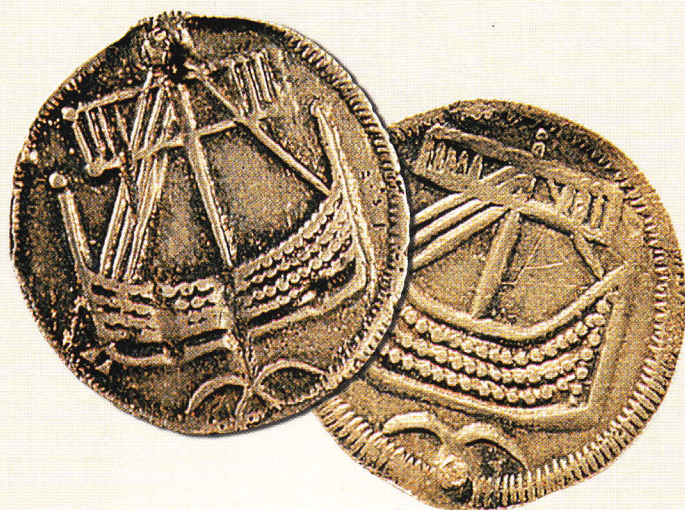


# NORSE AMERICA

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During the ninth century Nordic seafarers left their native Scandinavia in search of new lands to colonize. Some sailed west across the North Atlantic, island hopping into the unknown until they chanced upon a land full of vines—the coast of the New World.

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Viking ships on coins (opposite) minted at the beginning of the ninth century were found in Sweden's Birka market.

WERNER FORMAN/GTRES

This warrior figure is carved from elk horn. Contrary to popular belief the Vikings did not wear horned helmets.

BELZEAUX/RAPHO/CONTACTO PHOTO

# Vikings Across the Ocean

985

Viking trader Bjarni Herjólfsson, driven off course on his way to Greenland, sights what some consider was the coast of the New World.

986

Erik the Red, who had already left his native Norway to live in Iceland, starts colonizing Greenland, the starting point for voyages to America.

1000

Leif Eriksson the Lucky, Erik the Red's son, sets sail in a *knarr* with 35 crewmen. They reach America by chance and call the place Vinland.

1003

Thorvald Eriksson, Leif's brother, also travels to America and decides to settle there but is later killed in a fight with indigenous people.

CIRCA 1006

Thorfinn Karlsefni attempts to establish a colony on the American coast. He arrives with three ships, 150 colonists, and livestock.

CIRCA 1008

Snorri, Thorfinn Karlsefni's son, is the first child of European parents to be born in America.

1347

The Annals of Iceland record the last known voyage to America by Scandinavian sailors.



## ICELAND TO GREENLAND TO VINLAND

Having reached and settled Greenland, Vikings would inevitably continue farther west to America.

AKG/ALBUM

“In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the Ocean blue,” says the poem. He certainly did, but he was not the first to reach the New World: Humankind had discovered the continent on at least three separate occasions. The first was thousands of years ago when an anonymous Asian hunter crossed into what is now Alaska—although he didn’t know it, he was making history. In 1492 Christopher Columbus famously claimed the New World for Spain, fundamentally changing the history of the continent. But in between these momentous events came “Lucky” Leif Eriksson, the Viking renegade who accidentally landed in America around 1000.

That first Asian hunter was driven by his constant struggle for survival, pursuing migrating animals across the land bridge





### ATLANTIC ISLAND-HOPPING

At the beginning of the ninth century Vikings settled in Jarlshof, on the Shetland Islands, to the northeast of Scotland. These became an important stopover on the journey to Iceland.

BERTRAND RIEGER/AGE FOTOSTOCK

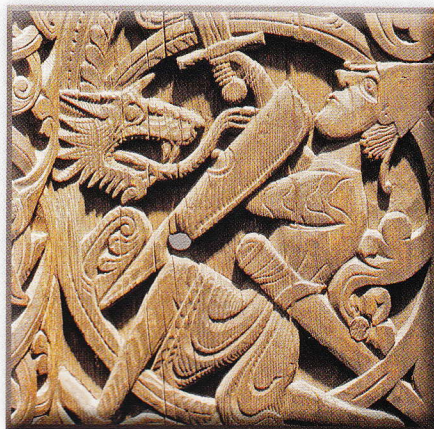
that then joined the continents. By contrast, Columbus set off on a deliberate voyage of discovery—even if the land he encountered wasn't what he set out to find. But Leif Eriksson's landing was the culmination of a chain of events that saw a group of Vikings become the first Europeans to set foot in America.

The Scandinavians expanded into the North Atlantic through different islands—the Hebrides, Iceland, and Greenland—on their route to finally reach America. One of their ships was blown westward by a storm and they found new land by chance. This was followed by a planned exploration and a study to determine the feasibility of settling there. Deciding that it was possible and desirable, a group was organized to sail west and colonize these new shores.

### MYTHS AND LEGENDS

**This intricate 13th-century carving shows Sigurd, a hero of ancient Scandinavian sagas. It was found in Norway, where most of Vinland's colonists probably originated.**

WERNER FORMAN/GTRES



### North Atlantic Colonists

Around the year 800, Norwegians started to build settlements on what they called the “Sheep Islands,” or the Faroe Islands, north of Scotland. They were later joined by Scandinavian seafarers from colonies in the Hebrides, west of Scotland; as the communities thrived, the Vikings made an expansionary leap from the Faroe Islands to Iceland. The first Viking to set his eyes on

this island was a Swede called Naddoddur who sailed around what he called “Snowland” in about 850. It was a Norwegian, Flóki Vilgerðarson, who settled the territory and named it Iceland. Permanent colonization began in 874, when Ingólfr Arnason established what would eventually become today's capital, Reykjavík.

Once the Vikings were firmly established in Iceland, Greenland became their next step, the result of an

# SHIPS FOR EXPLORATION, TRADE, OR WAR

The Vikings used two types of oceangoing ships: the *knarr* and the *drakkar*. In 1962 archaeologists discovered an 11th-century *knarr* they named the *Skuldelev 1*. Designed for transporting goods, animals, and passengers, studies show that *knarrs* were certainly strong enough to sail to America. The Vikings could navigate by the sun and stars and used sundials (left). The sagas say they also used “sunstones,” translucent crystals that could locate the sun when the sky was overcast by isolating its unpolarized light.



FRAGMENT OF SOLAR COMPASS FOUND IN GREENLAND, CIRCA 1000  
SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY/AGE FOTOSTOCK



KNARR, A CARGO VESSEL (RIGHT)

DRAKKAR, A WARSHIP (BELOW)

## THE EPIC VIKING SAGAS

Strictly speaking, a saga is a story of legendary or historical fiction built around key characters or heroes from Iceland. Originally, sagas were told around the campfire, but later many were written down for posterity.



BRIDGEMAN/ACI

unexpected encounter: Gunnbjörn Ulfsson, a Norwegian-born sailor blown off course during a storm on a voyage to Iceland, saw it around 930. The land was re-discovered in 981 by Hrólf Thorbjarnarson and Sneabjörn Holmsteinsson, who spent a winter on small islands off its coast. A year later Erik Thorvaldsson, better known as the infamous “Erik the Red,” arrived on its shores and established the island’s first settlement.

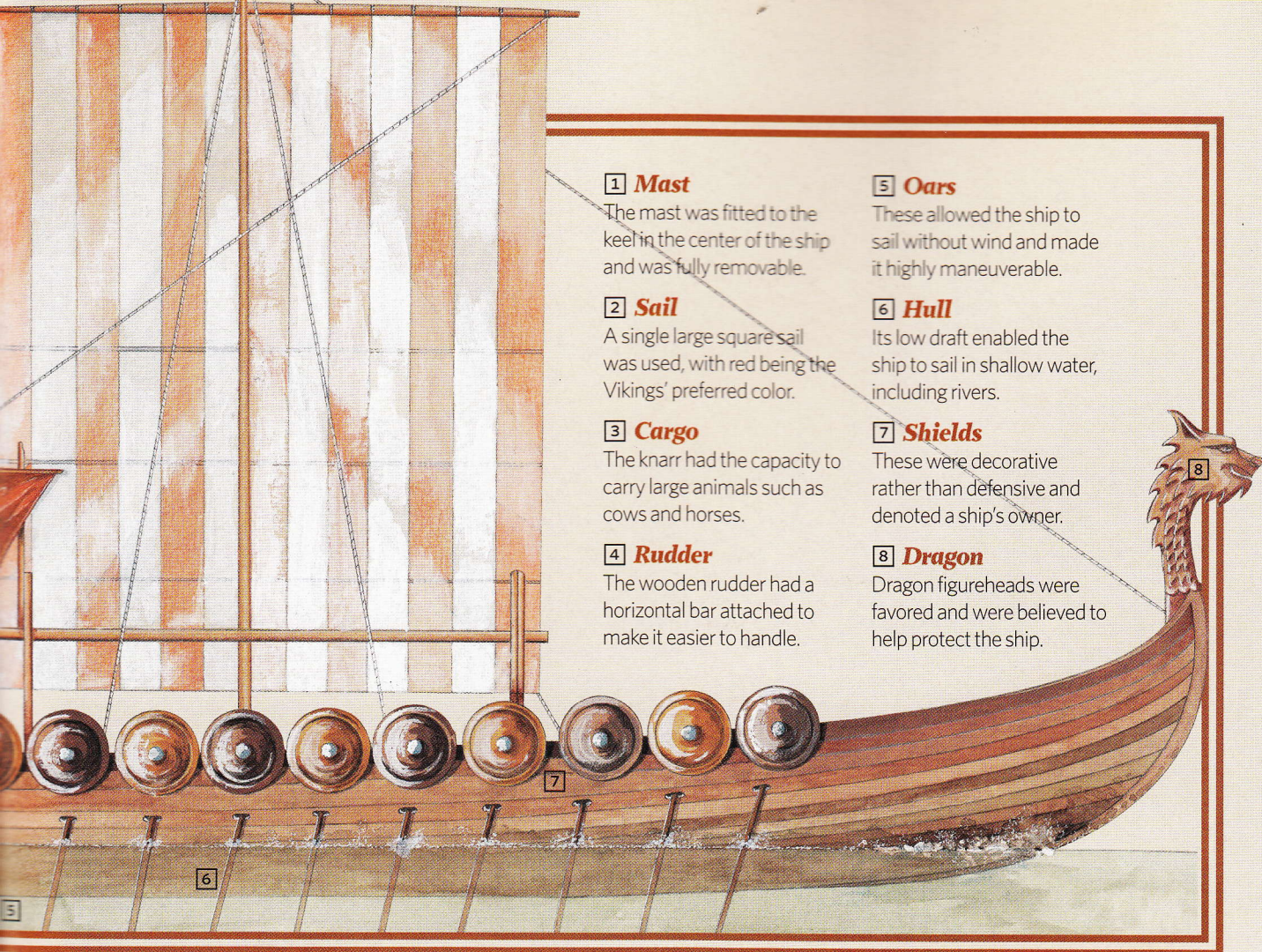
Erik had become an outlaw, exiled from Iceland for three years after a series of violent killings. In the summer of 982 he set sail for Greenland in a small cargo ship called a *knarr*. Once his exile was over, Erik returned to Iceland with a plan to colonize the new territory. He enthusiastically spread the word about the island’s virtues, calling it “green” to make it more attractive. His marketing worked, and Erik assembled 25 ships to carry a large number of families to their new home. As many as 14 ships arrived

safely, and some 400 colonists settled in a location Erik had chosen that he’d called Brattahlid, at the end of a long, deep fjord that made a good anchorage. It was from here that most of the Vikings’ subsequent explorations of Vinland set sail.

## America Found, Lost, and Found

Once the Scandinavians had settled on the west coast of Greenland it was almost inevitable that they would reach America. There was a busy trade between the various Viking settlements in the North Atlantic and the distance between Greenland and America is relatively small. There are two Viking sources that describe their experiences in Vinland: the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, and the *Saga of Erik the Red*. Both were written sometime during the 13th century but present different accounts of events.

According to the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, Vinland was discovered in two stages. In



**1 Mast**

The mast was fitted to the keel in the center of the ship and was fully removable.

**2 Sail**

A single large square sail was used, with red being the Vikings' preferred color.

**3 Cargo**

The knarr had the capacity to carry large animals such as cows and horses.

**4 Rudder**

The wooden rudder had a horizontal bar attached to make it easier to handle.

**5 Oars**

These allowed the ship to sail without wind and made it highly maneuverable.

**6 Hull**

Its low draft enabled the ship to sail in shallow water, including rivers.

**7 Shields**

These were decorative rather than defensive and denoted a ship's owner.

**8 Dragon**

Dragon figureheads were favored and were believed to help protect the ship.

ILLUSTRATIONS: MB CREATIVITAT

the first, Bjarni Herjólfsson, a Scandinavian trader, was heading from Norway to Iceland when he learned that his father had gone with Erik the Red to Greenland that year, probably 985 or 986. Bjarni set sail again and for three days made toward Greenland without any trouble. But then “a north wind rose together with fog and they knew neither where they were nor where they were headed.” When they finally sighted land, Bjarni suspected it was not Greenland, as it did not match any description he had heard. He decided not to go ashore.

The second stage of the exploration took place 15 years later, when people in Greenland were discussing the possibility of finding somewhere new to colonize. Leif Eriksson, one of Erik the Red's sons, decided to search for the land Bjarni had encountered. He bought the trader's boat and raised a 35-man

**IRON TOOLS ACROSS THE ATLANTIC**

This carving from Hylestad, Norway, shows a Viking blacksmith at work. The iron tools found by archaeologists in America point to a Viking presence in the New World.



ERIC LESSING/ALBUM

crew. When he reached the place Bjarni had sighted, Leif found a barren landscape covered with stones that he called Helluland or “flat rock land.” He sailed on and reached a flat, forested coast he called Markland or “forest land.” Finally he found dew-covered grassland where he and his men built houses and stayed for the winter. Exploring the area, they found large grapevines, so Leif named the place Vinland, or “wine land.” On his return voyage, believed to have happened around 1000, Leif is said to have rescued some shipwrecked Norsemen and was thereafter nicknamed “Leif the Lucky.”

**Keeping it in the Family**

The *Saga of Erik the Red*, however, claims it was Leif Eriksson himself who first discovered Vinland. It says that Leif was in Norway with King Olaf Tryggvason some-

## THE HOUSE OF THE VIKINGS

Replicas of Viking dwellings have been built at L'Anse Aux Meadows, in Newfoundland, the archaeological site that contains the remains of their original homes, as well as four workshops and a forge.



### A NEW FOUND LAND

## VIKING FOOTPRINT IN L'ANSE AUX MEADOWS

In 1959, after visiting Greenland, the Norwegian explorer Helge Ingstad decided to search for signs that the Vikings had sailed as far as America. He systematically conducted archaeological digs along the American coastline and uncovered the ruins of Nordic settlements in the far north of Newfoundland, next to the village of L'Anse aux Meadows. Ingstad and his archaeologist wife

excavated the site until 1968, finding the remains of eight buildings and a sufficient number of objects to prove they had been inhabited by Nordic people around A.D. 1000. The houses were built with wooden frameworks covered with turf, in the same manner used in 10th-century Iceland. They recovered over a hundred items: nails, a bronze brooch, glass beads, bone needles, files, and scissors. There were also the remains of a workshop where ships were repaired and a forge.



TENTH-CENTURY HELMET FOUND IN GJERMUNDBU, NORWAY  
PHOTO/ISA

time around 995-1000. When the king learned that Leif intended to return to Greenland, he gave him the mission of converting the island's pagan inhabitants to Christianity. The saga then describes Leif's voyage home as occurring in much the same way as Herjólfsson's in the *Saga of the Greenlanders*.

The sagas describe several more planned expeditions to Vinland. Thorvald Eriksen was next to try his luck, borrowing his brother's boat and reaching the new land without any mishaps. Thorvald and his men spent two years systematically exploring the surrounding area and planning its colonization. "This is a good land," Thorvald apparently exclaimed, "and I want my farm to be here." However, shortly afterward they fought a large band of Native Americans. Thorvald was killed and buried in the place where he had hoped to build his farm. Thorstein, another of Leif's brothers, led



DE AGOSTINI



**LEIF ERIKSSON SIGHTS THE NEW WORLD IN A 19TH-CENTURY PAINTING BY CHRISTIAN KROHG.**

BRIDGEMAN/ACI

the next voyage. Using the same boat as the previous expedition, he lost his bearings and spent the whole summer sailing between Greenland, Iceland, and Ireland. As winter approached he gave up and returned home.

A third expedition was led by Thorfinn Karlsefni, a rich Icelandic merchant who planned to colonize Vinland. He sailed with three ships carrying 150 colonists and plenty of livestock, but the settlement lasted less than three years. They were forced out after repeated battles with the natives, whom the Scandinavians nicknamed *skraelings*. Before they left, however, Thorfinn's wife gave birth to their son Snorri, making him the first known European to be born in America.

According to the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, a final expedition was carried out by Freydis, who was most likely the illegitimate daughter of Erik the Red. She probably used the old family boat that by then had sailed to

Vinland three or four times. Freydis was joined by two brothers, Helge and Finboge, who had acquired a larger and faster ship. This seems to have been their undoing, as Freydis may have killed both brothers and their 28 crewmen to take it for herself. The saga tells that Freydis's henchmen refused to murder five women who were also on board, so Freydis took up an ax and she slaughtered them. She then abandoned the family knarr and returned to Greenland in the new ship, claiming that the others had stayed to explore Vinland.

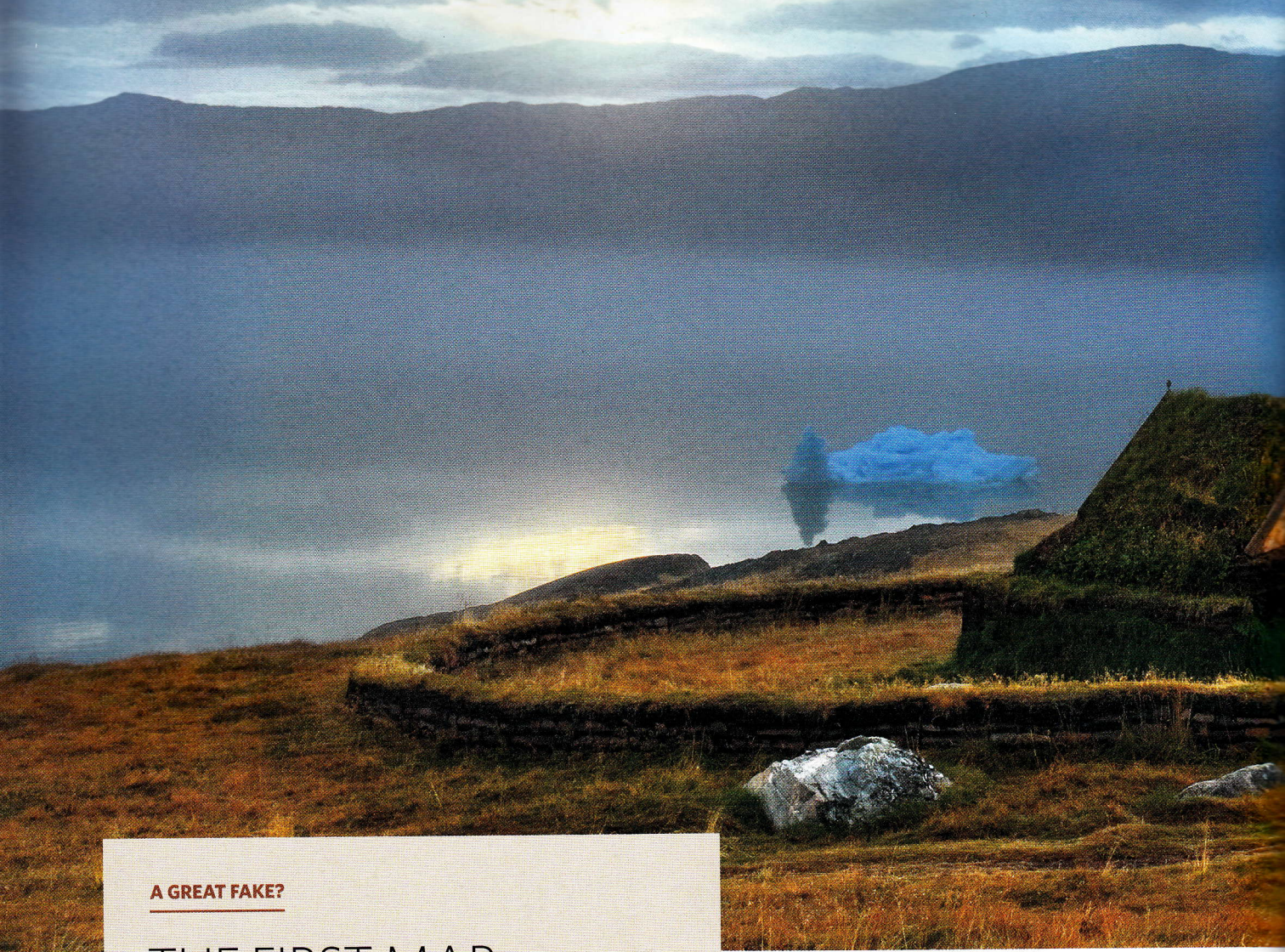
### The Legend Lives On

According to the sagas Vinland was first sighted more than a thousand years ago, but tales of its discovery were not written down until the 13th century. The earliest surviving manuscripts date from the 14th century, so there is nearly a 400-year gap between the first voyages to Vinland and the earliest

### LIFE AND DEATH IN VINLAND

According to Nordic legends, the Vikings tried to colonize America several times, but they never managed to hold out against its indigenous people for more than three years.





## A GREAT FAKE?

# THE FIRST MAP OF VINLAND

**T**he "Map of Vinland" was donated to Yale University in 1965 as proof that the Vikings had reached America. It was apparently part of the Tartar Relation, a medieval codex that some scholars believe may have come from a Spanish monastery. It shows the continents of Europe, Africa, and Asia (not shown here), and some islands. These include Greenland and, to

its west, an island with two fjords cutting into it that is identified as Vinland. The accuracy with which Greenland is drawn has made many scholars skeptical, as they do not believe that it could have been rendered so perfectly in the 15th century, especially when it was only circumnavigated for the first time in the 20th century. The authenticity of the map is still questioned, but it is now accepted as indisputable fact that Scandinavians sailed to America in the early decades of the 11th century.



DETAIL FROM THE "MAP OF VINLAND", YALE UNIVERSITY  
BRIDGEMAN/ACI

documents of its existence. The two sagas are the only medieval texts that describe the expeditions to Vinland, but others mention it in passing. In the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (circa 1073) the German priest Adam of Bremen says that the Danish king told him about "another island of the many found in that ocean. It is called Vinland because vines producing excellent wine grow wild there." Vinland is also referenced in the *Book of Icelanders*, a history of Iceland written around 1130. It links the name of Vinland with the colonization of Greenland by Erik the Red, "14 or 15 years before Christianity reached Iceland." This happened in the summer of 1000, dating the settlement of Greenland to 985 or 986.

Beyond the sagas, no further attempts to colonize Vinland are recorded, but that does not mean the Scandinavians abandoned it altogether. They are likely to have arranged occasional expeditions to bring back wood,



PETER ESSICK

an important raw material that Greenland was unable to produce. Sources also tell of Viking hunting expeditions in the arctic areas of Canada and the north of Greenland. In the *Annals of Greenland*, written in 1625, an Icelander called Björn Jonsson claims that, "All major landowners in Greenland had large ships and vessels built to send all sorts of hunting equipment to places in the north." Björn Jonsson mentions some of the places to which these expeditions headed including Nordseta and Greipar.

## Tracing the Sagas

Throughout the 1970s the Danish archaeologist Peter Schledermann conducted a series of research projects in Inuit settlements on the east coast of Ellesmere Island, Canada. During his excavations he unearthed 25 items of Scandinavian origin. The finds include two pieces of fabric, dated to the mid-13th century, boat rivets, a carpenter's

plane, and a piece of chain mail. And Robert McGhee from the Canadian Museum of Civilization has also found various Viking implements, on Bathurst Island in northern Canada. These are some of the tangible remains of Scandinavian expeditions to America a thousand years ago, and they testify to the Vikings being the first Europeans to deliberately try to colonize the New World some 500 years before Columbus claimed it for the Spanish Crown. ■

EDUARDO MORALES ROMERO  
MORALES ROMERO HAS SPENT  
MOST OF HIS LIFE IN SCANDINAVIA INVESTIGATING ITS VIKING PAST.

### Learn more

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#### BOOKS

***Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga***

Edited by William W. Fitzhugh and Elisabeth I. Ward, Smithsonian Books, 2004.

***The Age of the Vikings***

Anders Winroth, Princeton University Press, 2014.

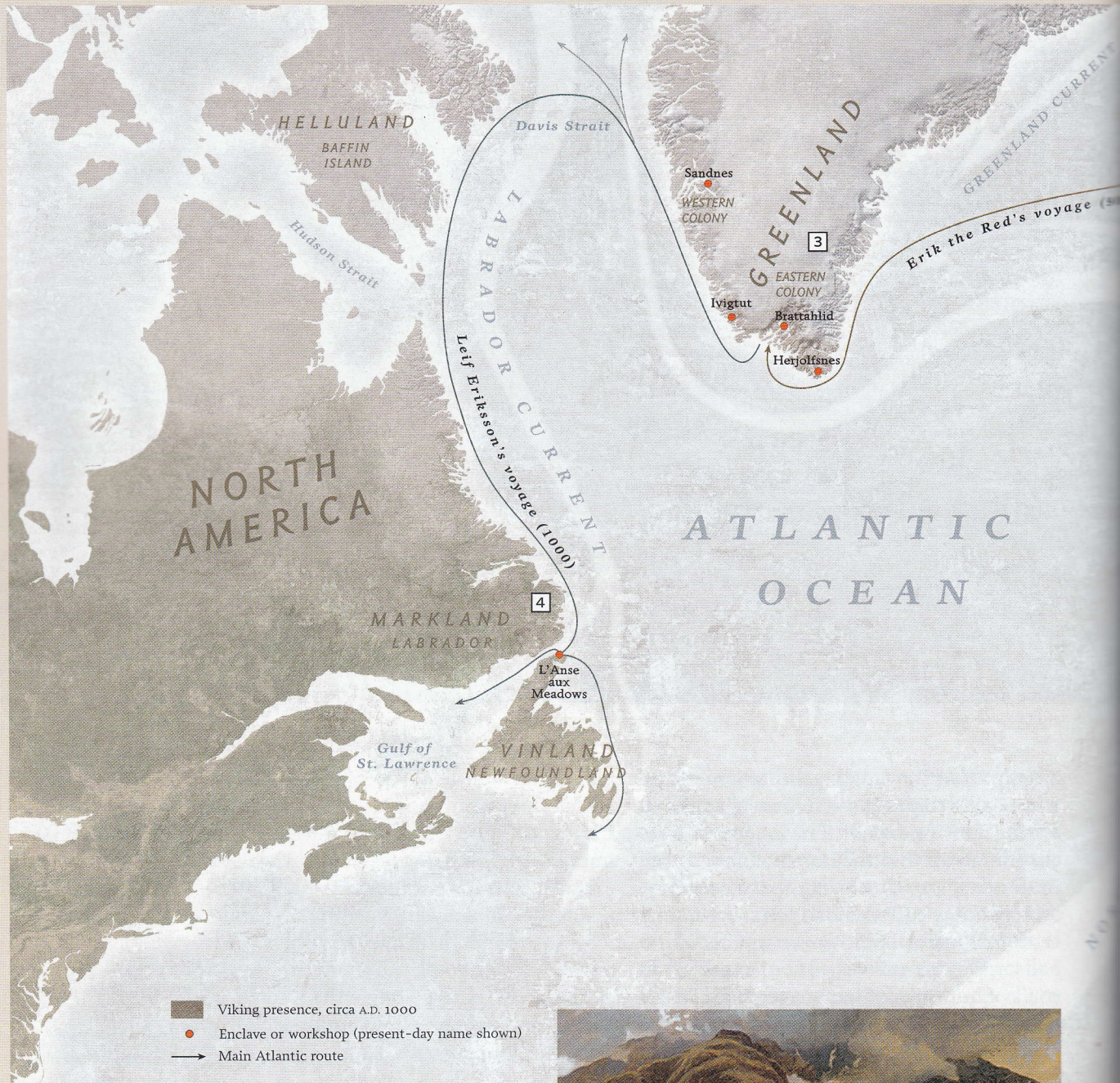
***The Sea Wolves: A History of the Vikings***

Lars Brownworth, Crux Publishing, 2014.

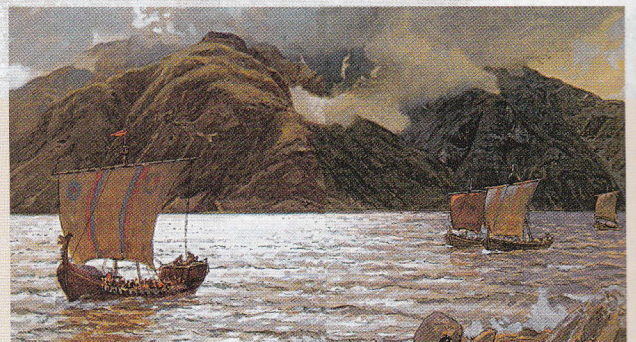
## ERIK THE RED IN GREENLAND

Brattahlid, the largest Viking site in Greenland, was founded around 986 by Erik the Red. He was devoted to the pagan Viking religion, but his wife, Thjodhild, converted to Christianity and built a turf church (reproduction above) around 1001.

# THE EPIC OF THE NORTH: FROM



The search for new lands to settle led the Scandinavians to America, which they reached through a series of expeditions that carried them far from their ancestral homes. These long and dangerous voyages were made possible by their swift, robust knarrs. By combining sail and oars, these ships were highly maneuverable, able to tack and sail close to the wind.



VIKING SHIPS, OIL PAINTING BY HANS GUDE, 1889

# SCANDINAVIA TO AMERICA



## 1 Scandinavia

The Vikings included Norwegians, who mainly colonized the northernmost Atlantic islands; Swedes, who explored Russia and Byzantium; and Danes, who focused on Britain.

## 2 Iceland

Approximately 900 miles from the coast of Norway, it would have taken Viking ships between a week and a month to reach Iceland. The island's colonization was completed around 930.

## 3 Greenland

Erik the Red led the settlement of the vast island of Greenland. He settled in Brattahlid, the center of the eastern colony, where Viking ships would set sail for the coast of America.

## 4 America

L'Anse aux Meadows was the first confirmed Viking settlement found in America. It's likely that clashes with indigenous people and bad weather may have driven the Vikings to finally leave.