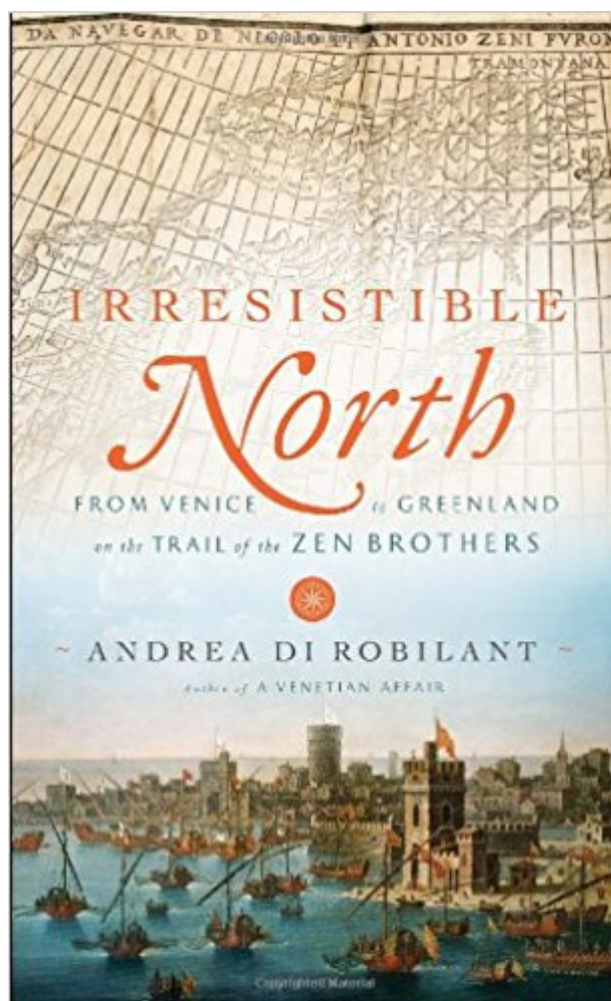


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# Irresistible North: From Venice To Greenland On The Trail Of The Zen Brothers



## 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Captivating. . . . Di Robilant cleverly weaves an original work of history and a travel book into one fascinating tale of mystery, adventure and intrigue.” —*Providence Journal* “Di Robilant is a

fine, solid researcher and a thoughtful, conscientious interpreter.â • â "The New York Times Book Review"â • â "Di Robilant has a flair for the evocative detail. . . . His willingness to travel to places far off the beaten path enlivens his account, giving it forward momentum.â • â "Los Angeles Times"â • â "While historians and cartographers will continue their challenges, readers will be intrigued and perhaps convinced by this very readable account.â • â "The Washington Times

Andrea di Robilant was born in Italy and educated at Columbia University, where he specialized in international affairs. He is the author of two previous books, *A Venetian Affair* and *Lucia: A Venetian Life in the Age of Napoleon*. He currently lives in Rome with his wife and two sons.

Very interesting book.

Excellent book. A non-fiction research narrated as intriguing fiction. Great in divulging a very unknown story to a wider audience.

A solid combination of historical research and personal travelogue The author analyzes and retraces the likely route of 14th century Venetian merchants across the north Atlantic.

Fun book. I enjoyed the story of the zen brothers journey. Not an academic book. Would recommend for people intredted in history of maps or travel

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). Di Robilant meticulously unravels this extremely strange and complicated story: not only the story itself, which is intriguing enough, but the story of the story, which was a hugely influential book when it was first published and for centuries later (in fact, it figures in di Robilant's previous book "Lucia in the Age of Napoleon" when his heroine's son is constantly pestering his mother to send him a copy of this Zen book that he is obsessed with), until it was denounced as "a tissue of fiction" in the 1835 spring edition of the Royal Geographical Society journal that destroyed the reputation of the Zens. Di Robilant seems to take this almost personally, and rises to the unenviable challenge of defending the Zens' tattered reputation from calumny and almost universal derision from every scholarly source. The magnificent achievement here is that, although no detail is left out, it is a light-hearted book, and fun and amusing to read. It is almost like a thriller, which one cannot put down because, unlike history which one already knows, at least vaguely, here there is no knowing how it is all going to turn out. There is much discussion of the elusive and intriguing character, Zichmni, assumed to be the Scottish knight Henry Sinclair, Earl of Orkney and vassal to the King of Norway, with whom di Robilant believes the Zen brothers joined forces in their explorations and adventures. Di Robilant travels himself to these remote places, giving the sense that now, as ever, explorers from Venice are thrilled to discover that there are other remote and improbable islands in the world which no one knows much about. A Venetian who ventures to these places cannot fail to find kindred spirits. And there is also something apt in the sense that emerges, which is what ultimately gives the whole Zen story credence, that exploration is not primarily about arriving at an intended goal, and from a certain perspective can be considered completely pointless. This book is the perfect illustration of the aphorism that the point of a journey is not to arrive, but the journey itself.

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. If the Zen's did follow on after the Norseman, and continue onto the West it still wouldn't make the discoveries by Columbus any less remarkable. (BTW, for those who like esoteric instances, Michael Dibdin wrote a series of mysteries set in Italy in the 1980s & 1990s, whose protagonist was a Venetian named Aurelio Zen who was supposed to be a descendant of this Zen family who are still famous in Venice.) Zeb Kantrowitz

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