

Greenlanders' Saga, c. 1000

THIS TALE OF NORSE EXPLORATION, THE GREENLANDERS' SAGA, was written down in about 1200, after being passed down as oral history for two hundred years after the events took place. In the 980s, Eirík the Red founded a settlement on the optimistically named Greenland. According to the Greenlanders' Saga, another Viking sailor, Bjarni Herjólfsson, was blown off course in about 1000 on his way from Norway to the settlement at Greenland and returned with tales of a fruitful and promising land that he had discovered but not explored.

There was now much talk of exploration. Leif, son of Eirík the Red of Brattahlíð, went to see Bjarni Herjólfsson and bought a ship from him and gathered a crew of thirty-five men. Leif asked his father, Eirík, if he would lead the expedition once more. Eirík said that he would rather not, declaring himself too old and much less hardy than he used to be. Leif said that he still had the best luck of any of his kinsmen. Eirík conceded to Leif and rode from home as soon as they were ready. A short distance from the ships, the horse Eirík was riding stumbled, and he fell from his horse and injured his leg. "It seems I'm not fated to find more land than the one we now inhabit," Eirík said. "We'll no longer travel together." Eirík went home to Brattahlíð, and Leif and his crew of thirty-five rode to the ship. There was one southerner on the journey who was called Tyrkir.

They prepared the ship and sailed out to sea. The first land that they found was the one that Bjarni and his crew had found last. They sailed up to the land, cast anchor, launched a small boat, and went ashore, but they saw no grass. The inland part of the country was covered by great glaciers, and as far as the

eye could see the land looked like one flat stone. The land seemed barren. Then Leif said, "We aren't as bad off as Bjarni who never made it ashore. I shall give this land a name and call it Helluland."¹ . . .

[They come upon another land they call Markland (Forest Land).]

Now they sailed out to sea with a northeast wind and were out at sea two days before they saw land. They sailed toward the land and came to an island which lay to the north of the mainland. They went to have a look around and found good weather and dew on the grass, and the first thing they did was scoop the dew up in their hands and bring it to their mouths; they had never tasted anything so sweet. Afterwards, they returned to their ship and sailed into the strait which lay between the island and the headland jutting north out of the land, turning west around the cape. There was a great shallows near the fjord, and their ship ran aground on the sea floor; and the sea couldn't be seen for a long way around the ship. Their curiosity to get ashore was so great that they couldn't bear to wait for the tide to rise under the ship, and they ran ashore where a river flowed out of a lake. As soon as the sea rose up under the ship again, they rowed the boat back to the ship and steered it up the river to the lake, dropped the anchor, and unloaded leather hammocks and built temporary dwellings.²

They decided to camp there for the winter and built great houses.³ Neither the river nor the lake was lacking in salmon, and they had never seen bigger salmon. The country's resources were so good that it didn't seem to them that they would need fodder for the cattle that winter; there was no frost, and the grass hardly wilted at all. The days and nights were more of equal length than in Greenland or Iceland; the sun was up by breakfast time and was still up late into the afternoon, even on the short winter days. When they finished building the houses, Leif said to his crew, "Now I'll divide our company into two groups, and we will search the land. Half of the crew shall stay at the compound and the other half must search the land but not be gone so long that they can't be home by evening, and they should not part company."

So that's what they did. Leif took turns going out with the men and staying at the compound. Leif was a great, strong man, magnificent to behold as well as a wise and just man in all respects.

One evening it came to pass that a man was missing, and it was Tyrkir the Southerner. Leif was very unhappy because Tyrkir had been with both him and his father a long time and had been very fond of Leif in his childhood. Leif lashed out at his companions, and he together with twelve men went out to search. They had gone only a short distance from the hall when Tyrkir came walking toward them, and he was greeted joyfully. Leif soon noticed that his foster father was in good spirits. . . .

Then Leif asked him, "Why were you so late, Foster Father, and separated from your companions?" Tyrkir spoke then a long time, at first in German,

rolling his eyes all over and making faces, but they couldn't understand what he said. After a while, he said in the Norse tongue, "I didn't go much farther than you, but I have some news about what I saw. I found grapevines and grapes."

"Can that be true, Foster Father?" asked Leif.

"Certainly it's true," he said. "We didn't lack for grapevines or grapes where I was born."

They slept through the night, and in the morning Leif spoke with his crew: "Now we shall have two kinds of work. On alternating days we will gather grapes and hew grapevines and fell the forest to make cargo for my ship." So that's what they did, and it is said that they towed a small boat filled with grapes behind their ship. A full cargo of timber was cut for the ship, and when spring came, they prepared to go. Leif gave the land a name based upon the good things they found there and called it *Vínland*.⁴

They sailed out to sea with a favourable wind until they saw Greenland under its mountain of glaciers. Then one man took to talking and spoke with Leif, "Why do you steer the ship so close to the wind?"

Leif answered, "I am keeping my eye on my steering but also on something more. Don't you see anything unusual?" They said they didn't see anything out of place. "I can't tell," said Leif, "whether I see a ship or a skerry."⁵

Now they saw it and said it was a skerry, but Leif could see better than they did and saw men on the rock. "Now I will sail near the wind," said Leif, "so that we can see if these men need help, and if they do, we must help them. If they are not men of peace, all of the advantage is on our side rather than theirs." So they drew near the rock, lowered the sail, cast anchor, and got out another little boat they had with them. Then Tyrkir asked who their leader was. The leader said he was called Thorir and was Norwegian by birth and asked, "And what is your name?"

Leif told him.

"Are you the son of Eirík the Red of Brattahlíð?" he asked.

Leif said that he was. "Now," said Leif, "I invite you all onto my ship and as many of your possessions as the ship can hold." They accepted this offer and sailed afterwards to Eriksfjard with their load. Then they came to Brattahlíð where they unloaded the cargo. Leif bade Thorir and his wife Gudrid and three other men to lodge with him and procured lodging for the other crewmen, both Thorir's crew and his own. Leif pulled fifteen men from the rock and was thereafter called Leif the Lucky. Leif grew in wealth and in honor.

That winter, a terrible illness befell Thorir's crew, and Thorir and many of his people died. That winter, Eirík the Red also died.

Now there was much discussion about Leif's *Vínland* voyage, and Thorvald, his brother, thought that the land had been explored too carelessly. Then Leif

spoke with Thorvald, "You shall go with my ship, brother, if you will, to Vínland, but first I will go in that ship and get the timber that Thorir left on the rock."

And so it was done.

Now Thorvald, with much discussion with his brother Leif, prepared for his voyage along with thirty men. After they prepared their ship and went to sea, nothing is told of their journey until they arrived at Leifsbud in Vínland,⁶ where they laid up their ship and settled in for the winter, catching fish for their provisions. In the spring, Thorvald said that they should prepare the ship and that some of the crew should take the small boat and travel west along the coast and explore there that summer.

They saw beautiful land and forests, and the woods were only a short distance from the shining white sand. There were many islands and much shallow water. Nowhere did they find men's lodging nor animals, but on a westerly isle they did find a wooden cornstack. They found no other work by human hands and returned to Leifsbud in the autumn.

The next summer, Thorvald went out to the east with his merchant ship and sailed north along the coast . . . and into the mouth of a fjord, next to the headland, which jutted out and was all overgrown with woods. They anchored the ship, shot out the gangway, and Thorvald went ashore and all his crew with him.

He said then, "Here it is fair, and here I want to build my home."

Then they headed back to the ship and spotted three mounds in the sand along the headland and went toward them and discovered three skin-covered canoes with three men under each.⁷ Thorvald and his crew split up and seized them all, except one who escaped in his canoe. They killed the other eight and went back to the headland and looked around and saw several mounds along the fjord and guessed that they were dwellings.]

After that, such a great drowsiness struck them that they could not stay awake, and they all fell asleep. Then a call came and woke them all; the call said, "Wake up, Thorvald, and all your company, if you wish to save your life, and go to your ship, you and all your men, and leave this land as fast as you can." Then a fleet of skin-boats came at them down the fjord.]

Thorvald said, "We must raise the barricades on the gunwales of the ship and defend ourselves as best we can, but attack them little."

They did this, and the Skrälings⁸ shot at them for a while and then fled as fast as they could. Then Thorvald spoke to his men and asked if anyone was wounded, and they reported that there was not one wound.

"I have a wound in my armpit," said Thorvald. "An arrow flew between the gunwales and the shield and under my arm, and here it is. It will lead to my death. I order that you prepare to leave as soon as possible. You will bring me

to that headland that I thought to make my home; it occurs to me that I shall dwell there for a while after all. There shall you bury me and lay a cross at my head and at my feet, and call that place Krossanes⁹ ever after."

Greenland was Christianized by then, even though Eirík the Red died before the coming of Christianity.

Now Thorvald breathed his last, and they did all according to what he had said and went afterward to meet with their companions and exchanged such tidings as they knew. They settled there that winter and gathered grapes and grapevines to put in the ship. They prepared to return to Greenland in the spring, at which time the ship sailed into Eiríksfjord with much news for Leif.

Translated by Tiffany Griffith from *The Vinland Sagas*, ed. Halldór Hermannsson (Ithaca, 1944), 49–54.