

10 Vespucci's Third Voyage and the Announcement of a New World (1501-1502)

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10.1 The Flotilla Piloted by Vespucci Meets the Ships from Cabral's Fleet at Cape Verde

It had been prearranged that the small fleet piloted by Vespucci should set sail from Lisbon towards the middle of May 1501. A few days before leaving, Amerigo saw to the stowage of the scientific material on the caravels. The *maestre* took care of stowing the supplies of food, water and wine necessary for a voyage lasting a year and a half, together with the *padroes* sculpted in Lisbon. The captain major, André Gonçalves,¹ had received the usual instructions that foresaw a rendezvous with Cabral's ships in the last week of the month at Cape Verde, as well as about how to treat the indigenous populations. The crew embarked on May 13, 1501. At dawn the next day, on the ebb tide, the ships navigated the six miles separating Lisbon's river port from the sea and, with a good aft wind, the three caravels sailed southward. On the fifth day, they crossed the archipelago of the Canary Islands and then for two days the sailors fished in the bountiful shallows to stock up with fish.

1 The name of André Gonçalves as captain of the *naveta* and then commander of the subsequent Portuguese expedition of three ships begun in May 1501 and completed in September 1502 appears in the work of Gaspar Correia *Lendas da Índia* (vol. 1, pt. 1, 152). The only known participant in this expedition was Gherardo Verde, who had the trust of both Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco and Bartolomeo Marchionni; he left the fleet at Bezequiche to board the *Anunciada* in order to collect goods and information to send to Florence.

On May 27, they sighted the Cape Verde Peninsula, clearly recognisable by the narrow verdant promontory extending towards the west, interrupting the grey profile of the beaches of Senegal. They had sailed trouble-free at a speed of eight knots for eight days in a row.

They arrived in time for the meeting with the ships from Cabral's fleet that had regrouped there as pre-arranged in order to return to Lisbon together. Great news was expected. As soon as the three caravels rounded the hook-shaped cape, they saw the city known by its inhabitants as Bezeguiche (now Dakar) and the small island of Gorée, which protected the port, in front of which several ships were anchored. One of these vessels was Diogo Dias's caravel, which by itself and for a long time had explored the waters, islands and coasts of East Africa. The three caravels from Lisbon anchored nearby and, after exchanging greetings, the sailors were informed of the disaster suffered by the Second Fleet and its unfortunate return from those coasts. The next day, the *Anunciada* arrived, the great ship chartered from Bartolomeo Marchionni and Girolamo Sernigi, captained by the capable Nicolau Coelho (see Chapter 8). The crews shouted greetings to each other, asking for news of friends and relatives and of the riches they were carrying to the homeland.

As soon as he could, Amerigo Vespucci asked for details of the Portuguese fleet's great enterprise. He explained in turn that his three ships were travelling towards the lands they had discovered a year earlier, across the Ocean Sea. Perhaps he also spoke about the idea of reaching the same places they had reached but by navigating other seas. He talked the most with Gaspar da Gama, a Jewish native of Goa who had sailed in the service of Vasco da Gama and knew the places he had just returned from very well. Using a rather rudimentary map, he listed the ports of call of East Africa (including those on the Red Sea), of the Persian Gulf and of western India. He also added that in the interior of the great Indian peninsula there was "a kingdom called Parlicati [Pulicat], which is a great kingdom rich in gold and pearls and jewels and precious stones". Gaspar da Gama then told Vespucci about the island of Zilan [Sri Lanka, or Ceylon], which he insisted should not be confused with the island of Tapobrana [Sumatra]. Zilan is also "very rich in precious stones, pearls and spices of all types, and other riches such as elephants and very fine pairs of horses".²

The "Seconda lettera familiare" provides more information that Amerigo thought useful to his former employer for trading in the market of such expensive goods:

[t]he said ships carry the following: they are loaded with infinite amounts of cinnamon; ginger, both green and dried; much pepper, cloves, nutmegs and their parts; musk and civet; storax; spicewood; cassia; gum; incense and myrrh; red and white sandalwood; camphor; grey amber; lacquer and tar; opium; aloe [...] and many other foodstuffs that it would be long to list them all.

He then adds, "I know nothing certain about jewels, except that I saw many diamonds, pearls and rubies, and among these one of beautiful colour that weighed seven and a half carats inserted in a stone".³

² "Seconda lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 51v.

³ "Seconda lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 52r.



Figure 10.1 The port of Dakar (then known as Bezequiche) is situated at the western end of the Cape Verde Peninsula and is protected by the small island of Gorée

The endless list of places and cities and the wealth of goods transported on the ships may have sounded exaggerated, and so Vespucci added, “Believe me Lorenzo that what I have written thus far is the truth”. Lastly, considering his own future in the light of the tragic losses suffered by Cabral’s fleet, he concludes,

This voyage I now undertake I see is dangerous [...] none the less I undertake it with a candid spirit to serve God and the world. If God has made use of me it will give me virtue as I am prepared to carry out all His wishes, provided He grants my soul eternal rest.⁴

As his flotilla was about to leave Cape Verde, Amerigo hurriedly finished the letter and entrusted it to Gherardo Verde who travelled with him and embarked on the *Anunciada* that was going to Cadiz; from Cadiz he travelled to Florence. Thus, the letter, copied and recopied by the merchants who were interested in it, has come down to us.

10.2 Vespucci Undertakes the Third Crossing of the Ocean Sea

The ocean crossing, on the shortest route between Africa and the New World, proved to be very long and fraught with dangers, just as Amerigo had foreseen. A few days after they left the safe port of Bezequiche (Dakar), sailing south-south-east, the three caravels entered a vast area of low pressure, as can be encountered along the equatorial belt, and for forty-four days they proceeded under an interminable storm. Night and day, a dark sky poured torrential rain on the small fleet tossed by the violence of the waves. The fires that were kept burning at the stern meant that the pilots did not lose sight of each other, but the wood and drinking water were running out. The crews were afraid that the end was near when Amerigo, during a moment when the night sky cleared, managed to distinguish some of the stars of Ur-

⁴ “Seconda lettera familiare”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 52v.

sa Minor low on the horizon, and using the astrolabe he managed to establish the latitude. He also noted that the compass needle pointed just east of the celestial pole instead of slightly west of it. This change in the magnetic declination indicated, as Christopher Columbus had established on his first voyage, that they were just beyond the meridian of the Azores. Having made his calculations, Amerigo announced that dry land was not far off, perhaps a week's navigation to the west. At this good news, the captain major gave the command to him for the time necessary to reach land. The new course was followed and, finally, after many days of difficult navigation, on August 17, 1500 they sighted land at latitude 5° South.

10.3 A Hostile Reception: Three Sailors are Killed and Eaten by Cannibals

The captains anchored the caravels about two miles off shore. Those who had travelled along these coasts knew of the many hidden obstacles where the sea was shallow. All knew the sad adventure of Columbus's flagship (§ 3.3) and the more recent incident of the *El Rey* (§ 8.2), so that everyone adapted without discussion to the principle: never expose the ship that must take you home to any risk.

The seashore was deserted, but the openings in the thick vegetation, as well as the smoke rising above the trees, showed that there were people. On coming ashore, the captain major took possession of the land in the name of King Manuel. The brevity of the navigation undertaken after crossing the meridian of the Azores persuaded him that they had not passed the *raya*,⁵ and thus the ceremony was justified. A squad went in search of provisions. They collected wood and drew water from a nearby source. While they were doing this, they noticed that a large number of natives had gathered on a high hilltop to watch them. They were naked and looked like others Amerigo had seen, but these natives were suspicious and did not respond to the signs of invitation. Therefore, the sailors left the bells and mirrors and other trinkets they had brought with them clearly visible on the beach, got back in their boats and departed from the shore: it was dusk. While they rowed back to the anchored ships, they saw the natives hurriedly come down the hill and take the things left on the sand.

The next morning, from the ships, they saw that the natives seen the day before were on the beach and were making smoke signals, which seemed to be calling them. The boats returned to the eagerly desired land, as perhaps riches were awaiting them. Using signs, the natives indicated that the sailors should go with them into the interior, and two crewmen asked the captain for permission to "go with them to the interior to see what kind of people they are and if they had any riches or spices, or other goods".⁶ The captain agreed on the understanding that the sailors return within five days. Taking the usual things to barter with the natives, they set off full of hope.

⁵ The *raya* was the demarcation line between the territories belonging to Portugal situated to the east and the Spanish lands to the west. The *raya* ran more or less from the mouth of the Amazon River southward along the present-day meridian 50° W.

⁶ "Lettera a Soderini". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 116r.

Von der neuen welt

darß vō den vōlcern andere kaußte/vñ sind vō vns
gangen/mit dem geding/dz sy zū vns nach fünf tagen
vff das höchst sorgten wider zekommen/wann wir ir
so lang warteten/vnd also haben sy den weg angriffen
vnd wir die widerfart zū vnsern schiffen genen.



Figure 10.2 Natives, using women as bait, attract a Portuguese sailor, whom is killed by one of them with a club.
Image from a German edition of Vespucci's *Von der neuen Welt* (Strasbourg, 1509)

The natives came and went, but did not communicate with the new arrivals, and five days passed, then six and then seven. Finally, on the seventh day, when the sailors came ashore the natives appeared with their women:

And given that they were still unsure, we agreed to send one of our men, who was an agile and valiant youth, and to best reassure them we went back to the boats, and he went among the women, and as he reached them they formed a great circle around him and began to touch and feel him, wondering at him in amazement. We saw a woman come down from the hill carrying a great stick in her hand. When she reached the place where our Christian stood, she went up behind him, raised the club and gave him such a blow that he fell dead on the ground. Immediately the women took him by the feet and dragged him towards the hill and the men rushed towards the beach and shot at us with their bows and arrows.⁷

A treacherous ambush, and once again women were used as the bait. Under a hail of arrows, no one managed to go ashore. They shot four rounds from the bombard, which missed the target but the noise scattered the attackers. The captain major forbade the sailors to hunt down the assassins, and the orders in this regard were peremptory. Thus, all were powerless witnesses to the dismemberment of their companion's body and watched in horror as he was roasted for a cannibalesque banquet. The cannibals mocked them and made it clear that the two companions they were waiting for had met the same end, "and they were sated by so much outrage, and we departed from them unwillingly and with much shame caused by the decision of our captain".

In actual fact, this tragedy was not the captain major's fault, as he was only following orders. The fault lay with those who had preceded this expedition in the area and had left very bad memories of their behaviour. The dark mood caused by this event and by being forbidden to retaliate accompanied them for a long time as they sailed.

Proceeding eastward, they reached a characteristic locality that was named the Ponta dos Tres Irmãos (Point of the Three Brothers) because of the presence of a row of three isolated hills. The ships then anchored nine miles further east, in a tranquil place that was given the name 'Praia dos Marcos'. As had been arranged, it was on this beach during the night between the August 31 and September 1 that Amerigo calculated the time of the conjunction between the Moon and the planet Jupiter.⁸ According to the ephemerides, this event would also be seen in Lisbon when the Moon partially eclipsed the planet at 23:18. The difference between the two measurements made it possible to establish the longitude of the land, which indicated that it definitely belonged to Portugal and not Spain, thus showing that Vicente Yáñez Pinzón was wrong when he claimed those places in the name of the Spanish Crown. Proud of this, the sailors erected the first of the three *padroes*.⁹

After a short navigation, they reached the point where the coast turned south-east. This time, they stayed out at sea, managing to get the better of

⁷ "Lettera a Soderini", folio 116v.

⁸ I owe this information and the calculation of the astronomical events used here to Prof. Vincenzo Millucci of the University of Siena. I thank him warmly for his expertise and patience.

⁹ The places where the *padroes* were positioned have been identified by Luzzana Caraci, *Per lasciare di me qualche fama*.



Figure 10.3 The third voyage of Amerigo: Lisbon May 19, 1501–September 7, 1502. 1) departure from Lisbon; 2) meeting with Cabral’s ships and stay until May 30, crossing in 67 days; 3) arrival in the New World at 5°S on August 17, the natives kill and eat three sailors; 4) landing at Praia dos Marcos on August 31 and calculation of longitude; 5) landing at Baía de Todos os Santos and second calculation of longitude between the September 27 and 28; 6) long stay at Porto Seguro; 7) January 6, 1502, stop at Rio de Janeiro; 8) January 15, a stop to take stock of the situation; 9) landing at Puerto San Julián (49°18’S) on March 6; 10) the islands now called the Falklands are sighted on April 7, beginning of the journey home; 11) arrival at Sierra Leone on May 10 and a long stay; 12) arrival at the Azores in mid-August and a long stay; return to Lisbon

the violent marine currents, which during the voyage two years earlier had obliged Juan de La Cosa and Amerigo Vespucci to invert their course. The three caravels then stopped in the bay of Pititinga. It was a long stay. Almost one month after the measurement of the longitude, they reached the Cape of Saint Augustine (south of present-day Recife), the easternmost point of the continent. They also stayed there for quite a while, while two boats searched that stretch of very insidious sea and a third sailed up the great São Francisco River to the point where the mountain chains seemed to close the river to both the north and south. After another month dedicated to searching the sea and hinterlands, on November 1 the flotilla reached a splendid bay, today called Baía. On the map he was making, Amerigo wrote “Badia di tutti e’ Santi” (All Saints’ Abbey), using the name of one of the beautiful churches in Florence that overlooked the river Arno, the memory of which was very dear to him.

Today the city of Salvador stands on the promontory closing the bay to the north, and here Amerigo again calculated the longitude using, in the night between September 27 and 28, the maximum vicinity between the Moon and Jupiter. In this way, he again established that this land belonged to Portugal. To commemorate this, the second *padrão* was erected.

From Baía, the coastline continued almost straight southward as far as Cape Caravelas. In those parts, the expedition encountered a friendly and curious tribe. The natives accepted gifts of bells and mirrors, and they gladly participated in the game of indicating an object or person, pronouncing the name in their own language and listening to the name in Portuguese. Some revealed themselves to be very quick learners and some of the visitors proposed to take two of them onboard as interpreters. Three Indios agreed to leave with the flotilla and trustingly embarked. They set sail once again towards the south; Captain Gonçalves recognised a less humid environment, a sparser forest, and knew that Porto Seguro was not far off.

10.4 Return to Porto Seguro

The ocean was calm, but the waters were becoming dangerous, with reefs and sandbanks, and then the lookout in the crow’s nest, having recognised the place, shouts, “Porto Seguro!” While the three caravels entered the vast calm expanse of water all in a line, the natives, all of them naked, crowded onto the beach making a great commotion. Two men clothed in rags arrived in a hurry and were more agitated than the rest. When they entered the water to get closer, they could be heard to shout greetings in Portuguese! They were the *degradados*,¹⁰ the two condemned men left there by Cabral who had survived more than twenty months in that land with the help of the natives: breathless from running they cried and laughed at the same time.

The captain major, Vespucci and several sailors went to inspect the village situated between the scented forest and the vast sea. They also inspected the *malocas*, the large houses built by the natives, inside which they had a macabre surprise. Pieces of smoked meat, certainly human, hung from the ceilings, the remains of enemies killed in the recurring local conflicts.

¹⁰ Mentioned by Valentim Fernandes who adds that they were taken back to the expedition’s homeland (cf. Luzzana Caraci, *Per lasciare di me qualche fama*, 148 fn. 22, 168 fn. 122).

Similar trophies became, together with parrots, the emblems of those extraordinary lands. Apart from this particular, Porto Seguro seemed the ideal place for a long stay. Part of the time could be dedicated to gathering information about the existence of wealth in the form of spices, gold and precious stones, but first it was necessary to map the geography of this land that seemed increasingly vast and without confines. They had interpreters, the three Indios they had brought with them for the purpose and the two Portuguese who in a year and a half had learnt a great deal. In this regard, Vespucci was very lucky: he was shown an old man who lived in the village and had arrived there some time before, and he came from a nomadic tribe that wandered, it must be presumed, much further south.

Amerigo decided to live in the village with the natives, as he had done on previous occasions, sleeping in their comfortable hammocks and eating their food, which tasted much better than the biscuit and dry fish eaten aboard ship.

He lists many animals: lions, pumas, jaguars, cats differing from the Spanish ones and lynxes (in reality these were large cats), small wild pigs (peccaries), roe deer, deer, fallow deer, hares and rabbits, and very long snakes. He did not forget the monkeys: "baboons and *gatti mammoni* [magical creatures] of all types". He also mentions bears, which were perhaps anteaters, and birds, including numerous parrots, more than Pliny could have imagined. Amerigo concludes, "I believe that so many species would not have fit into Noah's ark".

10.5 The Natives Provide Important Information

Amerigo would often spend many hours at the beach where, with the help of interpreters, he sought to gather information from the very old Indio with the lined face and vivid memory. The man, drawing with a stick in the sand, explained that to the west lay an endless chain of high mountains covered with glistening white snow, which could be seen by travelling up the river. Amerigo asked, "Even the river that flows into the lagoon of Porto Seguro?" - "Certainly, travelling up all the rivers" - "What is beyond the mountains?" - "Long narrow plains, beaches and a great sea, like the one in front of us".

For other questions it was hard to find the right words to understand each other and the drawings in the sand became confused, "Is there a passage leading to this sea?" - Amerigo insisted - "I have been told that where it is always cold and the nights are long there is a river that crosses the mountains". Amerigo continued - "Is the river water drinkable or not?" "I do not know, many moons have passed", the old man digressed. "How many moons have you lived?" - "Many, many" - the old man, concentrated, collected pebbles from the beach and arranged them like an abacus, the answer was precise "1700 moons"; Vespucci interprets: "I think that makes 132 years, counting 13 lunar cycles per year".

Apart from the age of the old Indio, his conversation with Amerigo is imaginary, but not completely. The questions are invented, but the answers are unequivocally documented on the map drawn up and printed by the cartographers Waldseemüller and Ringmann. It is a faithful interpretation of what the sailors on the three caravels had heard and seen with their own eyes: the long Cordillera of the Andes is drawn as a pile of mounds, as was the custom in Tuscany (see § 13.4 and fig. 13.5), and the western coast of

the new continent and an ocean never navigated or even seen by Europeans also appear.¹¹

In Vespucci's narration, there is no passage to the south-west between the two oceans; nor does it appear on the projection used by Waldseemüller. However, during navigation, the sailors were constantly on the lookout for it, and they believed they saw its entrance.

When the flotilla was preparing to continue its long and difficult journey, the two *degradados* boarded a ship, still incredulous of their good fortune. They brought with them objects given to them by the Indios with whom they had lived.¹²

10.6 The Customs of a Population with a Late Neolithic Culture

Cabral's men have left us vivid and fleeting images of the village of Porto Seguro, albeit rather superficial ones as the encounter only lasted a few days. After living with the natives for a month, Vespucci described a society whose subsistence was largely based on fishing and gathering 'roots', in addition to eating fresh fruit, which was also used to produce a slightly alcoholic drink fermented in terracotta pots. In addition to fishing, the necessary protein in their diet was provided by hunting (mainly iguanas) and cannibalism. It was a balanced and plentiful diet, which did not transmit parasites and intestinal infections and was guaranteed throughout the year. It required little work, leaving time for relaxation and the care of the body, which for those people consisted in carefully shaving and removing all body hair, painting the skin and deforming the face, although only men practised the latter.

The tribe was not hierarchical and its social structure was not bound by laws. Internal frictions were minimal, almost non-existent, one reason being that private property did not exist. It was their custom to share everything; such a practice persisted among the tribes of Terra del Fuego when Charles Darwin visited there at the beginning of the 19th century.¹³

Therefore, life within the tribe was peaceful, but there were frequent clashes with neighbouring tribes,

And when they fight, they kill each other with the utmost cruelty, and whoever is victorious buries his own dead and dismembers his enemies and

¹¹ In this period, the Indios, like all populations conserving part of the Neolithic culture, had a precise awareness of the geographical conformation of their country, even on a broad scale. There is no direct information for the Tupí-Guaraní people, but we have information about the Mexican populations from both Peter Martyr and Hernán Cortés, who wrote that they had maps drawn on textiles made of cotton or agave fibres in which towns, villages, watercourses and mountains were in the correct position. Cortés used them during the conquest of Mexico (see Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*). It is also known that the Inuit people were able to precisely draw places and itineraries with which to move about the Arctic lands, while Charles Darwin in his *Journal of Researches into the Natural History etc.* (ch. 10) states that the Fuegians (inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego) gave a name to every detail of the landscape in their barren territory.

¹² This results from a notarial act in which the noted humanist and editor Valentim Fernandes guarantees the authenticity of the objects taken to Lisbon by two sailors. See Amado, Figueiredo, "Documento puoco conhecido sobre o Brasil, documento puoco conhecido sobre o Brasil de 1500".

¹³ Darwin, *Journal of Researches into the Natural History etc.*, ch. 10.

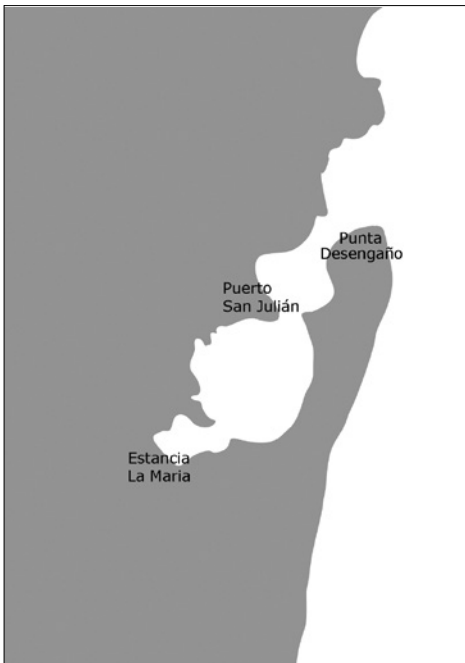


Figure 10.4 Puerto San Julián, where Amerigo's flotilla anchored on March 6, 1501, and where Magellan's fleet also sheltered on March 31, 1520 before departing for his circumnavigation of the globe. The privateer Francis Drake also wintered there with his ships in 1578, prior to sailing around the world. Lastly, the *Beagle*, the brig under the command of Robert FitzRoy, with Charles Darwin on board, passed through here in 1834 during its voyage around the world

eats them. The captives are imprisoned and kept as slaves in their houses; and if a woman, they sleep with her, if a man they wed him to their daughters. In certain moments, when they are taken by a devilish temper, they gather together relatives and other people, they stand an enslaved mother and all the children had by her in front of them, and with certain rituals kill them, piercing them with arrows, and eat them. The same is done with enslaved men and their offspring. This is certain, because we found smoked human flesh in their houses. We bought 10 children from them, males and females whom they had decided to sacrifice (or, rather 'to damn'). We strongly rebuked them, I do not know whether they will change their ways.¹⁴

On this occasion, Amerigo spent time describing the natives' sexual habits. He noted that the women, although naked, moved with composure without showing their genitals, and they were helped in this by the conformation of their thighs. However, they seemed very libidinous, as they, not the men, initiated free and public sexual relations. The women were also in the habit of forcing the men to use a dangerous erectile stimulant, consisting of insect larvae covered with stinging hairs, similar to the cantharis or 'Spanish fly', a beetle used for the same purpose in Europe.

Amerigo was shocked that the women took such initiatives, just as it is still shocking to certain irritating conformists who deplore the fact that he

14 "Terza lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folios 54vb and 55ra. The cannibalism and many other particulars detailed here are confirmed by a German gunner who was held prisoner for many months by the Tupinambá and was fortunate enough to be released: Staden, *Warhaftige Historia und Beschreibung eyner Landtschafft*.

talked openly about such things. However, they are wrong, as his testimony is allusive and only becomes explicit in the *Novus Mundus* written in Latin.¹⁵ In any case, female initiative in sexual relations seems to have much earlier origins and still exists in a matriarchal population in eastern Tibet, called the Naxi and belonging to the Moso group of Tibetan origin. This is an interesting coincidence, since the Native American populations (except the Inuit peoples) have Tibetan origins.

Seen from this perspective, the behaviour of the Indio women makes it easier to understand the natives' reaction to the violence perpetrated by the foreigners on their women, which appeared to them absurd as well as wicked.¹⁶ After witnessing such violence, the Indios thought to exploit the new arrivals' weakness, while the women agreed to offer themselves as bait to trap the foreigners.

From Vespucci's description, it can be established that, at the end of the 15th century, the Tupí-Guaraní population constituted a vast ethnos, which at the time, on the threshold of the agricultural revolution, appeared as a late Neolithic culture. Indeed, they lived by fishing and gathering and knew neither bronze nor iron, and not even maize (Vespucci was definite about this, but is belied by Girolamo Sernigi) or the banana, a plant they would grow some years later.¹⁷

Two years prior to Vespucci, another traveller, Michele de Cuneo, had described the Camballi (Cannibals) who lived further north of the islands in the Caribbean Sea as a population with a more developed culture than the Tupí. They were great cultivators, in addition to gathering fruit and tobacco leaves. Their society included the figure of tribal chief (*Cacique*), who in some cases was subordinate to another more authoritative chieftain.

During the Renaissance, the description of an unstructured and anarchic society such as that provided by Vespucci in the *Mundus Novus* and the "Lettera a Soderini" stimulated a number of writers, who felt that the weight of incongruous rules and laws impeded the ability to imagine freer societies. The first of a long series was Thomas More who, in *Utopia* published in 1516, recognised Vespucci's merits as a traveller and narrator. Years later, Michel de Montaigne reflected critically in his *Essai* (1580) on the customs of the natives in the New World, as described by the first navigators and explorers, and on the tragic clash between the *conquistadores* and the Indios.

10.7 Further and Further South, in Search of the Passage to Beyond

Having left Porto Seguro, the flotilla piloted by Amerigo anchored below Mount Pascoal, in the place where Cabral had taken possession of the Land of Vera Cruz in the name of King Manuel, after which it continued south. The series of saint's names from each day of the calendar that appear along the coast tell us that on December 13 they stopped at the mouth of the Santa

¹⁵ The use of a language known only to a few, such as Latin, to discuss salacious subjects is ancient and lasted until the end of the 1800s.

¹⁶ See § 7.6.

¹⁷ The banana would be introduced to the New World in those years by friars from a monastery on the Canary Islands who had received them from Morocco.

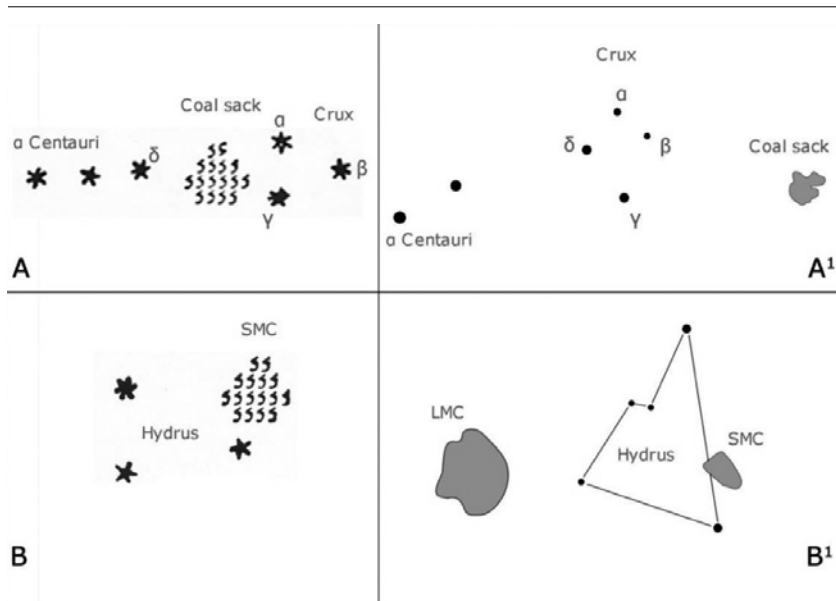


Figure 10.5 Comparison of the two surviving images of the Southern Sky outlined by Vespucci, realised with incunabula in the Roman edition of the *Mundus Novus* (A and B), with more recent astronomical images of the same sky (A1 and B1). The group of letters on the left, named ‘Canopo scuro’ by Vespucci (in A), represents the Coalsack nebula (in A1), whose position does not correspond in the two images. Below (B), the constellation of *Hydrus* with the Small Magellanic Cloud (SMC) on the right. LMC represent the Large Magellanic Cloud. Of the two drawings made by Vespucci, the second (B) is very close to reality, while the first (A) is less so. The mistake in positioning the Coalsack could have been made by the typesetter

Lucía River and the map tells us that the boats travelled some way upriver; on about December 20 they sighted the Serra São Thomé (today Serra de Caymore). On the Epiphany they reached the splendid Baía dos Reis, that is the Bay of the Three Wise Men, where the city of Rio de Janeiro stands today.

On the Waldseemüller Map, beyond the edge of that bay (within which the *Ilha do Governador* is not marked) the enigmatic words *piñachullo dcentio* appear. This text has been interpreted in various and contrasting ways. In fact, *piñachullo* can be translated as ‘pinnacle’, while *dcentio* means nothing unless it is read *detentio* and translated from an improbable Latin as ‘detention’ or ‘imprisonment’. More likely is the reading *do tentio*, to be interpreted as a humorous reference to the Corcovado hill, or to some curious episode, in a similar manner to *vazia baril*, which appears below the São Francisco River and translates as ‘empty the barrel’.

After the stay at Baía dos Reis, the expedition reached Porto São Sebastião. Here, during the night between January 17 and 18, Amerigo measured the longitude for the third time. He used the ephemerides calculated in Lisbon, again relative to the maximum approach of Mars and the Moon, when their azimuths coincided; the event was visible in Lisbon at about midnight.¹⁸ The third marker was not positioned here, perhaps because it was far from the confines of Portugal’s possessions, but at Cananéia, reached the following week and closer to that border. On January 25, the fleet anchored

¹⁸ This information was provided by Vincenzo Millucci, whom I warmly thank.

between Cananéia and the opposite island, a place named by the mapmaker, using bad Latin, as *Rio de Cananorum*.¹⁹

The expedition fulfilled its obligation to confirm that the Land of Vera Cruz discovered by Cabral belonged to Portugal together with other neighbouring lands. *It also ascertained that the New World constituted an actual continent*, which blocked for a great distance the continuation of journeys to the Moluccas. What else remained to be achieved? The captain major asked the other captains about the condition of their ships and crews and how much longer they would be able to continue navigation. The reply was six months. He therefore asked Vespucci to decide what to do, as he was better able to orient himself in those waters and had the clearest ideas on how to proceed.

The information obtained from the Indios led Amerigo to believe that the passage west was close by. He was in the same situation as Bartolomeu Dias had been thirteen years earlier. The Portuguese navigator, having unexpectedly found the opening towards the east after a great tempest, had to choose: continue into the unknown or return home? Dias had persuaded the crew to carry on. In the same way, Amerigo, faced with the alternative of returning home or continuing to navigate in the cold southern autumn and in unknown stormy waters, came to a decision. He decided they should take on enough supplies for six months and proceed south, hoping to find the passage towards Asia.

The voyage continued as far as latitude 52° South. Amerigo wrote almost nothing about what occurred during this period, and the map that has guided us so far is also silent. It is unrealistic to believe that the expedition wandered as if on vacation for a month and a half in the icy and tempestuous waters of Patagonia. It is more logical to believe that the navigator continued to seek the south-west passage of which he had heard more from the nomadic natives who roamed those places; it is precisely the names attributed to these places that provide us with a common thread.

Saint Julian, Bishop of Toledo, is celebrated on March 6. On that day, the flotilla finally came to what seemed to be the mouth of a channel leading to the other sea. The pilots entered, sailing along its northern coast and soon reached a vast bay of calm water. They continued onwards and after some time reached the back of the bay.

Continuing to follow the coast that turned north-east, all hoped to find a way turning west that led to the other sea, but having sailed around a promontory they were disappointed to find themselves in the turbulent ocean once again. The promontory was named Punta Desengaño (Delusion Point), and it is still known as such, in memory of that moment of discouragement.

The expedition obstinately continued to sail southward in the face of increasing difficulties. After having navigated for about 60 leagues, Amerigo managed to calculate the latitude: 52° South. At that moment, the sailors in the crow's nest thought they saw the opening of a channel between the high, sheer black cliffs battered by crashing waves. They were in great danger and the ships were forced to distance themselves from that inferno by veering east.

Amerigo never described this brusque finale, but having sailed right round the bay they were back at the entrance; many of the sailors remained

¹⁹ The name Cananea is that of a locality in East India where the Portuguese had established a first base during Cabral's voyage. Amerigo had news of it from Gaspar da Gama when they met in the port of Cape Verde.

convinced they had seen the mouth of the sought-after channel. We have the testimony of Antonio Pigafetta of Vicenza regarding this conviction, who twenty years later was aboard the flagship of the expedition led by Ferdinand Magellan. Pigafetta wrote,

And if it were not for the captain major we would not have found this entrance, as all thought and said that it was closed all around, but the captain general knew he had to navigate a hidden passage as he had seen it in the King of Portugal's treasury on a map made by the very excellent Martin Behaim.²⁰

Most of Magellan's biographers refute the words written by the chronicler from Vicenza using rather weak justifications.²¹ However, it is completely plausible that Martin Behaim, or someone before him, had gathered information from the veterans of the 1501-1502 Portuguese expedition. This fact is confirmed by the attempt made shortly afterwards by the Portuguese, who sent the expedition of Gonçalo Coelho including Vespucci as a pilot, as well as the expedition prepared by the Spanish in 1503-1506, once again entrusted to Vespucci and subsequently revoked (see Chapter 12 and Epilogue). Besides, Magellan headed precisely to Puerto San Julián to overwinter before finding the strait that the great geographer Mercator was to name after him.

Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the Portuguese expedition of 1501-1502 provided Magellan with vital information, much of which the explorers had learnt from the Indios.

10.8 Amerigo Vespucci, Astronomer

Today little attention is paid to the stars, which are obscured by light pollution and smog. Yet, only a century ago they were an important part of everyday life, so much so that children were taught to identify the most luminous planets and stars, to call them by their names, and to recognise the constellations. These notions, useful for finding one's bearings in the dark of the night, were also used in certain circumstances for calculating the time during the night, or the date.

During his third voyage, Amerigo, who had learnt how to use the astronomical instruments of the period from Rabbi Zacuto, managed to calculate the position of the brightest stars and establish their magnitude. He identified the two small constellations of *Crux* (with the Southern Cross) and *Hydrus*, and he discovered two *Canopi chiari*, two luminous clouds today named after Magellan, and also a *Canopo scuro*,²² a dark nebula now known as the Coalsack. Lastly, he established that the southern celestial

²⁰ Martin Behaim (1439-1506) made an excellent globe which, according to tradition, Magellan showed to Emperor Charles V to convince him to finance one of his projects.

²¹ According to Camillo Manfroni, editor of *Relazione del primo viaggio intorno al mondo* by Antonio Pigafetta, Magellan was cheated out of his discovery "by Spanish nationalists who cannot accept the fact that the discovery was made by a foreigner" (94 fn.). According to Laurence Bergreen, author of *Over the Edge of the World*, Pigafetta's view is refuted by the fact that the channel does not appear on Behaim's globe, except that Pigafetta talks of a *map* and not a *globe*, which besides dates to 1495. Others argue the question pointlessly.

²² *Canopo* is used by Vespucci in the general sense of 'celestial body' that it has in the Semitic languages.

pole was situated almost at the centre of the triangle with the stars *Achernar*, α Trianguli and β Carinae at its vertices and whose hypotenuse touches the Small Magellanic Cloud. The identification of the southern celestial pole was indispensable to him for establishing the orbits travelled around it by the most luminous stars.

During the full moon, the study of the stars was disturbed by too much light. However, Amerigo, while observing the rainy sky with his back to the Moon, noted a wide luminous arch similar to the multicoloured rainbow seen by day. He called his companions of adventure to confirm what he saw and their reply was positive; yes, the 'moonbow' was there. Today we know that the lunar rainbow exists, but moonlight, diffracted by water droplets suspended in the atmosphere, is too weak for the human eye to distinguish the colours within it.

Continuing towards the highest southern latitudes, where the nights in late autumn became very long as well as very cold, Amerigo sighted strange flashes of light in the sky and made note of them; perhaps they were the *aurora australis*, corresponding to the Northern Hemisphere's *aurora borealis*. After many long nights watching the sky, Amerigo felt proud to have undertaken so much work that would be of use to scholars.

10.9 The Epic Crossing to Sierra Leone

On April 7, 1502, the night lasted 15 hours and before the end of the day the lookouts sighted a new land among the autumn mists towards the south: the Falkland Islands as they are known today. They followed the grey coast for twenty leagues, the length of the northern part of the islands that appeared deserted and wild and offered no port or shelter. There was no point in trying to stop there as the cold had become intolerable and the sky was darkening with the menace of a great storm. In the mist, the fires at the ships' sterns were almost invisible. The captain major consulted with Amerigo, the gale was almost upon them, and there was no time to waste. They signalled to the other ships to draw near; it was time to set a course for Portugal!

Amerigo had taken stock of the situation just before reaching Cananéia and from that meridian he had travelled east for about 60 leagues. He calculated a north-north-easterly course along which they would navigate to reach the port in western Guinea situated below Sierra Leone.

It was good advice, it is certain that if we had stayed that night, we would all have been lost, because as soon as the ships formed a line, for all the night and following day there was a great tempest and we thought we would be lost and made solemn vows to undertake pilgrimages and other rituals, as is the custom of sailors.²³

In five days, they travelled 250 leagues (about 1,250 km) towards more temperate climes. The ships sailed with bare masts, only the foresail was unfurled and kept low in order to keep the prow high above the rough seas. Subsequently, the sea became calmer and the air warmer. They crossed the Equator, and on May 10, by the grace of God, they sighted the coast

²³ "Lettera a Soderini", folio 118ra.

of Guinea and then Sierra Leone and its port. Amerigo narrates the thirty-one days of the most daring navigation undertaken to that date in just eight lines. The three caravels had crossed the Atlantic Ocean from south to north, sailing 1,500 leagues (7,500 km), overcoming the continuous violent storms that lash the latitudes of 50° and 40° South. Almost all scholars who have studied this enterprise have thought it impossible for those small and fragile ships, and none have dared trace on paper the course taken by the small fleet on its return voyage, except for Roberto Levillier in 1948 and Jean-Paul Duviols in 2005.²⁴

The flotilla stayed in Sierra Leone for fifteen days. One of the caravels had to be burned, as it was no longer sea-worthy. From this port, the surviving caravels sailed to the Azores, where they spent fifteen days during which Amerigo wrote up his astronomical observations in a booklet, which has not come down to us. After leaving Sierra Leone, the navigation was much slower, perhaps with the aim of returning on the deadline that had been established before the expedition's departure. Therefore, after fifteen months, eleven of which spent south of the Equator without the help of the North Star, on September 7, 1502, the protagonists of this great enterprise reached Lisbon.

10.10 Amerigo Returns to Lisbon from His Third Voyage and Announces the Existence of a New World

The news that the small fleet piloted by Amerigo Vespucci had returned from the long journey, rich in so many extraordinary discoveries, spread like wildfire from the port of Lisbon to the entire city. Pietro Rondinelli, a businessman and Vespucci's former colleague, came to hear about it. He was in Lisbon to gather information about the spice trade after the recent arrivals from the East Indies.

Rondinelli immediately went to see his old friend and found him to be proud of the results but very unhappy about the treatment he received from King Manuel to whom he had just recounted the expedition's success. The King had immediately paid Amerigo what he was due for the 16 months of navigation as a pilot, a very modest sum only double what was paid to a specialist mariner. He had also bestowed on him an order of chivalry, perhaps that of Christ,²⁵ which had also been awarded to Vasco da Gama. The King asked to see what he had written and documented during the voyage, also forcing him to swear that he would keep quiet about anything that could be of use to the Spanish. Amerigo was very embittered and indignant about this and much else besides. This mood transpires from the announcement of his enterprise that he sent to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, his patron and friend in Florence.

²⁴ Levillier, *America le bien llamada*; Jean-Paul Duviols, *Le nouveau monde: Les voyages d'Amerigo Vespucci*.

²⁵ On October 3, 1502, Pietro Rondinelli wrote: "We will have Amerigo Vespucci here [in Seville] in a few days' time, who has undergone great labours and has had little profit, which merited more than the order" (*Codice Vaglianti*, folio 57rb). The abbot Angelo M. Bandini wrote: "The gratitude of the King of Portugal wished to perpetuate the memory of so great a man, by hanging as an immortal trophy in the Lisbon Cathedral the glorious remains of his conquering ship named the *Victoria*, which like the ship of Argus had courageously ploughed unknown seas". *Vita e lettere di Amerigo Vespucci*, Firenze MDCCXLV.

He sums up the results of that voyage in a short six-page letter (the “Terza lettera familiare”) in two brief phrases, “we arrived in a new land, which we found to be a terra firma for many reasons that will be told” and adds some lines later,

To conclude, I was down in the Antipodes, which by my navigation was in the fourth part of the world; the point of my highest zenith in that part formed a spherical right angle with those of the inhabitants of this north that are at longitude of 40° [from Gomara]; and this is enough.²⁶

After these words, Vespucci makes no further mention of his discovery but only writes about natural history, repeating things already said. However, it is opportune to cite two more short passages that help us to interpret two important facts, “I noted many wonderful works of God, and determined to inform your Magnificence of them, as I always have of *my other voyages*”. In this phrase, the plural indicates that Amerigo had undertaken two voyages prior to this, not one only. The other phrase reads,

All the notable things that happened to me during my voyage I have collected in a notebook so that when I am in retirement I can deal with them *to leave some fame of myself after my death*. I intend to send you a summary, but His Serene Highness the King is keeping it: when he returns it to me it will be done.²⁷

Amerigo continued diligently to reorganise the results of his travels, initially working during the stopovers on the journey home. He also worked, together with some of the captains who had sailed with Cabral, on the necessary updating of the *Padrão Real*, of which he had made a copy for personal use before departing on his voyage. He was increasingly convinced of the validity of the idea, which he mentioned in the “Prima lettera familiare” sent to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, that the Earth was vaster than used to be thought and contained lands and seas that had remained unknown until that time.

Several weeks had passed since he sent the letter to his friend, when he received an unexpected visit from the preacher friar Giovanni Giocondo of Verona, probably sent by Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco who wished to know more than was written in the laconic message received. Giovanni Giocondo, a cultured and spirited man, was an interpreter of Latin inscriptions and above all the architect of excellent buildings and bridges which can be admired in Italy and France. He too was keen to learn more about the far-away, newly discovered world.

The friar obtained a second letter from Amerigo, which contained more news and precise affirmations regarding the existence of a new world, its inhabitants and its climate. Amerigo again complained that King Manuel had not returned his astronomical writings, and added a summary description of the Southern Sky and a sketch of the celestial bodies he had seen.

²⁶ “Terza lettera familiare”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 53r. The second phrase after the affirmation “fourth part of the world” becomes confused (deliberately?). Ramusio attempts an interpretation in his work *Delle navigazioni et viaggi*, vol. III.

²⁷ “Terza lettera familiare”. *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 53rb; emphasis added.

It is not known what route Giovanni Giocondo took on his home journey, or where he stopped. However, it seems certain that along the way he came to learn of the sudden death of the person to whom the letter was addressed. Unsure of what to do with it, he decided to translate it into Latin and have it printed. In the translation, he added some emphasis, exaggerating some extraordinary facts. He then handed it to a printer, it is not known whether in Augsburg in Germany or in Paris or Rome, and departed without seeing the proofs. The printer did his best but could not understand some words: he got Amerigo's name wrong, it became 'Alberico', and also Lorenzo's patronymic confusing him with Lorenzo di Piero, called the 'Magnificent'. Despite these errors and oversights, the eight printed pages that appeared in the late summer of 1503 were an incredible success. Within two years, more than twelve editions and reprints appeared in many European countries, in addition to translations in several languages.²⁸ Tens of thousands of copies spread the extraordinary announcement.

It must be clear to the reader that all of this occurred without Amerigo Vespucci's knowledge, as he, as will be seen below, was on the other side of the ocean during those months and was struggling, after the wreck of the flagship, to prepare the colonisation of Brazil, together with Fernando de Noronha. It should also be added that he earned no money from the printing of his letter because he did not benefit from any special 'privileges', as was often the case in that time.

28 The account of how the letter was published is taken from my paper: Omodeo, "The Authenticity of Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novus*".