



Europe on late Medieval and early Renaissance world maps: provincializing Europe

By Angelo Cattaneo (Florence)

Abstract

Abraham Ortelius' representation of Europe in the frontispiece of the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (Antwerp, 1570), as well as Cesare Ripa's in his *Iconologia* (Rome, 1593) are very suggestive images.

In the frontispiece of the *Theatrum* the female personifications of the four known parts of the world, Europe, Asia, Africa and America, are facing each other. On a stone pedestal, under the shape of the head of a woman, there is also a conjectural fifth part, the so-called *Terra Magellanica*. The image of Europe, undoubtedly evoking a queen from her attributes and hierarchical position, inaugurates the theme of submission of the other continents that will be largely developed in the following century, as in the elaborate frontispiece of the *Atlas maior* by Joan Blaeu (1662).

Ripa's celebrated *Iconologia* (in full: *Iconologia overo Descrittione dell'imagini universali cavate dall'Antichità et da altri luoghi* — Iconology or Description of universal images derived from antiquity and other places), a highly influential emblem book as well as one of the most successful books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, crucial for the transmission of knowledge through visual communication, displays another famous representation of Europe in the form of a queen. Ripa also provided a detailed explanation of all the attributes of this personification of Europe. As for the crown, this is his explanation: '*She's crowned because she's queen of the world. [...] She holds a small temple in her hand because she holds the most perfect and true religion, and superior to all the others. [...] She holds crowns, sceptres, girdles because here there are the most powerful princes, the Pope, sovereign of the whole Christian world.*'

This identification Europe/Queen originally derives from a woodcut, composed by the Austrian mathematician and poet Johan Putsch and published by Christian Wechel in 1537. Intended to celebrate the empire of Charles V and dedicated to Ferdinand I of Habsburg, its popularity gave rise to a long series of pictures, often in frontispieces of atlases or town books, including late editions of Sebastian Munster's *Cosmographia* or Heinrich Bünting's *Itinerarium Sacrae Scripturae* (1581).

The analysis of this iconographic genre, since the early Renaissance, suggests that from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries the main themes in the iconography of Europe evoke



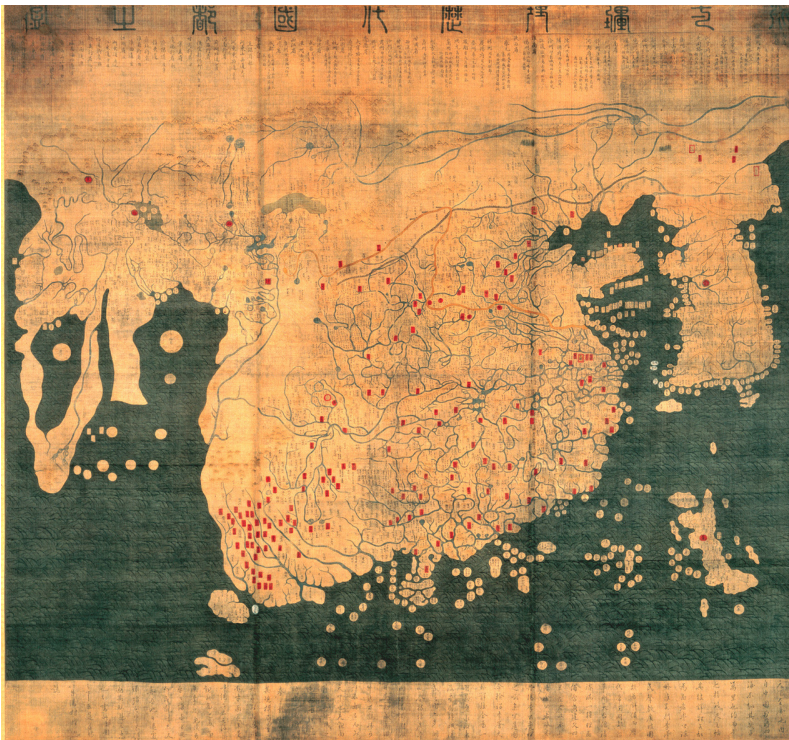
Fra Mauro's *mappamundi* (ca. 1450)



ideas of European superiority and dominion over the rest of the world.

However, going back to the fifteenth century, the comparative study of two monumental maps of the world, in particular of Fra Mauro's *mappamundi* (San Michele di Murano, Venice, ca. 1450) and the *Honil Kangni Yôktae Kukto Chi To Do* (Seoul, ca. 1470 or early sixteenth century, or 'Map of Integrated Lands and Regions of Historical Countries and Capitals'), hereafter referred to as *Kangnido*, invites reconsideration of this conclusion.

Fra Mauro's *mappamundi* is among the most relevant compendia of knowledge of the Earth and the Cosmos of the fifteenth century. The composite networks of contemporary knowledge (scholasticism, humanism, monastic culture, as well as more technical skills such as marine cartography and mercantile practices) converge in the epistemological unity of the *imago mundi*.



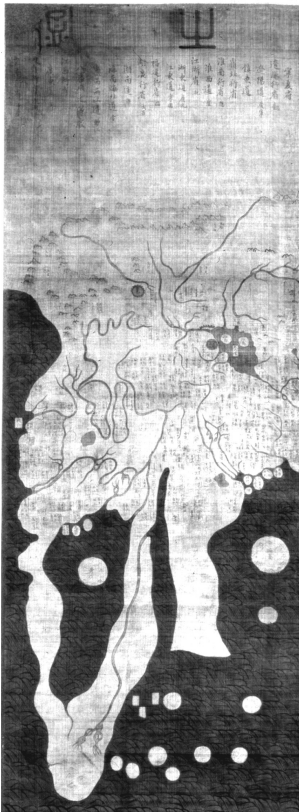
Honil Kangni Yôktae Kukto Chi To Do (Seoul, ca. 1470)

Magnificently depicted on silk, the *Kangnido* was based on a prototype prepared in 1402 under the supervision of two high Korean officials, Yi Hoe and Kim Sahyong, and the Confucian scholar Kwon Kun, as part of a cultural project of the newly founded Joseon Dynasty that ruled Korea from 1392. It shows the general form of the world, from Korea and Japan in the East to the Western part of the *oikumene*, that includes India, Persia, Africa and Europe. It is important to emphasize that the *Kangnido* is the oldest

surviving example of a world map drawn in Asia to depict the Western part of the world as well. According to Kwon Kun's preface, written in the lower part of the *Kangnido*, the map was made by combining and editing two earlier Chinese maps by Li Tse-min (ca. 1330) and Ch'ing Chün (ca. 1370), which are now lost.

The comparison between Fra Mauro's *mappamundi* and the *Kangnido* permits us also to reflect closely on the issue of the fifteenth century cosmographic representation of Europe. Both documents are from the same period; they both looked at the world from a cosmographic point of view, yet from opposite sides; they share a similar understanding of the fifteenth-century world in its general structure, although the relative proportions of the countries and continents are inverted, with Europe and Africa enlarged on the Venetian *mappamundi*, while China and especially Korea are very largely represented in the *Kangnido*. Both had Arabic sources.

When we look at the representations of Europe on these two world maps, the idea of an imagined European superiority and dominion over the rest of the world disappears. A conceptualisation and representation of Europe in both mid-fifteenth



Europe on *Kangnido*

century European culture and Korean-Chinese culture emerges from, and is also based upon, the existence of channels of communication and trade at a global level; the gathering of global information and the world circulation of knowledge and technology were a relevant part of the circulation of material culture from the 13th to the late 17th centuries between Europe and Asia. Alternate influences must have been absorbed through interaction along Asian routes of communication, such as the Silk Road and sea trade routes in the Indian Ocean, with the crucial intervening agency of Islamic traders.

This contribution will also present the romanization of the 210 or so toponyms written in Chinese, constituting the most ancient description of Europe existing on a map made in Asia.

The comparative study of Fra Mauro's *mappamundi* and the *Kangnido* clearly shows that it was absolutely not the case that technologies of space representation, control and trade were monopolised by the West; on the contrary, these documents, among many others, emphasize instead connections between several civilizations in the vast Eurasian continent within a multicentric world: from the Mediterranean, to Persia, Africa, the Indian Ocean. In these fifteenth century documents, Europe therefore emerges as the result of global networks, encompassing trade and

knowledge, with the intervening agencies of several cultures. ◼

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Angelo Cattaneo holds a Ph.D. in History from the European University Institute in Florence. His current research focuses on Medieval and Renaissance cosmography, cartography and travel literature, primarily on both European and Asian cultures and civilizations. His research also includes the study of channels of communication and trade at a global level, the gathering of global information, the world circulation of knowledge and technology as part of the broad theme of the circulation of material culture from the 13th to the late 17th centuries. He has been active publishing, editing, organizing conferences, making presentations at conferences and seminars and curating exhibitions, including *The Making of European Cartography* at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Florence (Florence, Olschki, 2003), and *The World of Giovanni da Verrazzano* (forthcoming, New York – Florence, 2008). He has been awarded research fellowships in Italy, Portugal, Spain, the United Kingdom, the USA, and Korea.



His forthcoming thesis is entitled *Fra Mauro's Mappamundi and Fifteenth-Century Venice* in the series *Terrarum Orbis* of Brepols (June 2008). He is currently a post-doctoral researcher active in Lisbon, Florence and Paris.