

# VIKINGS ON PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND?

by Gísli Sigurðsson, 2001

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"The fairest land 'tis possible to see," wrote Jacques Cartier when he first sighted Prince Edward Island in 1534. "Full of fine meadows and trees." For centuries it has been assumed that he was the first European to "discover" the Island. But recent research suggests that the Icelandic Sagas, written in the thirteenth century, may well contain the oldest description of Prince Edward Island -- the destination of a voyage from Greenland undertaken around the year 1000 AD. As well as being the "fairest land" described by Cartier, there is an intriguing possibility that Prince Edward Island may well be Leif the Lucky's legendary "Vinland."

Leifr the Lucky<sup>1</sup> was the son of Eric the Red. Sailing from Iceland, Eric the Red was the first Scandinavian to explore Greenland, founding a settlement there around 985 AD. Fifteen years later his son set out and explored a huge continent to the west. There he found a beautiful island which lay two days southwest from a heavily forested land. This island was just north of the mainland, accessed by a strait where Leifr and his men encountered exceptionally broad shallows exposed at low tide. Here they also found a short river flowing out of a salt water lake and decided to spend the year, enjoying an abundance of salmon, wild grapes and wild rice. Upon his departure Leifr named the place Vinland -- Land of Grapes.

Leifr's voyage was undertaken at the height of the Viking age -- 800 to 1050 -- when the peoples of Scandinavia were using their superb ships to build an empire. These seafarers are known in history as Vikings, a fearsome lot who combined their lust for trade and warfare with the quest for new lands to settle or exact tribute from. They were successful wherever they went and did not reach their limit until they met with the natives in North America. Their first successful overseas expedition was in 793, when a raiding party from Norway attacked the monastery on the island of Lindisfarne on the east coast of England. Within 200 years their power extended across the Baltic Sea and into Russia, even as far as the Caspian Sea and Constantinople; across the Nordic Sea to the British Isles -- where they established colonies in Dublin, York and the Orkneys; and across the North Atlantic where they discovered the Faroe Islands and Iceland, both of which had only been visited sporadically by Irish hermits. About 100 years after settling in Iceland they continued to Greenland and eventually to the North American continent. There, after a few years of peaceful settlement and trade, rising conflicts with the native peoples forced the Vikings to sea again, thus leaving North America to be "discovered" by Christopher Columbus.

## The Sagas

The main record of the Viking's exploration and settlement of North America is found in a series of stories called the Icelandic Sagas. There is no doubt that the Sagas are based on memories of real voyages. They are definitely not fanciful wonder tales about some imaginary land beyond the horizon. The historian, however, must approach them with caution. The only archaeological findings, for instance, which currently can be attributed to Europeans from the Viking era are at L'Anse aux Meadows at the northern tip of Newfoundland. There archaeologists have excavated a camp which was used for a few years around the year 1000 by the same kind of people as lived in Iceland and Greenland. The Sagas, though, have no reference quite matching the camp at L'Anse aux Meadows, which indicates that they are far from telling us all the details about these voyages.

It is therefore important to be aware of the nature of the Sagas as source material. It is very unlikely that they tell the full truth from A to Z. They are a collection of what people remembered of bygone times, put into a coherent order for the first time in writing in the thirteenth century. They cannot be regarded as historical sources in the same sense as contemporary documents. They are not the accounts of eye-witnesses, but written records of oral traditions – stories and information about exceptional voyages undertaken more than 200 years earlier. They were handed down by descendants of those who took part in the voyages and by others -- seafarers in particular – who were fond of telling tales about faraway places and how one could get there and recognize the landscape on arriving. Inevitably, over two centuries of telling and re-telling, the stories changed. Thus they cannot be expected to be correct about details of conversation and all the individuals who appear in them. But they are right about many general historical facts, such as the date of settlement in Iceland, in Greenland and the discovery of the continent beyond around the year 1000. We can operate on the assumption that the tellers of these tales were skilled and professional seafarers. For them it was of utmost importance to be able to give, receive and report to others directions about how to sail from A to B -- what course to set, how long to sail and what landmarks to look for. Details like these are likely to have been passed through oral tradition -- probably as an integral part of a story because stories are often used to store such information.

### A Tale of Two Sagas

Two of the Icelandic Sagas deal with the Vinland voyages: *Erik the Red's Saga* and *The Saga of the Greenlanders*. Around the middle of the twentieth century it was believed that *Erik the Red's Saga* was merely a rewriting of *The Saga of the Greenlanders*. This was the assumption on which Helge Ingstad operated when he found L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland and identified it somewhat speculatively as Leifur's Vinland. It is of course difficult to argue against someone who has actually found physical evidence of a Viking settlement. But it is clear from the L'Anse aux Meadows findings that this location was used as a stepping stone for exploring the lands further south; it may simply have been a place for repairing ships and resting before and after the crossing from Greenland. The northern tip of Newfoundland is certainly not a place which would create memories like the ones preserved about Vinland, the Land of Grapes. Recently, saga scholar Ólafur Halldórsson has shown that *Eric the Red's Saga* and *The Saga of the Greenlanders* were written independently of each other from an oral tradition in the

thirteenth century. This new conclusion about the textual independence of the two Sagas opens again the discussion on the whereabouts of Vinland. When it was assumed that the two Sagas were telling stories about the same voyages, scholars tried to judge which version was right and which was wrong. Now that we can read them as independent accounts we can look at them from a broader perspective, and use the information in them to speculate on the location of the places they describe.

The Sagas are *the* proof that the people of Iceland and Greenland voyaged westward where they found a huge continent with several off-shore islands around the year 1000. We do not need the Vinland map, rune stones or archaeological evidence to prove this basic fact. The Sagas also indicate that the Vikings made a number of voyages to North America. *Erik the Red's Saga*<sup>2</sup> says that in the far north of the continent, about which they had heard from Leifr, Thorfinnr Karlsefni and his crew explored a land with huge stone slabs, a land they called Helluland (Stone-slab land), which could be Baffin Island. After two days sailing to the south, they saw a heavily forested land with many deer and named it Markland (Forest land). This could be Labrador and Newfoundland. After crossing open sea from Markland they found another place with many fjords – possibly Nova Scotia. At the southern end of this place they came to a fjord with stronger currents than they had ever seen before, which they named Fjord of Streams. At the mouth of this fjord was an island. This description can easily match the Bay of Fundy, for even though these people were used to currents and tides they are likely to have been impressed by the Bay of Fundy, if they saw it, and probably told stories about it for a long time afterwards.

On this general latitude they also found more varied vegetation than in the forested north: grapes or berries, sweet enough for the making of wine, self-sown corn (possibly wild rice) and maple trees. After wintering at the Fjord of Streams Thorfinnr and his crew sailed further south, and the Saga tells of a huge river with an island at its mouth, (which could be the Hudson river and Manhattan) where they built a settlement and came into contact – peaceful and otherwise – with the natives living there. We are also told that part of Thorfinnr's group went north around the land they had first encountered after crossing the sea from Markland in order to find Leifr Eiriksson's Vinland, which was found on a previous excursion, as described in the *Saga of the Greenlanders*. Unfortunately they were blown off course when they tried to sail west around this land (Nova Scotia/Cape Breton?) and ended their journey in Ireland.

## **Vinland**

The voyage that discovered Vinland was originally supposed to be led by Eric the Red. The Sagas indicate that he either declined to go because of his age, or was unable to go after being injured by a fall from a horse. Instead, his son Leifr Eiriksson (Leif the Lucky) assumed command of the vessel setting out from Greenland. If we look at *The Saga of the Greenlanders'* description of Leifr's voyage we find straightforward directions which can, without stretching the evidence at all, be used to navigate a Viking ship from Newfoundland across the Gulf of St. Lawrence or the Cabot Strait and into the Northumberland Strait. Here is what the Saga says:

.... Leif boarded his ship, along with his companions, 35 men altogether. One of the crew was a man called Tyrkir, from a more southerly country. Once they had made the ship ready they put to sea and found first the land which Bjarni and his companions had seen last. They sailed up to the

shore and cast anchor, put out a boat and rowed ashore. There they found no grass, but large glaciers covered the highlands and the land was like a single flat slab of rock from the glaciers to the sea. This land seemed to them of little use. Leif then spoke: "As far as this land is concerned it can't be said of us as of Bjarni, that we did not set foot on shore. I am now going to name this land and call it Helluland (*Stone-slab Land*)." They then returned to their ship, put out to sea and found a second land. Once more they sailed close to the shore and cast anchor, put out a boat and went ashore. This land was flat and forested, sloping gently seaward, and they came across many beaches of white sand. Leif then spoke: "This land shall be named for what it has to offer and called Markland (*Forest Land [Labrador/Newfoundland?]*)." They then returned to the ship without delay. After this they sailed out to sea [*i.e. away from the most southerly point of Markland/Newfoundland*] and spent two days at sea with a north-easterly wind before they saw land. They sailed towards it and came to an island, which lay to the north of the land [*Prince Edward Island?*], where they went ashore [*around East Point?*]. In the fine weather they found dew on the grass, which they collected in their hands and drank of, and thought they had never tasted anything as sweet. Afterwards they returned to their ship and sailed into the sound [*Northumberland Strait?*] which lay between the island and the headland which stretched out northwards from the land [*Cape St. George?*]. They rounded the headland and steered westward. Here there were extensive shallows at low tide and their ship was soon stranded, and the sea looked far away to those aboard ship. Their curiosity to see the land was so great that they could not be bothered to wait for the tide to come in and float their stranded ship, and they ran ashore where a river flowed into the sea from a lake. When the incoming tide floated the ship again they took the boat and rowed to the ship and moved it up into the river and from there into the lake, where they cast anchor. They carried their sleeping-sacks ashore and built booths. Later they decided to spend the winter there and built large houses. There was no lack of salmon both in the lake and the river, and this salmon was larger than they had ever seen before. It seemed to them the land was so good, that livestock would need no fodder during the winter. The temperature never dropped below freezing and the grass only withered very slightly. The days and nights were much more equal in length than in either Greenland or Iceland. In the depth of winter the sun was aloft by mid-morning and still visible at mid-afternoon." They collect grapes and load their ship with wood before returning to Greenland. And when Leifr and his men leave the following spring he "named the land for its natural features and called it Vinland."<sup>3</sup>

In this overall description we must bear in mind that the winter-weather in Vinland seems to have improved considerably in the memory of people up in Iceland – which is not an unlikely development in an oral tradition. With regard to Prince Edward Island in particular it is not clear from the text whether they are supposed to have gone ashore on the island or the mainland. The counting of sailing days should not be taken too literally. We must take into account that when exploring new territories the Vikings did not sail much during the night, and their speed would have depended on the wind. Anything between one and three days sailing is therefore within likely limits. The reference to the size of the salmon encountered reinforces the idea that Vinland was in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence. Salmon enter the rivers there after two winters at sea, rather than after only one winter as in Newfoundland, thus making the salmon in that general area larger than the Vikings "had ever seen before."

In general we can say that the sailing directions given in the Saga are as good as one can get in so few words for sailing from Newfoundland to the Northumberland Strait: After losing sight of

Newfoundland, you sail southwest for a day or two until you come to what the directions tell you is an island. As you sail eastwards around it, you eventually see land ahead. At this point you are told to turn west and into a sound. Here you can easily bring your Viking ship ashore on the flat and sandy beaches or else anchor it safely in inland waters which abound with large salmon. Unfortunately the text does not allow us to narrow down more details than these. The real problem when it comes to navigating Leifr and his ship to Prince Edward Island is to decide where the expedition started from.

When the text says that sailing two days from Markland brings them to what they later call Vinland, we must bear in mind that the starting point could theoretically be several different places. Starting from the northernmost tip of the forested area in Labrador would take a Viking ship to L'Anse aux Meadows in two days. This, however, does not match with the description of wind-direction and the statement that Leifr's party doesn't see land for two days. We might find an island and a river on the east coast of Newfoundland and make it fit a journey starting at the northernmost tip of that island, but this requires forgetting the statement that Leifr sailed Southwest and crossed open sea. A ship sailing into the Gulf from Newfoundland might come across Anticosti Island. The problem with Anticosti, however, is that it lies south from the mainland, not north. A voyage starting from the south-eastern tip of Newfoundland would bring our vessel to Nova Scotia, and turn the island found into Cape Breton Island and the strait into the Strait of Canso. The Strait of Canso, however, is unlikely to be described as having "extensive shallows at low tide." All in all, there is nothing in the text to contradict the idea that the island found by Leif the Lucky was Prince Edward Island. Indeed, Prince Edward Island fits the Saga's description better than other candidates in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. In spite of this we must be aware that we have not thereby proved that Prince Edward Island is the island referred to in the text -- simply because of the nature of the Sagas as a source. Since they were written from oral accounts many generations after the actual events took place, they cannot be used to prove the exact location of any of the sites described therein. The text can, however, be used to narrow down possible locations – some of which are more likely than others.

## **Conclusion**

In spite of these uncertainties the overall picture which emerges from the Sagas is reasonably clear: Around the year 1000, people from Greenland and Iceland went on several voyages along the eastern coast of North America, into the Gulf of St. Lawrence and further south. In more than one location they built camps, sometimes living for several years in them. They came into contact with natives, partly on friendly commercial terms but they also fought battles against them. Internal conflicts as well as attacks from the natives eventually led to their departure. After this it is unlikely that the Greenlanders continued to go as far south as the Sagas tell, but it is highly probable that they continued to go to Labrador to cut timber all through the middle ages. Many lived to tell of their adventures in North America and, generations later, writers in Iceland compiled the surviving stories and preserved them in the Icelandic Sagas. We have already found physical remains from their camp at L'Anse aux Meadows which tell us, beyond doubt, that the people of Iceland and Greenland went further south.

And where do you go if you are in L'Anse aux Meadows around the year 1000 with your Viking ship and a whole summer ahead of you to explore new lands and gather goods to bring back

home to Greenland? You are bound to go south and into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. You hunt for the fruits and vegetation which Greenland lacks. You may even try to settle in some places, only to find the land already crowded with native people. So you end up going back home and spend the rest of your life boasting of the great time you had with your mates, sailing across the seven seas and finding new and previously unheard of lands . . . exactly like the Icelandic Sagas tell us. And if you follow Leif the Lucky's path to Vinland, as set out in the *Saga of the Greenlanders*? And look for the kind of features it describes?

You might just find yourself somewhere along the coast of Prince Edward Island.

1. Leifr was known as "the Lucky" after this voyage. Surprisingly, his nickname did not derive from the fact that he had found a fruitful land but, true to the team spirit of seafarers and fishermen, from being so lucky as to rescue a crew of 15 men whom he found on a skerry [a very small, rocky island] on his way home.

2. More accurately described as the *Saga of Gudridur*. Gudridur was, according to the Saga, the first European woman to give birth to a baby in North America.

3. New translation from Chapter 2 of *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, translated by Keneva Kunz. Published in a complete five volume translation of the Sagas: *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders: Including 49 Tales*. General Editor: Viðar Hreinsson. Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997.

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