European maps changed dramatically around 1500. Old distinctions faded and old categories applied less and less. The shape of change and its roots are most obvious in the work done in Portugal. The pattern set there was in the short but especially in the long run followed throughout Europe. Traditionally historians have discussed cartography in the Renaissance in national terms. Studies have dealt with maps in Spain, France, England, or Portugal. The map makers themselves have been identified with specific states. The study of cartographic history began in the mid nineteenth century in an era of growing nationalism. It is not surprising then that historians of maps treated their objects in the ways that historians of political and constitutional history treated their governments, trying to demonstrate the precedence, primacy, and superiority of their nations. The result, until the latter part of the twentieth century, was for individual scholars to concentrate on maps from just one country. It is now obvious that the old way was wrong and on a number of grounds. The European states of the nineteenth century did not exist in the fifteenth and the kingdoms that would emerge as national states had only the rudiments of government structures. The process of state building was a long one, only just beginning in the minds of political theorists and in political institutions of the sixteenth century. People who made the maps did not think in terms of nations. They did not include national boundaries or differentiate states by colour as has been the practice since the nineteenth century. Maps were simply not forms of national expression around 1500. Artists who made maps may or may not have been employed by governments or kings. They did work for patrons but their products were not just the results of what patrons told them to do. The maps made in the sixteenth century are the best testimony to the lack of overall plans imposed by a self-conscious state.¹

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries discussion about geography, geographical theory, and ways to describe the world was pan European. The maps, produced in ever increasing numbers, were an expression of that interchange.

R. W. Unger, Ships on Maps
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The goals, efforts, and accomplishments were not isolated or connected directly to the actions of states. Claims that ‘…cartography was early nationalized.’ or that ‘…mapping quickly became the business of the state…’ while possibly applicable to the seventeenth or even late sixteenth century are at the very least an exaggeration for the Europe of the years around 1500. It is more correct to see cartography of the Renaissance not as the product of different states but rather of different schools of art or of decoration. The more critical forces for the makers of maps were their exchanges and relationships with travelers, scientists, and writers on geography and cosmography than with the officials of nascent and still emerging states. That said there remain some compelling reasons to deal with map making in terms of the political jurisdictions of the period. It was certainly the case that patrons mattered to what map makers did. It is also the case that most scholarship, following the pattern laid down in the early days of the study of the history of maps, is based on divisions along national lines. It is convenient, because of earlier work, to talk in terms of maps done in specific places but it is also convenient because schools of map making and more specifically of decoration were often associated with one place or one royal court or some noble or wealthy patron. As in so many other ways map making in Portugal around 1500 effectively illustrates the norms.

Portuguese map makers were the first to come under pressure to deal with a rising tide of new data and so were both unique and precursors of general developments throughout Europe. The success by 1340 of conquering all Muslim territories in their part of Iberia freed the Portuguese to head out into the open Atlantic, something fishermen had been doing for some time. Presumably at first as much by accident as by design they encountered islands in the Atlantic either unknown to Europeans or at least unknown since Roman times. In the 1330s the Portuguese had already seen and started to settle the Canary Islands. Madeira and the Azores followed in the second half of the fourteenth century. From the early fifteenth more voyages out in the open sea to the south joined those already made along the coast of Africa. In 1434 Gil Eanes doubled Cape Bojador, not a great distance south but a critical step in mastering the navigation of the coast. By the 1450s Portuguese explorers had reached the Cape Verde Islands, about the time settlement of the Azores moved ahead. Systematic exploration sponsored by the crown yielded first the doubling of the Cape of Good Hope by Batholomeu Dias in 1488 and the all-ocean voyage to India by Vasco da Gama in 1497–9. The chronicle of success in dealing with voyages of ever greater distance certainly impressed Renaissance Europeans. People outside of Portugal were aware of the explorers’ efforts. Updated maps, as well as written records, spread information about where the travelers had gone.

Individuals from well beyond the borders of the kingdom were deeply involved in the Portuguese voyages. Critical for the ongoing exploration