

Kirsten Seaver's Vinland Map book– first thoughts

Source: <http://sci.tech–archive.net/Archive/sci.archaeology/2004–07/2170.html>

From: David B. (davidb_at_tronosspamchos.freemove.co.uk)

Date: 07/24/04

Date: Sat, 24 Jul 2004 19:31:26 +0100

Kirsten Seaver's new book "Maps, Myths, and Men" (ISBN 0–8047–4963–9) is extremely informative. The title, however, gives a clue that the information is by no means restricted to the subject indicated in her subtitle: "The Story of the Vínland Map". Leaving aside the hundred pages of notes, bibliography and index, it is probable that a good couple of hundred pages are devoted to various background issues, including a great deal about known early maps of the North Atlantic area, a 60–page chapter on the Norse "in and near North America"– mercifully dismissing items like the Kensington Runestone in a couple of pages– and a 77–page final chapter interweaving information about the construction of the Vinland Map with the biography of Father Josef Fischer S.J. ("Dating all the way back to 1440, the only person in the world who could have made the Vinland Map").

Surprisingly, the central claim about the purpose of the map– that it was intended to be found by the Nazis who would be unable to cope with its mixed message of bold Aryan exploration and Roman Catholic world domination– is given very little space, just a couple of paragraphs. Even then, Seaver suggests that "Not in his worst nightmares during that dark period in his life could Fischer have foreseen what actually happened when the map surfaced in public". Much more detail, however, is given to the background for the theory, particularly the overt and implied references to the Church. A point Seaver rightly (but perhaps over–enthusiastically) emphasises is that the map is meant to represent a globular Earth, on which the influence of Rome ultimately met itself going east and west. The key suggestion, which may or may not fall into the "over–enthusiastic" category, is that Bishop Eirik, after his work in Vinland early in the 12th century, would have gone west to reach his next alleged destination, the "wintery east" (an improved translation of the phrase "orientem hiemale"). We readers can't dismiss this idea as anachronistic, because of course the caption referred to is a fake. This Kirsten Seaver pretty much takes as given. Very little of the book is devoted to explaining the evidence that the map is a forgery (at this point I'd better declare my personal interest and say that if that's all you want to know, you should read my little book instead).

Old favourites like the anatase debate and the wormholes are covered, of course, and the book has probably the best compilation of information about the British Museum tests in the late 1960s, but Seaver is more interested

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in the reluctance of the map's owners (and the authors of the 1965 official book) to acknowledge the many problems. This is obviously the most dramatic aspect of the book, but its impact is rather dissipated by the structure of the text. Although it appears to be arranged in clearly defined topic sections, there are all sorts of overlaps, and many matters are considered over several chapters. As a result, it is very difficult to gain an impression of the chain of cause and effect in the story of the map; the book is better considered as a series of linked essays, with a mercifully effective index for anybody who wishes to investigate any particular matter in detail. Although I remain unconvinced by some of Seaver's conclusions, I learned a great deal (including one or two things I should have known already– d'oh).

David B.