Europe transformed drastically over the 1400s and 1500s, a period of time referred to as the Renaissance. Knowledge and truth were no longer considered to stem from the Roman Catholic church but from logic and science. This change is reflected in maps.

This is a diagram of what Europeans maps during the Middle Ages looked like.

Medieval maps are called T-O maps because they show the continents surrounded by an “O” of water and separated by a “T” of water.

Interaction: What continents did they know of during the Middle Ages? (Asia, Africa, and Europe).

Interaction: Where is north on T-O maps? (to the left). Would you like to travel using this map? (You would get very lost).

Interaction: You would get very lost if you tried to travel with a T-O map. Why would maps made during the Middle Ages show the continents this way? (First of all, they didn’t know the exact shape of the continents, and second of all, very few were traveling anyway, so there wasn’t a lot of demand for maps they could travel by.)

This map, made in 1475, is a good example of a T-O style map.

During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church was in charge of education. They chose what could be taught and to whom. So maps that were published in books often had very religious themes.

For example, the medieval church taught that human beings were first created in the Garden of Eden, which was located in the far east. It is pictured at the very top of this map. In fact, they believed that spices, which do usually came from East Asia, were twigs that people pulled from the rivers that flowed out of the Garden of Eden.

Another example is the picture of Gog, the evil king of the nation, Magog. According to the medieval church, the end of the Christian world would come when Gog and his subjects were released from the land they were trapped in. If you look closely, Gog has horns and a tail and apparently just stole a man’s arm.

It was also believed that there were monsters in the less civilized parts of the Earth. This map, for example, shows dragons in Africa.

By the time this map was made, people were already exploring faraway parts of the world. But during the Middle Ages, European ships usually wouldn’t sail out of sight of land unless they were in the Mediterranean Sea. It was said that the Greek god, Hercules, places pillars at the entrance to the Atlantic Ocean to warn sailors not to go any further. The Pillars of Hercules are even pictured on this map.

Interaction: Who can name a country that touches the Mediterranean Sea? (Lots of possible answers: Italy, Turkey, Palestine, Greece, Spain, Egypt, etc.).

Interaction: Even though Medieval Europeans did not care for much contact with the outside world, there were a few imported goods that they couldn’t live without, so to speak. Can anyone name one of these goods that seafaring on the Mediterranean would have been necessary to supply? (A few possible answers: sugar was produced in Egypt, spices from the far east were available for purchase in coastal east Mediterranean cities, especially Alexandria.).

This is a map of the world printed in 1504, but based on the mapping methods of a 2nd century Greek-Egyptian, Ptolemy. Ptolemy wrote a book about how to map using Longitude and Latitude.

When Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453, ancient Greek and Roman books were sent to Rome to save them from being destroyed. These manuscripts, including the books written by Ptolemy, contained a vast amount of knowledge lost to western civilization over the Middle Ages. When European scholars rediscovered them in 1453, it sparked a widespread fascination with the Greeks and Romans and a thirst for scientific knowledge. The period of time after this is called the Renaissance, meaning Rebirth.

Interaction: Can anyone tell me what I mean by longitude and latitude? (They are the imaginary lines on the globe that say how far north, south, east, or west a place is.)

Latitude tells you have far north or south from the Equator a place is, and longitude tells you how far east or west from the prime meridian a place is.

Interaction: Can anyone find the compass rose on this map? (It is the windheads.)

Interaction: Which wind is the same as our Northwest? (trick question: the Greco-Roman system of 12 winds doesn’t have NW, SW, NE, or SE).

Like other maps of this time period, it shows a sense of fascination and anxiety about distant parts of the world. The mapmaker notes that Africa is home to Rhinoceros, Elephants, and Tigers. He also notes the area where “Anthropophagi” lives. Anthropophagi is Latin for man-eater.

This map was made by an Italian mapmaker a bit after the Middle Ages had ended.

They called these Portolan Charts because they were made to help sailors sail between ports in the Mediterranean Sea. There’s something on this map that wasn’t on the last--a traditional compass rose. It was Italian sailors who came up with the 8 wind system that replaced the Greek and Roman 12-wind system. Of course, today we think of them as directions rather than winds.

Interaction: Can anyone guess why this map is shaped like this? (It is made of Vellum, not paper. Vellum is animal skin, and the skinny part to the left is the neck).

This map was also made by an Italian, but during the 1600s, when Italy and other European nations were conquering parts of the New World and Africa. They mostly stayed near the coasts for two reasons: first, it was easier to ship people and things to and from coastal areas; and second, many Europeans couldn’t survive inland, especially in Africa.

Interaction: Does anyone know why it was so dangerous to go inland? (Malaria)

Today we know that malaria is spread by mosquitoes, but in the 1600s, it was thought that malaria and other diseases were carried on southern winds. This is why some maps show southern windheads as skulls.
This map was published in the 1493 Nuremburg Chronicle, a book that described everything that was "known" about the world, sort of like an encyclopedia.

This map was made before Europeans knew about North and South America. It shows Asia, Europe, and Africa along with pictures of the men that settled each continent according to the medieval church. A man named Sem was believed to be the father of all of Asia, Japhet the father of all Europe, and Cam the father of all Africa.

On the side of the map are pictures of monstrous people that were believed to live in faraway places. Medieval scholars believed in them because the ancient Greeks and Roman writers had described them.

Interaction: This top picture shows a man with six arms. Can anyone tell me where you might have seen pictures of people with many arms? (Hindu gods are often pictured with four, six, or eight arms).

The picture second from the top shows a woman covered in hair. This is probably based on a birth defect, called Hypertrichosis, which makes a person grow thick hair all over their bodies. There are even portraits of people suffering from Hypertrichosis from the 1500s.

The page on the right is from the same book.

Probably the strangest monster on this page is the one on the top left. It shows a man with a dog's head. The ancient Greek and Roman writers described a race of monstrous people in Africa who walked like men do, but had the heads of dogs and lived on raw meat. Their language also sounded like the barking of dogs.

Interaction: The Greeks and Romans did actually meet these creatures, but they aren't a race of monstrous humans. Can anyone guess what the Greeks and Romans were actually describing? (Baboons).

The Greeks and Romans who actually saw baboons most likely did not mistake them for a tribe of human beings. But the people who wrote about them had probably heard them described from someone who had heard them described from someone else. So after hundreds of years, baboons were thought to be a tribe of human beings.

Another “monster” to take note of is the man with the giant lower lip on the top right-hand side of the page. This is probably based on the Mursi tribe in Ethiopia. When a woman becomes engaged in the Mursi tribe, she might choose to pierce her lip. Over many years, she slowly stretches out the piercing until she can fit a small plate in it. It might seem strange to our eyes, but it is considered beautiful to the Mursi people.

Even though this book has a lot of medieval lore in it, it was an incredibly progressive project that reveals the influence of the Renaissance at work. The word "Renaissance" means rebirth, and the Nuremburg Chronicle was published in German, a vernacular language, so that the knowledge of the Greeks and Romans could be reborn amongst the common people.

This map was made in the 1550s, well after European nations had come in contact with native peoples of the Americas.

However, the images of Africans and Americans still depicted them as somewhat monstrous, if not in appearance then in deed. In the top left corner of this map, we have an image of people with lip plates again, but the truly monstrous people are found in the lower left corner.

Interaction: Can anyone tell what they are doing to make Europeans identify them as monstrous? (Practicing cannibalism: it was fairly common for native American peoples to practice ritual cannibalism. In other words, they weren’t consuming humans for consumption but for religious purposes. In most cases, it was actually a sign of respect for the deceased. The Yanamamo people of the Amazon, for example, still consume the ashes of respected elders as a way to absorb their spirit back into the village.)

Another interesting part of this map is the angels at the North and South poles who are turning cranks.

Interaction: Can anyone tell me why this is significant? (It shows support for the theory that the heavenly bodies move because the earth rotates on its axis and around the sun. The church, at this time, taught that the sun and stars all rotated around the earth, and did not care for anyone saying otherwise.)

The Reformation, another product of the Renaissance, displaced many educated people, including the author of this 16th century map, Olaus Magnus.

When Sweden adopted Protestantism, the Roman Catholic clergy were not exactly welcome any longer. Olaus Magnus and his brother, both clergymen in the Roman Catholic church, fled from Sweden to Rome. There, Olaus wrote a book about Scandinavia which included this map.

Interaction: Would someone tell me what stands out most about this map to you? (many possible answers, but wait until someone mentions the sea monsters)

Magnus' book described dozens of sea monsters "known" to the northern peoples. Some are incredibly bizarre and fantastical, and others are clearly based on real creatures. For example, the Nahuai is undoubtedly the Narwhal. Nevertheless, this map and its monsters reflect a clear anxiety of sea travel, common throughout the Renaissance.

Interaction: Can anyone identify the Roman dieties on this map? (Apollo, the Sun god; Mercury, the messenger; Venus, the goddess of love and beauty; Mars, god of War; Jupiter; god of the Sky; Neptune, god of the Ocean; Saturn, god of time)

Activity Transition

I have a book of short biographies of important cartographers for everyone to take home, but first we need to finish them.