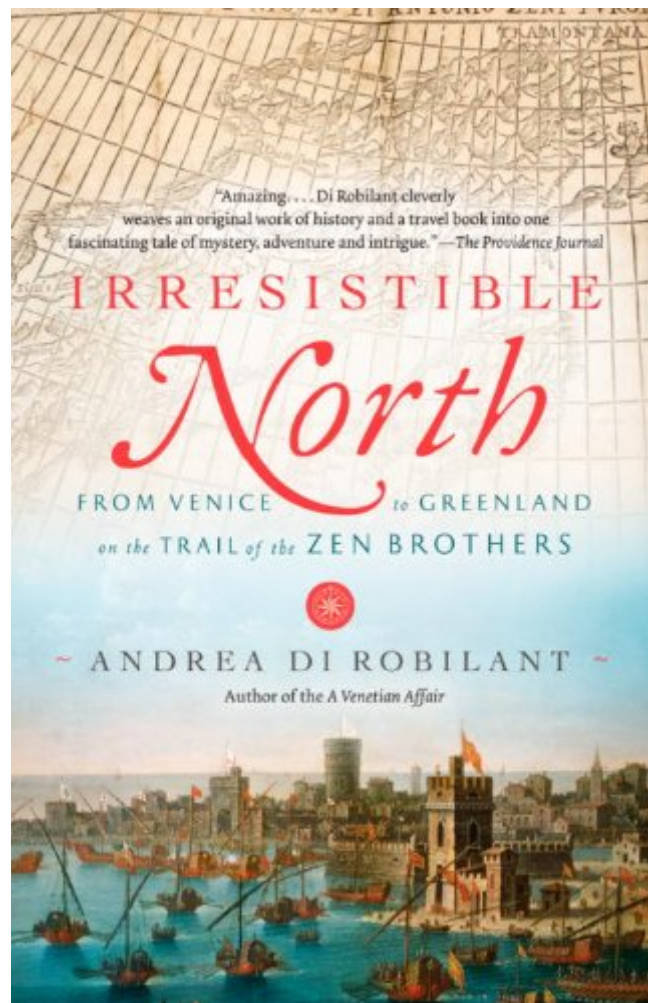




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Irresistible North: From Venice To Greenland On The Trail Of The Zen Brothers



Synopsis

From the author of *A Venetian Affair* and *Lucia* comes a charming odyssey in the path of the mysterious Zen brothers, who explored parts of the New World a century before Columbus, and became both a source of scandal and a cause célèbre among geographers in the following centuries. This delightful journey begins with Andrea di Robilant's serendipitous discovery of a travel narrative published in Venice in 1558 by the Renaissance statesman Nicolò Zen: the text and its fascinating nautical map re-created the travels of two of the author's ancestors, brothers who explored the North Atlantic in the 1380s and 1390s. Di Robilant set out to discover why later, in the nineteenth century, the Zen's account came under attack as one of the greatest frauds in geographical history. Was their map—and even their journey—partially or perhaps entirely faked? In *Irresistible North* the author follows the Zen's route from the Faeroes to Shetland to Iceland and Greenland, greeted by characters who help unravel the enigmas in the Zen's account. The medieval world comes to life as di Robilant guides us through a landscape enlivened by the ghosts of power-hungry earls and bishops of the old Norwegian realm and magical tales of hot springs and smoking mountains. In this rich telling—an original work of history and a travel book in one—the magnetism of the north draws us in as powerfully as it drew the Zen brothers more than six centuries ago.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

This is a book which touches on many themes. It is not easy to categorise. Andrea di Robilant is an historian and a journalist. In this book he interweaves the two genres. Perhaps the "Venetian Navigators" of the title also includes himself, as subject as well as author. Di Robilant, who is half Venetian and half American, takes up the quest of the Zen explorers, suggested to him by a chance encounter with an American tourist at the Marciana Library in Venice, which piques his curiosity. A few days later, he happens to notice the Zen palace near the Campo dei Gesuiti, "embellished with Leventine motifs" and a "soot-covered plaque" dedicated to "Nicolo and Antonio Zen, wise and courageous navigators to the northern seas." Di Robilant's previous books have all been based on his own illustrious Venetian family, and so what he sets out to explore here is, in more ways than one, uncharted waters. It is a controversial story based on a book printed in 1558 written by Nicolo Zen, which itself is based on the long-lost letters that were written by his great-great-great grandfather, one of the two Zen brothers who travelled to the North, to Orkney, the Faroes, Iceland and almost certainly as far as Greenland, though almost certainly not to North America (which was the premise of the American tourist's quest).

A '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.

Di Robilant states that the basis for the book is his finding of a 1558 volume in the Venice Maritime Museum with a map of the north atlantic. The book proposes that two Venetian brother (Antonio and Nicolo Zen) traveled to North American in the late fourteenth century, one hundred years before Columbus and Cabot. The book was written by a great-great-great-great-grandson of Antonio's, from damaged letters that were in the family archives. Though there are implausible places on the map, much could be made of the visit to Greenland and lands to the 'west'. Di Robilant sets out to follow in the steps (or sails) of the Zen brothers. He looks to 'prove' that some of the narrative can be verified, thereby proving that the Zen brothers did make their historical trip. It turns into quite an adventure for di Robilant, and he is able to prove that some of the descriptions in the 'book' are true and were not known to geographers in the fourteenth century. In between we get some interesting historical perspective as to the rise and fall of the Norwegian Kingdom and Henry Sinclair of the Orkney Islands. Di Robilant makes use of the information from one of the many defenders of the Zen brothers to show that the descriptions of lands west of Greenland can be shown to have been Newfoundland, Labrador and maybe even parts of maritime Canada. I would think that it would be inconceivable to believe that the Norseman, who had moved constantly west would have stopped at Greenland. Considering that it was almost a thousand miles to Greenland from the British Isles, another hundred or so miles west to Baffin Island and the North American coast would seem like a sunday jaunt.

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