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Maps of Power: Cartography, Territory, and State Formation in Italy

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Introduction

Maps are not neutral mirrors of the world; they are instruments that frame what can be seen, claimed, and governed. In Italy—where city-states, principalities, republics, and empires overlapped for centuries—the power to represent space was inseparable from the power to rule it. This book argues that cartography, from the earliest coastal charts to contemporary digital platforms, shaped political authority and regional identities by turning landscapes into legible, negotiable, and often contested objects. Control over representation—who draws, measures, and names—was integral to state-building and to the rivalries that knit and frayed the peninsula from the medieval era to the present.

We begin in a world of itineraries, portolan charts, and sacred geographies, where coasts, harbors, and pilgrimage routes established practical ways of knowing space. Communes traced limits around fields and neighborhoods, projecting civic authority outward in boundary stones and inward in urban plans. The map was already an argument: that a road belonged to one jurisdiction rather than another, that a market was sanctioned, that a bishopric extended this far and no further. In these early contexts, mapping practices not only recorded movement and possession; they staged them.

The Renaissance expanded the persuasive power of maps. Techniques of perspective, triangulation, and scaled surveying promised accuracy while advertising princely command. Military engineers mapped fortifications and approaches, transforming landscapes into theaters of defense and conquest. Hydraulic projects reshaped marshes and rivers, translating lines on paper into canals and embankments that redirected commerce and sovereignty alike. Cadastres enumerated parcels and obligations, tethering fiscal systems to measured ground and turning landowners into subjects visible to the state.

By the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the language of maps fused with the languages of science and administration. Enlightenment ideals of standardization, statistics, and public utility met the realities of dynastic competition. Roads, postal routes, and later departmental schemes reorganized territory, introducing new grids of mobility and surveillance. Naming practices and boundary-making were never merely technical; they recast communities, allegiances, and memories—often accelerating conflict even as they promised clarity.

The long movement toward unification gave cartography an overtly nation-making role. School atlases, railway diagrams, and popular wall maps cultivated the imagination of a single Italy while spotlighting enduring differences between regions,

dialects, and economies. Alpine ridgelines and river courses became diplomatic and military stakes, where contour lines could translate into treaties—and into trenches. Maps circulated in newspapers and pamphlets, teaching citizens not just where Italy was, but what it should be.

In the twentieth century, mapping mediated the reach of the modern state. Aerial photography and geodesy revolutionized military and civil surveys; ideological regimes mobilized cartography to symbolize unity, reclaim land, and visualize development. After dictatorship and war, the republic relied on national standards and evolving institutions to stabilize property, infrastructure, and environmental management. Yet the same grids that unified also highlighted regional autonomy and renewed debates over center and periphery.

Today, digital tools—GIS platforms, satellite imagery, and crisis-mapping dashboards—reconfigure the relationship between mapmakers, officials, and citizens. Tourism and heritage industries package regional identities for global audiences, while activists, planners, and scientists contest hazards, migrations, and resource use with competing datasets. These new cartographies inherit older logics: they promise transparency even as they arbitrate visibility; they enable participation even as they consolidate authority.

This book weaves together landmark maps, surveying techniques, and cartographic debates to show how representation governed territory, guided urban planning, and shaped military campaigns. Drawing on archives, printed atlases, engineering reports, and visual culture, it treats maps as both technical artifacts and political acts. Each chapter traces a moment when drawing Italy—as coast, city, province, nation, or network—helped to make Italy. The pages that follow invite readers to look closely at the lines, legends, and omissions by which power has been mapped, contested, and, again and again, reimagined.

CHAPTER ONE: Pilgrims, Itineraries, and Portolan Charts: Early Spatial Logics

Long before Italy existed as a nation, its territory was drawn in lists, routes, and coastal sketches. The earliest maps to guide movement through the peninsula were not maps in the modern sense but textual itineraries. These were practical documents: lists of waypoints, distances, and junctions. Roman roads had established a legacy of measurable, numbered travel. The *Notitia Dignitatum*, a late Roman register of offices and provinces, preserved a bureaucratic geography that mapped authority onto routes and stations. With the empire gone, the Church kept the habit of listing, and pilgrimage replaced imperial administration as a primary logic for movement.

Medieval pilgrim guides condensed space into stages and distances. The Bordeaux Pilgrim's itinerary to Jerusalem, though not Italian in destination, exemplified the form: start here, turn there, count the miles. Within Italy, similar texts listed routes from Lombardy to Rome, or from coastal ports to inland shrines. They told travelers where to find lodging, where bridges had collapsed, where crossings were safe. In a landscape of shifting lordships and patchy security, these lists were more than directions; they were maps of risk and trust, drawing attention to monasteries and bishoprics that offered sanctuary and hospitality.

The most famous of these routes was the Via Francigena, the medieval road that funneled pilgrims from northern Europe to Rome and sometimes onward to southern Italy. The account by Bishop Sigeric of Canterbury in the late tenth century survives as a spare sequence of place names, a skeleton of a map rendered in text. For the historian, these names are coordinates of power: castles, markets, and monasteries mark where authority resided. For the traveler, they were a lifeline. The itinerary did not visualize terrain; it narrated a journey, turning landscape into a sequence of obligations and encounters.

Maps of the cosmos, too, shaped how space was understood in medieval Italy. T-O maps—crude disks with Jerusalem at the center and the known world divided into three parts—offered a moral geography. They were schematic, more theological than navigational, but they established a hierarchy of places. Rome and Jerusalem occupied privileged positions. These worldmaps, copied in monasteries and cathedral schools, told readers where they stood in salvation history. They did not show the Apennines in detail or the harbors of the Tyrrhenian coast, but they embedded Italy within a sacred order that justified papal authority and guided pious travel.

At the same time, a different cartographic logic was emerging along the coasts.

Portolan charts—practical sailing maps drawn on vellum—spoke the language of harbors, winds, and compass bearings. Unlike the symbolic T-O maps, portolans were empirical. They recorded coastal profiles, anchorages, dangers, and distances between ports with remarkable precision. Their networks of rhumb lines—directional lines radiating from compass roses—helped navigators set courses across open water. In the western Mediterranean, Genoa, Pisa, and later Venice traded these charts as strategic secrets, tools of maritime empire.

The earliest surviving portolan from the western Mediterranean, the Carta Pisana, dates to the late thirteenth century and displays a dense web of routes linking ports from the Iberian Peninsula to the Levant. Its coastline is drawn with care; inland features are sparse. The map's purpose is unmistakable: to guide ships between safe harbors, not to describe territories. Yet it had political implications. Control over charting meant control over information that determined which ports were visited, which trade routes thrived, and which cities grew rich. The chart, in this sense, was an economic map as much as a navigational one.

While portolans mapped the sea, Italian communes were mapping the land. Boundary stones—piedi, termini, or cippi—inscribed with names, coats of arms, and distances punctuated fields and valleys. These markers materialized jurisdiction. They asserted that a grove or a pasture lay within a city's contado, the agricultural hinterland essential to urban provisioning and revenue. In documents, boundaries were described in periphrasis: "from the oak to the river, then along the ridge to the mill." Over time, communities added sketch maps to these descriptions, crude but effective tools for settling disputes and asserting claims.

Pilgrimage and commerce intertwined to create what historians call the "cartularity" of space: maps made of words, lists, and charters. Monasteries compiled cartularies—collections of property deeds—that mapped estates through narratives of boundaries, dues, and obligations. A single entry might describe a vineyard by reference to a road, a stream, and a neighbor's wall. These textual maps were legal instruments. They fixed rights, recorded dues, and created a shared memory of property lines. In the absence of a strong central state, such records offered the closest thing to authoritative territory.

The Italian peninsula's political fragmentation made these practices even more significant. Without a unified kingdom to impose a single map, rival communes, bishoprics, and feudal lords drew their own. Disputes over borders—between Lucca and Pisa, for example, or between Bologna and its rural neighbors—generated thick files of testimonies, surveys, and sketches. In the absence of clear lines, memory and ritual became cartographic tools. Processions that walked boundaries every year, or oaths sworn by elders describing landmarks, created living maps that changed slowly with the landscape.

Pilgrimage shrines drew their own geographies. The routes to Rome, to the shrine of Saint Nicholas at Bari, or to Monte Sant'Angelo on the Gargano peninsula structured seasonal movement. These itineraries circumscribed sacred geography. They did not mark political borders in the modern sense, but they mapped networks of sanctuaries that crossed jurisdictions and often competed with secular authorities for travelers' money and loyalty. A map of shrines was also a map of economic and spiritual influence, revealing which bishops and monasteries could attract patronage and which towns served as gateway nodes.

Portolan charts, while coastal in focus, gradually incorporated inland features relevant to sailors. Bays, river mouths, and coastal towers appear, along with notations on currents and dangerous shoals. As the charts were copied and updated, errors crept in, but so did improvements. New ports were added; old ones faded. The charts embodied a dynamic process of collective knowledge. They were often produced by professional cartographers in urban workshops, some of whom belonged to guilds. Their clients included merchants, shipowners, and political leaders who understood that accurate information translated into competitive advantage.

The overlap between pilgrimage itineraries and portolan charts created a composite image of Italy: a corridor of routes linking the seas to the interior. Goods arriving in Genoa could be carried inland along old Roman roads to Lombardy; pilgrims landing in Bari could head north to Rome. Maps, in these centuries, were often regional rather than peninsula-wide. They captured specific networks rather than a unified whole. Yet the accumulation of these networks laid the groundwork for a more comprehensive cartographic vision of Italy, one that would emerge only later under different political conditions.

Sacred maps also shaped expectations of space. Mappaemundi like the Hereford map, though produced outside Italy, circulated widely and influenced how Italian clerics and scholars visualized the world. They offered a moralized geography where the earthly city mirrored the celestial order. Such maps were not meant to be used for travel; they were didactic, meant to instruct and impress. They placed Italy within a narrative of salvation and empire, mapping not just where things were but what they meant. In the medieval imagination, this meaning mattered as much as distance.

Meanwhile, the Islamic world contributed to cartographic knowledge that reached Italian ports through trade. Al-Idrisi's twelfth-century world map, prepared for Roger II of Sicily, combined empirical detail with a systematic worldview. Though it did not directly guide sailors, it represented a sophisticated synthesis of geographic knowledge. Sicily's position as a cultural crossroads meant that Italian merchants and scholars encountered multiple traditions of mapping. This exchange refined portolan techniques and expanded the range of features considered worth recording.

The practice of measuring land also advanced in this period. Surveyors—*periti*—used chains and ropes to measure plots, a skill inherited from Roman *agrimensores*. They mapped fields for legal disputes, tax assessments, and communal planning. Their work produced small-scale, local maps, often attached to notarial records. These maps served immediate needs: dividing inheritances, settling boundaries, documenting leases. They were not meant for exhibition, but they were maps nonetheless, artifacts of governance at the level of neighborhoods and fields.

In the fourteenth century, crises reshaped the social landscape of mapping. The Black Death disrupted travel, altered economic patterns, and shifted power among cities. Yet the need for precise records grew. Landowners sought to secure claims amid depopulation; communes reorganized territories to maintain revenue. Cartographic activity adapted. Itineraries were updated to reflect new routes and hazards; portolan charts incorporated revised harbor information; local boundary maps multiplied. The map, as a form, proved resilient because it addressed fundamental questions of movement, possession, and control.

Humor and humanity crept into these maps as well. Marginal notes in portolans warned of pirates or praised a particularly fine anchorage. Itineraries might note a dangerous inn or a generous abbot. These asides remind us that maps were written for people, not abstract systems. Travelers were not disembodied points; they faced hunger, weather, and uncertainty. Maps mediated those realities. They offered guidance but also instruction: where to ask for help, where to avoid trouble, where to trust strangers.

Urban communes developed their own cartographic habits. Cities mapped themselves in walls, streets, and districts. Plans like the late medieval view of Siena, though not to scale, expressed a civic identity: compact, fortified, hierarchical. These views were not practical for navigation but were powerful for propaganda. They advertised order and prosperity. In the background, the countryside appeared as a pattern of fields, roads, and watchtowers, tied economically and defensively to the city. The map, in this sense, was a portrait of dependence.

The interplay between portolan charts and pilgrimage routes revealed a practical truth: Italy's geography demanded multiple maps. A ship's captain needed one map; a pilgrim needed another; a farmer needed a third. Each map privileged different features and different logics. One emphasized harbors and winds, another shrines and stages, another boundaries and dues. The peninsula's complexity resisted a single representation. Its cartography was plural, reflecting the fragmented sovereignty and diverse economies that characterized medieval Italy.

The production and circulation of maps were themselves political acts. A city that commissioned a map of its territory proclaimed its competence and reach. A bishopric that compiled a cartulary asserted its historical rights. A merchant who owned a

portolan chart controlled a strategic asset. In a world without standardized mapping institutions, personal and institutional collections of maps were sources of power. They were consulted in councils, used in courts, and copied for patrons. The map was not merely descriptive; it was performative, enacting claims to authority.

The fifteenth century saw incremental changes rather than revolutions. Portolan charts grew richer in detail, often adding decorative elements like coats of arms and city views. Pilgrimage itineraries continued to guide travelers, though new routes opened and old ones waned. Local boundary maps became more frequent, driven by legal and fiscal needs. The composite cartographic culture of medieval Italy remained intact, but its components were becoming more sophisticated. The groundwork was laid for more systematic, scaled, and politically ambitious maps that would emerge in the Renaissance.

This early cartographic world—built on itineraries, portolans, and textual boundaries—was not a single, coherent system. It was a mosaic of practices shaped by the needs of pilgrims, merchants, monks, and magistrates. These maps did not offer a unified view of Italy; they provided tools for moving, trading, praying, and governing. Their authority came from use: they worked for the journeys they were designed to guide. In their modesty and specificity, they reveal the first spatial logics by which Italy was known, negotiated, and claimed.

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