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# NORTHMEN IN AMERICA.

985—1015.

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# THE DISCOVERY OF AMERICA BY THE NORTHMEN.

985—1015.

A DISCOURSE DELIVERED BEFORE THE NEW HAMPSHIRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, APRIL 24, 1888.

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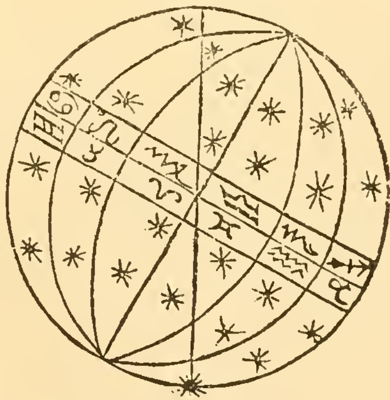

CONCORD, N. H.:
PRIVATELY PRINTED.
1891.

REPRINTED FROM THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE NEW HAMPSHIRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

# DISCOURSE.

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On the 29th day of October, 1887, a statue erected to the memory of Leif, the son of Erik, the discoverer of America, was unveiled in the city of Boston, in the presence of a large assembly of citizens. The statue is of bronze, a little larger than life-size, and represents the explorer standing upon the prow of his ship, shading his eyes with his hand, and gazing towards the west. This monument[1] suggests the subject to which I wish to call your attention, viz., the story of the discovery of this continent by the Scandinavians nearly nine hundred years ago.

I must here ask your indulgence for the statement of a few preliminary historical facts in order that we may have a clear understanding of this discovery.

About the middle of the ninth century, Harald Haarfager, or the fair-haired, came to the throne of Norway. He was a young and handsome prince, endowed with great energy of will and many personal attractions. It is related that he fell in love with a beautiful princess. His addresses were, however, coolly rejected with the declaration that when he became king of Norway in reality, and not merely in name, she would

[1] If it be admitted, as it is almost universally, that the Scandinavians came to this continent in the last part of the tenth or the early part of the eleventh century, it is eminently fitting that a suitable monument should mark and emphasize the event. And it seems equally fitting that it should be placed in Boston, the metropolis of New England, since it simply commemorates the event of their coming, but is not intended to indicate their land-fall, or the place of their temporary abode.

give him both her heart and her hand. This admonition was not disregarded by the young king. The thirty-one principalities into which Norway was at that time divided were in a few years subjugated, and the petty chieftains or princes who ruled over them became obedient to the royal authority. The despotic rule, however, of the king was so irritating and oppressive that many of them sought homes of greater freedom in the inhospitable islands of the northern seas. Among the rest, Iceland, having been discovered a short time before, was colonized by them. This event occurred about the year 874. Notwithstanding the severity of the climate and the sterility of the soil, the colony rapidly increased in numbers and wealth, and an active commerce sprung up with the mother country, and was successfully maintained. At the end of a century, they had pushed their explorations still farther, and Greenland was discovered, and a colony was planted there, which continued to flourish for a long period.

About the year 985, a young, enterprising, and prosperous navigator, who had been accustomed to carry on a trade between Iceland and Norway, on returning from the latter in the summer of the year, found that his father had left Iceland some time before his arrival, to join a new colony which had been then recently planted in Greenland. This young merchant, who bore the name of Bjarni, disappointed at not finding his father in Iceland, determined to proceed on and pass the coming winter with him at the new colony in Greenland. Having obtained what information he could as to the geographical position of Greenland, this intrepid navigator accordingly set sail in his little barque, with a small number of men, in an unknown and untried sea, guided in his course only by the sun, moon, and other heavenly bodies.[1] After sailing three days they entirely lost sight of land. A north wind sprung

[1] The mariner's compass was not discovered till the twelfth or thirteenth century.

up, accompanied with a dense fog, which utterly shrouded the heavens from their view, and left them at the mercy of the winds and the waves. Thus helpless, they were borne along for many days in an open and trackless ocean, they knew not whither. At length the fog cleared away, the blue sky appeared, and soon after they came in sight of land. On approaching near to it, they observed that it had a low, undulating surface, was without mountains, and was thickly covered with wood. It was obviously not the Greenland for which they were searching. Bearing away and leaving the land on the west, after sailing two days, they again came in sight of land. This was likewise flat and well wooded, but could not be Greenland, as that had been described to them as having very high snow-capped hills. Turning their prow from the land and launching out into the open sea, after a sail of three days, they came in sight of another country having a flat, rocky foreground, and mountains beyond with ice-clad summits. This was unlike Greenland as it had been described to them. They did not even lower their sails. They, however, subsequently found it to be an island. Continuing on their course, after sailing four days they came to Greenland, where Bjarni found his father, with whom he made his permanent abode.

This accidental discovery of lands hitherto unknown, and farther west than Greenland, and differing in important features from any countries with which they were familiar, awakened a very deep interest wherever the story was rehearsed. Bjarni was criticised, and blamed for not having made a thorough exploration and for bringing back such a meagre account of what he had seen. But while these discoveries were the frequent subject of conversation, both in Norway and in the colonies of Iceland and Greenland, it was not until fifteen years had elapsed that any serious attempt was made to verify the

statement of Bjarni, or to secure any advantages from what he had discovered.

About the year 1000, Leif, the son of Erik, an early colonist of Greenland, determined to conduct an expedition in search of the new lands which had been seen on the accidental voyage of Bjarni. He accordingly fitted out a ship, and manned it with thirty-five men. Shaping their course by the direction and advice of Bjarni, their first discovery was the country which Bjarni had seen last. On going ashore they saw no grass, but what appeared to be a plain of flat stones stretching back to icy mountains in the distance. They named it flat-stone land, or Helluland.

Again proceeding on their voyage, they came to another land which was flat, covered with wood, with low, white, sandy shores, answering to the second country seen by Bjarni. Having landed and made a personal inspection, they named the place woodland, or Markland.

Sailing once more into the open sea with a north-east wind, at the end of two days they came to a third country, answering to that which Bjarni had first seen. They landed upon an island situated at the mouth of a river. They left their ship in a sound between the island and the river. The water was shallow, and the receding tide soon left their ship on the beach. As soon, however, as their ship was lifted by the rising tide, they floated it into the river, and from thence into a lake, or an expansion of the river above its mouth. Here they landed and constructed temporary dwellings, but having decided to pass the winter, they proceeded to erect buildings for their more ample accommodation. They found abundance of fish in the waters, the climate mild, and the nature of the country such that they thought cattle would not even require feeding or shelter in winter. They observed that day and night were more equal than in Greenland or Iceland. The sun was above

the horizon on the shortest day, if we may accept the interpretation of learned Icelandic scholars[1], from half past seven in the morning till half past four in the afternoon. Having completed their house-building, they devoted the rest of the season to a careful and systematic exploration of the country about them, not venturing, however, so far that they could not return to their homes in the evening.

In this general survey they discovered grapes growing in great abundance, and timber of an excellent quality and highly valued in the almost woodless region from whence they came. With these two commodities they loaded their ship, and in the spring returned to Greenland. Leif gave to the country, which he had thus discovered and explored, a name, as he said, after its "qualities," and called it Vineland.

The next voyage was made by Thorvald, a brother of Leif, probably in the year 1002. The same ship was employed, and

[1] This statement rests on the interpretation of Professor Finn Magnusen, for which see "The Voyages of the Northmen to America," Prince Socely's ed., pp. 34, 126. Boston, 1877. The general description of the climate and the products of the soil are in harmony with this interpretation, but it has nevertheless been questioned. Other Icelandic writers differ from him, and make the latitude of the land-fall of Leif at 49° 55′, instead of 41° 43′ 10″, as computed by Magnusen.

This later interpretation is by Professor Gustav Storm. Vide *The Finding of Wineland the Good*, by Arthur Middleton Reeves, pp. 181–185. London, 1890. These interpretations are wide apart. Both writers are represented to be able and thorough scholars. When doctors disagree, who shall decide? The sciolists will doubtless range themselves on different sides, and fight it out to the bitter end.

The truth is, the chronology of that period in its major and minor applications was exceedingly indefinite. The year when events occurred is settled, when settled at all, with great difficulty; and it is plain that the divisions of the day were loose and indefinite. At least, they could only be approximately determined. In the absence of clocks, watches, and chronometers, there could not be anything like scientific accuracy, and the attempt to apply scientific principles to Scandinavian chronology only renders confusion still more confused. The terms which they used to express the divisions of the day were all indefinite. One of them, for example, was *hirdis rismál*, which means the time when the herdsmen took their breakfast. This was sufficiently definite for the practical purposes of a simple, primitive people; but as the breakfast hour of a people is always more or less various, *hirdis rismál* probably covered a period from one to three hours, and therefore did not furnish the proper data for calculating latitude. Any meaning given by translators touching exact hours of the day must, therefore, be taken *cum grano salis*, or for only what it is worth.

was manned with thirty men. They repaired at once to the booths or temporary houses constructed by Leif, where they passed three winters, subsisting chiefly upon fish, which they took in the waters near them. In the summers they explored the country in various directions to a considerable distance. They discovered no indications of human occupation except on an island, where they found a corn-shed constructed of wood. The second year they discovered native inhabitants in great numbers, armed with missiles, and having a vast flotilla of boats made of the skins of animals. With these natives they came into hostile conflict, in which Thorvald received a wound of which he subsequently died. He was buried at a spot selected by himself, and crosses were set up at his head and at his feet. After another winter, having loaded their ship with grapes and vines, the explorers returned to Greenland.

The death of Thorvald was a source of deep sorrow to his family, and his brother Thorstein resolved to visit Vineland and bring home his body. He accordingly embarked in the same ship, with twenty-five chosen men, and his wife Gudrid. The voyage proved unsuccessful. Having spent the whole summer in a vain attempt to find Vineland, they returned to Greenland, and during the winter Thorstein died, and the next year his widow Gudrid was married to Thorfinn Karlsefni, a wealthy Icelandic merchant.

In the year 1007, three ships sailed for Vineland, one commanded by Thorfinn Karlsefni, one by Bjarni Grimolfson, and the third by Thorvard, the husband of Freydis, the half-sister of Leif, the son of Erik. There were altogether in the three ships, one hundred and sixty men, and cattle of various kinds taken with them perhaps for food, or possibly to be useful in case they should decide to make a permanent settlement. They attempted, however, nothing beyond a careful exploration of the country, which they found beautiful and productive, its forests

abounding in wild game, its rivers well stocked with fish, and the soil producing a spontaneous growth of native grains. They bartered trifles with the natives for their furs, but they were able to hold little intercourse with them. The natives were so exceedingly hostile that the lives of the explorers were in constant peril, and they consequently, after some bloody skirmishes, abandoned all expectation of making a permanent settlement. At the end of three years, Karlsefni and his voyagers returned to Greenland.

In the year 1011 Freydis, the half-sister of Leif, inspired by the hope of a profitable voyage, entered into a partnership with two merchants, and passed a winter in Vineland. She was a bold, masculine woman, of unscrupulous character, and destitute of every womanly quality. She fomented discord, contrived the assassination of her partners in the voyage, and early the next spring, having loaded all the ships with timber and other commodities, she returned with rich and valuable cargoes for the Greenland market.

Such is the story of the discovery of America in the last years of the tenth and the early years of the eleventh centuries.

These four expeditions of which I have given a very brief outline, passing over many interesting but unimportant details, constitute all of which there remains any distinct and well defined narrative. Other voyages may have been made during the same or a later period. Allusions are found in early Scandinavian writings, which may confirm the narratives which we have given, but add to them nothing really essential or important.

The natural and pertinent question which the historical student has a right to ask is this: On what evidence does this story rest? What reason have we to believe that these voyages were ever made?

I will endeavor to make the answer to these inquiries as plain and clear as possible.

There are two kinds of evidence by which remote historical events may be established, viz., ancient writings, which can be relied upon as containing truthful statements of the alleged events, and, secondly, historical monuments and remains illustrating and confirming the written narratives. Such events may be established by one of these classes of evidence alone, or by both in concurrence.

Our attention shall be directed in the first place to certain ancient writings in which the story of this discovery of America is found. What are these ancient writings? and to what extent do they challenge our belief?

At the time that the alleged voyages to this continent in the year 1000, and a few years subsequent, were made, the old Danish or Icelandic tongue, then spoken in Iceland and Greenland, the vernacular of the explorers, had not been reduced to a written language, and of course the narrative of these voyages could not at that time be written out. But there was in that language an oral literature of a peculiar and interesting character. It had its poetry, its romance, its personal memoirs, and its history. It was nevertheless unwritten. It was carried in the memory, and handed down from one generation to another. In distinguished and opulent families men were employed to memorize and rehearse on festivals and other great occasions, as a part of the entertainment, the narratives, which had been skilfully put together and polished for public recital, relating to the exploits and achievements of their ancestors. These narratives were called sagas, and those who memorized and repeated them were called sagamen. It was a hundred and fifty years after the alleged discovery of this continent before the practice began of committing Icelandic sagas to writing. Suitable parchment was difficult to obtain, and the process was slow

and expensive, and only a few documents of any kind at first were put into written form. But in the thirteenth century written sagas multiplied to vast numbers. They were deposited in convents and in other places of safety. Between 1650 and 1715, these old Icelandic parchments were transferred to the libraries of Stockholm and Copenhagen. They were subsequently carefully read, and classified by the most competent and erudite scholars. Among them two sagas were found relating to discoveries far to the southwest of Greenland, the outlines of which I have given you in the preceding pages. The earliest of these two sagas is supposed to have been written by Hauk Erlendsson, who died in 1334. Whether he copied it from a previous manuscript, or took the narrative from oral tradition, cannot be determined. The other was written out in its present form somewhere between 1387 and 1395. It was probably copied from a previous saga not known to be now in existence, but which is conjectured to have been originally written out in the twelfth century. These documents are pronounced by scholars qualified to judge of the character of ancient writings to be authentic, and were undoubtedly believed by the writers to be narratives of historical truth.

They describe with great distinctness the outlines of our eastern coast, including soil, products, and climate, beginning in the cold, sterile regions of the north and extending down to the warm and fruitful shores of the south. It is to be observed that there is no improbability that these alleged voyages should have been made. That a vessel, sailing from Iceland and bound for Greenland, should be blown from its course and drifted to the coast of Nova Scotia or of New England, is an occurrence that might well be expected; and to believe that such an accidental voyage should be followed by other voyages of discovery, demands no extraordinary credulity.

The sagas, or narratives, in which the alleged voyages are

described, were written out as we have them to-day, more than a hundred years before the discoveries of Columbus were made in the West Indies,[1] or those of John Cabot on our northern Atlantic shores. The writers of these sagas had no information derived from other sources on which to build up the fabric of their story. To believe that the agreement of the narratives in their general outlines with the facts as we now know them was accidental, a mere matter of chance, is impossible. The coincidences are so many, and the events so far removed from anything that the authors had themselves ever seen, or of which they had any knowledge, that it becomes easier and more reasonable to accept the narratives in their general features than to deny the authenticity of the records. If we reject them, we must on the same principle reject the early history of all the civilized peoples of the earth, since that history has been obtained in all cases more or less directly from oral tradition.

In their general scope, therefore, the narrative of the sagas has been accepted by the most judicious and dispassionate historical students, who have given to the subject careful and conscientious study.

But when we descend to minor particulars, unimportant to

[1] It has been conjectured by some writers that Columbus on a visit to Iceland learned something of the voyages of the Northmen to America, and was aided by this knowledge in his subsequent discoveries. There is no evidence whatever that such was the case. In writing a memoir of his father, Ferdinando Columbus found among his papers a memorandum in which Columbus states that, in February, 1477, he sailed a hundred leagues beyond Tile, that this island was as large as England, that the English from Bristol carried on a trade there, that the sea when he was there was not frozen over; and he speaks also of the high tides. In the same paragraph we are informed that the southern limit of this island is 63° from the equator, which identifies it with Iceland. Beyond these facts, the memorandum contains no information. There is no evidence that Columbus was at any time in communication with the natives of Iceland on any subject whatever. There is no probability that he sought, or obtained, any information of the voyages of the Northmen to this continent. Ferdinando Columbus's Life of his father may be found in Spanish in Barcia's Historical Collections, Vol. I. Madrid, 1749. It is a translation from the Italian, printed in Venice in 1571. An English translation appears in Churchill's Collections, in Kerr's, and in Pinkerton's, but its mistranslations and errors render it wholly untrustworthy.

the general drift and import of the narratives, we find it difficult, nay, I may say impossible, to accept them fully and with an unhesitating confidence. Narratives that have come down to us on the current of oral tradition are sure to be warped and twisted from their original form and meaning. Consciously or unconsciously they are shaped and colored more or less by the several minds through which they have passed. No one can fail to have witnessed the changes that have grown up in the same story, as repeated by one and another in numerous instances within his own observation. The careful historian exercises, therefore, great caution in receiving what comes to him merely in oral tradition.[1]

We must not, however, forget that the sagamen in whose memories alone these narratives were preserved at least a hundred and fifty years, and not unlikely for more than three hundred, were professional narrators of events. It was their office and duty to transmit to others what they had themselves received. Their professional character was in some degree a guarantee for the preservation of the truth. But nevertheless it was impossible through a long series of oral narrations, that errors should not creep in ; that the memory of some of them should not fail at times ; and if it did fail there was no authority or standard by which their errors could be corrected. Moreover it is probable that variations were purposely introduced here and there, in obedience to the sagaman's conceptions of an improved style and a better taste. What variations took place through the failure of the memory or the conceit of the

[1] It is somewhat remarkable that most writers who have attempted to estimate the value of the sagas as historical evidence have ignored the fact, that from a hundred and fifty to three hundred years they existed only in oral tradition, handed down from one generation to another, subject to the changes which are inevitable in oral statements. They are treated by these critics as they would treat scientific documents, a coast or geodetic survey, or an admiralty report, in which lines and distances are determined by the most accurate instruments, and measurements and records are made simultaneously. It is obvious that their premises must be defective, and consequently their deductions are sure to be erroneous.

sagamen, whether few or many, whether trivial or important, can never be determined. It is therefore obvious that our interpretation of minor particulars in the sagas cannot be critical, and any nicely exact meaning, any absolute certainty, cannot be successfully maintained, since an inevitable doubt, never to be removed, overshadows these minor particulars. We may state, therefore, without hesitation, that the narratives of the sagas are to be accepted only in their general outlines and prominent features. So far we find solid ground. If we advance farther we tread upon quicksands, and are not sure of our foothold.

The question here naturally arises, viz., If in minor particulars the sagas cannot be fully relied upon, to what extent can we identify the countries discovered, and the places visited by the Northmen?

In answer to this very proper inquiry, I observe that, according to the narrative of the sagas, and the interpretation of Scandinavian scholars, the first country that the explorers discovered after leaving Greenland answers in its general features to Newfoundland, with its sterile soil, its rocky surface, and its mountains in the back-ground. The second answers to Nova Scotia, with its heavy forests, its low, level coast, and its white, sandy cliffs and beaches. The third answers to New England in temperature, climate, productions of the soil, the flat, undulating surface of the country, and its apparent distance from Greenland, the base or starting-point from which these voyages of discovery were made.

The statements of the sagas coincide with so many of the general features of our Atlantic coast that there is a strong probability, not indeed rising to a demonstration, but to as much certainty as belongs to anything in the period of unwritten history, that the Vineland of the Northmen was somewhere on our American Atlantic coast. Of this there is little room for

doubt. But when we go beyond this there is absolutely no certainty whatever. The local descriptions of the sagas are all general and indefinite. They identify nothing. When they speak of an island, a cape, a river, or a bay, they do not give us any clue to the locality where the said island, or cape, or river, or bay is situated. The whole coast of New England and of the English Provinces farther east is serrated with capes and bays and river-inlets, and is likewise studded with some hundreds of islands. It would be exceedingly interesting, indeed a great achievement, if we could clearly fix or identify the land-fall of Leif, the Scandinavian explorer, and point out the exact spot where he erected his houses and passed the winter.

The key to this identification, if any exists, is plainly the description of the place as given in the sagas. If we find in the sagas the land-fall of Leif, the place where the Scandinavians landed, so fully described that it can be clearly distinguished from every other place on our coast, we shall then have accomplished this important historical achievement. Let us examine this description as it stands in these ancient documents.

Leaving Markland, they were, says the saga, "two days at sea before they saw land, and they sailed thither and came to an island which lay to the eastward of the land." Here they landed and made observations as to the grass and the sweetness of the dew. "After that," continues the saga, "they went to the ship, and sailed into a sound, which lay between the island and a ness (promontory), which ran out to the eastward of the land; and then steered westwards past the ness. It was very shallow at ebb tide, and their ship stood up, so that it was far to see from the ship to the water.

"But so much did they desire to land, that they did not give themselves time to wait until the water again rose under their ship, but ran at once on shore, at a place where a river flows

out of a lake; but so soon as the waters rose up under the ship, then took they boats, and rowed to the ship, and floated it up to the river, and thence into the lake, and there cast anchor, and brought up from the ship their skin cots, and made there booths. After this they took council, and formed the resolution of remaining there for the winter, and built there large houses."

In this brief extract are all the data which we have relating to the land-fall of Leif, and to the place where he erected his houses, which were occupied by himself, and by other explorers in subsequent years.

We shall observe that we have in this description an *island* at the mouth of a river. Whether the island was large or small, whether it was round, square, cuneiform, broad, narrow, high or low, we are not told. It was simply an island, and of it we have no further description or knowledge whatever.

Their ship was anchored in what they call a *sound*, between the island and a promontory or tongue of land which ran out to the eastward. The breadth or extent of the sound at high water, or at low water, is not given. It may have been broad, covering a vast expanse, or it may have been very small, embraced within a few square rods. It was simply a sound, a shallow piece of water, where their ship was stranded at low tide. Of its character we know nothing more whatever.

Then we have a *river*. Whether it was a large river or a small one, long or short, wide or narrow, deep or shallow, a fresh water or tidal stream, we are not informed. All we know of the river is that their ship could be floated up its current at least at high tide.

The river flowed out of a *lake*. No further description of the lake is given. It may have been a large body of water, or it may have been a very small one. It may have been only an enlargement or expansion of the river, or it may have been a bay receiving its waters from the ocean, rising and falling with

the tides, and the river only the channel of its incoming and receding waters.

On the borders of this lake, or bay, or enlargement of the river, as the case may have been, they built their *houses;* whether on the right or left shore, whether near the outlet, or miles away, we know not.

It is easy to see how difficult, how impossible, it is to identify the landing-place and temporary abode of the Northmen on our coast from this loose and indefinite description of the sagas.

In the nearly nine hundred years which have passed since the discovery of this continent by these northern explorers, it would be unreasonable not to suppose that very great changes have taken place at the mouth of the rivers and tidal bays along our Atlantic coast. There is probably not a river's mouth or a tidal inlet on our whole eastern frontier, which has not been transformed in many and important features during this long lapse of time. Islands have been formed, and islands have ceased to exist. Sands have been drifting, shores have been crumbling, new inlets have been formed, and old ones have been closed up. Nothing is more unfixed and changeable than the shores of estuaries, and of rivers where they flow into the ocean.

But even if we suppose that no changes have taken place in this long lapse of time, there are, doubtless, between Long Island Sound and the eastern limit of Nova Scotia, a great number of rivers with all the characteristics of that described by the sagas. Precisely the same characteristics belong to the Taunton, the Charles, the Merrimack, the Piscataqua, the Kennebec, the Penobscot, the Saint Croix, and the St. John. All these rivers have one or more islands at their mouth, and there are abundant places near by where a ship might be stranded at low tide, and in each of these rivers there are expansions or bays

from which they flow into the ocean.[1] And there are, probably, twenty other less important rivers on our coast, where the same conditions may likewise be found. What sagacious student of history, what experienced navigator, or what learned geographer has the audacity to say that he is able to tell us near which of these rivers the Northmen constructed their habitations, and made their temporary abode! The identification is plainly impossible. Nothing is more certain than the uncertainty that enters into all the local descriptions contained in the Icelandic sagas. In the numerous explorations of those early navigators, there is not a bay, a cape, a promontory, or a river, so clearly described, or so distinctly defined, that it can be identified with any bay, cape, promontory, or river on our coast. The verdict of history on this point is plain, and must stand. Imagination and fancy have their appropriate sphere, but their domain is fiction, and not fact; romance, and not history; and it is the duty of the historical student to hold them within the limits of their proper field.

But there is yet another question which demands an answer. Did the Northmen leave on this continent any monuments or works which may serve as memorials of their abode here in the early part of the eleventh century?

The sources of evidence on this point must be looked for in the sagas, or in remains which can be clearly traced to the Northmen as their undoubted authors.

In the sagas, we are compelled to say, as much as we could desire it otherwise, that we have looked in vain for any such testimony. They contain no evidence, not an intimation, that the Northmen constructed any mason work, or even laid one stone upon another for any purpose whatever. Their dwellings, such as they were, were hastily thrown together, to serve only for a brief occupation. The rest of their time, according

[1] If the reader will examine our coast-survey maps, he will easily verify this statement.

to the general tenor of the narrative, was exclusively devoted to exploration, and to the preparation and laying in of a cargo for their return voyage. This possible source of evidence yields therefore no testimony that the Scandinavians left any structures which have survived down to the present time, and can therefore be regarded as memorials of their abode in this country.

But, if there is no evidence on this point in the sagas, are there to be found to-day on any part of our Atlantic coast remains which can be plainly traced to the work of the Northmen?

This question, we regret to say, after thorough examination and study, the most competent, careful, and learned antiquaries have been obliged to answer in the negative. Credulity has seized upon several comparatively antique works, whose origin half a century ago was not clearly understood, and has blindly referred them to the Northmen. Foremost among them were, first, the stone structure of arched mason-work in Newport, Rhode Island; second, a famous rock, bearing inscriptions, lying in the tide-water near the town of Dighton, in Massachusetts; and, third, the "skeleton in armor" found at Fall River, in the same state. No others have been put forward on any evidence that challenges a critical examination.

The old mill at Newport, situated on the farm of Benedict Arnold, an early governor of Rhode Island, was called in his will "my stone built wind mill," and had there been in his mind any mystery about its origin, he could hardly have failed to indicate it as a part of his description. Roger Williams, the pioneer settler of Rhode Island, educated at the University of Cambridge, England, a voluminous author, was himself an antiquary, and deeply interested in everything that pertained to our aboriginal history. Had any building of arched mason-

work, with some pretensions to architecture, existed at the time when he first took up his abode in Rhode Island, and before any English settlements had been made there, he could not have failed to mention it: a phenomenon so singular, unexpected. and mysterious must have attracted his attention. His silence on the subject renders it morally certain that no such structure could have been there at that time.[1]

The inscriptions on the Dighton rock present rude cuttings, intermingled with outline figures of men and animals. The whole, or any part of them, baffles and defies all skill in interpretation. Different scholars have thought they discerned in the shapeless traceries Phœnician, Hebrew, Scythian, and Runic characters or letters. Doubtless some similitude to them may here and there be seen. They are probably accidental resemblances. But no rational interpretation has ever been given, and it seems now to be generally conceded by those best qualified to judge, that they are the work of our native Indians, of very trivial import, if, indeed, they had any meaning whatever.

The "skeleton in armor," found at Fall River, has no better claim than the rest to a Scandinavian origin. What appeared to be human bones were found in a sand-bank, encased in metallic bands of brass. Its antecedents are wholly unknown. It may possibly have been the relics of some early navigator, cast upon our shore, who was either killed by the natives or died a natural death, and was buried in the armor in which he was clad. Or, what is far more probable, it may have been the remains of one of our early Indians, overlaid even in his grave, according to their custom, with the ornaments of brass, which

[1] Although most antiquaries and historical students have abandoned all belief in the Scandinavian origin of this structure, yet in the March number of Scribner's Magazine, 1879, an article may be found in defence of the theory that it was erected in the eleventh century by the Northmen. The argument is founded on its architectural construction, but it is clearly refuted by Mr. George C. Mason, Jr., in the Magazine of American History, Vol. III, p. 541.

he had moulded and shaped with his own hands while living.[1]

Could the veil be lifted, some such stories as these would doubtless spring up from the lifeless bones. But oblivion has for many generations brooded over these voiceless remains. Their story belongs to the domain of fancy and imagination. Poetry has woven it into an enchanting ballad. Its rhythm and its polished numbers may always please the ear and gratify the taste. But history, the stern and uncompromising arbiter of past events, will, we may be sure, never own the creations of the poet or the dreams of the enthusiast to be her legitimate offspring.

[1] In Professor Putnam's Report, as Curator of the Peabody Museum of American Archæology and Ethnology, in 1887, will be found the following interesting account of the "Skeleton in Armor:"

"I must, however, mention as of particular interest relating to the early period of contact between the Indians and Europeans on this continent, the presentation, by Dr. Samuel Kneeland, of two of the brass tubes found with the skeleton of an Indian near Fall River, about which so much has been written, including the well known verses by Longfellow, entitled 'The Skeleton in Armor.' That two of the 'links of the armor' should find their final resting place in this Museum is interesting in itself, and calls up in imagination the history of the bits of metal of which they are made. Probably some early emigrant brought from Europe a brass kettle, which by barter, or through the vicissitudes of those early days, came into the possession of an Indian of one of the New England tribes and was by him cut up for ornaments, arrow points, and knives. One kind of ornament he made by rolling little strips of the brass into the form of long, slender cylinders, in imitation of those he had, probably, before made of copper. These were fastened side by side so as to form an ornamental belt, in which he was buried. Long afterwards, his skeleton was discovered and the brass beads were taken to be portions of the armor of a Norseman. They were sent, with other things found with them, to Copenhagen, and the learned men of the old and new world wrote and sung their supposed history. Chemists made analyses and the truth came out; they were brass, not bronze nor iron. After nearly half a century had elapsed these two little tubes were separated from their fellows, and again crossed the Atlantic to rest by the side of similar tubes of brass and of copper, which have been found with other Indian braves; and their story shows how much can be made out of a little thing when fancy has full play, and imagination is not controlled by scientific reasoning, and conclusions are drawn without comparative study." Vide *Twentieth Annual Report of the Peabody Museum*, Vol. III, p. 543.

In an article on "Agricultural Implements of the New England Indians," Professor Henry W. Haynes, of Boston, shows that the Dutch were not allowed to barter with the Pequots, because they sold them "kettles" and the like with which they made arrowheads." Vide *Proceedings of the Boston Society of Natural History*. Vol. XXII, p. 439. In later times brass was in frequent, not to say common, use among the Indians.

Half a century has now elapsed since the sagas have been accessible to the English reader in his own language. No labor has been spared by the most careful, painstaking, and conscientious historians in seeking for remains which can be reasonably identified as the work of the Northmen. None whatever have been found, and we may safely predict that none will be discovered, that can bear any better test of their genuineness than those to which we have just alluded.[1]

It is the office and duty of the historian to seek out facts, to distinguish the true from the false, to sift the wheat from the chaff, to preserve the one and to relegate the other to the oblivion to which it belongs.

Tested by the canons that the most judicious scholars have adopted in the investigation of all early history, we cannot doubt that the Northmen made four or five voyages to the coast of America in the last part of the tenth and the first part of the eleventh centuries; that they returned to Greenland with cargoes of grapes and timber, the latter a very valuable commodity in the markets both of Greenland and Iceland; that their abode on our shores was temporary; that they were mostly occupied in explorations, and made no preparations for establishing any permanent colony; except their temporary dwellings they erected no structures whatever, either of wood or of stone. We have intimations that other voyages were made to this continent, but no detailed account of them has survived to the present time.

[1] There are in many parts of New England old walls and such like structures, apparently of very little importance when they were originally built, never made the subject of record, disused now for many generations, and consequently their origin and purpose have passed entirely from the memory of man. Such remains are not uncommon: they may be found all along our coast. But there are few writers bold enough to assert that they are the work of the Northmen simply because their history is not known, and especially since it is very clear that the Northmen erected no stone structures whatever. Those who accept such palpable absurdities would doubtless easily believe that the "Tenterden steeple was the cause of the Goodwin Sands."

These few facts constitute the substance of what we know of these Scandinavian discoveries. Of the details we know little: they are involved in indefiniteness, uncertainty, and doubt. The place of their first landing, the location of their dwellings, the parts of the country which they explored, are so indefinitely described that they are utterly beyond the power of identification.

But I should do injustice to the subject to which I have ventured to call your attention, if I did not add that writers are not wanting who claim to know vastly more of the details than I can see my way clear to admit. They belong to that select class of historians who are distinguished for an exuberance of imagination and a redundancy of faith. It is a very easy and simple thing for them to point out the land-fall of Leif, the river which he entered, the island at its mouth, the bay where they cast anchor, the shore where they built their temporary houses, the spot where Thorvald was buried, and where they set up crosses at his head and at his feet. They tell us what headlands were explored on the coast of Massachusetts and Rhode Island, and what inlets and bays were entered along the shores of Maine. The narratives which they weave from a fertile brain are ingenious and entertaining: they give to the sagas more freshness and greater personality, but when we look for the facts on which their allegations rest, for anything that may be called evidence, we find only the creations of an undisciplined imagination and an agile fancy.

It is, indeed, true that it would be highly gratifying to believe that the Northmen made more permanent settlements on our shores, that they reared spacious buildings and strong fortresses of stone and mason-work, that they gathered about them more of the accessories of a national, or even of a colonial existence; but history does not offer us any choice: we must take what she gives us, and under the limitations which she imposes.

The truth, unadorned and without exaggeration, has a beauty and a nobility of its own. It needs no additions to commend it to the historical student. If he be a true and conscientious investigator, he will take it just as he finds it: he will add nothing to it: he will take nothing from it.

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