

Wallace, Birgitta Linderöth. 2006. *Westward Vikings: The Saga of L'Anse aux Meadows*. St John's, Newfoundland: Historic Sites Association of Newfoundland and Labrador in association with Parks Canada. 127 pages.

Beautifully produced and copiously illustrated, *Westward Vikings* provides a comprehensive evaluation of the site of L'Anse aux Meadows in Northern Newfoundland. This is no ordinary site, for it is the only archaeologically attested settlement of the Norse in the New World, and thus enjoys a special significance in both cultural and historical terms. This volume represents a personal odyssey for the author and encapsulates the academically challenging discussions related to the Norse expansion to this ultimate outpost. The approachable written style, the presentation, and the inclusion of excellent images create a much wider appeal than is usual in archaeological volumes. Birgitta Wallace, whose personal involvement with the site has spanned more than forty years, is in a unique position to present this story and her name is as synonymous with the name of L'Anse aux Meadows as are those of Helge and Anne Stine Ingstad who made the identification in 1960, building on work from earlier in the century.

In terms of layout, this volume includes some departures from the conventional academic style of presentation: for example, it includes brief "sidebars" to provide information about certain topics and uses differing print sizes to indicate different levels of detail. The provision of a bibliography both usable and helpfully sub-divided by topic is a great advantage to readers of all levels of interest. The book opens with a time-line which enables all readers to situate chronologically the site at L'Anse aux Meadows, by setting out the chronology of contemporary events in both Scandinavia and the wider world. In addition it provides an introduction to the various indigenous groups.

The basis of our understanding of the site is summed up right at the beginning of the volume: "In North America, for a brief period c AD 1000, a sizeable Norse gateway existed at L'Anse aux Meadows in North Newfoundland. From L'Anse aux Meadows, the Norse explored a land rich in resources which they called *Vinland*." The gateway concept is one which is now universally accepted, but which only came to prominence following the detailed work undertaken by Wallace and her colleagues through combined analyses of the saga sources, archaeological details, climatic considerations and scientific elaboration. The long-held view that Newfoundland and indeed L'Anse aux Meadows was the totality of *Vinland* cannot be sustained. This is indeed a major change in our

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understanding of the site itself and of the colonisation, albeit temporary, of the eastern coast of Canada and the United States. Wallace provides the identification of the site itself as *Straumsfjörðr/Leifsbuðir*, the base from which the settlers explored to the south, encountering grapes and the butternuts found in the excavation and collecting timber in an area named *Hóþ* according to the saga sources. Wallace identifies this area as North East New Brunswick, a locale with a climate mild enough to permit the growing of grapes and butternuts—and indeed the self-sown wheat mentioned saga literature.

If this identification is to be accepted, and surely there can be few who doubt it, then we must see L'Anse aux Meadows as a gateway community. This leads on to the consideration of whether we should expect further contemporary settlements in the region. In brief, the argument turns on the resources and time thought to be needed to build the houses on this one site. Given that the Greenlanders probably had only between six and eight weeks to construct the original houses and a limited workforce of between 65 and 90, the development of sites of comparable size elsewhere would seem to be precluded. An extensive radiocarbon dating program at the site confirms that the settlement may have been occupied for little more than a decade. This conclusion is supported by the lack of middens located in the excavation and most particularly by the lack of obvious modifications to the buildings. Activities at this gateway community included iron manufacture and woodworking, both most likely to be related to the maintenance and repair of ships. Textile production, spinning, and possibly weaving may suggest the presence of females in the community. What brought the settlement to an end is debatable: it appears to have been burnt, possibly even by the Norse themselves, but the lack of material debris in the structures suggests a tidy abandonment, presumably on a voluntary basis. A planned withdrawal back to the relative security of Greenland—for a few centuries at least!

Post-abandonment activity to the present day at the site is detailed, situating the Norse settlement within the contemporary landscape and confirming the significance of this landscape of memory which was so significant in the initial identification of the Norse site itself. More recent events at the site include the building of both replica houses (in 1979-1980) and most particularly, the 2001 designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which confirmed the international significance of these turf covered remains. Finally with the establishment of *Norstead* nearby, these combined features ensure that a visit to this corner of Newfoundland is an exciting, stimulating and perhaps above all else, historically accurate experience. The concept of place is keenly understood here: home to a modern community as it was to a Norse one, it is also a nodal location as a gateway to a wider, resource-rich area. Only today and to the modern metropolitan eye does it appear to be farflung and remote.

This is a highly enjoyable read, engagingly presenting details of archaeology interwoven with saga stories and scientific details. Minor quibbles are few, the most obvious one being the delayed consideration (on page 104) of the interpretation of the name *Vinland*, but that is an editorial decision and does not in anyway detract from the undoubted success of this publication.

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