

Title: *Skálholt Map*

Author: Sigurd Stefánsson/Thord Thorláksson

Date: 1590

Description: The Vikings set foot in America just over a millennium ago, but credit for the discovery generally goes to Columbus, who only stumbled upon the New World almost 500 years later. One reason might be that the Norse involvement in North America was brief and unpublished, whereas Columbus' rediscovery led to the European conquest of the Americas. Another is that the Norse discoverers didn't leave behind any maps of the lands they called *Markland*, *Helluland* and *Vinland* (translated as *Flatstone/Slab Land*, *Wood/Forest Land* and *Grapevine/Wine Land*, respectively.).

But if the Vikings didn't map their discoveries, they did relate them in sagas. These later did form the basis for maps, the most famous (and controversial) of which is the *Vinland Map* (*Book III*, #243). Reputedly a 15th century copy of a 13th century original, that map is now in the possession of Yale University.

The *Skálholt Map*, shown here, is less well known, but has the advantage of being proven authentic. The first version was made in 1590 by Sigurd Stefánsson, a teacher in Skálholt, then an important religious and educational center on Iceland. Skálholt was, through eight centuries, one of the most important places in Iceland. From 1056 until 1785, it was one of Iceland's two Episcopal Sees, along with Hólar, making it a cultural and political center. Iceland's first official school, Skálholtsskóli (now Reykjavík Gymnasium, MR), was founded at Skálholt in 1056 to educate clergy. Stefánsson attempted to plot the American locations mentioned in the *Vinland Saga* on a map of the North Atlantic. Stefánsson's original is lost; this copy dates from 1669, and was included in the description of Iceland by Biørn Jonsen of Skarsaa.

The map mixes real, fictional and rumored geography. In its southeast corner, the map shows *Irland* and *Britannia*, and, to the north of both, the *Orcades* [Orkney Islands], *Hetland* [Shetland Islands], *Feroe* [Faroe Islands], *Island* [Iceland] and *Frisland*, a particularly persistent "phantom island".

The northeast part of the map shows the mainland of *Norvegia* [Norway] and to its north *Biarmaland* [the semi-mythical *Bjarmia*, possibly the area of present-day Archangelsk]. There are several old accounts of journeys to *Bjarmaland* and all of them strongly support the theory that the name refers to what we now call the Murmansk. On the top part of the map are situated the wholly fictional lands of *lotunheimar* [Jotunheim, in Norse mythology the home of the giants] and *Riseland* [another land of titans], and attached to it *Gronlandia* [Greenland], its flowing coastline resembling the lobed margins of an oak leaf.

In the *Mare Glaciale* [Ice Sea] in the north is *Narve Oe*, possibly translatable as the Island of Narfi (the father of Nott, the night). Two place names, both on Greenland, are, on the east coast, *Hvitserkr* [white shirt], a glacier mentioned in medieval sources and a handy landmark when sailing west from Iceland, also mentioned in the *Sailing Directions of Henry Hudson*; the more southerly place-name is *Herjolfsnes*, otherwise spelt *Herjolfsnes*; e.g., "The settlement at Herjolfsnes was founded c. 985 by emigrants from Iceland, under the leadership of Erik the Red;" an important farm and church during the old settlement (the ruins are now a popular tourist destination).

Greenland is of course an island, but was considered by the Vikings to be a huge peninsula of a contiguous northern mainland, that continued to America, where are noted *Helleland*, *Markland* and *Skraelingeland* [the latter being the Viking name for the

indigenous population]. Marked vertically on the map's southwestern edge is the name *Promontorium Winlandiae* [Promontory of Vinland].

In a development that would have pleased Stefánsson, the *Skálholt Map* has helped determine the actual location of a Norse site in North America. The map indicates that the northern tip of *Vinland* is on somewhat the same latitude as the southern coast of Ireland (about 51°N). This encouraged the excavations at L'Anse-aux-Meadows on the northern tip of Newfoundland, which in 1960 yielded the first archaeological evidence of Viking presence in America.

In a *Mercator's World* article by Kirsten A. Seaver entitled "Renewing the Quest for Vinland, The Stefánsson, Resen and Thorláksson Maps" (Volume 5, Number 5), this map is discussed and described. The following is a summary of this article.

From the Middle Ages well into the Renaissance, cartographical representations of the Far North reflected the second-hand perceptions of continental Europeans rather than of the people who lived there. An important early exception is the *Anglo-Saxon*, or *Cottonian*, world map (*Book II*, #210), a manuscript map dating from the first half of the 11th century, which shows Iceland. The island is vaguely shaped but properly named and located in the northwestern Atlantic, beyond the quite recognizable British Isles. Paul Harvey and Peter Barber have both noted that while the map is generally in the Roman tradition, several of its details suggest an English origin. Of particular significance is the map's depiction of the northwestern Atlantic regions, which no doubt reflects the reality of early Anglo-Icelandic contact rather than direct influence by the Norse, who in any case did not have a medieval cartographical tradition. It is worth noting, too, that the *Cottonian* map shows little familiarity with the Scandinavian Peninsula or the Baltic region and lacks any indication of either Greenland or North America.

During the ensuing centuries, Iceland cropped up on continental maps along with randomly placed North Atlantic islands and archipelagoes, sometimes under its real name and sometimes vaguely named *Thule* or *Fixlanda*. But Greenland, which the Norse had colonized in the late 10th century, was not cartographically linked to the rest of the Far North until around 1427, with the Danish cartographer Claudius Clavus' dramatic rendition of a vast Greenland arching over Iceland and joining the Eurasian landmass above Norway. Claudius Clavus made no attempt to suggest a Norse acquaintance with North America, however. That was left to the late 16th and early 17th century maps made by the Icelanders Sigurdur Stefansson and Gudbrandur Thorlaksson and the Danish theologian Hans Poulson Resen.

These maps have for some decades enjoyed a certain vogue among people who wish to link them with Yale's *Vinland Map* (*Book III*, #243), most notably R.A. Skelton, by assuming that they represent a tradition begun with much earlier maps, now lost but originally based on direct knowledge of Norse voyages to America. No such cartographical links have ever been satisfactorily demonstrated, and Stefansson himself indicated the relatively recent date of his cartographical sources in his texts to letter Keys **A** and **B**. Under **A**, just above *Skrælinge Land* (Land of the Skrælings), we learn that the *Skrælings*, the Norse name for Greenlandic and North American natives and translatable as "an inferior sort", were those whom the English (presumably Martin Frobisher and John Davis) had reached, and that the *Skrælings* got that name because they have been dried and burnt by either the sun or the cold. Under **B**, it says, *Next to this lies Vinland, called The Good because of its fertile soil and abundance of other useful things. Our fellow countrymen have thought that this ended to the south in the great wild ocean, but I can conclude from the new accounts that either a fjord or a sound separates it from America.*

Modern scholars familiar with the subject know that Stefansson's and the other two maps do not represent transmitted knowledge of either five centuries of Norse tenure in Greenland or early 11th century Norse exploration in America, but instead are speculations based on the same sparse literary sources available to us today and on 16th century cartography. However, after Helge and Anne Stine Ingstad's 1960 discovery of a genuine Norse site from the early 11th century at L'Anse aux Meadows, on a long Newfoundland island promontory reaching straight northward, it again became tempting to read ancient knowledge into Stefansson's *Promontorium Vinlandiae*.

This renewed interest has been accompanied by several wrong assumptions that the maps' delineations and legends constitute the sum of their information and that this information may be related both to the original Norse occupation of the L'Anse aux Meadows site and to the Ingstads' rediscovery of it. Others have been led to believe that, on the contrary, the maps are of such recent date as to be historically worthless.

For one thing, they provide a suitable postscript to Norse exploration in North America because they reveal early Nordic reactions to the European rediscovery of the coasts representing the farthest westward reach of the medieval Norse. These reactions imply awareness of the post-Columbian rules governing exploration and exploitation that primacy of possession was of the essence. They deserve to be examined, therefore, in conjunction with Denmark's long history as a colonial power, to which a West Indian can testify as easily as any Norwegian or Icelander.

Danish hegemony over Norway and its Atlantic colonies began with the 1397 *Kalmar Treaty*, uniting Norway and Sweden with Denmark under Queen Margrethe. While Sweden soon regained independence, Norway remained under Danish rule until 1814, and its Atlantic colonies even longer. Norwegian neglect of its Atlantic colonies had grown worse since the Black Death struck Norway in 1349, and the Kalmar Union exacerbated the situation to such a degree that contact ceased, and Dano-Norwegian officials didn't know that by around 1500, while their backs were turned, the Norse Greenland colony had closed down.

However, early 16th century accounts of the rich resources awaiting Europeans with a stake in North America quickly prompted a Danish focus on Greenland and on the saga reports of early Norse explorations in the rediscovered New World, believed to be connected in the north to a continuous landmass that made Greenland part of the New World as well as of northern Eurasia (see #383 *Gastaldi*). This notion, which the 1590 Stefansson map illustrates quite clearly, was already in the mind of the Danish-born Archbishop Erik Walkendorf of Norway when he planned an expedition to Greenland to reclaim for church and crown the Norse Greenlanders he thought still lived there. He received a papal indulgence in 1514, but the voyage came to nothing because he fell out of favor with King Christian II of Denmark. We can only speculate on what Stefansson's map might have looked like had the voyage been made.

The archbishop's list of the lucrative results he expected from this voyage is our best indication of his economic motive and New World ambitions. Like any self-respecting 16th century European, he listed silver and gold, although neither metal had ever been among the medieval Norse Greenland tithe goods, and he counted on pelts from animals that had never been known to live in Greenland. His list therefore suggests that he saw a reconnection with Norse Greenland as a first step toward obtaining a share of New World resources. Reclaiming a part of North America by pleading prior Norse discovery would depend on finding the Norse descendants in

Greenland and on learning from them exactly where *Helluland*, *Markland*, and *Vinland* were located.

First of all, however, Walkenciof had to work out the lost route to Greenland by following sailing directions the medieval Norse had used when they headed west from the Snæfell Peninsula in Iceland and looked for a glacier-clad mountain called *Hvitserkr* [white shift or shirt] serving as a marker on the east Greenland coast. The information the archbishop collected for his enterprise, therefore, contained such surviving directions, along with a version of the description of Greenland the Norwegian priest Ivar Bardarson had produced after his return to Norway in 1364, following 23 years in Greenland as the Gardar bishop's *officialis* in the Eastern Settlement. Alas, even the locations of the Eastern Settlement and the smaller Western Settlement (both on the southwest coast despite their names) were lost by 1514.

The Stefansson, Resen, and Thorlaksson maps show similar attempts to retrace the ancient routes to Greenland and North America and to pin down the location of the Norse Greenland settlements, still thought to exist, and of the New World sites mentioned in the *Vinland Sagas*, believed to lie somewhere along the as yet imperfectly surveyed northeastern coast of America.

When the Danish ethnographer and archaeologist K.J.V. Steenstrup scrutinized the Stefansson, Resen, and Thorlaksson maps in 1886, in conjunction with renewed Danish attempts to locate and study Norse Greenland farm ruins, his work was nourished by pure scholarly curiosity. Although strong public interest in defining the locations mentioned in the *Vinland Sagas* still existed in the late 19th century, it had a romantic rather than a mercenary focus. The mapping of the east coast of North America had long since lost its mystery.

Because the learned Icelander Sigurdur Stefansson served as the head of the Cathedral School of Skálholt See (in southern Iceland) toward the end of the 16th century, his map is often referred to as the *Skálholt Map*. Modern scholarly opinion holds that the original was drawn around 1590, probably by Stefansson himself, and not in 1570 as written on a later copy of the map. Its creation was most likely prompted by preoccupations similar to those that spawned King Fredrik II of Denmark's unsuccessful attempts (1568-1581) to reconnect with Greenland. Steenstrup ascribed the reason for the expeditions' failure to their attempt to reach land along the ice-blocked east coast an attempt that certainly shows how faded practical knowledge of Greenland sailings had become by the late 16th century.

Because the original map has long been lost, it cannot be examined for its handwriting or for delineations and nomenclature that differ from the earliest extant version, a manuscript copy made in 1669 by the Icelandic bishop Thordur Thorlaksson (1637-1697) and reproduced in facsimile in 1886. Bishop Thordur also preserved Stefansson's own explications to the letter keys on the map. An engraved version of the 1669 copy was used by the historian Thormodus Torfæus in his 1706 *Gronlanclia Antigua*. Peter C. Hogg of the British Library also has identified four later manuscript copies of the Stefansson map, made between 1669 and 1703 and similarly kept in the Manuscript Department of the Royal Library in Copenhagen, except for the 1703 version, which is part of the Arnarnagnæan Collections in Copenhagen. They vary in exactness, but each one includes, counterclockwise, Greenland, *Helluland*, *Markland*, *Skrælingaland*, and *Promontorium Vinlandiae*, in that order. These last four names mean "Slab Land," "Forest Land," "Land of the Skrælings," and the "Wine Land Peninsula."

The map's cartographic delineations, even of regions fairly close to home, are as unrealistic as some of its nomenclature. In the west, a continuous coastline joins Greenland to the American continent, as on continental maps of the same period. In the northeast, the Greenland coastline runs along a continuation of the North American landmass to encompass *Riseland* [Land of Trolls] and *Jotunheimar* [Home of Mountain Giants]. While the latter is in fact the name of a mountainous region in southern Norway, Stefansson's *Jotunheimar* is far from Norway and is linked (by Stefansson's own text to letter Key E, which says that this is supposedly where Geirrodd and Gudmund lived) to Saxo Grammaticus, whose *Danish Chronicle* (1204), recounting Denmark's heroic past, had been printed in 1514 and again in 1534.

Close to the *Jotunheimar* coastline lies an invented island, *Narveoe*. Well south of this we find Iceland, and to the south of this again, *Frisland* by then firmly cemented in North Atlantic cartography thanks to the "medieval" map Nicolò Zeno had made and published in Venice in 1558. The Zeno map's fake nature would not be conclusively demonstrated until 1886, however, when Oscar Brenner discovered the original *Carta Marina* by Olaus Magnus (Venice, 1539, #366), with which the Zeno map turned out to have a surprising amount in common. This 1886 watershed is often overlooked in interpreting earlier commentary on the cartography of the Far North, including Steenstrup's sensible observations. The line marked **H**. says clearly that nothing is known of the island *Frisland* and that the *Germani* (Icelanders, Northmen) say the Venetians invented it.

It is easy to trace the Stefansson map's two place-names on Greenland, *Heriølfssnes* and *Huidserk*. *Heriølfssnes*, evidently the first port-of-call in Greenland for medieval sailors, is familiar from the sagas as well as from early Norse sailing directions. *Huidserk/Hvitserkr* is known from the sailing directions attached to an early 16th century version of Ivar Bardarson's *Description of Greenland* and clearly refers to a Greenland glacier that voyagers crossing the Denmark Strait from Iceland must look for. Olaus Magnus had also played up *Huidserk* in his *Carta Marina*, showing it as an island between Iceland and Greenland, and in his *Historia de Genti bus Septentrionalibus* (Rome, 1559), where he wrote about it in such exciting detail that a well-read Icelander like Stefansson is not likely to have ignored it.

But did Stefansson simply invent his map on the basis of these inspirations? The question has occupied a number of scholars, including Peter Hogg. Hogg hazards the guess that the progenitor to the Stefansson map may have been a chart prepared for Archbishop Walkendorf of Norway in connection with his planned voyage to Greenland. Hogg has also shown a number of similarities between Stefansson's map and the *Resen* map of 1605 that suggest a common ancestor for these two maps, rather than a sequence in which the *Resen* map borrowed directly from the Stefansson map.

This map was taken from the Kongelige Bibliothek, the Danish Royal Library. The vignette, in Latin, refers to the original map by Siurdus Stephanus (Sigurd Stefánsson). The numbers on the map match the legends (**A** to **H**) next to the map, also in Latin.

Location: Kongelige Bibliothek, the Danish Royal Library.

Size: 25.8 x 21 cm

References:

Biørn Jonsen of Skarsaa, *Description of Greenland and the Skálholt Map*, Det Kongelige Bibliotek.

Seaver, K.A., "Renewing the Quest for Vinland, The Stefánsson, Resen and Thorláksson Maps", *Mercator's World*, Volume 5, Number 5, Sept/Oct. 2000, pp. 43-49.

Seaver, K.A., *Maps, Myths and Men*, pp. 56-59.

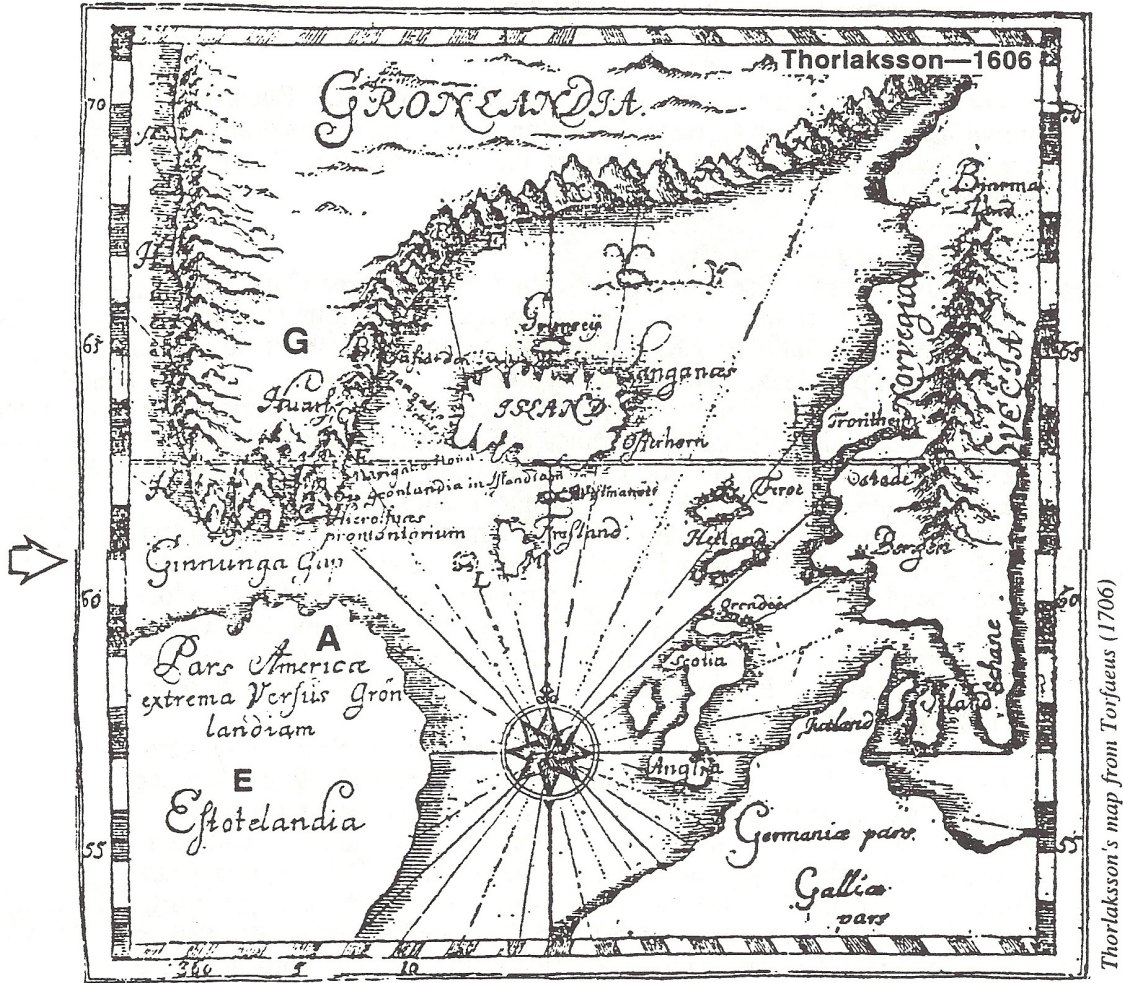




This description of Greenland from 1669 by Biørn Jonsen of Skarsaa on Iceland is primarily known for its hand written maps, of which the so-called Skálholt Map is the most famous. An addendum in Latin gives a description of Greenland by Theodor Thorlacius. A copy was made in 1690 by Thordur Thorlaksson (also known by his Latinized name, Thorlacius).

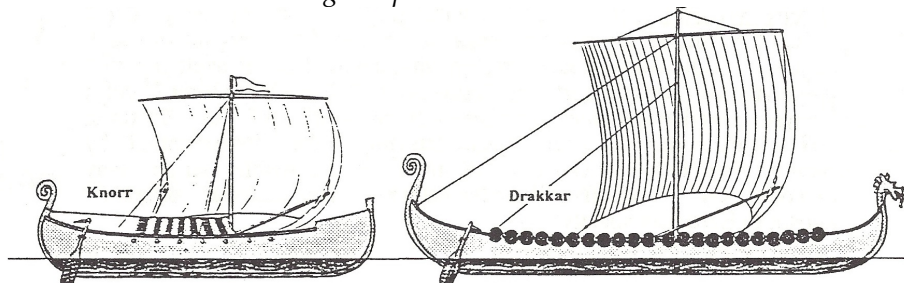


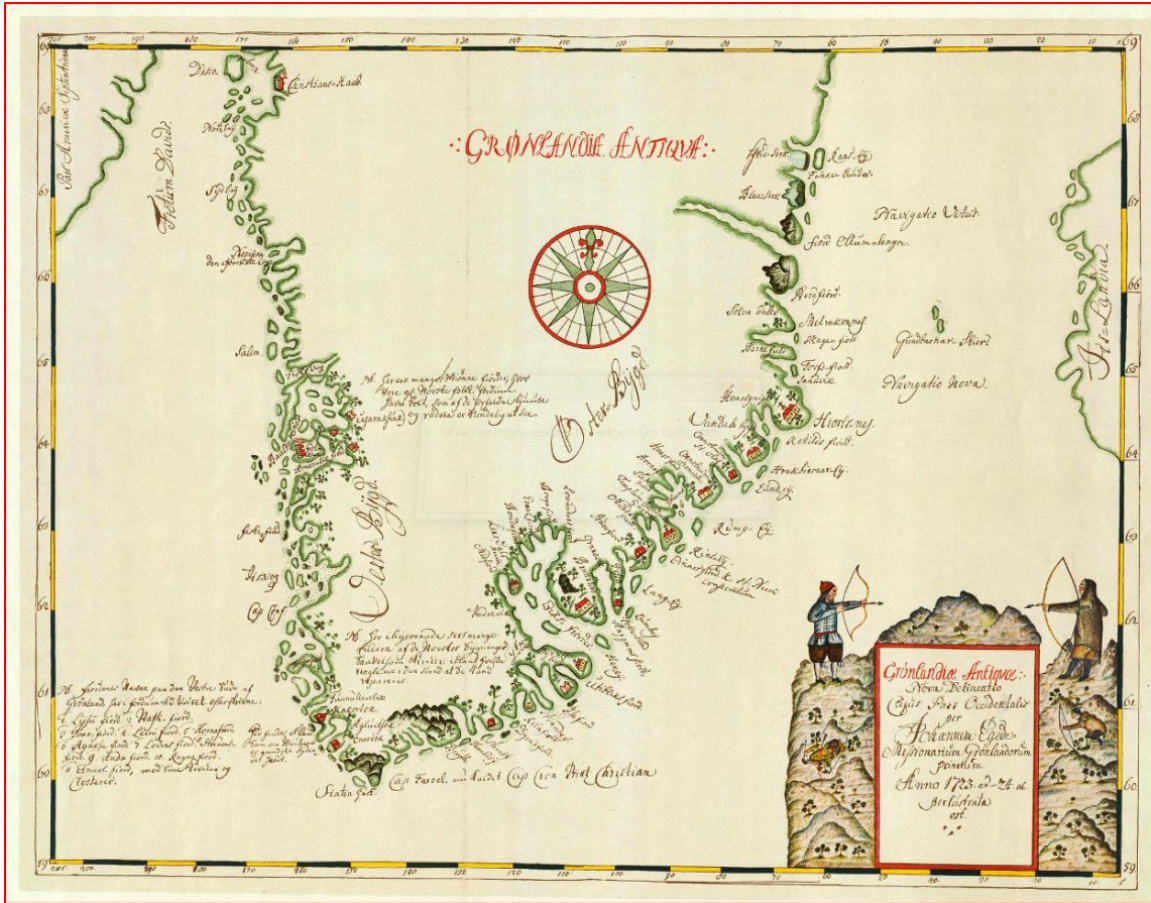
This map displays "America Pars" and "Terra Florida" along with the Norse settlements of Greenland [Gronlandia], Helleland, Resaland, Iceland [Island], the Western Settlement.



Ginnunga Gap [Hudson Strait]

Bishop Thorlaksson's 1606 map of the Atlantic (above) shows *Pars Americae extrema Versus Gronlandiam* [The closest American province near Greenland]. Presumably, he made this notation in order to differentiate Labrador (A) and *Eftotelandia* (E) — lands which earlier geographers often referred to as *Gronelandia* — from the Arctic isle of Greenland (G). The waterway between Labrador and the Arctic isle was known to Norwegians as the *Ginnunga Gap* centuries before Erik The Red established a settlement on Greenland. This waterway was once thought to lead directly north of Norway to the North Pole. And it does head due north by compass bearings to the Magnetic North Pole at Hudson Bay. By geographic coordinates, the direction of sailing from Iceland to the *Ginnunga Gap* was almost due west.





Hans Egede drafted this map of Greenland: Grønlandiæ Antiqua, 1723, the two people show an Inuit and a Norse from an old Inuit myth