Cartographies of Conquest

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Introduction

Maps make worlds. They do not merely reflect terrain; they select, simplify, and stage it. This book examines how cartography—crafted in workshops, ship decks, mission houses, survey camps, courtrooms, and community councils—became a decisive instrument in the intertwined histories of conquest, colonization, and scientific discovery. It argues that maps have always been political technologies, shaping what could be seen, claimed, governed, and remembered.

At the heart of this study is an encounter: European cartographic practices met Indigenous spatial knowledge systems that were already sophisticated, diverse, and adapted to place. The results were not a simple story of replacement, but one of translation, negotiation, and sometimes coercion. Canoe routes became “rivers,” seasonal camps became “villages,” and sacred sites were recast as “resources.” Yet Indigenous mapmakers, guides, and knowledge keepers also reshaped the archives of empire, leaving traces of alternative orientations—star paths, kinship routes, story-maps, and mnemonic landscapes—within documents that often sought to overwrite them.

The chapters that follow combine close readings of maps with attention to the instruments, measurements, and institutions that made them legible as science. Visual case studies—treaty plans, mineral surveys, expedition sketches, atlases, and museum displays—anchor the analysis. Rather than treating maps as passive illustrations, I approach them as actors with social lives: they circulated, persuaded, and provoked; they settled disputes and started others; they authorized the drawing of lines that outlived their makers.

Because conquest required paperwork as much as musketry, cartography became a form of administrative force. Boundary commissions converted uncertainty into borders; cadastral surveys transformed living landscapes into taxable parcels; hydrographic charts prioritized shipping lanes over fishing grounds and ceremonial waters. This book traces how these cartographic choices informed diplomacy and law, how they underwrote claims to minerals, forests, and waterways, and how they standardized identities—of peoples as “tribes,” lands as “wilderness,” and movements as “trespass.”

Yet maps also became tools of refusal and repair. Counter-mapping projects, historical land claims, and community-based GIS demonstrate how Indigenous nations and their allies leverage cartographic media to assert sovereignty, revitalize place names, and document stewardship responsibilities. These practices neither reject nor simply adopt European conventions; they bend them, layering story and song with satellite imagery,

and insisting that evidence can be spatial, embodied, and relational.

Reading maps across these contexts requires an ethical stance. Many of the sources reproduced in this book were produced in unequal conditions, and some enact harm by design—through erasures, slurs, or the conversion of living territories into extractive frontiers. I have worked with community protocols where possible, foregrounded Indigenous authorship when present, and treated archival silence as a historical fact to analyze, not a void to fill with speculation. The aim is not neutrality, but clarity about the stakes of representation.

Cartographies of Conquest invites readers to attend to the visual grammars—projection, scale, symbol, and caption—that render power ordinary. It asks how we might read for the hands that held the compass and the voices that guided the way; how we might see the treaty not only as text but as a spatial argument; how we might understand a mine survey as a future tense written onto land. Above all, it suggests that to change the maps we inherit is to change the worlds they continue to make.

CHAPTER ONE: Worlds on Paper: Mapping Before Contact

Maps are not modern inventions. Long before European ships carved lines across the Atlantic and Pacific, people around the world were drawing, weaving, carving, and singing spaces into being. The story of cartography did not begin with Mercator or Columbus; it began wherever humans needed to remember a trail, tell a stranger where to find water, or mark a boundary at the edge of a clan territory. Maps were—and are—diverse in form and function. They can be scratched onto sand, traced on birch bark, painted on hides, inscribed on clay tablets, or carried in the mind as songlines and star paths. In every case, maps are tools for organizing knowledge about place and movement, a way of making the world legible.

The earliest surviving maps are remarkably modest. A Sumerian clay tablet from around 2500 BCE shows the city of Nippur with its temples and canals, not as a view from above but as a schematic diagram of relationships. In ancient Egypt, tomb paintings and papyrus sketches charted estates for taxation and irrigation, mapping fields with a precision that made harvests predictable and taxes enforceable. In classical Greece, philosophers like Ptolemy turned geography into a mathematical system, proposing coordinates and projections that allowed a place to be fixed on a grid. These were maps of ideas as much as of land, confident that the world could be measured if only the right instruments and assumptions were applied.

At the same time, other traditions refused the tyranny of the grid. In Oceania, Polynesian navigators mastered a kind of cartography without paper, tracking shifting stars, wave patterns, and bird flight to cross thousands of miles of open ocean. Their knowledge was embodied and memorized, stored in chants and diagrams drawn in sand for teaching, but erased by the tide. In the Amazon, indigenous communities used painted bark cloth to show river networks and village locations, prioritizing seasonal flow and travel time over static position. In the Arctic, Inuit hunters carved maps onto driftwood or ivory, showing coastlines and ice conditions that changed with the weather. These were maps of motion and adaptation, designed to be useful rather than permanent.

In the Andes, the Inca Empire used a remarkable technology called the khipu—a set of knotted cords—to record geographic and administrative data. While khipus are often discussed in terms of accounting, they also functioned as spatial records, encoding distances, tribute obligations, and routes between settlements. Spanish chroniclers, bewildered by these tactile data bundles, described them as “records of tribute,” but modern research suggests they could convey complex information about places and

pathways. For Andean peoples, mapping was not necessarily a visual act; it could be tactile, mnemonic, and linear, a cartography of knots and patterns rather than ink and paper.

Across the Pacific Northwest, cedar bark maps offered a different perspective. Indigenous artists sketched river systems and village sites onto flexible bark, emphasizing flow and connectivity over fixed borders. The maps were portable, practical, and suited to a world defined by waterways and seasonal runs of salmon. A bark map could be rolled and carried, shared at potlatches, or used to plan a journey. It didn't pretend to be universal; it was local knowledge encoded in a form that made sense to people whose lives were tied to the rhythms of river and tide.

In West Africa, the Mandé people developed sand maps—temporary diagrams drawn on the ground to illustrate routes, landmarks, and social relationships. These were not mere sketches; they were performances of memory, created in the moment and then wiped away. The act of drawing was part of the lesson, a way of embedding geography into the body and the story. In the Great Lakes region of North America, Anishinaabe birch bark scrolls carried ritual and geographic information, with lines and symbols that guided ceremonies and movement across the landscape. These maps were sacred, carrying meaning beyond their literal marks.

On the opposite side of the world, Chinese cartographers produced elaborate maps on silk and paper, combining landscape painting with administrative geography. The "Yu Ji Tu" (or "Map of the Tracks of Yu Gong"), carved into stone in the 12th century, depicts ancient China's nine provinces and river systems with a remarkable blend of art and measurement. Meanwhile, Japanese cartographers created maps like the "Ise Bay Pilot Chart," which emphasized coastal navigation with practical details for mariners. In the Islamic world, scholars refined the use of coordinates and planetary observations to create maps that were both scientifically rigorous and aesthetically refined.

Europe, too, had its own pre-modern traditions. Medieval "mappaemundi" were theological diagrams more than navigational aids, placing Jerusalem at the center and illustrating biblical stories alongside continents. These maps were not meant to guide ships; they were maps of meaning, situating the world within a Christian cosmology. Portolan charts, by contrast, were practical tools for sailors, showing coastlines and ports with striking accuracy. Drawn on vellum, these charts accumulated experience from voyages, gradually refining the shape of the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts. They were among the most "scientific" maps of their day, yet they still bore the marks of artisanal craft and personal interpretation.

The diversity of these practices reminds us that there is no single "correct" way to map. A map is a negotiation between need and perspective. For an empire, a map is a tool of administration; for a navigator, it is a guide to moving safely; for a farmer, it is

a record of fields and irrigation; for a storyteller, it is a way to remember and teach. The form of the map—whether carved in wood, painted on hide, sung in a chant, or drawn on parchment—reflects the priorities of the culture that made it. A map tells you what its makers believed was important.

Before contact, Indigenous mapmakers in the Americas had sophisticated systems for recording spatial knowledge. In the Mississippi Valley, the “Birch Bark Scroll” traditions among Anishinaabe communities carried cosmological and geographic information, often tied to ceremonies and seasonal movements. In the Southwest, Pueblo communities marked ceramic vessels with symbols that represented places, rivers, and pilgrimage routes. On the Great Plains, painted buffalo hides documented battles, hunts, and territorial boundaries with pictographic detail. These were not crude sketches; they were maps embedded in art, ritual, and daily life.

Similarly, in the Caribbean, Taíno communities used woven baskets and carved gourds to represent spatial relationships, often linking waterways, gardens, and ceremonial plazas. These objects were not “maps” in the European sense of flat paper, but they performed cartographic work by organizing knowledge and guiding movement. The Inca road system, spanning thousands of miles, was itself a kind of map in motion—a linear network of routes, waystations, and markers that required constant maintenance and interpretation. Travelers learned to read the landscape as they moved, recognizing stone posts, bridges, and mountain passes as signs embedded in a broader system of spatial knowledge.

In Australia, Aboriginal peoples developed one of the most complex systems of “songlines”—narrative pathways that describe the creation of the world and the features of the land. These songs are maps, encoding distances, directions, and landmarks in a mnemonic structure that can be sung across generations. A person who knows the songlines can navigate vast distances by recalling the sequence of features and events described in the song. Songlines are also legal and ethical frameworks, linking people to place through responsibilities and kinship. They are maps that must be performed to exist.

In the Arctic, Inuit hunters created “nunaq” maps—mental models of the land that included not only topography but seasonal ice conditions, animal migration routes, and safe passage points. These maps were shared through stories and practical instruction, often while traveling. Some hunters carved miniature landscapes into driftwood to illustrate specific routes or hazards. These tactile maps were temporary and portable, designed for a world where the landscape changed daily. They were not intended to be universal; they were local, experiential, and grounded in lived practice.

Along the Silk Road, merchants and pilgrims produced route maps that blended geography with cultural knowledge. These itineraries included notes on markets, water sources, and safe lodgings, making them valuable guides for long-distance travel. In

East Africa, Swahili coastal communities used wooden boards called “Lukas” to draw charts of the Indian Ocean, marking islands, currents, and winds. These charts were mnemonic devices, helping sailors remember complex routes without relying on written coordinates. They were portable and adaptable, reflecting a maritime culture that valued memory and oral transmission.

In the Pacific, the Marshall Islanders developed “stick charts” to represent wave patterns and island positions. These charts, made of coconut fronds and shells, were not maps of land but of the ocean’s behavior. They taught navigators how to read the sea, identifying swells and currents that indicated the presence of islands. This was a cartography of process rather than place, emphasizing movement and interaction. It was highly sophisticated, yet it required training and interpretation—knowledge that was passed from master to apprentice.

In the Andes, the Inca used “ceque” systems—lines of sacred sites radiating from Cusco—to organize ritual and political space. These lines were not drawn on paper but were embedded in the landscape through shrines, stones, and ceremonies. They functioned as a map of power and meaning, aligning the city with the cosmos and marking territories. The Spanish, unable to see these lines, dismissed them as superstition. But for the Inca, they were as real and useful as any chart.

In North America, the Lakota used winter counts—annual records kept on hides—to mark significant events, including battles, migrations, and environmental changes. While not maps in the strict sense, these records provided temporal and spatial context for community memory. In the Pacific Northwest, Tlingit and Haida artists carved maps onto cedar planks, showing village sites, fishing grounds, and territorial boundaries. These carvings were both art and archive, meant to be displayed and interpreted by those who knew the stories.

In the Sahara, Tuareg nomads used mental maps of desert routes, waterholes, and trade paths that were passed down through generations. These maps were shaped by the rhythms of caravan travel and the need to avoid sandstorms and bandits. They were not drawn, but they were precise, tested by experience and updated constantly. Similarly, Bedouin guides in the Arabian Peninsula memorized star paths, wind patterns, and landmark sequences to cross vast, featureless terrain. Their knowledge was both geographic and poetic, embedded in stories and proverbs.

In Mesoamerica, the Aztec and Maya produced codices—folded books made of bark paper—that included maps of cities, tribute lists, and ritual pathways. The “Tira de la Peregrinación” (or “Map of the Pilgrimage”) from the Aztec tradition shows the journey of the Mexica from Aztlan to Tenochtitlan, using symbols and directions rather than scale or projection. These maps were not concerned with geographic accuracy in the European sense; they were concerned with narrative and meaning. They mapped the journey of a people, not just the land they occupied.

In Siberia, indigenous reindeer herders used simple wood and bone markers to map migration routes and seasonal camps. These maps were often improvised, carved on the spot and left for others to follow. They were minimal but effective, designed for a landscape that was vast and sparsely populated. In the Himalayas, Sherpa and Tibetan communities used painted thangkas—scrolls that depicted sacred landscapes and pilgrimage routes. These maps were spiritual guides as much as physical ones, mapping the path to enlightenment as well as the mountain passes.

Across the Amazon, indigenous communities used “geoglyphs” and earthworks to mark territorial boundaries and ceremonial spaces. These large-scale designs, visible from above, were maps on the land itself, created through collective labor and maintained over generations. The Spanish and Portuguese often misread these earthworks as natural formations or “primitive” art, missing their geographic and political significance. They were maps that could only be seen in full from a perspective that Europeans did not yet have.

Before contact, every continent had its own cartographic traditions, adapted to local environments and social structures. Maps were not always about ownership; they were often about relationship—how to move through a place, how to honor it, how to remember it. They were tools of survival, ceremony, and storytelling. They were not neutral; they reflected the values and priorities of the people who made them. And they were diverse, challenging the idea that there is a single “right” way to represent space.

The arrival of European explorers did not introduce maps to the world, but it did introduce a particular kind of map—one that aimed to fix space permanently, to measure it with instruments, and to claim it with lines and labels. Indigenous mapmakers had their own methods of fixing and claiming, but they were often flexible, adaptable, and tied to living knowledge. The tension between these two approaches—fixed and flexible, universal and local, scientific and experiential—would shape the encounters that followed. Understanding what came before is essential to seeing how maps became instruments of conquest, and how Indigenous knowledge persisted and adapted in the face of new cartographic regimes.

The maps before contact were not perfect, but they were effective. They helped people find food, avoid danger, and remember their place in the world. They were shared, taught, and revised. They were drawn in the dirt, carved in wood, painted on hides, and sung in the air. They were as varied as the peoples who made them, and they were sophisticated in ways that later explorers often failed to recognize. To study these maps is to see the world not as a single, unified space, but as a mosaic of knowledge systems, each with its own logic and its own story.

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