

## Claiming Land Through One's Representation of It

Whether through travel itineraries or maps, people in medieval times represented the world around them in various ways. Explorers such as Marco Polo and John Mandeville described their travels throughout the East, while many other writers chronicled pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Furthermore, cartographers visually implemented their view of the world, as in the case of Martin Waldseemüller and his 1507 map *Universalis Cosmographia*. Despite the wide range of time that encompasses the medieval era and the hundreds of years between these examples, many common themes exist among these various representations of the world, chief among them being the superiority of Christian Europe, and the influence it had on other lands. Medieval people reflected these themes textually and visually in their productions of space in order to lay claim to the world.

Medieval Europeans often used Christianity to demonstrate their supposed worldly influence. Due to Medieval Europe's strongly held Christian identity, Europeans often depicted powerful people around the world – whether real or fictional – as being Christian. In doing this, Europeans wished to show their widespread influence. Marco Polo, for example, said that the Great Khan of the Mongol Empire “regards as truest and best the faith of the Christians, because he declares that it commands nothing that is not full of all goodness and holiness.”<sup>1</sup> Both Polo and John Mandeville, in their writings, also describe Prester John (albeit in different ways), a fantasy but popularly believed Christian ruler in the East who ruled over a Christian kingdom.<sup>2</sup> In portraying both of these rulers

**Comment [JG1]:** Good title, if a bit wordy. Use **bold** to make sure the title stands out from the rest of the piece.

**Comment [JG2]:** Good way to acknowledge the problem and deal with it up front.

**Comment [JG3]:** Good, direct thesis statement.

**Comment [JG4]:** This is a really interesting claim, and a fascinating reading of the texts.

**Comment [JG5]:** Fantastical (?)

<sup>1</sup> Marco Polo, *The Travels* (London: Penguin Books, 1958), 119.

<sup>2</sup> John Mandeville, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (London: Penguin Books, 1983).

as Christians, Polo and Mandeville attempted to claim their lands as Christian lands, and through Europe's connection with Christianity, as European lands.

Cartographers also used this same method of representing Christianity and Europe's apparent influence through foreign Christian lands. Similarly to how explorers had written about Prester John, Martin Waldseemüller actually mapped out Prester John's empire on his *Universalis Cosmographia*, published in 1507, towards the end of the medieval period.<sup>3</sup> Waldseemüller planted crosses throughout the East showing the extent of Christian land. He even wrote a large block of text describing Prester John's empire, indicating its importance in the East. While the vast majority of his map is geographically accurate, Waldseemüller used Prester John in the same way as other people in medieval times – to show the apparent extent of European influence throughout the world.

**Comment [JG6]:** Good reading of the map as an argumentative text.

The use of Prester John, a fictional person, to stake a Christian claim in the East is particularly interesting. Polo, Mandeville, and Waldseemüller essentially redrew the present reality of the East in order to claim territory. The British used a similar tactic to this years later when they created a colonial empire. As Graham Burnett writes in his book, *Masters of All They Surveyed: Exploration, Geography, and a British El Dorado*, the “remapping and surmounting of history could be used to root colonial claims to possession.”<sup>4</sup> Since maps and written accounts are the sole source of territorial claims – borders are not drawn on the ground, and flags are unlikely to stay long in the ground

**Comment [JG7]:** This is a bit of an awkward transition to another good point. Its hard to make this sort of jump in time and space without having it come across as stilted. It might help to note that you are pointing to more recent examples because they are better researched and documented...you have to look other places for evidence to support what you want to argue. It's a tough needle to thread.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Waldseemüller, 1507, *Universalis Cosmographia Secundum Ptholomaei Traditionem et Americi Vespucii Alioru[m]que Lustrationes*, St. Dié, Lorraine, Holy Roman Empire, Scale unavailable.

<sup>4</sup> Graham Burnett, *Masters of All They Surveyed: Exploration, Geography, and a British El Dorado* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 255.

where explorers plant them – changing these accounts to reflect new borders is a method of changing the status quo and claiming what a country does not currently own.

**Comment [JG8]:** Good...and nicely put.

Waldseemüller also demonstrated European influence in how he depicted the shape of the world. In his map, the continents and oceans are shaped to look like the wings of a bird, and two globes, displaying different sides of the Earth, appear as two heads facing in opposite directions. This design mimics the double-headed eagle design on the flag of the Holy Roman Empire, in which Waldseemüller lived. In representing the world as the symbol of the Holy Roman Empire, Waldseemüller made a statement that his country symbolically controls the world.

Medieval authors have made similar statements about cities that, in reality, were out of European control. For example, many authors, such as William Wey, wrote about travels to Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> One effect of this was promoting travel and pilgrimage to the holy city, which Christians did not control. By discussing travel to Jerusalem, Wey and other authors who wrote about pilgrimages increased interest in the trip, and provided helpful information to future pilgrims. By potentially increasing the number of Europeans going to Jerusalem, these authors are contributing to making the city more Christian and European, even without having actual control of the city.

**Comment [JG9]:** I really like this idea. I'm not sure that I buy it...but I really like it.

In addition, writing about Jerusalem was a way of asserting European's claim over it. Just as Waldseemüller metaphorically laid claim to the world with his representation of its shape, so too did medieval writers claim Jerusalem through their words. The multitude of European pilgrims who wrote about their experiences and travels to Jerusalem tended to be religious people, as in the case of Richard of Verdun, who

**Comment [JG10]:** Good...this is nice, subtle thinking.

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<sup>5</sup> William Wey, *The Itineraries of William Wey* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2010).

wrote about his 1027 pilgrimage to the holy city.<sup>6</sup> It was these types of people who clamored for the Crusades to take back Jerusalem for Christians. So, it is fitting that they would write of Jerusalem, to take back the city figuratively, in literature.

**Comment [JG11]:** Mandeville, too, makes the case for retaking the Holy Land.

During the medieval period, Europeans used their representations of space to display their influence on the world around them. But towards the end of the medieval period, as more and more Europeans started to explore the world, representing space became a way for Europeans to assert their superiority and justify exploitation of distant lands. Waldseemüller's *Universalis Cosmographia*, drawn during this time of exploration, does indeed depict Europe as superior to other lands, namely Africa. While the whole of Waldseemüller's Europe is covered with cities, the interior of Africa is mostly bare, a result of not just European's lack of knowledge of Africa, but also the reason for that lack of knowledge: that Europeans valued African civilization little. They did not see an importance to Africa and its people; rather, they existed merely for Europe's benefit. In fact, what Waldseemüller did show in Africa's interior was an elephant and a group of barbaric-looking peoples, clearly indicating his belief that Africa is a wild place with uncivilized people, and so Europeans were justified to claim the continent and exploit what they could.

**Comment [JG12]:** And the Americas, too..they are really jammed over on the edge of the map, far away from the center of the map, and the center of authority

**Comment [JG13]:** It feels like you're dancing around the issue of slavery here without really addressing it.

Further showing the fact that Africa existed for Europe's benefit was that all the cities that Waldseemüller does show are along the coastline. While Africa's interior was largely unknown to the Europeans, its coastal cities were not. The reason for this was that Europeans needed knowledge of ports in order to access Africa's resources, and to sail around the continent to India. While the lack of knowledge of Africa's interior and the

**Comment [JG14]:** awkward

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<sup>6</sup> Brett Whalen, *Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 172-173.

small number of actual cities may have made it impractical for Waldseemüller to represent Africa any differently, the fact that he depicted Africa as simply being rimmed with port cities shows that its significance lies simply in its role as a source of European resources and a steppingstone to India, and nothing more.

**Comment [JG15]:** And the port cities are primarily European, aren't they?

Another significant feature of the *Universalis Cosmographia* is its portrayal of America. Waldseemüller was unsure of its exact boundaries, only showing the east coast of America on his map. Waldseemüller even wrote “Incognita,” meaning “unknown,” on the continent. And yet, he still decided to depict it. Waldseemüller did this for the same reason [that](#) Polo and Mandeville chose to write about the fictional Prester John in the East. While those authors wished to represent that part of the world as Christian, or at least as a future Christian land, Waldseemüller included an incomplete America as part of representing the world as being under European control. While Europe did not possess America at the time, Waldseemüller projected European influence to the New World by mapping the continent. To strengthen this claim, he even drew the flags of European countries throughout the Americas.

**Deleted:** why

**Comment [JG16]:** Its probably worth emphasizing that you mean the *whole* world here. Make sure your reader really gets what you are arguing.

In mapping America, Waldseemüller was staking a claim in it, something frequently done throughout the European age of exploration. As J.B. Harley wrote in *The New Nature of Maps*, “maps were used to legitimize the reality of conquest and empire.”<sup>7</sup> When Waldseemüller published his *Universalis Cosmographia*, Europeans had just discovered America. But in mapping the New World, Europeans were taking the first step in conquering it.

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<sup>7</sup> J.B. Harley, *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 7.

This is similar to what Polo and Mandeville achieved in the East, by writing about and describing novel places that few other Europeans had known about. Matthew Edney writes about this in his book, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843*: "The ineluctable necessities of conquest and government are to understand the physical space that one occupies or that one hopes to dominate, to overcome the obstacle of distance and to establish regular contact with the peoples and their territories.' To govern territories, one must know them."<sup>8</sup> Polo and Mandeville both spent time describing the various groups of people they encountered, from the Mongols to Indian villagers. **Knowingly** or not, these explorers took the first step in conquering these lands. They contributed to Europe's understanding of these peoples and areas, thereby making the territory more knowable, and by extension, more controllable. By gaining knowledge of foreign peoples and lands, Polo and Mandeville, in some sense, set up European governments to go and claim these places for **themselves**.

**Comment [JG17]:** Probably not the right word to use here, only because it runs the risk of being confusing when set next to Edney's specific use of "to know."

**Comment [JG18]:** This is a nice, subtle argument, and a very good use of Edney's book.

Furthermore, the manner in which these two writers described foreign peoples cast their subjects as **inferior**. Polo, for example, talked about the lax sexual morals of the people in many of the villages he passed through, and how they treated women poorly. He used his writing to show that Europeans were superior. Combined with his physical description of foreign lands, Polo projected the belief that Europeans were more worthy than natives to control these lands. This is directly akin to Waldseemüller's Africa. By showing all the European-occupied port cities on Africa's coast, but little to nothing on Africa's interior where only Africans lived, Waldseemüller is making the argument that European civilization is superior. This argument of European superiority fits in with

**Comment [JG19]:** So not only are they known, but they are known to be inferior.

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 1.

Waldseemüller's depiction of the world as a double-headed eagle, the symbol of the Holy Roman Empire. In the time of Waldseemüller, Europeans did not actually control the world. However, Europeans were greatly furthering exploration of foreign lands. By making the point that Europeans are superior as they are constantly discovering new lands, Waldseemüller is alluding to the fact that Europeans, as the superior culture, should have the right to control these places, rather than the native uncivilized populations.

The superiority of the West is a point that European writers and cartographers argued throughout the medieval ages and beyond. The fact that Waldseemüller made this point is extremely significant because he published the *Universalis Cosmographia* in a time in which the medieval era, the Renaissance, and the Age of Exploration all overlapped. When first looking at the *Universalis Cosmographia*, one sees a map made in the modern style, with geographical accuracy being of utmost importance. But yet, Waldseemüller still drew his map with a medieval cultural background, featuring mythical places such as the empire of Prester John and the Gates of Alexander (inside which Waldseemüller wrote "enclosed Jews") that both Polo and Mandeville wrote about hundreds of years prior. It makes sense, then, that a map that bridges different eras would also carry over a way of thinking about the world. The same argument that Waldseemüller and other medieval people make about Europe's superiority continued to get used throughout the next several hundred years, as European governments justified the creation of colonial empires.

Through the production of space – both textually in books and visually in maps – medieval people projected their superiority and influence in the world. Writers and

Comment [JG20]: Right.

cartographers used various means to showcase the importance of Europe, and more importantly, claim the world for themselves. By representing peoples and places around the world as Christian, medieval Europeans symbolically extended the borders of Christian Europe. In constantly representing areas out of their control, such as America or Jerusalem, in texts and maps, medieval Europeans gained knowledge and understanding of these places in order to further their claim over them. Finally, by depicting other cultures and peoples as inferior, Europeans justified the exploitation of foreign lands and the future creation of overseas empires. Europeans claimed the world around them not just with written texts, but also with maps, such as Waldseemüller's *Universalis Cosmographia*. While maps are obviously an effective way of displaying the world, Waldseemüller's *Universalis Cosmographia* proves that maps are just as effective as written works in utilizing the space it represents to make a point – in Waldseemüller's case, that the whole world belongs to Europe.

[This is an excellent paper, and one that I really enjoyed reading. You make a strong, subtle argument about the role of the texts and the map as a text in projecting and claiming a specific, Euro-centric worldview. You made good use of the external sources that we talked about...your use of Edney's work was especially helpful, I think, in making your argument. I think you might have focused a bit more – and a bit earlier, as well – on the issues that come from the map sitting at the juncture of what we tend to think of as discrete time periods with discrete modes of thought. I think that addressing this earlier in the paper, rather than at the end, might have given your readers a bit more guidance as they read through the paper, and might have given you some opportunities](#)

for further thought, as well. Specifically, I think it would have helped you to address the question that still lurked behind the scenes a bit in your essay of how you were reconciling clearly medieval texts with a later map, with even later historical scholarship of people like Burnett and Edney.

I mentioned above that I felt like you were dancing around the question of slavery without really wanting to tackle it. If that's a misreading on my part, then you can ignore this next bit. If not, and if you were shying away from bringing the slave trade to the conversation of European exceptionalism...don't. I think its probably a natural extension of the argument that you were making, and that considering slavery alongside your other texts would have greatly strengthened your argument. The way that Europeans treated the Other is a common theme that we talked about in Mandeville and Polo, and tracing that genealogy might have been a useful exercise.

I greatly enjoyed having you in class this past semester. I hope that you have a great Spring semester, and I wish you all the best luck in the rest of your college career. If I can be of any further help to you in the future, please don't hesitate to let me know.

### **Bibliography**

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