

### Vikings in America

by Graeme Davis  
Birlinn, 2009



By now we all know that Scandinavian settlers reached Greenland in the late 900s and built settlements there that endured for more than four hundred years. Since the 1960s, we've known that the literary accounts of Greenlanders' voyages to America are at least broadly true: the remains of a settlement at the northern tip of Newfoundland have been excavated and there is no question that it was of Scandinavian design.

Is that all to the story, though? Was Scandinavian interaction with North America limited to a few voyages between Greenland and L'Anse aux Meadows? Or, over the course of those four centuries, did the settlers in the Greenland colonies journey more widely in what's now Canada—trips which did not happen to get recorded on calfskin manuscripts back in Iceland?

Graeme Davis sets out to answer this question in this book. Davis has a Ph.D. from St. Andrews University and has previously written on Germanic linguistics and the early history of Orkney and Shetland. The book starts with a summary of Scandinavian expansion across the North Atlantic from roughly 800 to 1000 AD. Then Davis turns to his real questions—where did the Greenlanders travel to? He reviews the evidence of Greenlandic contacts with Newfoundland and “Vinland,” Ellesmere Island and the High Arctic, Hudson Bay, and with Dorset Culture and Inuit settlers.

His presentation is clear, forceful (to the point of

being overconfident), set out in easy-to-read language, and relatively even-handed. The book is very well written, keeps the text down to 180 pages, and includes helpful maps and illustrations.

For me, among Davis's most interesting points were that there is evidence that the Greenlanders made summer visits to collect eider down far to the north on Ellesmere Island, where remains of Nordic-style cairns and eider duck shelters have been found. Another of his points is that L'Anse aux Meadows is probably not the settlement mentioned in the surviving saga literature, that the site itself gives evidence that voyages to America were more numerous and wide-ranging than the literary remains suggest, and that the Greenlanders' most pressing reason to sail to America was to collect timber.

Davis doesn't hesitate to plunge into controversial and speculative topics, such as the Kensington runestone (which came to attention in Minnesota in the late 1800s and bears an inscription allegedly left by Swedish and Norwegian explorers in the 1360s), the Newport Tower (a stone structure in Rhode Island that may well be from the 1600s but that some have thought pre-colonial) and the Vinland Map (an early European map which shows the North Atlantic continent but which many think is a hoax). Davis is scornful of the scholars who reject out of hand the idea that Scandinavians could have made it to Minnesota or Rhode Island, but demanding in the standard of proof he would require from those who want to argue for genuineness. He is, however, fanatically open-minded about the possibilities of finding more evidence of Scandinavian contact with North America—and given recent the history of discovery, that seems like a wise stance to me.

I would like to be able to praise his approach as critical and sceptical overall, but Davis himself goes a bit off the deep end in some of his speculations. I wasn't convinced by his suggestion that a year-round European settlement on Ellesmere Island survived after the end of the Greenland colony (page 101). His argument that the word America derives from the Scandinavian word merki didn't convince me either. His certainty that we will eventually find evidence that the Vikings reached Minnesota (p. 129) seems a little too open-minded to me. I also thought the idea that the Narragansett Indians of Rhode Island gained tubercu-

losis resistance by intermarrying with Scandinavian settlers (pp. 160-165) a bit more far-fetched than he does, and his figure of “tens of thousands” of Vikings who made the journey to North America (p. 5) seems a little high. However, I think Davis is right to urge us not to stifle research by rejecting such ideas in a knee-jerk way.

Davis footnotes his text, but not well enough. The reader who wants to confirm his assertions or do further reading on a given topic may feel frustrated. He mentions recent DNA studies of Victoria Island Inuit to see if they had partly Scandinavian ancestors (p. 127) but provides no actual reference. We are told that Columbus spent the winter of 1477-1478 in Ólafsvík on Snæfellsnes (p. 5), but the evidence cited for this assertion feels rather vague and I learned elsewhere that it is controversial. We learn about the apparent survival of Dorset Culture communities in Hudson Bay as late as 1902 (p. 134), but get incomplete suggestions for further reading. Davis cites explorers' reports of Scandinavian remains on Ellesmere Island, but no recent reviews. Despite his saying that he wanted to keep the book “free from a heavy critical apparatus,” the lack of references weakens his credibility. Davis is a linguist, not an archaeologist or anthropologist, and my confidence in his ability to make judgements from physical evidence is a little shaky.

Overall though, we can thank Davis for pointing out how patchy the archaeological work in northern Canada has been, how unreliable the sagas are as a historical source, and how little we can rule out about Greenlanders' contacts with the American continent. He convinced me that there's a distinct possibility that more evidence of contact will be discovered in the next decades, as it was in the last. He gets credit for trying to answer fascinating questions in a popular but critical way. It would be nice if Davis had worked a little harder to boost the credibility of the book, and some statements need to be taken with a grain of salt. Vikings in America should be balanced with other books on the Canadian Arctic (I liked Robert McGhee's *The Last Imaginary Place*). But I still recommend it to anyone with a casual interest in the medieval North Atlantic. 🍷

### Fist And Shout Yet another weekend in the life of Reykjavík's lovable professional hipster



I went to Bakkus' one-year birthday celebration. I was to help with the decorations and set up a kissing booth.

I got there late, seeing as there was a woman in my bed when I woke up. The party started at four but I was too fucked from the previous night to start drinking. Instead, I went to the pricey Sushimiōjan and got vegetable sushi sans cheese and egg cake. Every time I go there they screw up my order at least twice. If this had been in Amerikkka the meal would've been free. Nice people though.

Then I decided to try out the veggie burger at Hamborgarabúllan. It was really good, but it was definitely missing something. It was still better than the food at Á Næstu Grösum. I got tired of their bland tasting food and partially cooked rice a long time ago.

When I got back Einar Sonic was playing his usual set of crowd-pleasing post-punk. Bakkus was giving away loads of free beer and whale meat. There was fish stew from Ísafjörður on offer and free face painting. No bouncy castle though. It was like a less exhausting version of Eistnaflug or a Gathering of the Juggalos minus the meth.

I think I kissed around fifteen people that night. At least four of them were women. Some even came for seconds. One pervert wanted one for free. Felt dirty at first, but then got used to it. I'm thinking about prostituting myself full time if this writing thing doesn't work out.

A lot of people lost more than their minds that night. I lost my sunglasses and, thanks to Bob Cluness, my innocence. I didn't see that many regulars as I thought I would. They were probably camping or at a touristcore concert.

Fist Fokkers created a mini-mosh on the Astroturf. Reykjavík!-lite fucked with people's heads a la Flipper or free jazz-era Black Flag. Afterwards there was a dance performance with contact mic scribbles by Slack9Bricks. Mr. Silla played next. She's by far one of the most sincere performers I've ever seen.

Later on DJ Musician set the roof on fire and Quadruplos brought the ruckus to the ladies. Fell in love with those guys when I saw them play at Crymó Gallerí.

There was a helium tank in the kissing booth. A lot of people got some shots of helium as well as a kiss. Outside I found a three-joint weed circle. I was very surprised to see a certain artist there. She still hasn't introduced herself to me. I've come to learn in my two years here that almost everybody here is high on something, and that I should stop being surprised when I see the most unlikely person snorting in the bathroom. I've also come to learn that everybody here has fucked each other.

Other than everybody feigning surprise at me rolling in the fake grass, this night is up there with Airwaves '08 and Eistnaflug '10. Afterwards a girl told me that somebody had peed on it during a performance. Still have to confirm that. 🍷

### Poetry | Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl

## Reading The Eddas (With Google Translate)



Living abroad I regularly get asked about this miraculous language I speak—Icelandic—and if it's true that we make new words for everything under the sun and can read the 13th century Eddas as easily as if we were drinking ice-cold mead in the midnight sun. Icelandic is supposed to be pure and untouched. The language that stood still, century after century, like a bee in amber, so that Icelanders could drink their skulls off with Breezers in Ibiza and brag to the world.

All of this would be sufficiently intolerable if it were true—but as a collective national deception which fosters a rampantly conservative attitude towards language it's causing infernal mayhem on a daily basis. Not only does every new generation feel less and less comfortable manoeuvring within this immovable 19th century construction we call 13th century Icelandic, but it actually generates a sort of slow, stale death where (mostly younger) people give up on adapting words to their (younger) language and pick up foreign words and sentences (primarily from English) untouched and unrecontextualised—i.e., they give up on their mother tongue.

Let me just state this clearly for the record, and let no one tell you otherwise: Icelanders can NOT read 13th century Icelandic any better than they can speak Swedish or German (i.e. a few can, most

can't). The only people who can properly read the Eddas are those who have either learned to read Old Norse or have access to the texts in modern translation—that is to say (almost) everyone who speaks any other language than Icelandic (since the myth of us understanding them relies on us pretending to be able to, modernising the texts would be tantamount to treason).

The fact is that Icelandic changed very much through the centuries and varied immensely between parts of the country (making it even harder for a modern man to read 17th century Hallgrímur Pétursson in the original than 13th century Snorri Sturluson) but all of Icelandic's peculiarities—its dialects and accents, as well as common Latin and Danish phrases—were killed off and the language homogenised and rewound by 19th century nationalist poets and scholars who teamed up with a Danish (!) linguist with a fetish for a 12th century Icelandic grammatical treatise. And as for neologisms; yes, we have “sími” (telephone), “sjónvarp” (TV) and “tölva” (computer)—but internet in Icelandic is just “internet”, the hood (of a car) is “húdd”, and video is “vídeó”. Every other word is Nordic by origin, and yet conservationists forbid Scandinavianisms like “ske” (happen) but not “bill” (car) or “jörð” (ground). These people are perhaps shallow enough to think that their rules make sense—and arrogant enough

to convince others.

Neologisms are fine—they are creative and fun, and we should have shitloads of them. But you can't boss around a language like this. If Icelandic is to survive (let alone thrive) as a language it has to have an enjoyable presence, it has to be an enjoyable experience for the people talking and hearing it. The moment a language becomes an obligation it ceases to induce anyone with passion—except, of course, for the irritable pedagogue who feels he or she can constantly “teach” others how they should speak their own mother tongue. Icelandic, just as any language, is (mostly) comprised of foreign words, and our grammar—like our sayings, idioms and proverbs—makes variably much sense. The new silly bits aren't any worse than the old, traditional silly bits. Language is, when observed up close, a very illogical thing—despite all of its inherent logic and morbid obduracy (do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself...)

In short. A people's language ruled by the fist of the eternally incensed and bitterly arrogant will become less and less wieldy with time until it no longer does the trick, until it is no longer capable of carrying the thoughts of the people, whereupon the people will move up and out, pick up and leave—adios, goodbye, nice to know ya. 🍷

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