

Skagafjörður Heritage Museum Brochure XX

**AURAS OVER THE FAMILY LINE**  
**The Saga of**  
**GUÐRÍÐUR ÞORBJARNARDÓTTIR**

By Hallgrímur Jónasson.

Translated 1999 from the booklet,

„Geislar yfir kynkvíslum“,

by David Gislason.



## FOREWORD

The booklet, "Geislar yfir kynkvíslum" by Hallgrímur Jónason was published by the Sögufélag Skagfirðinga (The Historical Society of Skagafjörður) in 1994, as an excerpt from the book *Fólk og fróðleikur* (People and Knowledge). This was done by request from the Byggðasafn Skagfirðinga (Skagafjörður Heritage Museum).

David Gislason, who translated the booklet in 1999, was a farmer in the Interlake area of Manitoba, and a descendant of the New Iceland Pioneers, Canada.



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Front page picture: A bronze cast of the statue by Ásmundur Sveinsson, titled the "First European Mother in America" from 1939. Photo by Hjörtur – Hinir sömu  
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## INTRODUCTION

Our sagas relate that Snorri Þorfinnsson, son of Þorfinnur karlsefni and Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir<sup>1</sup> farmed at Glaumbær in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Snorri was born in the wilds of Vinland. His father was the first known owner of Glaumbær farm, according to the sagas. *Grænlendinga saga* (*The Saga of the Greenlanders*) tells us that Þorfinnur bought the property at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, after he had returned home from his travels to North America. The veracity of the Sagas has long been debated. Many consider *Eiríks saga rauða* (*Saga of Erik the Red*) to be the more factual of the two, which might mean that neither karlsefni nor his descendants had any connection with Glaumbær. But both the *Eiríks saga rauða* and the *Grænlendinga saga* agree that Þorfinnur met his bride to be, Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, in Greenland.

Guðríður is an exceptional personality both by historic and literary connotation. By saga accounts her father Þorbjörn Vífilsson, who lived at Laugarbrekku on Snæfellsnes, had moved to Greenland with his family at the end of the 10th century. Guðríður was the widow of Þorsteinn Eiríksson from Brattahlíð when she and Þorfinnur met and fell in love. Þorfinnur was son of Þórður horsehead from Staður in Reynines, now known as Reynistaður, who was descended from the farm Höfði on Höfðaströnd.<sup>2</sup> His mother was Þórunn Þorfinnsdóttir from Álftafjörður in the West.

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<sup>1</sup> Ð-ð and Þ-þ, pronunciation is th.

<sup>2</sup> Þórður's father was Snorri, son of Þórður who settled at Höfði on Höfðaströnd.

When Þorfinnur met Guðríður in Greenland he was a successful captain and trader who sailed between Iceland, Norway and Greenland. There are many remarkable stories told of him, and one would not hesitate to count him as one of the great historic personalities from Skagafjörður of early times. They were married, sailed to Vineland and lived there for a time, but left in haste due to conflict with the natives. They returned to Iceland and moved to Þorfinnur's paternal farm Reynistaður. Snorri Þorfinnsson, their eldest son, was said to have been the first child of European lineage born in North America. As previously mentioned, the sagas do not agree on whether Þorfinnur and Guðríður lived at Reynistaður or at Glaumbær, or at both places. Bearing in mind some caution as to the reliability of the Icelandic sagas in general, it can be said that if these personalities existed in real life, Snorri could have lived at Glaumbær and built a church there around the year 1020.<sup>3</sup>

Guðríður was unusually widely travelled for a woman of her time, and sailed the Atlantic several times between Iceland, Greenland, Vineland and Norway and walked south across Europe to Rome. Her later years were devoted to God. After having walked to Rome to make confession and receiving absolution from the Pope she became a nun (hermit), the first from Skagafjörður that accounts relate.

*Sigríður Sigurðardóttir.*

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<sup>3</sup> Sagas of Icelanders II, 1987, p. 1109.



*A bronze cast of Ásmundur Sveinsson's statue, which he called "The first European mother in America", and is meant to represent Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir and her son Snorri Þorfinnsson. Photo by Sigríður Sigurðardóttir.*

## ***Auras Over the Family Line***

By Hallgrímur Jónasson

Seldom do I (*Hallgrímur Jónasson*) drive through the western region of Skagafjörður without stopping at the height of land between Páfastaðir and Holtsmúli. From the highways in that area, this provides for me one of the most beautiful views out into the heart of the region. Since the valley, Stífla went under water, there are not many narrow and prominent places in Skagafjörður which can be seen from the main thoroughfare, which offer such an undisputed magical beauty on par with some of the most significant sights in other areas of this land. On the other hand, it is my opinion and that of others, that this region as a whole is more beautiful than most others, and I know our land well.

From this site the view is open to the south-east. The island region and the mountains to the south-east are of complementary size and shape; the outline of the mountains for their part equally as even as the level stretches of land beneath them. They are to be sure, carved up with manifold scars, just as the land is cut up by many rivulets; the mountain belt above, the green expanse below. The Hegranes ridge to the north-east, with its river mouths and hillsides, set rather lower over the flatlands nearer the point of view, does not detract at all from one's impression. To the south, across the valley floor, the highland takes over, running level all the way to Hofsjökull glacier, which on a clear day can be seen from the outer reaches of the fjord.

Much nearer, due south, rises the mountain peak, Mælifell, high above the western mountain range. North towards the sea, one can see the islands and the headland, Þórðarhöfði. But now it is best to get to the heart of this story, and cease with the introductions.



*View from Glaumbær to the south. Mountain Mælifell is far to right on the horizon. The picture is of eclipse in March 20, 2015.  
Photo by Sigríður Sigurðardóttir.*

For decades, I acted as a guide for travelers through the North, as well as other areas, and often stopped to make camp with my travelling companions near one of the most interesting locations in the region. In the evening when we had pitched the tents and prepared the evening meal - and I engaged in describing in more detail the more interesting aspects of the area which we would not be seeing on our journey- one of my companions spoke up in words along

these lines: "You have taken us through the main parts of Skagafjörður, and shown us the character of the region and its most noteworthy locations. Will you now tell us something of that individual, man or woman, who was born here or settled here, of whom stories are told and whom you consider most noteworthy"? I did not respond at that time, for I did not consider myself prepared to answer the question. The question was not forgotten though, and I would often ponder on it. Here I will attempt to answer the question, though much time has passed, and I am not even certain that my questioner is still among the living.

I will begin by shifting my attention from Skagafjörður, far from there, in both time and distance. Before the journey is over, my story will return to this place, along with that person whom I have come to admire through our literature, past and present, of those who lived in Skagafjörður and whose life ended there.

It is late summer, shortly before the year one thousand. Out from Hraunhafnarós to the West of Snæfellsnes, a ship has set sail on a course for the western sea. The destination is Greenland, the southern part of which was at that time recently discovered and settled. On board is a group of at least thirty people whose intention is to make their home in the settlement of Erik the Red. The ship's captain and owner is Þorbjörn Vífilsson, the farmer from Laugarbrekka at Hellisvellir below Snæfellsjökul (Snæfells glacier). His father, Vífill, was said to be of good lineage, having come out with Auður



the deep minded. The son, Þorbjörn, took Hallveig Einarsdóttir from Laugarbrekka as his wife. He moved there and took over management of the farm. He was much respected, had many friends and was in all manner a good person.

They had a daughter whom they named Guðríður. She was, at this point in the story, well developed, and in every way the fairest of women. In addition, she was most capable in all her endeavours. It was not far *Laugarbrekka* to the farm at *Arnarstapi*, where Ormur and his wife Halldís lived. Guðríður lived there for some time as their foster child, and a strong friendship developed between the homes.

There was also a deep friendship between Þorbjörn and Erik the Red, even though the farmer, Þorbjörn from Laugarbrekka and his family had recently accepted Christianity, at the invitation and encouragement of the emissaries of King Ólaf Tryggvason of Norway. Now because Þorbjörn felt that he was lacking in wealth, and felt that on this account he would have difficulty in holding his place of honor, he decided to sell his land and buy a ship which was at anchor in Hraunhafnarós, and move to Greenland. It was now more than a decade since a flotilla of 25 ships under the command of Erik the Red set sail for Greenland to establish a settlement there. Only 14 landed had safely, the rest were either lost at sea or had returned to Iceland.

One fall, while Guðríður was living with her foster parents at Arnarstapi, a young traveler named Einar Þorgeirsson came to visit at the farm. His father, a wealthy man, lived farther in

along the point under the mountain named Þorgeirsfell. Einar was a handsome man, of good character, who liked to dress well. He sailed a trading ship between Iceland and her trading partners, and he fared well. On this occasion, when Einar saw Guðríður momentarily walk by the doorway, he was so taken with her beauty and charm that he prevailed upon her foster father to give him this woman to be his wife. Ormur replied that this was not in the cards, and nothing came of the proposal.

Now we return to the time that Þorbjörn set sail, bound for the Greenland-sea. In addition to the people from the farm at Laugarbrekka, on board were the couple from Arnastapi, Ormur and Halldís, and others who decided to throw in their lot with Þorbjörn.

They had not been long at sea, when the breeze gave out. They lost their directions in fog and cloudy weather. As fall approached, the weather worsened and the seas grew rougher, the ship heaved in the storm and swell. Finally sickness spread through the passengers, and nearly half of Þorbjörn's followers died. Among those who succumbed, were Ormur and Halldís, Guðríður's foster parents. After many weeks of storm and suffering, the survivors managed to make land at Herjólfssnes, named for Herjólfur Bárðarson who lived there on the Southernmost tip of Greenland. Winter was then at hand.

Those who ended up lost at sea, or tossed about in storms in the ships of that time, experienced greater adversity,

physical as well as emotional, than one can imagine or describe. When the winds failed, the ship floated aimlessly, and when storms broke out, there was no effective way of controlling the ship. In the cold, damp darkness of the fog, direction had no meaning. The icy drafts from the northern sea currents cut through the thin frail coverings of the ships. Then came food shortages, malnutrition and resulting illness, scurvy, the cause of which few then understood - the "sickness" so often referred to. Then, the inevitable sense of depression, anxiety and the uncertainty of what the outcome would be.

The long lost travelers received a warm welcome at Herjólfnes and were offered winter quarters. It is not known whether there were any children in the group, but most likely there were. Doubtless there would have been more women than Halldís among those who died, but we do know that the mother and daughter, Guðríður and Hallveig, as well as Þorbjörn Vífilsson reached the safety of land. That winter the people stayed at Herjólfnes with the farmer, Þorkell and his wife.

This was a time of great hardship in Greenland, weather was hard and little game was to be had. In this community there lived a woman by the name of Þorbjörg. She was said to be prescient, and a seeress. She was the youngest of nine sisters, and they all had been prophetic. Of these nine, Þorbjörg was the only survivor, she was nicknamed "Little Sibyl."

Þorbjörg went between the farms, told people their fortunes and predicted the weather. Many were curious about such matters, and as Þorkell was a leader among the farmers, it behooved him to endeavour to find out when conditions would improve. He invited the prophetess to his home where she was warmly welcomed. A high seat was prepared for her, and it was to be padded with chicken feathers. Þorbjörg was dressed in the following manner: “she had over her a blue mantle and was covered with gems from the headpiece down to the hem. Around her neck she wore a necklace of glass beads. She wore a lambskin hood lined with white cat-skin on her head. In her hand she held a staff with a brass knob inlaid with gems on the end. She was girded with a heavy belt attached to which was a skin pouch in which she kept her magical amulets, those which she used to read the future. On her feet she wore hairy calfskin moccasins tied with long leather thongs with knobs of tin at the ends. On her hands she wore cat-skin gloves, fur lined and white on the inside.”

The seeress was served goat-milk porridge “and cooked heart of all animals that were available. She had a brass knife with an ivory handle and two copper knobs, the point of the blade was broken off.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *The description of the manner in which the seeress was dressed, and the food she was served are so unusual as to suggest that it is accurate, though it does not affect the story line, it does suggest that the event was not simply made up.*

Late in the day when the seeress would make her prophesies and predict the future, she asked for the assistance of women who knew the magical song (incantation) called "Varðlokur," which was needed for the seance. But search as they might, there was none who knew either the text or the tune. They searched the farm more closely, for many people from the outlying areas had gathered, but none of these knew the chant either. Þorbjörn Vífilsson and his family were Christian, and did not want to participate in this event, as the search continued, Guðríður said, "I am neither versed in magic nor wise in these matters, but my foster mother, Halldís taught me the poem which she called 'Varðlokur' when we were in Iceland. But the young woman did not wish to take part. Þorbjörg 'Littlesybil' said that Guðríður would not be any worse a person even though she came to the aid of others. Whereas the farmer was very keen on proceeding, and Þorbjörn and his family were beholden to him, it seemed only proper to take part. The women formed a circle around the high seat of the seeress, and Guðríður sang "so beautifully and so well, that no one in attendance had heard the verse chanted with as lovely a voice." Þorbjörg the seeress expressed her thanks for the verse and song, and declared "that many powers of nature were attracted by the beauty of the song - those that before paid us no heed and refused our bidding." Next, she declared that the hard times that were at hand would soon pass, and the illness, which had plagued them, would also relent. "But you, Guðríður, I shall reward for the assistance you have given us, for your future is now quite clear to me. You will make the best of marriages while here in

Greenland, but you will not dwell here long, for your paths lead out to Iceland, and your descendants there will be many and prominent, and over your lineage shine a brighter light than I can adequately see or describe. May things go well with you, my child.”

I am not aware that any other woman in our literature, before or since, has enjoyed such a bright prophesy or comment, involving both herself and her descendants for many generations.

It was not long before the prophecy of improved weather was fulfilled. The same held true for the hunt, and for people’s health. The storm tossed travelers from Iceland soon recuperated.

As things improved, Þorbjörn made his ship ready once more, and with the surviving members of his group, sailed up the west coast of Greenland and in to Eiríksfjörð to Brattahlíð. Eiríkur received them well, and invited them all to stay with him for the balance of the winter.

When spring came, and the weather warmed, Eiríkur gave his friend Þorbjörn land at Stokkanes on the far side of the fjord. There Þorbjörn made his home, lived out his life, and was considered to be a man of honour.

Our sources now go on to outline events which will not be mentioned here, events of worldly import to be sure, but so

well known to us that there is no reason to elaborate on them, except where they touch on the heroine of our story.

Erik's saga and the Greenlanders' saga do not always agree, as those who have read them both will know. The latter though, with further study, appears to be the more reliable source, though that may be debated. Each will be drawn on, as they throw light on the affairs of Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir. A few details in the stories that touch on Guðríður are not clear enough as to be fully understood, but that does not alter the fact that the life of this woman is so unusual as to be quite remarkable. Her paths are woven in with events of such global proportion as to understandably overshadow her own. The weighty narrative of the discovery of the New World naturally focuses on other things, but shows us glimpses of Guðríður here and there. She is described as "a fine woman, that is to say, lovely to behold, of noble bearing ... a wise woman who knew how to conduct herself in the presence of strangers," and the beauty of her song was without equal.<sup>5</sup>

Of Erik's sons, Þorsteinn is said to have been the most promising man to be found in Greenland at that time. He asked for Guðríður's hand in marriage, and his suit was successful. Leifur was a second son and Þorvaldur the third son of Eirík the Red.

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<sup>5</sup> To be at home in the presence of stranger's means among other things, having a disposition that attracts others, and draws them in along life's way.

Bjarni Herjólfsson had been driven west across the ocean, and clearly was the first to sight the land that Leifur Eiríksson would later explore, and name Vineland. He brought the news to Greenland, and generated much debate and interest in sailing there. In the Greenlanders' Saga we read that Þorvaldur, Leif's brother, made an exploratory trip to Vineland. This account will only mention the fact that on these unfamiliar shores he was killed by an aborigine's arrow. His men buried his body on a headland there, made their way back to Greenland, and told their story.



*This sculpture, made by Sven Havsteen-Mikkelsen, on a rock at Brattahlíð in Eiríksfjörður, Greenland, represents Eiríkur rauði and Þjóðhildur, his wife. They are surrounded by a Viking ship, a Christian cross, a horseman, and the ruins of their estate at Brattahlíð.  
Photo by Sigríður Sigurðardóttir.*



At this point in the story Þorsteinn, Þorvaldur's brother, had married Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, and settled at Lýsufjörður, to the south in the western settlement. We read that he wanted to recover the body of his brother and give it a Christian burial in consecrated ground, as the people of Greenland had by now accepted this new faith. We can assume that his thinking was driven not only by a desire to recover the body of his brother from such a great distance, but also by a desire to explore this new land more thoroughly. A select crew accompanied him, including his wife.

On this trip they were tossed about aimlessly at sea most of the summer, but managed to return to Greenland in the first week of winter. This was now the second voyage lost at sea, doubtless a great ordeal for this young woman. In fact many a hardy seaman died from "an illness which beset them once they reached land," among those was Guðríður's husband Þorsteinn. She later returned to Brattahlíð, to her brother-in-law Leifur who, according to some sources, had now succeeded his father.

It is my impression from reading the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, that Guðríður was not interested in spending her life there, especially after the death of her foster parents. It is said that she encouraged her husband, Þorsteinn Eiríksson to make the trip to Vineland. The thirst for adventure has certainly run in her veins, and she had not lost her courage on her first difficult voyage. It is not unlikely that her thoughts often took her back to the place of her youth at Laugar-

brekka and Arnarstapi, where the view was both beautiful and magnificent in all directions. She may well have known the verse which Helga Bárðardóttir Snæfellsás is said to have recited when she left for Greenland:

Happy I would be if I could see  
Búrfell and Bali  
Both the crags at Lón  
Alþingshólar  
and Andvertnes.  
Heiðarkolla  
and Hreggnasa  
Dritvík and Möl  
From the doorway of my foster home.

These placenames are from Snæfellsnes, many near Laugarbrekka. But now, new events are near at hand.

Late one summer, just after the year 1000, two Viking ships sailed into *Eiríksfjörður*. At the helm of one of these, was one of the highest born Icelanders who at that time sailed between the known countries of the northern world, Þorfinnur karlsefni from Staður in Reynisnes, in Skagafjörður. This well known and wealthy traveler was descended from kings in both family lines, and one did not have to go far back to find them. His best attributes, though, were his accomplishments and his courage, as well as his drive and masculinity. Now he sailed directly from Norway, his ships laden with goods much needed in Greenland at that time. The other ship was piloted by Bjarni Grímólfsson from Breiðafjörður, and Þórhallur Gamlason. The crews of both ships spent the winter at

Brattahlíð. There Þorfinnur Karlsefni saw Guðríður for the first time as a mature woman. They seemed to be meant for each other, both extremely able, with personalities that drew others to them. In no time at all they fell in love. Þorfinnur proposed to Guðríður, and their marriage was celebrated at Brattahlíð that winter.

It can be assumed that at this time there was much talk of Leifur's discovery of Vineland, and the rich lands that waited there. These widely traveled men must have yearned to seek out this amazing world that Leifur had touched on, but now it seems, he was tied down with the affairs of governing Greenland. We gather from the sagas that Guðríður encouraged, rather than discouraged, her husband to investigate this land of adventure. The desire was kindled in her veins as before. The young couple soon committed to sailing there next summer, and even settle there if that seemed suitable, and the land promising. It was quite clear to her that Greenland could not induce them to stay and make their home.

Three ships sailed together from Eiríksfjörður, headed for Vineland with Þorfinnur Karlsefni in command. His ability as a navigator soon becomes clear. The ships sail north along the west coast of Greenland, then head west at the shortest distance to land on the other side, then south along this new found coast, in full view of land. This trip will not be described here, other than where the heroine of our story is mentioned, anything more would be too lengthy a tale, and here Eirik's saga and the Greenlanders' saga do not agree, as has been

mentioned. The travelers find Leifur's buildings. Disagreement arose between the ships crews. Þórhallur the hunter, with a crew of ten sails north, but his ship is driven onto the coast of Ireland. The others sail south and find even more fertile lands than at Leif's houses. There they encounter local aboriginals, and the Noremen return again to their former camp.

After the first winter there, Guðríður gave birth to a son whom they named Snorri, likely after Þorfinnur's grandfather. Snorri was the first European born in the New World, as far as we know. Trade between the Norsemen and the natives, which the newcomers called "Skrælings" took place peacefully at first, but the relationship soon worsened, and led to bloodshed and death. Guðríður watched over her newborn son as the clash between these two disparate groups unfolded.

The hopes of the settlers for peaceful pioneering were dashed by the multitude of the natives, and Þorfinnur decided to leave, and make for Greenland once more. With that, the efforts of the Norsemen at making a foothold in this land came to a close, at least for now. Þorfinnur brought nearly all of his company back to Greenland in safety. Bjarni Grímólfsson's ship sank not far from Ireland, its timbers eaten through by shipworms. Some of the crew reached safety in the shoreboat, but the captain died a hero's death as the saga records.

As before, good fortune followed Guðríður and her husband Þorfinnur. Four times now this courageous and capable woman had sailed the northern seas. It would hardly have occurred to her that she had yet to make as many voyages, some of which would be even longer.

They spent the next winter at Brattahlíð. Both her parents, as well as her friend Eiríkur the Red were now dead. There was nothing to tie her to this vast, rugged land, and her husband, the traveler, had other thoughts than to pass the years here. Here he had found his wife, as word would have it, one of highest quality. Their son, he felt, was too young to set out on perilous journeys over the rolling sea. He was more suited to a quiet life and home. From Greenland they planned to sail to Norway, and was it not time to look up relatives and homeland in Skagafjörður? Þorfinnur knew, as did Leifur, a direct sea route to Norway. It was much farther than the route to the new found land, and the opportunities for trade made it natural to go there first before heading to Iceland, and home to the family farms.

Guðríður needed no encouragement to make the journey. She was ready to set out on her fifth voyage over the sea, doubtless there was no one with whom she would be safer, as her husband would be in charge. Her fortunes were now such that, as rumor had it “no ship would have left Greenland with a more valuable cargo, than that which he commanded.”

Their voyage to Norway went smoothly that summer, and they spent the winter there. Þorfinnur sold his cargo, “and he, and they both were held in high esteem, one of the most noble couples in Norway, but the next spring he made his ship ready for Iceland.” In Norway they would have heard news of what had become of Bjarni Grímólfsson and Þórhallur the hunter, and their company.

Now Guðríður prepares to make her sixth ocean voyage. This time the destination is the land of her birth, notably not to Snæfellsnes, where she had been raised, but rather to the Arctic Sea, where the sun does not set on the longest summer day. On this trip, in good company and fair sailing, a feeling of unease may have come over Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, a sensation to which she had never before succumbed; for her future home was at hand. Though she herself was well bred, her path now led to the company of people of the highest rank and birth in all of Iceland. How would she be regarded, as wife of Þorfinnur, the wealthy, renowned traveler, in whose veins ran the blood of kings from both directions, even that of Ragnar Loðbrók himself? Marrying into such rank was not without its problems. Against such rank and prestige, she could only offer her own strength of character. Up to this point that had been sufficient for all those with whom she had dealings. Her bright, unsullied personality had perhaps never before allowed such matters to bother her, up until now there had been no cause.



*Reynistaður was the birthplace and legacy of Þorfinnur karlsefni, Guðríður's husband. Photo by Sigríður Sigurðardóttir.*

It may also be that Þorfinnur had similar concerns, more than half a decade had passed since he had set sail from home. News of his seafaring exploits had double reached home to his parents in Skagafjörður, Þórður Horsehead and his wife Þórunn, his reputation filling them with pride, his wealth and prowess admired by all. He knew his parents and his closest relatives well, and would not have wanted his wife to suffer any indignity from their haughty attitude. The Greenlanders' Saga relates that after the first winter the couple spent in Skagafjörður, Þorfinnur bought the land at Glaumbær, built his farm there, and managed it while he lived, and was considered the worthiest of men.

In *Eiríks saga rauða* we are told that they settled at Reynisnes, which would have been owned by the family. Þorfinnur's father was dead by then, but the family pride still burned in

the breast of Þórunn, his widow. In her opinion her son “had taken something of little worth,” meaning that he had married beneath his rank. Because of her arrogance, Þórunn refused to live with them, and moved away. But by the end of the first winter that the new housewife lived at Reynisnes, word of her virtues, strong personality, and acumen became so widely known and so indisputable, that Þórunn decided to return and live out the rest of her life with her. They got on well. These accounts could both be correct. After Þórunn left Reynisnes, her son could have purchased the Glaumbær land so that his wife and mother did not have to endure each other’s company, but rumors that reached her ears of her daughter-in-law’s reputation, convinced her that strength of character could balance out with high birth.

Although we do not know the year he died, Þorfinnur Karls-efni did not live to be an old man. We do not know either whether at this time there were other voyages made from Greenland, attempting to establish a foothold in Vineland, but it is certain that sailing would have been undertaken, and Norsemen camped there for periods of time. There are stories told of Bishop Eiríkur Gnúpsson of Greenland making the trip in the year 1121. It could certainly be assumed that the bishop would have been visiting his people, living there at that time.

After the death of Þorfinnur, Guðríður lived with her son Snorri, the same Snorri over whose cradle she kept watch on the shores of Vineland. When he reached maturity, married,



and no longer needed the supervision of his mother, she turned over the farm, and its management to him.

Now she turned her attention to herself, and the life she had left to live. At this time she would have been well into middle age, with a wealth of experience behind her. She was endowed with a great deal of energy, and an even stronger spiritual resolve. She was a committed Christian with a prophesy for a richer, more rewarding life than any other Icelandic woman, before or since. Was there anything that she lacked, to be satisfied with herself and her circumstances? Indeed she was not fully satisfied with herself. She had one voyage left to undertake, one that she could not avoid. This trip she owed to her god. She intended to make the pilgrimage to Rome, and seek absolution of her sins. This journey was to be the culmination of all her travels.

It is a long way from Iceland South to Rome. From Denmark or Norway, the trip took over two months each way. This pilgrimage was an extremely difficult undertaking, some people collapsed and gave up along the way.

Guðríður had undertaken her first voyage with her parents over the Greenland Sea, and it nearly cost her life. A large part of the next summer was spent with her first husband, adrift and lost at sea. Many of the crew perished, even though they did eventually reach land. This final journey, Guðríður would make on her own, both the sea crossing, and the long overland trek, and she would now be past middle

age. It would have taken a great deal of determination, both physical and spiritual, to carry out such an undertaking.

Sources do not go into much detail over this matter. The *Greenlanders' Saga* has only this to say: "and when Snorri married, Guðríður went abroad and walked South, she then returned to her son Snorri's farm. Snorri had then built a church at Glaumbær. Guðríður became a nun and recluse, living out the remainder of her life there."

On this occasion she is in service to her god and her own spiritual development. -This would have taken place late in the third decade of the 11th century. She completes the trip, and thus has twice walked the breadth of Europe, and eight times sailed the northern oceans. She would have been considered the most widely traveled woman of her time, and for several centuries to come. Her story is intertwined - as has been mentioned - with events of global proportion which were unfolding at that time. Her name, though, is not overshadowed by the heroic names and events, told in condensed form, of the discovery of a new and distant continent. Alongside those people of history stands Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, outstanding as a stately person, wise and courageous, one whose personality attracted and influenced; qualities that high birth, conceit and pride must surely have bowed before. Thus the epic sagas are related in the everyday language of today.

The *Grænlandingsaga* has this to say of the descendants of Guðríður and Þorfinnur Karlsefni: "Snorri had a son named

Þorgeir. His daughter was Ingveldur, the mother of Bishop Brand. Snorri Þorfinnsson's daughter was Hallfríður, she was the wife of Runólfur, the father of Bishop Þorlákur. Another son of Þorfinnur and Guðríður was named Björn, who was the father of Þórunn, mother of Bishop Bjarni." It is likely that there are others who might also be named, all remarkable people.

This was a large lining, and a good one. From Guðríður and over her descendants shone a brighter light than even the most prescient eyes and minds could have fully defined or appreciated.

Should my fellow traveler of old still be alive today, the one who got me thinking about who had been the most memorable, the best known historical individual connected with the region through which we traveled at the beginning of this tale, the answer is to be found in this chronicle.



*The author, Hallgrímur Jónasson was a University professor and part time travel guide in Iceland, his writings express his deep love for his country and its people. It has been translated and reproduced here with the permission of the Sögufélag Skagfirðinga (Historical Society of Skagafjörður) and the sons and the late Hallgrímur, Ingvar, Jónas and Þórir.*

*My thanks to them, David Gislason.*

## Remains from the past

In 2002 remains of a dwelling from before the year 1100 were identified, about 150 meters east of the old turf houses at Glaumbær. Remote sensing showed the remains of turf walls and a thin layer of peat ash. The walls and ash layer are under a thin, easily recognised, layer of ash from the Mt. Hekla eruption of 1104. In 2003 a test trench (pit) was made and walls and floor of a longhouse (skáli), from 11<sup>th</sup> century, was discovered. In 2009, when the top layer (the turf/sod) of the area was scratched, large buildings of turf came to light.



*Photo from 2009, by J.S./SASS shows where the remains of a dwelling from before 1100 was found.*

Test trenching and coring helped determine the nature and extent of the remains. Though under 10% of the results have been examined to date, it already seems clear there was a 30 meter long building there. Two parallel 2meter thick turf walls have been identified and parallel to them two 1.8meter wide benches with a 1.8meter earth floor between them. A number of other walls have been discerned, among them one

that appears to have been built before 1000. The building seems to have been occupied throughout the 11<sup>th</sup> century but abandoned before the 1104 eruption. Considerable amounts of bog iron were found along with evidence of iron workings. Previously it was believed that the old turf house, Glaumbær, was located where all previous domestic structures had been, but a test trench into the ash midden outside the back door of the turf house shows it was not used before 1104. This implies that the farm moved sometime around 1100.

This discovery is illuminating and proves that there is much information to be found even where there is no sign on the surface. Excavation is likely to reveal the first stage of turf house building in Skagafjörður, allowing us to see, in one place, both the first and the final stages of 1000 years history of turf house development. Excavation will answer many other questions, such as whether and why the farm was moved, when people first lived in Glaumbær, what the first houses looked like and how they were used.

Scholars disagree as to whether to believe the *Grænlandinga saga* in which Þorfinnur karlsefni and Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir are said to have purchased the Glaumbær farmland when they returned from Vinland in the first years of the 11th century. Despite some doubt that these characters ever lived in Glaumbær, there is no doubt that research on the site will bring to light many aspects of the past and perhaps raise more questions. Clearly, what awaits inspection is a unique source in a unique setting.

*Sigríður Sigurðardóttir.*