The depiction of America on Martin Waldseemüller’s world map from 1507—Humanistic geography in the service of political propaganda

Martin Lehmann

Cogent Arts & Humanities (2016), 3: 1152785
HISTORY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The depiction of America on Martin Waldseemüller’s world map from 1507—Humanistic geography in the service of political propaganda

Martin Lehmann

Abstract: This paper demonstrates that the depiction of America on Waldseemüller’s world map of 1507, regardless of its apparently modern depiction, was not a rendering based primarily on geographical knowledge of new discoveries across the Atlantic Ocean. On the contrary, this depiction of America should instead be considered to have been much more influenced by the extremely powerful political and economic interests of the Portuguese Crown and the southern German-trading houses in the impending conflict with the Spanish royal family over supremacy in the spice trade with India. After having demonstrated that this map’s depiction of America, which based on an insular conception, neither corresponded to contemporary ideas nor was verifiable in any way at the beginning of the sixteenth century in the European cultural sphere, the map itself will serve—in a way that has not yet been employed in research related to Waldseemüller’s world map—to illustrate the extent to which this supposedly groundbreaking depiction was capable of serving the political and economic interests of the Portuguese and those of the southern German merchant houses in equal measure.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martin Lehmann teaches Latin, geography, and history at a German academic high school/grammar school (Gymnasium). In addition, he teaches students in the department of classical philology (Latin) at the University of Freiburg. The scientific focus of his work aims at the contemporary perspective of the discovery of America and its ancient and medieval foundations. The first result of this research is represented by the dissertation Die Cosmographiae Introductio Matthias Ringmanns und die Weltkarte Martin Waldseemüllers aus dem Jahre 1507 - Ein Meilenstein frühneuzeitlicher Kartographie submitted to the University of Freiburg in 2010. After further scientific publications (Imago Mundi/Wolfenbütteler Renaissance-Mitteilungen/Neulateinisches Jahrbuch), he was instrumental in organizing and conducting the exhibition “Oberrheinischer Humanismus und Geographie: Martin Waldseemüller und die Entdeckung der Neuen Welt” in cooperation with the University library Freiburg and the local museum of city history (http://www.humanisme-du-rhin-superieur.eu/de/projekt-und-partner.html). His current project is the translation and comment of Waldseemüller’s Globus Mundi (1509).

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

In general, world maps of past times are mostly considered from the point of view, how far historical cartography was developed in relation to the supposedly omniscient people of the present age.

Therefore, these cartographic works aren’t genuinely appreciated, as it is much more important to classify them in the context of the respective time and to take the contemporary perspective seriously in one’s own research approach.

Against this background, the present paper wants to prove that the representation of America on Martin Waldseemüller’s 1507 world map, highly praised especially by the American public, follows by no means primarily geographical knowledge.

On the contrary, it must be understood as a rather politically and economically motivated representation with the purpose to serve the interests of the Portuguese Crown as well as those of the upper German trading houses.

© 2016 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.
Research, especially in historiography, has not provided any new insights into the notion that maps, and world maps in particular, not only reflect perceptions of geography, but also intentionally communicate how the maps’ makers view the world. The supposed self-evidential nature of these views of the world can, however, only be disrupted by questioning the use and hence the value that a particular social group or nation state obtains from the way they depict the world. Only this approach can begin to reveal the underlying interests of the mapmakers and their clients (see also Schneider, 2006, esp. pp. 78–84).

This paper demonstrates that the depiction of America on Waldseemüller’s world map of 1507, regardless of its apparently modern depiction, was not a rendering based primarily on geographical knowledge of new discoveries across the Atlantic Ocean. On the contrary, this depiction of America should instead be considered to have been much more influenced by the extremely powerful political and economic interests of the Portuguese Crown and the southern German trading houses in the impending conflict with the Spanish royal family over supremacy in the spice trade with India.

The individual phases of the transatlantic discoveries up to the publication of Waldseemüller’s world map will first be sketched to demonstrate that this map’s depiction of America is based on an insular conception that neither corresponded to contemporary ideas nor was verifiable in any way at the beginning of the sixteenth century in the European cultural sphere.

Subsequently, the map itself will serve—in a way that, to my knowledge, has not yet been employed in research related to Waldseemüller’s world map—to illustrate the extent to which this supposedly groundbreaking depiction was capable of serving the political and economic interests of the Portuguese and those of the southern German merchant houses in equal measure.

1. From Columbus’ Western Isles to Vespucci’s Southern Continent

After Columbus discovered islands on his first voyage (1492–1493) that he mistakenly thought were not far from the Asian mainland, his discovery of Cuba on his second voyage (1493–1496) led the Genoese sailor to assume that he had finally reached the long awaited Asian mainland via the western sea route. Columbus was only seriously convinced of this result for the first time during the course of his third voyage between May 1498 and November 1500, as he cruised the shores of present-day Venezuela and saw the vast waters of the Orinoco with his own eyes. According to Las Casas, he wrote in his ship’s log:

*Yo estoy creido que esta es tierra firme, grandissima, de que hasta ay no se a sabido, y la razón me ayuda grandemente por esto d’este tan grande rio y d’esta mar, que es dulce [...] (Varela, 1982, p. 222).*

I believe that this is a mainland, a huge one, which was hitherto unknown, and I am convincingly supported in this view by this great river and by this sea, which is fresh [...].

In a letter sent by Columbus from Hispaniola to the Catholic monarchs of Spain in September 1498, he connects his own discovery of an *otro mundo* (*another world*) to the idea of a paradise on earth. Since this earthly paradise had been located by numerous scholars, especially in the Middle Ages, in the far east of the Asian continent, Columbus consequently believed that he had found the eastern end of the Asian mainland.

This mainland which he thought accessible via a western sea route had remained unexplored by European travelers, but whose expanse had not yet been neither empirically nor astronomically definable:
Ni valía dezir que yo nunca avía leído que Príncipes de Castilla jamás oviesen ganado tierra fuera d'ella, y que esta de acá es otro mundo en que se trabajaron Romanos y Alexandre y Griegos, para la aver, con grandes exercícios; [...] Sant Isidro y Beda y Strabo y el Maestro de la Historia Scolástica y Sant Ambrosio y Scoto y todos los sacros théologos conçiertan qu'el Paraíso Terrenal es en el Oriente, etc. [...] Grandes indíciós son estos del Paraíso Terrenal, porqu'el sitio es conforme al opinión d'estos sanctos e sacros théologos. Y asimismo las señales son muy conformes, que yo jamás leí ni oí que tanta cantidad de agua dulce fuese así adentro e vezina con la salada; y en ello ayuda asimismo la suavíssima temperançia. Y si de allí del Paraíso no sale, parece aún mayor maravilla, porque no creo que se sepa en el mundo de rio tan grande y tan fondo (Varela, 1982, p. 207, 217–218).

Nor was it of value to say that I had never read that Sovereigns of Castile had ever possessed lands outside of its realm, and that this world here is another world than that in which the Romans, Alexander and the Greeks conquered with great armies. [...] St. Isidore of Seville, Bede, Strabo, the master of Historia scholastica [Petrus Comestor], St. Ambrose, Scotus and all the other learned theologians unanimously state that the earthly paradise was located in the east. [...] These are great indications of being the earthly paradise because its location corresponds to the view of the saints and the learned theologians that I have mentioned, and the signs are consistent with my thoughts, because I have never read or heard of such an amount of fresh water so far inland and, at the same time, located so close to salt water. My view is also confirmed by the very mild climate of these places. Should this water however not come from paradise, the miracle would be even greater, because I do not think so mighty and so deep a river can be found anywhere else on earth.4

In this context, it is of fundamental importance that some European cosmographical ideas from the last quarter of the fifteenth century, probably with origins in the Middle East, speculate that the inhabited world extends to the east by 270°, moving beyond the 180° Ptolemaic geography. Relevant examples include the Astronomia Medicinalis by Leonardus Qualea, the Yale map by Henricus Martellus, and Martin Behaim’s globe. Even Paolo da Pozzo Toscanelli, who, in a letter dating from 1480–1482 period, supported Columbus’ plan for a western voyage, can be associated with these ideas. The conceptually easier accessibility of the East by sailing west convinced Columbus that he would even be able to realize this goal with the technical means available at this time.5 (Figure 1).

When describing Alonso de Ojeda’s voyage from May 1499 to September 1500 where Ojeda, like Columbus, had also reached the coast of present-day Venezuela, Amerigo Vespucci connects the
ideas about the earthly paradise at the easternmost edges of Asia and, like his Italian compatriot, believes to have reached an unexplored part of the Asian mainland:

Gli alberi loro sono di tanta bellezza e di tanta soavità che pensammo essere nel Paradiso terrestre, [...]. Dipoi d’aver navigato al piè di 400 leghe di continuo per in costa, concludemmo che questa era terra ferma, che la dico essere a’ confini dell’Asia per la parte d’oriente, e el principio per la parte d’occidente; perché molte volte ci accadde vedere di diversi animali, [...] che non si trovano in Isole, stando in terra ferma (Bandini, 1745, p. 68, 76–77).

The trees are so beautiful and fragrant that we believed ourselves to be in the earthly paradise; [...] After we sailed ca. 400 leghe along the coast without interruption, we concluded that this is mainland, by which I mean that it forms the easternmost point of Asia and the first tip of Asia reached when sailing westbound, as we often had the opportunity to observe the most diverse animals, [...] such as are not found on islands, but only on a mainland.

Excursus

At this point, it seems appropriate to incorporate some comments on the semantic background of geographical terms used by explorers like Columbus and Vespucci, as well as numerous scholars, without whose insight the contemporary ideas about the newly discovered part of the world across the Atlantic Ocean could not be captured in their true meaning. The Italian terra ferma, including the Spanish or Portuguese variants of this term, and the Latin term continens were, in the age of transatlantic discoveries, fundamentally understood as a landmass that either forms a part of Asia or even constitutes a separate part of the world to the south, bordering and neighboring Asia. Insula is generally understood, regardless of its spatial expanse, as a landmass completely surrounded by the sea, which has no natural connection with the continentes of Europe, Africa, or Asia recognized since ancient times. This differentiation of geographical terms is well illustrated with a look at the Liber de geographia unus, published for the first time in 1527 by Swiss scholar Henricus Glareanus, who provides a clear definition of the geographical terms continens and insula relevant to the discourse of his age:

Porro hae tres partes vocantur continens. Nam insula dicitur undique circundata mari nec alicubi harum adhaerens continuata terra (Glareanus, 1530, ch. XXI, De divisione terrae).

Furthermore, these three parts [Europe, Africa and Asia] are referred to with the term continent. For an island refers to a sprawling landmass, which is completely surrounded by the sea and is not connected at any point to these three continents.

The continuing modern misunderstanding of these geographical terms is mainly due to the fact that nowadays, the term continent is also understood as a landmass of continental scale (Australia, for example), that just do not necessarily have to have a connection to any of the continents recognized since ancient times. This modern idea can, however, by no means be applied to the Age of Discovery, in which this kind of shift in meaning for this term had not yet occurred. Even Dutch scholar Gemma Frisius, whose consideration led him to conclude that the newly discovered landmass across the Atlantic was spatially separated from Asia (i.e. an insula), clearly distinguished these geographical terms in his 1530 work De principiis astronomiae et cosmographiae:

America ab inventore Americo Vesputio nomen habet, alii Bresiliam vocant, quae an continens an insula sit necdum satis constat. [...] Hanc partem terrae multi Asiae adnexit dicuntque continentem esse, sed horum ratio certa non est, igitur neque temere assentiendum puto. [...] America cum Asia non coniungitur. [...] At ego rem incertam experientiae et Lectorum iudicio committo (Frisius, 1530, ch. XXX, De America).

America gets its name from its discoverer, Amerigo Vespucci. Others call it Bresilia. It is not yet sufficiently clear whether this is a continent or an island. [...] Many would attach this continent to Asia, saying that it therefore should be a continent, but their view is not certain
and I feel I cannot blindly agree with it. [...] America is not connected to Asia. [...] But I shall leave this uncertain matter to experience and to the judgment of the reader.

On 22 April 1500, a Portuguese fleet under Captain Pedro Álvares Cabral reached the coast of present-day Brazil, which was initially thought to be an island.9 As shown in a letter sent on 27 July 1501 from Lisbon by Domenico Pisani, the Venetian ambassador to Spain, the idea that they had reached mainland quickly became prevalent across Portugal:

[..] de sopra del capo de Bona Speranza, verso garbin, hanno discoperto una terra nova, chiamano la terra de lì Papagà [...] iudichano questa terra esser terra ferma, perche corseno per costa duo mila mia e più, né mai trovorno fin. habitano homeni nudi et formosi (Berchet, 1892/1893, p. 43).

[..] above the Cape of Good Hope to the west, they have found a new country that they call Parrot Country. They consider it to be mainland because they sailed more than 2000 miles along the coast without finding the end. Beautiful, naked people live there.

After the caravels of Gaspar de Corte Real returned in October 1501 from their voyage to Newfoundland, the idea slowly began to prevail in Lisbon that the different stretches of the coast, which had been discovered in recent years, all formed the coastline of a still unexplored part of the Asian mainland.10 A letter authored on 18 October 1501 by Pietro Pasqualigo, the Venetian ambassador to the Portuguese court, clearly expressed this realization:

A di .9. dil presente arivò qui una di doe caravelle, quale l’anno passato la maestà dil dito re mandò a discoprir terra verso la parte de tramontana; el ha conducto 7 tra homeni e femene et puti [...]. questi homeni de aspecto, figura e statura somigliano Cingani [...], vestiti di pelle de diversi animali [...]. credono, questi di la caravela, la soprascritta terra esser terra ferma, et coniungerse con l’altra terra, la qual l’anno passato soto la tramontana fu discoperta da le altre caravelle de questa maestà [...]. etiam credono coniungerse con le Andilie, che furono discoperte per li reali de Spagna, et con la terra dei Papagà, noviter trovata per la nave di questo re che andorono in Calicut (Berchet, 1892, p. 87).

On the 9th of this month, one of the two caravels returned, which the king had sent out last year to discover land to the north; among other things, it brought with her seven men, women and children. [...]. These people are similar in appearance, face and figure to the inhabitants of Cingani [Asians]. [...] They clothe themselves with the furs of different animals. [...] The sailors of the caravel believe that the above-mentioned land is mainland and connected to the other country found far to the north the year before by others caravels of this king. They also believe that it connects to the Antilles discovered by the Spanish kings and the Parrot Country recently been found by the vessels of this king that had reached Calicut.

This insight was nevertheless not the only result of this process of realization. It also turned out that this part of Asia from a cultural perspective had very little in common with the Indian subcontinent already reached by Vasco da Gama. In a letter from 4 February 1499 by Peter Martyr, Milanese humanist and educator of the Spanish royal children, to his scholar friend Pomponio Leto, clearly discussed this unflattering situation for the Spanish Crown:

Ab orbe autem novo quid habeatur, petis. Solem secuti nostri Castellani ad occidentem magis ac magis in dies progredivuntur. Nudos omnes [...] reperuient incolas [...] Aurum gemmasque [...] multis in locis reperuient. Portugalenses vero, suum secuti transaequinoctium [...] aromatum commercia prosequuntur. (Lunardi, Magioncalda, & Mazzacane, 1988, p. 94).

But you want to know what is going on in the New World. Following the sun, our Castilians are pushing further and further forwards every day toward the West. They are discovering residents, all of whom are naked [...]. In many places, they are finding [...] gold and pearls. The Portuguese are, however, pursuing the spice trade, by [...] following their way across the equator. 11
Perhaps in order to take a closer look at Cabral’s discovery, a fleet under the Portuguese flag left Lisbon on 10 May 1501 to further explore the coastline in the south of present-day Brazil. Also aboard the fleet sailing under the command of Gonçalo Coelho was Amerigo Vespucci, who shared the findings of this voyage in two private letters addressed to Pierfrancesco de’ Medici in Florence after returning on 7 September 1502. At the beginning of 1503, a revised version of this letter appeared in print in Paris and has since gone down in the history of travel literature as the Mundus Novus letter. This letter also served to inform all scholars not directly involved in the discovery process that the islands originally discovered by Columbus in the western Atlantic were not, as had been claimed, an extension of the Asian mainland that extended far to the east, but rather a part of the world spatially connected to Asia that reached far to the south, contrary to the assumptions of the ancient and medieval scholars, and had maintained its cultural particularity because of its remote location:

Superioribus diebus satis ample tibi scripsi de reditu meo ab novis illis regionibus, quas [...] perquisivimus et invenimus; quasque novum mundum appellare licet, quando apud maiores nostros nulla de ipsis fuerit habita cognitio et audientibus omnibus sit novissima res. Etenim haec opinionem nostrorum antiquorum excedit, cum illorum maior pars dicat ultra lineam equinoctialem et versus meridiem non esse continentem, sed mare tantum, quod atlanticum vocaver; et, si qui eorum continentem ibi esse affirmaverunt, eam esse terram habitabilem multis rationibus negaverunt. Sed hanc eorum opinionem esse falsam et veritati omni contrario haec mea ultima navigatio declaravit, cum in partibus illis meridianis continentem invenerim frequentioribus populis et animalibus habitatam quam nostram Europam seu Asiak vel Africam [...]. Ibi eam terram cognavimus non insulum, sed continentem esse, quia et longissimis producitur litoribus non ambientibus eam et infinitis habitatoribus repleta est. [...]”

In recent days, I have reported to you extensively of my return from those new areas that we [...] explored and discovered; and these could be described as a New World, since our ancestors had no knowledge of these areas. They are new to all who hear of their existence. Because this also transcends the perception of those alive in the recent past, since the majority of them were of the opinion that there was no mainland across the equator in the southerly direction, only the sea, which they called the Atlantic; and if some of them had confirmed that there is mainland there, they had many arguments to refute the idea that this land would be inhabitable. My latest voyage, however, has adduced evidence that their opinion is wrong and entirely contradicts the truth, because I have found a continent at those southern latitudes, which is more densely populated by peoples and animals than our Europe, Asia or Africa [...]. We realized that this land is not an island but a continent, since its coasts extend over a long distance without enclosing it and it is inhabited by countless people.

The ideas about the geography of this newly discovered part of the world expressed in the letters cited are reflected in Alberto Cantino’s manuscript map dating from 1502 that, in turn, was based on a Portuguese original. Cantino’s map includes a text inserted adjacent to the eastern coast of Brazil which references the discovery of a mainland by Cabral:

“A vera cruz chamada p. nome aquall achou pedralvares cabrall fidalgo da cassa del Rey de portugall & elle a descobrio indo por capita moor de quatorze naos que o dito Rey mandava a caliqut y enel caminho indo topou com esta terra accui aqual terra se cree ser terra firme em aqual a muyta gente de discrâim andam nuas omes & molheres como suas mais os pario sam mais brancos que bacos e teem os cabellos muyto corredios: foy descoberta esta dita terra em aera de [mil] quinhentos.

The so-called Vera Cruz was found by Pedro Alvares Cabral, a nobleman of the Portuguese Royal House. He discovered it as commander of a fleet of 14 ships that said King sent to Calicut. On the way to India, he came across this land here, which he thought to be mainland. Many people live there. Men and women walk around without limitation, as nature created, naked. They are more fair-skinned than dark-skinned and have very slick hair. This land was discovered in 1500.
A similar text is found at the same place on a manuscript map by Genoese cartographer Nicolo de Caveri (and also based on a Portuguese original); Caveri’s map was known to be one of the main cartographic sources for Waldseemüller’s 1507 world map:

A vera crus chamada per nome aquall achom pedralvares cabral fidalgo da cassa del rey de portugall e elle adescobrio indo por capitanio de XIII navos que rey mandau o coliquit ien el caracho indo topoi com esta terra aqual terra fuerem esser terra ferme em aqual ha muita gente de descriua vam nuos omes e mulieres como quas mais os pario sam mais brancos.

The so-called Vera Cruz was found by Pedro Alvares Cabral, a nobleman of the Portuguese Royal House. He discovered it as commander of a fleet of 14 ships that said King sent to Calicut. On the way to India, he came across this land here, which he thought to be mainland. Many people live there. Men and women walk around without limitation, as nature created, naked. They are lighter-skinned. (Figure 2)

These versions are likely to have made it clear that the geographical nature of the newly discovered part of the world in the western Atlantic, from a contemporary perspective, was fundamentally associated with the idea of a landmass connected to Asia. Columbus, with his supposed discovery of the Asian mainland to the west of Europe, could feel vindicated that the theory he had accepted before his first journey of the eastward expansion of the inhabited world to 270° had been proven, at first sight, to be correct. As shown, the ideas of his Italian compatriot Vespucci were equally influenced by the mainland-like character of the newly discovered part of the world, even if the Florentine believed to have discovered a new part of the world spatially connected to Asia, despite the fact that it extended for unexpectedly large expanse to the south and was inhabited by people with a distinct cultural identity.

2. The depiction of America on Waldseemüller’s world map (Figure 3)

2.1. The geographic dimension of Waldseemüller’s depiction of America

The contemporary understanding of the newly discovered part of the world across the Atlantic Ocean as mainland, of course, inevitably raises the question as to why Waldseemüller used a very different, insular-based depiction on his world map (Figure 4). He explains his ideas on the topic in a text placed in front of the East Coast of America:

Capitaneo navium quatuordecim, quas rex Portugaliae ad Calicutium misit, ea hic primum apparuit. Quae credebatur firma, cum revera sit cum prius inventa parte circumflua, mire, sed nondum prorsus cognitae magnitudinis insula. In qua virilis ac feminei etiam sexus homines non alter quam eos mater peperrit, ire asueverunt. Et sunt hic quidem paulo albiore eis, quos superiori navigione ex mandato regis Castiliae facta reperiere.
This land appeared at this spot to the captain of the fourteen ships sent from Portugal to Calicut by the King: this country was thought to be mainland, although it, together with the previously discovered part, is an island of astonishing, but still unknown size. In this land, men and even women are used to walking around in no other way than the way nature has created them. And they are here admittedly somewhat lighter-skinned as those found on an earlier expedition under the command of the King of Castile.16

Although Waldseemüller does not mention the Portuguese Cabral by name, the textual reference to the texts from the Cantino and Caveri maps cited above should not be overlooked.17 However, Waldseemüller, completely inverting the statements made there, established the theory, revolutionary for his time, that this landmass is an island, which was only first thought to be mainland due to its enormous size. An equivalent of this assessment can also be seen in Matthias Ringmann’s companion to the world map, the Cosmographiae Introductio:

\[ Hunc \text{ in modum terra iam quadripartita cognoscitur et sunt tres primae partes continentes, quarta est insula, cum omni quaque mari circumdata conspicatur } (\text{Ringmann, 1507, ch. 9}) \]
The Earth is now known to be divided into four parts, of which the first three parts are continents, while the fourth part is an island, because it has been proven to be surrounded by the sea on all sides.

Although the words of Ringmann and Waldseemüller give the impression that there is some empirical foundation to their geographical conception, they name no sources for the would-be groundbreaking knowledge on the insular nature of the newly discovered part of the world. Instead, Waldseemüller’s planiglobe depiction along the top edge of his world map made Amerigo Vespucci the lead source for a depiction of the New World spatially separated from Asia, although it must have been clear to the two scholars that this idea in no way corresponded to that of the Florentine. Another difficulty that arose from this insular depiction lay in the spatial allocation of the newly discovered territories. If the landmass, perceived as continental and thus spatially connected to Asia, were to be understood as divided into a northern, still unexplored part of the Asian continent and an unexpected American continent reaching far south, the insular depiction, from a contemporary perspective, would almost downgrade today’s North America to a no man’s land, since it could neither be assigned to the Asian continent nor to the America lying to its south. All this must lead to the realization that the insular conception that Ringmann and Waldseemüller brought to life did not primarily concern itself with representing geographical knowledge.

2.2. The political dimension of Waldseemüller’s depiction of America

If the primary motivation for the depiction of America on Waldseemüller’s world map was not geographic, there must have been another reason for this insular-based and, from a contemporary perspective, revolutionary depiction of the newly discovered part of the world across the Atlantic. In light of the fact that Waldseemüller’s world map as a whole, and the depiction of the New World, in particular, shows strong Portuguese influences (not only is the rendering of the South American coast based on Portuguese sources with the manuscript maps by Cantino and Caveri, but the choice to name the newly discovered part of the world after Amerigo Vespucci was tellingly based on an expedition carried out under the Portuguese flag), the following should relate Waldseemüller’s depiction of America to the political and economic interests of the Portuguese mentioned in the introduction. In addressing this issue, however, one should not lose sight of the fact that the Portuguese in the first decade of the sixteenth century were primarily focused on establishing and further developing the eastern sea route to India around the southern tip of Africa. In the period before Waldseemüller’s world map was published, they were not only concentrated on expanding fortified bases and outposts in the ports on the Malabar Coast of the Indian subcontinent around Calicut already explored by Vasco da Gama, but they were also already beginning to explore areas located in Southeast Asia, considered to be the real spice islands, around Malacca and the Moluccas. For the Portuguese people, the discovery of the new part of the world across the Atlantic, independent of any potential wealth that could be expected from there, helped to intensify the still unresolved question of whether the barely opened and conquered spice territories in the East might be accessible via a western route. This scenario, certainly feared in Portugal for a long time, involved the risk that the Spaniards, not allowed to sail the eastern sea route around Africa to India, would use this western route as a backdoor to undermine Portuguese interests in the lucrative Indian spice trade.

Therefore, the insular depiction of the new part of the world on Waldseemüller’s world map must have initially been welcomed as a major setback to the ambitions of the Spanish Crown, who were indeed seeking a western sea route to the spice territories of India. This newly discovered part of the world as a barrier extending over a great distance from north to south (the southern end not even being visible on the map) could only have been perceived in Spain as an almost insurmountable obstacle for their intentions; even the opening between the northern and southern part of the landmass, still depicted by Waldseemüller despite the fact that Columbus’ fourth voyage had already proved that it did not exist, could certainly not conceal the fact that the coveted Indian spice countries were simply too far away. With the cartographic birth of the Pacific Ocean that accompanied the separate depiction of the new part of the world in the western Atlantic, the Indian
sub-continent was shown to lie too far away to make traversing the implied (but non-existent) strait cost-effective or low risk.23

Thus, the insular-based depiction of America on Waldseemüller’s world map, which historical cartography has hitherto mostly only examined with regard to Waldseemüller’s sources, can in no way be contemplated without considering the political and economic interests of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean. The relationship between the depiction of the new part of the world in the West and the political and economic interests of the Portuguese in the East should not be completely surprising, even on Waldseemüller’s map image of the Indian subcontinent. Although he had access to a quite modern rendering of these areas from the Caveri map, which had already been used in connection with the depiction of the East Coast of America, he still depicts the Malabar Coast around Calicut according to Ptolemaic specifications, even though Vasco da Gama had already reached it. This in itself can only be connected to the efforts of the Portuguese Crown to withhold the actual geographical conditions in the Indian Ocean from their Spanish rivals on a cartographic level, in order to strengthen the former’s position in the spice trade there and to enjoy, at least for a certain time, a head start in building its own colonial empire in India.

The media package from St. Dié shows exemplarily that, for humanist scholars like Waldseemüller and Ringmann, science is not the only, but (as can be seen in this case) actually just a subordinate criterion. In the West, with all the literary and cartographic sources available to them, mapmakers still conveyed something that was neither on the contemporary horizon nor had been verified in any way at this point in time. In the East, however, they based their depiction on ideas that they almost certainly knew had been geographically considered long outdated.

However, the politically and economically motivated depiction on Waldseemüller’s world map was not only of benefit to the Portuguese Crown, but also played into the hands of the southern German merchant families involved in the Indian spice trade, the Welser, Hirschvogel, and Imhoff families in Nuremberg and the Fugger family in Augsburg.24 bearing in mind the wealth that the individual families had acquired through the spice trade already established by the Portuguese with India, it is easy to understand that the merchants involved had a substantial interest in the continued existence of this lucrative source of income. The close economic ties the Welser family to the Portuguese royal house, already expressed in the license to trade in India granted to them by the Portuguese Crown in 1503, in this context, speaks for itself (see also Krendl, 1981/1982, p. 180). In subsequent years, the intensification of this contact resulted in the Welser family, at a time when direct trade was not allowed with the Malabar Coast, even being able to secure the pepper crop up until 1516 by way of contracts with the King of Portugal (see also Walter, 1992, p. 157). Moreover, in 1505, before the publication of Waldseemüller’s world map, several representatives of these southern German merchant families personally took part in the very financially successful India voyage of Portuguese sailor Francisco d’Almeida after the Habsburg Regent Maximilian specifically issued a letter of recommendation for them to the Portuguese King Emanuel (see also Krendl, 1981/1982, p. 180). Maximilian, who is known to have shown a great interest in the discoveries of the Portuguese throughout his life, seems to have acted as an intermediary in this business model (see also Wiesflecker, 1986, p. 450).

Of course, this act did only occur out of what Maximilian understood to be an understandable interest in providing the southern German merchants with the best possible economic conditions by way of his particularly familial (his mother, Eleonore, descended from the Portuguese royal house) and traditionally good relationship to Portugal, but it must also of course be looked at in light of the fact that the upper German merchant families who had become rich in the spice trade with India were also very appreciated sponsors for his costly political plans.25 Established as a circle of scholars under Duke René II in the Lorraine town of St. Dié—still a part of the Holy Roman Empire at the time—the Gymnasium Vosagense bore a helping hand to the practical implementation of such an extensive and expensive cartographic project. Maximilian’s personal relations with Freiburg,
especially with his later counselor and confessor Gregor Reisch, who also was the teacher of Waldseemüller and Ringmann, helped to realize such a project.26

These observations should make clear just how close the political and economic ties were between the Portuguese Crown, the southern German merchants, and the Habsburg regent Maximilian.

In summary, it can be stated that Waldseemüller’s world map represents a highly impressive example of the extraordinary degree of power the politics of cartography had at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Not primarily the geographical knowledge of the newly discovered part of the world across the Atlantic, but instead the extremely multi-layered triangular relationship, marked by political and economic dependencies, as well as familial relationships, between the Portuguese Crown, the upper German trading houses, and Maximilian von Habsburg, ultimately set the ground for this milestone of early modern cartography.

Funding
The authors received no direct funding for this research.

Author details
Martin Lehmann1
E-mail: martin.lehmann3@gmx.net
1 Department of Classical Philology, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Herbstzheim 79336, Germany.

Citation information
Cite this article as: The depiction of America on Martin Waldseemüller’s world map from 1507—Humanistic geography in the service of political propaganda, Martin Lehmann, Cogent Arts & Humanities (2016), 3: 1152785.

Cover image
Source: Detail of Martin Waldseemüller’s World Map from 1507 (Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress, Washington).

Notes
1. This paper is based on a presentation which I held at the Strasbourg conference “Res naves. Umbrüche in den humanistischen Quellen des Oberreins” in 2013. The many recommendations and suggestions—which I have gratefully welcomed—have been integrated in the written version. A German version will be published by the Franz Steiner Verlag as part of the conference papers edited by Marie-Laure Freyburger, Henriette Harich-Schwarzbauer, Wolfgang Kofler, and Sandrine de Raguenel.
2. Horst Pietschmann already brought this influence into the research debate with the Behaim globe, put together in Nuremberg in 1492, which, with its impressive spherical depiction and extensive details on India, was conceivably intended for the acquisition of capital for profitable trading with India. Moreover, he expressed the idea that the naming of the newly discovered part of the world across the Atlantic, propagated in Matthias Ringmann’s Cosmographiae Introductio, implemented on Waldseemüller’s world map and referencing the Florentine, Amerigo Vespucci, possibly had much less to do with the scientific rigor of the scholars at the Gymnasium Vosagense in St. Dié, but much more so with the interdependencies and relationships between the Portuguese Crown, Maximilian I of Habsburg, and the Medici Florence. In Pietschmann (2007, pp. 369–379).
3. On 12 June 1494, Columbus gathered his ship’s crew on deck and made them swear an oath that Cuba was part of the Asian mainland. In de Navarrete (1859, pp. 162–168), although Columbus had not verified whether this region actually was mainland and despite the fact that the statements of local residents even indicated otherwise, he apparently wanted to send a clear signal upon his return to Spain, in order to be able to assert his claims and be granted more voyages (see also Bitterli, 1999, p. 72).
4. [Translated from the German translation in:] Berger (1991, p. 112, 128–129).
5. See also Schmitt (1984, pp. 98–99). In the Lettera rarissima, a letter to the Catholic Monarchs written from present-day Jamaica on 7 July 1503 Columbus places the discovery of what, in his opinion, was the far east Asian mainland in conjunction with the ideas of Marinus of Tyre, who already supported the idea of a markedly greater eastward expanse of the Asian continent before Ptolemy and who, from Columbus’ perspective, had been falsely corrected by the great Alexandrian scholar in Varela (1982, p. 295).
6. The Age of Discovery used the term continens in the original sense derived from Latin, meaning to cohere, to be connected with. In Italian, according to the Dizionario etimologico della Lingua Italiana, the evidence of the term il continente appeared for the first time ever in 1590, namely in Torquato Tasso, yet meant in the modern sense of an expanded landmass, not necessarily connected to the original continents. For this reason, in all reverse translations of the Mundus Novus letter into Italian, the Latin continens is replaced by the term terra ferma.
7. Fundamental to the contemporary understanding of the geographical terms in the context of transatlantic discoveries Lehmann (2013, pp. 15–24).
8. Examples of the modern misunderstanding can be found in numerous publications. Garry Wills stated in the preface to Vespucci’s letters published by Luciano Formisano, “the reports of Vespucci first led Europe to suspect the momentous truth – that there are two oceans, and what Columbus had hit was a separate continent isolated on either side by these oceans.” In Formisano (1992, p. X), Hermann Wellenreuther also expresses this stance in his standard work on the history of North America: “the decisive factor in the roles of Vespucci and Matthias Ringmann [...] from St. Dié,
who, in the Introduction to Martin Waldseemüller’s [...] world map published in 1507, names the new part of the world America with reference to Vespucci, is [...] that Vespucci, like Ringmann, helped the breakthrough of the conception of a new and separate continent [...].” (In Wellenreuther, 2000, pp. 99–100). Even the guardian of the single copy of Waldseemüller’s world map from 1507, held at the Library of Congress in Washington, argued similarly, “Waldseemüller’s map supported Vespucci’s revolutionary concept by portraying the New World as a separate continent, which until then was unknown to the Europeans. It was the first map, printed or manuscript, to depict clearly a separate Western Hemisphere, with the Pacific as a separate ocean.” In Library of Congress 2016, http://www.loc.gov/rr/geogmap/waldexh.html (accessed on January 1, 2016).

9. Pêro Vaz de Caminha, the writer of Cabral, wrote a detailed report to the king of Portugal, in which he speaks of the discovery of an island (Ilha da Vera Cruz) (see also Wallisch, 2001). Apparently he did not find much support for this theory in Portugal. On the question of whether Cabral’s fleet, which was actually headed toward the Indian Calicut, deliberately took a westerly course to verify information on the conditions across the Atlantic, which was probably already known but kept secret, or if the fleet, with its intention to avoid Africa with a westerly evasive maneuver, accidentally drifted too far, research has provided no consensus. In his report on Columbus’ third voyage, Las Casas mentioned that the line of demarcation that the Portuguese, in the Treaty of Tordesillas, moved from its position set by Pope Alexander VI at 100 leagues to 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands, as well as the knowledge of mainland further south in the West, which the Portuguese kept secret, should be looked at. In Berger (1991, p. 140), a report by the Portuguese historian Antonio Galvano on a map brought from Venice to Portugal by the Portuguese Crown Prince Dom Pedro, which already not only displayed the Cape of Good Hope on the southern tip of Africa, but also the straight, later named the Strait of Magellan, on the southern tip of the landmass later called America, points in the same direction (Galvano, 1862, pp. 66–67).

10. Gaspar Corte Real undertook a first voyage in 1500, which had probably already led him to Newfoundland. He left with three ships in 1501 on a second voyage, from which he did not return.

11. Renate Pieper rightfully notes that the term orbis novus, denominated here by Petrus Martyr, goes hand in hand with the knowledge that Columbus’ discovery of primitive Indian peoples, who were able to produce some pearls and little gold, starkly contrasts the Portuguese efforts in the far more lucrative spice trade with an Indian civilization and that this term thus already depicts an evolution of Columbus’ use of outro mundo, which merely provided a geographical description of a previously unexplored part of the Asian mainland without implying any cultural connotation (see also Pieper, 2000, p. 99). However, in spite of his cultural evaluation, Petrus Martyr, through a geographic lens, like Columbus, speaks only of a still unexplored part of Asia.

12. Wallisch assumes that the coastlines, explored by Coelho and Vespucci at a southern latitude of 32 degrees, ended at the present border of Uruguay and Brazil, just north of the Río della Plata. They then sailed, as the Ridolfi fragment confirms, to a southern latitude of 50 degrees without any view of the Brazilian coast before embarking on the trip back to Portugal (see also Wallisch, 2002, p. 60).

13. Even if modern research is not unanimous to this day in deciding if the Mundus Novus letter is a literary fiction or an authentic work by Vespucci, experts are nonetheless in agreement that this letter marks an important point in the history of the reception of the New World (see also Pieper, 2000, p. 104). Wallisch only recently attempted to reestablish the Mundus Novus letter as an authentic text of Vespucci by primarily attributing the inconsistencies between the printed publications of the letters and the private letters to modern misunderstandings regarding the nautical and ethnographic information in Vespucci’s letters (in Wallisch, 2002, p. 10). After the initial publication in Paris in 1503, issues were already released in Venice, Augsburg, and Rome in 1504 and between 1504 and 1506, another 25 issues were printed, including 18 in the German-speaking area.

14. The text used here goes back to the issue acquired by Johann Otmar in Augsburg in 1504 (in Wallisch, 2002, p. 12, 14–15). With the formulation qua et longissimis productur litoribus non ambientibus eam, Vespucci makes clear that the landmass he found cannot be separated from Asia because this land is not fully surrounded by water. In his translation, David Jacobson revealingly leaves out this crucial part, which is necessary for understanding Vespucci’s concept of the term continent: “There we learned that the land was not an island but a continent, both because it extends over very long, straight shorelines.” (In Formisano, 1992, p. 47). Although Pomponius Mela and Claudius Ptolemy had already speculated about the possible existence of a southern continent, they were of course unable to provide empirical proof. In this respect, it is correct when Vespucci claims that all living people (maiores nostri) prior to him did not have cognition, or empirically substantiated knowledge of a southern continent of that kind. Unlike Wallisch, who identifies Vespucci’s nostri antiqui with ancient scholars like Pomponius Mela and Ptolemy and thus sees a relativization of the previously made statement about the maiores nostri, in my opinion, nostri antiqui refers to late medieval scholars such as John Buridan or Paul of Burgos, who dominated the natural-philosophical discussion in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries with their eccentric conceptions (opinio) based on spheres of land or water about an opposite hemisphere covered entirely by water (see also Wallisch, 2002, p. 9). The passage beginning with si qui eorum refers to Augustinus, who thought the presence of landmasses on the opposite hemisphere to be fundamentally conceivable, but nonetheless excluded the thought that this land could be inhabited. Vespucci’s realization of the southern expanse of the new continent, called by him the mundus novus, which was spatially connected to Asia, should be looked at, according to the term used by Columbus, outro mundo, or Petrus Martyr’s orbis novus, both from the contemporary as well as from the modern perspective, as a significant advance in the geographical understanding of the transatlantic discoveries.

15. As a diplomatic commissioner of the Este house who was based in Lisbon, Cantino secretly procured this map, had it copied and smuggled it out of the country. It was presented to the Duke of Este in November 1502 (see also Nebenzahl, 1990, p. 34).

16. This text is meant to amend the flawed translation from my dissertation published in 2010, which was influenced by an incorrect perception of geographical terms in the Age of Discovery. Cf. Lehmann, 2010, p. 205.

17. Waldseemüller also references Cabral’s 14–ship fleet as indicated on the Cantino and Caveri maps, even though
Vespucci, in his letter to Pierfrancesco de’ Medici on 4 June 1501 and the Portuguese King Emanuel, in a letter to the Spanish Monarch Ferdinand on July 29, 1501 both only mentioned 13 ships.

18. Despite the still unresolved question regarding the sources of the insular perception of the new part of the world, which, from a modern perspective, is astonishingly successful, yet was nevertheless only able to be fundamentally proven correct much later, it tends to be overlooked that neither Waldseemüller nor any other scholar of the time could seriously consider such a depiction as a geographically verifiable truth. The first European to ever see the West Coast of this part of the world, and thus also the Pacific, with his own eyes (undoubtedly necessary for Ringmann and Waldseemüller’s emphatically formulated idea of a landmass that is spatially separated from Asia) was the Spaniard Vasco Núñez de Balboa in 1513. Even if the research now is in broad agreement on the fact that advanced models of the part of the world across the Atlantic must have already existed before the European Age of Discovery, there is no consensus about their origins. Specialist in Middle Eastern and oriental studies, Fuat Hanner (2010, pp. 108–113).

19. This fact is of particular importance given that the United States of America claims Waldseemüller’s world map and its use of the name America for the first time as its sole birth certificate. The first time America was used in reference to the entire part of the world, however, was in 1541 by Gerhard Mercator.

20. By way of a report by the Italian traveler Ludovico di Varthema from 1506, the Portuguese learned that the spices traded in Calicut and on the Malabar Coast did not originate from the Indian mainland itself, but from the islands further east near Malacca and the Moluccas. The Portuguese were not able to occupy Malacca until 1511. The Moluccas were then only discovered shortly afterward in 1511/1512 (see also Schmitt, 1994, pp. 227–230).

21. The Western line of demarcation from the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 was supplemented by an Eastern line of demarcation for the first time in 1529 with the Treaty of Saragossa. The Moluccas remained a bone of contention for the two powers, which both claimed them. Since the longitude was difficult to determine, it was of course difficult to decide on line which the western-reaching Spanish area of influence and the eastern-reaching Portuguese area of influence should meet. To that end, both sides repeatedly attempted to use various maps and globes to shift the once established but, due to the longitude-issue, not precisely definable line of demarcation according to their own interests.

22. Schmitt already made it clear that such a landmass in Europe could only be perceived as troublesome barrier. He did not further question the geographical depiction and thus did not differentiate between the Portuguese and Spanish interests. In Schmitt (1992, p. 132).

23. In contrast to the main map, the planiglobe depiction at the top right border of the map shows the northern and southern landmasses as connected. The different shape of the American landmass on the large world map and on the planiglobe depiction is caused by the projection form, which greatly distorts the appearance at the lateral edges of the large world map. See also Hessler (2006, pp. 101–113). Also compare Lehmann (2010, pp. 108–113).

24. Nuremberg merchants played a central role in the pepper business at this time. They established a thriving trade line to Antwerp, what was then central pepper market of the world. In Walter (1992, pp. 157–158).

25. The political nature of Waldseemüller’s world map may still also be tangible when looking at the causal relationship of Maximilian’s rivalry with the French King Louis XII, his competitor for the crown and title of Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. In his recently published article, Renate Pieper presented the thesis that Maximilian wanted to impress the assembled stalls and numerous ambassadors, expected to have many riches overseas in the future, which were present at the Reichstag in Constance beginning just five days after the appearance of Waldseemüller’s world map, with precisely this publication in order to pull those in political disagreement with the French king over to his side. To Pieper (2016, p. 8) however, the records from the Reichstag in Constance in 1507 show no evidence of Waldseemüller’s world map. See also Wolgast, 2014. Perhaps the presumable presentation of Waldseemüller’s world map at the Reichstag in Constance was of a more informal character and was thus not listed in the official records.

26. Waldseemüller as well as Ringmann dedicate the medium of St. Dé to Maximilian. The good relations of Maximilian with the Waldseemüller family are also documented in a letter, in which the regent makes enquiries at the mayor and counsel of Freiburg about the violent death of Conrat Waltzenmüller, brother of Jakob Waltzenmüller, who had asked him for this favor, in Stadtarchiv Freiburg, A1 Xile 1492 Juli 6. In Schmitt (1991).
Lehmann, M. (2013). Amerigo Vespucci and His Alleged Awareness of America as a Separate Land Mass, Imago Mundi (Vol. 65, Part 1, pp. 15–24).

Lunardi, E., Magioncalda, E., & Mazzucane, R. (1988). La scoperta del Nuovo Mondo negli scritti di Pietro Martire d’Anghiera. Rome: Ist. Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato-Archivi di Stato.

Nebenzahl, K. (1990). Der Kolumbusatlas: Karten aus der Frühzeit der Entdeckungsreisen, übersetzt aus dem Amerikanischen von Jost-Christoph Raupenbrock. Braunschweig: Westermann.

Pieper, R. (2000). Die Vermittlung einer neuen Welt, Amerika im Nachrichtennetz des Habsburgischen Imperiums (pp. 1493–1598). Mainz: P. von Zabern.

Pieper, R. (2014). Between India and the Indies: German mercantile networks, the struggle for the naming of the New World. Culture & History Digital Journal, 3. doi:10.3989/chdj.2014.003

Pietschmann, H. (2007). Bemerkungen zur Jubiläumshistoriographie am Beispiel, 500 Jahre Martin Waldseemüller und der Name Amerika. Jahrbuch für Geschichte Lateinamerikas, Cologne/Weimar/Vienna, 44, 367–389.

Ringmann, M. (1907). Cosmographiae Introductio. St. Dié.

Schmitt, E. (Ed.). (1984). Dokumente zur Geschichte der europäischen Expansion, Die großen Entdeckungen (Vol. 2). Munich: Beck.

Schneider, U. (2008). Die Macht der Karten. Darmstadt: Primus.

Sezgin, F. (2007). Die Entdeckung des amerikanischen Kontinents durch muslimische Seefahrer vor Kolumbus, Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums (Vol. XIII). Frankfurt am Main.

Varela, C. (Ed.). (1982). Textos y documentos completos, Relaciones de viajes, cartas y memorias. Madrid: Alianza.

Wollisch, R. (2001). Das Schreiben über die Entdeckung Braziliens (1500). Frankfurt am Main: TFM.

Wollisch, R. (2002). Der Mundus Novus des Amerigo Vespucci. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Walter, R. (1992). Nürnberg in der Weltwirtschaft des 16. Jahrhunderts. In S. Füssel (Ed.), Die Folgen der Entdeckungsreisen für Europa, Pirckheimer-Jahrbuch (pp. 145–169). Nürnberg: Carl.

Wellenreuther, H. (2000). Niedergang und Aufstieg, Geschichte Nordamerikas vom Beginn der Besiedlung bis zum Ausgang des 17. Jahrhunderts. Hamburg: Lit.

Wiesflecker, H. (1986). Kaiser Maximilian I. (Vol. 5, Vienna, Ch. VI, 2. Die Neue Welt, pp. 447–452). Munich: Oldenbourg.

Wallisch, R. (2002). Der Mundus Novus des Amerigo Vespucci. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Wiesflecker, H. (1986). Kaiser Maximilian I. (Vol. 5, Vienna, Ch. VI, 2. Die Neue Welt, pp. 447–452). Munich: Oldenbourg.

Wolgast, E. (Ed.). (1982). Textos y documentos completos, Relaciones de viajes, cartas y memorias. Madrid: Alianza.

Wallisch, R. (2002). Der Mundus Novus des Amerigo Vespucci. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Wiesflecker, H. (1986). Kaiser Maximilian I. (Vol. 5, Vienna, Ch. VI, 2. Die Neue Welt, pp. 447–452). Munich: Oldenbourg.

Wolgast, E. (Ed.). (1982). Textos y documentos completos, Relaciones de viajes, cartas y memorias. Madrid: Alianza.

Wallisch, R. (2002). Der Mundus Novus des Amerigo Vespucci. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.