

ABSTRACT

Paving the way - Daniel Bruun and Norse building customs in the North Atlantic arena

One of the most remarkable contributions to our understanding of the Norse cultures of the North Atlantic was that of Daniel Bruun (1856-1931). A member of a prominent Jutland family, he received a military education, became a skilled cartographer, spent time in the French Foreign Legion and fought in Algeria. His childhood dream of studying Norse culture in Greenland was finally realised in 1894 when he conducted an impressive field campaign in the so-called Eastern Settlement.

This pioneering effort in archaeological building and landscape observation was to be followed by comparative studies in Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Norway. On his initiative, the North Atlantic cultures and their 'ancient' building customs were presented as a separate part of the Danish contribution to the World Exhibition of 1900 in Paris.

Bruun's work in the Greenlandic Eastern Settlement was replicated in the Western Settlement in 1903, cementing a solid foundation for further research into the buildings customs and morphology of houses and farmsteads in the North Atlantic region. After the National Museum of Denmark initiated large-scale excavations in Norse Greenland in 1921, the young architect Aage Roussell (1901-1972) became the leading figure in this field. In 1931, Roussell conducted a study tour to the Scottish Isles – on his honeymoon – filling in a geographical gap left by Bruun.

Roussell published his researches in English, partly using the observations presented by Bruun decades earlier and attempting to demonstrate that these North Atlantic archipelagos could be seen as part of the same cultural (Scandinavian) sphere studied by Bruun. Roussell established close contacts with local antiquarians in Orkney and Shetland and in 1939 he was invited to visit excavations at the Brough of Birsay and Jarlshof. Indeed, after the war there were attempts to involve him in the publication of Jarlshof.

In contrast to Roussell (who was actually awarded the British civil honour of O.B.E.), it is perhaps noteworthy that Bruun never included Scotland, and especially the Scottish Isles, in his comparative studies, and, unlike other antiquarian-minded Danes (e.g. Christian Pløyen and J.J.A. Worsaae), he never set foot in Britain. He was also a francophile with little sympathy for the British Empire and its colonial ways. Bruun seems to have remained rather unknown to an audience outside Scandinavia and this can be explained, in part at least, by the fact that only some of his work in Greenland was published in English, while his two monumental compilations of work in Iceland (1928) and the Faroe Islands (1929) were only published in Danish. Nevertheless, Bruun's contribution to the study of ancient building customs in the North Atlantic area was significant and has arguably been unappreciated. Perceived as a non-academic for much of his life, he did in fact pave the way for the academics who came after him.

Steffen Stummann Hansen

Toftanes 20

FO 520 Leirvík

Faroe Islands

stummann@olivantfo