

## II

AN ELEVENTH-CENTURY FARMHOUSE  
IN THE NORSE COLONIES IN GREENLAND

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At the Third Viking Congress in Reykjavik in 1956 I had the privilege to give the members of the Congress a survey of the topographical and archaeological investigations carried out in the medieval Norse settlements in Greenland during the years 1945-54. At the end of my lecture I gave a short account of the latest, then unfinished excavations at *Narssaq* in the Julianehaab district. I regret to say that these excavations have not been brought to a satisfactory conclusion. In the summer of 1958, however, I had the opportunity to make a more extensive investigation of the most important of the ruins, the dwelling-house, and as the results obtained by this investigation together with what we had already achieved in 1954 may be of some interest to archaeologists and linguists as well—and furthermore, as the finds from 1954 are only known through the paper which I read in Reykjavik in 1956 (and from another which I gave to the Congress of Americanists, in Copenhagen that same year), I am glad to get this opportunity to lay forth the principal results of the excavations carried out by the Danish National Museum at *Narssaq*.

The locality we are dealing with is situated near the small but rapidly growing south Greenland town *Narssaq*, north of Julianehaab. The area is the centre of the Norsemen's East Settlement, and of the some 200 farms which existed in this settlement quite a considerable number are found here. Very near the mouth of the *Tunugdliarfik* fjord—which is identical with the Norsemen's *Eiriksfjodr* (named after Eirik the Red, the famous Icelandic chieftain who about 985 started the Norse colonization in Greenland)—is a small but beautiful green plain just below the majestic Mt. *Qaqarsuaq*. The plain falls towards the sea with rather high and steep cliffs, which are constantly being broken down by frost and rain; no doubt the plain was considerably wider in the Middle Ages. To the Greenland Landnamsmen the place must have looked inviting; here they found the best conditions imaginable for settling in this country, and here lie the ruins of a Norse farm, no doubt one of the earliest so far found and examined in Greenland.

The farm is registered as East Settlement no. 17a but unfortunately we are unable to identify this farm with any place-name known from written sources. The ruins of the farm were found in 1935 by Aage Roussell and, as all other Norse ruins in Greenland, they were protected by law. After

the last war, however, some Norse ruins, such as those which were very badly preserved and not among those known from written sources, were allowed to be demolished if cultivation of land, building of houses or other important reasons made it necessary. Among these ruins were those registered as no. 17a. As it was most doubtful whether an excavation could yield but modest results, we would not spend time and money on an excavation here. This decision, however, proved to be a mistake! In 1953 the late Mr. K. N. Christensen, who was then in charge of the new combined sheep-slaughterhouse and cannery at *Narssaq*, started digging in one of the ruins to obtain gardening mould. Very soon Mr. Christensen found some surprising Norse relics, particularly artefacts of wood, and among them first and foremost the important stick with the runic inscriptions with which I will deal in detail later in this paper. Mr. Christensen at once stopped digging, preserved the finds and sent them to the National Museum. Of course we then had to revise our opinion of the ruins at *Narssaq*, and next summer, on behalf of the Danish National Museum, I carried out the sample excavation of which I have given a short account to the Third Viking Congress, and—as said before—the work was continued in 1958.

As in most Norse farms the houses lie scattered over rather a wide area. At no. 17a there are at least nine or ten houses, all completely collapsed and grown over with grass; probably more houses have, however, been claimed by the sea as a result of erosion. Excavation has only been carried out in the largest of the ruins where the first finds were made. The excavation was most difficult as a result of the extreme state of collapse of the walls mainly due to the house being built on sloping ground. Nevertheless we succeeded in obtaining a reliable plan.

The dwelling is a long-house, with its rooms in one row only. It is orientated north-south fronting west towards the sea. The total length of the house is 33 to 34 metres, and across it measures 6 to 9 metres. It is rather difficult to say anything certain concerning the division into rooms, except that there has been at least four: a small one, which is quite clear, to the north; most probably two larger rooms in the middle of the house and a fourth, nearly square, to the south. The latter seems to have been built later than the rest of the house, as an extension. One of the rooms in the centre must have been the living-room or hall, possibly the one to the north. The other may have been the kitchen, or fireroom. No doorway has been found, but it is beyond doubt that there has been a door or maybe two in the front wall. The walls have been built in the usual way—a construction of stones and turf with rather heavy lower courses, clearly seen in the north gable. The thickness of the walls vary from 1 to 2 metres. The wall is well preserved along the east side of the house, where in some places it is still standing to a height of about 1 metre. In other parts of the building only the lower course is left while in the rest of the house, especially in parts of the front, the walls are completely destroyed. There cannot be any doubt that the outer side of the

back wall has been covered with earth and turf, and most probably the latter material was also used to cover the other walls on the outside. In some parts of the building a considerable number of slabs were found on the floor, more or less disturbed, but quite certainly at different levels indicating different floor-levels. It is obvious that the house has undergone several changes while it was inhabited, and especially the floor-levels

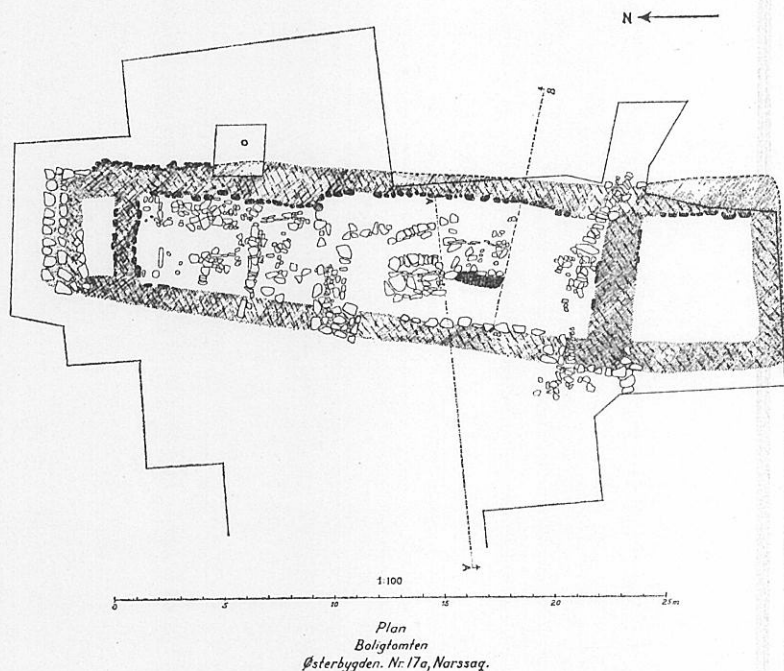


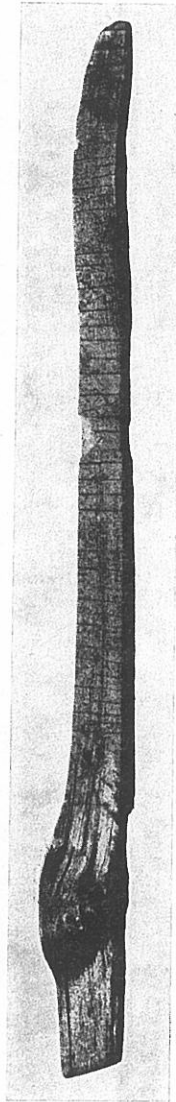
FIG. 1. The dwelling of the farm no. 17a. Plan.

were raised not inconsiderably. This fact was most clearly observed in connection with the long fire which was found in what may have served as fireroom. This fireplace, about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  metres long and about  $\frac{1}{2}$  metre across, shows at least four stages, and the upper level is about 40 to 45 centimetres above the bottom level.

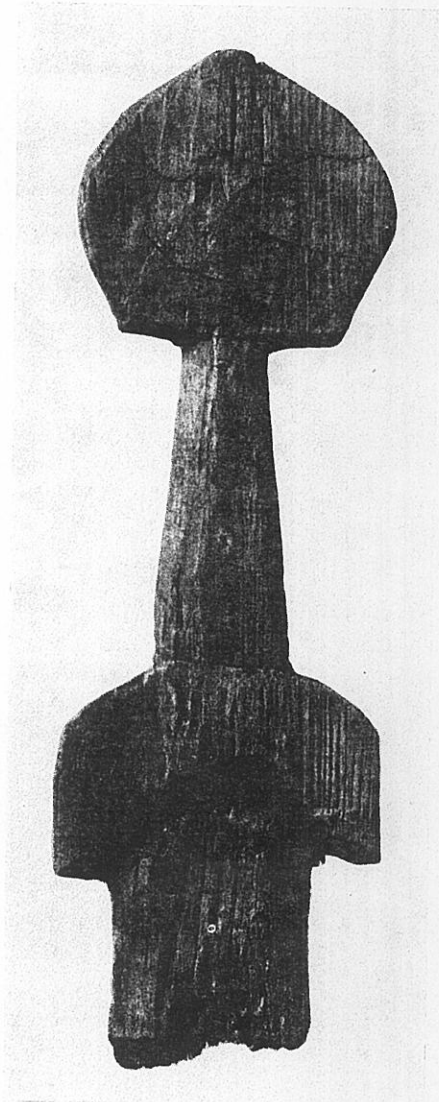
Of the greatest interest in the construction of the house is the complicated system of drainage, found under the floors. Unfortunately the whole system has not been measured and drawn so far, but the plan together with the photograph will give an impression of this system or, perhaps more correctly, these systems, as there are three separate arrangements. Each system consists of one or more conduits, dug down in the gravel, partly edged with flat stones and covered with slabs. At the south end of the original part of the house there is a conduit which can be



PLATE 1. Part of the draining systems in the dwelling at the farm no. 17a. The southern conduit; in the foreground the outlet.



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PLATE 2. The long wooden stick with the runic inscriptions. Side A.  
PLATE 3. Fragment of a wooden sword.

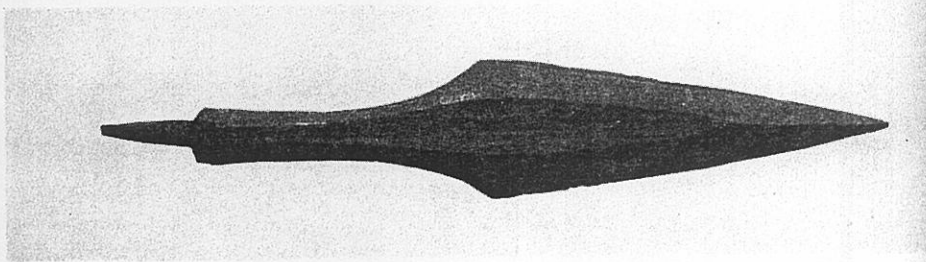
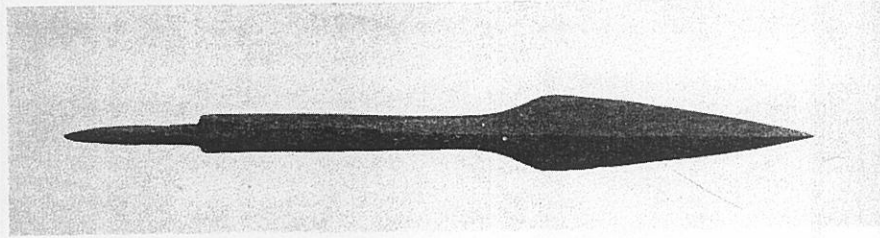


PLATE 4. Two arrowheads, made of antler.

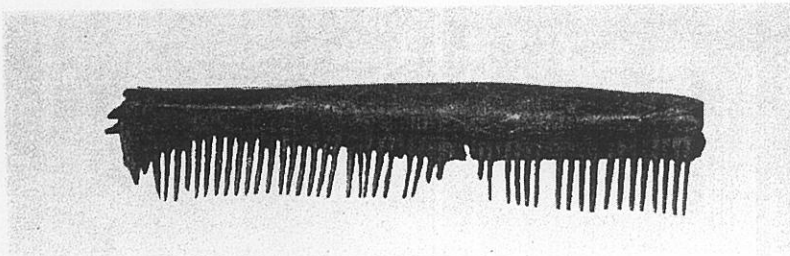


PLATE 5. Comb, made of bone.

followed from behind the east wall, under it, across the house and out through the front wall. This conduit has a total length of about  $9\frac{1}{2}$  metres. A few metres north of this conduit another channel begins, running at first parallel with the walls, for 7 to 8 metres, then curving rather sharply to the west and out through the front wall. A third system lies further to the north, under what may have been the hall. It consists of a main conduit, right across the house, from the east wall and, like the other conduits, runs out through the front wall. About 1 metre from the east wall this latter conduit, receives two small by-channels, or confluent, both 1 to 2 metres long, running obliquely from the back wall and meeting the main conduit at the same point.

There can be no doubt that here we have a skilful system of drainage, which has been able to carry away all the water which, particularly in spring but also after snow and rain, has flowed down from the mountain behind the house, and inevitably would have made the whole building moist and swampy if nothing was done to prevent it. If at the same time this system has, at least partly, served as a water supply it is most likely to have been the northern one where there may have been a basin or reservoir where the two by-channels meet the main conduit. The systems of drainage excavated at the Narssaq farm are the most comprehensive so far found and excavated in Greenland. In fact there are only two other localities where similar constructions have been found, and in both cases it is in houses which, like the Narssaq dwelling, are considered to be among the oldest in Norse Greenland. In 1932 Mårten Stenberger and Poul Nørlund uncovered a very interesting system in the hall at Brattahlid, the seat of Eric the Red, where there was no doubt that it was a combined system of draining and water supply. The other locality is Hvalsey. In the west end of the hall, and in a corridor, leading from there through the houses to the exterior, were found two confluent conduits. Aage Roussell, who excavated the farm at Hvalsey in 1935, is of opinion that this was unquestionably a drainage system.

In and around the dwelling was found a considerable number of weapons, tools, household utensils and other objects. As mentioned Mr. Christensen found some well preserved objects of wood, among many other items. By systematic investigation this material was considerably increased, and the finds as a whole are now comprehensive, though many are more or less fragmentary. Thanks to the constantly moist ground in the central part of the building objects of wood and bone, usually decayed, have been preserved. The unique pine stick with the runic inscriptions is somewhat irregular—no doubt driftwood from Siberia. The stick measures about 43 centimetres in length and is 1 to 2 centimetres across. In section it is nearly square. The stick bears very distinct runic inscriptions on all four sides which have been studied by the Danish runologist, Erik Moltke, who most kindly has given me the following information about their interpretation. (*Note: since this paper was read Erik Moltke has published the stick: En Grønlandsk Runeindskrift fra Erik den Rødes Tid, Grønland, No.*

11, November 1961.) The inscription on one of the two broad sides has so far not been interpreted. It seems to consist of a number of so-called *Lön*-runes, i.e. runes with a magical secret arranged in a code-system; possibly the man who carved the runes has concealed his name here. In one of the narrow sides we have the whole runic alphabet, the *fupark*, and on the other narrow side Moltke reads:

á sæ, sæ, sæ | es asa sat  
Bibrau heitir mæR su es sitr a Blanum

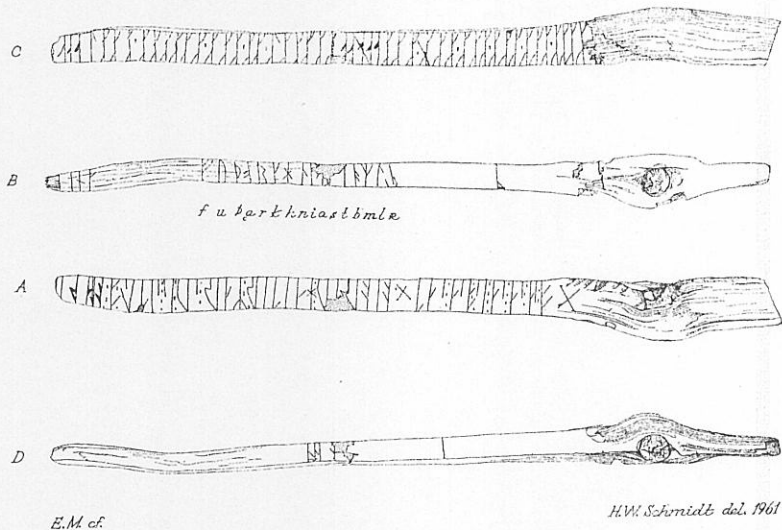


FIG. 2. The long wooden stick with the runic inscriptions. All four sides. Drawing.

Here we have four verses with outspoken alliteration. If translated we will arrive at approximately the following: In the sea, sea, sea is the place where the asa-gods are on their watch. Bibrau is the name of the virgin who is sitting in the blue sky or, perhaps better, the vault of heaven. The word Blauin (of which, it must be admitted, only the first four runes are preserved) is the name of the giant from whose skull the vault of heaven was formed on the day of creation. The sense of these obscure words might be the following: the sea is deceitful; the asa-gods (whom you cannot always trust, or who are not always friendly towards you) are on their watch with stormy weather and rough sea. But Bibrau (except for this inscription the name is unknown), that virgin who is sitting in the blue sky, will take care that we reach our destination safely. Furthermore, to emphasize the power of the stick, the rune-alphabet has been carved in one of the sides. The *fupark* was the most powerful magic factor to defend and protect one.

As the inscription has kept the nasal á-rune with its original value (about 1020 in Norway they begin to use this rune letter as an 'o') the stick must be dated to the time 1000-25, which is confirmed by the strange 'b' and 's' runes, which belong to the so-called Norwegian-Manx runic alphabet, which was in use c. 950-1050. On the other hand the 'r' rune in the inscription has a shape which must be looked upon a precursor of the special Greenland 'r' rune, which is known from so many fourteenth-century Greenland inscriptions. This shows that the stick can hardly be dated to the time before 1000. When the inscription is so old, however, we can with almost certainty say that the rune carver was not a native Icelander, as the runes in that country were not in common use until c. 1200.

From what has been said here it will be obvious that this stick with the runic inscription is of the greatest importance to runology and archaeology as well. Besides this stick we have at Narssaq found only two other runic inscriptions both carved on small pieces of wood. None of these inscriptions have been interpreted so far. In one of the inscriptions the runes are quite distinct. On one side of a thin, 9½ centimetres long, oval piece of wood we read 'snimmt is at ulask', on the other 'autslutkusi'. The only words here to be understood are the first ones on the former: 'it is too early to . . .' and then nothing more can be said at present.

Among the other objects of wood we must give prominence to a fragment of a sword. The fragment—mainly of the handle—is 17½ centimetres in length. This sword may have been a weaver's sword, but there is also the possibility that it was a toy. It is important that undoubtedly this sword had a real iron-sword as its model, and in my opinion the form allows a dating to the first half part of the eleventh century. Unfortunately there has not till this day been found any iron sword, or even a fragment, in the Norse settlements in Greenland, and of other weapons we only have a few axes-heads, spear-heads and arrow-heads of iron. This is no doubt due to the Eskimoes having in many cases plundered the deserted Norse houses, and taken all metal objects, but it must be noted that in Norse Greenland iron was scarce, especially in the later centuries of the settlements, when intercourse with Europe was cut off. From other finds we know that, instead of iron for making tools and weapons, bone was used, and of the same material is a padlock found at a farm in Vatnahverfi. The excavations at Narssaq have, however, brought to light some most interesting objects which at least to some degree make it necessary to revise our opinion of the use of other materials to replace iron. These objects consists of a number of arrowheads of antler, all of types well known from the late Viking age in Norway and Iceland. To my knowledge such arrowheads made of antler have never been found before. Now there cannot be any doubt that the antler arrowheads represent types from the tenth or eleventh century, and accordingly they must derive from the earliest phase of habitation here. This is of course very important regarding the question of dating the house, but also in another respect. The fact that

the Norsemen very soon after the landnam began to use antler as material for their arrowheads shows that it cannot only be looked upon as a matter of lack of iron, and not at all as a consequence of the severing of intercourse with Iceland and Norway, which did not take place until some hundred years later. The use of antler instead of iron must be given the simple explanation that the Norsemen very soon found that this material, which was easily obtainable as there were reindeer in abundance at that time, was just as good for arrowheads as iron, and they were easily made and easily replaced if lost. Among the implements of bone I must mention a handsome little comb of late Viking or early medieval type. Besides the finds include numerous objects of soapstone, especially spindlewhorls and fragments of lamps and vessels, and there are also many whetstones. Most of these objects—also many of wood and bone—cannot be dated with any certainty, but many of them undoubtedly are later than the stick with the runic inscriptions and the other artefacts mentioned here.

Briefly to sum up the results of the excavations at the Norse farm no. 17a at Narssaq: we here have a farm which was undoubtedly established in the first decades of the colonization. I am of opinion that we can classify it as a landnammsman's farm. This is proved first and foremost by the type of dwelling and its construction, but also by a number of the artefacts found, especially by the stick with the runic inscriptions and the arrowheads of antler. How long the habitation lasted we do not know, but it is to be believed that the farm existed for quite a long time, maybe some hundred years.

There are still problems to be solved at the landnammsman's farm at Narssaq. I hope that in the not too distant future at least some of the questions can be answered.

The following recent note has been submitted:

Since the above paper was submitted the author has in July 1962 finished the excavation of the dwelling of the Narssaq-farm. The results of this excavation solved most of the problems attached to this interesting Norse dwelling. Here it is impossible to go into details, but it must be mentioned that it was now proved that the oldest element of the house was the central part (with the fireplace) and this early house only consisted of one single room. Moreover it was found out that the drainage systems were much more complicated than stated in the investigations in 1954 and 1958, and it could with certainty be ascertained that parts of the drainage systems were also combined with water supply arrangements. Accordingly Fig. I. in this paper can only be considered as a preliminary plan.

## EYSTEINN HARALDSSON IN THE WEST, c. 1151

ORAL TRADITIONS AND WRITTEN RECORD

A. B. TAYLOR

### I: INTRODUCTION

THE expedition of Eysteinn Haraldsson, King of Norway, to the west, c. 1151 has been taken as the subject of this paper for several reasons. It is the last recorded Viking raid on the north-east coast of England. The various accounts of it are of interest from numerous aspects—textual, historical, toponymic and historiographical. Some of the historical aspects are rather odd. So far as is known, it has not been the subject of a paper before.

The historiographical aspect has been used as a starting point for a general, if brief, study of the manner in which commemorative skaldic verses about the kings of Norway passed from oral tradition into written histories. It is suggested that these verses usually survive embedded in an explanatory prose commentary because this was the form in which they were commonly handed down orally from skald to skald.

### II: THE TEXTS

#### *The Three Primary Accounts*

Let us look at the three primary accounts of the episode, the first composed in Norway, the second in either Norway or Iceland, and the third in England.

The first was a series of commemorative verses composed soon after the event by the Icelandic skald Einar Skúlason who for many years was attached to the royal family in Norway.

The second was a passage or chapter containing the verses of Einar embedded in a narrative prose commentary and written about 1170 by an Icelandic historian Eirík Oddsson in a work called *Hryggjarstykki* ('back-bone piece'). This work was a history of the kings of Norway from 1130 to 1161 and appears to have been based on inquiries made by Eirík during a stay in Norway between 1160 and 1170. It is now lost, but substantial extracts from it survive in *Morkinskinna* (c. 1220) and Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* (1230-40). Use is also made of it in *Orkneyingasaga* (1200-25).

The third account is in an early chapter of a manuscript work in Latin on the virtues and miracles of St. Cuthbert, written by Reginald, a monk