

## The “Discovery” of America

### The View from Europe

## Did Columbus discover America?

- This question usually leads to theories of “alternative” discoverers -- Phoenicians, Vikings, the Chinese, Egyptians, etc.
- Eviatar Zerubavel, a sociologist at Rutgers, has turned this question in a different direction:
- When did Europeans *mentally* discover America?
- Or, in other words, when did it become clear that they were looking at something entirely new?
- The answer is complex, but Zerubavel suggests that it took at least three centuries for the Americas to be recognized for what they were as separate continents, and hence the discovery is not an “event” but a process.

## The Globe before Columbus

- No one (or at least no one who could read, and probably very few others) prior to Columbus regarded the earth as flat.
- The question was rather one of how land was related to water on the globe.
- The assumption, based on the records of ancient Greek and Latin texts as well as more recent travels (such as that of Marco Polo), was that all land formed essentially one continuous landmass, divided into three “continents,” surrounded by ocean.



Martellus World Map of 1489

## 1492 and following:

- With Columbus’ voyages, and those of others, a host of different views arose regarding what, exactly, was the destination of ships which sailed west across the Atlantic. Most could be placed into three categories:
  1. The far coast of Asia or “India” (as in the previous map), filled with a previously unknown people. Few held this beyond Columbus.
  2. A “new world” -- a separate set of islands, which may have been any of a number of “lost lands” of ancient texts.
  3. A new area not necessarily detached from the old landmass -- possibly another, previously unknown, section of Asia.
- At the time, Columbus’ belief that he was in Asia was doubted not because of what he found there as much as because others knew that his calculations for the circumference of the Earth were off. (The circumference of the Earth, not its shape, was what was in dispute in Columbus’ day.

## 2. The New World:

- Others, notably influenced by Amerigo Vespucci quickly asserted that what was “out there” was a truly new landmass.
- Many widely read pamphlets were published under Vespucci’s name (some of which he actually wrote) about his “four” voyages between 1497 and 1504 (one of which we know he made) to America.
- Of his expedition to South America in 1501-02, Vespucci wrote that he became convinced that what he saw was an entirely new landmass, not known to the ancient Greeks, hence a “New World.”
- The various Vespucci tracts, whether genuine or not, spread throughout Europe.
- The impression given by these tracts was that there was a truly new, and entirely strange, land to the West, unlike anything in the known world.



Waldseemüller's map of 1807



Ortelius' Map of the Americas, 1570

## A Big “HOWEVER”

- **There was a great deal more information in the Vespucci tracts than Vespucci himself could have gathered in his fairly limited experience in the Americas.**
- **Much in these tracts was purely invented, embellishments based upon what was, even in Vespucci's own writing, an embellished account. (To please his patron, Lorenzo d' Medici.)**
- **Anthony Grafton, a historian at Princeton, has shown that much of the embellishments in these tracts is based upon older texts such as the Greek Herodotus and the fictional *Travels of John Mandeville*.**
- **Both of these writings played on a literary fascination with the mystery of strange peoples and unknown lands.**

## Conclusions:

- (1) The “realization” of a new continent was largely based on fiction.
  - (2) Whatever *was* genuine certainly did not offer much in the way of proof.
  - (3) Many saw the embellishments for what they were and did not fully buy into the “new world” idea.
  - (4) The connections between the Vespucci writings and ancient Greek accounts of “lost lands” such as those described by Herodotus, or the “Atlantis” of Plato led to the conclusion that the Americas were not a new landmass, but a forgotten one.
- Was America the remains of a lost civilization? Was it the Biblical land of Nod, which lay “East of Eden?” (Gen. 4:16) Was it a completely new land, but not a ‘surprise’ because Herodotus and others had suggested that more lands were out there? There was a lot on the table.
- (5) Many did not fully accept the “novelty” of the Americas.

## The “Big Asia”

- **Another common position was to see the lands to the west as a previously unknown extension of Asia.**
- **The “discovery” of the Pacific Ocean by Balboa in 1513, and the proof that this was a large body of water which came with Magellan in 1520-21, did not mean that Asia and America were separate.**
- **It would not be until the 18th century that Europeans travelling East from Russia would establish that the continents were not connected.**
- **(The “single landmass” theory which had been around since Ptolemy (100-170 c.e.) had a very long life.)**



Edward Wright's World Portolan, 1599



Gastaldi and Pagano World Map, 1550

## Some Implications of the “Big Asia”

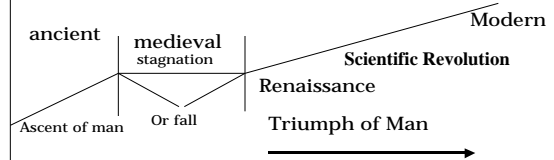
- Columbus’ basic understanding of what he had done remained intact -- he united west and east.
- The potential for an overland route to China from the American coast was often considered.
- The native peoples of the Americas were still often considered as a subset of Asian civilization. Thus:
- In 1576 Martin Frobisher labeled Baffin Island, in Northeastern Canada, “Asia.”
- In 1634 Colonists in New England were debating whether their colony bordered the land of the Tartars.
- When, in 1634, Jean Nicolet explored Lake Michigan inland as far as Wisconsin he landed wearing a silk robe, with the expectation that he might be met by Chinese officials.

## Conclusion:

- More than a century after Columbus, and possibly not until the Russian expeditions, America was not necessarily regarded as distinct from the landmass of the Old World.
- When America was “discovered” for what it actually *is* remains an open question.
- Europeans turned to ancient texts to figure-out, as much as possible, what they were encountering in the West.
- It was “new” to all Europeans to some extent, but they went to great lengths to accommodate their old theories (scientists still operate this way.)
- The variety of ways in which America was perceived greatly affected how Europeans saw the native peoples of the Americas.

## The Myth of Progress:

In the course of the Enlightenment and the early 19th century a new triumphalist scheme of history arose:



## Repristinators vs. “Futurists”

“Back to the..	“good old days”	... “are yet to come”
Get back to the values preserved in the old canon of texts.	Positive change	Leave the flawed past behind, build something on better, new, principles.
Are what “made us great”	The old texts and authorities	Produced an America which is an oppressive place to live and which oppresses others.