

USING MAPS

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Most college-level textbooks contain numerous maps related to key historical events – westward expansion; sectional tensions; population changes; war. Such maps are useful to students, especially for those individuals unfamiliar with the way historical boundaries between states and nations change over time. Still, left alone, maps are largely passive reference points. The following exercises encourage students to actively engage with maps and to transform their understanding of primary and secondary sources through transformative mapping.

1. Maps as Primary Sources

While most students are used to examining maps to glean basic geographic knowledge, historical maps contain a wealth of other information about cartography, politics, and the society within which a map was made and used. For example:

a) Project the following map of the world – created by Martin Waldesmüller in 1507, based on the voyages of Amerigo Vespucci – onto a screen or whiteboard:





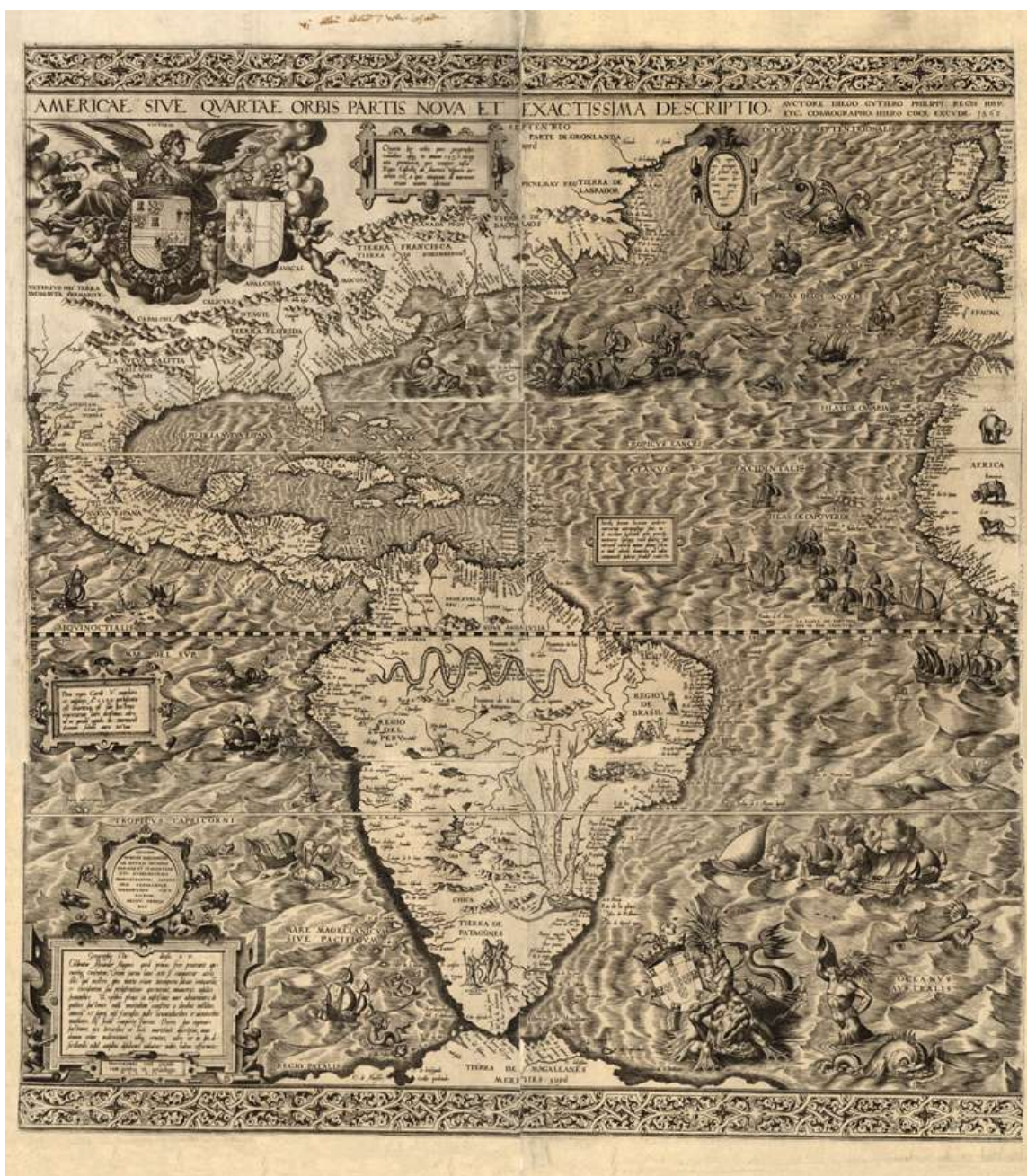
b) Have students list everything they can see – familiar land masses, human figures, oceans, names, and decorative elements.

c) Ask students to hypothesize as to why things look different from the way they might appear on a contemporary global map. Think about who made the piece, whose voyages informed the cartography, and what the nationalities of those two figures might mean for the way the visual information on the map was shaped. Consider the orientation of the world – with the Middle East in the center of the map – and why that would be a cartographer's choice in 1507. Try and figure out which parts of the North and South American continents appear to the left of the map, and what that suggests about European understandings of the western hemisphere.

Depending on the amount of time you have to process this map in class, you might want to give students some answers after a short discussion. If you have the opportunity, however, it's always productive to make students the architects of their own learning, and ask them to do research to find the answers. Students can report back on their findings in the next class.

The Wadsmüller map reflects religious belief, geographic knowledge, political influence, trade realities, and cartographic skill. But maps can communicate even more. For example:

a) Project Diego Gutiérrez's 1562 map of the Americas onto your classroom screen or whiteboard (an image of the map is on page 3 ↓)



b) While the difference in geographic knowledge expressed in this map, as compared to Wadsmüller's 1507 map, is striking, concentrate not only on land mass, but also on what appear to be decorative elements:

Close-up images from Diego Gutiérrez's 1562 map of the Americas



monsters



battles



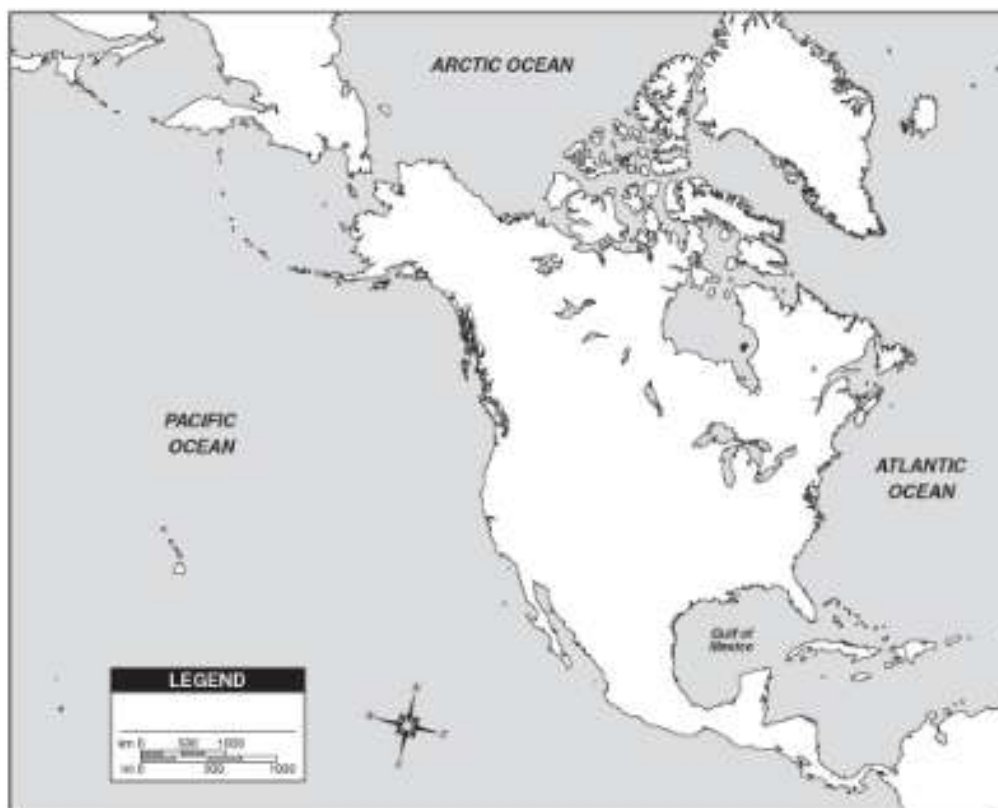
and giants

Discuss with your students what each of these images might represent in terms of the challenges European nations faced in navigating open ocean, colonizing new territories, and fending off competition from rival governments. (It's too easy to dismiss each element as mere fancy – even fanciful images communicate real worries, dangers, and ideas.) Have students imagine – and even draw – what this map might look like if Gutiérrez had sought to capture the perspective of indigenous peoples toward such massive, continental change. Would we see areas peopled by figures with their swords drawn? How would conflict and the ramifications of disease be represented?

2. Maps as Expressions of Prior Knowledge

Students carry with them beliefs about the way the North American continent looks and the geographic processes that have unfolded upon it – but since those beliefs are often the product of the culture that surrounds them, they may not be conscious of how those mental images shape their understanding of place. Asking students to communicate ideas about geography and history on maps can help make cultural knowledge transparent. For example:

a) Take a line drawing of North America that does not show modern state borders, and copy it onto multiple transparencies.



Map available at http://www.eduplace.com/ss/maps/pdf/n_america_nl.pdf



- b) Provide your students with erasable marker pens, and ask them to mark the borders of the American West.
- c) After everyone has marked borders, set the maps one on top of each other on the overhead projector, discussing the differences between maps as you go. Why did different students define the West in different ways? What influenced their decision-making? When do they think 'The West' came into existence? Do the boundaries they drew apply to the contemporary land? Where can they identify learning these ideas?
- d) You can adapt this to different moments and ideas in history – consider doing something similar with the concept of 'North' and 'South' prior to the Civil War, or to show the extent of United States territory at the end of the American Revolution.

3. Maps as Visual Organizers

Maps are a great way to have students transform secondary source information into visual form. For example:

- a) Have your students read about the trade networks that proliferated between North America and other parts of the world in the period 1700-1750.
- b) Provide several line maps of the world. (Line maps are easily located through Google, and you can find multiple orientations of the globe to share with your students.)
- c) Have your students render the information about trade on the maps. How can they use the maps to explain changes in world trade to someone who is unfamiliar with the subject? (This can be done on an individual basis, or as a small group project.)
- d) Discuss the maps – what was challenging? What was easy to express through this visual medium? What are the benefits and drawbacks of visual organization as opposed to textual organization?
- e) Compare the maps to those in the course text(s). Are they similar? Different? Why? Which map is more useful to the students, in their opinion? Ask for their reasoning.