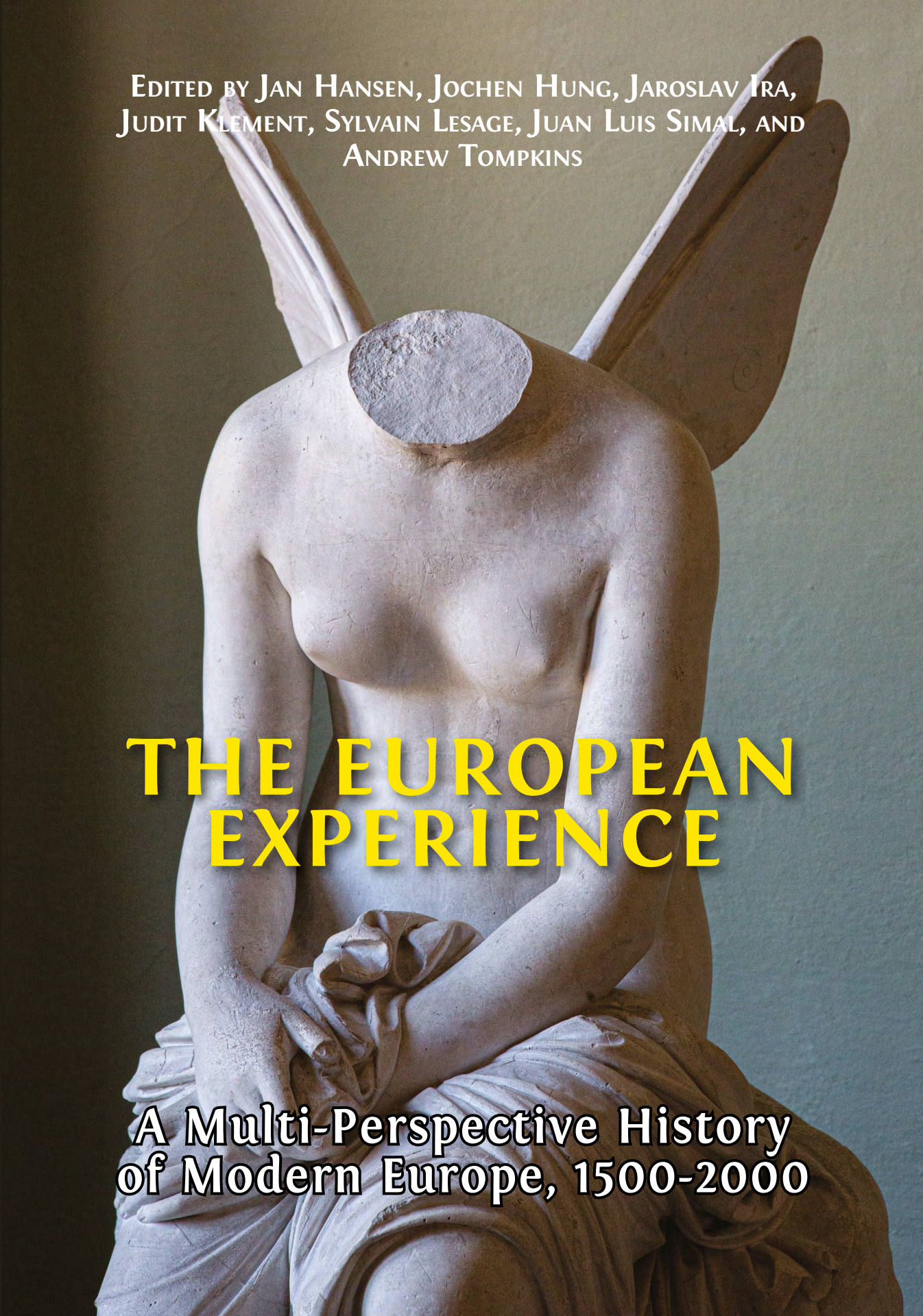
Edited by Jan Hansen, Jochen Hung, Jaroslav Ira, Judit Klement, Sylvain Lesage, Juan Luis Simal, and Andrew Tompkins



The European Experience

A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe, 1500-2000

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1.1.1 Ideas of Europe in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

Péter Erdősi, Markéta Křížová, Dirk van Miert, and Roberto Quirós Rosado

Introduction

The concept of 'Europe', while firmly embedded in everyday images and language, has always been uncertain and imprecise. It has resisted clear-cut definitions, developing through time and acquiring specific meanings in given places and at certain historical moments. But it was during the early modern period that the idea of Europe became more solid and stable in the minds of those inhabiting the region. Acquiring a concrete definition, its inhabitants accepted it as 'real' and objectively existing, being mostly defined from within, rather than from without. Even though comparisons with 'others' are crucial for self-definition, equally important was the conscious and unconscious search for common traits by those who constructed the image—the concept of Europe.

The effort to grasp the supposedly shared essence of Europe was complicated by the fact that it was approached from several different angles. In the following text, three principal ways of conceptualising Europe are briefly outlined: first, Europe as a geographical, social, political, and economic reality; second, Europe as a cognitive order of political, religious, and cultural ideas; and third, Europe as a named entity transmitted and discussed through representation in text and image. To be sure, distinguishing between these different ways of conceptualising Europe does not imply that these aspects can be studied in isolation—they are all intrinsically entangled.

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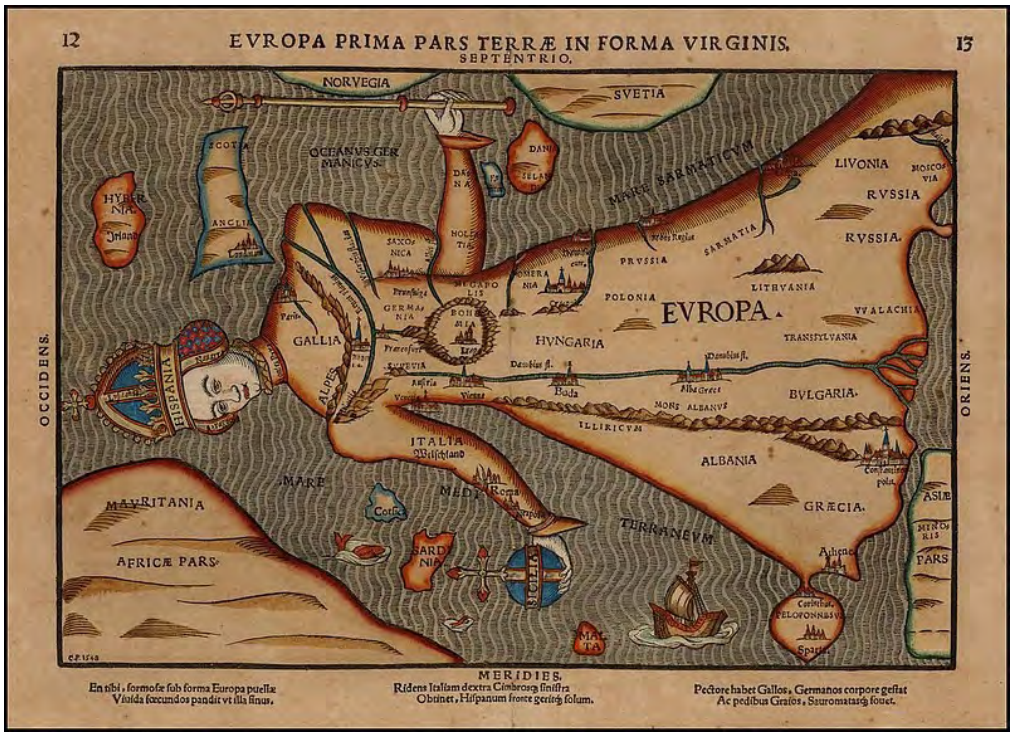
Europe as a Geographical, Social, Political and Economic Reality

As a *reality*, Europe can be seen, in the first place, as a geographical space, defined by material, physical features. But while the northern, western, and southern coastal borders could be drawn easily on a map, the problematic delineation of the eastern limits of Europe confirms the fact that geography alone is not sufficient. Europe was and is a layered complexity: a social reality (a demographic entity), a political entity (with a legislation and a military complex), and an economic trading zone. All of these aspects are determined to a large extent by geography.

However, geography—as well as shared culture and in many cases also political aspirations and/or self-identifications of their inhabitants—not only created the entity of Europe, but in the modern period also split it into sections, such as those labelled Western, Southern, Nordic, Eastern, Central, and even North-West or East-Central. Such designations act as serious categories of analysis in modern thought. A case in point is the shifting boundaries of East-Central Europe in the early modern period. According to the Hungarian historian Jenő Szűcs, the countries of the region had to face "'Eastern European' conditions but with defective 'Western-like' structures." East-Central European societies had adapted "structures of the Western type" in the Middle Ages, such as quasi-parliaments representing nobles, that allowed a sense of communal autonomy for social groups vis-à-vis the state.

While 'Central' and 'East-Central' Europe are relatively unproblematically inscribed into 'Europe' as a continent, the positions of Russia and the Ottoman Empire have long been contested—and still are today. For most of the early modern period, the Ottoman Empire covered South-East Europe, including Greece, which was increasingly regarded as the cradle of European culture. The powers in the West of Europe contested the Ottoman membership of Europe: despite their own mutual antagonisms, they felt forced to cooperate in containing an empire that they regarded as a mutual enemy. They were helped by Russia, which put itself firmly on the European map in the eighteenth century by fighting Swedish aspirations in the Great Northern War (1700–1721), and by attacking Ottoman strongholds at the same time, in alliance with the Habsburg Monarchy. Under the aegis of Tsar Peter I (1672–1725), Russia adopted 'Western' and 'Enlightenment' culture and constructed its own sixteenth- and seventeenth-century history as backward and pejoratively medieval. If we are to believe eighteenth-century Russian erudites themselves, the country only became part of Europe during Peter's reign. Ever since, European historians have bought into the idea that Russia 'entered' the stage of European history only at the end of the seventeenth century. Until that time, Russia was largely

known in Europe only through a small number of eyewitness accounts. When Ivan IV in 1558 looked to expand his empire westward, he met the combined resistance of Sweden, Denmark, Poland and Lithuania: 'Moscovia' was not culturally associated with Europe.



Heinrich Bünting, *Map of Europe shaped as a virgin* (1582), Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Europa_Prima_Pars_Terrae_in_Forma_Virginis.jpg.

Europe as a Cognitive Order

This leads to the second important way in which Europe was conceptualised—as a *cognitive order*. The emergence and the consolidation of the idea of Europe in the early modern period was predicated on the entanglement of shared notions, notions which suggested 'Europe' consisted of a particular political order (dominated by composite states), a particular religion (a Christian faith deemed 'catholic,' in the sense of 'universal') or a particular culture (built on a Roman heritage and a Christian tradition). Speaking about 'Europeans' implied that there were 'others' not just in a geographical sense, but in political, religious, and cultural terms. 'Uncultured' peoples like Moscovites, Scythians, Tartars, Cimmerians, Travellers or religious others such as Turks, Persians, Arabs, and—more problematically—Jews, while displaying some 'cultured' traits, were still perceived as not adequate to the notion of civilisation.

Later, this inadequacy also included the inhabitants of other continents, as observations of 'strange' customs and behaviours by people from overseas nations made Europeans more attentive to their own notions of normalcy.

The notion of mutual proximity and distinctiveness from the rest of the world, based primarily on the shared Christian religion and the notion of 'civilisation' as opposed to barbarism or paganism, had existed among the inhabitants of the 'Old Continent' since antiquity and the Middle Ages—and was borne out, above all, during the Crusades (1095–1492) and later through the pressure of the Ottoman expansion (1453–1566). But from the fifteenth century onwards, these sentiments significantly grew as a result of European expansion into other continents, leading to encounters with different 'races' and different social and cultural formations. In a defensive reaction to a sudden widening of horizons, an intensive process of self-fashioning took place that is not easy to tie to a particular time or place. This process of self-fashioning—of establishing the imagined community of 'Europe'—ran parallel to the formation of specific national identities over the same period. Even though the term 'Europe' was rarely used in sources before the eighteenth century, notions of superiority and distinctiveness had appeared, and were shared by the intellectual and social elites (more specifically, male elites) of various European countries.

As for the idea of a political order, the rise of the idea that the Habsburg Empire acted as a part which stands in for Europe as a whole is exemplified by 'Europa Eidyllion', a pastoral poem in Latin, written in 1558 by Johann Lauterbach (1531–1593), in which a personified Europa represents the Habsburg Universal Monarchy. Such dynastic monarchies as the Habsburg Empire referenced a supra-national political order. The Peace of Westphalia of 1648 was a crucial moment in which the powers of Europe were tied more closely into a transnational order in which the 'balance of power' was played out on a field conceived as 'Europe'. Crises in maintaining that balance, such as the Spanish (1701–1714), Polish (1733–1738), and Austrian Wars of Succession (1740–1748), and the Great Northern War (1700–1721) advanced the idea of Europe as a complex political system: a theatre of war constituting a political world in its own right.

When it comes to religion—even in such regions as the Holy Roman Empire, Poland, or Hungary that were notorious arenas of confessional struggle—the complexity of the European political world did not eliminate the prospect of a Christian Europe, a community of the chosen, transcending doctrinal division. In fact, the notion of Europe overlapped with the concepts of a *Respublica Christiana* or *Mundus Christianus*—the idea, originating in the work *The City of God* by Augustine of Hippo (354–430), a 'father of the church', that there is a spiritual Commonwealth of Christians. This Commonwealth of Christians was visualised as a unity of all true believers, subordinate to divine law, and superseding political divisions within the European community. The concept

of *Respublica Christiana* could also denote the idea of a political alliance of states with Christian rulers, headed by the Pope. However, the colonial and subsequent missionary expansion in the sixteenth century greatly enlarged the Christian community and put in doubt this specific way of defining Europe.

The dual inheritance of Europe itself—the Christian and the classical—encouraged a dual classification of mankind, whereby peoples were judged in accordance with their religious affiliation or with their degree of civilisation. The fundamental division along religious lines was between Christian and heathen. From the sixteenth century onwards, Christian scholars slowly started to regard Jews, certainly not heathens, as heirs to a civilised Rabbinic tradition, and from the seventeenth century onwards, these Christian scholars also turned to Arabic literature. Renaissance Europeans also appropriated from classical literature the distinction between Greeks and barbarians: the barbarian, while heathen, was also rough and uncivilised. As for the cultural order, then, it was since the sixteenth century that the 'Republic of Letters', the idea that there was a learned world shared between Europeans, replaced the idea of a unified *Respublica Christiana* as the realm of a shared civilisation. Recorded for the first time in 1417 in a letter of the Italian humanist Francesco Barbaro (1390–1454), the idea was taken up again in 1484 in a letter of the Frisian philosopher Rudolph Agricola (1443–1485). Further advanced by the Venetian printer Aldo Manuzio (1449–1515), it was championed by the Dutch scholar Erasmus (1466–1536), who was generally regarded as a 'princeps' (first citizen) of the Republic of Letters. When the Flemish philosopher Justus Lipsius (1547–1606) addressed the French religious leader and scholar Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540–1609) as "ocelle Europae" (darling of Europe) in a letter from 1575, or when an unknown correspondent called the Dutch humanist Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) "truly the eagle of our Europe" in 1617, it showed not only the geographic reach of the Republic of Letters but also that the category of 'Europe' covered the widest possible frame of reference for the intellectual universe these scholars inhabited. For the French writer Voltaire (1694–1778), writing in 1751, people from the Pope in Rome to the Tsar in Russia inhabited a commonwealth of learning that covered the nations of 'Europe', despite their continuous wars and religious differences:

> We have gradually seen established in Europe a Learned Republic, despite the wars and despite the religious differences. All the sciences and all the arts have thus helped each other. The *academies* have shaped this republic. Italy and Russia have been united through learning. The Englishman, the German and the Frenchman went to Leiden to study. The famous physician Herman Boerhaave gave advice to both the pope and the tsar.

Humanist communication, the attendance of universities in other countries, travel writing and the circulation of news about political and military events made 'Europe' as concrete for readers in Central Europe as the entanglement

of peripheral regions into the web of Western diplomacy did for political decision makers. In some of these peripheries, such as the Principality of Transylvania, the ruling elites had to balance their loyalties to the Ottoman Empire with European allegiances. While politically and financially dependent on the sultans, they tried to impress Western diplomats with the refined manners of their court, and to position themselves on the brighter side of the 'civilisation/barbarism' divide. Elite travellers from the West to the countries of Central Europe, and their counterparts from this region, observed only gradual differences between their own cultures and the ones they visited, rather than perceiving unfamiliar worlds altogether. Polish and Hungarian nobles, however, fashioned themselves as descendants of the Sarmatians and the Huns respectively. Fictive genealogies linking them with those bellicose ancient warriors from Asia were meant to highlight their own military virtues. At the same time, the cult of Roman antiquity, Latin (persisting as a language of education and governance in a multilingual context), and the influence of Neo-Latin literature sustained a formative intellectual pattern there, as elsewhere in Europe. The cities of Central Europe, most notably Vienna and Prague as the residences of the Habsburg imperial court, functioned as nodes promoting European intellectual, cultural, and artistic trends, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment.

The idea of 'Europe' as a Latinised Christian culture that had transcended the Jewish religion and inscribed itself in a Greco-Roman tradition remained antagonistic toward Turkish and Arabic cultures and even toward a resilient Jewry in Europe—to say nothing of 'heathen' cultures outside Europe. Tied to this notion of Europe as a unique cultural entity is that of Europe as coloniser, forcing its political system, Christian religion, and intellectual culture on people 'outside' of Europe, in particular in the Americas, Africa, India and Indonesia. In this perspective, China occupied a special place. Many Europeans perceived it as a recognisable, self-contained culture with a long-standing and well-recorded intellectual tradition. For seventeenth-century thinkers, unconquered China became a supreme 'other', a mirror that showed self-reflections of what it meant to be a European. Questions about the extra-European origin of European peoples and languages—in particular from large but unknown regions such as Scythia or Grand Tartary, which was seen as the 'womb of nations'—came to occupy the minds of scholars such as the German polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716).

Europe in Image and Text

Finally, the notion of Europe was *visualised* (or *textualised*) through various media, such as pictures, maps, and textual conceptualisations. In the second

half of the fifteenth century, the explosive spread of the printing press brought about a radical change in the cultural life of many Europeans. Printed books, musical scores, and cartographies became more widely accessible, facilitating an accelerated circulation of ideas and pictures that became entrenched in the consciousness of Europeans during the early modern period. Through the engravings of the German humanist Sebastian Münster (1488–1552) or the Italian scholar Cesare Ripa (1560–1622), for example, the continent was personified. In the guise of a woman bearing rich clothing, treasures, and *cornucopiae*, or as an anthropomorphic map, a common visual language for the idea of Europe was embraced by its own elites. To be sure, such images were not an entirely new construction. At the height of the Renaissance, different influences such as the organicist heritage of Aristotle, the physical authority of Galen, and the monetary propaganda of the Roman Emperor Hadrian had laid the foundations for the idea of the corporeality of the continent. A telling example is the Iberian impact of this 'mapped' Europe during its period of universal hegemony. There is no doubt that the illustration *Europa Regina* composed by Münster in 1544 or its derivative *Europae descriptio* (1587) by the Dutch engraver Matthias Quad (1557–1613) and the version included in the book *Itinerarium Sacrae Scripturae* (1587) by the German theologian Heinrich Bünting (1545–1606) were known in the court of Philip II of Habsburg (1527–1598). Michael von Aitzing's *De Europae Virginis descriptione* (1587) is based on an unknown Italian design from the 1540s that tried to conflate the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and King of Spain—the Habsburg ruler, Charles V—with Zeus as ruler of 'Europe', and that linked Charles' power with the thesis of the Holy Roman Empire as the Fifth Empire, the continuator of universal power of Assyria, Persia, Macedonia, and Rome.

In a world in which the new knowledge of the Atlantic, the Indian, and the Pacific Oceans was rapidly codified in increasingly precise maps, the Central European cosmographers delighted potential buyers of their printing plates with the representation of distant African, Asian or American lands in which Spanish, Portuguese, French, English, or Dutch explorers, conquerors, and traders had just arrived, but also with classical allegories in the shape of anthropomorphic maps. Until the great voyages of exploration, Europe saw itself as the centre of the world—or, in fact, *the* world—with Africa and Asia as appendices. Since the sixteenth century, however, it realised that it was a relatively small part of an immense wider world inhabited by a multitude of nations, languages, and religions.

Mixing the new geographical images and the fight for global hegemony, it was not until the period called *Pax Hispanica*, coinciding with the reign of Philip III of Habsburg (1578–1621), that the anthropomorphic idea of Europe—and the figuration of *Hispania* as its 'head'—became firmly established in the work

of Iberian cosmographers and historians. The consolidation of Spanish rule over the Western Mediterranean, the Americas, and the African and South-Indian coasts, and its influence over the Netherlands and Central Europe, allowed King Philip's vassals to reflect on the power of Europe and, within it, the universalist sovereignty of the Monarchy of Spain. For the Aragonese lawyer Joseph de Sessé, this continent, "although in quantity it is smaller than the other parts, exceeds all of them not only in the multitude of cities and places, but also in the multitude of people, industry, nobility, science, virtue, strength, fear and knowledge of God, which are over all the treasures of the world." According to de Sessé, the political dominance of the Europeans from the distant times of the Greeks and Romans until the Spanish conquered America was uncontested, and the power of his monarch's traditional enemies, such as the Ottoman Empire, was negligible. From this Eurocentric perspective, the continent was at the height of world power, with Spain in a leading role. Another contemporary Castilian author, Balthasar de Vitoria (1619), portrayed Europe as the best known of the four parts of the world. For this Augustinian friar, "Felix Europa", healthy and fertile, was the most powerful continent because of its monarchs and the influence of the Pope, dominating the whole world. Its creators were its inhabitants, its people, those "of better stature, of more advanced understanding, of more courageous men, of more effort and of more invincible spirit". Others, such as the Portuguese author António de Sousa de Macedo (1631), were keen to identify their homeland as the crown of that human Europe on whose head the Iberian Peninsula was situated. For Macedo, his kingdom of origin, supposedly situated by God in the Western lands of the continent, was "the honour of Spain and consequently of the whole world."

Conclusion

From the beginning of the sixteenth century onwards, then, the notion of 'Europe' as a political and economic reality became more pronounced. It acted as a geographical theatre of war. Already defined in political-religious terms as a *Respublica Christiana*, the confrontation with the New World helped to define it culturally as an entity of its own. Despite the intra-Christian wars, a tradition of learning, embodied by scholars and learned institutes, created an entangled network of learning which was called a Republic of Letters and grew more pronounced and reflective—of itself and of its 'others'—in the eighteenth century. Visually, the notion of Europe as a 'body' was shaped in a diversity of forms and orientations. These expressed different political viewpoints about the centres of power, but they agreed on the idea of a more or less self-contained entity called 'Europe'.

Discussion questions

1. In which ways did early modern encounters with non-European peoples (through trade, colonial expansion, etc.) change the concept of 'Europe'?
2. Does Russia belong to Europe? Why? Why not?
3. Religion played an important role in early modern ideas of 'Europe'. Is this still the case today? Why? Why not?

Suggested reading

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