

Who discovered America anyway?

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Who discovered the Americas? Traditionally honoured as the first discoverer, Christopher Columbus visited the islands of central America in 1492. But the discovery of the north American continent has been attributed to Giovanni Caboto (John Cabot), a Venetian citizen who, under licence from Henry VII of England, landed in Labrador in the summer of 1497.

This was a popular period for inter-continental travel. According to Gavin Menzies the Chinese visited the Americas 70 years earlier. Working from star charts and maps that pre-date Columbus, he has deduced that a Chinese expeditionary fleet under admiral Zheng He sailed into the Caribbean in 1421.

But 20 years earlier, in 1398, Sir Henry St. Clair and 200 knights landed 12 ships on the coast of America. Though he was a native Scotsman, born in 1345, his chief navigator was an Italian, Antonio Zeno, who produced an account of the voyage. Significant details include a hot spring that has been traced to Greenland, and caves and bitumen by a large river that identifies Nova Scotia.

A map, attributed to Zeno, first appeared in Venice in 1558 as part of book containing accounts of 14th voyages in the North Atlantic, and, in addition to Iceland and Greenland, shows details of the North American coastline, with lands named Estotiland and Drogeo. The evidence suggests the explorers spent the winter there. During this period Sir James Gunn took ill and died in Massachusetts, and the Scots carved a stone image incorporating the Gunn family insignia in his memory, called by locals the "Westford Knight."

But the Zeno Narrative relates that, almost thirty years earlier, a group of fishing boats were blown far out to sea and eventually came ashore on land that was probably Newfoundland, where they then spent more than twenty years before making contact with some European fishermen and returning to the Faroes.

The Icelandic sagas attest that Europeans did indeed reach North America much earlier. In around 995 AD an expedition under the leadership of Leif Eiriksson, son of Eirik the Red, reached Markland (Labrador) and subsequently settled in Vinland, named after the fruits they found there, now thought to be Nova Scotia.

The sagas say "the days and nights were much more equal in length than in Greenland of Iceland. In the depth of winter the sun was aloft by mid-morning and still visible at mid-afternoon" and "the temperature never dropped below freezing" - very different from the northern islands and Scandinavia where, in mid-winter, the sun is scarcely seen and the ground covered by frozen snow.

Traces of a Viking settlement have been uncovered at a place now known as *l'Anse aux Meadows* at the Northern tip of Newfoundland.

They encountered native americans, and though the Vikings traded with the indigenous peoples, relations were strained and sometimes hostile, and the Vikings departed without establishing a permanent settlement.

Leif Eiriksson, who led the Viking expedition to North America, is commemorated by a statue in front of the most prominent church in Reykjavik, Iceland. The inscription reads: "Leif Eiriksson Son of Iceland Discoverer of Vinland." Without detracting from Eiriksson's feats, the Americas were already plentifully inhabited on his arrival: his achievements though remarkable do not exactly include the discovery of the Americas.

A passage in the Icelandic *Eirik the Red's Saga* stands out because it states that the indigenous americans were already familiar with 'white men', even before the arrival of the Vikings. "They spoke of another land, across from their own. These people dressed in white clothing, shouted loudly and bore poles and waved banners."

Does that sound like early Christian monks? The white clothing is a strong clue. In fact, a much earlier document, the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, or the Travels of Saint Brendan, that dates from the 9th or 10th Centuries, relates exploits dating back to the 6th Century, and suggests that the Irish were familiar with the new world.

Brendan was an accomplished traveller, and sailed to Wales, England, the Scottish islands, Brittany, and northern Europe, founding monasteries abroad. It was from another monk, Barinthus, that Brendan learned of a land to the west called the "Land of Promise of the Saints, the land which God will give us on the last day". This land had been visited and was truly a "paradise".

Brendan attempted to sail to this Promised Land. Though his first attempt failed, Brendan and his crew of 14 monks set off on a second voyage which lasted seven years and probably took them to Iceland, Greenland and even the American mainland. The later account, the *Navigatio*, is not a historical record, but contains many details suggestive of a voyage to the far North West.

Brendan encountered a gigantic creature "ploughing up the surface of the water and shooting out spray from its nostrils", probably a whale, and a column "of pure crystal" rising out of the sea, suggestive of an iceberg. Then a high cloud-covered mountain towards the north where "the cloud turned out to be smoke belching from its peak" and the mountain later "shot out great flames" a good description of volcanic activity, probably Iceland.

Brendan claimed to have discovered a new island far to the west, rich in grapes and apples, so wide that "forty day's wandering still did not bring them to the farther shore" and containing a river flowing through the middle of the country so vast they were unable to cross. The island was placed on many of the maps made from that time onward, and may have been one of the influences on Columbus. Brendan died in Ireland in 578 AD.

In 1976, a scholar named Tim Severin made a sea-going coracle exactly as described in the story and followed Saint Brendan's most likely route across the North Atlantic to Newfoundland via Iceland and Greenland. Though some question the reality of the voyage, Severin's trip argues St. Brendan's voyage "was no mere splendid medieval fantasy, but a highly plausible tale founded upon real events and real people."

