Title: Vespucci world map
Date: 1526
Author: Juan [Giovanni] Vespucci

Description: This large illustrated manuscript planisphere on vellum presents the first cartographic record of exploration in North America after the portrayal of the Cabot landfall on the la Cosa chart (#305). The mapmaker, Juan [Giovanni] Vespucci, nephew of Amerigo Vespucci, had made several voyages to American waters, according to Peter Martyr, the first Spanish historian of the Indies. After Amerigo’s death at Seville in 1512, Juan, who had inherited his famous uncle’s maps, charts, and nautical instruments, was appointed to Amerigo’s former position as official Spanish government Pilot at Seville.

Juan soon became as important as his uncle in the management of geographical information from Spain’s overseas activities. Juan was a member of the council to improve existing charts and the Badajoz-Elvas Commission of 1524, which attempted to resolve Portuguese Spanish claims in the East Indies. During the same year that Vespucci produced this map, he was appointed Examiner of Pilots, replacing the ubiquitous Sebastian Cabot who was then leading an expedition in Brazil.

The Spanish reported little progress in the exploration of North America during the following two decades. Juan Ponce de Leon had been in Florida in 1513 searching for the legendary Fountain of Youth and had made an important contribution by describing the Gulf Stream. Freelance slave-raiding trips in the Bahamas and perhaps on the Florida coast were the main activities until 1520.
In that year Lucas Vasquez Ayllón, prominent Santo Domingo leader, organized an expedition to explore lands thought to exist north of Florida. He sent out a ship under Francisco Gordillo that was joined by another under Pedro de Quexos. In June 1521 they landed at the mouth of a large river, which they named after St. John the Baptist. The two captains claimed the surrounding land for Spain and, against Ayllón’s orders, took 150 natives back to Santo Domingo to be sold as slaves. Quexos’s ship returned safely, but Gordillo’s was lost at sea. Diego Columbus headed a royal investigation that ordered the surviving Indians returned to their homeland and released.

Ayllón received a royal grant of the territory and title of governor. In 1525 he sent Quexos back to explore further, and the coastline was probed from Florida to just north of the Chesapeake Bay. Not until July 1526 did Ayllón and his party of colonists land on the Carolina coast at the estuary they called the Jordan River. The colony was a tragic failure, but the pioneering Spaniards left their mark on the American southeastern coast via Vespucci’s map. St. Helena, a sound between Beaufort and Edisto Island reflects this: it is one of the oldest place-names still in use on the Atlantic coast.

This manuscript map differs significantly from Vespucci’s double-hemispheric world map with polar projection printed in 1524. The Hispanic Society map is constructed as a portolan chart with compass roses and rhumb lines across the entire surface. The chief compass rose, which extends into Mexico, illustrates the Portuguese influence in cartographic ornamentation during the 16th century. As can be seen here, Africa, southern Europe, and Asia Minor are well known, also the coasts of Florida, Mexico, Central America and northern South America. On the east coast of the present United States, another Florentine, Giovanni da Verrazzano, has been credited with claiming New England for Francis I of France and for discovering New York Bay in 1524. Estêvão Gomes, a Portuguese pilot in the service of Spain, explored the coast as far north as Maine and the Penboscot River (R:sengamos). Vespucci himself had attended the meeting at Badajoz which authorized this expedition. The Bacalāos, now known as the Grand Banks, Cape Race in Newfoundland, Stag River and the land of the bartoas are recorded by Vespucci, along with the new land of Ayllón. This first settlement within the boundaries of the United States had been made by Lucas Vazquez de Ayllón of Toledo near the Santee River (R:Jordan) in South Carolina.

The map is also notable as an expression of empire in 1526. Charles V’s imperial coat of arms is placed above North America while flags of Castile and Leon (gold castles on a red ground and brown lions on a white ground) mark Spanish territories just as the Portuguese ones do for their holdings. Moreover, Vespucci includes many engaging details: eight galleons sailing the ocean, the Red Sea painted red, the tower of Babylon located in Persia, elephants and camels in Africa, indigenous natives in South America and the churches of the Holy Land.

On this map Vespucci locates geographical features of which he is certain. Between Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, however, the area southward is blank until Ayllon [Carolina] is marked with a Spanish flag. Although none of the names from the original Gordillo and Quexos voyage appear and Ayllon’s colonizing expedition had not returned when the map was produced, the second passage under Quexos in 1525 is reflected on the coastline. The area henceforth appears on maps as Nueva Terra di Ayllon.
One interesting place-name, Rio de sa verazanas, is shown between the Jordan River and the Chesapeake Bay. This implies that the explorations of Verrazzano, a Florentine sailing for the King of France, were known in Spain.

The map is considered to be either a draft or copy of the official Spanish chart kept at Seville, initially called the padron real and later, padron general, it was on the padron that corrections and information of new discoveries were entered as reported under oath by returning pilots. Juan Vespucci provides on this outstanding manuscript map of the world the first documented details of coastal exploration north of Florida.

The map is large enough that, unlike other maps of the period, does not avoid the issue of the areas north and south of Eurasia and the New World. The mapmaker clearly believed that Asia was separate from the new discoveries. This map is also one of the earliest surviving maps to mark unmistakably the new Strait of Magellan.

Location: The Hispanic Society of America, New York

Size: 85 x 26.2 cm; 33.5 x 103 inches

References:
*Cumming, W.P., The Southeast in Early Maps, no. 7-8, 16-17, Plate 2.
*Nebenzahl, K., Atlas of Columbus and the Great Discoveries, pp. 84-86
*Wroth, L.C., The Voyages of Giovanni da Verrazzano, 1524-1528, 197n. no. 36.
*illustrated
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