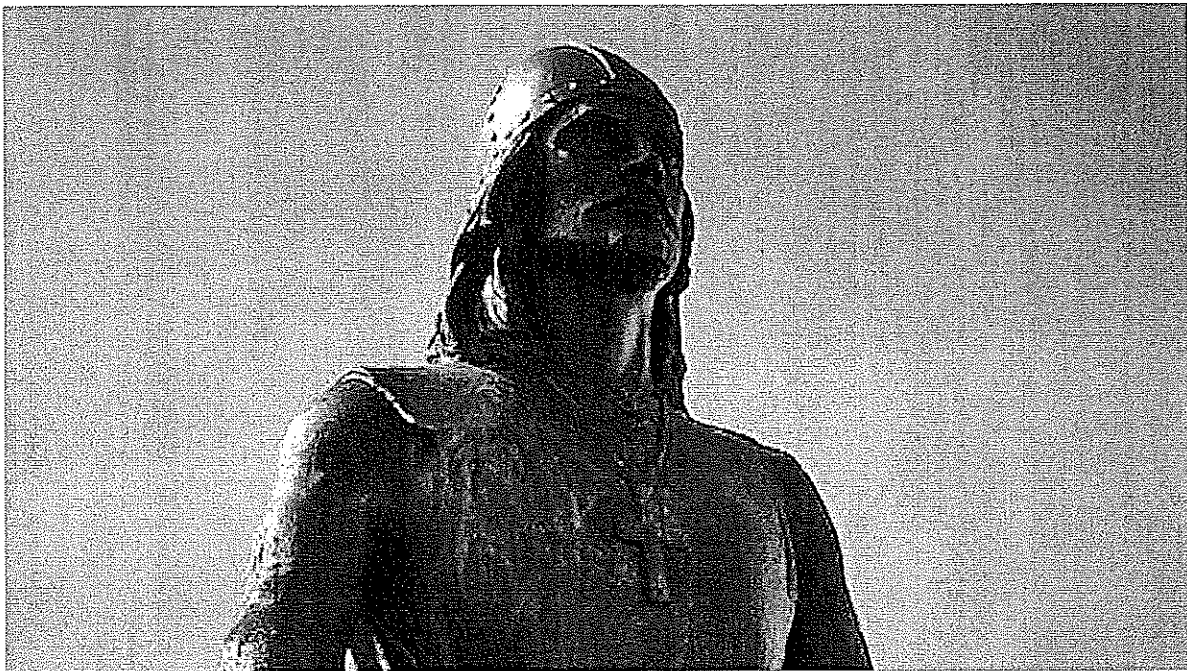


The Explorers: Leif Eriksson

By Biography.com Editors and A+E Networks, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.19.16

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TOP: Leif Eriksson memorial statue at Shilshole Bay Marina (Port of Seattle). BOTTOM: Leif Eriksson Discovers America by Christian Krohg (1893).

Synopsis: Leif Eriksson was a Viking explorer born in the 10th century. The Vikings, or Norse, sailed on great ships and raided and plundered lands for money, almost like pirates. Unlike pirates, they also founded settlements and states in Northern and Eastern Europe.

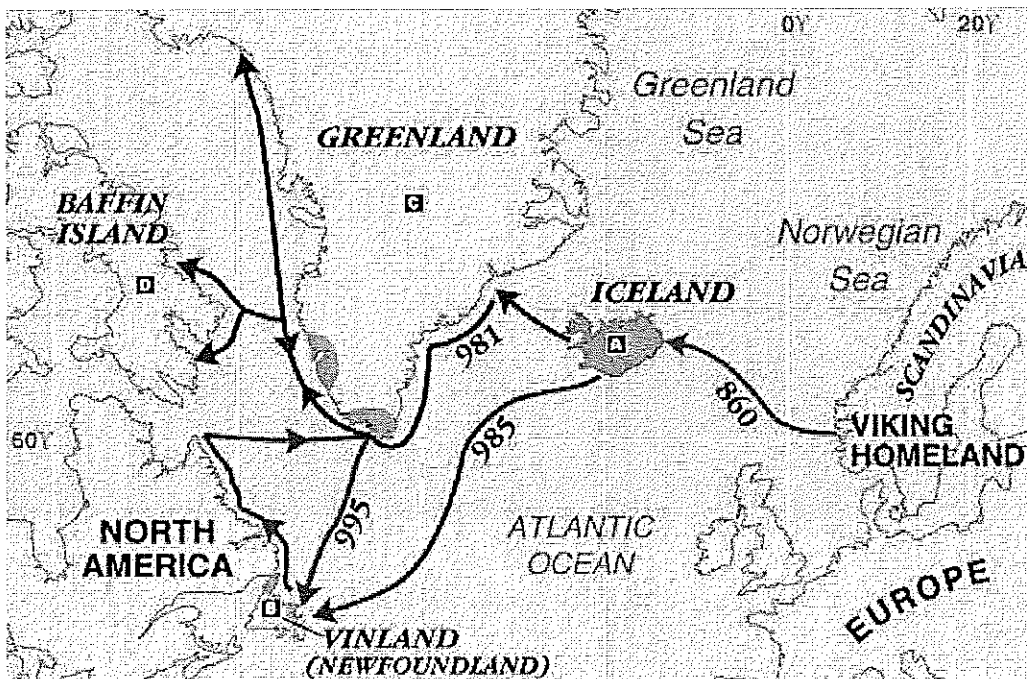
Leif Eriksson's father was Erik the Red, who is said to have settled Greenland. Eriksson is thought to be the first European to reach North America, centuries ahead of Christopher Columbus.

However, historians do not agree on the details of his voyage. One story claims that he found North America by mistake, and another claims that he had sailed there on purpose. Either way, Eriksson eventually returned to Greenland, where he had been hired by Norwegian King Olaf I Tryggvason to spread Christianity. Eriksson is believed to have died around the year 1020.

In the 1960s, the ruins of a Viking settlement were discovered in Newfoundland, Canada. The finding further proved that Eriksson's voyage did happen, and in 1964 the United States declared October 9 to be Leif Eriksson Day.

Leif The Mysterious

Leif Eriksson is believed to have been born between 960 and 970 A.D. He was a son of Erik the Red, who founded the first European settlement in what is now Greenland. Erik the Red's father had been banished from Norway and had settled in Iceland. It is likely that Eriksson was born in Iceland and then raised in Greenland when his own father, Erik the Red, was banished from Iceland. There are many different stories of Eriksson's life. Therefore, it is hard to separate fact and legend.



Vinland

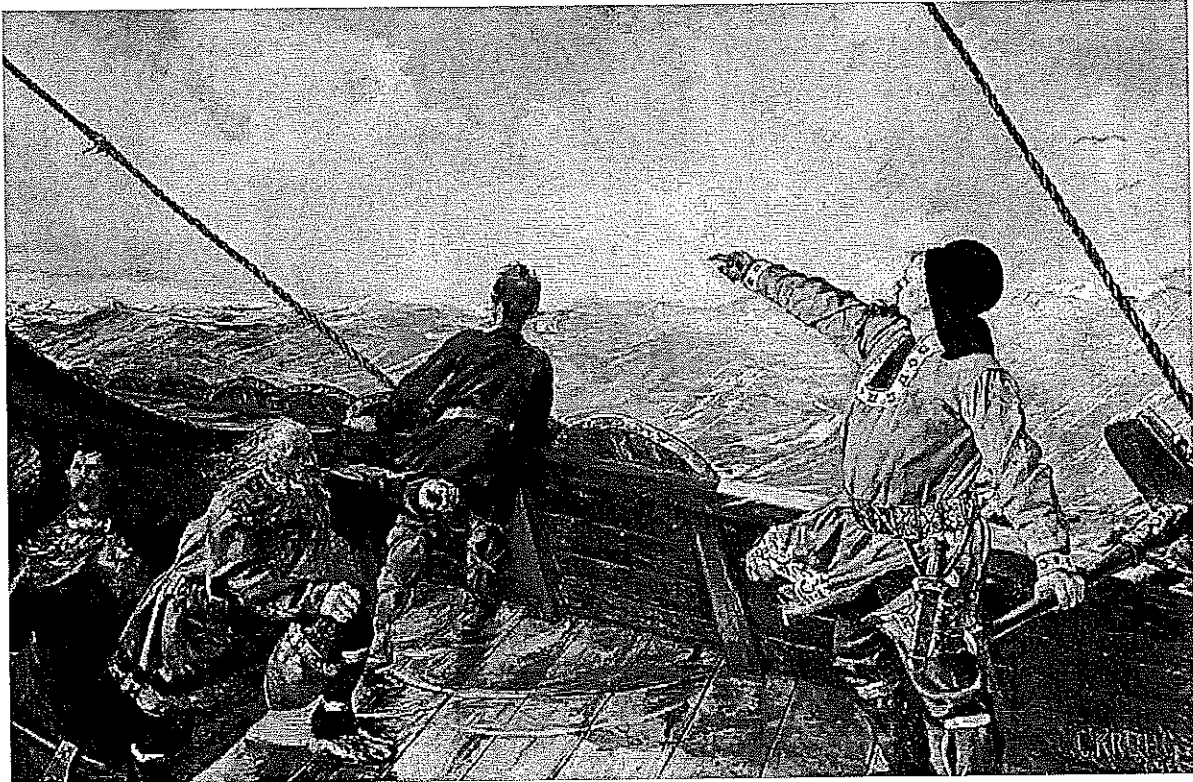
Around the year 1000, Eriksson is said to have sailed from Greenland to Norway. There, he served Norse King Olaf I Tryggvason. The king converted him from Norse paganism to Christianity, and then hired Eriksson to bring Christianity to Greenland. Eriksson did eventually make it back to Greenland, but the question is how he got there.

There is an Icelandic tale called The Saga of Erik the Red, written in the 13th century. The story says that Eriksson's ships drifted off course on the return voyage from Norway to Greenland, and landed on the continent of North America. They are most likely to have landed on what is now Nova Scotia, Canada. Eriksson named it Vinland, possibly because of the wild grapes there.

Another tale, The Saga of the Greenlanders, which dates to the same time period, suggests that Eriksson already knew about Vinland. He had heard of it from another sailor, Bjarni Herjólfsson, who had been there over 10 years earlier. The story says that Eriksson sailed to

Vinland on purpose. He first landed on an icy island he named Helluland, believed now to be Baffin Island. Next, he landed on the heavily forested Markland, thought now to be Labrador, and then made his way to Vinland.

Whichever story is true, Eriksson is said to be the first European to set foot in North America. Eriksson was most likely either the leader or a crew member of that Viking voyage. It was nearly 500 years before Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492.



Return

Eriksson explored North America but he never settled it. Nor did his brothers, Thorstein Eriksson and Thorvald Erikson, or another sailor, Icelander Thorfinn Karlsefni, who visited later. Instead, Eriksson returned to Greenland and spread Christianity. He convinced his mother, Thjodhild, to switch religions, and she then built Greenland's first Christian church, at Brattahlid. The ruins are on the site of Erik the Red's home.

Eriksson is believed to have spent the rest of his life in Greenland, and died around the year 1020.

Nobody knows exactly where Vinland is in North America. However, in 1963 ruins of an 11th-century Viking settlement were discovered at L'Anse-aux-Meadows, in northern Newfoundland. It is the oldest European settlement found in North America. More than 2,000 Viking objects have been recovered there. Eriksson and his men are thought to have spent the winter there before sailing home.

Legacy

In 1964, the United States made October 9 Leif Eriksson Day. Over the years, some groups have tried to make it a more popular holiday. However, Christopher Columbus's later trip resulted more directly in Europeans settling in North America. Therefore, Columbus continues to get top billing.

Still, Eriksson's voyage is marked by statues in the United States, Newfoundland, Norway, Iceland and Greenland. In addition, Iceland's Exploration Museum presents the Leif Eriksson Exploration Award every year. The awards are for achievements in the field of exploration.

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence BEST explains the reason why Leif Eriksson receives less recognition than Christopher Columbus?
- (A) Eriksson is thought to be the first European to reach North America, centuries ahead of Christopher Columbus.
 - (B) It was nearly 500 years before Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492.
 - (C) Eriksson is believed to have spent the rest of his life in Greenland, and died around the year 1020.
 - (D) However, Christopher Columbus's later trip resulted more directly in Europeans settling in North America.
- 2 Which paragraph from the section "Vinland" suggests that Eriksson may have sailed to Vinland on purpose?
- 3 Read the paragraph below:

Nobody knows exactly where Vinland is in North America. However, in 1963 ruins of an 11th-century Viking settlement were discovered at L'Anse-aux-Meadows, in northern Newfoundland. It is the oldest European settlement found in North America. More than 2,000 Viking objects have been recovered there. Eriksson and his men are thought to have spent the winter there before sailing home.

- How does the paragraph help develop the idea that Eriksson was the first European to find North America?
- (A) It explains what inspired people to look for Viking objects from Vinland.
 - (B) It explains how Eriksson and his men discovered L'Anse-aux-Meadows.
 - (C) It explains why no one knows where Vinland is located.
 - (D) It explains that Viking objects were found in Newfoundland.
- 4 Why does the author include the section "Leif The Mysterious"?
- (A) to describe how Eriksson's youth inspired him to be an explorer
 - (B) to explain that little is known about Eriksson's background
 - (C) to suggest that Eriksson was forced to sail away from Greenland
 - (D) to detail the reasons why so little is known about Eriksson

