

reviews

Erikson, Eskimos, and Columbus: Medieval European Knowledge of America.

By James Robert Enterline
Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.
xx, 342 pp., maps, illustrations, notes. \$45.00 hardcover, ISBN 0-8018-6660-X.

*Reviewed by Russell S. Kirby,
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One of the first lectures I attended as a graduate student focusing in historical geography of North America in the mid-1970s was focused on the geographical myths and counterfactual scenarios related to the discovery and settlement of the North American continent. Although the work of James Robert Enterline did not figure in that lecture, his book, *Viking America* (1972) had only recently been published. The notion that Greenland settlers had traveled to the shores of North America, establishing and then abandoning permanent settlements several centuries before Columbus, was accepted as probable. However, no consideration was given to the possibility of a pre-Columbian exchange of cartographic knowledge and detail between the first Native Americans and European cartographers in the 13th to 15th centuries.

In *Erikson, Eskimos and Columbus*, Enterline puts forward a simple hypothesis—that detailed cartographic knowledge of portions of the western hemisphere was accurately transferred from the native peoples of the Arctic regions, via the Greenland settlements, to European mapmakers, several centuries before the fabled voyage of Columbus in 1492. The text is divided into two sections of

unequal length. Following a lengthy introduction, Enterline discusses three “outstanding misunderstandings” in separate chapters. The first deals with the work of Claudius Clavus in the 1420s and 1430s, and a controversy, as described by Enterline, as to whether the work of Clavus was the first to show the general outline of Scandinavia. Enterline agrees with other cartographic historians that Clavus’s work incorporates the earliest known graphical depiction of the outline of Greenland, but interprets what some have claimed to be representations of Scandinavia as boundaries of islands and physiographic features from several spatially discontinuous areas of Arctic North America, as passed down through rough sketches and oral tradition from contact between Greenland settlers and native peoples of the Arctic and Greenland.

The second “misunderstanding” focuses on the *Inventio Fortunatae*, a lost book thought to be written around 1363. On a map drawn in 1507-8 by Johann Ruysch, the cartographer attributes eighteen highly stylized islands around the North Pole to that source. Cartographic representations of these islands on this map were later incorporated into the work of others, and Enterline surmises that Clavus also incorporated these data into his maps. Enterline again makes the claim that these islands are representations of landforms from locations across the Arctic, the product of knowledge transfer through a pre-Columbian exchange of cartographic information.

And finally, the third of the “misunderstandings” concerns the much debated Yale Vinland Map (circa 1440). While for some the misunderstandings surrounding this map relate to its provenance, in the context of Enterline’s discourse the central issue is how

the cartographer who drew the Vinland Map knew the general outline of the island of Greenland if it had never before appeared on a medieval European map. In Enterline’s view, allowing for some minor rearrangements of islands and other boundaries on the Vinland Map to place them in proper spatial alignment, the only plausible explanation for the curious cartographic misrepresentations he sees in the Vinland Map is a highly imperfect transfer of cartographic knowledge from the native peoples of the Arctic to the cartographic craftsman who ultimately drew the map without any first-hand knowledge of the lands he depicted.

The second section of Enterline’s book provides a chronological survey of known maps, atlases, and globes pertinent to the subject of exploration, discovery, and cartography of the northern hemisphere and North America. This material is reviewed with careful consideration to Enterline’s main hypothesis, and contains numerous reproductions of portions of maps, atlases, globes, and documents relevant to Enterline’s arguments. Many of these illustrations are quite interesting in their own right and are further elucidated through brief discussions of the historical context of each illustration selected. Many of these documents are extremely rare, and it is helpful to see them integrated into the text. The book concludes with an appendix in which the author describes and comments on some of the experiments done to establish the authenticity of the Vinland Map, notes to the preceding chapters, and an index.

Few icons of American history are so sacred that the mere suggestion that they are wrong seems blasphemous. This is not to say that historical geographers and cartographers have not done their level best to reveal as myth a

number of sacred "truths." But James Robert Enterline has chosen to tackle the notion that Columbus was the European discoverer of North America. True, Enterline goes to great lengths to preserve much of Columbus's presumed accomplishments, his thesis in *Erikson, Eskimos, and Columbus* is that considerable evidence of European cartographic foreknowledge of North America can be discerned in world maps from the 14th and 15th centuries, and that Columbus's voyage in 1492 was predicated on that knowledge.

Enterline arranges his argument in a crafty manner, first preparing readers for his thesis by describing the "hypothetico-deductive" scientific method he intends to employ as a basis for evaluating and interpreting the evidence and ultimately asserting his thesis to be true. This reviewer is also a practitioner of the scientific method, but generally we start with a null hypothesis, which is the antithesis of the research hypothesis, and seek to refute the null hypothesis in favor of the alternative. Enterline does not follow this approach, but rather works from every possible angle (sometimes literally) to find ways to support his thesis from the existing evidentiary base of maps and globes that survived from the medieval era to the present. This reviewer, while trained as a historical geographer, is not an expert on the history of European cartography from 1000 to 1500 A.D., and lacks the detailed knowledge of the subject matter necessary to fully evaluate Enterline's interpretations of each map, atlas, and globe. However, Enterline does not provide the reader with the reassurance that he has not selected only those documents supporting his argument, and ignored those that do not. In scientific terms, he may be guilty of "publication bias," that is, the publication only of positive findings.

Enterline's book presents an intriguing counterfactual hypothesis, marshalling evidence from rare, archival sources to support the view that the Atlantic Ocean into which Columbus sailed in 1492 was far from the unknown expanse of lore and fable. Though the writing style is tedious, the book makes for interesting reading. The volume is nicely formatted, well copyedited, with illustrations well reproduced (although in some instances the originals have the imperfections of the passing centuries). Although there are many endnotes, the author may again be guilty of selecting felicitously from the body of scholarly work. The gullible or less knowledgeable reader may be convinced by Enterline's arguments; however, it is likely that most cartographic historians may prefer that this book be forgotten by the scientific community, or used as an object lesson in how to misapply the scientific method in historiographic research. The best way, in the end, is for readers to form their own judgment, and that is another part of the scientific method to which this author subscribes.

Maps of **The Queens Jazz Trail**, **The Harlem Renaissance**, and **The East Village**. Published by Ephemera Press, Brooklyn, NY.

Reviewed by Matt Knutzen, New York Public Library

Ephemera Press, of Brooklyn, NY, has produced three touring maps related to the rich cultural landscape of New York City: The Queens Jazz Trail, The Harlem Renaissance, and The East Village. The following review provides description and analysis of these three titles.

The first, **The Queens Jazz Trail, A Full-Color Illustrated**

Map, is in its second edition, with project direction by Marc H. Miller, illustration by Tony Millionaire, and design by Cindy Ho. Copyright by Flushing Town Hall, Flushing Council on Culture and the Arts, 1998. It is 21" x 17" unfolded and retails for \$9.95. This map was produced as part of the Queens Jazz Trail guided tour of the borough, a program run by the Flushing Council on Culture and the Arts, Inc.

The front side is an illustrative handdrawn map "poster" depicting famous jazz artists and their homes in Queens while the back has a short essay about the importance of Queens as New York City jazz musician's borough of choice, an address listing of their residences, a short explanation of the Jazz Trail escorted tour and project acknowledgements.

At the very top (north) of the oblique perspective map is blue sky with puffy white clouds, under which sits the nonsubject area boroughs of Manhattan (at top left) and the Bronx (at top center), while Queens, the subject area, takes up the foreground and most of the remaining page. Manhattan and the Bronx appear in a cool lavender evoking mountains of steel and concrete. These are separated from the Queens side by the East River, which perhaps ironically appears in clean blue. The background coloring of Queens is depicted in a fresh shade of light green.

Crisscrossing the map is a network of major roads, highways, and expressways depicted in brick red. Small, tan banners adorn the various neighborhoods, parks, and cemeteries where famous jazz artists lived, performed, and are interred. Some of these have short explanatory text such as "St. Michael's Cemetery: Scott Joplin buried in a pauper's grave, 1917, marker placed, 1985" and "Jamaica: Site of the first jazz community in Queens. Clarence Williams