

The Westford Knight: heraldic evidence of pre-Columbian Scottish explorers in America?

by
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Introduction

In the little town of Westford, Massachusetts, situated some 35 miles (56 km) northwest of Boston, by the side of Depot Street, not far from the local high school, stands a stone monument next to a small section of a rock ledge cordoned off with stone pillars and chains. (Fig. 1) The monument was erected in 1976 and memorializes “Prince Henry First Sinclair of Orkney” and his voyage to North America in the year 1398 (nearly 100 years before Columbus’ more better known voyage) and the death of one of his party in 1399 on or near Prospect Hill in Westford. The stone ledge next to the monument is said to bear an “armorial effigy ... memorial to this knight”.

What is this effigy, popularly called the “Westford Knight”, and what is it doing carved into a rock ledge in Massachusetts?

The Story of the Westford Knight Effigy

The history of the effigy is somewhat difficult to trace for several reasons. For one thing, many of the sources available give only partial information, and leave out many specifics. For another, different sources add details which are not found in other sources, but fail to state where these details came from or are to be found. That said, however, here’s a brief history of the effigy as I have been able to piece it together from the diverse sources available, separating as much as possible the “wheat” from the “chaff” (of which there seems to be plenty):

The first written record of the image of the figure known as the Westford Knight appears in an 1883 history of Westford by R. Hodgman. The author describes a “broad ledge which ... has upon its surface grooves made by glaciers in some far off geological age. Rude outlines of the human face have been traced upon it, and the figure is said to be the work of Indians.”¹

In the early 1950s, Frank Glynn, an amateur archeologist from Clinton, Connecticut, began a correspondence with Dr. T.C. Lethbridge, an archeologist at Cambridge. Glynn was interested in evidence of Viking landings in New England. In one of the books Glynn sent to Lethbridge, *The Ruins of Greater Ireland in New England* by W.G. Goodman, was a drawing of an image found on a ledge in Massachusetts. Goodman had interpreted it as a representation of an 11th century Norse sword. Dr. Lethbridge, however, concluded that it was actually a wheel pommel sword from medieval Europe. He wrote to Glynn and encouraged him to locate this ledge. He believed that if Glynn cleared away more dirt that he would discover an image of a 14th century knight. After more than a year of searching for the figure, Glynn found it on a stone ledge in Westford, Massachusetts. When more of the dirt was removed, Glynn discovered a life-sized image of a knight with sword and shield. He took photographs of the image, which he sent to Lethbridge.²

Dr. Lethbridge turned his attention to the shield borne by the knight; it appeared to feature a buckle or perhaps a shoulder brooch and also seemed to show a galley or ship. Initially, Lethbridge believed the coat of arms to be that of the Sinclair family. However, after an inspection

of photographs of the image, Sir Iain Moncreiffe of that Ilk, then Unicorn Pursuivant, attributed the arms not to Sinclair but to “a Gunn companion-of-arms of Henry Sinclair.”³

And how do they think the image of a 14th Century Scottish knight came to be carved into a stone ledge in North America? The story of the Westford Knight begins with two Venetian brothers, Nicolo and Antonio Zeno, and their account of their journeys across the North Atlantic in the last years of the 14th Century with a man named Zichmni. A manuscript of their account of their journeys was discovered in an attic in Venice and published in 1558 by one of their descendants. The Zeno publication recounted the discoveries and travels of three members of the Zeno family, as transcribed from letters between Nicolo Zeno, his brother Carlo Zeno, and Nicolo's son Antonio. The letters were put in order and published to create a narrative of their travels from Frislanda to Engronellant, and the voyages of others to Estotilanda and to a place named Drogeo.⁴

A naturalist on Captain James Cook's second voyage of discovery, John Reinhold Forster, published a book in which he argued that Zichmni was an Italian corruption of the name Sinclair and that of the places mentioned, Frislanda was The Orkneys, Estotilanda was Newfoundland, and Drogeo was North America. Many now believe that Zichmni was Henry Sinclair, Jarl (or Earl) of Orkney and Lord of Shetland under King Hakon VI of Norway.⁵

Earl, or Prince, Henry Sinclair was also a subject of historian Frederick J. Pohl's *Atlantic Crossings Before Columbus*, published in 1961. Pohl made the claim that Henry, born at Rosslyn Castle near Edinburgh in 1345, not only wandered about Nova Scotia in 1398, but also lived among the Mi'kmaq natives there long enough to be remembered through the centuries since as the man-god "Glooscap".⁶ Indeed, Pohl made a list of some seventeen specific similarities between Glooscap and Henry Sinclair; for example, the fact that each had three daughters.⁷

How Did the Image Come to Be in Westford, Massachusetts?

The rough outline of the story of Prince Henry Sinclair's expedition as it has since come down to us is as follows: Earl Henry Sinclair of Scotland led a 200-man expedition to North America in 1398. His fleet consisted of thirteen vessels, two of them oar-driven galleys. The Zeno manuscript suggests he tried to land at Newfoundland but was driven off by natives, and then sailed into what is now Chedabucto Bay, Nova Scotia.⁸

After wintering in there, in 1399 he led 100 men south, perhaps carried by a northeaster, to what is now Massachusetts, just north of Boston. The party landed and spent some time there, living peacefully with the natives. To the west they could see a hilltop from which the natives frequently sent smoke signals. Accompanied by his men, Henry marched inland to the summit of this hill, now called Prospect Hill, located in Westford, Massachusetts. It is 463 feet (141 meters) in altitude and is the highest point in what is now Middlesex County, and afforded a good view in all directions.⁹

Earl Henry's cousin, Sir James Gunn, died near Westford, and was buried nearby. His effigy likeness was inscribed by punch-hole carving into an exposed slate ledge on Prospect Hill by the group's armorer. The punch-hole method of carving involved making a series of small impressions with a sharp tool driven by a hammer or mallet. Where glacial scratches or rock colorations already existed, they were incorporated into the man-made design.¹⁰

With all that as background, what does the Westford Knight look like? Exactly what is carved into the ledge in Westford that has caused all of this interest? There are three different sketches of the effigy carved into the stone, containing differing amounts of detail.

The first is a sketch by T.C. Lethbridge, based on Frank Glynn's photographs. A caption notes that the “[d]etail of body and shield [is] uncertain.”¹¹ (Fig. 2, no. 1)

The second can be found on the website of the New England Antiquities Research Association (<http://www.neara.org/CARLSON/atlantic.html>) and on the website of Orkneyjar: the heritage of the orkney islands (<http://www.orkneyjar.com/history/historicalfigures/henrysinclair/westknight.htm>). (Fig. 3)

And the third, containing far more detail and consisting of the full figure, can be found on the internet on a Sinclair family website (<http://sinclair.quarterman.org/sinclair/effigy.html>), on a Gunn family website (<http://www.clanguinn.us/knight.htm>), again at America’s Stonehenge website ([http://www.stonehengeusa.com/Davinci Code Connection to America's Stonehenge.htm](http://www.stonehengeusa.com/Davinci%20Code%20Connection%20to%20America's%20Stonehenge.htm)) and yet again on the Roseline Da Vinci website (http://theroseline.co.uk/index.php?main_page=infopages&pages_id=12). (Given the amount of detail in this figure compared to the others, one must suspect that the artist has “seen” more than was actually there in the stone.)

What the Image Looks Like

And what actually appears on the stone ledge? Figure 4 is a view of the ledge containing the image/carving which has been chained off by the side of Depot Street in Westford. (Fig. 4)

Figure 5 is an even closer view, taken from just outside the chains surrounding the image, with the stone marker erected in 1976 which tells the story of Earl Henry Sinclair. (Fig. 5)

Figure 6 shows that the shield has been painted in to make it more prominent. (Fig. 6)

Figure 7 is a close-up of the T-shaped carving that makes up the hilt and quillons of the sword, with the shield to the right. (Fig. 7)

There is also a photograph that Sir Iain Moncreiffe of the Ilk used when trying to identify the shield on page 96 of his book, *The Highland Clans*. In it, many of the punched holes and markings have been painted in to make them more prominent. In making his identification of the shield held by the knight, Sir Iain noted the following:

The effigy “appears to shew arms of a distinctively Nose-Scottish character: a galley, and in chief a star between two large buckles.”

“As with many Scandinavian heraldic boats, no mast appears to be shewn: but the oars are crossed in saltire at the blades, as in some Highland coats.”

“The dexter (left-hand) buckle is badly eroded, but part of its outer curve remains, and heraldically the star would always be placed between two similar objects.”

“The conventional style of the ship has a flavour of Scandinavian heraldry, and nearly ten per cent of old Scottish coats are marshalled with objects in chief.”

“The earliest surviving Scottish armorial roll, painted on parchment, shews the shield in 1332 of the then Earl of Caithness as a *golden galley on red*; and no line on the Westford rock suggests that the shield there had a separately colored chief, so that it may not be too unreasonable to suggest its blazon, in heraldic jargon, as *Gules a lymphad, sails furled, oars in saltire, and in chief a mullet Gold between two large buckles Silver.*”¹² (Fig. 8)

The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Image

Is the Westford knight really an effigy of a 14th Century Scot in New England? The evidence in favor of its being real include the following:

Sinclair’s story is presented as non-fiction in a half-dozen history books available in the reference section at the Westford library.¹³ Indeed, Sinclair’s story is literally “carved in stone” at the Depot Street site in Westford, Massachusetts. (Fig. 9)

By way of photographs and a rubbing made in the 1950s of the image sent to archeologist T.C. Lethbridge in London, the pattern on the shield was identified by Sir Iain Moncreiffe of that Ilk, Unicorn Pursuivant, as belonging to a member of the Gunn family of Scotland.¹⁴

According to a May 2004 article on the Westford Knight in *The Boston Globe* newspaper, the shield on the effigy matches the design of a shield in a castle in Scotland.¹⁵

The Zeno narrative, with an accompanying map, of the first part of Sinclair’s journey was written by Italian navigators and discovered in an attic in Venice before being published in 1558.¹⁶

According to the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia, a great white god named Glooscap had once lived among them and taught them various skills, including fishing with a net, which they had not known before. The legend describes how he built an island on which he placed large trees. Once he had completed his work he floated away on the winds and over the waters. Some people examining the legend have concluded the reference to an island and trees is likely a description of the building of a boat with masts. As noted before, Glooscap has been identified by Frederick J. Pohl with Prince Henry Sinclair.¹⁷

A watermelon-sized stone, given to the town in 1940, has carved on it a boat (hence its appellation, the Boat Stone), an arrow, and the numerals 184. (Fig. 2, no. 4; and Fig. 10) The curator of the Westford Museum, Elizabeth Lane, believes it to be a grave marker, signifying that the body of the Westford knight was buried 184 paces in the direction of the arrow. “Unfortunately, we don’t know where the stone was originally placed,” she says.¹⁸

Leeny Del Seamonds, a master storyteller in the Westford area, says of the tale: “I present it as truth because I believe it. I think there’s too many coincidences to just ignore it. Most stories I don’t tell the children are true, but this one I do because I think it is.”¹⁹

A lot of others, including some serious heraldic scholars, believe it, too. In speaking of Sir Henry (II) Sinclair, Bruce A. McAndrew, in his book *Scotland's Historic Heraldry*, says: "However, he should be best remembered for his Atlantic voyages with the Venetian Nicolo Zeno, in which they probably reached the eastern seaboard of Canada and the United States, for which there exists heraldic evidence! On a ledge at Westford, Massachusetts there is to be found an effigy of a 14th-century knight bearing a shield which is Scoto-Norse in character; it bears A galley, on a chief, a mullet between two buckles, arms which Moncreiffe suggests belong to a Gunn companion of Earl Henry."²⁰

A Neutral Opinion

A more neutral position is taken by Suzanne Carlson in her article, "North Atlantic Rim: Barrier or Bridge?" She says: "The Westford knight is a Johnny or Jamey-come-lately in the Sinclair story. The pecked outlines are too eroded to tell us much anymore. The case rests with the reliability of Glynn's recording methods and Lethbridge's sleuthing. There is certainly nothing in the correspondence that would suggest that a hoax was under construction. The identification of Henry's cousin James Gunn as the 'effigy Gunn' is pure speculation, but it is certainly plausible."²¹

The Evidence Against the Authenticity of the Image

The identification of the figure by T.C. Lethbridge is problematical. He is not what one might safely consider to be a mainstream archeologist. For example, he believed – and spent some time attempting to prove – that it was possible to use pendulums of various lengths to dowse for archeological artifacts. He also studied and wrote on ghosts, witchcraft, extrasensory perception, psychokinesis, parapsychology, and extraterrestrial aliens.²² None of this, of course, rules out the possibility that he may be correct in this instance, but it certainly tends to weaken the value of his opinions here.

The Westford town historian is said to have some (as yet unpublished) evidence that the T-shaped engraving was made by two local boys in the late 19th Century.²³

The surface of the slate is covered with parallel glacially-made grooves; two of these (the "sword blade") occur near the T engraving and create the image of the sword's "blade".²⁴ (Fig. 7)

Speaking of the sword, I am aware of no instances of effigies in Europe "breaking" the sword in the manner of the Westford knight to show the death of the individual being memorialized.

Even supporter Frederick Pohl noted that the only "undeniably man-made workings [are]: the pommel, handle, and guard of the sword; below the guard the break across the blade that is indicative of the death of the sword's owner; the crest above the pommel; a few holes at the sword's point; the punched-hole jess lines attached to the legs of the falcon; the bell-shaped hollows; the corner of the shield touching the pommel; the crescent on the shield; and the holes that form a decorative pattern on the pommel."²⁵

The area of Westford is not easily accessible by water, and it is improbable that any nautical or exploratory voyage would venture there. "Much of the coast [of New England] consisted of

rocky shoals or marshes, and the rivers were not navigable for more than a few miles into the interior.”²⁶ Westford, Massachusetts is, as noted in the Introduction, some 35 miles (56 km) northwest of Boston, and by the largest nearby river, approximately 40 miles (65 km) from the coast – as the crow flies, not as the river winds.

At only 463 feet (141 meters) in height, it is unlikely that Prospect Hill could have been seen from any real distance (*i.e.*, the coast), especially in wooded New England. Indeed, using a “visual line of sight” calculator, from a height of 463 feet elevation, the visual horizon will be only 26.3 miles (42.4 km), just over half the distance from Prospect Hill to the coast to the northeast, and but three-quarters of the distance to Boston to the southeast.²⁷

Environmental studies suggest that the area would have been a hardwood forest in the 14th Century, with 1-3 feet of soil over the bedrock. We know for a fact that some of this soil was removed in the 1950s to expose more of the image.²⁸

The Zeno narrative and map are regarded by modern scholars as 16th Century hoax, perpetrated to retroactively put forth a claim for Venice as having discovered the New World before the Spanish-backed Columbus, who came from Venice’s rival, Genoa.²⁹ Evidence against the authenticity of the map is based on the appearance of many non-existent islands in the North Atlantic and off the coast of Iceland.³⁰ Indeed, Shetland archivist Brian Smith in his paper on the Sinclair Atlantic voyage states: “If the Zeno map is the work of Venetian navigators who lived with the earl of Orkney for four and fourteen years respectively, they don’t seem to have paid much attention to their surroundings.”³¹ Current scholarship regards the map as being based on existing maps of the 16th century.³²

Further, even if we accept it as true, the Zeno narrative says absolutely nothing about Zichmni sailing to North America, to Estotiland and Drogeo. The story of Zichmni ends with the establishment of a settlement in Engronelant, or Greenland.³³

It’s a pretty long stretch from the “creator god” Glooscap of the Abenaki tribes to human Henry Sinclair. As noted earlier, Frederick Pohl made a list of seventeen specific similarities between Glooscap and Henry Sinclair.³⁴ But out of how many possible points of similarity or difference? I suspect that one could find seventeen “specific” similarities between any two historic personages,* despite an even greater (by several orders of magnitude) number of differences. Here are just a few instances of the attributes and story of Glooscap, most found on Native American websites, that are unlikely (for obvious reasons) to relate to Sinclair:

Glooscap, the first human, was created out of a bolt of lightning in the sand.³⁵ Glooscap made the world habitable for human beings by creating and arranging landforms, giving animals their attributes and eliminating many monsters.³⁶ In carrying out his feats, he often had to overcome his evil twin brother; in one legend, he turns the evil twin into stone. Another common story is how he turned himself

* Indeed, there has circulated for years just such a list of uncanny similarities between U.S. Presidents Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) and John F. Kennedy (1917-1963). *See, e.g.*, the list of 17 “Lincoln-Kennedy Coincidences” at <http://theshadowlands.net/jfk.htm>.

into a giant beaver and created five islands in the Bay of Fundy by slapping his huge tail in the water. Yet another legend has it that when Glooscap finished painting the splendor of the world, he dipped his brush into a blend of all the colours and created Prince Edward Island. When Glooscap slept, Nova Scotia was his bed, and Prince Edward Island his pillow.³⁷ When he left, he went into the West, not to the East.³⁸

The identification of the “arms” on the “shield” by Moncreiffe (as described in his book, *The Highland Clans*), is full of equivocal phrases: “appears to have been”, “[o]bviously it is impossible to attain certainty”, “seems to be”, “appears to shew”, “may not be too unreasonable to suggest”, “makes it possible that”, and “may therefore possibly”. This is hardly the firm support the effigy’s advocates claim for the identification of the supposed coat of arms on the knight’s shield.³⁹

It is a common phenomenon for people to see patterns and identify figures in what are actually just random lines and color variations, witness the many people seeing the face of Jesus on a tortilla or Mary in the bark of trees or on grilled cheese sandwiches.* A similar phenomenon occurs in seeing patterns in the stars in the night sky.

The identification of the individual whom the effigy is believed to represent grows and changes over time. From: “a Gunn companion-of-arms of Henry Sinclair”⁴⁰; to “one of Prince Henry’s loyal attendants by the name of Sir James Gunn”;⁴¹ to “Sir James Gunn ... a good friend and lieutenant of Henry Sinclair”;⁴² to “Sir James Gunn, Sinclair’s lifelong friend”;⁴³ to Prince Henry’s “first cousin Sir James Gunn of Thurso”;⁴⁴ to “Sir James Gunn, a member of Clan Gunn and a Knight Templar.”⁴⁵ Indeed, the further from the original sources the identification is, the more specific and detailed it seems.

Finally, there is the complete lack of any other archeological evidence of pre-Columbian European explorers in New England. Elizabeth Chilton, associate professor of anthropology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, says:

“In the more than 15,000 active archeological sites in New England, there has never surfaced any other evidence that 14th-century Europeans traveled as far south as New England.... If someone came here and carved a stone, they would have left plenty of garbage behind. People don’t just show up and carve on a stone and go home.”⁴⁶

Conclusion

So, the question remains – the Westford Knight: heraldic evidence of pre-Columbian Scottish explorers in America, or wishful thinking? You must look at all of the evidence, and decide for yourself.

* I am not making this up. See, e.g., <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4034787.stm>, BBC News, November 23, 2004, and <http://www.knbc.com/news/5375322/detail.html#>, KNBC Los Angeles, November 21, 2005.



Figure 1

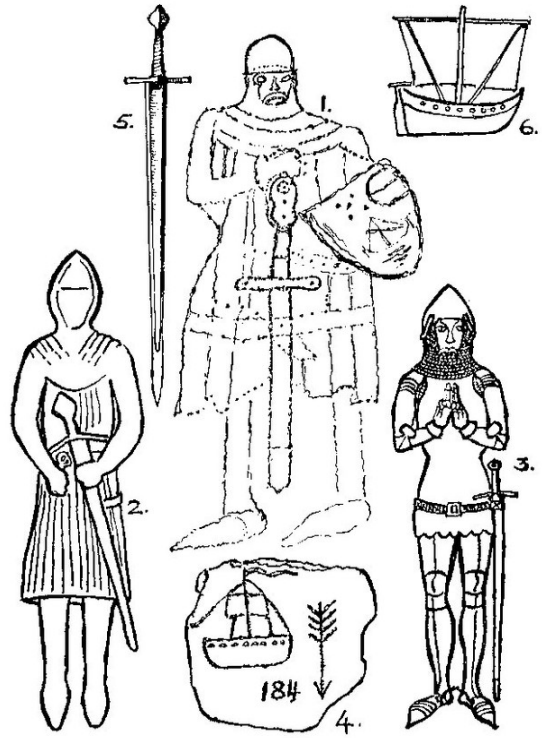


Figure 2

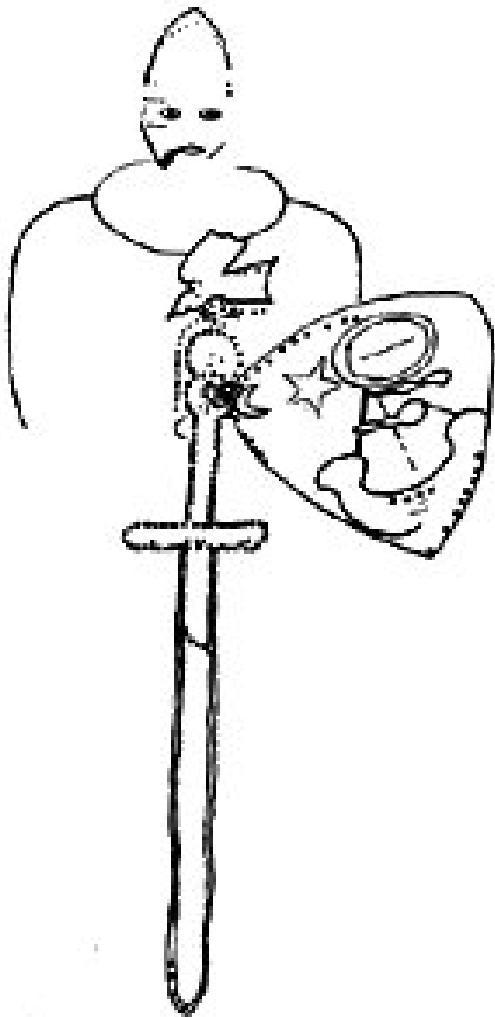


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

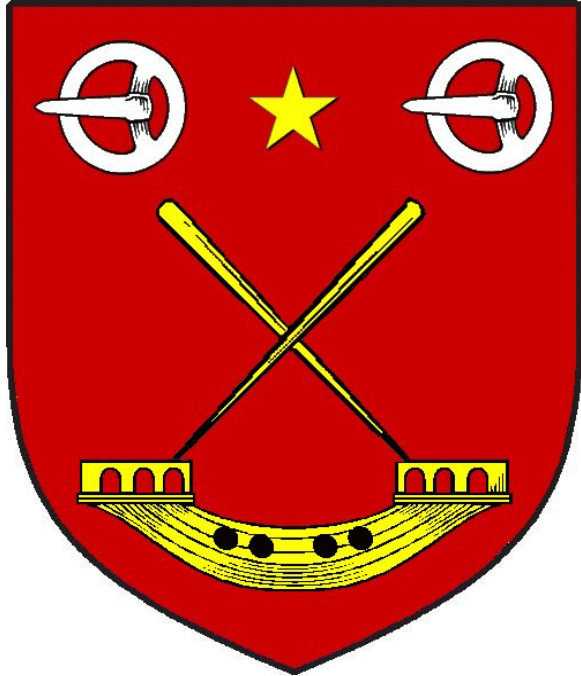


Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

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Figure 8 by the author

Endnotes

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