

# THE LAST VIKINGS

THE EPIC STORY OF THE  
GREAT NORSE VOYAGES

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**I.B. TAURIS**

LONDON • NEW YORK

Published in 2010 by I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd  
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010  
[www.ibtauris.com](http://www.ibtauris.com)

Distributed in the United States and Canada Exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan,  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

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ISBN 978 1 84511 869 3

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library  
A full CIP record for this book is available from the Library of Congress  
Library of Congress catalog card: available

Typeset in Minion by Dexter Haven Associates Ltd, London  
Printed and bound in India

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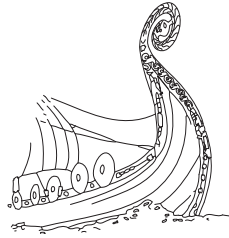
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# 1

## NO FORWARDING ADDRESS



### PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION OF GREENLAND

Greenland, the world's biggest island, is definable and real, although it is a remote place to most people even now and obviously was even more so in the days before aviation. Reaching from latitude  $59^{\circ} 46'N$  at Cape Farewell in the south to  $83^{\circ} 39'N$ , Greenland covers almost 840,000 square miles and is surrounded by some of the world's most dangerous seas, which is why its island nature was not confirmed until a piecemeal circumnavigation had been completed early in the twentieth century. Ashore, the landscape is equally intimidating with its huge proportions, its immense distances and its massive spine of granite running north–south to a height of two and three kilometres, weighed down by a vast ice sheet between two and three kilometres thick. In conjunction with the Arctic climate that prevails over the entire island, this towering, ice-crowned ridge is in large part responsible for the sudden and extreme changes in weather for which Greenland is known.<sup>1</sup> Despite these awesome features, Greenland nurtures beautiful, resilient flowers (Fig. 4) and is a botanist's delight as the home of around five hundred wild species of vascular plants, including five types of exquisite small orchids. It is also a geologist's paradise.

Geologically speaking, Greenland is essentially a part of North America, separated from it in the north only by the narrow Smith Sound. To the east, its nearest neighbour is volcanic Iceland, which the medieval Norse

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Fig. 4 Fireweed (*Chamaenerion latifolium*), ubiquitous in Greenland, is the country's hardy and beautiful national flower

began to settle in AD 870, completing the initial process in about sixty years. After that time, it became difficult for newcomers to claim good land, which was one reason why the feisty Norwegian-born Iclander Eirik 'the Red' Thorvaldsson, when setting out to found a colony in Greenland, was accompanied by a number of Icelandic families ready to clear new land.

### THE PUSH WESTWARDS

It indicates tremendous energy and momentum that the comparatively rapid colonisation of Iceland and Greenland took place while the Norse were also tightening their grip on Ireland, England and Scotland. Norsemen from those islands were in fact among the earliest settlers in Iceland; others came directly from Scandinavia, primarily from areas in western Norway that were little able to sustain a growing population. That included Jæren in the southwest, where Eirik the Red Thorvaldsson appears to have grown up.<sup>2</sup>

Eirik spearheaded the Norse settlement of Greenland just before AD 990, and the colony endured for about five centuries. Discussions abound



about what happened during that half millennium, because it is a complex topic that involves both modern archaeological reports and a miscellany of early written sources.

Ari the Learned's *Íslendingabók* (*Book of the Icelanders*), which begins by describing Iceland's early settlement around AD 870, includes a brief account of Greenland's colonisation, the oldest known reference to Eirik the Red's ambitious undertaking. The description was based on what Ari had learned from his own uncle, Thorkell Gellison, whom he had good reason to trust.

The country called Greenland was discovered and colonised from Iceland. A man called Eiríkr the Red, from Breiðafjör ur, went there and took possession of land in the district which has since been called Eiríksfjör ur. He gave the country a name and called it Greenland, and said that people would be more eager to go there if it had an attractive name. They found there human habitations, both in the eastern and western parts of the country, and fragments of skin boats and stone implements, from which it can be concluded that the people who had been there before were of the same kind as those who inhabit Vinland and whom the Greenlanders call Skraelings. He began colonising the country fourteen or fifteen winters before Christianity came to Iceland [985 or 986] according to what a man who had gone there with Eiríkr the Red told Thorkell Gellison in Greenland.<sup>3</sup>

Like many other Icelandic sagas, our two most important sources – the 'Saga of Eirik the Red' and the 'Saga of the Greenlanders' – were based on oral traditions, and both were written down in the early thirteenth century.<sup>4</sup> That prompts the question of how reliable Norse oral history would have been after the passage of two centuries, especially when both sagas give evidence of influence by the intellectual currents of the anonymous authors' own time. Fortunately, it has become increasingly clear that the Norse were able to preserve oral genealogies and family traditions for many generations, a good example being a boastful runic inscription in the Orkney megalithic tomb of Maeshowe: 'These runes were carved by the best rune-master in the western ocean, with the ax that belonged to Gauk Trandilsson in the southern part of the country [Iceland]. The inscription dates from the winter of 1153–54, when a group of Norse raiders harrying in the Hebrides had sought shelter inside the howe, and the boast was the work of Thorhall Ásgrímsson, the great-great-great-grandson of the man responsible for Gauk Trandilsson's death as described in 'Njáls Saga'.<sup>5</sup>

Commentaries on the sparse source material we have to work with are as plentiful as they are easily outdated. Fortunately, the primary sources

themselves do not alter, only the light by which each generation of scholars reads them. A sharper distinction between commentaries and sources would probably have minimised current problems in discussions about the Norse in Greenland and North America. Students of Norse Greenland may trace a number of woes to the 1837 Copenhagen publication of Carl Christian Rafn and Finn Magnussen's *Antiquitates Americanae*. Written in Icelandic with Latin and Danish translations, it was a compendium of sources the authors hoped would help with the understanding of medieval Norse activities in Greenland and North America, and it had an English summary that widened its potential readership considerably. It was deservedly welcomed on both sides of the Atlantic. Unfortunately, the volume's publication also encouraged scholars and non-scholars alike to speculate rather freely about the Norse in North America and Greenland, because the compilers asserted that an old, round tower in Newport, Rhode Island had been constructed as a medieval Norse church and thus demonstrated a successful and enduring Norse presence in that area throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> This structure and other supposedly Norse creations have fed a cult history that is much too fat and happy to die of its own accord, and which the 'Postscript' discusses in conjunction with the *Vinland Map* and other dubious creations credited to the medieval Norse.

Problems also arise from the fact that modern archaeologists working in Greenland – usually under very difficult conditions – have had an extra cross to bear in the form of unskilled, early digs in Norse Greenland ruin sites. For example, when it transpired that there was an ancient Norse graveyard on the Herjolfsness site (in the southernmost reaches of the main Norse settlement), a Danish commercial assistant named Ove Kielsen excavated there for two and a half days in 1839 and found some wooden crosses, a skull with blond hair still attached, and a garment identified as a 'sailor's jacket' but later shown to be part of a medieval man's gown. After receiving a stipend of four pounds sterling as a reward for his work so far, Kielsen hired twenty-four men to work for five more days, during which time they dug up a large part of the churchyard to a depth of two or three feet. Their efforts, which constituted sheer vandalism by today's standards, turned up a number of modest objects, in varying states of preservation, which experts back in Copenhagen deemed worthless.<sup>7</sup>

One of the things learned since the mid-nineteenth century is that the medieval North Atlantic expansion, which resulted in the Norse Greenland colony, preserved a remarkable cultural affinity among all the Norse societies around the North Atlantic and the North Sea. At the same time, settlers in their various new island homes very soon came to regard

themselves as denizens of their new homelands, not of Norway. This two-edged situation gives added significance to contemporaneous comments on Greenland found in the *Historia Norvegiæ*, and also to statements in the *Konungsskuggsjá* (*King's Mirror*).

Both books recognised that not the least of a mariner's perils was the chance of getting lost at sea. The *Historia Norvegiæ* relates that some Icelandic sailors encountered fog while returning home from Norway and drifted so far off course that they had no idea where they were. When the weather finally cleared, they reportedly observed land between Greenland and Biarmaland, the Norse name for the White Sea region and beyond. There, they vowed, they had seen marvellously large men, and on a nearby island there were maidens who reportedly became pregnant from drinking sea water. Having delivered these sops to standard medieval lore, the *Historia's* author retreated into contemporaneous geographical ideas and explained that beyond those marvel-lands, and separated from them by icebergs, one would find Greenland, which Icelanders had settled. Greenland forms Europe's outer boundary to the west, the author explained, and it reaches all the way towards the African Islands where the Great Ocean flows in. Dredging his mind for further information, he added that far to the north of the Greenland Norse settlements live a race of short people whom hunters call Skrælings, and who make their weapons from walrus tusks and sharp stones because they lack iron.<sup>8</sup>

In the *King's Mirror*, after the father had cautioned his son that an aspiring merchant must be prepared for many vicissitudes, whether at sea or in heathen countries, he provided a description of Ireland taken straight from the writings of Gerald of Wales (about 1146–1223), praising the island's mild climate in which people need no clothes even in winter and averring that Ireland is so holy that neither snakes nor toads are found there. Those who venture farther north would need to take care, however, the father admonished, because the Greenland Sea is prone to hafgerðingar (probably tsunamis) and features many monsters, including the margygr with long hands and the large-breasted upper body of a woman, but with a man's long hair and beard. They had not been seen very frequently, the father believed, but 'people have stories to tell about them, so men must have seen or caught sight of them'. Rather more useful to traders would be the rostungr (walrus) found in Greenland waters and described as a species of seal, with two big tusks in its upper jaw yielding ivory, and with tough hide which, when cut into strips, provided strong ropes. Along with various kinds of animal skins, those products made Greenland a worthwhile destination for a trader willing to brave the perils of that northern sea, including the frightful ice off Greenland's east and northeast

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coasts. The father nevertheless wanted his son to know that while the country provided good conditions for man and beast, few people lived there, and few went there to visit. Those who did so, wanted to satisfy their curiosity, to win fame, and to gain wealth by means of a trade from which one might expect a good profit in a place that ‘lies so distant from other countries that men seldom visit it.’<sup>9</sup>

### MODERN VOICES OF GLOOM AND DOOM

Home to barely 65,000 people, Greenland is sparsely populated even today, and the Norse of a thousand years ago would have amounted to mere specks in that huge landscape. Of the twenty-five open, square-rigged ships that set out on Eirik’s colonising venture some time between AD 986 and 990, laden with emigrants and their belongings, only fourteen made it all the way to Greenland after a crossing that caused some to perish and forced others to return home. However, that was sufficient to start the main colony in the southwest (the Eastern Settlement) and a satellite colony (the Western Settlement) some 400 miles farther north – the latter name reflecting the settlers’ awareness that the Greenland west coast veers noticeably west as it runs north. Recent scientific evidence has confirmed that both of the Greenland Norse settlements were populated around AD 1000.<sup>10</sup>

To a man and woman, those pioneers were accustomed to hard, physical work and to conditions in the Far North, where the struggle for existence was an even greater challenge than in the rest of medieval Europe, and they were determined to create a society where their inherited hunting, fishing and farming culture could continue to flourish. Expert at exploiting the natural resources of the Far North, they emigrated to Greenland precisely because of that country’s rich resources, and they were obviously successful, given that five centuries passed before smoke no longer rose above the turf-covered roofs of their settlements.

Although the duration of the Norse tenure in Greenland equals the length of time that has passed since the European ‘rediscovery’ of America, their venture is almost without exception seen as having failed in some way. Despite their proven ability to survive in such a challenging environment for half a millennium, they have routinely been portrayed in posterity as tragic victims of external circumstances exacerbated by their own shortcomings, and there have been many explanations for why a doomed society supposedly developed from the sturdy seeds planted by Eirik the Red. Suggestions include genetic deterioration, malnutrition,

incompetent resource exploitation, fatal skirmishes with encroaching Inuit, failure to learn from the Inuit, pestilence brought from Europe, pirates descending from Europe, isolation from Europe, the breakdown of an already fragile social order, an eastward return to Iceland and Norway and last, but certainly not least, climate change.

In his 2005 bestseller *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, the American author Jared Diamond makes Norse Greenland his poster child for societal failure and states unequivocally: 'Greenland Norse society collapsed completely: Its thousands of inhabitants starved to death, were killed in civil unrest or in war against an enemy, or emigrated, until nobody remained alive.' Their society was doomed from within and without, Diamond writes. He suggests that we may learn from studying that society's collapse because, in his view, many of our own problems are broadly similar to those which the Norse Greenlanders faced because of their 'unintended ecological suicide' and general lack of foresight, as well as due to poor adjustment to Greenlandic conditions. Norse Greenland society provides our most complex case of prehistoric collapse, Diamond believes, adding that it also represents the case for which we have the most information, given that it was 'a well-understood, literate European society'.<sup>11</sup>

Certainly, the Norse Greenlanders were European, but their literacy rate remains unmeasured and unmeasurable, and their society is not particularly well understood even now. Public misconceptions about Norse Greenland abound, including about the developments which Diamond considers likely to have caused the Norse Greenlanders' self-inflicted demise: 'environmental damage, climate change, loss of friendly contacts with Norway, rise of hostile contacts with the Inuit, and the political, economic, social and cultural setting of the Greenland Norse.'<sup>12</sup> There is clearly a call to examine both current knowledge about the political, economic, social, and cultural setting of Norse Greenland, and the fatal deficiencies supposedly besetting this European outpost and distant beacon of the medieval Roman Church. Two questions invite themselves: what was the Norse Greenlanders' fate in fact? And do the proposed contributing circumstances stand up to scrutiny?

Common sense suggests that erosion and changes in the climate would not in themselves have caused an entrenched population to vanish while there was still food on the land and in the sea. Medieval Icelanders had environmental problems similar to the Greenlanders' and suffered calamitous volcanic eruptions besides, but they survived and recovered from every disaster, including the Black Death, which finally reached Iceland in 1402. There is no evidence at all that the Black Death ever

invaded Greenland. Nor should one suppose that the Greenlanders, being of the same sturdy stock as the Icelanders, had less ability to cope with weather fluctuations by the late fifteenth century, or less will to live, than either their ancestors who had accompanied Eirik the Red or their contemporaries in Iceland.

Prompted by current discussions about global warming, the climate situation at the time of the Norse Greenlanders' colonial tenure nevertheless crops up frequently and terms like the 'Medieval Warm Period' and the 'Little Ice Age' are tossed about rather too freely. Although the 'Little Ice Age' was not an observable phenomenon in the far northwest until just before 1700, in writings about Norse Greenland the term has often been applied to a period beginning as early as about 1350, when there was a cooling trend interrupted by several periods of milder weather. Although much of the 'information' about that cooling trend derives from misinterpretations of supposedly fourteenth-century sailing directions to Greenland, which suffer heavily from seventeenth-century interpolations, they have strongly influenced interpretations of complex climate data from that vast region.

Recent climate research, which indicates that cold and/or erratic weather affected the Eastern Settlement during a period prior to the colony's desertion, has prompted renewed suggestions that a worsening climate contributed in a major way to the Norse Greenlanders' disappearance. Such cause-and-effect reasoning is meaningless when we know neither the exact time of the Eastern Settlement's closing down nor the relationship between the climate at any time and the medieval inhabitants' situation – or indeed how they responded to climate variability. What we do know is that around AD 1000, average temperatures in southwestern Greenland were about the same as around 2000, and that the millennium in between saw many climate fluctuations. The big climate changes that allow forestry and agriculture on an unprecedented scale have come after 2000, with Greenland's experiencing a warming with no known parallel in the preceding thousand years, not even at the tail end of the Medieval Warm Period when Eirik the Red and his pioneers cleared the first farms in their new colony. Palaeo-botanical studies of seeds and other plant remains from both the Eastern and Western Settlements show that while the Norse could cultivate hardy root crops and that they had managed to grow flax, they were unable to raise even the hardest grain to maturity.<sup>13</sup>

Another persistent explanation for the end of the Norse Greenland colony is that severed contact with Norway around 1400 must inevitably have struck a mortal blow to the Norse Greenlanders' existence. However,

the Eastern Settlement lasted for a century or a century and a half after the rupture of formal Norwegian connections, which suggests that the experience was quite bearable. The question of Norway's role in the Norse Greenlanders' lives is nevertheless a weighty one and will be taken up in various contexts in later chapters.

What is beyond dispute is that the Norse Greenlanders did vanish. Recent archaeological investigations indicate that the Western Settlement closed down around 1400 (not around 1350, as is usually claimed) and that, except for a few possible stragglers, the Norse inhabitants had left the Eastern Settlement by about 1500. Even the best available historical and archaeological information fails to illuminate either the circumstances or the timing of the decisions to close down these communities. Nobody witnessed the departure of the Norse Greenlanders, and nobody knows why they left and where they went.

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