



Off the map? Hermaphrodites on the Hereford Map



Fig. 1: Hartmann Schedel, *Das buch der Cronicken* [...], Nuremberg 1493, here at fol. 11v (detail).
Public domain.

Medieval world maps (*mappaemundi*) attract a lot of attention, scholarly and popular, and rightly so. Ranging from the very simple T/O maps which show little else than the world divided into three parts (Asia, Africa, Europe) to giant, highly complex maps like the famous Ebstorf Map, they have a lot to offer. Thanks to digitisation projects like that of the British Library, it has become much easier to study these maps, or simply enjoy looking at them; have a look [here](#) if you like (and come back later).

Mapping the marvels of the East

Among other things, the *mappaemundi* often show the Marvels of the East (to use the title of a classic article: Witkower 1944) including the so-called 'monstrous races', or Plinian races (as Pliny's *Natural history* was an important source for any knowledge concerning these beings). Some were socially different from Western society, like the Amazons; most were bodily different, as the famous Skiapodes - a people with only one leg and one (giant) foot, which they use to protect themselves from the sun, or the Antipodes who have their feet turned backwards. From ancient times, Hermaphrodites were part of the conventional list, and often discussed and depicted in the context of these 'monstrous races'. Augustine, for example, in his *City of God* mentions Hermaphrodites when discussing the monstrous races as found in pre-Christian natural history (see <https://intersex.hypotheses.org/1487>). Or, to take another example, more than a millenium later Hartmann Schedel in his famous Chronicle depicts various monstrous races, including (see Fig. 1) Antipodes, Hermaphrodites, and Skiapodes. Other examples from ancient, medieval and early modern times could be added. The term *Hermaphroditi* is normally used as an ethnonym, although sometimes one reads *Androgyni*; Pliny, oddly, in his *Natural*



history (at 7.2.16) speaks of a double-sexed people called *Machlyes*; elsewhere, he also uses the terms *hermaphroditi* and *androgyni* for double-sexed humans (*Nat. hist.* 7.3.34), but not as ethnonyms. (On the Machlyes, see <https://intersex.hypotheses.org/1021>).



Fig. 2: Amazons at the Amazon River. Source: Levinus Hulsius, *Nova et exacta delineatio Americae Partis Australis*, Nuremberg 1599 (detail). Via https://www.raremaps.com/gallery/detail/37234cf/Nova_et_exacta_delineatio_Americae_Partis_Australis_Quae_est_Brasilia/Hulsius.html. Public domain.

Literary sources are often quite vague when it comes to locating the monstrous races. Like all 'marvels of the East' they were often located in Asia, but likewise in Africa. Medieval maps depict monstrous races more or less everywhere outside Europe (see van Douzer 2012 for an excellent recent overview). After 1500, as European knowledge about the rest of the world changed dramatically, we see some of the monstrous races migrate; the most famous example are perhaps the Amazons, sometimes located in Asia, sometimes in Africa, but since the 16th century also thought to be found at the river which was named after them (see Fig. 2). Hermaphrodites in early modern times were said to be common in the Americas, and especially

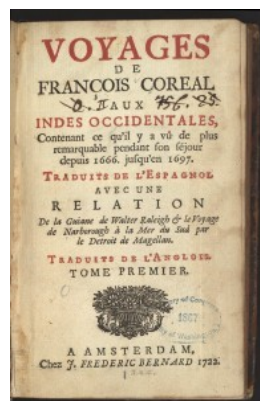


Fig. 3: Cover page of Coreal's *Voyages*, via: <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/379/view/1/5/>. Public domain.

Florida was often singled out as home of many hermaphrodites. Corresponding reports go back to the 16th century; a famous late example are the *Voyages* by Francesco Coreal (known only from the French translation - it is not quite clear whether there really was a Spanish original; see Fig. 3).

But back to the Middle Ages and hermaphrodites. Most accounts of 'monstrous races' circulating in the Middle Ages also refer to a double-sexed people, normally called in Latin



Hermaphroditi (sometimes *Androgyni*), often located in the very south. This is also true for one of the most famous medieval *mappamundi*, the Hereford Map (called after the cathedral where it is still found), where the 'monstrous races' are depicted on islands on the very edge of the world.

The Hereford Hermaphrodites



Figure 4: Hermaphrodites on the Hereford Map. Source: http://medievaldisabilityglossary.wikispaces.com/Hermaphrodite+*; public domain.

The Hereford Map (see Fig. 4) shows Hermaphrodites as nude humans with double genitalia and a double breast; this largely corresponds to the conventionally, vertically split depiction of hermaphrodites in medieval and early modern art. Face and hair, however, are not split, as they are in other medieval images of the hermaphrodite people (see, for example, Fig. 1). Interestingly, the hermaphrodite on the Hereford Map seems to have a beard. Much more clearly, the figure wears a turban.

The legend, not fully legible in Fig. 4 according to the edition (Westrem 2001, 379) reads:

“Gens uterque sexus innaturalis multimodis modis.”

The Latin is a bit rough, but I think it should be translated as:

“A people having both sexes; they are unnatural in many ways.”

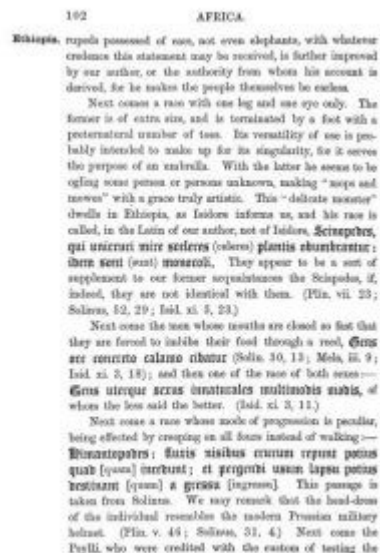


As for the 'unnatural' (*innaturalis*), it is not quite clear what this means. Recent scholarship (Strickmann 2003, 187; DeVuhn 2014, 376) has argued that this refers to deviant sexuality, and stressed that the turban links the hermaphrodite on the Hereford Map to (sexualised) depictions of Muslims. There is indeed a long tradition of describing (and depicting) non-Christians as sexually deviant and effeminate, and it is also true that Othering often meant conflating various traditions (Mittman 2012, 96: 'exotic Others were fluidly conflated'). Yet I am not wholly convinced that the hermaphrodite of the Hereford Map is really linked to this polemic depiction of non-Christians; the turban is a marker of exoticism but in my view is a rather loose link.

'Unnatural' - medieval and modern meanings

Yet whether or not the turban makes the hermaphrodite 'Muslim', the question is what 'unnatural' means in this context. It could well refer to unnatural sexuality and sodomy - but without further context, I hesitate to take this as granted for the Middle Ages. Not only are 'natural' and hence 'unnatural' notoriously vague terms. More specifically, in the Middle Ages 'unnatural' was not normally used to describe sodomy, at least not in legal sources (see Puff 2004 for a valuable discussion). This makes it somewhat speculative how medieval readers understood the legend on the Hereford Map.

Less speculative is how this text was understood in the nineteenth century. Of course, 'unnatural' still was used in many ways, but in Victorian England (and I think elsewhere too), in the context of hermaphrodites it was indeed read as a reference to deviant sexuality. In fact, an important comment-cum-edition of the Hereford Map (for a long time used in scholarship), that of William Lathan Bevan and Henry Wright Phillott, shows precisely this.



'... of whom the less said the better' (Bevan and Phillott 1873, 102). Source: <https://archive.org/stream/cu31924029955428#page/n169/mode/1up>

In this valuable book, [Rev. Bevan \(1821-1908\)](#) gave ample references for all elements of the Hereford Map, including the monstrous races. Only in the case of the hermaphrodites, he is extremely short (Bevan in Bevan and Phillott 1873, 102):



“[Next comes] one of the race of both sexes - *gens uterque sexus innaturaes multimodos modis* - of whom the less said the better.”

Strikingly, this very phrase ('of whom the less said the better') is also used in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* for Mirabeau's *Eroticon biblion* (<http://intersex.hypotheses.org/3230>). This parlance, and the telling silence, suggest that Bevan associated hermaphroditism with deviant sexuality, although one should also remember that sometimes references to hermaphrodites were suppressed in Victorian editions and translations of historical sources where there was not even a hint to 'unnatural' - or natural, for that matter - sexuality (see <https://intersex.hypotheses.org/60>). This in my interpretation suggests that not only were hermaphrodites associated with sodomy in the 19th century, but that binary notions of bodily sex at this time were seen as so important that any obvious violation of a strictly binary system in itself was problematized, and hence suppressed.

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