

14 The Final Years of Vespucci and His Scientific Merits

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14.1 The Voyage to the Moluccas is Cancelled. Amerigo is Named Piloto Mayor

On becoming King of all Spain, Ferdinand of Aragon cancelled the expedition to the Moluccas: expenses continued to grow and funding did not work, while King Manuel who was suspicious of its objectives protested intensely. Therefore, Amerigo Vespucci and Vicente Yáñez Pinzón were entrusted with selling off the large quantity of supplies and the three ships acquired for the voyage.

In 1508, Vespucci, Vicente Yáñez Pinzón and Juan Díaz de Solís¹ were charged with escorting a large cargo of gold, from the mines identified by Columbus in the West Indies, and other goods belonging to the Queen that were in Burgos. On the same occasion, Amerigo was conferred with the title of *Piloto Mayor* (Chief Navigator) of the *Casa de Contratación*.

It was an important and well-paid position, which required him to instruct and examine those who wished to become sea captains. In practice, he had to organise a course of studies that led to an official qualification after passing an exam. Very little is known about the teaching Amerigo undertook in his own home,² but it is certain that he also taught map-making and how to calculate longitude according to the method he had devised and tested, and

¹ On Juan Díaz de Solís see *Le Historie*, vol. II, ch. LXXXIX, 90 fn. 6.

² The pilot Niño García wrote: "Amerigo me decia muchas veces que podia poner el cabo [S. Agustín] en 8°, hacienda yo cartas en su casa" (Amerigo told me several times; when I drew maps at his house, that I could put the cape [of Saint Augustine] at 8° S). From: Navarrete, *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos*, 3: 320.



Figure 14.1 An allegory by Stradanus, in which Amerigo Vespucci, shown as an astronomer (with armillary sphere and banner with the Southern Cross), encounters America represented as an Indio of colossal stature. Note the cannibalistic feast in the background and the many animals on the right including an anteater (in the foreground). The Latin inscription below the image reads “Amerigo discovered America. Once named, always alert”. The attribution of the discovery to Amerigo is the artist’s mistake; the second part of the inscription, reminiscent of formulas used during weddings, perhaps alludes to a marriage in which the wife takes the husband’s name. Illustration by Jan Van der Straet (Stradanus); etching by Theodor Galle. Second half of the 16th century. © Wikimedia Commons

which he had only revealed to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco and Rabbi Zacuto.

Having to teach at home and the fact that his nephew Juan, son of his younger brother Antonio, a lawyer in Florence, came to live with him persuaded Amerigo to move to a larger residence, which he sublet from Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca³ who in the meantime had become Bishop of Palencia.

In addition to instructing sea captains, Vespucci was also entrusted with overseeing the *Padrón Real*, the official map of Spain and its territories created at that time perhaps in response to his own proposal: he was to keep it, update it and give a copy to whomever had the right to have one. Vespucci was too generous in distributing copies, so much so that King Ferdinand became alarmed and ordered one of his functionaries to make Vespucci take an oath promising to only give copies to persons authorised by the King or the *Casa de Contratación*. In this unusual procedure, there is perhaps an ironic reference to Amerigo’s required compliance with the oath imposed on him by King Manuel, which created problems in the preparation and management of overseas voyages.

We have a letter from this period, dated December 9, 1508, written by Vespucci to Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros. Having stated that he had no personal interest in the question, Vespucci explained to this important individ-

³ Consuelo Varela, *Colón y los florentinos*, 83.

ual the way in which he thought King Ferdinand could regulate the trading of goods, especially textiles, between Spain and its new colonies.

Such an exchange of views shows that Amerigo was not only respected for his navigational abilities, but also for his competence in commercial questions.

14.2 Amerigo's Will and Death in Seville

Amerigo's life in Seville became more comfortable even though sedentary. In 1510 the plague spread through Andalusia (the type is unknown), and upon becoming ill he wished to make a will,⁴ dated April 1511. The document's nine pages reveal some aspects of Amerigo's life that would be otherwise completely unknown, as well as his family affections. He was very fond of his wife, despite his long absences. He left her all that he had acquired during his stay in Spain, "I confirm, so as not to have burdens on my conscience, that everything I possess, movable property, real estate and animals in this kingdom of Spain [...], I have earned or acquired during the period of my marriage to María Cerezo, my wife, daughter of Gonzalo".

He was also very fond of his nephew Juan. He left him his nautical instruments, including a metal astrolabe, scientific books and novels, written in Latin and other languages, in addition to his clothes, some of which made of silk and woollen cloth. It does not appear that he left him his maps and written works.⁵

Amerigo provided for various bequests to numerous churches in Seville, the most important being the church of San Francisco in which he wished to be buried. Other bequests were made to his servants Juan and Juana.

He left his wife three slaves, two Africans and a 25-year-old called Isabel from the Canary Islands, who had two small children, Juanico and Juanica. He urged that good care be taken of this family and forbade them being sold.

The list of debts in his will is short and for us informative, "I owe *maestre* Cristóbal, a gunner who is in Hurava [Urabá] in the Indies, 26 gold ducats. I owe Agostín, Florentine bookseller in Lisbon, 3 gold ducats: they should be paid from my assets", and he adds "I confess that I have at my house, here in Seville, 11 bombards, one large and 10 small, property of the diplomat de Enciso who is in India. They must be given to him".

The bombards in question are probably those carried by the fleet of the four merchants and which in the port of Caracas were arranged to defend the shipyard where the caravels were repaired. The gunner Cristóbal had sold those arms and gunpowder to Martín Fernández de Enciso, author of a *Suma de geographia*, a splendid *incunabulum* of 1518 in which he wrote extensively of the West Indies.

The list of his debtors is as long as that of his creditors is short: in other words, he was unable to refuse anyone who asked him for help, and we also know that he did not have receipts for some of his loans. This is a certain recipe for becoming poor.

⁴ Consuelo Varela found this document, which she published in the appendix of her 1988 book, *Colón y los florentinos* (pp. 167-72 of the Italian translation).

⁵ On the large map drawn by Juan Vespuccio, there are no details taken from the maps that his uncle made showing the geography of those territories. It seems probable that Amerigo's *The Four Journeys* was in Hernando Colón's large library.

There is only a single trace in the will of the five years spent in Portugal. The accounting and bequests in Florence, where Amerigo had other assets, are carefully kept separate from those in Spain. He seemed to remember very little of his period in Florence: as Consuelo Varela notes, he did not know whether his mother was still alive, and he forgot to mention his brother Girolamo.

His creditors were friends and companions of travel and overseas adventures: Juan de La Cosa for assistance rendered to his family during his absence from Seville and for other reasons; Don Diego de Nicuesa, Governor of Veragua, who gave him two water pumps, one copper the other zinc, because that is how seafarers help each other.

Amerigo was unaware of the tragic deaths of both friends, the first pierced by a hundred arrows, the second left to die on an unseaworthy vessel by Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, who was in turn murdered by his father-in-law Pedrarias Dávila; and seafarers also died in such manner.

The largest debt, 144,000 *maravedís* owed to him by the widow of Gianotto Berardi, was remitted, which Consuela Varela also notes.

The executors of the will were his loyal friend of many years Pietro Rondinelli and Emanuele Cattaneo from Genoa.

Amerigo did not die after dictating his will, but in the following year on February 22, 1512; the will was revoked perhaps because some of those named in it had died in the meantime.

He asked to be buried in a Franciscan habit as a sign of humility, like Queen Isabella and Christopher Columbus. The Florentine navigator was temporarily buried in the funerary chapel of his father-in-law Gonzalo Fernando Cerezo.

14.3 The Image of Amerigo Vespucci

Amerigo was a calm and strong-willed man. During adolescence, his education was disjointed, but he continued to study until well into adulthood, mastering the principles of cosmology and becoming creative in that field. He wrote “To leave some fame of myself”, but he did not seek fame for the acquired wealth or the battles won but rather for the cultural progress that he had promoted. He was aware of the need to contribute to the progress of the community in which he worked and lived: “To act with a resolute soul to serve God and the world”, this was his motto.

After all, he was a Renaissance man.

He worked with reserve and discretion, always keeping a low profile but aware of his own considerable abilities. This characteristic could have led to him disappearing from the picture of great contributors to human progress had his friend and benefactor Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco and the scholars of Saint-Dié in Lorraine not asked him to inform them of his achievements and then passed on what he had recounted to them.

He was often kind (a virtue scorned today) even to those who were hostile towards him, examples being the return of the huge canoe to the cannibals, contributing to the ransom of ten Indios destined to be eaten by cannibals, and his decision not to burn the stilt houses. The reading of his will also shows his generosity.

His words also reveal a serene religiosity with traces of Puritanism, derived from the teaching of his uncle Giorgio Antonio.

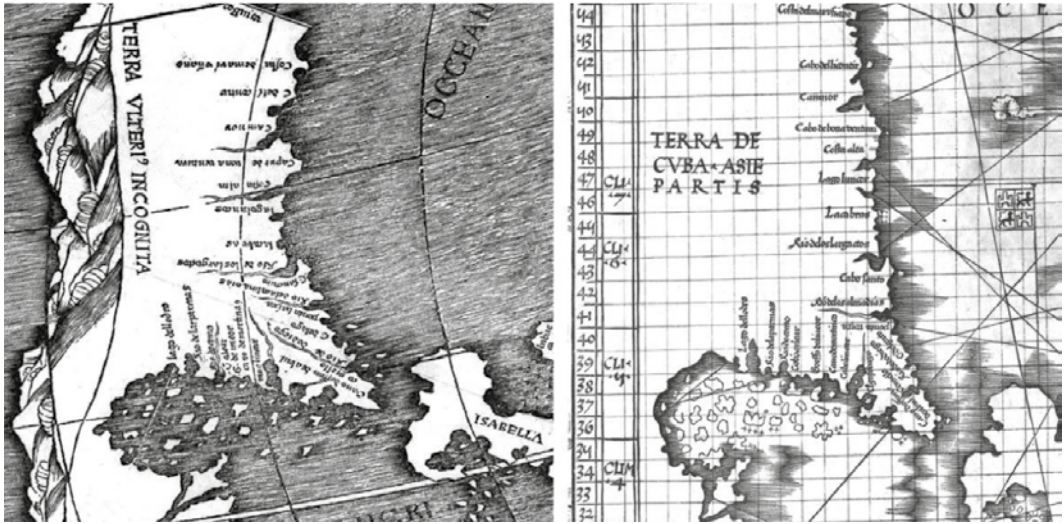


Figure 14.2 On the left a detail of Waldseemüller's *Planisphere* (1507), representing part of North America in accordance to Vespucci's own updating of the Portuguese *Padrão Real*. On the right, a detail of the *Carta Marina* (1516), of identical derivation, on which there is the inscription "Terra de Cuba/Asie partis", which expresses Columbus's conviction

Like Columbus, Amerigo was able to get up after every fall, silent and stubborn: after the failure of the company he worked for; after the loss of the four new ships that before being consigned were dashed against the coast by a storm, one after the other; when he had to flee from Lisbon to avoid the anger of King Manuel, after having reached the height of success, abandoning the documentation relating to what he had achieved through hard toil and suffering, then ceding what remained to the emissary from far-off Lorraine. "We will soon have Amerigo in Seville, who deserved much more than the title of 'cavaliere' that was granted him",⁶ commented Piero Rondinelli. In this regard, Christopher Columbus wrote to his son Diego, "I have spoken with Amerigo Vespucci. He always wishes to please me, he is a very decent man, luck was against him, like it was for many others; his actions have not brought him all the advantages they should have".⁷

Having taken refuge in Seville with nothing, he got back on his feet again in the service of two young sovereigns who wished to do great things; there was the prospect of the new final voyage to the New World and then tragedy struck. King Philip, son of a great emperor, died at 28 years old; Joanna, the young Queen, was driven out of her mind by the atrocious mourning, and all prospects collapsed. Amerigo had to pick up the pieces, get rid of the ships and supplies acquired for that voyage during which he could have completed and consolidated all he had created. This was the final and bitterest blow.

⁶ *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 57rb.

⁷ Facsimile and English translation in *The authentic letters of Columbus*. Translations [by José Ignacio Rodríguez] <https://archive.org/details/authenticletters00colu/page/170>.



Figure 14.3 Allegory of the dialectician who sets the greyhounds of truth and falsity to hunting down the 'problem'. Frontispiece of Book II of *Margarita Philosophica* (1503) by Gregor Reisch, humanist, cosmographer and cartographer. © Wikimedia Commons

Amerigo was not the first and neither was he the last of those who created and constructed the Renaissance to be persecuted by adverse fortune and the cruel stupidity of those who managed the fate of the community.

14.4 The Legacy of Amerigo Vespucci

I have had the opportunity on several occasions to highlight the positive and universal welcome afforded to Amerigo's announcement of the existence of a New World, or a fourth part of the world. I have referred to the welcome given to Amerigo's narration by eminent people and I shall not list the other commendations that can be read in books of the period. I will say that the announcement caused a reaction that could even be called a cultural revolution.⁸ Abbot Angelo Bandini refers to an episode that I in turn am happy to recount. When the surprising news of a New World reached Florence, the city authorities decided to celebrate it in the Ognissanti quarter, loved by generations of the Vespucci family, where celebratory illuminations were kept alight for three days. We do not know whether Amerigo was aware of this; if he was, it would have made him happier than all the praise received.

Among the immediate reactions to the *Mundus Novus* was that of someone who must certainly have been a cultured man versed in the cosmology of the time. As Amerigo wrote him a letter⁹ in which he used a larger number of Spanish words than usual, it may be suggested that he was addressing a Spaniard who understood Italian.¹⁰ Amerigo explained the characteristics of the hemisphere he explored to him, characteristics that not only regard geography but also aspects of cosmology.

Although such explanations are not as rigorous as required today, they reveal a constant attention to all that the author encountered during his travels: variations in the sun's height, in the temperature and in the luxuriance of the flora during the course of the seasons, establishing a constant comparison with what was seen on the other side of the Atlantic. The populations inhabiting the torrid zone are not uniform in skin colour: in Africa they are black, on the other side of the ocean they are light-skinned and this for different reasons, including the fact that the New World is richer in fresh water, cooler and has more luxuriant vegetation. Vespucci did not accept the simplistic generalisation based merely on the influence of the stars/planets and latitude, but believed that the various circumstances relating to the living conditions of those little-known populations had to be taken into consideration: how they ate, reproduced and prospered. It is not merely by chance that he cites the 'philosopher par excellence' Aristotle, whose 'cause and effect' he seems to accept when discussing the question of biological heredity, a question he curiously came across with regard to birds' lack of fear of men they had never previously encountered.¹¹

⁸ For other favourable reactions, see the book by the excellent scholar Abbot Angelo Maria Bandini, *Vita e lettere di Amerigo Vespucci*, Firenze, 1745.

⁹ The Ridolfi Fragment, c. 1505, in Formisano, *Amerigo Vespucci, Lettere di viaggio*, 29 and ff.

¹⁰ Because of these characteristics and the topics discussed, it may have been the Catalan/Neapolitan cosmographer Jaime Ferrer, who, backed by Queen Isabella, took his own letter to Seville (see the beginning of Chapter 4), in which he put forward the same ideas that Vespucci rebutted in this reply.

¹¹ Gerolamo Cardano would later brilliantly develop this observation on biological heredity.

The anthropological comparison between the indigenous populations of the two continents, one of Mongolian stock and the other of Black descent, was avant-garde for the period. This comparison probably derived from the habit of assessing the price of slaves, a habit he probably picked up when he worked for the Berardi commercial house, which had accumulated wealth through the slave trade. This practice allowed him to appreciate characteristics that were not so obvious, for example tone of voice.

As regards the customs and habits of the people he encountered, that is the social life and ethnology of the Indios, Vespucci had an advantage over his contemporaries who travelled in the New World. This advantage consisted in having lived with the Indios for weeks at a time on several occasions. These long stays, not without risk, allowed him to observe infrequent events such as births, funerals and medical treatments. His discussion becomes so interesting that the reader would like to know more, wishing that Vespucci had lived with the natives for a much longer period and had been able to tell us how they managed to cut down huge trees up to eighty metres high using stone axes, or how they managed to excavate the trunks to make sturdy canoes.

The reader would like to know how those people, without, or almost without, a tribal hierarchy, could move an entire village every eight to ten years, rebuilding dwellings that could house two or three hundred people. The reader would also like to know how they built villages of stilt houses with drawbridges and other devices, marvellous constructions that required the efficient collaboration of hundreds of men for many months (when it came to burning down such a complex, Amerigo and his companions hesitated and then abandoned the idea). In short, the abundance of information Amerigo provided about what the populations that appeared to him in very primitive conditions were capable of building constitutes a very valuable patrimony, which to date has not been made as much use of as it merits.

To the false teachers who hold that history-oriented naturalistic disciplines do not constitute 'real science',¹² I believe it correct to point out that when Christopher Columbus planned the routes to and from the Asian markets he enhanced 'real science', as did Amerigo Vespucci when he planned the measurement of longitude.¹³

For this purpose, Claudius Ptolemy had suggested a method based on lunar eclipses, rare events unusable for very distant places. Amerigo understood that any astronomical event observable at the same time in distant places, at different local times, could be used for measuring longitude, and therefore developed an extension of the Ptolemaic method. This extension was described in the "Prima lettera familiare" addressed to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco in July 1500¹⁴ (see Chapter 7, § 7.7). Later, he applied it several times during the third voyage along the coasts of Brazil. Finally, he taught it some years later to the school for navigators in Seville; indeed, this method was in general use at the beginning of the 16th century, to the great advantage of cartography and navigation.

¹² See Omodeo, *Il Secolo d'oro*, forthcoming, § 15.8.

¹³ "Longitude is something more difficult, which few people can know, except for those who remain awake and look at the conjunction of the Moon with the planets. Because of the said longitude I have lost a lot of sleep and my life has been shortened for x years, but I keep everything well spent, because I hope to come into fame for centuries, if I return with good health from this journey". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 49va.

¹⁴ *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 43.

Amerigo's innovation turned the attention of scholars of this period to all celestial phenomena of use for measuring longitude. In fact, when Galileo Galilei discovered the 'Medician stars' that orbit around Jupiter¹⁵ with astronomical precision, they were persuaded that the times of their appearance and disappearance behind the planet could be used for further development of the Ptolemaic method. Others thought the same and consequently Galileo received, from Venice and Holland, requests for the calculation of the ephemerides for these small planets. In those years, Galileo was a prisoner at Arcetri and his sight was weakened. Therefore, he passed on the requests to his pupil Benedetto Castelli, a Benedictine monk. However, when Castelli had finished the work, unexpected discrepancies were found: when Jupiter was behind the Sun with respect to the Earth, there was a delay of about twenty minutes in the calculated values. In order to explain this difference, it had to be concluded that light moves with a finite velocity, and the Danish astronomer O. Roemer proposed a first estimate of this speed of 215,000 km/second (rather than the 299,000 km/sec accepted today). Such an unexpected discovery derived from Vespucci's momentous proposal.

As for the study of the coordinates of the largest stars of the Southern Hemisphere, almost a century passed before someone returned to the work Amerigo Vespucci began with great difficulty in the autumn months of 1502.

14.5 A Misunderstanding Divides Amerigo's Biographers

During the 18th century, also known as the Age of Enlightenment, there was a revival of interest in great cultural and explorative endeavours, as well as in the lives of illustrious men. Thus, a first, well-documented, biography of Amerigo Vespucci appeared in Florence. This was the *Vita e lettere di Amerigo Vespucci* written by the abbot Angelo Bandini (1726-1803), librarian and archivist, published with the date of 1745.¹⁶ Bandini presented to readers the three letters written by Amerigo, which together constitute an adequate description of the Florentine navigator's work: the "Prima lettera familiare" (unknown before then), the "Lettera a Soderini" and the "Mundus Novus", the two latter translated from Latin into Italian.¹⁷ Abbot Bandini added a Prologue to the three letters, about seventy pages long, in which he outlined the life and merits of Amerigo.

These pages contain a good deal of praise and parochialism together with odes and sonnets, as was the practice at the time; however, they are also well-documented, honest and correct. It is a pity that they have been read little and studied even less.

Bandini did not hide the fact that Vespucci was the target of criticism and cited some examples. Among these is a passage by the abbot Noël-An-

¹⁵ The description appeared in the *Sidereus Nuncius*, Venice 1610.

¹⁶ This biography, rich both in details taken from works that were difficult to obtain and in very pertinent critical considerations, cannot have been written by a 19-year-old novice, but rather by a mature scholar. Moreover, the dedication to Giulio Ranieri Orlandini del Beccuto, chamberlain of Grand Duke Francis III of Lorraine, who had procured him the position as librarian, supports this. Muñoz, who is discussed in the following page, dates this book to 1754 (*Historia del Nuevo-Mundo*, X, l. 5).

¹⁷ The *Vita e lettere di Amerigo* also contains the letter by Girolamo Sernigi describing Vasco da Gama's first voyage (see *Codice Vaglianti*, folios 61ra-65ra), although it is wrongly attributed to Vespucci.

toine Pluche, who in the vast work *Spectacle de la Nature* (1732-1742) wrote:

He published reports in which he attributed to himself the discovery of the new terra firma. He was doubly unjust towards Columbus, causing this great man to be stripped of his offices, and to lose his freedom, stealing through his charlatanism the glory of giving his name to the continent discovered by Columbus.¹⁸

Bandini also cited another severe and singular criticism aimed at Amerigo by the Jesuit Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix, translating from the French as follows:

Amerigo Vespucci, who was nothing more than a private citizen in the fleet and Ojeda's partner in the endeavour, has published the account of this discovery, for which he takes all the honours, and, to persuade the public that he was the first European to land on the continent of this vast part of the world, dared to affirm that his voyage lasted 25 months [*sic*]. Ojeda, questioned by a magistrate during a case in this regard, contradicted him under oath; but as he [Amerigo] was immediately believed on his word, they became used to using his name for the New World.¹⁹

The source of Abbot Pluche's information about Amerigo's usurpation is unknown. However, in the case of P.F.X. de Charlevoix, it is easy to believe that it was through hearsay, picked up during his visits to the Jesuit colleges established in Haiti and Paraguay. The misunderstanding persists in these harsh reproaches aimed at Amerigo, which I have mentioned several times regarding the achievements of the two great protagonists of the explorations on the other side of the Atlantic.

Columbus had announced the discovery of a new archipelago across the ocean, the Antilles, which blocked the way to the Indies (but in actual fact he knew much more). Vespucci, who had sailed along a much longer stretch of the continent's coast, also exploring inland several times, had announced the existence of a new continent, a fourth part of the world. This was sensational news for the period. The cartographers, without exception, accepted it immediately. It would have been enough to go back to the sources to clarify this misunderstanding, as Abbot Bandini knew, but this did not happen. Instead, the misunderstanding grew as the unjust criticisms of Abbot Pluche, an author with many readers and high standing, were published in France in a series called *Biographie des hommes illustres*, distributed throughout Europe.

¹⁸ This successful publication, Pluche's *Spectacle de la Nature*, had many editions and translations, including Italian; this passage appears in vol. VIII, section V.

¹⁹ de Charlevoix, *Histoire de L'Isle Espagnole ou de S. Domingue*.

14.6 J.B. Muñoz Writes His *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*

The Age of Enlightenment was coming to its turbulent end when King Charles III of Spain asked his subject Juan Bautista Muñoz to write a work on the most glorious period of his kingdom. The latter set to work and thus in 1793 (on the eve of the ‘Terror’ in nearby France) the first volume of a painstaking and elegant edition of the *Historia del Nuevo Mundo* appeared in Madrid. The *Historia* was a strangely dull work without bibliographical references that narrated the life of Christopher Columbus up until the autumn of 1500, the year in which for the Genoese navigator it seemed “the moment had come to rest and enjoy his well-earned rewards, and then came the fatal blow that embittered all the days of his life”. Those words ended Volume I; volume II never appeared, and thus the work remained mutilated (like many other works published in Spain at the time) and the reader remains permanently in doubt about how an unknown assailant came to strike Columbus.

By contrast, the thirty pages of the ‘prologue’ are vivid and clear. Here, J.B. Muñoz narrated how he documented his work and made severe judgments on a number of authors, in particular Angelo Bandini and Peter Martyr d’Anghiera, and he was also extremely caustic about Amerigo Vespucci. He wrote,

The pages written by the abbot Bandini were useful to me for completing the proof of his fraud, which I will exhibit in an opportune place. In the meantime, I cannot help noting this among the fruits of his charlatanism: Vespucci as a man of the sea was inferior to almost all the explorers of his time; despite this he was rewarded almost more than all the others, and until today his memory has been only a little less honoured than the incomparable Columbus. Despite the fact that a thousand scholarly writers have unmasked the Florentine imposter, his apologists have not been lacking.²⁰

Here, the story of usurpation was reinforced by the added accusation of incompetence.

Vespucci’s faults were not specified in this book, nor did Muñoz document them. It seems they consisted in having appropriated Columbus’ merits, to such a degree as to almost appear of the same stature. However, the historiographer was unaware that already in the title of his book *Historia del Nuevo Mundo* he attributed Columbus with something that did not belong to him, but rather to Amerigo. Indeed, Columbus never affirmed that he had reached a New World rather than Asia.

The anger of Muñoz – who was unaware that Amerigo had received Spanish citizenship – probably derived from the fact that Vespucci had made it known that the Brazilian territories belonged to Portugal, the nation that had exploited this to take possession of many other lands belonging to Spain. However, there is something that escapes us in all of this ill-will. I remain certain that Muñoz did not justify in any way the serious accusations he made against Amerigo.

About 15 years after these occurrences, Charles IV and his son Ferdinand VII were forced by Napoleon Bonaparte to cede the Spanish crown

²⁰ Muñoz, *Historia del Nuevo-Mundo*, X.

to his brother Joseph, already King of Naples. This began a very dark period for Spain.

14.7 The ‘Vespucci Question’ Becomes More Complicated

The complex problem of interpreting the events narrated herein meant that many people have denied Amerigo’s success, often with indignation and anger. According to his various denigrators, he had appropriated Columbus’ merits through deception and lies. In reply to this, it must be said that Amerigo never claimed to have discovered the islands and territories first discovered by Columbus and neither did he propose to name them after himself. He very appropriately maintained that the new lands were part of a New World and not to Asia, as he himself had previously believed and as Christopher Columbus continued to do.

The discovery of the existence of a fourth part of the world was not the result of a moment, it was a process that developed over time; beginning with Christopher Columbus, it matured thanks to Amerigo and it concluded, but not definitively, with Magellan’s enterprise.

As clarified above, even the name America, proposed by the cartographers of Saint-Dié, was not finally accepted for many decades. In the meantime, the case against the Crown, known as the *Pesquisa Colombina*, was continuing and becoming more complicated. As inferred from Fernando Colombo’s *Le Historie*, the Treasury’s defenders maintained, mistakenly but perhaps in good faith, that Columbus’ merits – and therefore the division of the resulting wealth – did not regard the discovery of the *terra firma* but only of the islands, and that the navigator’s heirs must therefore be satisfied with what came from the said islands. The heirs (or their representatives) replied that the Admiral had also discovered the *terra firma* in the Gulf of Paria.

It is a telling fact that in this judicial debate, which partly took place in Haiti, there was no mention of the Admiral having set foot on *terra firma* during his first voyage, believing he was in Asia, and that he also returned there during his second voyage. Vespucci was aware of this, having drawn that land on his own map, which we find marked with the emblem of Castile. Obviously, in this judicial context Juan de La Cosa, who was an eyewitness, could not intervene, while Vespucci, a decisive witness, was not called to testify. Instead, Alonso de Ojeda, a man who should have been in prison for his piracy and murders, was called to give evidence in court.

14.8 All References to Vespucci and His Voyages are Deleted from the Portuguese Archives

On May 24, 1826, Don Martín Fernández de Navarrete, an excellent historian of Spanish Renaissance navigation, turned to the Viscount of Santarém, a Portuguese politician who was very devoted to the King, and at the time the head of the royal archive of Torre do Tombo. Navarrete wanted information on the documents housed there relating to Amerigo Vespucci. Two months later, on July 25, Don Navarrete received a surprising reply. There was no mention of Vespucci’s name in King Manuel’s original papers between 1495 and 1503, nor did it appear in the 82,902 documents of the chronological collection, nor in the 6,095 documents in the Las Gvetas col-

lection and not even among the numerous sheaves of correspondence written by the King and other personages. Nor could any reference to Giuliano del Giocondo and Bartolomeo del Giocondo be found in those documents.²¹

The eager Viscount of Santarém added that he could not find any mention of Amerigo in the books and manuscripts of his own era, relating to the years 1497-1631 housed in the Royal Library in Paris. As the archivist concluded, “Vespucci’s claims [and what he recounts] in his *Lettera a Pietro Soderini* are therefore very dubious”. The diligent archivist added that there was not even any trace of Vespucci in the documents relating to a Portuguese pilot who stopped at Bezeguiche,²² on his way to Calicut, where he met the ships sent by King Manuel to find new markets. He dwelt on this subject, confusing the dates.²³

It is not credible that the Viscount of Santarém, who moreover said that he was seriously ill during this period, was able to trace the enormous number of documents that he mentioned in less than two months. Nor can it possibly be believed that he managed to examine over one hundred thousand manuscript pages, a task that would take many years, perhaps decades, to complete. Therefore, the viscount, carried away by his zeal, passed off as his own the final account of the long and difficult work of others, obeying orders that could not be disregarded.

Despite this, Don Martín Navarrete accepted this information as valid. Furthermore, having carefully translated the letter addressed to Duke René II of Lorraine into Castilian from the Latin of Abbot Johannes Basin,²⁴ he became aware that it presented various oversights and inconsistencies and convinced himself that his Portuguese correspondent was right. He concluded that Vespucci had lied on many occasions in order to appropriate Columbus’ merits, nevertheless admitting with some caution that Vespucci had taken part, although in a subordinate capacity, in the endeavours he recounted.

To those who agree with Navarrete, one can reply that there is substantial evidence that the voyages took place and that Amerigo played a leading part in them. It is a fact that Pietro Rondinelli, who visited Vespucci in Lisbon after his return from the 1501-02 voyage across the ocean, and with whom he had a firm friendship, stated that King Manuel had conferred a knightly order on him. It is a fact that Vespucci provided Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de’ Medici with an accurate description of the cargo on the ships in Cabral’s second fleet, which had returned from India, which description was useful for Lorenzo’s commercial interests. It is also a fact that Amerigo described the *Canopi chiari* and their exact position in the Southern Sky, which corresponds to the observation of Magellan, who saw those ‘clouds’ about 20 years later. The same goes for the description of the *Canopo scuro*, i.e. the Coalsack nebula, visible in the Southern Hemisphere, which Amerigo had observed and described.

It is difficult to deny that Amerigo measured longitude for King Manuel, nor can it be contested that he reached Porto Seguro and took on board his

²¹ Error for ‘Giuliano di Bartolomeo del Giocondo’; Navarrete referred to Viscount of Santarém’s letter in *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos*, vol. III, 309-14.

²² The native name for Dakar.

²³ See the beginning of Chapter 10.

²⁴ See § 13.2.

ship the two *degradados* left there by Cabral.²⁵ Furthermore, extremely reliable documentation exists regarding the activities of Giuliano del Giocondo in Lisbon.²⁶ It is also certain that Vespucci sailed for a long distance along the western coast of the Atlantic and that he made a detailed drawing of that part of the New World and established its longitude. On this occasion, I will omit much more information about the existence and reality of his voyages, which have been extensively presented in this book.

The many refutations of the hasty denials and categorical affirmations made by the ‘head archivist’ strongly suggest that King Manuel, the only one who could give such an order, had commanded that every trace of Vespucci’s achievements in Portugal should be removed: a definitive *damnatio memoriae*.²⁷

14.9 Damnatio Memoriae

King Manuel was right to be angry with Vespucci. One reason derived from the fact that this servant of his, in the *Mundus Novus* – a copy of which the King had received from some zealous courtier – strongly criticised the Portuguese navy. Amerigo perhaps was right regarding the crew he sailed with to the southern Atlantic Ocean, but he was wrong to generalise. Bartolomeu Dias was an excellent and courageous navigator, as were his brother Diego, Vasco da Gama and Nicolau Coelho (captain of the *Anunciada*) and others. A more serious reason for King Manuel’s anger towards the Florentine was the fact that he had talked too much about voyages and places that should have remained a secret. The king was convinced that a policy of strict secrecy was the best thing, but he had no perception that this policy, constantly pursued by him, presented great flaws. He was unaware, for example, that a modest Florentine merchant, Pietro Vaglianti, kept copies of two of his letters written to Pope Julius II and Pope Leo X on his desk,²⁸ letters in which he boasted of Portuguese naval and commercial successes, information that was useful for predicting commercial trends.

Isolated in his palace, rather distant from Lisbon and its port, King Manuel did not realise that the veterans of the great voyages were besieged by hordes of curious people in the port’s taverns who asked for news about everything, and that this news, intercepted by many informers, reached precisely the places he did not want it to. The *política de sigilo* was worth about as much as ‘Pulcinella’s secret’, that of the Neapolitan mask who wears a sailor’s uniform.

When King Manuel heard that Amerigo had taken refuge in Spain and was preparing an expedition to the Moluccas of which he was to be a captain, he

²⁵ Valentim Fernandes, illustrious humanist and publisher, correspondent with Matthias Ringmann, author of *Navegação dos portugueses para além do círculo equinocial*, guaranteed, as a notary, the authenticity of the objects that the two *degradados* took back to Lisbon from Porto Seguro. See Janaína Amado, Luiz Carlos Figueiredo, “A Certidão de Valentim Fernandes, documento pouco conhecido sobre o Brasil de 1500”.

²⁶ See Pietro Omodeo, “The Authenticity of Amerigo Vespucci’s *Mundus Novus*”, 362.

²⁷ On this *damnatio* vedi Formisano, *Amerigo Vespucci, Lettere di Viaggio*, 192.

²⁸ In the *Codice Vaglianti*, the “Letter to Pope Julius II” appears in folio 120vb, and the “Letter to Leo X” in folio 140va. This codex also includes a report on the Kingdom of Congo (folios 85ra-100rb) prepared on behalf of King John II of Portugal.

persuaded himself that Amerigo had broken his oath. He furiously wrote in threatening terms to his father-in-law, King Ferdinand of Aragon, asking him to cancel the planned visit by Philip of Austria and Queen Joanna, his wife, which was done without protest. As for Amerigo, traitor and perjurer, the king decreed a *damnatio memoriae*: nothing of what his unfaithful servant had done for him was to be remembered. It may be presumed that the people to whom the king assigned the task of enacting the decree did their best, but they certainly took too much time, so that the judgment did not have the desired effect. Too many people had taken part in the expeditions, or knew about them, and they contributed to confirming the accounts given by Amerigo, who at the time was highly respected and admired for his achievements.

Forty years after the publication of Navarrete's great work, it happened that the respected American essayist and poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson, ignoring Navarrete's caution, heavily exaggerated what he had written, and at a conference in 1865 stated:

Strange [...] that broad America must wear the name of a thief. Amerigo Vespucci, the pickle dealer at Seville [...] whose highest naval rank was boatswain's mate in an expedition that never sailed, managed in this lying world to supplant Columbus, and baptize half the Earth with his own dishonest name.²⁹

Such words, which resounded at the end of the American Civil War, caused a great stir, leading to the publication of many articles and books, over the following century and a half, deploring the inappropriate and unworthy choice of the name of a counterfeiter for the New World. Thus, the *Vespucci question* was born, which had an infelicitous following in Italy.

14.10 A Question of Method

Before concluding, it is appropriate to make a brief analysis of two questions regarding Navarrete's great work in five volumes, published in the 1820s, to which many of the authors who have written on Vespucci refer, including all his detractors. At the beginning of volume III, Navarrete discussed the methods that should be followed by writers of history. The first recommendation regarded the gathering of adequate documentation. The Spanish scholar constituted a commendable example in this regard. He published a mountain of documents from archives, documents that are still useful to those who study Renaissance navigation. Another of his correct recommendations is that of not allowing oneself to be affected by admiration and enthusiasm, avoiding a poetic compilation of epic events for which moderation is appropriate in order to avoid betraying historical truth. Both recommendations were taken up by Ilaria Luzzana Caraci and Consuelo Varela, who in turn added other documents concerning navigators of that great era.

In actual fact, total reliance on official documents does not always guarantee reaching the historical truth desired by Don Martín Navarrete, primarily because if the collection is incomplete other documents could make it necessary to modify or overturn the acquired 'truth'. Moreover, the erro-

²⁹ Emerson, *English Traits*.

neous reading of a document can decrease the value of the formulated opinion. An example of the risks involved for the historiographer is the case of Alonso de Ojeda, much praised by chroniclers of the time and by some modern authors. This lively and daring young man underwent a great transformation during his lifetime, documented by the case against him promoted by Columbus and the sentence inflicted on him after the disaster he caused as Governor of Coquibacoa,³⁰ as well as by Queen Joanna's injunction.³¹ Hence, the historiographer must come to a very different conclusion about him and his activities.

A similar rectification must be made concerning the sanctity of Christopher Columbus, for whom the process of beatification was begun in the second half of the 19th century. This was promoted by the Franciscans and the city of Genoa based on a study by Antoine Roselly de Lorgues³² of the Genoese navigator's merits. This idea of sanctity was contradicted by what is narrated in de Cuneo's letter³³ and in Bobadilla's report,³⁴ even if the necessary revision does not affect the judgement of his stature and merits as a man and navigator.

Where Navarrete's opinion really cannot be accepted is on the subject of Vespucci's faults, which he carefully list and from which he derived a completely negative judgement, in his opinion definitive and unalterable. Indeed, he thought it permissible to scoff at any possible awkward attempt to contrast his 'historical truth'. Such an attitude could have harmful effects in environments in which anyone who disagrees with the opinions of those in power is considered guilty, forcing novices into conformism.

Many of Navarrete's accusations appear in the notes placed below his own translation from Latin to Castilian of Vespucci's letter dedicated to Duke René II of Lorraine. Some of his criticisms regard the fact that Vespucci's description of the natives' customs differs from that given by Columbus. This is true, but it is due to the fact that Vespucci often described populations different from the Taino and from the Cannibals that Columbus encountered in the Antilles. Navarrete also criticised Vespucci's narration of the capture and sale of over two hundred slaves in the "Lettera a Soderini", which he states occurred at the end of the first voyage, while in the "Prima lettera familiare" this episode seems to have occurred after the second voyage. The incongruity exists, but it is not due to malice: Vespucci was replying to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco who asked to be informed of the most notable things that happened to him; in satisfying this request, he committed an excusable chronological mistake, not a deception.

Navarrete also criticised the dates and measurements, which vary in an exasperating manner from one letter to another, sometimes between one line and another on the same page.³⁵

³⁰ See § 11.1.

³¹ "Real provisión para que se proceda en la Española contra Alonso de Hojeda, Bernardino de Talavera y sus cómplices, por crímenes". Navarrete, *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos*, 3: 120.

³² Roselly de Lorgues, *Cristoforo Colombo, Storia della sua vita*.

³³ See § 3.8.

³⁴ See § 6.9.

³⁵ Such errors constitute a serious problem that were common in the period, so much so that in his great work on pure and applied mathematics, *General Trattato di Numeri et Misure* (1556-60), Tartaglia felt it necessary to dedicate an entire chapter to the way in which numbers should

However, Navarrete had already formulated his condemnation of Vespucci in the Prologue to Volume III where he wrote,

The second Section contains the reports on the four journeys that it is presumed Amerigo Vespucci undertook, which were not published in Spain but rather in a hidden and cunning manner in various places in Europe (while the family of Columbus was on the island of San Domingo), succeeding in calling the new continent by a name that did not belong to it [...]; the artful caution with which the reports spread through foreign countries, always avoiding appearing in Spain and Portugal where it was not so easy to hide the truth: and later neither court sentences nor the force of the law were enough to remove the name *America* from the part of the world discovered by Christopher Columbus and the Spaniards who followed him in such an audacious and dangerous endeavour.³⁶

No authentic substantial facts are cited in this severe accusation, while the fact that Columbus knew about Amerigo's third voyage and that its merits went unrecognised is ignored. Moreover, Navarrete held Vespucci responsible for what was published in Europe about his travels, but it would not have been difficult for him to ascertain that the *Mundus Novus* was published in faraway places and without Vespucci's knowledge, as he was on his fourth voyage at the time. Besides, King Manuel and the Spanish sovereigns had certainly been informed about these publications by their diplomats. Navarrete also ignored the fact that Amerigo had become a Spanish citizen, a citizen of the country whose values he meant to defend.

One can understand the distress of an erudite and patriotic man like Navarrete, writing at the time of the restoration following Napoleon Bonaparte's tyrannical seizure of power in Spain. One can understand the desolation of a man contemplating the ruin of his own country, from which the overseas colonies had just separated, and easily understand why he wished to glorify a distant period of wealth and power, wounded by a presumed usurpation. What one cannot understand are those who insist in wrongly denigrating Amerigo Vespucci, a man of great merits, with accusations that are easily disproven.

be written. In Amerigo's writings, this question is often extremely complicated, even though a source of ambiguities can be identified in the fact that the number 4, if not accompanied by other Arabic numbers, can often be mistaken for the Roman numeral X. For this reason, 4 is read as ten and 44 read as twenty: mine is a modest corrective for a multitude of errors.

36 "La Seccion II contiene las relaciones de los cuatro viages que supone haber hecho Américo Vespuccio; las cuales nunca se han impreso en España; pero divulgadas oculta y artificialmente por Europa (mientras la familia de los Colones residia en la isla de Santo Domingo) lograron apellidar al nuevo continente con un nombre que no le correspondia [...] la cautela artificiosa con que se propagaban por países extranjeros, huyendo siempre de aparecer en España y Portugal donde no era tan fácil ocultar la verdad; ni en tiempos posteriores las sentencias judiciales ni la fuerza de las leyes, hayan bastado á privar del nombre de *América* a la parte del mundo que descubrió Don Cristóbal Colon y los españoles que le siguieron e imitaron en tan árdua y peligrosa carrera".

