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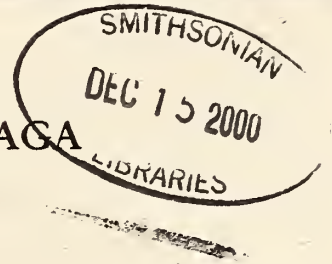
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## VIKINGS: THE NORTH ATLANTIC SAGA

by William W. Fitzhugh

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The year 2000—give or take a year or two—is the thousandth anniversary of the Viking discovery of North America, of Leif Eriksson's touchdown on land he called "Vinland," 500 years before Christopher Columbus. Leif Eriksson's epic voyage, which brought the first Europeans to the New World, culminated two hundred years of Norse exploration and settlement in the North Atlantic. Although his accomplishment did not lead to permanent settlement in the Americas, Leif's voyage achieved an important and highly symbolic circling for humankind, connecting our species into a single global system, completing humanity's million years' journey out of Africa and into the farthest reaches of the earth.

In 1992 school children across America celebrated the Quincentenary—the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' voyage to the New World, yet few teachers or their students probably took note of the earlier episode of European contact in the New World. A recent exhibition at the National Museum of Natural History, *Vikings: the North Atlantic Saga*, focuses attention on this earlier "discovery of America" and the wider contributions of the Vikings and their Norse descendants, who continue to inhabit North Atlantic regions into the modern day.

The exhibition provides the first comprehensive treatment of Norse exploration and settlement of the North Atlantic region between 860 and 1500,

illuminating new research in archaeology, history and the natural sciences that is transforming our understanding of the Vikings and their impact on history. *Vikings: The North Atlantic Sage* tells the story of "West-Vikings," the hardy Norse who settled the Faeroes, Iceland, and Greenland, and from there traveled west to the North American lands they called Helluland (Baffin Island), Markland (Labrador, and Vinland (Newfoundland). The dramatic story of the Viking expansion across the North Atlantic is a chapter of North American history that deserves to be more widely known.

Images of the Vikings have radically changed through the centuries. These images begin in negative European monastery accounts of marauding Vikings pillaging and plundering; appear in 13th century Icelandic saga tales of the daring voyages of Erik the Red and Leif Eriksson; transform to romanticized descriptions of Viking valor by 19th century historians and poets; are reinterpreted in 20th century archaeological descriptions of settlements, ships and cemeteries; and are reanalyzed yet again by today's natural scientists examining pollen and ice cores. The stories of the Vikings unfold through time, creating their own story of how history is written and how images and stereotypes emerge. These stories are often shrouded in mystery, misunderstandings, and popular imagery, only to be transformed at a later date into some quite different conception. The Vikings thus present a rich case study for those interested in learning about the past and about the many ways we learn about that past, since our



knowledge of the Vikings has changed so radically over time as new evidence and analytical tools have emerged.

## THE EXHIBITION

*Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga* focuses on the Vikings' little-known North Atlantic story, the inspiring tale of Viking sea-faring farmers who made the North Atlantic a Norse "lake" for one thousand years. It includes those who settled down and maintained a vibrant Christian Norse society in Greenland for 500 years, and those who explored and settled briefly in northeastern North America and maintained contacts with Native American Indians and Inuit for four hundred years before Columbus arrived in the Caribbean. None of this history is well known to North Americans or to Europeans because the historical and scientific evidence documenting this West-Viking story has only just begun to be published. New studies, including literary research into the Viking sagas, archaeological excavations of Norse and Native sites, and historical and environmental research, bring to life an exciting new picture of a western Atlantic portion of the Viking world that has until recently been neglected and unknown.

The exhibition begins with a presentation of Viking history and culture in Scandinavia and its expansion into Europe and the British Isles. The visitor can follow the early Viking pioneers who explored and settled Iceland in the mid-ninth century; and learn about their ships, navigation techniques, and the various reasons why the West-Viking expansion took place, including the need to find new lands for an expanding population and stock-raising economy. One of the lures for the Vikings was walrus ivory, which by this time had become more precious than gold in the high courts and church chambers of Europe.

The Icelandic portion of the exhibition features the social and environmental changes that occurred when Vikings arrived and set up a new society in this land of fire and ice. The rapid peopling of the landscape, the removal of its fledgling forests, and the installation of large stocks of animals

permanently transformed the island into what it is today: an agrarian-industrial nation whose economic interests and environmental resources must be carefully managed to avoid ecological catastrophe. Here archaeological and natural science illuminate the causes of the failed Norse colonies in Greenland and the changes Vikings brought to the Icelandic landscape, which caused great population loss and economic hardship even in that more temperate land. These serve as a reminder of the past, of over-exploitation in a part of the world where climatic cooling can have devastating effects. Iceland also presents a case study of ethnic merging, with a new nation arising out of Celtic and Norse immigrants, a society that adapted a system of Nordic self-government based on community assemblies that has been a model of modern democracy, dating back to the first general assembly at Thingvellir in 930. But perhaps the greatest contribution to emerge from Iceland was the recording and preservation of the sagas. This facet of the Viking World is presented dramatically in the exhibition in a dedicated "saga theater" in which the sagas relating to the discovery of America are presented in sound and light in a simulated Icelandic long house.

Iceland was the staging point for the final series of West-Viking expansions that led to Erik the Red's discovery and settlement of Greenland, and the extension of that effort further west into North Greenland, and then further west into North America. Recent archaeological work not only offers a window into the four-hundred year span of Norse Greenland (985-1450); but also gives us exciting new information about Viking voyages to Vinland. Evidence for the latter is presented from cartography and archaeology and includes a reconstruction of the Viking site discovered at L'Anse aux Meadows in northern Newfoundland. This portion of the exhibition also includes new information about contacts between the Norse and various Native American groups (Indian, Dorset, and Thule culture). These contacts suggest that the Norse may have been trading for ivory as well as gathering timber from Markland (Labrador); that



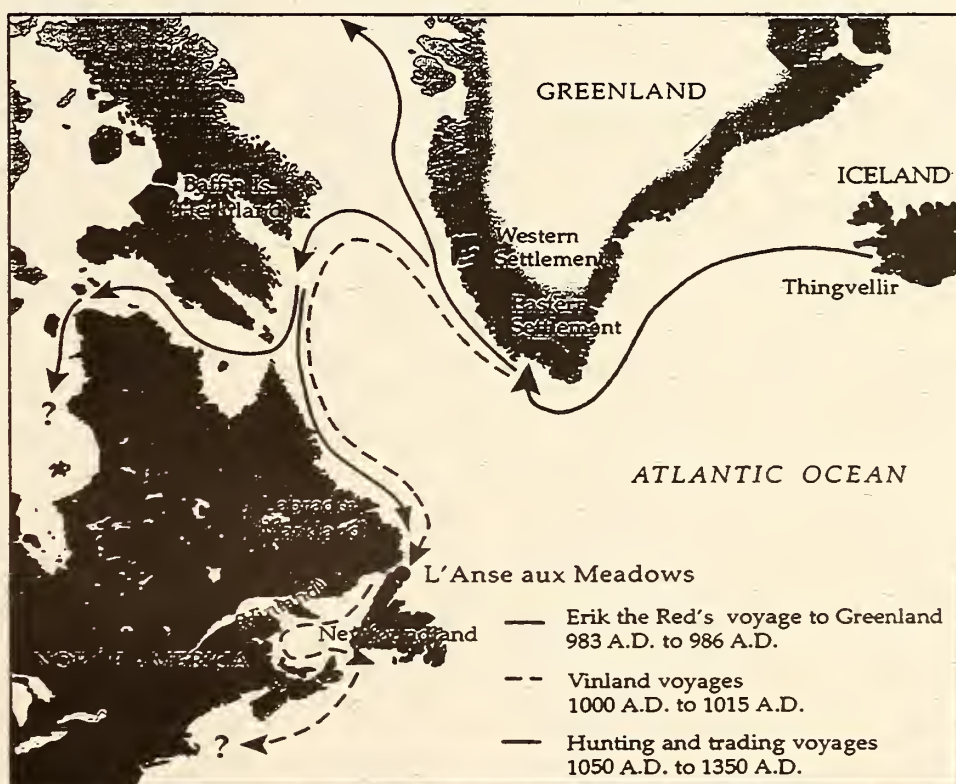
their voyages to America continued for several hundred years after the Vinland voyages ceased in the early 11th century; and that Norse-Native contacts were confined largely to the Arctic regions of northeastern North America. Recent archaeological research now shows that Norse activities in North America were much more extensive than previously believed and may have included purposeful trade and exchange. Finally, the exhibition deals with the controversial question, "Where was Vinland?" and the many claims and counter-claims made about Viking landings in America.

The exhibit could not be more timely. Even today, Leif Eriksson remains at best a shadowy figure, mentioned only in passing in textbook accounts of the early history of North America. Fortunately, his exploits were passed down as oral literature for more than two hundred years, then were written down in the 13th century by Viking descendants in Iceland, in the *Saga of the Greenlanders* and *Erik the Red's Saga*. For generations, most historians discounted these *sagas* as valid sources, but in 1960 the discovery of the Norse settlement in northern Newfoundland changed the world's view of the Vikings in North America. An earlier *AnthroNotes* article, "Vinland Revisited: 986-1986," by Alison S. Brooks, offered a detailed description of these saga accounts and the archaeological evidence supporting Norse settlement in the New World:

*For years, archaeologists searched for the original location of the Vinland settlement from Nantucket to Labrador. Finally, in 1960, at L'Anse aux Meadows on the northern tip of Newfoundland,*

*a Norwegian archaeologist, Helge Ingstad, discovered remains of three long sod houses on 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 small 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; 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 authentication of the L'Anse aux Meadows site as a Norse settlement of brief duration has been widely accepted by archaeologists (1986:4).*

Since Brooks wrote her summary account in 1986, even more Viking objects have been found in



Map By Marcia Bakry, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution

archaeological sites from northern Maine to the High Arctic, indicating a wide zone of Norse activity and revealing a pattern of Norse exploration and native contacts that lasted for nearly 500 years.

### **“VIKINGS” AND “NORSE”**

By the latter part of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Norse had largely mastered the challenges of making a living in their Scandinavian homelands and had developed a remarkable ship that gave them the ability to seek adventure, profit, and new lands beyond the coastal farms of western Norway. In doing so, the early Norse earned a new identity—Vikings—in the eyes of their European neighbors, an identity that followed them far across the North Atlantic and down to modern times.

To many, the term “Viking” has become indelibly associated with seafaring warriors, explorers, and entrepreneurs, despite the fact that this word was only sporadically applied directly to the Nordic peoples; the British used it to refer to the “curse of the north,” the marauding sailors who regularly despoiled the British coastal settlements after the famous Viking raid on Lindisfarne monastery in A.D. 793. That date is generally taken as the beginning of the Viking Age, which lasted two hundred and fifty years until the Normans, descendants of the Vikings, crossed the channel from Normandy, France, to invade England in 1066. The term Viking is thought to have originated from a place in southern Norway called “Vik,” which became an early center of Viking raiding fleets. The name soon came to refer to Norse-speakers, called “Northmen” by their southern adversaries, who sallied forth from “viks” (“bay” or “harbor” in Old Norse, or “refuge” in Old English) seeking adventure and profit. Those “bay men” who went off raiding were said to go “a-viking” or were simply called “vikings.”

The term Viking did not refer to the Nordic peoples who stayed home. Those who shared a similar language (Old Norse) and cultural traditions that distinguished them from other linguistic or ethnic groups were known by various ethnic names, such as Goths, Norwegians, or Danes. The

pioneering Norse who discovered and settled lands in Iceland and Greenland during the Viking Age were not technically Vikings. Collectively these 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century Norse are sometimes called West Vikings, although their traditions and history are primarily those of Nordic seafaring farmers rather than the Viking marauders who terrorized Europe.

Thus the term “Norse” is preferred and is especially appropriate for medieval Nordic peoples of the North Atlantic who were predominantly Christian after A.D. 1000 and culturally derived primarily from Norway. However, the long history of the search for the “Vikings” in North America and its modern popular use has made it the only term recognizable to a general North American audience. Hence the term Viking is used throughout the exhibition and this article to characterize the “Northmen” during the entire period from A.D. 793 until A.D. 1066, when William the Conqueror of Normandy invaded England and defeated King Harold, effectively ending the Viking Age. Following this period raids ceased and the political and economic integration of Scandinavia, Europe and the North Atlantic settlements moved forward rapidly. After this time Nordic peoples of northern Europe, Iceland, and Greenland should more correctly be called Norse, as befitting the Christian medieval society that they had become, rather than Vikings, which unfortunately is North American customary usage for all Viking Age and Medieval Period Nordic contacts in North America.

### **VIKINGS AT HOME**

Most Norse lived as farmers on small plots of land or served as retainers to kings or locally powerful chiefs and their supporters. Despite their reputation as shipbuilders, sailors, and warriors, the Norse identified themselves as farmers rather than as fishermen, hunters, trappers, or traders, even though individuals might spend considerable periods of the year engaged in these tasks. Carpentry and especially boat building were not trades; they were skills known to all Viking men, just as spinning, weaving, and clothes-making were known to all Viking women. However, there were



no activities more central to Norse identity than stock-farming—the raising of cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs.

The technological element upon which Viking expansion and influence depended was boat-building and maritime skill. Little was known about Viking ships until the late 1800s when Norwegian burial mounds were excavated revealing well preserved ships; more recent excavations have further documented Viking ship types and their development from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Tree-ring dating of the wooden ships has provided a precise chronology for their construction and repair. Viking boats were designed to be dragged across long portages as well as to withstand fierce ocean storms. Such ships gave Vikings the ability to trade, make war, carry animals, and cross open oceans.

The magic ingredients that made Viking ships possible were iron, carpentry skills, abundant timber, and a large labor force. The Viking technique of smelting produced iron that could withstand salty waters. The availability of iron for tools and fastenings meant that even moderately well-off farmers could muster the materials and manpower to build a ship. Before the Viking Age, owning a ship was a mark of status for the powerful chieftains. During the Viking Age ships became a necessity for even lesser chieftains and successful farmers. Swarms of Viking boats could be produced, and during the long midwinter farming break, the Baltic and North Sea came alive with Viking crews out for valor and profit.

## THE VIKING AGE

The territorial expansion of the Vikings from their Scandinavian homelands that began in the last decades of the 8<sup>th</sup> century was the fundamental historical reality that created the Viking Age. This expansion started as seasonal raids on the northern and western British Isles by Norwegian Vikings, who first invaded the Shetlands and Orkneys and then used these as bases for staging raids on northern Scotland, Ireland, and the west coast of England. Danish Vikings struck along England's eastern coast and along the northwestern shores of

the mainland south of Denmark. Viking chiefs had already become familiar with these lands through trading activities, and within a few decades after the strikes began, the purpose of the raids became more economic and political. Soon, Vikings were trading and extorting money (called *Danegeld*) more than they were raiding and stealing, although the raids continued sporadically throughout the British Isles and western Europe for the next two centuries, and even extended to Spain, the Mediterranean, and North Africa.

Over time Vikings who went raiding returned to regions they had first visited as marauders and took wives and land and settled there permanently, leaving younger and more boisterous generations to go "a-viking" elsewhere. In this way Viking population and lands expanded rapidly during the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, and soon farming, trading, and diplomacy became as common as raiding and pillaging for Vikings living abroad. Danish Vikings expanded settlements along the eastern coast of Britain, and towns soon grew up in Dublin and York, while Normandy became a Nordic territory and later a Duchy of France.

At the same time as Viking raids and settlements were transforming western Europe, Vikings from Sweden were exploring, raiding, and building economic relationships to the east through European and Russian river systems leading to the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, and the eastern Mediterranean. Swedish Vikings became powerful traders, politicians, and mercenaries in these regions, and founded a dynasty that ruled Novgorod in what is today Russia, and Kiev in modern Ukraine. During the Byzantine Empire, they sold their services as protectors of the ruling caliphs. These eastern Vikings brought back immense wealth to Scandinavia in the form of Eastern silver and artifact treasures from as far away as the Caspian Sea, Baghdad, and even India.

Vikings who ventured west, primarily Norwegians and those who had resettled in the British Isles, embarked on a different course, settling the islands of the North Atlantic as farmers and hunters who supplied medieval Europe with such exotic goods as ivory, falcons, and precious

fur, in addition to wool. These hardy Norse farmers reached the Faeroes by 825 and Iceland by 870. By 930 a population of 30,000 Norse had become established in Iceland, and all its arable lands were occupied. Thereafter, communication between Iceland and Norway and the British Isles was maintained on a regular basis. By 930 the Icelandic parliament was founded, and in 982 Erik the Red, outlawed from Iceland, set off to explore Greenland, returning to Iceland in 985 to lead a colonizing effort that founded Greenland's Eastern and Western Settlements.

On or about 1000 A.D. Leif Eriksson set out to explore lands west and south of Greenland, which he called Helluland (Baffin Island), Markland (Labrador), and Vinland (Newfoundland). During the next decade or so other Vinland voyages were made by other members of his family. Thereafter, Vinland explorations ceased and during the following three hundred and fifty years, until the Greenland colonies were abandoned about 1450, the Norse in this distant settlement remained oriented primarily to Iceland, Norway, and the British Isles. However, historical records and finds of Norse artifacts in Native American archaeological sites show that throughout this period, Greenlandic or Icelandic Norse occasionally visited Markland for timber and made sporadic contacts with native peoples in northwest Greenland and the Canadian arctic.

The West Viking story may be likened to a 9<sup>th</sup> century Nordic wave that surged out of Scandinavia and the northern British Isles at the peak period of the Viking Age and raced across the North Atlantic to Iceland, Greenland, and northeastern North America

during a period of unusually warm, stable climatic conditions. Many theories have been advanced to explain the events that propelled the Vikings outward from their northern homelands: developments in ship construction and seafaring skills; internal stress from population growth and scarce land; loss of personal freedom as political and economic centralization progressed; and the rise of state-sponsored Christianity over traditional pagan belief. Probably all are correct in degrees, but the overriding factor was the awareness of the opportunities for advancement abroad that lured Norsemen from their home farms. By taking on lives as soldiers of fortune, Vikings, who faced declining opportunities at home, could dramatically alter their prospects by becoming wealthy, reaping glory and fame in battle, and achieving high status as leaders and heroes based on their own abilities and deeds. With success abroad, one could advance rapidly to positions of prestige and power in the relatively open structure of Viking society.

### THE GREENLAND COLONIES

The final chapter of the Norse story in the North American region concerns the history of the two colonies established by Erik the Red in Greenland. Much is known of life in Norse Greenland from the sagas and from nearly two hundred years of archaeological investigations. In recent decades





important new sites have yielded rich information about the Greenland Norse, including the "Farm Beneath the Sand" site. Here a farm that was occupied for 300 years was preserved in permafrost and yielded many spectacular artifacts including an entire door, loom, and whole animal carcasses. Studies of such sites enable scholars to ask how the Greenland colonies functioned and whether they died out as the result of a little Ice Age, overpopulation and depletion of natural resources, isolation from Europe, raids by pirates, Inuit (Eskimo) attack or territorial infringement, immigration to America, or simply gradual population loss.



A NEW IMAGE FOR THE VIKINGS (?)

### VIKING AMERICA THROUGH TIME

After the disappearance of the medieval Norse from Greenland and the integration of the Icelandic Norse into the broader European economic and political scene, little was heard of Vikings in North America until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before the 1830s North Americans knew the Vikings only as the Europeans saw them—as raiders and pillagers of Europe. These views changed rapidly after 1837 when the saga texts became available in English translations. These sagas indicated that Leif Eriksson and others had explored and settled in as-yet-unknown areas of northeastern North America. The discovery of literature describing Viking explorations that may have reached southern New England struck American antiquarians like a thunderclap. Information about mysterious rock engravings; a conspicuous old stone tower in Newport, Rhode Island; and a pagan burial containing "plate armor" all became grist for a new 19<sup>th</sup> century Viking craze in North America. This early American obsession with Vikings was sealed when Henry Wadsworth Longfellow published his epic poem, *The Skeleton in Armor*. This tale of a love-struck Viking warrior who sailed to America, built the Newport Tower for his lost love, and came to an unhappy end buried in his armor in an unmarked grave in nearby southeastern Massachusetts became an indelible part of 19<sup>th</sup> century American literary romanticism. Scholars later discovered that the inscriptions and burial

were Native American and dated to the colonial period and that the tower was built in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century by Governor Benedict Arnold, but by then the popular Viking imagery was indelibly imprinted in the American imagination.

In the 1890s Ebenezer N. Horsford of Boston lectured and published scores of books on his theories of Viking contacts in New England. Although his and many other claims of Viking cities like Norumbega and artifact finds have been dismissed by scholars, the allure of a "Viking America" lives on and continues to motivate a small circle of advocates whose steadfastness in promoting evidence of Viking and earlier European Neolithic or Bronze Age finds in America have been termed "fantastic archaeology." Most of these finds are the results of innocent mistakes, but a considerable number are pranks or hoaxes based on finds of real Viking artifacts that came to America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century as heirlooms with Scandinavian immigrants.

Understanding the history of this phenomena and its broader roots in popular attitudes about Vikings in European and American society helps explain the enduring nature of the American public's romance with things "Viking." North Americans today associate "nordic" with winter track events or episodes from the public radio show

"Prairie Home Companion." The term Viking connotes a brawny, battle crazed berserker from comic books or the Monty Python movies, but its only assured recall is the Minnesota Viking football team. All Vikings in popular culture renditions wear helmets with horns, despite the fact that Vikings never had horns on their helmets; this persistent image seems to have originated as a 19<sup>th</sup> century Wagnerian opera costume based on archaeological finds of Danish Bronze Age horned helmets. Clearly America's romance with the Vikings is based on more than historical fact!

## CONCLUSION

The new millennium presents us with the opportunity to explore a little known chapter in the history of North America that has been emerging with evidence from the L'Anse aux Meadows site and finds of Norse artifacts in Native American sites in northeastern North America. These finds confirm information related in the *Vinland Sagas* and extends the range of Norse contacts or influence in North America from Greenland to Maine. The fact that these finds date from 1000 to 1400 corroborates historical evidence that the Iceland and Greenland Norse continued to visit North America long after Leif Eriksson's initial Vinland voyages ceased about 1015. Even though the Norse did not establish permanent settlements in North America, their continuing visits ensured that a tradition of knowledge about these lands, resources, and peoples remained alive in Greenland until about 1450 and in Iceland down to the present day.

Perhaps the most important outcome of contact was the familiarity Native Americans gained from European habits, behavior, and materials that helped them take best advantage of future European interactions. This information must have been passed down through time within Native societies, for when later Europeans arrived (for example, Martin Frobisher in Labrador in 1576-78), Inuit groups were already familiar with people they called *Kablunat* (white men) who came in big ships with interesting things to trade.

Finally, our investigation of the Norse North Atlantic Saga teaches us much about the Vikings and later Norse societies who opened this early northern bridge to North America. To date, the Scandinavian component in the history of the Americas is absent from the popular tradition and educational base of American history. It is useful, therefore, to consider how this tradition—a northern European Nordic tradition—played a crucial role in the early American contacts, maintained itself through the Middle Ages, and passed information on to others, perhaps even to Columbus himself. In fact, it is believed that Columbus visited Iceland shortly before his voyages to North America and surely he would have heard about the saga lands to the west from sailors or scholars he met. After a quiescent period between 1400 and 1800, Nordic influence reemerged as a wave of immigrants to North America in the 18th and 19th centuries began making major new contributions to North American society.

To a great extent, our next millennium will be shaped by the very same values that motivated the Vikings in their western push across the Atlantic—the need to explore new horizons, to test the human spirit, to seek opportunities wherever they exist. Such is the historical message of *Vikings: the North Atlantic Saga*!

**Note:** This article is based on the author's much longer introductory essay, "Puffins, Ringed Pins, and Runestones: The Viking Passage to America" in the exhibition catalog (Fitzhugh and Ward:11-25).

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