

REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY

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Summary

Since Greek and Roman times, regional geography has been used to describe the physical and human characteristics of regions and nations. It became important and in the nineteenth century when the first explorers were presenting the new worlds to the European geographical societies. At the beginning of the twentieth century two main schools of geography were competing. The German school, originating in the work of Ratzel, was based on the link between nature and culture. The French school, based on Vidal de la Blache's work, incorporated the concept of "possibilism" and "genre de vie" to show the rôle of societies within the region. Nowadays regional approaches are used by planners and new quantitative techniques bring a new life to regional geography at the local and continental scales.

1. Introduction: Regional Geography, the Oldest Type of Geography

Regional Geography is, almost certainly, the oldest type of geography, since it can be traced in the works of Herodotus. In the fifth century B.C. Herodotus described a threefold division of his known world, Asia, Lybia and Europe. Describing Babylon, its gardens, buildings, walls, doors and population, within its region was part of its presentation of the Mesopotamian kingdom. The very empirical description was a method used to show the power of the Assyrian king.

Strabon never published this map. This is a reconstruction from Strabon's geographical indications, using coastlines, rivers, mountains and cities. It shows that Strabon's geography could be used by sailors around Europe from Mare Internum (Mediterranean sea) to the Oceanus. It also shows the importance of river valleys used to reach the outside parts of the Roman Empire.

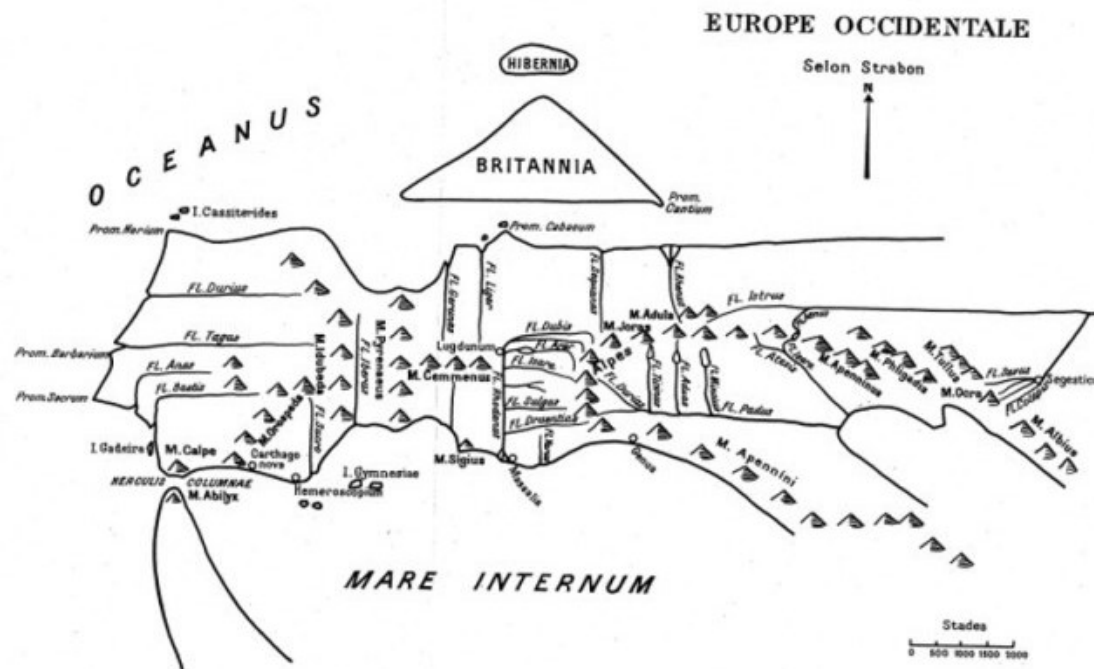


Figure 1: Strabon's mental map of Europe. Source: Strabon-Géographie, Tome II by François Lasserre, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1966.

During the Greek and the Roman eras regional geography was still used as a mean to describe the empires, routes for the armies and the wealth of conquered lands. Strabon in his 17 books wrote the best in these descriptions, in the first century, and gave regional geography its foundations. The oldest tradition in geographical inquiry is called "chorology": it is the study of the areal differentiation of the earth's surface. In Strabon's work it was used to describe human activities, with a considerable interest on contents that could be used by military and political rulers. The word "region" comes from the Latin root "regere", which means to manage - the region being the appropriate scale to manage a part of the kingdom or empire. In a broader sense the region is defined as a bounded area, possessing some unity or organizing structure. The importance of the regional approach grew in importance during the Renaissance and the European colonial period. The rulers of the newly conquered territories were sending to European kings and queens texts and maps describing the vegetation, the population, and the wealth of the regions.

And during the nineteenth century each colonial expedition was followed by travel writings. These texts and maps have been vital for regional geography. The Chamber of Commerce, interested in economic and trade relations with these new worlds, welcomed conferences from leaders of these expeditions, building links with the emerging Geographical Societies, for example in the U.K., France and Portugal. For a century, regional geography had close relations with trade companies, financing expeditions, books, maps and atlases. It was also the time of the publication of "Universal Geographies" describing the world. Some active Geographical Societies, such as the Royal Geographic Society, found their roots in this common history between trade and geography. Due to these links, it is not surprising to note that in the early twentieth century the region was the central object of geography.

2. How to define a region?

Geography is "the only field where region is a major concept" as stated by Julliard. This is true from the time when the first geographers were describing the newly discovered worlds, through when the princes were dividing their territories in administrative regions the better to control them and now when countries have organized themselves in statistical or planning regions or plan a reform based on regionalization (e.g. France).

However, the concept region is still difficult to define. Is it a homogenous area from a physical point of view and can one talk of a natural region? Is it a heterogeneous area with a basic structure such as a river or a fluvial basin? Is it a cultural area based on a common way of life or an area based on a city and its hinterland - a so-called nodal region? In fact, all are regions even if, for a long time, natural regions were the only ones considered by the scientists owing to the dominance of the naturalist point of view.

This was the case in the nineteenth century when a Darwinian and determinist approach emphasised the influence of nature on mankind. Close relations between environment and people were used to explain life in a region often called a "pays". It was a way to organize the biosphere into regions, by labelling the species and then drawing biome boundaries. This approach to Geography was well developed by the German school. The regions were classified, like plants, by their geology, soils, nature, and climate - giving birth to nations of people behaving in a similar way.

In contrast, the French school of Geography at the beginning of the twentieth century, was developing a "possibilist" approach. The basis for this was that if there is a natural environment in a region, people can choose from the possibilities to develop their economic, social and cultural life. The physical environment is just seen as a base for territorial development. Since regions composing France were diversified, each of them could create its own way of life and choose to be part of France despite the physical differences.

The concept of landscape was closely linked to this approach. The landscape expresses a natural, social and aesthetic unity, the intimacy between a culture and a region. Regional landscapes have been shaped by human activity, and a special attention is given to the patterns of forests, fields, roads, since cultural groups have different ways of settling the land. This concept is associated with the idea of a common human life, a community, building its way of life and its sense of place.

This concept was used after World War I and II to reorganize European nations. As an example, each of the Balkan countries was created by uniting a cluster of regions - the underlying hypothesis being that they would share a sense of national unity. History shows us that this was not the case and the word "balkanization" is now used to show a dislocation of territories; cultural regions had more identity than the new nation states and this led to ethnic and religious conflicts.

The concept of region, invented in Europe, was also exported in other parts of the world. It had significant effects on the development of regional identities as in Québec, for linguistic and cultural reasons, or now in Kabylia (Algeria) for ethnic reasons.

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Biographical Sketch

Antoine Bailly is a Professor of Geography at the University of Geneva, President of the Swiss Committee of the International Geographical Union, President of the Regional Science Association International, and President of the Club Européen de la Santé. He is also Past President of the University of Geneva Council. Specialization: economic geography, regional science, medicometry and behavioral geography.