THE BEGINNINGS OF OUR GLOBAL AGE: EUROPE, AFRICA, AND ASIA

Primary Source

Most people today take accurate maps for granted. During the Age of Exploration, however, the maps that European explorers used were primitive. Large areas of Earth were barely known or completely unknown to them. Gerard Mercator, a Flemish cartographer, drew the first map of the world. His design was so clever that many of his ideas are still used today. ♦ As you read, imagine how Mercator went about making his map. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.

1569 Map of the World by Gerard Mercator (1512–1594)

Gerard Mercator was born in Flanders, which is part of modern-day Belgium. He was the most important European mapmaker of the 1500s. He produced many maps before creating his famous map of the world.

Mercator’s goal in producing his map was to create a guide for navigators, not just to show newly explored lands. On his map, lines of longitude (meridians) and latitude (parallels) are straight, parallel lines. This would become known as the Mercator projection. Geographic features like oceans and continents fit into this grid.

Using Mercator’s map, navigators could plot straight-line courses over long distances without taking continuous compass readings. On the other hand, Mercator’s map, like all flat maps, had important drawbacks. The most serious is comparative size. Because the parallel lines are straight, the scale is distorted. Areas at the top and bottom of the map appear much larger than they really are. For example, on a Mercator projection map of the world, Greenland appears larger than South America. In fact, it is smaller than the Arabian peninsula.

Questions to Think About

1. What are the two types of lines on Mercator’s map? What direction does each run?
2. How did Mercator’s map help navigators?
3. Draw Conclusions Which parts of eastern North America seem to be drawn most accurately? What might be some reasons for this?
4. Activity Compare a modern Mercator projection of eastern North America with Mercator’s map. How are the two maps different? How are they similar?