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The Fact and Fiction of Vikings in America

Karri L. Springer

Many people do not fully understand the stories, history, archaeology or evidence for Viking presence in North America. This paper evaluates the stories against the scientific evidence found to date. Archaeologists, although qualified to discuss all sides of the arguments, rarely do, because of the lack of career rewards for doing so. However, the problems associated with hoaxes should be important to all archaeologists interested in maintaining credibility with the public. Viking legends are well suited for such evaluation. The Kensington runestone hoax is emphasized in this evaluation while other Viking hoaxes are overviewed. Relevant evidence from archaeological sites in the United States and Canada is presented. The L'Anse Aux Meadows site is highlighted for unraveling many of the mysteries surrounding the North American legends of the Vikings.

Adventure stories abound about the marauders of the north seas, the Vikings. Visions of sword-wielding giants of men and great swooping ships come easily to mind, but this is not the whole picture. Real Vikings smelted iron, carved wood, wove cloth, hunted, traded and explored more extensively across the North Atlantic than any other people before or since. They even beat Columbus to the Americas by 500 years.

The Vikings' famous, or infamous, journeys left behind traces to follow. They told and retold stories about their journeys, which were written down as the Sagas. Their runic writing style has supposedly been found in the Americas, as well as in Scandinavia (their home). However, the most conclusive evidence that the Vikings eventually arrived in North America comes from scientific archaeology.

Evaluation

Several claims for Viking presence in America will be evaluated based mainly on archaeological evidence. Archaeologists, by studying the evidence left behind by past cultures, can interpret glimpses of past actions. Archaeologists will never fully understand the past, since no one present today witnessed it. In other words, the archaeological record is incomplete due to its nature.

If the archaeologists use mere analogies or educated guesses, how can they evaluate stories about Viking presence in North America? Archaeologists are also scientists, who aspire to certain ethical principles, such as factual reporting of information, to retain their credibility within their discipline (Lynott and Wylie 1995). They are trained observers, who can recognize clues that the layman could not. They re-evaluate research as new procedures are developed. They should not profit from the destruction of sites or artifacts. These attributes separate the archaeologist from the layman.

Hoaxes

Why should archaeologists be concerned about fakes, falsehoods and hoaxes, especially as they relate to the Vikings in America? Many false stories and

"artifacts" appear in North America's past. Some are cherished so dearly by individuals or communities that they will not believe reality. Some may find the reality to boring. Archaeologists should strive to create interpretations of the real past that are interesting to the layman. Thereby, the archaeologist eliminates the need for the public to turn to fantasy instead of fact.

How and why are falsehoods created? Several reasons have been recognized, including local patriotism, pride of ancestry, cultural revenge, financial interests and narrow-minded determination to prove a particular view of history (Redmond 1979:12). They are created through curiosity, imagination and creativity. What the hoaxes do not have is scientific testing, to bolster their claims. Without this, the hoaxes have no weight.

Hoaxes can be detrimental to the public and to science. Piltdown man, created by nationalism and pride, caused serious problems for understanding the nature of early humans in England. The Viking hoaxes, also created by nationalism, ancestral pride, and determination to prove a theory, cause problems today. Many uninformed people unknowingly perpetuate the lies. This clouds people's perception of the actual finds, such as L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, Canada, which actually proves Vikings settled on North America before Columbus. Following the lies is detrimental to everyone interested in critical evaluation of the differences between reality and fantasy.

The Kensington Runestone

One of the most famous controversies surrounding Vikings in North America comes from central Minnesota. The story begins with the migration of Scandinavians to the northern Plains in the 1880's. They had much pride in their ancestry, but found it difficult to defend themselves from the "dumb-Swede" sentiments (Williams 1991) that remain in "Ole and Lena" jokes. The following story may have been created due to these emotions.

In the fall of 1898, Olof Ohman and his son were clearing a field at their home near Kensington, Minnesota. After clearing some small trees, they found a large, flat stone (measuring 36"x15"x5.5" and weighing 230 pounds) entangled in tree roots in the ground. Ohman's son discovered runic inscriptions (a type of writing used by Scandinavians before the Roman alphabet was introduced) on the stone. Soon the stone was placed in a shop window in Kensington. Local citizens showed interest. Even the newspapers in Minneapolis/St. Paul printed stories about the stone. The first scholar to investigate the stone was O. J. Breda, who made a translation, but did not give a date (Williams 1991).

By the early spring of 1899, both Breda, University of Minnesota, and Professor George R. Carume, Evanston, Illinois, considered the stone a fake and noted incorrect runes and words from the wrong era as proof. This caused the Kensington locals to search for more Viking relics. Finding nothing, the stone was returned to Ohman.

Several years later, in 1907, a social historian, Hjalmar R. Holand, became Ohman's neighbor. Holand found that the locals were more interested in discussing the Runestone than the trials of a settler's life, so he decided to investigate it, instead. By 1908, Holand had published his first article on the stone and throughout his life he would be a proponent of its authenticity (Williams 1991).

About this same time, the Minnesota Historical Society decided to set up a committee to study the stone. On April 21, 1910, the committee said the stone was authentic, but needed to be analyzed by a specialist. Professor Gisle Bothne, University of Minnesota, successor to Breda, was consulted. He said it was a fake,

as Breda had. Bothne then asked John A. Holvik to join the committee. Holvik and Holand began butting heads instantly and continued throughout their lives (Williams 1991).

The common translation is, "8 Swedes and 22 Norwegians on exploration journey from Vinland westward. We had camp by 2 rocky islets one days journey north from this stone. We were out and fished one day. After we came home found 10 men red with blood and dead. AVM save from evil. Have 10 men by the sea to look after our ships 14 days' journey from this island. Year 1362." (Wahlgren 1986: 102).

In 1910 Holand tried unsuccessfully to sell the stone to the Minnesota Historical Society for $5000. Next, he tried to get money to transport the stone to Europe for further study, but the Society did not fund this either. In 1911, with his own funding, Holand went to Europe where runologists dismissed the runes as forgeries. Holand only noted this trip in one obscure article and deliberately omitted it from all of his others. He still did not believe it to be fake and criticized the runologists for their lack of belief (Williams 1991).

The Historical Society published their final report in 1915, which strongly states the inscription is a fraud. Even with the assistance of George T. Flom, eminent historical linguist from the University of Illinois, the committee's report was a fence sitter. The historical society and the committee contradict themselves. The final statement of the committee reads, "after carefully considering all the opposing arguments, the Museum Committee of this Society and Mr. Holand, owner of the stone believe its inscription is a true historical record" (Minnesota Historical Society Museum Committee 1915:286). Afterward, the stone was returned to Alexandria. For 20 years all was quiet (Williams 1991).

In 1932, Holand published a small book, *The Kensington Stone*, which aroused curiosities. Holand's book was filled with imagination, pride and a little research, but no objectivity (Williams 1991). The public was swayed by this popular book, especially since no strong opposition had been voiced (Holand 1940, 1962; Peterson 1946).

The stone traveled to the Smithsonian Institution for study by Danish scholars in 1948 and was photographed and compared to stones found in Greenland. The locals and media from Minnesota saw the trip as an authentication of the stone's inscription, but the Danish scholars said, again, that it was a fake (Williams 1991).

In 1949, the stone was returned to Minnesota for the state's centennial and later to Alexandria, where it currently resides. During the next 20 years, many articles and books were published on the stone's lack of authenticity. One of the most damaging pieces of research found was a letter dated January 1, 1899 from J. P. Hedberg of Kensington to Swan J. Turnblad, editor of a Minneapolis newspaper. It asks for help in translation of the runes. However, the written inscription had many recurring problems that do not appear on the stone. These problems suggest the letter was a first draft, rather than a copy of the stone. Holvik also found that a person in 1909 had noted the differences in the first copy of the letter, as well (Williams 1991).

Investigations into Ohman's past began. Many thought he created the stone himself. Ohman enjoyed reading, especially about the history of Sweden, since it was his homeland. Ohman's friend, Sven Fogelblad had a college degree and many scholarly books. Together they had enough information to create the runestone (Williams 1991).

In 1958, Erik Wahlgren was the first scholar to defeat Holand's arguments directly and he also established Ohman as the forger (Wahlgren 1958). In 1963, Holand died, but the debate continued. Another blow to the authenticity of the stone

came in 1968 when Theodore Blegen found the missing field notebook of the geologist of the Historical Society Committee with the initial observations of the roots from which the stone had been removed (Blegen 1968). This provided much contextual evidence for the recent placement of the stone into the ground. The notebook also contained interviews with participants in the discovery. Overall, this notebook was detrimental to the proponents of the Vikings in Minnesota theory.

Since then, proponents of the stone's authenticity have been Dr. Ole D. Landsverk, professor of physics and math who believes, along with Alf Monge, that the runic inscriptions are cryptograms and are authentic (Landsverk 1961, 1969; Monge and Landsverk 1967). Their methods have little cultural basis and their testing is almost nonexistent. Robert Hall and Rolf M. Nilsestuen are also supporters (1994).

As of the 1990's, no evidence for Vikings in Minnesota has been found and other discrepancies in the Ohman/Holand story have surfaced. The date of finding the stone is questionable, was it November or August? Were the aspen's roots 4" or 10" in diameter? This would be a difference in age of the tree from 10-30 yrs old to 70 yrs old. If the tree was 10-30 years old, the stone could have been deliberately placed under the roots. Were the inscriptions done before or after the stone was removed from the soil? The original geologist noted the chisel marks were fresh and unweathered. Currently the "H" put on the rock by Holand and the rune chisel marks have the same amount of patina, which indicates they are equally weathered, and therefore carved at the same time. Some of the words used are similar to colloquial Scandinavian (a combination of Norwegian and Swedish used in the northern Plains in the mid-1800's). Also, the story recorded on the stone relates directly to a massacre in the mid-1800's of ten Scandinavians at Norway Lake, MN, which occurred while the rest of the townspeople were in church. It also relates to the amount of time taken to tow a reconstructed Viking ship from Yonkers, NY to Chicago (14 days journey) for a celebration in 1893 (Williams 1991).

In a video produced by the BBC, this story ended with deathbed confessions of Frank Walter Cran, the son of one of Ohman's friends and of Ohman's son, Edward. They said that Ohman and his friends had created the stone "to fool the educated ones" (Williams 1991:206). The credibility of these confessions is questionable, but does provide a Hollywood conclusion to the question of whether or not Vikings were in Minnesota.

This story illustrates the complicated nature of frauds and their persistence in ethnic pride, state pride, popular culture and the media. The question of authenticity could have been answered in 1899 by Breda and Carume, rather than 100 years later, if people had been willing to accept their findings. When visiting Alexandria, MN, however, the pride continues. Few will accept facts over fantasy, but archaeologists must keep trying.

More Viking Hoaxes in America

Everywhere from Oklahoma to Maine in the United States have claimed to have evidence of the presence of Vikings. Heavener, Oklahoma claims to have a runestone, but how the Vikings could get into the heart of Oklahoma with their ships or how they could do so without leaving behind traces is unknown. These fresh carvings are unintelligible, unless read in reverse and as a cryptogram as Landsverk and Monge (the sole proponents of this method) believe they should be (Williams 1991:219).

Newport Tower in Rhode Island,a stone shell about 24 feet tall, was considered of Norse origin by several people, including Philip Ainsworth Means in the mid-1800's. By the late 1800's, most scholars thought it

to be of colonial origin. Later, by comparing the architecture with a similar tower in England (Feder 1999) and excavating around the structure, where colonial artifacts were found, the Newport Tower was accepted as coming from the colonial time period (Williams 1991:217).

A legend of Norumbega, the lost city of New England, attributed its origin to the Viking explorers. Eben N. Horsford used a few stones, loose cartographic and poor linguistic evidence to suggest that he found this Norse settlement near his home outside of Boston (Williams 1991:206). He hypothesized that they cut the oak trees to make drinking vessels for export to the Old World. No evidence exists for his claims. The rocks are natural. Julius E. Olson and Justin Windsor, Harvard, also criticized the claims (Williams 1991:207).

Dighton Rock in Massachusetts is a 40 ton boulder with many carvings, some of which are said to be Norse. It may have the distinction of being the first artifact photographed in the U.S., but the carvings are likely of Native American origin (Williams 1991: 213).

Similar false stories exist for the Beardmore relics in Ontario, the Spirit Pond Runestones in Maine, and the Vinland Map from Yale (Williams 1991). These stories all fit into one of the reasons mentioned previously for why people create hoaxes. People are very proud of their false relics, even erecting permanent signs and statues displaying the finds. However, only one artifact of Viking origin has ever been unearthed in the U.S.

Archaeology of Vikings in the U.S.

A Viking coin was found at the Goddard site dating to A.D. 1070. Goddard is a prehistoric Native American site. The coin was the only Norse artifact found. This coin was unearthed by amateurs and originally attributed to English origin. It was also determined to be in this place, because of trade between the Vikings and Native Americans (Williams 1991:222).

Archaeology of Vikings in Canada

The Norse explorers reached Canada. Evidence of their presence comes from sites with iron tools or distinct figurines. The sites range from Hudson Bay to Newfoundland and southward. This evidence from the mainland is scarce, but that from Greenland is clear. Viking settlements with substantial populations explored the lands in the north.

Vikings may have increased their range of travel around AD 900, not only because of the prosperity of their culture, but also because of a warming trend which cleared the arctic regions of drift ice and shifted the tree lines to about 100 km north of their present line. These conditions may have also contributed to the eastward expansion of a people from Alaska, the Thule (probably ancestors of the Inuit), who displaced the Dorset culture previously living in these regions. Thus, the Thule interacted with the Vikings more heavily, though the nature of the contact is unclear (McGhee 1978:83).

Thule carving changed, as evidence of some form of contact with the foreign Vikings. Chessmen and European-dress figurines became common. Vikings brought chess games to the New World for entertainment (McGhee 1978:99). The carvings in Thule archaeological sites very closely resemble them. Every Thule village excavated has produced some evidence of the use of iron. Since no Native American sites in this area produced evidence for the smelting of iron, they must have obtained their iron artifacts from the Vikings. The Vikings were the only foreign culture known to have this technology and to have contacted these Native Americans. The iron trade was at least partially direct, as the Vikings obtained hides and ivory, which traveled as far as China in trade (McGhee 1978:99).

At a late Dorset site on Hudson Bay, a copper amulet in the shape of a harpoon head was found. It was determined to be of European origin, but it is unknown if the Vikings actually traveled this far westward or whether intertribal trade brought the piece so far inland (Maxwell 1985:244).

L'Anse aux Meadows

The most impressive evidence of Vikings in the New World comes from L'Anse aux Meadows, on the northern tip of Newfoundland. This is an actual Viking settlement and is considered the only direct evidence of Vikings in North America. This site was found in 1960. Two excavations occurred since, one from 1961-68 and another from 1973-76. Eight walled structures were found, as well as hundreds of Viking artifacts. The radiocarbon date is AD 1000. Iron was smelted at this site and the artifacts and structures are very similar to the Viking sites on Greenland (Williams 1991:222).

As well, the Sagas (oral stories of the Vikings written down hundreds of years later) tell of Vinland the Good, where grapes grew. The descriptions of the paths, the places and the people encountered by the adventurers can trace the westward expansion of the Viking empire. Their gathering and processing of goods to transport back to Greenland or Europe are noted in detail, as well as their cargo carried during exploration. The Sagas also describe the findings of the exploration of the foreign lands (Magnusson 1980, parkscanada 1998).

The evidence is circumstantial as to whether or not the site of L'Anse aux Meadows was described in these Sagas. However, as evidenced by the writings and the archaeological and paleoecological records, it is probable that L'Anse aux Meadows was the entrance to the Vinland of legend (parkscanada 1998).

Conclusion

By looking at L'Anse aux Meadows, legend and reality intersect. What was once considered fantasy is now reality. The Vikings did settle in North America and probably were as far south as the St. Lawrence River! The thrill of knowing these statements are substantiated facts is much more impressive than the frustration left by rehashing lies and manufacturing fakes. By focusing attention and energy on the realities of Viking, or any other culture's achievements, everyone benefits. Excitement can be genuine and pride can be true.

The public and the scientists can understand one another. Scientific reasoning, folklore and cultural pride can work together to produce educated guesses, confirmed answers and further questions. Situations such as these are ideal for all involved. Archaeologists, as well as other scientists, must learn that listening to and educating the public can be beneficial to them and their careers.

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