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Vikings in America: Theories and Evidence

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PUBLICATIONS proving the discovery and settlement of the North American continent by the Vikings or Norsemen are increasing in a never-ending flood. Every month brings out a new list of articles, newspaper announcements, monographs, and books on the subject, some adding "new" information, others rearranging and restating discoveries and theories which had been previously issued. What is the origin of, what is the motivation for, this flood?

The Vikings (purists prefer a host of other terms) were not brought actively to the public notice until Henry Wadsworth Longfellow published his *Saga of the Skeleton in Armor*. From this fictional beginning, the pursuit of the elusive Norseman on our shores has produced many and devious theories, introduced many disputed and undisputed pieces of evidence. The Old Stone Mill in Newport, Rhode Island, Benedict Arnold Esq., Propr. (at one time, at least), was first claimed as Viking handiwork; numerous Indian pictographs were added to the roster; around the turn of the century the whole problem was given a tremendous boost by the discovery of the Kensington Rune Stone; and finally, the whole matter blazed again into glorious controversy as a result of the publication of two books, Means' *Newport Tower* (1942) and Holand's *America 1355-1364* (1946), with the consequent excavation around the Old Stone Mill itself.

Reputable archeologists will not dispute the discovery of the New World by the Vikings, especially if Greenland is included in the western hemisphere. Sagas, documents, tribute rolls, Church records all combine with admirably executed archeology to make the Viking settlements in this unfriendly area indisputable. But the travels of the Vikings to the rich lands further west?—here the "reactionary" scientists raise a hesitant eyebrow, and wonder how much of the "evidence" is worth considering.

Schools have long taught that Lief Erickson discovered three western lands: Helluland, Markland, and Vinland, and that these lands, or at very least the last mentioned, can be identified with the North American continent. The discovery of these lands, it is true, rests on no more firm foundation than certain sagas: minstrels' tales which passed from generation to generation for centuries before being written down; but the evidence seems trustworthy, and has generally been accepted. It is when attempts are made to pinpoint these lands that the scholars come to blows. The youth of this generation is not satisfied with the glowing generalities of its elders.

The battle between the Viking supporters and their critics has long been one which has generated more heat than light. Enthusiasm for Viking discoveries has frequently become a cult, and the infidels who refuse to accept the

true faith without question are condemned to outer darkness, there to suffer interminable torture in the form of repeated epistolary and public press barbs. No true Viking supporter has a good word to say for anyone who, at any time, has seen fit to question the finds of the True Believers.

In part, this is a healthy sign. No science makes progress without its critics, for the critics point out the weakness of theories and lead to a re-examination and a reaffirmation of the facts and the faith. It is likewise well for the Viking enthusiasts to continue to pour the vials of their wrath on those who do not see eye to eye with them, for if they did not, some really vital discovery might be overlooked in the general condemnation of all theories which concern the pre-Columbian discovery of America. Since a genuinely open mind on these matters is not now possible (providing it ever was), it seems time for one disillusioned Vikingist to set down a brief summary of the evidence pro and con the subject, especially in view of the most recent reaffirmation of faith by Pohl in *The Lost Discovery* (1952) and the startling contentions of Mallery in *Lost America* (1951).

Material adduced to prove the discovery and settlement of America by the Vikings can now fairly be said to divide between the Eastern Evidence and the Midwestern Evidence. (It has been a long time since anyone has supported the Vikings in the Ohio Valley with any degree of scholarship.) The Eastern Evidence has the merit of greater probability—since the Vikings came from Greenland, they most probably landed on the eastern seaboard—and is further supported by a more hoary antiquity. The Midwestern Evidence has the advantage of a more able and vocal protagonist, more freshness of material, and a more startling find, the Kensington Stone. But as the presentation of the material now stands (it is always subject to revision), the Midwestern material depends on an eastern location of Vinland, and thus it is to the east coast that we must first turn to examine the evidence which has been presented.

This is no place to review the sailing directions, the landfalls, the flora and fauna as presented in the sagas. These documents present a melange of facts and fancies, ranging from the wholly probable to the wholly improbable (viz. the unipeds!). One cannot accept them as gospel, nor can one dismiss them altogether. Various protagonists have “definitely” identified Vinland as lying as far south as Virginia or as far north as Labrador. With such potential variation, it is obvious that, without further concrete evidence, the location of Vinland must remain in a vacuum. However, additional evidence has been advanced.

The largest piece of this evidence, and the first to be connected with the Vikings, is the Old Stone Mill in Newport, or as it is now more frequently called (at least outside of Newport), the Newport Tower. This structure has been under concerted attack by historians, archeologists and lay experts since 1942. During the summers of 1948 and 1949, artifacts of indisputable colonial origin were found in association with the Tower’s foundation under circumstances which preclude subsequent intrusion or “planting” (Godfrey 1950, 1951a, 1951b). In spite of this, the Viking enthusiasts have continued

to assert the Tower's Norse origin, basing their conclusions on three main facts: the Plowden Petition, the Wood map, and the measurement argument.

In a petition by Sir Edmund Plowden dated 1632, for a grant of Long Island and parts of the adjacent mainland, mention is made of a "round stone towre." No location is given, and no other significant information adduced. There is no indication that Plowden's company was going to build a round stone tower, nor any reason why they should build such a structure; this was not the form of English watchtower or fort that was then being built in the New World. On the other hand, there is nothing to indicate that the Tower in Newport has any connection with the land covered by Plowden's petition; in fact it is well outside the forty leagues square of the adjoining mainland which Plowden petitioned and, furthermore, Newport is on an island. The mention in the petition certainly does not *prove* the existence of a tower in 1632, nor does it place such a tower in the location of Newport.

The map by William Wood, dated 1635 (Newport and the surrounding country were not settled until several years later), shows a town marked "Old Plymouth" somewhere on the east shore of Narragansett Bay. The reasoning advanced for accepting the Wood map as evidence for the existence of the Newport Tower is even more tenuous. Wood's map, although excellent for its period, does not accurately delineate the contours of Narragansett Bay, so it is impossible to be specific about the location of "Old Plymouth." Supporters of this piece of evidence, however, insist that it is on the location of present-day Newport. Second, there is no indication as to what "Old Plymouth" is, although the symbol used is the same as that used elsewhere on the map for towns. Supporters of the Norse theory of the Tower's origin claim that Wood found the Tower, and presumed that it was the remains of an earlier settlement of the town on Plymouth (although there never was such a settlement) and so indicated it on his map. The theory is far-fetched, and the evidence is certainly not conclusive.

The measurement argument in favor of the Norse authorship for the Newport Tower is one which has been growing in recent years, and has only recently achieved the dignity of publication in a book (Pohl 1952). The contention is that various measurements, which in the English foot show random irregularity, have complete consistency when translated into the Old Norse foot, which was equal to 12.3543 English inches. The principal measurements used for this argument are the internal diameter of the Tower, the external diameter, the diameter of the columns, and the "height of the first floor." The last measurement can be eliminated; the measurement used by the supporters of the theory is from the level of the first floor to the present ground level, and this measurement has no validity. The true measurement, to the earliest floor at ground level, as revealed in the 1949 excavation, comes very close to $9\frac{1}{2}$ English feet (9.465'), which when converted to the Norse equivalent is 9'8" with something over, a nonsignificant (and not even) figure. The other measurements are likewise lacking in validity: although the Tower shows good circularity, the internal diameters vary up to $1\frac{5}{8}$ " (on the basis of *one* series

of measurements) when measured from column to opposite column. But attempts to find a point equidistant from all columns, a Tower center, show that the irregularity exceeds this figure by inches. The column diameters vary considerably also. But beyond all this is the actual condition of the masonry, which precludes measurement with any degree of accuracy. The structure, as originally finished, was covered with a thick layer of mortar, which completely covered the stonework to a depth of up to two inches. The thickness of this mortar was very irregular, as can be seen from the small areas still extant, and measurement on the stone gives little indication of the original dimensions.

The supporters of the Norse theory further contend that the Tower was built as a religious edifice, in fact, that it was the first Catholic Church in the New World. However, Norse churches, whether built in Greenland, Iceland, the Orkney Islands, or in Scandinavia, were not built in any Scandinavian unit of measurement, but were built with a unit of measurement of either the Roman or the Greek foot, the latter equaling 12.795 English inches (Roussell 1941:129). Converting the irregular Tower measurements to either the Roman or Greek foot does not yield anything significant. On the other hand, the measurements as they stand, adding or subtracting for the thickness of the mortar, come close to acceptable measurements in feet and fractions of feet. Furthermore, colonial builders were not averse to using feet and inches, even in irregular amounts. The measurement argument, in other words, has no validity.

There is, then, no good evidence to contravene the positive archeological findings of the Newport Tower's colonial origin.

With the Newport Tower eliminated, the other claims for the location of Vinland seem a little thin. The most recent area identified has been the Bass River-Follins Pond area of Cape Cod. Pohl contends that the area *exactly* corresponds to the sailing directions in the sagas and to the descriptions of the land of Vinland. His contention can be neither affirmed nor denied. The sailing directions in the sagas are so loose and indefinite that they have been successfully elasticized by innumerable other experts. The description of Vinland is hardly less stretchable. But even if the application to the Follins Pond area fits the sagas today, it does not necessarily fit the area a thousand years ago. There have been some rather considerable changes in the shoreline of Cape Cod since the sixteenth century, and certainly the change since the eleventh century is even greater. It is even possible that the Follins Pond-Bass River feature did not exist at the time of the discovery of Vinland. To reinforce the site, however, Pohl has discovered "mooring stones."

"Mooring stones" are large boulders into which have been drilled holes. Into these holes a peg or ring was inserted, to which the ship was moored. The technique is an old one, used in Scandinavia in Viking times, but also used currently by fishermen along the eastern seaboard. The drilling of holes in boulders is, however, not restricted to this use. Some holes were drilled by the Indians for purposes which are not now known; some holes were drilled as preparation to splitting the stone for building; some holes were drilled by

prospectors looking for minerals; and, undoubtedly, there were other hole-drillers. There is nothing necessarily Norse about a hole in a rock, and Pohl admits that they must be accepted with caution. He points out that such holes have been drilled by several different techniques, only one of which might have been used by the Norsemen. However, this method, the use of a straight chisel, is still used, especially when the drilling is being done at random, as by a fisherman, prospector, or farmer splitting rock for his barn foundation. Another point that has been raised in support of the Norse origin of certain mooring holes is the degree of weathering inside the hole. This is hardly significant. A more or less vertical hole in a boulder is an excellent trap for water, plant debris, and other acid-forming materials. The very irregularity of the tool marks enables such acids to bite more sharply into the rock and obliterate the markings. Moreover, the differential rate of weathering of rocks is well understood, so that the unelaborated statement that certain mooring holes are weathered and therefore Norse in origin has no significance whatever. Mooring holes, then, wherever found, are not evidence for the presence of the Norsemen on the North American continent unless supported by other more valid evidence.

Returning to the Follins Pond site after this digression, it can be stated that, "mooring holes" notwithstanding, there have been found in the area no indubitable Norse artifacts, in spite of extensive surface hunting and also archeological investigation at the only point on the pond's perimeter at which a boat could be beached. Following publication of a rather sensational article based on Pohl's speculations, the area was intensively (although not accurately) explored by curio seekers and tourists, but nothing was turned up. On May 10 and 11, 1952, a group from the Massachusetts Archaeological Society excavated several areas suggested as most promising by Pohl, but found nothing of Norse origin. At the conclusion of the excavation, the Society released to the press a cautious statement that "nothing has been proved or disproved as to Mr. Pohl's theory," which leaves Follins Pond just where it was before: one of the very many suggested sites for Vinland.

In *Lost America*, Mallery expands the field of Viking explorations far beyond anything ever previously suggested by the most enthusiastic Viking supporter. Among the many areas where he finds these intrepid explorers is Newfoundland. At the southwest corner of Pistolet Bay, now raised thirty-five feet above the present sea level, he claims to have found geographic features corresponding to the sagas, as well as house foundations and other Viking objects. Unfortunately, his publication is very inadequately illustrated, providing neither photographs nor plans of the site and structures, nor of the artifacts. There is much merit in his choice of area, as will be seen later, but again conclusive proof is lacking.

Other isolated finds have been made on the Atlantic seaboard, and they fall into two categories: "runic" inscriptions and small portable artifacts. Of the inscriptions, Moltke has reported (in Brøndsted 1951) that the only one on the eastern seaboard which has genuine runes is one on Nomans Land

Island (near Martha's Vinyard), which is obviously of recent date. (It was probably carved shortly after Gathorne-Hardy postulated Nomans Land as a possible site for Vinland [1921].) Other "inscriptions" offered as runic are either frost cracks in rocks, Indian pictographs, fortuitous postcolonial scratches (such as the marks made by a disk harrow on the rock near Popham Beach, Maine) or actual colonial and postcolonial inscriptions. One of the marks on the famous Dighton Rock, which has frequently been offered as a runic inscription, reads: THIS WAY TO THE SPRING. None of these contributes anything to the location of Vinland.

The portable artifacts are hardly more helpful. Brøndsted lists eight assorted objects, Pohl four more, and one was sent to the author for consideration in 1950. Of these thirteen, six are axes, with flaring blades. They are of a type still used in Scandinavia and France, and have not been out of use too long in this country. The circumstances of the finding of these objects are never sufficiently clear to postulate high antiquity. The other objects—a spearpoint, a slate knife, a stone axe, an iron ring, a sword handle, a dagger blade, and a halberd—are all of easily portable nature and likewise were not found under unexceptionable circumstances. The best of these objects, the sword handle, of a type which Brøndsted accepts tentatively as authentic, came from the belongings of a known collector and world traveler, and there is no indication of where it was acquired.

In summary, then, the information on the location of Vinland is considerable in quantity, amorphous in quality, and scientifically worthless. Supporters of the Norse theory contend that where there is so much smoke there must be some fire, and continue to rally around with more smudge pots to obscure the perception of the inadequate nature of the material they are presenting.

The Midwestern evidence seems, on first glance, to rest on more secure material. The key item is, of course, the Kensington Rune Stone, and its supposed validity has shed authentic luster on a host of minor finds. The history of the Kensington Stone is curious. The circumstances of its finding are considerably in doubt, the only witness being a small boy, the finder's son. There has even been a suggestion that no inscription was found on the stone when it was first uncovered, but that the inscription "appeared" later. It was displayed in the local bank, then declared a forgery and returned to its owner and finder. What did Olof Ohman do with this inscribed stone, which he had supposedly discovered entwined in the roots of a tree when clearing a new field? If his account of the discovery of the stone is correct, he must have realized that the inscription *could not* have been a forgery, and that the Kensington Stone was indeed a valuable relic which, some day, would be vindicated. Did he, therefore, preserve this treasure? No, he flopped it down in his barnyard (a wonderful place to accelerate weathering of the inscription, incidentally) and used it as a step for his granary. Three years later, a young man came from Wisconsin asking about the early settlement of the area, and Olof Ohman palmed the relic off on him. He didn't ask any money for it (which is peculiar if the circumstances of the finding had been genuine) and bowed out of the picture. The

new owner, Hjalmar R. Holand, has spent fifty years attempting to authenticate his possession, in spite of the continued opposition of those experts who best know Norse epigraphy and philology. He has gathered around himself a rank of enthusiastic romanticists, many of whom are very vocal defenders of the faith, but very few of whom are expert in the matters of which they speak.

Two approaches to the decipherment of the mystery of the Kensington Stone have been attempted: the archeological and the philological. The former is inconclusive; the circumstances of the discovery cannot now be authenticated. Brøndsted has pointed out two fallacies involved in the documentation of the find: (1) the circumstances of the discovery were formulated so long after the supposed date of the act that there is room for much error, and (2) the only implication of archeological antiquity is that the finder claimed that the stone was clasped in the roots of a tree, of which the age was not determined at the time and cannot now be calculated. The runological and philological approach has produced varying results, depending on the bias of the investigator and his degree of scholarship. The acknowledged expert runologists have been consistent in their denunciation of the inscription as a forgery, which included characteristics (such as the umlaut and the consonantal use of "j") which are two centuries later than the supposed date of the inscriptions. The most recent writers on this topic are Erik Moltke, runologist of the Danish National Museum, and Erik Wahlgren, Professor of Germanics at the University of California at Los Angeles. These authorities leave very little doubt that the inscription is a late nineteenth-century work.

Even as in the east, many portable objects of Norse origin have been brought forward to prove the Viking theory. None of these has been observed *in situ* by a trained archeologist; all have passed through several hands before publication. Holand has listed fifteen such objects: 4 axes, 1 battle-ax, 2 swords, 3 halberds, 3 fire-steels, 1 spearhead, and 1 mooring pin (?). To this list, Brøndsted adds an ax and a hoe. Brøndsted accepts as potentially genuine the swords, halberds, spearhead, one of the fire-steels, and three of the axes. Of all of these finds, the halberds can be potentially dated with the greatest accuracy. This weapon seems to have come into rather restricted use in the thirteenth century, and to have undergone a gradual evolution, surviving in the eighteenth century as a symbolic and ceremonial staff. The three examples found in the midwest were all too light to be serviceable weapons, and look as if they might have been of a ceremonial nature. Sigurd Grieg, of the University Museum, Oslo, informed Holand that the halberds were of the period around 1500 (Holand 1946:202). They belong, therefore, to a period one and one-half centuries *later* than the supposed date of the Kensington Stone, which Holand suggests was carved by the expedition which dropped these relics! But all of these experts were wrong. The truth about the halberds was disclosed recently by R. W. Breckenridge, of Ames, Iowa (see pp. 118-20, below). The "halberds" were *tobacco cutters*, made by the Rogers Iron Company of Springfield, Ohio, for the American Tobacco Company, as an advertisement for their Battle Axe Plug Tobacco! The other objects cannot be attributed to the early

thirteenth century with any greater degree of assurance. The fire-steels are of a type in common use until the nineteenth century; the axes likewise continued in use beyond the period of the Norse voyages.

If any of the finds are genuine, they were most probably family heirlooms of the first Scandinavian settlers. Ancestral Viking weapons are the treasured possessions of many Norwegian families today, and because of their easy portability, were undoubtedly carried to the New World by the nineteenth-century immigrants. In the collection of Logan Museum of Anthropology of Beloit College is a spear-point, of typical European Neolithic shape, technique, and material, yet it was plowed out of a field of Wisconsin. Its finding certainly does not imply a Neolithic penetration of the middle west!

Another group of finds was made near Beardmore, Ontario, in 1930 or 1931. The material consists of a sword, an ax, the fragments of a shield-boss, and an implement which Brøndsted identifies as a rattle (1951:125). The authenticity of the objects seem to be beyond question, and the circumstances of the discovery seem to be reasonably clear, but there are several suggestions that fraud was involved, and certainly one of the individuals connected with the material, Johan Bloch, had access to his father's Viking collection in Norway and may have brought these pieces to this country in 1923. One set of facts reinforces this source for the material: the age of the various objects does not harmonize very well. Brøndsted agrees that it is quite possible that they might have been used by the same man around A.D. 1000, although his sword was more than a little out of date. On the other hand, the state of preservation of the objects is so poor that it is hardly likely that Bloch would have selected these miserable fragments to bring with him. Thus it cannot be said that the Beardmore find is positive evidence of a Viking grave in Ontario; on the other hand, it is the only assemblage of objects which rises above the heirloom category in both nature of the material and circumstances of discovery. Likewise, the find was reported sufficiently quickly so that some scientific investigation of the site could be made. It is the best archeological evidence for the Vikings in America, but it is none too good.

Investigators have been constantly aware that evidence for Norse discovery of the New World cannot rest solely on such portable objects unless the circumstances of their finding is beyond question. Something more solid, something less movable, must be found. Consequently, Holand has further suggested the evidence for Norsemen with a large collection of mooring stones. On one occasion, he was even able to select one hole out of a group of holes in a rock, and declare that *this* was a mooring stone, the other holes having other origins!

The present status of the Vikings in America is thus not very good. Nothing authentic has been turned up which could not have been brought here in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (it is, perhaps, significant that the bulk of the portable finds has been made in regions settled by Scandinavians), and no trace, cultural or racial, of Norse influence in any Indian or Eskimo group has yet been proved. Where did Lief the Lucky land? How is it that no trace of that landing has ever been discovered?

A possible solution to this problem is that we have been looking too far south. Climatically, Greenland was much warmer around the year A.D. 1000 than it is today, and presumably Labrador, Newfoundland, and Nova Scotia were equally more pleasant. It is probably in one of these regions that Norse artifacts, graves, and house foundations should be sought. Such an interpretation, too, is born out by the sagas themselves, for the "Skrellings," natives of Vinland, were much more like the Eskimos with whom the Norse were familiar in Greenland than any known Indian tribe. Little exploration has been made for archeological material in these areas. Mallery's "discoveries" need careful checking, for it is obvious from other parts of his book that he does not weigh his evidence carefully. For example, he dates the Newport Tower as sixth-century Celtic, on the basis of some analyses of rusted nail fragments which he received from the author. These nail fragments had been found in association with mid-nineteenth-century pottery.

While we should not expect too many remains based on the brief voyages told of in the sagas, there is evidence that trade between Greenland and Vinland continued into the fourteenth century, so some remains must be preserved. A new approach, a new area, is needed, before the Vikings in America will be found.

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