

# Antes de Colón: el mapa secreto

## Before Columbus: The secret map of America

by Demetrio Charalambous

The first maps of America have long constituted an enigma for researchers, who have still not satisfactorily explained how it is that they show the presence of lands that are supposed to still be undiscovered at the time that these same maps were published. These problems have until now been analyzed in isolated fashion, without it ever being suspected that they might be related one to another. Nonetheless, when a few years ago this writer discovered a fresh cartographic problem not covered by any previous investigator (the presence in an anonymous Spanish portolan chart of 1527 of the great unknown rivers of America)[1], I then understood that this enigma could be related to other American cartographic mysteries, identified by various authors in the maps of Nicolo Caveri and the anonymous "Cantino"[2], as well as in those of Martin Waldseemüller dating from 1507.[3]

I was in the situation of one who having discovered a lost piece of a puzzle, dedicates himself to finding the other pieces, discovered some time ago by people who could not imagine their respective functions; upon assembling the old and the new pieces, I was astounded at the magnitude of the resultant design. In effect, the premature representations of American geography present in these maps can be organized in a coherent figure that covers vast regions of the three Americas, not explored by any known navigators.

It was necessary to prove that all of the representations originated from one prototype, and my conclusion is that this prototype is pre-Columbian. I will now present the evidence to the reader, not in the sequence that I encountered it myself, but in a systematic manner, so as to facilitate the analysis. I shall begin with the premature representations of American geographical features found in the first maps of the New World, and then pass to the historical testimony.



Map of Nicolo Caveri showing the East coast of North America. Circa 1502

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The map of Nicolo Caveri presents the eastern coast of the present United States with its principal estuaries and bays, the Florida peninsula, the Gulf of Mexico, Yucatán and Honduras, all very well depicted. But the navigator who did the exploring is unknown, so that diverse hypotheses have been put forward to explain this incongruity, none of them been satisfactory:

1) That the coast represented is not that of North America, but of Asia, or a "duplication" of Cuba<sup>[4]</sup>. The fallacy is evident, as we can clearly distinguish the Mississippi delta correctly placed in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico, as well as, moving eastward, the bay of New Orleans, that of Mobile, the hook of the San Blas Cape drawn with surprising accuracy, the Appalachian Bay, and Tampa and Charlotte Harbors. Then, from Florida moving northward, there is the mouth of the Saint John's river, the Savannah River, Pamlico Sound, Cape Hatteras, and a wide aperture: the Chesapeake Bay. The coast rises to approximately 42° North.

The design of North America emerges correctly, as much in its general aspect as in its details. It is absurd, then, to suppose that a correct and detailed representation of North America may be the result of a mistaken attempt to depict Asia, or a hypothetical second Cuba.

It is helpful here to compare the sketch by Bartolomew Columbus<sup>[5]</sup>, which does in fact show Asia across from the Antilles, but in which are absent the peninsulas of the Yucatan and of Honduras, the mouth of the Mississippi, and the peninsula of Florida; rather, there is a blunt cape that may be easily recognized as that represented by Martín Behaim in his globe of 1492, at the extreme of Asia.

2) That Caveri was indeed depicting North America, which had been discovered by Américo Vespucci in a supposed journey in 1497.<sup>[6]</sup>

However, this hypothesis is unsupported for lack of documentation that any such journey ever took place.

In addition, Caveri's map of the coast of North America presents toponymy that is taken from Columbus' logbook, as demonstrated by the historian George Nunn,<sup>[v7]</sup> such that attributing this representation of America and her toponymy to Vespuccio may be definitively discarded.

The reader will ask then, was it Columbus who explored the east coast of North America from what is currently New York to Florida, and the Gulf of Mexico, recording the mouth of the Mississippi and the peninsula of Yucatan? Of course, Columbus never saw these coasts, so how can it be explained that Caveri included in his map of what is perceptibly North America, toponymy that Columbus used in his description of Cuba?

Here it may be suspected that Caveri copied North America from a prototype without toponymy, and, believing that this was the Tierra Firme of Cuba mentioned by Columbus,<sup>[8]</sup> applied the toponymy the Admiral had used in his description of Cuba.

Logically, the island of Cuba remained absent of names, and couldn't even be called Cuba, such that Caverio refers to the island as "Isabella", the same name Columbus used to baptize a small island in his first voyage.

The "islets" of the Gulf of Batabanó, in front of Cuba, suffered the same fate as the Cuban toponymy: Caveri transposed them to North America and the Gulf of Mexico, respectively.<sup>[9]</sup>

Thus, we are driven to conclude that Caveri derived his notable accuracy of the east coast and the Gulf, then unvisited by any recent European navigator, from an unknown prototype; the logbook of Columbus provided the toponymy for part of this region.<sup>[10]</sup>

American cartography offers further evidence of a secret prototype: the famous map of Martín Waldseemüller, published in 1507. In it may be seen the Northern Pacific Ocean, six years before its discovery by Vasco Núñez de Balboa in 1513. Until then, it was believed, by Columbus and others, that there was only one ocean between Europe and Asia: the Atlantic. The isthmus of Veragua, in Central America, lay between the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, as seen in the sketches attributed to Bartolomew Columbus, in 1506.<sup>[11]</sup>

Waldseemüller nonetheless presents the Pacific ocean separating Asia from America, which represents notable progress with respect to the conceptual notions of the great navigators of the period.

The map of Waldseemüller stores an even greater surprise: in it appears the general form of Central and South America, the former tapering progressively from Mexico (which no one had discovered yet!) to Panama, and the latter reaching its greatest point of east-west extension at the latitude of the Saint Augustin Cape, in Brazil, and then tapering southward, as in reality.





*Waldseemüller map showing the East coast of North America, Florida, the Gulf of Mexico, Yucatan and Honduras, all of that unknown yet to the Europeans. 1507.*

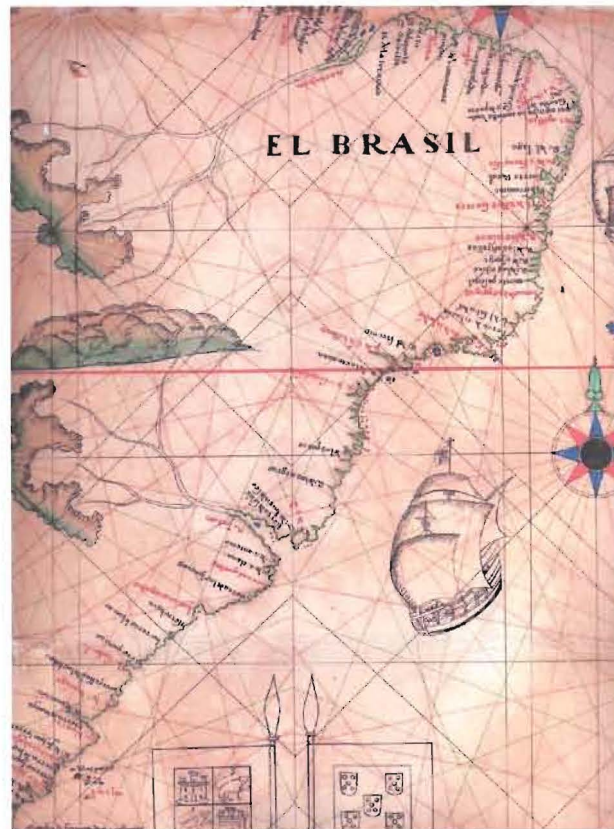
The German Cartographer designed this map according to a sketch by Américo Vesputio, as evidenced by the title of his work, "Universalis cosmographia secundum Ptolemaei traditionem et Americi Vespucii aliorumque lustrationes".<sup>[12]</sup>

It appears that Vesputio sent a sketched copy of the prototype, without interior geography, possibly because this superficial information was all that he was able to obtain in Lisbon.<sup>[13]</sup> Regarding State secrets, there are always different grades of confidentiality, and it may be supposed that Vesputio, as a foreigner, was not authorized to gain access to information bearing on the interior geography of lands corresponding to Spain. What he viewed was sufficient, nonetheless, for him to understand that the New World was an independent continent, separated from Asia by an ocean; it is this information, cleverly masked by the drawing of Caveri, that Vesputio disseminated in his letters, seeing it reflected in the planisphere of Waldseemüller.

Little by little the prototype continues to emerge, but until this time no more has been seen than external geographical contours; the interior geography remains obscure, waiting for someone to illuminate it in a chart of the Indies, which still lies in darkness.

Here I arrive at my own cartographic discovery. An anonymous map published by the royal Spanish cartographers in 1527, which is housed in the Ducal library of Weimar, shows the principal rivers of the American continent, including the Paraná, Paraguay, and Bermejo, the Amazon, complete with the great tributaries, the Madeira, Branco, Madre de Dios, Mamoré, and Purús, years before they were explored by the Spaniards.<sup>[14]</sup> (The first reports by Gaboto on the Paraná arrived in Spain in October of 1528, and the Amazon was first navigated by Francisco de Orellana in 1542).

In North America, a large unidentified river descends to the Chesapeake Bay. At first glance, the design seems to be unexplainable as no river with similar characteristics empties into the bay. However, the river's north-south orientation, the extension, and the two large tributaries also present, vividly suggest the Mississippi River and the Ohio and Missouri river tributaries.



*Map of Diego Ribero (detail), showing the unknown rivers of South America. 1527*

Three rivers to the west of this basin could represent Pánuco, Presas and Río Grande del Norte. Inasmuch as the east coast of North America on this map curves exaggeratedly to the east, it is possible that the cartographer mistook this section of the coast for a second Gulf of Mexico, erroneously situating the rivers there.<sup>[15]</sup> We might suppose that the cartographer copied the rivers from a prototype without toponymy, of Portuguese origin, and hence his error, in light of the absence of direct data from a mariner who had navigated the region (the rivers lack names).

The Portuguese origin of the prototype copied by the Spanish cartographers is unquestionably evidenced in the toponymy of the Paraná river: here it is called the "Jordam", the name given by the Portuguese to a small river to the north of Rio de Janeiro, and which appears displaced at 32° South on the map of Caverio. The Spanish, misled by the latitude, believed that the bay represented by Caverio was the River Plate, which is why they called "Jordam" the river depicted in the Portuguese prototype. Clearly, the map does not correspond to a navigation by a Spanish mariner, as the cartographers would not have referred to the Paraná river with a Portuguese name that corresponded to a river in Brazil. They would have referred to it as the Paraná (an indian name) or with a Spanish name, as they did later.

The map also shows a series of mountain chains, which we identify as the Andean foothills called "La Montaña" in the Amazon, and further to the south, the central Bolivia-Argentine range, continuing through the Sierra de Ancasti until the sierras of Córdoba and San Luis, as well as the heights of the northern Chaco and the Sierra de Maracajú, in the Mato Grosso do Sul.

As in the case of the rivers, the representation is selective, as if they had wanted to show certain navigable passages and the mountains to which these rivers led, to the exclusion of all other geographic features, important though they may have been.

Comparing this map of Weimar (1527) with others produced by the royal cartographers of Spain from the same period, it is apparent that the hydrography and the orography is apocryphal. The Spanish map known as "Planisferio Salviati", of 1527, produced by the same team of royal cartographers, does not present any of these rivers and mountains.





*Map of Diego Ribero, without the apocryphal rivers. 1527*

Another map of the series, produced by Diego Ribero in 1529, neither shows the Amazon nor the boreal river that we supposed to be the Mississippi, and in place of the apocryphal drawing of the Paraná, it presents a different view of this hydrographic basin, according to information brought back on a ship of Cabot who had recently returned to Seville. Indeed, here the river is called the "Gran Río de Paraná" and it is explained that "now Sebastián Cabot is there, and has built a fortress..." etc.

It is evident, then, that the representation of the great American rivers in the map of Weimar is the product of apocryphal information of Portuguese origin. But we have seen that the maps of Caverio and Waldseemüller, which also show American geographical features that were unknown in their time, were copied from a Portuguese prototype as well. Thus, it is possible to conclude that the different apocryphal elements present in these maps derive from the same American prototype which was in the hands of the Portuguese King since before 1502.

This conclusion is confirmed by documents which explicitly refer to a pre-Columbian map of America. The first of these documents is the letter written in the year 1500 by Mestre Joao, astronomer for the Cabral fleet, from the coast of Brazil, which is addressed to the King of Portugal:

**"Regarding the site of this land, Your Majesty should request a world map, which is in the possession of Pedro Vaaz Bisagudo, in which Your Majesty may view the site of this land, although this world map does not certify whether this land is inhabited or not: it is an aged world map..."[16]**

This document, of unquestionable authenticity, is kept in the Arquivo Nacional da Torre de Tombo, in Portugal. It does not convey a simple, gratuitous comment, but is directed to the King of Portugal on the solemn occasion of the taking of Brazil in the King's name. It cannot be maintained that a map post-dating 1492 should be called "aged" by Mestre Joao, who was writing seven or eight years later. In addition, no known mariner had traveled the coast of America to a latitude as far south as that of Mestre Joao (16° 9' South).

Thus, we have the explicit and unequivocal mention of a pre-Columbian map of America. Scarcely two years after this letter, the maps of Caverio and Cantino showed unknown regions of American geography. It seems evident that they copied the pre-Columbian prototype mentioned by Mestre Joao, which was delivered by Vaaz Bisagudo to the King. [17]

As to the route traveled by a sketched copy of the prototype from Lisbon to Gimnasio Vosguense, where Waldseemüller was working, we have already seen that the German cartographer expressed in the title of his work that he had designed the New World according to an illustration by Vespucci ("secundum... Americi Vespuccii aliorumque lustrationes").

It seems that the sketch accompanied the French version of the Lettera to Pier Soderini, which Vespucci had sent from Lisbon to René de Bar y Lorena, patron of Waldseemüller, in 1505.[18] Thus, both maps, that of Caverio and the other of Waldseemüller, appear to have been copied from an American prototype that was in Lisbon.

It still remains to be shown who brought a facsimile of the American prototype to Spain. A letter written in 1524 by Antonio de Azevedo Coutinho, from the city of Elvas, to the King don Juan de Portugal, revealed that the cartographer, Jorge Reinel, received a magnificent reward (30.000 reales) from Charles V, no doubt for the revelation of a Portuguese cartographic secret. It seems likely that this was payment for information from the prototype map; scarcely two years later, the Spaniards

produced the map of 1527, showing the great rivers of America with Portuguese toponymy.

We have, then, three series of American maps which show geographic features still not discovered by European mariners:

- 1 the Portuguese series that appeared around 1502 (Caveri and Cantino);
- 2 the German series of Waldseemüller, beginning in 1507
- 3 the Spanish series beginning with the Weimar map of 1527.

Immediately before each of these series emerged, we find that information had been derived from some source in Lisbon; this we learn from the map of Vaaz Bisagudo for 1500, the letter from Vespucci of 1505, and the payment to Jorge Reinel in 1524. It would seem that this source is our prototype map.

I present here my reconstruction of the American prototype, according to the evidence found in the mentioned maps, indicating with a dotted line those regions which can not be reconstructed from current knowledge.

The Pacific coastline is not shown either in Weimar 1527, or in Waldseemüller, indicating that it was not shown in the prototype. It seems to have excluded the Pacific coast and the highest chain of the Andes, and to have terminated at about 40 degrees south. But it is a vast and detailed representation of large parts of America, and there can be little doubt that it corresponds to unknown voyages prior to Columbus.



*Reconstruction of the pre-columbian map of America delivered by Pero Vaaz da Cunha, "O Bisagudo", to the King of Portugal by 1500, and copied afterwards by Caveri, Waldseemüller and Ribero.*

It is impossible that between 1492 and 1500 there could have been various oceanic expeditions of the scope that would have permitted the exploration of the entire Atlantic coast of America between 42° North and 40° South, the great rivers of America including their important tributaries, the Pacific ocean, the interiors of Mexico and South America up to the foot of the Andes, all of this without the rest of the world's being aware of it, particularly since the eyes of Europe were fixed on the transatlantic enterprises after the voyage of Columbus. When we combine this with the evidence of the "aged world map" seen by Mestre Joao in 1500, we are driven to recognize that there must have been some



pre-Columbian prototype.

I have already set out my conjectures regarding the origins of this map in a book titled *Descubrimiento en el mar de papel*.<sup>[19]</sup> I will not expose my entire theory here; I wish only to draw attention to the archives of the Portuguese Order of Christ, whose tradition was very old, and could have included references to medieval and ancient navigations. The Portuguese navigators were almost all affiliated with this Order. Henry the Navigator was its Grand Master, and Vasco de Gama one of its knights. It is highly probable that Pero Vaaz da Cunha, in whose possession was the pre-Columbian map, was also a knight of Christ; perhaps in the last years of the fifteenth century he encountered the prototype in the Order's archives. In this respect, it seems significant that a sketched copy of the map was sent to René de Bar y Lorena, patron of Waldseemüller, and member of a house traditionally allied with the Portuguese Order.<sup>[20]</sup>

Whatever the truth about its origins, it seems clear that there was in fact a pre-Columbian map of America in Portugal, and that this map influenced not only the first Portuguese maps of the New World, but also the maps of Martin Waldseemüller and the Spanish *Padrón Real*. This map revealed to Américo Vesputio that the New World was a continent apart from Asia, and afforded him the glory of baptizing America with his own name.

[1] See Demetrio Charalambous, "Los grandes ríos incógnitos de América develados en un mapa de 1527", *Todo es Historia*, 338 (1995) 62-68.

[2] The boreal Tierra Firme shown by Caveri and Cantino across the Antilles was identified as North America by Henry Harrisse (1883), John Fiske (1892), Gabriel Marcel (1893), Lawrence Wroth (1944), Roberto Levillier (1948) and Kenneth Nebenzahl (1990), among other historians of cartography.

[3] The surprising accuracy of Waldseemüller was observed by the historian of Jesuit cartography Guillermo Furlong, who wrote: "Neither Waldseemüller nor his collaborators of Saint Dié could have had the science necessary for such accuracy in drawing the image of South America" (*La Nación*, Buenos Aires, 1969). Similarly, Dr. Hans Wolf has recently written: "Here the configuration of South America is remarkably correct. This is especially worth noting when we consider that, as far as we know, neither the West coast of North America, nor the southern part of South America had been explored at the time. It is not clear whether his accuracy was due to lost or secret information, or was in fact coincidence or intuition." (*America: Early Maps of the New World*. Munich, 1992).

[4] See Vicente Sierra, *Amerigo Vesputi, el enigma de la historia de América* (Madrid, 1968).

[5] See Sebastiano Crinó, *Schizzi cartografici inediti dei primi anni Della scoperta dell'America* (Florence, 1930).

[6] Roberto Levillier, *América la bien llamada* (Buenos Aires, 1948).

[7] George Nunn, *Geographical conceptions of Columbus* (New Cork, 1924).

[8] The Genoese, in order to convince the Catholic kings of his arrival in Asia, made his crew members sign a statement in which they swore that Cuba was mainland. In addition, in order to mislead his competitors, Columbus claimed to have found Cuba at a point 42 degrees north, which persuaded Caveri that Cuba was the northern mainland of the prototype, which in his scale of latitudes reaches 55 degrees north.

[9] Some Cuban place-names displaced to North America in the maps of Caveri and Cantino survived in North American toponymy, due to the copying of successive cartographers; thus an error survived.

[10] This solution also explains the aberrant delineation of the Antilles by Caveri: Columbus stated that Cuba was opposite the Cape of Isabella, so Caveri represented a non-existent peninsula at the north of Cuba (his "Isabella"), and put it *vis-à-vis* with Florida (that he believed to be Cuba) according to the description of the Genoese.

[11] The large map of Waldseemüller shows a marine passage in Central America, but the small map in the inset omits it. This contradiction may be explained by the fact that Waldseemüller referred to different authorities for each of these renderings: Columbus and Vesputi. The large map adheres to the theories of Columbus, and the small one to the sketch of Vesputi.

[12] There can be no doubt that Vesputi produced maps; Peter Martyr asserts that he saw, in the office of bishop Fonseca at Burgos, a map upon which Vesputi had collaborated (*De Orbe Novo*, dec. II, cap. X).

[13] Waldseemüller does not show the internal geography of America: his mountains are to the West of the line he indicates as "Terra Ultra Incógnita", and so are purely decorative.

[14] The rivers could not have been added later, because another Spanish map that dates to about 1530, preserved in the Herzog August Library at Wolfenbüttel, shows the same rendering of the Amazon river and his tributaries.

[15] In the maps of Diego Ribeiro, the North American coast shows a single bay that could have been taken for the mouth of a large river, to wit, the Chesapeake Bay, comparable in size to those of the Amazon and Paraná rivers. This bay, in conjunction with the inflection of the coast that simulates a

second Gulf of Mexico, could have persuaded the cartographer to situate the Mississippi river there, in the anonymous map of Weimar. In addition, we present evidence that the situation of the great northern river in this map is conjecture of the cartographer, and not the product of information conveyed by Spanish mariners: the map of Wolfenbuttel, produced by a collaborator of Ribeiro, presents the complete Amazon, but conceals the Mississippi, suggesting that the cartographer was not sure about its situation.

[16] According to the text of the letter published by Antonio Baiao, Director of the Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, in agreement with other eminent Portuguese historians. We have verified the accuracy of this text for ourselves, consulting a photostatic reproduction of the original letter.

[17] The astronomer limited his description of the aged mappamundi to the domains of the Portuguese king, Brazil and Mina de Oro. The vast regions belonging to the king of Castile that continued "this land" (Brazil) are not explicitly described in the letter, so as not to irritate the Portuguese king, but they were depicted on the mappamundi, as they were copied by Caveri and Cantino.

[18] The canon of Saint Basin de Sedencourt, member of the Gimnasium Vosguense, related that the French translation of the *Lettera* was sent to the duke of Lorraine by Vespucci (Walter Lud, *Speculi Orbis*... 1507).

[19] Demetrio Charalambous, *Descubrimiento en el mar de papel*. Buenos Aires, 1995.

[20] The intermediary was a confidant of the duke. Actually, Amerigo Vespucci and René de Lorraine had been educated in Florence by the same tutor, Giorgio Antonio Vespucci, uncle to Amerigo. The navigator later served as secretary to the Florentine embassy in Paris, so that he did not lose contact with his former study-companion.



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