

Writing Den
Student Handout

Who Discovered America?

by Robert Livesey

Most people have heard, and believe, that Christopher Columbus was the first person from Europe to sail across the Atlantic Ocean to discover America.

That is not true!

In 998 A.D., more than 500 years before Columbus crossed the Atlantic, a Viking outlaw warrior, Eirik the Red, sailed with 25 ships and hundreds of followers, men, women, and children, to discover a new country. Only 14 ships survived the journey. Eirik named his new home Greenland.

The son of one of Eirik's followers, Bjarni Herjolfsson, (ie: son of Herjolf) later got lost at sea and arrived at Newfoundland, an island province on the east coast of Canada today. Bjarni returned to Greenland to describe his new discovery. It was Bjarni Herjolfsson who, by accident, discovered North America.

The eldest son of Eirik the Red, was named Leif Eiriksson (ie: son of Eirik). He purchased Bjarni's ship and sailed with a crew of 35 Vikings along the east coast of North America until he reached what we call Newfoundland today. Leif called it Vinland, because of the wild berries and vines he found there. On his journey home to Greenland, Leif rescued a group of people who had been shipwrecked on a reef. He became known as "Leif the Lucky" after he saved the strangers. It was Leif the Lucky who first explored North America.

Leif had a younger brother, Thorvald Eiriksson. When Thorvald heard about his brother Leif's adventure, he also wanted to explore Vinland. He borrowed Leif's ship and sailed west with a crew of 30 Vikings. Along the east coast of what is Canada today, Thorvald and his warriors encountered a group of native people. He was killed in the battle that followed. Thorvald was the first known Viking to die fighting with the natives of North America.

Eirik the Red had a third son, Thorstein Eiriksson, who married a beautiful young woman, Gudrid. But, Thorstein died suddenly from a disease. Later, Gudrid fell in love with, and married, another handsome Viking, Thorfinn Karlsefni. In the year 1004 A.D., the young couple decided to make Vinland their new home. They sailed to a

Writing Den
Student Handout
Who Discovered America?

place known today as L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland with four ships and 160 men and women. They built the first European settlement in North America at L'Anse aux Meadows, which they called Straumfjord.

At Straumfjord, the Vikings encountered a mysterious native tribe (Beothuks) who had white skin, blue eyes, and blonde hair. All was peaceful at first as they exchanged gifts. Some Vikings married Beothuk wives.

But later, a Viking newcomer had an argument with a Beothuk warrior over a weapon, and killed the native. When the Vikings refused to give the killer to the Beothuks to execute, a fierce battle erupted. The Vikings were forced to abandon their settlement, and return to Greenland.

Eirik the Red also had a daughter, Freydis, who attempted to revive the settlement at Straumfjord. She and her husband sailed in one ship with 30 men and some of their wives. Two Viking brothers, new arrivals from Norway, joined them in a second ship with another 30 men and five Viking wives. After they arrived at Straumfjord, Freydis and her husband lived in the fort abandoned by Thorfinn and Gudrid; the two brothers and their followers created a second camp.

Freydis was a selfish and vicious Viking woman. She argued with the Norwegian brothers. Her saga claims that she falsely accused them of insulting and physically attacking her when she visited their camp. To avenge her honour, Freydis' husband attacked the other camp and killed all the Viking men. When her husband refused to kill the five Viking wives, Freydis killed the women herself.

By this time, Eirik the Red had died, and Leif the Lucky had become the head of the family. When Leif learned about the behavior of his sister, he declared that, as a punishment, his sister and her descendants would never prosper and that there would be no future settlement at Straumfjord. It was abandoned.

Today, the Viking settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, a province of Canada, has been restored for tourists to explore.