

**TITLE:** *The Christopher Columbus Chart*

**DATE:** 1492-1500

**AUTHOR:** Christopher Columbus

**DESCRIPTION:** “On this map, doubtless, the fate of the world was decided.” Charles de la Ronciere, historian of the French navy, made this remarkable claim in his book *Carte de Christophe Colomb*, (Paris, 1924). Labeled, “Portuguese Map of the XVI Century”, the item was on display in a gallery of the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris when it caught his eye. The vellum sheet, which is preserved in the Departement des Cartes et Plans, measures 70 x 110 cm (27 x 43 ins) and comprises two maps. One is a nautical chart of the Atlantic and the coasts of Europe and Africa, extending from Norway to the mouth of the Congo and eastward to the Black Sea and the Red Sea. Outside the frame of this chart, on the neck of the vellum, is the second map, a small *mappamundi* surrounded by the nine celestial spheres.

Although Columbus was an accomplished mapmaker, scholars have been frustrated in their attempts to confirm who actually created this unsigned document, originally acquired by the French national library in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Both map and chart provide a detailed record of Portuguese discoveries and settlements identified by flags. The *mappamundi* depicts the coasts of Africa as discovered by Bartolomew Dias to the Cape of Good Hope in 1488. The Indian Ocean follows various features of Ptolemy’s *Geography* and is bounded by an easterly peninsula, *Patalis regio*. There is no evidence of the discoveries of Columbus in 1492 in the Atlantic, or of Vasco da Gama’s discovery of the sea route to India, 1497 to 1499. On the chart, a Spanish flag flying over Granada in Spain appears to date the completion of the work after January 2, 1492.

The sea chart shown here displays a classic delineation of the greater Mediterranean area, supplemented by the Atlantic coast stretching from southern Scandinavia to the mouth of the Congo River (named *Rio Poderoso* by Diogo Cao in 1484). It has particularly rich nomenclature down the African coast, where Columbus is thought to have made at least one voyage with the Portuguese. To the east, the Black Sea and Red Sea are included. Westward is a series of islands some real, some imaginary – from the Arctic to the Gulf of Guinea. Below the compass rose in the North Atlantic lie three islands, *Isles of the Seven Cities*. This was the Portuguese name for the islands that other Europeans called *Antilia*.

In the neck, or narrow portion of the parchment, a small circular world map centering on Jerusalem and surrounded by celestial rings symbolizes the geocentric concept of the universe, commonly accepted at that time. It is most unusual to have a practical navigator’s chart juxtaposed with a cosmographical plan. One of the accompanying lengthy notes in Latin announces that the world map, or *mappamundi* although drawn on a plane, should be considered spherical. Displaying the earth in this manner underscores the transitional character of the map from medieval to Renaissance thinking.

This circular *mappamundi* is also noteworthy for showing southern and eastern Africa more accurately than does either the *Martellus* map or the *Behaim* globe (#256 and #258). It implies that information is included from Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese navigator who discovered India, even though he did not return to Europe until 1499. The treatment of the west, south, and east coasts of Africa suggests the map’s Portuguese origin. Latin is used for the numerous lengthy annotations. The 250 place-names, however, appear in their Portuguese form, and many Portuguese-controlled

areas display the Lusitanian flag. A reference at the Cape Verde Islands mentions their discovery by the Genoese, an intriguing fact considering Columbus' birthplace.

The surviving remains of Columbus' library include his revelatory marginal notes, particularly in his copy of Cardinal d'Ailly's cosmography, *Imago Mundi* (#238). Monique de La Ronciere, having researched these notes, recently pointed out that Columbus referred to his "four charts on paper, all of which also contain a sphere." She also noted an error in the inscription on this chart, next to the Red Sea, which is identical to an error in one of Columbus' marginal notes.

The Spanish flag flying over Granada implies the map was completed after January 1492, when Spain captured that city from the Moors. There was no attempt to show the new discoveries reported from 1493 onward, as recorded on the *Juan de La Cosa* planisphere of 1500 (#305) and those which followed. This fact suggests a date for this map no later than the early 1490s.

It appears questionable that a chart with this degree of professional finish and decoration, heightened with gold and including elaborate vignettes of selected major European cities, was actually executed by Christopher Columbus or his brother, Bartolommeo. The style and emphasis do not appear to support the assertion. Certainly Columbus could have commissioned it, and his Portuguese contacts could have provided the new information, which had to have originated in Lisbon. The chart, with its *mappamundi* inset, remains a remarkable document of the discovery period. Although the attribution to the Admiral by the French scholars has merit, it has never been confirmed.

A Latin legend reporting the discovery of the Cape Verde Islands by the Genoese Antonio de Noli was one of a number of references which alerted De la Ronciere to the fact that the map was by a Genoese, though made in Portugal. The many Latin legends though, suggested an association with Columbus. These features also link the map with the chart. The legends were apparently taken from Columbus' copy of his favorite book, Pierre d'Ailly's cosmographical treatise *Imago Mundi*, published at Louvain in 1483, and include transcriptions of Columbus' own marginal notes (the *postils*). One of the most significant is the legend about the Red Sea, noting that Solomon's fleet took six months to cross it, and from there it takes a year to reach India. This repeats a mistake in Columbus' *postil* about the Red Sea.

In the Atlantic, the *Island of the Seven Cities*, in about 53° N, carries a legend which refers to its settlement by the Portuguese and to the silver found in the sands. Also known to the Portuguese as *Antilia* [the island opposite], it was sought by Columbus as a staging post as he sailed on his first voyage, but much further south, in 28° N. To the north is a large well delineated island, namely Iceland, which is described in a legend as *Thile* [Thule]. This legend also describes the length of the day, the fishery and trade with England. De la Ronciere argued that this is not evidence that Columbus visited Iceland, as stated by his son Ferdinand, but is hearsay information that Columbus picked up at Bristol.

In one of the *postils* in *Imago Mundi* Columbus refers to his "four charts on paper, all of which contain a sphere". De la Ronciere suggests that Columbus or his brother Bartholomew, a professional chartmaker, made the Paris map "under the walls of Granada in 1491" to present to their Sovereign. He interprets Columbus' aims according to the impressive but now discarded theory of his friend Henry Vignaud, that Columbus did not seek to reach Asia by a western route. He regards the Paris map as the proof that

Columbus was seeking islands, notably the *Island of the Seven Cities* in the Ocean Sea (as the Atlantic was known).

De la Ronciere's theory provoked much controversy. The omission of *Cipangu* [Japan] from the *mappamundi* is a serious argument against the map as by Columbus since *Cipangu* featured so large in his plan. David Quinn has suggested that the *mappa mundi* may have been based on the map, now lost, which Fra Mauro sent to Portugal in 1458 or 1459 because of its similarity to Mauro's large wall map of 1459 in Venice (#249).

The Paris map does not fit exactly the concepts of Columbus as we now interpret them. Yet clearly the Paris map does have some connection with Columbus." Every map boasts its mystery," J.B. Thacher asserted in his survey of the maps of Columbus and his discoveries. The Paris map remains one of the most intriguing and work is still proceeding in an attempt to resolve its mysteries. In Helen Wallis' opinion, David Quinn's theory that it may have been made by Bartholomew Columbus in connection with his visit to England in 1488 - 89 is the most convincing.

The map may also provide evidence, despite the belief of De La Ronciere to the contrary, that Columbus did visit Iceland in 1477. It well illustrates the prophesy which Ferdinand Columbus claimed that his father had fulfilled: "There will come a time in the later years when the Ocean shall loosen the bonds by which we have been confined, when an immense land shall be revealed and Typhis [pilot of the Argonauts] shall disclose new worlds, and Thule will no longer be the most remote of countries."

**Location:** Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris

**Size:** 28 x 44 inches (700 x 1100 mm)

#### References:

\*Bake, Jill Withrow, "The Maps that Columbus Used", 21pp (e#246)

\*Fite, E. & Freeman, A., *A Book of Old Maps*, #3.

\*Nebenzahl, K., *Atlas of Columbus*, pp. 22-25.

Crone, G.R., *Maps and their Makers*.

Quinn, D.B., *England and the Discovery of America 1481-1620*. (London, 1974).

\*Ronciere, Charles de la, *La Carte de Christophe Colomb*. (Paris, 1924).

\*Wallis, H., "Is the Paris Map the long-sought chart of Christopher Columbus?", *The Map Collector*, #58, pp. 20-21.

\*illustrated



*The "Christopher Columbus" Chart*



Mappamundi insert







Detail: North Africa

## Columbus Pitches His Expedition to the Indies, 1484-1492

Based on a Mistake by Ptolemy

|                        |
|------------------------|
| COLUMBUS'S CALCULATION |
| INDIES ONLY            |
| <b>4,000</b>           |
| MILES TO THE WEST      |
| THE REALITY            |
| INDIES ACTUALLY        |
| <b>12,000</b>          |
| MILES TO THE WEST      |

An illustration showing Christopher Columbus standing and pointing to a map on a table. Seated at the table are Ferdinand and Isabella, the Monarchs of Spain, looking at the map. The map shows the Atlantic Ocean and the Americas. The scene is set in a room with a large window and a coat of arms on the wall.

FERDINAND & ISABELLA  
Monarchs of Spain