

Editorial

An account of the origins of conceptual models of geographic space

Abstract

This narrative examines early conceptualizations of geographical space among the primitive tribes of Europe in pre-history times. It was constructed as a result of intensive fieldwork, strenuous archeological investigations, laborious transcription of ancient runic devices and a strong desire to avoid actually doing anything useful. It could reveal important clues pertaining to the development of geographic thought, although that is very unlikely indeed. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Once upon a time, in the frozen wastes of northern Europe, lived a group of stoic pig-herders called the *Tessellati*. Life was hard for the *Tessellati*, who lacked the rich, fertile lands of the sub-tropical zones (such as those of Yorkshire, UK). Due to their small stature and numbers, their entire kingdom was established over only a few square kilometers of mud at the margins of the permafrost. The sole effort of their society was devoted to the husbanding of the woolly, egg-laying dairy pig;¹ the only animal hardy enough to survive the long winter on poor vegetation. Fortunately for the *Tessellati*, this pig proved versatile enough to provide most of their material needs. Pigs were thus highly prized, but because of inbreeding, this particular species was fiercely territorial, and in fact completely intolerant of all other life-forms. So, to ensure the pigs remained isolated and that the maximum number of pigs could be raised on the very small amount of available land, it was necessary for the *Tessellati* to construct a cell for each pig. Cells were built of regulation size and shape to ensure the best possible packing density, and completely covered the kingdom. However, this highly organized system was short-lived; a constant diet of

¹ For research into other imaginary creatures, and most especially the Highland Haggis, see McNoleg (1996).

ham, eggs and dairy produce takes a heavy toll and, before long, heart disease and scurvy had effectively wiped out the *Tessellati*.

Meanwhile, at the other side of the continent, in the tropical reaches of Kent, an entirely different society had developed. In this watery kingdom, a group of hunter-gatherers known as the *Vectules* clung on to life at the margins of an angry ocean. Due to Global warming, the waters would inundate their primitive towns at high tide. One tragic fact thus far omitted was that, because of devout superstitious beliefs, it proved impossible for the *Vectules* to learn to swim, make boats or relocate to higher ground. So when the waters came, the only thing they could do was to climb a tree and hang from, or sit on, a convenient branch. However, to obtain purchase, they would first have to dislodge one or more flightless, tree-climbing, carnivorous parrots who would also be clinging to the branches for dear life. The parrot, and its tragic over-abundance, was the direct result of genetic engineering experiments, carried out for religious reasons by the *Vectules*, but which went horribly wrong. Now these birds were of all shapes and sizes and extremely vicious, but of course it was forbidden to attack them for fear of offending the gods.

As the incoming tide approached, a spare hold or perch on a tree was highly prized, and an 'absence of a parrot' in a particular place would fetch its finder a high price as the waters began to rise. In time, elaborate frame devices were developed to keep parrots out of vacant spaces on the tree. In fact such parrotless spaces soon became a prized trading commodity for the *Vectules*, proving, even before the age of the Internet startup company, that it is possible to sell somebody absolutely nothing and get away with it. However, such stupidity could not last, and before long *Vectules* society gave way to less restrictive forms of religious practice; in short they moved inland and developed a taste for barbecued parrot.

Conclusions

Of course, in these enlightened times, such early struggles against the elements are all but forgotten. It is nevertheless a fact that these dual conceptualizations of geographic space, offered to us by the *Tessellati* and *Vectules*, live on; though their originating cultures have long since passed away. The *Tessellati* should be remembered with respect for their gridded '*pigcells*', now (unfortunately) spelled the American way as '*pixel*'. And the *Vectules* should be equally venerated for their freeform spatial unit, the '*absence of parrot*', which became known colloquially as the '*poly-gone*' in the slang of the later occupying Cockney tribe and thence shortened to '*polygon*' to be in keeping with the trendy upcoming Greek vocabulary.

Corollary

Apart from the obvious insights this study provides into the origins of the basic spatial data structures that we now take for granted (see McNoleg, 1998 for further details), the following observations also remain relevant (i) watch your diet, (ii)

beware of global warming, (iii) do not mess with genetic engineering and (iv) if a system starts to extol the virtues of owning something that does not actually exist, it is time to change the system.

References

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