The Cabot Dilemma: John Cabot's 1497 Voyage & the Limits of Historiography

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In 1497, John Cabot (Giovanni Cabotto) set off on a voyage to Asia. On his way he, like Christopher Columbus, ran into an island off the coast of North America. As a result, Cabot became the second European to discover North America, thus laying an English claim which would be followed up only after an interval of over one hundred years. With such an interlude, his voyage seems mainly of academic interest. Although it is true that prior discovery was often used as a justification for colonization,[1] the great amount of time between discovery and colonizing reduces Cabot's importance to a minimum in this regard. However, this is not at all to say that Cabot was unimportant. In becoming the first European to land on these shores since the time of Leif Erikson, Cabot opened up the Grand Banks to a steady encroachment of European fishermen, thus paving the way for eventual colonization.[2] His voyage marked England's first foray into the new age of discovery, and served as a foundation for England's later claims to North America, albeit at some remove. With his importance so established, it is natural that scholars continue to study Cabot's heroic travels and try to pinpoint them. Sadly, the vagueness of the evidence makes this effort futile except in a very general way.

John Cabot knew the world was much bigger around than Columbus claimed, and that it thus would be impossible to sail straight from Spain to Asia. He had a simple yet ingenious plan, to start from a northerly latitude where the longitudes are much closer together, and where, as a result, the voyage would be much shorter. Sailing west in the bark *Mathew*, he could reach land comparatively quickly, revictual, and coast southward until he found "Cipango," or Japan.[3]

This scheme might have succeeded were it not for Canada; and it is at the point when Cabot reached the unwanted continent that the historians' dispute begins.

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Historians have advanced a number of theories concerning his landfall: some say that Cabot landed in Labrador; others say it was in Nova Scotia or Cape Breton Island; still others support a landing in Newfoundland; and a minority argue for a landing all the way in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, or as far south as Maine. Each of these theories is based on some evidence and it is impossible to refute any of them completely. The weight of the evidence seems to support the Nova Scotian landfall, an hypothesis which had been generally accepted since William F. Ganong argued persuasively for it in 1929.[4] However, the discovery of a new document in the 1950's reopened the debate, which has continued with unabated fervor since that time.[5]

Unfortunately, it is simply impossible to establish firmly and without doubt the place where Cabot landed because of the paucity and inspecificity of the extant documents. Many writers make the mistake of taking their evidence entirely too literally in attempting to establish an airtight case, as in the example of John T. Juricek's 1967 article supporting Ganong. Too often, these writers ignore broad evidential trends which contradict their specific, but tenuous, proofs. Also, few writers give sufficient attention to evidence which does not relate directly to navigation, thus using only half of the available data. The Nova Scotia landing does seem to be the most reasonable hypothesis, but on the basis of considerably different support than other writers have suggested, and with much less a degree of certainty.

Briefly, the extant documents are of three types: government records, letters, and maps. The government documents include the letters of patent from the king permitting Cabot to sail and establishing the legal status of discoveries, and the records of payment to Cabot for his discovery. Five letters provide the most detailed description of the voyage. One was from Pasqualigo, a Venetian residing in London, to his brothers at home; the Duke of Milan received the second and third letters, the first anonymous and the other from Raimondo Soncino; John Day's correspondence with Christopher Columbus, discovered only in 1956, provide the fourth; and last was a letter from Pedro de Ayala to Ferdinand and Isabella. As one might expect, these letters provided varying degrees of detail and reliabilty. The most informative tend to be those of Soncino and especially Day.

The two maps provoke continuing controversy. The first, drawn by Juan de La Cosa in 1500, unquestionably included information gleaned from Cabot's voyage because no one else sailed to North America in the ensuing three years. The problem surrounding this map is in its interpretation—that is, in determining how closely it reflected Cabot's own map, and how closely Cabot's map conformed to the area he actually discovered. The second map probably was drawn by Cabot's son, Sebastian, in 1544. Much more detailed and accurate than La Cosa's, it

undoubtedly incorporated information unknown at the time of Cabot's voyage. Even permitting that Sebastian Cabot sailed with his father in 1497, a questionable claim, the map's value remains dubious because of the great length of time which separated that voyage from the creation of the map. After too many intervening trips Sebastian's memory of a half-century old event clearly was coloured by more recent discoveries.[6]

From these sources, basically two lines of evidence emerge from which to deduce the area Cabot discovered: first, the navigation of the voyage that we can glean from letters and maps, combined with our knowledge of the navigational methods of the time; and second, phenomena which Cabot observed on or near the land, such as flora and tides, as reported in the letters. Historians typically focus on navigation, almost to the exclusion of the observed natural phenomena. This is unfortunate because, from this great a temporal distance, it is impossible to draw precise conclusions concerning the navigation of the voyage and the geography of the lands discovered. Cabot himself held only a rough idea of what he discovered and the cartographers who put his ideas into map form only rendered a more generalized and imprecise picture. While admitting that navigational records cannot be ignored in recreating a general outline of the voyage (and in places yields specific crucial information), the observed phenomena deserve a greater place in the historian's attempt to understand Cabot's voyage. These phenomena can be relied upon with greater, if not absolute, certainty; unfortunately, there are fewer references to sightings than to navigation in the documents. Sightings especially are valuable when used in conjunction with geography, for in joining the two we are presented with a much clearer picture of the voyage. A number of generalities combine to form a specific and coherent, if far from certain, picture of Cabot's voyage.

The navigational evidence can be divided further into two parts, what is known about the crossing, and what is known about the exploration. Of the trip to North America, Soncino stated that Cabot left Bristol, rounded Ireland, and turned northward, finally turning to the west and "leaving the north on his right hand after some days." Pasqualigo wrote that Cabot "says he has discovered mainland 700 leagues away, which is in the country of the Great Khan." By contrast, the anonymous letter to the Duke of Milan stated that Cabot "has also discovered the Seven Cities, 400 leagues from England," and Pedro de Ayala told Ferdinand and Isabella, "I believe the distance is not 400 leagues." Finally, Day wrote to Columbus that

> the cape nearest Ireland [in the New World] is 1800 miles west of Dursey Head . . .They left England toward the end of May, and must

> have been on the way thirty-five days before sighting land; the wind was east and north-east and the sea calm going and coming back, except for one day when he ran into a storm two or three days before finding land.[7]

In addition, there is Sebastian's map, which showed the landfall occurring on John the Baptist's Day, or 24 June. This is quite literally all the remaining information about the outgoing voyage, yet the number of conclusions which have been drawn is enormous.

It is unwise to trust any of the distances recorded because of enormous discrepancies. Most writers simply ignore the shorter distance of 400 leagues as too small to be realistic. But they fail to consider the source of these figures. Even if one accepts Pasqualigo and Day as the more reliable sources, it is notable the distance of 400 leagues was cited by two different authors at widely separated times. This smaller figure thus was being used at court, and was not simply a mistake on the part of one writer; Cabot himself may have mentioned it. If nothing else, this draws into question the validity of any figures gleaned from the trip. This notion is supported by Juricek's explanation that the technical means for measuring distances of this great a magnitude simply were not very accurate. The difficulties in using any quoted distances to recreate the voyage are compounded by another serious problem, the uncertainty of whether the distance ought to be measured in English or Roman leagues.[8] Therefore, to start from a point (Achill Head, Ireland) which no other authority accepts, arbitrarily choose a conversion for the league, find the point on the North American coast closest to the converted distance, and then to cite this "landfall" as evidence of Cabot's amazing skill as a navigator—as Melvin Jackson does in his attempt to prove a Labrador landfall[9]—is ridiculous. On the other hand, Juricek hardly does himself more credit by recognizing that 700 leagues is an imprecise amount while yet asserting that this figure supports his theory best![10] That three widely different distances were mentioned, that the means for calculating them must have been crude, and that all are given in round figures at an unknown conversion rate, suggests that the numbers are very general, and virtually worthless for a precise calculation of the landing spot. All one can conclud is that Cabot landed somewhere between Maine and Labrador, which is patently obvious from a glance at the map and general knowledge of where he was going.[11]

For similar reasons, it is unproductive to spend time calculating precisely the distance Cabot could have covered in the number of days he had to make the crossing. First, no two sources agree on a date of departuret go with the landing date provided on Sebastian Cabot's map. Furthermore, Day offered only a general

estimate when he said Cabot "must have been on the way thirty-five days before sighting land."[12] Finally, given Cabot's wandering about (mentioned by Soncino) and the storm he sailed into, calculations of how much distance he covered are thrown hopelessly off. There is no way of telling how much of the time he spent going west, and how much time wandering, which would render invalid any calculations of travel distance even were it known how long the trip took.

If little credence can be given to the stated distances of the voyage, the known route is perhaps even more vague. At first it seems obvious that Cabot made his way straight across a northern latitude after turning west, after all, his plan was to reduce the distance travelled by staying far to the north, where longitudes are closer together. Furthermore, his letter of patent granted him the right to sail to the "eastern, western and northern sea," but not the southern,[13] which might have provoked a conflict with Spain.[14] However, there are many reasons to believe Cabot neither could nor wanted to stay entirely on his northerly route.

Several natural factors might have led Cabot to the south. The wind, according to Day, blew from east-northeast on the outward trip.[15] Cabot probably adjusted for this. But not so the current, which he had no way of anticipating. The Labrador Current flows down from the north and undoubtedly would have affected the passage of the *Mathew*. By using recent hydrographic data, however, Jackson shows that the current would not have driven the ship further south than the Strait of Belle Isle.[16] There is also the possibility of magnetic deflection, which would have made the compass point slightly to the west.[17] Deflection was considered a factor until the publication of Day's letter, in which he remarked the "compass needle failed to point north and marked two rhumbs below."[18] This indicates Cabot was aware of the effect, and knew how to adjust for it. Ultimately, we can derive only that these natural factors may have pushed Cabot to the south; the current certainly did, and we should not assume that Cabot adjusted perfectly for wind and deflection. The degree of this effect, however, likely was small, and in no way suggests of itself that Cabot landed anywhere but the northern part of Newfoundland, or even Labrador.

There are nonetheless several compelling reasons for believing Cabot landed considerably to the south of this territory. The first of these is a comment by Soncino that has been ignored almost uniformly by historians. He wrote that "After having wandered for some time he at length arrived at the mainland, where he hoisted the royal standard."[19] Samuel Eliot Morison is the sole author who seemed to notice this reference to wandering about, and he dismissed it as "a typical landlubber's interpretation of beating to windward."[20] This however, is unlikely. Soncino's knowledge of the voyage probably came from his friend Cabot in a report which would not have included a description of such routine

activities as beating to windward. More likely, Cabot related various turnings and driftings which occurred as a result of an unhappy crew, bad weather, and so forth. Soncino shortened all of this to Cabot "wandering about considerably," but one should not doubt that wander he did.

Such an interpretation is more believable in light of other knowledge we have of Cabot's voyages. For example, Day stated that on Cabot's unsuccessful voyage of 1496, "he went with one ship, his crew confused him . . . and he decided to turn back." Thus, there was precedent for Cabot not keeping directly to his course. Furthermore, even on the return leg of the successful trip, as Day wrote, Cabot's "sailors confused him, saying that he was heading too far north," and led him to land in Brittany—in spite of the fact that the Gulf Stream might have carried him even further north than he intended.[21] The difference between Bristol and Brittany is almost as great as that between Cape Bauld—the southernmost point to which the natural factors could have carried him—and Cape Bonavista, in southern Newfoundland. Such a miscalculation or misdirection is no mean error, yet this detour is almost always passed over.

It is debatable whether Cabot was confused by his crew or used this to excuse his own navigational error, or whether he was forced by a restless crew to direct his ship away from where he knew he should be headed. There being little doubt that Cabot was an excellent mariner, the third interpretation seems most likely.[22] If indeed the anxiety of the crew led to the error, how much more likely is it the crew would have forced similar detours on the way out? Returning to England, the crew panicked after a short time and forced the ship to turn southward toward a place where they were sure to find land. It would hardly be a surprise if they also led the captain astray on the outward voyage when no one knew for certain if they would find land at all. There were, furthermore, two good reasons that the sailors would have wanted to look more to the south. First, there was bound to be ice in the latitudes north of Newfoundland;[23] and, as Morison noted, even a little bit of ice would have been a serious danger for the wooden ships of the day.[24] Thus, it is entirely likely that not only the crew but Cabot himself decided that Asia had to be discovered further south, even if this entailed somewhat more traveling. Second, the only land certain to be discovered in the direction they travelled was found by Columbus, many degrees to the south. Although they were not supposed to explore the south, Cabot's men may have concluded their prospects were more certain in that direction, and therefore may have redirected the ship there.

Morison raiseed one further objection against a Cape Breton landing in *The Great Explorers*. He argued that after sounding on the Grand Banks off Newfoundland Cabot would have headed directly west in search of the land which he knew to be near. Furthermore, he suggested, "a glance at the chart should

convince any reasonable person that Cabot could not have sailed the five hundred or more miles from the eastern edge of the Bank to Cape Breton, missing Cape Race, Cape Pine, Cape St. Mary's, and Saint-Pierre."[25] Admiral Morison may be taken at his word on what a mariner would have done about his soundings. However, Juricek rightly points to Day's comment that the sea was calm "going and coming back, except for one day when he ran into a storm two or three days before finding land."[26] This storm corresponds roughly to the time Cabot crossed the Grand Banks. Even if he had time to take his soundings before the storm broke, it is unlikely he was able to direct his ship precisely as he chose thereafter. Additionally, the storm would have obscured visibility, as would, afterward, the fog which is thick off Newfoundland in the summer.[27] It is thus entirely possible Cabot would have been thrown off course and been unable to see the land directly near him. When the weather cleared he likely would have headed west, as Morison suggested. If so, he would have found Cape Breton Island.

The evidence relating to Cabot's exploration of the coast he found is more direct, and thus more reliable. Four main routes are advanced by historians. Morison believed Cabot landed at an island in northern Newfoundland, sailed south until he rounded the island, then retraced his path back to the north, from which point he departed.[28] J. A. Williamson favours a Maine landing, followed by a northward coasting back to Nova Scotia.[29] Juricek, following Ganong, argues the most likely explanation is an original landfall at Cape Breton Island, followed by a short voyage south along the coast, and then a northwesterly trip to the southern coast of Newfoundland. From here Cabot either headed directly east, or, according to Juricek, went back west for some distance to verify that he was on the mainland before turning east again. David Quinn advanced a similar hypothesis. Finally, from a landfall on the southern coast of Labrador, Jackson would have Cabot sail south, through the Strait of Belle Isle; then, following the east coast, travel south and then east around Newfoundland, heading for home somewhere along the east coast of that island. For the bulk of this essay, I examine the evidence relating to the exploration, evaluating each bit in turn, and testing the various theories against them. Finally, I will develop an hypothesis which is as consistent as possible with the evidence.

As Jackson rightly points out, Cabot's goal was to explore southward toward "Cipango," where the spices originated, thus there was no reason for him to coast toward the north. For this reason, Williamson's hypothesis (admittedly one that he advances with great reserve), which proposes that Cabot turned northward after landing, is unlikely. Another perhaps even more important bit of evidence about the coasting voyage comes from Day, who stated in his letter that "most of the land was discovered after turning back."[30] Any theory of Cabot's coasting voyage must

thus include a convincing reason why upon returning he would have run into land beyond that which he had just discovered when sailing south. Ignoring this, Morison's proposal of a landing on the east coast of Newfoundland is entirely inconsistent with Day's statement, since only water is to be found after turning back toward England from this place. Jackson is simlarly vulnerable on this point. Furthermore, it is difficult to see why Cabot would have followed the coast on his east—that is, Newfoundland—rather than the mainland on his west. Sailing to find Asia, not an island, he surely must have regarded the landmass of Newfoundland as an island once he rounded it. Moreover, it is questionable whether Cabot could have undertaken this route even if he wanted to. As Morison convincingly argued, the Strait of Belle Isle would have been closed to a wooden vessel even in late June by ice.[31]

La Cosa's map is a useful source for examining Cabot's exploration. However, one must exercise a great deal of restraint when interpreting maps such as La Cosa's; as J. A. Williamson explains, "too much study of them saps a man's critical faculty."[32] This is the case, for example, with Juricek. Despite his generally realistic hypothesis, he draws a number of unjustified conclusions about the route Cabot took, and takes La Cosa's map entirely too seriously—as long as it suits his purposes. Using the latitudinal boundaries given by Day, he attempts to show that the latitudes on La Cosa's map correspond closely to the land along his proposed voyage from Cape Breton Island to Cape Bauld.[33] However, it is noteworthy that he chooses two totally arbitrary points for the beginning and ending of the coasting voyage. The southern point, where the voyage begins, he places considerably to the south and west of the westernmost flag designating English-discovered territory. Even worse, if his latitudes are to correspond to a true map, he must assume that Cabot sailed all the way up the coast of Newfoundland to Cape Bauld. This is absurd. The part of La Cosa's map which would correspond to eastern Newfoundland does not resemble even remotely the actual coast; not only does it lack the inlets and peninsulas of Newfoundland but it juts out eastward for more than half the way to what would be Cape Bauld. Even if one accepts Juricek's tenuous hypothesis that the poor mapping job resulted from Cabot's haste in making for home, how is one to account for the fact that Cabot, despite being desperately short of provisions, was following the coast back toward the west?

In one sense, all of this is quibbling since it should be obvious from the rest of the map that any precise calculations based on it would be ridiculous. For example, La Cosa clearly distorted the scale of his map. Some argue the map was actually two separate maps, one of each hemisphere, on different scales.[34] Even so, a scale error still occurred within the Western Hemisphere: the coast Cabot

explored is huge in relation to the islands Columbus found. This led some historians to expand absurdly the coast that Cabot sailed, all the way down to Cape Hatteras or even Florida.

Such a conclusion is unjustified because, besides the fact that the voyage would have been next to impossible, there simply is no reason to suppose La Cosa's map is accurate enough to support it. On the contrary, a glance at Spain as it appears on his map reveals the inaccuracies inherent in it—and if La Cosa's own country was not portrayed with a fine sense of accuracy, how much less so Canada would have been. This is further supported by what we know of the mapping methods of the day. For one thing, insufficient instruments prevented the accurate gauging of locations. For another, Cabot went ashore only once, yet only ashore could he most accurately use the instruments he possessed to determine his location.[35] Furthermore, David Quinn points out that the map Cabot made (and from which La Cosa's is presumed to be drawn) would likely "compare closely with that of Hispaniola made by Columbus on his first voyage: a running survey with a coastline and names, but without scale, orientation, or graduation from latitude or longitude."[36] Thus, La Cosa's map showed not a precise map nor a general outline of what Cabot discovered but an outline of what Cabot *thought* he had discovered. With this caveat in mind, the La Cosa map can still be used as a valuable document if it is considered conceptually.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the La Cosa map is one that lends credence to the hypothesis that Cabot primarily explored the southern coast of Newfoundland: La Cosa showed the part of the coast that the English discovered as being mostly flat, and oriented east-west, not north-south. It is entirely possible the coast would not have looked quite so flat, but it is difficult to see how La Cosa could have mistaken the orientation. By simply watching the sun rise Cabot would have known he was discovering a substantially east-west coast. From Maine to Labrador, there is nowhere but the southern littoral of Newfoundland where the coast runs east-west. The theories of both Morison and Jackson falter on this point.

There is some question whether this land was thought to be mainland or island. Here, as so often, the written evidence is ambiguous. The document giving Cabot a £10 reward refered to him as "hym that founde the new Isle."[37] On the other hand, Pasqualigo said "that Venetian of ours who went with a small ship from Bristol to find new islands has come back and says he has discovered mainland," and Soncino confirmed, much later, that "after having wandered for some time he [Cabot] at length arrived at the mainland."[38] Day refered to "the capes of the mainland and the islands," clearly indicating Cabot thought he had found Continental territory as well as islands. Day did seem to contradict himself near the end of his letter, when he wrote that "the cape of the said land . . . was called

the Island of Brasil, and it is assumed and believed to be the mainland that the men from Bristol found."[39] Thus, the terms are not being used with precision and there is reason for caution in claiming Cabot discovered the mainland. Nevertheless, it is most likely this "Island of Brasil" was thought to be on the order of a continent, and it seems clear Cabot never circumnavigated it. More important is the La Cosa map, undoubtedly yet indirectly derived from Cabot's own map, which is now lost. All but one of the English flags on this map were located on the mainland. It is highly unlikely, then, that the vast majority of Cabot's coasting voyage was, as Jackson suggests, around something which, in circumnavigating it, he could not have failed to recognize as an island.

The emerging picture increasingly excludes the exploration of the east coast of Newfoundland beyond, at most, Cape St. Francis. However, this introduces two new difficulties. First, the coasting distance of 300 leagues given by Pasqualigo is no longer met. Second, the latitudes given by Day, at least as the northern boundary of the voyage, no longer match the corresponding latitude on the actual map.

Pasqualigo's coasting distance may reasonably be disregarded, basically for the same reason that the distance across the ocean cannot be taken too seriously. Beazley supports this:

> . . . when Pasqualigo reports that Cabot . . . coasted three hundred leagues . . . he seems open to the suspicion of great exaggeration . . . it passes belief that a Bristol navigator could reach the mainland of North America, coast nearly one thousand miles along a totally unknown shore (where he would have to contend with many strong currents, sudden winds, and outlying points of danger), and return to Somerset within ninety days, after a journey of about 5,500 miles.[40]

Juricek himself admits that "when coasting along an unknown shore, a ship makes so many short zigs and zags that the natural tendency is to exaggerate the distance traveled," and concludes the distance shown along the La Cosa map, predictably, was overestimated.[41]

There remains the ticklish question of latitude posed by Day when he wrote that "the cape nearest to Ireland is 1800 miles west of Dursey Head which is in Ireland, and the southernmost part of the Island of the Seven Cities is west of Bordeaux River." Later in the letter, Day mentioned that Cabot departed from the cape nearest Ireland.[42] Virtually all writers on the subject use these figures to conclude that Cabot explored the coast of Newfoundland and departed from somewhere in the area of Cape Bauld, whether this hypothetical coasting takes place, as in Morison, down the east coast and back up it; or as in Jackson, down

the west coast, around the south, and back up the east coast; or, as in Juricek, from Nova Scotia, across the south, and up the east coast. None of these historians is prepared to admit that the latitude could have been substantially off; indeed they are pleased at how close in latitude Dursey Head is to Cape Bauld.

That this optimism is misplaced is demonstrated by the degree to which it leads otherwise good historianss to abandon all logic. As Jackson did with distance, so Morison begged the question with his latitudinal calculations. Assuming Cabot started in Dursey Head, knowing he went toward the west, and reasoning that he must have been turned slightly to the south by the ice floes in the Strait of Belle Isle, Morison deduced a landing point of Griquet Harbor. He then used the fact that this is on the latitude stated in Day's letter as evidence of Cabot's great skill in celestial navigation.[43] As with Jackson, this judgement would be justified far more if the landing point had been derived from something other than Cabot's own figures, but it was not.

No evidence really stands to prove Cabot supremely accurate in his calculations, and the example of his return voyage offers evidence to the contrary. Even if one discounts the possibility of his crew somehow forcing him off course, Quinn admits Cabot probably would not "... be able to estimate his latitude with any approach to precision when he made his landfall. If he was only two degrees (140 miles) out, he was not doing too badly."[44] If he had trouble calculating his latitude when landing, Cabot likely would have experienced even more difficulty figuring out the exact latitude of the cape from which he departed for England, since he would have been without the benefit of solid ground on which to set up his instruments. Considering the amount of coasting and exploring since the earlier landfall, estimates would have been vague. Also, the heavy banks of fog which lay off the coasts of Newfoundland in the summer would have added to the difficulties of sighting.

In short, there is good reason to believe Cabot miscalculated his latitude. He was probably most accurate with the southern boundary, where he had the advantage of landing to help in finding his bearings. His later calculation, for the cape nearest Ireland, did not have had this advantage, and thus may have been off. Two degrees puts the cape somewhere around Fogo Island; if he was off as much as he was on the return trip, he may have meant anywhere as far south as Cape St. Francis. This would be in keeping with a general error toward the south.

Of the northern latitude boundary, considerable confusion exists over the implications of Day's wording. He wrote that "the cape nearest to Ireland is 1800 miles west of Dursey Head which is in Ireland, and the southernmost part of the Island of the Seven Cities is west of Bordeaux river."[45] By this, Morison took him to mean Cabot landed at the the cape nearest Ireland, i.e., the one directly west of

Dursey Head; however, there is no reason to infer this from the letter.[46] Literally, the cape nearest Ireland is much further south at Cape Bonavista; if Cabot had been to Cape Bauld, and calculated his position as accurately as many suppose, he would not have called it "the cape nearest Ireland." Day, furthermore, in juxtaposing this position with that of the southernmost point of the Island of the Seven Cities, seems to have adopted a northern boundary. Such a boundary would not have been established on the outward voyage but on the return trip as Cabot coasted northward. This is entirely consistent with a coasting voyage up the east side of Newfoundland to either Cape St. Francis or Cape Bonavista; either would have seemed to be the northernmost point to a ship coming from the south.

The southern latitude boundary causes further difficulty. Day said "the southernmost part of the Island of the Seven Cities is west of the Bordeaux River."[47] It is true that Day here refered to the southernmost point of an island, not the southernmost point of the voyage. However, it seems clear Day did not mention the southernmost point on the Island of Seven Cities arbitrarily but instead meant is as the southernmost point that Cabot explored; he obviously used it as a boundary in tandem with the point nearest Ireland, in the north. As suggested before, it is wrong to take terms such as "mainland" and "island" too literally, realizing that no one, not even Cabot, knew what had been discovered. Different interpretations are part of a lack of information; perhaps that is why Day seems to have used both.

The navigational evidence thus supports at least the possibility of a Nova Scotian landfall and a coasting voyage along southern Newfoundland. Cabot probably was led so far south by the ice and the rumblings of his crew; it is unlikely his calculations were accurate enough to preclude such a southerly landfall. The orientation of the coast in La Cosa's map strongly indicates Cabot spent at least some time coasting along southern Newfoundland. These tenuous suppositions can be strengthened by examining the geography. This type of evidence is based on sightings by Cabot of flora, fauna, and climate; it is thus inherently different from navigational evidence based on probable sailing patterns.

Like navigational evidence, sightings must be read with an eye for generalities. Soncino mentioned that Cabot thought "Brazil wood and silk" were native to the new land.[48] Obviously, no mulberry bushes were anywhere near where Cabot explored. Yet it would be wrong to discount all sightings on the basis of this one inconsistency. After all, Cabot had a vested interest in proving that he reached Asia, and what better proof than that silk could be found there? Other sightings, in which he held less of an interest, were furthermore the result of direct observation rather than inference and may prove quite valuable in determining the landfall and place of exploration.

The first thing Cabot noticed before even spotting land was the storm which engulfed him just before landfall. This was quite typical in the area around Nova Scotia, where northward-moving cyclonic storms originate in the summer. Concerning the weather nearer the land, Soncino reported it as temperate. Today the average July temperature in Nova Scotia is in the mid-sixties, Fahrenheit, and can get all the way up into the ninties; temperatures in Newfoundland average between fifty-five and sixty degrees. Cabot's description of the weather, then, is consistent with a landing on either Nova Scotia or Newfoundland. It does not, however, argue strongly against landings as far north as Labrador.

One particularly notable aspect of the new land was the amount of fish swarming in the water near it. Day commented, "All along the coast they found many fish like those which in Iceland are dried in the open and sold in England and other countries, and these fish are called in English 'stockfish.'"[49] He means by this, of course, the cod, England's primary import from Iceland. Soncino was more emphatic about the abundance of fish:

> the sea there is swarming with fish, which can be taken not only with the net, but in baskets let down with a stone...his companions, say that they could bring so many fish that this kingdom would have no further need of Iceland, from which place there comes a very great quantity of stockfish.[50]

Coming from experienced sailors who were probably familiar with the Iceland trade, this statement verifies that the ship must have sailed somewhere along the south of Newfoundland or around Nova Scotia, for these areas have the densest fishing grounds in the world.[51] Of course, the fishing all around this area is excellent, and Cabot's voyage cannot be narrowed down further on the basis of this information alone.

Most, authors realize the importance of Soncino's report of huge quantities of fish but which does little to help reconstruct Cabot's voyage; yet they are prone to ignore a resource mentioned by Day—trees—which provides an important reason for believing Cabot must have seen at least a part of Nova Scotia.

Day said Cabot and his crew "found tall trees of the kind masts are made."[52] He could have been speaking only of Nova Scotia, in the midst of the Acadian forest region. Not only does this area contain the white pine used for masts (while Newfoundland does not), it was exploited by the first settlers specifically for this purpose. The trees, moreover, were gigantic, some supposedly six feet in diameter and over 200 feet tall.[53] Since the text emphasizes the great height of the trees, the Nova Scotia pines seem to be implied; Cabot hardly could have mistaken the small trees of Newfoundland for mast material.[54] It is possible Cabot exaggerated the

productivity of the land, as he did with the silk. This, however, is rendered less likely by the fact that England at the time had forests sufficient to meet her needs for masts.[55] Cabot would have had no reason to tell the king of such trees; it was neither something that England needed, like fish, nor a known product of the land for which Cabot was seeking, like silk. The Day text, moreover, showed the mast trees were spotted at the original place where Cabot landed. This lends further credence to the claim, since Cabot upon coming ashore would have seen the trees more closely than from the distance aboard ship. The evidence, then, points strongly to a Nova Scotian landfall.

Another matter in which Cabot would have taken keen interest was the hydrography of the area. Little was mentioned in the documents on this subject besides Pasqualigo's observation that "the tides are slack and do not flow as they do here."[56] Morison argued that this comment supports a Newfoundland landing, since the tides there crest at only two to five feet.[57] Two arguments may be advanced against this. First, it does not rule out the possibility of a Nova Scotian landing, where the tides on the Atlantic Coast side also are generally under ten feet.[58] Second, it is not at all clear Morison's argument supports a Newfoundland *landing*, since Cabot could have determined the Newfoundland tide while coasting off it.

So much was actually recorded in the letters. There are two further problems, which Morison noted. First, Cabot saw no Indians. Morison attributed this to a Newfoundland landing; the Indians did not stay near the coast, the Nova Scotian Micmac being known to migrate to the coast in the summer to gather seafood.[59] This much does seem to support a Newfoundland landing, but it is hardly incontrovertible evidence. Interestingly, Day says the place where Cabot landed recently had been occupied, they found a trail that went inland, they saw a site where a fire had been made, they saw manure of animals which they thought to be farm animals, and they saw a stick half a yard long pierced at both ends, carved and painted with brazil.[60] Possibly Cabot did not see Indians because his timing simply was off by a few days. Also, Cabot saw what may have been fields cleared for villages, which is more consistent with a Nova Scotia setting, even by Morison's own logic. Moreover, the theory proposed here would have Cabot spending little time coasting off Nova Scotia, and a good deal of it on Newfoundland (where, after all, most of the land would be discovered), and so there is no compelling reason to believe Cabot would necessarily have seen other humans.

Morison's second objection derived from an interesting and provocative clue—an Italian gilt sword and Venetian earrings found in the possession of a Beothuk Indian in Newfoundland in 1501 by Gaspar Corte Real.[61] The objects had to be the remains of the 1497 or 1498 voyages of Cabot, since none other were

made in the meantime to this area. Morison argued the objects were most likely left behind by accident on the 1497 voyage. While a possibility, this certainly does not preclude a Nova Scotian landfall. For one thing, it is possible Cabot made an unreported landing on a Newfoundland peninsula which he mistook for an island; Day's letter only said Cabot made no more than one landing on the mainland.[62] More likely, however, the items were remnants of the 1498 voyage. Although it is possible to assume they were left behind in 1497, none of the evidence makes this more likely than the same happening in 1498. It is more probable the objects washed up on shore, along with a dead or ill victim of a shipwreck, than that they were accidentally forgotten, especially in the case of the earrings. Morison's own suggestion that the second voyage was lost on the rocks off the coast makes washing ashore seem the more likely case.[63]

IT IS NOW possible to construct a hypothetical route which Cabot might have followed, and that is generally consistent with both forms of evidence (navigation and sightings). Cabot set sail from Dursey Head or some nearby point on or about 20 May. He headed north for a few days, then cut back west, sailing directly for what he believed to be the northern coast of Asia. In spite of good weather and a fair wind, his crew became anxious after several weeks at sea. Cabot himself, concerned about the ice in the water, steered somewhat to the south and was pushed further in that direction by the current. Sporadically his men, afraid of the ice and despairing of finding land, urged him even more in that direction; sometimes the ship headed due west, sometimes southwest. About the time Cabot crossed the Grand Banks, a storm hit, disorienting him and blowing him past the long sought land just to the north.

Taking soundings after the storm, Cabot realized he was near land, and headed due west. At last, after 35 uncertain days, the eastern shore of Cape Breton Island came into view early in the morning. After going ashore briefly, Cabot turned southwest and followed the coast: it went just as he had expected. Figuring he had been proven correct, and being somewhat short of provisions due to the unexpectedly long trip over, he turned confidently back north to head for home. He also probably wanted to learn the outline of the coast toward the north, where he expected to land in the future; he thus eschewed the way he had come and aimed northward. Striking out across what later would be named appropriately the Cabot Strait (although he would not have known it as a strait), after a few days he was surprised by the southern shore of Newfoundland running east and west in front of him. Perhaps thinking this was only an outcropping of Asia, he followed it for some distance to the east.

Eventually, after realizing the coast was much larger than he first thought, and

short on provisions, he cut back southeast to recapture the approximate latitude along which he found the original land, since this would certainly carry him home. On the way he saw the southern part of the Burin Peninsula, and later, Cape Pine. Not having time to investigate, Cabot assumed those islands lay off the mainland and aimed north again. At last he followed the direction he wanted to take (the safer coastal route) northeast along the Avalon Peninsula, leaving it at Cape St. Francis and heading off more sharply to the east. For his sailors, though, it was not sharply enough, and they directed him far to the south of where he wanted to be. Perhaps Cabot, too, was misled about just how far south he had travelled initially, and did not realize the extent of his error. Aided by the Gulf Stream and strong west winds, Cabot made it home very fast, if not quite in the 15 days attributed to him.

THE HYPOTHETICAL voyage advanced above is no more than an approximation to the truth, closer than which it may not be possible to come barring further documentary evidence. It is meant to serve as a general guide of the possible, not as a precise and accurate deduction. It is by no means conclusive because the evidence is much too vague and even contradictory. It is difficult to draw very detailed conclusions from the type of information which can be gleaned from the letters and the maps. That both Pasqualigo and Soncino concluded Cabot reached the coast of Asia and the land of the Grand Khan without having met even a single person, or having produced evidence of civilization beyond a painted stick with holes in it, argues strongly that the men reporting on the events were almost as much in the dark about Cabot's landfall as we are—perhaps even more so. Although it would be preferable to have an entirely consistent and accurate itinerary for the voyage, the fact remains that, from this great a temporal distance, it is impossible to produce one. This conflict is the essential dilemma for the historian studying Cabot.[64] Cabot's general accomplishments are far more important than the specifics of his voayge, and, moreover, the evidence for them is much clearer than the tenuous testimony relating to the trip. His petitioning of the English king, Henry VII, for a charter to explore unkown lands helped usher England into the age of discovery.[65] And of more immediate importance, of course, was the opening of the New World to Old World fishermen, the most significant precursor to the colonization of Canada.

ENDNOTES

1. Samuel Elion Morison, *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 157, 192.

2. Donald F. Putnam, *Canadian Regions* (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell Company, 1952), 49.

3. J. A. Williamson, *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery Under Henry VII, With the Cartography of the Voyages by R. A. Skelton* (Cambridge: University Press, 1962), 83.

4. John T. Juricek, "John Cabot's First Voyage," *Smithsonian Journal of History,* 2:5.

5. Ibid.

6. R. A. Skelton, "The Cartography of the [Cabot] Voyages," appendix to Williamson, *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery Under Henry VII* (Cambridge: University Press, 1962), 299.

7. For all these quotations, see David B. Quinn, ed., *America from Concept to Discovery,* New American World (New York: Arno Press and Hector Bye, Inc., 1979), 1:97.

8. Juricek, 8.

9. Melvin H. Jackson, "The Labrador Landfall of John Cabot," *Canadian Historical Review,* 44:134.

10. Juricek, 8-9.

11. J. A. Williamson, 83.

12. Quinn, 98.

13. Ibid., 94.

14. Williamson, 51. Ferdinand and Isabella had already instructed their ambassador to try to talk Henry VII out of permitting the voyage, since they were very concerned that it would end up interfering with Spanish exploration and trade. Quinn, 94.

15. Ibid., 99.

16. Jackson, 137.

17. C. Raymond Beazley, *John and Sebastian Cabot* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1898), 70.

18. Quinn, 99.

19. Ibid., 97.

20. Morison, *The Great Explorers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 51.

21. Quinn, 99.

22. Jackson is one of the many modern historians who believe this; *Op. cit.,* 140. The general view of the letters is that Cabot was the best mariner in England.

23. Donald F. Putnam, *Canadian Regions* (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell Company, 1952), 48.

24. Morison, *The Great Explorers*, 56.

25. Ibid., 59.

26. Quinn, 99.

27. Putnam, 47.

28. Ibid., 60.

29. Williamson, 71-72.

30. Quinn, 98.

31. Exceptional weather is possible, but doubtful. See Putnam, 48.

32. Williamson, *The Voyages of John and Sebastian Cabot* (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1937), 7.

33. Juricek, 14-15.

34. Williamson, *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery Under Henry VII*, 73.

35. David B. Quinn, *England and the Discovery of America, 1481-1620* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 97.

36. Ibid., 100.

37. Ibid., 95.

38. Quinn, *America from Concept to Discovery*, 96-7.

39. Ibid., 99.

40. Beazley, 67.

41. Juricek, 16.

42. Quinn, *America from Concept to Discovery*, 98-99.

43. Morison, *The Great Explorers*, 56.

44. Quinn, *England and the Discovery of America*, 1481-1620, 100.

45. Quinn, *America from Concept to Discovery*, 98.

46. Morison, *The Great Explorers*, 66.

47. Quinn, *America from Concept to Discovery*, 99.

48. Ibid., 97.

49. Quinn, *New American World*, 98.

50. Ibid., 97.

51. Putnam, 99.

52. Quinn, *New American World*, 98.

53. Putnam, 27.

54. Ibid., 54.

55. Morison, *The Great Explorers*, 6.

56. Quinn, *New American World*, 96.

57. Morison, *The Great Explorers*, 67.

58. Putnam, 78.

59. Morison, *The Great Explorers*, 67.

60. Quinn, *New American World*, 98.

61. Morison, *The Great Explorers*, 62.

62. Ibid.

63. Morison, *The Great Explorers*, 62, 74.

64. Unfortunately, as J. A. Williamson points out, the typical Cabot scholar's "minutely detailed scholarship becomes ever more admirable, while his judgment of the broad implications of evidence decays." The uncertainty of detail and its relative unimportance are two lessons which the historian should learn from the vast body of speculative historiography concerning Cabot's 1497 expedition. Perhaps the most valuable function it could serve would be to disabuse many historians of their own excessively exact notions, which might seem entirely consistent even though other, equally important evidence is ignored. See Williamson, *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery Under Henry VII*, 67.

65. Louis De Vorsey, "The New Land: The Discovery and Exploration of Eastern North America," in *North America: The Historical Geography of a Changing Continent*, ed. Robert D. Mitchell and Paul A. Groves (New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield, 1987), 37.