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# GUDRID THORBJORNSDOTTIR,

## First European Mother to Give Birth on American Soil

The first baby of European parents, Snorri, was born in “Vinland the Good”, where Leif Eiriksson had explored. Snorri’s parents were Thorfinn Karlsefni and Gudrid Thorbjornsdottir. Gudrid was thus the first “European—American” mother; she lived an amazing life.

**Gudrid’s Family and Girlhood.** Gudrid grew up in Viking-era Iceland. Gudrid’s mother, Hallveig Einarsdottir of Laugarbrekka, married Gudrid’s father, Thorbjorn Vifilsson, a son of Vifil. Vifil was an immigrant to Iceland who had arrived with the household of Aud the Deep-Minded, when Aud had fled from northern Scotland (see November 2006 issue of *Norfolk Heritage Review*).



After getting situated in Iceland, Aud emancipated many of her slaves, and one of those was Vifil, an Irishman. Thus, Gudrid was at least 1/4 Irish, ethnically speaking. As a girl, Gudrid was fostered by a couple who were good friends of her father. The foster-parents were Orm and Halldis; they lived in Arnarstapi.

However, this fostering arrangement came to an angry end during an autumn feast hosted by Gudrid’s father. At the feast, Orm (Gudrid’s foster-father) promoted a marriage proposal made by a wealthy merchant named Einar Thorgeirsson, who had remarked that Gudrid was a beauty. When speaking on behalf of Einar, to Thorbjorn, Orm emphasized an economic advantage for the marriage: “It could be a great asset to you, Thorbjorn, because of the



money involved.”<sup>1</sup> This marriage proposal was angrily rejected by Thorbjorn, Gudrid’s father. Suspecting that the financial aspect was the most influential element in this marriage proposal, Thorbjorn deemed Einar low-class, not worthy of his daughter, so he replied to Orm: “I never expected to hear such a suggestion from you ....! My lack of money must be very obvious to you! And since you thought her [i.e., Gudrid] worthy of such a meagre match, she shall not go back with you to your home.”<sup>2</sup>

Thorbjorn returned to his home with Gudrid. The next spring Thorbjorn invited his friends and family to a feast, and used the feast as an opportunity to announce his intention to emigrate from Iceland to

Greenland. Thorbjorn announced: “I have spent a long life here; I have enjoyed the favour and friendship of others, and I can say that we have always got on well together. But now I find myself in financial difficulties. This home of mine has hitherto never been considered a humble one, and I would rather abandon my farm than forfeit my dignity, rather leave the country [of Iceland] than disgrace my kinsmen. I have decided to take up the offer that my friend Eirik the Red made to me when we took leave of one another in Breidafjord; I intend to go to Greenland this summer, if I can have my way.”<sup>3</sup> Thorbjorn’s family and friends were stunned, for Thorbjorn and his family were well-liked.



Thorbjorn sold his property and used some of the proceeds to buy a longship then lying in the Hraunhafnar Estuary. Soon afterwards, Gudrid’s father and thirty others (i.e., various kinsmen and friends, even including Orm and Halldis) emigrated to Greenland, to join Thorbjorn’s old Norwegian-born friend, Eirik the Red. In time, Thorbjorn’s longship would become part of another adventure in Gudrid’s adventure-loaded life.

**Marriage # 1 (Thorir).** So Gudrid’s family relocated to Greenland, with problems from the very beginning — Thorbjorn’s group was immediately struck by a sickness that killed many, including Orm and Halldis. But life in Greenland got better. After living in Greenland for some time, Gudrid married a Norwegian emigrant named Thorir the Easterner. Little is



reported of their life together until Thorir and Gudrid become shipwrecked near Greenland, and were rescued by none other than Leif Eiriksson, as Leif was returning from his historic discovery (and temporary settlement) of “Vinland the Good”, in North America. *The Grænlendinga Saga* recounts this event as follows:

... Leif said to his men [who were then exploring in Vinland, living in temporary “booths”], “Now we have two tasks on our hands. On alternate days we must gather grapes and cut vines, and then fell trees, to make cargo for my ship.” This was done. It is said that the tow-boat was filled with grapes. They took on a full cargo of timber [which was quite valuable in Greenland]; and in the spring they made ready to leave and sailed away. Leif named the country after its natural qualities and called it *Vinland*.

They put out to sea and had favourable winds all the way until they sighted Greenland and its ice-capped mountains. Then one of the crew spoke up and said to Leif, “Why are you steering the ship so close to the wind?”

“I am keeping an eye on my steering,” replied Leif, “But I am also keeping an eye on something else. Don’t you see anything unusual?”

Now they caught sight of it, and said it was a reef. But Leif’s eyesight was so much keener than theirs that he could now make out people on the reef. “I want to sail close to the wind in order to reach these people,” he said. “If they need our help, it is our duty to give it; but if they are hostile, then the advantages are all on our side and none on theirs.”

They approached the reef, lowered sail, anchored, and put out another small boat they had brought with them. Tyrkir [Leif’s foster-father] asked the men who their leader was.

The leader replied that his name was Thorir [i.e., Gudrid’s husband], and that he was a Norwegian by birth. “What is your name?” He asked. Leif named himself in return.



“Are you a son of Eirik the Red of Brattahlid?” Leif said he was. “And now,” he said, “I want to invite you al aboard my ship, with as much of your belongings as the ship will take.” They accepted the offer, and they all sailed to Eiriksfjord thus laden.

When they reached Brattahlid they unloaded the ship. Leif invited Thorir and his wife Gudrid and three other men to stay with him and found lodgings for the rest of the ship’s company, both Thorir’s men and his own crew. Leif rescued fifteen people in all from the reef. From then on he was called Leif the Lucky. He gained greatly in wealth and reputation. <sup>4</sup>

Through this crisis experience, Thorir and Gudrid get to know Leif’s family better through this experience. Later, a sickness invades Eirik’s settlement at Brattahlid (Greenland), causing many deaths. Eirik the Red died, leaving Leif as head of the Brattahlid settlement. Also, Gudrid’s husband (Thorir) dies, leaving Gudrid a widow. After Thorir dies, Leif’s family provides for Gudrid.

**Marriage # 2 (Thorstein).** Soon, one of Leif’s brothers, Thorstein, proposed marriage to Gudrid. This is not surprising, for we learn of Gudrid: “Gudrid was of striking appearance; she was very intelligent and knew well how to conduct herself amongst strangers.”<sup>5</sup>

And, Gudrid accepted Thorstein’s marriage proposal. When Gudrid and Thorstein Eiriksson married, they settled at Thorstein’s place near Eirik’s farmstead (called “Brattahlid”), near Eiriksfjord (the community founded by Eirik the Red, and led by Leif Eiriksson after Eirik died).



B e c a u s e Gudrid was known as a Christian, it is not

unlikely that Gudrid visited the nearby chapel (*see photograph showing a reproduction version of Thjodhild’s chapel at Eiriksfjord — this chapel was constructed in light of foundational remains found by archaeologists*<sup>6</sup>) of Thjodhild, widow of Eirik the Red. Gudrid’s mother-in-law, Thjodhild Jorundsdottir was the mother of Eirik’s three sons Leif, Thorstein, and Thorvald.<sup>7</sup>

The next information we have about Thorstein and Gudrid concerned their reaction to the

death of Thorstein's brother Thorvald. Thorvald had made a trip to Leif's Vinland property, with Leif's permission. Thorvald was so impressed with Vinland he told his companions that he wanted to settle there permanently.



Sadly, Thorvald was mortally wounded by a Skraeling's arrow, there, and according to his request, Thorvald was buried in Vinland (as he was dying, Thorvald recalled that he had already said that he wanted to "settle" in Vinland). Thorvald's burial place was called *Krossness*, because Thorvald's dying request was that he be buried in Vinland, and that two crosses be erected to mark his burial (and to show that he was a Christian). When the survivors of that trip returned to Greenland, with their sad news, Thorstein and Gudrid decide to make a trip to Leif's Vinland property, in hopes of retrieving the body of Thorvald (which was a notion contrary to Thorvald's dying request). But bad weather ruined this attempted voyage. The *Grænlandinga Saga* describes this attempt as follows:

Thorstein Eiriksson was now eager to go to Vinland to fetch back the body of his brother Thorvald [*for reburial in Greenland*]. He made the same ship [*i.e., the ship of his brother Leif, which had originally been used, in A.D. 1000, to discover America's "Vinland" in the first place*] ready and selected the biggest and strongest men available. He took a crew of twenty-five and his wife Gudrid as well. When they were ready they put to sea and were soon out of sight of land.



But throughout that summer they were at the mercy of the weather and never knew where they were going. Eventually, a week before winter [*began*], they made land at Lysufjord in the Western Settlement of Greenland. Thorstein looked for accommodation and found lodgings for all his crew, but he and his wife [*Gudrid*] could find none, so the two of them stayed on board the ship for a few days. At this time, Christianity was still in its infancy in Greenland.

Early one morning some people came to their tent [aboard Leif's longship], and their leader asked who was inside [the tent]. "Two people," replied Thorstein. "Who is asking?" "My name is Thorstein," said the other, "and I am called Thorstein the Black. I have come here to invite you and your wife to come and stay with me." Thorstein Eiriksson replied that he wanted to consult with his wife; but Gudrid left the decision to him and he accepted the invitation. "Then I shall be back tomorrow with a cart to fetch you said Thorstein the Black. "There is no lack of means to provide for you but you will find life at my house very dull, for there are only the two of us there, my wife and myself, and I am very unsociable. I am also of a different faith from yours, although I consider you to be better than mine." Next morning he returned with a cart to fetch them. They moved over to his house to stay and were well looked after there.<sup>8</sup>

Thorstein and Gudrid were thus sheltered by Thorstein's "namesake", Thorstein the Black, and his capable wife, Grimhild the Large. Thorstein is one of those who died of disease, when a sickness swept through the settlement that winter. Thorstein, after arranging for the bodies of his friends (who died of that sickness) to be shipped to their homes, himself died of the disease. However, on the day of Thorstein's death, at a time when he wavered between life and death (and appeared for a while to be dead), Thorstein encouraged Gudrid to face her future without him, predicting that Gudrid would have yet another marriage (and a happy one, with many descendants), while Thorstein himself was destined to enjoy a wonderful place of rest. (By the way, our English word "heaven" derives from the Old Norse "havn", meaning a "haven" — a safe harbor for rest and restoration.) So, Gudrid is now a widow again.

**Marriage # 3 (Thorfinn Karlsefni).** Then a merchant named Thorfinn Karlsefni arrives in Greenland. Karlsefni proposes marriage to Gudrid, and she accepts. Soon Karlsefni negotiates permission from Leif Eiriksson to visit and use Leif's property in Vinland. Gudrid accompanies Karlsefni on this visit to Vinland. (This journey becomes three years of Providential history.)

During the years in Vinland, Karlsefni and Gudrid have a child, Snorri. Snorri Thorfinnsson (a/k/a Snorri Karlsefnisson) is thus the first "European-American" to be born on North American soil. Accordingly, Gudrid Thorbjornsdottir is the first European-American to give birth in North America. Gudrid lives in Vinland with Karlsefni for about three years. (*Snorri is a three-year-old when his family leaves Vinland for Greenland.*) However, despite a series of peaceful bartering with Skraeling natives (who traded furs for cow's milk, which shows



that Karlsefni's expedition brought cattle with them to Vinland), the Skraelings try to steal the Vikings' weapons, and deadly battles follow. Although Vinland will be revisited later (for timber and other natural resources), this dooms the Vikings' enthusiasm for establishing a permanent settlement in Vinland. Therefore, Karsefni and Gudrid (and the survivors) leave Vinland, and return to Greenland, loaded with goods from America. Later Karlsefni and Gudrid leave for Norway, doing business there for awhile. Eventually, Karlsefni and Gudrid journey back to Iceland (Gudrid's native country). Karlsefni buys farmland in Iceland (at Reyniness), and they settle there. In time, Gudrid gives birth again, this time to another boy, Thorbjorn, who is named for Gudrid's father. Gudrid is now a mother of two sons.



### **Gudrid the grandmother.**

Eventually, Karlsefni dies, leaving Gudrid a widow for the third time. Snorri operates the family farm, then, and he eventually marries. Gudrid became a grandmother, when Snorri's wife gives birth to a son (Thorgeir), a daughter (Hallfrid), and another daughter (Steinunn). Gudrid is now a grandmother, but she's not ready for a rocking-chair! Gudrid decides to travel the world a bit; she takes an overland journey (including a lot of walking) in Europe, Gudrid goes as far as Rome, then she returns to her family's farmstead at Reyniness.



Gudrid leads the founding of a church at Glaumby (Iceland). Later, Thorbjorn (also called "Bjorn") marries and fathers a girl, Thorunn.

**Gudrid's Historic Legacy.** Gudrid is well-remembered. The sagas concur that many prominent Christians in Iceland were direct descendants of Gudrid and Karlsefni. For examples, Gudrid's descendants includes the following well-known Icelandic churchmen, Thorlak Runolfsson, Bjorn Thorunnsson, Brand the Elder, Brand Jonsson, Hauk the Lawman, etc.

Records indicate that Gudrin and her father (but not her foster-parents) were already known

as Christians, in Iceland and later in Greenland, before those countries officially adopted Christianity. In Gudrid's final home, Glaumby (also spelled Glaumbær), Iceland, there stands a church which claims to be the successor to the one she and her Vinland-born son (Snorri) founded. At the front of the Glaumbær church is a symbolic statue (see photo) of Gudrid, made by sculptor Ásmundur Sveinsson in 1939. This statute is well-placed, because Gudrin's Christian faith was well-known there, although her Christian faith pre-dated the official conversion of Iceland, at the national Althing, during A.D. 1000.

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1. *Quoting from Eirik's Saga*, chapter 3, *within The Vinland Sagas: The Norse Discovery of America*, transl. by Magnus Magnusson & Hermann Pálsson (Penguin, 1965), page 80.
2. *Quoting from Eirik's Saga*, chapter 3, *within The Vinland Sagas*, page 80.
3. *Quoting from Eirik's Saga*, chapter 3, *within The Vinland Sagas*, page 80.
4. *Quoting from Grænlandinga Saga*, chapter 4, *within The Vinland Sagas*, pages 57–59.
5. *Quoting from Grænlandinga Saga*, chapter 6, *within The Vinland Sagas*, page 62.
6. Magnusson and Pálsson inform us about archaeological data regarding Thjodhild's chapel in Greenland: "[I]n 1962, full-scale excavations . . . revealed the foundations of a tiny medieval church, only sixteen feet long by eight feet in area, with four-foot-thick walls of turf and timber, set inside a small churchyard containing some eighty graves. The church stood some 200 yards from Eirik's home, and was concealed from it by a fold in the rising ground. The other medieval Norse churches discovered in Greenland were all built of stone. This very primitive and humble turf church can only be identified with 'Thjodhild's Church', which was built 'not too close to the farmstead' of Brattahlid." *Quoting* Magnusson & Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas* (footnote 5 to chapter 5 of *Eirik's Saga*), pages 86–87. (Dr. Bill Cooper should appreciate this discovery!)
7. Eirik's daughter, Freydis the Murderess, was not born to Thjodhild. Eirik's three legitimate sons (Thjodhild's sons) all became Christians (as did their mother), whereas Freydis remained a pagan like her father (Eirik the Red). By God's grace, it was Leif "the Lucky" who brought the Christian faith to Greenland, with Leif's evangelism being soon accepted by his mother and his brothers (and many other Greenlanders). Tragically, Leif's father (Eirik the Red) and half-sister (Freydis the Murderess) rejected it. In chapter 5 of *Eirik's Saga*, we learn that the young Leif Eiriksson (who had recently beforehand fathered a son in the Hebrides) had learned and accepted the Christian faith from Norway's King Olaf Tryggvasson, during the late 990s (A.D.).
8. *Quoting from Grænlandinga Saga*, chapter 6, *within The Vinland Sagas*, pages 61–62.



