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Front cover Anonymous Mexican
artist. Portrait of José Antonio
Alzate y Ramirez, Eighteenth
century. Col. Patrimonio
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‘NUEVO MAPA GEOGRÁFICO DE LA AMÉRICA SEPTENTRIONAL’

José Antonio de Alzate y Ramírez’s remarkable map of New Spain

Wesley Brown

In 1768, Don José Antonio de Alzate y Ramírez (1737–1799), a Mexican renaissance man (See front cover), created a large manuscript map of New Spain (defined at the time as those portions of North America controlled by Spain). This he sent to the French Royal Academy of Sciences hoping that the learned society would publish it. It was titled ‘Nuevo Mapa Geographico de la America Septentrional’ and bore the date of 1768, although it was printed sometime later. Because Spain jealously guarded its geographic knowledge about the New World and rarely allowed information to be published, this map (and its derivatives) is the only one printed of New Spain that appeared during the eighteenth century that uses Spanish information!¹ Regions to the north, in what would become the western United States, are rich with previously unprinted information and Alzate is distinguished as the first to apply the name Texas to the geographic region (Provincia de los Texas) to a printed map.

Questions about this map abound. When he created the map he sent to France, Alzate made critical changes from an earlier manuscript that he made for Spanish authorities in 1767. Why did he make those changes? And why send such valuable secrets to the French, rivals of the Spanish? Of the two printed editions of the map, the French was made by Philippe Buache, Royal Geographer to Louis XV, or by his successors (Fig. 1). The Spanish edition was made by Spain’s foremost mapmaker at the time, Tomás López (Fig. 2). When were these two editions printed and which came first? And why was such valuable information, which was in the possession of two of Europe’s most prolific map publishers, not disseminated more broadly? Fifteen known examples are extant; it seems odd that a map with keenly sought-after intelligence and printed in two different editions has so few surviving copies.² This brief essay, will explore the mapmaker’s life and his fascinating map and try to unravel these mysteries.

José Antonio de Alzate y Ramírez

Don Antonio was born in 1737 near Mexico City in the town of Ozumba (subsequently renamed Ozumba

de Alzate in his honour) to wealthy parents. Educated in a prestigious Jesuit school, he later attended the Royal Pontifical University in Mexico City receiving a Bachelor of Theology degree in 1756. Shortly after, he joined the priesthood and then embarked on a wide range of scientific investigations, publishing on weather observation, archeological ruins, volcanos, psychedelic properties of plants, and astronomical observations during the transit of Venus. He launched *Gaceta de Literatura*, a successful gazetteer of scientific literature, which thrived between 1788 and 1795. Many of his scholarly papers were published by the Royal Academy of Sciences in Paris, perhaps then the most respected scientific body in the world. In fact, his printed map (the subject of this article) was dedicated to this august body. He became a leading advocate of enlightenment principles of scientific investigation in the New World and was elected to the Academy in 1771 becoming its New World correspondent, a great honour for a colonial. So well respected was he that in 1884, when Mexicans created a scientific group, it was called the Antonio Alzate Scientific Society, which later became the Mexican National Academy of Sciences. His name graces the title of its journal to this day: *Memorias de las Academia Nacional de Ciencias Antonio Alzate*.

Alzate’s surviving maps

Alzate was not a trained cartographer, but he supplemented his geographic and astronomical evaluations with the study of official manuscript maps stored in Mexico City. However, it does not seem that he had access to the most recent records of expeditions dispatched by Spanish authorities to the north.³ Even so, he was resolved to produce maps of the entirety of New Spain, a vast largely unknown area.

His first surviving manuscript map is titled ‘Nuevo Mapa Geográfico de la América Septentrional Española, dividida en Obisposados y provincias’, dated 1767 (Fig. 3). This very large map (155 x 189 cm) is bound by vignettes of wondrous animals, birds and native peoples, it has tables and descriptive text boxes

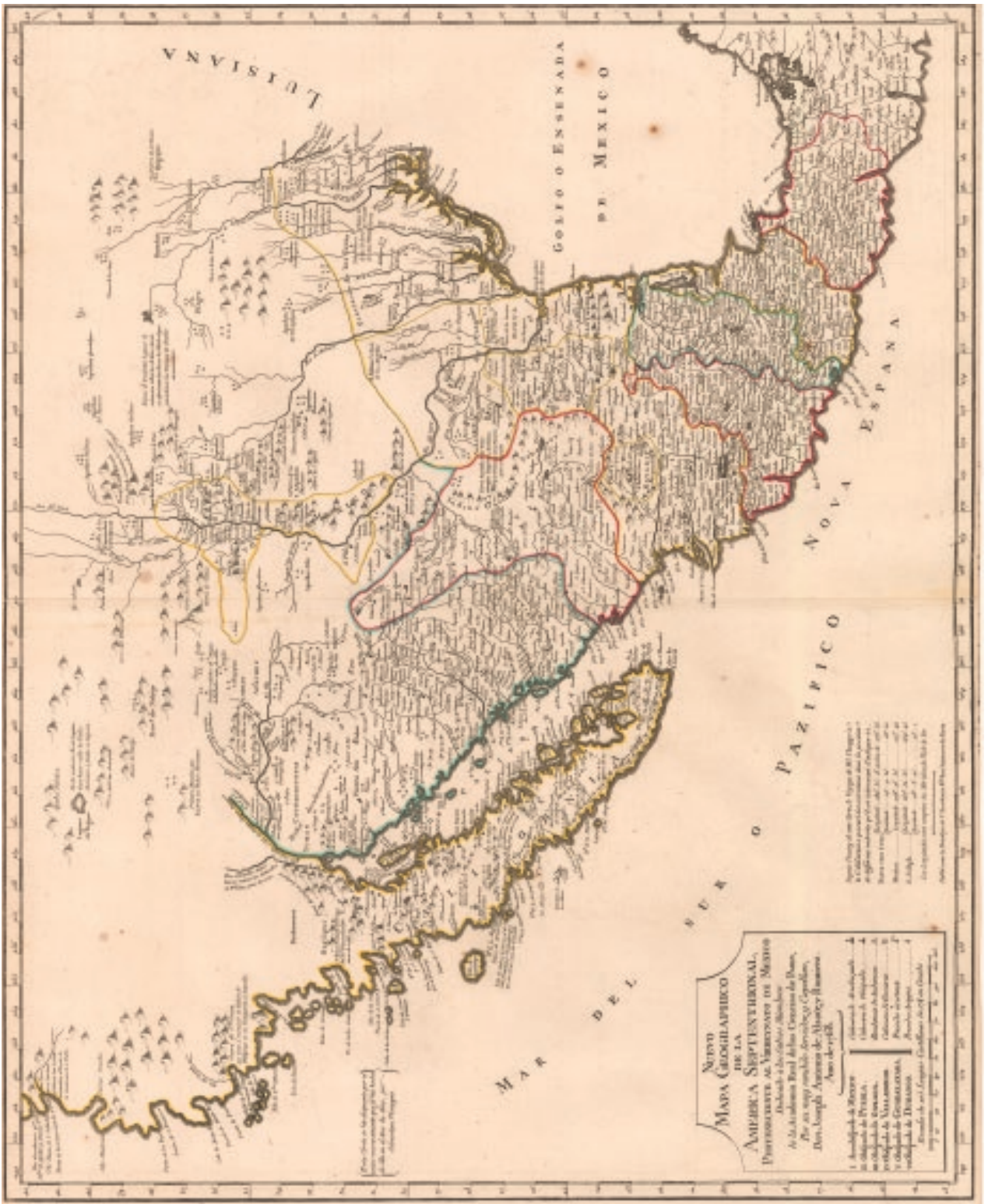


Fig. 1 Alzate y Ramirez, 'Nuevo Mapa Geographico de la America Septentrional', 1768. Printed map of New Spain. French edition. 54 x 67 cm. MacLean Collection Map Library, Illinois.

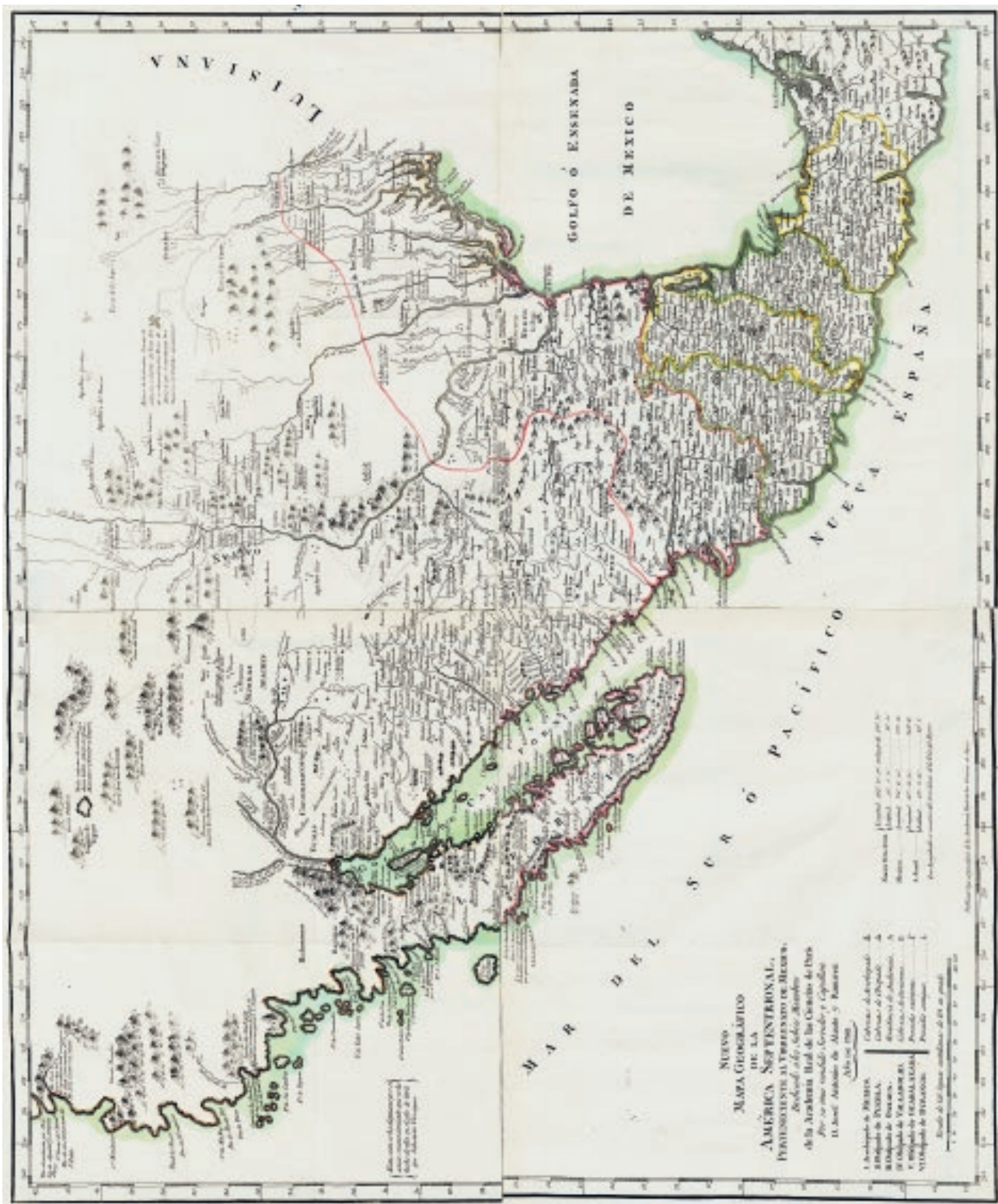


Fig. 2 Alzate y Ramirez, 'Nuevo Mapa Geográfico de la América Septentrional', 1768. Printed map of New Spain. Spanish edition. 53 x 64 cm. Collection of Wesley Brown.