

ABSTRACT

Fra Mauro's (vanished?) World Map

According to an undisputed tradition initiated by Placido Zurla in 1806, in mid 15th century the Camaldulense monk Fra Mauro, from the monastery of St. Michael of Murano near Venice, composed two exemplars of what was to become his famous world map. One was sent to Lisbon in April 1459 to its commissioner, the king of Portugal, Alphonse V. To date, this tradition has been accepted and followed by the community of scholars, despite the lack of evidence available in support of the presence of Fra Mauro's map in Portugal after that year. In fact, the map seems to have disappeared immediately after its arrival in Lisbon, and there are no traces of its existence in contemporary writings by Lusitanian authors and cartographers' or on maps. Some modern historians and scholars have attempted to identify the "Portuguese" copy of Fra Mauro's map with the map that served as a model for the chart given in 1487 to Pedro de Covilha and Alfonso de Paiva on their departure for their African exploration. Another very doubtful identification was made with the huge -- too huge indeed -- world map seen in Lisbon by Hieronymus Münzer in 1494. However, a closer examination of such documents demonstrates that neither the first nor the second map can be taken into serious consideration and that those maps were unrelated to Fra Mauro's. An accounting record signed by the royal chancellery of Portugal in 1462 is also relative to the above discussion: a handful of scholars believe that this document comprises a conclusive piece of evidence for the presence of a copy of the Mappamondo in Lisbon after 1459. Yet deeper examination of the accounting record and of its framework proves that it refers to events that took place while the map was still being composed in Venice, i.e. prior to its departure for the Portuguese court. Therefore the "disappearance" of the "Portuguese" copy of Fra Mauro's map may depend on the fact that a second copy was never drawn up, and that Fra Mauro produced just one and only one world map -- the Mappamondo still on display in Venice. This is the great cartography masterpiece that was sent to Alphonse V in 1459, but probably rejected due to major geographical errors introduced by the painters and illuminators who worked on it from 1457 to 1459, a time when Mauro may not have been able to exert control on their work. As a result, the map was returned to Venice, where it was placed into its present frame in August 1460 and exhibited in the "Sala del Mappamondo" of the Camaldulense monastery on the island of St. Michael of Murano.