

Diego Cuoghi

THE MYSTERIES OF THE PIRI REIS MAP ©

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"A map of the world that does not include *Utopia* is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing."
(Oscar Wilde)

THE PIRI REIS MAP

English translation by Roberto Patriarca, with valuable help of James Gill (alias Albion of Avalon)

At the present day no one believes the existence of the strange inhabitants of the region of the Baikal Lake that we see in this image, taken from the medieval "Book of Wonders". So nobody should take as absolutely creditable the cartographic evidence of the ancient navigation maps dated before 16th century. Maps that were written up before the discovery of a precise way to calculate the longitude. Discovery that happened in the 17th century. The geographic maps designed until that period were based on symbolic systems of representation such as Jerusalem as the center of the world, inverted north/south orientation, or different scales for different nations and so on. In many cases these maps were not drawn on the basis of direct evidence but were copied and modified from other maps, and were often adapted to suit the needs of nations like Spain and Portugal, in dispute for the dominion of recently discovered lands. Added to this fact, it was believed until 1507, that those lands, visited for the first time by Columbus and then Vespucci, were part of Asia and not a new continent. Furthermore many maps joined parts of the known Far East with parts of newly explored lands, and then often added southern mythical "incognito lands". These additions were made in order to refer to the ideas of the ancient Greek philosophers (rediscovered in the Renaissance).



In the same maps we can often see other mythical places like the "Reign of Priest John", the island of Brazil, the Garden of Eden, the Tower of Babel or the Island of Saint Brendan.

But if you try and search the Internet using "Piri Reis map" as keywords, you will surely come across many web sites dedicated to "mysteries", which allege that this map, dated "Year 919 in Muslim Calendar" (A.D. 1513 in our calendar), contains a precise representation of the coasts of Antarctica, a continent

unknown at that time. The same happens for other famous maps, such as the one drawn by Orontius Finaeus in 1531 and the one by Philippe Buache, , dated 1739. According to Charles Hapgood, author of "Maps of the Ancient Sea Kings: Evidence of Advanced Civilization in the Ice Age", those map contain a precise representation of Antarctica as it was before last ice age. The same idea was advanced by Von Daniken in "Chariots of Gods" and by Flavio Barberio in "*Una civiltà sotto ghiaccio*", but the most famous book among the ones which made this theory so popular, is Graham Hancock's archeological fiction "Fingerprints of the Gods".

According to many mystery enthusiasts, these maps were either based on ancient representations, perhaps dating as far back as the mythical Atlantis, or were drawn from pictures taken from the sky, by satellites, aircrafts or spaceships. That because the knowledge available as of 16th century cannot explain such stunning correspondence with reality.

Both Hapgood and Hancock claim that the representation of the Antarctic continent is incredibly precise. And since it clearly indicates rivers, lakes and mountains, this ancient cartographic model could date as back as 15,000 years ago. They also suggest that the map was drawn basing on surveys, which must have been taken from a satellite in a geostationary orbit over... Egypt. The usual, recurring Egypt of mysteries.

In this page I will try a much simpler explanation.



Clicca sulla mappa
per ingrandire

Click on the map
to enlarge

What is known today as the map of the Turkish admiral Piri Reis is actually just a fragment of the original, much larger map, which represented the whole known world. This surviving portion represents Atlantic Ocean, western coasts of Europe and Africa, and eastern coasts of America. It is dated "Muslim Year 919", which corresponds to our A.D. 1513 (but the map was presented to the Sultan in 1517). According to its author, the map was compiled from "twenty older charts and eight planispheres". It is very likely that Reis also examined the journey accounts written by early explorers of New World, especially Portuguese, as they are often mentioned within notes on the map. The notes have been transcribed by Turkish scholar Bay Hasan Fehmi and published by Yusuf Akcura, President of the Society for Turkish Historical Research, in 1935 in his work "*Piri Reis Haritasi*", and then re-published by Ayse Afetinan in "The oldest map of America" in 1954. It is worth nothing that, although this and other maps abound with clear and perfectly readable text and captions, the authors who present them as proof of their extravagant theses quote nothing but few lines. The only region of South America to look sufficiently detailed on the map is the coast of Brazil, although River of Amazonas is drawn twice, in different locations. Other areas such as Caribbean islands, though already explored at that time, are roughly charted, with evident errors in both position and orientation.

Piri Reis himself states, in a note, that he consulted the charts of Cristopher Columbus. The peculiar (and wrong) configuration of the Caribbean area in his map seem to confirm that statement. That region of the American continent is indeed improperly represented: it features a large island arranged north-south, which cannot easily be identified with Cuba, not even by rotating the whole map counterclockwise by 90 degrees.



But what that part of Piri Reis' map actually represents is the east coast of Asia, as it had been imagined and depicted on the charts of 15th century that Columbus probably used. The large island bordered in red can be identified with Japan (Cipango), as it appears on planisphere of Martin Behaim, 1492.



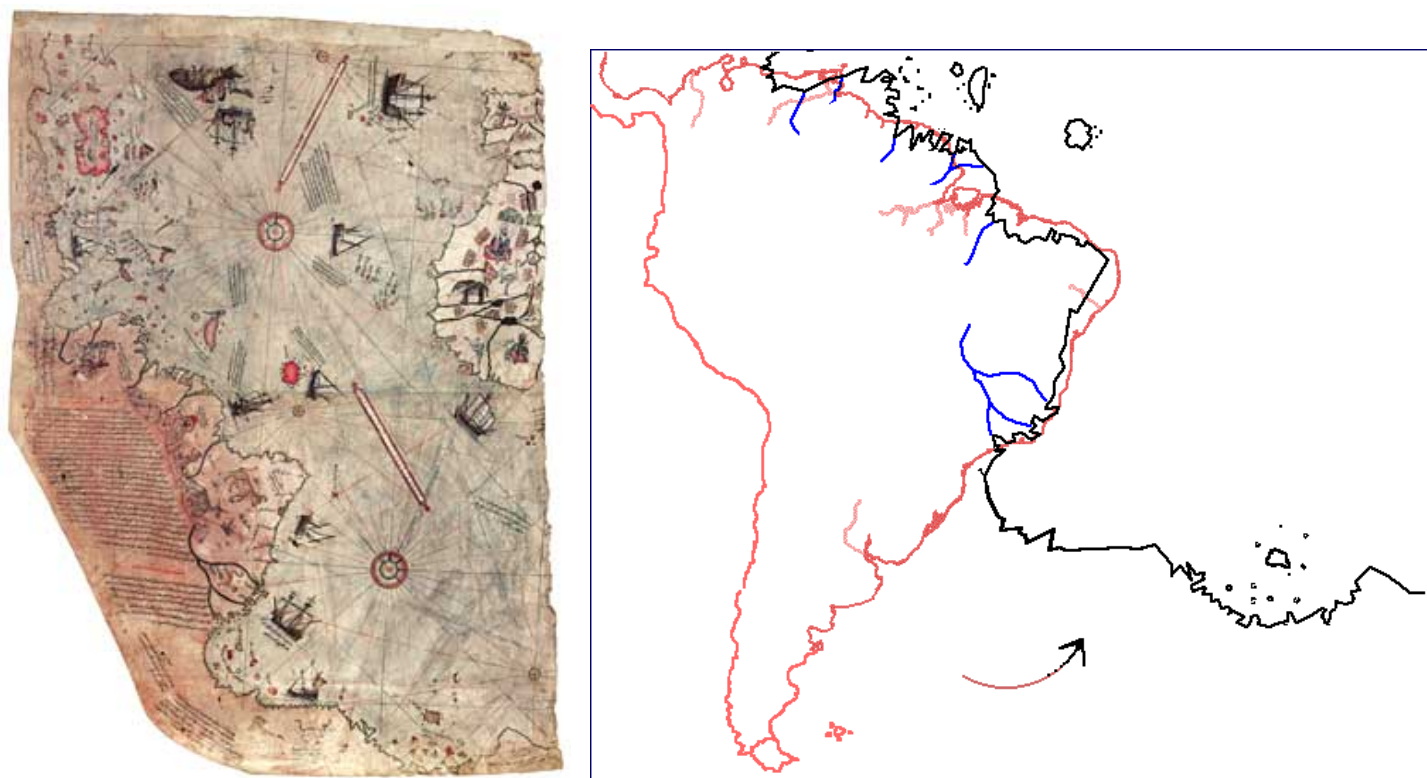
Japan (Cipango) in the Martin Behaim globe (1492) and in its graphic reproduction, compared with the Caribbean area on Piri Reis map.

The Earth was infact thought to be much smaller than it actually is, and Asia was though to lie just across Atlantic Ocean, not far from Azores and from legendary Island of Saint Brendan (the latter appears on Piri Reis map while it never actually existed, except in tales about lives of the Saints). The map of Piri Reis is thus a very important document, as it contains valuable information about the "maps of Columbus", one of which was probably drawn by Toscanelli.

At Piri Reis' time South America had already been explored, first by Amerigo Vespucci and then by Binot Paulmier de Gonneville. Vespucci made two journeys to the new continent between 1499 and 1502, reaching as far south as 50th parallel (not far from Strait of Magellan and Tierra del Fuego), while it is not sure whether he took part in a third journey between 1503 and 1504. De Gonneville, on the other hand, remained within the lands south of Brazil from 1503 and 1505. On his way back he took a native with him, who was named Essomericq.

Even after Vespucci, who first realized he was not coasting Asia but a new continent, the name "America" was only being used to denote what is now known as South America. It was still believed that the newly discovered lands north of Caribbean Sea were part of Asia, and that Japan (Cipango) was just west of Cuba, as we can see from planispheres of early 1500, such as those of Giovanni Contarini and Francesco Rosselli. We can thus conclude that the map of Piri Reis, having been compiled from both older charts and new third-hand knowledge, represents an extremely imprecise description of lands that lie across the Atlantic Ocean. Even maps dating back to the first years of 1500 (Juan de La Cosa, 1500; Cantino, 1502) are more accurate than Piri Reis' when it comes to profile and orientation of islands such as Cuba, Jamaica and Puerto Rico.

The only part of the map that Piri Reis probably copied from a quite accurate source is the coast of current Brazil. But if we overlap the two coast lines, we can easily realize that correspondence is only apparent.

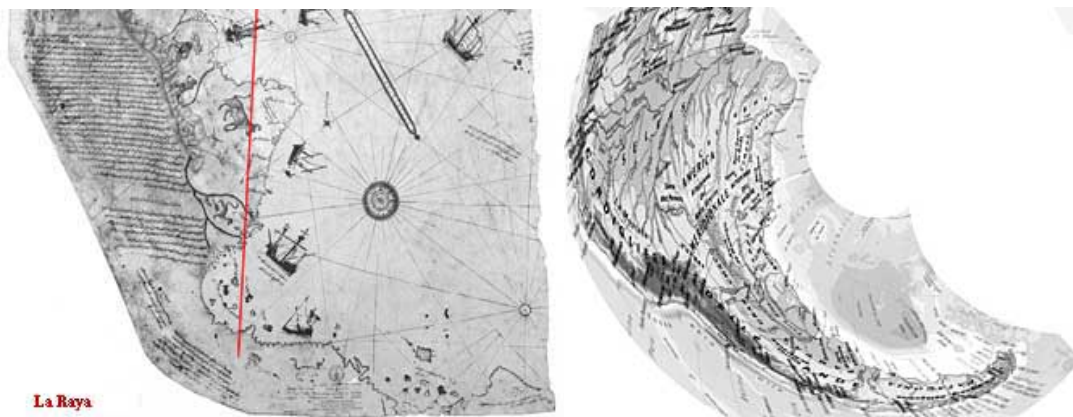


But what mystery lovers are most enthusiastic about is the bottom edge of the map, which is said to represent Antarctica. Some claim that Land of Queen Maud and other features of Antarctica are clearly recognizable on the map, even though that continent was not explored but many centuries later. Unfortunately these people, including Hancock, claim the above hypothesis without making any cartographic comparison or first-hand check: they just accept Charles Hapgood's statements as true. Hancock in particular does not mention any book about history of cartography within the notes of the first two chapters of his book "Fingerprints of the Gods" (the very chapters about geographic charts). He just quotes Hapgood's work, thus clearly showing that he didn't even make an attempt to learn on the subject.



. Moreover, if the map of Piri Reis is so accurate and if the land depicted at the bottom edge of it is really Antarctica, one may ask why none of those authors explains what has become of the missing 1200 miles of coast from Brazil to Tierra del Fuego (the whole length of Argentina), and why this odd Antarctica protrudes from Brazil instead of laying 2500 miles south of it.

One just needs to examine that part of the map carefully to realize, even without being an expert cartographer, that it represents nothing more than the extremity of the south-american continent, an approximate representation made possible by means available at that time. The drawing is deformed, slanted to the right, possibly to conform to the peculiar shape of the piece of parchment. It is also worth mentioning that cartographic maps were used as political tools as well. Placing some land on either side of the meridian dubbed "la Raya" which was agreed upon as a demarcation between Spanish and Portuguese zones of influence could serve as an excuse for the corresponding power to claim rights of possession. Piri Reis often mentions Portuguese maps in his notes, and of course Portuguese would have preferred the coast south of Brazil to bend sharply to the right towards Africa. That would have placed the coast within the 180 degrees assigned to their jurisdiction by **Treaty of Tordesillas** in 1494.





Close to the bottom of Piri Reis map there is an archipelago featuring a larger island called "il de Sare". Among those islands is written "Buadalar issizdir, ama bahar cektur", that is "Those islands are deserted but spring here lasts long". It could be a primitive representation of Falkland/Malvinas islands (the larger of which is called Soledad). It may seem quite odd, as the small archipelago was "officially" discovered in 1592. But a group of islands in the same location can be seen on the Circolus Antarticus chart by Pedro Reinel, dated 1522 (Istambul, Topkapi Museum Library). South America in the Circolus Antarticus chart by **Pedro Reinel, 1522** (Istambul, Topkapi Museum Library).



South America in the *Circolus Antarticus* cart by Pedro Reinel, 1522 (Istambul, Topkapi Museum Library)

And a group of islands off 50th parallel appears in the Martin Waldseemuller's map of 1507 as well. It is thus possible, though not officially documented, that some navigator coasting the south-eastern end of America during the first decade of 1500 actually sighted an archipelago, and reported the sighting back home. Such an hypothesis is mentioned on some web pages about Falkland Islands' history (see page 1 and page 2), too. Those pages also suggest the names of Amerigo Vespucci and Binot Paulmier de Gonneville.



Waldseemüller map of 1507, with an enlargement of South America explored by Amerigo Vespucci as far as 50° parallel



Another enlargement from the Waldseemüller map of 1507

Waldseemüller map of 1507, with an enlargement of the portion of South America explored by Amerigo Vespucci, who reached as far south as 50° parallel. Another enlargement from the Waldseemüller map of 1507. Waldseemüller's map derives from the very accounts of the journeys made by Vespucci. In this document the newly discovered continent is for the first time referred to as "America", a name the author chose in honor of Amerigo Vespucci. This map too could have formed the basis of Piri Reis' compilation work, as Columbus' charts did.

After Vespucci's last journey, more and more expeditions were undertaken with the purpose of opening a new route towards Asia, but no result was obtained until 1520. It is thus not unreasonable to suppose that other expeditions might have sailed along the remaining short stretch of coast, up to the strait located at 54th parallel, even before 1513. The strait was later named after Magellan, who in 1520 realized it was not a mere gulf but a way between Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Magellan then succeeded in crossing the strait among many difficulties, and finally reached Philippines.

At that time, the land south of the strait was thought to represent the northern edge of that large continent which, according to tolemaic tradition, must have existed in the southern hemisphere to balance the quantity of emerged lands in the northern one. Furthermore, many charts and planispheres of that period read "Terra Australis Incognita" (Unknown Austral Land) on the land south of the strait of Magellan.



World maps by Camocio, LeTestu and Mercator

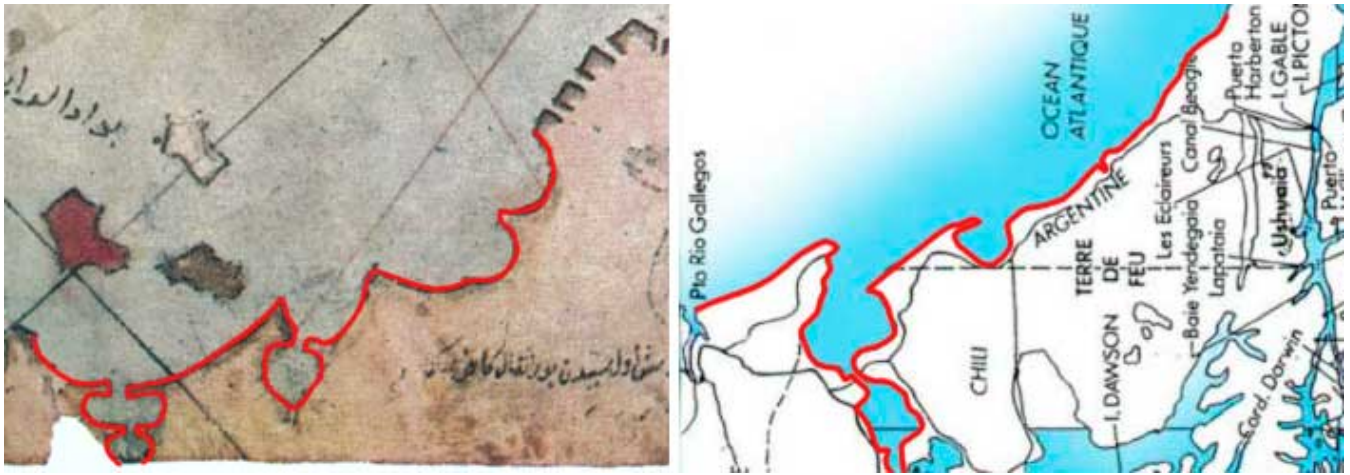


Mercator, World Map, 1569 (part.)

The southern end of **Tierra del Fuego** - thus named because of the villages' bonfires Magellan saw while sailing across the strait - is Cape Horn, swept by winds and stormy, which was circumnavigated only in 1615. That too did not happen for the sake of knowledge but for mere economical reasons. Indeed, two Dutches, Cornelius Shouten and Jacob Lemaire, intended to reach Indonesian seas avoiding all known routes (strait of Magellan, Cape of Good Hope), as Company of Indies had denied them the permission to follow those routes. They succeeded in their feat, but once they reached Java they were arrested by Dutch authorities, which disbelieved their discovery of a new route. Tierra del Fuego was in fact commonly thought to be a peninsula linked to "Terra Australis".



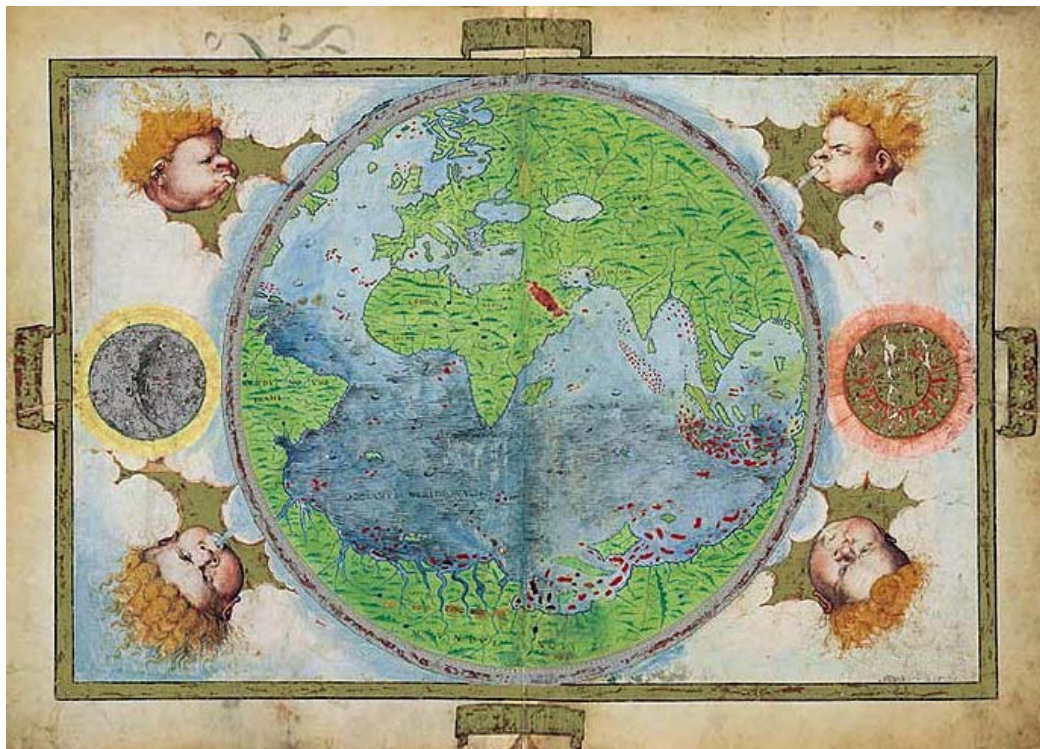
The map drawn by Jan Jansson after Lemaire circumnavigation of the Tierra del Fuego. To the right a detail of the mouth of the Strait of Magellan, compared to a detail of Piri Reis map.



A comparison between a close-up of Piri Reis map and a modern map of the Magellan strait entrance and Tierra del Fuego rotated counterclockwise by 90 degrees.

It could just be a coincidence, but one cannot but notice the presence, in both charts, of the two basins forming the mouth of Strait of Magellan, and of another large bay farther south. Could the mystery of Piri Reis' map be just that? Did Piri Reis employ the journey accounts of the Portuguese sailors who reached Tierra del Fuego before Magellan? Magellan set out in 1519 and it looks like he already knew about some strait or bay as "he saw it, in the Treasury of the King of Portugal, on a map drawn by Martin de Bohemia" (Martin Behaim), as the journey's chronicler Antonio Pigafetta tells us. Or, on the contrary, can we speculate that the lower extremity of the map was added later, after the journey of 1519? We indeed know that the chart of Pedro Reinel, kept in the same Library of Topkapi, was probably retouched after the discovery of the Strait of Magellan

But the more probable hypothesis remains that, drawing the extremity of the South American continent, Piri Reis would have been based on the more diffuse geographic theories in the first decades of the '500. According to many geographers of the age the more southern part of the South America would have been joined to the mythical Terra Australis Incognita. The map of Lopo Homem (1519) can allow us to reconstruct the aspect of the complete map of Piri Reis:



In this map, from the famous *Atlas Miller*, we see that the still unexplored extremity of the South American continent fold towards east, going to form the mythical austral continent that, touching the Indonesian archipelago, continues without a break until the extremity of Asia.