



The Letters of Amerigo Vespucci and Other Documents Illustrative of his Career (Translated)

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(Translated) The information found in this volume was translated by CLEMENTS R. MARKHAM, an English geographer, explorer, and writer. He was secretary of the Royal Geographical Society between 1863 and 1888, and later served as the Society's president for a further 12 years. Markham also provides notes and an introduction to this volume.

The account of the alleged voyage of Amerigo Vespucci in 1497-98 was written for that worthy's own countrymen, and for foreigners who lived at a distance from the Peninsula. When, after some years, the story reached Spain in print, men were still alive who would have known whether any such voyage had ever been made. Among them was the able and impartial historian Las Casas, who considered that the story was false, and disproved it from internal evidence. The authority of Las Casas is alone conclusive. Modern investigators, such as Robertson, Navarrete, Humboldt, Washington Irving, and D'Avezac examined the question, and they all came to the same conclusion as Las Casas.

The matter appeared to be finally settled until 1865. In that year M. F. de Varnhagen, Baron of Porto Seguro in Brazil, published a book at Lima, where he was accredited as Brazilian Minister, with the object of rehabilitating the Florentine's character for honesty, by arguing that the story of the alleged voyage in 1497-98 was worthy of credit. This makes it desirable that the whole question should once more be discussed. Varnhagen at least deserves the thanks of all students of the history of American discovery for having published, in an accessible form, both the Latin and the Italian texts of the letters of Vespucci.

It has been decided by the Council of the Hakluyt Society to supply a volume to the members containing translations of the letters of Vespucci, of the chapters in which they are discussed in the history of Las Casas, and other original documents relating to the subject. Readers will thus be enabled to form independent judgments on this vexed question; while the Introduction will furnish them with the events of the life of Vespucci, and with a review of the arguments in support of Varnhagen's theory, as well as of those which militate against it.

The tales of Amerigo Vespucci have a place in the history of geographical discovery, and require, although they do not deserve, serious consideration; the more so as they have, in recent years, been treated seriously by a learned and accomplished writer such as Varnhagen, who has been followed by one or two eminent and well-known men of letters. It is, therefore, proper that translations of the letters should be printed by the Hakluyt Society, and that their merits should be fully discussed.

In addition to the two letters of Vespucci, the present volume contains the evidence taken in the Columbus lawsuit bearing on the subject, the chapters in the history of Las Casas in which the veracity of Vespucci is discussed, the narrative of the voyage of Hojeda from Navarrete, and some other documents throwing light on the career of the Florentine adventurer.



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