

## *Vikings, the North Atlantic Saga*, Edited by William W. Fitzhugh and Elisabeth I. Ward

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Volume 19, numéro 1, spring 2003

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds19\\_1rv02](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds19_1rv02)

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Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Pope, P. E. (2003). Compte rendu de [*Vikings, the North Atlantic Saga*, Edited by William W. Fitzhugh and Elisabeth I. Ward]. *Newfoundland Studies*, 19(1), 237–239.

*Vikings, the North Atlantic Saga*. Edited by William W. Fitzhugh and Elisabeth I. Ward. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, index, illust., maps, paper, 2000, ISBN 1-56098-995-5.

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*VIKINGS IS, NOMINALLY*, the catalogue of the exhibition organized by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., in the summer of 2000. This handsome volume is, in fact, much more -- it is also a collection of essays on the Norse world. These are organized into six sections, discussing Scandinavia, Europe, the North Atlantic, Norse Greenland, contact with northern North America, and the invention of tradition about "Vikings". An opening essay introduces each broad topic and the whole volume has enough in the way of colour photographs and maps that it could pass as a coffee-table book -- that is, if it were not so informative. The pictures in this catalog are primarily of pieces lent to the exhibition, which is to say that many crucial artifacts are illustrated and discussed. These are often accompanied by explanatory sidebars: a report on the Norse penny from the Goddard site in Maine, or a concise explanation of how excavated scraps of jasper can yield information on the cultural origins of Norse explorers. In its layout *Vikings* actually resembles one of those Time-Life cultural encyclopedias more than it does a catalogue or a coffee-table book. It is distinguished from such publications by the level of expertise brought to bear on the colourful subject at hand.

There is hardly an expert on medieval Scandinavians not represented here and many essays are of exceptional quality, particularly as summaries of the present state of our knowledge. To pick a particular example, say Fitzhugh's general introduction, Orri Vesteinsson on the archaeology of the Icelandic *landnam*, or Jette Arneborg on Greenland's relations with Europe, would be to slight some other equally fascinating piece.

Readers of *Newfoundland Studies* will, likely, turn first to the section on contact with America. Here Daniel Odess, Steven Loring and editor Fitzhugh offer a fine summary of the First Peoples whom the Norse met, when they arrived in our part of the world. Birgitta Wallace describes the settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows and in a separate essay gives a persuasive reading of the Vinland sagas, in the context of the archaeological data, with which she is so familiar as Parks Canada's principal investigator. Gisli Sigurdsson provides a workmanlike summary of competing theories about the location of Vinland, including even the more improbable itineraries. Pat Sutherland and Peter Schlederman each provide excellent reviews of Norse/Native interaction in the Canadian arctic regions where they themselves have worked for decades. Douglas McNaughton's essay on early cartography is one of the weaker essays in the volume. He does not bring much to the topic unless, as he implies, a conviction that Yale's Vinland Map must be a forgery counts as evidence of expertise. Kirsten Seaver's concluding paper speculates that the Norse Greenlanders emigrated to some unknown early English fishing colony. Since the late medieval fishing industry she introduces as a *deus ex machina* does not resemble the one we know from the work of experts like Evan Jones and Maryanne Kowaleski, this becomes increasingly unconvincing. A second essay by Seaver with Jette Arneborg, introducing the section on Norse Greenland, is much more successful.

The discussion of Greenland will also fascinate those with a serious interest in the history of human settlement on the island Newfoundland. This is so, not simply because Greenland was the background from which Leif and his friends and relations arrived on our shores, but also because that other land, green before we were new, has been subject to some of the same constraints of island biogeography that shaped our history and prehistory. Niels Lynnerup's essay

on life and death in Norse Greenland is an excellent introduction to the demographic tightrope walked by small island populations. Joel Berglund's report on the western settlement's famous "farm beneath the sand" is a superb evocation of a key archaeological site, buried as the climate deteriorated into what specialists have been calling, loosely, "the little ice age" of early modern times. Other important essays round out the picture of Norse Greenland, but the most brilliant contribution to this discussion and arguably to the whole volume is Thomas McGovern's analysis of the demise of Norse Greenland. This wonderfully subtle summary of a complex catastrophe lays bare the critical interconnections between environmental change and the history of cultural response to change, in a way that could only be achieved by someone who has worked on the archaeology of the region for a long time.

In some ways this is typical of the strengths of this volume as a whole: it is very successful in reporting the best of the considerable amount of work that has been done on the Norse world, in the last 30 or 40 years. As a collection of essays, *Vikings* succeeds at the level of the organizing sections in which even the weaker essays have something substantial to offer. The volume has, however, weaknesses at the editorial level, some general, some particular. The captions are too often erroneous or inappropriate (231, 234, 242, 255 to give examples from one section). This suggests haste in the editorial process, an impression strengthened by omissions in the generally comprehensive bibliography. These problems are trivial, though, and if readers have reservations about the volume they will likely be at a completely different level.

There are three issues that are worth pondering. First, the term "Viking" is over-extended here, as in many other publications edited with an eye to popular sales. "Viking" seems to have been originally an ethnonym for the baymen of the Oslo area but it soon enough took on the piratical overtones it has retained. Few of the people who settled the North Atlantic islands were Vikings in this sense. "Norse" is a useful alternative term for Scandinavians of Norwegian origin, who made up most of the settlers of Iceland, Greenland and, in turn, Vinland. It is noticeable that the section on Greenland generally refers to the Norse, though "Vikings" are resurrected in discussion of contact with North America.

A second issue will occur to Canadians who read Hilary Clinton's preface equating the "spirit of exploration that has fueled the progress of both the Nordic countries and the United States". One might suppose that Newfoundland and Labrador and even the Canadian Arctic are, for the editors, part of America in something more than a geographical sense. This has been, for over a century, a troubling aspect of the Smithsonian's attention to a past which we necessarily share with many other nations but which we are, naturally, reluctant to see unilaterally expropriated by one peculiarly self-centred neighbour.

A final doubt intersects, in some subliminal way, with both the issue of what "America" is besides the United States of America and with the distinction between the awe-inspiring Vikings and the workaday Norse. In his acknowledgements, the editor draws our attention to his belief that he descends from a saga-celebrated Viking, one "Thorpin the Dane of Orkney". Few of us are likely descended exclusively from churls and thralls. So the relevance of descent in this context is unclear, unless it is meant to assert a kind of precedence or entitlement to a place either in this historical discourse or perhaps on this continent. There is a potentially ugly side to an obsession with the "Vikings" as Europeans forerunners, to the extent that our interest becomes essentially mythological and distracts us from the actual historical processes by which Europeans appropriated North America. The Norse Atlantic saga, as Gwyn Jones called it many years ago, has something to do with why North America has the ethnic complexion it does today, but it is

not the whole story. More to the point, its function in the larger American mythology is, let us say, ambiguous.

This is not meant to imply that these disquieting notes intrude on much of the work presented in what is, in the end, a very valuable collection. This is much more than a catalogue. It will repay skimming, just as it is well worth close study. It should be widely assigned to students; while even specialists will find it useful as a review of research and for its excellent illustrations. Ignore its flaws or put them in perspective and take a good look at this volume, if you are at all interested in the Norse Atlantic.