

## The Mountains of the Moon

By Joe McAlhany, Old World Auctions

Africa's unforgiving terrain ensured that the search for the source of the Nile would never be simple. Until its sources were finally discovered and confirmed in the late nineteenth century, the question of the river's origins was answered with theories often taken from secondhand accounts and whimsical pseudoscience. But for centuries one answer triumphed over the rest: Ptolemy's Mountains of the Moon and the two spurious lakes derived from them. Among the most enduring of cartographic myths, the Mountains of the Moon and the lakes often referred to as Zaire and Zaflan appeared on early Ptolemaic maps and did not vanish until the nineteenth century.

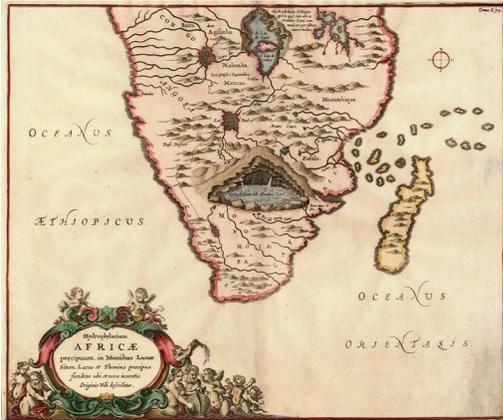
Ptolemy did not pull this conception of the Nile's sources out of thin air. He most likely found the idea through the work of Marinus of Tyre, a Syrian geographer. Marinus wrote of Diogenes, a Greco-Roman merchant and traveler who landed unexpectedly in East Africa in 110 AD. After 25 days of moving along existing trade routes, Diogenes found two lakes and a snow-capped range of mountains, which he claimed were the sources for the Nile. It is possible that Diogenes came across Lake Victoria and/or another of Africa's Great Lakes, and that the mountains he saw were what came to be known as the Rwenzori Mountains (the range is informally called the Mountains of the Moon today), but there is no certainty on the matter.



Regardless of the inaccuracy of Diogenes' claims, his alleged sources of the Nile would be widely accepted for centuries to come thanks to the work of Ptolemy. The influential geographer's map of the African continent included the Mountains of the Moon and the associated lakes south of the equator. Referred to as *Montes Lunae*, the mountains are depicted with several rivers flowing out of the range into the apocryphal lakes, originally called *Paludes Nili* (which translates to *Swamps or Marshes of the Nile*). The western lake would eventually come to be known as Zaire (or, occasionally, Zaire in the north and Zembere in the south) and the eastern lake as Zaflan. Small islands are commonly found in both. The mountains are always named some variation of Mountains of the Moon. The origin of the range's otherworldly name is unclear, although a common guess among commentators is that it is the result of sloppy translation, likely of another range's name.

Even as knowledge of the continent expanded, Ptolemy's mountain range and source lakes were slow to disappear from maps. In the early half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, two Jesuit missionaries, the Spaniard Pedro Paez and the Portuguese Jeronimo Lobo, found and described the source

of the Blue Nile at Lake Tana. Paez, who arrived at the springs at Gish Abay in 1618, described the mountains as gushing from the root of a water-filled mountain, Mount Gish.



The Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher published Paez's account in his *Mundus Subterraneus* (circa 1665), a work that focused in part on the fantastic idea that a network of underground waterways kept water circulating throughout the earth. Kircher included a fascinating map to accompany Paez's account showing the water within the hollowed-out core of the Mountains of the Moon. This curious map is an excellent example of where the latest discoveries and utter nonsense intersect; for while Kircher's map is based on Paez's mostly accurate (if a bit primitive) account of the head of the Blue Nile, the geography is woefully off, with the equivalent of Lake Tana (here

called *Lac Bed*) near the southern tip of the continent instead of above the equator in eastern Africa. The two spurious lakes are depicted upriver.



The beginning of the end for Ptolemy's sources of the Nile in cartography was French cartographer Guillaume Delisle's *L'Afrique dressée sur les Observations de Ms. de l'Academie Royale des Sciences*, first published in 1700. In addition to adjusting the longitude of the Mediterranean, therefore righting the shape of the northern part of Africa, Delisle was also the first cartographer to eliminate Ptolemy's fabled lakes. Delisle believed in a scientific approach to cartography - if he could not verify the validity of a piece of geographic information, he would not include it on his maps. Fortunately he lived in an age when



information about Africa was increasing, thanks to France's growing presence on the continent. Delisle's map correctly identifies the source of the Blue Nile in Ethiopia, but the White Nile is omitted since its origins were still unknown. This map - and Delisle's modern, rational approach - proved hugely influential, but variations of Ptolemy's Mountains of the Moon and his two lakes remained in cartography for at least another century. Respected cartographers such as D'Anville, Tirion, Bonne, and Kitchin continued to include Ptolemy's speculative sources of the Nile on maps after the publication of Delisle's landmark work, albeit with adjustments that often

awkwardly mixed the newest information with Ptolemy's ancient and stubborn theory. Many maps appeared with the Nile's heads now above the equator, but they still used the basic model Ptolemy gave to the world in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

The myth of the Mountains of the Moon and the lakes Zaire and Zaflan only ended when the source of the White Nile was definitively determined at last by Henry Morton Stanley in the 1870s. Stanley built on the explorations of those who came in the decades before him, most notably Richard Francis Burton and John Speke, to confirm that Lake Victoria was indeed the source of the White Nile. He was also the first European to report seeing the Ruwenzori range, the snowy mountains that are arguably the actual Mountains of the Moon (and which bear that nickname today). It is still somewhat controversial as to whether or not the vague similarities between Ptolemy's mythical origins of the Nile and the actual sources are merely coincidental or the result of a game of geographical telephone, where real discoveries were confused by second and third-hand accounts. Either way, it's a stimulating example of how an inaccuracy can flourish for centuries in cartography.

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