

THE DISCOVERY OF THE AZORES AND ITS FIRST REPERCUSSIONS IN CARTOGRAPHY

by

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This article corresponds to a development of an earlier paper¹ which I presented to the *XIII International Conference on the History of Cartography* (Amsterdam, 1989). Since then I have dealt with the new Battista Beccario chart in some other texts of mine², always in this same spirit (considering the new documents as a first echo of the discovery of the Azores, not of America).

What I discuss here is the possibility that the first repercussion of the discovery of the Azores is contained in the new chart by Battista Beccario whose existence was revealed in the year 1988 (but that until now has attracted little attention and has been referred to and discussed by no other author but me).

I believe that this chart and its «twin sister» (the Battista Beccario, 1435, nowadays kept at the Biblioteca Palatina, in Parma, already known for a long time but almost ignored in the bibliography, at least by Portuguese authors) contain some of the first echoes

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¹ «A New Chart and an Old Problem. The Imaginary Islands of the Atlantic Revisited».

² Namely «Um Novo mapa e a sua Representação do Atlântico Pré-Colombino», *Oceanos*, Lisboa: Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimientos, 1989, nr. 1, 55-57; *Portugal e o Descobrimento do Atlântico. Síntese e Cronologia — Portugal and the Discovery of the Atlantic. A Summary and a Chronology*, Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1990; *Portugal and the European Discovery of America. Christopher Columbus and the Portuguese*, Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1992.

—still diffuse and not very precise, but true echoes anyway— of the Portuguese discovery of the Azorean archipelago.

Later was to come the Gabriel de Valseca's chart of 1439, where we find the first correct representation.

It is amazing how the Portuguese historians of Cartography in the past failed to notice the existence of the «old» chart by Battista Beccario, in Parma (and its sensational inscription *Insule de novo reperte*), and how they failed to acknowledge and discuss a document so important for the understanding of the discovery of the Azores.

This can only be explained by one reason: the fact that Armando Cortesão, the great master of Portuguese History of Cartography, failed to notice it and discuss it in his own books, and therefore no one did it, since Cortesão's times...

This clearly shows the strange situation in which Portuguese historiography has lived until a few years ago — a strange situation which is visible through a large number of other examples. There can be no doubt that in Portugal the History of Cartography has suffered an obvious and pitiful decay in the last years. Until recently nothing has been done except to copy Armando Cortesão and Teixeira da Mota.

Why did Armando Cortesão in his time, being a very good scholar, fail to discuss and study such an important chart? We can only guess. It was probably due to the manner in which he was obsessed with the other (the previous, and very similar) *Antilia* chart, his «own» Zuane Pizzigano³.

Why have the Portuguese authors perpetuated this oblivion since then? Definitely because of the indisputable decay in Portuguese cartographical studies⁴.

It is therefore no wonder that the «new» Battista Beccario chart (revealed at London in 1988) continues to be ignored (despite my efforts

³ See Armando Cortesão, *The Nautical Chart of 1424 and the Early Discovery and Cartographical Representation of America*, Coimbra: Universidade de Coimbra, 1954.

⁴ Professor Luís de Albuquerque tried to put an end to this decay, by getting young people interested in working on these subjects, and therefore offering me conditions to work on the History of Cartography field, and inviting me to be the author responsible for the preparation of the *Adenda* to the facsimile reedition of *Portugaliae Monumenta Cartographica* published in 1987-1988.

in calling attention to it). The same happened for a long time with its «twin sister» kept in Parma...

Some years ago I began to call attention to these two charts (and to their sensational inscriptions *Insule de novo reperte*). I've done it in my texts published until now⁵, and I do it again here, in what seems to be an adequate occasion: the publishing by the University of the Azores of a work *In Memoriam* of a fine researcher specialized in Azorean History — Olímpia da Rocha Gil.

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1988 was a truly exceptional year in terms of the appearance of new specimens of those rare and precious documents, the maps of the period of the great discoveries, and of other ancient treasures related to these voyages. Several maps came to light, and became available for study by the international scholarly community.

The emergence of these documents had particular significance for Portuguese charts or charts connected with the Portuguese discoveries. Six maps were presented for sale on April 13 at Christie's in London⁶. Two were Portuguese — a chart by Luís Teixeira, 1578, representing the Mediterranean and the Atlantic between Europe and Morocco⁷, and a large Atlantic chart of the seventeenth century by another cartographer of the Teixeira school⁸.

⁵ The texts referred to in note 2, published after returning from the XIII International Conference on the History of Cartography. Even before that Conference, I had already published a small text in a magazine calling attention to the new Beccario chart (this was «Mapas Velhos, Problemas Novos», *Sábado. Revista de Grande Informação*, nr. 0, Lisbon, 28/05/1988).

⁶ See the respective catalogue: *Valuable Travel, Atlases and Natural History Books including important Portolan Charts (Wednesday, 13 April 1988)* (London: Christie's, 1988).

⁷ It was said that this one was purchased privately for Portugal, by a private collector, but in the end it seems that it was not. In this moment I have no other information of what happened to this important chart. Cartographical documents of this importance should be listed and kept in a record by some Portuguese official institution. I try to do it on my own, with obvious difficulties (without any help from such an institution) for the purpose of preparing new Supplements to *Portugaliae Monumenta Cartographica* in the future.

⁸ Portugal was able to acquire this one, through an intervention of the Portuguese Secretary of State for Culture. See the catalogue cited above for the

At much the same time, in the District Archives of the Portuguese city of Viana do Castelo, I myself was in the process of identifying three cartographic specimens which had been cut up in the seventeenth century to serve as covers for collections of documents⁹.

A short while later, Christie's of New York sold four Portuguese astrolabes which had been used on board a Spanish galleon, the *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*, wrecked in the seventeenth century. Two of these were acquired and brought to Portugal and have been added to the collection of the Museu de Marinha in Lisbon¹⁰.

However, Christie's sale of April 13 in London¹¹ was important not just because of the two Portuguese charts. The fact is that the lot included another chart which was particularly interesting for the Portuguese — the Battista Beccario which is now the object of the present study¹².

This was described as a fifteenth-century Italian chart (the oldest in the lot), and, according to the first opinions expressed in the

analysis and identification of the two charts proposed by Christie's specialists. I have already expressed my own preliminary assessment of these specimens in «Alguns Fragmentos de Mapas Encontrados em Viana do Castelo e Outras Novidades do Ano de 1988 para a História da Cartografia», *Revista da Universidade de Coimbra*, Coimbra: Biblioteca Geral da Universidade, 1989, vol. XXXV (Homenagem a Luís de Albuquerque — 1ª Parte), 309-322. I don't think this large chart was made by the well known Portuguese cartographer João Teixeira Albernaz I, and I consider it as having been made by some other cartographer of the same family, possibly one Miguel Albernaz.

⁹ Found by Dr. Manuel Gonçalves Vale, head of there Archives. The specimens, which have been in the archives at Viana do Castelo from the beginning, obviously already belonged to the Portuguese state, and no money was spent. See their publication, photographic reproduction and study in my article referred to in the previous note.

¹⁰ This acquisition was made possible by the joint action of the Instituto Português do Património Cultural, the National Committee for the Commemorations of the Portuguese Discoveries, and the Portuguese Navy.

¹¹ The six charts sold in London, on April 13, 1988, were all presented as part of the collection of the Counts of Maldeghem, burghers of Bruges, and had never been mentioned, published or studied before.

¹² The purchaser of the Battista Beccario Genoese chart (item # 192) wished to remain anonymous. Christie's however helped me with access to reproductions of the chart, and I would like to thank Mr. Tom Lamb in particular for his kindness in this matter.

Christie's Catalogue, certainly the work of an anonymous cartographer from Genoa¹³.

As I immediately pointed out¹⁴ the problems this chart potentially raises — or raises once again... — concern the Portuguese in a special way. It may well turn out to be considered as a new (and large) stick with which to stir up the old controversy (lately somewhat stilled) surrounding the possibility of a discovery of America prior to Columbus, a few decades before 1492... Such a discovery could only have been achieved by Portuguese navigators, since no one else was sailing those areas of the Central Atlantic at the time.

It is clear that, were this to be proved, it would cause a major sensation — especially just four years before the Commemorations of Columbus to be held in 1992.

But I don't think this is the case. I wrote that at the time, and since then I have not changed my opinion.

The new specimen is a «normal» portolan-chart of the Mediterranean, also including parts of the Atlantic Ocean and the African coast which were being explored by the Portuguese. There we find the customary imaginary islands known as the «false Azores» and, further West, the similarly common great islands of *Antilia* and one other (the name of which is not visible).

The problem one always has to face in such cases is that of judging how seriously one should take these representations, since it is known that it was common practice in such charts for cartographers to include a number of imaginary islands in the Atlantic, many of which are related to Celtic legends, such as that of St. Brandon, or to Portuguese myths, like that of the Seven Cities.

This issue was raised in the past on various occasions by Jaime and Armando Cortesão, above all in relation to Zuane Pizzigano's chart of 1424, and to Andrea Bianco's charts of 1436 and 1448. However, the conclusions they came to were controversial. In fact, were they to be proved, they would be quite revolutionary — to the point of overthrowing Columbus' fame, by showing that he had forerunners

¹³ On this Catalogue of the April 1988 sale see note 6.

¹⁴ In the article quoted above, included in *Sábado* magazine published in May 1988. See note 5.

in the discovery of America. In the Atlantic of the period, these could obviously only have been Portuguese¹⁵.

Nevertheless, in this chart which has come to light in 1988, we find something that might be thought very significant for those of a mind to accept it as evidence. Besides the usual representations of the legendary Atlantic islands — namely the «false Azores» and the *Antilia* group— we find, written next to those large Western Islands: *Insule de novo reperte* («Islands newly discovered»). This caption is perfectly visible on the parchment, in large red lettering. The same had occurred in the already known signed chart by Battista Beccario (or Beccari) of 1435, kept in the Biblioteca Palatina, in the Italian city of Parma. This and other features clearly show that the two charts were made by the same hand, and the new one must also be a work by Beccario (they are very similar, true «twin sisters» as I wrote above).

So, after the finding of the «new» Beccario we face the same problem (and even more acutely) that the «old» chart in Parma already confronted us with — a problem that should have been discussed by Portuguese historiography on cartography a long time ago, if not for the oblivion that the «old» chart suffered.

How are we to interpret the inscription? Should it be understood as a reference to the actual discovery of lands which were being identified with the traditional islands customarily drawn on the charts? What could these lands be? The real Azores, at the time of their discovery in the 1420s and 1430s? The Antilles, or the American continent itself?

In fact, all depends on the dating of the new chart. There can be no doubt that it is really by Battista Beccario, and therefore its manufacture should correspond more or less to the 1420s or 1430s.

¹⁵ I have dealt with the subject of the Italian charts influenced by Portuguese discoveries, in *Origem e Desenvolvimento da Cartografia Portuguesa na Época dos Descobrimientos*, Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1988, pp. 89-102, and again in *Portugal e o Descobrimento do Atlântico. Síntese e Cronologia — Portugal and the Discovery of the Atlantic. A Summary and a Chronology*, Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1990, pp. 43-58, and in *Portugal and the European Discovery of America. Christopher Columbus and the Portuguese*, Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1992, pp. 41-56. Therefore I shall not dwell further on these questions here.

I believe the real territories to which the enigmatic inscription refers will almost certainly be the Azores.

However, there are those who identify what is designated by most historians as the «false Azores» (the chain of imaginary islands running from North to South off the coast of Portugal, represented on all the charts) with the real archipelago of the Azores. This chain of islands can be seen on the new chart, bearing some of their customary names, such as *corve marini, di conigi, San Zorzo, de ventura, delle avi, de brazil, capraria, lovo*.

Whoever agrees with this identification of the islands is therefore bound to conclude that the other large islands to the West correspond to something else... something further off... something which can only be America... And these large Western islands do appear on the new chart, also with their usual names, *Antilia, Roylo, Taumar*, plus one other (which has faded, but which must have read *Satanazes* or *Salvagia*).

On the other hand, if the imaginary islands closer to Portugal are not the Azores but rather those islands which cartographers used to copy from chart to chart (even when they themselves doubted their existence), then... the real lands which were being discovered at the time of the making of this chart... might be... the actual Azores themselves... (here incorrectly drawn, designated by the expression *Insule de novo reperte* and confused with the traditional group of *Antilia*).

As we know, the beginning of the colonization of the Azores dates back to 1431-1432 with Gonçalo Velho (the islands were discovered in 1427 by one Diogo de Silves) and the first true cartographic representation was to appear correctly (distinct from the «false Azores») for the first time in Gabriel de Valseca's chart (1439)¹⁶.

It should be noted that the new Beccario's chart represents the islands of *Porto Sancto, de legname, deserta* and *salvage* in a rather elementary way and still located in the area of the Canaries.

If this new chart really dates from c. 1435 (and it seems it does¹⁷) then the news of «islands newly discovered» can just simply refer to

¹⁶ See Alfredo P. Marques, *Origem e Desenvolvimento...*, p. 93.

¹⁷ In my opinion, this chart may indeed come from the first half of the fifteenth century, most probably c. 1435, and was certainly made by Battista Beccario. Different

the Azorean archipelago, whose exploration and colonization was beginning at this time, under Gonçalo Velho. Therefore I believe that these *Insule de novo reperte* are the Azores, inaccurately represented and identified with *Antilia*. In my opinion, this is the most likely explanation.

As I have already observed, Battista Beccario's signed chart of 1435 bears a similar inscription — *Insule de novo reperte*¹⁸. These two portolan-charts probably contain the first echoes of the discovery of the Azores. It may well be that the chart found in 1988 is the first to bear evidence of the Portuguese discovery of the archipelago in the first phase of the Portuguese Discoveries, under King João I, Infante D. Pedro and Infante D. Henrique, at the end of the 1420s or the beginning of the 1430s.

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This must have been a **true** discovery (new lands found **for the first time**), because that is the true meaning of the expression *de novo* in the language of the time. This expression *de novo* means «for the first time», and not «once again» as it means in nowadays language.

This can create confusion only in the minds of those who ignore the meaning this expression had at the time, and consequently can be tempted to try to use this as a «piece of evidence» for any theories proclaiming that the Azores were already known before then, and were being considered by Beccario as «rediscovered».

Like Luís de Albuquerque before me, I continue to consider that the Portuguese discovery of the Azores during the 15th century must

from those of Bartolomeo Pareto (1455) or Albino Canepa (1489), the design is closer to that of maps of the twenties, thirties and forties — the period when Zuane Pizzigano's, Battista Beccario's and Andrea Bianco's charts were made. See all the charts referred to above in Tony Campbell, 'Census of Pre-Sixteenth-Century Portolan Charts', *Imago Mundi*, 38 (1986), 67-94: Zuane Pizzigano, 1424 (# 141); Battista Beccario, 1435 (# 100); Andrea Bianco, 1436 (# 112); Gabriel de Valsea, 1439 (# 128); Andrea Bianco, 1449 (# 84); Bartolomeo Pareto, 1455 (# 104); Albino Canepa, 1489 (# 143). Its amazing similarity with Beccario's chart of 1435 in Parma leads us to conclude that it must have been made by the same cartographer, more or less at the same time, c. 1435.

¹⁸ This is the «old» chart kept in the Biblioteca Palatina at Parma (Italy), # 100 in T. Campbell's census.

have been the **first discovery** of the archipelago, and there is not any significant reason to make us think otherwise.

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We already had to deal with similar problems raised by Italian charts recording Portuguese discoveries in the Atlantic in the fifteenth century, in respect to the equally fascinating caption, *ixola otinticha* («authentic island») in Andrea Bianco, 1448. But most of all, the question of a possible representation of pre-Columbian America was raised by Armando Cortesão's controversial discussion of Zuane Pizzigano's chart (1424)¹⁹. This new chart by Beccario may be considered by some authors as another piece of evidence pointing in the same direction.

As I have already written, that is not my opinion. I consider this inscription *Insule de novo reperte*, c. 1435, near *Antilia*, as being the first echo of the discovery of the Azores, and I cannot consider it as being related to America. In other words, I think that this *Antilia* is a diffuse representation of the Azores, not of the main land in the West.

But then, who knows if the birth of *Antilia* itself, some years earlier, in Pizzigano's chart dated 1424, is not an echo of the same kind?

The year 1424 (when Pizzigano dated his chart) is not far from the year 1427 (when that man called Diogo de Silves is said to have discovered the Azores...). And nobody knows anything about this Diogo de Silves... And even the date 1427 is questionable...²⁰

Wouldn't it be possible that Pizzigano's *Antilia* is also a diffuse representation — therefore the first representation... — of the Azores?

I am ready to believe that in all of these maps what we are dealing with are true discoveries of lands, even if disguised by myth and erroneously identified with mythical islands whose discovery was already expected. But I do think that these lands are the Azores, not America.

¹⁹ The chart that Armando Cortesão published himself, and so deeply obsessed him. See the above quoted A. Cortesão, *The Nautical Chart of 1424 and the Early Discovery and Cartographical Representation of America*. This chart is kept at the James Ford Bell, Library (USA).

²⁰ On all these debates see Alfredo P. Marques, *Origem e Desenvolvimento...*, pp. 92-93.