

On the Viking Discovery of America

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During the three hundred years from the ninth to the eleventh centuries, the people of Scandinavia were much feared by the inhabitants of Europe. Called the Vikings, and inhabiting the areas now known as Denmark, Sweden and Norway, they were very successful at raiding, piracy and exploration. Known to be the settlers of Greenland and Iceland, it is now believed that the Vikings also discovered North America. There are two Icelandic sagas, which both tell of the accidental discovery of an unknown land, and an archaeological site, all of which support the idea that Canada was discovered some time in the tenth century. However, a number of supposed Viking finds in North America appear to be frauds. Despite the evidence mentioned above, there are scholars who still believe that Columbus was the first to discover the American continent.

The Graenlendinga Saga is an Icelandic piece of writing recorded during the Twelfth century. This saga, and another piece of writing known as Eirik's Saga, both tell the story of the discovery of "Vinland," a land in which grapes and wheat grow wild. In many ways, however, the two sagas contradict each other. They give different dates for the discovery and different names for the leaders of the expedition, as well as a number of other small discrepancies. Because of the contradictions between the two sagas it is very difficult to decide which is the more accurate or reliable.

Magnusson states: "Eirik's Saga was written as a deliberate revision or 'improvement' of Graenlendinga Saga by a learned author who thought he had more reliable sources about the families involved" (Magnusson, p1126)

The information for Eirik's Saga was supposedly derived from family tradition. However, as both of the sagas were written some one hundred and fifty years after the event that they describe, it is very likely that neither is correct.

One of the basic facts that both sources share in common is the claim that the discovery of Vinland was accidental, resulting from a ship blown off course. They also agree that the new land contained wild grapes and wheat, and that another island to the north had much timber. A few years after the initial discovery, a small colony was supposed to have started in this new land, and to have remained there for three years. The colonists left through fear of the Indians.

Archaeological excavations at a place called L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, Canada, seem to back up the stories of the Vinland Sagas. A number of house ruins were unearthed here that, according to Magnusson, are almost certainly Norse. When these ruins were first uncovered there was some doubt about their age. One of the structures was found to be a smithy, and radiocarbon tests on charcoal from this and other buildings dated the remains to the period from AD 900 to 1000. A number of artefacts were also found at the site. These strongly indicated a period of Norse occupation. The buildings were so similar to other Norse remains that Magnusson describes them as "...a complex of ruined buildings which can hardly be other than Norse." (p.145)

Others agree that the ruins are of Norse origin, but vary in important details. Bertril Almgen believes that L'Anse aux Meadows is the Vinland mentioned by the sagas. He argues that "vin" is the old Norse word for "meadow", a word which reflects the surrounding area. As

well as this, the sagas describe the weapons which were carried by the local Indians and these are similar to weapons still used in this area. This interpretation is disputed by Magnusson. He believes that "vin" meant "wine", and that the actual "Vinland" of the sagas was further south.

One famous piece of evidence dealing with this matter was the "Vinland Map." It was published by Yale University Library in 1965 and sparked a number of arguments as to whether or not it was authentic. The map shows a very accurate depiction of Greenland, which has led to such criticism as:

"It is suspicious that Greenland should be shown with so much accurate detail at so early a date (unless this is a coincidence), while the British Isles and Scandinavia are so ill depicted" (Almgren, p. 64)

There are other arguments against the authenticity of the Vinland Map. One rumour was circulated that it was a joke that fell into the wrong hands and was used to fool a great deal of scholars and dealers in antique books.

Another not-so-famous find was the Kensington Stone, a slab of rock inscribed with runic script. However, according to Magnusson, the writing has been described by experts as a mixture of Swedish, Norwegian and English writing. The stone was found in Minnesota, hundreds of miles inland from the area believed to be Vinland, and cannot really be credited with being an authentic Viking artefact.

Many other such finds of "Viking" artefacts have been discredited as fakes. However, this has not occurred with the ruins at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, which are generally accepted as genuine. This site, with the evidence of radiocarbon dating and the Norse nature of its artefacts, gives genuine credibility to the Graenlendinga and Eirik's Saga. The evidence strongly supports the belief that the Vikings did visit the coast of North America long before Columbus.

Bibliography

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Graenlendinga Saga and Eirik's Saga both contained in Magnusson, *ibid.*