IMAGES OF EMPIRE
FRANCIS I AND HIS CARTOGRAPHERS

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A significant but often neglected aspect of Renaissance courtly culture was cartography. The 'Age of Discovery' ushered in an era of European expansionism in which, in the competition for wealth and glory among rulers, it no longer sufficed merely to rule a single, integrated territory. Truly educated princes had to be well versed in the newest overseas discoveries; truly powerful ones needed to acquire overseas possessions of their own. Typically, historians seeking to assess the cultural impact of European overseas exploration, trade, and colonisation have focused on cross-cultural exchanges between Europeans and indigenous peoples, and the effects, mostly deleterious, of the conquest on native cultures. When evaluating the implications of expansion for European society, however, they tend to follow the lead of J.H. Elliott, and argue that whereas the 'Columbian exchange' brought Europe manifold benefits that forever altered the course of Europe's economic and political development, the voyages of discovery did little to change European culture, popular or elite.1 By the same token,

1 For an overview of the topic of European colonial expansion, see Brunelle, 'The World Economy and Colonial Expansion'; for a discussion of the 'Columbian Exchange', see Crosby, Ecological Imperialism; Elliot's seminal work, The Old World and the New, 1492-1650, was the first to point out how little the discovery of the New World altered the world view of the Old World in the early modern period; for a similar interpretation, see Schlesinger, In the Wake of Columbus. Geoffroy Atkinson notes 'les mentions des pays d'outre-mer' in the works of certain French humanists. He emphasises, however, that most writers had little or nothing to say about the new discoveries: Atkinson, Les nouveaux horizons de la renaissance française, pp. 301ff. Greenblatt, Marvelous Possessions, argues that not only did European culture fail to change very much as a result of its experience with the non-European 'other', but that rather Europeans 'took possession' of indigenous cultures as a necessary step in appropriating their lands as well. The literature on the encounters between Europeans and non-Europeans, and the impact of them on indigenous societies is rapidly expanding. See, for example, the two volumes of reprinted articles in Forster, ed, European and Non-European Societies: the essays in Schwartz, ed, Implicit Understandings, and those in Greenblatt, ed, New World En-
historians of cartography and geography have emphasised primarily a positivist narrative of the evolution of map making from a highly imagina-
tive art to a 'valid' science where geographers excised culture from maps in
the name of scientific 'objectivity'. They also examine the geopolitical
power struggles that spurred rulers to seek the latest and most accurate
maps to be had. Rulers competing for power and access to the wealth of the
New World eagerly sought to obtain geographical data on the best routes to
the Indies for themselves and to deny it to their rivals, because in the race to
stake a claim to territory in the New World, or to trading entrepots in Asia,
accurate information could spell the difference between success and failure.2

During the 1980s and 1990s, however, historical geographers began to
garner new insights from the anthropologists, sociologists, and philosophers
whose work was expanding the focus and methodology of historical
scholarship. Brian Harley, an already eminent scholar of the history of cart-
ography, was an especially important pioneer in this trend. After reading
the work of Michel Foucault, and especially Foucault’s remarks on geo-
graphy, Harley found that he could never read a map in quite the same way
again. Maps, he realised, were as much texts and cultural artifacts, deeply
ambivalent in meaning, and replete with symbols, as the scores of written
texts cultural historians were busy deconstructing. Of most significance,
Harley and those who have built upon his insights concluded that maps, like
other texts, were about power, and not merely because they reflected power
relations that already existed, but also because they asserted special
knowledge, power and possession.3 As Harley put it in 1989: ‘Cartogra-
counters. See also Cervantes, The Devil in the New World; Clendinnen, Ambivalent
Conquests; Seed, Ceremonies of Possession.

2 Mollat du Jourdin and De La Roncière, Sea Charts of the Early Explorers; Parry,
The Age of Reconnaissance, pp. 53-113; Quinn, ‘The Americas in the Rotz Atlas of
1542’ and ‘Maps in the Age of European Exploration’; Skelton, Maps; Thrower,
Maps and Civilization; Tooley, ‘Map Making in France’.

3 Harley drew his inspiration for his cultural approach to maps especially from the
writings of Michel Foucault, and in particular from Foucault’s brief discussion of
geography in an interview with the editors of the French journal Hérodote. Cf.
Foucault, ‘Questions on Geography’; Harley, ‘Maps, Knowledge, and Power’,
‘Silences and Secrecy’, ‘Deconstructing the Map’, ‘Rereading the Maps’, and ‘His-
torical Geography’; Harley and Zandvliet, ‘Art, Science, and Power’. For discus-
sions of the impact of Harley’s work on the historiography of cartography, see
Peto, ‘Cartography and Power’; Wintle, ‘Renaissance Maps and the Construction of
the Idea of Europe’. For other cultural approaches to map history, see Brotton,
Trading Territories; Conley, The Self-Made Map; Cosgrove, ed, Mappings;
Lestringant, Mapping the Renaissance World; Mignolo, The Darker Side of the