

Alessandro Zorzi's sketch maps (text)

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Slide 2. The codices

Alessandro Zorzi made at least six notebooks where he compiled letters and news about geographic discoveries, along with numerous sketches and comments.

The oldest one of these notebooks is kept at the city library of Ferrara (Biblioteca Comunale Ariostea II.10) and contains ten letters dated between 1501 and 1506 about voyages to the New World.

Another five notebooks were kept at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Florence (Magl. XIII, 80-84) but volume 82 was lost at some point after 1789. The best known of these manuscripts, and the one that was 'active' over the longest period of time, is volume 81, entitled "Alberico" and devoted to news regarding America. This volume will be the main focus of my talk.

The other volumes preserved at Florence cover news about other continents: East Indies (volume 80), northern and eastern Europe (volume 83) and Africa and Asia (volume 84).

The Ferrara notebook's sketches were published in 19th century but in a little usable manner;¹ first correct edition was in 1985 by Laura Laurencich-Minelli.² Codex Alberico's sketch maps have sporadically appeared in print,³ in particular the maps allegedly linked to Christopher or Bartholomew Columbus, but only in 2014 was a digital facsimile of the entire manuscript at last published. It is contained in a CD-ROM that accompanies the book *Vespucci, Firenze e le Americhe*.⁴ The main goal of this presentation is to give you a tour through these magnificent high-resolution images. To my knowledge, the other three codices are still unpublished.

Slides 3 and 4. Content and importance of Zorzi's codices

The Alberico Codex is a compilation of news about the New World, both printed and manuscript as you can see on this image, which shows two consecutive pages. The codex includes many marginalia – from one word to full-page drawings.

Zorzi's notebooks are important for several reasons. First of all, they contain transcriptions of several letters, reports and maps that are not extant in any other copy. Furthermore, they give

¹ Ferraro, Giuseppe. *Relazione Delle Scoperte Fatte Da C. Colombo, Da A. Vespucci E Da Altri Dal 1492 Al 1506*. Bologna: Romagnoli, 1875. <https://archive.org/details/relazioneellesc00ferruoft>

² Laurencich-Minelli, Laura. *Un "giornale" del Cinquecento Sulla Scoperta dell'America. Il Manoscritto Di Ferrara*. Cisalpino-Goliardica, 1985.

³ Most complete publication to date, but very difficult to find even in the best libraries, is Crinò, Sebastiano. "Schizzi Cartografia Inediti Dei Primi Anni Della Scoperta Dell' America." *Rivista Marittima* LXIV, no. 9 (November 1930): Supplemento.

⁴ Pinto, Giuliano, Leonardo Rombai, and Claudia Tripodi, eds. *Vespucci, Firenze E Le Americhe. Atti Del Convegno Di Studi Firenze, 22-24 Novembre 2012*. Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2014.

us a perspective about the geographic information that was available to a curious Venetian of the first third of the 16th century, and the marginalia give us hints about how Zorzi personally interpreted the news he received.

Zorzi's drawings show an interest in architecture, ethnography and of course geography. Many drawings of the first part of Codex Alberico are also found in the earlier Ferrara manuscript.

Slide 5. But who was A. Zorzi?

Alessandro Zorzi left his name in one of the texts of Codex Alberico. The first name is abbreviated Alexo. The last name is very difficult to read because a later hand amended it to 'Strozi'.

Zorzi's whereabouts are almost as obscure as this piece of text. We don't know much about him, other than he was a Venetian with a keen interest in geographical discoveries. Roberto Almagià considered him a cultivated man,⁵ whereas Laurencich-Minelli said he was just curious, with a broad but superficial culture.⁶ Perhaps both were right, they were just describing the same person at different phases of his life: youngish for the Ferrara manuscript and more mature for the Florence ones?

Zorzi's initial aim at compiling news in the Ferrara manuscript is unclear, but the later codices hint that Zorzi may have been planning to publish a compilation of voyages, illustrated with maps, perhaps similar in concept to what Giovanni Battista Ramusio eventually published in the 1550's.

Slides 6 to 8. Map of Cuba

After this introduction, I will now go on to highlight several sketch maps that Zorzi drew in Codex Alberico.

The first one is a map of Cuba, drawn on a page of book IV of the *Paesi nuovamente ritrovati*, published in 1507.⁷ The printed text narrates part of Columbus's second voyage.

A very similar sketch map is contained in the Ferrara manuscript, on a page of Angelo Trevisano's 1501 letter about Columbus's second voyage. Trevisano was translating from Pietro Martire d'Anghiera's draft version of the *Decades* and was in turn the source for the author of the *Paesi*. Zorzi's map of Cuba must therefore be earlier than 1507.

What is the source of this map? Laurencich-Minelli wrote that it is "probably derived from a Canerio or Cantino type chart".⁸ The sketch does indeed look similar to Cuba on the 1502 "Cantino chart", aside from the fact that the anonymous Portuguese author of that map called the island "Yssabella", not Cuba or Fernandina as Zorzi does. Did Zorzi have access to the

⁵ Almagià, Roberto. "Intorno a Quattro Codici Fiorentini E Ad Uno Ferrarese Dell'erudito Veneziano Alessandro Zorzi." *La Bibliofilia* XXX (1936): 313–47.

⁶ Laurencich-Minelli, op.cit. page 17.

⁷ *Paesi Nuovamente Ritrovati et Nuovo Mondo Da Alberigo Vesputio Florentino Intitolato*. Vicenza: Fracanzio di Montalboddo, 1507.

⁸ Laurencich-Minelli, op.cit. page 54, note 16.

original Cantino chart, which was sent from Portugal to the Duke in Ferrara? Or perhaps to one of the copies that were made of it, such as the Caverio chart?

Slides 9 to 11. Map of Hispaniola

Zorzi's Codex Alberico contains a sketch map of Hispaniola island, just one page before the sketch map of Cuba. It shows an unusual coastline shape, with a mountain range in the center and four rivers that cross the island from the mountains to the sea along the four cardinal directions. A very similar sketch exists in the Ferrara manuscript, illustrating the same fragment of Columbus's second voyage.

This map looks unlike any contemporary depiction of the island. It has been hinted that it may be based on an early map, drawn before Bartholomew Columbus explored the southwestern peninsula of the island around 1497.⁹ In this case, the Ferrara manuscript sketch would be a copy of the earliest known complete map of Hispaniola. However, I tend to think that this sketch is probably Zorzi's own creation, not a copy of an actual map but a mental reconstruction based on Trevisan's descriptions of the island's shape (which Martire described as a chestnut leaf), rivers and mountains ("trovono 4 fiumi, luno da una parte laltro da laltra, 3 delli quali discendevano da uno istesso monte" = "there are found 4 rivers, each from one side, 3 of which flow down from a same mount"). Zorzi's map is indeed very different from the earliest known depictions of Hispaniola, on La Cosa and Cantino charts.

Curiously, however, a look at an almost contemporary map made by Rosselli reveals a similarly amorphous outline for Hispaniola.

Slide 13. Isabela's church

In 1494 the Spaniards led by Christopher Columbus founded a town called Isabela in Hispaniola's north coast. This was the first permanent European settlement in the New World. The colonists built a number of buildings, including a church. Angelo Trevisan says so in the letter that Zorzi copied in the Ferrara manuscript, so Zorzi drew a church next to the text. A question similar to the one about the Hispaniola map arises: did Zorzi just use his imagination or did he base the drawing on some earlier depiction? If it were the case, as pointed out by Laurencich-Minelli, this would be the earliest and only image of the first European church in America. However, a look at other drawings of churches and buildings in Zorzi's manuscripts reveals that they all tend to look alike. In my opinion, such a drawing is more a conventional sign for 'church' rather than a copy of any actual architectural depiction.

Slides 14 to 18. Columbus letter's maps

I am now going to show the two most famous sketches of Codex Alberico. They are found in Zorzi's version of the Italian translation of Christopher Columbus's July 1503 letter from Jamaica, which was published in Venice in 1505.¹⁰

Slide 15. The first sketch is a map of the tropical regions of the known world. It extends from Brazil ("Santa Croce") in the west to the easternmost coast of Asia, where Zorzi has located several place names given by Columbus to the lands he discovered in his fourth voyage; for

⁹ Ibidem, page 50, note 2.

¹⁰ Bayuera Bressano, Constantio, trans. *Copia de La Lettera per Columbo Mandata a Li Serenissimi Re et Regina Di Spagna: De Le Insule et Luoghi per Lui Trouate*. Venetia: Simone de Louere, 1505.

example, “Beragna”, a mistaken copy of Columbus’s “Veragua”. It is hinted, but not shown, that Asia continues all the way to Brazil.

Slide 16. The second sketch focuses on the New World, giving a clearer view of its geography. The “Mondo Novo” (South America) is indeed connected to Asia by the recently discovered land. Hispaniola and Jamaica are ‘floating’ far away from the mainland whereas Cuba is missing or, according to some scholars, is believed to be a peninsula of Asia.

These two maps are quite famous because in the 19th century they were attributed to Bartholomew Columbus, the Admiral’s brother.¹¹ Bartholomew travelled to Rome in 1506 to lobby for his family’s rights and brought with him a map that Zorzi affirms to have seen. The scholars who first published Zorzi’s sketches assumed that Bartholomew’s map had been copied by Zorzi on Codex Alberico, and so these sketches were called “Bartholomew Columbus’s maps”. However, Almagià later did a more serious research on the issue and concluded that this could not be the case. Bartholomew’s map was likely limited to the Caribbean and Zorzi’s mention of it occurs in a different document of the codex.

Slide 17. A quite decisive argument for Almagià was that the earlier Ferrara manuscript already contains a similar sketch of the Asian coastline, illustrating the same *Letter from Jamaica*. Main difference is that in the Ferrara notebook the map is oriented with south at top. One recognizes for example the toponym “Beragna” in the Ferrara manuscript. The map here follows the text, which has the same form for this toponym. Furthermore, there is no mention of Bartholomew Columbus in the Ferrara manuscript, which as we saw must have been finished in 1506 or 1507.

Slide 18. I agree with Almagià that the most likely explanation is that Zorzi drew these sketch maps as an aide to understand the text next to it – for himself as well as for future readers. He clearly did this for another travel narrative he copied in the Ferrara manuscript: the *Mundus Novus* published in the name of Amerigo Vespucci. Always with south at top, in one page Zorzi graphically represented the distances sailed by Vespucci and in another page the latitudes he reported. That said, some specific features of the cartographic sketches in Codex Alberico may indeed have been updated with newer information brought by Bartholomew Columbus, including the mentioned map, as pointed out by several scholars.¹²

[Slides 19 to 22. Zuan Rames’s map](#)

Zorzi copied an Italian translation of a letter, dated 1519 and not known in any other copy, sent from Spain to Zuan (Juan) Rames, informing about Hernán Cortés’s first operations in Mexico. This is one of the earliest sources about the conquest of Mexico. We know nothing about Juan Rames or about the author of the letter but in 1520 Zorzi managed to copy (“tolto di grosso”) a map that we can see in this slide.¹³ Interestingly, Zorzi added a note comparing this

¹¹ Wieser, Franz R. von. *Die Karte Des Bartolomeo Colombo Über Die Vierte Reise Des Admirals*. Innsbruck: Wagner, 1893.

¹² Among others Nunn, George E. “The Three Maplets Attributed to Bartholomew Columbus.” *Imago Mundi* 9, no. 1 (1952): 12–22.

¹³ Laurencich-Minelli, Laura, and Cristina Mantovani. “La Lettera E La Carta Geografica Di Zuan Rames. Un Documento Trascurato Del Codice Alberico Sulla Conquista Del Messico.” *Bollettino Della Società Geografica Italiana* 12, no. 1 (1995): 11–22.

map to another map that he had seen, made by or sent to Zoan Baduer, which is lost too and of which nobody else has ever heard.

Slide 21. Spanish maps from these years are very rare, and one of the few examples, this chart made by Jorge Reinel, omits the Gulf of Mexico entirely.

Slide 22. The earliest extant map to show the Gulf of Mexico is this one, undated but believed to be from 1519. New cartographic information reached Venice really quickly those days.

[23 to 26. Map of Mexico](#)

For me, the most beautiful map in Codex Alberico is this one of Mexico City, called Temixtitan at the time. The city is shown as an island in the middle of a lake, with a large square in its center and bridges and boats connecting it to the mainland. To the south, the map shows Panuco river, with its mouth at the Gulf of Mexico. In the adjacent page, Zorzi drew a more detailed map of the region between the city and the sea.

The map is found in the middle of Zorzi's translation into Italian of the Latin version of Hernán Cortés's letter sent from Mexico in 1520. The Spanish conquistador wrote this letter before the events that led to the expulsion of his army from the city and a subsequent siege that devastated it. We know that Cortés included a manuscript map of the city with his letter, but it was not published by the first editors of the letter in Spain and is now lost. Cortés's map did however somehow find its way to Nüremberg, where it was included in the publication of a Latin translation of his letter in 1524.¹⁴ That text is the source that Zorzi translated.

Slide 25. The layout of the city in the Nüremberg map is quite similar to that of the one in Codex Alberico, although Zorzi's perspective makes it in my opinion more appealing to the eye. The Nüremberg editor also included a small map of the entire Gulf of Mexico.

Did Zorzi simply adapt the map from the Nüremberg edition? He did have the Latin text in front of him for the translation, but how come that Zorzi provided a lot of details about the land between the coast and the Aztec capital, which are missing in the printed map? Did he get it from some other manuscript version of the map? Or did he or some unknown artist just convert the map of the Nüremberg edition into a bird eye's perspective?

Slide 26. Just one more note on this Mexico city map. Several decades later, a similar map was included in volume 3 of Ramusio's *Delle navigationi et viaggi*.¹⁵ It is quite obviously derived from Cortés's map but with numerous errors and distortions. What I want to point out is that in this case Zorzi was a precursor to Ramusio, and we will see something similar in the next map.

[Slides 27 to 31. World map in trapezoidal projection, with south at top](#)

The last map of Codex Alberico is also the largest: extending over 8 pages, it shows the entire world in trapezoidal projection, with south at top. The trapezoidal projection means that

¹⁴ Cortés, Hernán. *Praeclara Ferdinandi Cortesii de Nova Maris Oceani Hyspania Narratio: Sacratissimo Ac Invictissimo Carolo Romanorum Imperatori Semper Augusto, Hyspaniarum &c. Regi Anno Domini MDXX. Transmissa*. Translated by Pietro Savorgnano. Norimberga: Fridericum Peypus, 1524.

¹⁵ Ramusio, Giovanni Battista. *Terzo Volume Delle Navigationi et Viaggi*. Venetia: Stamperia de' Giunti, 1565.

meridians are straight lines that converge from the equator towards each pole. This world map was drawn between copies of letters dated November 1523 (as you can see on the first sheet of the map) and October 1524, but the map may have been drawn at a later date.

The map includes the geographical discoveries reported by the Magellan – Elcano expedition, unsurprisingly given that the main accounts of this expedition are included in the codex's text. The depiction of Mexico connects with the maps we just saw. Zorzi also cites a “geographia” made or owned by Venetian ambassador Ambrogio Contarini of which we have no other information.

The sheets overlap, so overall more than 360 degrees of longitude are drawn.

Slide 30. In the map of the Indian ocean I can't help but remind the map of Africa included in Ramusio's compilation several decades later. Were the trapezoidal projection and the south at top orientation just in fashion at the time or did Ramusio get inspiration from one of Zorzi's sources – or perhaps directly from Zorzi's sketches?

Slide 31. In the last sheet, Zorzi added a map of the northern regions in equidistant polar projection.

32. Final remarks

Zorzi managed to copy maps that are now lost (Zuan Rames, Ambrogio Contarini?) or extremely rare (Cantino, Cortés's map of Mexico), which makes the historical value of Codex Alberico extremely high.

Zorzi's main goal when copying or creating cartographic sketches was to make sense of and to clarify the information contained in the documents he transcribed. The positioning of maps as marginalia was not random but followed an intentional program to 'illustrate' the travel accounts that Zorzi had compiled.

The painstaking compilation of travel accounts, the trapezoidal world map with south at top and even the views of Mexico city suggest to me (as already put forward by Almagià) that Zorzi had in mind, at least in the latter part of his life, an editorial project similar to what Giovanni Battista Ramusio managed to start publishing in the 1550's.

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Questions & Answers

After the presentation, there was no time for questions but a couple of members of the Brussels Map Circle later asked them privately. I leave my answers below.

Q: Did Zorzi know Ptolemy's *Geography*?

A: Definitely yes. For example his sketches of Indian Ocean coastlines contain many Ptolemaic toponyms and Ptolemaic conceptions like an oversize Taprobana Island. [For more information see pages 331-332 of Gautier Dalché, Patrick. "The Reception of Ptolemy's Geography (End of the Fourteenth to Beginning of the Sixteenth Century)." In *Cartography in the European Renaissance*, edited by David WOODWARD, 3:285–364. The History of Cartography. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2007.]

Q: What reference meridian did Zorzi use in the Zuan Rames map?

A: Difficult to say with certainty because the longitude scale is crude and ranges only from 275 to 305 degrees so quite a lot of extrapolation is required to draw the 0 = 360 degree meridian. In general, the zero meridian seems to lie somewhere to the west of the Cape Verde islands.