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Africae Tabula Nova

Stock#: 64868
Map Maker: Ortelius
Date: 1579
Place: Antwerp
Color: Hand Colored
Condition: VG
Size: 19.5 x 14.5 inches
Price: SOLD



Description:

Ortelius' Africa—One of the Most Influential Maps of the Continent of Africa

Finely colored example of Ortelius' map of Africa, from *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, the first modern atlas. The map was one of the first widely-disseminated, modernized maps of Africa and it became the standard map of the continent until well into the seventeenth century.

This map of Africa is based on Gastaldi's eight-sheet wall map of 1564 and Mercator's world map of 1569. It shows the entire continent of Africa, with Madagascar, the Arabian Peninsula, and the tip of Brazil. The continent is split into political units, including Nubia and Zanzibar. Mountains and rivers are indicated, as are hundreds of settlements marked with a small building symbol.

Most of the decorative elements are contained within the surrounding seas. Swordfish and a morose whale swim in the Atlantic. The large title cartouche is also in the Atlantic. The frame is flanked by two female statues belted in place, with the text *Africae tabula nova* filling the interior space. In the bottom right corner, a fierce battle is taking place, with parts of the ships obscured by smoke from broadsides. A similar, reversed scene is included on Diego Gutiérrez's map of the Americas of 1562.

The main branch of the Nile is sourced from two lakes at roughly the same latitude. The larger of these rivers is also the source for the Zuama and Zaire Rivers. The former, which is also a name for the Zambezi River, branches into the Spiritu Sant, which is supposedly the Limpopo River. All the rivers are amalgamated here, reflecting the common Medieval belief that most continents had a central lake which gave rise to the largest rivers of the landmass. Farther north, the Niger River rises from Lake Niger.



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The map is significant for several reasons, including its place in the history of cartography of the African continent, its depiction of Central Africa and its rivers, and its inclusion in the first modern atlas.

The early mapping of the African continent

Medieval mapping of the African continent was tied to the Christian worldview. Traditionally, the known world of Antiquity, which included the north of Africa, Asia, and Europe, was arranged symbolically in what is known as a T-O map. Such world images were common in Medieval manuscripts and they show the three landmasses in a T shape with an O, the ocean, surrounding them. The T-O maps are east-oriented—Paradise and Eden were supposedly located to the east—and some have Jerusalem at their center. Europe is in the bottom left corner and Africa the bottom right.

Over the course of the Medieval period, *mappaemundi* on the T-O model were increasingly stuffed with new place names and features, particularly those mentioned in the popular travel narratives of Marco Polo and Sir John Mandeville.

From roughly 1200, portolan charts showed increasing portions of the African coast. Meant for maritime navigation, these charts contained little to no information about the interior of the continent. They did, however, reflect the advancement of European, particularly Portuguese ships south along on the west coast of Africa. The culmination of these voyages was in 1498, when Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope and reached the Indian subcontinent.

Da Gama's forging of an all-water route to India was particularly illuminating when compared with the prevailing geographic theories of the day, which were dominated by work of the second-century AD Alexandrian scholar, Claudius Ptolemy. Ptolemy postulated in his famous work, *Geographia*, that the Indian Ocean was enclosed by land which stretched from the south of Africa to southeast Asia. Early modern scholars were already questioning Ptolemy, however, even before da Gama reached India. For example, the Fra Mauro map has a peninsular southern Africa with a waterway flowing around it.

Early printed editions of Ptolemy—the first with maps was printed in 1477 in Bologna—would increasingly include *tabula nova*, or new maps, which supplemented Ptolemy's ideas with more modern observations. The first edition to include the Portuguese discoveries in Africa was the Rome edition of 1508. The first surviving printed map to include the discoveries was the earlier Contarini-Roselli world map of 1506, the only surviving example of which is at the British Library.

Martin Waldseemüller's 1507 world map, the sole example of which is now at the Library of Congress, also shows the revised version of the continent. Additionally, Waldseemüller included the new discoveries in his Africa maps for an edition of Ptolemy published in 1513. The first modern map of the entire African



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continent was in Sebastian Munster's edition of the *Geographia* published in 1540. After Munster, this Ortelius map was the first widely-distributed map of the continent and it would popularize the ideas of Giacomo Gastaldi, his main source.

Gastaldi lived in Venice and had collaborated with Ramusio on his famous travel collection, which gave Gastaldi access to the latest geographic knowledge. In his important, yet not widely distributed, 1564 map of Africa, Gastaldi corrected the southwest coast, which was typically sloped too steeply. He also introduced a novel depiction of the sources of Africa's rivers, which will be discussed below. Finally, he drastically increased the number of place names included: 655 names along the coast and a whopping 1200 in the interior.

Ortelius retained many of these place names, although he shifted some to new locations. In some cases, as with the names of lakes, he largely used his own names. He also scaled down the level of ornamentation and decoration drastically as compared to the 1564 map. Ortelius also corrected Gastaldi by narrowing the point of the Cape of Good Hope and reduced the extension of the continent to the east. These adjustments made Ortelius' map far closer to the actual east-west, north-south size of the continent; it was the most accurate map of Africa to date.

The cartography of Central Africa

The innovative depiction of the African river systems in Gastaldi and Ortelius are notable for their divergence from previous models and for their importance as a model for future mapmakers. Typically, mapmakers thought the Nile River rose from twin lakes south of the equator, which were near the Mountains of the Moon. Streams from the mountains fed the lakes. Ptolemy describes such a lakes-and-mountains layout in his works, although the precise identification of the Mountains of the Moon may have been a fourth century addition to his text.

Sixteenth century mapmakers, including Waldseemuller, chose to follow the Ptolemaic model. This was typical of cartographers at the time, who had abandoned Ptolemy's coastlines in favor of the more recent Portuguese outlines yet who also clung to Ptolemaic place names for the interior of Africa well into the nineteenth century.

Gastaldi, most likely thanks to sources he read via Ramusio, chose to abandon the Mountains of the Moon entirely. Instead, he drew a massive central lake from which flows the Nile, Zaire (Congo), Cuama (Zambezi), and Spirito Sancto (Limpopo) Rivers. To the east is another, smaller lake at roughly the same latitude, which also feeds part of the Nile. Therefore, Gastaldi created an entirely different view of the interior of Central Africa, while still embracing Ptolemy's twin lakes theory.



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Ortelius here also includes a large central lake, called Cafates. He rejected the name of Zaire-Zembere used by Gastaldi. To the east and just slightly north is another, smaller lake. Rivers from the north of both lakes wend northward and join to form the Nile. The Zaire (Congo) flows from the northeast of Lake Cafates, while the Zuama (Zambezi) exits at the south of the lake. It branches into the Spiritu Sant, or the Limpopo. Thus, one lake gives rise to four of the largest rivers in Africa.

Theatrum Orbis Terrarum and the states of the “Africae tabula nova”

In 1570, Ortelius published the first modern atlas; that is, a set of uniform maps with supporting text gathered in book form. Previously, there were other bound map collections, specifically, the Italian Lafreri atlases, but these were sets of maps—not necessarily uniform—selected and bound together on demand.

Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, Ortelius' atlas, outperformed competing atlases from other cartographic luminaries like the Mercator family. Between 1570 and 1612, 31 editions of the atlas were published in seven languages. At the time of its publication, it was the most expensive book ever produced.

This map first appeared in the very first 1570 atlas and was engraved by Frans Hogenberg. Only one copperplate was used for this map over its entire publishing career of 1570 to 1612. However, it was re-engraved several times. In 1595, a crack began over the title that worked its way down the text over the following years. The crack can be seen on this example.

The map is hugely important to the history of cartography of Africa. It was the major cartographic influence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and part of the first modern atlas. It should be a central part of any collection of African maps.

Detailed Condition:

Old hand-color.