Iceland; Stepping Stone for the Medieval Norse Fur Trade in North America
Robert G. Johnson and Janey Westin
A Book:

The Last Kings of Norse America, Runestone Keys to a Lost Empire

By Bob Johnson PhD, adjunct professor, U of MN

& Janey Westin, BA, calligrapher, stone letter carver, and specialist in medieval inscriptions.
Part 1

Historical reasons behind king Magnus’s 1356 expedition to North America
(136 years before Columbus’s voyage)
It was all about the fur trade!
The key idea behind the population of medieval Norse who lived in North America is:

**A population explosion** on Greenland (and probably Iceland) after 1000 AD resulted in Norse exploration and settlement on the continent. This was motivated and made possible by the development of a healthy fur trade with native Indians on the continent, a peaceful business that resulted in the formal annexation of Greenland and Iceland by Norway about 1261 AD.

But first:  **How it all began!**
A little early history

Iceland was settled by Norsemen beginning about 870 AD. Greenland settlement began with Erik the Red about 985 AD. Most of the land on Iceland had been claimed by the time a farmer named Herjolf moved from Iceland to a peninsula on Greenland in 997 AD. A year later his son, Bjarni, returned from a merchant voyage to Norway to join his father, and discovered America.
Bjarni Herjolfsson discovers America ~998 AD. After first sighting land on Newfoundland, he sailed for nine days to reach his father’s house.
Leif Eriksson got the credit. He was a Greenlander who explored the east coast of N. America in 1003 AD from his base on a lake connected to the sea by a short river at Carpon Cove (north cape of Newfoundland).
After Leif, came Thorfinn Karlsfni and wife Gudrid, adventurous Icelanders who settled briefly at current day Newburyport, Massachusetts about 1015 AD. This map matches the description in the saga. He traded for furs, and that’s how the Norse fur trade began.
The fur trade became big business

The West Greenland merchants, in smaller ships, would sail out to trading posts in the summer, back to Greenland for the winter, and the next summer, sail to Norway to market their furs, which were taxed by the king. The fur trade flourished for almost 250 years until the climate changed.
Bishop Gnupsson voyage, 1117-1118, on a trade ship. (Source: H. Ingstad)
The fur trade became so important that in 1261 AD, Norway formally annexed Greenland and established a tax on all the residents. That was a mistake!....
...Because after 1261 the Greenland summers turned colder and living became difficult. By 1350 the merchants and other residents of the western Greenland colony, disgusted by the taxes and difficult life, had nearly all migrated to North America, and the fur trade died.
Enter: King Magnus, b.1316, d.1374

After his father was killed, Magnus became king of Norway and Sweden at age 4. He did some good things, but was not a good diplomat and he lost the support of the nobles. In 1343 he was forced into a delayed abdication in which his second son, Haakon VI (b. 1340) would become king of Norway twelve years later in 1355. Magnus would no longer be in total control of his empire.
With the loss of the lucrative Greenland fur trade, Magnus’ finances worsened, and he began to look around for ways to improve his finances.
The German Hansa were taking away his Baltic Sea trade, and in a desperate move he decided to try to conquer the Russian provinces at the east end of the Baltic Sea and monopolize their trade. To fund the war, he borrowed five years of the Pope’s tithes that would be collected from Norway and Sweden.
But as the tithes began to come in when his campaign began in 1349, the bubonic plague hit Norway and Sweden, and he was forced to end the war and give his attention to the problems of the plague. The nobles of both countries were even more unhappy with him.
After the plague, it was only five years until 1355 when son Haakon VI at age 15 would become king. Magnus had a brilliant idea. He would organize an expedition to sail to the western lands to restore the lost fur trade, and would arrange for Haakon to be second in command. Haakon would not be around to compete with him for many years until the expedition returned.
He decided keep the pope’s tithes over the next four years to fund the expedition. This he did, but not with the pope’s permission. Consequently, the pope excommunicated him. This didn’t seem to bother Magnus, because he kept the money and went ahead with his plans.
In 1354, he issued a proclamation announcing the expedition. As recorded by his scribe, the proclamation addresses an unnamed “you.” Historians have always assumed (incorrectly) that the “you” was Paul Knutson, the commander.
But the grammar indicates otherwise, and we now know that the “you” was his second son, Haakon VI, who was to be empowered as king of Norway the next year, and Magnus was assigning Haakon to the expedition and authorizing him to select his retinue.
Our re-examined translation of Magnus’s 1354 proclamation:

“We desire that you pledge that you, on your part, take all those men who in the choosing desire to journey with, all from wheresoever, either titled or else not titled, from my personal attendants or other men’s attendants. Or any other men, those who would be acceptable to us on this trading voyage.”
He then speaks in the future sense:

“With that said, the Honorable Paul Knutson, the Honorable Commandant, shall be, upon (his) being chosen, fully authorized to name those men of his choice who would be the stouts (strong men) best suited for him, both for officers and crew.”
He then returns to the present sense, and addresses Haakon:

“We ask for the acceptance of this command with a right good will for these matters because we do this in honor to God and for our soul’s and forbearers' sake, who on Greenland established Christianity and upheld it to this day, and we will not allow it to perish in our days.”
Summary

The goal of King Magnus’s 1356 expedition to the Western Lands was to consolidate his empire by regaining political control of the Norsemen who now lived on the continent, and by arranging for their future fur trade. The expedition was funded by the Pope’s tithes, and re-establishing Christianity was a political necessity.
In 1356, the expedition sailed westward by way of Iceland and Greenland, and set up their base in what's now Rhode Island. Along the way, they obtained maps.
Part 2

Evidence for the expedition
Magnus’s expedition sailed out in 1356 with four ships, and set up their base in Rhode Island. Over the next six years they explored the Great Lakes area, made arrangements for future trade with Norsemen now living there, built a church, lost a ship and 17 men in a storm on Hudson Bay in 1361, lost ten men in a massacre in western Minnesota in 1362, and left two runestones behind when they returned to Norway. Here are the runestones:
Kensington Runestone, found in 1898 by farmer Olof Ohman: a memorial to ten Norsemen who were massacred on Big Cormorant Lake in 1362. (Westin photo).
This runic inscription was made under the direction of Commander Knutson on a little island in a shallow lake near Kensington, MN after the massacre of ten of their men at Big Cormorant Lake. They had not found any Norsemen to negotiate with for future trade, and the delay of the search forced Knutson to try to go back to Norumbega by way of the Great Lakes.
The island campsite northeast of Kensington, where in 1362 the Norsemen inscribed runes on a stone, and erected it on a nearby hill to the south (behind where this photo was taken).
View of the former Olof Ohman farm, now the Kensington Runestone Park. The runestone was found just below the turnaround at the top of the hill.
8 Gotlanders (Swedes) and 22 Normenn (Norwegians) on [this] taking-back journey from [??] west Vinland. We hove to anchorages by 2 skerries one days journey north from this stone. We were also fishing one day. After we came home found 10 men reddened with blood and dead. AV(e)M(aria) Salvation from evil fate.

(a) troop (of) 10 men have a large winter house to look after our ship 14 daghrise (1 day’s journey = 75 miles) from beyond this island. Year 1362.
Spirit Pond runestone, Maine, found in 1971. Its inscription is greatly abbreviated. Size is 11” across.
This inscription was made by King Haakon and his poet (skald) at Spirit Pond near the mouth of the Kennebec River, south of Augusta on the coast of Maine. It was composed and carved during the winter after the summer expedition to Hudson Bay in 1361 when the ship and 17 men were lost in a great storm. Here is what the poem says, the year numbers are Haakon’s age:
Fallen kinsmen, ever valiant fellows. A roaring sea struck 17 dead. Hail to you Weeping Fountains! Year 20, we lost the company of twelve companions 12 daghrise (900 miles) westward, 10 daghrise (750 miles) northward.

The saga of a young Folkung. Bearded chief man Haakon discovered a circle by being able to sail toward the west on the lakes of the trade empire. Weeping Fountains! Year 21.

A shout into the burning lights! Blessed Mary! Alas! Powerless those on the Sealship to proceed to obtain an edge to devote attention in regard to win the ship against the terrible storm. Seventeen presage their inevitable battle stroke, accept the sinking, the bane of their approaching death.

Hail to you Weeping Fountains! Year 21.
Examples of abbreviations in the inscription
SIGATUMODIN” on the stone is Siginn aettum O Drengir
“Fallen Kinsmen always valiant fellows”
“BAMAR OO” on the stone is: Beata Maria! Oh! Blessed Mary! Alas!
The Heimskringla text, many abbreviations.
Additional evidence for the expedition
The expedition's base, 'Norombega', where they built a church and established trade.
Newport Tower: The remains of the church built at the expedition’s headquarters
Altar location on the second floor,
The slot in the wall held the altar table.
The square niche below held the sacramental items. (Westin Photo)
When the church was nearly finished at Norombega, Knutson decided to contact the Norse on the plains of the “Graenavelde” (Dakotas and Minnesota) to restore their trade also. In 1361 Knutson sailed three ships to the mouth of the Nelson River on Hudson Bay to take small boats southward to contact the Norse. On the way a terrible storm sank a ship and 17 men were lost.
The Trade Empire
X = ship sinking in Hudson Bay
'Graenaveldi = Norse area
Knutson’s unsuccessful search delayed the return to his ship, and he was forced to try to return to Norombega by way of the Great Lakes. On Big Cormorant Lake he lost ten men in an Indian massacre. After leaving the Kensington memorial runestone, his fate is uncertain.
The Norsemen had lived and traded widely in North America from about 1050 until about 1340 when Greenland became colder. The sailing merchants then migrated to the North American continent, and the trade back to Norway ceased.
More evidence of Norse in North America. Holes in stones, often near waterways.
Medieval Norse holestones are found in Iceland, Greenland, eastern Canada and the northeastern regions of the US as well as central North America.

They were made with a hammer and chisel, and the natural shape is slightly triangular. They are typically an inch wide and 3 to 8 inches deep.
A modern map of medieval farms in northeastern Iceland. The ´Gragas´ law book specifies the marking of boundaries with stakes set into stones.
Uses for holestones

(1) Marking property boundaries.
(2) Mooring boats to shore.
(3) Tying up horses and dogs.

Stakes were usually set into the holes to make the boundary stones more visible or to tie up animals or boats.
The Kingigtorssuaq runestone, found in 1836 on Upernavik Island off Greenland. It refers to Rogation Day.
Gotlandic picture stone: Walking and marking the property boundaries.
Holestone, Big Cormorant Lake, identified as the massacre site.
Holestone sites in Roberts County, SD, and Pope County MN

[Map showing Holestone sites in Roberts County, SD, and Pope County MN.]
A boundary marker near the Whetstone River, Roberts County.

Figure 10.5 A large isolated holestone in South Dakota located a considerable distance up the slope from the stream, and far from any farmstead. This was not a mooring stone.
Boundary stone drinking horn carving
Roberts County, South Dakota.
The drinking horn model for this carving had a handle attached by a band around the horn. His model horn was probably obtained in a trade for furs. (Johnson photo)
Ten flagged holestones, Whetstone River site of a Norse chieftan’s house - the local meeting house.
Conclusions

Medieval Norse farmer/traders lived and traded furs in the Great Plains region until the trade ended shortly after 1300. Without the mutual benefit of the trade, some native Indians became hostile, and the surviving Norse were forced to combine with a friendly tribe. The result was the well known Mandan tribe of “white” Indians, as they were regarded by other tribes. At their peak the tribe numbered more than 10,000 people in 1738 when Verendrye first reported them on the upper Missouri River.
THE LAST KINGS OF NORSE AMERICA

RUNESTONE KEYS TO A LOST EMPIRE

ROBERT G. JOHNSON & JANET WESTIN
“SIGATUMODIN” on the stone is Siginn aettum O Drengir
Fallen Kinsmen always valiant fellows
“BAMAR OO” on the stone is:
Beatae Maria Oh
Blessed Mary! Alas!
From George Catlin’s letters:

• A stranger in the Mandan village is first struck with the different shades of complexion and various colors of hair which he sees in the crowd around him.
• He is disposed to exclaim that “These are not Indians!” … among the women particularly there are many who are almost white…with hazel, grey, and blue eyes.
THE END

Read all the details in: “The Last Kings of Norse America” by Robert G. Johnson & Janey Westin.

- 985….Greenland settled.
- 1003….Leif Eriksson explores and names Vinland.
- 1015… Karlsefni trades for valuable furs.
- 1261….Greenland formally annexed by Norway.
- 1340….Greenlanders migrate to North America.
- 1356….Expedition launched to restore the fur trade.
- 1362….King Haakon VI returns to Norway.
  ………..Commander Knutson’s fate is unknown.
- 1362 onward: Norsemen merge with Indian tribes.
- 1492….Columbus rediscovers America.
THE END

The complete account of this history is told in the book:

The Last Kings of Norse America: Runestone Keys to a Lost Empire

BY JOHNSON AND WESTIN
Traders’ route