



The Cartographic State

Maps, Territory, and the Origins of Sovereignty

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Sovereignty

JORDAN BRANCH
Brown University



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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107040960

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First published 2014

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Branch, Jordan, 1976–

The cartographic state : Maps, territory and the origins of sovereignty / Jordan Branch.
pages cm. – (Cambridge studies in international relations ; 127)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-04096-0 (hardback)

1. Cartography–History. 2. Sovereignty. 3. International relations. 4. Territory, National. 5. Boundaries. 6. World politics. I. Title.

GA201.B69 2013

320.1'5–dc23

2013020832

ISBN 978-1-107-04096-0 Hardback

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The Cartographic State

Why is today's world map filled with uniform states separated by linear boundaries? The answer to this question is central to our understanding of international politics, but the question is at the same time much more complex – and more revealing – than we might first think. This book examines the important but overlooked role played by cartography itself in the development of modern states. Drawing upon evidence from the history of cartography, peace treaties, and political practices, the book reveals that early modern mapping dramatically altered key ideas and practices among both rulers and subjects, leading to the implementation of linear boundaries between states and centralized territorial rule within them. In his analysis of early modern innovations in the creation, distribution, and use of maps, Branch explains how the relationship between mapping and the development of modern territories shapes our understanding of international politics today.

JORDAN BRANCH is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Brown University.

The Cartographic State

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For my parents, Eren and Watson Branch

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Acknowledgments

Although this project has involved a lot of time working alone, with stacks of books, there is no way I could have completed it without the help of many people.

This book began as a dissertation at the University of California, Berkeley, so my first debt of gratitude is to my dissertation committee: Steve Weber, Chris Ansell, Ron Hassner, and Kate O'Neill. Nick Ziegler also served as a member of my prospectus committee, helping to get the project off the ground. Chris Ansell was instrumental, from the very beginning of this project, in helping me negotiate the back-and-forth between extreme breadth and complexity and making a coherent and defensible argument. Ron Hassner's enthusiasm and help have been amazing – who else, after all, combines such a depth of knowledge about our field, a limitless willingness to help, and an impressive collection of antique maps? Kate O'Neill provided extremely useful feedback in spite of facing the monumental task of reading an entire dissertation in one go, rather than in a more civilized piecemeal fashion. Finally, I could not have asked for a better dissertation chair than Steve Weber. From the very beginning, Steve provided me with exactly the type of guidance that I needed, allowing me the freedom to pursue whatever wild ideas came up, but keeping my historical study grounded in the key issues of International Relations. Steve was the kind of advisor I could – and did – call to ask about how to phrase specific parts of a response letter for an article revision. His support has been priceless.

My fellow graduate students at Berkeley have also earned my thanks – for transforming classes, exam preparations, and everything else that could make graduate school a burden into positive experiences. Jessica Rich and Naomi Choi deserve special mention as close friends who have always put up with me and as colleagues who have given me honest and supportive feedback on my work. In addition, the broader International Relations community at Berkeley, including

the numerous students and faculty affiliated with the Institute for International Studies, provided a stimulating environment for exchanging ideas and papers – even for someone like me, whose work has sometimes been at the periphery of our field. (The Institute for International Studies also funded part of the research for this book.)

In 2011, I was extremely fortunate to receive the Hayward R. Alker Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Center for International Studies at the University of Southern California. The year I spent there allowed me the time, resources, and support needed to convert a somewhat unwieldy dissertation into a focused and vastly improved book. Particularly valuable were the support and feedback I received from Patrick James, the director of the Center, and from many of the faculty in USC's School of International Relations (including, in particular, Mai'a Cross, Robert English, Brian Rathbun, and Ann Tickner). In addition, while at USC, I was fortunate to be able to meet with Nicholas Onuf, who provided invaluable comments on this project, as well as sage advice that was particularly helpful to a new Ph.D.

In 2012 I joined the political science department at Brown University, where I finished the revisions on this book. My colleagues at Brown immediately welcomed me and made me feel like a valued member of the department; they have helped make the transition to being a faculty member completely painless. The students in my fall 2012 "Maps and Politics" class were also helpful in their questioning of the arguments in this book. I am extremely pleased to have finished this project – and to begin new ones – in this friendly and rich academic environment.

Additionally, this project benefited from the extensive pushing, prodding, and questioning that I have faced at a number of venues outside Berkeley, USC, and Brown when speaking at conferences and at other universities, including the political science departments at George Washington University, Northwestern University, the University of Chicago, and the University of Toronto. When you start talking about maps, people become interested, and I have always benefited from the incisive comments, questions, and suggestions that I have received. Others who provided valuable advice include Daniel Nexon, Hein Goemans, Christian Reus-Smit, and Jeppe Strandsbjerg. Also helpful was the extensive feedback from reviewers and editors at *International Organization* and the *European Journal of International Relations*, where some of this book's arguments have previously appeared (reprinted with permission from: "Mapping

the Sovereign State: Technology, Authority, and Systemic Change,” *International Organization* 65(1), Winter 2011; “‘Colonial Reflection’ and Territoriality: The Peripheral Origins of Sovereign Statehood,” *European Journal of International Relations* 18(2), June 2012). The questions and suggestions of the two anonymous readers of the book manuscript also improved the final product immensely. John Haslam at Cambridge University Press has guided the book through the publication process flawlessly, and, from our very first meeting, his enthusiasm for this project has been invaluable.

Finally, I have to thank the people who have made it possible for me to bring this project to fruition. Helen Lee, whom I had the unbelievable good fortune to meet in a graduate seminar on research methods (of all places!), gives me the kind of support and encouragement that one can only dream of. My brother, Adam Branch, has played an instrumental role in my whole academic career as well as in this project. Leading by example, Adam first showed me that graduate studies in political science could be fun. Then, before I began at Berkeley, he gave me a copy of Hendrik Spruyt’s *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors* – guiding me toward the questions that eventually led to this book. My parents, of course, deserve more gratitude than I can offer. Their support – of every imaginable kind – has always been beyond measure. Their example and love continue to keep me going, every day. This book is dedicated to them.

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1 Introduction

In the 1680s, King Louis XIV of France was presented with a new map of his realm, the product of decades of work using the most advanced scientific mapping techniques of the early modern period. Funded largely by government resources and based on the combination of trigonometric surveying and exacting measurements of latitude, the map showed the correct coastal outline of France, in contrast to where that coastline had previously been pictured as lying. (See Figure 1.1.) The updated image revealed that earlier maps had significantly overestimated the total area of France – with a difference of about 54,000 square miles – and Louis is reported to have expressed his dismay at this “loss” of territory, greater in size than any of his successful military conquests to date.¹

The map, of course, revealed that Louis had never ruled a territory that was as large as he had imagined it to be. The map itself changed nothing, other than the ruler’s idea of his realm – but the *idea* of what is ruled is central to how political actors pursue their interests. Since the early modern period, maps have continued to shape how rulers and subjects understand politics, defining everything from divisions between states to internal jurisdictions and rights. At the global level, the mapped image of the world dominates ideas of political organization: states are understood as territorial claims extending to a mapped linear boundary. Although this may appear perfectly natural to observers today, how we got here is anything but straightforward.

In other words, why is today’s world map filled with territorial states separated by linear boundaries? Answering this question is central to understanding the foundations of international politics. In today’s international system, all political units are sovereign territorial states,

¹ While the exact words of Louis’ reaction are unknown, when the map was presented to the Royal Academy of Sciences and members of the court, its implications were clear. See Konvitz 1987: 7–8; Petto 2007: 7.

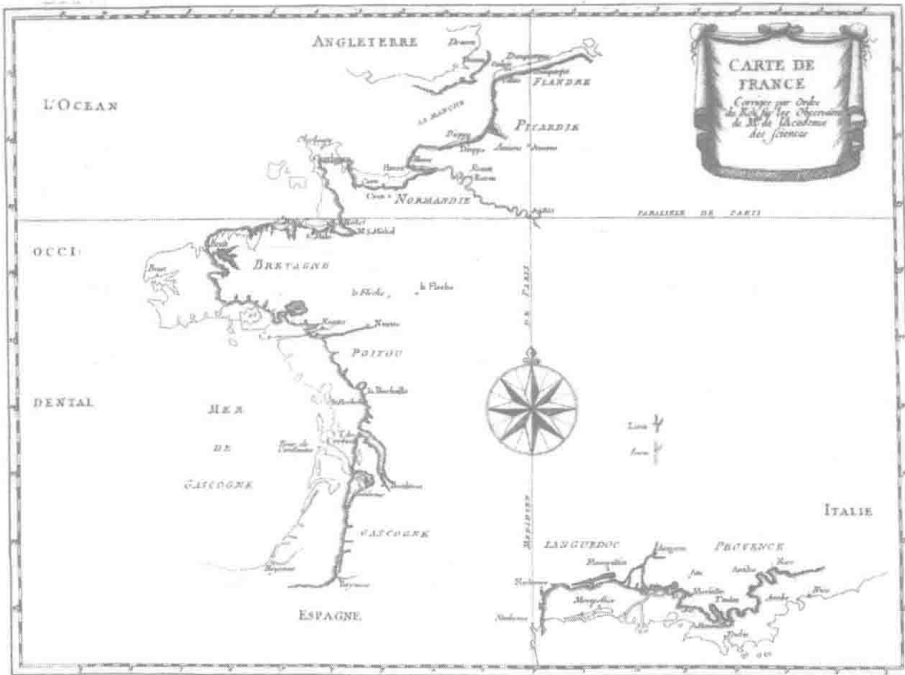


Figure 1.1 Map of the coastline of France, 1693

Note: This image is of a 1693 printed copy of the map, but an original manuscript version had probably been prepared in 1683. The coastline describing a larger expanse (drawn in a lighter outline) represented the earlier estimation from the mid 1600s, while the coastline depicting a smaller area (drawn in a heavier outline) was based on the new measurements (Konvitz 1987: 7–8; Petto 2007: 7).

defined by linear boundaries and with theoretically exclusive claims to authority within those lines. This provides the basis for international law and practice – the foundational terms for how states bargain with one another. Although the ideal may not describe reality in some parts of the world, it nonetheless shapes the goals toward which almost all political actors aspire. Yet this system is actually unique to our modern world and emerged out of a complex set of processes inside and outside early modern Europe – processes that we need to understand in order to grasp both the origins and the future trajectory of the sovereign state.

Asking why our maps look the way they do is more complicated – and more revealing – than we might think. The role of maps in the emergence of sovereign states was not merely to depict the political

world as it existed. Maps were fundamentally involved in producing this outcome as well. Maps have shaped, and continue to shape, how people understand the world and their place within it. Early modern Europe saw a revolution both in mapmaking technologies and in the ideas and practices of political rule. That was no coincidence: how rulers conceived of their realms was altered as they, and others, increasingly used maps that depicted the world in a new way. The origins of our international system of sovereign territorial states can be found at the intersection of cartographic depictions, political ideas and institutions, and the actions of rulers and subjects. That intersection is the subject of this book.

Evidence from the history of cartography, peace treaties, and political practices reveals how new mapping technologies changed the fundamental framework of politics in early modern Europe. Key characteristics of modern statehood – such as linear boundaries between homogeneous territories – appeared first in the representational space of maps and only subsequently in political practices on the ground. Authority structures not depicted on maps were ignored or actively renounced in favor of those that could be shown, leading to the implementation of linear boundaries between states and centralized territorial rule within them. For their part, mapmakers never intended to change politics. Instead, they were concerned with making money, creating art, and advancing the science of cartography. Furthermore, the European encounter with the Americas and subsequent competition therein required new means for making political claims – new means that were provided by mapping. These intertwined dynamics reshaped political organization and interaction, leading to the system of exclusively territorial states that has continued to structure international politics to this day.

Mapping and the emergence of the sovereign state

The territorial state is familiar to observers today, but the fundamental novelty of this form of political organization is often missed. The drastic nature of the early modern transformation of political rule is revealed when we look at changes in how political authority was conceptualized from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. For example, in 1086 a contemporary observer wrote as follows concerning the creation of

the Domesday Book, the inventory of William the Conqueror's rule in England:

Then sent he [King William] his men over all England into each shire; commissioning them to find out "How many hundreds of hides were in the shire, what land the king himself had, and what stock upon the land; or, what dues he ought to have by the year from the shire." ... So very narrowly, indeed, did he commission them to trace it out, that there was not one single hide, nor a yard of land, nay, moreover (it is shameful to tell, though he thought it no shame to do it), not even an ox, nor a cow, nor a swine was there left, that was not set down in his writ. And all the recorded particulars were afterwards brought to him.²

The passage illustrates the medieval tradition of claiming political authority over a collection of diverse persons and places, recorded in this case in an exhaustive written survey. Rule, in other words, was not about how extensive a territory was on a map, but instead concerned what and who exactly was under a ruler's authority.

After the introduction of new mapping techniques and their widespread adoption beginning in the sixteenth century, however, rule began to be understood differently. The change is evident in a passage from Christopher Marlowe's play *Tamburlaine the Great* (c. 1588), spoken by Tamburlaine on his deathbed:

Give me a map; then let me see how much
Is left for me to conquer all the world[.]³

A novel shift has occurred toward using maps to picture territorial authority as a spatial expanse – in the case of the fictionalized Tamburlaine, to lament all that remained unconquered at his death. He has no interest in seeing a list of his enemies' vassals, holdings, and manors.

Several centuries later, map-based political claims were no longer aspirational, but instead defined actual political claims on the ground.

² *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (1912), entry for AD 1085.

³ *Tamburlaine the Great*, Christopher Marlowe, c. 1588. Available online at Project Gutenberg: www.gutenberg.org/etext/1589. This sixteenth-century play is a fictionalized account of the life of Tamerlane, or Timur, the fourteenth-century Central Asian conqueror.