Sebastian Cabot World Map

Cartographer: Sebastian Cabot  
Date: 1544  
Size: 124 x 210 cm  
Location: Bibliotheque Nationale, Res. Ge.AA.582, Paris  
Description: According to R.W. Shirley, this magnificent elliptical map, of which only one copy is known, is framed and on display in the Department of Maps and Plans in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris. Engraved on copper in eight sheets, it was found in Bavaria in 1843 and has been attributed to Sebastian Cabot on account of specific references to him in one of the long flanking panels of Spanish and Latin text on either side of the map.

Sebastian Cabot first traveled with his father Juan (or John) Cabot, a Venetian in the service of Henry VII. In 1497-98 landfalls were made on the coasts of Newfoundland or Nova Scotia and later further southwards, in the belief that Asia had been reached. According to contemporary records Sebastian again set out in 1509 and may have discovered Hudson’s Bay, but on nearly all early 16th century maps it is the Corte-Real brothers who are given the honor of reaching present-day Canada. Sebastian Cabot later became a Spanish Pilot, making several journeys to South America, and the text of his large map acknowledges the more recent discoveries of Spanish and Portuguese seamen as well as those by his father and himself.

Several features of the Cabot map are of great interest. First, it is one of the few printed maps which in its calligraphy, elegance and illustrative style deliberately seeks to emulate the finest hand-drawn charts of Spanish or Portuguese origin. A number of ships, human figures and animals are engraved in precise detail, and have been hand colored. There are conquistadores fighting Indians in Peru, a splendid tent of the enthroned Great Khan, polar bears, a mounted camel and a large jaguar or cougar.

Second, Cabot has been at pains to give the best cartographic rendering of those areas of most recent exploration, particularly the East Indies and the Americas. In South
America the river Amazon is prominent, also the River Plate - both areas of Cabot’s own voyages - but apart from land just south of the straits of Magellan no large Antarctic continent is indicated. Legends off the coast of Mexico and Peru describe these countries and their conquests by Cortes and Pizarro respectively. The map also takes into account the explorations by Ulloa in 1539 and Coronado in 1540-42 into the interior of the south-west of the United States. John Cabot’s own landfall is placed in the vicinity of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, some 10° further south than the indication given on earlier maps such as those by La Cosa (c.1500 #305), Thorne (c.1527 [1584]) and Ribero (1529, #346). The coastline of the eastern seaboard is almost as good as that in Mercator’s large world map twenty-five years later (#406); Cabot wisely does not try to define the western coastline and leaves it open as Terra Incognita.

In other parts of the world the map is strangely inexact. The Mediterranean is much mis-shapen, the British Isles are very poorly rendered and Scandinavia is little better drawn than on Ptolemaic-type maps half-a-century earlier. Iceland, too, is shown almost due north of Scotland.

Sebastian Cabot was well-received in England throughout his long life and contemporary reports mention a re-issue or re-engraving in 1549 by Clement Adams with Latin side text. Hakluyt, writing in 1582 and almost certainly referring to Cabot’s work, praises “the great map in her Majesty’s Privy Gallery”. This map probably perished in the burning of the Palace of Whitehall at the end of the 17th century.
Reference:

Detail: Indian Ocean
Detail: Amazon River and South American natives
Detail: Patagonian Giant, South America
Detail: Eastern Hemisphere
Detail: Central Africa
Detail: Southern Africa