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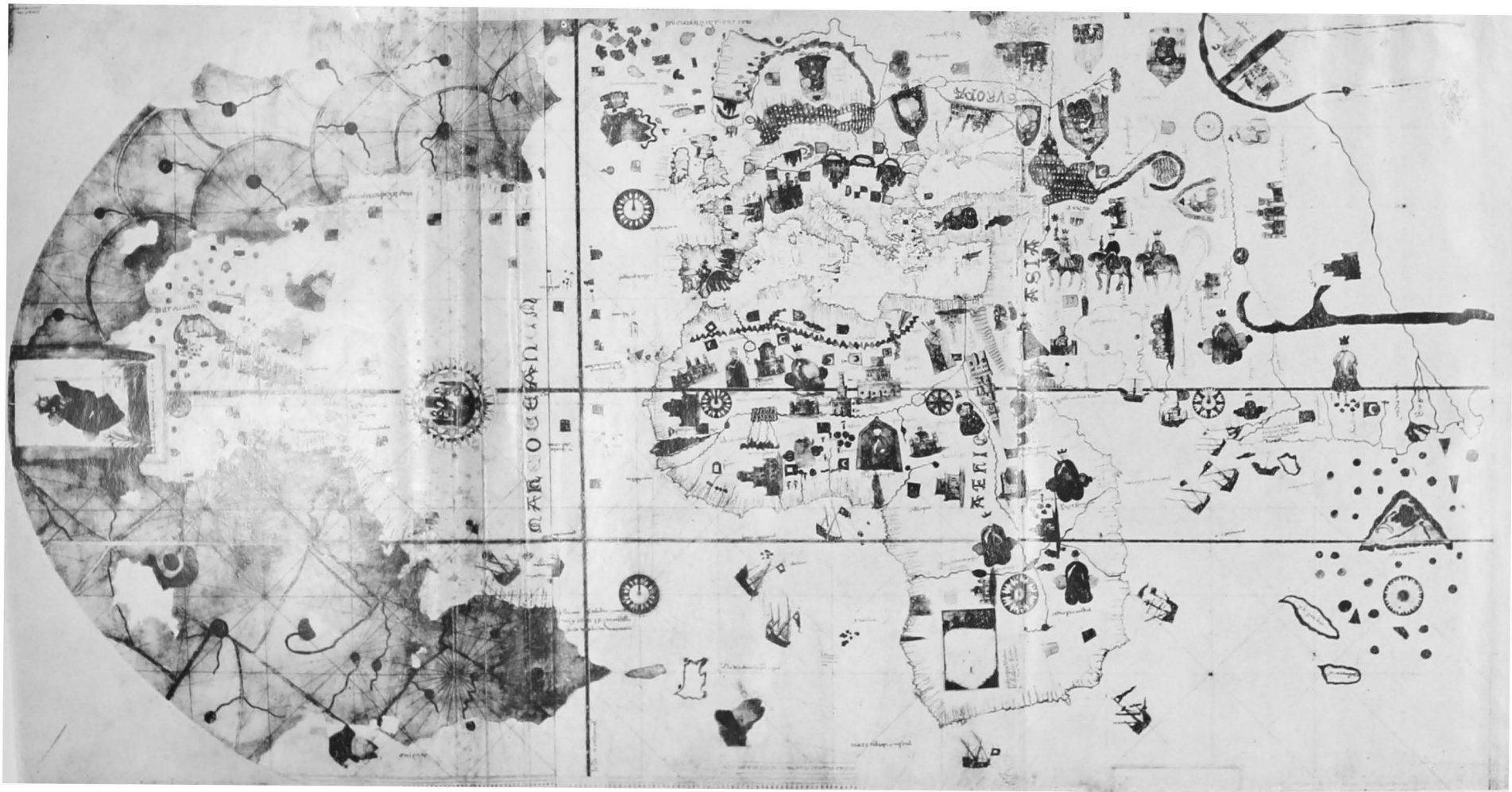
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I. World map of Juan de La Cosa, 1500

THE
CABOT VOYAGES AND
BRISTOL DISCOVERY
UNDER HENRY VII

BY
JAMES A. WILLIAMSON

WITH
THE CARTOGRAPHY OF THE
VOYAGES

BY R. A. SKELTON

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PREFACE

THE VOYAGES considered in this volume are those made from Bristol in 1480 and 1481, concerning which very little is known save that they took place; the undated discovery of the so-called Isle of Brasil by unknown Bristol men some time before 1496; the expeditions led by John Cabot in 1496-8; those sent forth by the syndicates of Bristol merchants and Azorean promoters in 1501-6, of which syndicates the second was known as the Company Adventurers to the New Found Land; and finally the expedition commanded by Sebastian Cabot in 1509 or 1508-9 and intended for the discovery of the North West Passage.

In 1929 the Argonaut Press published a volume by me upon the Cabot Voyages. It took account of all the evidence I could collect at that time, and expressed some conclusions that have now to be disclaimed or modified in the light of recent discoveries. I have to offer my very sincere thanks to Mr J. E. S. Sawyer, the present proprietor of the Argonaut Press, for his permission to use any material from the 1929 volume, irrespective of his copyright. It will be seen that I have availed myself extensively of this privilege.

In the past thirty years there has been a general increase and clarification of the background knowledge affecting the interpretation of the early oceanic discoveries. How much the men of the time knew, how they understood it, and how widely spread among them the information was, are still in many ways obscure; but they are less obscure than they would have been but for the labours of the students of cartography and of early geographical literature which have borne fruit in the past generation.

In the same period there have been important discoveries of new evidence on the voyages. Professor W. E. C. Harrison discovered in 1930, and Professor D. B. Quinn correctly interpreted, an English document revealing the previously unknown voyage of 1481 as the companion to that of 1480. In 1938-9 Professor Denys Hay, working in the Vatican Library, obtained from a manuscript

Preface

of Polydore Vergil's *Anglica Historia* a statement on the last voyage and death of John Cabot which did not appear in the printed editions of that work. In 1943 Professor M. Ballesteros-Gaibrois published in the *Revista de Indias* some local documents of Valencia which showed that a Venetian named Johan Caboto Montecalunya resided in the city during the years 1490-3. In 1948 Signor Rodolfo Gallo printed some important legal documents giving details of property transactions of John Cabot in and near Venice in 1482-4, and providing the names of his father, brother and wife. Most recently, exceeding in importance anything on the voyage of 1497 since the revelation of the letters of Pasqualigo and Soncino a century ago, there has appeared the letter of John Day discovered at Simancas by Dr L. A. Vigneras in 1956. This letter not only necessitates a recasting of our ideas on the *Matthew's* voyage, but gives a positive statement that the men of Bristol had previously discovered a part of North America which they identified with the traditional Isle of Brasil. To my former Cabot book I was able to contribute some documents newly obtained from English records. For the present volume I have been unable to glean anything new, except a few additional entries in the Household Books. I have examined without result some classes of documents in the Public Record Office, which I thought might contain something relevant. If they do, it has escaped my search.

In preparing the volume I have been under great obligations to Mr R. A. Skelton, Superintendent of the Map Room in the British Museum and Honorary Secretary of the Hakluyt Society, whose knowledge and judgment of the problems of early maps and geographical lore are unsurpassed, and have helped me in many conversations and in a detailed criticism of the whole writing of the book. In addition, he has applied to the arrangement of the material, and to its references, the standards which he has established for the Society, a system that increases utility to the student. As the reader will see, Mr Skelton has also written directly for the volume a contribution on the maps, which may well have its effect on the controversies that have arisen concerning them

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and will certainly add to the book a stamp of authority which it needs.

My thanks are due also to Professor D. B. Quinn, who has sent me various transcripts and has given great help in obtaining translations. He has also given me good advice on the Record Office documents already referred to; and his standards of accuracy and of judgment in the interpretation of evidence have helped me to keep, as I hope, on the straight path in some important passages.

Signor Rodolfo Gallo and Professor M. Ballesteros-Gaibrois have generously allowed the printing, in English form, of the important Italian and Spanish documents originally discovered by them. My thanks are also due to Dr Geoffrey Marcus for aiding me with his knowledge of the Danish archaeological work on the Greenland colony.

I am indebted to several other scholars for their help or their discoveries on particular topics, and have made my acknowledgements in the explanatory notes to the documents with which they have been concerned. Where no translator is named, the translation is my own or (in some cases) that of the late H. P. Biggar, who generously gave me, long ago, copies of some of his unpublished translations.

Cabot study is never finished. Great parts of the story are still obscure, and even the major outlines are questioned. Evidence is meagre and the reading of some of it uncertain. But advance continues. New documents are found, and growing background knowledge assists their interpretation. It is a living subject.

J. A. WILLIAMSON

December 1960

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