

**VIKINGS AND SAGAS:
ERIK THE RED AND LEIF
ERIKSON:
EXPLORATIONS OF THE
NORTH ATLANTIC**



VIKINGS AND SAGAS: ERIK THE RED AND LEIF ERIKSON: EXPLORATIONS OF THE NORTH ATLANTIC

Description

Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, students here will understand the story of the Viking exploration of Greenland and Vinland as told in the Icelandic and Greenlandic sagas, the role Erik the Red and Leif Erikson played in exploration, and how the Viking sagas may have played a role in Columbus' decision to sail west five hundred years later.

Subjects

World History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- Viking Ship Museum, Oslo, Norway
- Leif Lucky Bridge, Grindavik, Iceland
- L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland
- Leif Erikson Statue, Reykjavik, Iceland

Essential Questions

- Who was Erik the Red? Who was Leif Erickson? Why are they famous? How do we know their stories?
- Did Leif Erikson really discover America?
- If the Vikings made it to the New World 500 years before Columbus, why didn't they stay?
- Did Columbus know of the Viking stories before he sailed west?

Academic Summary

From the *Icelandic Saga* (also called *Saga of Erik the Red*)

Leif set sail as soon as he was ready. He was tossed about a long time out at sea, and lighted upon lands of which before he had no expectation. There were fields of wild wheat, and the vine-tree in full growth. There were also the trees which were called maples; and they gathered of all this certain tokens; some trunks so large that they were used in house-building. Leif came upon men who had been shipwrecked, and took them home with him, and gave them sustenance during the winter. Thus did he show his great munificence and his graciousness when he brought Christianity to the land, and saved the shipwrecked crew. He was called Leif the Lucky.

... After this there was much talk about making ready to go to the land which Leif had discovered. Thorstein, Erik's son, was chief mover in this, a worthy man, wise and much liked. Erik was also asked to go, and they believed that his luck and foresight would be of the highest use. He was [for a long time against it, but did not say nay], when his friends exhorted him to go. They made ready the ship which Thorbjorn had brought there, and there were twenty men who undertook to start in her. They had little property, but chiefly weapons and food. On the morning when Erik left home he took a little box, which had in it gold and silver; he hid the money, and then went forth on his journey.

... They sailed away from land; then to the Vestribygd and to Bjarneyjar (the Bear Islands). Thence they sailed away from Bjarneyjar with northerly winds. They were out at sea two half-days. Then they came to land, and rowed along it in boats, and explored it, and found there flat stones, many and so great that two men might well lie on them stretched on their backs with heel to heel. Polar-foxes were there in abundance. This land they gave name to, and called it Helluland (stone-land).

Then they sailed with northerly winds two half-days, and there was then land before them, and on it a great forest and many wild beasts. An island lay in the south-east off the land, and they found bears thereon, and called the island Bjarney (Bear Island); but the mainland, where the forest was, they called Markland (forest-land). Then, when two half-days were passed, they saw land, and sailed under it. There was a cape to which they came. They cruised along the land, leaving it on the starboard side. There was a harborless coast-land, and long sandy strands. They went to the land in boats, and found the keel of a ship, and called the place Kjalar-nes (Keelness). They gave also name to the strands, calling them Furdstrandir (wonder-shore), because it was tedious to sail by them. Then the coast became indented with creeks, and they directed their ships along the creeks.

... They said to Karlsefni that they considered they had found good and choice land. Then they received them into their ship, and proceeded on their journey to where the shore was cut into by a firth. They directed the ships within the firth. There was an island lying out in front of the firth, and there were great currents around the island, which they called Straums-ey (Stream-island). There were

so many birds on it that scarcely was it possible to put one's feet down for the eggs. They continued their course up the firth, which they called Straumsfjodr, and carried their cargo ashore from the ships, and there they prepared to stay. They had with them cattle of all kinds, and for themselves they sought out the produce of the land thereabout. There were mountains, and the place was fair to look upon.

They gave no heed to anything except to explore the land, and they found large pastures. They remained there during the winter, which happened to be a hard one, with no work doing; and they were badly off for food, and the fishing failed. Then they went out to the island, hoping that something might be got there from fishing or from what was drifted ashore. In that spot there was little, however, to be got for food, but their cattle found good sustenance. After that they called upon God, praying that He would send them some little store of meat, but their prayer was not so soon granted as they were eager that it should be. Thorhall disappeared from sight, and they went to seek him, and sought for three half-days continuously.

... when they sailed from Vinland, they had a southern wind, and reached Markland, and found five Skrælingar; one was a bearded man, two were women, two children. Karlsefni's people caught the children, but the others escaped and sunk down into the earth. And they took the children with them, and taught them their speech, and they were baptized. The children called their mother Vætilldi, and their father Uvægi. They said that kings ruled over the land of the Skrælingar, one of whom was called Avalldamon, and the other Valldidida. They said also that there were no houses, and the people lived in caves or holes. They said, moreover, that there was a land on the other side over against their land, and the people there were dressed in white garments, uttered loud cries, bare long poles, and wore fringes. This was supposed to be Hvitramannaland (white man's land). Then came they to Greenland, and remained with Erik the Red during the winter.

In the icy reaches of the North Atlantic, where exploration and seafaring had long been a way of life, stories of western lands had been passed down by way of legends and unwritten sagas. Unfortunately, many of these stories were lost or incomplete by the 15th century. Many legends that do survive tell of Viking discoveries in Iceland, Greenland and lands further west. Steeped in lore and mystery, many of the sagas are no more than riddles and tales. An overall picture, however, can be ascertained. The Viking settlement of Iceland, Greenland and the New World was simply part of a natural progression of their movement westward as they looked for trading opportunities and land.

The Viking Age began in the late eighth century. Over the next three hundred years, Norsemen carved out an empire that stretched from the Slavic lands of present day Russia in the East to the beaches of Normandy in the South to the coast of the maritime provinces of present day Canada in the West. Evidence suggests that the Norse had an extensive trading network with the Middle East, as thousands of Arabic coins have

been found in present day Scandinavia that date from the Viking Age. They established trade routes throughout northern Europe by which spices and silks were brought from the East and exchanged for slaves, ivory and furs. Trading centers such as Dublin, Riga and Kiev were set up to handle the exchanges. A remarkably democratic people for the age, the Vikings brought with them the concepts of trial by jury and parliamentary rule. According to the sagas, Iceland was the first step to the west.

Norwegians (Vikings) arrived in Iceland in about 870 CE. After first pushing aside a group of Irish monks, the Norsemen quickly conquered the entire island. A hardy and fiercely independent lot, many of the original Icelandic settlers had fled political strife in their Norwegian homeland, and over time Iceland became an outlet for many dissidents from Scandinavia. One such man eventually led the way even farther west.

Erik the Red and his father arrived in Iceland in about 980 after a hurried departure from Norway. According to *Erikis Saga Rauð* (*Saga of Erik the Red*), "some killings" in the homeland precipitated their exodus, although it is unclear whether the killings involved Erik, his father, or both. In either case, Erik's stay in Iceland was a troubled one. He married and attempted to settle down, but within two years he was summoned before a regional Althing on charges of murder. Unable to justify his actions to the assembly, Erik was banished for a period of three years. Since a return to Norway was impossible, Erik decided to look further west, where, according to the sagas, sixty years earlier a land had been sighted by Gunnbjörn Ulfsson when he was blown off course while sailing from Norway to Iceland. Ulfsson had not landed, and the new region had remained unnamed.

Erik set sail for the west in the summer of 982. After a short time, he sighted land. Although mostly covered by a massive ice sheet, this new land had some attractive grassland pastures. Perhaps Erik should be considered the first real estate developer as well. Before returning to Iceland he named the new land "Greenland" as a way to entice others to follow him. It worked, and by the summer of 985 twenty-five ships loaded with settlers and provisions set out for Greenland. Only fourteen ships finished the voyage, but Erik and his family were among the survivors. He and his followers established what became known as the "eastern settlement" (actually in Southern Greenland). Over time, others followed, some settling with Erik, while others established the "western settlement" approximately 400 miles further up the western coast of the island.

The story of the Greenland settlers is told in the second famous saga: *Groenlendinga*. According to the sagas, a man named Bjarni Herjulfsson was the first to see lands west of Greenland after he had been blown off course on his way to the eastern settlement in 985. According to the stories, Herjulfsson had sighted a land, "... [which] had no mountains, but was wooded, with small hills." Realizing that this land did not fit the descriptions of Greenland, he decided not to put ashore. Turning north, he found a land with high mountains and glaciers. Bjarni then turned east, sailed for four days and came upon Greenland. Fifteen years later, stories of the mysterious western lands were circulating through Norway and Iceland. As a young man looking for adventure and to make a name for himself, Leif decided to explore the new lands. He traveled to Bjarni's compound and purchased his ship. Leif then sailed west, hoping to follow the older man's route in reverse. After a short time, Leif sighted a land "... bare of grass, and

covered with great glaciers; the land between the glaciers and the sea looked like one mass of stone." Going ashore, Leif and his party named the land Helluland. Leif Erickson thus became the first European confirmed to have set foot on North American soil. Unfortunately, the lack of any settlement remains has hampered historians over the centuries in their efforts to definitively prove where it was. Most conjecture that Helluland was probably Baffin Island. The southern portion of Baffin Island is a harsh land of rocks and ice, as the sagas describe. Obviously this was no place to put down a settlement, so Leif and his party returned to their boats and sailed southward.

According to the sagas, Leif next found a, "...land which was wooded and level, and there were extensive stretches of white sand". Going ashore, Leif named the land Markland, which means "forest land". Historians speculate that this was probably the coast of Labrador, as its physical description matches that of the saga. Leif did not stay long. Returning to the ship, the little party set sail again and headed southwest. After two days, the Vikings came upon a third land. Unlike any they had seen, this new land appeared to be a paradise. According to the Greenland Saga,

There was no lack of salmon in the river or the lake, and they were bigger salmon than they had ever seen before. The land was so bountiful that it seemed to them that the cattle would not need fodder during the winter. There was no frost in the winter, and the grass hardly withered. Day and night were of more equal length than in Greenland and Iceland. On the shortest day of the year the sun was visible in the middle of the afternoon as well as at breakfast time.

Leif decided that this land required a more careful examination. After searching inland, his men found "vines and grapes." Realizing that he could make a profit on the voyage, Leif directed his men to cut trees and gather grapes for the return voyage. The trees were needed in Greenland, while the grapes and grapevines could be used in trade. The Vikings then built makeshift houses and set in for the winter. In the spring, Leif sailed for Greenland. Before he left, he named the newly discovered land after its grapevines, calling it Vinland.

Leif arrived back at the eastern settlement that summer. His exploration and settlement days were finished. Erik died that previous winter, leaving Leif as the head of his family. He also became the leader of the settlement. The Greenlanders' saga tells of four more voyages, one by each of Leif's siblings. The Icelandic saga details the voyages of two others. One is of Thorfinn Karlsefni, an Icelandic sea captain. In 1010, he journeyed to Greenland. While wintering in Leif's longhouse, Karlsefni met and married a woman named Gudrid. They traveled to Vinland in the spring of 1011. During the first year a child, Snorri, was born giving her claim to the title as the first "American" child. The settlement in Vinland only lasted three years after Snorri was born before its inhabitants returned to Greenland. There are no records of any other attempts at settlement, but there is evidence of voyages to Markland in search of wood, a scarce commodity in Greenland. The last mention of Vinland was from the Icelandic annuals of 1121. Markland, on the other hand, appears in one reference or another until 1347. By

that time, the famous sagas about Erik and Leif had been written down. *Groenlendinga* was written around 1200, and *Erikis Saga Rauða* was written in 1260. The Icelandic version (Erik's saga) probably took its cues from the Greenlanders' tale.

The western outreaches of the Norse empire eventually lost contact with the European world. By the time Columbus sailed on his first voyage in 1492, the Viking settlements in Greenland and Vinland were gone, and tales and sagas of the "western lands" had long since passed into legend. Not all, however, was lost. Columbus is reported to have visited Iceland in 1477, where it is likely that he heard stories of the sagas. Evidence suggests that the Genoese sailor came to believe that Norse explorers had found lands north of China and Japan on what is today the west coast of Siberia. Columbus (and almost everyone else) knew that the Earth was round. They didn't know about North and South America. Columbus then developed a plan to travel west from Iberia, believing he would bump into the East Indies.

A haunting question remains. Where was Vinland? Historians, cartographers and scientists have attempted to answer that question, especially in the last fifty years. A good deal of evidence points to the northern coast of Newfoundland, at a place known today as L'Anse aux Meadows. Ruins of Viking buildings and a few artifacts have been found at the site, but they are difficult to date with any specificity. Some scientists point to Maine, Massachusetts and locations south of the Canadian Maritimes. Today wild grapes grow only as far north as Massachusetts, but it is likely that the climate has changed over the centuries. Every new finding seems to complicate the story. Perhaps they are all correct. Vinland may have been the entire North American continent from Labrador to Virginia. What is known is that the Vikings were here. They were here long before Columbus sailed in 1492 and "discovered" the new world. Five hundred years earlier, another brave soul had looked into the unknown. Erik the Red saw a dream of land and trade. In doing so, he set the tone for generations to come. He looked west. Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, students here will understand the story of the Viking exploration of Greenland and Vinland as told in the Icelandic and Greenlandic sagas, the role Erik the Red and Leif Erikson played in exploration, and how the Viking sagas may have played a role in Columbus' decision to sail west five hundred years later.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the story of the Viking exploration of Greenland and Vinland as told in the Icelandic and Greenlandic sagas.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the role Erik the Red and Leif Erikson played in exploration.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how the Viking sagas may have played a role in Columbus's decision to sail west to reach the Asian continent five hundred years after the Vikings had explored the North Atlantic.

Procedure

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Who discovered America? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed below. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Vikings in the New World (20 min)
- Video – Europeans who discovered America before Columbus (15 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on the Vikings and their explorations in the North Atlantic, taking notes as appropriate. (30 min)
- Group Activity – Discussion on the Vikings and their exploration of the North Atlantic. (15 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the story of the Viking exploration of Greenland and Vinland as told in the Icelandic and Greenlandic sagas, the role Erik the Red and Leif Erikson played in exploration, and how the Viking sagas may have played a role in Columbus's decision to sail west five hundred years later.

Extension

On tour: Viking Ship Museum, Oslo, Norway

While on tour in Oslo, students can visit the Viking Ship Museum, where they can see for themselves a museum containing a number of Viking artifacts, including the Oseberg Ship, a well-preserved Viking ship discovered in a large burial mound in Norway. The ship was discovered in 1905 by archaeologists and is considered to be the best-preserved find to have survived the Viking Age.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- www.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/1000Vinland.asp
The Discovery of North America from the Saga of Erik the Red (primary source) — from the Modern History Sourcebook at Fordham University
- www.heritage.nf.ca/exploration/norse.html
The Norse in the North Atlantic (website)
- <http://cmods.org/Units/Unit2/Cmod6VikingsinGreenland.pdf>
The Vikings in America and Greenland (PDF of an academic paper)
- www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-vikings-a-memorable-visit-to-america-98090935/?no-ist
The Vikings: A Memorable Visit to America (website) – from the Smithsonian Museum
- www.mnh.si.edu/vikings/voyage/
Viking Voyage (website). Outstanding interactive website from the Smithsonian Museum with multiple sections that kids can run a quest through. Highly recommended for all students and teachers.
- www.history.com/topics/exploration/leif-eriksson
Leif Erikson (website) – from the History Channel
- www.studyblue.com/notes/note/n/25-lecture-vikings-in-the-new-worldppt/file/490511
Vikings in the New World (PowerPoint) – from the anthropology department at the University of Oklahoma
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yk00rpGbEgE
Europeans who Discovered America before Columbus (video) – from the History Channel, this 14-minute video is appropriate for all classes.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=DalQsFVK-fk
The Vikings: Voyage to America (video) – from the History Channel, this 45-minute video follows the trail of Erik and Leif. Highly recommended for AP and Advanced students.

Background Information

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erik_the_Red
Erik the Red – Wikipedia article
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leif_Erikson
Leif Erikson – Wikipedia article
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saga_of_Erik_the_Red
Saga of Erik the Red – Wikipedia article
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greenland_saga
Greenland Saga – Wikipedia article

Key Terms

- Erik the Red
- Greenland
- Iceland
- Leif Erikson
- Norway
- Sagas
- Vikings

