



**HISTORYMAKERS** **Leif Ericson**  
*Leif the Lucky*

"[He was] tall and strong and very impressive in appearance. He was a shrewd man and always moderate in behavior"—description of Leif Ericson in *The Saga of the Greenlanders* (c. 1200)

According to legend, Leif Ericson discovered America 500 years before Columbus and

brought Christianity to the Vikings in Greenland. Modern historians say neither idea is true, though

one of the legends has a germ of truth.

Leif Ericson was one of three sons of Eric the

Red, who apparently had a violent temper. Eric was

forced to leave his native Norway because he had

committed some murders. He moved to Iceland,

but again had to leave after he killed two men. After

settling in yet another area of Iceland, he killed

another man in another argument. This time his

neighbors forced him to leave the island.

Having heard tales of a region to the west of

Iceland, Eric sailed in that direction. He and his

family reached Greenland in 982. The climate there

was warmer than today and better than Iceland's.

He found he could graze cattle year-round. The

next year he returned to Iceland and told many

Vikings of the virtues of this new area. Eric con-

vinced the other Vikings, and they returned to

Greenland where they formed three settlements.

One source of history about the Vikings is the

sagas, or epic poems. In *Eric's Saga*, Leif sailed back

from Greenland to Norway to meet King Olaf, a

Christian. The saga then says that the king charged

Leif with the task of converting the Vikings in

Greenland. Leif accepted the challenge, but as he

sailed for his father's home a fierce wind blew him off

course. He was pushed across the Atlantic Ocean

until he reached a rich land farther west. When a

member of his crew found grapes growing in this

beautiful land, Leif "the Lucky," as he was called,

named his discovery Vinland, or Wine Land. He then

returned to Greenland, told everyone of his discov-

ery, and converted most of the Vikings to Christianity.

This legend includes some truth and much exag-

geration. Leif was probably not the Viking who dis-

covered North America, though he did sail there.

He was also probably not the person who converted

the Vikings to Christianity, though he may have

been a Christian. *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, which is about 200 years older than *Eric's Saga*,

gives what appears to be a more accurate story.

Around 1000, a Viking named Bjarni Herjólfsson

was blown off course while sailing to Greenland. The

wind took his ship farther west, and he reached

North America. When he returned to Greenland,

his description of the pleasant land apparently

caught the imagination of Leif.

Leif set off for this new place. He and his crew

sailed down the coast of Greenland and turned

west. They reached what may have been modern

Baffin Island and turned south. They then sailed

along the eastern fringes of what is now northern

Canada until they finally touched ground at

Newfoundland. Leif and his crew spent the winter

there and returned to Greenland the next year.

Other Vikings later made efforts to settle the

area. Leif's brother Thorvald sailed to the new

place, but he was killed by a Native American.

Another Viking, Thorfinn Karlsefni, tried to establish

a colony in the new region. However, it lasted about

three years until the hostility of the natives forced

the Vikings to leave. Leif spent the remainder of

his life in Greenland, where he died about 1020.

In the 1960s, archaeologists discovered the

remains of a Viking community at a place called

L'Anse-aux-Meadows in Newfoundland. In an

attempt to try to establish the truth behind the sto-

ries of Leif, a Norwegian explorer began an investi-

gation. He found that the foundations of a number

of the buildings in Newfoundland greatly resem-

bled Viking buildings in Greenland and Iceland.

Nevertheless, the mystery of Leif Ericson continues.

**Questions**

1. **Determining Main Ideas** What made Greenland attractive to the Vikings?
2. **Developing Historical Perspective** Which version of the story of Leif Ericson is more accurate than the other? Explain.
3. **Drawing Conclusions** What physical evidence supports the saga's story of the Vikings in North America?