

## **THE MADOC ENIGMA**

### **DID THE WELSH DISCOVER AMERICA**

**BY  
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The year is 1169; Owain Gwynedd, King of Gwynedd dies after a reign of 32 years, which provided his kingdom with an era of stable rule. The virile Owain has many sexual liaisons with various women. He leaves 19 siblings, all of whom, by Welsh tradition are acknowledged as royal. The resultant confusion over the heir to the throne is contested by his various offspring. Although the legitimate heir to the throne is Iorwerth (Drwndwyn) (Edward with the broken nose), his physical and possibly intellectual condition precludes him from his rightful claim. Brothers Howell and David fight over the right to rule Gwynedd.

The resultant bloodletting plunges the kingdom of Gwynedd into a gruesome civil war. Howell seizes the throne for a while and is subsequently murdered by his brother David, who is an illegitimate half brother hijacks the throne.

Madoc Ap Owain Gwynedd another of the siblings who is traditionally described as being of a 'mild disposition' is sickened after the murder of his wife the Princess Annest, who was caught up in the family feud. Madoc decides with his brother Rhirrid to seek a way out of the turmoil. It seems leaving Wales in search of a new kingdom and way of life is the only solution open to them. Although Madoc had a daughter Gwenllian, there is no record of her going on the journey with them.

It is only supposition, but the possibility exists that Madoc may have convinced his brother David that by financing such an expedition would further his quest for power and territory. Thus begins the romantic, legendary tale of Madoc Ap Owain Gwynedd..

Madoc and his brother Rhirrid spent much of their childhood in Ireland, probably at Clochrane, the Welsh connection with this part of the world being through their mother Brenda, who was a Viking princess.

Both were consummate seafarers who had no doubt heard tales of the Norse and Viking sagas. The brothers may also have been influenced by the story of St Brendan the Voyaging Monk who, a few hundred years previously, was purported to have found mysterious islands 'far to the West.'

An old manuscript quoted by the author Zella Armstrong tells us that '...1170 Madoc Ap Owain Gwynedd together with his brother Rhirrid and sister Georil set sail, for where they did not know and exploring the ocean in search of more tranquil scenes.' Another version of the departure of Madoc tells us that four of "Gwynedd's sons and his sister Goeril' joined Madoc on that fateful and tragic expedition.

Early legend implies that Madoc sailed a single masted longship similar to Viking design called the "Gwennan Gorn" a clinker built vessel which was held together with nails made of stag horn. Rhirrid sailed westward in a similar vessel called the "San Pedr". A myth clung to by many of the early geographers and believed by sailors of the period that there were 'magnetic islands' out there among the oceans, which ships held together by metal nails or fastenings could not leave, once held in the magnetic field. However the myth discounts any tools and other metal implements taken on the voyages.

The formidable searing skills of the Vikings enabled them to have possibly visited the Northern parts of the continent of America. Certainly Madoc and Rhirrid were in possession of such abilities and each owned ships, which would enable them to undertake the long sea journey.

There is much speculation about the navigation of Madoc's long sea voyage. It is possible that the seafarers had observed and utilised the favourable Trade Winds which blow from the North east to the equator, enabling them to round the Gulf of Mexico and ultimately to disembark in the Bay of Mobile. Possibly this and the combination of current brought them to their destination rather than the knowledge of such a land.

There are two great currents between Europe and America, one flowing from Europe to America and another flowing towards Europe. There is a distinct possibility that he possessed a knowledge of navigation and could have found his way to Newfoundland using the Labrador current, which flows on the eastern seaboard of the United States. This current is joined on the Grand Banks by the perambulating Gulf Stream which moves in a huge reverse motion to the opposite direction. This is a personal theory

and is like most of the legend unprovable. The use of the winds and currents would have eliminated the two ships being caught in the doldrums for any extensive amount of time.

Navigational aids were not unknown to sailors of this period. The lodestone reputed to have been known to seafarers of this era would have given approximate reckoning. Another crude navigational aid was a notched circle of wood with a straight stick piercing the middle. This would have given a daytime fix, which worked not unlike a sundial. Astronomy, which had been studied since prehistoric times enabled seafaring folk to navigate for long distances. This assumes that Madoc would have known the rough direction of his destination, which had been mentioned in the early fables.

The first voyage of Madoc, it is said took eight weeks, and landed in the bay of Mobile, probably during the summer of 1170. The old tale tells us that Madoc left some 120 people to establish a base camp in the very beautiful and fertile Mobile Bay. He then returned to Wales to recruit more people for his expedition. The original 120 people were lost without trace. This was just the beginning of one of the most romantic and mysterious adventures of mediaeval times.....

The "Gwenan Gorn" and the "San Pedr" probably landed in Mobile Bay during the summer of 1170. The Prince Madoc was impressed with, to quote Zella Armstrong ".....the present and fruitful land, the inhabitants delighted him and were apparently pleased with the *visitors*." *This as we shall see would change.*

The ancient tale has it that Madoc having found such a paradise decided that he would return to Wales and recruit more individuals to settle the new land which he had found. It is said that on his first return to Wales, Madoc regaled his brother King David and his wife Queen Emma (who was half sister to King Henry II of England) with tales of the exotic lands far to the West. This is described in the Robert Southey epic poem "Madoc" written hundreds of years later. The same incident is also described in other accounts of the fable. Was it because of the promises of riches and extended territory that Madoc was allocated the facilities of the port, now known as Rhos on Sea to equip "10 or 11 sailes" for the long journey back? It could be interpreted from this information that major finances for such an expedition could have come from a wish of the ruling family to acquire more territory and power - Madoc's brother

## **David. The first incident of an Imperialist Wales?**

Migrants who would have chosen to accompany Madoc into the unknown would have had a compulsive urge to make such a voyage. Their motives whether they be religious, political, the lure of wealth or the wish for adventure are not explained. The charisma which Madoc exercised must have been exceptional in persuading them to subscribe physically or financially to such a highly dangerous venture.

One of the primary purposes would have been to escape the discontent and chaos which prevailed in the unsettled state of the medieval small kingdoms of Wales. Four of "Gwynedd's sons" who would have been siblings of Madoc and his sister Georil were said to have chosen to sail into the unknown on his second voyage, further illustrating the confusion of their Welsh status.

During the second expedition, Madoc must have assembled people with many skills to hopefully sustain the community which he hoped to settle in the Americas. It was impossible to foretell the wild and exciting journey which lay before them.

The Viking style ships left Wales, loaded with supplies, princes, priests and paupers all of whom wanted to live in peace in the magical land which Madoc had told them about.

On arrival initial contact with the Indians, from the sparse information provided seems to have been friendly. This is illustrated from an incident related hundreds of years later.

During the year of 1942 two teenage boys visited to town of Gadsden, Alabama, who made the acquaintance of a rather talkative old man by the name of Chief Tappawingow of the Muskogee Nation. The old man repeated to them a legend handed down for generations that white men sailed the Coosa river (which joins the Alabama river) trading in fur, metals and wood, Although no physical proof currently exists for this story it is one of the many rumours which have circulated about the Welsh migrations amongst the Indian tribes. The chief mentioned that trading would have been of advantage to both communities.

The ancient legends state that Madoc had left, after his first voyage some 120 people to form a base camp. Having reached for the second time the long coastline with some many similar inlets and bays, it was impossible

for him to recognise the place which he had left some months earlier. Searching for the abandoned party he sailed further West and then turned the search inland for his comrades. This proved fruitless. Madoc could find no trace of them. They were never heard of again.

Time passed and the adventurers became curious and moved up the Alabama river, where so legend tells us, he stopped at the Desoto Falls on the Coosa River, where seemingly the first of the fortified settlements were established.

Here begins the mystery of the 'Stone Forts' of Alabama, Tennessee and Georgia. Historians and archaeologists have long speculated about the purpose of, and who built the fortifications. Researchers have found for example, that the fortification at the Desoto Falls was identical in plan to Dolwyddelan Castle, which was the birthplace of Madoc. Many scholars who have investigated the stone forts believe that the Native Americans could not have built these strange constructions, as they did not have the technology.

The adventurers moved on and appear to have constructed a number of these 'forts' which seem to encircle land which they wished to settle. About 70 miles west of Chattanooga is situated the Old Stone Fort, at Tennessee. 45 miles south lies the Welsh Caves fortification, at Desoto Falls, Alabama. Fort mountain Georgia is situated about seventy miles southeast of Chattanooga. There are a few other settlements mentioned in old records and tales, of which none have survived. The general opinion of archaeologists and other scholars are that the 'forts' were of 'prehistoric' origin, which in American terms seems to mean pre Columbian, although the builders have never been formally identified.

For a time the adventurers settled in the area of Chattanooga but bad luck seems to have again dogged them. They were routed by the Cherokee and were forced to leave the area, despite the huge efforts to protect themselves and the area of land which they wished to settle.

The next part of the venture is another mystery, only supported by myth and legend, but reflects the tenacity of the Welsh migrants who wandered the land for many years seeking a home.

The vexing question is - Did the Welsh Expedition leave the ancient fortified remains surrounding the Chattanooga area? What little archaeological work which has been carried out on the ruins all agree that construction could only have been sustained by a people with a knowledge similar to the military architecture prevalent in Europe in the 1100's. There has been no conclusion drawn as to whom these people were, only the stories handed down for generations by the Indians who said a "white moon-eyed people" built the forts.

The Welsh adventurers who only wished to live in peace seem to have been driven from place to place by Indians who maybe viewed them as a threat. It is also a possibility that these strangers had inhabited hunting grounds of the Native Americans, or had, with no knowledge of Native American tradition, accidentally desecrated grounds which were sacred to the Indians. All the theories need substantial investigation to prove or disprove the story of the Welsh migration to North America.

What is fact, however, is that there **WERE** ancient stone fortifications and it has been generally recognised that these were built **BEFORE** the Indians moved to the area. This is where myth and the only factual evidence for its' proof converge. This is the romance of the epic, what dreamers, historians and seekers of territorial power have been wishing to prove and possess for hundreds of years, the reality of the Madoc enigma.

John Dee one of the principal mystics of the last five or six hundred years laid claim to the Americas, when in the name of Elizabeth I he addressed the English Council at Court he started his speech "The Lord Madoc, son of Owain Gwynedd, Prince of North Wales lead a colony and inhabited Terra Florida or thereabouts." There is much documentation surviving on this claim, but no actual proof that this adventure ever took place. All that survives is tradition. Some of these stories surfaced in the medieval courts of Europe during the 1200's and have survived to this day. For whatever reason Queen Elizabeth I never pursued this territorial claim with any enthusiasm, despite the fact that the 'old enemy' the Spanish were making inroads into the Americas and claiming extensive lands.

The legend persisted in the Americas of the Welsh speaking Indians, and there are several documented examples. John Evans a Welshman employed by the Spanish during the 1790's to investigate this claim, denied the existence of Welsh speaking Indians. It is strongly hinted that politics could have been the reason for the denial.

Further rumours surfaced. One of the most substantial is the famously documented conversation of Chief Oconostota and Governor John Servier of Tennessee. Writing in 1781 he states "I asked him (Oconostota) if he had ever heard any of his ancestors say what nation of people these whites belonged to. He answered that he had heard his grandfather say that they were a people called Welsh; that they had crossed the Great Water and first landed near Mobile and had been driven up the heads of the waters until they arrived at Highwassee River) which is near Chattanooga in present day Tennessee."

The grand tragedy seems to have staggered on for almost the next two hundred years, with the Welsh driven from place to place. Finally they seem to have been subsumed by the Native Americans. A tribe called the 'Mandans' emerged. These were a fierce people, many with notably European physical attributes of beards, red hair, auburn hair, blue eyes. Some were fair skinned. The layout of their villages very different to that of other tribes.

They were vividly portrayed by an artist name George Catlin who spent eight years painting, talking to and writing about them. His obsessive interest in Native Americans led him to leave career family and everything he owned in order to complete his history of these peoples.

There are several notable chapters in his journals describing the organisations of the Mandan villages, the fact that they understood agriculture and even the use of metals.

By the 1830's any traces of European ancestry which had survived between the Welsh and the Native American must have been extremely small. As was the surviving population serving to fulfil the prophecy of Oconostota "they have become like Indians....."