THE NORSEMEN IN AMERICA

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THE NORSEMEN IN AMERICA

The first Europeans to reach America came by way of Iceland and Greenland. Unlike Columbus and his contemporaries some five hundred years later, they were not primarily interested in international trade, nor did their voyages command the patronage of governments. They were husbandmen, hunters and fishermen, looking for new homes; and their movement across the North Atlantic took more than a century. They explored the North American coast southwards probably to New England and northwards to the Arctic, without however ascending the St. Lawrence River or penetrating into the interior of the continent. Their Greenland settlements were abandoned by the sixteenth century, having lasted more than five hundred years. Knowledge of their route to American lands was preserved in Europe, although nobody realized that the coasts they had found belonged to a new continent.

During the ninth century, pagan Vikings from Norway and Denmark descended upon Western Europe, while others from Sweden moved against the countries east of the Baltic. Taking advantage of the political chaos after Charlemagne's death (814), Vikings raided as far as Nantes and Paris. They even sacked Moorish Seville (844) and sailed around Spain to the Rhone valley, Italy and North Africa. By the middle of the century their attacks on the British Isles had changed to conquest and settlement. In England the Danish advance was checked by the one remaining Anglo-Saxon kingdom, Wessex, under Alfred the Great (871-899). In Ireland, too, the power and unity of the established Norwegian princes seems to have declined during the later years of the century, when their homeland was plunged into the civil wars from which Harald Finehair emerged as King of Norway. Whether as a result of this warfare, or simply by the extension of Norwegian settlement in Ireland and the northern British islands, Norwegian settlers streamed into Iceland in the sixty years after about 870; by 930, we are told, all the lands had been settled and the population may have already been pressing on the available resources of the country.

The next stepping-stone westward was Greenland, that huge ice sheet whose eastern glaciers can, in exceptionally clear weather, be seen from the mountains of northwestern Iceland. Greenland was sighted during the period 870-930 by a certain Gunnbjörn
Ulfsson, who probably sailed near the east coast; his discovery, which has always been called the Skerries of Gunnbjörn, has never been located. Icelanders first set foot on Greenland in 980, when an expedition wintered somewhere on the east coast. The leaders of this expedition, Hrólfr Raudsenski and Snaebjörn Hölmsteinsson, are thus the real discoverers of Greenland.

The effect of their voyage on the first great explorer of the Western Hemisphere, Eric the Red, is unknown. Indeed, little is known of Eric's early years, not even with certainty whether he was born in Norway or—as is almost certain—in Iceland. In 982 Eric killed a man in Iceland and was outlawed for three years. He spent them exploring the west coast of Greenland, which he reached on a search for the Skerries of Gunnbjörn. He returned to Iceland to organize a colonizing company to occupy the new country to which, in order to attract settlers, he gave the enticing name, Greenland. In 986 he led a flotilla of twenty-five ships, fourteen of which reached the west coast. Here two settlements were established: the Eastern near the southern tip, in the vicinity of Julianehaab, and the Western in the region of the Godthaab fjords.

In this same year an Icelandic merchant, Bjarni Herjúlfsson, sailed from Iceland to spend the yuletide with his father, who had emigrated to Greenland with Eric. Bjarni was driven far off course in storms and fog. When the weather cleared, he and his companions saw land, wooded and dotted with small hills. Sailing north, they came next to a flat, forested land and then to a mountainous coast with glaciers. They did not put ashore at any of the three lands sighted. There has been much conjecture as to what Bjarni's landfalls were; the likelihood is that they were Newfoundland, Labrador and Baffin Island.

All sources do not agree as to what happened after this. However, it is certain that Leif, the son of Eric the Red, did land either by accident or by design on the American mainland about the year 1000 and that the southernmost part of the coast he visited received the name Vinland. In the next two decades a small number of expeditions visited the mainland, the most important of them being led by Thorfinn Karlsefni Thordarson. He attempted to found a colony. It was abandoned after two or three years, not however before the first white child had been born in America. This child, the son of Thorfinn and his wife, was named Snorri. Thorfinn's expedition has been variously dated between 1003 and 1014; the dates accepted depend on the number of Vinland expeditions each
investigator recognizes. It also seems certain that a bishop, Eric upsi Gnúppson, set out in 1121 in search of Vinland. A ship carrying timber from Markland (Labrador) was driven to Iceland in 1347. It is possible that an Icelandic pilot, Jón Skúlason (Scolvus), guided two Portuguese envoys in a Danish ship to North America about 1470. But here the curtain virtually closes on the Norse voyages to the American mainland, so far as trustworthy written sources dealing with them are concerned.

THE SOURCES

These pre-Columbian voyages and settlements of the Icelanders have produced a vast body of literature, with varying and contradictory interpretations. This is to be expected from the paucity and vagueness of the sources. Our information on the history of the Vikings in America is chiefly based on two types of material: written accounts and archaeological discoveries. Of the former, the most important are two Icelandic sagas: the Saga of Eric the Red and the Saga of the Greenlanders. These purportedly describe the same events: the settlement of Greenland and the voyages undertaken thence to various parts of the east coast of North America. Opinions have varied greatly as to which is the older, more authentic and reliable work. The prevalent opinion now seems to be that the Saga of Eric was composed, in its present form, during the latter half of the thirteenth century and the Saga of the Greenlanders about 1200. But there is no agreement as to which is the more reliable. Other sources we possess include a Tale of the Greenlanders, written possibly in the first half of the thirteenth century, which relates the circumstances of the erection of a bishopric in Greenland in 1124 as well as some other events there in the twelfth century; scattered notices in Icelandic geographical works; and a few entries in Icelandic annals prior to 1430. In addition, some information may be gleaned from mediaeval maps and from the occasional item in a mediaeval chronicle or in such a work as The Art of Hunting with Birds, written by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (died 1250). Finally, there is The King's Mirror, a Norwegian work dating from about 1225, which gives a description of Greenland and the life of its inhabitants, together with the earliest description of the Northern Lights. In what follows further reference will be made to these sources.

There is not much archaeological work bearing on the visits and attempted settlements of the Icelanders south of the Gulf of
St. Lawrence. What has been done has yielded no results, except for the excavations (discussed below) of Helge Ingstad in Newfoundland in 1961. On the contrary, there has been a great deal of archaeological work done in Greenland and in the Canadian Arctic. The most important results of this work are to be found in Meddelser om Grønland and in the Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition. These writings are mainly in English.

THE NORSEMEN IN GREENLAND

Greenland, as has been said, was settled by Icelanders in the next few years after 985. The settlers were looking for lands suitable for husbandry and found them in the hospitable fjords of the west coast. They brought cattle with them; the size of their barns indicates that they came to have large herds. They also had sheep, of course, and there were a few horses, goats, pigs and some poultry. Cereal grains could not be cultivated to any extent. They brought dogs, it seems of two breeds—the ancestors of the present Eskimo dog and a long-legged hound—but apparently no cats. The Greenland settlers came to number from 3,000 to 9,000, according to various estimates, scattered over about 300 farms in the two settlements. Here for more than five centuries they were to lead a life not dissimilar to that of Iceland, but one in which hunting came to play an ever-increasing role. From the earliest times they supplemented the food their husbandry offered them by the game found in the sea and on land. Seal meat, especially that of the harp seal, was most important. Whales were also a welcome catch, as were the salmon in the rivers and the cod in the sea. Inland roamed large herds of caribou, to be had almost for the asking. There is no reason to think that there was ever any shortage of food in Greenland, although there was no doubt a lack—painful to the Icelander—of beer, mead and (ironically for the discoverers of Vinland the Good) of wine.

On their lands the newcomers raised first of all houses of the type common in Iceland, the long house or hall, usually with one common room. In time, however, this gave way to the centralized house. It consisted of a number of rooms huddled under one roof and with only one entrance door—an ideal arrangement to defeat the cold, which in winter always sought entry. We find the same development—indeed, it seems—in Iceland. But whereas in Iceland houses were built almost solely of turf and sod, in Green-
land they were almost from the beginning erected of stones with
earth filling between them, banked with sod to make the walls very
thick—as much as ten feet in some cases. Outhouses, such as
barns and storage sheds, were also built of stone.

The Icelanders in Greenland were in command of wares—so
to speak—for which there was a high demand in Europe. One of
these was ivory from the tusks of the walrus. In Western Europe
during the Middle Ages most ivory articles were made from the
tusks of the walrus, not those of the elephant. Again, ropes made
from walrus hide were in great demand for shipping. More highly
prized, but much rarer, were the white falcons of Baffin Island.
Falconry was the most popular sport of the upper classes during the
Middle Ages and the most sought-after bird was the Greenland or
White falcon. The Greenlanders caught these birds for the King
of Norway after ca. 1920, when Iceland and Greenland accepted the
king of Norway as their sovereign. He doled them out to the poten-
tates of Europe, Asia and Africa, with the result that Greenland
and the surrounding islands were known as the Falcon Islands.
Even more precious, because even rarer, were polar bears. These
animals were the darlings of European kings and, like the falcons or
the silks of Byzantium, were diplomatic instruments. To capture a
polar bear and present it to a king was to make one's fortune, as
may be read in the *Tale of Audunn* and his bear. Audunn presented
a polar bear to the King of Denmark about 1050 and received, in
addition to money and jewelry, an ocean-going vessel fully laden
with a valuable cargo. One of the prized possessions of Henry III
of England (1216-1272) was a polar bear. Thus the Greenlanders
had valuable objects to exchange for the wheat, timber, iron and
other goods they imported from Europe.

We know less of the cultural than of the material state of the
Icelanders in Greenland. One of the Eddic lays (poems dealing
with the mythology and heroic age of the Germanic people),
*Atlamál*, was composed there, but apparently reflects life in the
hunting rather than in the farming settlements. Chess and draughts
pieces have been found in considerable number in the ruins of
the farmsteads. Some of the chessmen attest a high degree of
artistic skill, as do other carvings in ivory and stone.

About the religious life of the Greenlanders there is considerable
information. The Icelandic Althing (the island's national assembly)
adopted Christianity in the year 1000, which automatically made it
the legal religion of the Icelandic colony, Greenland. Leif the
Lucky, who brought a priest or priests with him in that year, is said to have accomplished the conversion of the Greenlanders in spite of the opposition of his father, Eric the Red. Eric’s wife, Thjodhildr, readily accepted the new faith and erected, some distance from their farmstead of Brattahlid, in the Eastern Settlement, the first church in the Western Hemisphere. It was a small building, with three walls of turf and a west wall of timber. Its remains were excavated by the Danish ethnologist, Jørgen Meldgaard, in 1961. He also excavated the churchyard, in which we may presume that Leif and his parents were buried; their bones may now be among those uncovered by Meldgaard.

Christianity spread rapidly and the ruins of at least sixteen parish churches exist, twelve in the Eastern Settlement and four in the Western. All were built of stone masonry — unlike the turf or timber churches of Iceland — and were larger than those of the homeland, in spite of the small population. There also arose a nunnery opposite the island of Unartok and a monastery, overshadowed by huge and forbidding mountains, in Ketilsfjord (Tasermiut).

In 1124 the Greenlanders petitioned for a bishop. A Norwegian priest named Arnald was consecrated, the first of a long line of bishops of Gardar (south of Brattahlid, across the Eiriksfjord). Soon a large and fine cathedral was erected there, as well as an episcopal residence, a banquet hall and other buildings. Among them, it would seem, was a large, open pen, constructed of huge boulders, in which polar bears might be kept while waiting transshipment to Europe. The church at Gardar early acquired fishing and hunting rights in many localities and a monopoly of polar-bear hunting in some of them. It became wealthy. Indeed, at some time before the end of the Greenland settlements, all land in them passed into the possession of the church.

Yet all was not well with Christianity in the New World. No bishop made his way to Greenland after about 1378, when Bishop Alf died, although appointments to the see of Gardar continued to be made until the second quarter of the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, it is certain that the Greenlanders continued to practise Christianity into the sixteenth century and that vestiges of it remained among the Eskimos much later than that. The lack of close contact with the church in Europe, however, paved the way for the disappearance of the Christian faith.
THE END OF THE GREENLAND SETTLEMENTS

The disappearance of the Icelandic settlements and way of life in Greenland has long been regarded as one of the great historical mysteries. Many ingenious theories have been advanced to explain it: that the Icelanders were exterminated by aborigines or by pirates in bloody warfare; that malnutrition and physical degeneration brought the race to an end; that its vitality was destroyed by consanguineous marriages; that climatic deterioration made husbandry no longer possible; that epidemics killed the people, while the worms of a butterfly (Agrotis occulta) destroyed vegetation. Some of these theories lack any basis in evidence, some are fantastic and none has much to recommend it. The whole answer to the problem will perhaps never be known, but there can be no doubt about the main outlines of its solution. Fundamentally, the European Christian culture of the Icelanders was extinguished in Greenland as the result of a gradual racial intermixture with the aborigines.

When the Icelanders came to Greenland, they found no inhabitants in the parts they settled or visited, but they did find traces of earlier habitation which told them that a people similar to those they were to meet in Vinland had lived there. These people they called Skraelings (a word whose root means small and wizened or withered) and historians have usually identified them with the Eskimos. There is, in fact, little basis for this identification; all our sources describe the Skraelings as dark or even coal-black creatures, some three or four feet in height. Their habitations were simply holes in the ground and their material culture was extremely primitive.

These people did not infiltrate the farming settlements until the thirteenth century, but the Icelanders no doubt came into contact with them earlier in northern Greenland and the Canadian Arctic. The sagas record that from the earliest days individuals drifted from the farming settlements into what were called the “wastes” (ōbygdir), where hunting became the chief occupation. This was a way of life more congenial to many than the relatively hard practice of husbandry, which in any case had to be supplemented by hunting. The momentum of this movement constantly increased, especially after the Skraelings’ southward infiltration began. Even so, the mixture of races was a slow process. The explorers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries met two different peoples in Greenland and Labrador, the one European in physical type and the other
smaller and mongoloid. This would seem to indicate that the intermixture of Icelanders and Skraelings, whether these were Eskimos or more primitive aborigines, was still incomplete. It is a fact that in Greenland the Eskimos did not move into the bottoms of the fjords until the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; it may be that husbandry there survived, to some extent, the extinction of Icelandic culture.

It may be regarded as certain that by 1342 the inhabitants of the Western Settlement had so intermarried with the Skraelings that farming was discontinued and Christianity either rejected or gradually forgotten. The whole settlement was then abandoned or, as an annalist tells us, the inhabitants had rejected Christianity and all good mores and turned to the peoples of America. They left their homes, sheep and cattle and migrated no one knows where—probably to Baffin Island, Labrador or further inland into the Canadian Arctic.

The Eastern Settlement, however, continued to exist for at least another 150 or 200 years; the ruins of buildings erected in the latter half of the fifteenth century show that it was then still in a flourishing condition. Perhaps this is to be explained by the fact that it was larger than the Western Settlement (which contained only a third of the farms); by the fact that it was in closer and more frequent touch with Europe; by the fact that the cathedral was located there; and by the fact that the Skraelings reached it later than they did the Western Settlement. But in the end its fate was the same: the gradual loss of Christianity and Nordic culture through intermarriage with the pagans and the consequent loss of the Icelandic language by the children of these mixed marriages; the replacement, in the material sphere, of an iron age by a stone age culture; the whole process hastened possibly by fewer contacts with Europe after the fourteenth century. In the course of the sixteenth century the farms were abandoned and the great majority of the inhabitants dispersed.

THE NORSEMEN IN THE CANADIAN ARCTIC

In a certain sense Greenland may be called the base for all the pre-Columbian explorations of America. From there the Icelanders launched their ships to explore the eastern coasts of what are now Canada and the United States and thence they made voyages to all parts of the eastern Canadian Arctic. Very early they advanced across Davis Strait to Baffin Island and north along the west coast of
Greenland to Disko Island and beyond it as far as Thule. The special object of these voyages was to hunt walrus and whales, to be found there in large numbers. The islands of the Arctic Archipelago west of Greenland were also visited—regularly, it would seem, for on Norman Lockyer Island, St. Helena Island and Devil Island in Jones Sound nesting grounds for eider ducks have been found which can have been laid out by no one but the mediaeval Greenlanders. In these regions, as well as on the Melville Peninsula, polar bear traps erected by the Greenlanders have also been found. The whole territory north of Disko Island and west of Baffin Bay seems to have been known as Nordrseta (the Northern Booth Dwellers Region), a name which indicates not only that voyages were made to these regions but that some of the Greenlanders early abandoned husbandry and there took up a mode of life supported by hunting and not unlike that of the Eskimo.

In fact, it seems that just as the Skraelings infiltrated the Icelandic settlements in Greenland, so the Icelanders, faring northward, mingled with and influenced the aborigines of the Canadian Arctic. Any attempt to measure or trace their influence is bound up with two very difficult questions: the origin and nature of the Thule Culture of the Eskimos—a culture contemporary with the Icelandic settlements in Greenland—and the identity of the people called the Tunnit.

The Thule Culture is thought by most scholars to have originated in Alaska and spread eastward to Greenland, supplanting an earlier Eskimo culture called the Dorset. Excavation of Thule Culture sites in Greenland (and even in Canada) have shown that the people of that culture were in close touch with the Icelandic settlements. The sites excavated by Holtved in Inglefield Land, northwest Greenland, in 1944 are apparently the earliest stage of the Thule Culture known in the eastern Arctic; Holtved assigns them to the eleventh or twelfth century. At these sites iron, apparently of Norse origin, had already replaced stone as blades for harpoons, knives and adzes. The collection of 12,000 specimens included only eleven slate blades, while most of the rather more numerous chipped flint blades were of the earlier Dorset type and did not belong to the Thule Culture at all. This use of iron in the very earliest eastern Thule sites is difficult to explain if one accepts the hypothesis that the culture originated in Alaska; if the culture was already formed before encountering Icelandic influences, it should in its earliest stages in Greenland have been a stone age culture. So is
the fact that, as Therkel Mathiassen says, "the art [in stone and bone] of the Thule Culture manifests a steady degeneration gradually as it spreads from Alaska eastwards." These difficulties are removed if the Thule Culture is regarded as arising in Greenland, out of the racial and cultural intermixture of the Icelandic settlers and the aborigines. This explanation seems to hold, whether or not the Skraelings were the bearers of the Dorset Culture or of a still earlier stone age culture that has been identified in the Arctic. In fact, it has been argued that the whole material and spiritual culture of the Thule people was to a great extent derived from the Icelandic settlements in Greenland.

The problem of the Thule Culture is complicated by the problem of the identity of the Tunnit. According to E. W. Hawkes, the Eskimo tradition is that the Tunnit "were a gigantic race formerly inhabiting the northeastern coast of Labrador, Hudson Strait and Baffin Island. Ruins of old stone houses and graves, which are ascribed to them by the present Eskimo, are found throughout this entire section. Briefly, we may say that there is evidence, archaeological as well as traditional, that the Tunnit formerly inhabited both sides of Hudson Strait." The Tunnit are a mystery people. They have been identified as just another Eskimo tribe; as North American Indians; and only recently as the people of the Dorset Culture. The view that the Tunnit were Icelanders from Greenland who had adopted more or less an Eskimo way of life has sometimes been advanced, most recently and cogently by Dr. Jón Dúason. According to this view, the Tunnit were the originators and bearers of the Thule Culture, which thus began in the east and gradually spread westward. The Tunnit, coming from an iron age culture, were clumsy when for lack of iron they had to make stone or bone weapons and articles; but as time passed and the culture moved westward, greater skill was acquired. The degeneration in the art of the Thule Culture, moving east, may thus be an improvement, moving west.

Whatever the truth may be in these matters, there can be no doubt that the relations between the mediaeval Greenlanders and the aborigines of America form a subject greatly in need of clarification. For it was in Greenland and in the lands west of it that the Icelandic voyages had their most important and lasting effects. By comparison the Vinland voyages, so much publicized and often romanticized, were ephemeral ventures.
THE VINLAND VOYAGES

The discovery and attempted settlement of some part of the eastern American mainland have fascinated both scholars and laymen. There is no pause in the flow of books on Vinland or in the attempts to locate it.

According to the Saga of Eric the Red and the Saga of the Greenlanders, the Vinland discovered and wintered in by Leif the Lucky about the year 1000 was distinguished by self-sown wheat (whatever that was: usually wild rice is suggested), wild vines and trees called mosurr (possibly bird's-eye maple or a kind of birch). The dew there was very sweet; salmon of great size abounded; cattle could forage for themselves in winter, for there was no frost and the grass barely withered. Day and night were of more equal length than in Iceland and about the time of the winter solstice the sun rose about 9:00 a.m. (dagmalastadr) and set about 3:30 p.m. (eyktarstadtr). An island lay north of the country and a river flowed from a lake into the sea. When Leif returned to Greenland he brought a cargo of grapes, vines and timber.

Nothing in the above has enabled scholars to locate Vinland, except to conclude that it must be in a region where grapes grow and the winters are mild. Even the promising passage about the length of day has proved a broken reed; for there is no agreement as to exactly what hours dagmalastadr and eyktarstadtr meant, although most scholars accept the times above as approximate. Even so, the interpretation of the passage involves highly technical definitions and astronomical calculations. In working out the location, scholars have placed Vinland as far south as 31°N. latitude and as far north as 58°26'N. latitude — that is, between Florida and Labrador.

Most discussions of the location of Vinland have therefore been based on accounts of later voyages than that of Leif. Here, however, our two main sources differ greatly. The Saga of the Greenlanders records four further voyages. Leif's brother, Thorvaldr, sailed to Vinland about 1003 and was slain there by Skraelings. Then his brother Thorsteinn made an unsuccessful attempt to reach Vinland, to bring back Thorvaldr's body. Then came the colonizing expedition of Thorfinnr karlsefni Thordarson, who had married Thorsteinn's widow. Finally, perhaps about 1014, another expedition was led by Freydis, a daughter of Eric the Red; it accomplished nothing. The Saga of Eric the Red tells only of the
abortive voyages of Thorsteinn, and the more successful one of Thorfinnr *karlsefni*.

The latter is thus the only expedition to Vinland recounted in any detail, and that only in the *Saga of Eric*. The saga gives some sailing directions and descriptions of places visited; but these are so vague and confused that they have led to no agreement as to the location of the places visited by the expedition or the region or regions where it wintered. Moreover, the *Saga of Eric* cannot be reconciled on many points with the shorter account in the *Saga of the Greenlanders*. According to the latter, Thorfinnr sailed from the Eastern Settlement to Vinland, where he had no trouble in finding the houses built by Leif the Lucky. There is no mention of these in the *Saga of Eric*, which describes the expedition as sailing from the Western Settlement first north to an island named Bjarney (Bear Island), then south for two days to a land called Helluland (Flagstoneland), south for two more days to a land named Markland (Woodland) and thence south along a sandy coast to a beautiful mountainous region named Straumfjord. Here there occurred a dispute as to whether Vinland lay north or south. The explorers landed, disembarking their goods and livestock; but a severe winter and a shortage of food drove them south again to a river's mouth, a place with plenty of fish and game, with self-sown wheat on low ground and wild vines on high ground. In this place, Hóp, they wintered; but Skraelings attacked them and, fearing continual warfare, they went back to Straumfjord until the end of a third winter. There dissension arose, and they returned to Greenland. The *Saga of the Greenlanders*, besides omitting most of these wanderings, has the expedition returning in two years, not three. Both sagas describe the Skraelings as willing to trade at first and then turning hostile, but the encounters described seem quite different. Freydis, in the *Saga of Eric*, was on this voyage and led in a fight against the Skraelings; in the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, it was on her own, later, voyage that she instigated a massacre. Her brother Thorvaldr, already killed in Vinland according to the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, is described in the *Saga of Eric* as being shot by a Uniped (*einfættingr*) at a place north of Straumfjord. The two sagas are contradictory and, above all, vague on the itinerary of Thorfinnr's expedition. Yet they are the basis for most attempts to locate Vinland and the other places mentioned.

This search has been pursued relentlessly ever since 1837, when C. C. Rafn published most of the relevant texts in his *Antiquitates*
Americanae. Convenient summaries of subsequent writings on the subject may be found in H. Hermannsson’s *The Problem of Wine-
land* (1936) and J. R. Swanton’s *The Wineland Voyages* (1947). Swanton has compiled a list of the various places identified with the names in the sagas. There is least discrepancy as to the location of Helluland and Markland. Markland has been identified by twenty commentators as follows: Southeast Labrador (six), Newfoundland (six), Nova Scotia (six), Maine (one) and James Bay (one). Twenty commentators place Helluland in Labrador or Newfoundland. Yet the *Saga of the Greenlanders* says that the first land visited by Leif on his way to Vinland was the third land sighted by Bjarni Herjúlfsson and in both cases describes it as having glaciers—a description which, considering the route, can apply only to Baffin Island. The *Saga of Eric* does not mention glaciers on the land Thorfinnr karlsefni called Helluland; but it must be noticed that he could not have sailed from the Western Settlement, and still less from Disko (which many identify as Bjarney), and reached even northern Labrador in two days. It is, however, when we come to Vinland that the greatest difference of opinion is found. Eighteen commentators have posited fourteen different locations, in various parts of Labrador, Quebec, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Massachusetts, New York and the Great Lakes area. F. Nansen regarded Vinland as a wholly mythical place, but has found no followers.

What then can be said? Only this: if we are to give any credence to the sagas, Helluland must be Baffin Island and Markland must be almost any part of Labrador or possibly Newfoundland. As for Vinland, the most plausible region answering the general description in the sagas is some part of New England.

Not a single relic of Vinland has been found on the American mainland. On the other hand, it would seem that traces of the presence of Norsemen have finally been discovered in Newfoundland. In 1961 the Norwegian journalist-explorer Helge Ingstad excavated the ruins of seven houses near L’Anse aux Meadows in northern Newfoundland. He dates them tentatively from the eleventh century. One of the houses was twenty metres long, divided into five rooms entered from a passageway running the length of the house. This type of construction, according to Ingstæad, was common in Norway around 1000. Another ruin closely resembles some excavated in Greenland. Hearths were also found of a type common in mediaeval Iceland and Greenland.
It need not be doubted that these ruins are Norse work, but it cannot be argued that they are Leif's houses or even Vinland houses at all, unless one is to accept Ingstad's contention—for which there is no evidence—that there were two Vinlands, a northern and a southern one. The term Vinland may indeed have been used to designate all the territories visited by Icelanders south of Markland, but Leif's Vinland was a much more restricted region. It may even be, as Bishop Eric upsri Gnipsson's voyage in 1121 "to search for Vinland" suggests, that the exact location of Leif's Vinland was soon forgotten. This is the last recorded attempt to reach Vinland; but voyages continued to be made to Markland and not unlikely to Newfoundland, in both of which settlements of Icelandic hunters may have arisen. Ingstad's find promises to be a very interesting confirmation of the presence of the Norsemen on the east coast of America and its off-shore islands. Further excavations may yield valuable material. They will most probably confirm the expansion of the Icelanders from Greenland to the Arctic regions and the east coast of Canada, even though the effort to colonize Vinland was abandoned early.

ALLEGED PRE-COLUMBIAN VOYAGES TO AMERICA

It has often been asserted that the Irish were in America before the Norsemen. There were, of course, Irish monks in Iceland for some two centuries prior to the coming of the Norwegians; they left when the pagans arrived, but there is no evidence that they went to the American mainland. The Navigatio Sancti Brendani, an account of voyages attributed to St. Brendan (ca. 484 — ca. 578), has been interpreted as describing Iceland, Greenland and North America; but the passages so interpreted may quite well stem from later accounts by Irish monks and Norsemen. There are also three references in the Icelandic sagas (one of them in the Saga of Eric the Red) to a Hvitramannaland (White Men's Land) or Ireland the Great, south of Markland. These references are likely the result of the authors' confusion with the Irish Tir-na-Fer-Finn, which also means "white men's land", in Ireland. In any case the passages, read in detail, refute themselves. Furthermore, it is inconceivable that, had there been a flourishing Irish colony in North America, no other mention of it should be made in Icelandic or Irish sources. The absence of any archaeological evidence is also conclusive; for this would certainly have been mentioned in Icelandic sources,
which so carefully record the traces found of the Irish in Iceland and of the Skraelings in Greenland.

Equally unfounded is the claim that the Norsemen reached the region of the Great Lakes. Vinland has been located there, by arguments based on the Saga of Eric and the Saga of the Greenlanders, although it is preposterous to think that, had the Norsemen discovered as mighty a river as the St. Lawrence or as great a waterfall as Niagara, no mention of it would be found in the sagas. Another basis for this location of Vinland has been the alleged discovery of Viking weapons near Beardmore, Ontario, in the nineteen-thirties. These are genuine eleventh-century weapons, but there is no reason to believe that they reached this country in the eleventh century and were buried with their owner. On the other hand, there is good reason to believe that they came from Norway only in the nineteen-twenties and were buried as a hoax.

The Great Lakes do not represent the farthest inland penetration of this continent attributed to the Norsemen. We are asked to believe that in the fourteenth century some thirty Norwegians and Swedes were roaming the interior of present-day Minnesota. The evidence for this is a letter of 28 October 1354, addressed by King Magnus of Norway to Poul Knutsson, commanding him to undertake an expedition to Greenland in order, it seems, to prevent the extinction of Christianity there. There is no evidence that the expedition ever sailed. But in 1898 a Minnesota farmer, Olof Ohman, claimed to have found a stone with a runic inscription while clearing his land near Kensington, Minnesota. The inscription reads (Thalbitzer's translation):

"8 Goths and 22 Norwegians on exploration journey from Vinland westward. We had camp by two skerries one day's journey north from this stone. We were and fish[ed] one day. After we came home we found 10 [of our] men red with blood and dead. A[ve]. V[irgo]. M[aria] save [us] from evil.

[We] have 10 men by the sea to look after our ship[s] 14 day's journey from this island. Year 1362."

Faith in the genuineness of this inscription has proved great and the literature on the Kensington Stone is voluminous. Its supporters believe it to have been carved by members of the Knutsson expedition, who came from Hudson Bay. The Knutsson party has also had attributed to it a variety of weapons and other articles, identified as mediaeval Scandinavian and said to have been found in or
near Minnesota. Farther afield, the party is credited with building the Newport Tower in Rhode Island, as a fortified round church. Recently, too, the view has been advanced that the *Inventio fortunata*, a work now lost which described the Arctic regions of Canada, was the work of Nicholas of Lynne, a Franciscan friar who travelled with the expedition.

All this elaborate structure has often been demolished. The author of the *Inventio fortunata* probably obtained his information from a priest, Ivar Bardarson, who returned from Greenland shortly before 1364, when the *Inventio* is said to have been written. The Newport Tower has been shown to be a seventeenth-century structure. All runologists agree that the Kensington inscription cannot date from the Middle Ages. Brönsted has shown that there has not been found on the North American continent any article which could be used as an archaeological document to prove that Norsemen reached southern Canada or the United States. Finally, Wahlgren in his book, *The Kensington Stone*, has shown how easily the inscription could have been concocted in the Minnesota of the eighteen-nineties. Yet a huge replica of the Kensington Stone still greets the visitor to Alexandria, Minnesota, and the faith of its devotees rises above all proof.

There are other, equally hardy fantasies. It is still seriously argued that one Madoc established a Welsh colony in the southern United States, that he built the Newport Tower and that Indians spoke Welsh for centuries. Even stranger is the continuing belief on the part of many in the “marvellous history” of the Zeno brothers, Nicolo and Antonio. In the service of “the great prince Zichimi” (Henry Sinclair, first earl of the Orkneys, 1350-1404) they are supposed to have cruised all the North Atlantic and even discovered Nova Scotia in 1398. Yet it has been shown time and time again that the Zeno narrative is a sixteenth-century concoction and that its accompanying map is based on the 1537 map of the northern regions by the Swede Olaus Magnus and on the fifteenth-century maps of the Dane Claudius Clavus. Myths are easier to create than to destroy and they have confused the whole question of European voyages to America before Columbus.

**POST SCRIPT**

How far did the geographical knowledge acquired by the Icelanders in Greenland penetrate Europe? That is a complex, intriguing and so far inadequately investigated question. Certainly
much knowledge was transmitted, but often in a muddled form. This was partly because of differences between the old Nordic pagan view of the world (which regarded the earth as flat, surrounded by the “deep sea” where the midgard serpent encircled the world with his tail in his jaws) and the classical view that southern Europe had inherited. Furthermore, the Norsemen’s knowledge about American lands had to be fitted into the prevalent mediaeval view that there were only three continents: Asia, Africa and Europe. Greenland was believed to be connected to a land bridge extending north of Iceland from Norway or northwest Asia. Alternatively, it was regarded as an island lying off the east coast of Asia. The whole of eastern America north of the Gulf of St. Lawrence was known to mediaeval Europe as Hvitramannaland (White Men’s Land). It appears on mediaeval maps as part of the east coast of Asia, with the name Albania superior to distinguish it from Albania inferior around the Caspian Sea. The islands of the eastern Canadian Arctic were shown, as the Falcon Islands, off the east coast of Asia. Vinland was sometimes regarded as an extension of Africa. Thus the Atlantic became a land-locked sea.

Greenland’s contact with Europe is usually said to have grown weaker by the fifteenth century. The fact that no annals were written in Iceland during that century after 1430 explains in part the dearth of information on this period. But Greenland, paradoxically, seems to have been better known than ever in Europe, if we are to judge by its representation on fifteenth-century maps. Its position and outline are shown more correctly than ever before, for example, on the maps of Claudius Clavus and Nicolaus Germanus. The route to it seems to have been well known in southern Europe. On the ships of the Danish king Portuguese envoys sailed to Greenland and possibly farther in the 1470’s and again in the 1490’s. There was much intercourse between the Danish and Portuguese courts during the latter half of the fifteenth century. Whether or not Columbus learned of the route to America by way of Iceland and Greenland is a much debated question; he might well have done so from Bristol merchants, who were actively engaged in trade with Iceland, or perhaps on his alleged voyage to that country in 1477. There can be no doubt that Cabot knew of this route, and sailed over it on his voyages. Contact with Greenland, and through it at least with Markland, existed without a break from the earliest Greenland voyages to the first English and Portuguese voyages to those northern regions: from the end of the tenth century to the begin-
ning of the sixteenth. At that point, however, the Norsemen had ceased to play any role in these explorations.

The tragedy, if we are to call it that, was thus played out. Christianity and European culture, which had existed in Greenland and perhaps even in some parts of northern Canada, passed away. Much earlier, the Greenlanders’ contact with Vinland had been broken. Many marvel that, having found such an inviting region as Vinland is said to have been, they did not leave their own bleak shores for those “greener” pastures. But in fact the “Greenland” of Eric proved more attractive to the Icelandic settlers than the “Wineland” of his son Leif. The western fjords offered them the kind of life they were accustomed to, with food in abundance. More important still was the lack of people to undertake a fresh colonizing venture; for the Greenland settlements were always small and from the start were drained of part of their inhabitants by the migration of those who took to the “wastes” and what may be called an Eskimo way of life. In the end, as we have seen, the farming settlements proved too small to maintain their identity. Abandoning husbandry for hunting and intermingling with the Skraelings, the settlers lost their spiritual and cultural heritage, although traces of it remained in the new Eskimo world. The Norsemen, who had discovered America, were absorbed by it.
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