

Claiming California: From *Terra Incognita* to Miguel de Venegas

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Early modern European knowledge about California was informed by the impressions of the first explorers as well as by more empirical information collected over the centuries that followed, and from which the shape and extent of that territory slowly grew out of the shadows of *terra incognita* and Spanish possession of it became consolidated. National claims on its periphery, however, provoked continued debate about the geographical scope of California, and the desire to possess it led both English and Spanish authors and cartographers to represent these national claims, and by extension, to fill in and occupy the otherwise blank space with information that demonstrated possession. By the eighteenth century, contemporaneous textual and cartographical configurations of the American west fused empirical knowledge of that territory with an imagined landscape, sustaining an international competition for territory. This article explores early endeavours to claim California within the New World territories of England and Spain from the sixteenth century to the reception of Miguel de Venegas' *Noticia de la California*, published in 1757.

KEYWORDS California history, exploration, cartography, Miguel de Venegas

Khōra “means”: place occupied by someone, country, inhabited place, marked place, rank, post, assigned position, territory, or region
Jacques Derrida. *On the Name*, 109.

Sixteenth-century developments in surveying and describing spaces and landscapes helped objectify properties and territories, making them tangible and subsequently associating them with an individual or collective sense of ownership or entitlement. Intensifying this association at a collective, national level are chorographic characteristics that appear on regional and international maps in the form of language, symbols, and narrative, explicating the nation's historical relationship with a place,

and filling an otherwise empty space — Plato’s receptacle or *chōra*.¹ The map and the documentation that influenced it also represented the potential for both territorial expansion and national claims on those lands. The cartographic treatment of blank spaces, and the map’s mitigation of unknown space relative to known space,² reveals a culture for collecting not only territory and its contents, but also information in the form of textual and cartographic sources, in a period when materiality and collecting had become mainstream preoccupations.³ The commodification of cartographic information subsequently necessitated the collection of new and authoritative sources about spaces such as California,⁴ all of which became consumed by the publisher’s client.⁵ The reader’s access to California was complicated by an awareness of territorial ambition and national political interests, which sometimes resulted in the falsification of information about that territory,⁶ or the exclusion of certain types of information from a national or linguistic collective consciousness. Far from being an inventory of objects and places, the early modern map also proffered historicizing narrative elements that explained its geographical configuration, and it increasingly was used to illustrate a book’s arguments rather than stand alone as a wall map.⁷ In one sense, the absence of information about California invited the insertion of narrative threads into the representation of that space, and these ranged from its insularity and relationship to the Asian continent to the Northwest Passage. In another sense, however, authors and mapmakers deliberately cultivated this Platonic void for distinct purposes. This article explores the emergence of California on early maps influenced by international competition to acquire the Northwest, as it grew from a conceptualized territory-to-be-possessed into a territorial possession.⁸

¹ *Timeaeus* 49a. About *chōra*, see Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place. A Philosophical History* (Berkeley, 1997); Jacques Derrida, *On the Name* (Stanford, 1995); and John Sallis, *Chorology: On Beginning in Plato’s Timaeus* (Bloomington, IN, 1999).

² Topics explored by Thomas J. Bassett, “Cartography and Empire Building in Nineteenth-Century West Africa,” *Geographical Review* 84.3 (1994), pp. 222–24; Alfred Hiatt, “Blank Spaces on the Earth,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 15.2 (2002), pp. 223–50; Donald L. McGuirk, Jr., “Terra Incognita,” in *The Oxford Companion to World Exploration*, ed. David Buisseret (Oxford, 2007), Vol. 2, p. 295; Seymour I. Schwartz, *The Mismapping of America* (Rochester, 2003); Henry R. Wagner, *The Cartography of the Northwest Coast of America to the Year 1800* (Amsterdam: N. Israel, 1937; reprint 1968); and, John K. Wright, “*Terrae Incognitae*: The Place of the Imagination in Geography,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 37.1 (1947), pp. 1–15.

³ Daniela Bleichmar and Peter C. Mancall, eds., *Collecting Across Cultures. Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Philadelphia, 2011), pp. 2–3.

⁴ Matthew H. Edney, “Reconsidering Enlightenment Geography and Map Making: Reconnaissance, Mapping, Archive,” in *Geography and Enlightenment*, ed. David N. Livingstone and Charles W. J. Withers (Chicago, 1999), pp. 167–68.

⁵ See my chapter, “*Terra Incognita* on Maps of Eighteenth-Century Spanish America: Commodification, Consumption and the Transition from Inaccessible to Public Space,” in *Eighteenth-Century Thing Theory in a Global Context: From Consumerism to Celebrity Culture*, ed. Ileana Baird and Christina Ionescu (Burlington, VT, 2013).

⁶ Brian Harley, “Maps, Knowledge, and Power,” in *Geographic Thought. A Praxis of Perspective*, ed. George Henderson and Marvin Waterstone (New York, 2009), p. 136.

⁷ Joan Pau Rubiés, “Imagen Mental e Imagen Artística en la Representación de los Pueblos no Europeos. Salvajes y Civilizados, 1500–1650,” in *Historia imaginada. Los usos políticos de las imágenes en la Europa Moderna*, ed. J. L. Palos and D. Carrió-Invernizzi (Madrid, 2007), pp. 327–57: 329–32.

⁸ My gratitude to Don McGuirk and Janine Rogers who commented on earlier versions of this article, portions of which I presented before the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies meeting in fall, 2009, as well as the Marjorie Young Bell Faculty Fellowship, which funded my research for this article.

California in the European imagination

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century mapmakers struggled to represent North America because much of the north and west of the continent remained uncharted until the end of the eighteenth century. This unknown quality persevered, Carl Murray believes, because “the discoveries of navigators such as Drake, Schouten, Le Maire, and Tasman did little more than modify the shape of terra incognita in the minds of some, and it long continued to be represented in maps;”⁹ early notions about this area of the continent did not easily evolve or become modernized. Michael Mathes credits a 1510 Spanish edition of the chivalric novel *Amadís de Gaula* with proposing the existence of an island named California populated by Amazonian-like women.¹⁰ Hernán Cortés discovered that island: according to his fourth letter (1525), the pearl-rich island was a ten days’ journey from Mexico, and entirely populated by women.¹¹ A map prepared in 1535 and based on this information depicted the island known for its *perlas* off the southern tip of present-day Baja California at the entrance to the Sea of Cortés.¹² The fantastical island of women could still be found a century later on maps of the islands that populated the Sea of Cortés.¹³

English historians proffered a different perspective on California’s discovery. Although many maintained that it was originally found by Cortés, others insisted that Francis Drake “landed there and took possession of it in 1578.”¹⁴ One English textbook claimed that California had been discovered by Cortés in 1578, a factual error that illustrates the requisitioning and subsequent manipulation of information about California for political purposes.¹⁵

In addition to its discovery, the insularity of California was also debated — a topic to which we will return — and in some cases, cartographical representations hedged on its shape. Giovanni Battista, on his portolan chart of the Americas (Venice, c. 1543), simply left the coastline open and unfinished so that it was neither an island nor a peninsula,¹⁶ whereas others left no doubt: California was attached to the peninsula on the map published in López de Gómara’s *Historia de las Indias*,¹⁷ as it was on Paulo Forlani’s map (1565), notable for forming a single landmass from Asia and North America.¹⁸

⁹ Carl Murray, “Mapping *Terra Incognita*,” *Polar Record* 41.2 (2005), pp. 103–12: 108.

¹⁰ W. Michael Mathes, “The Mythological Geography of California: Origins, Development, Confirmation and Disappearance,” *The Americas* 45.3 (1989), pp. 315–41: 316–17. Mathes offers a more complete historiography for California’s insularity in his article.

¹¹ H. Cortés, *La quarta relación* (Toledo: Gaspar de Ávila, 1525), 5r. Biblioteca Nacional de España. R/15460. “. . . Que esta yslla esta diez jornadas desta provincia [de México] . . . se afirman mucho aver una yslla toda poblada de mugeres sin varo[n] ningun[o].”

¹² *Mapa de la Nueva Tierra de Santa Cruz*. After May 3rd, 1535. Archivo General de Indias. Mapas y Planos, México, 6.

¹³ *Mapa de la Peninsula y Golfo de California*. 1632. Archivo General de Indias. Mapas y Planos, México, 56.

¹⁴ Edmund Burke and William Burke, *An Account of the European Settlements in America* (London, 1757), vol. 2, ch. 7, p. 237.

¹⁵ R. Turner. *A New and Easy Introduction to Universal Geography . . . to a Youth at School*. 6th ed. (London, 1794), p. 228.

¹⁶ Many maps use both; see, for example, Kino’s 1701 map (Archivo General de Indias. Mapas y Planos, México 95) and M. de Venegas’ 1757 map.

¹⁷ Zaragoza: Miguel Capila, 1553.

¹⁸ *Universale descrizione di tutta la terra conosciuta* (Venice: F. Bertelli, 1565).

The question of California's peninsularity was joined by questions about territorial possession. If the peninsularity of California had yet to be determined, then the land that attached it to the peninsula, and the adjacent continental land if it were an island, was unclaimed *terra incognita*. In 1581, a map updated by Drake's voyage was issued from Antwerp.¹⁹ This "true description" called the peninsula of California *Nova Albion*, after England's antiquated name, and it occupied the entire Northwest, bounded to the east by *Nova Francia* and to the south at the Sea of Cortés by *Nova Hispania*. A mass-produced map by Michael Lok (1582), circulated by Richard Hakluyt, appended a peninsular California to the Sierra Nevada, the northwesternmost territory below the Verrazano Sea (Figure 1).²⁰

His map also noted that the English were the last to explore the area (in the year 1580) and located an English ship directly above the text "Sierra Nevada," the coastline for which was absent compared with the well-defined coastline north of Florida. Frobisher's 1576–1578 expedition into northeastern Canada was also indicated on this map, and the coastline that would have demarcated this territory from the

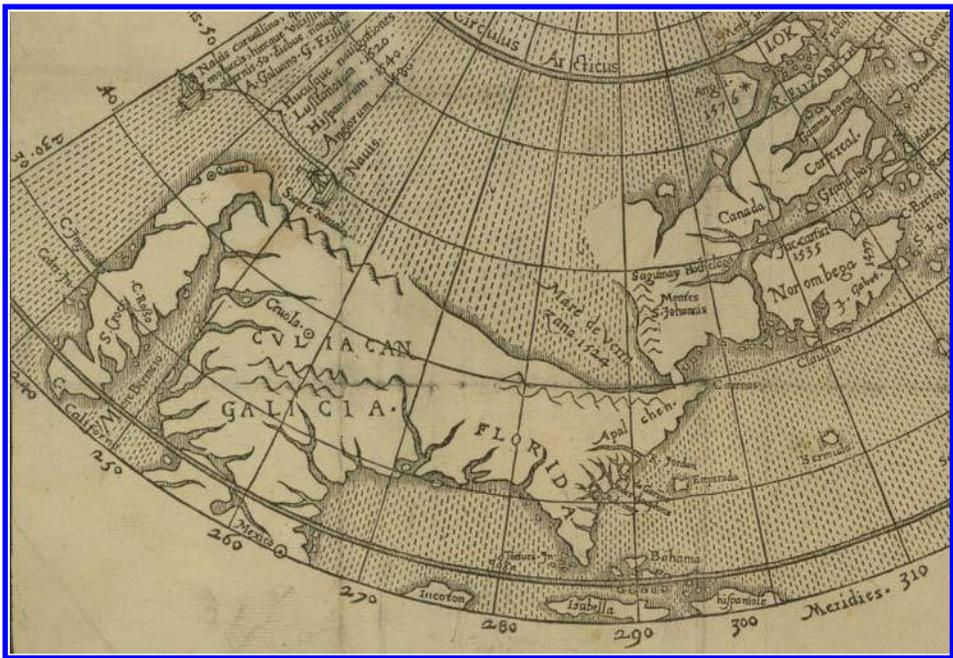


FIGURE 1 The New World by Michael Lok, in Richard Hakluyt, *Divers voyages touching the discoverie of America* (London: Thomas Woodcocke, 1582). Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University D582 H155d.

¹⁹ Nicola van Sype, *La herdike enterpinse fait par le Signeur Draeck d'Avoir circuit toute la Terre* (Antwerp, 1581), Library of Congress, G3201.S12 1581.S9.

²⁰ This sea was named for the Atlantic explorer who believed it to be the Pacific Ocean. In 1527, Vesconte Maggiolo mapped the expedition and according to his version of North America, the narrow strip of land to the east is all that remained of much of the eastern sea board.

Verrazano Sea was similarly undefined, perhaps communicating the promise of territorial expansion into the continent. Cibola was marked with the same map sign that indicated Quivira and Mexico City as the important urban centres of North America, the latter of which was the only one that existed at the time.²¹

Subsequent maps represented the English claim to California with one of two toponyms: New Albion and Port of Sir Francis Drake. One or both are present on maps representing the peninsula of California after 1581, including a map originally created by Petro Martire d'Anghiera (Paris, 1587). There were some notable exceptions, however, as not all non-Spanish maps that represented the Californian peninsula after 1581 used these British toponyms.²² By the eighteenth century, two terms, California and New Albion, were almost always paired in British textual descriptions.²³ The placement of this text became just as important as the extent of the territories represented on the map, particularly on some early maps (such as the 1587 Hakluyt world map and the Molyneux map of 1600), because these toponyms migrated from the peninsula to the mainland, expanding the territorial claim made by English and Spanish authors and cartographers.

Competition for California and its region required a sensitive approach to the publication of texts related to exploration and conquest, which affected the quality of sources collected by the cartographer or by the reader. Spain prohibited the publication of many sixteenth-century histories and maps because they contained new information about the New World.²⁴ It also forbade the addition or deletion of names and places from the official map of Spanish territories, the *padrón general*, which was used for both administrative and commercial purposes, and therefore stored at the Casa de la Contratación in Seville.²⁵ The Spanish believed the English would take advantage of that information and seek territory in the same region, a fear shared by the English toward the Spanish.

The ensuing vacuum of information, coupled with national rhetoric, allowed English authors to diminish the extent of conquest and exploration undertaken in California, which they characterized as only weakly settled by Spain. British politician and historian, Edmund Burke, and his brother William, claimed in their history book that the territory north of New Mexico was “not ascertained . . . [and] the Spanish settlements there are comparatively weak; however, they are every day increasing, in proportion as they discover mines.”²⁶ In Burke’s view, the Spanish were motivated by

²¹ Both Arizona and New Mexico have places named after Cibola to this day.

²² See, for example, Abraham Ortelius, *Americae sive Novi orbis* (Antwerp: C. Plantin, 1587) and the Petrus Plancius-inspired *America sive Novus orbis* that accompanied de Bry’s edition of H. Benzoni, *Historia del mondo nuovo* (Frankfurt, 1596).

²³ John Barrow describes “Nova Albion, tho’it has been since known by the name of California,” in *A Collection of Authentic, Useful and Entertaining Voyages and Discoveries* (London, 1765), vol. 1, p. 175. Most history books by British authors relate the naming of New Albion by Drake.

²⁴ Michel van Groesen, *The Representations of the Overseas World in the De Bry Collection of Voyages (1590–1634)* (Leiden, 2008), p. 194.

²⁵ Harry Kelsey, “American Discoveries Noted on the Planisphere of Sancho Gutiérrez,” in *Early Images of the Americas: Transfer and Invention*, ed. Robert E. Lewis and Jerry M. Williams (Tucson, 1993), pp. 247–62: 247.

²⁶ Burke and Burke, *An Account of the European Settlements in America*, vol. 2, ch. 7, p. 237.

their greed for wealth to expand into territory that he assessed as nonetheless poorly or weakly settled, the truth of which became a concern expressed by the Spanish over the quality of their fortifications in the event that the British or Russians tried to attack California.²⁷

Burke's criticism was also directed at the Jesuits who continued to establish settlements throughout California. Miguel de Venegas, an eighteenth-century Mexican missionary and historian of California, who in fact never went to California, called them *apostolic conquerers*. The use of missions and missionaries such as Venegas became a strategy for the occupation of land and, indeed, a means through which terra incognita was comprehended within the realm of Christianity. Missionaries, after all, performed the same task that Jesus asked of his apostles before his death by spreading Christianity to the rest of the world. Venegas, furthermore, compared aspects of the settlements orchestrated by Jesuits during his lifetime with those of Cortés in Mexico and likened a Jesuit by the name of Juan María de Salvatierra (d. 1717) to the conqueror of Mexico.

The similarities between the two men did not stop at their ability to spread Catholicism or to occupy space with aspects of Hispanic culture, including physical and political infrastructure, and language. Venegas specifically stated that Salvatierra and Cortés shared a paternal compartment toward the indigenous people and their souls. Describing how Salvatierra lashed himself rather than the Indians who did not attend a feast-day mass, Venegas related that:

The zealous and very humble Father did not lose this chance of impressing upon the Indians the sense of humiliation, with a steadfastness very like that shown, under similar circumstances, by Don Fernando Cortés, the notable conqueror of New Spain who, on fiesta-day when all the congregation had assembled in the church for mass, ordered the official in charge to give him some blows with a whip, such as should be given one who failed to attend mass.²⁸

In this light, Burke's comment about the weak Spanish claim to California became a criticism directed at Catholicism, because the Jesuits were largely responsible for Spanish expansion into the American Southwest. Venegas, on the other hand, cultivated this association of Mexico's conqueror with a celebrated Jesuit for the purpose of justifying and reinforcing the civilized occupation of those territories.

The marriage of old and new sources ensured the persistence and fixity of early knowledge of the Americas well into the eighteenth century. The use of Cortés, as well as the recasting of Salvatierra in his image, exemplifies the appearance of sixteenth-century knowledge about California and its area in eighteenth-century texts

²⁷ A 1788 letter from the Viceroy of New Spain confirms he was preoccupied by the shabby fortifications along the coast of California. Detailing the events of 1777, he admits that "no es posible resguardar y fortificar todos los puntos interesantes de nuestras dilatadas costas." Archivo General de Indias. Estado, 20,N.39.

²⁸ The English translation of *El Apostol mariano representado en la vida del V.P. Juan María de Salvatierra* (México, 1754) is found in Miguel de Venegas, *Juan María de Salvatierra of the Company of Jesus; Missionary in the Province of New Spain, and Apostolic Conqueror of the Californias*, trans. Marguerite Eyer Wilbur (Cleveland, 1929), see Book 1, ch. 13, p. 128.

and maps that nevertheless incorporated eighteenth-century information, validating the representation using historical authorities as well as the most recent sources and eye witness reports collected by Venegas. Depending on which nationalistic view of the region influenced the map reader, eighteenth-century California was cartographically as much an island as it was a peninsula or a territory joining Asia and America, despite its long-before established attachment to the continent as a peninsula, and despite the Spanish king's decree of 1747 that it was not an island. Venegas' original manuscript — as it was overhauled by his posthumous editor — upheld this insularity as well as the existence of Anian.²⁹ Cortés moreover remained a source that justified California as an island in this period,³⁰ although by the mid-eighteenth century, editors usually positioned a footnote below this description that clarified “It is confirmed that California is not an island, as some once believed, but rather a peninsula.”³¹ But, Cortés' description was not always corrected, and such was the case in a 1779 French edition of his letters.³²

In contrast, some authors believed — despite the quantity and quality of information about the peninsularity of California — that the extent of California was still undetermined. For instance, one author argued that little was known of California, so that “The Dutch say they formerly took a Spanish vessel in those seas, which had sailed round California, and found it to be an island; but this story cannot be depended on. There is no certain account of its shape or bigness.”³³ To another extreme, however, is Thomas Bankes' contention that California, “the most northern of all the Spanish dominions, . . . was for a long time supposed to be an island, but at last was found to be *only* a peninsula, issuing from the north coasts of America, and extending into the Pacific Ocean [my emphasis].”³⁴ The map that accompanied Bankes' book expressed California as a sliver of land that ran parallel to Mexico. North of where the peninsula joined with the continent was the region of New Albion, and north of this, the Port of Sir Francis Drake! Bankes minimized California — it was *only* a peninsula — and he promoted English interests by re-determining the location of the town named for the British conqueror farther northward along the Pacific coast of the continent than it usually was positioned on maps.

Asia and the Northwest Passage

The insularity of California was not the only geographical question of the region in this period, and Cortés again became a source for its existence: Europeans sought a

²⁹ Mathes, “The Mythological Geography of California,” p. 334.

³⁰ See, for example, a Spanish reference to California as an island, in Ginés Campillo, *Compendio curioso del Atlas abreviado* (Madrid, 1766), pp. 111–12.

³¹ *Historia de Nueva-España . . . por Hernan Cortes* (Mexico, 1770), p. 349; *Historia de Méjico . . . por Hernan Cortés* (New York, 1828), p. 534; H. Cortés, “Fourth Letter,” *Cartas de relación*, in *Historiadores Primitivos de Indias*, ed. Enrique de Vedia (Madrid, 1852), vol. 1, p. 102; *Cartas y relaciones de Hernan Cortés* (Paris, 1866), p. 289.

³² H. Cortés, *Correspondance de Fernand Cortés avec l'empereur Charles-Quint*. (En Suisse, 1779), p. 411.

³³ Woods Rogers, *A Compendium of Authentic and Entertaining Voyages* (London, 1766), vol. 7, p. 241.

³⁴ Thomas Bankes, *A new royal authentic and complete system of universal geography* (London, c. 1787).

northern waterway connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Citing Cortés's fourth letter in which he speculated that there was a strait stretching from the North Atlantic to the Pacific, Thomas Jefferys maintained that Cortés believed in the potential of earlier Portuguese discoveries by Gaspar Corte Real along the coast of the Canadian Maritimes.³⁵ Cortés articulated a plan to enter the waterway from the Pánuco, Mexico, area heading northeast while positioning ships in the northwest Atlantic that would meet their counterparts who had departed from the Pacific. Several other sixteenth-century Spanish authors noted the possibility of the passage's existence, including López de Gómara, Juan de Acosta, and Juan de Torquemada, and they were used as authorities by British authors over the following centuries to justify the necessity for further exploration.

The relationship between the Northwest Passage and the territory north of California was expressed on a 1634 French manuscript map (Figure 2)³⁶ on which an insular California situated just southeast of *Nouvelle Albion* was paired with the label *Amerique*. To the east of California was the "Great Ocean, discovered in the year 1612, by Henry Hudson, English. It is believed that from here there is a passage to Japan." In a later French map that was used in multiple editions and translations of a French cosmography, California was an island that was also called New



FIGURE 2 North America by Jean Guérard, *Carte Universelle Hydrographique* (1634) *Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cartes et Plans, GE SH ARCH- 15.*

³⁵ Thomas Jefferys, *The Great Probability of a North West Passage* (London, 1768), pp. 81–85.

³⁶ Jean Guérard, *Carte Universelle Hydrographique*, 1634. *Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cartes et Plans, GE SH ARCH-15.*

Albion.³⁷ Across from the Vermillion Sea, which emptied into the Strait of Anian, were Anian and Quivira, “also known as New Albion.” This configuration effectively positioned British territory on the continent south of a potential Pacific entrance to the Northwest Passage. Despite omitting the British parts of Canada, the map minimized the representation of any Spanish claim to the continental northwest by confining its northern-most territory to an island. In contrast to the 1634 manuscript map and the 1681 printed map, many mass-produced French maps treated the connection between California and a Northwest Passage conservatively and refrained from specifically identifying either, and instead designated the region “terres inconnues.”³⁸

In part, the mystique that surrounded California was preserved by Spain’s cautiousness about who could come to it and conduct exploration, in addition to limitations imposed upon the circulation of information. In one early seventeenth-century incident some French explorers were caught and tried before the Junta del Gobierno de Nueva España for having gone to California with the intention of discovering land and for collecting information about it, and because they were foreigners, as foreigners were rarely permitted to travel to or live in Spanish territories abroad.³⁹ According to the manuscript, the French were trying to “demarcar dicha costa, y la de esta Nueva España buscando el Norte.”⁴⁰ As a consequence of the investigation, the Spanish authorities realised that the French explorers had seen some whales enter an apparent waterway in the northern region “that never left,” which led them to presume that there was a strait between the Pacific Ocean and the northern waters of the Americas.⁴¹ That is, Spanish authorities confirmed to their own satisfaction that North America was separate from Asia, which was in their interest, because the Spanish were specifically concerned that “el enemigo descubriese nuevos estrechos para venir a estas costas [de California]” from the Atlantic.

This sort of admission would never be found in a mass-produced text because it effectively pointed to a potential location for the Pacific entrance to the Northwest Passage while authorizing this information with an eye-witness account that had been tested by New Spain’s juridical court. As it was, British authors were suspicious that if a Northwest Passage did exist, it would be found by accessing it from the Pacific rather than from the Atlantic.⁴² Arthur Dobbs in his treatise about the north of

³⁷ *Nova Mexico*, in Pierre Duval, *Geographiae universalis pars prior . . .* (Nuremberg, 1681), after p. 92. John Carter Brown Library E681 D983g.

³⁸ For example, Claude Bernou, *Carte de l’Amérique septentrionale . . . c.* 1681. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, SH 18°, p^o 122, div 2.

³⁹ Linda Newson, “Inmigrantes extranjeros en América española. El experimento colonizador de la Isla de Trinidad,” *Revista de Historia de América* 87.1 (1979), pp. 79–103: p. 88.

⁴⁰ Dated 1637. “Autos de Francisco Esteban Carbonel y otros,” in Archivo General de Indias. Patronato, 31, R.2.

⁴¹ Interestingly, the issue of whales entering a passage without later exiting the passage occurred earlier in Spanish reports about the area and appears to have become a trope that situated the limits of geographical knowledge against the portents of an unknown waterway. Sebastián Vizcaino reported on his 1602 map of Madalena Bay in Mexico that there was a “canal de Ballenas,” and that “no se vio el fin.” Archivo General de Indias. Mapas y Planos, 53, fol. 67v.

⁴² See a mid-century reprint of John Harris, *Navigantium atque itinerantium bibliotheca, or a complete collection of voyages and travels* (London, 1744) and also Samuel Hearne, *A journey from Prince of Wales fort in Hudson’s Bay, to the northern ocean* (London, 1795).

Canada complained that because the Spanish never published details of their travels around California, he could not comment on the islands that may or may not populate the Pacific north of California with respect to a possible entrance to the Northwest Passage.⁴³

The predisposition to orientalize California, as Lok did with the mythical Asian toponym of Quivira, originated in the sixteenth century when explorers such as Columbus and cartographers such as Sebastian Münster labelled it the island of Japan (Zipangri, or Cipango) on his Ptolemaic map, *Novae insulae* (Basil, 1552). Columbus explained that

Y yo así lo tengo, porque creo que sí es así, como por señas que me hizieron todos los indios destas islas y aquellos que llevo yo en los navíos, porque por lengua no los entiendo, es la isla de Cipango, de que se cuentan cosas maravillosas, y en las esferas que yo vi y en las pinturas de mapamundos es ella en esta comarca.⁴⁴

Like Japan, the island of California was proximate to the relatively unexplored continent of Asia which was filled with the same mythology that Johannes Ruysch and Sebastian Münster, along with succeeding generations of cartographers, transferred to the New World, forming the Asian-North American landmass. An eighteenth-century British author endorsed Münster's configuration "of this country to have been very accurate, as not only the islands, but the continent, are laid down nearly as they are known to be situated."⁴⁵ John Campbell asserted in 1741 that California was "part of that vast Continent which joins America to Asia," which is how a "Christian Woman of Mexico" managed to find herself in China, because these lands were believed to be joined.⁴⁶ Some historians also speculated on the racial similarities of Mexicans and East Asians.

The Asian–American geographical configuration used by early sixteenth-century cartographers such as Ruysch was re-popularized in the mid seventeenth century by Nicholas Sanson (Figure 3), and repeated in the subsequent English and French texts published with Sanson's map. On a 1682 English version,⁴⁷ California was again an island, its northern-most port named for Drake. The Vermillion Sea emptied north of California into an unknown body of water. From the west approached the coast of Asia that disappeared bearing east-northeast, just as the coast beyond the Sierra Nevada and Frobisher's exploration of eastern Canada disappeared into the Verrazano Sea on Lok's map. From the east, Hudson Bay emptied into Button Bay, which fed into a sea of glaciers. The unknown space between these three bodies of water was flanked by British territory south at New Albion, and east at British Canada. The

⁴³ Arthur Dobbs, *An account of the countries adjoining to Hudson's Bay in the north-west part of America* (London, 1744), 149.

⁴⁴ Dated 24 October, 1492, in Christopher Columbus, *Los cuatro viajes*, ed. Ignacio B. Anzoátegui (Madrid, 1991), p. 47.

⁴⁵ William Goldson, *Observations on the Passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans* (Portsmouth, 1793), p. 110.

⁴⁶ John Campbell, *A concise history of the Spanish America . . .* (London, 1741), p. 84.

⁴⁷ Bernhardus Verenius, *Cosmography and Geography in two parts* (London, 1682). "A New Mapp of America Septentrionale," is based on a map by Nicolas Sanson, Part 2, after p. 428. John Carter Brown Library, D682 B658c.



FIGURE 3 *Amérique septentrionale* by Nicolas Sanson (Paris: N. Sanson and Pierre Mariette, 1658). *The Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress G3300 1650.S3.*

adjoining of terra incognita to lands already claimed by Spain and England evidently stimulated not only the imaginations of early modern writers and cartographers, but also their desire to push the frontier separating territory possessed by either country from this unknown land farther away with each map.

The impact of Miguel de Venegas' *History of California*

The first history of California was published in Spain in the mid eighteenth century, and within fewer than fifteen years, it had been translated into several European languages. One of the first mass-produced maps of a peninsular California was copied in all translations and versions of Venegas' *History of California*, posthumously edited and published as *Noticia de la California, y de su conquista temporal, y espiritual hasta el tiempo presente* by his editor Andrés Marcos de Burriel in 1757. Burriel overhauled Venegas' original text, correcting and updating it, and reorienting some of the work's arguments, converting California from the island Venegas believed it to be into a peninsula. The English translation, published in 1759, considerably altered the original text; it later formed the basis for Dutch, French and German editions released the following decade. The English preface replaced the original Spanish preface, and advised the "British reader" that "He will learn that the Spaniards have a well-grounded fear of being invaded, . . . by a nation, [that] . . . they would have been thought, half a century ago, in no greater danger than from the

inhabitants, if there is any, in the moon.”⁴⁸ The English editor added to these comments the promise that within the book the reader would discover that the Northwest Passage does indeed exist.⁴⁹ Not surprisingly, the original preface written by Burriel did not mention either the Northwest Passage or the Spanish fear of encroachment upon their territory. In fact, Burriel was particularly concerned about the quality of new information that his work contained, and he submitted it for “censorship . . . by secular persons . . . because the work deals with government and commerce, shows the lack of defenses, reflects the poverty of the region and the danger of Russia and England, and opposes the geographical concepts of the French academicians.”⁵⁰ By French academicians, Burriel was referring to myths circulated by French cartographers about the Spanish exploration of the coast north of California.

The visual material that accompanied the Spanish edition (Figure 4) was also replicated to some extent in the subsequent translations. The map placed after the preface of the first volume was bordered by vignettes of the Californian people. This is the map that is today most associated with Venegas’ text, but it was not the first map to be published alongside the Spanish edition. In 1756, another map accompanied a limited print run of Venegas’ text, having been attached to it by the publisher without Burriel’s consent (Figure 5). Although it illustrated California as a peninsula, it also established a Northwest Passage and placed it in British hands, and it is the 1756 version of the text that was published with this map in its first printing, a copy of which was procured by the English translator and formed the basis for his translation, published in 1759.⁵¹ A text block northwest of Hudson Bay revealed that British ships had found a passage from Hudson Bay to California in the late 1740s. The mapmaker credited Henry Ellis for this information, who published his text and a responsibly less-detailed map about this apparent discovery in 1749.⁵² The 1756 map was based on one published in 1753 by Phillippe Bauche, reproduced for several decades thereafter. According to Aphrodite Karamitsanis, Bauche was notorious for perpetuating the myth that the Spanish had discovered a Northwest Passage, and in fact the waterway is depicted as accessible on a 1784 version of the map despite Cook’s discovery of the ice that blocked the passageway in 1779.⁵³

A book review of the English translation of Venegas’ history furthermore speculated about the extent of the land north of California and its possible attachment to Asia:

⁴⁸ M. de Venegas, *A Natural and Civil History of California* (London, 1759), vol. 1, p. xii.

⁴⁹ The French preface follows suit. M. de Venegas, *Histoire naturelle et civile de la Californie* (Paris, 1766–67), vol. 1, p. xx.

⁵⁰ W. Michael Mathes, “Historical-Biographical Introduction,” in *Obras Californianas del Padre Miguel Venegas, S.J.* (Mexico, 1978), pp. 5–27: p. 13. These concerns were expressed in a letter from Burriel to Richard Wall (dated Aug. 1st, 1754), published in *Colección de documentos inéditos para la historia de España*, ed. Miguel Salvá and Pedro Sainz de Baranda (Madrid, 1848), vol. 13, p. 263.

⁵¹ A review of the English translation can be found in *The Monthly Review, or Literary Journal* (London, 1759), vol. 20, pp. 497–501.

⁵² The date on the map’s text should read 1747 rather than 1740. Henry Ellis, *A Voyage to Hudson’s-Bay . . . in the years 1746 and 1747* (Dublin, 1749), p. 490.

⁵³ See, for instance, *Carte des nouvelles decouvertes au nord de la mer du sud* (Venice, 1784), reproduced in Aphrodite Karamitsanis, ed., *From Terra Incognita to the Prairie West: A Map Exhibit* (Alberta, 1988), p. 19.

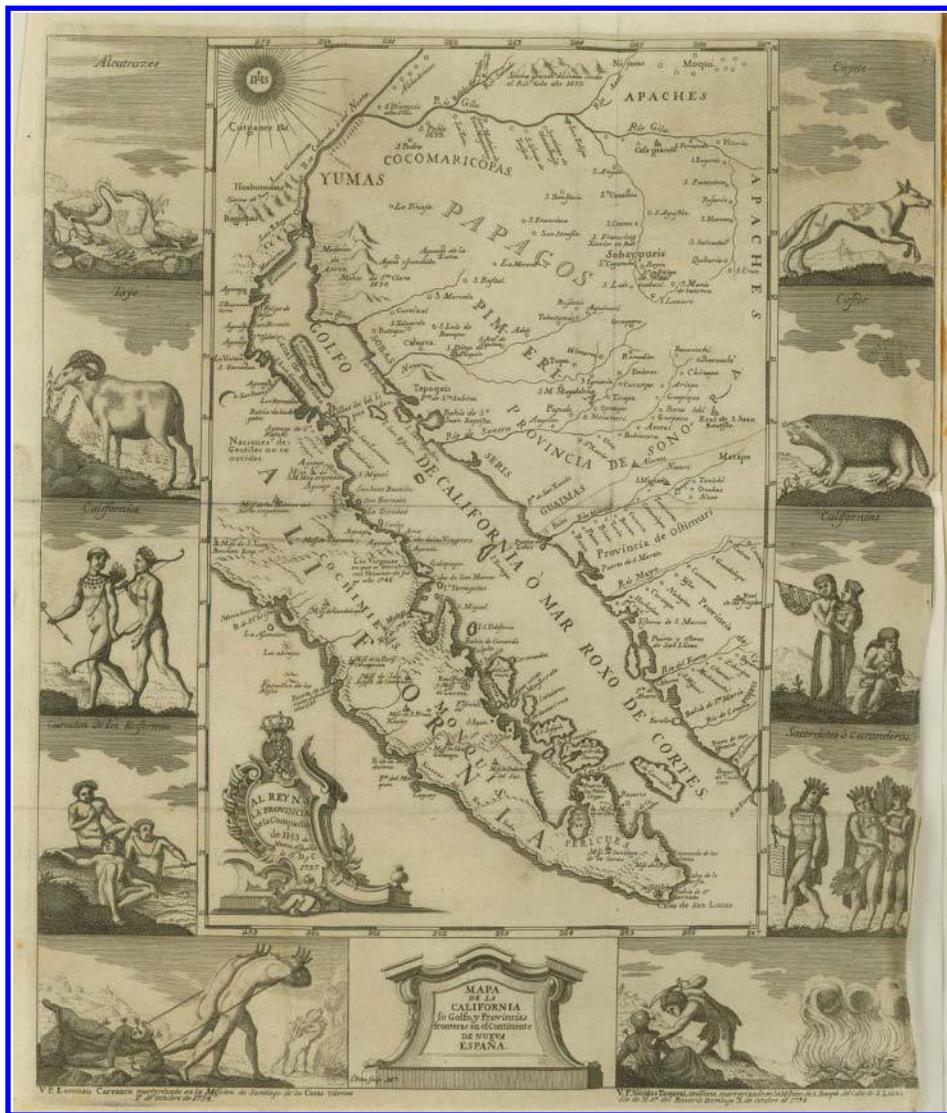


FIGURE 4 *California*, in Miguel de Venegas, *Noticia de la California* (Madrid: Viuda de Manuel Fernández, 1757), vol. 1, after Preface. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University B757 V455n.

We do not find, even from the account before us, whether California, though stretching very far to the north-west, joins to the north-east of Tartary, and that the streights of Anian are to be sought on that side; perhaps it is impossible ever to ascertain whether the space between the north-east of Asia, and the north-west of America, consists of land or water; and yet lucky incidents may determine the question.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ *The Critical Review, or Annals of Literature* (London, 1759), vol. 7, pp. 489–504.



FIGURE 5 *Mapa de la America ... y Mar del Sur* by Manuel Rodríguez (Madrid: Viuda de Manuel Fernández, 1756), vol. 3, after p. 436 of *Noticia*. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University B757 V455n.

Venegas did acknowledge the expedition by Dobbs-Galley in 1746–1747 and its intention “to discover a North West Passage,” which he conceded “would be of great importance to the British Nation,”⁵⁵ but he warned that the endeavor would amount to nothing more than a chimera.⁵⁶ Venegas clearly articulated that California had nothing to do with the discovery of the Northwest Passage,⁵⁷ whereas British authors feigned debate about whether it was an island or a peninsula. They connected the two spaces in order to position England more advantageously to claim new land and a potentially-lucrative trade route by perpetuating the view that terra incognita encroached upon the territory Spain claimed as California, and that England claimed as New Albion.

Burriel’s map had less scope but it established California as a peninsula and was chiefly responsible for consolidating, due to the success of its translations, the

⁵⁵ M. de Venegas, *Noticia de la California, y de su conquista temporal, y spiritual hasta el tiempo presente* (Madrid, 1757), vol. 3, Part 4, pp. 238 and 244, respectively.

⁵⁶ M. de Venegas, *Noticia de la California*, vol. 3, Part 6, p. 248.

⁵⁷ M. de Venegas, *Noticia de la California*, vol. 3, Part 6, p. 282.

veracity of this peninsularity.⁵⁸ A map engraved by J. Gibson, who also engraved the 1759 English version of Venegas' map, illustrated California as a peninsula in 1762 for *The American Gazetteer*.⁵⁹ Gibson positioned a text box in the Pacific off the coast of Mexico explaining that the configuration for California was taken from a map published originally in Spanish by Venegas, but few details from the Venegas map were transferred to this considerably greater scale of map. Nowhere on the Venegas map was New Albion or the Port of Sir Francis Drake mentioned, nor was a border articulated to demarcate California from territory belonging apparently to New Albion to its north, situated just south of the text "Parts Undiscovered" and this to the west of settlements along the western shore of the Hudson Bay.

Jacob Baegert, a German Jesuit who spent several years in California, provides another perspective on the reception of Venegas' work. He wrote, having read Venegas in Spanish, his own version of California's history in German, as he was not aware that a German translation of Venegas had been undertaken until he was quite a way into the endeavor.⁶⁰ Baegert noted that Venegas' work was popular among the English, and identified some defects in the translations, such as the disparity between the length of Venegas' 1757 text and the nearly halved length of the translations. Although he accused the translators of economizing the content of the original text through translation, he harshly criticized Spanish authors for their proclivity to provide too many descriptions and details. He concluded that the English translator simply tidied up the text to make it more enjoyable for the English and subsequent French and German readers.

Baegert disdained the style in which medieval and early modern historians prepared texts about history and geography. Earlier works tended to provide general summaries that related to the topic and situated it in a universal historical and geographical context. As Harry Kelsey notes,

Some of these tales describe incredible men and beasts inhabiting various parts of the world, a fact that has puzzled many historians, who think the Spanish geographers should have known better . . . The stories were footnotes intended to show learned readers that [the author] was familiar with all the standard classical works.⁶¹

These summaries included tales that described not only Amazons and mythical cities such as Quivira; they also spanned great lengths of time and space and served to demonstrate the author's erudition. It was this style of chronicle of which Baegert complained with respect to the inclusion by Venegas of Marco Polo's narrative and the greatness of Rome. A similar observation was made about the motivations for

⁵⁸ Mathes, "The Mythological Geography of California," p. 335.

⁵⁹ *A New and Accurate Map of America*, in *The American Gazetteers* (London, 1762), vol. 1, frontispiece.

⁶⁰ Published at Mannheim, 1772, I refer here to the first Spanish edition edited by Paul Kirchoff, *Noticias de la Península Americana de California* (Mexico, 1942). Kirchoff argues that Baegert originally wrote his text in Spanish, because he himself notes that he has barely used his native tongue of German during his years amongst Spanish Jesuits in California, along with some linguistic oddities that betray the influence of Spanish in the German text, xli.

⁶¹ Kelsey, "American Discoveries Noted on the Planisphere of Sancho Gutiérrez," pp. 248–49.

Venegas' Spanish text by Thomas Jefferys, who had read the 1759 English translation. He also believed that the purpose of Venegas' text was to "induce the Court of Spain to further Conquest . . . and the full settling of California," noting that Venegas betrayed his concern that the British would discover a Northwest Passage if Spain did not take more interest in these lands.⁶² In this vein, the English author further accused Venegas of the common practice of hiding the true sources for some of his new information. A 1787 map by Diego Francisco of California provided a rationale for the quality of information it contained, apologetically warning the reader that "On this map the names of all the Islands, Ports and Rivers, etc. are not all given, because the map was made only to illustrate the happenings and missions founded in New California." That is, this cartographer deliberately refrained from sharing information that was otherwise likely at his disposal in order to emphasize the recent successes Spanish missionaries had achieved expanding into the Northwest.⁶³

Unlike the value Baegert placed on eye-witness information provided by a contemporary source rather than an historical authority, Jefferys believed the analysis of earlier explorers was more accurate and should be considered more authoritative than that of his contemporaries. Because they owned "a simplicity and honour . . . there was no motive for telling the lie, . . . [and] they faithfully reported the discoveries they made."⁶⁴ He argued that the connection between America and Asia, California as an island, and the existence of a northeast passage are accurate from the earlier explorers, and so the same sources should be trusted for a Northwest Passage⁶⁵ — namely, the claims made by Cortés.

On a final note, although Venegas became an authority on California in the eyes of his peers, and the map published alongside his text certainly confirmed its peninsularity, his name was nonetheless appropriated by British authors desirous of legitimizing their own views on the American Northwest. William Robertson, for instance, cited Venegas for concluding that most maps of that period represented California as an island,⁶⁶ whereas other historians credited Venegas for observing the likelihood that Asia and America met in the north⁶⁷ and speculated that Spanish explorers brought along a copy of Venegas' book on expeditions to the North Pacific.⁶⁸

Conclusion

California, not unlike the Northwest Passage and the New World in general, entered the European consciousness as a conceptual terra incognita populated in the absence of concrete data with cartographical and literary placeholders. Once certain attributes such as language-specific toponyms were assigned to that space, national claims on

⁶² Jefferys, *The Great Probability of a North West Passage*, p. 80.

⁶³ *Mapa de Californias, Antigua y Nueva*. Archivo General de Indias. Mapas y Planos, Mexico, 706.

⁶⁴ Jefferys, *The Great Probability of a North West Passage*, p. 107.

⁶⁵ Jefferys, *The Great Probability of a North West Passage*, p. 108.

⁶⁶ W. Robertson, *The History of America* (London, 1788), vol. 3, p. 232.

⁶⁷ John Campbell et al., *The Modern Part of a Universal History* (London, 1783), vol. 35, p. 119.

⁶⁸ Robert Greenhow, *History of Oregon and California and Other Territories* (Boston, 1844), p. 117.

it became manifest, as did the desire to possess it, or to ensure that a foe did not acquire it. We have also established that the placement of toponyms on the cartographic image, along with contrary cartographic representations of a space that contemporaneously existed and circulated, became another means through which nationalizing perspectives on mapping North America could be expressed and controlled. Using a variety of sources drawn principally from two groups — historical authorities and the most recent reports — early modern cartographers collected maps and texts that subsequently authorized their cartographic version of California and North America. Spanish sources were particularly valuable for the mapping of the west, and the reception and manipulation of Miguel de Venegas' history of California reinforces the tension between two nationalist perspectives on that territory. The commodification of information about California subsequently drove the publication industry to produce newer maps and histories reflecting recent discoveries and reports, which were later consumed by a readership hungry for the latest knowledge concerning that region of the world. Despite this drive for new information, certain antiquated attributes and possibilities for California continued to be debated throughout the early modern period, as did the promise of territorial possession as its contents as well as its periphery materialized.

Notes on contributor

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