

Winter, snow and cold in the life of the Westviking

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ABSTRACT

The Westviking were the ancient Norse originally from Norway who settled in Greenland, Iceland (Jones, 1986, Mowat, 1990) and later partially (Ingstad, 1970, 1977, 2001, Martin, 1995) in Canada (L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, Canada, now a National Historical Site as well as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, yet the Vinland as described by them was presumably never discovered) about one thousand years ago. Contrary to the first French and English settlers in Canada and in New England, the people from Scandinavia were probably better equipped to face what awaited them in the cold lands of the North Atlantic as they were accustomed to harsh winter conditions in their homeland. Although several authors (Dansgaard, 1975, Ingstad, 1970, 1977 and 2001, Jones, 1986, McGhee, 1982, 1984, Mowat, 1990, Oleson, 1963, Plumet, 1969, 1976, in Boyer, Unglik and Stewart, 1979, Wallace, 1978.) have written about numerous archeological sites and sagas in order to better understand this lost civilization, hardly anything is mentioned about how they lived through winter.

The main purpose of this paper is to examine how the Westviking were influenced by winter, snow and cold in their day-to-day life as they were making progress in the West. Essentially three segments are identified and analyzed: toponomy and sailing, lifestyle and housing and food and clothing. Indeed some places were named after the cold season and how and where they sailed were sometimes dictated by glaciers and ice caps. Winter, snow and cold had to be taken into account in the building of their houses, their lifestyle, the type of food they had to produce, eat and store as well as the type of clothing they made.

Keywords: Westviking, winter, snow, cold, Canada, Greenland, Iceland.

INTRODUCTION

Following the rise and the fall of several empires (Greco-Roman Empire; ± 100 B.C. to ±500 A.D., followed by the Eastern Roman Empire known as the Byzantine Era and the Ottoman Empire: 1299 to1908), a Nordic invasion was being developed in Europe known as the Viking Age (±800 to1400). As early as the 8th century, the Vikings or Norsemen (they were explorers, warriors, merchants and/or pirates) were invading most of Europe as well as exploring (namely by building innovative Viking ships mostly called *Drakkar* and *Knarr*) and settling in Iceland (around 874), Greenland (Erik the Red in 986 to ±1450) and partially in Canada around 1000 A.D. (henceforth named the Westviking).

Some Norsemen now had to live at about the same latitudes or even higher than their native land in Scandinavia and they had to get used to different climates and possibly harsher winters.

To this day, very few scientists have tried to write on how the Norse people lived with winter, cold and snow while settling in their new lands. This article is an attempt at shedding some light

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on this question. Several archaeological site findings, analyses and sagas demonstrate that the Westvikings used winter, snow and cold to their advantage. They were already better accustomed to cold winters compared to the first French and English settlers coming to North America in the 17th century and were by far more successful. Among other things, darkness rules around or above the Arctic Circle (almost no sunshine from November to February) and those conditions create by far the longest and the most difficult season for people. Three parts are discussed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Toponymy and sailing

While sailing, exploring and settling, The Norse named these new places after winter, snow and cold. The name Iceland is a classic example. Probably named *Thule* (4th century BC) by Greek geographer Pytheas, Naddod would have been among the first Viking to reach this island around 860. Caught in a snowstorm near *Reydarfjord* (Eastern tip of Iceland) he called the place *Snaeland* (“the country of snow”), later Vilgerdason (around 865) spent the whole winter there. In the springtime he climbed up a mountain near *Vatnsfjord* and amazed by the amount of icebergs drifting along the coast, he simply named the place Iceland.

Even today in Iceland several places bear the name of *Jokul* (meaning “glacier”). Its largest glacier is located in the southeast and is called *Vatnajokul*. There are also *Myrddalsjokul*, *Jokulsa a fjollum* and *Jokulsa a bru* (Glacier river) as well as *Jokulfirtir* and *Drangajokul* in the northwestern part of Iceland. This area is called *Snaefellsnes* (having to do with the notion of snow and ice). In Greenland (this name is possibly a misspelling of *Cronusland*, meaning Crown land, Mowat, 1990); Erik the Red noticed several glaciers and large amounts of snow. He called the place *Snaefell* himself being familiar with a place named *Snaefellsjokul* in Iceland. Another glacier near the settlement of Erik the Red in Greenland is named *Hvitserk* (*hvit* meaning “white” and *serk* meaning “shirt”, so by interpretation “the mountain covered with snow”).

Winter paralyzed sailing. We know back then that no shuttle was available between Norway and Iceland during the winter season (Adam, 1976, Ramskou, 1976, in Boyer). This distance represented several *Doegrs* (about 12 hours of sailing covering, depending on weather conditions, anywhere between 90 and 400 km). In the cold season the Vikings had no option but to stay (hibernate) at home. Although few landmarks existed to help Norsemen sailing in this part of the world, they learned to use wind and ocean currents to their advantage to speed up the process. Sailing farther north, snowy summits did help them reach their destination. Indeed, from Cape Wrath in Scotland, one could see (weather permitting) *Vatnaglacier* (*Vatnajokul*, 2000 m high) in Iceland. From the northwest tip of Iceland to the most eastern coast of Greenland, *Blaserk* (a large glacier covered with permanent snow) could be seen (weather permitting). Along the northern coast of Labrador (eastern Canada), they could see the low summits of Baffin Island which contrasted greatly with the ones in the Torngats (2000 m, indicating the end of the Helluland and the beginning of the Markland). Sailing farther south fewer and fewer glaciers and snow were visible, indicating the proximity of their Vinland (possibly Newfoundland or even farther south). In the wintertime they stored their sailing vessels upside down to protect them from snow and ice as shown partly by the findings of Ingstad, (1970, 1977, 2001) in L’Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland. The Vikings devoted part of the cold season to repairing them. Hence, different glaciers, snow, wind and sea currents were used to guide them in rugged areas.

Lifestyle and housing

Upon their arrival in North America, Vikings had to build shelters and take into account the harshness of winter. Traces of shelters were found as far north as 77° N (cairns). In Greenland and Iceland, several archaeological sites reveal ruins of ancient houses built with walls one to two meters thick (revealing several layers of sod, sand and gravel which provide a good insulation against the cold). Roofs were made of sod and were steep, showing adaptation to snow. Holes (chimneys) allowed smoke to escape from the dwellings and were connected to hearths allowing them to cook and to generate heat for the winter. According to authors (Ingstad, 1970, 1977, 2001,

Jones, 1986, Mowat, 1990, Plumet, 1969, 1976, in Boyer, Wallace, 1978) many houses were built close to each other, with hallways, small rooms, no windows, narrow doors, entrances facing south, all of which maximized resistance against the long winters. Churches, warehouses, forges and byres (stables) were also built. People spent wintertime in small rooms requiring less heat. Flooring consisted of algae and tree branches a better protection against cold. Material such as bones, floating logs, sod and other materials were used as fuel to provide heat. People were confined to indoor activities including sleeping for many hours, sewing and making clothes, playing dice and chess, and having discussions about past and future projects. They also repaired their sailing vessels and other pieces of equipments. Diseases, fights and quarrels were common during this long and dark season (Mowat, 1990).

Food and clothing

Wintertime made it very challenging for Westviking when it came to food and clothing. Large quantities of food had to be stored and available to all members of the community in the long and cold season. Proper clothing had to keep everyone warm. Prior to the cold snaps, large volumes of cattle were killed. The meat was dried up and covered with salt for preservation. Nevertheless, famines in the wintertime were recorded in Iceland and in Greenland (Jones, 1986, Mowat, 1990). Goats and cows provided fresh milk from which cheese and butter could be made. Dried fish, seafood and dried seal meat were also on the menu. Rabbit and bird bones were also found in Greenland (from hunting). Snow and ice were also useful in preserving the food. At one point, more than 300 farms were recorded in Greenland (12th century) with a population of about 5000 people (from the Eastern and Western settlements) to feed, as well as 60000 people in Iceland for the same period.

The Westviking bring clothes from Europe. Yet in Greenland and in Canada (Chartrand, 1993) clothes had to be warmer. Wool was the main fabric used to make clothes for the wintertime. A wooden figurine was discovered in Greenland (Jones, 1986), it shows a hood covering a person's head and shoulders, lying on top of a thick coat with, thick pants, boots and mitts completing the picture. Wool (Jones, 1986) as well as fur (bear, seal and sea-lion skins) protected everyone in the cold and long season (sagas also described their clothes). Eider down was also used in clothes for insulation and comfort.

CONCLUSION

For the past number of years, more and more researchers have confirmed the veracity of Norse sagas from scholars. From Scandinavia to England, to Scotland, Orkney Islands, Shetland, Faroe Islands, on their way to Iceland, Greenland and later to Canada, the Westviking explored and later settled in new lands of the North Atlantic. Although a milder climate was in place during this medieval (± 700 to 1400) time (Dansgaard, 1975), correlated to their expansion, winter was the most challenging season for everyone. Even to this day, the occurrence of the Little Ice Age (± 1400 to 1850) is believed to have caused the disappearance of the Westviking in Greenland around 1450 (Malaurie, 1976, in Boyer). Winter was longer and colder, and summer became shorter and shorter. This meant bad news for the Greenland colonies, the remotest northern outpost of European civilization, as people were struggling to live from agriculture, grazing and raising cattle. Nevertheless, the Westviking used winter, snow and cold to their advantage, whether it was naming places surrounding them, guiding them while sailing, or building houses. They accordingly adjusted to the winter with more appropriate clothes, food and a different lifestyle for as long as they could. Further research will help in better understanding how this brave people lived through winter and invented innovative ways to survive the cold season.

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