

Erik the Red

Erik Thorvaldsson (Old Norse: Eiríkr Þórvaldsson; 950 – c. 1003), known as Erik the Red, is remembered in medieval and Icelandic saga sources as having founded the first Norse settlement in Greenland. The Icelandic tradition indicates that he was born in the Jæren district of Rogaland, Norway, as the son of Thorvald Asvaldsson, he therefore also appears, patronymically, as Erik Thorvaldsson (Eir kr Þorvaldsson). The appellation "the Red" most likely refers to his hair color. Leif Ericson, the famous Icelandic explorer, was Erik's son.

Exile

Erik the Red's father was exiled from Norway for the crime of manslaughter. He sailed West from Norway with his family and settled in Hornstrandir in northwestern Iceland. The Icelanders later sentenced Erik to exile for three years due to "some killings" he committed around the year 982.

After marrying Thjodhild (Þjóðhildr), he moved to Haukadal (Hawksdale) where he built a farm. The initial confrontation happened when his thralls started a landslide on the neighboring farm belonging to Valthjof (Valþjófr). Valthjof's friend, Eyiolf the Foul (Eyjólfr saurr), killed the thralls. In return, Erik killed Eyjiolf and Holmgang-Hrafn (Hǫlmgöngu-Hrafn). Eyiolf's kinsmen demanded his banishment from Haukadal.

Erik then moved to the island of Öxney (Iceland). He asked Thorgest (Þórgestr) to keep his setstokkr, inherited ornamented beams of significant mystical value,[5] which his father had brought from Norway. When he had finished his new house, he went back to get them, but they "could not be obtained". Erik then went to Breidabolstad and took them. These are likely to have been Thorgest's setstokkr, although the sagas are unclear at this point.

Thorgest gave chase, and in the ensuing fight Erik slew both Thorgest's sons and "a few other men".

After this each of them retained a considerable body of men with him at his home. Styr gave Eric his support, as did also Eyiolf of Sviney, Thorbjorn, Vifil's son, and the sons of Thorbrand of Alptafirth; while Thorgest was backed by the sons of Thord the Yeller, and Thorgeir of Hitardal, Aslak of Langadal and his son Illugi.

The dispute was resolved at an assembly, the Thing, with the result that Erik was outlawed for three years.

Discoveries

Map of the northern region (including some fantasy islands) by Abraham Ortelius, ca. 1570
Even though popular history credits Erik as the first person to discover Greenland, the Icelandic sagas suggest that earlier Norsemen discovered and tried to settle it before him. Tradition credits Gunnbjörn Ulfsson (also known as Gunnbjörn Ulf-Krakuson) with the first sighting of the land-mass. Nearly a century before Erik, strong winds had driven Gunnbjörn towards a land he

called "Gunnbjarnarsker" ("Gunnbjörn's skerries"). But the accidental nature of Gunnbjörn's discovery has led to his neglect in the history of Greenland. After Gunnbjörn, Snæbjörn Galti had also visited Greenland. According to records from the time, Galti headed the first Norse attempt to colonize Greenland, which ended in disaster. Erik the Red was the first permanent European settler.

In this context, about 982, Erik sailed to a somewhat mysterious and little-known land. He rounded the southern tip of the island (later known as Cape Farewell) and sailed up the western coast. He eventually reached a part of the coast that, for the most part, seemed ice-free and consequently had conditions—similar to those of Iceland—that promised growth and future prosperity. According to the Saga of Erik the Red, he spent his three years of exile exploring this land. The first winter he spent on the island of Eiriksey, the second winter he passed in Eiriksholmar (close to Hvarfsgnipa). In the final summer he explored as far north as Snæfell and in to Hrafnfjörður.

When Erik returned to Iceland after his exile had expired, he is said to have brought with him stories of "Greenland". Erik deliberately gave the land a more appealing name than "Iceland" in order to lure potential settlers. He explained, "people would be attracted to go there if it had a favorable name". He knew that the success of any settlement in Greenland would need the support of as many people as possible. His salesmanship proved successful, as many people (especially "those Vikings living on poor land in Iceland" and those that had suffered a "recent famine") became convinced that Greenland held great opportunity.

After spending the winter in Iceland, Erik returned to Greenland in 985 with a large number of colonists and established two colonies on its southwest coast: the Eastern Settlement or Eystribyggð, in modern-day Qaqortoq, and the Western Settlement or Vestribyggð, close to present-day Nuuk. (Eventually, a Middle Settlement grew, but many people suggest it formed part of the Western Settlement.) The Eastern and Western Settlements, both established on the southwest coast, proved the only two areas suitable for farming. During the summers, when the weather favored travel more, each settlement would send an army of men to hunt in Disko Bay above the Arctic Circle for food and other valuable commodities such as seals (used for rope), ivory from Walrus tusks, and beached whales.