



Jack D. Forbes. *The American Discovery of Europe*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007. 272 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03152-6.

Reviewed by Mark Meuwese

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Americans Agronauts?

This interesting but speculative book examines a wide variety of topics related to possible transatlantic voyages made by indigenous Americans before and after 1492. Jack D. Forbes, professor emeritus of Native American studies and anthropology, turns on its head the popular assumption that Europeans may have reached the Americas prior to Christopher Columbus. Forbes's main argument is that the Aboriginal peoples of the Americas were skilled seafarers and maritime navigators who frequently traveled to Europe long before the Genoese explorer reached the New World. Not content with this provocative thesis, Forbes also suggests that the Aboriginal people who traveled to the Old World before and after Columbus left a genetic impact on Europeans through widespread intermarriage. A third contentious argument is that the Inuit, through their interactions with Norse colonists in Greenland, spread infectious Old World diseases to other parts of North America long before 1492, resulting in the disappearance of such ancient American civilizations as the Cahokia in the Mississippi Valley.

Forbes presents his arguments in seven wide-ranging chapters. Chapter 1 examines the probability that Columbus encountered unidentified Aboriginal Americans in Galway, Ireland, in or around 1477. According to Forbes, "this momentous event, largely ignored by white historians," is very significant because it gave the Genoese navigator "*absolute certainty* that he could sail westward to Cathay (Katayo or China) and India" (p. 5). Most of the chapter is taken up by a discussion of what Columbus understood to be the location and meaning of the fabled Cathay.

In the second chapter, Forbes discusses the role of ocean currents and winds in transatlantic navigation. Forbes argues that Aboriginal American navigators had a natural advantage over their European counterparts because of the strong northeast-flowing Gulf Stream. Using their knowledge of the natural environment and the

sea, the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean and those living along the eastern seaboard of North America only had to follow the Gulf Stream to eventually reach Europe. Forbes supports this thesis with evidence ranging from reports about American plants and trees having washed ashore on European coasts to documented accounts of (non-Aboriginal) navigators having sailed or rowed in small boats from North America to Europe without much difficulty. The chapter ends with a discussion of Galway in Ireland as a natural receiving point for plants, trees, and possibly even humans that were carried by the ocean currents and winds from the Americas.

Chapter 3 describes indigenous American seafaring techniques and traditions before and around the time of Columbus. It examines various boat types used by Aboriginal peoples in the Caribbean and Mesoamerica. Native peoples of the Caribbean were expert navigators who frequently traveled to Florida and the South American mainland to exchange goods with local indigenous communities living there. The Yucatan Maya were also skilled seafarers who used cotton and matted sails to traverse the Caribbean waters. The size and technology of indigenous Caribbean and Mayan sea crafts were so impressive that Columbus initially mistook them to be ships from the Chinese emperor.

In chapter 4, Forbes unexpectedly moves back deep in time by detailing maritime aspects of ancient migrations to and from the Americas. Like other recent scholars, Forbes argues that the first humans entering the Americas were maritime travelers rather than nomadic hunters. Forbes also suggests that the indigenous peoples of the Americas were not a physically uniform population but instead were characterized by considerable physical variety. The discussion of the peopling of the Americas is used as a springboard for a wide-ranging examination of the idea that ancient Americans were long-distance travelers who may have traveled to Europe thousands of

years ago.

Chapters 5 and 6 try to make the case for American Indian and Inuit voyages to Europe before 1492. In the absence of any written sources, Forbes uses obscure archeological finds as evidence for indigenous American visits to Europe. Some of the material remains cited by Forbes as proof for Aboriginal American voyages to Europe are several small ceramic death masks found in a medieval rubbish pit in the city of Gloucester in England. According to Forbes, the artifacts, now located at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, closely resemble Mesoamerican death masks. Tests carried out on the masks suggest that they may have been made prior to the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire in 1521. Forbes speculates that Mesoamerican visitors may have brought these masks with them on their way to medieval England. The documentary and archeological proof for Inuit visits to pre-Columbian Europe is also diverse and imaginative. Forbes uses the findings of Inuit harpoons in Ireland and Scotland as evidence for Inuit voyages. More speculative is Forbes's assertion that various Northwest European accounts about mysterious mermaids or mermen are in reality misunderstood sightings of Inuit men or women whose legs could not be seen because they rested in their kayaks.

The final chapter is a brief survey of American Indian and Inuit visits to Europe after 1492. Forbes emphasizes the large number of indigenous people who were taken to Europe as slaves in the wake of the Columbian voyages. The number of indigenous Caribbean slaves forcibly brought to Spain was so substantial that they may have had a genetic impact on the population of the Iberian Peninsula. After the Portuguese discovery of Brazil in 1500, a large number of Brazilian Indians also ended up as enforced laborers in Portugal. Not to be outdone by the Iberian colonial powers, English explorers, Dutch whalers, and Danish colonial officials became prolific kidnappers of Inuit in the Northern Atlantic. Dutch and Danish abductions of Inuit men and women became so large scale that the Dutch and Danish governments repeatedly issued ordinances prohibiting the practice. The chapter ends with a short discussion of Aboriginal diplomats and artists visiting Europe after 1700.

The strongest aspect of this book is that it calls attention to the neglected role of the sea in American Indian history. Although indigenous peoples of the Americas lacked seafaring traditions comparable to Western Europeans or East Asians, oceanic navigation did play a role in the shaping of pre-Columbian civilizations. More work also needs to be done on the histories of Aboriginal

fishermen, sailors, and transatlantic travelers after 1492. Forbes's study reminds us to integrate American Indians more fully into maritime history.

Unfortunately, the book's largest weakness is its speculative character. Most of Forbes's arguments about indigenous pre-Columbian voyages remain debatable in the absence of persuasive documentary or archeological evidence. A case in point is the author's frequent assertion that Aboriginal Americans may have widely intermarried and produced offspring with Europeans in the Old and New Worlds before 1492. As evidence for this process in Ireland, Forbes describes that the blood type found among one Australian woman of Irish descent resembles that of a blood type predominantly found among indigenous peoples in the Caribbean and South America. Although it may be possible that a lone Native American navigator reached Ireland and intermarried with an Irish woman before 1492, there is no documentary evidence whatsoever to suggest that these intercultural unions were frequent and large scale. Moreover, Forbes admits that it is unknown when this blood type first emerged in Ireland. Forbes is on similar shaky grounds when suggesting that the ceramic heads found in Gloucester were brought to England by Mesoamerican travelers before 1492. One could easily counter that the masks may also have been brought back as curiosities by an unknown medieval English expedition. While the artifacts are certainly intriguing, as proof for Aboriginal transatlantic voyages they remain circumstantial evidence in the absence of corroborating sources.

Forbes is occasionally also prone to exaggeration and misinterpretation of documentary evidence. When discussing Brazilian Indians living in the early seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, the author refers to the Irishman Bernard O'Brien who witnessed the presence of "large numbers of Brazilians" in Dutch cities (p. 177). Relying on O'Brien, Forbes even suggests that some of these Brazilian Indians embraced Judaism. Although Brazilian Indians indeed lived in the Dutch Republic during the 1620s, Dutch West India Company records only mention thirteen individual Indians. This was not "a large American community" (p. 174). Moreover, O'Brien never implied that Brazilian Indians embraced Judaism. Instead, O'Brien almost certainly referred to New Christians or Portuguese Jews who had recently migrated to Amsterdam to publicly practice their Jewish faith from which they had been prohibited by the Spanish Inquisition in Portugal and Brazil.

In conclusion, it is difficult to situate this book in existing studies on the maritime history and culture of in-

digenous American peoples. Surprisingly, Forbes has not much to say about Aboriginal motives for transatlantic voyages. He appears primarily interested in demonstrating that these oceanic voyages could have taken place.

Unfortunately, while the author's focus on indigenous American seafaring before Columbus is laudable, the evidence the author has gathered for his argument is highly disputable.

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