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Fridtjof Nansen Translated by Arthur G. Chater

Excerpt

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From an Icelandic MS., fourteenth century

CHAPTER IX

[continued]

WINELAND THE GOOD, THE FORTUNATE ISLES,
AND THE DISCOVERY OF AMERICA

A CONFIRMATION of the identity of Wineland and the *Insulæ Fortunatæ*, which in classical legend lay to the west of Africa, occurs in the Icelandic geography (in MSS. of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) which may partly be the work of Abbot Nikulás of Thverá (ob. 1159) (although perhaps not the part here quoted), where we read :

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Wineland
=the
African
islands

“ South of Greenland is ‘Helluland,’ next to it is ‘Markland,’ and then it is not far to ‘Vinland hit Góða,’ which some think to be connected with Africa (and if this be so, then the outer ocean [i.e., the ocean surrounding the disc of the earth] must fall in between Vinland and Markland).”¹

This idea of the connection with Africa seems to have been general in Iceland ; it may appear surprising, but, as will be seen, it finds its natural explanation in the manner here stated. It also appears in Norway. Besides a reference in the “King’s Mirror,” the following passage in the “*Historia Norwegiæ*” relating to Greenland is of particular importance :

“ This country was discovered and settled by the *Telensians* [i.e., the Icelanders] and strengthened with the Catholic faith ; it forms the end of Europe towards the west, nearly touches the African Islands (‘*Africanas insulas*’), where the returning ocean overflows ” [i.e., falls in].

¹ Cf. *Grönl. hist. Mind.*, iii. pp. 216, 220 ; G. Storm, 1888, p. 12. The latter part (in parenthesis) does not occur in the oldest MS.

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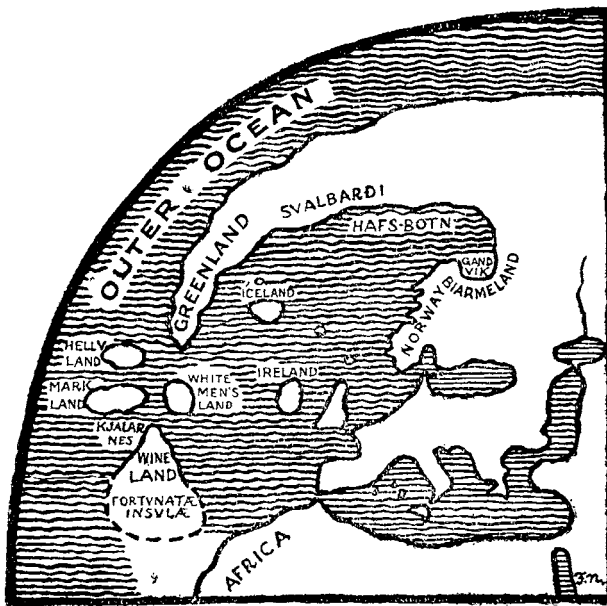
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It is clear that "Africanæ Insulæ" is here used directly as a name instead of Wineland, in connection with Markland and Helluland, as in the Icelandic geography. But the African Islands (i.e., originally the Canary Islands) were in

fact the Insulæ Fortunatæ, in connection with the Gorgades and the Hesperides; and thus we have here a direct proof that they were looked upon as the same.



The conception of the northern and western lands and islands in Norse literature

G. Storm [1890] and A. A. Björnbo [1909, pp. 229, ff.] have sought to explain the connection of Wineland with Africa as an attempt on the part of the Icelandic geographers to unite new discoveries of western lands with the classical-mediæval con-

ceptions of the continents as a continuous disc of earth with an outer surrounding ocean. But even if such "learned" ideas prevailed in Iceland and Norway (cf. the "King's Mirror"), it would nevertheless be unnatural to unite Africa and Wineland, which lay near Hvitranna-land, six days' sail west of Ireland, unless there were other grounds for doing so. Although agreeing on the main point, Dr. Björnbo maintains (in a letter to me) that the Icelanders may have got their continental conception from Isidore himself, who asserted the dogma of the threefold division of the continental circle; and the question whether Wineland was African or not depended upon whether it came south or north of the line running east and west through the Mediterranean. But the same Isidore also described the Insulæ Fortunatæ and other countries as islands in the Ocean, and his dogma could not thus have hindered Wineland from being regarded as an island like other islands (cf. Adam of Bremen's islands), but why then precisely African? Besides, the Icelandic geography and the *Historia Norwegiæ* represent two different conceptions, one as a continent, the other as islands. It cannot,

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therefore, have been Isidore's continental dogma that caused them both to assume the country to be *African*. It seems to me that no other explanation is here possible than that given above. CHAPTER IX

It might be objected to the view that "Vinland hit Góða" originally meant "Insulæ Fortunatæ," that several sorts of wild grape are found on the east coast of North America; it might therefore be believed that the Greenlanders really went so far and discovered these. Storm, indeed, assumed that the wild vine grew on the outer east coast of Nova Scotia; but he is unable to adduce any certain direct evidence of this, although he gives [1887, p. 48] a statement of the Frenchman Nicolas Denys in 1672, which points to the wild vine having grown in the interior of the country.¹ He also mentions several statements of recent date that wild-growing vines of one kind or another have been observed near Annapolis and in the interior of the country, but none on the south-east coast. Professor N. Wille informs me that in the latest survey of the flora of North America *Vitis vulpina* is specified as occurring in Nova Scotia; but nothing is said as to locality. The American botanist, M. L. Fernald [1910, pp. 19, f.], on the other hand, thinks that the wild vine (*Vitis vulpina*) is not certainly known to the east of the valley of the St. John in New Brunswick (see map, vol. i. p. 335), where it is rare and only found in the interior. From this we may conclude that even if it should really be found on the outer south-east coast of Nova Scotia, it must have been very rare there, and could not possibly have been a conspicuous feature which might have been especially mentioned along with the wheat. But even if we might assume that the saga was borne out to this extent, it would be one of those accidental coincidences which often occur. It must, of course, be admitted to be a strange chance that the world of classical legend should have fertile lands or islands far in the western ocean, and that Isidore should

The vine
North
America

¹ Storm thinks that Sir William Alexander's "red wineberries" from the south-east coast of Nova Scotia (in 1624) would be grapes, but this is uncertain.

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describe the self-grown vine and the unsown cornfields in these Fortunate Isles, and that long afterwards fertile lands and islands, where wild vines and various kinds of wild corn grew, should be discovered in the same quarter. Since we have the choice, it may be more reasonable to assume that the Icelanders got their wine from Isidore, or from the same vats that he drew his from, than that they fetched it from America. Again, even if the Greenlanders and Icelanders had found some berries on creepers in the woods—is it likely that they would have known them to be grapes? They cannot be expected to have had any acquaintance with the latter.¹ The author of the “Grönlendinga-þáttur” in the Flateyjarbók is so entirely ignorant of these things that he makes grapes grow in the winter and spring (like the fruits all the year round on the trees in the myth of the fortunate land in the west), and makes Leif’s companion Tyrker intoxicate himself by eating grapes (like the Irishmen in the Irish legends), and finally makes Leif cut down vine-trees (“vínvið”) and fell trees to load his ship, and at last fill the long-boat with grapes (as in the Irish legends); in the voyage of Thorvald Ericson they also collect grapes and vine-trees for a cargo, and Karleivne took home with him “many costly things: vine-trees, grapes and furs.” It is scarcely likely that seafaring Greenlanders about 380 years earlier had any better idea of the vine than this saga-writer, and we hear nothing in Eric’s Saga about Leif or his companions having ever been in southern Europe. No doubt it is for this very reason that the “Grönlendinga-þáttur” makes a “southman,” Tyrker, find the grapes.

The wild
wheat

Wheat is not a wild cereal native to America. It has therefore been supposed that the “self-sown wheat-fields” of Wineland might have been the American cereal maize.

¹ “Vínber” (grapes) are mentioned in the whole of Old Norse literature only in the translation of the Bible called “Stjórn,” in the “Grönlendinga-þáttur,” and in a letter (Dipl. Norv.) where they are mentioned as raisins or dried grapes. In addition, “vínberjakongull” (a bunch of grapes) occurs in the Saga of Eric the Red.

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As this proved to be untenable, Professor Schübeler¹ proposed that it might have been the “wild rice,” also called “water oats” (*Zizania aquatica*), an aquatic plant that grows by rivers and lakes in North America. But apart from the fact that the plant grows in the water and has little resemblance to wheat, although the ripe ear is said to be like a wheat-ear, there is the difficulty that it is essentially an inland plant, which is not known in Nova Scotia. “Though it occurs locally in a few New England rivers, it attains its easternmost known limit in the lower reaches of the St. John in New Brunswick, being apparently unknown in Nova Scotia” [Fernald, 1910, p. 26]. For proving that Wineland was Nova Scotia it is therefore of even less use than the wine. CHAPTER
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It results in consequence that the attempts made hitherto to bring the natural conditions of the east coast of North America into agreement with the saga’s description of Wineland² have not been able to afford any natural explana-

¹ Schübeler, *Christiania Videnskabs-Selskabs Forhandlinger for 1858*, pp. 21, ff.; *Viridarium Norvegicum*, i. pp. 253, f.

² It should be mentioned that the American botanist, M. L. Fernald, has recently [1910] made an attempt to locate the Icelanders’ Wineland the Good in southern Labrador, explaining the “vinber” of the Icelandic sagas as a sort of currant or as whortleberry, the self-sown wheat as the Icelanders’ lyme-grass (*Elymus arenarius*), and the “máurr” as “valbirch.” By assuming “vinber” to be whortleberries he even thinks he can explain how it was that Leif in the “Grönlendinga-þátr” was able to fill the ship with “grapes” in the spring (and what of the vine-trees that he cut down to load his ship, were they whortleberry-bushes?). Apart from the surprising circumstance of the Icelanders having called a country Wineland the Good because whortleberries grew there, the explanation is inadmissible on the ground that whortleberries were never called “vinber” (wineberries) in Old Norse or Icelandic. Currants have in more recent times been called “vinbær” in Norway and Iceland, but were not known there before the close of the Middle Ages. In ancient times the Norse people did not know how to make wine from any berry but the black crowberry; but there are plenty of these in Greenland, and it was not necessary to travel to Labrador to collect them. Fernald does not seem to have remarked that the sagas most frequently use the expression “vínviðr,” or else “vínviðr” and “vinber” together, and this can only mean vines and grapes. His explanation of the self-sown wheat-fields does not seem any happier. That the Icelanders should have reported these as something so remarkable in Wineland is not likely, if it was nothing but the lyme-grass with which

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tion of the striking juxtaposition of the two leading features of the latter, the wild vine and the self-sown wheat, which are identical with the two leading features in the description of the *Insulæ Fortunatæ*. If it were permissible to prove in this way that the ancient Norsemen reached the east coast of North America, then it might be concluded with almost equal right that the Greeks and Romans of antiquity were there; for they already had the same two features in their descriptions of the fortunate isles in the west. It should be remembered that wheat was not a commonly known cereal in the North, where it was not cultivated, and it would hardly be natural for the Icelanders to use that particular name for a wild species of corn. Both wheat and grapes or vines were to them foreign ideas, and the remarkable juxtaposition of these very two words shows that they came together from southern Europe, where, as has been said, we find them in *Isidore*, and where wine and wheat were important commercial products which one often finds mentioned together.

Encounters
with the
Skrælings
in Wine-
land

If we now proceed further in the description of the Wine-land voyages in the *Saga of Eric the Red*, we come to the encounters with the *Skrælings*. These encounters are, of course, three in number: first they come to see, then to trade, and then to fight; this again recalls the fairy-tale. The narrative itself of the battle with the *Skrælings* has borrowed features. The *Skrælings'* catapults make one think of the civilised countries of Europe, where catapults (i.e.,

they were familiar in Iceland. On the other hand, it is possible that the " *másurr* " of the sagas only meant valbirch. But apart from this, how can the sagas' description of Wineland—where no snow fell, where there was hardly any frost, the grass scarcely withered, and the cattle were out the whole winter—be applied to Labrador? Or where are *Markland* or *Helluland* to be looked for, or *Furðustrandir* and *Kjalarnes*? Nor do we gain any more connection in the voyage as a whole. It will therefore be seen that, even if Professor Fernald had been right in his interpretation of the three words above mentioned, this would not help us much; and when we find that these very features of the vine and the wheat are derived from classical myths, such attempts at explanation become of minor interest.

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Catapults, which are also mentioned in the "King's Mirror," had a long beam or lever-arm, at the outer end of which was a bowl or sling, wherein was laid a heavy round stone, or more rarely a barrel of combustible material or the like [cf. O. Blom, 1867, pp. 103, f.]. In the "King's Mirror" it is also stated that mineral coal ("jarðkol") and sulphur were thrown; the stones for casting were also made of baked clay with pebbles in it. When these clay balls were slung out and fell, they burst in pieces, so that the enemy had nothing to throw back. The great black ball, which is compared to a sheep's paunch, and which made such an ugly sound (report?) when it fell that it frightened the Greenlanders, also reminds one strongly of the "herbrestr" (war-crash, report) which Laurentius Kálfsson's saga [cap. 8 in "Biskupa Sögur," i. 1858, p. 798] relates that Þrándr Fisiler,¹ from Flanders, produced at the court of Eric Magnusson in Bergen, at Christmas 1294. It "gives such a loud report that few men can bear to hear it; women who are with child and hear the crash are prematurely delivered, and men fall from their seats on to the floor, or have various fits. Þrándr told Laurentius to put his fingers in his ears when the crash came. . . . Þrándr showed Laurentius what was necessary to produce the crash, and there are four things: fire, brimstone, parchment and tow.² Men often have recourse in battle to such a war-crash, so that those who do not know it may take to flight." Laurentius was a priest, afterwards bishop (1323-30) in Iceland; the saga was probably written about 1350 by his friend and confidant, the priest Einar Hafliðason. It seems as though we have here precisely the same notions as appear in the description of the fight with the Skrælings. It is true that this visit of Þrándr to Bergen would be later than the Saga of Eric the Red is generally assumed to have been written; but this may have been about 1300. Besides, there is no reason why the story of the "herbrestr" should not have found its way to Iceland earlier.³

The resemblance between such a weapon with a shaft for throwing and the Skrælings' black ball is distant; but it is not impossible that ancient reports of something of the sort may have formed the nucleus upon which the "modernised" description of the saga has crystallised; although the whole thing is uncertain. This Algonkin tradition has a certain similarity with some Greenland Eskimo fairy-tales [cf. Rink, 1866, p. 139].

¹ As arquebuses or guns had not yet been invented at that time, this strange name may, as proposed by Moltke Moe, come from "fusillus" or "fugillus" (an implement for striking fire) and mean "he who makes fire," "the fire-striker."

² Evidently saltpetre has been forgotten here, and so we have gunpowder, which thus must have been already employed in war at that time, and perhaps long before.

³ Moltke Moe has found a curious resemblance to the description of the "herbrestr" given above in the Welsh tale of Kulhwch and Olwen [Heyman: Mabinogion, p. 78], where there is a description of a war-cry so loud that "all women who are with child fall into sickness, and the others are smitten with disease, so that the milk dries up in their breasts." But this "herbrestr" may

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In any case this part of the tale of the Wineland voyages has quite a European air. CHAPTER IX

For the rest, this feature too seems to have a connection with the "Navigatio Brandani." It is there related that they approach an island of smiths, where the inhabitants are filled with fire and darkness. Brandan was afraid of the island; one of the inhabitants came out of his house "as though on an errand of necessity"; the brethren want to sail away and escape, but

"the said barbarian runs down to the beach bearing a long pair of tongs in his hand with a fiery mass in a skin¹ of immense size and heat; he instantly throws it after the servants of Christ, but it did not injure them, it went over them about a stadium farther off, but when it fell into the sea, the water began to boil as though a fire-spouting mountain were there, and smoke arose from the sea as fire from a baker's oven." The other inhabitants then rush out and throw their masses of fire, but Brandan and the brethren escape [Schröder, 1871, p. 28].

In the narrative of Maelduin's voyage a similar story is told of the smith who with a pair of tongs throws a fiery mass over the boat, so that the sea boils, but he does not hit them, as they hastily fly out into the open sea [cf. Zimmer, 1889, pp. 163, 329]. The resemblances to Karlsevne and his people flying with all speed before the black ball of the

also be compared with the "vábrestr" spoken of in the Fosterbrothers' Saga [Grönl. hist. Mind., ii. pp. 334, 412], which M. Hægstad and A. Torp [Gamalnorsk Ordbog] translate by "crash announcing disaster or great news" [cf. I. Aasen, "vederbrest"]. Fritzner translates it by "sudden crash causing surprise and terror," and K. Maurer by "Schadenknall." It would therefore seem to be something supernatural that causes fear [cf. Grönl. hist. Mind., ii. p. 198]. The "Grönlandske historiske Mindesmærker" mention in the same connection "isbrestr" or "jökulbrestr" in Iceland. I have myself had good opportunities of studying that kind of report in glaciers, and my opinion is that it comes from a starting of the glacier, or through the latter skrinkling from changes of temperature; similar reports, but less loud, are heard in the ice on lakes and fjords. Burgomaster H. Berner tells me that the small boys of Krödsherred make what they call "kolabrest," by heating charcoal on a flat stone and throwing water upon it while simultaneously striking the embers with the back of an axe, which produces a sharp report.

¹ Scorium (slag) is also used in mediæval Latin for "corium," animal's skin, hide.

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Skrælings, like a sheep's paunch, which is flung over them from a pole and makes an ugly noise when it falls, is obvious; but at the same time it looks as though this incident of the Irish myth—which is an echo of the classical Cyclopes of the *Æneid* and *Odyssey* (cf. Polyphemus and the Cyclopes), and the great stones that were thrown at Odysseus—had been “modernised” by the saga-writer, who has transferred mediæval European catapults and explosives to the Indians.

The curious expression—used when the Skrælings come in the spring for the second time to Karlsevne's settlement—that they came rowing in a multitude of hide canoes, “as many as though [the sea] had been sown with coal before the Hóp” [i.e., the bay], seems to find its explanation in some tale like that of the “Imram Brenaind” [cf. Zimmer, 1889, p. 138], where Brandan and his companions come to a small deserted land, and the harbour they entered was immediately filled with “demons in the form of pygmies and dwarfs, who were as black as coal.”

The “hellustein” (flat stone) which lay fixed in the skull of the fallen Thorbrand Snorrason is a curious missile, and reminds one of trolls (cf. Arab myth, chapter xiii.). Features such as that of the Skrælings being supposed to know that white shields meant peace and red ones war have an altogether European effect.¹

¹ The poles that are swung the way of the sun or against it seem incomprehensible, and something of the meaning must have been lost in the transference of this incident from the tale from which it was borrowed. It may be derived from the kayak paddles of the Greenland Eskimo, which at a distance look like poles being swung, with or against the sun according to the side they are seen from. It may be mentioned that in the oldest MS. of *Eric the Red's Saga*, in the *Hauksbók*, the reading is not “trjánum” as in the later MS., but “triom” and “trionum.” Now “triónum” or “trjónum” might mean either poles or snouts, and one would then be led to think of the Indians' animal masks, or again, of the trolls' long snouts or animal trunks, which we find again in fossil forms in the fairy-tales, and even in games that are still preserved in Gudbrandsdal, under the name of “trono” (the regular Gudbrandsdal phonetic development of Old Norse “trjóna”), where people cover their heads with an animal's skin