

## Zheng He and the Great Southland:

the context for the belief that he may have voyaged there.

Paper presented to *The Zheng He, down West Ocean, Chinese Overseas Discussion Forum*, Fuzhou, China: 388-401, 2005.

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**Zheng He and the Great Southland:** the context for the belief that he may have voyaged there. Paper presented to *The Zheng He, down West Ocean, Chinese Overseas Discussion Forum*, Fuzhou, China: 388-401, 2005.

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It has been said of Australia—a land occupied by its own indigenous people for 40,000 years at least—that its campfires ‘were first lit in a past before time’. (Horton, 1997, xii). Not knowing that their land even existed, around two thousand-five-hundred years ago the Greek scholar Pythagoras argued that, as the earth was a sphere, the lands of the northern hemisphere had to be balanced by a large southern land mass. Three centuries later, this theory appeared envisioned in the globe shown below and in a Roman visualisation of the same notion produced another two centuries later.

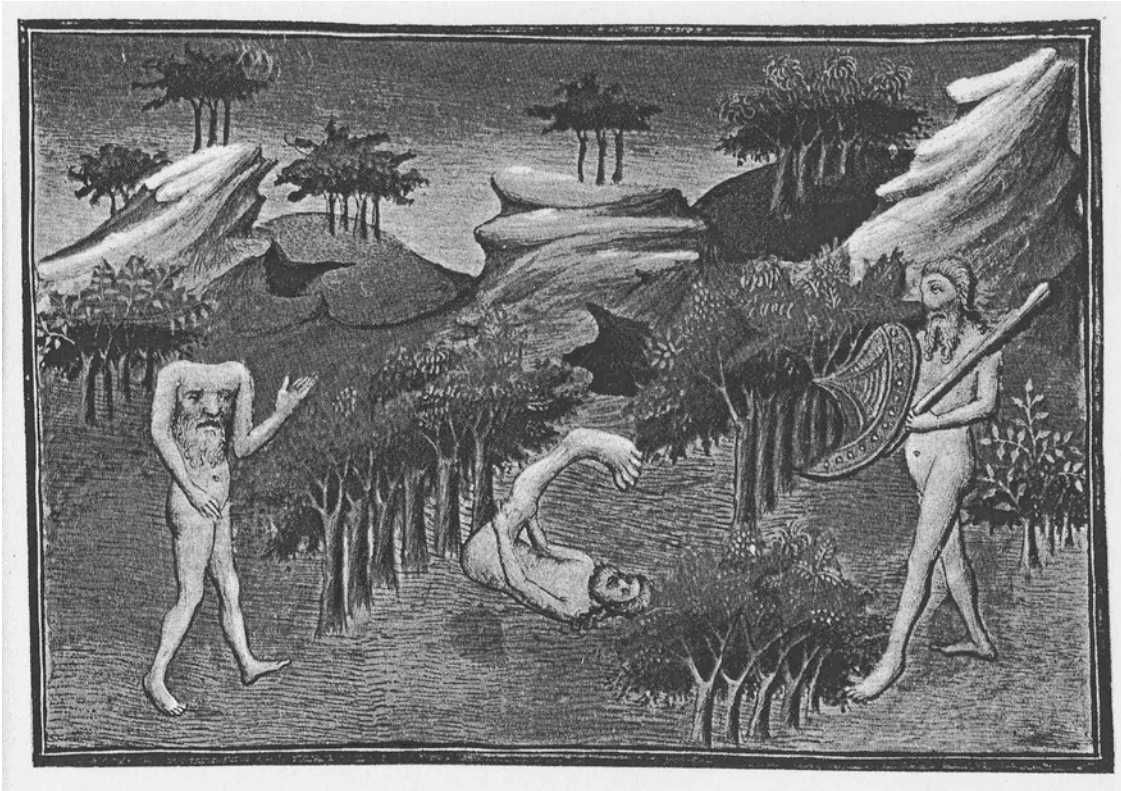


*A globe by Krates of Mallos c. 150BC and a ‘geographical view’ of the world by Pomponius Mela (From Schilder, 1976:7).*

A century further on from these depictions—apparently as a result of intelligence that was filtering through to him from travellers to Asia—Ptolemy of Alexandria extended Africa and Asia south to meet the hypothetical southern land mass.

Much was written on the subject of a vast legendary mass in the south that came later to be known as *Terra Australis Incognita* (Latin: literally—unknown southern land) (Wood, 1922; Schilder, 1976). The nature of southern seas, the location and form of the land itself, and the customs and appearance of its inhabitants were to become one of the

greatest of all the European unsolved mysteries. These unknown lands were reputed—by virtue of their hypothetically-opposite and balancing nature to the ordered and familiar world in the north—to be the home of strange beings and grotesque animals; of lands surrounded by seas filled with horrendous creatures.



*A contemporary French imagining of the peoples inhabiting unknown southern lands (Source unknown)*

The European world retreated into what has been called its ‘Dark Ages’ after the fall of the Roman Empire and as a result, objective scholarly discourse about unknown regions to the south and east was not to re-emerge in Europe until the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. The emergence of Genghis Khan and the decision of the Catholic Pope to develop an overland contact with him were two major influences, eventually leading to the travels of the Polo family to what Europeans called the ‘Far East’. The Polo family were Venetian merchants who travelled overland to his court, eventually returning home with tales of his great empire. They had also been told of rich lands south and east of India with whom mariners were in regular contact. Java was of special interest with its apparently vast riches, multitudinous shipping and fabulous spices. Marco Polo, the best known of his family, also studied Chinese and Arab charts, and his reports on these matters are credited with having ‘revolutionized geographical conceptions’ in Europe about the eastern region (Wood, 1922: 36).

### *Searching for the Southland*

Overland links with the 'Far East' became tenuous in the mid 14<sup>th</sup> Century after the Chinese suspicion of all outsiders grew, especially following the overthrow of the Mongol empire, coupled with the expansion of the Ottoman Turks, who detested Christian incursions across their land via the overland route.

Attention then turned to the development of a sea route. As passage was forced down past the Cape of Good Hope under the patronage of the Portuguese King 'Henry the Navigator', (Diaz in 1486; da Gama in the following year), Spanish, Dutch, English and French seafarers all sought to access the riches and people of the east and all wanted to locate the mythical Southland.

Some believe that the *Great Southland* had been earlier visited by the legendary 15<sup>th</sup> century Admiral Zheng He. As those attending this conference well-know, in the course of seven voyages—at times in very large ships, sometimes in great fleets—he travelled between 1405-1433. In doing so he visited places like Jeddah, Ormuz, Mogadishu, Calcutta, Singapore, Java, Sumatra and Malacca. Zheng He died soon after he returned home from his last voyage and the new Emperor, beset by wars, decided that he could not continue with the voyages and China, as the 'Middle Kingdom' turned it's back on the outside world. Seafaring across the oceans was banned and it is believed in European circles that Zheng He's records were totally destroyed (e.g. Petersen, 1994; Menzies, 2002:55). Thus, though he left material evidence of his visits at nearby Malacca in the form of shrines and memorials, to this day there is no physical evidence that Zheng He made the relatively short journey south to arrive on Australian shores ahead of the European searchers.

In 1509 the Portuguese sailing east from the Cape of Good Hope established themselves in India and the Indian Ocean. By 1511 they had occupied Malacca, eventually moving through to the Moluccas (Spice Islands) and then throughout south-east Asia, where they established a vast trading empire.

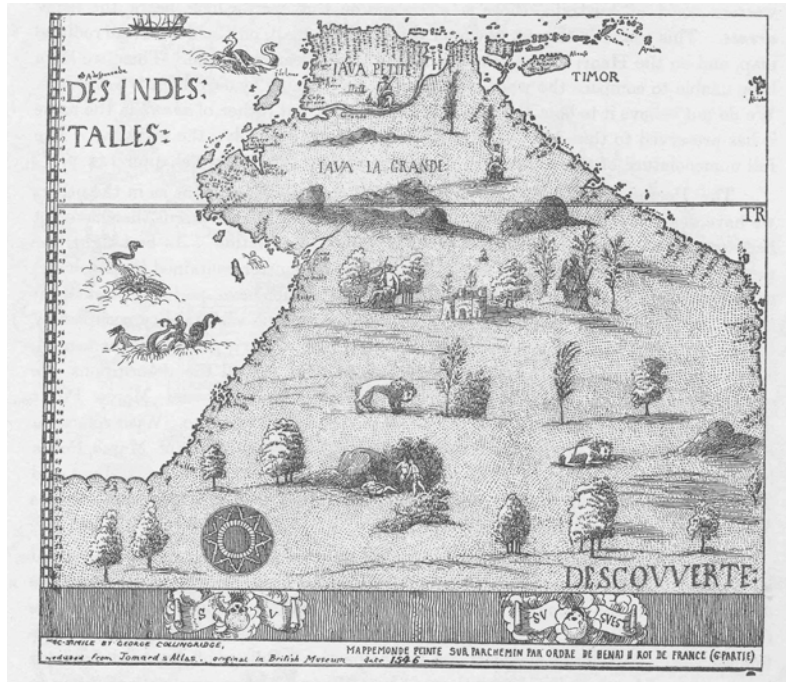
Sailing west from South America after Magellan's voyage in 1519, the Spanish unsuccessfully searched for the *Great Southland*. The commander of one ship, de Torres actually passed through the strait that now bears his name and in doing so delineated the southern limits of New Guinea. He must have seen evidence of the land to the south—but this discovery and the fact that he had inadvertently fixed the northern limits of the Southland remained forgotten for another hundred and fifty years. This is of relevance to students of Zheng He, for in the *Atlas of Ancient Maps in China* that was published in 1994—is evidence that some of his charts did survive. Further, while on the one hand advising of the 'total destruction' of Zheng He's records in his contribution to that same work, on the other Cao Wanru indirectly allows that some may remain (1994: 22).

The notion that the Southland was found by people other than those (below) who are presently credited with the 'discovery' is not new. Many passionately believe, for example, that early maps prove that the Portuguese found the Great Southland, but kept their find secret, only to have their maps and charts destroyed in the great earthquake that later destroyed Lisbon (e.g. Collingridge, 1895; McIntyre, 1977). In essence, some expert late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century navigators, like the famous Matthew Flinders RN, believed

that early 16<sup>th</sup> century charts showed that mariners had voyaged the short distance south from Malacca to the Australian mainland. Noted equally-famous contemporaries e.g. Joseph Banks and Alexander Dalrymple (the former a noted botanist and voyager with James Cook RN, the latter, the first British naval hydrographer, and a chief proponent of the existence of the Southland) agreed.

These particular charts were believed to have been copied from the Portuguese originals by the French. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, academics, and theoreticians like George Collingridge and O.H.K. Spate, argued that these so-called Dieppe or Dauphin (French) maps derived from Portuguese originals—providing ‘serious evidence’ for a prior discovery of Australia. (Collingridge, 1895; Spate, in introducing the second edition of Wood, 1969:80). In these maps ‘*Java Maior*’, or ‘*Java La Grande*’, was the name given to a very large land mass shown south of present-day Java and Timor. Some of these same authors also attest to the possibility that the Portuguese learned of the southern lands from the many expert mariners they encountered in the Indies. Thus a case for a prior ‘discovery’ of the Southland has long-since been made. In the absence of ‘hard’ evidence (such as that outlined in other cases below), however, the critics of those who believed in a Portuguese or Asian primacy in the discovery, (to the detriment of any British claim), were loud in condemnation.

*Image: A French map of 1546, apparently based on the Portuguese. Note the position of Timor. (Collingridge, 1895:191)*



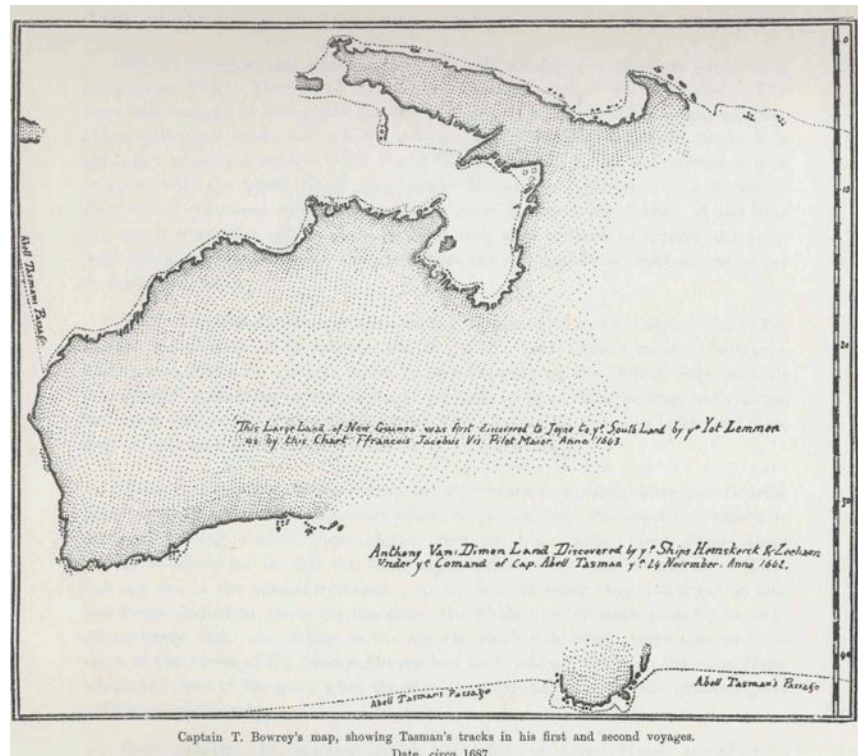
Of all seafarers, the Dutch are generally recognised as the first to have left real proof of their arrival at the Southland. Their surviving records show that in 1606 they landed on Australia’s northern coasts during a voyage aboard the *Duyfken* (*Little Dove*). A decade later Dutch seafarers began travelling to Batavia their capital in the Indies (now Jakarta) via a newly-found track down from the Cape of Good Hope, taking an easting amongst the winds of the ‘Roaring 40s’, then heading north for the Indies and the rich spices there.

All mariners at the time were beset with problems in determining longitude, making the decision when to turn north a matter of ‘deduced (or dead) reckoning’. Thus, in 1616 Dirk Hartog arrived unexpectedly on a previously unknown coast. There he left a pewter



and there sighted a coast he called *Van Diemen's Land* (now Tasmania) and claimed it for the Netherlands (Herres, 1899). In 1644 on another voyage he delineated the shape of the northern and north-west coasts of *New Holland* (Schilder, 1976). This work was subsequently used by cartographers and by mariners traversing the seas, as the following illustration shows.

A chart, by Captain T. Bowrey, dated 1687 showing Abel Tasman's voyages. (Collingridge, 1895:281)



Captain T. Bowrey's map, showing Tasman's tracks in his first and second voyages.  
Date. circa 1687.

In 1688 the famous 'pirate and hydrographer', William Dampier arrived on the north-west coast of New Holland and his best-selling journal, that was published in 1697, added further to the European knowledge of the place.

After Dampier there came the Dutchman Willem de Vlamingh and in landing at Dirk Hartog Island he removed the Hartog plate and left one of his own. This appears below.

Then in 1699 Dampier returned, having convinced the Admiralty that the then uncharted east coast of *New Holland* should be approached via Cape Horn. Frustrated by delays and too late to risk a journey from that direction, Dampier approached his objective from the Cape of Good Hope. He examined parts of the west coast but was unsuccessful in examining the eastern shores. (Preston and Preston, 2004)

Thus while the shape of the west, south and north coasts of New Holland became well known as a result of the voyages of the Dutch and Dampier, the nature and location of the eastern coast of New Holland remained a mystery, one that was to remain unsolved for well over half a century as this French map of 1755 shows. Delegates to this conference, all well aware of Zheng He's extensive voyages three centuries earlier will be amazed by this delay.



*Carte Réduite. 1755 by J.N. Bellin*

### ***The Macassans:***

Around the time the French chart opposite was reproduced, Macassan trepangers (from Ujung Pandang) began the first of their regular voyages to the northern and north-west shores of Australia; these they called *Marege'* and *Kayu Jawa*. The Macassans harvested trepang *Beche-de-Mer* or sea slug, fish, trochus shell, and other marine life, and they also established camps and processing works. (MacKnight, 1976).

### **British and French claims to Southland**

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century Britain and France entered into a 'superpower' race for territory and they despatched many expeditions in search of the Great Southland, finding only a vast number of islands in the Pacific.

In 1768, the British sent out James Cook RN and he followed his predecessors through the Pacific Islands and then on to Van Diemen's land (Tasmania). Driven north by a storm he sighted the mainland coast and in 1771 Cook took possession of what he called *New South Wales* in the name of the British King.

In the following year the Frenchman Francois de St Alloüarn was in the Indian Ocean also searching for the Southland and in being unsuccessful, travelled west to arrive at Dirk Hartog Island on *New Holland*. There in raising a flag, and placing a parchment in a bottle, he annexed the land for France (Marchant, 1998).



*The French annexation bottle. WA Maritime Museum*

None of the three claimants to those shores, the Dutchman Tasman in 1642, Englishman Cook in 1771 and Frenchman St Alloüarn in 1772 knew whether *New Holland*, *New South Wales* and *Van Diemen's Land* were joined as one, or whether they were vast unconnected islands.



Not realising that they had already found it, the whereabouts of the Southland remained an ongoing mystery in European minds and one aim of Cook's second voyage in 1772-5 was to solve the question whether the Great Southland lay in areas yet to be traversed by European explorers. He then traversed the southern latitudes of the Indian and much of the lower Pacific Ocean, proving finally that there was no continent there.

### **Rivals on new-found shores.**

The young Napoleon Bonaparte apparently applied for a place on the voyage of la Pérouse, the next French expedition to search, but was lucky to be refused. While they were at sea, in January 1788 the British First Fleet arrived at Botany Bay in New South Wales to begin the process of European settlement there. La Pérouse was sent to observe the landing and having done so, departed for further work in the South Seas, never to be seen again.

Soon afterwards another Frenchman, d'Entrecasteaux was sent to look for both the Southland and the lost explorers and he too arrived at New Holland, charting part of the south coast and then crossing east to chart parts of Van Diemen's Land.

In July 1801 Matthew Flinders RN arrived on the south west coast and in travelling along the southern coast, he found and then sailed up the two extensive bays, expecting them to lead north up into the Gulf of Carpentaria via a sea separating New Holland from New South Wales (Scott, 1914). In proving that this sea did not exist, he realised the lands were all part of one great island continent. This was the Great Southland or *Terra Australis* and this he later came to call Australia.

By then post-revolutionary France under Napoleon Bonaparte was actively searching for a base on which to establish their own colony in the region. After a series of explorations J.F.E. Hamelin arrived at Dirk Hartog Island on the west coast, waiting for his commander Nicolas Baudin's ship to arrive, Hamelin's crew found de Vlamingh's plate lying at the foot of its post on Dirk Hartog Island and brought it back aboard. Hamelin ordered it to be returned ashore where it was re-erected together with a memento of his own visit. His record is yet to be found (Marchant, 1998). As one author later observed, there in those objects, appeared the unequivocal evidence of their arrival and the 'title deeds' attesting to the European claim to the western coast of Australia (Halls, 1974). That the British later ignored the Dutch and French claims and sent out their own colonists is another matter entirely.



Image: Hartog, de Vlamingh's and Hamelin's record of their landings on Dirk Hartog Island. (Halls, 1974)

There, with our present focus on the Great Admiral Zheng He and his travels we should leave the European exploration of the Southland (Australia), noting that those who believe he must surely have sent vessels south from Malacca during his stay there, still hope for proof in the form of contemporary record or material evidence.

There are also those who believe that shipwrecks might one day prove an indisputable source, though the fabled *Mahogany Ship*, that was found and then lost in the sands of Victoria on the south-eastern Australian coast well over a century ago is more noted today for the breadth of the speculation that surrounds its origin, than for any hard evidence it has provided. Portuguese, Spanish and Chinese (e.g. Menzies, 2002: 153-6 theories abound, with others more prosaic, suggesting that it was an early sealer or whaler.

Nonetheless, many are convinced that the Java Le Grande of the French and Portuguese Dieppe Maps is Australia and some think that one day, Asian antecedents to these charts, might emerge. After a period of strident derision against a Chinese or Portuguese discovery, the tide appears to be ebbing and the evidence is slowly being re-assessed. To some, the records of Zheng He's voyages remain as a possible source

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