

Famous Explorers:

Leif Ericson



*Commemorative coins for Leif Ericson:
a silver dollar of the USA and an
Icelandic silver Kronur.*



Leif Ericson was a Viking born in Greenland in around 970 AD. His father, Erik the Red, was also an explorer. Originally from Norway, Erik formed the first permanent **settlement**, or small community, in Greenland in 986 AD. Erik's son Leif is now thought to be the first European to settle on the North American continent, which he named Vinland, five hundred years before Christopher Columbus's voyage.

After growing up in Greenland, Leif Ericson returned to Norway and became one of King Olaf Tryggvason's **hirdmen**, making him a guard and member of the royal court. Under King Olaf, Leif converted to Christianity and was given the job of spreading the religion to Greenland.

During his return trip from Norway to Greenland, Leif was blown off course and landed near what was to become Vinland. There, he rescued two shipwrecked sailors. On land, he saw wheat fields and grapevines that had been planted by the Native Americans. He did not choose to stay right away, and completed his voyage back to Greenland.

After talking with another explorer named Bjarni Herjolfsson about having both seen this unknown land, Leif gathered a crew and went back to explore

it. His first landing was a rocky place he called Helluland, which means "Flat-Rocked Land." Historians think this was the place we now call Baffin Island. The next place he explored he called Markland, which means "Forest Land" and was probably located in what is now Labrador. Two days later, Ericson finally landed at what he called Vinland, a word historians think means "wineland." The settlement he and his crew built was called Leifsbudir, which means "Leif's Booths," by those who later journeyed from Greenland to North America. Archaeologists have found evidence of Vikings living near the northern tip of Newfoundland in Canada, and so we think this may have been where Leif Ericsson settled.

To travel across the ocean, Leif used Viking longships, which were powered by a combination of wind and rowing. The sails were square, and made out of rough wool cloth. The **pro**w, or front part of the ship, was often decorated with a fearsome statue of a dragon or snake meant to protect the crew and ward off dangerous sea monsters described in Norse mythology. The ships were usually made out of wood from oak trees, the trees commonly associated with the Norse god Thor.

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Define these Terms:

Settlement

Hirdmen

Prow

Reading Comprehension:

Leif and his father were both born on different landmasses. What were they?

What did Vikings put on the fronts of their ships, and why?

Writing Prompt:

Why do you think that schools usually teach us that Christopher Columbus “discovered” America, even though Native Americans have been living there for thousands of years and archaeological evidence now makes Vikings the earliest known European settlers?

Write your response on a separate sheet of paper.

Activity:

Find Norway on a world map. This is where Leif lived while serving under King Olaf. How far away is Norway from Greenland, the island where Leif’s father Erik established a colony? How far away is the Canadian island of Newfoundland from Greenland?
