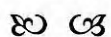


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The Voyages of John Cabot

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The Voyages of
John Cabot

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INTRODUCTION

JOHN CABOT, the Venetian sailor who took the first English ship across the Atlantic, was not a writer like Columbus, and consequently our knowledge of his projects and his achievements is limited to what is derived from the reports of other men who knew him or his son and from certain official documents. In general our material may be classified into: (a) English official documents, (b) reports derived from John Cabot himself, and (c) reports or records derived more or less directly from Sebastian Cabot. The materials in *a* and *b* are harmonious; those in classes *b* and *c*, on the other hand, are practically irreconcilable. The result of this conflict of testimony has been to discredit Sebastian Cabot and to lead many scholars to believe that he tried to ascribe to himself what his father did. Other critics reluctant to bring so serious a charge against a man who held honorable positions in Spain and later in England believe that the material in class *c* relates to the second voyage — that of 1498, and that by a mistake it was in the minds of the narrators confused with the voyage of 1497. For a presentation of all the original material the reader may be referred to H. HARRISSE, *John Cabot the Discoverer of North America, and Sebastian his Son* (London, 1896), and to G. E. WEARE, *Cabot's Discovery of North America* (London, 1897). G. P. WINSHIP, *Cabot Bibliography* (London, 1900), gives a complete guide to the Cabot literature. For a brief account of the voyages and of the Cabot question see E. G. BOURNE, *Spain in America* (New York, 1904), pp. 54-63. The most important recent monograph is H. P. BIGGAR, *The Voy-*

ages of the Cabots and of the Corte-Reals, in *Revue Hispanique*, tome X. (Paris, 1903).

The material presented here consists of the private letters of two Italians sojourning in London in 1497–1498, and the official despatch of the junior Spanish ambassador at the English court.

E. G. B.

THE VOYAGES OF JOHN CABOT

LETTER OF LORENZO PASQUALIGO TO HIS BROTHERS ALVISE AND FRANCESCO, MERCHANTS IN VENICE ¹

THE Venetian, our countryman, who went with a ship from Bristol to find new islands, has returned, and says that 700 leagues hence he discovered mainland, the territory of the Grand Cham (*Gram Cam*).² He coasted for 300 leagues and landed; he did not see any person, but he has brought hither to the King certain snares which had been set to catch game, and a needle for making nets; he also found some cut trees, wherefore he supposed there were inhabitants. Being in doubt he returned to his ship.

He was three months on the voyage, and this is certain, and on his return he saw two islands³ but would not land,

¹ This letter was received in Venice on September 23, 1497, and a copy of it was incorporated by Marino Sanuto in his diary. It was first brought to light by Rawdon Brown in his *Ragguagli sulla Vita e sulle Opere di Marin Sanuto*, etc. (Venezia, 1837). It was published in English in a generally accessible form in 1864 in the *Calendar of State Papers, Venetian Series*, I. 262, edited by Rawdon Brown. The translation here given is a revision of Brown's version. Another translation is printed in Markham, *The Journal of Columbus* (London, 1893).

² This reference to the Grand Cham probably indicates familiarity with Columbus's views of what he had discovered as expressed in his letters to Santangel and to Sanchez; see above, p. 268.

The landfall of John Cabot has been the subject of prolonged discussion. Labrador, Newfoundland, and Cape Breton are the principal places advocated. Of late years, owing to the vigorous and learned arguments of Dr. S. E. Dawson there has been an increasing disposition to accept Cape Breton on Cape Breton Island as the most probable location. See Winship, *Cabot Bibliography*, for the literature.

³ The words "to starboard" have been inserted at this point in all English translations. Biggar has pointed out that the words *al dreto* so translated are Venetian dialect for *addietro*, which is an alternate form for the more

so as not to lose time, as he was short of provisions. The King is much pleased with this. He says that the tides are slack and do not flow as they do here.

The King has promised that in the spring our countryman shall have ten ships, armed to his order, and at his request has conceded him all the prisoners, except traitors, to go with him as he has requested. The King has also given him money wherewith to amuse himself till then,¹ and he is now at Bristol with his wife, who is also Venetian, and with his sons; his name is Zuam Talbot,² and he is styled the great admiral. Vast honor is paid him; he dresses in silk, and these English run after him like mad people, so that he can enlist as many of them as he pleases, and a number of our own rogues besides.

The discoverer of these things planted on his new-found land a large cross, with one flag of England and another of St. Mark, by reason of his being a Venetian, so that our banner has floated very far afield.

London, 23 August 1497.

FIRST LETTER OF RAIMONDO DE SONCINO, AGENT OF THE DUKE OF MILAN, TO THE DUKE³

. . . Also some months ago his Majesty sent out a Venetian, who is a very good mariner, and has good skill in discovering new islands, and he has returned safe, and has found two very large and fertile new islands; having likewise discommon *indietro*, back. The earlier translators thought *al dreto* equivalent to *al dritto*, on the right. *Al tornar al dreto* means simply "in going back."

¹ "August 10, 1497: To hym that founde the New Isle, 10£." British Museum, Add. MSS. No. 7099, 12 Henry VII., fol. 41. From Weare, *Cabot's Discovery of North America*, 124.

² So in Sanuto's text. This form indicates perhaps that Pasqualigo had only heard the name and not seen it written.

³ This letter was found in the archives of the Sforza family in Milan. The manuscript is apparently no longer extant. There are two somewhat divergent texts. The one translated here is the one sent by Rawdon Brown to the Public Record Office in London. Both are printed in Weare, *Cabot's Discovery*, pp. 142-143. The translation given here is by Rawdon Brown as printed in the *Calendar of State Papers, Venetian Series*, I. 259-260.

covered the Seven Cities,¹ 400 leagues from England, on the western passage. This next spring his Majesty means to send him with fifteen or twenty ships.

SECOND LETTER OF RAIMONDO DE SONCINO TO THE DUKE OF MILAN²

Most Illustrious and Excellent My Lord:—

Perhaps among your Excellency's many occupations, it may not displease you to learn how his Majesty here has won a part of Asia without a stroke of the sword. There is in this kingdom a Venetian fellow, Master John Caboto by name, of fine mind, greatly skilled in navigation, who seeing that those most serene kings, first he of Portugal, and then the one of Spain, have occupied unknown islands, determined to make a like acquisition for his Majesty aforesaid.³ And having obtained royal grants that he should have the usufruct of all that he should discover, provided that the ownership of the same is reserved to the crown, with a small ship and eighteen persons he committed himself to fortune; and having set out from Bristol, a western port of this kingdom, and passed the western limits of Ireland, and then standing to the northward he began to sail toward the Oriental regions, leaving (after a few days) the North Star on his right hand; and,

¹ The Seven Cities was a legendary island in the Atlantic. They are all placed and named on the legendary island of Antilia on the map of Grazioso Benincasa in 1482. See E. G. Bourne, *Spain in America*, pp. 6 and 7, and Kretschmer, *Die Entdeckung Amerikas*, Atlas, plate 4. Columbus reported in Portugal that he had discovered Antilia (see p. 225, note 1); hence the deduction either of John Cabot or of Raimondo that the region explored by Cabot, being far to the west in the ocean, was the same as that visited by Columbus. Cf. also art. "Brazil, Island of," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

² This letter is preserved in the Archivio di Stato in Milan. It was first published in the *Annuario Scientifico del 1865* (Milan, 1866). It was first printed in English in Winsor, *Narrative and Critical History of America*, III. 54-55 (Boston, 1884), in the chapter by Charles Deane, entitled "The Voyages of the Cabots." This translation was revised by Professor B. H. Nash of Harvard University and is given here with only one or two slight changes.

³ In this passage Cabot's immediate impulse is attributed to the voyages of Columbus and their results.

having wandered about considerably, at last he struck mainland, where, having planted the royal banner and taken possession on behalf of this King, and taken certain tokens, he has returned thence. The said Master John, as being foreign-born and poor, would not be believed if his comrades, who are almost all Englishmen and from Bristol, did not testify that what he says is true. This Master John has the description of the world in a chart, and also in a solid globe which he has made, and he shows where he landed, and that going toward the east he passed considerably beyond the country of the Tanais.¹ And they say that it is a very good and temperate country, and they think that Brazil-wood² and silk grow there; and they affirm that that sea is covered with fishes,

¹ No satisfactory explanation of this can be given. Bellemo, in the *Raccolta Colombiana*, pt. III., vol. I., p. 197, interprets this sentence to mean that Cabot showed on the globe the place he had reached on the voyage and then to that statement the remark is added, referring to earlier journeys, "and going toward the east he has passed considerably beyond the land of the Tanais." Tanais is the Latin name for the Don, and at the mouth of the Don was the important Venetian trading station of La Tana. Cf. Biggar, *Voyages of the Cabots and Corte-Reals*, pp. 33-34, note. Biggar dissents from this interpretation. I would offer the conjecture that "the land of the Tanais" stands for the land of Tana. In Marco Polo the kingdom of Tana, on the western side of India, is described as powerful and having an extensive commerce. See Marco Polo, pt. III., ch. xxx. Raimondo, if unfamiliar with Marco Polo, would understand La Tana by Tana and then naturally assume that "the country of Tana" was a slip for "country of the Tanais." Cabot on the other hand might have heard of Tana when in Mecca without getting any very definite idea of its location except that it was far to the East in India. The phrase "toward the East," like the one earlier in the letter "toward the Oriental regions," is used of the ultimate destination, not the direction, and of the destination as a known spot always thought of in Europe as "the East."

² *El brasilio* for *el legno brasilio*. Brazil wood was an East Indian red wood imported into Europe. It is the *Caesalpina sappan*. Its bright color led to its being compared to glowing coals, *brazia*, *brascia*, etc., Eng. brazier, and then to its being called, as it were, "glowing coals wood," *lignum brasile*, *lignum brasilium*, etc., and in Italian most commonly *brasile* and *verzino*, a popular corruption. Heyd, *Histoire du Commerce du Levant au Moyen-Age*, II. 587. On the transference of the name of this wood to a mythical island in the Atlantic and then, after the discoveries, to the present country of Brazil which produced dye-woods similar to *Brasilio*, see Yule's art. "Brazil, Island of," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and Winsor, *Narrative and Critical History*, I. 49-51.

which are caught not only with the net but with baskets, a stone being tied to them in order that the baskets may sink in the water. And this I heard the said Master John relate.

And the aforesaid Englishmen, his comrades, say that they will bring so many fishes that this kingdom will no longer have need of Iceland, from which country there comes a very great store of fish which are called stock-fish.¹ But Master John has set his mind on something greater; for he expects to go farther on toward the East² from that place already occupied, constantly hugging the shore, until he shall be over against an island, by him called Cipango, situated in the equinoctial region, where he thinks all the spices of the world, and also the precious stones, originate;³ and he says that in former times he was at Mecca, whither spices are brought by caravans from distant countries,⁴ and that those who brought them, on being asked where the said spices grow, answered that they do not know, but that other caravans come to their homes with this merchandise from distant countries, and these [caravans] again say that they are brought to them from other

¹ *Stochfissi*. The English word "stockfish" Italianized. Of the English fish trade with Iceland, Biggar gives a full account, *Voyages of the Cabots*, pp. 53-62, making frequent citations from G. W. Dasent, *Icelandic Annals*, IV. 427-437. He quotes also a passage from the *Libell of English Policy*, 1436, beginning:

"Of Yseland to wryte is lytille nede
Save of stokfische;" etc.

² *El Levante*, here again as a known place, oriented from Europe. His destination, not the direction of his route.

³ In Cabot's mind the Cipango of Marco Polo is confused with the Spice Islands. Marco Polo says nothing of the production of spices in his account of Cipango. The confusion is probably to be traced to Columbus's reports that he had discovered Cipango and that the islands he had discovered produced spices.

⁴ From 1425 Jiddah on the east shore of the Red Sea rapidly displaced Aden as an emporium of the spice trade where the cargoes were transhipped from Indian to Egyptian vessels. Jiddah is the port of entry for Mecca, distant about forty-five miles, and Mecca became a great spice market. See Heyd, *Histoire du Commerce du Levant au Moyen-Age*, II. 445 *et seq.*, and Biggar, *Voyages of the Cabots and Corte-Reals*, pp. 31-36. Biggar quotes interesting passages on the Mecca trade from *The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema*, Hakluyt Society (London, 1863).

remote regions. And he argues thus, — that if the Orientals affirmed to the Southerners that these things come from a distance from them, and so from hand to hand, presupposing the rotundity of the earth, it must be that the last ones get them at the North toward the West;¹ and he said it in such a way, that, having nothing to gain or lose by it, I too believe it: and what is more, the King here, who is wise and not lavish, likewise puts some faith in him; for (ever) since his return he has made good provision for him, as the same Master John tells me. And it is said that, in the spring, his Majesty afore-named will fit out some ships, and will besides give him all the convicts, and they will go to that country to make a colony, by means of which they hope to establish in London a greater emporium of spices than there is in Alexandria; and the chief men of the enterprise are of Bristol, great sailors, who, now that they know where to go, say that it is not a voyage of more than fifteen days, nor do they ever have storms after they get away from Hibernia. I have also talked with a Burgundian, a comrade of Master John's, who confirms everything, and wishes to return thither because the Admiral (for so Master John already entitles himself)² has given him an island; and he has given another one to a barber of his from Castiglione-of-Genoa, and both of them regard themselves as Counts, nor does my Lord the Admiral esteem himself anything less than a Prince. I think that with this expedition there will go several poor Italian monks, who have all been promised bishoprics. And, as I have become a friend of the Admiral's, if I wished to go thither I should get an archbishopric. But I have thought that the benefices which your

¹ *I.e.*, a place far enough east from Arabia to be thought of as west from Europe. After making all due allowances one may be excused for feeling some misgiving whether John Cabot actually ever was in Mecca. While some of the spices and eastern commodities were brought overland by caravan from Ormuz or Bassora, the greater part came by water to Jiddah. At Jiddah he could hardly have failed to get fairly accurate information as to where the spices came from. That one who had seen that great commerce should have remained so much in the dark as to conclude that spices came from northeastern Asia is strange enough.

² In imitation of Columbus.

Excellency has in store for me are a surer thing; and therefore I beg that if these should fall vacant in my absence, you will cause possession to be given to me, taking measures to do this rather where it is needed, in order that they be not taken from me by others, who because they are present can be more diligent than I, who in this country have been brought to the pass of eating ten or twelve dishes at every meal, and sitting at table three hours at a time twice a day,¹ for the sake of your Excellency, to whom I humbly commend myself.

Your Excellency's

Very humble servant,

RAIMONDO.

London, Dec. 18, 1497.

DESPATCH TO FERDINAND AND ISABELLA FROM
PEDRO DE AYALA JUNIOR AMBASSADOR AT THE
COURT OF ENGLAND, JULY 25, 1498²

I THINK your Majesties have already heard that the King of England has equipped a fleet in order to discover certain islands and mainland which he was informed some people from

¹ English social joys in the fifteenth century did not appeal to the more refined Italians. An interesting parallel to this comment of Raimondo de Soncino is to be found in Vespasiano's life of Poggio. "Pope Martin sent him with letters to England. He strongly condemned their life, consuming the time in eating and drinking. He was used to say in pleasantry that oftentimes being invited by those prelates or English gentlemen to dinner or to supper and staying four hours at the table he must needs rise from the table many times to wash his eyes with cold water so as not to fall asleep." Vespasiano da Bisticci, *Vite di Uomini Illustri del Secolo XV*. (Florence, 1859), p. 420.

² The original is in the archives at Simancas partly in cipher. It was discovered and deciphered by Bergenroth and published in the *Calendar of State Papers, Spanish Series*, I., pp. 176-177. The Spanish text was published by HARRISSE, *Jean et Sébastien Cabot*, pp. 329-330, and in WEARE, *Cabot's Discovery*, pp. 160-161. Bergenroth's translation is given here, carefully revised. The contents of this letter were briefly summarized in a despatch to the Catholic sovereigns by Dr. Puebla, their senior ambassador, which was transmitted at or about the same time with that of Ayala. The Puebla despatch, which contains nothing not in the Ayala despatch, can be seen in Weare, p. 159.

Bristol, who manned a few ships¹ for the same purpose last year, had found. I have seen the map which the discoverer has made, who is another Genoese, like Colon [and?]² who has been in Seville and in Lisbon, asking assistance for this discovery. The people of Bristol have, for the last seven years, sent out every year two, three, or four light ships (*caravelas*), in search of the island of Brazil and the seven cities,³ according to the fancy of this Genoese. The King determined to send out [ships], because, the year before, they brought certain news that they had found land. The fleet consisted of five vessels, which carried provisions for one year. It is said that one of them, in which another Fai [Friar?] Buil⁴ went, has returned to Ireland in great distress, the ship being much damaged. The Genoese continued his voyage. I, having seen the route which they took, and the distance they sailed, find that what they have found, or what they are in search of, is what your Highnesses already possess since it is, in fine, what fell to your Highnesses by the treaty with Portugal.⁵ It is expected that they will be back in the month of September. I inform your Highnesses in regard to it. The king of England has often spoken to me on this subject. He hoped to derive great advantage from it. I think it is not further distant than four hundred leagues. I told him that, in my opinion, the land was already in the possession of your Majesties; but, though I gave him my reasons, he did not like it. Because I believe that your Highnesses will presently receive information in regard to all this matter, and the chart or map which this man has made, I do not now send it; it is here and it, according to my opinion, is false, in order to make it appear that they are not the said islands.

¹ In this Ayala would seem to have been misinformed. Cf. pp. 423, 425.

² The "and" is not in the original, but is supplied by all the editors. It is not absolutely certain that it belongs there. If it does, the passage implies that Cabot had recently been in Seville and Lisbon to enlist interest in his second voyage.

³ This information is not elsewhere confirmed. On Brazil and the Seven Cities, see p. 426, note 2, and p. 425, note 1.

⁴ One Friar Buil went with Columbus on his second voyage.

⁵ The treaty of Tordesillas, June 7, 1494; see p. 323, note 3.