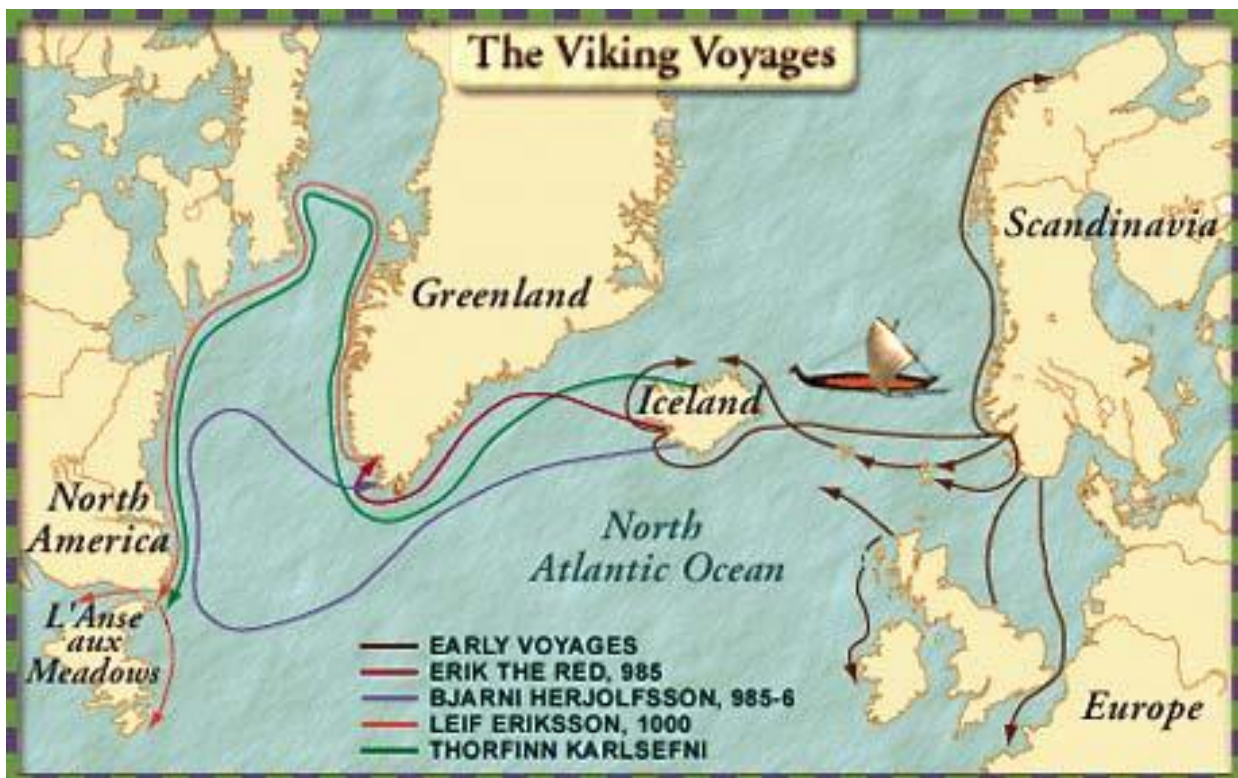


EXCERPT from Made in America (chapter 1: “The Mayflower and Before”)
written by Bill Bryson, 1994

No one knows who the first European visitors to the New World (North and South America) were. Credit is generally goes to the Vikings, who reached the New World in about A.D. 1000, but others *could* have been there earlier. An ancient Latin text, the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*, or *The Voyage of St. Brendan the Abbot*, recounts with persuasive detail a seven-year trip to a land across the sea claimed to have been made by this Irish saint and a band of acolytes (loyal followers) some four centuries before the Vikings – and this, it was said, on the advice of another Irishman who claimed to have been there earlier still.

...Whether by Irish or Vikings – or Italians or Welsh or Bretons or any of the other many groups for whom credit has been sought – crossing the Atlantic in the Middle Ages was not quite as daring a feat as it would at first appear, even allowing for the fact that it was done in small, open boats. The North Atlantic is conveniently scattered with islands that could serve as stepping-stones – the Shetland Islands, the Faroes, Iceland, Greenland, and Baffin Island. It would be possible to sail from Scandinavia (the homeland of the Vikings) to Canada without once crossing more than 250 miles of open sea.



We know beyond doubt that Greenland – and thus, technically, North America – was discovered in 982 by one Eric the Red, father of Leif Ericson, and that he and his followers began settling it in 986. Anyone who has ever flown over the frozen wastes of Greenland could be excused for wondering what they saw in the place. In fact, Greenland’s southern fringes are farther south than Oslo (in Norway, where the Vikings came

from) and offer an area of grassy lowlands as big as the whole of Britain. Certainly it suited the Vikings. For nearly five hundred years they kept a thriving colony (settlement) there, which at its peak boasted sixteen churches, two monasteries, some three hundred farms, and a population of four thousand. The one thing Greenland lacked was wood with which to build new ships and repair old ones – a somewhat vital consideration for a seagoing people. Iceland, the nearest landmass to the east, was barren. The most natural thing would be to head west to see what was out there. In about 1000, according to the sagas (the Vikings' oral or spoken history), Leif Ericson did just that. His expedition discovered a new landmass, probably Baffin Island, far up in northern Canada, over a thousand miles north of the present-day United States, and many other places, most notably the region they called Vinland.

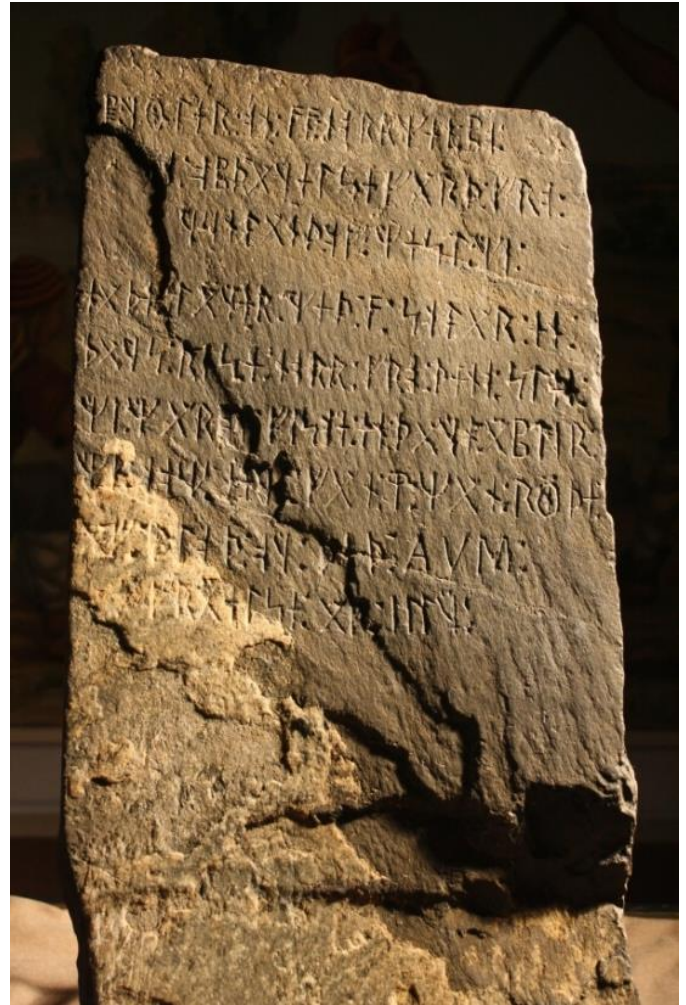
Vinland's location is a tantalizing historical puzzle. Through careful readings of the sagas (they were eventually written down by later generations of Europeans) and calculations of Viking sailing times, various scholars have put Vinland all over the place – on Newfoundland or Nova Scotia, in Massachusetts, even as far south as Virginia. A Norwegian scholar named Helge Ingstad claimed in 1964 to have found Vinland at a place called L'Anse au Meadow in Newfoundland. Others suggest that the artifacts Ingstad unearthed (dug up) were not of Viking origin at all, but merely the detritus (debris, leftovers) of later French colonists. The name is no help. According to the sagas, the Vikings called it Vinland because of the grapevines they found growing in profusion (large quantities) there. The problem is that no place within a thousand miles of where they might have been is likely to have supported wild grapes in abundance. One possible explanation is that Vinland was a mistranslation. *Vinder*, the Viking word for grapes, could be used to describe many other fruits – cranberries, gooseberries, and red currants, among them – that might have been found in these northern latitudes. Another possibility is that Vinland was merely a bit of deft propaganda (misleading information), designed to encourage settlement. These were, after all, the people who thought up the name *Greenland*.

The Vikings made at least three attempts to build permanent settlements in Vinland, the last in 1013, before finally giving up. Or possibly not. What is known beyond doubt is that sometime after 1408 the Vikings abruptly (suddenly) disappeared from Greenland. Where they went and what became of them is a mystery. The tempting presumption (possibility) is that they found a more congenial (agreeable, better suited) life in North America.



There is certainly an abundance of inexplicable (hard to explain) clues. Consider the matter of lacrosse, a game long popular with Indians across wide tracts (areas) of North America. Interestingly, the rules of lacrosse are uncannily (strangely similar) like those of a game played by the Vikings, including one feature – the use of paired teammates who may not be helped or impeded (interfered with) by other players - so unusual, in the words of one anthropologist (a scientist who studies ancient societies), “as to make the probability of independent origin vanishingly small (almost impossible).” Then there were the Hangeragmiuts,

a tribe of Inuits living high above the Arctic Circle on Victoria Island in northern Canada, a place so remote that its inhabitants were not known to the outside world until early in this (20th) century. Yet several members of the tribe not only looked distinctly European but were found to be carrying indubitably (undoubtedly) European genes. No one has ever provided a remotely satisfactory explanation of how this could be. Or consider the case of Olof and Edward Ohman, the father and son, who in 1888 were digging up tree stumps on their farm near Kensington, Minnesota, when they came upon a large stone slab covered with runic inscription (ancient writing), which appear to describe how a party of thirty Vikings had returned to that spot after an exploratory survey (information gathering trip) to find the ten men they had left behind “red with blood and dead.” The inscriptions have been dated to 1363. The one problem is how to explain why a party of weary (tired) explorers, facing the likelihood of renewed attack by the hostile natives, would take the time to make elaborate (time consuming and detailed) carvings on a rock deep in the American wilderness, thousands of miles from where anyone they knew would be able to read it. Still, if a hoax (elaborate joke), it was executed (carried out) with unusual skill and verisimilitude (appearing real and true).



Kensington Rune Stone

All this is by way of making the point that word of the existence of a land beyond the Ocean Sea, as the Atlantic was then known, was filtering back to Europeans long before Columbus made his celebrated voyage. The Vikings did not operate in isolation (alone). They even left a map – the famous Vinland map – which is



known* to have been circulating in Europe by the fourteenth century (see a copy of the map on the following page). We don't positively know that Columbus was aware of this map, but we do know that the course (direction) he set appeared to be making a beeline (straight line) for the mythical island of Antilla, which is featured on it.

* The paper, at least, that the map is written on dates back to the fourteenth century. However, some experts who have chemically analyzed the map claim that the type of ink on the map didn't exist until after 1920.

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Discuss each question with classmates and then write a thorough and thoughtful answer for each in the space provided. **Use evidence from the reading to support your opinions!**

1. Why do you believe the Vikings left their homeland in Scandinavia to explore and eventually settle lands to the west?
2. Bryson states at the bottom of the first page that “We know beyond doubt that Greenland – and thus, technically, North America – was discovered in 982 by one Eric the Red...” Explain how we in modern times could indeed know this “beyond doubt.” What proof or evidence is there?
3. Do you believe the Vikings were indeed the first Europeans to reach North America? Explain why or why not using evidence from the article to support your answer.

4. Was “Vinland” an actual place? If you believe it was, explain why and where it might be located. If you think it never existed, explain why. Study the “Vinland Map” on the last page to help support your answer.
5. On the second page, Bryson once again states with confidence, “what is known beyond doubt is that sometime after 1408 the Vikings abruptly disappeared from Greenland.” Based on the reading, where do you think they went? Use evidence to support your theory.
6. If the Vikings truly discovered North America some 500 years BEFORE Christopher Columbus, explain why Columbus, not the Vikings, is remembered as the European who discovered “America”.