

The Vikings Discover America, ca. 1000

The Hell's Angels motorcycle gang on steroids - an appropriate description of the Viking raiders who ventured from their Scandinavian homeland to pillage the coasts of northern Europe beginning in the 8th century. Booty was their prize and the defenseless monasteries that thrived in splendid isolation on desolate shore lines often their target.

The raiders used savage hit-and-run tactics. They would attack their victim, pillage as much treasure as possible and then demand a ransom to insure that they would not return again - a promise that was invariably broken. By the 10th century these raids had become a seasonal event and the Vikings feared as the "Scourge of Europe." Over time, the raiders settled in, rather than plundered some of the territories they visited such as Iceland, Ireland (where they founded the city of Dublin), Normandy in France (its name referring to the land of the "Norsemen") and central Russia (its name derived from the Nordic term Rothsmenn, meaning seafarer and shortened to "Rus").

The Viking's reliance on the sea as their avenue of attack and escape motivated them to develop seaworthy ships and reliable navigational techniques with which they could travel vast distances over open water. These advantages enabled them to travel the cold, treacherous ocean to the west and reach the shore of America almost five hundred years before Columbus.

Eric the Red was the first to venture into the distant waters when - having been banished from the island for a series of murders - he sailed west from Iceland in 985 or 986 to an island he dubbed "Greenland". His son, Leif Ericsson, continued his father's explorations and in the year 1000 or 1001 sailed southwest from Greenland to the islands off the coast of northern Canada and finally to the shores of Newfoundland. The Norseman found the land so inviting that they stayed through the winter before returning to Greenland.

Voyage to a new land

The story of the Viking exploration is contained in the sagas that passed by word-of-mouth from one generation to another before being committed to paper. Modern archeological evidence has substantiated much of the saga's story.

We join Leif Ericsson as he leads his crew from Labrador - which he named "Woodland" - to Newfoundland.

The "grapes" the Norsemen discovered probably refer to the wild red currant, gooseberry or cranberry that grow in Newfoundland.

The Vikings briefly settled in Newfoundland but were ultimately driven out by the natives.

"Now sailed they thence into the open sea with a northeast wind, and were two days at sea before they saw land, and they sailed thither and came to an island which lay to the eastward of the land, and went up there and looked round them in good weather, and observed that there was dew upon the grass. And it so happened that they touched the dew with their hands, and raised the fingers to the mouth, and they thought that they had never before tasted anything so sweet.

After that they went to the ship and sailed into a sound which lay between the island and a promontory which ran out to the eastward of the land, and then steered westward past the promontory.

It was very shallow at ebb tide, and their ship stood up so that it was far to see from the ship to the water. But so much did they desire to land that they did not give themselves time to wait until the water again rose under their ship, but ran at once on shore at a place where a river flows out of a lake. But so soon as the waters rose up under the ship, then took they boats, and rowed to the ship, and floated it up the river, and thence into the lake, and there cast anchor, and brought up from the ship their skin cots, and made there booths.

After this they took counsel and formed the resolution of remaining there for the winter, and built there large houses. There was no want of salmon either in the river or in the lake, and larger salmon than they had before seen. The nature of the country was, as they thought, so good that cattle would not require house feeding in winter, for there came no frost in winter, and little did the grass wither there.

Day and night were more equal than in Greenland or Iceland, for on the shortest day the sun was above the horizon from half past seven in the forenoon till half past four in the afternoon..."

The discovery of grapes gives the new land a name

"It happened one evening that a man of the party was missing, and this was Tyrker the German. This Leif took much to heart, for Tyrker had been long with his father and him, and loved Leif much in his childhood. Leif now took his people severely to task, and prepared to seek for Tyrker, and took twelve men with him. But when they had got a short way from the house, then came Tyrker towards them and was joyfully received.

Leif soon saw that his foster father was not in his right senses. Then said Leif to him: 'Why were thou so late, my fosterer, and separated from the party?' He now spoke first for a long time in German, and rolled his eyes about to different sides, and twisted his mouth, but they did not understand what he said. After a

time he spoke Norsk. 'I have not been much farther off, but still I have something new to tell of; I found vines and grapes.'

'But is that true, my fosterer?' quoth Leif.

'Surely is it true,' replied he, 'for I was bred up in a land where there is no want of either vines or grapes.'

They slept for the night, but in the morning Leif said to his sailors: 'We will now set about two things, in that the one day we gather grapes, and the other day cut vines and fell trees, so from thence will be a loading for my ship.' And that was the counsel taken, and it is said their longboat was filled with grapes. Now was a cargo cut down for the ship, and when the spring came they got ready and sailed away; and Leif gave the land a name after its qualities, and called it Vineland.

They sailed now into the open sea, and had a fair wind until they saw Greenland, and the mountains below the glaciers..."

References:

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