

THE WALDSEEMÜLLER MAP



Position 1--Ancient Prophecy Fulfilled

This legend highlights an idea that’s almost completely forgotten today: that the New World was remarkable to Europeans in 1507 because it lay not just to the west but also to the south. The striking *southness* of the New World, so unexpected to geographers of the time, is what made the authors of the Waldseemüller map, Martin Waldseemüller and Matthias Ringmann, conclude that a new, fourth part of the world had been discovered across the sea, separate from Africa, Asia, and Europe. And this new continent, they decided, deserved to be named after Amerigo Vespucci, who had just a few years earlier described it in letters home. Contrary to what most people now assume, the name America appears nowhere on North America (shown here at the top left of the map) but rather on the giant landmass to its south—South America, that is, famously described for the first time by Vespucci as extending far below the equator. This new land, the legend reads, is nothing other than the distant southern land across the ocean that the Roman poet Virgil had once prophesied would fall under the dominion of Rome. The Waldseemüller map, in other words, presents for the

first time a vision of an ancient prophecy fulfilled, and it charts the contours of a dream shared by many of Europe’s early scholars, missionaries, and political rulers alike: that a new Christian empire, ruled from a resurgent Rome, would soon span the entire globe.

Position 2—Claudius Ptolemy and the Old World

The portrait shown here is an idealized depiction of the ancient Greek sage Claudius Ptolemy. Working in Alexandria, Egypt, in the second century AD, Ptolemy had produced a text known as the *Geography*, which described how to map the world using the principles of latitude and longitude, and which provided some 8,000 specific coordinates for places in Europe, Asia, and Africa: the three parts of the Old World known since antiquity. Lost and forgotten in Europe for a millennium, Ptolemy’s *Geography* had resurfaced in the early fifteenth century, providing humanist scholars of the ancient world with a wealth of information about the geography of antiquity—and offering modern Europeans an entirely new kind of map to guide them as their Age of Discovery got underway. The core of the Waldseemüller map, consisting of Europe, the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Near East, shows the world as Ptolemy had mapped it, expanded at the margins, however, to include the many discoveries of medieval European visitors to Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Perched at the top of the map, Ptolemy gazes out at a small inset hemisphere containing the Old World as he had known it, with one exception: Africa is shown in full, but with its southern portion identified only as “land unknown to Ptolemy.”



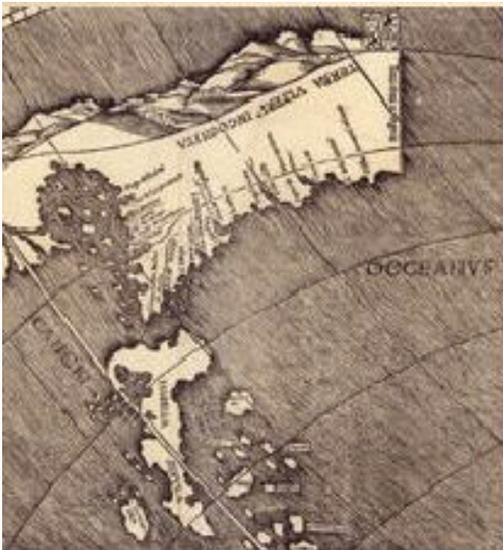
Position 3--Amerigo Vespucci and the New World

The portrait shown here, an obvious companion to the portrait of Ptolemy to its left, is an idealized portrait of Amerigo Vespucci, the Florentine merchant and explorer whose letters describing a series of voyages along the coast of South America inspired Martin Waldseemüller and Matthias Ringmann to coin the name America. Vespucci here gazes out at a small inset hemisphere containing the New World—which consists not just of the Americas but also parts of the Far East unknown to Ptolemy, as visited and described during the Middle Ages by Marco Polo and other travelers. The symbolism here is potent: on the left, Ptolemy, representing the wisdom and power of the ancients, surveys the half of the world known to in antiquity; Vespucci, representing the adventurous and learned spirit of modern explorers, surveys the half of the world discovered since Ptolemy’s time. Yoked together in the Waldseemüller map, the learning of the ancients and the achievements of the moderns provide a breathtaking new vision

of the world as a whole.

Position 4--The World at a Glance

This legend reminds viewers that the point of the Waldseemüller map is not so much to feature any one part of the world as it is to suggest that for the first time in history the world can be surveyed and studied—and explored and conquered—as a whole. “In describing the general appearance of the world,” the legend reads, “it has seemed best to put down the discoveries of the ancients and to add what has since been discovered by the moderns, for instance, the land of Cathay, so that those who are interested in such matters may... see nearly everything that has been discovered here and there ... carefully and clearly brought together, so as to be seen at a glance.” In the medieval cartographic tradition only God had this ability to survey the whole world at a glance—but now, the map implies, in a message infused with the humanistic spirit of the Renaissance, anybody can.



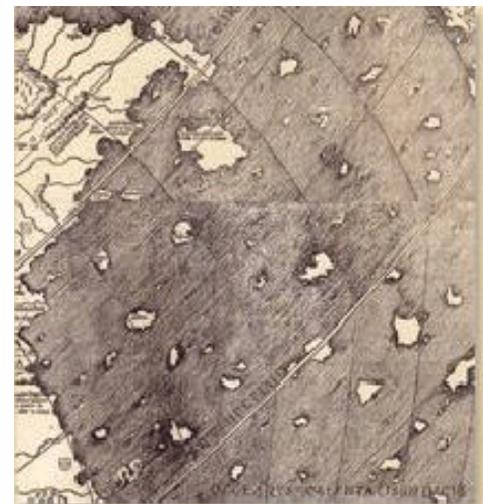
Position 5--Northern Waters

The North Atlantic as it appears here is at first glance hard for modern viewers to interpret. Copied from marine charts made by the Portuguese in the early 1500s, the large landmass at the top-left of the map represents what we know of today as North America, with a coastline that extends roughly from modern day Canada all the way down to what appear to be Florida, the Gulf of Mexico, and Central America. A Spanish flag flying at its southern tip identifies the region as a Spanish possession—but much of this coast was in fact first explored a decade earlier for the English, by the Italian John Cabot. Immediately to the southeast of North America are the islands discovered in the Caribbean by Columbus, including two of the most important, here labeled Isabella (Cuba) and Spagnolla (Hispaniola); far off to the northeast, mid-way between North America and Europe, is what seems to be an island but actually is another part of Newfoundland or Labrador, discovered and claimed by the Portuguese in 1500. The entirety of the New World, in fact, is shown as belonging either to Spain or to Portugal, in accordance with the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas, which decreed that a north-south line be drawn to separate lands belonging to Spain and to Portugal. Spain’s rights fell to the west of the line, and Portugal’s to the east—which explains why so many Latin Americans today speak Portuguese, not Spanish.

Spain and to Portugal. Spain’s rights fell to the west of the line, and Portugal’s to the east—which explains why so many Latin Americans today speak Portuguese, not Spanish.

Position 6--The Far East

This part of the map shows the Far East as Marco Polo described it—and as Columbus, Vespucci, and others expected to find it when they set out across the Atlantic. Here, at the very northeast edge of Asia, are Cathay and Manzi (China), the lands of the Great Khan. At the top of the map, immediately below the name Chatay (Cathay), is the fabled walled city of Quinsai, singled out by Marco Polo as “the finest and most splendid city in the world.” The large island at the very edge of the map is Zipangri (Japan). Columbus set out from Spain in 1492 expecting to sail west and eventually reach what one can see on the map here: a vast East Indian archipelago off the coast of China, dominated by Japan and a few other large islands. And, in fact, when he reached the Caribbean—an archipelago dominated by a few large islands off the coast of a giant mainland—he made a logical but misguided assumption: that he had reached the Indies. The natives, he decided, should therefore be called Indians.





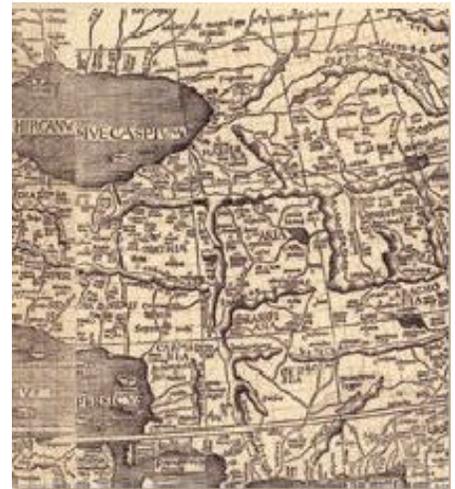
Position 7--The Known World

The center of the Waldseemüller map—roughly speaking, comprising Europe, North Africa, and the Near East—presents a picture not of the modern world but of the ancient one. The place names, derived from Ptolemy's *Geography* and other ancient sources, are archaic, and many of the geographical details presented here were already known to be inaccurate—among them, the eastward extension of Scotland in the north, the breadth of Eurasia and the Mediterranean, and the contours of northern Africa. But this central part of the map wasn't designed to be geographically accurate. It was designed to provide students of antiquity with a tool for making sense of the places mentioned in ancient history and literature, and to show how much of the New World the newly ascendant Holy Roman Empire could hope to add to its Old World dominions. This is why the map places the double eagle, the symbol of the Holy Roman Empire, under Italy and Germany—and why the whole map itself, in fact, bears a striking resemblance to a double eagle, with the New World and the Far East stretching out and up from the Old

World like the wings of the double eagle, whose eastward- and westward-looking heads are replaced with those of Ptolemy and Vespucci.

Position 8--Schöner's Red Lines

This portion of the map is crisscrossed with a mysterious grid of carefully drawn red lines. Supposed at the time of the map's rediscovery, in 1901, to have been drawn on the paper before the map was printed, the lines have been studied carefully by the Library of Congress's John Hessler, who has determined them to have been drawn on the map by its owner, the German astronomer and geographer Johannes Schöner—the man to whom we owe the survival of this lone copy of the map. Exactly why Schöner drew the lines isn't clear, but he may well have used them for astrological purposes, or to help him transfer information from the map to globes he was designing in the years before 1520.

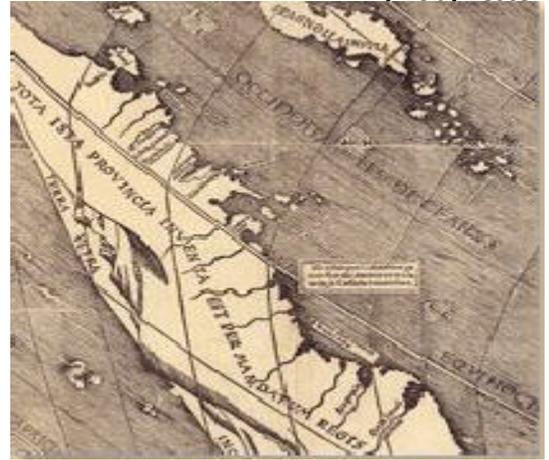


Position 9--Prester John and Three Indias

The legend advertised here with a large cross and shield reveals that even sober geographical scholars of the Renaissance such as Martin Waldseemüller and Matthias Ringmann had yet to let go of long-held myths about the East. "Here," the legend reads, "rules that good king and lord who is called Prester John." An imaginary eastern Christian ruler of fantastic wealth and power who for centuries had been rumored in Europe to be on the verge of marching a great host of eastern Christians west to join the forces of Europe in retaking the Holy Land from the Muslims, Prester John was supposed to have had access to the Fountain of Youth and to rule over much of what medieval Europeans knew as the Three Indias. This was a vast but fuzzily understood portion of Asia that included much of what we call today the Far East, the Near East, and the Middle East, as well as Africa east of the Nile. The desire to find Prester John was an immensely powerful motivator for much of the European exploration of Africa, India, and even the New World that took place in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

Position 10--The Discoveries of Columbus

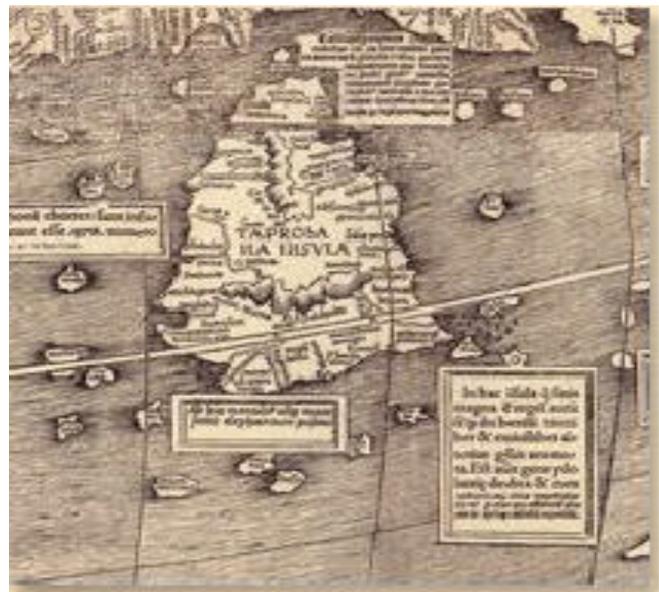
The islands of the Caribbean and the northern portion of South America shown here are unambiguously described in legends as having been discovered by Columbus—and as belonging to Spain. A small legend off the coast of South America reads, “These islands were discovered by the Genoese admiral Columbus at the order of the king of Castile,” and in large block letters across northern South America are the words, “This entire region was discovered by order of the king of Castile.” The Spanish flag flying just below the equator on the coast of South America marks the limit of Spanish territory, as explored by Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, and others.

**Position 11--West Africa and the islands of the Atlantic**

Shown here just to the west of southern Europe and western Africa are the various island groups of the mid-Atlantic, discovered and settled by the Portuguese and the Spanish in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, among them the Azores, Madeira and Porto Santo, the Fortunate Isles (the Canaries), and the Cape Verde islands. To the south of the Cape Verde islands a legend reads, “Islands of the Portuguese, discovered in the year 1472, in the time of the Infante Henry [better known as Prince Henry the Navigator, who is famously said to have launched the Portuguese exploration of Africa].” Many of these Atlantic islands were indeed discovered or settled by the Portuguese under Henry’s direction, but the date listed here is incorrect: the islands had already been discovered by that time, and Prince Henry himself had died in 1460. The African coastline opposite these islands is no longer based on Ptolemy’s Africa but instead follows the marine charts of the Portuguese, making Africa as a whole a curious-looking, stitched-together hybrid of ancient and modern geographical sources.

Position 12--Taprobane

The island shown here in the Indian Ocean is the legendary island of Taprobane, rumored by the Greeks, Romans, and medieval Europeans to be either an island of great size that extended below the equator or perhaps even the tip of a giant southern continent distinct from Asia, Africa, and Europe. The island seems based on secondhand reports of what today is known as Sri Lanka. The Indian Ocean is here shown to be an open sea, connected to the Pacific and the Atlantic, rather than—as Ptolemy had described it—a sea bounded on all sides by land. This was a radically new way of portraying the Indian Ocean and reflects the results of the very recent Portuguese voyages around the south of Africa and across the Indian Ocean to India.





Position 13--The Dragon's Tail

This long—and imaginary—Asian peninsula is sometimes referred to as the Dragon's Tail. It first appears on maps that date to the final decade or so of the fifteenth century. Several different ideas of what it represents have been proposed. It may reflect secondhand knowledge of the Indian subcontinent, located farther to the east than in reality. (In this theory's favor is the present of the large island labeled "Seylam," just off its southeast tip, which is probably a variant spelling of Ceylon, now Sri Lanka.) Those who believe that the Portuguese were making secret voyages to the New World in the late fifteenth century have suggested that the Dragon's Tail represents South America. The apparent similarities of the two coastlines are indeed suggestive, but most scholars now reject this theory. The most likely explanation is that the Dragon's Tail represents a fanciful extension of Ptolemy's Asia, based on the accounts of Marco Polo, Niccolò Conti, and other European travelers, and on the new information from the Portuguese that the Indian Ocean was not a closed body of water.

Position 14--America Gets Its Name

Here, printed in block letters on what we know today as Brazil, is the first use of the name America on a map—a name coined for this express purpose by the map's makers, Martin Waldseemüller and Matthias Ringmann. The two men knew that Columbus had opened the route across the Atlantic in 1492, but Amerigo Vespucci, now sailing in the service of the Portuguese, had been the first to visit and describe the vast and unexpected southern extent of this new continent. For this Waldseemüller and Ringmann decided Vespucci deserved the honor of having the continent named after him. They explained their decision in a companion volume to the map, the *Introduction to Cosmography*. "These parts," they wrote, referring to Africa, Asia, and Europe, "have in fact now been more widely explored, and a fourth part has been discovered by Amerigo Vespucci. . . . Since both Asia and Africa received their names from women, I do not see why anyone should rightly prevent this [new part] from being called Amerigen—the land of Amerigo, as it were—or America, after its discoverer." The parrot that appears to the north of the name America is a nod to one of the other



names Europeans had given the continent at the time: Land of the Parrots. The ship that appears just offshore flies a Portuguese flag, signifying that these lands belong to Portugal, not Spain; and the ship itself is identified in the legend below as belonging to the fleet of Pedro Álvares Cabral, who on his way to India in 1500 made a surprise landing in Brazil, while swinging out wide into the Atlantic to catch winds that would take him around the southern tip of Africa.

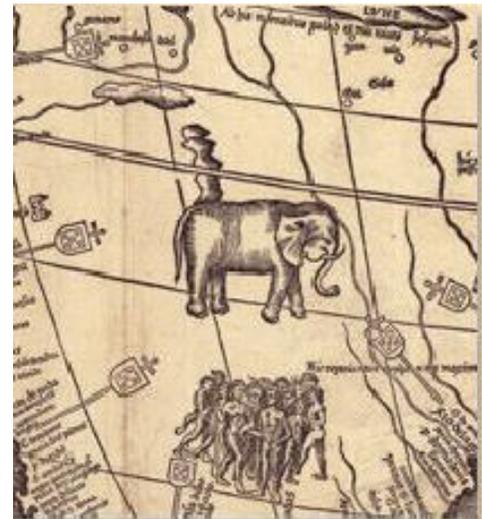


Position 15--The Pacific—Before Balboa and Magellan

The standard history of New World discovery holds that Europeans first became aware of the Pacific Ocean only in 1513, when Balboa caught sight of it from a mountain peak in Panama—and that Europeans only rounded the tip of South America and entered the Pacific in 1520, during Magellan's famous circumnavigation of the globe. Until that point, almost all Europeans assumed the New World to be part of Asia. Not Martin Waldseemüller and Matthias Ringmann, however, who in their companion volume to the map, the *Introduction to Cosmography*, made the inexplicably confident statement that this new, fourth part of the world had been “found to be surrounded on all sides by the Ocean”—unambiguous language that suggests that Europeans may have reached tip of the continent before 1507. A Portuguese flag indeed does fly at the limit of the continent on the map, and in some of his letters Amerigo Vespucci makes reference to having sailed in the service of the Portuguese to a point some 52 degrees south of the equator—which happens to be almost the exact latitude of the Straits of Magellan.

Position 16--Beasts and Savages

Europeans knew almost nothing about the interior of southern Africa when the Waldseemüller map was made. The Portuguese, focused on rounding the continent and sailing east to India, had carefully surveyed and mapped the African coastline, but their marine charts left the continent's interior blank, giving copyists free reign to fill it with fanciful images. On the Waldseemüller map a large elephant and a huddled band of naked African tribesmen fill the otherwise empty African interior: an early example of a cartographic tradition that Jonathan Swift would later sum up memorably in verse. “So geographers in Afric maps / With savage pictures fill their gaps / And o'er uninhabitable downs / Place elephants for want of towns.”

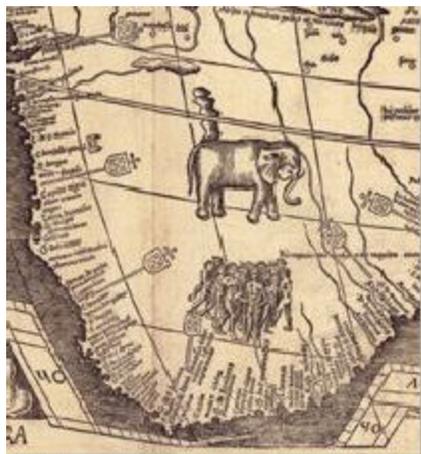


Position 17--The Spice Islands

Marco Polo is famous today as one of the first medieval travelers to have provided Europeans with a firsthand account of the extent and wonders of China. But in the centuries immediately after his death he was also celebrated for the way in which he returned home: an ocean journey that took him south and west through the Spice Islands and the Indian Ocean. The Waldseemüller map here shows the dazzling archipelago that he claimed to have passed through—a world of thousands of islands, impossibly rich in gems, precious metals, exotic spices, and pagan peoples. It was the prospect of reaching these islands, as much as reaching Japan and mainland China, that during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries lured European merchants and missionaries east around Africa and west across the Atlantic. When Amerigo Vespucci first reached the coast of South America in the company of the Portuguese, he decided to follow the coast to the south in large part because, as a merchant, he hoped to pioneer a shorter route to this region than the one the Portuguese had recently opened up by sailing east around Africa.

Position 18--A Missing Legend?

The short legend printed here notes that the New World portion of the map delineates the “various lands and islands” discovered by Amerigo Vespucci. The text, however, is clearly not the language originally intended to appear here—it’s far too short for the available space, which almost surely was designed to hold a legend closer in length to the one at the bottom-right of the map. Why this change? Some scholars believe it was because Waldseemüller had a falling out with the colleagues with whom he had prepared the map, and that they therefore decided to withhold the dedication and statement of authorship that Waldseemüller had originally composed for this space—a dedication that now appears only in the map’s companion volume, the *Introduction to Cosmography*. That dedication—which refers to a map, not a book, and identifies Waldseemüller as its author—would fit neatly in the space here. “To the best of my ability and with the help of others,” it reads, “I have studied the books of Ptolemy, from a Greek copy, and, having added the information from the four voyages of Amerigo Vespucci, I have prepared a map of the whole world for the general use of scholars, like an introduction, so to speak.”



Position 19--the Rounding of Africa

Just as remarkable as the sight of the New World to viewers of the Waldseemüller map would have been the sight of southern Africa, showing the ocean route to India that the Portuguese had successfully opened only a decade before, when Vasco da Gama became the first European to sail around Africa and east to India. Southern Africa on the map is copied from Portuguese marine charts of the period and depicts the continent with much more geographical accuracy than in the north, where the map presents it largely as it had been mapped in ancient times by Claudius Ptolemy. The closely spaced names running perpendicular to the coast are those given by the Portuguese to their discoveries during the gradual course of their Africa explorations, and Portuguese flags and crosses that appear periodically along the way represent *padrões*, stone markers planted by the Portuguese at prominent points to claim their territory. To call attention to the significance of this brand-new route to Africa, and to signal a radical break with the geography of Ptolemy, Waldseemüller rams the southern tip of the continent right into the

bottom margin of his map, breaking the continuity of its frame.

Position 20--Final Words

In this final legend, Martin Waldseemüller and his colleagues note that in preparing their map they have devoted themselves to the difficult and novel task of synthesizing the New and Old Worlds for the first time—“so that those who are interested and love things of this sort may see all that is known to us of the present day.” They then conclude on a note that still resonates powerfully today. “This one request we have to make: that those who are inexperienced and unacquainted with cosmography shall not condemn all this before they have learned what will surely be clearer to them later on, when they have come to understand it.”

