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Norse Greenland: Selected Papers from the Hvalsey Conference 2008

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Norse Greenland: Selected Papers from the Hvalsey Conference 2008. Edited by Jette Arneborg, Georg Nyegaard, and Orri Vésteinsson. *Journal of the North Atlantic*, Special Volume 2. Steuben, Maine: Eagle Hill Publications, 2009. 197 pp., maps, color and black and white illustrations and photographs. $30.00 (softcover). Online at http://www.bioone.org/toc/noat/2/sp2. ISSN 1935-1984.

This review concerns a special issue of the *Journal of the North Atlantic* with a focus on Norse Greenland. Most of the papers in this volume were presented at an international conference held in southern Greenland in September 2008. The purpose of the conference was to mark the 600th anniversary of a wedding that, according to the medieval Icelandic annals, took place at Hvalsey in the Norse Eastern Settlement on 16 September 1408. This wedding was between two Icelanders, Sigriður Björnsdóttir and Þorsteinn Ólafsson. (The couple returned to Iceland two years later.) The account of the wedding is one of the last contemporary written references to the Norse in Greenland and hence is especially evocative, not least because of the silence that descended after this time. The author of this review attended the conference, and while visiting the church, all the conference delegates found it fascinating to be informed that the wedding, being a legal rather than a romantic undertaking, would have taken place, not in the church itself, but in the house adjacent to the church, and only after that would the household and guests have gone to the church to hear mass. The church is larger than one might think, and the 70 or so conference delegates fitted in easily. The name "Hvalsey" means, literally, "Whale island" in Old Icelandic/Old Norse (Hval = whale; ey = island), and the church takes its name from the adjacent fjord that was named "Hvalsey fjord" by the Norse settlers. In the discussion that follows it is important to note that the Hvalsey church is not the only ruin on the site—there was a farm associated with the church, as noted above, and a number of other ruins and ruin groups in the vicinity, not all of whose functions are clear. The old Greenlandic name of the Hvalsey area is *Qaqortoq*, meaning "white," and possibly the first Inuit to visit the place (perhaps in the 14th or 15th century) gave it this name from the most prominent feature—a whitewashed church—as is suggested by Nyegaard (p. 12[1]). The nearest town, a short boat ride away, formerly called Julianehåb by the Danes, now also bears the name of Qaqortoq.

Much has been written on the apparent enigma of what happened to the Norse settlers in Greenland. What is known is that around AD 985, two settlements were established on the western coast, one in the south, known as the "Eastern Settlement" and one about 400 km further north, near what is now the modern capital of Nuuk, and known as the "Western Settlement." The land was otherwise uninhabited, as the Thule Eskimos had not yet spread to the southwestern part of Greenland. The primary documentary sources for the colonization are *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grænlendinga saga* (the "Saga of Eirík the Red" and the "Greenlanders' Saga"), published in Hreinsson (1997) and known collectively as the *Vínland sagas* as they also tell the story of the Norse "discovery" of the continent of North America around the year AD 1000. There are a number of other sources concerned with Norse Greenland, however, and the most comprehensive collection and discussion of all the documentary records pertaining to Greenland is by the Icelandic scholar Ólafur Halldórsson, *Grænland í miðaldaritum*, "Greenland in Medieval Writing" (Halldórsson, 1978). According to the records, the Greenland colonists were primarily from Iceland, and were led by Eirík Thorvaldsson, known as Eirík the Red. The Western Settlement seems to have been abandoned around AD 1360, and the Eastern Settlement sometime in the 1500s.

With notable exceptions, the papers in this volume do not focus on the question of the disappearance of the Norse, but on many other aspects of their lives during the 500 years or so that they remained in Greenland. The volume is lavishly illustrated with many maps, figures, and early drawings of the site, some of them extremely attractive. The contents of the volume are as follows: It begins with an opening address on the "Hvalsey Fjord Church" by Aleqa Hammond (now Prime Minister of Greenland) and a Foreword by the editors, Jette Arneborg, Georg Nyegaard, and Orri Vésteinsson, as well as a list of the conference delegates, and the conference program. The papers are: "Restoration of the Hvalsey Fjord Church" by Georg Nyegaard; "The Human Skeletons from Herjólfsnes" by Niels Lynnerup; "The 'Dairy Farm' of the Hvalsey Fjord Farm" by Jette Arneborg, Fuuja Larsen, and Niels-Christian Clemmensen; "The Place of Greenland in Medieval Icelandic Saga Narrative" by Jonathan Grove; "Early Religious Practice in the Greenland Settlement" by Lesley Abrams; "Greenland and the Wider World" by Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson; "The Runic Inscriptions from Vatnahverfi and the Evidence of Communication" by Lisbeth M. Imer; "Continuity and Change: The Dwellings of the Greenland Norse" by Mogens Skaaning Høegsberg; "The Use of Artistic Media in Norse Greenland" by Lilla Kopár; "L'Anse aux Meadows, Leif Eiriksson's Home in Vinland" by Birgitta Wallace; "The Ethnicity of the Vinelanders" by Gunnar Karlsson; "How Did the Norsemen in Greenland See Themselves? Some Reflections on 'Viking Identity'" by Anne-Sofie Gräslund; "Parishes and Communities in Norse Greenland" by Orri Vésteinsson; "The Rediscovery of Greenland During the Reign of Christian IV" by Vivian Etting; "Graves and Churches of the Norse in the North Atlantic: A Pilot Study" by Berit Gjerland and Christian Keller; and "The Case of the Greenland Assembly Sites" by Alexandra Sanmark.

Prior to a discussion of the individual papers a few facts may be noted. Almost all documentary sources on the Norse settlements in Greenland derive from Iceland, and soon after the recording of the wedding at Hvalsey in 1408, a period ensues, lasting to around the early 16th century, when there is a dearth of historical writing in Iceland (Ogilvie and Farmer, 1997; Ogilvie, 1998). Knowledge of the colonies faded, and the old sailing routes were forgotten. Political and geographical developments form a backdrop to a renewed interest in their fate. The Kalmar Union, initiated in 1397, united the countries of Denmark, Pomerania, Sweden with

1 For references within the volume being reviewed, only the name of the author and the page number is given. For other references, the name of the author and the date of publication is given in the conventional manner.

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Finland, and Norway (who also ruled over Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, the Shetland Islands, and Orkney). The Union gradually broke up, leaving Denmark and Sweden to emerge as the two stronger powers. However, one legacy of the Union was that Norway, and most of the countries ruled by her, remained in a union with Denmark that lasted for several centuries, coming to an end at varying times. As early as around 1472, King Christian I of Denmark sent an expedition to Greenland. Unfortunately, the results are unclear (Etting, p. 155). A new effort by King Christian II around 1521 failed due to the outbreak of war with Sweden. As far as is known, no further Danish attempts were made to sail to Greenland for some time, and in 1576–1578 the Englishman Martin Frobisher "rediscovered" Greenland while attempting to find a northwest passage to India.

All the papers in the volume are of a high scholarly standard, and all serve to cast light on a variety of aspects of life in Norse Greenland. Some have an archaeological focus, others deal with the documentary sources, some discuss the general history of the colonies, others focus on religious or cultural matters, or trade, and others blend these topics. The papers will be discussed by topic, beginning with the paper that is concerned primarily with the history of the "rediscovery" of Norse Greenland, and which provides further historical context for the period after the end of the sixteenth century, as mentioned above. This paper, by Vivian Etting, "The Rediscovery of Greenland During the Reign of Christian IV," recounts the details of further expeditions to Greenland during the reign of Christian IV of Denmark (1588–1648) in particular during 1605–1607. King Christian ruled for 60 years, and had a profound impact on art and science (Etting, p. 158). An expedition to the west coast of Greenland in 1605 included trading with the local inhabitants (and the capture of two of them) and was considered a great success. Further expeditions in 1606 and 1607 were less successful. No trace was ever found of the Norse settlements—not least, perhaps, because of the confusion over the name "Eastern Settlement," which caused it to be believed that the settlements were situated on the east coast of Greenland. This paper contains many illustrations including early maps that show Greenland, such as the oldest depiction of Greenland in the so-called Clavus map from 1466 (Etting, p. 156), photographs of contemporary documents such as a passport issued for one of the explorers in 1605, and paintings, including a painting of four "Eskimos" who were caught on an expedition in 1654 and brought to Bergen in Norway (Etting, p. 163).

The paper "Restoration of the Hvalsey Fjord Church" by Georg Nyegaard combines a discussion of the archaeological research regarding the church itself with a historical perspective on all the excavations that have been carried out in the area. Nyegaard notes that the church is the best-preserved Norse ruin in Greenland. "It is built of local granite stones, and the masonry remains almost complete, with gables standing up to about 5.5 m. high" Nyegaard, p. 22). He also points out that, as is always the case in Norse Greenland, the church is closely associated with the ruins of a farm. The Hvalsey church is believed to have been built around AD 1300; however, in the late 1990s, an excavation led by Knud Krogh of the National Museum of Denmark showed that the Hvalsey church was built on a churchyard that is older than the church itself, suggesting that there was almost certainly an earlier church on the site. Architecturally, the ruin shows "so much affinity with both Norway and the islands of northern Scotland, "that it must be assumed that an architect from abroad had been involved in the construction of the buildings" (Nyegaard, p. 11). This "surprising internationality" that the church architecture reflects suggests that it must be seen as an expression "of a certain economic and cultural capacity and strength at this relatively late stage of the Norse settlement history in Greenland (Nyegaard, p. 11). In this paper, Nyegaard also outlines the history of events after the Norse had left, and discusses, for example, the first known visit to Hvalsey by Europeans since the Norse abandonment. This occurred in 1723 when the Norwegian missionary, Hans Egede (1686–1758) went on an expedition to try to find the Norse Eastern Settlement. Although some excavations did take place in the 19th century, the first extensive excavations were undertaken from the early 20th century onwards. The National Museum of Denmark has been the key player in these investigations, although with considerable international collaboration.

Papers with a primarily archaeological focus regarding the purpose of certain ruins and dwellings are by Arneborg et al. and Høegsberg. Thus the paper on "The 'Dairy Farm' of the Hvalsey Fjord Farm" by Jette Arneborg, Fuuja Larsen, and Niels-Christian Clemmensen focuses on evidence for the status of a neighboring group of ruins to the Hvalsey Fjord farm. An earlier investigation by the Danish architect Aage Roussell in 1935 suggested that this ruin group was a part of the Hvalsey farm and he referred to them as the "Dairy Farm" with the main cluster accordingly called the "Home Farm." Arneborg et al. suggest that the "Dairy Farm" was a separate farm and was perhaps a predecessor of the Hvalsey farm that was moved for unknown reasons (Arneborg et al., p. 28). Also following on from the work of Aage Roussell, the paper "Continuity and Change: The Dwellings of the Greenland Norse" by Mogens Skaaning Høegsberg considers Roussell's typology for the dwellings of the Norse Greenlanders and suggests a revised typology and terminology in the context of the more complex picture that has emerged as further archaeological research has been undertaken in more recent times. In particular, the author suggests that there was a closer association between Greenlandic and Scandinavian building styles than had previously been thought.

Combining archaeological research with a religious focus, the paper "Graves and Churches of the Norse in the North Atlantic: A Pilot Study" by Berit Gjerland and Christian Keller considers other types of dwelling places: church locations and burial sites, and what they term "sacred geography." Here it is of relevance to note that Christianity was accepted in Iceland in the year AD 1000, seemingly with minimal fuss (but see the discussion regarding the paper by Abrams below), and presumably around the same time in Greenland, although far less is known regarding the conversion situation there. Comparing church locations and burial sites in Iceland, Norway, and Greenland they ask the question: "Was there such a thing as a sacred Norse geography in pagan and early Christian times?" and suggest: "The limited regional studies in this paper indicate that there certainly were some fairly stereotypical conventions which were followed in each region, with a set of variations" (Gjerland and Keller, p. 177). Thus, for example, in western Norway, pagan burials have a strong affinity to the home field and lie close to the farm core, while similar burials in Iceland are located far from the farm. As pagan burials are replaced by Christian burials associated with a church, a very different trend seems to occur. In Norway, churches tend to become detached from the farm cores and are erected in more public places, while in Iceland, churches are associated with particular farms and families and are placed very close within house clusters. In Greenland, church locations tend to exhibit more variety and include both "Icelandic" and "Norwegian" styles. "The Greenlandic churches in the sample have a great affinity to water and 'welcome' positions. This is hardly surprising given the fact that most Norse farms

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in Greenland are located near the shore, much more so than in Norway, where there are many inland farms. The Greenlandic churches also have a strong affinity to farm cores and home fields, just like the medieval churches in Iceland" (Gjerland and Keller, p. 173). Continuing the theme of Christianity in Greenland, in the paper "The Runic Inscriptions from Vatnahverfi and the Evidence of Communication" by Lisbeth M. Imer, the suggestion is made that the runic inscriptions indicate that the tradition of writing in Norse Greenland played an important part in the expression of Christianity and that it had the purpose of maintaining connections with the Scandinavian Christian world (Imer, p. 78).

The paper by Lesley Abrams on "Early Religious Practice in the Greenland Settlement" is a very detailed and thorough discourse that draws on the available historical and literary sources to speculate on how the exact nature of the conversion to Christianity and early Christian life in Greenland might have been. She emphasizes that it is more than likely that there was no sudden dramatic change, as is often suggested in medieval Christian literature, and which is a notable feature of the story of the conversion in Iceland, where the decision as to whether the country should remain pagan or become Christian is left to one wise man. More likely than not "there was far more discussion, debate, and disagreement than the conventional conversion narratives allow for" (Abrams, pp. 58–59). Furthermore, "We are very much in the dark when it comes to hard facts about the religious situation in Greenland in the early settlement" (Abrams, p. 59). The two surviving sagas that focus on the voyages to Vínland, *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grænlendinga saga* (the "Saga of Eirík the Red" and the "Greenlanders' Saga"), describe several of the first settlers as being firmly rooted in paganism: Eirík himself, who was a committed pagan, Thorbjörg the seeress, and the hunter Thorhall, composer of a poem for "my patron, Thor" (Abrams, p. 59). Certainly there is no narrative of conversion in these sagas; however, they do show interest in the religious life of the early settlement, although with varying emphases and with different details (Abrams, p. 62). It is likely that both sagas were written in order to give religious weight to forebears of important contemporaries. It has been suggested, for example, that *Eiríks saga* was rewritten to magnify the exploits of Thorfinn Karlsefni, the ancestor of Hauk Erlendsson, who produced a version of the saga some time before his death in AD 1334 (Wahlgren, 1993:704; Vohra, 2008; Abrams, p. 57). In both *Eiríks saga* and *Grænlending saga* there is emphasis on Gudrid (wife to Karlsefni) and her religious endeavors (a pilgrimage to Rome, building a church, becoming a nun), and it is possible that both sagas drew on a work written in support of efforts to have Björn Gilsson (Bishop of Hólar in the north of Iceland, 1147–1162, and a descendant of Gudrid) canonized (Halldórsson, 1978:452). In brief, Abram's conclusions are that, rather than conforming to a Christian stereotype, the early community of Greenland could have "experienced an extended period of religious diversity before Christianity gained a sufficient degree of institutionalization to impose a more conventional Christian way of life" (Abrams, p. 56).

One thing that is likely to be clear with regard to the acceptance of Christianity in Greenland is that, as with Iceland, the decision would almost certainly have been made at a "thing" site. Assembly sites or "things" are to be found in all the Scandinavian homelands, as well as in the Viking settlements of Iceland, the Faroe Islands, the Hebrides, the Isle of Man, Ireland, mainland Scotland and England, and in the Orkney and Shetland islands. The role of these assembly sites was to act as a forum for the making of political and other decisions, and for solving disputes, as well as for religious rites, for commerce, and as a focal place for people to meet. Perhaps the most famous one is at Thingvellir in Iceland. Established in AD 930, it is sometimes referred to as the "Mother of Parliaments." In "The Case of the Greenland Assembly Sites" by Alexandra Sanmark, she discusses the likelihood of the existence of two thing sites in Norse Greenland, both in the Eastern Settlement: at Brattahlið, known mainly as the place where Eirík the Red is supposed to have settled, and at Garðar, the site of the Bishop´s seat (now named Narsarssuaq and Igaliku, respectively).

In sharp contrast to many studies that focus on the paucity of the lives of the Norse Greenlanders, the paper by Lilla Kopár on "The Use of Artistic Media in Norse Greenland" considers their artistic lives. She notes that archaeological evidence has revealed very little variation among the Viking colonies of the North Atlantic in their preference for certain artistic media, with the most significant materials being metal, bone, wood, soapstone, and ivory. However, one thing that made products from Norse Greenland different was access to this last medium—ivory. Walrus ivory and narwhal tusks were valuable trade materials that had to be acquired on perilous hunting trips in the far north of Greenland to the area called Norðursetur by the Norse, now Disko Bay or *Qeqertarsuup tunua*. Walrus ivory was used for making small figurines of humans and animals, game pieces, tools, buttons, and belt buckles (Kopár, p. 109). Narwhal tusks, commonly mistaken outside Greenland for unicorn horns, were believed to possess considerable prophylactic powers (Kopár, p. 110). Ivory had long been considered a precious commodity in Europe, with a traffic in elephant ivory chanelled via outposts of the Roman Empire. Possibly because of its collapse and subsequent Muslim conquests, elephant ivory became harder to obtain, and walrus ivory from Greenland found a ready market. It has been suggested that this trade from Greenland failed by the 14th century, but the situation is clearly complex (Roesdahl, 1998; Seaver, 2009). Some of the most famous examples of walrus ivory carving are the Lewis chessmen, a group of 78 12th-century chess pieces found on the Isle of Lewis, and the bishop's crozier found in the grave of the bishop at Garðar. The grave has recently been dated to the 1270–1280s, and this suggests that the bishop buried there may have been Olaf, bishop of Greenland between 1246 and 1280 (Arneborg, 2006:50; Kopár, p. 110).

Another paper that considers trade, albeit with a primarily economic rather than an artistic focus, is that by Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson on "Greenland and the Wider World." Stating that his paper is based primarily on written medieval sources, he begins by giving an excellent introduction to these sources, continuing with a discussion on the economy of Norse Greenland. This was based on animal husbandry, but hunting probably became a key factor soon after settlement. That seal meat formed an important part of the diet has become increasingly clear (Ogilvie et al., 2009). It is likely that fishing did take place, as evidenced by fishing gear such as hooks and sinkers, parts of nets, and documentary sources that mention processed dried fish (Guðmundsson, p. 75). However, there is no other direct evidence of this last commodity. Import items were iron and other metals, as well as timber and tar. The newly established Christian church also needed goods like wax, linen, and wine. Timber was important, but it is clear that the Norse Greenlanders continued to sail to Labrador (*Markland* in Norse), most probably for timber and possibly to trade (Guðmundsson, p. 73). Guðmundsson states that export commodities could be divided into two categories: bulk and exotic. In the first category are cow and calf hides, seal and sheep skins, caribou hides, and walrus hides and ropes made from the hides (Guðmundsson, p. 71). Guðmundsson poses the interesting question as to whether the Greenlanders exported stockfish, but, as noted above, there

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is no direct evidence for this. Of the exotic types of export, the most important was walrus tusk, as detailed in the paper by Kopár, above. All kinds of white fur from arctic hare and arctic fox was exported, and also polar bear pelts. There are also accounts of live polar bears being given to European potentates (Guðmundsson, p. 72). However, Greenland's most expensive regular export was the white Greenland falcon (Guðmundsson, p. 72). Guðmundsson also provides an extensive discussion of the boats that were used for trade and travel. Larger ships like the *knörr* would have been used for crossing the Atlantic, but when sailing between Greenland and Iceland, and Greenland and Labrador, smaller boats would have sufficed. Interestingly, there is evidence that the Greenland Norse built their own boats (Guðmundsson, p. 74). It is possible that, for some time, Iceland would have served as a transit point for the Greenland trade; however, from the early 14th century, it is likely that ships sailed directly between Bergen and Greenland. Guðmundsson suggests that there were no significant changes in the nature or marketability of Greenlandic exports during the course of the 14th century. In the early 15th century, communication between Iceland and Greenland appears to have ceased. Guðmundsson suggests that this may have had something to do with changing trade patterns, in particular with an increase in the stockfish trade by the English and others.

The paper by Jonathan Grove, "The Place of Greenland in Medieval Icelandic Saga Narrative," focuses squarely on the documentary saga sources and provides an authoritative and detailed discussion of the accounts of Greenland in the narrative traditions of the Icelandic sagas. As noted above, the most well-known documentary sources regarding Greenland are the *Saga of Eirík the Red* and the *Greenlanders Saga*, but a number of other sources exist. One, the Íslendingabók or "Book of the Icelanders," composed by Ari Þorgilsson around 1122–1133, contains the now well-known sentence as regards the naming of Greenland, that it would encourage people to go there "that the land had a good name" (quoted in Grove, p. 50). This story was propagated further in later sources such as the above-mentioned *Eirík's Saga.* In this regard, it is perhaps of relevance that, when the early Norse settlers approached Greenland by ship, it would have been the green coastal areas that would have made the first impression, not the icy wastes of the interior—so in this context, the name is perfectly appropriate. Grove suggests that the medieval Icelandic writings on Greenland were written "by Icelanders, for Icelanders" (p. 50) and that the accounts, describing what was, in effect, a distant land, served to emphasize Iceland's perceived place at the heart of the medieval North Atlantic world (p. 34). Furthermore, even though there was still sporadic contact between Iceland and Greenland as late as ca. 1410, the Icelandic accounts of Greenland that are usually thought to have been composed in the 13th and 14th centuries, were "not informed by any broad base of historical knowledge" (Grove, p. 50). Although they undoubtedly contain many kernels of what the modern world values as historical veracity, these changed with the passage of time, and the sources thus present "a series of distorted images of Greenland as an extreme environment, an increasingly remote outpost of the Norse world, perpetuating a tradition of alterity ..." (Grove, p. 50), with Iceland having "its own perceived place at the heart of the medieval North Atlantic world" (Grove, p. 34).

In her paper on the identity of the Greenland Norse, "How Did the Norsemen in Greenland See Themselves? Some Reflections on 'Viking Identity,'" Anne-Sofie Gräslund tackles the popular (and, to some extent, scholarly) concept of a distinct group of peoples referred to as "Vikings." She notes that, historically, there are two uses of the word *Viking*: "one pre- and early historical (up to the 14th century), with positive and negative connotations, designating a man of Scandinavian descent and sea-warrior identity, and a modern one dating back to the 17th century, more marked by the ideological standpoint of its user and by a desire to create ethnic and national identitities in the Scandinavian countries" (Gräslund, p. 136). She further emphasizes the point that "the concept of the Viking Age and the idea of a common Viking culture did not exist until the second half of the 19th century, in the days of nationalism" (Gräslund, p. 136). In considering how the Greenland Norse saw their identity (most certainly not as "Vikings"), Gräslund draws a parallel with Swedish immigrants to the United States who saw themselves as both Swedish and American, and suggests that something similar was the case with the Greenland Norse; they were Greenlanders, but, at the same time, their Scandinavian roots were significant.

The next two papers concern the expansion westwards from Greenland to the North American continent, to the elusive place that has come to be known as Vínland. Continuing the theme of identity, as discussed in the paper by Gräslund, in "The Ethnicity of the Vinelanders," Gunnar Karlsson considers the question: Who were the Europeans who attempted to settle on the continent of North America around the turn of the 11th century; were they Norwegians, Icelanders, Greenlanders or just Norsemen? Karlsson notes that, in some sense, such a question is a modern construct. Thus, for example, it seems unlikely that people who emigrated from Norway to Iceland had any sense of Norwegian identity, but thought rather of themselves as coming from a particular district in Norway (Karlsson, p. 131). As regards the identity of the Icelanders, it is now known that many of the original settlers, most notably the female population, came from the British Isles (Karlsson, p. 132). Karlsson suggests, however, that the inhabitants of Iceland began to call themselves Icelanders as early as the first or second generation in the country. They certainly did not consider themselves Norwegian, and there are episodes in the sagas where the people from Norway are called *útlenda menn,* in other words, foreigners (Karlsson, p. 131). A Norwegian was also sometimes referred to as an *austmaður*, in other words, a man from the east. Although many of the would-be settlers to Vínland were born in Iceland, for the most part they lived in Greenland, and the expeditions to Vínland were conducted from there. Karlsson asks: did this make them Icelanders or Greenlanders? Answering his own question, he suggests that they probably would have considered themselves first and foremost Greenlanders. A further layer in this discussion is that there seems to have been a sense of belonging to a larger group, what today might be called Scandinavia, and that during the period considered here, a person either from the Scandinavian homelands or the North Atlantic colonies is likely to have considered themselves *norræn*, or Norse. Karlsson concludes that the settlers of "Vineland," as he terms it, had a double ethnic identity—they were Greenlanders, and they were Norsemen, thus echoing the views of Gräslund, above.

The paper on "L'Anse aux Meadows, Leif Eiriksson's Home in Vinland" by Birgitta Wallace unites many of the themes considered above, and is an extremely detailed and informative account regarding the highly significant site of L'Anse aux Meadows in northern Newfoundland, the only archaeologically attested site of Norse presence in the New World. Wallace has been involved with the site for over 40 years, primarily as Senior Archaeologist for Parks Canada, and this paper represents one of the most authoritative accounts of "Vínland" that is likely to be read. Here she sifts all the available archaeological and documentary records regarding the

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L'Anse aux Meadows site, and ideas concerning Vínland, including circumstances around the history of the identification of the site by Helge and Anne-Stine Ingstad in 1960, and the subsequent site excavation. As noted earlier, the primary documentary evidence for the Norse presence on the continent of North America comes from the "Vínland Sagas" as they are termed: the *Saga of Eirík the Red*, and the *Saga of the Greenlanders.* Wallace notes: "It is fair to say that the discovery of L'Anse aux Meadows was inspired by the Vínland sagas" (Wallace, p. 119). However, there has been considerable debate concerning their historical veracity. Nonetheless, all scholars are agreed that they do represent historical accounts of the "discovery" of North America by the Norse; it is only the details that are complex. In this paper, Wallace suggests that: "The Vínland sagas may contain a greater grain of reality than we thought" (Wallace, p. 126). Further to this, she provides a cogent argument that Leif Eiríksson, son of Eirík the Red, who is accredited with being the "discoverer" of North America (some 400 years before Columbus) is indeed closely associated with the site. The thorny question of where the exact location of Vínland was to be found would seem to be resolved by Wallace. A crucial element here is the actual name "Vínland," which means "Wineland." In the sagas, it is emphasized that the colonists found wild grapes. These do not grow in northern Newfoundland, but their northern limit is to be found in New Brunswick, situated across the Gulf of St. Lawrence, presumably within easy reach of a Viking vessel. A further key factor in the story is the butternuts or wild walnuts which were found during the excavation of the L'Anse aux Meadows site in association with the Norse stratum. Wallace concludes: "Thus L'Anse aux Meadows is a base for summer excursions to a place far south with butternut trees and grapes" (Wallace, p. 123).

It was stated early on in this review that, for the most part, the papers in this special issue of the *Journal of the North Atlantic* were not concerned directly with reasons for the loss of the Norse settlements. However, two papers focus indirectly on this topic. In "The Human Skeletons from Herjólfsnes," Niels Lynnerup explodes what is clearly a myth, but one which still occurs in present-day publications. This is that the skeletons exhumed from the site of Herjólfsnes located to the far south of the Eastern Settlement "did seem to support theories of an isolated, degenerate and sickly population, doomed to extinction" (Lynnerup, p. 23). References to the excavation history of Norse Greenland have been made above, particularly with regard to the paper by Nyegaard. One of the early excavations, in 1921, resulted in a major find of skeletal material at Herjólfsnes. This has been dated to between AD 1400 to 1450 (Arneborg et al., 1999; Lynnerup, 1998; Lynnerup, p. 26). The conclusions of this early excavation were that the main reason for the decline of the Norse settlements was that of racial degeneration: the skeletons were said to be small, reflecting small people; they died before reaching old age; the skeletons were marked by disease; and there was a striking decrease in skull size. All of these suggestions have been discredited by later research. Thus, for example, with regard to skeleton size, it was believed that, at the beginning of the settlement, the Norsemen were tall and powerfully built. In fact, the people of the Viking Age are likely to have been smaller than later medieval populations (Lynnerup, p. 26). As regards the linkage of mental capacity with brain and cranial size, this has long since been abandoned (Lynnerup, p. 26). The suggestion that the Norse were disease-ridden was based primarily on subjective assumptions. Lynnerup emphasises that the scientists and archaeologists who worked on this skeletal material were diligent and arduous in their research, but they were products of their time. In the 1920s and 1930s, issues of race and population degeneration were very much in the foreground. In the same way, Lynnerup notes "it is perhaps not surprising that many present-day theories on the disappearance of the Norse focus on climate change" (Lynnerup, p. 27).

As has been noted by Lynnerup, the Norse populations in Greenland were probably far less numerous than has previously been thought, with perhaps an initial settlement of 400–500 inhabitants, and perhaps a peak population of about 1000 to 1200 in the Eastern Settlement, and 500 to 800 in the Western Settlement (Lynnerup, 1996). In his paper "Parishes and Communities in Norse Greenland," Orri Vésteinsson observes that, while much earlier research has focused on the issue of food procurement and attendant difficulties (e.g., Barlow et al., 1997), "it now appears that obtaining enough calories was not a problem for the Norse Greenlanders" (Dugmore et al., 2009; Vésteinsson, p. 142). Further to this, "The more sophisticated understanding we now have of Norse Greenlandic subsistence suggests that more complex reasons than simple want of food affected the development and eventual demise of the settlements" (Vésteinsson, p. 142). In this paper, Vésteinsson develops the theme of isolation. He notes that there has been considerable discussion regarding the isolation of the Greenland Norse from the rest of the world. However, the topic of communication between the two settlements is less developed, and he suggests further, that by focusing on intra-settlement communication within the parish system, some conclusions may be drawn on this topic of internal isolation. Here it is important to remember that medieval Christian societies entailed a geographical division based on parishes, which were communities associated with a particular church. In areas with a fairly dense population, social gatherings associated with Christian celebrations, and feast days provided a focal point for the parishioners and would have aided social cohesion. In Greenland, farms were extremely isolated and settlement greatly dispersed. To emphasize this point, Vésteinsson notes that the Eastern Settlement, for example, covered some 15,000 km^2 and had 190 to 260 farms. "This sparse settlement pattern means, in effect, that social interaction between farms in Norse Greenland would have been rare, and in most cases would have required special effort ..." (Vésteinsson, p. 152). In addition to this, compared to Iceland, for example, the parish system was highly centralized, suggesting that Norse Greenlandic society was more divided, with an upper and a lower class, with the upper class, the "church-lords," more completely in charge of surplus production. Vésteinsson concludes that the "isolation of the Norse Greenlanders was twofold. They were not only isolated from the rest of the world, but they also lived in an isolation from each other that was an order of magnitude greater than in any other society in the whole of medieval Christendom" (Vésteinsson, p. 153). In the end, the quality of life must have seemed poor, "irrespective of how much food could be put on the tables" (Vésteinsson, p. 153).

Perhaps, in its final form, the Hvalsey church was in use for no more than a little over a hundred years, and then stood, unused, for another 600 or so—in retrospect, a symbol of the isolation noted by Orri Vésteinsson. Also, because it features so strongly in one of the last accounts of the Greenland Norse, it is understandable that it has become a powerful symbol of the whole Norse settlement. For anyone who has seen the church and the site in which it is located, this symbolic power is greatly reinforced. The location, adjacent to the Hvalsey fjord, is stunningly beautifully, and the church itself, although open to the heavens, is surprisingly large, solidly built and architecturally very pleasing. As Nyegaard notes, "The monumental ruin has become almost an icon of the medieval Nordic settlement of Greenland and especially of its extinction some time

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during the 15th century" (Nyegaard, p. 22). The Hvalsey church must be seen as a poignant tribute to the indomitable human spirit, and the papers in this special volume of the *Journal of the North Atlantic* that focus, not on the failures of the Greenland Norse, but rather on their successes, may be seen as a tribute to the Norse colony that inhabited southern Greenland for some 500 years. This volume, of *Selected Papers from the Hvalsey Conference 2008*, will be enjoyed by specialists and non-specialists alike who have an interest in the Greenland Norse.

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