

CHAPTER
13

HISTORYMAKERS **Leif Ericson**
Leif the Lucky

Section 2

“[He was] tall and strong and very impressive in appearance. He was a shrewd man and always moderate in behavior.”—description of Leif Ericson in The Saga of the Greenlanders (c. 1200)

According to legend, Leif Ericson discovered America 500 years before Columbus and brought Christianity to the Vikings in Greenland. Modern historians say neither idea is true, though one of the legends has a germ of truth.

Leif Ericson was one of three sons of Eric the Red, who apparently had a violent temper. Eric was forced to leave his native Norway because he had committed some murders. He moved to Iceland, but again had to leave after he killed two men. After settling in yet another area of Iceland, he killed another man in another argument. This time his neighbors forced him to leave the island.

Having heard tales of a region to the west of Iceland, Eric sailed in that direction. He and his family reached Greenland in 982. The climate there was warmer than today and better than Iceland’s. He found he could graze cattle year-round. The next year he returned to Iceland and told many Vikings of the virtues of this new area. Eric convinced the other Vikings, and they returned to Greenland where they formed three settlements.

One source of history about the Vikings is the sagas, or epic poems. In *Eric’s Saga*, Leif sailed back from Greenland to Norway to meet King Olaf, a Christian. The saga then says that the king charged Leif with the task of converting the Vikings in Greenland. Leif accepted the challenge, but as he sailed for his father’s home a fierce wind blew him off course. He was pushed across the Atlantic Ocean until he reached a rich land farther west. When a member of his crew found grapes growing in this beautiful land, Leif “the Lucky,” as he was called, named his discovery Vinland, or Wine Land. He then returned to Greenland, told everyone of his discovery, and converted most of the Vikings to Christianity.

This legend includes some truth and much exaggeration. Leif was probably not the Viking who discovered North America, though he did sail there. He was also probably not the person who converted the Vikings to Christianity, though he may have been a Christian. *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, which is about 200 years older than *Eric’s Saga*,

gives what appears to be a more accurate story.

Around 1000, a Viking named Bjarni Herjolfsson was blown off course while sailing to Greenland. The wind took his ship farther west, and he reached North America. When he returned to Greenland, his description of the pleasant land apparently caught the imagination of Leif.

Leif set off for this new place. He and his crew sailed down the coast of Greenland and turned west. They reached what may have been modern Baffin Island and turned south. They then sailed along the eastern fringes of what is now northern Canada until they finally touched ground at Newfoundland. Leif and his crew spent the winter there and returned to Greenland the next year.

Other Vikings later made efforts to settle the area. Leif’s brother Thorvald sailed to the new place, but he was killed by a Native American. Another Viking, Thorfinn Karlsefni, tried to establish a colony in the new region. However, it lasted about three years until the hostility of the natives forced the Vikings to leave. Leif spent the remainder of his life in Greenland, where he died about 1020.

In the 1960s, archaeologists discovered the remains of a Viking community at a place called L’Anse-aux-Meadows in Newfoundland. In an attempt to try to establish the truth behind the stories of Leif, a Norwegian explorer began an investigation. He found that the foundations of a number of the buildings in Newfoundland greatly resembled Viking buildings in Greenland and Iceland. Nevertheless, the mystery of Leif Ericson continues.

Questions

- Determining Main Ideas** What made Greenland attractive to the Vikings?
- Developing Historical Perspective** Which version of the story of Leif Ericson is more accurate than the other? Explain.
- Drawing Conclusions** What physical evidence supports the saga’s story of the Vikings in North America?