



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

THE VIKINGS

IN NORTH AMERICA

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The Vikings in North America

Introduction

There is increasing evidence that Viking adventurers and settlers made it to North America and that they occupied some coastal areas, albeit only for a short period.

Increasing Evidence

Evidence of a settlement has been found in Newfoundland at a location known as L'Anse aux Meadows. The Norse did settle in Greenland and they remained there for nearly 500 years, so it is no surprise that such accomplished mariners would have ventured to mainland North America.

The only physical evidence for their settlements, so far, has come from Newfoundland but it is likely that they ventured southwards to what is now the United States and that they were aware of the North eastern seaboard, which now comprise of states such as Maine and New Hampshire.

There was plenty to attract them, timber, game, minerals and many other things, which they could not obtain in Greenland.

It was the Icelandic Norsemen who first settled in Greenland around the year 980 AD.

Erik the red is believed to have been the first Viking to have developed a settlement on Greenland, which he did after having been banished from Iceland for manslaughter.

Brattahlid

This settlement was called Brattahlid.

It is known that they traded with native Americans, whom they called Skraelings, a word that meant 'screachers'. One of these peoples were called the Dorset, who later emigrated to North America and abandoned Greenland. We don't know as to why this occurred. Was there conflict with the Norse?

They also had contact with the Thule who were the ancestors of the Inuits. These people were not forced out of Greenland and are believed to have been a factor in eventually forcing the Norse to leave some 500 years later.

Fish, walrus ivory and whale meat and blubber were easily procured and these items provided wealth when traded to the Scandinavian homelands.

The Norse population probably reached the number of about 3000 settlers at its peak.

The population began to decline by the late 1200's due to a dramatic climate change which made the climate colder. The Norse had also over hunted animals like the walrus and there is evidence that they would not assimilate with the Thule and that as the climate deteriorated and because the two groups were competing for resources, that warfare became increasingly frequent. It appears that by the late 15th century, that there were no Norse settlements in Greenland.

North American coast

The evidence for Norse activity on the North American coast, though archaeologically scarce, is testified by the Icelandic sagas, which state that in 985, that one Bjarni Herjolfsson, was blown off course whilst on route to Greenland. He recorded that he had seen land to the west and that much of it was covered in dense and never ending forest. He named it 'Markland (forest land). He described further geographical features naming one area as Helluland (land of flat stones) and then describing an other area, the most southerly, as Vinland (land of wine) because of berries that grew there.

He must have put ashore in Vinland because a further record in the Icelandic sagas states that some 15 years later in 1001 AD, that Lief Erickson, the son of Erik the red, explored the area described by Bjarni. Lief's foster father, one Tyrker had accompanied him on this venture and had gone missing in the area that they called Vinland.

Lief found him, lying in the woods. He'd eaten huge amounts of fermenting gooseberries, cranberries and squash berries, and was drunk and incapable. Hence the belief that wine was plentiful in that area.

Lief and his companions spent the winter in Vinland before returning to Greenland in the spring. There is no known record of any interaction with the native Americans, though it is unlikely that no contact was made.

Further expeditions

A further expedition took place to Vinland in 1004 AD, led by Lief's brother, Thorvald.

The Icelandic sagas state that Thorvald attacked nine sleeping native Americans who were sleeping under bark skin canoes. No explanation is given as to why this happened.

Eight of the natives were slaughtered but one escaped. He returned with a significant force and in the following fight, Thorvald was killed by an arrow as he manned a barricade at the Norse camp. No further details are known, though some of the Norse must have escaped to tell the story.

Another expedition took place in 1009, led by one Karlsefni. It appears that, initially, the Norse made peace with the natives and traded for furs, but that this was short lived and that another battle took place in which the Norsemen were forced to retreat.

Lief's sister, Freydis Eriksdottir, was present at this encounter. She was pregnant and couldn't keep up with the fleeing Norsemen, and she berated them for running from such 'screeching creatures'. She was somehow rescued and the Norse retreated to the sea.

Other incidents were recorded and the hostility of the native North American's appears to have been a major factor as to why no Norse settlements were established in that region.

The Norse are believed to have conducted expeditions to North America until the 14th century but detail is lacking though there must have been some significant events that occurred.

How different the history of the world would have been if the Norse had established permanent settlements in the Americas.