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MATERIALIZING BORDERS AND LEARNING TO THINK IN LIMITS IN 17ᵀᴴ-CENTURY FRANCE

"To the King (*Au Roi*)!" a weighty table proclaims. A gift to Louis XIV in 1684 from Claude-Antoine Couplet,[1] member of the lately founded Academy of Sciences (ill. 1), the marble *pietra dura* table shows a map of France picked out in gleaming colored stone. *Hae tibi erant artes*, the inscription continues: "these are your arts", quoting from Virgil's *Aeneid*. The hero has just encountered his father in the underworld, who grandly informs him that his "arts" will be those of good governance: "to impose the ways of peace. To show mercy to the conquered and to subdue the proud."[2] The mosaic translates these "arts" into the form of a map.

Couplet's gift depicts France as a set of clearly divided units, colorful stones laid into stable, *bounded* relationships to constitute a unified surface. The stones are labeled and easy to discern. Together, they form an image that is legible; geographical variety is brought under one visual regime, that of the French monarch and his cartographers. The "proud" others are subdued. Ambiguities are eliminated, distinct visibility enhanced. For good measure, the ensemble is surrounded by a measuring line indicating relative scale, or just (and accurate) "rule" that conflates the arts of the geographer and his ruler with that of the ruling monarch. A further border of three bands of marble hems the edges, straightening and framing like fortress ramparts. The world is an operational field presented to the eyes of the monarch and those who

[1] On Couplet, see B. de Fontenelle, *Éloges des académiciens avec l'histoire de l'académie royale des sciences en 1699 avec un discourse préliminaire sur l'utilité des mathématiques*, Vol. 2 (The Hague 1740) and J. Heyman, "Couplet's Engineering Memoirs, 1726–33", in: *History of Technology* 1976, vol. 1, pp. 21–44. On the table, see F. Knothe, "Pierres fines: The Manufacture of Hardstone Works at the Gobelins under Louis XIV", in: *Art of the Royal Court: Treasures in Pietre Dure from the Palaces of Europe*, eds. W. Koeppe and A. Giusti, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008, p. 45 & Cat. 99, pp. 276–277.

[2] Virgil, *The Aeneid* Book VI, trans. H.R. Fairclough, available online: https://www.theoi.com/Text/VirgilAeneid6.html [accessed: 15 March 2024].

1. Various artists (probably Manufacture Nationale des Gobelins, commissioned by Claude-Antoine Couplet 1642–1722), *Tabletop with Map of France*, 1684, hardstones, marble, alabaster, wood. (C) Château de Versailles, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn – © Jean-Marc Manaï

visit him at Versailles, where the table is initially installed in the *cabinet des rarités*.[3] A description in the *Mercure Galant* of the Siamese embassy to Versailles in 1686 singles out the table, extoling its delicacy and precision, fashioned with "*une justesse inconcevable*".[4]

Modern historians of cartography emphasize that in the 17th century, borders of the delimited, linear kind we encounter on the Sun King's table did not exist. As Joseph Konvitz writes, in early modern France mixed zones of control intersected *pęle-męle* along the kingdom's edges; assembled of intersecting masses of "appurtenances, dependencies, and annexes,"[5] they "were often easier to describe verbally than to represent cartographically."[6] The early modern French kingdom was not yet 'territorial', in other words, but existed

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[3] On the King's *cabinet*, see R. Wellington, *Antiquarianism and the Visual Histories of Louis XIV. Artifacts for a Future Past*, London–New York 2015.

[4] D. de Vizé, *Voyage des ambassadeurs de Siam en France*, Lyon 1686, pp. 277–283.

[5] P. Sahlins, "Natural Frontiers Revisited: France's Boundaries since the Seventeenth Century", in: *The American Historical Review* 1990, December, 95, 5, p. 1427.

[6] J. Konvitz, *Cartography in France*, 1660–1848, Chicago 1987, p. 32.

in patchwork form.[7] Yet the table from 1684 manifests a world that is bounded, with regions clearly defined. How are we to make sense of this apparent discrepancy?

This essay explores the appearances of boundaries on this table. It considers the work performed by borders in this particular object and related maps, arguing for the importance of historicizing borders by examining their historical semantics. Contemporary art history often prioritizes artistic practices that call national borders into question, seeking to denaturalize them and expose their injustices.[8] And contemporary theories of 'the border' in the fields of philosophy and political theory often highlight aspects of multiplicity, multi-perspectivity, and the ubiquity of borders in today's world.[9] In such accounts, *the border* appears as a modern but also a timeless figure of thought – *the* border becomes a stand-in for borders writ large. Seventeenth-century France can help us to historicize the semantics and aesthetic manifestations of borders in a place and period when new terms for border came into use just as new types of maps were appearing on a burgeoning cartographic market. Considering Couplet's table and comparing it to other period cartographic objects, we can recuperate how borders signified and assumed particular forms at a specific historical moment. I propose that, in this context, borders took on certain visual and material expressions to facilitate a collaborative practice of understanding the world, and one's place in it, in terms of bounded perimeters. On one hand, Couplet's table represented the world to the King and court within a framework of visual submission that built upon a semantic shift in border terminology from "limit" to "natural frontier"; on the other hand, novel forms of printed maps and pedagogical tools were incorporated into the geographic education of gentlemen in ways that embedded the user's world view into practices of "bordered" thinking. Examining the mediascape of objects featuring borders

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[7] See P. Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees*, Berkeley & Los Angeles 1989.

[8] See, e.g., A. Guilló, "Border art and borders of art, an extradisciplinary approach", in: *antiAtlas Journal #1* 2016, Spring, available online: http://www.antiatlas-journal.net/01-border-art-and-borders-of-art [accessed: September 20, 2024], A.P. Stambaugh, "Border Art as a Political Strategy," in: *ISLA – Information Services Latin America Web Site*, http://www.igc.org/isla/Features/Border/mex6.html, verano de 1999, or M. Ticktin, "Borders: A Story of Political Imagination", *Borderlands* 2022, 21, 1, pp. 135–167.

[9] For overviews of recent literature and directions in border studies see, e.g., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, ed. D. Wastl-Walter, London 2016, T. Wilson and H. Donnan, "Borders and Border Studies", in: *A Companion to Border Studies*, eds. T. Wilson and H. Donnan, Chichester 2021, pp. 1–25.

(geographic and political) helps us see how notions of a historically specific concept of the border may have been transmitted, which anticipated the formation of delimited borders on the ground.

DEFINING BORDERS

Couplet's table offered the King and his court a vision of France as a state neatly assembled from a panoply of distinct provinces. It translated geographic diversity into a smooth, unified surface, held together by the geographer's ruler under the aegis of the King's rule. This was the gift that the King's scientific academicians claimed to offer an increasingly centralized regime (and sedentary court at Versailles): a kingdom inspected and cared for in order to generate wealth and consolidate political power.[10] Jean-Baptiste Colbert founded the *académie* in 1666 with this express purpose, to foster scientific innovation and facilitate the expansion of French overseas trade, territory, and wealth – thereby adding to the central monarchy's *gloire*.[11]

Colbert sent cartographers and inspectors throughout the kingdom to mobilize control of France's resources, including timber for shipping as well as marble.[12] One key goal of the *académie* was to solve the problem of calcu-

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[10] The literature on the emergence of the cartographic image of the modern state is vast, see, e.g., M. Biggs, "Putting the State on the Map: Cartography, Territory, and European State Formation", in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 1999, Apr., 41, 2, pp. 374–405 and, especially J. Akerman, "The Structuring of Political Territory in Early Modern Printed Atlases", *Imago Mundi* 1995, 47, 1, pp. 138–154. On French cartography, see, e.g., M. Pelletier and H. Ozanne, *Portraits de la France: Les Cartes Témoins de L'Histoire*, Paris 1995 and M. Pelletier, *Cartographie de la France et du monde de la Renaissance au Siècle des lumières*, Paris 2002. On French atlases, specifically see M. Pastoureau, *Les atlas français, XVIe–XVII siècles. Répertoire bibliographique et étude*, Paris 1984. On the history of French borders specifically, see the authoritative history by D. Nordman, *Frontières de France: De l'Espace au Territoire XVIe–XIXe-siècle*, Paris 1998, as well as *Histoire de la France: L'espace français*, eds. A. Burguière and J. Revel, Paris 1989 and Sahlins, *Natural Frontiers…*, as well as Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making…*.

[11] On the academy, see R. Briggs, "The Académie Royale des Sciences and the Pursuit of Utility", *Past & Present*, 1991, May, 131, pp. 38–88, A. Stroup, *A Company of Scientists: Botany, Patronage, and Community at the Seventeenth-Century Parisian Royal Academy of Sciences*, Berkeley & Los Angeles 1990, and E. Stewart Saunders, "Louis XIV: Patron of Science and Technology", in: *The Sun King: Louis XIV and the New World*, ed. S.G. Reinhardt, New Orleans 1984, pp. 155–167.

[12] Taking stock of resources was an expedient way to harness potentially dissident nobles, as Chandra Mukerji has shown; see C. Mukerji, *Impossible Engineering: Technology and Territoriality on the Canal du Midi*, Princeton 2009, Mukerji, "The Great Forestry Sur-

lating longitude at sea. Among the projects developed for this purpose were attempts to map first France and then the world by establishing the Paris meridian, which involved sending out cartographers like Jean Picard to triangulate the countryside.[13] What was necessary, declared Picard in a 1682 memorandum to Colbert, was establishing an overarching frame ("*chassis*") into which the individual puzzle pieces of measured geodetic triangles, which the Academy had been collecting, could be inserted. We get a sense of these "pieces" from the annotated manuscript drawings that Picard compiled on the Breton coast.[14] Quickly noted down, the triangles are different sizes, but are equipped with calculations that allow them to be brought into alignment with one another in a manner that would make the French state visible as a whole, with a *chassis* to provide a measured means of linking each bit. In this sense they were not unlike the *pietra dura* map mosaic, which also fitted bits of geographical information into a frame defined by an overarching, unified scale. Picard's memorandum further suggested that this frame ought to be the boundaries of France, from Dunkerque to Perpignan, linking two recently acquired territories through the new meridian along the length of the Kingdom. His writes: "once this grand axis is finished, we can make one that comprises the whole Kingdom following its *frontiers*, and its coasts…."[15]

The word Picard uses, *frontières*, defines the French border in a particular manner that, by the second half of the 17th century, had established itself in terms of how borders were termed and visualized in the period. As historian Lucien Febvre notes, *frontière* initially appeared in French as a feminine adjective associated with the word *front*. It could be used as a noun as well, and in the Middle Ages it conveyed two meanings: an architectural façade or a line-up of troops directed towards an enemy.[16] It did not mean a political boundary; other words for such borders were used, including *bornes*, *fins*,

vey of 1669–1671", in: *The Use of Archives for Political Reform in Social Studies of Science*, 2007, April, 37, 2, pp. 227–253 and Mukerji, *Territorial Ambitions and the Gardens of Versailles*, Cambridge 1997.

[13] Emphasis mine. See L. Gallois, "L'académie des sciences et les origins de la carte de Cassini", *Annales de Géographie* 1909, 15, 100, pp. 308–310 and Konvitz, *Cartography in France*, pp. 4–7.

[14] The drawings and accompanying notes can be viewed at https://bibnum.obspm.fr/ark:/11287/3J7Ql. J. Picard (1620–1682) and P. de La Hire (1640–1719), "Observations faites par Picard et La Hire sur les côtes de France", décembre 1679–19 novembre 1681, pp. 72–75, Bibliothèque numérique – Observatoire de Paris [accessed: March 15, 2024].

[15] Ibidem. See also M. Pelletier and J.J. Levallois, *Mesurer la Terre: 300 ans de géodésie française*, Paris 1988 on the geodedic tradition in France.

[16] L. Febvre, "Frontière: the word and the concept", in: *A New Kind of History from the Writings of Febvre*, ed. P. Burke, London 1973, p. 208.

lisières, or *limites* (from Latin *limes*), which came to be the most frequently used term in the 16th century to indicate the edge of a political territory.[17]

By the seventeenth century, as the Bourbon monarchy consolidated power, the architectural-military term began to "bury" itself into the French language as well as into the earth, as Febvre describes.[18] In 1678, the military engineer Sébastian Le Prestre de Vauban would write, in his *Mémoire des places frontiers de Flandres*, that the open and irregular ("*dérangée*") *frontière* on France's northeastern edge ought to be put in order by building up a set of fortresses that "close the enemy's way into our country and facilitates our entry into his…"[19] This "*ligne de fer*" was specifically conceived as an architectural and military front, which could both advance and protect, while regularizing the border and eliminating ambiguous overlaps of jurisdiction. Already in 1673 Vauban was urging the war minister François-Michel le Tellier (Marquis de Louvois) that the King ought to straighten his edges, or "square his field ("*Le roi devrait un peu songer à faire son pré carré*") in order to strengthen the frontier by eliminating chunks of "other" sovereignties that edged into French space and disrupted a unified field of territory within (and without) by clearly defining "inside" and "outside".[20] By then, *frontiére* had effectively come to replace *limite* in French border discourse.

NATURAL FRONTIERS AND POLITICAL LIMITS

Clearing up and fortifying frontiers was not synonymous, however, with a *delimited* border in the modern sense (a term that only came into use in the late 18th century).[21] It was also very material. Rather than setting an abstracted line, the band of individual fortresses that was to surround France and project it outward frequently mobilized a further rhetoric of "natural" frontiers, i.e. those found in the physical landscape, which was undergirded by recourse to the (mythic) historical boundaries of Ancient Gaul. History buttressed the claims that France's "natural frontiers" were defined by the sea, the Pyrenees, the Alps, and the Rhine.[22] Drawing on a notion of Gallia Antiqua, publicists and cartographers in the service of the monarchy like the Jesuit Father

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[17] Ibidem.

[18] Ibidem.

[19] Cited in ibidem, p. 210.

[20] Cited in J. Dejean, *Literary Fortifications: Rousseau, Laclos, Sade*, Princeton 1984, p. 43.

[21] See Sahlins, *Natural Frontiers*…, pp. 1438–1443.

[22] Ibidem, pp. 1427–1428 and Febvre, *Frontière*…, pp. 215–216.

Philippe Labbé would write (pretending to be Richelieu) that "[i]t was the goal of my ministry to restore to Gaul the limits that Nature has traced for her, to submit all the Gauls to a Gallic king, to combine Gaul with France, and everywhere the ancient Gaul had been, to restore the new one"[23] (ill. 2).

Couplet's table mobilizes this discourse of natural frontiers, combining it with the efforts of cartographers like Picard to define late 17th-century France through mapping. On the table, France occupies the map's symbolic and geographic center: it is the largest polity, and pushes its neighbors to the map's

2. Nicolas Sanson, *Galliae antiquae descriptio geographica / autore Nicolas Sanson Abbavillaeo*; *Robert Cordier sculpsit*, 1627, engraving, Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b7200330j/f1.item#

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[23] Labbé quoted from G. Zeller (*La Monarchie d'Ancien Régime*) Translation Sahlins, cited 1425.

edges, which are simultaneously the object's perimeter. The refined attention to the coastline nods, on the one hand, to the academy's attempts to map the coast more accurately in order to better calculate longitude. At the same time, the sea's white marble surface sets France's silhouette into clear relief, defining the Kingdom's natural, oceanic "frontiers", while indicating a potential for expansion overseas.[24] Wind roses and the measurement band that frames the depiction further highlight claims to precision and, hence, the important role the academy offered to the monarch's ambitions.

These ambitions were to bring glory and affluence to France. Affluence, according to Furetière's *Dictionnaire Universel* (1690), came from the verb *affluer*, which meant "to meet up at one point. It is said first about waters that flow to one spot…great affluence and abundance of goods is made with the help of rivers. *Affluer* also means "to arrive in abundance…like the riches and *délices* that flow to the court of France."[25] Colbert's mercantilist policies relied on seas and rivers, as well as giant infrastructural projects like the *canal du midi* (completed in 1681) to mobilize French resources.[26] On Couplet's map, the virtuoso rendering of rivers and the new canal do double duty, marking France's "natural frontiers" while also evoking the flow of resources that makes possible such glories as Couplet's marble table.

A KINGDOM SET IN STONE: REPRESENTING FRANCE IN MARBLE

The stone itself helps to set these dynamics of natural frontiers into relief. Because the mosaic is divided into provinces, rather than "national" blocks (e.g. France or the Spanish Netherlands), the sense of France's claims to border regions is enhanced by rivers that appear to be etched in nature; they slice like fine white veins through the map's stone surface so that France seems to grow "naturally" into Flanders, as well as to the banks of the Rhine.[27] Like-

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[24] On the politics of importing white Carrara from Italy, see Geneviève Bresc-Bautier, "L'importation du marbre de Carrare à la cour de Louis XIV: rivalités des marchands et échecs des companies", in: *Marbres de rois*, ed. P. Julien, Aix-en-Provence 2013, pp. 123–150.

[25] A. Furetière, *Dictionnaire Universel, Contenant generalement tous les Mots François, tant viewx que modernes, & les Termes de toutes les Sciences et des Arts: Divisé en trois Tomes*, The Hague & Rotterdam 1690, p. 55.

[26] On "Colbertism", see, for instance, Ph. Minard, "The Market Economy and the French State: Myths and Legends around Colbertism", *L'Économie politique* 2008, 37, 1, trans. by JPD Systems, pp. 77–94.

[27] On the monarchic rhetoric of rivers as royal veins see T. Conley, *The Self-Made Map: Cartographic Writing in Early Modern France*, Minneapolis 1996, p. 224 and F. de Dainville, *La gégraphie des humanists*, Paris 1940, p. 281.

wise, in the south, Spain appears as a line of red stones that contrast with the colorful "French" marble bits, constituting another natural *frontière* through the deployment of contrasting colors of rock.

These same rivers and canals further indicate the means by which valuable marble was shipped to the King's artisans in Paris from France's edges. Marble constituted an essential part of Bourbon representational politics; it was a key building material at Versailles, and Colbert's mercantilist project promoted the search for French sources of marble.[28] These were located along the Pyrenees in the south and Flanders in the northeast. Once integrated into Versailles either as architecture or objects like marble tables, marble offered an echo of the "natural frontiers" of the kingdom by bringing France's borders to the center.[29] Descriptions of Versailles specifically and of French architecture in general highlighted the use of marble. André Félibien, for example, went into great detail about the types of marble used, as did Charles d'Aviler in his *Cours d'Architecture* (e.g. "*un autre marbre versastre qu'on nomme de Campan & qui vient des Pyrenées*").[30] Marble could thereby function as a kind of material shorthand for the King's reach as well as France's infrastructural prowess. The marbles deployed in Couplet's table to construct the alternating bands of gray and red that highlight the table's firm edges were "border" marbles: most likely Saint-Anne (the gray) and Rance (the red) from Hainault on France's northeastern edge.[31]

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[28] See P. Julien, *Marbres de carrières en palais*, Marseilles 2006, pp. 156–161 and S. Mouquin, *Versailles en ses marbres: politique royale et marbriers du roi*, Versailles 2018.

[29] Authors like Jacques Savary des Bruslons declared Colbert's marble policies a huge success: "quoique les montagnes de France soient aussi remplies de carriers de marbres qu'aucune autre des États voisins et qu'il y ait des marbres francais capables de le disputer en finesse de grain, en dureté & en poli aux plus beaux marbres etrangers, ce n'est guere cependant que depuis la Surintendance des Batiments de Monsieur Colbert, qu'on s'est appliqué serieusement a exploiter celles qui étaient déjà decouvertes, & a en fouiller de Nouvelles qui n'ont point fait regretter les peines & les dépenses qu'il en a couté d'abord. En effet, ces marbres sont si beaux & en si grande quantite que depuis l'annee 1664, on n'en a guère employé à Versailles & dans les autres maisons Royales, qui en sont pour ainsi dir toutes baties, que de ceux qui ont ete tires des carriers du Royaume…" cited in Mouquin, *Versailles en ses Marbres*, pp. 29–30.

[30] See A. Félibien in *Description du chateau de Versailles, de ses peintures, et d'autres ouvrages faits pour le Roy*, Paris 1696, pp. 29–32 and Ch. D'Aviler, *Cours d'Architecture*, Paris 1710, eg. p. 211.

[31] Email consultation with Versailles marble expert Sophie Mouquin, March 13, 2018. Further investigation would need to be done in order to securely ascertain the origins of the stones.

Rance, in particular, was immediately recognizable and identifiable with Versailles, where it was one of the most frequently used stones: it was featured everywhere from the Hall of Mirrors, to the King's bathtub, to the Staircase of the Ambassadors, where it framed Adam-Frans van der Meulen's painted scenes of military sieges along the eastern *frontières*. The red marble with off-white splotches came from a quarry known as the *trou* (hole) of Versailles, but for most of its history this hole was not in France at all.[32] The village of Rance is on the border with Hainault, in the very same region where Vauban was building his iron wall of defense during the period. In the 1670s and 80s, when the table in question was produced, vast quantities of Rance were quarried to build Versailles, along with marbles from the Pyrenees. The stone blocks were shipped either by sea and then up the Seine, or via the Oise to Paris, trajectories the informed viewer can follow on the marble map.[33]

The manner in which Couplet's table depicts France suggests a seamless flow of affluence to the King via waterways, as if there were no disruptive external circumstances. This helps to naturalize the table's materialization of the kingdom. Yet the village of Rance found itself at the crossroads of French-Habsburg conflict. Within less than a century, Rance had been part of at least four polities. But war could not halt the French court's desire for marble.[34] Although Rance marble itself did not come from France, it was naturalized *as* French through its close visual connection with Bourbon power.[35] These quarries would become French in the very year that Couplet offered his gift, 1684. The table mosaic embodies this conceptual loop: stone hauled from the kingdom's frontier embeds the map of France within a thick frame (a sort of "natural rampart" to use Vauban's term), which appears "naturally" connected to the networks of rivers and seas that Couplet's map showcases so expertly. The King's field has been squared.

Tables lift information from the ground, allowing it to be inspected more clearly. They offer a stable kind of view, a visual *chassis*. As anthropologist

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[32] On Rance, see, e.g., S. Mouquin. "Versailles, un édifice de marbre. Le rouge de Rance et les harmonies colorées versaillaises" for *Les Wallons à Versailles* 2007, Dec., Versailles, France, available online: https://tinyurl.com/2d7e6ec9 [accessed: September 20, 2024] and Mouquin (2018), pp. 48–53 and E. Grossens "Les Marbres de Flandres et du Hainault à Versailles", in: *Marbres des rois*, ed. P. Julien, Aix-en-Provence 2013, pp. 37–55.

[33] Ibidem.

[34] On Flemish marble in France, see Mouquin, *Versailles en ses marbres*, pp. 139–180.

[35] As Sophie Mouquin has noted, this integration of the material into the French state was facilitated by the strong cultural associations attached to both marble and the color red. Frequently, Rance was referred to simply as "jasper", for instance in Mme de Scudéry's description of the Staircase of the Ambassadors as "*un marbre jaspé*." Madeleine de Scudéry, *La promenade de Versailles*, Paris 1669, p. 41.

Jack Goody writes of the table form, "one of the features of [the table] is the tendency to arrange terms in (linear) rows and (hierarchical) columns in such a way that each item is allocated a single position, where it stands in a definite, permanent, and unambiguous relationship to the others." Goody is referring not to four-legged tables, but to graphic tables as a mode of organizing information.[36] Yet in in Couplet's map-table, the two modes of "tabling" conflate.[37] The table transforms ground into a "measured" form that renders a specific territory visible. The map of France is presented as pieces of earth that have been cut and labeled in a homogenized set of inscriptions that declare a homology between place-names and the shapes of geographic regions, as if they were unambiguous and clearly defined by nature. The wide borders of red and gray marble from the frontier help to separate the map from the world off the table, much as they separate France from its neighbors. The material frontier transforms French ground into a legible cartographic figure. And Louis XIV spent lavishly to protect the borders of his marble tables, once paying 900 livres to the Gobelins for "7 gilt bronze *bordures*".[38]

The emphasis on borders distinguishes 17th-century French marble tables from contemporary Italian hard stone tables. These were designed to playfully amplify ambiguities between figuration and materiality, and they tend to feature flowing vegetal or other organic motifs that test boundaries, rather than reaffirming them.[39] The tables made at the Gobelins prioritize, in contrast, a visual language predicated upon closure and compartmentalization; numerous examples depict French royal insignia in the center of sets of interconnected rectangles on the objects' perimeters that contain common birds (ill. 3). These barnyard fowl surround the monarchy, whose power to depict them in stone

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[36] J. Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, Cambridge 1977, p. 68.

[37] Notably, in 1680 German polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz penned a treatise entitled, *Entwurf gewisser Staats-tafeln* ("Sketch for Certain Tables of State"), in which he proposed the utility of compressing state-related data into tables that would make up for not having first-hand information, for Leibniz wrote, "one cannot always have the thing in Nature in front of one's eyes" the table would gather that "which belongs together" and make it available "in the blink of an eye." G.W. Leibniz, "Politische Schriften" 3. Band: 1677–1689 in Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe, ed. Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR, Band IV/3, Berlin 1986, p. 345.

[38] V. Cochet, "L'utilisation par les menuisiers et les ébenistes", in: *Identification des Marbres*, ed. J. Dubarry de Lassale, Dourdan 2000, p. 39.

[39] On Gobelins designs for hard stone tables, see Knothe, *Pierre Finnes*, pp. 40–53. On Italian tables, see, for instance, H. Baader, "Livorno, Lapis Lazuli, Geology, and the Treasures of the Sea in 1604", *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma* 2017, 5, pp. 141–167. Baader writes, "The vibrant materiality of the stone creates – and at the same time destroys – the illusion of the Livorno seascape and therefore plays both with and against mimesis." Ibidem, p. 163.

3. Various artists (Manufacture Nationale des Gobelins), 1675–1680, hardstones, wood, Paris, Musée du Louvre. (C) GrandPalaisRmn (Musée du Louvre) – © Jean-Gilles Berizzi

(through the royal workshops) has elevated them from the ground and rendered them visible by placing them on the table in bounded frames that allow us to inspect and compare them.[40] This may be a metaphor for the nobility that Louis XIV gathered from the provinces and assembled at court, much as he brought marble to Versailles from around the land.[41] Entry twelve in the Versailles furniture inventory describes "a table of stone dotted with branches, foliage, flowers, fruits and birds made of…fine stones of Florence, around which reins/reigns

[40] When Charles Le Brun, First Painter to the King, gave the Siamese embassy a tour of the *pietra dura* workshops at the Gobelins, he emphasized the ways in which work with tiny stones was impressive because it gathered small bits into a whole that only achieved clarity when provided with a frame (the table) that offered an overview. "toutes les Pierres qui entrent dans cet Ouvrage [pietra dura] sont Pierres precieuses, & l'on en taille de si petites qu'il est Presque impossible de les voir avant qu'elles ayent esté mises en oeuvre." D. de Vizé, *Voyage*, p. 105.

[41] On the ideology and iconography of birds and the Versailles menagerie, see P. Sahlins, *1668: The Year of the Animal in France*, New York 2017.

(*règne*) a band of white marble between two bands/nets of red marble."[42] Here, the word "*règne*" can mean encircling, as well as pointing to both a King's reign and a horse's reins, all of which act as a ribbon "net" (*fillet*) that encloses and elevates what exists in nature, but which cannot be recognized until the King's expert workshops, or academies give them a definitive form. This visual and linguistic rhetoric of "reining" a territory by both extending and defining its *frontières* appears, then, to be a leitmotif that connects, in our case, the rendering of France with its "natural frontiers" through cartography and the "decorative" labor of precious Gobelins furniture like Couplet's unique table.

SEEING THE WORLD AS A TABLE: NICOLAS SANSON'S GEOGRAPHICAL LESSONS

Absolutism depended on collaboration.[43] In France, this collaboration grew not solely from coercion but also from mutual benefit. The absolutist project must thus be understood as one that did not operate simply top-down, but rather that depended on networks of mutual support. The table-as-gift was also a pitch for such a collaborative working relationship, which academicians like Couplet hoped would continue once Colbert had died in 1683. When he gifted the table, Couplet aimed to secure funding under Colbert's successor, the war minister Louvois. Visual language and material culture, here, are put in the service of power through the means they provide of defining and legitimizing natural frontiers with "incredible *justesse*" in the sense of accurate rationality and historical precedent.

This may be why the France on the table's surface is, ironically, *not* the image of France that Picard's triangulation was revealing. Before he died in 1682, Picard made a map that juxtaposed the French coastline based on his new measurements with the coastline on earlier maps.[44] The new vision of France appeared considerably smaller than previously believed, causing the King to complain that the academicians had repaid him poorly for all his kindness.[45]

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[42] *Inventaire général du mobilier de la Couronne sous Louis XIV* (1663–1715) Partie 2 / publié… sous les auspices de la Société d'encouragement pour la propagation des livres d'art, ed. J. Guiffrey, Paris 1886, p. 131.

[43] William Beik, "The Absolutism of Louis XIV as Social Collaboration", *Past & Present* 2005, 188, pp. 195–224.

[44] Available at https://oshermaps.org/browse-maps?id=108986#?c=&m=&cv= [accessed: 15 March 2024].

[45] L. Jardine, *Ingenious Pursuits: Building the Scientific Revolution*, New York 1999, p. 138.

Couplet seems to have made a judicious choice to instead use an older map, of the sort currently being made by the *géographe du roi* Nicolas Sanson, which depicted a disproportionately extended France.

Sanson taught popular courses on geography in Paris, while maintaining a close working relationship with the crown.[46] I would augment the question of collaboration by considering how maps and pedagogical tables by Sanson addressed borders and conveyed information about them to a larger public through print. Couplet's table was a one-off luxury object whose principal audience was the King. Yet Sanson's printed maps reached a broad audience and they proved formative to the French public's understanding both of France and of the world.

French cartographers made maps for different purposes and for different audiences throughout the 17th century.[47] The King's military engineers tended to be the most concerned with frontier zones, while the royal academicians pursued other scientific goals. Both of these branches of cartography worked in the field, taking measurements on site. Armchair geographers (*géographes du cabinet*) like Sanson, on the other hand, collated a variety of information which they gathered in their studies into maps that were compiled by others. These maps were then disseminated widely to a public eager to learn more about rapidly expanding geographic horizons. At a young age, Sanson seems to have garnered favor with Richelieu for a map he made depicting Ancient Gaul which extended France to the natural frontier of the Rhine.[48] By mid-century, he was producing what we today dub "base maps" of France. These established a foundational image of the kingdom, a template that could be overlaid with different types of infrastructural divisions; the same "base" was repeated with, for example, postal routes, waterways, administrative districts, etc. The foundational map could be divided and filled with an endless amount of different information depending on what was desired (ill. 4).[49] As an ensemble, these maps assembled aspects of human, economic, and natural resources, drawing them together in a tightly bounded and administered unit. Thus, while many of Sanson's maps, like the one on Couplet's table, cater to

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[46] On Sanson, see Pastoureau, *Les Atlas français…*, and idem, *Les Sanson: cent ans de cartographie française 1630–1730*, Lille 1982.

[47] I. Laboulais, "Dessiner la frontière, tracer la limite: retour sur les travaux des géographes du roi aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles", in: *Frontières et Espaces Frontaliers du Léman à la Meuse: Recompositions et échanges de 1789 à 1814*, eds. C. Mazauric and J.P. Rothiot, Nancy 2008, pp. 31–44.

[48] See Pastoureau, *Les Atlas Français…*, p. 387 ff.

[49] See Akerman, *The Structuring…*, pp. 149–151.

4. Nicolas Sanson, *Carte des rivières de la France, curieusement recherchée par Nicolas Sanson*, 1641, hand-colored engraving, Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France. https://tinyurl.com/2svnacd7

the idea of historically determined "natural" frontiers, rivers and mountains are not the only borders that structure his cartographic work.

In texts by geographers like Sanson, the word *frontière* appears less frequently than the word *division* as a means of designating boundaries.[50] "Divisions", like frontiers, were understood in terms of "natural" borders as well as abstract units that made the world more comprehensible. For certain contemporaries of Sanson's, like Père François, there were four essential geographic divisions: traditional geography, the natural realm, the civil realm, and the solar, or celestial realm. Each division had its particular characteristics, although they were all interconnected as part of a larger system. Understanding these divisions provided a set of interlocking categories into which all worldly

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[50] See Laboulais, *Dessiner…*, pp. 31–44.

information could be processed.[51] For Sanson, divisions were more prosaic: they furnished a bounded set of building blocks, in which information could be organized and stored, both on maps and in memory.[52]

Divisions therefore criss-cross Sanson's maps and also correspond to the divisions in a series of popular educational tables he published, beginning in 1644, to teach geography. These were instructional manuals that divided information into hierarchical graphic categories separated by brackets (ill. 5). One might begin, for instance, with a continent, then move into separate polities, under which there might be provinces, then cities, etc. The graphic form of these tables streamlined information, erasing complications and ambiguities, by laying out a system of subdivisions into which information could
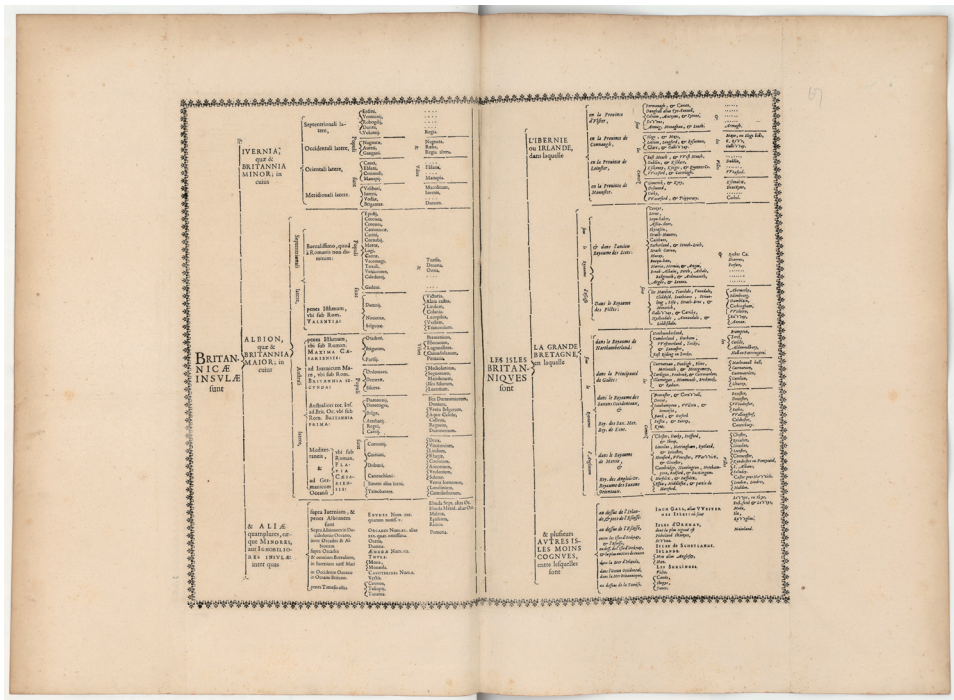

5. Nicolas Sanson, *Britannia Insulae Sunt /Les Isles Britanniques sont*, 1651, Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b53225441q?rk=10922800;4

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[51] He explained this thesis in P. Jean François, *Science de la Géographie Divisee en trois parties, qui expliquent les divisions, les universalitez & les particularitez du Globe Terrestre*, Paris 1652.

[52] Laboulais, *Dessiner…*, p. 36.

be easily ordered.[53] These tables could be used accompanying his maps so that the user could mentally plot information from potentially overwhelming cartographic renderings into a simple graphic schema (ill. 6).[54] Anything one learned about the world's geography could be placed in a kind of mental table of the graphic sort Goody describes: "each item is allocated a single position, where it stands in a definite, permanent, and unambiguous relationship to the others." Borders delineate these unambiguous divisions, either as brackets, or on Sanson's maps as lines.
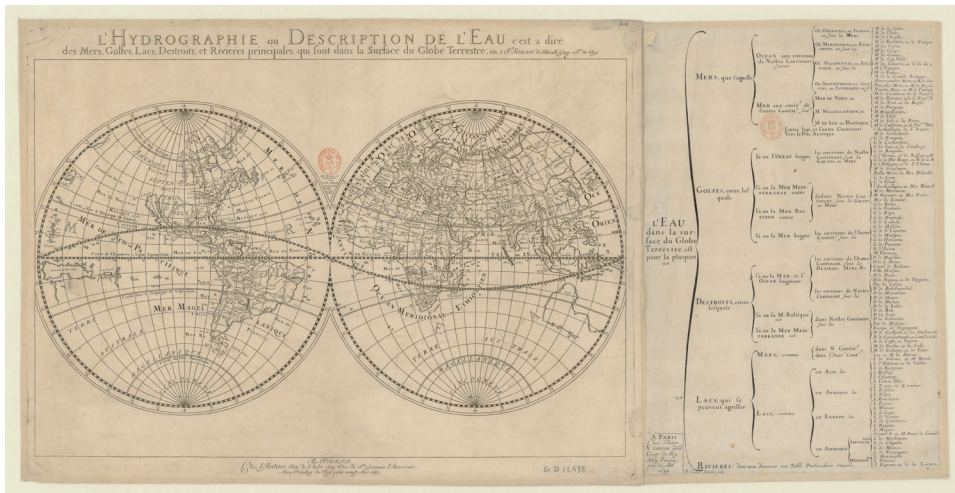
6. Nicolas Sanson, *L'hydrographie ou description de l'eau, c'est-à-dire des mers... et rivières principales... du globe terrestre / par le Sr Sanson...*, 1644, engraving, Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b-53032732m?rk=407727;2#

In his maps, he deployed a regularized system of boundary gradations so that certain types of boundaries always appear as dotted lines, while others are dashed in bold, and still others are unbroken double lines, etc. (ill. 7). Applied across an atlas, these divisions transposed the schema of his tables into cartographic space, creating hierarchies of importance, size, and authority in a remarkably consistent graphic language. By mid-century, 98% of Sanson's

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[53] On systems and French geography see I. Laboulais-Lesage, "Un enjeu épistémologique" *Revue d'histoire des sciences* 2006, janvier–juin, 59, 1, pp. 97–125.

[54] Akerman, *The Structuring…*, p. 141.

7. Nicolas Sanson, *Carte générale du royaume de France avecq tous les pays circonvo-isins / par N. Sanson*, [with detail] 1658, hand-colored engraving. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France. https://tinyurl.com/36wm4c4n

atlases deployed homogenized borders across his renderings of the world's geography.[55]

The schematic deployment of color helped to standardize these boundaries. In his *Introduction à la Géographie*, Sanson instructed that "we apply colors along these points, surrounding each province or jurisdiction of a color different from those who touch it…"[56] The world (and France) thus becomes a colored mosaic – like Couplet's table – comprised of contrasting units of information exposed by a system of divisions that the map reader can easily discern. A regularized schema of printed toponyms further homogenizes these divided spaces, layering yet another border framework on top of potential geographic ambiguities: boundaries are reinforced through the process of labeling particular forms, as we see in the naming of the provinces on the marble table.[57] A clearly named shape becomes synonymous with a clearly outlined visual form. In the words of the Père Richeome (1597), images like Sanson's could provide a "*facile et preignante instruction*," because "colors and exterior lines allow us to throw ourselves into the knowledge of a thousand things in the blink of one eye, which would take ages to cover if we were to learn about them by listening."[58] They were thus useful as pedagogical tools, which in teaching geography also instilled a kind of political education.

Sanson thereby maps out a plan for learning through – and within – borders. He creates a shared path of knowledge acquisition that addresses difference through the erection of divisions, which allow information to be categorized and memorized. The mind is to be protected from excessive and disordered external information. Both his maps and his tables serve as means of establishing control over external and internal worlds, pushing inward and outward simultaneously to occupy space while inhibiting access in order to mitigate confusion. "If we want to last a long time against so many enemies, he [the king] should think about tightening up ("*se resserrer*"), Vauban wrote.[59]

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[55] As James R. Ackerman has observed, Ortelius' *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* only featured bounadries in 45% of its maps, while in Sanson's mid-century atlases 98% were rendered with politically bounded *divisions*. Ibidem.

[56] Sanson writes, "on applique des Couleurs le long de cest (sic) points, entourant chaque Province ou Juridiction d'une couleur différente de celles qui la touchent, & l'on applique sur les points des subdivisions la mesme couleur dont l'on a entouré la Province ou Juridiction." Cited in Laboulais, *Dessiner…*, p. 38.

[57] See D. Woodward, "Techniques of Map Engraving, Printing, and Coloring in the European Renaissance", in: *The History of Cartography*, vol. 3, ed. D. Woodward, Chicago 2007, pp. 591–610.

[58] Cited in J. Adhémar, "L'Enseingment par image", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 1988, January/February, p. 53.

[59] Cited in Dejean, *Literary Fortifications*, p. 43.

CONCLUSION

While the King's marble table was heavy and sedentary (representative of a monarch who resides permanently in his palace and depends on his geographers for intelligence), Sanson's cartographic tables offered mobile armature, an expansive mental frontier against a potentially unruly and overwhelming world lacking clear borders to structure it. One could carry Sanson's tables everywhere as a kind of perceptual praxis, sorting the world into bounded, defined units, each one separated from the other by a line or bracket. Although borders on the ground may have been complex and interwoven, French maps and geographic tables of the 17th century conveyed a means of perceiving the world in bordered terms. These posited themselves as "natural" because they were understood as part of an endemic global structure. These objects catered in their historical moment to the dynamics of an expanding absolutist state with an appetite to entrench its "natural frontiers", and laid a shared mental groundwork for the subsequent implementation of delineated modern borders.

This essay has suggested that historicizing the language of borders, that is, the words we use to explain and describe them, can help us understand with greater acuity both how borders were conceived and how they were visualized. Pairing the examination of the historical semantics of "the border" in 17th-century France with a broader landscape of objects that mediated political boundaries demonstrates ways in which the specific notion of the *frontière* inflected how borders presented themselves in decorative arts objects as well as in maps and geographical pedagogy. Looking closely at these objects and the languages they deploy – visual, material, textual – helps us grasp the mutability of boundaries by allowing us to perceive differences in the ways in which boundaries may appear at particular historical moments. Simultaneously, examining the case of 17th-century France and its frontiers aids us in seeing how bordered thinking indelibly framed historical perceptions of the world through pedagogical practices predicated upon dividing the world into bounded bits conjoined like a tabular mosaic in the mind.

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MATERIALIZING BORDERS AND LEARNING TO THINK IN LIMITS IN 17TH-CENTURY FRANCE

Summary

A *pietra dura* table manufactured at the royal Gobelins workshops (Paris) in 1684 will serve as a case study for considering the historical dimensions of borders and how they take particular aesthetic forms. The table pictures a map of France, made out of a mosaic of differently colored pieces of marble. The map is traversed by representations of boundaries, between provinces and states as well as a five-part bounded frame that encircles the map. In this object, borders appear as both a lens through which one can learn about the world and control it, while simultaneously presenting boundaries as an embedded part of the material world: a delimited France as a figure that is also a (stone) ground. Considered in its historical dimension, however, the term "border" is insufficient for explaining the types of changes (political, scientific, and cultural) that produced this object. Indeed, during this period, the nature and vocabulary of borders was developing in new ways, just as the image of the state was slowly transitioning from a subject-based (monarchical) to a territorial-based concept of statehood. I argue that by examining the materiality of this particular table, as well as comparing it to other products of material culture from the period (including cartographic atlases and pedagogical lessons), we can recall how borders signified and assumed a particular form at a given historical moment. I propose that, in this context, borders took on specific visual and material forms that aimed to facilitate a kind of collaborative practice of understanding the world, and one's place in it, in terms of bounded perimeters. The aim of reproducing this historical moment in border production is to encourage us to examine the historical determinants of borders today, both in their epistemological and aesthetic dimensions.

Keywords:

border studies, decorative arts, early modern France, Versailles, Marble, Pietra Dura, Nicolas Sanson, geographical pedagogy