

# Viking: Odinn's Child

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Extract

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*To my holy and blessed master, Abbot Geraldus, it is with much doubt and self-questioning that I pen this note for your private attention, laying before you certain disturbing details which until now have been hidden, so that I may humbly seek your advice. In choosing this course I am ever mindful how the works of the devil, with their thousand sharp thorns and snares, lie in wait for the feet of the unwary, and that only His mercy will save us from error and the manifold pitfalls of wickedness. Yet, as you read the appended document, you will understand why I have been unable to consult with others of our community lest I sow among them dismay and disillusion. For it seems that a viper has been nurtured in our bosom, and our presumed brother in Christ, the supposed monk called Thangbrand, was an impostor and a fount of true wickedness.*

*You will recall, my revered master, that you requested of your unworthy servant a full and true inventory of all documents and writings now in our abbey's keeping. As librarian of our community, I began this task in dutiful compliance with your wishes, and during this labour discovered the above-mentioned document where it lay unremarked among the other volumes in our collection of sacred writings. It bears no identifying mark and the script is well formed, the work of a trained penman, so – may I be forgiven if I have committed the sin of presumption – I began to read, imagining to find recorded therein a life*

of one of those saints such as Wilfred of most blessed memory, whose shining and glorious example was so ably recorded by our most learned predecessor, the monk Eddius Stephanus.

But such is the mystery of His ways that I have found instead a tale which often substitutes hypocrisy for truth, depravity in place of abstinence, pagan doubt for true faith. Much I do not comprehend, part I can comprehend dimly and by prayer and fasting strive to expunge from my mind. Yet other – and this is what troubles me – contains notice of many distant lands where surely the seed of truth will flourish on fertile soil if it is broadcast by the faithful, trusting only in God and his sublime grace.

Of the identity of the author of the work there can be little doubt. He is remembered by several of the older members of our congregation, and by subtle enquiry I have been able to confirm that he came to us already an old man, sorely hurt and in need of succour. His learning and demeanour led all our congregation to suppose he was in holy orders. Yet this was but the skill of the arch-deceiver, for this present work reveals the unswerving error of his ways and the falsity of his heart. Truly it is said that it is difficult for a man who has fallen deeply into temptation to emerge from the wallow of his sin save with the grace of our Lord.

Also I have learned how this false Thangbrand spent long hours alone in the scriptorium in quiet and arduous labour. Writing materials were supplied, for he was a gifted copyist and possessed of many artistic skills despite advancing years and fading eyesight. Indeed, his posture, hunched close over his pages, shielded his work from others' gaze and rendered it difficult to overlook what he was writing. But Satan nerved his fingers, for instead of sacred text he was engaged in preparing this dark and secret record. Naturally I have instructed that henceforward no writing materials be provided to anyone without due justification. But whether what has now been written is a blasphemy I have neither the intellect nor learning to judge. Nor do I know whether this work should be destroyed or whether it should be retained for the strange and curious information it contains. For is it not written that 'A much travelled man knows many things, and a man of great experience will talk sound sense'?

Regrettably, two further volumes I hold in safe keeping, presuming them to be a continuation of this blasphemous and wicked memorial. Neither volume have I investigated, pending your instruction. Holy father, be reassured that no further particle of the reprobate's writing exists. I have searched the library most attentively for any other trace left by this pretended monk, who departed unexpectedly and secretly from our community, and I found nothing. Indeed, until these documents were discovered, it was presumed that this pretended monk had wandered away from us, confused in his senility, and we expected for him to be returned by the charitable or to hear that he had departed this life. But such has not happened, and it is evident from this account that this would not be the first occasion on which he has absconded like a thief in the night from the company of his trusting and devout companions. May his sins be forgiven.

On behalf of our community, beloved master, I pray for your inspired guidance and that the Almighty Lord may keep you securely in bliss. Amen.

*Æthelred*

*Sacristan and Librarian*

*Written in the month of October in the Year of our Lord One Thousand and Seventy*

# ONE



I SMILE SECRETLY at the refectory gossip. There is a monk in Bremen across the North Sea who has been charged with collecting information for the Bishop of Bremen-Hamburg. His name is Adam, and he has been set the task of finding out everything he can about the farthest places and peoples of our world so that he may compile a complete survey of all the lands known, however dimly, to the Christian Church, perhaps with a view to converting them later. He interviews travellers and sailors, interrogates returned pilgrims and foreign diplomats, makes notes and sends out lists of questions, travels for himself and observes. If only he knew . . . right here in this monkish backwater is someone who could tell him as much about strange places and odd events as any of the witnesses whom he is cross-examining so diligently.

Had I not heard about this assiduous German, I would be content to spin out the last years of my life in the numbing calm of this place where I now find myself in my seventieth year. I would continue to copy out sacred texts and embellish the initial letters with those intricate interlacings which my colleagues believe I do for the greater glory of God, though the truth is that I take a secret delight in knowing that these curlicues and intricate patterns derive from the heathen past they condemn as idolatrous. Instead, their refectory tittle-tattle has provoked me to find a corner seat in

our quiet scriptorium and take up my pen to begin this secret history of my life and travels. How would my colleagues react, I wonder, if they discovered that living quietly among them is one of that feared breed of northmen 'barbarians', whose memory still sends shivers down their spines. If they knew that a man from the longships wears the cowl and cassock beside them it would, I think, give a new edge to that plea which recently I found penned in the margin of one of their older annals – 'From the fury of the foreigner O Lord preserve us.'

Writing down my memories will also help pass the time for an old man, who otherwise would watch the play of sunshine and shadow moving across the edge of the page while the other copyists hunch over the desks behind me. And as this secret work is to keep me from boredom, then I will begin briskly – as my mentor the brithem, once drummed into my young head more than half a century ago – and of course at the very beginning.

My birth was a double near-miss. First, I failed by a few months to be born on the millennium, that cataclysmic year foretold by those who anticipated, often with relish, the end of the world as we knew it and the great Armageddon prophesied by the gloomy Church Fathers of the Christians. Second, I only just missed being the first of our far-flung race to be born in that land far distant across the western ocean, scarcely known even now except in mists and swirling wisps of rumour. It was, at that time, dubbed Vinland the Good. As luck would have it, my foster brother had the distinction to be the original and perhaps only fair-skinned child to come into this world on those distant shores. However, I can claim that the three years I spent there are about as long a span of time in that place as anyone from our people can boast, and because I was still so young they have left their mark. I still recall vividly those huge, silent forests, the dark water of bog streams lit by the glint of silver salmon, the odd striding pace of the wide-antlered deer, and those strange native peoples we called the Skraelings, with their slant eyes and striking ugliness, who ultimately drove us away.

My own birthplace was a land on a far smaller scale: Birsay, an insignificant, dune-rippled island in the windswept archipelago off the north coast of Scotland which the monk-geographers call the Orcades. When I first drew breath there, Birsay was home to no more than a couple of hundred inhabitants, living in half a dozen longhouses and sod-walled huts randomly placed around the only large structure – a great long hall shaped like an upturned boat, a design I was to grow very familiar with in later years and in some strange settings. It was the main residence of the earls of Orkney, and the widow of the previous earl, Jarl Haakon, told me of the circumstances of my birth when I visited that same long hall some fifteen years later, seeking to trace my mother, who had disposed of me waif-like when I was barely able to take my first infant steps.

My mother, according to the earl mother, was a massive woman, big-boned, muscular and not a little fearsome. She had green-brown eyes set in narrow sockets under very dark and well-marked eyebrows, and her one glory was a cascade of beautiful brown hair. She was also running to fat. Her family was part Norse and part Irish, and I have no doubt whatever that the Celtic side predominated in her, for she was to leave behind an awesome reputation for possessing strange and uneasy gifts of the sort which trouble, yet fascinate, men and women who come in contact with them. What is more, some of her character passed on to me and has accounted for most of the unusual events of my life.

The earl mother told me that my birth was not an occasion for rejoicing because my mother had disgraced herself. I was illegitimate. Thorgunna, my mother, had suddenly appeared at Birsay in the summer of the previous year, arriving from Dublin aboard a trading ship and bringing with her an impressive quantity of personal luggage, but without parents or a husband or any explanation for her journey. Her obvious wealth and self-confident style meant she was well received by Jarl Haakon and his family, and they gave her a place in their household. The rumour soon arose that my mother was the ill-favoured offspring of one of our opportunist Norse chieftains, who had gone to try his luck in

Ireland and married the daughter of a minor Irish king. This speculation, according to the earl mother, was largely based on Thorgunna's aloof manner and the fact that Ireland abounds with kinglets and chieftains with high pretensions and few means, a situation I was to experience for myself in my slave days.



THORGUNNA LIVED WITH the earl's entourage through the autumn and winter and was treated as a member of the family, though with respect for her size and strength of character rather than with any close fondness. And then, in the early spring of the pre-millennium year, it became obvious that she was with child. This was a sensation. No one had ever considered that Thorgunna was still of child-bearing age. Like most women, she said as little as possible about her age and she was far too fearsome a woman for anyone to enquire, however discreetly. By her appearance it had been presumed that she was in her mid-fifties, barren, and had probably always been so. Indeed she was such a broadly built woman that not until the sixth month was her condition noticeable, and that made the sensation all the more spectacular. The immediate reaction after the first stunned disbelief was to confirm what the sharper tongues had been saying all winter: Thorgunna employed sorcery. How else could a woman of her age be able to carry a child inside her, and how else – and this was the crux of the matter – had she been able to seduce the father so utterly?

'There was never the least doubt who your father was,' the earl mother told me. 'Indeed there was a great deal of jealousy and spitefulness from the other women of the household on the subject. He was such a dashing and good-looking man, and so much younger than your mother. People were hard put to explain how he had fallen under her spell. They said she had brewed up a love potion and slipped it into his food, or that she had cast a foreign charm over him, or that she had him under the effect of the evil eye.' Apparently what infuriated the critics even more was that neither Thorgunna nor her lover tried to conceal their affair. They

sat together, gazed at one another, and in the evenings ostentatiously went off to their own corner of the long hall and slept beneath the same cloak. 'What puzzled people even more was how your father became so besotted with your mother less than a week after he arrived. He had barely set foot in Birsay when she carried him off. Someone remarked that he looked like a good-looking toy being seized to comfort the giantess.'

Who was this glamorous traveller, my natural father? He was a well-to-do farmer and fisherman whose ship had sailed into Birsay's small anchorage in the autumn while en route from the farthest of the Norse lands, Greenland. Indeed he was the second son of the founder of the small and rather struggling colony in that ice-shrouded place. His father's name was Eirik rauda or 'Erik the Red' (I shall try to insert an translation wherever appropriate as my wanderings have given me a smattering of many languages and a near fluency in several) and his own was Leif, though in later years I would find that more people had heard of him as Leif the Lucky than as Leif Eriksson. He, like most of his family, was a rather wilful, dour man with a marked sense of independence. Tall and strong, he had tremendous stamina, which is a useful attribute for any frontier colonist if combined with a capacity for hard work. His face was rather thin (a feature which I have inherited) with a broad forehead, pale blue eyes and a prominent nose that had been broken at some stage and never set straight. He was, people seemed to find, a man whom it was difficult to argue with, and I would agree with them. Once he had made up his mind, he was almost impossible to be persuaded, and though he was capable of retreating behind a series of gruff, blunt refusals, his usual manner was courteous and reserved. So he was certainly respected and, in many ways, very popular.

Leif had not intended to stop in at Birsay. He was on his way from Greenland to Norway, sailing on the direct run which normally passes south of the Sheep Islands, which our Norsemen call the Faeroes. But an unseasonal bout of fog, followed by a couple of days of easterly headwinds, had pushed his course too

far to the south, and he had made a premature landfall in the Orkneys. He did not want to dawdle at Birsay, for he was on an important errand for his father. He had some Greenland products to sell – the usual stuff such as sealskins, walrus hides, walrus-skin ropes, a bit of homespun cloth, several barrels of whale oil and the like – but the main reason for his journey was to represent his father at the Norwegian court before King Olaf Tryggvason, who was then at the height of his mania for converting everyone to the religion whose drab uniform I now wear.

Christianity, I have noted in my seventy years of lifetime, boasts how humility and peace will overcome all obstacles and the word of the Lord is to be spread by example and suffering. Yet I have observed that in practice most of our northern people were converted to this so-called peaceful belief by the threat of the sword and our best-loved weapon, the bearded axe. Of course, there were genuine martyrs for the White Christ faith as our people first called it. A few foolhardy priests had their tonsured heads lopped off by uncouth farmers in the backlands. But that was in an excess of drunken belligerence rather than pagan zeal, and their victims were a handful compared to the martyrs of the Old Ways, who were cajoled, threatened, bullied and executed by King Olaf either because they refused to convert or were too slow to do so. For them the word of the Lord arrived in a welter of blood, so there is little wonder that the prophesied violence of the millennial cataclysm was easy to explain.

But I digress: Erik had sent his son Leif off to Norway to forestall trouble. Even in faraway Greenland the menacing rattle of King Olaf's religious zeal had been heard. The king had already sent messengers to the Icelanders demanding that they adopt the new faith, even though they were not really Norwegian subjects. The Icelanders were worried that King Olaf would next send a missionary fleet equipped with rather more persuasive weapons than croziers. With Iceland subdued, fledgling Greenland would have been a mere trifle. A couple of boatloads of royal mercenaries would have overrun the tiny colony, dispossessed Erik's family,

installed a new king's man, and Greenland would have been swallowed up as a Norwegian fief under the pretext of making it a colony for the White Christ. So Leif's job was to appear suitably eager to hear details of the new religion – a complete hypocrisy on Erik's part in fact, as he was to remain staunch to the Old Ways all his life – and even to ask for a priest to be sent out to Greenland to convert the colonists. I suspect that, if a priest *had* been found for the job, Leif had secret instructions from his father to abandon the meddling creature on the nearest beach at the first opportunity.

Erik also instructed his son to raise with King Olaf the delicate matter of Erik's outlawry. Erik was a proscribed man in Iceland – a hangover from some earlier troubles when he had been prone to settling disputes with sharp-edged weapons – and he was hoping that the king's protection would mean that certain aggrieved Icelanders would think twice about pursuing their blood feud with him. So, all in all, Leif had a rather delicate task set for him. To help his son, Erik devised what he thought could be a master stroke: a gift to catch the royal eye – a genuine Greenland polar bear to be presented to the royal menagerie.

The poor creature was a youngster which some of Erik's people had found, half-starved, on a melting floe of drift ice the previous spring. The floe must have been separated from the main pack by a back eddy and carried too far out to sea for the polar bear to swim to shore. By the time the animal was rescued it was too weak to put up a struggle and the hunters – they were out looking for seals – bagged it in a net and brought it home with them. Erik saw a use for the castaway and six months later the unhappy beast was again in a net and stowed in the bilges of Leif's embassy boat. By the time Birsay was sighted, the polar bear was so sickly that the crew thought it would die. The creature provided Leif with a first-rate excuse to dally away most of the winter on Birsay, allegedly to give the bear a chance to recuperate on a steady diet of fresh herring. Unfortunately this led to unkind jests that the bear and my mother Thorgunna were alike not only in character and gait, but in appetite as well.

That next April, when a favourable west wind had set in and looked as if it would stay steady for a few days, Leif and his men were eagerly loading up their ship, thanking the earl for his hospitality, and getting ready to head on for Norway when Thorgunna took Leif on one side and suggested that she go aboard with him. It was not an idea that appealed to Leif, for he had failed to mention to Thorgunna that he already had a wife in Greenland who would not look kindly on his foreign import. 'Then perhaps the alternative is going to be even less attractive,' Thorgunna continued. 'I am due to have your baby. And the child is going to be a boy.' Leif was wondering how Thorgunna could be so sure of her baby's sex, when she went on, 'At the first opportunity I will be sending him on to you.' According to Leif, who told me of this conversation when I was in my eleventh year and living with him in Greenland, my mother made the statement about sending me away from her with no more emotion than if she were telling Leif that she had been sewing a new shirt and would deliver it to him when it was ready. But then she softened and added, 'Eventually, if I have the chance, I intend to travel on to Greenland myself and find you.'

Under the circumstances my father behaved really very decently. On the evening before he set sail, he presented his formidable mistress with a fine waterproof Greenlandic sea cloak, a quantity of cash, a thin bracelet of almost pure gold and a belt of Greenland ivory made from the teeth of walrus. It was a very handsome gesture, and another speck in the eye for those hags who were saying that Thorgunna was being left in the lurch and was no better than she deserved. Anyhow, Leif then sailed off on his interrupted journey for Norway, making both a good passage and an excellent impression. King Olaf welcomed him at the Norwegian court, listened politely to what he had to say, and after keeping him hanging around the royal household for almost the whole summer, let him sail back to Greenland on the westerly winds of early autumn. As for the wretched polar bear, it was a temporary sensation. It was admired and petted, and then sent off

to the royal kennels, where it was conveniently forgotten. Soon afterwards it picked up distemper from the dogs and died.

I was born into this world at about the same time that the polar bear departed it. Later in my life, a shaman of the forest peoples in Permian, up in the frozen zones, was to tell me that the spirit of the dying bear transferred itself to me by a sort of spiritual migration at the moment of my birth. I was reluctant to believe it, of course, but the shaman affirmed it as fact and as a result treated me with respect bordering on awe because the Permians worship the bear as the most powerful spirit of all. Whatever the truth about the transmigration of souls, I was born with a minimum of fuss and commotion on a summer's day in the year my present colleagues, sitting so piously around me, would describe as the year of our Lord, 999.