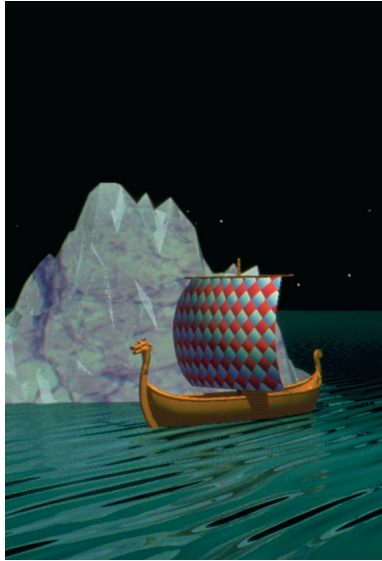


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NORSE AMERICA

Study Guide
by
Thomas H. McGovern

NORSE AMERICA

56 minutes

Produced & Directed by T.W. Timreck
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Studies Center at Smithsonian Institution

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NORSE AMERICA

Study Guide

by

Thomas H. McGovern

North Atlantic Biocultural Organization

Anthropology Department

Hunter College, CUNY

695 Park Ave., New York, N.Y. 10021

SYNOPSIS

Norse America introduces the viewer to the latest findings on the Viking-Age voyages across the North Atlantic to North America. It places these medieval transatlantic travels in the wider context of prehistoric maritime adaptations in North Atlantic Europe, and illustrates the continuity of seafaring traditions from Neolithic to early medieval times. The remarkable Norse voyages across the North Atlantic were part of the Scandinavian expansion between AD 750-1000 that saw Viking raids on major European monasteries and cities, long distance trading ventures into central Asia, and the settlement of the offshore islands of the North Atlantic. The impact of Viking raiders on the centers of early medieval literacy are comparatively well-documented in monastic annals and contemporary histories, but the Norse movement westwards into the Atlantic is recorded mainly by modern archaeology and by the semi-fictional sagas produced by the Norsemen themselves.

While many of the sagas describe events of the 9th and 10th centuries (complete with memorable dialog and very specific descriptions of scenery), they were first written down in the 13th-14th centuries in Iceland. Historians have long debated the accuracy of the sagas, and modern research has helped to unravel the motives of those who commissioned their writing down several hundred years after the events they recount. Modern saga scholarship dates to the publication of complete editions by Rafn in the late 19th century, and this publication

sparked extensive research and speculation about pre-Columbian Norse voyages to America. In 1892 the first of a series of reproduction Viking ships was sailed across the Atlantic from Norway, demonstrating that clinker-built wooden vessels of Norse design were capable of the crossing. Subsequent voyages by reproduction ships (such as the *Saga Siglar* featured in this film) have allowed testing of possible sailing techniques and navigation, and have become a form of experimental archaeology rather than pure adventure.

The publication of the sagas also began an archaeological hunt for the traces of possible pre-Columbian European settlements in the Northeast. Unfortunately many early digs were poorly controlled and destroyed many Native American and Colonial period sites in a fruitless quest for Viking remains. In the first half of the 20th century, archaeological work on Norse settlement sites in Greenland, Iceland, and the northern British Isles provided a great deal of important evidence on the settlement, subsistence, and way of life of the Norse colonizers in these islands, but no definite traces of a Vinland colony were found. Finally in the early 1960's, Norwegian scholars Helge and Anne Stine Ingstad discovered and partially excavated a definite Norse site at the northern tip of Newfoundland at L'Anse aux Meadows. Fully excavated by a Parks Canada team led by Birgitta Wallace, the L'Anse aux Meadows settlement is firmly dated by characteristic Viking period artifacts and house types (and by over 100 radiocarbon dates clustering around AD 1000) and appears to represent a short-lived base camp rather than a full farmstead like those found in Greenland and Iceland.

Since the 1960's numerous exotic artifacts have been found in Thule Inuit sites in Arctic Canada, including Inuit carvings of Norsemen and metal objects of many types. A single Norse coin recovered from the Native American Goddard Site in the Gulf of Maine probably entered Indian or Inuit trading networks sometime before its final deposit. These scattered finds may reflect later, unrecorded Norse voyages to North

America, as well as continued contact with the surviving Norse colony in West Greenland (which itself became extinct ca. AD 1450-1500).

While much remains to be learned about the Norse Vinland voyages and contact with Native American groups, it is already clear that the Viking Age transatlantic ventures were very different in character from the Columbian voyages 500 years later. The failure of the first attempt at European settlement in the New World was to provide Native American cultures another half-millennium of independent development, and provides an intriguing case for comparison with the very different results of Columbus' journeys.

BASIC OBJECTIVES

- 1) Gain an understanding of the different types of evidence for the Norse voyages to Vinland: legends, sagas, historic records, maps, archaeology, place names, and modern sailing experiments. Develop a critical appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of these different sources of evidence.
- 2) Develop a sense of the rich North West European maritime background to the Norse voyages, and the diversity of the peoples involved in the Viking voyages (Scandinavians, Celtic peoples, Native Americans). The Vikings drew on a rich, multi-stranded seafaring tradition with deep roots back into prehistory. Contacts between the Norse and their contemporaries was not restricted to Viking raids, and cultures influenced each other in complex ways.
- 3) Consider the interaction of global climate, human technology (especially seafaring), and settlement expansion during the early Middle Ages. Cycles of climate change interact in unpredictable ways with developments in human history, sometimes expanding human possibilities, sometimes restricting them.

4) Place the Viking voyages in a cultural and environmental context, so that they can be seen not as mysterious events associated with unexplained stones and runes, but as part of historical processes subject to scientific investigation and systematic research.

5) Appreciate the history of historical and archaeological scholarship in the North Atlantic region, with its tradition of international research and growing inter-disciplinary focus on northern maritime adaptation.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1) What sort of records were the Norse sagas? How were they written down and preserved? How does this process affect modern historians' use of these accounts? How can we explain differences between saga accounts of Vinland and the archeological finds at places like L'Anse aux Meadows?

2) The two Vinland Sagas (Eirik the Red's Saga and the Greenlanders' Saga) present slightly different accounts of the voyages. Eirik's saga places great emphasis on the role of Lief Eiriksson in the exploration of Vinland, and in the introduction of Christianity to Greenland. Why do many modern saga scholars suspect the less colorful Greenlander's saga may be both earlier and closer to the original oral traditions?

3) Compare/ contrast the royal funding & support for Columbus' voyages and the "family affairs" of the Viking colonizers. What effect did the centralized planning and capital investment of the 15th century have on the outcome of the Columbian voyages? Consider the different social and economic structures supporting European seafaring at the beginning and at the end of the Middle Ages.

4) What are some of the problems of preservation and discovery that limit the archaeological record in the North Atlantic area? What sorts of human activity are likely to leave clear

traces in the archaeological record? What sorts of activities are inherently hard to detect through archaeology?

5) Contrast the Nordic wooden ship building tradition (based ultimately on the forest resources of the continental Scandinavian homeland) with the skin boat traditions of the Celtic North Atlantic islands and the rest of the circumpolar north. Why was timber a valued resource of Vinland?

6) Discuss Native American resistance to Norse colonization. Why were the Vikings so successful militarily against the settled peoples of England and the continent, but faced defeat in Vinland? Why was the military outcome different after AD 1500? Smallpox rather than gunpowder may be the key here.

7) The world view of the Norse voyagers was very different from that of Columbus (who thought he was crossing a wide sea to reach China). Discuss the effect of these two very different sets of expectations on the resulting voyages.

8) Compare the culture contact between the Norse and the northern Celtic world (Picts, Scots, Irish) and their contact with the Native Americans.

9) Discuss the impact of the full publication of the Vinland Sagas by Rafn in the late 19th century. How did these books start the story of research into Norse America? How did 19th century antiquarianism and the saga evidence for pre-Columbian transatlantic contact combine with other trends in late 19th century America to produce a rash of investigations like the Mystery Hill excavations?

10) Discuss the circumpolar zone as a route for culture contact and exchange. What sort of conclusions can be drawn from Bob McGhee's find of a Central Asian bronze bowl in the Canadian arctic?

11) Why was it fortunate that the unique L'Anse aux Meadows

site was discovered in the late 20th century rather than in the early days of the Norse America search in the late 19th century? Consider how archaeological excavation techniques affect the evidence recovered. While 19th and early 20th century documentary history may remain authoritative, archaeological reports from this period are drastically outmoded. Discuss the implications for combined, multi-disciplinary research projects.

VOCABULARY

ARCHAEOLOGY: The recovery and analysis of material evidence for past human behavior. Techniques of excavation, survey, dating, and laboratory analysis have steadily improved since the beginning of archaeology as a separate discipline in the 19th century. In North America, most archaeology is taught in anthropology departments while in most of Europe archaeology is either a separate department or is affiliated with history.

BASE CAMP: A substantial, but temporary center for foraging and exploration. The single known Norse site in Canada at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland is thought to have been a base camp used for exploration of the Gulf of St. Lawrence region.

BEOTHUCK - Native American people inhabiting Newfoundland, bearing a strong maritime hunting and fishing tradition extending back thousands of years. Became extinct following European colonization of Newfoundland in the 16th century.

BRENDAN: St. Brendan was a semi-mythical Irish abbot whose legends contain many stories of seafaring on the "Western Ocean". Brendan may be mythic, but his tale reflects a longstanding Celtic seafaring tradition. While Celtic monks were mentioned inhabiting Iceland and Faroe before Norse settlement, their traces have not been found archaeologically.

CIRCUMPOLAR : The band of sea and land that rings the poles, most often used to describe the arctic and sub-arctic zone of the northern hemisphere. The arctic circumpolar ring has two major water gaps, the Bering Sea and the North Atlantic. Both have been the site for ancient maritime cultures and complex cycles of colonization and exchange.

GODDARD SITE: Native American trading site on the Gulf of Maine excavated by the Maine State Museum, and containing over 30,000 artifacts- including one Norse coin. Finds at the Goddard site indicate a Native American trading network stretching from the Hudson to Labrador, and the coin need not indicate Norse presence in Maine.

KNARR: Norse merchant ship, built for sailing and ocean voyages rather than warfare, much rounder than the famous longships built for speed and fighting. The Saga Siglar pictured in the film is a ship of this type.

L'ANSE AUX MEADOWS: The only definite Norse archaeological site in North America, discovered by Helge Ingstad and excavated by Norwegian and Canadian archaeologists. This site includes an iron smithy, three large dwelling halls, and evidence of boat repair. It lacks the hay barns and animal shelters characteristic of Norse farms in other parts of the North Atlantic, and is interpreted by Canadian excavator Birgitta Wallace as a briefly occupied base camp for exploration.

NORSE: Archaeological term for the ethnically diverse people colonizing the North Atlantic islands ca., AD 800-1000. While speaking a Scandinavian language and making use of Nordic breakthrough in ship building and navigation, these colonizers drew on many of the peoples of the British Isles as well as Scandinavia. In archaeological terms, their settlement of the North Atlantic is divided into Viking Period (AD 800-1100) and the Late Norse Period (AD 1100-1500).

PICTS: Celtic people inhabiting most of modern Scotland and the Northern Isles during the Dark Ages and early Middle Ages. Affected by both the Norse raiders and colonists from the NE and the Scotii (originally Irish) colonists from the SW, the Pictish kingdoms were eventually absorbed into the unified Scotland of the Middle Ages..

THULE: Native American arctic adapted people directly ancestral to the modern Inuit. Contacted the Norse in Canada and in Greenland. Replaced the Norse settlement in Greenland ca. 1450-1500 AD.

NOTE:

To learn more about the peoples of the North Atlantic and their interaction with land, climate, and resources, contact the NABO (North Atlantic Biocultural Organization) research cooperative. Address:

Sophia Perdikaris
NABO
Anthropology Department
Hunter College CUNY
695 Park Ave
New York, NY 10021
Search for NABO on the WWW.

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