

Hierophanies in the Vinland Sagas: Images of a New World

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Abstract. The fabled land of Vinland is mentioned in legends. Described as a place of immense natural wealth with abundant pastures, wild grapes, self-sown wheat and rivers and lakes full of salmon, one gains the impression of an earthly paradise where all wants could be met. This paper asks whether the Viking settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows (Newfoundland, Canada) could be considered a sacred space, as delineated by the twentieth century religious historian Mircea Eliade. In his research into hierophanies, a feature of his definition of sacred space, Eliade documents the widespread use of vines as a hierophany, suggesting that the presence of vines in the Vinland Sagas may not be literal but used as a metaphor for something symbolically more significant.

One of the most evocative images that comes down to us from Norse legends is that of the fabled land of Vinland. Described as a place of immense natural wealth with abundant pastures, wild grapes, self-sown wheat and rivers and lakes full of salmon, one gains the impression of an earthly paradise where all wants could be met. The main sources for the legend of Vinland come from two Icelandic sagas: *The Saga of the Greenlanders* (GS) and *Eirik the Red's Saga* (ES).¹ They are both based on oral traditions and first written down in the early thirteenth century.²

In 1914, W.A. Munn published a short book suggesting that Vinland was located in what is now Canada at the northernmost tip of the island of Newfoundland near the present community of L'Anse aux Meadows.³ Whilst the link to Vinland is considered by some to be

¹ Keneva Kunz and Gisli Sigurdsson, *The Vinland Sagas: The Icelandic Sagas About the First Documented Voyages Across the North Atlantic: The Saga of the Greenlanders and Eirik the Red's Saga* (London: Penguin Classics, 1997).

² Kunz & Sigurdsson, *Vinland Sagas*, p. iv.

³ W.A. Munn, *Wineland Voyages: Location of Helluland, Markland and Vinland* (St John's, NL, Canada: Evening Telegram Ltd, 1946).

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contentious, archaeological evidence has now conclusively shown that there was a Viking settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows.⁴

Vinland and L'Anse aux Meadows

Whilst considered to be (exceptionally well-composed) literature, Kunz & Sigurdsson have suggested that the Vinland Sagas are more than pieces designed to entertain as they also seem to describe real people, places and historical events.⁵ Both sagas give independent, but sometimes conflicting, accounts of the discovery of three new lands: Helluland (Stone-slab land), Markland (Forest land) and Vinland around 1000 CE.⁶ Located somewhere to the West of Greenland, these lands were thought to be part of the North American continent (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The Icelandic Map, c.1590

Munn's proposal placed Vinland further North than previously thought.⁷ Norse archaeologists Helge and Anne Stine Ingstad subsequently

⁴ Bridget Lindereth Wallace, *Westward Vikings: The Saga of L'Anse aux Meadows* (St John's, NL, Canada: Historic Sites Association of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2006).

⁵ Kunz & Sigurdsson, *Vinland Sagas*, pp. xiii-xv.

⁶ Kunz & Sigurdsson, *Vinland Sagas*, pp. xx-xxi.

⁷ Kunz & Sigurdsson, *Vinland Sagas*, pp. 66-7.

investigated the site and suggested that ruins located at L'Anse aux Meadows looked remarkably similar to Norse ruins they had seen in Greenland.⁸ Linderoth Wallace has estimated that the site dated to around 1000 CE, that between 65 and 90 people could have been housed on the site and that the buildings were erected and abandoned within a decade.⁹ Thus there seems no doubt that L'Anse aux Meadows was a significant Viking settlement, suggesting that the sagas did indeed describe the discovery of North America some 500 years before Columbus (Figure 2).



Figure 2. L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland. Looking approximately North, towards Epaves Bay and Sacred Island. The building on the right is a reconstructed long house. Photo T. Foster, August 2009

The link to Vinland, however, seems more controversial. Linderoth Wallace, using archaeological evidence, has pointed out that grapes could not have been harvested from L'Anse aux Meadows as it was too far

⁸ Helge Ingstad and Anne Stine Ingstad, *The Viking Discovery of America: The Excavation of a Norse Settlement in L'Anse aux Meadows Newfoundland* (New York, NY: Checkmark Books, 2001).

⁹ Linderoth Wallace, *Westward Vikings*, pp. 68-9; pp. 71-3; p. 78; p. 84.

north for grapes to grow and that they must have been sourced further south. However she also says: ‘Vinland was a large region, a ‘land’ and not a specific site. The question should therefore read: Is L’Anse aux Meadows one of the sites mentioned in the VS? The answer is a resounding “yes”’.¹⁰ The Ingstads made an alternative proposal. Appreciating that iceberg-laden oceans and vines didn't seem to make sense, they suggested that L’Anse aux Meadows was Vinland by utilizing an alternative etymological meaning of the Norse for 'vin' as it may also mean a pasture or meadow.¹¹ The question(s) then is whether there is an alternative explanation for the location of Vinland and where does L’Anse aux Meadows fit into the story?

Hierophanies and L’Anse aux Meadows

The twentieth century religious historian Mircea Eliade defines a hierophany as the manifestation of the divine or the sacred, especially in a sacred place, object or occasion. Seemingly there appear to be three major elements in the construction of such a sacred space as follows:

- There is a **central absolute fixed point**; ‘...it is the break in space that allows the world to be constituted, because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis of all future orientation’, creating a cosmology or new world.¹²
- There are **images of an opening**; ‘In the sacred enclosure, communication with the gods is made possible; hence there must be a door to the world above by which the gods can descend to earth and man can symbolically ascend to heaven’.¹³
- There is a **knot that binds**; ‘...always all-seeing, all-powerful and at need, “binding” by his “spiritual power” –by magic’, and by ‘the weaving of the Cosmos, the thread of human destiny, the labyrinth, the chain of existence’ binds the world together.¹⁴

¹⁰ Linderoth Wallace, *Westward Vikings*, pp. 97-104.

¹¹ Ingstads, *Viking Discovery of America*, p. 42.

¹² Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane - The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Orlando Florida: Harcourt, 1959), p. 21.

¹³ Eliade, *Sacred Profane*, p. 22.

¹⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. Philip Mairet (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), pp. 92-124; p. 98; p. 121.

According to Eliade, vines are a hierophany occurring in a number of cultures including Mesopotamia, Greece, the Bible (Genesis) and Madeism (Figure 3). The vine, sacred to the Great Goddess(es), was placed at the ‘navel of the sea’ or centre of the world, conveying wisdom and immortality. From this centre, ‘the vine then is held to be a cosmic tree, because it spreads over the heavens, and its grapes are the stars’.¹⁵



Figure 3. Vines at L’Anse aux Meadows. Artwork K. Foster

While the Ingstads have suggested that – like Greenland – Vinland may have so been named to tempt new settlers, the imagery of grapes and vines certainly seems central to the story. In the GS we read:

- I had only gone a bit further than the rest of you. But I have news to tell you: I found grapevines and grapes.¹⁶
- They made ready for their journey [back to Greenland], taking with them plenty of the land’s products – grapevines, berries and skins.¹⁷

¹⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (London: Sheed and Ward, 1958), pp. 284-6.

¹⁶ Kunz & Sigurdsson, *Vinland Sagas*, p. 8.

¹⁷ Kunz & Sigurdsson, *Vinland Sagas*, p. 17.

And in the ES:

- After three days had passed the two returned to the shore, one of them with grapes in hand and the other with self-sown wheat.¹⁸
- There they found fields of self-sown wheat in the low-lying areas and vines growing on the hills.¹⁹

However it does seem slightly peculiar that vines are given such a prominent mention when the Viking world of that time would have included most of the vine growing regions of the Mediterranean.²⁰ While it may indeed be the case that the Vikings found grapes and vines in the new world, an alternative explanation of the inclusion of vines in the Vinland Sagas is that it is an Eliadian hierophany, symbolizing a sacred space; that of Vinland itself. In the Vinland Saga descriptions where the Vikings met the natives, both the GS and ES mention a bull. However, the presence of livestock – reportedly brought from Greenland to Vinland – while not discounted, is disputed.²¹

The GS says:

- A large group of men came out of the woods close to where the cattle were pastured. The bull began bellowing and snorting very loudly. This frightened the natives, who ran off with their burdens...²²

And the ES:

- At this point a bull, owned by Karlsefni and his companions, ran out of the forest and bellowed loudly. The natives took fright at this, ran to their boats and rowed off to the South.²³

According to Eliade, hierophanies associated with bulls are an extraordinarily rich subject being identified with the sky gods of Indo-

¹⁸ Kunz & Sigurdsson, *Vinland Sagas*, p. 42.

¹⁹ Kunz & Sigurdsson, *Vinland Sagas*, p. 44.

²⁰ Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, trans. Susan M. Margeson and Kirsten Williams, Second Revised Edition (London: Penguin Books, 1998). p. 295.

²¹ Linderoth Wallace, *Westward Vikings*, p. 58.

²² Kunz & Sigurdsson, *The Vinland Sagas*, p. 15.

²³ Kunz & Sigurdsson, *The Vinland Sagas*, p. 45.

Mediterranean religions.²⁴ The bull is associated with fecundity and fertility cults, making fields, animals and women fruitful (the horns are associated with the crescent moon) as well as being associated with storms, thunderbolts, weather and the sky in general (Figure 4).²⁵ Eliade says: ‘The “specialization” of sky gods may change their form radically; by abandoning their transcendence, by becoming “accessible”...’.²⁶



Figure 4. The bull at L'Anse aux Meadows. Artwork K. Foster

The visualization of vines and the bull as hierophanies thus presupposes:

- The presence of a centre. While it appears likely that the Vikings explored an area that includes what is now Western Newfoundland and the Maritime Provinces, the main – perhaps only – human settlement remains L'Anse aux Meadows, suggesting that this could be the symbolic centre of Vinland.
- An opening. The Vikings made their camp at the Western edge of the 'new' world, creating a gateway between the old and the new.

²⁴ Eliade, *Patterns*, p. 91; p. 76.

²⁵ Eliade, *Patterns*, pp. 85-93.

²⁶ Eliade, *Patterns*, p. 92.

- A knot that binds. Perhaps one of the enduring achievements of the Vinland voyages was the discovery of populated new lands, creating lasting ties and a new world-view for humans on both sides of the Atlantic.

Conclusion

It therefore appears that some distinguishing characteristics associated with an Eliadian sacred space could be mapped to L'Anse aux Meadows, suggesting that the presence of vines in the Vinland Sagas may not be literal but used as a metaphor for something symbolically more significant. Based on the archaeological evidence brought forward to date, the most likely location for the symbolic centre of Vinland appears to be L'Anse aux Meadows itself.