

# America Before Columbus

Clifford Nelson Atkinson

Virginia Research Royal Arch Chapter No. 1753

January 21, 2006

Many of you, like myself, obtained the bulk of our history education in the 40s, 50s, and 60s. We learned that Columbus discovered America in 1492. We may have seen references to Viking voyages to Greenland and the northern coast of North America around 1000 C.E., but they were barely mentioned.

Over the last fifty years there has been a growing body of evidence that the "New World" was discovered long before Columbus set sail. The first suggestion of contact between Europe and the Americas comes from writers of ancient Greece and Rome. Lands situated far to the west of the ocean beyond the "Pillars of Hercules" are mentioned by Aristotle. More intriguing, it is tied to the statement that the West Indies were visited regularly. Even stranger still, what are probably the most important references to pre-Columbian trans-Atlantic travel comes from the most unlikely source of all – Columbus himself.

In 1959, a Russian professor discovered a letter written by Columbus to Queen Isabella of Spain that shows he was well aware of the existence of the West Indies before he set sail on his voyage and that he carried a map of the islands made by earlier explorers. There are charts in the Library of Congress that prove this point. Rutgers University Professor Van Santina states that Columbus confirmed a secret trade route between Africa and the New World.

African contact with pre-Columbian America was confirmed in 1970 by a Professor of Art at the University of America in Mexico City. After an extensive examination of a large number of private collections and museums in the Americas, and as a result of his own excavations in Mexico, he discovered a substantial number of Negroid heads in clay, copper, copal, and gold. The heads, found in a variety of strata whose dates ranged from the earliest American civilization right up to the period of Columbus, are of undoubted African influence.

Despite the widespread belief that the culture of the Native American was a true Stone Age one, evidence does exist of metal working at a time of remote antiquity. The oldest metal artifacts in North America have been found in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Manufactured from copper, they include axes, knives, and chisels dated between 3000 and 4000 B.C.E. The naturally occurring copper was found as ingots in a relatively pure state and did not have to be smelted. One bizarre anomaly has yet to be explained. Assays made and reported in 1991 show that some of the copper artifacts found in North American burial grounds were not made from pure copper, but from zinc-copper alloys of Mediterranean origin.

Further intriguing evidence that gives proof to sustained Egyptian contact with the Americas has been discovered in Europe, which indicates the motive for the voyages-trade. Dr. Michelle Lescot of the Natural History Museum in Paris, while examining the wrappings of the mummy of Egyptian Pharaoh Rameses II (c. 1290 – 1224 B.C.E.) found herself looking at shreds of tobacco. When she continued her examination deep inside the mummy, her findings were confirmed. The internal organs, which had been placed in canopic jars during the mummification process, had been preserved using a mixture of vegetable products including chopped tobacco leaves. As the mummification process based upon these procedures was of long standing, sustained trade must have taken

place with the American continent, for at that time, this particular variety of tobacco was indigenous to America and did not occur elsewhere.

Roman shipping, which was of a far more sophisticated type than the Egyptian, would have had no trouble at all making this voyage. Roman ships considerably larger than Columbus' flagship, the *Santa Maria*, were common by the time of Jesus. Lionel Casson, an historian who specialized in ancient shipping, has stated that the Romans had cargo carriers of about 340 tons burden and grain ships of 1,200 tons.

Several Roman shipwrecks have been located off the coast of the United States, Honduras, and Brazil. Clearly identifiable artifacts have been recovered from many of them, mainly ceramic wine casks. As early as 1971, two were found in Castings Bay, Maine, by scuba divers at a depth of 12 meters. Colleagues at the Early Sites Research Society in Massachusetts identified them as being of Iberic/Roman manufacture of the first century C.E. Another was discovered near the shoreline of Jonesboro, Maine in 1972, large quantities of amphorae were discovered at the bottom of the Caribbean Sea off the coast of Honduras. Scholars who examined them identified them as originating in North African ports and applied for a permit to do a proper excavation of the wreck. Honduran government officials denied the request because "they feared further investigation might compromise the glory of Columbus."

North African amphorae seem to abound in the Americas. In 1976, a Brazilian diver found several on the seabed near Rio de Janeiro. Following his discovery, more were recovered. Some were passed to Professor Elizabeth Will at the University of Massachusetts, who identified them as Moroccan. She was able to narrow the point of manufacture down to the Mediterranean port of Zillis and dated them to the third century C.E.

Artifacts of Roman origin in North America are not restricted to shipwrecks. In 1943, James Howe bought a farm on the banks of the Roanoke River near Jeffress, Virginia. His first find was bog iron followed by slag, and he concluded that he had found the site of an old forge. He could find no records, however, of iron being worked anywhere near his property. Intrigued, he continued his search and found 400 pounds of iron and a natural draft furnace that had been used by these unidentified ironworkers. He began to excavate carefully and found various quantities of iron down to a depth of 80 cm. He then discovered a superb bronze cup in relatively good condition, two fragments of bronze, and a bronze spindle. The finding of the bronze amid the debris of an ancient ironworks indicates that the bronze artifacts had been imported from abroad and not made on the spot, for no trace of either copper or tin, the constituent metals of bronze, were found anywhere near the sites. The bronze cup is fascinating; six cups of a similar type and metallurgy were found in the ruins of Pompeii and is indisputably dated as being over 2,000 years old.

Just as Thor Heyerdahl's epic voyage in the *Ra* proved that Egyptian visits to America were feasible with even the most primitive forms of shipping, Tim Severin's re-creation in 1976 of the voyage of St. Brendan indicated the plausibility of many Celtic myths. Irish legends tell of many voyages to a magical land far to the west. The story recounting the Voyage of Bran tells of an Atlantic crossing to a place over ten times the size of Ireland. One Celtic clan, the Formorians, is believed to have sought refuge there after their defeat in battle.

Moreover, the legends of trans-Atlantic Celtic travel are not restricted to the Lands of Saints and Scholars. The folk traditions of the Native American people tend to confirm the blarneying stories of the native Irish.

Perhaps the most famous Celt reputed to have traveled to the New World is Sr. Brendan, the Abbot of Clonfert. Three versions of this legend were recorded. Two were from the eighth century, the "Life of Brendan" and "The Voyage of St. Brendan." A third is found in the twelfth-century work known as the "Book of Lismore." St. Brendan reputedly crossed the Atlantic in 565 C.E. and spent seven years in North America before returning to Ireland. No archaeological evidence exists that indicates the truth of this legend, with the possible exception of a stone beehive hut at Upton, Massachusetts. This intriguing structure is generally similar to early Celtic monk's cells found on the Blasket Isles off the coast of Kerry, southwest Ireland.

Although St. Brendan's expedition can only still be classified as legendary, it must be noted that the Spanish reported ancient stone forts in Florida and attribute their origin to ancient Welsh settlers.

Thor Heyerdahl and Tim Severin were not the first modern adventurers to demonstrate the feasibility of Atlantic crossings in ships of ancient design. In 1893, a replica of the Gokstad ship under the command of Captain Magnus Andersen crossed the Atlantic in time for the Chicago's World Fair. The Captain remarked that the ship's performance was remarkable and that her rudder was a work of a genius. On 15 May 1893, she out-sailed the steamships of that time by covering 223 nautical miles in twenty-fours, an hourly average of 9.3 knots. The same year, a replica of Columbus's flagship, the Santa Maria, also crossed the Atlantic, but averaged only 6.5 knots. Thus it can be clearly seen that, in design quality, build, and performance, the tenth-century Viking ships were far superior to the fifteenth-century vessels used by Columbus.

Viking culture, for all its sophistication, produced no early written literature. Their history was passed down orally in stories or sagas describing particular events or linked episodes.

These sagas did not achieve written form until between the twelfth and fourteenth century.

At first regarded by historians as mere myth or folklore, over the course of the last two centuries these sagas have come to be accepted by academics. Although told in narrative form, they are rich in historical material, which has served as a form of literary signpost pointing to irrefutable evidence of Viking occupation in Iceland, Greenland and, most dramatically of all, Newfoundland. The authenticity of the sagas as historical documents is now accepted, and the only point upon which historians differ to any significant degree is the exact dating of the events described, and even here there is strong consensus that limits the variation to not more than two years.

The earliest saga to take written form was the "Islendingabok," recorded by the Icelandic priest and historian Ari Frodi, also known as Ari the Learned. His account, written down between 1122 and 1132, provides some useful gems of information about the Viking exploration and settlement of the islands and coasts of the great northern ocean. Vineland is mentioned four times. He also records that the Viking settlers in Greenland found the remains of habitations and stone implements left by earlier settlers, and there were similar ruins in Vineland.

Iceland was the birthplace of the explorer Eric the Red who, even today, is a household name. In 982, Eric set sail to the west and made his first landfall on Greenland at a place he called Mid Glacier, an ice-covered mountain that was later Blacksark. He then sailed south along the east coast, constantly on the lookout for pastureland that would be suitable for settlement. He found a suitable place on a large island off the southwest coast of Greenland. By the summer of 986, Eric had gained support for a new settlement, and over a thousand people crammed into thirty-five ships and set sail with him. Many of

the ships were scattered by adverse winds or lost at sea; only fourteen reached their final destination, and the number of settlers who landed is estimated as little more than 400.

Even though the temperature in Greenland 1,000 years ago was appreciably warmer than at present, the country was still remarkably bleak and inhospitable. Yet Eric's newfound colony thrived for several years, eventually sustaining sixteen parish churches, a cathedral, a monastery, and a nunnery.

Leif, Eric's son, imbued with the Viking sense of adventure and curiosity, set sail with a crew of thirty-five men and made his first landfall at a mountainous island that his brother, Bjami, had seen. They explored the island and found that, inland, were great ice-covered mountains. According to the saga, from the sea to the mountains was like one great flat rock, almost totally devoid of good qualities. Leif called it Helluland — the Land of the Flat Rock. There is one point on the Newfoundland coast that matches this description with uncanny accuracy. If Leif had landed at what is now called Flat Rock Cove near Sr. John's, it would have provided an ideal harbor for his ship, and the nearby land of Flat Rock Point mirrors the description given.

The saga recounts that Leif and his men returned to their ship and once more put out to sea. They sailed until they found the second of the new lands described by Bjami. This was a wooded land fringed by white sand. Where they made landfall, the shore gently sloped toward the sea. Leif named this country Markland — the Land of Forests. Leif and his men left Markland in some haste, as they had detected an unusual wind blowing in just the right direction. After sailing for two days to the southwest, in which time a Viking ship of that era would have covered 300 miles, Leif made landfall once again. This would have placed him in the region of southern New England.

This place seemed almost ideal. The rivers abounded with salmon, and it appeared that cattle would have no problem with winter feed, for there was no frost and the grass did not wither much. The area was also well wooded. The hours of the day and night were more equally divided than in Greenland, so the Viking party set to build houses for the winter. The saga recounts that, one evening, one of their number went missing. The search party found him in high spirits, for he had found grapevines and grapes. Leif, therefore, named the land Vineland. This discovery was made in 1003.

There have been many investigations over the years to establish the exact location of Vineland and Markland, resulting in a consensus that identifies Markland as Nova Scotia and Vineland as somewhere in New England. The area identified with Leif's original settlement has been variously claimed as near the Gulf of Maine in the vicinity of Boston, but more credibly as Narragansett Bay and the area surrounding present-day Newport Rhode Island. Modern archaeologist Helge Ingstad reports that anthracite coal that originated in Rhode Island was found in Viking settlements in Greenland. From the time that Leif Ericsson brought his first cargo of timber and grapes back to Greenland, the Viking lands in the New World were used as a rich source of raw materials, with Markland being a primary source of timber for the Greenlanders. The manifests of cargos landed at Bergen in Norway tell us that Greenland shipping brought to the home country a variety of furs of great value, including the skins of marmot, otter, beaver, wolverine, lynx, sable, and black bear, yet none of these animals were native to Greenland; all were from the New World.

Thus documentary evidence attesting to the kingdom of Norway's claims to sovereignty over "new" lands to the west was plentiful by the mid-fourteenth century. In the final decade of that century, Queen Margrette of Norway charged her principal advisor, Henry St. Clair of Orkney, with the task of exploring and exploiting these lands in a manner that would free the kingdom from the stranglehold of trade exerted by the Hanseatic League



(Germany). Henry St. Clair's ancestors built Rosslyn Chapel. Many modern writers today credit his ancestors with establishing the foundation of Freemasonry, but that is a story for another day.