

The Case of Caribbean Island Isabella off the Coast of Japan
Oscar Barrau - Summer 2006

FINAL REPORT

1. Description of grant-supported activity

My current research focuses on old Spanish book editions of the 1500s, particularly the ones with a focus on the West Indies. The project supported by this grant started when I came across a reference to Polono's and Cromberger's 1503 edition of Marco Polo's book. This edition included a title page with an illustration containing a tripartite vertical division: to the left, a factotum cut of a church; in the upper middle, Santo Domingo and the island of Isabella; and to the right, a coastal fort and ships. I found the inclusion of the Caribbean island Isabella in a book on East Asia peculiar and significant. While the travels of Marco Polo date back to the 1200s, Christopher Columbus's experience of the Caribbean was not documented until 1493, only ten years before the Spanish version of Polo's book saw the light. Although the Caribbean was unknown during Marco Polo's days, the editors may have felt they had to incorporate a current geographic update of the most westwards parts imagined in 1503.

Most modern studies addressing the cosmography of the early 1500s make use of the works by cartographers and explorers of the time period. Geographic representations integrated in book illustrations are, however, usually not included in historical cosmographic studies. My contention is that the study of illustrations in book editions of the time period should also be taken seriously, especially because the circulation and printing of maps on the New World was strictly prohibited in the early 1500s. The study of travel books will contribute to a better understanding of the world as depicted at the turn of the sixteenth century.

2. Were you able to complete the project? Describe any difficulty you had.

The objective of my exploratory project's final part was to find a royal decree regulating the dissemination (through printing) of maps depicting the New World in Spanish book editions of the early 1500s. Maps of new territories fell under the category of "secrets of State" during this period. Last summer I searched for this decree in the Archives of the Indies in Seville (South of Spain) with no productive results. I later found out that this document could possibly be in the Archives of Simancas, located to the North of Madrid. I returned to Spain last Christmas with the hope of finding this document in the Archives of Simancas. It takes a while to learn about the organization of these archives, so I couldn't complete my search before returning to the US.

3. Did, or will, the project result in a specific product -- a manuscript, composition, syllabus, etc? If so, please describe and indicate state of development.

When finished in 2008, this project will result in an article-length manuscript that will be submitted to a peer-reviewed scholarly journal for publication.