

EXPLORERS FROM EUROPE

If you ask “who discovered America?”, the answer that you will usually receive is Christopher Columbus, but did he?. We have seen that the Asian ancestors of the Amerindians arrived in America long before Columbus. Was Columbus the next to arrive?

In the centuries after 1492 stories and legends grew up about other adventurous seamen having reached the new world long before Columbus, one legend tells how a Buddhist monk named Hwei-shin sailed from China to Mexico in 459 AD. Other claims that an Irish monk named Brendon the Bold landed in America in 551 AD. Yet another says that the first European to reach the new world was Leif Ericson, “Lucky Leif”, a Viking sailor from Iceland, and as recently as 1953 a plaque was set up at Mobile Bay in the modern American state of Alabama, which reads ;” in memory of Prince Madoc”, a Welsh explorer who landed on the shores of Mobile Bay in 1170 and left behind, with the Indians, the Welsh language.

All these stories have their supporters. But only in the case of the Vikings have modern scholars found firm evidence to support the old legends. In the 1960s archeologists uncovered traces of Viking settlements in both Newfoundland and New England.

In Newfoundland the archeologists found the foundations of huts built in Viking style. they also found iron nails and the weight, or whorl, from a spindle. These objects were important pieces of evidence that the Vikings had indeed reached America. Until the arrival of Europeans none of the Amerindian tribes knew how to make iron. And the spindle whorl was exactly like those used in known Viking lands such as Iceland.

The Vikings were a sea-going people from Scandinavia in northern Europe. They were proud of their warriors and explorers and told stories called “sagas” about them. The saga of Leif Ericson tells how he sailed from Greenland to the eastern coast of North America in about the year 1000 AD. When he found vines with grapes on them growing there, he named the place where he landed “Vinland the Good”. Other Vikings followed Leif to Vinland. But the settlement they made there did not last. The hostility of the local Amerindians and the dangers of the northern seas combined to make them give up their attempt to colonize Vinland. The Vikings sailed away and their discovery of Vinland was forgotten except by their storytellers.