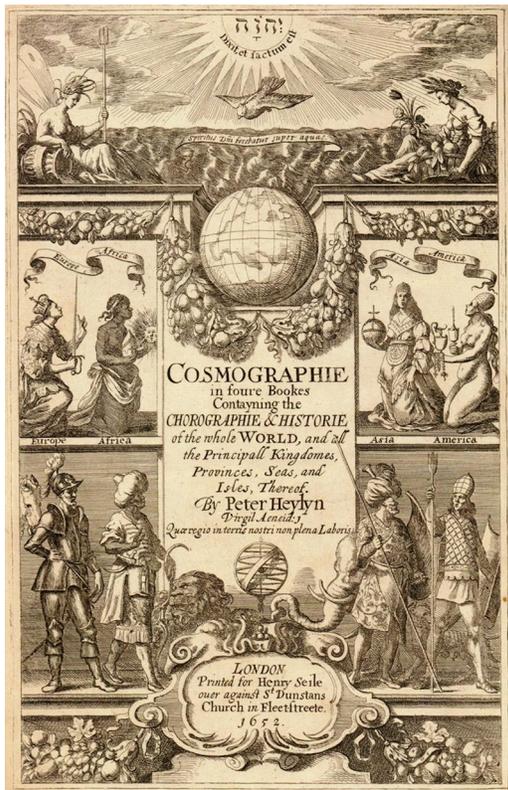


Symbolism and Allegory for Map Collectors

By Marti Griggs

During the Renaissance artists used iconography to convey specific themes and combined symbols to weave elaborate allegories. Their audiences were familiar with Greek and Roman mythology and were deeply knowledgeable of Christianity from which these symbols originated. The art of mapmaking was as much a part of the whole Renaissance movement as were painting and literature. Mapmakers also used a vast repertoire of symbols that were universally understood by their customers, but are potentially mystifying to modern collectors of old maps.



The title page from Peter Heylyn's *Cosmographie* (1652) illustrates a variety of symbols characteristic of cartographic art. The Divinity (rays of the sun, Hebrew Jehovah, and dove) and his creation, clouds (Air), sea nymph (Water) and Ceres (Earth), form the top panel. The second panel shows both European and Christian dominance in the female personifications of the continents. The final panel presents the male representatives of the continents, each in military dress with their attendant animals. The garland of fruit symbolizes wealth and plenty.



Several recurrent symbols are seen in Frederick de Wit's title page for the *Atlas Major* (1690). Seated in a throne is the earth goddess *Cybele* with her turreted headpiece and lion at her feet. She is instructing the personification of History and Geography while the angel of Fame blows her trumpets emphasizing the importance of the atlas. Perched atop a globe is a very unusual representation of the four continents pictured as infants. In the background, Atlas holds up the heavens while Neptune and his entourage skim across the sea.

Allegorical figures personify abstract concepts, such as glory, wisdom, prosperity, and commerce. They can also represent one of the liberal arts, such as geography, astronomy or history; a nation, continent or heavenly body; one of the virtues or vices; the cardinal directions; the four elements or four seasons.

A rudimentary knowledge of the iconography commonly used in cartographic art is helpful in understanding the cultural context of early maps. Many symbols are obvious, while others are more difficult to decipher and understand. It is not necessary to understand all the complexities in order to enjoy and appreciate the various embellishments that can be found on maps and especially on the title pages of geographical works. But it is helpful to know some of the main characters and symbols.

One of the most commonly used themes in cartography is Europe receiving homage from the people of the world signifying European dominance throughout the world. Generally Europe is depicted as the regal queen Europa with the personifications of the continents or a specific region depicted in a subservient manner. The continents are generally portrayed as female figures, but occasionally male soldiers served the same purpose.

Biblical scenes are a prevalent theme on maps, particularly those of the world and the Holy Land. The Divinity may be shown in a variety of ways including the rays of sunshine, an all-seeing eye, the Greek letter delta or the Hebrew letters JHVH (Jehovah). Commonly used icons include the cross that symbolizes the Christian religion, the crescent of the Islamic religion and an arrow that represents pagan religions or heathenism. A prevalent theme pictures Christianity defeating paganism or Islam, or good triumphing over evil.



The dedication cartouche from J.B. Homann's map of the Duchy of Wurtemberg (1710) features the portrait of the Duke, Eberhardo Ludwigo surrounded by allegorical figures. Mars represents military strength while Diana signifies the bountiful wildlife of the duchy. Notice the rays of sunshine falling on the portrait symbolizing God's blessings.



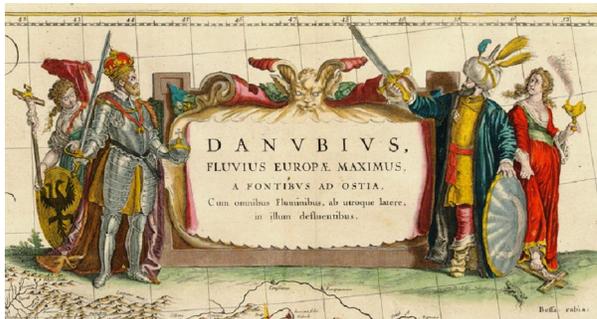
The title cartouche of J.B. Homann's map of the Duchy of Wurtemberg (1710) symbolizes peace (putti with olive branch), plenty (Bacchus and the satyr), community (figure with a spade), and commerce (putti in the guise of Mercury and the river god).

The portrait of a king, queen, or emperor signifies royal affiliation, that the monarch has commissioned the work, or that the region mapped is under his or her possession. Representations of royalty are often accompanied by the personification of Fame, or Honor, carrying (or wearing) a laurel wreath and blowing a trumpet. She sometimes carries two trumpets of different lengths symbolizing good and ill fame.

Peace and prosperity are also recurrent subjects in cartographic art. The concepts were depicted through a number of symbols including the earth goddesses with overflowing cornucopia, the combination of cornucopia (or garland of fruit), rudder and globe symbols, and by figures representing peace, justice, and abundance. Peace is generally pictured as an angel holding a healing caduceus, olive branch or palm and is associated with doves. Justice is the familiar blindfolded figure holding a sword in one hand and scales in the other.

A group of figures engaged in various scientific pursuits is a ubiquitous subject signifying the importance of expanding knowledge. In these scenes, a host of putti is usually joined by the female personifications of History, Geography and Astronomy and sometimes the recognizable figure of a prominent geographer like Ptolemy or Mercator. These figures, especially putti, representing surveying, navigation and mapmaking, frequently embellish cartouches.

Images of trade and commerce dominated pictorial cartouches in the 18th century. Mercury, mythological god of trade and commerce and the symbol of exploration, is a recurrent figure found in cartography from this period. Neptune and river gods are other symbols associated with naval power and commerce.



The title cartouche for Willem Blaeu's map of the Danube (circa 1635) features the conflict between Christianity and Islam. At left Europa (holding a crucifix) and the Holy Roman Emperor (double-headed eagle on shield) face-off with an Ottoman Sultan and Asia (holding a censer), who stands on a crucifix. At bottom the river Danube is personified by a host of river gods and playful nymphs signifying the importance of trade and commerce along the river.



As ornamentation became less elaborate, concepts were increasingly alluded to simply with the use of the imperial and nationalist symbols, such as the American eagle or Russian bear. American mapmakers used symbols, such as a railroad, emphasizing the concepts of Manifest Destiny and the Age of Progress.

Those with an interest in symbolism and allegory can learn more from Rodney Shirley's *Courtiers and Cannibals, Angels and Amazons*, which explores the art of cartographic title pages. This article is excerpted from the second edition of *Collecting Old Maps*, due for publication in February, 2015. The book includes an extensive list of the themes, concepts, mythical figures, and symbols frequently seen on old maps.