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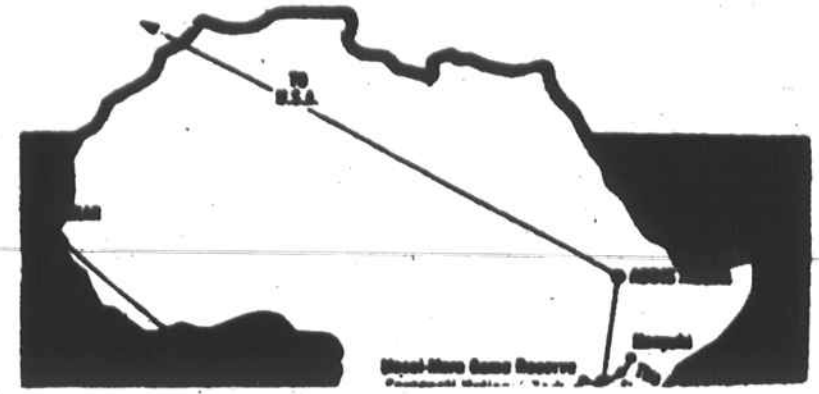
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## African Spotlight



## The Europeans Came

The voyages of discovery in the 15th and 16th centuries had their medieval precedents in the 10th and 11th centuries. After the barbarian invasions had paralyzed the Roman empire, a state of lethargy and economic stagnation pervaded the whole of western Europe. This opened an era known as the Middle Ages. Among the forces which finally stirred up the Europeans was the injection of vital energy into Europe by northern kingdoms of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. The consolidation of these three kingdoms, about 1050 was accompanied by waves of expansion and conquest. To the east the Northmen established a kingdom in Russia and reached Constantinople where they become a symbol of military power. To the south, they conquered Normandy in France and twice overran parts of England. Their descendants, the Normans, aided in the reconquest of Spain from the Moors, and established out-posts in North Africa. Westward, the Northmen subdued Ireland, discovered and colonized Iceland and Greenland. In the first decade of the 11th century, two Norwegians: Biarni Heriulfson and Leif Ericsson, on separate voyages, reached the shores of America somewhere between Labrador and Cape Cod. However subsequent voyages failed to achieve any measure of colonization.

Their voyages failed to open the new world yet their exploits were widely known. As pioneers in seafaring, shipbuilding, and colonization, they entered the main stream of European expansion. They were the first to build vessels which could safely ride the turbulent waters of the Atlantic as far as is known. There are many experts who believe that the Egyptians were the first to achieve this feat. However, the Norse conquests led to an expansion of trade which helped to dissolve the isolation which Western Europe had lived under and led to contact with other lands.

European pilgrimages to Palestine in the 12th and 13th centuries constituted a second factor that broke the shell of isolation. The armies of crusaders voyaging to Palestine gave a tremendous stimulus to the building of ships. Italian merchants from Genoa and Venice grew rich upon the profits of transporting and provisioning the warrior pilgrims. In Syria and Egypt, the crusaders saw Oriental spices, fine cloth, and precious stones. The merchandise which came from Arabia, India, Ceylon, China, and the spice Islands completely transformed the European life. Before 1100, living conditions had been extremely poor because the arts of preserving food were little known. The Europeans relished such Oriental spices as pepper, nutmeg, cinnamon, ginger, cloves, and mace. These seasonings made stale food more palatable. Other oriental products, included tapestries, diamonds, pearls from India, rubies from Ceylon, medicinal rhubarb, opium, the only drug then known which deadened pain, and chinaware. The regeneration of commerce and adventure were really stirred when Marco Polo wrote of his adventures in the Far East.

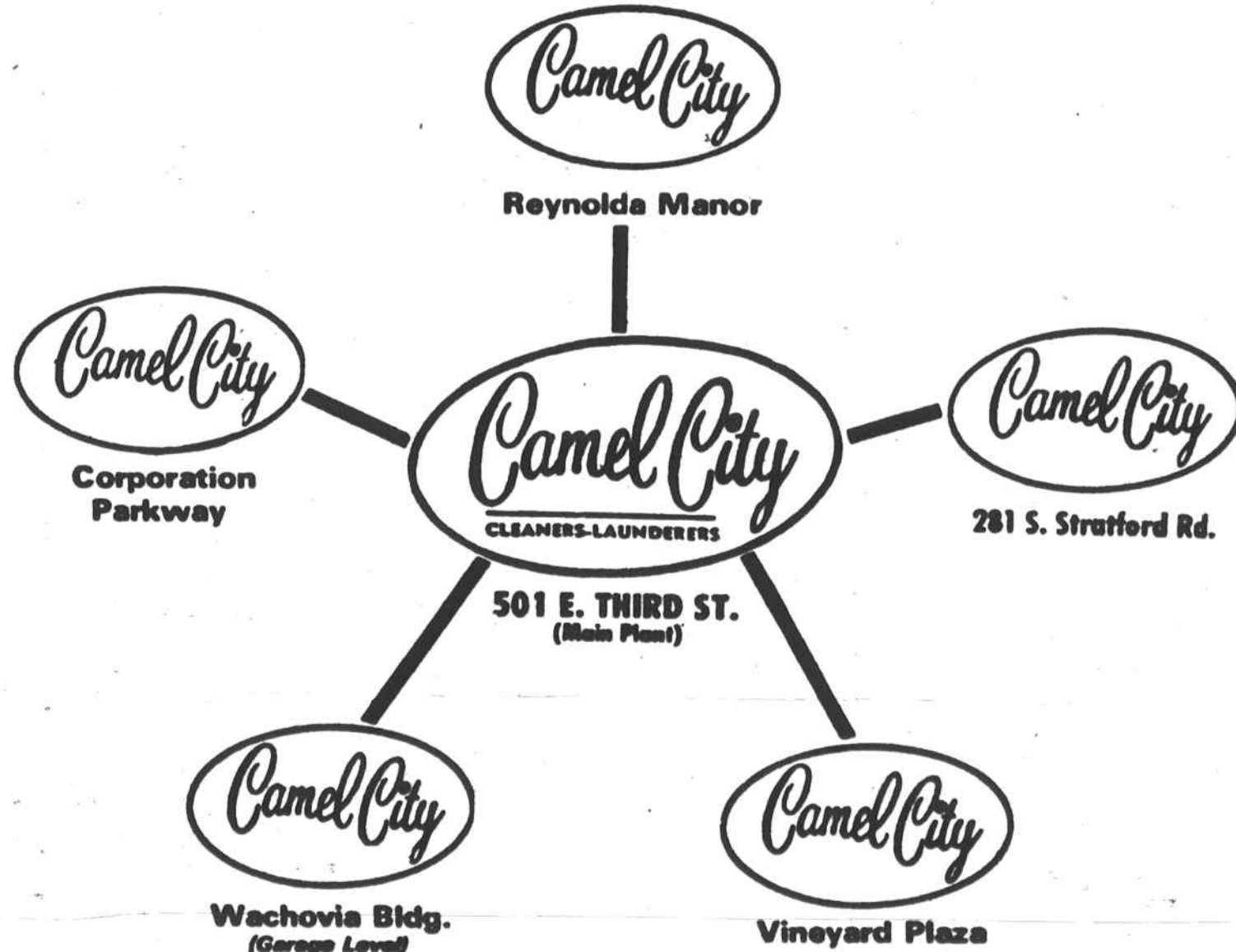
In addition to the tales about the Far East came rumors of strong lands of Abyssinia and Zanzibar and Madagascar with tales of negroes ivory, and gold.

The knowledge of Africa by the Europeans appears to have been richer in the classical era of the Roman civilization than it was during the Middle Ages. The Romans along with the Phoenicians (mixtures) knew the western coast of Africa as far as the Canary Islands which they called the "Fortunate Islands". All of this knowledge along with the records of chroniclers like Ibn Battuta, A Berber and Leo Africanus, a Moor from Granada in Spain stimulated greater interest in Africa.

Robena Egemonye

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