

ON OCTOBER 11 last year, the eve of Christopher Columbus Day, Yale University published in England and America an elegant five-guinea book called "The Vinland Map and the Tartar Relation." It was billed as "the most exciting cartographic discovery of the century." It was more than that, for the heart of the book was a medieval map (see right) which seemed to finally prove that Columbus did not discover America—that he was forestalled in the 12th century by the Vikings. The message, and its timing on the eve of a day of official pro-Columban junketings, was received with roughly equal amounts of fury and delight.

Vinland (the odd-shaped island to the left of the map) was the Viking name for the north-east coast of America: Yale's book claimed the map was "indisputably" produced 50 years before Columbus's voyage in 1492. Since the publication—which was preceded by seven years' secret research—several critical voices have been raised in England against the map's authenticity. Last week, as the tone of the debate began to take on the waspishness which marks a full-scale scholarly dispute, "The Sunday Times" Insight team obtained some as yet unpublished documents which argue the question...

THE DIFFICULTY with the Vinland Map has always been the fact that nothing is known about its history. Its discoverer, an antiquarian bookseller named Lawrence Witten, from New Haven, Connecticut, acquired it from "a European source" in 1957.

The suggestion has been made—and not denied—that the source was Spanish. But Witten has steadfastly maintained that (a) he is not at liberty to disclose his source, and (b) that, even if he could, it would not help, because the map cannot be traced back past the owner he bought it from. "I assure you," said Witten last week, "that aspect is a blind alley."

The map, therefore, stands or falls by internal evidence, and this was examined, secretly, for seven years before last year's publication. During this period the map was acquired by the Yale Library. The purchase is believed to have been underwritten by the American millionaire Paul D. Mellon for a sum in the region of £100,000, perhaps the highest ever paid for an antique map.

Verifying the map was an Anglo-American operation, undertaken by Dr Thomas E. Marston, curator of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at

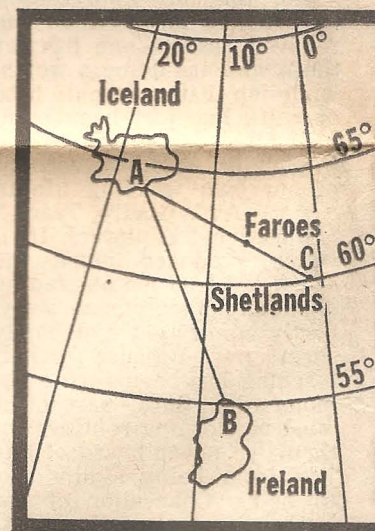
# Is the Vinland Map a forgery?

same, and gave them an origin unquestionably before Columbus: in detail, around 1440, probably in the Swiss town of Basle.

Both the Relation and the Speculum seemed clearly the work of the same scribe, in a lettering described as "Upper Rhineland bastard book-hand." But what really excited Marston and Witten was that the lettering on the parchment map also seemed the same. As the books were certainly pre-Columban, around 1440, the map would be pre-Columban also if it could

Crone's review has drawn a bitter reply from Skelton, for publication in a future "Encounter." "Since each of us," he writes, "is presumably concerned to arrive at the truth, and not to score debating points, I hope that Mr Crone will bring to any further discussion of this difficult document the qualities of detachment and judgment which we have learnt to expect of him, but which in his review seem to have momentarily failed him."

The temperature of the debate is not likely to be



graphy (the style of the antique script in the map and the books). This goes to the central point of the Yale thesis, which depends on map and books being by the same hand.



Yale, and two British Museum men: R. A. Skelton, Superintendent of the Map Room, and George D. Painter, Assistant Keeper of Printed Books.

The map, when Witten first showed it to Marston in October, 1957, was in a recent binding, together with a fifteenth-century book—an account of the mission of John de Plano Carpini to the Mongols in 1245-7. This was the "Tartar Relation." The supposition was that the map was simply an illustration of the Relation.

However, despite an apparent link between them, there were worrying discrepancies. Wormholes in the map and the book did not quite match up, and lettering on the map appeared to refer to another book, "The Speculum."

But in 1958 Marston bought, quite by chance through a London dealer, a mildly valuable fifteenth-century book: Vincent of Beauvais's "Speculum Historiale." Witten, asked to examine it, had an inspiration: the map, the Tartar Relation and the Speculum seemed to belong together. With the map at the front, the Speculum in the middle and the Relation at the back, the wormholes matched up.

The watermarks on the paper of both books were the

be linked definitely to them. During the next seven years' painstaking work on the documents, a clear-cut thesis evolved, expounded in great detail in the book by Marston, Skelton and Painter (now a best-seller in America). This was that the monk who wrote out the Speculum and the Relation illustrated them with a map of the world—the "Vinland Map."

And, they claim, he must have worked from a master-map—unheard of and now lost—based on the Norse voyages to America in the twelfth century. The thesis was a startling one because the Norsemen, who steered by the stars, were not known to make charts.

After the generally favourable early reviews of the work, this point was taken up in a distinctly hostile review in last month's issue of "Encounter." G. R. Crone, Librarian and Map Curator of the Royal Geographical Society, "How such a document could have escaped notice for so long is difficult to understand," he wrote.

"With every respect for the erudition displayed," he said, "I consider the authors have set too high a value on this Map." The Vinland Map, he claims, is clearly post-Columbus.

lowered by the reply to Skelton's reply, which Crone has already written. "It is scarcely scholarly practice," he complains, "to assert a lack of objectivity in a review without advancing unambiguous evidence in support of the charge . . . I deplore the practice, when discussing the Vinland Map, of indulging in personal attacks on critics."

Crone's criticism is purely cartographic. Since it emerged, another doubt has been raised on the paleo-



Professor Taylor: the map looks like a modern fake

At Burlington House on February 24, Skelton read a paper to a private meeting of the Society of Antiquaries. The meeting was chaired by the London University paleographer Professor Francis Wormald.

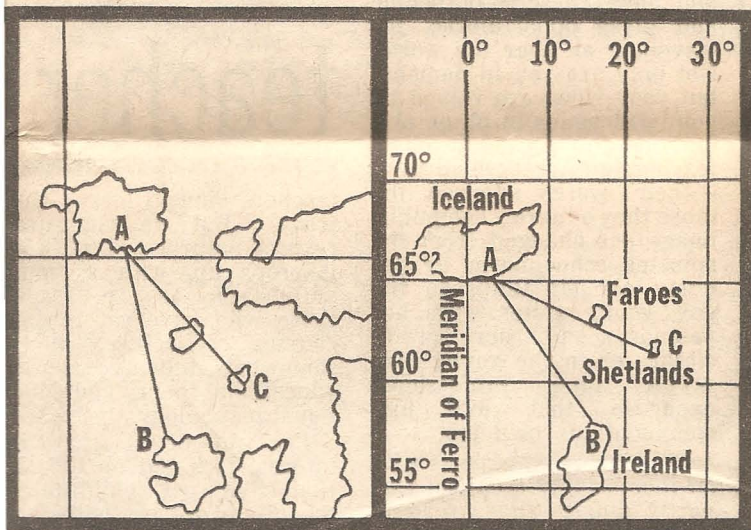
The record of the meeting has not been published but the general feeling of the discussion was that, while the script on the Map and the Relation could be contemporary in style, there were reservations about their being by the same hand. Differences in the scaling and spacing of the letters were pointed out.

The consensus was that further evidence—such as chemical analysis of inks, etc.—would be required before the authors' premise could be accepted.

Meanwhile, however, the most sweeping attack on the map has come only partially to light. This is a paper by Professor Eva Taylor, possibly the world's most distinguished authority on medieval cartography, which advances evidence indicating that the map is a clever modern fake.

Professor Taylor was shown a reproduction of the map some four years ago, when Skelton was working on it. She told the Yale team she did not believe it was a genuine 15th-century product.





## The odd resemblance between Vinland and Mercator

ABOVE: The Atlantic section of the "Vinland Map." Vinland, on the left of the map, is claimed by Yale to be a representation of the north-east coast of America, with crude versions of the St. Lawrence and Hudson Rivers. Apart from other criticisms, Professor Eva Taylor says that the entire and remarkably accurate version of Greenland would not have been possible in 1440, the pre-Columban date claimed for the map.

FROM LEFT, Iceland, Ireland, Shetland and the Faroes are shown, in turn, on a modern map, the Vinland Map, and a reproduction of Mercator's 1569 map from the twentieth-century journal "Imago Mundi." Professor Taylor says the error in the angle BAC is identical in Vinland and Mercator. Mercator could hardly have worked from the Vinland Map, or it would be known about. Not only is the angle reproduced, she claims: the scale of the Vinland Map is identical to the "Imago Mundi" reproduction. Could this section of the Vinland Map have been traced by a faker from the modern reproduction? Taylor also claims the Vinland Map adopts the practice, 'unique to Mercator' of outlining not the Shetland and Faroe islands themselves, but the banks on which they stand.

They decided, however, that her criticisms did not affect the authenticity. Professor Taylor then prepared a long critique of the map, to be published after the Yale book came out.

side with a 20th-century map on approximately the same scale—1/66½ millionths—the two are at a first glance almost indistinguishable," she says.

If the Vinland Map's ver-

Meanwhile, the Yale side have made interim replies to the criticism: firstly, Skelton has written an article for the next issue of the Institute of Navigation Journal. This admits that the Greenland

production was the hope that someone in Europe would recognise it and be able to fill in its past.

Failing this, of course, the question has been raised in England of chemical tests for



At the end of last year, however, Professor Taylor was taken ill—before she was able to see to the publication of her paper. She is now in hospital, but has handed over the paper to her literary collaborator, Michael Richey, secretary of the Institute of Navigation. The current issue of the Institute's quarterly Journal carries a brief, unillustrated outline of the paper.

Last week, however, the full paper was shown to "The Sunday Times," together with some of the drawings which Richey is checking through in the hope he may publish later, possibly after Professor Taylor's recovery.

Professor Taylor claims that the Vinland Map could not be a product of 15-century cartography, and contends that the likeliest explanation of certain incongruities is that it was built up in the 20th century from a series of maps. These she says could be: "Elements of Map Projection," published by the US Hydrographic Office; "Imago Mundi," a scholarly periodical devoted to old maps; a modern atlas, probably Dierche's Schul-Atlas, a facsimile of Maggiolo's World Map of 1511, and some other modern maps.

One of her major points is the map's representation of Greenland. "Placed side by

sion of Greenland is genuine," she says, it is the only map before the nineteenth century which shows the whole of Greenland. All other evidence is that the north of Greenland was unexplored until then: the Vinland version would lead to the conclusion that the Norsemen circum-navigated Greenland (going within six degrees of the Pole in open boats). "The latest scholarly study of the Sagas," she says, "does not suggest that they penetrated further than 76 degrees north."

The other chief point she makes on the Atlantic section of the map is shown in the drawings above. But Professor Taylor makes numerous points about other sections: particularly the Eastern Mediterranean. "The gross misplacing of Crete, the faulty Aegean Sea, and the absence of the Sea of Marmora are strange features on a map purporting to be of the mid-fifteenth century, when extremely accurate charts of the Mediterranean Sea were available."

"As might be expected," she writes, "a forger often betrays himself by not knowing quite enough about the field in which he is working."

Professor Taylor, due to her illness, is not able to go through all her maps and references for publication.

point is puzzling—but goes on to take issue with many of Taylor's cartographical points.

Many of these arguments, however, come down to a question of expert opinion: for instance Taylor claims on the one hand the Aegean Sea is inaccurate, while Skelton claims it is accurate.

The argument clearly is liable to go on in antiquarian circles for some time: the clear consequence at the moment is that the map's claim to be "indisputable," and "the most exciting cartographic discovery of the century" is heavily dented.

Dr Marston, telephoned at Yale last week, said that he was aware of Professor Taylor's critique, although he had not seen the full paper. It did not shake his own belief in the map.

His argument differs somewhat from Skelton's, in that he feels the cartographic points are not really relevant. The map, he says, is only claimed to be a copy, made in 1440 from an earlier chart.

At the moment, he says, there is no prospect that the map's provenance can be further investigated: "I understood that the man it came from couldn't remember where he got it." One of the reasons, in fact, for publishing the map in actual-size re-

page on the parchment and ink. Skelton, in fact, in his forthcoming Journal of Navigation article, says this would settle the issue of authenticity if this could be undertaken without damaging the map.

Marston, however, says that chemical tests would *not* add enough to the knowledge about the map to be worth the damage.

Certainly a sample of ink might have to be taken from several parts of the map, as a test on one part would clearly be inconclusive.

In the midst of the clash of expert evidence, there is for the moment another possible view. Sir James Marshall Cornwall, former President of the Royal Geographical Society, said last week: "I'm not an expert in very early cartography, but I'm sure that the argument that it is based on an example of early Viking cartography is specious. If you ask me, the truth probably lies somewhere between all the claims. Some early cartographer heard of the Icelandic sagas—for instance, through a pilgrim—and just stuck it in."

Sir James, who attended the Society of Antiquaries' meeting where the script question was raised, added: "I cannot accept that the map proves anything, or alters anything that we don't know already."