

Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, two German scholars, Josef Fischer and Franz Wieser, found twelve printed sheets of paper in the archives of a Bavarian noble family, which, arranged in the correct order, formed a map to be pasted onto wall. Together with these sheets there was another map, but of a different type: it was made up of twelve sections to be cut out and glued onto a solid globe about 12 centimetres in diameter.

The large map, called the *Universalis Cosmographia* or also the *Waldseemüller Planisphere*, after the geographer who made it, represented the Earth's entire surface with the three continents Europe, Asia and Africa drawn according to Claudius Ptolemy's representation, as well as the New World, shown based on the information provided by Amerigo Vespucci and dedicated to him with the name 'America'. Both the wall map and the one that was supposed to cover a solid globe were printed using the technique of xylography in the town of Saint-Dié-des-Vosges in the Franco-German Duchy of Lorraine.

This authentic treasure was made known in 1907, exactly four hundred years after its date of publication. At the time, it only aroused slight interest, perhaps because it was not possible to see the smallest details on the copies that were immediately distributed, but principally because they exalted the work of Amerigo Vespucci who at the time was not held in high esteem.

One hundred years later, in the early part of this century, the Waldseemüller Map was acquired by the Library of Congress in Washington, which immediately put a very good reproduction on the internet, thus making it possible to identify a growing number of clues suggesting a direct derivation of the image of America from material provided by Vespucci himself.¹

The present volume deals with events that took place five hundred years ago, between the end of the 15th century and the early 16th century. These events led to the conquest of the oceans and the discovery of a Fourth Continent populated by many peoples in various stages of social and cultural development, rich in treasures such as gold and pearls, in addition to many products which we would now find it difficult to do without, such as maize, potatoes, tomatoes, cocoa, rubber, tobacco, vanilla and quinine.

¹ See Omodeo, "The Authenticity of Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novus*", 359-88.

The premise for this endeavour was the discovery, or rediscovery, of the archipelagos of the Canaries, Madeira, Azores and Cape Verde, which became the outposts from which to venture into the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean. Other events stimulated oceanic navigation: the exchange of goods between the peoples of central-northern Europe and those of the Mediterranean, in addition to fishing in tropical waters and the cold northern seas with an abundance of fish, which preserved in various ways was distributed throughout Europe, improving the diets of its populations that were growing despite continuing epidemics.

The contemporary development of the arts, technology and science, together with the boom in the number of printed books, stimulated the spread of a new culture and boosted confidence in the rational activity of man, able to undertake the greatest and most arduous endeavours with such energy that within the space of a few decades a new epoch was born.

The rediscovery of Ptolemy's *Geography* and the ideas of Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli on the configuration of the oceans and the continents known at the time, together with the economic and commercial programmes of the forward-thinking Portuguese Prince Henry "the Navigator", inspired sailors to travel ever further and naval architects to design ships better suited to this purpose.

Thanks to this, the most skilful and daring mariners were able to prove their talent and became the protagonists of incredible events: Christopher Columbus, Bartolomeu Dias, Vasco da Gama, Juan de La Cosa, Amerigo Vespucci, John Cabot, Vicente Yáñez Pinzón and Ferdinand Magellan. These protagonists, even though travelling under rival flags, did not compete with each other using dishonest means: they played the role they had chosen or which they had been assigned, earning the recognition of all.

Vespucci in particular, for whom an updated biography is proposed in this work, was praised by many of his contemporaries, including his presumed rival Christopher Columbus. Only Bartolomé de las Casas, courageous defender of the rights of the Indios, spoke of Amerigo's 'usurpation' of Columbus's merits. However, this priest was misinformed and had misunderstood - as we will see below - the roles of the two navigators in the arduous and lengthy task of discovering those far-away lands.

With the publication of *Historia del Nuevo Mundo* by Juan Bautista Muñoz (1793) and, above all, the *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos* by Don Martín Fernández de Navarrete (1826-1837) the confusion over the roles and respective merits of Columbus and Vespucci, which was already outlined in the 16th century, generated a bitter controversy between Vespucci's detractors, who considered it unjust that the New World received the name of America, and his defenders who were of the opposite opinion, a debate that continued throughout the 19th century.

This controversy increased in vehemence as time passed, assuming paradoxical connotations. In the early 1900s, Alberto Magnaghi declared in a monograph that the printed letters by Amerigo were false, that his first and fourth voyages never happened, and that he had travelled on behalf of Portugal only to inform the Spanish of what he had seen.² This gratuitous reconstruction further characterised Amerigo as being just a braggart and a spy. The diminishment of his historical relevance was continued by many histori-

² Magnaghi, *Amerigo Vespucci, studio critico*.

ans of science. In the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*,³ for example, Vespucci is only mentioned in three notes, two of which of no significance, while he is not mentioned at all in the *Biographical Encyclopedia of Scientists*⁴ nor is he mentioned in *The Mapping of America* by R.V. Tooley.⁵ A partial remedy to this misleading perspective on Vespucci's scientific merits and the importance of geography for the history of science has been provided by the volume on *Early Modern Science of The Cambridge History of Science*, edited by Kathrin Park and Lorraine Daston, who included an illuminating section to "Cosmography" by Klaus Vogel.⁶ Moreover, Robert Wallisch, in his German edition of *Mundus novus*, has significantly contributed to dispel the doubts about Vespucci's authorship and to reassess his scientific achievement.⁷

In the new millennium, the criticism again intensified producing new arguments. Felipe Fernández-Armesto, in his book *Amerigo: The Man Who Gave His Name to America*, published in 2006, describes the navigator in this way: "Amerigo [...] was a pimp in his youth and a magus in his maturity", using magus to indicate an able illusionist who can get one over on anybody.⁸ The most trivial (and boring) slander became a trap into which an author with genuine merits fell: Tzvetan Todorov, the anthropologist of the Europeans' encounter with the American *other*, characterises Vespucci as an "obscene writer of pornography".⁹ Fortunately, Amerigo's actions are now being re-evaluated, as is also evident in the proceedings of a conference held on the 500th anniversary of his death.¹⁰

My reconstruction of Vespucci's endeavour and context will show that it is reasonable that everything that he has handed down in manuscript or printed form is true, except for several variations imposed on him for understandable reasons by those who authorised him to undertake the journey or by relationships with his companions of 'adventure'.¹¹ This conviction has obliged me to start by returning to the earliest genuine documentation dating to the late fifteenth century or early sixteenth century.¹² Fortunately, Vespucci's principal written works have been studied with careful philological criteria by Luciano Formisano in various publications.¹³ Original drawings by Amerigo Vespucci are inserted in the above mentioned Waldseemüller wall map, which confirm, clarify and enrich what he narrated in his letters.¹⁴

3 Directed by Charles C. Gillespie, 18 vols. in 4°, published in New York under the auspices of the American Council of Learned Societies (1970 to 1980).

4 Published in 6 volumes in Bristol and Philadelphia in 1994.

5 Tooley, *The Mapping of America*.

6 Vogel, "Cosmography", 469-96.

7 Wallisch, "Zur Rehabilitierung des *Mundus Novus* und seines Autors", 157-69.

8 Fernández-Armesto, *Amerigo: The Man Who Gave His Name to America*, ix.

9 Todorov, "Viaggiatori e indigeni", 329-57.

10 Pinto, Rombai, Tripodi, *Vespucci, Firenze e le Americhe*.

11 See Omodeo, "The Authenticity of Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novus*", 359-88.

12 The collection of documents preceded by a bibliography compiled by Ilaria Luzzana Caracci, *Amerigo Vespucci*, in 2 volumes (1996-1999), is very useful.

13 Formisano, *Amerigo Vespucci: Lettere di Viaggio; Iddio ci dia buon viaggio e guadagno (Codice Vaglienti)*, here cited as *Codice Vaglienti*. See also Formisano, Masetti, *America sive mundus Novus, le lettere a stampa attribuite ad Amerigo Vespucci*; Perini, *Amerigo Vespucci cronache epistolari*.

14 In October 2016, a second digitised edition of this wall map appeared. I refer to the project of the Galileo Museum in Florence and the U.S. Library of Congress, viewable at the following web address: <http://mostre.museogalileo.it/waldseemuller>.

To give a more complete picture I have linked the endeavours of Amerigo Vespucci with those of Christopher Columbus, Alonso de Ojeda, Vasco da Gama, Pedro Álvares Cabral, Juan de La Cosa and others, as all operated within a large common plan. Indeed, geographical exploration, although it widened human knowledge, has always had a high cost and therefore significant economic consequences, such as the conquest of markets and other sources of wealth, as well as increasing power and prestige. The aim is to give a rational picture of such decisions, which were only rarely based on capricious likes and dislikes, while they more often derived from opportunities and contingent political necessities.

The political choices behind geographical explorations, especially those made by the Portuguese, were not made in an open manner, indeed they were often undertaken in secret. Such a way of proceeding obliges scholars of such ancient events to propose hypotheses and conjectures regarding the timing and motives of such choices. I too have had to proceed in this way and in so doing have often strayed from the traditional criteria. My way of proceeding was dictated by the conviction that the Vespucci question is “a badly put question”: these are the words that open the great philological study by Luciano Formisano (1985), and I totally agree. Supported by this conviction, I have examined how some misunderstandings came to arise and how they subsequently became exaggerated. I have dedicated the final part of the book to this examination, while I have always clarified how and why I distance myself from standard narratives, confining part of these technical justifications to the notes, so as not to weigh down the reader. I have also carefully indicated in what ways my conjectures can be confirmed or refuted. I leave such verification to others as I cannot do it myself given my advanced age.

Among the important gaps to be filled in the scholarship on Vespucci, I would like to mention three. The first one concerns the events of the time between December 1497 and February 1498. I offer here a reconstruction based on the evidence we have at our disposal. I derive this evidence from cartography. The second gap (which cannot be reconstructed, yet) concerns Vespucci’s flight from Portugal and his arrival in Sevilla between December 1504 and January 1505. The third problem indirectly relates to Vespucci as it concerns the mapping of the New World by Christopher Columbus.

Note on translation

Unless otherwise specified, the English quotations contained herein are my own translations of the original texts.

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