Myths, Facts, and Debates:
Christopher Columbus and the New World before 1492

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Christopher Columbus had long attracted the interest of scholars before mass publication of biographies in the past several generations caught the imaginations of the public at large. Yet his life remains controversial. Historians continue to argue about their findings because within the past thirty years research has modified much received opinion, particularly touching the question whether or not Columbus knew of the existence of the New World before sailing to it in 1492. Historians are closer to the answer than ever before, but as with other points of contention, the known facts are confusing.

One is usually taught that Columbus learned as a sailor and navigator that the world was round and, therefore, to afford Europe a cheaper way to reach Asia, sailors proposed to sail westward across the Atlantic into unknown waters. Columbus approached Ferdinand and Isabel with a proposal to do just that at their expense, and after seven long years, they agreed. This interpretation, leading one to believe that Columbus blandly ignored the project's obstacles, risks and dangers, has now been largely discredited by researchers who showed that Columbus had done much preparatory work before his famous voyage, and probably knew more about the New World than the records could ever show.

For instance, those who have studied his contract for the first voyage of 1492, cite a passage which stated Columbus would receive privileges and rights "for what he has discovered in the ocean seas,"¹ words that sparked disagreement among linguists, historians, lawyers, and interested non-specialists. Some argue that this passage proves Columbus had already discovered America and uses the past tense for legal reasons. Others dismiss the passage as poorly written. A third group thinks that this phrasing reflects his arrogant certainty that he would discover new lands. When Salvador de Madariaga wrote his famous biography of Columbus just before World War II, he dismissed any suggestion that the Admiral meant territories which he had already discovered, and argued that Columbus, assuming the voyage would be successful, had the passage written in the past tense in anticipation of this event. This reasoning would especially make sense if one recalls that his rights and privileges would begin only after the discovery. Madariaga also suggested that the sentence in question grew out of the explorer's "Quixotic psychology."² Such a brief dismissal of an important, apparently clear passage has failed to satisfy historians. Spaniards, always noted for their penchant for legal precision in such matters as contracts, deeds, and other binding documents, would never have tolerated poorly constructed language in such an important document, especially in one involving the royal family. For such a contract, excellent lawyers could be assumed to have participated in its drafting. If the passage did not seem quite clear, however, historians could search for other explanations of its meaning, and many did so.³

Existing evidence suggests Columbus had indeed already "discovered" a great deal about lands off America's coast. Even Madariaga mentioned that in February, 1477, Columbus visited the island of Thule (Iceland). As he always took copious notes about navigational matters wherever he went, Columbus probably gathered facts about Scandinavian events in the North Atlantic.⁴ Yet before delving into details of his trip to Thule, one should recall that both Columbus and the Scandinavians maintained close ties to the Portuguese, who

helped the explorer to knowledge of the New World. Between his visits to Scandinavian territories and residence in Lisbon — both in the 1470s — it was easy for him to obtain a great deal of information about Iceland, Vinland, Greenland, and Canada.

King Erik, ruler of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden during the 1420s and 1430s, married a cousin of Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal. Both men were interested in explorations and each recognized the value of finding a water passage to China and India. They believed it might be possible to do so by sailing westward: Henry because of his scientific knowledge of the known world, Erik because of his experiences in the North Atlantic. Therefore, throughout the 1420s, they shared their information about Greenland, Iceland, and points around them. Erik's government sent copies of reports and navigational facts to Lisbon while Portuguese specialists went northward to learn more. By the late 1420s, a considerable library containing maps, copies of the Vinland sagas, and nautical data on current sailing conditions in the North Atlantic was available in Lisbon to those with the government's permission to use them. Moreover, this exchange of information continued throughout the next two decades. In the 1450s, Scandinavians visited Lisbon to gather facts about recent Portuguese explorations southward in the Atlantic, and brought with them their latest data on conditions in their Atlantic colonies.

The Portuguese king in the 1450s, Alfonso V, joined with King Kristjern I in sending an expedition beyond the known territories of the Scandinavians. For this mission Alfonso supplied sailors with experience in exploring Africa's coasts. The venture, known as the Pining-Pothorst expedition, conducted its research in the Atlantic after much preparation between 1470 and 1473. Documents proving that this expedition existed were only found early in the twentieth century, and they show that the Portuguese initiated this voyage to find a northwest passage to Asia.⁵ Led by two sailors who had been in Greenland before, that expedition sailed from the Scandinavian outpost to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. They might have sailed as far down the North American coast as Florida, to reach the warmer waters of the Caribbean in the fall of 1472, by essentially employing the same exploratory techniques used in searching out the African shore line.⁶ Yet they failed to find a new passage to India and China. Armed with a map drawn by Toscanelli that detailed the discoveries of recent explorers in the western Atlantic and yet did not show the results of the Pining-Pothorst adventure, officials planned a new joint mission. Known as the Skolp expedition, it sailed between 1476 and 1477 in search of a new passage to Asia, but, like the earlier group, failed to find one.

In 1476 Columbus appeared in Lisbon. Within a short time he consulted with those who knew of Portugal's explorations and became privy to valuable information about Africa and the Atlantic. He examined the Scandinavian materials (or their translations) going back nearly five hundred years, probably heard of the Pining-Pothorst and Skolp expeditions, and in any case did learn about Scandinavia's islands in the Atlantic because he visited Thule soon after. We know Columbus, perhaps as a representative of the Portuguese government, went to Thule because he wrote about the island in his own hand, recording that he explored it carefully and sailed in the neighboring waters.⁷ Because Skolp was in the area at the same time (1476-1477), Columbus might have talked to him or, even better, sailed on the same expedition. There is no reason why he might not have. Portuguese and Scandinavians already had a strong tradition of co-operative expeditions and explorations. Columbus also probably visited both Greenland and Vinland while in Iceland. If he used the normal sailing route o

Scandinavians in the fifteenth century, he could not help but reach these islands when exploring around Iceland. At least in Iceland in the fall of 1476 he talked to local government and church officials, read records of other voyages in the area, and studied maps. Columbus' own account of his trip to Iceland shows he must have even landed on the island of North Devon in the summer of 1477.⁸

It is easy to believe Columbus knew of the Pining-Pothorst expedition, especially since Skolp's mission grew out of the failures of the earlier one. What is questionable is how much he learned of the first Portuguese trip down the North American coast. He probably heard of their reaching the Caribbean and talked with a member of that expedition, though none of this can be documented at the present time. Even if he only obtained vague details of the first voyage, Columbus could have pieced together the relation of the North American coast or the Caribbean to Europe and Africa. This hypothesis has led many historians to ask if Columbus possessed a map of the New World prior to sailing there in 1492. No issue related to his first voyage for Spain has drawn more scholarly attention in the past fifteen years than that of such a map.

In 1959 a Soviet historian published a radically new account of the explorer's trip of 1492 that concluded Columbus intended to reach the Caribbean rather than Asia. David Y. Tsukernik, after reading the Admiral's diary, pointed out that Columbus, taking advantage of the western trade winds, sailed directly toward the Caribbean, and used the best route ever found for sailing ships bound for the New World. Tsukernik argued that Columbus sailed in too precise a manner to allow for an accidental discovery of the Caribbean. Moreover, Columbus traveled as if he knew exactly where he was going because his ships moved at top speed day and *night*, though explorers never sailed in unknown waters full out or after sunset. This policy holds true even today. Relying on the Admiral's own log and the known possible speed limits of the type of ships he used, Tsukernik calculated the speed which Columbus maintained by checking the amount of time the explorer used for his voyage against the miles involved. The Russian scholar also quoted writers contemporary with Columbus who wrote that after the Admiral's death there were found among his papers sealed instructions to the captains of each ship, orders to be opened in case they became separated at sea. In every instance, Columbus ordered his officers to move westward 2,800 miles from the Canaries at a good speed, then to slow down and not to sail at night beyond that point since land would appear at about 3,000 miles. In fact, the actual distance between the Canaries and the first land in the Caribbean is 3,000 miles. Moreover, the Admiral's log mentioned a chart. When his crews demanded that they return to Spain on September 22 and 23, 1492, Columbus calmed their fears. How? His diary's entry of September 25 provided the answer. The explorer wrote that he showed the three captains a chart which indicated they were slightly off course and hence had not reached land when everyone anticipated. It was a small matter to readjust their course to conform to the chart's information. With that done, the mutiny ended.

The Soviet historian argued that Columbus sailed with such confidence because he had information gathered by earlier sailors in that part of the world.⁹ Possibly Columbus drew his own chart from information gathered in Portugal and in Scandinavian territories. His map obviously had compass directions; therefore, it must have been of recent origin. One source of information — apart from those already suggested — may have come while he lived in Madeira in the 1480s. At the time, a ship with a half dead Portuguese crew came into port. These men talked of wandering over the Atlantic, of finding some uncharted islands, and

of eventually working their way eastward toward home. The ship's captain lived in the explorer's home until he died as a result of this trip. He carried with him notes of the voyage and probably a log, both of which he might well have turned over to his interested host, who could thus have sailed so quickly to the New World. The Soviet scholar also reminded us that Francisco García Vallejo, a sailor on the expedition of 1492, stated later in sworn testimony that Columbus had a chart.¹⁰

Tsukernik made one small mistake in his reasoning which does not detract from his basic thesis, yet needs correcting. Columbus sailed to the New World in search of Asia, not the Caribbean. This we know from his diaries. Columbus admitted that the islands he saw in 1492 in the Caribbean were, to his thinking, Asian. Neither he nor the Scandinavians had any suspicion that a continent and one more ocean separated Europe from Asia to the west.

The next episode in the controversy occurred when Yale University, on October 12, 1966, published a map of Vinland recently acquired by the library and kept secret until publication. This map instantly touched off another debate about Columbus' first voyage, though most of the discussion was outside academic circles. It involved nationalists, politicians, and newspaper editors.¹¹ The map, supposedly drawn by a Swiss monk around 1440, depicted Greenland and Vinland, along with portions of Hudson Bay and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. What troubled many individuals at first was the map's accurate representation of these areas. Cartographic proof apparently existed of the Scandinavian presence in North America during the tenth century (under the leadership of Leif Ericson whose name appeared on the document), long before Columbus was born. The literary and archeological evidence available to specialists in the 1960s seemed to be confirmed by this map.

For the rest of the 1960s specialists debated the issue. In anticipation of some skepticism, Yale University had the map's material and inks tested for age and authenticity, while other individuals examined its wording and drawings. Their findings presented in the book that first published the map, failed to convince many scholars. One of the authors of the Yale publication, Raleigh A. Skelton, passed by such objections to discuss the map's possible connection to the explorations of Columbus and Henry Cabot: "We cannot yet point to any direct link between it and the rediscoveries of North America at the end of the fifteenth century. Yet it is conceivable that they had heard of the Viking voyages."¹² In fact, scholars already knew from Columbus' own account that he had visited Thule in 1477. The controversy led to a conference at the Smithsonian Institute on November 15-16, 1966, the results of which were subsequently published.¹³ Briefly told, various international specialists presented papers reflecting their views, the majority grudgingly indicating that the map was authentic. Robert S. Lopez, representing a minority opinion, called the manuscript a counterfeit.¹⁴ Then in January, 1974, officials of Yale University announced that the map was a fake. Using techniques of analysis not available in 1957 when they first examined the document, scientists found anatase (a type of titanium oxide) in the map's ink — a substance not existing before the 1920s.

The map's importance in relation to Columbus lay on the possibility that he might have seen it or a copy. Now we know this was not possible. If he had a map, it was not a copy of the Yale forgery. The cartographic controversy, however, encouraged historians to continue studying the life of Columbus and the role of other fifteenth-century explorers, and remind many people that the amount of information on contacts between Europe and America prior

to 1492 remained limited and often questionable. Such an interest, for instance, led to the new tests of the Yale map that finally settled the issue of its authenticity.

Now, while more is known than ever before about Columbus and his contacts with the New World before 1492, much remains speculative and unproven. Yet several facts now appear to be uncontested about his role in America before the watershed date. The Scandinavians explored in America along the Great Lakes and on the Canadian shore — not to mention Vinland, Iceland, and Greenland — long before Columbus was even born. They maintained colonies with a combined population running into the thousands, evidence for which comes from archeological digs, cartographic remains, and literary evidence from explorers, officials, and the records of the Scandinavian branch of the Catholic Church. Moreover, these communities were linked to the Old World by continuous maritime communications with the government, Church, and merchants. Secondly, we know today that the Portuguese had very close relations with the Scandinavians in the mid-fifteenth century. Their mutual interest in world exploration led them to share information about the Atlantic world, and joint explorations south of the Scandinavian territories in the Atlantic are now documented.

What still remains unclear is whether these Iberian sailors explored as far south as the Caribbean, though they did know from their African ventures how far southward the world existed before reaching uncharted latitudinal levels, and they were more willing in the 1470s than earlier to sail deeply to the south, since by the latter part of the century the Portuguese had over forty years of experience in exploring coastlines. Columbus could have known of these expeditions to the south Atlantic from his visits to either Thule or Portugal.

Various, perhaps fillable gaps in our evidence naturally exist. It would be important, for example, to have proof that Columbus talked with members of the Pining-Pothorst expedition. As of now, no written notes in his own hand of the mission have been found. The same applies to the Skolp mission. In neither case do we have documented proof that he received specific information about points south of St. Lawrence on the North American coast. At the moment, historians only know for sure that he was aware of expeditions which sailed from the Scandinavian islands in the Atlantic to points west and south of them.

Undoubtedly more documents will surface in future years to answer other puzzling questions. A likely place for some surprising finds is in Portugal's archives, which have hardly been searched by historians. Other documents could be located in Spain, since the remains for that century are vast and new discoveries about Columbus are constantly being made. Unfortunately the results of this research too often appear in obscure academic journals not readily available outside of Spain and in limited editions of lectures or books.

If Columbus knew a great deal about the New World — at least enough to convince himself of its existence — then one could speculate with greater confidence about his relations with the King and Queen of Spain when requesting that they finance his expedition to the west. The Admiral's dealings with the royal pair would make more sense if we assume he knew something about America before 1492, and shared his information with them as a means of persuading them. One could easily imagine him discussing his journey to Thule, the Scandinavian stories and even the Portuguese voyages, since these could pose special problems for Spain should they be made public by Lisbon after the Spanish claimed territory in the New World. Columbus did show Ferdinand and Isabel his notes, documents,

and maps of the Atlantic. Secondly, the explorer's prior knowledge of the New World would also account for the exactness of the language employed in his written arrangement with the Spanish government. Prior knowledge, finally, would explain why he sailed so quickly and accurately to the Caribbean. That he took his brother and some friends on this famous voyage, something he might not have done if the mission seemed dangerous, also suggests he knew more about what he was doing than he admitted on extant records.

Most accounts of the explorer's life tell of how he thought his expedition had landed on some Asian island in 1492. This misapprehension is quite possible, given what he knew about the New World. He saw Indians who had Oriental features. He had also heard of sailors who, being washed upon north European coasts, had Oriental features and spoke strange languages. Many historians believe these were simply Latvian and Russian sailors who, plying the northern waterways of Europe, were blown southward by storms. Yet Columbus, receiving garbled details of such incidents, could have concluded otherwise. Such pieces of evidence coupled with his Scandinavian findings, would not contradict the stories he heard about Eskimos while in Iceland. All of these points might suggest that North America was Asia. What Columbus could not know was that between Asia and Europe were another continent and ocean.

Another curious point is the way the Spanish treated Columbus' "discoveries" after he returned to Spain. Very little is known about the thoughts and motives of officials just before and after 1492 regarding the explorations. These men spread stories of vast riches having been discovered in this new land, but they did so after he returned. Did they suspect he had not found Asia but another piece of territory instead and did they cover up the failure of his mission with such tales? Or could they have been trying to avoid problems with the Portuguese, who claimed dubious areas west of Africa? Lisbon declared maritime routes to Asia by sea were her private preserve (even if the Portuguese had not discovered such a passage), though of course the Pining-Pothorst expedition would establish Portugal's rights to the area claimed by Columbus, should she press its case. If Spain declared that fabulous new lands had been discovered, the Portuguese might conclude that they were different from the wealthier tracts their sailors had found in the 1470s. Such circumstances would, in addition, explain why the Portuguese rejected the Admiral's request for support in another mission to America under his command: they might have already known such islands existed and were not worth the expense of another voyage. The suggestion that claims to the new territories provided the motivation for the Spanish stories — to protect Spain from the earlier claim of the Portuguese — is speculation, but is an issue worth further investigation. If confirmed, it would mean Spain knew of the Portuguese trips to the New World prior to those of Columbus, and in turn that the explorer knew North America existed before 1492.

Despite the major developments in the historiography of early explorations made in recent decades, just as many questions as ever beg for answers. At least today historians realize that Columbus knew a great deal about the lands deep in the Atlantic, perhaps more than any other Spaniard. In future years, the traditional story of how Columbus discovered the New World will have to be modified. Only a fool would risk sailing off the edge of the world into the mouths of mythical sea dragons and only an irresponsible government would finance such a misadventure.

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Notes

- 1 For original text see Martín Fernández de Navarrete, *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos que hicieron por mar los Españoles* (Madrid, 1825), II, 7.
- 2 Salvador de Madariaga, *Christopher Columbus* (1940; rpt. New York, 1967), pp. 186-187.
- 3 Enrique Bayerri y Bertomeu, *Colón tal cual fué* (Barcelona, 1961), pp. 376-377.
- 4 Madariaga, *Christopher Columbus*, p. 81.
- 5 Sofus Larsen, *The Discovery of North America twenty Years before Columbus* (Copenhagen, 1924).
- 6 J. Kr. Tornøe, *Columbus in the Arctic?* (Oslo, 1965), p. 66.
- 7 Charles Duff, *The Truth about Columbus* (London, 1957), pp. 32-33.
- 8 Tornøe, *Columbus in the Arctic?*, p. 76.
- 9 The Russian article is reprinted in full by Tornøe, pp. 94-103. The information in the preceding paragraphs was drawn from this reprint.
- 10 Tornøe, *Columbus in the Arctic?*, p. 102.
- 11 Raleigh A. Skelton, Thomas E. Marston, and George D. Painter, *The Vinland Map and the Tartar Relation* (New Haven, 1965).
- 12 Raleigh A. Skelton, "Did Columbus or Cabot see the Map?," *American Heritage*, 16 (1965), 106.
- 13 For the papers presented and the names of the participants see Wilcomb E. Washburn, *Proceedings of the Vinland Map Conference* (Chicago, 1971).
- 14 Robert S. Lopez, "The Case is not Settled," in *Proceedings*, pp. 31-45.