

Leif Erikson Discovers America

Traditionally, Americans remember **Christopher Columbus** as the first white man to discover the **New World**. A favorite poem tells us, “In fourteen hundred ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.”¹ However, according to Viking tradition, **Leif Erikson** was the first white man to “sail the ocean blue” and land on the mainland shores of North America. And it happened about five hundred years before Columbus! Today we’ll look at both the facts and the folklore surrounding this significant event.

I introduced you to Leif Erikson in our last lesson. He was the son of Erik the Red. As you may remember, Erik the Red had the reputation of being hotheaded. But Leif had an entirely different reputation. He was nicknamed **Leif the Lucky**. He was thought to be lucky because he once saved a group of people from a sinking ship. (I think *they* were the lucky ones!)



Leif Erikson and his men reached the coast of Canada about 1003, making them the first white men known to have explored North America.

In his youth, Leif wanted to meet the king of Norway. His name was **Olaf Tryggvason** (oh loff TRIGG vay-son). Leif was intrigued by the amazing stories he had heard about the king from traders who sailed back and forth between Greenland, Iceland, and Norway. King Olaf was known for being tall, fierce, and strong, while also being generous. Besides all of this, King Olaf had converted to Christianity. In 999, Leif sailed to Norway to meet King Olaf face to face. It was also a chance for Leif to become acquainted with his father's homeland. (As you may remember, Erik the Red was originally from Norway. Naturally, Leif had strong roots there.)

In the process of mingling with King Olaf, Leif also converted to Christianity. We have no record of how genuine Leif's conversion was. Some say he may have embraced the king's faith to keep trade relations strong between Greenland and Norway. Regardless, Leif was commissioned by King Olaf to take the Christian faith back to Greenland. Leif obliged, returning to Greenland with priests and the message of the Gospel.

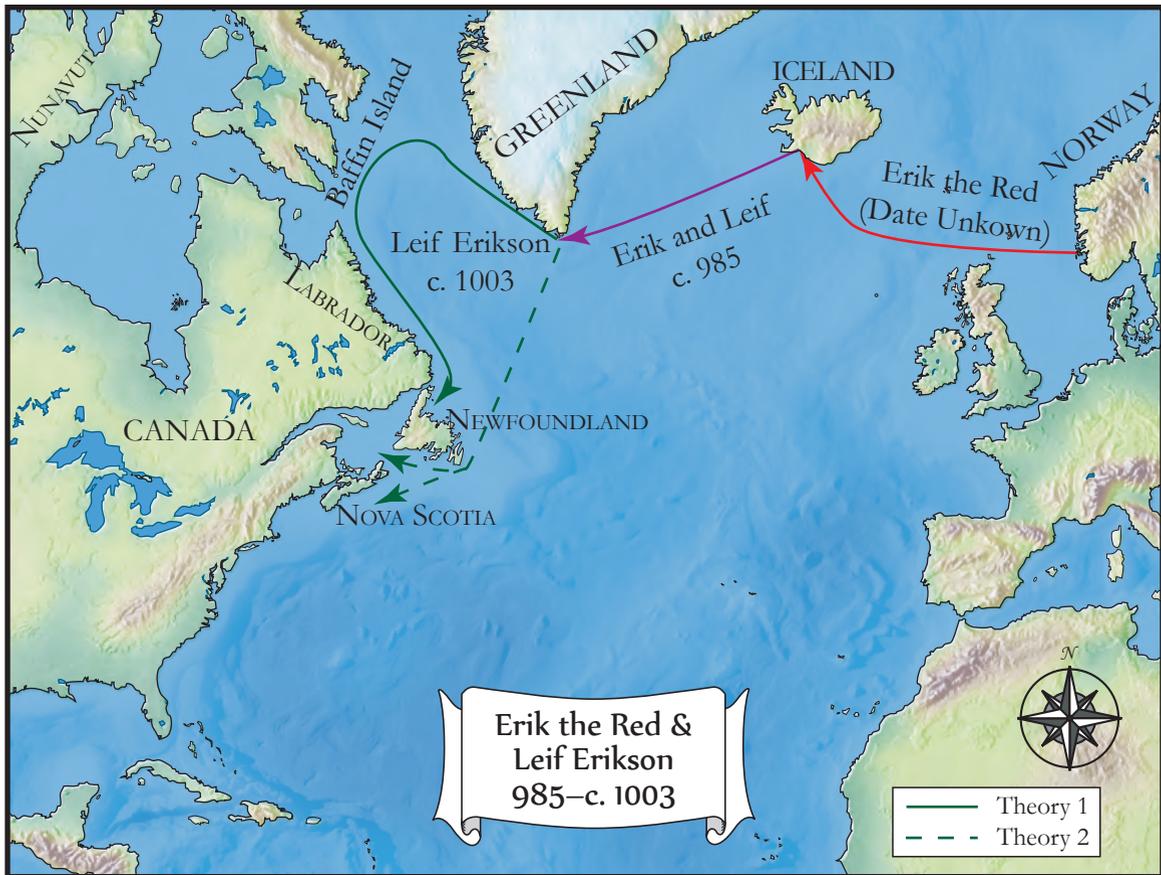
Leif Erikson Takes the Gospel to Greenland

As the story goes, one of Leif's first converts was his own mother. Her name was Thjodhild (thuh JODE hilde), as mentioned in our last lesson. She and many other Greenlanders embraced the teachings and forgiveness of Christ with grateful hearts. Erik the Red, however, was obstinate toward the new religion. Though Thjodhild built a Christian chapel right on their own property, Erik kept his distance. He remained faithful to his Viking gods the rest of his life.

Meanwhile, some other interesting news was being circulated around Greenland. It seems that a Viking trader named **Bjarni Herjolfsson** (bee ARE nee HARE dee yolf-son) was telling everyone about a wooded coastland he had seen to the west while blown off course from his travels. Bjarni sighted this land but never made it ashore. This story was naturally intriguing to both Erik the Red and his son, Leif. As a true Viking, Leif immediately wanted to explore it, but Erik was not so sure. As an old man and the leader of Greenland, he thought his days of exploring should be over.

But Leif persisted in persuading his father to go with him. With reluctance, Erik the Red agreed to accompany the expedition. However, on the morning of their departure, Erik accidentally fell from his horse. He considered this fall to be a sign of bad things to come and backed out of the expedition altogether. With everything set to go, it only made sense for Leif to proceed without him.

Around the year **1003**, Leif Erikson made his mark in history with the yearlong voyage he undertook at the age of 21. It seems that Leif bought Bjarni's ship and recruited 35 men to sail with him. Where to? They were not exactly sure. They didn't know that the large continent of North America existed! They just headed northwest and then to the south.



Leif Explores North America

According to one theory (based on a saga), the first land Leif found was disappointing because it had no trees at all. He may have been on the outskirts of **Baffin Island**, located in what is now **Nunavut**, the Inuit territory in modern-day Canada.* Finding it rocky and desolate, Leif named it **Helluland**, meaning “Slab-land.” Next, it may be that Leif and his crew sailed along the coast of modern-day **Labrador**, a peninsula in northeastern Canada. He observed some forests there, but the land was rugged and uninviting. Leif named it **Markland**, or “Forestland,” and likely kept sailing to **Newfoundland** (NOO fun-land), Canada.

Another theory (based on a different saga) implies that Leif Erikson sailed from Greenland straight to Newfoundland and then on to one or more stops in **Nova Scotia**, Canada. (See the map provided.)

According to either theory, Leif Erikson was the first white man known to have visited the mainland continent of North America! Though he didn’t stay long, he and his crew stayed long enough to make history—and do a little exploring.

*In 1999, the Nunavut Territory and government, which had been approved in 1993, officially came into existence, giving the Inuit people their own self-governed territory within Canada. The name *Nunavut* means “Our Land.” Nunavut was created out of land that was previously part of the Northwest Territories, and it includes Baffin Island, the fifth largest island in the world.



Following the expedition of Leif Erikson, more and more Vikings made their way to North America with enough supplies and manpower to start a small settlement.

Leif Erikson and his men found endless natural resources of trees, thick grass, fresh salmon, and grapes. Some say that Leif named the location **Vinland**, or “Wineland,” because of the grapes. Others say it was named Vinland because the word *vin* in Old Norse means “green grass” or “meadow.” Regardless of why he named it Vinland, Leif Erikson called it home for a time. He and his men built sturdy stone and turf shelters at a small settlement called **Leifsbudir**, or “Leif’s booths,” and stayed for the winter.

One of the many things the men appreciated about their new home was the absence of frost on the ground. (They were so used to it in Greenland!) They also enjoyed the nearly equal periods of daylight and nighttime every 24 hours. This also was different from Greenland, where the sun shines for months

and then goes away for months at a time. The forests proved to be helpful for years to come by providing sturdy lumber for shipbuilding. But as lush as North America was, Leif longed for his homeland. In less than a year, he returned to Greenland. Though he may have visited Vinland a few more times, he never again made it his home. However, his brother and sister both tried to do so.

Thorvald and Freydid

In 1004, Leif’s brother **Thorvald** used the same ship to sail back to Vinland. He went again in 1011 with 60 men, 5 women, livestock, and supplies. The group had every intention of staying for a while. A couple by the name of **Thorfinn** and **Gudrid** stayed long enough to give birth to a son there. His name was **Snorri**. As far as we know, Snorri was the first white child born on the North American continent. Snorri spent the rest of his life in Iceland, not knowing that he had made history.²

The Viking settlers fared well for a time in America. With the local natives, they traded things like dairy products and red cloth for furs and wood. They might have stayed much longer, but they began to run into some trouble. The native people were becoming more and more hostile toward them. The Vikings called these dark, stocky people *skraelings* (SCRAY lings or SCREE yoo lings). They may have been Inuit, or they may have been Native Americans. (Of course, thousands of Native Americans were in North America long before Leif Erikson.) No one knows for sure who the local people in Vinland were. But whoever they were, they must not have been attractive to the Vikings. The name *skraelings* means “ugly people.” With numerous incidents between the Vikings and the *skraelings*, Thorvald’s settlers felt it best to leave. They only returned on occasion for timber.

Some Viking sagas report that Leif Erikson’s sister **Freydid** (freh DID) made a later attempt to settle the land. To be more accurate, she tried to make money off the New World. Supposedly, Freydid took two ships back to Vinland with the promise that the crews of both ships would profit from their fur trade with the native people. But Freydid went back on her word. Like thieves in the night, she and her crew murdered the crew of the other ship so they could keep more of the profits!

If this incident wasn’t enough to make Freydid sound terrifying, folklore says that Freydid once scared off hostile *skraelings* from her camp by wildly beating her chest with



Pictured here is a replica Norse longhouse—built with a sod roof. It’s located in L’Anse aux Meadows on the northern coast of Newfoundland.

a sword and yelling loudly. I'm not sure if she was being brave or was just a bit crazed! Either way, her reputation was not good at all, as told in the Viking sagas.

Though the sagas are full of interesting stories like those of Freydid, it's hard to know just how accurate they are since they were written down about two hundred years after the events took place. A few of the stories are told differently. For example, one saga implies that Leif Erikson was blown off course when he discovered America. Another saga tells us that he went searching for America after Bjarni sighted it.

Either way, it seems to be true that Leif Erikson was once in North America. As recently as 1960, archaeologists found evidence of a Viking settlement on the northern tip of Newfoundland to back up the sagas. The archaeological site is called **L'Anse aux Meadows** (LONCE oh MEE dows), which means "the bay with the meadows." And regardless of how Leif found America, I think it makes for interesting history.

I suppose what intrigues me the most about the whole story is that American history books would tell a different story if the Vikings had succeeded in staying! You see, Christopher Columbus claimed that he sailed to *Iceland* in 1477 to research legends of the *Viking* discovery of the New World!³ If the claims of Columbus are accurate, then the Vikings may have had something to do with the famous voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492. How about that?

Macbeth, King of Scotland

Generally speaking, when you think of the Middle Ages, you probably think of knights in shining armor, enchanted castles, and beautiful princesses. I certainly do. But if the truth were known, the lives of the kings and queens of the Middle Ages were often gruesome, grim, and bloody. Today's lesson is about one such medieval king, whose reign started with a murder and ended with a murder—his own murder, that is. The king's name was **Macbeth**. His home was Scotland. Macbeth's life was so dramatic that it inspired **William Shakespeare** in the sixteenth century to create a play based on his character. It's still popular today!

The last time we looked at Scotland, we learned of Columba (Lesson 25). He was an Irish missionary who took the Gospel to Scotland. His work was significant. Scotland became a strong center for the teaching and evangelism of the Christian faith.

But of course, not everyone in Scotland was positively influenced by Christianity. Such was the case of Macbeth. He was a greedy general. He worked under **King**

Duncan I of Scotland. Macbeth wasn't content being just a general—he wanted to be king. And because his wife had royal blood in her family, he thought he *ought* to be king!

So in the battle at **Bothnagowan** in **1040**, Macbeth faced King Duncan to steal the throne of Scotland. In the midst of the battle, Macbeth killed Duncan with his own hands. With this show of strength, Macbeth declared himself the king of Scotland. He kept the position for 17 years. Despite his brutal means of becoming king, Macbeth ruled over Scotland in a decent manner. Overall, he was considered a strong and capable king.



Macbeth, a mere general in the army, declared himself the king of Scotland after killing King Duncan I.

Revenge!



In 1054, Malcolm III defeated Macbeth on the battlefield. However, it took him four more years to secure the throne of Scotland.

Malcolm got what he wanted. He ousted the stepson and made himself the king of Scotland in 1058. His reign lasted 35 years!

There was a problem, though. Duncan I had a son—who rightfully *would* have been king had it not been for Macbeth. This son's name was **Malcolm III**. He wanted revenge for his father's death as well as to be the king of Scotland. (And so the plot thickens!) In 1054, Malcolm III teamed up with **Siward** (SEE werd) of **Northumberland** in a fight against Macbeth. This happened at a place called **Dunsinane** (DUNN sih nane). Technically speaking, Malcolm III and Siward won—but they were unable to secure the throne from Macbeth.

Three years later, in 1057, Malcolm III tried again. This time he met up against Macbeth at a place called **Lumphanan** (LUM fah non). In retaliation for his father's death—and in hopes of becoming king—Malcolm III wanted more than a victory on the battlefield. He wanted Macbeth dead. So Malcolm III killed Macbeth with his own hands. How ironic that Macbeth was killed by the *son* of the man whom *he* had killed!

Despite Malcolm III's victory, he still wasn't the king of Scotland—at least not yet. For a few months, Macbeth's *stepson* took the throne of Scotland in his father's place. But finally,

*“Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more.”*

—Shakespeare

All in all, the time period preceding Malcolm III was turbulent. From 844 to 1057, there were 12 assassinations over the throne of Scotland! Besides fighting within the kingdom, the Scots were under constant threat from the Vikings—who ruled parts of Scotland. It was centuries before Scottish literature would be born, since there was little time for the arts.

Shakespeare's Macbeth

But this intriguing plot of murder and revenge has hardly been forgotten in literature. You can see how the fight for the throne makes for a great script. At least William Shakespeare thought so! He is the famous Englishman who took the story of Macbeth's murder of Duncan I in order to be king and built an incredible **tragedy** around it. A tragedy is a play that doesn't have a happy ending. Of course, like many authors of today, Shakespeare dramatized the story and famously wrote these words of despair:

Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.⁴

In addition, Shakespeare created many fictitious characters to embellish the events of the story and make it even more interesting. For example, the cruel and conniving character named Lady Macbeth (who urges her husband to kill the king of Scotland) was probably a compilation of two real women in history—the ambitious wife of Macbeth and the nagging wife of another king. It's not clear in history if either of these women were part of a murderous plot to take the throne, as Shakespeare would lead us to believe!

Therefore, if you ever read or watch the Shakespearean play *Macbeth*, don't consider it historically accurate. It's not. But the play truthfully depicts how easily a person can be sidetracked by greed, ambition, and the desire for power.



In Shakespeare's play, Lady Macbeth is a cruel character who lures her husband into killing the king of Scotland. In history, it's unclear whether Macbeth's wife was part of the plot at all!

El Cid, a Spanish Hero

 ccording to Spanish tradition, El Cid is a true hero. He is remembered for helping the Spanish reclaim their land from the Moors. And that was no small task! But upon closer examination, I think El Cid's heroic reputation has been glamorized and goes a little beyond his true character.

To understand this story, we'll need to review the invasion of Spain by the Moors (Lesson 33). Do you remember them? The Moors were Muslims from northern Africa who invaded Spain in 711 at the Strait of Gibraltar. They brought with them great prosperity. Spain flourished in art, science, and architecture under the influence of the Umayyad dynasty. Serious problems existed, however, in regard to religion. Though Christians were given freedom to worship, they were also persecuted. It was a difficult time for the church.

For centuries, there were faithful Christians who set up their own communities and managed to live apart from Muslim influence. A large population of these Christians lived in northeastern Spain along the Pyrenees mountain range. They were protected in the northeast by a French region named **Navarre**. Their southern borders, however, were completely unprotected. But they were also unnoticed! The Muslims weren't paying much attention to the growth of the Christians in the north.

What the Muslims might not have understood was that a revival was going on in northern Spain. It started with an unusual discovery. As the story goes, in 835, a shepherd was led by a star to a marble coffin in the mountains. Inside the coffin were, supposedly, the bones of **James**, who wrote the Book of James in the New Testament. (Some believe that James was the half brother of Jesus.) To say the least, it was inspiring to the local



Though his loyalties were mixed, El Cid has been remembered as the Spanish caballero who led the Reconquista against Spanish Muslims.

Christians to have the remains of this great man and martyr in their midst. The Spanish Christians adopted James as their own. They named the place of discovery **Santiago de Compostela** (San tee AH go day kom poh STAY la), which means “St. James of the field of the star.”

This discovery—be it fact or fiction—inspired thousands of Christian pilgrims to visit the area. During this era of the Middle Ages, the holy site at Santiago de Compostela was second in popularity only to the city of Jerusalem. All this to say that the number of Christians in Spain grew as a result of the renewed interest in the faith. And with this growth came renewed passion to reclaim all of Spain for Christ. Christian soldiers shouted “Santiago!” and made banners of this name to lead their campaigns. Priests and knights alike rose up in arms against the Muslims.

From all this enthusiasm, Christian regions in Spain began to spread. By 1037, the Christian states of **León** and **Castile** emerged. A little to the east of these, the Christian state of **Aragon** appeared. And later, **Portugal** was established. All along the way, fortress-like castles were built to protect these lands from the Muslims. This slow takeover became known as the **Reconquista**. (*Reconquista* means “reconquest.”) This reconquest lasted for about 450 years!

El Cid—Knight of the Reconquista

It was during this revival of Christianity in the early period of the Reconquista that our hero El Cid emerged in popularity. El Cid was a Spanish knight, or **caballero**, admired for his skill in combat. His real name was **Rodrigo Diaz**, and he was born about **1040**. The Christians called him **El Campeador** (el KAHM pea ah door), meaning “challenger” or “champion.” The Muslims called him **El Sayyid** (el saw EED), which means “lord” or “noble.” *El Sayyid* was shortened to *El Cid*. It’s interesting that El Cid is remembered in history by a version of his Arabic nickname. That might have had something to do with his mixed loyalties. Let me explain.

Though El Cid began his military adventures fighting for Christians in Castile, it seems he was less than virtuous along the way. El Cid was accused of keeping some money that he collected for the king. For this crime, he was banished from Castile in



Though views vary, the author of the Book of James was most likely the half brother of Jesus. Tradition holds that James died as a martyr in the first century.

1081. After his banishment, El Cid declared himself a **freebooter**. That means he would accept employment from *anyone* who needed his fighting skills—whether Christian or Muslim! He didn't care.

As you can imagine, El Cid and his small army of caballeros were kept pretty busy. Considering the turbulent times between the Spanish Muslims and the Christians, there were many in need of his services. For eight years, El Cid worked for the Muslim emir of Saragossa (a city in Aragon) and extended the Muslim territory. This hurt the cause of the Christians trying to expand Aragon.

Then, in 1089, for a fee of ten thousand gold dinars, El Cid switched loyalties again and led seven thousand men in capturing **Valencia** from Muslim forces! Valencia, a large city on the Mediterranean shore of Spain, was an important port city to Muslims and Christians alike. Total possession of it was critical for either side.



Caballeros, medieval Spanish knights, were known for their fighting skills on horseback. They *and* their horses wore armor!

To secure Valencia for good, El Cid did something more brutal than heroic. In 1094, he burned the chief justice alive. He would have killed the justice's entire family had not his own men protested. He also took the people's possessions and divided them among his own men. Though El Cid got what he wanted, his measures were drastic. To atone for his ruthless behavior, El Cid proceeded to govern Valencia with great skill and justice. For this, he became a hero to the Spanish people.

It seems that El Cid's wishy-washy loyalties between the Christians and the Muslims were forgotten over time. He was remembered instead for being the bold caballero who took Valencia back from the Muslims. It was a pivotal victory in the long, agonizing Reconquista. But even more than that, El Cid is credited with reclaiming Spain for Christ, though this may or may not have been his personal ambition.

El Cid died in 1099. His wife governed Valencia for three years in his place. El Cid was buried in the town of **Burgos**, where he was born. His bones are revered by some as those of a saint. His fame grew in part from a poem written in his honor in 1140. It was simply called *The Poem of the Cid*. Though written years after El Cid's death, the poem

undoubtedly helped him to win the hearts of the Spanish forever. In Spanish literature, he grew to be full of holy zeal and became one of the greatest Spanish heroes of all time. El Cid's adventures as a caballero also inspired the writing of an opera by **Jules Massenet** (MAA seh NAY).

As for the Spanish Muslims and *their* recollection of El Cid, I don't think he would be considered much of a hero. During the Reconquista, the Muslims were pushed farther and farther south into the region of **Granada**. Ultimately, they were defeated there by **Ferdinand** and **Isabella** in 1492. Hey, isn't that when Columbus made his famous voyage to America? Yes, it is. But I'm getting way ahead of myself here. We won't cover that event until Volume III!



Pictured here at sunset, this magnificent statue in Buenos Aires is titled *El Cid Campeador*, meaning "El Cid the Champion." The equestrian statue has been replicated in several cities around the world.

