

VIKING EXPLORERS IN ANCIENT AMERICA

AUTHOR SAYS NORSEMEN MADE IT ALL THE WAY TO THE WEST COAST

REGULAR READERS OF TBR are well aware that the Vikings surely sailed in Hudson Bay and explored eastern North America, penetrating as far as what we now call Minnesota and the Dakotas and as far south as New England. (See the May/June 2012 and May/June 2015 TBR editions.) But wait—did they also navigate along the West Coast of North America? Here author Philip Rife brings us even more evidence of ancient European explorers in old America.

BY PHILIP RIFE



Some evidence of a Viking (Norse) presence in pre-Columbian North America is widely known. Their settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland is a Canadian national historic site; Minnesota's famous Kensington rune stone is housed in its own museum; the Heavener rune stone in eastern Oklahoma has a state park devoted to it; and a series of Viking mooring stones are featured in North Dakota's tourist literature.

Much less well known is evidence suggesting that intrepid Viking explorers also reached the continent's Pacific coast.

"Vinland" was the name the Vikings gave to a temperate land they discovered somewhere to the west of Greenland. Most conventional historians speculate that Vinland was located somewhere in one of Canada's eastern maritime provinces or the Northeastern U.S. But a few maverick researchers propose a quite different candidate: Maryland-sized Vancouver Island in Canada's west coast province of British Columbia.

They point to a series of loose-laid rock towers called cairns situated at prominent points overlooking the Northwest Passage across the top of Canada and

along the coasts of Alaska and British Columbia.

An archeologist who recorded some 15 of these cairns along the Pacific coast of Alaska observed:

Cairns of piled stones [are] to be found on the mountains well above [the] timberline, both on the mainland and on offshore islands. They have no relation to the Russian occupation, and are not boundary marks. They are away from any trails or lines of travel at altitudes of from two to three thousand feet, located on clear stretches, generally on mountaintops. The oldest natives can give no explanation of them. Stone piles have been found by members of the U.S. Geological Survey, who offered no explanation for them.¹

(This would seem to rule out both indigenous populations and glacial deposits as cairn sources.)

The Vikings, on the other hand, are known to have erected similar cairns as navigation beacons elsewhere (including two near L'Anse aux Meadows).

One noted early 20th-century Canadian anthropologist of Icelandic parentage was convinced he found another form of evidence that Vikings traveled at least partway through the Northwest Passage. He made the following observation about an isolated group of Eskimos living on Victoria Island (located about two-thirds of the way to Alaska) who were believed to have had no contact with Caucasians: "There are men here



A Woolen Cap Is So Much Lighter—and Warmer

Icelandic Vikings are depicted in a section from a larger piece of medieval art. The men have their shields and spears at the ready, but these sailors look more interested in sleeping than plundering and pillaging. Accurately, according to most scholars, these Vikings are shown with woolen hoods or caps, a garb in which many artists of the Viking era depicted them, not with heavy iron helmets. (See our item on page 6.)

whose beards are almost the color of mine, and who look like typical Scandinavians with abundant three-inch-long beards. One woman about 20 has the features one sees in Scandinavian girls.”²

Like other pure “Native Americans,” Eskimos normally have virtually no facial hair.

More recently, another Canadian scientist believed he found a more tangible type of evidence of a Viking presence—segments of Viking-style chainmail armor—on Ellesmere Island (about halfway through the Northwest Passage). The director of the Arctic Institute of North America described the significance of his find:

In more than 15 years of archeological exploration, I can recall no greater prize. The rings obviously had come from a suit of chainmail, the typical armor of medieval Europe. Yet here they lay, in an area of the world supposedly unknown to medieval Europeans. Datable material found with the iron links indicated they were deposited sometime in the 1300s.³

And in 1999, an archeologist with the Canadian Museum of Civilization unearthed several artifacts on nearby Baffin Island that point to an unrecognized Viking presence there. These include a length of cord spun from yarn similar to that from 14th-century Greenland; whetstones with traces of bronze and smelted metal (foreign to indigenous people); and notched wooden sticks like those known to have been used by Vikings to tally items of cargo.⁴

Importantly, the Northwest Passage—the eastern end of which began near the Viking colony on Greenland—would have been largely ice free during summer months in the Viking era.

Proponents of Vancouver Island as Vinland find more support for their theory in descriptions of Vinland in Viking sagas. The sagas say the voyage from Greenland to Vinland took 90 days. Viking ships were capable of sailing 100 miles in a day. Vancouver Island is about 7,000 miles from Greenland via the Northwest



Canada's Navigational Cairns

Viking cairns (carefully balanced piles of rocks) are sometimes found in Canada along the Arctic coast—evidently erected to serve as landmarks and navigational aids. There are over 100 cairns on Baffin Island alone. Above is an impressive set of at least five “inuksuit,” as the Eskimos call them, on Baffin Island’s Foxe Peninsula. On a bleak and many times monotonously indistinguishable landscape that could be hit with bad weather, these cairns might be the only way you could navigate home in a fierce snowstorm. Some scholars insist the Eskimos were the builders of these rock structures, while others aver that Norsemen brought the know-how and concept to North America.

Passage, allowing ample time for weather delays and cairn building along the way. Conversely, any destination on the Atlantic coast would have been reached in far less than 90 days.

Viking sagas also describe Vinland as a place with giant trees and giant salmon. Trees grow considerably larger on Vancouver Island than in either Scandinavia or northeastern North America, as do the salmon in surrounding waters. And like Vinland, Vancouver Island has a temperate climate even today.⁵

In addition, an area on the southeastern coast of Vancouver Island around Cowichan Bay appears to match specific terrain features ascribed to the Vinland settlement in the sagas.⁶

Lastly, Vancouver Island is a near-mirror image of the landmass shown on Yale University’s famous Vinland Map.

Regardless of where Vinland was located, there is a variety of evidence supporting the idea that the Vikings

traveled the length of North America’s west coast, as well as a considerable distance inland.

For example, there is the mysterious “stone anchor” atop Turtleback Mountain on Orcas Island, Washington, located between Vancouver Island and the Washington mainland. The 45-foot-long ground artwork is fashioned from dozens of small boulders and depicts a presumably metal anchor with clearly defined flukes and a crossbar. The anchor, which points like an arrow in a northwest direction (toward the start of the trail of cairns leading to the North Atlantic), was reportedly already there when the first White settlers arrived on the scene. Native Americans who visited the island seasonally to harvest shellfish did not use such anchors. The Vikings did.⁷

(Perhaps serendipitously, the athletic teams of Orcas Island High School are called Vikings.)

About 250 miles inland near Spokane, Washington, some unusual artwork was discovered on a large

whale-shaped boulder. The first published reference linking it to Vikings was apparently an article in a Spokane newspaper in 1919. Prior to that time, the artwork was assumed to be Native American. The article quoted a runic scholar who claimed some of the characters on the boulder were identical to others found in Norway in 1899.

In 1924, the same expert said he recognized Viking uniforms in a painted scene on the boulder depicting Indians with bows, arrows and clubs battling non-Indians who were armed with swords and axes.⁸ Two years later, he shared further revelations with a Spokane newspaper, which published the following story:

The discovery of the most remarkable runic record ever uncovered on the North American continent, telling of the visits of Viking expeditions hundreds of years ago, has been made near Spokane.

On a great boulder of lava rock just north of the city limits, Professor Oluf Opsjon, an internationally known authority on runic writings, has found the story told in indelible paint of a visit in the year 1010 A.D. of a band of Norsemen, and a terrific battle which took place there with the Indians.

The article continued by quoting the professor in his own words:

The record tells that the men of the party put the seven women on top of the boulder, and the men stood about the base, fighting the Indians. Twelve of the Norsemen were killed and the others escaped after the women were taken prisoners and carried away by the Indians.

Later, six of the survivors returned to the scene of the battle. They dug a grave near the rock and buried their dead, who had been stripped of everything they possessed by the Indians.⁹

In a follow-up article, Prof. Opsjon cited additional discoveries he said were proof of Viking incursions in the Pacific Northwest around the same time: "Other accounts of Norse travel in 1010 have been discovered on the Frazier River in British Columbia; on the Columbia River near Vantage Ferry, Washington; in Grant County, Washington; on the Columbia River near its mouth; and in Tillamook County, Oregon."

When some eastern academics questioned Prof. Opsjon's findings about the Spokane rock, he challenged them to visit the site before passing judgment: "The evidence is absolute and conclusive on the Spokane runic



Archeologists dig at what the establishment calls possibly only the second Viking settlement site they have found in North America so far. This National Geographic photo shows a stone from a hearth where Viking blacksmiths worked on iron. The ore was not hard rock but what is called bog iron, produced by various bacteria that, over thousands of years, turn ferrous oxide into insoluble ferric oxide, which can be dug up and smelted into iron. (The iron industries in Russia and the United States initially depended on bog iron as well as the Vikings.) This site is at Point Rosee in southwestern Newfoundland, which is not to be confused with Point Rosie on the island's southeastern coast. The famous first-re-discovered Viking settlement of l'Anse aux Meadows is at the northern tip of Newfoundland Island. The Point Rosee site was discovered by a space satellite looking in the near-infrared spectrum, which detected buried walls. Digging revealed, among other things, a carnelian bead from India, similar to ones found at known Viking sites. Sarah Parcak is the lead investigator of the new site.



A REAL VIKING HELMET

This is the only actual Viking helmet that has somehow survived down the ages, found in the Gjer-mundbu (in Ringerike in Norway) mound burial. It is made from four iron plates in what is called the “spangenhelm” pattern, with a “spectacles” guard around the eyes, which was possibly more of a liability than an asset. All free Norsemen were expected to own armor and weapons and carry them at all times—no “gun control” here. The Havamal, given by Odin, father of all the gods, no less, gives sage advice: “Don’t leave your weapons lying about behind your back in a field; you never know when you may need them all of a sudden.” But contrary to the stereotypes, horns and wings were rarely if ever sported on Viking helmets, and probably most Vikings en masse did not even wear iron helmets, which were expensive and heavy, so that unless you were a chieftain or king you probably would not have one. Painters seem to have invented the horned-helmeted Viking image in the 19th century—but horns were only worn on ceremonial helmets—the horns would be a hindrance in actual combat—and heavy to carry during a voyage on a long boat. Most Viking warriors likely wore light-weight leather helmets covered by hoods or caps against the weather. Despite the reality, horned helmets have become synonymous with Vikings in the popular mind. A temporary misidentification of a bronze age carving in Sweden with a horned helmet as “Viking” did not help matters, although this was corrected in 1874.

rock, and I invite any gentlemen of science who consider themselves qualified to translate runic script to make their own independent investigations.”¹⁰

So far as is known, none of Prof. Opsjon’s detractors ever took him up on his offer.

He summed up his case for the Spokane runes this way: “They are not Indian markings. They are true runic characters as I have known them from intensified study for many years, and they tell a vivid connected story.”¹¹

Regrettably, weathering and vandalism have obliterated most of the message on the boulder. However, oral history of the region’s Clallam tribe corroborates much of the story. Shortly after the revelations in Spokane, a newspaper in Seattle interviewed a Clallam tribal leader:

[He] said the strain of those Norse invaders, who pushed the prows of their Viking ships through Puget Sound waters long before Columbus discovered America, may still be found in comparatively fair-haired, light-skinned members of his people.

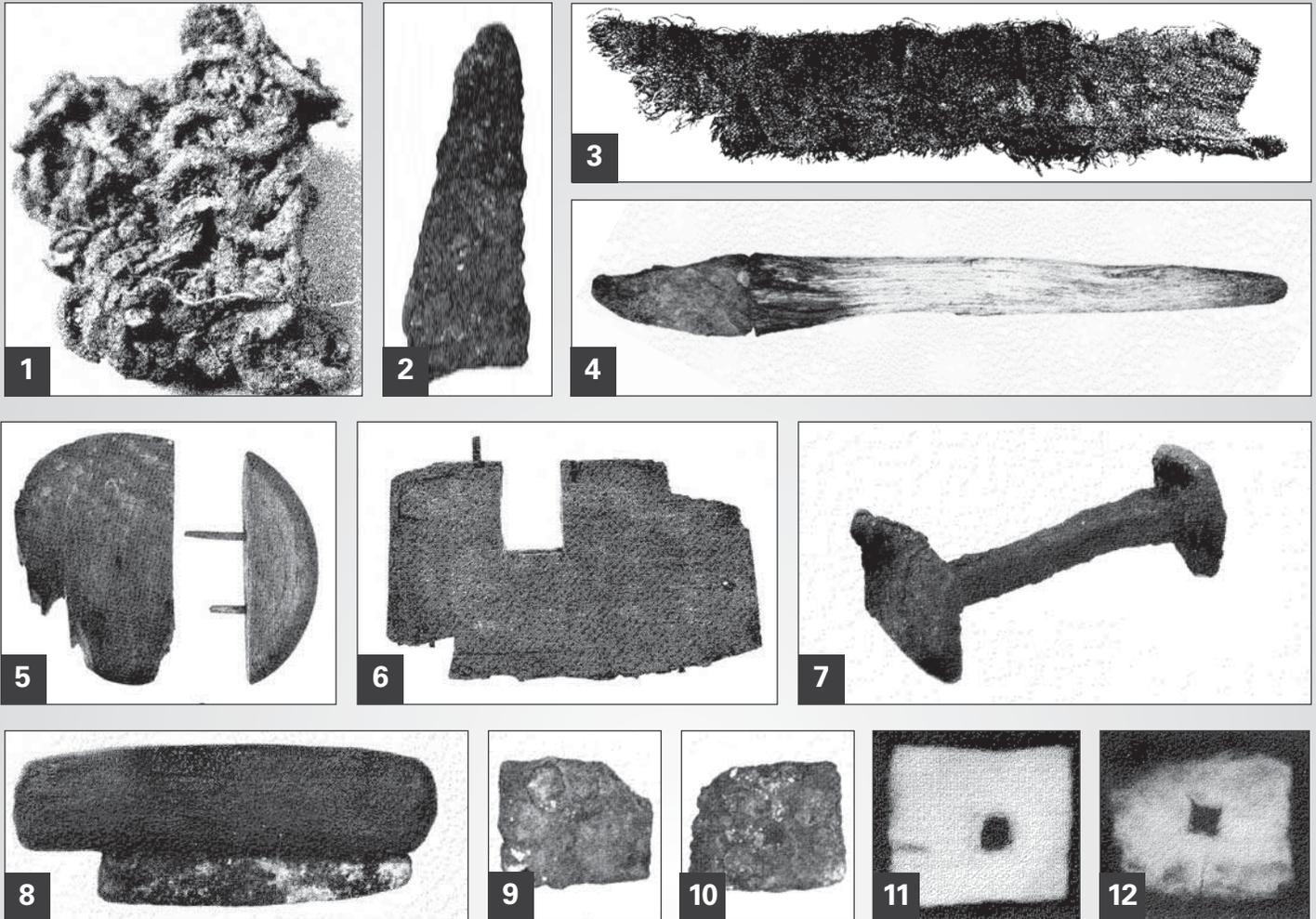
[He] said his grandfather told of big blond men who came in three ships to what is now the British Columbia coast generations ago. In six moons, one of the boats sailed away. The other blond giants remained. One of the men who sailed away stole [a Clallam woman. The Clallams] swore revenge. Some of the white men were killed in battle, and the women with long white hair were captured.

The man added that his grandmother told him the deadly encounter with the white invaders took place at a big rock near Spokane.¹²

Farther south, in central Oregon, is what appears to be an 11th-century Viking version of “Kilroy was here.” Found on a remote cliff face, the incised characters are in a style of runes used in Sweden and Denmark from the 9th through 12th centuries. The message includes a name (either “Rai” or “Rani”), “20 years” (perhaps his age or time in service) and the date “1057.”¹³

Early travelers in south-central Oregon encountered what may have been a series of Viking trail markers, as described in an 1885 issue of *American Antiquarian* magazine:

In traveling through the Klamath Lake country, one continually sees rocks piled one upon the other. It is almost impossible to dislodge them, they are so stationary. The common form is where



FINDS IGNORED BY COURT HISTORIANS

During the 1978 and 1979 field seasons, working in the Bache peninsula region on the east coast of Ellesmere Island in Canada's North West Territories, a number of artifacts mostly of European manufacture and presumably related to Norse activities were found, located in winter house ruins from the Old Thule culture. The finds were made at three sites specifically: Skraeling Island, Haa Island and the Knud peninsula.

TOP ROW: 1) A chunk of chainmail, found about a foot below the sod in a ruined Viking house; 2) iron blade or point containing traces of nickel and copper; 3) large piece of woolen cloth woven with a 2/2 twill with a thread count of about 9 x 6 per cm, evidently a common Norse thread count; 4) iron knife blade inset in a handle made of musk-ox horn.

MIDDLE ROW: 5) Two sections of barrel bottoms secondarily joined and decorated with incised circles; 6) piece of oak wood with wooden dowels inset, probably

once part of a box; 7) iron boat rivet, possibly from a Viking long ship.

BOTTOM ROW: 8) Iron knife blade set in a wooden handle, found in central area of "festival structure," house No. 4; 9, 10) two square boat rivet sections; 11-12) radiograph images of the same, showing the square holes in the plates.

All illustrations and information on this page are from: Schledermann, Peter, "Notes on Norse Finds from the East Coast of Ellesmere Island, N.W.T.," *Arctic*, Vol 33, No. 3, 1980. The publisher, the Arctic Institute of North America is a nonprofit, tax-exempt research and educational organization, founded in 1945.

NOTE: According to the researchers, the iron fragments presented were subjected to X-ray diffraction and non-destructive X-ray fluorescence. Further analyses were done on an ARL EMX SM electron microprobe using the pure metals as standards. Analyses were conducted and indicated that both terrestrial and meteoric iron fragments were presented in the artifact assemblages. Two iron pieces showed

several flat and at the same time rounded rocks the size of a hat or larger are placed on each other to the number of four or five. The piling process is generally upon large boulders.¹⁴

Other evidence suggests Vikings explored as far down the continent's west coast as Lower California.

(A likely explanation for the absence of coastal cairns south of British Columbia is that while such markers would be useful for someone navigating through an area with multiple channels and large islands, they'd be unnecessary along the essentially channel-free and island-free coasts of Washington, Oregon and California.)

Oral history of the Seri tribe tells of a strange ship rounding the southern tip of the Baja Peninsula and sailing into the Gulf of California. It recounts the arrival "a long time ago" of the "Come from Afar Men." These strangers, who are described as having "white" hair and beards, were accompanied by women with "red" hair. They landed on the gulf island of Tiburon in a "long boat with a head like a snake."

The visitors proceeded to catch and render whales, after which they sailed back toward the sea. However, their ship ran aground and was wrecked by breakers. The survivors were adopted into the Mayo tribe and are said to account for a few individuals in each generation of the tribe born with blond hair and blue eyes.¹⁵

Higher water levels during the Viking era would have allowed ships to sail from the Gulf of California into the now-landlocked Salton Sea. According to one early white settler in the area: "I ran into a tribe of Indians that were fascinating. They had blue eyes, lighter skin tones than other Indian tribes, and their hair was red in color."

A tribal chief told the man that two strange ships had arrived in the area a long time ago. The Indians killed the men aboard, but the women were adopted by the tribe.¹⁶

If some other accounts are true, Viking visitors may have left more than their genes in the Salton Sea area. There've been a number of reports over the years by people who say they've seen Viking-style ships partially buried in what is now desert terrain.

In 1898, an Indian was gathering wood in the desert when he spied part of a large "canoe" sticking out of a

sand hill. He said it had a long "neck" with the head of a strange beast on the end of it and round metal "plates" hanging on its side. The Indian considered the find a bad omen and never went back.¹⁷

In 1916, a couple was having a picnic when the man spotted something odd protruding from a sand dune above them. When he climbed up to investigate, he said he found it was the front of a wooden ship. The man claimed he sat atop it to convince himself he wasn't seeing things. When he paid a return visit to the spot later, he discovered that shifting sand had reburied the ship.¹⁸

In 1926, a group of people collecting desert wildflowers stumbled upon the same (or a similar) ship. One member of the group reportedly removed a metal shield from the side of the vessel before an earthquake sent them scurrying for their lives. There is no record of what became of his souvenir.¹⁹

Around 1930, a Mexican man discovered a ship on the floor of a desert canyon on the California-Mexico

border. He said a rock on the canyon wall above the craft had writing that he didn't recognize and was neither Spanish or English. The ship had a long curving bow he likened to a swan's neck and round metal disks shaped like a "tortilla" on its side. The man took one of the disks home to show his wife, but she said he threw it away when it rusted.²⁰

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A group of fierce White warriors came into the land, brandishing spears and battle axes.

In 1933, a couple was camping in what is now the Anza-Borrego State Park in San Diego County when an old prospector visited their campsite with a strange tale: He had recently seen an old ship high up on the side of a canyon wall nearby. Skeptical but curious, the couple followed the old man's directions and were amazed to find the scene was just as he had described.

The wooden ship appeared ancient. It had a curved bow and circular indentations along both sides that looked like they could once have held shields. They could not see the ship's interior from the canyon floor, and the sand and shale wall was too unstable to climb. They made mental notes of what they had seen, and the woman (who was a librarian) researched ancient craft to try to identify it. She concluded it most resembled a Viking ship.

The couple planned to return to the site with a camera, but before they could do so, the great Long Beach earthquake struck southern California. They later dis-

covered the canyon wall had collapsed, and the ship was now buried under tons of earth.²¹

If these ships are in fact Viking, the thinking is they may have been cut off from the Gulf of California by a sudden seismic event or else their crews fell victim to hostile natives.

Finally, hardy Vikings evidently trekked as far inland as central Arizona.

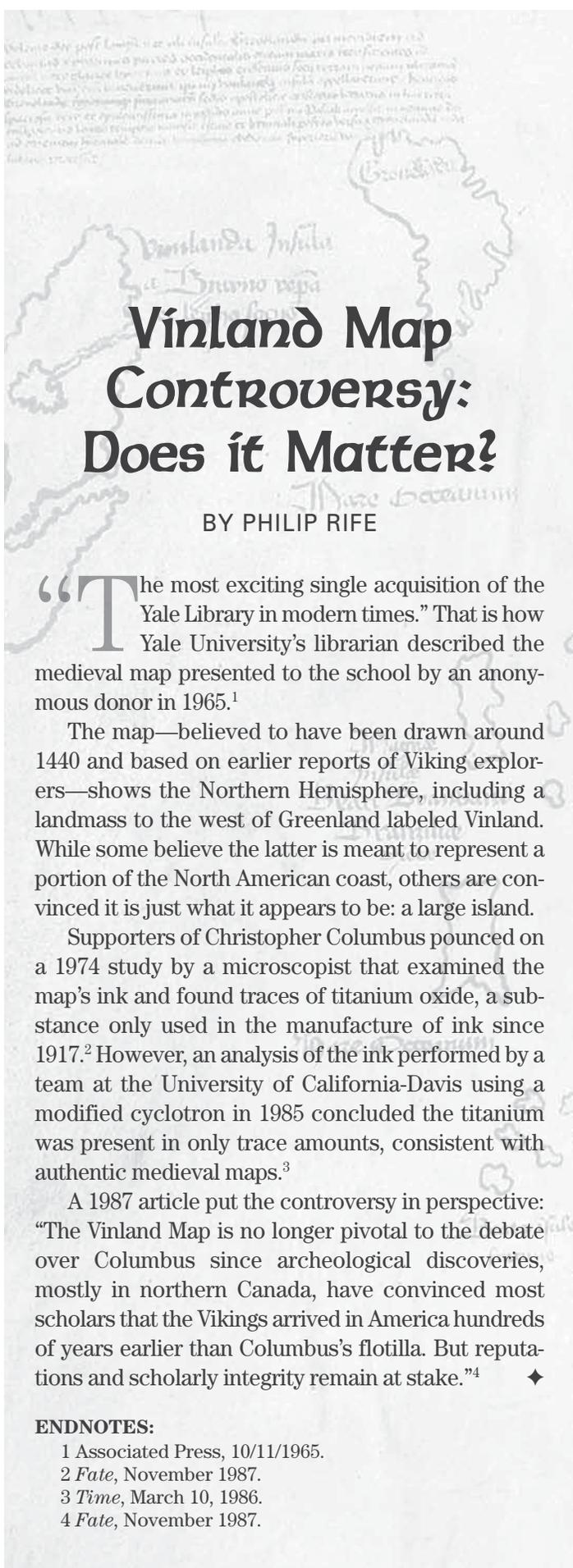
Indian oral history of the area around Red Rock near Tucson tells of tall white men with red beards who arrived several hundred years before the Spanish conquistadors and worked local metal mines. According to one tribal elder: “A group of fierce white warriors in strange costumes came into the land, brandished spears and battle axes, and killed many of our brothers. These invaders screamed and roared in battle. Our weapons were useless—they were protected by metal shirts.”²²

The chainmail-clad Vikings from cooler climes were probably as happy to leave the sweltering Southwest as the Indians were to see them go. ♦

ENDNOTES:

- 1 *The Tlingit Indians* by Frederica de Laguna.
- 2 *Viking America* by James Enterline.
- 3 *National Geographic*, May 1981.
- 4 *Maclean's*, November 20, 2012.
- 5 www.forest.facts.tripod.com.
- 6 www.spirasolaris.ca.
- 7 *The Orcas Islander* (Orcas Island Historical Society), summer newsletter 2005.
- 8 *Vikingship* (Leif Ericson Society), Vol. 14, No. 2.
- 9 *Spokane (WA) Daily Chronicle*, July 5, 1926.
- 10 *Ellensburg (WA) Daily Record*, July 7, 1926.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Vikingship*, Vol. 14, No. 2.
- 13 www.pe.net/merlin/rune.html.
- 14 *Ancient Man: A Handbook of Puzzling Artifacts* by William R. Corliss.
- 15 *American Indian Myths and Mysteries* by Vincent H. Gaddis.
- 16 *Vikingship*, Vol. 12, No. 3.
- 17 *Lost Cities of North and Central America* by David Hatcher Childress.
- 18 *Treasure Found*, Spring 1984.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Fate*, January 1973.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Vikingship*, Vol. 12, No. 3.

PHILIP RIFE earned a journalism degree from Penn State University and served in the U.S. Air Force. The author of nine books and numerous historical articles, his most recent book is *Bones of Contention: Uncovering the Hidden Truth About America's Lost Race*.



Vinland Map Controversy: Does it Matter?

BY PHILIP RIFE

“The most exciting single acquisition of the Yale Library in modern times.” That is how Yale University’s librarian described the medieval map presented to the school by an anonymous donor in 1965.¹

The map—believed to have been drawn around 1440 and based on earlier reports of Viking explorers—shows the Northern Hemisphere, including a landmass to the west of Greenland labeled Vinland. While some believe the latter is meant to represent a portion of the North American coast, others are convinced it is just what it appears to be: a large island.

Supporters of Christopher Columbus pounced on a 1974 study by a microscopist that examined the map’s ink and found traces of titanium oxide, a substance only used in the manufacture of ink since 1917.² However, an analysis of the ink performed by a team at the University of California-Davis using a modified cyclotron in 1985 concluded the titanium was present in only trace amounts, consistent with authentic medieval maps.³

A 1987 article put the controversy in perspective: “The Vinland Map is no longer pivotal to the debate over Columbus since archeological discoveries, mostly in northern Canada, have convinced most scholars that the Vikings arrived in America hundreds of years earlier than Columbus’s flotilla. But reputations and scholarly integrity remain at stake.”⁴ ♦

ENDNOTES:

- 1 Associated Press, 10/11/1965.
- 2 *Fate*, November 1987.
- 3 *Time*, March 10, 1986.
- 4 *Fate*, November 1987.