The Portuguese Discovery of Australia
Fact or Fiction?

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W.A.R. Richardson

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The Dutch, under Willem Janszoon in the Duyfken, and the British, under James Cook in the Endeavour, have long been known to have reached Australia's shores in 1606 and 1770 respectively. For more than two centuries a debate has been going on about whether any other Europeans preceded them.

The British hydrographer and rival of Captain Cook, Alexander Dalrymple, was the first person to publish a statement suggesting that the 'continent' of Jave-la-Grande on the Dauphin, or Harleian map, was really Australia.¹ This map is probably the best known of a number of mid-16th-century manuscript works produced in France, which are known collectively as the Dieppe maps. Since the inscriptions on the apparent continent situated south of Indonesia are clearly derived from Portuguese sources, the presumption was that some Portuguese mariners were really the first Europeans to reach Australia. At first sight this does not seem an unreasonable hypothesis for, as can be seen on figure 1, the only landmass that does exist approximately where the enigmatic 'continent' appears, though admittedly considerably further east, is Australia. What is more, at least part of Jave-la-Grande's east coast does look a bit like the coasts of Queensland and New South Wales. Numerous writers since Dalrymple have upheld and elaborated upon this theory, but none has been able to provide sufficiently convincing arguments to turn it from intriguing speculation into established fact.²

For historians of cartography, superficial resemblances on early maps are notoriously unreliable evidence; leaving aside occasional entirely fictional elements, geographical features were often misplaced, errors of scale were relatively common, and coastal outlines were partially or completely hypothetical. Even without the problems involved in trying to represent a sphere on a flat surface, maps and charts could only be as reliable as the frequently contradictory information available to their makers. As early as the 14th century, charts of much frequented

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¹ Dalrymple (1774).
² Smith (1985).
coastlines, such as those of the Mediterranean, the Black Sea and the Atlantic coasts of Spain, Portugal and France, were remarkably accurate, but even two centuries later it is hardly surprising that serious mistakes abounded in little-known parts of the world where speculation could play as great a part as real knowledge.

Heinrich Bünting’s 1581 world map provides a salutary warning of the dangers of uncritical acceptance of superficial similarities. Compare the outline of Australia’s west coast on figure 1 with the remarkably similar outline of India Meridionalis on figure 2; they are significantly more alike overall than the east coast of Java-la-Grande and Australia’s east coast. Yet when you look at the astonishingly inaccurate outlines of those parts of the world that were then well known — even the boot of Italy is facing the wrong way — it is hardly logical to suggest that Bünting’s map provides proof of the discovery of Western Australia; the coastline is undoubtedly fictitious and inserted to produce a harmoniously balanced world; its similarity in position and shape to Australia’s west coast is pure coincidence.

The case for an early Portuguese discovery of Australia rests entirely on imagined resemblances between the ‘continent’ of Java-la-Grande on the Dieppe maps and Australia, for no surviving Portuguese 16th-century chart shows any trace of land in that area, and there are no records whatsoever of any voyage along any part of the Australian coastline before 1606. Advocates of the Portuguese discovery theory endeavour to explain away this somewhat embarrassing lack of direct supporting evidence as being due to two factors: the Portuguese official secrets policy, which must have been applied with a degree of efficiency that is hard to credit, and the 1755 Lisbon earthquake which, they claim, must have destroyed all the relevant archival material.

Two of the most successful propagandists for the Portuguese ‘discovery’, Kenneth McIntyre and Ian McKigan, relied heavily on different, complicated, mathematical manipulations of Java-la-Grande’s east coast in order to ‘correct’ conjectured, but unproven, Portuguese navigational errors. This enabled both of them to turn that coast approximately into what they believed it to be, part of an incomplete, distorted map of Australia which had been misplaced by the French. It was also suggested by both the above authors that the French had

Figure 2  World map contained in Heinrich Bünting’s Itinerarium Sacrae Scripturæ, Magdeburg, 1581, an interesting example of how coastal outlines on 16th-century maps need to be treated with suspicion. India Meridionalis looks remarkably like Western Australia, but is clearly a fictional creation. Look at the astonishingly bad outlines of the then known world.
National Library of Australia, Map Collection MAP RM 2430.
equated Arnhem Land with Java and Cape York with Sumbawa; this supposedly accounts for the shifting westwards of ‘Australia’ by over 20 degrees of longitude. The concept can be visualised on figure 1.

Since the most prominent feature of Jave-la-Grande’s east coast, cap de fremose, has no obvious counterpart on Australia’s east coast, an inordinate amount of effort has been expended in trying to explain it away. Different authors have variously identified it as Cape Howe, both the southern and north-eastern tips of Tasmania, and the East Cape of New Zealand’s North Island.

In view of this conspicuous lack of unanimity, it is hardly surprising that several recent articles have revealed fundamental flaws in all the theories which, relying primarily on imagined or manufactured resemblances, proclaim Jave-la-Grande to be Australia. Other articles, quite divorced from any preconceptions regarding Jave-la-Grande’s identity, and making use of an obvious, but hitherto ignored source of evidence, that of place-names, have come to an entirely different conclusion regarding its identity.

Before proceeding to examine some of the linguistic problems associated with how place-names and other inscriptions got on to maps, and what could only too easily subsequently happen to them at the hands of copyists and printers, a few non-technical observations need to be made regarding the way maps and charts were made in the early 16th century.

At least so far as Asia is concerned, practically no original, large-scale charts of the period have survived. Those charts that have come down to us are therefore almost exclusively compilations made by assembling and scaling down a number of large-scale originals which were either made by practising mariners while sailing along the coasts concerned, or copied from native pilots’ charts, or were endeavours to give graphic expression to a written or verbal description. Many are, at least partly, diagrammatic.

The Portuguese used native pilots whenever possible, and even when they did not, it is improbable that they hugged every coastline continuously, so their charts would often not be continuous either. Confirmation of this is provided, for example, by Diogo Ribeiro, the Portuguese cartographer who worked for the Spaniards in Seville. On his 1527 world chart he placed a note concerning the east coast of the Malay peninsula; in English it reads: The hypothetical coastline marked is not coloured because its outline is not known since the discoverers did not continuously follow the coast; the same applies to Sumatra . . . because we know it is an island, but no one has coasted along its southern side.

Without the guidance of the original chartmakers, cartographers in Portugal undoubtedly occasionally juxtaposed non-adjacent coastlines. One specific case of this is provided by a chart of the 1590s by the Dutchman Willem Lodewycksz; clearly copied from a Portuguese one, it includes what purports to be an outline of the Java shore of Sunda Strait between Java and Sumatra. To produce it, two charts, on different scales and partially overlapping, were joined at a completely wrong angle by a compiler; one chart was reasonably accurate for the period, while the other was clearly no more than a diagrammatic linkage of four place-names. So widespread was the acceptance of this false, and presumably very early outline, that it was incorporated on nearly all surviving charts of the area, including the Dieppe maps, for about a century, probably because the Portuguese rarely sailed through the strait concerned.

If mistakes such as this could occur, it is quite obviously an inherently unreliable practice to try to solve such cartographic problems as the identity of Jave-la-Grande exclusively by trying to match up pieces of coastline on 16th-century maps with their imagined 20th-century equivalents. Place-name evidence can quite possibly confirm or refute such hypotheses. In the case mentioned above, it is only place-name evidence that proves that the two coastal sections concerned are partially duplicated.

None of the writers on Jave-la-Grande apparently thought the inscriptions on the Dieppe maps of any significance, apart, for example, from naïve attempts to equate one east coast inscription, coste dangereuse (‘dangerous coast’) with the Great Barrier Reef, and the correct identification of most of the words on the ‘continent’ as being either French, Portuguese or Gallicised Portuguese. It is manifestly illogical to virtually ignore the evidence of place-names, especially those on coastlines whose identity is in question.

Toponymy is admittedly not an exact science, so before looking critically at some of the place-names on Jave-la-Grande it is necessary to
examine some of the problems involved. Thus, though such English names as Ironbridge, Oxford and Portsmouth mean what their modern forms suggest, and Pontefract is a recognisable French–cumin–Latin hybrid meaning ‘broken bridge’, many other place-names positively invite misidentification by popular or folk etymologists, as a glance at Eilert Ekwall’s *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* shows only too clearly. Beacby Head, on the south coast of England, is quite unrelated in origin to beaches; its name can be traced back to a Norman French spelling of beau chef (‘beautiful headland’). The Lizard is not so called because of any imagined resemblance to that reptile, but comes from two Cornish words, lis (‘court’ or ‘hall’) and ard (‘high’). The many places beginning with ‘Ship-’ have no maritime connections, but with the trade in sheep’s wool, a vowel shift being responsible for the change.

South African children used to be taught in school that Algoa Bay, on which Port Elizabeth stands, and Delagoa Bay, where Lourenço Marques (now Maputo, the Mozambican capital) now stands, were so called because they were where Portuguese ships used to stop on their way to (Portuguese a) and from (Portuguese de) Goa, the capital of the Portuguese Asiatic empire. The explanation has no foundation in fact; they were named a lagoa (‘the lagoon’) and da lagoa, the bay ‘of the lagoon’, as numerous early maps of the area confirm. Such traps are only too easy to fall into.

Researchers into place-names recorded on early Portuguese maps and charts have been very few, and nearly all seem to have failed to appreciate the vast variety of human handwriting, spelling and pronunciation; likewise they seem to have had little or no knowledge of historical linguistics.

Although places were named after saints, kings and queens, navigators, ships and so on, perhaps the most interesting of all for the historian of cartography are those which attempt to reproduce native names. Whenever the Portuguese could communicate with local inhabitants they frequently attempted to use native names, generic or specific. Without the assistance of a reliable interpreter it would be quite possible, when questioning the identity of, say, an island one pointed to, to be told the name of its nearest headland, or a village on the coast, or a dominant hill or volcano on it, without the inquirer being aware of the fact. The word would then be written down by the mariner as best he could. Unless he preceded it with a generic, such as cabo (‘cape’), rio (‘river’), baia (‘bay’), or ilha (‘island’), with or without a following de (‘of’), an uninformed compiler back in Lisbon could, and often did, record the name of a river as a town, a volcano as an island, and so on.

Sometimes the meaning of the native generic, such as the Malay pulo (‘island’), was known. Obviously in the case of the Malay name now spelled Ujong Kulon (‘western end’ or ‘western cape’), which was rendered Junculă or something like it by the Portuguese and Dutch, as on the above-mentioned chart of Sunda Strait, its meaning cannot have been understood. Applied by the Javanese to the western end of Java, European cartographers applied it to a peripatetic town in western Java for at least three centuries.

Even with the guidance of Portuguese or native generics, an inscription written between two landmarks often got attached to the wrong one. Giacopo Gastaldi, a mid-16th-century Italian cartographer, records the name Sunda, actually the western third of Java, in no less than four different spellings in four different locations on three different islands on one of his maps. The same thing can still happen today; in a historical atlas published in 1966 there is marked on the coast of Vietnam, where Vung Tau now stands, a town named Poulo Condore; this is actually a spelling variant of the name by which the Malays and Portuguese knew what is now called the Con Son island group off the Mekong delta. One Welsh cartographer, in his atlas of c. 1600, which is clearly copied from Portuguese sources, even managed to lift wholesale a set of names which should have been located along Java’s west coast, on Sunda Strait, and transpose them to the north coast, where he interspersed them between names which really did belong there.

Let us now examine in more detail the problems involved in recording and copying such native names. The Portuguese mariner and trader in Asia had to deal with a great variety of languages with strange sounds, and their written forms were in apparently incomprehensible scripts, not the familiar Roman characters. The researcher into Asian place-names on Portuguese 16th-century charts and maps has to bear in mind that the sailors of the time had to record in writing the exotic sounds they heard, in forms that would enable them and their fellow countrymen to
read and reproduce them reasonably accurately in speech, at least sufficiently so as to allow native speakers to recognise them. There is a natural tendency for English, French and Spanish speakers to respectively Anglicise, Gallicise and Hispanicise words in another language. The Portuguese also inevitably tried to adapt foreign names to their own sound and spelling norms.

A few random samples from three languages can illustrate the problem. A native speaker of English today, with no knowledge of any foreign language, if asked to record in writing the French word *huit* (‘eight’), would almost certainly write ‘wheat’. Similarly, for *seize* (‘sixteen’), he would probably produce ‘says’. The nearest he would be likely to get to representing the Spanish word *jaula* (‘cage’) would be ‘howler’, while the name of Portugal’s old university town of Coimbra would almost certainly cause him to write ‘Queenborough’, for the two-syllable pronunciation of that word is so similar that only a very perceptive ear would register the difference.

Portuguese navigators of the 16th and 17th centuries faced similar problems when they endeavoured to record the place-names they heard spoken in strange languages in America, Africa and Asia. Several such languages contained some sounds which were quite unfamiliar to them and these they had to represent in writing to the best of their ability. Not surprisingly, since no European languages had at the time developed consistent spelling norms, the same name could be written by different people in different ways. Some Asian place-names were recorded in at least a dozen variant forms. One can find numerous cases in chronicles and runts or pilot books, where the writer or copyist has written a word, even a Portuguese word, in three or four different spellings on the same page.

In some cases the name given to a place by one language group bore no sound, or even meaning relationship to the name used by another. This sometimes led to one and the same place figuring two or more times on a map compiled from a variety of sources, on each occasion with a completely different name. Not unnaturally, if a word in a given language, say Malay, sounded reasonably like a Portuguese word, then that word could be written down. A French, English, Dutch or Italian cartographer, with some knowledge of Portuguese, but none of the area portrayed on the map he was copying, could well ‘translate’ such a word. A typical example is that of a headland near a village on Java’s Sunda Strait shore, which was variously rendered *anjer, anjer, anier* and *anger* by the Portuguese; it eventually appeared on a Spanish chart now in Yale University Library as *Punta del Peligro* (‘Danger Point’); the Spanish copyist had misunderstood the inscription *punta d’anger* on a chart by the French cartographer M. D’Après de Manneville; one particular edition of the chart actually omitted the apostrophe.

The Spaniards, French, Dutch and English did their best to lay hands on charts made by the Portuguese, using bribery, subversion or capture. In most cases they initially retained on the copies they made the spellings recorded by the Portuguese, though inevitably with a number of copying errors. Frequently the spellings were adapted to conform more closely to the sound/spelling conventions of the language of the copyist. Thus that part of central Vietnam which the Portuguese usually spelled *champa*, the Dutch normally recorded as *Tsionpa*. The country we now call Kampuchea the Portuguese called *camboja*, which the Dutch rendered as *Cambodia*, eventually producing the Anglicised form Cambodia. Spelling is therefore potentially very misleading, since quite often, and especially on printed maps, words in several languages figure on one and the same map, not to mention hybrid forms and partial or complete translations.

Many writing systems undoubtedly started out as attempts to represent the spoken forms of languages. But no two people pronounce all words identically and every language has dialect forms. Sounds which are identical in several languages may well be represented by different letters; thus the ‘n’ of the English word ‘onion’ is now represented by ‘gn’ in French and Italian, by ‘ñ’ in Spanish and ‘nh’ in Portuguese.

A copyist who had little or no knowledge of foreign languages had a real problem. If the writing was clear he could, of course, copy blindly what he saw, but there was, and still is, a very natural tendency to try to edit or ‘correct’ words which look strange, especially if they contain letter combinations which do not occur in one’s own language. Frequently a written word would appear to the copyist to be so like a word in his own language that he would write that word down. For example, the island of Sumatra, also known in the early 16th century as *Taprobana*, or,
with the very common metathesis of the letter ‘r’, Trapobana, was rendered as la Trap-boone (‘the Too-good’) island by João Afonso, a Portuguese pilot and cartographer who settled in France. The name Beachy Head, mentioned earlier as from beau chef (‘beautiful headland’), is recorded on an English map of Sussex published in 1595 both as Beachy poyn and Beauclife. A comparison of chef and clife suggests quite clearly that the form Beauclife was caused by adapting the by then uncomprehended word chef, through the exercise of impeccable logic, to describe Beachy Head, which is an enormous chalk cliff. The ‘h’ of chef was taken to be ‘ll’, a very common mistranscription when the letter ‘l’ was seldom dotted, while the order of the ‘e’ and ‘f’ was reversed. Such examples are legion. The nonsensical name of the old lighthouse on top of Beachy Head, Belle Tout, is clearly a misrendering of belle tête, a synonym for beau chef. Frequently, of course, the handwriting was illegible and this gave rise to endless mistranscriptions, resulting in words being incorrectly divided or combined, not infrequently appearing to be absolute gibberish.

With these sorts of problems in mind, let us now examine some of the place-names on Jave-la-Grande. Inscriptions such as coste dangereuse, coste des herbaiges and cap de fremose on the east coast, if one takes them at their face value, are useless for identification purposes; there are too many dangerous coasts, coasts with grass or pasture along them, and too many beautiful capes in the world. Some far more specific names are required if any light is to be shed on the subject of Jave-la-Grande’s identity by toponymy. If place-names are to confirm the suggested Australian identification, then those along both coasts of the enigmatic ‘continent’ have to be proved to be translations or adaptations of words in some Aboriginal languages, or it must be shown that some of them indicate things typically or uniquely Australian, such as a kangaroo or a boomerang.

The name Jave-la-Grande itself certainly deserves some comment. The concept of two Jivas, a greater and a lesser, seems to have been popularised first by Marco Polo, almost certainly from Arabic information, but owing to variations in the transmission of his account of South-East Asia, not merely in place-names, but also in distances and points of the compass, there was great confusion regarding their identity and location. William Marsden, in his edition of Marco Polo’s Travels, proved beyond any doubt, in his annotations regarding names and products mentioned, that by Java Minor Marco Polo meant Sumatra and by Java Major he meant Java itself, possibly together with Borneo as well, since the latter, or at least parts of it, at one time formed part of a Javanese Empire. Since Java is significantly smaller than Sumatra, a number of European writers and cartographers decided that Java Minor must be Java itself. Others applied the name to Borneo and to variously located non-existent islands somewhere south of what we know as Java.

Commentators on Jave-la-Grande have failed to observe two significant facts about the name, which is only a French translation of Marco Polo’s Java Major or one or other of the numerous Portuguese renderings of it. Firstly, by no means all the Dieppe maps apply the term to the apparent continent. Some restrict it to Java itself; one has Java la grande astride both Java proper and the ‘continent’. Guillaume Le Testu, in his manuscript atlas of 1556, named Java Petite Iave, while the names Grande Iave and Terre Australe are inscribed on the west and east coasts respectively of the familiar Jave-la-Grande landmass. In common with several Dieppe cartographers, he attached both of these coastlines to a hypothetical southern continent which on three occasions he unambiguously states to be the product of his own imagination, statements ignored by proponents of the Portuguese discovery theory, and especially by Roger Hervé who claims to have identified several of Le Testu’s fictitious features. Ten years later, on Le Testu’s world chart of 1566, Grand Iave was attached to Java proper, which appeared in its typical Portuguese form with no southern coastline. Even more significantly, the traditional Dieppe ‘continental’ outline vanished completely and was replaced by a landmass named l’Inde Orientale projecting from another hypothetical southern continent. His Inde Orientale bears no resemblance whatsoever to Jave-la-Grande, but is extremely reminiscent of the southern continent which figured on so many world maps for so long, and which was popularised by Mercator’s famous world map of 1569 and above all in Ortelius’ atlas of the following year. Interestingly, it first appeared on globe gores made by Mercator in 1541, at precisely the same time as the Dieppe maps began to appear; the first reliably-dated map showing Jave-la-Grande is included in Jean Rotz’ manuscript atlas of 1542.
The second fact that seems to have escaped notice is that though some Portuguese cartographers identify Java itself by some spelling variation of that name, many add the word maior; the Portuguese however, on whose information the Dieppe maps were based, never attached the name Java maior to any island except Java; whenever they used the term Java menor, it was applied not to Sumatra, but to Sumbawa. Cartographers of other nationalities were hopelessly confused over the two Javas.

So far as the west coast of Java-la-Grande is concerned, I will deal here primarily with the one name that seems to provide incontrovertible evidence concerning the identity of that coastline. It appears to read Quabesequmesce on the Harleian or Dauphin map; other versions appear on other Dieppe maps.

The Harleian name seemed a fairly long word and was therefore quite possibly one of the cases where copyists joined two or more words together. The 1598 Elizabethan English translation of Jan Huyghen van Linschoten’s Itinerario mentions among the spices obtainable in Indonesia one called cubeb; at least in Europe it now seems to be practically unknown. Marco Polo mentioned it as one of the products of Java Major and it was still being imported into England in the early 19th century. Among the various names for it mentioned by Linschoten is Quabes, the first six letters of the Harleian and Desceliers 1546 map inscriptions. The Dutch original recorded Quabeb, so the ‘s’ for ‘b’ of the English version was either a mere misprint or, perhaps, an indication that the English translator had worked from a manuscript version of the text, since a final ‘s’ of the period and the letter ‘b’ were very easily mistaken for one another. The apparent ‘m’ of the Harleian is clearly ‘u’ on the Desceliers 1546 and 1550 versions. If the first six letters were the name of a spice, presumably the rest of the ‘word’ had originally meant something. In view of the French cartographers’ regular habit of turning final Portuguese vowels into a Gallic final ‘e’, it seems quite certain that the original inscription had read quabeb aqui esta (‘cubeb is here’). The famous ‘Cantino’ map of 1502 is but one of many maps which list products available in different locations. It is at this stage that the need for a specific name for identification purposes is satisfied. Linschoten, on the basis of information almost certainly culled from Garcia de Orta’s Coloquios dos Simples e Drogas da India, published in Goa in 1563, states that cubeb comes ‘out of the Ilandes of Iaua from Sunda, where they grow and in no other place’. He goes on to state, as did Garcia de Orta, that the Sundanese took measures to prevent others from breaking their monopoly by treating it in some way before it was marketed. Sunda, actually the western third of Java, was believed by several writers and cartographers to be a separate island. A map in João de Barros’ fourth Decada da Asia, of the early 17th century, shows Sunda separated from the rest of Java by an obviously artificial, river-like strait, giving graphic expression to the idea.

A Spanish cartographer, Nuño García de Toreno, produced a map of Asia in Valladolid in 1522, showing an island between two others which are identified as Sumatra and Java. From its position it, too, is obviously intended to represent Sunda. The only inscription against it appears to read bilialiaibi; none of the ‘i’s is dotted. The ‘word’ is very long and seems to bear no likeness to any place-name in the vicinity of Sunda Strait; however, the qualia in the middle is evidently a miscopying of quabeb or quaubeb. The last four letters again seem to be a miscopying of aqui (‘here’). The first four letters bear no obvious resemblance to any Spanish, Portuguese, or French word that would make sense in the context. The modern Malay word beili, however, means ‘to buy’. Thus bilialiaibi (‘buy cubeb here’) on this Spanish map provides a parallel inscription to Quabesequmesce on the Harleian and Desceliers maps. It also provides cartographic evidence corroborating the statements by Garcia de Orta and Linschoten regarding Sunda being the source of cubeb.

The fact that both French and Spanish cartographers miscopied the inscriptions concerning cubeb shows that they did not understand what they were copying from their Portuguese sources. What is the name of a spice which grew only in western Java doing on a coastline proclaimed by some to be the west coast of Australia? The conclusion surely is inescapable that the west coast of Java-la-Grande has nothing whatsoever to do with Australia, but is an admittedly very bad sketch map of part of south-western Java on a different scale from the main map, and separated from Java proper by an artificial strait or river, usually named R. grande, much in the same way as Sunda was from Java on the João de Barros map.
Lest this conclusion be thought to be based only on one name, it should be pointed out that it is confirmed by several others, including gao, a word variously recorded as negre or noirre ('black') and neige ('snow'), another which occurs in numerous French versions of the Portuguese word brasol, and yet another which at first sight looks like Hame de Sylla on the Harleian map, but is actually Haure de Sylla.

Gao is but a variant spelling of the 16th-century Portuguese word jao ('Javanese'). It is difficult to conceive that any Portuguese mariner would have written the word gao on a map of part of Australia, whose inhabitants and products differ so markedly from those of Java.

The fact that the French words meaning 'black' and 'snow' were presumably different attempts to render the same word on their Portuguese original suggests either that it was particularly illegible, or that it was a word they did not understand, and so recorded French words which looked reasonably similar. No conceivable written version of the Portuguese words preto or negro ('black') could be close enough to neve ('snow') for them to be confused. Could the original word not have been a Malay one? Negri, now spelled negeri, indicates some form of settlement. The words negri, with the normally undotted 'i', and gao, written on different levels, with no Portuguese generic to indicate what the words referred to, could easily have been attached by the French to different geographical features. There is, in fact, some difference of opinion between the Dieppe cartographers as to whether gao refers to a bay or a river. 'Javanese village' would seem to be an unlikely inscription to find on a Portuguese chart of the coast of Australia. The error I have suggested was in fact made by the 17th-century English cartographer, William Hacke, on a manuscript chart of Sundra Strait copied from a Dutch original; he 'translates' the Malay word Negery three times as 'Black'.

Brasil was the name by which the Portuguese knew the tree known in Asia by its Malay name sappan. Its dyewood had been known in Europe for centuries; Marco Polo mentioned it, and it figures in several locations on the 'Cantino' map; it also served to baptise Brazil, where a similar dyewood tree was found. Despite the use by Aborigines of certain varieties of mangrove to produce a red dye, there is no evidence to suggest that any tree producing a red dye existed in Western Australia in sufficient commercial quantities to merit its presence being recorded. Clearly sappan in Java is indicated.

The inscription Haure de Sylla (i.e. Havre de Sylla, 'Harbour of Sylla') appears to be an instance of another common copying error. Just below it appears the word cap ('cape'). For reasons of space, cartographers quite often divided long words and wrote the separate parts on different levels. A copyist could easily fail to recognise these as one word and render them as two, not infrequently attaching them to different features. The most important port on the south coast of Java is now spelled Cilacap. Its former spelling of Tjilatjap makes clear that the sound represented by 'j' is repeated. The modern spelling misleads most Europeans, since the 'c' in 'ci' is normally pronounced by them as a bilabial of some sort, while in 'ca' it sounds like the 'c' in English 'cat' or French cap. Early Portuguese cartographers' renderings of this Javanese sound varied, including 's', 'ch' and 'c', irrespective of the following vowel sound. The French had apparently seen the port of Cilacap spelled on their Portuguese original as sila or perhaps syllia, with the last three letters, spelled cap, on a different level. They took syllia to be the name of the port, while cap ('cape') appeared to emphasise the importance of a nearby headland.

Such linguistic evidence regarding the west coast of Jave-la-Grande gives rise to serious doubts regarding the identification of its east coast as that of Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. After all, if the Portuguese had reached Australia, it would have been the north or west coast they would have discovered first from the vicinity of Timor. The place-name evidence clearly does not support the contention that they did. The prospect of commercial gain was the main driving force behind Portuguese exploration. Since no Australian product was known in the 16th century, with the possible exception of trepang, there was no motive to inspire the Portuguese to undertake voyages towards the Australian coast even if they had known about it.

It has already been pointed out that the proponents of the Portuguese discovery theory encountered a serious anomaly in the fact that there was no obvious counterpart on the Australian east coast for the huge cap de fremose promontory on Jave-la-Grande's east coast. At least four widely differing 'solutions' were propounded by them. It seemed to me that
since the west coast of *Jave-la-Grande* had been shown to be a misidentified piece of Asiatic coastline incorrectly incorporated by the French on a world map on a different scale, the same might well apply to the east coast. An examination of the map of South-East Asia and Indonesia was undertaken to see whether any feature corresponding to *cap de fremose* could be found. It needed to be a roughly triangular promontory with a large coastal indentation at either base, several river mouths on one side of it, and off that same side a group of islands. Neither the north coast of Sumba, nor the south-western promontory of Irian Jaya, actually an island, which others had suggested, met all the criteria.\(^2\) Only one location satisfied them all, namely the Mekong delta of Vietnam.

Figure 3 compares the outline of *Jave-la-Grande*’s east coast with the modern outline of the coast of Vietnam and that provided by the ‘Cantino’ map of 1502. No surviving map of the area before Diogo Ribeiro’s of the mid-1520s gets the Mekong delta in anything like its true relationship to the coast north of it. We have already noted that at that time Ribeiro still did not know the real outline of the east coast of the Malay peninsula. Despite the ‘policy of secrecy’ pleas of some writers, Ribeiro, a Portuguese working for the Spaniards, on his world maps of 1525, 1527 and 1529\(^3\) gives clear evidence of having managed to lay hands on increasingly more accurate information regarding the Gulf of Thailand and the coast of Vietnam. Could the east coast of *Jave-la-Grande* not be the result of a Portuguese voyage along the coast of Vietnam, some time before Ribeiro recorded its distinct curve reasonably correctly, and the Mekong delta no longer appeared at a very prominent angle to the coast north of it?

During the 16th century what we now call Vietnam was divided into three states, known to the Portuguese from south to north as camboja, champi and cochinchina, in their most usual spellings. If *Jave-la-Grande*’s east coast is actually that of Vietnam then some of the corresponding features would presumably be those shown on figure 4. *Gouffre* (‘Gulf’) corresponds to Vinh Rach Gia, *cap de fremose* is Mui Ca-Mau, which the Portuguese knew as *cabo de camboja* (‘Cape of Cambodia’), while *Baye neuve* would be where the Saigon or Donnai River enters the sea; the river mouths would be those of the Mekong itself, and the islands named *sail* and *magna* on the Harleian and Desceliers 1546 maps would be what the Malays and Portuguese knew as *pulo condor* (‘wax gourd island’), now known as the Con Son islands. Other correspondences can be identified by numbers on figure 4.

Where the Dieppe cartographers wrote *coste des herbaiges* (‘coast of pastures’) the Portuguese wrote on the equivalent Vietnamese coast *costa de champa*. *Champa* is only one letter different from *champs* (‘fields’) in French, which is a reasonably acceptable synonym for ‘pastures’. Is this mere coincidence? Here I will only examine four other names which seem pointedly to confirm the inference to be drawn from the cartographical correspondences and that of *champa* with *champs*.

With the exception of the Harleian map, all the other Dieppe maps that include and name the island group off *cap de fremose* place *sail*, *sall*, *sal*, or *sel*, preceded by some abbreviation for island(s), against the largest, and *magna*, or some version of it, against the second-largest island. This should be sufficient to cast doubt upon the suggested meaning of ‘great’ for *magna*. If most of the Dieppe cartographers evidently thought that the other name meant ‘salt’, as their spellings suggest, why did the Harleian and Desceliers 1546 maps insist on including an ‘i’ which does not figure in any ancient or modern spelling of ‘salt’ in either French or Portuguese?

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*Figure 3 The east coast of *Jave-la-Grande*; Vietnam on the ‘Cantino’ map; Vietnam today. Drawn by Jens Smith, Flinders University of South Australia.*
Figure 4  The east coast of Jane-la-Grande and that of Vietnam, with suggested corresponding features

NB 1 Only the first five numbered names are discussed in the text. For comment on the rest, see the article under note 3(vi).
2 The commonest names known to the Portuguese are given alongside the

modern names where possible.
3 All the names on the east coast of Jane-la-Grande are upside down on the Harleian map.

Drawn by Jens Smith, Flinders University of South Australia.
It was a comparison of the Dieppe outlines of the salīl and mārgna group with those of the Con Son group on the British Admiralty chart that led to an important observation. If salīl and mārgna were really the Con Son group, why was the largest island on the Dieppe maps below, rather than above, the second-largest as it should have been? Could the salīl and mārgna group have originally been on a separate chart and subsequently been incorporated upside down by a compiler at a time when the convention of north being at the top of a map was by no means generally accepted?

Granted the possibility, could the accompanying inscriptions have been read upside down too? It should be pointed out that Portuguese manuscript charts continued the long-established portolano tradition of writing place names clockwise around a coastline, so that east coast names were upside down and west coast ones the right way up, while island names were written at all sorts of angles. The significance of some maps having included an ‘i’ in salīl then became clear. The letters ‘i’, ‘y’ and ‘j’ were more or less interchangeable at the time. If we spell salīl with a ‘y’; say, and invert it, even in print it bears a remarkable resemblance to the Portuguese word for islands, Ilhas. The coincidence was too great not to be followed up.

As we have seen, the Malays and Portuguese knew the Con Son group by the name pulo condor. The ‘Cantino’ map of 1502, long before the Portuguese had got to the area, and several other maps, such as the Caverio of c. 1505 and the Waldseemüller ones of 1507 and 1516, all produced some version of the inscription fūlicandora, either against the islands or against the Mekong delta, or in some cases against both. Its initial letter ‘f’ suggests that the name first came to the Portuguese from an Arabic-speaking informant, since it was the usual letter used by Arabic-speakers to represent the sound of our letter ‘p’, which they could not pronounce, in foreign names. If the Portuguese clearly knew some version of the name with a final ‘a’ as early as 1502, could a manuscript version of candora or condora possibly have given rise to mārgna when inverted? After a number of experiments, a hypothetical version of the original Portuguese inscriptions was arrived at, using a slightly incomplete final ‘a’. As can be seen in figure 5, Ilhas candora inverted becomes sayll and mārgna. Those who have their legitimate doubts as to the validity of this reconstruction may like to examine both the manuscript and printed versions of the word candora upside down on the maps mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph; I believe they will have to admit that my hypothesis is not as far fetched as it may at first seem.

Those who believe that no one could be so stupid as to draw a chart upside down should remember that the practice of placing north at the top of a map is a relatively modern convention. A chart of the pulo condor group, published by none other than Alexander Dalrymple in 1795, suggests both by its inscriptions and by the marginal latitude readings that north is at the top. Beneath the chart is an engraving of a view of pulo condor, and it is only by the presence of a minute arrow below the engraving that one can discover that north is actually at the bottom.

The most prominent cape on the central coast of Vietnam is known as Mui Varella. The coast immediately north of it is shown on the earliest Portuguese charts as costa da varela, almost invariably written costa dauarela, for in the early 16th century the Portuguese definite articles o and a (‘the’), and the contractions do and da (‘of the’) were frequently written attached to the following noun. In view of the incredibly common confusions between manuscript ‘u’ and ‘n’, and ‘t’ and the old long letter ‘s’, it seems almost certain that costa dauarela was the origin of the inscription coste dangereuse and its synonym version coste perilleuse.

The one remaining name there is space to deal with here is the island of Aliofer. It is quite definitely a very slightly mistranscribed rendering of the Portuguese word aljófar (‘seed pearl’). In the early 16th century the only place in the Far East famed for pearls was the vicinity of Hainan island off the south coast of China. It is one more case of a commercial product being put on a chart and being taken by a copyist to be a place-name. Hainan island, or a town on it, was named Aliofer or Aloffar on maps by Gastaldi, Ortelius and several other cartographers. Its attachment as Aliofer to the most northerly of the named islands off Jave-la-Grande’s east coast, but so far out of its true position and scale relationship to what must surely be the Mekong delta and the Con Son islands, suggests that the original map compiler, presumably a Portuguese, knew of an island approximately in that area, where pearls could be obtained. It follows that the map of the east coast of Jave-la-Grande (i.e. Vietnam) was probably compiled before details of the first successful
official Portuguese voyage to Canton in 1517 reached Portugal; otherwise
Hainan island, either in the guise of aljófar or as some version of ainão,
would presumably have been more accurately placed, and the outline
of Vietnam’s coast would have been more correct. It seems likely that
it was made as a result of the previous year’s abortive voyage of Fernão
Peres de Andrade, for we know that he did not get beyond the Vietnamese
coast at the entrance to the Gulf of Tonkin. We also know that his fleet
stopped for water and supplies somewhere on the coast of Champa on
its way back to Malacca and that it also spent several days at pulo condr or.

Since my research was originally undertaken in the hope that it
might confirm the Australian identification, it is with mixed feelings
that I must follow where the evidence leads and conclude that the Dieppe
maps do not support the theory.

Jave-la-Grande is a composite construction, made up of very primitive
early sketch charts of parts of the coasts of Java and Vietnam, presumably
originally without any indication of orientation or latitude. Obviously
their scales do not conform to that prevailing on other parts of the Dieppe
maps.

The fact that Portuguese 16th-century charts nearly always showed
Java, Sumbawa and some other Indonesian islands without southern
costlines may well have suggested where these two coasts might
belong. It is possible that some of the west coast names may have been
recognised as belonging to one or other of Marco Polo’s confusing Javas;
the east coast inscriptions were evidently not recognised by the French,
or the coast of Vietnam would not have been placed south of the equator.
However, the landmass formed by these two coastlines very neatly
created what had been eagerly awaited: further apparent evidence of the
existence of Terra Australis, which Magellan’s discovery of Tierra del
Fuego in 1520 had been thought to prove. Even though all the Dieppe
cartographers did not join up Jave-la-Grande both eastwards and
westwards to Tierra del Fuego to form a hypothetical southern continent,
the fact that some did makes clear that the concept was very much in
the air at the time.

Further proof of that is provided by Mercator’s long-lasting landmass
of Beach south of Java, first shown as part of his hypothetical Terra
Australis of 1541, on the eve of the appearance of the Dieppe maps.
Mercator’s ‘continent’ was the result of specific errors in Latin versions
of Marco Polo’s narrative appearing in editions of Simon Grynaeus’
travel literature compendium, Novus Orbis Regionum, published in Paris
and Basle in 1532. In one vital context, where Marco Polo had stated that
certain countries were south of Champa, in other words, central Vietnam,
these editions read, in English, ‘south of Java’. On this ‘authority’
Mercator therefore invented a coastal outline and islands and attached
Marco Polo’s names to various features. However the forms of the names
inherited from Marco Polo were so different from those recorded by the
Portuguese that they were not recognised, and consequently several
states and islands actually in southern and south-eastern Asia were
duplicated in the southern hemisphere. Mercator’s Terra Australis,
entirely fictitious except for the north coast of Tierra del Fuego, was
popularised by his world map of 1569 and Ortelius’ representation of it
in his famous atlas of the following year. Only very slowly did it
disappear from maps as new discoveries gradually revealed that it did
not exist where Mercator had placed it. It survived, at least in part, for
almost two centuries, while Jave-la-Grande only really lasted for a quarter
of a century, and even then only on maps originating from the French
Dieppe school of cartographers.
Jave-la-Grande, despite its position on the Dieppe maps, and despite the superficial similarity of part of its east coast to part of Australia’s east coast, provides no evidence whatsoever of a Portuguese discovery of Australia in the 1520s. Evidence from other sources may conceivably yet materialise, but it will have to be much more convincing than any hitherto produced.32

In view of the toponymic nature of the case I have presented and the conclusion reached, it is an interesting coincidence that Dalrymple, in the very work that began the Jave-la-Grande/Australia controversy over two hundred years ago, should have commented in a note: ‘Attention to Names, where Native Names have been preferred, frequently clears away errors of long standing.’33

Notes


2 The best known attempts in recent years are:

(iii) ——, Chance Discovery of Australia and New Zealand by Portuguese and Spanish Navigators between 1521 and 1528, Palmerston North, 1983 (the original French text, published by the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris in 1982, contains extensive notes and reproductions).


Items (i)–(iv) contain specific criticisms of aspects of the theories of Kenneth McIntyre and Ian McKiggan; items (v)–(viii) are primarily toponymic studies.


5 Reproduced in G.P. Rouffaer and J.W. Ijzerman (eds), De Eerste Schipvaart der Nederlands
near Oost-Indië 1585–1597, s'Gravenhage, 1915, vol. 1, in the pocket at the back. A simplified outline of the relevant portion is reproduced in op. cit. 3(v) above, fig. 4, with comments on pp. 28–30.

6 Giacopo Gastaldi, Il Disegno della Terza Parte dell’Asia, 1562, British Library, maps, M.T. 11. g. 1 (6).


8 Martin Llewellyn, MS atlas, c. 1600, Library of Christ Church, Oxford, chart O. 14

9 Jean Alfonse, Les Voyages Asantauraux, Poitiers, [1559], pp. 64–5.


13 Compare the texts on folios XXXIV, XXXV and XXXVII of Le Testu’s Cosmographie with Hervé’s 'identifications' in his book, op. cit. 2(iii) above, and especially in the original French edition.


17 ‘Cantino’ world chart, Biblioteca Estense, Modena, MS. C.G.A. 2; reproduced in PMC, vol. I, plates 4 and 5.


19 Nuño García de Torreno, untitled map of Asia, Biblioteca Reale de Torino, Turin, portolanOXVI2. See the partial reproduction in R.A. Skelton, Explorers’ Maps, London, 1958, fig. 87.

20 William Hacke, A Chart of the Straits of Sunda, c. 1680, British Library, K. Mar., vi, 1, 55.

21 An interesting case of divided inscriptions is provided by one author. He wished to prove that the space between Java and Sumbawa (Arnhem Land and Cape York as he maintained) was really the shallow Gulf of Carpentaria. He managed to misread two Indonesian place names, one of which was written on two levels. He then proceeded to ‘translate’ the result into a grammatically impossible Portuguese sentence which he rendered into English as ‘No boats go here’. Generations of writers have since uncritically accepted and repeated his erroneous conclusion. See George Collingridge, The Discovery of Australia, Sydney, 1985, p. 168; facsimile eds 1983 and 1987. See also my detailed comments in op. cit. 3(v) above, pp. 15–16.


24 British Admiralty chart 3986.


27 Alexander Dalrymple, Poolo Condor; the chart is included in Ra 29, Dalrymple Charts, vol. 1, 1740–1805, Map Section, National Library of Australia, Canberra; it is also reproduced as fig. 5 in 3(vii) above.


29 João de Barros, Decada Terceira da Asia, Lisbon, 1777, part 1ª, livro 2º, pp. 177–84.

30 Gerard Mercator, set of 12 globe gores, Louvain, 1541; reproduced in R.W. Shirley, op. cit., plate 104. A forthcoming study of all the inscriptions on and associated with the Mercator southern continent will show that, apart from the north coast of Tierra del Fuego, it was an outline invented to accommodate a number of pieces of erroneous information. It will show that Ortelius, on his world map of 1564 (reproduced in R.W. Shirley, op. cit., plate 97), introduced an enormous scale error in his representation of Tierra del Fuego’s north coast. He evidently copied this error from an unidentified Italian cartographer. It will also show that one of Mercator’s inscriptions, Pitaororum regio, resulted from a series of consequential errors by Johannes Schöner (1515), Oronte Fine (1531), an anonymous cartographer (c. 1535) and Mercator himself (1541). It is not evidence of an early Portuguese discovery of Western Australia, as A. Donald Troupson, by an intuitive leap, suggests in his ‘Pitaororium Regio (Region of Parrots): Fact or Fiction?’, The Globe, no. 30 (1988), pp. 23–41.


32 Four items of a non-cartographic nature are frequently cited as supposed evidence of a Portuguese discovery of Australia. It is idle to speculate on the ‘Mohogany Ship’ until it has been found again and scientifically examined; critical scrutiny of the other three items is contained in the following articles which convincingly show them to be of no evidentiary value whatsoever:

(i) M. Pearson, The Bittangbeau ruin — who built it?, National Parks and Wildlife Service of New South Wales, 1980;

See also articles by E.D. Gill and Ian McKiggen in Bill Potter (ed.), *The Mahogany Ship: Relic or Legend?*, Warrnambool, 1987.

33 Alexander Dalrymple, op. cit. 1 above, p. 2.