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PALM BRIEF

Columbus and *Raphia taedigera*

The year 1992 saw, not surprisingly, a flurry of activity associated with the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the well known departure for the "Indies." There can be no doubt of the historical significance of the voyages of Columbus and the subsequent Hispanic invasions of the Americas that followed hot-foot upon his discoveries.

Whether the event merits coloration or commiseration depends principally on one's point of view and point of origin. Whatever, the publicity involved has also rekindled interest in the claims for transatlantic contact prior the year 1492. Much of the argument in support of earlier crossings is based on the Arabic and Iberian writings of the period and also the early sixteenth century records of the appearance in the Old World of crops indigenous to the New World. This movement took place with remarkable, and some would assert impossible, rapidity, if indeed it was post-Columbian (Tuley 1992).

For those not familiar with *Raphia* palms, the numerous species included in the genus are entirely confined to the African Continent with the one exception of *Raphia taedigera*. There are conflicting arguments as to the status of this species and, particularly, as to whether it is indigenous or introduced to the New World (Otedoh 1977). In the Americas, the plant occurs in two, relatively confined, geographically distinct populations, one in coastal Brazil and the other in the Panama/Nicaragua Isthmus. In Africa, there is a scattering of records for the West Coast between the Niger and Congo deltas. This palm is very similar indeed to the ubiquitous *R. vinifera* P. Beauv. of West Africa and might well be considered to fall within the normal range of variation found in that species or perhaps as a recognizable variety of it. How-

ever, as Otedoh points out, the mesocarp of both tends to be low in saponins (highly effective fish poisons found in some other members of the genus) and it is commonly eaten and used for oil in West Africa. He proposes that the fruit was probably employed in the provisioning of post-Columbian slave vessels and viable seed thus carried to the New World. This could well be the case, but if it were a regular feature, perhaps a more diffuse establishment pattern and a wider scatter of recorded sites would be anticipated. Also one would question the probity of the slave masters and their ruffian crews in making anything other than minimal arrangements for the provisioning of their cargo, as they would have looked upon it.

If, however, we consider the evidence for pre-Columbian Moorish expeditions across the Atlantic, the roles would be reversed. European Christian slaves ignorant of local foodstuffs would be manning the sweeps with Berber and Negro troops, familiar with such, forming part of the crew. In such circumstances, the likelihood of a whole range of African foodstuffs being selected to provision the journey is far more likely. Also, if these two-way crossings were to become a regular feature, then the prospect of deliberate planting of favored plants from either shore becomes a real possibility. Such a scenario would certainly extend the historical time frame for such movements and give greater credence to the "Introduction" school of thought.

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PAUL TULEY
28 Mountside
Guildford, Surrey
GU2 5JE, UK