

Gudrid Thorbjarnardóttir (c980–?)

‘FAR-TRAVELLED’ ICELANDIC PIONEER TO AMERICA

Old Norse sagas laud the exploits of Erik the Red and Leif Eriksson, but their real hero is female. **Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough** introduces the first lady of Viking Vinland

The cartoon stereotype of the Viking age is decidedly male: bearded blond men in boats raiding the coastlines of western Europe, discovering and settling new lands. Yet from the Valkyries of Norse mythology to female prime ministers and presidents, from legendary shieldmaidens to others trailblazing socially progressive gender politics, the Nordic world has a long history of extraordinary women.

No one epitomises this heritage better than Gudrid Thorbjarnardóttir, a Norse explorer known as the ‘far-traveller’, born on Iceland’s Snæfellsnes peninsula in the latter part of the 10th century. What we know of her life story is derived from two Old Norse sagas, *The Saga of Erik the Red* and *The Saga of the Greenlanders*. Together they are known as the ‘Vinland sagas’, because they describe voyages sailing to the fringes of North America around the year 1000. The Norse named these lands ‘Vinland’, apparently because of the wild grapes that grew there.

The sagas were first recorded in 13th-century Iceland over two centuries after the events they describe took place, their tales having been transmitted down the years in oral form, retold and reshaped as the stories passed from generation to generation. They contain elements we might expect to see in fantasy films – dragons, trolls, zombies – but they are our main textual sources for Norse activities at the far-western margins of the medieval world. It was thanks to the sagas that archaeologists began to search for material evidence of these journeys – for example, at L’Anse aux Meadows at the tip of Newfoundland, where the

remains of several Norse buildings were discovered in the 1960s.

Gudrid is described in *The Saga of the Greenlanders* as “a woman of striking appearance, and wise”. In both texts, her dramatic story began when she and her father sailed west from Iceland to join Erik the Red’s new colony in Greenland. That sea journey was notoriously dangerous and, according to *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, Gudrid, her husband and several others were shipwrecked, then rescued by Leif the Lucky, son of Erik the Red. Sickness afflicted the colony that winter, and Gudrid’s husband died, but Gudrid lived to fight another day.

The Saga of Erik the Red tells of no shipwreck and no husband. In it, instead, when Gudrid arrived Greenland was in the grip of a famine. Though a Christian, she took part in a pagan ritual, helping an seeress called Thorbjorg to chant songs to charm the spirits and end the famine.

Both sagas tell us that Gudrid married Thorstein, son of Erik the Red and younger brother of Leif the Lucky (Eriksson), then spent a dark, terrifying winter at the farmstead of a pagan farmer, which was struck by a deadly plague. The tale cites supernatural forces: at one point, the farmer’s wife looked out into the yard to see the figures of those who have died, waiting menacingly for her – and among them saw herself and Gudrid’s husband, Thorstein Eriksson. By the morning she was dead. Thorstein died a few hours later, but – true to form – Gudrid survived another deadly winter.

Gudrid’s next husband was an Icelander, Thorstein Karlsefni, with whom she travelled to Vinland – indeed, *The Saga of the Greenlanders* tells us that

Gudrid urged Karlsefni to make the journey. Once in Vinland, Gudrid gave birth to a son, Snorri – the first baby born to a European on the North American continent, if the account is true.

Gudrid is the real hero of the Vinland sagas – such an important character in *The Saga of Erik the Red* that it’s been suggested the story would be more aptly named *Gudrid’s Saga*. In her older years, she continued her travels, undertaking a pilgrimage to Rome. She became a formidable matriarch, ancestor to many illustrious Icelanders – it is her line listed at the end of *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, not that of Erik the Red. As the pagan seeress in *The Saga of Erik the Red* told her: “from you will be descended a long and worthy line, and over all the branches of that family a bright ray will shine”.

A modern sculpture of Gudrid at her birthplace, Laugarbrekka in western Iceland, depicts her standing on a ship, one hand resting on the square, toothy dragon’s head that forms the bow. On her shoulder she balances her little son Snorri, his face lifted upwards, arm raised to the sky. Gudrid’s eyes, though, are fixed firmly ahead, on the long sea road before her.

True, the sagas are by no means straightforward historical records. But they are our main source of information about the remarkable people who undertook long and dangerous sea voyages, building new lives far from home and discovering new lands – and Gudrid was perhaps the most extraordinary of all. 🌐

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Vinland bound

Old Norse sagas describe Gudrid Thorbjarnardóttir as “the loveliest of women and noble in every trait”. But this far-travelled Icelandic woman was eulogised largely not for her beauty and charm but as a strong-willed survivor who married three times and bore a son, Snorri, in Vinland (North America) during one of her intrepid voyages