

The Challenge of the Name *America*

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THE NAME *AMERICA* was a challenge for historians and linguists maybe from the moment of its birth, in Europe as well as here in America. It is well known that our continent was named after Amerigo Vespucci. It is also known that the historians still question the importance of Vespucci's role in America's discovery or even exploration.

Martin Waldseemüller (1470 or 1475–1512), however, is credited with being the godfather of America. He was a German clergyman and professor of geography at the University of Strassburg. He wrote his “*Cosmographiae Introductio*” in Latin and published it in 1507. The only existing copy of it is located today in the University Library in Strassburg. Dedicated to the “Divine Maximilian, Caesar Augustus,” it contains nine chapters of geography and maps. On page 18 he says that the world's fourth part is “America” (= South America). On page 25 he is more specific: “The fourth part of the world, since Americus discovered it, “Amerigen” (Greek: *-gen* = land) i.e., Americus' land as well America could be called.” He explains on page 30 his suggestion: “The fourth part of the world was discovered by Americus Vespuccius – as it will be learned in the following letters – therefore I do not see for what reason should be objected, that this land after Americus – the discoverer and a man of sagacious mind – Americus' Land or America should be called, since Europa and Asia are also named in feminine form.”

The *United States Catholic Historical Society Monograph*,¹ which consists of four parts, contains Waldseemüller's *Cosmographiae Introductio* in facsimile of the 1507 edition and its English translation by Edward Gaylord Bourne. It also contains Vespucci's letters about his four voyages and their translation into English by Dr. Mario E. Cosenza. The third part is Waldseemüller's map. The 8' by 4½' original is reduced here to 14' by 26' in facsimile. Ac-

¹ New York 1907 (on the 400th. anniversary of the original's publication).

ording to Waldseemüller about a thousand copies of this map were sold in a short month after it was published. Today, however, only one copy is known to exist – in the castle of Wolfegg in Württemberg, Germany. The fourth part is a facsimile of Waldseemüller's globe. The original globe is today in the Hauslab-Lichtenstein Collection in Vienna.

The Cosmographiae Introductio is actually a handbook and explains why he had used the name "America" on the maps. Six years later in 1513 on another map, however, Waldseemüller again calls America "Terra Incognita" (the unknown land).² He also gives the following explanation: "This land with adjacent islands was discovered by Columbus, a Genoese, under the authority of the king of Castile."

Vespucci's nephew Giovanni published a map in 1523 and did not use the name America. In Spain the name "The Indies" was used; the French Postel used the name "Atlantis" in 1561, and Michael Servetus called the name "America" a mistake in his *Ptolemy* in 1535. On Mercator's Globe of 1541, however, South and North America is named "America"; the German Oertel called North America "Columbana" and South America "America." Only in the seventeenth century did the names "South America" and "North America" become popular.

Bourne gives an interesting explanation why Waldseemüller himself abandoned the name "America" and why Servetus called this name a mistake. According to Vespucci's letters to several personalities of his time, he made four voyages: in 1497, 1500, 1501, and 1503. According to Bourne, the year of his first departure was actually 1499, and not he but a man named Hojeda was the head of the expedition. This time, however, Vespucci explored the northern coasts of South America. Already his departure was inspired by Columbus' successful trip in 1497, and maybe for the same reason he has dated his departure two years earlier. I think, however, the main reason of his popularity could be that he wrote very interesting descriptions of his. He pointed out that the natives had no rulers, no money, and no clothing; their love life was free, and nature provided their living; they had no agriculture, but had tall build-ings; and that their women were brave – that once when the timid

² Edward Gaylord Bourne, "The Naming of America," *American Historical Review*, Volume 10, October-July 1904–1905.

men sent their women to deal with a young Spaniard the women simply ate him.

Another important reason could be the fact that at first neither the world nor Columbus thought that he had discovered a new continent. Everybody believed that Vespucci was the first to explore the "Terra Incognita."

Today Columbus is unquestionably acknowledged as America's discoverer. Vespucci, however, is called sometimes an explorer, sometimes just an adventurer; but our continent is named in his honor.

While Bourne answered the challenge entirely as a historian, Heinrich Charles³ approached the name *America* from a very different point of view. He sees poetic and euphonic value in this name and regards it as "the shortest, the most popular, and the most enduring poem ever composed."⁴ He thinks that our continent is the only one that has not just a birthday, the day of Columbus' landing (October 12, 1492), but a name day, too, the day Waldseemüller's book was published (April 25, 1507). Therefore it is not surprising that Charles is the most devoted defender of Vespucci against his most fanatic critic Ralph Waldo Emerson,⁵ who calls Vespucci not only a pickledealer but a thief, too. He (Emerson) devotes almost half of his book (83 pages) to proving that Vespucci was rather a scholar than an adventurer and that neither he nor Waldseemüller knew that the name *America* was given to the same territory where Columbus landed first.

Although *Charles* discusses briefly the origin of the name "Amerigo," too, he is more interested in the history of persons and places involved. He begins with the name *Amal* the Asa god of creative labor in the Mythological or Saga period, and mentions many important people who had a similar name over the Heroic, Romantic, and Chivalrous periods. He enjoys giving an elaborate historical background and therefore devotes a whole chapter of his book to the history of the city *St. Die'* where Waldseemüller's book was published.

It is also interesting to read his "fantastic stories and theories" about the name *America* "as long as the facts of the naming of the

³ *The Romance of The Name America*. Published by the author in New York, New York, 1926.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵ *English Traits*, Boston 1856, p. 148.

New World were unknown.”⁶ He even knows of two namesakes of America, two towns: “Ammerschweier” in Alsac and “Monfort l’Amaury” in the Department Seine-et-Oise (Chapter 15).

It is not surprising that the name “America” challenged the *American Name Society*, too. The first article of the first issue of *Names*, the official journal, is devoted to the name of our country. Madison S. Beeler⁷ gave here the best summary of the history and etymology of this name so far.

The challenge of the name America made Joy Rea⁸ a challenger himself, but he – mainly following the French Jules Marcou (1875) – singled out Beeler to argue with his statements about Waldseemüller’s and Vespucci’s role in creating the name “America.” His basic statement is that Beeler “gives Waldseemüller credit for having named the new continent in honor of Vespucci.”⁹ He thinks that Waldseemüller’s statement on page 30 of his *Cosmographiae* . . . “could also be read as explanation in which Waldseemüller stated that he had *heard* that this land was called America . . .”⁹ I cannot see it in this way, but he gives a lengthy explanation that Columbus could have brought back the name *Amerigue* from his fourth expedition in 1502. This was the name of an Indian tribe, a district, and a mountain in Nicaragua. He also mentions the English explorers and buccaneers who used the name “America.” They *could have heard* the word and *could have made* it into a “culture word.”¹⁰

Rea’s arguments are emotionally appealing but not convincing. He neglects the fact that the English explorers at the end of the XVI century could also have learned the word from Waldseemüller’s maps. Maybe this is the explanation why about a thousand copies of this map were sold in a month after it was published in 1507.

Another argument of Rea is that Beeler “does not explain why Waldseemüller did not employ the Latinization that had already been used – *Albericus Vesputius*.”⁹ He could have found a depend-

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 168, 169.

⁷ “America – The Story of a Name.” *Names*, 1.1, March, 1953.

⁸ “On the Naming of America.” *American Speech*, 39:42–50, Feb. 1964.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹¹ *The Romance of the Name America*. Published by the author in New York, New York, 1926, p. 44. – In chapter 13 (“Fantastic Stories of the Naming America”), Charles writes about Marcou and others: “These notions, however, are in so far interesting as they show to what aberrations of the mind speculation can lead to if not supported by the actual facts” (p. 173).

able explanation to that in Charles' book¹¹ that this was a misprint. The basic mistake of Rea was, however, that he ignores the fact that our Vespucci was named "Amerigo" after his grandfather who had the same name.¹²

It is hard to understand why he singled out Beeler and disregarded all other historians who discussed this name. Many of them questioned Vespucci's right to give his name in naming "America" but not the fact that it happened. But it is even harder to understand why he ignored the second part of Beeler's article, in which the latter gives a very elaborate etymology of the name. This etymology alone excludes the theory that Vespucci's Latinized name was only an accidental choice between "Albericus" and "Americus."

Beeler follows the linguistic history of the name, taking *Friedrich Heinrich von der Hagen*¹³ as his guide, who thinks that the name *Amerigo* has a Germanic origin, and *Amalrik*, *Amalrich*, was its first form in the Old High German. von der Hagen shows several variants of this name and mentions its latest appearances in the ninth century: *Amelrico*, the bishop of Como; *Amelrico*, the viscount of Milan, and *Amelricus*, the bishop of Tours. The first person known by this name was the son of the Visigothic King Alaric, *Amalaricus*.¹⁴

In Italian "Amerigo" and "Americo" were used in Vespucci's time. The name in Tuscan, however, was neither popular nor unknown. The Italian linguists trace the name back to German in two lines: one to *Heinrich* (Amerigo, Americo, Emerico, Enrico, Henrico, Heinrich); the other to *Amalarich*. *Fumagalli*¹⁵ says that "Amerigo, Americo, Emerico, sono forme toscane dell' antico nome tedesco' Amalarico' da cui i francesi hanno fatto' Amaury'." ("Amerigo," "Americo," and "Emerico" are the Tuscan forms of an old German name "Amalarico," which the French changed to "Amaury.")

¹² Giuseppe Fumagalli: *Piccolo dizionario dei nomi propri italiani di persone*, Genova, 1901.

¹³ "Amerika ein Ursprünglich Deutscher Name." *Neues Jahrbuch der Berlinischen Gesellschaft für Deutsche Sprache und Altertumskunde*. 1.13-17 (1836).

¹⁴ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Getarum*, Th. Mommsen, Berlin, 1882, p. 134.

¹⁵ Giuseppe Fumagalli, *Piccolo dizionario dei nomi propri italiani di persone*, Genova, 1901.

In the *Encyclopedia Americana*, representing the popular theory here in America, *Marion Wilcox*¹⁶ says that the Old High German *Amalrich* originated among the Goths and was carried into all western European countries. *Amal* was an East Gothic hero; after him a dynasty was named "Amala" or "Amelungen." We find the name among the West Goths, too; a grandson of Theodorich the Great was called "Amalarich." Here the first part of the name, which means "labor, effort" has a *rich* suffix. This suffix can be found in the Old English of "Beowulf," where *ric* means "powerful" as an adjective and, "domain" or "empire" as a substantive. The whole name means therefore "rich in efforts" or "powerful in efforts." It is easy to follow the linguistic development from "Amelrico" to "Amerrico," to "Americo," and to "Amerigo," Vespucci's first name. It is not unusual that the *l* assimilates to *r* in front of another *r*, and that the voiceless *c* [k] becomes a voiced *g* between two vowels.

That the names Amerigo-Americo and Emerico are the same is not Fumagalli's opinion only. *Carl Egger*¹⁷ says that "Americus" (Latin), "Amerigo" (Italian), "Americo" (Spanish), "Americk" (Old English), "Almarich" (German), is composed of the Germanic *amal* (labor) and *rihhi* (ruler). He makes here two other statements too: 1) This name was given to Vespucci after whom the continent was named, but which was discovered by Columbus. 2) This name is regarded according to its origin the same as "Henricus" (Haimrich, Heinrich). He repeats his last statement when he says that though "Emericus" is regarded as a separate name, "Emerico" (Italian), "Emery" (Gallic), "Americo" (Spanish), "Emmery," "Emry" (Old English), "Emmerich" (German), "Emericus" (Latin) have the same origin as "Americus" (Latin) and "Amerigo" (Italian).¹⁸

The Brazilian, *Rosario Farani Mansur Guerios*,¹⁹ says also that "Americo" has the same origin as the German "Emmerich" which he derives from "Heinrich," *haims* meaning "home country" and *rik* meaning "ruler." He has an entry for "Amalrico" also, deriving

¹⁶ Marion Wilcox, "America," *Encyclopedia Americana*, New York: Americana Company, 1956, 1:478-79.

¹⁷ Carl Egger, *Lexicon Nominum Virorum et Mulierum*, Romae, Studium 1957.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁹ *Dicionário Etimológico de Nomes e Sobrenomes*. Curitiba, 1949.

it from the German "Amalrich," in which *rich* means again "ruler," but *amal* means "war."

*Ernst Förstemann*²⁰ lists the personal names grouped under the root syllables from which they are derived. He says that the Old High German root "*Haimi*" comes from the Gothic *Haims* (home), and we find listed here a score of names derived from this root with the date of their earliest written record. "Haimirich," "Haimrich," and "Heimrich," for example, are found in documents from 728 A.D.

Summarizing *Fumagalli*, *Guerios*, *Egger*, and *Förstemann's* conclusions we may presume that the Italian "Amerigo" can be derived either from "Amalrich" or from "Heinrich." Although Beeler, modestly claims that he presented only "a review of the many discussions which have been devoted to the history of "America," he makes a very interesting remark.²¹ If (Beeler says) *Amalrico* were the ancestor of the name *Amerigo*, the palatalization of the *a* to *e* in front of an *l* plus consonant, as well as the change of the intervocalic *k* to a voiced *g*, can be considered as a normal phonetical development. So is the assimilation of the pretonic cluster *-lr-* to *-rr-*. But this *-rr-* cluster is stable in Tuscan. This means that if really *Amalrich* were the original form, *Amerrigo* would be the prevailing spelling of Vespucci's name. And Beeler comes to the conclusion that the Old High German name *Haimirich* alone should be considered as the ancestor of the name *Amerigo*.

This theory seems to be supported by the fact that *Amalrich* can be found mostly in Western Europe and *Haimirich*, *Heinrich* in Central and Eastern Europe.

von der Hagen mentions that variants of *Amalarich* were popular in the ninth century, but I think that it is questionable that this name survived the following six centuries while the East Goths became extinct, and the power of Germanic stems shrank in Europe after Charlemagne, in the ninth century. His two sons encouraged the separation of the Germanic and Romance people in Europe, and Italy was definitely not a Germanic territory.

The Hungarian linguists seem to have an answer to this question. Dr. János Karácsonyi²² writes about the first Hungarian king, the

²⁰ *Alteutsches Namenbuch*. Vol. II, Second Ed. Published by P. Hanstein's Verlag at Bonn, 1900-1916.

²¹ *Names*, I:11.

²² "Az Arpád-ház Szentjei" on pp. 305-321 of *Arpád és az Arpádok Történelmi Emlékü*, edited by Dezső Csánki, Budapest, Franklin Translat., 1910.

later *St. Stephen*, that he named his son – the later *St. Emeric* – after the queen's uncle, the ruling German emperor and the later *St. Heinrich II*. In naming his son after the German emperor he intended to strenghten not only the family ties but also the political situation of the new Hungary. Hungarians were good riders and fighters, but it became evident that they could establish and maintain a permanent country between the Germanic and Slavic blocks only if they turned to Christianity and made peace with their neighbors. *Stephen* converted the Hungarians to christianity and married a German princess, *Gisella*.

Emeric is *Imre* in Hungarian. Gergely Czuczor and János Forgarasi²³ analyzed this name and identified it with the German *Heinrich*, too, but they think that the Hungarian form is influenced by the Arabic word *imre* which means "man."

St. Stephen's son *Emeric* had already become a saint of the Catholic church in 1083.²⁴ He is the only saint with this name. Amerigo Vespucci must have been baptized after him because in the Catholic church generally a name with a patron saint can be given in the baptismal.²⁵

*Carlo Tagliavini*²⁶ seems also to confirm this theory. He discusses one name each day for the Italian radio according to the calendar of the Roman Catholic Church. He knows that *Imre* is very popular in Hungary and identifies it and its variants *Imbreh*, *Imreh* with the Latin *Emericus*, *Hemicus*, which comes from the Germanic *Haimirich*.

This way the Germanic *Amalrich* or *Haimric* had to be accepted by the Hungarians first, who gave the name a patron saint so that it could be given in the baptismal to a man after whom our continent was named. The name *America* has a colorful European history, but it became genuinely American.

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²³ *A Magyar Nyelv Szótára I–VI*, edited by G. Emich, Pest. 1862–74.

²⁴ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 14:287.

²⁵ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 10:674–75.

²⁶ *Un Nome al Giorno: Origine e Storia di Nomi di Persona Italiani I–II*, Torino, Edizioni Radio Italiana, 1955–57, 1:29, 2.234–36.