

A NOTE ON THE DESCELIERS' MAPPEMONDE OF 1546 IN THE JOHN RYLANDS LIBRARY¹

By C. A. BURLAND, F.R.A.I.

THE Desceliers' map² is painted upon the flesh side of six skins of vellum of which the ends are joined between the Equator and Tropic of Cancer on the map, and the side joints are so placed that they are concealed by vertical scales. The painting is strikingly like that on contemporary French Books of Hours, particularly in the matter of colours. Ultra-violet light shows these to be all of mineral origin and of similar type throughout the map. The only evidence of other paints being used at a later date is to be found on a small patch of restoration near the Equator. There is also a large area in the North Pacific now discoloured to a light bluish tone by some special application put on the map in 1877, when it was discovered that this part was occupied by the date and Desceliers' name. Apart from this the map remains substantially as it left the hands of the cartographer.

For some period prior to its acquisition by Lord Crawford, the map appears to have lain folded with the vellum skin of the upper, Western, section exposed to light and air. This folding has resulted in a small break in the vellum on the Equator, and the exposure has greatly darkened the pale brown ground colour of the North American continent, so that the overlying paintings have become greatly obscured. This darkening was partly overcome by photography through a red screen at some period before 1900. The photographs were published in Canada

¹ Through the courtesy of the Librarian, I was permitted to make an examination of this remarkable document on behalf of the *Geographical Magazine*, London. We were also permitted to take our own photographs by infra-red light and study the map by ultra-violet light. Both the photographers (Messrs. Flemings of Africa House, Kingsway) and I would here like to express our thanks for the kindness of all members of the staff of John Rylands Library, whose help made our visit a success.

² Ryl. French MS. 1*. It measures 2 m. 60 × 1 m. 30 (8 ft. 2 × 4 ft. 1½).

and copies are obtainable from the Canadian Houses of Parliament at Ottawa. The present work with infra-red light has resulted in a considerable improvement in the definition obtained, and also has obscured the lettering in red to a lesser extent than in the earlier work. The photographs will be published in the *Geographical Magazine* early in 1951.

Although now carefully mounted on linen between rollers, for use as a wall map, the work was designed as a table map. The lettering on the two hemispheres faces away from the Equator in order to make it more easily accessible to a visitor looking at it from either side of a table.

The map was painted by Pierre Desceliers, the Parish Priest of Arques near Calais, for the Court of Francis I of France. For long it was known as the "Dauphin Mappemonde", and there is no reason to doubt that it was made for the Prince who in 1547 was to become Henri II. As a work of art it is typical of the Renaissance in France. The border is garnished with beautifully executed scroll work framing heads of cherubs in the Northern Hemisphere and human skulls in the Southern, between them the names of the points of the compass are painted in Roman capitals. On the seas, dolphins, whales and sea-serpents disport themselves among the ships and elaborate compass cards, and on land there are painted groups of people in classical poses set in small patches of romantic scenery which in themselves make charming miniatures.

The map omits latitudes above the Arctic and Antarctic Circles, and is constructed on a cylindrical projection (Mercator's) which permits of the use of compass bearings to identify the position of any place from the compass-cards with which it is profusely decorated. The lettering used is delightfully clear. Small names, some in black and some in red, are written in a Gothic hand of the period, and the larger inscriptions are in Roman capitals. There remain other "Gothic" influences in the treatment of small islands which often appear painted in tints and metals in a truly heraldic manner. It is noteworthy, however, that the only places where heraldic charges appear on the map are the British Isles. The St. George Cross, gules on a field or, appears on both England and Ireland, referring no

doubt to the total occupation of the latter country by the English in 1542. Scotland has its own shield with a cross of St. Andrew gules, but this is overlaid with a vertical cross which appears very dark now but may once have been azure. In the North Sea there are two galleys flying blue flags sweeping towards Britain. They reflect Desceliers' news sense. England was then formally at war with France, and the galleys no doubt are carrying French aid to Scotland where Queen Mary Stuart was then just four years old.

In his treatment of the rest of the world Desceliers is dependent upon the accuracy of his information. He varies from an almost unrecognisable Scandinavia to surprising accuracy in South America and Indonesia. There can be little doubt that he was thoroughly acquainted with the travel literature of his day. He records English, Spanish and Portuguese discoveries as accurately as he does French. Coasts from which he had no reports are indicated by a special type of curving line; though unknown land areas are peopled by whatever he thinks most probable from available sources. In Africa we meet Prester John, and the King of Guinea rides on a white elephant. In North-east Asia we find the fantasies of Sir John Mandeville; men with heads in their breasts, and lop-eared humans; but where Pierre Desceliers had no literary backing he was more charming and natural. He decorated the empty spaces with classical figures, rapidly sketched in, but nevertheless graceful.

On the whole, the map is amazingly accurate. The literary sources from which the information was obtained can in some cases be traced, for instance, Jacques Cartier's "Breve Recit" for Canada; though even here he has obviously added much, probably obtained directly from the voyagers. In other parts of the world of the map one is constantly surprised. Desceliers must have relied on Arab accounts of Central Africa, but he brings his "Mountains of the Moon" farther south than Ptolemy, and places the Rift Valley lakes with a close approximation to their true position, including Lake Nyassa. No doubt he obtained information about Indonesia from both Arab and Portuguese sources. He depicts the East Indies very accurately as far as Ceram and then he brings us up with astonishment at

what appears to be a very good representation of part of Australia, but well to the north of its true position. Perhaps it would be best to regard this as an exaggeration of the north coast of New Guinea derived from Portuguese accounts. It is in the Pacific, however, that Desceliers shows the most astonishing insight. West of Indonesia he shows the Ysle de Altofer (? an Arab name for the Solomons?) He knows of a Pacific archipelago Y^e de Marsouyns, which is more extensive than is described in Magellan's voyage, but probably derived from that source, and then, in approximately the right place is shown a large square island, Y^e de Magan Magna, shockingly like North Island, New Zealand. Desceliers shows by his carefully drawn coastline and a river that he is drawing an island which he believes to be properly described, on good authority. It is too much to expect that he really had heard of New Zealand, or that his informant should have missed South Island when passing through Cook Strait. My personal view is that he has been given information about Fiji, particularly as to the North East he gives a smaller island, Y^e de Hail. This I take to be a rendering of a true Polynesian word, such as Tahiti or Hawaii. Probably in this case it refers to Hapai in the Tonga group. In any case the whole matter remains a mystery and further research is necessary.

For China and Japan, Desceliers still has to rely on the accounts of Marco Polo, but across the Pacific he has more accurate information. Between two areas of unknown coast he draws carefully a length of shore and a river in the neighbourhood of San Francisco ; though he shows no sign of having information of Cortes's exploration of the Gulf of California in 1539.

In many parts of the world he draws native peoples with considerable accuracy. Cases in point are his Hottentots in South Africa, and the North American Indians. On the South American continent he waxes eloquent in his drawing and we see Brazilian cannibals attacking shipwrecked mariners, and others in feather ornaments carrying beams of logwood for trade. In Peru the Spaniards attack an Inca fortress, and in the south, where a Welsh Griffin prophetically guards Patagonia (awaiting the advent of the sheep farmers), the Straits of Magellan are very well drawn.

The map is a very beautiful expression of Renaissance culture in France, but, even more than that, it is a monument to the amazing spread of discovery in the short sixty years following the discovery of the Cape of Good Hope by Bartholomew Diaz in 1486.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The Desceliers' map has previously been reproduced in autotype with no colour corrections, in a privately printed edition of 100 copies, with collations and notes by Charles Henry Coote, in 1898. "Bibliotheca Lindesiana: Notes No. 4. Autotype Facsimiles of three Mappemondes."

The other comparable maps reproduced in this work are the Desceliers' Mappemondi of 1536 (British Museum, Add. MSS. 5413) and of 1550 (British Museum, Add. MSS. 24,065).