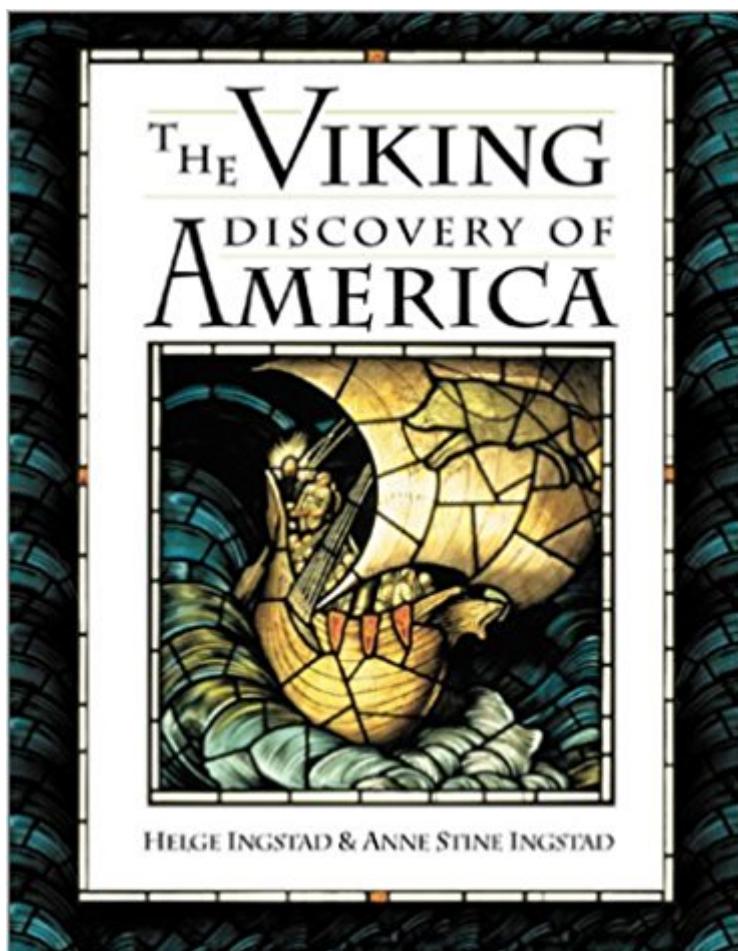


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The Viking Discovery Of America: The Excavation Of A Norse Settlement In L'Anse Aux Meadows, Newfoundland



Synopsis

The locations of Vinland and the first European settlement are mysteries that have puzzled scholars, archaeologists, and historians for more than two centuries. From 1961 to 1968, Helge Ingstad and his wife Anne Stine Ingstad, both acclaimed Viking scholars, conducted seven expeditions at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland. The results of their work are recorded in one of the most in-depth studies of the subject: *The Viking Discovery of America*. Combining a first-hand account of the Ingstads' groundbreaking discoveries with a compelling history of Viking explorations, this archaeological survey refutes centuries of historical assumptions about Viking contact with the New World in the centuries before the arrival of Christopher Columbus. The book details how the Ingstads meticulously worked from old Viking sagas, existing research, and their own hypotheses to piece together the story of a group of Vikings, who, faced with crowded conditions in Greenland, decided to expand their horizons, eventually discovering a new territory. Readers will also discover fascinating information about shipbuilding and navigation techniques, well-known and obscure explorers and their journeys, Viking culture and lifestyle, as well as the factors that led to the eventual evacuation of their settlement. Full-color maps and photographs from the expeditions help to bring the text alive.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This account of Norse explorations in America by Helge and Anne Stine Ingstad, focuses on the ruins they found and excavated, left by Norse settlers near the present village of L'Anse aux

Meadows on the northern tip of Newfoundland, somewhere around 1000 AD according to carbon dating. Helge Ingstad, a Norwegian, wrote most of the text of this well illustrated 199-page large-format book. His archeologist wife, in charge of the actual diggings, wrote the chapter on their meticulous uncovering of the ruins of eight turf buildings during the course of seven seasons from 1961 to 1968, the largest of which, House F, contained six main rooms separated by turf walls. Much smaller but of key importance was House J, a working "smithy" in which local bog iron was smelted. The three houses A, B, and C, closely clustered together, have since been restored to original condition to form the core of a Canadian national historic park established in 1977 and open to visitors, complete with "re-enactors" dressed in Old Norse costumes. The site's second-largest house, A, is a longhouse about 75 feet in length with four rooms. Much of the described detail of the actual digs will probably be lost on many general readers, but this chapter does convey a sense of the incredibly slow and painstaking efforts involved in any important archeological dig. No doubt of greater interest to the non-archeologically inclined will be Helge Ingstad's chapters on the background of the Norse Vinland ventures in the region, including an illuminating analysis of the two pertinent sagas. Of these, the one long believed to be the more authentic ("Erik the Red's Saga"), presumably because of its more sophisticated literary style, many now consider factually the less reliable.

I would have liked to have given this book 2.5 stars, right in the middle, because I really think it's a so-so book. But since the choice was 2 or 3 and 2 was too low, 3 stars it is. There is certainly a good deal of history and scholarship shown here, and for those such as myself who have an interest in the subject but lay no claim to expertise, much to be gained. But I couldn't shake the feeling that some academic scores were being settled. Helge Ingstad, who wrote most of the first parts of the book (with his wife, Anne Stine Ingstad, doing the part about the actual L'Anse aux Meadows dig), spends too much time deriding viewpoints alternate to his own. Since it was his line of reasoning that lead to the discovery of the L'Anse aux Meadows site, it seems that focusing on his own arguments should have been enough. Apparently, though, it wasn't. A major part of the book consists of summaries and analyses of two sagas telling different stories of the Vikings in Greenland and their exploration of North America. One, Erik's Saga, is a ripping good yarn that apparently had been the version favored by scholars. Ingstad makes a convincing argument that the other, The Groenlendinga Saga, is more historically reliable. But he does it at such length (about 1/3 the book) and in such language that the argument comes across as personal as much as academic, as a means of taking pokes at those on the other side of the issue. For example, The Groenlendinga

Saga is a "plain, straightforward narrative" of "generally authentic nature," while Erik's Saga is by turns "improbable," "fiction" influenced by fables, "cannot be correct," "more than a little suspect," "incredible," and so on and so on.

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