

A "Northern Periphery" project: The Viking Trail

Conservation of an early Norse farm at Narsaq, South Greenland.

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At the millenium celebration of Leif Ericson's voyage to Vinland much attention was directed at the two most important groups of ruins to be found in the former Eastern Settlement, the norsemen's Brattahlid and Gardar (present-day Qassiarsuk and Igaliku). These two have already been subjected to thorough archeological investigations. Gardar was excavated by the National Museum of Denmark in 1926¹ (Poul Nørlund and Aage Roussell), while the excavations in Brattahlid took place in 1932² (Poul Nørlund and Mårten Stenberger). Once the excavations completed, the two ruin sites were restored according to the standard of the day. Efforts of upkeep since then have been modest. Resource allotments over the years for this purpose have been very limited, a fact clearly observable at the ruin sites as they appear today. There is a need for a thorough and contemporary type of restoration of and care for the Greenlandic cultural heritage, comprising not just norse ruins, but certainly also the numerous findings witnessing to the various aboriginal population waves that have found their way to Greenland long before the 10th century settlers came in from Iceland

It is the National Museum & Archive of Greenland that has the general responsibility for the protection of Greenland's cultural heritage. Notwithstanding, over the last few years, a couple of local (municipal) museums in South Greenland have taken it upon themselves to remedy the lack of initiatives in highlighting the historical landmarks that are hidden away under the sod and heather. For example, since 1998, Narsaq Museum has prepared a project, the goal of which is to restore the ruins of one of the of the oldest norse settlements in Greenland, the so-called *Landnáma Farm*, right in the middle of Narsaq town.

Here, we want to relate the preliminary investigations that have taken place, as well as the plans for a more formal conservation to take place in the years to come.

The *Landnáma Farm* in Narsaq.

Since the end of the 19th century, it has been known for a fact that the norsemen settled on the lowland promontory where you find present-day Narsaq³ (in Greenlandic, "*narsaq*" means "*plain*"). Recent discoveries show that aboriginal hunters have been living in this area long before the norse settlements, but no traces of their dwelling are to be found any more. Untill the mid-20th century, norse ruins were still to be seen where now Narsaq cemetary is located. Unfortunately, because of the rapid development of the township, all such remains have now disappeared. However, the location of the norse farm can still be observed on aerial photos, and the light of a late afternoon sun still makes its contours vaguely discernable in the terrain.

¹ Nørlund, P. 1929: Norse Ruins at Gardar. Meddelelser om Grønland 76,1.

² Nørlund, P. & Steenberger, M. 1934: Brattahlid. Meddelelser om Grønland 88,1.

³ Bruun, D. 1896: Arkæologiske undersøgelser i Julianehaabs distrikt. Meddelelser om Grønland 16, III. p.257-58.

In the 1950'ies, another group of ruins were found above the shoreline of a shallow bay at the southern fringe of town. The findings took place during construction work in connection with the establishment of a slaughterhouse for sheep. Unfortunately, the remains of these Norse buildings were so badly eroded that they were deemed unfit for research. Consequently, they were exempt from the otherwise automatic legal conservation clause which is meant to protect all important findings of an archeological nature.

Vebæk's excavations.

When a few years later, at that same place, people began to dig up dirt for their private gardens, many interesting things were found. The National Museum was called in, and authorities agreed to re-evaluate the matter to see whether these ruins might qualify for conservation measures after all.

In 1956, a closer investigation of the finds was initiated by the archeologist C.L.Vebæk. The largest of the ruins proved to be the habitation unit of the farm, and it did not take long time to verify that in fact, it was in a much better state of conservation than originally estimated. Also, local conditions for the preservation of organic materials proved to be unusually favorable, and the ruin actually did contain a considerable number of interesting finds. However, in other respects, the archeological challenge turned out to be much bigger than first estimated, and as it turned out, there was neither time nor money to complete the excavations that year.

Sizeable and expensive as this project has been, progress has been slow. By 1964, only the farm dwelling and one small stable has been excavated. In the area as a whole, remains of no less than 10 buildings have been identified. However, to this day, only one out of these ten has been formally protected. The rest were considered destroyed and were deemed to have no historical value. At the termination of this round of investigations, the excavated sites were left without cover of any kind, and any use of the area was left to the discretion of the slaughterhouse.

For a number of reasons, the result of Vebæk's excavations were published only in 1993⁴. Inspired by his work, and further motivated by the growing number of tourists showing an interest in the history of Greenland and its heritage from the Middle Ages, Narsaq Museum decided to look into the possibility of a full-scale restoration of the ruins. Especially the dwelling house is interesting for its many unique architectural details, as shown by Vebæk's excavations. A plan for the restoration of that ruin⁵ was adopted, and preliminary investigations were conducted in 1998. Since then four seasons of archeological work have been completed in order to verify exactly how much of the original structures has survived.

Preliminary investigations.

Since the completion of the excavations in 1964, the site has changed in appearance. Today, only whoever has Vebæk's working papers at hand, and who knows the history of the place, will be in a position to identify the various remains. The deepest of Vebæk's excavation ditches have been filled up, and low mounds indicate the house-walls of old. The exact position of the walls is clear only in the northern part of the ruin where stone structures prevail.

⁴ C.L. Vebæk 1993: Narsaq – a Norse landnáma farm. *Man & Society* 18. A preliminary report about these findings were published in the review "Naturens Verden" of July 1967. Vebæk died in 1993.

⁵ H. Kapel 1994: Landnamsgården i Narsaq. Plan for restaurering og pleje af ruigruppen Ø17a. Arbejdsrapport.

The primary goal of the preliminary investigations has been to relocate the rest of the excavated buildings and examine the state of their conservation. It has proven necessary to conduct extensive trial excavations in the uneven surroundings of the ruin in order to establish exactly what part of the terrain contains remains of the original buildings, and what on the other hand turns out to be nothing but recent mounds of dirt.

These preliminary excavations have put new data on the table, capable of supplementing earlier observations. Also, samples collected throughout the process will hopefully be able to shed some light on the exact dating of the various sections of the building. The work was completed in the summer of 2003, and the road has now been cleared for the restoration proper of the ruin.

The architecture.

The basic design of the structure, as well as the fact that this dwelling house has been built apart from the buildings relating to the farm's economic activities, indicate that we are facing a very early settlement. Vebæk's work has established that we are facing a two-storey building. Vebæk himself thought that the middle part of the structure - containing the fireplace - must have been the first to be built. He saw it as the remain of a traditional longhouse of the type that was in use during the very first settlement period, a view corroborated by several of the archeological finds. Later on, the southern room would have been added, and later still, the addition to the north.

Recent C-14 datings have proven that the oldest building blocks date from before 1000 AD, i.e. all the way back to the time when Eric the Red settled in Greenland - a fact lending even more importance to this ruin.

Vebæk's work has brought many unusual details to our attention, such as e.g. the in-house stone-covered sewer system. Undoubtedly, the general humidity of the terrain being a general problem, the primary function of this system has been to contain the water that kept seeping down from the fields above the house and prevent it from flooding the floors. It seems that the settlers have been able to turn the liability of uncontrolled water abundance into an advantage. Water supply for the household has never been a problem, and at the same time, the ditches under the floor level have taken care of the surplus water, assuming a sewer function of its own. The documentation left by Vebæk seems to show that the house ruin was dug all the way through down to the floor level. But with the work now completed, it seems that actually, many of the stone-covered ditches were left untouched.

Restoring the ruin.

Existing plans to restore the ruin imply that all traces of earlier excavations and later use of the area be removed. The idea is to clean up the floor in all the rooms so as to expose the water supply and sewage system, the fire places and other noticeable architectural details. The walls have for the most part been built using turf and stones and have only been conserved a few places. When the restoration is completed, new low turf walls (one meter high) will show their position. The trial excavations of 2002 and 2003 have demonstrated that in spite of Vebæk's thorough investigations, there is still valuable finds to be made.

The cleaning up of the floor, as explained above, will be done manually as a purely archeological challenge, whereas the leveling of the terrain outside the walls of the old building will, for all practical purposes, be taken care of using appropriate machinery.

”The Viking Trail”

Restoring the *Landnáma Farm* is part of a Narsaq Museum project called ”Saga and Storytelling”, which is sponsored by the *Northern Periphery Programme* and financed by EU. This project also deals with the popularization of Norse history in a new information center, in various websites and in a number of new and innovative tourist initiatives. Among the latter, the so-called ”cultural trails” also give rise to economic development on a local level.

At the same time, a restored *Landnáma Farm* will function as an integrated part in the general development and improvement of the service extended to that well motivated group of tourists who take a special interest in Norse history - a timely service to supplement the offers which the municipality of Narsaq has already assembled in the program called ”Viking Trail – Greenland”. That trail leads on to far-flung places, in the great fiords and mountainous expanses of South Greenland and further on, wherever the vikings went. That way, the Northern Periphery Programme affords us a possibility to enhance the quality of our local work, while at the same time giving a small museum the opportunity to take part in transnational cooperation together with partners from the entire North Atlantic area.

Archeologist Hans Kapel is former museum inspector at the National Museum in Copenhagen. He leads the work restoring the Landnáma Farm in Narsaq on behalf of Narsaq Museum, and has been in charge from the beginning.

Rie Oldenburg is leader of Narsaq Museum, NPP-partner.

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Illustrations and text to them will be send by from Hans Kapel, they will probably be the following:

- 1) sketch of the dwelling house*
- 2) sketch of the area, placement of ruins*
- 3) 1 or 2 Vebæk photos*
- 4) 1 photo of the fish-hook and maybe the chessman*

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