

A Voyage to the New World, or A Tall Tale!

Did Sir Henry St Clair, 1st Earl of Orkney, discover the New World before Christopher Columbus? And did Henry's grandson commemorate the voyage with carvings of New World plants in his newly built chapel?

In this article, we aim to highlight the puzzles and contradictions in the tale that turn any search for the facts into 'confusion worse confounded' (John Milton, *Paradise Lost*).

For many years Christopher Columbus was celebrated as the man who discovered America in 1492. We now know that there have been Europeans in North America as early as the 11th century. Today, many North Americans of European heritage are eager to find out just who those early Europeans might have been.

In 1558, a Venetian called Nicolo Zeno junior published a narrative. It said that in 1380 his ancestor Nicolo Zeno set sail through the Strait of Gibraltar to go north to England and Flanders, as was common for Italians in those days. There is evidence that Nicolo did make such a voyage in 1380, returning in 1385. The narrative goes on to state that after getting lost in a storm, Nicolo and his men found themselves on the Island of Frislanda. Here, Nicolo met Zichmni, Duke of Sorano, who invited Nicolo to join his fleet in sailing westwards around Frislanda. Nicolo wrote to his brother Antonio, telling him to come and join him in his adventure, which Antonio duly did.

Zichmni made Nicolo his naval captain, and together they set off to conquer Shetland, while Antonio remained in Frislanda. They had adventures in Iceland and Greenland, where they found hot springs and a thriving monastery dedicated to St Thomas. Nicolo spent an unspecified time there but after falling ill he decided to return to Frislanda, where he died. After Nicolo's death, Zichmni persuaded Antonio to sail onwards with him on more adventures.

The Zeno narrative then describes a group of fisherman who came home to Frislanda after 25 years' absence. They had been shipwrecked on Estotiland, an unfamiliar place 'lying to the westwards above one thousand miles from Frislanda'. One of the fisherman told Zichmni of being captured by natives, who were cannibals. They made friends by showing the natives how to fish with nets. This saved their lives, and earned them much respect. One of the returning fishermen told of many years being passed from Chief to Chief, showing each tribe how to fish in the European manner. He had eventually won his freedom, and was able to return home.

Antonio and Zichmni set sail to find these new lands, but were blown off course, and ended up in Icaria, which is thought to be the Kerry Islands in Ireland. After this detour, Antonio and Zichmni returned to Egroneland, (Greenland). Zichmni established a settlement there, and was not heard of again. Antonio and the rest of Zichmni's crew returned to Frislanda.

It is a fascinating story, and many people have puzzled over the Zeno maps, trying to work out which island represents which country. Opinions are as many as the islands of Northern Europe and Scandinavia! One thing is certain – nothing is certain!

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The Source of the Narrative – a Puzzle

We learn that when Nicolo junior was a child, he found the letters and maps in his home, but he tore them into pieces. Years later, he decided that the papers were important, and tried to piece them together, filling in gaps where originals had been destroyed. The original fragments are missing, and many believe they never existed at all. The story is rather implausible. Had Nicolo Zeno simply cut and pasted from real diaries of the day, to create a new but false version to impress his own family? Or is there enough truth in some of the papers to suggest that such a voyage may have taken place? Modern historians can see parts of the narrative that have clearly been copied from surviving diaries of Christopher Columbus, and other known explorers. The maps have been the subject of intense debate and speculation as to whether they replicate authentic 14th century maps that have since been lost or are 16th century forgeries.



This map was published by Nicolo Zeno, junior, in 1558. The identity of the islands has created much speculation.

The Puzzle in the Place Names

The narrative did not use traditional names for the places mentioned. Richard Henry Major, a respected translator and editor, used a phonetic method of translating the place names described in the narrative. But there are differing opinions over the identity of the islands of the narrative. Frislanda could be the Faroe Islands, but the description and maps suggest a larger land mass that simply doesn't exist. One of the biggest puzzles is Icaria, the island on which Antonio Zeno and Zichmni land towards the end of the narrative. Major argues that this is the Kerry islands, but William Herbert Hobbs argued that Icaria was actually Newfoundland. However, most academic historians now agree that Icaria is not in North America, and that Antonio and Zichmni never made it across the Atlantic.

The Puzzle of Zichmni's Identity

Zichmni is never identified within the narrative, and it is only in the 1780s that a travel writer, John Reinhold Forster, tentatively suggested that Zichmni was Henry St Clair, 1st Earl of Orkney. There is no evidence that Henry was an explorer. As a Baron and Earl with fealty to two kings, he would hardly have the time to leave his territories and go exploring.

Henry's main preoccupation would be keeping peace in the Orkney and Shetland islands, and protecting the vital trade routes between Caithness and the islands. Not to mention his vast holdings in lowland Scotland and responsibilities to the Scottish king.

The narrative describes Zichmni as rebelling against the Norwegian King, but Earl Henry had sworn fealty to King Hakon VI in 1379. And he is clearly recorded as defending Shetland, not attempting to conquer it. More significant is that Father Augustine Hay, who wrote the genealogy of the St Clairs, and who was known to exaggerate and embellish his narrative to give the family greater prestige, makes no mention of Henry having undertaken such adventures. In fact, there is not a single shred of evidence that Zichmni was Henry Sinclair.

The Henry myth really took hold due to writers like Frederick Pohl in 1974, Richard White in 1983, and Andrew Sinclair in 1992, who all took the Zeno story, then added their own spin to the tale. It was further taken up by Niven Sinclair, who promoted it tirelessly on both sides of the Atlantic. Their works are widely quoted by people retelling the 'Prince Henry' story, and the more it is told, the more people believe it to be true!

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The Puzzle of how a Story Changes as it is Told

By the 1980s writers about Rosslyn Chapel were retelling the story as fact. However, the date of the voyage had changed from 1380 to 1390. This may be because historians had proven that Nicolo Zeno was in Venice by 1385. It was then claimed that in reproducing the map, an 'X' had been missed off the date printed there. This would make the voyage 1390, not 1380. But Nicolo Zeno was on trial in Venice for embezzlement at that time. If it did happen in 1393 as claimed by Niven Sinclair, Nicolo would have been over 60 years old – so some people then suggested that it was his son, not Nicolo senior, who took the voyage. If the facts didn't fit, the 'facts' were changed!

As Rosslyn Chapel became better known, the notion that a St Clair was involved in the Zeno story really took hold. By the 20th Century the story had Henry himself engaging with the Micmac tribe, and teaching them to fish with nets. Henry suddenly became a Knight Templar, despite being no such thing, and his voyage was then linked to Templar treasure being taken to the New World and buried secretly. By the 1980s the story was firmly established as fact in the minds of amateur historians worldwide. Monuments and markers to the fabled journey were created.

Is the Story Commemorated in Stone at Rosslyn Chapel?

In 1947 a guide to Rosslyn Chapel written by Will Grant mentioned, for the first time, the existence of carvings in Rosslyn Chapel that resembled maize, or Indian corn, and aloe cactus, something not known in Scotland at the time the Chapel was built. He made no mention of the Zeno story and did not suggest that the carvings represented a journey. Nor did he specify which carving in particular represented cactus or Indian corn. There is no mention of the corn before this date, despite a range of guidebooks and articles recording the Chapel's structure and decorations, written in the 18th and 19th centuries.

By the 1980s, due in part to Frederick Pohl and friends, the guides at the Chapel were pointing out specific carvings to be Indian corn, aloe vera and trillium, a Canadian plant not known in the UK.

By this time Henry was being called Prince Henry, and his voyage to the New World was stated as fact. Niven Sinclair had such passion for the story that he wrote many articles promoting the idea, and he even raised finance to commemorate the 'voyage' at its supposed landing points in the New World.

In 1999, botanist Adrian Dyer carried out an investigation of the plant carvings in Rosslyn Chapel. Dyer disputed that the carvings of so-called 'Indian Corn' could possibly be maize, suggesting instead that the carving represented some kind of aloe. This is also a plant not known in Scotland at the time of building, and a third plant, trillium, from Canada, has also been identified. The plant carvings are generally artistic impressions, so it is not really possible to identify them accurately. Mr Dyer was careful to state that none of the carvings in the Chapel appear to be botanically correct, and any identification is in the eye of the beholder! The trillium could be a Canadian plant, or simply a depiction of the holy trinity in the eye of the original sculptor. We will never know for sure.



This carving is often identified as trillium, a native plant of North America.



The window arch in Rosslyn Chapel outlined in what some people believe is Indian corn or maize.

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Conclusion

Here at Rosslyn Chapel we have examined the story in detail over a ten-year period. We have read widely all the various interpretations. We have seen that most writers have tended to start from a position of believing or not believing, and from there try to make the evidence fit their theory. We have tried to look objectively, without prejudice. There has not been room in this article to outline every different theory and interpretation, but be assured that we have read them all!

Our conclusion is that Sir Henry St Clair would certainly have been capable of voyaging to Greenland and Iceland, and possibly further west. There is no evidence that he did, and we can find no evidence that he is the Zichmni in the story. Even if he were, the narrative takes him to Greenland and no further.

It's not impossible that people in Sir Henry's employ went exploring further afield, and it is clear that Northern Europeans did make settlements in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Massachusetts as far back as the 11th century. As the late Vicki A Hild said in her case study of the life and times of Henry Sinclair, 'Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence'.

We fully expect people to argue and write about this fabled voyage for many years to come, and our guides at Rosslyn Chapel will continue to enjoy telling it to visitors from all around the world.

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Recommendations for further reading

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