

## No. 7: The Map as a Metaphor for Access to Knowledge by Nicholas of Cusa

### *Commentary*

Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64) was a prominent churchman, reformer, philosopher, theologian, and mathematician. Born in the village of Cues (modern Bernkastel-Kues), on the Moselle, he studied at the universities of Heidelberg, Padua, and Cologne. An active participant in the Council of Basel, he was made a cardinal in 1448. In addition to his active involvement in the affairs of the Church, he produced an impressive number of philosophical and theological writings and was known, especially later in life, for his personal piety.

Nicholas also seems to have had a keen interest in astronomy and in the mathematical and practical problems of cartography. He wrote a treatise on the reform of the Julian calendar (1436) and purchased a manuscript celestial globe, an astrolabe, and a torquetum in Germany in 1444. The "Eichstätt map" of central Europe bears an inscription reading in part: "let thanks be given to Nicholas of Cusa, who...ordered places, unexplored by any predecessors, to be engraved on a copper-plate of modest size." Little is known of the manuscript original and its preparation, although it has been speculated that Nicholas's position in Rome allowed him to collate information from a wide variety of informants, while he may himself have made observations while traveling as a papal legate for Pius II in Germany.

Nicholas's thought was strongly shaped by a sense of the profound separation between man and God. Man's hunger for knowledge therefore had as its goal not absolute truth, but "learned ignorance," the knowledge of his own inability to know. Nicholas emphasized, however, not the negative consequence that results from this state, but rather man's power to create a series of conjectures that approximate the truth: this creativity demonstrates that the human mind was formed in the image and likeness of God (*Genesis* 1:26).

These are the ideas that we find expressed in the passage from Nicholas's *Compendium*, written in the year of his death (1464). In a comparison between man and the animals, Nicholas chose the metaphor of man as a cosmographer to emphasize man's unique

ability to control and conceptualize the world through his intellectual and artistic nature. Borrowing the image of the human mind as a city from John Scotus Eriugena and St. Bonaventure, he contrasted its depiction of the mind as the passive recipient of information from the senses with a much more dynamic image of man as the synthesizer and organizer of this information into what is essentially a new creation or a new world within his mind. Man should then turn to contemplate the new version of the world that his creativity has produced, shutting off the senses and thus further access to the external world. Through his ability to create this new world, man discovers his likeness to God; through inward contemplation he can then achieve a truer appreciation of God.

Nicholas's choice of the mapmaker as a metaphor for man's access to knowledge sheds interesting light on the place of cartography in the 1460s, suggesting at the very least that the idea of the map was familiar enough to potential readers to make it a useful aid in explaining difficult philosophical concepts.

Translation and Commentary by Victoria Morse from Nicholas of Cusa, *Compendium*, ch. VIII, 1464. In his *Opera Omnia*, XI:3, pp. 17-20, ed. Bruno Becker and Carolus Bormann (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1964).

The picture of the cosmographer in the city is a composite of fifteenth-century images compiled by Jennifer Woodward in Adobe *Photoshop*®.

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