



[untitled portolan chart of Europe, the Mediterranean and Black Seas, the coast of West Africa through the Canaries, and of undetermined islands in the Atlantic Ocean].

Attributed to Batista Beccari, Genoa(?), circa 1434.

An illuminated manuscript on vellum, heightened in gold. Size of original: 66 x 117 cm. Beccari records the Atlantic islands in "blocks" with an outline encompassing an entire archipelago. He shows two pairs of blocks, each containing a large and a small group. This configuration is very similar to the earliest known chart to incorporate such islands, the 1424 chart of Zuane Pizzigano, except that Pizzigano orients them diagonally while Beccari shows them nearly straight north-south. Beccari has given names to each of the four blocks as a whole, rather than to individual islands; fading of the ink has made some difficult to discern. The least legible is the larger of the two northern groups, but by correlation to other surviving *portolan* charts (and specifically to another Batista Beccari chart) it would be *Satanagio*, the Genoese dialect equivalent to the Portuguese *Satanazes* (Satans). To the north lies an umbrella-shaped block named *Tanmar*, and the island blocks to the south are called *Antillia* and *Royllo*. Only a few *portolan* charts survive from this early period showing these Atlantic islands. Their identity has been the source of controversy that will doubtfully ever be resolved (see the monograph on *Mythical Islands of the Atlantic* on this website).

The simplest explanation is that they are "false Azores," a cartographic fancy which helped inspire Henry the Navigator's courage for western voyages. This is unlikely, however, both because the *portolan* chart as a genre disdained speculation, and equally because the islands are accompanied by the statement *Insulle de novo Rpto* [Islands newly discovered ['reperto']]. Some of the islands, specifically the northern ones, may represent "true" Azores. If so, this would verify Portuguese discovery of the Azores prior to the 1424 Pizzigano chart.

The two island blocks to the south, *Antillia* and *Royllo*, are particularly perplexing. *Antilia* is traditionally known as the mythical island of the Seven Cities,

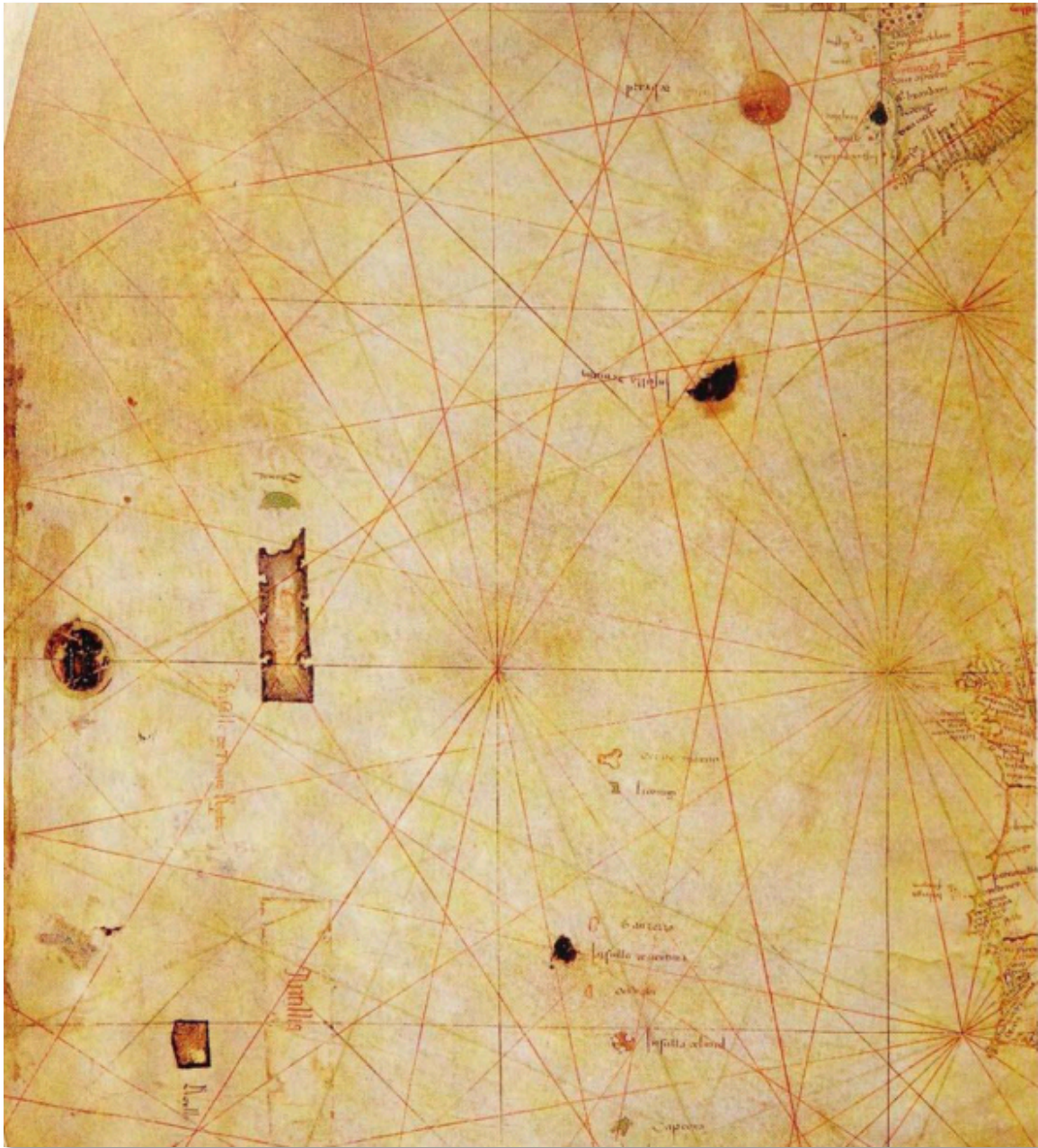
although that association was the result of the later merging of two separate traditions. The term *Antilia* is probably a derivation of the Portuguese *ante* and *ilha* ["in front of" and "island"], or possibly of the Arabic *Al-tin*, the dragon. It has also been flippantly associated with Atlantis, though with little support from academia. Some early chart-makers certainly understood it as *ante ilha*, as the island is found labeled as such (*Ante Yllas*) on some *portolan* charts, e.g., in the *Miller Atlas* of circa 1519 (#329.1). The interpretation as the Arabic *Al-tin* is found on the 1367 Pizigani map, which depicts an Atlantic island accompanied by an inscription and illustration about the Arabic legend of dragons.

There is early corroborative evidence of Portuguese landfalls in *Antilia*, whatever its identity; for example, Ruysch's world map of 1507 (#313) shows *Antilia* and states that it had been earlier found by the Portuguese. It was the opinion of the Portuguese historian Armando Cortesao that the *Antilia* of Henry's time represented fragmentary knowledge of the New World more than half a century before Columbus. Given the islands' latitude and position, and given Portugal's interest in the Canary Islands at that time, the possibility that they record Portuguese landfall in the Americas cannot be lightly dismissed. Portuguese presence in the Canaries was well established by the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, with Spanish sovereignty over the islands not being mandated until 1479. The 1479 *Treaty of Alcacovas* gave the Guinea coast, the Azores, the Madeiras, and Cape Verde Islands to Portugal, and gave the Canaries to Castile. Prior to that, the Portuguese dominated in the Canaries, and in fact had temporarily won official sanction for their claim with the bull *Romanus Pontifex* of Pope Nicholas V in 1454. Though more obviously considered to be a base for exploration of the African coast, the winds off the Canaries are ideal for a trans-Atlantic crossing to the Caribbean, and a vessel venturing west of the islands by design or mishap could certainly have found itself washed up on Caribbean shores. In fact, the answer to this chart's *Antilia* may well lie in Columbus himself who used the Canaries as his point of departure for all four voyages to America. Were it possible to know whether he chose the Canaries by knowledge of earlier successes rather than by luck or political deference, it would then be possible to argue more convincingly that the *Antilia* and *Royllo* of Beccari and his colleagues were the *Indies* of Columbus. The prominence and relationship of the Canaries and *Antilia/Royllo* on Beccari's chart almost beg for this explanation.

Another enigmatic land shown by Beccari is the island of *Brasil*, founded in Irish legend. Although the identification of *Brasil* is unknown, the consistency and coherency of surviving records supports the thesis of an Irish presence as far as the Faeroe Islands and Iceland by the early ninth century, with sketchy evidence suggesting landfalls further west. *Brasil* island appeared on *portolan* charts as early as the *Dalorto* map of circa 1325, charted as an island to the west of Ireland (as it is shown here by Beccari), though it subsequently moved about in the Atlantic at the whims of Italian and Catalan chart-makers. Theories as to the origin of this island's name also remain guess-work. It might be derived from the Gaelic word for "fortunate" or "blessed," or from the Romance word for "brazier" [brass worker], or from its root "bras," meaning "flame-colored," which in this case would refer to dyewoods, though to species other than those for which the Brazil of South America was named?

The Ruysch map of 1507 (#313) shows an island to the northwest of Ireland with an inscription in Latin stating that "in 1456 this island was completely consumed by fire." As the features accorded *Brasil* on some charts make it look volcanic in nature, the association with Ruysch's lost island has invited speculation. Icelandic tradition, in fact,

records an island between Iceland and Greenland, which does not exist in our time, from which the coastal mountains of both were visible. *Brasil* continued to appear on British Admiralty charts as *Brazil Rock* as late as 1873.



*Detail showing the mythical islands of Antilia, Satanagio, Tanmar, Royllo and Brasil*

In a fashion typical of the more elaborate *portolan* charts, Beccari has adorned the otherwise void inland areas of his chart with vignettes of the cities considered most important by him, the most prominent being his native (?) Genoa. Others are: Venice, Genoa's perennial rival; Santiago de Compostella, in northwest Spain, the most important place of pilgrimage in medieval Europe after Jerusalem and Rome; Marseille, an important commercial center and a departure port for the Crusades; Cologne,



commercial center and river port; Cairo, seat of Egyptian control over Levant trade; and ever-important Jerusalem. The remaining two are the least familiar to modern eyes. One is Varna, lying on the shores of the Black Sea. Varna had been captured by the Turks in 1391, and by Beccari's time had become an important Ottoman port. Within a decade of this chart (1444) Varna was the site of Europe's final offensive defeat in her battle against the Ottomans, with her loss of the Near East soon to be consummated by the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The remaining metropolis illustrated is Fez (*Tirirnissen*, offset to the east) that for Europe was perhaps the most fabulous and exotic of these cities depicted in vignette. Founded in 808 A.D., in Beccari's time the "new city" of Fez, connected by walls to the old, had been built, and Fez had already reached its greatest glory under the Marinid sultans of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. At the time of Beccari's chart, Fez had taken on particular significance for Europe because of its proximity to Ceuta, whose conquest by Portugal in 1415 marked the first permanent European foothold in Africa and the beginning of European overseas expansion. Below Fez, along the bottom of the chart, an inscription explains that the region to the south consists of deserts and great forests, and is inhabited by black people.

Little is known about the maker Batista Beccari. On this chart the vignette of Genoa is clearly more prominent than any other, suggesting that he worked in, or at least considered his allegiance to be to, that city-state. That Batista worked in Genoa is also strongly supported by a document which recently surfaced. This document is a contract in which Batista, residing in Genoa, agreed to apprentice a nine-year-old boy named Raffaelino Sarzana in the art of making charts for a period of eight years. The document is dated August 17, 1427, placing the end of Raffaelino's apprenticeship term at 1435, just after the tentative date assigned to this *portolan* chart.

Batista was probably the son or relative of Francesco Beccari, a chartmaker who was active at the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and who is known to have been working in Barcelona in 1399. Both Francesco and Batista were pioneers, a new breed of chartmaker, anxious not only to improve the delineations of familiar coasts but also to extend their charts' frontiers. Both makers are highly regarded for the originality of their toponymy and their cartographic innovations. Batista, for example, appears to have introduced the practice of emphasizing coasts by color, and adopted an improved rendering of Atlantic distances and Sardinia introduced by Francesco.

**Reference:**

Suarez, Thomas, *Shedding the Veil, Mapping the European Discovery of America and the World*, 1992, Chapter IV, #9, Plates IV, V, VI, pp. 30-36.



*Detail showing Genoa and Venice*