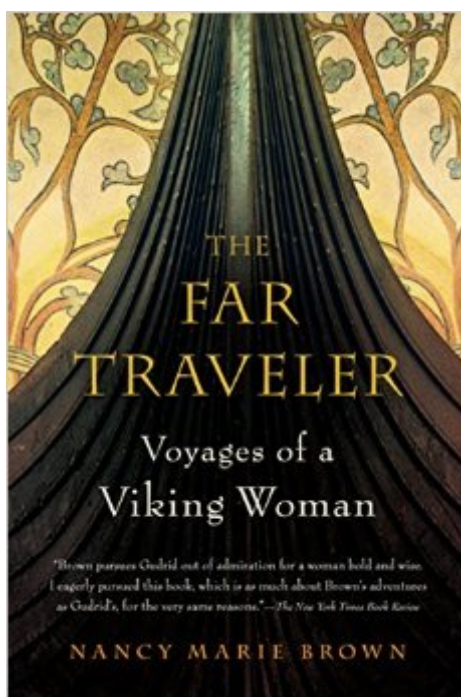


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The Far Traveler: Voyages Of A Viking Woman



Synopsis

Five hundred years before Columbus, a Viking woman named Gudrid sailed off the edge of the known world. She landed in the New World and lived there for three years, giving birth to a baby before sailing home. Or so the Icelandic sagas say. Even after archaeologists found a Viking longhouse in Newfoundland, no one believed that the details of Gudrid's story were true. Then, in 2001, a team of scientists discovered what may have been this pioneering woman's last house, buried under a hay field in Iceland, just where the sagas suggested it could be. Joining scientists experimenting with cutting-edge technology and the latest archaeological techniques, and tracing Gudrid's steps on land and in the sagas, Nancy Marie Brown reconstructs a life that spanned—and expanded—the bounds of the then-known world. She also sheds new light on the society that gave rise to a woman even more extraordinary than legend has painted her and illuminates the reasons for its collapse.

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Customer Reviews

Nancy Marie Brown's *The Far Traveler* is a wonderfully intelligent and immediate narrative not only of the journeys of Gudrid, the Icelandic colonist of North America around the year 1000 who also made a pilgrimage to Rome, but also of the dangerous world and harsh climate she inhabited—and how her people, the Icelanders and Greenlanders, sustained their way of life in the North Atlantic environment. With little known from the Icelandic sagas about the life of Gudrid, author Brown makes excellent use of a range of sources to reconstruct the Norse world, recounting along the way her own work as a volunteer archaeologist at Glaumbaer in Iceland, likely Gudrid's last home. Not to be

forgotten among these sources of information are the experimental archaeologists who have built replicas of Viking ships and, as important, have reconstructed the techniques of women's work in the Norse world, so much of it based on the economically vital production of cloth from wool. I highly recommend this engaging, fluently written, deeply researched book.--Patrick J. Stevens, curator, Fiske Icelandic Collection, Cornell University Library

The far-traveling Viking woman of the title was Gudrid Thorbjarnardottir, once a sister-in-law of Leif Eirikson and reputedly the mother of the first European child born in North America. The little which is known specifically of Gudrid comes from two Icelandic sagas: "Eirik the red's Saga" and "The Greenlanders' Saga", but even those two sources disagree with one another about details of Gudrid's life. What we can be reasonably sure of is that Gudrid was born in Iceland, traveled to the new Norse Greenland colonies in about the year 1000, became a ward of Eirik the Red, and married his son, Thorstein, who soon died. Widowed, Gudrid then married the Icelandic merchant Thorfinn Karlsefni, apparently convinced Karlsefni to attempt colonization of the newly discovered Vinland, lived with her husband for three years in Vinland -- at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, it seems -- giving birth to a son, Snorri, then returned to Greenland and then back to Iceland, where Karlsefni died. In later life, Gudrid may have made a pilgrimage to Rome and returned to Iceland to die a nun. With so few details of Gudrid's life certain, the greatest part of Nancy Marie Brown's book is devoted to exploring what we know of Viking life, especially in Iceland, and what we don't know, plus a first-hand account of Brown's experiences as a volunteer archaeologist at the site of what appears to be Gudrid's final home in Iceland. Along the way, the author discusses the nature of Icelandic sagas and the fine Viking arts of cheese-making and weaving. All this is done in an engaging manner that brings Gudrid (and modern Iceland) fully to life. My only real criticism of the book is that it could have benefited from additional maps and from diagrams of the Norse ruins at L'Anse aux Meadows and of Gudrid's Icelandic farm at Glaumbaer.

A powerful book. *The Far Traveler* is a striking play with some of the concepts of the age that it relates. In saga time, divinatory practice was said to open up the past, revealing hidden information about people and their (wrong)doings. This book represents remote sensing in a dual sense; not only does it provide an illuminating account of high-tech archaeology and the ways in which it gazes beyond the surface layers of modern Icelandic farmland, also, and more importantly, it convincingly reconstructs a series of spectacular events from distant times and contexts. Thanks to Nancy Marie Brown's vivid imagination, detailed research, and, above all, skilful narration, the brave world of

Gudrid finally gets the treatment it truly deserves. A moving and gripping account, in a language strangely reminiscent of the saga style. Gisli Palsson, author of *Travelling Passions: The Hidden Life of Vilhjalmur Stefansson* *Travelling Passions: Stefansson, the Arctic Explorer*

I am just a general reader who happens to enjoy well-written history. I've never read much at all about the Vikings but the NY Times review of *THE FAR TRAVELER* was enticing and I was not let down by its promise. Nancy Marie Brown has reached back to a place and people obscured by time, doing a decent job of erasing some of the fog and cold desolation that obscure the Dark Ages and Medieval Epoch in Iceland and Greenland. She also succeeds in revealing a lot about contemporary archaeological practice and thought. Brown turns first to the Sagas, the 10th and 11th century tales of Vikings, for inspiration. Though embroidered, the Sagas, written down some generations later, are regarded as holding historical memories. Brown focuses on one woman who appears in both the Eirik the Red and Greenland Sagas as her guide, Gudrid, who traveled from Iceland to Greenland to Vinland, back to Iceland and remarkably, in later age, on a pilgrimage to Rome. Her son Snorri was very likely the first European child born on North American soil, circa 1005. Her personal story reveals much about religion, economics, gender relations, values, world view and other aspects of her culture. Born late in the 10th century AD, she witnessed the spread of Christianity and the fading of the violent marauding male economy as the domestic textile industry spun by women on the farm began to reposition Iceland in the world trade scene. Brown travels to all of the places Gudrid did, reads scholarship on her topic and participates in archaeological digs and recreation of weaving studios. The digs at L'Anse Aux Meadows, Newfoundland, have been reported on before, but Brown brings a fresh fascination to them in the context of Gudrid's life. She provides strong descriptive passages of the places she visits and there is one map in the front of the book. It would have been nice, however, to have had some illustrations. I would also like to have known a little more about Brown's own context and interest in this subject.

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