



CAPTURING A WORLDVIEW

It's easy to take maps for granted these days, given the ubiquity of tools like GPS and Google Earth, but for Caltech professor of history Nicolás Wey Gómez, a good map is more than a tool—it's an important artifact that captures and reflects the geographical view of the world from a particular moment in history, providing a potential treasure trove of information.

Take the terrestrial globe shown here, which dates to 1492. The oldest

known extant globe, historians believe it portrays the world much as Christopher Columbus would have conceptualized it just before he "sailed the ocean blue."

In fact, says Wey Gómez, "it shows some of the same miscalculations that Columbus made." For instance, it overextends the longitudinal reach of the three known continents—Europe, Africa, and Asia—so that the western edge of Europe is much closer

to the eastern edge of Asia than it should be. In part that's because, by the time of the map's making, Portuguese explorers had already explored much of the west coast of southern Africa, and the northern extent of Greenland was known. With so much land extending in the north-south direction, the reasoning went, land must cover much more of the globe from east to west than previously suspected.

"If the map had been accurate, it would have been a very short distance from the Canaries to Japan, an island Martin Behaim, the globe's creator, located on the tropic of Cancer," says Wey Gómez. "That's why Columbus—on his first Atlantic crossing in search of the Indies—descends to the Canaries, and from there he sails generally due west."

But there is more to this globe than what it suggests about Columbus's

view of the world. Wey Gómez has used it, along with letters and other literature, to piece together the story of how and why Behaim created the globe—in large part to establish his qualifications for a proposed (but never funded) westward voyage from the Açores islands to northern China. Such maps provide a window for Wey Gómez onto established ways of thinking about the distribution of terrestrial habitats and life around

the world at various times throughout history.

"Maps are truly fascinating. They have enabled humans to see a world that could not really be seen from within their bodies on the ground," says Wey Gómez. "In that sense, maps are not entirely unlike the instruments we use today to perceive and to explore a world that we cannot experience directly through our senses." —KF