

# **The Vinland Sagas: The Norse Discovery of America Study Guide**

**The Vinland Sagas: The Norse Discovery of America  
by Anonymity**

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# Plot Summary

The Vinland Sagas are two of the classic Icelandic Sagas, but even among these special works of literature, they have a special place. They both tell the story of the Norse exploration and attempted colonization of North America, over five centuries prior to Columbus. Both sagas tell the legendary story of Eirik the Red (Erik, for the Anglicized), who was outlawed from Iceland in the tenth century, founded a colony of Icelanders in Greenland, and even suggest that he named Greenland in order to attract more settlers there.

The stories also introduce a sharp, rich sea merchant, Bjarni Herjolfsson, who on his way to Greenland, was caught up in winds that sent him across the Atlantic and to three previously undiscovered islands. Fifteen years later, Eirik the Red's famous son, Leif Eiriksson, known as Leif the Lucky, brought his own ship to the New World to explore it. Leif and his thirty-five crewmen found wild grapes, open fields of grass, massive amounts of timber, new game, and rivers stuffed with salmon. Leif named his new land Vinland, or 'the land of grapes.'

Other voyages followed, some of which were led by Leif's brothers. In both sagas, Thorstein leads a voyage. However, these later voyages encountered a native people the Icelanders called the Skrælings and were probably the Red Indians of New England. The greatest expedition was led by Leif's brother-in-law Thorfinn Karlsefni, who attempted to create the first permanent Icelandic colony in North America.

The Vinland Sagas contain two sagas that tell these stories differently, the Grænlendinga Saga and Eirik's Saga. Both sagas discuss all of the events mentioned thus far, but they vary the events and include information the other leaves out. In both sagas, Gudrid, Karlsefni's wife, receives prophesy from her dead husband Thorstein's corpse that predicts that she will have a great life and many wonderful progeny, but the details are delivered differently. Both sagas discuss encounters with the Skrælings but the events unfold differently. In other cases the events simply differ entirely.

These differences make it somewhat difficult for historians to uncover which of these events actually occurred and which did not. Many of the events include beings and stories from Icelandic lore but in other cases the events have actual archaeological evidence. For instance, the church Gudrid founded towards the end of her life has very likely been unearthed. There is also strong archaeological evidence that both Eirik the Red and Leif Eiriksson were real.

However, the sagas were written at the height of the Viking Age in a period where Iceland's primary export was literature, and this perhaps led to exaggeration and tall tales. Nonetheless, the Vinland Sagas stand as strong historical evidence that it was the Icelander Leif Eiriksson and not the Genoan Christopher Columbus, who was the first European to discover North America.



# **Grænlinga Saga, Chapters 1 - 2, Eirik Explores Greenland, Bjarni Sights Land to the West**

## **Grænlinga Saga, Chapters 1 - 2, Eirik Explores Greenland, Bjarni Sights Land to the West Summary and Analysis**

The Grænlinga Saga is about the exploration of Greenland. It begins in Chapter One, with the introduction of Thorvald, the son of Asvald, who is the father of Eirik the Red (known today as Erik the Red). Thorvald and Eirik lived in Jaederen, Norway. They killed some men and so were exiled, traveling to Iceland, which was then well-settled.

Thorvald and Eirik settled at Drangar in Hornstrands; Thorvald dies there and Eirik marries Thjodhild, the daughter of Jorund Ulfsson. The two of them move south and create a home they call Eirikstead. They then conceive a son, who they name Leif.

Eirik is banned from Haukadale because he murdered Eyjolf Saur and Hrafn the Dueller; this forces him to travel west to Breidafjord and make a home on Oxen Island, but Eirik then comes into conflict with Thorgest of Breidabolstead over some carved decorative panels known as bench-boards that he lent to Thorgest; but this produced a fight which led to Eirik being named an outlaw yet again, this time by the Thorsness Assembly.

Eirik must now move again, and prepares for a trip at sea to find another new home. He proclaims that he will find the area that had been seen by a man driven westward at sea during a storm. At sea, Eirik finds the country and settles near a glacier Eirik calls Mid Glacier, which came to be called Blaserk, and then inspects the land to determine whether it is habitable. He eventually settles at a fjord he names Eiriksfiord and then explores the land, naming a variety of landmarks. In a year and a half he returns to Iceland and he tells the people there the country he discovers will be called Greenland in order to attract people there.

After the next winter, Eirik returns to Greenland. Icelandic historians claim that he took with him a fleet of twenty-five ships but that only fourteen made it. Some had to return to Iceland, others wrecked. This was the year 985 or 986, 15 years before Iceland converted to Christianity. The author then lists the men of note who traveled with Eirik.

Chapter Two introduces Herjolf Bardarson and his wife, Thorgerd; their son was named Bjarni. Bjarni showed great promise and skill, developing a good reputation and acquiring his own merchant ship. Herjolf sold his farm to sail to Greenland with Eirik. Herjolf settles at Herjolfsness and was a man of stature; at this time, Eirik is living at



Brattahild and also commanded respect. Eirik's sons are Leif, Thorvald, and Thorstein. His daughter was named Freydis and she married Thorvard at Gardar, where the bishop currently lives. Freydis, however, was an arrogant woman.

During this period, Greenland was not Christian. Bjarni came to Iceland a year or so later, bringing his men on his ship. However, on the way the men became lost. Eventually they found a country but were worried that it was not Greenland. The man had few mountains and was heavily wooded. Bjarni and his crew continue to sail down the coastline until they find a land that appears to them to be Greenland. Herjolf lives here and it is called Herjolfsness for this reason. Bjarni stopped trading until his father died and farmed thereafter.



# Grænlinga Saga, Chapters 3 - 4, Leif Explores Vinland, Leif Returns to Greenland

## Grænlinga Saga, Chapters 3 - 4, Leif Explores Vinland, Leif Returns to Greenland Summary and Analysis

Eventually Bjarni sails to Norway from Greenland in order to visit the King of Norway, Earl Eirik; he told the Earl of his voyage and was made the Earl's retainer; he returned to Greenland during the next summer. Due to Bjarni's success, many sought to discover new countries, such as Leif Eiriksson, the son of Eirik the Red. Thus, Leif composed a crew of thirty-five; he asked his father to lead the voyage and he agreed. However, Eirik was injured by his horse before they left and so Eirik stayed home.

On their journey they found the area Bjarni sighted, stopped there and went back to see. They found another little country. The two areas were named Helluland and Markland. Then they came to another island and discovered new fruit. They leave yet again, but have trouble at sea, running aground. The crew decides to stay there, building some houses and were able to harvest many salmon. After building houses, Leif divides his companions into exploring parties.

In Chapter Four, Leif's men find that their German companion, Tyrkir, was missing, but they found Tyrkir and he had found vines and grapes. They then gathered them and had a full cargo of grapes and timber. In the Spring, they named the area Vinland and sailed to Greenland.

On the way, Leif and his crew run across a grounded ship and rescue a Norwegian named Thorir. When they reached Brattahild, they unloaded the ship. Thorir's wife was with them; her name was Gudrid. Leif invited these two and their companions to stay with him - fifteen in all. This led to Leif being called 'Leif the Lucky' and his reputation increased.

That winter, Thorir and many of his men die from a disease. Eirik the Red dies as well. Many speak of Leif's travels to Vinland and Leif's brother Thorvald wishes to explore Vinland next. Leif lends Thorvald his ship and asks him to bring back timber.



# Grænlandinga Saga, Chapters 5 - 6, Thorvald Explores Vinland, Thorstein Eiriksson Dies

## Grænlandinga Saga, Chapters 5 - 6, Thorvald Explores Vinland, Thorstein Eiriksson Dies Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 5, Thorvald prepares to travel to Vinland and takes a crew of thirty. They eventually reach Leif's Houses in Vinland and stayed there for the winter. In the spring, they explored the region along the coastline and found attractive country with woods and sandy beaches. Islands were everywhere and no humans to be seen. They then sailed east and had a shipwreck and named the place where they repaired the ship Kjalarness. Once the repairs were completed, they sailed east along the coast again. They finally found a beautiful place and Thorvald decided to make it his home.

However, on the return to the ship, Thorvald come across some 'Skrælings' hidden under their skin boasts. They killed eight men but the ninth man escaped. They saw settlements further away. All of a sudden, they started to feel drowsy and saw a swarm of skin-boats heading toward them. Thorvald and his men hunker down and successfully defend themselves.

Only Thorvald was injured, having been shot with an arrow in his armpit. Before he dies, he has his men bury him at the place he thought would make a good home. They then named the place Krossaness. After burying him, Thorvald's men returned to the Leif's Houses and spent the winter there, telling Leif after their voyage in the spring.

In Greenland, Thorstein Eiriksson married Gudrid Thorbjorn's-daughter, the widow of Thorir the Easterner. Thorstein wished to travel to Vinland to retrieve his brother Thorvald's body. He then took a crew of twenty-five strong men and his wife Gudrid to see. During the travel, they often became lost but made it to Western Greenland before winter. However, it was difficult for Thorstein and his wife to find lodging, until Thorstein the Black offered him room. That winter many men became ill and died; Thorstein's wife, Grimhild, caught it, as did Thorstein Eiriksson. Grimhild died, as did Thorstein Eiriksson. Gudrid was distraught.

Oddly, after his death while still in his deathbed, Thorstein's corpse sits straight up and wishes to tell Gudrid her destiny in order to alleviate her suffering. He tells her that she will marry an Icelander and have a good life, with many vigorous children. He then says that they will travel from Greenland to Norway and then to Iceland. Finally, Gudrid will make a pilgrimage to Rome, return to her farm in Iceland, build a church and be

ordained a nun. After that, Thorstein died for good. Thorstein and Gudrid took his body to the ship and eventually all the bodies were taken back to the church at Eiriksford.





# Grænlandinga Saga, Chapters 7 - 9, Karlsefni in Vinland, Freydis in Vinland, Karlsefni's Descendants

## Grænlandinga Saga, Chapters 7 - 9, Karlsefni in Vinland, Freydis in Vinland, Karlsefni's Descendants Summary and Analysis

In the same summer Gudrid returns to live with Leif, Thorfinn Karlsefni arrived in Greenland from Norway. He had great wealth and spent the winter with Leif Eiriksson. Karlsefni fell in love with Gudrid and they were engaged. Many encouraged Karlsefni to make the trip to Vinland. He yielded and gathered sixty men and five women to go with him. They agreed to share equally in the profits and took livestock in order to make permanent settlement.

Karlsefni asked Leif for housing in Vinland and Leif lent the houses to him. After setting sail, Karlsefni's crew arrived safely. They set up camp and let the livestock out to graze. Karlsefni had timber cut down to make a cargo hold for the ship. After the first winter, Karlsefni's settlement encountered the Skrælings. However, the Skrælings were terrified by the bull they had with them and they ran. Karlsefni blocked them from entering their houses.

Next, the Skrælings offered to trade with Karlsefni and his settlement, but they wanted weapons, so Karlsefni forbade it. Instead, they offered milk and the Skrælings accepted. Trading milk for packs and furs, Karlsefni traded well. However, Karlsefni then ordered a strong wood palisade built around the settlement.

Karlsefni and Gudrid have a son, Snorri. The Skrælings returned the next winter, but when the women offered them milk, the Skrælings threw their sacks over the palisade. A Skræling was killed by one of Karlsefni's men for trying to steal but right before this an old woman in a black cloak appeared to Gudrid, maintaining that her name was also Gudrid. Yet she disappeared.

Karlsefni wants to plan for the next Skræling attack. They sent ten men out into the wood and the rest cleared an area within the wood for their livestock. The Skrælings came to battle in the open area and many Skrælings were killed. They then fled. Karlsefni and his men then lived out the winter there but Karlsefni wanted to return to Greenland. They did so in the summer, carrying many valuable resources.

In the summer when Karlsefni returned from Vinland, two brothers named Helgi and Finnbogi came from Norway to Greenland. Freydis Eirik's-daughter went to visit the brothers one day. She wanted them to join her on a voyage to Vinland and share



equally the profits. Leif once again allow the voyagers to stay in his houses. The two parties took thirty-men, but Freydis stowed away five more.

They arrived safely but when the brothers saw that Freydis had lied, they became angry. During the winter, Freydis approached Finnbogi and invited him outside to talk. Freydis wants to bury the hatchet so that she can use Finnbogi and Helgi's ship, which is larger, to return to Greenland.

When Freydis returned, her husband Thorvard asked her where she had been. She then accused Finnbogi of treating her roughly and prodded Thorvard to avenge him. She then threatened divorce. Thorvard then gathered his men and weapons and they went to the brothers' house and captured them. Freydis had both men killed; she then had all the men killed in their party, and then killed five of their women herself. She then threatened to kill anyone of her party who told of what she did there when they went back to Greenland. They then returned to Greenland.

Karlsefni was ready to sail to Vinland again. Freydis returned to her farm, but her companions spoke of her crimes and her brother Leif heard. He captured three of Freydis's men and tortured them until they told him the truth. Leif then prophesied that Freydis's descendents would never prosper. After this, her reputation was destroyed.

Karlsefni sailed after this, but he went to Norway to sell his cargo. The nobles of Norway made much of them and he made great sales. Then he returned to Iceland and stayed the winter; he bought lands at Glaumby and made a home there, farming for the remainder of his days. He and Gudrid had great children. After Karlsefni died, Gudrid and Snorri ran the farm. When Snorri married, Gudrid indeed took her pilgrimage to Rome, had the church built and lived out her days as a nun, just as the prophesy foretold.

Snorri had a son named Thorgeir, who fathered Yngvild who in turn was the mother of Bishop Brand, the Bishop of Iceland from 1163-1201. And Snorri had a daughter, Hallfrid, the wife of Runolf, the father of Bishop Thorlak. Karlsefni and Gudrid have another child, Bjorn, who fathered Thorunn, who gave birth to Bishop Bjorn and many descended from Karlsefni. Karlsefni was responsible for telling most of the stories in Grælandinga Saga.



# Eirik's Saga, Chapters 1 - 2, Gudrid's Ancestry, Eirik Explores Greenland

## Eirik's Saga, Chapters 1 - 2, Gudrid's Ancestry, Eirik Explores Greenland Summary and Analysis

Chapter 1 begins Eirik's Saga. It opens with the introduction of a warrior-king named Olaf the white, who was sired by King Ingjald. Olaf conquered Dublin and made himself king in Ireland. He then took Aud the Deep-Minded as his wife, who was herself the daughter of Ketil Flat-Nose. Together, Aud and Ingjald have a son named Thorstein the Red.

During a battle in Ireland, Olaf was killed, and so Aud and Thorstein the Red left to Hebrides. Thorstein married Thurid and they produced many offspring. Thorstein the Red then became warrior-king and with Earl Sigurd the Powerful, conquered many lands in Scotland. He ruled a king until the Scots betrayed him and he was killed during a battle.

When she heard that Thorstein died, Aud the Deep-Minded had a ship built and sailed to Orkney; she then gave away Gros, her daughter, in marriage. Aud then left for Iceland with twenty free men with her. In Iceland, she spent the winter with Bjorn, her brother, and then made a home for herself at Hvamm. She was a Christian.

Many British slaves came with them to Iceland, one of whom was named Vifil and was a noble. Aud granted him his freedom. Vifil received land, Vifilsdae and had two sons, Thorbjorn and Thorgeir, promising men.

In Chapter 2, Eirik explores Greenland. Thorvald, the son of Asvald, fathered Eirik the Red; when he was older, Eirik and Thorvald left Jaederen due to some murders; they made a new home in Iceland at Drangar. After Thorvald died, Eirik the Red was married to Thjodhild and made a home for himself at Eirikstead. He had many slaves, but they produced a landslide that destroyed a neighbor's farm, which led the neighbor's kinsmen to kill the slaves. Eirik then killed then kinsman of his neighbor, which led to Eirik being banished from Haukadale, where he lived at the time.

Eirik moved slowly west, first taking over Brok Island, then Oxen Island and spent the winter in Tradir, at South Island. While there, he lent his valuable bench-boards to Thorgest; he then moved to Oxen Island and created another Eirikstead. When he asked for his bench-boards, Thorgest would not return them, so they fought a battle and many of Thorgest's kin were killed. The battle divided the locals.

However, Eirik was once again declared an outlaw, this time by the Thorsness Assembly. Thus, he readied his ship again and sailed away, avoiding Thorgest. Several men accompanied Eirik but he went alone to a land that had been spotted by Gunnbjorn

during a storm. Eirik then sailed to a glacier he called Blaserk and sailed south to find good land. He then set up Eiriksfjord on a new island. His second winter was spent at Eirik's Holms and then in the next summer he sailed to Hrafnsfjord.

The fourth summer, Eirik returned to Iceland and stayed with Ingolf of Homlatur; he then fought Thorgest and was beaten. Yet then the two men reconciled. Afterwards, Eirik let to colonize Greenland, which he named 'Greenland' to attract people to.



# Eirik's Saga, Chapters 3 - 4, Gudrid Goes to Greenland, Gudrid is Told Her Future

## Eirik's Saga, Chapters 3 - 4, Gudrid Goes to Greenland, Gudrid is Told Her Future Summary and Analysis

A man named Thorbjorn Vifilsson married Hallveig and acquired land. He grew in stature and became a chieftain, running a large farm. His daughter, Gudrid, was beautiful and exceptional. Thorgeir, a freed slave, had become wealthy; his son, Einar, was handsome and courteous. He was also a good trader with Norway. While in Iceland engaging in trade, Einar ran across Gudrid, who he then pursued. He asks a friend, Orm, to push for the marriage, and argues that Gudrud's father, Thorbjorn, needs to marry Gudrid to a rich man. Orm resisted but Einar pushed forward.

At a feast that Thorbjorn held, Orm spoke with him about Einar and made Thorbjorn's argument. Thorbjorn was deeply insulted and denied the request. In the spring, Thorbjorn had another feast and publicly admitted his financial troubles. He also announces that rather than lose what he has, he has decided to follow Eirik the Red to Greenland. Everyone was shocked. Thorbjorn sold his land, bought a ship and took thirty people with him, including Orm. The group has bad luck on the trip and disease killed half the crew before they reached land, including Orm and his wife.

The men landed at Herjolfsness at the state of winter and met a farmer named Thorkel, who invited them to stay the winter.

In Chapter 4, famine has struck Greenland. A woman there, named Thorbjorg, was a prophet called Little Sybil; she attended feasts in the winter and many invited her to have their fortunes told. Thorkel was the head farmer and went to Thorbjorg to discover when the famine would end.

When she came to Thorkel's house, she was dressed elaborately and everyone treated her respectfully. She spent the night and in the morning performed her witchcraft. She needed female aides but Gudrid refused due to her Christian belief; but Thorkel pressured her and she submitted.

Thorbjorg predicts that the famine will end soon, as will the epidemic. She also tells Gudrid's fortune, predicting her distinguished marriage in Greenland, which will not last long. She will start a great family line in Iceland and her progeny will be great.

At that time, Thorbjorn readied his ship and sailed to Brattahild to find Eirik the Red, who received him warmly. Thorbjorn's family stayed with Eirik for the winter and Eirik gave Thorbjorn a plot of land called Stokkaness, where he lived the rest of his life.



# Eirik's Saga, Chapter 5 - 6, Leif Discovers Vinland, Thorstein Eiriksson Dies

## Eirik's Saga, Chapter 5 - 6, Leif Discovers Vinland, Thorstein Eiriksson Dies Summary and Analysis

Eirik and his wife Thjodhild gave birth to two sons, Thorstein and Leif, both promising young men. Thorstein became well-known in Greenland, but Leif sailed to Norway to meet King Olaf Tryggvason. While in Norway, Leif fell in love with Thorgunna, a woman of noble birth and unusual knowledge. Leif asks Thorgunna to leave with him but she seems indifferent at first. However, when she tells Leif that he has fathered her child, she tells him that she intends to raise their son in Greenland when he can travel. Still, she wishes to wait to come to Greenland until their child is old enough.

Leif leaves, and they trade gifts. The child, Thorgils, is born and arrives to live with Leif. Thorgils always has an uncanny element about him. Leif then returned to Norway with his men to see King Olaf Tryggvason, who bestowed honor on him. He then approves Leif's journey to Norway. The king wants him to preach Christianity there, but Leif found the mission difficult. Leif then sets sail and has difficulty at sea and runs across lands no one knew about. These lands had wild wheat, and vines; Leif and his men took samples. He also brought home shipwrecked seamen. He then brought Christianity to the country and was called "Leif the Lucky" for finding and rescuing the men.

Leif makes land at Eiriksford and returns to Brattahlid and began preaching Christianity. Eirik did not want to abandon his old ways, but Thjodhild was converted and had a church built. Afterwards, Thjodhild would not live with Eirik until he converted.

Many wanted to go with Leif to see the land he discovered. His brother Thorstein wanted to lead a group there. He took twenty men with him and mainly weapons. Eirik the Red was to go with them, but fell off his horse, cracking some ribs, before they left.

Thorstein and his crew left Eiriksford but had problems at sea and eventually returned home. The exhausted crewmen then went to stay with Eirik and Thorstein.

In the next chapter, Thorstein asks for Gudrid's hand, and Gudrid and her father received the proposal well. They were married at Brattahlid. The two moved to Lysufjord for the winter, but disease came to the farm where they were staying. Thorstein and the wife of their host, Sigrid, both caught the disease. Sigrid then died. Thorstein then found that Sigrid's corpse had come back to life and was trying to get in bed with him. The husband had to kill his undead wife.



That night Thorstein died but his corpse stood up in the night and spoke, encouraging Gudrid to pray. She believes that God will protect her in the future and goes to talk to her undead husband. He tells her that Greenland has the bad custom of burying their dead in unconsecrated ground and with little funeral rite. He wants to be buried at a church; he then predicted her future and told her not to marry a Greenlander. He finally encouraged her to give their money to the church or the poor and he died again. From that time forward, the custom in Greenland for burying the dead was changed, with funeral rites added.

Thorbjorn Vifilsson dies later and Gudrid receives everything; she then goes to live with Eirik the Red at Brattahlid.



# Eirik's Saga, Chapters 7 - 8, Karlsefni in Greenland, Karlsefni Goes to Vinland

## Eirik's Saga, Chapters 7 - 8, Karlsefni in Greenland, Karlsefni Goes to Vinland Summary and Analysis

Chapter 7 introduces Thorfinn Karlsefni, the son of Thord Hose-Head; Karlsefni was rich and was of noble birth; he was a well-known merchant on the seas and took a voyage to Greenland with Snorri Thorbrandsson and forty other men. Two other men, Bjarni and Thorhall, brought forty men of their own. Both ships reached Eiriksfiord in the fall. Eirik traded with them and the captains gave Eirik gifts. Eirik in turn invited them to his home, Brattahlid where they could store their goods. They all then spent the winter together. During the Christmas feast, Karlsefni asked Eirik for Gudrid's hand in marriage. Eirik supported the proposal and saw this as a way for her destiny to be fulfilled.

In Chapter 8, many of the men at Brattahlid made plans to go to Vinland for the land. Karlsefni and Snorri readied their ship and sailed in the summer. Bjarni and Thorhall joined them, as did some other men. Altogether 160 traveled with them. They traveled to the Western Settlement, then to Bjarn Isle; eventually they found a new country they named Helluland, and when they found a second island, they named it Markland. Finally, they went ashore on a long beach to a land the called Kjalarness.

Leif had received two Scottish slaves from King Olaf, Haki and Hekja, to be used when needed; Leif had given them to Karlsefni and he used them to explore the country's resources for three days. After three days, they came back with grapes and wheat, proclaiming they had found good land.

The men then sailed to a fjord and steered into it. They called an island in it Straum Island. They named the ford Straumfjord and unloaded their livestock, staying through a severe winter. They ran short of food as a result and prayed for help; their help did not come quickly. The men then captured a whale when it beached and cooked and ate the meat, but it made them sick. The winter weather eventually broke and the men were able to fish. They then returned to Straumfjord for supplies.





# Eirik's Saga, Chapters 9 - 11, Thorhall Breaks Away, Karlsefni Goes South, The Skrælings Attack

## Eirik's Saga, Chapters 9 - 11, Thorhall Breaks Away, Karlsefni Goes South, The Skrælings Attack Summary and Analysis

Thorhall the Hunter desired to go north to search for Vinland but Karlsefni wanted to move south. Thorhall then took nine men, his ship and broke away. A wind blew them far away from shore and they found their way to Ireland, but the men were beaten and enslaved there, and Thorhall killed.

Karlsefni, however, sailed south with Snorri, Bjarni and the others. They eventually found a river with sandbars; they then sailed into an estuary and named it Hope. They found great natural resources there. The men stayed a fortnight but one morning they saw a large number of skin-boats and men with sticks in them. Snorri thought they may have meant peace. The men were tiny and evil-seeming with coarse hair and large eyes with broad cheekbones. These men, called Skrælings, stared at them and ran off. Then Karlsefni and his men stayed at their settlement through the winter; there was no snow.

When the spring came, Karlsefni and his men saw a large number of skin-boats coming their way. The two parties then started to trade. The Skrælings wanted to buy weapons, but Karlsefni and Snorri would not allow it. They also wanted red cloth for which they traded grey pelts. During the trading, Karlsefni's bull appeared and the Skrælings were scared off. For three weeks they did not see the Skrælings again. The next time they appeared, they seemed interested in war. A fierce battle took place, and the Skrælings used catapults with ballista, which terrified Karlsefni and his men. They decided to run and make their stand.

Freydis then appeared to see the retreat and castigated the men for running. Freydis could not keep up with them because she was pregnant. The Skrælings caught up with her but she pulled at her breast and slapped it with a sword which caused the Skrælings to run off in terror. Karlsefni and his men then praised her courage.

A great many Skrælings were killed but only two of Karlsefni's men. They then went back to their houses and realized that they could not live in safety there so they decided to leave, returning to Straumfjord and stocking up on resources. Bjarni Grimolfsson and Freydis stayed behind with one hundred people. Karlsefni and Snorri went north with the remaining forty; they spent two months at Hope. Karlsefni left to find Thorhall and explored much land thereby.



# **Eirik's Saga, Chapters 12 - 14, Thorvald Eiriksson Dies, Bjarni Grimolfsson's Death, Karlsefni's Descendants**

## **Eirik's Saga, Chapters 12 - 14, Thorvald Eiriksson Dies, Bjarni Grimolfsson's Death, Karlsefni's Descendants Summary and Analysis**

One morning, Karlsefni and his men happen upon a Uniped (a mythical creature) who shoots an arrow into Eirik the Red's son, Thorvald's groin. He then dies from the wound. The Uniped runs off and Karlsefni and his men chase it. They chased the beast by sea but could not catch it. They then went back to Straumfjord and spent their third winter there but they have many fights among themselves, and the unmarried men pestered the married. Karlsefni's son Snorri was born that fall and when he was three they left.

On the way home they capture two Skræling boys and raised them; their names were Vætild and Ovægir and said their land was ruled by two kings, Avaldaman and Valdidida. They also mention a mythical land of white-men known as Hvíramannaland.

Karlsefni and his men reach Greenland and spend the winter with Eirik the Red.

However, Bjarni Grimolfsson's ship was blown into the Greenland sea into waters with maggots; the ship was eaten through and started to sink; the men tried to seal the holes. When this failed, the men chose lots to see who would leave the ship. Bjarni drew a bad lot and was to leave the ship when an Icelandic friend offered to trade places. However, Bjarni and those with him died in the maggot sea. Those in the ship's boat reached land and told the story.

After two more summers, Karlsefni returned to Iceland with Snorri, his son, to his farm at Reyniness. Karlsefni's mother initially did not like Gudrid but came to like her more as time went on. Snorri Karlsefnisson sires a daughter Hallfrid who gave birth to Bishop Thorlak Runolsson. They had another son, Thorbjorn, who sired Thorunn, who gave birth to Bishop Bjorn. Snorri had a son named Thorgeir, who sired Yngvild, who birthed the first Bishop Brand. The saga ends.



# Characters

## Eirik the Red

Eirik the Red (Eiríkr rauði in Old Norse) is thought to have lived between 950 and around 1003. He is widely believed to have created the Norse settlement in Greenland. His parents were forced to leave Norway due to some killings, as the Vinland Sagas report. They then settled in western Iceland but then Erik himself got involved in several killings (recounted in more detail in Eirik's Saga) which lead him to be declared an outlaw around 982. The dispute surrounded a dispute with his neighbor, Thorgest.

While Eirik the Red was not the first Icelandic settler of Greenland, he was the first permanent settler and he is also said to have named it; in both sagas it is reported that Eirik named the island 'Greenland' in order to attract settlers there. In Eirik's Saga, Eirik spends three years exploring the island. He also founded a home there, Eiriksfiord. In 985, Eirik led many settlers to Greenland, founding the Eastern Settlement and the Western Settlement. In the Eastern Settlement, Eirik founded his long-term estate, Brattahlid and was the primary chieftain of Greenland, acquiring great renown and wealth.

Eirik would later be killed due to disease brought to Greenland by settlers. Before this, however, he is thought to have had four children with his wife Thjodhildr, Freydis, their daughter, and three sons: Leif, Thorvald and Thorstein Eiriksson. Despite Iceland's conversion to Christianity, along with Greenland's conversion, Eirik died a believer in Norse paganism. His son, Leif, would discover Vinland (part of present-day Newfoundland) and his other sons would help to explore it.

## Leif Eiriksson

Leif Ericson (Leifr Eiríksson in Old Norse) is believed to have lived between around 970 and 1020 A.D. He was the son of Eirik the Red and was a famous Norse explorer like his father. It is widely believed that Leif Eiriksson was the first European to ever set foot in North America (excluding Greenland). Leif was born in Iceland, his father an outlaw. Leif eventually married Thorgunna and they had a single child, Thorkell Leifsson, their son.

On a trip to Norway to meet with King Olaf I, Leif was brought to Christianity. King Olaf I charged him with the evangelization of Greenland, and Leif then bought Bjarni Herjolfsson's boat and left to find Greenland, taking thirty-five men with him. During his trip, he ran aground two islands that he named Helluland and Markland respectively.

After leaving Markland, Leif and his crew found yet another island, which they named Vinland or 'Land of the Grapes.' It has massive amounts of natural resources, including salmon, wild wheat and grapes and was warm enough to avoid the massive snows of winter. It had grass the entire year round. While Leif is not thought to have been the first



man to bring Christianity to Greenland, there is archaeological evidence of Leif's settlement in North Newfoundland, which is today called L'Anse aux Meadows.

Leif lent his settlement to various other explorers who followed him, including his brother Thorstein and Thorfinn Karlsefni.

## **Bjarni Herjolfsson**

A 10th century explorer from Norway who was the first to sight North America from the sea; this is thought to have occurred in 986.

## **Thorfinn Karlsefni**

Thorfinn Karlsefni is perhaps the third major character in the book. He was from Iceland and explored Vinland in 1010 A.D. attempting to form a permanent settlement there. Karlsefni was a wealthy and talented sea merchant who led a large number of men and women to the settlement but due to conflicts with natives, who they called the Skrælings, they decided to leave, regarding the land as unsafe.

## **Gudrid Eiriksdottir-Karlsefni**

Gudrid is another major character in both sagas. Her first husband is Thorstein Eiriksson, who dies from disease and whose corpse prophesies that she will marry a great man and have many powerful children. These things come to pass when Gudrid marries Thorfinn Karlsefni. The two have a son Snorri and after Snorri is married and Karlsefni dies, Gudrid makes a pilgrimage to Rome, builds a church in Iceland (thought to have been recently discovered) and lives out her life as a nun.

## **The Skrælings**

A 'Skræling' is the name that Norse settlers of Greenland gave to the Thule people (probably Inuit) in Greenland, but they used the same name for the Native Americans they encountered in Newfoundland, who are probably the ancestors of the Beothuk. 'Skræling' means barbarian or foreigner. In the sagas, the Skrælings are so numerous and barbaric that Karlsefni decides to take his settlement and leave Vinland.

## **Thorstein Eiriksson**

Thorstein was Gudrid's first husband and the son of Eirik the Red; when he died, his corpse prophesied Gudrid's future; he also led an important expedition to Vinland.



## **Freydis Eirik's-daughter**

Eirik the Red's daughter, an arrogant and wicked woman who in the Grænlinga Saga was responsible for the murders of dozens of Vinland settlers. In Eirik's Saga, however, she fends off a Skræling attack.

## **Snorri Karlsefnisson**

The son of Karlsefni and Gudrid.

## **Thorvald Eiriksson**

The third son of Eirik the Red and the brother of Leif and Thorstein, Thorvald plays a much smaller role in Eirik's Saga than Grænlinga Saga.

## **Thorbjorg**

A pagan Icelandic witch who foresees Gudrid's future in the Grænlinga Saga.



# Objects/Places

## Norway

The country of origin for nearly all Icelanders, Greenlanders and other settlers. Many trading missions are made to Norway during the Vinland Sagas and Christianity comes to Iceland and Greenland from Norway as well.

## Iceland

Iceland is the central country of events during the Vinland Sagas.

## Greenland

Eirik the Red takes the first permanent settlers to Greenland after being outlawed from Iceland.

## Helluland and Markland

Two islands discovered and named by Leif Eiriksson during his voyage to Greenland.

## Vinland

An area that is today the Northern tip of Newfoundland, Leif Eiriksson built the first Norse settlement there in the early 11th century, nearly five hundred years before Columbus. The land is named Vinland because of its wild grapes and plentiful resources. Other expeditions were led to Vinland, but the last mentioned is that of Karlsefni. His settlement may have been successful save that he and others judged the land upset due to the large presence of Skrælings.

## Eiriksfjord

Eirik the Red's settlement in Greenland built around a fjord.

## Brattahlid

Eirik the Red's estate in Greenland.



## **Straumfjord**

A fjord discovered north of Vinland where many resources were gathered.

## **Outlawry**

The Icelanders declared a man an outlaw when a judge believed him guilty of a certain crime. An outlaw can legally be killed by any man without penalty. Eirik the Red's outlaw status led him to leave Iceland for Greenland.

## **Viking Ships**

The famous Viking Long Boats were used to travel between Norway, Iceland, Greenland and Vinland.

## **Trading**

The major reason for travel between Norway, Iceland and Greenland was trade.

## **Cargo**

Cargo between Norway, Iceland, Greenland and Vinland included pelts, cloth, grapes, wild wheat, salmon, and timber.

## **Skirmishes**

Skirmishes pervade the Vinland Sagas, not only between Icelanders but between Norse settlers and the Skrælings.

## **Gudrid's Prophecy**

In both sagas, Gudrid is prophesied to live a long life, marry well and have many children. After her husband's death, the prophecy states that she will make a pilgrimage to Rome, build a church in Iceland and live out her years as a nun. These things, according to the sagas, came to pass.

## **Gudrid's Church**

The church Gudrid had built in Iceland due to the prophecy. There is archaeological evidence for its existence.



## Speaking Corpses

In Icelandic lore, recently deceased individuals would often deliver messages through their reanimated corpses.



# Themes

## Discovery of the New World

Medieval Norwegians had an unusual penchant for exploration. Most medieval communities were composed of serfs with few life prospects. The vast majority of Europeans would rarely leave their city-states, much less their countries. Widespread emigration not forced by conquest or circumstance is a phenomenon much more characteristic of later centuries. One impressive feature of the Vinland Sagas is the presentation of Norwegian and Icelandic elites as bold explorers long before their time, possessing a degree of individuality largely unknown during their time period.

This individualism was particularly striking in Medieval Iceland, which had no formal state to speak of and was instead ruled by a group of loosely affiliated chieftains whose jurisdictions of judgment overlapped. The peace was enforced by a system of outlawry, declared by particular assemblies and voluntarily respected by others. It was through this system, in fact, that Eirik the Red was forced to leave Iceland in the first place.

Not only were Eirik, his sons and Karlsefni bold explorers in search of new lands, but they were easily able to recruit fellow settlers, willing to leave their communities and build a new home far away. Voyages to new lands were particularly dangerous and many often died; the same was true of maintaining settlements. Yet for whatever reason, Medieval Icelanders attempted these mighty tasks. Thus, one theme of the Vinland Sagas is the exploration and discovery of the New World, which seems to have been about much more than the discovery of treasure.

## Lineage

All Icelandic Sagas, however, retain a communitarian element that compliments the individualistic culture of the Icelanders. Icelanders affiliated in familial clans and kept close track of the ancestry, tracking their lineage back generations. They believed that the actions of those in one generation could have dire consequences for those of future generations, and one such case is reflected in the Grænlendinga Saga when Freydis's murders lead her to be cursed with poor progeny.

The Vinland Sagas, particularly Eirik's Saga, tracks the lineages of its various major characters. In the first chapter of Eirik's Saga, his lineage is listed, beginning with a warrior-king known as Olaf the White, sired by King Ingjald. Olaf was King of Ireland and took a wife named Aud the Deep-Minded, daughter of Ketil Flat-Nose, one of the first Icelandic settlers. Aud and Ingjald had a son known as Thorstein the Red. When Olaf was killed, Thorstein took over, conquering many lands in Scotland. Thorstein eventually dies in battle, leading Aud the Deep-Minded to follow her father Ketil Flat-Nose to Iceland; she there had many children, and is connected to the family of Gudrid,



who plays a major role in the book. Aud the Deep-Minded's lineage plays a central role in the Laxdaela Saga, another Icelandic Saga of note.

Gudrid's lineage continues, particularly after she marries Karlsefni and gives birth to Snorri Karlsefnisson, who had a daughter, Steinnun, who married Einar, and they sired Thorstein the Unjust, father of Gudrun, who in turn married Jorund Keldur. Their daughter, Halla, gave birth to Flosi, who fathered Valgerd, the mother of Sir Erlend the Strong, who sired Hauk the Lawman. Icelandic lineages continue uninterrupted to this very day.

## Conflict

The Icelandic Sagas could not be the great works of literature they are without a deep theme of conflict. The Vinland Sagas could not have gotten off the ground unless Eirik the Red's parents were made to flee Norway due to 'some killings'. Eirik the Red himself was involved in a serious conflict with his neighbor.

To give one example, after Thorvald died, Eirik the Red was married to Thjodhild and made a home for himself at Eirikstead. At this home, he possessed slaves who were thought to have accidentally generated a landslide, destroying the neighbor's farm. The kinsmen of the neighbor retaliated, killing the slaves and then Eirik retaliated by killing his neighbor's kinsmen. Eirik was then banned from Haukadale and had to leave for Greenland.

Another important conflict occurred between Freydis Eirik's-daughter and two Norwegian brothers named Helgi and Finnbogi. Freydis invited them to come with her on her voyage to Vinland and share the profits. Freydis stowed away extra men in order to have a greater force than the brothers. When the brothers discovered this, they were angry; in response, Freydis approached Finnbogi to bury the hatchet. However, when Freydis went home, she told Thorvard, her husband, that Finnbogi had hurt her and she goaded Thorvard into avenging her. Thorvard then took his men and captured the brothers. Freydis had them killed along with all of their men; she then killed all five of their women herself. This story, however, only occurs in the Grænlendinga Saga, but it still represents an important conflict.

Perhaps the most important conflict in both sagas, however, is the conflict between the Vinland settlers and the Native Americans there, those the Icelanders called Skrælings. The Skrælings initially appeared peaceful, but eventually they became violent. While the Icelanders could fight them off, their numbers were too large. Karlsefni and his settlers eventually decided to leave Vinland due to the dangers from the Skrælings.



# Style

## Perspective

The authors of the Vinland Saga are unknown; but they appear to have clear major influences, particularly that of a culture of chivalry on the European continent. In this period, romantic tales of great heroes were in the air, as was the power of medieval Christianity.

The reader can understand the Vinland Sags, then, not merely as histories of their periods but as romances of the sagas' major characters, particularly Eirik the Red, Leif Eiriksson, and Karlsefni and Gudrud. These figures are seen by the Icelanders to this day as among the great founders of their country, and their role was even more significant during the writing of the sagas because the heroic achievements of these individuals were still within live historical memory.

The Vinland Sagas also appear to see the days of the Vinland Saga as halcyon. The early days were great ones. Furthermore, the authors appear to be committed Christians, attributing the spread of Christianity in Greenland to Leif Eiriksson. The authors speak much more about the conversion of Iceland to Christianity than other saga writers of the day, often discussing the religion of the major figures and associating those with better characters with being Christians. For instance, one of the more quarrelsome members of Karlsefni's settlement party, Thorhall, is noted as one resistant to Christianity.

Of course, the authors, like all saga writers, take a grand perspective on familial histories and focus to some extent on family lines. They appear to attribute importance to the continuity of families across time. Further, the authors appear to accept as true various pieces of Icelandic Lore, such as talking corpses, witches, prophecies and the existence of the Uniped.

The sagas are written in the third-person, in ordinary prose, despite discussing grand events. Internal dialogue is never present. Finally, the saga has no major villain (unless Freydis's role is overemphasized); instead, all of the major characters are mixtures of good and bad, though some are clearly seen as better than others.

## Tone

Initially the reader will find the tone of the Vinland Sagas as matter-of-fact and dry. The Sagas are short and appear to rush through events as if the authors were simply interested in a historical record - which may have indeed been their purpose. For instance, the authors often list lineages and engage in a lot of stage setting for major events, such as giving back stories and histories of major characters. Further, the texts often lead into asides about brief events of note but that do not contribute to the story line.



As noted in the perspective, the authors write in the third-person and leave out descriptions of the thought lives of the characters. The tone of the text therefore appears matter-of-fact because it seems to be a condensed history of the events it covers. Unlike other sagas, it does not seek to present grand story arcs or describe grand lineages; thus, even the content descriptions have a thrown together feel. As a result, the tone of the Sagas appear to be characteristic of history texts.

However, the matter-of-fact tone of the Vinland Sagas is sometimes belied by embellishment. The discussion of Icelandic Lore, particularly Thorstein's corpse's prophesy over Gudrid about her future, is undoubtedly an additional for the purposes of excitement and interest, as is the death of Thorstein at the hands of the Uniped in Eirik's Saga. This may reflect the fact that Iceland's major export at the time of the sagas was culture, with many Icelandic writers hired by royalty for various purposes. Thus the Vinland Sagas may have needed elements of excitement to spread.

## Structure

The Vinland Sagas themselves are contained within a book that contains an extensive introduction by its authors, Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson. They discuss the historical setting of the sagas, their historical veracity, archaeological evidence that supports their veracity, geographical landmarks, the culture of the saga writers, and the effects of Norse colonization. All in all, the introduction is exceedingly useful.

Following the introduction are the two sagas; the Grælinga Saga is presented first. The Grælinga Saga contains nine chapters, which mainly discuss Eirik the Red's travel to Greenland, Leif's discovery of Vinland and other areas, the excursions of Thorstein, Thorvald and Karsefni, Freydis's excursion, the marriage of Gudrud, and the prophesy surrounding her.

These events are all discussed in chronological order with chapter titles that give away the major event of the chapter. Chapter 1 is named "Eirik Explores Greenland" because it discusses Eirik the Red's exploration of Greenland. The other chapters are similarly named: "Bjarni Sights Land to the West," "Leif Explores Vinland," "Leif Returns to Greenland," "Thorvald Explores Vinland," "Thorstein Eiriksson Dies," "Karlsefni in Vinland," "Freydis in Vinland," and finally, "Karlsefni's Descendants."

Immediately following the Grælinga Saga is Eirik's Saga which focuses more on the events surrounding Eirik the Red but largely covers the same events. However, various events differ, are left out, or are included that were not so in the Grælinga Saga. For instance, Thorstein dies in two different ways, Gudrid receives her prophesy in two distinct fashions, in one saga the conflict that got Eirik the Red outlawed from Iceland is discussed in more detail and in the first saga Freydis has a significantly larger and more wicked role. Generally, Gudrid features much more prominently in Eirik's Saga as well.

Eirik's Saga is longer, with fourteen chapters, but many have similar titles: "Gudrid's Ancestry," "Eirik Explores Greenland," "Gudrid Goes to Greenland," "Gudrid is Told Her



Future," "Leif Discovers Vinland," "Thorstein Eiriksson Dies," "Karlsefni in Greenland," "Karlsefni Goes to Vinland," "Thorhall Breaks Away," "Karlsefni Goes South," "The Skrælings Attack," "Thorvald Eiriksson Dies," "Bjarni Grimolfsson's Death" and "Karlsefni's Descendants."

Following the two sagas, the authors include a long list of personal and place names, a chronological table, and several helpful maps.



## Quotes

"He named the country he had discovered Greenland, for he said that people would be much more tempted to go there if it had an attractive name." (Grænlinga Saga, Chapter 1, Eirik Explores Greenland, 50)

"Bjarni was a man of much promise. From early youth he had been eager to sail to foreign lands ... He soon had a merchant ship of his own." (Grænlinga Saga, Chapter 2, Bjarni Sights Land to the West, 51)

"I am not meant to discover more countries than this one we now live in. This is as far as we go together." (Grænlinga Saga, Chapter 3, Leif Explores Vinland, 55)

"Leif was tall and strong and very impressive in appearance. He was a shrewd man and always moderate in his behavior." (Grænlinga Saga, Chapter 3, Leif Explores Vinland, 56)

"I am anxious to tell Gudrid her destiny, so that she may resign herself better to my death, for I have now come to a happy place of repose." (Grænlinga Saga, Chapter 6, Thorstein Eiriksson Dies, 64)

"I do not have the heart to punish my sister Freydis as she deserves. But I prophesy that her descendants will never prosper." (Grænlinga Saga, Chapter 9, Karlsefni's Descendants, 70)

"Eirik and his men were sentenced to outlawry at the Thorsness Assembly." (Eirik's Saga, Chapter 2, Eirik Explores Greenland, 77)

"I never expected to hear such a suggestion from you - that I should marry my daughter to the son of a slave!" (Eirik's Saga, Chapter 3, Gudrid Goes to Greenland, 80)

"This is the sort of knowledge and ceremony that I want nothing to do with, for I am a Christian." (Eirik's Saga, Chapter 4, Gudrid is Told Her Future, 82)

"Then they prayed to God to send them something to eat, but the response was not as prompt as they would have liked." (Eirik's Saga, Chapter 8, Karlsefni Goes to Vinland, 96)

"The newcomers rowed towards them and stared at them in amazement as they came ashore. They were dark-colored, evil-looking and their hair was coarse; they had large eyes and broad cheekbones." (Eirik's Saga, Chapter 10, Karlsefni Goes South, 98)

"This is a rich country we have found; there is plenty of fat around my entrails." (Eirik's Saga, Chapter 12, Thorvald Eiriksson Dies, 102)

"And there this saga ends." (Eirik's Saga, Chapter 14, Karlsefni's Descendants, 105)



## Topics for Discussion

Name three primary differences between the Grænlendinga Saga and Eirik's Saga. Are any of them significant?

Which of the two sagas, Grænlendinga Saga or Eirik's Saga, do you think is more historically accurate and why?

What is outlawry in Icelandic law? How does it affect both sagas?

Why does Leif Eiriksson travel to Vinland? Why does Karlsefni do the same?

How does Freydis's role in both sagas differ from one another? Is this significant?

How central is Gudrid's prophesy to the sagas? Does it matter that the presentations of the prophesies differ?

What is the significance of Christianity in the sagas? Why is it mentioned? Name three ways it affects the story.