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"VINLAND" REVISITED: 986-1986

In 1987, Americans will celebrate the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution; in 1992 they will celebrate the quincentennial of Columbus' discovery of the New World. But an important and far older event will go almost unnoticed: the 986 millennial of the first recorded European discovery of North America.

Who were these first recorded European colonists and is there any evidence that confirms their tale? The Greenlander saga, written in the 13th century, describes the somewhat complicated story of exploration and discovery, which culminated in the sighting and colonizing of new lands

west of Greenland, presumably in North America. The story begins 1000 years ago this summer, in the year 986 when Eirik the Red, accompanied by Herjulf, father of Bjarni, and a small group of colonists left the Norse settlement in Iceland to found a new colony in Greenland. Later that summer, Bjarni sailed from Norway to Iceland to spend the winter with his father. When he discovered that his father had already left with Eirik, Bjarni departed for Greenland on the same course they had taken. Unfortunately, as soon as Bjarni's ship was out of sight of land, the east wind failed and the ship wandered for many days in the fog. When the fog cleared, the wind had shifted to the south, and Bjarni sailed on a

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westward course for a day until he sighted land.

The land Bjarni saw was not the mountainous Greenland coast with its many glaciers but a low wooded country without mountains. (This description fits several locations in New England as well as in southwest Nova Scotia.) Consistently refusing his men's entreaties to go ashore for water and fuel, Bjarni sailed northeast along the coast for two days, out of sight of land, until he made a second landfall on a heavily forested coast (Nova Scotia?). A third land, seen after three further days voyage, was high and mountainous. Sailing north along the coast, Bjarni perceived that this was an island (Newfoundland?). Four days sail to the northeast across the open sea brought him to Greenland and Herjulf's farm, where Bjarni remained.

The Greenlanders, pre-occupied with establishing their settlement, appear to have ignored Bjarni's tales of another land to the west. But sixteen years later on another voyage to Norway, Bjarni and his tale caught the interest of Norway's ruler, and Norwegian excitement over possible new lands and sources of ivory spread back to Greenland when Bjarni returned in about A.D. 1002. In the following year, Eirik's son Leif purchased Bjarni's ship and set sail for the west with 35 men. Leif first landed on a barren and rocky coast with distant ice mountains. He named the area "Helluland", identified today as probably a location in the Canadian high arctic, possibly the east coast of Eaffin Island or the north coast of Labrador. The next landfall southward he called "Markland", a heavily forested coast with low sandy stretches that may have been in central or southern Labrador. Finally two days later, he sighted a wooded land, and, in late August, landed there, on the west side of a long, northward pointing cape. He then sailed up a short river and built a large sod house by a lake to shelter

his men through the winter. The land was distinguished by its long winter days, "sweet dew," and abundant supplies of salmon. The discovery of "wine berries" led to its naming as "Vinland". The following spring, Leif and his men returned to Greenland, following Bjarni's route.

According to the saga, ensuing years witnessed several voyages to and short settlements in "Vinland", the first captained by Leif's brother Thorvald. Thorvald's murder of eight Skraelings (war-whoopers) as they slept under their "skin" (or possibly birchbark) canoes, and the Skraelings' murder of Thorvald constitute the first recorded meeting of Native Americans and Europeans. This meeting also marked the first time humans encircling the globe from west and east had met.

Following this unhappy meeting and the return of Thorvald's men to Greenland, another Norseman, Thorfinn Karlsefni, sailed to Vinland and founded a colony. The colony prospered on whale meat, game and fish, and traded the milk of their cattle to the Skraelings for skins. Thorfinn's wife Gudrid gave birth to a son, Snorri, the first European child born in North America. But relations with the Skraelings soon deteriorated, and Thorfinn was forced to return to his home in Iceland, where his descendants wrote down the tale of these voyages sometime in the thirteenth century. A second saga (Eirik's saga) concurs with many of the above details but describes Leif Eiriksson as the discoverer of Vinland during a voyage from Norway, not from Greenland. Most authorities lean toward the Greenlander saga as the more accurate account.

Are these sagas entirely mythical, or are the voyages to Vinland based on reality? What evidence do archeologists cite for contact between the Vikings and some Native Americans or for Norse settlements in the New World?

To be accepted as proof of Norse-Native American contacts, archaeological evidence must conform to several standards. First, the evidence must consist of material objects that are indisputably linked to one culture but found in the territory of the other. The linkage between object and people can be through style in form or decoration--a curvilinear Norse pin, or an Indian arrowhead--if the style is specific enough to identify the maker. Linkage can also be through a manufacturing technology known to one group but not to the other, or through raw material, such as a special stone type, limited to one group's territory. Additionally, the object must be found in a well-dated context of the appropriate age, so that it is clearly not a later introduction or even a forgery.

Several archaeological examples substantiate Norse and Native American contacts. Some of the most exciting are from the Canadian high arctic. The east coast of Ellesmere Island is only 25 miles from the northwest coast of Greenland. There, on a prehistoric Inuit (or Eskimo) house floor, less than 800 miles from the North Pole, a fragment of European chain mail was excavated in 1978. Other finds including bottoms of wooden barrels, iron boat rivets, knife blades and a piece of woolen cloth were all dated to between 1190 and 1390 A.D. Since Inuit neither raised sheep, spun or wove clothing, stored food in barrels, or wore chain mail, these objects clearly represent Norse finds in a native American context. Although Inuit hammered tools out of meteoric iron, the low nickel content of the pieces shows that they were smelted from other ores by techniques known only to Europeans and other Old World peoples.

From the Norse perspective, the impetus for these early contacts and for Norse penetration deep within the Arctic Circle was clearly economic: Greenlanders and Icelanders alike

needed new sources of valuable commodities to support their precarious existence in the world's northernmost settlements. In exchange for metal, cloth, and other items of European manufacture, the Norse brought home skins, narwhal tusks, and walrus ivory to Greenland to trade for food and metal items which Greenland could not produce. The Greenland Norse even paid taxes to Norway and tithes to Rome in walrus ivory; in 1327 Greenland's bishop sent a tithe of 400 tusks. On the west coast of Ellesmere Island, a folding bronze balance from a 14th century Inuit site suggests the visit of a Norse trader. Further to the west, fragments of smelted copper, iron, and bronze from Bathurst Island, Cornwallis Island, and the east side of Hudson Bay testify to the penetration of Norse goods well into central Canada.

Inuit style ivory and wooden carvings, perhaps representing Norsemen, are among the most intriguing bits of evidence for Norse-Native American contacts. Two possible examples come from Ellesmere Island and another from the southern coast of Baffin Island, in a house floor dated to the 13th century. This particular carving is typically Inuit in its stumpy arms and lack of facial features, but the figure is dressed in a long European-style surcoat, embellished with a cross on the breast. Since the Greenland Norse had accepted Christianity around the time of Leif Eiriksson's voyage, this carving probably represents a contemporary Inuit view of a Norseman, possibly carved locally given its general style.

Even this find, however, does not prove that Norsemen settled in North America, since objects can travel from hand to hand across long distances without any direct contact between the maker of an object and its final owner. There are two such examples relating to Norse-Indian contacts (as opposed to Norse-Inuit contacts): a chert arrowhead in the southern Labrador/

Newfoundland Indian style, recovered near an eroding Norse graveyard in Sandnes, Greenland; and the Maine penny, minted in Norway between A.D. 1065 and 1080 and found at the Goddard prehistoric Indian site near the mouth of Penobscot Bay. These objects do not necessarily demonstrate Norse settlement in New England or even contact between Norse and Indians, since they were probably traded through Inuit intermediaries.

Colonization can only be demonstrated by architecture in a foreign style, or by overwhelming evidence of technological or economic activities not practised by the original inhabitants nor likely to have been invented by them. For years, archaeologists searched for the original location of the Vinland settlement from Nantucket to Labrador. Finally in 1963, at L'Anse aux Meadows on the northern tip of Newfoundland, a Norwegian archaeologist, Helge Ingstad, discovered remains of three long sod houses by a sheltered harbor, on land visited both by ancestral Eskimos before the Norse era, and by Indians. Greenland Norse houses had stone foundations. But these New World houses lacked such foundations and so could be explained as temporary dwellings. Furthermore, one of five small outbuildings contained a substantial amount of slag from an iron smithing operation. Radiocarbon determinations of charcoal associated with the slag suggest an age of around A.D. 1000. Over 100 objects of European manufacture were unearthed at L'Anse aux Meadows. A spindle whorl attests to the weaving of wool and to the presence of women. A cloak pin of bronze, a material unknown to Native Americans, was similar in style to those found in Viking settlements of the British Isles. Finally, some wooden floorboards from a boat indicate directly the presence of Norse ships. The authenticity of the L'Anse aux Meadows site as a Norse settlement of brief duration has been widely accepted by archaeologists. Whether or not this site was

Vinland cannot be determined. Grapes never grew at L'Anse aux Meadows, but wine can be made from other berries. On the latter point, however, one of Thorfinn Karlsefni's own men appears to have dismissed the grapes as a piece of 11th century false advertising.

To date, no other Norse colonies in the New World have been discovered, nor is there any accepted evidence of Norse visits to areas outside the northeastern corner of the continent. Enigmatic stone cairns, thought to be Norse navigational aids or megalithic monuments, were probably constructed by Native Americans, whereas other finds, such as the well-known Kensington runestone from Minnesota represent archaeological hoaxes. Since Norse exploration in the North Atlantic was directed towards new sources of portable wealth in general and walrus ivory in particular, it is unlikely that they would have explored the interior or southern coasts of the North American continent.

Were there any European colonies or visits to the New World prior to the Norsemen? It is impossible to argue that no Irish fisherman was ever blown across the north Atlantic in a storm. But deliberate trade and colonization efforts were unlikely prior to 986, since the Norse were the first to develop the sailing technology necessary to exploit the distant islands of northwest Europe and eastern Canada and to tie the newly founded colonies back to a central power.

Why did the Norse settlement or settlements in the New World fail, when the Vikings were such feared conquerors and successful colonizers throughout Europe? European weapons of the 10th to the 14th centuries were not markedly superior to those possessed by the Skraelings, and the latter's boats would have been more maneuverable in inland waters. Supply lines between the mainland of North America and the Norse

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settlement in Greenland were impracticably long and dangerous, even during the relatively mild climates of the 11th to the 13th centuries. When the climate deteriorated after about 1300, the life of the Greenland Norse became increasingly precarious. Around the time of Columbus' "discovery" of the New World, the Greenland colony was abandoned.

Norse contact with Native Americans appears to have ceased around the time of the first Spanish colonies in the 16th century. Were the Spanish aware of the Norse voyages across the North Atlantic and of a colonization effort some 500 years older than their own? An old controversy persists whether or not Columbus made a secret voyage to Iceland for directions across the Atlantic. We may never learn the answers to these questions, but archeological evidence certainly suggests what some in the United States still deny, or, at least, overlook--the Norse discovery of America one thousand years ago.

Suggested Readings:

Gordon, Kate. The Vikings and Their Predecessors, with a contribution by Robert McGhee. Ottawa, Canada: National Museum of Man, 1981.

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