PARALLEL SPACES OF THE RENAISSANCE

The Cartographic Worlds of the Renaissance

Manipulating the Shifting Map

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ABSTRACT

With the “discovery” of America, the maps of the Ancients shattered before the eyes of humanist Europe. Between the Portolan charts of navigators and the scholarly *mappae mundi*—growing out of the reappropriation of Ptolemy and certain hybrid or indeterminate maps—the Renaissance saw the joint evolution of discovered and imagined worlds thanks to gaps in cartographic knowledge. Faced with these clashing geographies, the sixteenth century tried to make the map of this new world compatible with the biblical account of the dispersion of peoples. Cartographers brought their faith, which was often non-conformist, into their work. They rushed in to fill gaps in knowledge, such as whether a maritime passage or land connection existed or not. They manipulated the world to bring forth islands, strips of land, and even another continent. By anticipating coming discoveries, they incited princes to explore and colonize new spaces.

Oronce Finé, *Recens et integra orbis descriptio*, Paris, 1534-1536. The map projects a heart, reflecting Oronce Finé’s faith tinged with hermeticism. Source : BNF

"Carta marina," in Girolamo Ruscelli, *La Geographia di Claudio Tolomeo alessandrino*, Venice, 1561. This map includes the theory of a bridge between Europe and America put forward by Giacomo Gastaldi in 1548. Source : Bibliothèque du Congrès

After Christopher Colombus's "discovery" of what quickly became a "New World" west of the Atlantic in 1492, the old mappamundi now included only a small portion of the globe, sending Europe's head spinning. The sixteenth century gave painful birth to a new map that was drawn as archipelagoes—which were previously disjointed—were gathered together to make the Earth into a globe. This map was no longer limited to the three parts of the Ancient World that the biblical account peopled with the descendants of Noah's three sons: Ham in Africa, Shem in Asia, and Japheth in Europe. Contrary to Aristotle's opinion, the "torrid zone" on both sides of the equator revealed itself to be well peopled, and the globe proved universally habitable. Sacred medieval cartography, which was oriented toward the east where Paradise was located, gave way to a cartography that was partially secularized through the reappropriation of the pagan work of Ptolemy (second century). His *Geographia*, which was translated from Greek to Latin in Florence around 1409, was, from 1475 onwards, diffused widely by the printing press. It provided a cartographic technique that **could take into account** these broadened horizons. The map was reformed through a cartographic humanism that compared ancient knowledge with information from explorers, but still submitted these new mappamundi to the biblical account.

Humanists, Navigators, and Princes: Parallel Cartographic Worlds

From the practical style of Portolan charts and the scholarly style of Ptolemaic maps to the broad range of hybrids deploying treasures of local geographic erudition, the Renaissance invented parallel worlds stemming from competing visions of space. It was only in the late sixteenth century that the atlases of Abraham Ortelius (1570) and Gerhardus Mercator (1595) brought together these images by connecting—with varying degrees of consensus—parts of a world that was encompassed, connected, and joined from one cardinal point to another. The cartographer, who rearranged land masses to have them conform with the Creator's initial design, was the artisan of a *cosmopoeia*, of a "world creation" in the words of Mercator. The princes of Europe also took a keen interest in cartography when they became a crucial tool of government following the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), in which the universal papacy granted a colonial monopoly to the crowns of Castile and

Portugal on either side of a bitterly negotiated meridian west of the Cape Verde islands. Conquests and colonial worlds opened up for those who knew how to manipulate the map.

In the mid-sixteenth century, the large number of geographical prints brought scholars face to face with the limits of their knowledge, as contradictory accounts abounded and sowed confusion regarding the existence of a southern continent, a maritime passage in the north between Europe and Cathay, and regarding the status of America in particular, which was either separated from or connected to an Asia peopled by Shem. These doubts provided room for maneuver for cartographers, who rushed in to offer hypotheses regarding unknown parts of the world that their princes could explore and colonize.

The Open Doors of Uncertainty

Some scholars persisted in believing that the American "New World" was just the other side of Asia. For his mappamundi drawn in 1519 for Francis I and printed in 1536, Oronce Finé (1494-1555), a professor of mathematics at the Collège des lecteurs royaux beginning in 1530, used a projection in the shape of a heart. It allowed him to physically amalgamate America, Europe, and Asia, and to make the map an image of the religion of universal love, whose beginnings Finé sought out in ancient wisdom. In 1548, Giacomo Gastaldi (c. 1500-1566) had an updated Italian edition of Ptolemy printed in Venice, which served as a reference until the *Theatrum orbis terrarum* of Abraham Ortelius in 1570. Validating the account of America's peopling by the descendants of Noah, one of these "atlases" gathers humanity together onto a single global island encompassing all the coasts of both the Pacific and the Atlantic thanks to a land bridge connecting Scandinavia to Florida. The world is presented in its harmony, with the map expressing the perfect sphericity of an *orbis terrarum* that appears on paper thanks to a *trompe l'oeil* effect, which is reinforced as the viewer *steps backward*. While the geographers of Northern Europe disqualified the single continent present in some Italian cartography, they nevertheless continued to trace global routes on the new map, insistently promoting the existence of a quicker maritime passage in the north connecting the East and the West.

The layout of these maps is less peremptory than asserted by acerbic critics of late sixteenth century cartography. Cartographers interiorized the fragmentary and shifting nature of geographical knowledge: gnawed by doubt, they worked to dissimulate it. The holes in their geographical awareness were plugged by the "edges" of the map. These figurative details were integrated within the cartographic discourse in order to enclose it: medallions and *cartouches* cleverly hide holes, sea monsters signal unknown areas, and hypothetical territories are suggested. These were so many features that kept intact the totalizing ambition of the map. In his planisphere of 1569, Mercator was uncertain regarding the existence of a maritime passage to Asia located in northwest America, and thus placed a large medallion above the New World to cover this gap in knowledge; conversely, he drew a more modest *cartouche* above Siberia, which reveals a maritime passage in the north-east connecting China and the wealth of the Orient.

Image of a Possible World: The Map as Prophecy

In 1577, John Dee could promise Elizabeth of England (1558-1603) a vast global empire by setting out to take possession of Antarctica, that "third world" imagined by the Renaissance. The lands at the antipodes were nevertheless just a mathematical hypothesis that balanced in the south the landmasses that were present in the Northern Hemisphere. The fastest path

there had to be the northern maritime route promoted by his friend Mercator, which connected the Orient without crossing other European empires centered on the Atlantic.

The “englobing of the world” (A. Romano) proceeded via the map and its ability to create the space it represents. It prompted princes to verify the cartographic pretentions constructed in the cabinets of geographers. In his *Cosmographie universelle* of 1556, Guillaume Le Testu (1510-1573) of France created islands and territories out of thin air for his maps of the austral region promised for the king of France. He allowed for the anticipation of their discovery, but refused to write more on the subject in his textual commentary. The map is thus one step ahead of the text, as if an unstable prophecy was defying the prince to give it concrete form.

Embarking upon a scholarly adventure to reassemble the globe’s floating archipelago, cartographers depicted *figures* of a world to come in the words of Tertullian -for whom, in the third century, a *figura* was a prefiguation. Just as the Old Testament had prefigured the New Testament and completed the revelation of divine will, the mystical reason for the outline of continents on the globe would be fully revealed only at a more advanced stage of the history of universal salvation. The map anticipated this movement, as its rearrangements raised awareness regarding a *historia sacra* that was in the process of being written. Therein lies the meaning of a Renaissance cartography that, although desacralized by Ptolemaic technique, still drankdeep from the well of *geographia sacra*.

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