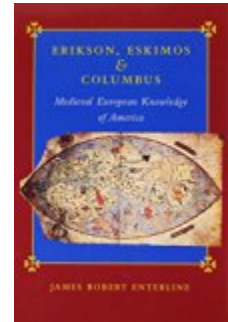


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James Robert Enterline. *Erikson, Eskimos and Columbus: Medieval European Knowledge of America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. 368 pp. \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-7895-4.

Reviewed by Emily Rose (University of Cambridge)
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In *Erikson, Eskimos and Columbus: Medieval European Knowledge of America*, James Enterline seeks to shock his audience by telling us that Columbus did not discover America in 1492. Rather than the “land-ho!” great man theory of discovery, Enterline promotes what he calls the “Eskimo information divulgence” theory. The book is thought-provoking, suggesting new ways to look at Columbus and his contemporaries: not as mad religious zealots or brave star-gazing mavericks, but as rational and knowledgeable explorers motivated, at least in part, by some imprecise information leaked subtly over centuries from the Thule Eskimos via Scandinavia.

After a series of logical steps purporting to indicate that information known to Eskimos was assimilated into what Europeans thought were maps of Scandinavia, Enterline offers a chronological survey of all relevant history. This useful review of famous medieval texts and maps, many with reproductions, constitutes the largest portion of the book and will be of interest to early modernists and will serve as a worthwhile reference for medievalists. Enterline’s exhaustive appraisal of medieval maps is extremely useful to have at hand; it does not, however, prove his point.

Using “Eskimo orientation procedures” (p. 294) and adjusting the scale of maps, Enterline seeks to confirm his hypothesis by examining all surviving medieval maps. But as he admits that “there is no hard direct evidence—and we should no longer expect to find any” (p. 15), he is left “extracting alternative graphical dualities that escaped the creator’s conscious mind” (p. 34). The difficulty lies in Enterline’s insistence that this method is scientific. He offers such statements as “my approach will attempt to formalize the testing of the hypothesis by modelling

the structure of a hypothetico-deductive system” (p. 25), and an assertion that “the Renaissance is defined officially to have begun during the fourteenth century” (p. 10n).

Although the author warns readers early on that “this is not a history book” (p. xix), it is difficult to understand who would constitute his audience other than those interested in history. Scientific allusions permeate Enterline’s argument (the correlation coefficients of maps and appeals to psychology, linguistics, anthropology, archaeology and onomastics), yet his work is aimed not at scientists but at general readers likely to be overwhelmed by the sheer number of references provided and by the specialized vocabulary employed. Enterline has clearly read widely, and the book brims with interesting and curious nuggets of information. Instead of leaving his readers intrigued, however, he seeks to browbeat them with examples. The structure of the book is clear and the chapter summaries seek to assure readers that the argument is progressing logically, but significant gaps remain, which the author often fills with rhetorical questions, leaps of the imagination, and suppositions. Phrases such as “it is not inconceivable” (p. 276), “it seems necessarily the case” (p. 279), and “let us guess at an identification” (p. 290) do not engender confidence.

The scarcity of actual evidence that can be adduced does not deter Enterline. In his effort to test his hypothesis, he falls back on statements that use the word “naturally,” as in something “would naturally have been from Scandinavian sources” (p. 120), or a sailor “naturally would then have sought to investigate” the possibilities of trade (p. 206). Readers may not be convinced when Enterline concludes, for example, that a map filled

with children's doggerel and names from folksongs was intended to lend authority to the graphic ideas the map-maker must have received from the Eskimos (p. 48).

Is it not plausible, Enterline asks, that a medieval Thule Eskimo migrated eastward to Greenland with a picture of the Bering Strait in his head, where he would have risked being kidnapped to Europe and interrogated about his origins? While certainly not impossible, this supposition seems to this reviewer to belong more to the realm of historical fiction than either history or science.

Enterline raises many questions about received wisdom and points to new possibilities and interpretations. He appears, for example, to be open-minded about such artifacts as the Vinland map. To suggest that late fifteenth-century impulses to explore the west were "clearly motivated by information originating with or

transmitted by the Norse" is intriguing, if perhaps overstated (p. 214). But to maintain that "in fact all such westward attention was so motivated, directly or indirectly" stretches credulity (p. 214).

I found this book diverting, but its entire argument rests on the questionable paradigm that southern Europeans found new reasons to ignore Greenlanders. Enterline may well be correct that some knowledge of northern lands across the Arctic penetrated to southern Europe, but no convincing historical evidence is marshalled to demonstrate this premise, and the scientific evidence he presents is more suggestive than persuasive. Enterline is sufficiently humble to acknowledge that some "may wish to dismiss our approach as 'advocacy science' wherein a hypothesis goes seeking evidence instead of the evidence forcing conclusions" (p. 292). So it seems to this reviewer.

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