

The True Discoverers of America

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When we think of the great discoverers — Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, Ponce de León, Pedro Álvares Cabral, Vasco Núñez de Balboa, Bartolomeu Dias, and others — we usually picture a single man commanding a fleet at one of history's grandest moments. But there were not only solitary leaders: there were entire families carrying the DNA of discovery in their destinies, and doing so in far quieter circumstances. I am speaking of the Viking warriors Erik the Red and his son, Leif Erikson.

Norway, the second half of the tenth century. A man — most likely red-haired and red-bearded, hence the byname "the Red" — belonged to a warrior people who had been pressing southward into Europe for centuries, helping to redraw the political map of the continent as their relentless raiding made kingdoms and fiefs expand or retreat. His name was Erik. Not content to pour his warlike nature over his southern neighbors, he killed a countryman and was exiled from Norway as punishment.

Erik was thus given the opportunity, compulsory as it was, to exercise his gift for command aboard a ship with no fixed destination in the North Atlantic. One ordinary day he sighted an island that had never been mapped — the land we now know as Iceland. He found it so perfect that he returned clandestinely to Norway and recruited settlers to form a small community in the new home. He rebuilt his life there, living with his family in subsistence. But he made the same mistake again: he killed a second man, and for that he suffered a second exile.

Sailing once more through the cold waters of the North Atlantic, he became the discoverer of a second and far larger island: Greenland. There, with his followers, he dreamed of founding his own kingdom, and gave rise to the Eastern and Western Settlements. From Greenland they traded with continental Europe, in a social body whose organization, discipline, and equality would stand comparison with the Scandinavian societies of our own day. Perhaps it was that very perfection that left his son Leif unsatisfied. And so he sailed farther west, toward the unknown.

He named the place where he landed, on the eastern coast of North America, Vinland. We now know it to be the region of Newfoundland, in Canada, where he established initially friendly contact with the native peoples and encouraged the building of a settlement. He returned to Greenland and, as his father had done after the first exile, persuaded others to emigrate with him. On one of those crossings he learned that his father, Erik the Red, had died. He never returned to Vinland, where wars between natives and settlers followed in later years.

Erik's story is finely told in the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, a literature much like the Icelandic sagas in its pastoral character, its heroism, and its incomparable courage. And although Leif Erikson's landfall took place in what would become Canada, in 1964 the President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, proclaimed Leif Erikson Day, observed each year on October 9.

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