

Sebastian Münster, 1540

NOVAE INSVLAE, XVII NOVA TABVLA *

THIS IS THE FIRST printed map of the Western Hemisphere (other than world maps) to show America surrounded by water, distinctly separate from the other continents, and with a land connection between North and South America. Through the many editions of Münster's books, this map was one of the most widely known and influential of the sixteenth century.

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The place names and inscriptions were printed by stereotype—metal plates cast from molds made from words set in type, then placed in interstices in the wood block and held in place by resin. This facilitated the many German, Latin, French, and Italian editions of this map.

The so-called “Sea of Verrazzano,” appearing to nearly cut North America in two, had a long cartographic life, in large part due to the influence of Münster's map. This false sea, first reported by Giovanni di Verrazzano in 1524, was due to a misinterpretation of Pamlico Sound, the waters between the Outer Banks of North Carolina and the mainland, as the “Mare Orientale” (Pacific Ocean) only a short distance across the “isthmus” of the Outer Banks. As late as the middle of the seventeenth century, some mapmakers continued to show the Pacific Ocean as lying just beyond the Appalachian Mountains—a cartographic expression of the yearning to find a short, easy route to the Orient.

The results of the Spanish exploration along the Pacific coast of Mexico were accounted for by moving the western outlet of the Sea of Verrazzano from the Pacific Ocean, where it was placed by earlier mapmakers, to the Arctic Ocean. The delineation of the western coast of North America foreshadows the soon-to-be-discovered California coast. The Pacific Ocean is still very narrow and Japan lies near to future California. The implications of Magellan's circumnavigation, which showed the great width of the Pacific Ocean, still had not been incorporated by most mapmakers.

Münster's map reinforces the hope for possible easy routes to the riches of the Orient: a clear seaway over the top of the continent; across the narrow Verrazzanian isthmus; across the Panamanian isthmus; and through the Straits of Magellan. Because of its widespread distribution, this map gave Europeans their first conception of the New World as a land geographically separate from the Old World.

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Novae Insvlae, XVII Nova Tabvla [Woodcut, 24 x 34 cm. First appeared in Münster's edition of Ptolemy's *Geographia*, Basel, 1540, map number 17.]

*A NEW MAP OF THE NEW ISLAND

Map courtesy of The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

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