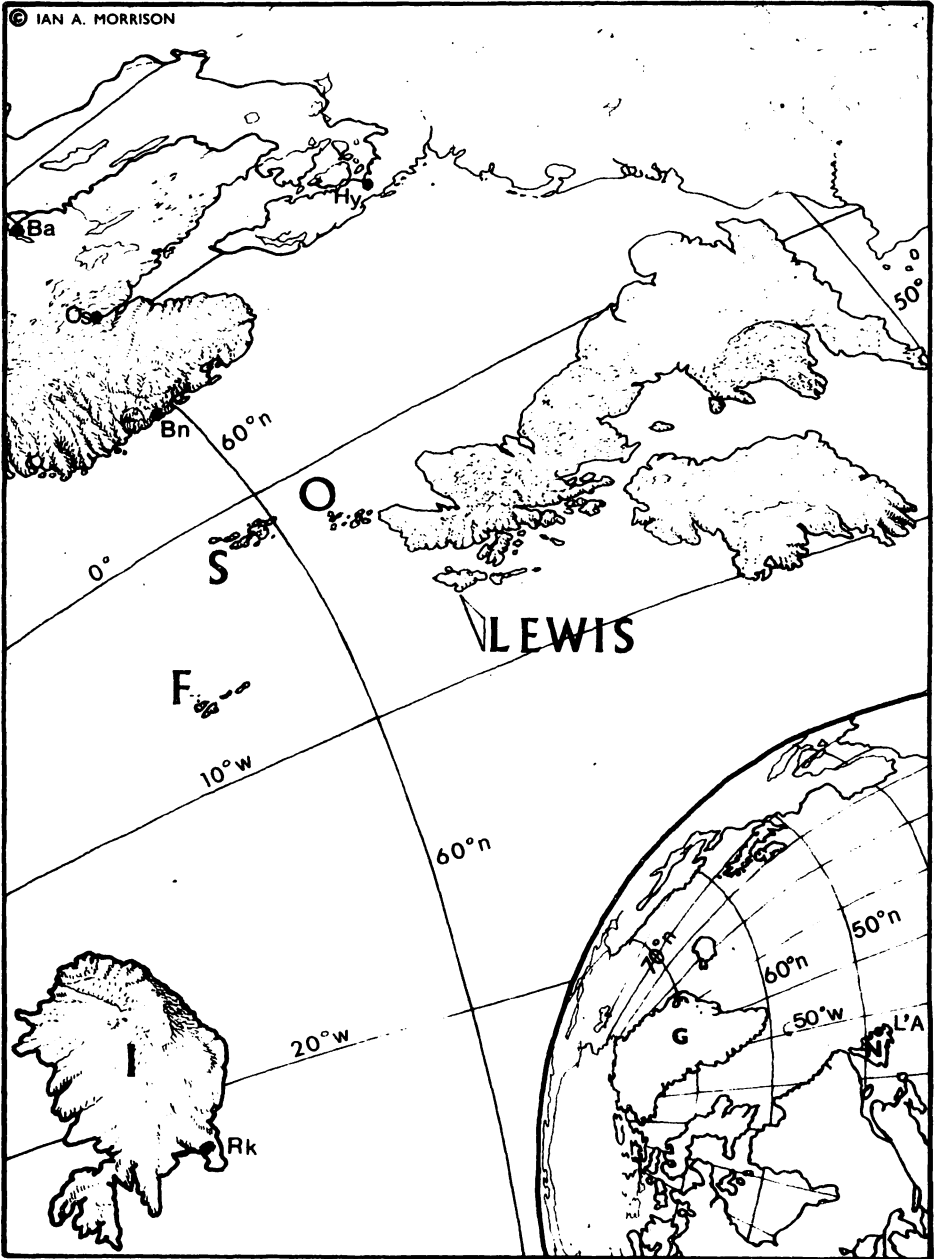


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## On Seeking to put Lewis and the Viking Atlantic Islands in Perspective.

Ian A Morrison

(Key: O, Orkney; S, Shetland; F, Faroes; I, Iceland;  
G, Greenland; N, Newfoundland.  
Ba, Birka; Hy, Hedeby; Os, Oslo; Bn, Bergen;  
Rk, Reykjavik; L'A, L'Anse aux Meadows.)

However the cartographer goes about it, he can not skin a globular planet and peg it out on a flat page without losing or distorting some of its qualities. In practice, very few people build up their mental image of relationships on the Earth's surface by using an actual globe. Since we seldom have either the training or the patience to re-programme our perceptions sufficiently to come wholly to terms with the unfamiliar mathematical conventions or map projections, we are vulnerable to geographical misconceptions.

For an area as large as the North Atlantic, the distortions characteristic of map projections are often not only gross in quantity but also sufficiently subtle in quality to make it difficult for us to really assimilate and allow for their full implications. Even when one is aware of the principles involved in the construction of the map graticules, the perceptual problem remains. We thus tend to slip into accepting that the world *is* as the flat map shows it, and though we may accept intellectually that we live on a spheroid planet, at gut level a lot of us are still flat earth dwellers. Worse than this, our perception of that flat earth is thoroughly conditioned by Mercator's somewhat specialised and extreme projection, merely because this has been for many years "THE Map" on the Schoolroom wall.

Perhaps the thoroughness of this conditioning explains why there never seems to have been any comment on the characteristic "Mercatoroid" distortion of Greenland on the alleged Vinland map . . . . as a trafficker in map projections, the writer has always found it mildly disquieting that this happened on a map . . . . said to have been drawn before the Dutchman who invented that projection was born . . . .

His graticule is certainly handy for those in pursuit of loxodromes, but it is a Rhumb do for the rest of us. — The lines of longitude are shown parallel instead of converging on the poles as in reality, so there is particularly severe distortion in the high latitudes of interest to the members of this Society. It certainly does not give a realistic “feel” for the geography of the Viking Atlantic routes and island settlements. There are several other formal map projections that would undoubtedly be better in theoretical terms, but each also has attendant disadvantages in some degree, and the reader would have to adapt afresh to their unfamiliar conventions.

Short of cajoling the Editor to give away disposable inflatable globes with this journal, it seemed worth trying to exploit the soft-ware that is already in our skulls for interpreting ordinary perspective views and drawings. Accordingly, the “maps” presented here are meant to be read simply as “artist’s impressions”; accurate but quite ordinary sketches of the ball on which we live.

Since these are perspectives of the familiar kind, scale diminishes from the foreground to background. The lines of latitude and longitude have been shown at  $10^{\circ}$  intervals to help us to keep track of this. At any latitude,  $10^{\circ}$  north-south is equivalent to very nearly 700 miles, while along the  $60^{\circ}$ N line every  $10^{\circ}$  east-west represents half that, i.e. circa 350 miles (because of the convergence of the meridians,  $10^{\circ}$  at  $50^{\circ}$ N is almost 450 miles, and at  $70^{\circ}$ N just under 240 miles).

The  $60^{\circ}$ N line is in many respects the key one in these views, running through the zone of Viking seaways from Bergen, via Shetland, south of Faroes and Iceland to the tip of Greenland. From what is known of Viking navigational techniques it seems not unlikely that “latitude sailing” was practiced, with crews deliberately following a parallel of latitude like that by sun and star observations. Certainly the surviving set of sailing instructions for running down the westing from Hearnar near Bergen to Greenland seems to bear this out.

However the navigation was accomplished, there appears to have been substantial intercourse (of one kind or another) between the Scottish Western Isles and Iceland. It seems that

the present day blood group statistics of Iceland are more closely related to the Hebrides and Ireland than to Norway. This is perhaps less surprising when we look at the maps. We are so conditioned now to regarding the "Outer" Isles of Scotland as being "peripheral" to our preoccupations in Britain and Europe that we need a conscious attempt at re-orientation even to begin a reasonably based assessment of their place at a cross-roads among the islands of the Viking Atlantic.

These perspective views are offered as a small "visual-aid" towards that re-orientation. When the Society's members draw their longship up the beach on Lewis, they will have Viking Ireland and Man to the south; Orkney, Shetland and Scandinavia itself to the north and east; Iceland, Greenland and Vinland to the north and west.