TITLE: *de Virga's World Map*
DATE: *1411 - 1415*
AUTHOR: *Albertinus de Virga*
DESCRIPTION: This circular world map is painted on a piece of parchment measuring about 69.6 x 44 cm, with an extension, or neck, attached on the left-hand side. The world map proper, 41 cm/16 inches in diameter, extends over two-thirds of the overall parchment. The remaining part, the extension or neck, is occupied by a calendar and two tables with inscriptions relating to the calendar. Between the map and its figure there is a mention in small characters - *A. 141 . Albertin diuirga me fecit in vinexia*, the last number of the date having been erased by a fold in the parchment. That notwithstanding, the parchment is generally in good condition with some folds and tears that inhibit its readability. The right side carries some tears that indicate that the map was nailed on this side to a wooden piece around which it was evidently rolled. The whole map is framed with a double line and the laced corners between the figures are adorned with oriental-style decoration.

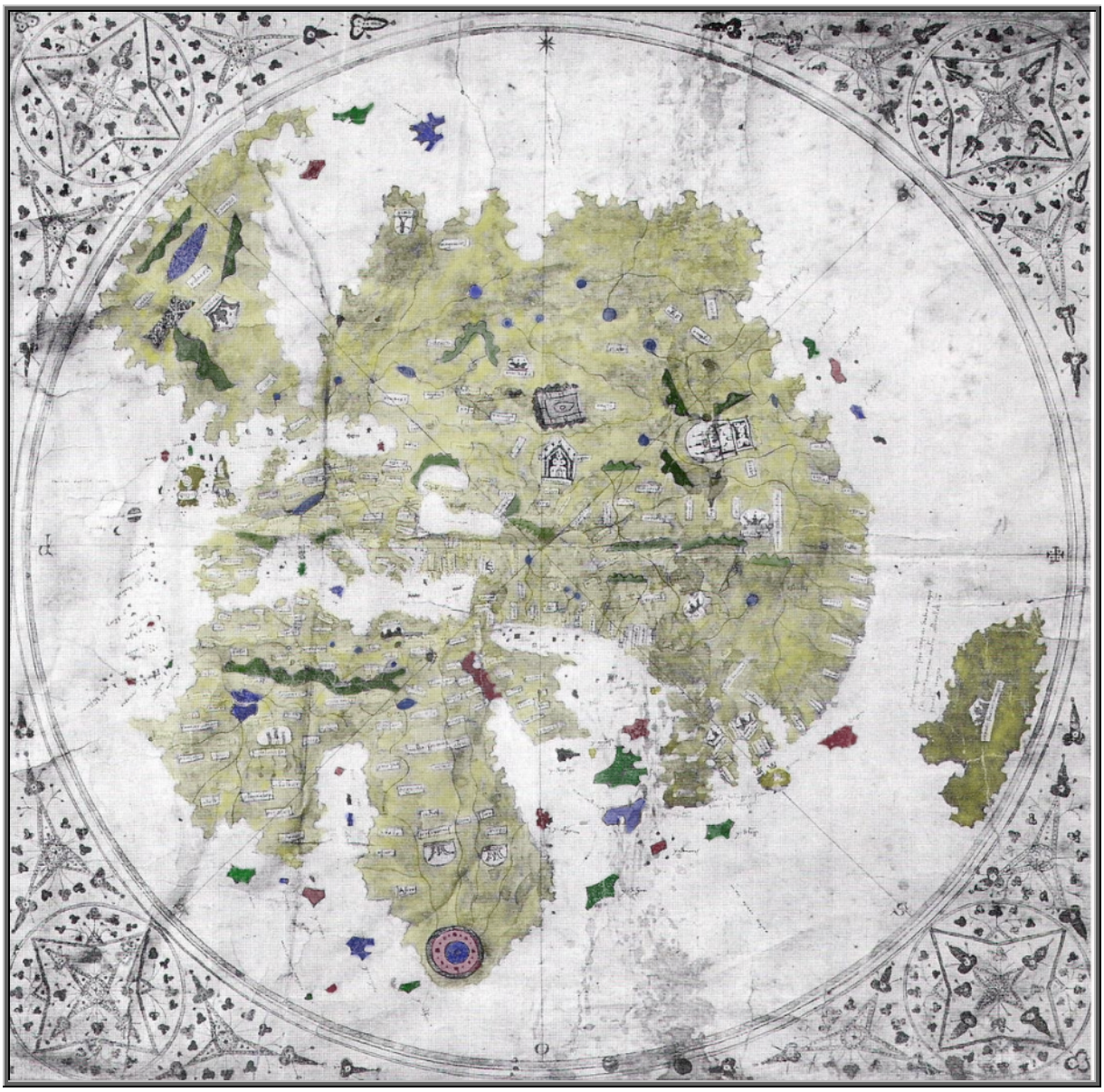
Oriented with North at the top, the world map contains a wind rose with eight divisions, the center of which is situated on the western shores of the *Mar Capara* [Caspian Sea] the northern division is marked with a star and the eastern division is marked by a cross.

While no color copy, or color photograph of this map has survived it is known that the map was produced in color with the seas left white, except for the Red Sea that is colored in vermillion. The landmasses are colored in yellow, although the islands are in a variety of colors; the mountains are in a greenish-brown, the lakes in blue, and the rivers are colored brown. The names of various locations are written in either red or black ink, always on the inside of a small box or cartouche. These are sometimes capped by a crown or by a picture of a castle, which indicates the principle countries or kingdoms.

The continental landmass is surrounded by a large expanse of ocean which several times mentions *Mari Oziano magno*. The Holy Land, marked with the names of *Jordan* and *Gorlan* [Jerusalem], does not, as with many previous medieval maps, exactly occupy the center of the map. The three known continents, *Europa, Africa*, and *Axia*, underlined on the map for emphasis, are harmoniously placed (in part) around the Mediterranean Sea, drawn tolerably with exactness like the European *portolan* [nautical] charts, and (on the other hand) around the Indian Ocean, which is decorated with multi-colored archipelagos similar to the Arab maps. According to its principle commentator Franz Von Wieser, the de Virga map presents itself in some ways *"like a compromise between the classical medieval world maps and the map of seaports"*.

The influence of the Genoan and Catalonian nautical maps is marked particularly by the detailed indications of the then recently discovered islands in the Atlantic, the Canaries and the Azores. Africa is decorated with the common representation of the Atlas Mountains, which spread over the northern part of Africa like a serpent, and by the *Mountains of the Moon* towards the south which surrounds twice the region where the *Ylon* [the river Nile] and several other rivers flow. A large gulf that opens into the ocean carries the notation *Dara Four Asiner close to some islands*. Some crowns in Africa are accompanied by the mention of *Pre. Yoanes* [Prester John of Ethiopia], *Muya*, and a castle of *Icalmcsa* [Sidjilmassa, from the Sahara]. The *Garden of Eden* is depicted at the southernmost tip of Africa with the symbol of two concentric rings, from which emerge the four rivers mentioned in *Genesis.* The delineation of Africa is unusual given that most European medieval world maps show southern Africa as extending strongly eastward (see #*242,* #*245,* #*246*), or, as with those based upon Ptolemy, showing an enclosed Indian Ocean (#*239*). The outline of de Virga's

Africa is quite intriguing given that the Portuguese Bartolomeu Dias was still over 70 years way from rounding the Cape of Good Hope.



A colorized version of the de Virga map

In Asia, most of the regional notations are consistent with Mongolian domination, a crown with the notes *Medru, Calcar, Monza sede di sedre* [the *Mangi* of northern China], and *Bogar Tartarorum* [the Great Bulgarian or Golden Horde]. There is also a plan for fortifications marked simply *M[on]gol* [Caracorum, in Greater Asia]. On the shores of the Indian Ocean there are the kingdoms of *Mimdar* and *Madar* [Malabar?], along with many islands with the following note which, without a doubt, relates to Sri Lanka: *Ysola d alegro suczimcas magna.* In the southeast, out in the middle of the Indian Ocean, is a large island provided with the note: *Caparu sive Java magna*, which includes in only one piece of land the distinct geographic features of *Zipangu* [Japan] and of Java, gathered from Marco Polo.

In northern Europe, beyond the note placing the location of *Ogama, Goga* [Gog and Magog] de Virga notes several places such as the kingdoms of *Rotenia* [Russia], *Naia, Samolica*, and, in the middle of a large promontory de Virga indicates the furthest limits of the known world north of Denmark and Scotland, the kingdom of *Norveca* [Norway]. Iceland/*Thule* is not named or shown on the map.

As for the calendar appended to the world map, it shows the figure of a child whose body parts correspond to the twelve signs of the Zodiac, a classic representation of a miniature Adam. On the left is a table of 100 letters, alternating black and red, which allows the reader to calculate the date of Easter as either *2 April 1301* or *18 April 1400*. On the right, a checker pattern determines the seasons. This entire portion of the parchment, separate from the map proper, seems to have been copied from part of some astronomical tables dating from the beginning of the 14th century.

The map's designer, Albertin de Virga, a Venetian, is not well known otherwise. It is known that he is also the author of a nautical map of the Mediterranean Sea, of the classical type, which has flowery ornamentation similar to this world map and signed in the same way: *A. 1409 . . . in venexia.*

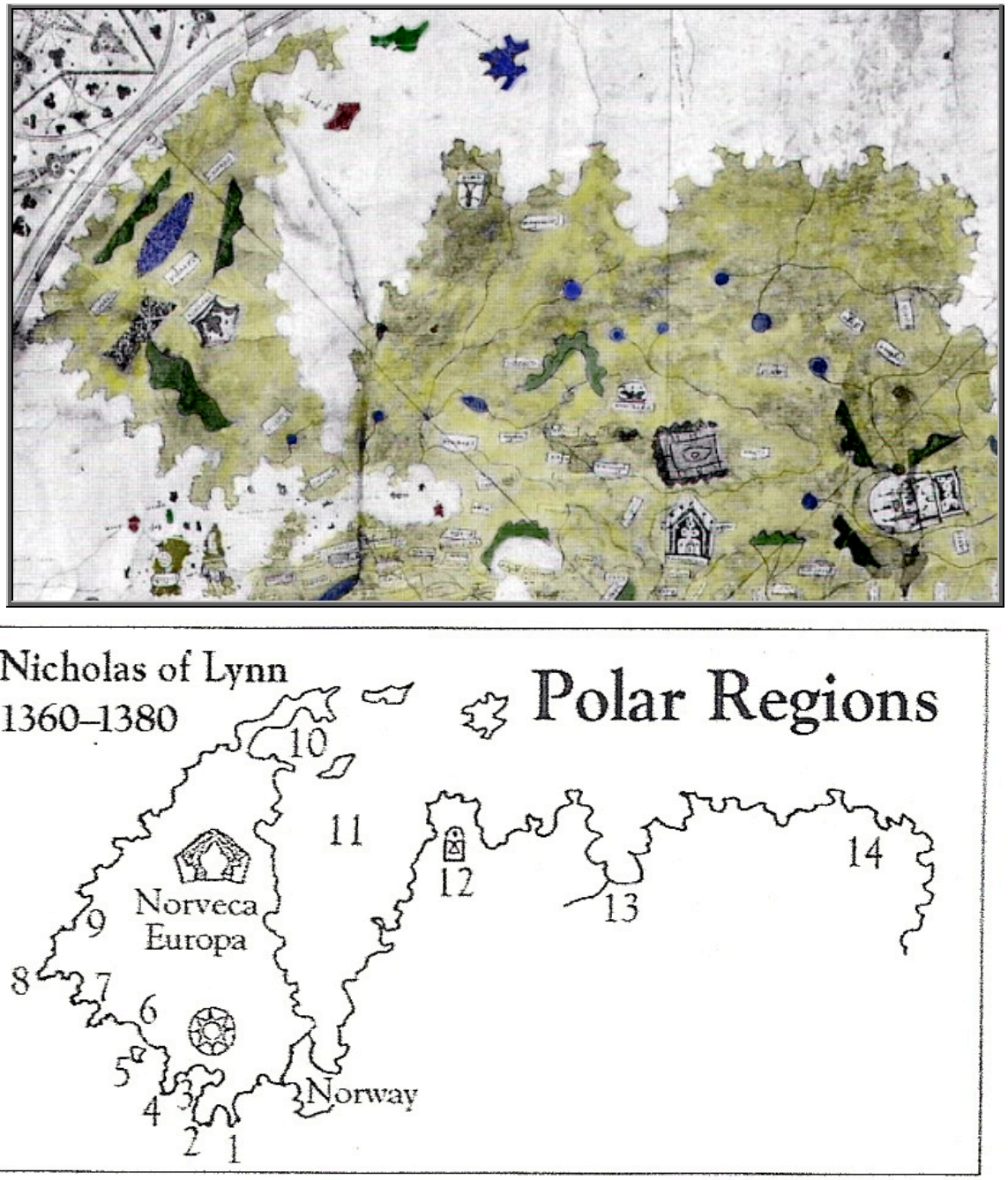
This map contains areas of Asia with names used in the Mongol dynasty; some rivers and cities have similar names as those in "*The Travels of Marco Polo*", and it shows that before the map was drawn the cartographer had referred to the maps made by Chinese Yuan scholars.

What requires special notice is there can be seen a remark on the V-shaped land on the upper left of the de Virga map that says: "*the known furthest extreme of the world*". According to some scholars this remark could not possibly be written by a European, because if one looks at the map it is easy to see the furthest part from Europe is not the V-shaped land, but China, so obviously this remark is originally from the ancient Chinese. This suggests that when making the de Virga map, the mapmaker copied a Chinese map and left this remark unchanged.

Kirsten Seaver in an article entitled "Cartographic controversy: Albertin de Virga and the Far North", *Mercator's World* 2:6, discussed the Virga map's delineation of the little known northern regions, the following is a summary.

The de Virga world map has been missing since 1932, when its owner withdrew it just days before an auction to be held by Gilhofer & Ranschburg in Lucerne, Switzerland, according to the cartographic historian Albert Dürst, who describes the map minutely in a 1996 article in the journal *Cartographica Helvetica*. Dürst notes renewed interest in the map after a recent claim by a researcher at the University of Hawaii, Gunnar Thompson, that de Virga indicated large parts of North and South America in the upper left section of the map, but Dürst does not comment on Thompson's theory.

Thompson, a psychologist who serves as director of the Multicultural Discovery Project at the University of Hawaii, supposes that de Virga lacked precedents for expressing medieval European surveys of the Americas on a planisphere and thus depicted the New World in an odd configuration — to the north and west. He contends that the continent labeled *Norveca* represents America's east coast from Labrador to Florida, that the land northeast of Norway is Venezuela and Brazil, and that the island situated southeast of Asia delineates the coast of Peru.



A sketch of the northern section of de Virga's world map reveals the legacy of a survey by Nicholas of Lynn, according to Gunnar Thompson. He suggests that most of the lands identified as "Polar Regions" correspond to territories near or beyond the Magnetic North Pole: 1) Greenland; 2) Baffinland; 3) Ginnungagap or Hudson Strait; 4) Labrador; 5) Newfoundland; 6) St. Lawrence River and Gaspe Peninsula; 7) Nova Scotia or Norumbega; 8) Cape Cod; 9) Chesapeake Bay; 10) Florida and the Antilles; 11) Gulf of Mexico; 12) Venezuela; 13) Amazon River; and 14) Brazil.

Thompson is not the first to argue that pre-Columbian American discovery by the Norse and others resulted in early cartographical representations of the Americas. Nor is he

the first to claim that an elusive medieval travel account of the Arctic, called *Inventio Fortunatae* (circa 1360), was written by Friar Nicholas of Lynn, who, according to Thompson, not only crossed to North America but also surveyed the lands well enough to later provide cartographical evidence.

Enticing though these ideas may seem, they do not hold up under scrutiny. They also do not help us interpret the work of Albertin de Virga. Medieval European cartographers knew the world was round and would have known how to represent areas that "spilled over" to the west or east. The *Inventio Fortunatae*, though lost, appears to have been real enough, but it is highly unlikely that it was written by Nicholas of Lynn. Finally, no convincing evidence of medieval surveys or mapping of the Americas exists.

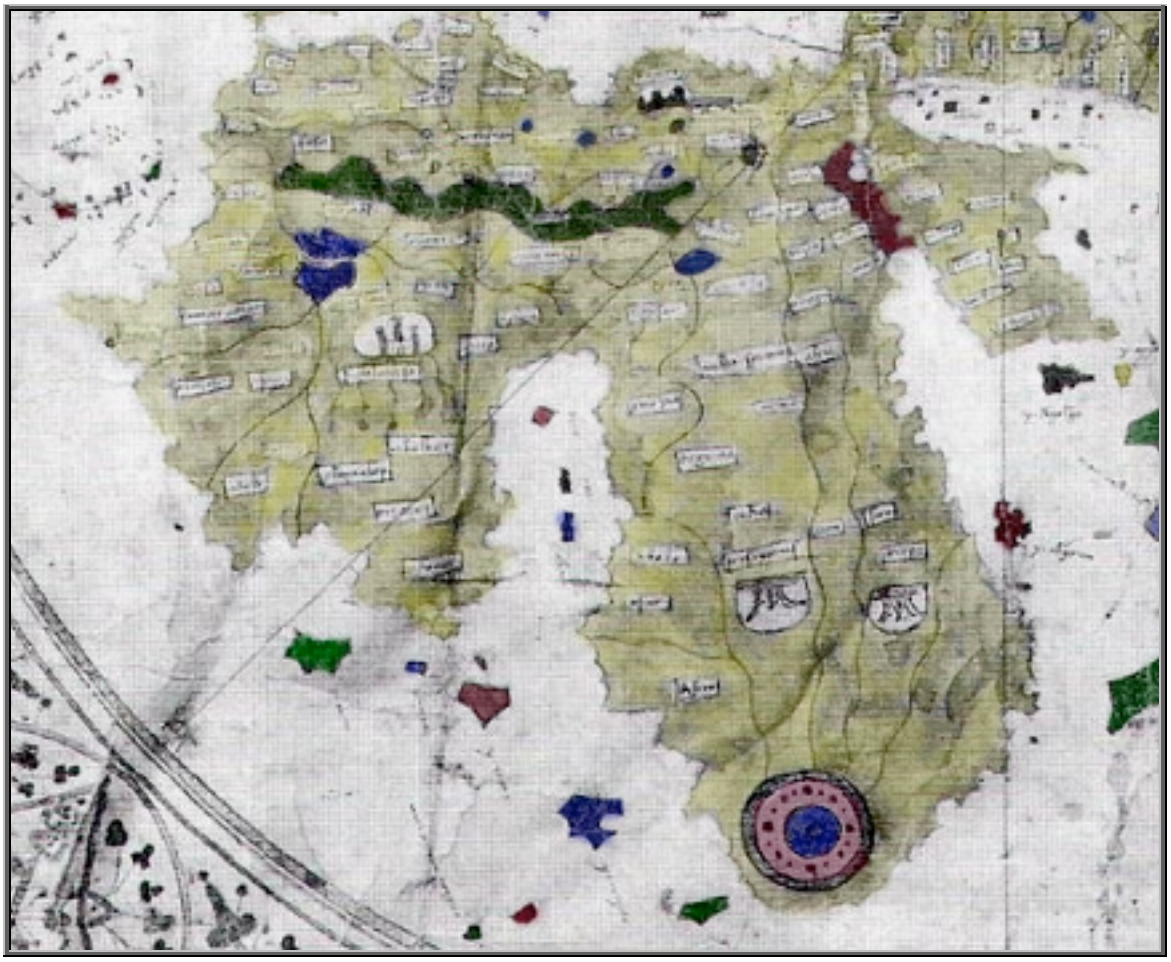
Unlike the case of the so-called *Vinland Map (#243)*, there was no reason to dispute the authenticity of de Virga's world map when it emerged from oblivion in 1912, and there is no reason to dispute it now. On the contrary, there are very good reasons to wonder why we should disregard the mapmaker's own nomenclature, particularly given the evident care with which de Virga executed the task he had set himself. We also need to ask why a cartographer would fail to name a poorly known region if, indeed, he was familiar with it.

De Virga's African outline is startlingly advanced compared with the works of his contemporaries in Venice and elsewhere. De Virga appears to have had an unusual ability to calculate shapes and distances on the basis of second-hand information provided to him, most likely by sailors probing the African coasts and from reports by merchants familiar with the trans-Saharan gold route.

Juxtaposing de Virga's world map with a 1511 Venetian edition of Ptolemy's *Geographia* (compiled by Bernardus Sylvanus with maps by Andreas Matheus Aquavivus) underscores the realism of the former. Although the 1511 maps incorporate American discoveries, they indicate little knowledge of the Far North and are otherwise regressive, considering what de Virga knew a century earlier. However, de Virga's depiction of the Atlantic coast suggests that even this cartographer's ability to conceptualize coastlines could not entirely transcend gaps in the information available to him.

Although the map also depicts a somewhat foreshortened coastline from the Algarve to Brittany, the coast is at least recognizable past the English Channel and beyond the Scheldt, up the west coast of Danish Jutland. Trouble comes after the Skaw (northernmost Jutland), where in order to enter the Baltic Sea a ship had to head south in the Kattegat (a strait separating Sweden and Denmark) before passing through a narrow sound separating the island of Sjælland from the Scanlan Peninsula — in de Virga's time part of Denmark rather than of Sweden.

The Danish king exacted payments from ships on their way to and from the Baltic toward the *Hanse* cities (a medieval alliance of cities that controlled trade between the eastern and western sides of northern Europe). The Scania herring trade was so important that this extra piece of Denmark would have been known to Venetian merchants, who flocked to the Flanders markets in order to trade with the *Hanse* bringing their cargo south.



Africa on the de Virga map

Although inaccurate by modem standards, de Virga's delineations of the Baltic Sea and Scandinavian Peninsula fairly represent contemporary *Hanse* knowledge. Such information would have been available to de Virga either from *Hanse* merchants or through Venetian merchants returning from trips to the North to buy salted herring, stockfish (wind-dried cod), and other commodities. Nevertheless, it would have been difficult for de Virga to visualize the intricacies of the Baltic entrance solely from descriptions of the rounding of the Skaw, the route south along the east coast of Sjælland taken to pass through the sound, and the passage east (actually, east followed by northeast) into the Baltic Sea.

His map adequately depicts the western part of the Baltic with an arm dipping south, as well as the eastward-tending inner Baltic with the Finnish Bay and a north coast comprised of Finland and southeast Sweden combined with Danish Scania. The entire northern arm (now called the Bothnian Bay), beginning at about 60°N, lay outside the *Hanse* merchants' scope, as it was devoid of significant trading centers. Furthermore, Bothnian Bay freezes over so early in the winter and is so often bedeviled by heavy fogs that few sailed those waters in the early 15th century.

Nevertheless, many *Hanse* would have heard about or experienced a part of this cold arm reaching north into the unfamiliar regions just a little past the Scanian peninsula. Perhaps de Virga, after hearing a description of this assumed northward passage into the

unknown (rather than a closed bay), decided it must lie just to the west of Scania, rather than to the east where the waters were much more familiar to the *Hanse*.

Logically, the land mass in the map's northwest corner, featuring a crown and the name *Norveca* (repeated in three more places, probably to indicate the three major Norwegian towns) would then represent his concept of southwest Sweden detached from Danish Scania and of southern Norway from its join with Sweden at least as far north and west as Bergen. That the land mass called *Norveca* has nothing to do with either Greenland or North America should be abundantly clear from the nomenclature alone; it also is firmly connected to the world Albertin de Virga and his contemporaries already knew.

Showing the rather wide southern end of Norway in this manner would also be in keeping with *Hanse* information. As the center of the stockfish trade, Bergen had served as the chief Hanseatic port in Norway throughout the Middle Ages, and any *Hanse* skipper worth his salt would have known the route there. Repeated trade restrictions prevented trading farther up the coast, however, at least legally. Trade had not yet begun with Iceland, a circumstance that explains why de Virga's map does not show an island named Iceland or *Tyle/Thule* (Ptolemy's name for the farthest north). The omission of this island by any name also demonstrates, as does the rest of the map, that de Virga did not base his work on the Ptolemaic concepts that had barely begun to enter European thought at the time.

Although he clearly did not know the shape of Norway, de Virga would have been aware of the country's existence. Anyone living in Venice around 1415 who had commercial ties or who was curious about geography would have known that Norway lay far to the north, that it dominated the stockfish trade, and that the country was mountainous and probably very large. Nobody could describe its shape and extent, but on several maps of the early 15th century Norway appears as a rectangle framed and bisected by mountains. De Virga's fellow Venetian cartographers, Andrea Bianco *(#241)* and Fra Mauro *(#249)*, accorded Norway plenty of space in 1436 and 1459, respectively. Nevertheless, reports written by the Venetian nobleman Piero Querini and two of his crew about their enforced 1431 sojourn in the Norwegian Lofoten islands make it clear that Norway was as exotic to 15th century Italians as the Brazilian jungles were to 19th century European explorers.

It is tempting to assume that medieval churchmen who had spent time in the Far North contributed to Rome's knowledge of this remote region and that this knowledge long had been diffused through various channels of culture and learning. In reality, information flowed primarily in the opposite direction from the 11th century onward. Adam of Bremen's writing about the North depended more on the European accounts available to him than on the information brought to him by the Danes, and medieval Norse literature demonstrates greater awareness of Adam's writing, as well as other European geographical and cosmographical works, than of information derived directly from their own northern background.

Whereas modern scholars are able to fit topographical descriptions or information from travel accounts into an existing geographic image, such visual aids did not exist during the Middle Ages. Medieval readers must for themselves conceptualize distances and exotic locations, and as a result, their inventions wandered all over the map, both literally and figuratively. Innumerable letters demonstrate the Roman Curia's ignorance about the Far North. As late as 1464 a receipt was issued to the Norwegian bishop Alv of Stavanger "in Ireland."

Thompson and other writers support their claims about pre-Columbian European cartographic awareness of the Americas by calling into service the supposed 1360 voyage of Nicholas of Lynn, as well as an Arabic mention of *Greater Ireland*. In addition to the regular

Ireland associated with the British Isles, the Arabic geographer Abu-Abd-Allah Mohammed al-Idrisi, 1099-1180, *(#219)* noted a *Greater Ireland* in the northwest Atlantic, supposedly a reference to known land on the American side. Al-Idrisi's work does not support such an interpretation. The *Book of Roger*, which accompanied al-Idrisi's maps, says that Ireland, which lies west of the "deserted island" of Scotland, is a very large island. Having noted several sailing distances in those northern waters, the author then observes that it is one day's journey from Iceland to "Ireland the Great." Not only is it clear that al-Idrisi is referring again to the large island called Ireland located west of Scotland, but the travel time given equals that "from the extremity of England to the island of the Danes." An Icelandic codex from 1387 also describes Ireland as a large island, to the north of which lies another large island named Iceland. This statement leaves no room for alternative interpretations of another "island" that was supposedly North America.

Gunnar Thompson's theory regarding the de Virga map's *Norveca* rests on his conviction that the cartographical record of American discovery reaches back through the Middle Ages. Others have expressed a similar belief, including those who believe the *Vinland Map* at Yale University is a genuine mid-15th century expression of Norse discovery in America. No published author has been more fervently convinced of a cartographical record of Norse transatlantic sailings than the German Ptolemaic scholar Father Josef Fischer, S.J. (1858-1944), whose probable ties to the *Vinland Map* and demonstrable ties to the auction house of Gilhofer Ranschburg in 1932 merit further scrutiny in connection with the disappearance of the de Virga world map.

The map was re-discovered in a second-hand bookshop in 1911 in Šibenik, Croatia by Albert Figdor, an art collector. Albert Figdor died 1927 in Vienna. The map was analyzed by Doctor Professor Franz von Wieser, of the University of Vienna, a well-known Austrian cartographical scholar. Authenticated photographs were taken, which are today in the British Library. As Father Fischer's mentor, von Wieser kindled the young scholar's interest in cartographical and historical material pertaining to the Norse discovery of America. But in his 1912 published treatise on the de Virga map, von Wieser referred to Fischer's work only in a footnote, in which he refuted Fisher's conviction that the Danish cartographer Claudius Clavus had brought North America, as well as Greenland, into European cartography. Fischer had based his conviction on the published works of the Danish geographer A.A. Bjornbo, as well as on personal correspondence with him, which ceased just before Bjornbo acknowledged that he had been wrong about Clavus.

When Figdor died on 22 January 1927, his magnificent collections became the property of his niece Margarete Becker-Walz, the wife of a prominent Heidelberg lawyer. At first, the Austrian authorities refused to allow the collections out of the country, but after much legal wrangling and string-pulling, the well-connected Frau Becker-Walz managed to auction off the bulk of Figdor's art works and furniture in 1930. These auctions did not include maps and manuscripts, but in 1932 the Swiss firm of H. Gilhofer & Ranschburg announced an auction to be held on June 14-15, in Lucerne, featuring many rare items from the Russian Tsar's library at Zarskoje-Selo as well as the de Virga world map, a large photograph of which introduced the catalog. The map's reserve price was set at 9,000 Swiss francs, and its connection with Figdor and von Wieser was noted.

That is the last we know for certain about this map. Why Margarete Becker-Walz withdrew the map at the last minute from such a distinguished antiquarian auction house is a matter of speculation. We can discount a sudden discovery that the map was fake, for no one doubts its authenticity. Nor would Becker-Walz have decided that she or someone close to her needed it for cartographical study, for there was no such scholar in her family. Most

likely, someone gave her reason to believe the map would fetch a higher price if written up in a new study of hitherto unsuspected features in de Virga's work. If so, a strong probability exists that those features had to do with the landmass in the northwest corner labeled *Norveca*.

Father Fischer was the only scholar in Becker-Walz's part of Europe who combined a belief in medieval cartographic manifestations of the Norse discovery of America with sufficient scholarly stature to allow an approach to the map's owner. In 1932, besides being at the height of his reputation as a cartographic historian, he was no longer in von Wieser's shadow. He may have found the time ripe to rebut his former mentor's criticism of his views on Norse cartography.

That year brought an opportunity to revive his interest when he was asked to comment on a manuscript atlas about to be auctioned by Gilhofer & Ranschburg — an atlas he had been allowed to keep at Stella Matutina for the purposes of study. Given his close relations with the auction house at the time the de Virga map was being offered for sale, it is highly likely he would have seen Auction Catalog Number 8 with its photograph of the map.

If Becker-Walz withdrew the map from the auction on Fischer's advice and withdraw it she did — neither of them would have had much opportunity to proceed further. Early in 1933 Hitler and the National Socialists came to power in Germany. Father Fischer was still at the Jesuit college of Stella Matutina in Feldkirch and would soon have felt both the worsening relations between Germany and Austria and the anti-Catholicism of the Nazis. By April of 1934 Stella Matutina's large contingent of German students had to transfer to Saint Blaise in Switzerland because the Austrian Jesuit school could no longer grant them valid diplomas.

For Margarete Becker-Walz and her husband, as Jews living in Heidelberg, the situation would have turned ugly sooner. Arrests, boycotts of Jewish businesses, and dismissals from academic and other public positions began almost immediately after the Nazis came to power. It would have made little difference to Becker-Walz in the long run if she had converted to Christianity, as Figdor in his time had done. In the fall of 1935 anyone with at least three all-Jewish grandparents was declared a Jew. All Jews at the university, including honorary professors like her husband, had to resign their positions by the end of that year. Some 51 percent of the Heidelberg Jews emigrated, especially in the years 1937-1938. Those who remained after the infamous *Kristallnacht* (9–10 November 1938) were moved into "Jewish Houses" the following year. After 1940 most were deported to the Gurs concentration camp in the Pyrenees and to extermination camps in Germany. It is unlikely that any of these Heidelberg Jews escaped the confiscation of their homes and property by the National Socialists that became the lot of almost every Austrian Jew after the Anschluss in 1938.

After Germany's surrender in 1945, Nazi loot was found stored all over the former Third Reich in town offices, houses used as billets, officers' clubs, and cattle barns. Some of these stolen articles are slowly finding their way into the antiquarian market, and with luck we may again see de Virga's world map. Those wishing to hasten the process might start by looking into the fate of Margarete Becker-Walz and her husband Ernst Walz, an important Jewish citizen of Heidelberg and a defiant supporter of the Weimar Republic to the republic's bitter end. His own end came in 1941.

LOCATION: *unknown*

SIZE: 69.6 x 44 cm

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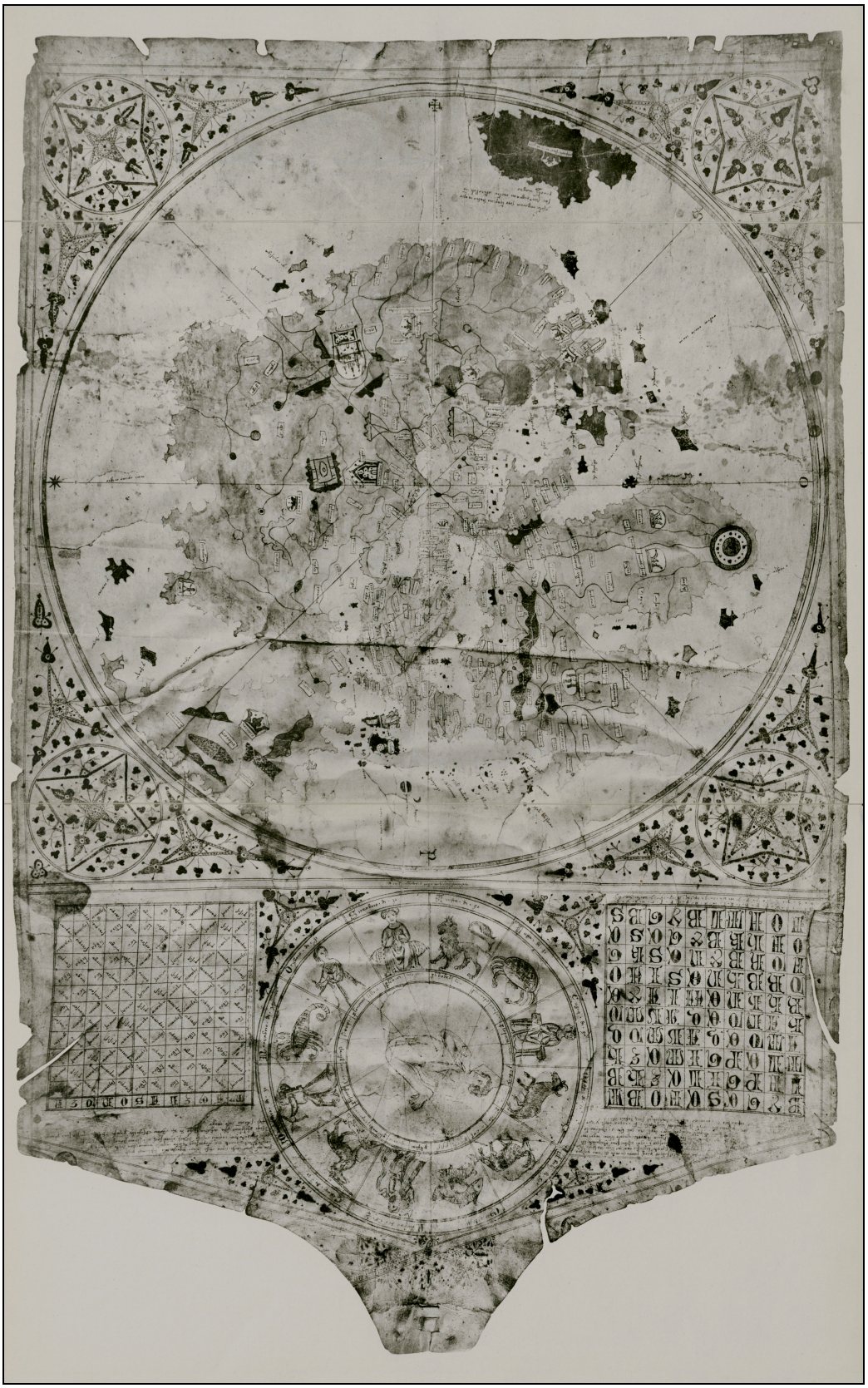
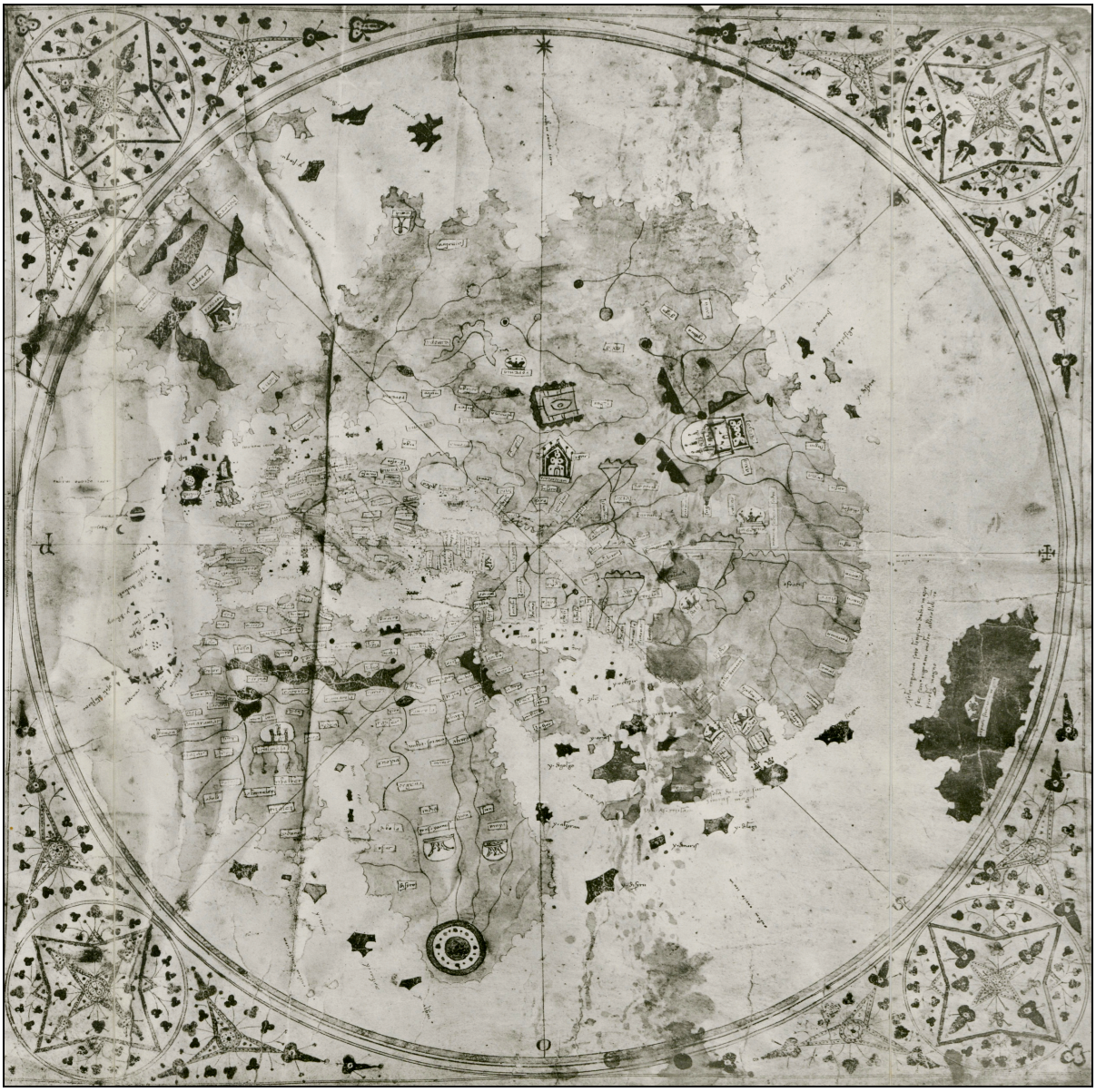
*Seaver, Kirsten "Cartographic controversy: Albertin de Virga and the Far North" *Mercator's World* 2:6, 1997.
*Thompson, Gunnar, *The Friar's Map,* pp. 130-131, 153-164.
*Von Wieser, Franz, *Die Weltkarte des Albertin de Virga aus dem Anfange des XV Jahrhunderts in der Sammlung Figdor in Wien,* 1912.

*illustrated

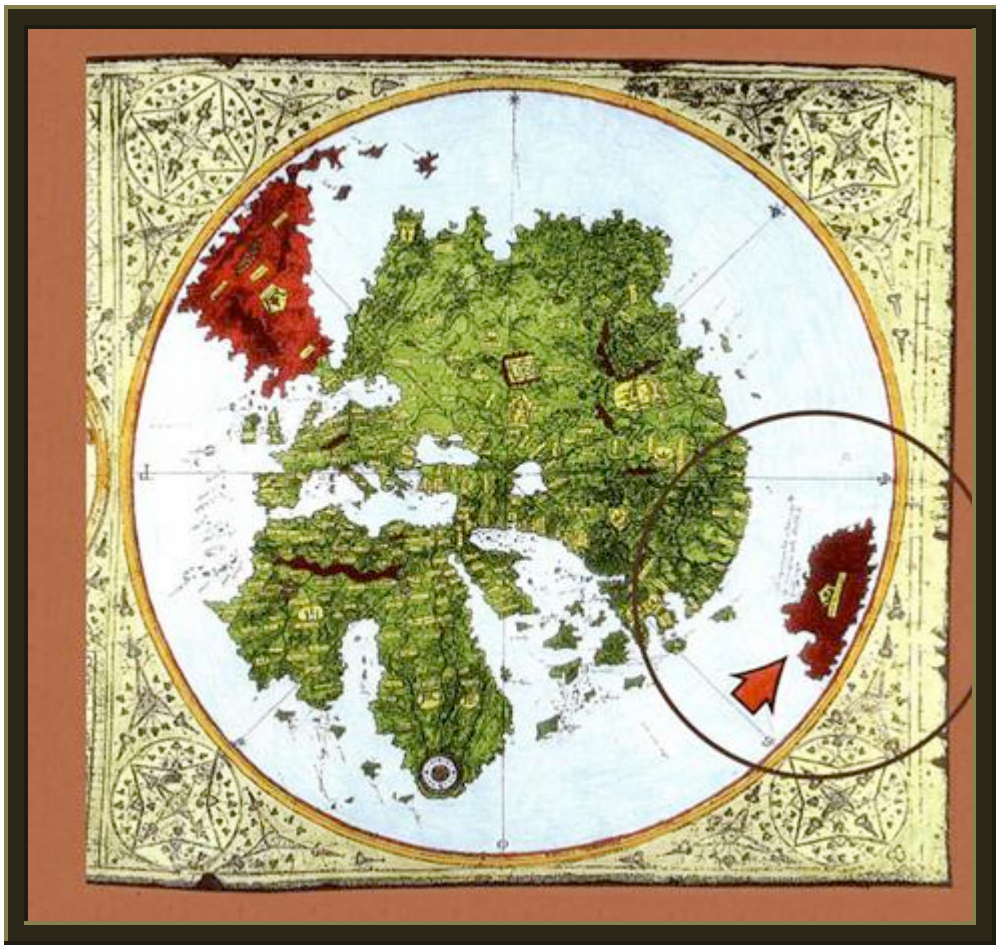
Detail: Asia





de Virga's World Map

#240



This map by the Venetian cartographer, Albertin de Virga, shows Marco Polo's "Southern Continent" southeast of Asia. The island-continent is called "Ca-paru or Great India." The map was made between 1410 and 1414. It was not until more than a century later that Francisco Pizarro, a Spaniard, finally reached Peru. He arrived at the shores of a southern mainland that was already named "Peru." And it was already included on Chinese, Venetian, and Portuguese maps. Western historians have given Pizarro credit for discovering Peru – even though it was already discovered and mapped by somebody else. From another theory by Gunnar Thompson.