

Lesson Plan 1

The Children of Eric the Red Explore the West: The Norsemen Encounter Indigenous People of North America

Suggested Grades: 9-12

“In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue...”

What American child – or adult, if the truth be told – doesn’t mentally invoke this little rhyme to remember the year when Christopher Columbus left Spain, sailed across the Atlantic, and landed on the shores of what would come to be called “The New World” or “America?” We have no similar memory aid to help recall the earlier “Norsemen” or “Viking” explorers who journeyed across the ocean from Norway to Iceland, then to Greenland, and eventually to an area in North America that they named “Vinland” (“Wineland”). They explored and even settled briefly in North America nearly five hundred years before Columbus’s 1492 journey. While neither Columbus nor the Vikings discovered America – both North and South America had been inhabited for more than ten thousand years when Columbus arrived – it is fitting to credit the Vikings as the first Europeans to reach the American continents within recorded history.

Background: The Vikings in North America, and their Documents

We know little about the Vikings who came to North America approximately one thousand years ago. Nor do we know much about the details of their experiences as explorers and settlers here. A few documents, supplemented by archeological evidence, demonstrate that these individuals did exist and that they explored and briefly settled in North America; but otherwise, the available evidence leaves a great deal to conjecture, educated guesses, and imagination. The facts, as far as they are known, are as follows:

- By the tenth century A.D., Norwegian settlers had migrated from island to island across the North Atlantic. They settled first in Iceland, then in Greenland, and lastly in Canada. Archaeological evidence shows that sometime around 1000 A.D., mariners from

Greenland built a village at what is now called L’Anse aux Meadows in northern Newfoundland.

- The first documentary evidence of Norse contact with lands west of Greenland is a brief mention written around 1130 A.D. in the *Islendinga-bok*. Adam of Bremen wrote the first datable description of any significant length in the 1070s.
- Two lengthier texts, known as the Vinland sagas, were written down between 1200 and 1300 A.D., but they are thought to reflect earlier oral traditions – tales that had been told for generations. The *Groenlandinga Saga* (*The Saga of Greenland*) and *Eiríks Saga Rauda* (*The Saga of Eric the Red*), give two often contradictory accounts of the events of 980-1030 A.D.

- The last datable mention of a Norse colony on the American mainland refers to events that occurred in 1161 A.D. Other documents make a few indirect references to slightly later events.
- Scholars suspect that climatic change may have doomed the Vikings' western settlements. Steadily falling temperatures throughout the region after 1200 A.D. would have shortened both the navigation and growing seasons in Arctic Canada. By the 1500s, Greenland also was empty of Norse settlers and mariners.

The first five documents in the American Journeys website are related to the Norsemen and their North American activities. English translations of the two Vinland sagas appear in their entirety, as documents AJ-056, *The Saga of Eric the Red* (31 pages of text); and AJ-057, *The Vinland History of the Flat Island Book* (22 pages of text). The website also contains three briefer Viking-related documents or excerpts: "From Adam of Bremen's *Descriptio Insularum Aquilonis*" (AJ-058, 2 pages of text); "From the *Icelandic Annals*" (AJ-059, 1 page of text); and later references, "Papal Letters Concerning the Bishopric of Gardar in Greenland during the Fifteenth Century" (AJ-060, 5 pages of text).

The two Vinland sagas, which are the focus of this lesson, were preserved in a manuscript volume called *Flateyjarbok*, or *Flat Island Book*. The sagas had already been passed down orally for generations, probably for more than three hundred years, by the time they were written down in about 1387 A.D. as part of the *Flat Island Book*. The manuscript was found in Iceland almost three hundred years later, circa 1650 A.D. This manuscript volume of some 1,700 pages

now resides in the Royal Library, Copenhagen, Denmark. The book was first printed in the 1860s, photographic facsimiles were prepared in the 1890s, and it was translated into English in 1906. The translations included on the web site are from *The Northmen, Columbus and Cabot, 985-1503* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906).

The Saga of Eric the Red recounts a version of the colonization of Greenland by Eirik Rauda Thorvaldsson (Eric the Red), provides stories about the adventures of the children of Eric the Red, and describes the exploration of North America by Thorfinn Karlsefni. This text describes how Thorfinn established a North American base at Straumfjord and made voyages to the north, perhaps to the Labrador coast. Later, he made another journey to the south and east, perhaps to the eastern side of Newfoundland's northern tip.

The Vinland History of the Flat Island Book recounts a series of voyages made sometime after Eric the Red's colonization of Greenland. Biarni Heriulfson made a voyage with three landfalls; the first was perhaps Newfoundland, the second Labrador, and the third, farther north, could be Baffin Island. According to this saga, Leif Ericson later made a voyage in which he sailed up the western coast of Greenland, across to Helluland, south to Biarni's second landfall which he called Markland, and finally to Biarni's first landfall where grapes were found—hence the name Vinland. This saga tells of two other voyages, one led by Thorfinn Karlsefni, and another led by Eric the Red's daughter, Freydis.

Scholars generally believe that the Helluland of these documents is Baffin Island, and that Markland was somewhere on the coast of Labrador. The possible locations of Vinland, Leifsbudir, Straumfjord,

and other places named in the texts are still hotly debated, with possibilities ranging as far south as Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Despite its rich archaeological record, L'Anse aux Meadows cannot be positively identified as any of the places mentioned or described in the documents.

Objectives

Using selected excerpts from the two Vinland sagas, this lesson will introduce students to the existence and experiences of the Norse explorers who reached northern North America ten centuries ago. It will also expose students to the demands of working with very early primary source texts, where chronology and history blend inherently with folklore and literary traditions. The specific objectives of the lesson are as follows:

- Students will be able to trace the spread of human adventurers on the North American continent.
- Students will be able to compare and contrast different versions of the same story as they are told within each of two documents.
- Students will be able to evaluate very early texts that record the first explorations in terms of the literary tradition of the time.

- Students will be able to extract factual and chronological information from a document, while drawing educated conclusions about reliability both of portions of a text and as taken in its entirety.

Connections with the Curriculum

This lesson meets the following national history standards for grades 5-12:

- Understand the stages of European oceanic and overland exploration, amid international rivalries, from the 9th to 17th centuries. (United States History Standards, Era 1: Three Worlds Meet, Beginnings to 1620, Standard 2A).
- Read historical narratives imaginatively, taking into account what the narrative reveals of the humanity of the individuals and groups involved – their probable values, outlook, motives, hopes, fears, strengths and weaknesses. (Historical Thinking Standards, Historical Comprehension, Standard 2E).
- Engage in historical analysis and interpretation by comparing competing historical narratives. (Historical Thinking Standards, Historical Analysis and Interpretation, Standard 3G).

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Introducing the Material

This may be the first time your students have ever heard of any European “discovery” or exploration of America before Christopher Columbus. Even if they have heard of the Vikings, they probably don’t know details. So before you assign excerpts from the documents, you will need to give your students background and secondary information about the Norsemen and their North American presence.

General Background

Have your students begin by reading the section in their textbook that mentions Viking exploration of North America. Next, assign the sections on “Viking Explorations” and “Discoveries Across the Atlantic” on the Mariner’s Museum (Newport News, Virginia) website, www.mariner.org/age/vikingexp.html. This website concisely summarizes what is known of Viking experiences in Iceland, Greenland, and North America. More importantly for this lesson, it talks specifically about the Vinland sagas. As the final part of the preliminary introduction to this lesson, have your students examine maps to identify the locations of the various places the Vikings lived or were most likely to have explored. Ask your students to find Norway, Iceland, Greenland, Baffin Island, Labrador, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

Selecting Excerpts

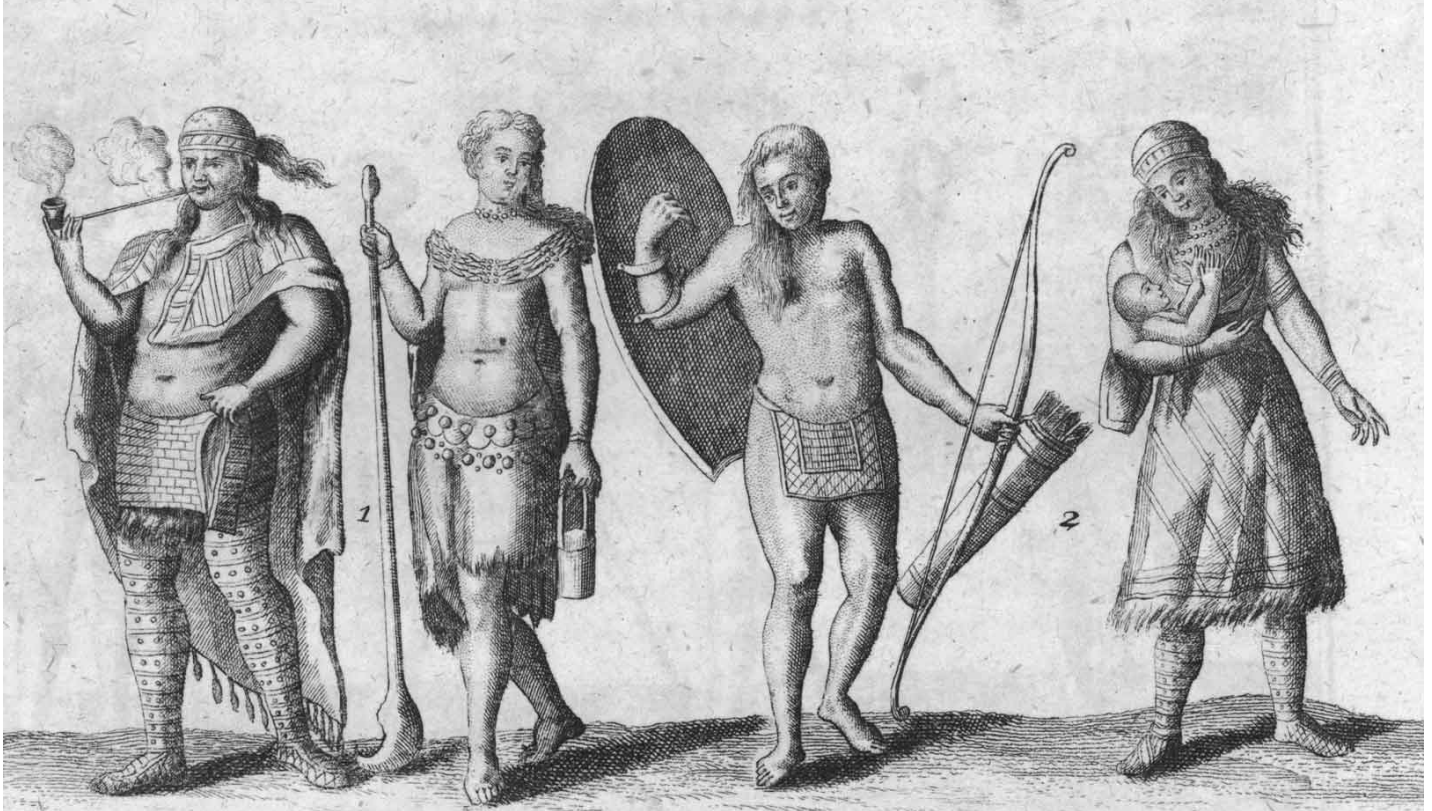
You are not quite ready to have your students begin to work with the primary source documents. The two Viking sagas used in this lesson and included on the *American Journeys* website are lengthy (31 and 22 pages respectively), and the material is difficult to interpret. As the teacher, therefore, your first

task will be to identify, print, and make copies of excerpts that are of appropriate length and complexity for your students, and that best tie in to the particular subject matter of the course.

This lesson plan offers sample excerpts and activities suited for a high school American history class. The suggested passages focus on the Viking exploration of “Vinland” and other lands west of Greenland, and they emphasize the experiences of Leif Ericsson (one of Eric the Red’s sons) and Thorfinn Karlsefni (sort of a son-in-law of Eric the Red¹). The suggested excerpts are paired or grouped, to facilitate development of students’ analytical and critical thinking skills. The two sagas talk about many of the same events. Sometimes the two versions are very close, perhaps revealing that one was taken in part from the other. For example, *The Vinland History* seems to directly summarize *The Saga of Eric the Red’s* version of Eric’s migration from Norway to Iceland, and then to Greenland. Other times, the versions differ so greatly from one text to the other that it is hard to recognize they are even talking about the same event or journey. Basic details of who was involved, when something took place, or what happened and why, can differ substantially. By reading sets of stories together, students will have the opportunity to compare and contrast conflicting versions, and they will learn how to assess historical accuracy in these sorts of texts.

The selected excerpts eliminate as much genealogy information as possible. Before the stories were preserved in written form, these sagas were the sole way in which the society could preserve and transmit genealogical information from one generation to the next. As a result, the texts are littered with names of people and places. Each time a new indi-

¹ Eric the Red had a son, Thorstein Ericsson. Thorstein married Gudrid. Thorstein died a few months later, leaving Gudrid a widow. Gudrid returned to Eric’s household (according to the *Saga of Eric the Red*) or to Eric’s son Leif’s household (according to *The Vinland History*). A year later, Gudrid married Thorfill Karlsefni.



vidual appears in the sagas, they are linked back several generations and possibly one or two forward, and they are connected to several places. Two examples illustrate:

- “There was a man named Thorvald; he was a son of Asvald, Ulf’s son, Eyxna-Thori’s son. His son’s name was Eric. He and his father went from Jaederen to Iceland, on account of manslaughter, and settled on Hornstrandir, and dwelt at Dranger.” (This is how *The Saga of Eric the Red* introduces Eric the Red, and his migration from Norway to Iceland.)
- “The same summer a ship came from Norway to Greenland. The skipper’s name was Thorfinn Karlsefni; he was a son of Thord Horsehead, and a grandson of Snorri, the son of Thord of Hofdi. Thorfill Karlsefni, who was a very wealthy man, passed the winter at Brat-tahlid with Leif Ericsson. . . .” (This is how *The Vinland History of the Flat Island Book* introduces Thorfill Karlsefni, the Viking explorer of Vinland.)

For modern American readers, the names are unfamiliar. The strange sound of the names, plus their sheer quantity, can quickly confuse and overwhelm a student. The names will not add to students’ understanding of early American history, so almost all of these recitations of family lineage have been excised from the suggested excerpts for this lesson. You may wish to ask your students to read one or two of these passages on the website, just to give them a flavor for the way the Vikings told their stories.

In terms of content, a number of things have been intentionally omitted from the suggested excerpts. These texts combine

folklore, mythology, and literature with historical elements. Keeping in mind that this lesson is designed for use in an American history course, nearly all of the material on folklore and mythology has been excluded. Both documents include frequent references to the transition from the older Norse religion to Christianity, but nearly all of the references are unrelated to Viking activity in North America or their interactions with the native peoples they encountered. Again, to keep the focus on American history, this material has not been incorporated into the suggested excerpts. Teachers of literature, folklore or mythology classes, or religious history and comparative religion might develop similar lesson plans based on a different set of excerpts.

Lastly, some material has been excluded from the selected passages because of the content or violent nature of the stories. One story was excluded because it talked about Leif Ericsson’s fathering a child out of wedlock. Another section, from *The Vinland History*, describes Eric the Red’s daughter Freydis convincing her husband and other settlers in Vinland to put to death several of their own group. It was not possible to cut out all such passages, where the violence is an integral part of the larger story. In *The Saga of Eric the Red*, Freydis also kills, but in this version, she saves the Vinland settlers in a battle with the indigenous people. It did not make sense to omit that part of the story. Teachers will want to read the excerpts carefully and may decide to modify the passages before giving handouts to their students.

Even eliminating most of the genealogy, folklore, mythology, religious history, and violent content, the suggested excerpts total nearly ten pages single-spaced. Very likely, especially for lower grades, you will

Opposite:

1. Huron and Iroquois, man and woman; 2. Algonquians, man and woman; 3. Eskimoes, man and woman; 4. Greenlander and inhabitant of Novazembla. Engraving from Johann Fredrich Schröter, *Allgemeine Geschichte der Länder und Völker von America*. Volume I, p. 50a. Halle, 1752. (AJ-145)

want to shorten the reading assignment even further. You may want to eliminate one or more of the pairs of excerpts. Alternatively, you may choose to drop the pairing of passages, in order to cover a larger number of the journeys instead of teaching students to compare and contrast different versions of fewer events.

You will want to go to the website and familiarize yourself with the full texts before beginning this lesson. You may decide that different portions of the documents would better serve your needs, but even if you stick with part or all of the suggested excerpts, you will want to anticipate questions and issues that may arise if students look at other portions of the documents.

Background on the Sagas

This lesson uses excerpts from the sagas. No matter how carefully one tries to take sections that are self-explanatory, your students will still need at least a little bit of additional information to understand the context for the pieces you assign. Assuming they have already read a little about the Vikings, a one-page handout should suffice (see p. 48).

Activities

Activity 1: Compare and Contrast Two Versions of the Same Story

The purpose of this activity is to enhance reading comprehension and encourage students to compare and contrast contradictory accounts of the same episode or events. Explain to your students that they will be reading two versions of the same story. Sometimes things will be very similar, but other times there are lots of differences. Their task will be to extract information from one

version, then from the other, and then to explore the similarities and differences. As a class, you will want to discuss why such differences exist, and how to interpret documents that present conflictive information like this.

This activity uses the following sets of stories:

- Leif Ericsson’s trip to Norway, and his involvement with Christianity (2 versions, 1 paragraph each);
- How Leif Ericsson came to be called “Leif the Lucky” (2 versions, 1 paragraph each);
- Thorstein Ericsson’s unsuccessful voyage, and Eric the Red’s plans to join his son on a voyage (3 versions, 1 paragraph each); and
- Thorfinn Karlsefni and Vinland (2 versions, long passages from each version).

Depending on the age of your students and their reading level, you may want to have each student read all of the material, or alternatively, you may assign half the class to work on the three shorter pieces and the other half to focus on the stories about Thorfinn Karlsefni and Vinland. This activity can be assigned as a writing exercise or it can be done as a class discussion. Either way, students will work from the list of questions in the Activity 1 Handout on pp. 45-46.

Activity 2: Vinland

The purpose of this exercise is to further enhance reading comprehension. Students will be asked to extract descriptive information about the new lands discovered, explored, and settled by the Vikings. This activity uses the following excerpts:

- Leif Ericsson’s exploration of Helluland, Markland, and Vinland, from *The Saga of Eric the Red*;
- Thorvald Ericsson’s exploration of Wineland, from *The Vinland History*;
- Thorfinn Karlsefni and Vinland – two versions.

Divide the class into two groups. Have one group read the selections from *The Saga of Eric the Red*. The other group will read the selections from *The Vinland History*. Ask the students to answer the questions in the Activity 2 Handout on p. 47, and discuss in class.

Activity 3: The People.

Ask students to select one of the individuals mentioned by name in the excerpts and write a brief character-sketch describing what they think that person might have been like. They might choose a person named and described in one or both texts, or they might choose someone mentioned only briefly in terms of what work they did. Instruct your students to write about this person’s life, activities, and personality. They should use specific quotes to indicate what evidence supports their description. If the two texts give different impressions about the person, ask students to discuss the differences.

Enrichment/Extension Activities

1. Encourage your students to read other sections of the two sagas, and write an essay about what they read. You will probably want to identify particular sections or topics in advance, and develop appropriate questions. Possibilities include: Eric the Red’s adventures in Iceland and Greenland (*The Saga of Eric the Red*, pp. 15-17; *The Vinland History*, 45-47); Biarni’s voyages (*The Vinland History*, 47-50); the introduction of Christianity, and encounters between the old and new religions (*The Saga of Eric the Red*, pp. 25-26, 29, 34; *The Vinland History*, 46, 47-48, 56-57); stories about women (*The Saga of Eric the Red*, pp. 27-29, 31, 38, 43; *The Vinland History*, 56-59, 61)

2. Encourage students to use the Web and other library resources to do additional research about the Vikings in Greenland or North America. The remains of Brattahlid, Eric the Red’s home in the Eastern Settlement, have been located and studied extensively. Much has been written about the findings. Have students collect and summarize articles, and share the information with other students in the class.

3. Suggest that students research the size, shape, and structural characteristics of Viking ships. The sagas mention that as

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many as 40 men sailed on one ship. They say that the vessels also carried “all kinds of livestock,” tools, weapons, food, and hammocks. Ask your students to imagine what it would have been like to spend weeks on a crowded vessel like that? What would the sounds and smells have been like?

4. Use these documents for lessons in other subjects. Sections of the Viking sagas might be used for studying early European history, or folklore and mythology. Other parts would add to the study of religious history or comparative religion. The approach to the lesson could be similar, but it would use other portions of the texts.

5. Have the students compare the Viking’s journeys and experiences to those taken by English, French, and Spanish explorers and settlers 500 or 600 years later. Research the types of ships used by the later explorers, and compare them to the Vikings’ ships. Compare their interactions with the native population to the experiences of later European settlers.

Selected Bibliography

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