

Vikings in Manitoba?

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During the Middle Ages, Vikings discovered a place across the Atlantic Ocean they called “Vinland.” Most historians and archaeologists believe that Vinland was somewhere on the East Coast of North America. But author James W. Curran, writing in the 1930s, argued that Vinland was not located on the Atlantic seaboard at all. Rather, he believed that it formed part of the continent’s interior that included Manitoba.

Some of Curran’s reasons for coming to this conclusion are interesting, if not particularly convincing. For example, he thought that the low western shore of Hudson Bay, with its wide beaches and lack of good harbours, met the description of the first Norse landing places in Vinland as recounted in the old Norse stories, or “sagas.” But there are probably plenty of places on the East Coast that also fit the same general description. Curran also figured that the wild grapes of Manitoba were what the Norsemen were talking about when they described the wild grapes of Vinland. But wild grapes don’t just grow in Manitoba; they also grow in the Maritimes and New England as well.

Likewise, Curran equated Vinland’s “self-sown wheat,” as reported by Leif Ericsson in 1000 CE, with a wild plant called blue joint grass that resembles domesticated wheat until it matures. Since blue joint grass grew naturally in the tall-grass prairies of Manitoba, Curran thought that Eriksson had Manitoba in mind when he was speaking of Vinland’s “self-sown wheat.” But we really don’t know for sure that Ericsson’s “self-sown wheat” and blue joint grass are indeed the same thing. Even if they are, blue joint grass is by no means peculiar to Manitoba.

The indigenous Mandan people (*Numakaki*) of North Dakota built villages surrounded by ditches and palisades. Curran reckoned that the design of these fortifications was adopted from Vikings who had ventured onto the interior plains many centuries ago. Far more credible is the hypothesis that the Mandans learned to build these fortifications from their own Aboriginal forebears.

Finally, Vinland was described in the sagas as a land where cattle were able to feed all winter long in the open. Curran interpreted this statement as a reference to the buffalo herds of the open prairies of the northeastern plains (buffalo are close relatives of domesticated cattle).

A presumed relic of a Viking presence in the continental interior came to light with the reported discovery of a Norse “runestone” near Kensington, Minnesota in 1898. This stone bears an account of a clash locally between Natives and a contingent of Norsemen in 1362 CE. Debate still goes on as to the authenticity of this “relic,” with most of the academic community arguing that it’s a hoax. For those who consider it genuine, there arises the question of the route whereby the Norsemen found their way into Minnesota.

One suggestion ties the Kensington Stone to an expedition headed by one Poul Knutsson, who was said to have been dispatched by the King of Norway in 1354 to find a lost colony of Greenland settlers who mysteriously disappeared without a trace. The story has it that Knutsson’s search party journeyed into Hudson Bay, with a detachment proceeding up either the Hayes or the Nelson River, southward through Lake Winnipeg, and thence up the Red River into Minnesota. Once there, several members of the expedition came to grief at the hands of hostile Natives, and this is the story that is supposedly inscribed in the Kensington Stone. The survivors of the Knutsson expedition are said to have arrived back in Norway two years later. Alas, there is no sound historical evidence that the expedition ever sailed from Norway (or anywhere else) in the first place.

The implications of this story for its believers, of course, is that Manitoba played a significant role in the Viking explorations of North America. Predictably, local people became alerted to the chance of finding evidence of the Norse passage through Manitoba, and it was only a matter of time before such traces were being reported. Not the least of these was a made-in-Manitoba “runestone” found in 1925 by a farmer near Husavik in the Interlake. Examination of this object by a geologist from the University of Manitoba showed it to be simply a piece of naturally-weathered rock known as dolomite. Curiously, one of the “inscriptions” on the stone was translated by two Winnipeg Icelandic scholars to read “riki,” an ancient Nordic word for “state”!

The late 1940s saw a flurry of “vikingology” in Manitoba. A structure first thought to represent an ancient Norse presence on Lake Winnipeg was an egg-shaped, 3-metre-high rock cairn “discovered” in 1948 on the northern tip of Hecla Island. It was eventually shown to be nothing more than the former base of a pole-mounted signal light that had been used to guide boats into Gull Harbour. Also in 1948 the *Winnipeg Tribune* newspaper and the Manitoba Museum jointly sponsored a brief archaeological expedition to the Upper Nelson and Hayes rivers to search for, among other things, evidence of the legendary Medieval Norse journey to Minnesota.

Such an enterprise qualifies admirably as a search for the proverbial needle in a haystack. Predictably, no such evidence was found. That same year, a Wisconsin lawyer is reported to have come to Manitoba in search of Viking mooring stones of the kind used in the 14th

Century to secure boats to the land as they lay offshore. Available newspaper records fail to mention the results of this enterprise, but the smart money says the lawyer didn't find what he was looking for.

Most exciting, at first blush, was a 3-by-4-inch stone object said to have been found near Sanford, Manitoba and reported to officials of the Manitoba Museum in the early 1950s. Five rows of 10th- or 11th-Century Norse runes were inscribed into its surface, and these were definitely genuine. But when photos and a cast of the artefact were sent to the Danish National Museum, it was pronounced to be a miniature copy of a real runestone – Skarthe's Stone – originally discovered at the Old Norse site of Hedeby in northern Germany. Apparently, when a museum was opened there in the 1930s, a number of small-scale replicas of the runestone were produced as mementoes to mark the event. How or why one of them ended up in a field near Sanford is the *real* mystery.

According to professional historians, the very first Europeans to set foot anywhere in Manitoba were Sir Thomas Button and his crew, who did the honours in 1612 CE.

And Sir Thomas Button was no Viking.



Manitoba bound? Not likely!