VIKING SETTLEMENT

While it is true that some Vikings were brutal pirate raiders and fierce warriors who looted and terrorized Europe for over three-hundred years, most were peaceful and settled farmers, merchants, shipbuilders, sailors, metalworkers, woodcarvers, and fishermen. The majority of Vikings were mostly interested in trade, and in setting up successful working communities in new areas.

The Danish Vikings initially looted and burned coastal towns in Belgium, the Netherlands, France, England, Spain, and Italy. The Swedish Vikings attacked eastward into what would later be known as Russia, and used the Volga and Dnieper Rivers to reach as far as the Caspian and Black Seas. Meanwhile, the Norwegian Vikings focused mainly on raiding Scotland, Ireland, and Normandy.

Around A.D. 870, the Norwegian Vikings pushed westward and began settling in Iceland. By A.D. 985, Eric the Red led several hundred Icelanders to Greenland. Several years later, word came that a Viking sea captain named Bjarni Herjolfsson, while accidentally sailing off-course, had sighted a large new body of heavily wooded land further west of Greenland. Eric's son, Leif (with his long, russet-colored hair but clean-shaven appearance, unlike his thick, red-bearded father), volunteered to lead an expedition to try and verify this alleged discovery. The year was now around A.D. 1010, as our story begins...

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

Leif Erikson carefully outfitted four wooden ships for the journey: two long ships and two knorrs. The long ships were typically used for battle, and were ninety feet long and seventeen feet wide, with each carrying about thirty-five people. The knorrs were smaller trading ships about fifty feet in length and able to carry twenty people each. Both types of ship had a traditional craved dragon or snake head on its prow for good luck as they challenged the daunting seas. An innovative keel was built along the length of the bottom of every Viking ship, for added stabilization in rough waves and weather. The ships were outfitted with both a single large sail and fifteen pairs of long wooden oars -- the latter used when navigating up rivers when the winds were slack. A total number of one-hundred and eleven passengers, including Leif, would attempt the voyage into the unknown and potentially settle in the new land. The volunteer emigrants consisted of fifty men, fifty women, and eleven children, all under the age of twelve.

Food for a month was gathered and stowed in preparation, on the assumption that it would take two weeks to sail to the new land and two weeks to immediately return if the land was determined to be unacceptable for habitation. Such supplies included: sacks of barley, rye and oats; a bevy of live goats, chickens, sheep and pigs; and an ample supply of cabbages, carrots, turnips, assorted varieties of dried salt fish, dried beef, hard cheeses, potatoes, and apples were also loaded aboard. Barrels of fresh water and several casks of wine were finally added.

Next came the important iron cooking pots with their tripods and hooks, metal axes, saws, hammers and other necessary tools, along with fur bedding and blankets. A keg of valuable iron nails was included, each one carefully counted. As for linen and woolen clothing, additional warm layers were included to augment the men's long trousers and pull-over tunics, and the women's loose-fitting dresses which ended at the ankle. In addition, all Vikings wore simple leather shoes.

Should any fighting in the new land become necessary, each man was outfitted with his usual battle gear: a long-handled broad axe with its curved blade, a spear, a stout wooden shield, a lethal double-edged sword, and a cone-shaped helmet made of leather. As the leader, Leif Erikson alone was allowed to wear a metal helmet and protective chain mail under his tunic, should any battle become inevitable. A necessary supply of bows and arrows was also inventoried.

As a final act before setting sail, Eric the Red provided each of the four Viking ships with small carved stone figurines of the main Norse gods: Odin (a.k.a.Woden), the chief of the gods and goddesses; Thor, son of Odin, who was the god of the sky, and the controller of thunder and lightning; Frey, the god of agriculture, who ensured a good harvest; and Freyja, the twin sister of Frey, who was the goddess of love, fertility and marriage. The Vikings believed that Odin lived in Asgard, the home of the gods. And they believed that if they died in battle, they would be rewarded with spiritual ascension to a special hall in Asgard called Valhalla -- where they could fight all day, and feast and drink and make love all night, forever.

The inclusion of such pagan idols on this voyage, however, was quite upsetting to Leif Erikson, because he had recently converted to Christianity while in Norway through the personal influence of King Olaf 1 Tryggvason. But there was nothing to be done about it now in front of his father, so Leif -- totally outnumbered in his new faith -- kept his concerns to himself. He kept the small wooden cross around his neck nestled under his tunic.

Along with a cheering crowd at the dock in Greenland, Eric bade his son and his company farewell, and the four ships sailed west under gusty, still chilly June winds. After ten days at sea, Leif was relieved when he finally spotted land. He and his people stepped ashore on a large level stone area which he named "Helluland" (or Flat Rock Land, which today we call Baffin Island). But because it was largely barren, he sailed further south until he reached a heavily wooded region which he named "Markland" (or Forest Land, which today we call Labrador). Seeking an even a more attractive landfall, Erikson continued south, until he found an area with abundant wild grapes, good soil and plenty of timber. It was here, at last, that the eager party of Norse Vikings founded their new settlement. [Note: After harvesting the grapes and making wine many months later, he named this place "Vinland" (or Wine Land, which today we call Newfoundland).]

In a suitable meadow area near the ocean shore where they beached their ships, foundations for the Viking homes were planned and dug. Next, nearby trees were cut and fashioned, then constructed in the Greenland and Iceland style, with sturdy timbers in the walls and ceiling, and a roof lastly covered with thick grassy turf after leaving a center hole as a chimney. Inside, the floor was hard-packed earth. A central hearth was arranged for cooking and heating. Two meals a day were served, in the morning and in the evening. Vikings ate with their fingers, or with spoons and knives but not forks. A 'high seat' was placed near the hearth, exclusively to be used by the father of each family. Benches were added around the fire for the mother and any children to sit, and raised platforms near the hearth were built as sleeping berths. Most women would eventually have a loom built indoors to weave cloth and make clothing for their family. The homes would be snug and warm for the upcoming winter months, but for now they were cool and comfortable inside for the brief but pleasant and mostly sunny summertime. Each home had no windows -- only an entrance door -- so any indoor light basically came from the hearth fire.

Crops were put in as soon as the first homes and central storehouse were completed. The soil here was rich, and there was plenty of fresh water streams and ponds nearby. Wild cranberries, sweet red partridgeberries, and tart orange cloudberries grew in abundance, so the children were quickly put to work harvesting them. Meanwhile, the men put themselves to the task of catching the plentiful cod, herring, salmon, and trout from the nearby waters. Later, the men made themselves small wooden fishing boats with oars to fish further out into the Atlantic. Eventually, seals and wild birds would be hunted, along with deer, elk, moose, and assorted small mammals in the rocky, rolling hills and forests.

Although they were unaware at this point, however, the Norse Vikings were being secretly watched by the native inhabitants of this land -- the Inuit and the Beothuk. These indigenous peoples had been living here successfully for thousands of years. Now they had potential rivals for the land and the waters and such life-giving resources. And they sensed that they would soon need to fight to preserve their way of life.

About a year into the new settlement, Leif Erikson decided to further explore south of Vinland. He announced that he would take one long boat with thirty men and be gone for perhaps six months. That would leave twenty men behind with the fifty women and eleven children. He would leave next June, after the icebergs drifting down from the north had cleared away from the coastal sailing lanes.

Leif declared that Ragnar would be in charge of the community in his absence. Ragnar was a proven warrior, strong and skilled, a former looter and raider -- but he could also be impulsive and temperamental. Still, Erikson felt he was the only real choice to help ensure the safety of the young settlement.

But this decision would unfortunately prove to be a major mistake.

For among other things, Ragnar's family life was very unhappy, mostly due to his bullying attitude. His wife, Dulcibella, had once been an Iberian slave. He had purchased her from a Danish Viking a dozen years ago for the price of a heavy silver bracelet, which he had earlier looted from an Irish monastery. Dulcibella was still very fetching, with dark eyes, olive skin, and raven-black hair, but she secretly longed to somehow escape her husband's tyranny and return to her beloved Spain. Ragnar routinely beat his wife over various matters, such as when she lost a valuable iron cloak clasp-pin.

Then there was Magnus, their only son, now ten years old. He strongly resembled the darker Mediterranean features of his mother. His father tried to force the lad into becoming a bloodthirsty warrior like himself, but the boy was not interested. Being more attuned to the quiet natural world, Magnus was acutely sensitive, highly intelligent and observant. He was also viewed favorably by the community for his kind manner. He wanted to study medicines and potions to make the sick and weak well again. He knew many helpful roots and herbs, and how to compound a poultice to make certain wounds heal better. Magnus could likewise skillfully attend to ailing livestock and other suffering animals. When Ragnar insisted on teaching his son the basic uses of the battle axe or the broad-sword and Magnus was insufficiently enthusiastic, his father likewise beat him and publicly berated him.

"My only son is a weakling, and my wife can bear no more children, so what am I to do? I must marry again and take a second woman to my bed," he wailed. "I must produce a worthy son!"

But there were no other available women in the settlement for Ragnar. Agna and Sigrun were both married and would not have him, and Eir was widowed but too old to bear any more children.

Meanwhile, Bjorn was noticing that Dulcibella was eyeing him at odd moments around the settlement, clearly interested in his further company. But he was already married to young Nanna, a comely blond who was carrying their first child. What to do? he pondered, clearly perplexed.

The most unusual member of the Viking settlement, however, was an albino dwarf named Halfdan. With milk-white skin, long colorless hair, and striking pink eyes, he acted as a kind of shaman for the community. Such as any king traditionally rubbed the back of a hunchback for good luck, Halfdan's oddness was respected and accepted by others, sharing their meals and lodgings on a casual rotational basis. He was the group's chief storyteller, reciting the classic "sagas" (or legends) that all Vikings loved -- tales of bravery and daring -- and singing joyous or sad songs of romance. As a "skald" (or poet), he additionally wrote poems using the unique Viking line-alphabet system called "runes," a forerunner of the Germanic language. It was also said that Halfdan could divine the future by carefully examining the entrails of specific dead birds, and he was even rumored to be able to speak to dead people in the spirit world. Lastly, Halfdan was entrusted to formally conduct a Viking boat burial, should the need arise. This rare event was when an important warrior's corpse was laid in a special boat, then set afire and allowed to drift away out to sea -- ceremoniously into the afterlife.

One cold and windy late-September day, a group of settlement women returned with some wild mushrooms that they had gathered in the far forest. These would be equally distributed to each household, to be added to breakfast porridge as an extra nutrient and for zesty flavoring.

But when young Magnus noticed the basket of collected mushrooms, he noticed that some did not look quite right. True, they were the familiar white fungi, with white gills, but their stems looked slightly green and hence, suspicious. He told his mother his concerns. Dulcibella, in turn, told Magnus to inform his father, who was, after all, the temporary community leader.

Ragnar, however, was not interested.

"How can I count on you, Magnus, when you lost an iron nail in the tall grasses when unloading the nail keg from our ship when we first arrived here? The nails were carefully counted out, and was found to be one short, and you alone were to be responsible for those valuable items." His father had beat Magnus after the boy failed to find the missing nail. "But maybe Halfdan can tell us if the mushrooms that you worry so much about are safe to eat. They look fine to me."

The albino dwarf was summoned and calmly examined the white mushrooms in question. He closed his pink eyes for a moment, then opened them, and declared to the curious crowd that the fungi were suitable to eat.

But Magnus pleaded instead with Halfdan and his father. "Please, good sirs, let us choose a piglet and feed it that type of mushroom mixed in with its regular slops, and wait and see if it gets sick."

The other community members who had gathered had overheard this logical proposal, and expressed their agreement with the boy's experiment. "It is worth a try, just to be sure," Ivar declared, to the murmuring, nodding approval of the other men and women bystanders.

So a robust piglet was selected, fed according to Magnus' plan, and the people waited.

Nothing happened after the first day and night passed. Ragnar and Halfdan looked at each other with smug satisfaction and reassurance. But after a second day had passed, the piglet was found dead in his pen. Magnus had accidentally identified one of the most common, poisonous mushrooms in existence, the Angel's Death Cap -- now known to be fatal, with no known cure, after a mere 48-hours of its ingestion.

The clever lad had been vindicated. He had saved untold lives in his community. But he had unwittingly made a new enemy -- a now jealous and publicly shamed Halfdan. And the albino dwarf secretly vowed his revenge from then on...

Three days later, an eight-year old named Egill disappeared from the settlement. After careful reconnaisance, evidence that the boy had been abducted was found: a broken handmade spear, not of Viking design, had been discovered on a vague trail leading into the forest, along with newly disturbed ground and a few freshly broken branches indicating a kind of dragging struggle.

The alarmed Norsemen finally realized that they were not alone in Vinland!

Ragnar recruited Bjorn to accompany him on the rescue mission. In his over-confidence, the leader unwisely assumed that just two armed Vikings would be enough to easily conquer any primitive savages that they might confront. Bjorn was justifiably hesitant, however, believing that more men were needed for such an unknown and risky endeavor, but he was ordered to go and had to obey. The pair put on their battle gear, gathered their weapons, and headed together into the deep, unexplored forest.

With the settlement leader and the boy's father gone, Halfdan moved quickly to enact his plan and eliminate Magnus. He asked the unsuspecting boy to come with him and try to identify some newly discovered plants. The area was a distant two-hour hike away from camp, he explained, near the edge of a cliff overlooking the ocean. Magnus agreed to come. The weather was getting colder, with racing, dark clouds that presaged the season's first snowfall. After kissing his mother goodbye and donning an extra layer of clothing, the lad and the dwarf with long, colorless hair set out to the far northwest.

Halfdan tried to put the boy at ease as they walked farther and farther away, making simple conversation and sharing a few adventurous tales which Magnus enjoyed. When they arrived at the high cliff, the albino dwarf cautioned that they had to be extra careful near the edge where the mystery plants were located, especially in such strong winds.

As the boy innocently knelt down to better examine Halfdan's indicated plant finds, the evil skald smirked to himself, then shoved the unsuspecting boy off the edge. But to the pink-eyed dwarf's surprise and horror, Magnus instinctively grabbed Halfdan's little left leg as he lost his footing, and both man and boy fell -- as if fused together -- to their deaths, plunging one-hundred and fifty feet to the brooding black rocks and angry waters below.

Meanwhile, back at the Vinland settlement, Bjorn returned alone, running breathlessly and visibly bloodied, to warn the settlers of a possible attack by the indigenous local peoples. "We saw Egill tethered like some kind of slave in their camp. Ragnar and I tried to communicate and trade with the savages to free the boy, but we were suddenly overwhelmed by their warriors, more than a dozen against just us two. Ragnar fought bravely and killed or wounded a handful but was killed in turn with many native spears. I was badly wounded after killing two or three but was able to escape with my life and return here. Tell the remaining eighteen men to suit up for battle and get their weapons! Get the women and children to safety! The enemy knows where we are. And I don't know exactly how many of them exist in this one tribe. Go now!" he urged, then collapsed. Dulcibella ran immediately to his aid, pushing past Nanna as she watched with shock and surprise. Was the Iberian wench secretly in love with her husband? The collected pile of yarn Nanna was spinning was dropped in the confusion, and her tiny craved stone spindle whorl was later believed to have been lost.

Fortunately, nothing happened by way of a native attack, either that day or in the months to come as a hard, bitter winter moved in. Eventually, Leif Erikson and his exploratory band of thirty men returned. He was informed of the tragic death of Ragnar and the assumed deaths of both Magnus and Halfdan, both of whom failed to ever return to the settlement. Sadly, Egill was never seen again either, to the agonizing despair of his parents. Meanwhile, a fully-recovered Bjorn had taken Dulcibella as a second wife, which was commonly permitted under Viking law. As for Nanna's feelings about this development, her feelings were never aired nor even considered. Both women made the best of the situation over time, however, and raised Nanna's baby girl -- Hildr -- together.

Leif formally informed the community at length about what he had discovered further south on his exploration.

"There are many hostile tribes of "skraelings" (or Ugly Ones) everywhere, which we noticed both on land and from the safety of our ship. The far southern areas are very favorable for future Viking settlements -- with good farmland potential, plentiful timber, and much wild game -- but, truth be told, the fighting necessary for securing such lands would not be worth the many risks involved. In my short absence, you have seen first-hand what can happen here with the native peoples, and what dangers are lurking just beyond the forest shadows. I have therefore decided that we will abandon our settlement in Vinland soon and return to Greenland, with some of us perhaps even going then back to Iceland. I must inform my father, Eric, of the hidden hazards we have found in these new lands."

Thus, by around A.D.1021, the Norse Vikings had abandoned North America, never to return.

In 1960, however, an iron nail, an iron cloak clasp-pin, and a tiny carved stone spindle whorl were discovered by archeologists digging at the northern-most tip of the Canadian province of Newfoundland. This startling find proved that the Vikings had come briefly to North America almost 500 years before Christopher Columbus arrived in San Salvador in 1492.

You can see these three original Viking artifacts today in the museum at L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site in Newfoundland, which is now also a UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Perhaps you might then remember Magnus, Dulcibella, and Nanna...as well as the other intrepid Vikings who once set foot at that very spot a thousand years ago...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

October 24, 2021