

THE LION'S SHARE: THE SECRET LAND GRAB OF DRAKE'S CIRCUMNAVIGATION

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Francis Drake's journey around the world between 1577 and 1580 is renowned as one of the most famous voyages in history. The circumnavigation was a great achievement for England, but the official story Queen Elizabeth and her Privy Council maintained for nine years was that Drake was a pirate, and that the treasure he captured on the voyage would be returned to Spain. Upon his return, information about the voyage and his route were suppressed and the crew was sworn to secrecy: they were not to reveal where they travelled on 'pain of death'. Here I present the case that perhaps the most important state secret of all was that the official land claim record falsified the position of Nova Albion, Drake's claim on the west coast of what is now the United States. Between the draft and the published version, the claim was moved south by several degrees to the northern border of New Spain. It is not likely that the differing latitudes were a scribal or typographic error. The Chinese porcelain sherds once thought to be from vessels in Drake's cargo that proved he was in the San Francisco Bay area can now be considered artefacts from a later Spanish shipwreck, and Drake's true 'fair & good bay' known as the bay of Nova Albion may be found six degrees further north. This ruse enabled England, by the rules of the time, to claim the lion's share of uncharted territory north of Spain's colonial boundary.

Keywords: Elizabethan history; colonial archaeology; Sir Francis Drake (c 1540–96); California

INTRODUCTION

Francis Drake's circumnavigation of the globe between 1577 and 1580 was one of the most famous voyages in history (fig 1). The voyage was recognised as a great achievement for England at the time, even while Queen Elizabeth and her Privy Council maintained for nine years that Drake was a pirate and that the treasure he captured during the voyage would be returned to Spain. Upon Drake's return, details about the voyage and his precise route were suppressed and the crew was sworn to secrecy; they were not to reveal where they travelled on 'pain of death'. One contemporary French historian placed the blame squarely on Queen Elizabeth for not allowing Drake's records of the voyage to be published, writing: 'I don't know if there is good reason for this counsel: for making it known could not be but to the honour of her nation'.¹ The geographer Gerardus

1. Lancelot Voisin de la Popelinière, quoted in Fuller 2007, 40.

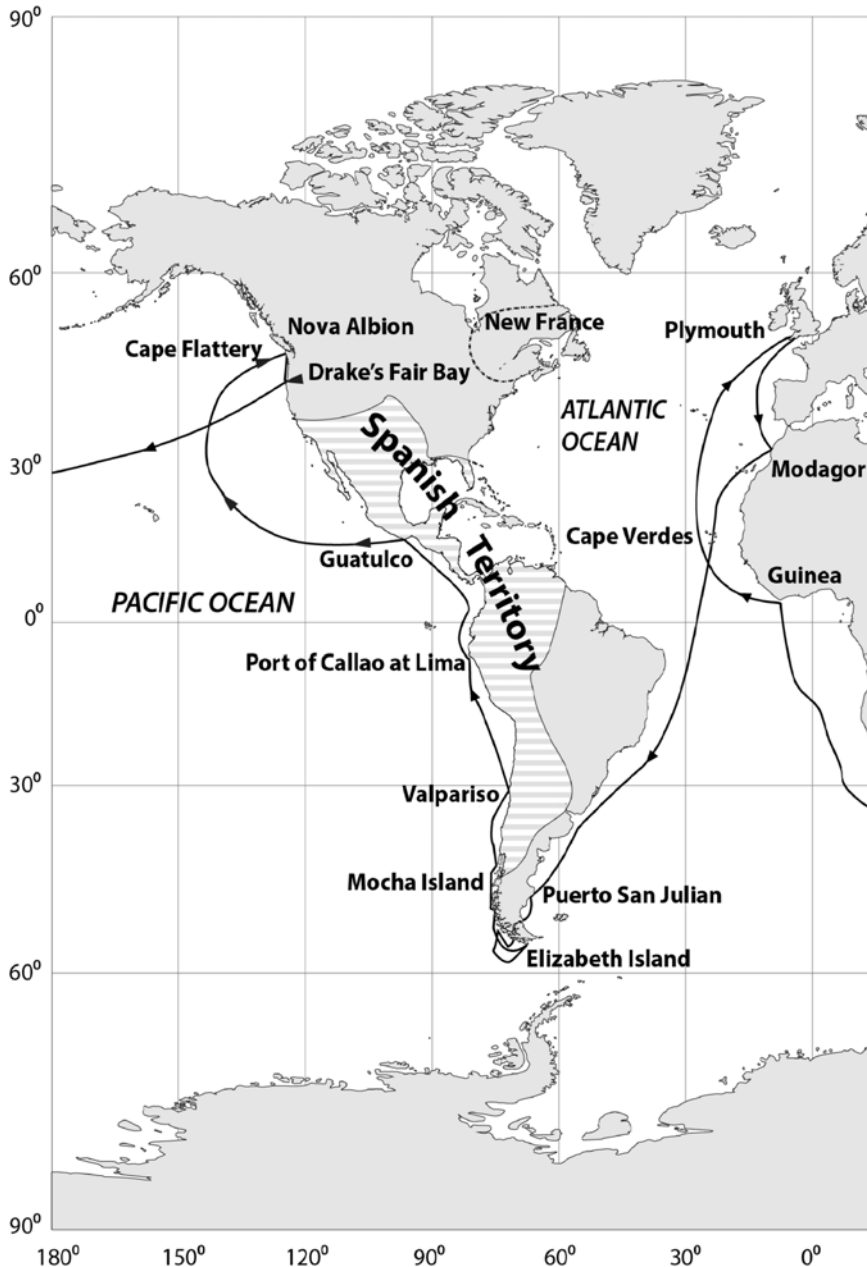


Fig 1. Drake's route on the west coast during the circumnavigation 1577–80. Map: author.

Mercator (1512–94) similarly complained that information about the voyage was being concealed, and questioned the reasons for 'so carefully concealing the course followed during this voyage, [and] for putting out differing accounts of the route taken and the

areas visited'.² In this paper I will argue that perhaps the most important state secret of all was the actual geographical position of Nova Albion, Drake's claim on the west coast of what would eventually become the United States. Between the draft and the published version, the southern boundary of Drake's claim was moved south by six degrees – to the northern border of New Spain – indicating that the extent of England's land claim was deliberately falsified in the official record.

In my 2019 book, *Thunder Go North: the hunt for Sir Francis Drake's fair & good bay*, I presented evidence that the Harley 280 manuscript in the British Library was in fact a draft of Richard Hakluyt's chapter 'The famous voyage', which was published in *The Principall Navigations, Voiages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589).³ 'The famous voyage' chapter served as the formal written attestation of Drake's land claim of Nova Albion. The historian Susan Clegg has written about censorship in Elizabethan England, and has discerned various stages of censorship by comparing different versions of the same texts. Following Clegg's example, I determined that the Harley manuscript recorded the true locations of Drake's activities along the west coast, and that he was looking for the entrance to the North-West Passage.⁴ The manuscript also relates his true timeline along the west coast of America during the summer of 1579. In this paper, I present a fuller case that perhaps the most important state secret of all was that the official record of the land claim falsified the latitudes of Drake's 'fair and good bay' and the territory he named Nova Albion.

According to the Harley manuscript, Drake's northern limit in the Pacific was 48 degrees north, and his fair bay was located at 44 degrees north.⁵ In contrast, the official account puts Drake's fair bay at 38 degrees north (around San Francisco Bay), and his highest point on the coast at 42 degrees north, which is at the Oregon and California border (fig 2).⁶ Given that the draft account related what we assume are the correct latitudes, Drake and his men in the *Golden Hinde* spent most of the summer of 1579 on what is now the central Oregon coast rather than a bay in California. Supporting this contention, the higher latitudes in the manuscript are the same as those found in three other contemporary manuscripts, including the inquisition testimony of John Drake, Drake's young cousin who was a cabin boy on the expedition.⁷

When Drake and his men arrived on the west coast sometime in June of 1579, they were in danger of being shipwrecked. Out at sea they had encountered freezing weather and a storm off the coast, which widened the leak that the *Golden Hinde* had since they were off the coast of Panama. Drake was in search of a sheltered bay so the ship could be careened to get to the leak. Sailing south along the coast they first anchored in a harbour that was not suitable for the manoeuvres needed to repair the ship. They continued south, and within a few days found the fair bay.

The indigenous peoples had never seen the likes of Drake and his men before, and they treated them as if they were supernatural beings or even gods, although Drake and his chaplain tried to dissuade them of this idea. The crew careened and repaired the *Golden*

2. USLC, Mercator, letter, 1580.

3. Darby 2019, 10–31.

4. Clegg 2005.

5. BL, Harley MS 280, fols 87r–87v.

6. Hakluyt 1589. 'The famous voyage' chapter is not paginated, but the un-numbered leaves are inserted between pages 643 and 644.

7. Nuttall 1912. 'First account of the voyage of circumnavigation given by John Drake', 32, and 'Second narrative by John Drake', 50.

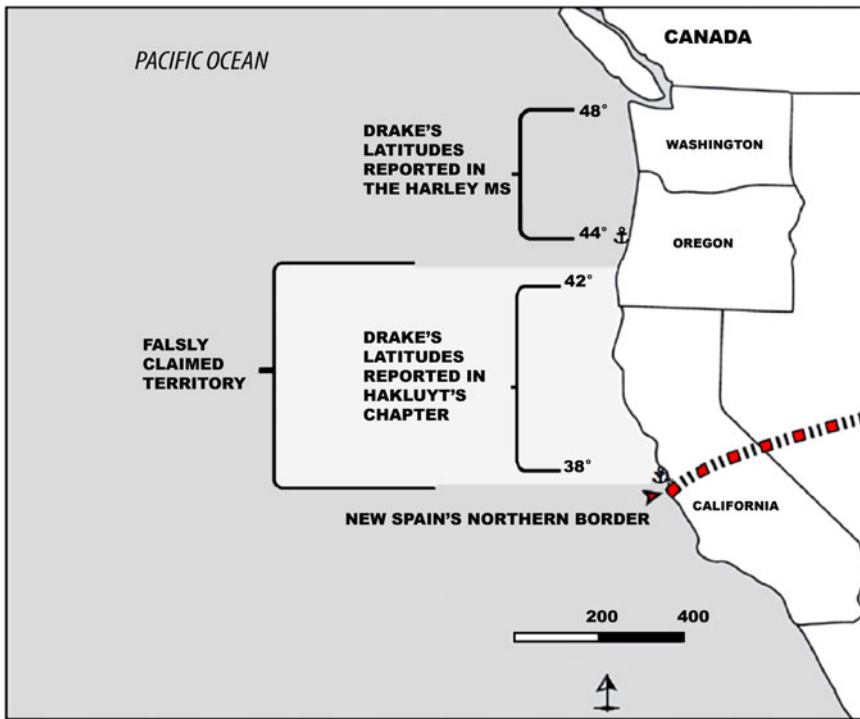


Fig 2. Map of the west coast of America, showing the latitudes reported in the Harley manuscript and Hakluyt's published account. Map: author.

Hinde and refitted a small ship only known as 'Tello's bark' that they had captured off the coast of Nicaragua. The treasure they stacked on the beach was massive. One inventory of the bullion described 650 ingots of silver weighing over eleven tons, and thirty-six parcels of gold weighing just over 100 pounds. There were Peruvian emeralds, a huge quantity of pearls, several crates of Chinese porcelains and a quantity of fine cloth.

Shakespearean scholars suggest that Drake's circumnavigation of the world was such a triumph for England that William Shakespeare named his theatre The Globe after this accomplishment. The events at Drake's fair bay may have provided the playwright with plot lines for *The Tempest*, which began with a storm and a shipwreck, and featured an indigenous man named Caliban who worshipped the shipwrecked men as gods.⁸

When repairs were finished and the ship readied for the voyage across the Pacific, the *Golden Hinde* was ballasted with silver bars. Drake's main problem at this point in the voyage was that there were too many men for the *Golden Hinde* to carry back to England. This would have been the case even if they had no cargo but victuals, fresh water and firewood.⁹ When the *Golden Hinde* embarked on the Pacific crossing, the twenty or so men in Tello's bark did not accompany them, and are unaccounted for in either the Harley manuscript or in Hakluyt. John Drake, the cabin boy on the expedition, said that these men

8. Cole 1989, 40.

9. Nuttall 1912, 101.

were left in the Americas.¹⁰ They were remembered twenty-five years later in England by Shakespeare's fellow playwright and poet Ben Johnson, who co-wrote a play about Englishmen sailing to America. In the play, one of the characters suggested the fate of these men as follows: 'A whole country of English is there, man, bred of those that were left there in '79. They have married with the Indians, and make 'em bring forth as beautiful faces as any we have in England. . . .'¹¹

Apart from the latitudes of the expedition printed in Hakluyt, the evidence that is most often cited in placing Drake's landing in California consists of seventy-seven sherds of porcelain from wares dating from the Late Ming period, which were found in Native American midden sites at Drakes Bay, California. Drake had captured a Spanish merchant ship off the coast of Guatemala and took the cargo that included Chinese porcelain wares imported from Manila. In 1981, historian Ed Von der Porten and art historian Clarence Shangraw suggested some of the wares Drake took from the merchant ship were presented to the Native Americans at Drakes Bay, and were later broken and the sherds ended up in middens. In their analysis, Von der Porten and Shangraw reported they could distinguish stylistic differences between the porcelain wares in Drake's captured cargo and the wares carried by the Spanish galleon *San Agustín*, which shipwrecked in Drakes Bay in 1595, only sixteen years after Drake's exploration of the coast.¹² The *San Agustín* had sailed from Manila, and the cargo included crates of porcelains imported to Manila from China.

The next section discusses the geopolitical context when the Harley 280 manuscript was drafted, and reviews the evidence for its relationship to Hakluyt's chapter in *Principall Navigations*. This is followed by a discussion of the Chinese porcelain artefacts theorised to be from Drake's cargo.

THE GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF DRAKE'S VOYAGE OF CIRCUMNAVIGATION, 1577–80

When Francis Drake embarked upon his circumnavigation in 1577, England was confronting an emerging coalition of Catholic powers that threatened its maritime and political interests. At one point, Spain, asserting sovereignty over the Western Atlantic, protested to Queen Elizabeth that English merchants had entered waters it considered part of its dominion. In reply, Elizabeth famously declared that 'the use of air is common to all; neither can any title to the ocean belong to any people'.¹³ The Queen was articulating the principle that would later be codified as *mare liberum* – that the high seas beyond coastal waters were free to all nations. Despite the Queen's assertion, the Spanish and Portuguese increasingly regarded English seafarers as pirates, even when their declared intent was legitimate trade. English vessels were seized, their crews imprisoned and, in retaliation, England engaged in increasingly violent exchanges that stopped only just short of formal warfare.

Amid these tensions, Elizabeth and her Privy Council concluded that England must establish a colonial foothold in the Americas if the country were to remain geopolitically relevant. The secretive nature of the voyage was evident from the beginning. The plan of

10. John Drake in Nuttall 1912, 51.

11. Johnson *et al* 1605, 138.

12. Shangraw and Von der Porten 1981, 23

13. Ehlers *et al* 2002, 8.

the voyage to the Pacific was initiated by Sir Francis Walsingham (c 1532–90), who summoned Drake and ‘roughed out a plan’ to discover territory to claim beyond the possession of Spain.¹⁴ The details of Drake’s voyage were tightly controlled and largely censored, so it was not until the 1930s that the original plan for the voyage was rediscovered in the Cotton manuscript collection of the British Museum.¹⁵ This document revealed that Drake was on a secret mission, and he had been instructed to enter the Pacific Ocean through the Strait of Magellan and then to ‘confound the Spaniard unawares’ through surprise attacks on Spanish shipping and treasure depots along the coasts of Chile, Peru and New Spain. Beyond these raids, Drake was instructed to seek potential lands for colonisation and to reconnoitre for a western entrance to the much hoped for North-West Passage.

For nine years following Drake’s return, Elizabeth and her Privy Council maintained the diplomatic fiction that Drake had acted independently as a pirate and that his spoils would be returned to Spain. The Crown retained the treasure. Elizabeth herself is said to have adorned one of her gowns with ‘hundreds of the lovely pearls’ from Drake’s plunder, while part of the proceeds was directed towards the expansion of England’s naval fleet – preparation for the inevitable conflict with Spain that culminated in the Armada campaign of 1588.¹⁶

Drake’s claim of Nova Albion on the west coast of North America was formally proclaimed with the publication of Richard Hakluyt’s account of the circumnavigation, ‘The famous voyage’, published in 1589 in his most important work, *Principall Navigations, Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation*.¹⁷ It was in this text that the six-degree ruse first appears. Somewhere between the manuscript draft (British Library, Harley MS 280) and the printed version, the geographical position of the land claim was altered. This subtle yet consequential manipulation effectively expanded England’s putative territorial claim while simultaneously blocking Spain’s potential northward advance. It was a calculated geopolitical land grab through which England asserted dominion over much of the western coast of what is now the United States. The deception endured for centuries.

By the mid-nineteenth century, as Californians sought to craft their state’s foundational narratives, most American scholars had accepted Hakluyt’s published latitudes at face value. Consequently, the legend of Drake as the heroic discoverer of California became firmly enshrined in regional history – despite the strong likelihood that he never set foot upon its shores. The question of which bay in California became a contentious debate among scholars in California. In 1868 F D B Stillman asserted that Drake and Company never would have landed on the dangerous shores of Jack’s Bay – soon to be renamed Drakes Bay by advocates of that bay – but must have landed in San Francisco Bay.¹⁸ Drake and his men had explored inland, but the account is not clear about how many days they explored. Many historians found it difficult to understand how they could have missed finding, or being led overland, to the great San Francisco Bay if they had landed at Jack’s Bay.

Richard Hakluyt himself is often described as ‘a propagandist of overseas expansion’.¹⁹ Hakluyt’s writings and analysis informed policy decisions at the Elizabethan court, and were aligned with those of his patron, Sir Francis Walsingham, Queen Elizabeth’s secretary

14. Wilson 2007, 145.

15. Taylor 1930. Taylor found the plan of the voyage (Cotton MSS, Otho, E VIII), which revealed that the voyage was backed by most of the members of the Privy Council and the director of the navy.

16. *Oakland Tribune* 1915, quoting Zelia Nuttall.

17. Hakluyt 1589.

18. Stillman 1868, 332–7.

19. Hoffmann 1977, 210.

of state, chief strategist and spymaster. Walsingham oversaw the publication of Hakluyt's official account of the voyage, and the all-important land claim of Nova Albion. 'The famous voyage' chapter served as the formal written attestation of the claim, and went to some length in the narrative to describe the installation of an engraved metal plate mounted on a post that was the land claim marker. The plate, said to be made of brass or copper, displayed 'Her Majesties right and title' as well as the day and year of their arrival, with a sixpence set under the plate.

Hakluyt and Walsingham shared the understanding that colonisation would enrich the realm by creating markets for English cloth and other commodities, and by bringing in raw materials and minerals. Moreover, if England could plant her flag in America, it would create a check to expanding Spanish claims and effectively limit the spread of Catholicism. The *Principall Navigations, Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation* emerged from this ideological milieu – an ambitious project intended both to celebrate and to legitimise England's maritime ambitions, including the strategically important claim to Nova Albion.

Within a week of Drake's return, Queen Elizabeth ordered all his logs, charts and journals to be confiscated and secured under her personal authority. Not only was Drake's original logbook of the voyage suppressed, but contemporary accounts of his exploration of the west coast of America are contradictory – evidently by design and by spy craft. These important records have never been seen by scholars since, and it is likely that they were lost in one of the fires that burned Whitehall Palace in 1691 or 1698.

Based on my examination of the Harley manuscript, I have identified it as Richard Hakluyt's abstract of a section from the sea journal kept by Drake's chaplain, Francis Fletcher. This is material that Hakluyt later used as the foundation for 'The famous voyage' chapter.²⁰ Clergymen served as commissioned officers on Elizabethan naval expeditions, and their duties often included maintaining a daily record of events and decisions made by the voyage's leaders. The naval historian Julian Corbett observed that the Harley manuscript contains details absent from all other known accounts of Drake's voyage, and surmised that it was written by someone who harboured a grievance against Drake.²¹ Fletcher indeed had a fraught relationship with his commander; after one dispute, Drake forbade him from coming before the mast, 'for if he did, he sware he should be hanged'.²²

The Harley manuscript has long been recognised by scholars as a significant primary source for the study of Drake's circumnavigation, although, as noted above, the latitudes Drake attained in the Pacific and other details were not consistent with the Crown's version of the voyage. Commonly referred to as the 'Anonymous Narrative', the provenance can be traced to Sir Simonds D'Ewes (1602–50), the seventeenth-century antiquary and diarist who studied common law at the Middle Temple, which was the same institution attended by Richard Hakluyt. Before D'Ewes acquired the document, it may have formed part of the collection of Ralph Starkey, a London merchant and noted antiquary who died in 1628. Starkey was an avid collector of papers and correspondence from the Elizabethan court, and his holdings later became a key source of early modern historical manuscripts.²³ The D'Ewes collection subsequently passed into the possession of Robert Harley (1661–1724)

20. Darby 2019.

21. Corbett 1912, 407.

22. BL, Harley MS 280, fol 82r, transcribed in Vaux 1854, 176.

23. Wright 1972, 248–9.

and Edward Harley (1689–1741), first and second earls of Oxford. Their extensive manuscript holdings were later incorporated into what became the Harleian Collection, now preserved in the British Library.

Written in the first person, the Harley narrative prompted Helen Wallis, former map librarian at the British Museum, to propose that the author had personally taken part in Drake's voyage.²⁴ Historian and geographer E G R Taylor similarly observed that 'the unvarnished account of the Anonymous Narrative probably comes nearer to the truth [of the voyage]' than any other surviving record.²⁵

The manuscript covers the voyage from the Strait of Magellan to the crew's return to Plymouth. The draft chapter is similar in structure and syntax to the final version in Hakluyt's chapter. It has a ten-page narrative section that in many places has the exact wording to the published version or has been slightly changed and made better by corrections and clarifications that appear to reflect the hand of an editor. As previously noted, the finished Hakluyt chapter – in contrast to the draft – placed Drake's fair bay at about what is now called Drakes Bay, situated just north of San Francisco. Additionally, the text of Hakluyt's chapter had been purged of Chaplain Fletcher's disparaging comments against Drake that had appeared in the Harley manuscript. Drake was by then an acknowledged English hero, and evidently the editor felt that these comments would have detracted from Drake's heroic image. Accompanying the narrative are five pages of supplementary notes, which W S W Vaux titled 'Memoranda, apparently relating to this voyage' when he transcribed the whole manuscript for his book *The World Encompassed by Sir Francis Drake*, published by the Hakluyt Society in 1854.²⁶

Because many scholars have relied solely on W S W Vaux's 1854 transcription of the manuscript, crucial evidence indicating that the Harley manuscript was in fact a work-in-progress has gone largely unnoticed. The original document contains numerous crossed-out passages, marginal notes and editorial markings that are clear signs that it was a draft undergoing revision. The principal text was written in dark brown ink, while black ink was used for annotations and later edits, suggesting an iterative process of composition and refinement.

The most compelling evidence emerged during my own examination of folio 82r, where a small sketch of a pointing hand (ie a manicule) appears in the margin beside a note instructing that a block of text concerning Drake's Portuguese pilot should be inserted elsewhere in the document. Searching through the narrative section, I located a corresponding manicule on folio 87r, adjacent to the passage describing Tom Moone, one of Drake's men, taking a chain of gold from a Spanish gentleman. This discovery prompted me to consult 'The famous voyage'. There, precisely after the episode involving Moone, appeared the paragraph about Drake's Portuguese pilot, indicating that the editorial instruction had in fact been followed.

These edits and alterations demonstrate that the Harley manuscript was a working draft of Hakluyt's account of Drake's circumnavigation, prepared prior to the imposition of official censorship and revision. It provides direct material evidence that the manuscript was actively edited on Hakluyt's desk before alterations were made in order to manipulate

24. Wallis 1984, 141

25. Taylor 1932, 363.

26. Vaux divided the manuscript into two sections and transcribed them in appendices for his important collection of contemporary accounts of the circumnavigation published by the Hakluyt Society in 1854.

the narrative and adjust the reported latitudes of Drake's movements along the American west coast.

Further corroboration of this attribution emerged in 2023, when archaeologist and Elizabethan historian Dean Snow examined a copy of the manuscript.²⁷ Snow recognised the formatting conventions and handwriting style of a particular unnamed scribe known to have worked in Richard Hakluyt's office during the 1580s. He concluded that the Harley manuscript was almost certainly written by this same scribe. This was the same individual who, in 1582, recorded the account of a shipwrecked sailor that later became the subject of one of Snow's own studies.²⁸

Nine years after Drake's return, with England poised on the brink of war with Spain, Queen Elizabeth and her Privy Council judged that the time had come to shed some of the secrecy of the story of Drake's circumnavigation. Sir Francis Walsingham oversaw the preparation and publication of Richard Hakluyt's chapter, which included the claim to Nova Albion. Historian Mary Fuller has observed that Hakluyt's chapter navigated the competing government imperatives to report and not to report on the voyage. As she notes, '[t]he narrative that eventually emerged to take a place in the collection said little about much, remaining silent about its sources and authorship while revealing a clear interest or bias in its account of events'.²⁹

Guatulco was Drake's last landfall in Mexico before the expedition's broad reach west into the Pacific and north. Both the Harley manuscript and a marginal note in the first edition of Hakluyt's chapter noted Drake was to reconnoitre for the entrance to the North-West Passage. Sailing from Guatulco, Drake took a course 800 leagues west, out to sea to catch the clockwise gyre that would swing them north. It is important to note that the prevailing wind along the coast was toward the south, which meant Drake could not navigate directly north along the coast to California to reach the unclaimed land beyond Spain's border of New Spain. The chapter records that Drake approached land at 42 degrees latitude, and that he then sailed south to where he found the fair bay at approximately 38 degrees north, near present-day San Francisco, on or around 17 June 1579.³⁰ The manuscript describes Drake's movements quite differently:

... sailing northwards till he came to 48. gr. [48 degrees north] of the septentrional latitude, still finding a very large sea trending toward the north, but being afraid to spend long time in seeking for the strait [the entrance to the North-West Passage], he turned back again, still keeping along the coast as near land as he might, until he came to 44. Gr [44 degrees north], and then found a harbour for his ship, where he grounded his ship to trim her...³¹

Based on the understanding that Hakluyt's draft accurately depicts Drake's movements, Drake would have sighted land at around Cape Flattery, on the north-west tip of the state of Washington, and sailed south to the central Oregon coast. The expedition first sailed into what they called a 'bad bay', perhaps Nehalem Bay, which did not meet the

27. Snow 2023.

28. Darby 2023.

29. Fuller 2007, 40.

30. Vaux 1854, 115. 'The Course ...', reprinted in Vaux, appendix v, 221.

31. BL, Harley MS 280, 87v.

requirements for careening the *Golden Hinde*, and continued a few degrees south to where they found the fair bay.

According to Hakluyt's chapter, Drake left the west coast on 23 July; in contrast, the draft manuscript related he and his crew left in the latter part of August.³² This is another point in favour of the manuscript's legitimacy, since an August departure seems more likely to be accurate. The sailing directions Drake had captured from the Spanish warned that it was dangerous to arrive in the western Pacific during the typhoon season, which begins in June and lasts until October. Spanish sailing directions indicated that, sailing westbound, the crossing would take two to three months and sometimes four. Hakluyt's published account related that after they left the west coast, they did not see land until the latter end of September. However, the draft manuscript account said the expedition sighted land at the latter end of November, well out of typhoon season. Given the risks, it is unlikely Drake would have jeopardised the expedition by sailing to the East Indies during typhoon season. The dates indicated in Hakluyt's draft suggest that they remained at their sheltered bay for nine to ten weeks, and that the Pacific crossing took approximately three months. It seems that not only were the latitudes of Drake's west coast locations misrepresented in the published account, but that the timeline of his movements was also altered.

It is improbable that the shifting of latitudes in the chapter was the result of scribal or typographical error. As a piece of strategic misinformation, changing the latitudes effectively allowed England, under the geopolitical conventions of the late sixteenth century, to claim all uncharted territory north of Spain's colonial boundary in New Spain. Alongside the altered latitudes, the dates and locations of Drake's movements in the Pacific were also deliberately modified, producing a chronology that obscured the expedition's true course along the northern coast.

The higher latitudes recorded in the draft manuscript are, moreover, corroborated by independent first-hand testimony from members of Drake's crew. John Drake, the cousin and cabin boy, provided two depositions to his Spanish captors after being taken prisoner during Captain Edward Fenton's subsequent expedition, which had been intended to revisit the American west coast. In his testimony, John Drake reported that the 1579 voyage had reached 48 degrees north, where the crew encountered cold weather, snow-capped mountains and a region of islands.³³ These geographical details correspond closely to the perpetually snow-covered Olympic Mountains and the San Juan Islands east of Cape Flattery – features distinctive to the Pacific north-west at that latitude, none of which are features found on the northern coast of California.

ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE FOR A MORE NORTHERLY LANDING

Between 1929 and 1934, historian and geographer E G R Taylor published a series of articles presenting evidence about Sir Francis Drake's 1579 landfall that challenged the dominant paradigm that Drake landed in a bay on the California coast.³⁴ Taylor found a note in the diary of Richard Madox, chaplain on Fenton's voyage. It was an incidental remark that Drake reached 48 degrees north on the west coast. As Taylor observed, there was 'no possible reason for any falsification of the facts in a shipboard discussion, or in a

32. Harley manuscript transcription in Vaux 1854, 184.

33. Nuttall 1912, 50.

34. Taylor 1929, 1930, 1934a, 1934b.

diary jotting meant for the writer's eye alone'.³⁵ This unguarded testimony reinforces the authenticity of the higher latitudes in the Harley manuscript.

Among the most compelling evidence Taylor followed up on was the fact that Drake and his men recorded seven indigenous vocabulary words or phrases spoken by the people at the fair bay. Taylor showed the vocabulary list to a linguist from the University of California at Berkeley, who suggested that the words were possibly Chinookan words, the language of people who lived at the mouth of the Columbia River, now the boundary between the states of Oregon and Washington.³⁶ Linguist John Lyon conducted an assessment of the vocabulary list in 2016, and found good sound and meaning matches for three of the vocabulary words in the trade jargon known as Chinook Jargon, a trade language that was spoken among the indigenous people of the whole north-west coast cultural area, but not along the central California coastline.³⁷

Subsequently, in my comparison of the vocabulary words to languages spoken by indigenous peoples on the Oregon coast, I found fair to good sound and meaning matches for all of the seven words and phrases.³⁸ In addition, I compared the ethnohistoric descriptions made by Drake and his men with ethnographic accounts of indigenous people from the north-west coast and with accounts of those of the central California coastline. I determined that the various contemporary accounts were more likely describing groups from the north-west coast cultural area, rather than the Miwok or Pomo people of California, based on the indigenous architecture, basketry, cosmology, regalia and foods, as well as the flora and fauna described in the contemporary accounts.³⁹

Taylor's analysis was supported by cartographic and textual data, and her work began to change the dominant paradigm that Drake and his crew aboard the *Golden Hinde* had spent the summer of 1579 on the central California coast. Taylor's theory that Drake reached more northerly latitudes was eclipsed in 1937 with the sensational 'discovery' of an artefact purported to be Drake's Plate of Brass that was found on a hillside overlooking San Francisco Bay. As noted above, the artefact in question was a metal plate allegedly left by the explorer to mark his claim of Nova Albion. Coming on the heels of Taylor's findings, the timing of this discovery was not likely a coincidence. The Plate of Brass was championed by the eminent historian Herbert E Bolton, then director of the Bancroft Library at the University of California at Berkeley. Bolton declared the plate to be tangible proof of Drake's Californian landing, and disparaged Taylor's theory.⁴⁰ Bolton's endorsement was authoritative, and the object was swiftly enshrined as one of California's foundational relics.

The Plate of Brass was conclusively exposed as a forgery in 1977, yet by then the earlier scholarship proposing a north-west coast landfall for Drake had long faded from academic memory. My subsequent research in 2019 identified compelling evidence that Bolton himself was almost certainly responsible for the creation of the plate, a hoax motivated in part for money, but also to keep Drake in California. Further corroboration emerged in 2025, when newly uncovered archival material strengthened the case that Bolton not only initiated the Drake plate hoax, but also played a significant role in fabricating another controversial artefact: the so-called Chowan River Dare Stone.⁴¹

35. Taylor 1932, 360–9.

36. Ibid, 364–5. See also Darby 2021.

37. Lyon 2016.

38. Darby 2021.

39. Darby 2019, chs 15–18.

40. Bolton 1937, 14.

41. Darby 2025.

THE CHINESE PORCELAIN SHERDS FOUND AT DRAKES BAY, CALIFORNIA

In the 1960s archaeologists began looking for additional evidence besides the Plate of Brass to support the premise that Drake and his crew landed along the coast of California. During excavation in middens at Drakes Bay, researchers recovered a collection of historic artefacts. These included blue-and-white Chinese porcelain sherds from wares packed in Manila that had originated from various Chinese manufacturing centres, including Zhangzhou and Jingdezhen as well as 'odd lots or single vessels that were in stock from any source in the western Pacific trades'.⁴² Other artefacts in the middens included iron spikes, a pig mandible, a Japanese sake cup and Spanish colonial terracotta sherds from large jars and vessels. These artefacts were spread out at all depths in the middens. They found no 'Drake horizon' or stratigraphic context could be distinguished from the artefacts attributed to the *San Agustín* shipwreck that wrecked in November of 1595.

By 1977, with the loss of the Plate of Brass as evidence, members of the Drake Navigators Guild, who promoted Drakes Bay as the landing place, were left with no identifiable physical evidence of Drake's presence. The problem for these advocates was that if any artefacts existed from Drake's visit they would be commingled with the artefacts from the *San Agustín* shipwreck.

In 1981, marine historian Edward Von der Porten, of the Drake Navigators Guild, and Asian art historian Clarence Shangraw followed up on the 1972 study, and collaborated on an analysis of porcelain sherds recovered from Drakes Bay and Point Reyes. They postulated that they could identify attributes they could use to distinguish any Chinese porcelains Drake might have left from the porcelains that belonged to the *San Agustín* collections. Their analysis was ambitious, and ignored the testimony of the shipwrecked captain, Sebastião Rodríguez Cermeño, who had reported that the indigenous people in Drakes Bay possessed no articles of European manufacture. It is reported that Drake had given cloth, clothing and glass beads, and perhaps even porcelain vessels, to the local residents in the location where he landed: Cermeño, in contrast, found no trace of Europeans having previously been there and that the indigenous people had looked on Cermeño and the members of his crew with 'much wonderment in seeing people never before seen by them'.⁴³

In Von der Porten and Shangraw's unpublished report for Santa Rosa Junior College and the Drake Navigators Guild, they laid out their essential premise: in the summer of 1579 Drake gave the indigenous people porcelain wares from four crates he had seized from a merchant ship. Over time, some of these wares were broken and the resulting sherds were deposited into middens; such sherds would have maintained their sharp edges. The researchers proposed that, in contrast, sherds found on the beach would be from the porcelains in the *San Agustín* shipwrecked cargo and these sherds would be water worn and lacking the sharp breaks found on sherds that were discovered in the middens. Three other assumptions of the 1981 study were that the Chinese wares were manufactured within a year or two of when they were shipped from Manila, and that the artists painting design motifs in the myriad potteries would be consistent in the designs, and that these designs would be temporally diagnostic.

42. Von der Porten 1972, 5.

43. Wagner 1924, 14.

In their 1981 report they asserted that seventy-seven blue-and-white porcelain sherds out of the total collection of 235 sherds could be confidently associated with Drake's cargo because they determined they were from the 'earliest part of the reign of Wan-Li, that is, the beginning of the fourth quarter of the sixteenth century'.⁴⁴ Their methodology relied primarily on distinguishing stylistic motifs that they believed were executed more precisely on earlier, higher-quality wares, which they attributed to Drake's landing, versus less precisely painted motifs on later wares of purportedly inferior quality that they believed belonged to the *San Agustín* shipwrecked cargo. Von der Porten and Shangraw argued that the sherds ascribed to Drake exhibited marginally more refined renderings of traditional Chinese decorative motifs. They grounded this claim in the assumption that newly introduced designs were initially painted with greater precision, with workmanship declining as production increased.

When a new design or decorative idiom was first used, it was painted with precision, but after a while, because the wares were hand-worked and produced in quantity, the application tended to become casual because the task became boringly repetitious.⁴⁵

This interpretive framework is tenuous and rests on a speculative correlation between stylistic precision and chronological primacy practised over a wide geographic area. The sherds that the researchers attributed to Drake's cargo consisted of high-quality Kraak wares ($n = 57$), a few provincial Fukien wares ($n = 13$) and four Ching-te Chen sherds that were not Kraak ware, including a tiny cup and a fragment from a phoenix bowl. Their analysis omits the identification and a discussion of the other four sherds in their count of seventy-seven sherds that they attribute to Drake's cargo. The phoenix bowl was described in their analysis as having a phoenix 'deftly painted in a rich violet-blue', which they noted was a colour associated with wares manufactured between 1522 and 1566 (fig 3).⁴⁶ The provincial Fukien wares were limited to '13 small bowls with sprays-of-foliage decorations and a few whose decoration is unknown' (fig 4).⁴⁷

Most of the quality Kraak wares that Von der Porten and Shangraw ascribed to Drake's cargo originated from kilns in Ching-te Chen (modern Jingdezhen), which was a centre of high-quality porcelain manufacturing. In addition, they found that fifty-six of the water-worn sherds that they attributed to the later shipwreck were also Kraak ware derived from Ching-te Chen; however, they dismissed these examples on the grounds that they considered them of lower quality, probably later in date and 'usually from Fukien kilns near Ching-te Chen rather than from the city itself'.⁴⁸ The researchers acknowledged the presence of several high-quality, water-worn sherds from two small Kraak ware Ching-te Chen bowls that had clearly washed out of the *San Agustín* wreck, although they treated these items as anomalous 'outliers', suggesting merely that high-quality Ching-te Chen ware 'was still reaching the Manila trade when the *San Agustín* wrecked'.⁴⁹ The presence of

44. Shangraw and Von Der Porten 1981, 73.

45. Ibid, 17.

46. Ibid, 62.

47. Ibid, 74.

48. Ibid, 73.

49. Ibid.



Fig 3. Porcelain sherd described as a phoenix motif bowl fragment, Shangraw and Von der Porten 1981, 62, 74. NPS Type VII, Sample 1. *Photograph:* reproduced courtesy of NPS.



Fig 4. Bowl fragment, described as provincial Fukien Type VII, Sample 3, attributed to Drake's cargo by Shangraw and Vonder Porten, 1981, 43, 74. *Photograph:* reproduced courtesy of NPS.

these pieces in the shipwreck assemblage effectively undermines the qualitative distinction that the researchers asserted existed between the two assemblages.

The replication of Von der Porten and Shangraw's methodology and findings has proved impossible. Subsequent scholars have raised concerns about this analysis. In 2008, archaeologist Jessica Lally demonstrated that the reference literature available in 1981 for dating Chinese porcelain was insufficiently precise: attributing a sherd to a sixteen-year window was unrealistic given that typologies at the time typically relied on broad chronological categories such as early, middle or late seventeenth century. As Lally observed, 'resources contradicted one another, not only using different date ranges for attributes and types, but also a lack of standardisation of terms'.⁵⁰

Despite these methodological limitations, Von der Porten and other members of the Drake Navigators Guild relied heavily on the 1981 porcelain analysis when promoting the Drakes Bay Historic Landmark Nomination in 2010. To their credit, the archaeologists at the National Park Service (NPS) ultimately removed the porcelain assemblage from consideration, recognising that the evidence was insufficient.⁵¹

In light of the significance of the historical question at stake, a more rigorous analysis was clearly warranted. Such an analysis was undertaken in 2011 by University of California, Berkeley archaeologist Matt Russell, who re-examined the porcelain assemblage for his doctoral dissertation. Russell rejected the assertion that any sherds could be attributed to Drake's cargo, concluding instead 'that the entire collection of sixteenth-century Chinese porcelain can be attributed to a single source ... the 1595 *San Agustín* shipwreck'.⁵²

The Drake Navigators Guild continues to assert that the porcelain sherds are from Drake's cargo, and that these artefacts are evidence of Drake's presence in Drakes Bay. This group has played a central role in shaping and maintaining the dominant public narrative surrounding Drake's landing, including through editorial influence on Wikipedia and affiliated online platforms. Some of these sherds have been displayed at Buckland Abbey. The NPS designated Drakes Bay a National Historic Landmark in 2012 with a qualified statement that Drakes Bay was the 'most likely' location of Drake's landing. Immediately after the announcement, the Drake Navigators Guild issued a press release claiming that this recognition 'formally acknowledged Francis Drake's landing site at Drake's Cove in 1579', which was misleading at best.

NPS archaeologist Jessica Siebert further clarified that the site's designation of national significance derives primarily from the presence of the Spanish shipwreck and associated indigenous archaeological sites, noting that 'the national significance of this property as articulated in the documentation does not rest on Sir Francis Drake'.⁵³ Importantly, the National Historic Landmark nomination was written prior to my published work that found that the Harley manuscript related Drake's true movements on the west coast. The NPS has thus far refrained from amending the record, or from publicly addressing misleading or inaccurate claims disseminated in print and broadcast media.

In 2014 an XRF trace element analysis of twenty-seven of the Chinese porcelain sherds from Drakes Bay and Point Reyes was conducted. The purpose of the XRF testing was to

50. Lally 2008, 82.

51. National Park Service [nd](#).

52. Russell 2011, 265.

53. Darby 2019, 181.

determine whether trace element spectra could distinguish between the porcelains identified in 1981 and attributed to be from Drake's cargo at the time and the sherds known to be from the *San Agustín* collections. This analysis was conducted by Marco Meniketti, with some assistance from Edward Von der Porten, co-author of the 1981 study. In his discussion of the so-called Drake materials, Meniketti noted that 'ceramics from the wrecked *San Agustín* and the cargo of Francis Drake are archaeologically commingled and separated through stylistic assessments'.⁵⁴ With several qualifications about the XRF process, the author said he found minor differences between the alleged Drake sherds and sherds from the *San Agustín* along several indices. In 2023 Meniketti revisited this study in a paper presented at the eighty-eighth annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in Portland, Oregon. The author noted in the abstract: 'This paper presents a sober examination of the controversy [of where Drake landed] and presents a comparative study of ceramics from Pt. Reyes, California, thought to have been part of Drake's plundered cargo of Chinese porcelains, which he abandoned ashore.'⁵⁵

The Chinese porcelain sherds also figured prominently in another recent attempt to resolve the controversy, in a study presented at the 2024 meetings of the Society for Historical Archaeology in Oakland, California. At a midden deposit in Drakes Bay, researchers discovered a pig mandible that was found in association with the porcelain sherds, prompting an effort to determine whether the faunal remains could be attributed to Drake's 1579 encampment or to Cermeño's *San Agustín* shipwreck of 1595. The investigators proposed that AMS radiocarbon dating, stable isotope analysis and mitochondrial DNA testing might distinguish between an Asian pig, which would support attribution to the *San Agustín*, and a European pig, which would be evidence suggesting the pig was from Drake's cargo of plunder as he made his way north from South America. Although results remain pending, the abstract of the preliminary findings presented at the 2024 meeting indicates that the pig remains were not associated with Drake:

The search for the precise landing spot of Sir Francis Drake on the western coast of North America has lasted centuries. The discovery of sixteenth-century Ming Dynasty porcelain and other European artifacts located at Point Reyes National Seashore has long been at the center of the 'Drakes Bay' controversy. The debate revolves around whether these materials are the result of Drake's careening of the *Golden Hind* in 1579 or the 1595 wreck of a Manila galleon captained by Sebastian Rodríguez Cermeño. This paper presents new archaeometric data derived from unique faunal remains from [archaeological site number] CA-MRN-308, a site located at Pt. Reyes. AMS radiocarbon dating, stable isotopic, and mtDNA analysis of 16th-century pig remains suggest it was likely of Asian/Philippine origin, and thus more likely arrived with Cermeño than with Drake.⁵⁶

My research on Sir Francis Drake's activities along the west coast of North America has been the subject of critique from several scholars.⁵⁷

54. Meniketti 2014, 306.

55. Meniketti 2023.

56. Fitzgerald *et al* 2024.

57. For example, Meniketti 2023; Lawler 2019, 9.

SOME EVIDENCE IN OREGON

Until recently, archaeologists working in Oregon and Washington had not been looking for evidence of Drake's landing in archaeological sites on the coast, and any historic artefacts found in such sites were assigned to the maritime fur trade era. An informal survey of archaeological collections found that there are two artefacts on the Oregon coast that may be evidence of Drake's summer landing, but these are both problematic. The first artefact is an English silver shilling dating from *c* 1560, which was found on the beach at Nehalem Bay after a storm in 1962. Since the coin was not found in a dated archaeological context, the evidence is only circumstantial that it could have arrived with Drake. The second artefact is an iron wedge, or perhaps a caulking tool, that was found in 1973 by archaeologists from Oregon State University, who excavated it from an archaeological site near Yachats, a town on the central Oregon coast situated at a latitude of 44 degrees 18 minutes north.⁵⁸ The artefact was found about seventy centimetres below the ground surface, and had been cached in a ten-centimetre-deep pit lying below a shell midden. The organic material that was recovered from the same stratigraphic context as the wedge was radiocarbon dated, and had a median radiocarbon age of *c* AD 1560 at a two sigma-error range AD 1465–1650 (95 per cent confidence). This artefact is now unfortunately lost and, apart from a poor photocopy of a photograph of the artefact and a brief mention in a master's thesis, there is no further record of it in the repository at Oregon State University.⁵⁹

To date, the precise location on the Oregon coast where Drake might have landed is unknown. In the 1950s and 1960s, Oregon author Stan Allyn proposed that Whale Cove, a horseshoe shaped cove located on the central Oregon coast at 44 degrees north, was Drake's port of Nova Albion.⁶⁰ This bay is a good fit for the bay depicted in two contemporary maps of the bay of Nova Albion, including an inset in the Hondius Broadside (fig 5).

The other contemporary map of the bay of Nova Albion was drawn by cartographer and explorer Robin Dudley, the illegitimate son of Sir Robert Dudley (1532–88) (fig 6). Dudley's manuscript charts are the draft versions of the maps that appeared in his published atlas, *Arcano del mare*, or *Secrets of the Sea*, his life's most important work; he began working on the atlas in *c* 1606 and it was published in Florence in 1646–7.⁶¹ The manuscript charts were drawn in preparation for making the final engravings for Dudley's atlas and are in the collection of the Bavarian State Library in Munich, Germany.⁶² One of the depictions of the bay of Nova Albion is in a hand-drawn map of the west coast of North America. Dudley had in his collection a set of maps to which he was referring as he drew the coastline in pencil and then in ink onto his lined paper. What is remarkable about this map is it is the only map that reports the depths of Drake's fair bay in fathoms, and they happen to be a precise match for the depths of Whale Cove (fig 6).

Dudley said he had received his information from Drake himself, and this was a likely case. Dudley had inherited maps and papers from his father, Sir Robert Dudley, who was one of Drake's sponsors on the voyage of circumnavigation. By 1594, when Robin Dudley

58. Barner 1981, 64.

59. Ibid, 67.

60. White 2021.

61. Hickey 2021, 178–81

62. BSB, Robert Dudley MS.

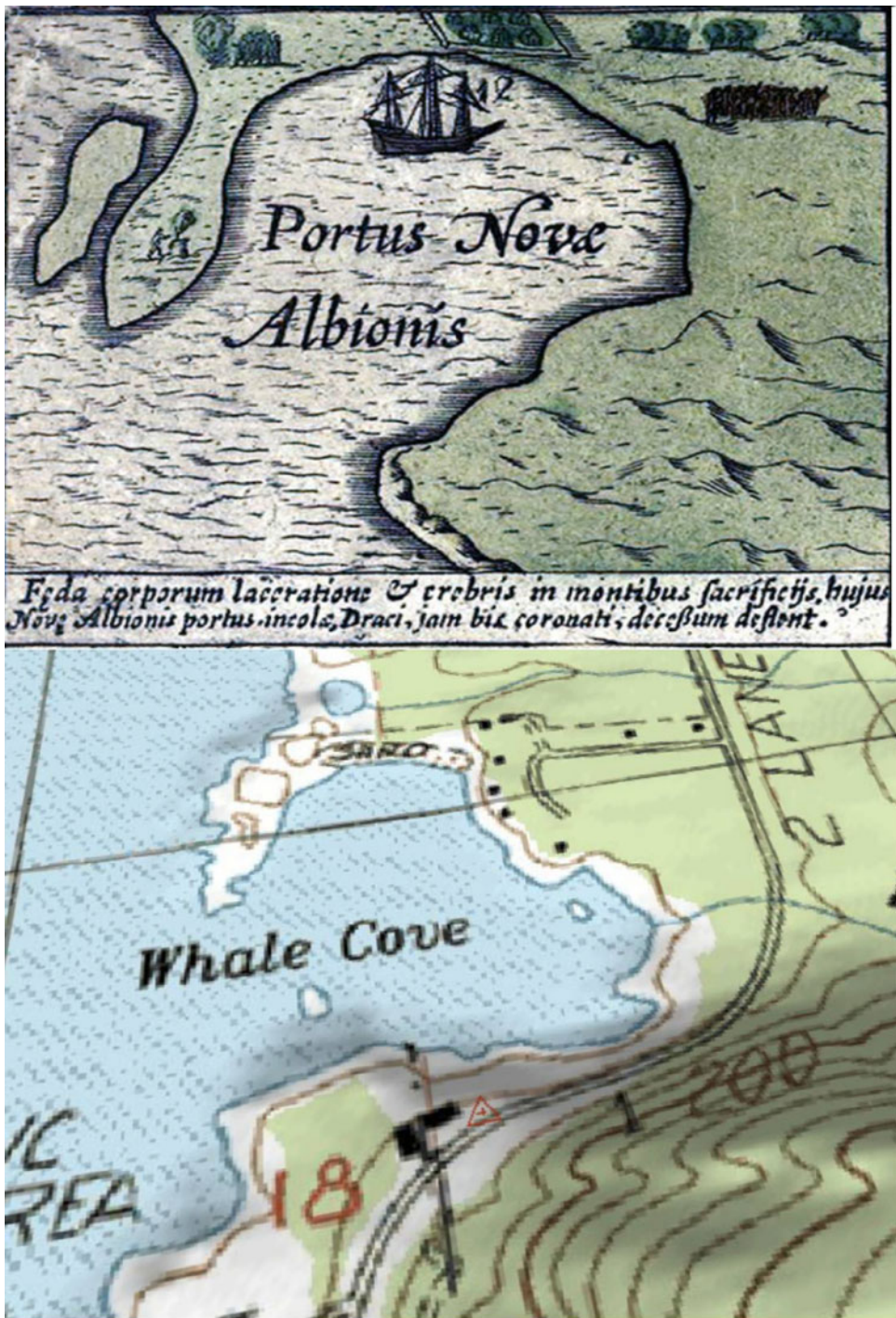


Fig 5. A comparison of Whale Cove with the Portus Nova Albion inset on Drake's Broadside map, Hondius (c 1595). Image: author.

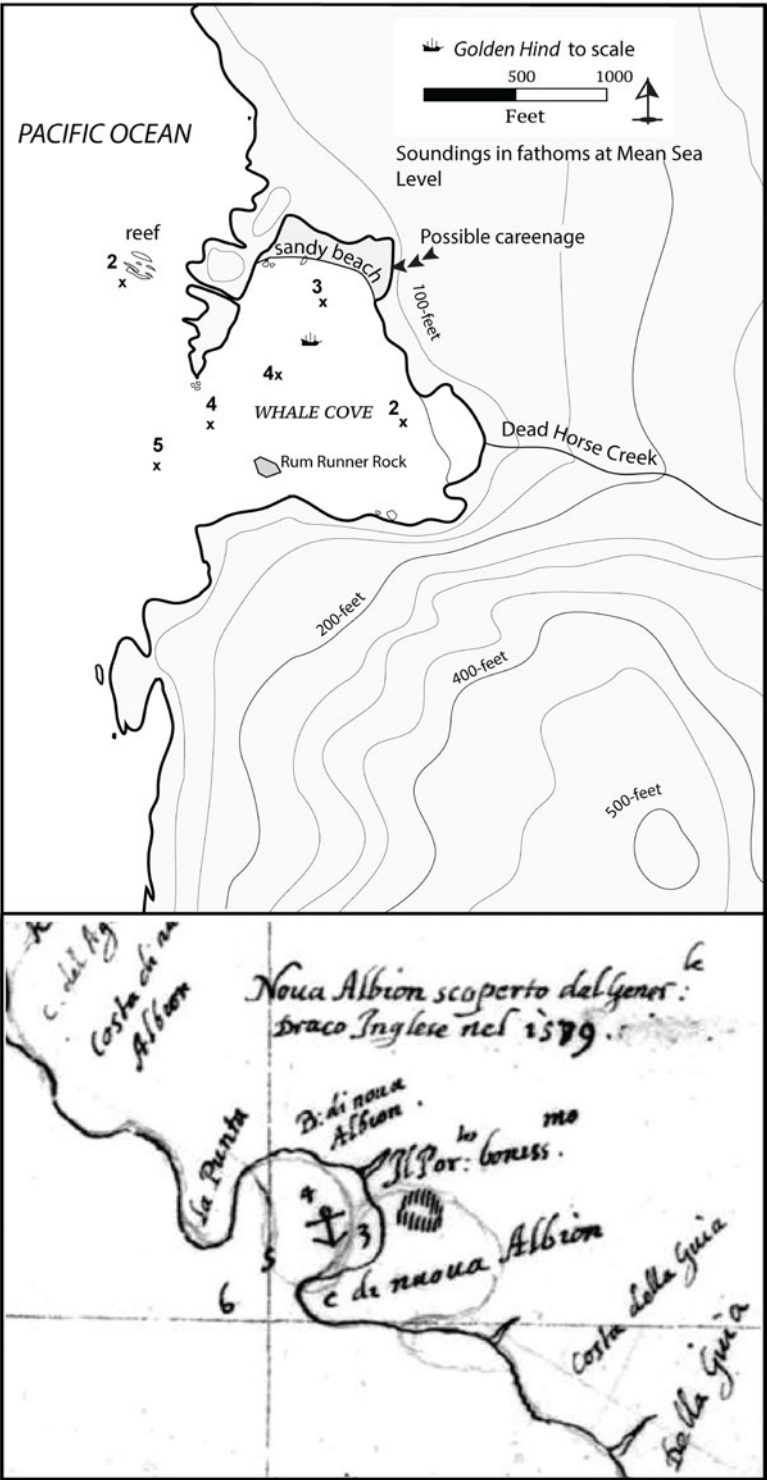


Fig 6. Comparison of the shape, depth and geography of Whale Cove with Robert Dudley's manuscript map 85. Image: author.

was only twenty years old and an experienced navigator, he asked Queen Elizabeth for permission to undertake his own voyage to the Pacific to 'follow in Drake's and Cavendish's wake'.⁶³ By the summer he had acquired ships and men, charts and rutters, and was ready to sail. It is likely he had copies of Drake's own charts. However, in October of that year Elizabeth revoked her permission for him to sail to the South Sea and instead proposed that he go to the West Indies with Sir Walter Raleigh.⁶⁴

Besides Whale Cove, there are several bays and harbours in the vicinity of 44 degrees north that may be where Drake landed on the Oregon coast, and further research, another chance find and/or archaeological investigations may eventually resolve this enduring question.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the analysis of the Chinese porcelain sherds found at Drakes Bay, California, are of little evidentiary value in determining the location of Sir Francis Drake's summer anchorage of 1579. Paradigms are hard to shift, and Drake has been an iconographic figure in California since the Gold Rush in 1849. The swashbuckling story of Drake, his golden hoard and his adventures resonated with Californians, and they embraced Drake as the golden son of the Golden State. The significance of the six-degree ruse is not so much about where Drake landed, but more about how the falsified claim of Nova Albion bolstered England's position, and its eventual claim to most of North America. The secrets long buried in the Harleian manuscript include the latitudes of the northernmost limit of Drake's voyage in the Pacific, and of the 'fair and good bay' where Drake and his crew spent most of the summer of 1579. The manuscript confirmed that Drake had reconnoitred for a possible entrance to the North-West Passage, and that he was camped on the coast until the latter part of August, rather than departing on 23 July, as reported in Hakluyt's chapter. It appears that the latitudes of Drake's movements in the official accounts were a ruse to claim as much territory as possible for England, leaving no gap between the border of New Spain and England's new possession. This would explain why Queen Elizabeth guarded the journals and true charts made on the voyage: Queen Elizabeth was sewing the fox's skin to the lion's.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The invaluable support of Charles Cline, and of all of my colleagues in the Department of Anthropology at Portland State University, is greatly appreciated. My gratitude also goes out to Dean Snow for his invaluable expertise and insights on an unnamed early modern scribe in Hakluyt's offices. I appreciate the skill of Chris Knutson for his careful editing. I appreciate the staff help that was given to me at the British Library, London; the Bavarian State Library, Munich, Germany; the Henry E Huntington Library, San Marino, California; the Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California; and the Oregon Historical Society, Portland, Oregon.

63. Ibid, 94.

64. Ibid, 95.

ABBREVIATIONS AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbreviations

AMS	accelerator mass spectrometry radiocarbon dating
BL	British Library, London
BSB	Bavarian State Library, Munich, Germany
NPS	National Park Service, United States
USLC	United States Library of Congress, Washington DC
XRF	X-ray fluorescence

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- BL, Cotton mss, Otho, E viii
- BL, Harley ms 280, fols 81–90
- USLC, Kraus Collection, letter, December 12, 1580, 'Autograph letter signed, in Latin. To Abraham Ortelius', *Library of Congress*, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021699424> (accessed 6 Apr 2026)

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