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**The Buried Past  
of Greenland**

By POUL NORLUND.

Among the many adventurers, discoverers, and explorers who have written their names on the pale Arctic heavens there shines—after a lapse of almost a thousand years—the name of an Icelandic outlaw, Eric the Red, the discoverer and colonizer of Greenland. All the daring, gruffness, and audacity of the Viking age center in this proud, lonely figure who, in the Scandinavian countries, has become one of the personifications of a barbaric but glorious past, and whose name, in America, too, is recalled together with that of his son Leif Ericson, the discoverer of the American continent.

In the flocks of South Greenland Eric the Red founded a free political community, where he and a few of his countrymen found wider scope for their bold self-sufficiency and spirit of independence than could be found at home in Norway and in Iceland. Here they possessed practically the same means of livelihood as in northern Iceland—pastures for their large flocks of sheep and for their cattle and horses; the most advanced even tried to raise corn. Over the moors they hunted the reindeer, and in the sea seals and white bears which came drifting on ice-floes along the shores, and they were not afraid of setting out on expeditions to the north in search of the huge sea-monsters frequenting those regions, particularly the walrus, the skin of which was cut into things and the

tusks traded to the Norwegian merchants who visited the country. On the inmost shores of the deep fjords about Julianahope and Godthope, where the colonists settled most thickly, the sites of their farmsteads, undisturbed by the ravages of time, are still to be found beneath the sod and the willow copes. According to a topographical description dating from the fourteenth century the settlements consisted of about 300 farms, two cloisters, and sixteen churches, one of which was the cathedral at the episcopal residence of Gardar. The sites of most of these are now known, thanks to a charting carried on by both skilled and unskilled persons for more than a century and a half, and on the basis of excavations in both Greenland and Iceland made by Captain Daniel Bruun it has been proved that the Greenlandic dwellings corresponded to the old Icelandic dwellings of the Saga period.

By continued archaeological excavations we shall certainly be able to procure still further details concerning the old Greenlanders' life on the farthest outpost of European culture. Even now, through excavations which the present writer undertook in 1921 for the Danish Commission for the Scientific Investigation of Greenland, new and unexpected perspectives have been opened.

One of the most renowned Icelanders who followed Eric the Red to Greenland was named Herjolfsdottir. He took land farthest to the south, a few miles from Cape Farewell, but in contrast to all his companions he settled on a headland by

the open sea instead of seeking shelter in the snug fjords. At Herjolfsness grew up a large farm, which later had its own church, and in the neighborhood was a harbor, one of the favorite ports of call for the Norwegian merchant vessels.

The storms of centuries lashed the headland and made relentless inroads upon the exposed churchyard where, at the water's edge, some remains of the old graves were laid bare. To anticipate the sea in its devastating work we excavated the whole churchyard. Around the little though not quite insignificant church lay the graves, layer under layer, the uppermost fully decomposed, but the lower showing a more and more wonderful state of preservation the deeper we reached. There were coffins joined with wood-nails or balen fibers; there were small carved crosses, sometimes with runic inscriptions, which had been placed in the hands of the dead; but the most remarkable things were the garments in which the corpses had been wrapped when their relations could not procure any coffin.

People have been so accustomed to the things which can be preserved and excavated in the warm countries, for instance, in the tombs of Egyptian kings and others, that it is necessary to emphasize how remarkable—indeed in its way unique—this discovery of medieval garments is. In Europe also in that period the dead were frequently wrapped in clothes instead of being placed in coffins; but never once has a complete garment been brought out of the earth. They have all rotted.

No one could ask for a more vivid illustration of the medieval Greenlanders' life and culture than that given by the dresses now exhibited in the National Museum of Copenhagen. They are woven of wool and were certainly made in Greenland, where the women had plenty to do in working the wool from the great flocks of sheep which grazed on the mountain slopes. Probably the Greenlanders also exported ready-made cloth as did the Icelanders; there were, indeed, so many articles of necessity which had to be bought in Europe that furs and walrus tusks were hardly sufficient to pay for all their requirements.

But if these dresses were made in Greenland their congruity with the European fashions is so much the more startling. One by one you can take them forth and point out their parallels in the abundance of medieval sculptures and miniatures which we in Europe must use instead of the originals as a sort of fashion paper. They are the same fashions which we find in Paris and the Netherlands; they are the same head-dresses which Petrarch wore or which later in the fifteenth century the Florentines used. It speaks strongly for the activity of international intercourse, and for the Greenlanders' intimate relations with Europe, that these fashions were able to wander the long way over Scandinavia and, on the Norwegian merchant vessels, farther, away out to Herjolfsness.

Of course, the Greenlandic limitations possess nothing of the gorgeous splendor of the original models. The material is coarse and the colors have disappeared—If gaudy colors were used, as in medieval Europe. These dresses were much worn and often mended before being used as shrouds, and naturally the lapse of centuries has left its traces. But when we imagine them in their original condition we must admit that the cut is intricate and well deliberated, and the best pieces have so fine a fall that they are really a pleasure to look at.

They were not such garments as the peasantry wore in Scandinavia. According to our European "fashion papers" most of the dresses belong to the period about the middle of the fourteenth century, but of course in Greenland they must be later. It was a period when the dresses fitted the body closely to the waist, falling toward the feet in soft, voluminous folds, and when the men, too, wore long, richly fortified dresses which they slipped over their heads like a jumper, while as head-gear they used closely fitting hoods of which the upper back part was continued into a long tail or tippet which dangled down the back or was fastened round the head. This hood—the French chaperon—was very highly favored throughout Europe in the later Middle Ages. It was the most popular and most characteristic garment, and it is really surprising that not one single specimen has been preserved in Europe, while fourteen to fifteen pieces were recovered in fine

condition from the Greenlandic soil. How is this possible? They wrapped the dead each in his garment and put him into the rude earth, and 600 years later we found the corpses decomposed, as is the way of nature, but the wrapping in about the same condition as when it was buried.

The explanation is that these graves are below the line at which in these days the soil will thaw in the warm summer time. The dresses have been frozen down. But this is an answer that raises a new question. They cannot have cut the graves in the frozen ground; in that case the corpses would not have been decomposed, and all the garments were penetrated by grass roots which must have originated at a time when these layers of earth were unfrozen. The only reasonable explanation is this: In the Middle Ages the ground thawed to a greater depth and then a change of climate occurred before the putrefaction from the corpse spread to its surroundings. Such changes may well have come gradually if we suppose that the deepest and best-preserved graves were made at midsummer and even at the beginning thawed only for a short period of the year.

The excavations at Herjolfsness support a theory which is set forth by Professor O. Pettersen of Sweden, and which for the last decade has engaged the attention of meteorologists and historians. According to this theory a change of climate, ascribed to cosmic causes, took place during the latter part of the Middle Ages, affecting a great part of the earth.

The Norse commonwealth of Greenland existed independently for about 250 years, until in 1261 it surrendered to the Norwegian Crown. Soon afterward the king received the monopoly of the navigation of the coasts of the country, but in return he assumed the obligation of maintaining commercial intercourse, and the arrangement must certainly have been a benefit to the isolated Greenlanders. A real peril was prevented—for Norwegian shipping was at this moment rapidly declining, and skippers were scarce who, at their own risk, would keep up the connection. The purely European character of the garments found at Herjolfsness must prove that throughout the fourteenth century there was a rather lively intercourse with Europe; indeed it proves that the Greenlanders far into the fifteenth century were in communication with the old country, because we found European fashions from the second half of that century. But the arrival of ships became rarer and rarer and at last stopped altogether. If a change in the ice conditions of the coast of South Greenland really occurred it must have been fatal to navigation; probably one ship after another was caught in the ice packs until at last there was not one skipper left in Norway who knew the difficult and perilous route.

To us, who lived for a whole summer at Herjolfsness and saw ourselves blocked most of the time by drift-ice coming from the east and rounding Cape Farewell, it is hard to imagine how the Norsemen, under similar ice conditions, were able to use this place as a harbor. Nowadays Herjolfsness is one of the points on the southwest coast which is most difficult to navigate; the ice forces the ships farther north, where they cannot "stand in" toward the land until they have passed the whole of the old eastern settlement.

The change in climate made life harder for the Greenlanders. Supplies from Europe were necessary for their existence, their wholly European culture depended on a close connection with the home country. And, on the other hand, the same conditions which became fatal for the Norsemen brought the Eskimos southward, for their source of livelihood was on the drifting ice, the favorite haunts of the seals. But in the long run the two people could not live side by side without collision, there was not room enough for both. We imagine that they settled their differences not by a decisive contest but by small local feuds. Naturally the Norsemen, cut off from supplies from Europe, got the worse of it against a people trained to the Arctic climate and living in complete independence of the rest of the world.

Many people, among them renowned scientists, refuse to believe that the same Eskimos who nowadays are famous for their peacefulness were able to accomplish such a war of extermination. But my own nation, the Danish, now one of the most peaceful and anti-militaristic people in the world, a thousand years ago sent one devastating Viking army after the

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other over Western Europe. It has been said that the white race cannot be conquered by the savage; but it is often seen that its superiority disappears if it is isolated. And talk of the Norsemen's superiority to the Eskimos is silenced by the last result of our excavations at Herjolfsness. After our return the remains of the excavated skeletons (their state of preservation being rather bad) were

forwarded for examination to the renowned Danish anatomist, Professor F. C. C. Hansen. His careful investigations show that the last Norsemen of Greenland were a badly degenerated race, small and wretched persons, suffering from rickets and tubercular diseases, many of them crippled, degenerated through intermarriage and undernourishment. Their teeth were even in youth decayed because of bad food. Consequently it was not a host of tall champions who had to fight the Eskimos, but a doomed race. We bow with respect to these our kinsmen who, voluntarily or involuntarily, stayed at their advanced upshot, and there were left to die. And their fate does not become less tragic because the breaking of communication with Europe was primarily due to circumstances of which their countrymen were not masters. But we must admit that the Eskimos, the hardy polar people, by the right the strongest, took Greenland to the white race. It was, under the circumstances, no great achievement.—The Nation.

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