



WHEN THE **VIKINGS** WERE IN NUNAVUT

A thousand years ago, the ancient Norse told rumours of a mysterious place called Helluland, far to the northwest of Europe. Now, a millennium later, clues are turning up on Baffin Island that could overhaul the history of the Arctic.

STORY BY MARGO PFEIFF PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID COVENTRY



VIKINGS WERE HERE: In the rich sod of the Nanook site at Baffin Island's Cape Tanfield, Patricia Sutherland thinks she's uncovered proof of Norse inhabitation – everything from the telltale design of the stone huts to traces of smelted bronze.

“Look at this!” says Patricia Sutherland. It’s 2002 and she’s kneeling on the tundra, pointing her trowel at a whale bone at the bottom of the muddy trench she’s been excavating. The bone has been fashioned into a spade to cut sod into building blocks, the kind of artifact she would expect to find in old Norse sites in Greenland. To Sutherland, one of Canada’s top Arctic archeologists, the sod-chopper isn’t the only thing that seems out of place at the Nanook archeological dig. Here on the treeless barrens just outside Kimmirut, Nunavut, the structure that she’s unearthing – a large, rectangular foundation of rock and sod – just doesn’t fit with the landscape.

That’s exactly what American archeologist Moreau Maxwell thought when he first began digging here in the 1960s. “He couldn’t explain the structures he was finding,” says Sutherland. “He said it was complicated.”

Complicated – that’s exactly what Nanook has proven to be for Sutherland, a former curator of archeology for Ottawa’s Museum of Civilization. But now, after seven summers of excavation here, and 12 years of meticulously poring over artifacts and piecing together clues, she thinks she’s got the site figured out.

She says that here, on southern Baffin Island, was a trading post occupied by the ancient Norse. Her theory is controversial. But if it’s correct, it could rewrite the history books.

IT’S LONG BEEN KNOWN that the Norse were active in the far reaches of the North Atlantic. About a millennium ago, seafaring Norwegian traders, some worshipping Odin and others having converted to Christianity, island-hopped in search of resources. They sailed from Scandinavia to the Shetlands, Orkney Islands, Ireland, the Faroes, Iceland, and finally to the western shore of Davis Strait, where colonies were established by Erik the Red, a convicted murderer and charismatic marketer. He named this new place “Greenland,” convincing settlers to join him in the protected fjords of the island’s southwest. For centuries, the Norse thrived there, supporting themselves by farming and sending trade goods to Europe – everything from walrus ivory to live polar bears for Old World royal courts.

It was during the colonization of Greenland that the snow-capped mountains of Baffin Island were most likely sighted far to the west.>



TOP: This tiny willow-root basket from a Dorset site on Baffin is identical to one found in Norse Greenland. **TOP RIGHT:** A Dorset carving in walrus ivory, possibly depicting the face of a Viking visitor. **MIDDLE:** Sutherland’s assistants gingerly remove a whale skull from the Nanook dig. **ABOVE:** A Dorset ‘antler wand’ inscribed with what appears to be a European face and a Dorset one. **LEFT:** A Dorset mask.



TOP: Discovered on Baffin Island, this Norse-style cordage matches yarn found at Viking settlements in Greenland. But was it Norsemen who brought it to Nunavut, or was it local natives? **TOP RIGHT:** A Dorset depiction of a man in what appears to be European-style dress – possible evidence of face-to-face encounters. **ABOVE:** Kimmirut's Ooloopee Killiktee, a polar bear monitor at the Nanook dig, surveys the Cape Tanfield shoreline for signs of danger. **RIGHT:** A Dorset figurine of a carved-ivory polar bear head.



A cryptic reference to Baffin was first penned by a 14th-century Icelandic scribe who recorded events that had taken place more than two centuries earlier. In the Saga of Erik the Red, Erik's adventurous son, Leif Erikson, sailed westward from Greenland around 1000 AD, soon encountering a desolate stretch of land. Rowing ashore, he was unimpressed: "[T]he land was like a single flat slab of rock to the sea. This land seemed of little use." Erikson dubbed it Helluland – "land of stone slabs" – and turned his back on it, heading southwards. Soon he found Markland ("land of forests," possibly Labrador) and then Vinland ("land of wine" or "of pasture" – Newfoundland). At a site now called L'Anse aux Meadows, he built a small station for repairing ships and gathering cargo before returning to Greenland the following spring. Helluland barely received another mention, and by the mid-1400s, the Norse had vanished even from Greenland.

Despite this, or perhaps because of it, whispers of Norse in Canada's Northland have lingered for centuries. Mentions of "blonde Eskimos" appeared from 1821 onwards in the journals of explorers William Parry, John Ross, John Rae and John Franklin. In 1910, Arctic ethnologist Vilhjalmur Stefansson, an Icelandic-Canadian, wrote in his diary about an isolated group of tall Inuit on southwest Victoria Island: "There are three men here whose beards are almost the colour of mine, and who look like typical Scandinavians." But DNA testing on the Victoria Islanders revealed no Nordic genes.

In the 1970s, archeologist Peter Schledermann of the Arctic Institute of North America found Norse artifacts at several sites on Ellesmere's east coast. There were knife blades, pieces of oak with inset wooden dowels, copper, medieval chainmail, ship rivets and woven woollen cloth. These relics dated from between the 13th and 15th centuries, many proven to have originated in Norse settlements

ENVISIONING THE PAST: When Sutherland surveys the Nanook site, she sees a Norse outpost used for centuries to trade with the local Dorset people.

in southern Greenland. Fragments of objects made of smelted metal have also turned up on Bathurst and Devon Islands. Had Inuit or their predecessors, the Dorset, scavenged them from Norse shipwrecks? Had they journeyed to Greenland and brought them back? Or had the Norse themselves come here, seeking to trade?

Not long ago, this last theory was commonly accepted: The Norse had ventured west, possibly well into Nunavut, Nunavik and the gulf of St. Lawrence, to exchange goods with the aboriginals of North America. "But that idea fell out of favour," says Sutherland. So it was controversial when Newfoundland's L'Anse aux Meadows was declared to be a Norse outpost. And when National Museum of Canada archeologist Tom Lee announced in the 1960s that he'd uncovered Norse camps on Quebec's Ungava Bay, "he brought the wrath of the entire archeological community on his head," says Sutherland. After that, most scholars shied away.>

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VIKINGS CONTINUED

Then Pat Sutherland came along. In 1977, as an expert in indigenous archeology, she was hired by Parks Canada to do a survey of potential archeological sites in what would become Quttinirpaaq National Park on Ellesmere Island. She'd just arrived when, amidst the lingering June snow, she spotted something lying on a bald patch of tundra. It was a long, thin piece of metal. Not being familiar with Norse artifacts, she had no idea what it was. But the Parks expert to whom she showed it was shocked. "It was one arm of a bronze balance used by professional Norse traders in the Old World for weighing silver," says Sutherland.

Six years later, on Axel Heiberg Island, Sutherland again stumbled across a strange artifact. Carved on a single piece of antler were two radically dissimilar faces – one with typical round Dorset features, and another, long and thin, with what appeared to be a beard and heavy eyebrows. To her it was an iconic portrayal of two very different cultures. She puzzled over it for a long time, and began to rethink the long-held belief that Norse had not crossed paths with the Dorset.

In 1993 Sutherland was invited to join a dig at a medieval Greenlandic farm called Garden Under Sandet in Greenland. Here, she quickly learned about all things Norse. One of the finds made there was part of a loom with threads of yarn still attached. Six years later, while studying artifacts at the Museum of Civilization, she sifted through a collection excavated in the 1970s and 80s by Father Guy Mary-Rousselière, a French-Canadian anthropologist and missionary based in Pond Inlet. She stopped dead at the sight of two soft pieces of yarn, three metres long, that looked exactly like the wool she'd seen in Greenland. Sure enough, when she took them to a textiles expert, they matched precisely with wool woven at Garden Under Sandet in the late 13th century.

Sutherland knew she was on to something. She hunkered down in the museum's collection, searching through more than 15,000 Arctic objects and comparing them to confirmed Norse artifacts from Greenland, Russia and Europe. Over 100 strands of yarn came to light, hailing from previously excavated sites ranging from northern Baffin Island to northern Labrador. The Inuit and their predecessors, Sutherland knew, didn't use wool – but the Norse did, making garments and even sails from it. The yarn was identified as having been spun with a spindle, requiring great skill to bind the short, smooth fibres of wild animals like Arctic hare. It would have been a laborious task, but the result was yarn

that was very soft – and very European.

Armed with this knowledge, Sutherland set off in the year 2000 to re-open the most tantalizing site on Baffin Island: Maxwell Moreau's puzzling Nanook dig in Tanfield Valley, about 20 kilometres from Kimmirut. In Sutherland's eyes, Nanook would have been a perfect spot for the Norse: It had ample sod, a sheltered harbour large enough for wooden ocean-going ships, and plentiful wildlife – especially Arctic fox, the same creatures that prompted the Hudson's Bay Company to choose Kimmirut as their first Baffin post. It was barely 300 kilometres from Greenland – two or three days' sailing. "Why people have trouble accepting that Norse would have been here is crazy," Sutherland says.

After six centuries, Helluland was back in the press and Sutherland's fellow archeologists closely followed her progress. "I knew the project was controversial because everything to do with Norse is controversial," she says. "It had the potential to shift the paradigm about what was happening in the Arctic 1,000 years ago."

Known to be single-minded and unflinchingly committed, Sutherland was prepared for the uphill battle. She had received her share of criticism over the years, as is the norm in a field where radical new concepts are fiercely scrutinized. So to test the strength of her own thesis, she analysed multiple lines of evidence simultaneously. She excavated new artifacts while at the same time working with experts in fields as diverse as Norse architecture, ancient textiles, insect remains and DNA. Her challenge was to build a multi-pronged case that the ancient Norse had lived in Nunavut.

It wasn't easy. During long days of fieldwork at Nanook, the site became increasingly complex. Moreau Maxwell's excavations had damaged the walls of the mysterious stone dwelling, but she soon discovered a new wall: layers of sod chunks alternating with large stones, some cut and shaped in a style reminiscent of European stone-masonry. Nanook also yielded a trove of artifacts not usually associated with the Inuit or Dorset, including the whalebone spade, and notched wooden "tally sticks" to record trade transactions. There were remains of European rats that couldn't have survived long in the Canadian Arctic, more strands of Scandinavian-style spun yarn, and European whetstones designed for sharpening metal knives that didn't exist in indigenous Northerners' toolboxes. One particularly intriguing item was a carved wooden figure with a beard and heavy ridge over his eyes: either eyebrows or the edge of a cap common among medieval European merchants. >

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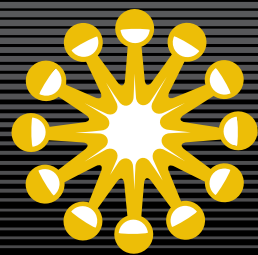
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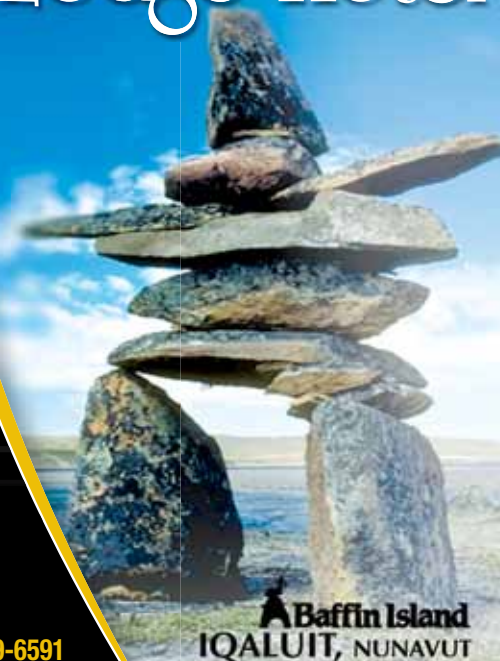
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VIKINGS CONTINUED

It wasn't a straightforward dig. Among this jumble were classic hunter-gatherer artifacts like fur-cleaning tools and needles – things Inuit or Dorset might use. And there were issues with the radio-carbon dating: results pointing to the 8th century, hundreds of years before the Norse arrived even in Greenland. Part of the problem, says Sutherland, is that "everything on the site was saturated with seal, walrus and whale oil." Marine-mammal materials are known to skew radio-carbon results, dating them too old. The site seems to point at having been occupied several times, and one radio-carbon date confirms Tanfield Valley was occupied in the 14th century, at the very time Norse settlers lived along nearby Greenland.

Sutherland approached the Geological Survey of Canada to unearth more clues. Using a process not commonly employed in archeology, a technique called energy-dispersive spectroscopy, they painstakingly scanned wear-grooves on more than 20 whetstones from Nanook and similar sites, looking for smelted metal. The results were spectacular: microscopic streaks of bronze, brass and smelted iron, forming positive evidence of European metallurgy. To some scholars – even Sutherland's sceptics – this was the smoking gun. She presented her preliminary results at a meeting of the Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology in St. John's in October of last year. Afterwards, James Tuck, professor emeritus of archeology at Memorial University, declared, "While her evidence was compelling before, I find it convincing now."

SUTHERLAND, WITH MORE than three decades of Arctic archeology under her trowel and by now also a research fellow at the University of Aberdeen and an adjunct professor of archeology at Newfoundland's Memorial University, is convinced Nanook was the site of a Norse outpost dating from the 13th century or so. The structures there strongly resemble confirmed Greenlandic Norse sites, right down to the shallow, stone-lined drainage system to funnel water from the site. Sutherland says the stone-and-sod walls seem to have been hastily constructed in comparison to similar buildings in Greenland, perhaps in a race against a rapidly approaching winter. The close proximity of Dorset artifacts and other remains suggests small bands of hunters likely camped nearby.

Sutherland believes the Norse travelled the Baffin and Labrador coasts for roughly 400 years, from AD 1000 to AD 1400, to ply trade. While it's not clear how many Europeans were at Nanook, nor whether they overwintered or

just visited during the warm summers, she speculates that it was just one of many sites throughout the region where Norse traded iron and wood for furs and ivory, luxury items coveted in Europe.

If she's right, Nanook would become only the second confirmed Norse site in North America, after Leif Erikson's L'Anse aux Meadows. But while Erikson only stayed for a winter, and had no apparent dealings with the local aboriginals, Nanook is very different.

"The Northern world," says Sutherland, "was not a remote, marginal place 1,000 years ago, where nothing ever happened. The Norse push west from Norway was a commercial enterprise, for resource exploitation and trade. It was the start of early globalization."

FOR THE 63-YEAR-OLD Sutherland, 2012 looked to be her bonanza year: She presented her metallurgy findings and in November was featured in a major *National Geographic* article. That same month, she was in a documentary broadcast on the popular CBC show *The Nature of Things*.

But in April of that year, she'd been abruptly dismissed from her 28-year-long tenure at the Museum of Civilization, and her Nanook Project had been put on ice. Her husband, legendary Arctic archeologist Robert McGhee, was stripped of the emeritus status the museum bestowed on him in 2008. Neither Sutherland nor the museum will comment on the dismissals at the present time.

Sutherland's firing, coming on the heels of the federal government's roll call of shutdowns, funding cuts, media-muzzlings and layoffs in the science community, created a furor. One of her many supporters, Memorial University's Tuck, speculated to *Maclean's* that Sutherland's reinterpretation of Canadian history might not be in tune with the new mandate of her old institution, which is changing its name to the Canadian Museum of History and focusing narrowly on the country's past 150 years. Other rumours are swirling that with the Harper government's ardent focus on Arctic sovereignty, evidence of Norwegians having set up shop in the Arctic a millennium ago might be too inconvenient to tolerate.

For Sutherland, the hardest blow is having been cut off from her 12 years' worth of research material. For now the remarkable Nanook site lies fallow. "More than anything, I want to finish this project," she says. "At this point in my life I feel it's my legacy." The full saga of the Norse on Baffin has waited 1,000 years to be told, but even now, the ending of the story remains a mystery. [UP](#)



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