

Historical Perspective of the Greenland Vikings

by J. A. Hunsinger

Axe of Iron: The Settlers, the first of a five book series, is a tale of the Northmen, or Vikings, who journeyed across the North Atlantic Ocean from Iceland during the latter half of the tenth century to explore and settle portions of Greenland and North America. I have followed history insofar as is known; however, the extent of the Northmen's exploration of North America, a land they referred to as Vinland, is unknown.

It happened so long ago scholars cannot agree on what the word Vinland means. Nor do they agree on where it is, but more on that later.

The Northmen did not leave their home country because of wanderlust, although a quest for land probably played a part. It may also have been a result of the still common practice of deeding settled farmland to the firstborn son, leaving younger sons no option but to settle elsewhere.

In order to understand these Northmen and the indigenous peoples they contacted in their quest for a new homeland, I offer the following to give perspective to the reader of a time, more than one thousand years ago; in this land we now call North America.

We know that Northmen not only reached North America between 997 and 1003,ⁱ they regularly sailed back and forth from Greenland to North America, Iceland, Norway, and perhaps other northern European destinations for about five hundred years.ⁱⁱ

The term Norse, or Norsk, is used to describe all peoples of Scandinavian origin, e.g. Swedish, Danish (including Greenland and the Faeroe Islands), Norwegian, Icelandic, and the Orkney and Shetland islanders. Norse is also a reference to their common language—for in those days they all spoke the same language—and to

differentiate them from other Germanic peoples.ⁱⁱⁱ

For the purpose of this story, reference will be made to both Northmen and Norsemen in a general and interchangeable sense. They were no longer Vikings, and I will not refer to them as such. When they sailed across the Atlantic, they became something else entirely.

The Medieval Warm Period, between the ninth and fourteenth centuries, made these voyages possible. Benevolent weather allowed them first to settle Greenland and later to reach and explore unknown portions of North America. The weather was considerably warmer during this period than it is today in North America and Greenland.^{iv}

The Northmen, under Eirik Thorvaldsson (Eirik the Red) colonized Greenland. Their sheep, goats, cattle, and horses grazed the lush green pastures while they traded in walrus hides and ivory with their European homeland. However, the fragile environment soon became overgrazed and could not support their domestic animals in viable numbers, forcing a gradual shift from an agrarian to a hunter-gatherer society, as the contents of their middens indicate.^v Wild game was plentiful during the early years, but after a time, the hunting moved farther and farther afield as yak and caribou herds were depleted. Finally no game remained except a few ring seals.^{vi}

It is particularly important for the reader to be aware that *not a single document originating in Greenland exists*. The Norse Greenlanders may have been illiterate for the most part. Everything about their personal history is conjecture because none of it comes to us from the source, they themselves. The runic alphabet they employed did not lend itself to lengthy dissertation.

Everything about the five-hundred-year history of the two main Greenland settlements comes to us from sources with no vested interest in telling the true story of these hardy people. In all cases, the information was compiled as long as two hundred years after the fact by saga writers who had never been to Greenland.^{vii}

The man responsible for centuries of misconceptions, Adam of Bremen, a German cleric of the eleventh century, wrote a four-volume treatise on the Vikings. Volume IV deals specifically with Greenland and Vinland. It is his reference to “the profusion of grapes and self-sown wheat” found in Vinland that has perpetuated the myth of grapes and grain to the present day.^{viii} In fact, grapes have never grown north of the forty-fifth parallel—Nova Scotia and Maine—at any time in history, and the wet weather of the Canadian Maritimes will not support the growth of wheat.^{ix}

The Norse Greenlanders were not wine drinkers so grapes would have been of little importance to them. Their preferred alcoholic beverages were beer, when barley and hops were available, and mead, made from honey and water.^x

The Norse word *vin*, the root of Vinland, is incorrectly associated with grapes. It means pasture or meadow in Old Norse, hence literally Pastureland. Norway and Sweden have many place names where the word *vin* is used as either a root syllable or as a suffix, e.g., Vinje, Vinnan, Granvin, etc. Invariably the meaning is associated with pasture or meadow, not wine, as was the case with Vinland when Leif Eiriksson named it more than one thousand years ago.^{xi}

The Greenland saga, the real one, began sometime between 982 and 984. In reality it bore little resemblance to the *Groenlendinga Saga* written long afterwards. Eirik the Red, exiled from Iceland because of continuing trouble, and his eldest son, Leif,

explored the western coastline of Greenland sometime between 982 and 984.

They remained for at least one winter—presumably hauling their ship from the water before freeze up and constructing winter quarters—before continuing their exploration during the following spring and summer. They finally chose two suitable fjords on the southwestern coast, some four hundred miles apart. These sites were to become the Eastern and Western Settlements.

They set sail for Iceland during the summer of 985, planning to gather settlers, ships, livestock, and equipment. Eirik called the new empty land Greenland, making no reference to the vast ice sheet covering most of the island, to induce people to come back with them.

The strategy worked, and in the spring of 986, a fleet of twenty five ships sailed for Greenland. Fourteen of the ships made it to Eiriksfjord, the southernmost of the two settlement sites selected. Of the remaining eleven ships, a few made it back to Iceland; the fate of the others is unknown.^{xii}

Later that same summer, Bjarni Herjulfsson of Iceland, while sailing to the newly established settlement in Greenland to visit his father who recently arrived with the rest of the settlers, was storm-driven far off course and sighted unknown land to the west.^{xiii} His sightings were probably Labrador and Baffin Island; however, he did not land, continuing instead to Greenland, a decision decried by his crew and the Greenland settlers.^{xiv}

The Norse knew about North America for at least fourteen years before exploration began, or that is what the sagas tell us. The sagas also tell us that Leif Eiriksson purchased Herjulfsson's ship and, with a crew of thirty five men, set sail for

North America sometime between 997 and 1002. Many do not believe that avid explorers such as the Northmen were content to wait fourteen years before someone checked into Herjulfsson's discovery.^{xv}

With life spans averaging forty odd years, fourteen years would make the difference between a young man and an old man. And exploration was definitely for the young. I doubt they waited.

I believe these people mounted other expeditions almost immediately after Herjulfsson told them what lay to the west. They were famous for being impulsive, and they were inveterate explorers. Curiosity alone would guarantee they did not linger fourteen years before setting off into the unknown.

The sagas tell us Leif Eiriksson landed on both Baffin Island and Labrador before finding what he sought, a land of bountiful timber and pasture for livestock near the northeastern tip of Newfoundland Island. Nobody knows what Leif called Newfoundland Island. Nor is it known whether he called the new land Vinland.^{xvi}

Leif Eiriksson wrote nothing down; we do not know what he called the settlement he constructed on Newfoundland. The sagas refer to the site as *Leifsbudir*, or Leif's Booths.^{xvii}

The Norwegian Helge Ingstad, and his wife, Dr. Anne Stine Ingstad, an archeologist, discovered and excavated Leifsbudir between 1961 and 1968.

This momentous but oft-ignored discovery proves that Northmen were the first Europeans on the North American continent. They regularly sailed from Greenland to North America, Iceland, and Norway for more than four hundred years before Columbus was born.^{xviii}

Between 997 and 1002, Leif and his men completed construction of the houses and support buildings of Leifsbudir, at the head of the small bay where he landed. The buildings were not temporary huts, but permanent all-weather structures.

According to the Norse sagas, Leifsbudir was one of at least three permanent settlements built and utilized by Greenlanders and Icelanders. The other settlements referred to in the sagas, *Hop* (meaning tide pools), and *Straumfjord* (meaning stream fjord), have never been located.^{xix}

Greenlanders used three place names, attributable to Leif Eiriksson, to describe areas where they landed: *Helluland* (Flat Stone Land) believed to be Baffin Island; *Markland* (Wood Land) most likely heavily wooded Labrador; and *Vinland* meaning and exact location unknown—a general area, not a specific place.^{xx}

Given the Northmen's propensity for exploration, as well as the need to constantly find new hunting grounds, it is safe to assume they also explored much of the northeastern coast of North America and made forays into the interior. Like the natives they encountered, they hunted and traded. Their simple lifestyle left no sign of their passage.

Norse artifacts have been found on the south shore of Ungava Bay in Hudson Strait, the western and eastern shores of Hudson Bay itself, Baffin Island, Labrador, Newfoundland Island, and many other sites in the Canadian North. A Norse penny recently turned up in Maine, and a rune stone was unearthed in Minnesota during the latter portion of the nineteenth century.^{xxi}

Norse artifacts have been found as far inland as the state of Oklahoma. With the exception of the Norse penny found in Maine, archeologists continue to disagree about

the authenticity of all other Norse artifacts discovered in the United States.^{xxii}

The Norse Greenlanders, primarily livestock farmers and hunters, were also warriors by nature and necessity and fully capable of defending themselves against all comers. The indigenous people they encountered as they explored were numerically superior. Weaponry was similar enough that the outcome of protracted armed conflict tended not to favor the Northmen.

Not surprisingly, the natives were friendly and anxious to trade in the beginning. After all, they had no reason to dislike their Norse visitors; they had never seen one before.

Had the Northmen been more amicable toward the people they initially contacted, a very different early history for North America might have resulted. Instead, the sagas tell us they cheated in trade, killed the natives indiscriminately, and eventually had them so incensed that a state of war existed, making all attempts at settlement impossible. At least that is the presently accepted theory among academics.^{xxiii}

By today's standards, the Northmen were a cruel and savage nationality. The Dark Ages, in which they existed and became a force with which to be reckoned, was a period of eight hundred years of almost continuous warfare. The Northmen were some of the most accomplished warriors of that violent time.

The native tribes they came in contact with seemed to tolerate their presence better when the Northmen came only to trade. Any attempt at permanent settlement - Hop, Straumfjord, and Leifsbudir - always led to violent confrontation.^{xxiv}

This situation only existed initially. We know nothing about the remainder of the four hundred years of association between the Northmen and the people we now

collectively refer to as Indians. *And there most certainly was an association.*

Greenlanders referred to the indigenous people of North America as *Skraelings*, generally thought to be an epithet, but the meaning is not known. We do not know whether Skraeling is a reference to the Tornit (pronounced Dornit) they contacted initially, the Inuit (Eskimo) who followed the Tornit later in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, or includes all the indigenous people they contacted.^{xxv}

Some believe that the Northmen interbred with the Inuit of Baffin Island and other groups of people in the far north, as tall, fair-skinned Inuit were reported by the next influx of explorers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This is not a fanciful contention at all when consideration is given to the fact that women were always in short supply. The lack of sufficient females caused many fights and blood feuds among the Northmen.^{xxvi}

Farther south the Northmen contacted ancestors of several other Indian tribes. At some point approximately one thousand years ago the ancestors of Indian tribes we now identify as belonging to the Algonquian and Iroquoian language groups, e.g., Ojibwa, Cree, Huron, Mohawk, Iroquois, etc, began to emerge. Various tribal bands of these people occupied all the land from Hudson Bay, south to Lake Superior, and east to the Canadian Maritimes, the area in which this story takes place. They fought over the hunting grounds and ancestral lands annually, alternately claiming or losing lands as ongoing warfare involved subsequent generations.^{xxvii}

We do not know what they called themselves one thousand years ago. It is believed by some that they referred to themselves simply as the People. Most still have a name in their language that translates to the People. I have endeavored to use their names

for themselves, if we know it, or a diminutive of that name, throughout this novel.

The two known Norse Greenland colonies prospered into the late fifteenth century. The population eventually swelled to as many as four thousand people at any given time, spread among farms in the areas around these settlements.

At some point late in the fourteenth or early in the fifteenth century, all settlement attempts and trading voyages to Greenland from Iceland and other points to the east were abandoned. Sometime in the middle of the fourteenth century (Western Settlement), and just after the turn of the fifteenth century (Eastern Settlement), the Greenland populations disappeared without a trace.^{xxviii}

Perhaps most of the inhabitants of the Greenland settlements had already moved west having migrated to successful settlements already established by other Northmen with the native populations of North America over the ensuing years.^{xxix}

In any case, I maintain they eventually gave up the sea. Like thousands of their compatriots in Europe, they settled ashore. All impetus and desire for undertaking the perilous voyages became a thing of the distant past.

Around 1450, winters became colder in the far north, a lot colder. The ice in the harbors and fjords began remaining well into summer, and then it just remained. Greenland became uninhabitable for the Northmen. The Medieval Warm Period ended. A mini-ice age gripped the Arctic and northern portions of North America for the next four hundred years, into the last half of the nineteenth century.^{xxx}

During the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, a Catholic Prelate voyaged to Greenland, ostensibly to check on his flock. Although a few domestic animals grazed the hillsides, he found no people, living or dead. No ships, supplies, or tools remained. The

people and their possessions had simply vanished into the mists of time.

The Icelandic bishop Gisli Oddsson, quoting church records, stated in the sixteenth or seventeenth century (the exact date is unknown) that the Norse Greenlanders joined the natives of America in 1342, giving up Christianity in the process. The record notes a firm date for the migration, not sometime in the fourteenth century.^{xxx1}

We know three things for certain if one considers the disappearance of these people objectively: They did not sail to Iceland or Europe; they did not remain on Greenland until they died of hunger or exposure; they did not simply disappear. No, they had been migrating slowly to North America for five hundred years. Assimilation with the indigenous peoples became, over time, the Norse Greenlanders' only option for survival. It is the only logical answer to the one-thousand-year-old mystery.^{xxxii}

Since their assimilation, almost everything the Northmen left behind on this continent has turned to dust, become locked under the permafrost, or disappeared under many feet of debris in the forests and along the seashores of North America.

I have attempted to tell a tale of what might have happened, what could have happened, and considering the options available, what probably did happen to the Norse Greenlanders.

More than 40–generations have elapsed since they came to this continent. Now their very existence, everything they accomplished, has faded from the collective memory of all the peoples they contacted and lived among.

I prefer to believe the four thousand live on however, their genetic makeup diluted by the intervening centuries of time. They are still here, smiling back at us from the faces of the Inuit Greenlanders, Cree, Ojibwa, and Iroquois with whom they joined so long

J. A. Hunsinger

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