

The Discovery of "Vinland" according to the Old
Icelandic Eiríks saga Rauða and Groenlendinga Þáttur

Hilda Radzin

I. A Survey of the Old Icelandic Language

Iceland was settled by the Norsemen who came from Norway, starting about 875 A.D. In the early period, the Icelandic language was identical with the language of western Norway. The oldest forms of the Icelandic language are found in the tenth and eleventh century poetry. This poetry has been preserved in the thirteenth century records. Greenland was settled by Icelanders c. 990 A.D. As presented in the earliest Icelandic manuscripts (c. 1150 - 1200 A.D.), the Old Icelandic language can already be distinguished from the Old Norwegian language.

II. A Survey of Early Voyages by Icelanders

The Icelanders of the old Commonwealth (930 - 1262 A.D.) made many voyages. They went to Scandinavia and the British Isles, and visited Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, and Irish courts. They settled Greenland and made voyages to North America, returning to Iceland with tales of great men.

Radzin 2

The service of Icelanders as court poets extended all over the Scandinavian lands. In a limited way, the court poet was the historian of the country.

III. A Survey of the Old Icelandic Sagas

In the Old Icelandic language, the word saga is used with reference to any kind of story, or history, whether written, or oral. The names "Icelanders' Sagas" and "Family Sagas" are generally used with reference to heroes supposed to have lived in Iceland in the tenth and eleventh centuries. These sagas present the characters vividly and show understanding of human tragedy. Very few of these sagas were written down before the thirteenth century. Some scholars have stated that these sagas were composed as early as the eleventh century and transmitted orally until written down. While some Icelanders intended to present factual history in their poetic works, others relied more on their imagination.

Radzin 3

IV. The Discovery of "Vinland" according to the Old
Icelandic Eiríks saga Rauða and
Groenlendinga Þáttur

The Eiríks saga Rauða¹ (Saga of Eirik the Red) and the Groenlendinga Þáttur² (Saga of the Greenlanders) are Old Icelandic family sagas. A great part of the events are set in the colony in Greenland. These sagas contain tales about adventurous voyages in Vinland ("Wineland"), as the Icelanders called North America, and they differ considerably in the events they present. The Eiríks saga Rauða was considered to be more reliable. The results of modern research have tended to show that the Groenlendinga Þáttur is older. According to the Groenlendinga Þáttur, Bjarni Herjólfsson sailed from Norway in 985 to join his father in Iceland. He found that Herjolf had sailed with Eirik the Red to Greenland. In 986, Bjarna, seeking to visit his father in the new colony, missed Greenland. He sighted two flat wooded areas of land. Without landing there, he returned to Greenland.

In 1001 A.D., Eirik's son Leif purchased Bjarni's

Radzin 4

ship. Then he went in search of the lands seen by Bjarni. He sailed west from Greenland and then from north to south. He discovered new land and called sections of it "Helluland" and "Markland." Then he and his men sailed for two days until they sighted land again. They sailed toward it and came to an island. From there they sailed into the sound that was between the island and the mainland. There they landed and explored thoroughly the territory to which Leif gave the name "Vinland" ("Wineland") because his German companion Tyrkir found that grapes were growing there.

According to Eiríks saga Rauða, on Leif's return from "Vinland," Thorfinn Karlsefni sailed to "Vinland." He had three ships. Leif's brothers, Thorstein and Thorvald, also took part in the exploration of "Vinland." Thorvald was killed by the natives. By 1013 A.D., three groups of Greenlanders had settled in "Vinland." Then the "Vinland" episode ended.

Radzin 5

V. The Name "Vinland"

In Leif's crew was a German whose name was Tyrkir. He went on his own to explore the new country. When he returned, he spoke for a long time in German, moving his eyes in all directions. No one could understand what he was saying. After a while, he spoke in Icelandic and said that he had found vines (vinvið) and grapes (vinber). He said that he was sure that he had found grapes. Where he was born, there were plenty of vines and grapes. Leif's men gathered grapes and vines. They decided to spend a winter in the new country and built some large houses. There was never any frost all winter. The grass hardly withered at all. In the spring, the tow-boat was filled with grapes. They took on a full cargo of timber and sailed away. Leif named the country after its wild grapes and called it "Vinland." The Old Icelandic word for "grape" is "vinber."

VI. Was There a Real "Vinland?"

There has been much discussion pertaining to the

Radzin 6

reality of "Vinland." The earliest historical statement pertaining to "Vinland" is made by Adam of Bremen in his Descriptio Insularum Aquilonis, chapter 38. He states that he heard of "Vinland" from King Swen Estridsson, who died in 1076. The land is called "Vinland" because vines grow there naturally, producing the best wine.

Voyages to America in search of timber were continued by the Greenlanders even after the Norsemen period had ended. The entry in the Skálholt Annals shows that the Greenlanders still made voyages to Markland (Newfoundland) in the fourteenth century.

Another record of a Greenlander expedition in the northern regions of North America is in the runic inscription on the island of Kingiktorsoak.

In 1961, the Norwegian explorer Helge Ingstad stated the results of his study at the excavation site on the northern part of Newfoundland, near the fishing village of L'Anse aux Meadows. The foundations of nine structures from the period of Norsemen had been found. There is no proof that the Newfoundland site was Leif Eiriksson's

Radzin 7

"Vinland."

Some evidence on Norsemen in North America comes from zoology. Zoologists have found specimens of a sea snail, *Littorina littorea*, at a site at Halifax, Nova Scotia. This sea snail is not considered to have been native during the Norsemen period. It is possible that the snail was imported from Iceland or Norway.

It has been stated that Leif Eiriksson's settlement of "Vinland" must have been in New England, if grapes could grow there. Some scholars have suggested that the Old Icelandic word "vinber" could mean cranberries that grow in Newfoundland. Others maintain that the period of Norsemen voyages coincided with milder climate in northern latitudes.

Considering the estimated dates of the Old Icelandic manuscripts of Eiríks saga Rauða and Groenlendinga Þáttur, it can be maintained that three or more centuries had passed since the voyages were made to "Vinland." During this period, some fictitious elements had been added to the historic accounts. The genuineness of the voyages to

Radzin 8

"Vinland" is established by the accurate reporting of some details in the sagas--the wild grapes and corn. Later explorers, Jacques Cartier, Champlain, Hudson, and others found wild grapes and corn on the mainland of America.

The authors of the Old Icelandic sagas call the natives of "Vinland" "Scrallingar." In later accounts of exploration of the mainland of America, these natives are called "Indians."

According to the Old Icelandic "Eiríks saga Rauða and Groenlendinga Þáttur," the mainland of America was discovered by the Norsemen some 500 years before Columbus.

Hilda Radzin

St. John's University

Radzin 9

NOTES

¹E. and F. Jonsson, ed., "Eiríks saga Rauða," in Hauksbok, (Copenhagen, 1892-6).

²Vigfússon and Unger, ed., "Groenlendinga Þátttr," in Flateyjarbók, (Christiania, 1860).