The Norse discovery of America

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BOAT WITH SQUARE SAIL, RESEMBLING THE OLD TRADING-SHIPS
THE NORSE DISCOVERY OF AMERICA

BY

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INTRODUCTION

The Norse discovery of America is not what we would call a popular question, though it has attracted the attention of many nations. Books and treatises on this subject have appeared in English, French and German. As might be expected, the question has especially interested the people in the Scandinavian countries whence the adventurous navigators drew their origin. After the complete disappearance of the Greenlanders, who in all likelihood were the leaders in the enterprise, their kinsmen in Iceland, Norway, Denmark and Sweden took up their cause and defended their honor. It is only natural that the kinsmen of the explorers should take a lively interest in the achievements of their ancestors. A long list of prominent names testify to the interest that they take in their forefathers. In America the interest in this subject springs from two causes. In the first place there is a general desire to learn and understand the history of the country. Most historians now allow some place to the early Norse discoveries. In the second place the descendants of the old Norsemen have settled in large numbers in this country, and like the Dutch and the French they still cherish a love for the land of their origin and take pride in the achievements of their kinsmen. To the modern Norseman who has had a part in the development of his adopted country it is a feeling of pride to know that his kinsmen were the first white men to set foot on American soil.

But the fact that so much is written on this question is not altogether due to national pride or vanity. The main reason why people study the Vinland question is a scientific one. The discovery of America is one of the great events
in the history of the world, and it is a matter of grave con-
cern to know the truth. We want to know who discovered
America. People in the Scandinavian countries have taken
an especial interest in the question, because the documents
are in their own tongue and they have ready access to the
old literature. The saga way of thinking is not more remote
but that they can grasp things that appear obscure to others.

After so much has been written on this vexed question, it
might appear superfluous to add another book to bewilder
the minds and to clog the market; but it seems that every
new book has only aroused a new interest and increased
the desire to study the subject. From the discussions fol-
lowing the last book it has always appeared that the reading
public has not felt satisfied with its conclusions and has
looked forward to a different solution. For two reasons
especially I have been unable to agree with the writers on
this subject. The attitude which they have taken to the old
sagas and the neglect which they have shown to the old
geography I consider indefensible. If these points become
unduly prominent in the course of the work, it is because
others have overlooked them.

If this work has any character of its own, it is that it
accepts without reserve the statements of the saga narra-
tive and attempts to follow the text closely. The task con-
sists in identifying the localities described in the sagas with
places along the east coast of America. Much excellent
work of this kind has been done in Greenland and Iceland.
Numerous places have been compared with the descriptions
in the sagas and found to accord in a remarkable way. It
has appeared to me that it was now time to study the nature
and the appearance of the country along the east coast of
America and to compare it carefully with the descriptions
in the Vinland sagas. Aside from the likelihood that the
Greenlanders first visited the mainland of America, the Vin-
land sagas are after all our final authorities in the matter.
It stands to reason that if they are worth following we
should follow them closely and assume that they say just
what they mean. For one to say, as many have done, that
he follows the sagas and then to disregard them except in
the most general way is to set himself up as final authority
on what the Norsemen saw and where they sailed nine hundred years ago.

The narrative and the description in the Vinland sagas appear to me to be quite as natural and real as in the sagas laid in Greenland and Iceland. There are numerous details and names of places and descriptions of countries and coasts that can hardly be fictitious. Actual investigations in Greenland and Iceland have shown that the places correspond closely to the saga description. The same is the result of archeological investigations everywhere. It would not be surprising if the same would prove true in the case of the Vinland sagas. In one way the work here becomes more difficult, as it extends over so wide an area and covers so long a coastline. For the same reason the descriptions in some cases are so much more general and more elusive, but no less true. The possibilities of error are multiplied by the increasing distances. Kjalarnes and Krossanes should be identified on the same general principles that Gardar and Herjolfsnes were located. The difficulty of obtaining definite starting points on the American side I have minimized by making the points of departure on the other side of the sea more specific. The complete severance of Greenland and Vinland for centuries from the rest of the world makes a gap in the historical continuity and necessitates a treatment that is different from that followed in Iceland or Norway.

Those who have treated the Vinland question have in practice followed the method of fairy tales. Historical events have a fixed geography and are held together by a chain of cause and effect. A myth or a fairy tale has no definite place. Even when a locality is indicated it is vague and imaginary in its nature. A fairy tale is cut loose from things real and moves in a world of its own. In the same way the historians of the Vinland sagas have cut loose from Greenland and landed the explorers at will on some part of the American coast. They have plunged in medias res and told us all about Vinland without letting us know how they got there. They have neglected to show why they have selected this or that part of the coast for the ancient Vinland. The connecting link between Greenland and the
New World is missing. To illustrate this point I shall cite an instance. Rafn, who was well versed in the old sagas, told in his great work the story of the sagas; but the members of the Rhode Island Historical Society, who possessed very scant knowledge of the sagas, located Vinland for him. The organic connection between the two parts was broken and Vinland does not hang even by a thread to Greenland, which is the starting point. I have endeavored by a careful study of Norse geography and a closer reading of the texts to supply this defect and to fill the gap that has before existed. I have not made this link. The sagas and geographies are clear and explicit on that point; only writers have failed to bring it out.

No work is done single-handed. Friends generally assist in some way or other and get little credit for it. With Mr. Torkel Offelie, who is deeply interested in all subjects touching Norse literature, I have discussed many phases of this question and reaped the benefit of his judicious remarks. Professor Knut Gjerset, the author of the “History of the Norwegian People,” has read the manuscript and made some helpful suggestions. Mr. Henry Goddard Leach of the American-Scandinavian Foundation has generously allowed me the use of many illustrations for this volume, and Professor E. B. Delabarre of Brown University has put at my disposal the photographs taken on the Brown-Harvard Expedition in 1900.