

Was there a trade between Vikings and American Indians?

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We used to think that the Vikings from Greenland who landed in North America only had unfriendly encounters with American Indians. **Excavations on Baffin Island reveals that there may have been a commercial trade between the Scandinavians and the Dorsets.**



We have known since the discovery of [L'Anse aux Meadows](#) in 1960 that the Vikings, who had come from Greenland, attempted to settle on the island of Newfoundland around the year 1000. In this area, which they were calling Vinland, encounters with the American Indians were largely hostile. However, since 1999, the idea that the Vikings may have had some more peaceful contacts with the Native Americans of **Baffin Island**, the Helluland of the Norse sagas, has surfaced.

That hypothesis surfaced when a missionary discovered threads woven with hare hair in the remains of an indigenous site during the 1980's. The priest gave the threads to the Canadian Museum of History, and those were studied by the archeologist Patricia Sutherland.

Sutherland was immediately intrigued by the fact that the threads had come from a [Dorset](#) camp around 700 years ago, whereas the Dorsets, a native civilisation from the area which had disappeared suddenly in the XIVth century, did not spin threads. Sutherland saw there the workmanship of the Vikings from the Greenland settlements.

Since then, she has searched for further evidence of a potential trade between the Dorsets and the Vikings by looking at objects that had been collected on sites attributed to the Dorsets. And clues are piling up: more threads, wood fragments that may have been used to make Viking utensils (tally sticks, spindles), Scandinavian sharpening stones and Dorset masks whose features evoke European faces.

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Sutherland and her team then started new excavations on the four sites where the objects had come from. One of them, the [Tanfield Valley](#) is home to the ruins of a large dwelling, whose dimensions are bigger than the Dorset buildings. Inside, they found drilling holes, which might have been done with a Scandinavian auger as the Dorsets were not using drill bits. The team also found pieces of European rat skin and a shovel made of whalebone and quite similar to those used by Greenland Vikings. Part of the building seems to have been used as latrines, yet Native hunters weren't staying long enough in one place to build such facilities. Other traces suggest that the Dorset hunters who were camping in the area may have traded with foreigners. The Vikings could have then traded metal and wood for products of the Dorset hunting activities.

There is a lot left to do on Baffin Island, and the hypothesis of a friendly contact between Scandinavian Natives of the Helluland is still very controversial, but Patricia Sutherland is convinced that the Vikings had established a long-term trade with the Dorsets and she intends to prove it.

Source: [National Geographic](#) (published in September 2016 and consulted in January 2018)