

Scots in America...500 Years before Columbus

Ask anyone who the first westerners to set foot on the American continent were, and they'll say Christopher Columbus and his crew. The truth is that the Vikings were roaming the eastern seaboard of that continent 500 years before the more famous expedition that Columbus led, and included in the crew of the most successful of those pioneering Viking expeditions was a Scottish couple.

The first European in America was a Viking named Leif Ericsson, who, according to the 'Saga of Eric the Red', was blown off course on a voyage to Greenland in the year 1000AD. The land he found became known as Vinland (wine land) on account of the 'wine berries' found there.

Around 1004 AD (1010AD in some versions), Thorfinn Karisefni led a new expedition to this promised land of wine. He took with him up to 160 men, three ships, gifts from King Olaf of Norway and two Scottish slaves - a man named Haki, and a woman named Hekja, both reputed to be fleetier than deer such was their speed at running.

When the Vikings reached an attractive place on the west coast of America, they sent the Scots ashore to run along the waterfront and gauge whether or not it was safe for the rest of the crew to follow. Only once the Scots had survived a day of this baiting of any potential enemies did the Vikings deem it safe to spend the night ashore.

The expedition to Vinland was abandoned three years later, after Karisefni's expedition encountered unfriendly natives and a distinct lack of the promised wine. It does, however, demonstrate how daring and pioneering Viking culture was at the turn of the first millennium and also how far it widened the horizons of the Scots who were embroiled in their constant adventuring.