

Prima Tavola, Ramusio - Gastaldi, 1563



Ramusio published this "upside down" map in volume 1 of the three volume *Delle Navigazioni et Viaggi*. This book included the travel accounts of Marco Polo and Magellan. The first version of this map was printed from a woodblock and first appeared in the 2nd edition in 1554.

This is a milestone map. It is the first printed map of Africa correctly to locate and show all of Madagascar. It is named S. Lorenzo Isola. The name Isola de S. Lorenzo was given by Diogo Dias, the Portuguese navigator who first landed there in 1500 on the feast day of St. Lawrence. The map is also the first to show evidence of Portuguese settlement in West Africa: Lamina (El Mina), the Portuguese fort in present day Ghana – see below.



The map is also the first to identify the chief seaport of the ancient Kingdom of Monomatapa. This port is Cefala, now Nova Sofala in present day Mozambique. It was a large port at the mouth of the Sofala River; it was reputed to be able to accommodate 100 ships, but it has silted up due the deposit of topsoil after significant upstream deforestation. The Portuguese captured the town in 1505; all that remains of the former town are ruins – see in the image below.



Vasco da Gama's companion, Thomé Lopes, identified Sofala with the dynasty of the queen of Sheba, ruler of the Biblical Ophir, Great Zimbabwe, which was the capital of Monomatapa.

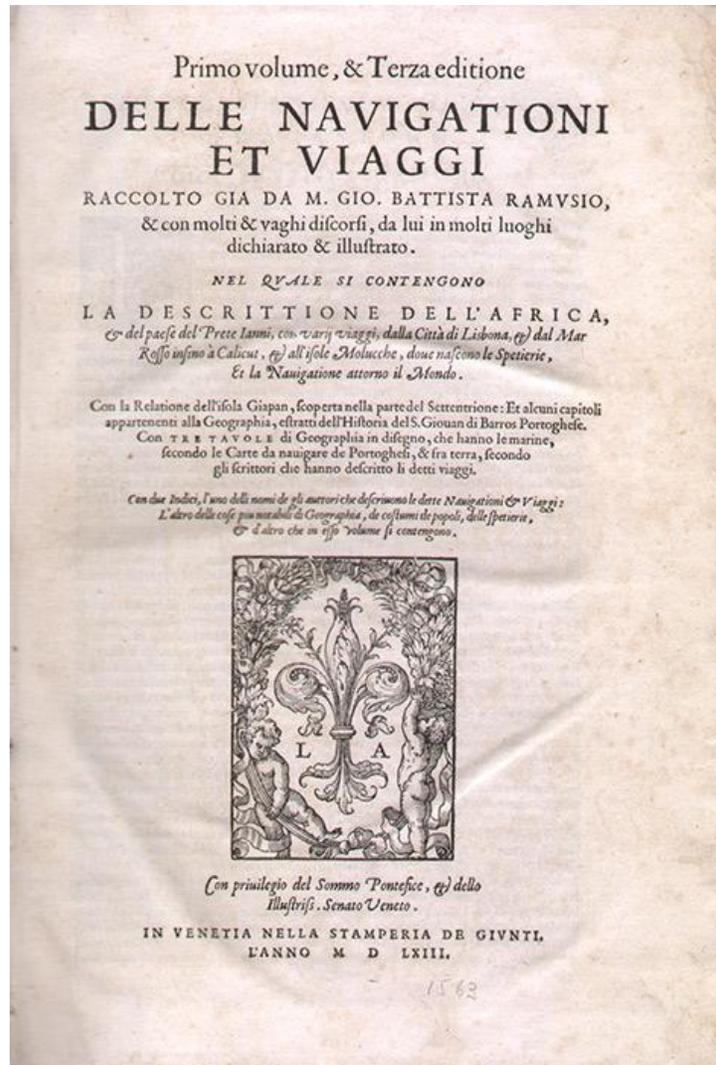
Giovanni Battista Ramusio was a senior official of the Venetian Republic who was renowned for his collection of reports on voyages. He obtained geographical information for his map from the Portuguese discoverer, Montalbondo. His *Delle Navigazioni et Viaggi* was much admired, translated and imitated, notably by Richard Hakluyt in England.

Ramusio also obtained information from an Arab geographer, Hasan ibn Muhammed al-Wazzan al-Fasi. He was better known to Europeans as **Leo Africanus** (<http://www.leoaffricanus.com/index.html>); he published a similar upside down map, in *Historical description de l'Afrique*. The association with Leo Africanus may explain why the map is “upside down”. The story goes that when Muslims (such as *Leo Africanus*) arise they face the rising sun in the east; the right hand is dominant and has other significance in the Arab world. So, South, on the right of East, is at the top - a romantic and possibly correct explanation. The convention of placing North on top is attributed to Claudius Ptolemy, a Roman citizen, probably Egyptian by birth, who lived during the 1st century AD.

Giacomo Gastaldi served the Venetian Republic as a cartographer and worked with a number of publishers; he was an expert with the rapidly evolving copperplate technology. His edition of Ptolemy's *Geography* was very highly regarded. His 1564 wall map of Africa is a milestone in the history of cartography because it represented a significant departure from the Münster tradition. His famous *Geographia* was the definitive book with maps of the “ancient world”.

The map above was printed from a single copperplate, probably engraved by Gastaldi. The vertical central narrow panel was left unprinted to allow for stitching into the book. The map is 39.0 X 27.5cm. The prime meridian is through the Canary Islands named after *Insula Canaria*, Island of the dogs - large, fierce dogs were endemic to the island or possible a species of seal now locally extinct.. The headline *Prima Tavola* (first map) refers to the map being the first in volume I on Africa.

The copperplate map appeared for the first time in 1563, in the 3rd edition of *Delle Navigazioni* published by Tomaso Giuntti, in whose print shop the original woodcut was destroyed in 1557, during a fire (woodcut published in 1554). See the title page below. The copperplate version of the map was published again in 1588, 1606 and 1613



This map hangs above the work surface in my study – to remind me always to question conventions and paradigms.

Similar maps are by Bertelli, a text box at top right (Betz map #10), and Leo Africanus (Betz map #5), a woodcut with the place names in French and, at the top, are the letters MY DL. The earlier Ramusio woodcut (Betz map #4) has three ships and two sea monsters of the coast of present day Namibia and, on the verso, there are eleven lines of text. In the copperplate (Betz map #7) there are two additional sea monsters in the Southern Atlantic; the verso is blank.

References:

1. Betz, Richard L. The Mapping of Africa: A Cartobibliography of Printed Maps of the African Continent to 1700. 't Goy- Houten, The Netherlands: HES & De Graaf Publishers, 2007. See maps # 30 and #29. www.betzmaps.com .
2. Norwich's Maps of Africa, 2nd Ed (Editor J. Stone), Norwich, Vermont, Terra Nova Press, 1983. Map 6 is described as the woodcut, but the image is of a map from the copperplate.