

# THE NORSEMEN IN CANADA

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THE present year is the hundredth anniversary of the publication of Karl Christian Rafn's *Antiquitates Americanae*. In this monumental work the distinguished Danish antiquary set forth certain representations which made known the fact that the Norsemen had, in the Middle Ages, sailed to the west of Greenland on several voyages of discovery which culminated on the shores of America<sup>1</sup>. They had anticipated the coming of Columbus by some five centuries. The reaction of the people in America, particularly in New England, was immediate and enthusiastic. Tangible evidences of the Viking occupation of the country were found or fabricated. To such lengths, indeed, was the "Norse-identification-movement" carried in the next twenty years that it comes in for some well-deserved ridicule from James Russell Lowell in his *Biglow Papers* of 1862.

It was this unfortunate combination of enthusiasm and credulity on the part of a people that had progressed at the time no great distance beyond the pioneer stage and were sadly lacking in critical acumen in academic questions that led to the falling of the Norse tradition into disrepute. I use the word *tradition* advisedly, as the recorded account of the Norsemen's voyages to America was not, in any case, committed to writing till several generations after their alleged occurrence. But with the passage of years ample opportunity has been afforded the learned world to weigh and sift the evidence on both sides of the question. The result of this extended investigation has been to give full vindication to the essential truth of the prose sagas that tell of the discovery of America. After all, they are now proved to be supported by outside and disinterested testimony. It is only in matters of detail that any great degree of uncertainty still lies.

The sources of the detailed accounts of the western explorations of the Vikings occur in (a) the Greenland and (b) the Icelandic sagas, of which the first are collected mainly in the so-called *Flatey Book*, the second in *Hauk's Book*. The relative merits of these documents have been much discussed, but the opinions of the critics are divided. The apparent truth of the matter is that in each of them fact and fiction are commingled. It is disquieting, perhaps, to

<sup>1</sup> Thormod Torfason, likewise a Dane, had written on the same subject in 1715, but his book seems to have aroused little interest.

observe that the Greenland version recognizes six voyages of discovery, whereas the Icelandic notes but three. But of these, two are of no importance whatsoever as regards the business of exploration. The *Flatey Book*, however, robs Leif Ericsson of the usual distinction granted to him of being America's discoverer, and assigns it to a certain Bjarni, son of Herjolf.

It came about in this way: Greenland was colonized in 985 or 986. The same year Bjarni sailed with his ship from Norway to Iceland, only to find that his parents had recently joined the new settlers. Accordingly, he sailed westward, seeking Greenland. But possessing as he must have the vaguest ideas as to its whereabouts, he inadvertently sailed by it and continued on his voyage till he encountered one and another and yet another land, all of which he refused to explore, for he knew from what he had heard concerning Greenland that it differed from all of these. Therefore, he headed north and presently reached the settlement where his parents now resided.

*Hauk's Book*, which knows nothing of this, attributes to Leif Ericsson an experience somewhat similar to that of Bjarni; but the *Flatey Book* represents Leif as a genuine explorer who had learned of the adventures of his predecessor and wished to discover the nature of the new western lands whose location now was known, whereas Bjarni's sole interest in them had lain in how to avoid them. Whatever the truth of the matter may be, Leif is the true geographer, since he gives names to what he discovers. The barren ice-capped country that he first sights he calls Helluland (Flat-stone Land); another, low-lying and wooded, he names Markland (Forest Land); his third and most famous discovery is Vinland (Wineland or Vineland). In the region last named he wintered with his party, in pleasant surroundings, nourished and refreshed by the "wild grapes" of the region.

This was in 1002-3. The next voyage to America was in 1004 when Thorvald came over with some of Leif's former crew. They experienced no difficulty in finding the abandoned camp of Leif, which they used as a base for their explorations, the account of which leaves us completely in the dark as to their whereabouts. At the end of two years they had their first clash with the natives, the Skraelings, who appear to have conducted themselves decently till wantonly provoked by the Norsemen. Thorvald was killed by a chance arrow and the party returned to Greenland in 1007.

The next attempt to reach Vinland, which was undertaken by the brother of Thorvald for the purpose of recovering his remains, proved completely abortive.

Most famous in many ways of the Vinland voyages is that of Thorfinn Karlsefni. Its date is uncertain, but must belong to the early years of the eleventh century. The narrative is enlivened by accounts of sex-jealousy in the party and even by a religious controversy between Christian and pagan. The personnel of the undertaking amounted to 160 men, women and children. From this it may be inferred that the leader aimed at the colonization of the new world. They found what they assumed to be Leif's Helluland and Markland, but Vinland eluded them till the second year. There are some who doubt if they ever reached its shores. However, one section of the party, in the spring of the second year, landed in an estuary where they discovered the wild vine and "wild wheat", and other bounties of nature through which little doubt was left in their minds that they had found the wished-for Vinland. The Skraelings soon appeared and began trading operations with the Norsemen. But ultimately they became hostile and attacked *en masse*, forcing the strangers to retire.

In this and other encounters with the natives, very little of the vaunted Viking courage is in evidence and despite the contempt of the Norseman for the Skraeling, he is apparently in considerable fear of him when it comes to open combat. Indeed the Greenlanders play a somewhat sorry part in their contacts with the natives, which is all the more remarkable inasmuch as we have only the former's side of the story to reckon with. In fact, they frankly acknowledge their own dishonesty, treachery and cowardice.

The last voyage to be recounted in detail possesses little or no interest in the history of exploration. The story is coloured by the malignant personality of the "leading lady", Freydis, half sister of Leif, a thoroughly detestable woman; and there is little in the narrative beyond intrigue, "battle, murder and sudden death".

The account of Norse contacts with America can be carried a little further. As an event of the year 1121, it is related that the Bishop of Greenland sailed to Vinland. He appears not to have returned, as a successor was appointed shortly afterwards. It is a fair assumption from this occurrence that at least one Norse settlement existed in America in the early twelfth century. The good ecclesiastic would hardly have concerned himself with the spiritual deficiencies of the wretched Skraelings. Again, an entry, in Latin, in the seventeenth century annals of Iceland records an unexplained religious apostacy in the Greenland colony in 1362 and what seems to be a migration to join the "peoples of America". It may not be without significance that about this time the Greenlanders suffered from the effects of a southward migration of the

Eskimos. After about 1410, communication between Norway and Greenland ceased. When Frobisher "discovered" Greenland in 1576, it was as it were to a new land that he came.

Two or three other shreds of evidence in corroboration of our belief that the Norsemen retained their hold of some part of America throughout the fourteenth century may be mentioned. The Iceland annals for 1347 make reference to the arrival in Norway of a Greenland ship that had recently visited Markland. About the same time there occurs in a fur-list of pelts imported from Greenland a number of animals not native to Greenland but well-known in America. It is also known that an expedition sent out from Norway in 1354 to inquire into the religious condition of the Greenland colonists did not return till 1364. This long absence may be explained on the ground that the party followed the spiritually recalcitrant colonists to America.

Here the literary tradition fails. Let us see now what traces, if any, the Norsemen left behind in America. On the analogy of temporary contacts between people of different cultures which may be observed elsewhere, we might expect to find traces of the strangers persisting in one or another of the following ways: (1) survival of place names; (2) folk traditions; (3) inscriptions; (4) tangible remains not of an epigraphical nature.

Attempts have been made—but only, I think in New England—to relate modern names of localities with Norse antecedents. Thus, Norumbega has been referred to *Norvega*; Hyannis to *Hauganess*; Seconnet to *Sjö-Konenaesset* (Mermaid Point); and even the very innocent and colourless Mount Hope to the *Hop* or *Hopi* of the sagas. But these and other names that have at times been considered of Norse extraction have long since been shown to be of either Anglo-Saxon or Indian origin.

The Indians of North America possess no tradition of early visits by white men, but it is perhaps of some geographical importance that the Eskimos of Labrador over a wide area have a legend regarding the sojourn, on the mainland but chiefly in islands off the coasts, of a foreign people of large stature in the dim and distant past. These they call by the name of *Tunmit* and they point even to the remains of their houses and their graves. Unfortunately for this part of the Eskimos' belief, the presence of stone implements amid the ruins of the huts and in the tombs seems to imply the activities of early aborigines rather than of mediaeval Norsemen, though this consideration does not entirely invalidate the tradition. But I suppose that few who today recall the perverse story spread abroad from an Eskimo origin twenty

years ago, a story that seemed to throw a light on the ultimate fate of the Andre party, will be likely to put faith in any legend that emanates from that quarter. I refer to the Eskimo story told to missionaries in the far north of how, years before, a great bird had descended from the clouds bearing white men on its back and how these had been robbed and killed by the Eskimo. It was not until the actual discovery of the remains of the ill-starred expedition a few years ago that the story came to be discredited. Whatever the truth of the matter may be with regard to the Tunnit, we are bound to say, for the present at least, that there is a strong probability that they may be merely fishermen from Newfoundland who were shipwrecked on "the Labrador" as recently as a century or so ago. The legend represents them as possessing no ship and no boats even, except what they stole from the Eskimos. At the same time, inasmuch as the tradition seems to be very widespread, there is a possibility that we have to do with a genuine reminiscence of some early Viking visit.

The runic inscription has long served as a pitfall for the ignorant and the learned alike. And yet there should be no mystery about the matter. The alphabet (or *futhork*, as it is commonly called from the sequence of the initial letters corresponding to our a b c), whether derived from the Romans, the Greeks or the Marcomanni, according to three several theories of its origin, is clearly Phoenicio-Greek in style and its letters are of a definite and simple form. Indeed it ought to be impossible to mistake a rune for anything else. None the less, the search for inscribed Norse documents in America has been marked by repeated "discoveries" of runic inscriptions that eventually turn out to be something quite different in character. New England was the first offender, but the crime-wave spread till it embraced a territory extending from the island called No Man's Land near Martha's Vineyard to Spokane, Washington.

I know of no more than two alleged Viking inscriptions in Canada. One was recently reported from near Winnipeg. In this case, an examination of the stone by a geologist shows that the markings were put there by the hand of nature—produced presumably by the uneven texture of the conglomerate. The other, near Yarmouth, N. S., was seen and published over half a century ago. But the most competent authorities who have dealt with this stone have reached the conclusion that the "inscribed words" are either produced by natural causes or else are Indian pictographs. The presence of the rune is, at all events, entirely ruled out.

It is unnecessary to dwell on the many alleged runic inscriptions that have been found scattered over the northern part of the

United States—the Dighton Inscription, the Grave Creek Inscription, the Monhegan Inscription, the Spokane Inscription, and many others of less consequence. In none of these inscriptions is the hand of the forger seen, but the inscriptions are not runic. Of a truth, strange as it may seem, it appears that there exists in America only one runic inscription that is demonstrably false. This is the document in the island known as No Man's Land mentioned above. Although cut on a large boulder that lies on the shore, the letters were not seen—for a reason that is obvious enough—till 1926. The inscription runs: "Leif Ericsson. 1001. Vinland". This is precisely what we should expect of a practical joker. I recall that, when a boy, I laboriously wrought, somewhere in Pictou Co., N. S., the inscription: "R. Kidd. 1798".

But there appears to be one genuine record on stone left by the Norsemen. This is at Kensington, in western Minnesota, a place hardly worthy of the name of town. Here an inscribed stone, bearing undoubted runic characters, was discovered nearly forty years ago. Inasmuch as Kensington lies far off the supposed track of the Norsemen and the runes are demonstrably not of the eleventh-century type, the document was almost immediately dismissed as an impudent forgery. But with the passage of the years it has become apparent that the older authorities were at least too impatient, and Mr. Holand's recent reexamination<sup>1</sup> of the stone and everything connected with it has resulted in convincing many scholars of its genuineness. To me, as a student of archaeology, the most convincing point in its favour is the condition of the stone. This is a prosaic and mechanical consideration that would escape the notice of the philologist. But there are limitations, as we know, to "the gentle art of faking", and the Kensington stone shows definite marks of weathering not only on the roughly smoothed surface which bears the inscription but *within the letters themselves*. As the stone was found under the roots of a good-sized tree in a part of the State that was not settled till the sixties of last century, it is impossible for us to account for this weathered condition on any other ground than that which assumes its exposure to the elements, letters and all, for generations or centuries.

The translation runs:

"8 Goths and 22 Norwegians on a voyage of discovery from Vinland through the west. We had camp on two skerries one day's journey north of this stone. We were (out or away) and fished one day. After we came home, found 10 men red with blood and dead. *Ave Virgo Maria*. Deliver (us) from evil.

<sup>1</sup> H. R. Holand, *The Kensington Stone*, 1932.

On one of the edges of the stone there is this addition:

"Have 10 of our men at the sea to look after our ships 14 days' journey from this island. Year 1362."

Here is much food for thought! One may pass over the fact that competent philologists who have reexamined the stone find the characters and language in harmony with what is known of the situation in the fourteenth century. Extremely interesting is the reference to the "island". The spot where the stone was found is in no sense insular, but a geological examination of the locality shows clearly that there was here not very remotely in time an island in a lake that has since dried up.

The "skerries" would appear to be rocky islets in one of the innumerable lakes<sup>1</sup> that exist in the State of Minnesota. The abundance of blood on the murdered companions' bodies would suggest the business of scalping. The "sea" which is here mentioned must be the westernmost extremity of Lake Superior which lies nearly two hundred miles from Kensington. This sea is, as the writing implies, fourteen days' journey away. This would amount, then, to a rate of travel of about fourteen miles a day—which is about what one would expect under the conditions of the time. Kensington is situated a little south of a line drawn westward from Lake Superior's projecting tail. What could have been the Norsemen's goal? Perhaps the western ocean which, as they must have realized, lay beyond the vast expanse of land.

But if a genuine inscription has survived, surely there must be other tangible evidences of the Norse occupation of America remaining. Fortunately a mass of rubbish has now been cleared away, and we are beginning to lay our hands on a few things that are of certain origin. There is no necessity for whipping a dead horse in the case of the great majority of "finds" that have been made in past years. Many of these are very well known—the old stone mill at Newport, R. I., the ruins on the Charles River near Boston, the foundations of Leif's house in No Man's Land, and the Fall River skeleton, immortalized in Longfellow's *Skeleton in Armour*. These and many others are now assigned, beyond question, to the post-Columbian period.

It is very interesting to find that the true Viking relics again lead us to Lake Superior. Six isolated discoveries have been made, on the American side, consisting of three battle-axes, a hatchet-head, a spear-head and a fire-steel. The most competent European authorities have declared these to be of undoubted Scandinavian manufacture and to represent types that were common in the late

<sup>1</sup> The actual number is in excess of 10,000.

Middle Ages. The discoveries were made in Minnesota and Wisconsin; one of the artifacts had been in the possession of the Indians, and there is a chance that the wide distribution may be due to their being handled and rehandled by the red men. A superficial judgment might claim to find their former owners in the persons of the Norsemen who were found "red with blood and dead" at Kensington in 1362. But we have recently ascertained, by certain evidence, that Norse exploration was not confined to the region south and west of Lake Superior.

A discovery of the highest importance has been announced only a few months ago in Ontario. This is at Lake Nipigon, whose southern extremity lies but 35 miles north of Lake Superior. A prospector seeking mineral deposits exploded a "shot" of powder in a likely spot near the lake and thereby uncovered what has been long—and hitherto vainly—hoped for by those who have interested themselves in prehistoric America—a Viking's grave. It contained a sword, a battle-axe head and a shield. All are in a remarkably good state of preservation. This material, fortunately, escaped the clutches of private collectors; it has been acquired by the Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology where it has been placed on exhibition.

A comparison of these Viking weapons with examples from Scandinavia reveals their association, typologically, with the late Middle Ages, though it would be hazardous to assert that they belong definitely to the period of the Kensington Stone. We may venture to hope that the neighbourhood of the find will, in course of time, be further explored and examined to ascertain whether or not there are other graves in the vicinity. Probably the burial here indicates no more than the death of a member of an exploring party, but the possibility of the existence of a Norse settlement cannot be ruled out until we have provided ourselves with proof to the contrary. At all events, the importance of the Nipigon discovery would be difficult to exaggerate, arising as it does from the consideration that we have here the first undoubted example of undisturbed Norse remains ever found in North America. In the case of the Norse arms found in Minnesota and Wisconsin there always remains the haunting apprehension that they may possibly be imported heirlooms, inasmuch as so many of the population are of Scandinavian extraction. But in the Nipigon grave we may inter all our doubts in exchange for what lay buried there.

In conclusion, we may deal briefly with the century-old question: what parts of the American continent or islands adjacent thereto are denoted in the names Helluland, Markland and Vinland.



It may be said at the outset that the sailing directions of the sagas seem thoroughly chaotic and remind one of what we read in Homer's *Odyssey* of the voyages of the hero Odysseus. But to him who consults the sagas and at the same time a map that shows the relation of Greenland to the shores of America that lie over against it, there presently comes a conviction that the Norse voyages of the eleventh century were confined to a somewhat circumscribed area of ocean. The four points of interest, Greenland, Helluland, Markland and Vinland, are visualized as lying at no great distance one from the other. This is confirmed by Sigurd Stefansson's map of the sixteenth century. The author places such important landmarks as Greenland, Iceland and Ireland in about their proper relation, though a few degrees too far north in every case. Helluland he puts about in line with the southern extremity of Greenland; then comes Markland; and lastly Vinland and Skraelingland at a latitude of about 55°N. Now the 55th parallel actually intersects the Labrador coast at a point midway north and south. Allowing for Stefansson's error, we ought to seek Vinland somewhere on the northern shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Have we any evidence to prove that the Norsemen's voyages of the eleventh century reached a more southerly point? None at all, I think, once we allow the New England mirage to fade away into thin air. Indeed the persistence with which the Vikings are arbitrarily dragged from their course and made to visit the New England coast at various points may be traced to the narrow and blatant patriotism of the Sam Slick type that prevailed in New England a century ago but has happily long since taken flight into the Middle West. If, as we are sometimes prone to believe, "the faintest of all human passions is the love of truth," we can see no clearer exemplification of this than in the misguided zeal with which even the savant has been known to follow the trail of the red herring that has been dragged across the path of truth by the chauvinists.

Vinland has been found even further south—in Maryland and Virginia. The sagas contain one astronomical observation relating to a point in Vinland. It runs: "Day and night were more evenly divided than in Greenland or Iceland; on the shortest day the sun was up over the marks for Nones and breakfast-time." The latter part of this reads much like gibberish, but it has been interpreted by one authority to mean a point at 37°N. The same passage asserts that Leif and his party experienced no winter frosts and the grass in winter merely withered a little. But this will not do for Virginia, to say nothing of the colder Maryland, for

there the thermometer sometimes drops to zero and the grass becomes very sere. Indeed the proper conditions could hardly be found anywhere north of Georgia—which is surely out of the question. So presumably the matter is one of relativity. The Norsemen would have felt the climate of, say, Anticosti, considerably milder than that of Greenland. Moreover, other scholars who have tried their hand at the interpretation of the astronomical passage in the saga find that it may apply to a latitude as high as 49° or 50°—which would harmonize with what we see in Stefansson's map excellently well.

But what of the *vinber* that gives Vinland its name? And what of the self-growing and perpetuating grain of the sagas? It would prove tedious were one to summarize merely what has been written in answer to these questions. Suffice it to say that there are two good reasons why it is impossible to accept the belief that the *vinber* signifies the grape: (1) Grapes have never grown wild along the shores of America in sufficient quantities to evoke surprise and admiration; (2) we find that one of the expeditions actually collected the "grapes" in the winter-time. Whence it is a fair assumption that it is some other berry that is in question, and though it is possible that this fruit is the wineberry, the most likely suggestion is that we have to do here with the cranberry which flourishes, as is well known, in the vast bogs of northern Canada and can be harvested during the winter season. The wild grain cannot well be the maize; it is in all probability the "wild rice" that grows in great abundance by the northern lakes and in the northern marshes.

The arctic or sub-arctic location of Vinland is further attested in the description of the natives. The Skraelings (variously interpreted to mean the "small ones", or the "withered ones", or the "yelling ones") are described as little, ugly fellows with wild hair, big eyes and broad cheeks. They range the coastal waters in skin boats and are themselves clothed in skins. They use slings in fighting—a weapon not cultivated, for reasons that are obvious, among the forest-bred Indians. The utter absurdity of attempting to identify these aborigines with the red men is all the more patent when we recall that, in the later annals, the name Skraeling is applied also to the inhabitants of Greenland. We may, without any misgivings, regard them as the Eskimos, and as there is no historical or archaeological evidence to show that the Eskimo ever penetrated further south than the left bank of the St. Lawrence, we may draw from this a geographical inference that is in perfect harmony with our other conclusions.

But while almost everything that enters into the question supports the belief that the eleventh-century Norsemen confined their western voyaging to high latitudes, one is inevitably forced to reserve judgment when it comes to the matter of definite geographical identification. On the whole, we seem justified in associating Helluland with the bleak, rocky shores of Labrador; but Penny Land, to the north of Hudson Strait, would also suffice. We may, with greater confidence, identify Markland with Newfoundland. Vinland is exceedingly baffling. The Norsemen would surely have chosen to sail through the Strait of Belle Isle rather than round the eastern shores of Newfoundland. But when we enter the Gulf of St. Lawrence, we lose our bearings completely. There is, however, one geographical observation in the saga of Karlsefni's voyage that may be of significance. The Norsemen had in view during their sojourn of a winter at Hop, which appears to be in Vinland, an impressive mountain. On their way home, after travelling a long distance, they saw the same mountain again. This certainly suggests the Laurentian Mountains of Quebec whose eastern extremity, 6000 feet in height, may be seen both from the Atlantic and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. In view of this, we may offer a guess that Vinland was a part of the Quebec coast, half-way or thereabouts between Anticosti and the Strait of Belle Isle. Beyond this we dare not proceed lest we fall into the snares and pitfalls in which our New England friends have been from time to time involved.

The occurrence of Norse remains in the region of Lake Superior presents another problem, perhaps two distinct problems. The text of the Kensington Stone makes it abundantly plain that the party who set it up had ships on the lake. They had made their way, consequently, "from Vinland" up the St. Lawrence and thence westerly through the Great Lakes till they were obliged to abandon the water. Whether the discoveries that we have noted of Norse material in Minnesota and Wisconsin betokens the existence of settlements formed in that region during the fourteenth century is still uncertain; the future ought to reveal much.

For the occurrence of the Viking grave near Lake Nipigon two explanations are possible. It may represent an unfortunate occurrence that is to be associated with some northerly expedition conducted from a base on Lake Superior, for the distance is not above 40 or 50 miles. But it may have nothing whatever to do with this line of penetration. The possibilities of a Hudson Bay route of exploration have not been exploited by scholars, and yet it is by way of Hudson Bay, Hudson Strait, and James Bay that

the uninitiated might well suppose that the early Norsemen had made their way into the country. The route appears an entirely obvious one to follow as one sails westward from Greenland. In the present instance, it might be conjectured that a Norse expedition would have travelled up the Albany River from James Bay; a tributary of it communicates with Lake Nipigon.

Now that we are able to differentiate the genuine from the spurious and the objects of Norse manufacture from those of Indian, French and English origin, we may reasonably hope that we are on the threshold of a period of enlightenment.