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# A mine of maps

Cartographic material reveals  
Portuguese colonial fantasies

Márcio Ferrari

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Precious cartographic material has been given unrestricted visibility because of the work of a group of researchers from the University of São Paulo (USP). This group has organized the Digital Library of Historical Cartography with free online access at <http://www.cartografiahistorica.usp.br>. The website, the result of a concept developed by the Laboratory of Historical Cartography Studies (Lech), houses a collection of rare maps printed between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. With the plurality and speed of the Internet, the site makes cross-referencing, comparisons and interpretative keys possible. After all, a single map alone is not much use, says Iris Kantor, a professor at the History Department of the USP and one of the project's coordinators. The collection offers considerably more than geographical information; it also discloses how fantasies were created over time, as revealed by images of Brazil created abroad. The project was part of a

View of Brazil  
that reveals  
exploitation

# DESCRITTIONE DI TUTTO' L MONDO, SECONDO la pratica de' Marinari,

VNIVERSI ORBIS DESCRIPTIO AD VSVM NAVIGANTIVM.



Chi tratte  
dell'arte ma  
rinarica.



L'vno di que  
sta Tavola.

**Q**VESTA Tavola mostra la faccia di tutto' l Mondo accommodata alla pratica de' Marinari, per laqual pratica sarebbero da dirsi molte cose, ma perche di ciò ne sono da altri scritti interi volumi, quale è l'opera di Pietro di Medina, lo specchio de' Marinari di Giovanni Aurigario, le regole dell'arte del navigare di Pietro Nonio, e certe altre operette: rimetteremo alle fatiche loro quel studioso, che desidera d'essere ammestrato in cot'al pratica: contentandoci solamente di riferire qui poche cose, tanto più, che questa picciola Tavola può esser poco adoprata da' Marinari poiche ad essi bisogna una mappa di giusta, e conveniente grandezza, quale fu quella, che fabricò Gerardo Mercatore, prestantissimo Geografo del nostro tempo. Adunque la pratica di questa Tavola è tale. Qualunque volta, che'l Marinaro vuole partirsi da qualche luogo, e navigare à qualche altro, dee considerare tre cose per finire il suo viaggio: l'altrezza del Polo sì del luogo dal quale si parte, sì del luogo alquale arriva: la distanza del viaggio frà l'vno, e l'altro luogo: e finalmente l'habitudine c'hà, ò la regione nella quale piega il secondo luogo à rispetto del primo, che da ciò verrà in conoscenza del vento, ò del combo, che può

Previous page,  
World Map according  
to navigations,  
showing the Southern  
Continent, part of  
Geography by Claudius  
Ptolemaeus, edited  
between 1597 and  
1598.

On the side, Atlas  
sive *Cosmographicae  
Meditationes de Fabrica  
mvmdi et fabricati  
figvra*, produced in  
Amsterdam in 1606,  
showing the American  
continent in the two  
hemispheres, but  
without the connection  
with Asia.



major theme-related project called *Dimensões do Império português* [Dimensions of the Portuguese Empire], coordinated by Professor Laura de Mello e Souza with FAPESP support.

The collection was developed from two main sources. The first was a set of notes written over a period of 60 years by Admiral Max Justo Lopes, a leading expert on cartography in Brazil. The second source was the private collection of the Banco Santos, a bank that was under Brazil's guardianship during the intervention process in 2005 and that involved the assets of former banker Edemar Cid Ferreira. A court decision transferred custody of the former banker's collection to the Institute of Brazilian Studies (IEB) at the USP. This initiative was praiseworthy, as this collection, according to Iris Kantor, "was stored in very insecure conditions in a warehouse, with no concern about suitable storage." Approximately 300 maps were retrieved. It is widely known that the original private collection was significantly larger, but the locations of the remaining maps are unknown.

The first step entailed recovering and restoring the retrieved maps. These maps arrived at the USP "totally naked," and the initial work included such steps as identifying and dating the maps and establishing their authors. During 2007 and 2008, the Digital Reproduction Laboratory of the IEB researched, acquired, and

used the appropriate technology to reproduce the map collection in high resolution. Various attempts were made to achieve the desired accuracy of the colors and lines. The Information Technology Center, located at the USP's campus in São Carlos (Cisc/USP), then developed specific software that enabled the building of a database capable of interacting with the USP library's general catalog (Dedalus) and of collecting and transferring data from other Internet databases. An inspirational source for the researchers was British collector and graphic artist David Rumsey's website, which houses 17 thousand maps (<http://www.davidrumsey.com>). Another inspiration was the pioneering Virtual Historical Cartography Library of the National Library, a collection of 22 thousand digitized documents (<http://bndigital.bn.br/cartografia>). In the future, the USP's cartography collection will become part of the Digital Library of Historical Cartography. Priority has been granted to the maps of the Banco Santos collection because they do not belong to the university, and at any time, the court may request that they be returned to erase the bank's debts.

The Digital Library has "cartographic and bibliographic information, biographies, data of a technical and publishing nature, and explanatory entries that contextualize the production, circulation and appropriation process of cartographic images." "There are no naive maps," says



Dutch map based on Jean de Léry  
*Carte tres Curieuse*,  
 from 1719

Iris Kantor, indicating that this information must be obtained to understand what lies beneath the surface of the maps' geographical contours and toponymy. "Historians assume that all maps lie; manipulation is important information in any cartographic element."

Geopolitical and commercial interests of a given era and the interests of those who produced or ordered the maps were part of this manipulation. In the early 2000s, Historian Paulo Miceli from the State University of Campinas (Unicamp) was invited by Banco Santos to provide consulting services concerning how to organize the collection. He states that the first cartographic record of what is now known as Brazil was a map prepared by Spanish navigator Juan de la Cosa (1460-1510). The map is dated 1506 and shows "the demarcation line of the Treaty of Tordesillas, a very accurate portrayal of Africa, and, to the left, a tiny triangle depicting South America." "Brazil surfaced from out of a kind of fog of documents, conditioned, among other things, by the rigor of the Portuguese crown over the work of the cartographers, who were subject to the death penalty." Brazil's gradual "apparition" in the empire's geopolitical scheme is the topic of Miceli's post-doctoral thesis, appropriately titled *O desenho do Brasil no mapa do mundo* and scheduled for publication this year by the Unicamp publishing press. The title refers to *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (*Theater of the World*), written by the Flemish geographer Abraham Ortelius (1527-1598) and considered to be the first modern atlas.

Contrary to widespread belief, the main and practical function of these ancient maps was not to guide explorers and navigators. Until the nineteenth century, explorers and navigators used written scripts, or "nautical charts," written on parchment without concern for beauty or ambiguity. These nautical charts, perforated by compasses and other instruments, became wrappers of document files in cartographic collections," according to Miceli. "Maps were objects of ostentation and prestige, with ornamental and fruition value for noblemen and scholars," says Iris Kantor. "One of the treasures of the Vatican is its cartography collection." The nautical charts were handwritten, while maps were printed, which granted maps the status of special documents. The original metal plates, with alterations performed over a period of many years, lasted up to 200 years and were always in the hands of "families" of cartographers, publishers, and bookstore owners. Sometimes, these families were related by blood and were thus the heirs of said plates. Highly specialized studios also owned maps. Experienced cartographers did not travel but collected their information from "navigators who were often illiterate," according to Miceli. An example of the prestige attributed to cartography is the *Atlas maior*, produced by the Dutchman Willem Blauwe (1571-1638); decorated with gold ink, it was considered the most expensive book during the Renaissance.

A criterion of the Historical Cartography Digital Library is the search for "schools" of car-

tographers, including the French, Flemish, and Venetian schools. The basic knowledge of cartography originated from Portuguese navigators and cosmographers. Iris Kantor believes that the schools intermingle, so she plans to replace the word “school” with “style.” The team also plans to reconstruct the genealogy of map production for the corresponding historical period. The study of these documents includes identifying documents with voluntary errors as a counter-information effort, which Miceli refers to as “patriotic adulteration.” Examples of the latter are maps that incorrectly identify the location of natural resources, such as rivers, to benefit the Portuguese or the Spanish under the division of the Treaty of Tordesillas.

Evidence of cartography’s function as propaganda can be found on the map *Brazil*, which was created by the Venetian school in 1565 and illustrates the beginning of this article. Geographic accuracy is not a key feature of this map. “The toponymy is not outstanding, even though the entire coastline had already been named at that time,” says Iris Kantor. “This map was made for the laymen, perhaps for traders, as indicated by the boats with the crests of the French and Portuguese crowns. The map depicts the brazilwood trade, with no identification of political sovereignty. Brazil is shown as a region of free access. The portrayal of the indigenous people and their contact with the foreigners transmits cordiality and reciprocity.”

“The fact is that maps represent us,” says the USP professor. “For example, the study of post-independence Brazilian cartography calls our attention to a view of national identity based on a romantic, liberal and naturalist geographical culture, which represents the country as a geographical continuum stretching from the Amazon Region to the La Plata River. In those times, the idea of a national people was not that homogeneous. It is no coincidence that the men who declared the independence and designed the legal framework of our country were linked to the natural sciences, to cartography, etc. Geography was crucial in the creation of the national identity.”

A different example of the use of digital resources for the study of maps is being pursued at Unicamp and is derived from the project *Trabalhadores no Brasil: identidades, direitos e política*, coordinated by Professor Silvia Hunold Lara with FAPESP support. This study, *Mapas temáticos de Santana e Bexiga*, focuses on the daily life of urban workers from 1870 to 1930 (<http://www.unicamp.br/cecult/mapastematicos>). According to Professor Lara, one can reconstruct the daily lives of urban dwellers “without dissociating them from their mode of work and their claims for their rights.” ■

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