



## Barry Lawrence Ruderman Antique Maps Inc.

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### Septentrionalium Terrarum descriptio

**Stock#:** 83715  
**Map Maker:** Mercator  
**Date:** 1606 circa  
**Place:** Amsterdam  
**Color:** Hand Colored  
**Condition:** VG+  
**Size:** 14.5 x 15.5 inches  
**Price:** SOLD



#### Description:

#### *Mercator's Iconic Map of the Northern Polar Regions—The First Separate Map of the Area*

Fine example of the second state of Mercator's map of the North Polar regions, the first separately-published map of the North Polar Regions. It shows the North Pole surrounded by four islands, an iconic representation. It is also a telling documentation of the prevalent geographic theories of the time.

Although best known for the projection named for him, Gerard Mercator was also the first cartographer to create an Arctic map. In fact, this was due in part to his famous projection. The Mercator projection sacrifices accuracy at the poles for navigational utility and efficiency. This map, the first stand-alone map devoted to the Arctic regions, is drawn from an inset on his famous world map of 1569—a clarification of the Arctic region that was so distorted on the larger world map.

Mercator's classic map of the Arctic is in hemispherical form and framed by four medallions and a handsome floral border. The map extends thirty degrees in radius to sixty degrees N latitude—ten degrees wider in radius than the original inset. The pole itself is made up of four islands, which myth had it were separated by four strong flowing rivers. These carried the oceans of the world towards a giant whirlpool at the pole where there stood a large rock, labeled here as "Rupes Nigra et Altissima."

An account of this myth in Mercator's own hand still exists in a letter from the cartographer to John Dee. It



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is based in part on a report by the traveler Jacobus Cnoyen van Herzogenbusch describing a lost fourteenth-century work, *Inventio Fortunata*. The *Fortuna* tells the story of an English friar who traveled to the northern regions. It also mentions pygmies, which Mercator places on one of the four islands. Although many believed the rock at the North Pole to be magnetic, Mercator preferred to place a magnetic rock near the Strait of Anian, possibly in an attempt to explain magnetic variation. The idea of a whirlpool was also seemingly supported by the recent voyages of Martin Frobisher and John Davis, who both reported strong currents pushing massive icebergs along with ease.

The map shows Greenland, Iceland, and the mythical island of Frisland. The northern most portions of Asia, Europe, and America cluster at the edges of the hemisphere, with California identified as a Spanish territory and labeled far north of its usual location. The Biblical land of Gog, usually associated with Tartary, is shown in Asia, just across the Strait of Anian. Three of the four medallions contain inset maps of the Faeroe Isles, the Shetland Isles, and Frisland. The fourth contains the title.

The map is covered in depth by *Geography Geek's* video [here](#).

### States of the map

There are two states of this map, of which this is an example of the second. The first state, published in 1595, appeared in the third part of the atlas *Atlantis Pars Altera*. It was published by Rumold, Gerard's son, as Gerard had died in 1594. It shows the four islands as complete; Nova Zembla is also shown as clearly delineated into two halves. This state was printed in another edition at Duisburg in 1602.

In 1604, the plates changed hands when they were purchased by Jodocus Hondius. Hondius refreshed and reworked the plates, creating a new state first published in Amsterdam in 1606. This state has the pygmy island (the island in the lower right) with an incomplete coastline. Nova Zembla is now one island, but its coastline is also now incomplete.

### Arctic possibilities in the sixteenth century

The Arctic was an area of intense interest to Europeans in the early modern period. Thanks to Columbus' voyages in the late fifteenth century and the increase in trade volume with the East Indies in the sixteenth century, all European powers sought faster and easier access to Asian, and especially Chinese, markets. The Arctic was assumed to contain a passage to the Pacific, and therefore China, if only it could be found by Europeans explorers willing to brave the cold North.

One possible location of the passage was known as the Strait of Anian; here, it is the "El Streto de Anian." Anian derives from Ania, a Chinese province on a large gulf mentioned in Marco Polo's travels (ch. 5, book



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3). The gulf Polo described was actually the Gulf of Tonkin, but the province's description was transposed from Vietnam to the northwest coast of North America. The first map to do so was Giacomo Gastaldi's world map of 1562, followed by Zaltieri and Mercator in 1567. It appeared on maps until the mid-eighteenth century.

Many expeditions set off in search of the fabled passage(s). The most recent for Mercator were the aforementioned expeditions led by Frobisher and Davis. Frobisher was the first Englishman to set off in search of the Northwest Passage. With the backing of the Muscovy Company, Frobisher ventured north three times between 1576 and 1578; each time he made it as far as northeast Canada. He carried a copy of Mercator's 1569 world map on board with him and Mercator in turn incorporated his discoveries, including Frobisher's Strait ("Fretum Forbolshers") in this later work.

John Davis was the second Englishman to sail for the Passage. He left in 1585 and explored what is now known as Cumberland Sound and is written here as "E. Cumberlands Isles." He did not find the passage but left his mark on the area with the Davis Strait, which Mercator also included.

### Frisland and the Zeno map

Mercator includes the island of Frisland on the main map and also as an inset. This island originated from the [Zeno map](#), which Mercator had also used in his 1569 world map. That map is also the inspiration for the outline of Greenland as shown here.

The story goes that Nicolo Zeno set off in 1380 for England and Flanders. He adventured in northern waters for decades before eventually returning to his native Venice, where he died around 1403. While away, Nicolo and his brother, Antonio, were supposedly in the service of King Zichmi of the island of Frisland.

News of the discoveries and the first version of the Zeno map was published in 1558 by another Nicolo Zeno, a descendent of the navigator brothers. Nicolo the Younger published letters he had found in his family holdings, one from Nicolo to Antonio and another from Antonio to their other brother, Carlo, who served with distinction in the Venetian Navy. They were published under the title *Dello Scoprimento dell'isole Frislanda, Eslanda, Engrouelanda, Estotilanda, & Icaria, fatto sotto il Polo Artico, da due Fratelli Zeni* (On the Discovery of the Island of Frisland, Eslanda, Engroenland, Estotiland & Icaria, made by two Zen Brothers under the Arctic Pole) (Venice: Francesco Marcolini, 1558).

At the time of publication, the account attracted little to no suspicion; it was no more and no less fantastic than most other voyage and travel accounts of the time. Girolamo Ruscelli published a version of the Zeno map in 1561, only three years after it appeared in Zeno's original work. Mercator then used the map as a



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source for his 1569 world map and for this map of the North Pole. Ortelius used the Zeno islands in his map of the North Atlantic. Ramusio included them in his *Delle Navigationo* (1583), as did Hakluyt in his *Divers Voyages* (1582) and *Principal Navigations* (1600), and Purchas (with some reservation) in his *Pilgrimes* (1625). Frisland appeared on regional maps of the North Atlantic until the eighteenth century.

Mercator's four polar islands were abandoned by colleagues by the 1630s, while the supposed Northwest Passage managed to elude explorers until recently. No matter its accuracy, and perhaps because of the fascinating details it contains, this first stand-alone map of the North Pole is a cartographic milestone and would make up an important part of any Arctic collection.

**Detailed Condition:**

Latin text on verso.