

# Cartographic Representation of Europe during the Renaissance

## Author-s:

[Émilie D'ORGEIX](#) [1]

## Abstract

The rediscovery of *Geography* by the Greek author Ptolemy, and its translation into Latin in 1409, had a profound influence on the representation of the European continent during the Renaissance. The first map of Europe, published in 1554 by Gerard Mercator, was the origin of a long genealogy of maps using ancient and contemporary sources. Beyond the “progressive” aspects of this new model of measured and projected representation, Europe as an allegorical figure also led to a vast cartographic production reminding that the territories of maps are physical constructions as much as they are intellectual ones.

---

## Article

Caught in a genuine *furor geographicus*, scholarly Europe during the Renaissance enjoyed the profound renewal inspired by the rediscovery of Ptolemy's *Geography*, a Greek text from the second century, which was accompanied by 26 regional maps, and translated into Latin in 1409 before being published in Bologna in 1477. At the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the religious, allegorical, and non-metric cartographical tradition in use at the end of the Middle Ages made room for secular, measured and projected graphic representations that lastingly structured the principles of early modern scientific cartography. The contributions were firstly technical and representational. The combination of maps on different scales, used notably in Peter Apian's *Cosmographia* (Antwerp, 1545), made it possible to both represent and position diverse administrative entities: countries, counties, regions, provinces. Beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, several major series of European atlases included these compilations of national and European maps. It was in this context that the first map of Europe appeared. Dated 1554, it is the work of the Flemish cartographer Gerard Mercator (1512-1594), who was working at the time on a large atlas of Europe, of which a single copy survives today. The Europe he represented is vast, reaching the 75° parallel in the North, encompassing Iceland in the Northwest, along with Mount Sinai and the Sinai desert in the Southwest. It ends along the Atlantic coast in the West, while in the South the coastal band of the African continent stretches across the length of Western Morocco, the Nile delta, and the two Syrtes. In the East, the map extends to the mouth of the River Ob and the Upper Volga. Mercator relied on a multitude of both ancient and early modern sources to complete this gigantic compilation: travel books, memoirs of explorations, contemporary maps (including the one by Oronce Finé for France, published in 1638) and Ptolemaic reference points (notably for Alexandria, the first city he included on his map). Thanks to this work, which Mercator described as “*laboriosissimum*,” Europe finally acquired its early modern physiognomy. The updating of topographical data and toponyms made it possible to set the continent straight by correcting Ptolemaic distortions, as well as to reduce the breadth of the Mediterranean, which was still based on incorrect calculations by Posidonius. Mercator also gave prominence to Russia, adding plaques to his map which detailed the configuration, size, and government of a region, information that until then had seldom appeared. Moreover, his work is set within a vast confluence of cartographical works. In addition to the publication in 1570 of the map by Abraham Ortelius, a major

cartographical investigation was initiated by the Cologne editors Georg Braun and Franz Hogenberg, on the occasion of the series *Civitates orbis terrarum* (1572). Their numerous urban maps, views, and profiles “minutely dissect”—to use the words of Antoine Du Pinet—the configuration of Europe’s largest cities.

While Mercator’s work was the starting point for a long genealogy of folio maps of Europe, the task of the continent’s geographic promotion fell more particularly to the Dutch cartographers from the Blaeu, Hondius, and Van Langren workshops, which in the late sixteenth century popularized the use of terrestrial globes. As their constructions made it possible to choose a geometric cutting in the direction of meridians, it favoured the position of Europe in relation to that of other continents very effectively. By breaking the continuity of the terrestrial surface in the middle of the Pacific, from the 1570s onwards the creators of the globe promoted the centrality of Europe, thereby giving it a privileged position by organizing the world around it.

Although physically circumscribed and measured in the late sixteenth century, Europe nevertheless remained a fragile geographical entity. While its territories, roads, cities, and landscapes had largely been clarified, at the same time increasing international—and especially American—exchange favoured a universal and already encyclopaedic cartographical production that weakened both its position and status. It was only with the end of the wars of religion, which were marked by the secularization of thought, that European populations, which until then had defined themselves as Christians as opposed to pagans or infidels, became aware that they belonged to a shared territorial zone. It was in this context that the first anthropomorphic maps of Europe were published, giving “body” to a geographical entity that still remained largely abstract. These political maps, whose aim was to attract the support of the largest number of people, subtly called on two traditions. The first was the myth of the goddess Europa ravished by Zeus in the form of a bull, which was part of a desire for the historic legitimation of the European continent, here openly linked to its ancient mythological origin. The second was the early modern transcription of the theo-anthropo-geocentric concept of medieval Christian cartography, notably materialized by T-and-O maps. Reviving the foundations of medieval allegorical cartography, early modern anthropomorphic maps provided an alternative metaphoric model that recomposed the anatomy of Europe. The continent, depicted in the form of a crowned queen or, more rarely, of the Virgin Mary when the map served the Catholic cause, took on a presumption of reality according to Christian Jacob. Generally positioning Europe’s head in the Iberian Peninsula, its heart in France, and its dress in Northern Europe, anthropomorphic maps gradually consolidated the contours of the European political space. While “Queen Europe,” which was published in Munster’s *Cosmographia* in 1545 is better-known, it was inspired by an earlier copy published in 1537 by Johannes Putsch, a Tyrolean cartographer in the service of Ferdinand I. Widely diffused, thanks notably to the works of Henrich Bünting, Mathias Quad and Johann Bussmacher, they enjoyed remarkable posterity in the last decades of the seventeenth century.

These tools for the spatial representation of the European continent during the sixteenth century—closely combining scientific requirements and mnemotechnic matrix—were crucial in stabilizing geographic spatiality, as well as the political and social status of Europe. Basing themselves on the works of their predecessors, seventeenth century cartographers would make full use of these references, notably through the development of historical geography.

### **Bibliography:**

Baridon, Laurent, *Un atlas imaginaire. Cartes allégoriques et satiriques* (Paris: Citadelles & Mazenod, 2011).

Grataloup, Christian, *L’invention des continents* (Paris: Larousse, 2005).

Jacob, Christian, *L'empire des cartes. Approche historique de la cartographie à travers l'histoire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996).

Rivière, Jean-Loup, "La carte, le corps et la mémoire," *Cartes et figures de la terre*, exhibition catalog, Paris, Centre Georges-Pompidou CCI, 1980, p. 83-91.

Tapié, Alain, Zwingenberger, Jeanette, eds., *L'homme-paysage. Visions artistiques du paysage anthropomorphe entre le xvi<sup>e</sup> et le xxi<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Lille-Paris: Palais des Beaux-Arts-Somogy, 2008).

---

**Source URL:**

<https://ehne.fr/en/article/european-art/representation-europe/cartographic-representation-europe-during-renaissance>

**Links**

[1] <https://ehne.fr/en/node/927>