

Muslims Worldwide

Early Muslim Exploration Worldwide: Evidence of Muslims in the New World Before Columbus

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The Muslims were far ranging sea traders – merchants and explorers whose travels added to the store of geographic knowledge. So great was their knowledge and their reputation for such knowledge, that when eleventh-century King Roger of Sicily wanted to know about the world, he knew he had to ask a Muslim. The Muslim scholar entrusted with the task of creating an atlas for King Roger, was Abu Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Muhammad Abdallah Ibn Idris Al-Hammudi Al-Hasani, or simply Al-Idrisi.

Al-Idrisi (1100 - 1166) was born in Morocco, the son of a noble family which claimed direct descendancy from the Prophet Muhammad. Educated in Cordoba, he was a poet, a student of medicine and an avid traveler. He traveled widely, visiting the Canary Islands, Muslim Spain, North Africa, and the region that is present-day Turkey.

At the time, Sicily in particular was a meeting ground for Muslim and Christian civilizations. The island had been under Muslim rule until the end of the 11th century. Like Muslim Spain, it was a beacon of prosperity to a Latin Christian Europe caught in the economic and intellectual slow-down we call the Dark Ages. In Sicily the Arabs built dams, irrigation systems, reservoirs and water towers, introduced new crops – oranges and lemons, cotton, date palms – and made good use of the island's mines and fishing grounds. Early in the 11th century a band of Norman adventurers, had ridden into southern Italy to wrest it from the Byzantine Greeks and their allies, the Muslims, and in 1101 the Norman Count Roger capped his career by conquering Sicily. Four years later he passed the territory on to his son, crowned King Roger II. Roger II, educated by Greek and Arab tutors, was an intellectual with a taste for scientific inquiry, and relished the company of Muslim scholars, of whom Al-Idrisi was one of the most celebrated.

Al-Idrisi, at Roger's invitation, finally settled in Sicily where he was employed by the Norman King to write a system-

atic geography of the world. The result was *Kitab Ar-Rujari (Roger's Book)*, which shows the world divided into seven regions, gives distances between major cities, and describes the customs, people, products, and climate of the entire known world. It also records the voyage of a Moroccan sailor who sailed into the Atlantic Ocean for 30 days and returned to tell of a rich inhabited land. Could this have been the Americas?

Al-Idrisi engraved his information of the known world on a spherical globe as well as on a silver disk-shaped map. The great disk, almost 80 inches in diameter and weighing over 300 pounds, was fabricated out of silver, chosen for its malleability and permanence. Al-Idrisi explained that the disk merely symbolized the shape of the world: "The earth is round like a sphere, and the waters adhere to it and are maintained on it through natural equilibrium which suffers no variation. . . All creatures are stable on the surface of the earth, the air attracting what is light, the earth what is heavy, as the magnet attracts iron." (See map details on page 279.) Using maps such as these, Al-Idrisi showed the earth to be round (elsewhere, other Muslim scholars had computed the circumference of the earth) – more than three centuries before Columbus.

In 1160, Sicilian barons rose in rebellion against the son of King Roger, and during the disorders looted the palace. In a great fire in the courtyard, they burned records, books and documents – including a new Latin edition of Roger's

Book which Al-Idrisi had prepared. At the same time, the silver map and celestial sphere disappeared, apparently cut up and melted down.

Since the barons had attacked the Muslims of Sicily with particular ferocity, Al-Idrisi fled to North Africa where, six years later, he died. But as he brought the Arabic text with him, however, his great work lived on, winning widespread fame and serving as a model for Muslim geographers and historians for centuries. It provided the great Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun with practically all of his geographical knowledge.

It was not, however, available in Europe. Although the Arabic text of Roger's Book was published in Rome by the Medici press in 1592, it was not again available to Europeans in Latin until the 17th century. In the 1400s, therefore, Christopher Columbus had to rely on other sources of information. Using a globe prepared by a German cartographer named Martin Behaim – based on Ptolemy's miscalculations – Columbus also added in Marco Polo's equally misleading estimates of distances and concluded, incorrectly, that by sailing west from Spain he could reach Japan or India after no more than a 4,000 mile voyage.

It is a curious thought that had Columbus been aware of the true distance – from Al-Idrisi's estimates – he might have hesitated to undertake his voyage.



Evidence of Muslims in the New World Before Columbus

• **Al-Masudi** in his *Muruj adh-Dhahab* (938), tells of **Khashkhash Ibn Saeed Ibn Aswad**, who crossed the Atlantic Ocean and returned in the year 889: "He was a young man of Cordoba who gathered a group of young men and went on a voyage on this ocean. After a long time he returned with fabulous booty. Every Spaniard (Andalusian Muslim) knows his story."

• **Abu Bakr Ibn Umar Al-Qutiyya** relates the story of **Ibn Farrukh**, who landed in February 999 in Gando (Canary Islands), visited King Guanariga, continuing his journey westward until he found islands he called Capraria and Pluitana and returning to Al-Andalus in May.

• **Al-Idrisi** in his extensive *The Geography of Al-Idrisi*, in the 12th century, reported the journey of North African seamen who reached the Americas. Al-Idrisi wrote: "A group of seafarers sailed into the sea of Darkness and Fog [the Atlantic Ocean] from Lisbon in order to discover what was in it and the extent of its limit. They were a party of eight and they took a boat which was loaded with supplies to last them for months. . . They finally reached an island that had people and cultivation but they were captured and chained for three days. On the fourth day a translator came speaking the Arabic language! He translated for the King and asked them about their mission. They informed him about themselves, then they were returned to their confinement. When the westerly wind began to blow, they were put in a canoe, blindfolded and brough to land after three days' sailing. They were left on the shore with their hands tied behind their backs. The next day, another tribe appeared, freeing them and informing them that between and their lands was a journey of two months." This astonishing historical report not only clearly describes contact between Muslim seamen and the indigenous people of the Caribbean islands,

but it confirms the fact that the contact between the two worlds had been so involved that the native people had Arabic speakers among them.

• **Al-Umari** in his *Masalik al Absar fi Mamalik al Amsar* reports of **Mansa Musa** describing to scholars in Cairo, on his famous pilgrimage to Makkah in 1324, how his predecessor in the West African Islamic Empire of Mali "would not believe that it was impossible to discover the limits of the neighboring sea [Atlantic Ocean]. He wanted to find out and persisted in his plan. He had two hundred ships equipped and filled them with men, and others in the same number filled with gold, water and supplies in sufficient quantity to last for years. He told those who commanded them: 'Return only when you have reached the extremity of the ocean, or when you have exhausted your food and water.' They went away; their absence was long before any of them returned. . . We asked the captain about their adventures.' 'Prince,' he replied, 'we sailed for a long time, up to the moment when we encountered in mid-ocean something like a river with a violent current. My ship was last, the others sailed on, and gradually as each one entered this place, they disappeared and did not come back. We did not know what had happened to them. As for me, I returned to where I was and did not enter the current.' But the emperor did not want to believe him. He equipped two thousand vessels, a thousand for himself and the men who accompanied him and a thousand for water and supplies. He conferred power on me [Mansa Musa] and left with this companions on the ocean. This was the last time that I saw him and the others, and I remain absolute master of the empire."

This report reveals that the Manding monarch made great preparation for the journey and had confidence in its success. The captain who reported the violent "river" must have encountered a mid-ocean current. While we do not know for certain the outcome of the ex-

pedition of these two thousand ships, we do have evidence from this side of the Atlantic establishing Manding contact in the Americas in this period.

The Manding made contact with the closest land mass to the West African coast, Brazil. They appear to have used it as a base for exploration of the Americas, traveling along rivers in the dense jungles of South America and overland till they reached North America. The African Muslims of Honduras called themselves "Almamys" prior to the coming of the Spaniards. They may have been related to the Africans of northern Honduras seen by Ferdinand Columbus, the son of Christopher Columbus. In the Manding language "Almamy" was used for Al-Imamu, Arabic for "prayer leader."

In 1920, American historian and linguist Leo Weiner of Harvard University wrote a controversial but well documented work entitled *Africa and the Discovery of America*, in which he provided evidence that Columbus was well aware of the Manding presence and that the West African Muslims had not only spread throughout the Caribbean, Central and South America, but that they had reached Canada and were trading and intermarrying with the eastern woodland Iroquois and Algonquin nations. Much later, early English explorers were to meet Iroquois and Algonquin chiefs with names like Abdul-Rahim and Abdallah Ibn Malik.

Clearly, knowledge of the presence of Islam in the Americas was known by early Spanish and Portuguese explorers. A case can be made for thinking of the whole colonization of the Americas by the Spanish as an extension of the "Reconquest." Informed by explorers and soliders of the influence of Islam, Ferdinand issued a series of edicts in order to stop the flow of Muslims and Moriscos – free or enslaved – to the Americas, to prevent those already here from teaching Islam, and to "win back" the Muslim native Indian populations.