



NEW ZEALAND  
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**NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER**



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FACT AND IMAGINATION IN ARCHAEOLOGY

(An extract from a talk given on 4 June 1968 to the University of Auckland Archaeological Society by Mr Andrew Sharp, Senior Research Fellow, History Department, University of Auckland.)

A body of facts in a scientific inquiry is a body of facts and nothing more. It is essentially by a process of imagination that the interpreter deduces relationships and evolves hypotheses. It may be objected that the relationships, if truly significant, are inherent in the facts. But if it were not for the operation of imagination on the facts, the relationships would remain unrealised. Yet it is also true that in deducing relationships and erecting hypotheses, the imagination cannot run riot, but must conform to logic if its results are to deserve the name of science. Just why this should be so is in the final analysis mysterious and yet inescapable. It is apparently deeply rooted in the workings of the human mind that it shrinks from accepting at one and the same time two views which are mutually incompatible, and the reason why they are mutually exclusive can be explained only by the statement that this is so. Again if a fact or an inter-related body of facts is capable of several explanations which are each compatible with the fact or body of facts, it is unscientific and opposed to logic to adopt one arbitrarily as a conclusion and ignore or reject the others. I fear, however, that through misuse of imagination rigorous and objective standards of logic are too often ignored in the deduction of relationships between facts and the formation of hypotheses in prehistory.

As an exercise in the application of rigorous objectivity in prehistoric reconstruction, I propose to take the theme of Viking visits to North America.

Certain passages in Icelandic sagas which described visits to Vinland, a land of perpetual summer in the western ocean, had been interpreted as historical records of Viking visits to North America in or about the year 1000 A.D. This interpretation went on long before indubitable archaeological evidence of visits to North America by prehistoric Europeans had been found. When I was a young man published accounts of the finding of archaeological evidence supporting the sagas were periodically paraded in newspapers and magazines. Some iron tools found somewhere in the hinterland of the United States were thought to be possible relics of Scandinavian visits in prehistoric times, but later proved to be tools used in some agricultural technique in historical times. A tower on or near the east coast was another candidate for a hypothesis of Scandinavian occupation until it was carbon dated in American colonial times. Somebody

found some mysterious holes on the coast which were thought to have contained hitching posts for Scandinavian longboats. The erroneous or dubious character of this evidence did not, however, prevent most people, including most scholars who published works on the theme, from concluding that the stories in the sagas really were historical records. It is of course a matter of fact that in the early nineteen sixties a Scandinavian investigator named Helge Ingstad found by archaeological excavation at L'Anse au Meadow in the north of the island of Newfoundland evidence of early human occupation reputed to be Norse. Mr Ingstad described his finds in an article in the November 1964 issue of National Geographic under the title 'Vinland Ruins Prove Vikings Found the New World'. These finds consisted of a number of building sites, some old nails, and a smithy with slag from the smelting of local bog iron. By radiocarbon analysis the average date of ten charcoal samples from fires associated with the settlement was about 900 A.D. Two datings in the smithy were 860 A.D. plus or minus 90 years and 1060 A.D. plus or minus 70 years. In a note preceding the article, the editor of National Geographic stated that just as the article went to press a whorl, unquestionably Norse, from an implement used to twist raw wool into yarn, had been reported from the Ingstad excavations.

In his article, Mr Ingstad made no bones about the fact that he had long accepted the view that the Icelandic sagas of visits to Vinland embodied memories of historical visits by Leif Ericsson and other Norsemen to the New World, and that he had been searching for confirmatory evidence, which he considered he had found at L'Anse au Meadow, the sites there being 'Vinland ruins'.

Let us now look at the traditional evidence for the historicity of the Vinland tradition as it was on the eve of Mr Ingstad's finds. Professor Gwyn Jones summarised that evidence in his book The Norse Atlantic Saga, published by O.U.P. in 1964. I quote it to you as a classic example of the misuse of imagination in scholarly deduction, whereby Professor Jones arbitrarily accepts the bits and pieces of the traditional evidence which suit his conclusion and explains away the manifold contradictions which do not. As I quote it I ask you to keep in mind that this was the evidence which inspired Mr Ingstad to look for archaeological confirmation of his preconceptions:

'Vinland has been sought and found at numerous points on the American continent between Hudson Bay and the state of Florida. The difficulties are many: the literary evidence is often less than consistent and not rarely appears contradictory; the facts of geography, strung out as they are over thousands of miles of varied coastline, can all too easily be made to fit very different interpretations of this evidence.... Fortunately the discrepancies between our two literary sources,

the ... Groenlendinga Saga and ... Eiriks Saga, whilst troublesome enough are not unmanageable. Both versions are the workings over of original material in accordance with the well-established facts of saga-making. Deviations, accretions, influences, reinterpretations, misunderstandings ... changes of emphasis, and varying allocations of credit are to be expected; but the important thing to recognize is that these confirm rather than deny a sound underlying historical tradition.'

The unsatisfactory features about the sagas, says Professor Jones, confirm rather than deny a sound underlying historical tradition - a remarkable bit of illogic if ever there was one. All that the sagas show is that there was a well-established tradition, not that it was historical.

Speaking of Vinland, Professor Jones goes on to say that the name is found first in a book by Adam of Bremen, who says he was told of it by Svein Estridssen, King of the Danes, who died in 1076.

Did Vinland really exist anywhere else than in the imaginations of the Norse story-tellers whom the King of the Danes quoted to Adam of Bremen at some time before 1076, and did the Norse story-tellers who compiled the sagas several centuries later glorify their ancestors by taking them to Vinland and back in retrospect?

At this point I have no doubt that the Vinland map in Yale University, which caused great excitement among scholars throughout the world when it was described in 1965, will have come into the minds of some of you as a support for the preconceptions of Professor Jones and Helge Ingstad. This map shows Vinland to the west of another island called Greenland. Here is what Time Magazine said about it in its issue of 15 October 1965:

'It is by far the most important cartographic discovery of this century. It is the first map ever found that shows any part of the Western Hemisphere before the voyage of Columbus. Drawn about 1440, probably by a monk in a Swiss scriptorium, the map's startling features are a strikingly accurate delineation of Greenland in the upper left-hand corner and a representation of "Vinland" (the name Vikings from Iceland and Greenland in the 10th century gave a portion of the coast of North America). There, crudely drawn but unmistakable, are Hudson Bay and the Gulf of St Lawrence.'

Claims of this character were called in question by G. R. Crone, a British cartographical expert, in an article entitled 'The Vinland Map Cartographically Considered', in the March 1966 issue of the Geographical

Journal. He traced the progressive displacement of early depictions of Iceland to the west in a succession of fourteenth and fifteenth century maps consequent on the introduction of more realistic representations of Iceland in its approximately correct position, and suggested that it was probable that the surplus Iceland thus displaced to the west was identified with Vinland in the Vinland map by some cosmographer who was interested in the Norse voyages. He did not consider that it had been proved that the map was pre-Columban.

At this point I may perhaps be able to offer some evidence from first-hand experience relating to the view that L'Anse au Meadow was part of Vinland. In the early spring of 1948 I visited Newfoundland and saw ice-floes still floating in the harbour at St Johns. It would require more than Professor Jones's temperature rise of two or three degrees in 1000 A.D. as compared with today to convince me that Newfoundland was Vinland, the land with the balmy climate throughout the year from whence Viking visitors took a load of grapes on their return voyage, as the Vinland tradition relates. Helge Ingstad tried to get over this difficulty by resurrecting the suggestion of an earlier speculator that the 'Vin' in Vinland does not really mean wine, but comes from another word meaning grass. Professor Jones, however, in commenting independently on this speculation, would have none of it. The idea that the Viking visitors took a load of grass with them on their return voyage is certainly less than heroic.

Other archaeological evidence which both Professor Jones and Helge Ingstad cite is the discovery a generation ago of an Indian arrow-head of Labrador type in a corner of a Norse graveyard in Greenland. Both of them thought that this was evidence of probable Norse contact with America. A fervent member of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, however, might wonder why it should be assumed that the palefaces had a monopoly of traffic across Davis Strait. Archaeological evidence needs to be considered on its merits in relation to other possible explanations and not be tied in with preconceptions which in Mr Ingstad's and Professor Jones's case stem from traditions which are admittedly conflicting.

Let us now assume for the sake of argument that Vinland is a red herring - a commodity which is more in keeping with the economy of Newfoundland as we know it than grape-growing. Are there other possible explanations of Mr Ingstad's evidence which he, because of his preconceptions, has not considered?

How far is the presence of the whorl, described as unquestionably of Norse type, and any other artefacts of the same type found at L'Anse au Meadow, evidence that the occupants of the site were Norse? This raises the issue of what it meant to be Norse a thousand years ago. The

Icelandic saga material on which Professor Jones and Mr Ingstad, and almost everybody else who have written about prehistoric Norse visits to America, so heavily rely also says that when the Norse from the European mainland discovered Iceland they found Irish settlers there. It is a matter of historical record that the mainland Norse had been voyaging back and forth to Iceland and the northern and western coasts of the British Isles for several centuries prior to 1000 A.D. After so much intercourse as these claims and facts imply, where did the Norse and Celtic blood and culture respectively begin and end? Were the Celts so stupid as not to adopt Norse artefacts soon after contact occurred? Could any archaeologist confidently argue that such borrowing could not have occurred, or that the occurrence of one or two artefacts of a certain type is a valid indication of the provenance of the people who brought them to L'Anse au Meadow? I think, therefore, that the possible provenances should be broadened to include settlers from either Scandinavia or Iceland and the contiguous islands or the northern or western parts of the British Isles.

A possible hypothesis covering the archaeological facts of L'Anse au Meadow is that about a millenium ago a boat making for somewhere in the areas I have named to somewhere else in them with some household commodities aboard was blown away in a storm and arrived on the northern tip of Newfoundland, that its occupants, having lost their bearings in the storm, did not know where they were in relation to Iceland or the British Isles, that they settled down where they were, that the whorl is a remnant from an instrument which was in their boat, and that after several generations they disappeared for unknown reasons, much as the early European settlers of Greenland did.

The radiocarbon dates given by Helge Ingstad in his article do not throw any light one way or the other on the themes we are discussing. The time depth of several centuries during which the Vikings ranged between Scandinavia and Iceland and Greenland and the British Isles, conditioned apparently in considerable degree by a temporary phase of higher temperatures, is too short for the margin of indifference in radiocarbon dating to be effectively overcome.

There is no nautical or geographical reason why voyagers from Northern Europe could not have established two-way contact with the eastern littoral of North America, particularly the parts nearest Greenland. The navigation target both in coming and going is an extended coastline which could not have been missed, provided the voyagers on the leg back to Europe were careful to come up into higher latitudes before they left the North American coastline. It is, however, a considerable over-simplification to assume that the settlement of which the remains have been found at L'Anse au Meadow is evidence of two-way contact by Norse voyagers with Vinland, a land of perpetual summer on the

North American continent. I have no doubt, however, that until the day I die and long after, these voyagers will ply back and forth in the imaginations of that great majority who prefer romantic explanations to prosaic ones.