

REPORTS ON CONFERENCES, SYMPOSIA, SEMINARS

THE GERMAN DISCOVERY OF AMERICA: A REVIEW OF THE CONTROVERSY OVER DIDRIK PINING'S VOYAGE OF EXPLORATION IN 1473 IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC

Symposium at the GHI, February 25, 2003. Speaker: Thomas Hughes (GHI). Commentator: A.J.R. Russell-Wood (Johns Hopkins University).

"The German Discovery of America," by Dr. Thomas L. Hughes, a Senior Visiting Research Fellow at the German Historical Institute, reassessed the controversy over Didrik Pining's 1473 voyage of exploration in the North Atlantic—a German-led, Danish-sponsored, and Portuguese-financed expedition seeking a northwestern route to Asia.

Although fragmentary references to this voyage of discovery exist in a few sixteenth-century documents, some dated decades after the event, it was not until 1925 that Dr. Sofus Larsen of the University of Copenhagen published his then sensational book about the Pining voyage, *The Discovery of North America Twenty Years Before Columbus*. Since then, Larsen's account has enjoyed strong scholarly and public support in Scandinavia and Portugal. By contrast, in Germany a certain public acceptance has been offset by strenuous pro and con arguments among German scholars over the last several decades.

Four explorers were mentioned by Larsen. The leaders, Didrik Pining and Hans Pothorst, had clearly seen prior service for the King of Denmark. So, presumably, had Johannes Scolvus. The fourth participant, Joao Vaz Corte-Real, was believed to have been the agent on board for King Alfonso V of Portugal, who financed the undertaking through the good offices of his dynastic colleague and collaborator, King Christian I of Denmark. According to Larsen, the mission most likely began in Bergen, refitted in Iceland, journeyed to Greenland, and went on to discover the "land of codfish" (Labrador or Newfoundland). Pining was rewarded by the Danish king with his appointment as governor (Viceroy) of Iceland, 1478-90, and Corte-Real by the Portuguese king with his appointment as governor in the Azores, 1474-96. We unfortunately know very little about Pothorst, and even less about Scolvus.

Pining and Pothorst had had previous careers as freebooters and privateers, and were known for their expertise in northern waters. From 1925–33 they were assumed to be Danish heroes until German genealogists suddenly and conclusively proved that Pining was a native of Hildesheim, where Pothorst was probably his childhood friend.

No sooner had German heroes unexpectedly arisen, however, than distinguished German scholars entered the fray as disputants. Richard Hennig generally supported the Larsen thesis, while Egmont Zechlin and Heinrich Winter stressed its evidentiary deficiencies. Further research by Paul Pini and Klaus-Peter Kiedel extended the arguments in the years 1970–80.

Meanwhile, the slim evidentiary base has been regularly augmented by continuing public fascination with the story. Streets, buildings, and memorials have been dedicated to Pining in Bremen and Hildesheim. Stamps commemorating Pothorst and Corte-Real have been issued in Greenland and Portugal. All four explorers have achieved a certain notoriety on the internet. Novels and docudramas have further explored the border between fact and fiction.

In 1965, the Norwegian sea captain and arctic explorer Johannes Tor-noe even posited a Pining—Pothorst—Corte-Real voyage of several ships, lasting from 1471–1473, viewing the entire east coast of North America, reaching the Gulf of Mexico, and visiting the Caribbean, “far enough south to determine that there was no opening to the west,” and thereby conditioning later voyages by Scolvus and Columbus.

American and English historians have, on the whole, oscillated between ridiculing and accepting the plausibility of at least part of the Larsen saga. The German critics have trouble with the sighting of Labrador for cartographical and time constraint reasons, but even they accept the probability that a joint Portuguese-Danish voyage did take place, commanded by Pining and Pothorst, with Corte-Real and Scolvus on board. However, they doubt that the voyage went further than the west coast of Greenland.

After reviewing the scholarly disputes in detail, Hughes left the Pining saga in a “kind of suspended animation, with perhaps more suspense than animation.” Considerable circumstantial evidence does exist to support the central proposition, but the positive evidence needed for final proof is lacking. Historians still look for the additional piece of evidence that could tilt the balance one way or the other. Until then we are left with the verdict “not proven,” which, of course, can be read as “not disproven” as well.

Comments on the Hughes paper were given by Dr. A.J.R. Russell-Wood, a specialist on fifteenth-century Portugal and Professor of History at the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. He noted that Hughes

showed once again that there is a tendency for scholars to believe what they are predisposed to believe, but he also found the lecture a “timely reminder that much exploration was achieved by persons denied their place in histories of discovery.”

Dr. Russell-Wood focused on five broad issues that emerged from the presentation. 1) The central role of monarchy in the early modern period, evidenced by this significant example of the royal Portuguese use of a royal Danish flag of convenience. 2) Motivations may well have been mixed—commerce (fisheries), military gain, intelligence gathering, national prestige, and the use of Iceland and the Azores as staging points for further westward exploration. 3) Paradigms of exploration: there were contrasts between this apparently isolated Danish voyage in the north, and the repeated subsequent voyages of the Portuguese in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries to Labrador, Newfoundland, and Cape Breton. 4) Cultural heroes: nations are tempted, however late, to consecrate emblematic figures and create celebrity myths useful to their own national purposes. This has happened in connection with these four explorers even in recent decades, especially with the Salazar regime in Portugal. 5) Sources and historiography: this story is a timely reminder of how it was the exception rather than the norm for there to be firsthand accounts of voyages of exploration. Neither Pining nor Corte-Real apparently ever took on the role of chronicler. The consequent lacunae not only present problems to historians but also permit flights of fancy.

Thomas Hughes