ASSESSING THE EVIDENCE OF VIKING LANDINGS IN NORTH AMERICA

**Archeological research into L’Anse aux Meadows**

**A Viking base camp?**

In 1960 Helge Ingstad and his wife Anne were searching for archeological evidence of Vikings in Labrador and Newfoundland. In the small village of L'Anse aux Meadows on the northern tip of Newfoundland they met a fisherman who showed them sod foundations that had the shape of Viking longhouses. More than a decade of archeological investigation at this site has proved conclusively that Vikings had built a settlement in North America 500 years before Columbus, just as the sagas say. The evidence at the site also suggests that more southerly voyages might have taken place, and that other settlements might be found. Archeologists believe L'Anse aux Meadows was a base camp which afforded a way-station to further explorations of North America.

Excavations revealed a number of artifacts that are diagnostic of a Viking site. From 1961 until 1968, the excavations uncovered Viking artifacts including a ringed pin, a soapstone spindle whorl, a bone pin, a whetstone, iron boat rivets, worked wood and other objects. There was evidence of iron-smelting and forging, and hearth charcoal is dated to A.D. 1000. The style and construction of the three longhouses and outbuildings are identical to 11th century Iceland and Greenland. The artifacts indicated weaving and iron-working, activities which were not practiced by Native Americans until after A.D. 1500. These finds confirm L'Anse aux Meadows as the earliest European settlement yet known in North America.

Later excavations revealed more about the purpose of this settlement and the type of activities that took place here. Their work produced further evidence of wood-working and iron-smelting, suggesting that the main activity at the site was repairing damaged vessels or constructing new ones from wood obtained in the nearby forests. Butternuts and worked pieces of butternut wood, a tree that was not native to Newfoundland but was present one thousand years ago in northern Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, were also found. This discovery indicates that the people who lived at L'Anse aux Meadows had traveled further south and had brought back nuts and wood native to those southern areas and were sampling the region's resources as described in the sagas. These finds suggest that the L'Anse aux Meadows site was a base-camp or gateway to the rich lands around the Gulf of St. Lawrence, which is likely the Vinland of the sagas.

After 20 years of excavations, archeologists can also say with confidence that this was a short-lived settlement because of the small amount of remains indicating domestic activity. There were no stables for animals, no storage barns, and no burials. Even the houses and their surroundings contained very little domestic debris. For these reasons, it is believed that the site may have been used for only a few years. Where are all these objects? Were they made of perishable materials that have not survived? Were they taken by native visitors after the Norse departed? Were the Norse Vinland explorations less extensive than suggested in the sagas? Or was Vinland – that southern land of grapes and pastures - as much a mythical paradise to the Vikings as it seems to us today?

**Evidence of Native Contacts in Vinland**

**What have we uncovered?**

The excavations at L'Anse aux Meadows provide a small bit of evidence for these contacts in the form of two artifacts obtained by the Norse from native Americans. One is a beautiful oval soapstone lamp found in the smelting hut. Unlike thick, roughly-made soapstone lamps made by the Norse, this lamp is thin and delicately carved and is an unmistakable product of an Eskimo carver. How this piece arrived at L'Anse aux Meadows is mysterious, because there were no Eskimo people living in Newfoundland at this time. It seems likely that the Norse obtained this lamp by trade or by taking it from an abandoned Eskimo site they visited in Labrador. The second piece is a small soapstone spindle whorl that the Norse appear to have made from a fragment of a thin, fat-encrusted Eskimo cooking pot which could have come from the same source or from an earlier Eskimo site in Newfoundland.

To date, only one other artifact has been found indicating contact between Norse and Native people in the Vinland region: a Norwegian silver penny dating, minted between A.D. 1065 and 1080, found at a large Indian site in Maine. However, this coin is not proof that the Vikings ever reached Maine. When it was found the penny had a perforation for use as a pendant, but later this portion of the corroded coin crumbled to dust. Because several other artifacts found were Eskimo tools made from stone, archeologists believe this penny probably arrived in Maine by native trade rather than by a Norse ship.

Considering the many contacts described in the sagas, it is strange that so few Norse artifacts have been found in the many Native archeological sites that have been excavated in the Vinland region between Newfoundland and New England. In the 11th century these areas were occupied by large numbers of people organized into different native groups who traveled widely along the coast by boat in summer. Had the Norse been as active exploring or settling in these regions as described in the sagas, one would expect their sites to contain Norse artifacts they had acquired by trade, theft, or by scavenging Norse sites. The picture that emerges from archeology is that Vinland is further north than suggested by the sagas, and also involved fewer people and less extensive exploration than suggested by the sagas.

**Evidence From The Sagas**

**Are they reliable sources?**

The earliest and most complete information we have about Vinland the Good is found in two sagas, Greenlanders' Saga and The Saga of Erik the Red which tell of the Viking discovery of North America. The two accounts were written independently, though both tell of things which took place in the early 11th century that were passed down by word of mouth in Greenland and Iceland until they were written down in the 13th century in Iceland. Both give general descriptions of the native peoples the Vikings met, relative sailing distances, and landscape features which help us determine the location of Vinland. But the two versions are also contradictory in a number of ways, and while they provide much information about the new lands, they do not conclusively resolve the question, "where was Vinland?"

Greenlanders' Saga describes a voyage made by Bjarni Herjolfsson, the first Norseman to see the shores of North America, and the subsequent voyages of Leif Eriksson, his brother, his sister, and the Icelandic merchant named Thorfinn Karlsefni. This saga describes hostilities with skraelings, the Norse term for the native peoples they met in the lands visited south and west of Greenland which they called Vinland and Markland. This saga places Erik the Red's family at the center of the Vinland voyages.

The Saga of Erik the Red tells the Vinland story as a single expedition led by Thorfinn Karsefni, a rich trader from Iceland who married Leif Eriksson's widowed sister-in-law, and traveled with her to Vinland , where they lived for several years. In this story, Leif's role is similar to that of Bjarni Herjolfsson in The Greenlanders' Saga; he merely sights land, but never sets foot on it. This account gives less prominence to the Eriksson family, though in both accounts Leif the Lucky is a heroic, magnanimous figure who converts the Grenlanders to Christianity.

In addition to these differences, the two sagas also describe different places where the Vikings traveled. In Greenlanders' Saga, Leif Eriksson builds several houses and calls the camp Leifsbudir, and all the future voyagers use this same location. In The Saga of Erik the Red, two settlements are mentioned, one in the northern part of Vinland called Straumfjord, and one in a more southerly location called Hóp. If there were a number of settlements, then Vinland was a region, not a specific settlement.

Based on the saga evidence alone, one might imagine the Vikings sailed far south along the coast of North America. However, the sagas' unclear and inconsistent descriptions of Vinland geography probably resulted from elabortion and distortion introduced during the two hundred years when they were passed down orally in Greenland and Iceland. For these reasons the sagas are viewed as only one of several sources regarding Norse activities west of Greenland

**Environmental Studies**

**Can we locate Vinland using environmental descriptions?**

Part of the evidence for the location of Vinland comes from studies of natural history and environmental evidence found in archeological sites. Combining these data with evidence from the sagas enables scientists to reconstruct the climate and environment and determine where one might expect to find sites, if the saga descriptions are accurate.

The sagas contain a number of believable observations of environmental indicators, such as types of trees, species of fish, length of day, temperature in winter, etc. That the Norse were intent on exploring these resources is shown in the saga statement that "they took specimens of all of them." Environmental scientists and others familiar with climatic zones have been able to piece together the probable location of Vinland from these saga descriptions. However, there are complications in that the Old Norse words in the sagas can be translated a number of different ways, making this method for locating Vinland problematic at best. Also, statements describing "fields of self-sown wheat," "there was no snow at all that winter," and "the livestock needed no fodder during the winter" may have pertained to some but not all locations in Vinland. Descriptions of the animals encountered point towards more northern regions, while plant desciptions fit better with southern locations.

The sagas tell of Vinland being a rich land where salmon ran in the streams, flatfish could be caught in the ocean, and game animals were numerous. Both may provide some information about geographic locations visited by the Vikings one thousand years ago. Environmental scientists know that today salmon spawn in rivers from Maine to Ungava Bay, but very few salmon bones have been found south of New Brunswick. Because salmon like cold water, it is unlikely they were south of Nova Scotia in the warmer conditions of the 11th century.

Additionally, descriptions of places where a headland was thick with deer and where "the point looked like a large dunghill, as the deer gathered there at night to sleep" aptly describes the dense summer migrations of caribou on the central and northern Labrador coast.

Woodland caribou, and deer or moose (alternative translations for the Old Norse word dýr) do not congregate in large numbers. This would indicate that most of Vinland was located in northern areas, in the Canadian maritime provinces.

In Greenlanders' Saga Leif Eriksson is said to have named 'Vinland' for the rich southern land because of grapes he found growing there. This makes it unlikely that L'Anse aux Meadows could have been the Vinland of the sagas, because grapes have never grown in Newfoundland. Their current northern range is northern Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and southern Quebec. Even in the warmer climate of one thousand years ago they never grew in Newfoundland or eastern Quebec.

However, grapes do grow in the same sort of climate as butternut trees, and one of the most surprising discoveries at L'Anse aux Meadows were butternuts and pieces of carved butternut wood. Ocean currents could not have carried butternuts or driftwood from these areas to northern Newfoundland, and the nuts are too large to have been carried by birds. They must have been brought back to L'Anse aux Meadows by Vikings explorers, and those same explorers would have also encountered wild grapes.

The presence of butternuts also helps explain the saga references to grapes, which were supposed to have been found near all of the saga settlements but have never grown in Newfoundland. L'Anse aux Meadows should probably be seen as being in the "northern" Vinland and probably functioned as a "gateway" - a site not too far from Greenland, but also within reach of more productive southern regions where such useful products as nuts, grapes, and other fruits could be obtained.

Some scholars, however, have argued that Vinland meant "grass-land" to signify its suitability for farming and cattle-raising. This hypothesis rests on the fact that the word 'vin' has two possible meanings. Vin (long I) means grapes or wine in Old Norse, whereas 'vin' (short i) means grass or pasture lands in Old German, the European language most closely associated with the Vikings' Old Norse language.

The theory that Vinland meant grassy fields found support when L'Anse aux Meadows was discovered in a grassy location far north of lands where grapes could grow. Modern scholars are included to read 'Vinland' as grape land not only because grapes are found in southern portions of this regions but because some saga references spell Vinland with a double i (Viinland), whereas pasture land in the Greenlanders' Old Norse would have been vinjaland or vinjarland.

**Archeological Research**

1. Why do historians think that the settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows may have been used as a "base" camp? (Provide evidence or clues)

2. What conclusions have been made about the amount of time the Viking spent there?

**Contact with Natives**  
  
1. Explain how the artifacts found at the settlement lead to the conclusion that the Vikings must have made contact with natives

2. Why contradictions are caused by the fact that there are so few artifacts?

**Evidence from the Sagas**

1.What are some of the differences in the two sagas?

2.What problems create a reliability issue with these stories?

**Enviornmental Studies**   
  
1. What environmental evidence is used in the descriptions within the sagas?

2. What do the different animals and plants mentioned in the sagas suggest?