

# LESSON I

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*The First Americans* . . . . . ? A.D.  
*Leif Ericson*. . . . . 970 or 980 — 1020 A.D.

## ATMOSPHERE

### THE FIRST AMERICANS

Who were the first people to explore what we call America today? Not Europeans! Historians believe that the first explorers of America were people who migrated from central Asia. These “first Americans” probably crossed the Bering Sea from Siberia to Alaska, either using a raft or walking over a bridge of land that no longer exists. By the time of the age of European exploration, there were millions of descendants of these Asian immigrants scattered from Alaska to as far south as Chile.

No one knows exactly when the first Americans arrived. However, we do know that the migrations of these Native Americans continued until they had spread throughout present-day Canada, the United States, Mexico, Central America, and South America. Over time they became organized into hundreds of tribes and family groups. Each group developed its own way of life, depending on the location and type of land where they settled.

Through the centuries, a number of great Native American civilizations grew up in the Americas. These civilizations, such as the Aztec and Inca empires, built large cities, established their own reli-



*Picture 1-1*  
**Native American on raft**



Picture 1-2  
**Leif Eriksson**



Picture 1-3  
**Eric the Red**

gious beliefs, and developed skills in such disciplines as math, astronomy, and art. However, most Europeans arriving in America during the sixteenth century considered Native Americans to be an inferior, uncivilized race and lusted for their land and its resources with little compassion or guilt.

### LEIF (THE LUCKY) ERIKSSON

The first *recorded* European explorer of America was the Viking adventurer Leif Eriksson (spelled various ways—Ericson, Ericsson, Erikson, or Erickson). Son of Erik the Red, Leif was probably born in Iceland, an island that had been colonized by a group of Norwegians sometime between 890 and 930 A.D. Around 982, Leif's father Erik was banished from Iceland for several years because of his violent behavior.

Sailing westward from Iceland, Erik discovered another island, which he named Greenland. This name did not fit the topography of the land, since four-fifths of the island was covered in ice. However, Erik the Red did find good farmland on its south and west coasts. When his period of exile was over, Erik returned to Iceland to recruit others to join with him and his family in colonizing Greenland.

Sometime in 985 – 986, Erik the Red succeeded in persuading a small group of Icelanders to sail with him to Greenland to plant a colony there. In Greenland, Eric established his family on a farm, where his children, including his son Leif, grew to adulthood. Described in Viking sagas as tall and handsome, Leif, like most Norsemen, had long flaxen hair and piercing blue eyes. A skilled seaman and a ruthless warrior, Leif Eriksson was also known as a faithful and generous friend.

As he grew to manhood, Leif heard many stories about King Olav of Norway and his glorious deeds. By 999, Leif had grown eager to meet this celebrated king and made plans to lead an expedition to Norway. While visiting in Olav's court, Leif and his men were introduced to the foundations of the Christian faith. According to some sources, Leif and his companions accepted the Gospel and agreed to be baptized.

When Leif returned to Greenland, he shared the Gospel with his mother. She became a believer; and after her conversion, she asked her husband Erik to build a church for worship. Although Erik agreed to have this church constructed, there is no record that he visited it when it was completed or accepted the Christian faith as his own.

## EVENT

### THE FATE OF THE FIRST AMERICANS

At first, many Native American tribes received European explorers and colonists with curiosity and friendliness. In fact, some tribes even helped to save a number of European settlements from starvation. Most Native Americans were fascinated with European materials and skills, which were unfamiliar to them. However, when Europeans seized Native American lands and enslaved them, they became violent. Terrible conflicts and many deaths resulted, and the Europeans usually prevailed. Furthermore, those Native Americans not killed in battle faced the very real possibility of dying from diseases brought over by Europeans (for which they had no immunity. In fact, historians believe that the germs carried by Europeans to the New World had killed 50 to 80 percent of the Native American population within the first hundred years of contact.).

As Europeans continued to come to America in the sixteenth century and to plant colonies there in the seventeenth century, they did everything that they could to establish their supremacy over Native Americans. In particular, they sought to increase the natives' dependency upon European manufactured goods, for which they eagerly traded. By taking advantage of this dependency, Europeans were able to secure vast tracts of land in exchange for materials worth very little. As the years passed, more and more Native Americans lost their lives or their freedom at the hands of European explorers and colonists.



*Picture 1-4*  
**King Olav of Norway**

Map1-1  
**Eriksson's Explorations**



*Picture 1-5*  
**Vikings in Vinland**  
Upon their landing on Vinland, Leif and his men decided to remain for the winter.

## ERIKSSON'S EXPLORATIONS

After returning from Norway, Leif began making plans to follow up on the story of a voyage made by Bjarni Herjolfsson in about 985 - 986. Herjolfsson had apparently sailed past his intended destination, Greenland, and discovered new lands, which were covered in trees and without glaciers. For several days, Herjolfsson had traveled north along this land; he then turned east and made his way to Greenland.

Sometime in 1000 or 1001, Leif decided to buy Herjolfsson's boat. He assembled a crew and set out to retrace Herjolfsson's route. When Leif asked his father to command this expedition, Erik agreed to do so. However, on his way to the ship, Erik fell from his horse and suffered an injury that prevented him from sailing with Leif and his men.

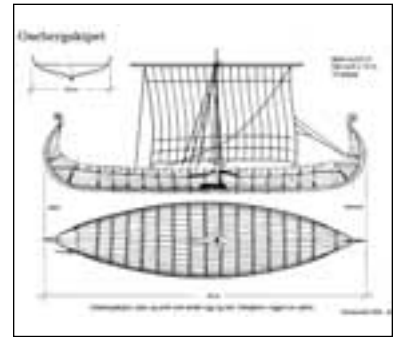
Because Leif and his men left behind no maps, scholars are not certain where they landed during their voyage of exploration. There are

several historical theories concerning the location of their three landing sites:

- The first landing site, which they named *Helluland* (Country of Flat Stones), is likely to be present-day Baffin Island or possibly Newfoundland.
- The second landing site, which they named *Markland* (Land of Forests or Woods), is likely to be present-day Labrador or possibly Nova Scotia.
- The third landing site, which they named *Vinland* (Wineland), is likely to be present-day Newfoundland or possibly Cape Cod.

When they landed on Vinland, Leif and his men decided to remain for the winter. There they chopped down trees, built huts, hunted for game, and fished for salmon. They were amazed at the land's abundant resources. They also noticed that the winter days in Vinland were longer than the winter days in Greenland. As they prepared to leave, Leif and his men loaded their ship with lumber and grapes to carry home. On the return voyage to Greenland, Leif succeeded in rescuing fifteen sailors who he found shipwrecked on a small reef. This daring rescue earned him the nickname Leif the Lucky.

The year after Leif's return from Vinland, Erik the Red died. Leif's time then became consumed with caring for Erik's lands, and he never personally returned to Vinland. However, other Vikings sought to colonize the area with his assistance. For a period of about twelve years, Vikings apparently traveled back and forth from Greenland to Vinland. Leif's brother Thorvald, his sister Freydis, and his brother-in-law Thorfinn Karlsefni were all involved in exploring and seeking to colonize this new land. (Note: In 1962, remains of a Viking settlement were found near the northern tip of Newfoundland. Carbon-14 testing of the organic material there dates the settlement at approximately 1000 AD.)



Picture 1-6  
**Viking boat or ship**

None of these Viking settlements lasted very long. In fact, there is no recorded evidence of Vikings in Vinland past 1014 A.D. The native people of Vinland, whom the Vikings called Skraelings (which means savage wretches), greatly outnumbered the Norsemen and frequently attacked them. Feeling homesick and frightened, the Vikings loaded their ships with timber and fur and sailed back to Greenland.

Stories about Erik the Red and Leif the Lucky were frequently recounted among the Vikings. Approximately 150 years after Leif's expedition, these stories were written down in the form of heroic poems called *The Saga of the Greenlanders* and *The Saga of Erik the Red*. However, few other Europeans seem to have ever known about the Viking discoveries in America. Consumed with wars, religious crusades, and disease, Europeans had time for little else. For nearly five hundred years after Leif Eriksson, no new European explorers seem to have come to America.

After the sixteen winters had lapsed, from the time when Eric the Red went to colonize Greenland, Leif, Eric's son, sailed out from Greenland to Norway. He arrived in Drontheim in the autumn, when King Olaf Trygvason was come down from the North, out of Halagoland. Leif put into Nidaros with his ship, and set out at once to visit the king. King Olaf expounded the faith to him, as he did to other heathen men who came to visit him. It proved easy for the king to persuade Leif, and he was accordingly baptized, together with all of his shipmates. Leif remained throughout the winter with the king, by whom he was well entertained.

Heriulf was a son of Bard Heriulfsson. He was a kinsman of Ingolf, the first colonist. Ingolf allotted land to Heriulf between Vag and Reykianess, and he dwelt at first at Drepstokk. Heriulf's wife's name was Thorgerd, and their son, whose name was Biarni, was a most promising man. He formed an inclination for voyaging while he was still young, and he prospered both in property and public esteem. It was his custom to pass his winters alternately abroad and with his father. Biarni soon became the owner of a trading-ship; and during the last winter that he spent in Norway [his father] Heriulf

determined to accompany Eric on his voyage to Greenland, and made his preparations to give up his farm. Upon the ship with Heriulf was a Christian man from the Hebrides; he it was who composed the Sea-Roller's Song, which contains this stave: "Mine adventure to the Meek One, Monk-heart-searcher, I commit now; He, who heaven's halls doth govern, Hold the hawk's-seat ever o'er me!"

Heriulf settled at Heriulfsness, and was a most distinguished man. Eric the Red dwelt at Brattahlid, where he was held in the highest esteem, and all men paid him homage. These were Eric's children: Leif, Thorvald, and Thorstein, and a daughter whose name was Freydis; she was wedded to a man named Thorvard, and they dwelt at Gardar, where the episcopal seat now is. She was a very haughty woman, while Thorvard was a man of little force of character, and Freydis had been wedded to him chiefly because of his wealth. At that time the people of Greenland were heathen.

Biarni arrived with his ship at Eyrar [in Iceland] in the summer of the same year, in the spring of which his father had sailed away. Biarni was much surprised when he heard this news, and would not discharge his cargo. His shipmates inquired of him what he intended to do, and he replied that it was his purpose to keep to his custom, and make his home for the winter with his father; "and I will take the ship to Greenland, if you will bear me company." They all replied that they would abide by his decision. Then said Biarni, "Our voyage must be regarded as foolhardy, seeing that no one of us has ever been in the Greenland Sea." Nevertheless, they put out to sea when they were equipped for the voyage, and sailed for three days, until the land was hidden by the water, and then the fair wind died out, and north winds arose, and fogs, and they knew not whither they were drifting, and thus it lasted for many "doegr." Then they saw the sun again, and were able to determine the quarters of the heavens; they hoisted sail, and sailed that "doegr" through before they saw land. They discussed among themselves what land it could be, and Biarni said that he did not believe that it could be Greenland. They asked whether he wished to sail to this land or not. "It is my counsel" [said he] "to sail close to the land." They did so, and soon



saw that the land was level, and covered with woods, and that there were small hillocks upon it. They left the land on their larboard, and let the sheet turn toward the land. They sailed for two “doegr” before they saw another land.

## IMPACT

- Historians believe that the first explorers of America migrated from central Asia and eventually scattered from Alaska to Chile.
- A number of great Native American civilizations developed. However, most Europeans arriving in America during the sixteenth century considered these Native Americans to be primitive and inferior and sought to take over their land and other resources.
- Leif Eriksson is the first European known to have discovered land in North America and to have attempted to colonize there (500 years before Columbus!).
- The Viking colony of Vinland, established by Leif and his men (most likely on Newfoundland or the Cape Cod region), lasted for as long as twelve years. Stories about Leif’s expedition were eventually written down by the Greenlanders, but few other Europeans seem to have known about these Viking discoveries in America.



