

A Brief History of Norway

For thousands of years, northern Europe was covered by a huge mass of ice very much like the ice that covers Greenland today. About 13,000 BC the climate started to get warmer and the ice started to melt. About 7,000 BC Scandinavia was free of ice. People have been living in Scandinavia since about 9,000 to 8,000 BC. One of the earliest settlements has been discovered near Komsa. The people of that settlement may have come from the east from Russia or south from Europe, no one is sure.

Human beings may have even lived along the ice-free brim of the Norwegian coast during the last Ice Age. By about 3000 BC people living in Norway had domesticated animals and cultivated grain. Prior to that the people living there hunted and fished for food. Indo-Europeans invaded the country about 2000 B.C. bringing with them horses.

The bronze age (1500-500 BC) brought the additional development in agriculture and the making of tools and weapons. We also have indications that seafaring played an important part of the life in Scandinavia. During the early part of the iron age (500 BC - 0) due to a deterioration in climate, the population of the area declined. During the next 400 years the climate changed to what it now is and the population again increased. After the fall of the Roman Empire, several new tribes invaded the country.

From 800 to 1050 the Viking Age flourished and is perhaps the greatest period in Norwegian history. During the Viking Age, the Norsemen traveled and conquered lands as far away as Constantinople using the rivers of Russia. They even journeyed to North America. Norwegian exploration went several directions. They went westward to Iceland, Greenland and Vinland; southward to Europe and eastward to Russia and from there following the rivers southward to the Mediterranean.

Several Vikings went to Russia and then southward on the rivers, finally reaching Constantinople. There they were hired as warriors and guards, some of whom became very popular. The guards in the emperor's employ were known as 'Varangians'. One of the most noteworthy was Harald Sigurdson a half-brother of Saint Olav. He was such a great warrior that he became the chief of the Varangians. After several years in Constantinople, Harald returned to Norway and claimed that vacant throne and declared himself king of Norway.

The westward exploration of the Vikings is of more interest to this story. Iceland was the first land to the west visited by the Vikings. In 930 the people living in Iceland formed an Allting which is a body that has governing powers. From there they went to Greenland and finally to Vinland or North America.

The first Norwegian colonists in Iceland came as emigrants about 874 AD after hearing stories of the land to the west of Norway. Earlier, sailors driven off course by storms had landed on the island and named it Iceland because of its climate. The two early settlers were Ingolf Arnarson and Leif Hrodmarsson. The two men had been on a Viking raid with three sons of Jarl Atli of Gaular. After arriving home, the two men (Ingolf and Leif) fought with and killed two of the sons of Jarl Atli. Leif, because he was responsible for the quarrel, had to give up all of his goods

to the family of the slain men. Life became difficult after that, so the two men decided to explore Iceland. The two men stayed there for a year and determined that the land was acceptable for living. So they returned to Norway. Leif went on a raid of Ireland to seek fortunes and returned with goods and ten Irish slaves. Ingolf sold his land in Norway. The two men outfitted two ships and returned to Iceland. They took with them their wives, cattle, slaves and freemen wanting a new home. When they arrived in Iceland the two ships parted ways.

Leif and his fellow Norsemen were killed by the Irish slaves. The slaves then took the women and as much of the goods as they could and fled to a nearby island. Ingolf's men, on an exploratory venture, found the murdered men and summoned Ingolf. Ingolf found the slaves, killed them, took the women and the ship and returned to Leif's settlement where he spent the winter. The next spring, Ingolf sailed westward and founded his permanent settlement near some hot springs and named the place after them calling it Reykjavik, the present capital of Iceland.

There followed a period of settlement over the next several years until in about 930, more than 20,000 people were living in Iceland. Many of the people who settled there did so because they did not want to live in Norway under the harsh rule of Harald Fairhair. Some were enemies of King and were not safe living in Norway. Other people were in search of land, wealth and freedom. The search for land is to be found throughout Norway's history as a reason for leaving the homeland.

Each of the settlements governed themselves and handed out punishment when necessary. Soon, however, they decided to form a national assembly. One of the local leaders returned to Norway and studied the legal codes of the mother country. After three years he returned to Iceland and helped frame the code of laws for the country. In 930, an Althing was established with a national code of laws. Each summer a national meeting or Althing would meet for two weeks and form laws for the country. The Althing continued to meet each year with almost no interruptions until 1798. In 1000 AD the Althing proclaimed Christianity the religion of Iceland. King Olav of Norway had proclaimed Christianity the religion of Norway earlier and was upset that Iceland was still a heathen land. In 999 he had some heathen Icelanders seized and killed when they arrived to trade in Norway. This along with the work of many missionaries caused the Althing's action of 1000.

Eric the Red was one of the first settlers in Greenland. Eric and his father Thorvald were implicated in a murder in Jaeder in Norway and fled to Iceland. Thorvald died in Iceland. Eric married Thjodhild, moved near Vatshorn and settled at Ericstad. A son, Leif, was born there. Eric, however, fought with other settlers of Iceland and killed some of their men and lost several of his own men. Eric then left Iceland for the land spotted by a sailor driven off course by storms. He discovered the land and settled there. Eric named it Greenland, stating that men would be attracted to the country if the country had a good name. This worked because the same summer twenty-five ships with emigrants and their families left Iceland for Greenland. Only fourteen of them reached Greenland. All were heathens except one Christian from the Hebrides.

Eric established his home at Brattahlid and according to the sagas "was the most distinguished person there, and was obeyed by all". Some of the emigrants settled with Eric while others went

further westward and established a second settlement. Eric had three sons, Leif, Thorvald, and Thorstein and a daughter, Freydis.

One of the men who went with Eric to Greenland was Herjulf from Iceland. He was related to Ingolf the founder of Iceland. Herjulf's son Bjarni was at this time on a trading voyage. Bjarni had taken several foreign voyages in his youth and had his own trading ship. When he returned to Norway from a trading expedition and found that his father had left for Greenland, he decided to follow. On the way, however, he ran into a storm followed by dense fog and got lost.

After several days, the fog lifted and the sun shown allowing them to get their bearings. Soon they spotted land covered with wood with small knolls on it. They knew that Greenland was mountainous so they knew that this land was not Greenland. They then sailed in a northeasterly direction and saw another land two days later. This was a flat land covered with wood and did not appear to be Greenland. They again sailed northeasterly for three more days and sighted a third land and seeing that it was an island continued on their way. Four days later they finally arrived in Greenland and Bjarni was reunited with his father. Bjarni then stayed with his father and gave up voyaging and lived on Greenland until his death. The lands that Bjarni spotted were visited later by several other explorers. The lands were part of the North American continent. This indicates that according to the Norse sagas, Bjarni Herjulfson was the first Viking to sight North America. This happened about 986.

In 999, Leif sailed for Norway but got driven by storms to the Hebrides where he stayed for several months. He was there attracted to a woman named Thorgunna. When Leif was ready to leave, Thorgunna told him that she was carrying his child and wanted to go with him. Leif said that he would not dare take such a noblewoman to the wilds of Greenland. She replied that she would bear his child and send the child to Leif. Leif gave her a gold ring, a cloak of Greenland homespun and a belt of ivory. He then ventured to Norway and met with king Olaf Tryggvason. He was treated well in court. He was also converted to Christianity. King Olaf asked Leif to return to Greenland and preach Christianity to the heathens there. Upon his return to Greenland, Leif started preaching and soon converted several people including his mother. His father Eric, however, never accepted the new religion.

Olaf the king died in September 1000. Bjarni Herjulfson returned to Norway and reported his sighting of land to the west of Greenland. Some people thought that he had not been curious enough because he never landed and explored any of the country he sighted. Many people thought that he should have stopped and explored this new land. He did not live up to the Viking image. Bjarni soon returned to Greenland.

About this time in Greenland, there was much talk of exploration. Leif, Eric the Red's son bought a ship from Bjarni Herjulfson and engaged thirty-five men to go exploring with him. Eric was asked to be the leader but he declined saying that he was too old. So Leif as leader left with his men one of whom was a southerner (German) named Tyrker.

The first land sighted was the last land that Bjarni sighted and when they were near the land, they sent a small boat ashore to explore. The land was covered with glaciers and rock and seemed to the explorers of little value. Leif did give the land a name calling it Helluland (the land of flat

stone). They then returned to the sea and soon sighted another land. Again they lowered a boat and explored this land. This land was covered with wood and had stretches of white beaches. Leif gave this land the name of Markland (woodland). Once more they returned to sea and sailed in a southwesterly direction. Two days later they sighted an island which lay to the north of the mainland on which they landed. They returned to the ship and finally sailed into a sound which lay between the island and the cape which ran north from the mainland. There they ran aground in low tide and went ashore. They found a river and when the tide returned they sailed their boat up the river to a lake. They made a camp there and stayed for the winter.

The salmon was big and abundant in the river. Enough grass grew there to feed the animals and there was no frost in the winter. Day and night were more equally divided than in Greenland. While staying there, the Vikings working in shifts explored the area. One day when he was out exploring, Tyrker, the southerner returned and said that he found vines and grapes. Because Tyrker was from the continent, he had seen grapes and vines and did know what they were. Before leaving, the men collected grapes, cut vines, cut wood and stored it all on board ship. In the spring they set sail for Greenland with their cargo. Leif again named the land, calling it Vineland.

On the return voyage, when they were nearing Greenland, Leif spotted men stranded on a reef. He sailed near them, lowered a boat and rescued them and some of their cargo. All then returned to Greenland, the year was 1003. Because of his safe return and his rescue of the stranded sailors, Leif was thereafter known as Leif the Lucky.

In the summer of 1019, Thorfin Karlsefni left Iceland for Greenland with a ship and about forty men. He was joined by two other Icelanders in a second ship with about forty men also. They arrived in Ericsfjord where they stayed for the winter. During the winter Thorfin met and married Gudrid who had been married to Thori Eastman and Thorstein Ericson. Also during the winter months, much talk centered on the search for Vineland. Karlsefni decided to search for the country the following summer. They had a force of four ships and 160 men.

The ships sailed southerly for two days and found land but the land was very rocky so they continued. There were also many arctic fox on the land. After sailing for two more days and in a more southwesterly direction, they reached an island with bears on it and duly called it Bjarney (Bear Island). They also reached land with woods on it and called it Markland (woodland). Two more days sailing brought them to a cape with long beaches and sands. They called the place Furdustrands (The Wonder Beaches). Next they encountered a land with several bays. The voyagers sailed into one of these bays and sent two Scots (Hake and Hekja) out to scout the land. They returned with news and samples of both grapes and wheat. Karlsefni thought this land was good. He did, however, continue on his way southward until he encountered land with a fjord and an island nearby. They sailed into the fjord and called it Straumsfjord. There they decided to stop and spend the winter.

The voyagers explored the land and found plenty of grass for the cattle. There were mountains there and the view was beautiful. They did not provide for the winter very well and suffered for most of the winter. Finally they killed a whale and cooked it. After eating the whale they all

became sick however. Karlsefni who had some knowledge of whales did not recognize what kind of whale it was.

When spring arrived Karlsefni and most of his party sailed south again in search of Vineland. Finally they came to a river which flowed from the land and through a lake into the sea. There were shoals in front the entrance to the river and they could only enter at high tide. They called the place Hop.

On land they found wild fields of wheat on the low ground and vines everywhere on the hills. Every stream was full of fish. They made holes in the ground at low tide and after high tide the holes had fish in them.

It was here that Karlsefni first encountered the Skraelings. One day they saw nine skin canoes with men in them. They waved a white shield at them and the men stopped to look at the visitors. According the Karlsefni's reports, they were ugly men with unkept hair. They had large eyes and broad cheeks. The Skraelings left and rowed to the south.

Karlsefni and his party stayed by the lake for the winter and had a much better time than the previous year. No snow fell and the cattle had enough to eat all winter. But the next spring the canoes returned and there were more of them. Again they stopped but this time they traded with Karlsefni and his men. They offered skins and grey furs for red cloth. They also wanted to trade for weapons, but the explorers refused. Suddenly a bull belonging to Karlsefni charged out of the woods and frightened the Skraelings and the savages fled.

The next time the Skraelings arrived at the camp they appeared more hostile and were yelling. Karlsefni raised a red shield and the two sides fought. The Skraelings had a special weapon handled by several men. The weapon would hurl a large globe resembling a sheep's paunch and it would land and explode near the Vikings. The Vikings were afraid and outnumbered so they retreated.

Freydis, an illegitimate daughter of Eric the Red shouted at the men and tried to get them to stop and fight. They would not listen to her so she took a sword from a fallen Viking and attacked the savages. The rest of Karlsefni's men saw this, came to her aid and praised her courage. Finally the savages were driven off and the Vikings were safe for the time being.

Karlsefni decided that even though the country had good resources, the Vikings were a long way from home and the local people were very warlike. Therefore, he and his men decided to return to Greenland. An interesting note of the voyage is that during the first autumn a son, Snorri was born to Karlsefni and Gudrid. He was, therefore, the first Viking born in America.

An interesting story is also recorded about Freydis, Eric's daughter. She and two brothers returned to Vineland in two ships. Freydis and the brothers argued a great deal about how many men to take along and once there about which person should get the better lodging. Finally she tricked her husband and his men to kill all of the men of the two brothers. The men did not kill the five women who were along, so Freydis took an axe and killed all five of them. They stayed

for the winter and then in the spring they loaded their boats and returned to Greenland. No one was to speak of the killings, but were to say that the other men stayed in Vineland.

Soon there were rumors about the killing and Leif heard of it. He took three men of Freydis's crew and tortured them until they told the whole story. Leif said that he could not bring himself to treat Freydis his sister as she deserved but he did predict that the stock of her family would never amount to anything.

The tales of Vikings and their exploration have survived through time mostly in Icelandic sagas. But are they real or just stories? If they are real, where did the Vikings land when they arrived on the North American shore? Geoffrey Gathorne-Hardy believes that the stories are in fact true and has even determined some possible places that the Vikings might have landed upon and explored.

The three lands that Bjarni saw after he was driven off course could have been the Barnstable peninsula in Massachusetts, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland respectively. In Leif's voyage the following corresponding land names are suggested. Helluland was Labrador or Newfoundland and Markland was Nova Scotia. The Vineland that Leif found was probably somewhere in Massachusetts.

The trip of Karlsefni went further south and lasted longer than any of the earlier trips. It is therefore of much more interest to the author. It has been suggested that Straumfjord was really Long Island Sound and Hop was where the Hudson river empties into the Atlantic ocean. This is of course the modern approach to New York City. Several authors have disagreed with this solution, some even stating that the Vikings never reached North America and if they did they only got as far as the east coast of Canada.

Records indicate that Greenland's first bishop Erik made a trip to Vinland in 1121 to visit the inhabitants. An even later voyage to the western lands or North America can be found in an entry in a record from approximately 1342 which appears as follows: "1342 The inhabitants of Greenland abandoned their Christian faith and all true morality and allied themselves with the native American tribes. It is reported that Greenland is located not far from the western lands."

Hjalmar Rued Holand as translated by Helmer M. Blegen believes that the 'western lands' referred to Vinland (the American continent) and the 'American tribes' as the American Indian tribes. That indicates that Norwegians were in America until at least 1342 if not later.

Excavations made in Newfoundland during the summer of 1962 by the explorer Helge Ingstad seem to prove the fact that Norwegians were in America. He found well-preserved remnants of a Norse settlement in the northernmost part of Newfoundland.

The Viking power declined over the years following their western travels until in 1537 Norway became a province of Denmark. The great sea power of the Vikings dwindled to nothing. The Viking age was no more. During most of the years of Viking power, the country was ruled by one or more kings. Because the Vikings had no firm order of determining the king, many Vikings wanted to rule and fought for that right.

King Harald (the Fairhair) unified much of Norway about 900 AD. He established his headquarters in western Norway, probably because the Norwegians living there were the most rebellious. He became the first king of Norway. Other kings of importance include Olav Haraldson (Olav II) or better known as Saint Olav, perhaps the greatest name in Norwegian history. He was born in 995 and ruled from 1016 to 1030. He had spent time in Europe and was converted to the Christian religion. He unified the country which had been ruled by several local princes. He also established Christianity as the religion of Norway and did away with all pagan worship. King Olav was killed in battle on July 29, 1030 and his body was secretly carried to Trondheim and buried in the bank of the river there.

After his death, stories were told of miracles taking place at his grave. One year later his body was dug up and moved to St. Clement's church where it resides as the remains of a saint. People now look upon Olav as a champion of national liberty.

Harald Hardrade ruled from 1047 to 1066 and is the same person who was the Varangian chief Harald Sigurdson. At 15 years of age he fought alongside Olav at Stiklestad and was wounded. After the battle he left for Gardariki (Russia). After staying there for several years he made his way south to Constantinople. He returned to Norway in 1047 and served as fellow king with King Magnus. Magnus died a year later and Harald became sole King. Harald was also the founder of city of Oslo, the present capital of Norway.

The civil war period of Norwegian history (1130-1240) brought about the decline of the power of the Vikings. Many men fought for the right to rule Norway but as soon as one would win another would rise against him.

The period of decline and fall (1319-1537) was characterized by a decline of power for Norway. Several joint kings ruled Norway, Sweden and Denmark or parts of each. The greatest calamity of this period was the Black Death which struck Norway during the middle of the 1300's. It has been estimated this plague killed about half the population of Norway or nearly 350,000 people.

The decline in Norwegian power continued until in 1537. Norway then became a part of Denmark which according to John Midgaard in *A Brief History of Norway* - "marked the lowest level in the history of the Norwegian people."

In 1905 Norway again became an independent country. In a national election the people elected Prince Carl of Denmark as King. He and his wife Maud, a daughter of British King Edward VII were crowned the new King and Queen in the ancient cathedral of Trondheim in 1905. He took the name of Haakon VII thereby linking himself with an old line of Norwegian kings. Haakon served as King until 1957. His son Olav followed Haakon and is the present King of Norway.