

Europe's Confused Transmutation: The Realignment of Moral Cartography in Juan de la Cosa's *Mappa Mundi* (1500)

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Abstract

Following the voyages of Christopher Columbus, John Cabot, Alonso de Ojeda and Amerigo Vespucci in the last decade of the fifteenth century, the New World of the Americas entered the cartographic and moral consciousness of Europe. In the 1500 *mappa mundi* of Juan de la Cosa, navigator and map-maker, we see Europe as a hybrid moral entity, a transitional blend of the medieval and the modern at the crossroads between two mappings of Europe. This paper argues that the Juan De la Cosa map represents a blurred transition between map-making traditions and a mixed moral rhetoric of European identity.

The De la Cosa map operates across two sets of imagined axes: held horizontally, the map is set to a Ptolemaic grid with Europe straddling the prime meridian, and yet when held vertically it presents a medieval moral continuum in which the Americas occupy an ascendant position, a verdant new Jerusalem in contrast to the Babylon of the old world. Europe is both drawn to the centre of a new world order, and also pushed to the moral margins in an echo of the medieval *mappa mundi* still imperfectly resolved.

Keywords: Europe; Cartography; Transformation; Identity; Intellectual History; Exploration.

Introduction

Gerard Delanty has argued that Europe is “an idea that has forever been in a process of invention and reinvention determined by the pressure of new collective identities.”¹ Shaped by transmutations in worldview and self-imagination, the malleable concept attached to a land mass and its people is formed by rhetoric, geographical imagination, culture, science, history

¹ Delanty. *Inventing Europe*, 1-2.

and politics. Central or peripheral, heavenly or mundane, the European peninsula-continent described by Barry Cuncliffé as the “westerly excrescence of Asia” has ever been part of an elaborate dance of shifting cultural construction and reconstruction.²

This article explores the specificities of this process at the hinge between European map-making and identity through the reading of the Juan De la Cosa *mappa mundi* (fig. 1). De la Cosa, creator of the map, was a Cantabrian sailor and navigator who accompanied Christopher Columbus on his first voyages in the final decade of the fifteenth century and Alonso de Ojeda on his voyages in the first decade of the sixteenth century. Luisa Martín-Merás has proposed that the map was created by De la Cosa for Archbishop Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca, courtier, royal chaplain to Queen Isabella of Castile and advisor to the royal couple. It is thought that De la Cosa may have created the map to impress the Catholic Monarchs, a lavish gift with both practical and political purposes.³ Fonseca was placed in charge of Spanish New World ventures following the promising reports of Columbus’ second voyage in 1493, and thus the map can be seen as a complex didactic object, imparting spiritual history and spiritual sense of purpose together with detailed cartography. The monarchs, we might infer, were being subtly educated and influenced by their spiritual advisor and de facto minister of colonial affairs in favour of New World expansion coloured by Spanish religious imagination.

Until its 1832 purchase by Baron Walkenaer, the Dutch ambassador to Paris, the De la Cosa map was unknown in the history of cartography. Its discovery was a historically significant accident: the Baron, suspecting that he had discovered something unprecedented, purchased the map from a Parisian antiques dealer who was unaware of its true value. The renowned Alexander von Humboldt – geographer, naturalist and friend of the Baron – laboured for decades through publication and advocacy to make the map famous as one of the most significant representations of the Americas in the history of cartography.⁴ In 1853, the map was put up for sale with Walkenaer’s estate, and the Spanish admiralty was made aware of its significance by Ramon de la Sagra, an acquaintance of its former owner.⁵ Since arriving at its current home, the Museo Naval of Madrid, the map has been studied in detail due to its novelty and innovation within the history of geography and map-making, and this genre of

² Cuncliffé, *Europe*, vii.

³ Martín-Merás, “La Carta,” 79. See also Cervera Pery, “Juan de la Cosa,” for more information on De la Cosa.

⁴ Martín-Merás, “La Carta,” 82.

⁵ Martín-Merás, “La Carta,” 80.

scholarship comprises the majority of the literature.⁶ Many of the insights gleaned from these researches pertain to its provenance and age, a topic that continues to engender debate among scholars of the map.⁷

The De la Cosa map is an artefact of great complexity and bears further scrutiny; it is an eyewitness account of the Americas, of the rhetoric of empire and daring nature of exploration that infuse early modern Iberian self-fashioning.⁸ And yet despite the aspirations of the map at the time of its creation, it is also a product of medieval aesthetics and world knowledge. The task of this article is to establish the uneasy coexistence of these two forces: a medieval De la Cosa map and a modern De la Cosa map in a synthesis that appears uncomfortable to the modern eye; the map represents the assimilation of new discovery entangled with historical legacy. The methodology of this essay, deeply indebted to geography and intellectual history, frames an intellectual landscape in transition transposed upon a cartographic methodology in transition. The methodology of the article serves to highlight our modern insecurity regarding the difference between the ‘medieval’ and the ‘early modern,’ by failing to conform to our historiographical delineations.

Before beginning, the notion of a ‘morality’ within the map bears a little scrutiny. The map is ‘moral’ for it implies a denigration and valorisation of the locations within its frame; the map puts forward an argument for what should be desired and what should be devalued, guiding behaviours and beliefs. It suggests actions, for it both proposes a better way of living, in dialogue with the New World, and reinforces the spiritual rectitude of an existing way of living, European Christianity. The map does not just chart the world, but the reference points for behaviour, and the links between loci in a moral world. Simply put, it is morality spatialised.

The Europe, and the World, of the map are part of the history of ideas regarding the

⁶ For a summary of the map’s recent history see Martín-Merás, “La Carta,” 82-84. For recent contributions from the history of cartography, see Paladini Cuadrado, “Contribución”; O’Donnell and De Estrada, *El mapamundi*; O’Donnell and De Estrada, “La Carta”; Robles Macias, “Juan de la Cosa’s Projection”; Silió Cervera, *La carta*; Terol Miller, “Evocación”.

⁷ The map bears the inscription “Juan de la Cosa made it in the Puerto de Santa Maria in the year 1500,” and yet the date of the map has been disputed among historians of cartography. George E. Nunn has argued that the map cannot be an original due to anachronistic features such as the insular depiction of Cuba, and must be a copy dating from approximately 1508. See Nunn, *The Mappemonde*. E. Roukema has more recently agreed with Nunn’s argument that the map is a copy of a lost original, and yet places the *terminus ad quem* at 1504, with the possibility of an earlier date. See E. Roukema, “Some remarks,” 38.

⁸ Ricardo Padrón, *The Spacious World*, 3.

morality of places, locations and spatial relationships, a blurred instant in an ever-moving spectrum. In a swiftly changing world in which traditional hierarchies are in a state of disruption, the map attempts to form new moral comparisons while clinging to old conventions. It is confusing because the moment it attempts to capture was neither medieval nor modern, an effort to present what Dennis Cosgrove had described as “creative, sometimes anxious ... moments of coming into knowledge about the world.”⁹

[Figure 1: The Juan de la Cosa *Mappa Mundi*, Museo Naval, Madrid.]

[Figure 2: Europe and North Africa in the Juan de la Cosa *Mappa Mundi*, Museo Naval, Madrid.]

The Hybridity of the Map

Defying strict periodisation, the De la Cosa map is an artefact of self-fashioning in flux. It can be best described as a map depicting the world as understood by fifteenth-century historical cartography and religious doctrine, but with navigational tools from portolan charts such as rhumb lines superimposed upon the surface¹⁰; it is a *mappa mundi* with modern accretion.¹¹ The West of the map is an addendum to the traditional view of world order; it differs in style, level of detail and even colour palette (see fig. 3). The map is both conceptual in a medieval sense – it distorts measurement in order to populate the surface of the world with stories – and practical in a modern sense.¹² Perceptions change across space and time, and precipitate a shift in matrices.¹³ As Spain, and Europe as a whole, sought to find its way to places denied to it by nature – the words of Pedro de Medina in 1547 – one can see the shaping of a New World from pieces of the old.¹⁴ The result is a map that is neither medieval nor early modern,

⁹ Dennis Cosgrove, “Introduction,” 2.

¹⁰ Rhumb lines (also known as lines of constant course or loxodromes) were ruled in networks upon a navigational chart while conserving a constant angle with the meridians. This allowed a navigator to set their bearing and proceed without changing direction as measured relative to true or magnetic north, allowing confident navigation without coastal reference and with a sense of scale.

¹¹ Verlinden and Pérez Embid, *Cristóbal Colón*, 145.

¹² Spaces exist within the orderly outlines of the continents that are, to quote Naomi Reed Kline, “abstract representations of the world not meant to help the viewer gauge distances in terms of actual travel.” See Reed Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought*, 2-3.

¹³ Wintle, *The Image of Europe*, 4.

¹⁴ Padrón, *The Spacious World*, 13-14.

but in transition: its ambiguity reminds us that all maps are in fact transitional. I propose that the map, despite its incorporations of scientific development and positivism, is a figurative entity, a non-verbal narrative of cultural reception and transition.¹⁵

Through a contested attempt to define new shared identities, we see that Europe is an argument as much as it is an entity. In the space created by the De la Cosa map, a medieval notion of Christendom against the superlatives and negatives of the world transforms before our eyes into a new entity embedding its traditional Christian identity into a larger and ever more spatially complex world. The map demonstrates two forms of representation, corresponding to the dual moral axes introduced as a model for human spatial imagination by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, the horizontal and the vertical:

“Corresponding to this geometric bias towards the vertical and the temporal bias towards the cyclical (and eternal) is a special view of human nature – one which discerns a vertical dimension in the metaphorical sense. Human nature is polarized. Man plays two roles, the social – profane and the mystical – sacred, the one bound in time, the other transcending it.”¹⁶

[Figure 3 – left justified, text wrap: The New World, including the Caribbean and the east coast of the Americas. The Juan de la Cosa *Mappa Mundi*, Museo Naval, Madrid.]

The transformation witnessed within the map complicates what Tuan has described as an “axial transformation,” demonstrating both axes in a single map. Rather than representing a transformation between sides of a neat dichotomy, the map instead displays contesting vertical and horizontal imaginings. There is not one Europe, but many simultaneous Europes, at play within De la Cosa’s depiction of the world; both axes exert influence. It is a product of an era still newly acquainted with Ptolemy’s *Geographia*, enamoured of medieval *mappae mundi*,¹⁷ and boldly advancing nautical navigation through a series of the increasingly sophisticated portolan navigational charts, a genre of maps though to have originated in either Genoa or Catalonia in the twelfth century.¹⁸ To speak of a fixed image of Europe within the map-making traditions preceding and following the creation of the map would be to

¹⁵ Peters, *Mapping Discord*, 33.

¹⁶ Tuan, *Topophilia*, 129.

¹⁷ Edson, *The World Map*, 9.

¹⁸ For information on the origins of Portolan charts, see Brotton, *Trading Territories*, 104-118.

immediately oversimplify the picture: it is a story filled with epistemic contradictions.¹⁹ As Evelyn Edson has demonstrated in the case of the fifteenth-century sailor and cartographer Andrea Bianco, there existed several models for mapping the world long before the discovery of the Americas by Europeans. Juan de la Cosa merged these models together in a manner that demonstrates not only that parallel cartographic worldviews existed, but that they could coexist on the same map.

The multiplicity of overlapping models, forged through what Evelyn Edson has termed “struggles between antique authority and contemporary experience,” is crystallised in all of its confusion within Juan de la Cosa’s depiction of the world.²⁰ Bianco serves as an excellent example of the multiple overlapping world-views that appear within the hybrid identity of the De la Cosa arrangement. The model of Ptolemy’s recently rediscovered *Geographia* and that of the more traditional *mappa mundi* both appear within Bianco’s atlas.²¹ A third navigational map from Bianco was written in the style of the portolan chart, a navigational map for pilots based on compass directions and estimated distances.²² Bianco’s 1436 tripartite view of mapmaking was both a coexistence of styles and an antagonism of styles, for all were valid.²³

As Christopher Wortham has discussed, the horizontal dimension of the map depicts a continuum from the West to the East, but when turned ninety degrees, it displays the familiar geography of Old World and New World.²⁴ The dual axes come about through a peculiar combination of traits: the map is a chart, rectangular and designed to be placed upon the surface of a table, to be viewed from all sides. One can imagine that Archbishop Fonseca would have presented this map to Ferdinand and Isabella in this fashion, as a chart to be perused. The text and feature images are aligned to the north, east and south edges of the map, readable and viewable to those standing on all sides (see fig. 1). As a result, medieval conventions continue to exert influence when the map is viewed in a medieval fashion, as an ascending continuum. One’s shifting perspective of the map changes from vertical to

¹⁹ See Cosgrove, “Introduction,” 10.

²⁰ Edson, *The World Map*, 233.

²¹ Edson, *The World Map*, 1.

²² Edson, *The World Map*, 6.

²³ Like Bianco’s *mappa mundi*, the De la Cosa map is filled with rich illustrations of Christian and Classical history, like Bianco’s portolan chart, the map contains detailed compass roses and rhumb lines for navigation, like Bianco’s Ptolemaic map, the map is laid out north to south and east to west, albeit with the characteristic Ptolemaic fan shape fitted to rectangular dimensions (see fig. 1 as oriented). Edson, *The World Map*, 7, 9.

²⁴ Wortham, “Disorientation,” 183

horizontal as one circles the map, revealing its multiplicity. This is the manner in which the Museo Naval has chosen to display the map: as a chart within a glass-topped cabinet for all to circle and view from different perspectives. As this article will suggest, each perspective has unique connotations that exist simultaneously within the map.

The De la Cosa map, poised as it is between cartographic paradigms, offers a valuable insight into a shifting European imagination of self and other in rapid transition. As the axes shift so too does the navel of the world, the “procreative link between earth and heaven.”²⁵ The Christendom of the Middle Ages has overcome its awkward relationship with Jerusalem, the centre of the *mappa mundi*, a religious heart that was lost to Christian control through the failure of Crusade and the fall of Constantinople:

“... the T-0 map was a matter of considerable embarrassment to the Christian Pope, who could not, like his [equivalent authorities] in China and Islam, put his finger on the centre and say smugly, “There sit I at the shrine of our faith, in the midst of fellow believers.”²⁶

The term “T-O map,” also known as the *orbis terrarum* (circle of the lands) refers to the depiction, first found in the seventh-century *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville, of the known world as a spherical zone divided by the lines of three major bodies of water into the continents of Asia, Africa and Europe.²⁷ In this vision of the world, myriad confusions of symbolic world order spring riotously from rapid shifts in the cartographic imagination. Europe is denigrated to inferiority in contradistinction to the Americas, and yet raised into ascendancy as the centre of a new world order.

[Figure 4 – left justified, text wrap: The Westminster Psalter *mappa mundi*, British Library Add. MS 28681, f. 9.]

The 1265 Westminster Psalter *mappa mundi* is a prime example of the world that lingers within the De la Cosa map (see fig. 4). Through this colourful and artistically intricate representation of time and space through the medium of the world map, we apprehend a

²⁵ Edgerton, “From Mental Matrix,” 10-12.

²⁶ Edgerton, “From Mental Matrix,” 26.

²⁷ For an image of the T-O, see the image of the Psalter map in figure 4.

continuum stretching from Eden in the East to the pillars of Hercules in the West.²⁸ Europe resides as a moral entity within what we might term a moral ecology of cartographic elements, a world-system of interrelated entities, each suggesting a value judgement and a comparison to one or more other element in the schema. To read such a map is to view an embedded visual hierarchy that brings order to confusion, aiding the memory and interconnection of the world within the mind.²⁹ Fallen world and centre of civilisation, paradise of heavenly virtue and old world, Europe mutates through a series of superlative rises and degenerate falls that teach us a great deal about the plotting of spiritual space upon the map. It is part of a medieval tradition that Winfried Nöth describes a composition of hybrid conflicting features that provide the reader with “geo-, topo-, historio-, mythographic and theological orientation.”³⁰ Its internal clashes provide meaning on different levels, but never as a holistic message.

The Psalter map, arranged as it is not from north to south but from east to west, generates a kind of moral gravity. Those things that are lofty, transcendent and superlative occupy the apex of the map – Christ in majesty, the Angels, the terrestrial paradise – and those things that belong to the lower order of things, fallen in time and similitude to God, have likewise “fallen” to the bottom of the map (see fig. 5).³¹ This represented the vertical model, a term coined by Yi-Fu Tuan, as “more than a dimension in space” that “signifies transcendence and has affinity with a particular notion of time [...]”³²

The cartographic logic of a medieval *mappa mundi* such as the Psalter map places all things sacred and profane in a cosmological model in which space between the ends of the earth is conceived of as a kind of height rather than distance. Tuan describes this principle as follows:

“To the man in the Middle Ages, absolute up and down made sense. The earth occupies the lowest place in the heavenly hierarchy: movement to it is downward movement... To look up at the towering medieval universe is like looking at a great

²⁸ The map places superlative principles at its apex, and orders the map in a continuum from sacred to profane, beginning in Eden, moving through the East, past Jerusalem and ending with the West.

²⁹ Reed Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought*, 4.

³⁰ Nöth. “Medieval Maps,” 352.

³¹ This is reinforced by the presence of dragons below the map, symbols of the Devil.

³² Tuan, *Topophilia*, 129.

building...»³³

The Psalter map and those created with a similar shape and orientation – the Hereford map, for example, and the Ebstorf map – are entities of spatial hierarchy, visually narrating the abstract continuum between entities on a chain of being. They allow complex schemata of representation, but along a vertical axis stretching from divine apex to depths. In the domain of geography, the detail and accuracy of familiar locations such as the British Isles, Europe and the former Roman world demonstrate a deep familiarity with Christendom. And yet despite this detail, the west has descended to the bottom of the world, its low point. These elements, still at work within the De la Cosa map, continue to exert influence over the imagination of the world newly depicted on its surface.

[Figure 5a-b – next to each other: The Eastern, or “high” extremity of the Psalter map (left) with Eden, and the Western, or “low” extremity of the map (right) with dragons. British Library Add. MS 28681, f. 9.]

It is within the play of lines of power that we can clearly see the De la Cosa map as both a repository of medieval symbolic imagery, a displacement of medieval knowledge in a partial dissolution of imagery associated with a medieval worldview. Many medieval ideas survive, but take on new resonances in dialogue with newer models; the result of this process is hybridity as well as disunity and polysemy. The Europe depicted in the De la Cosa map, seemingly in a state of incomplete transformation from one place of focus in a world of spiritually powerful *loci* to the centre of a matrix of trade, is in fact possessed of a logic all of its own. Images of ships crossing the oceans and calling at myriad ports co-exist (uncomfortably) with monsters, marvels and figures from Scripture (see fig. 7). The former and the latter jostle for attention, and the incipient “desperate attempt at precision and monosemy” characteristic of modern maps is rendered all the more contrived when forced to share the surface of the map with the faded but myriad tropes of the medieval.³⁴ Evelyn Edson argues that such a map must inevitably transition into modernity, but only after many intermediate phases:

³³ Tuan, *Topophilia*, 133-134.

³⁴ Nöth, “Medieval Maps,” 353.

“Could the virtues of the narrative *mappa mundi* be retained in the modern world? Monsters, alas, had to go, and Jerusalem moved from the centre of the world but only after a long, tortuous explanation.”³⁵

This explanation would suggest that the process was one of evolution, but the De la Cosa map reveals a process more subtle reception. As the centre shifts, the old continues to exert force, but at the expense of coherency: Wortham reminds us that in the depiction of space, “disorientation is accompanied by de-centring.”³⁶ Old bastions of centrality are dislocated and left to float, new centres appear. The medieval *mappa mundi* had demonstrated a powerful logic of centrality by placing not Europe, but Jerusalem, in the centre of power. Europe, despite being lavishly embellished with detail in most medieval maps, was of no special significance within the ordering of space. Unlike the cosmological maps of the Islamic or Chinese traditions, medieval Europe was peripheral in its own worldview, as Samuel Edgerton Jr. describes:

“As we compare this early Christian map with other ideological diagrams like those from China and Islam, our first glance might deceive us into believing that each communicated the same message to its constituents. All three can be said to be “positional enhancing” in that their common designs, whether based on circle or square, concentrate the viewer's attention upon the centre. All three thus imply exclusive, inward-directed worldviews, each with its separate cult centre safely buffered within territories populated only by true believers.”³⁷

[Figure 6 – left justified, text wrap: Saint Christopher carrying the Infant Christ. Juan de la Cosa *Mappa Mundi*, Museo Naval, Madrid.]

This claim holds true in a variety of maps. China sits at the heart of the world in the Liang Chou map of 1593, Mecca at the centre of the Ibn-Hawqal world map of c. 980.³⁸ Byzantine cartographical and geographical imagination played upon the popular Christian motifs of Eden and Jerusalem, but also came to construct a vision of Constantinople as an imperial

³⁵ Edson, *The World Map*, 233.

³⁶ Wortham, “Disorientation,” 183.

³⁷ Edgerton, “From Mental Matrix,” 26.

³⁸ Wintle, “Europe as Seen from the Outside,” 29-30, 33-34.

centre, the nexus point between East and West.³⁹ The Europe of the *mappa mundi* was confined to an inferior zone of the moral spectrum. It was shifted to the edge of a circular known world (*oikoumene*), centred on the Holy Land, pushed to the peripheral by the dual forces of the vertical axis and the powerful influence of Jerusalem. There are older, more prestigious and more powerful forces at work within the history of Christendom. Written as they are across the entire temporal span of Creation and centred upon the Christian cradle of Zion, the Old and New Testaments place Europe in a peripheral role within the history of Christianity. The De la Cosa map demonstrates to modern observers that this view remains within the core makeup of early modern maps, just as medieval ideas defined the centuries following Columbus' voyages. Periodisation cannot capture these disruptions, but cartography can.

The haunting of the De la Cosa map by medieval imagery corresponds to some of the overlapping ideologies of those who found themselves on the first voyages to the Americas. The map has been placed in a national, religious and scientific narrative of a golden age of geography illuminating the darkness of the Middle Ages, and yet it is itself part of a confused deployment of medievalism transposed over a burst of new knowledge.⁴⁰ Europe, as a moral construct within the broader collection of abstract entities that form a world-system, has long played a dance in the shifting of centres and peripheries visualised within the medium of the map.

A corpus of influential antecedents dwells within the map, from marvels of the East to *mappae mundi* to iconography. In fancy or in true belief, the stubborn medievalism of De la Cosa's cartography reflects some of the romantic imaginings of the first voyage as recounted by Christopher Columbus in his narrative of the journey, also known as *El Primer Viaje*. In the case of Cuba, it is hard to see where the language of marvellous travel narratives so popular in the late Middle Ages ends, and observation of a landscape begins:⁴¹

“Cuba emerged from [Columbus'] stilted description not as a real place but as a literary *locus amoenus* [pleasant place], where nothing was described in detail but everything was of the sweetest and fairest and man is at one with the harmonies of

³⁹ Angelov, “Asia and Europe,” 52-64.

⁴⁰ Martín-Merás, “La Carta,” 71.

⁴¹ The passage below, for example, is redolent of paradisaical imagery from such books as Odoric of Pordenone's *Relatio* or the *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, both exemplars of a tradition thought to present a true account of the east up to and far beyond the last decade of the fifteenth century.

nature. It was a superlative land which excelled the powers of tongue to relate or pen to record.”⁴²

The medievalist imagination of Columbus in the narration of the new world has been imbued into the map. The new world is verdant and green where the old is washed out and monochromatic, seeming to fade into the background (cf. figs. 2 and 3). This bright new Eden possesses an iconographic representation of Saint Christopher bearing the infant Christ (see fig. 6), a sign that Christian imagination, or perhaps the notoriously eccentric imagination of Columbus, has created a new vertical axis in the style of past *mappae mundi*.⁴³

[Figure 7: Kings, Dog-heads, and Blemmys in the Juan de la Cosa *Mappa Mundi*, Museo Naval, Madrid.]

Europe retains its peripheral role as “vertically” inferior to the paradisaical Americas, and yet moves to occupy the new navel position of the map, central and yet morally inferior. Or is it Europe that is now morally superior? The map seems to imagine an endlessly reversible moral axis stretching along the line of the equator. The Virgin and Infant Christ oversee it all within the frame of the “grand rose,” the ornamented compass nexus joining the Atlantic rhumb lines together and displaying the cardinal directions of the map (fig. 8). Cuba is paradise to the European, and Europe heaven to the native inhabitants of the Americas. In this account of an encounter between Columbus and a *Cacique* or Chief of Port Paix in Hispaniola, we see a rhetoric of European superiority being constructed side-by-side with the valorisation of the New World:

“[Columbus] told [the *Cacique*] how he came from the monarchs of Castille, who were the greatest princes of the world. But... the other would only believe that the Spaniards came from heaven and that the realms of Castille were in heaven...”⁴⁴

The De la Cosa map visually represents this process, creating a reversible axis of moral gravity, creating a contested zone of superlatives based on a confusion and dissolution of

⁴² Fernández-Armesto, *Columbus*, 85.

⁴³ See fig. 4, the Psalter map. Cf. the juxtaposition of paradise and world in the Psalter map, and the Old and New Worlds in fig. 1, the De la Cosa map.

⁴⁴ Christopher Columbus, *El Primer Viaje*. As cited in Fernández-Armesto, *Columbus*, 87.

medieval moralised cartography. Christopher Columbus, obsessed with the idea of Eden in the East far beyond De la Cosa and his contemporaries, even imagined access to the medieval Eden, a new glimpse of the ancient navel of the world:

“I believe that if I were to sail beyond the Equator, I should find increasingly greater temperance in the climate and variation in the stars – though I do not suppose that it is possible to navigate there, where the world reaches its highest point, not for any many to approach, for I believe that there the earthly paradise is located, where no man may go, save by the grace of God.”⁴⁵

The map is not so literal, for it is no longer part of an intellectual world that truly believes, as Columbus did, in an Eden in the East. Its paradise is more of a new world valorisation coloured by medieval tropes, an Eden of spiritual possibility and Christian conversion. If we are to read the map as medieval, then we must see it not as a *mappa mundi* enabled and supported by the logic of the age in which it was created, but the recipient of a historical legacy which is engaged with self-consciously and unconsciously to narrate space, and yet never coalesces into a unitary worldview. It is already a historical affectation and yet displays no awareness of this fact, for the present that it depicts is steeped in this history. Just as the De la Cosa map depicts a lingering medieval moral geography, we cannot say that the modern ideas that the map is famous for initiating are anything more than inchoate. Lines are drawn across the map, and yet these lines are not the ordered grid of maps to come. In the section to follow, the cycle of influence and reception continues, transmitted through the De la Cosa map and into many divergent afterlives.

[Figure 8 – left justified, text wrap: The Virgin and Child in the compass rose joining the Atlantic rhumb lines. Juan de la Cosa *Mappa Mundi*, Museo Naval, Madrid.]

Europe’s Confused Transmutation

Jeffrey Peters has argued that maps “demand a kind of forgetting on the part of those who use them,” and that “viewers of maps must forget what they know to be obvious,” for maps are an artificial form of representation.⁴⁶ In the case of Juan de la Cosa and his map this forgetting is

⁴⁵ Columbus, *El Primer Viaje*. As cited in Fernández-Armesto, *Columbus*, 131.

⁴⁶ Peters, *Mapping Discord*, 40.

incomplete, for the status of “obvious” is contested; it is hard to imagine that this was a map able to be obviously true and thus transparent in function, for it has no unitary conventional logic and is thus appears to be eccentrically unique. The map makes an argument as to the true nature of the world and supplies rhetoric by its very structure, and yet this truth is bifurcated between medieval and modern ideas. The De la Cosa, in this light, is in a state of confusion rather than in that of true forgetting, an identity crisis: old things are remembered while new things partially displace them, distorting their meaning. The arrangement of the map can never fade into the background and present a transparent vision of the world, for it is the product of a moment in which nothing is obviously true. In a world only just beginning to think cartographically in a modern sense, the map marks the beginning of a new thought at the expense but not exclusion of its antecedent.⁴⁷ This would suggest that the medieval map died in the sixteenth century, as Evelyn Edson has proposed:

“Eventually, as physical details began to accumulate about inland trade routes and geographical features [medieval imagery] needed to be moved out of the way. Possibly it was a matter of taste, as some sixteenth-century maps ... continued to be beautifully illustrated.”⁴⁸

In this narrative, European rhetoric selectively begins to forget the medieval – except when it was pleasing to the eye or when it serves a political purpose – in favour of lines, names and coastlines, the vocabulary of colonialism. The De la Cosa map weakens this assertion, for it depicts not an end to medieval maps, but a lingering reception and reconfiguration. This is not a neat move from the obscurity of medieval maps to a world free of “disabling associations with religious belief,” but something more ambiguous.⁴⁹ The medieval haunts the map, bringing the notion of a clean break between historical epochs into doubt. By attempting to accurately reflect the present, the map reminds the modern viewer that shifts in worldview not sudden or neat, but always convoluted and confusing to those who live through it.

The map depicts an initial reaction to the incorporation of the New World into the European imagination. With the discovery of the Americas came the beginning of a new European discourse of power concerned with the religious and technological valorisation of

⁴⁷ Padrón, *The Spacious World*, 12.

⁴⁸ Edson, *The World Map, 1300-1492*, 231-232.

⁴⁹ See the discussion of the rhetorical narrative of map-making as idea of progress in Cosgrove, “Introduction,” 8.

European rectitude paired with the superlative and yet Godless Eden of the Americas.⁵⁰ Europeans found themselves in a world that forced comparison with other peoples, and began to self-identify as “a positively valued construct, embodying superiority over the other continents in power, war, learning, the arts, culture, style, religion, and everything else.”⁵¹ In the words of Pagden, “the shrinking of the frontiers [of Europe] in this way gradually forced upon the European consciousness a greater sense of the boundaries that lay between them and the rest of the world.”⁵² The world was bigger, not only intellectually but cartographically. As Evelyn Edson puts it, “before America was discovered, there was a place to put it on the map.”⁵³ The map struggles to depict this, filling in the gaps with more comfortable tropes.

Juan de la Cosa enshrined many novelties of the 1490s within his map. New lines divide its face, from the Tordesillas meridian to the West, through the prime meridian, to the Zaragoza antemeridian to the East.⁵⁴ The De la Cosa map depicts the “*liña meridional*” splitting the Americas in two vertically in adherence to the 1494 decision at Tordesillas that divided the map between the Iberian powers.⁵⁵ The roughly contemporary map created by Columbus or a member of his expedition is cruder and more inaccurate than that of De la Cosa,⁵⁶ suggesting that his map was compiled from De la Cosa’s own observations rather than those of his patron.⁵⁷ The voyage of Vasco da Gama to Africa’s east coast and India expanded the detail of the coastlines depicted in the map.

The map was intended as a comprehensive summary of all knowledge about the discoveries of the 1490s in their entirety, and yet this does not define it.⁵⁸ The accurate mapping of the African coast and India by the Portuguese, the discoveries of Cabot, Columbus, and Ojeda in the Americas merged with the incomplete mass of those lands still

⁵⁰ The early sixteenth century saw the growth of a representation of Europe as anthropomorphic queen of the world, as can be seen in the Johann Putsch *Europa Regina* map of 1537 and its successors, in which the continent of Europe is depicted as a monarch in full regalia, with Iberia as a crowned head, and the Italian and Danish peninsulas as arms. See Erben. “Anthropomorphe Europa-Karten des 16. Jahrhunderts,” esp. 101-111.

⁵¹ Wintle, *The Image of Europe*, 8.

⁵² Pagden, *The Idea of Europe*, 51.

⁵³ Edson, *The World Map*, 227.

⁵⁴ For a detailed discussion of the axes at work in the map, see Robles Macias, “Juan de la Cosa’s Projection.”

⁵⁵ Hossam Elkhadem et al., “Juan de La Cosa.”

⁵⁶ McIntosh, *The Piri Reis Map*, 140.

⁵⁷ The map is also thought to include mixed information from de la Cosa’s later voyages with Alonso de Ojeda and Amerigo Vespucci. See Fernández-Armesto, *Amerigo*, 75.

⁵⁸ See Martín-Merás’ argument regarding the function of the map noted in footnote two.

imperfectly understood.⁵⁹ The exact state of the map in cartographic history is captured in a distinct moment, a niche between discoveries. In 1499, for instance, Vespucci sought to match up the eastern extremity of the Indian Ocean coast with the new lands discovered in what was later understood to be the Caribbean and the east coasts of the Americas.⁶⁰ Vespucci's findings were not incorporated into the De la Cosa map: it has been "state of the art," and yet this state had already been rapidly superseded.

Although this dimension of the map's history is crucial to its meaning, the picture is larger. Despite the tendency to fit De la Cosa into what Jerry Brotton describes as "an increasingly objective and definitive account of the relations of points and features on the earth's surface to each other," the map and its successors were possessed of diverse social uses beyond their role as protoscientific objects.⁶¹ Perhaps the most profound afterlife of the map is found not in its history as part of a progress narrative, but as the crucible of a new plethora of registers in which divergent content – religious, cosmological, historical, factual, cartographic – could be divided for the manifold representation of Europe and its intellectual world.

The period immediately following the moment of the Juan De la Cosa map witnessed the appearance of an emergent Europe as a clearly defined region firmly ensconced in the centre of a world-system, the spider at the middle of a growing colonial web.⁶² In the years following the dawn of the sixteenth century, the level of detail of maps becomes ever more concentrated, and the last "vertical" representations of myth, history and Scripture disappear. The hybridity of the De la Cosa map is all the more remarkable for the sharp break of its descendants into new and divergent genres within a few short years. The De la Cosa map does little to obviously privilege the religious or the scientific. Just as Andrea Bianco saw different genres of map as serving different purposes in the fifteenth century, so too did his successors come to develop new genres of their own in the sixteenth. The navigational sea chart genre, to which the De la Cosa belongs, performed the dual function of displaying the confident symbolism of empire, and laying claim to newly discovered lands.⁶³ The world map genre – to which the De la Cosa also belongs – was steeped in the language of mystical power

⁵⁹ The vagaries of the map are particularly obvious to the east, where the land beyond India dissolves into a mass of indistinct shapes, and in the New World, in which the scale and contours of the land-masses discovered is tenuous and highly stylised.

⁶⁰ Fernández-Armesto, *Amerigo*, 75.

⁶¹ Brotton, *Trading Territories*, 18-19.

⁶² Delanty, *Inventing Europe*, 3.

⁶³ Brotton, *Trading Territories*, 25.

and authority, continued the language of Christian cosmology for the legitimation of royal power. Despite this narrative of European colonialism, the map reminds us that narratives of power are rarely clear-cut, and never simple.

It would be easy to propose that the map depicts a Europe shifting from a position within a greater Christendom and state of ambiguous legitimacy to a firm centrepiece in a single world-system, as Edgerton has proposed:

“Whether applied as the abstract direction system on a map, or the actual direction system of an urban site, or even the compositional system of a picture, the cartographic grid in the Renaissance was believed to exude moral power, as expressing nothing less than the will of the Almighty to bring all human beings to the worship of Christ under European cultural domination.”⁶⁴

The accurate plotting of space is an innovation and a practice in the geography of empire in equal measure, and yet this is not a simple narrative. The medieval religious models found haunting the De la Cosa map can be viewed in its descendants, the sixteenth-century maps that followed. Ptolemy gave shape to the religiously tinged expression of cosmology, Vespucci to the accurate depiction of the world as a navigable and plottable entity. These two forces were not mutually exclusive. The former fed into the latter, for Vespucci grew up in a Florence steeped in Ptolemy.⁶⁵ He entered the new world in 1499 with “a head already stuffed full of Ptolemy,” as Felipe Fernández-Armesto puts it.⁶⁶ The discoveries of Vespucci, married with the revived knowledge of Ptolemy, marked the sharp separation of map paradigms. The goal of the new cosmography, to quote Berlinghieri, was to show the earth from above so that “we may circle all or part of it, pilgrims through the colour of a flat parchment, around which the heavens and the stars revolve.”⁶⁷ Even once the medieval elements of cartography were supposedly purged, they continued to exert influence. By revealing an incomplete assimilation, the De la Cosa map makes the unclear lines of transition to follow more apparent.

A staple of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century rhetoric of European superiority and

⁶⁴ Edgerton, “From Mental Matrix,” 12.

⁶⁵ Giorgio Antonio Vespucci was known to have owned a personal copy of the 1482 Francesco Berlinghieri *Geographia*. Fernández-Armesto, *Amerigo*, 74.

⁶⁶ Fernández-Armesto, *Amerigo*, 74.

⁶⁷ Brotton, *Trading Territories*, 23,

Empire, the science of cartography diverged from cosmography within the years following the De la Cosa map. As old genres merged and new genres were born, space was reconfigured in new forms from a De la Cosa template. The 1569 Mercator projection shaped and stretched the spherical globe to map “accurately” on a two-dimensional surface with intriguing effects that would be felt for centuries to come.⁶⁸ By stretching the map into a grid more fitting for navigation and thus creating “truth,” the projection distorts space for ease of traversal, and diminishes another crucial truth:

“[...] Mercator’s primary innovation in cartographic technology, it would seem, was to have developed a map where projection of the world is ‘true’ – that is, useful – because it is explicitly ‘false,’ whose primary characteristic is not its *accuracy*, but its *readability*.”⁶⁹

The De la Cosa map, as the birth of this process, echoes through the Mercator projection. The marriage of the rhumb lines it enshrines and the reconfiguration of the grid-like structure of Mercator merge to form a superior tool for navigation.⁷⁰ It represents the beginning of a process later realised in the Mercator projection: the creation of a larger-than-life Europe firmly ensconced in a position of power in the centre of a grid, a model to be used and abused for centuries to come.⁷¹ It is within the Mercator projection, Michael Wintle has argued, that we see the birth of the Eurocentric cartographic image. The projection plays games with space, exaggerating the centrality and the relative size of Europe and squashing other lands into a peripheral role.⁷² This model, later solidified within the Abraham Ortelius map of 1570, “created the ideal medium through which to endlessly mediate the countless voyages, travels, encounters, exchanges, and discoveries” of sixteenth-century geography.⁷³ The projection

⁶⁸ The innovation of Gerardus Mercator was to allow the accurate plotting of rhumb lines with increased ease. By taking the distortion of a spherical Earth into account, the Mercator projection allowed rhumb lines that were straight and easy to plot and follow. This was a great boon for navigation, but greatly distorted the shape of the continents.

⁶⁹ Peters, *Mapping Discord*, 39-40.

⁷⁰ Monmonier, *Rhumb Lines*, 2.

⁷¹ See introduction, Monmonier, *Rhumb Lines*, esp. xi.

⁷² Wintle, “Europe as Seen from the Outside,” 23.

⁷³ Brotton, *Trading Territories*, 175.

gave rise to a greater ease of navigation, but may hide more sinister political motives.⁷⁴ Ricardo Padrón has argued that the Americas were invented through the carving of a slice from the natural world by Europeans.⁷⁵ If this is the case for the Americas, then the De la Cosa map can be seen as a world-wide entity stitched together from manifold excised natural entities and grafted upon a medieval frame. The scars remain for all to see: they are livid, unhealed, and visibly remind us of their origins. European scalpels, European results. Despite the precision of the operation to modern eyes, the De la Cosa map reminds us of its complexity.

Conclusion

Looking at Juan de la Cosa's *mappa mundi* with a modern eye, we are inclined to seek that which is familiar to us, to see the map as proto-modern with "inaccuracies." This would be to impose a teleological narrative of progress upon maps with much more mutable and ambiguous identities; so too for the identity of Europe, ever in flux.⁷⁶ In this article, I have argued that the map we see before us, and the Europe within the map, dwells within a liminal space between medieval and early modern depictions of the world, and that this intermediate position teaches us a great deal about what it is for a map – and for a worldview – to be medieval or modern. More specifically, I have argued that the "moment" of the map demonstrates not linear progress, but the messy, hybrid, chaotic transformation that was in process at the time of its creation. When viewed as a navigational chart, the map is an incomplete manifestation of later trends. When viewed as a *mappa mundi*, the map is a moral continuum with a distinct "top" and "bottom." It is neither, and is instead its own artefact: it is haunted by its past, and subsequently haunts its future.

Within this shifting frame of reference, we see Europeans in the act of imagining Europe anew, and yet still possessed of a long-lasting view intrinsically associated with Delanty's medieval Christendom. It is a struggle for self-expression in a moment of doubt: is the new land discovered only years before truly the East? Can paradise be found within the navigable world? What is the relationship between New World and Old East? Is history or cosmology

⁷⁴ Monmonier, *Rhumb Lines*, 173.

⁷⁵ Padrón, *The Spacious World*, 19.

⁷⁶ Brotton, *Trading Territories*, 19.

more significant? Europe an intellectual entity within the De la Cosa map is not medieval or entirely modern, and casts doubt on the validity of such characterisations. It is both, and neither, a reflection of a world in a process of confused transmutation. Its imagination of Europe is an echo of the past, a vision of things to come and a hybrid construct with a logic all of its own. Europe, if we are to take inspiration from the De la Cosa map, will forever be shaped by past ideas of its moral valence and position. These ideas, part of its core identity, will continue to exert force upon the future, hybridised and adapted. History does not deal in neat periodicity, Europe eschews simple characterisation, and moments of realignment serve as invaluable insights into this messy truth.

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