



west

east

MAPPING EDWARD SAID'S
ORIENTALISM

Emily Williamson . December 16, 2013 . 4.621 Orientalism and Representation, Professor Nasser Rabbat

INTRODUCTION

According to Edward Said, the discourse of Orientalism is composed of three overlapping definitions. It is at once an *intellectual pursuit* of researching the Orient, a *style of thought* that compares the East to the West, and finally, a *corporate institution* that describes, makes claims about, dominates, and possesses the Orient¹. Thus, rather than observing the world directly, Said argues that Orientalism operates as an apparatus through which to view, analyze and represent the people, landscapes, and “natures” of the Orient. Furthermore, he surmises that this “imaginative geography” – the culturally constructed boundaries drawn between East and West – is not a new phenomenon and may be traced back to the ages of Ancient Greece. He writes, “The Orient was almost a European invention, and has been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.”² To that end, even though the boundaries between East and West change over time, the Orient maintains a distinct internal consistency whose image always reflects the needs and desires of the West.

Rather than deconstructing, rearranging or challenging Said’s thesis of Orientalism, the diagrams that follow adopt the very premise of his thesis and illustrate the changing, yet persistent dialectic between West (in red) and East (in green). Beginning with the Myth of Europa³, each diagram is an historical frame (not a period) that marks an important paradigm shift in the power dynamics and geographical boundaries between the two entities. Thierry Hentsch eloquently describes the oppositional relationship between East and West, “As essences they are complementary, yet as distinct as oil and vinegar: the blend is often savory, but the fine line separating the two seems to always reappear. The line seems to always have existed; as though, from Antiquity onward, the Orient and West have been locked in ceaseless and unrelenting combat, with the Mediterranean as its epicenter, its shifting field, its zone of demarcation.”⁴



[2000BC] MYTH OF EUROPA

Since myth and fiction are central to the creation and persistence of Orientalism, the Myth of Europa is an appropriate frame from which to begin. According to Greek Mythology, the god Zeus transformed himself into a bull and seduced Europa, the daughter of a Phoenician king. The night before her abduction, Europa dreamt of “two lands locked in conflict for her favor, the land of Asia and the land which faces it.”²⁵ The next day, Zeus is said to have carried her from Phoenicia (the East) to Crete (the West) on his back. Thus, it can be inferred that from the very beginning, the West makes claims to the East linguistically by appropriating Europa’s name for its own, territorially by claiming the biblical lands as its place of origin, and imperialistically by its possession of Europa.

ZEUS IN CRETE

PHOENICIA

2000BC

1900BC

1800BC

1700BC

1600BC

1500BC

1400BC



[1300BC] ACHAEA V. TROYLAND

The second frame, also bound to Greek mythology, demonstrates the oppositional relationship between the Achaeans and Trojans in the Trojan War when Paris of Troy took Helena from her husband the king of Sparta. Even though the Achaeans and Trojans shared the same culture and Hellenic heritage, the richly fabricated drama between these two entities contributes to the historical imagination and construction of The Other – in this case the Trojans.

ACHAEA
TROYLAND

1300BC

1200BC

1100BC

1000BC

900BC

800BC

700BC

ARCHAIC GREECE

FOUNDING OF ROME



[490BC] GREECE V. PERSIA (Achaemenid Empire)

Whereas the previous two frames were mythical inventions that transformed into important historical identities for the West, it is this third frame according to Hentsch, that the constructed difference between East and West is carved out more distinctly. He writes, "At the time of the great Greek Civilization the world's centre of gravity was located in the eastern Mediterranean, with a certain limited contact with Asia. Already the West was distinguishing itself from the East, and Greek culture, as we still understand it today was Western."⁶ This shift occurred during the Battle of Marathon in 490BC when the Persians, under King Darius I, attempted to conquer Greece for the first time. Even though Greece was far from homogeneous, the onset of the Greco-Persian Wars initiated a desire for the Greeks to differentiate themselves from their formidable opponents in terms of their linguistic, cultural and political structures. They invented themselves as civilized, intelligent, and "free" set against their Persian adversaries whom they classified as hot, languid, and unintelligent.⁷





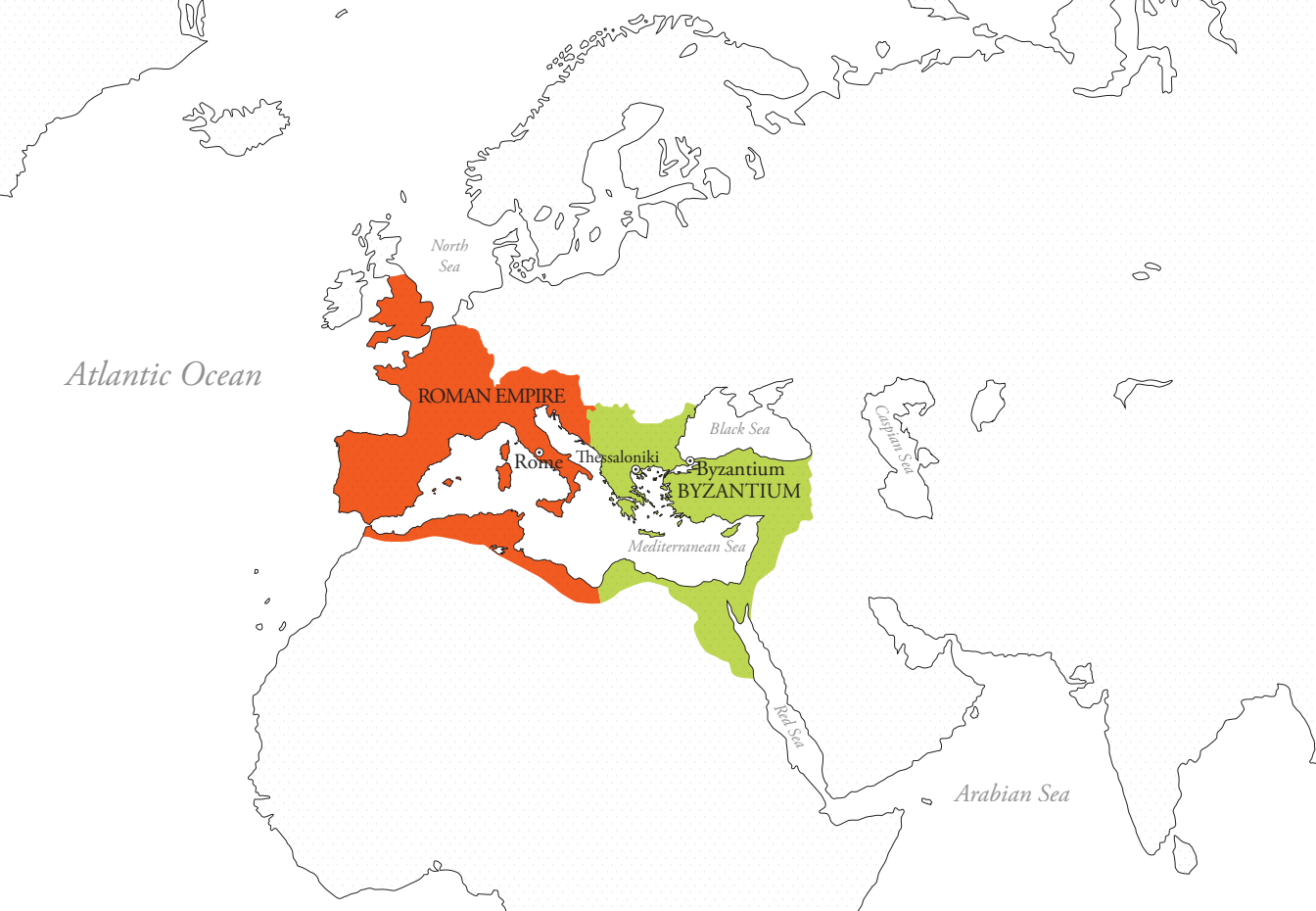
[58] ROME V. PERSIA (Parthian Empire)

During the reign of Alexander the Great, the boundaries of Europe extended from the Ionian Sea all of the way to the Himalayas. Though the territory was still divided and conquered according to what Alexander knew, in many respects this could have been seen as the single moment in history when the East and West were truly united. The fourth frame and paradigm shift however, occurred after the dissolution of his domain with the rise of the Roman Empire and the re-emergence of Persia, the Parthian Empire. Beginning in 58, the Roman-Parthian Wars between the East and West arose out of both of their desires to rule Armenia, a territory at the intersection of the two zones. Even though Persia gained the Armenian throne, the nomination for a new leader required the Roman Emperor's approval. The West, therefore, was seen at this moment as maintaining intellectual and authoritative power over the East.

ROMAN EMPIRE

ROMAN PARTHIAN WARS

PARTHIAN EMPIRE



[293] PARTITION OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

As compared to the previous frames in which Greece had always been a part of the West and even an inventor of it, the partition of the Roman Empire pushed Greece and Byzantium to the Eastern side of the divide. In this case, linguistic and religious differences were the primary cause for the fissure. While the West spoke Latin and endorsed the Roman Catholic Church, the East spoke Greek and favored the Eastern Orthodox Church. Even though the Byzantine Empire will be shown from this point forward as part of the West, its loyalty to one side or the other remains ambiguous until its fall to the Ottomans.



[614] BYZANTIUM V. PERSIA (Sasanian Empire)

The sixth frame marks yet another shift of the East-West boundary from the middle of the Mediterranean back to its eastern edge. With the dwindling importance of Rome and increased interest in Constantinople, Jerusalem, and access to the Mediterranean for trade, the final phase of the Byzantine-Sasanian Wars – specifically Persia's siege of Jerusalem in 614 – ruptured the continuous boundary between East and West. In Persia's claim to the Mediterranean coastline, Jerusalem became the junction between what were now three entities: Persia, the Byzantine Empire in Europe and the Byzantine Empire in North Africa.

BYZANTINE EMPIRE

⦿ SIEGE OF JERUSALEM

SASANIAN EMPIRE

614

620

630

640

650

660

670



[711] CHRISTIANITY V. ISLAM

While the line drawn between East and West in the previous frame primarily concerned trade and access points to the Mediterranean, with the rise of Islam in the 7th and 8th centuries, concern shifted to religious grounds. Unlike the boundary that ran north-south, the divide between Christendom and Islam ran east-west beginning at the Black Sea and cutting across the Mediterranean, southern territories of the Frankish Kingdom and Northern territories of the rapidly deteriorating Visigoth Kingdom. It could be argued that the paradigm shift occurred when an Islamic Army captured Cordoba in 711, the first time the Orient had successfully penetrated the Occident from its western edges. Even though much of European Christendom was still unaware of Islam at this point, for the Europeans who had encountered its military stamina, Islam became synonymous with “devastation, terror, and barbarians”⁸ on one hand and a tawdry imitation of Christianity on the other .

BYZANTINE EMPIRE

● CAPTURE OF CORDOBA

● ABBASID CALIPHATE

● CONQUEST OF SICILY

UMAYYAD CALIPHATE

● FOUNDING OF CAIRO

711

750

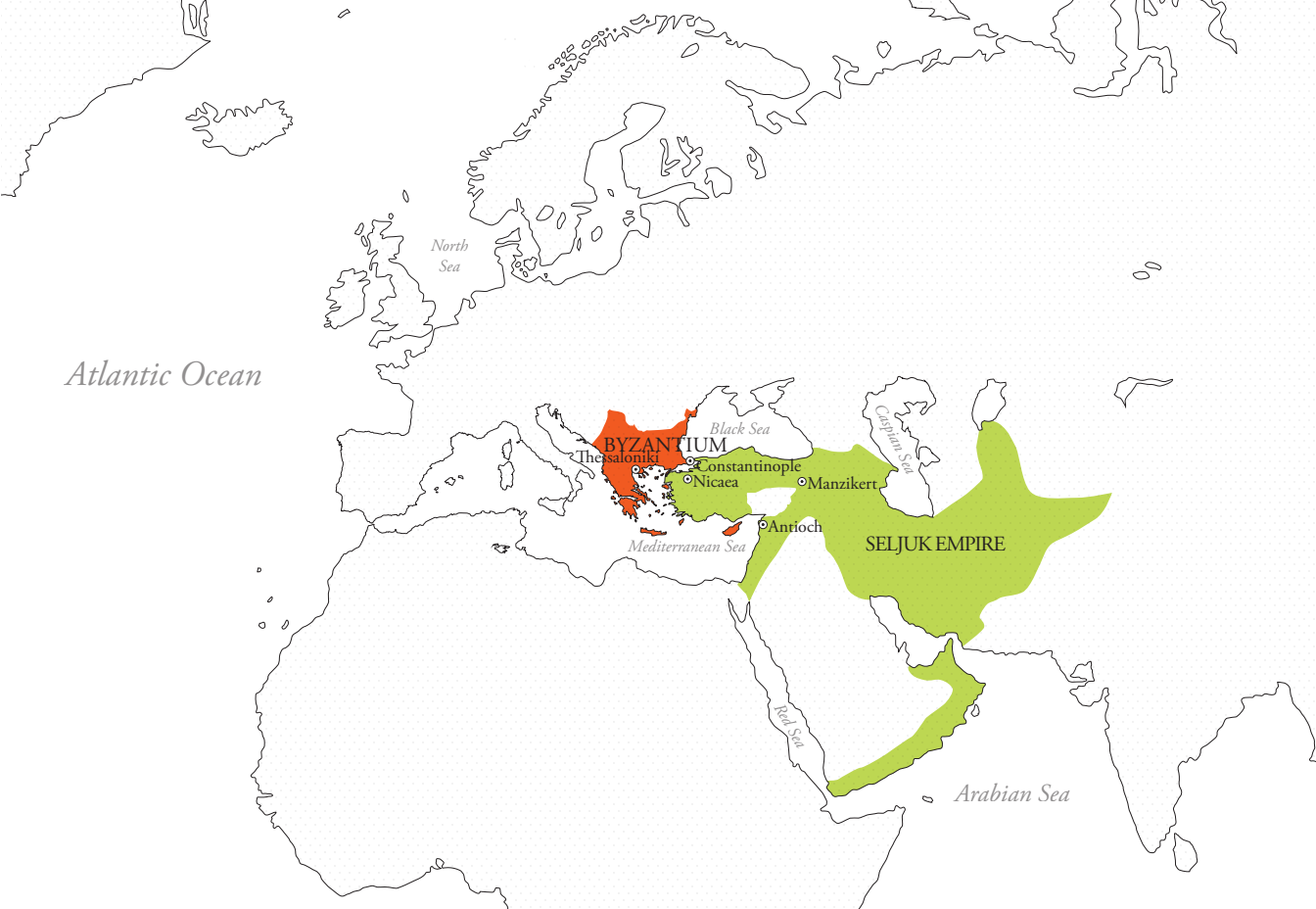
800

850

900

950

1000



[1071] BYZANTIUM V. SELJUK EMPIRE

With eruption of the Byzantine-Seljuq war, the eighth defining frame between East and West occurred with the Battle of Manzikert in 1071 when the weakened Byzantine military lost to the Seljuk Turks. Whereas before the war, the West had been known for its military clout and the East for its intellect and economic development, a shift in the Western consciousness occurred during this period in which the much shrunken Byzantine Empire had needed to reshape its identity against the East and fight for its position in cultural and economic spheres. At this time, the line dividing East and West had sharpened almost to a point with Constantinople as the divider and joiner of the two worlds.



[1099] THE CRUSADES

The First Crusade and in particular the Siege of Jerusalem marks yet another shift in the boundary's geographical positioning as well as a different cultural consciousness between East and West. At this point in time the line separating the two entities shifts slightly back towards the Orient in the Occident's favor. In a sense, this shift may be seen as a reversal of the Byzantium v. Persia frame. Whereas in 614, Persia had acquired Jerusalem and split the West into north and south, in this frame, Christendom captures Jerusalem – the gateway between the Fatimids and the Turks. What was not similar however, was the reason for conquest. Though access to trade and the Mediterranean were still important, the Crusaders desired to restore Christendom's access to the holy land. Thus, the ideological divide between Christianity and Islam, particularly at the level of the state, intensified during this period.

THE CRUSADES

● SIEGE OF JERUSALEM

FATIMID DYNASTY

SELJUK EMPIRE

1099

1125

1150

1175

1200

1225

1250



[1241] HUNGARY V. MONGOL EMPIRE

With the advent of the vast Mongol Empire at Karkorum, the Orient's center of gravity shifted to the far East, but expanded rapidly to encapsulate much of the Abbasid Caliphate. Eventually, the Empire spread north over the Black Sea towards Europe. It was with the Battle of Mohi in 1241 between the Kingdom of Hungary and the Mongol Empire in which these distant adversaries of the East became an immediate threat to the West. This frame is important in that for the first time, the Orient came into direct contact with the northern territories of the Occident. The passage between East and West no longer resided solely at Byzantium and thus multiple perceptions of the Other emerged – most of them grounded in fear of their unfamiliar enemy.

KINGDOM OF HUNGARY

● BATTLE OF MOHI

MONGOL EMPIRE

1241

1275

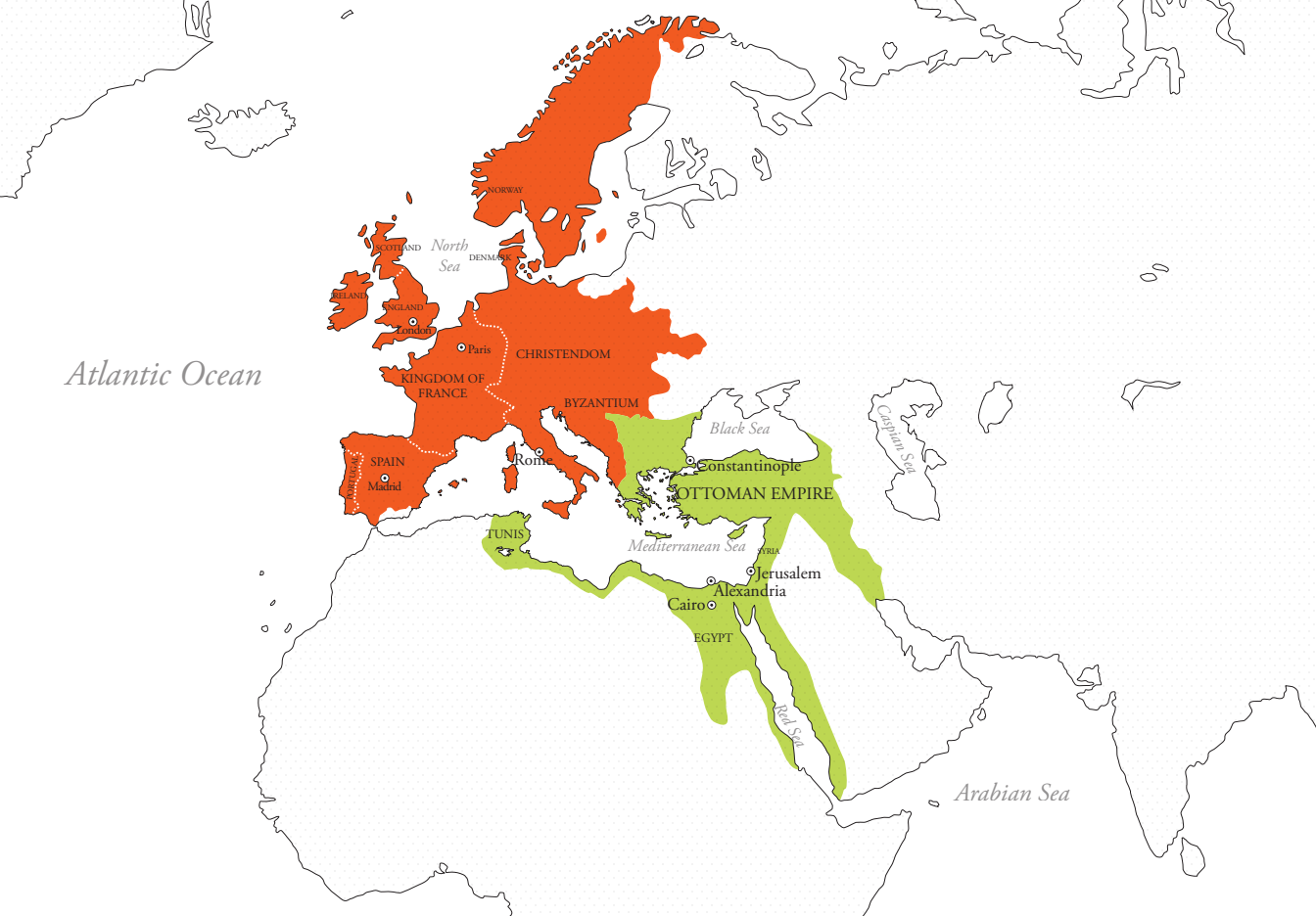
1300

1325

1350

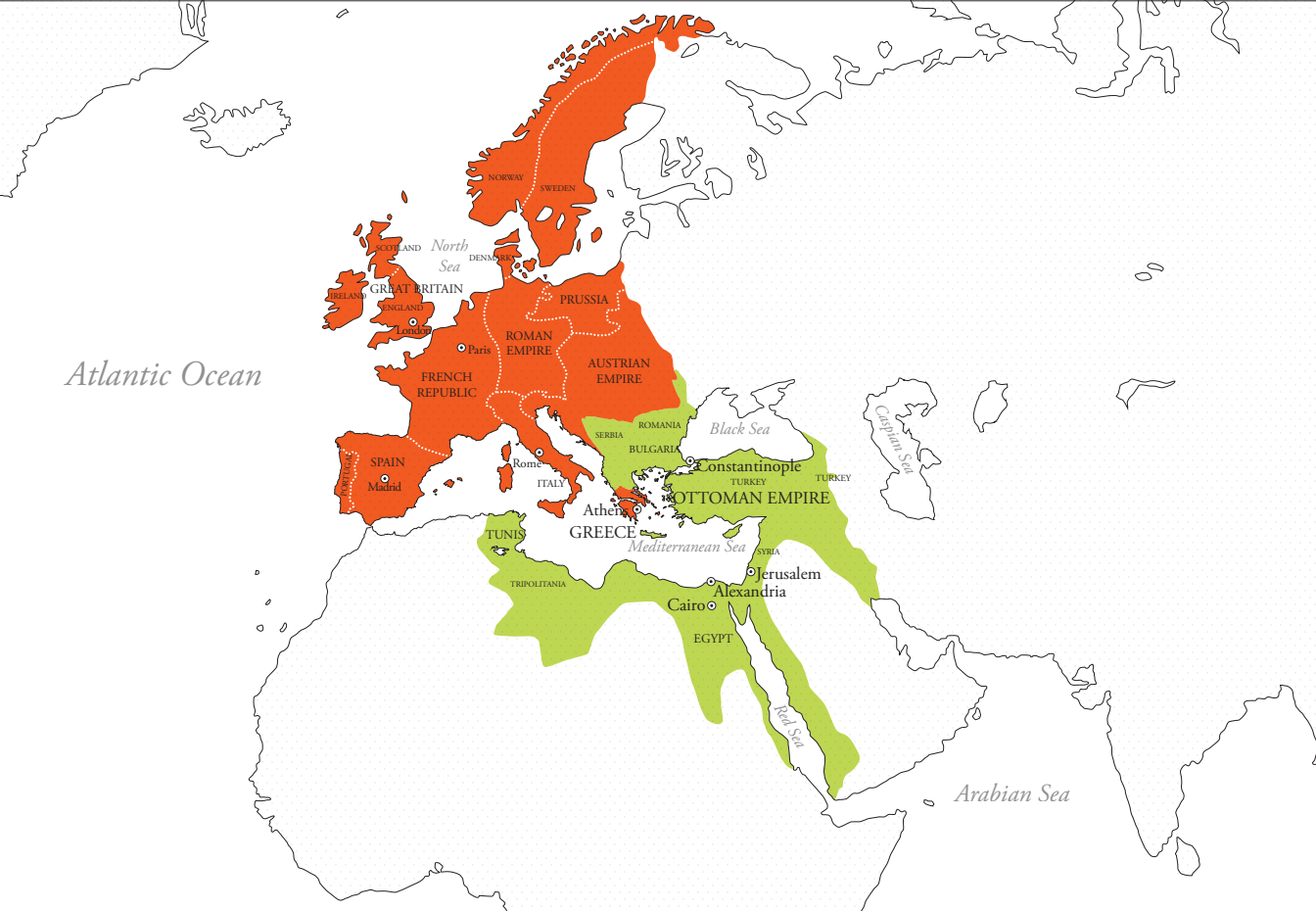
1375

1400



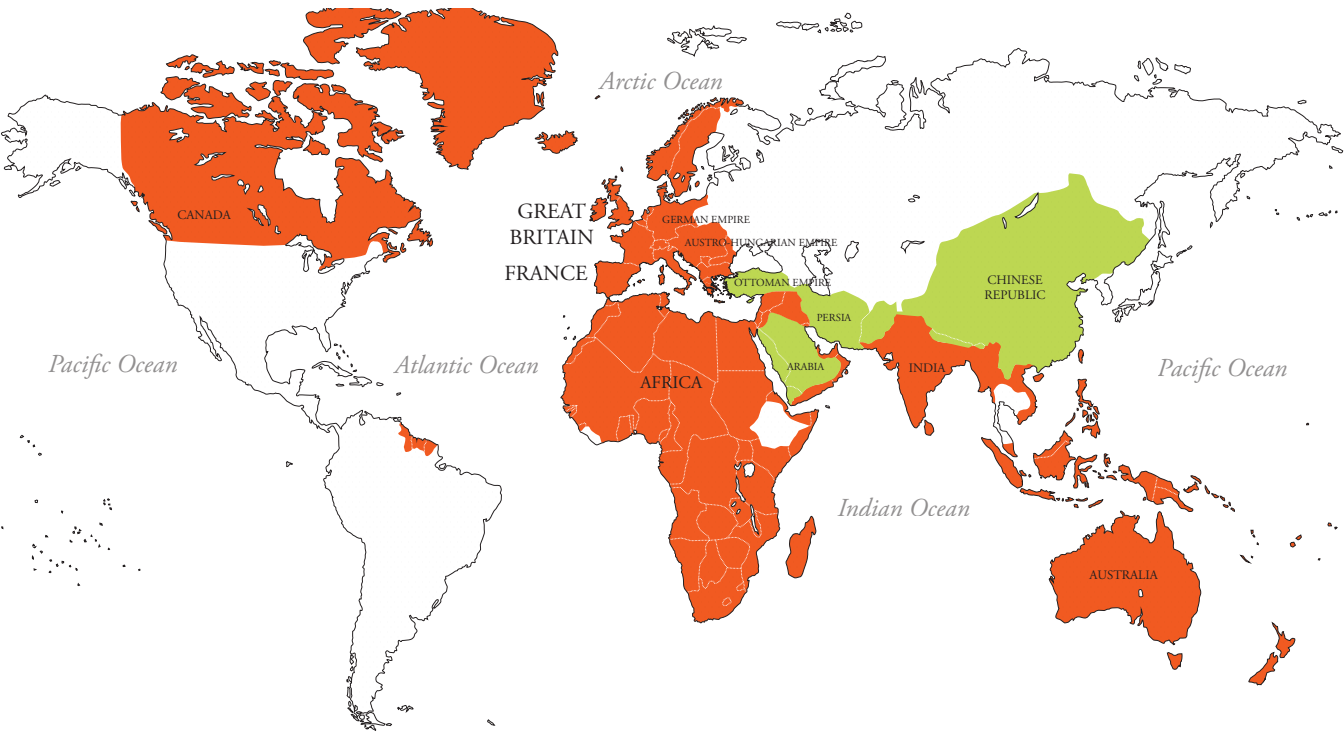
[1453] BYZANTIUM V. OTTOMAN EMPIRE

Even though the trepidation of the East lingered with the rise of Mehmet II and the Ottoman Empire, the West's attention began to shift from the Mediterranean towards the Atlantic. Though the paradigm shift could be explained as having more to do with the rise of mercantile capitalism, individualism, and humanism, in other words, a shift in mentality more than geographical positioning, the Siege of Constantinople of 1453 reinforced the West's realignment with the New World. As the Occident saw itself crossing over into the modern age in which cities rose in importance and individualism replaced religion, the Orient emerged as the romantic, but backwards past that the West had long left behind. In a sense, this schism between modernity and tradition is reminiscent of how the Greeks might have imagined themselves against their Persian "Other".



[1826] INDEPENDENCE OF GREECE

Though Napoleon's conquest of Cairo in 1789 might have been an appropriate moment at which to designate a paradigm shift considering the avid attention it receives in both Said's and Hentsch's texts, the physical manifestations of this nationalistic and imperialist set of ideologies arrives later – in the form of Nationalism with the Independence of Greece in 1826 and in the form of Imperialism with the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. It is with this first paradigm shift of Greece's independence in which the West not only re-claims its origins in Greek antiquity, but also re-defines culture on nationalistic, bounded terms. Even though the victory of Greece appears insignificant on the map, this boundary no longer follows a single line, series of lines or points. Instead, Greece maintains its own boundary surrounded by the East on all sides – it is the West within the East – a theme that is transformed into imperialism with the next frame.



[1919] COLONIAL EMPIRE

With the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, the British and French cultural enterprise dominated over 85% of the world's territories. Rather than the West continuing to define itself against the East from within its own boundaries, it observed, recorded, appropriated, and consumed the East in the East. At this point in time therefore, the West re-made itself more in terms of expansionism – the territory it owned and controlled – rather than just Great Britain or France. What was left of the Orient on this map then are only the territories the Occident had yet to conquer.

COLONIAL EMPIRE

1919 TREATY OF VERSAILLES

OTTOMAN EMPIRE

1920 THE FALL OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

MODERN NATION STATES

1945 WORLD WAR II

1919

1920

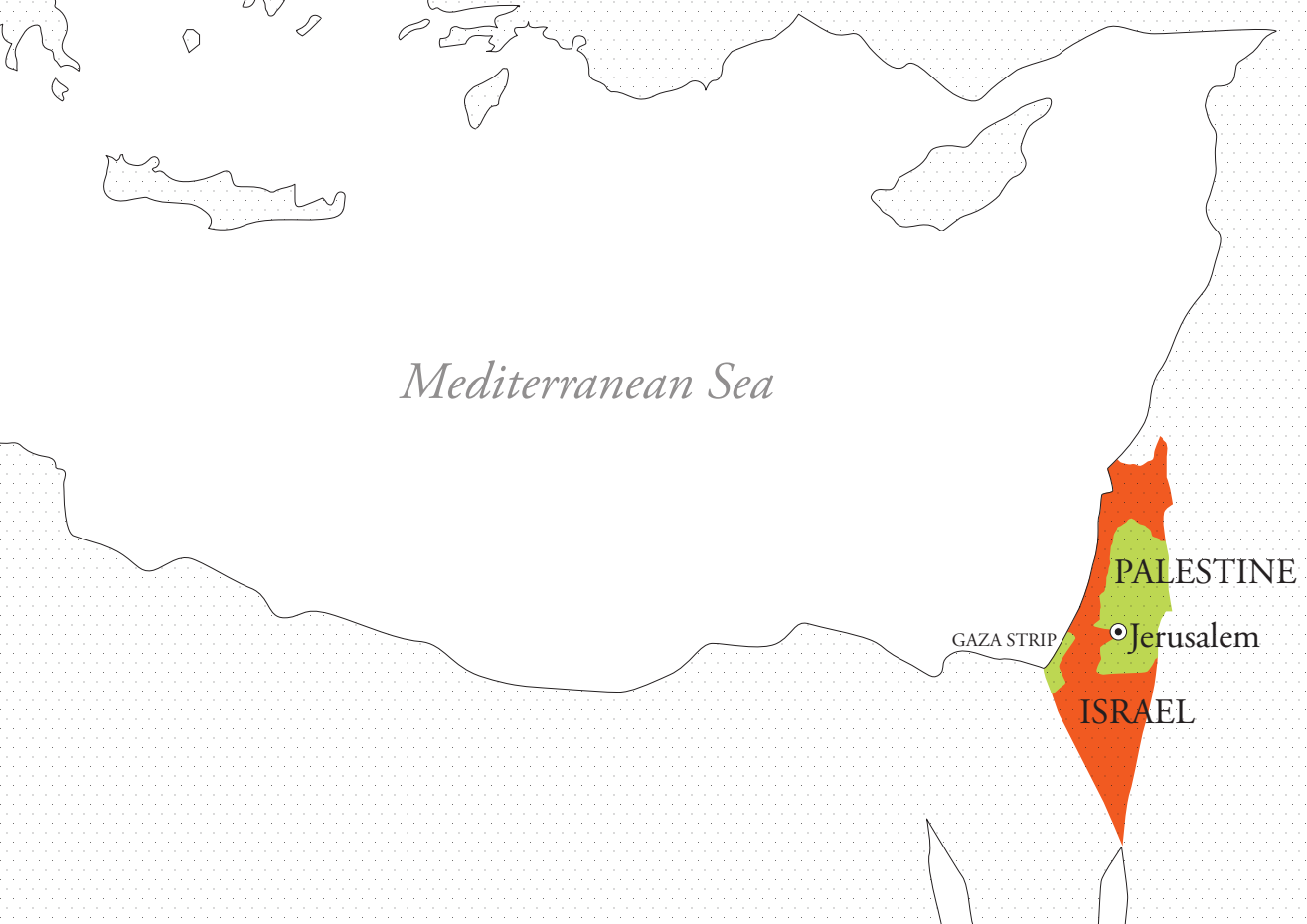
1925

1930

1935

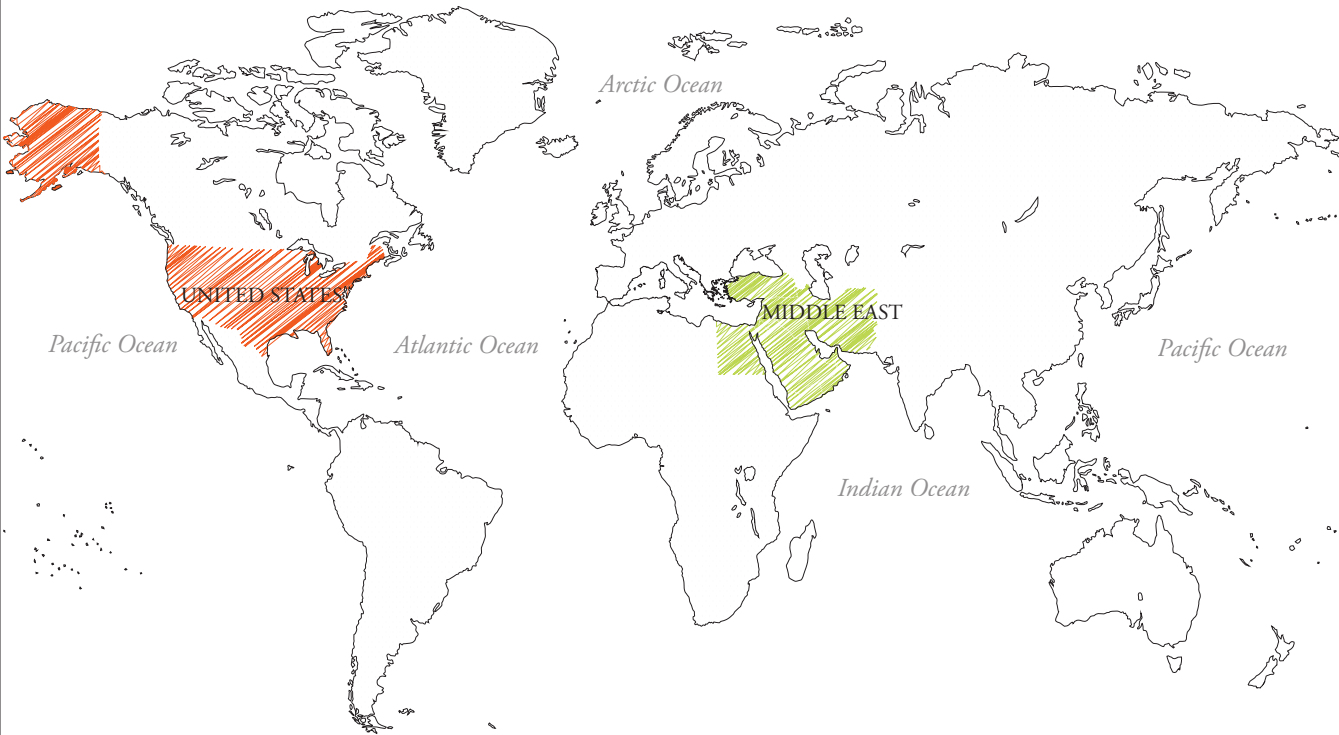
1940

1945



[1948] ISRAEL V. PALESTINE

The very inspiration for Said's work on Orientalism, this frame illustrates the divisive and complex relationship between Israel and Palestine at Israel's creation on May 14th, 1948. While the state of Israel saw itself as a Western culture submerged in the East similar to that of the crusader states, it viewed Palestine as the Arab "Other" – a land with no past, present or future and an irritating obstacle to Israel's independence. Early Zionists even described Palestine as "an empty desert waiting to burst into bloom; such inhabitants as it had were supposed to be inconsequential nomads possessing no real claim on the land and therefore no cultural or national reality."⁹ To push past this existing Orientalist dichotomy, Said argues that "the struggle for equality in Palestine and Israel should be directed towards a humane goal, that is, coexistence, and not further suppression and denial."¹⁰



[1979] UNITED STATES V. MIDDLE EAST?

Beyond the historical frame of Israel and Palestine, we are submerged in the present tense and it becomes impossible to discern if, when, where, and how the line is drawn between The Occident and The Orient. Though Said might advocate for a frame in which the United States v. The Middle East sets the stage, might the increasingly hybrid, migrating, and globalizing world be able to shake up and re-make these “supreme fictions”?¹¹ The mythical futures of the East and West remain to be *seen*.

1979 IRANIAN REVOLUTION

UNITED STATES
MIDDLE EAST

1995 OKLAHOMA CITY BOMBING

2001 SEPTEMBER 11th

1979

1985

1990

1995

2000

2005

2010

endnotes

¹ Edward Said. *Orientalism*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 2-3.

² Said, *Orientalism*, 1.

³ Note: The idea of beginning with the Myth of Europa should be attributed to Thierry Hentsch as this is how he begins his book, *Imagining the Middle East*.

⁴ Thierry Hentsch. *Imagining the Middle East*. (New York: Black Rose Books Ltd., 1992) 1.

⁵ Denis De Rougemont. *Vingt-huit siècles d'Europe*. (Paris: Payot, 1961), 8.

⁶ Hentsch, *Imagining the Middle East*, 18.

⁷ Hentsch, *Imagining the Middle East*, 18.

⁸ Hentsch, *Imagining the Middle East*, 59.

⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 286.

¹⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, xxiv.

¹¹ Said, *Orientalism*, xvii.

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