

THE VINELAND-EXCURSIONS OF THE ANCIENT  
SCANDINAVIANS

BY

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1883.

Before having the honour of giving a short account of the early discovery of America by the Scandinavians, I must be permitted to remark, that the greater part of what I am going to relate here we may take for granted to be known to Scandinavian historians and archæologists. As, however, foreign scientists can less easily avail themselves of the original sources, the old sagas, and as the knowledge of foreigners of the discovery of America before Columbus, especially the Scandinavians' Vineland-excursions, must be founded on an old work: "Antiquitates Americanæ", I believe that a critical review of the facts related in the original sagas will not be out of place in this assembly.

The 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries were, as is well known, a period of great naval expeditions, discoveries, and conquests, undertaken principally by Spain and Portugal. The 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and, to some extent, the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries were of similar importance to the Scandinavian countries, and numerous viking-fleets left their

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homes to make conquests and to gain spoil and glory on foreign shores<sup>1</sup>. Normandy and England had to submit to the dominion of the Danes, Ireland and Scotland felt the weight of the Norsemen's swords, and Swedish emigrants went eastward into Russia, where they formed strongholds in Novgorod and Kijev<sup>2</sup>. Distant Iceland, which perhaps was discovered first by Irish monks<sup>3</sup>, was afterwards colonized by Norwegians<sup>4</sup>, and from thence Erik the Red went, after previous explorations, in the year 986 to South Greenland, where he settled in Brattahlid<sup>5</sup>. Also the western coast of Greenland was partly colonized, and the finding of a small runic-stone<sup>6</sup>, northwest of Upernivik, is an eloquent evidence that the explorations of the settlers extended far into the arctic Zone. From southern Greenland originated then the discovery of a great part of the Atlantic coast of North-America, and it is an account of this discovery, founded on the statements of the sagas, especially on the saga of Erik the Red, which I now have the pleasure to place before you. That the old accounts do not always agree is almost a matter of course, but, on the other hand, it must be acknowledged, that they both strongly confirm each other, and in all essential particulars give us the same information concerning the Scandinavian pre-Columbian discovery of the New World.

Among the colonists who accompanied Erik the Red to Greenland, was a man named Herjulf. When his son Bjarne<sup>7</sup> came back to Iceland, after a visit to Norway, and learned that his father had gone to Greenland, he again went afloat to find him, and discovered on this westward voyage a distant richly-wooded country, on which, however, he did not land. Afterwards he reached Greenland with a south-westerly wind, and remained with his father till the death of the latter.

When Bjarne later, after another visit to Norway, returned to Greenland, there was much talk about expeditions of discovery. Leif<sup>8</sup>, the son of Erik the Red, bought his ship, hired 35 men, and put to sea with his companions, among whom was a German named Tyrker. Finally they reached a coast, where they landed. There was no grass, but large snow-covered mountains everywhere higher up in the country; between the mountains and

the sea it looked like a large stony plateau. Leif called the country *Helluland*. They sailed on, and found another country, where they also landed. This country was flat and covered with forests; there were sandy regions, and a low beach. Leif named it *Markland*. At last they reached land with a north-easterly wind, and steered into a sound. It was very shallow during ebb-tide, and the ship ran aground. When they got it afloat again, they steered through a river into a lake, where they anchored. Here they remained during the winter, and built large houses. They found splendid salmon in the river, and in the winter there was no frost, so that cattle did not need to be kept under cover. On the shortest day, the sun was above the horizon from half past seven to half past four. Leif divided his men into two parties, and made them take turns in watching the house and exploring the country. One evening Tyrker was missing. Leif went out with some of the people to look for him. They soon found him, and Leif immediately perceived that he was not in his right senses. He spoke German at first, rolling his eyes and making faces; then he spoke Scandinavian. "I have found vines and grapes" said Tyrker. "Is it true?" said Leif. "Certainly, it is" — the former answered — "I was born in a country, where neither vines nor grapes are wanting". When spring came, they sailed away with a cargo of timber and grapes, and Leif called the country *Vineland*. Then he returned to Brattahlid, having gained both riches and renown.

Thus the saga of Erik the Red, which, in geographical respects, appears to me the best, tells us about the discovery of America by Leif in the year 1000 A. D. The same saga subsequently speaks of other voyages to Vineland<sup>9</sup>, — by Leif's brother Thorvald and the rich Icelander Thorfinn Karlsefne, also by Leif's sister Freydis, with her husband and the two Icelanders Helge and Finboge. When we compare these accounts with the saga of Thorfinn Karlsefne<sup>10</sup>, we obtain further information, not only with respect to the natural conditions of Vineland, but also about the inhabitants, the so called Skrællings. The country is, on the whole, described as fine, although there were sandy regions. The winter brought no frost, and the cattle,

which they had brought with them, could be on the pasture all the year round. There were magnificent forests, abounding with game, and rivers rich in fish; grapes and wheat grew spontaneously. The natives (the Skrællings) were short, dusky people, with broad cheeks and coarse hair. They lived in mud-huts, and used skin-boats, "over which poles (i. e. oars) were swung". They carried on barter with the Scandinavians, and exchanged furs for red cloth and food prepared with milk. Sometimes hostilities broke out, in which no doubt the stalwart and well-armed Norsemen remained victors, but Leif's brother Thorvald lost his life in one of these strifes. During their visits to Vineland the Scandinavians built loghouses (búðir) and subsisted, partly at least, on the produce of the chase and fishing. After having remained there for a shorter or longer time, (generally for 2 or 3 years) they sailed home to Greenland, with a cargo of furs, timber, and grapes. At a later period bishop Erik<sup>11</sup> is mentioned as going from Greenland to Vineland in the year 1121, and, even in the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Greenland ships came to Iceland and Norway after having visited Markland<sup>12</sup>. That the Vineland excursions were also made subjects of discussion in Denmark is proved, plainly enough, by a remark of Adam Bremensis<sup>13</sup>, relative to what he has heard from the Danish king Svend Estridson: „*Præterea unam adhuc insulam recitavit a multis in eo repertam oceano, quæ dicitur Vinland, eo quod ibi vites sponte nascantur, vinum optimum ferentes. Nam et fruges ibi non seminatas habundare, non fabulosa opinione, sed certa comperimus relatione Danorum*“.

The celebrated American historian Bancroft says in his „History of the United States“, that the patriotism of an Icelandic historian has certainly awarded to the ancient Scandinavians the honour of being the first discoverers of America, but that no importance can be attached to the half mythological sagas<sup>14</sup>. With respect to this view, I cannot agree with Mr. Bancroft. If the Scandinavians in their open ships (something like the boats of northern Norway) could sail to Iceland, and from there to Greenland, which is a fact founded not only on the accounts of the sagas, but also on the monuments and antiquities which have been found<sup>15</sup>, there is no reason whatever to doubt

the statement of the sagas, when they add, that the Greenland settlers visited certain regions of the North-American Atlantic coast. What is stated about the courses: S.W. and S. going out, N. and N.E. returning home, agrees perfectly with this view, and what is said about Helluland, with its desolate stone-plateau, as well as what is said about Markland (situated farther south) with its large forests, corresponds so well with Labrador and Nova Scotia, that we have full evidence of the truth of the ancient accounts in the physical conditions of these countries. Vineland, situated most to the south, bears no less resemblance to certain warmer parts of the Atlantic coast of the United States. On the whole coast, the tide is very strong<sup>16</sup>; the coast, especially toward the south, has large sandy plains; large forests can (or could formerly) be found; maize and wild grapes are indigenous in these regions, and it is not difficult to point out places where the winter is so mild that it brings little or no frost. It must be admitted, that the natives, found by the Scandinavians in Vineland, were Esquimaux but these people are still found on the northern coast of Labrador; and for that matter they may have extended farther south nine centuries ago, especially as we must suppose, according to the sagas, that the "red man" had not yet entered these regions. From what is stated above, it seems to me that Mr. Bancroft's doubt is entirely unauthorized. What the sagas tell about the physical conditions of Vineland corresponds remarkably well with the nature of certain parts of the Atlantic coast of the United States, and, just on account of this, I consider the visits of the Scandinavians to these countries as indisputable.

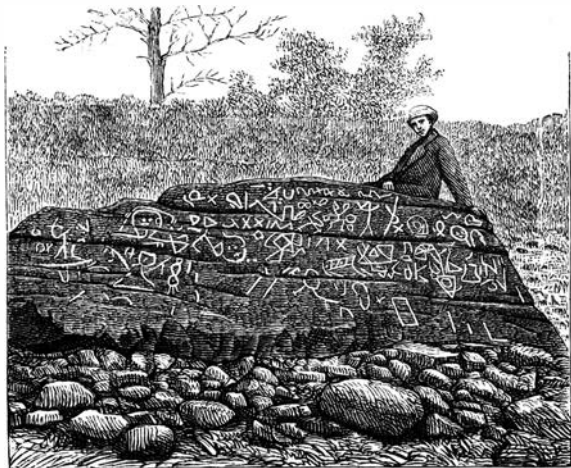
It may, however, be quite exceptionally, that the Transatlantic voyages of the ancient Scandinavians are called in question. With reference to the accounts of the sagas, it has been admitted long ago in Scandinavia that such expeditions have really taken place, but, in identifying the localities mentioned in the sagas with corresponding ones on the Transatlantic coast, I believe that the effort has not always been crowned with success. That Helluland corresponds to Labrador, and that Markland is the same as Nova Scotia, appears to me quite certain. On

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the other hand, I do not believe that the position which has been assigned to Vineland, can any longer be adhered to. On a cursory view of the case, it certainly does not appear so, and the position of Vineland even gives the impression that it might be fixed with astronomical accuracy. In the saga of Erik the Red it is stated, that the sun was above the horizon, on the shortest day of the year from half past seven to half past four, and, as in fact a geographical latitude of  $41\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$  corresponds to this, it has been supposed that the position of Vineland could with certainty be assigned to the present Rhode Island and Massachusetts<sup>17</sup>. But just here, I believe, a mistake has been committed which I wish to be allowed to explain. If the geographical latitude has to be found from the length of the day, it is an indispensable condition, that the length of the day can be decided on with great accuracy. For this purpose very accurate time-keepers are required, which, however, the ancient Vineland-travellers entirely wanted. If sunrise really took place at seven o'clock, it would correspond to  $31^{\circ}$  geographical latitude, but if it took place at eight, the latitude would be  $49^{\circ}$ . In other words, we can, on this supposition, look for Vineland on the whole coast from New-Foundland to Florida; and even with a mistake of only a quarter of an hour, there will be free scope of many degrees of latitude. Neither does what is said about the length of time used to sail from Markland to Vineland help us over the difficulties, for the saga of Erik the Red reports, that it took two days<sup>18</sup>, while, according to the saga of Thorfinn Karlsefne, it took a long time ("they sailed southward for a long time")<sup>19</sup>, and I believe, therefore, that it is to the climatic and botanical informations imparted to us by the sagas that we must look for help to form a somewhat reasonable conception of the position of Vineland. When even not only magnificent forests and grapes, and wheat growing spontaneously are mentioned, but when we also learn that the winter was so mild that it brought no frost, we must (even if the last assertion cannot be understood quite literally) decidedly think of countries further south than Massachusetts, and I should prefer, especially on account

of the winter-temperature, to seek the good Vineland in the present Virginia<sup>20</sup>.

If furthermore the question be, to prove the authority of the old sagas, and to decide on the position of Vineland, it must consequently be very interesting to be able to point out, on the Atlantic coast of North-America, monuments and antiquities, which may be proved to be of Scandinavian origin. It is possibly well known that it has been thought such monuments might be found, and many certainly still believe that they really exist<sup>21</sup>. There is no doubt, however, that we here meet with a great mistake, the almost humorous character of which may be explained by the fact, that it originated during the less critical



The Dighton-Rock (from a photograph).

and more fantastic period of Scandinavian archæology. The celebrated Dighton-Rok on the river Taunton in Massachusetts, on which it was supposed Scandinavian runes could be read, is, according to a letter from Mr. WORSAAE to Mr. RAU, dated Nov. 1st 1878, without doubt of Indian origin<sup>22</sup>, (a view in which I for my part perfectly agree with him after having seen a photograph of the rock). The much mentioned church ruin in Newport, Rhode Island, has also changed quality, and reveals itself in our



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days as the basement of an old windmill from the British colonial time<sup>23</sup>. I do not know, that, on the North-American Atlantic coast any monuments or remains have been found which can with certainty be referred to the ancient Scandinavians. I even venture to affirm that it does not appear very likely any such will be discovered in the future, for, as far as I can judge, the Scandinavians have not at all, in those remote times, founded colonies in Vineland, but only made shorter or longer visits there.

Since the publication of “*Antiquitates Americanæ*” transatlantic Scandinavian colonies have been mentioned both in our own and in foreign literature<sup>24</sup>, but I have searched in the sagas in vain for information which might confirm the existence of such. While Iceland was colonized, even if very thinly, and also parts of Greenland, the sagas only mention voyages to America, especially to Vineland, examinations of the coasts, and sojourns of several years, but they do not mention any real settlement. They tell us indeed, that women sometimes took part in these excursions, and about Thorfinn Karlsefne it is said expressly, that he brought with him all sorts of cattle, “as he intended to colonize the country”<sup>25</sup>, but he did not accomplish this design. After having remained there for several years, and after severe battles with the Skrællings, Karlsefne and his men considered it the safest plan to return to Greenland<sup>26</sup>. When RÆFN thinks that Bishop Erik went to Vineland in the year 1121 to strengthen the resident Scandinavians in the Christian faith<sup>27</sup> (let us remember the “church” in Newport), it must be remarked, that nothing is said about this prelate, but that he went to Vineland in the above mentioned year. I have not been able to find any information concerning the existence of Scandinavian colonists, and the intention of the voyage might possibly have been to preach the gospel to the Skrællings. I do not venture to deny that an Irish colony was founded about the year 1000 in the mysterious Hvítramannaland (according to M. BEAUVOIS<sup>28</sup> the regions around the St. Lawrence-river), where Are Marson was baptized, and, like Bjørn Asbrandson, detained for life. But if we have to refer to the accounts of the sagas, — and we can refer to nothing else — then I believe, that we must give up the

thought of Scandinavian colonies in Vineland. Partly accidentally, partly from love of discovery and renown, the settlers from Greenland have found their way to Vineland, and for a long period made voyages there to procure timber and other requisites — this is unquestionable —, but it is certainly not necessary to add, that this does not entitle us to speak of colonization.

I am now at the close of my investigations, and beg you kindly to accept what I have been able to offer you. In spite of the deficiency of colonies and monuments, the Scandinavians can assuredly be awarded the honour of having discovered large tracts of the American continent, centuries before Columbus, but the small number of the discoverers did not admit of any colonization, and the expeditions, which issued from remote Greenland, and which, in any case, were but little known outside Scandinavia, had no influence on the course of History. A later re-discovery by more powerful nations, great conquests and extensive settlements were needed to form a bridge between the Old and the New World, but still it is a fact, that the countries in which the culture of Europe and the energy of the Anglo-Americans in modern times have created states and populous cities, were frequented, nine centuries ago, by the hardy heroes of ancient Scandinavia.

#### NOTES.

- 1) Steenstrup: *Normannerne*. 1—4. 1876—1882.
- 2) Thomsen: *Origin of the ancient Russ.* 1877.
- 3) Peschel: *Geschichte der Erdkunde*. 1865 p. 74, 75.
- 4) *Grønlands historiske Mindesmærker*. III. 1845 p. 899. The first Norwegian who settled in Iceland was Ingolf; the settlement took place in the year 875.
- 5) *Erik den Rødes Saga* (*Grønlands hist. Mindesm.* I. 1838 p. 205 & 207).
- 6) *Grønlands hist. Mindesm.* III. p. 843.
- 7) *Erik den Rødes Saga* (*Grønlands hist. Mindesm.* I. p. 209—215).
- 8) *ibid.* p. 215—227.
- 9) *ibid.* p. 227—253.
- 10) *Thorfinn Karlsefnes Saga* (*Grønlands hist. Mindesm.* I. p. 407—443).
- 11) *Grønlands hist. Mindesm.* III. p. 903.
- 12) *ibid.* p. 907.
- 13) *Adam Bremensis*. Lib. IV. Cap. 247. (*Pertz: Monumenta Germaniæ historica*. Tome VII. p. 386).

- <sup>14</sup>) Bancroft: History of the United States. I. 1839 p. 5 & 6.
- <sup>15</sup>) K. Steenstrup's treatise.
- <sup>16</sup>) The high tide on the Atlantic coast of the United States is well known, and the narrative of Leif's discoveries even indicates this fact; the ship was aground during ebb-tide, so that the sea appeared far off, and the crew could run ashore. (Erik den Rødes Saga: Grønlands hist. Mindesm. I. p. 219).
- <sup>17</sup>) Rafn even decides the latitude to be  $41^{\circ} 24' 10''$  (Grønlands hist. Mindesm. I. p. 269 and Annaler for nordisk Oldkyndighed 1841 p. 26). According to this, Vineland would be the present Massachusetts and Rhode Island (Grønlands hist. Mindesm. III. p. 885, 886).
- <sup>18</sup>) Grønlands hist. Mindesm. I. p. 217, 219.
- <sup>19</sup>) Grønlands hist. Mindesm. I. p. 411 and 413. Only after sailing a long time southward from Markland, the spies who were sent out brought wheat & grapes from the country.
- <sup>20</sup>) Even in Boston ( $42^{\circ}$  N. L.) the mean temperature of the winter is  $-2^{\circ}$  R., in New York ( $41^{\circ}$ )  $0^{\circ}$ , and in both places the winter brings continual, and occasionally hard frost. Only on reaching Virginia, where Richmond ( $37^{\circ}$  N. L. the Lat. of Syracuse in Sicily) has a mean temperature during winter of  $+2^{\circ}$  R., one may with some right speak of a mild winter without frost. (Grisebach: Vegetation der Erde. II. 1872 p. 585).
- <sup>21</sup>) Rafn: Antiquitates Americanæ, 1837. The same: Den gamle Bygning i Newport (Annaler for nordisk Oldkyndighed, 1841 p. 37) Gravier: Découv. de l'Amérique p. l. Normands, 1874. The same: Roc de Dighton (Congrès des Américanistes. Nancy 1875. I. p. 166).
- <sup>22</sup>) Rau: The Dighton-Rock inscription (Magazine of American History. 1879). Bancroft told Fr. Løhr, that he had visited Writing Rock (Dighton Rock) and had come to the conclusion, that it could not be used as evidence for the presence of the Scandinavians in America. (Peschel: Geschichte der Erdkunde. 1865 p. 78, anm. 4). Probably this has contributed to make Bancroft so sceptical about the discovery of America by the Scandinavians before Columbus.
- <sup>23</sup>) Rau: Observations on the Dighton-Rock inscription (The American Antiquarian. 1878).
- <sup>24</sup>) See f. inst. Rafn: Annaler for nordisk Oldkyndighed, 1841 p. 48 and Beauvois: Colonies européennes du Markland et de l'Escociland (Congrès des Américanistes. Luxembourg 1877. I. p. 174).
- <sup>25</sup>) Grønlands hist. Mindesmærker. I. p. 239.
- <sup>26</sup>) *ibid.* p. 431.
- <sup>27</sup>) Annaler for nordisk Oldkyndighed. 1841 p. 32 and Antiquar. Tidsskr. 1861 p. 13.
- <sup>28</sup>) Découverte du nouveau monde par les Irlandais (Congrès des Américanistes. Nancy 1875. I. p. 41). Grønlands hist. Mindesm. I. p. 155. *ibid.* p. 769—79.