

INTRODUCTION

"From Gardar to Gardar". This was how the medieval Norsemen described the extent of the world. Eastern Gardar was Istanbul in Turkey, while the Western was Igaliku in Kalaallit Nunaat, denoted Greenland.

Norse immigrants settled in Greenland around A.D. 1000. By 1300, the number of inhabitants may have arisen to 4 - 6000, divided in two settlements. At around 1500, both settlements were totally deserted.

Thus the extent and power of Christian Europe was not to last. By the end of the 15th century, both Gardars had fallen; the Eastern fell to the Ottoman Turks, the Western was left open to the Inuit. Since then, people have been intrigued by the fate of the deserted Norse colonies in Greenland. Old documents have been studied and ruins excavated. Even novels have been written, describing the depression and despair of the last colonists (Lorentzen 79, Bollerud 82, Smiley 88).

Perhaps the "last days" of the colony have deluded and hindered us from recognizing the Greenland material for what it is: Scattered over an enormous area are hundreds of ruins, which have remained virtually untouched since their desertion, making it perhaps the most complete example of a rural medieval settlement in existence.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the written material, which is fragmentary and insufficient. Most of the surviving texts originated outside Greenland, and exist only in 16th and 17th century transcripts, with all the problems of interpretation this implies.

As a result, Norse Greenland is indeed a subject where archaeology and history should be combined. And where the rich potential of the physical remains will sooner or later give archaeology a leading role.

Under the charge of the National Museum of Denmark, several surveys and excavations have been made. Most of the excavations were carried out during the nineteen twenties and the early thirties, while smaller excavations and especially surveys have been made until this day. Much of this material has been published, and some is available in the archives. The present study is primarily based upon published material. In some very few cases, material from archives have been used.

My engagement in Norse Greenland archaeology started with my participation in the Nordic Archaeological Project in the Qorlortoq area in 1976 and -77, and continued as a cooperation with Svend Erik Albrethsen in some later seasons. Albrethsen has also permitted me to use his survey-maps for this study.

Work with this book started with spatial analyses of the archaeological material, as a preparation for the conference "Norse

in the North Atlantic" in Bowdoin College, Maine. The questions that arose from these studies demanded an appraisal of some of the written sources. It became obvious that certain problems could only be solved by creating a synthesis between archaeological and historical records.

This approach is, of course, not very original. Such efforts have been made all over the world, none the least for Norse Greenland. Why, then, another attempt?

First of all, because of a personal frustration. During my work with the archaeological material, it gradually appeared that many of the studies in Norse Greenland history and archaeology did not meet the requirements of modern research. Important works in Norwegian as well as inter-Nordic literature were ignored, and many of the archaeological analyses were surprisingly old-fashioned.

Second, because the attempts to combine history and archaeology to create further knowledge had begun to stagnate. Many previous conclusions have gradually appeared to be insubstantial, and the critical voices were becoming louder (Langer Andersen 82, Olsen 82).

This book is an attempt to describe some paramount features of the archaeological material, primarily concerning settlement patterns, ecological adaptation, and social organization. The archaeological picture thus created is compared to the historical evidence, and a synthesis is attempted.

It should at this point be emphasized that this book is not aimed to be a general history of Norse Greenland. Such books already exist, and a deeper analysis of the total material would break all practical bounds for a single volume.

Instead, I have tried to focus on certain aspects that I find important, and to present a thorough discussion of these issues. This approach is reflected in the organization of the book:

First, a general outline of the Eastern Settlement and the history of its research is presented in Chapters 1 and 2. This is intended as a "platform" for further research.

Second, a number of analyses of the archaeological material are discussed in Chapters 3 to 5.

Third, the church archaeology is discussed together with the written sources in Chapters 6 to 8.

Finally, a more general discussion of the Eastern Settlement is presented in Chapter 9.

This study has been limited to the Eastern Settlement for several reasons:

It is the area in which I have worked. It is also an area which has been subject to systematic archaeological surveys, and important analyses of the environmental conditions have been made in the area.

And last but not least, the most important written records deal with this settlement.

The Western Settlement is still being studied by former participants in the Inuit-Norse Project, and it seemed natural to leave the problems of the Western Settlement in their custody. This attitude has, however, not prevented communication, as the numerous references "personal communication" will demonstrate.