The Story of the Norse Vikings in Greenland and Why their Settlement Collapsed After 450 Years
Most of the information for this presentation was taken from a new interdisciplinary book titled

**Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed**

by Jared Diamond
Lands where Inuit lived (in purple)
Greenland is the same latitude as Norway, but is not warmed by the Gulf Stream so is much colder. The Arctic current and cold from Greenland’s ice cap affect Greenland’s weather.
Arctic Icebergs
Icebergs sit frozen in sea ice in Meteorite Bay, northwestern Greenland. Icebergs are part of Greenland’s icecap.
Viking ships had a low draft, which means the keel below the water line was low even when ships were full.
Eric the Red left Iceland for Greenland in 983.
When he sailed into the vast landmass which came to be known as Greenland, he came upon two deep fjords protected from the harsh winds and saltwater spray of the North Atlantic. As he sailed into these fjords, he saw grassy slopes filled with buttercups, dandelions, and bluebells and thick forests of willow, birch, and alder.

Eventually the Norse built two colonies, the Eastern and Western settlements. It is said in the saga Eric the Red he “took the best land in the Eastern settlement.”
Social Structure of Norse who were Medieval European Christians

The traditional social structure of the Norse consisted of Chiefs, freemen (farmers and free laborers), and bondsmen (slaves). Chiefs owned land, livestock and often many ships. Freemen and slaves worked with chiefs and so did bondsmen.

Chiefs competed with each other, sometimes by peaceful means (giving lavish gifts and organizing large feasts for everyone) and sometimes by warfare.
For the first 300 years, from 980 to 1300, it seemed that settlements in Greenland were surviving relatively well. They built a reproduction of their predominant Christian, Norwegian way of life, bringing with them to Greenland’s fjords their livestock, tools and families, building a string of parish churches, and providing for all the basic necessities. In this orderly, law-abiding life lay their pride, dignity, and identity.

Conditions which favored them in Greenland were south facing slopes, flat lowland meadows to grow hay and graze animals, and fresh streams of water.

Eventually the two settlements had 5,000 people, 300 farms, and a series of 22 churches, plus one convent.
**Viking Settlement**

Typical Viking settlements were centered around the longhouse, a large barn-like building in which the family lived. Other buildings included storehouses, where grain and food supplies were kept, and workshops, where weapons and farming tools were made. Because the Vikings were skilled seafarers, many of their settlements were near water, and they used their well-constructed boats for fishing, for trade, and to raid other settlements and villages.
It happens in Greenland...that all that is taken there from other countries is costly there, because the country lies so far from other countries that people rarely travel there. Every item, with which they might help the country, they must buy from other countries, both iron and all the timber with which they build houses. People export these goods from there: goatskins, ox-hides, sealskins and the rope...which they cut out of the fish called walrus and which is called skin rope, and their tusks...The people have been christened, and have both churches and priests.... (King's Mirror)

Taken from a hand book passed from father to young son written in the 1200’s AD
Luxury trade items Greenlanders sold in Norway included walrus skin, falcons, whale tusks, feathers, polar bear skins.
Their medieval Catholic faith meant the world to the Greenland Norse.
Bishops were sent directly from Norway to Greenland.

Trade records indicate Catholic Churches in Greenland paid annual tithes in kind to Norway and Norway in turn sent the money to Rome.

A surviving receipt for one such shipment, the Crusade Tithe of 1274-1280, shows the shipment consisted of 1,470 pounds of ivory from the tusks of 191 walruses.
Looking back on these settlements from our vantage point today, we can observe that the Norse were imperceptibly following practices which weren’t sustainable in their environment in Greenland. These practices were as follows:

• Chopped down forests to use wood for fuel, furniture and houses
• Used cleared land for grazing cows
• Built houses out of 6-foot slabs of turf which meant a home consumed about 10 acres of grassland

These practices weren’t sustainable. Greenland’s southwest coast was too fragile to withstand that pressure. Why?

• The short, cool growing season meant grass developed slowly
• Grass was needed to hold topsoil in place
• Without grass or trees to hold topsoil in place it washes or blows away
• Without grass or other dead organic matter, topsoil lacks organic humus which provides nutrients
A Sub-plot
Leif Erickson's voyages from Greenland to Newfoundland
Leif Eriksson, Eric the Red’s son, landed in Northwest Newfoundland, began a settlement with 8 buildings there and called it Vinland (Wineland). It is now thought the grapes they were referring to were from St. Lawrence seaway and Nova Scotia area for that’s the farthest north wild grapes would have grown. They made 5 voyages from Greenland in the 10 years that the settlement lasted. From the Newfoundland settlement they voyaged down the coastline, hugging the coast, remaining within sight of land and avoiding the risk of the open ocean. Isolation, climate, and disputes with native American proved too difficult. Information about this settlement comes from two sagas Eric the Red and Greenlander’s Saga and also from archeological finds.
Leif Eriksson Discovers America
Painting by Krogh
Norse cloak pin and sewing whorl found at excavations at Newfoundland settlement
The Inuits
Lands where Inuit lived (in purple)
The Inuit entered Greenland around 1200 AD and by 1300 ventured down the western coast. They had long ago mastered Arctic conditions, their ancestors had survived in the Arctic region for thousands of years, and they had a wide range of hunting strategies and everyday practices which favored survival.
Walrus
Killing seal at breathing hole
Inuit Hunter in Caribou skin clothing
Caribou
Inuit Hunter with white reindeer skin jacket with fox fur trim
Failed Opportunity to Learn from Inuit

Looking back the Norse Greenlanders should have learned from the Inuit to hunt seals as the most reliable food source in winter. But they preferred beef and didn’t like seal. The Norse also should have eaten fish. If they had, they may have survived. They may have had a cultural taboo against it. Many communities have taboos and define themselves by their taboos. Diamond says “If you’re going to establish a community in a harsh and forbidding environment the idiosyncrasies which define and cement a culture are of paramount importance. The social glue that had been their strength in mastering Greenland’s difficulties may have also contributed to their downfall.”

Another error they may have corrected if they had perceived how to do so was, instead of obtaining wood from Labrador which would have relieved pressure on their own forests, they spent their time hunting walrus to sell walrus tusk in Norway. They wanted to sell walrus tusk to have the money to buy church bells, stained glass, bronze candlesticks, Communion wine, and vestments for their churches
Following the demise of the Western Settlement in the mid-fourteenth century, the Eastern Settlement continued for another hundred years. In 1408 the last record of the community was recorded. It was a wedding at the Hvalsey Church. Thorstein Olafsson married Sigrid Bjorndotter with 4 witnesses and marriage bans announced for 3 consecutive Sundays. That was the last word to come from Greenland; after that was silence. The church stands today as a reminder of the tragic collapse of the Greenland Norse.
Reasons for Collapse of Norse Community in Greenland according to Jared Diamond
CLIMATE CHANGE

Studies of climate change show that in the Northwestern Atlantic in 1300’s there was a cooling effect in air temperature and ocean temperature. This brought colder glacial winds than usual. Proof of this of cooling can now be measured in ice core samples which contain ice rings, that is, ice layers with glacial ice. Fossil vegetation, sea sediment, and animal and human bones can also be tested and measured. Climate change was a main stressor for the Norse in Greenland. The cold brought about a shorter growing season. That meant cattle and sheep had less grass to graze on and there wasn’t enough hay to get animals through winter. This started a series of events that, over time, led to a slow, downward spiral. Existence was no longer sustainable, people had no economic cushion to absorb problems.
Environmental Damage and Resource Depletion

Deforestation set off a set of circumstances the most noticeable of which was less firewood. Deforestation also caused soil erosion and soil erosion led to soil depletion. Soil depletion was not immediately perceived by the settlers. Unbeknownst to them, topsoil became thin due to loss of organic matter.
Identity as Medieval European Christians

The Norse identity as European Christians meant they built churches on the best land, wore latest European clothes, and preferred to eat beef and pork. This strong common identity helped them get along and survive hardships. Diamond says “The values to which they clinged most stubbornly and caused their decline were the same values which stood them in good in other circumstances. If they had invested less in churches and imitated the Inuit more, they might have survived another winter on earth.”
Long distance from Norway

As the farthest settlement from Norway, Greenland became more and more isolated and supplies and trade goods took longer to arrive. Windy, stormy weather and ice bergs were a constant danger.
Poor Relations with Inuit

In three written texts the Norse refer to the Inuit as “skraelings” a word that meant wretched.

Iceland’s Annals says “Skraelings assaulted Greenlanders killing 18 men and capturing 2 boys and one bondsman and made them slaves.”

There is no evidence of trade between these peoples nor is there evidence of intermarriage. As European Christians, the Norse scorned these non-European, pagan people.
Jared Diamond’s final conclusion
Many scholars who try to explain why societies collapse find explanations which attribute collapses to “acts of God” outside the community’s control. Some point to earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Some point to climate change, weather was either too hot or too cold for survival. Some point to the decimation of communities by disease such as what happened to the Native Americans by small pox.

But Diamond attributes collapses to human failure to perceive their dependence on basic resources and human failure to change rigid thinking.

In the final analysis, he concludes, we must be sure our social values coincide with our need to survive biologically. We must protect our water sources, watersheds, soil, and forests. They are our most basic biological resources. They are tangible and finite. Some societies collapse when they become so consumed with debating fine points of their history and culture- such as the Greenlanders making sure Thorstein Olafsson married Sigrid Bjornsdotter in Hvalsey Church before 4 witnesses with the wedding bans announced on 3 consecutive Sundays, they forgot the forest cover was gone and the pasturelands had disappeared.
REASONS FOR THE FALL OF THE WESTERN ROMAN EMPIRE

• Disparity in wealth between aristocrats and masses caused loss of a sense of stake among the masses
• High unemployment
• Loss of patriotism and work ethic
• Use of violence for entertainment,
• Failure of leadership, low quality of emperors.
• No viable system of succession
• Poor relations with Germanic peoples to north
• Imperial overreach - Romans could no longer afford to secure the borders of the Empire
• Christianity offered people a new worldview and gave them a way to deepen their spirituality and turn toward humanitarian endeavors
• Lead pipes from lead as a byproduct of silver mines in southwestern Spain may have poisoned people. Lead was also used to preserve food and to stop fermentation of wine
• Lack of productivity, trade imbalance, financial exhaustion