

The Renaissance Studies Program
“Truth, Falsehood, and Fraud in the Renaissance” Series
Presents the fourth and final lecture by

SUREKHA DAVIES

*Reading, Writing and Mapping
Ethnographic Credibility*



**5:30 p.m., Monday, November 10, 2014
Walnut Room
Indiana Memorial Union**

Sixteenth-century European mapmakers read contemporary travel accounts and devised distinctive motifs for the inhabitants of different parts of the Americas. They marketed their works as uniquely suited for comparing societies and the influence of environment on human bodies, temperaments and mental abilities. At a time when some readers were complaining that there was too much to know, maps made peoples of different regions memorably distinct from one another. This paper shows how mapmakers inserted the concept of the monster – used to denote beings that broke the category of the human – into discussions about peoples of the Americas. Such motifs as Patagonian giants and beings with heads in their chests have little credibility when viewed through modern eyes, and are usually dismissed as exaggeration, imagination and error. By contrast, I shall analyze mapmakers’ renditions of monstrous peoples historically, asking questions that are not based on modern cultural assumptions, to reveal aspects of Renaissance epistemologies for phenomena that lay at the limits of possibility. In so doing, I indicate a road map for re-configuring our understanding of early modern science as a visual pursuit.

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