



Detail of the map: Is the Greenland outline too good?

Mapmaker monk still defended

By David Blundy

TELLING evidence that the Vinland map, hailed only 10 years ago as the greatest cartographic discovery of the century, is a fake has left the British expert on the subject unmoved. The map was said to prove that the Vikings discovered America many years before Columbus.

But last week scientists in America who have spent two years studying the ink used on the map claimed that it was drawn, not as originally thought by a Swiss monk in 1440—52 years before Columbus left Spain—but by a forger sometime after 1920.

The British expert is sceptical about the new evidence, however. "I am not shaken," says George Painter, assistant keeper in charge of Fifteenth-century printed books at the British Museum. Painter was part of a team which spent several years authenticating the Vinland map. "I would stand by everything we said," he says. "I would regard this as just another episode in the dialogue between scholars and investigators. Yale University made a lot of scientific tests and so did the British Museum laboratory. Our evidence was that the map is genuine. Little is known about the medieval use of inks. There were many different types even on the same manuscript. A monk might well lean across and borrow some different ink from his chum's inkwell.

What no one disputes is that the 11in. by 16in. map was drawn on paper made in the Upper Rhineland about 1440. But Walter McCrone Associates, an American group of experts in small particle analysis, claims that the brownish-yellow ink used contains a titanium dioxide pigment not developed until 1920.

The McCrone experts took 29 ink samples from nine areas of the map and subjected them to advanced electronic tests. They concluded that the Vinland map

ink was indistinguishable from modern commercial ink.

Yale University Library, which owns the map, said that the process had only recently been developed and that two other ancient documents were, in fact, verified in the tests. The Yale Librarian, Rutherford Rogers, said the forgery appeared to be the work of two skilled men. "One was an historian of the medieval period and the other an expert in medieval handwriting.

Rogers points out, however, that the discovery does not alter "what seems to be the historical fact" that Leif Ericson discovered the North American mainland about 500 years before Columbus.

The map's significance is that it shows not only the known medieval world but also Iceland, Greenland and a long island to the west of Iceland called Vinlandia Insula. This was claimed by experts to represent the north-east coast of America, with a crude interpretation of the Hudson and St Lawrence Rivers. If the map is genuine, it also shows that Norsemen sailed all the way round Greenland — a fact hotly disputed by scholars.

The map first came to light when an Italian book dealer living in Spain, Enzo Ferrajoli, sold it to Laurence Witten, a book dealer at New Haven, Connecticut, who in turn sold it to the Yale Library for £100,000 in 1957. A team of experts, including Mr Painter and American scholars, was set up to examine the manuscript. After seven years of painstaking research, they pronounced it genuine in 1965.

In Britain the first challenge came from G. R. Crone, map curator of the National Geographical Society, who called the map a fake.

But the Vinland map remains a mystery. If it is a forgery, who forged it? Any forger would have had to have "an inconceivable knowledge of medieval maps," says Mr Painter.