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THE IDEA OF MAP AND THE MAPS OF OLAUS MAGNUS

Let me now admit to an advanced case of cartophilia. I have loved maps ever since I was a child, probably because they were symbols for the exotic places they represented, symbols which became in my mind more than just representations of those places. They fed my fancies of elsewhere, everywhere that I wasn't.

Quite early I learned to read a map, in that traditional sense of using it to discover how I could move from where I was to where I wished to be. Aided by a reasonably good sense of direction, I learned that a map was a tool which could lead me away from where I was.

I also learned that maps could possess an intrinsic charm. I remember being fascinated by the first papier-mâché relief map I ever saw, whose real bumps and dips allowed my fingers a phrenological sense of the world's mountains and valleys of which Northern Indiana, my childhood home, was so ill-possessed. It mattered not that over the years childish hands had reduced the proportional height of the Himalayas by several thousand feet nor that an unfortunate bump had put an hitherto undiscovered mountain into the floor of the Sahara Desert. Here was a sense of the vastness, if not quite the grandeur, of the earth.

That vastness can become rather scary when the road one wants becomes the "road not taken" because the cartographer's notion of just what a road is does not correspond to one's own. The ruts that faced me a few years ago in Norfolk (England) certainly did not justify in my mind the appellation of "road", much less the red ink that defined them as such on paper. Being lost in an English wheatfield, however pastoral, does much to lessen the "intrinsic charm" of a map. In fact, it suggests certain criteria for assessing the value of a map and even, the very idea of a map.

It seems to be the central function of a map to keep one from getting lost or, positively, to help one arrive where one wishes. This use of a map is, at best, neutral, at worst, misleading. The better the map is, the more accurately it will represent what lies between oneself and one's objective. It is important to note that this representation is intentional: that is to say, it

acquires meaning only when we understand what it is we are looking for. Our intention – to find where we are, to find where we wish to go, how to get there, what’s there, and what’s between us and it – our intention shapes our understanding of the map before us. This didactic function of any map is conditional, then, upon *its* accuracy and *our* intention.

It is reasonable to observe as a consequence of this that a good map is a guide to where someone else has been. The space has been seen – on foot, from a car, an airplane, a satellite – it exists in some objective sense. A good map is essentially historical in substance. It is a document in the past tense, out of date the moment it is drawn. Is there anything so frustrating as last year’s book of road maps? Or this year’s, for that matter, where, acknowledging the vast increase of concrete over farmland, the standard American road atlas has reduced the size of its state maps (and thereby their delineation of secondary roads) to accommodate greater numbers of city maps. The historical dimension to a map is important insofar as it affirms the existence of place. It is likely, for instance, that our own “Weg der Verenigde Naties” will crumble and disappear on its own long before cartographers admit that fact. My favorite roadsign is in Ohio, between Lima and Columbus. It states, simply, that one is travelling on “Abandoned State Road 149”. Such a concern for historical accuracy is also central to the nature of a good map.

These two aspects, then, the historical and the intentional, are close to the core of the idea of map, an idea whose potential is made manifest through cartographic accuracy. It is clear that we need, even prize, accurate maps. It is also possible that as the accuracy of a map increases and, thus, the exactitude with which it defines what lies before us, that that very precision also restricts us. To define is to restrict. One cannot get There, if There does not exist.

A good map, then, limits exploration: we do not explore what we already know. In summarizing for us the historical situation, a good map simultaneously limits possibility. It is true that most of us have not been on *this* road or *that* mountain, and this is so in part, I suggest, because we know the road and the mountain exist: they are on our map. But it is also true that most of us are not explorers. We grumble mightily at the detours: we admire the scenery at a hundred ten kilometers an hour: we sample the terrain in “camp sites” and gripe affrontedly when the showers don’t deliver quite as advertised.

There is a relationship between a good map and our plasticized society. The knowledge that shortly ahead lies a major road crossing is assurance that there is also food, lodging, and, in some American states, a gun shop. A good map, thus, shapes our expectations. The proverbial vigilance of the nineteenth century riverboat pilots we read about in Mark Twain, for instance, whose very name attests the fact, was due entirely to the errancy of their maps of the channel. So shifty was that channel that the pilot who relied solely on his map was sure to strand his boat, at the least, or tear the bottom from it, at the worst. Our intention in consulting a map is often only to learn the most superlative way of getting somewhere – the fastest, the prettiest, the shortest, the slowest. It is clear by now that there is a functional relationship between maps and speed. We are often concerned with avoiding the least efficient route, usually thought of as the least direct. I would suppose it fair to say that for most of us, a map symbolizes the urgency in our lives. This is true even metaphorically, as well. We "map out our lives", we look for a "guide" to success (beauty, health, sex, you name it), we "chart our course" on the "pathway of life". The metaphor permeates our Western conceptions of purpose and suggests the manner in which we unite history (the past) with the future. If you want to know how to get There, ask directions from someone who's been There. This approach seems at once so reasonable and, even, so logical that we scarcely give it any thought. It is an automatic action. A good map will get you There, if There exists and if There is where you want to go.

If my construction of the idea of map is right, then there are situations, such as those I have tried to describe, when a good map can be a very bad map indeed, because a good map can be wrong. In fact, I should think it were technically impossible for a map to be anything but wrong, in the sense that it cannot be absolutely correct; and to the extent that we believe that the map we are consulting is a just representation and our reliance upon it proper, so great is the possibility that we shall go astray. The map can never *be* the thing it represents and hence, will always be philosophically incomplete, as well.¹

¹In the parody, 'Naturalism Revived', from Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy-Casares, *Chronicles of Bustos Domecq*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: Dutton, 1979), p. 43, Borges postulates the passion of a mapmaker to make the perfect map, on a scale of 1:1.

This is not necessarily cause for dismay. In fact, I believe that to the extent that a map can be wrong, so great is the possibility for discovery. Consider, then if you will, a case for the virtues of bad maps.

A bad map allows us freedom of movement, freedom of choice. If you can't get There because you don't know where There is, or what it is, or even if it exists, your direction is not prescribed. The very unreliability of a bad map causes us to see the world differently. It demands of us complete attention to our journey. We must see and understand anew what we previously took for granted. Thus did those Mississippi River pilots, knowing the capriciousness of the channel and the incomplete perceptions of it afforded by their charts, keep a wary eye on the river-road itself for signs of danger, constantly re-interpreting what they saw around them. Mark Twain speaks of this river-eye as the trait that would make or break a pilot. This knowledge that the map was inaccurate or incomplete, which compelled a pilot to devote himself to assessing what he saw and sensed about his journey, had a profound impact on the pilot's view of the road travelled. This I take to be the practical effect or use of a bad map. It necessarily heightens our awareness of the world around us. Ideally, it calls into question our perceptions of the space in which we move.

Insofar as a map is an historical statement, those elegant, cartographic monuments from the great age of exploration are bad maps. They are patently incorrect and appallingly incomplete. One cannot easily get from Here to There with them as a guide. Those monster-filled seas, those swirling voids, those boundaries trailing off into nothingness proclaimed the map's very uselessness and emphasized its ahistoricity.

But those charts had a different function, one that modern cartographers have forced us to ignore, save where they cannot affect the matter. Those bad maps were visionary. They were fictions, aimed at teasing the imagination, providing an assurance of things to come sustained only by the excitement of not knowing what that was. They were liberating documents, freeing their users to construct new worlds. It is, perhaps, a truism by now that America was invented long before it was discovered. Is it not somehow symbolic of our age that its maps are such loveless things, of blue cybernetic perfection and tedious detail? Is it any wonder that the old maps were, and are, exciting to contemplate, daring the imagination to fill in the empty spaces, to find new dents in the shore? Those old, bad,

maps were incitement to wonder, a puzzle to the mind, demanding solution.

Because the perceived world is finite, to "go astray" is only a relative statement about going off the map. We cannot in any real sense "get lost", but going off the map allows us to reconstrue the world we are in. This I take to be the function of art, the metaphorical effect or use of a bad map.

I wonder if you haven't had a similar experience to mine in elementary school, when my best friend and I invented a country. It was an island, of course, as it was bound to be to those growing up in the relatively flat, land-locked Midwest, and it had a jagged coastline, not at all like the sand-smooth shore of Lake Michigan. As the co-sovereign of this piece of superaquatic real estate, I got to draw the maps, the boundaries, and the topography. Our essentially utopian ideals required the perfect landscape and profile, which was the subject of much consideration between us. This led, however, to the joy of redrawing the perimeter, only we called it making a new discovery. It was a game, of course, and probably went on too long, but our real world having been fully mapped (in part as the result of a dreadful war), it was reasonable that we should seek new shorelines. It was surely significant, however, that our country deliberately had an unknown region, an uncharted sector of tantalizing speculation. We had deliberately, even necessarily, created a bad map. Yet, even in bad maps, the notion of intentionality is important. In that the map represented what we needed, instead of what merely was, it was a good map. It was the intention of the users that shaped the map, not the reverse. The same was, and is, true of those elaborate medieval and renaissance maps with which new dents were put in the coastlines of the world. A bad map can be a good map. It may so prick the imagination that it is all but impossible to remain where one is. Can there be much doubt that it was the incompleteness of our maps that sent people to the moon, much as maps of the Atlantic with empty left-hand margins tempted explorers to put something there? It is, if you will, a way of testing the validity of the map, a way of changing its tense from future to past, of reducing potential chaos to potential order, of showing others the safe or short or sure road. Each new delineation, however necessary, desirable, or useful in some scheme, foreshortens our imagination in another. The possible becomes realized, but in only one way because of the authority we assign to the fact of a map.

It is in the stimulation of a plurality of possibilities that a bad map becomes a cherished tool of enquiry.

The maps about which I wish to speak are associated with a specific book, the *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* of Olaus Magnus, published in Rome in 1555, an ethnographic work about Scandinavia, richly illustrated. The research was undertaken by Olaus Magnus in 1518-19 at the request of the papal legate to Sweden as a sort of ecclesiastical inventory of the realm, especially the very North, with a view to assessing the strength of the Church there. It became much more than that, in the end for, in its way, it is a kind of Swedish version of the English Domesday Book (1070-85). The *fact* of putting a map in this book shows some scientific sense to the whole work of which it is a part. That the book is in Latin is only natural, not because it was published in Rome, but because it addresses itself to scholars of all nations. Indeed, if printed in Swedish, it would have found almost no readers at all.

Of the book to which the map is the introduction, much has been written.² It is, as far as I know, unique in its time as a scientific study of the natural and ethnological history of a remote area. It attempts to record empirical observation of places and customs, and its reliance on folk explanations is correspondingly minimal, though not absent.

²For the historical information here, I am indebted to John Granlund, whose "Introduction" to the facsimile published by Rosenkilde and Bagger in Copenhagen in 1972 is invaluable.

*III. 1: Map of Scandinavia from the *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* of Olaus Magnus, published in Rome in 1555.*

Its model seems to be Pliny's *Historia naturalis*. Most of its 772 chapters discuss one subject and are illustrated by their own, usually unique, woodcuts. Interestingly enough, of the 481 woodcuts used for illustration, only 12 are duplicated, once each, in the text and many are clearly purpose-made from what we assume to have been Olaus' own drawings done at the time of his visit. This is impressive in view of the fact that most books of the time were illustrated with stock prints frequently repeated

through the book. Most useful of all, the book has an extensive *Index rerum*, keyed to the marginal notes with which the main text is generously supplied.

Of the map itself, there are a number of observations to be made. First, and most importantly, though the proportions are wrong and there are some placement problems, the map is reasonably accurate. It shows the use of measures of latitude and longitude (though these are not accurate in modern terms) and has *most* of the provinces of Sweden correctly named and placed, as well as the coastal provinces of Finland and Norway, with no useable indications of these for Denmark. The positions of Uppsala and Stockholm (*Holmia*) are incorrect, and Copenhagen is ignored. The only other city named in Scandinavia is Nidaros (modern Trondheim) in Norway, an important religious capital from mediæval times and one with which the archdiocese of Uppsala had considerable relations and with which it shared ecclesiastical governance of Härjedalen in Sweden and Jämtland (the latter then a part of Norway). Other cities indicated by name (Riga, in modern Latvia, Memel [Klaipeda], in Lithuania, and [just possibly] Moscow, though that word might stand for Muscovy, the territory) are exceptions, suggesting their importance to Sweden. As an ethnographic work about Sweden, that country, together with Finland, is the central interest of the map. Though the map is nationalistic, the sense of boundary is weak, perhaps unconsciously reflecting the often fluid borders within Scandinavia, as well as suggesting to the Church what it had lost in its fumbling in the North.

There is water everywhere, but the breadth of the rivers may be due to several factors, the technical inabilities of the woodcutter or the need to suggest easy access to the interior of the country. The sense of proportion between the various lakes is not understood, nor is the proper orientation of the Gulf of Finland. Most startling is the absence of the Oslo Fjord. The water has abundant fish and many boats of commerce, and the fish are more kindly disposed in the Baltic than in the Atlantic. Indeed, their very faces grow harsher the more north one travels. It is possible that, on this map, the monster eating the boat off Iceland represents the great Maelstrom off the coast of Norway. Though iconographically the fish may represent all this, it is likely that they are in no little sense decoration, too, for mapmakers, like nature, abhor vacuums. It is reasonable to see the decoration as carry-overs from mediæval cartography, though it is

interesting that there seems to be a balance here between monsters/paganism on the one hand and churches/Christianity on the other. This is surely due in part to the propaganda purposes of the map and book it illustrates.

Surface features are fairly banally represented. There are indications of trees and mountains, but, significantly, there are no trees on Iceland in this map and the mountains there are all shown as active volcanos. The ring around misplaced Uppsala possibly represents the Viking

*III. 2. Emblem from the *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*.*

mounds at Old Uppsala, but the squares, three dots, and diamonds are, apparently, indications of minerals and ores. The Midnight Sun appears as an important cultural fact in the far North.

Importantly, this map (and the final form of the book) was, in the end, made for non-Scandinavians, probably to get them interested in the North, perhaps to get Olaus Magnus his old job back. (Approving Olaus' brother, Johannes, to be the new archbishop in Uppsala, in an attempt to be off

with the traitorous Gustaf Trolle, Gustav Vasa sent Johannes, accompanied by his brother as secretary, to Rome for consecration, an act too-long withheld, though eventually granted. Though Olaus was frequently importuned to return, neither brother ever saw Sweden again and the Pope's refusal to replace Trolle in time lost Sweden-Finland to the Reformation.) Whatever its original purpose, the book and its map clearly came to represent a sort of commercial advertisement for Scandinavia, especially for Sweden-Finland. There is a certain local pride in Olaus Magnus' narrative of the habits and customs of the peoples of the North. It is also reasonable to assume that, in some sense, he had it published as a record of his life's greatest achievement.

By the time it appeared, the *Historia* was of little practical use to its original sponsors. However, the book, and its map, was an important contribution to scientific knowledge of the time. Its study was honestly carried out according to the standards of the day, standards that, with some judicious reading, hold up today. Furthermore, it marks the first sustained attempt at a synoptic view of Scandinavia, not excepting the writing of Saxo Grammaticus and Adam of Bremen.

But what, then, do we make of this map today? Does it lead us into directions that are provocative or suggestive for us, apart from their original intention? Of what *use*, in fact, is this map? Of what use was it ever?

It is, of course, perhaps first of all, an artefact. It has an existence in itself and within the book of which it is a part. It stands as a kind of frontispiece to the book, and its large size proclaims the importance of the subject which follows. As an artefact which happens to be a map, however, it is of little practical use for getting anywhere. We would certainly not expect to use it as a guide for our travel, nor, clearly, was it intended as such. It is, in fact, deliberately inaccurate in several crucial details, the most obvious of which is the placement of Uppsala, whose just location Olaus Magnus surely knew. Attention is even called to this placement with the black marks around it. This deliberate distortion suggests that there is a "rhetoric" in the arrangement of features which overlays the apparent purpose of any map – the just representation of the location of identifying features. It seems inescapable, here, that the "rhetoric" of this misplacement is intended to demonstrate visually to the user the centrality of Uppsala, and its cathedral (and, by extension, its archbishop, whose title,

incidentally, Olaus eventually received after his brother), to Swedish life, indeed, to the life of Scandinavia, for it is virtually in the very center of the whole map. Indeed, Sweden itself, is the dominant land-mass in the map, whose representation of Denmark, for instance, is clearly peripheral.

The chief purpose of this map as artefact, then, is its suggestibility and its provocation to curiosity. The *Historia* is not a "history" in the modern sense of that word, nor is it, strictly speaking, a narrative, at all. Rather, it is a contemporary exploration of Sweden-Finland, and especially its northern reaches, for a specific purpose – the understanding of the religious situation there in the early 16th century. That it far-exceeded this purpose is due entirely to the persistent curiosity of Olaus Magnus.

The map, however, is a representation of something more. It is a condensed version of Olaus Magnus' own magnificent *Carta marina* of 1539, said to have been the largest map published in its time. The *Carta marina* is about ten times larger than the map in the *Historia*. It is, in fact, usually thought that the book is intended as the promised Commentary on the *Carta marina*.

We are in an age that relies on maps. Indeed, it is one that eagerly seeks them out whatever their merits and yet, makes so little attempt to evaluate them. It seems important whenever we make decisions that they be made in consultation with a map. Wars are fought with and about maps and we have adopted that war-language for many common metaphors – we speak of strategies and game-plans or, taking speech from that other kind of map, the play, we fit things into scenarios. Is it any wonder that we are so shocked when the drifting of events fails to conform to our charts? Our good maps have turned out to be bad maps.

This same attitude is even more strongly seen in our approach to education. Schools and universities are absolutely fixated on master plans, lesson plans, course outlines, goal-directed learning, programmed learning, career orientation, structured this and that – it's a wonder any original ideas peep through the paper thicket at all.

III. 3. Emblem from the Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus.

A good map is a bad map whenever it suggests that there is but one possibility. It is but small exaggeration to say that nothing has ever been discovered by using a map: much has been uncovered to the side of the route chosen. A bad map that is a good map will allow many journeys from Here to There, even if There does not exist. Such a map will even allow for the possibility that There does not exist, because it is not, in the end, the quality of the map that is important, but the quality of the journey.