

THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

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THE FRIAR'S MISSIONS AND MENDOZA'S BOOK

THE SPANISH MARCH TO ASIA

By 1492, portolan charts were already providing a highly accurate profile of southern Europe, the Mediterranean, and the western coasts of Africa, as we can see in this map drawn by Jorge de Aguiar in 1492, the same year of the discovery of America.

The map depicts the Iberian world just before the discoveries, with the kingdom of Granada, still unconquered, and the two capitals of the other the two Iberian kingdoms, Lisbon and Barcelona. This map of Jorge de Aguiar is extremely interesting, not only because it shows in detail the Atlantic islands, where Portuguese fishermen were venturing farther and farther, but mostly because of the sheer size it gives to the Ocean: water was beginning to flow into world maps. But Columbus, who took to the Ocean in that same year 1492, was the heir of two late medieval geographic misconceptions, the kind we have already found in Fra Mauro's map: the size of Asia was overstated, while the size of the oceans was understated. That's why Columbus gave credit to the maps that imagined a terrestrial sphere being the third of its actual size.

This was the case of the letter and the map that the Italian cosmographer Toscanelli sent to him. The letter contained information about the rivers, cities and bridges of Cathay, a land of enormous wealth and great learning, standing at the western edge of a rather small Atlantic Ocean. This was also the case of the first terrestrial globe ever made, done by the prestigious German cartographer Martin Behaim in the eve of the discovery of the Americas. With Japan and China, named Cipango and Cathay, clearly placed within sailing distance of the Canary islands, Columbus jumped across the Ocean in search of the Far East: he discovered America because he was looking for China. It was the East, and its richness of spices and silks, that pulled the West towards it.

After Columbus's return, the Portuguese realized immediately the scope of Columbus's discovery and, to avoid future disputes, the king of Portugal signed a treaty with the king and queen of Castile and Aragon, in order to settle a demarcation line that protected their future

discoveries. The Treaty of Tordesillas, signed in 1494, and endorsed by the Papal Bull *Inter caetera*, is an extraordinary document. It not only divides the known world but also everything to be discovered from the date of its signature: in the Christian world, discovery was certainly in the air. The Portuguese took immediate advantage of the rights given to them by the Treaty: four years after it, Vasco de Gama was already in India.

For the Castilian crown, that was deeply involved in the American enterprise, the great booty came in the 1520s, with the conquest of Mexico, and in the 1530s with the conquest of Peru. But even so, discoveries were still a priority, and in 1521 Magellan set sail in search of the passage that would connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and open the way from America to East Asia. It was a dreadful journey, as long as uncertain. When they finally landed in the Philippines, they knew for sure that the earth was round, the Pacific immense, that scurvy was likely to kill them all and that the Asian natives and Portuguese colonists were quite unwelcoming.

Magellan was killed in the Philippines and only eight men of his crew of 270 made it back. Even so, the wealth of information that this voyage supplied was decisive for the Spanish identification of the Moluccas as the definitive source of the most coveted spices. The newly gathered knowledge went into Diogo de Ribeiro's map, drawn in the late 1520s, and considered to be the first scientific world map. The map, that covers the whole circuit of the globe between the polar circles, displays the line of the Tordesillas treaty. This map reduces for the first time the size of the Mediterranean to its correct proportions and clearly displays the immensity of the Pacific. Ribeiro's map also shows the islands of the Far East, where the name of China is clearly shown below the banner of Castile and Leon, while the big galleons that have already displaced the small caravels, ply the Pacific. The Ribeiro map displays a very detailed knowledge of the Moluccas and clearly specifies the exact islands where the main spices were to be found, be it for instance camphor or clove.

But the Spanish empire had too many open fronts at that moment and Charles the 5th decided to end the disputes with the Portuguese in the Far East by selling them the disputed Spanish right to the Moluccas: the Treaty of Zaragoza, in 1529, settled the question as far as Castile was concerned.

Finally, the combination of the treaty of Zaragoza with the successive failed expeditions put a momentary stop to the Pacific voyages. But in the second half of the 16th century, with Philip the 2nd on the Spanish throne, the rush towards the East gained momentum once again.

At the explicit request of Philip the 2nd, Urdaneta was included in the Legazpi expedition that sailed from Mexico in 1564. He was chosen on account of his outstanding seamanship and his unrivalled knowledge of winds and currents gathered in his long years as a prisoner in the Moluccas. But to cross the open seas, he needed a navigation expert, with knowledge of astronomy and the capacity to apply mathematical rules to astronomical observations in order to fix and retain the ship's position. And this he found in the Augustinian Martin de Rada. The Spanish crown also wanted Rada for his outstanding capacities as mathematician and astronomer.

The Tordesillas Treaty had divided the world between the Portuguese and the Spanish. But it had only fixed the meridian that ran through the Atlantic. After the Magellan expedition, when the Spanish suddenly appeared in East Asia, Portugal claimed that the counter meridian left all East Asia under their control. They were right, but nevertheless the King of Spain sent Rada there to discuss Spanish rights in situ and to argue that the Portuguese had miscalculated the meridian.

The expedition arrived safely to Cebu, in the Philippines, and Urdaneta left immediately and easily found its way back by first heading forty degrees north to catch the Kuro Shivo current that carried them to Upper California. The spirit of the Spanish settlement in the Philippines was well captured in this 17th century engraving. It shows, on the right the military component of the expedition, with Philip the 2nd in ceremonial attire and pointing to a rather chaotic map of Borneo and the Philippine islands that also displays China. He is followed by Legazpi and his conquistadors, swords in hand. On the left comes Urdaneta, wearing an incongruous bishop's mitre and shedding Christian light upon the islands. Even if he spent almost no time in the Philippines, the fact that his size equals the King's size is symbolic of the place that the church will occupy in the new colony. Behind him stands Martin de Rada, rather shy and rather sad, holding an astrolabe and followed by a troupe of tonsured friars, encapsulating the enormous importance that the religious orders will acquire in the Philippines.

But within a short time, the Philippines, with its lack of precious metals, its scarce and untamed population, and the epidemics that were already devastating the islands as they had devastated Mexico, were a strong disappointment. And an unnecessary danger, because both Rada and Urdaneta were convinced that they were inside of the Portuguese demarcation. With the Portuguese hindering their access to the Moluccas and their spices, the only hope for this poor and peripheral colony was to trade with the numerous Chinese that plied South East Asian waters. That's why the Castilians moved from Cebu, where they had settled first and that was more Moluccas oriented, to Manila, which was more China oriented.

They dreamed to obtain from China the right to establish a permanent colony like the Portuguese Macao. But their dreams never came true and in fact it didn't take them long to forget them. When Chinese supplies met the American demand, Manila became de facto a Mexican colony and the first global hub in world history.