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Collation: [2], viii, 156, [2] pages

REFUTING CLAIMS THAT BEHAIM REACHED AMERICA BEFORE COLUMBUS

Histoire Diplomatique du Chevalier Portugais Martin Behaim de Nuremberg. Avec la Description de Son Globe Terrestre... traduite de l'Allemand par le Citoyen H.J. Jansen.

Author

[BEHAIM, Martin]; DE MURR, M. Christophe Theophile

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Physical description

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Dimensions

229 by 140mm. (9 by 5.5 inches).

Notes

With the rare map 'Pars Globi terrestris Ao. 1492 a Martino Behaim Equite Lusitano Norimbergae confecti Delineavit Christoph. Theoph de Murr 1778', showing a truncated hemispheric globe "gore" of what is essentially the eastern extent of both the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. The Americas are conspicuous by their absence, as Columbus returned to Spain no sooner than March 1493, but the map extends to cover the landmass of eastern Asia, the islands of Southeast Asia, Japan, and those off the coast of Africa, including the Canaries, Cape Verde, Madeira, and the mythical island discovered by St. Brendan; all based on Behaim's "Erdapfel" globe, the oldest surviving terrestrial globe, now in the Germanisches National Museum in Nuremberg.

First published in Nuremberg in German in 1778, then in Jansen's French translation in 1787 which was subsequently included as a redacted supplement to Jansen's edition of Pigafetta's account of Magellan's voyage, in 1801. This is the self-described third French edition, newly revised and enlarged by the author. The folding plate, a new addition for this edition, signed J.P. Gablen and dated 1801 in the image, is after an original woodblock created "shortly after the death of the great navigator", and ominously depicts Magellan's ships arriving in the Indies.

De Murr addresses, and refutes, the claim made for Martin Behaim's discovery of America before Columbus. The idea seems to be based on a misunderstanding of the brief account of the Portuguese voyage of discovery along the west coast of Africa in 1483/4 which appears on the verso of folio CCXC of the Latin edition of the "Nuremberg Chronicle".

"This passage mentions, that when the voyagers [Diego Cam and Behaim] were in the Southern Ocean not far from the coast, and had passed the line, they came into another hemisphere, where, when they looked towards the east, their shadows fell towards the south, on their right hand; that here they discovered a new world, unknown until then, and which for many years had never been sought for except by the Genoese, and by them unsuccessfully... These lines are part of a passage which it is said is interpolated by a different hand, in the original manuscript of the chronicle of Schedel. De Murr assures us that they are not to be found in the German translation of the book by George Alt, which was finished the 5th October, 1493. But even if they were, they relate merely to the discovery which Diego Cam made of the southern hemisphere, previously unknown, and of the coast of Africa beyond the equator, all which appeared like a new world, and as such was talked of at the time... The misinterpretation of the passage first gave rise to the incorrect assertion that Behem had discovered the New World prior to Columbus; as if it were possible such a circumstance could have happened without Behem's laying claim to the glory of the discovery, and without the world immediately resounding with so important an event. This error had been adopted by various authors without due examination; some of whom had likewise taken from Magellan the credit of having discovered the strait which goes by his name, and had given it to Behem" (Irving, Columbus, Appendix xiii)

The idea to call the globe "apple" may be related to the Reichsapfel ("Imperial Apple", Globus cruciger) which was also kept in Nuremberg along with the Imperial Regalia (Reichskleinodien).

From its creation until early in the sixteenth century, it stood in a reception room in the Nuremberg town hall. After that time, it was held by the Behaim family. In 1907, it was transferred to the Germanic Museum in Nuremberg. In 1992, it was moved to the Vienna University of Technology, to be studied at high resolution by the Behaim Digital Globe Project. In 2011, a second digitalization by the German National Museum began, and a facsimile was produced by the firm of Greeves and Thomas in 1982 to commemorate the quincentenary of the production of the original.

Martin Behaim (1459-1507)

Martin Behaim, as his surname suggests, was descended from a wealthy Nuremberg family, who had arrived there in the early 1300s, having fled religious persecution in Bohemia. Later, he claimed for himself, that he was a student of the celebrated mathematician and astronomer known as Regiomontanus (Johannes Müller von Königsberg, 1436 – 1476). Nevertheless, his intellectual abilities recommended him to King John II of Portugal, when he travelled to Lisbon in about 1481. Behaim became one of a group of mathematicians commissioned by King John to solve the problem of determining latitude. It is possible that Behaim's contribution to the conundrum was to provide the commission with a Jacob's-staff, or cross-staff, and astronomical tables used for determining the declination of the sun.

Armed with these instruments, Behaim may, or may not, have accompanied Diego Cam (Cão) on his voyage of discovery along the west coast of Africa. However, what is certain, is that after 1486, Behaim was elevated to Knight of the Portuguese Order of Christ, and married a daughter of the hereditary governor of islands in the Azores, Jobst von Hurter.

Back in Nuremberg, in 1490, the City Council member George Holzschuher proposed that Behaim construct a globe based on recent geographic discoveries in Portugal. Along with the painter Georg Glockendon, and possibly with the help of Hartman Schedel, compiler of the "Nuremberg Chronicle", Behaim started work on the globe and completed it in 1492. The "Erdapfel" – Earth Apple – is the oldest surviving terrestrial globe. Dedicated to burghers Gabriel Nützel, Paul Volkamer, and Nicolaus Groland, Behaim also gives credit to Ptolemaeus, Marco Polo, and Sir John Mandeville for their inspiration.

Historically, Behaim has been credited with inspiring the voyages of Columbus, and predicting the existence of the Magellan Strait. However, this is now questioned.

Bibliography

Provenance

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