

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 6 (1992)

Artikel: Of myths and maps : the Anglo-Saxon cosmographer's Europe
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99889>

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Of Myths and Maps: the Anglo-Saxon Cosmographer's Europe

Margaret Bridges

Taking time out between the description of two phases of his military campaign in Britannia, Julius Caesar pauses to describe the island's inhabitants in terms of their life-style. Not unsurprisingly, the writer singles out for comment those features of life elsewhere which signal the transgression of a prohibition central to his own culture. British women are referred to as polyandrous and the groups of ten to twelve men who share wives (but not homes) are said to consist mainly of brothers, fathers and sons. On the other hand, the Roman author has provided these incestuous islanders with a taboo that is unfamiliar to his gourmet countrymen. Britain is said to abound in hares, fowl and geese in whose sight, but not taste, the indigenous population delights:

They account it wrong to eat of hare, fowl, and goose; but these they keep for pastime or pleasure (. . .) Groups of ten or twelve men have wives together in common, and particularly brothers along with brothers, and fathers with sons; but the children born of the unions are reckoned to belong to the particular house to which the maiden was first conducted.¹

If I begin by evoking this passage from the fifth book of the *Bellum Gallicum*, it is because the islanders who refrain from eating poultry and game, and who, in the more radical formulation of the Middle Ages, marry

¹ Leporem et gallinam et anserem gustare fas non putant; haec tamen alunt animi voluptatisque causa. (. . .) Vxores habent deni duodenique inter se communes et maxime fratres cum fratribus parentesque cum liberis; sed qui sunt ex his nati, eorum habentur liberi, quo primum virgo quaeque deducta est (250–253).

their "daughters, sisters and other female relatives" recur in the writings of the medieval encyclopaedists and in travel narratives, like that of Sir John Mandeville, with one major difference: the inhabitants of Britannia, that "other" world on the western periphery of Graeco-Roman maps, are displaced, by the Other become Self, to the eastern periphery of the world, to an isle beyond an isle, itself beyond the land of Cathay where all islands smack deceptively of paradise:

Beyond that yle is another yle where is gret multytude of folk. And thei wole not for no thing eten flesch of hares ne of hennes ne of gees, and yit thei bryngen forth ynowe for to seen hem and to beholden hem only, but thei eten flesch of all other bestes and drynken mylk. In that contree thei taken hire doughtres and hire sustres to here wyfes and hire othere kynneswommen. And yif there ben x. men or xii. men or mo dwellynge in an hows, the wif of euerych of them schalle ben comoun to hem alle that duellen in that hows, so that eury man may ligen with whom he wole of hem on o nyght and with another another nyght. And yif sche haue ony child, sche may yeue it to what man that sche list that hath companyed with hire, so that no man knoweth there whether the child be his or anotheres. And yif ony man seye to hem that thei norisschen other mennes children, thei answeren that so don other men hires.² (Seymour 1967:208)

The displacement of this disconcerting community from Western Europe to East Asia, while preserving the peripheral nature that guaranteed its simultaneous desirability and repulsiveness, reflects the gradual change in the status of the English cosmographer in the intervening 1400 years. The classical heritage of the *literati* of Anglo-Saxon England included *mappae mundi* and cosmographical writings of various kinds which were "centered" around Rome or Greece — if I may use the concept of a centre here less in the graphical sense than in the sense of an authoritative vantage point, identified with the Self. With Solinus, those maps and writings affirmed that the shores of Gaul should really be considered the *finis orbis*, and the British Isles beyond it *paene orbis alterius* ("almost an other world").³

² The Bodleian version of *Mandeville's Travels* reports the islanders' polyandry but not their reluctance to eat poultry and game (Seymour 1963:111).

³ *Finis erat orbis ora Gallici litoris, nisi Britannia insula non qualibet amplitudine nomen paene orbis alterius mereretur* (180).

Roman geographers like Pomponius Mela considered the uncivilized nature of Britain's inhabitants (*inculti omnes*) to be a function of their remoteness from the (Roman) continent (*ut longius a continenti absunt*, 172). Moreover the classical tradition had privileged the orient over the occident in a number of ways. To mention for the present only those features relevant to cosmographic discourse, Isidore was using a well-worn metaphor when he referred in his *De rerum natura* to the orient as the "caput (. . .) et quasi facies," in other words as the head or face of the macrocosmic body, while assimilating the northern region of the quadripartite world to the body's *ultima pars* (207). For the cosmographic corpus this means that sequential descriptions generally begin in the east, while the western and northern regions come last and least. Although some Roman geographers began their descriptive sequence with the pillars of Hercules in the west, as did Pliny (5), Orosius and Isidore seem to have been instrumental in transmitting to the Middle Ages the east-to-west sequence (also used by Pliny in connexion with the earth's measurements: II:366–369).

If the boundaries of the world as it was known to the Anglo-Saxons through classical cosmography effectively placed them in the shabbiest of margins, the tendency of Christian geographers to interpret geographical space in terms of the temporal sequence of salvation history similarly placed England at the spatio-temporal end of the world. In the eighth chapter of his *De excidio britonum*, Gildas refers to the coming of Christianity as the first warm rays of light to shine on a region that was formerly "numb with chill ice and far removed, as in a remote nook of the world, from the visible sun."⁴ And one recalls the famous passage from the second book of the *Historiae adversum paganos* in which Orosius describes the course of world history as moving from the Babylonian east to the Roman west — of which he is himself a part — through the four ends of the earth, by the ineffable dispensation of God. The Old English version of that passage reads as follows:

pas feower heafodricu sindon on feower endum byses
middangeardes mid unasecendlicre Godes tacnunge. þæt

⁴ . . . glaciali frigore rigenti insulae et velut longiore terrarum secessu soli visibili non proximae verus ille (. . .) radios suos primum indulget, id est sua praecepta, Christus (91).

feorþe is Romane [ond] on westewardum. Babylonisce þæt æreste
[ond] Romane þæt siðmeste hie wæron swa fæder [ond] sunu.

(Bately:36)

Of course the Anglo-Saxons were no closer to experiencing cosmic liminality than the Antipodeans were ever able to experience what it was like to be suspended upside down. Boundaries, centres and cardinal points are relative concepts that receive absolute value only within the cosmological framework of a given culture, whose verbal and graphic representations of that framework are reflected in the cosmographical writings and maps of their encyclopaedists. (By "encyclopaedists" I mean those who collected and collated authorized representations of the real world.) In antiquity as well as in the Middle Ages, their writings sometimes overlapped with the travel narratives that represented, or claimed to represent (which for my purposes is the same thing), actual, individual experience of the world. In this narrative mode, which I will not be examining further here, and which is to encyclopaedic cosmography what the itinerary or surveyor's map is to the cartographer's *mappa mundi*, distance is a function of the time needed to cover it, and topographical representations are subordinated to the vantage point of the beholder, so that land or water is perceived to the right or to the left rather than in relation to any of the conventionally adopted boundaries, centres or cardinal points. It is not with experience, which is always centered around the Self, that the encyclopaedic cosmographer is concerned, and I do not want to suggest that the Anglo-Saxons actually experienced liminal vertigo. One would no doubt be mistaken in equating the cosmological framework of their world with the one that came down to them from antiquity with very few Judeo-Christian modifications. Even making allowances for the inevitable hiatus between experience and representation, it does seem suspicious, however, that English cosmographers should have continued for so long to transmit and translate works in which they are thus marginalized, until such time, well into the thirteenth century, as they develop strategies for recuperating *auctoritas*.

The development of the Trojan connexion in the new founding myths represents one such strategy; evocation of a worthy prince's daughter from Saxony, called Angela, in Ranulph Higden's efforts to replace earlier marginalizing etymologies of the name Yngelonde, such as Isidore's Anglia from *angula*, represent another such strategy (Vol. II:5). The

question I would like to ask here is "why did it take so long for these strategies to appear?" Should we really think of the literate communities of Anglo-Saxon England, within whose scriptoria and classrooms the cosmographical writings of the Mediterranean world were faithfully reproduced, as self-deconstructing communities? Would their acceptance of those writings not strike us as less strange if their cosmographical inheritance had itself problematized the notions of centre and boundary, of Self and Other? I shall argue that the Anglo-Saxons inherited a map of considerable referential and etymological equivocation and that this is nowhere more true than in relation to the concept and name of the continent which they did and didn't represent as their own, namely, Europe.

The famous opening sentences of both Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and of Orosius's *Histories* set the stage for their local and universal histories respectively by naming the *loca in quibus geste sunt* ("places in which events occur," which in the words of one medieval historiographer constitute the *res gestae* of history, together with people and dates):⁵

Brittania Oceani insula, cui quondam Albion nomen fuit, inter septentrionem et occidentem locata est, Germaniae Galliae Hispaniae, maximis Europae partibus, multo interuallo aduersa.

Breoton ist garsecges ealond, ðæt wæs iu geara Albion haten: is geseted betwyh norðdæle and westdæle, Germanie and Gallie and Hispanie, þam mæstum dælum Europe myccele fæce ongegen.

In Bede's formulation (14), as in the Old English translator's (Miller:24), it is uncertain whether the island Britain is included in the continent of which Germany, Gaul and Spain constitute the greatest part or whether, as in the oldest surviving Greek uses of Europa, the term is indissociable from the concept of the "mainland" viewed from its implied binary opposite, the maritime world of islands, boats, and backs of whales.⁶ This uncertainty is

⁵ Hugo of St. Victor, quoted in van den Brincken (294).

⁶ In the oldest attested reference to Europa, the post-Homeric *Hymn to Apollo*, the term seems to denote the mainland, as opposed to the Peloponnese. Present day speculation on the term's etymology is divided over whether the etymon is a

confirmed, I think, by the tendency of continental historians from the Middle of the eighth century onwards to restrict usage of "Europenses" and "Europa" to the Franks and their empire (van den Brincken, 290). A further uncertainty associated with Orosius's exordial evocation of Europe relates to the question of how many units it is useful to distinguish:

Ure ieldran ealne ðisne ymbhwyrft ðises middangeardes (. . .) on þreo todældon [ond] hie þa þrie dælas on þreo tonemdon: Asiam [ond] Europem [ond] Affricam, þeah þe sume men sæden þæt þær nære buton twegen dælas: Asia [ond] þæt oþer Europe.

(Bately:8)

Alongside the authority of ure ieldran, who had tripartioned the world, the Old English redactor of the *Histories* juxtaposed the authority of *sume men* who preferred to halve the world. This binary division into Self and Other remained a theoretical possibility right through the Middle Ages and was usually achieved by subordinating Africa to Europe. In this connexion it seems ironic that the only undisputed "natural" boundary between the continents – the Mediterranean – was never invoked in a bipartitioning of the world, which always involved substituting for that boundary the more variable one separating Europe from Asia, most often the Tanais or Don.

From Herodotus onwards the classical world had already posed the question of the arbitrariness of boundaries, whose contours could be traced back to an originary act that was simultaneously an act of naming. Herodotus's forty-fifth chapter in the fourth book of his *Histories* is not just remarkable for its implicit misogyny – he seems to question the validity of the eponymous heroine at the same time as he characterizes the women's names as misfits that are inadequate to geographical reality – but is also noteworthy for the way it associates the naming process with that of division of an essentially undivided reality. The act of naming/dividing is mythologized as an originary act accomplished by a boundary-marker (in the sense of someone who marks boundaries). If the boundaries of a

Greek one, meaning "black-faced" or "broad-faced," or whether it is an Assyrian one, designating the region where the sun sets. I have not myself come across medieval awareness of either of these etymologies.

region are uncertain – as Herodotus tells us is the case with Europe – then the founding myth must be an uncertain one also:

Another thing that puzzles me is why three distinct women's names should have been given to what is really a single landmass; and why, too, the Nile and the Phasis – or, according to some, the Maeotic Tanais and the Cimmerian Strait – should have been fixed upon for the boundaries. Nor have I been able to learn who it was that first marked the boundaries, or where they got the names from. Most Greeks assume that Libya was so called after a native woman and that Asia was named after the wife of Prometheus (. . . .) As for Europe, nobody knows if it is surrounded by sea, or where it got its name from, or who gave it, unless we are to say that it came from Europa, the Tyrian woman and before that was nameless like the rest. (285)

He goes on to comment that the continent is unlikely to have been named after the girl whose abduction from Phoenicia only took her as far as Crete and Lycia, neither of which he considers part of the land which "we now call Europe." He also seems to think that her being an Asian – which is the principal category of the Other for Herodotus – makes her an unlikely eponymous founder of his own continent.

The gap thus opened up by the cynicism of Herodotus was bridged by subsequent mythographers like Horace, who, in the 27th ode of his third book of *Odes and Epodes* represented the naming of the continent as Europa's consolation for abduction and rape:

Soon as she touched Crete, mighty with its hundred cities, "O father," she exclaimed, "O name of daughter, that I forsook, and filial duty, by frenzy overmastered! Whence have I come and whither? (. . . .) 'Worthless Europa,' my father, though far distant, urges, 'why dost thou hesitate to die? On this ash thou canst hang thyself with the girdle that happily has followed thee. Or if the cliffs and rocks sharp for death allure thee, come! give thy body to the hurrying gale, if thou wilt not rather card a mistress' wool, thou of royal blood, and be given o'er, a concubine, to the mercies of some barbarian queen!'"

As she thus complained, Venus with a treacherous laugh stood by, and her son with unstrung bow. Soon when the goddess had had sport enough, "Refrain from anger and hot passion," she exclaimed, "when the hated bull

shall give thee his horns to be mangled! Thou knowest not that thou art the wife of Jove invincible. Cease thy sobs! Learn to bear becomingly thy great destiny! A region of the earth shall take thy name."⁷

In the compressed time scheme of Horace's lyric, Europa has been deprived of her virginity by the divine bull at some unspecified moment during her westward sea-voyage on his back. It takes some stretching of the imagination to visualize the scene and it is hardly surprising that medieval euhemerization or demythologization, beginning with Isidore, was to imagine the abduction taking place in a ship decorated with frescoes representing bulls or alternately with the Cretan king's royal standard figuring an emblematic bull (*Etymologiae*, VIII, xi:34–35). *Modo multum amati* the bull may have been, but the mother of Europe is overheard voicing the feelings of loss and severance that psychoanalysts associate with the process of individuation. Even if that process is represented by Horace as one from the state of *filia* to that of *uxor*, there is no mistaking the parallelism between her painfully acquired right to a name and that of the land. It will be noted that whereas the myth conforms to the general pattern of naming by a colonizing outsider, the fact that it allows the Cretan island to stand as synecdoche for the land mass to which it had in early usage been opposed, is not the least of its dislocations. Unlike that other mythical heroine, Lucrecia, whose rape led to the founding of the Roman republic and whose suicide alone could convert the shame attendant upon rape into a cause for pride, the victim Europa is transformed by Horace's smiling Venus into a victor through the granting of her name to a *sectus orbis* (lines 67–75). The relationship between the

⁷ quae simul centum tetigit potentem / oppidis Creten, "pater, o relictum / filiae nomen pietasque" dixit / "victa furore. // unde quo veni? (. . .) / 'vilis Europe,' pater urget absens: / 'quid mori cessas? potes hac ab orno / pendulum zona bene te secuta / laedere collum. // sive te rupes et acuta leto / saxa delectant, age te procellae / crede veloci, nisi erile mavis / carpere pensum // regius sanguis dominaeque tradi / barbarae paelex.'" aderat querenti / perfidum ridens Venus et remisso / filius arcu. // mox ubi lusit satis, "abstineto" / dixit "irarum calidaeque rixae, / cum tibi invisus laceranda reddet / cornua taurus. // uxor invicti Iovis esse nescis. / mitte singultus, bene ferre magnam / disce fortunam; tua sectus orbis / nomina ducet." (264–269)

myth of sexual transgression and the founding myth is less transparent here than in the case of Lucrecia, where, as Ian Donaldson has shown (10 *et passim*), the parallel between the rape of the body and the rape of the land is a fairly straightforward one. But I shall ignore for the present the fascinating sexual inversions and territorial dislocations embodied in the story of Europa giving birth to the land and shall instead focus on the fact that the naming process is said to originate in an act of sexual transgression, which in turn is associated with an act of transportation or displacement.

The same features mark the Old Testament story which was to lead to medieval identification of the major classical divisions of the world with the three regions settled by Noah's sons after the flood. The enigmatic story in Genesis chapters nine and ten of the dissemination and linguistic diversification of the descendants of Shem, Ham and Japheth, whose geographical distribution corresponds roughly to the world as known to the redactor of that part of the Pentateuch, represents power relationships between these three population groups as reward and punishment for the proper and improper response to Noah's drunkenness, and constitutes the priestly redactor's version of the story of the tower of Babel.⁸

And Noah began to be a husbandman, and he planted a vineyard:
And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was
uncovered within his tent.

And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father,
and told his two brethren without.

And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both
their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the
nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward,
and they saw not their father's nakedness.

And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his
younger son had done unto him.

And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall
he be unto his brethren.

And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and
Canaan shall be his servant.

⁸ That particular story is usually attributed to the J, or Iahwist redactor.

God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.

And Noah lived after the flood three hundred and fifty years.

And all the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years: and he died.

Now these are the generations of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham and Japheth: and unto them were sons born after the flood.

(. . .) These are the families of the sons of Noah, after their generations, in their nations, and by these were the nations divided in the earth after the flood.

(Genesis 9:20 – 10:32)

Ham's crime, if taken literally as the sight of his father's nakedness, was slight indeed, and the seemingly disproportionate punishment naturally led to a spate of aggravating interpretations. The figure of speech that seems to have defeated most early Judeo-Christian exegesis is the expression that figures Ham's transgression as catching sight of his father's nakedness; in Leviticus and elsewhere in the Pentateuch, this expression (to behold a relative's nakedness) was used to designate incestuous relationships and Talmudic commentaries even speculated that Ham might have emasculated his father, in a legend resembling that of Chronos (*Midrash Rabbah*, I, 293, n.2). The Anglo-Saxon redactor of *Genesis A* had assimilated Ham's crime to wilful disrespect or mockery, in a tradition represented by the Jewish commentator Flavius Josephus and transmitted to Anglo-Saxon England by Genesis commentaries like that of Bede (Doane:277):

þær[Cham] freondlice/ on his agenum fæder ne wolde/
gesceawian ne þa sceonde huru /hleomagum helan ac he
hlihende/ broðrum sægde hu se beorn hine/ reste on
recede. (1579b–84a)

St. Augustine, in the sixteenth book of the *City of God*, had earlier allegorized Ham's crime as one of heretical misinterpretation of Christ's passion; drunken Noah is Christ, whose father would not let the cup pass from him (650–652). So the original story of sexual transgression, which

we might consider to be the founding myth proper, very soon became dissociated from the story of the peopling of the earth by the descendants of Shem, Ham and Japheth, whose names were, directly or indirectly, associated with the seventy-two tribes traditionally thought to constitute the world's population.⁹ The names of Noah's generations were by and large to people the maps of the onomaso-maniac Middle Ages divorced from their mythological support. So, for example, in *Genesis A*, Cham is condemned by the patriarch to be a *hleomaga þeow*; the concomittant blessing of the other brothers is however missing, as is any explicit reference to ethnic dissemination. Only the descendants of Shem's son Heber are said, in line 1649, to have settled in the East. Typically, Ælfric's treatise on the Old and New Testament elides the story of Ham's transgression, mentioning instead the building of the Tower of Babel and the destruction of Sodom immediately prior to the settling of Shem, Ham and Japheth's offspring in the East, South and North respectively (24–27).¹⁰ Through the narrator's anticipation of a posterior event, the punishment of the Sodomites, Ælfric has implicitly restored the original link between sexual transgression and ethnic dissemination — a link that had been lost in standard interpretations of Genesis 9 and 10.

It would have been interesting to examine Augustine's role in problematizing the representation of geographical reality through diverting attention away from the map in favour of moralizing allegorizations as well as through his replacement of tribes and nations by communities of believers. I can here merely point out that in the sixteenth book of the *City of God* Augustine equated Japheth's offspring with the inhabitants of the Christian community who were to reap the rewards of their faith, Shem's descendants with "the first fruits of Israel" who had crucified the God born of their race, and Ham's descendants with the

⁹ That the eponymous founder of a nation is not always discernable from its current name, is attributed by Flavius Josephus to the principles of intelligibility and euphony that governed Greek renamings i.e. the people called Scythians by the Greeks were once called Magogians, who were of course descended from Magog, son of Japheth (I:123; 59).

¹⁰ In this work (274), as elsewhere (*Interrogationes*:40), Ælfric seems particularly eager to stress the fact that Japheth's descendants settled in the North, and nowhere mentions the West (tripartitioning oblige).

heretical Christians — in other words, they were the good, the bad and the worse in the only map of the world that could matter, the tropological one (650–652). These allegorizations, which reinterpreted the myth and the map, were clearly not foremost in the minds of the British historians of the Middle Ages, who in some MSS of the *Historia Britonum* blithely traced the lineage of Brutus the Briton back to the (cursed) Ham. Nor were they accessible to Alfred's biographer Asser, who, in identifying Alfred's ancestor Scaef ("the boy in a boat") with Shem (the boy from the Ark) gave Alfred a semitic genealogy, as was pointed out by Denys Hay in his remarkable book on the emergence of the idea of Europe (43–48). Hay is primarily interested in tracing the progressive emotional investment of the three continents — an investment "which they lacked in the pagan period" (14). Where he, however, everywhere emphasizes the link between classical tripartitioning of the world and the Judeo-Christian generations of Noah, I perceive a hiatus. Augustine is not the only influential thinker to have separated within the body of his text treatment of the tripartite world from commentary on the relevant sections from Genesis. His friend Orosius opted in his *Historiae* for the classical tradition only, ignoring a Iaphetic definition of Europe altogether, as did his late ninth-century Anglo-Saxon translator. TO diagrams, which according to the recent count by Destombes (19) represent an impressive 60% of all extant medieval *mappae mundi*, are deceptive in their apparent identification of the regions settled by the patriarch's three sons and their descendants with the classical continents named after their eponymous founders.

This illustration¹¹ from an eleventh-century MS of Isidore's

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Etymologies unites what the medieval cosmographer's text separates. Like Augustine, the Spanish bishop (in books seven and nine) performs his exegetical onomastics at a considerable remove from his geographical partitioning of the world (in book fourteen) reflecting, I believe, another form of hiatus between what I have been calling the "myth and the map." Moreover, the examples of the OE Orosius, and of British and Saxon genealogies suggest that it is not just the pagan version of the founding myth that has fallen off the edges of the cosmographer's maps. The rare Anglo-Saxon *mappae mundi* that have come to my notice present a similarly confusing picture. The Latin captions of an early twelfth century TO map in St. John's College Oxford,¹² places Japheth, the founder of the nations in whom salvation history would be fulfilled, in Asia (and Britannia in the circumambient Ocean, just off Asia):

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It may be objected that cosmography, unlike mythography, as a discourse of the real, or one that represents itself as such, never aimed at providing place names with stories that would account for boundary-making and place naming. Perhaps, like Pliny, the encyclopaedic cosmographer thought it was his task "[to] specify the bare names of the places without their record, as they were in the beginning before they had achieved any history, and (. . .) though their names are mentioned, it is only as forming a portion of the world and of the natural universe." (III:3–5) Again and again, the Roman cosmographers assure us that the world has its own order, *suum ordinem*. That the same authors provide us with mythologizing explanations of that "natural" order, as does Pliny in the paragraph immediately following the lines just quoted (where he outlines the Mediterranean coastal regions in terms of a personified Ocean, whose conquering ardor makes certain regions shrink in fear, and therefore creates recessions in the coastline (III:7), merely confirms that founding myths may support a vision of the givenness of the world's geographical configurations and their subsequent cosmographical representations, just as they may suggest an arbitrarily, or conventionally, divided world. The point I am trying to make is that the cosmographical inheritance of Anglo-Saxon England was fundamentally ambiguous in relation to the naming of places and the determining of boundaries that circumscribed them. This paper has reflected on what this might have meant with regard to Europe, the continent whose name was given by a myth that was accessible in euhemerized form only, where it was accessible at all. It is an anthropological commonplace that every place on a map also signals an event in history. The principal challenge to the student of Anglo-Saxon cosmography, I suggest, is represented by the severance of this axiomatic link between the place Europa, and the event, or *mythos*, it evokes.

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