[Template:Other uses](/wiki/Template:Other_uses" \o "Template:Other uses) [thumb|375px|Animated, color-coded map showing the various continents and regions.](/wiki/File:Continental_models-Australia.gif) [Depending on the convention and model](/wiki/Continent#Separation_of_continents), some continents may be consolidated or subdivided: for example, [Eurasia](/wiki/Eurasia) is most often subdivided into [Europe](/wiki/Europe) and [Asia](/wiki/Asia) (red shades), while [North](/wiki/North_America) and [South America](/wiki/South_America) are sometimes recognized as [one American continent](/wiki/Americas) (green shades).

A **continent** is one of several very large [landmasses](/wiki/Landmass) on [Earth](/wiki/Earth). Generally identified by [convention](/wiki/Convention_(norm)) rather than any strict criteria, up to seven regions are commonly regarded as continents. Ordered from largest in size to smallest, they are: [Asia](/wiki/Asia), [Africa](/wiki/Africa), [North America](/wiki/North_America), [South America](/wiki/South_America), [Antarctica](/wiki/Antarctica), [Europe](/wiki/Europe), and [Australia](/wiki/Australia_(continent)).[[1]](#cite_note-1) In [geology](/wiki/Geology), areas of [continental crust](/wiki/Continental_crust) include [regions covered with water](/wiki/Submerged_continent).

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## Definitions and application[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=1)]

[thumb|right|A](/wiki/File:Dymaxion_map_unfolded-no-ocean.png) [Dymaxion map](/wiki/Dymaxion_map) shows land masses with minimal shape distortion

By convention, "continents are understood to be large, continuous, discrete masses of land, ideally separated by expanses of water."[[2]](#cite_note-2) Many of the seven most commonly recognized continents identified by convention are not discrete landmasses separated completely by water. The criterion "large" leads to arbitrary classification: [Greenland](/wiki/Greenland), with a surface area of [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) is considered the world's largest island, while Australia, at [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) is deemed the smallest continent.

The Earth's major landmasses all have coasts on a single, continuous [world ocean](/wiki/World_ocean), which is divided into a number of principal [oceanic](/wiki/Ocean) components by the continents and various geographic criteria.[[3]](#cite_note-3)[[4]](#cite_note-4)

### Extent of continents[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=2)]

The most restricted meaning of *continent* is that of a continuous[[5]](#cite_note-5) area of land or mainland, with the coastline and any land boundaries forming the edge of the continent. In this sense the term [*continental Europe*](/wiki/Continental_Europe) (sometimes "the Continent") is used to refer to mainland Europe, excluding [islands](/wiki/Island) such as [Great Britain](/wiki/Great_Britain), [Ireland](/wiki/Ireland), [Malta](/wiki/Malta) and [Iceland](/wiki/Iceland), and the term *continent of Australia* may refer to the [mainland of Australia](/wiki/Australia_(continent)), excluding [Tasmania](/wiki/Tasmania) and [New Guinea](/wiki/New_Guinea). Similarly, the [*continental United States*](/wiki/Continental_United_States) refers to the 48 contiguous states in central North America and may include [Alaska](/wiki/Alaska) in the northwest of the continent (the two being separated by [Canada](/wiki/Canada)), while excluding [Hawaii](/wiki/Hawaii) in the middle of the [Pacific Ocean](/wiki/Pacific_Ocean).

From the perspective of [geology](/wiki/Geology) or [physical geography](/wiki/Physical_geography), *continent* may be extended beyond the confines of continuous dry land to include the shallow, submerged adjacent area (the [continental shelf](/wiki/Continental_shelf))[[6]](#cite_note-6) and the [islands](/wiki/Island) on the shelf ([continental islands](/wiki/Continental_islands)), as they are structurally part of the continent.[[7]](#cite_note-7) From this perspective the edge of the continental shelf is the true edge of the continent, as shorelines vary with changes in sea level.<ref name=Ollier>[Ollier, Cliff D.](/wiki/Ollier,_Cliff_D.) (1996). Planet Earth. In Ian Douglas (Ed.), *Companion Encyclopedia of Geography: The Environment and Humankind*. London: Routledge, p. 30. "Ocean waters extend onto continental [rocks](/wiki/Rocks) at continental shelves, and the true edges of the continents are the steeper continental slopes. The actual shorelines are rather accidental, depending on the height of sea-level on the sloping shelves."</ref> In this sense the islands of Great Britain and Ireland are part of Europe, while Australia and the island of New Guinea together form a continent.

As a cultural construct, the concept of a continent may go beyond the continental shelf to include [oceanic islands](/wiki/Oceanic_island) and continental fragments. In this way, Iceland is considered part of Europe and [Madagascar](/wiki/Madagascar) part of Africa. Extrapolating the concept to its extreme, some geographers group the [Australasian](/wiki/Australasia) continental plate with other islands in the Pacific into one continent called [Oceania](/wiki/Oceania). This divides the entire land surface of the Earth into continents or quasi-continents.[[8]](#cite_note-8) [thumb|300px|Map of](/wiki/File:Island_nations.svg) [island countries](/wiki/Island_countries): these states are often grouped geographically with a neighboring continental landmass

### Separation of continents[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=3)]

[Template:See also](/wiki/Template:See_also)

The ideal criterion that each continent be a discrete landmass is commonly relaxed due to historical conventions. Of the seven most globally recognized continents, only Antarctica and Australia are completely separated from other continents by ocean. Several continents are defined not as absolutely distinct bodies but as "*more or less* discrete masses of land".[[9]](#cite_note-9) Asia and Africa are joined by the [Isthmus of Suez](/wiki/Isthmus_of_Suez), and North and South America by the [Isthmus of Panama](/wiki/Isthmus_of_Panama). In both cases, there is no complete separation of these landmasses by water (disregarding the [Suez Canal](/wiki/Suez_Canal) and [Panama Canal](/wiki/Panama_Canal), which are both narrow and shallow, as well as being man-made). Both these [isthmuses](/wiki/Isthmus) are very narrow compared to the bulk of the landmasses they unite.

North America and South America are treated as separate continents in the seven-continent model. However, they may also be viewed as a single continent known as America or [the Americas](/wiki/The_Americas). This viewpoint was common in the United States until World War II, and remains prevalent in some Asian six-continent models.[[10]](#cite_note-10) This remains the more common vision in Latin American countries, Spain, Portugal, France, Italy and Greece, where they are taught as a single continent.

The criterion of a discrete landmass is completely disregarded if the continuous landmass of Eurasia is classified as two separate continents: Europe and Asia. Physiographically, Europe and South Asia are peninsulas of the Eurasian landmass. However, Europe is widely considered a continent with its comparatively large land area of [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert), while South Asia, with less than half that area, is considered a subcontinent. The alternative view—in geology and geography—that Eurasia is a single continent results in a six-continent view of the world. Some view separation of Eurasia into Europe and Asia as a residue of [Eurocentrism](/wiki/Eurocentrism): "In physical, cultural and historical diversity, [China](/wiki/China) and [India](/wiki/India) are comparable to the entire European landmass, not to a single European country. [...]"[[11]](#cite_note-11) However, for historical and cultural reasons, the view of Europe as a separate continent continues in several categorizations.

If continents are defined strictly as discrete landmasses, embracing all the contiguous land of a body, then Asia, Europe and Africa form a single continent which may be referred to as [Afro-Eurasia](/wiki/Afro-Eurasia). This produces a four-continent model consisting of Afro-Eurasia, America, Antarctica and Australia.

When sea levels were lower during the [Pleistocene](/wiki/Pleistocene) [ice ages](/wiki/Ice_age), greater areas of continental shelf were exposed as dry land, forming [land bridges](/wiki/Land_bridge). At those times [Australia–New Guinea](/wiki/Australia_(continent)) was a single, continuous continent. Likewise the Americas and Afro-Eurasia were joined by the [Bering land bridge](/wiki/Bering_land_bridge). Other islands such as Great Britain were joined to the mainlands of their continents. At that time there were just three discrete continents: Afro-Eurasia-America, Antarctica, and Australia-New Guinea.

### Number of continents[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=4)]

[Template:Anchor](/wiki/Template:Anchor) There are numerous ways of distinguishing the continents:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Models** | | | | | | | | |
| [center|300px](/wiki/File:Continents_vide_couleurs.png)  Color-coded map showing the various continents. Similar shades exhibit areas that may be consolidated or subdivided. | | | | | | | | |
| **4 continents**[[12]](#cite_note-12) | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) [Afro-Eurasia](/wiki/Afro-Eurasia) | | | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) [America](/wiki/Americas) | | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) [Antarctica](/wiki/Antarctica) | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) [Australia](/wiki/Australia_(continent)) |  |
| **5 continents** [[13]](#cite_note-13)<ref name=OU>Océano Uno, Diccionario Enciclopédico y Atlas Mundial, "Continente", page 392, 1730. ISBN 84-494-0188-7</ref><ref name=LCC>Los Cinco Continentes (The Five Continents), Planeta-De Agostini Editions, 1997. ISBN 84-395-6054-0</ref> | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) [Africa](/wiki/Africa) | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) [Eurasia](/wiki/Eurasia) | | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) America | | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) Antarctica | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) Australia |  |
| **6 continents**[[14]](#cite_note-14) | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) Africa | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) [Europe](/wiki/Europe) | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) [Asia](/wiki/Asia) | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) America | | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) Antarctica | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) Australia |  |
| **6 continents** <ref name=Columbia>"[Continent](http://www.bartleby.com/65/co/continent.html)". [*The Columbia Encyclopedia*](http://www.bartleby.com/65/). 2001. New York: Columbia University Press - Bartleby. [Template:Wayback](/wiki/Template:Wayback)</ref>[[15]](#cite_note-15) | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) Africa | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) Eurasia | | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) [North America](/wiki/North_America) | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) [South America](/wiki/South_America) | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) Antarctica | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) Australia |  |
| **7 continents** <ref name=EB>"[Continent](http://www.britannica.com/ebc/article-9361501)". [*Encyclopædia Britannica*](/wiki/Encyclopædia_Britannica). 2006. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.</ref><ref name=NatlGeo2>[World](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=world&Mode=d&SubMode=w), [*National Geographic*](/wiki/National_Geographic_(magazine)) *-* [*Xpeditions Atlas*](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/)*.* 2006. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society.</ref><ref name=AoCA>[The World - Continents](http://atlas.gc.ca/site/english/maps/reference/international/world/referencemap_image_view), [*Atlas of Canada*](http://atlas.nrcan.gc.ca/site/english/index.html) [Template:Wayback](/wiki/Template:Wayback)</ref><ref name=Oxford1>[*The New Oxford Dictionary of English*](/wiki/Oxford_English_Dictionary)*.* 2001. New York: Oxford University Press.</ref><ref name=Encarta>"[Continent](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761553387/Continent.html)". [*MSN Encarta Online Encyclopedia 2006*](/wiki/Encarta)*.*. [Archived](http://www.webcitation.org/5kwRKkaEZ) 2009-10-31.</ref><ref name=Oxford2>"Continent". McArthur, Tom, ed. 1992. *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. New York: Oxford University Press; p. 260.</ref> | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) Africa | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) Europe | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) Asia | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) North America | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) South America | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) Antarctica | [Template:Small](/wiki/Template:Small) Australia |  |

* The seven-continent model is usually taught in [China](/wiki/China), [India](/wiki/India), [Pakistan](/wiki/Pakistan), the [Philippines](/wiki/Philippines), parts of Western Europe and most [English-speaking countries](/wiki/List_of_countries_by_English-speaking_population), including Australia[[16]](#cite_note-16) and the [UK](/wiki/United_Kingdom) [[17]](#cite_note-17)\* [Template:Cns](/wiki/Template:Cns)
* [Template:Cns](/wiki/Template:Cns) [Latin America](/wiki/Latin_America),[[18]](#cite_note-18) and [Greece](/wiki/Greece).[[14]](#cite_note-14)\* A five-continent model is obtained from the six-continent combined-America model by excluding Antarctica as uninhabited. This is used, for example, in the [Olympic Charter](/wiki/Olympic_Charter).[[19]](#cite_note-19)

The terms [*Oceania*](/wiki/Oceania) or [*Australasia*](/wiki/Australasia) are sometimes substituted for *Australia* to denote a region encompassing the Australian continent and various [islands](/wiki/Pacific_Islands) in the [Pacific Ocean](/wiki/Pacific_Ocean) that are not included in the seven-continent model. For example, the *Atlas of Canada* names Oceania,[[20]](#cite_note-20) as does the model taught in [France](/wiki/France), [Italy](/wiki/Italy), [Greece](/wiki/Greece),[[14]](#cite_note-14) the Ibero-American countries ([Spain](/wiki/Spain), [Portugal](/wiki/Portugal), [Brazil](/wiki/Brazil) and [Hispanic America](/wiki/Hispanic_America)), [China](/wiki/China), and [South Korea](/wiki/South_Korea).

## Area and population[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=5)]

[Template:Anchor](/wiki/Template:Anchor) [Template:See also](/wiki/Template:See_also)

The following table summarizes area and population of each continent using the seven continent model, sorted by decreasing area.[[21]](#cite_note-21) [Template:Anchor](/wiki/Template:Anchor)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Continent** | **Area (km²)** | **Area (mi²)** | **Percent total landmass** | **Population** | **Percent total pop.** | **Density: People per km²** | **Density: People per mi²** | **Most populous city (**[**proper**](/wiki/List_of_cities_proper_by_population)**)** |
| [**Asia**](/wiki/Asia) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | 29.5% | 4,164,252,000 | 60% | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | [Shanghai](/wiki/Shanghai), [China](/wiki/China) |  |  |
| [**Africa**](/wiki/Africa) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | 20.4% | 1,022,234,000 | 15% | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | [Lagos](/wiki/Lagos), [Nigeria](/wiki/Nigeria) |  |  |
| [**North America**](/wiki/North_America) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | 16.5% | 542,056,000 | 8% | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | [Mexico City](/wiki/Mexico_City), [Mexico](/wiki/Mexico) |  |  |
| [**South America**](/wiki/South_America) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | 12.0% | 392,555,000 | 6% | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | [São Paulo](/wiki/São_Paulo), [Brazil](/wiki/Brazil) |  |  |
| [**Antarctica**](/wiki/Antarctica) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | 9.2% | data-sort-value=4490| 4,490[[22]](#cite_note-22) | 0% | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | [McMurdo Station](/wiki/McMurdo_Station), [US](/wiki/US) |  |  |
| [**Europe**](/wiki/Europe) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | 6.8% | 738,199,000 | 11% | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | [Moscow](/wiki/Moscow), [Russia](/wiki/Russia)[[23]](#cite_note-23) |  |  |
| [**Australia**](/wiki/Australia_(continent)) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | 5.9% | 29,127,000 | 0.4% | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | [Sydney](/wiki/Sydney), [Australia](/wiki/Australia) |  |  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| [thumb|325px|Comparison of area (by tens of millions of square kilometers) and population (by billions of people)](/wiki/File:ContinentStatistics.svg) | [thumb|right|300px|Graph showing population by continent as a percentage of](/wiki/Image:WorldPopulation.png) [world population](/wiki/World_population) (1750 - 2005) |

The total land area of all continents is [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert), or 29.1% of earth's surface ([Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert)).

## Highest and lowest points[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=6)]

[Template:See also](/wiki/Template:See_also)

The following table lists the seven continents with their highest and lowest points on land, sorted in decreasing highest points.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Continent** | **Highest point** | **Elevation (m)** | **Elevation (ft)** | **Country or territory containing highest point** | **Lowest point** | **Elevation (m)** | **Elevation (ft)** | **Country or territory containing lowest point** |
| Asia | [Mount Everest](/wiki/Mount_Everest) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | China and [Nepal](/wiki/Nepal) | [Dead Sea](/wiki/Dead_Sea) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | [Israel](/wiki/Israel) and [Jordan](/wiki/Jordan) |  |  |
| South America | [Aconcagua](/wiki/Aconcagua) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | [Argentina](/wiki/Argentina) | [Laguna del Carbón](/wiki/Laguna_del_Carbón) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | [Argentina](/wiki/Argentina) |  |  |
| North America | [Denali](/wiki/Denali) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | United States | [Death Valley](/wiki/Death_Valley) † | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | United States |  |  |
| Africa | [Mount Kilimanjaro](/wiki/Mount_Kilimanjaro) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | [Tanzania](/wiki/Tanzania) | [Lake Assal](/wiki/Lake_Assal_(Djibouti)) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | [Djibouti](/wiki/Djibouti) |  |  |
| Europe | [Mount Elbrus](/wiki/Mount_Elbrus) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | Russia | [Caspian Sea](/wiki/Caspian_Sea) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | Russia |  |  |
| Antarctica | [Vinson Massif](/wiki/Vinson_Massif) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | (none) | Deep Lake, [Vestfold Hills](/wiki/Vestfold_Hills) † | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | (none) |  |  |
| Australia | [Puncak Jaya](/wiki/Puncak_Jaya) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | [Indonesia](/wiki/Indonesia) ([Papua](/wiki/Papua_(province))) | [Lake Eyre](/wiki/Lake_Eyre) | [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) | Australia |  |  |

† The lowest exposed points are given for North America and Antarctica. The lowest non-submarine bedrock elevations in these continents are the trough beneath [Jakobshavn Glacier](/wiki/Jakobshavn_Glacier) ([Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert)[[24]](#cite_note-24)) and [Bentley Subglacial Trench](/wiki/Bentley_Subglacial_Trench) ([Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert)), but these are covered by kilometers of ice.

Some sources list the [Kuma–Manych Depression](/wiki/Kuma–Manych_Depression) (a remnant of the [Paratethys](/wiki/Paratethys)) as the geological border between Europe and Asia. This would place the Caucasus outside of Europe, thus making [Mont Blanc](/wiki/Mont_Blanc) (elevation 4810 m) in the [Graian Alps](/wiki/Graian_Alps) the highest point in Europe - the lowest point would still be the shore of the Caspian Sea.

## Other divisions[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=7)]

### Supercontinents[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=8)]

Aside from the conventionally known continents, the scope and meaning of the term *continent* varies. [Supercontinents](/wiki/Supercontinent), largely in evidence earlier in the geological record, are landmasses that comprise more than one [craton](/wiki/Craton) or continental core. These have included [Laurasia](/wiki/Laurasia), [Gondwana](/wiki/Gondwana), [Vaalbara](/wiki/Vaalbara), [Kenorland](/wiki/Kenorland), [Columbia](/wiki/Columbia_(supercontinent)), [Rodinia](/wiki/Rodinia), and [Pangaea](/wiki/Pangaea).

### Subcontinents[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=9)]

Certain parts of continents are recognized as subcontinents, particularly those on different [tectonic plates](/wiki/Plate_tectonics) from the rest of the continent. The most notable examples are the [Indian subcontinent](/wiki/Indian_subcontinent) and the [Arabian Peninsula](/wiki/Arabian_Peninsula).[[25]](#cite_note-25) [Greenland](/wiki/Greenland), generally reckoned as the [world's largest island](/wiki/List_of_islands_by_area) on the northeastern periphery of the [North American Plate](/wiki/North_American_Plate), is sometimes referred to as a subcontinent.[[26]](#cite_note-26)[[27]](#cite_note-27) This is a significant departure from the more conventional view of a subcontinent as comprising a very large peninsula on the fringe of a continent. Where the Americas are viewed as a single continent (America), it is divided into two subcontinents ([North America](/wiki/North_America) and [South America](/wiki/South_America))[[28]](#cite_note-28)[[29]](#cite_note-29)[[30]](#cite_note-30) or three (with [Central America](/wiki/Central_America) being the third).[[31]](#cite_note-31)[[32]](#cite_note-32)

### Submerged continents[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=10)]

Some areas of [continental crust](/wiki/Continental_crust) are largely covered by the sea and may be considered [submerged continents](/wiki/Submerged_continent). Notable examples are [Zealandia](/wiki/Zealandia_(continent)), emerging from the sea primarily in [New Zealand](/wiki/New_Zealand) and [New Caledonia](/wiki/New_Caledonia), and the almost completely submerged [Kerguelen continent](/wiki/Kerguelen_Plateau) in the southern [Indian Ocean](/wiki/Indian_Ocean).

### Microcontinents[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=11)]

Some islands lie on sections of continental crust that have rifted and drifted apart from a main continental landmass. While not considered continents because of their relatively small size, they may be considered [microcontinents](/wiki/Continental_fragment). [Madagascar](/wiki/Madagascar), the largest example, is usually considered an island of Africa but has been referred to as "the eighth continent" from a [Template:Cfy](/wiki/Template:Cfy).[[33]](#cite_note-33) [thumb|300px|"Botanical continents" defined by the WGSRPD](/wiki/File:WGSRPD_World.svg)

### Botanical continents[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=12)]

"Continents" may be defined differently for specific purposes. The [Biodiversity Information Standards](/wiki/Biodiversity_Information_Standards) organization has developed the [World Geographical Scheme for Recording Plant Distributions](/wiki/World_Geographical_Scheme_for_Recording_Plant_Distributions), used in many international plant databases. This scheme divides the world into nine "botanical continents". Some match the traditional geographical continents, but some differ significantly. Thus the Americas are divided between Northern America (Mexico northwards) and Southern America (Central America and the Caribbean southwards) rather than between North America and South America.[[34]](#cite_note-34)

## History of the concept[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=13)]

[thumb|left|187px|The Ancient Greek geographer](/wiki/File:Strabo.jpg) [Strabo](/wiki/Strabo) holding a globe showing *Europa* and *Asia*

### Early concepts of the Old World continents[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=14)]

The first distinction between continents was made by [ancient Greek](/wiki/Ancient_Greece) mariners who gave the names Europe and Asia to the lands on either side of the waterways of the [Aegean Sea](/wiki/Aegean_Sea), the [Dardanelles](/wiki/Dardanelles) strait, the [Sea of Marmara](/wiki/Sea_of_Marmara), the [Bosporus](/wiki/Bosporus) strait and the [Black Sea](/wiki/Black_Sea).<ref name=Toynbee>[Toynbee, Arnold J.](/wiki/Arnold_J._Toynbee) (1954). *A Study of History*. London: Oxford University Press, v. 8, pp. 711-12.</ref> The names were first applied just to lands near the coast and only later extended to include the hinterlands.[[35]](#cite_note-35) But the division was only carried through to the end of navigable waterways and "... beyond that point the Hellenic geographers never succeeded in laying their finger on any inland feature in the physical landscape that could offer any convincing line for partitioning an indivisible Eurasia ..."<ref name=Toynbee/>

Ancient Greek thinkers subsequently debated whether Africa (then called *Libya*) should be considered part of Asia or a third part of the world. Division into three parts eventually came to predominate.[[36]](#cite_note-36) From the Greek viewpoint, the Aegean Sea was the center of the world; Asia lay to the east, Europe to the north and west, and Africa to the south.[[37]](#cite_note-37) The boundaries between the continents were not fixed. Early on, the Europe–Asia boundary was taken to run from the Black Sea along the [Rioni River](/wiki/Rioni_River) (known then as the *Phasis*) in [Georgia](/wiki/Georgia_(country)). Later it was viewed as running from the Black Sea through [Kerch Strait](/wiki/Kerch_Strait), the [Sea of Azov](/wiki/Sea_of_Azov) and along the [Don River](/wiki/Don_River,_Russia) (known then as the *Tanais*) in [Russia](/wiki/Russia).[[38]](#cite_note-38) The boundary between Asia and Africa was generally taken to be the [Nile](/wiki/Nile) River. [Herodotus](/wiki/Herodotus)[[39]](#cite_note-39) in the 5th century BC, however, objected to the unity of [Egypt](/wiki/Egypt) being split into Asia and Africa ("Libya") and took the boundary to lie along the western border of Egypt, regarding Egypt as part of Asia. He also questioned the division into three of what is really a single landmass,[[40]](#cite_note-40) a debate that continues nearly two and a half millennia later.

[Eratosthenes](/wiki/Eratosthenes), in the 3rd century BC, noted that some geographers divided the continents by rivers (the Nile and the Don), thus considering them "islands". Others divided the continents by [isthmuses](/wiki/Isthmus), calling the continents "peninsulas". These latter geographers set the border between Europe and Asia at the isthmus between the Black Sea and the [Caspian Sea](/wiki/Caspian_Sea), and the border between Asia and Africa at the isthmus between the [Red Sea](/wiki/Red_Sea) and the mouth of [Lake Bardawil](/wiki/Lake_Bardawil) on the [Mediterranean Sea](/wiki/Mediterranean_Sea).[[41]](#cite_note-41)[thumb|Medieval](/wiki/File:T_and_O_map_Guntherus_Ziner_1472.jpg) [T and O map](/wiki/T_and_O_map) showing the three continents as domains of the sons of [Noah](/wiki/Noah)—Asia to Sem ([Shem](/wiki/Shem)), Europe to Iafeth ([Japheth](/wiki/Japheth)), and Africa to Cham ([Ham](/wiki/Ham,_son_of_Noah)).

Through the Roman period and the [Middle Ages](/wiki/Middle_Ages), a few writers took the [Isthmus of Suez](/wiki/Isthmus_of_Suez) as the boundary between Asia and Africa, but most writers continued to consider it the Nile or the western border of Egypt (Gibbon)[Template:Citation needed](/wiki/Template:Citation_needed). In the Middle Ages, the world was usually portrayed on [T and O maps](/wiki/T_and_O_map), with the T representing the waters dividing the three continents. By the middle of the 18th century, "the fashion of dividing Asia and Africa at the Nile, or at the Great Catabathmus [the boundary between Egypt and [Libya](/wiki/Libya)] farther west, had even then scarcely passed away".[[42]](#cite_note-42)

### European arrival in the Americas[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=15)]

[Christopher Columbus](/wiki/Christopher_Columbus) sailed across the [Atlantic Ocean](/wiki/Atlantic_Ocean) to the [West Indies](/wiki/Caribbean) in 1492, sparking a period of European exploration of the [Americas](/wiki/Americas). But despite four voyages to the Americas, Columbus never believed he had reached a new continent—he always thought it was part of Asia.

In 1501, [Amerigo Vespucci](/wiki/Amerigo_Vespucci) and [Gonçalo Coelho](/wiki/Gonçalo_Coelho) attempted to sail around what they considered the southern end of the Asian mainland into the [Indian Ocean](/wiki/Indian_Ocean), passing through [Fernando de Noronha](/wiki/Fernando_de_Noronha). After reaching the coast of [Brazil](/wiki/Brazil), they sailed a long way further south along the coast of [South America](/wiki/South_America), confirming that this was a land of continental proportions and that it also extended much further south than Asia was known to.<ref name=OGorman>[Template:Cite book](/wiki/Template:Cite_book)</ref> On return to Europe, an account of the voyage, called *Mundus Novus* ("New World"), was published under Vespucci’s name in 1502 or 1503,<ref name=formisano1>Formisano, Luciano (Ed.) (1992). *Letters from a New World: Amerigo Vespucci's Discovery of America*. New York: Marsilio, pp. xx-xxi. ISBN 0-941419-62-2.</ref> although it seems that it had additions or alterations by another writer.<ref name=Zerubavel1>Zerubavel, Eviatar (2003). *Terra Cognita: The Mental Discovery of America*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, pp. 77–79. ISBN 0-7658-0987-7.</ref> Regardless of who penned the words, *Mundus Novus* credited Vespucci with saying, "I have discovered a continent in those southern regions that is inhabited by more numerous people and animals than our Europe, or Asia or Africa",<ref name=formisano2>Formisano, Luciano (Ed.) (1992). *Letters from a New World: Amerigo Vespucci's Discovery of America*. New York: Marsilio, p. 45. ISBN 0-941419-62-2.</ref> the first known explicit identification of part of the Americas as a continent like the other three.

Within a few years the name "New World" began appearing as a name for South America on world maps, such as the Oliveriana (Pesaro) map of around 1504–1505. Maps of this time though, still showed [North America](/wiki/North_America) connected to Asia and showed South America as a separate land.<ref name=Zerubavel1/>

[thumb|left|375px|*Universalis Cosmographia*, Waldseemüller's 1507 world map—the first to show the Americas separate from Asia](/wiki/File:Waldseemuller_map_2.jpg)

In 1507 [Martin Waldseemüller](/wiki/Martin_Waldseemüller) published a world map, [*Universalis Cosmographia*](/wiki/Waldseemüller_map), which was the first to show North and South America as separate from Asia and surrounded by water. A small inset map above the main map explicitly showed for the first time the Americas being east of Asia and separated from Asia by an ocean, as opposed to just placing the Americas on the left end of the map and Asia on the right end. In the accompanying book [*Cosmographiae Introductio*](/wiki/Cosmographiae_Introductio), Waldseemüller noted that the earth is divided into four parts, Europe, Asia, Africa and the fourth part, which he named "America" after Amerigo Vespucci's first name.<ref name=Zerubavel2>Zerubavel, Eviatar (2003). *Terra Cognita: The Mental Discovery of America*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, pp. 80–82. ISBN 0-7658-0987-7.</ref> On the map, the word "America" was placed on part of South America.

### The word ''continent''[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=16)]

From the 16th century the English noun *continent* was derived from the term *continent land*, meaning continuous or connected land<ref name=oed>"continent n." (1989) [*Oxford English Dictionary*](/wiki/Oxford_English_Dictionary), 2nd edition. [Oxford University Press](/wiki/Oxford_University_Press).</ref> and translated from the Latin *terra continens*.[[43]](#cite_note-43) The noun was used to mean "a connected or continuous tract of land" or [mainland](/wiki/Mainland).<ref name=oed/> It was not applied only to very large areas of land—in the 17th century, references were made to the *continents* (or mainlands) of [Isle of Man](/wiki/Isle_of_Man), [Ireland](/wiki/Ireland) and [Wales](/wiki/Wales) and in 1745 to [Sumatra](/wiki/Sumatra).<ref name=oed/> The word *continent* was used in translating Greek and Latin writings about the three "parts" of the world, although in the original languages no word of exactly the same meaning as *continent* was used.[[44]](#cite_note-44) While *continent* was used on the one hand for relatively small areas of continuous land, on the other hand geographers again raised Herodotus’s query about why a single large landmass should be divided into separate continents. In the mid 17th century [Peter Heylin](/wiki/Peter_Heylin) wrote in his *Cosmographie* that "A Continent is a great quantity of Land, not separated by any Sea from the rest of the World, as the whole Continent of Europe, Asia, Africa." In 1727 [Ephraim Chambers](/wiki/Ephraim_Chambers) wrote in his *Cyclopædia,* "The world is ordinarily divided into two grand continents: the [old](/wiki/Old_World) and the [new](/wiki/New_World)." And in his 1752 atlas, [Emanuel Bowen](/wiki/Emanuel_Bowen) defined a continent as "a large space of dry land comprehending many countries all joined together, without any separation by water. Thus Europe, Asia, and Africa is one great continent, as America is another."[[45]](#cite_note-45) However, the old idea of Europe, Asia and Africa as "parts" of the world ultimately persisted with these being regarded as separate continents.

[thumb|right|250px|*Hollandia Nova*, 1659 map prepared by](/wiki/File:Thevenot_-_Hollandia_Nova_detecta_1644.png) [Joan Blaeu](/wiki/Joan_Blaeu) based on voyages by [Abel Tasman](/wiki/Abel_Tasman) and [Willem Jansz](/wiki/Willem_Jansz), this image shows a French edition of 1663

### Beyond four continents[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=17)]

From the late 18th century some geographers started to regard North America and South America as two parts of the world, making five parts in total. Overall though the fourfold division prevailed well into the 19th century.<ref name=lewis30>[Template:Cite book](/wiki/Template:Cite_book)</ref>

Europeans discovered [Australia](/wiki/Australia_(continent)) in 1606 but for some time it was taken as part of Asia. By the late 18th century some geographers considered it a continent in its own right, making it the sixth (or fifth for those still taking America as a single continent).<ref name=lewis30/> In 1813 [Samuel Butler](/wiki/Samuel_Butler_(schoolmaster)) wrote of Australia as "[New Holland](/wiki/New_Holland_(Australia)), an immense island, which some geographers dignify with the appellation of another continent" and the [*Oxford English Dictionary*](/wiki/Oxford_English_Dictionary) was just as equivocal some decades later.[[46]](#cite_note-46) [Antarctica](/wiki/Antarctica) was sighted in 1820 and described as a continent by [Charles Wilkes](/wiki/Charles_Wilkes) on the [United States Exploring Expedition](/wiki/United_States_Exploring_Expedition) in 1838, the last continent identified, although a great "Antarctic" (antipodean) landmass had been anticipated for millennia. An 1849 atlas labelled Antarctica as a continent but few atlases did so until after [World War II](/wiki/World_War_II).[[47]](#cite_note-47) From the mid-19th century, atlases published in the United States more commonly treated North and South America as separate continents, while atlases published in Europe usually considered them one continent. However, it was still not uncommon for American atlases to treat them as one continent up until World War II.<ref name=lewis32>[Template:Cite book](/wiki/Template:Cite_book)</ref>

From the 1950s, most U.S. geographers divided the Americas into two continents.<ref name=lewis32/> With the addition of Antarctica, this made the seven-continent model. However, this division of the Americas never appealed to [Latin Americans](/wiki/Latin_America), who saw their region spanning an [Template:Lang](/wiki/Template:Lang) as a single landmass, and there the conception of six continents remains, as it does in scattered other countries.[Template:Citation needed](/wiki/Template:Citation_needed)

Some geographers regard Europe and Asia together as a single continent, dubbed [*Eurasia*](/wiki/Eurasia).[[48]](#cite_note-48) In this model, the world is divided into six continents, with North America and South America considered separate continents.

## Geology[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=18)]

[Template:Refimprove section](/wiki/Template:Refimprove_section) [Template:Further2](/wiki/Template:Further2)

Geologists use the term *continent* in a different manner from geographers, where a continent is defined by continental crust: a platform of [metamorphic](/wiki/Metamorphic_rock) and [igneous rock](/wiki/Igneous_rock), largely of [granitic](/wiki/Granite) composition. Some geologists restrict the term 'continent' to portions of the crust built around stable [Precambrian](/wiki/Precambrian) "shield", typically 1.5 to 3.8 billion years old, called a [craton](/wiki/Craton). The craton itself is an [accretionary](/wiki/Accretion_(geology)) complex of ancient mobile belts (mountain belts) from earlier cycles of [subduction](/wiki/Subduction), [continental collision](/wiki/Continental_collision) and break-up from plate tectonic activity. An outward-thickening veneer of younger, minimally deformed [sedimentary rock](/wiki/Sedimentary_rock) covers much of the craton. The margins of geologic continents are characterized by currently active or relatively recently active mobile belts and deep troughs of accumulated marine or [deltaic](/wiki/River_delta) [sediments](/wiki/Sediment). Beyond the margin, there is either a [continental shelf](/wiki/Continental_shelf) and drop off to the [basaltic](/wiki/Basalt) [ocean basin](/wiki/Oceanic_basin) or the margin of another continent, depending on the current plate-tectonic setting of the continent. A continental boundary does not have to be a body of water. Over geologic time, continents are periodically submerged under large epicontinental seas, and continental collisions result in a continent becoming attached to another continent. The current geologic era is relatively anomalous in that so much of the continental areas are "high and dry"; that is, many parts of the continents that were once below sea level are now elevated well above it due to changes in sea levels and the subsequent uplifting of those continental areas from tectonic activity.[[49]](#cite_note-49) [thumb|left|350px|The tectonic plates underlying the continents and oceans](/wiki/File:Plates_tect2_en.svg)

Some argue that continents are accretionary crustal "rafts" that, unlike the denser basaltic crust of the ocean basins, are not subjected to destruction through the plate tectonic process of subduction. This accounts for the great age of the rocks comprising the continental cratons. By this definition, Eastern Europe, India and some other regions could be regarded as continental masses distinct from the rest of Eurasia because they have separate ancient shield areas (i.e. [East European craton](/wiki/East_European_craton) and [Indian craton](/wiki/Indian_craton)). Younger mobile belts (such as the [Ural Mountains](/wiki/Ural_Mountains) and [Himalayas](/wiki/Himalayas)) mark the boundaries between these regions and the rest of Eurasia.

There are many [microcontinents, or continental fragments](/wiki/Continental_fragment), that are built of continental crust but do not contain a craton. Some of these are fragments of [Gondwana](/wiki/Gondwana) or other ancient cratonic continents: [Zealandia](/wiki/Zealandia_(continent)), which includes [New Zealand](/wiki/Geography_of_New_Zealand) and [New Caledonia](/wiki/Geography_of_New_Caledonia); [Madagascar](/wiki/Geography_of_Madagascar); the northern [Mascarene Plateau](/wiki/Mascarene_Plateau), which includes the [Seychelles](/wiki/Seychelles). Other islands, such as several in the [Caribbean Sea](/wiki/Caribbean_Sea), are composed largely of granitic rock as well, but all continents contain both granitic and basaltic crust, and there is no clear boundary as to which islands would be considered microcontinents under such a definition. The [Kerguelen Plateau](/wiki/Kerguelen_Plateau), for example, is largely volcanic, but is associated with the breakup of Gondwanaland and is considered a microcontinent,[[50]](#cite_note-50)[[51]](#cite_note-51) whereas volcanic [Iceland](/wiki/Geography_of_Iceland) and [Hawaii](/wiki/Hawaiian_Islands) are not. The [British Isles](/wiki/British_Isles), [Sri Lanka](/wiki/Sri_Lanka), [Borneo](/wiki/Borneo), and [Newfoundland](/wiki/Newfoundland_(island)) are margins of the [Laurasian](/wiki/Laurasia) continent—only separated by inland seas flooding its margins.

Plate tectonics offers yet another way of defining continents. Today, Europe and most of Asia constitute the unified [Eurasian Plate](/wiki/Eurasian_Plate), which is approximately coincident with the geographic Eurasian continent excluding India, Arabia, and far eastern Russia. India contains a central shield, and the geologically recent [Himalaya](/wiki/Himalaya) mobile belt forms its northern margin. North America and South America are separate continents, the connecting [isthmus](/wiki/Isthmus) being largely the result of [volcanism](/wiki/Volcano) from relatively recent subduction tectonics. North American continental rocks extend to Greenland (a portion of the [Canadian Shield](/wiki/Canadian_Shield)), and in terms of plate boundaries, the North American plate includes the easternmost portion of the Asian land mass. Geologists do not use these facts to suggest that eastern Asia is part of the North American continent, even though the plate boundary extends there; the word continent is usually used in its geographic sense and additional definitions ("continental rocks," "plate boundaries") are used as appropriate.

The movement of plates has caused the formation and break-up of continents over time, including occasional formation of a supercontinent that contains most or all of the continents. The supercontinent [Columbia](/wiki/Columbia_(supercontinent)) or Nuna formed during a period of 2.0–1.8 billion years and broke up about 1.5–1.3 billion years ago.[[52]](#cite_note-52)[[53]](#cite_note-53) The supercontinent [Rodinia](/wiki/Rodinia) is thought to have formed about 1 billion years ago and to have embodied most or all of Earth's continents, and broken up into eight continents around 600 million years ago. The eight continents later re-assembled into another supercontinent called [Pangaea](/wiki/Pangaea); Pangaea broke up into Laurasia (which became North America and Eurasia) and Gondwana (which became the remaining continents).

## See also[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=19)]

[Template:Portal](/wiki/Template:Portal)

* [List of sovereign states and dependent territories by continent](/wiki/List_of_sovereign_states_and_dependent_territories_by_continent)
* [List of supercontinents](/wiki/List_of_supercontinents)
* [List of transcontinental countries](/wiki/List_of_transcontinental_countries)
* [Lists of cities](/wiki/Lists_of_cities)
* [Subregion](/wiki/Subregion)
* [Template:Wikipedia books link](/wiki/Template:Wikipedia_books_link)

## References[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=20)]

[Template:Reflist](/wiki/Template:Reflist)

## External links[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=21)]

[Template:Wikidata property](/wiki/Template:Wikidata_property) [Template:Commons+cat](/wiki/Template:Commons+cat)

* ["What are continents?"](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3uBcq1x7P34) [YouTube](/wiki/YouTube) video by [CGP Grey](/wiki/CGP_Grey)
* [Template:Cite EB1911](/wiki/Template:Cite_EB1911)

[Template:Physical Earth](/wiki/Template:Physical_Earth) [Template:Continents of the world](/wiki/Template:Continents_of_the_world) [Template:Regions of the world](/wiki/Template:Regions_of_the_world) [Template:Use dmy dates](/wiki/Template:Use_dmy_dates)

[Template:Authority control](/wiki/Template:Authority_control)

[\*](/wiki/Category:Continents)