



Sebastian Cabot World Map

**Cartographer:** Sebastian Cabot

**Date:** 1544

**Size:** 124 x 210 cm

**Location:** Biblitheque Nationale, Res. Ge.AA.582, Paris

**Description:** According to R.W. Shirley, this magnificent elliptical map, of which only one copy is known, is framed and on display in the Department of Maps and Plans in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris. Engraved on copper in eight sheets, it was found in Bavaria in 1843 by a German scholar, Dr. von Martius, in the home of a Bavarian curate and has been attributed to Sebastian Cabot on account of specific references to him in one of the long flanking panels of Spanish and Latin text on either side of the map.

Sebastian Cabot first traveled with his father Juan (or John) Cabot, a Venetian in the service of Henry VII. In 1497-98 landfalls were made on the coasts of Newfoundland or Nova Scotia and later further southwards, in the belief that Asia had been reached. According to contemporary records Sebastian again set out in 1509 and may have discovered Hudson's Bay, but on nearly all early 16<sup>th</sup> century maps it is the Corte-Real brothers who are given the honor of reaching present-day Canada. Sebastian Cabot later became a Spanish Pilot, making several journeys to South America, and the text of his large map acknowledges the more recent discoveries of Spanish and Portuguese seamen as well as those by his father and himself. Cabot commanded a three-ship Spanish expedition to the Moluccas in 1524. which he diverted to the Rio de la plata region of South America to hunt for gold. After three years and no gold. he returned to Spain in disgrace and was banished. Yet by 1527 this remarkable explorer was back as pilot Major. At age 70 Cabot was reappointed naval advisor to Edward VI of England. At the time of his death a decade later. he was organizing yet another voyage to find the northwest passage.

Cabot's map became a classic. both because of his authorship and the spectacular iconography that complements the delineation. Several features of the Cabot map are of

great interest. First, it is one of the few printed maps that in its calligraphy, elegance and illustrative style deliberately seeks to emulate the finest hand-drawn charts of Spanish or Portuguese origin. A number of ships, human figures and animals are engraved in precise detail, and have been hand colored. There are conquistadores fighting Indians in Peru, a splendid tent of the enthroned Great Khan, polar bears, a mounted camel and a large jaguar or cougar.

Second, Cabot has been at pains to give the best cartographic rendering of those areas of most recent exploration, particularly the East Indies and the Americas. In South America the river Amazon is prominent, also the River Plate - both areas of Cabot's own voyages - but apart from land just south of the straits of Magellan no large Antarctic continent is indicated. Legends off the coast of Mexico and Peru describe these countries and their conquests by Cortes and Pizarro respectively. The map also takes into account the explorations by Ulloa in 1539 and Coronado in 1540-42 into the interior of the southwest of the United States. John Cabot's own landfall is placed in the vicinity of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, some 10° further south than the indication given on earlier maps such as those by La Cosa (c.1500 #305), Thorne (c.1527 [1584]) and Ribero (1529, #346). It has been speculated that this was an intentional maneuver to support English claims to eastern Canada and to oppose the French. At the same time, by including the St. Lawrence, Cabot reflects Cartier's presence there in 1534-35. The coastline of the eastern seaboard is almost as good as that in Mercator's large world map twenty-five years later (#406); Cabot wisely does not try to define the western coastline and leaves it open as *Terra Incognita*.

Mexican-based explorations of the southwest in North America by Francisco de Ulloa in 1539 in the Gulf of California and Coronado in 1540-42 also contributed to the delineation. On the map, lower California is shown as a peninsula, and the mouth of the Colorado River appears. In the Pacific, legends summarize contemporary knowledge of Mexico and Peru. Cabot's emphasis in South America is on the Amazon and the Rio de la Plata, both of which he had personally explored.

Strangely enough, the map's weakest point is its failure to show Europe accurately. From the Mediterranean to Scandinavia, including the British Isles, the configurations are incorrect. Overall, Cabot's attempt to develop an innovative projection was notably unsuccessful. Nonetheless, viewers have always been attracted by the splendid illustrations of fauna, both actual and imaginary, and of fabulous people accompanied by legends from early medieval sources. The Asian lore includes a large vignette of the Great Khan along with a lengthy description of China and Japan derived from Marco Polo.

Sebastian Cabot's voyages and his important service to English and Spanish kings as cosmographer and mapmaker during his long life made him a towering figure of the discovery era. This planisphere is his only surviving map. It has long been known only from this copy, although recently another example was discovered in Weimar, East Germany.

In other parts of the world the map is strangely inexact. The Mediterranean is much mis-shapen, the British Isles are very poorly rendered and Scandinavia is little better drawn than on Ptolemaic-type maps half-a-century earlier. Iceland, too, is shown almost due north of Scotland.

Sebastian Cabot was well-received in England throughout his long life and contemporary reports mention a re-issue or re-engraving in 1549 by Clement Adams with Latin side text. Hakluyt, writing in 1582 and almost certainly referring to Cabot's



work, praises “the great map in her Majesty’s Privy Gallery”. This map probably perished in the burning of the Palace of Whitehall at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.



Detail: India

Only the single copy of this map is known. A reproduction of a full sized photographic copy of the original was deposited in the Harvard College Library in 1882. Thirteen copies of the original were made at the time, of which two were retained in Paris. The other ten copies were distributed among leading American libraries.

Although the map is without name of author, title, or date, it has been attributed to Sebastian Cabot. The inscriptions on the side, which are pasted on the original map, although they were not composed by Cabot but probably by a Doctor Grajales, may fairly be looked upon as an integral part of the map. Inscription No. 17 refers to Sebastian Cabot as the map's author. In this inscription, in part: *Sebastian Cabot, captain and pilot-major of his sacred imperial majesty, the emperor Don Carlos, the fifth of his name, and the king our lord, made this figure extended on a plane surface, in the year of the birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ, 1544, having drawn it by degrees of latitude and longitude, with the winds, as a sailing chart, following partly Ptolemy and partly the modern discoveries, Spanish and Portuguese, and partly the discovery made by his father and himself; by it you may sail as by a seachart, having regard to the variation of the needle.*

It is known that a second edition of the map, dated London, 1549, circulated unchallenged in England as the handiwork of Cabot during the latter's sojourn in that country. This consideration, and the evidence of the legend above quoted, tend to

establish the authorship of the map, though, it must be noted, the map itself is unsigned. The date is fixed as 1544 by the explicit statement in the inscription already quoted.

Some time after the voyages of 1497-98 Sebastian Cabot settled in Spain, where he became Crown Pilot in 1515 and Pilot Major in 1518. He served in this latter capacity until 1525. He was absent from Spain on an expedition to South America, including the region of the La Plata River, from 1526 to 1530; and he filled the office of Pilot Major again from 1533 to 1547, when he returned to England and there lived until his death about 1565.

The chief interest in the map is its bearing on the Cabot voyages to North America, 1497-98. In the body of the map, in Hudson Bay, is a reference to legend "8" on the side, which legend reads as follows: *This land was discovered by Juan Cabot, a Venetian, and by Sebastian, his son, in the year of the birth of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, 1494, on the 24th of June, in the morning, to which they gave the name of "land first seen" (prima tierra vista); and to a large island which is situated along the said land they gave the name of San Juan, because it was discovered on the same day. The people of it are dressed in the skins of animals. They use in their wars bows and arrows, lances and darts, and certain clubs of wood, and slings. It is a very sterile land. There are on it many white bears; and very large stags like horses, and many other animals; and likewise there is infinite fish, sturgeon, salmon, very large soles, a yard in length, and many other kinds of fish, and the greatest quantity of them is called baccallaos or codfish; and likewise there are in the same land hawks black as crows, eagles, partridges, linnets, and many other kinds of birds of different species.*

Examining the map itself closely, one notices that the author places the scene of his discoveries and those of his father in the vicinity of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, by the words *prima tierra vista*, which he inscribes at the entrance to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The location is plain.

Despite this statement, scholars of today are not in agreement as to the location of the Cabot landfall. Various early maps place the scene of the discovery in northeastern Labrador. The *La Cosa* map (#305) of the year 1500, constructed in Spain where it is known that copies of the original Cabot maps were sent soon after 1498, has "*mar descubierta por yngleses*" and "*cavo de ynglaterra*" further north than the mouth of the St. Lawrence River. The Thorne map, of the year 1527, has the words "*Terra haec ab Anglis primum fuit inventa*" across Labrador at about 60° north latitude. The Ribero map of 1529 (#346), Weimar copy, contains the words "*Esta tierra descubrieron los Ingleses*" on Labrador at 60° north latitude; and the Vatican copy of the same map, in the same inscription and in the same place, adds that the English discoverers were "*de la villa de Bristol*." The Verrazano map of 1529 (#347) also places the English flag on Labrador near 60°.

These maps show that the landing place of the Cabots on the soil of North America was for a long time located far in the north in Labrador; and at least three of these maps, that of Thorne and the two of Ribero, came from Seville, where Sebastian Cabot was in charge of the government monopoly of map-making and probably himself gave out the information that the maps divulged as to his own discoveries and those of his father. Cabot was absent from Spain on the expedition to South America, when Ribero made his maps; but even so, the geographical information on which the latter worked must have come from Cabot, his superior officer during the long period in which the two had been associated as official map-makers before Cabot's departure for South America.

On the other hand, on the map of 1544, the only map by Cabot that has come down to the present day, that explorer places the landfall of the Cabots in North America at the mouth of the St. Lawrence, ten degrees farther south than on the older maps. This change, says noted historian Henry Harrisse, "is a fraud by Cabot, a conscious attempt to bolster up the claims of the English to the regions of the St. Lawrence against the encroachments of the French under Cartier and the other French leaders, a treacherous "bid for the King of England's favor."

Michael Lok's map (#419), which locates the landfall in accordance with the Cabot map, shows that the view of the subject, accepted by Cabot in 1544, was accepted in England in the days of Queen Elizabeth.

The date of the Cabot discovery, given above in the marginal inscription number 8, as "1494", is probably a misprint by the copyist for "1497". On this point there is general agreement.

In the body of the map are various references to the twenty-two marginal legends, few of which, however, contain anything of interest. For the most part they are made up of curious tales and old fables. Number 8, already quoted, concerning the landfall of the Cabots, is the most important, those concerning Mexico and Peru the most interesting. Students of the present time would welcome in these legends more discussion of geographical problems, such as the Northwest Passage.

The following topics are treated of in the legends:

1. Between the Bermudas and the West Indies, a passage in honor of Christopher Columbus.

2. North of the island of Antigua, a description of the island of Hispaniola, or Santo Domingo.

3. Opposite the west coast of Mexico, a resume of the contemporary knowledge of Mexico. *The language is as follows: This mainland, which the Spaniards named New Spain, the most illustrious gentleman, Don Fernando Cortez, marquis del Valle de Guaxacon, conquered. There are, in this land, provinces and cities innumerable; the chief of them is the city of Mexico, which contains more than fifty thousand inhabitants; it is in a salt lake which extends over fifty leagues. There is in the said city, and in all the other provinces, much gold, virgin silver, and all kinds of precious stones; and there is produced in the said land and provinces very much silk, and cotton, alum, orchil, dyewood, cochineal, and saffron, and sugar, of all the aforesaid great quantities, with which many ships come loaded to these kingdoms of Spain. The natives of this land are very expert in all things that relate to trade; instead of coins they make use of certain kernels, split in halves, which they call caeca, cacanghnate, a barbarous expression. They have much wheat and barley, and many other grains, and vines, and many fruits of different kinds. It is a land of many animals, deer, mountain boars, lions, leopards, tigers, and much other game, both birds and land animals. It is a people very skillful in moulding any object after nature, and in painting pictures. The women usually adorn themselves with precious stones and valuable pearls. These Indians use a certain kind of paper, on which they draw what they wish to express with figures [pictures] instead of letters. They never had peace among themselves; on the contrary, some persecuted others in continual fights, in which the prisoners on either side were sacrificed by their enemies to their gods, and their dead bodies were given to the army, at public banquets. They were idolaters, and adored whatever took their fancy; they were very fond of eating human flesh, whereas now they have laid aside these fierce and cruel customs, and have clad themselves in Jesus Christ, believing heartily in our holy evangelical faith, and obeying our Most Holy Mother Church and its most holy precepts.*

The map locates the city of Mexico and the port of Vera Cruz, and commemorates the discoveries and conquests of Hernando Cortez in Mexico.

4. In the Strait of Magellan, and
5. At the Molucca Islands, a reference to Magellan's voyage of circumnavigation and to his discovery of many of the Philippine Islands.
6. The coast of Peru, a reference to that country in the following words: *These provinces were discovered by the honored and valiant gentleman, Francisco Pizarro, who was the governor of them during his life; in which there is infinite gold and virgin silver, and mines of very fine emeralds. The bread which they have they make of maize, and the wine likewise; they have much wheat and other grain. It is a war-like race; they use in their wars haws, and slings, and lances; their arms are of gold and silver. There are in the said provinces certain sheep of the form of small camels; they have very fine wool. They are an idolatrous people, and of very subtle mind; and on all the sea-coast, and for more than twenty miles inland, it never rains. It is a very healthy land. The Christians have made many settlements in it, and continually keep increasing them.*
7. At the mouth of the La Plata River, a statement of the discovery by Juan Diaz de Solis of this river, the river of silver, the largest river then known. On the map of South America one notices such names as *Lake Nicaragua, Panama, and the Amazon River*, the discovery of which is attributed to Francisco de Orellana. Cabot records his belief that the La Plata is larger than the Amazon.
8. In Hudson Bay, a statement already quoted, concerning Cabot's discovery of the mainland.
9. Concerning Iceland;
10. the northern part of Russia;
11. and 12. the northern part of Asia;
13. Prester John and the central part of Africa;
14. India and the Indian custom by which a wife sacrifices herself on her husband's tomb;
- 15, the Tartars;
16. the island of *Taprobana* in the Indian Ocean;
17. the variations of the compass;
18. navigation on the north of Europe; and
- 19, 20, 21, and 22, islands in the Indian Ocean.

The last part of legend 22 reflects the 16<sup>th</sup> century knowledge of Japan, drawn from Marco Polo: *Ciapangu is a large island lying in the high seas, which island is fifteen hundred miles distant from the mainland of the Grand Khan towards the East. They are idolaters, and a gentle and handsome race. It has an independent King of its own, who is tributary to no one. It contains much virgin gold, which is never taken away from the island, because ships never touch there as it is so distant and out of the way. The king of the island has a very great and wonderful palace all made of gold in ingots of the thickness of two reals, and the windows and columns of the palace are all of gold. It [the island] contains precious stones and pearls in great quantities. The Grand Khan, having heard the fame of the riches of the island, desired to conquer it, and sent to it a great fleet, and could never conquer it, as Marea Polo more aptly relates and tells us in his book, the 106<sup>th</sup> chapter.*

There are other points of interest in the map besides the inscriptions, such as the peninsular character of lower California, and the river system emptying into the Gulf of California, and the extent of the country drained by it. This is an early attempt to set



down on the map the results of the recent explorations of Ulloa in 1539, and of Coronado in 1540-42 .

In the northeast of North America, the fairly correct outline of the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the St. Lawrence River, copied from Deslien's map, reflects the geographical results of the explorations of Cartier in these regions. "*Baie Saint Laurens*" is Cartier's original term.

Newfoundland, which still appears as a cluster of islands, is emerging, New England is taking shape, and the Atlantic coast of North America is almost as good as that of Mercator in 1569 (#406). There is no reference to Verrazano's river, the present Hudson, and none probably to the Mississippi, which had then but recently been crossed by De Soto, although the *rio del spiritu santo* may be the Mississippi.

Although HARRISSE calls the map "the most imperfect of all the Spanish maps of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which have reached us," and KOHL declares that it has so many errors that it is "utterly improbable" that it was made by Sebastian Cabot, it must be remembered that all the old maps have many errors. This map is but little worse than those of the other map-makers of that century.

**Location:** Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale.

**Size:** 47" x 84"

#### **References:**

\*Barber, P., *The Map Book*, pp. 102-103.

\*Cumming, W.P., R.A. Skelton, D.B. Quinn, *The Discovery of North America*, pp. 74-75.

\*Fite, E. and A. Freeman, *A Book of Old Maps Delineating American History*, #18, pp. 60-63.

Henry HARRISSE, *John Cabot, the Discoverer of North America, and Sebastian, His Son*.

London, 1896.

\*Nebenzahl, Kenneth, *Atlas of Columbus and the Great Discoveries*, pp. 104-107, pl. 34.

\*Shirley, R.W., *The Mapping of the World*, #81, Plate 69, pp. 90, 92-93.

\*Wolff, H., *America, Early Maps of the New World*, #91, pp. 74-75.

\*illustrated



Detail: Indian Ocean





Detail: Pacific Ocean, Western Hemisphere





Detail: South America





*Detail: Amazon River and South American natives*



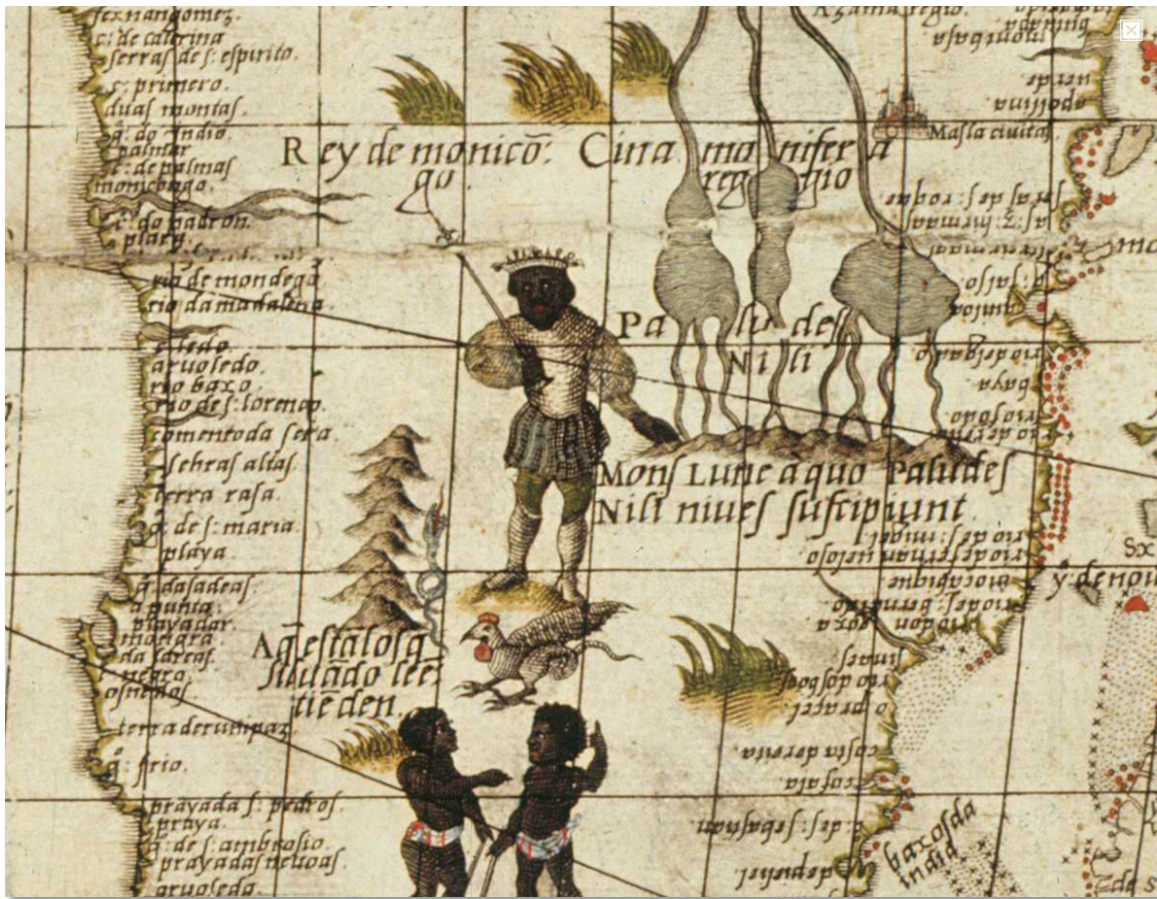
Detail: Patagonian Giant, South America





Detail: Eastern Hemisphere





Detail: Southern Africa, Mountains of the Moon



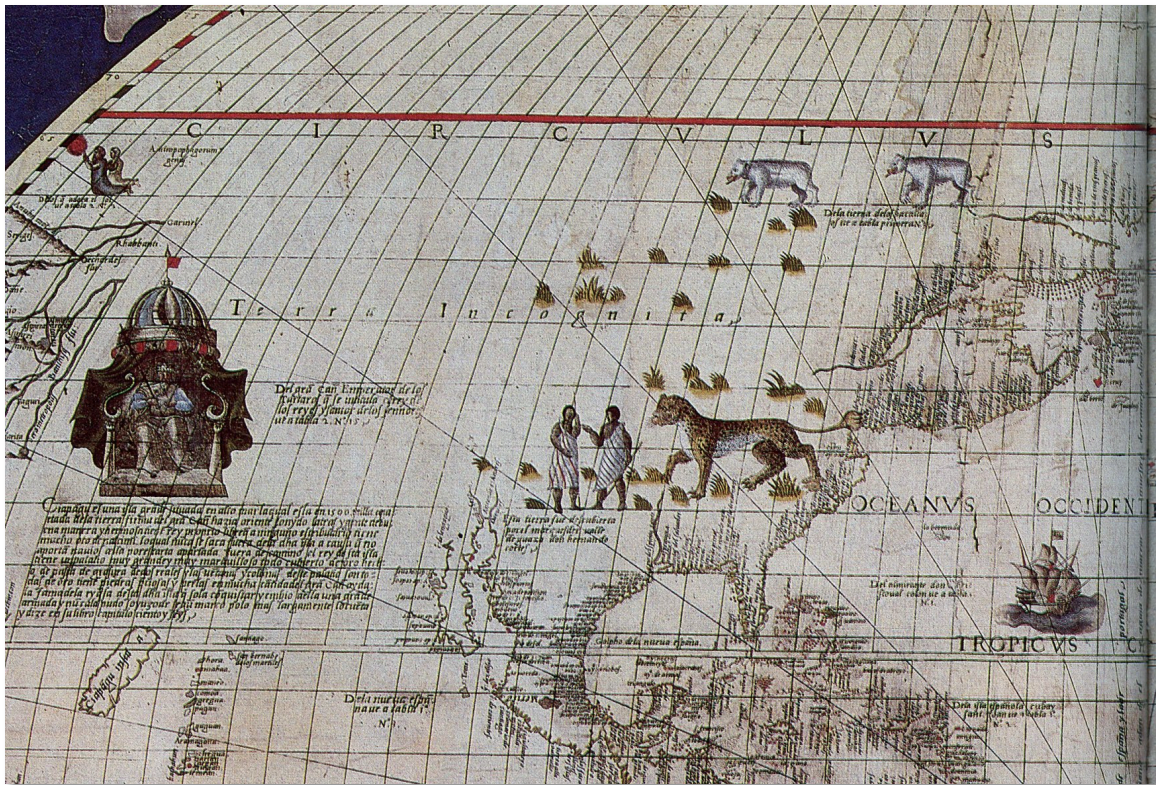


*Detail: Central Africa*



Detail: Southern Africa





Detail: North America

This is a section of the large elliptical copper-engraved chart (47" x 84") has printed legends pasted on either side of the map. One of these inscriptions states that the map was made by Sebastian Cabot in 1544; another describes the country discovered by 'Juan Cabot, a Venetian, and by Sebastian, his son', and places the 'land first seen' at Cape Breton, on Cabot Strait. Sebastian was about fifteen at that time. The St Lawrence shows the discoveries of Jacques Cartier, and it has been suggested that the map was here attempting to establish the priority of English over French claims to the country. The accuracy of several statements in the inscriptions, which were not written by Sebastian, has been questioned, including his authorship of the map. Sebastian left England for the service of Spain in 1512 as a captain in the navy, and held the important official position of Pilot Major in the Casa de Contratación from 1518 to 1547. In the latter year he returned again to England, where he died about 1557. There are numerous contemporary references to other maps made by Sebastian Cabot; this is the only extant map, however, attributed to him.

