

MERCATOR'S SOUTHERN CONTINENT

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The age-old concept that a vast southern landmass must of necessity exist to counterbalance that in the northern hemisphere was given graphic expression by many cartographers, including Ptolemy¹, Johannes Schöner² and Oronce Finé³, but undoubtedly the most famous one is that depicted by Gerard Mercator.

It is commonly believed to have first appeared on his famous 1569 world map, but he had actually portrayed it slightly less elaborately on globe gores in 1541.⁵ Three years earlier he had been content to copy and adapt the southern landmass on Oronce Finé's twin cordiform world map of 1531, which he may well have got to know through its publication in the 1532 Paris edition of *Novus Orbis Regionum ac Insularum Veteribus Incognitarium* ('The Region of the New World and Island's Unknown to the Ancients'), a compendium of travel literature edited by Simonon Grynaeus.

The southern landmasses of Ptolemy, Schöner and Finé were imaginary with the exception of part of Finé's which incorporated a representation of the north coast of Tierra del Fuego. Schöner, in fact, produced several quite different versions. The north coast of Tierra del Fuego was also incorporated in much more detail in Mercator's southern continent on his 1569 map. He also believed, however, that he had documentary evidence to substantiate his portrayal of the rest of it. He can hardly be blamed for not knowing that there were fundamental errors in all the sources he relied on.

Owing to its size, Mercator's 1569 map cannot be reproduced here; it is so large that none of the detail would be decipherable. The version of his southern continent made by his contemporary, Abraham Ortelius, appears in Figure 1,⁶ unfortunately, not all the inscriptions on it are identical to those on Mercator's map.

Mercator mentions the authorities on whom he relied for the portrayal of the large northward projection south of Java on the map itself; they were Marco Polo and Ludovico di Varthema. A number of Marco Polo manuscript and published versions contained one par-

ticularly significant error. In his description of South East Asia, Marco Polo had originally stated that certain lands and islands were south of Champa, which was a kingdom in central Vietnam; at some stage in the transmission of his narrative the name Java was substituted for Champa. Since the forms of the names of places mentioned by Marco Polo, after centuries of copying, were very different from those known in 16th century Europe from Portuguese sources, the Champa/Java error was not detected. Consequently, since Marco Polo had, for two centuries and more, been considered the *authority* on Asia, his apparent statement to the effect that certain places were south of Java was taken at its face value. Mercator therefore produced imaginative graphic outlines of the kingdoms and islands concerned, as best he could on the basis of the scanty information provided by Marco Polo, together with some misinformation from Varthema, and placed them south of Java, with Marco Polo's versions of the names attached to them. The actual places, with their Portuguese-derived names also appeared in approximately their correct positions.

The first person I am aware of to realise the false identity and positioning of Java Minor, by which Marco Polo meant Sumatra, was the cartographer Petrus Plancius; on a map of 1594⁷ he omitted it from his version of Mercator's southern continent and gave his reason for doing so. It was not until the mid-1800s that the actual edition or editions of Marco Polo used by Mercator were identified, through the appearance in them of the name *Baoech* or *Boeach*, for what in other editions had been *Locach* or *Lucach*, and which was actually probably part of peninsular Thailand. The name, which Mercator rendered as *Beach*, appeared in the Latin editions of Marco Polo included in the abovementioned travel literature compendium edited by Simon Grynaeus; it was published in slightly variant versions in Paris and Basle in 1532.

Mercator was convinced of the existence of the southern continent. Since Tierra del Fuego's north coast was widely accepted as part of it, and he had the apparent authority of Marco Polo for the lands south of Java, he must have tried hard to find documentary evidence to

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substantiate the linking of Tierra del Fuego's north coast with the coast of *Beach*, but eastwards and westwards. No such 'evidence' materialised during his lifetime for the stretch of coastline across the South Pacific, so he adopted the common cartographic practice of his age and covered the unknown section with cartouches. As can be seen in Figure 1, Ortelius did not copy him in this regard, but placed a Latin inscription there to the effect that some people called the southern continent Magellanic after its discoverer.

In the southern Indian and Atlantic Oceans, Mercator must have believed himself more fortunate. On some anonymous globe gores of c. 1535, which copied the outline of Oronce Finé's southern continent, there were two Latin inscriptions on the Indian Ocean southern coastline: one was BRASIELIE REGIO ('Region of Brazil') and the other PSITACORVM TERRA ('Land of Parrots').⁸ Mercator, who, as we have seen, was very familiar with Oronce Fine's map, must have been well aware that the first of these inscriptions was copied from him; he himself had not copied it on his 1538 adaptation of Fine's map, since he knew for sure where Brazil was.⁹ He may or may not have known that Finé had miscopied that inscription from Johannes Schöner's 1515 globe, where it had appeared as BRASILIE REGIO on his southern landmass, just south of a strait at the southern tip of South America, which was actually the River Plate estuary. Schöner himself misplaced the inscription which should have appeared north of the 'strait'. Finé, however, apparently presumed that BRASIE/LIE REGIO applied to the whole southern continent, just as some people referred to it as TERRA MAGALLANICA etc., consequently its precise position must have seemed of no great importance. However, since Finé's 1531 map by chance did not give any capitalised version of the name BRAZIL in South America, while maps by other cartographers did, the anonymous cartographer seems to have been puzzled. Were the other cartographers right in their positioning of the name or was Finé? He therefore hedged his bets, placing BRASILIA / Regio and the associated popular name, PAPAGALLI / Regio ('Land of Parrots') in South America where they really belonged, and left Oronce Finé's BRASIELIE REGIO inscription where it was; but he also added a variant 'Land of Parrots' inscription to keep it company, so PSITACORVM TERRA appeared southwest of the Finés' inscription. Mercator, unaware of this sequence of events, still omitted the Finé's inscription, but left

another variant 'Land of Parrots' inscription, *Psitacorum regio*, on his own southern continent, roughly where the anonymous cartographer had put it on his version of Finé's coastal outline. Generations of cartographers copied him.

In the South Atlantic, a cape named *Promontorium Terrae Australis* ('Promontory of the Southern Land') appeared on numerous maps from those in Ortelius's 1570 atlas onwards. It was accompanied by a long inscription on Mercator's 1569 map which gave his source, the *Suma de geographia* of 1519 by the Spanish navigator and geographer, Martin Fernández de Enciso. The relevant passage in that book appeared to indicate the existence of a mainland southwest of the Cape of Good Hope and southeast of Cape St Augustine (near Recife in north east Brazil). The passage, however, contains one incomplete sentence, which may well indicate the omission of one or more lines of text from the original manuscript. Since the latter does not seem to have survived and Enciso's source for the statement cannot be traced, it is impossible to state what land was really being referred to. Mercator, however, thinking he had found further evidence confirming what he believed, that a vast southern continent did exist, accepted at face value what Enciso appeared to have said.

The remaining 'confirmatory' inscriptions on Mercator's 1569 map are a string of names extending from a *Golfo di s Sebastiano* to a *C. di Maestro* some 50° to the west (Figure 2). The cape at the western end of Tierra del Fuego's north coast, which Magellan named *cabo deseado* ('the desired cape'), is correctly named and placed; the southeastern cape of the South American mainland, which Magellan named *cabo de 11,000 virgenes* ('Cape of 11,000 virgins') is likewise correctly placed and named, though partially in Latin. What, therefore, are the *Golfo di s Sebastiano* and the *C. di Maestro* at either extremity of that section of the southern continent? There is certainly no coast extending as far east and west as that indicated on Mercator's map.

It may be observed that both the above inscriptions include the Italian *di*, rather than Spanish *de* and *del* respectively, as might be expected. Furthermore, some of the intervening inscriptions are in Spanish, some in Italian. The use of *di* with *Maestro* suggests that the latter word is used, not in its common Spanish and Italian

meanings of 'master', 'teacher', etc., but in the now obsolescent, if not obsolete, Italian navigational meaning of 'northwest'.

As for the *Golfo di s Sebastiano*, there is a bay on Tierra del Fuego's east coast now known as *Bahía San Sebastián*. What must have happened is that someone, either Ortelius¹⁰ or, much more probably, an earlier, unidentified cartographer, tried to reconcile information from a small scale Spanish map of both shores of the Strait of Magellan, based only on material derived from the Magellan voyage, with an Italian map of the southern shore only, on a scale some five times larger. Since Magellan's ships did not, so far as we know, sail down the east coast of Tierra del Fuego, a map based only on information from his ships would not have included the *Golfo di s Sebastiano*. The failure to recognise that *C. di Maestro* was actually a duplicate of the northwest cape which Magellan called *cabo deseado*, and the absence of the *Golfo di s Sebastiano* from a Magellan-based map would mean that neither extremity of the Italian map was identified, and therefore the scale difference between the two was undetected.

What is more, it seems that it may have remained undetected even as late as 1769, for in that year Alexander Dalrymple produced a chart of the South Atlantic on which the coastline of the Gulf of St Sebastian was resurrected, because a vague report of Anthony de la Roche's voyage in 1675 suggested that there was a mainland in the area indicated by Mercator and Ortelius.¹¹ It was, in fact, almost certainly the island known as South Georgia. Captain Cook, though finding South Georgia, not surprisingly failed to find the shoreline of the Gulf of St Sebastian which was marked on the Dalrymple chart he had with him in 1775.

As in the case of the *Jave-la-Grandel/Australia* controversy, it would seem to have been sufficiently demonstrated that hypotheses regarding dubious coastlines and the positions of features on early maps and charts should never be constructed without a thorough examination of the associated inscriptions and their possible sources.

References

¹ Reproduced in R. W. Shirley, *The Mapping of the World*, London, Holland Press, 1984, plate 20. In subsequent references to this work, only the Shirley plate numbers are given.

² For a reproduction of the relevant section of Schöner's 1515 globe referred to later in this article, see W. A. R. Richardson, 'The origin of place names on maps', *The Map Collector*, 55 (Summer 1991), p. 22.

³ Shirley, p 60.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 102.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 68.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 104.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 152.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p 63.

⁹ A. E. Nordenskiöld, *Facsimile Atlas*, Stockholm, 1989, and subsequent editions, plate XLIII.

¹⁰ Ortelius' 1564 world map had given a similar coastal outline and inscriptions; see Shirley, p. 97. On a map entitled *Americae Sive Novi Orbis Descriptio* in his atlas *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* of 1570, the outline and inscriptions are almost identical with those on Mercator's 1569 map reproduced in Figure 2, though the tell-tale *di* used an Ortelius' 1564 map and on the Mercator map have been replaced by *de*.

¹¹ Alexander Dalrymple, *A chart of the ocean between South America and Africa*, 1769, Canberra, National Library of Australia, RM 461. The relevant section of this chart will be reproduced in the forthcoming expanded version of this article in *Terrae Incognita*, 25, 1993.

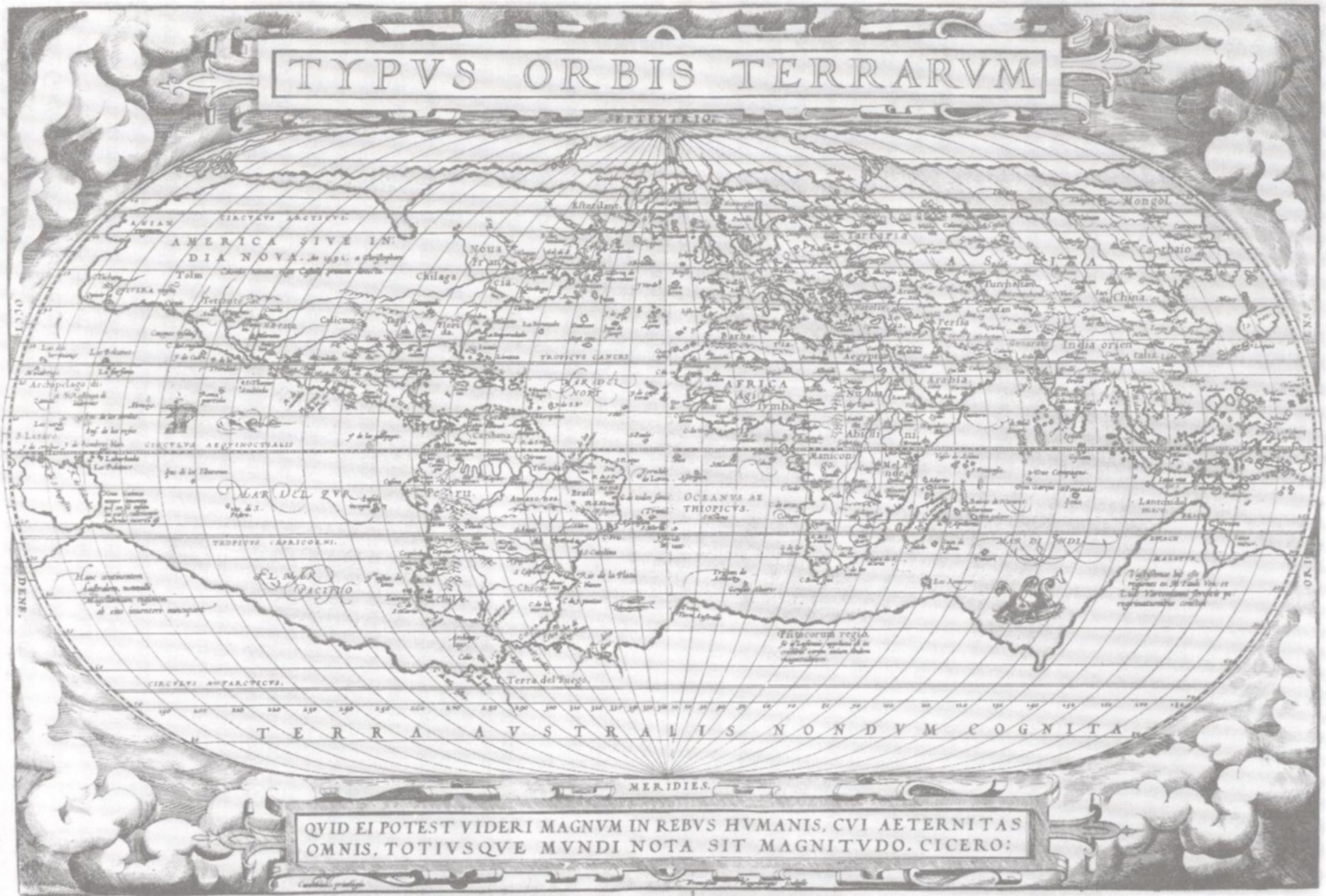


Figure 1 Abraham Ortelius' Typus Orbis Terrarum from his 1570 atlas, Theatrum Orbis Terrarum. The southern continent is copied from Mercator's famous world map of 1569, but on a much smaller scale. Not all the inscriptions are identical with those on Mercator's map.

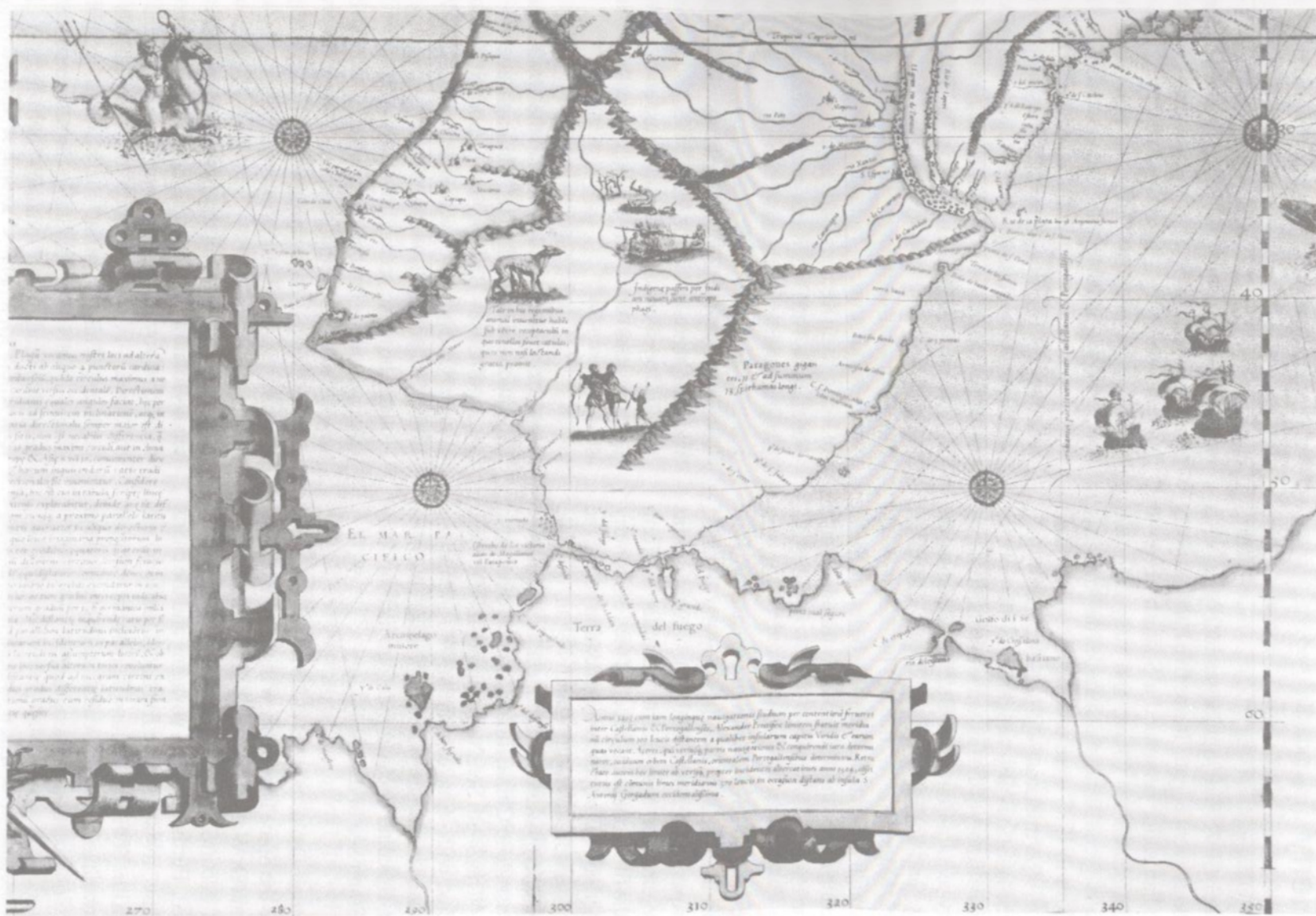


Figure 2 Detail in the vicinity of the Strait of Magellan on Mercator's 1569 map. Note especially the array of inscriptions extending either side of the Strait.

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