

***HANS  
EGEDE***



***A DESCRIPTION  
OF GREENLAND***

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# HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION.

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THE regions in the neighbourhood of the North Pole have lately become the objects of increased curiosity; and among these regions Greenland has attracted a more than usual interest. This country was first peopled by a colony from Iceland, which occupied both the Western and Eastern parts of the Island. The first settlers in the West appear to have been destroyed by the natives, who are denominated Skrellings; and though a communication was preserved for several centuries between the Eastern coast of Greenland and some parts of the Danish territory, yet it was interrupted about the close of the fourteenth century by accumulated masses of ice, which formed an impenetrable barrier of considerable extent around the shore; and though various attempts have been made, at different times, to explore a passage through this frozen rampart, yet there is no definite account of any attempt of this kind which has

hitherto been successful. May we hope that the execution of this project, which is prompted, not only by curiosity but by philanthropy, is reserved for the present era, and that it will be finally accomplished by the nautical skill and enterprise of this country!

As we possess indubitable evidence that a considerable extent of this coast was formerly occupied by a flourishing colony, and that it contained numerous villages, with a bishop's see, we cannot but be anxious to know what has been the fate of so many human beings, so long cut off from all intercourse with the more civilized world. Were they destroyed by an invasion of the natives, like their countrymen on the Western coast? or have they perished by the inclemency of the climate, and the sterility of the soil? or do they still subsist? If they subsist, it must greatly interest our curiosity to learn in what manner they have vanquished the difficulties with which they have had to contend, both from the climate and the soil, and the total privation of all articles of European manufacture. In the novel circumstances in which they have been placed, have the present race advanced or declined in the degree of culture which their forefathers possessed? What proficiency have they made? or what deterioration have they undergone? Have they remained nearly stationary at the point of civilized existence at which their ancestors were placed four centuries ago? or have they entirely degenerated into a savage race, and preserved no memory nor vestige of their original extraction from, and subsequent communication with, the continent of civilized Europe? These are certainly points of interesting research; and to

which we cannot well be indifferent as Christians, or, indeed, as human beings.

In the mean time, though we cannot yet supply any particulars respecting the present state of the Eastern coast of Greenland, we think that the readers of this new edition of Egede will not be displeased with us for furnishing them with all the information which remains, respecting its past state, as well as with some historical details, which will render the present volume more complete than it would otherwise have been.

Greenland was first discovered by Eric, surnamed Rufus, or the Red, in the year 981 or 982[1]. This chieftain was of Norwegian extraction. His father had fled from Norway, and taken refuge in Iceland, in order to avoid the vengeance which menaced him, on account of a murder which he had perpetrated in his native land. Eric appears to have committed in Iceland a crime similar to that for which his father had fled from Norway. In endeavouring to escape the pursuit of justice, Eric accidentally discovered the coast which is the present object of our inquiry. He took his departure from Iceland at the port of Snæfellzness, which is situate in a Western promontory of that island. He arrived in the vicinity of a mountain called Midjokul[2]; or, as it is denominated by others, Miklajokul. Peyrere interprets this, "*le grand glaçon*," the great mountain of ice. Subsequent navigators gave it the name of Bloeserken, or Blue Smock, and others of Huidserken, or White Smock, according to the variations in the hue of the ice in different aspects and at different periods of the year.

Eric passed the first winter after his departure from Iceland in an island which he called after his own name, Ericscun, and which Torfæus places in the midst of the cultivated Eastern district. In the following spring he entered one of the bays of Eastern Greenland, to which he gave the name of Ericsfiord; and where he formed his first settlement, which he denominated Brattahlis. In the summer of the same year he explored parts of the more Western district, and gave names to many of the places which he visited[3]. He passed the following winter in the island of Ericscun; and in the succeeding summer he passed over to the main land, and proceeded along the Northern coast till he reached an immense rock, which he called Sneefiell, or the Rock of Snow. At this point he gave the name of Ravensfiord to another bay, on account of the multitudes of that ill-omened bird with which this spot abounds. Other parts of the coast derived their appellations from the names of the different adventurers who accompanied Eric in this expedition, as, Hergulfsness, Ketillsfiord, Solvadal, Einarsfiord, &c[4].

In the following summer Eric, having conciliated the forgiveness, or purchased the forbearance, of his enemies in Iceland, returned to that country to procure an additional supply of inhabitants for his new settlement. In order to render his proposals more attractive, he named the country for which he was endeavouring to provide colonists, Greenland, as if, compared with the rugged sterility of their native Iceland, it was a region of verdure and delight. He described it as abounding in cattle, and as rich in every species of game and fish. And as such delusive



representations, when assisted by the vivid eloquence of enthusiasm, or the unhesitating assurance of effrontery, seldom fail of their effect, Eric returned to his recent acquisition with numerous ships, and a large body of settlers, from Iceland.

In less than twenty years after Eric the Red had begun to colonize Greenland, his son Leiff, who had made a voyage into Norway, renounced his Pagan errors, and received the baptismal rite. His conversion was owing to the example and the admonitions of King Olave Tryggwine, or Trugguerus[5], who had himself recently embraced the same doctrine, and had been very successful in causing it to be diffused throughout his dominions.

Leiff, having passed the winter at the court of the King of Norway, returned to Greenland, in company with a priest and some other missionaries, whom the King had commissioned to instruct Eric, and the other settlers, in the faith which Leiff had embraced. On their voyage to Greenland they met some mariners, who were floating upon a wreck in the open sea. These they took on board, and conveyed to the new settlement. Eric, at first, incensed with his son for having laid open to strangers the route to the new-discovered country, turned a deaf ear to his Christian admonitions. But the earnestness of the son, seconded by the instruction of the missionaries, at last prevailed over the insensibility of the father, who submitted to the rite of baptism, when the other Greenlanders followed his example.

The Christian doctrine, which had been thus introduced, was so much approved, and so generally received, that

churches were established in twelve different parts of East Greenland, and in four of the Western district. Torfæus makes the year 1000 the era of the conversion of the Greenland colonists to the Christian faith. This historian of ancient Greenland has also preserved a list of its bishops, from the year 1021 to 1406, after which period no mention is made of any subsequent episcopal appointments; and indeed the intercourse between Greenland and the native region of the first settlers appears to have been previously discontinued.

A Danish Chronicle, which M. Peyrere had consulted, refers the discovery of Greenland to a much earlier date than that which has been given upon the authority of Torfæus; and the earlier date of 770 is more likely to be true, if, as M. Peyrere mentions, there is a bull of Pope Gregory IV, in 835, relative to the propagation of the Christian faith in the North of Europe, in which Iceland and Greenland are particularly mentioned.

The Danish Chronicle, to which Peyrere appeals, states, that the Kings of Denmark, having been converted to Christianity during the empire of Louis le Debonaire, Greenland had become an object of general attention at this period.

The Danish Chronicle relates, that the first settlers in Greenland were succeeded by a numerous posterity, who penetrated farther into the country, and discovered, among the rocky heights and icy mountains, some fertile spots, which were more auspicious to pasturage and cultivation. They followed the division of Greenland which Eric had

established, and called the two settlements in the East and the West, Osterbygdt and Westerbygdt.

In the Eastern district the Greenlanders erected a town, to which they gave the name of Garde, where, according to Peyrere, who refers to the Chronicle, the Norwegians established a sort of emporium for the deposit and sale of their merchandize. The town of Garde became also the residence of their bishops; and the church of St. Nicholas, the patron of sailors, which was built in the same town, became the cathedral church of the Greenlanders.

As the temporal jurisdiction in Greenland was subject to the kings of Norway, so the spiritual power of the bishops was subordinate to that of the archbishops of Drontheim; and the bishops of Greenland are said frequently to have passed over to Norway, in order to consult their ecclesiastical superior.

The Danish Chronicle, which was one of the early documents upon which Peyrere founded his narrative, relates, that an insurrection broke out in Greenland, in 1256, when the inhabitants refused any longer to submit to the tributary exactions of Magnus, King of Norway. On this occasion, Eric, King of Denmark, at the request of Magnus, who had married his niece, equipped a naval armament in order to quell the rebels, and restore the authority of his nephew. The Greenland insurgents no sooner beheld the flag of the Danish fleet approaching their coast than they were struck with a panic, and sued for peace.

This peace was ratified in the year 1261. Angrim Jonas, who records the above-mentioned transaction, gives the names of the three principal inhabitants of Greenland, who

signed the treaty in Norway. "Declarantes," says Angrim, as quoted by Peyrere, "*suis factum auspiciis ut Groenlandi perpetuum tributum Norveguo denuo jurassent.*" Under their auspices the Greenlanders had been again brought to swear to pay a perpetual tribute to the Norwegian.

In composing his account of ancient Greenland, Peyrere derived his principal information from an Icelandic and a Danish Chronicle. The first was the production of Snorro Sturleson, who was a native of Iceland, and chief justiciary of that island in 1215. We are also indebted to him for the compilation of the Edda.

In the Icelandic Chronicle above-mentioned, which appears to be a tissue of different narratives, one of the chapters is entitled, a Description of Greenland, which Peyrere has copied into his account as literally as the difference of languages would admit. There is a similar description in Torfæus (p. 42, &c.), with particular but unimportant variations. Both the accounts are founded on the authority of Ivar Bert or Ivar Bevius, who had, for several years, been steward or maitre d'hotel to the Bishop of Garde, and was one of the persons who had been selected by the governor to expel the Skrellings from the Western province of Greenland or Westerbygd, which they had invaded and depopulated.

Perhaps it will be best to insert this description of Eastern Greenland, which was the most flourishing settlement of the Norwegians in this country, as it is found in the narrative of Peyrere, and in the history of Torfæus. If the skill, the philanthropy, and the enterprize of some English navigators should ever obtain an access to this long lost settlement,

and the passage should again become as safe and practicable as it was in ancient times, it will be an interesting research to compare the present state of this district with the early accounts.

The most Eastern town in Greenland, says Ivar Bert, as exhibited in the French version of Peyrere, is called Skagefiord[6], where is an uninhabitable rock, and farther out in the sea is a shoal, which prevents ships from entering the bay, except at high water, and it is at this time, or during a violent storm, that numbers of whales and of other fish enter the bay and are caught in abundance.

As you proceed a little higher towards the East, there is a port called Funkabadir, from the name of a page or missionary of St. Olave, King of Norway, who, with several other persons, suffered shipwreck at that spot[7].

In a still higher latitude, and close to the mountains of ice, or, as Torfæus says, "*propius Alpes*," is an island, named Roansen or Ranseya[8], which, in early times, appears to have been celebrated for the quantity of animals, particularly of white bears, which it furnished for the chase. Torfæus says, that these white bears were not to be hunted without leave of the bishop. Beyond this spot the land and ocean are said to present nothing but an accumulation of snow and ice.

To the West of Herjolfsness is Kindilfiord, or, as Peyrere spells it, Hindelfiord, which is described as a cultivated and well peopled bay. Upon the right, as you enter the bay, there is a church, called Krokskirk or Korskirk, with a monastery consecrated to St. Olave and to St. Augustin, the domain of which extends to Petersvic, where there are numerous

habitations. It also possesses the territory on the opposite side of the bay.

Next to Kindilfiord is Rumpesinfiord, or Rumpeyarfiord[9], in an interior recess of which there is a convent, dedicated to St. Olave, which is proprietary of the whole district to the shore of the bay. This bay contains many holms or little islands, the property of which the monastery divides with the episcopal see. Numerous hot springs are found in these islands, of which both Peyrere and Torfæus say, that they are so hot as to be inaccessible during the winter, but that in summer the temperature is so much reduced, that they become the resort of many persons in a diversity of maladies.

Next to Rumpesinfiord, is Einarsfiord, and between them is a large mansion, named *Fos*, fit for a king or “regi competens” in the language of Torfæus[10]. Here is also a large church dedicated to St. Nicholas. As you enter Lunesfiord, to the left, there is a little promontory called Klining; and beyond it an arm of the sea, denominated Grantvich. Farther in the interior is a house[11], named Daller, which belongs to the bishop’s see. The cathedral is at the end of the bay. Here is a large wood, in which cattle are left to browse.

The whole of Lunesfiord, with the large island which is called Linseya by Torfæus, Reyatsen by Peyrere, is appropriated to the cathedral. This part abounds with reindeer, which are hunted with the consent of the bishop. The island of Reyatsen contains a species of stone or marble, out of which they cut bowls, jugs, and different kinds of

culinary vessels, which possess the property of resisting the fire.

More to the West is an island named Langent, where there are eight farms[12]. In the vicinity is Eric'sfiord; and at the entrance of this arm of the sea there is an island called Herrieven, or the Harbour of the Lord, half of which belongs to the bishop's see, and the other half to the church, which is called Diurnes, which is seen on entering Eric'sfiord[13].

The country, says Peyrere, copying the Icelandic Chronicle, is unpeopled and desert between the Osterbygd and Westerbygd; and upon the borders of this desert there is a church, called Strosnes, which was formerly the metropolitan see, and the residence of the bishops of Greenland. The Westerbygd is represented as occupied by the Skrellings[14]. This part of the country is described as possessing horses, oxen, sheep, goats, and other animals, but no human beings, either Christian or Pagan.

Such is the account which is given of the ancient state of Greenland by Ivar Bert, the author of the Chronicle, which is mentioned above, and in which, if there be some inaccurate representation, there is probably more truth.

Peyrere remarks, that the Icelandic Chronicle is incorrect in describing the church of Strosnes as the episcopal see, since that honour always belonged to the town of Garde. The Danish Chronicle, whilst regretting the interruption of the communication with Greenland, assures us, that, if the episcopal residence of Garde[15] were still standing and accessible, we should find a great number of documents for a complete and authentic history of Greenland.

The Iceland Chronicle, according to Peyrere, gives a varying and inconsistent account of the fertility of Greenland. In one part it says, that the country furnishes the best corn which is to be found in any part of the world; and that the oaks are of such vast bulk, and such stately growth, that they produce acorns as large as apples. But in another passage the same Chronicle affirms, that no seed of any kind, which is sown in Greenland, will grow on account of the cold; and that the inhabitants are unacquainted with the use of bread. The latter part of this account harmonizes with that of the Danish Chronicle, which affirms, that when the country was first discovered by Eric the Red, the sterility of the soil obliged him to subsist entirely upon fish.

But in the same Danish Chronicle, which has just been mentioned, we find it asserted, that, after the death of Eric, his successors, who penetrated farther into the country, discovered some fertile spots between the mountains, and fit either for pasture or tillage. The Icelandic Chronicle contradicts itself when it says, that nothing will grow in Greenland owing to the intensity of the cold. Peyrere also remarks, that that part of Greenland, which was peopled by the Norwegians, is in the same latitude as Upland, which is the most fertile province in Sweden, and produces fine crops of grain. And the Icelandic Chronicle itself says, in another place, that the cold in Greenland is not so great as in Norway; and very good corn is grown in that country.

Greenland, says Peyrere, like other countries, which are composed of plains and mountains, exhibits great diversities of soil, and though the close approximation to the farthest North, in many situations, destroys the process of



vegetation, yet there appear to be localities, which are by no means destitute of fertility. There are pastures possessing excellent herbage; and amongst the animals, which contribute to the subsistence of man, or to other uses, we find[16] sheep, oxen, horses, rein deer, stags, and hares; and of the more savage animals, we find wolves, foxes, and an abundance of white and black bears. The Icelandic Chronicle mentions beavers and martens.

Peyrere adds[17], that grey and white falcons abound more here than in any other part of the world. The superior excellence of these birds caused them to be formerly sent to the kings of Denmark, who made presents of them to the kings and princes in the neighbouring countries, when falconry constituted one of the amusements of the great.

The above-mentioned author, who wrote in the middle of the seventeenth century[18], says, that in Greenland nature produces a singular phenomenon, which is described as a sort of miracle in the Icelandic Chronicle. This phenomenon is no other than what is commonly called the *Northern Lights*. These lights are mentioned as appearing more particularly about the time of the new moon; and illuminating the whole country, as much as if the moon were at the full. "The light is more bright," says Peyrere, "in proportion as the night is more dark."

The Danish Chronicle, which is quoted by Peyrere, relates, that in the year 1271 a violent hurricane from the North East drove a vast accumulation of ice upon the coast of Iceland, which was covered with so many bears and so much wood that it led to the supposition, that the territory of Greenland was extended more to the North East than had

been hitherto imagined. This circumstance tempted some Northern sailors to attempt the discovery, but they found nothing but ice. The kings of Norway and Denmark had long before this fitted out ships for the same purpose, but without any more success than the Icelanders had experienced. The principal incitement to these voyages was a received opinion, or traditionary report, that this country contained numerous veins of gold, of silver, and precious stones.

The Danish Chronicle pretends, that some adventurous merchants formerly amassed a large treasure by these expeditions. But regions of silver and gold have always been amongst the favourite illusions of mankind; and the imagination has revelled in visionary mines of the precious metals, not only in the South but in the North; and both at the Equator and the Pole.

In the time of St. Olave, King of Norway, some sailors from Friesland, incited by the thirst of gold, are said to have undertaken a voyage to the North Eastern extremity of Greenland; but, instead of returning home with mountains of wealth, they were happy to escape the fury of the winds on this rocky coast, in any miserable asylum which they could find.

The Danish Chronicle, which is a mixture of truth and fable, adds, that the Frieslanders, having made a landing upon the coast, discovered some wretched cabins just rising above the earth, around which lay heaps of gold and silver ore. Each of the sailors helped himself to as much as he could carry away. But, when they were retreating to the shore, in order to re-embark with their treasure, they saw

some human forms, as ugly as devils, issuing out of their earthen huts, armed with bows and arrows, and accompanied with dogs of vast size. Before all the sailors could reach the shore some of them were seized by these frightful archers, who tore them limb from limb within sight of their companions. The Danish Chronicle adds, that this region is so rich that it is peopled only by devils.

Peyrere tells us, that one of the chapters in the Icelandic Chronicle describes the ancient route between Norway and Greenland, before the navigation was rendered impracticable by the descent of accumulated mountains of ice from a more remote point of the North. But what is mentioned concerning this route contains nothing very definite or satisfactory.

The above-mentioned Icelandic Chronicle has another chapter on the affairs of Greenland, transcribed from an old book entitled *Speculum Regale*. This chapter describes some marine monsters of enormous dimensions, which were formerly seen upon the coast of Greenland. The Norwegians called the first of these prodigies Haffstramb; and speak of it as showing itself breast high above the waves. It resembled the human form in the neck, head, visage, nose, and mouth, except that the head was more than usually elevated, and terminating in a point. It had wide shoulders, at the end of which were two stumps of arms, without any hands. The body tapered downwards, but it was never visible below the middle. It had a frozen look. The emersion of this phantasm above the waves was the signal of a hurricane.

The second monster received the appellation of Marguguer. It resembled the female form as far as the