

Colonial Worldview

Introduction

Colonialism changed the world drastically. The maps and books that Europeans produced while they actively colonized other parts of the world illustrate how they justified their actions and what they hoped to gain.

This map was published in 1493 in a book that described everything that was “known” about the world, sort of like an encyclopedia.

This map was made before Europeans knew about North and South America. It shows Asia, Europe, and Africa along with pictures of the men that settled each continent according to the medieval church. A man named Sem was believed to be the father of all of Asia, Japhet the father of all Europe, and Cam the father of all Africa.

On the side of the map are pictures of monstrous people that were believed to live in distant parts of the world. Medieval scholars knew of the “monstrous races,” as they have been called, because the ancient Greeks and Roman writers had described them.

Interaction: This top picture shows a man with six arms. Can anyone tell me where you might have seen pictures of people with many arms? (Hindu gods are often pictured with four, six, or eight arms).

The picture second from the top shows a woman covered in hair. This is probably based on a birth defect, called Hypertrichosis, which makes a person grow thick hair all over their bodies. There are even portraits of people suffering from Hypertrichosis from the 1500s.

The page on the right is from the same book.

Probably the strangest monster on this page is the one on the top left. It shows a man with a dog’s head. The ancient Greek and Roman writers described a race of monstrous people in Africa who walked like men do, but had the heads of dogs and lived on raw meat. Their language also sounded like the barking of dogs.

Interaction: The Greeks and Romans did actually meet these creatures, but they aren’t a race of monstrous humans. Can anyone guess what the Greeks and Romans were actually describing? (Baboons).

The Greeks and Romans who actually saw baboons most likely did not mistake them for a tribe of human beings. But the people who wrote about them had probably heard them described from someone who had heard them described from someone else. So after hundreds of years, baboons were thought to be a tribe of human beings.

Another “monster” to take note of is the man with the giant lower lip on the top right-hand side of the page. This is probably based on the Mursi tribe in Ethiopia. When a woman becomes engaged in the Mursi tribe, she might choose to pierce her lip. Over many years, she slowly stretches out the piercing until she can fit a small plate in it. It might seem strange to our eyes, but it is considered beautiful to the Mursi people.

This map was made in the 1550s, well after European nations had come in contact with native peoples of the Americas.

However, the images of Africans and Americans still depicted them as somewhat monstrous, if not in appearance then in deed. In the top left corner of this map, we have an image of people with lip plates again, but the truly monstrous people are found in the lower left corner.

Interaction: Can anyone tell what they are doing to make Europeans identify them as monstrous? (Practicing cannibalism: it was fairly common for native American peoples to practice ritual cannibalism. In other words, they weren’t consuming humans for consumption but for religious purposes. In most cases, it was actually a sign of respect for the deceased. The Yanomamo people of the Amazon, for example, still consume the ashes of respected elders as a way to absorb their spirit back into the village.)

Another interesting part of this map is the angels at the North and South poles who are turning cranks.

Interaction: Can anyone tell me why this is significant? (It shows support for the theory that the heavenly bodies move because the earth rotates on its axis and around the sun. The church, at this time, taught that the sun and stars all rotated around the earth, and did not care for anyone saying otherwise.)

This is the title page of a 1595 world atlas published in Belgium.

Each of these women represents one of the continents.

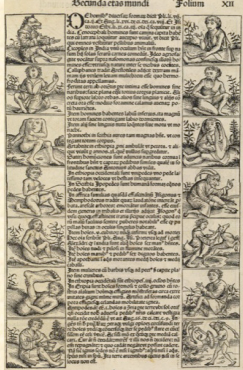
Interaction: Let’s see if we can identify which continents each figure represents. Europe is probably the most obvious. Can someone tell me which woman symbolizes Europe and how you know? (The woman on the throne: the throne and scepter represents right to rule, and the mapmaker, a European, would have believed his continent rightfully in power over others)

Interaction: Can anyone tell me which figure is Asia and how we can know that? (The standing woman on the left; she is holding incense. The spices used in incense came from Asia.)

Interaction: Which figure is Africa? (The standing woman on the right: apart from having darker skin than the other figures, she has a sun behind her head to represent the warm climate of Africa and sprig of balsam in her hand symbolizing tribute.)

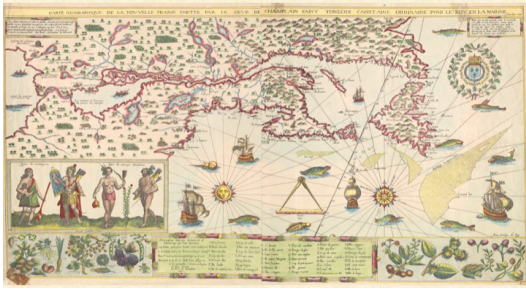
Interaction: Can anyone figure out which continents the remaining two figures represent? (The woman holding a severed head represents the Americas-- the head suggesting cannibalism, of course. The unfinished woman represents “Terra Australis,” which the name Europeans gave to the vast southern continent that scientists believed must exist in order to balance out the rotation of the earth. At this time, it was believed that the Island just south of South America, named Tierra del Fuego or “Land of Fire”, was the northernmost tip of Terra Australia. This is why Terra Australis’ figure has a flame under her.)

Interaction: Why is Terra Australis shown as unfinished? (it was undiscovered or unexplored).



This map was made by a French explorer named Samuel de Champlain, who was governor of New France in what is now Canada.

This map depicts several important resources of New France and New England, including cod, minx, beavers, seals, and whales.



Interaction: Does anyone know why cod was such an important resource for Europeans? (it was a fish that preserved very well and, at first, was incredibly populous. Explorers reported that if you dropped a basket into the Gulf of Maine, you would pull up a basketful of cod. Skeletons of codfish from a few hundred years ago have shown that a full grown codfish can weigh as much as a full grown man. They have been so overfished that we have only very young cod left).

Interaction: Can anyone tell me why a French map of the New World will include pictures of minx and beavers? (they were especially interested in furs)

Interaction: Why would Europeans picture Native Americans on their maps? (there was a lot of curiosity about Native Americans in Europe)

The French typically had better relations with Native Americans than the British because they relied on them for fur trading. Also, unlike the British, the French were not really interested in agriculture so there was not as much land encroachment. One interesting part of this map is that it shows Lake Ontario, which was far beyond where Europeans had explored at this time. Champlain had to have been told of Lake Ontario from Native Americans.



This map also includes images of the New World resources sought after by European colonists.

Interaction: The image to the left of the map title shows a European king being presented with lumber. Why was lumber such an important resource during the colonial era? (necessary for buildings, ships, and fuel, etc. England in particular sought New World lumber as England had been mostly deforested long ago).



This map includes an image that illustrates the rich gold deposits of South America.

While there was quite a bit of gold in South America, the colonizers of North America were disappointed to discover that there was little gold or silver in the eastern parts of the continent.

Interaction: While the French, Dutch, and British did not get a lot of gold from their North American colonies, the continent did have quite a bit of gold. Why did they not find it? (The richest gold deposits of North America were on the west coast, which would not be reached by Europeans until much later).



This map of Pernambuco, a part of Brazil, features a large image of a sugar cane plantation.

Interaction: What do the workers of this plantation look like? (African descent: refining sugar cane was incredibly hard, uncomfortable work, and it was done almost entirely by slaves)

Interaction: Sugar cane produced three major commodities of the colonial era. The first is obviously sugar. Does anyone know what the other two are? (Molasses and Rum)

This map, made by a Dutch mapmaker, shows an image of one the saddest consequences of colonialism: slavery.

In 1501, less than 10 years after Columbus first landed in the New World, the first African slaves that were brought to the Americas arrived. The enslaved Africans who had survived the journey across the Atlantic would likely perish from being overworked or in the smallpox epidemics that started ravaging the Caribbean and South America as early as 1507.

Interaction: Initially, Columbus had wanted to use Native Americans as slaves. Does anyone know why Europeans switched to enslaving Africans? (Native Americans knew the land and could escape and survive easily. They also succumbed to European diseases in high numbers, as they had no immunities to European diseases. Africans tended to survive longer and were less likely to run away, as they didn't know how to survive in the unfamiliar land).

Interaction: It is difficult to understand how colonists could justify enslaving other human beings. Thinking of some of the images we've seen in these maps, can anyone explain what parts of the colonial worldview enabled Europeans to practice slavery? (a notion that non-Europeans were somewhat less human; the idea that Europe had a right to reign over other continents; overwhelming greed for the rum, tobacco, and sugar produced by slave plantations.)

Activity Transition

I have a booklet for everyone to take home that includes several more European maps. We're going to be examining the maps for more instances of colonial motivations and beliefs.