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HOW AMERICA WAS DISCOVERED

Ralph A. Sanders

A case can be made that Rodrigo de Triana discovered America. Aboard the *Pinta* on Columbus's first voyage, Rodrigo excitedly called out "tierra! tierra!", as he spotted land at two o'clock on the morning of October 12, 1492. Rodrigo had reason for his excitement. After all, his own "Admiral-General of the Ocean Sea", Christopher Columbus, promised a fine bounty for the first of his crew to see land. But Columbus in fact chose to renege on his promise, claiming that he, the Admiral, actually eyed that same land the night before. So, as we have been taught, Christopher Columbus discovered America. Alas, poor Rodrigo. He may have been the first to see land, but for that achievement Rodrigo found nothing of fame or fortune.

Was Rodrigo alone in his experience? Have the narratives of discovery got the story wrong? Rodrigo's tale suggests that we ask, who actually discovered what? How certain are we that our famous discoverers of America - the Columbuses, Vespuccis and their like - are actually the first discoverers? These lionized heroic figures from times past no doubt deserve *something* of credit for their achievements, but precisely what they achieved and did not achieve is another matter altogether. So, let's look again at these discoveries of the new world with a closer view as to who actually came first.

Prelude to Discovery

Discovery stories of America from a European perspective begin with the earliest ideas about the Atlantic Ocean, questions of what lay far out beyond the familiar old world shores. The earliest accounts of Atlantic oceanic sailings belong to the Irish. In the Irish literary tradition of the *immram* - Irish navigational narratives - we find stories in the 8th century of Bran mac Feabhail, who endeavored to find the "Otherworld" in the Atlantic and who is said to have discovered the Island of Joy and the Land of Women. Another *immram* mentions Mael Duin, who sailed to find the murderer of his father, but who along the way visited no fewer than thirty-one islands. Yet another *immram* figure was St. Brendan who ventured out in hopes of finding another more blessed, more

perfect, other land across the sea. St. Brendan's story, later than other *immram*s and with more documentation, has Brendan of Clonfert (c 484 – c 577), a veteran of sailing to close islands and the nearest parts of western Europe, finally undertaking a seven years voyage to discover an earthly paradise on the far side of the uncharted ocean. What is common to all these stories, and others of early sailings, was the reliance and dependence on legend, on hopes and dreams, that fired the imagination and made the inspiring prospect of glorious success worth undertaking. From St. Brendan we learn of his search for the Garden of Eden, and his discovery of "Islands of Sheep, Jasconious, and a Paradise of Birds." (One wonders who might have placed their livestock on these previously unknown Islands of Sheep). Though these early discoveries of St. Brendan paled with time, another land, called St. Brendan's Island, persisted among sailors and mapmakers for hundreds of years; even Christopher Columbus hoped to come upon it during his voyage of 1492. Not least in the Irish imagination was the disappearing island of Hy-Brasil lying somewhere to the west of Ireland. This peculiar place was plotted on ocean maps as early as 1325. John Cabot, before his 1498 excursion to North America sailed in search of Hy-Brasil (this name "Hy-Brasil", of Irish etymology, has no connection with the Portuguese-named "Brasil" or "Brazil" of South America).

Mythical islands were routinely imagined and searched for by early European seafarers. From Iberia we learn of the legendary island of Antillia, believed to have been discovered and populated by seven Visigoth bishops with their flocks and fabulous wealth about the year 750. The island made its first mapped appearance in 1424 and continued on in most nautical charts throughout the 15th century. In another legend, Welsh lore has it that Prince Madoc, weary of war in his homeland, sailed in 1170 to North America with a pioneering party, landing said by some to have been in Mobile Bay, Alabama. Dubious though that Welsh claim might be, both cases here suggest that sailing capabilities in Europe were expanding.

It was Norse Vikings who led the way. Theirs was a breakthrough of historic proportions, not mainly through their ship design, which was highly innovative, but rather by imagining oceanic voyaging in an entirely new way. While others dreamed of reaching exotic islands, the Norse saw opportunities for trade, for plunder and for gaining new land. By fits and starts, Norse forays into practical, businesslike voyaging created an entirely

new era of Atlantic history. The Norse too had their mythology, in part a mythology of the ocean itself, a belief that Aegir commanded the sea, and, charmingly, his nine daughters expressed themselves as waves. But within the framework of Aegir's consent, the Norse fanned out, seeking practical opportunity. Pushing their way outward from Scandinavia, the Norse reached Scotland, Ireland and nearby islands, eventually touching Iceland to the west before the year 900. By the time they landed in Iceland, however, Irish clerics had already founded a monastery there as many as two centuries before. Although the early *immram*s seem to have ignored this achievement, the founding of monasteries was a constant theme of St. Brendan and those Irishmen who followed his lead. Their efforts indisputably establish the Irish and not the Norse as the originators of Atlantic exploration.

The Norse idea of sailing for practical reasons, that is, for gain, was not lost on others in the Baltic region. By the 1200s the Hanseatic League came into being led by German entrepreneurs who fused together artisanal guilds and hansas-trading houses to link like-minded cities devoted to long distance trade. Consolidations of both state and mercantile power created a base of means and motivation for outreach beyond the simple coastwise circulation of goods. Increasingly, the search for commodities, resources, and material wealth dominated seafaring enterprise. By the 1300s, throughout Europe, ever-widening circles of exploration, trade, and the learning of new opportunities become the rule. This persistent pattern of maritime expansion over two centuries made European discovery of America quite inevitable.

Somewhat remarkably, the expansion of maritime horizons in the 1300s occurred throughout northern Europe almost simultaneously. As the Hanseatic League grew in power and outreach to link as many as two hundred cities of Northwest and Central Europe, excursions into North Atlantic waters increased as well. The Basques of northern Spain and southwestern France seem to have led the way. Traditional Basque whaling in nearby Bay of Biscay slowly gave way to longer-distance ventures. Basque whalers are said to have traded with Greenland in the 1300s as part of their whale hunts off the coast of Labrador. The whalers' need to establish nearby flensing stations during the hunt suggests that Basques may well have used the eastern Canadian shoreline, perhaps in Labrador, with some regularity. By that time, of course, Norse movements into Iceland, Greenland, and at least intermittently into the same Canadian region had been firmly

established. The English had developed a fish trade with Iceland from early in the fifteenth century, if not before, leading to their vigorous exploitation of cod resources on the Grand Banks off Nova Scotia a half a century later. Some evidence suggests that German and Dutch ships visited Iceland at early dates as well.

Maritime excursions into the Atlantic by the Spanish, Portuguese, and Italians of southern Europe were somewhat slower to develop, the main instances not occurring until the 1400s. Spanish navigators in particular had little presence in the nearby Atlantic. One exception may lie in a voyage of Jaume Ferrer, a second generation Genoan living in Majorca. Ferrer reputedly sailed under the flag of Majorca to the west coast of Africa in 1346 searching for a "River of Gold", though the outcome of his attempt is unknown. The most prominent early Atlantic venturers from southern Europe were Portuguese navigators touching islands and mainlands along the northwestern coast of Africa. But it was not until the early 1400s that Portugal began a serious westward reach, discovering and claiming for her own the island of Madeira (1419), the Azores (1427), and the Cape Verde Islands off the coast of West Africa (1456).

Italian commerce, on the other hand, was largely confined to the Mediterranean, where trading with the Near East flourished during and long after the Roman Empire, but there is little to suggest that either the Genoans nor the Venetians, the two principal Italian ports, systematically ventured beyond Gibraltar before the 1400s. But centuries of navigation and trade produced in these Italian city-states a competitive, entrepreneurial, and opportunistic outlook which played significantly in the later epoch of American discovery.

As the 1400s reached their final decades, the stage was well set for the Age of Discovery of the Americas to begin. Ever-enlarging spheres of European interest pushed to the outermost portions of the known Atlantic during the 1400s, leaving only the question of how far one might push westward to reach the coveted prizes of Asia. During that century and the years that followed, a pattern emerged in Atlantic voyaging that adhered to facts of latitude, that is to say, southern European navigators - the Portuguese and Spanish - generally constrained their efforts to southern waters below 30 degrees north latitude. Those of western Europe - mainly the English, Dutch, and French - generally sailed between 30 and 60 degrees north; and the high-latitude Norse generally

remained north of the 60th degree parallel. Seafarers of these nations who finally reached the Americas typically did so at these particular latitudes.

Christopher Columbus's initial voyage of 1492 touched off an entirely new era in European venturing, in part because he succeeded in reaching a land destination by sailing west, but also because he reported back this fact with concrete evidence to superiors in Portugal and Spain, and announced his findings in several widely shared letters. The main message was: land can be reached by sailing directly west. That he "discovered America" on this voyage, however, is belied by facts. Columbus thought he had reached Asia, and never wavered in that belief. On his initial voyage, Columbus saw neither North nor South America, discovering nothing of America as a previously unknown world. So, the large question to ask is: who among the Europeans actually discovered America? That question is deceptively difficult to answer, because the American continents are very large, and European oceanic expansion was everywhere getting underway. Assigning credit to those who initially found parts of this new world is by no means a simple task.

To illustrate the point, consider that even Columbus's initial voyage of discovery of islands in the Caribbean in 1492 may have been preceded by another. A story with some support by Columbus's contemporaries has it that a certain Portuguese navigator, by name Alonso Sanchez de Huelva, was pushed across the ocean by storms originating off the coast of Africa in 1484, landing then on some western island. Alonso eventually made his way home, arriving in the Azores on the island of Terceira. There he was led to Columbus's home on that island, sharing his experience and ship's log with Columbus. Alonso died shortly thereafter, presumably leaving all his knowledge in Columbus's hands. A statue of Alonso Sanchez stands in Huelva today to commemorate his adventure.

So, we want to look at the matter of the European discovery of America. Our focus here reflects the massive European influence on later history that derives from these early European adventures. But on this point, we are reminded that to credit Europeans for their discovery of America is a narrowly Eurocentric idea. The lands Europeans discovered were long known to people who lived there, and so to those unnamed aboriginal folk goes first credit for discovery.

First Peoples

The first discoverers of America were paleolithic people who arrived in today's Alaska many millennia ago, but who were they? Let's not call them "Amerinds" - American Indians - as is sometimes done, because they could not be "American" until Amerigo Vespucci lent his name to "America", nor were they "Indians", until Columbus claimed to have reached the "Indies". Alternatively, the earliest peoples might be called "Beringians", after the recently coined place-name. "Beringia" is defined as that territory spanning the Asian and North American continents, land that includes parts of both Siberia and Alaska, and also includes the so-called "land bridge" connecting the two continents much as the Isthmus of Panama connects North and South America. But Beringia is named for a Dane, Vitus Bering, who in 1728 sailed those Arctic waters that today separate the Asian and North American mainlands. From Bering's voyage we have named those waters the "Bering Strait". So, labeling the ancient paleolithic people "Beringians" thus carries yet another European tinge. Not incidental to our theme of more carefully identifying first discoverers, celebrating Bering's achievement might use some tempering. Another sailor known to have navigated the strait- the *Bering Strait* - was Semyon Dezhnev, a Russian explorer of Siberia and the first European to sail there 80 years before Vitus Bering did so, in 1648. It would serve the cause of justice to place the "Dezhnev Strait" on our modern maps.

In fact, we have no name for the peoples who first crossed from Siberia into Alaska perhaps 16,000 years ago, but their later descendants, dwelling in Alaska by at least 10,000 BCE, were the Yupik people, and so we can say for now, pending new research, that the first discoverers of what we call America were ancestral Yupiks. Or were they?

The existence of the Beringian land bridge has been well established as the avenue of first migration to North America, but it was not the only such bridge at that time. The same glaciation that lowered sea levels in Beringia also massively extended polar glaciation southward into the northern half of Europe and the North Atlantic Ocean. This resulted in a hemispheric geography rather different than we now know. A second solid surface, made solely of ice, linked today's coastal France with America's Chesapeake

region. And, it is suggested, another paleolithic group made its way along the Atlantic glacial coastline to North America, at roughly the same time that Alaska was first populated. These were the Solutrians of France. Any evidence of this migration route along the glacier front of course would have long disappeared with glacial retreat, but some evidence of distinctive Solutrian stoneworking culture has been unearthed in the Chesapeake region. This hypothesis of Solutrian discovery of America has numerous doubters, however, in spite of its temporal and geographical parallels with Beringian migration. Yet, with this possibility, however remote, we have a rival party in the story of who came first to the Americas.

Ancient paleolithic figures came to be viewed as indigenous to the Americas over the numerous millennia that followed initial and subsequent migrations, and it is against that long backdrop that we take up the matter of European discoveries of America, those historical events that inexorably spawned epic collisions between aboriginal and European cultures in the Americas. European oceanic voyaging was long in developing, over as many as a thousand years, as purely local sailing extended into ever longer arcs. Those arcs eventually reached western shores.

Atlantic Canada

By as early as the year 800 the Norse Vikings had established themselves as rulers of the far north Atlantic. By 871 they had permanently settled in Iceland, following the lead of an original pioneer, Ingolfur Arnarsson, and also a certain Naddodd, a Norwegian sailor who, lost at sea, inadvertently came upon the island as the first Norse visitor. But Iceland, as we have noted, had long been known to Irishmen who built a monastery there in the 7th or 8th century.

Beyond Iceland, Norse Vikings continued their push west. After settling Iceland, a party of Icelanders moved on to Greenland. We learn that Eric ("The Red") Thorvaldsson established his settlement in Greenland in 984, and thereby, at least in the eyes of some, became known as Greenland's original discoverer. But that honor does not belong to Eric. Another Icelander, Gunnbjorn Ulfsson, visited Greenland almost a century before and, from Ulfsson's early report, later sailors were able to avoid a navigational hazard in

the form of "Gunnbjorn's skerries" , a group of low-lying islets between Iceland and Greenland.

Not long after Eric Thorvaldsson reached Greenland with his settlement party in 986, a certain Bjarni Herjolfsson, sailing west from Iceland, overshot Greenland and found himself in sight of the North American mainland, almost certainly the first European to have seen this new land. Bjarni returned to Greenland with his story and eventually, by the year 1000, Leif Ericsson had purchased Bjarni's boat and led an expedition to today's Newfoundland, establishing a base that today is known as L'Anse aux Meadows. For this act, Leif Ericsson is now honored as the original European discoverer of the New World. But in fact, Ericsson had followed in Bjarni Herjolfsson's wake and in his boat.

Remarkably little of the Norse settlement of Greenland and their North American excursions was known to other Europeans, in spite of the fact that the Greenland settlement lasted four full centuries, and had demarcated Atlantic Canada as consisting of three areas, which they called "Helluland" (Baffin Island), "Markland" (Labrador), and "Vinland" (Newfoundland, possibly parts of Nova Scotia). A recent excavation on Baffin Island, called the "Helluland Project", hints at a permanent or semi-permanent Norse settlement there, dating back to about 1200. For centuries, Norse Greenlanders paid church tithes and Papal Crusade taxes and exported walrus tusks, animal hides, and hunting falcons to favored elites in England and elsewhere. But following the ultimate failure of the Greenland settlement and any institutional memory of it in Norway or elsewhere after 1400, Greenland itself would have to await its own "rediscovery" later in that century, as would those parts of Atlantic Canada the Norse regularly visited.

Following the Norse were the Basques. As noted previously, there are grounds to think the Basques of northern Spain and southwestern France visited the region on whale hunts at least a century before Christopher Columbus's first voyage to the new world. Whale hunts required whaling stations to reduce the volume of usable whale product before returning home, suggesting that an intermittent Basque presence in mainland Atlantic Canada was required. One author places Basques there as early as 1372.

A crucial fact of this earliest history is that neither the Norse nor the Basques produced any maps of the North Atlantic region, leaving no hints of territories for later adventurers to seek. That is why an early map of the area, called the "Zeno map", once enjoyed a

strong following among North Atlantic seafarers. First published in 1558 in Venice by a family descendant named Nicolo Zeno, the map and accompanying material describes a voyage to North America by the Zeno brothers and a noble Scotsman, Henry Sinclair, about the year 1400. In modern times, the Zeno map has been thoroughly debunked, owing to its numerous inaccuracies and exaggerations. But there is more to this story as it bears on the discovery of lands in Atlantic Canada.

Some background. The Zeno family of Venice gained prominence from its deeper past. The Zenos originally gained considerable wealth controlling a Venetian franchise for transporting European Crusaders to the Middle East. Later, a certain Carlo Zeno became something of a local Venetian legend, having been instrumental in defeating the hated Genoans in the Battle of Chioggia in 1379, a war over Mediterranean trading practices. This naval hero, Carlo Zeno, had brothers Nicolò (c. 1326–c. 1402) and Antonio Zeno (died c. 1403), who themselves became famous for their subsequently described exploration of North Atlantic and Arctic waters.

We learn of Nicolo and Antonio through a Zeno family account, given to us by a descendant in this family, also named Nicolo. Through the brothers' surviving letters to one another, this later Nicolo, an historian in his own right, assembled a story of their adventures and produced a map of the North Atlantic, publishing the whole of it in the year 1558, about 150 years after the original Zeno letters were written. In this publication, we learn that the Zeno brothers met up with a Scottish noble named Henry Sinclair, whose authority extended to several islands off Scotland, and whose territorial interests drove him westward. Together, Sinclair and the Zenos are said to have made their way to several islands and to the North American coastline. According to Nicolo Zeno (the younger) all this took place not later than the year 1400, nearly a century before Columbus's famous initial voyage. This account to some skeptics was Nicolo Zeno's attempted revenge on the Genoans, erasing the fame of that notorious Genoan, Christopher Columbus, with Zeno successes, beating Columbus to the new world by nearly a century. Nicolo also told of Nicolo and Antonio discovering the new world of walled cities and empires of gold, similarly replacing Spanish discoveries in Central and South America with Zeno deeds. Nicolo, it seems, had only a weak grasp of the vastness of the new world, ascribing to his forebears a wildly improbable voyage of discovery.

So, reasons abound for rejecting the younger Nicolo Zeno's tale of events purportedly occurring about the year 1400. But the question remains. How are we to regard Zeno's story? Is Nicolo's written account of 1558 merely a cheap fiction, or is it a reckless, deeply-biased, and poorly documented account of a voyage that actually did take place? Nicolo states that the Zeno brothers with Sinclair found two locations in North America, places they called "Estotiland" and "Drogio". Superimposing the Zeno map on a modern one shows that "Estotiland" closely corresponds locationally with Newfoundland or Nova Scotia, and "Drogio" with Labrador. This superimposed coincidence itself seems highly unlikely as a fictional account, accurately conjecturing a North American geography that Zeno himself cannot have known.

Some interpretations suggest that "Estotiland" refers to a new Scotland, in deference to Henry Sinclair's interests. More interestingly, the mysterious label "Drogio" may refer to Basque whaling near Labrador. The term "drogio" (not a Venetian term) stems in this case from Basque whale hunting techniques. Heavy wooden drogues (as in the modern usage, "drogue parachutes") were attached to harpooned whales to slow them down until a final capture was made. If Basques used whaling stations in Labrador and were there before 1400 as previously suggested, then Zeno's choice of "Drogio" as a place name for Labrador feels more like an authentic account than one of fictive imagination. The younger Nicolo Zeno cannot possibly have known of Basque hunting techniques in that part of the Atlantic except from actual letters written by the earlier Zenos before 1400.

Whether or not we can accept the notion that Henry Sinclair and the Zeno brothers reached North America by 1400, any further European venturing to that part of the north Atlantic is not documented for most of the fifteenth century, at least for seventy years of it. Before that time, fifteenth century whaling hunting by the Basques and fishing by the English on the fertile Grand Banks - the shallow continental shelf lying off the coast of Newfoundland - are likely to be the only instances of European presence. The Greenland settlement and its intermittent visits to the North American mainland had utterly collapsed by the 1430s if not before. But European maritime interests in the direction of Atlantic Canada finally emerged in the 1470s with an initiative under Danish King Christian I to learn more of the region's resources and trading opportunities. He outfitted a fleet of ships for that purpose under command of Didrik Pining and Hans Pothurst, two

experienced Baltic sailors and pirate hunters. A parallel account has it that a certain John Scolvus (sometimes called John of Kolno, a Pole) may have sailed with the Danish fleet. Also, owing to a royal marriage between Denmark and Portugal, Portuguese mariner Joao Corte-Real joined the expedition. From this involvement, we learn that Corte-Real may have explored land he called "Terra Nova do Bacalhau" ("new land of the codfish"), probably either Labrador or Newfoundland. Presumably, Pining, Pothurst, and Scolvus visited this place as well. If so, then Corte-Real and his party landed in North America about two decades before Christopher Columbus's first new world voyage.

Decades of fishing in the western waters of the Atlantic, perhaps together with contemporary accounts gleaned from Portuguese mariners, led the English to venture its first known Atlantic voyage explicitly aimed at discovery. In 1480, John Jay, a merchant of Bristol, together with a partner Thomas Croft, set out to find the "Island of Bresylle" and to traverse the seas for other lands. The initial attempt was driven back by storms, but in 1481 another attempt was undertaken. Although no record of discovery for this latter voyage was recorded at the time, John Jay later claimed the (non-existent) Island of Brasil had been found, suggesting his ships in fact may have reached land, perhaps in North America.

By far the most important, if not the first, discovery of North America in its northern reaches resulted from the voyages of John Cabot, also known as Giovanni Caboto, a citizen of Venice. He sailed for England first in 1496, four years after Columbus landed in the West Indies, with a charter "to find, discover and investigate whatsoever islands, countries, regions or provinces of heathens and infidels, in whatsoever part of the world placed, which before this time were unknown to all Christians." In none of this did Cabot actually succeed, having been foiled by unfavorable weather, an unruly crew, and inadequate supplies. He set out again in 1497, this time reaching Atlantic Canada - perhaps Newfoundland - spending only about three weeks surveying the coastline before returning to Bristol. Cabot believed he had touched upon Asia, much as Columbus had thought, and considered, rightly, that high latitude sailing toward Asia would produce a shorter, more viable, route to that destination. In retrospect, this 1497 voyage appears to have been a reconnaissance for a larger expedition, which Cabot undertook with five ships in 1498. In preparation, Cabot carried with him some merchandise, including

"cloth, caps, lace points and other trifles", items for trade with native populations he expected to encounter. Cabot's third voyage lasted two years, time enough to have explored much of the North American eastern seaboard from Canada to Chesapeake Bay, and possibly even further south into the Spanish Caribbean. This excursion provided a first North American foothold for England, and offered crucial information for the continental coastline north of Florida that Juan De la Cosa found useful a year later in compiling his map of 1500. Fragmentary evidence further suggests that an Augustinian friar Giovanni Antonio de Carbonariis accompanied the 1498 expedition, remaining perhaps in Newfoundland to found a mission. If Carbonariis succeeded in creating a settlement in North America, it would have been the first Christian settlement on the continent.

Before the century was out, another English mariner named William Weston, who had accompanied Cabot on an earlier voyage, set out to find the "new found land", visiting the same part of the Canadian Atlantic, ranging northward far above Labrador. At about the same time, in 1498, João Fernandes Labrador visited the region on behalf of Portugal, first sighting what is now known as Labrador, and charted the coasts of southwestern Greenland and adjacent northeastern North America. Portugal supported a followup to Labrador's visit, commissioning two sons of Joao Corte-Real, Miguel and Gaspar, to pursue their father's early finds, "rediscovering" Greenland and mapping coastal Labrador in 1499 and 1500. With these acts, the rediscovery of the North Atlantic region of Canada was largely completed.

Florida and the Southeast

By 1500, Spanish ships plied the Caribbean Basin and lands to the south of Columbus's Indies with considerable regularity. By 1504, the Spanish had established Santo Domingo on the island of Hispaniola as a base for wide ranging explorations. From Santo Domingo, ships reached several other prominent islands and various points in Central America; later on Santo Domingo provided a base of operations for Cortez in Mexico, Balboa in Panama, and Pizzaro in Peru. The Caribbean - mainly Hispaniola - was the initial Spanish stronghold in earliest America. But this busy pattern of Caribbean

discovery and exploration in the first decade of the 1500s reveals a startling oddity. From available accounts, it seems the Spanish at this time never sailed *north*. Had they done so, they easily could have reached Florida, which in fact lay closer to Hispaniola than either Cuba or Panama, both places the Spanish actively chose to explore.

The continent of North America is too vast to have been discovered in a singular instance. We know that the Norse had landed in the far north of the continent several centuries before the Spanish or Portuguese ventured westward. Those earlier discoveries in Atlantic Canada has no bearing whatever on Spanish explorations in the Caribbean region. But when and how the *southeastern* part of North America was actually discovered is shrouded in considerable mystery. Established facts are scanty. We know that the Spaniard Ponce de Leon landed on the northeast coast of Florida in the year 1513, and that in 1519 Alonso Alvarez de Pineda explored and mapped the Gulf of Mexico coastlines of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and western Florida, lands which he called "Amichel". But incontrovertible evidence establishes that neither Ponce de Leon nor Alonso de Pineda could have been the first discoverers of the southeast region of North America. Two fully authenticated maps of the southeast region, one in 1500 and the other in 1502, were drawn long before either of these explorers reached his destination.

A somewhat unappreciated Spanish mariner named Juan de la Cosa may have seen more of the Spanish Caribbean than any other in the earliest days of discovery. De la Cosa's presence is found in many of the accounts attributing discoveries to others. He owned and piloted the *Santa Maria*, Columbus's flagship in the 1492 voyage, joining Columbus again in 1493 for the second voyage as Master of the *Marigalante*, and yet again with Columbus in 1498 aboard the *La Nina*. In 1499 De la Cosa joined Ojeda and Vespucci for his fourth Atlantic voyage, this time touching land in South America's north coast, and a fifth voyage in 1499 took him, with Balboa and Bastidas, to Colombia and Panama. Twice more De la Cosa visited the Caribbean region after that, eventually losing his life in 1509 in a clash with natives near present-day Cartagena. Yet, as a matter of historical accounting, De la Cosa's fame rests not on his voyages per se, but rather on his cartographic skill. Noted as an important Spanish cartographer in his day, De la Cosa authored the first map of the new world in 1500. In it, he portrays a large North

American landmass, an extensive Central America nearly joining the two continents, and a somewhat exaggerated northern coast of South America. In sum, he showed that the Caribbean was encapsulated on three sides by land, approachable by sea only from the east. De la Cosa's map in broad outline is a decent representation of what we accept today as geographical fact.

But De la Cosa's portrayal of the region leaves us uncomfortable because it exhibits two features that ought not to have appeared at all, given the limited amount of Spanish exploration that had taken place before 1500. In his experience before 1500 or that of other Spanish explorers in his time, Juan de la Cosa cannot have known any part of the North American coastline, either along the Atlantic seaboard or along its southern coast, nor of any part of Central America except perhaps near Panama. No Spanish ships of record by 1500 had visited these places. But all these features are found on De la Cosa's map. In addition, De la Cosa characterized Cuba as an island, a view contrary to Columbus's belief that Cuba was a peninsula extending off the Asian mainland. These two men disagreed despite the fact that De la Cosa and Columbus sailed together on the first three of Columbus's voyages, two of which landed on the Cuban coast. How de la Cosa could have reached a conclusion different from Columbus from their equivalent experience remains an unanswered question.

The De la Cosa map contains findings either from some undocumented Spanish explorations of these parts of the new world or, more likely, it exposes a wholly new episode of North American discovery. In the latter case, it would not be the Spanish who discovered these lands, but the Portuguese. Although no written records of early Portuguese presence in North America have surfaced, some evidence for this interpretation does exist in the form of another map of North America. Drawn in 1502, just two years after De la Cosa's work, is the so-called "Cantino" map, a Portuguese version of the new lands across the Atlantic. The map's author is unknown; the name "Cantino" refers to an Italian spy, Alberto Cantino, who secreted a copy of the document from Portuguese archives for Italy's Duke of Ferrara.

This map, drafted in Lisbon, provides text and labels in Portuguese and its contents clearly reflect Portuguese interests in Brazil and elsewhere. It offers a careful sketch of major Caribbean islands and precise detail from Portuguese exploration of coastal

Brazil. The map's representation of the north coast of South America suggests the author also knew of Spanish explorations there. Juan de la Cosa's interpretation that Cuba is an island may have been taken from Portuguese sources before 1500. But, most significantly, the Cantino chart provides in exquisite detail a depiction of both the east and west coasts of Florida, showing numerous major river inlets with Portuguese names for them. None of Florida's detailed geography was known to the Spanish by 1502 or for a decade after that.

Although the Cantino map was drawn in 1502, it is evidently a compilation of what was previously known to the Portuguese maritime community and what could have been gleaned from Spanish sources. In 1494, a treaty between Spain and Portugal delimited rights of discovery for each nation, Portugal to possess such land as it found lying east of a line bifurcating the Atlantic Ocean, and Spain to have lands to the west of it. Thus all of the New World, both north and south, save the Brazilian easternmost coast, belonged to the Spanish. This means that Portuguese knowledge of Florida and the Caribbean necessarily was acquired before 1494, or that the Portuguese engaged in illicit new world exploration after that date. We have no means to determine which might be true, but we can presume that in either case the Portuguese were first discoverers of the southeastern coast of North America. Ponce de Leon and Alonso de Pineda certainly were not.

Brazil

On March 9, 1500, Pedro Alvarez Cabral departed Portugal with great fanfare on a mission designed to follow up Vasco da Gama's discovery of the sea route to India. During the initial voyage of 1498, da Gama noted that land could be seen in the Atlantic's western waters, but he made no landfall there. Though Cabral's main intention was to follow up da Gama's voyage to India, he initially chose to pursue da Gama's suggestion that new lands could be found by sailing west. News of Columbus's early successes in the western Atlantic undoubtedly had reached his ears as well. On April 22, 1500, Cabral landed on present-day Brazil's northeast coast, and after a preliminary reconnaissance, determined that this land was great in extent and claimed the whole for the crown of

Portugal. From this expedition, Pedro Cabral is generally recognized today as the discoverer of South America.

But this claim for Cabral seems more political than factual, an attempt to legitimize and reinforce Portugal's assertion of control over Brazil. Two other mariners sailing for Spain offer grounds for believing in earlier landfalls. Amerigo Vespucci, sailing in the name of a province of Spain, is sometimes credited with discovering South America, having visited Brazil in 1497, three years before Cabral, and also the north coast of the continent at Guyana in 1499. An even stronger claim can be made for Vincente Pinzon. Vincente captained the *Nina* in Columbus's first voyage in 1492, and thereafter made several voyages to the new world. He discovered the mouth of the Amazon, thinking it to be the Ganges River of India, in January of 1500, four months before Pedro Cabral landed in Brazil.

Yet probably none these, not Pedro Cabral, Amerigo Vespucci, or Vincente Pinzon, was first in reaching Brazil. That honor more likely falls to Jean Cousin, a French mariner who may have landed near the Amazon in 1488, four years before Columbus's initial voyage. Evidently Cousin established some kind of trading station in Brazil, as in 1504, another French mariner, Binot Paulmier de Gonneville asserted that when he visited Brazil, French traders from Saint Malo and Dieppe had by 1504 been trading there for "several years". Sailing with Cousin in 1488 was Martin Alonso Pinzon, Vincente's older brother, who later captained the *Pinta* for Columbus's sailing of 1492, and who frequently is credited with assisting in Columbus's navigation, drawing on his earlier experience with Cousin.

French records of Jean Cousin's first landing in Brazil were lost in a fire started by an English bombardment in 17th century France, but fragmentary gleanings from this period of French exploration have been assembled by noted anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in his *Triste Tropiques*. He cites a French trading vessel returning home in 1531 with a cargo of three thousand leopard skins, three hundred monkeys, and six hundred parrots "which already knew a few words of French." Further, he asserts that the name "Bresil" was of French origin, dating back at least to the 12th century, referring to a mythical continent whence wooden dyes were obtained, a name thereafter adopted by visitors for the newly discovered Brazil. Levi-Strauss adds that after the time of Cousin, numerous

items from native vocabularies were incorporated into the French language without intervening transmission from Iberian sources, terms such as *manioc*, *tapir*, *jaguar*, *agouti*, *toucan*, *caiman*, and *coati*, among others.

Venezuela

One facet of the discovery of South America lay in the Brazilian east coast - places where Cousin, Vespucci, Pinzon, and Cabral landed - but this did not constitute the sole pathway of discovery. Landfalls on the continent's north coast occurred as well. As noted, Amerigo Vespucci made landfall in Guyana in 1499, the same year that Rodrigo Bastidas of Spain, along with Vasco Balboa, visited Colombia and Panama. But the earliest of these north coast explorers was Christopher Columbus himself on his third voyage, when he arrived in today's Venezuela in 1498. Columbus appreciated that a river so mighty as the Orinoco could arise only from a landmass of continental scale. Thus a claim might be made that Christopher Columbus actually did discover America, but only on his third voyage, and only one portion of the South American New World. But even that claim depends on discounting the possible earlier accomplishments of Jean Cousin and Amerigo Vespucci.

WHO THEN DISCOVERED AMERICA?

Unambiguously, the first European to discover any part of America was Bjarni Herjolfsson, the Norwegian. All others followed, in different places and at different times. We've accounted for most of these individuals here and in so doing, have identified their places of origin. All except the Norse sailed under a flag of some ruling authority, either a nation or a kingdom that eventually was absorbed into a modern nation. It makes some sense then to interpret discoveries as sponsored events. In this view, the discoverers of the new world were, in whatever order you prefer, Norway, Denmark, England, France, Spain, and Portugal. All those who have been honored as first discoverers of America, by and large, were those whom their state sponsors or chroniclers chose to enshrine.

Sources

A large number of sources were consulted in the production of this article. Among the most instructive have been:

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