

COLUMN

Sometimes history not exactly as it's written

A very, very old gold coin that was found on the south coast of Newfoundland, my home province, this summer once again draws into question just when Europeans first started settling North America's east coast.

It has long been accepted that Christopher Columbus "discovered" the continent in 1492 and sailor and explorer John Cabot discovered Newfoundland on behalf of the English in 1497.

But the gold coin, which has been identified as a Henry VI quarter noble, was minted in England between 1422 and 1427, more than 70 years before the province was officially discovered by Europeans.

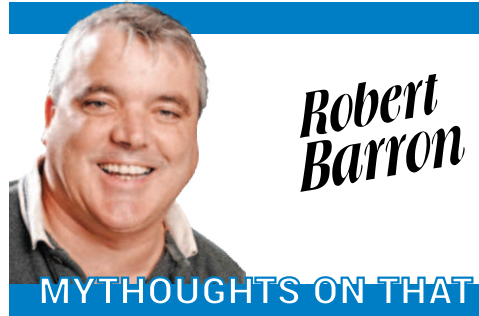
Of course, Vikings had established a small settlement on the north coast of Newfoundland about 500 years before Cabot arrived.

But that was short lived and archaeologists have determined that they likely stayed no more than 10 years before abandoning the settlement and heading back to Iceland and Greenland, never to return as far as the historical records currently show.

Sagas left by the Vikings, who were not exactly known for their diplomatic skills, indicate that they had bad relations with local First Nations who vastly outnumbered them, so they thought it better just to leave.

So Vikings more than likely didn't drop the coin, which is said to be the oldest English coin ever found in Canada, because they were long gone in the 1400s and, besides, the coin was found several hundreds of kilometres away from where the Viking settlement was.

Paul Berry, the former curator of the Bank



of Canada's Currency Museum, said the coin was worth a considerable amount of money in the 1400s and was probably not in circulation when it was lost.

While some European could have had a coin that was more than 70 years old in his pocket and lost in sometime after 1497, I think it's more probable that it was dropped in Newfoundland closer to the time it was actually minted, which was well before Cabot and his crew came ashore.

It has long been speculated that adventurous English, Basque, and Portuguese fishermen had come across Newfoundland's rich fishing grounds (at least they were once) generations before as they followed the fish around the Atlantic Ocean.

Many believe that they had kept this discovery a secret for as long as possible in order not to share the fishing grounds with anyone else.

I've always wondered how the very large east coast of North America was explored so quickly after Columbus landed in the Caribbean in 1492, and it seemed to me that some of the

ship's captains already had a good sense of where they were going and what they were looking for.

St. John's, the port city on Newfoundland's east coast that is the capital of the province, is known to have been visited by Europeans shortly after Cabot landed in 1497, but anyone familiar with the city knows how hard it can be to find the city's harbour when approaching from the sea.

Cliffs rise about 100 feet straight out of the crashing waves on the coast leading into the harbour, and the harbour is connected to the ocean through a small crack in the cliff face.

That means that once ships manoeuvre through that small passageway through the cliffs, which are now known as The Narrows, they sail into a large and calm harbour which serves as great protection from the wild North Atlantic Ocean for vessels.

But anyone approaching from the sea and not familiar with the area would probably not

have seen that crack in the cliff face easily and would have travelled right by it for many years before discovering where it led.

That's why I, and many others, theorize that St. John's was well known by European fishermen in 1497 and they probably had been using it as a base for many years before then.

Interestingly, an English silver coin minted in the 1490s was found at Newfoundland's Cupids Cove Plantation Provincial Historic Site just last year, and before the discovery of the gold coin a few months ago, it was considered the oldest English coin ever found in Canada.

History is not always as it appears or as simple as it is in the history books.

It's usually much more convoluted and complicated, and I can't wait to see what else will be found to add to our knowledge of those times.

Robert Barron is a reporter with the Cowichan Valley Citizen. He can be reached at Robert.Barron@cowichanvalleycitizen.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Send your items to: editor@cowichanvalleycitizen.com

Robert's column brings back memories

Several times I've re-read Robert Barron's column "Rat hunting was part of school day". It continues to make me smile, it makes me laugh out loud.

It also brings back memories of how seem-

ingly free we were, how uncautious, how un-fearful, how unrestrictive and yet respectful of authority. All this was not so very long ago.

Good job Robert and thank you. I'm making copies to bring smiles to others.

Angela Gustafson
Cobble Hill

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