

A3-VA-Reading Comprehension

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Understanding where you are in the world is a basic survival skill, which is why we, like most species come hard-wired with specialized brain areas to create cognitive maps of our surroundings. Where humans are unique, though, with the possible exception of honeybees, is that we try to communicate this understanding the world with others. We have a long history of doing this by drawing maps – the earliest version yet discovered were scrawled on cave walls 14,000 years ago. Human cultures have been drawing them on stone tablets, papyrus, paper and now computer screens ever since. Given such a long history of human map-making, it perhaps surprising that is only within the last few hundred years that north has been consistently considered to be at the top. In fact, for much of human history, north almost never appeared at the top, according to Jerry Brotton, a map historian... “North was rarely put at the top for the simple fact that north is where darkness comes from,” he says. “West is also very unlikely to be put at the top because west is where the sun disappears.” Confusingly, early Chinese maps seem to buck this trend. But, Brotton, says, even though they did have compasses at the time, that isn’t the reason that they placed north at the top. Early Chinese compasses were actually oriented to point south, which was considered to be more desirable than deepest darkest north. But in Chinese maps, the emperor, who lived in the north of the country was always put at the top of the map, with everyone else, his loyal subjects, looking up towards him. “In Chinese culture the Emperor looks south because it’s where the winds come from, it’s a good direction. North is not very good but you are in a position of the subjection to the emperor, so you look up to him,” says Brotton. Given that each culture has a very different idea of who, or what, they should look up to its perhaps not surprising that there is very little consistency in which way early maps pointed. In ancient Egyptian times the top of the world was east, the position of sunrise. Early Islamic maps favored south at the top because most of the early Muslim cultures were north of Mecca, so they imagined looking up (south) towards it. Christian maps from the same era (called Mappa Mundi) put east at the top, towards the Garden of Eden and with Jerusalem in the centre. So when did everyone get together and decide that north was the top? It’s tempting to put it down to European explorers like Christopher Columbus and Ferdinand Magellan who were navigating by the North Star. But Brotton argues that these early explorers didn’t think of the world like that at all. “When Columbus describes the world it is in accordance with east being at the top,” he says “Columbus says he is going towards paradise, so his mentality is from a medieval mappa mundi.” We’ve got to remember, adds Brotton, that at the time, “no one knows what they are doing and where they are going.”

According to the passage, early Chinese maps placed north at the top because:

1 point

- ☐ The Chinese invented the compass and were aware of magnetic north.
- ☒ They wanted to show respect to the emperor.
- ☐ The Chinese emperor appreciated the winds from the south.
- ☐ North was considered the most desirable direction

Clear selection

Early maps did not put north at the top for all the following reasons EXCEPT:-

1 point

- ☐ North was the source of darkness
- ☒ South was favoured by some emperors
- ☐ East and South were more important for religious reasons for some civilizations
- ☐ East was considered by some civilizations to be a more positive direction

Clear selection

Which one of the following about the northern orientation of modern maps is asserted in the passage? 1 point

- ☐ The biggest contributory factor was the understanding of magnetic north
- ☐ The biggest contributory factor was the role of European explorers
- ☐ The biggest contributory factor was the influence of Christian maps
- ☒ The biggest contributory factor is not stated in the passage

Clear selection

It can be inferred from the passage that European explorers like Columbus and Megellan-

1 point

- ☐ set the precedent for north-up maps
- ☐ navigated by the compass
- ☒ used an eastward orientation for religious reasons
- ☐ navigated with the help of early maps

Clear selection

Which one of the following best describes what the passage is trying to do?

1 point

- ☐ It questions on explanation about how maps are designed.
- ☒ It corrects a misconception about the way maps are designed.
- ☐ It critiques a methodology used to create maps
- ☐ It explores some myths about maps

Clear selection

The role of natural phenomena in influencing map-making conventions is seen most clearly in

1 point

- ☒ early Egyptian maps
- ☐ early Islamic maps
- ☐ early Chinese maps
- ☐ early Christian maps

Clear selection

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