Vespucci, Amerigo, 1451-1512

Definition: Vespucci, Amerigo from Philip's Encyclopedia

Italian maritime explorer. He was possibly the first to realize that the Americas constituted new
continents, which were named after him by the German cartographer Martin Waldseemüller in 1507.
Vespucci made at least two transatlantic voyages (1497-1504).

Summary Article: Vespucci, Amerigo
from The Columbia Encyclopedia

(āmärē'gō vāspōt'chē), 1454–1512, Italian navigator in whose honor America was named, b. Florence.
He entered the commercial service of the Medici and in 1492 moved to Seville. He accompanied
Alonso de Ojeda in 1499, but by agreement the two separated shortly before land was sighted in the
West Indies, and Vespucci alone explored the mouths of the Amazon. Subsequently he sailed along
the northern shore of South America and among the islands. He returned to Spain in 1500, and in 1501 he
entered Portuguese service to explore the southern coast of South America. Vespucci found the
mouth of the Río de la Plata and probably went as far as lat. 50°S. He explored c.6,000 mi (9,700 km)
of coastline, but it is in the scientific application of his discoveries that his achievements are
remarkable. He evolved a system for computing nearly exact longitude (previously determined by dead
reckoning); he arrived at a figure for the earth’s equatorial circumference only 50 mi (80 km) short of
the correct measurement. Vespucci accepted South America as a new continent, not part of Asia.
Consequently cosmography was radically altered, and in 1507, with the publication of Martin
Waldseemüller’s Cosmographiae introductio, the name America first appeared as applied to the
continent. His voyage completed in 1502, Vespucci returned to Spain, where in 1508 he was made
pilot major, a high and prestigious position. He died of malaria contracted on his voyages. Vespucci’s
achievements were long belittled by scholars, but the conclusions of Alberto Magnaghi in the 1920s and
30s are now widely accepted, and the pilot major is given his due. An edition of Vespucci’s letters and
other documents appeared in English in 1894.


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