

PRINCE MADOG AB OWAIN

In fourteen hundred and ninety-two Columbus sailed the ocean blue... and discovered America. But, according to legend, Prince Madog ab Owain Gwynedd got there first – a whole 300 years earlier.

Madog and his brother Riryd set sail from what we know today as Rhos-on-Sea in 1170, and dropped anchor possibly in modern day Alabama. He returned to Wales with tales of high adventure and set sail a second time, taking a band of settlers with him. It's thought they landed at Mobile Bay and then headed inland along the Alabama river. But the story doesn't end there: stone forts along the river dating from around the time of Madog's arrival are said to be of a similar design to Dolwyddelan Castle, and early explorers are thought to have found evidence of Welsh influence among various tribes of North American Indians – including the use of coracles – a type of boat still in use in Wales today.

Whether fact or legend, Madog's story has provided fertile inspiration for generations of poets, novelists and cultural historians.

Madoc was allegedly the son of Owain Gwynedd a 12th Century prince of Gwynedd, widely considered one of the greatest Welsh rulers of the Middle Ages. Following his death in 1170, a bloody feud broke out between his heir Hywel (known as the 'Poet Prince') and Maelgwn, Rhodri and Dafydd his younger sons. They were sons of Owain's second wife, Cristin. In total he had at least 13 children from his two wives and several more born out of wedlock but - as was the tradition in Wales - fully acknowledged. According to the legend, Madoc and his brother Rhirid were among these.

The legend claims that Madoc was disheartened by the fighting between his half brothers and so he and Rhirid decided to explore the western ocean with a small fleet of boats. This they did, setting sail from Llandrillo, Rhos-on-Sea.

The story tells that they discovered a distant and abundant land where one hundred Welshmen disembarked and established a settlement. It has been suggested that their landing place was west Florida or Mobile Bay, Alabama in the US. Madoc and some others then returned to Wales to recruit more settlers and then returned across the Atlantic a second time, never to return.

While there is no absolute proof, there have been some tantalizing anecdotes that seem to support the legend. On November 26, 1608, Peter Wynne, a member of Captain Christopher Newport's exploration party to the villages of the Eastern Siouan Monacan, above the falls of the James River in Virginia, wrote a letter to John Egerton. In it he informed Egerton that some members of Newport's party believed that the pronunciation of the Monacans' language resembled "Welch" which Wynne spoke. Furthermore, the Monacans were among those non-Algonquian tribes collectively referred to by the Algonquians as "Mandoag" – a term tantalisingly close to 'Madoc-ian'.

Another early settler to claim an encounter with a Welsh-speaking Indian was the Rev. Morgan Jones. He told Thomas Lloyd, William Penn's deputy, that he'd been captured in 1669 by a tribe of Tuscarora called the Doeg. According to Jones, his life was spared when the tribe's chief heard him speak Welsh. The chief seemed to be familiar with the language, understanding much of what Jones said. Jones' report says that he then lived with the Doeg for several months, preaching the Gospel in Welsh before returning to the British Colonies where he recorded the adventure in 1686.

Folk tradition has long held that a site called "Devil's Backbone" at Rose Island, about fourteen miles upstream from Louisville, Kentucky, was once home to a colony of Welsh-speaking Indians.

In 1810, the first governor of Tennessee, Jon Sevier wrote to his friend, Major Amos Stoddard regarding a conversation he'd had years earlier in 1782 with the old Cherokee chief, Oconostota about the ancient fortifications built along the Alabama River. In the letter, Sevier claims that the old chief told him that the forts had been built by a white people called "Welsh", as protection against the ancestors of the Cherokee. Sevier had also written in 1700 of the alleged discovery of six skeletons in brass armor bearing Welsh coat-of-arms.

This story is corroborated in a later letter, dated 1824 by Thomas S Hind, who wrote to the editor of the American Pioneer regarding the Madoc tradition. In this letter, Hind also claimed that in 1799, six soldiers had been dug up near Jeffersonville, Indiana on the Ohio River with breastplates decorated with Welsh coat of arms.

It is probable that the truth will never really be known, that no artifact nor evidence will ever be found to prove beyond doubt that a Welsh nobleman discovered America three centuries before Columbus. Nevertheless, it is a tantalizing story and a legend that has withstood the test of time.