Historiography of the Norse Voyages to North America

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Maps, ruins of habitation and even dramatic sagas have come and gone telling a legend daring tale of explorers from the east that came to North American shores and set foot upon the land in an effort to establish a settlement. The Scandinavians, also called the Norse, who ventured out from Denmark, Sweden and Norway sailed their longships to Iceland, Greenland and some say Newfoundland. If this is true when did it take place and where did they land in Newfoundland? Many scholars have gone back and forth debating to what extent the Norse settled in North America and certainly there are wild and crazy theories that will not be discussed here but instead a look will be taken at the academic side of the debate. Some have doubted the stories and wish to see hard physical archeological proof but discussion within this paper is not going to analyze the physical ruins of the proposed settlement but instead the focus is to look at the writings that have given so much to the debate.

As we have seen in previous discussions and texts the Norse have long been noted for their sailing process and their ability to explore regions outside their homeland with great efficiency so it may be for some natural they continued on into the unknown. Perhaps discovering new lands with ease and while settlements are hard to confirm it is known that they did indeed sail and sail often.

However, the debate still rages on and that is why it is important to look deeper at the debate that continues. Many historians have taken a look at this topic with a degree of skepticism and doubt. Some bias has stepped in the way with this topic as many feel that a definitive answer would cause history to be rewritten. While many have written on the topic we should be careful to look at each piece with an unbiased eye toward the writing itself.

Seeing first a translated manuscript from the Norse farmer and merchant Thorfinn Karlsefni and his wife Gudrid we can see what is referred to as firsthand account of an expedition into an unknown land...
looking for a settlement and further areas to settle. In this manuscript there is a narrative of the voyage in which we learn of the travels of Thorfinn and his company took. Here the authors describe an area that is compared to modern land areas. The translation is interpreted in order to give multiple views of the text. Such examples include the word for water or any body of water in the older Icelandic language is vatn which in a more modern translation is simply lake. So saying a certain body of water such as a creek could have been called vatn by Thorfinn but not so centuries later. Such discrepancies and explanations add to the debates about whether or not travel did actually occur as described. There is also a description of homes that were built which helps to give evidence to the theory of why the physical sites found in Newfoundland are present. There is also an anecdote of fighting with Native Americans to give a possible idea of why the Norse left. Nothing is truly conclusive but there is a theory. Looking at this source it is interesting to note of the straight forward manner of translation as opposed to the translator interject much in terms of opinion.[1]

Looking further into the debate there is E.A. Williamsen’s look at the Vinland Sagas and how they contrast with each other. Specifically the sagas being looked at in contrast are the Grænlendinga Saga in which Herjólfsson gives some details of a new land that has been discovered with notable landmarks and the saga of Leifr Eiríksson in Eiríks saga rauda that occurred after Herjólfsson had his voyage. While there are landmarks listed in the sagas the landmarks have been found to be more inclusive than not and Williamsen gives a critique on the prevailing story that Herjólfsson was accidently blown off course and land in North America and in the same way Eiríksson is too blown off course to find North America. Both of these sagas were written years after the events were to have occurred and subsequent explorers did not have the same luck as these two first Norsemen to have had the help of storms.[2] In this way it could be possible to see where the debate on whether or not the Norse made it to North America began to surface. Williamsen does well to stay as unbiased and academic as possible is his writings of the topic. He does not try to give the reader a yes or no to the question but instead gives us the views that still lead to more debate.

Coming back to the saga of Herjólfsson and his detailed landmarks historian Mats Larsson starts trying to find a connection to real world sites. Larsson discusses how the prevailing theory of the L’Anse aux Meadows ruined settlement may or may not match up with the sagas description of the land area. In it he gives an overview of studies that has been conducted based on the stories in the sagas and then scientific research of the areas in Newfoundland and the surrounding area which studied the flora, fauna, landmasses and other items of note. The first and leading theory was first proposed by Gustav Strom in 1887 and is as Larsson tells it ‘a brilliant and logical study’ that concludes the more likely location of the settlement told of in the sagas in Nova Scotia.[3] Even in Larsson’s text there is debate that is centered on the language and wordings of the sagas. Translations have been found to have multiple and subjective meanings. One such word that is discussed in this text is the word for a type of beach, furdustrandir. This could mean either remarkable beach or wonder beach. This term was used due to the time taken to travel the shore; however, modern scholars point to Nova Scotia’s lack of beaches as known today and instead describe the shore as being rocky.[4] However, one point to remember is that the saga writers described the beach as taking a long time to navigate as the remarkable point. Like Williamsen we see the use the sagas as the primary source material.

This can be somewhat troubling as the sagas were not true firsthand accounts but as close as could be possible even during the dark ages. The two sagas that make up the Vinland Saga have been used extensively to tell the story of various voyages to North America and Greenland but the sagas are told in a narrative style that leads the writers to a more fanciful telling that could be seen by more ancient writers like those in Homer’s Greece before and even during the time of Thucydides was important because it was the audience’s approval that matter most.[5] This was a similar concept with the sagas. To tell a story that would have the listeners enthralled from beginning to end; relatable and exciting.

In “Vinland and Wishful Thinking: Medieval and Modern Fantasies” by Sverrir Jakobsson there is more
information presented with a focus being on the native inhabitants of Greenland and a newly discovered land area. These native people, called Skraelings in the sagas, lived in the north in Greenland and were described to have sailed in hide covered boats. Another interesting note brought up by Jakobsson is that in both the Vinland Sagas the Skraelings are afraid of cattle. This could be explained due to the fact that many people in this particular area would not have had experience with this type of animal previously. The Horse, however, were known to sail with their livestock in order to settle in promising areas. This is more to discuss on Karlsefni and his voyage due to the excitement of such a journey. Looking deeper into the sagas Jakobsson points out that many Norse at the time would make the mistake of thinking that the islands south of Greenland were actually part of Africa. This point being made by the saga writers brings a new light to the tales that future historians like Jakobsson to give clues to settlements in areas southwest of Greenland.[6] Historians now have to consider if the Norse navigation had them sailing accurately.

So much has already been written from the point of view of Norse sailors and their descendants that readers can paint a pretty clear picture of what could have happened and what could have been during the earliest part of the 11th century in Greenland and Canada that perhaps a shift in focus is necessary to help broaden the picture. There is a document account of strangers coming upon the area of Canada’s eastern shore that has been passed down through the Passamaquoddy and Wabanaki peoples. This is in opposition of sorts due to not relying primarily on the sagas but instead having knowledge of them. The primary source for Annette Kolodny is the handed down tales from the Native Americans.

Documented and compiled by Kolodny gives examples where not only do the stories from the sagas begin to match up based on social and cultural references but also from those stories passed down within Native American legends. The first piece of evidence presented is the use of whistles that were utilized by the Wabanaki in battles to frighten enemies. The sagas did mention this piece of evidence as well of the Skraelings. Kolodny’s research also brought out stories of the native peoples that spoke of people who were fierce fighters without mercy and “hard skinned northern men”.[7] This is a very interesting source to find due to its use of a source outside of the Vinland Sagas. It is a fresh take on the tales that have been passes down generation to generation. Kolodny also begins discussing the biological aspect that is missed on many of the other historian’s writings that incorporates the blue eyed children that began to appear at the latest 500 years ago. This is not conclusive but it does lead to an interesting tale.[8] In fact one study performed by deCODE Genetics and the University of Iceland has made a discovery of a possible link between American Indian DNA and Icelandic DNA. The study theorized that someone could have been taken back to Iceland and then had children in Iceland. While this theory could point to interbreeding it is still much too early to be definitive.[9] However, this could point to a possibility that Norse settlers took wives from the Native American populations and may have produced children. This would point to the need for genetic testing in the tribal populations of eastern Canada. Perhaps this is something that has not been taken seriously enough in the past to provide any real context on conclusions to the question. Researchers in the past might have been quicker to dismiss the legends passed down as simple folklore and myths of a native people.

However, there is more information from tales that describe the arrival of large ships called canoes with pale skinned men. This was not the first ship to come into the area as a larger ship had sailed to this place with many more men. However, the smaller ship was not anchor to the area long and after a couple days sailed back to the “big water”. [10] While this text is a good way to look at the other side of the story there is some bias to the telling as it is one-sided. Perhaps the story tellers that have passed down the stories have included their own biased views into the telling of the stories. Not only that but there could perhaps be the point to be made for the changes that could happen in the stories as new story tellers begin to tell it themselves.

It should also be said that many people have told stories that glorify the people the story is talking
about. The people who compiled the sagas would probably not want future readers to read the tale and think less of those the sagas are speaking about. How would it look if the Vikings were massacred while doing what they do best? How would future generations feel about sailing if they thought that they would fail completely? On the other hand the same could be said of the Native American story tellers. In the telling they tell of their worries bravery in fighting the pale hard skinned warriors from the North. These primary sources do look at the people involved directly but they paint a mysterious picture of those that they encounter.

"Nostalgia, medievalism and the Vinland Voyages." written by G. Barnes is an article that actually expands on sagas and adds light to a few other voyages that occurred thereafter. This source goes to the idea of retellings with an eye of glory toward the Norse. The article does add to some of the various ideas of Norse explorations and the pride behind the sagas. It also goes into some detail of the sagas in their life prior to being written down fully as a documented text.[11]

Other documents have been centered on a map that could predate Columbus’ voyage and could explain where the Norse might have ended up. Two such texts are the article from History Today titled “US and British Scientists are still Divided Over the Authenticity of a Map which cites Norse Explorers as the First to Discover America” and “Vinlandsaga: The Mystery of the Yale Vinland Map” by John Yates both discuss the mysteries behind the map. This fabled map is not as wonderful as it might seem since the map is still only from the early 15th century and no one knew it even existed until the 1950’s. Yates gives a very detailed view of the doubt in authenticity of the map that is house by Yale University. Yates does not shy away from the fact that the man who procured the map was arrested due to theft charges.[12] While the History Today article is more of an informational piece that gives a description of the map that was supposedly created in the 11th century. This article helps paint the picture of the map that has mystified so many in the modern world.[13]

Having the vast majority of the source material coming from the Vinland Sagas is difficult to add in anything new. With scientific theories brought in then there is some place for a base in new theories and new paths to discuss. The problem, however, is that there is only one real source to go to if someone wants to know from the Norse side of the tale. The sagas are stories written down that now researchers have tried to use in connection to modern geographic features or by retracing the steps taken. However, the researchers have to look at the sagas in the context of the time when there were written or perhaps go even further back in time. If these sagas are the only real piece of evidence then the debate will continue unless there is archaeological artifacts that come to surface but that is leaving out the discovery of the map. The Vinland Map as it is described in the articles above is inclusive at best due to the mysterious nature of the discovery.

While looking at this question in the context of what has been done we can see that as each year passes more and more researchers have begun to look at this topic much more than previously. As many researchers have gleamed from the sagas and notes areas that seem to match up with landmarks and geographic features we certainly can see forward progress with the research. This helps us to find more and more information that might not have ever been known. The other aspects to look at would be the research that has been with Native American tribes and the interviews done with the elders of the tribes. Having these stories are not only fascinating but also help to shed light on the possibility of Norse settlers and warriors but also interactions that might have occurred. Leading to the theories of why the Norse might have left the area.

A great deal of research is needed in order to focus on the question at hand. The research that has been done is predominantly one-sided towards Norse settlers and the archaeological research has not been done in the area that trade and commerce might have occurred with native populations. This could be a missed opportunity for the researchers as the Norse were very well known for their trade practices within new territories and perhaps this could be an area where we would have some new opportunity to support their voyage. Even the DNA research could be expanded. The article cited
admits that the study only looked at around 80 people which is very low for such a study to be conducted. A larger study would be needed in order to find better and more conclusive answers. While the topic of Norse voyages to North America has always been controversial it does seem to be have always been accepted that they did venture this far west.

Looking at the research we are able to dig much deeper than we could by simply trying to answer questions. Getting down to the way research was conducted and in such ways that could have been missed we are able to determine how useful will a source be to a topic. The research within this topic’s frame has been very helpful in looking at how other historians have come into this topic but there are some missing pieces to this puzzle. Looking at the DNA testing was a useful element due to the new and modern take on the possibility of the question. Also we get a chance to see other methods of research that would not have been conducted 50 years ago. Having a university study based on scientific research done at such a level adds legitimacy to a project that will allow others to take a more serious note.

While the purpose of this paper is not to answer the question of why the Norse did not found a permanent settlement in North America or whether or not they even came. The true purpose was to look at the way those who have discussed of the topic. The information that has been presented is important to the debate but it has not been able to truly clarify how much more information is truly needed. As mentioned earlier in the paper there could be a reason for genetic testing in some Native American populations with possible connections to Icelandic DNA and Native American DNA in Icelandic Populations. Cataloguing the very similar stories that have been handed down from generation to generation within multiple tribes would also give a good starting point for researchers to begin looking deeper into the possibility of Norse explorers on the Canadian shores. A wider range of sources that could be added would prove immensely useful in telling the story of other voyages if they occurred. Backed by scientific methods these sources would be able to answer more questions with greater accuracy than they have been up to this point. For now much of the stories are just that and for the most part it is mostly speculation.

Bibliography


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