

THE LOST WESTERN SETTLEMENT OF GREENLAND, 1342

(Part 2)

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Chapter 4

THE COLONISTS IN THE SETTLEMENT

When Erik the Red brought settlers to Greenland, he had two types of settlements where they could live. He himself lived in the larger settlement, with his farm Brathild soon competing with Gardar as the largest farms. This was a European community, with the desires for higher social standing of contemporary Icelandic society. The Western Settlement was two hundred and fifty miles north, and not for weak or fearful settlers. Erik knew that this outpost, far from civilization and society, fit the personalities of some of his men. They were self-reliant and happy with a hunting lifestyle, preferring to explore new spaces and less likely to adjust to the more European Eastern settlement.⁸¹ In addition, they were skeptical about organized religion, and still communal in sharing resources, a trait from Viking times.

Of the fourteen ships that survived the trip from Iceland, two or three of the surviving shiploads went to the Western Settlement.⁸² From the start, they preferred the freedom and isolation of the settlement away from political domination. They explored hunting grounds up the coast of Greenland to Disko Bay, Inugsuk Island, and further north at Crooked Fjord Heath at the northwestern tip of Greenland.⁸³ Here they found polar bears, walruses, gyrfalcons, and narwhales with an unusual long straight tooth.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Enterline, 1972), 148.

⁸² Pohl, *The Viking Explorers*, 46. There were three churches and main farms in the Western Settlement, so the number was probably three ships. Historians originally thought that settlers went to the Western Settlement in the next generation; carbon dating showed they were established at the same time.

⁸³ Holand, 104-5.

⁸⁴ *The King's Mirror*, 122. The narwhal strongly resembled the mythical unicorn.

The most important animal in the hunting ground was the walrus, rated by Greenlanders as a whale, but really a seal, and valued for its tusks and skin.⁸⁵

Its appearance is distinguished from that of other seals in that it has, in addition to the other small teeth, two large and long tusks, which are placed in the front part of the upper jaw and sometimes grow to a length of nearly an ell and a half. Its hide is thick and good to make ropes of; it can be cut into leather strips of such strength that sixty or more men may pull at one rope without breaking it.⁸⁶

When they went out hunting for walrus in large groups, they were pressed for time and had to work fast, killing mature males, females, and adolescents, which was wasteful. Most households sent hunters to the northern grounds in the summer months. Other hunters stayed out all year, and hunted polar bears at a more leisurely pace.⁸⁷

There was a rhythm to their seasons. Hunting often took several months, at great distance from the settlement. At the mouth of their fjord system, they hunted harp seals in the spring from a small island in the Angissunguaq group where they lived, and went out either to catch the harp seals, or bring in a beached whale.⁸⁸ Before the fall hunting came the vital haying season in mid to late August, as they cut every patch of fodder and even rough brush and sea weed to get the animals through the winter.⁸⁹ They collected guillemots in late summer, butchering the partly flightless sea birds in a seasonal glut, before taking advantage of seasonal caribou migration in the autumn. In the winter they stayed inside, using foods stored in *skemmas* to survive the cold.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ *The King's Mirror*, 140.

⁸⁶ *The King's Mirror*, 140. An ell was the length of a man's arm, and varied by country.

⁸⁷ McGovern, 190-91. Hunters who stayed all winter included those banished as outlaws.

⁸⁸ McGovern, 159; Meldgaard, "Landmandsliv," 99.

⁸⁹ McGovern, 170-71.

⁹⁰ McGovern, 172-75. The Norse air-dried meats in these huts, and protected it from scavengers.

While they valued their freedom, they retained the democratic tradition of communal hunting and sharing resources from the Viking times.⁹¹ Norse society never developed the aristocracy of better off countries like Denmark and Sweden, and chieftains held power only as long as they could effectively lead.⁹² Rich and poor alike had to work hard, and cooperate with each other as the community was too marginal for a nonworking aristocracy.⁹³ They survived by hunting walruses, caribou, seals, and polar bears in groups of 18-20 men; it was dangerous work, but there was safety in numbers. It also fit their Viking traditions of sharing both the hazards and benefits, making sure everyone got part of the bounty. While the seals pupped near Sandnes, this was communal property shared with small farms away from the fjords.⁹⁴

There was a definite pecking order to Norse society, but the leaders also had the responsibility for decision making and subsidizing poorer farms in bad years.⁹⁵ The largest farms had more acreage and better food, eating more beef and caribou than the poorer farms living on seal and goat meat; however, they all had enough to eat. The leaders organized the hunt and harvest schedules, kept the extra replacement animals and the bull, and helped the small farms in time of need. The larger farms in the Eastern Settlement benefitted the most from the hunt for luxury goods, as they entertained the traders who came, and were less devastated by hunting accidents.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Meldgaard, "Landmandsliv," 100. As Vikings, they did not complain or ask for help.

⁹² Seaver, *The Last Viking*, 41. Norway also never developed a nobility, unlike Sweden and Denmark which were more prosperous due to extensive farmlands, unlike Norway with 3% farmland.

⁹³ Seaver, *The Last Viking*, 41-42.

⁹⁴ Diamond, 235. Norwegians still hunt moose in groups, sharing the animal between hunters regardless of who shoots it. A group in Skien, Norway, splits the moose between twelve hunters.

⁹⁵ Diamond, 232-33.

⁹⁶ McGovern, 193-95. Small farms in the Western Settlement had less men to spare.

The inhabitants of this community understood the pattern of their lives, but not of religion. Although Christianity came to Greenland shortly after the first settlers, the men in the Western Settlement never saw any real benefit from organized religion. The women embraced the new faith, but the men preferred the masculine Viking gods like Thor, regarding Christianity as a “contemptible and lily-livered faith.”⁹⁷ Their leaders built the three small churches as expected, but avoided the church complexes of the Eastern Settlement. Walrus tusks, live animals, and furs from their hunting essentially supported the tithing and trading for the entire colony, but this was due to a love of hunting and fishing, called *fangst*, rather than any love of civilization or the church.⁹⁸

Their lack of religious understanding stemmed partly from belonging to a pre-literate society, with the largest farmers serving as priests. The Norse lacked paper and parchment, keeping oral tales and religious stories alive in verbal form.⁹⁹ Early writing in Scandinavia was on runic stones that left cryptic messages from a limited alphabet.¹⁰⁰

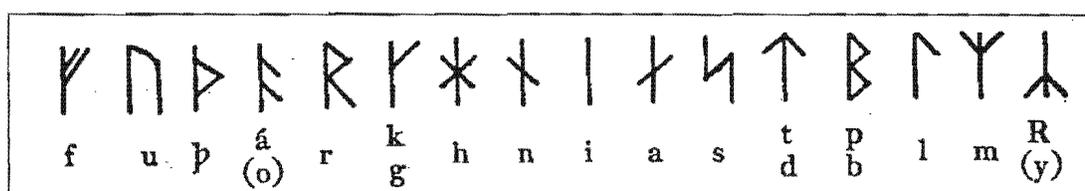


Figure 3: The Later Runic Alphabet

⁹⁷ Mowat, 74. From the sagas, Christianity came to Greenland in about 1000 with Leif Eriksson, son of Erik the Red (who remained pagan to his death). Leif's mother embraced the religion with the other women of the settlement. Paganism was probably present in both settlements to varying degrees.

⁹⁸ Fyllingsnes, 86.

⁹⁹ Enterline, 5, 7. Literacy came later to Scandinavia than many parts of Europe. When the farmers served as priests, they had to remember religious verses as oral tradition from earlier priests.

¹⁰⁰ Jones, 35. The sixteen symbols could signify different sounds; reading them requires thorough knowledge of Old Norse.

Runic stones were the only records left in the Western Settlement and northern hunting areas of Greenland. They had limited information as it took time to carve the inscriptions. One example was a runic stone found at Kingittorsuaq above the hunting grounds at Disco Bay in the High Arctic from the 1300s. Found at a tall cairn (pile) of stones, it bore the inscription: “Erling Sighvatsson and Bjarni Thordarson and Eindridi Oddsson on the Saturday before the minor Rogation Day [April 25] piled these cairns.”

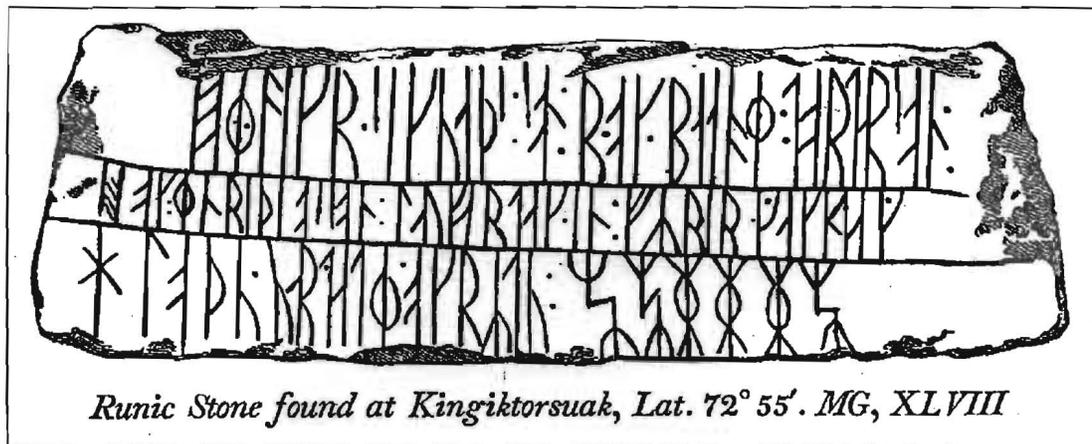


Figure 4: Runic Stone from Island of Kingittorsuaq¹⁰¹

Imparting the essence of the Christian religion would have been difficult on these stones, even with interested subjects. The men in the Western Settlement preferred the outdoors, as they were a very fit group. The above stone suggested that they stayed out all winter hunting, as it was too early for ships to make the trip north. They came from the tradition of exposing sickly infants in Iceland, hardly a Christian philosophy.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Jones, 80. Most authors use 1333 as the date, as a date of 1125 was impossible linguistically.

¹⁰² Pohl, 69.

As peasants, they used what they found. Their clothing was well adapted to northern conditions, as the Greenlandic sheep provided high quality wool for weaving warm clothing, and their woven vadmål sold well in Europe. Between driftwood, small bushes, and animal dung, they had ample heating for their houses.¹⁰³ Collecting feathers for eider down quilts in the high Arctic, they exported eider down to Europe.¹⁰⁴

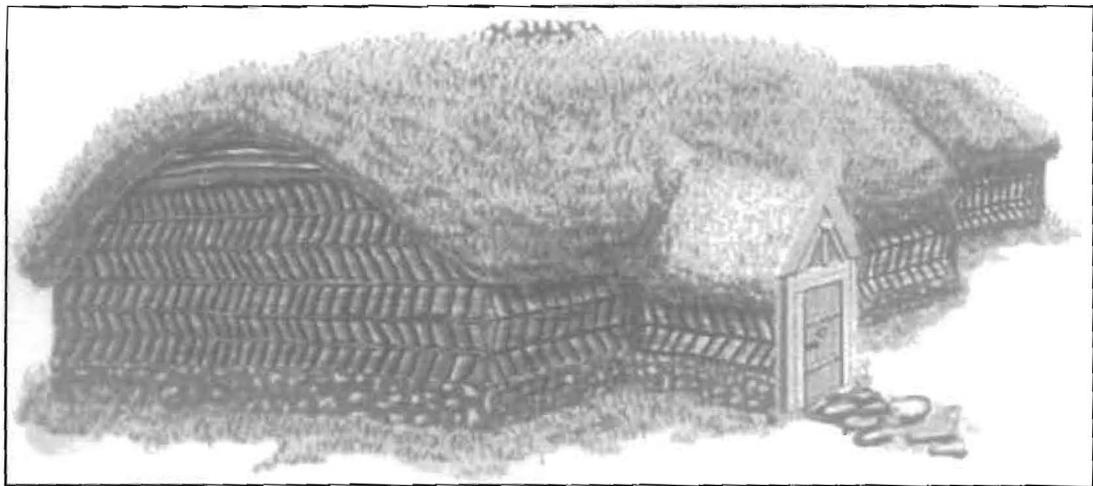


Figure 5: Medieval Turf-and-Stone Norse House¹⁰⁵

The Norse had a long history of successful living in an extremely cold climate. Both Norway and Iceland had marginal farmlands, and they took their sustenance from fishing and hunting instead.¹⁰⁶ They built warm houses using local stones for walls, turf for filling the walls and roof, and driftwood and whalebones for framing buildings.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Roussell, 24. Housewives burned sheep manure and greasy bones, not wood chips and sticks.

¹⁰⁴ Enterline, 22.

¹⁰⁵ Seaver, *The Frozen Echo*, drawing by David O. Seaver, 49.

¹⁰⁶ Ari Thorgilsson, *The Book of the Icelanders* (c. 1125), translated by Halldor Hermansson (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1930), 131.

¹⁰⁷ Krogh, 54. Homes were well insulated with turf, while barns had cracks for ventilation.

The Norse settlers were creative in using whatever they found in building materials. As excellent seamen, they traveled between the scattered farms and hunts in small boats with six-oars.¹⁰⁸ From Markland (Labrador), they got the timber to build their small ships adapted to ice conditions, as noted in the 1347 Icelandic Annals:¹⁰⁹

There came also a ship from Greenland that was smaller than the small Icelandic vessels. She put in at Ytre Straumsfjord. She had no anchor. There were seventeen (some say eighteen) men aboard; they had sailed to Markland [Labrador] but were afterwards driven hither by storms.¹¹⁰

They worked bog iron into crude iron blooms at hearth pits in Newfoundland.¹¹¹

Lacking iron nails and rivets, some used whale baleen and thongs.¹¹² One creative builder Ásmund kastanrassi (“Wriggle-Ass”) sailed in 1189 from Greenland to Iceland in a ship “held together with wooden pegs and baleen or sinew lashing.”¹¹³

The Norse were independent, resilient, and adapted to living a subsistence lifestyle on the edge of civilization. What they prized most was their freedom, and this they had in Greenland for three hundred years.¹¹⁴ But trouble loomed as it got colder, the Thule outnumbered them in the hunting grounds, the Eastern Settlement used resources for grand living, and authorities in Norway wanted more money. These factors combined to give them the incentive to leave what had once been a successful, thriving community.

¹⁰⁸ McGovern, 156. Small boats were easier to pull up on the ice if needed

¹⁰⁹ Roussell, 21-22. The Icelandic Annals were yearly records written in Latin.

¹¹⁰ Ingstad, 30.

¹¹¹ Seaver, *The Last Viking*, 44-45. This technique used charcoal made from fresh green wood as in L’Anse aux Meadows. Archeologists were amazed at the amount of iron in the settlement.

¹¹² Nansen, vol. 2, 305.

¹¹³ Seaver, *The Frozen Echo*, 66. He shipwrecked the next year, so the voyage ended badly

¹¹⁴ Meldgaard, “Landmandsliv,” 100.

Chapter 5

THE LAST STAGES OF THE SETTLEMENT

The two small settlements in Greenland prospered for about three hundred years, at the edge of European civilization. Unknown Icelandic scribes documented the beginning of the Greenland settlements better than their endings. The Western Settlement suddenly disappeared in the period 1342-1360, with the Eastern Settlement gradually declined at the end of the 1400s. The true beginning of the end started when the Greenlanders gave up their independence to Norway in 1261, and lost control of their shipping in 1294.

All went well in Greenland for a long time. The first sign of trouble was in 1247, when King Håkon Håkonson sent a bishop requesting that Greenland give up its independence along with the inhabitants of the Faroe Islands and Iceland so he had all Norwegian speakers under his control.¹¹⁵ As Icelandic poet Sturla Tordsson wrote in the 1200s, the king had “increased his ownership over the cold northern home under the polar star.”¹¹⁶ They were to pay taxes, follow Norwegian law, and use royal shipping. While they had loyalty to Norway, the Greenland settlers felt pressured. They debated a long time, but in 1261 they faced reality; either they submitted to the Norwegian crown, or risked losing what little shipping they had coming from Norway.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ H. C. Petersen, ed. *Grønlandernes historie før 1925 [The History of the Greenlanders before 1925]*, translated from Greenlandic by Birgitte Sonne (Atuakkiorfik, Greenland: Namminersornerullutik Oqartussat, 1991), 23.

¹¹⁶ Halvdan Koht, *Det Grønland vi miste - og det vi ikke miste [The Greenland we lost, and what we did not lose]* (Kristiania: Aschehoug, 1924), from saga about Håkkonsson, chapter 311. Norwegian text: “auka herredøme sitt yver den kalde heimen nord under polstjerna.”

¹¹⁷ Lindegaard, 29. This change brought the Norwegian king’s agent to live in the Eastern Settlement after 1262 to enforce laws and collect taxes, taking away the tradition power of the Norse chieftains under the lawspeaker at Brattahlid.

Initially being part of Norway provided no real disadvantage. The Greenlanders owned their own ships, and avoided a 10% tax on ships sent yearly by the royal crown. However, in 1294, the Norwegian king instituted a disastrous change of not allowing sailing in and out of Greenland without a license, to block the Hanseatic League and make private shipping more difficult. This meant that all shipping went on the King's ship, called the knarren, with very irregular shipping dates. This monopoly particularly harmed the Western Settlement, as the royal ship sold its merchandize to the closer and more prosperous Eastern Settlement, with nothing left for the Western Settlement.¹¹⁸

The monopoly on shipping was disastrous to Greenland's exports of goods largely caught by the Western Settlement. Illegal shipping benefitted the Eastern Settlement, as they stockpiled the trade goods caught primarily by the Western Settlement. Despite lack of shipping, Greenland exports remained in very high demand when carried out on ships that had "drifted out to Greenland," which was in sight of Iceland across the Denmark Strait.¹¹⁹ The white or grey gyrfalcons provided sport for kings, and came only from Greenland and Baffin Island. Not only were walrus tusks used for church carvings, but walrus skins provided very strong ropes for ships. Polar bear skins and live animals remained popular. The last payment "in kind" sent by the Western Settlement in 1327 for its tithes and taxes was easily converted to twenty-eight pounds of pure silver in Bergen for the Holy See.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Enterline, 119-20.

¹¹⁹ Keller, "Furs, Fish and Ivory," 15.

¹²⁰ Seaver, *The Last Viking*, 92. This represented Greenland's share of Peter's Pence and Crusading Tithes for the Baltic, probably some years in arrears.

The Norse were resourceful in avoiding the new shipping regulations, getting timber and bog iron from Newfoundland. However, they lacked cash for export licenses, as they had no money, and usually paid by trading in kind. Also they could not use their own ships to transport goods without risking confiscation of their ships. The Western Settlement stopped getting wheat and trade items even through the Eastern Settlement as ships stopped coming north; at the same time the Eastern Settlement built new halls and churches.¹²¹ One group took the risks; the other took the profit.

More important however was the loss of freedom and autonomy. The church kept setting new tithes for crusades in the Baltic area.¹²² They also tried to claim the small churches and surrounding land in the settlements. In both Iceland and Greenland, the largest land owners built and maintained the churches on their farms, serving also as priests when needed, and keeping part of the tithes for maintenance and priestly duties.¹²³ When the church tried to claim these churches and the surrounding lands, farmers saw the church as trying to gut the largest farms. Eventually both Greenland and Iceland objected to the new parish church system.¹²⁴ There was no benefit from religion by the end of the settlement, with no priests to perform baptisms, marriages, or burials, and no sacraments due to lack of both wheat and wine. With farmers serving as priests, pagan ways crept back into daily life, if they ever really departed.¹²⁵

¹²¹ McGovern, 203.

¹²² McGovern, 198. Small farmers paid these tithes by working for larger farmers, or making payment in products from Nordrsetur like walrus and bears. Often they had no choice but to send a family member on the hunt, as they had less margin of farm goods to give with the cooling climate.

¹²³ Seaver, *Frozen Echo*, 92-93.

¹²⁴ Seaver, *Frozen Echo*, 92. This led to armed resistance in Iceland.

¹²⁵ Seaver, *Frozen Echo*, 101.

Concurrently, there was an increasing division of social classes in Iceland, Norway, and the Eastern Settlement, with the men in charge getting a bigger share of the wealth. As mentioned, the Western Settlement kept the Viking social system, where all received a fair share in communal efforts. This put the Western Settlement at odds with the upper classes and church in the outside Nordic world.¹²⁶ Already on the margin of civilization, the Western settlement had less surplus, and no signs of real wealth in archaeological excavations other than more domestic animals and better food for the largest farms. Inhabitants in the Eastern settlement used resources for status symbols such as a crucifixion set, stained glass windows, and rich church vestments.¹²⁷

This conflict with church and king was important, but even more immediate for the demise of the Western Settlement was the cooling climate. The Norse handled the increased cold, but their cows had a tough time with colder winters and shorter summers. Before the longer winters, cows had to stay inside seven months before the longer winters, compared to five months at the Eastern Settlement; farmers already had to carry the small pre-modern cows outside at the end of the winter, as they were exhausted, and took weeks to recover their strength.¹²⁸ Climate cooling led to dead cows at the end of the winter: “the exhausted cow, after a longer winter, has given up his errand, exactly the day before the stall door was opened.”¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Keller, *Eastern Settlement Reconsidered*, 5, 34.

¹²⁷ McGovern, 196, 203. The Norse aspired to the status of lawgivers in Icelandic society, and the Eastern Settlement kept ties and arranged marriages with this class. This group also included the King’s agent and the bishop and his agents, plus family members.

¹²⁸ Meldgaard, “Landmandsliv,” 99. Farmers tied cows with a rope around their throats to pegs up the outer wall; as the cows filled the barn with manure, higher pegs held the cows in place.

¹²⁹ Meldgaard, “Landmandsliv,” 100.

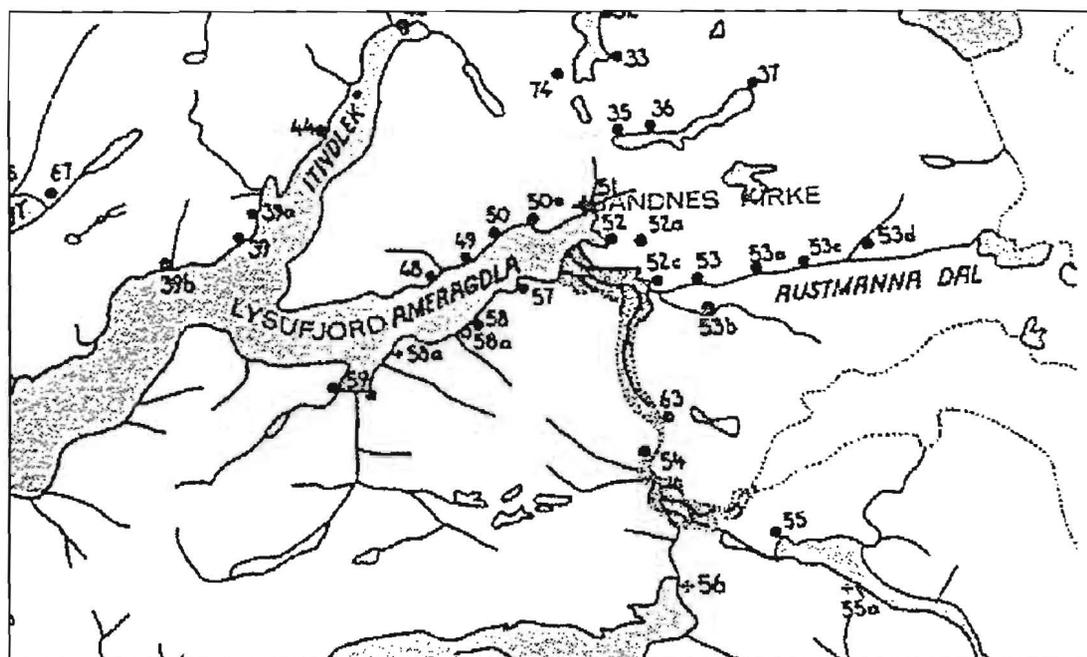


Figure 6: Center of Western Settlement, Lysufjord with Sandnes Farm¹³⁰

Three types of farms reflected the social hierarchy of the Western Settlement: large farms like Sandnes V-51 had extra animals in separate quarters; mid-sized farms (V-54) had fewer animals; and small farms (N-48) depended mainly on goats.¹³¹ The Norse were not all affected equally by the cooling climate. The larger farms had better food, and extra help to handle the cold. The smallest farms were marginal from the start, doing more hunting or helping the largest farmers.¹³² Most affected were the middle-sized farms, further away from water systems and on less fertile pasturage, like V-54 Nipaitsoq. These farms changed their building design in about 1300, and kept their animals inside, with stalls in grey areas of Figure 7 (next page).

¹³⁰ Krogh, 183. Scale 1 inch=6.95 miles, 1 cm=4.17 km.

¹³¹ McGovern, 104-06.

¹³² McGovern, 198-99. Other problems included a larvae infestation and erosion.

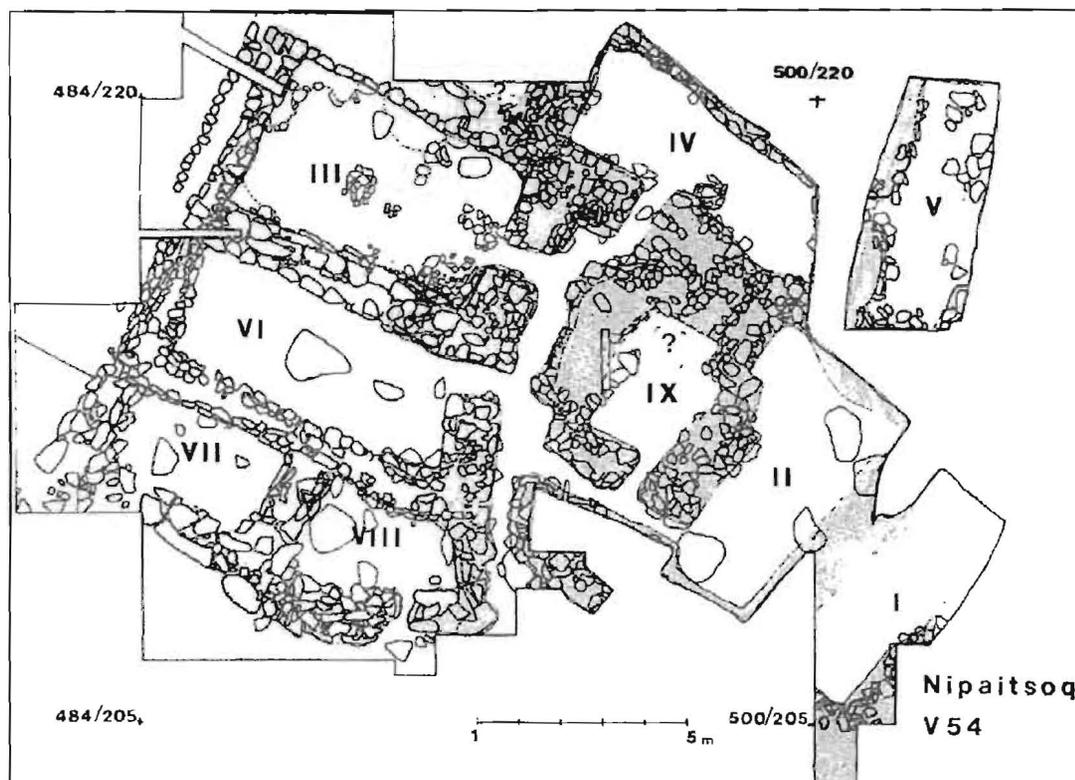


Figure 7: Farm V-54, Nipaitsoq.¹³³

The combined farm at Nipaitsoq included a work room, sleeping room and central area, central passageway, a storage room, three stalls (one for a cow), and a larger room for sheep or goats. The complex had a smithy and a sauna in separate buildings.¹³⁴ Room III was a small gathering hall with central fire, and raised benches. Room IV was a larder or storeroom for entire carcasses of meat, and other prey. Room V appeared to be for cattle, with Rooms I and II probably for goats and sheep.¹³⁵

¹³³ Andreasen, 178. Approximate size of the complex was nineteen by twenty-four meters, or 62.5 by 78.75 feet, for 4921.875 square feet.

¹³⁴ Andreasen, 179-181.

¹³⁵ McGovern, 144-47.

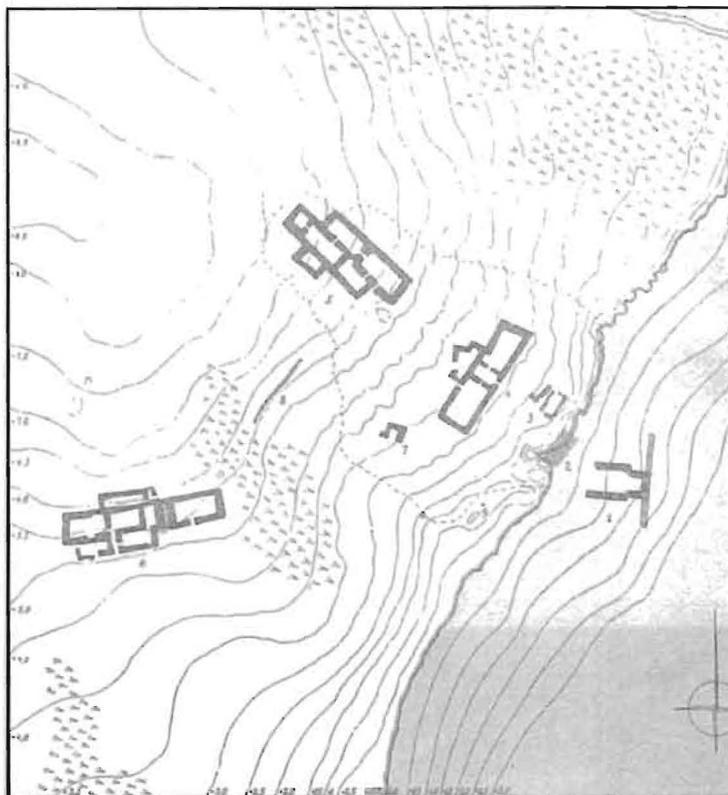


Figure 8: Sandnes Farm V-51 on Lysufjord¹³⁶

In comparison to Nipaitsoq, the largest farm Sandnes spread over a considerable area. It had the church for the area (now under water, marked #1). The living quarters were in building #4. The animals were well away from dwelling quarters in separate facilities #5 and #6 that had stalls for the animals, including the extra cows and bull for the settlement. The smithy for iron forging was in #7, while #8 was a dike.¹³⁷ It was spacious compared to Nipaitsoq and smaller farms, and less affected by the changing climate due to having more animals in better quarters, and more farm help.

¹³⁶ Krogh, 57. Scale: 1 inch = 46.875 meters or 153.8 feet.

¹³⁷ Krogh, 57. The dike was possibly for irrigation. There was no identification for #2 and #3.

An even bigger threat to the settlement came from the approaching Thule, who hunted the ring-neck seals. Again, the Thule handled the increasing cold, but the animal they depended upon did not. These seals built dens in the ice to have their pups, and needed to scratch out several breathing holes per den in thinner ice, to avoid the waiting polar bears hoping for a meal.¹³⁸ As the weather got cooler, the Thule followed the seals into Disko Bay by about 1260 (from carbon dating) where the Norse caught both walrus and polar bears. In clashes over the hunting grounds, the Norse were outnumbered from the start and pulled back to their home fjords. They had already lost the hunting areas at Baffin Island due to increasing sea ice, making sailing dangerous.¹³⁹

Archeologists found little evidence of cultural interaction between the Norse and Thule, with little exchange of words, hunting techniques, or culture.¹⁴⁰ The Norse were never particularly sensitive in dealing with natives, and took small items from the Thule winter camps at Disko Bay while the Thule were out hunting. Trading occurred probably both directly or indirectly in Greenland and the New World, depending upon the contact between the groups. In indirect trade, the owner of one pile of goods left it on the ground; if the buyer liked the transaction, he left a corresponding bundle. The first trader returned, and if happy with the transaction, took the second pile, leaving his goods for the new owner.¹⁴¹ This type of transaction took both time and trust to develop, and probably disappeared with competition over the hunting grounds.

¹³⁸ McGovern, 115-16.

¹³⁹ Meldgaard, *Nordboerne*, 87.

¹⁴⁰ Meldgaard, "Inuit-nordbo projektet," 3.

¹⁴¹ Keller, "Fur, Fish and Ivory," 4.

Further cooling brought the Thule to the Godthaab/Nuuk region by 1300, which blocked the Norse exit to the ocean. This also cut them off from collecting driftwood, harvesting beached whales, and killing harp seals, a primary source of Norse protein.¹⁴² The biggest conflict came when the Thule started hunting caribou in the fjords behind the Norse farms, as they lacked any tradition of keeping domestic animals. The final insult was their tendency to mistake the Norse domestic animals, always freely grazing in the mountains as was customary from both Iceland and Norway, for available game.¹⁴³ The hot-tempered Norse, already with their backs against the wall, probably took loss of their domestic animals as a personal affront, leading to violence.

Overall, there was an oral tradition of conflict between the groups, of mutual fear and suspicion.¹⁴⁴ The Thule were afraid of the much larger Norse, who called them *skraelinger* which translated to pygmies in Old Norse. They also learned to avoid the quick aggression of the Norse; although evenly matched in hunting ability, the Norse had the advantage of steel weapons.¹⁴⁵ In turn, the Norse were afraid when outnumbered, or backed into a corner, and quickly retreated. From oral Inuit tradition, minor skirmishes escalated into a sneak attack on a Norse farm. One Inuit legend blamed problems between the two groups on a Thule girl Navaranaq, who instigated a fight between the two groups, leading to the defeat of the Norse.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² McGovern, 259.

¹⁴³ Gad, *Grønland*, 68. Sheep and goats still wander freely on roads in Norway and Iceland.

¹⁴⁴ Meldgaard, *Nordboerne*, 95-96.

¹⁴⁵ Henriksen, 178.

¹⁴⁶ Emgaard, 23. While legend, there was some type of skirmish between the two groups.

The most likely point of the attack was at a very small farm at V-48, called Niaqussat. In 1903, Daniel Bruun reported in an Inuit story of two human Norse craniums found with stone (Thule) arrows in their heads; while the skulls were discarded, German missionaries took the arrows a few years earlier. However there were still two unburied Thule skeletons down by the fjord, as the Thule had the same prohibition against touching the dead as many other native cultures.¹⁴⁷

While making decisions in the Western Settlement fell to the three largest farms, these decision makers looked at the communal good, and consistently chose survival, backing off while hunting at obvious signs of danger. In addition, they still had ships that held 18-20 men for hunting. Evidence shows that they withdrew suddenly, taking people and as many animals as they could as first priority. They left many personal artifacts; from the amount of valuable iron left behind, Vera Henriksen concluded that the Norse left unwillingly and suddenly.¹⁴⁸ Loose animals found in the settlement were probably either the extra animals held in reserve by the largest farms, or animals that had been up in mountain setters, and came back to the farms on their own.

Archeological evidence supported the theory that the Norse pulled out en masse in an orderly withdrawal. In leaving swiftly, they made no contact with the Eastern Settlement, Iceland, Norway, or any other civilized society. Not one single family took the safe trip to the Eastern Settlement, staying instead with their communal group. Some farms on the fringe of the settlement kept going until about 1400.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Bruun, 8.

¹⁴⁸ Henriksen, 179-80, 183. The Norse either imported iron, or worked blooms in Labrador.

¹⁴⁹ Seaver, *Last Viking*, 59. They might have been hunting or stayed by choice.

Loss of physical security was probably the most pressing factor. They were afraid to use the hunting grounds at Disko Bay, and were essentially trapped back in four fjords with numerous Thule at the mouth of the system. This was a mountainous region, with little visibility up winding fjords. After an attack on one farm, they had no way of knowing whether this was an isolated attack, or there was a larger invasion coming. It made sense that they broke out of the fjord system while they still could.

Simultaneously, they lost what little economic security they once had. The outside world remained ignorant of the climate changes they faced, and the Thule coming down the coast.¹⁵⁰ The Norwegian king and Catholic Church squeezed them to pay more taxes and tithes, simultaneously with the loss of their hunting grounds for export products. With the church threatening to take their farm land and property, they also feared a reaction of their not paying taxes or tithes after 1327.¹⁵¹

They also had specific complaints with the Eastern Settlement. Due to lack of shipping, the Western Settlement had to depend on the Eastern Settlement, which used the fruits of the Western Settlement's labor without sending back trade goods. The hunters took the physical risks of killing large mammals; the profits of this risk went to build stone churches as foreign-born bishops initiated large building campaigns:

The later formally planned stone churches thus seem to reflect the power of a central ecclesiastical authority to divert substantial amounts of labor to the construction of structures in an alien architectural tradition that had no direct subsistence utility.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ McGovern, 259.

¹⁵¹ Henriksen, 144.

¹⁵² McGovern, 205. This use of labor also subverted the traditional power of the lawspeaker.

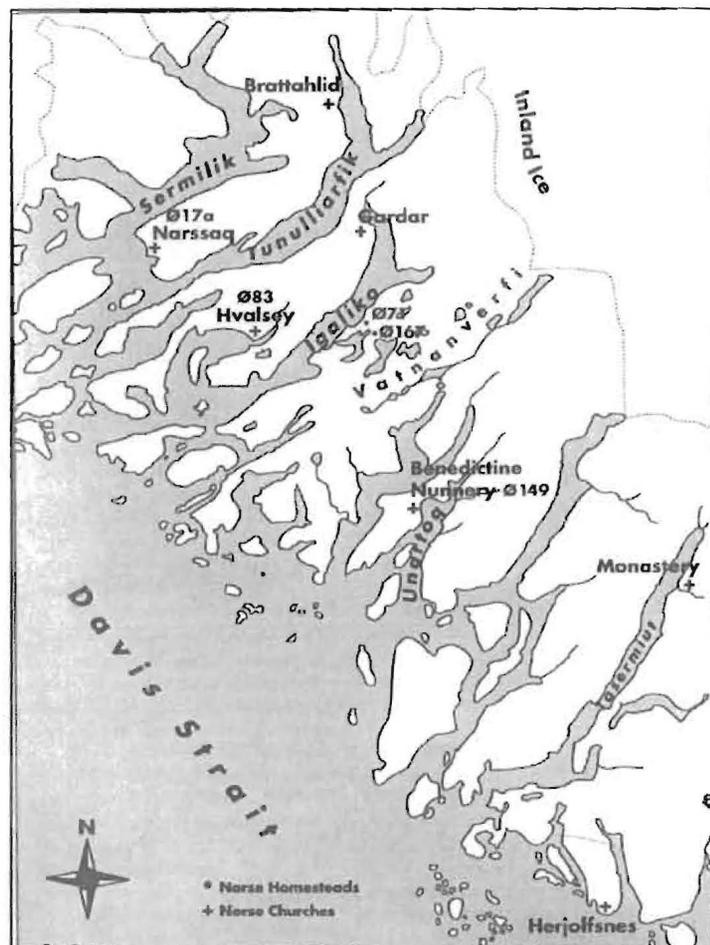


Figure 9: Map of Eastern Settlement¹⁵³

The Eastern Settlement supported a cathedral at Gardar (now Igaliko), a monastery, a Benedictine nunnery, and twelve parish churches for two hundred farms in a smaller region than the Western Settlement.¹⁵⁴ Church building consumed much of the labor force during summer months, keeping them away from communal hunting.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Seaver, *The Frozen Echo*, map by David O. Seaver, 3. Scale: 1 inch = 31.25 miles.

¹⁵⁴ David Wilson, *The Vikings and Their origins: Scandinavia in the First Millennium* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), 81.

¹⁵⁵ McGovern, 204-05.

As mentioned, the Western Settlement stopped paying its taxes in 1327. While they lost access to their traditional hunting grounds due to the encroaching Thule, they also witnessed the extensive building at Gardar, which left more than fifty ruins of the bishop's residence, utility buildings, store houses, dikes for irrigation, large kitchen gardens, and winter protection called byres over one hundred cows.¹⁵⁶ Norse society in Greenland showed increasing stratification by about 1260, with the upper class in the Eastern Settlement consuming most of the expensive imported goods.¹⁵⁷ While the bishop's farm provided aid in bad years, this was different than the Viking mentality of making sure all inhabitants got enough to sustain life in the first place, and probably did not sit well with the Western Settlement, with its already skeptical view of religion.

Somehow news got out to the civilized world that there was rebellion in the Western Settlement. With the source unfortunately lost, there was some premonition of disaster with authorities. In August 1341, Ivar Baardsen received an appointment to investigate the settlement, and collect whatever taxes he could, with historians placing his visit between 1342 and 1349.¹⁵⁸ The *Soga om austmenn* [Saga of the Eastmen] gave the Norwegian captains sailing between Iceland and Greenland: Nikolás i Leku in 1340; Bjami Selbyggir in 1341 and 1346, and Sigurdr Austmadr Gyridarson.¹⁵⁹ The only documented ships bringing Baardsen to Greenland sailed either in 1341 or 1346.

¹⁵⁶ Marita Engberg Ekman, *Destination Viking: Western Viking Route* (Visby, Sweden: North Sea Viking Legacy, 2001), 175-77. Sandnes Farm was quite modest compared to Gardar Cathedral Farm.

¹⁵⁷ McGovern, 200-06.

¹⁵⁸ Finn Gad, *The History of Greenland I, Earliest Times to 1700*, translated from the Danish by Ernst Dupont (London: C. Hurst, 1970), 141.

¹⁵⁹ Hallvard Magerøy, *Soga om austmenn: Nordmenn som siglde til Island og Grønland i mellomalderen* [Saga of the east men: Norwegians who sailed to Iceland and Greenland in the Middle Ages] (Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 1993), 124.

Baardsen had time to make the trip from Norway to Iceland and then the Eastern Settlement before winter closed in. The period of late summer and early fall was the hunting season in Greenland, with less wind and sea ice restricting travel; it was called *sensommer* [late summer] in Scandinavia, later called Indian summer in North America.

While the year Baardsson visited the Western Settlement remained unclear, he hoped to make a name for himself to gain promotion in the Catholic Church. This made the visit most probable in 1342, on a ship sailing from Norway in 1341. The other alternative was visiting the settlement in 1347 or 1348, on a ship from Norway in 1346, not consistent with quickly concluding the affair to win promotion. Unfortunately, Baardsen let a scribe record the visit, with no date of this visit to Sandnes:

In the Western Settlement stands a large church, named Stensnes [Sandnes] Church. That church was for a time the cathedral and bishop's seat. Now the Skrœlings have destroyed all of the Western Settlement; there are left some horses, goats, cattle, and sheep, all feral, and no people either Christian or heathen.¹⁶⁰

Greenlandic sheep stayed outside in the winter, whereas the cows they found outside could only survive inside. Realizing the animals would not survive a winter, they slaughtered as many as they had room to carry back to the Eastern Settlement.

While rumors surfaced that the Thule had taken over the Western Settlement, Baardsen and later archeologists saw no sign of battle or bloodshed.¹⁶¹ Additionally, the Thule would have slaughtered the domestic animals for meat, as they were already doing.

¹⁶⁰ Jónsson²⁹. The term Skrelinge or more commonly Skrœlinger translated from Old Norse as pygmies, denoting their short stature, and was highly derogatory. This paper will designate them as the Thule culture, the current usage.

¹⁶¹ Gad, *History of Greenland*, 141. This meant that Baardsson came to the settlement the same season as its inhabitants either died or left

Alternate theories were that the settlers hid in the mountains when they saw the church tax collector, or were out hunting, and dismayed when they returned to find their animals slaughtered. Neither of these theories made much sense. The Sandnes farm was in an open glaciated bowl without trees or any place to hide; they also lacked any visibility up the fjords. The Norse hunted primarily in male groups, with an occasional woman along to cook, but left the women, the young and the old back at home. Any movement towards the mountains was readily visible from the beach.

It made sense for the Norse to get their families and animals to safety as soon as possible. The Thule were spread out along the coast, giving a threat of attack to the heavily laden ships. Also sea ice blocked the route to the Eastern Settlement except in late summer, and this route was against the Greenland current. Sailing was easiest across Davis Strait due to the current swinging away at Godthaab toward the Cumberland Sound on Baffin Island (see map page 8), and down the coast of North America.¹⁶²

The Norse were often in the new world across Davis Strait for hunting, felling timber, smelting iron blooms, and trading with the Thule and Dorset tribes. The usual route across the strait was just north of Godthaab, and was much safer than sailing to Iceland or Norway due to less storms and sea ice. The Norse knew three areas well in the new world: Markland or Labrador, Ungava Bay going in to Hudson Bay, and the Cumberland Sound, as well as Devon and Ellesmere Islands in the High Arctic.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Bruun, 4. Icelandic sagas called this area Helluland, or land of big rocks.

¹⁶³ Meldgaard, "Fra Brattalid til Vinland," 372-380. The latter two islands were both too cold for animals or families.

In addition, the Norse were well adapted to a northern climate, loved to hunt the caribou, and probably stayed in the north. They also did better with the Inuit in the north than the more aggressive Indians to the west who killed Erik the Red's son Thorvald, from the *Icelandic Sagas*.¹⁶⁴ The Thule were peaceful on a daily basis, until their shamens excited them to a sneak attack in retaliation for Norse misbehavior.¹⁶⁵

A fire at the Skálholt Bishopric in southern Iceland destroyed many of the *Icelandic Annals* in 1630.¹⁶⁶ As bishop of Skálholt from 1630 to 1638, Gisle Oddsson reconstructed in 1637 the most important clue of what happened to the Norse.¹⁶⁷

1342 the inhabitants of Greenland of their own will abandoned the true faith and the Christian religion, having already forsaken all good ways and true virtues, and joined themselves with the people of America. Some consider too that Greenland lies closely adjacent to the western regions of the world. From this it came about that the Christians gave up their voyaging to Greenland.¹⁶⁸

Jones noted “parallel” lines in Lyskander’s *Grönlandske Chronica* of 1608 as “a somewhat dubious confirmation of this annal.”¹⁶⁹ While historians debated Oddsson’s memory, there was ample documentation from the Canadian Arctic to support this entry that the Western Settlement left for America and abandoned civilization.

¹⁶⁴ Meldgaard, “Fra Brattalid til Vinland,” 372.

¹⁶⁵ Meldgaard, “Om de gamle Nordboer,” 99-100.

¹⁶⁶ Henriksen, 138. Gisle Oddsson grew up at the bishopric, and used his memory of the bishopric archives and book collection he had studied earlier as son of Bishop Odd Einarsson to rebuild the specific information. Someone obviously added the term America at a later date.

¹⁶⁷ *Grönlands Historiske Mindesmærker*, 459. Original text: “1342 Groenlandiæ incolæ a vera fide et religione christiana sponte sue defecerunt, et repudiatis omnibus honestis moribus et veris virtutibus ad Americæ populos se converterunt; existimant enim quidam Groenlandiam adeo vicinam esse occidentalibus orbis regionibus. Ac inde factum quod Christiani a Groenlandicis navigationibus abstinerent.”

¹⁶⁸ Jones, 61-62. This is the most common translation of the Latin text.

¹⁶⁹ Jones, 62n.

The Norse in the Western Settlement left for a number of reasons. Staying where they were, they might perish either at the hands of the Thule or a changing climate. Their cattle suffered with the longer winters, and their domestic animals made easy targets for the Thule coming through Norse farms to hunt caribou. The settlement showed contraction of marginal farms, as the climate showed extreme fluctuations in the period of 1280-1380.¹⁷⁰ McGovern saw the settlement as going through a “cusp collapse,” a series of gradually increasing minor changes past the point where a small change triggered the dramatic and sudden ghost town that Baardsson discovered.¹⁷¹

While the climate and Thule probably precipitated their departure, the settlers had their backs against the wall with the Eastern Settlement and Norwegian authorities. They lost the means of harvesting luxury goods to pay their taxes and tithes, and saw no benefit in the organized religion and kings taking the fruits of their labor. With no desire for the restrictions or covetous lifestyle of Iceland, Norway, and the Eastern Settlement, they preferred their Viking traditions of communal living and sharing of resources. In the new world, they had the possibility of a new life, and freedom from monarchs, churches, and civilization. They had already demonstrated the ability to adapt to a new setting, with two prior moves to Iceland in 874 and Greenland in 986, both times for more freedom and less interference from authorities. While the Thule in essence gave them the immediate reason to leave quickly, they were already fed up with the situation, and had nothing to lose by leaving.

¹⁷⁰ McGovern, 258-59.

¹⁷¹ McGovern, 259-60.