

The Shaping of Europe during the Middle Ages

It was the ancient Greeks who first thought about Europe. Of course, they had no European Union in mind – that was an idea of the 20th century – but they did feel that Greece and the countries surrounding it made up a group of civilisations bound together by history, politics, religion, cultural contact and economic interests. The Greeks never thought they could be just one part of this group of nations; on the contrary – they believed in their own cultural excellence and regarded others as inferior, second-rate “barbarians.” They expressed this conviction by way of a myth, the myth of “Europa.”

One of the oldest Greek fictional texts, Homer’s *Iliad*, refers to a story - well known by the author and his readers (or audiences) – of *Europa*, a Phoenician princess, daughter of the Phoenician king Agenor. One day she caught the attention of Zeus, the father of gods, when he happened to visit Phoenicia and saw the lovely girl playing with her maids in the meadows close to the sea where the royal cattle were grazing. Zeus disguised himself as a strong, but tame white bull. The princess and her maids played with the peaceful and friendly animal, stroked it, and Europa even climbed on his back to demonstrate her boldness. At that moment, the bull slowly moved towards the seashore, plunged into the water, and swam away with the princess desperately clinging to his neck, leaving the wailing girls behind. The bull eventually landed on the coast of Crete where Zeus threw off his disguise and declared his love for Europa who could not resist his courtship, and, in the following years, *Europa* bore Zeus three sons. As the king of Crete had no children, Zeus could persuade him to marry Europa and raise the children as his own. The princes later became famous heroes and founded powerful royal dynasties. Quite a few of their descendants migrated to other countries around the Mediterranean Sea to found towns and kingdoms there, thus forming strong links between their native Greek culture and foreign civilisations.



Image 1. *The Rape of Europa* by Antonio Carracci.
Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f4/Antonio_Carracci_-_Rape_of_Europa.jpg

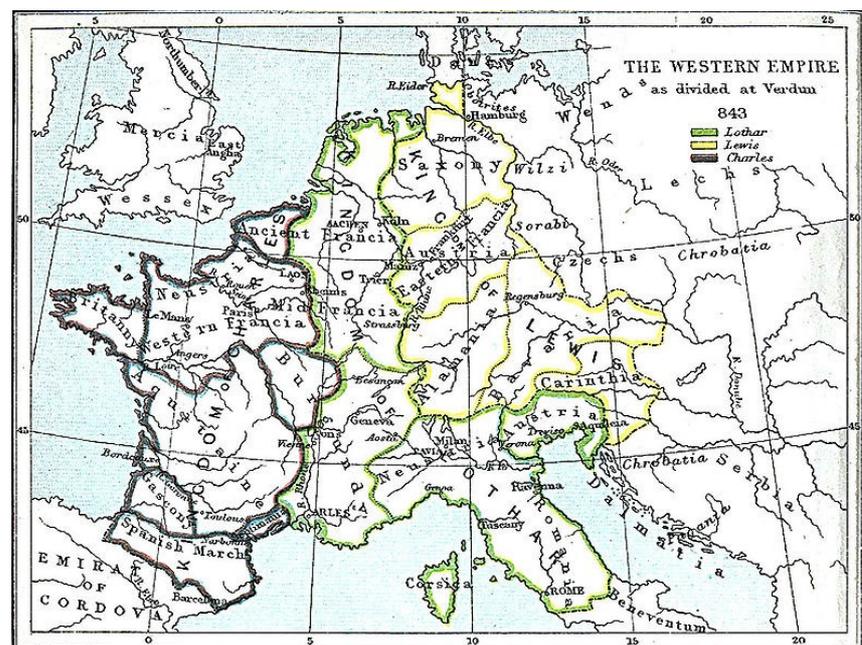
Obviously, the myth of *Europa* was meant to explain the cultural hegemony of Greece in the Near East and the eastern Mediterranean, but later, in the course of the Roman conquest of the whole continent, the idea of *Europa* as the ancestor of a common link between the nations of Europe took root. This was due largely to the enthusiasm of poets, writers, and scholars of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance for the *Metamorphoses*, the great collection of Greek and Roman myths written by the Roman poet Ovid, which beautifully tells the story of Zeus, Europa and their descendants.

The shaping of the territorial, economic, and cultural identity of Europe is a product of the Middle Ages. Without this achievement none of the nations which came into being on the western extension of the Eurasian peninsula would ever have been able to develop the awareness of their belonging together.

During the Middle Ages, the continent had no name of its own, but was generally given names like "Latin Christianity," as the Christian religion had only taken permanent root in the "European" countries which had been part of the Roman Empire – the Northern Mediterranean and the "new" countries north of the Alps and on the Atlantic Ocean. After the breakup of the Roman Empire, and the 5 *Hijra* of Mohammed (622), the nations of the Near East and Northern Africa adopted Islam, Mohammed's new religion, and lived under the Caliphate, the empire ruled by Mohammed's descendants.

The Barbarian Invasion (Migration of Peoples), which had caused the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, resulted in the emergence of a large number of kingdoms and independent or 10 semi-independent dominions that eventually all adopted the "Latin", i. e. Roman Christian faith. After the 7th century A.D., the Germanic nations, having conquered kingdoms of their own in Italy, France and Germany, eventually merged into the new empire of the Franks. On the fringes of the Frankish Empire, other Germanic and Slavonic peoples were evangelized and adopted the Catholic faith: by 1100 A.D., almost all nations of south-western, western, central and northern Europe were Catholics. 15 The eastern part of the Mediterranean, the Byzantine, or East-Roman, Empire retained what they called the "correct", or Orthodox, Christian doctrine. This was a faith based upon Greek traditions of the Christian religion. When, in the course of the 14th and 15th centuries, Greece and Asia Minor came under the rule of Muslim Turks and the Byzantine Empire vanished, it was the countries of eastern Europe which adopted and fostered Orthodoxy.

20 At the end of the 9th century A. D., the powerful Frankish Empire broke into three, (and later two) parts – the western part was 25 organised as the kingdom of France, and the eastern part, which included the kingdoms of Italy, Burgundy, and Germany, was established as the Roman Empire of the Germans. It expanded into the 30 east of central Europe, where new Slavonic nations had been established, e. g. Poland and Bohemia.



Western Europe 843 (from the Atlas to Freeman's Historical Geography, edited by J. B. Bury, Longmans Green and Co. Third Edition 1903)

35 The attacks of some aggressive migrating peoples could be stopped. The sea-raids of Scandinavian Vikings had led to new powerful nations in northern Europe, the British Isles, the North-West of France and even in South Italy and Sicily. The nomadic people of the Magyars, who time and again had raided the countries of Central Europe, could be overcome. They eventually settled down as the Kingdom of Hungary.

40 At the end of the Middle Ages, Europe contained most of the "modern" nations which considered themselves to be part of a common tradition. They gave the land they were living in the name of

“Europe,” making use of the ancient myth of Europa. This was a link connecting all of them and was meant to express that all the nations of Europe shared a common tradition, a common cultural core, a common history and common economic interests. The awareness of “Europe” also included a promise for the future since, in the 15th century, Europeans had started to discover and explore the world
5 outside their European horizon.

In the Early and High Middle Ages, the experiences of common people were very limited and hardly reached beyond their immediate sphere of life. Even educated people generally had only vague or no knowledge of the world beyond central and western Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Baltic Sea, and no more than a limited knowledge of the route to India. In the Late Middle Ages, new
10 technologies and new means of transport enabled them to embark on expeditions which gave them a complete overview of the world. By the end of the 18th century, almost the whole globe was known to Europeans.

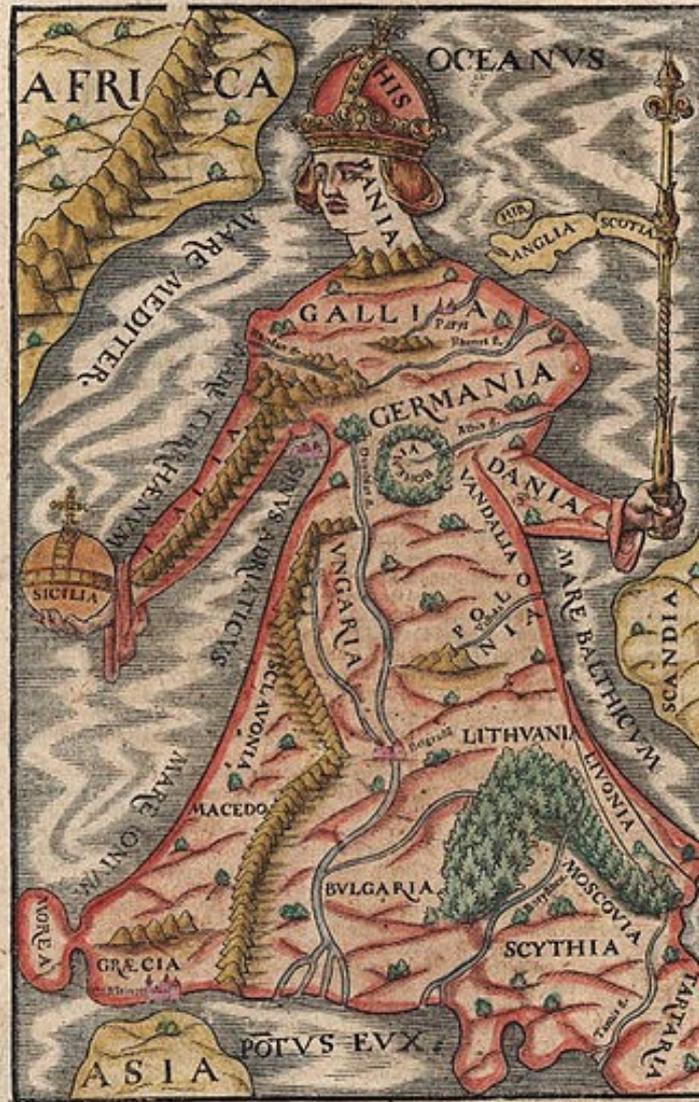
In the middle of the 15th century Portuguese and later Spanish sailors started looking for a sea-route to India since established land routes had been blocked by the Turks. Portuguese explorers began
15 a series of expeditions along the west coast of Africa down to the Cape of Good Hope. In 1498, Vasco da Gama succeeded in finding the sea route to India round the Cape of Good Hope. The Genoese navigator and Spanish sea-captain Christopher Columbus was convinced that he could reach Asia quickly by sailing westward. In 1492, he discovered the continent of America, which he believed to be a part of Asia. From 1519 to 1522, Ferdinand Magellan sailed round the globe, thus proving that the
20 earth was round. Stimulated by Spanish and Portuguese successes, England, France and the Netherlands joined the competition to discover and make use of the newly discovered lands. Towards the end of the 16th century, Europe had knowledge of large areas of the world - and most of the world knew Europeans.

Towards the end of the 16th century, when European countries had grown strong and powerful and
25 had started to conquer and dominate the world, Gerhard Mercator, a German geographer, commented on the myth of *Europa*, saying that the Europeans of his time possessed the beauty of Europa, and their strength, power, virtues, and passion – invincible and moderate at the same time – must have been passed down to them by Zeus himself.

30 („Und manche sagen, Europa habe seinen Namen erhalten, weil es in seiner Schönheit jener geraubten Jungfrau ähnlich sei. Der Stier, der nach ihrer Meinung Europa getragen haben soll, verkörpert sicher recht gut Sitten und Eigenart der Europäer. Seine Kühnheit hat, bei allem trotzigem Übermut, etwas Erhabenes, sein Gehörn lässt ihn schön
35 erscheinen, er ist ganz weiß, hat eine große Kehle und einen fleischigen Hals; so steht er da, Führer und Aufseher der Gestüte; von großer Enthaltbarkeit, zeigt er sich doch, sobald er dem anderen Geschlecht zugeführt wird, überaus leidenschaftlich, um gleich darauf wieder keusch und maßvoll zu sein. So ungefähr ist auch die Natur der Europäer beschaffen, namentlich derjenigen, die weit im Norden Europas ansässig sind.“ Atlas oder kosmographische Gedanken, 1595)

It was in the encyclopaedic description of the world by Sebastian Münster, the *Cosmographia* (1550),
40 that this idea was expressed most impressively. For Münster, Europe was “Regina Europa” whose calling was to rule the world. The Europeans were eager to make this vision come true.

Volker Hoffknecht



In wegen General Tafeln vnd in der neuen Tafel die allein Europam begreiff. Doch wann man anfehen will vnd darzu rechnen die groffen Landſchaften die gegen Mitternacht gehen ſolt wol die breite Europe vder treffen die Länge. Wie aber Ptolemæus Europam beſchrieben hat iſt ſein Länge größer dann die breite. Das iſt ein mal gewiß daß Europa iſt ein trefflich fruchtbar vnd wol erba-

Image 1: Map of Europe as a queen, printed by Sebastian Münster in Basel in 1570. (Wikimedia Commons)