

**THE PRE-COLUMBIAN
DISCOVERY OF AMERICA BY THE
NORTHMEN; WITH
TRANSLATIONS FROM THE
ICELANDIC SAGAS**

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B. F. DE COSTA

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B. F. DE COSTA.

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CONTENTS.

- I. Preface.
- II. General Introduction. — Historic Fancies; The Sea of Darkness; Juba's Expedition; Traditions; The Northmen; The Colonization of Iceland; The Papal Letters; Settlement of Greenland; Organization of the Church; Monuments and Ruins; Explorations in Greenland; The Decline of Greenland; Lost Greenland Found; The Character and Achievements of the Northmen; The Ships of the Northmen; The Literature of Iceland; The Manuscripts; The Truthfulness of the Narratives; Early Voyages from England to Iceland.
- III. Gunnbiorn and his Rocks.
- IV. Eric the Red's voyages to Greenland and his settlement, - A. D. 983-986.
- V. Biarne Heriulfsson's voyage to the coast of America, - - - A. D. 986.
- VI. Leif Ericson's voyage to Vinland, A. D. 1000-1001.
- VII. Thorvald Ericson's voyage to Vinland - - - - - A. D. 1002.
- VIII. Thorstein Ericson's attempt to Seek Vinland, - - - A. D. 1005.
- IX. Thorfinn Karlsefne's settlement in Vinland, - - - - - A. D. 1006-1009.
- X. Freydis's voyage and settlement in Vinland, - - - - - A. D. 1010-1012.

MINOR NARRATIVES, AND LETTERS.

- I. Are Marson's Sojourn in Hvitramanna-land, - - - - - A. D. 983.
- II. Voyage of Biorn Asbrandson, - - - A. D. 999.
- III. Gudleif Gudlaugson's voyage, - - - A. D. 1027.
- IV. Allusions to Voyages found in Ancient Manuscripts.
- V. Saga of Einer Sokkeson - (*circum*) A. D. 1175.
- VI. Geographical Fragments.
- VII. Papal Letters, Letters from the Vatican Library.
- VIII. The Bull of Gregory IV, - - - - A. D. 834.

PREFACE.

The chief aim of this work is to place within the reach of the English-reading public every portion of the Icelandic-Sagas relating to the Pre-Columbian Discovery of America by the Northmen, and to indicate the movements by which that discovery was preceded. The reader will, therefore, find in this volume material from the Sagas not to be found in any other work in an English form.

The Sagas have been left, in the main, to tell their own story, though the necessary notes and explanations have been added.

So long ago as the year 1838, a distinguished writer in the *North American Review*, in closing a valuable and appreciative article on the Sagas relating to America, said: "We trust that some zealous student of these subjects will be immediately found, who will put the Icelandic authorities into an English dress, and prepare them, with proper literary apparatus, for the perusal of the general reader."

In 1868 this suggestion was acted upon by the writer. Availing himself liberally of the studies of those who had preceded him, he brought out a volume devoted to the subject. That work, however, owing to a large demand, soon went out of print; while in 1890 the progress of discussion, and the nearness of the coming Columbian Celebration, justified a new edition, which was brought out, with various improvements, being soon exhausted.

A third edition is now called for, and, in fact, rendered necessary by the discovery in the Vatican Library, at Rome, of a number of Papal letters that exhibit the subject in a new light. The testimony of these letters is of the highest value.

In treating the Sagas, the writer has not felt called upon to modify his views on any important point, and, substantially, his interpretation of these documents is the same as that undertaken in the original work. Time has only served to strengthen the belief of scholars in the historical character of the Sagas, while geographical studies now point, as formerly, to New England as one scene of the Northman's exploits, many of which have left no record, though traces of Icelandic occupation may yet be found on the coast between Cape Cod and Nova Scotia.

The author is strengthened in his opinion, not only by his own studies, but by the growing favor with which the profoundest scholars in Europe regard the Icelandic historical literature. Everywhere societies, as well as distinguished students of history, are in one way or another expressing their belief in the authenticity of the Sagas relating to the Pre-Columbian Discovery of America. Speaking of the Icelandic voyagers, and their acquaintance with America, Professor Max Muller says: "I have met with nothing to shake my belief in the fact that the Northmen possessed such knowledge."*

This work is not issued with the least intention of seeking to detract from the glory of the achievements of Columbus. That were impossible, though we should remember the claim of the Cabots, the great fellow countrymen of the Genoese, who saw the Continent of America before Columbus himself viewed it. The desire is to place before the reader the story preceding that of 1492, which is so interesting and important.

The author hopes that the Sagas have not been misinterpreted, or left obscure, especially as these records relating to the Pre-Columbian voyages are given in Professor Rafn's work on the Antiquities of America, accompanied by helpful notes and versions in Latin and Danish. In everything relating to the latter tongue, the author has had the invaluable assistance and advice of one who has

* Letter to the Author, August 14, 1889.

spoken it from childhood. He has also had most important and indispensable aid in connection with the Icelandic.

This work being strictly historical, both in spirit and design, the poetical extracts which occur here and there are translated as literally as possible, without any attempt to garnish them with metre and rhyme. Nevertheless examples in rhyme are given in the Notes.

It will be seen that the author differs on some points from Professor Rafn; yet it is believed that if that great student of Northern Antiquities could have gone over the subject again, studying it on the ground, and amid the scenes in which so many of the exploits of the Northmen were performed, he would have modified some of his views.

On the other hand, the author has sought to strengthen several of the conclusions of that noble and laborious investigator, and particularly by bringing out more fully the truthfulness of the Icelandic descriptions of the New England coast, which, centuries ago, presented an aspect that it does not now possess.

Let us remember, too, that in vindicating the Icelanders we honor those who gave, not indeed the first knowledge of the American Continent, but men to whom we are indebted for much that we esteem very valuable besides the immortal Sagas. In reality we fable, in a great measure, when we speak of our "Saxon inheritance." It is rather from the Northmen that we derived vital energy, freedom of thought, and, in a measure that we do not yet suspect, our strength of speech. Yet, happily, the people are becoming conscious of their indebtedness; so that it is to be hoped that the time is not far distant when the Northmen may be recognized in their true social, political and literary character, and at the same time, as navigators assume their rightful position in the Pre-Columbian Discovery of America.

It is gratifying to be able to state here, in concluding, that, after the publication of the Second Edition of this work (just before 1890), the distinguished historian of the United States, the Hon. George Bancroft, under date

of Washington, D. C., Dec. 30, 1889, communicated to the author the fact that he had withdrawn his objections to the historic character of the voyages recorded in the Sagas, and that he struck out reference to the subject in his last work, not only for the reason that he was engaged in condensing the narrative, but because he recognized that he had long been in error. This is certainly a most important admission.

B. F. DE COSTA.

PRE-COLUMBIAN DISCOVERY.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION.

HISTORIC FANCIES.

Before the plains of Europe rose above the primeval seas the Continent of America emerged from the watery waste that encircled the whole globe, and became the scene of animate life. The so-called New World is in reality the Old, and bears abundant proofs of hoary age. But at what period it became the abode of man we are unable even to conjecture. Down to the close of the tenth century of the Christian era it had little or no written history even in Central America. Traces of a rude civilization that suggest a high antiquity are by no means wanting. Monuments and mounds remain that point to periods the contemplation of which would cause Chronos himself to grow giddy; yet among all these great and often impressive memorials there is no monument, inscription or sculptured frieze that satisfactorily explains their origin. Tradition itself is dumb, and the theme chiefly kindles when brought within the realm of imagination. We can only infer that age after age nations and tribes rose to greatness and then fell into decline, barbarism and a rude culture holding alternate sway.¹

Nevertheless, men have enjoyed no small degree of satisfaction in conjuring up theories to explain the origin of the early races on the Western Continent. What a charm

¹ Of course we must not overlook the recent researches into the history of Central America, and especially the studies in connection with Yucatan.