


3. Geographical Myths

*Mary Fuller*

There is no question that geographical myths circulated in Shakespeare’s England: an obvious example would be the continued popularity of Sir John Mandeville’s *Travels*, a central vector for continued circulation of older information about the geographical and ethnographic marvels lying beyond the boundaries of Europe. (See Figure 6.) English-language printed editions appeared in 1496, 1499, 1503, 1568, 1582, and 1612, after which (if anything) the frequency of editions increased; taking into consideration an extensive parallel circulation in manuscript, we can guess that Mandeville’s *Travels* may have been read more widely than any other single English book about extra-European geography available in the sixteenth century. “Mandeville” was a pseudonym, his narrative invented and fleshed out with borrowings from actual medieval travelers as well as from classical sources. By the later decades of the sixteenth century, the reliability of the *Travels* was already suspect, and viewed by scholars of geography as, at the least, suffering from irredeemable textual corruption. Accordingly, we may wonder whether this work circulated geographical myths, or geographical fictions, which readers felt no call to believe. The persistent reading of Mandeville by explorers such as Columbus and Martin Frobisher, of course, complicates such an assumption.

Migrating myths: Prester John

Separating geographical fiction from geographical fact in the Renaissance was not the task of a moment. The works of serious geographers — men whose intention it was to represent the world as accurately as they could — continued to represent myths persisting from the Middle Ages, both graphically (on maps) and textually (in narratives and cartographic legends). One of the hardest of these myths was the existence, somewhere outside Europe, of a powerful Christian monarch known as Prester John. Prester John was often associated with “India,” itself a mobile concept for late medieval and early modern geography, but the actual location of his domain varied widely. Martin Waldseemüller’s 1507 world map places the land of Prester John in Central Asia, just south and west of “Thebet.”
When Benedict, seeing Beatrice approach, asks Don Pedro for an errand “to the Antipodes,” or to “fetch you a toothpicker now from the furthest inch of Asia; bring you the length of Prester John’s foot; fetch you a hair off the great Cham’s beard,” he probably has in mind a version of the story in which the realm of Prester John adjoined that of the Mongol Khan (Ado 2.1.200–03).

Another important tradition locates Prester John’s kingdom in the vicinity of Ethiopia (sometimes identified as “India Minor”); Martin Behaim’s globe of 1492 provides one example. The late sixteenth-century atlases of Gerardus Mercator (Atlas sive cosmographicae meditationes, 1595) and Abraham Ortelius (Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1570) continued to locate Prester John’s realm on maps. For Mercator, he was “emperor of Abyssinia,” represented on the map of Africa as a bearded white man with a crown, throne, and scepter; for Ortelius, he was king of Ethiopia, but an annotation to his map of Tartary (Russia) also associates Prester John with a kingdom of Asian Christians founded by the disciple Thomas. Both Richard Eden and Richard Hakluyt carefully noted mentions of Prester John in the margins of the travel narratives they collected and edited.

Climate science and the monstrous races

Another legacy from the Middle Ages was the idea that “monstrous races” existed around the borders of what had classically been, to Europeans, the known world or oikoumene: the temperate regions extending out from the Mediterranean. These appeared in a variety of forms, some cultural (Amazons, cannibals) and some morphological (people with dog’s heads or none, people with only one foot, and so on). Medieval maps and texts had assigned such peoples to a variety of locations: India and the islands of the Indian Ocean, Central Asia beyond the “Caspian mountains,” and sub-Saharan Africa (Woodward 3: 1, Plate 14).

Both the notion of a monstrous humanity and its association with regions of extreme climate, in the frigid or torrid zones, were grounded in a cosmographic science whose authority was put into question by the geographic explorations of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. By the 1550s, English mariners had experienced the frigid and torrid zones and could see for themselves that these regions beyond the classical oikoumene were both inhabitable and inhabited by persons of ordinary configuration. These inherited ideas did not dissipate immediately: when Richard Eden printed accounts of the first two English voyages to sub-Saharan Africa, he did not hesitate to interpolate into these eyewitness materials a section on African monsters and marvels drawn from classical sources, and including cannibals, dragons, and men without heads (Decades of the newe worlde, 1555). A few decades later, explorer George Best’s account of Martin Frobisher’s voyages to the Arctic carefully refuted the classical theory of uninhabitable zones. He wrote that the testimony of “our Englishmen” who had been in Guinea (Frobisher among them) characterized lands in the torrid zone as “most fruitfull and delectable,” abounding in flora and fauna that were unfamiliar only in their abundance and excellence (Hakluyt 7: 252–53). Both general cosmographies and firsthand accounts by travelers register the paradigm-shifting discovery that the predicted effects of such climates on human culture and physiology were simply not there to be seen.

Renaissance geography and the persistence of marvels

The collapse of a science that predicted “monstrosity” at the edges of a world centered on Jerusalem did not purge geography of that science’s residual effects, and this was particularly (although not exclusively) true in regions where observations were out of date, sketchy, or unavailable in the forms recognized by geographers. The travels across Asia of the Franciscan friar John de Plano Carpini (1245–47) had provided several centuries
of European geographers with firsthand observations of the territories and peoples stretching from Poland as far east as Mongolia; Richard Hakluyt printed the narrative in the second edition of his Principal Navigations (1598–1600).

Plano Carpini (like many other travelers) claimed not to have seen the Asian monstrous races but to have been told of them by "certain clergymen of Russia" at the court of the Mongol Khan. Images based on Plano Carpini’s account can be seen on the world map of Martin Waldseemuller (1516), and two of the Asian races he enumerates are named and located in the authoritative atlases of Gerardus Mercator and Abraham Ortelius. On Mercator’s map of Russia, the Samoyeds, located in the north of Asia, were “real”; the Parossitae, who fed exclusively on the steam from boiling meat, were not (these were derived ultimately from Pliny’s Naturalis Historiae). Closer to home for European audiences, Iceland was described by some geographers as a repository of natural marvels (and of cultural deviance).

Here, absence of contact was not the problem. Iceland came under the crown of Denmark and Norway; it regularly received bishops from the Continent, and Icelandic scholars might be educated in Copenhagen. English fishing ships also regularly visited Iceland, and the West Country housed a significant population of Icelanders. Presumably, learned geographers on the Continent were simply not in communication with populations who were well informed about Icelandic nature and culture and could have corrected assertions that the volcanic Mount Hecla was (or was believed to be) the gateway to hell or that Iceland was so remote as to be unknown to sailors.

Classical history, colonial fantasy, indigenous testimony

Unlike some of the other exotic people embedded in European geographical myth, the Amazons had a place in historical legend and literature as well as in natural history. (See Figure 6.) Narratives of the Trojan War identified the Amazons as one of the allies who came to fight alongside Troy; their homeland was located on the southern shores of the Black Sea, in what is now northeastern Turkey. Later on, as with Prester John, the Amazons proved to be easily detached from their geographical and historical origins. Leo Africanus located them in Central Africa, but another and very important tradition – passing through romance into geography – found them in the New World. The conjecture of New World Amazons dates back almost to the origins of Spanish contact with the Caribbean. Both Columbus and Cortés spoke of Amazon islands that they hoped, given time, to discover and explore fully; the place name “California” remains as a residue of one such search. Sir Walter Raleigh, whose explorations of the Orinoco basin were strongly informed by Spanish testimonies about the region, believed the Amazons would be found farther inland from the coast of present-day Guiana.

Amazons were culturally rather than physiologically exotic: being an Amazon was a practice, not a condition. That practice consisted of several basic features: membership in a polity ruled by women and excluding men; the practice of arms, especially archery, for purposes of both war and hunting; and, occasionally, removal of the right breast to facilitate archery. (Thus Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons, is described as Oberon’s “buskined mistress and … warrior love” [MND 2.1.71]: she is wearing boots for hunting.)

The Amazons of the New World were, to a significant extent, colonial fantasy. Their existence consoled with expectations that exotic peoples would be found at these new geographical margins and that the cultural norms governing European civilization might be either absent or inverted in the Americas. As women who lived without men, they were also readily incorporated into a system of metaphors that imagined American land itself as feminine, a functionally uninhabited “virgin land” ripe for the consummation of European presence. (One exception to this gendered discourse about the Americas was Newfoundland: Europeans frequented the island and its fishing banks as early as the 1480s but never seemed to imagine it in the erotic terms made famous by John Donne’s Elegy XIX to his mistress as “my America, my new found land.”)

Imagining the Americas as female, or as inhabited by women without men, had an obvious functionality for colonial thinkers. Such metaphors made indigenous men in particular invisible, and implied that other men were required to husband the land, governing it and making it fertile. Yet such fantasies are not the whole story. Recent scholarship has suggested that in the New World, colonial fantasy was at least partially enabled by indigenous testimonies about the strange peoples – Amazons and men without heads among them – living “over there.” Problems of translation and projection notwithstanding, such myths seem to have had a life of their own, independent of European tradition.

The editor Samuel Purchas, an Amazon skeptic, commented that none of the travelers reporting the presence of Amazons claimed actually to have made contact with them, and suggested that they were probably hearing about what were simply “warlike wives.” The mythic name eventually settled in a geographical location so that, by 1590, Edmund Spenser could invoke “the Amazon’s huge river” as a known place in the proem to Book 2 of The Faerie Queene.

The cannibal imagined and observed

Despite the failure of European travelers ever to lay eyes on an Amazon, European engravers were quick to produce images of what had not been seen. The presence of
cannibals was posited from the very beginning of the European encounter with the Americas in the 1490s. They were represented even more frequently than Amazons in depictions of the New World, and indeed, the image of a half-naked people nibbling on human arms or legs while other limbs roasted on a grill nearby became an important visual signifier of the Americas. Being a cannibal, like being an Amazon, was a cultural practice rather than a state. And yet – as a practice – cannibalism also was taken to indicate an underlying state of ferocity or depravity. Thus, the term might be used simply to indicate ferocity in general: as in Queen Margaret’s denunciation of her son’s murderers as “bloody cannibals” (3H6 5.5.61) or, in a more comic vein, the Host’s warning to Simple that Falstaff will “speak like an Anthropophaginian” if disturbed (Wiv. 4.5.7).

The state underlying habitual cannibalism might be natural: Jean de Léry would argue that the Brazilian Tupinamba had simply been abandoned by God to their own human faculties. It might also have an inflection of supernatural evil. Thus, one thirteenth-century text excerpted by Hakluyt describes the invading Mongols, “Antichrist his complices,” as cannibals for whom the breasts of strangled virgins were a particular delicacy (Hakluyt 1: 51). Other late medieval texts and maps conflated the Mongols with a tradition concerning the apocalyptic destroyers, Gog and Magog. This tradition was rooted in Ezekiel’s prophecy that, in the “latter days,” Gog from the land of Magog would “come from thy land in the north parts … against my people of Israel” (Ezekiel 38:15–16). In the Book of Revelation, Gog and (a now personified) Magog had come to be associated with the supernatural forces gathered in end times: “And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, And shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four quarters of the earth, and Magog, to gather them together to battle” (Revelation 20:7–8). On the thirteenth-century Ebstorff map, Gog and Magog were located in the northern parts of Asia, as cannibals who “nourish themselves with the flesh of humans and drink blood” (“gog et magog quos comites habebit antichristus. hii humanis carnibus vescuntur et sanguinem bibunt”) (Gow 72). Marco Polo had suggested that the names “Gog” and “Magog” were versions of “Ung” and “Mongul,” and this association of the Mongols with Gog and Magog can be found on maps as late as the revised Mercator atlas of 1636.

The cluster of geographical, biblical, cosmographic, and ethnographic associations that placed the cannibalistic “Mongul als Magog” at the far margins of the Asian continent suggests, again, the persistence of a cosmographic science that associated extreme climates with aberrations in nature. The same residual set of ideas also located cannibalism in equatorial Africa: for example, opposite Madagascar on Martin Waldseemüller’s 1507 world map can be found the legend “Antropophagi etiopes.” It surely also predisposed Columbus to believe that he would find cannibals when he made landfall in the Caribbean, somewhere between the Tropic of Cancer and the equator. To these traditions and projections about cannibalism, however, would soon be added another discourse based on close and personal observation.

The Calvinist minister Jean de Léry and the German Hans Staden both had a sustained experience with the Tupinamba, a Brazilian tribe that did in fact practice ritual cannibalism: the first lived with them as a guest, the second as a captive. Each wrote an account of their experiences and observations that went into multiple print editions in the second half of the sixteenth century (and beyond); both texts and their associated images received further dissemination as the third and fourth volumes, respectively, of Theodor de Bry’s series of illustrated voyages, India Occidentialis. Léry’s narrative and a third account by the cosmographer André Thevet were important (if uncited) sources for the largely positive depiction of the Tupi in Michel de Montaigne’s essay “Of the Cannibals.” This essay, in turn, became the source for Gonzalo’s description of his imagined polity in The Tempest, a land with “no use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil” (Temp. 2.1.151).

An Indies “reserved for the English”? Not all geographic myths were ethnographic. The parallel to Amazons always farther up the river was the legendary city, or other marvel, always “further up and further in.” The discovery of populous, rich, and sophisticated cities in Mexico and Peru enabled the hope or belief that other rich cities awaited the efforts of another Cortés or another Pizarro. Sir Walter Raleigh’s Discoverie of Guiana rests on the belief that inland Guiana held such a city, which the English might find where the Spanish had failed. Similarly, hopes persisted through the latter half of the sixteenth century that, just as Spain and Portugal had discovered sea routes to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope or via Panama, another such route was reserved for the English in the north.

The Northwest Passage and Northeast Passage were not myths so much as hopes as yet not firmly connected to geographical knowledge. Yet the concentration on the North Atlantic and the polar regions that accompanied these persistent hopes encouraged the circulation of legendary and speculative geographical information about the north as well as the reproduction of other information whose contours had altered significantly in transmission. In the same way, rumors about Prester John’s defeat of a pagan army probably reflected “the distorted outlines of an authentic historical event,” the defeat of the Persian sultan Sanjar by the Khan of the Kara-Khitai at Samarkand in 1141 (Silverberg 11, 15).

Raleigh’s El Dorado provides a prime example of the way actual geographies might be transformed into myth under the combined pressures of multiple translations and general desire. Raleigh had heard from a Spanish source
about an indigenous king known as “El Dorado” (the golden one), who ruled over Manoa, a city very rich in gold that had been founded by refugees from the Inca royal family after the Spanish conquest of Peru. The city was located on a large lake in the hinterlands of Guiana. Manuscript maps based on information from Raleigh’s expeditions of 1595–96 represent an enormous “Lake Parimá” up the Essequibo River and south of the Orinoco, in a region the English had not yet penetrated (Woodward 3: 2, Plate 73, Figure 59.8). The idea of this lake appears to have come from indigenous reports about the “annual flooding of the savannahs of the Rupununi [River] near lake Amuku,” during which elites engaged in a seasonal gold trade (Lorimer 371n4). Without ever having been found, the group of ideas under the heading of “El Dorado” simply became a place, and it can be found as a place-name in Guiana on the Jodocus Hondius globe of 1600.

Polar distortions

Some geographic myths were not produced by the transmission or mistransmission of information from other times and other languages but were an artifact of scientific theory. Some earlier maps had represented a “closed sea” north of Europe, with (for instance) Greenland as a peninsula projecting north and west from Russia; but an idea of the known continents as large islands was gaining ground. One conjecture depicted the pole itself as being surrounded by four islands, an idea visible on Martin Behaim’s globe, the world map of Abraham Ortelius (1586), and Mercator’s world map of 1569 as well as (in an expanded version) the revised atlas of 1595. (Both Ortelius and Mercator placed pygmies on one of the hypothetical polar islands, although Mercator noted that these were also called “Skraelings,” the Norse term for the Inuit.) If Asia and America were islands surrounded by water, and the pole itself was an archipelago rather than solid land, new and undiscovered sea routes in the north became theoretically possible.

Early modern cosmographers such as Robert Record and William Cunningham could predict conditions of light in the polar regions: how long a day would be at a given time of the year, at what angle a shadow would fall. Yet the science of late sixteenth-century England was not yet able to understand the climactic conditions that would be produced in high northern latitudes by their unusually long winter night and long midsummer day. As experienced an Arctic navigator as John Davis could still argue that it was theologically and scientifically impossible for polar waters to remain frozen year-round, and that indeed inhabitants of these regions enjoyed “the life, light, and comfort of nature in a higher measure than all the nations of the earth” (Davis C5r). He and others envisioned an open sea at the pole, with pleasant sailing in the warm temperatures of a midnight sun. The fantasy of a polar sea that could not freeze made a short sailing route over the pole to China and the East Indies seem to some theorists like an obvious choice for an England already placed so far north in the Atlantic. In 1600, the East India Company was still considering the merits of this polar route, proposed by Robert Thorne early in the century and by John Davis toward its end; Henry Hudson’s first recorded voyage, in 1607, was intended to discover a passage to Japan and China via the North Pole.

Imaginary islands

At the first performance of The Tempest, in 1611, the Bermudas or “Isles of Devils” may have plausibly been “still vexed” by the witches and devils believed to cause the storms for which they were known (Temp. 1.2.229).

Soon, however, they hosted an English colony, becoming considerably less fantastic and more mundane, at least to those who lived there. As one of the characters in Thomas Middleton and John Webster’s Anything for a Quiet Life said of Bermuda: “now – th’enchantment broke – ’tis the land of peace, / Where hogs and tobacco yield fair increase” (5.2.94–95).

Other fantastic islands remained so, however. The circumpolar islands represented by Mercator, Ortelius, and others were only some of the imagined islands that could be found on early modern maps. These included Antillia, Brasil, Frisland, Estotiland, Grocland, St. Brendan’s Isle, and the Island of Seven Cities, to give only a few of the better-known examples. Some of these names eventually became attached to actual islands and territories: the mid-Atlantic island of Antillia became the Caribbean Antilles, and the legendary island of Brasil, shown on one chart just south of Greenland, eventually named the vast region of the Americas claimed by Portugal after the landing there of Pedro Alvares Cabral in 1500 (Seaver 212–13).

How did cartographers and mariners come to imagine islands where none existed? In Shakespeare’s century at least, imaginary islands were probably an artifact of several conditions. Most sailors in the sixteenth century navigated by dead reckoning from their point of departure, without a reliable means of determining either an absolute latitude (east–west position) or any kind of longitude (north–south position). Add in mists, mirages, problems of instrumentation, and the variation of the compass, and a coastline glimpsed unexpectedly might be recorded as an island to which one or the other traditional name could be attached. These observational difficulties probably account for some of the legendary North Atlantic islands regularly shown on sixteenth-century maps.

Apocryphal accounts like the alleged voyage of the Zeno brothers to Estotiland and Drogio (reprinted by Hakluyt) may record contacts with Greenland or Labrador – albeit with considerable embellishment. Similarly, the story of Arctic islands inhabited...
by Arthurian colonists that passed to Hakluyt from Mercator and John Dee may derive ultimately from contacts between Bergen and the Norse settlement in western Greenland (Hakluyt 1: 302–03; Seaver).

Later and better-documented voyages of exploration, such as those by Martin Frobisher in the late 1570s, certainly contributed imaginary islands to the cartographic record. For larger landmasses, perceptual problems and certainly contributed imaginary islands to the cartographic such as those by Martin Frobisher in the late 1570s, certainly contributed imaginary islands to the cartographic record. For larger landmasses, perceptual problems and difficulties in fixing position only added to the effects of extrapolating, sometimes with wild inaccuracy, from scanty observational data (a particular problem for Greenland). George Best’s 1578 map of the Frobisher discoveries shows Baffin Island (which extends across more than ten degrees of longitude) as an archipelago of scattered, smaller islands. In a similar fashion, as late as 1597, the large island of Newfoundland was represented on maps not as a single landmass with a continuous, deeply indented coastline but as a group of islands (Quinn). In the first case, envisioning the northern fringes of the Americas as an easily penetrable group of islands surely enabled the imagination of a passage through the northwest and, as Best’s legend puts it, “trendin[g] to Cathaia”; in the case of Newfoundland, inattention to the hinterland of a region frequented principally for its marine resources was probably to blame. In the Antipodes, the situation was reversed: the northern coast of the island of New Guinea was sometimes represented as the farthest extension of a large Antarctic continent, “Terra Australis Incognita.”

**4. Climate**

*Mike Hulme*

*Do so conjointly meet, let not men say,*
*“These are their reasons, they are natural,”*
*For I believe they are portentous things*
*Unto the climate that they point upon.  
(JC 1.3.28–32)*

The idea of climate has always been useful for explaining things. For classical Greeks, climate helped to explain – and hence justify – Greek cultural superiority: it was they who inhabited the optimal temperate zone between the unwelcoming frigid and torrid climates of the uncivilized north and south. For many a modern mind, too, climate has been invoked to explain differences in civic cultures, moral sensibilities, and human intelligence. For example, in the early twentieth century, many scholars were convinced that the humid climates of the tropics caused a lack of vigor in African cultures (Huntington; Livingstone). And, most recently, putative changes in future climate – brought about, we are assured, by human actions – are asserted to be the causes of future wars, famines, plagues, and mass migrations (Hulme, “Climate”).

In late sixteenth-century England, climate was also a signifier – but of portentous events, human moral failure, and judgments of the divine will. So in the epigraph that opened this chapter, from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, the