



Gabriel de Vallseca (before 1408 – after 1467) was Catalan cartographer associated with the famous Majorcan school of cartography, which consisted of map and instrument makers of primarily Jewish descent. Vallseca was himself of Jewish descent and it is theorized by historians that he was a so-called crypto-Jew, someone who practices Judaism in secret while publically professing another faith, because his sons were later persecuted by the Spanish Inquisition. Five portolan chars of his hand have survived, made between 1439 and 1449, four of them signed and dated. This chart of 1439, the oldest extant, bears the inscription *gabriel I de ualsequa la feta en malorcha any M.ccccxxxviii* (Gabriel de Vallseca made it in Majorca, in the year 1439) and represents the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Atlantic coasts of Europe, North Africa, the archipelagoes of Madeira, the Canary Islands and the Azores. His most famous work was created in 1439 and is the first map to depict the recently discovered Azores islands. It is a *portolan* chart and partial *mappa mundi* that exhibits Vallseca's incorporation of contemporary innovations by Italian and Portuguese cartographers in combination with typical elements from the Majorcan school such as wind roses, human and animal figures, plants, and various notes in Catalan.

This 1439 manuscript chart, made by the Catalan cartographer Gabriel de Vallseca, one of the most important mapmakers in 15th century southern Europe, is among the most valuable charts of that time. Made following the tradition of the so-called Majorcan School of cartography, it depicts the Mediterranean and adjacent regions, including abundant illustrations and explanatory texts. Both the texts and the drawings show the political situation of the time, with numerous flags and banners indicating the sovereignty of each region.

The map depicts the Atlantic Ocean from Scandinavia to the Rio de Oro on the northwestern coast of Africa and includes both the real islands of the Azores, Canaries,

and Madeira as well as the mythical islands of *Thule*, *Brasil*, and *Mam*. According to a note on the reverse side of the map, the map was purchased for the price of 80 gold ducats by the famous explorer, navigator, and cartographer Amerigo Vespucci (1454–1512). It is believed by historians that he acquired the map in Florence during the 1480's and took it with him on his voyages to the New World between 1497 and 1504. The coveted work of cartography was later acquired by Cardinal Antonio Despuig y Dameto (1745–1813) sometime before 1785. The map was damaged during the winter of 1838/39 when an inkwell was accidentally tipped onto the map while the Count of Montenegro was showing it his visitors: Frédéric Chopin (1810–49) and George Sand (1804–76). Unfortunately, the spill blotted parts of a crucial note concerning the discovery of the Azores, obscuring the name of their discoverer and the date of their discovery. The map changed hands three more times during the 20th century, finally ending up in the Maritime Museum of Barcelona in 1960, where it remains on display to this day.

Although a considerable part of the African coast south of Cabo Bojador is depicted, this is just a conjectural representation imported from older charts of Catalan origin, such as the Angelino Dulcet chart of 1339, Cresoues' chart of c. 1375, and Mecla de Viladestess chart of 1413. It was only with the chart of Andrea Bianco of 1448, made fourteen years after the Cape Bojador was doubled (1434), that the Portuguese discoveries in the south were for the first time represented on a chart.

Two features make this chart historically important. The first is that it is the first cartographic work to depict the nine islands of the Azores in their approximate geographical locations. The second is the inscription near the Azores archipelago, giving the name of its discoverer and the date of the discovery; *Aques tes illes foram trobades p. diego de silues I pelot delrey de portogall an lay Mccc xxvij* (these islands were found by Diogo de Silves I a pilot of the King of Portugal in the year 1427). Also worth noting is the inscription on the back of the chart indicating that it belonged to *Amerigo ves oucct*, who may have paid a considerable amount for it: *Questa ampia pella di geographia fue pagata da Amerigo Vespuci - LXXX ducati di oro di marco* (this large geographical skin was paid for by Amerigo Vespucci - 80 golden ducats) Some historians consider the legend to be the forgery of an unscrupulous dealer justifying to ask a higher price for the manuscript.

The chart contains nearly two thousand place names, and it is the earliest surviving map in which the Azores, first visited twelve years before, are represented in a modern, accurate way. It is an exceptional document since this is the only late medieval Spanish nautical chart preserved in Spain.

This chart is made on parchment and measures 75 x 112 cm. It depicts the Mediterranean, Europe, Near Asia, and northern Africa, as well as part of the Atlantic Ocean. The chart is framed by a gold-blue strip, and the signature of Vallseca wrote his signature in the left edge of the map. However, one of the most interesting features of the chart is its graphic information, with abundant illustrations of cities, flags, and kings. In northern Africa, we can see the depiction of several rulers, accompanied by explanatory texts, something usual in Catalan-Majorcan nautical charts of the time.

Although the chart follows the cartographic tradition of the 15th century *portolan* [nautical] charts, with abundant place names written perpendicularly to the coasts and relatively good accuracy, we can also see traditional and biblical references, such as the Three Wise Men riding westward from the East.

The most notable is the depiction of the islands of the Azores (officially discovered in 1431 by Henry's captain Gonçalo Velho Cabral), which although

incorrectly spaced, are accurately depicted for the first time as strung out from southeast to northwest.

The lavish colors and the quality of the drawings indicate that this chart is a very luxurious work, joining cartographic innovations and a clear artistic purpose. The chart was no doubt commissioned by a wealthy nobleman or king. Stylistically, this richly decorated chart resembles the Majorcan luxury cartography of the time, with its numerous flags, coats of arms, city vignettes, animals, figures of kings and explanatory texts in Catalan. One single compass rose is shown which, as in most early charts, is placed near the top border. Close to the eastern border, the figures of the biblical Three Wise Men are illustrated, riding from the east to the Holy Land and the Queen of Sheba, housed in a red stylized tent, a feature that is shared with only two older extant charts: the *Catalan Atlas* of 1375 (#235) and the well-known chart of Angelino Dulcetti of 1339.

The chart of Gabriel de Vallseca was later purchased in Florence by the Cardinal Antonio Despuig y Dameto before 1785. It came into the possession of his heirs, the Counts of Montenegro in Majorca, and it was while the count was showing the chart to Chopin when the accident with the inkwell occurred.

In 1910, the map was put on sale, and bought by the Institute of Catalan Studies, which deposited it in the National Library of Catalonia. In 1960, the chart was transferred to the Maritime Museum of Barcelona, where it is still held under the shelf-mark Inv. 3236.

There are three existing *portolan* charts signed by Gabriel Vallseca:

- Map of 1439, at the Museu Marítim de Barcelona (inv. 3236) - partial *mappa mundi*
- Map of 1447, at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Rés. Ge. C4607) - Mediterranean only
- Map of 1449 at the Archivio di Stato di Firenze (CN 22) - Mediterranean only

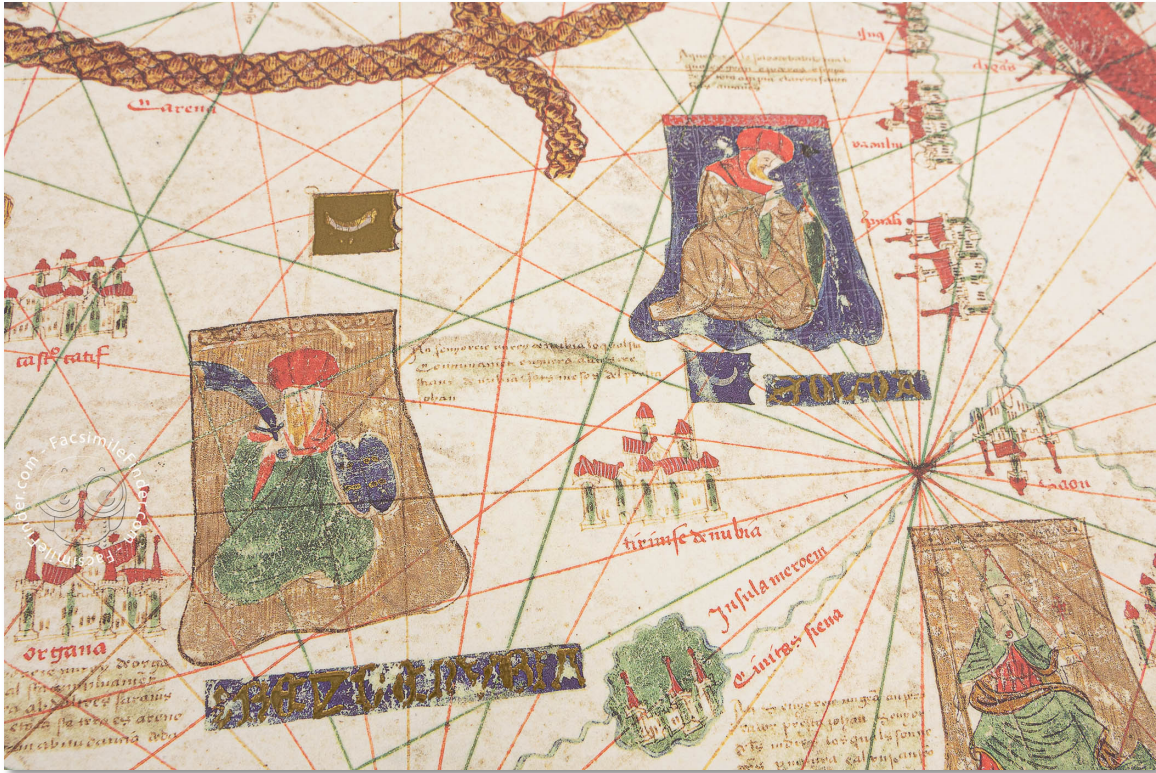
There are also two anonymous maps attributed to him:

- Undated map (est.1440) at Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (portolà 16) - partial *mappa mundi*
- Undated map (est. 1447) at Bibliothèque nationale de France (Rés. Ge. D 3005) - fragments of the eastern Mediterranean

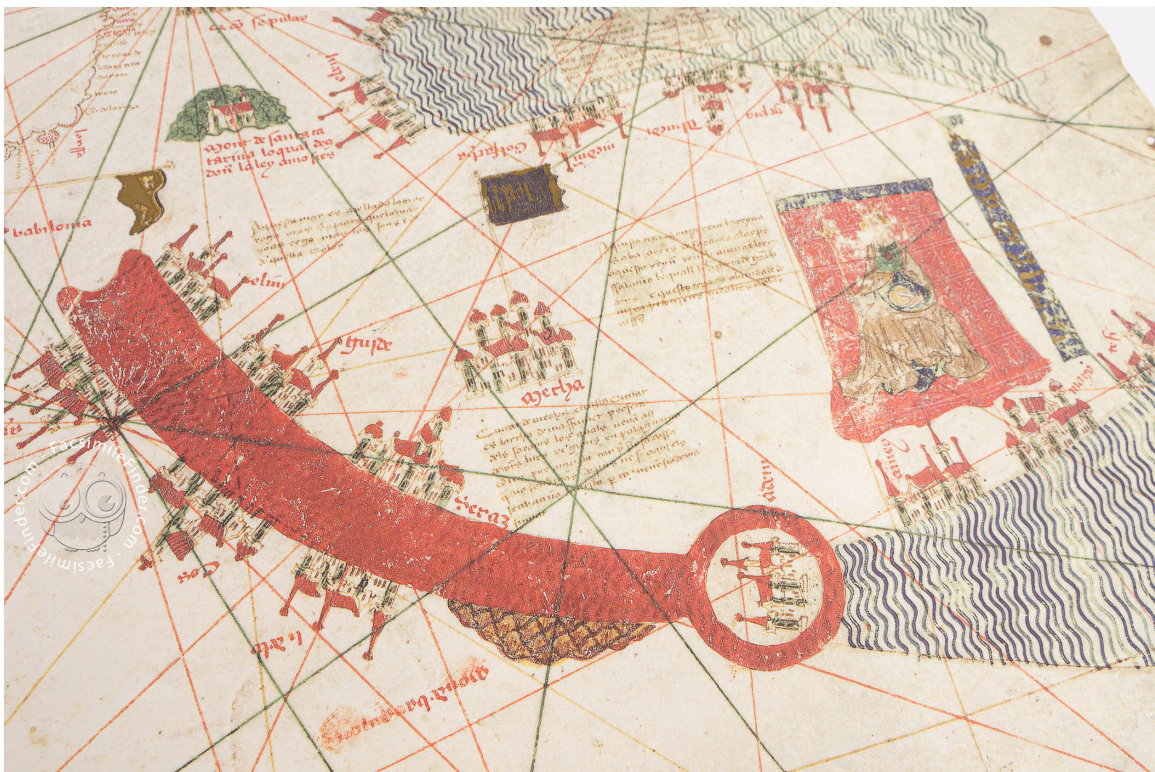
Although his style conforms to the traditional Majorcan cartographic school, Vallseca incorporated some more contemporary innovations in cartography from Italy, Portugal and elsewhere, most notably from Francesco Beccario (e.g. the homogenization of the scale between the Mediterranean and Atlantic). Gabriel de Vallseca's charts retain some signature Majorcan decorative motifs, such as the wind rose, miniature humans, animals and plants, the Atlas Mountains shaped as a palm, the Alps as a chicken's foot, Bohemia as a horseshoe, the Danube as a chain, the Tagus as a shepherd's crook, the Red Sea colored red, and scattered notes and labels in the Catalan language.

Location: Biblioteca de Catalunya

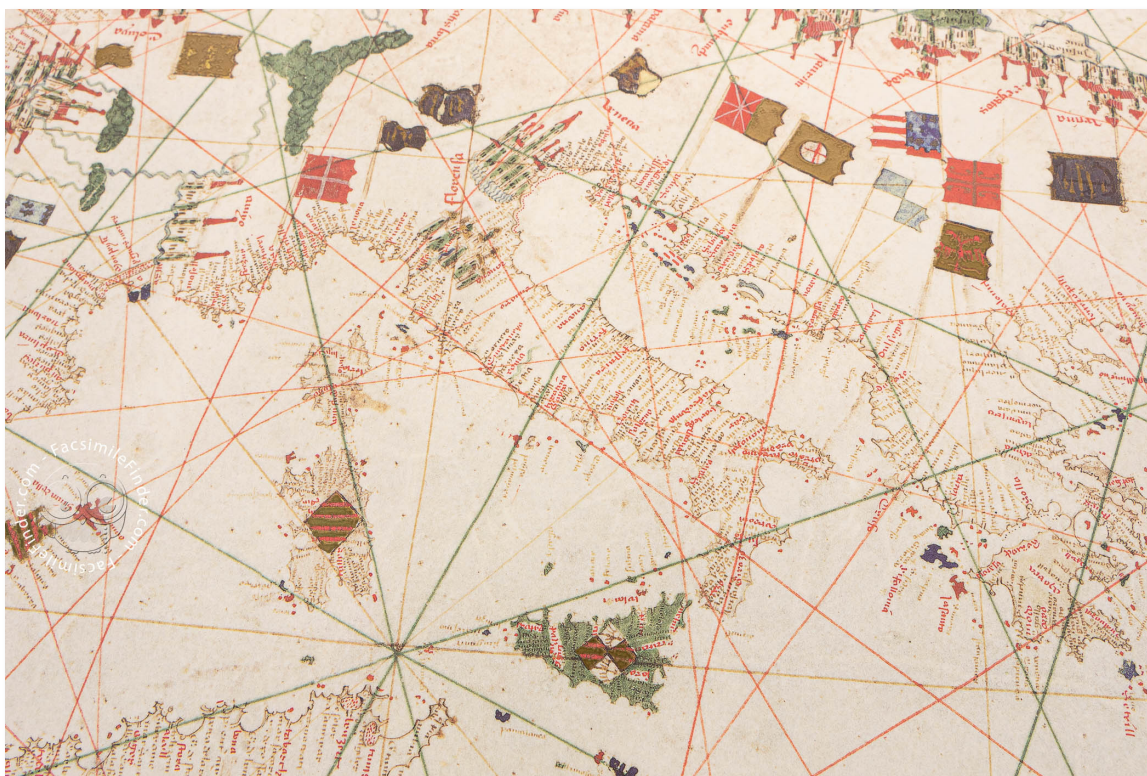
Size: 112 x 75 cm



Detail: Kings in North Africa



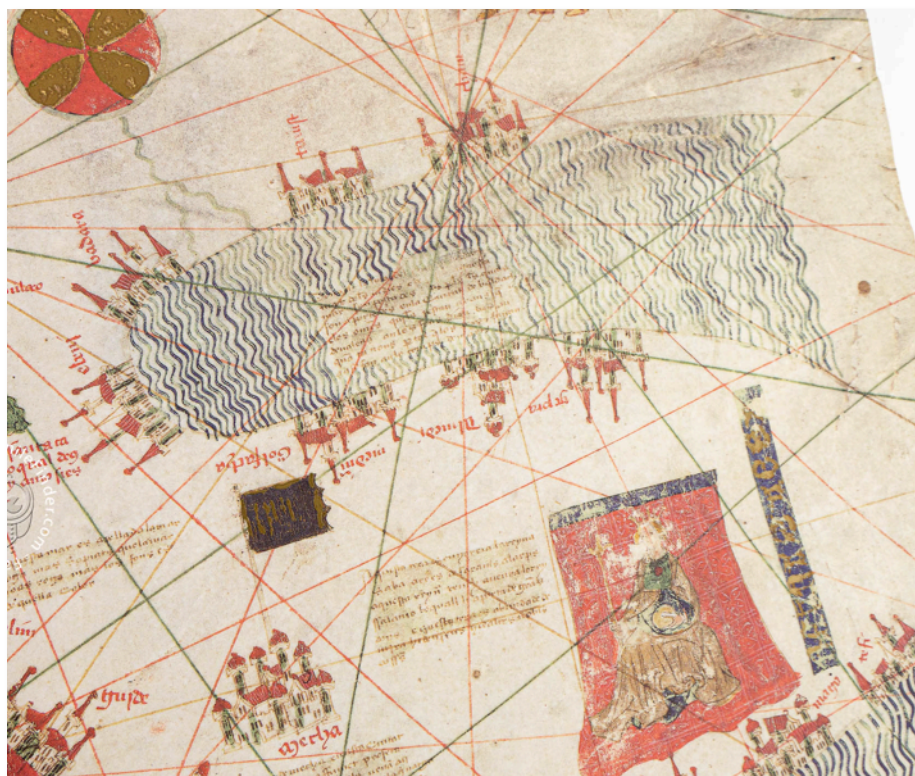
Detail: The Red Sea and the Queen of Sheba



Detail: Italy



Detail: British Isles, Ille Brasil and Thule



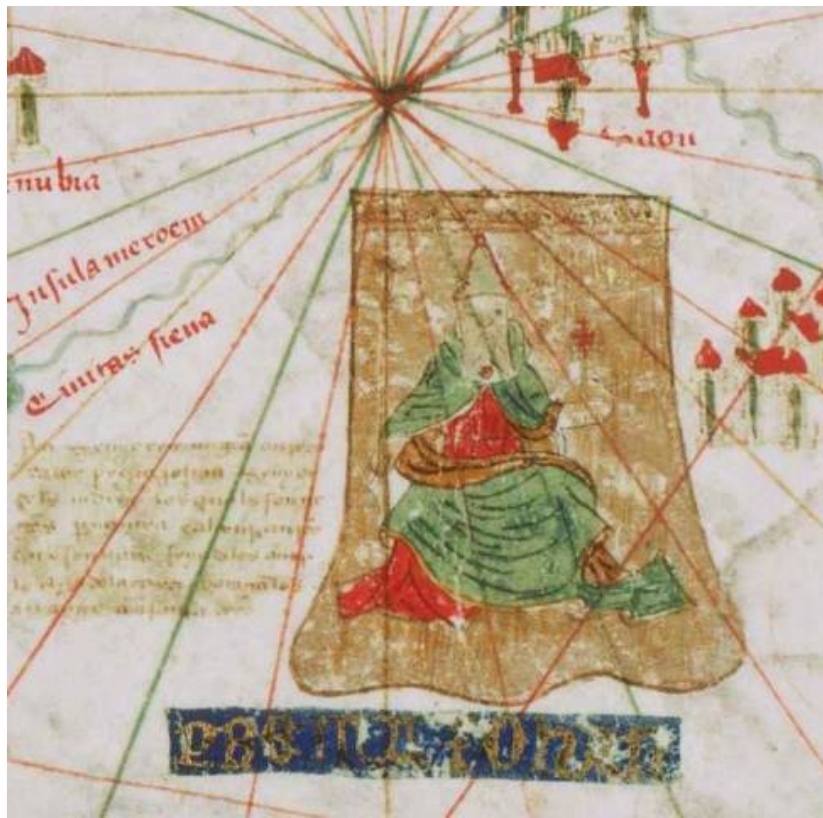
Detail: Persian Gulf



Detail: Northern Africa



The Biblical three Wise Men



Preito Iohan [Prester John] in Ethiopia