

Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

The Vikings in America

T. J. Oleson

Volume 33, Number 1, 1954

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300362ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/300362ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (print)

1712-9095 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Oleson, T. J. (1954). The Vikings in America. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, 33(1), 52–60. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300362ar>

THE VIKINGS IN AMERICA

T. J. OLESON
University of Manitoba

A VERITABLE flood of writings continues to pour from the printing presses on the subject I have chosen to call "The Vikings in America." In this address I propose to examine some of these recent writings and attempt to summarize the present state of our knowledge of some aspects of this topic which have long engaged the attention of professional and amateur investigators and are well known to historians. In the main I have limited my study to articles and books which have appeared since 1939 although I have taken into account a few earlier works. All the works that have come to my attention are listed and briefly commented on in an Appendix.¹ Many of these deal with topics which space has precluded me from treating in this address.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE GREENLAND COLONY

Greenland was settled from Iceland in 985 and during the following fifteen or twenty years. Two settlements, both on the west coast, called the Eastern and Western, flourished there for some centuries. The Western Settlement is often said to have disappeared *ca.* 1342, either by reason of the migration of the inhabitants to America or their extermination by the Eskimos — a matter I will not attempt to deal with here. The Eastern Settlement lasted at least till the end of the fifteenth or beginning of the sixteenth century. Its disappearance has long been regarded as one of the great unsolved mysteries of history and many theories have been advanced as solutions to this problem.

The theory that the Icelanders were defeated and wiped out in bloody warfare with the Eskimos or aborigines was long ago refuted by Fridtjof Nansen and Vilhjalmur Stefansson.² Further detailed and conclusive arguments against it were advanced in 1943 by Dr. Jon Duason in his work on the explorations and settlements of the Icelanders in the Western Hemisphere. Nor has the great archaeological work which the Danes have done in both settlements revealed anything that might indicate that the Icelanders were bloodily exterminated by the Eskimos. This is true of the magnificent report by Aage Roussell of the excavations of the farms and churches of mediaeval Greenland, published in 1941.

Since the excavation of the churchyard at Herjolfsnes in the Eastern Settlement, carried out in 1921, many have come to believe that malnutrition and physical degeneration explain the disappearance of the colony. This view was advanced by Dr. Poul Norlund in his 1924 report on the excavations and reaffirmed in his book *Viking Settlers in Greenland* in 1936, and by Dr. Fr. C. C. Hansen in the

¹ The Appendix, a critical bibliography, will be published in the *Canadian Historical Review*, March 1955.

² Accents and Icelandic characters were not easily available when this paper was put into print. English equivalents have been used throughout the paper.—*Editor*.

report on his anatomical investigations of the skeletal remains exhumed in the churchyard. As I have seen no really exhaustive examination of these reports except that of Dr. Jon Duason in his above mentioned work, I wish to say something in this connection.

Of the churchyard at Herjolfsnes there remained at the time of the excavations only the parts north, east and west of the church. The sea had eaten away almost all the area south of the church. It is evident, however, that the southern part has been much larger than the northern part for the west and east walls of the yard meet the northern wall at angles much greater than 90° . In this churchyard Norlund dug up some 200 graves and recovered from about 110 to 120 of these, well preserved clothing, about thirty coffins, and skeletal remains of some twenty-five bodies of both children and adults. A few of these bodies were fairly well preserved, of some practically nothing was left. No remains at all were found in the coffins exhumed.

These skeletal remains were transported to Denmark where they were subjected to a painstaking anatomical examination by Dr. Fr. C. C. Hansen, Professor of Anatomy at the University of Copenhagen. He found in most of the remains unmistakable signs of disease, malnutrition, excessive wear of teeth and other deficiencies. Dr. Hansen also measured the empty coffins, which varied in inside length from 154 to 204 cm. (*ca.* 60 to 80 inches), and attempted to determine the approximate height of the individuals who had once been buried in them. On the basis of his examinations and measurements Dr. Hansen concluded:

The vigorous northern race that originally colonized Greenland degenerated in the course of the centuries under the influence of the hard and at last constantly deteriorating life conditions and other unfavourable conditions, especially isolation both intellectually, materially and as regards race hygiene. It became a race of small people, little powerful, physically weakened, with many defects and pathologic conditions.

How sound are these conclusions? Not very, it must be said. Of the twenty-five bodies, in eight cases the remains were so few that nothing of importance could be deduced. Of the remaining seventeen bodies, sixteen were found in the northeast or northwest corners of the churchyard and one in the southeast corner. This last was a well preserved find, the bones of a powerful individual whose health had been good. Now, it is well known, that in mediaeval times only the lowest and most poorly nourished classes in the community — beggars and paupers — were buried in the portion of a churchyard north of the church. This consideration does not seem to have weighed at all with Dr. Hansen, who in his eagerness to postulate a general degeneration among the inhabitants of Greenland even ventures the suggestion that the remains of the powerful individual found in the southeast corner of the yard were probably those of a foreign visitor. No real attempt was made by him or Dr. Norlund to determine the age of these burials. Dr. Duason has shown on the basis of Norlund's own report that some of them at least were not from the last days of the colony but from the thirteenth century. Again in measuring the coffins Dr. Hansen has adopted the arbitrary standard of subtracting 15 cm. (*ca.* 6 inches) from the length of the coffin to arrive at the theoretical

maximum length of the individual and has then on the basis of the width of the coffin calculated the probable height of the individual. In the case of the coffin whose length was 204 cm. (ca. 80 inches) this method results in a probable height for the buried individual of 181 cm. (ca. 71 inches). Such a method does not inspire confidence, especially when it is considered that wood for coffins must have been fairly scarce and they would probably be made as small as possible, that some of the excavated ones had been used more than once (Dr. Norlund deduces this from the absence of a lid in five cases), and that little is known of the age of these burials. It would indeed seem that seldom have such sweeping generalizations been made on the basis of such small evidence and with so little consideration of various factors which would affect the results. Dr. Hansen makes no allowance for the difference in stature between mediaeval and modern man, which was, as is well known, considerable. In any case, the skeletal remains from the paupers' corner and the coffins exhumed at Herjolfsnes cannot possibly be regarded as a representative sample of the physical condition of the Icelanders in Greenland at the close of the fifteenth century.

In his writings Dr. Norlund has emphasized that there was a gradual deterioration in the climate of Greenland in the later Middle Ages. This, according to him, helps to explain the degeneration of the Icelandic population in Greenland. It is true that there has in recent times been considerable talk of a deleterious change in climate from 1300 on, but opinions are very divided on the question. In any case it must, I think, be admitted, as Jon Eythorsson has pointed out, that Icelandic weather records, which are comparatively speaking very complete for the last thousand years, do not give any support for the contention that there has been any significant change in the climate of Iceland and Greenland in the last millennium.

In my opinion the most plausible theory for the disappearance of the Greenland colony is that of the gradual absorption of the Icelanders and their culture by the Eskimo — a theory first propounded as long ago as 1776 by Eigill Thorhallason in his *Efterretning om Rudera* and since then championed especially by Nansen, Stefansson and Duason. What little light archaeological work on Eskimo sites in Greenland throws on this problem favours this theory.

VINLAND

The literature on Vinland is growing most exuberantly and there is no end to the attempts being made to locate the site of this settlement. I have time here to notice briefly only a few of the more significant works on this subject. I may say at once that after perusing the writings on Vinland from the last fifteen years and after having made an independent attempt to determine its location by a close study of the sources, I have reached the conclusion that all attempts to locate it which are based on the nautical, geographical (i.e. topography, climate, botany, etc.), ethnographic and astronomical data supplied by the literary sources can never produce certainty. The sources are so scanty, confused and sometimes contradictory that the above conclusion seems to me unavoidable.

Of the two main sources on the Vinland voyages Dag Stromback wrote in 1940: "One — *Eiriks saga rauda* — is a work of the

scholarly type with its roots in the classical historical writings of the thirteenth century. The other — *Graenlendinga thattr* — is a later document from the fourteenth century based directly upon an oral tradition of a certain district or a certain family and written down at a time when the tradition had begun to fade and when romantic sagas and other late tales easily were able to exercise influence upon its composition and style." Stromback believes that both sagas deserve attention and that one may be no less historical than the other, although the *Graenlendinga thattr* has some fantastic episodes. "Yet," he says, "where the territory was located that the Norsemen called *Vinland* can probably never definitely be settled," and "Textual criticism offers the only sound method for achieving a basis for further hypotheses about the Norsemen's routes and about the location of Wineland."

Recently the archaeologist Johannes Bronsted has also expressed doubts as to the success of any attempt to locate *Vinland* without extensive and thorough archaeological investigations, and suggests a number of localities where these should be carried out.

In the literature of the past fifteen years *Vinland* has been located as far north as the shores of Hudson Bay and as far south as Georgia or even Florida. Let us look at a few of these works beginning with that of the eminent Finnish scholar, V. Tanner. In a paper published in 1941 he based his arguments largely on the nautical data of the sources and this led him to place *Helluland* in southern Baffin Land, probably near Frobisher Bay, and *Markland* in the Labrador territory between Cape Porcupine and West Bay or possibly on the wooded strand south of Nain. This location immediately lands Tanner in difficulties, which well illustrate the problem faced by even the most conscientious investigator, for he must read the "two days' sailing" of *Eiriks saga rauda* for the distance between *Helluland* and *Markland* as an error for "five days' sailing" the minimum time in which this distance could have been covered. Tanner finds *Vinland* in the vicinity of Pistolet Bay, Newfoundland. Here he is again in difficulties. Wine berries or grapes do not occur in this region. Tanner therefore enters upon an elaborate discussion of the meaning of the word *vin* and ends by reviving the view of Sven Soderberg and Fridtjof Nansen that the word means "meadow" or "pasture" in the context of the sagas.

This location of *Vinland* in Newfoundland by Tanner was then critically examined by two scholars, Sigurdur Thorarinsson and A. W. Brogger, who more or less agree with Tanner's views on *Helluland* and *Markland* but reject Newfoundland as *Vinland*. They both agree that *vin* can only mean "wine" here and both place considerable emphasis on the passage in the *Graenlendinga thattr* about the shortest day, which I will discuss presently and which is, of course, ruinous to the view of Tanner who, indeed, had tried to pass it off as an interpolation. Neither Thorarinsson nor Brogger really tries in his article to locate *Vinland*, although they both suggest New England as the likeliest place.

Attempts have been made to locate *Vinland* on the basis of the botanical information in the sagas. The most recent attempt is that of Dr. Askill Love. He has argued that the "tree called *mosurr*" must be a birch, the "self-sown wheat," Indian rice and the "*vinvidr* bearing

the fruit *vinber*," the Wild Vine. From the distribution area of these plants he concludes that Vinland must have been somewhere on the east coast of America from southern Maine to Long Island, probably the Cape Cod region. Dr. Love does not claim absolute certainty for his identification and indeed the meagre description of the plants in the sagas precludes certainty. Rightly therefore Dr. Love urges archaeological investigations of this region.

Day and night were more equal there [in Vinland] than in Greenland and Iceland; during the *skammdegi* [i.e. the period from ca. 20 Nov. to 20 Jan.] the sun was in *eyktar stadr* [i.e. the place on the horizon over which the sun is at about 3 or 3.30 p.m.] and in *dagmala stadr* [i.e. the place over which the sun is at about 9 p.m.], has led to such speculation. This involves highly technical definitions and astronomical calculations and has, not surprisingly, led to very wide differences of opinion. On the basis of this passage the northern limit of Vinland has been calculated to lie as far north as 58° 26' N. Lat., and as far south as 31° N. Lat., if not further. The literature of the last fifteen years on this problem has done little to provide a solution. The difficulties and the indecisiveness of the various calculations may be conveniently studied in Dr. Rolf Muller's paper, published in 1948, "Altnordische Eyktmarken und die Entdeckung Amerikas," where the most recent literature is summarised.

To conclude this brief discussion of the location of Vinland mention may be made of John R. Swanton's *The Wineland Voyages* (1947), an excellent and succinct summary of the literature on Vinland. It also contains an interesting section listing the data found in the sagas on the various places mentioned therein and a striking list of the numerous and varied localities which commentators have identified as Helluland, Markland, Vinland, etc. This can hardly fail to impress the reader with the futility of any further attempts to locate these places except by extensive archaeological work.

THE NEWPORT TOWER

The controversy concerning the origin of the Newport tower on Rhode Island was revived in 1942 by the publication of a book by Philip Ainsworth Means entitled *The Newport Tower*. The author traced the history of this controversy to his day and then proceeded to argue that Benedict Arnold could not have built from the ground up the structure to which he referred in his will in 1677 as "my stone-built wind-mill." Having to his own satisfaction driven the last nail into the coffin of the Arnold theory, Mr. Means then attempted to prove that the tower was a part of a round church from the Middle Ages built, most likely, by Bishop Erikur Gnipsson, whom Icelandic annals report to have sailed in search of Vinland in 1121. Without producing any positive evidence Mr. Means stated that the bishop had built the church for a secret Norse colony in Vinland. He then attempted to show that the tower has prototypes in the round church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and other round churches in Europe, with which the prelate became acquainted on a Crusade in which there is no evidence whatsoever for his participation. Mr.

Means never explained how a Norse colony could exist for years in America without leaving any traces of its existence save the central portion of its round church.

Other theories were now advanced. Hjalmar R. Holand claimed that the tower was indeed a part of a round church but that it had been built (ca. 1355-1360) by members of the Powell Knutsson expedition whose work he had long claimed the Kensington runic inscription to be. The tower, Mr. Holand said, was the headquarters of the expedition which must have spent a number of years in it and the vicinity, although no artifacts have been found. He has also attempted to show that the linear measure used in constructing the tower was a Norse and not an English measure. His attempts in this direction were seconded by Mr. Frederick J. Pohl who has enthusiastically entered the lists as a champion of the Knutsson theory. The arguments based on the linear measure used are greatly weakened by the fact that the tower is of such rough construction that accurate measurement is almost impossible. As far as I know, no competent architect has ever measured the tower.

Another theory as to the origin of the tower was advanced in 1948 by Mr. Herbert Pell. From the absence of artifacts in or near the tower he argued tellingly that, if it is indeed a mediaeval structure, it could not be the work of a settled community or an expeditionary force, but must have been built by men who possessed practically no supplies or tools, e.g. shipwrecked sailors. These he thought he had found in the companions of Miguel Cortereal, to whom Professor E. B. Delabarre ascribes the inscription on the Dighton Rock. Shipwrecked in the region where the tower now stands, Cortereal and his companions erected the tower in 1502 or 1503 both as a habitation and to attract the attention of possible rescuers sailing along the coast.

Still another theory was advanced in 1949 by Mr. Th. Fliflet. In his opinion the tower was a sort of mercantile office building, a mediaeval storehouse, whose arcaded ground floor was nothing but a symbol of trade from Hanseatic days. The Celts were given the honour of having built the tower by Arlington H. Mallery in his fantastic book *Lost America* largely on the grounds of his claim that the stone work is distinctively Celtic.

Professor Kenneth J. Conant suggested that, if indeed the tower was standing as early as 1634, it may well have been the work of the windmill-building Netherlanders in the New World. In this same article, however, his main arguments were to the effect that, although the tower admittedly has mediaeval features, nothing in its construction could not equally well have been produced in seventeenth century New England. Mr. Holand attempted to answer his arguments but with little success in my opinion.

Many of the above theories are no doubt interesting and often ingenious but the arguments for and against them are largely inconclusive. It has therefore often been urged that excavations be made in and around the tower. It was not, however, until 1948 that the Newport Park Commission gave permission for this to be done, and the work was undertaken by Mr. William S. Godfrey, Jr. None of the few objects found antedated the colonial period of American his-

tory. Thus the excavations, although perhaps only negative evidence, strengthen the case for the post-Columbian origin of the "Old Stone Mill."

THE KENSINGTON STONE

Erik Moltke has written: ". . . the genuineness of The Kensington Stone is near to becoming something of a religion for certain Americans, a matter of national honor if one may say so." What is the story behind this stone? Briefly this: On 28 October 1354 the king of Norway, Magnus Eiriksson, issued a letter to Powell Knutsson instructing him "to take all the men who shall go in the *knorr* [the king's ship in the possession of the crown of Norway, which was regularly used for sailing between Bergen and Greenland] whether they be named or not named, from my bodyguard or other men's attendants." He was to proceed with these men to Greenland and, the letter continues, "We ask that you accept this our command with a right good will for the cause, as we do it for the honor of God and for the sake of our soul and our predecessors, who have introduced Christianity in Greenland and maintained it to this day, and we will not let it perish [nederfalle] in our days." This letter is genuine. We are now asked to believe that the story of the expedition it ordered was as follows.

Knutsson set out the next year, reached Greenland and there found that nothing was known concerning the whereabouts of the inhabitants of the Western Settlement who as apostates had some years previously "turned to the peoples of America." Knutsson therefore sailed away in search of them to Vinland where he established his headquarters and built the Newport tower — a fortified round church. Having failed to find the apostates after a diligent search for them in Vinland, Knutsson sailed north again along the shores of Labrador, into Ungava Bay, through Hudson Straits, south along the east coast of Hudson Bay, into James Bay and west to the mouth of the Nelson River. Nowhere did he find a trace of the Greenlanders.

On seeing the mighty Nelson he was impelled not only to seek the apostates inland but also to explore the interior of this great land. Accordingly, leaving ten men with his ship or ships, he and the remainder of his crew made their way up the long course of the Nelson to Lake Winnipeg, on, on through the lake to the Red River and up this into the interior of present day Minnesota — a fourteen day journey from the mouth of the Nelson. In Minnesota the party failed to find the lost inhabitants of the Western Settlement and ten of its own members were slain. One or more of the survivors then carved a runic inscription recording for posterity a fragment of the history of the expedition. It reads in Thalbitzer's translation as follows:

"8 Goths (Swedes) and 22 Norwegians on exploration journey from Vinland westward. We had camp by two skerries one day's journey north from this stone. We were and fish(ed) one day. After we came home (we) found 10 (of our) men red with blood and dead. A. V. M. (Ave Virgo Maria) save (us) from evil.

(We) have 10 men by the sea to look after our ship(s) 14 days' journey from this island. Year 1362."

The party then disappears from history and we hear no more of it, although the men left with the ships returned to Norway in 1363 or 1364.

This is the tale of the Newport tower and Kensington stone which Hjalmar R. Holand will have us believe, although in the whole of it the only known fact is that King Magnus caused to be written the letter addressed to Powell Knutsson. The rest of the story of this extraordinary voyage is the creation of Holand, and in the main it rests on the discovery of the runic stone mentioned above by a Minnesota farmer, Olof Ohman, in 1898. The above quoted inscription on the stone was immediately pronounced a forgery by runologists and lay neglected until it was re-discovered in 1907 by Hjalmar R. Holand, who has from then to this day been the indefatigable defender of the authenticity of the inscription. He has written three books on the subject and numerous articles.

Interest in the Kensington Stone was greatly increased or revived when in 1948 (the fiftieth anniversary of its discovery) it was temporarily moved to the United States National Museum under the direction of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D. C. In the last ten years a number of eminent philologists and runologists have studied the inscription and published their findings. The more important ones may be noted here.

W. Thalbitzer, formerly professor of Greenlandic at the University of Copenhagen, gave a guarded verdict in favour of the genuineness of the inscription. Erik Moltke, Inspector for the National Museum in Copenhagen and a runologist, pronounced it a forgery. Harry Anderson, Lektor in Old Scandinavian at the University of Copenhagen, declared it a forgery. Professor S. N. Hagen of Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, Pa., a philologist, believed it genuine. Professor Erik Wahlgren, a philologist of the University of California, writing in refutation of Hagen's article utterly condemned the inscription. Professor Richard Hennig of Dusseldorf, author of *Terrae Incognitae*, believed it genuine. Professor Sven B. F. Jansson, Docent of Stockholm University and a runologist, declared it an arrant forgery. Professor Johannes Bronsted of the University of Copenhagen and an archaeologist somewhat reluctantly pronounced it a forgery.

To many of the above writings, which were adverse to the genuineness of the inscription, Holand wrote replies in which he attempted to refute the arguments of those to whom, in the title of one of his papers, he referred as "the learned" ("Hvad mener de Laerde om Kensingtonstenen?").

It would be impossible to summarize here the arguments for and against the authenticity of the inscription. It seems to me, however, that the adverse arguments of Sven B. F. Jansson, Erik Wahlgren, Harry Andersen and Erik Moltke are irrefutable. In conclusion I quote a few comments from an article by Moltke published in 1953 and entitled "The Ghost of the Kensington Stone".

. . . this runological abortion.

. . . all the leading runologists of Scandinavia (and Germany) have pronounced the Kensington stone to be false.

It may give American readers some impression of how specialists in the

Scandinavian countries regard the Kensington stone to learn what the professor of Icelandic at Copenhagen University, Jon Helgason, said to me when I told him that I intended to write on the Kensington stone: "No self-respecting scholar," he said, "can in decency deal with this monstrosity; there is certainly no archeologist who would bother with a grave from the stone age if the burial urn rested on a telephone book." . . . Concerning this inscription one may sum it up by saying that practically every word in it demands an excuse for its presence on the stone, if the inscription is to be from the fourteenth century, and even the excuses are insufficient to justify such forms as *opdagelsefard*, *rise*, *og*, *se efter* and *ahr*, which, however may easily — together with *from* and *ded* (English *from* and *dead*) — be explained as a modern jokester's 'archaisms' and blunders.

Well, and that is the end of it, an inscription condemned from the beginning by every competent runologist, defended by none, an inscription suspect in every detail, in rune forms, grammar, syntax, vocabulary, in the weathering of the runes, in the history of the find.