

Shannon Lewis-Simpson, ed. *Vínland Revisited: The Norse World at the Turn of the First Millennium.*

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REVIEWS

Shannon Lewis-Simpson, ed. *Vinland Revisited: The Norse World at the Turn of the First Millennium*. Historic Sites Association of Newfoundland and Labrador, Inc., St. John's, NL, 2003, ISBN 0-919735-07-X

THIS VOLUME is comprised of some 40 compendious essays selected from papers delivered at the Viking Millennium International Symposium, held at a number of venues in Newfoundland in September 2000. The 43 presenters represented the Scandinavian countries, including Iceland, and Scotland, England, Poland, the United States, and Canada. The editor arranged the essays under the rubrics "Voyage to Vinland," "Society, Culture and Settlement," and "Exploration, Navigation and Cultural Interaction," though several of the essays could have fallen under more than one of these headings. The editorial "Introduction: Approaches and Arguments" provides a commentary on each of the sections according to the order in which the original papers were presented, with cautionary remarks on the uses of literature, historical record, and archaeological findings, all subject to the intellectual fashions and biases of the milieu in which they were written. Readers would do well to read the "Introduction" before proceeding further.

"Voyage to Vinland" comprises a dozen essays that cover the geographical range across the North Atlantic: Scandinavia, England, Ireland, Scotland, the Scottish Islands (Hebrides, Orkneys, and Shetland), Iceland, Greenland, and Vinland, focusing on settlement, cultural origins and diversity, cultural elements in the landscape, and trade. The same general topics are represented under the other two rubrics. Rather than attempt to comment on each and every essay, this review will select one or two themes that recur throughout the volume to provide the flavour of the volume from a different perspective.

The first of these themes concerns the early influence of Christianity in the Viking world. Magnus Magnusson, in his discursive essay on "The Vikings: Saints or Sinners?," reviews the changing view of the Vikings from twelfth-century Ireland, through Victorian Britain, to the present. In his inimitable style, lightly provocative and challenging, he contrasts the laconic and down-to-earth references in the mediaeval Icelandic sagas with the Victorian preference for Gothic gore and may-

hem. He proclaims that he has been “vainly trying to have the word ‘viking’ stricken from the English language” — an ambition with which this reviewer heartily concurs. But then he discourses on ‘viking’ saints: Sweden’s King Erik Jedvardsson (murdered in church, 1160), St. Birgitta (fourteenth century), the two canonized Icelandic bishops Thórlakur Thórhallsson and Jón Ögmundsson, Norway’s King Olaf the Saint (killed, 1030), and Denmark’s canonized King Knut II (r. 1080-86). He suggests that Knut I (King Canute of Denmark and England) was more deserving of canonization, and extols the life and virtues of Guðríðr Thórbjarnardóttir whose career took her from Iceland to Greenland, Vinland (where she bore Snorri Thórfinnsson, the first European child born in the New World), Norway, Rome, and back to Iceland.

Kristján Ahronson’s brief but evocative essay on “The Crosses of Columban Iceland” takes the story of a Christian presence in southwestern Iceland and a couple of sites in the north prior to Norse settlement and in the initial stage of Norse colonization, with suggestions of Gaelic influence in the archaeological evidence. Anne-Sofie Gräslund’s insightful essay on “From Pagan to Christian — on the Conversion of Scandinavia,” also based on archaeological evidence, only makes brief mention of the political compromise of c.1000 A.D. that made Christianity legal and official in Iceland, but suggests that the “process of Christianisation had started much earlier.” Christopher D. Morris, in his “Christian Vikings In the North Atlantic” — an oxymoronic title that is also geographically misleading — restricts his attention to the Shetland Islands.

None of these authors find occasion to refer to *Landnámabók*, Ari Thórgilsson’s circuminsular account of the initial land taking or colonization of Iceland from the 870s to the 930s A.D. Of the 431 principal settlers who pioneered the colonization of Iceland, *Landnámabók* only ascribes the designation “viking” to seventeen of them, several of whom came to bad ends and left no progeny.

No doubt there were others with a viking past, particularly men associated with those listed above, but it is more significant that virtually none of the hundreds of sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons of the colonists recorded in *Landnámabók* had the term attached to him. The sole exceptions were Thorolf and Egil, the sons of Skallagrim the principal settler in Borgarfjord, who went raiding in the Baltic according to *Egil’s Saga*. There is little doubt that the viking tradition never took root in Iceland or, by extension, in Greenland.

If the viking role in the colonization of Iceland was slight, the same cannot be said of a Christian influence. Content analysis reveals that a significant proportion of the immigrant pioneers came, not from Norway and the other Scandinavian lands, but from the British Isles. These constituted the *vestmann* element in the new colony. It was dominant in the western half of Iceland, in the South, West, and North Quarters. Many of the *vestmenn* families had had two or three generations of exposure to the culture of Christian Ireland, so it is not surprising that *Landnámabók* identifies some of them as Christian.

Iceland only became officially christian in the year 1000 A.D., at the command and instigation of the Norwegian king, Olaf Tryggvason, but *Cristne Saga* records that several churches were built in the Skagafjord watershed in the North Quarter as a result of a mission between 981 and 986, and particularly at Áse in Hjaltadal in 984 A.D.

In the initial phase of the colonization of Greenland according to *Eirik's Saga Rauda*, Eirik the Red's wife Thjóðhild built a church at Brattahlíð when her son Leif Eiríksson is alleged to have brought the Christian faith to the colony in 1000 A.D. from Nidaros in Norway on the instructions of King Olaf Tryggvason. It is also noteworthy that Herjolf Bardarson, one of Eirik *rauda's* colonists and whose son Bjarni Herjolfsson was the initial discover of lands west of Greenland, was, according to *Grænlandinga Saga*, accompanied to Greenland in 986 A.D. by an unnamed Christian from the Sudreys (Hebrides), his presence confirming that Iceland was not closed to *vestmann* Christianity during the period when heathendom prevailed.

If Leif Eiríksson did, indeed, bring Christianity officially to Greenland, his brother Thórváld Eiríksson was distinguished by his leading an expedition that overwintered three winters (1005-1008 A.D.) in the new western lands and explored further afield than Leif. He was the first to encounter native peoples, the first to commit atrocities against them, and the first European to be killed on these far-western shores. Like his brother, he was ultimately on a quest for a new *landnám*, which he found somewhere on the east coast of Vinland, and which, significantly, he named Krossanes. All indications in the Icelandic literature are that, far from being 'vikings', Bjarni Herjolfsson the first discoverer, Leif Eiríksson the first explorer, and Thórfinn *karlsefne* Thórdarson the first would-be colonist of Vinland were all experienced seafaring merchants and landowners with both personal and ancestral associations with Christianity.

The second thread which can be followed through the volume lies in the number of essays focused on Newfoundland and Labrador which some scholars have equated with Vinland and Markland of the sagas. The text of Magnus Magnusson's Henrietta Harvey Lecture "Vinland: the Ultimate Outpost" leads the parade. After challenging the misuse of the term "Viking" in the title of the symposium, he pronounces that the opening of the west around 1000 A.D. was "not a national or ethnic venture; it was the outcome of individual entrepreneurialism by merchants from the smallest and remotest of all the Scandinavian settlements — Iceland and Greenland." He recites and compares the accounts as recorded in *Greenlanders' Saga* and *Eirik the Red's Saga* at some length, introducing the latter as "a carefully crafted saga, much more coherent and tidy" than the former — an assessment much at variance with this reviewer's in matters of geography and chronology. He very satisfactorily debunks the role of Leif Eiríksson in bringing Christianity to Greenland at the behest of King Ólaf Tryggvason in 1000 A.D., but fails to note the chronological significance of Bjarni Herjolfsson's later voyage to Norway "to see Earl Eirik" Hakonarson, presumably after his defeat and killing of King Ólaf in the sea-fight at

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Svold in the summer of 1000 A.D., as described in *Greenlanders' Saga*. This would place Bjarni with Earl Eirík, at earliest, in 1001 and back in Greenland in 1002 to initiate the “talk of voyages of discovery” that led, in 1003 (or later), to Leif’s expedition, retracing Bjarni’s earlier voyage of 986 and naming Helluland, Markland, and Vinland. The Symposium was held three or four years too early, or fourteen years too late! The lecture-essay ends with a discourse on the genetics of cats in New York and Boston!

The thread continues with Birgitta Wallace’s detailed account of “The later excavations at L’Anse aux Meadows” in the four summers 1973-1976 which effectively left nothing of the archaeological site for future archaeological investigation. Results cover such questions as date and length of occupation, though the AMS date 997+/-8 is not mentioned and the graph of radiocarbon dates is ill-conceived — concerned readers would better consult Plate 16 in *The Historical Atlas of Canada, Vol. I* — the relationship of the Norse to the local aboriginal groups, climate and topography, iron manufacture and site function, all with interesting details. Kevin McAleese’s “L’Anse Aux Meadows: Rediscovered and Remade” touches on its World Heritage status, its ambiguous place within the *long durée* of aboriginal presence, the history of speculative scholarship focused on the question of location, and the current site interpretation in relationship with the current local economy — the last expanded upon by Darrell Markewitz. Bell, Macpherson, and Renouf’s “Thumbnail Portrait of the Great Northern Peninsula, A.D. 1000” provides strong scientific statements on landscape evolution and vegetation history (based on pollen analysis), temperature reconstruction, and changes in relationship to shifting cultures.

At a different level, Magnús Stefánsson and Alan Crozier continue the debate on the etymological origin of “Vinland”: whether it was ‘Vinland, land of grapes’ or ‘Vinland, grassland’ — a debate that is part of the larger question, How far afield did the Norse explorations go, in what directions, and who did they meet? Kevin McAleese returns to the last part of this question in “*Scraelingar* Abroad — *Scraelingar* at Home?,” reviewing the saga accounts in the light of what is now known of Mi’kmaq, Recent Indian, Dorset/Palæoeskimo and Thule/Inuit cultures. He makes no mention of the term *Skrellinger* appearing on Bishop Resin’s map of 1605, nor that Gerardus Mercator placed it on one of his Arctic islands and on Greenland in 1569. Peter Pope’s essay on “The Greenland Norse and Zuan Caboto in the Strait of Belle Isle” is a fine and insightful contribution to the debate on the possible connection between the earlier and later discoveries. The thread ends with Kirsten Seaver’s thorough and absorbing account and commentary on Yale University’s highly controversial ‘Vinland Map’: “Faith, Facts and Fables.”

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