

EXPLORERS FROM EUROPE

If you ask “Who discovered America?”, the answer that you will usually receive is “Christopher Columbus.” But did he? We have seen that the Asian ancestors of the Amerindians arrived in America long before Columbus. Was Columbus the next to arrive?

In the centuries after 1492 stories and legends grew up about other adventurous seamen having reached the New World long before Columbus. One legend tells how a Buddhist monk named Hœi-Shin sailed from China to Mexico in AD 459. Another claims that an Irish monk named Brendan the Bold landed in America in AD 551. Yet another says that the first European to reach the New World was Leif Ericson, “Lucky Leif,” a Viking sailor from Iceland. And as recently as 1953 a plaque was set up at Mobile Bay in

the modern American state of Alabama which reads “In memory of Prince Madoc, a Welsh explorer who landed on the shores of Mobile Bay in 1170 and left behind, with the Indians, the Welsh language.”

All these stories have their supporters. But only in the case of the Vikings have modern scholars found firm evidence to support the old legends. In the 1960s archaeologists uncovered traces of Viking settlements in both Newfoundland and New England.

In Newfoundland the archaeologists found the foundations of huts built in Viking style. They also found iron nails and the weight, or “whorl,” from a spindle. These objects were important pieces of evidence that the Vikings had indeed reached



Leif Ericson sighting America. An impression by a nineteenth-century artist.



An Aztec drawing of the Spanish conquest.

America. Until the arrival of Europeans none of the Amerindian tribes knew how to make iron. And the spindle whorl was exactly like those used in known Viking lands such as Iceland.

The Vikings were a sea-going people from Scandinavia in northern Europe. They were proud of their warriors and explorers and told stories called “sagas” about them. The saga of Leif Ericson tells how he sailed from Greenland to the eastern coast of North America in about the year AD 1000. When he found vines with grapes on them growing there, he named the place where he landed “Vinland the Good.”

Other Vikings followed Leif to Vinland. But the settlements they made there did not last. The hostility of the local Amerindians and the dangers of the northern seas combined to make them give up their attempt to colonize Vinland. The Vikings sailed away and their discovery of Vinland was forgotten except by their storytellers.

It was the Spanish who began the lasting European occupation of America. When Columbus returned to Spain he took back with him some jewelry that he had obtained in America. This jewelry was important because it was made of gold. In the next fifty years thousands of treasure-hungry Spanish

Why is America called “America”

Why did European geographers give the name America to the lands that Columbus discovered? Why did they not name them instead after Columbus?

The reason is that to the end of his life Columbus believed that his discoveries were part of Asia. The man who did most to correct this mistaken idea was Amerigo Vespucci. Vespucci was an Italian sailor from the city of Florence. During the late 1490s he wrote some letters in which he described two voyages of exploration that he had made along the coasts of South America. He was sure, he wrote, that these coasts were part of a new continent.

Some years later Vespucci’s letters were read by a German scholar who was revising an old geography of the world. The letters convinced the scholar that Vespucci was correct, and that the lands beyond the Atlantic were a new continent. To honor Vespucci the scholar named them America, using the feminine form of Vespucci’s first name as the other continents had female names.

The Fountain of Youth

To sixteenth century Europeans America was a land of marvels, a place where nothing was impossible. Some even believed that there they might discover a way to regain their lost youth.

Ponce de León was a Spanish conquistador who came to the New World with Columbus on the explorer's second voyage. He became the governor of the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico. The Amerindian people of Puerto Rico told de León that to the north lay a land rich in gold. This northern land, they said, also had an even more precious treasure—a fountain whose waters gave everlasting youth to all those who drank from it. In the spring of 1513 de León set off in search of the magic fountain. He landed in present day Florida and sailed all round its coast searching for the miraculous waters.

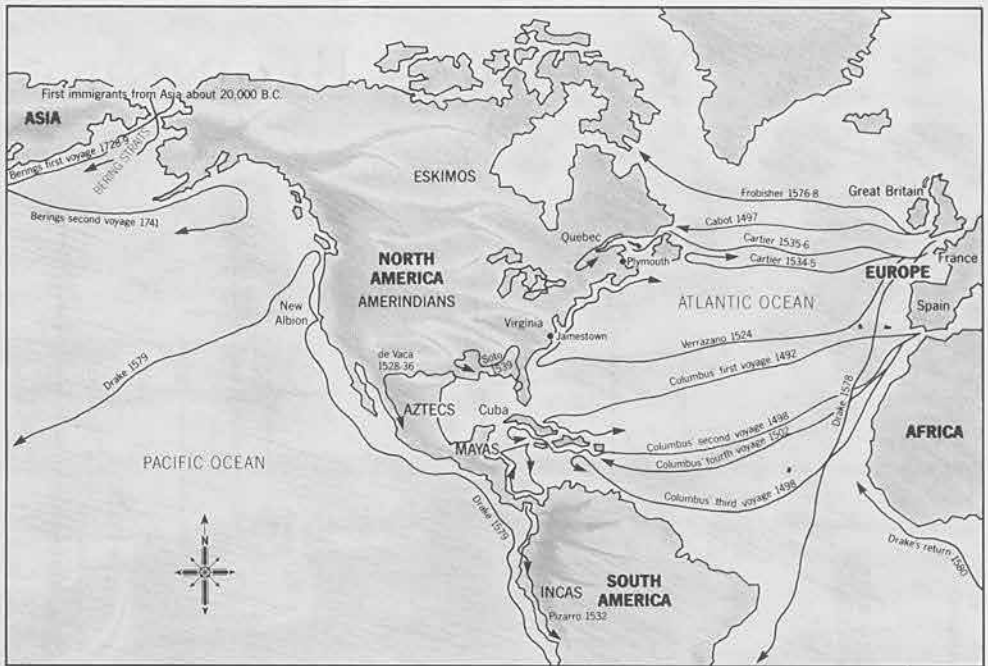
Ponce de León never found the Fountain of Youth. But he did claim Florida for Spain. In 1565 Spanish settlers founded St. Augustine there, the first permanent European settlement on the mainland of North America.

adventurers crossed the Atlantic Ocean to search for more of the precious metal. It was a lust for gold that led Hernán Cortés to conquer the Aztecs in the 1520s. The Aztecs were a wealthy, city-building Amerindian people who lived in what is today Mexico. In the 1530s the same lust for gold caused Francisco Pizarro to attack the equally wealthy empire of the Incas of Peru. A stream of looted treasure began to flow across the Atlantic to Spain from a new empire built up by such conquerors—“conquistadores”—in Central and South America.

In the years that followed, other Spanish conquistadores took the search for gold to North America. Between 1539 and 1543 Hernando de Soto and Francisco Coronado, working separately, explored much of the southern part of what is now the United States. De Soto landed in Florida from Cuba. He led his expedition westward, discovering the Mississippi River and traveling beyond it into Texas and Oklahoma. Coronado traveled north from Mexico, searching for the “Seven Cities of Gold” that Amerindian legends said lay hidden somewhere in the desert. He never found them. But he and his men became the first Europeans to see the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River and they journeyed as far east as Kansas before returning to Mexico.



Discovery of the Mississippi, a romanticized nineteenth-century painting by William H. Powell. De Soto and his followers are shown displaying their cannon and a cross to a group of frightened Amerindians.



The exploration and settlement of America.

The journeys of men such as de Soto and Coronado gave Spain a claim to a large amount of land in North America. They also led to the founding of some of the earliest permanent European settlements there. In 1565 Spanish settlers founded St. Augustine on the coast of present-day Florida. In 1609 other settlers founded Santa Fe in New Mexico.

The growing wealth of Spain made other European nations envious. They became eager to share the riches of the New World. In 1497 King Henry VII of England hired an Italian seaman named John Cabot to explore the new lands and to look again for a passage to Asia. Cabot sailed far to the north of the route Columbus had followed. Eventually he reached the rocky coast of Newfoundland. At first Cabot thought that this was China. A year later he made a second westward crossing of the Atlantic. This time he sailed south along the coast of North America as far as Chesapeake Bay.

Cabot found no gold and no passage to the East. But his voyages were valuable for the English. In later years English governments used them to support their claims to own most of the east coast of North America.

The French also sent explorers to North America. In 1524 the French king, Francis I, sent an Italian sailor named Giovanni Verrazano for the same purpose as

Columbus and Cabot—to find lands rich in gold and a new sea route to Asia. Verrazano sailed the full length of the east coast of America, but found neither. However, he anchored his ship in what is now the harbor of New York. Today a bridge which carries his name, the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, is one of the city's most impressive sights.

Ten years later another French explorer, a fisherman from Normandy named Jacques Cartier, discovered the St. Lawrence River. He returned to France and reported that the forests lining the river's shores were full of fur-bearing animals and that its waters were full of fish. The next year he sailed further up the river, reaching the site of the present-day city of Montreal. Cartier failed to find the way to Asia that he was looking for, but he gave France a claim to what would later become Canada.

Claiming that you owned land in the New World was one thing. Actually making it yours was something quite different. Europeans could only do this by establishing settlements of their own people. By the seventeenth century plenty of people in Europe were ready to settle in America. Some hoped to become rich by doing so. Others hoped to find safety from religious or political persecution. In the hundred years after 1600, Europeans set up many colonies in North America for reasons like these.