

# Far Other Worlds and Other Seas: The Context of Claims for Pre-Columbian European Contact with North America

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The Mind, that Ocean where each kind  
Does streight its own resemblance find;  
Yet it creates, transcending these,  
Far other Worlds, and other Seas...

(Andrew Marvell, *The Garden* [ca. 1650], ll.43-46)

## INTRODUCTION

AT 2 A.M. ON FRIDAY, OCTOBER 12, 1492, Rodrigo de Triana, the forward lookout of the *Pinta*, cried "Tierra! Tierra!" as a Caribbean moon faintly illuminated a distant spit of land. That, at least, is one version of what was perhaps the most fateful moment of recorded history.<sup>1</sup> The events that followed set in motion an inexorable process of European expansion into the Americas and, for human populations on both sides of the Atlantic, the world could never again be quite the same. Five hundred years further down a road signposted most prominently for Native Americans by cross-cultural misunderstanding, racism, religious bigotry, and tragedy on a continental scale, the recent quincentennial commemoration of the voyage of Christopher Columbus was an unalloyed celebration only for the historically-challenged.

The quincentenary brought with it a deluge of articles and books deconstructing European accounts of the conquest of the Americas and European encounters with "otherness." Some authors indulged themselves in an orgy of political correctness which contrasted "a largely virtuous pre-Columbian America and a Renaissance Europe bereft of redeeming features" (Elliott 1993:37). Colum-



bus was either vilified as a genocidal maniac (Sale 1990; Stannard 1992) or, as in the splendid National Gallery of Art exhibition in Washington, D.C., "Circa 1492. Art in the Age of Exploration," simply ignored as too controversial a figure. Two multi-million dollar epic films on the life of the Genoese navigator drew tiny audiences. As one historian wryly commented, "Columbus was mugged on the way to his own party" (Maxwell 1993:38). In downplaying the figure of Columbus, however, some of the works spawned by the quincentenary served at least one useful purpose, a contrasting emphasis that the "discovery" was not an isolated event brought about by the mania of one individual but the product of a long, if sometimes broken, tradition of Mediterranean and European exploration and speculation. In short, historical processes took centre stage.

Despite the ambiguities of the recent quincentennial, popular fascination with the history of European exploration of the Atlantic remains strong. And there is an especially vigorous interest in claims that other individuals or groups from the Old World reached these shores before Columbus. On principle, all such hypotheses deserve some modicum of consideration but a form of historical triage can quickly sort out the fantastic from the potentially credible. The former, the fantastic, are easily recognizable as the work of those who, in a protracted fit of latter-day hyper-diffusionism and latent or blatant racism, wish to derive most, if not all, important cultural features of the New World from the Old.

It is not my purpose here to evaluate in detail each and every claim for pre-Columbian contact. That task has been adequately dealt with by others who demonstrate that, with the exception of the ephemeral Norse settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows, all of the currently associated evidence is the product of misunderstanding, misguided fantasy or outright forgery.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I wish to focus on the broader picture of those historical processes which eventually made possible the achievements of Leif Eiriksson, Christopher Columbus, and John Cabot. These processes originated in different geographical areas — north-western Europe and the Mediterranean. They were of greatly differing duration and had vastly disparate results. A fuller understanding of these historical processes explains not only why the earliest known instances of European contact with the New World were broadly predictable but also why other claims for pre-Columbian contact, be they European or African, are highly improbable.

#### THE EARLY MEDITERRANEAN: PHOENICIANS & PHILOSOPHERS

Venient annis, saecula seris  
Quibus Oceanus vincula rerum  
Laxit, et ingens pateat tellus,  
Tethysque novos detegat orbes,  
Nec sit terris ultima Thule.

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Eventually, there will come a time  
When Oceanus will loosen the chain of things,  
And a vast continent will lie revealed,  
When Tethys will disclose new worlds  
And Thule will no more be the farthest of lands.  
(Seneca, *Medea*, Act III: 374-5)

It is seldom appreciated that the roots of Atlantic exploration reach far back into antiquity. Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c.4 B.C.—A.D. 65), a native of Cordoba in Roman Spain, is known to us as a philosopher, tragedian, and tutor to the notorious Nero, not as a geographer. Despite this, his vision of a vast continent beyond the Atlantic, a world unknown to Europeans, is perhaps the most frequently quoted passage of all his writings. But, behind Seneca's vision there already stood some five centuries of classical belief in the sphericity of the Earth and speculation about what lay beyond the Atlantic. In addition, Phoenicians and Carthaginians had begun the first exploration of the Atlantic seaboard and the islands off the west coast of Africa.

The Phoenicians, aptly described as "the first merchant venturers," were a major force in extending Mediterranean geographical knowledge (Culican 1961). From Tyre and Sidon on the Levantine coast, they began to establish trading colonies as early as the twelfth century B.C., first in Cyprus, later in Sardinia, Sicily, Spain (Cadiz) and North Africa (Carthage). Such was their reputation as seamen that, at the end of the seventh century B.C., the XXVI Dynasty pharaoh of Egypt, Necho II (610—595 B.C.), commissioned several Phoenician ships to sail south from the Red Sea, circumnavigate "Libya" (i.e. Africa) in a clockwise direction and return through the Pillars of Hercules (the Straits of Gibraltar). Upon arrival back in Egypt two years later, the Phoenicians reported that, at one stage of the voyage while sailing west, the sun had stood to the right, that is to the north, a phenomenon unknown in the Mediterranean world. For this reason, the fifth century Greek historian, Herodotus (IV.2), recorded their story with scepticism, not recognizing that this solar observation was proof that the Phoenicians had reached and passed the equator. Shortly after this extraordinary voyage, ships from the Phoenician colony at Carthage, near modern Tunis, began to probe beyond the Pillars of Hercules along the western seaboard of Africa and Europe.

Ancient authorities make it clear that the Atlantic was something of a Phoenician preserve. Sailing south from the Pillars of Hercules gave them access to West African sources of gold, silver, and ivory, and such exotic fauna as apes and peacocks. Trading colonies were established along the West African coast at least as far south as the Cape Verde Islands by the mid-fifth century B.C. Carthaginian admiral, Hanno the Magonid. Perhaps more by accident than design, the offshore islands of the Canaries and Madeira were also discovered during this period of Carthaginian exploration.

Sailing north from the Pillars of Hercules brought the Phoenicians to the Kassiterides or "Tin Isles" though precisely where these were located remains uncertain. In the late fourth century B.C., according to Pliny the Elder (Book IV), Pytheas, a merchant from the Greek colony at Marseilles, sailed into the North Atlantic. It is likely that, initially, he was following routes established by the Phoenicians but, in the end, he probed much further afield. Six days north of Britain and one day's voyage from the "frozen ocean," Pytheas arrived at the island of Ultima Thule whose inhabitants subsisted on local grain, roots, fruit and honey. Although the Pytheas story was later doubted by the first century A.D. geographer, Strabo, references to the midnight sun in summer, the disappearance of the sun in winter, and "sea-lung," an unnavigable conglutination of air, water and earth, which could hardly be anything other than a combination of fog and pack ice, speak for its essential veracity. The identification of Ultima Thule remains uncertain. Iceland must be eliminated since it was not settled until the late first millennium A.D. but the Faroes, Shetlands, or somewhere along the west coast of Norway are all possibilities (McGhee 1991:20).

By the late sixth century B.C., the Greek mathematician and geometer, Pythagoras, had established that the world was a sphere, thus explaining such phenomena as the curved shadow cast on the moon by Earth during lunar eclipses and the way in which distant ships disappeared incrementally below the horizon. The earlier Greek concept of a flat earth comprising three relatively small continents grouped around the Mediterranean had to be abandoned in favour of a globe with a dramatically increased surface area. Into this new space, Plato (427-347 B.C.), in his dialogues *Timaeus* and *Critias*, projected his lost world of Atlantis,

an island in the mouth of the sea in the passage of those straits, called the Pillars of Hercules... larger than Libya and Asia, from which there was an easy passage over to other islands and from those islands to that continent which is out of that region.

Named after Atlas, son of Poseidon, Atlantis was a fiction invented for philosophical purposes although the concept perhaps owed something to a knowledge of Carthaginian exploration beyond the Pillars of Hercules as well as oral tradition about the cataclysmic destruction of the volcanic Mediterranean island of Thera-Santorini in the late second millennium B.C. Certainly, Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), philosopher and tutor of Alexander the Great, had heard of many islands in the Atlantic and the Carthaginian colonization of a land "many days' journey from the Pillars of Hercules." Aristotle (*De Caelo [On the Heavens]*, 298a) further believed that sailing west into the Atlantic would eventually bring one to India for, he asserted, "...there is continuity between the parts about the Pillars of Hercules and the parts about India and that in this way the ocean is one" (Barnes 1984:489).

Stoic philosophers, such as the Greek polymath, Posidonius (ca. 135—ca. 51 B.C.), also supported Aristotle's assertion that it was possible to circumnavigate the globe. The second century Greek geographer, Marinus of Tyre, believed Eurasia

was very wide from west to east and that the Atlantic so narrow that, with favourable winds, it could be crossed in a few days sailing. Eratosthenes (ca. 276—ca. 195 B.C.) further claimed that sailing west would bring one to another unknown continent which he felt was required by natural symmetry to balance the continental landmasses grouped around the Mediterranean. Based in Alexandria, the great centre of learning in the ancient Mediterranean world, Eratosthenes, in a thoroughly brilliant experiment, also calculated each degree of the circumference of the earth to 110 kms, within a few percent of the correct value.<sup>3</sup>

Roman expansion in the Mediterranean in the third century B.C. inevitably brought them into collision with the powerful Carthaginian thalassocracy. In 202 B.C., Scipio Africanus decisively defeated Hannibal of Carthage at the battle of Zama and the Romans took over all of Mauretania (west Algeria and Morocco). After the destruction of Carthage in 146 B.C., Rome incorporated all of north Africa into its empire and the provinces of Mauretania, Numidia, Africa Proconsularis and Cyrene became important food-producing regions. To the south lay the formidable barriers of the rocky wastes of the Fezzan and the Saharan desert and this apparently deterred any extension of the Roman frontier. Nor were they interested in taking over the Carthaginian system of colonies on the West African coast for the products of sub-Saharan Africa, such as ivory, gold, precious stones, rare woods, ostrich feathers, exotic fauna and slaves, were supplied to them by Garamantian middlemen running camel caravans through the Sahara. Bereft of the support of their founding city and ignored by the Romans, the Carthaginian colonies in Madeira and along the West African coast dwindled into extinction. Over a thousand years would pass before the system would be revived.

Carthaginian expansion along the Atlantic seaboard was driven by the economic imperatives of establishing direct trade routes with Europe and West Africa. In contrast, the goods of Asia flowed into the Mediterranean by overland routes, especially along the Great Khorasan Road, or through the Indian Ocean and then overland as they had done for millennia. A direct sea-route from the Mediterranean to Asia did not exist and these Mediterranean seamen, habituated to coastal-hugging, were not about to test the theories of the philosophers and geographers by venturing into the unknown western ocean. Their oared galleys were ill-suited to deep ocean trips and the secrets of the Atlantic currents and winds were yet to be discovered. The motive and the means for Atlantic exploration were lacking and what, if anything, lay directly west of the Pillars of Hercules was to remain a mystery as unfathomable as the ocean itself for the time being. The stage, however, had been prepared.

As late as the fifth century, scholars such as Macrobius and Martianus Capella continued to champion the concept of a spherical world. But, with the advent of Christianity, "flat-earthers" were in the ascendancy. "To discuss the nature and position of the earth does not help us in our hope of the life to come," opined the fourth century church father and author of indigestible homilies, Saint Ambrosius. Similarly, the unimaginative Tertullian (ca. A.D. 160—ca. 230), Bishop of

Carthage, declared, "For us, curiosity is no longer necessary." The faithful were listening and, in A.D. 391, the great Alexandrian centre of learning, the Serapeum, was razed by a Christian mob. In A.D. 524, Ancius Boethius, the last great classical scholar in the West, was executed in Ravenna by his former patron, the Gothic emperor Theodoric. Five years later, Justinian closed Plato's Academy in Athens.

In a giant step backwards from knowledge and freedom of enquiry to ignorance and intolerance, the leaden hammer of Christian dogmatism smashed the Ptolemaic universe and pounded the earth flat. The "Christian" universe was modelled after the tabernacle of Moses, the sky a low tent roof and the paths of stars determined by angels and, therefore, beyond human investigation. Western scholars abandoned Alexandria and Rome and fled to the freer intellectual atmosphere of Byzantium. The torch of science and technology passed to centres of learning in the Arab world in which *taffakur* (the study of nature) and *tashkeer* (the mastery of nature through technology) were treasured. Classical science and philosophy continued to be studied and developed by Islamic scholars while Christian Europe slipped into a twilight of Roman Catholic superstition in which knowledge of the world was determined by Papal fiat and narrow-minded biblical exegesis.

#### THE LATER MEDITERRANEAN: THE PORTUGEUSE & COLUMBUS

Groucho [impersonating the captain]: A fine sailor you are!

Chico: You bet I'm a fine sailor... my father was-a partners with Columbus.

Groucho: Columbus has been dead for four hundred years!

Chico: Well, they told me it was my father...

Groucho: I'll show you a few things you don't know about history. Now look... [drawing a circle on the globe.] Now, there's Columbus.

Chico: That's-a Columbus Circle...

Groucho: Now, Columbus sailed from Spain to India looking for a short cut.

Chico: Oh, you mean strawberry short cut?

(The Marx Brothers, *Monkey Business*, 1931)

With the spread of Islam from the eighth century onwards, fundamental geo-political re-alignments began to occur in West Asia and in the lands around the Mediterranean basin. West Asia and North Africa were rapidly overrun by Islamic armies and toeholds were established in south-eastern and south-western Europe. Despite pious exhortations to free the Holy Land, the long, tragic and destructive Crusades were frequently little more than thinly-veiled attempts, encouraged especially by Venetian commercial interests, to secure the western end of the Asian trade routes. In the stalemate which followed, Europeans found the eastern trade in spices, silk, and other exotica in a stranglehold exerted by the

ravages of the bubonic plague, the retreat of the Mongol Khanates, and the militant expansion of Islam.

Occasionally European travellers, missionaries, and merchants wandered as far afield as Persia, India, Ceylon and China. In the thirteenth century, for example, Marco Polo (ca. 1254—1324) records encounters with Genoese and Venetian merchants along the Great Khorasan Road. Genoa had trading colonies in Egypt, Syria, Cyprus, Constantinople, and on the shores of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. Nevertheless, trade was effectively controlled by the Islamic polities through which all these routes passed.<sup>4</sup> What was needed was direct access to the sources of Asian and African trade and this access could only be gained by sea routes which circumvented the extended overland routes through the Islamic world of Asia and North Africa. There were two possibilities — an eastern route around the vast continent of Africa which had not been circumnavigated since the Phoenician expedition of the late seventh century B.C. or a western route across the Atlantic. In short, the genesis of European settlement of Newfoundland and the rest of the American continent lies in the exploration of that second solution to the dilemma posed by an impermeable Islamic barrier to direct European trade with Asia.

Frequently in historical reconstruction, a focus on individuals overshadows more fundamental processes which far transcend any single person. In this manner, such figures as Leif Eiriksson, Christopher Columbus and John Cabot become metonyms obscuring the contexts which generated their accomplishments. This point is central to the evaluation of claims for pre-Columbian contact with the Americas — context is all-important and, where no compelling context can be established, such claims should be regarded as greatly suspect. For example, in his recent book, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts*, Anthony Grafton (1992:69) perpetuates the nineteenth century myth that, in 1419, Prince Henry the Navigator (A.D. 1394—1460) established at Sagres on Cape St. Vincent, a windswept promontory on the southwest tip of Portugal, a sort of fifteenth century equivalent of Cape Canaveral dedicated to astronomical and navigational research and that the work continued after Henry's death in 1460.<sup>5</sup> The myth surrounding Henry the Navigator and the Sagres school irritates many historians for it places too much emphasis on one individual and obscures the development of a system of oceanic commerce established in the mid-fifteenth century by the Portuguese with considerable international financial assistance.

The system began in 1443 when the Portuguese, as if emulating the Carthaginians, began to set up a string of *feitorias* or trading-posts along the west coast of Africa as far south as the Gold Coast.<sup>6</sup> The enterprise, which continued to evolve throughout the rest of the century, was driven by two imperatives — to find an eastward sea route to Asia and to obtain direct access to West African sources of gold, slaves, and “grains of Paradise” (malagueta pepper), thereby by-passing the monopoly of the Saharan camel caravan route which had continued since the Garamantes began to supply the Roman provinces of North Africa over a thousand years earlier. In both objectives, it was successful. A secondary but no less



important development was that the Atlantic islands — Madeira, the Azores and the Canaries — were soon drawn into the developing system. At first, the importance of the islands was simply as sources of water and supplies. But, with the introduction of sugar cane plantations, they became significant sources of economic activity in their own right.<sup>7</sup>

In 1453, Constantinople succumbed to the armies of Sultan Mehmet II and the strangulation of Venetian and Genoese trade with the Orient through ports in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea became a death-grip. Not surprisingly, therefore, the lucrative West African trade drew the attention of powerful Italian merchant-bankers — the Spinoli, Grimaldi, and Centurioni families set up shop in Seville while the Lomellini, Affaitati, Giraldi and Marchione families established themselves in Lisbon (Maxwell 1993:40). In collaboration with such German bankers as the Welsers and the Fuggers, these Italian concerns supplied the northern European market through Antwerp with such Iberian products as wine, olive oil, and Setubal salt as well as African spices and gold.

In the meantime, the Portuguese search for an eastward route to Asia by circumnavigating Africa continued. In 1488, in the twentieth Portuguese attempt to find a southern limit to the African continent, Bartolomeu Dias (ca. 1450—before 1499) rounded the Cape of Good Hope into the Indian Ocean. Dias turned back but the way was open and, ten years later, Vasco da Gama (ca. 1460—1524) reached India.<sup>8</sup> Upon Dias' return to Lisbon, King John II lost any further interest in the entreaties of Columbus to investigate a westward route to the Orient.

In fact, the westward route to Asia had already been attempted at least twice in the thirteenth century by Moorish explorers from Lisbon and by the Vivaldi brothers, Ugolino and Guido, who departed from Genoa in May of 1291 in two ships (Fernando-Armesto 1991:43, 271). Both expeditions vanished without trace. The same fate befell two Portuguese captains, Fernao Dulmo and Joao Estreito, commissioned by John II in 1487 to sail west to discover the fabled island of Antillia. Their decision to strike west from the Azores placed them too far to the north to pick up the easterly winds that would have carried them across the Atlantic.

With the eastward route secured by the Portuguese, Columbus eventually persuaded Isabella I of Castile and Ferdinand II of Aragon that Spain's interests lay in a westward route to the Orient, a route which he erroneously believed would be quite short.<sup>9</sup> This much most people know. What is less well-known is the extent to which Columbus himself was a product of the internationally financed Portuguese system of oceanic exploration and trade. He was connected to the Madeira sugar industry by his first marriage and traded down the West African coast as far as Ghana from 1482 to 1485. During this period, he became familiar with the techniques of Portuguese navigation and the clockwise pattern of Atlantic winds which the Portuguese had already learned to exploit to carry them to and from the Guinea coast.<sup>10</sup> He worked as an agent for the Genoese merchant-bankers, the Centurioni, and his one-third share of 1,300 ducats for the first voyage across the

Atlantic in 1492 was borrowed from Italian merchants (Maxwell 1993:40). The rest, as they say, is history and needs no recounting here.

Whatever one's characterization of Columbus — fearless explorer and visionary, genocidal maniac, or someone complexly situated in-between — he was a protean figure and my purpose here has not been to diminish his extraordinary personal qualities, nor to ignore the many other influences which spurred him west. Flint (1992), for example, argues that Columbus was aware of the Brendan legend and Heyerdahl (1971) suggests that he learned of Leif Eiriksson's Vinland either from Vatican sources or during a visit to Iceland that, according to his son, he made at the age of twenty-six. Neither thesis can be dismissed but I am not persuaded of their importance even if they are correct. "Awareness" does not necessarily imply "influence" and it is difficult to see how Columbus' search for a route to Asia could have been inspired in any significant way by Brendan's search for a fabled isle. And, unless Columbus believed that the Norse had discovered the north-eastern extremity of Asia, it is equally difficult to see how the Vinland saga could have encouraged him in his own quest.

The major purpose of this discussion has been to view Columbus and his achievement as the product of a long tradition of Mediterranean oceanic exploration driven by powerful economic forces and sustained by a complex system of international finance. This tradition culminated in a "revolution of perception" in which Europeans were suddenly able to "discern the totality" of the Atlantic system (Maxwell 1993:39).

...(the) Portuguese and Spaniards acted on a great leap of global geographical perception at the turn of the fifteenth century. It was the translation of this new geographical perception of the world into European commercial and military domination and, in the Caribbean and elsewhere, racial hegemony, which set the pattern for the explosive "encounter of civilizations" that the quincentennial used as an incantation but rarely examined (Maxwell 1993:44).

#### NORTH-WEST EUROPE: THE SEAFARING IRISH MONKS

Or, where the Northern Ocean in vast whirls,  
Boils round the naked melancholy isles  
Of farthest Thule, and the Atlantic surge  
Pours in among the stormy Hebrides.

(James Thomson [1700—1748], *The Seasons. Autumn*, ll.862ff.)

Christianity reached Ireland by the early fifth century. With the new religion came the concept of the monastic hermit and, apparently, it was these men, travelling in search of isolated retreats, who were the first Europeans to voyage into the north Atlantic. In 563, Saint Columba left Ireland to found the Iona community in the Hebrides. His followers reached the Orkneys in 579, the

Shetlands before 620 and, shortly thereafter, the Faeroes and Iceland. In 825, Dicuil, an Irish scholar at the Carolingian court, compiled his *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae*, primarily from classical sources. However, he also incorporated information on the north Atlantic, especially the Faeroes and Iceland, gleaned from seafaring Irish monks. Dicuil writes:

There are islands around our own island Hibernia, some small and some very small. Near the island Britannia are many islands, some large, some small and some medium-sized. Some are in the sea to her south and some in the sea to her west, but they abound mostly to the north-west and north. Among these I have lived in some, and have visited others; some I have only glimpsed, while others I have read about. (Tierney 1967:73)

Saint Brendan (ca. 489—ca. 577) is known to us as the founder of monasteries at Ardfert, north of Tralee, and at Clonfert in Galway. Church business took him to Brittany and Wales and he figures as a visitor to Ionia in the late seventh century *Life of Saint Columba* written by Adomnan, ninth abbot of the small community there (Anderson and Anderson 1961:500-501). But, neither this work nor another ecclesiastical book, *Oengus Féilire*, composed ca. 800, mentions any voyage by Brendan into the Atlantic. The first references to the *egressio familiae Brendani*, “the going forth of Brendan’s family (of monks),” appear in various ninth and tenth century compositions. The Breton *Life of Saint Machutus (Saint Malo)*, purportedly written in the late ninth century, and the slightly later *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* both refer to Brendan’s quest for the Isle of the Blest in the Western Sea (O’Donoghue 1893).

The tradition is a mixture of both real and fantastic elements, drawing heavily on the same sixth century quest imagery which inspired the Arthurian legends. Having learned of the existence of this fabulous land of perpetual daylight where every stone was precious, every tree full with ripe fruit, and every flower forever in bloom, Brendan gathered a party of seventeen monks, provisions for forty days, and set sail from Dingle Bay in County Kerry, south-east Ireland.<sup>11</sup> Their craft was a curragh, a small light wood-framed boat covered with ox-hides, powered by a square sail and open to the elements. After a voyage of seven years and many fantastic incidents, including the discovery of Judas Iscariot marooned on a small rock, Brendan and his monks found their objective, explored it for forty days and then returned home.

The belated recounting of the story three centuries after the death of the protagonist and its many miraculous and fantastic incidents, to say the least, cast great doubt on its historicity. While references to such real phenomena as whales, icebergs, pack-ice, volcanoes, rocky islands, fogs, and great flocks of seabirds certainly “paint a distinctively North Atlantic picture” (McGhee 1991:26), they are consistent with the knowledge gained by the monastic dispersal as far as Iceland. Devoutly, even courageously but, in a pre-compass era, blindly blundering around

the north Atlantic in tiny open boats searching for fabled isles is religious madness and not the sort of system which leads to the discovery of new continents. In any case, the solitude of the hermit monks of the north Atlantic was not to last because a real expansionary system was already aborning.

NORTH-WEST EUROPE: THE NORSE

A land of leaning ice  
 Hugged by plaster-grey arches of sky,  
 Flings itself silently  
 Into eternity.

"Has no one come here to win you,  
 Or left you with the faintest blush  
 Upon your glittering breasts?  
 Have you no memories, O Darkly Bright?"  
 (Hart Crane, *North Labrador*, [1917], ll.1-8)

In the late eighth century, various Norse-speaking groups from southern Scandinavia and Denmark began to raid beyond their borders on an ever-expanding front. In the following century, communities along the entire western seaboard of Europe learned to fear the sight of the high-prowed longships nosing their way along their shores and up their rivers. By the early ninth century, the nature of this dramatic historical phenomenon had begun to change from raiding to colonization and Norse settlements were established in northern Scandinavia, the Faeroes, Iceland, the Orkney and Shetland islands and in parts of Scotland, Ireland, England and northern France (Brown 1993).

The diaspora was accelerated by the unification of Norway under King Harold Fairhair (850?—933) during which many petty chieftains and their followers were driven out. Sometime between 900 and 930, Gunnbjörn Ulf-Krakuson, en route from Norway to Ireland but driven into the north-western Atlantic by storms, became the first European to sight southern Greenland. By 930, most arable land in Iceland was occupied and there was mounting pressure to move on to this new land. In 978, an initial attempt by the Icelandic community to settle Greenland ended in disaster. However, a second attempt in 986 led by Eirik raudi (Eric the Red), an exile first from Norway and then from Iceland, resulted in the successful colonization of the southwest coast. The Greenlanders were within 500 kilometres, or two to three days sail, of Baffin Island. The first sighting came that same year when Bjarni Herjulfsson en route from Iceland to Greenland was blown off course and became the first European to sail along a North American coastline. To the timber-poor Greenlanders, his account of a well-wooded land a short distance to the west was an irresistible lure and, fifteen years later, in 1001, Eirik's son, Leif set out to retrace Bjarni's voyage.

Even without the archaeological evidence from L'Anse aux Meadows, the Norse sagas about Vinland would have to be taken seriously. Although the two major sources, the *Groenlendinga saga* and *Eiriks saga raudi* cannot be reconciled in many of their details, their nature is quite prosaic, convincingly accurate in observations about encounters with Natives and environments, and free of fanciful phenomena. In scale and complexity, the Norse system of expansionary colonization and the political, demographic and economic imperatives which drove it does not compare with the international system in south-western Europe which prompted and supported the Hispanic colonization of central America. However, it was sufficient to fling the Norse clear across the northern Atlantic even if, in the end, it could not sustain the settlements in Vinland and Greenland in the face of Native opposition and deteriorating climatic conditions.<sup>12</sup>

#### MERGING TRADITIONS?: THE BRISTOL FISHERY AND JOHN CABOT

The Norse system may have had lingering effects which helped inspire the voyages of John Cabot (Giovanni Caboto). What is known for certain about the life of this explorer could be written on the tiniest scrap of sailcloth. The place and date of his birth are uncertain — possibly Genoa around the same time as Columbus was born. By 1476, he is listed as a citizen of Venice where he became involved in the Venetian trade with the eastern Mediterranean. Between 1484 and 1495, his movements are uncertain but there is good reason to identify him with Juan Caboto Montecalunya, a navigator who, around 1490, petitioned both Spanish and Portuguese authorities for assistance in making a westward voyage to the Orient (McGhee 1991:88). Pre-empted by Columbus, Cabot moved to Bristol in 1495 and petitioned Henry VII for royal sponsorship. This was granted the following year but a mutinous crew brought the first voyage to a premature conclusion. In late May of 1497, the *Mathew* slipped its moorings in Bristol and thirty-five days later, on June 24 (St. John's Day), made a landfall probably, but not certainly, on the eastern coast of Newfoundland. Cabot returned to report that he had discovered the land of the Great Khan (Cathay). An attempt to repeat this voyage in 1498 with a larger flotilla ended in disaster. One ship was forced to turn back to Ireland and another to Bristol. Cabot and the three other ships under his command disappeared.

It is known that the Greenland Norse continued to make sporadic visits to Vinland and possibly other areas of eastern Canada as late as 1347. A century later, Bristol along with other English ports was heavily involved in the Icelandic fishery to the point of provoking complaints and counter-measures by the Danish crown. During the period between 1478 and 1490, the governor of Iceland had a fair measure of success in excluding English ships from his waters. Despite this, close connections continued and a 1484 census lists no less than forty-eight Icelanders as resident aliens in Bristol (McGhee 1991:90).

It is almost inconceivable to suppose that Cabot, whose avowed intention was to traverse the North Atlantic, would not have learned about Vinland from these natives of a society which had preserved the sagas in the form of oral tradition. Moreover, it is likely that, as early as 1480, the Bristol fishermen had already been exploiting the Grand Banks and had sighted, if not landed in, eastern Canada. Documents dating to 1480—1481 refer to voyages by ships from Bristol in search of the “Isle of Brasil” in the north-west Atlantic.<sup>13</sup> It is significant that one of these ships was loaded with forty bushels of salt whose only use would have been to preserve fish and that the voyages occurred immediately after England’s exclusion from the Icelandic fishery.

### THE ORIGINS OF AMERICAN INDIANS

It ain’t what we don’t know; it’s what we know that ain’t so — that’s the problem.  
Will Rogers.

In 1530, an expedition led until his death by Ferdinand Magellan (ca. 1480-1521), a Portuguese navigator working for Castile, returned to Spain. Their circumnavigation of the globe demonstrated conclusively what others had suspected, that America was not part of Asia and that its people were not “Indians.” Initially, even the humanity of Native Americans was doubted by some but, in 1537, Pope Paul III (1468—1549) in his famous bull, *Sublimis Deus*, proclaimed that “the Indians are truly men.” The question of humanity resolved, Europeans were faced with two further problems. The first was what one historian has recently called a search for “commensurability,” that is a means of categorizing, understanding, and explaining the origins of Native Americans and the nature of their culture (Pagden 1993:2). The second problem was that of legitimating the European conquest of the New World in general and specific national claims in particular.

In a pre-archaeological era, the first problem precipitated an extended rum-maging through Biblical and classical literature for an explanation of the origins of Amerindians. By relating the new to the familiar — what Pagden (1993:17ff.) has called “the principle of attachment” — much of the sting of confronting “otherness” was removed (Grafton 1992:253-254). Diderot was later to pose the rhetorical question of why America had never suggested, to any European, wonders of its own; instead, Europeans attached to the new lands and peoples much of the mythology of the Old World — gardens of Eden, fountains of youth, cities of gold, Amazons and Hyperboreans.<sup>14</sup>

Although Biblical connections were favoured, no explanation of Indian origins was too fantastic. The most enduring, and one still ludicrously preserved in Mormon belief, was that they were descended from the ten lost tribes of Israel (II Kings 15:29). Fray Diego Duran, writing around 1580, was sufficiently persuaded by Indian stories of plagues and long journeys and the practice of circumcision to

subscribe to this notion which continued to receive widespread support up until the nineteenth century (Feder 1990:62).<sup>15</sup> Others, such as Ezra Stiles, President of Yale University (1783), following Francisco Lopez de Gomara, Conquest historian and author of *Historia general de las Indias*, identified them with the Canaanites expelled from Israel by Joshua (Trigger 1989:68). In his *The Hope of Israel* (1650), Rabbi Manasseh ben Israel wryly argued that the Indians were actually Jews but, having heard of the excesses of the Inquisition, were keeping it a secret from the Spaniards (Feder 1990:62). Ethiopians, Hindustanis, Norwegians, Celts, Carthaginians, Chinese, and Atlanteans (the list is not exhaustive) were all invoked as progenitors. Gradually, however, wild speculation began to yield to systematic investigation. Thomas Jefferson (1743—1826), in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), adduced archaeological, linguistic, and physical anthropological evidence to argue for an Asiatic origin across the Bering Strait which, nine years previously, had been charted for the first time by Captain Cook. Samuel Haven, in his *Archaeology of the United States* (1856), concurred with this opinion and argued for great time depth for Indian origins.

Much of this speculative history had ugly overtones of the second problem, that of legitimation. If, as the Puritans believed, America was the New Israel, and the Indians were descendants of the Canaanites or, for that matter, some other recent immigrant group, then their dispossession and enslavement by Europeans could be justified. If some pre-Columbian trans-Atlantic connection from this or that European nation could be demonstrated, then the national agenda of that colonial power would be well-served. For Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdes, author of *Historia general y natural de las Indias* (1535), the genesis of Mesoamerican civilization could be attributed to followers of the legendary Spanish King Hespero who purportedly fled Europe in 1658 B.C. (Feder 1990:62). For the Irish, there was Brendan, but the English crown had nothing to gain by promoting a legend which would merely strengthen Catholic claims to North America. There was, in any case, a more appropriate candidate — King Arthur.

Around A.D. 900, an anonymous Welsh poet composed an epic poem (or *immram*) entitled *The Spoils of Annwn*. Supposedly narrated by Taliesin, the famous sixth century Welsh bard, the poem describes how Arthur and his knights sailed to Annwn, the Welsh "Otherworld." Later versions transformed Annwn to Avalon, the "apple orchard" and blissful isle which lay in the direction of the sunset where, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth, Arthur was taken after his last battle to be healed of his injuries. Geoffrey further believed that Arthur had conquered Iceland. In 1578, John Dee, the Elizabethan astrologer, patron of exploration and one of the first people to use the phrase "the British empire," extended these claims even further by suggesting to Richard Hakluyt, the famous chronicler of early English exploration, that Arthur had also conquered "Frisland," an island purportedly located south of Greenland. Though Hakluyt rejected the suggestion, he did regard Arthur's legendary expeditions as a general "precedent for English expansion."<sup>16</sup> Other more gullible or more chauvinistic minds promoted the idea that

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Arthur had actually annexed America and, therefore, that Elizabeth I had a valid claim on the New World. It was in this climate of opinion that the peninsula of south-eastern Newfoundland was named Avalon.

Hakluyt was persuaded, however, by the story of Madoc, legendary Prince of Wales, that the British had a legitimate claim to the North America (Hakluyt 1907, vol. v:79-80; vi:58). The contemporary English antiquarian, William Camden (1551—1623), also helped to popularize the legend which describes how Madoc, escaping from a Welsh dynastic feud in 1170, sailed around the south coast of Ireland to the west and eventually came to a land populated by an unknown people. Thereupon, he returned to Wales, outfitted a fleet and vanished westwards. According to Hakluyt, Madoc's land,

... must needs be some part of that countrey of which the Spanyards affirme themselves to be the first finders since Hanno's time. Whereupon it is manifest that that country was by Britaines discovered, long before Columbus led any Spanyards thither...I am of opinion that the land whereunto he (Madoc) came was some part of the West Indies.  
(Hakluyt 1907, vol. v:79-80)

The nationalist agenda is plainly spelled out:

And it is very evident that the planting there (the West Indies) shal in time amply enlarge her Majesties Territories and Dominions, or (I might rather say) restore to her Highnesse ancient right and interest in those Countries, into which a noble and worthy personage, lineally descended from the blood royall, borne in Wales, named Madock ap Owen Gwyneth, departing from the coast of England, about the yeere of our Lord God 1170, arrived and there planted himselfe and his Colonies...

(Hakluyt 1907, vol. vi:58).

Significantly, the Madoc legend cannot be traced back before the 1580's during the reign of Elizabeth I. Whatever its origins, an elaboration of an earlier legend or a frank fiction, the story undoubtedly found favour with the Welsh-derived Tudor royal family. Some, like the early seventeenth century historian, George Abbot (1620), rejected "vain shows out of the British antiquities...the wisdom of our State hath been such as to neglect that opinion." Nevertheless, the legend showed great staying power. Hakluyt's successor, Purchas, believed likewise and Sir Thomas Herbert in his *A Relation of Some Yeares' Travaille* (1634) argued that, not only had Madoc been inspired by Seneca's prophecy but also that Vinland was a corruption of Gwynedd-lande or Wineda and that Eirik "had been confused with Madoc" (Deacon 1966:163). The belief that somewhere in North America, albeit on a conveniently moving frontier, there existed a tribe of Welsh-speaking Indians persisted through the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth century (Burder 1797; Williams 1791, 1792).



... the myth of a tribe of Welsh Indians... placed them first on the Atlantic coast, where they were identified with the Tuscarora, and then farther and farther west until about 1776 we find "Welsh" or "white" Indians on the Missouri, where they appeared as the Mandan, and later on the Red River. Later still they were identified with the Hopi of Arizona, and finally with the Modoc of Oregon, after which they vanish.

(Hodge 1910:282)<sup>17</sup>

After all these nationalistic claims, the Scots cannot be left unchampioned. In 1558, Nicolo Zeno of Venice published a map, ostensibly from his family's archive, along with an account of the discovery of several islands in the north-west Atlantic by his late fourteenth century forebears, Nicolo and Antonio, in the company of a north European, one Prince Zichmi (McGhee 1991:78). Though both documents were eventually recognized as fraudulent, there are still those who identify Zichmi with Prince Henry Sinclair, a fourteenth century Earl of the Orkneys (Pohl 1950; 1959).

#### DIFFUSION & CULTURE CONTACT

That it is not in accord with the facts is no reason in the public mind why it shouldn't be true.

(Lowell Thomas, *India: Land of the Black Pagoda* [1930:190])

In this article, I have endeavoured to show why some claims for European contact with America in the pre-Columbian period are suspect *ab initio* because they share several characteristics. They are isolated incidents, they are usually associated with a charismatic figure to whom legendary feats accrete, they abound with fantasy, they serve patently nationalistic or religious agendas and, most importantly perhaps of all, they occur in contexts which provide no clear imperatives for the exploration. In stark contrast, Leif Eiriksson, Christopher Columbus, and John Cabot stand as products of powerful economic and political processes which put their voyages into a wholly understandable framework. Can the matter rest here — a scholarly exercise in retrospection with no contemporary relevance? I think not, for equally unlikely claims about the past continue to be raised which are just as oblivious to any rules of scientific rigour. These claims share a common characteristic of being argued on the basis of loose comparisons between ancient societies which are "explained" by diffusion, the underlying assumption being that mere contact will be sufficient to induce change.

The diffusion of ideological, linguistic or material influences from one culture to another which have come into fleeting or overwhelming contact with each other is, of course, an unambiguously attested phenomenon. Some diffusionary arguments have been respectably modest in their scope and intention, even if erroneous. In *The Dawn of European Civilization* (1925), for example, the great prehistorian, Vere Gordon Childe, having established a series of prehistoric trans-Mediterranean linkages, argued that the megalithic building period in Europe was a peripheral

echo of the pyramid building age in Egypt. Radiocarbon dating eventually demonstrated that, in fact, the megaliths long precede the pyramids and that the two phenomena are unconnected (Renfrew 1973).

Other diffusionary arguments have been frankly ludicrous. In *The Ancient Egyptians* (1923), Grafton Eliot Smith strenuously sought to derive the inspiration of Mesoamerican civilization from ancient Egypt because both shared such general traits as sun worship, stone architecture, pyramids, irrigation agriculture, metallurgy and so forth. That the two civilizations were separated by as many thousands of miles as years was not seen as an impediment to the hypothesis. Still other diffusionary arguments have been more menacing. A prime example is provided by Gustav Kossinna's *Ursprung und Verbreitung der German in vor- und frühgeschichtliche Zeit* (1927) in which he located the Indo-European homeland on the North German plain and attributed all important innovations in the European prehistoric record to the genius of the Aryan people.

I have drawn these examples from the chequered past of my own discipline and hasten to add that archaeology and anthropology have long since moved on from such simplistic and, often, racist nonsense. Unfortunately, however, hyper-diffusionism on a popular level remains a highly saleable commodity. One need only think of the insidious publications by Barry Fell, *America B.C.* (1976), *Saga America* (1980) and *Bronze Age America* (1982), in which virtually every important facet of Amerindian culture becomes the product of trans-Atlantic contact from Europe and the Mediterranean. Or a recent local work on the Norse settlement of Newfoundland in which the suggestion is made quite seriously that the original inhabitants of this island are the results of miscegenation with the Norse (Fardy 1993:64).<sup>18</sup> Not content with the fact that Amerindians have been dispossessed of their land, these authors seem bent on dispossessing them of their heritage and even their ethnicity.

We may laugh at Erich von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* (1969) in which everything from the ground markings in the Nazca Valley of southern Peru to the Egyptian pyramids is attributed to extra-terrestrial visitors, all of whom are tall, blond, and blue-eyed. But, we should not forget that it was a multi-million dollar best-seller. We may admire the courage and skill of Thor Heyerdahl (1950; 1958) in rafting across the Pacific or of Tim Severin (1978) who traversed the Atlantic in a modern version of a curragh and their demonstration that primitive craft are capable of trans-oceanic voyages. But, we should not forget that the one argues that the Easter Island monoliths were erected by red-haired, white-skinned and bearded strangers from South America (though, with such Scandinavian features, their homeland obviously lay elsewhere), while the other breathes new life into a highly improbable mediaeval legend which this still-too credulous age can well do without.<sup>19</sup> The hypothesis that Celtic civilization is of African origin may strike us as patently ludicrous but a book arguing that very notion has gone into a second edition (Ali and Ali 1993). We may applaud the original intention of Leonard Jeffries and the Portland African-American Baseline Essay Project to provide

young students with a black perspective on history and science. But, when these essays descend into a series of spurious claims, including the one that sub-Saharan black Africans built the Egyptian pyramids using telekinesis, we must assert that the past cannot be arbitrarily rewritten in the name of affirmative action any more than it can for nationalist, imperialist, or racist agendas.<sup>20</sup> All ideas may deserve to be heard but they must all pass the same tests.

That last statement may not sit well with some other colleagues for archaeology, like most other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, has been infected by the reborn relativists of the deconstructionist movement and the sainted Foucault — ironically, French archaeology seems to have been inoculated. Deconstruction is fine — when I was an undergraduate, which was not so long ago in the great scheme of things, it was called “source criticism” and “objectivity,” that unattainable but devoutly-to-be-strived-for state. But, unrestrained relativism is not fine. To adapt a thought of George Steiner’s, when archaeologists and historians say that the past has been dissolved into a myriad of reconstructions, all equally valid, then the creators of confusion, the bringers of death — Pol Pot or whoever — hear what they are saying. If this sounds overly dramatic, reflect on the rival claims for historic legitimation in a fragmented Yugoslavia, a sundered Sri Lanka or, here in Canada, a national body politic which unashamedly refers to the “two founding nations” of Francophones and Anglophones while the Assembly of First Nations struggles to be heard. Half a century ago, W.H. Auden saw it so clearly — in *For the Time Being*, Herod agonizes over the consequences if he fails to massacre the Innocents and thereby eliminate the newly-born Christ:

Reason will be replaced by Revelation. Instead of Rational Law, objective truths perceptible to any who will undergo the necessary intellectual discipline... Knowledge will degenerate into a riot of subjective visions... Whole cosmogonies will be created out of some forgotten personal resentment, complete epics written in private languages, the daubs of schoolchildren ranked above the greatest masterpieces.

(Auden 1945:115-116)

Nineteenth century unilineal evolutionists genuflected to the belief that “less-advanced” societies would inevitably borrow what they could from “more-advanced” societies. In this worldview, it was perfectly feasible for a small company of Europeans or Africans or Chinese or whoever (read: “superior beings”) to inexorably and fundamentally alter the path of American civilization (read: “inferior beings”). In this regard, latter-day diffusionists like Barry Fell and others are reinforced in their attitudes by the apparent ease with which a few boatloads of Spaniards brought down the powerful Aztec and Incan empires. Various arguments have been advanced for the phenomenon — the Spanish technological/ military advantage of horses, guns, and armour; the apparent fulfilment of Aztec legend which foretold the return from the east of the god, Quetzalcoatl; the utter ruthlessness of the invaders; the effects of European diseases; the disaffection of periphery

to centre within the Aztec empire; and the highly centralized and, therefore, extraordinarily vulnerable system (Thomas 1994). In their summary executions of the god-kings, Montezuma and Atahualpa, both Cortes and Pizarro ripped the heart out of the two empires as swiftly and as lethally as any sacrificial priest wielding an obsidian knife atop an Aztec pyramid-temple. All of these phenomena are undoubtedly of considerable significance but, perhaps overriding all such considerations, as has been recently stressed in the quincennial retrospective, was the utter "otherness" of the experience, the head-on collision of two subjectivities.<sup>21</sup> In the face of it, both Montezuma and Atahualpa fatally hesitated and the impact of that "otherness" achieved catastrophic proportions despite the fact that, with the right tactics, strategy and decisive action, either emperor could have easily mopped up the small Spanish force.

The outcome of the Norse presence in Newfoundland was profoundly different. Contact with the local population ranged from peaceful barter to pitched battle. In the end, despite the supposed advantages of ocean-going ships, steel swords, armour, defended settlements and a long legacy of violent resolution of "cultural misunderstandings," the Norse could not sustain their presence and the "superior" Europeans were compelled to leave without any apparent cultural impact whatsoever.

New worlds are not discovered by individuals acting outside of any meaningful socio-economic context. As one of my heroes, C.L.R. James (1963:x), trenchantly observed:

Great men make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make. Their freedom of achievement is limited by the necessities of their environment.

And even when contact does occur, that contact in and of itself cannot explain the diffusion of traits from one society to another. Therefore, the onus is on any would-be diffusionist to delineate not only the context of the contact situation but also why the supposed transference of cultural traits occurred. Despite the long-standing geo-political domination of European and Euro-American civilization, there can be no implicit and unexamined assumptions of cultural superiority.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Various sources give quite different versions of the lookout's name and, in addition, Columbus subsequently claimed first sighting for himself.

<sup>2</sup>See especially McGhee (1991), Cazeau and Scott (1979), Fingerhut (1984), and Cole (1980). On supposed Norse artefacts outside Newfoundland, see Wallace (1982; 1991).

<sup>3</sup>Ptolemy (floruit A.D. 127-151) recalculated a much shorter circumference for the earth based on a figure of only 93 kms per degree which was to mislead Europeans for the next 1,400 years. Islamic scholars came up with more accurate figures of 122 kms per degree (the ninth century astronomer, Abu al-'Abbas Ahmad al-Ferghani, known in Europe as Alfraganus) and 115.35 kms per degree (a ninth century commission of seventy scholars

assembled by Caliph 'Abd Allah al-Ma'mun) but these results were either not known to Europeans or were ignored by them.

<sup>4</sup>In anticipation of a landfall in Asia where international trade was largely in Arab hands, Columbus took with him as interpreter Luis de Torres, an Arabic-speaking Spaniard. The first words spoken by Europeans to American Indians may well have been, "Salaam alaikum (Peace be upon you)!"

<sup>5</sup>The myth also occurs in Boorstin (1983:161ff.) and in the Nova television documentary, *Columbus and the Age of Discovery* (1990) narrated by Historian, Mauricio Obregon. On the fictive basis of the Sagres school, see Boxer (1990) and Albuquerque (1992).

<sup>6</sup>In the last quarter century of historical research, Portuguese achievements in early Atlantic exploration have been copiously documented by Pierre Chauna, *Séville et l'Atlantique, 1504-1650, I-XII* (Paris: SEVPEN, 1959), Frédéric Mauro, *Le Portugal et l'Atlantique au XVIIIème siècle, 1570-1620* (Paris: SEVPEN, 1960), and Vitorino Magalhaes-Godinho, *L'économie de l'empire Portugais aux XVIème et XVIIème siècles* (Paris: SEVPEN, 1969). See also Maxwell (1993) and Fernandez-Armesto (1991:42).

<sup>7</sup>Merchants from Barcelona reached the Canaries in the early fourteenth century but with little effect and the Spanish enslavement of the local Guanches did not begin until 1483. The Portuguese began to settle the uninhabited archipelagoes of Madira and the Azores in 1420 and 1427 respectively. By 1490, they had established sugar cane plantations as far south as the Cape Verde archipelago and the islands of Sao Tomé e Principe in the Gulf of Guinea (Maxwell 1993:40).

<sup>8</sup>It is only appropriate to acknowledge the pervasive influence of Islamic science, mathematics, astronomy, geography, cartography, navigation, and ship design on European oceanic exploration. Both Lisbon and Seville had long-standing trade relationships with the Islamic world and a college was established in Toledo in the twelfth century to translate Arabic scientific sources and Greek works which had been preserved in Arabic. Compasses, astrolabes, quadrants, stern rudders, and the lateen sails which allowed European caravels to sail into the wind were all either invented by the Arabs or passed on by them. Vasco da Gama was guided along Africa's east coast and across the Indian Ocean by an Arab pilot, Ahmad ibn Majid, who used an Arab map unknown to European sailors.

<sup>9</sup>Columbus used maps and information from Martin Behaim (1459-1507), the Nuremberg cartographer, Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli (1397-1482), the Florentine physician, astrologer, cosmographer and cartographer, and Pierre d'Ailly's *Imago Mundi*, (preserved in the Seville Museum) with its assertion that the Atlantic was "of no great width," was his bedside companion for many years according to his son and biographer, Ferdinand.

<sup>10</sup>The Portuguese used the northeastern Trades to carry them down the African coast; for the return voyage, they hooked out into the Atlantic to catch the Westerlies. The discovery of this wind pattern was critical to mid-Atlantic exploration. Before the advent of engine-powered ships, explorers generally preferred to beat against an adverse wind for this assured them of their ability to return. Thus, most fifteenth century attempts to sail west to the Orient were made from the relatively northern latitude (ca. 38°N) of the Azores against the Westerlies. It was also believed that this latitude would provide the shortest route to Cathay. However, the strength of the Westerlies defeated every attempt. Columbus, in contrast, reached south to the Canaries before turning west (Fernandez-Armesto 1991:47).

<sup>11</sup>In 1927, after the compass aboard *The Spirit of St. Louis* froze, Charles Lindbergh completed his flight by dead reckoning, navigating by the Big Dipper and Polaris. His last

sight of North America was St. John's and, by extraordinary historical coincidence, his first European landfall was Dingle Bay!

<sup>12</sup>Both the Norse and the Thule Eskimo arrived in southern and northern Greenland respectively in a period of optimal climatic conditions which ended around 1100. The following cooling trend which culminated in the Maunder Minimum or Little Ice Age from around 1650 to 1850 forced the Thule out of the High Arctic and was fatal to the Norse settlements.

<sup>13</sup>A letter written in Spanish by John Day, a Bristol merchant involved in trade with Spain, was discovered in the Simancas archive in Spain in 1955. The letter is undated and concerns the discovery of an island in the North Atlantic by an unnamed explorer sailing from England. Internal references make it clear that the explorer is Cabot and that the letter must date to 1497. It is addressed to "El Almirante Major," a title which, at that time, was held solely by Christopher Columbus and further reports that the island is almost certainly the same "Isle of Brasil" discovered "in times past" by the men of Bristol (McGhee 1991:82). Cartographic details in the Milan Chart (ca. 1480) and the Paris Map (ca. 1490) suggest that eastern Canada may have been sighted even earlier by the Portuguese (McGhee 1991:95).

<sup>14</sup>Pagden (1993:162-163). This exaggerated historical perspective still pervades some approaches. However, as Fernandez-Armesto (1993:11) has pointed out, "The America which helped change the world did not all come out of books, nor did it just reflect back European prejudices: real earth, real plants, real experience and real people had real — if in some respects long-deferred — influence."

<sup>15</sup>For example, Edward Kingsborough's *Antiquities of Mexico* (London: privately printed, 1831-38), superbly illustrated with hundreds of drawings of codices and artefacts, was still wedded to the "Lost Tribes" hypothesis.

<sup>16</sup>Hakluyt (1907, vol.1:54) accepted that Arthur's conquests had extended over much of the north Atlantic from Iceland through Scandinavia to western Russia.

<sup>17</sup>Hodge's list is far from complete — Madoc's descendants were also identified with the Shawnee, Comanches, Cherokee, Creek, Osage, and Navajo. Robert Southey (1774-1843) composed an epic poem, *Madoc In Aztlan* (1805), which celebrated the Welsh prince's feat. The 1858 Eisteddfod offered a prize for the best essay on "The Welsh Discovery of America." The submission by Thomas Stephens in which he rejected both the literary tradition and the existence of Welsh-speaking Indians was rejected by the judges in great indignation and was published posthumously (Stephens 1893).

<sup>18</sup>The argument is based on a number of points which cannot all be addressed here but the contention that Beothuk canoes had high prows because of the influence of Viking longships betrays a deep ignorance of birch-bark canoe building and of the Norse who never used longships in the north Atlantic. To suggest that the Beothuks' ability to work iron when they came across it in the post-contact period can only be explained by the fact that "some of the skills and traits of the white men ... lingered with the red men" is not only a crudely racist notion but erroneous — the Beothuk applied their traditional skills of lithic technology to the new material and treated it as if it was a sort of malleable stone. In a province with outstanding Micmac land claims, the notion that the original inhabitants, the Beothuks, had become half-European long before any Micmac presence has obvious political implications.

<sup>19</sup>A recent flyer for *The Beaver*, a magazine on Canada's past published by the Hudson's Bay Company, refers to "the story of how Norse seafarers and Irish monks crossed the uncharted North Atlantic to find a New World long before Columbus."

<sup>20</sup>For claims that the Olmecs of Mesoamerica were derived from sub-Saharan African trans-oceanic voyagers, see Clegg (1975), Van Sertima (1976), and Bradley (1981) as well as the critical discussion in Fingerhut (1984:81-90). For the most part, the arguments are crudely racist and largely based on discerning supposedly "Negroid" facial features in Olmec statuary. The search for African linguistic elements in pre-Columbian scripts has had as much success as the search for Welsh-speaking Indians. Decipherment of the epi-Olmec and Olmec languages shows them to be Zoquean and Mixe-Zoquean respectively — in other words, central American in origin (Kelley 1993).

<sup>21</sup>Try as we might, it is impossible for us now to fully grasp this experience for we have no contemporary analog. However, the chaos and panic caused by Orson Welles' famous 1938 broadcast of H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, dramatized as a series of news reports cutting into an apparently normal radio service, indicates how easily an alien "encounter" can precipitate social disintegration.

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