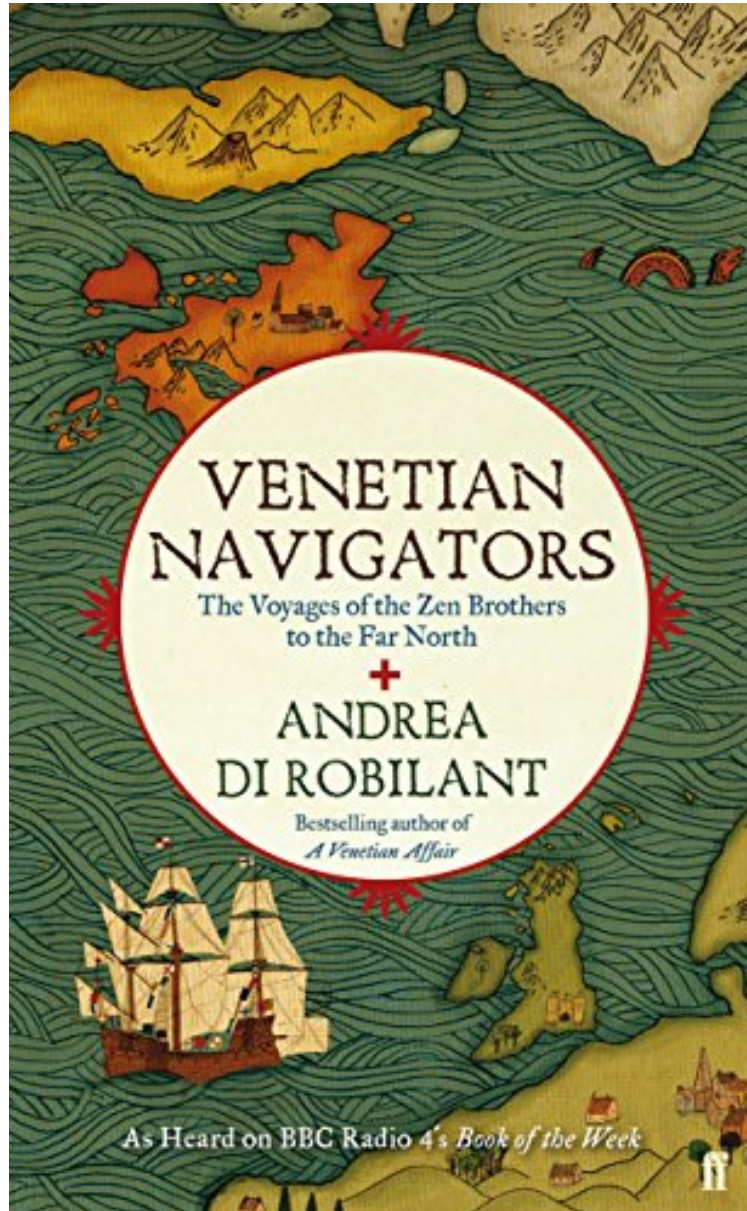


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Venetian Navigators: The Voyages of the Zen Brothers to the Far North

Andrea Di Robilant

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Andrea Di Robilant : Venetian Navigators: The Voyages of the Zen Brothers to the Far North before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Venetian Navigators: The Voyages of the Zen Brothers to the Far North:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. 'I came upon this curious map in the most unexpected way...'By Jennifer Cameron-SmithA book with a curious and wondrous map was published in Venice in 1558. Its author, Nicol Zen, (referred to as Nicol the younger in the narrative) was an official of the Venetian Republic, and in the book he claimed that his great-great-great grandfather Antonio and his great-great-great granduncle Nicol had travelled around the north Atlantic as far as the coast of modern Newfoundland in the late 14th century. This was a full century before Christopher Columbus. '... Truth is the daughter of Time.' Surely Marcolini, the printer, could not have chosen an allegory more suited to this tale.'Andrea di Robilant became interested in this story after a chance meeting with an American tourist in Venice. In the 14th century, Nicol and Antonio Zen journeyed from Venice to the North Atlantic. Along the way, visiting lands named Frislanda, Islanda, Icaria, Drogio and Estotiland, they encountered warrior princes and fought savage natives. They wrote of monasteries heated by springs, where bread could be baked without a fire, and of a 'smoky mountain'. The story of their adventure travelled throughout Europe, finding its way into both the workshop of the great cartographer Mercator and the court of Elizabeth I. In 1835, the story was denounced as a 'tissue of lies' and the Zens faded into oblivion. Was it a hoax, or did the brothers really make this journey? Andrea di Robilant set out to investigate the story of the brothers Zen, and travelled from the Palazzo Zen in Venice, to the Orkney Islands, to Shetland, the Faroes, to Iceland and to an isolated monastery in Greenland. The narrative touches on some fascinating historical personages: Nicol the younger and his publisher Marcolini; the 16th century English explorer Martin Frobisher and Dr John Dee (who owned a copy of the Zen map); the Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator (who replicated the map's errors) and Henry Sinclair, the 14th Earl of Orkney who is seen as the best guess for the elusive warrior Zichmni (of Frislanda) - who spoke Latin and led complex military operations. Di Robilant himself met some fascinating characters along his journey, but no hard evidence of the Zen journey. It does seem that many of the Zen discoveries were misplaced (at the very least) but I like the author's belief that the islands discovered by the brothers, the strangely named Frislanda, Estotiland, Drogio, Icaria and Islanda were today's Orkney Islands, the Faroes, Shetland, Iceland and (possibly) Greenland. The book is a mixture of history and travelogue and I enjoyed reading about the voyages of the brothers Zen and of the maritime glory of Venice. 'We made our approach warily because the sea behind us was in great turmoil and the land we had reached was unknown to us.'Jennifer Cameron-Smith2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A Book about a BookBy ItaI downloaded the Kindle edition of this book after listening to the first episode on BBC Radio 4's 'Book of the Week.' It was not what I had been led to expect from an abridged version, narrated beguilingly and with complete conviction, which promised a thrilling tale of discovery in the exotic North Atlantic. Gradually it became apparent that 'Venetian Navigators' was more about the book written a century and a half after the Zen voyages by the great-great-great-grandson of Antonio. The author, Nicolo the Younger, relied for his information on family heirlooms - a chart and five letters which he had succeeded, as a child, in damaging badly. This Nicolo did not confine himself to restating what his ancestor and his brother reported. He bestowed on the long dead Messer Nicolo and Antonio a knowledge of America which was only available post Columbus, and even incorporated Greek mythology into his book. All of which, claims Andrea di Robilant, was perfectly acceptable in the sixteenth century. We could, with justification, believe that Nicolo the Younger fabricated the whole story, but the details he mentioned, like the Smoky Mountain in Entgroneland (present day Greenland) and methods of cooking using geothermal energy in Iceland, were enough to make di Robilant hesitate. He visited each of the places mentioned in Nicolo the Younger's book. Nowhere did he find a folk memory of late fourteenth century seafarers. Neither of the brothers nor their crew seems to have left the smallest trace anywhere in the far North; but he came close to the Smoky Mountain and confirmed that it was possible to bake bread without a fire. That one, or both Zen brothers, reached the Orkney, Shetland and Faroe Islands and landed in Iceland and Greenland is plausible but far from certain. If they did, they can hardly be described as discoverers. Long before they set out from Venice a transatlantic trade route existed linking Norway to the Eastern coast of North America and archaeologists have unearthed evidence of Viking settlements in Labrador and Newfoundland. Di Robilant's achievement is to make the dark centre of the story more visible by bringing light to bear on it from many angles. This book contains a wealth of information - about sixteen century Venetian publishing, the fourteenth century war between Genoa and Venice, medieval trade, the Scottish earl Henry Sinclair, Christianity in Iceland, Norse and Inuit settlements in Greenland, map making by Mercator, empire building in Elizabethan England, sea tunnels in today's Faroe Islands - to give a taste. Although I found some of the arguments unconvincing and thought this long book would benefit from some judicious pruning, 'Viking Navigators' was never dull. If you are not looking for proof that America was discovered by Venetians a hundred years before Columbus, and are prepared to accept what di Robilant has to offer, I think you will find this book interesting and enjoyable.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Curious map, intriguing history, wonderful tale!By an shopperA 'curious map' published by a 16th century Venetian at the back of a book he wrote is, in a sense, what drives the fascinating narrative of "Venetian Navigators". The old Venetian book was about voyages made by the author's ancestors in the late 14th century to the Far North, and the map, constructed on the basis of surviving fragments of their accounts, offered much new information about that part of the world. As nations competed to expand their empires, sending out explorers and keeping secret their findings, the map and the narrative of the voyage upon which it was constructed stirred up intense international rivalries. Some, like

Queen Elizabeth I of England and her most learned advisor John Dee, looked upon the map and narrative as auspicious to expansionist endeavors. Later, others, with rival political agendas, would denounce the narrative as 'a tissue of lies'. In the meantime, that map went on to play a prominent role in the history of map making and in particular in the way the icy waters and land masses of the North Atlantic were perceived to be configured for a very long time. Di Robilant traces over two hundred years of political schemings and international rifts that together the map and book stirred up. Di Robilant happened upon the subject of his book quite a chance, and found himself, unaware, drawn into its mysteries. This was not a book he had been planning to write. His curiosity to investigate the claims made by those early modern Venetians, including their having reached the Americas a century before Columbus, led him on his own explorations northward into wondrously remote places. It is truly a pleasure to follow him on his own journeys and share his thoughts and scrupulous research as he gathers and pieces together his evidence like the best of sleuths. Historian, detective, explorer, di Robilant weaves his research, evidence and personal experiences together with a neat, refreshing and often playful prose. I had no idea how intriguing navigation narratives, cartography and the territorial rivalries of the Far North could be!

In the 14th century, Nicolo and Antonio Zen journeyed from Venice up the North Atlantic, encountering warrior princes, fighting savage natives and, just possibly, reaching the New World a full century before Columbus. The story of their adventure travelled throughout Europe, from the workshop of the great cartographer Mercator to the court of Elizabeth I. For centuries, the brothers were international celebrities, until, in 1835, the story was denounced as a 'tissue of lies' and the Zens faded into oblivion. But was it a hoax? And what if these Venetian navigators really did make their incredible journey? Intrigued by the myth, Andrea di Robilant sets out to discover the truth about the Zen voyages. Following in their footsteps, his quest to solve one of Venice's most intriguing mysteries takes him on a fascinating journey of his own, from the crumbling Palazzo Zen in Venice to the Orkney Islands, Shetland, the Faroes, Iceland and even as far as an isolated monastery in Greenland. Part history, part travelogue, "Venetian Navigators" is a charming tale of great journeys, fine detective work and faith against the odds.

About the Author Andrea di Robilant was born in Rome in 1957. He was educated at Columbia University, where he studied history and international politics. He has worked as a journalist all his life, in Europe, the United States and Latin America. His previous books, *A Venetian Affair* and *Lucia in the Age of Napoleon*, were published to great acclaim. He lives in Rome with his wife and two sons.