

Southern Iceland Spring 985 AD

NARRATOR: (calm, strong voice throughout) I will tell you a Viking tale of murder, revenge, and adventure that began on Iceland in about 985. Later, the story moves to Greenland, and finally to Vinland, the land that would become North America.

During those times arguments between men frequently led to violence because the laws of the land were not clearly defined. Thirty-six jarls, or chieftains, ruled the four major districts of Iceland. When trouble came the district high chieftain called a thing, a lawsuit or assembly of freemen to decide the fate of a lawbreaker. Attended by minor chieftains acting as a council, the high chieftain assumed the position of the law speaker--judge and jury--during the thing and his verdicts were final.

And so it was on Iceland with a man called Eirik Thorvaldsson, who later became known as Eirik the Red. A vile tempered man, Eirik stood accused of killing two men in a fit of rage. One, Filth-Eyjolf, a kinsman of the owner of a neighboring farm, killed two of Eirik's slaves for causing a rock slide that destroyed a sheep shed. A kinsman of Filth-Eyjolf, Hrafen the Dueller, sought revenge for the killing and Eirik killed him, too.

In a separate matter that led to killings, Eirik loaned a set of his bed boards to a neighbor, Thorgest. Eirik later asked for the return of his boards and Thorgest refused. Fighting resulted from this theft. There were two main factions, those men supporting Eirik the Red and those men supporting Thorgest. The fighting turned into a blood feud, spreading over the district, finally reaching the point of open warfare when Eirik and his men killed two of Thorgest's sons and several of his followers.

As the feud spread, the district chieftain intervened and called for a thing at Thorsnes, in the south of Iceland, to settle the matter. The word went out over the district that the fighting was to stop and all landowning freemen were expected to attend.

The Trial of Eirik the Red

NARRATOR: The people gathered in the amphitheater of the Thorsnes Thing, among the rocks and grasses along the base of a sheer granite cliff overlooking the sea. A grass-covered knoll dominated one end and scattered birch trees dotted the landscape. A splash of color from the woolen clothing of the people gathered around the base of the knoll brightened the earth tones of the scenery and lent a festive air as the people stood in groups or milled around the wood fires to stay warm. The buzz of many conversations filled the air.

A chill onshore wind, moist with spray from the breakers that crashed onto the rocky shoreline, ruffled the tall grass and the leaves of the birch trees. Low grey clouds obscured the sky and the summit of the volcano Hekla, in the near distance. The law speaker and his council of minor chieftains sat atop the knoll. His eyes played over his charges as the last of the latecomers joined friends and kinsmen.

Prominently arrayed nearby, Eirik the Red, his wife, three sons, daughter, kinsmen, and friends, stood apart from the others. The immediate family had not been involved in the feud, but was present in a support role. Eirik presented a commanding figure, hands fisted on his hips; his red beard blew in the wind as he glared belligerently at his enemies standing nearby.

The law speaker got to his feet. Silence fell over the people as all waited for their high chieftain to speak. He beckoned those having business at the thing to draw near.

Eirik, the accused, and Geirstein and Odd of Jorvi, the first of the accusers, stepped forward.

The law speaker looked at Eirik for a moment before he turned his attention to the other two men.

LAW SPEAKER: (firm voice) “Tell me your part in this matter.”

ACCUSERS: (angry, loud voices) “Eirik killed our kinsmen, Filth-Eyjolf and Hrafen the Dueler at Leikskalar,” Odd said.

“We demand to settle our differences by the einvigi, a duel to the death, each of us in turn.” Geirstein said.

NARRATOR: Eirik made to bluster at them until stopped by the raised hand of the law speaker. The law speaker glanced at the crowd and then fastened his attention on the two accusers.

LAW SPEAKER: (forceful) “There will be no einvigi. A duel to the death will not solve this matter. Now, who witnessed these killings?”

WITNESSES: (shouted from the crowd) “I saw Eirik kill Eyjolf,” a man said. “Aye, I saw him kill Eyjolf without warning and then he had a fight with Hrafen the Dueler and killed him, too,” another man added.

NARRATOR: The law speaker motioned them forward.

LAW SPEAKER: (calm, questioning tone) “Why did Eirik kill, Eyjolf? Tell me what happened to make him kill him.”

WITNESSES: (angry, voice raised) “Eirik’s two thralls caused a rock slide that smashed a sheep shed. Eyjolf got mad and killed both of them. When Eirik heard about it he flew into a rage. He and Eyjolf argued and Eirik killed him.”

NARRATOR: Over the next hour or so, the law speaker also heard from Thorgest and two of his witnesses on the other matter before the thing. Thorgest admitted his part in starting the feud by stealing Eirik’s bed boards. But, he would never forgive Eirik for killing his sons and kinsmen. His anger boiled over, forcing the law speaker to silence him. It seemed the problems

were without solution. A pattern of violence was emerging that all pointed in one direction. Things were not going well for Eirik.

LAW SPEAKER: (questioning tone) “Are there other witnesses for the accusers?”

NARRATOR: The law speaker looked out over the silent assembly. When nobody answered his eyes came to rest on Eirik.

LAW SPEAKER: (forceful) “What say you?”

EIRIK: (angry, voice raised) “Aye, I killed both of them, everybody knows that.” Eirik sweeps a hand out over the onlookers. “Eyjolf killed my thralls and I killed him for that. It is my right. He deprived me of my property. Hrafen the Dueller attacked me and I defended myself, killing him in the process. Thorgest is a common thief and I attacked him and his men for stealing from me. I make no apology for any of this. It is my business and mine alone.”

NARRATOR: Eirik glared at his accusers and their witnesses. The law speaker’s expression did not change during Eirik’s final outburst; he looked at him silently for a heartbeat.

LAW SPEAKER: (very forceful tone) “I will decide what is to be done, according to our laws and customs. You, Eirik Thorvaldsson will heed my words.”

NARRATOR: The law speaker’s commanding voice boomed out over the crowd. Eirik gritted his teeth, his famous temper barely held in check as he glared at the law speaker. Eirik heaved a great sigh, knowing full well that he could not afford to anger his chieftain.

LAW SPEAKER: (loud, for all to hear) “Who speaks for Eirik?”

NARRATOR: The law speaker’s eyes swept the crowd.

WITNESSES: (shouted from crowd) “We do!”

NARRATOR: Thorbjorn and a man called Styr stepped forward from the crowd. The law speaker beckoned for them to speak.

WITNESSES: (loud clear voices) “Eirik defended himself when attacked by Thorgest and his followers,” Thorbjorn said. “Aye, we fought with him,” Styr added.

LAW SPEAKER: (questioning tone) “Who started the argument that led to this fighting?”

NARRATOR: The law speaker’s eyes bored into the eyes of the two witnesses.

Both men seemed uncomfortable, each glancing at Eirik for support.

EIRIK: (angrily shouting) “I started the argument. Thorgest stole my property. I wanted him to return my bed boards. He refused.”

NARRATOR: The law speaker nodded thoughtfully, motioning for the two witnesses to continue.

EIRIK: (angry, loud, threatening) “Enough of this; I have not denied the killings. Make your decision.”

NARRATOR: Eirik waved his arms angrily, shouting at the law speaker and glaring defiantly at his accusers and their witnesses. Shouts and angry gestures of defiance swept through the crowd, with each faction loudly voicing their opinions. The order of the Thing fell apart, beginning a slide into chaos.

LAW SPEAKER: (loud, very forceful) “Hold! Quiet all of you!”

NARRATOR: The law speaker shouted above the din, both hands over his head in an attempt to restore order. Gradually the people became silent, their frustration and anger satisfied for the moment. Everybody was on their feet, naturally split into the feuding factions. The law speaker’s hold over his people was the only thing preventing bloodshed. He glanced at Eirik occasionally as he strode back and forth atop the mound, his mind grappling with what he knew he must do. Seeming to come to a decision, he stopped suddenly and gave his full attention to Eirik the Red.

LAW SPEAKER: (forceful) “Eirik Thorvaldsson, you stand accused of killings and outlawry.”

NARRATOR: Again, the deep voice of the law speaker boomed out over the crowd. A kind of animal growl rose from many of the people. The law speaker’s raised hand restored order after a moment. As all fell silent, waiting for the verdict and sentence to be passed down, Leif Eiriksson, the oldest of Eirik’s offspring stepped closer to his mother Thjodhild, and draped an arm over her shoulders protectively. Tears wet her cheeks.

LAW SPEAKER: (loud, forceful) “Eirik, I find you guilty of all charges. You are banished from all of Iceland for three years. No man will interfere while you settle your affairs. Be gone from this island before the new moon or you will be hunted down and killed.”

NARRATOR: Pandemonium ruled for a time, while the law speaker and his council departed the scene. Eventually, the people departed for their scattered farms. Eirik, his family, kinsmen, and followers departed for his farm at Eiriksstadir, for a strategy meeting. At this meeting, it was decided to explore and settle the unknown land sighted by Gunnbjorn Ulfsson as he was storm driven far off course to the northwest of Iceland. Thorvald, Thorstein, and Freydis, Eirik’s offspring, were to remain with their mother on Iceland to find people to join the expedition. Eirik, his son Leif, and a full crew of men, sailed from Iceland on the ebb tide the following morning. They found the ice covered island, later to be known as Greenland, spending the remainder of that first year exploring the rugged coastline and building shelters to stay the winter.

Settlement of Greenland

NARRATOR: (calm, strong voice throughout) The following year, during the summer of 986, Eirik, his son Leif Eiriksson, and other men of his crew, returned to Iceland for their families. Upon his return, Eirik found that his other two sons and daughter had gathered 500-people, 25-ships, and supplies for the first year of settlement. It is said that Eirik called the island Greenland to entice people to follow him there. That is not certain, nor is it known if he actually gave the island its name. Fourteen of the original complement of 25-ships made it to Greenland, the fate of the other 11-ships is unknown, but given the stormy waters of the North Atlantic Ocean, they probably rest on the seabed somewhere between Iceland and Greenland.

Greenland is the largest island on Earth and the only portion of the island not covered with an ice sheet, is along the southwestern coast. During the first year, the people settled there on small farms around the head of a long fjord that came to be known as Eiriksfjord. Eirik and his family claimed the best land at the head of the fjord and he called his farm Brattahlid. In the beginning, green grass for livestock forage was abundant. There were even a few thin stands of stunted birch trees and willow bushes until all had been eaten to the ground by the settler's livestock. Trade with Iceland and Norway commenced and life was good.

In later years, several people moved 400-miles north to another likely fjord that became known as Lysufjord. Eventually, as many as 4000-Viking settlers may have lived on Greenland for some 400-years and then, sometime between the 14th and 15th centuries, all disappeared, never to be seen again.

Sighting of North America

NARRATOR: During that first summer of the Greenland settlements, a seafarer and trader named Bjarni Herjulfsson arrived on Iceland, from Norway, to find that his father, Herjulf had sailed to Greenland with Eirik the Red and his followers. Bjarni immediately put back to sea and set sail for the island. A violent storm blew him far off course and he missed Greenland; however, he sighted unknown land further to the west—North America. Realizing his mistake, Bjarni reversed course and finally found Greenland, reuniting with his father.

Discovery of America

NARRATOR: Leif Eiriksson later became interested in Bjarni's tale of unknown land to the west of Greenland, bought Bjarni's ship, and with his original crew, sailed into the western ocean to have a look. On the voyage he landed on two shores, one he called Helluland (flat stone land) and the other he called Markland (forestland). Today we call them Baffin Island and Labrador respectively. Leif and his crew then sailed further south, finally landing on the northeastern tip of another island. We call this island Newfoundland. What Leif and his men called the island we may never know, but the saga writers two centuries later referred to it as Vinland

Leif built a settlement on Newfoundland, consisting of eight buildings, that he called Leifsbudir (Leif's Booths). This settlement was used for several years for some unknown purpose.

In 1962, the Norwegian explorer, Helge Ingstad and his wife, Anne-Stine Ingstad, an archaeologist, found Leifsbudir and spent the next several years excavating the site. Although the

sagas tell us that there are two other settlements in Vinland, Hop and Straumfjord, which have not been found, we have positive identification of Leifsbudir.

So, sometime between 997 and 1002--nobody is certain of the year--Leif Eiriksson, the eldest son of Eirik the Red, became the first man of European descent to land on the North American continent, almost 500-years before Christopher Columbus was born.

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