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AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION.

THE PRESENT STATUS OF PRE-COLUMBIAN DISCOVERY
OF AMERICA BY NORSEMEN.

BY

HON. JAMES PHINNEY BAXTER,
Of Portland, Maine.

(From the Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1893, pages 103-110.)

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THE PRESENT STATUS OF PRE-COLUMBIAN DISCOVERY OF
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A great deal has been written during the past few years respecting the pre-Columbian discovery of America by the Norsemen near the close of the tenth century; indeed, there has been a renaissance of mythical lore respecting this much bewritten subject, so that one may well shrink from venturing to rehabilitate these shadowy figures, which hover on the uncertain line which separates tradition from history.

When the sagas of Biarni, of Leif, of Thorvald, and others came to light, they were, indeed, a godsend to historical enthusiasts, who not only accepted them as veritable history, but, with remarkable facility, ascribed to Norse creation all archæological remains of doubtful origin, which they encountered.

Rude characters wrought upon rocks along the New England coast by aboriginal artists, altered not only by time, whose keen chisel is never inactive: but possibly, nay certainly, by mischievous hands, were easily seen to be Runic characters, and the lines of rocks piled along the beach by the fierce rush of stormy seas, were described as the handiwork of men, presumable Norse.

When one considers the failures of these enthusiasts, among whom were several able men, in their attempts to convince the world of the existence of Norse remains in New England, one can hardly wonder at Bancroft's contemptuous treatment of the subject. At the time when he wrote, these men were posing as the expositors of the sagas, and the proofs, which they adduced, were not of a nature to merit the serious regard of a man like our historian.

The objects to which they pointed with the greatest assurance were the stone mill at Newport, and the Dighton rock. Learned treatises were written by architectural amateurs to

prove the Norse origin of the Newport wonder, and its structural analogies to similar European buildings, accompanied by elaborate drawings to show how it looked to Norse eyes. To these, theoretical additions were added by others, and had not some bookish man shown by indubitable proof that it was built by the emigrant Arnold, after the model of a like stone structure in his native English town, we should have had in time on the soil of New England another tower of Babel.

But the Dighton rock was left, and it bore an inscription, a Runic inscription, and a learned professor had translated it. How simply it read. Its very simplicity, so much in harmony with the rugged Norse character, was sufficient in itself to prove its genuineness. It told of the landing of Thorfinn, the number of his men, and bore a representation of his wife, and of their child born after landing. Who would have the temerity to question this record? Yet, to-day, what student of American aboriginal rock writing but smiles at the strange delusion of the disciples of Rafn, when brought face to face with this interesting relic of our red-skinned predecessors? Such delusions, however, are not singular. The history of the world abounds with them.

One would have supposed that such signal instances of failure would have discouraged similar attempts; but such is not the case, and a new crop of Norsemaniacs, more zealous than their predecessors, has taken their place. Like them, these sciolists seize upon every archaic relic of doubtful origin to support their favorite postulate, and, like them, they press etymology, that facile science for theoretic display, into their service with a boldness that commands admiration.

Of relics, stone mortars, such as our Indians used, old horn spoons and débris of indescribable kinds, with nothing to indicate their age or origin, are brought forward as of Norse fabrication; and, most astounding of all, the remains of a great city have been discovered near Boston; a Norse city, and its name was Norumbega; that name which the bibulous Frenchman, stranded at a temperance hotel in Maine, was told, as he admired it upon the swinging sign over the door, was the original name of the Pine-Tree State, and who, reading it with the stress upon the second and fourth syllables, was moved to exclaim: "Well named from the first."

Of course we are all glad to learn that the location of Norumbega is at last settled, and that Massachusetts has it. It

has been an insufferable nuisance to Mainiacs with historical tendencies. We are glad to hear of its unexampled extent and the nature of its ancient traffic, themes which furnish the enterprising journals of the day with picturesque opportunities for description. We are glad to know that the pulpit has a new subject with which to attack sin; a great city right in Massachusetts, with its immense canals floating lumber from the interior to its splendid docks and wharves, whence it went on ships full laden to far outland havens; a city, in spite of its prosperity, which came to nought through ungodliness. The fate of these ungodly Norumbegans, who married and were given in marriage with the Canaanites about them, may prove a timely warning to bad Bostonians, while the good, it is to be hoped, may not vaunt themselves overmuch because they were especially raised up by Providence to succeed the wicked Norumbegans. Such is the story recently told to an approving audience, of "The Norseman and the Puritan."

But perhaps etymology may be made to yield still better results. It is still remembered with what calm confidence the learned Mather derived the Algonquin word Naumkeag, the aboriginal name for the home of Endicot, from the Hebrew Nahum-keik, the bosom of consolation, which he believed, with his usual inflexibility of faith, was proof conclusive of Algonkin descent from Heber; and why should we be surprised to learn that Americus Vespuccius did not give his name to the continent, but Eric, the ruddy sire of Leif, whose name America preserves in its two middle syllables, like a fly in amber or one of Mr. Donnelly's cryptographs? We are not surprised to find that we have been misinformed as to the first name of Vespuccius, and that he is no longer A-meri-cus, but a sad one rapidly passing to a merited oblivion.

But while on the name of Eric may we not, in behalf of Maine, which ought to have a share in the Norseman since it was once a part of Massachusetts, remark that it appears on the Maine coast in the region of the Sagadahoc, one instance of which may be cited, namely, Mericoneag, the Abnaki name of the peninsular whereon Harpswell now flourishes? May not this have been named in honor of another Eric, the first bishop of Vinland? This theory is supported by names in the vicinity, especially by the names of the rivers near by, known as the Sagadahoc and Pjepscoot, or Bishop's Cot, as the English recorded it. Why may not the humble home or cot of the

good Norse Bishop, Eric, have been at the latter place? What reflections this may furnish to our Roman Catholic friends. How wonderfully Father Biard's steps were guided to this region, so near the spot where the seeds of faith had been sowed by Bishop Eric. The soil had already been prepared for him in the hearts of these Norse Abnakians in this obscure region, and the little river Pjepscoot all at once assumes an important place in the new history of "Em-Eric-a," as it is to be henceforth pronounced by all good Norsemaniacs.

Allusion has been made to the Sagadahoc. In this new method of writing history we are told that Sagamore, the title of an Abnaki chief, is a corruption of Sagaman, a person among Norsefolk also occupying a chief place. Truly suggestive was this to one person at least when, awhile ago, the Maine Historical Society met on the heights at the mouth of the beautiful Sagadahoc—Saga-da-hoc, the Saga-height or high place—and he reflected, may not this be the very spot where the Norse Abnaki Sagamores were wont to meet and enjoy their sagas, a much nobler occupation than that of the historians who had usurped their place to rest and enjoy their segars?

Time will not permit a further pursuit of this branch of the subject, but it is proper to remark that, if we adopt this method in our study of etymology, we shall find in the Abnaki branch of the Algonkin tongue, words having great similarity of sound to certain Chinese words, as well as to words of other tongues, and may expect to see come to the front Li Yen's story of the Chinese discovery in the seventh century of Fusang, or America, which was said to be numerous "lis" from the Celestial Empire, and lest some one may not know what a "li" is, it may be well to observe that it is a Chinese term for a measure of distance.

But leaving this perhaps too fruitful branch of the subject, may we not more profitably occupy ourselves with what a recent writer, who is evidently an admirer of the etymological method, terms the "bookish" method of research, by which is meant the method of seeking historical evidence in written or printed documents? As a matter of fact, neither archaeology, ethnology, nor etymology at present yields satisfactory support to the Sagas relating to the discovery of America, if we except the remnants of former habitations found on the coast of Greenland, where the Sagas located Ericsfiord, that erewhile mythical

haven from which the Norse heroes sailed for Vinland. The importance of this discovery is acknowledged. We may also acknowledge ourselves to be believers in the Sagas, founding our belief largely upon the internal evidence of truth which they possess. The Sagas are all that we have to bridge the wide gap between the Norse occupation of Greenland and the discovery of America by Columbus. For more than a century and a half they were not reduced to writing, but were repeated orally by men trained for the purpose of perpetuating and diffusing the knowledge of historical events. They can not, therefore, be properly regarded as history, and anything which may yield them external support will always be welcomed by historical students.

Believing that in Roman Catholic archives something relating to the Norse adventurers to the New World might be discovered, the author went to Rome sometime since, bearing suitable credentials, for the purpose of pursuing investigations in the Vatican, and, though his efforts were unsatisfactory, he still entertains hope, that facts having an important bearing upon this subject, may be found in Roman Catholic archives. One fact may be here presented as furnishing a proof of the verity of the sagas.

The policy of the Roman Pontiffs has ever been to extend the dominion of the church over the whole earth; hence the discovery of a new land, in which they could plant the seeds of the Roman faith, has never failed to be regarded as an event of much importance. Such newly discovered lands were regarded as the spiritual property of the church, and as soon as practicable, they were brought under her fostering care; hence we should expect to find in the church archives references to such discoveries.

Let us go back to a date previous to the Norse colonization of Iceland, which is set down in the *Crymogaea* of Arngrim Jonas as A. D. 874; say to the year A. D. 830, at which period Gregory Fourth occupied the papal throne. The world knew nothing at this time of Iceland, nor of any larger land west of Norway above the sixth circle. In this year we find Gregory confirming Auscarius as the first archbishop of Hamburg, Christianity having been introduced into Denmark but three years previous. To the north lay Sweden and Norway in the darkness of paganism. Thirty years later, the Roman congregation having, without doubt, planted the banner of the church

in Sweden; Pope Nicholas First, who had succeeded Gregory, invested Auscarius as his legate, and in doing so defined his jurisdiction. It is no longer confined to Hamburg and indefinite territory beyond, but is extended over the Swedes as well as "over any other nations in those parts to whom the mercy of God shall open a way."

In the year 874 A. D., Iceland was colonized; but the church had not reached Norway, and it is not until the year 948 A. D. that we find this country mentioned in pontifical annals. At this time Agapetus occupied the pontifical chair, and Archbishop Adalgarus was granted jurisdiction, not only over Swedes and Danes, but also over Norwegians and all other countries to the north, and we may expect, that ere long, the star of church empire, holding its way westward, may reach Iceland. Nor are we disappointed in this, for following along to the reign of Pope Benedict Eighth in the year 1022 A. D. we find him enlarging the jurisdiction of the see of Hamburg. Heretofore it had comprised the Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians, and now the Icelanders are taken in as well "as all islands adjacent unto the countries aforesaid."

We become interested in this progress of the church westward and are fain to follow it.

Greenland had been discovered in 982 A. D. by Eric, but at this date, 1022 A. D., had not been mentioned in pontifical documents. The author is aware that, according to certain German codices, Auscarius and his successor Rembert, who flourished in the ninth century, were given by popes Gregory Fourth and Nicholas First legatine powers over both Iceland and Greenland, but they are not supported by pontifical documents, nor by the best codices of Paris and Corbie; and as neither Iceland nor Greenland had been colonized at the date mentioned, they may properly be regarded as erroneous.

The church has now reached Iceland, and is following a little behind geographical discovery.

The year 1053 A. D. opens, and Leo the Ninth reigns at Rome. Christianity in its Roman garb has reached Greenland, and the people there have become amenable to its influence. The jurisdiction of Archbishop Adalbert has heretofore been nominally limited on the west to Iceland, but now the pope enlarges it so as not only to embrace Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, Iceland, and Lapland but also Greenland, as well as "all northern nations and certain portions of adjacent Slavia."

This, according to Migne's *Patrology of the Latin Fathers*, is the first mention of Greenland in pontifical documents. Having reached Greenland, we have come to the end of the history of geographical discovery toward the west until we resume it in Columbian chronicles. If, however, America was discovered by the Norsefolk at the close of the tenth century, as we are told it was by the sagas, should we not find the same kind of evidence of the fact in the annals of the Roman Catholic Church, which we have already found respecting the discovery of Iceland and Greenland? We have seen that in 1053 A. D. the jurisdiction of Archbishop Adalbert, of Hamburg, was extended by Pope Leo IX to include Greenland. In 1055, by a bull of Pope Victor XI, the same jurisdiction was continued to Archbishop Adalbert, who died in 1072.

The legatine powers of the see of Hamburg had become so extensive as to make it convenient to erect an archbishopric at Lund, in Sweden, in 1104, and Greenland was placed under its jurisdiction; and as the bishops of Iceland could not exercise inspection over its ecclesiastical affairs, it became desirable to have bishops of its own; hence in 1106, a bishopric was erected at Holum, and its charge committed to Eric Gnupson. After this date we lose sight of this man until 1112, when he appears in Greenland, superintending for several years after this date the ecclesiastical affairs of the country. During this period there appears no evidence that he had received his appointment from Rome, or been duly consecrated to his office. In 1121, however, Calixtus Second, then occupying the papal throne, he received consecration from Archbishop Adzer, of Lund, and had committed to his care not only Greenland but Vinland. To this latter country, where a colony is said to have emigrated from Greenland, Bishop Eric is said to have gone to take under his protection the ecclesiastical affairs of the new colony. If this is not true, we may expect to be able to follow Bishop Eric's subsequent career, but this we find ourselves unable to do, for he vanishes utterly from view. No record of his death appears, while an examination of the church history of the time, reveals the important fact, that Greenland was without a bishop, and in 1123 made an application for one, which was granted, and the next year Arnald was consecrated at Lund by Archbishop Adzer to fill the bishopric left vacant by Eric. Although some obscurity exists with relation to these transactions, they

certainly afford very important support to the truth of the sagas, and it is hoped that further evidence of their truth may yet be discovered in Roman Catholic archives. Of course I should not forget Adam of Bremen, whose reference to Vinland is always quoted. Archbishop Adalbert, who occupied the see of Hamburg from the year 1045 to 1072, was the patron and personal friend of the historian, whose work, *Gesta Pontificium Ecclesiae Hamburgensis* was completed in 1075. Of the good Bishop, Adam always speaks with affection and reverence. He says that "he was so grand, so generous, so hospitable, so desirous of divine and human glory, that little Bremen, having become known by his virtue like another Rome, was devoutly resorted to from all quarters of the earth, especially from the north." Among the comers were Icelanders, Greenlanders, and Orcadeans, inhabitants of the Orkneys, who came to ask for preachers. It is probable that the archbishop himself journeyed as far west as Greenland, as on one occasion, when dispatching Islef, the first bishop of Scaltholdt to his charge, he sent by him letters, like those of the earlier apostles, to the people of Iceland and Greenland, saluting their churches with veneration, and promising to visit them soon, glorying that these countries had received the faith by his efforts. When we realize the close intimacy existing between these men, and their high character, these familiar words, which Adam uses to convey to us what Archbishop Adalbert said to him respecting Vinland, receive additional force. "He spoke," says he, "also of another island found in that ocean called Winland, because vines grew there spontaneously, yielding excellent wine. For that fruits grow there spontaneously we know, not from fabulous report, but for certain, from the reports of the Danes." This was written many years before the time of Eric Gnupson, that important figure in any story of North American discovery by Norsemen which may be constructed. It is to be hoped that the researches of students may yet bring to light much more respecting him.

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