Vesconte World Map, a.k.a. the Fano Chart

Description: Vesconte Maggiolo is the head of a family of Genoese cartographers active since the early 16th century later, whose charts are highly decorated but delicate at the same time, representing - like all medieval portolan charts - the Mediterranean basin. A watercolor parchment (92 x 139 cm) of 1504, kept at the Biblioteca Federiciana in Fano, depicts the lands known in the early 16th century, i.e., immediately after the discovery of the New World. Oceanic islands and coastlines are just outlined while inland geographic information is poor and inaccurate; there are twelve roses of 32 winds, and place names, written in various Mediterranean languages, are in red or black depending on the importance of the places.

His son Jacopo is the author of a chart on parchment kept at the Naval Museum of Genoa, where the representation is extended to the Atlantic coasts of Europe and Africa, with a profusion of decorative elements: roses and scales are simple, but striking is the multitude of colorful tents in Africa and Asia, the number of ships in full sail, the kings seated on thrones in their respective countries, the many vignettes scattered along the coasts, including Genoa, highlighted by a stretch of blue sea.

A contemporary paper by the same author, kept at the Biblioteca Civica Berio in Genoa, is very similar in style, colors, and in the decorative apparatus, which suggests that these late parchment products were by then only intended for amateurs and bibliophiles rather than for mariners.

Commencing in 1500 the first extant planisphere, the La Cosa chart (#305) is noted as being followed by the Cantino planisphere, 1502 (#306) and then either this Fano chart or the Caverio planisphere (#307). Dates for the Caverio chart vary slightly but affect the outcome of any research as it is either, just preceding, the same year, or the year after this Fano chart. Then one of the next extant charts is generally given as the Pesaro chart.
(315.5), among others. From the Cantino planisphere, which itself is a “cobbled together copy” of an original Portuguese “Padrao” chart, researchers have stated that each subsequent chart is a “copy” of the Cantino chart or in a completely off-hand manner a “copy” of a similar chart without specifying where or when this “mystery” chart or charts were produced.

According to Gregory McIntosh, the main thesis of this thought experiment is that the depictions of the old world especially the seas, peninsulas, and place names of the littoral of the Indian Ocean, Red Sea, Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal on the Vesconte Maggiolo world map of 1504 and the Caverio, Kuntsman No 2 (309), Egerton MS 2803 (312) and Pesaro (315.5) manuscript world maps are derived not from multiple introductions of Portuguese cartography into Italian cartography, but by the introduction of that Old World image in a single event, that is the arrival of the Cantino planisphere in Genoa November 1502 and its subsequent dissemination through traditional manuscript copying processes, particularly via the highly influential copy made by Nocolay de Caverio. Though this main thesis maybe correct, the evidence presented by his research may not be particularly strong and McIntosh agrees that his suggestions remain only a suggestion.

Michael Ferrar clearly illustrates that the Cantino and Caverio charts are in draughting terms a mile apart; they are not one being the “copy” of the other and in fact it can be clearly shown that Cantino is two different charts “cobbled” together and Caverio is a poorly drawn pastiche of probably three charts.

Ferrar also points out that the Persian Gulf is a rendition of the Ptolemaic plot of 150 C.E. and has been drawn to the north of its geographical position no doubt influenced by the slewing of the Indian Sub-continent, which if drawn correctly would not only move eastwards but reduce the northing of the Persian Gulf. But here we perhaps witness the possibility that the chart is unfinished in that Ceylon and Madagascar as well as a myriad of Islands are missing from the Indian Ocean. The Indian Sub-continent is too well drawn for this to be an omission from the data available and points to the possibility of a desire to finish the chart quickly (or produce a saleable copy) and thus it may not extend to the east very far past the cut edge.

In comparing charts which previous researchers have adamantly proclaimed are copies of each other, Ferrar commenced with a simple overlay of the “FANO” chart onto the Cantino chart with equal scale bars. But, being at such a small scale differences are in fact lessened, even though it clearly shows that this Fano chart is not a copy of the Cantino chart, but is in fact a singularly drawn chart.

Ferrar concludes that the chart held in the Biblioteca Comunale Federiciana, Fano, is a well drawn and decorated example of the genre. If this is the first chart by Vesconte de Maiollo then Ferrar assumes he practiced and learnt his art and trade from a Master’s atelier. It should not have fallen into the hands of someone, who requiring a parchment, tried to wash the chart off, but it did!

The fact that it lacks clarity in the portrayal of South America and is highly suspect in the portrayal of the Indian Ocean could actually indicate that it was a long term project and the sections were drawn as information arrived rather than a single operation and thus the chart could in fact be a work spread over several years. Thus the chart could date from 1498 to 1504 which would put Vesconte de Maiollo at about 25 years of age at its inception and hence a more likely age to complete a chart after training. But as usual there are a myriad of possible explanations.
The Fano chart gives the impression of being unfinished in the east and of aged data in the west. Is this chart therefore a working model, a template which can be redrawn very successfully for the European/African central section and updated as required for the latest data which was no doubt arriving frequently as the explorations of both the east and west progressed? If you are a cartographer/draughtsman firstly you require a template to hold your design and information, but if it can serve the purpose also of being a show-piece to possible clients whom may be interested in investing in a planisphere, an up-to-date chart, then you serve two purposes with a single item. Ferrar cannot find a reason for the lack of detail in the Indian Ocean in 1504, nor for the discontinuous coastline of South America, when in 1504 it was well known and even the Cantino planisphere has that coastline appended. Thus Ferrar concludes that this chart is of an earlier date than appended, (if it is in fact correct) and that Vesconte de Maiollo had already drawn a far more detailed and up to date chart using this as his template and sales pitch and it survived because it was used for most of his career and perhaps was used by his brothers and sons in their endeavors.

References:
Ferrar, Michael, “ChFANO/1;The Fano Chart of Biblioteca Comunale Federiciana; Analysis and Comparison to Evaluate Origin”, 2018.
Folio 1: a world map in the Egerton MS 2803, 1508, often attributed to Vesconte Maggiolo (#312)
Polar map by Vesconte Maggiolo, 1511 (#316)