

HISTORY OF CARTOGRAPHY PROJECT

No. 13: HYMN TO GOD, MY GOD, IN MY SICKNESS

Commentary

David Woodward, cofounder and editor of the *History of Cartography* series, surrounded himself with John Donne's work. He selected five of Donne's passages for the third History of Cartography Project broadsheet, "John Donne on Maps and the Microcosm: A Sampler" (1994). A framed and beautifully decorated copy of "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" sat near his desk. Rosalind, David's wife of thirty-eight years, read "The Good-Morrow" at a memorial service following his death on August 25, 2004.

For his lecture at the 20th International Conference on the History of Cartography (Boston/Portland, 2003), David examined Donne's "Hymn to God, My God, in My Sicknes," which was probably composed in 1623, late in Donne's life. Although much of Donne's work captured David's interest and passion at a very personal level, he came to this particular poem as an historian of cartography who was fascinated with Donne's use of maps and scientific allusions. That David chose to study this poem (and did so before the onset of his own illness) supports one of his life-long convictions: maps are more than geographical tools or records; they are inherently cultural and personal.

The following is taken from David's analysis.

In Donne's poem, "Hymn to God, My God, in My Sicknes," the poet is lying on what he thinks is his death bed. He likens himself to a map examined by his physicians, now transformed into cosmographers. They point out a southwestern strait on him, the Strait of Magellan (*per fretum febris*), through which he will reach the other world to the West. Moreover, the image of the straits is clear: they are not only narrow, but their notoriously strong currents made them passable in only one direction ("For, though those currents yield return to none"). But in passing through these straits at his death, the poet is resurrected, because West and East are the same thing on the map ("As west and east / In all flat maps (and I am one) are one, / So death doth touch the resurrection").

Commentators have asked whether Donne had a specific map in mind when he wrote the poem. If he used real maps to trigger his descriptions—and there are reasons to believe that he did—we should consider the whole corpus of maps that might have been available to him. The argument that a medieval tripartite or T-in-O map best fits the poem does not account for Donne's powerful and evocative reference to the straits. The pairing of Magellan with the Pacific, Anian with Asia, and Gibraltar with Jerusalem are explicit in Donne's poem, but the image of the tripartite world

provides little resonance. Also, in other works, Donne made use of the word "hemispheres." Somehow the two hemispheres must be joined to make one world. I believe that in "Hymn to God, My God, in My Sicknes," Donne means the east and west hemispheres.

I propose that we invoke the image of the double hemisphere stereographic projection, one of the most popular world map types of the late sixteenth century. It is almost certain that Donne was familiar with the world map published on this projection by Jodocus Hondius in 1595 to commemorate Drake's and Cavendish's circumnavigations (the so-called "Drake Broadside Map"). In the right hemisphere the three straits are clearly visible. Indeed, almost no other maps of this kind configure the continents to allow this. Usually, Africa, Europe, and Asia are contained in one hemisphere and the Americas in the other.



Vera totius expeditionis navticae, ca. 1595. Size of the original: ca. 38 x 53.5 cm. Photograph courtesy of the British Library, London (M.T.6.a.2).

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