

# Greenland discovery

*A short history of the discovery of Greenland by Norse voyagers.*

A stiff-backed Danish Naval explorer stood tall in his walrus hide boat as a handful of energetic Inuit women rowed him northward into the mists of East Greenland's impenetrable coast. The short Arctic summer of 1884 was drawing to a close as they dodged between the streams of sharp brash ice drifting south from late summer's iceberg collapses. Lieutenant Gustav Holm peered hopefully into every fjord along the empty coastline searching for his Holy Grail, the 400-year-old lost settlement of the Eastern Vikings. But there was nothing to find, just the sad moaning of swirling icefloes and sudden artillery barrage of exploding icebergs, with now and then the bleached bones of ancient humans laid out by starvation on scant patches of heather.

All along his 600 mile northerly struggle against the polar current, Greenland's 10,000 foot icecap tumbled vertically down through deep fjords to repel him. Then, having crossed the entrance of the most majestic fjord he'd ever seen, Holm was suddenly amid a lost tribe of Inuit, poised on the verge of extinction. On that foggy day, heralding winter's imminent approach, Gustav Holm the amateur Anthropologist arrived in his personal Heaven, while for the hunger-ravaged people he found clustered in seal skin tents within the little harbour they called Ammassalik, he was to be their saviour, in more ways than one.

Surprisingly, Holm was not the first European to probe these forbidding shores. In 900AD the Norse mariner Gunnbjorn Ulfsson sailed north from the Faeroe Islands to stake a claim on Iceland. He was possibly stimulated by stories of a visit in 870AD by 'merchants from the Faeroes' who, according to the Norwegian monk Tjodrik in his *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium*, named their discovery 'Snowland'. Whether Gunnbjorn actually made it to Iceland's fjords before Gardur circumnavigated the island, and named it Gardursholmr after himself, is not fully known.

But what is reliably understood is that as his longship probed northward through the icefields between Iceland and Greenland, Gunnbjorn sighted skerries, or rocky islands, to his northwest in a location that, from his sailing directions, scholars agree could only have been in the vicinity of Ammassalik.

If Hauk's *Landnamabok* is to be trusted, it was this story that years later prompted a party led by Snaebjorn, the son of Einar of Stafholt who was fleeing Iceland for murder, to attempt a settlement here. *'They went (west) to Gunnbjornskerries, and found land. Snaebjorn would not let any one land at night. Styrbjorn went from the ship and found a purse of money in a grave-mound, and hid it. Snaebjorn struck at him with an axe and the purse fell. They built a house and covered it all over with snow. That was in the month of Goe (beginning about February 14). Then they dug themselves out. Snaebjorn made ready the ship. They came to Halogaland and went thence to Iceland, and arrived at Vadil.'* The mystery of the source of the purse of money has never been examined.

Had Gustav Holm travelled a couple of years later, the probability is that the inhabitants may have all been dead, for when he arrived some were already reduced to cannibalism due to the hunting having been very bad for two previous seasons. Without raw materials people cannot survive where they are, nor can they travel anywhere better. This was especially true in East Greenland where the mighty polar current flows south from the Arctic Ocean. If few sea mammals are minded to leave the southern fjords and swim north against it, the hunting upstream can suddenly decline. In 1899, 180 miles

north of Ammassalik, Danish lieutenant Amdrup found the so-called "Deadhouse" at Nuuaalik, with all thirty inhabitants perished: unable to escape due to malnutrition. The equation was frighteningly simple: no seals meant no food, no heat, no clothing, no travel, no future.

Finding them in such a condition drove Lieutenant Holm to petition for Government relief which, promoted to Captain, he delivered somewhat belatedly in 1894 in the form of colonial administration and a permanent trading post, by which time the original population had dwindled from 413 to just 239. The result of Holm's intervention was the temporary summer camp becoming East Greenland's administrative centre, *pitoraq* notwithstanding. But how Holm came to be here was itself the result of a curious string of misunderstandings.

Recently discovered major climate cycles are now believed to be largely responsible for the decline of the original Greenland Norse settlements. This has been borne out by England's leading historian of climate, Professor H Lamb, whose research shows that between 300 to 550AD and again between 900 and 1200AD the northern climate was much more favourable to both navigation and farming. Firstly, this would explain why the Norse had so many successful open-decked voyages across those seas. Secondly, it would also account for the lush pastures that prompted Erik the Red to name his discovery 'Greenland' and successfully settle his own farming interests there. Shorter warm and stable periods also occurred in between those years. These were noted by the learned Irish chronicler Dicuil, in his epic work of 825AD *The Book of the Measure of the World* in which he describes Irish monks setting out for Iceland in February, which is today one of the worst months to travel across the North Atlantic Ocean.

Clearly, if these findings are right, then it follows that the Norse colonies slowly waned along with the tolerable weather needed to sustain them. For the Norseman's European metabolism, the resulting reduction in supply of local milk and cereal, and a poor collection of summer crowberries and angelica, would have been totally inadequate. We know from records that few children were born or survived during that period. Even for the Inuit, fully adapted to a meat and fat diet, the reproduction rate during such harsh climatic periods was low.

The arrival of the aggressive Inuit Thule culture from what is now Canada's Northwest Territories undoubtedly finished the Vikings off, as the violent paintings of Aaron of Kangeq attest. Not that there would have been much fight left in the few starving Norsemen still holding on to European ways. But not everyone was. Somewhere in between the recognition of climatic decline and racial obliteration there had been a significant cultural transition. Bishop Gisle Oddsson reported in 1342 that settlers were associating amicably with the heathen Skraelings, or Inuit, and had begun to adopt their mode of life. As this defied canonical law, it could only suggest that such law for many was secondary to survival in a climate that was quickly changing.

However, it was little-known events in Scandinavia that provided the critical conditions for their failure. The last resupply ship to Greenland, the *Knarren*, sailed from Bergen in 1355. Subsequent vessels (each with the same unlucky name) were all wrecked, the last in 1369, leaving the settlers without the means such as grain, tools and raw materials to even maintain everyday life, much less withstand deepening winters. The Black Death had ravaged Norway in 1349 and Pestilence took a further toll in 1392. A year later the Hanseatic League sacked Bergen and the Greenland operational headquarters there was torched, cutting off the Greenlandic Norse completely by destroying all records and creating the historical amnesia that gave rise to today's myth of vanishing Vikings.

When, in 1721, Danish missionary Hans Egede finally won his King's support and set out to find the lost flock of Greenland Christian Vikings (they converted in the year 1000 through the influence of Lief the Lucky, son of Erik the Red), his research material would have relied to a large extent on ancient eddas and sagas (which Icelanders today still read in the original form). The oldest and most authoritative is Are Frode's *Islendingabok*, written around 1130. Frode had the information from his uncle, Thorkel Gellisson, who had been in Greenland and had conversed with a man who himself had accompanied Eric the Red there. He writes of two settlements, East and West, formed by the migrants who in 986 DA took up the offer of free land.

The offer came from Eric the Red (or more correctly Eirik Rauðe), named after his wild red hair and uncompromising temperament to match, a farmer from Breiðafjörður who in 982 AD was banished for three years from Iceland for homicide, as he had earlier been from Norway, and sailed to explore the potential for a freer life in the direction of the setting sun. His travels in this new land ranged at least as far north as Uumannaq at over 70° N on the west coast, and everywhere he travelled he'd seen coastal plains and deep valleys filled with good pasture.

On his return to Iceland, rather than try to settle back in as *persona non grata*, he persuaded twenty five boatloads of settlers to follow him to a better place, which he'd named 'Greenland' to deliberately attract other farmers. It was not a con, for there really was good grazing at that time of the climatic cycle. (The German historian, Adam of Bremen, speculated in 1076 that '*The people there are greenish from the salt water, whence, too, that region gets its name*').

Eric was the original real estate salesman, recorded as saying that '*...having a good name would entice men to go thither.*' He was a respected leader and successful farmer and he settled in what is still called Eric's Fjord (modern maps may also show it as Tunudliafik), building a substantial farmhouse he named Brattahlid (after his wife), of which the lower walls, like his reputation, are all still standing. It rests opposite the plain of Narssarssuaq, which appropriately during the Cold War years was an American Air Force base. Eric, never shy of a fight, would have liked being so close to all that aerial freedom and firepower.

But from the moment Hans Egede fixed on the belief in Eastern and Western settlements, the hunt was on to find them. Western, he reasoned, must surely have been the site he first found and resettled himself, Hope Colony on Haabertz Island, near what is today the capital city of Nuuk, and Eric's dispersed cluster amongst the southwest fjords must have naturally been a part of the greater Western settlement. So that left an Eastern settlement to be discovered, which logically must be somewhere up the east coast. After all, did the longships for years not sail that route from Iceland?

Seconded from the Danish Navy in 1829, Lieutenant Wilhelm Graah led a small team travelling in two walrus-hide umiaqs, or cargo boats, and two seal-skin hunting kayaks through the southern fjords hoping to reach 69° North while searching for the missing Eastern Settlement. His expedition left in April and by June ice conditions had stopped them, south of Sermilik fjord and well short of Ammassalik. He found no Norse remains but met 536 Inuit in the process of quitting the East Coast for the West, driven by continued poor hunting. The magnificent little horseshoe harbour on Imasivik Island protected Graah's team as they overwintered prior to their retreat the following year.

Fifty-five years later, a second Dane, Lieutenant Gustav Holm, crossed the great divide of Sermilik fjord in 1884 to creep excitedly into a handsome and well protected harbour he named Kong Oscar's Havn. The short Arctic summer was ending, and now it was not only too late to look further north, but too late to return south. Holm's party had to overwinter here, amongst people who were starving. Once again, this sad fact may

have been a boon, for the people of Ammassalik (literally, the place where Capelin fish are caught in summer) were happy to trade their most valued artefacts for food and equipment. After almost a year amongst them, Holm took back to Denmark a detailed study of these people and one of the most remarkable Arctic ethnological collections ever assembled, the more so for preserving a culture utterly untouched by any outside influence whatsoever. Today we can marvel at East Greenland's astonishing craftsmanship partly thanks to their hunger and Holm's professional discipline. And so can the Greenlanders marvel again, as the magnificent collection has recently been returned to East Greenland where it is helping people to re-establish their sense of cultural identity.

By a curious twist, the Eastern Viking settlement had existed, but not in a way that could have been predicted by Egede. The key lay in the difference between ancient and modern navigation. Vikings like Floki Vilgerderson, when searching for Iceland, originally relied on ravens to find land: *'And when he let loose the first, it flew back astern (towards the Faeroes). The second flew up into the air and back to the ship. The third flew forward over the prow, where they found land.'* The introduction of the lodestone compass, visible at any time of day or night, meant that the ravens could at last relax. Although the new compass was nothing more than a needle, rubbed against a magnetic lodestone to turn it into a magnet and stuck into a straw floating in a bowl of water where it found its own north-south alignment, for the first time navigators had a reliable frame of reference beyond the rising and setting of the sun and a notch carved into the mast to reckon their latitude. However, what they didn't know was that their magnetic reference point was constantly moving.

When Hans Egede came looking for the 'lost' Vikings in 1721, magnetic north appeared to him to lie somewhere in the direction of the narrow Robeson Channel, separating the northern tips of Greenland and Ellesmere Island. But in 986 AD, as the first Norse settlers stood in the doorway of their newly built farmhouse in the Western Settlement (near today's Nuuk), their compass was pointing not north, but due east towards the northern islands of Russia's Franz Joseph Land, on a direct line well south of the North Geographical Pole. From this perspective, Julianehaab Bugt (Bay) appeared to run not northwest-southeast, but due east-west and Greenland's southern point was not then Kap Farvel, but the un-named southern tip of Nunarssuit Island just west of Kap Thorvaldsen, and well west of Qaqortoq. The Norse navigators coming from Scandinavia or Iceland, working to a lodestone compass, would have kept well south of the ice mass often clustered around Kap Farvel, and tracked, what was for them, due west across Julianehaab Bugt. They would not have turned north until rounding the little islands of Agdlerussarqat that fringe Nunarssuit's tip. This would therefore have been their clear southerly point, the definitive dividing line, and with north appearing to run diagonally uphill onto the glaciers from there, it suddenly makes perfect sense of the Norsemen's perception of Eastern and Western settlements, and a lot more besides.

For example, we now realise that Eric the Red's home is in fact the mythical Eastern Settlement, and it allows sense to be made of accounts of discoveries recorded by Lief the Lucky which to scholars previously sounded physically impossible, as did other accounts of such journeys. While according to *The Greenlanders Saga*, Lief is considered to have made the first true Norse explorations in America, beginning around 1003, he was not actually the first. Lief's journeys relied on information from a journey made 17 years earlier by Herjolf and his son Bjarni Herjolfsson, part of Eric's founding wave of migrants in 986 AD, who were the first Norse to sight the American coast after having been blown well off course while sailing from Eyrar in Iceland. According to his account, Herjolfsson sailed through endless fog, probably north of the Grand Banks, to

arrive on the northwest of Newfoundland. From there he sailed north, making three landfalls recorded successively as '*land covered with forest and low hills*', '*a flat country covered with woods*' and '*a land high, mountainous and glaciated*'. These phrases represent the first reliable European descriptions of North American shores. After Herjolfsson, at least two other landfalls were recorded as having been made on these shores by Norse voyagers. Leif's journey was therefore only one of many. Lief began from his father's home and retraced in reverse order Herjolfsson's voyage, first reaching a coast he called Helluland ('*country of flat stones found on the shore that were so large that two men could easily lie stretched across them, sole to sole*': possibly Labrador and not the more popularly believed Baffin Island). He continued south to Markland ('*land of trees growing down to the water's edge, on a promontory with the shape of ship's keel and long sandy strands*' - or narrow beaches: almost certainly the eastern side of Cape Breton Island, Newfoundland) and finally in 1004 he reached a place he generically named Vinland (probably as far south as the valley of St John in Nova Scotia) where they landed and built huts. The narrow beaches were later named Furðustrandir or "Marvelstrands", and the cape was Kjalarnes (currently Cape Porcupine). On the northern tip of Newfoundland, which Lief specifically referred to as Vinland, today's L'Anse aux Meadows was probably the site of his Leifsbuðir, or Leif's Settlement, while a short distance south, the modern Canada Bay was most likely his ancient Krossanes.

On a raised beach above Epaves Bay near L'Anse aux Meadows, Norwegian scholars in the 1960's excavated three complexes of houses and outbuildings, including a charcoal-filled forge dated to around the year 1000, confirming it was here in 1009 that Snorri, the first new European in the New World, was born to Karlsevni and Gudrid, the widow of Lief's brother Thorstein.

But of more surprise was the much later claim of a find, on Ellesmere Island far to the northwest, of chainmail armour, iron blades, copper fragments and woollen cloth. Perhaps it was someone, whom no manuscript records, who drifted an awfully long way from home. Although if so, he was not the only explorer to reach there. One who did record his travels to this northern region was an English Minorite friar and Oxford mathematician who '*journeyed through the North, described all the places that he saw, took the height (latitude) with his astrolabe, and put into writing all the wonders of the lands*'. Referring to the authority of his 1569 polar map, Gerard Mercator in his letter to John Dee of 20 April, 1577, refers to one of his sources as "*The historie of the voyage of Jacobus Cnoyen Buschoducensis, throughout all Asia, Africa, and the North*". This work in turn acknowledges its own debt to an earlier work of around 1360 entitled *Inventio Fortunatae* '*which began at ...latitude 54°, continuing to the Pole*'. It purported to describe what lay beyond the limits of the classical Seventh Climate.

Whilst the well-travelled Greenland Norse would undoubtedly have been his guides, since no mention exists of ships or an expedition, the Monk's identity has yet to be fully established. Mercator believed it was Hugh of Ireland, of whom almost nothing is known, save for this snippet:

*'Hugh... of Ireland, a Minorite, wrote a certain journey in one volume... We read of no other work by this Hugh, but he is said to have flourished in 1360 AD, in the reign of King Edward III'*. History records that a book, *Inventio Fortunatae*, was presented by a monk sometime before 1377 to England's Edward III, 'King of the Sea', the man who started the Hundred Year's War and ironically proclaimed himself King of both France and England, the two combatants.

The name Vinland, or Wineland, coined by Lief the Lucky and suggesting vines and grapes, if not wine itself, has beguiled scholars through the ages and probably derives from later and more fanciful narratives such as the *Flateyjarbok* of 1387 which draws on

well-known Irish legends of a land of plenty, typified by abundant wine. This term, of Mediterranean origin, would have entered Norse lexicon through the Irish writing skills that translated into book form the original Viking oral traditions. Early Norse made mead wine from honey, but wine, as we know it, was not a feature of the early Norse culture in Greenland, meaning the naming of their find probably suggests the discovery of a pastoral and forest abundance that contrasted sharply with the overpowering barrenness surrounding their tiny Greenland farms.

Leif's employment of Wineland as a rhetorical code for plenty would have been consistent with his father's persuasive marketing style, the evidence being in the effect: his substantial reports resulted in an immediate attempt at settlement, led by Thorfinn Karlsefni. Thorfinn came to Greenland in 1002, married the widow of Thorstein, another of Eric the Red's sons, and set forth with four ships and 160 men, women and children to settle what they expected would be rich pickings. After internal squabbles, principally friction arising from Thorvald the Hunter's desire to keep moving, rather than be stuck with the business of settlement, and continued hostility from defiantly territorial Native Americans (Indians), the pioneers abandoned the attempt. Disaster reportedly overcame the fleet and Thorfinn's was the only vessel to make it back to Greenland.

An earlier understanding of the practicalities of the Magnetic North issue would have enabled scholars to translate legends into fact sooner than they did: that Vikings had indeed explored the Americas some 500 years before Columbus and Cabot. As it is, ongoing archaeological work has expanded on our understanding of short-lived Norse attempts at colonising Newfoundland and cast a new sadness on their disappearance.

Of the landing 500 years before the Norse, by legendary Irish monk Saint Brendan travelling in a leather boat, there is no trace as yet. Although, if a cow can swim across a river then St Brendan might well have crossed the Atlantic, as demonstrated by Irish explorer and historian Tim Severin, who retraced St Brendan's alleged voyage and proved conclusively just how well cowskin technology has worked through the ages.

So, from the migratory waves of ancient Inuit hunters to the relatively modern journeys of St Brendan and Lt Holm, the discovery of Greenland is a complex tale of human inquisitiveness and remarkable coincidence.

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