

**MARTIN BEHAIM, THE GERMAN
ASTRONOMER AND COSMOGRAPHER
OF THE TIMES OF COLUMBUS; BEING
THE TENTH ANNUAL DISCOURSE BEFORE
THE MARYLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY,
ON JANUARY 25TH, 1855**

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Martin Behaim, the German Astronomer and Cosmographer of the Times of Columbus; Being the Tenth Annual Discourse Before the Maryland Historical Society, on January 25th, 1855 by John G. Morris

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JOHN G. MORRIS

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MARTIN BEHAIM,
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BY JOHN G. MORRIS, D. D.



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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES

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Martin Behaim.

THERE are many men who have acted conspicuous parts in scenes of thrilling historical interest, whose names are little known to general readers, and whose surpassing merits are not properly appreciated. They have been either lost in the more refulgent light of brighter luminaries, or have been purposely over-looked by cotemporaneous historians. Fellow laborers in the same field of investigation, who have left records of their own operations, may have from envy or interested selfishness, disregarded their claims to distinction or only casually mentioned their names as associated with themselves. Thus often, real merit in science, literature and art, is depreciated, and many a man, on the other hand, gains credit for what he never achieved, and receives a reward which he never deserved. But posterity often awards to a man the honor which his cotemporaries have denied him. All history demonstrates this fact. There is a resurrection of genius, which had long been buried in oblivion. Envy and detraction may dig its grave and bury it; but eventually it comes forth reanimate. It was not dead; it only slept.

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Historians and poets of the olden time speak of various statues, and other works executed by distinguished artists of their day, which then attracted the admiration of the world of taste and refinement, but most of them with even the names of the artists also, have perished. Now and then, one is exhumed from amid the rubbish of some ancient temple, and men of artistic taste and knowledge recognize it as the long lost production of some celebrated sculptor of antiquity. It may be mutilated to some extent, but the modern artist sets to work and repairs it. He endeavors to restore it to its original beauty and symmetry, and however he may fail, yet the ancient artist's name is rescued from oblivion, and posterity awards him due honor.

Let ours be the task of bringing out from undeserved obscurity, a man famous and powerful in his day, but now known only to comparatively few; a man cotemporary with the discovery of our country,—the associate and assistant of Columbus,—the fellow voyager with many of the great navigators of that period,—a man to whom his too ardent friends have attributed the discovery of this continent, but whilst he does not deserve, and never claimed that distinction, still by his astronomical and geographical science, far in advance of most men of his generation, as well as by his superior skill in the preparation of nautical instruments and charts, contributed much to the splendid geographical discoveries of that adventurous age.

We allude to **MARTIN BEHAIM** of Germany. His name is not as familiar to us as those of Columbus, and Vespuccius, Magellan, and de Gama, but it will be shown that his services were not less valuable,

and his merits not less commendable. Probably exceeding them all in scientific acquirements, he not less deserves the admiration and gratitude of mankind. His name has been for several ages somewhat obscured, but it is beginning to shine forth in its original lustre. The bright, particular star is emerging from the cloud which for years had partly concealed it, and it now again holds a conspicuous place in the firmament of science. Professor Ghillany of Nurnberg, of all others, deserves most credit for resuscitating the name of Behaim, and to his magnificent work on this subject, all future historians and biographers must go for full and authentic information.

The Historical Society of Maryland does not confine its researches exclusively to the history of our own State, but extends them to other lands and other ages; and hence it will not be thought improper to introduce a subject foreign to our own land and age.

Before we enter more particularly on our specific subject, we shall dwell for a few minutes on some facts of great historical interest closely connected with it.

The whole history of the discovery of our country is full of interest. We do not allude merely to the adventurous daring, the appalling sufferings, the unconquerable perseverance, the lion hearted energy of the men who achieved it, all of which have been so graphically described by historians, and by none so well as by our own illustrious countryman, Mr. Irving, but we allude to the scientific results of those various expeditions, and we shall confine ourselves for the present more particularly to some of

the maps and charts, which these bold adventurers prepared. It will be seen that whilst they are exceedingly imperfect and erroneous in many respects, yet they are objects of deep interest to men who study the early history of our continent.

To Humboldt we are indebted for the publication of the earliest *pen and ink* map of America, extant. There is but one copy of the original known, and that belongs to the valuable collection of the distinguished Baron Walckenaer of Paris, where, in 1832, Humboldt first discovered its real character, and its real author. It had until then been regarded as a Portuguese map of the world of an unknown age. It is a map of the world by Juan de la Cosa, (also called Juan Biscaino,) which he drew in the year 1500, i. e. six years before the death of Columbus. It was a precious discovery to such a man as Humboldt, and he had the most important sections of it engraved on three sheets. It bears the inscription, *Juan de la Cosa la hizo en el Puerto de Ste. Maria en año 1500.* This inscription stands under a small colored picture, representing the great Christopher wading through the sea, and bearing on his shoulders the infant Christ, carrying a globe in his right hand, a significant allusion to Christopher (Christ bearing) Columbus, and expressive also of the hope of the spread of Christianity which the discovery of this continent (Aug. 1, 1498) excited. Juan de la Cosa, the draughtsman of the map, was the associate of Columbus on his second expedition, which continued from September 25, 1493, to June 11, 1496. He was connected with five expeditions, in two of which he was commander. He must have been a man of great nautical experi-

ence and science, and perhaps of some presumption too, for in the evidence in a trial growing out of the operations of Columbus, it is said by one of the witnesses, that Christopher Columbus, who was usually styled admiral, complained of Juan de la Cosa "for going about and claiming that he knew more than he, the admiral himself."

That section of the map most interesting to us, represents in tolerably exact configuration, but too far north for the greater and less Antilles, the northern coast of South America, also the eastern coast on which the mouths of the Orinoco and Amazon rivers are laid down. A coast line without any name from Cabo de la Vela to the extreme north, connects Venezuela with Labrador. There is nothing on the map to show that he had any idea of the outline of the coast from Puerto de Mosquitos on the western end of the isthmus of Panama to Honduras, a part of the coast first discovered by Columbus on his fourth and last expedition, (from May, 1502 to November, 1504.) He had no conception of the configuration of the Gulf of Mexico, which Cortez first navigated in 1519, though the existence of the coast of Mexico was made known at an earlier period by the natives of Cuba; nor is the coast of the United States of North America distinctly designated, though Sebastian Cabot on his second expedition, sailed along the whole coast from Newfoundland to Florida, in 1498. Northerly in a *mer descubierta per Ingleses*, N. E. of Cuba, the map gives the discoveries of English navigators on a coast that runs from east to west. The coast here represented is probably that extending along the Gulf of St. Lawrence, opposite the present

Island of Anticosta. The isle of Verde, N. E. of Cuba d'Ingleterre is probably Newfoundland. The coast which abruptly turns to the north, extending only to 70° latitude, and reaching so far east as to embrace the Islands of Trierland, is most probably the present Iceland.

This map contains no positive allusion to the earlier discovery of the continent of America on the coast of Labrador, by John and Sabastian Cabot, between latitude 56 and 58, on June 24, 1497, thirteen months before the discovery of the continent of South America, at the eastern part of the province of Camana by Columbus. It is very likely that de la Cosa knew it, but why he did not state it, is not known.

This is the proper place to remark that the so styled first discoveries of the continent of North America by the Cabots, and of South America by Columbus, should be designated only as rediscoveries. About 500 years before that period, (A. D. 1000,) Leif, the son of Ereik the Red, the Scandinavian, landed on the continent in Massachusetts, which was a part of Vinland, which name the Scandinavians gave to the coast between Boston and New York. According to the oldest tradition and Icelandic record, even the southern coast between Virginia and Florida, was already described under the name of the White man's Land, or Great Iceland. Intercourse subsisted between Greenland and New Scotland (Maryland) until 1347; between Greenland and Bergen, in Norway, until 1484, that is, until seven years after Columbus had visited Iceland.