

TITLE: *Laon Globe*

DATE: 1493

AUTHOR: *unknown*

DESCRIPTION: It was Martin Behaim of Nuremberg (1459-1507), who, in so far as we have knowledge, constructed one of the first modern terrestrial globes, and it may, indeed, be said of his “Erdapfel,” as he called it, that it is the oldest terrestrial globe extant (#258). Globes in his age, and even earlier, were by no means unknown. Giovanni Campano (fl. 1261-64), a distinguished mathematician of Novara, wrote a *Tractus de Sphera solida*, in which he describes the manufacture of globes of wood or metal. Toscanelli, when writing his famous letter in 1474 (#252), refers to a globe as being the best adapted for demonstrating the erroneous hypothesis as to the small distance which he supposed to separate the west of Europe from eastern Asia. Columbus, too, had a globe on board his vessel upon which was depicted *Cipangu* [Japan], and which may have been the work of his brother Bartholomew, who, according to Las Casas, produced charts as well as globes. But only two globes of a date anterior to the discovery of the New World have survived, namely the *Behaim* globe in Nuremberg, and a smaller one at the *Depôt des planches et cartes de la marine*, Paris, i.e., the *Laon* globe.

The *Laon* globe, apparently following closely in time to Behaim’s famous globe, is an engraved and gilded red copper ball, having a diameter of 17 cm (7 inches), about the size of a 36-pounder cannon ball, and pierced by a socket which at a former period held an axis. There is evidence that at one time it was part of an astronomical clock and to have had only a secondary or incidental, and in part rather careless, application to geography.

It is known as the “Laon Globe” because M. Léon Lérout acquired it, in 1860, in a curiosity shop in the town of Laon. The engraved surface, on which appear the outlines of continents and islands, is well preserved. It has two meridian circles, which intersect at right angles and which can be moved about a common axis, likewise a horizon circle which is movable. Numerous circles appear engraved on the surface of the ball, drawn at every 15th degree, including meridians and parallels. The prime meridian passes through the Madeira Islands, a fact which suggests a Portuguese origin, since these islands are generally thought to have been discovered by Lusitanian seamen. One hundred and eighty degrees east of this prime meridian, a second meridian is engraved, equally prominent, passing through the middle of the continent of Asia, and 60 degrees still farther to the eastward is a third. Each of these meridians is divided into degrees, which are grouped in fifths and are numbered by tens, starting at the equator. The meridians are intersected by a number of parallels, lightly engraved in the northern hemisphere, less distinct in the southern, and represent the seven climates employed by the cosmographers of the Greek and Roman period, as well as by those of the middle ages, in their division of the earth’s surface.

As to its geographical representations and design, this terrestrial globe appears to be older than that of Martin Behaim, yet at the southern extremity of Africa we find the names *Mons Niger* and *S. Thomas*, inscribed with the legend *Huc usque Portugalenses navigio pervenere 1493* [a Portuguese ship reached this far in 1493], Cão’s “furthest” in 1485. Therefore, notwithstanding its antiquated geographical features, it is estimated to originate approximately in the year 1493; although E.G. Ravenstein believes that the above legend could have been added quite easily long after the completion of the globe itself, a procedure by no means unknown among map publishers to bring items up-to-date.

The *Laon* globe gives a wholly different representation of the North compared with Behaim, more in agreement with the usual maps of the world of the Nicolaus Germanus type, with sea at the pole round the north of the continent, which terminates approximately

at the Arctic Circle. The Scandinavian peninsula (called *Norvegia*) has a form somewhat resembling this type; but to the north of it, *Gronlandia* appears as an island, with a land called *Livonia* projecting northward on the east, and two islands, *Yslandia* and *Tile*, on the west. Nothing is known of the origin of the *Laon* globe, or of the sources of its representation of the North. Such were the geographical ideas of the North at the close of the Middle Ages, when the period of the great discoveries was at hand; they were vague and obscure, and the mists had settled once more over large regions which had been formerly known; but out in the mists lay mythical islands and countries in the north and west.

Africa lacks any knowledge of the Gulf of Guinea on its west coast. Africa on the *Laon* globe resembles the form presented by Fra Mauro in his 1459 planisphere (#249) and it shows the southern tip of Africa trending eastward, along with a series of islands, including Madagascar, Zanzibar and in the eastern Indian Ocean, a peninsular in southeast Asia that resembles the old *Tiger-leg/Dragon's Tail*. It does display a formidable *Zipangu* [Japan]. Due to its small size, very few areas or cities are labeled.

In the Atlantic it shows two elongated islands, *Antela* and *Salirosa*, undoubtedly meant for *Antillia* and *Salvagio*. Perhaps the globe maker had at command only a somewhat defaced specimen of a map like Bianco's (#241) or that of Weimar, showing perforce only two islands, and merely copied them, guessing at the dim names and outlines, without thinking or caring whether anything more were implied or making any farther search. This is apparently the last instance in which the larger two islands of the old group or series, marked by their traditional names or what are meant for such, appear together.

The author is unknown. A heart-shaped projection of this globe was published in the *Bulletin de la Soc. de Géog. de Paris*, 4me série, torn. 20te, 1860.

LOCATION: Dépôt des planches et cartes de la marine, Paris

REFERENCES:

*Nordenskiöld, A.E., *Facsimile Atlas*, pp. 73-74, Figure 41.

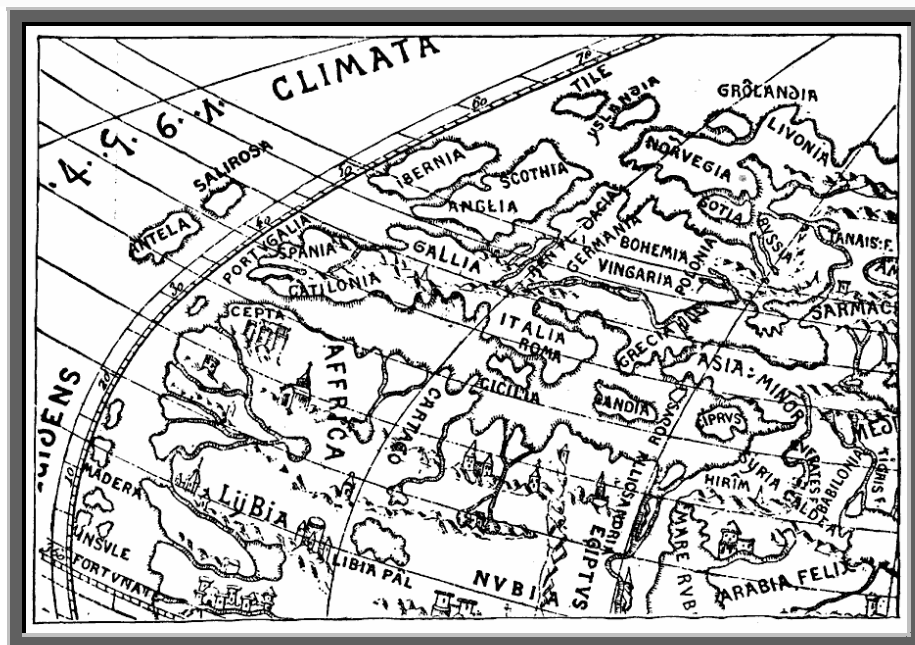
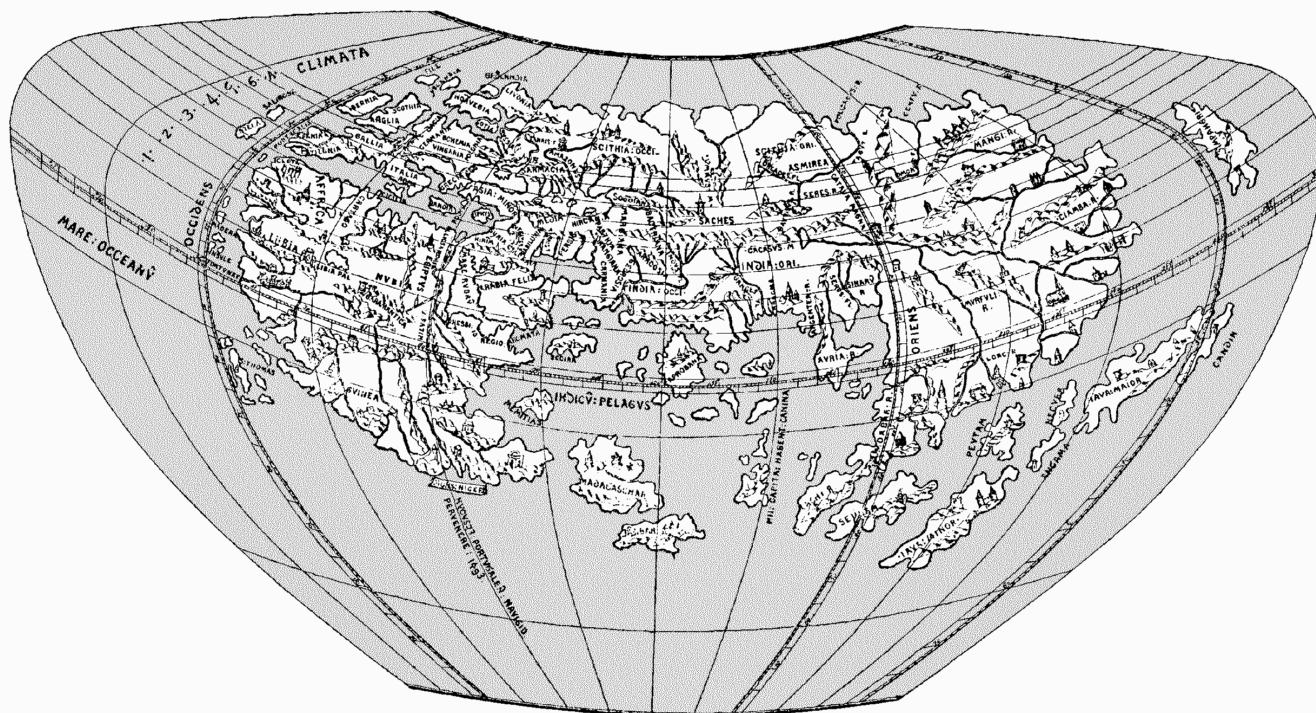
*Ravenstein, E.G., *Martin Behaim*, p. 57.

*Stevenson, E.L., *Terrestrial and Celestial Globes*, pp. 51-53.

*Winsor, J., *Narrative and Critical History of America*, pp. 56, 101, 123.

*illustrated





A facsimile by D'Avezac of a section of the Laon Globe. This facsimile shows Western Europe, the Mediterranean, Asia Minor, and northern Africa from the Red Sea to Cape Fortuna (Cape Verde)