Yet Another Version of the Portuguese 'Discovery' of Australia

W. A. R. Richardson

Abstract: In this article, written in response to the recent publication of a book by Peter Trickett, Beyond Capricorn: How Portuguese adventurers secretly discovered and charted Australia and New Zealand 250 years before Captain Cook, the author dismisses the latest claims that the Portuguese discovered Australia.

Peter Trickett’s book Beyond Capricorn: How Portuguese adventurers secretly discovered and charted Australia and New Zealand 250 years before Captain Cook (Bowden, Adelaide, South Australia: East Street Publications, 2007), recently publicised worldwide, is the sixth book since 1893 to claim that the Portuguese discovered Australia in the 1520s.

The details of the claims are all different, even though they are all based on the same supposed evidence - the appearance, exclusively on some fifteen mid-16th century French maps, of a large, enigmatic ‘continent’ lying immediately south of Indonesia.

On all of them it is attached to Sumbawa, in some cases to Java as well, and in yet others to the north coast of Tierra del Fuego also. On none of the maps does the ‘continent’ have a south coast. The inscriptions are nearly all either in Portuguese, or French, or Gallicised Portuguese, yet not a single surviving Portuguese map, chart, or other pre-1600 document shows any indication of this ‘continent’ or of Australia. The only landmass of comparable size even vaguely in that position is Australia. It has therefore been naively assumed by many that it must be Australia.

At least three different speculative explanations for this presumed misplacement of ‘Australia’ some 24° west and some 5° north of its real position have been produced, but none is convincing. It has been assumed by some that Arnhem Land and Cape York were confused by French cartographers with Java and Sumbawa respectively, and the former two features submerged under the latter two, in order to account for the Indonesian place-names on ‘Arnhem Land’ and ‘Cape York’. Gavin Menzies tried to prove that the island identified on all the maps as Java actually was Arnhem Land, by ‘translating’ selected Javanese place-name inscriptions, claiming that they were in medieval Portuguese! He even passed off the word java in one inscription as being a mis-rendering of the word Gove, the peninsula in eastern Arnhem Land which was not so named until 1943!

Part of the east coast of this landmass, usually referred to as Jave la Grande, does perhaps look a bit like the supposedly corresponding coast of Queensland and northern NSW, but there is no Australian feature corresponding to the large triangular projection at its southern end. No less than six different speculative identifications of this awkward, anomalous feature have been produced, including two different headlands of Tasmania and the East Cape of New Zealand’s North Island.

It is a basic principle of research that the proof of any hypothesis requires that all available evidence should be critically examined. Trickett fails lamentably in this regard. He uses only about 10% of the relevant material. He examines the coastal outlines and inscriptions on the charts of only one cartographer, whose identity is unknown. He disregards the differing details on all the other so-called Dieppe maps.

The ‘Vallard’ atlas of 1547, identified by the name of its one-time owner, is unique in one particular regard. On both the east and west coasts of the ‘continent’ of Jave la Grande, called Terra Java in this atlas, there are over fifty coastal inscriptions, where the other Dieppe maps have about ten on each, varying slightly in number and spelling from one to another. The most significant ones on the west coast are omitted from the ‘Vallard’ west coast, and some from the east coast too. Trickett assumes that the ‘Vallard’ cartographer had access to much more information than all the other cartographers. The assumption is palpably wrong. Some cartographers inserted invented inscriptions on coastlines that had relatively few, in order to impress whichever wealthy dignitary the map or atlas was intended for. This is clearly one such case. Trickett

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assumes that the ‘Vallard’ inscriptions on those two coasts are in Portuguese or French. Anyone familiar with Romance languages who examines them will realise that the scribe or cartographer responsible was an appalling linguist. The inscriptions are in an astonishing jumble of languages, adjectives sometimes failing to agree with the related noun. By wishful thinking and a vivid imagination Trickett manages to match up a number of these hybrid inscriptions with features on the ‘Australian’ coastline.

In comparing enigmatic coastlines on small-scale 16th century maps with their supposed equivalents on larger scale modern maps, scale is a very relevant matter. However, on none of Trickett’s ‘comparative’ coastline sketch maps on pages 101, 122, 155, 173, 182, 298 and 314, is any scale shown. This causes him and his readers to fail to realise that his ‘Wilson’s Promontory’ is some 17 degrees, nearly 2000 kilometres, south of the real Wilson’s Promontory!

If evidence does not suit a theory, one ‘solution’ is to alter it. Trickett’s ‘solution’ to the embarrassing problem presented by the major, key feature of the east coast triangular promontory is to assume that the French joined two sections of map incorrectly. So on that speculative pretext he doctors the promontory by rotating it clockwise by 90°, thus turning its headland into ‘Wilson’s Promontory’, and extending the ‘Australian’ coastline to west of ‘Kangaroo Island’. It also enables him to turn an adjacent island into New Zealand’s ‘North Island’, with some speculative, dotted coastline added on page 232 to make it look rather more like North Island than it really does. Such unscrupulous tinkering with ‘evidence’ produces fiction, not history.

A quite different solution to the identity of Jave la Grande/Terra Java was recently published, using all the available evidence. It shows that both coasts are actually copies of very early, differently-scaled, Portuguese sketch charts of the coasts of southwest Java, and southern Vietnam, together with the islands east of it. There is absolutely no doubt that the west coast of Jave la Grande/Terra Java represents the west and southwest coasts of Java. The inscriptions on the other Dieppe maps prove it, the word gao (Javanese), is but one; it is on other maps, but not in the ‘Vallard’ atlas.

There are enough inscriptions on the east coast and the islands east of it, to support the claim that it represents the southern half of the coast of Vietnam; there is absolutely no need to doctor the difficult triangular promontory - it is the Mekong delta. One example in point is the inscription ‘aljofar’. Trickett, as a result of his unjustifiable tampering with the problematic triangular promontory, suggests that the word aljofar is Polynesian, and attaches it to Tonga. The word is Portuguese, of Arabic origin, meaning ‘pearl’. In the 16th century only three areas in Asia were renowned for pearls – the Persian Gulf, the area between Sri Lanka and India, and Hainan Island off the south coast of China, northeast of Vietnam. On the original, undoctored, ‘Vallard’ east coast, it appears north of the triangular promontory (the Mekong delta). The word aljofar frequently appeared in association with Ainam (Hainan Island) on Portuguese maps, and does so on another of the Dieppe maps, the Harleian, or Dauphin map. On some non-Portuguese maps Aljofar actually identified Hainan Island, or a town on it.

The French evidently believed that these two charts were genuine, but they were unable to identify them from the unfamiliar inscriptions. Both originals must have lacked any identification of scale and latitude. The French therefore speculatively added both charts to the blank south coasts of Java and Sumbawa, under the impression that they could be part of the great southern continent which was widely believed to exist.

As Trickett himself says, on his page 143, this solution by ‘a retired Australian academic... has been met with acclaim in orthodox academic circles’. However, he appears to have been unable to counter either identification, for he mentions neither the author of the recent book, Was Australia charted before 1606? The Jave la Grande inscriptions (namely myself), nor the publisher (National Library of Australia), nor the date (2006) in either his text or in his chapter notes; and he omits my name from his index, although he does include it in his bibliography. In an endeavour to discredit the unnamed book’s contents, he adopts a ‘man of straw’ tactic, stating that the unnamed author claims ‘to have proved that the entire map of Terra Java is the coast of Vietnam’. He then proceeds to ridicule this ludicrous, manifestly false supposed summary. The standards of scholarship in Beyond Capricorn are self-evident!

The initial blanket publicity given to Peter Trickett’s ‘sensational’ book suggests that it will sell for a while. However, the level of scepticism aroused by its proximity to the unmasking of Gavin Menzies’ 1421. The year China discovered the world, suggests that the true nature of Trickett's book will become apparent much more quickly.