

The Vikings of Scandinavia were probably the first Europeans to see the Americas. These daring sailors had crossed the Atlantic to settle Iceland and start a colony on Greenland. In the year 1000, a storm blew Leif Ericsson and his crew westward to the coast of North America, perhaps Nova Scotia. In 1003 an expedition set out from Greenland for “Vinland,” named for the grapevines Leif had seen there. People still argue about where they landed, but they had several encounters with Native Americans, whom they called Skraelings. The story begins as Thorfinn Karlsefni arrives in Greenland from Norway and marries Gudrid, a widow. She and the other Greenlanders pressure Karlsefni to make an expedition to Vinland. ♦ *As you read, think about what happens when two different peoples meet. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

The Greenlanders’ Saga

So his voyage was decided on, and he secured himself a ship’s company of sixty men and five women. Karlsefni entered into this agreement with his shipmates, that they should receive equal shares of everything they made by way of profit. They took with them all sorts of livestock, for it was their intention to colonize the country if they could manage it. Karlsefni asked Leif [Ericsson] for his house in Vinland. He would lend the house, he said, but not give it.

Next, then, they sailed their ship to sea and reached Leifsbudir [Leif’s Shelters] all safe and sound, and carried their sleeping-bags ashore. They soon enjoyed a big and splendid catch, for a fine big whale was stranded there. They went and cut it up, and had no problem with regard to food. The livestock went on up ashore . . . Karlsefni had timber felled and dressed for his ship, laying the wood out on the rock to dry. They took every advantage of the resources the country had to offer, both in the way of grapes and hunting and fishing and good things.

After that first winter came summer. It was now they made acquaintance with the Skraelings,

when a big body of men appeared out of the forest there. Their cattle were close by; the bull began to bellow and bawl his head off, which so frightened the Skraelings that they ran off with their packs, which were of grey furs and sables and skins of all kinds, and headed for Karlsefni’s house, hoping to get inside there, but Karlsefni had the doors guarded. Neither party could understand the other’s language.

Then the Skraelings unslung their bales, untied them, and proffered their wares, and above all wanted weapons in exchange. Karlsefni, though, forbade them the sale of weapons. And now he hit on this idea; he told the women to carry out milk to them, and the moment they saw the milk that was the one thing they wanted to buy, nothing else. So that was what came of the Skraelings’ trading: they carried away what they bought in their bellies, while Karlsefni and his comrades kept their bales and their furs. And with that they went away.

Source: “The Greenlanders’ Saga,” in *The Norse Atlantic Saga*, by Gwyn Jones (Oxford University Press, 1964).

Questions to Think About

1. What was the goal of the Greenlanders’ expedition to Vinland?
2. Why did the Skraelings come to the Viking camp? What happened there?
3. **Drawing Conclusions** From this account, what can you tell about the lifestyle and attitudes of the Native Americans the Greenlanders met?
4. **Activity** “The Greenlanders’ Saga” is by a Viking historian. But how did this encounter appear to the Native Americans? Write a diary entry describing the meeting from the point of view of either a Native American or one of the Greenlanders.