

Towards a Flat Earth Theory

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# Towards a Flat Earth Theory

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Glenn McGlathery

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Sometimes, evidence is hard to come by. Evidence that the Earth is spherical has been slow to emerge during the millenia in which humans have wondered about such things. The difficulty has come about, in part, because humans are so close to the Earth which they have sought to describe. It has been hard to conceptualize beyond the Earth while being such an integral part of the system. Only the most imaginative have broken through the barriers of lore, myth, superstition, and common sense to describe an Earth that is other than flat.

This article is a tongue-in-cheek attempt to persuade teachers and students that much of what we call "evidence"

"is really "faith" in what we have heard. The subject, the Earth's shape, holds intrinsic value and most of us have made up our minds as to the Earth's shape, although we have little or no empirical evidence to support our belief. What visual evidence suggests the Earth is spherical rather than flat? The Earth seems more or less flat as you look out over the horizon. Perhaps you get a hint of sphericity from the vantage of 9,200 m in an airplane over the midwest but only if you have a fairly vivid imagination. There is simply little visual evidence to suggest that the Earth is spherical.

Can you get students to defend their reasons for believing in a spherical Earth—assuming that is the general belief of most children?

First, prepare a flat model of the Earth. You can easily do this by drawing a projection from an atlas onto a large cardboard disc. Make the map as elaborate

as you wish. Show all continents in proper relation. Use your imagination to show what happens at the edges of the flat Earth. I do what ancient cartographers often did when they drew regions which they were unsure of. They inscribed "Here Be Dragons" in uncharted areas. The inscription around edges can add interest and mystery to the project. You must give the appearance of believing strongly in the flat Earth theory.

The Earth has probably changed its shape very little since the time its inhabitants have tried to describe it. Yet, descriptions have been many and diverse.<sup>(3)\*</sup> Sumerians saw the Earth as a gigantic mountain surrounded by an enormous wall on which the sky rested. Babylonians thought the Earth was a large hollow mountain. The mountain

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\*See References.

sheltered the kingdom of the dead and was surrounded by the river ocean. On the opposite bank stood walls upon which heaven's metallic dome rested. Earth and heaven floated on the ocean. Celestial caverns held the upper waters from which the rains came. The sun traveled through the sky on a chariot. Egyptians thought the world was a chest where the Earth formed the bottom and the sky the cover. Four mountains held up the sky from which stars hung like lanterns. A celestial river surrounded the world. A sacred bark carrying the sun floated on the river. At night, the sun journeyed behind mountains. The celestial river poured into an ocean in the heart of Africa.

The Chinese saw the world as a covered wagon with the Earth as the floor of the wagon. The canopy had nine

layers or skies and was held in place by eight pillars. One of the pillars had collapsed after a cataclysm, making the sky lopsided. The Earth tilted toward the southeast. Other people thought the Earth rested on the back of a large turtle who slowly swam through space.

## **Is the Earth Flat?**

Now you are ready to hold a discussion with your students. You might try a variation of the following:

Teacher: (*Displaying the flat Earth model*) I have a model here that shows the Earth. This disc represents the Earth's true shape.

Student: But the Earth isn't flat! It's round!

T: My disc is round.

S: But the Earth's round like a ball.

T: Like a sphere? Yes, many believe

that. But I think that the idea of a spherical Earth is a conspiracy, an idea made up by people who make atlases. These people discovered how to make globes and had nothing better to do than paint continents and water on them.

S: (Chuckle, Chuckle)

T: No, I'm serious. Why do you think the Earth is round like a ball? What is your evidence?

S: We've all been taught that since we started school.

T: Does that make it right? Is being told something really evidence? I'll tell you why I think the Earth is flat. If it's a sphere, then there are people on the other side. Right?

S: Right!

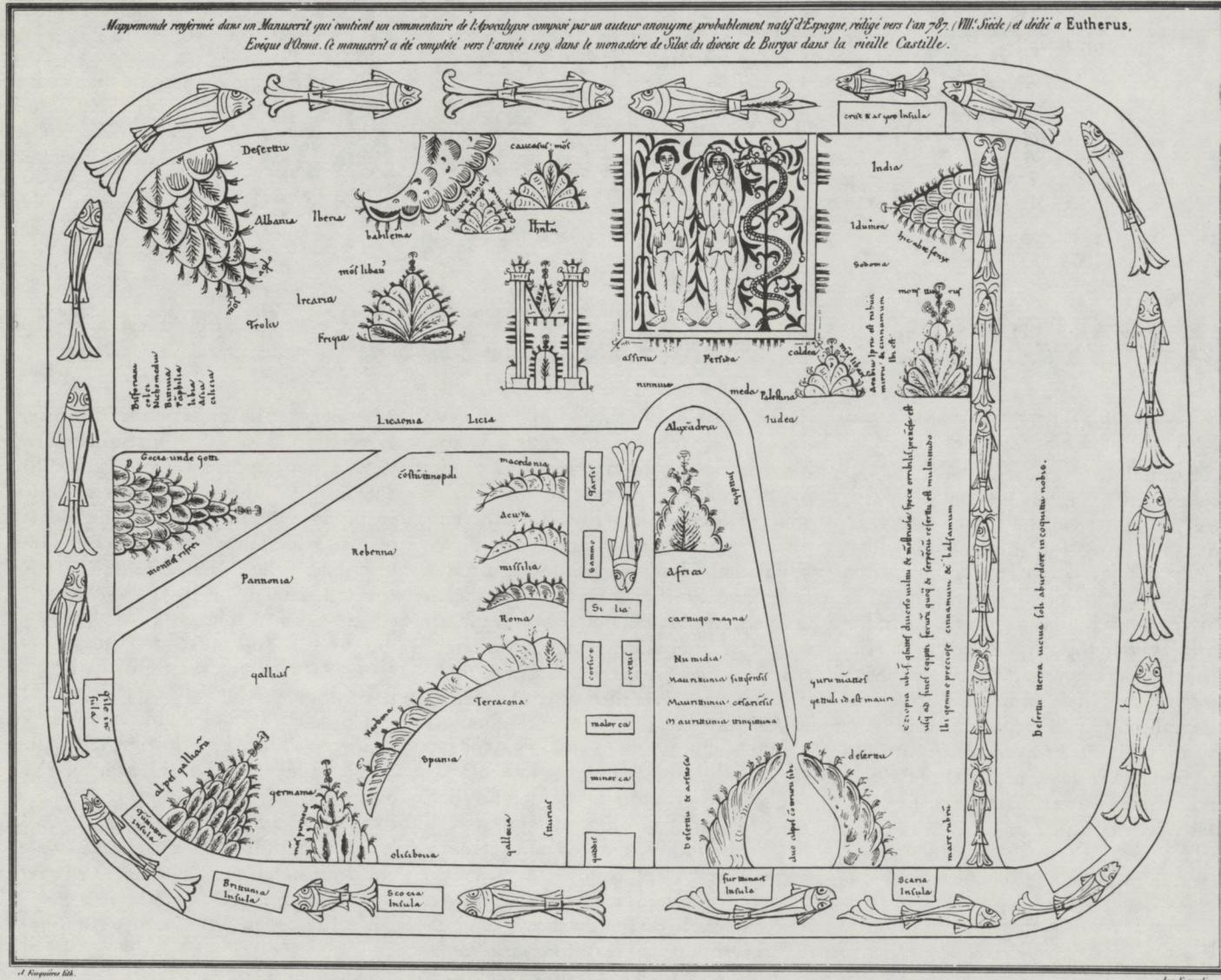
T: We're standing right side up, right?

S: Right!

T: Then the people on the other side of

*This map of the world was drawn in the Eighth Century A.D., probably by a Spaniard. Library of Congress Collection.*

*Atlas du vicomte de Santarem*



the Earth must be standing upside down, right?

S: Hmm . . .

T: Now isn't that a preposterous idea?

Above Average Student: But we're all pulled to the Earth by gravity. There's really no up and down in space.

T: Pooh. Tell me more about gravity.

AAS: Gravity's a force that holds things on the Earth and makes loose objects fall down, not up.

T: What about things like hot-air balloons?

AAS: That's different. Gravity just exists and . . .

T: Well, if you want to believe in magic and stuff like that . . .

S: Photographs of the Earth from space show the Earth is round.

T: So is my model.

S: But astronauts have flown around the Earth and saw that it wasn't a flat disc.

T: Maybe all those space flights were a hoax. Maybe cartoonists were hired to simulate the space program. I remember seeing an interview with an elderly man who had watched the "launch." He said he didn't think that the astronauts were going to the moon. He believed NASA merely shot the rocket out into the ocean where the astronauts were picked up. Then the TV studios took over and showed us what they wanted us to see. So, is the space program real? Is the Earth *really* spherical?

S: But we've seen real photographs. Pictures don't lie.

T: Sometimes photographs are fakes. I've seen "photographs" of the Loch Ness monster, UFOs, and the Abominable Snowman. Photographers are good at "touching up" photographs to make them appear the way they want. Where's your evidence?

S: If you stand on a dock at the ocean, you can see the top of a ship, or the mast, before anything else. Doesn't that prove that the Earth is spherical?

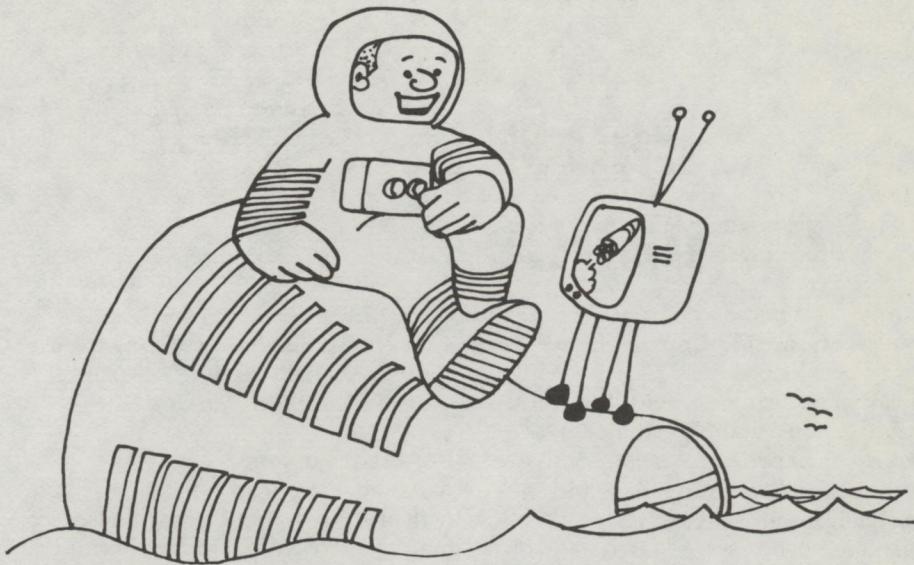
T: Have you ever personally been to a dock and seen that?

S: No, but I've always heard that it's so.

T: That's not evidence, that's hearsay.

S: This is crazy. Do you really believe that the Earth is flat? What is *your* evidence?

T: My evidence comes from what I see and from being reasonable. It's hard to get good evidence either way. I'm a member of the Flat Earth Society, actually the International Flat Earth Re-



search Society with headquarters in Dover, England. We're working on the problem.

AAS: Then you don't have any evidence, either.

T: Not really, but that's not the point. What's your evidence for a spherical Earth? History is on my side. The idea of a flat Earth is far older than the idea of a spherical Earth.

Anaximander, Thales' pupil, envisioned an Earth shaped somewhat like a drum, three times as wide as high. The Earth was isolated in the middle of an enormous sphere and was upheld by whirlpools of air.

Pythagoras believed the Earth was spherical, probably because the sphere was considered by mathematicians and philosophers as the "perfect" shape. Saint Augustine preferred to return to the idea of a flat Earth since this seemed more compatible with the Scriptures and hence less troubling to believers.

Rosmas, during the sixth century, proposed a typical version of the Earth. He considered that the Earth could have no other shape than the Tabernacle of Moses, essentially a flat Earth surrounded by a mysterious ocean.

Theories on the Earth's shape run in cycles from flat to spherical to flat to . . . Historically, the Earth has been viewed as flat for longer than it has been thought of as spherical.

However, on your side, many people today believe in a spherical Earth. In the late 1900s a Reverend Dowie founded the city of Zion on Lake Michigan's shores. He preached a "flat" Earth. One

of the Reverend's most ardent followers, Wilbur Glenn Voliva, saw the Earth as a disc with the North Pole in the center and no South Pole. He suggested there were natural railings around the Earth to keep ships from falling off. Another advocate of the flat Earth was Albert Smith, founder of the Universal Zetarist Society. Mr. Smith suggested as a "proof" that the Earth was flat was that railroad tracks don't have to be curved before putting them down in place.

S: Well, we still think the Earth is round.

T: That's fine. Just realize that you're trusting something just because people say it's true.

S: We'll take a chance. Your Earth is too thin, anyway. With all the drilling people do, what happens when they poke out the other side?

T: What if they went through and the drillings began to show traces of turtle shell . . . that people had actually been drilling into the back of a giant turtle slowly . . . swimming . . . ?

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