

Only Norse Map of America?

A medieval map of the world, which it is claimed "records in graphic form the only documented pre-Columbian discovery of America" is included in a volume published on both sides of the Atlantic today*. It is also said to be the only known example of medieval Norse cartography.

The map was in a calf-bound volume also containing a previously unknown account of Friar John de Plano Carpini's mission to the Mongols in 1245-47 (*The Tartar Relation*) acquired eight years ago from a private collection in Europe by Mr. Laurence Witten, an antiquarian bookseller of New Haven, Connecticut.

When it was first examined by Mr. Thomas E. Marston, Curator of Medieval Renaissance Literature at Yale, and Mr. Alexander O. Vietor, Curator of Maps, Yale University Library, they could not be sure the map was authentic. As Mr. Marston writes: "Both map and manuscript were slightly wormed, but the worm holes were not on the same positions in the two parts. "Even more disconcerting was the fact that the map bore the unexplained words: 'Delineation of the first part, the second part (and) the third part of the *Speculum* (mirror)'."

Early in 1958 Mr. Marston happened to order a manuscript of part of a work by the thirteenth-century Dominican friar Vincent of Beauvais, which he had noticed in the catalogue of a London bookseller. This was the *Speculum Historiale* (Mirror of History).

WORMHOLE EVIDENCE

After its arrival in New Haven, Mr. Witten discovered that the manuscript matched the map and the account of the visit to the Mongols. "The hand was the same, the watermarks of the paper were the same; and the worm holes showed that the map had been at the front of the volume and *The Tartar Relation* at the back."

The round-trip of 8,000 miles from Lyons to the court of the Mongols made by Carpini at the bidding of Pope Innocent IV three years after the Mongol tidal wave swept back from Europe is already known from the friar's own accounts. *The Tartar Relation*, the Latin manuscript of which is reproduced, with the text edited and translated by Mr. George D. Painter, Assistant Keeper of Printed Books in the British Museum, complements Carpini's own version.

century when one of the two main Greenland settlements was abandoned.

The last recorded traffic between Iceland and Greenland was between 1406 and 1410, and in spite of archaeological and other evidence of occasional contact, Mr. Skelton holds that by the middle of the fifteenth century "the detailed knowledge accumulated by the Norsemen about the lands in the west had passed out of European consciousness".

It would be misleading to think of the medieval Norsemen sailing under conditions similar to those of today. Climatologists were agreed that for the period between A.D. 950 and 1200 there was clear evidence of greater warmth in Iceland and Greenland. But a deterioration set in during the thirteenth century.

Mr. Skelton considers the outline of Greenland in the Vinland Map to be so accurate that it can only be the result of first-hand knowledge gained by sailing along the coasts before ice made this impossible. The apparent precision of the northern coastline makes him wonder whether the cartographer added a theoretical north coast, or if in fact conditions allowed medieval Norsemen to anticipate Peary's circumnavigation of Greenland.

BY WORD OF MOUTH

The detailed drawing of the west coasts of Greenland leads the author to believe that the original outline was traced before the abandonment of the western settlement in the first half of the fourteenth century.

But why should a chart be made? If, as all the evidence suggests, the Norsemen sailed by astronomical observation, they did not need maps. Nevertheless, given their ability to work out their northing by the stars, "we are entitled to make the further inference that they could determine the approximate latitude of conspicuous coastal features".

To the west of Greenland is shown *Vinlanda Insula*. As the Norse voyages to Vinland, Helluland, and Markland, variously identified as parts of what is now Newfoundland, or the Canadian and American mainlands, were over 100 years before the writing of Icelandic history began in the twelfth century, it is pointed out that this outline must be the result of transmission by word of mouth. "In the circumstances we could expect from such a map no more than a general indication of the coasts in question and of their most conspicuous features."

But the prime interest inevitably shifts from the section of the map illustrating the Carpini mission to the outlines of Greenland and Vinland, the name believed to have been given by Leif Ericsson at the opening of the eleventh century to a land where vines grew somewhere west of Greenland.

Most of the Vinland map, says Mr. R. A. Skelton, who is superintendent of the Map Room at the British Museum, has strong affinities with a circular world map in the 1436 atlas of Andrea Bianco in the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana at Venice. Both, for example, place Mount Sinai and Basra in Africa.

Whatever the origin of the common forms and errors, whether the cartographer of the Vinland Map took them from Bianco or from a common prototype, Mr. Skelton is convinced that the outlines of Iceland, Greenland, and Vinland were drawn at the same time and by the same hand as the rest. As late as the fifteenth century, however, Madeira, the Canaries, the Azores, and Iceland were put at the western edge of the map.

CHANGED CLIMATE

Mr. Skelton argues that "so long as the Norse (or any previous) discovery remained unknown to cartographers, or at any rate recorded in a form which they could use, no true Atlantic chart could be made before the discoveries of Cabot and Columbus, and none has in fact survived. The western part of the Vinland Map, taken as a whole, has therefore no extant antecedent and may be cited as the oldest map of the north Atlantic Ocean in existence."

Iceland, settled by the Norsemen, had remained in contact first with Norway and increasingly during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries with other countries in western Europe, notably England. Greenland was also linked with Norway and Iceland, but these ties weakened in the course of the fourteenth

centuries that challenge traditional versions of the Norse discovery of America. The fourteenth-century *Tale of the Greenlanders* gives the credit to Bjarni Herjolfsson; the *Saga of Eirik the Red* awards the honour to Leif Ericsson. According to the Vinland Map, Bjarni (no other name is given) and Leif Eirikson discovered Vinland together. However, Mr. Skelton points out, the two accounts may have become merged in the map's version.

BASLE AS SOURCE?

The provisional conclusion reached is that the map is based on two prototypes, that for the Old World presumably dating from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, while the Atlantic part may date from the thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries.

Mr. Marston says that all the evidence points to the Upper Rhineland "as the source of origin of the manuscript, paper, binding, and paleography". What is left of the binding "places it about the middle of the fifteenth century. Its paper, usually secondary evidence, is in this case of primary importance and dates it about 1440, a date that fits in with all the other evidence."

To pinpoint the source of the manuscript's origin is "highly speculative, but there seems to be sufficient evidence to point to the Swiss town of Basle", the seat of a church council which brought scholars together from all over Europe between 1431 and 1449. "Where else could such a product as this be prepared, combining an east European account of a mission to the Mongols with a medieval historical text and a map of northern European origin?"

Although no direct link has been established between the Vinland Map and the rediscoverers of America, Mr. Skelton finds it "conceivable that they had heard of the Viking voyages" and that the example of the Norse seamen was "an incentive for their own ventures". Of this Norse initiative in crossing the ocean, "the Vinland Map is a memorial".

*R. A. Skelton, Thomas E. Marston, and George D. Painter: *The Vinland Map and The Tartar Relation*, 291pp. Yale University Press, 1955.