A Visit To North America's Only Authenticated Viking Site

By Jennifer Bain
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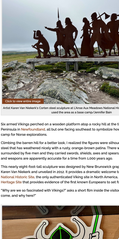

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Artist Kieran Ian Hildebrand's 2000 oil painting of Lif (Anne Ive Meadows Historic Site depicts how Vikings used the resources on the L'Anse aux Meadows Site.

Six armed Vikings perched on a wooden platform atop a rocky hill at the tip of the Great Northern Peninsula in Newfoundland, all but one facing southward to symbolize how this place was once a base camp for fierce explorers.

Climbing the barren hill for a better look, I realized the figures were silhouettes made of thick Corten steel. Their bodies were simple, but their faces were detailed. Each had a unique expression, surrounded by their men and they cut hard swords, shields, bows and spears. Their clothing, hairstyles and weapons are apparently accurate for a time from 1,000 years ago.

This nearly eight-foot-tall sculpture was designed by Parks Canada interpretive graphic artist and illustrator Karen Van Niekerk and unveiled in 2009. It provides a dramatic welcome to L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site, the only authenticated Viking site in North America and a UNESCO World Heritage Site that provides evidence of the first known European visitors to set foot on this continent.

"Why are we so fascinated with Vikings?" asks a short film inside the visitor center. "Why did they come, and why leave?"



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L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site has a display of how the Vikings may have traveled popular culture. Jennifer Bain

To find out, I lingered over a display of pop culture objects like a vintage "Princess of the Vikings" Barbie, and then joined a tour with Parks Canada interpretive presenter Mark Pilgrim.

A local who grew up treating this seaside site as his playground, Pilgrim walked us to another interpretive panel that explained how Norse explorers used the sun, stars, ocean currents, wind and low-lying islands each other like an ancient actually touching. The artist and Historian Meeting of Two Worlds by Newfoundlander Lukas Bystrom and Swede Richard Briset are erected in 2002 to symbolize the encompassion of the globe by humans.

"This side represents indigenous cultures and this side represents European culture," Pilgrim explained, pointing to the two figures. "The meeting between these two cultures is what colonization happens for hundreds and hundreds of years like circle — and it happens when the Norse came in contact with the indigenous people here in Vinland."



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The Meeting of Two Worlds sculpture represents Indigenous and European cultures finally meeting as humans completed a circumnavigation around the globe. Jennifer Bain

Ancient Norse stories known as the *Vinland Sagas* spoke of a "high-pressed vessel" from Greenland that anchored in a bay along the North American coast. Explorer Leif Eriksson named the place Vinland. Pilgrim explained that Vinland translates to "wine land" or "grape land."

After a small Norse outpost was discovered here at L'Anse Aux Meadows in the 1960s, a settlement full of wood-framed peat-turf buildings was finally uncovered.

Credit for this discovery goes to archeologist-explorer Helge Ingstad and his archaeologist wife Anne Stine, who are honored with yet another statue here, this one by Nils Aas. A bust that shows their faces is also on display in the visitor center. Their son Benedikt Ingstad, who was 12 when his parents began excavations, told Canadian Geographic magazine that his mother named George Decker in which a row Newfoundland and Labrador, he convinced a Norwegian whaling ship to take him north.



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Anne Stine and Helge Ingstad are honored at L'Anse aux Meadows for proving the Norse first landed here when they came to North America. Jennifer Bain

As Pilgrim talks, it ingstad said to Decker 'boy hunters and pumps in the ground!' Decker nonchalantly replied 'Once have authentic a lot grass Come on, I'll show you' and led him to the place where he'd grass for his cows, a spot that locals referred to as the "the red Indian camp" terminology if he's been living in Labrador.

That was it: ogbo Ingstad's wife joined him and they provided over lengthy excavations by an international team. The archaeologists uncovered the only Viking settlement ever discovered to have been discovered in North America and proved that Lathe Eriksson and his Norse explorers arrived here about 1,000 years ago, give or take.

Eight Norse-building outlines have been completely were unearthed. The walls and roofs of dwellings, workshops and an iron forge had been made of sod laid over timber frames. Long narrow fireplaces in the middle of the floor served for heating, lighting and cooking. The buildings resembled those used in Norse Iceland and Greenland at the time.

Norse used this site for several years as a base camp and a gateway for summer explorations deeper into Vinland for timber and other resources.



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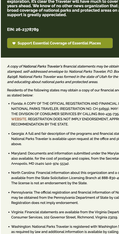
A view from the L'Anse aux Meadows visitor center of the landscape that once attracted a Norse expedition.Jennifer Bain

Archaeologists unearthed artifacts found on similar sites in Iceland and Greenland. A bronze, ring-headed pin from the Arctic forerunners used to fasten their cloaks. A bone needle and a spindle whorl, once used as the flywheel of a handheld spindle. The fragment of a bone needle believed to have been used to repair sails. A soapstone bowl fragment. Slag from iron working and a charred plank flag from smelting and working of iron, plus iron boat rivets or nails.

"This, more than any other find, led archaeologists to identify the site as Norse," says Parks Canada.

There were two big finds that were unlikely to be found, since these things don't grow north of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, their presence confirmed the saga claims that the Norse traveled south.

All these finds led to L'Anse aux Meadows being declared a national historic site in 1968 and a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978.



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Parks Canada Heritage presents Pam Hickey's Return to L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site exhibit, 1,000 years ago.Jennifer Bain

Long popular with International Viking enthusiasts, the seasonal site drew about 13,000 visitors in 2012, down from pre-Covid numbers. It's open from June to early October. Visitors learn that while almost everyone uses "Vikings" and Norse" interchangeably, Viking is the correct term for Scandinavian men when raiding, and that both men and women can be called Norse.

Inside the visitor center they see original artifacts, a few thrills such as replica flaming Viking boat and a 3D model of the original Norse camp. Outside, there is a grassy area with small plaques in the ground that mark the locations of the Norse dwellings. Interpretive panels explain how they were built. The most costumed interpreters, but full-scale replicas of the Norse sod buildings and handles replica weaponry, tools and cooking utensils.

Pilgrim and other Parks Canada staff members, the seasonal site skew about 12,000 visitors in 2012, down from pre-Covid numbers. It's open from June to early to Click Victors learn that while almost everyone uses "Vikings" and Norse" interchangeably, Viking is the correct term for Scandinavian men when raiding, and that both men and women can be called Norse.

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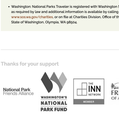

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A reconstructed sod building at the Viking encampment at L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site.Jennifer Bain

Indigenous cultures — starting with Maritime Archaic, Groswater and Dorset Peoples and then followed by ancestors of the Beothuk — have used the site for at least 4,000 years ago and left behind traces of fire pits and tent rings and signs of tool making.

They were here up to and after the Norse arrived, but there's no evidence the two groups met here. They did on north and south of here. According to Parks Canada, some believe that clashes between Norse and Indigenous Beothuk forced the Norse from staying too long in Vinland and may even have forced them to return home.

In 2021, it was revealed that wood from three trees cut by Vikings and found at L'Anse aux Meadows had been precisely dated to 1021 CE. There's still no word on how long the Norse stayed, but the best guesses are between three and 20 years.



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Rosemond Rosenfeld, artist Ricky Nadeau Trudel, L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site.Jennifer Bain

The name L'Anse aux Meadows, in case you're wondering, first appeared on an 18th French chart as Anse à la Médée Médeels Creek. It was likely named for Medea, a sorceress in Greek mythology whose name adorned many ships in the 17th and 18th centuries. The name was anglicized by English settlers into L'Anse aux Meadows but the bay is still called Médée Bay.

The first time I visited, on a big trip from an expedition cruise ship between Greenland and Newfoundland, I was underwhelmed. I'd realize the site provides a dramatic and all-time scene of green hillsides and sweeping views of the sea. When I returned in July on a family road trip, we came here over two days to explore the landscape as well as the visitor center and archaeological site and Viking encampment. Even then it wasn't enough time.

Walking in the footsteps of all those who have called this globally important patch of land home, I followed Bonny Nadeau Trail along the shoreline and inland over bogs and barrens to admire the area's biodiversity.



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A beautiful, wooden bridge and long set boards on Bonny Nadeau Trail at L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site.Jennifer Bain

My new favorite flower, rosemond, provided welcome bursts of yellow on a dreary day. The ever-abundant Labrador tea's yum it's used for a caffeine-free boreal beverage was blooming. Patches of bakeapple berries, which are also known as cloudberries, were in flower and will soon be ripe for the experience. Predators plants, like pitcher plants and bladderwort, were nowhere to be found.

At 3km Trail, I read how wadalaria were once soaked in the water to loosen the hair before tanning as part of a process to make waterproof boots, mitts and other clothing. And while I didn't spot any hares, I was impressed by the numerous tracks left by porcupines, baboseppies and crossberries, and to hunt fellow Plantagen and waterbirds. Last week. But for trout and tip-animals like mink.

A boardwalk led me across the bog and back to the parking lot. But had it not been there then that weathered sculpture of six Vikings set atop a rocky hill would surely have drawn me the way.

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A statue of Norse explorer Leif Eriksson stands in the harbor of the community of L'Anse aux Meadows, set far from the national historic site.Jennifer Bain

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