

## FEATURE ARTICLE

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## World Navels

Powerful empires often believe themselves to be literally the center of the universe. Space and time, power and meaning are taken to flow from their single world navel. The following are three notable examples.

First, Rome was held to be the center of the world, from which distance itself was measured in radial lines. Rome contains the Umbilicus Urbis Romae, or “navel of the city of Rome” (Figure 1), as well as, within a few meters, a *Miliarium Aureum*, or “golden milestone,” which was erected by Emperor Augustus ca. 20 BC (Murphy 2007, 44). While distances were supposed to be measured from the golden milestone, “in accordance with long-established tradition, actual distances were calculated... from the gates in the Republican wall” (Favro 1992, 77). Such measurement practices reflected the Romans’ beliefs about their natural role as “masters of the *oikumene*” (Murphy 2007, 47). *Oikumene* is Greek for “inhabited world,” and is also the word the geog-



Figure 1. Plaque attached to the structure of Rome’s navel, as it stands today.

rapher, mathematician, and astronomer Ptolemy of Alexandria of the second century CE used to denote the entire territory he was measuring and mapping.

The architect Vitruvius and the Peutinger Map (Figure 3) provide two examples of how the Romans held themselves to be both masters and center of the *oikumene*. In his well-known *De Architectura*, Vitruvius wrote, “it was the divine intelligence that set the

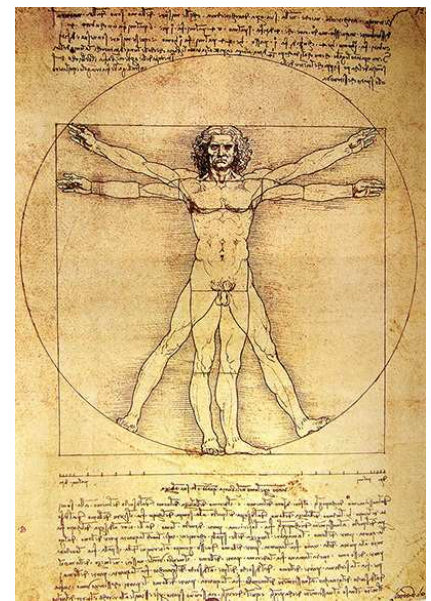


Figure 2. Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man.

city of the Roman people in a peerless and temperate country, in order that it might acquire the right to command the whole world” (ca. 15 BC, Book VI, Ch. I, §XI). Vitruvius, in his passages “on symmetry: in temples and in the human body” (Book III, Ch. I, §§2-3), took the “central point” of the body to be “naturally the navel” (§3). Leonardo Da Vinci used this work to draw his *Le proporzioni del corpo umano secondo Vitruvio* (ca. 1490), or “Vitruvian man” (Figure 2). Interestingly, Da Vinci’s embedding of an ideal human body in a square, itself lined up with a circle according to Golden Ratio proportions, indicates the genitals rather than the navel as the body’s (the universe’s?) center.

Rome’s centrality is also represented by the Peutinger Map (Figure 3), an “itinerarium” or road map of the Roman Empire’s *cursum publicum* that is dated to the 12th or early 13th century CE and which “derives ultimately from a fourth-century archetype.” Unsurprisingly, Rome is located roughly at



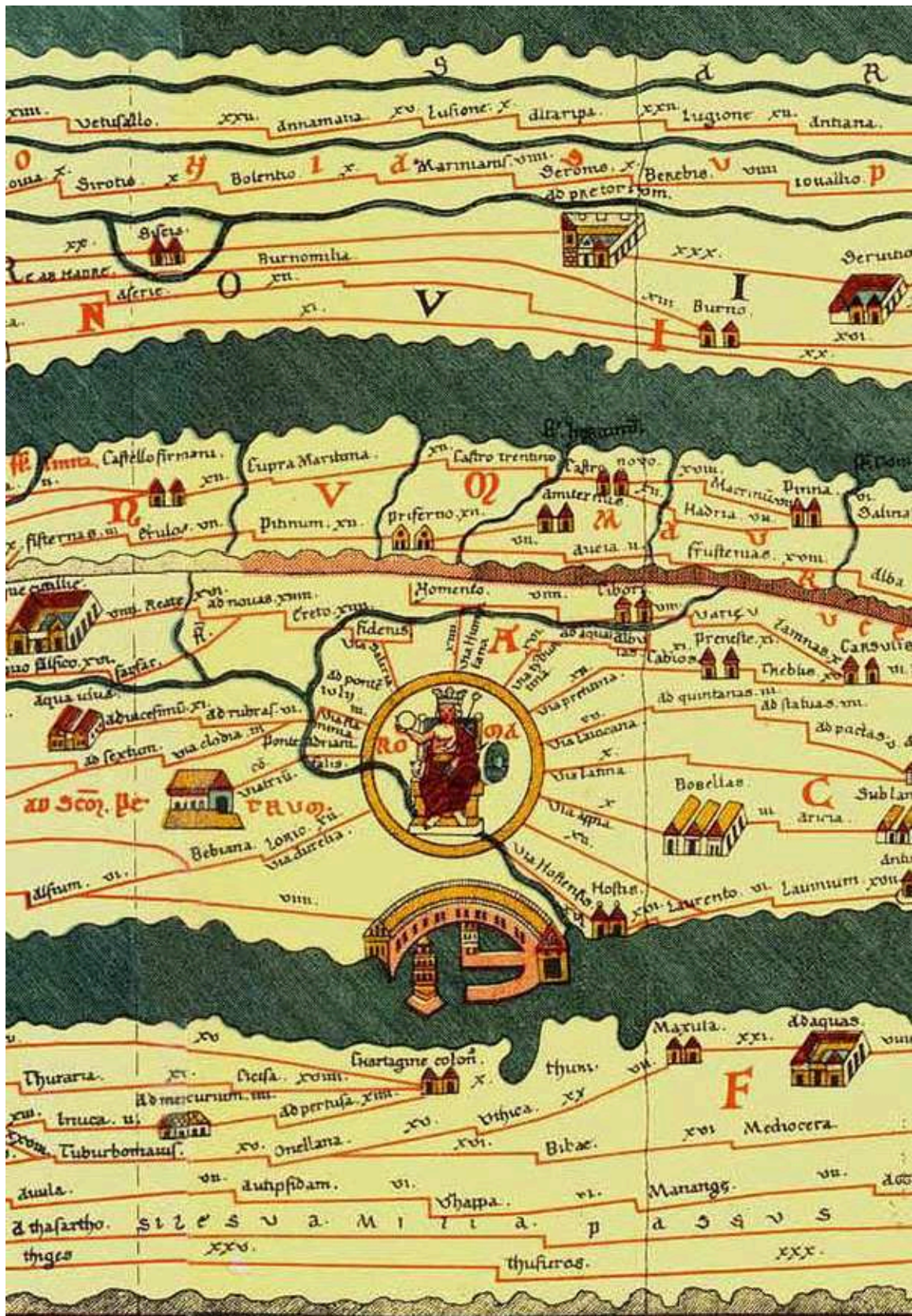


Figure 3. Inset of the Peutinger Map.



the map's center. This required twisting and transforming the Italian peninsula and—given the hint of China on the right-most edge of the map—the entire *oikumene*. While the literality of the empire as the center of the world was not disputed, the bodily metaphors used to signify that notion again varied. The Peutinger Map “personified [Rome] as an enthroned goddess holding a globe, a spear, and a shield” (Harley and Woodward 1987, plate 5; see “Figure Sources,” Fig. 3). Recalling also that the symbol of Rome is a she-wolf with suckling twins, Romulus and Remus, might the world

navel sometimes be more female than male? A navel signifies birth and, ultimately, the female matrix, the uterus.

Second, Jerusalem is identified as the center of the world in many medieval “T and O” maps, which position or orient Asia on top of a T inside a circle, with Europe and Africa on either side below, cut by the Mediterranean (Alexander 1999). For instance, the Ebstorf Map positions Jesus’ head at its top and glorifies Jerusalem with an inset in its middle (Figure 4). An omphalos stone is found in Jerusalem’s Chris-



Figure 4. The Ebstorf Map, a T and O mappamundi from the 13th century CE. Jerusalem is prominently displayed in the center.



tian Quarter, in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where many Christians believe Jesus is buried. In addition, Midrash Tanhuma identifies the Foundation Stone (Figure 5) at the very center of the nearby Dome of the Rock, widely believed to be the exact location of the ancient Temple of Solomon, as the navel of the world. As this latter shrine is also crucial to Islam (e.g., it is argued that Prophet Muhammad rose to the heavens from the Rock), Jerusalem is the world navel for three religions.



**Figure 5.** The Foundation Stone, as seen from the dome of the Dome of the Rock.

Finally, Madrid has also been viewed as the center of the world. Specifically, la Puerta del Sol indicates the “Kilómetro 0” (though the site predates the metric system; Figure 6). Approximately 50 kilometers from la Puerta del Sol, King Philip II ordered the construction of the complex of El Escorial, which took 21 years to complete (1563-84). The grid-like system of El Escorial’s buildings and surrounding grounds vividly suggests a cartographic matrix spreading throughout the growing Spanish Empire (Figure 7). Edgerton writes, “Philip was also an admirer of Abraham Ortelius, the famous Dutch Mapmaker, and he must certainly have watched in fascination as more and more new lands found their places in the expanding web of Ptolemaic coordinates” (1987, 48). Following Edgerton (1987, 48-9), we can indeed imagine how King Phillip II “as he stood in his vast Escorial plaza, must surely have imagined himself standing at the umbilicus of the world.”

In each of these examples, the empire’s power is graphically represented through centered maps, and is made flesh through cosmological navels, typically a monument or a physical object such as a rock. This complex set of representational practices has been baptized the “omphalos syndrome” (Edgerton 1987, 12, 17, 26-27, 37-38; Harley 2001 [1998], 66; Wood, Kaiser, Abramms 2006, 88-92; Murphy



**Figure 6.** Photograph of the Kilómetro 0 plaque in Madrid, today.

2007, 43-48, 56-57; on “centre points” of maps, see Peters 1983, 24, 27, 63-64, 127-128). The original characterization of the omphalos syndrome is Edgerton’s:

The omphalos syndrome, where a people believe themselves divinely appointed to the center of the universe, shows its symptoms in the history of cartography as often as in ancient city planning. The oldest extant world map, inscribed on sun-dried brick from sixth-century B.C. Mesopotamia, illustrates a circular cosmos with Babylon in the middle. Both the early Christians and the Mohammedans placed their own holy shrines in the center of similarly circular charts of the cosmos. (1987, 26; footnote suppressed)

Murphy (2007) underscores the negative and limiting aspect of the omphalos syndrome:

Something happens to imperial capitals, something psychological and, over time, corrosive and incapacitating. It happens when the conviction takes hold that the capital is the source and focal point of reality – that nothing is more important than what happens there, and that no ideas or perceptions are more important than those of its elites. This conviction saturated imperial Rome, as it saturates official Washington [Figure 8]. (43)

Imperial maps centered on a single navel encourage the universalizing, narrowing, and ontologizing of an empire’s self-image. The map’s individual and institutional users universalize by overgeneralizing the cartographic grid; narrow by insisting on one oversimplified map, with only one

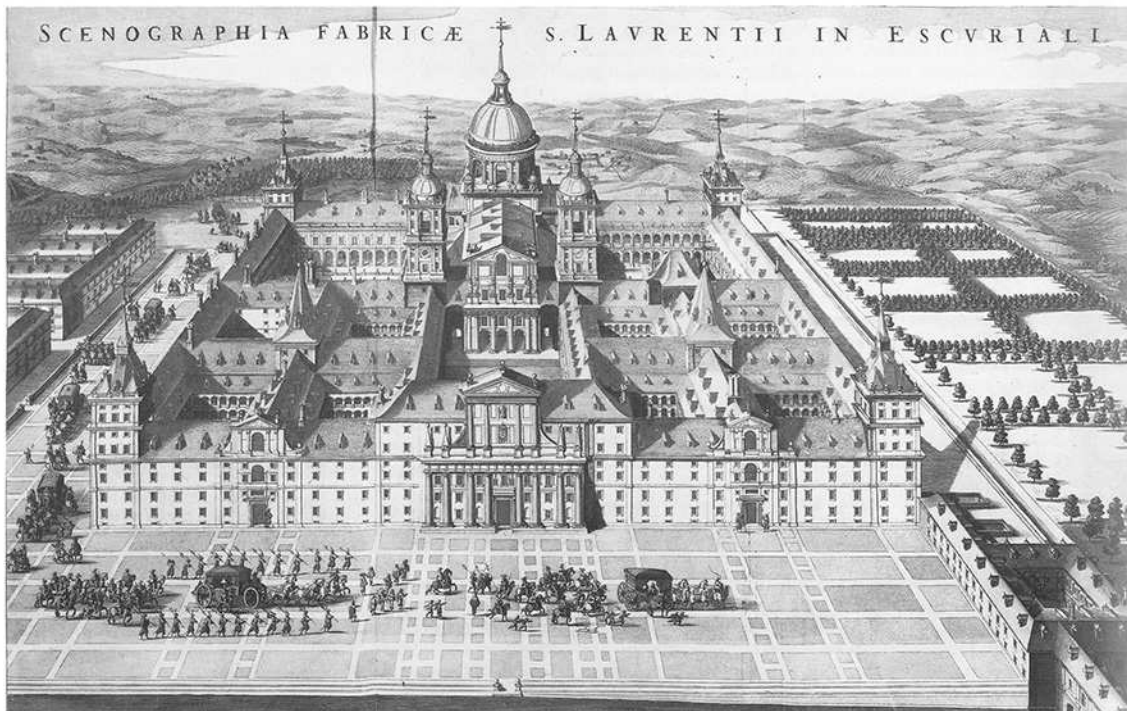


Figure 7. A view of El Escorial from the Dutch cartographer Joan Blaeu's *Atlas Maior* (1662).

possible internal imperial center (in contrast to denigrated “outlandish” or “provincial” areas); and ontologize by forgetting that the map is not the territory (Borges 1975 [1954]; Bateson 1999 [1972]; Korzybski 1933; Muehrcke 1974a, b; Muehrcke and Muehrcke 1998; Turnbull 1993; Wood 1992, 2010; Winther 2015, under contract). In short, the empire’s maps and monuments declare that there is no other perspective and no other projection from which to draw and measure the universe. While fist, sword or missile violently impose an empire’s will, its map enforces a rigid vision of the actual constitution of the world, and its physical navel reifies the literal center of the universe.

Non-Western examples of world navels also abound. For instance, the Templo Mayor in Tenōchtitlán—Mexico City today—was treated as the center of the world, namely, the Aztec empire. Indeed, one likely meaning of the word

“Mexico” is “navel of the moon,” from Nahuatl, the Aztec (or Mexica) language (<http://etimologias.dechile.net/?Mexico>; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexico#Etymology>). Second, the UNESCO World Heritage site of San Bartolo in Guatemala contains the Mayan Pyramid of “Las Pinturas,” the North Wall of which (Figure 9) depicts “mythical scenes that narrate the birth of the first men through a ritual that is conducted by the Maize God” (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5738/>). As the recent re-discoverers of this site argue, “the placement of the five infants at the center and four corners of the San Bartolo birth scene suggests a cosmological plan of the four directions and world center” (Saturno et al. 2005, 12; see “Figure Sources,” Fig. 9; cf. Saturno et al. 2006). Third, the Ming Dynasty map *Da Ming Hun Yi Tu* (“Amalgamated Map of the Great Ming Empire”) places China in the center, portraying the empire fairly accurately but grossly distorting the Arabian peninsula, Africa, and Japan (Figure 10). This map likely stems from the late 14th century CE, during the reign of the Hongwu Emperor, founder of the Ming Dynasty. The Amalgamated Map is roughly contemporaneous with the construction of the Forbidden City by Hongwu’s son, the Yongle Emperor. Nestled in the new capital of Beijing, the Forbidden City was taken to be the literal center of the universe (Yu 1984; Ebrey 2010).



Figure 8. The Zero Milestone in Washington D.C.





**Figure 9.** Artistic rendering of the North Wall birth scene in the Las Pinturas pyramid, San Bartolo, Guatemala (detail of drawing by Heather Hurst).

The mapping practices associated with the omphalos syndrome demonstrate that “the habit of equating one’s age with the apogee of civilization, one’s town with the hub of the universe, one’s horizons with the limits of human awareness, is paradoxically widespread” (Levin 1963, 268). Hegemonic empires in particular may be so strongly associated with the omphalos syndrome that the latter might be a mark or a definition of the former. Could one perhaps make an even stronger argument that all peoples exhibit the omphalos syndrome to some extent, thereby making ubiquitous world navels a signifier not just of empire, but of culture in general?

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### Figure Sources

**Fig. 1.** <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/5/5c/UmbilicusUrbiPlate.jpg>

**Fig. 2.** [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitruvian\\_Man](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitruvian_Man); Stemp, R. 2006. *The Secret Language of the Renaissance: Decoding the Hidden Symbolism of Italian Art*. London: Duncan Baird.

**Fig. 3.** <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/>



**Figure 10.** *Da Ming Hun Yi Tu*.

[50/TabulaPeutingeriana.jpg](http://50/TabulaPeutingeriana.jpg) (inset); Plate 5 of Harley, J.B., and Woodward, D., eds. 1987. *The History of Cartography: Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean, Vol. 1*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Fig. 4.** Figure 18.19, p. 310 of Woodward, David. 1987. “Medieval Mappaemundi.” In *The History of Cartography: Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean, Vol. 1*, edited by Harley, J.B., and D. Woodward. 286-370. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Fig. 5.** [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/45/The\\_rock\\_of\\_the\\_Dome\\_of\\_the\\_Rock\\_Corrected.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/45/The_rock_of_the_Dome_of_the_Rock_Corrected.jpg)

**Fig. 6.** [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/ff/Km\\_cero.JPG](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/ff/Km_cero.JPG)

**Fig. 7.** Figure 11, p. 28, of Wilkinson-Zerner, C. 1993. *Juan de Herrera: Architect to Philip II of Spain*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Blaeu, J. 2010 (1665). *Atlas maior*. Intro. by Peter Van der Krogt. TASCHEN.

**Fig. 8.** [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/89/Zero\\_mile\\_dc.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/89/Zero_mile_dc.jpg)

**Fig. 9.** Page 13 of Saturno, W.A., Taube, K.A., Stuart, D. 2005. “The Murals of San Bartolo, El Petén, Guatemala Part 1: The North Wall.” *Ancient America* 7: 1-56; <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/2002/03.21/01-mayan.html>

**Fig. 10.** <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/cd/Da-ming-hun-yi-tu.jpg>

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