Amerigo Vespucci and how his name appeared on the maps

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Seminar

There is great debate regarding who rightly deserves credit for discovering America. American school children are taught that Christopher Columbus was the discoverer of the land. However, many believe that Amerigo Vespucci is the one who deserves the credit, and indeed, his name appears on the maps. Explaining the name is simple enough; it can be traced to Martin Waldseemuller treatise and map from 1507.

I seek to elucidate the rationales behind naming the continents “America.” While Amerigo Vespucci is not the man credited with the discovery of the New World, he is the man whose name the continents bear. I will discuss how the humanist movement and Vespucci’s successful self-promotion as a humanist, and careful, accurate descriptions capturing humanist proprieties helped secure his name on the maps. Amerigo Vespucci included a great deal of detail in his letters along with very high quality and selection in this detail. This level of detail established Vespucci as more than just an adventurer or explorer but also a geographer. The high quality of his geographical coordinates enabled the creation of the new maps. He also gave anthropologically rich descriptions of the inhabitants and their ways. In addition to the detail that Vespucci provided, there was a change in the way people thought about authority and what they used to perceive as the undoubted truth. In addition the humanist mapmakers were culturally primed for new assessments that overturned the traditional authorities or ideas such as the geographical views of Ptolemy.

**Origin of “America”**

As for the actual naming of America, it was originally placed on a map that was done in 1507 by Martin Waldseemuller. The map portrays Ptolemy and Amerigo Vespucci on the map, seemingly saying that Vespucci was a modern day Ptolemy time when Waldseemuller took Vespucci’s name off the map and did not want to give him credit. Waldseemuller placed him behind Columbus due to the fact that he learned Vespucci did not take his first voyage. This, however, did not come with any hard evidence seeing as if he “had an authoritative report discrediting Vespucci, he surely would have made this information available.” [[1]](#footnote--1)

Many accepted the name America; however, “there had been a long history of attacks on Vespucci as a dishonest self-promoter who had fooled the world, and also of praises of the man as the worthiest of heroic discoverers.”[[2]](#footnote-0) This may have also influenced Waldseemuller in his decision to remove “America” from his map. In his biography of Vespucci, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto also points out the self-promoting aspect of Vespucci’s personality. Fernandez-Armesto points out a time when Vespucci “joined [Alonso de] Hojeda’s voyage in an unknown capacity. He wrote about it afterward as if he were sole commander of the fleet. Of course, this was untrue.”[[3]](#footnote-1) While Waldseemuller decided his map would not bear the name of Vespucci, other cosmographers adopted the name and stuck with it and, as Johnson believes, “the eventual survival of the name depended on its being accepted by the Flemish and Dutch, who would dominate cartographic publishing at the end of the sixteenth and throughout the seventeenth century.”[[4]](#footnote-2) Of those Flemish cartographers, Gerhard Mercator is one of the better-known mapmakers who put America on his 1538 world map.[[5]](#footnote-3)

**State of the Question**

There has been many works written on the topic of Vespucci and the naming of America, providing multiple reasons as to why he was the deserving man. In *Renaissance German Cosmographers ad the Naming of America,* Christine Johnson wrote, “the true ‘discoverer’ of America is therefore the person who enabled the recognition and acceptance of the fundamental newness of the New World.”[[6]](#footnote-4) While Columbus did arrive at the New World first, he did not know he had found an entirely new mass of land and believed until his dying breath that he had reached Southern Asia. It is entirely possible, and believed that others such as St. Brendan of Ireland and the Vikings were there before both Columbus and Vespucci. In fact, it is known that the Vikings did in fact inhabit the new world. However, there was no concept of a new world or global geography. If they did know where they were, it involves documentation, letters, and information, all of which we have from Vespucci that helped scholars make the decision to name this land “America.” This means that just landing there is not enough. “Setting foot on these new shores was only the first, and the least important, step,”[[7]](#footnote-5) no matter who it was that did it first.

Christine Johnson discusses the idea of how the discovery of America not only opened up “maps to new lands, also opened up new intellectual possibilities.” [[8]](#footnote-6) This idea is an example of the humanist thinking that was part of the naming of the America. The way of thinking during the humanist movement was a much different one from that of Scholasticism. Scholasticism the idea of teaching from textbooks and had a more scholarly sense to it, hence the name. Humanism derived more from the idea of thinking, reasoning, and challenging, or not just accepting everything. The act of discovery is more of a mental than physical activity and that is indeed one of these intellectual insights. While one obviously must physically discover something to get credit for it, it is more important to know that you made a discovery. “In the words of the Vespucci biographer Frederick Pohl, ‘which did more to enlarge man’s conception of the earth.’”[[9]](#footnote-7) In this case, it is clearly Vespucci. It has he who concluded it was a New World while Columbus was under the assumption he was south of Asia. That idea would have done nothing, and actually had a negative affect in the long run on the concept of the earth and maps, as it would have been wrong. This alone should be enough of an argument for Vespucci to have his name on the map. It, however, is not that easy. One still must examine the letters that Amerigo wrote about his voyages, which I shall do.

As previously stated, after placing the name on the map in 1507, Waldseemuller himself retracted it. Christine Johnson believed that the name was a good choice because of they way Vespucci appealed to his fellow humanists and because his writings were “extensive and cosmographically precise reports from an author bearing the name of the prestigious and well-connected Vespucci family,”[[10]](#footnote-8) similar to one of the argument that I am explaining. The naming of America is in part because Vespucci was extremely exact and accurate with his reports in his letters. As for the survival of the name and how it stuck, it was “cemented in place at precisely the point when the early popularity of Vespucci was being overtaken by a stream of larger publications about the new discoveries.”[[11]](#footnote-9) The name, while off Waldseemuller’s map, made its way onto others very quickly. Peter Apian’s 1520 world map[[12]](#footnote-10) credits Vespucci with the discovery, in 1497, and named the land “America.”[[13]](#footnote-11) One of the reasons that it stayed on maps and such was because there was a need to label the lands and since it had already been done by Waldseemuller, it was more convenient to stick to his naming than come up with a different one or even simply putting “New Land.”[[14]](#footnote-12) She continues to say that America, not only survived because there was no good reason to change everything in the books and maps, but it prevailed because “its origin and adoption in regions where cosmographical and cartographical publishing flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”[[15]](#footnote-13)

Franz Laubenburger takes a similar approach to how he views the naming of America. He states that even if Waldseemuller did not coin the term, he had a great deal of influence after he placed the name on his 1507 map. There is also debate if he was single-handedly the one to come up with this, which is more what Laubenburger is referring to here. That is because Matthias Ringmann worked with Waldseemuller and published the *Cosmographiae Introductio* in which the name “America” also appeared alongside that of the map that Waldseemuller produced.

In his article *Italy and the Invention of America,* Thomas J Cachey Jr. gives his belief as to why the New World bear Vespucci’s name. He references *Utopia* and how Thomas More reported “Vespucci’s voyages ‘were universally read and spoken about’ throughout Europe in Latin. These spread Vespucci’s fame, even to the point that a provincial humanist, Waldseemuller, named the New World after Amerigo and the name stuck.”[[16]](#footnote-14) Essentially, Cachey Jr. is attributing the popularity of Amerigo’s writing to the naming of America. The reason that these were so popular was because they were translated into Latin for more people to read. In addition to the fact that Europeans could physically read it because of the language, the form that Vespucci wrote it in had to have added to the popularity of his letters. Vespucci had just discovered a great new land and people would obviously want to read about it. He also gives such illustrious detail that people can enjoy knowing more about this founding and help place the new land in the history books and maps.

**Vespucci’s Detailed Geographical Descriptions**

Amerigo Vespucci offers specific detail about his whereabouts in his letters. He goes through his every movement from different islands and then inland. Yes, the geographic specificity that Vespucci wrote with had a great deal to do with why the mapmakers decided to name the landmass after him. However, it also gave him another great discovery, a discovery that is not well known at all and is a major point in the Western Hemisphere. In his first letter, Vespucci writes that he was trying to “round a cape of land which Ptolemy calls the Cape of Cattigara, which is near the Sinus Magnus…sailing southward along the coast, we saw two very large *rios,* or rivers, issuing out of that land, one running from west to east, some four leagues (or sixteen miles) wide; the other, running from south to north, three leagues wide.”[[17]](#footnote-15) Having then sailed fifteen leagues down this river, it is safe to say that he was the discoverer of what was the Amazon River. If it had not been for his acute description of the area and surrounding areas, it would have been more difficult for mapmakers to locate such an important river. He is able to give a location saying that he “sailed so far south through the Torrid Zone that we found ourselves beneath the equator, with both the poles at the edge of the horizon; and we moved six degrees beyond it.”[[18]](#footnote-16) In addition to giving coordinates, he also gives his location by providing coordinates from land that he is familiar with, such as the Canary Islands which he mentions quite frequently in his letters, and then logging how many leagues or miles they had travelled and in which direction. He also combines the two strategies for mapping in a way. He mentions the new world and its location in his *Four Voyages* letter by saying, “we sailed until, at the end of thirty seven days, we came to a land that we judged to be mainland; which lies to the west of the Canary Islands, about a thousand leagues beyond the inhabited west and within the Torrid Zone, for we found the North Pole to rise over its horizon sixteen degrees, and it was seventy five degrees farther west than the Canary Islands.”[[19]](#footnote-17) Vespucci presents detailed description of his location by saying both the coordinates with the degrees and also saying how far west the land lies from the Canary Islands. This gives cartographers very much to work with as they attempt to successfully place this newly found landmass.

Vespucci also gets especially technical with calculations attempting to perfectly locate his exact longitude position. To show how his calculations regarding longitude and latitude, he explains saying

“If twenty-four hours equal 360 degrees, and such was my longitude from the meridian of Cadiz. For, giving 16 2/3 leagues to every degree, I reckoned that we were 1,366 2/3 leagues (or 5,466 2/3 miles) west of Cadiz. And I give 16 2/3 leagues to each degree because, according to Ptolemy and Alfraganus, the earth rotates 24,000 miles or 6,000 leagues: which, divided by 360 degrees, makes each degree equal 16 2/3 leagues. I verified this calculation many times with the pilots’ charting, and found it to be sound and true.”[[20]](#footnote-18)

With these calculations tested multiple times and verified by his fellow pilots, it was only sensible for the mapmakers of the time to consider what Vespucci claimed as legitimate. In addition, Vespucci seemed very confident in his findings and being such a well-known and trusted explorer, it would make sense to believe his coordinates and calculations were accurate. Using this, he was able to convey how far south and west he had travelled. With this helping Vespucci figure out his location status, mapmakers could also use this to pinpoint where they believed he was. He stated that computing longitude is more difficult than latitude and he spent many long nights observing the moon and planets to figure it out, saying he shortened his life by ten years but it was well worth it.[[21]](#footnote-19) All of these details that Vespucci provided were of great help to cartographers.

Waldseemuller was one of the main mapmakers that took these calculations to heart and worked with them to create a map that was the first to show the new world and labeled “America.” In his *Cosmographiae Introductio,* he gave intricate detail of maps and the shapes and tools that he used on them. With the detail that Vespucci presented, he decided, “the fourth part of the earth we have decided to call Amerige, the land of Amerigo we might even say, or America because it was discovered by Amerigo.”[[22]](#footnote-20) In addition to naming the land after Amerigo, Waldseemuller even spoke of him as an equal to Ptolemy. By stating that this part, the fourth part, of the world was a section of the world that was “barely known to Ptolemy”[[23]](#footnote-21) implies that it is something that Vespucci knows more about, which he indeed does. Waldseemuller feels that Vespucci is not only worthy of having the land named after him, but also is put on the same level as the great Ptolemy, which he emphasizes with his displaying of him alongside Ptolemy on his map. By doing this, people who viewed the map would be influenced by the fact that those two were side by side and look at them as the two great geographers that were able to decipher what the world looked like and where land lied. Vespucci is put in the same light as Ptolemy as a more modern version as he assisted in making people aware of new discoveries and new landmasses that people did not know existed.

The importance of Vespucci and his proper location calculations were of the utmost importance to mapmakers. He made their jobs much easier by giving these coordinates or enriched descriptions of the path he took on his voyage. Ability to make these maps goes even beyond the naming of the land given to Vespucci. It was vital for the maps to be made and made accurately and that is thanks to Amerigo Vespucci to make this possible. As Joanne van der Woude states, “maps reveal how people perceive space, property, and identity, and as such, narrate or even ‘plot’ literary and cultural developments.”[[24]](#footnote-22) The making of these maps was crucial to the further advancement of geography and the way people viewed the world and, as I said, Vespucci deserves the credit for this feat.

**Vespucci and the Natives**

In just about every letter he wrote, Vespucci wrote every detail he came across describing the inhabitants of this newfound world. In his first letter, written to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de’ Medici, he writes about the natives, their looks, and the way they went about their lives with certain customs. He described them as beardless and naked, “just as they issued from their mothers’ wombs so they go about until their dying day.” [[25]](#footnote-23)He writes about his first voyage in his *Four Voyages* letter also, continuing to be fascinated with the natives and how they go about. He described them as people “of medium stature, very well proportioned.”[[26]](#footnote-24) This was a topic of importance and interest at this time. The desire to achieve an accurate portrayal of the human body was something of great interest. Around 1513, Leonardo da Vinci accomplished this feat by his drawing of *The Vitruvian Man*. While this was after the discovery of America and it would be difficult to argue that Vespucci and his descriptions had a great affect on da Vinci, it shows what was important to the humanists at this time and how they envied his way of writing and attention to extreme detail.

Vespucci continued to discuss how well proportioned the inhabitants of the new world were. In addition to their “big, solid, well-formed and well-proportioned bodies,”[[27]](#footnote-25) Vespucci claimed he could not tell the difference between mothers and virgins which even more so emphasizes the fact that humanists in the Renaissance sought after the idea of the perfect human being. Not only does Vespucci feel the need to mention this, it implies that in Europe it was clear which women had given birth. Instead, in this world that nobody had ever known of before, it was possible that “those who had bourne children could not be distinguished from the virgins by the shape or tautness of their wombs, and this was true too of other parts of their bodies, which decency bids me pass over.”[[28]](#footnote-26) This is even more incredible because they would live their lives naked and not hide this with cloths. The Europeans looked at this as impressive seeing the conditions of the society one would think would be far inferior to that of the civilization they are accustomed to in Europe.

While this did not happen until somewhat later, there is a connection between American and the human body that is literal. “By the 1570s, allegorical personifications of America as a female nude with feathered headdress had begun to appear in engravings and paintings, on maps and title pages, throughout Western Europe.”[[29]](#footnote-27) There is an engraving that was done around 1580 by Theodor Galle that shows how highly regarded Vespucci’s letters were and not to just the mapmakers. While it is not in focus or by any means the main idea of the illustration, natives huddled over a fire cooking severed human limbs are visible portraying the cannibalism Vespucci wrote about in his letters. There are also many animals describing what Vespucci claimed to have seen. In his *Mundus Novus* letter, Vespucci gives a brief description saying, “There are many kinds of forest animals there, especially lions, bears, countless snakes, and other dreadful and ill-formed beasts.”[[30]](#footnote-28) If you look at the animals in this depiction, it is not always clear what exactly they are. Galle seems to have put more emphasis the “ill-formed beasts” line when it came to the animals than he did any other. There seem to be what look like horse and bear like creatures, but it is not totally clear seeing that they are not proportional to what we know horses and bears to look like. It was a completely different world from what people were used to and Galle shows this with the strange animals.

**Life in the Torrid Zone**

While writing about the geographical terms and locations in his *Cosmographie Introductio,* Waldseemuller also brought anthropology into the equation. This is in relation to something that Vespucci discovered towards the beginning of his voyage to the New World. Amerigo disproved what many philosophers had originally thought about the possibility of life in the Torrid Zone. They had believed that life was not possible because of the great heat but Vespucci “found the contrary to be true: the air is fresher and more temperate in that region than outside it, and so many people live within it that they outnumber those outside it.”[[31]](#footnote-29) The description of the natives was also beneficial to mapmakers, science, and essentially the everybody because this proved that there could be life in this area. The area around the equartor here that Vespucci discovered is far different from that of the land in Africa that was too hot to be inhabited. Not only did they find out that people could live there, which was previously unknown, the fact that there was life there and were able to go about naked and get color from the heat helps give a general where the land would be located on a map and what the climate is like there. While geographical points would be more helpful, this too can be of use to mapmakers and more importantly, to the new news that people can not only live, but thrive in the climate of the New World.

Waldseemuller also uses his expertise in the subject and information he gathered from Vespucci while going over the five celestial zones. Waldseemuller seems to take this with great importance as after he speaks of how there was “a very large part of the earth that for all time was unknown, but has been recently discovered by Amerigo Vespucci,” he says how he was going to include the “four voyages translated from the Italian language into French and from French into Latin.”[[32]](#footnote-30) The fact that Waldseemuller decided to include the letter in his book makes it seem as if he wants to give Vespucci the most publicity and recognition as he can. Not only was Vespucci the discoverer of the New World, he disproved many great philosophers.

**Observation over Authority**

As I stated earlier, the fact that people started to think on their own instead of just believing what they previously believed to be true played a role in the naming of America. For so long, people thought that the only land was what they already knew about. Part of that was due to the style of education being Scholasticism. Instead of focusing on authority, many started to favor observation over it. Humanism, the new movement that was taking place during this time, put more of an emphasis on writing and thinking instead of just accepting what they previously believed to be true. Vespucci himself brings up one of the more prominent examples of this new concept of overturning or questioning authority. Vespucci “concluded that this was continental land – which I esteem to be bounded by the eastern part of Asia, this being the beginning of the western part.”[[33]](#footnote-31) This was only the beginning of what Vespucci began to realize. Vespucci first concluded that this new land mass was continental land and not an island. He then realized that what he found we might be rightly “called a new world.”[[34]](#footnote-32)

Instead of assuming Columbus was correct about the land that he had just discovered and it was merely islands off the coast of Asia, or part of Asia’s mainland, Vespucci took it a step further. The most obvious example of this is clearly the fact that Vespucci realized he discovered a new continent. Originally, ancient authorities believed “that there is no continent south of the equator.”[[35]](#footnote-33) Vespucci could have accepted the previous authorities and believed he had just discovered some new islands. However, if that were the case he would not have been the true discoverer. His title as discoverer hinges on the fact that he realized what others did not: these were not just islands off the coast of Asia. It would by no means have been outrageous for Vespucci to believe this as well. However, this was a movement about questioning older authorities and realizing new and different possibilities.

**Admiration of Vespucci**

In addition European humanists admired Vespucci’s assessment of the situations he encountered. They very much admired his judgment of the land, natives, and geographical coordinates; however, another aspect that was admired was the fact that he could communicate with the natives. Vespucci claimed to be able to communicate in his first letter, after his discovery of their cannibalism. “And this we verified in the many regions where we found such people, for many times we saw the ones and heads of some of those they had eaten, nor do they deny it, and their enemies also told us of them, living as they do in continual fear of them.”[[36]](#footnote-34) This suggests, and actually straight up says, that Vespucci spoke with them as they “told” him about the cannibalistic culture. While Vespucci could be exaggerating, as he tended to do, it is also possible he actually made an effort to communicate and understand. This would add to the fact that people during this time wanted to understand more and admired what Vespucci was able to do. They admired him so much that these people also decided to rethink previous thoughts and concluded that Ptolemy was not entirely correct. This shows that people were willing to accept that previous policies were not always the right policies or doctrines.

**Conclusion**

There always has been and always will be debate over the true discoverer of America. There will also be debate over the name of America. However, they coincide with each other. The true discoverer of America is Amerigo Vespucci. He realized what he had sailed upon and knew it was something new. He may not have been the first to have the idea to sail west, but he made the most of it while doing it and his voyages west were the most important made during the age of discovery.

Amerigo Vespucci made it easy for cosmographers to decide to name the new land after him. He gave such detailed explanations and descriptions of what mapmakers needed or wanted to make the new maps. If he were the one to realize this was a new place and made it possible to map it, why name it after anyone else? Vespucci not only realized all of this, he transformed the world and the way people look at it in both a literal way, in regards to how they physically see it, and mental way, in the way they now view the possibility of new things and not just what they previously knew. Literally, Vespucci changed the maps. While he was not the mapmaker, he was the one who provided the information to change them. He also changed the way people thought as they started to accept new things such as possibilities of new lands or ideas that were doubted in the past. Vespucci changed everything that people believed and brought us into the modern world.

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