European navigators faced a daunting task in attempting to find a way across the Pacific in the sixteenth century.

These maps show how European cartographers underestimated the extent of the Pacific Ocean in the early sixteenth century. In that period cartography was based not only on knowledge gained through observation, but also on travel narratives and geographical descriptions that relied on sources such as the imaginative writings of Marco Polo dating from the late 1200s. Explorers like Ferdinand Magellan (1520) and Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo (1542) had little or no knowledge of the Pacific’s patterns of winds and currents.

In 1542, when the San Salvador set out to sail north and west to Asia, she would have carried on board a set of charts supplied by Spanish officials. These would have contained the results of previous Spanish voyages north along the coast of New Spain. With Asia as her ultimate destination, she probably also carried information the Spaniards had been able to acquire – often through bribery and espionage – from coveted Portuguese charts of that region. However much of San Salvador’s projected route was simply unknown to Europeans. Comparing this route with the prevailing winds and currents along the coast of California, it is easy to see that Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo had been set a daunting task.

Below: This later copy of a 1541 map of coastal Mexico and Baja California by Domingo del Castillo illustrates the extent of Spanish geographic knowledge of these regions on the eve of the San Salvador voyage. It is likely that Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo took a copy of this map with him on his voyage north. He and his companions were literally venturing into uncharted waters.

Left: German cartographer Sebastian Münster’s map of 1540 shows how Europeans continued to underestimate the distance from New Spain to China across the Pacific Ocean. The presumed existence of islands featured in the Northern Pacific can be traced to Marco Polo’s travel narratives dating from the late thirteenth century.

Left: Battista Agnese’s chart of the Pacific Ocean (ca 1544) depicts both the lack of European knowledge of the Northern Pacific (left blank by the cartographer) and also the goal of much of Spanish and Portuguese navigation: the Spice Islands in the Eastern Pacific.
European navigators faced a daunting task in attempting to find a way across the Pacific in the sixteenth century. These maps show how European cartographers underestimated the extent of the Pacific Ocean in the early sixteenth century. In that period cartography was based not only on knowledge gained through observation, but also on travel narratives and geographical descriptions that relied on sources such as the imaginative writings of Marco Polo dating from the late 1200s. Explorers like Ferdinand Magellan (1520) and Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo (1542) had little or no knowledge of the Pacific's patterns of winds and currents.

In 1542, when the San Salvador set out to sail north and west to Asia, she would have carried on board a set of charts supplied by Spanish officials. These would have contained the results of previous Spanish voyages north along the coast of New Spain. With Asia as her ultimate destination, she probably also carried information the Spaniards had been able to acquire – often through bribery and espionage – from coveted Portuguese charts of that region. However much of San Salvador's projected route was simply unknown to Europeans. Comparing this route with the prevailing winds and currents along the coast of California, it is easy to see that Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo had been set a daunting task.
European navigators faced a daunting task in attempting to find a way across the Pacific in the sixteenth century.

These maps show how European cartographers underestimated the extent of the Pacific Ocean in the early sixteenth century. In that period cartography was based not only on knowledge gained through observation, but also on travel narratives and geographical descriptions that relied on sources such as the imaginative writings of Marco Polo dating from the late 1200s. Explorers like Ferdinand Magellan (1520) and Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo (1542) had little or no knowledge of the Pacific's patterns of winds and currents.

In 1542, when the San Salvador set out to sail north and west to Asia, she would have carried on board a set of charts supplied by Spanish officials. These would have contained the results of previous Spanish voyages north along the coast of New Spain. With Asia as her ultimate destination, she probably also carried information the Spaniards had been able to acquire – often through bribery and espionage – from coveted Portuguese charts of that region. However much of San Salvador's projected route was simply unknown to Europeans. Comparing this route with the prevailing winds and currents along the coast of California, it is easy to see that Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo had been set a daunting task.

Below: This later copy of a 1541 map of coastal Mexico and Baja California by Domingo del Castillo illustrates the extent of Spanish geographic knowledge of these regions on the eve of the San Salvador voyage. It is likely that Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo took a copy of this map with him on his voyage north. He and his companions were literally venturing into uncharted waters.