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METCALFE



WHAT IT MEANS *to find* VIKINGS IN NEWFOUNDLAND

If you're going to L'Anse aux Meadows, it helps to be a romantic. It helps to look at an excavated bronze pin, last worn by some nameless Scandinavian 1,000 years ago, and see instead an unruly people, adapting stubbornly to unfamiliar lengths of the North Atlantic Ocean. It helps to see past the artifacts, and into the epics they entail.

Greenlanders and Icelanders, commonly known to us as "Vikings," were close neighbours to the First Peoples of North America from the 10th century until the 15th, visiting the continent to trade, fight, forest, forge, and, on at least one

Saga of the Greenlanders, as well as the *Saga of Erik the Red*. It's not difficult to understand why these documents were initially dismissed by mainstream historians. They tempt our incredulity, with casual references to magic, the undead, and the intervention of gods. They even contradict each other. But the existence of L'Anse aux Meadows – the only authenticated Scandinavian site in North America – proves them true, at least in overall theme.

They begin with the 10th century Icelandic merchant Bjarni Herjólfsson, blown off course on his way to Greenland



A statue of Leif Erikson



The Snorri

occasion, build themselves a proper Scandinavian outpost in what is now L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site in Newfoundland, dated confidently to 1021.

INDULGING MYTHS

We know the names of the earliest Scandinavian visitors to Atlantic Canada because their stories were preserved for more than 200 years in the oral histories of Iceland, then written down, in fragments, throughout the 13th century. By about 1387, they were compiled with other tales into the

in 986 and stumbling, almost certainly, onto Newfoundland, Labrador, and Baffin Island. In a peculiar instance of restraint, Herjólfsson refuses to land on all three, sailing again for Greenland. Whether from prudence or an abundance of caution, this decision reduced Herjólfsson to a historical footnote – the first known European to have seen North America, without being the first to land.

That honour would go to Leif Erikson, son of Erik the Red, when he sailed in search of Herjólfsson's three mysterious shores in the year 1000. Leif would name them Helluland,

Markland, and Vinland from north to south, and, unlike Herjólfsson, he stood on all three.

“As far as this land is concerned,” declares Erikson, “it can’t be said of us as of Bjarni, that we did not set foot on shore.” Exactly where Erikson and his crew set foot is a question without an answer. In Helluland and Markland they made only brief stops, leaving, at most, footprints in the snow and mud. Helluland has been linked frequently with Baffin Island, and sometimes with northern Labrador, whereas Markland is most often associated with Labrador, and sometimes Newfoundland. The true debate, however, rages over Vinland, where Erikson and his crew built houses, spent the winter of 1000-01, and gave the most thorough account.

It is said to be located where a large island rests immediately north of a much larger mainland, and while Erikson and his crew land on both – island and mainland – it’s not clear on which

in the *Saga of the Greenlanders*,” he wrote, “we find quite straightforward navigational directions, which, without stretching the evidence at all, can be used to navigate a Viking ship from Newfoundland, across the Gulf of St. Lawrence or the Cabot Strait, to Prince Edward Island and into the Northumberland Strait.”

Helge Ingstad was a Norwegian writer and explorer who believed passionately the sagas were describing Atlantic Canada, and when, in 1960, he correctly identified the irregular mounds in L’Anse aux Meadows as a pre-Columbian outpost of Scandinavian design, he was also certain he’d discovered Erikson’s camp, and thus Vinland. It’s difficult to blame him, but while his contribution to our understanding of the westward migration of Scandinavians over the North Atlantic is unparalleled, in this last deduction, he was almost certainly wrong.



Runes at Norstead



Nine Men's Morris

they built their camp, or to which they were referring when they said “Vinland.” Its description gives heart-stopping hints as to where in Atlantic Canada it might have been – fields of self-sowing wheat, a profusion of grapes, salmon larger than had been seen by any Greenlander – and countless theories have since been advanced, such as the St. Lawrence Valley, Miramichi Bay, Nova Scotia, even Cape Cod. My favourite comes from research professor Gísli Sigurðsson, with the Árni Magnússon Institute in Iceland.

“If we look more closely at the description of Leif’s voyage

THE MOUNDS THEMSELVES

When it finally came time to visit L’Anse aux Meadows, in July of 2022, I carried all the nervous energy of a college student facing final exams. For nine months I’d been engaged in rigorous recreational study of the Scandinavian voyages to Atlantic Canada, relishing their detail and mystery, such that when my guide through the discovery centre, Susanna Milne, asked what I’d like to see first, my immediate answer was, “Show me the butternuts.”

Of all the archaeological wealth unearthed at L’Anse aux



A butternut



The Norstead forge

Meadows, by archaeologist Anne Stine Ingstad between 1961 and 1969 and then by Birgitta Wallace in the 1970s, the most entrancing to me were three butternuts, products of the White walnut tree, native to the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence (Maritimes), and southwest into Quebec, Ontario, and New England. They were proof that the Scandinavians of L'Anse aux Meadows had sailed farther south. Exactly how much farther we cannot yet say, but I return to my rule of not underestimating our ancestors.

There are casual references in the annals of Iceland of voyages to North America as late as 1347, so we can say with confidence that Greenlanders and Icelanders were sailing west for more than three centuries, plenty of time to make a thorough study of the eastern seaboard. It's a lot of

history to read into a butternut, resting, modestly, behind the immaculate glass of a display case, but we must follow the evidence wherever it leads, and at least in L'Anse aux Meadows, it leads away from Vinland.

This site, unearthed on the very tip of Newfoundland's Great Northern Peninsula, does not support the "self-sowing wheat" (probably wild rye, *Elymus virginicus*), "profusion of grapes" (probably wild grape, *Vitis riparia*), and massive salmon described in the sagas, things found more readily in the Maritimes. It also lacks all signs of Scandinavian settlement—stables for livestock, fields for crops, garbage middens overflowing with the bones of wild caught game.

By all indications, L'Anse aux Meadows represents a very brief stay, its architecture geared toward the repair of



ships and the rest of sailors, and not permanent occupation. The prevailing theory is that L'Anse aux Meadows was a stopover site, used by Icelanders and Greenlanders on their way to and from destinations farther south and west.

The site itself, where eight buildings once stood, is a modest place. A wooden bridge and walkways run through the manicured grass of an opened bog, the mounds themselves no more than a few inches tall, taller, in fact, than they would have been when Ingstad first studied them in 1960. Their height was exaggerated, I'm told, in the reburial process, so as to be more visible. Alongside each mound is a plaque, describing the functions of each building, so far as can be guessed—hall, house, forge, repair shop.

But Parks Canada has done one better, erecting a replica village immediately beyond these mounds, populated with actors articulating the deeds of the Viking Age in thematically rough English and French. I have read the sagas twice in their entirety, and revisited their more consequential passages many times more, but to hear them on the lips of proper thespians was something else entirely. One man, playing the part of Egil Egilson – one of the saga's navigators—retold the disastrous fifth expedition in which Erik the Red's daughter, Freydis Eiríksdóttir, fools a crew of Greenlanders into slaughtering a crew of Icelanders, and his voice, his expression, his passion, gave me chills such as paper and ink never could.

I was warned, before stepping into this replica village, that these actors were devotees of the sagas, whereas the interpreters up the hill, at the discovery centre, draw their knowledge first and foremost from the archaeology. The dichotomy between these purveyors of knowledge was plain to see, another dose of flavour from this far-flung corner of our collective past.

NORSTEAD

Just east of the L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site, with its interpretive centre, manicured mounds, and replica village, stands Norstead, yet another replica village, likewise filled with formidable thespians on a mission

of authenticity and education. There you can visit the *Snorri*, a replica knorr roughly identical to the one that conveyed Herjólfsson and Erikson to North America in 986 and 1000, respectively. This particular ship sailed from Greenland to Newfoundland in 1976, and was parked precisely here for your viewing pleasure.

Down the Norstead walkways are upright stone murals imbued with runes, the alphabet used in most Germanic languages (English included) before their replacement with the Latin alphabet you're presently reading. People in proper Scandinavian clothes display the needlecraft of the Greenlanders, the forging of iron tools and weapons, the longhouses for feasting and sleep, even the boardgames to which Greenlanders were partial. You can even sit in the chieftain's chair, draped in his sheep's skin cloak and holding his sword, assuming he's not using them.

Oddly enough, my closest spiritual brush with the Viking Age – far from an uncomplicated chapter in human history – was a short hike immediately beyond Norstead, leading through the long grass and onto the very peak of an isolated coastal cliff, the waters of the Strait of Belle Isle turning angrily at the urging of afternoon gales, the clouds deliciously dark, surrendering the odd cavalcade of rain. The greyness of it, the tumult, the unfeeling shove of inclement weather, reminded me that the North Atlantic itself is a consequential character in this disjointed narrative. At one time, it was a frontier across which stubborn Scandinavians hopped from island to island, reshaping them along the way. By the time these people abandoned Greenland (and by extension North America) in and around 1450, they weren't quite Vikings anymore, nor were they quite Europeans. They had become an awkward branch on the cultural tree of humanity, strange, entirely unique, leaving behind only modest impressions on the shores they sought to understand. I was grateful to see at least one of those impressions at L'Anse aux Meadows, the romantic remains of a complicated people, just beyond the reach of the waves.



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