

In 1562, Mapmakers Thought America was Full of Mermaids, Giants and Dragons

By Atlas Obscura, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.06.17

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An old map called "The Americas, or A New and Precise Description of the Fourth Part of the World." Map from Public Domain. Map from Public Domain.

Christopher Columbus famously landed in America in 1492. Once he returned to Spain, rumors started flying in Europe. What was this New World like? It was a total mystery.

The time came when someone had to try to make a map of this mysterious world. They wanted it to be accurate, but they'd never been there before.

They could only use the little information and stories they'd heard from sailors and explorers like Columbus.

The problem is that many of these stories were flat-out untrue. They spoke of America as a land of mermaids, sea snakes and giants.

Based on tall tales

Using the information they had, Spanish mapmaker Diego Gutiérrez and a Dutch artist tried to draw a map in 1562.

In many cases, the map is not far from the truth.

Still, most of it is wrong. They drew the New World according to tall tales they had heard.

"I think the Europeans were much more interested in seeing another world [different from their own]," says Aquiles Alencar Brayner. He works for the British Library.

Gutiérrez was a respected mapmaker for Spain's king at the time, Phillip II. The artist used names for places that were created by European explorers.

In the 1500s, most people in Europe couldn't read. As a result, maps were more than just a way of getting around. They were used to tell stories about places and people, Alencar Brayner explains.

Gutiérrez drew wildlife that had been seen by explorers, including monkeys, parrots, an elephant and a lion.

A map of curious creatures

Like many other maps from this time, the oceans are shown to have terrifying sea monsters. In the Atlantic Ocean west of Ireland, a huge clawed creature lurks in the waves. It shows their fear of unknown waters.

A flying fish can be spotted just below a ship battle in the lower right panel. Meanwhile, a strange-looking ape seems to be chewing on its prey just west of northwest Africa.

The west coast of South America appears particularly dangerous. There is a menacing whale ramming into a ship. Mermaids hold what looks like a spaceship near the southern part of South America.

At the time, Central and South America were home to the Aztecs and the Mayans. These people were intelligent farmers and artisans. In the map, however, they are drawn as barbarians who eat other humans.

They might be giants

In southern South America, Gutiérrez shows two members of the Tehuelche tribe as large giants. They live in "Tierra de Patagones," or the "land of giants."



The region, which we know as Patagonia in the countries of Argentina and Chile today, was described by Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan after visiting the native Tehuelche tribe in 1520. According to his stories, the Tehuelches were anywhere from six- to six-and-a-half feet tall. That seemed gigantic to the short Spanish people back then, says writer Irene Butler.

The map was never meant to be exact

While there is incorrect material in the map, the artists did get some things right. They show rough sketches of the Amazon River, Lake Titicaca and Mexico City, author John Hébert writes.

The map also contains one of the earliest mentions of the name California. "C. California" is written in tiny print on the very left side at the southern tip of today's Baja California.

The map was not supposed to be scientifically exact, explains Hébert.

It was made more for show, he writes. It was a way for Spain to proclaim to the world that it had control over American territory.

The power of drawing

Spain tries to show its power in the map. King Phillip II is shown on the map. He looks like a majestic god. He is shown in a chariot on the Atlantic Ocean, behind the Greek god Poseidon.

"It's interesting to see the relationship between map drawing and power," says Alencar Brayner. "By the time you can map something, you can point out that it's belonging to you."

This map of the Americas is full of fantastical creatures and incorrect information. Still, it is an interesting time to remember. There were still more exciting wonders waiting to be discovered in the New World.

Quiz

- 1 Read the section "Based on tall tales."
Select the paragraph from this section that explains why maps were so useful to people.
- 2 Read the section "The map was never meant to be exact."
Which sentence from the section explains the true purpose of the map?
- (A) While there is incorrect material in the map, the artists did get some things right.
 - (B) The map also contains one of the earliest mentions of the name California.
 - (C) The map was not supposed to be scientifically exact, explains Hébert.
 - (D) It was a way for Spain to proclaim to the world that it had control over American territory.
- 3 Read the section "A map of curious creatures." Then examine the image of the map in this section.
Which selection is BEST illustrated by the map?
- (A) In the Atlantic Ocean west of Ireland, a huge clawed creature lurks in the waves.
 - (B) Mermaids hold what looks like a spaceship near the southern part of South America.
 - (C) At the time, Central and South America were home to the Aztecs and the Mayans.
 - (D) In the map, however, they are drawn as barbarians who eat other humans.
- 4 Use the first map image and information from the article to select the TRUE statement.
- (A) It took Diego Gutiérrez a very long time to design his map of America.
 - (B) Diego Gutiérrez's map shows some accurate information as well as some fake information.
 - (C) Christopher Columbus provided the most accurate information to Diego Gutiérrez for his map.
 - (D) Diego Gutiérrez wanted to present America in the most fantastical way to get people interested in his maps.