

Notes from a Symposium on Cartography and Imperialism at the Royal Geographical Society. *Challenging Maps and Exploration* (London, 30 October 2025)

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The symposium *Challenging Maps and Exploration* took place on Thursday, 30 October, organized by the Royal Geographical Society in collaboration with the Sunderland Collection¹. The event brought together academics, researchers, and explorers, combining multiple disciplines and approaches to the relationship between cartography, travel, and Western imperialism. Overall, the presentations helped to consolidate several research lines that scholars have recently begun to develop through monographs and academic publications. For this reason, the symposium was particularly valuable, as it provided an opportunity for exchange bringing together scholars and cartography professionals from a variety of academic and research contexts.

The first panel, titled *Cartographic Encounters with Empire*, chaired by Dr. Katie Parker (Royal Geographical Society), analyzed the discourse of power hierarchies reflected in maps and the map-making process, with particular attention to the early modern and nineteenth-century periods. The panel included Dr. Edward Armston Sheret (University of London) and Professor Sujit Sivasundaram (University of Cambridge).

Dr. Armston Sheret focused his analysis on maps produced during the Speke and Burton expedition which, together with those by August Grant, played a crucial role in shaping British imperial policy in Africa, especially in the search for the sources of the Nile (Fig. 1). Notably, he drew attention to how these maps depicted transport networks, revealing the existence of mobility infrastructures long before European exploration.

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¹ The sessions of the symposium can be accessed online at the following link: <https://oculimundi.com/challenging-maps-and-exploration>.

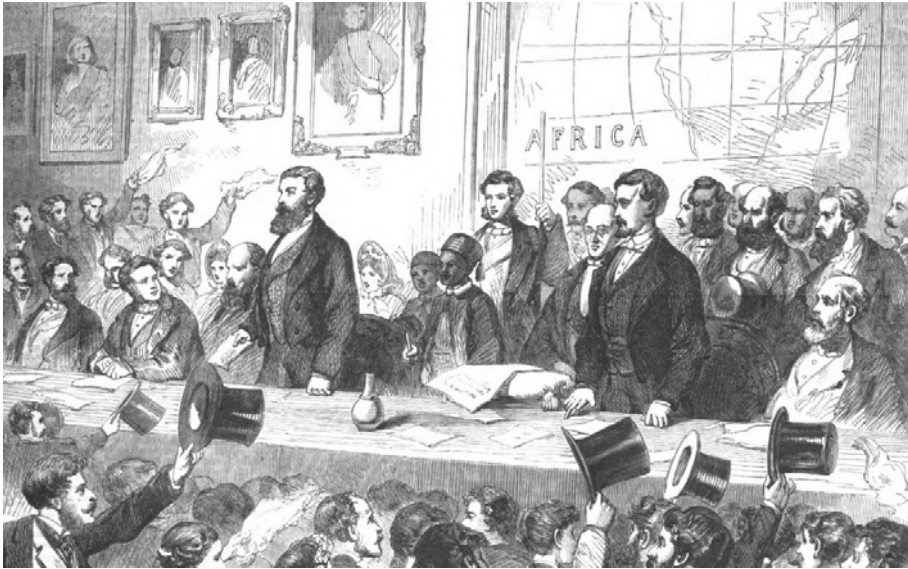


Fig. 1 – Reception of captains Speke and Grant by the Royal Geographical Society.

Source: *The Illustrated London News*, Vol. 43, Jul-Dec 1863, p. 1.

Consequently the role of local populations is foregrounded as knowledge holders and facilitators of travel, for example in journeys from Zanzibar into the interior. Regarding this route, a specific map has been useful in showing the presence of one of the settlements listed as Arab in the inland area, confirming their activities before the arrival of the British explorers. Another relevant issue concerns how local memory contributes to the map-making process. In these maps, blank spaces coexist with territories defined symbolically; Sheret stresses that these cartographic voids should not be interpreted as gaps in knowledge², but rather as limits to physical European exploration³.

Professor Sujit Sivasundaram then provided a diachronic analysis of the evolution of the city of Colombo in Sri Lanka⁴. Here, the intersection of impe-

² On the interaction between visible signs and submerged meanings, the reader is referred to MORRI R., «Visibile-Invisibile», in *GNOSIS. Rivista Italiana di Intelligenza*, 4(2019), pp. 233-240.

³ For a more in-depth examination of this new approach to the history of exploration, see MARTIN P.R., ARMSTON SHERET E., «Off the beaten track? Critical approaches to exploration studies», in *Geography Compass*, 14, 1(2020), pp. 1-14 and ARMSTON SHERET E., *On the Backs of Others: Rethinking the History of British Geographical Exploration*, University of Nebraska Press, 2024. He wrote about the role of local guides – which he analyzes by drawing on Antonio Gramsci's notion of the “subaltern” – in ARMSTON SHERET E., «Diversifying the historical geography of exploration: Subaltern body work on British-led expeditions c.1850-1914», in *Journal of Historical Geography*, 80, 2023, pp. 58-68.

⁴ The line of research on the relationship between British imperialism and Sri Lanka has its roots in the professor's earlier studies. Notably, it should be noted in SIVASUNDARAM S., «Tales of the Land: British Geography and Kandyan Resistance in Sri Lanka, c. 1803-1850», in *Modern Asian Studies*, 41, 5(2007), pp. 925-965 and SIVASUNDARAM S., *Islanded. Britain, Sri Lanka, and the*

rialism and cartography results in a forced representation of the city as a strategic port, a colonial imposition that silences local voices. This approach emerges clearly when examining historical maps of Sri Lanka and Colombo. Regarding the island, he highlighted its overrepresentation in early modern maps: Taprobana – the historical toponym for the island – appears twelve times larger than its actual size. This disproportion is depicted in the maps of Sebastian Münster, Giuseppe Rosaccio, and subsequent representations, often accompanied by an iconography emphasizing the elephant (Fig. 2). Once a royal symbol, the animal becomes in Western representations a scientific object and a vector for trade – a giant domesticated. In contrast to European cartography, Sivasundaram considers Al-Idrisi's maps as an Islamic counter-narrative: rather than a colonial outpost emblematic of oceanic boundaries, the island appears as a connective hub linking multiple territories through trade networks. The discussion then returns to Colombo as a symbol of multiple colonialisms shaping the city over time. Although the city was not a natural port, the construction of a port by successive colonizers, while intended to integrate it into global networks, represented a disconnection for local populations, such as the fishing communities forced to relocate. This process is clearly documented in Portuguese, Dutch, and later British maps, such as the *Plan of the Harbour of Colombo* (1794)⁵.

The panel discussion examined the complexity of the relationship between reality and cartographic representation. Dr. Sheret emphasized the embodied nature of map-making, illustrated by the Antarctic case, where mirages and misidentified icebergs caused errors in perception⁶. Dr. Parker stressed the plurality of actors involved in map-making and the interplay between materiality and embodiment, executed by specific people at specific times. According to Sivasundaram, this deep connection between maps and cultural context makes the concept of “accuracy” a constructed notion. Sheret further noted that the geographic-physical dimension of African maps emerges primarily when assessing a territory's potential for future colonization, in terms of agriculture. Returning to the representation of islands, Dr. Parker invited reflections on their

Bounds of an Indian Ocean Colony, University of Chicago Press, 2013. More specifically regarding the cartographic implications of colonial politics, see SIVASUNDARAM S., «Towards a Critical History of Connection: The Port of Colombo, the Geographical “Circuit,” and the Visual Politics of New Imperialism, ca. 1880-1914», in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 59, 2017, pp. 1-35.

⁵ With regard to the study of these territorial dynamics in Colombo, reference is made to SIVASUNDARAM S., «Towards a Critical History of Connection: the Port of Colombo, the geographical “circuit” and the visual politics of New Imperialism ca. 1880-1914», in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 59, 2(2017), pp. 346-384 and to the most recent work SIVASUNDARAM S., «Breaking the sea and digging the earth: wetland infrastructures and social conflicts in late modern Colombo», in *Urban History*, 2025, pp. 1-26.

⁶ Concerning the multiple thematic lines about geographical and historical research of antarctic exploration, see PALAGIANO C., CERRETI C. (eds.), *Ghiacci e miraggi. Fonti e questioni intorno alla ricerca dell'Antartide (1772-1900)*, LIX, «Memorie della Società Geografica Italiana», Roma, Società Geografica Italiana, 1999.

grotesque or exaggerated depiction on maps⁷. Sivasundaram argued that this results from the historical marginalization of islands on maps, while Sheret illustrated the overrepresentation of land using the Antarctic expedition of Robert Falcon Scott, noting that light conditions often misled human perception, causing measurement errors in maps and diaries.



Fig. 2 – Map of Taprobana in *Cosmographia universalis* by Sebastian Münster (1544).

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The second panel, *Cartographic Encounters with Indigeneity*, examined how Western maps and map archives often erase or minimize Indigenous presence, yet can

⁷ Even though the subject is vast, the depiction of islands in colonial maps deserves some bibliographic references. Specifically about the connection between colonial cartography and islands, see KENT A.J., VERVUST S., DEMHARDT I.J., MILLEA N., *Mapping Empires: Colonial Cartographies of Land and Sea. 7th International Symposium of the ICA Commission on the History of Cartography*, 2018, Springer, 2020. For an overview of the historical representation of islands from the Middle Ages onward, the topic has been recently discussed in WITTMANN K.R. (ed.), *Mapping Insularity: A Visual History of Islands in Medieval and Early Modern Worlds*, Leiden, Brill, 2025. For an examination of the process of territorial appropriation of the island through place-naming, see GALLIA A. «Nesonyms and power in historical cartography. The denomination of islands as an act of domination», in GALLIA A., MUTI G., PECORELLI V. (eds.), *Critical toponymy: practices of (re)naming and the power to transform time into space. Numero Semestrale di Studi e Ricerche di Geografia*, 1(2023), pp. 23-33.

also serve as powerful tools for Indigenous sovereignty (through toponyms, resource mapping, etc.)⁸. The panel included Professor Michael Bravo (University of Cambridge) and Dr. Rohi Rai (Brunel University London), chaired by Professor Sana Murrani (University of Plymouth). A key feature of this panel was its focus on working directly with Indigenous communities.

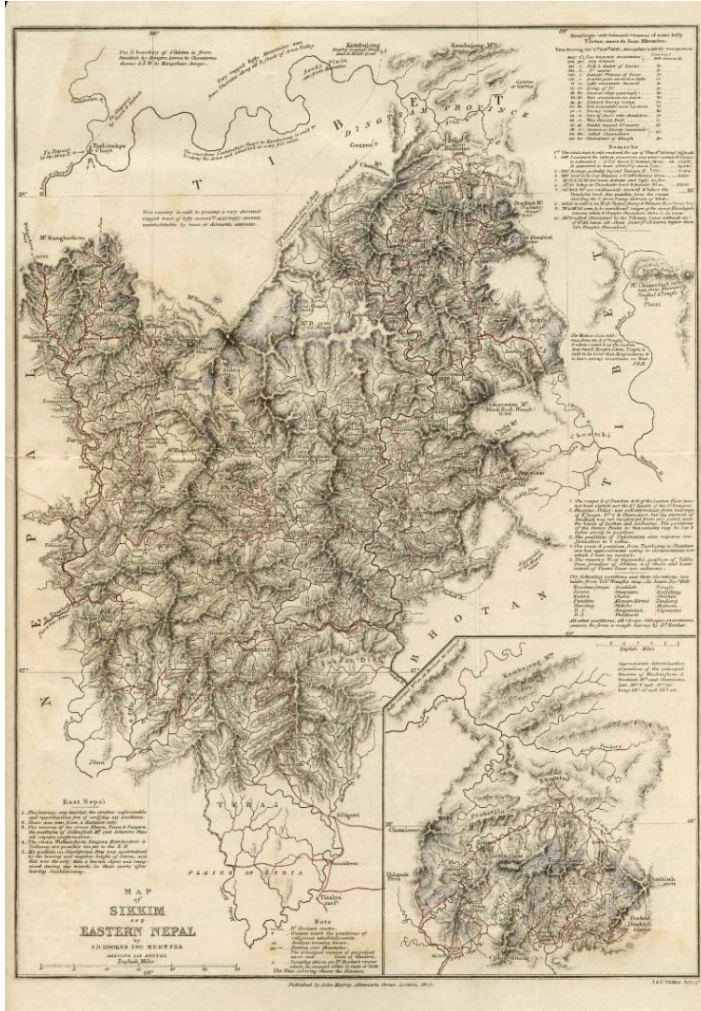


Fig. 3 - Sikkim map from Hooker's Himalayan Journals.

Source: HOOKER J.D., *Himalayan Journals or Notes of a naturalist in Bengal, the Sikkim, and Nepal Himalayas [...]* Vol I (-II), London, Murray, 1853.

⁸ During the 2024 RGS-IBG Annual International Conference, a dedicated Map Room addressed this topic under the title *Mapping Indigeneity*. The results of the discussion are available in MARTIN P.R., PARKER K., «Mapping Indigeneity in the RGS-IBG map collections», in *Area*, 00, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.70064>.

Dr. Rohini Rai, a sociologist, began her presentation by discussing colonial maps and the northeast Himalayan region⁹. Methodologically, her research combines interviews with the Himalayan diaspora in the UK with her own perspective. The project *Indigenising the Himalaya*¹⁰, in collaboration with the Royal Geographical Society and the Institute of British Geographers, centered on public engagement and unconventional modes of representation, including dance, archives, and storytelling. The maps analyzed were military maps from the nineteenth century (Fig. 3), designed to delineate colonial borders and buffer zones, often suppressing Indigenous cosmologies¹¹.

Meetings with communities, particularly in Ashford, allowed the maps to be reconsidered through Indigenous perspectives. One participant wrote on a post-it that it was the first meaningful engagement with his territorial roots in thirty years. Emotional and identity-related aspects intersected, highlighting the importance of dialogue between map-makers and those living in colonized areas.

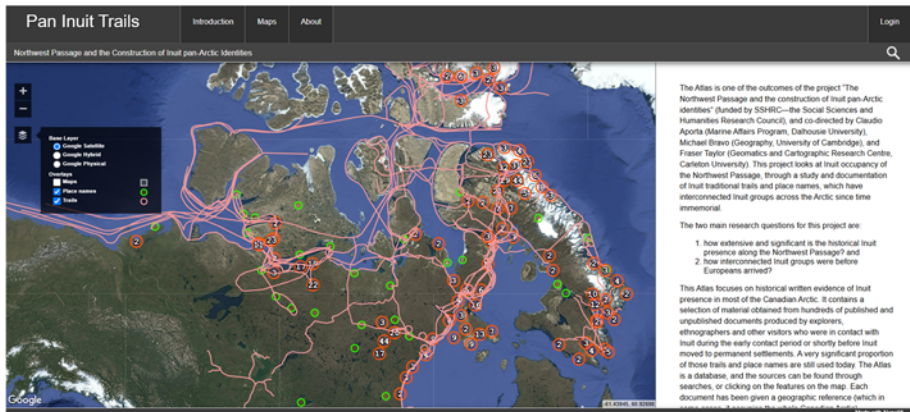


Fig. 4 – Screenshot of Pan Inuit Trails, co-directed by Professor Bravo.

Source: <https://paninuittrails.org/index.html>.

Professor Michael Bravo reflected on the diverse ways maps can be interpreted. Maps are not only visual artifacts but also oral ones. He linked this to the concept of trails, with particular attention to the Canadian Arctic. He presented a map of Inuit travel routes, revealing a dense network of paths in contrast to the

⁹ On the impact of British Empire on Himalayan territories, reference is made to FLEETWOOD L., *Science on the Roof of the World: Empire and the Remaking of the Himalaya*, Cambridge University Press, 2022.

¹⁰ You can explore the project in more depth by viewing an online exhibition at the following link: <https://www.rgs.org/our-collections/stories-from-our-collections/online-exhibitions/reimagining-the-himalaya-through-the-lens-of-diasporic-indigeneity>.

¹¹ ROHINI R., «Racializing space, spatializing “race”: racialization, its urban spatialization, and the making of “Northeastern” identity in “world class” Delhi», in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 46, 2003, pp. 3271-3292.

common European-imagined route of the Northwest Passage, opened with Indigenous assistance. These Indigenous routes constitute an intricate network across ice and land, and many associated toponyms were erased through European colonization (Fig. 4)¹².

The panel discussion emphasized the complexity of cartographic representation. Chair Sana Murrani noted that Professor Rai belongs to a community whose cosmology is often ignored in colonial maps, a significant positional consideration. She further highlighted the scarcity of written records in the Himalayan region, underscoring the need to consider other forms of spatial knowledge, including spiritual and performative practices. Dance, in this sense, acts as a cultural archive, creating non-conventional maps through movement. These reflections raise fundamental questions about the nature of a map and invite further international debate in cartographic studies. Professor Bravo concluded by emphasizing the “fluid” nature of maps, which historically should be decentered from Western commissioning frameworks to integrate other cosmologies.

The third panel sought to highlight the perspectives of contemporary explorers. Titled *Cartographic Encounters with Contemporary Exploring*, it was chaired by Tom Allen (Expeditions and Fieldwork Manager, Royal Geographical Society) and featured explorers Phoebe Smith and Felicity Aston, who shared how historical and contemporary maps inform and influence their expeditions.

Felicity Aston, who has decades of expedition experience worldwide¹³, emphasized the role of maps in planning and organizing expeditions. She recounted three experiences in particular. The first involved an Antarctic expedition 25 years ago, where she installed a meteorological station. During a flight, she noticed a small, sharp-peaked mountain not marked on maps; consulting them revealed the label «mountain reported in 1963». Mapping Antarctica remains challenging¹⁴. Similarly, Arctic Ocean mapping presents difficulties due to rapidly shifting sea ice, making terrain navigation difficult. Her final story concerned the “endless landscape” of Siberia’s Pole of Cold near Yakutsk. When asking

¹² The professor has published numerous works on the historical-geographical and ethnographic study of the Arctic and its peoples. Without claiming to be exhaustive, and remaining within the field of the history of exploration, the following are particularly noteworthy: BRAVO M., «Geographies of exploration and improvement: William Scoresby and Arctic whaling, 1782-1822», in *Journal of Historical Geography*, 32, 3(2006), pp. 512-538 and BRAVO M., «Indigenous Voyaging, Authorship, and Discovery», in TERRALL, M., CRACIUN, A., *Curious Encounters: Voyaging, Collecting, and Making Knowledge in the Long Eighteenth Century*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2019, pp. 71-112.

¹³ At the age of 34, Felicity Aston became the first woman to complete a solo crossing of Antarctica. For an account of the expedition, reference is made to the monographic work ASTON F., *Alone in Antarctica*, Chichester, Summersdale Publishers Limited, 2013.

¹⁴ With respect to this issue the following references, while not exhaustive, may be of use: CLANCY R., MANNING J., BROLSMA H., *Mapping Antarctica: A Five Hundred Year Record of Discovery*, Springer, 2013 and DODDS KJ., «Antarctica and the modern geographical imagination (1918-1960)», in *Polar Record*, 33 (184), 1997, pp. 47-62.

locals for a map, they questioned its necessity, noting “there is only one road.” Maps existed but were mostly mental.

Phoebe Smith¹⁵ discussed how maps are presented in schools mainly as technical objects, creating a barrier between students and the land. She shared her experiences in North Wales, reflecting on how local toponyms evoke stories and myths, such as “sleeping giants.”

DIARIO



Fig. 5 – Felicity Aston in Antarctica.

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The final discussion returned to the partiality of representation: maps do not fully capture the territory. Smith noted the multitude of trails that exist in reality but are absent from maps. Aston emphasized that exploration is still necessary to verify and monitor cartographic data against real-world conditions (Fig. 5). Tom Allen observed that digital maps are largely privatized and reflect corporate intentions, exhibiting biases similar to those of paper maps. Aston concluded that exploration today remains essential to reconcile maps with actual terrain, as the two often do not match.

Overall, the event emphasized a wide range of issues concerning the role of maps in relation to the concept of exploration, moving from journeys conceived within nineteenth-century imperialism to contemporary practices of travel. Across the different contributions, the map emerged as a particularly useful tool for advancing epistemological and methodological reflections, en-

¹⁵ To examine the explorer’s distinctive travel practice in greater depth, reference is made to the interview published in PITT H., SMITH T.A., «Conversations with Practitioners 2: Phoebe Smith and Dwayne Fields», in SMITH T.A., PITT H., Dunkley R.A. (eds) *Unfamiliar Landscapes. Young people and diverse outdoor experience*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 5-14.

couraging scholars to reconsider the perspectives from which geographical maps are approached¹⁶. What was perhaps lacking was a focus on the exegetical dimension of maps, one that would engage more closely with the interpretive analysis of cartographic sign systems and symbols, as well as with the relationship between graphic representation and its commissioning agents – an aspect that would, moreover, have been pertinent to the overarching theme of the symposium.

More generally, the study day confirmed the multiple directions in which research on maps is currently developing, not only within the Western academic landscape. On the one hand, the need to work more intensively on historical cartography became clear, given its considerable potential for understanding the dynamics of colonial imperialism, which remains largely unexplored; on the other hand, it became evident that the study of maps should be integrated with distinct practices of territorial representation, engaging local communities whose geographies have been obscured by colonial mapping¹⁷.

¹⁶ Regarding the re-interpretation of maps, starting from the studies on critical cartography developed in the 1980s, the scientific scholarship is extremely broad and is partly expressed through a renewed appreciation of the historical value of maps – cross-referenced and aligned with other sources, beyond the purely descriptive dimension traditionally associated with cartography – as well as through attempts to go beyond maps by exploring alternative forms of representation. These two lines of research, however, often do not intersect. Due to space constraints, only a limited selection of bibliographic references is provided. The following may be highlighted, for instance CASTI E., *Reflexive Cartography. A New Perspective on Mapping*, Elsevier, 2015; KENT A., VUJAKOVIC P. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Mapping and Cartography*, London, Routledge, 2020. A recent convergence between map studies and the humanities can be seen in ROSSETTO T., LO PRESTI L. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Cartographic Humanities* (1st ed.), London, Routledge, 2024; with regard to the study of the circulation of cartographic and technical knowledge, with due consideration of patronage, see instead D'ASCENZO A., GEMIGNANI C.A., GUARDUCCI A., PRESENDA P., STURANI M.L. (eds.), *Reti cartografiche. Circolazione di carte, cartografi, idee, tecniche. Geotema*, 71, XXVII, 2023.

¹⁷ Provided here without any claim to completeness, concerning these participatory research practices, see – on migratory imaginaries – TURCO A., CAMARA L., *Immaginari migratori*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2018; – on the memory of Atlantic slavery – ARBORE C., MAGGIOLI M., POZZI G. (eds.), *La memoria della schiavitù. Politiche di patrimonializzazione del mondo atlantico*, Milan, Unicopli, 2023; and – on mobility and symbolic african geographies – GHISALBERTI A., «Mobilità e nuovi immaginari del mondo per un abitare sostenibile: geografie simboliche per l'Africa rurale, e oltre», in *Semestrare di Studi e Ricerche di Geografia*, XXXVII, 1 (2025), pp. 109-123. A recent contribution, also of a methodological nature, focusing on Black social movements in the Americas and traditional peoples in Brazil, is available in PEREIRA JUNIOR D., AND SLETTO B., *Indigenous cartographies*, in ROSSETTO T., LO PRESTI L. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Cartographic Humanities* (1st ed.), London, Routledge, 2024, pp. 254-261.