

BACKGROUND

“None of the dead can rise up and answer our questions. But from all that they have left behind, their imperishable or slowly dissolving gear, we may perhaps hear voices, ‘which are now only able to whisper, when everything else has become silent,’ to quote Linnaeus.”

BJÖRN KURTEN
How to Deep-Freeze a Mammoth (1984)

CLASH OF CULTURES



(Opposite) Routes of the early European explorers in and around North America.

In about the year AD 982 (the exact date is disputed), Norseman Eirik Thorvaldsson the Red sailed west from Iceland to explore the mysterious lands that sometimes appeared distantly on the far horizon when the winds blew from the north. Three years later, he and his men returned with glowing tales of a fertile, uninhabited land where fish were plentiful and the grazing grass lush and green. Eirik named it the Green Land, a name retained to this day.

Eirik persuaded 25 shiploads of settlers to sail for Greenland in 986. They founded tiny, remote Brattahlid in the southwest, and the so-called Western Settlement at Godthaab some 200 miles (320 km) to the north. For centuries, these tiny hamlets were bases for Norse wanderings far to the north, among icebound fjords and islands on the fringes of the Arctic Ocean, and west 186 miles (300 km) across the Davis Strait to Baffin Island, Labrador, and beyond.

The restless and adventurous Greenlanders farmed, kept cattle and sheep, fished, and were skilled hunters who took game on land and sea. Above all, they were seamen, who explored every nook and cranny of southwestern Greenland. Very early on, it seems, bold young men ventured far north toward the arctic ice, and across the Davis Strait to the *Ubygdir*, “the unpeopled tracts,” new lands beyond the western horizon.

Only the faintest records of these western voyages have come down through the centuries. They survive in two fragmentary Icelandic documents, often called the Vinland Sagas, written at least 200 years later. *The Saga of the Greenlanders* and *The Saga of Eirik the Red* are tantalizingly vague and contradictory accounts of extraordinary voyages. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to separate historical fact from fantasy, geographical information from vague description written and copied several times over (Wahlgren, 1986).

The Saga of the Greenlanders tells how a young merchant named Bjarni Herjolfsson comes home to Iceland from Norway with a full cargo. He finds that his father has moved to Greenland with Eirik the Red, sets out to visit him, but the voyagers become lost in a wilderness of North Atlantic fog. Days or weeks later, they encounter a low, forested coast, which faces east. Bjarni realizes that this cannot be Greenland, so he turns north, sights more forested land a few days later, then an island with mountains and glaciers. Herjolfsson turns east, sails across Davis Strait, and reaches Greenland safely.

Perhaps some 15 years later, in the 990s, Leif Eiriksson, son of Eirik the Red, sets out on a journey of exploration to the west. He sails across to the icy island that was Bjarni's last landfall, then voyages southward until he is well below the latitude of southern Greenland. Eiriksson and his 35 followers winter in a sheltered location where they are amazed and delighted to find wild grapes and grapevines growing. They survive an unusually mild winter, explore the countryside, load up with timber and return home to Greenland. Leif Eiriksson names the new lands: *Helluland*, "Slabrock Land," perhaps Baffin Island and northern Labrador, *Markland*, "Forest Land," probably central Labrador and Newfoundland, and *Vinland*, "Wineland," to the south, whose location is a matter of vigorous controversy. In a meticulous analysis of the sagas, Erik Wahlgren (1986) has argued persuasively that Eiriksson wintered over somewhere near Passamaquoddy Bay, close to the border between Maine and New Brunswick. The grapes that so enraptured his men were wild grapevines that are common in New England. Others believe, on the basis of a 16th-century Icelandic chart, that Vinland was Newfoundland, and that Eiriksson simply embellished his account with wild grapes to encourage prospective settlement (McGhee, 1984a).

Leif Eiriksson never returned to Vinland. His brother Thorvald followed in his footsteps, mounting an expedition that lasted two years. He appears to have explored the Bay of Fundy, was killed in a clash with local people, and buried there. A visiting Icelandic merchant named Thorfinn Karlsefni was next in Vinland. He took a 60-person expedition back to Leif's winter settlement and traded with some visiting Indians. There was fighting and men perished on both sides. After two winters, Karlsefni sailed back to Greenland, probably sometime around 1012. More sporadic and unrecorded Norse voyages to Labrador probably ensued in the following three centuries, ventures in search of timber, which was in short supply in Greenland (McGhee, 1984a).

Norse Settlement in North America

Archaeologists have searched diligently for traces of Viking settlement in North America. There have been the usual archaeological fantasies – stones inscribed with Norse runic script and mysterious towers in New England and the celebrated Kensington Stone discovered in Minnesota in 1898. None stand up to scholarly scrutiny (Wahlgren, 1986).

The logical place for such sites would be Labrador or Newfoundland, and it is at L'Anse aux Meadows in northern Newfoundland that the only known trace of Norse settlement has come to light. Helge Ingstad and Anne Stine discovered the remains of eight sod-walled structures on a terrace overlooking a shallow bay (Ingstad, 1977; 1985). These turf houses contained Norse artifacts such as a spindle whorl and a needle hone. One of the houses was too long to have been covered by a single roof. It consisted of several dwellings built together, perhaps forming a kind of sleeping hall. The settlement had a work shed, a smithy situated well away from the houses, and a possible bath house, also four turf boat sheds, perhaps once roofed with sod-covered rafters or branches. There are signs of both earlier and later native American settlement on the site.



L'Anse aux Meadows, in northern Newfoundland. (Above left) Aerial photograph of the marine terrace at Epaves Bay, showing partially excavated house-sites. (Above right) Layout of the site: A–D, houses; E, work shed; F, large house; v, natural deposit of iron ore; w, charcoal kiln; x, forge; y, boat sheds; z, cooking pits. (Right) Two sod houses reconstructed by Parks Canada, showing the entrances. The reconstructions are based on archaeological data and information from other Norse sites.



L'Anse aux Meadows is a shallow bay, but a site with one major advantage – ample grazing for cattle. It lies at a strategic point, surrounded by water on three sides, an excellent base for exploring the St Lawrence Valley, if such a Norse enterprise was ever contemplated. Radiocarbon dates from the dwellings date the settlement to about AD 1000, but the precise identity of the builders is unknown.

No other irrefutable traces of Norse settlement have come to light in North America. Some disputed longhouse foundations on Ungava Bay, across Davis Strait from Brattahlíð, are almost certainly of Inuit manufacture, and not the work of Norsemen¹.

¹ For the purposes of this book, the term Eskimo is used to refer to Alaskan maritime peoples, while Inuit is used for their Canadian Arctic relatives.



Clues to a Norse presence in the High Arctic. (Above) Wooden figurine of a Norseman found in a Thule (Inuit) house at Okkiviluk. (Above right) Fragment of Norse woollen cloth from Skraeling Island.



As early as the 12th century, Norsemen had sporadic contacts with Inuit groups living in the Canadian Archipelago and along the western Greenland coast, in the Nordsetur (the central west coast), the area around Disko Bay, and probably much farther north (McGhee, 1984a). A scatter of Norse artifacts has come from Inuit settlements in the High Arctic – especially from the Ellesmere Island area. These include non-Inuit copper and iron fragments, pieces of woollen cloth, chain mail, and carpenters' tools, also boat nails and rivets, even carvings that give impressions of Norsemen. There are Norse stone cairns, some reworked bottom sections of casks, and a single runic inscription from Kingitortoq high on Greenland's western coast, probably dating to 24 April 1333. A close reexamination of collections from earlier excavations at Nunguvik on northern Baffin Island has yielded further evidence of Norse contacts, including strands of yarn identical to some found in the Norse Western Settlement in Greenland, dating to between about 1300 and 1350 (Sutherland, 2000). Fragments of pine wood, a timber that does not occur as driftwood in the region, also came from the same site, two bearing holes with what appear to be rust stains from iron nails. The wood dates to the late 13th or early 14th century. The dwellings from which these finds come are attributed to late Dorset people, who seem to have survived in this area until medieval times, somewhat later than once thought. These finds are thought to be evidence for direct contact between Norse and Inuit, rather than being objects passed from hand to hand between Inuit communities. Traces of cordage and yarn also come from two sites on southern Baffin Island, about 620 miles (1000 km) south of Nunguvik, suggesting that contact between Norse and Inuit were much more complex than once imagined. (Some Norse finds have yielded radiocarbon dates as early as the mid-first millennium AD, long before Eirik the Red or Leif Eiriksson, raising a faint possibility that there were much earlier Norse-Inuit contacts, but the dates are problematic and are probably inaccurate, as are many other Arctic radiocarbon dates (McGhee, 2000).)

The Norsemen called the Inuit Skraelings. "They possess no iron, but use walrus tusk for missiles and sharpened stones instead of knives," we learn from the *History of Greenland*, a work based on a 13th-century manuscript (McGhee, 1984a). Contacts between Norse and Inuit were probably sporadic, the result of summer bear- and walrus-hunting expeditions far to the north. Walrus ivory was the medium in which Greenlanders paid their annual tithes to the church in distant Norway, on some occasions at least 400 tusks annually, far more than could be obtained around the Greenland settlements.

As far as we can tell, the contacts between Inuit and Norse were sometimes friendly, occasionally violent, apparently rarely prolonged. In all probability, the Norse came in touch with both Inuit and American Indians, the latter

Beothuk, Algonquian-speakers who were summer visitors to the Labrador coast and Newfoundland (McGhee, 1984a; for archaeology, see Chapter 21). Norse artifacts have come from as far afield as the western shores of Hudson Bay and latitude 79°N, 500 miles (805 km) north of the Kingitortoq rune stone. That is not to say that the Norse themselves actually traveled this widely, for many prized exotica may have passed along Inuit barter networks.

However, the Norse did not colonize North America. In AD 1000, Europe was not ready to, or capable of, settling the lands to the west. The tough and resourceful Norsemen could survive on Greenland coasts. However, they lacked the sheer numbers and the resources to expand and maintain pioneer settlements, to confront and compete with much larger indigenous populations. Nor were there strong motives for colonization – no religious persecution at home, no promise of great wealth to attract the greedy adventurer. Eventually, even Greenland proved beyond their capabilities. Norse civilization survived there until around 1500, progressively debilitated by increasing arctic cold (the so-called Little Ice Age) that brought Inuit hunters farther south, by economic deprivation and competition for game resources, and perhaps by declining birth rates and sheer cultural isolation from the homeland. There were occasional hostile visitors, too, perhaps even some piracy, for Basque whalers from northern Spain had been sailing in Greenland waters since at least 1372.

Eventually, the Norsemen quietly withdrew, leaving two geographical legacies behind them for later explorers – the term "Skraeling" and two place names: Markland, a land of forests, and Promontorium Winlandiae, a land of vines – actually northern Newfoundland. Their epic journeaus survived in European consciousness as hints of exotic peoples living at the very edge of the known world. "There are animals of such enormous size that the inhabitants of the inner islands use their bones and vertebrae in place of wood in constructing houses. They also use them for making clubs, darts, lances, knives, seats, ladders, and, in general, all things which elsewhere are made from wood ..." Thus did the Arab geographer al-Idrisi describe the North Atlantic and its rich fisheries in his *Nuzhet al-Mushtaq*, written in about AD 1150 (McGhee, 1984a). Like the medieval geographers, al-Idrisi relied not only on first-hand experience, but travelers' accounts

Abandoned Norse site, known as Farm Beneath the Sand, showing the foundations of stone buildings after three years of excavations. The site, occupied between the mid-11th to 14th centuries, was once part of the Western Settlement, now the present-day municipality of Nuuk.



from every corner of the world. Perhaps, among these accounts, he heard vague stories of northern whale hunters from the far north. If al-Idrisi was indeed writing of Inuit peoples from North America, the tales of their whalebone houses had probably reached him through many hands from Norse sources in Greenland and Iceland.

The first, fleeting contacts between Inuits, native Americans, and Western voyagers did nothing to alter hunter-gatherer cultures that had been evolving in a vast, isolated continent for more than 13,000 years. Centuries were to pass before Westerners again voyaged along North American shores.

The Search for a Strait

On 12 October 1492, Christopher Columbus, Admiral of the Ocean Sea, sailing under the Spanish flag, set foot on San Salvador in the Bahamas. There he found naked people, “very well made, of very handsome bodies and very good faces.” Columbus himself believed he had found the outlying islands of east Asia, and called the inhabitants of the new lands “Indios,” Indians. The Admiral’s explorations brought a torrent of settlers to the Caribbean, settlers who came to “serve God and get rich.” They soon encountered an astounding diversity of different peoples – simple hunters, village farmers, and magnificent civilizations like that of the Aztecs of highland Mexico. When Hernan Cortés and his soldiers gazed down on the great Aztec capital at Tenochtitlán in the Valley of Mexico in 1519, they marveled at a gold-laden civilization that rivaled those of Christendom in its magnificence.

Only seven years after the death of Columbus in 1506, conquistador Vasco Nuñez de Balboa trekked across Central America and gazed on the Pacific. The Indies were not part of China at all, but what “we may rightly call a New World more densely peopled and abounding in animals than Europe, or Asia, or Africa.” For years afterward, Europeans had but two ambitions in the Americas – to find another gold-rich civilization, and a navigable strait to China.

Just as the last Norse colonists vanished in southern Greenland, Genoese-born John Cabot sailed west from Bristol, England, in search of a short, northern route to the Indies (Morison, 1971). The *Mathew* sailed in 1497, made landfall on Newfoundland, coasted down the west coast, and discovered the rich cod fisheries of the Grand Banks. Cabot encountered no human beings, but observed snares and nets, presumably belonging to Beothuk groups.

Two years later, Portuguese explorer Gaspar Corte Real sailed northwest from the Azores and made landfall on “a land that was very cool and with big trees,” almost certainly Newfoundland. He returned the following year. His men kidnapped 57 Beothuk Indians, who “live together by fishing and hunting animals, in which the land abounds, the skins of which they use for garments and also make houses and boats thereof.” The people lived in “rocky caves and thatched huts.” After their first experience with Europeans, the Beothuk retreated to the interior and were very hostile to later visitors.

The next quarter-century saw the icebound and foggy north with its forested, rocky shores fade into relative oblivion. Only cod fishermen penetrated northern waters, people with little interest in exploration or the local inhabitants. Everything else was eclipsed by the brilliant discoveries

“The first meeting of Cartier and the Amerindians.” Painting by Théodore Gudin (1802–1880).



that followed on Columbus far to the south. Then, in September 1522, Juan Sebastian del Caño in the ship *Vittoria* anchored at Seville in Spain, carrying just 18 of the 239 men who had set out on Ferdinand Magellan’s epic circumnavigation of the globe. He had sailed into the Pacific through the stormy Magellan Strait at the southern tip of South America. Spanish and Portuguese explorers had now covered the entire east coast of the Americas from Florida to Patagonia, but had been unable to find any other strait north of Magellan’s. On most maps of the time, Newfoundland floated in the North Atlantic, without any seeming link to the lands farther south. Thirteen degrees of latitude from Maine to Georgia remained unexplored. Here, surely, lay either a strait to the west, or, even better, open sea that would carry European mariners to the “happy shores of Cathay.”

In January 1524, the Italian gentleman explorer Giovanni da Verrazzano sailed west from Madeira (Morison, 1971). Instead of dropping down to the West Indies, he sailed well north of Columbus’ track just over 30 years before. About 1 March, he made landfall at Cape Fear, North Carolina, then sailed up the east coast as far as Newfoundland. He encountered many friendly Indian groups along the way, mostly simple farmers and fishermen, wearing leaves or skins. The people of Casco Bay, Maine, apparently more familiar with foreigners, were less welcoming. “They used all signs of discourtesy and disdain, as was possible for any brute creature to invent, such as exhibiting their bare behinds and laughing immodestly.” Verrazzano named this coast *Terra Onde di Mala Gente*, the “Land of Bad People,” in revenge.

The prospect of a northern route to China brought Jacques Cartier, French Master Mariner of Saint-Malo in Brittany, to Newfoundland in April 1534. He returned to France five months later, having sailed completely around the Gulf of St Lawrence, where his men lived off great auk meat, salmon and other fresh fish, goose eggs and wild strawberries. He was accompanied by two Huron Indian teenagers, a chief’s sons, who were to act as guides on his second voyage. Cartier returned a year later to penetrate deeper into the Gulf. His Huron guests knew the great river well, all the way upstream to modern Quebec. It was, Cartier realized, a highway to the interior. “No man has been to the end, so far as they had say,” he wrote.

Cartier made contact with St Lawrence Iroquoians living near modern Quebec, and arrived at Hochelaga, the site of present-day Montreal, on



The Algonquian village of Secotan in Virginia, sketched by John White in about 1585. A romanticized view of the American Indians that shows many details of daily life.

2 October 1535. There, more than 1000 Indians greeted him, bringing gifts of corn bread and performing welcoming ceremonies. They lived in a fortified village surrounded by corn fields, partly situated on the grounds of today's McGill University. The fortifications consisted of palisades with two redoubts "garnished with rocks and stones, for defense and protection." There were 50 bark and wood houses inside, each with several rooms and a central fireplace, grouped around a central plaza. The people were in a constant state of readiness, for their home was close to the militant Five Nations of the Iroquois, notorious for their sudden raids. Cartier was impressed by his friendly reception in what were the golden days of race relations along the St Lawrence. They were not to last. When Cartier returned in an abortive attempt to found a colony, the Huron were hostile, attacked his settlement and killed at least 35 people. For more than a half-century, the Huron were left alone, as exploration and settlement faltered.

Raleigh's Virginia

On 27 April 1584, two ships slipped out of Plymouth, England, on a voyage of reconnaissance along the more southern coasts explored by Verrazzano 60 years earlier. Philip Amadas and Arthur Barlow sailed at the behest of Walter Raleigh, who held letters patent from Queen Elizabeth granting him permission to colonize an unspecified area of North America. Four months later, the two vessels anchored close to Nag's Head in present-day North Carolina. They soon came in contact with the local Powhatan Indians, Algonquian-speakers, "very handsome, and goodly people," who entertained them royally (Morison, 1971). "The soil," Barlow wrote enthusiastically if mendaciously, "is the most plentiful, sweete, fruitfull and wholesome of all the world." All this was good publicity for prospective colonists and for royal ears. Queen Elizabeth I knighted Walter Raleigh and allowed him to name his prospective colony Virginia.

In April of the following year, Sir Richard Grenville led an expedition of five ships and about 500 men, including 108 prospective colonists, to Virginia. This time, Raleigh sent along a scientist, Thomas Hariot, an Oxford mathematician, and an artist, John White. The settlement was a complete failure, but Hariot and White had ample opportunity to visit several Indian settlements. White sketched the people and their villages with astounding, if romantic detail. Hariot's *Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* appeared in 1588. Illustrated with White's sketches, it became a basic source of information on American Indians for more than a century (Rountree, 1989).

Despite later efforts, no permanent colony was established in Virginia until that at Jamestown on the James River, about 35 miles (56 km) from Chesapeake Bay in 1607. That effort succeeded both because of sustained economic support from England, and because the colonists exported tobacco home. A year later, Samuel de Champlain established a colony at Quebec on the St Lawrence, 12 years before the Pilgrim Fathers landed at

Plymouth in New England. The first two decades of the 17th century saw the era of permanent European colonization in North America finally begin – with catastrophic effects on the native peoples that lay in the white settlers' path.

Spanish Explorations in the Southeast

A century earlier, however, the Spanish had tentatively explored North America from the south – from New Spain (Mexico) and the Caribbean. Not that this exploration had followed immediately upon the conquest of Mexico, for it took 10 years and innumerable military campaigns to subdue the Indian population of Central America. The lust for gold intensified as more and more territory was opened up to European exploitation. Vast land masses lay to the north of wealthy Mexico. Did these also contain fabulous riches? Applicants willing to lead expeditions into the unknown implored the Spanish Crown for permission to find out (Fagan, 1977).

The first man to sail north from the Indies was a soldier named Ponce de Leon, who landed near present-day Palm Beach, Florida, in 1513 (Milanich and Hudson, 1993). He was searching for the mythical "Fountain of Youth" that chroniclers insisted was to be found on an island north of Cuba. His search was fruitless, the country sandy and low-lying, the local inhabitants fierce and unfriendly. Six years later, Alonso Alvarez de Piñeda entered the Mississippi River estuary, where he spent six weeks. The area was quite densely populated, but devoid of gold.

The sinister and red-bearded Panfilo de Narvaez followed Piñeda north, but landed to the east, in what is now Tampa Bay. There his men obtained some gold objects that fired their greedy imaginations. Sending his vessels to find a better harbor, Narvaez set out to march west along the coast with 260 men, promptly losing touch with his ships. The soldiers constructed temporary boats, but these foundered off the mouth of the Mississippi. The last vessel was cast ashore off modern Galveston, Texas. Only a junior officer named Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, two soldiers, and a black slave survived. The four men withstood incredible hardships, and walked all the way from Texas to New Spain. Their report gives little information on the country and its inhabitants, except for an impression of people with few material possessions living in a dry environment. But they did hear stories of large, wealthy towns to the north.

In 1537, the conquistador Hernando de Soto came home to Spain after making a small fortune under Francisco Pizarro in Peru (Garciلاس de la Vega, 1951; Milanich and Hudson, 1993). He was restless for further adventure, and lobbied for the governorship of Cuba and Florida, which he obtained. By 1539 this remarkable adventurer had raised a force of 622 men and had landed in Tampa Bay. De Soto hoped to find a kingdom as wealthy as that of the Aztecs or Inca. His only objectives were gold, the acquisition of wealth, and colonization (for archaeology, see Chapter 22).

Tampa was unpromising. The local people lived in "a town of seven or eight houses, built of timber and covered with palm-leaves. The chief's house stood near the beach on a very high mound made by hand for defence;

at the other end of the town was a temple, on top of which perched a wooden fowl with gilded eyes." The surrounding countryside was flat and swampy, and no metals were to be found.

De Soto set off through marshy terrain until he reached higher ground. His soldiers treated the local people brutally, burning villages, then seizing food stocks and adults as slaves. Eventually, the conquistadors reached the large settlement of Cofitachequi, where an important female chieftain greeted them in a shaded canoe. Apparently terrified of the Spaniards, she ordered that all yellow and white metals in her domains were to be laid before the foreigners. Large quantities of copper were forthcoming, also sheets of mica, which local artisans fashioned into fine ornaments. The Spaniards asked for freshwater pearls, but were told they were imported from far away. In desperation, the chieftain directed them to the "upper part of the town," where a temple covered the burial place of long dead chiefs and their relatives. The soldiers looted the burials. Some 350 lbs (158 kg) of discolored freshwater pearls were divided between them.

During their journey to Cofitachequi, the conquistadors had passed many abandoned villages, as if the local people had lived there for a long time. Three miles (4.8 km) from Cofitachequi lay Talomeco, a larger settlement with the usual artificial earthen mounds upon which a temple and the chief's house formerly stood. The temple was still standing, a structure over 100 ft (30 m) long and 40 ft (12 m) wide, with a steep roof of reeds and split cane adorned with sea shells. The Spaniards forced their way in and wondered at wooden statues mantled with pearls, at enormous bundles of skins and dyed cloth. There were caches of copper-bladed

The brutality of this Spanish attack on a Florida Indian village in the 1590s recalls the harshness of De Soto's expedition half a century earlier.





The French in Florida. (Above right) Chief Athore in 1564 showing French explorer René de Laudonnière a stone pillar erected by a previous French expedition two years before. The pillar (labeled “F” in the sketch map above left) bore the coat-of-arms of the King of France. The scene of friendship and harmony by artist Jacques le Moyne de Morgues may have been used to recruit emigrants to the New World.

ceremonial weapons, battle axes and clubs, delicately inlaid bows and arrows, wooden and woven cane shields, all of the finest workmanship – but no gold.

The taciturn and inflexible De Soto was so obsessed with the yellow metal that he ordered his men westward over the Blue Ridge Mountains into what is today Tennessee. Hardships multiplied. Choctaw raiders attacked the party. More than 150 men perished in a counterattack to recover lost baggage. The conquistadors wintered near the Yazoo River in Mississippi, where they encountered “fine looking” Indians in a fleet of canoes that “appeared like a famous armada of galleys.” Next spring, De Soto led his men through the Ozarks into eastern Oklahoma. There they heard stories of “many cattle,” whose skins the local Indians gave them in abundance as bed covers. But they never set eyes on the bison themselves.

Finally, De Soto realized that the gold-laden kingdoms over the horizon were a fiction. He headed southeast toward the Gulf of Mexico. The journey was a harsh one, through unfriendly territory occupied by suspicious Indians. De Soto himself perished of fever, but half of the 622 men who had set out with him managed to reach Cuba.

De Soto’s expedition debunked any dreams of fabulous, golden kingdoms in the north. Apart from two abortive French expeditions to Florida in the 1560s, the Mississippi Valley and the Southeast with their elaborate chiefdoms were left in peace for over a century. By the time the 16th-century Spaniards encountered them, many large Indian settlements had been abandoned, as if the population had declined sharply. Some archaeologists believe this may have been the result of epidemics of exotic diseases like smallpox that spread across the interior long before the Indians had direct contact with Europeans (Crosby, 1986). (This is a controversial subject, see Chapter 22.) The large earthworks built by some of these people were to puzzle white settlers and scholars for generations.

Hawikuh pueblo, Zuñi settlement in New Mexico, photographed in the late 19th century.



The Seven Lost Cities of Cibola

When Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca reached Mexico City overland from Texas in 1536, his tales of a harsh and arid land to the north astounded the gold-hungry colonial government of New Spain. So greedy were they that they shrugged aside Vaca’s tales of suffering. Ever since Cortés and Pizarro had plundered Mexico and Peru, there had been talk of the fabled Seven Cities of a mythical land named Cibola, cities founded as long ago as the 8th century by a legendary bishop from Lisbon (Fagan, 1977). Where, then, were these cities, if they were not to be found in Mexico or Peru? When Vaca returned with vague rumors of large towns to the north, towns crowded with Indians and rich in gold and silver, the authorities were goaded into action. The Viceroy of Mexico sent Franciscan friar Fray Marcos de Niza in search of the cities, a man said to have “great experience in the affairs of the Indians.” He was accompanied by Esteban, the black slave who had traveled with Cabeza de Vaca as a guide. They were a curious pair: the sober priest and the jaunty, freed slave who journeyed in great style, dressed in ribbons and feathers, for he had acquired somewhat of a reputation as a sorcerer among the Indians.

The expedition was a disaster. Esteban explored far ahead of the main caravan, sending back optimistic messages along the way. After a 15-day desert crossing, his party arrived at a Zuñi pueblo in what is now New Mexico, only to be massacred by the inhabitants. Marcos claimed that he heard of the killings from a survivor, then traveled secretly within sight of the pueblo, where he gazed undetected at “a faire cite,” with many houses “built in order . . . all made of stone with divers stories, and flatte roofs, as farre as I could discerne.” The people were light skinned, possessed “emeralds and other jewels,” and used “vessels of gold and silver, for they have no other metal, whereof there is greater use and more abundance than in Peru.”

As can be imagined, Marcos’ report fueled the flames of gold lust when he returned to Mexico City with “more feare than visuals.” The friar was a good storyteller, and embellished his report at every opportunity. In fact, historians are almost certain that he turned and ran, never penetrating much farther north than the Gila River in southern Arizona, a long way from Zuñi country. Marcos’ stories fell on fertile ground. In February 1540, Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, a competent young nobleman and royal courtier, led a much larger expedition in Marcos’ footsteps: 225 horsemen, 60 foot soldiers, and a motley crowd of slaves and Indian allies marched north, with Fray Marcos as their guide (Fagan, 1977).

Coronado and his men found themselves traveling along Indian trails through harsh, dry country. Horses and men suffered greatly in the shimmering heat, but emerged from the desert within reach of six Zuñi pueblos. These were the “Seven Lost Cities,” a disappointing sight to the conquistadors. “It is a small, crowded village,” wrote Pedro de Castaneda, Coronado’s chronicler, of Hawikuh pueblo, “looking as if it had been all crumpled up together. There are haciendas in New Spain which make a better appearance at a distance.” Marcos’ celebrated city was little more than a glorified village. Coronado routed the defenders in less than an hour. The hungry soldiers made a beeline for the

storehouses, where they found “much corn and beans, and fowl.” Of gold and precious stones there were no signs.

In the months that followed, Coronado explored much of the Southwest – without finding any gold. His men entered Hopi country, penetrated as far as the Grand Canyon, and visited Pecos pueblo close to modern Santa Fe, a settlement so large it could field 500 warriors. The town “is square, situated on a rock, with a large court or yard in the middle, containing the steam rooms,” reported Pedro de Castaneda. “The houses are all alike, four stories high. One can go over the top of the village without there being a street to hinder.” The houses could be entered only by means of ladders from the roofs, with doors that led into the passages.

Conquistador Hernando de Alvarado was sent onto the plains that lay east of Pecos to investigate stories about strange animals like cows with hairy skins. Alvarado and his men were soon surrounded with enormous herds of bison, “the most monstrous thing in the way of animals that has ever been seen or read about.” Later, Coronado himself ventured onto the plains and deep into Kansas, where he encountered Plains Indians who relied on bison for food, hunting them in game drives or at water holes.

Barely a hundred men marched into Mexico City in the fall of 1542 when the dispirited expedition returned home. There were only a handful of Indian blankets and turquoises, and a wealth of new geographical knowledge, to show for more than two years’ arduous traveling. It was half a century before attempts were made to settle the arid, goldless Southwest. Even then, the Spanish hold on these remote lands was tenuous at best, although Catholic missionaries and explorers had traveled widely through the region by the late 18th century.



A chromolithograph published by F.E. Wright, 1892, after a painting by Ricardo Balaca, depicting Columbus landing on San Salvador. Painted “on his return from his first voyage for their Catholic Majesties.”



The Inuit man captured by explorer Martin Frobisher in 1576.

“A Young People, Younger a Thousand Years...”

Columbus and his successors revealed a vast continent teeming with new forms of animal and plant life, and with a bewildering diversity of human societies both simple and complex (Fagan, 2004). Who were these “Indians,” exotic, feathered people that Columbus paraded before the Spanish court, people according to Pope Alexander VI “well disposed to embrace the Christian faith?” Where had these strange humans come from and why were they so diverse? Soon, Europeans back home could see a surprisingly wide variety of native Americans, shipped back by explorers, missionaries, and slavers. The Aztec nobles and acrobats from Mexico who spellbound the Spanish Court in the 1520s, were a far cry from North Americans “clothed in beastly skinnies” who ate raw meat and had the manners of “brut beasts.” In contrast, John White’s Virginia Indians were depicted as friendly, noble-minded people, who did not abuse nature. The Inuit of the far north were apparently harder. Martin Frobisher brought back a man and woman from Baffin Island in 1576. The hunter obligingly paddled his skin kayak on the River Avon near Bristol and shot ducks with his bow and arrow.

The 16th century saw a torrent of speculation about the origins of the American Indians, speculations about ancient Carthaginian migrations, about the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel exiled by Assyrian King Shalmaneser in 721 BC (Wauchope, 1972). There were more serious observers, too, like the celebrated Dominican Friar Bartolomé de las Casas, a champion of the Indians, who wrote that “there is not a great argument that the people of these islands and continent are very ancient.” But he, and other historically minded religious scholars, turned to the only historical sources available to them – the Scriptures. They believed that all American Indians were related to familiar ancient societies in the Scriptures, like the Tartars, Scythians, and biblical Hebrews.

The Elizabethan philosopher Francis Bacon, on the other hand, marveled “at the thin population of America, for you must accept your inhabitants of America as a young people: younger a thousand years, at least, than the rest of the world.”

Whatever their antiquity, everyone agreed that the Indians had come from the Garden of Eden. How, then, had they reached the Americas? Had they sailed across a vast ocean, or had they walked? Siberia was still a geographical blank in the 16th century, the Bering Strait between Asia and Alaska unknown. In 1589, Jesuit missionary José de Acosta published a remarkable work, his famous *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias* (Fagan, 1987; Willey and Sabloff, 1993). It was entirely possible, he wrote, that “men came to the Indies driven unwittingly by the wind.” However, he believed that most of the Indians had reached the New World in the same manner as the unfamiliar beasts that abounded in the Americas – by land. He theorized that small groups of “savagely hunters driven from their homelands by starvation or some other hardship” had taken an overland route through Asia to their present home. There were, he argued, “only short stretches of navigation” involved. At first, Acosta wrote, only a few Indians settled in the Americas. But they were successful. Their descendants developed not only agriculture, but elaborate states like those of the Aztecs

and Inca. Acosta calculated that first settlement had taken place as much as 2000 years before the Conquest of Mexico.

It was to be a century and a half before Russian explorer Vitus Bering sailed through the Bering Strait in 1728, and seven decades after that before North American archaeology was born. By that time, Western explorers had penetrated all the oceans, and encountered a myriad unfamiliar human societies on remote shores. The Age of Enlightenment had made science fashionable in the intellectual circles of 18th-century Europe. Captain James Cook had mapped much of the Pacific, and the Russian scientist Pfefferkorn was able to state in 1794 that “it is almost certain that the first inhabitants of America really came by way of the strait.” Not that such sober observations quenched the wild fire of speculations about the ancient Americans. They were the background to the first archaeological researches in North America.

Further Reading

Fagan, Brian M. 1977. *Elusive Treasure*. Charles Scribners, New York.

A popular account of early archaeological research in North and Central America. Copiously illustrated.

Milanich, J. T. and Hudson, Charles. 1993. *Hernando de Soto and the Indians of Florida*. University Press of Florida, Gainesville.

A fascinating account of De Soto's landing.

Morison, Samuel Eliot. 1971. *The Discovery of America. Volume 1: The Northern Voyages*. Oxford University Press, New York.

This is the definitive account of early explorations of the North American shoreline by a master of historical analysis and narrative.

Pauketat, Timothy R., and Diana Loren (eds.). 2005. *North American Archaeology*. Routledge, London.

This edited volume contains essays on North American archaeology by regional experts, aimed at giving comprehensive coverage of the subject for advanced students. Not available for this revision.

Sabloff, Jeremy A. and Willey, Gordon R. 1993. *A History of American Archaeology*. 3rd ed. W.H. Freeman, New York.

The standard work on the history of American archaeology for the serious student. Lavish illustrations and comprehensive bibliography.

Wahlgren, Erik. 1986. *The Vikings and America*. Thames & Hudson, London and New York.

An authoritative, closely argued essay on the Viking exploration of North America.