

GEOGRAPHICAL IDEAS AND THE CONQUEST  
OF VENEZUELA

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## GEOGRAPHICAL IDEAS AND THE CONQUEST OF VENEZUELA

THE geographical configuration of a territory undoubtedly has great influence on events there. Geography guides migration, decides the economic life of the region, weakens or strengthens its people, and opens or closes the roads to cultural influences and to foreign invasions.

On the other hand the influence of "false geography," that is the mistaken ideas of the location of a certain territory, carried on by tradition penetrates the minds of people and lures them to attempt enterprises they would not try otherwise. And even though these projects originate in erroneous, objectively false concepts, they still produce important historical events of decisive importance.

The history of the conquest of America is full of this sort of event originating in "false geography." Certainly the history of the conquest of Venezuela was influenced in more than one way.

### MEDIEVAL GEOGRAPHICAL CONCEPTS

It would take too long even to roughly sketch the well-known geographical ideas prevailing in medieval times. The men who conquered America were certainly influenced in some way or other by these ideas. In fact we owe to medieval times the state of mind of the conquistadores who believed everything they heard, no matter how incredible and fantastic, about the territory they were conquering or discovering. The ignorance as to the real geographical location, the confusion caused by the unsuspected human groups, flora and fauna encountered in the new territory, as well as the inability to fully interpret the information received from the Indians, all these strengthened their credulity in accepting *a priori* every fantastic story they heard or thought they understood about a "paradise on earth," "land of great wealth," "gold-country," "houses of the sun," etc. All this explains the reckless expeditions to faraway unknown countries, organized with only scant and general ideas on geography, guided by vague notions obtained from cosmographers and Indians, information scarcely understood.

The conquest of Venezuela, that is, the penetration towards the south from the coast of the Caribbean Sea, was full of these fantastic ideas of erroneous geography. Two principal ideas guided the expedi-

tions of conquest in Venezuela: the supposed existence of an ocean strait or of an easy and short land pass to the Pacific Ocean, whose discovery would have permitted easy participation in the flourishing commerce between Europe and Asia; and the report of the existence of a "very rich" land, inhabited by Indians possessing "great riches," the famous "El Dorado" or "House of the Sun," supposedly situated in the interior of this territory. The geographical science of the time favored these assumptions, strengthening the belief of the conquistadores that they could easily attain their fabulous and fantastic dreams.

#### AMERICA, AN ARCHIPELAGO

We must stress the fact that in 1528, the time when the conquest of the interior of Venezuela began, even those geographers who accepted America as a continent—and not all did—were not convinced that it was a true compact territorial mass, existing as a barrier between Europe and Asia. It corresponded with traditional ideas, deeply rooted in medieval beliefs—Jerusalem as the center of the world—to continue to consider America as merely an appendix of the Old World.<sup>1</sup> That is why the generality of men, the so-called "public opinion," maintained alive, although confused, the idea that America was merely a group of islands surrounded by only one ocean washing both the coasts of Europe and of Asia. We find these ideas expressed in many historical documents, and incredible as these concepts appear to us, they were generally accepted at that time. This was true even after 1520, when the uninterrupted coast line from Florida to the Straits of Magellan was known. In many documents later than 1520 there was affirmed the insular character of different American territories, among them, those of Santa Marta, Cartagena, and Venezuela.

García de Lerma, governor of Santa Marta, wrote in 1530 that some of the councillors of the city had "experiencia de lo de la isla."<sup>2</sup> In 1533, in the *libro de despachos* of the Council of the Indies, there is a marginal note which reads: "Al gobernador y oficiales de Santa Marta, para que tengan al licenciado Tobes por obispo confirmado de la dicha isla."<sup>3</sup> In the text of a royal decree dated February 5, 1536, addressed to the same governor, we read that a certain Benito Martín had died

<sup>1</sup>H. Krechmer, *Die Entdeckung Amerikas in ihrer Bedeutung fuer die Geschichte des Weltbildes* (Berlin, 1892).

<sup>2</sup>"Carta de 10 de febrero del 1530," Documento Num. 209 of *Documentos Inéditos para la historia de Colombia, coleccionados en el Archivo General de Indias de Sevilla por el académico correspondiente Juan Friede* (5 vols. to date; Bogotá, 1955-1957), II, doc. 209.

<sup>3</sup>"Documento de 20 de mayo de 1533," *ibid.*, doc. 502.

"on this island."<sup>4</sup> In the lawsuit between Martín de Orduña and the Welsers, presented before the Council of the Indies in 1535, García de Lerma is mentioned as governor of the *island of Santa Marta*;<sup>5</sup> in the *pleito* of the heirs of Francisco de Arbolancha against the governor, presented in 1537, they still speak of the *island of Santa Marta*,<sup>6</sup> etc.

Other documents contain similar ideas about Cartagena. Thus, for example, in some negotiations carried on in 1535 in Acla (Panamá), there appears one Martín de Guzmán acting "in the name of the inhabitants and conquerors of the *island of Cartagena*";<sup>7</sup> in the lawsuit brought by Constanza Franca in 1541, Pedro de Heredia is called governor of the *island of Cartagena*, etc.<sup>8</sup>

Several documents contain the same idea of Venezuela. In the record of services made by Ambrosio de Alfinger there is mention of the *island of Venezuela*.<sup>9</sup> Jerónimo Koehler, in his report on the Venezuelan expedition in 1534, refers in general to the *islands of Venezuela, Peru, etc.*<sup>10</sup> On April 9th, 1541, the attorney Juan de Villalobos, on giving authority to Alonso de San Juan and Nicolas Federman, calls the latter "governor of the *island of Venezuela*,"<sup>11</sup> and even on January 20th, 1547, we find a letter addressed to the "treasurer of the *island of Venezuela*."<sup>12</sup>

All the above affirmations, no matter how confusing to us today, are not the imaginative ravings of unbalanced minds, but popular ideas of the times found confirmed in several ancient maps of the New World.

The idea of the southern coastline of the Caribbean Sea as part of an island is found, for example, in Schöner's globe of the world done in 1515<sup>13</sup> In this globe South America appears as an island in the center of a single ocean. The idea of South America as an island is also clearly shown in the globes built by both Juan de Stobnicza and Lenox, and is

<sup>4</sup> "Documento de 5 de febrero de 1536," *ibid.*, doc. 816.

<sup>5</sup> Archivo General de Indias, Sección Justicia 717.

<sup>6</sup> Friede, *Documentos Inéditos*, doc. 925.

<sup>7</sup> Friede, *Documentos Inéditos*, doc. 693.

<sup>8</sup> Archivo General de Indias. Sección Justicia 1090.

<sup>9</sup> Doc. 30 de junio de 1530. AGI, Sección Justicia 990.

<sup>10</sup> Document published in the *Zeitschrift des Historen Vereins fuer Schwaben und Neuberg* (Augsburg, 1874), I, 321-333, under title "Aus Hieronymus Koehlers Aufzeichnungen . . ."

<sup>11</sup> AGI, Sección Justicia 990.

<sup>12</sup> AGI, Sección Caracas, 1, f. 121.

<sup>13</sup> This map and those to be mentioned are all well-known. They can be found brought together and reproduced in Krechmer, *op. cit.*, or in Roberto Levillier, *América la bien llamada* (Buenos Aires, 1916).

still clearer in the map drawn by Leonardo Da Vinci. Of the latter map a researcher says "it is more fantastic than scientific."<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless it agrees with the geographical ideas mentioned in the documents quoted above. The island configuration, the small size, the short distances between the North and South seas, all these confirm even though rather vaguely the general ideas of the conquerors about the geography of this part of the world even as late as the middle of the sixteenth century.

The author has not been able to find documents giving details and exact ideas of what these people imagined when they referred to these *islands*, but the very idea of an island implies the concept of a fairly small territory that invites exploration and finding of the way to the Pacific Ocean.

#### SEARCH FOR A TRANS-CONTINENTAL STRAIT

The concept of the New World as a group of islands inspired the hope of finding an ocean strait to make the direct trip from Europe to Asia. Many of the capitulations made during these years contain precise instructions for the seeking of this strait. The discovery of the Pacific Ocean by Vasco Núñez de Balboa where the narrow strip of land of Panama separates the oceans gave birth to the hope of finding the desired strait very near this spot. So much so that when Juan de Solís started on his trip to the "Spice Islands," he was given specific instructions to send his reports as soon as he reached the Pacific, "if the so-called Castilla de Oro (Panama) should happen to be an island and should there be an opening through which you can send your letters to the island of Cuba."<sup>15</sup> So firm was this hope that when Don Pedro de los Ríos was officially given the government of Panamá in 1526<sup>16</sup> he was given instructions to build two houses, one on each end of the road across the isthmus, "until," continues the text, "the strait is found."

The great inlet which forms Lake Maracaibo, whose size and coastline were still unknown, was another spot where they hoped to find this strait. Such a hope was made clear in the capitulation made with Diego Caballero in 1526 for the discovery of the coastline of the lake (from Cape Vela to Cape San Román) in which it was affirmed that in that territory "would be discovered many secrets of the country and of the other South Sea . . . because it is in the sea lane to the Spice Islands."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Levillier, *op. cit.*, II, 60.

<sup>15</sup> Martín Fernández de Navarrete, *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos que hicieron por mar los españoles desde fines del siglo XV*, III (Madrid, 1955).

<sup>16</sup> May 3, 1526. AGI, Audiencia Panamá 233. Tomo 2, fol. 145v.

<sup>17</sup> August, 1525. AGI, Audiencia Panamá 233. Tomo 2, fol. 57.

It is also of record that the first expeditions of Ambrosio de Alfinger to Maracaibo were really guided by the firm belief in the possibility of reaching this strait. In fact, the governor came back from his first trip completely convinced that such a strait actually existed. Only in 1533 when, in coming back from the second expedition, some of the troops crossed the eastern mountain range and came around the south end of Lake Maracaibo did they realize that there was no such a strait in that region.<sup>18</sup>

#### SIZE OF THE CONTINENT

Together with the idea of the New World being an island, there was also the belief that it was of small extent. To give an idea of the confusing information of the conquistadors about geographic distances in America, it is sufficient to mention that when Federmann in 1530 found himself before a flooding tributary of the Orinoco only 100 leagues from Coro, he did not hesitate to believe the information given him by the natives that this was the "South Sea," and later on, when he questioned this he simply said that he had reached the Rio de la Plata.<sup>19</sup> Likewise García de Lerma, governor of Santa Marta, in 1532 believed that just by "travelling 150 leagues up the Magdalena River he would be below the equator, and in the same territory as Pizarro."<sup>20</sup> Therefore, according to him, Perú, that is, the Pacific Coast, was only 750 kilometers from Santa Marta! The royal audiencia of Santo Domingo wrote to the Council of the Indies that the governor, Pedro de Heredia, was going inland from Cartagena and was "bringing news that very near to there lay the land of Peru."<sup>21</sup> Heredia, the report went on, had urged the governor of Venezuela and Cartagena to undertake inland expeditions because "they were on the borders of Peru and could get very near that country." Jerónimo Dortel, governor of Paria near Guiana, wrote on November 5, 1536 that he "had entered its boundaries (of Paria) in search of the other ocean."<sup>22</sup> Even in 1539, when Pedro de Puelles requested the post of governor of Quito, he conveniently offered to discover the "La Plata" from his own post.<sup>23</sup> That same year the royal officials in Cartagena complained that if it had not been for the bad government of the *juez de residencia*, Juan de Vadillo, Pedro

<sup>18</sup> The author has a book in preparation on the Welsers.

<sup>19</sup> Nicolas Federmann, *Historia Indiana*. Translated from the German by Juan Friede (Madrid, 1957).

<sup>20</sup> Friede, *Documentos Inéditos*, doc. 399.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, doc. 595.

<sup>22</sup> Letter of August 17, 1537. Given in summary form by *Colección Muñoz*, LXXXI, fol. 62v.

<sup>23</sup> August 3, 1539. AGI, Audiencia Santa Fé, 80.

de Heredia "would have discovered and conquered and pacified all the land up to the other sea."<sup>24</sup> In the meantime, Lic. Santa Cruz, residency judge in Cartagena, in his report on a trip to the mountains of Abreva (situated to the right of the lower Atrato, near Darién) stated that this territory "because it has *verrugas* and jigger fleas, is below the equator, that is, near Quito."<sup>25</sup>

Recently there was found in Germany a fragment of a map (apparently by Diego de Ribeira), showing the boundaries of the *gobernaciones* granted up to that time. The text corresponding to Venezuela, though quite faded, says: "This is the territory of the great house and noble company of the Belzares, stretching to the strait of the land of Magellan."<sup>26</sup> This map, probably used in the lawsuit of the Welsers against the royal *fiscal*, is one more example of the concepts held at that time about the smallness of the South American continent, which supported the possibility of giving the company all the land down to the Straits of Magellan. With such ideas prevailing at the time we can better understand how Lic. Tolosa in 1548 identified the expedition towards Acarigua, in the southernmost corner of the Venezuelan plains, with the "discovery of the Marañón River,"<sup>27</sup> and that when Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo wrote the second part of his *Historia* in the same year, he did not dare roundly to deny that one could "in a few days" travel from Santa Marta to the "South Sea," declaring: "This I do not affirm nor deny, *sc.*, the distance of the journey, whether it is short or long. . . ."<sup>28</sup>

The mistaken idea of the slight extension of the South American continent induced the ambitious conqueror Nicolás Federmann to organize in 1530 his expedition to Acarigua, to discover a convenient land route from Coro to the Pacific Ocean, which he hoped to discover by advancing south in a straight line. We should not be surprised that years later, in 1536, when Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada started his trip up the Magdalena River, he was really "looking for Peru," and only by chance found the Chibcha plateau in the heart of what is now Colombia.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Friede, *Documentos Inéditos*, doc. 1265.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, doc. 1246.

<sup>26</sup> Published in *Augusta 955-1955* (Munich, 1955).

<sup>27</sup> July 8, 1548. AGI, Patronato 197, ramo 23.

<sup>28</sup> Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *Historia General y Natural de las Indias, Islas y Tierra Firme del Mar Océano* (Madrid, 1851), lib. 26, cap. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Juan Friede, "Conceptos Geográficos durante el descubrimiento del Nuevo Reino de Granada," in *Bolívar* (Bogotá), Num. 44 (1956).

## ORIGIN OF THE "GOLDEN MAN" LEGEND

Just as important as the erroneous geographic ideas for the development of Venezuela was the legend of El Dorado. The legend undoubtedly had its origin in the medieval belief in some fantastic paradises on earth, a thesis carefully studied by many geographers and historians. In order to present the American point of view of this concept, we can show that this idea appeared in America as a social phenomenon at the moment when the conquistador, having exploited the Indians of the coast, started his penetration of the interior to find the mines used by the Indians there in their *rescate* transactions with the Indians of the coast. This enterprise offered great difficulties, both because of the geography and the warlike character of the natives. Out of this ardent desire to conquer the gold-bearing lands grew the confused legend of El Dorado. It was in Venezuela, a land close to the equator believed to be the location of gold by medieval minds, that the legend received realistic form and color, even an exact geographical location. The avalanche of people rushing to the imaginary gold-country is comparable only to the modern gold, oil, and rubber rushes. The road from Coro to the south was literally covered with the corpses of those who tried to find this illusory golden land.

We might ask: why was the Venezuelan territory picked for the location of El Dorado?

## CHIBCHA VERSION OF THE LEGEND

The Welsers, in their litigation for the New Kingdom of Granada<sup>80</sup> declared that in his last expedition to "Rio Grande," that is, the Magdalena River, Governor Ambrosio de Alfinger was told that near the spot was a province of exceptional richness called "Xerira." Alfinger, declared the Welsers, could not reach this country because he did not have enough men and supplies. Therefore he decided to go back to Coro to re-provision and attempt to reach Xerira for the second time. Unfortunately on his return trip he was killed by the Indians. The existence of Xerira had apparently been a secret, carefully kept by the governor and transmitted only to his employers, the Welsers. Even the detailed report on this expedition, written by Esteban Martín<sup>81</sup> never once mentions this province, even though the writer gives many details about the Indian tribes living in the mountains: Indians dressed in ponchos of dyed cotten, using slingshots and speaking a totally different language from that of the Indians along the Magdalena River.

<sup>80</sup> Friede, *Documentos Inéditos*, doc. 1343.

<sup>81</sup> AGI. Audiencia de Santo Domingo, 206.



Of course, the above-mentioned report on Xerira was not merely an invention of the author, nor did it treat of a "dorado." "Xerira" was simply the *Jerira* or *Jerida* plateau inhabited by the Guane Indians of the Chibcha tribe, located in the extreme north of the Chibcha plateau, a few days journey from the spot reached by Alfinger. Possibly the Indian tribes described by Esteban Martín were the advance guard of the Guanés themselves, and it would be difficult to imagine that, traveling so near to this territory and perhaps even penetrating it, Alfinger never had heard about the "rich" Muisca Indians, belonging to the same language family and culture group, and great craftsmen in gold, which they acquired through barter with other tribes for blankets and salt which was abundant in their territory. Their cultural influence and their commerce extended to both sides of the Andes<sup>32</sup> and especially into the valley of the Magdalena which Alfinger and his soldiers were then crossing. Therefore it is hard to believe that Alfinger did not hear in some detail about the Chibcha "kingdom."

Nevertheless, because it was not then discovered, and because Ambrosio Alfinger died on that expedition, this "Xerira" became more and more mysterious, and the idea was formed that he had arrived at the very gates of this land of "great riches," this rich *tierra dentro*, this *dorado*.

#### ANTILLES VERSION OF THE LEGEND

Another version of the legend soon appeared. The excitement produced in the Spaniards living in the Antilles<sup>33</sup> by the discovery of Peru and the secrecy with which Hernando Pizarro surrounded his voyage to Spain when he carried the treasure obtained after Atahualpa's death<sup>34</sup> soon produced another version of El Dorado. In Santo Domingo, a new story, helped along by uncertain and complacent geography, soon was spreading about a land of marvellous riches situated between Perú and the Rio de la Plata—two provinces practically unexplored at that time.

It is possible that later research will reveal some details about the exact origin of the El Dorado legend, but the fact remains that the legend was so strong in Santo Domingo that even the royal audiencia did not doubt its truth. It informed the Council of the Indies<sup>35</sup> that "according

<sup>32</sup> The author has a book in press entitled *Descubrimiento del Nuevo Reino de Granada y Fundación de Bogotá*, which will give detailed information on these points.

<sup>33</sup> Letter of the Royal Audiencia of January 30, 1534. AGI, Audiencia de Santo Domingo, 49: "... con estas nuevas tan grandes de las riquezas del Perú, habiamos de tener trabajo de tener la gente de esta isla y aún de todas las otras comarcas. . . ."

<sup>34</sup> December 10, 1533. AGI, Audiencia de Santo Domingo, 49.

<sup>35</sup> See above, note 33.

to altitudes and measurements" taken by cosmographers and pilots, these fabulously rich territories were in the region "directly opposite this island [Santo Domingo] and the island of San Juan, entering directly southward, lying on both sides of the equator." The council did not hesitate to authorize a great expedition of 400 men, 200 on horseback and 200 on foot, which should find this "dorado" after "consulting with the navigators many times." These reports certainly had Venezuelan territory in mind since the *gobernación* indicated had as boundaries those of Santa Marta and Peru to the west, Marañon and Rio de la Plata to the east, and the unknown "South Sea" to the south.

It is true that this expedition was never carried out, perhaps due to the doubts expressed in marginal notes on the Council's *consulta*. Nevertheless this version of the El Dorado legend, placing the coveted territory between Peru and Rio de la Plata to the east of the Andes, must have excited the imagination of the conquerors of Venezuela. Indeed, this version could very nicely be tied up with the other "Xerira" version mentioned above.

The Antilles version soon received confirmation from news arriving from the Andean territory recently discovered. There it was connected with a fabulous unknown—and therefore, with the logic of the times—rich country, inhabited by the legendary Amazons, or where there existed great quantities of the much appreciated cinnamon. Several expeditions soon set out from various cities to discover *this* Dorado. In 1537 Hernán Pérez de Quesada set out from the Chibcha plateau and a report<sup>36</sup> states that he arrived only three or four days journey away from the Amazon country. Sebastián de Belálcazar in 1538 left from Popayán to search for this cinnamon country.<sup>37</sup> A little later on, from Quito, Gonzalo Pizarro started towards the same goal. Likewise Dr. Robles wrote to the royal audiencia<sup>38</sup> that the people of the New Kingdom were preparing to set out to find the "House of the Sun," "famous for its richness," which according to all the information, lay just 15 days' journey from there.

#### GOAHIBO VERSION OF THE LEGEND

A third, equally fantastic version of the El Dorado legend was added to the Chibcha and Antilles versions. This placed the rich region towards the headwaters of the Meta and Guaviare Rivers. The Welsers

<sup>36</sup> Informe de Juan de Sanmartín y Antonio de Lebrija. AGI, Sección Patronato 27, ramo 16. Published in *Relaciones históricas de América* (Madrid, 1916).

<sup>37</sup> "Declaración de Sebastián de Belálcazar," Friede, *Documentos Inéditos*, doc. 1283.

<sup>38</sup> September 20, 1539. Given in summary form in *Colección Muñoz*, LXXXI, fol. 283v.

themselves had said that "there was news of much riches to be had in these lands," mentioning at the same time the valley of the Meta River.<sup>39</sup> The officials of Cubagua wrote that the provinces of the Meta were "the richest in the world."<sup>40</sup> Captain Fernando de Alderete declared that while he was in Cumanagoto, he "was informed that the province of the Meta was rich."<sup>41</sup> Jerónimo Dortal complained that his misunderstandings with Antonio Sedeño prevented him from discovering the *rich* Meta River. He reported that his soldiers would follow him only if he went on an expedition to the Meta.<sup>42</sup> Even in the seventeenth century, Lucas Fernández Piedrahita wrote in his history of "the wealth that lay in the famous Meta river [region]."<sup>43</sup>

Undoubtedly this report about the Dorado being in the headwaters of the Meta river, a zone poor in gold but adjacent to the mountain ranges of the territory inhabited by the "wealthy" Muisca Indians, must have originated among the Goahibo tribes who lived in the region. They were great navigators of the large rivers of the Llanos country, and even though they did not have gold mines in their own land, they obtained the gold objects used for adornment and religious practices from the Muisca Indians who lived beyond the mountains: the very Indians discovered by Jiménez de Quesada. However, it was only later on that the Meta river region acquired the reputation of being the Dorado region. It was believed to be near the Caribbean coast: Jerónimo Dortal wrote from Cubagua that "only 25 days' journey, according to the interpreters and guides, separated him from the Meta River."<sup>44</sup>

Thus the Venezuelans were confronted with three different versions of the "Golden Man" legend: the Chibcha, the Antilles, and the Goahibo. The Antilles version, verified by "navigators and cosmographers," located the coveted region on Venezuelan soil, while the Chibcha and Goahibo versions located it near Coro.

#### GEOGRAPHICAL CONFIGURATION OF THE ANDES

There is still another geographical concept that greatly influenced the Venezuelan conquest.

We have already seen that many contemporary maps pictured the

<sup>39</sup> Friede, *Documentos Inéditos*, doc. 1343.

<sup>40</sup> June 2, 1538. Given in summary form in *Colección Muñoz*, LXXXI, fol. 125.

<sup>41</sup> Friede, *Documentos Inéditos*, doc. 1072.

<sup>42</sup> August 17, 1537. Given in summary form in *Colección Muñoz*, LXXXI, fol. 62v.

<sup>43</sup> *Historia General de las Conquistas del Nuevo Reino de Granada* (Madrid, 1851), pte. 1, lib. 3, cap. 4.

<sup>44</sup> August 17, 1537. Given in summary in *Colección Muñoz*, XXXI, fol. 62v.

coasts of the "Northern Sea" (Atlantic) and the "South Sea" (Pacific) as being close together and running almost parallel for quite a long way. In these maps the coast of the Pacific Ocean, after running a short way southward, turns east, forming an open angle. It then forms a great-imaginary-gulf, an American version of the African gulf of Guinea, already known in those days. The idea that the Pacific was the South Sea because of its relative position to the Panama isthmus which runs east-west, was verified by the cartographers, who said it was really an ocean situated south of the American continent.<sup>45</sup> One of the first is that of Waldseemüller of 1507, which shows an imaginary (it had not yet been discovered) Pacific Ocean to the south of the Caribbean Sea. The same thing is shown in several of Schöner's globes, up to the year 1533. It is also clearly shown in the so-called Leonardo da Vinci globe made in 1516, in which are indicated some places of the future Venezuela (Aldea?, Cabo de Grana?, Arboleda?, Pariana, Chiribichi [Cumaná] and Palinmel?), separated from the coast of the Pacific by an-imaginary-cordillera, running parallel to them from west to east.

This supposed eastern deviation of the Pacific coast was an idea deeply rooted at the time of the conquest of Venezuela, and it was the cause of the fantastic ideas on the configuration of the *tierra adentro*, the principal objective of the conquest: the belief in the eastern deviation of the Andes. For it was only logical that the cordillera would run eastward, if it followed the Pacific coastline. Thus it would form the "back" of the province of Venezuela. This idea is clearly shown on the so-called Da Vinci map and especially on Lenox's map, where the imaginary and still unexplored Andean cordillera are drawn parallel to the Pacific coastline—north-east to south-west, forming the "shoulders" of Venezuela. Thus the conquistadors believed that by crossing the mountains south of Coro they would find an open path to the Pacific Ocean.

The conviction that the Andes ran eastward gave rise to the same idea with relation to the Magdalena River, flowing in the valley on the "other side" of the Cordillera. It was thought *logical* to assume that this river also ran eastward. Accordingly, following the geographical ideas of the times, the Magdalena did not begin in the south, but in the east, actually south-east in relation to Coro and Maracaibo, the region used as a starting point for the conquest.

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<sup>45</sup> See above, note 13.

## OVIEDO'S MAP

A graphic representation of the erroneous geography concerning the Andes and the Magdalena River which guided the conquerors is the map of Lake Maracaibo which Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo included in his *Historia* with the expressed purpose of refuting an inaccurate map taken to the Council of the Indies in 1534 by the two procurators of Coro, Luis González de Leyva and Alonso de la Llana.<sup>46</sup> Oviedo's map is completely incomprehensible unless we take into account the geographical ideas prevailing in Venezuela at that time.

To the east of the "Rio Grande" [the Magdalena], is shown the "Sierra Nevada" which ends at the said river: this is true although the drawing is not very exact and shows clearly the very limited knowledge possessed about the true configuration of this range of mountains found entirely within the province of Santa Marta, and which therefore was unknown to Oviedo and the conquerors of Venezuela.

"El Valle," situated more to the east, between the "Sierra Nevada" and the "Sierra de Bubures" [now called Sierra de Perija], is correctly drawn. Its entrance is by way of the Cabo de la Vela, and its exit by way of the province of Pacabueyes, along the banks of the Magdalena. It is really the Valledupur, correctly marked on the map.

This "Sierra de los Bubures" turns in the map towards the east, forming a range probably called "Sierra de Mérida" today. This corresponds, to an extent, with reality, even though the Sierra de Mérida constitutes properly a branch of the Cordillera Oriental that runs along the Venezuelan coast. But Oviedo identifies this Sierra de Mérida with the main Andes range itself, and makes it turn to the east just as the Venezuelans believed at that time. Proof of Oviedo's belief is the notation, written to the south of Lake Maracaibo, "here governor Ambrosio was killed." The valley of "Micer Ambrosio," where this occurred, is a valley of the Cordillera Oriental.

A river, which seems to be a right tributary of the Magdalena and which according to Oviedo is the "Yuma River," runs along the southern slopes of this hypothetical Andean range. Such a river does not really exist, because the Sierra de Perija empties its waters into Lake Maracaibo and the Magdalena River, and the Sierra de Mérida does likewise into the same lake and the Orinoco. Nevertheless, "Yuma" is what the Indians called the Magdalena River, and if we observe the names noted by Oviedo along this river, we will see that it must be the

<sup>46</sup> See above, note 28.

Magdalena. The "Tamara" along the banks of this river is the "Tarmarme" mentioned by Jiménez de Quesada in his *Compendio* [possibly the origin of the modern Tamalameque]. Furthermore, we find marked the "Sierra de Mene," which, as is well-known, lies between Lake Maracaibo and the Magdalena. Oviedo's "Yuma" river, then, is the Magdalena, and instead of showing it running from the south, as it actually does, he has it running from the east, just as the contemporary Venezuelans imagined it. In this way Oviedo graphically supported the erroneous ideas the Venezuelans had about the direction of the Andes in general, and of the Magdalena River, in fact, of the configuration of the whole territory.

#### RESULT OF THESE ERRONEOUS CONCEPTS

These false concepts of geography had serious consequences in the history of the conquest of Venezuela, since they seriously clashed with the truth of the matter. This misapprehension was undoubtedly one of the principal reasons for the interest shown in Venezuela by the wealthy commercial house of the Welsers. The belief that there was a strait from Lake Maracaibo to the Pacific Ocean which would have facilitated trade with the Far East was an irresistible inducement to the German company, which had had trade with the Orient since the fourteenth century. The desire to explore this route was the big attraction for Alfinger. It was for this reason that on his trip from Santo Domingo to Coro he turned off to Lake Maracaibo, founding there the city of the same name. All the later Welser expeditions were directed towards this lake.

The last and fateful expedition which finally proved that there was no such sea strait from Maracaibo to the Pacific Ocean coincides exactly with all loss of interest by the Welsers in the provinces, with disastrous consequences for the development of Venezuela.

Another effect of the erroneous geographical ideas was shown in the capitulations between the Welsers and the Council of the Indies, where the latter body assigned as the southern boundary of their province the "South Sea"—this too was a fateful decision. To the members of the Council as well as to the conquistadors themselves, both ignorant of the real configuration of South America, it was inconceivable that in the center of the continent there stretched an immense territory, the basin of the Amazon River, hundreds of thousands of square miles lying between the two oceans.

It is also easy to understand the decisive influence of the idea of El

Dorado on the fervid imaginations of the conquerors of Venezuela, imbued with the idea that the continent was rather small and that they could explore to the shores of the Pacific. The continuing expeditions launched from Urabá, Cartagena, and Santa Marta towards the south, and from the Andean region towards the east, all of them in search of the South Sea, caused a veritable "war of nerves" in Venezuela, which explains their insistent and reckless push toward the south. They felt they absolutely had to occupy the "rich" territory before people from some other province did so, knowing full well what conflicts would then result. Francisco Castellanos wrote from Cubagua about the gold fever; "that all the governors were beside themselves waiting for "marvellous news." Philip of Hutten in his letters of January 16, 1540 and March 10, 1541,<sup>47</sup> tells his brother of the many rivals for the prize of El Dorado, especially the conquerors of Cartagena, Santa Marta, and the new kingdom of Granada, and Jerónimo Dortal, and he adds: "we expect wars not only against the Indians but also among the Christians."

This tension and rivalry explains the unusually reckless expeditions to the south by the German governors. Notwithstanding Alfinger's failure in his last expedition, Federman started another with renewed courage. The second governor, Jorge de Spira, returned from one expedition completely exhausted and died while preparing another attempt. The young Philip of Hutten, followed his path to destruction, and even after all this, Federman, in Europe, hoped to return to Venezuela to try the same journey to the south. The shadowy, mixed-up ideas concerning El Dorado received right in Venezuelan territory a palpable form, a species of geographic "certainty," that was the guiding force of most of the spectacular expeditions of conquest. Only in 1546, when the enormity of the expeditions' failures became apparent and the province was noticeably declining did the fever die down and Licenciado Tolosa could say that "they no longer believe these reports because the Indians had told great lies."<sup>48</sup>

Errors concerning the geography of the Andes range also had sad consequences. They produced the tragic failure of Alfinger's second expedition to the valley of the Magdalena. Estéban Martín<sup>49</sup> records that Alfinger, before starting back from the Magdalena River to Coro, wanted to find the rich province of Simití, which, according to Indian reports, lay up the Magdalena River. With this objective, the expedi-

<sup>47</sup> February 15, 1538. Printed in summary in *Colección Muñoz*, LXXXI, fol. 174.

<sup>48</sup> *Historisch-Literarisches Magazin* (Beyreuth-Leipzig; ed. Johann Meusel), I (1785), 81.

<sup>49</sup> October 15, 1546. AGI, Santo Domingo, 207.

<sup>50</sup> See above, note 31.

tion started to climb the mountains *towards the east*. The conquistadores did not believe that they had to follow a *southern* course to reach that province, convinced that they would find Simití to the east because of the deviation of the Andes and the Magdalena. They perished on the frozen heights of the Cordillera Oriental. The royal audiencia of Santo Domingo echoed the errors of the conquistadores when it informed the Council of the Indies about Alfinger's expedition.<sup>51</sup> It described him as starting "through the back of the Sierra Santa Marta," that is to say, through the western slopes of the Cordillera Oriental, from the valley of the Magdalena River. The report also asserted that this expedition "followed a course eastward (*por la via de Levante*), in search of the other ocean."

Erroneous geographical concepts certainly played their part in the miserable failures of Spira and Hutten, and in part, of Federman, in their expeditions to the south. Spira continually turned south each time he failed to find a way to cross the mountain ranges, and Hutten boldly did the same. They both fell victims to the immense and deadly Amazon forest. This persistence can be explained only by their firm belief that they would soon find the imaginary mountain ranges of the Andes that formed "las espaldas de Venezuela," and behind which lay the long-sought "South Sea."

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<sup>51</sup> AGI. Audiencia of Santo Domingo, 42.

