

## Who *Really* Discovered America?

A well-known school rhyme goes like this: "In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue"—and then discovered America. However, Columbus **may not have been** the first non-Native American to visit the Western Hemisphere. So many other potential discoverers have been **nominated**<sup>1</sup> that the question **might almost be rephrased** as "Who didn't discover America?" What does history show? Who really discovered the New World? Those suggested include the Vikings, the Japanese, the Chinese, the Egyptians, the Hebrews, the Portuguese, and some Irish monks.

The Vikings are the best-known contenders. Evidence suggests that Leif Erickson and cohorts visited the New World about the year 1000, almost 500 years before Columbus. Viking records and New World artifacts<sup>2</sup> indicate they arrived at a place they named "Vinland the Good"—the land of grapes. Scholars originally hypothesized that Vinland **must have been** Newfoundland. Today, however, it is believed that Vinland **couldn't have been** that island since it is too far north for grapes to grow. Could the climate **have been** warmer in Erickson's day? Perhaps. However, current thought is that Vinland **may have been** the New England coast.

The Japanese are more recent candidates. Pottery fragments discovered in 1956 on the coast of Ecuador date back about 5,000 years. These fragments resemble Japanese pottery of the same era, and it has been

1. **nominated:** proposed, suggested

2. **artifacts:** manmade objects



Statue of Christopher Columbus

established that there was no native pottery in Ecuador in 3000 B.C.E. **Could** the Japanese **have introduced** it? Smithsonian Institute scholars conclude that individuals **may have sailed** from Japan across the Pacific to Ecuador, or Japanese fishermen **might have been swept** out to sea and **carried** 10,000 miles across the ocean. This theory **may sound** unlikely and **may eventually be disproved**. Nonetheless, the pottery evidence **must mean** something.

One interesting theory stems from the story of St. Brendan, a sixth-century Irish monk who made many voyages to establish monasteries. A sixth-century document suggests that Brendan made a journey far out into the Atlantic, reports of which **may have influenced** Columbus to believe that there really was a New World. Brendan and his fellow monks saw "sea monsters," "crystals rising up into the sky," and "a rain of bad-smelling rocks." In 1976, British navigation scholar Tim Severin decided to see if Brendan and his companions **could really have accomplished** this voyage. Using the specifications described in the St. Brendan text, they built a curragh, an Irish leather boat, and attempted the journey. On the way, they passed Greenland and wintered in Iceland, where they saw whales, a volcano, and icebergs. They theorized that Brendan's sea monsters **might have been** whales, the ice crystals icebergs, and the bad-smelling rocks volcanic debris. Severin's group did eventually get to Newfoundland, proving that a curragh **could have made** the journey to North America. Religious artifacts and stone carvings bearing vocabulary and grammatical constructions from Old Irish have been found in Virginia. This suggests that other missionaries<sup>3</sup> **could have gone** to the New World after Brendan's return. Thus the story **may be true**.

But back to the original question: Who really "discovered" the New World? Future research **should get** us closer to an answer. Columbus and the others mentioned above did not, of course, really discover America. The real finders were the Native Americans who migrated across the Bering Strait more than 10,000 years ago. In any case, even if Columbus did not discover the New World, no one disputes that he started two-way communication between the Old World and the New. In that sense, his reputation is still safe.

3. **missionaries:** persons sent to distant places to teach and spread religion

### AFTER YOU READ

#### A VOCABULARY

Match the words in **bold** with their meanings.

1. Many other potential discoverers have been <b>nominated</b> .	a. is from
2. Leif Erickson and cohorts arrived about the year 1000.	b. remains of an explosion
3. Scholars <b>hypothesized</b> that Vinland was Newfoundland.	c. companions
4. <b>Nonetheless</b> , the pottery evidence must mean something.	d. descriptions or directions
5. Severin used the <b>specifications</b> described by St. Brendan.	e. proposed as an explanation
6. This <b>idea</b> stems from the story of St. Brendan.	f. however
7. This <b>theory</b> seems unlikely.	g. possible
8. The bad-smelling rocks may have been volcanic <b>debris</b> .	h. proposed explanation

#### B COMPREHENSION

Read the statements. Check (✓) True or False.

	True	False
1. Schoolchildren are often taught that Columbus discovered America.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Scholars originally theorized that Vinland was probably Newfoundland.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Vinland could have been Newfoundland because grapes grow there.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Pottery fragments found in Ecuador date from the year 5000 B.C.E.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. The story of St. Brendan definitely convinced Columbus that there was a New World.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. St. Brendan and his companions could have gotten to America in a curragh.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. The ice crystals seen by Brendan and his companions must have been icebergs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Columbus opened up communication between the Old World and the New.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>