

Excerpts from Annette Kolodny, *In Search of First Contact: The Vikings of Vinland, the Peoples of the Dawnland, and the Anglo-American Anxiety of Discovery* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

From Chapter Six, “The Phantom of First Contact” (pp. 274–79)

My friend and teacher, Wayne Newell, a Passamaquoddy elder and Native speaker, said he was familiar with the two Vinland sagas, and certain elements within them rang familiar. The noisemakers brandished by the Skraelings [the Norse name for all Native Americans] to scare off the Norse reminded him of homemade flutes or whistles whirled on the end of a string, a noisemaker he too had made as a child. Wabanaki peoples had once regularly employed such devices to frighten enemies by convincing them that “your numbers were larger than they actually were.” The red cloth that the Norse offered in trade for pelts would have been valued by his people because “red was a spiritual color” for the Passamaquoddy. But when all was said and done, Newell could recall hearing no stories that clearly related to any arrival of the Norse.

In his view, such stories would initially have been treated as “local news,” interesting but not necessarily resonant with wider meaning. Over time, the “local news” might have been forgotten altogether; or, if there had been repeated or memorable contacts, that news might have been turned into “old” stories passed from one generation to another. But as the Indians found themselves overwhelmed by new invaders who could neither be ignored nor defeated, and as their populations dwindled from disease and constant warfare, the older stories of strangers arriving from the east by sea got eclipsed by the new catastrophe; or the old stories were remade to fit the new situation. Still, he thought, some fragments might survive somewhere.

Author and storyteller Joseph Bruchac (Western Abenaki) is convinced that there are survivals. After decades of collecting the lore and legends of Eastern Woodlands peoples, both Iroquoian and Algonquian, he firmly believes that “traditional stories have real historical memories within them.” When we chatted at his home in Greenfield Center, New York, in March 2003, he said, “We have stories among the Abenakis that go back to 10,000 years ago.” So survivals in stories of events that went back only a thousand years struck him as very likely. Although he knew of no old stories that explicitly identified their protagonists as Norse (or Viking), he was aware of several with tantalizing clues. Wabanaki peoples, in particular, had long told of ancient encounters with “hard-skinned dangerous people who came from the north.” Arrows were said to bounce off their skins, and these strangers were described as having “no human sympathies.” Obviously, it is tempting

to speculate that stories of “hard-skinned dangerous people who came from the north” might suggest parties of Norse exploring southward from L’Anse aux Meadows, wearing chain mail tunics to protect themselves in potentially hostile territory. Arrows would appear to bounce off their skins. But heavy chain mail tunics would have been extremely uncomfortable attire for an exploratory expedition. Moreover, Eskimoan peoples from the Arctic were also venturing southward during this period, and they are known to have worn a kind of armor made from stringing together the split bones of animals (see LeBlanc 23). Arrows would have appeared to bounce off their bodies, too.

Bruchac also recalled that Willie Dunn (Mi'kmaq métis) had once told him a Mi'kmaq story said to come down from precontact times. In this story, a group of Mi'kmaq in a canoe were lost in a dense fog, when they met up with an unfamiliar kind of boat with a number of strange people in it. The strangers were described in the story as “liver-colored, or pink.” The two groups “helped one another get their bearings” and then parted. For Bruchac, stories like these contain memories of the earliest contacts with Europeans, perhaps Norse, and invite further investigation.

Mi'kmaq mothers and grandmothers on traditional lands along the Miramichi Bay in New Brunswick, Canada, still sometimes tell their children that their people have blue eyes because they are the descendants of Vikings. Many Mi'kmaq claim Viking ancestry on the basis of the fact that early explorers described Indians in their area as light-skinned with green or even blue eyes. Yet, as many historians point out, from the second half of the fifteenth century onward, any number of European fishing fleets hauling cod off the Labrador coast could easily have explored southward into the Gulf of Saint Lawrence and the large inviting bay of the Miramichi or into other Mi'kmaq territories along the Saint Lawrence River. Moreover, in 1525 the Portuguese founded a short-lived colony somewhere on the north side of Cape Breton Island, on the edge of Mi'kmaq territory. That same year, a 50-ton Spanish caravel landed at Cape Breton, returning to Spain filled with male and female captives for slaves. Anthropologist Harald E. L. Prins speculates that if the captives were Mi'kmaq, then the Mi'kmaq code of revenge “would have spelled disaster for Cape Breton’s fledgling [Portuguese] colony,” and he notes a French pilot’s log from 1559 that reported the Natives having “put an end” to the little settlement (Prins, *The Mi'kmaq* 45). If there were any European survivors, Prins further speculates, then perhaps “some women and children” were allowed to live and may have been adopted (Prins, *The Mi'kmaq* 45). So even if the claims about the earliness of these traits are accurate, light-colored eyes and brown or blond hair might have derived from several sources. In short, while traditions about contacts with peoples from elsewhere, long before the sixteenth century, permeate the stories of Native groups along the Atlantic seaboard, we can never really be certain to what they may refer. Still, as Bruchac has written, “Long before Columbus, some of our stories tell us, men came from the direction of the sunrise and stayed for a time” (*Our Stories Remember* 46–47).

But in the twenty-first century, to recover among Native peoples any reliable trace memory of a contact that occurred a thousand years in the past is like following a will-o'-the-wisp, that faint elusive light that sometimes plays at night over marshy grounds. At best, there are hints, tantalizing clues, and conjectures. Even what appears at first as hard evidence turns out to be subject to conflicting interpretations. Yet stories about some first contacts—or even first sightings—have endured.

Sitting in his office on Indian Island [Maine] one afternoon in June 2005, then-Chief of the Penobscot Nation, James G. Sappier, shared a story his mother had told to him and his siblings when they were children. His mother, Mary Madeline Polchies Sappier (also Penobscot)—called Madeline by her friends and family—had indicated that it was a very old story, passed down through the grandmothers. The story, as Chief Sappier remembered it, was as follows and is published here for the first time:¹

Long ago, our people were observing a large canoe coming up the river. The men were poling the canoe up through the river, as it was shallow and the tide was out. They were steadily moving up the river to a place where they finally tied it up. There were no women on this canoe. Where they tied up their canoe, today this place is called Winterport.

They were strange looking men, very whitish, pale skinned and a lot of hair on their faces. They left the canoe and waded to shore and staying on the shore, they took red clay and mud from the river banks and placed it all over their bodies. Native women in seeing this thought they were trying to look like our Tribal members.

In observing this the members [of the Penobscot group watching the strangers] thought that they were covering themselves with mud and red clay to look like us and also protect themselves from black-fly and mosquito bites. After they finished covering themselves, they then went inland and gathered food and water. They were not here long as within a couple of days they untied their canoe and rode the tide down the river in their large strange-looking canoe with strange-looking men. We followed them until they went out on the big water [i.e., the Atlantic Ocean].

This canoe was much larger than our war canoe and held a lot more men. Our people did not know these

people nor where they came from. No one in the Tribe approached them as they did not act right and were unknown strangers[,] some being very loud.

When he finished telling the story, Jim (as he invited me to call him), reiterated that, for her part, his mother only knew that this event had happened “a very long, long time ago, long before white people began arriving more frequently in greater numbers.”

Unfortunately, despite the story’s emphasis on the earliness of the event it describes, there is no way to know precisely when this sighting took place. We only know that it is thought to predate the more significant European arrivals of the seventeenth century and that it occurred near present-day Winterport, located a few miles above the southern end of the Penobscot River where it empties into Penobscot Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. Winterport is where the river turns from salt to fresh water. Both the men and their craft are unknown to the Native observers, and nothing in the story offers any definitive clue as to the identity of the “strange looking men.” In order to be poled through the water at low tide, however, this “large strange-looking canoe” must have been a vessel with a relatively shallow draught. This feature was characteristic of the sixteenth-century Basque and French shallops as well as the Norse knarrs used by the Vinland colonists. Some of the later European vessels, like the small pinnaces, also had a relatively shallow draught, and the use of long oars to help “pole” a vessel through shallow waters was common practice among both the Norse and the later European arrivals. Moreover, most of the Europeans who came to America, whether as fishermen, explorers, or would-be colonists, were bearded; and many of these came onshore to gather food and water. As a result, a plausible case could be made that this story contains trace memories of a sighting of Norse, or a sighting of crew members from Champlain’s 1604 exploratory expedition up the Penobscot River, or a sighting of any one of several other early European visitors to Maine. Or perhaps, as Wayne Newell might suggest, the story conflates traces of more than one early expedition that anchored for a time near Winterport before heading back “out on the big water.”

All those possibilities aside, there is another aspect of Madeline Sappier’s story that compels attention. Given the story’s strong implication that it describes a *first* sighting of previously unknown men, the story is remarkably free of any suggestion of surprise, fear, awe, or wonder on the part of the Native observers. Instead, the story expresses a matter-of-fact curiosity about the reasons for the strangers’ odd actions (covering themselves with red clay from the river bank) and a mild reproof of their “loud” behavior. To be sure, these Penobscot ancestors were wary and, all unseen, prudently watched the strangers and followed their craft until it entered the Atlantic. The Penobscots could also feel relatively secure because they knew themselves to be numerically superior, even though the strangers arrived in a canoe “much larger than a war canoe and held a lot more men.” Still, the story tells

us that the strangers “did not act right and were unknown,” so why does their arrival raise no obvious alarm?

In an article published in 1994, titled “The Exploration of Norumbega,” historian James Axtell may have provided at least part of the answer. After surveying a wealth of fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth-century documents written by Europeans who encountered Native peoples, Axtell concluded that “no matter how early a European ship is known to have touched on New England’s shores, Indian reactions or possessions suggest that it had been preceded by others” (“Exploration” 154). By way of example, Axtell cited the Portuguese navigator Gaspar Corte-Real. When Corte-Real kidnapped fifty-seven Indians in 1501, probably along the Maine coast, he was certain that other Europeans had been there before him. One Native possessed “a piece of broken gilt sword,” which the Venetian ambassador in Lisbon identified as “certainly . . . made in Italy”; and another Native boy was wearing in his ears “two silver rings,” identified as made in Venice (qtd. in Axtell 154). Very possibly, these had been barter items exchanged by John Cabot, an Italian from Genoa, who had sailed the North American coast in 1497 under a patent from Henry VII of England. But whatever the source of these items, one fact is certain: Because in Native North America, communities knew what was going on in other communities within about a three hundred mile radius, by the turn of the sixteenth century, the arrival of strangers in the lands of the Wabanaki was already old news. That news had travelled the old traditional trading routes and been told and retold at the summer gatherings.

But there may be another less obvious explanation for the apparent lack of alarm in Madeline Sappier’s story. Among the Passamaquoddy of Maine, the nineteenth-century folklore collector Charles Godfrey Leland found two very different versions of the coming of Gluskap, the shared Wabanaki culture-hero and culture-bringer. In *The Algonquin Legends of New England* (1884), Leland included the following: “It is told in traditions of the old time that Glooskap was born in the land of the Wabanaki, which is nearest to the sunrise; but another story says that he came over the sea in a great stone canoe, and that this canoe was an island of granite covered with trees” (28–29). The second story does not appear in Silas Tertius Rand’s authoritative collection, *Legends of the Micmacs* (1894), so there is no way to determine how widespread it may have been. Also, at the remove of well over a century since the story was collected, there is no way now to determine whether the story contains the kernel of some barely remembered ancient migration or some other ancient notable arrival from across the Atlantic.² At most, it suggests that the advent of a being (or beings) from some foreign land in a different kind of vessel—for both of which the stone canoe presumably serves as a synecdoche or symbolic correlative—was not such an exceptional idea after all, at least among some Wabanaki groups. To put it another way, sightings of strangers in strange vessels from “over the sea” did not necessarily imply *firstness* nor did they always have to bode impending disaster.

* * * * *

From the Epilogue, “History Lessons” Lesson Three: The Sagas as Prophecy Texts

Nowadays, *The Greenlanders’ Saga* and *Eirik the Red’s Saga* have taken their place within a larger body of trans-oceanic texts that we call contact narratives. The sagas remain important and unique in their *firstness*, but otherwise—like so many contact narratives—they recount one party’s experience of meeting a previously unknown people on a landscape which, for one of the groups, is also strange and unfamiliar. As such, the sagas repeat the central theme of all contact narratives, whether composed in Mexico by the conquistadors or in New England by a Native storyteller: the bewilderment of encountering radical *otherness* and the need somehow to incorporate that new experience into the group’s already existing conceptual patterns and world view.

But the Vinland sagas are unique in more than just their chronological firstness. They are also unique in that, unlike the European contact texts of a later period, the sagas do not shade over into narratives of conquest and colonialism. Because the Norse and the indigenous peoples met as autonomous groups with roughly equivalent technologies, and because the Norse were so few in numbers, the Norse could never even attempt to achieve political, military, or cultural sway over the Skraelings. And they certainly never attempted to exert sovereignty over Vinland or its inhabitants. However much Thorfinn Karlsefni and the other Vinland voyagers might have wished for a different outcome, in fact their venture resulted only in seriatim journeys to this good new land. Thus the sagas reveal a colonialist project that is never realized but only ever-incipient.

This perhaps explains why the two Vinland sagas overwhelmingly strike the modern reader as prescient with the tragedy that would begin to unfold some five hundred years later: the steady annihilation of the Native peoples and indigenous cultures of America. For even though amicable trade with the Skraelings clearly brought the Norse great profits, nonetheless the Natives represented to the Norse, above all else, an obstacle both to colonization and to the unfettered exploitation of Vinland’s abundant resources. And since neither Iceland nor Greenland in the eleventh century had populations large enough to immigrate in massive numbers and by force overcome the Natives of Vinland, the plan to colonize Vinland had to be abandoned. But beginning in the seventeenth century, aided by firearms and bringing with them epidemic diseases against which the Native populations had no immunity, Europeans in ever-increasing numbers again explored, exploited, and settled the same lands that the Norse had called Vinland. Once again, the Europeans began to

see the Natives not as “our brethren of the same land,” Thomas Jefferson’s fine phrase, but as obstacles to expanding colonization (“To Brother Handsome Lake” 307). And once again, as in the sagas, trade turned to treachery as the Europeans substituted cheap rum and brandy for the metal trade goods sought by the Indians; cross-cultural contact morphed into a collision of cultures, as European nations appropriated Native homelands in the competition for dominance in the New World; and Europe’s enterprising expansionism turned violent. Little wonder that, in contrast to the celebratory effusions of the nineteenth century, most Americans today read the sagas as the tacit preamble to a tragic and very American tale.

This is the insight embedded in William T. Vollmann’s *The Ice-Shirt* (1990). In that novel, an all-too-credulous and repeatedly pedantic narrator attempts to pinpoint the Vinlanders’ landfalls: “From the astronomical observations that they took, we know that they must have landed near New Jersey. But other scholars, some of even greater repute than I, say that the Greenlanders stayed at Cape Cod, in Maine, in Newfoundland, in North Carolina” (216). Then, in a dream-like narrative based on the sagas, Vollman’s text sings an elegy both for “the new country [that] offered so much of freshness and greenness” and for the Indians “growing deeper and deeper into death” (219, 310). In other words, wherever the real Vinland may have been located geographically, its symbolic meaning is *here*.

Works Cited

- Axtell, James. “The Exploration of Norumbega: Native Perspectives.” *American Beginnings: Exploration, Culture, and Cartography in the Land of Norumbega*. Eds. Emerson W. Baker, Edwin A. Churchill, et al. Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 1994. 149-65.
- Bruchac, Joseph. *Our Stories Remember: American Indian History, Culture, and Values through Storytelling*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 2003.
- Eirik the Red’s Saga*. Transl. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson. *The Vinland Sagas: The Norse Discovery of America*. Eds. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson. London and NY: Penguin Books, 1965. 75-105.
- The Greenlanders’ Saga*. Transl. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson. *The Vinland Sagas: The Norse Discovery of America*. Eds. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson. London and NY: Penguin Books, 1965. 47-72.
- Jefferson, Thomas. “To Brother Handsome Lake.” 3 Nov. 1802, Washington, D.C. *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*. Ed. Merrill D. Peterson. New York: Viking, 1975. 305-307.
- Kehoe, Alice Beck. *America Before the European Invasions*. London and NY: Longman, 2002.

- LeBlanc, Steven A. "Prehistory of Warfare." *Archaeology* 56.3 (May/June 2003): 19-25.
- Leland, Charles Godfrey. *The Algonquin Legends of New England, or, Myths and Folk Lore of the Micmac, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot Tribes*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1884.
- Prins, Harald E. L. *The Mi'kmaq: Resistance, Accommodation, and Cultural Survival*. Ft. Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996.
- Rand, Silas Tertius. *Legends of the Micmacs*. New York and London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1894.
- Stanford, Dennis and Bruce Bradley. "The Solutrean Solution." *Discovering Archaeology* 2.1 (Jan./Feb. 2000): 54-55.
- Straus, Lawrence Guy. "Solutrean Settlement of North America? A Review of Reality." *American Antiquity* 65.2 (2000): 219-226.
- Vollmann, William T. *The Ice-Shirt*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1990.

Endnotes

¹ With his permission, I tape-recorded Chief Sappier as he told the story, and I also took notes. I then sent him a transcription of what he had said, and he shared that transcription with his siblings to see if their memories of the story coincided with his. For the most part, they did. Published here is the version of my transcription as corrected and amended by Chief Sappier and his siblings. I have not changed or corrected their punctuation and/or sentence structures but, to ensure clarity, I have interpolated one comma and some additional words and phrases in square brackets.

² There are also stories among the Wabanaki of Gluscap travelling in a stone canoe from America to Europe and even first discovering Europe (or at least England and France). According to one version collected by Leland, "This [journey] was before the white people had ever heard of America" (*The Algonquin Legends of New England* 128). Another version of this story appears in Rand. With regard to the story of Gluscap's arrival from "over the sea" in a stone canoe in the land of the Wabanaki, it must be read and interpreted with caution. Leland is known to have pieced together different story fragments according to his own preconceived ideas about Norse (and other) early European arrivals. That said, if accurately recorded, then this story appears to contain a suggestion of migration. Although largely discounted by many archaeologists and anthropologists, some recent archaeological studies have postulated an ancient migration across the Atlantic from Europe to North America as part of the earliest peopling of the continent; see Stanford and Bradley, "The Solutrean Solution" 54–55 and Kehoe, *America Before the European Invasions* 18–19. For the counter-argument, see Straus.