

**A SIXTEENTH CENTURY  
PORTUGUESE REPORT CONCERNING AN EARLY  
JAVANESE WORLD MAP**  
*RELATÓRIO PORTUGUÊS DO  
SÉCULO XVI DESCREVE MAPA-MÚNDI ANTIGO  
DE ORIGEM JAVANESA*

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*In the sixteenth century, there were numerous voyages of discovery in the oceans of the world, expanding European understanding and influence. These explorations, and in particular the knowledge they created, have tended to overshadow other ventures into the unknown. Not just the Europeans, but other cultures as well, navigated the seas and accumulated geographical information, putting together their own ideas about the distribution of the lands and seas around the globe. Arab and Asian seafarers plied the oceans in trade and exploration, and created maps and geographical texts.*

*These maps and texts, however, are not as numerous as a scholar might wish. The Asian maps, particularly early ones, are few in number, and these are virtually all Chinese and Korean creations, world maps based on traditional religious concepts of a circular landmass. There are few maps based on actual navigation. But an early sixteenth-century Portuguese document gives a brief description of a Javanese map, which apparently showed much of the world. It also depicted the routes of the navigations of the Chinese and other Pacific peoples. The map itself has been lost, but we read of it in a letter from the Portuguese admiral Afonso de Albuquerque to his king, Dom Manuel, dated 1 April 1512.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Java, Portuguese, Brazil, Pacific, Afonso de Albuquerque, navigation, map, chart, letter, terra incognita.*

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The recent anniversary of Columbus's voyages focused the world's attention on European accounts of the famed navigator's feats. Spanish texts, particularly those of Las Casas, are widely available and provide us with ample material on the initial European expeditions to the New World. Prior to the time of Columbus, there were other ventures out into the oceans by the Europeans, with navigations along the coasts of Africa by the Portuguese, expeditions to the various Atlantic islands of Madeira, the Canaries, Cabo Verde etc., and, later, voyages to India and the Far East. These, too, are reasonably well documented in maps and royal charters of the period. However, this relative abundance of European cartographic and textual material has at times allowed us to overlook non-Western materials concerning early exploration. These alternative sources provide us with new insights into other

peoples conceptions and knowledge of the oceans. There are numerous Chinese and Korean world maps, for example, showing a depiction of the world far removed from the classical Western traditions of Ptolemy and the medieval *mappaemundi* (Nakamura, 1947 and McCune, 1977).

Early navigations, furthermore, were not restricted by any means to the European peoples. Arab and Chinese seafarers sailed in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans, as well as the smaller seas. However, these Eastern explorations, and Asian cartographic creations, are rarely mentioned in any early European sources. The two traditions seem to have evolved quite separately. Each set of cartographic cultures seems to have had little knowledge of the other, at least until the arrival of the Jesuits in China (Kaikkonen, n. d.).

One early sixteenth century Portuguese document, however, does provide a brief mention of a Javanese map, which apparently showed much of the world as well as the paths of the navigations of the Chinese and Gores (inhabitants of Formosa [Taiwan] and the Ryukyu [Liu-Kiu, or Loochoo] archipelago). We read in a letter from the Portuguese admiral Afonso de Albuquerque to Dom Manuel, dated 1 April 1512, that the admiral is sending the king:

“...hum pedaço de padram que se tirou duma grande carta dum piloto de jaoa, a qual tinha ho cabo de bonoa esperança, portugall e a terra do brasyll, ho mar rroxo e ho mar da persia, as ilhas do cravo, a navegaçam dos chins e gores, com suas lynhas e caminhos dereytos por omde as naos hiam, e ho sertam, quaees reynos comfynavam huns cos outros: parece me, senhor, que foy a melhor cousa que eu nunca vy, e voss alteza ouvera de folgar muyto de ha ver; tinha os nomes por letra jaoa, e eu trazia jao que sabia ler e esprever; mamdo esse pedaço a voss alteza, que francisco rodriguez empramtou sobre a outra, domde voss alteza poderá ver verdadeiramente os chins domde vem e os gores, e as vossas naos ho caminho que am de fazer pera as ilhas do cravo, e as minas do ouro omde sam, e a ilha de jaoa e de bamdam, de noz nozcada e maçãs, e a terra delrrey de syam, e asy ho cabo da terra da navegaçam dos chins, e asy pera omde volve, e como daly a diamte nam navegam: a carta pincipall se perdeo em froll de la mar: co piloto e com pero dalpoem pratiquey ho syntir desta carta, pera lá saberendar Rezam a voss alteza; temde este pedaço de padram por cousa muyto certa e muyto sabida, porque he a mesma navegaçam por omde eles vam e vem: mingua lhe o arcepedego das ilhas que se chamam celate, que jazem amtre jaoa e malaca.”

Translation:

“...a piece of a chart, taken from a large chart of a Javanese pilot, containing the Cape of Good Hope, Portugal, and the land

of Brazil, the Red Sea, and the Sea of Persia, the Clove Islands (*i. e.*, Spice Islands), the navigation of the Chinese and the Gores, with their rhumbs and direct routes followed by the ships, and the hinterland, and how the kingdoms border on each other. It seems to me, Sire, that this was the best thing I have ever seen, and that Your Highness would be very pleased to see it; it had the names in Javanese writing, but I had with me a Javanese who could read and write. I send this piece to Your Highness, which Francisco Rodrigues traced from the other, in which Your Highness can see where the Chinese and Gores come from, and the course your ships must take to the Clove Islands [*i. e.*, Spice Islands], and where the gold mines lie, and the islands of Java and Banda, of nutmeg and mace, and the land of the King of Siam, and also the end of the land of the navigation of the Chinese, the direction it takes, and how they do not navigate farther. The main chart was lost in the *Frol de la Mar* (sunk in a storm in December of 1511). With the pilot and Pero de Alpoim I discussed the meaning of this chart, in order that they could explain it to Your Highness; you can take this piece of chart as a very accurate and ascertained thing, because it is the very navigation by which they come and go. The archipelago of the islands called Celate, which lies between Java and Malacca, is missing.”

This complete letter has been published in Raymundo Antonio de Bulhão Pato (Lisbon, 1884) and in *Documentos da Torre do Tombo* (Lisbon, 1892). This translation is from *Portugaliae Monumenta Cartographica*, 1:80. The letter is interesting evidence of extensive voyaging in the eastern seas, and demonstrates the sophistication of Javanese cartography — something of which, alas, we have far too few examples.

This letter has also caused some debate concerning what it tells us about the lost map. Cortesão rejects the hypotheses of Ferrand and Pereira, who believe this passage shows that the Javanese knew of Brazil in the fifteenth century (Cortesão, 1935; *Portugaliae Monumenta Cartographica*; Pereira, 1919; Ferrand, 1918). He states that it is hardly strange that Brazil should appear on the map, as the Portuguese had known of its existence for some time by then, adding that he sees no reason to date it in the fifteenth century. The Javanese cartographer, he says, probably “had simply seen some Portuguese chart and copied what was new to him (*Portugaliae Monumenta Cartographica*, 1:80)”. In other words, the Javanese perhaps had a map showing the eastern part of the world well charted, based on local navigation and information, and then he added Portugal, Africa, and Brazil, working from a Portuguese chart.

This is certainly plausible, and the process of copying and adding to charts is not at all unusual. Indeed, in this same letter, Albuquerque says that Francisco Rodrigues has traced part of the map, and it is this tracing which is being sent to the king. However, certain aspects of Albuquerque's letter seem to argue against the Javanese map's being simply a copy of a Portuguese chart, with additions. First of all, Albuquerque himself nowhere makes such a claim. And why, moreover, would he write to the king in such a tone of surprise and wonderment if this were no more than a copy: "pareceme, senhor, que foy a milhor cousa que eu nunca vy" ("It seems to me, Sire, the best thing I have ever seen")? Is he simply surprised that a Javanese could make such a good copy? This seems unlikely.

Why, too, would a copy have left out the Celate Islands, of which it is clear the Portuguese had knowledge and which would have appeared on the supposed 'Portuguese original'? Rather, it seems that Albuquerque is implying that the (purely Javanese) chart is quite impressive in its completeness and accuracy, and that this is just one small lacuna. The fact that the chart's toponyms are in Javanese would also seem to argue against its being a simple copy. Furthermore, Albuquerque says that the chart displays the routes followed by the Chinese and the Gores, and that it is "a very accurate and ascertained thing, because it is the very navigation by which they come and go". It seems unlikely that a Javanese cartographer would have simply taken a Portuguese chart, copied it, and added the routes of the Chinese and Gores; in addition, Albuquerque's assertion that it is "a very accurate and ascertained (*sabida*) thing" implies that the chart is based on navigation, not another map. Even if we assume that the eastern portion of the map was purely Javanese, and that the part showing the Cape of Good Hope, Portugal, and Brazil was taken from some Portuguese chart, we are still left with the question of how the Javanese cartographer put these two pieces together in terms of scale, coastal outlines, etc. Did he take the Portuguese portion and reconstruct it according to Javanese cartographic methods? How would he have known how to integrate it in terms of scale, especially for the more distant regions of Portugal and Brazil? We are left with many questions. Pereira notes that:

"(A) enumeração das terras mencionadas nesta passagem da carta ... parece ter sido feito em presença do mesmo padram; comtudo nessa enumeração não se observa uma determinada ordem, nem seguindo os rumos, nem seguindo as costas dos mares" (Pereira, 670). Translation: "(The) enumeration of the lands mentioned in this passage of the letter ... seems to have been done in the presence of this same chart [discussed in the letter]; nonetheless,

in this enumeration one does not note any definite order, neither one following directions, nor one following the coasts of the seas.”

However, one notes that the letter first speaks of the Cape of Good Hope, Portugal, and Brazil, thus following an east to west direction. Then, perhaps turning to the other half of the chart, Afonso de Albuquerque lists the Red Sea and the Sea of Persia in the Middle East and then, moving eastwards, he mentions the chart’s portrayal of the Spice Islands (the Moluccas). The image we are left with is an extensive map going from the Atlantic coasts of Brazil all the way to the islands of the East. If our ‘reconstruction’ of the Javanese map is correct, it would be evidence against Javanese voyages to Brazil.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This would support Cortesão’s arguments, but he himself does not discuss this issue.

If the Javanese had in fact navigated to Brazil, it is more likely that they would have followed a Pacific route. Thus, the South American lands would appear in the eastern portion of their chart, and display the western coasts of that continent. The chart which Albuquerque seems to be examining has no such depiction, as he mentions no coasts or lands beyond the eastern oceans.

One other statement in Afonso de Albuquerque’s letter as to what this chart shows brings us to another interesting account of an ocean voyage: “...e asy ho cabo da terra da navegacam dos chins, e asy pera omde volve, a e como daly a diamte nam navegam”. Translation: “...and also the end of the land of the navigation of the Chinese, and the direction it takes, and how they do not navigate farther”. What this refers to is not exactly clear; perhaps there was a legend on the map, in addition to depictions of the routes of the Chinese navigators, which spoke of limits to their knowledge of those seas; that legend might be what said “how they do not navigate farther”, The phrase “end of the land of the navigation” is more problematic; perhaps here Albuquerque is describing how a coast trailed off into terra incognita. But he gives no indication of where this is on the map.

We are left with a frustratingly incomplete picture of the Javanese map. The survival rate of old maps is low, and this one too is a victim of time. Afonso de Albuquerque’s description gives us some clues as to the layout and scope of the Javanese work. But perhaps most important is the fact that Albuquerque’s letter clearly demonstrates early European interest in the cartographic and navigational knowledge of another culture.

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No século XVI, várias viagens de descobrimento expandiram a influência e o reconhecimento europeus. Essas expedições marítimas, e em particular o conhecimento que geraram, ofuscaram

outras aventuras pelo desconhecido. Outros povos navegaram pelos oceanos, acumularam informações e organizaram suas próprias idéias sobre a distribuição de terras e mares. Navegadores árabes e asiáticos criaram mapas, cartas náuticas e textos geográficos expondo suas descobertas. Esses mapas, no entanto, não são tão numerosos. Os asiáticos, particularmente os mais antigos, são poucos e quase todos originários da China e Coréia, e baseavam-se em conceitos religiosos tradicionais e na idéia de um grande território em forma circular. Há poucos mapas atuais. Mas um documento português do século XVI traz uma breve descrição de um mapa antigo de origem javanesa que, aparentemente, mostrava muito do mundo. Também descreve as rotas de navegação dos chineses e outros povos do Pacífico. O mapa, propriamente, foi perdido, mas há uma análise a seu respeito em uma carta do almirante Afonso de Albuquerque para seu rei, dom Manuel, datada de 1<sup>a</sup> de abril de 1512.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Java, portugueses, Brasil, Pacífico, Afonso de Albuquerque, navegação, mapa, cartas náuticas, terra incógnita.

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In response to a request by our journal's board, Admiral Max Justo Guedes, director of the Brazilian Navy's Documentation Center and a scholar well versed in nautical charts from the past, has selected a number of navigational maps drawn up by Francisco Rodrigues at the same time and covering the same region referred to by the author of this article. Published at Livro de Francisco Rodrigues (c. 1513, Bibliothèque de la Chambre des Députés, Paris), these maps are reproduced and captioned below, along with an explanatory note.

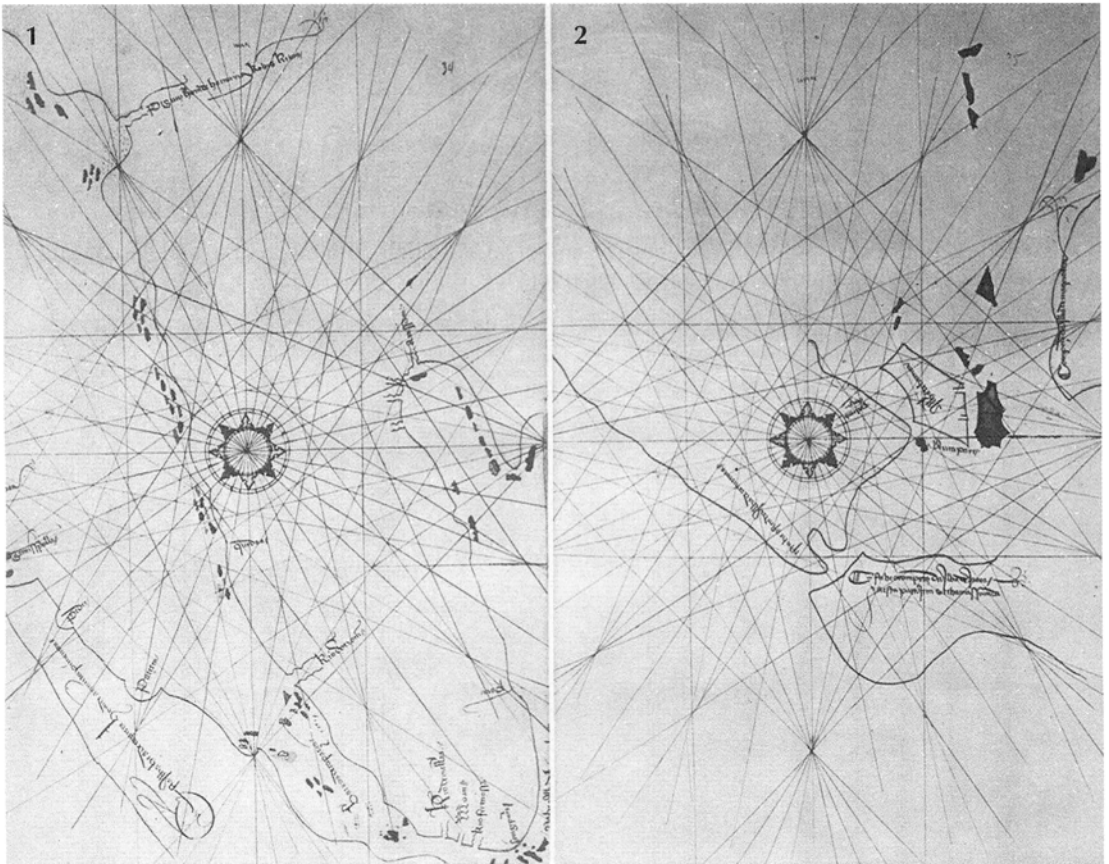
**Editor's Note**

As the governor Afonso de Albuquerque stated in a letter to king Dom Manuel in 1512, Francisco Rodrigues was a "very learned young man" who knew well how to draw up navigational charts. He traveled about the Orient in the early part of the second decade of the sixteenth century and was pilot of the first Portuguese expedition sent to the much-coveted Moluccas Islands; it is also known that he did a great deal of navigating in the Indian Ocean, including the Red Sea.

Francisco Rodrigues's skill in drawing up navigational charts prompted him to seek information from pilots native to those seas and to endeavor to adapt the charts they used to the norms employed by Portuguese navigators, and by European navigators in general. The source of the charts illustrating this text — *Livro de Francisco Rodrigues* — reflects the results achieved by this pilot.

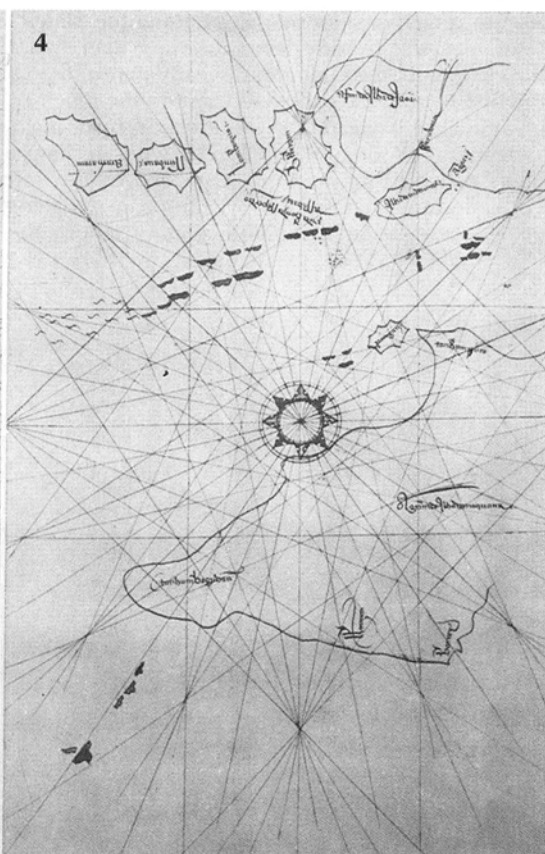
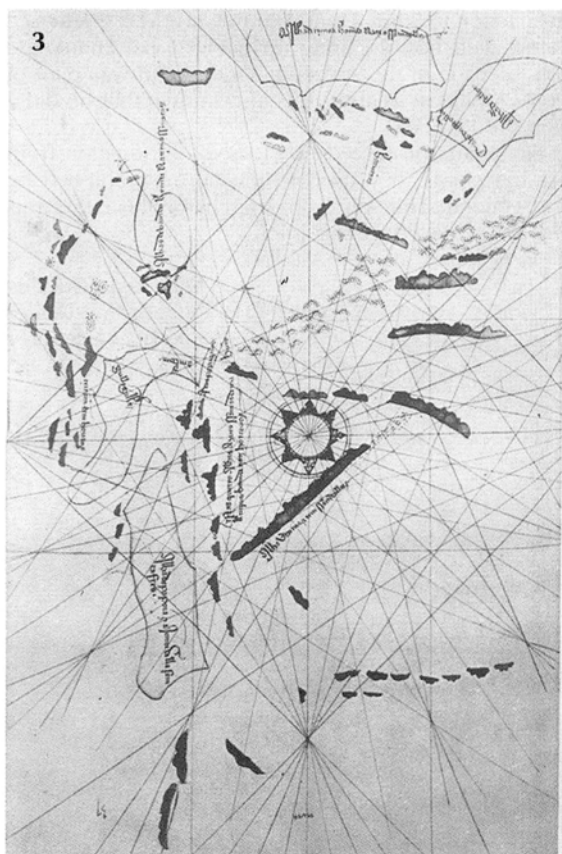
**Max Justo Guedes**

Director, Documentation Center  
Brazilian Navy



1 - Malay Peninsula and the northern part of Sumatra.

2 - Eastern end of Sumatra, western end of Java, southwestern end of Borneo, and Banga Island.



3 - Eastern and northern coast of Borneo, eastern end of Java, Madeira, Bali, Lombok, and Sumbawa.  
 4 - Eastern part of the East Indies archipelago, including the Moluccas.