially, to modernize its economy and start to industrialize in the nineteenth century.

2 J. De Vries, 'Escaping the Great Divergence'. *TSEG/Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History*, 12:2 (2015) 39-50. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.18352/tseg.55>.