# Continents and consequences: the history of a concept

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## Abstract

*Originally intended to provide an accessible overview for colleagues in Papua New Guinea, this article outlines the emergence of the continental division of the world in classical antiquity. In medieval Europe this survived as a learned conception which eventually acquired emotional content. Nevertheless, the division was still within the context of universal Christianity, which did not privilege any continent. Contrary to the views of recent critics, the European sense of world geography was not inherently 'Eurocentric'. While Europeans did develop a sense of continental superiority, Americans, Africans, and many Asians also came to identify themselves with their continents and to use them as weapons against European domination. The application of the division to Melanesia is also considered.*

This is a revised version of a talk which I gave for my colleagues at the University of Papua New Guinea in October 2009. Its main purpose was to provide an accessible overview for people working in specialist fields who could not necessarily be expected to have a detailed understanding of world history. As it has attracted outside interest, I have been persuaded to offer it for a wider audience. Clearly, it is not a rigorous, scholarly treatment based on original research. That would require a book rather than an article. Much of its original 'naivety' has therefore been retained. Nevertheless, I do think it is of value. As it covers a long stretch of time, and the whole world, it may be useful even to well-informed readers. Moreover, it differs from recent approaches, especially that of Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen's seminal *The myth of continents*.[1] These are concerned to critique, and largely to condemn, existing metageographical conceptions. They situate themselves within a wider attack on 'Eurocentrism', and challenge 'the global geographical framework in use today [which] is essentially a cartographic celebration of European power'.[2] Insofar as that criticism seeks to 'move global history away from an excessive concern with

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1    Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The myth of continents: a critique of metageography*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997.

2    *Ibid.*, p. 189.

the West',[3] it is entirely justified and indeed necessary. Too often, however, it rests on what Richard Wolin has called 'the assumption that just because an idea or notion happens to emanate from the West, it is inherently defective'.[4]

My purpose is not to defend the anomalies and absurdities of the continental division of the world. Rather I try to explain not just how Europeans came to adopt and develop it, but also why many non-Europeans chose to make use of it. My key point is that this European geography was not essentially Eurocentric. For most of their history, the continents were considered simply as geographic divisions within a Mediterranean cultural area or a Christianity which was seen and depicted as universal. European maps never placed Europe at the centre of the world. Eventually Europeans would extol Europe, but Americans, Africans, and at least some Asians would in response extol their own continents and use their new continental identities to create broader alliances in their struggle against European imperialism.

Historians study the interactions of continuity and change. We are particularly interested in why things persist even though they may be manifestly ill-designed for their current functions. An obvious example is the QWERTY arrangement of the keyboard I am using to write this.[5] This is not just an inefficient layout, it was deliberately designed to be so. The first mechanical typewriters of the 1860s and 1870s had to have difficult keyboards to prevent quick typists from jamming the keys. QWERTY became the standard with the development of touch-typing in the 1880s. The costs of retraining typists for other keyboards have ensured QWERTY's survival even though the need which it once met has long since disappeared. Similar, but longer and more interesting stories can be told of other cultural artefacts in everyday use, such as the alphabet and the calendar. My present topic involves something which lacks the obvious day-to-day utility of keyboard, calendar, and alphabet, which is also manifestly suboptimal, but which has a comparable history of persistence: the practice of dividing the world into continents, and of placing cultural value on this ostensibly geographical pattern.

The problems of this scheme hardly need emphasizing here in Papua New Guinea. Does it place us in Asia? Or are we an Australian offshore island? Or are we part of something which might be called Australasia? Perhaps we are in a region better defined in terms of the sea rather than the land: Western Pacific, South Pacific, or Oceania. Similar problems arise in the Americas: whether there are two continents or one, and, if there *are* two Americas, whether the dividing line should be placed geographically at the Isthmus of Panama or politically and culturally along the Mexican–American border. The Caribbean with its islands and coasts is another part of the world where a maritime regionalization would seem to be more appropriate than a continental one. Yet these are almost points of detail compared with the manifest absurdity of 'counting the European peninsula as a "continent" on the same order as Asia'.[6]

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3    William G. Clarence-Smith, 'Editorial note: Zomia and beyond', *Journal of Global History*, 5, 2, 2010, p. 185.

4    Richard Wolin, '"Modernity": the peregrinations of a contested historiographical concept', *American Historical Review*, 116, 2011, p. 719.

5    This account of QWERTY is based on Stephen Jay Gould, 'The panda's thumb of technology', in *Bully for brontosaurus: reflections in natural history*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1991, pp. 59–75.

6    Lewis and Wigen, *Myth of continents*, p. 195

# Classical origins of the continents

Nevertheless, the persistence of the continents as the main geographical divisions of the world can be understood only through the history of that European anomaly. To make sense of the continents we must begin with a sea, the Aegean. Some 2,700 years ago its shores and islands were home to the Greeks. Conceptually they distinguished between the islands, which were surrounded by water, and the two mainlands, which they considered unbounded, *ēpeiros*.[7] Translated into Latin as *continens*, this would become our 'continent'. Acquaintance with the wider Mediterranean world revealed a third mainland to the south, which the Greeks called Libya (Libuē), though it did not at first have the same status as Europe and Asia, which continued to be known as the double continents: *hoi dissoi ēpeiroi*. To place this local knowledge in a wider context, we have to turn to mythology. Homer and the other early poets believed that a river, the Ocean Stream, flowed round the earth. On its rim, at the furthest east, next to the golden chamber of the sun's rays, was the city of King Aiētēs.[8] In the legend of Jason and the Argonauts this kingdom came to be identified with Kolkhis at the eastern end of the Black Sea. The Argonauts went there for the golden fleece; they returned using the Ocean Stream. Later writers tried to make some geographical sense of this. Jason reached the Ocean Stream by going up a river, which was either the Phasis (Rioni), which runs through what is now Georgia, or the Tanais (Don), which flows into the Maiōtic Lake (Sea of Azov). Many believed that the Nile also flowed from the Ocean Stream. If so, there were water divisions between the three continents.[9]

The division between Libya and Europe at the Pillars of Hēraklēs (Straits of Gibraltar) was reasonably straightforward, but, as the Ocean Stream came to be left to the poets, the other boundaries became problematic. Hērodotos, the 'Father of History', writing in the second half of the fifth century BCE, used the continental scheme with some reluctance.[10] As he pointed out, all the mainlands are connected. Placing the division between Libya and Asia at the Nile created obvious problems with regard to Egypt. While he spent much time trying to explain the behaviour and sources of the Nile, he did not connect it to the Ocean Stream, belief in which he considered foolish. However, he did accept that Phoenicians had sailed round Libya. He noted that the boundary between Europe and Asia might be placed at either the Phasis or the Tanais. He opted for the Phasis, but it seems likely that even then the Tanais was preferred. The Rioni is a small river, which does not lead far into the interior, while the Don is one of the major rivers of Eurasia.

The choice of the Tanais placed the division between Europe and Asia along a north–south axis. As the ocean changed from an active circumfluent stream to a passive sea,

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7　For centuries, Greek words have been given Latin spellings in English. Tradition apart, there is no good reason for this. The more recent tendency has been to use spellings which are closer to the Greek original. I have tried to do this as much as possible, except in cases such as those of Homer and Aristotle, where English usage is far too firm to allow pedantry to prevail.

8　The image comes from the poet Mimnermos of the late seventh century BCE, quoted in E. H. Bunbury, *A history of ancient geography*, New York: Dover, 1959 (first published 1883), vol. 1, p. 20.

9　James Romm, 'Continents, climates and cultures: Greek theories of global structure', in Kurt A. Raflaub and Richard J.A. Talbert, eds., *Geography and ethnography, perceptions of the world in pre-modern societies*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 217.

10　For Hērodotos' discussion of the continents, see *Histories*, 4.36–45.

few believed that the Don connected with it. Hērodotos considered that he knew its source.[11] Classical maps, as they developed, showed the river leading deep into the interior, where it flowed from mountains in a particularly obscure part of the world. As it became clear that no such mountains existed, and that the Don was not by itself long enough to form a line of division, the north–south axis was shifted eastward in the search for a suitable combination of river and mountain range, settling eventually in the nineteenth century on the Ural mountains and river. This has neither geographical, nor cultural, nor political sense. It is just the most recent development of a bad idea.[12]

It is worth, for a moment, considering the alternative. The Rioni is obviously too small to serve as a division between continents, but it parallels the Caucasus, which are clearly suitable if one uses mountains rather than rivers, and which indeed usually do serve as the continental boundary. To the east of the Caspian, one gets a series of lines along mountain ranges which reach the Pacific with the Stanovoys. Hērodotos' geographical knowledge did not extend nearly that far, but he clearly envisaged the division between Europe and Asia running along an east–west axis rather than a north–south one. This is why he saw Europe as being as long as the other two continents combined. Whereas Asia was bounded in the east by desert, as was Libya in the south, the limits of Europe to the north and west were quite unknown. Hērodotos therefore considered Europe to be the largest continent. Such a division along an east–west axis makes at least as much geographical, historical, and cultural sense as one along a north–south axis.[13] Later, Hellenistic geographers such as Dikaiarkhos of Messēnē (Messina) and Eratōsthenēs of Kurēnē (Cyrene) developed the idea of a *diaphragma* (midriff) running along the middle of the Mediterranean and the mountain chains of Asia. This complicated the continental division. South of the *diaphragma*, 'Asia' might be divided into, or even replaced by, 'Arabia', 'Ariana', and 'India'. The area to the north was either left nameless or labelled 'Scythia'.[14]

So far, we have been considering the continents essentially as geographical constructions. However, even at the beginning, there was something slightly different about Europe. Hērodotos noted that the continents all had women's names, and struggled to explain this. The origins of the names for Libya and Asia remain obscure. Europe first appears in the songs ('hymns') attributed to Homer but now considered to be much later. Twice in the 'Hymn to Pythian Apollo' there is a stereotyped phrase, 'both those who live in rich Peloponessus and those of Europe and all the wave washed isles'.[15] But Eurōpē was also a significant figure in mythology. She was one of a long string of beautiful women abducted or impregnated by Zeus in animal form, in this case a bull, who took her to Crete, where she gave birth to King Minōs. Hērodotos ignores the legend, describing Eurōpē instead as a

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11  *Ibid.*, 4.57.

12  For discussions, see Lewis and Wigen, *Myth of continents*, pp. 27–8; Norman Davies, *Europe: a history*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 8.

13  Lewis and Wigen, *Myth of continents*, p. 31, advance a similar argument.

14  Georgia L. Irby, 'Mapping the world: Greek initiatives from Homer to Eratosthenes', in Richard A. Talbert, ed., *Ancient perspectives: maps and their place in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome*, Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2012, pp. 99–103.

15  Hugh G. Evelyn White, trans., *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, Loeb edition, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1924, pp. 343, 345.

Phoenician princess carried off by Cretans in part of a long series of tit-for-tat abductions which established an antagonism between Europe and Asia.[16] These would culminate in the wars between Greece and Persia at the beginning of the fifth century BCE.

Those wars turned a geographical division into a political one. The Ionian Greeks of western Asia Minor had been subject first to Lydia and then to Persia. Their revolt against Persia was crushed, and this provoked a Persian invasion of the Greek mainland in Europe. The opposition between Greece and Persia, Europe and Asia, provided the basic structure of Hērodotos' narrative. He began by announcing that he would describe the great and marvellous deeds both of the Greeks and of the barbarians, so that their glory would not fade through time. Following Homer, he made no moral distinction between the Greeks and their adversaries. Indeed, as his treatment of the Eurōpē myth showed, he delighted in subverting Greek legends by providing contrary and evidently more credible 'Persian' narratives. His work was intended as a set of investigations (*historiēs*) in which he was careful to include conflicting accounts, to respect cultural differences, and to reserve judgement. In this he has served as a model for modern world historians. However, his narrative was organized round a fundamental antithesis between East and West. By invading Europe, the Persians had arrogantly overstepped the bounds which they themselves had set, as, according to Hērodotos, they claimed 'Asia and the barbarian races dwelling in it as their own, Europe and the Greek states being, in their opinion, quite separate and distinct from them'.[17]

The Persians were punished for their arrogance. The Greeks of Europe would remain free. As for the Greeks of Asia, there were several proposals to resettle them. Hērodotos himself endorsed the suggestion that they might be moved to Sardinia, where he thought they might have become the most prosperous people of the Greek world. Had this been done, the division between Greek and Persian would have become the same as that between Europe and Asia. Although relocation of the Ionians was favoured by Sparta, it was successfully opposed by Athens.[18] Hērodotos ended his main narrative with the battle of Mukalē (Mycale) and the restoration of Ionian independence in 479 BCE. With Greek *poleis* on each side of the Aegean, the division between Europe and Asia returned to being purely geographical.

Persia would regain control of mainland Ionia in 387–386 BCE, and for most of the fourth century politics again re-enforced geography. In the works of Isokratēs, the leading Greek writer of the time, Europe recovered some of the emotional potency which it had had for Hērodotos.[19] This was an age of great advances in the natural sciences, culminating in the work of Aristotle. The sciences of the earth developed in harmony with those of the heavens. The universe came to be seen as a set of concentric spheres with a round earth as a relatively small feature at the centre. The equator, the tropics, and the polar circles provided the basis of a grid which would eventually be applied to the earth. The inhabited world (*oikoumenē*), which was much longer than it was broad, was divided by latitude and length of daylight hours into zones (*klimata*) which were not related to surface features such as seas,

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16  Hērodotos' treatment of the myth is in *Histories*, 1.2. Adhering to the old idea of a continent, he argues that, as she went only to Crete, she never reached Europe: see *ibid.*, 4.45.

17  *Ibid.*, 1.4.

18  *Ibid.*, 1.170, 9.106.

19  Romm, 'Continents', p. 225; Denys Hay, *Europe: the emergence of an idea*, New York: Harper & Row, 1966, p. 3.

islands, and continents. While Aristotle in his scientific works occasionally used the conventional division into continents,[20] in his *Politics* he suggested a scheme which placed the Greeks in a central position between Europeans, who had spirit but lacked intelligence and skill, therefore keeping their freedom but being incapable of ruling over others, and Asians, who were intelligent and inventive, but lacked spirit, and were therefore always in a state of subjection. The Greeks were both intelligent and high-spirited, free and well governed. If they formed themselves into a single state they might rule the world.[21]

Under Aristotle's pupil, Alexander the Great of Macedon, that is substantially what happened. Briefly he carved out an empire which stretched from Greece and Egypt to the banks of the Indus. At Alexandria he founded the city which would be the centre of Western learning for the next five hundred years. Scholars did not forget the division of the world into three continents, but it no longer had political or cultural relevance. Although a revived Persian empire would eventually recover most of the East, it would be deeply influenced by Greek learning. Syria and Egypt remained under Greek dynasties. They would ultimately be conquered by a new power from the West, Rome. The Roman empire was based on the Mediterranean, with a hinterland which ultimately reached Great Britain. While Latin was the language of administration and the army, scholars continued to work in Greek.

All three continents were included in the Roman empire. Few Romans concerned themselves with the continental divisions. Modern biblical commentaries may speak of St Paul's 'European mission', but the apostle used no such language. References to 'Asia' in the New Testament are to the Roman province of that name in western Anatolia. There was also a province of 'Africa', in the area between present-day Egypt and Morocco. The name would survive the empire, becoming the Arabic Ifriqiya, what is now Tunisia. Neither 'Africa', nor 'Libya', nor 'Europe' appears in the New Testament. 'Aithiopiē' (Ethiopia) does, however. Its acceptance of Christianity is foreshadowed as testimony to the religion's universal significance.

Unlike 'Asia' and 'Africa', 'Europe' was never used to mark an administrative division. It remained purely a geographical concept, to which some Romans for a time retained a sentimental attachment. In the first century CE, the encyclopaedist Pliny the Elder described it as 'nursling of the people that conquered all the nations and by far the most beautiful of lands'.[22] Later, Romans took pride more in being part of an expanding empire which included all three continents.[23] Meanwhile, scientific geography largely ignored the continents, developing by establishing a grid which might be applied to the entire globe: the *klimata* and what would eventually become our lines of latitude and longitude. This culminated in the work of Claudius Ptolemaeus (Ptolemy) in the second century CE. Whether he actually constructed a map is uncertain, but he did set out the projections and give the coordinates from which maps might be drawn.[24]

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20 Aristotle, *Meteorologica*, 1.13 (350).

21 Aristotle, *Politics*, 7.7 (1327b); see also 3.14.6 (1285).

22 Pliny, *Historia naturalis*, 3.5, quoted in O. A. W. Dilke, *Greek and Roman maps*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985, p. 68.

23 Daniela Dueck, 'The geographical narrative of Strabo of Amasia', in Raflaub and Talbert, *Geography and ethnography*, p. 245.

24 The most recent account is Jerry Brotton, *A history of the world in twelve maps*, London: Allen Lane, 2012, pp. 41–53.

Earlier writers had envisaged the *oikoumenē* as a world-island surrounded by water, or, perhaps, as Kratēs had suggested in the second century BCE, as one of four such islands, north south, east, and west, including, on the other side of the world, a land of antipods whose feet pointed in the opposite direction to those of men in the *oikoumenē*.[25] Whether there was a southern temperate counterpart to the *oikoumenē* was much debated. Aristotle believed that this zone was habitable, but did not speculate as to whether it was in fact inhabited. St Augustine dismissed the idea on the grounds that there was no positive evidence for it, and no mention in Scripture of so wide a dispersion of the descendants of Noah.[26]

Ptolemy believed that Africa and the Far East were linked by land enclosing the Indian Ocean.[27] After the revival of Ptolemaic geography in the fifteenth century, a vast *terra australis incognita* appeared on most European maps until the middle of the seventeenth century. A detailed consideration of this theme would be beyond the scope of this article. Eschewing such theoretical speculations, Ptolemy's map confined itself to a known world which stretched from the Canary Islands off the Atlantic coast of Africa in the west to the borders of China in the east, and from Taprobane (Sri Lanka) in the south to Thule (probably the Shetlands) in the north. What lay beyond in terms of land or ocean remained off the map. For the most populous part of the *oikoumenē* he set out seven *klimata* based on the length of the day. The first ran through Meroē (in present-day Sudan), the second through Aswan, the third through the Nile Delta, the fourth through Rhodes, the fifth through the Dardanelles, the sixth through the middle of the Black Sea, and the seventh through the Dnepr.[28]

## Jewish, Muslim and Christian adaptations

The centuries after Ptolemy saw major upheavals, huge intellectual shifts, and fundamental political change. The Roman empire survived crises in the third century, became Christian in the fourth, succumbed to barbarian invasion in the west in the fifth, and lost much of the east to the Arabs in the seventh. A diminished eventually Greek-speaking empire survived based on Constantinople. Western Europe fell into almost complete confusion. The Mediterranean lands, in an arc from Syria to Spain, became part of the Dar al-Islam. In Baghdad in the ninth century the philosophical, scientific, and technical works of the Greeks were translated into Arabic to stimulate a flourishing, dynamic culture. What Marshall Hodgson calls the Islamicate civilization was also open to and shaped by Indian and Persian learning, and had to respect the demands of a monotheistic religion.[29]

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25   Dilke, *Greek and Roman maps*, pp. 36–7.

26   Aristotle, *Metereologica*, 2.5 (362b); Augustine, *City of God*, 16:9.

27   Dilke, *Greek and Roman maps*, p. 81.

28   *Ibid.*, p. 76. This follows Ptolemy's *Mathematical syntaxis*, better known by a curious Graeco-Arabic name, *The Almagest*. Ptolemy's ideas of terrestrial mapping were set out more fully and with greater sophistication in his later *Geōgraphikē huphēgēsis*, known in English as *Geography*. For the *klimata* in Pliny, *Historia naturalis*, 6.211–20, see Dilke, *Greek and Roman maps*, pp. 185–7.

29   Marshall Hodgson, *The venture of Islam: conscience and history in a world civilization*, vol. 1, *The classical age of Islam*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974, pp. 57–60. Hodgson rightly criticizes the use of 'Islamic' to label all the cultural productions of the inhabitants of the Dar al-Islam. His suggestion of 'Islamicate' has not caught on, but no better alternative is available.

**Figure 1.** Copy of al-Idrisi's twelfth-century map. ©British Library Board. Shelfmark Maps.856 (6).



In geography, Greek influence predominated. While Islamicate writers paid little attention to the continents, some developed the climatic system of Ptolemy.[30] This tradition culminated with al-Idrisi in the mid twelfth century (see Figure 1).[31] How this geography was understood may be seen in the *Muqaddimah* (*Introduction to history*) written by Ibn Khaldūn at the turn from the fourteenth to the fifteenth century. Whereas Aristotle had placed the Greeks centrally between the anarchic Europeans and the servile Asiatics, Ibn Khaldūn characterized all the inhabitants of the third to fifth *klimata* – historically the Arabs, Greeks and Romans, Persians, Israelites, Indians, and Chinese – as temperate, civilized, and religious, while the blacks to the south and the Slavs to the north had qualities close to those of dumb animals. The temperate *klimata* included most of the Dar al-Islam, but were not restricted to it. He recognized a civilizing role of Christianity as well as Islam among certain peoples in Africa and Europe living close to the temperate zones.[32] His view of the human world was in this respect scientific rather than religious.

Looking at the history of the Christian world Ibn Khaldūn somewhat complacently noted that, 'When the Greek dynasty was destroyed and the Roman emperors seized power and adopted Christianity, the intellectual sciences were shunned by them, as religious groups and their laws require.' By contrast, the Muslims were originally simple people from outside the empire, but they 'developed a sedentary culture such as no other nation had ever possessed', learning philosophy from 'the bishops and priests among their Christian subjects' and

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30   *The encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition, vol. 2, Leiden: Brill, 1965, s.v. 'D̲j̲ug̲h̲rāfiyā', pp. 575–90; C. Raymond Beazley, *The dawn of modern geography*, vol. 1, New York: Peter Smith, 1949 (first published 1897), pp. 393–468; Adam Silverstein, 'The medieval Islamic worldview: Arabic geography in its historical context', in Raflaub and Talbert, *Geography and ethnography*, pp. 273–90.

31   Discussed in Brotton, *Twelve maps*, pp. 66–81.

32   Ibn Khaldûn, *An introduction to history: the muqaddimah*, tr. Franz Rosenthal, ed. and abridged N. J. Dawood, London: Routledge, 1967, pp. 58–61.

**Figure 2.** Twelfth-century clime map. From Beazley, *Dawn of modern geography,* vol. 2, facing p. 576. The map has south at the top and shows seven habitable climes with an uninhabitable frozen north. The 'Arem Civitas' so prominently displayed derives through the Arabs from the Indian idea of Mount Meru at the centre of the world.



THE CLIMATE MAP OF PETRUS ALPHONSUS C. A.D. 1110.
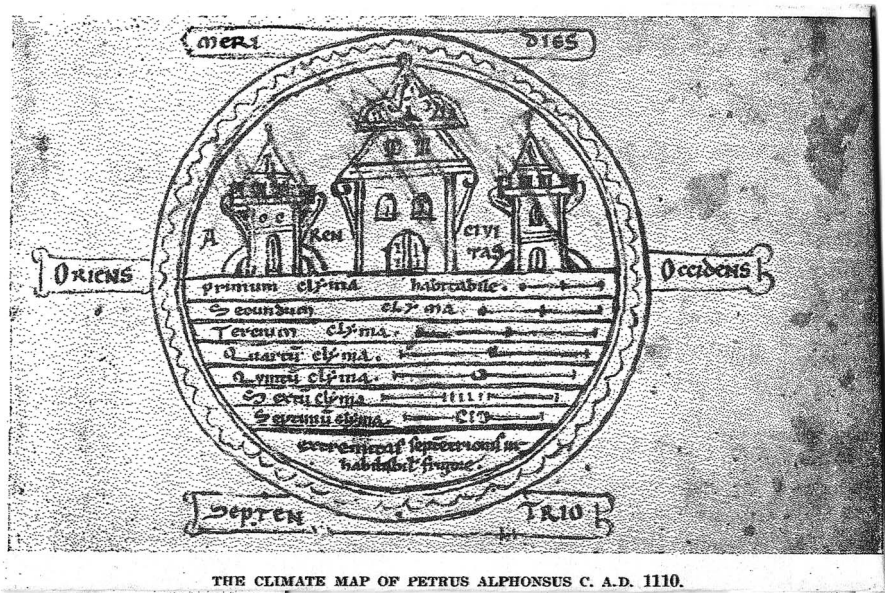
eventually translating the books which contained the Greek knowledge that was no longer part of a living intellectual culture.[33]

The Latin West had always been the intellectual poor relation to the Greek East, with which it eventually lost cultural contact. As cities vanished, monasteries struggled to preserve the written records of civilization. Much was lost and what survived was radically simplified.[34] Of Ptolemy in the West, there remained a circular diagram, devoid of geographical information, in which a set of lines drawn across the lower hemisphere represented the *klimata* (see Figure 2). The continents fared better. From about the seventh century almost to the end of the fifteenth, the increasingly dominant image of the world in western Europe was that depicted in the so-called TO maps (see Figure 3). Although highly schematized, these did have a geographical basis. Circular and usually centred on Jerusalem, they gave to Asia the whole of the eastern hemisphere, while dividing the west between Europe to the north and Africa to the south. The lines of partition were the Mediterranean, the Don, and the Nile.

The TO may not much look like what we would now consider a map. It is easy to treat it as 'an entertaining curiosity in the history of freakish speculation'.[35] Nevertheless, the power

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33  *Ibid.*, pp. 373–4, quotations from p. 432.

34  For a further discussion, see Beazley, *Dawn of modern geography*, vol. 1, pp. 375–91, and vol. 2, 1901, pp. 549–79, 591–633.

35  W. K. Hancock, *Survey of British Commonwealth affairs*, vol. 2, *Problems of economic policy 1918–1939*, part 2, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940, p. 302.

**Figure 3.** Printed TO map from Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, Augsburg, 1472. © British Library Board. Shelfmark IB.5441.
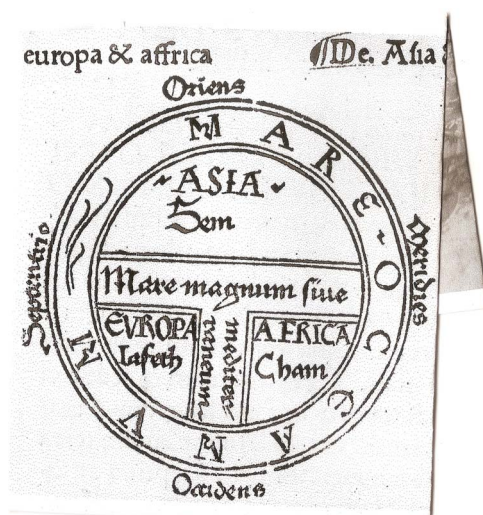


which it held over the medieval imagination entitles it to more sympathetic consideration. Like a diagram, a map is a simplification intended to bring out certain important points. Unlike a diagram, a map has to bear some sort of relation to the topography of the real world. Many maps, such as street guides or mariners' charts, have a navigational purpose which privileges geographical accuracy. World maps are not so immediately utilitarian. Their purpose is to present a view of the world as a whole and to emphasize what are seen as its key features. Today the most common world maps and globes show the world as divided into carefully defined areas, each coloured differently and named. Neither the lines of division, nor the colours, nor the names exist in nature. Their purpose on the map is to show that the modern world is composed of nation-states, and that the boundaries between them are of fundamental importance.

A TO map had a comparable function: to set out the basic underlying features of the world as it was understood at the time, its division into three continents but its unity under Christ. It had its roots in the Old Testament. The 'Table of nations' in Genesis 10:1–32 repopulated the world with the descendants of the three sons of Noah: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. The prophetic books foresaw a restored Jerusalem obedient to God's commandments, 'and all nations shall flow into it'.[36] From the second century BCE, Jewish writers began to reconcile the genealogical schema of Genesis and the Jerusalem-centred vision of the prophets with the continental divisions of the Greeks.[37] Flavius Josephus writing in the first century CE tried to place the nations geographically, but did not identify them exactly with the continents. He located the descendants of Japheth on an arc round from Asia Minor to Spain; the descendants

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36  Isaiah 2:2.

37  Romm, 'Continents, climates and cultures', pp. 228–30; James M. Scott, 'On earth as in heaven: the apocalyptic vision of world geography from *Urzeit* to *Endzeit* according to the *Book of Jubilees*', in Raflaub and Talbert, *Geography and ethnography*, pp. 182–96.

of Ham stretched from Syria to Libya; the descendants of Shem occupied Asia from the Euphrates to India and China. However, he followed earlier writers, such as the early first-century Alexander Polyhistor in claiming that Libya, originally Hamitic, had later been conquered by Epher, a son of Abraham, and therefore a descendant of Shem.[38]

The derivation of Africa from Epher was later also accepted in the Islamic world, which took over the Genesis genealogies. It was also defended by Biblical commentators in Europe until at least the late eighteenth century.[39] This absolved Africans from the curse which Noah placed on Ham, which fell on his son Canaan and which was used to justify the conquest of Palestine by the Hebrew descendants of Eber, the great-grandson of Shem. The curse was also used to justify slavery in the Jewish and later in the Islamic world, from which it was eventually taken over in a racialized form by early modern Europeans. It does not appear to have been used this way in medieval Europe.[40]

Scholars in the Dar al-Islam did not associate the sons with the continents. Indeed, they placed the Indians and Chinese to the east among the sons of Japheth.[41] A precise linkage between the sons and the continents was made only by Latin Christians, probably from the extreme west of Europe, from the mid fifth century on.[42] As the eldest son, Shem inherited Asia, the largest portion; Africa went to Ham, while Europe went to Japheth, the youngest. Unlike Islamicate maps based on the *klimata*, Christian TO maps, uniting biblical and classical concepts, reflected a religious vision of the world. The TO image appears not just in maps but also in the orb, often surmounted by a cross, held by Christ or by emperors and kings as a symbol of earthly dominion.[43]

What we now label the early middle ages was a period not just of cultural loss but also of experimentation and creativity. While the political carapace of the Roman empire had been shattered, the cultural body of Christianity survived. Western Europeans struggled to find new words to make sense of their post-Roman world; they were the first to describe themselves as 'modern'.[44] A writer of the eighth century coined *Europeenses* to describe those who defeated the Arab invasion of southern France in 752. Somewhat later, Charlemagne tried to revive the empire. He was described as the father king of Europe, but his empire did not outlast the ninth century. The sense of Europe as a cultural or political system faded with it, to be eclipsed by the idea of *Christianitas* (Christendom), which began to be developed in the writings of the ninth-century popes.[45]

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38   Josephus, *Jewish antiquities*, 1.122–39, 239–41.

39   Olaudah Equiano, *The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African: written by himself*, London: Penguin, 1995 (first published 1789), pp. 292–3, n. 569, citing Anthony Purver, *A new and literal translation of all the books of the Old and New Testaments with notes explanatory*, London, 1764, vol. 1, p. 47.

40   William McKee Evans, 'From the land of Canaan to the land of Guinea: the strange odyssey of the "sons of Ham"', *American Historical Review*, 85, 1980, pp. 15–43; David Brion Davis, *Slavery and human progress*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 36, 39, 42–3, 86–7.

41   Davis, *Slavery*, p. 41.

42   Hay, *Europe*, pp. 9–13, Dilke, *Greek and Roman maps*, pp. 173–4.

43   Peter Whitfield, *The image of the world: 20 centuries of world maps*, London: British Library, 1994, p. 14.

44   Carol Symes, 'When we talk about modernity', *American Historical Review*, 116, 2011, p. 719.

45   Hay, *Europe*, pp. 25, 50–2, 29.

Nevertheless, it was an eleventh-century pope, Urban V, who made the most effective use of the idea of Europe in a famous speech at Clermont in southern France in 1095.[46] Following Hebrews 11:13–16 and 13:14, he insisted that 'in one sense the whole world is exile for a Christian, and in another the whole world is his country'. He then set out the division of the world into its three parts. Christianity had begun in Asia; it had had its greatest saints and martyrs in Africa; but it was now confined to a small part, a *portiuncula*, of Europe which was under attack from Turks and Saracens. This contrast between the universality of the Christian religion and its restriction to part of a single continent inspired his listeners. Crying out *Deus veult!* they would go on to organize the First Crusade. The emotional force of Urban's speech lay in its sense of the global potential of Christendom. The division of the world into continents was academic, remote from the experience of his audience. It had to be explained. That Europe alone was Christian was not a mark of distinction but an unfortunate outcome of history, which he called on his listeners to redress.

## Renaissance and Reformation Europe

Although the main historian of the idea of Europe has considered that by the eleventh century it had become 'largely démodé, an outworn concept', it did have one advantage: no-one ever tried to place Christendom on a map.[47] How the world was divided into three continents may not have been common knowledge. Even mapmakers sometimes mislabelled Europe and Africa.[48] Nevertheless, the continents could be displayed visually in a way in which Christendom evidently could not. In the second half of the thirteenth century the last of the Crusader states in the Near East fell to the Muslims. As Christianity again became restricted to Europe, the three kings of the Nativity, whom St Matthew had had placed in the East, became in Western art representatives of the three continents, icons of the continuing universality of the Christian message, and of the equality of man under Christ. Their iconographic prominence contrasts sharply with that of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, who appear only in depictions of the drunkenness of Noah, but never as embodiments of the continents or races of man.[49]

As the power of the papacy and the empire faded from the late twelfth century, western Europeans began again to use and develop the terms 'Europe' and 'European'. For some these were a convenient synonym for 'Christendom' and 'Christian', for others a preferred alternative which linked their world with that of classical antiquity, whose heritage they hoped to recover and enlarge.[50] Either way, although Europe lost political unity, as the successor of Christendom it gained a cultural and emotional resonance which it has never lost. As with the *poleis* of ancient Greece there would be a 'dialectic between unity and diversity, Christendom and nations' which would persist to the present day.[51]

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46  *Ibid*., pp. 30–2.

47  *Ibid*., pp. 52 (quotation), 55.

48  *Ibid*., p. 54; Dilke, *Greek and Roman maps*, p. 174; Brotton, *Twelve maps*, p. 85.

49  Hay, *Europe*, p. 53.

50  *Ibid*., pp. 58–88.

51  Jacques Le Goff, *The birth of Europe*, tr. Janet Lloyd, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005, p. 19.

**Figure 4.** The Hereford Mappa mundi (*c*. 1300). ©The Hereford Mappa Mundi Trust and the Dean and Chapter of Hereford Cathedral.



Meanwhile, three things would undermine and ultimately destroy the TO map. The first was the addition of information which obscured and undermined its underlying structure. Medieval maps were not everyday objects, and some were far from simple. Large ones, such as that at Hereford (which measures 1.63 by 1.37 metres), were intended to evoke a sense of wonder as well as to provide topographical information (see Figure 4). Images of cities, rivers, islands, and other geographical features were included. In the east

might be found the earthly paradise with the four rivers flowing from it, Noah's Ark, the Tower of Babel, the Crossing of the Red Sea, and the wall of Alexander the Great confining the giants Gog and Magog, who were expected to break out at the Apocalypse. Also often included were the various monstrous races of mankind described in Pliny's *Natural history*. Even larger, at 3.58 by 3.56 metres, was the Ebstorf map, which was destroyed in the Second World War. It is superimposed on the body of Christ with his head at the top in the east next to the terrestrial paradise, his feet at the bottom in the west, and his hands to the north and south enclosing even the monstrous races.[52] Christian inclusivity could go no further. Overwhelmed with such illustrations and with verbal explanations as well, these maps functioned as visual encyclopaedias. Later on, more accurate mapping of the Mediterranean, Black Sea, and Atlantic coasts, and the introduction of conceptions perhaps derived from Arabic scholarship, would further compromise the simplicity of the TO scheme.

The second blow to the medieval pattern came with the recovery of Greek learning in the fifteenth century, and especially the works of Ptolemy. It was immediately recognized that the *oikoumenē* was oval in shape rather than circular. The centre of the world had to shift eastwards from Jerusalem to a point somewhere near the entrance to the Persian Gulf. Thus the medieval unity of Christian and secular knowledge was compromised. The earthly paradise disappeared from maps, along with the wall of Alexander and the monstrous races of Pliny. Maps might still be complicated by images and texts, but the trend was towards austerity, with primacy accorded to coasts, to the lines of the equator and the tropics, and to the grid pattern of parallels and meridians.

One consequence of the new cartography, already mentioned, was the great increase in the perceived size of Asia. Ptolemy's maps were more than reinforced by information coming ultimately from writers such as Marco Polo. While eastern Asia had been very much squeezed in medieval maps of the TO pattern, it was now greatly expanded. By taking a low estimate of the circumference of the earth, one could argue that China and Japan might be reached by sailing west into the Atlantic. Doing so, Columbus reached in 1492 what he thought to be, and named, the Indies. It was left to others, such as Amerigo Vespucci, to 'invent' a new world. In a famous map of 1507, Martin Waldseemüller displayed Ptolemy as the geographer of the old world, and Vespucci as that of the new (see Figure 5). He also placed Vespucci's name on the newly discovered continent: America. The text justifying this argued: 'Since a further fourth part of the world has been discovered by Americus Vesputius … I do not see why anyone should object to its being called, from its shrewd discoverer Americus, "Amerige", as if "Land of Americus", or "America", since Europe and Asia have derived their names from women.'[53]

From the sixteenth century there has been a steady increase in geographical knowledge. The outlines of the main land masses were fairly well established by the end of the eighteenth century. It is not my purpose to review again that well-known process, but rather to look at how European world maps developed after the collapse of the TO paradigm. The trend

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52 David Woodward, 'Medieval mappaemundi', in J. B. Harley and David Woodward, eds., *The history of cartography*, vol. 1, *Cartography in prehistoric, ancient, and medieval Europe and the Mediterranean*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp. 290, 307–10.

53 Quoted in Dilke, *Greek and Roman maps*, p. 165.

**Figure 5.** Waldseemüller world map from *Cosmographiae introductio,* 1507. It shows Ptolemy and Vespucci as the geographers of the Old and New Worlds respectively.



towards austerity has already been noted. It continued. Maps had to present an accurate and objective image of the world without pictures or texts. These were removed to the margins, where they would luxuriate. In the sixteenth century the proliferation of maps and the development of atlases created a strong map-consciousness in western Europe. It would eventually become impossible to think of the world apart from its map. Artists began to play with the shapes in the maps. The Netherlands were turned into the *Leo Belgicus*, the world itself into a face under a fool's cap, and, most importantly for us, Europe into a crowned queen (see Figure 6). Here she appears not as a ruler over the rest of the continents but as a unifying figure encompassing her various nations as Christ had once encompassed the whole world. She would join the illustrative elements at the borders of the map, as these became more elaborate and theatrical. The main motif was usually that of the four elements – earth, air, fire, and water – often linked with the pagan gods and the seasons. Europe and the other continents were seldom so prominently displayed, but where they did appear, it was with Europe receiving the tribute or homage of black, bare-breasted Africa, be-feathered America, and turbaned Asia (see Figure 7). The maps which by their increasing accuracy might have undermined the idea of Europe as a separate continent, instead by their iconography established and reinforced its position.

As the Reformation fractured Western Christianity, and ideas of universal empire faded, diversity increasingly appeared to be the key to Europe's success as a political system and a cultural sphere. Writing in the late eighteenth century, the historian Edward Gibbon portrayed Europe as a great republic divided into twelve powerful kingdoms, three respectable commonwealths, and many smaller independent states. This diversity meant that, though some countries might be poorly governed, others would be well ruled. Tyranny was restrained, republics stabilized, and monarchies imbibed principles of freedom.

**Figure 6.** Europe as a queen. The image, taken from Sebastien Munster's *Cosmographia universalis* (1588) was created by Joannes Putsch (Bucius) in 1537, and may reflect the ideas of the court of Emperor Charles V. Source: Paulus Swaen Old maps gallery & auction.

**Figure 7.** Dutch world map of 1633, showing the four elements and Europe as a Queen receiving the homage of the other three continents. ©British Library Board. Shelfmark Maps.C.3.d.1, 50–51.



The progress of knowledge and industry was stimulated by national rivalries. Wars were temperate and indecisive. Any conqueror emerging from Tartary

> must repeatedly vanquish the robust peasants of Russia, the numerous armies of Germany, the gallant nobles of France, and the intrepid freemen of Britain; who, perhaps, might confederate for their common defence. Should the victorious barbarians carry slavery and desolation as far as the Atlantic Ocean ten thousand vessels would transport beyond their pursuit the remains of civilised society; and Europe would revive and flourish in the American world, which is already filled with her colonies and institutions.[54]

The sixteenth-century image of Europe as a queen over the continents prefigured much of what would happen in subsequent centuries. Beginning in the early seventeenth century writers reinforced this iconography, stressing how Asia sent spices, silks, and gems, and Africa gold and ivory, while America became subject to European colonization. This Europe appeared 'enthroned on high, the supreme ruler with the world at her feet'.[55] By the end of

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54  Edward Gibbon, 'General observations on the fall of the Roman Empire in the West', in *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman empire*, vol. 3, London: Penguin 1995 (first published 1781), Penguin edition (1995), pp. 511–14.

55  Caption to Blaeu map of 1606–7, quoted in Brotton, *Twelve maps*, pp. 269–70. See also Samuel Purchas, quoted in Hay, *Europe*, pp. 120–1.

the nineteenth century most of the rest of the world was directly or indirectly under the control of Europeans or of men of European descent. The survival of the remaining independent states, and the recovery of autonomy by those subject to European rule, depended largely on their efficiency in adopting and mastering European ideas and techniques. The continental division of the world was part of the cultural heritage of Europeans, globalized in their period of dominance. Independence meant entry into a state system defined by European thinkers and European treaties from Westphalia (1648) onwards. Therefore late twentieth-century critics such as Marshall Hodgson have damned the continents as 'vicious historical distortions', and argued that 'The acceptance of such terms by non-Westerners too is a sign of their continuing cultural dependence on the West'.[56] This is a plausible interpretation from the viewpoint of a scholar of the Dar al-Islam, but elsewhere self-identification with the other continents was part of the historical revolt against European domination. The rest of this article will look at that process and examine how far the peoples of the Americas, Asia, and Africa have internalized their continents.

## Revolutions in the Americas

The revolt against Europe began in the Americas. By the mid eighteenth century, as colonial systems began to be tightened and greater control imposed from the centre, the descendants of European settlers in the New World began to see themselves as Americans, and different from officials sent out by imperial governments from Europe. Britons in America began to question the subordination of their continent to an island. Taking over the existing European iconography of America as a be-feathered Indian, Boston merchants, dressed as Mohawks, dumped British tea into their harbour in 1773. As its most recent historian concludes: 'The symbolism of the Boston Tea Party legitimized the colonists as "new and improved" Indians who deserved America for themselves.'[57] Nevertheless, there were obvious problems with using this traditional image of America. It was 'typically identified by the signs of cannibal indulgence (weapons and severed body parts) alongside that emblem of native idleness, the hammock'.[58] One must also add nudity. Montaigne in the sixteenth century might have addressed such difference with Herodotean dispassion, refusing to believe 'that there is anything barbarous or savage about them, except that we call barbarous anything that is contrary to our own habits', but that was not the prevailing view in the late eighteenth century.[59] The Patriots of the Boston Tea Party dressed as Indians partly to show that their real identities were not to be revealed.[60]

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56 Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, vol. 1, pp. 48, 49.

57 Benjamin L. Carp, *Defiance of the patriots: the Boston Tea Party and the making of America*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010, p. 157.

58 Michael Neil, 'Physicke from another body', review of Louise Noble, *Medicinal cannibalism in early modern English literature and culture*, and Richard Sugg, *Mummies, cannibals and vampires: the history of corpse medicine from the Renaissance to the Victorians*, in *London Review of Books* 33, 23, 1 December 2011, p. 14.

59 Michel de Montaigne 'On cannibals', in *Essays*, tr. J.M. Cohen, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958, Book I, ch. 31, p. 108.

60 Carp, *Defiance of the patriots*, pp. 145–6.

**Figure 8.** American Freedom, 1818. The eagle is perched on a cactus. This is part of the Aztec legend of the founding of Tenochtitlan (Mexico City) and appears on the Mexican national flag. The original is in the Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City. Source: Jaime E. Rodríguez O., 'Emancipation of America', *American Historical Review*, 105, 2000, p. 148.
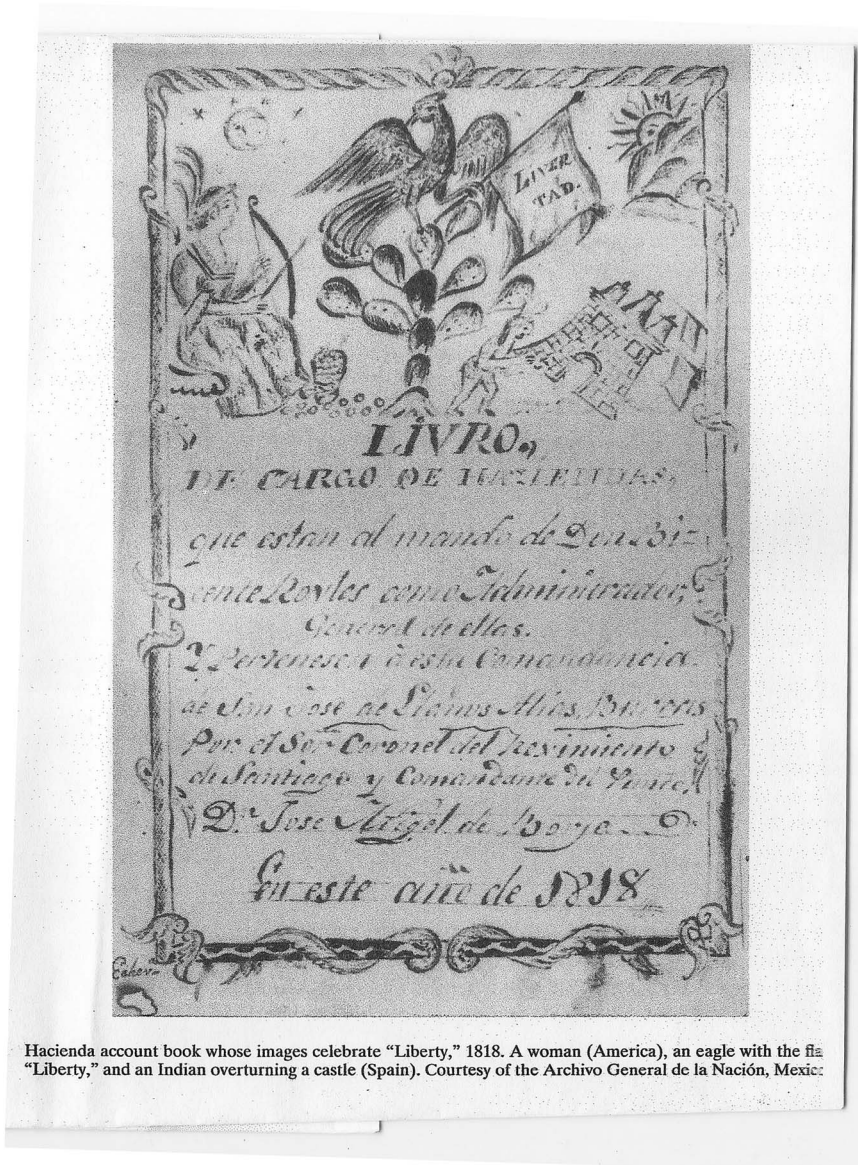


Hacienda account book whose images celebrate "Liberty," 1818. A woman (America), an eagle with the flag "Liberty," and an Indian overturning a castle (Spain). Courtesy of the Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico.

When they spoke without disguises, American revolutionaries appealed to the values of civilized Europe, proclaiming a 'decent respect to the opinions of mankind' and vigorously condemning the British for their use of Indian allies who did not respect the established

usages of war.[61] Only in parts of Latin America, especially Mexico, would there be a serious attempt to reassert a pre-Columbian past, and to make this central to national identity (see Figure 8). Elsewhere, the roots of America were be found mainly in the Old World. Those who proclaimed themselves to be Americans usually presented themselves not as resurgent indigenes but as new men who could create new societies freed from the constraints of European absolutism, entrenched nobilities, and established churches. The New World would be a new continent of freedom, from the monarchies that 'oppress … in almost every country of Europe, the quarter of the globe which calls itself the pattern of civilization and the pride of humanity'.[62]

With the overthrow of the Spanish empire, republicanism might have united Americans; instead it divided them. The name 'American' had come to be attached not to the whole continent but to one part of it, a part which would eventually become preponderant, militarily, economically, and culturally, not just in the western hemisphere but globally. The problem was recognized early on. Writing from Washington in 1820, Servando Teresa de Mier noted: 'They wish to be the only Americans or North Americans even though neither name is totally appropriate. Americans of the United States is too long; in the end, they will have to be content with the name *guasintones*, from their capital Washington … just as they call us Mexicans, from the name of our capital.'[63]

Obviously, this did not happen. The citizens of the United States continued to monopolize the name of America. In the 1850s, largely in response to President Franklin Pierce's endorsement of William Walker's filibustering conquest of Nicaragua, Spanish speakers in the Americas conceived a 'Latin America' as a continental identification to be used against American and European imperialism.[64] At times, Latin Americans felt that they might share in a common ideology of freedom and a common American identification, but for much of the twentieth century the United States has asserted itself in an arrogant and culturally insensitive way in the Americas. The 'Good Neighbor' policy of Franklin Roosevelt appeared as a brief interlude between the triumphalism of Theodore Roosevelt and the knee-jerk backing of repressive 'anti-communist' dictatorships in the Cold War. Therefore one thing which unites most of the inhabitants of the Americas is the desire to avoid American domination.[65] Despite geography and language, even English Canadians think more than twice about calling themselves Americans.[66] Nevertheless, the idea of the Americas as distinct from the other continents, from which they are separated by oceans rather than by rivers, straits, or canals, is reasonably secure.

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61  For the 'ideological' role of Indians in the American Revolution, see *ibid*., pp. 149–52; Dror Wahrman, 'The English problem of identity in the American Revolution', *American Historical Review*, 106, 2001, pp. 1236–62.

62  James Madison, 'Vices of the political system in the United States', quoted in Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson, *Liberal beginnings: making a republic for the moderns*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 95.

63  Quoted in Rodríguez O., 'The emancipation of America', p. 131.

64  Michel Gobat, 'The invention of Latin America: a transnational history of anti-imperialism, democracy and race', *American Historical Review*, 118, 5, December 2013, pp. 1345–75.

65  Rodríguez O., 'Emancipation of America'; Greg Grandin, 'Your Americanism and mine: Americanism and anti-Americanism in the Americas', *American Historical Review*, 111, 2006, pp. 1042–66.

66  Nor do French Canadians identify with Latin America: '*Le Québec, c'est ne pas le Paraguay.*'

# Africa emergent

Africans were the next to identify themselves with their continent. A sense of African identity can be pushed back into classical antiquity. In the Roman world Africanus was not an uncommon name.[67] In the most famous case, that of Scipio Africanus Major, it referred to victories in Africa rather than an African origin. In the sixteenth century, Pope Leo X gave his name and the epithet Africanus to al-Hasan ibn Muhammad, the forcefully converted Moor who provided Europeans with their first detailed account of the African interior. By the late eighteenth century Africans in the diaspora began to search for an identity. We can see this in the famous case of the Igbo Gustavus Vassa, Olaudah Equiano, who called himself the 'Ethiopian', the 'Oppressed Ethiopian', and the 'Oppressed African', eventually placing 'The African' on the title page of his account of his life.[68]

In the nineteenth century the name Africanus was again proudly given, this time clearly designating origin and ethnicity. While this continental identity emerged from the diaspora, in the twentieth century it was readily adopted in the homelands. Growing European racism from the late nineteenth century greatly reinforced this. As Africanus Coker, the agent of a British trading firm explained to his bosses in 1921:

> Because I had and do have the English language as vernacular, and the treatment I received from the members of the old or Victorian school of thought, I had been thinking and calling myself an Englishman; but thanks to the members of the new or Georgian school of thought who have expressed it in plain English that a blackman is not to think himself the equal of a whiteman and therefore not entitled to just and equal treatment, they have so put this idea into practice that today I feel and do assert that I am not an Englishman.[69]

Independent Africa quickly developed organizations of continental scope. Uniquely, it also has a (very dull) official anthem ('Let us all unite and celebrate Africa together') and an (inspiring) popular song of unity, 'Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika' ('God Bless Africa'). Of all the continental identities it is almost certainly the most accepted and the least problematic for those who assert it, the most including and the most welcoming. 'We are all Africans here' is a phrase which now comes easily and naturally in everyday conversation. The relation of this Africa to the classical Africa of the Mediterranean basin is less assured.

Historically the zone south of the Sahara was linked economically to the ports of the Mediterranean. Culturally it looked east to Mecca. Yet, even here, the attitudes reflected in the *Muqaddimah* long persisted. Nineteenth-century caliphs of Sokoto in what is now northern Nigeria saw themselves as living 'on the fringe of the Sudan … where paganism and dark ignorance prevail'.[70] The imposition of colonial rule reorientated this zone south

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67  Asiaticus is also attested as a cognomen, but there are no instances of Europeanus, Dueck, *Geography in classical antiquity*, p. 14.

68  *The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by himself*, London: Penguin, 1995 (first published 1789).

69  Coker to John Holt, 28 March 1921, in P. N. Davies, *Trading in West Africa 1840–1920*, London: Croom Helm, 1976, pp. 171–2.

70  Caliph Muhammad Bello (ruled 1817–1837), quoted in Thomas Hodgkin, *Nigerian perspectives: an historical anthology*, London: Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 13.

and west towards the Atlantic. In the mid twentieth century the long-standing Mediterranean sense of cultural superiority drew President 'Abd al-Nasir of Egypt into a leading role in the struggle for African independence:

> we ourselves are in Africa. Surely the people of Africa will continue to look to us – we who are the guardians of the continent's northern gate, we who constitute the connecting link between the continent and the outside world. We certainly cannot under any condition relinquish our responsibility to help to our utmost in spreading the light of knowledge and civilisation up to the very depth of the virgin jungles of the continent.[71]

While the inhabitants of the virgin jungles have never accepted such leadership from the north, a sense of African identity is shared by Muslims and Christians south of the Sahara. At the political level, the classical Libya/Africa of the Mediterranean basin is fully part of the present-day African Union.

## Various Asias

No comparable sense of Asian identity has emerged. The sense of cultural unity which Europe took over from Christendom did not exist in Asia. Historically the continent had three major centres of cultural dynamism: in China, in India, and in the Dar al-Islam. We have already looked at Islamicate cartographical traditions, which followed the climatic rather than the continental paradigm. Emotionally the Dar al-Islam stands opposed to the Dar al-harb, the land of struggle which comprises the rest of the world. While most of the Dar al-Islam is in Asia, much of it is also in Africa and some in Europe. For most of its inhabitants, a continental division of the world therefore contradicts both historical experience and present realities. Nevertheless, in the Ottoman empire, as in the Roman empire, a sense of spanning Europe and Asia had some importance. Mehmet II, Fatih (the Conqueror) proclaimed himself to be 'the Sultan of the Two Continents and the Two Seas'.[72] This sense of bi-continentalism has survived into the modern Turkish Republic.

Indian cartography had little interest in 'preparing a seemingly accurate map of the finite terrestrial earth'. Instead maps were to make 'manifest the structure of the cosmos through which the soul makes its long cosmic journey'.[73] The earth was centred on a largely mythical Mount Meru, which rose some 84,000 *yojanas* (between 168,000 and 756,000 miles). In one of the leading conceptions it was divided into four continents: Badrāśva in the east, Aparagoyana in the west, Jambūdvīpa in the south, and Uttarkuru in the north.[74] Buddhism transmitted these ideas to Southeast Asia and the Far East.[75] However, there seems to have been no interest in connecting this paradigm to a real geography, even to the

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71  Quoted in Colin Legum, *Pan Africanism*, New York: Praeger, 1965, p. 39.

72  Gavin D. Brockett, 'When Ottomans became Turks: commemorating the conquest of Constantinople and its contribution to world history', *American Historical Review*, 119, 2, April 2014, p. 405.

73  Joseph E. Schwartzberg, 'Introduction to South Asian cartography', in in J. B. Harley and David Woodward, eds., *The history of cartography*, vol. 2, book 1, *Cartography in the traditional Islamic and South Asian societies*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 329.

74  Joseph E. Schwartzberg, 'Cosmographical mapping', in *ibid*., pp. 335–6.

75  For the Buddhist system in Thailand, where Jambūdvīpa appears as Chomphuthawip, see Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam mapped: a history of the geo-body of a nation*, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994, pp. 20–36.

extent of the European TO maps. Later secular maps placed India at the centre, with the rest of Eurasia ignored or marginalized: 'England, France, [and] other hat-wearing islands'.[76]

Unlike China and the Dar al-Islam, India, in the broadest sense, came under European colonial rule. At the end of the nineteenth century some Indian nationalists adopted the European opposition of East and West, contrasting Indian spirituality with the materialism of the West. This reinforced criticisms which many Europeans and Americans were making and continue to make of the spiritual impoverishment of their own societies, and led to a growing interest in 'Eastern' religions, especially Buddhism. However, internationally the most important Indian religious thinker of the period, Swami Vivekananda, did not set up an antithesis between Asia and Europe. While forcefully expounding a very sophisticated Vedanta Hinduism at the Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1893, he saw all religious as expressions of a universal truth. 'The star arose in the East; it travelled steadily towards the West … till it made a circuit of the world, and is now again rising on the very horizon of the East.' He appealed repeatedly to Western science. He insisted that India had enough religion, but did need bread. He praised the United States as the 'motherland of liberty' marching 'at the vanguard of civilization with the flag of harmony'. He never spoke of Asia.[77]

Buddhist geographical conceptions were transmitted to China, which also developed very sophisticated secular cartographic traditions.[78] As the central kingdom (*Zhongguo*), China itself came to be very carefully mapped, but this contrasted with a perfunctory and usually inaccurate treatment of the outside world. Being the centre of civilization and the residence of the Son of Heaven, China was surrounded by zones of increasing barbarism, about which precise knowledge was decreasingly necessary. The Chinese found this paradigm perfectly satisfactory for some two thousand years and their maps reflected it (see Figure 9). Outside influences shook but did not overturn it. At the end of the sixteenth century the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci constructed a Chinese map along European lines. He placed the Americas at the top in the east, Europe and Africa at the bottom in the south. China was therefore as close to the centre as was geographically possible. This was not good enough. Ricci's map created a sensation in China. Transmitted to Japan it rapidly became standard, despite the policy of seclusion which was rigidly maintained until the 1850s. In China it was eventually rejected. 'How', a critic, Wei Jun, asked 'can China be treated like a small unimportant country?'[79] Traditional Chinese cartography quickly reasserted itself. The Chinese were not cultural relativists. The Central Kingdom remained the centre of civilization, not a

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76  Joseph E. Schwartzberg, 'Geographical mapping', in Harley and Woodward, *Cartography in the traditional Islamic and South Asian societies*, p. 400.

77  Swami Vivekananda, 'Addresses at the Parliament of Religions', http:en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Complete_Works_of_Swami_Vivekananda/Volume_1/Addresses_at_the_Parliament_of_Religions (consulted 17 July 2014). For the more traditional view, see Claude Markovits, 'L'Asie: une invention européenne?' *Monde(s)* 3, May 2013, p. 64.

78  For the development of geography in China the key text is Joseph Needham, *Science and civilization in China*, vol. 3, *Mathematics and the sciences of the heavens and the earth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959, pp. 497–540. Consciously reacting against prevailing assumptions of the time that asserted European superiority, Needham was inclined to overstate Chinese achievements in this field. For a rather different view, see Richard J. Smith, *Chinese maps: images of 'all under heaven'*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

79  Quoted in Smith, *Chinese maps*, p. 49. Without access to the original I have had to give this in the translation as I have it. The original was probably more pointed: 'How can the Central Kingdom be treated like a small unimportant country?'

**Figure 9.** *Da Ming hun yi tu* (Great Ming amalgamated map) This Chinese world map is unusual in providing geographical detail of the world outside China rather than depicting it as a sea with countries represented by small boxes with labels. It squeezes Arabia, Africa, and Europe into the last eighth of the map at the left. Wikipedia dates it to the late fourteenth century, but Smith, *Chinese maps*, p. 30, to the late sixteenth. Source: Department of Geography, Hong Kong Baptist University, uploaded by Professor Zhou Qiming.



state in a world of states, until almost the end of the nineteenth century, when the pressures of the external barbarians, especially the Japanese (who did know where they were in the world), became irresistible. Until then, Chinese world maps continued to reflect the Sinocentric view.

While Chinese cartography remained Sinocentric, the Ricci map survived in Japan (see Figure 10). For more than two centuries the island empire was even firmer than China in cutting off intercourse with the outside world, but it did not reject European geography. Eventually 'Dutch studies' would flourish, and Japanese maps followed European patterns. Culturally Japan remained, and tried to define itself, within a Sinocentric space. Hira Atsutane (1776–1843) 'claimed that *Japan* was the "Middle Kingdom" since the unbroken imperial line of Japan (*bansei ikkei*) demonstrated that the island empire was the "Land of the Gods" not China where dynastic changes and "Tartar rule" were frequent'. The 'Opening

**Figure 10.** *Shōhō zu* (Map of the world). This world map, based on that of Ricci, was printed in Nagasaki in 1645. With an east–west axis, it places the Americas at the top. Source: Rare Books and Special Collections (RBSC) © University of British Columbia Library.
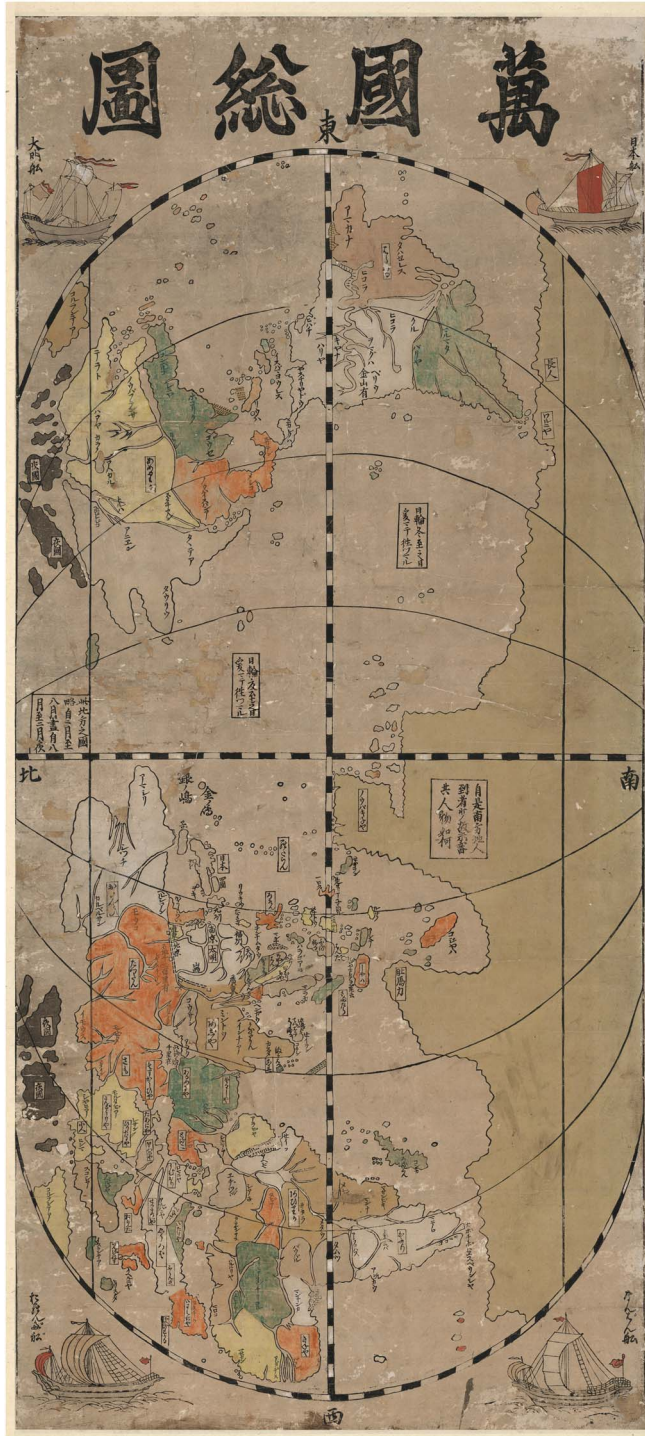
of Japan' at the middle of the nineteenth century presented better opportunities for self-assertion. The modernizers of the Meiji period renounced traditional 'backwardness' for what they saw as European progress.[80] The country was able to adapt quickly and to make a rapid transformation into an effective, expansionist modern state, gaining full acceptance into the Western defined community of states by the end of the nineteenth century, entering into an alliance with Great Britain in 1902 and achieving Great Power status in 1905.

This contrasts sharply with China, which occupied an inferior position until the ending of the 'unequal treaties' in 1943. For China, defeat by Japan in 1894–5 forced the intellectual elite to reconsider the nature of the world and their place in it. The Jesuits in the seventeenth century had introduced a word for Asia: *yaxia*, a simple transcription into Chinese. It had little impact. In the 1890s it was pushed aside by a new word, *yazhou*, which had greater resonance, and was widely used. No longer was the world seen as divided between civilization and barbarism. Instead it was divided into continents (*zhou*). The Asian continent was defined in terms of its vulnerability. As the anarchist writer Liu Shipei set it out in 1907: 'Today's world is a world of brute force. And the territory of Asia is a ground upon which the white race uses its brute force'. Liang Qichao, the leading thinker of the time, had already reconceptualized Chinese history, defining the modern period as the one in which 'the Chinese people [*zhong guo minzu*] united with all the Asian peoples [*quan yazhou minzu*] in struggle and competition with Westerners [*xiren*]'. Definition of this Asia was more difficult, but Buddhism might link the Far East with India. Liu Shipei tried to push it further: 'Muslims and Indian Brahmins also went east from India and are now all over the Southern Seas [*nanyang*]. Today Indians and Filipinos are familiar with British and American culture, and this too makes it easier for Western and Southern Asia to unite.' Asia might be defined not through primordial traits but through the experience of imperialism and in resistance to it.[81]

In imagining Asia, the role of Japan would be critical. Liu Shipei identified it with the white imperialists.[82] In Japan itself a new tendency, at first rather romantic and idealist, linked it with the peoples of the mainland, and called for a 'return to Asia' (*Ajia kaiki*). This was first reflected in the Kōa-Kai (Society for Raising Asia) founded in 1880. Before the First World War this was a very much a minority position within a political elite which stressed instead its commitment to modernity.[83] Nevertheless, with the defeat of Russia in the war of 1904–5, Japan appeared to many as the champion of the oppressed and colonized peoples of the world. As the Egyptian nationalist Mustafa Kamil declared: 'we are amazed by Japan because it is the first Eastern government to utilize Western civilization to resist the shield of European imperialism in Asia'.[84] Tokyo began actively to develop ties with other Asians, including those in the Islamic world, and created the Ajia Gikai (Asian Reawakening Society)

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80   Sven Saaler, 'Pan-Asianism in modern Japanese history: overcoming the nation, creating a region, forging an empire', in Sven Saaler and J. Victor Koschmann, eds., *Pan-Asianism in modern Japanese history: colonialism, regionalism and borders*, London: Routledge, 2007, p. 3; Lewis and Wigen, *Myth of continents*, pp. 71–2.

81   Rebecca E. Karl, 'Creating Asia: China in the world at the beginning of the twentieth century', *American Historical Review*, 103, 4, October 1998, pp. 1096–1118, quotations at pp. 1115, 1098, 1116.

82   *Ibid.*, 1116.

83   Saaler, 'Pan-Asianism', pp. 3–6.

84   Selçuk Esenbel, 'Japan's claim to Asia and the world of Islam', *American Historical Review*, 109, 4, October 2004, p. 1146.

for that purpose in 1909.[85] After 1919 Pan-Asian ideas became increasingly prevalent, and eventually dominant in the 1930s. Tokyo claimed to be the leader of the Asian peoples' struggle against Western imperialism, but the wartime Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere would be the framework of an even more exploitative Japanese imperialism. Others, such as Nehru in India, would try to use Asianism against Tokyo. That Japan still held Southeast Asia at the time of surrender, and had, to a greater or lesser degree, backed local nationalists, was crucial in their early achievement of independence. Imperialism had to fight its way back, and ultimately failed.

After the defeat of Japan's military pan-Asianism, Nehru placed himself at the forefront of a peaceful, democratic Asianism. On the eve of Indian independence he urged the All-Asian Relations Conference: 'Let us have faith in the human spirit which Asia has symbolized for these long ages past.' At the United Nations he announced himself 'as a representative of Asia'. India's role was central: 'Even culturally speaking our bonds are very great with all these parts of Asia, whether it is Western Asia or the Far East or Southeast Asia and these bonds are very old and very persistent.'[86] He did not want to create a bloc, 'but inevitably the countries of Asia will come closer together and India will play a leading role in this'.[87] Nevertheless, like Vivekananda and Gandhi, Nehru saw himself more as a world figure than as a narrowly Asian one. His policies would lead to the Bandung Conference, the Afro-Asian bloc, and the emergence of a 'Third World' distinct from the competing superpowers and defined largely by its need for development. African identity was strengthened by this. Asian identity was largely lost: there would be no Organization of Asian Unity. Nehru's policies were undermined by Partition and the Kashmir dispute, which precluded close relations with the Asian states to the west. In any case, he loftily dismissed Arab politics as 'extraordinarily immature'.[88] He looked instead to China, but this would be a difficult relationship. With the defeat of the Nationalists and the triumph of Communism, Beijing committed itself to a universal revolutionary cause rather than the promotion of Asian values. The war with China in 1962 finally discredited Nehru's Asianism.

More recently there has been some talk of 'Asian values' as lying behind the economic success of the Far East. Insofar as it means anything, this would seem to be a very much debased form of Confucianism, emphasizing ideas of family solidarity, but without the sense that an educated elite should rule by moral example rather than by force, placing the welfare of the peasant population above the pursuit of wealth and power by the rulers. Perhaps more interesting is the current advertising campaign insisting that Malaysia, lying at the intersection of the Islamic, Indian, and Chinese zones, is 'Truly Asia', but with its emphasis on features such as golf courses this is clearly intended to attract tourists from Europe and America rather than to create a new sense of internal identity to transcend the division between Malays and Chinese. While the Chinese broadcaster CCTV claims to deliver Asia to the world, it stresses dynamism and diversity rather than shared culture and traditions.

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85   *Ibid.*, pp. 1140–70.

86   Frank Moraes, *Jawaharlal Nehru: a biography*, New York: Macmillan, 1958, quotations at pp. 449, 450, 446–7; see also Markovits, 'L'Asie', pp. 44–5.

87   Nehru to his chief ministers, 3 February 1949, quoted in Sarvepalli Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru: a biography, vol. 2: 1947–1956*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1979, p. 55.

88   *Ibid.*, p. 232.

In some contexts the continent may provide a frame of reference of value to some of its inhabitants, but Asia remains much more of a European concept than an Asian one, as the literature on 'Orientalism' reminds us.

## Conclusion

While my original purpose was simply to provide information for colleagues in Papua New Guinea, an article for a wider audience may also briefly suggest how PNG fits into the continental picture. Prominent in their list of 'patent absurdities' Lewis and Wigen place 'maps that show the massive supercontinent of Asia terminating along a precise north–south line through the island of New Guinea', which they term 'unambiguously Melanesian'.[89] This statement of the apparently obvious needs considerable qualification. While the position of the border is arbitrary, the two halves of the island have not shared a common history. The western portion formed the eastern end of the Indian Ocean economy. For centuries its external orientation has been to the Malay and Dutch worlds. The eastern half became significantly linked to a wider world only with the emergence of the Pacific Ocean economy from the middle of the nineteenth century. The political division reflects this. 'Melanesia' was an early nineteenth-century European conception of doubtful validity, and derogatory implications in its contrast with 'Polynesia'. Until quite recently the indigenous experience was profoundly local. To a large degree it still is. 'Melanesian', like 'African' now does have wide, almost unquestioned, acceptance. Despite this self-identification by the people of PNG, the government does not challenge the division of the island, nor does it press for observer status for the West Papuan liberation movement in the Melanesian Spearhead Group linking PNG with the island states of the western Pacific.[90]

Any attempt to link cultural and political divisions with simple geography at the global level is bound to be arbitrary or inconsistent, and almost certainly both. Geographically Europe clearly is not a separate continent. Historically, with its combination of shared culture but political diversity, it became the paradigm for what a continent might be. The continental division of the world allowed Americans, Africans, and Asians to imagine their own continents as valid alternatives to Europe. All the continents have their problems of definition. What place is there for Russia and Turkey in Europe? How can the other states of the New World live with the hegemony of the United States of America? How will the relation evolve between the original Africa of the Mediterranean coast and the rest of the continent to the south? Can Asia ever be anything other than a rather bad geographical expression? Such questions are a long way from solution, but the language of the continents is now universal, and will have to be used in dealing with them. Like QWERTY, it is something we are stuck with.

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89   Lewis and Wigen, *Myth of continents*, pp. 197–8, 38.

90   Stephanie Lawson, 'Ethnic identity and regionalism in the Pacific islands: the case of "Melanesianess"', *South Pacific Journal of Philosophy and Culture,* 11, 2010–12, pp. 7–8, 15.