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### **Book Review: Francesc Relano, The shaping of Africa: cosmographic discourse and cartographic science in late medieval and early modern Europe (2004)**

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## **Book Review: Francesc Relano, The shaping of Africa: cosmographic discourse and cartographic science in late medieval and early modern Europe (2004)**

### **Abstract**

The main ambition of Francesc Relano's fascinating book *The Shaping of Africa* is to show how the idea of Africa, as a continent distinct from Europe and Asia, emerged between the late Middle Ages and the early modern period from a mixture of natural philosophical, theological, nautical and popular discourses, as well as from several initially separate traditions of mapmaking. He illustrates in the process that the African interior remained largely a mystery to Europeans until the late nineteenth century.

### **Disciplines**

Arts and Humanities | Law

### **Publication Details**

Lucas, A. R. (2005). Book Review: Francesc Relano, *The shaping of Africa: cosmographic discourse and cartographic science in late medieval and early modern Europe* (2004). *British Journal for the History of Science*, 38 (4), 477-478.

FRANCESC RELAÑO, *The Shaping of Africa: Cosmographic Discourse and Cartographic Science in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002. Pp. x + 271. ISBN 0-754-60239-7. £52.50 (hardback).  
doi:10.1017/S0007087405267535

The main ambition of Francesc Relano's fascinating book *The Shaping of Africa* is to show how the idea of Africa, as a continent distinct from Europe and Asia, emerged between the late Middle Ages and the early modern period from a mixture of natural philosophical, theological, nautical and popular discourses, as well as from several initially separate traditions of mapmaking. He illustrates in the process that the African interior remained largely a mystery to Europeans until the late nineteenth century.

In his opening chapters, Relano explains how, throughout the Middle Ages, European conceptions of the regions of the Earth south of the Libyan desert and the Pillars of Hercules were the subjects of varied and often wild speculation. If it was acknowledged at all that there were lands south of Libya and Ethiopia, scholarly opinion generally held that there were a number of reasons why they were not suitable for human habitation. These ranged from popular beliefs that they were inhabited by various monstrous races inimical to humankind, to patristic beliefs that God had ordained that only Europe should be habitable, and that a fiery 'torrid zone' around the equator made it impossible for human beings to travel from the northern to the southern hemisphere.

Running counter to the accepted wisdom were, however, equally tantalizing suggestions of a sea passage to Asia via Africa. As Relano shows, reports of Phoenician circumnavigation had circulated since the time of Herodotus, as had similar reports of successful Arabic, Indian and Chinese voyages from the eleventh or twelfth centuries onward. Vast swathes of Africa were thought to be under the dominion of the Christian potentate Prester John, who, it was commonly believed, might offer military and other assistance to the European powers in their ongoing struggles with the nations of Islam. Most importantly, the experiences of European travellers and explorers to the east, west and south during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries suggested the possibility of extraordinary new commercial opportunities in the newly discovered lands.

Relano explains that for hundreds of years the most influential of the European cartographic traditions was that associated with monastic *mappae mundi*. Following the accepted wisdom of divines such as Augustine of Hippo and Lactantius, who had sought to reconcile biblical teaching with the theories of the late classical geographers Macrobius and Martianus Capella, the monastic tradition portrayed Africa as part of the medieval ecumene. In this conception, Europe, Asia and Africa were all part of one 'super-continent' surrounded by an enormous ocean.

By the late Middle Ages, Portolan navigational charts, combined with the recently revived Ptolemaic tradition of geometrical cartography and increasingly reliable reports from travellers and explorers, provided the essential elements of the modern conception of Africa. Relano does an

excellent job in detailing the cross-pollenating of the various cartographic traditions, travellers' narratives and cosmographic discourses behind this innovation. In so doing, he illuminates the labyrinthine processes by which the modern conception of Africa was realized.

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