

In July 2017 my wife and I visited Qassiarsuk, on the southern tip of Greenland. This was part of a trip from the UK up the west coast of Greenland, which included visits to the Faroe Islands and Iceland *en route*. We had visited some settlements on Greenland's east and south coasts as part of a trip in 2015, but wanted to get a little further north this time.

Narsarsuaq is an Inuit settlement with little more than an airport and a small museum/shop, located by the Tunulliarfik Fjord on the southern tip of Greenland. Across the Narsarsuaq River from Narsarsuaq itself, on the other side of the Tunulliarfik Fjord, is Qassiarsuk - an even smaller settlement. This was of more interest to us as it is believed to be here that Erik the Red and his wife Thjodhild had a small farm, named Brattahlid.

Ruins of several buildings are still visible, and a couple have been reconstructed and furnished as they would have been in Norse times.



The settlement is overlooked by a 3m tall bronze statue of Leif Eriksson (Erik the Red's son), designed by August Werner. It is cast from the same mould of the statue of him at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland and Labrador, now believed to have been one of the first landing points of Leif Eriksson in North America in 1000. The original mould was made in 1962 for the Seattle World Fair.



*Leif Eriksson's statue overlooking Qassiarsuk...*

*... and at L'Anse aux Meadows.*

The Norse settlement of Brattahlíð was established in around the year 982, and there was a Viking presence here from then until the mid-fifteenth century. Thjodhild had converted to Christianity, though Erik himself had not (he was, however, apparently baptised as his wife refused to have sex with him unless he was baptised). In the summer of 1000 she had a small chapel built. This was one of the first Christian or European churches to be built on the eastern side of the Atlantic Ocean. Only a small turf wall marks the outline of where the chapel stood.



*The site of the original chapel.*



A reconstruction of the chapel has been built a short distance from the original remains. The original church was constructed of a turf wall on three sides and a wooden door. The interior would have been principally made of wood. The floor was paved with slabs of local red sandstone, outlining an area of approx. 2m by 3.5m.

*The reconstructed chapel.*



*The turf walls of the reconstruction.*



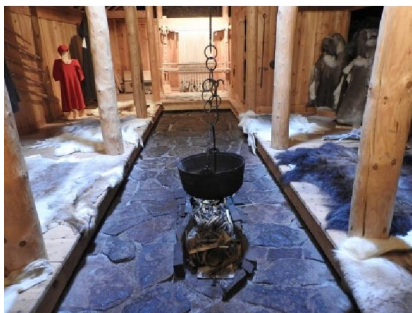
*The interior of the reconstructed chapel.*

There are the remains of 143 burials surrounding the church (these were probably originally surrounded by a fence). The graves are oval in the shape, and the remains of wooden crosses have been found in some of them. The skeletons at the southern end of the churchyard are of better size and health than those in the more northern areas, and are thought to have been the remains of people of higher social class. It is thought that the cemetery was only in use for about 30 years.

The settlement also contains evidence of a farm (mainly as depressions in the ground, some outlined with recently placed stones), and a forge. A reconstructed Longhouse based on likely 10th century Viking designs, accompanies the reconstructed Chapel.



*The reconstructed Longhouse.*



*The hearth in the reconstructed Longhouse.*



*Hunting implements.*



*A Loom.*





*Reindeer skins.*



*Skins on a sleeping ledge.*

The first Norse parliament (*'thing'*) in Greenland, similar to the *Althing* in Iceland, was also located at Brattahlid.

It was from here that Leif Erikson is thought to have sailed south on the voyage in which he discovered the North American continent.

It is not known why the Norse people died out at Qassiarsuk. It is thought that there was little continual interaction between the Norse settlers and the Inuit (and as far as I am aware there is no evidence of *tafl* being played by the Inuit or even in Iceland in Norse times), though there is evidence of at least some fraternisation. There are a number of possible reasons for the settlement's demise in the fifteenth century, including competition from the Inuit, a change to the trade routes (perhaps due to improved sailing vessels), or cooling temperatures linked to the little Ice Age making the settlement uninhabitable.

Steve Lonsdale (Xerxes), January 2018.