

L'ANSE AUX MEADOWS



Telling stories about Vinland from Newfoundland, L'Anse aux Meadows at the very northern tip of the Great Northern Peninsula mustn't be missed out. It was here, in the early 1960's, that the Norwegians Helge and Anne Stine Ingstad, based on the research of saga scholars, anthropologists and archaeologists before them and guided by local resident George Decker, found the first and so far only unequivocal evidence for a Norse presence in North America. After remains of turf buildings, a simple smithy and all sorts of wood debris which could be used for carbon dating had been found, it was the discovery of a metal pin and a soapstone spindle whorl which matched similar finds from Iceland and Greenland that wiped away the last doubts about who had lived in the small settlement in Epaves Bay around the year 1000. The site, which marks the time and place of the completion of the encircling of the globe by mankind through the encounter of Natives and Norsemen, became one of the first UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 1978. After the excavations had been completed, the foundations of the Norse buildings were recovered with soil to protect them and what we see today must be similar to what Helge Ingstad saw when George Decker first led him to the site: a collection of green mounds in the small plain above the beach. To give a better idea of the place and its significance Parks Canada, who operate the site since the 1970's, have built a visitor center and reconstructions of the Norse dwellings at a stone's throw from the original dwelling site.

I first came to L'Anse aux Meadows in 2012 for a video project about the Norse transatlantic voyages. It is a remote site and it takes a long way travelling from almost everywhere in the world to get there. The anticipation that builds up during the journey certainly adds to the feeling many people (including myself) get when arriving at L'Anse aux Meadows: it is a magical place with green hills rolling down to the water's edge from which a number of smaller islands with distinct shapes lead our view to the horizon where, on a clear day, the coast of Labrador and Belle Isle, that majestic island in the strait from the open ocean into the Gulf of St. Lawrence, captures our eye.

Already in 2012 I had met Parks Canada visitor guide Clayton Colbourne, who first told me about the jasper finds which finally led me to Fortune Harbour. And I had met Dale Wells, then a heritage presenter. When I met both of them again in summer 2015 I did not feel like a stranger to the place anymore.

Clayton, who grew up on the land tongue right next to the site, has a lively but rather unsentimental interest in the Norse in Newfoundland. Nevertheless he radiates some sort of pride when he accounts all the first-hand knowledge he has on the excavation activities in the 1960's and 1970's. Dale instead, who is now the Parks Canada manager on site, gets enthusiastic and almost emotional when she speaks about the Norse in Newfoundland and her luck of working at this unique place. I also met Loretta Decker, George Decker's grand-daughter who is my age. She told me about her childhood amongst all the scholars and experts from all ends of the globe who would often stay at her family home in the 1970's. The Norse site in L'Anse aux Meadows was Loretta's playground. For her it has remained the heart of Vinland, although she shares the now most common view established by Parks Canada archaeologist emerita Dr. Birgitta Wallace that L'Anse aux Meadows was a sort of base camp or gateway to Vinland which extended further south and west in the Gulf of St. Lawrence from there.

The regional tourist board appears less sensible to insights based on scientific research: lately they have put up a large sign on Route 430 North (the *Viking Trail*) at about 50 km from L'Anse aux Meadows: "Welcome to Vinland". Admittedly, I was stunned when the sign appeared after a long and lonesome road trip north. Intuitively I got the feeling that someone had guessed what I was coming for, and that I had finally reached my destination. In the next moment, however, I felt uncomfortable with that sign which tried to pinpoint Vinland and hence negated the vagueness of its actual location and expansion, a core aspect of *The Vinland Phenomenon*.



Norse site: Sod covered foundations of one of the three large halls



Replica of the bronze pin found at LAM which gave final evidence of the Norse origin of the site



Clayton Colbourne

Loretta Decker with her father Lloyd, ~ 1971; from: Nicolay Eckhoff, L'Anse aux Meadows the way I remember it

Sign on Route 430 North on the way to LAM

