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The Turks and Caicos Islands as Possible Landfall Sites for Columbus

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ABSTRACT

Between 1625 and 1986, nine different islands in the region of the Bahamas have been identified as the *San Salvador* of Christopher Columbus. More than thirty different people have been associated with the quest and have published their findings. Those islands nominated as *the* first landfall are: Cat, Watlings, Grand Turk, Mayaguana, Samana, Conception, Caicos (considered to be one island), Plana Cays, and Egg/Royal. Grand Turk Island has been advocated by six investigators: Caicos, by three. Since the search for *San Salvador* began, there have been new and accurate transcriptions/translations of the Las Casas abstract of Columbus' *Journal*, the route across the Atlantic has been re-plotted, and the *Journal* has been subjected to computer analysis. Intensive investigation of the problem, largely initiated by *The Society for the History of Discoveries*, and recently completed by the *National Geographic Society*, has solved the five-century riddle. Caicos no longer has any supporters: Grand Turk, only two. It is the opinion of the author that Grand Turk can no longer be considered as a viable candidate for the first landfall and, along with Caicos, must be rejected.

INTRODUCTION

Between 1625 and 1986, nine different islands in the region of the Bahamas have been identified as the *San Salvador* of Christopher Columbus.¹ More than thirty different people have been associated with the quest and have published their findings. In historical sequence the islands nominated for the landfall honor are: Cat, Watlings, Grand Turk, Mayaguana, Samana, Conception, Caicos (with South/East/Middle/North Caicos considered to be one island), Plana Cays, and Egg/Royal.²

The Turks and Caicos Islands, geographically a part of the Bahamas but politically a separate British possession, have been identified as the general area of landfall by nine people, six having selected Grand Turk and three, Caicos.³

This number, however, has not remained constant. One early advocate of Grand Turk abandoned the region entirely, shifting over to Watlings. Another moved first from Caicos to Grand Turk, and then to Samana. If all nine Turks and/or Caicos supporters were living today, the score would be Grand Turk: 5, Caicos: 2.

THE GRAND TURK ADVOCATES (1825-1847)

The first person to suggest a landfall at Grand Turk was Martín Fernández de Navarrete (1825), a man who certainly needs no introduction to those of us who study Columbus.⁴ Almost in passing, and as a footnote in his transcription of the Las Casas abstract of the *Journal*, Fernández de Navarrete suggested Grand Turk.⁵ His basis for this identification derived almost entirely from an impression that Columbus was passing through an archipelago of many islands. In his haste to move Columbus on to Cuba, Fernández de Navarrete ignored the very document that lay in front of him, and the sailing directions *eastward* from Island III to Island IV were side-stepped. In all fairness, Fernández de Navarrete did not place a very high priority on nailing down the route. It was as though it were an after-thought, but apparently more reasonable to him than either Cat or Watlings, the two leading contenders at that time.

Two years later, in 1827, Samuel Kettell published the first English-language translation of Fernández de Navarrete's transcription. In this he supported the Grand Turk hypothesis, without offering any new evidence for it.⁶ In essence, Kettell merely re-stated the notion that the voyage was a direct one to Cuba (Grand Turk-Caicos, Little Inagua-Great Inagua) and did not concern himself with the fact that the *Journal* contained contrary information for the period between 11 October and 27 October. Further, his translation was abominable.

In 1846, George Gibbs entered the arena, making a much better case *against* Cat Island than for Grand Turk.⁷ For all practical purposes, Gibbs added little to the casual and fleeting remarks made by Fernández de Navarrete and Kettell, though he did remind his audience that the *Journal* places Islands I and IV too close together to allow a landfall as far north as either Cat or Watlings. Also, it must be noted that Gibbs was a resident of Grand Turk; an excellent example of the parochial, partisan advocate, defending the home turf.

The last of the 19th-century Grand Turk sponsors was R. H. Major, who, in 1847, joined the Fernández de Navarrete school, largely because of the influence exerted by Gibbs.⁸ Later, in 1871, Major formally withdrew his advocacy of Grand Turk and allied himself with the Watlings group.⁹ At the time when Major was actively supporting a Grand Turk landfall, he added nothing new to the distorted, direct route to Cuba. Further, when he lined up with A. B. Becher, sometime after the latter's 1856 pronouncement that Watlings was the rediscovered *San Salvador* he contributed little to that scheme, either.¹⁰

THE CAICOS ADVOCATES (1947-1984)

There have only been three students of the landfall to attempt to equate *San Salvador* and Caicos: two of these are deceased and one has fled northwestward to Samana.

Pieter H. G. Verhoog, in 1947, reopened the landfall campaign with a salvo directed primarily at Samuel E. Morison, but also at all of the earlier Watlings forces.¹¹ He constructed what may have been the first plotting chart of the voyage, starting with X-marks-the-spot, when the light was possibly seen on the night of 11 October, and continuing until landfall of The Spanish Island (*La Isla Española*).¹² For each Columbian mile recorded in the *Journal* Verhoog used one millimeter on his chart. By following the bearings given in the *Journal*, to the best of his ability, Verhoog "reconstructed" a chart of the islands involved. The resulting plotting chart is so nearly identical to the actual islands he matched that one can only believe that it was "made to fit." He may have begun with no preconception, but as his scheme evolved there is every reason to suspect that real islands replaced hypothetical ones.¹³

Verhoog's total acceptance of the light episode forced him to produce an island many miles *east* of San Salvador, namely Grand Turk. His acceptance of 60 Columbian miles for the length of *San Salvador* (derived from Las Casas' *Historia* and Ferdinand's *Historie*, but not found in the abstracted *Journal*) led him next to Caicos (viewed as one large island). Assuming that these things were correct, and that the Caicos Bank was the harbor large enough for all the ships of Christendom, how did Verhoog sail *southwest* for 20 nautical miles to find an island that Columbus said was almost as long as Caicos? The answer is simple: do what everyone else had done; ignore any parts of the *Journal* that are unappealing and write new ones! Verhoog then sailed for Mayaguana, going in the wrong direction for the wrong distance to an island of the wrong size!

Island III (*Acklins-Crooked*) must have been a welcome discovery for Verhoog (if not for Columbus), because it at least has a coast that trends NNW-SSE in part, and is of sufficient length to meet the *Journal* requirements. There is even a place for *Cabo Verde* at the southern end and a shallow harbor with two entrances (although blocked by a reef). But now the Commodore runs into very heavy seas.

Columbus sailed from Island III to Island IV in six hours or less, and had Island IV in sight for the last three hours of that run. At a steady speed of 8 knots (better than *double* the average trans-Atlantic speed of the *Santa Maria*), it takes *nine* hours' sail from Acklins (Verhoog's III) *to even see* Little Inagua (Verhoog's *isleo* off IV), and 11 hours to get there. Verhoog would have Columbus make this run of 87 nautical miles in less than six hours and then have him go as far as *Cabo Hermoso*, another 36 nautical miles, before dark. Everything else being equal, this alone disqualifies Verhoog and eliminates him from the game.

If the above facts can be overlooked or somehow explained, then the run from Little Inagua to the Ragged Islands (*Islas de Arena*) may not be. It is much too far in the time allotted and in the wrong direction. But Verhoog found a method for correcting the direction; he invented a compass variation of 15° E, which was as handy to him as the invention of the “land league” was to Morison.¹⁴

Looking at all of this from the perspective of a Monday morning quarterback, and knowing full-well that hindsight always affords 20/20 vision, it is absolutely astounding that other reasonably intelligent people would stumble ashore on Caicos, thinking they had discovered *San Salvador*. Columbus, even without a chart, never made this mistake!

But in 1955, Edwin A. Link, accompanied by Mrs. Link, P. V. H. Weems, and Mendel. L. Peterson, landed on Caicos.¹⁵ Their purpose was not to find *San Salvador* per se, but to compare the Verhoog and Morison tracks. This they did, in a most unique, compromising, and astounding way.

The Link expedition accented Verhoog's Island I (Caicos), then sailed 80 nautical miles to Mayaguana (Verhoog's II) *without stopping* believing (as some others have) that Columbus by-passed an unnamed, second island. The Links then continued northwest for *another* 125 nautical miles to Samana, their choice for *Santa María de la Concepción*. Despite this impossibly long distance, and forgetting that Columbus said that he intended to sail southwest, and did eventually reach an island 30 nautical miles in length only 20 nautical miles away, the Links said of nine-mile-long Samana, “It looked like a large island.”¹⁶

When Link left Mayaguana (Verhoog's II and the island Link thought Columbus skipped), he also left Verhoog. From Samana, Link had to get to the Ragged Islands, one of the few locations everyone accepts. Well, if you can pass one island, you can pass another, so Link by-passed Acklins-Crooked to the north and sailed 60 nautical miles to Long Island. Here he joined Murdock and Fox at the southern part of Long, then went to Bird Rock with Becher-Murdock-Thacher-Morison.¹⁷

I was the third and last Caicos advocate, coming to its shores in 1961.¹⁸ I knew enough of the *Journal* twenty-five years ago to know that Watlings was not *San Salvador*. I also knew enough about sailing, navigation, and geography to realize that the Link track was a mathematical impossibility. That left me with Verhoog, since everybody before his time (such as Fernández de Navarrete, von Humboldt, Irving, Fox, et al) had been eliminated by others wiser than I. Verhoog had a new idea, and we all know that newer is better.

I constructed my own plotting chart, using the recipe found in the *Journal*, plus the 45 nautical miles for *San Salvador* from the *Historia* and the *Historie*. It looked almost exactly like the one prepared by Verhoog. I did not realize it then, but I am fully cognizant now, that I made my chart fit the real one. This is why I said earlier that Verhoog may have begun with no preconception, but hypothetical islands evolved into real ones. I knew

every island between Florida and the Greater Antilles; there was no way I could push this aside as I created islands from the descriptions of Columbus. I would like to say that it was subconscious, which I believe it was, but only a person with zero knowledge of the islands could construct an unbiased chart from the *Journal*.

When I placed my reconstruction over a modern map the fit was rather good. Verhoog appeared to be vindicated and I published my findings, something I still regret.

The publication brought my first letter from Verhoog, and we maintained a lively correspondence until shortly before his death in 1984. During these years, when the letters were flying back and forth between Tampa and Noordwijk-Zee, I found a re-kindled interest in the first voyage, especially in the *Journal* itself, and I began to find flaws in the transcriptions and translations. These were of no interest to Verhoog, who would not budge a millimeter from his original 1946 position.

I went to Spain in 1972 and examined the critical documents in Madrid and Sevilla. I made my own transcription and translation of the relevant parts and journeyed to Mexico City in 1979 to present my findings.¹⁹ I became convinced that, if everything else would fall into place, it was still impossible to follow the *Journal* from Acklins to Little/Great Inagua and thence to the Ragged Islands. But nothing I said to Verhoog moved him. More than a dozen times he wrote, "I have never found a single serious objection against Caicos as the landfall of Columbus in 1492." He even put this identical sentence into print in 1983.²⁰

I asked him, if a navigationally impossible course was not a "serious objection," what would he call it? His answer was that I should re-read my 1961 paper, for it was based on the same hard facts that he had used, and facts are facts. Period.

I questioned Verhoog on the point that if the north coast of Island IV ran east-west for 36 nautical miles, (1) why did not Columbus see it before he reached the *isleo*, and (2) why did he not run aground when he sailed southwest from the northeast point of Island IV? He answered, "You have let yourself be overwhelmed by a hopeless Marion Link."²¹

Verhoog's course remained unaltered in 1980, when his Caicos argument was placed before the annual meeting of *The Society for the History of Discoveries*. Although it shed no new light on the old controversy, it did ignite the fires of research in a few.

THE GRAND TURK ADVOCATES (1981-1986)

As a direct result of Verhoog's 1980 paper, restating his 1947 position, a special Columbus session was organized for the 1981 meeting of *The Society for the History of Discoveries*. With renewed vigor, the landfall issue was attacked. Portions of the *Journal* were freshly transcribed and translated. A history of the transcriptions, translations, and interpretations was

offered. For the first time, high technology was brought into play, with a computer analysis of portions of the route and, among other things, a detailed examination of the length of Columbus' units of measurement. These papers, after revision, were twice published.²²

It was this surge of activity that caused Joseph Judge, Senior Associate Editor of the *National Geographic Magazine*, and a member of the *Society for the History of Discoveries*, to recall the words of Sherlock Holmes. "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." Judge knew that the game was afoot and the hunt was on.²³

Among these papers was one by Robert H. Power, reviving the Grand Turk theory for the first time in over a century. Loaded with cartographic and pictorial evidence, and fresh from field work in the Turks and Caicos Islands, Power made an impassioned plea for a reconsideration of a Grand Turk landfall.

Power brought to the Columbus fray the objectivity that had served him so well in a long-waged battle to correctly identify the movements of Sir Francis Drake in the San Francisco area. He entered the arena with no pre-determined islands nor foregone conclusions. His logic and evidence were sufficient to cause me to backtrack 20 miles to the east, escaping the quicksand of the Caicos shores and forever leaving Verhoog and Link stranded, with no hope of rescue.

I returned to the islands, finding everything necessary to convince me that Grand Turk was *San Salvador*. I also encountered local historian H. E. Sadler, whose arguments were basically those of Fernández de Navarrete and Gibbs. I also found a man as rigid as Verhoog, who refused to take the *Journal* requirements seriously.²⁴ Though Sadler published his findings the same year that Power delivered his paper (1981), there is little there to support a Grand Turk landfall if the complete route is considered. He takes the direct Grand Turk-to-Cuba track, pioneered by Fernández de Navarrete over 150 years ago.

My stay on Grand Turk caused me to write a piece for a local magazine (1982), another grievous error on my part. While supporting Power in general, I did disagree with all of the other Grand Turk routes.²⁵

In 1983 Power published a formal revision of his 1981 paper.²⁶ In this he accepted my position that the *Journal* laid down an impossible condition for sailing from Acklins-Crooked to Little Inagua. This had been my earlier source of discontent with Verhoog. By placing Columbus at Hogsty Reef on the night of 18 October, the distance and direction became palatable. Of course, I sacrificed *Cabo Verde* and had a difficult time matching the *Journal* description of *Fernandina* to Mayaguana (my Island III). And I still could not explain the actions at Great Inagua or why Columbus would go 200 miles out of his way to Cuba (mostly in the wrong direction) when Cuba can be seen from Great Inagua. Also, where was I going to find another island for the frequently mentioned *Babeque*?

My proposed track from Grand Turk to South/East/Middle/North Caicos, accounting for Islands I and II, seemed reasonable. At first I was willing to go to Mayaguana for III, but beyond that the *Journal* requirements would not justify a longer route westward. I prepared a chart based solely on time sailed and found that even Mayaguana was too far, and that unless Providenciales were Island III, the route did not jibe with the *Journal* up to that point in space and time. And, if Providenciales were III, nothing afterwards would fit.

Power, as I, needed a *Cabo Verde* and a NNW-SSE coast, about 21 to 24 nautical miles from Providenciales. He fell back on a trick used by Becher: he invented a new island by combining several. Power's "Large Island of Fernandina begins with a cape located 20 nautical miles from the nearest land, and includes Mayaguana, the Plana Cays, Acklins-Crooked, and over 2,000 square miles of the Atlantic Ocean!"²⁷ At this point, like Martín Alonso Pinzón, I departed the fleet.

I undertook a thorough re-study of the issue and, fortuitously, I had the opportunity of seeing two new, and very accurate, transcriptions/translations of the *Journal*.²⁸ There is now no doubt in my mind that the *Journal* was, in its original form, a remarkably precise account of the voyage, and that the Las Casas abstract preserves all of the major aspects and is virtually the *entire* Journal of Columbus.

CONCLUSION

No landfall island may be determined unless it articulates with the *entire* voyage to Cuba. Simply being a "good fit" for the *Journal* description of *San Salvador* means absolutely nothing. Grand Turk is an excellent choice if we are looking for one island only. Half a dozen islands, for that matter, meet the *Journal* requirements for *San Salvador*, even Watlings. But there must be linkage to all the other islands.

Grand Turk articulates only with Island II, and only if Columbus did not sail southwest on the afternoon of 14 October. Caicos fits nothing, for there is no Island II of the right size within reach, and certainly none to the southwest. The route starting at Grand Turk and the one starting at Caicos require impossible sailing directions and distances at the end of the Bahamian odyssey.

In the past I have made a plea for objectivity in this quest, and would be the first to admit that I have not always possessed this quality. I have also said that this is a question of science, not of religion.²⁹ The former is tentative and always subject to revision. Most students of the landfall puzzle, however, have not approached it as scientists would, but as religious zealots. This is why only three of the more than thirty published investigators have altered their positions in over 300 years of debate. And this is why many here, at this *First San Salvador Conference* will depart with the same landfall baggage they brought with them to this island.

In 1961 I felt that there were more facts to support a Caicos landfall than any other. Additional information came to me after that, mainly from colleagues whom I often did not agree with but to whom I listened. By 1979 I knew I had been wrong. By 1981, after additional field work in the islands, I became a strong advocate for Grand Turk.

The last five years has been a period of intense study of the problem. As with any other significant change, many elements had to come together. And at the right time and in the right place.

Unlike some of my colleagues, I have no regrets that the problem has now been solved. I do owe an apology to untold numbers of students and peers who have been mis-led by my ideas that have now been proven erroneous. But I find great pleasure in the fact that Gustavus V. Fox has been restored to his rightful place in history by the recent work of the *National Geographic Society*.³⁰ I fully support the Samana-Acklins/Crooked-Long-Fortune route as the one sailed by Columbus during that fortnight so many years ago.

NOTES

1. The primary sources for the first voyage of Columbus are Martín Fernández de Navarrete, *Viajes de Cristóbal Colón* (Madrid, 1934); Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Historia de las indias*, 3 vols., ed. Agustín Millares Carlo (Mexico City, 1951); and, Ferdinand Columbus, *Historie del S. D. Fernando Colombo*, trans. by Benjamin Keen as *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus* (New Brunswick, 1959).

2. The best summary of the several landfall theories appears in, John Parker, "The Columbus Landfall Problem: A Historical Perspective," *Terrae Incognitae*, XV (1983), 1-28.

3. Though some of the islands advocated involved more than one person, such as the Link expedition of four, the assumption here is that each theory had one main proponent.

4. In addition to being the man that discovered the lost abstract of the Columbus *Journal* and gave us the first transcription in 1825, Fernández de Navarrete was an authority on the Spanish language, recognized as such after his publication of *Ortografía de la lengua castellana* (Madrid, 1815). He also created the definitive work on Cervantes, *Vida de Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra* (Madrid, 1819). More than fifty major works were written by Fernández de Navarrete, including many on maritime history and discoveries.

5. Fernández de Navarrete, *Viajes*, op. cit., p. 24. "Examinado detenidamente este diario, sus derrotas, recaladas, señales de las tierras, islas, costas y puertos, parece que esta primera isla que Colón descubrió y pisó, poniéndole por nombre *San Salvador*, debe ser la que está situada mas al Norte de las Turcas, llamada *del Gran Turco*. Sus circunstancias conforman con la descripción que Colón hace de ella."

6. Samuel Kettell, *Personal Narration of the First Voyage of Columbus* (Boston, 1827).

7. George Gibbs, "Observations to Show That the Grand Turk Island, and Not San Salvador, Was the First Spot on Which Columbus Landed in the New World," *Proceedings of the New York Historical Society*, 1846, 137-148. The library of the NYHS contains several interesting letters from Gibbs. One, dated 20 October 1857 is a copy of a letter to Capt. A. B. Becher of the Royal Navy, in which Gibbs states, "He who is convinced against his will, is of the same opinion still." He also denies the charge of parochalism.

8. R. H. Major, *Select Letters of Christopher Columbus, With Other Original Documents, Relating to His First Four Voyages to the New World*, (London, 1847).

9. *Ibid.*, 2nd ed., 1870.

10. A. B. Becher, *The Landfall of Columbus on his First Voyage to America* (London, 1856).

11. Pieter H. G. Verhoog *Guanahani Again* (Amsterdam, 1947). Essentially the same article, accompanied by Verhoog's plotting chart, appears as, "Columbus Landed on Caicos," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, LXXX (October, 1954), 1101-1111.

12. Throughout the literature, beginning with Las Casas, the name Columbus bestowed upon the large island east of Cuba, called *Bobío* by the Indians, is corrupted to *Española* (and expressed even more vulgarly in English as *Hispañola*). Columbus named this land *La Isla Española*, The Spanish Island. By the time Las Casas began his abstract the name had been shortened, but it is incorrect to refer to this island as *the island of Spanish!* *Española* is an adjective, and was never used otherwise by Columbus. Its appearance on the sketch of the island that is alleged to have been made by Columbus during the first voyage is clear proof that Christopher never drew it.

13. Verhoog, *op. cit.*, pp. 1102 and 1103.

14. The U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, Analysis Branch, Geomagnetism Division, states that there is no way to derive isogonic lines in the past, unless there is an independent method of dating magnetic alignments, such as matching tree rings with disturbed magnetic particles in the American southwest. Personal correspondence from K. L. Svendsen, chief, May 19, 1967. All reference to past compass variation is guesswork, otherwise.

15. Edwin A. Link and Marion C. Link, "A New Theory on Columbus's Voyage Through the Bahamas," *Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections*, CXXXV (January, 1958).

16. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

17. See Parker, *op. cit.*, for a summary of these. Other supporters of this general route have been C. R. Markham, R. T. Gould, J. W. McElroy, Edzar Roukema, and Ruth G. D. Wolper.

18. R. H. Fuson, "Caicos, Site of Columbus' Landfall," *The Professional Geographer*, XIII (March, 1961), 6-9.

19. National Council for Geographic Education, Annual Meeting, Hotel El Presidente Chapultepec, Mexico City, Mexico, October 31-November 2, 1979.

20. Pieter Verhoog, "Columbus Landed on Caicos," *Terrae Incognitae*, XV (1983), p. 34.

21. Personal correspondence, May 29, 1982.

22. Louis De Vorsey and John Parker, editors, *Terrae Incognitae*, XV (1983). This issue of the *Journal of The Society for the History of Discoveries* was also issued as a trade book under the title of *In the Wake of Columbus* (Detroit, 1985).

23. Joseph Judge, "Where Columbus Found the New World," *National Geographic Magazine*, CLXX (November, 1986), p. 572.

24. H. E. Sadler, *Turks Island Landfall*, vol. 1 (Grand Turk, 1981).

25. R. H. Fuson, "Grand Turk Was Guanahani and Is San Salvador," *Turks and Caicos Current* (July/August, 1982), 21-30.

26. Robert H. Power, "The Discovery of Columbus's Island Passage to Cuba, October 12-27, 1492," *Terrae Incognitae*, XV (1983), 151-172.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 162.

28. Eugene Lyon, "The Diario of Christopher Columbus: October 10-October 27, 1492," in *A Columbus Casebook*, supplement to "Where Columbus Found the New World," *National Geographic Magazine*, CLXX (November, 1986), supplement pp. 5-45; Oliver C. Dunn and James E. Kelley, Jr., *The Diario of Christopher Columbus' First Voyage to America 1492-1493* (Norman, in press). Both of these are line-by-line transcriptions and translations, but Lyon only covers a two-week portion of the voyage, whereas Dunn and Kelley transcribe and translate the entire journal. In addition, the latter work includes detailed notes, an index, and a computerized concordance. The concordance alone may be the single most important contribution to the study of the first voyage since Fernández de Navarrete transcribed the Las Casas abstract.

29. R. H. Fuson, "The *Diario de Colón*: A Legacy of Poor Transcription, Translation, and Interpretation," *Terrae Incognitae*, XV (1983), p. 75.

30. Judge, *op. cit.*, 566-599.

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