The Vikings and America

Erik Wahlgren

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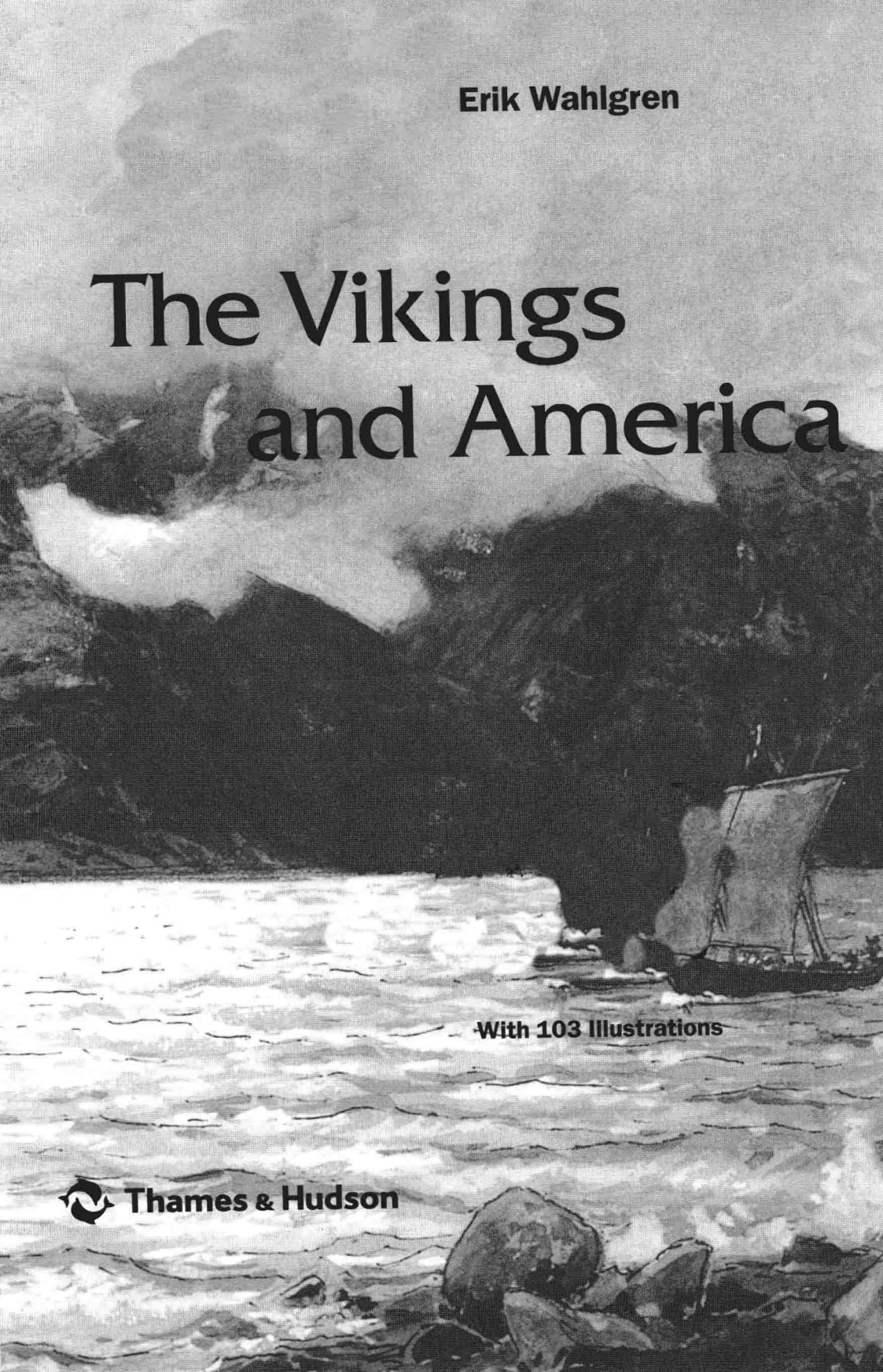

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Frontispiece
Viking ships under sail in Sognefjord by Hans Gude (1889).
This conception of the Vikings and their long ship is clearly a product of 19th-century Romanticism, though Gude's painting also reflects the growing historical awareness of his time. The Gokstad ship had been discovered only nine years previously.

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Preface

Since the spring of 1933, emboldened by my then new-found if sketchy acquaintance with the Old Norse/Icelandic language, I have pursued the Icelandic sagas. In 1950 I began in earnest to inquire into what they might tell us about the discovery of America. Except on Greenland, archaeological evidence at that time was slight, misidentifications and romantic or frivolous 'evidence' abounded, and literary or historical interpretations were often mutually contradictory. The situation is better now. With the warming of the Arctic and sub-Arctic climate, new archaeological sites have been discovered and older ones have become more productive. Marine architects have conducted practical experiments, presumed Viking Age voyages have been retraced, ethnologists have contributed valuable insights and enjoyed some success in countering popular myths. Historians have become more constructively critical, and philologists have attempted to look realistically at their data, while readers in general are learning that ethnic pride does not require the crutch of spurious or doubtful achievement. What were once vague possibilities have become probabilities, probabilities have become stronger and in some cases facts. And a few one-time 'facts' have been shed in the process.

An ancient text does not yield all its information to him who runs. It is quite unlike a newspaper, which is supposed to do exactly that. As a person of linguistic training I have attempted to draw reasonable conclusions from the sagas and from whatever else is currently known about the early exploration of North America and in particular the 'problem of Vínland.' For reasons that will become clear as the book progresses, I spell that place-name in the Icelandic way, with an acute accent over the *i*. In somewhat regretfully using the word 'Eskimo' I am aware that it is a name conferred on them by American Indians, and that the Eskimos themselves far prefer to be known as *Inuit* ('The People').

My personal gratitude embraces first and foremost those ancients whose vision encourages ours and whose daring

intimates what might yet become ours. Secondly, it reaches back to the sagawriters, some portion of whose literary product survived to put us latecomers on the trail. Thirdly, it is extended to all who have written about Viking exploration, for those whose works I have not encountered may in one way or another have influenced those I have read. For special favors I must thank the following institutions and individuals: The Simon H. Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the American Philosophical Society for invaluable financial assistance during early stages of this project; Professor Glyn Daniel of Cambridge for insisting that I write this book; Professor Peter Schledermann and the Arctic Institute of North America and Editor Robert E. Lee of the *Canadian Journal of Anthropology* for Canadian materials; and the staff of Thames and Hudson for invaluable advice and suggestions.

My gratitude is extended likewise to the Skraelings whom, to my knowledge, nobody has previously bothered to thank; to Chester N. Gould (1872–1957) who introduced me to the Icelandic sagas and spoke winningly – though not omitting the frustrations – of an academic career in the humanities; to my forbears, whose respective clusters of Swedish and Anglo-Saxon idiosyncracies are so unmistakably imprinted on my own genetic code; to my son Arvid, for his interest in the antics of humankind; lastly and never least, to dear Helen Jean, whose wifely solicitude can cope with even an author's abstracted gaze and random replies.

Unless otherwise credited, all translations or adaptations from foreign languages have been made by the author, who alone bears full responsibility for all statements of fact or interpretation in the following pages.

Seattle, Washington
May 1985

Erik Wahlgren


80° 120° 100° 80° 60° 40° 20° 0° 20° 40° 80°
70°
120°
PEARY LAND
ELLESMERE I.
Kane Basin
INGLEFIELD LAND
Thule
Smith Sound
DEVON I.
Buchanan Bay
Cape York
Neville Bay
BAFFIN BAY
GREENLAND
Kingiq-torsoaq
Upernavik
CANADA
BAFFIN I.
DISKO I.
Jacobs-havn
HUDSON BAY
60°
HALL PENINSULA
Davis Strait
Arc
West Firths
Breidafjord
ICELAN
Godthaab
WESTERN SETTLEMENT
Reykjavik
RESOLUTION I.
PAMIOK I.
Payne Bay
Cape Chidley
Ungava Bay
Gardar
Brattahlid
Eiriksfjord
EASTERN SETTLEMENT
Herjólfsnes
Cape Farewell
LABRADOR
80°
Hamilton Inlet
ATLANTIC
OCEAN
Strait of Belle Isle
L'Anse aux Meadows
USA
GULF OF ST LAWRENCE
NEWFOUNDLAND
VINLAND
GRAND MANAN I.
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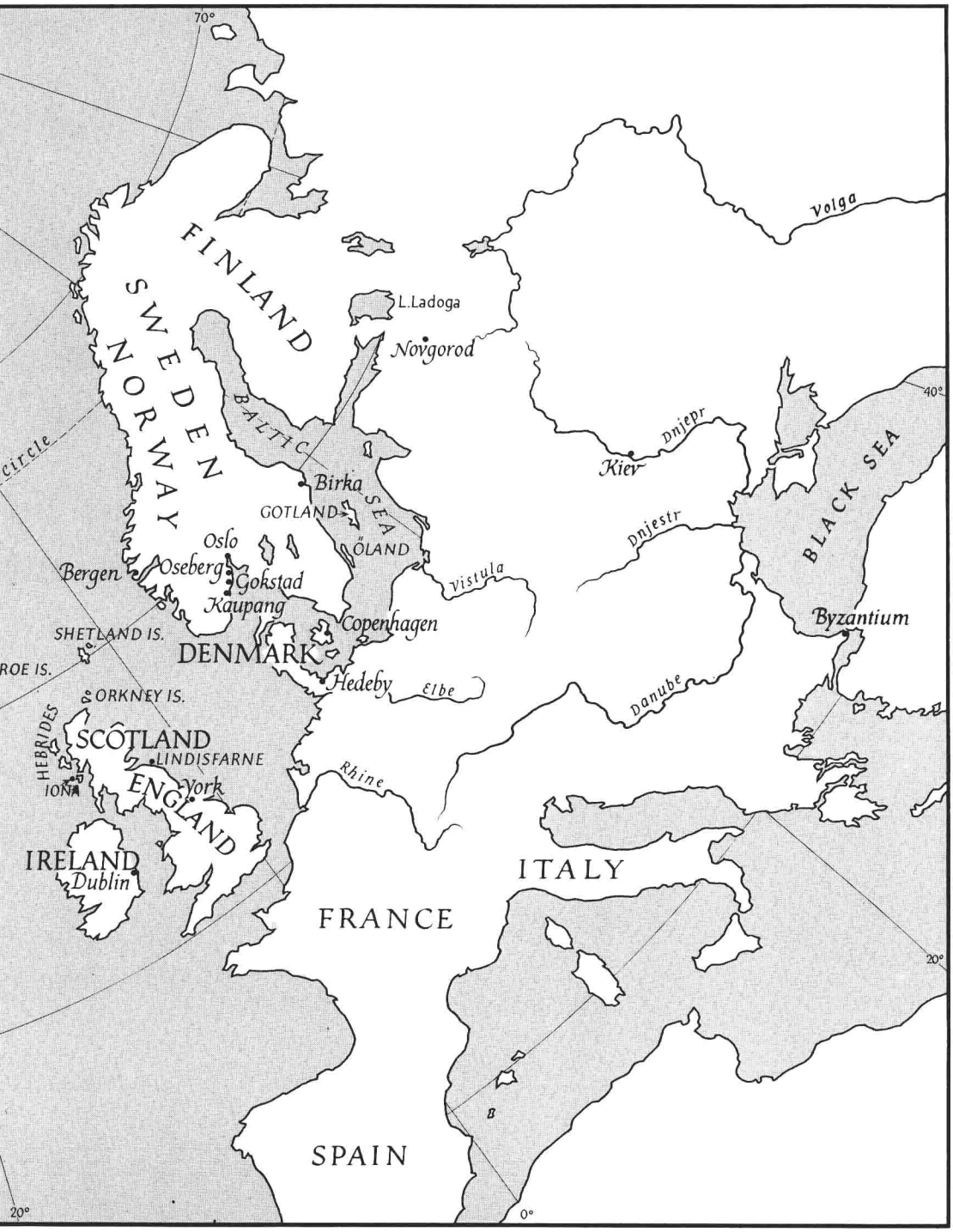

1 The western world of the Vikings.

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1

The uttermost reach

It was cold up there, then as now. Making their way past numerous islands and – at last – out of the accursed Arctic fog, the ship's crew sighted a shore dominated by glaciers, with seals and polar bears all about. Now returning southward past a row of those tall *nunatakks*, or solitary rocky humps that poke hundreds of feet above the surrounding land-ice, past Nugssuak Peninsula which, whether they knew it or not, bears west Greenland's highest mountain, they believed themselves – though mistakenly – to have sailed farther north along Greenland's western coast than any white man had done before.[1] As one checks such things on a modern map, they must have reached Melville Bay, were perhaps above 76°N. latitude and a good 600–700 miles north of the Arctic Circle, measured in a straight line. But in those difficult waters, or in any waters, a sailing ship does not proceed in anything like a straight line. Deeming it wise now to return home with his report, the expedition leader noted that the temperature had fallen below freezing during the night. It was 25 July, the year was 1267, and passengers and crew were chiefly Norse Greenlanders. Among them were at least some who could be accounted 10th-generation residents of the vast island whose ice cap is the Northern hemisphere's largest remnant of the great quaternary freeze.

Voyages to the *úbygdir* ('unpeopled tracts'), however hazardous, were no novelty to a hardy race of farmer-hunters and fishermen of chiefly Norse-Icelandic stock who, even in their settled abodes along Greenland's southwest coast, were regarded as living 'at the end of the world.' The activities of sealing, whaling and the gathering of driftwood had for generations lured these descendants of Scandinavia's Vikings past islands, fjords and ice floes to hunting grounds ever farther north of their fragile civilization at the edge of the inland ice. A degree of systematization had long since taken place. Hunting stations had been established, even tiny 'factories' set up for the melting of blubber into train oil, the precious fluid transported homeward in leather sacks at the end of each hunting season. But

2 Pre-Viking Age iron helmet from Valsgärde; the crest and eye-guards are of bronze, the lower half of chain mail.

this expedition was a bit special in that it had been commissioned by the Church. And to the Church, as represented by Greenland's episcopal see at Gardar (modern Igliko) the expedition made its report. For even in this remote outpost of European civilization, distant from Iceland, farther still from ancestral Norway and incredibly far from Rome, one senses the high Middle Ages. No malodorous heathens, these outdwelling Scandinavians of the 13th century were pious, indeed anxious Christians. Long gone was the time of Erik the Red and the other founding fathers of well on to three centuries before, who knew no external authority, paid no taxes. Many of them were Christian by the turn of the millennium, at their own request provided with a resident bishop since 1126. Submitting to the nominal authority of Norway's King Hakon the Old in 1261, the Greenlanders were now the subject of special clerical concern.[2]

Records show that a large part of the best land owned by the Greenlanders had gradually come into the possession of the Church. As elsewhere, such property had been donated by living parishioners or bequeathed in their wills, chiefly to ensure the celebration of requiems for their souls. Heathendom there may have been in remote corners of the settlement and, surely enough, among such Norse colonists as lived a life of apostasy and outlawry beyond the borders, but basically the Christian faith was strong. It needed to be tenacious in a land where life was fraught with heavy uncertainty and where trolls abounded on land and sea. It required as well the guidance of a trained clerisy, the support of dignified places of worship and the inspiration of bell, book and candle. The religious establishment had in turn to be supported. That support comprised land ownership and gifts *in natura*, for there was neither gold nor coinage among the Greenlanders. And now Church officials in Norway, pressed by the Papal curia, were concerned not merely with the immortal souls of their distant parishioners, but with their tithes as well. The authority and the Greenlandic revenues of the King of Norway were slight in comparison with the influence and the property of the Church: the moral authority and the services performed by the latter were tangibly omnipresent, whereas the dignity of the Crown was a theory and that *quid pro quo*, its promised services, destined to be unreliable.[3]

Greenland had been sighted, and once landed upon but never properly explored, by Norsemen well before Erik the Red's famous tour of exploration in the years 982–5. After returning to

his home in western Iceland, Erik had assembled twenty-five shiploads of eager colonists and made, in the year 986, his westward sailing that planted the Norse tongue and republican institutions on the northern hemisphere's largest island.

It is not too early to remind the reader that no real understanding of the settlement of Greenland or the problem of early American history is possible without a perusal of the so-called Vínland sagas. Nowadays usually referred to in English as *The Saga of the Greenlanders* and *The Saga of Erik the Red*, these two short works – peripheral products of a major prose tradition in Old Icelandic – will hereafter be cited as *Greenlanders' Saga* (O. Icel. *Groenlendinga saga*) and *Erik's Saga* (*Eiríks saga rauda*).[4]

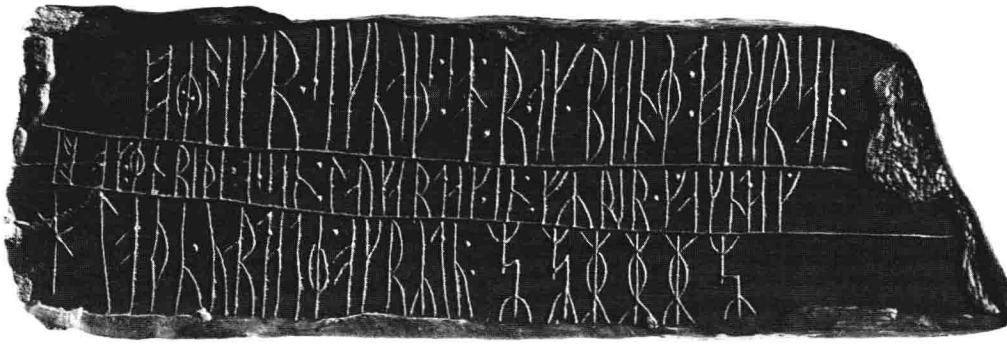
To return to the reconnaissance of 1267: it was conducted as a survey of the colony's, and hence of the Church's, prospects in the northern region, and undertaken in the wake of the previous year's reports by hunters who had ventured farther than was then usual into the *Nordrsetur* ('northern seats'), those hunting grounds that were never reached without effort. It cannot now be determined whether it was that 'official' journey of 1267 or some later voyage unknown to fame which resulted, directly or indirectly, in the world's most northerly inscription in a Scandinavian language. The word-forms of the inscription as well as the shapes of the characters – runes – in which it was quite competently carved comport with any date from the second half of the 13th century to the first half of the 14th. This was late runic, the only form of writing preserved to us from the Norse habitation of Greenland. At all events, the rune stone from Kingiqtorsoaq gave major impetus to the modern discussion of that early settlement along with the discovery of the North American continent and the effort to establish a colony on its eastern fringe.[5] By virtue of political events in which the Greenlanders had small interest and over which they had no control, their country was by *c.* 1400 a remote and poorly known protectorate of the Danish–Norwegian Crown, a source of mixed fact, legend and misinformation. The recolonization of Greenland from Denmark[6] started with the distinguished Norwegian-born Lutheran clergyman and colonizer Hans Egede (1686–1758) who, sent out from Copenhagen in 1721, established the Greenland Mission. Through the labors and writings of Egede, Greenland re-entered European consciousness as a real place, if as yet little more than the primitive territorial annex of a culturally backslidden Scandinavian

3 Location of the Kingiqtorsoaq stone in Greenland.

monarchy. It was thus under Danish auspices that the Kingiqtorsoaq stone was discovered – perhaps we should say rediscovered.

For hundreds of years the Eskimos – or as they themselves prefer to be called, Inuit, 'the People' (*Eskimo* is an Indian word meaning 'eater of raw flesh') – had been aware of traces left by the race of tall, blond strangers who at one time had regularly visited the *Nordrsetur* hunting grounds. Among the remains that had survived the vicissitudes of weather, the curiosity of animals and the collecting proclivities of the Inuit themselves, were three small cairns, or piles of rock, arranged by human hands on the island of Kingiqtorsoaq, north of Upernavik at 72°58′ N. lat. The cairns had been called to the attention of visiting Danes, including, of course, government administrators and religious missionaries to the Upernavik district. Half a millennium after the original piling of the cairns, the distinguished cartographer and naval officer Lieutenant, later Commander, W. A. Graah (1793–1863), who on a subsequent voyage nearly died of hardship and starvation while exploring Greenland, was reconnoitering the Upernavik area on his first voyage to Greenland in 1823–4. In the latter year he was shown a small stone, no more than 10 cm by 3.5 cm, discovered by the Eskimo Pelimut. Found beside the three cairns in one of which it must once have been placed, the stone is of a black–gray or dark green quartz slate. The 'front' surface bearing the inscription is smooth. The three cairns were so arranged as to form an equilateral triangle that may have some directional significance. Though one of the smallest rune stones known, it is among the most pivotal. Most of the inscription can be easily interpreted:

4 The rune-inscribed stone from Kingiqtorsoaq.



> Erling Sighvatsson and Bjarni Thordarson and Endridi Oddsson on the Saturday before Rogation Day raised these cairns and cleared . . . (alternatively 'and runed', i.e., composed a runic charm for apotropaic purposes).

The inscription ends in six secret runes that have never been satisfactorily interpreted, though they may indicate the year. The probable date is 24 April (Gregorian 2 May) 1333. We may ask ourselves whether the ambiguously spelled word 'cleared/runed' designated the laborious but prosaic task of clearing something – stones, ice? – or the to us more exotic effort at banishing the obstructive pack-ice through some vestigial runic magic. Three men, three cairns. The three authors took pains to identify themselves. Was this a formal property claim? Was it an ordinary 'Kilroy was here' inscription, an exultant expression of achievement? Or was it the final monument of a solitary trio facing an early death? The men could not have reached these parts that same year, and were consequently hold-overs from the year before. Unless they were accustomed to wintering at this latitude, their ice-bound plight must have been a desperate one throughout the ghastly winter. Did they die of starvation or amid the ice and waves during a last frantic effort at flight? Or did they hold out until rescued during high summer, to return in triumph and edify kinfolk and friends with tales of walruses and trolls? It may be that the practice of wintering over was not so rare, after all. That possibility reduces the drama, but not our curiosity. Illustrating the fragmentary nature of ancient data, the question remains.[7]

Since the Pelimut–Graah discovery another sixteen decades have passed. Archaeological expeditions have been probing the identifiable sites of Norse habitation in Greenland, and about three hundred farmsites have been recognized. What has been found in the way of material goods confirms and amplifies the little that the Icelandic sagas and annals have bothered to tell us about existence in Greenland. But many puzzles remain, including, as we shall see, the ultimate mystery of what caused the Norse Greenlandic colonies as a whole to fade from history.

Several things are known to us from manuscript sources as well as from the most recent digging investigations. The Greenlanders sailed north, they sailed south, they crossed Davis Strait and searched the shores facing them. How far south, how far north, is not as yet known, but the picture has become clearer. These western Norsemen encountered here and there the native

5 Eskimo with seal; 19th-century illustration from Greenland.

peoples – of various tribes and cultures, but Skraelings all – who had preceded them as visitors or settlers. The word *skraeling* signified in Old Norse something like 'pitiful wretch.' And indeed, one of Hans Egede's sons, himself brought up in Greenland, wrote in later life of how dreadful they had appeared to him as a new arrival from Europe.[8] It took some time for the shock to wear off. The medieval encounters were alternately casual or intense, characterized by peaceful trading or by hostility to the point of bloodshed. The similarity of these contacts to those recorded throughout history everywhere on the globe need surprise no one. The Norse were scarcely noted for gentleness, the natives were either helpful or fearful and suspicious, eager for contact or prepared for battle, and as we shall note later, ignorance and bad luck often tipped the odds simultaneously against both sides. Peace calls for greater exertions than war.

In the opinion of the Arctic ethnologist Dr Robert McGhee, the Norsemen encountered both Indians and Eskimos.[9] The Indians were probably Beothuk, related to the Algonkians who occupied the coastal regions of Newfoundland during the summer, fishing and hunting sea mammals and birds – these would be puffins, gannets and related species – from birchbark canoes. In winter the tribesmen retreated to the interior forest. By the 16th century they were described as being extremely hostile to intrusion by Europeans, who had not been above kidnapping them for the slave trade. Implements of the Dorset Eskimos had been found by the Norse when they explored southern Greenland beginning in 982. But the Dorset themselves had apparently withdrawn, though they remained in northern Greenland, northern Labrador and the Ungava Bay region.[10]

Eskimos of the Thule culture had migrated eastward from Alaska during the 11th century, reaching northwestern Greenland by the 12th. During the 13th century the Thule had come to Ungava Bay and northern Labrador, where they coexisted for two centuries with the Dorset, having then, also, reached Disko Bay. During the following century Thule Eskimos colonized the outer fjord areas of the Norse settlements. The Norse, living by preference at the heads of the fjords, were compelled now to conquer, be conquered by, or coexist with the natives. The Norse clung to Greenland from 986 to possibly 1480, and there is some shaky evidence of their tenure past 1500. But a comparable Norse presence on the mainland was not to be.

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