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Natural Frontiers Revisited: France's Boundaries since the Seventeenth Century

PETER SAHLINS

UNTIL ABOUT FIFTY YEARS AGO, the idea of France's natural frontiers was a commonplace in French history textbooks and in scholarly inquiry into Old Regime and revolutionary France. The idea, as historian of the revolution Albert Sorel wrote in 1885, was that "geography determined French policy": that, since the sixteenth, if not the twelfth, century, France had undertaken a steady and consistent expansion to reach the Atlantic, Rhine, Alps, and Pyrenees.¹ These were "the limits that Nature has traced," which Cardinal Richelieu had proclaimed, the same boundaries "marked out by nature" invoked by Georges-Jacques Danton. From the architect of absolutism to the representatives of the National Convention, the idea had been a guiding principle of foreign policy and a central term in the definition of French unity. According to historian Albert Mathiez, writing in the 1920s, the Convention merely "cloaked in a red bonnet the old monarchical politics of natural frontiers"—even if the idea of natural frontiers had not always been explicitly invoked by those in power.²

The idea of France's natural frontiers still surfaces occasionally in textbook accounts of French expansion, but most historians of France today dismiss the "doctrine" of natural frontiers as too teleological a reading of France's history. In this, they owe an unacknowledged debt to French historian Gaston Zeller (1890–1960). A native of Clermont-Ferrand, Zeller taught for thirteen years at the University of Strasbourg, where in 1933 he succeeded Lucien Febvre in the chair of modern history.³ But, unlike Febvre, Zeller retained a passionate and unrelenting interest in "the history of events," writing extensively about France's eastern frontiers: the conquest and annexation of Metz, Lorraine, and Alsace during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These concerns, combined with his own experience before and during World War II, profoundly influenced his attack on the "false idea" of natural frontiers.⁴

I would like to thank James Amelang, Linda Colley, Natalie Zemon Davis, Peter Gay, John Merriman, four anonymous readers for the *AHR*, and especially L. A. Kauffman, for their constructive criticisms of an earlier version.

¹ Albert Sorel, *Europe et la Révolution française*, Vol. 1: *Les Moeurs politiques et les traditions* (Paris, 1885), 244–337; 246.

² Albert Mathiez, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1924), 2: 166.

³ Paul Vaucher, "Gaston Zeller," *Revue historique*, 225 (1961): 530–32; Georges Livet, "L'Institut et la chaire d'histoire moderne de la Faculté des lettres de Strasbourg de 1919 à 1955," *Bulletin de la Faculté des lettres de Strasbourg*, 36 (1957–58): 204–09.

⁴ Zeller's principal arguments are summed up in "La Monarchie d'Ancien Régime et les frontières naturelles," *Revue d'histoire moderne*, 8 (1933): 305–33; and "Histoire d'une idée fausse," *Revue de synthèse*, 11–12 (1936): 115–31. Further material is contained in *La France et l'Allemagne depuis dix siècles* (Paris, 1932), and his doctoral thesis, *La Réunion de Metz à la France (1552–1648)*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1926), 1: *passim*.

Zeller's pointed rebuttal of the "doctrine" focused almost exclusively on France's claim to the Rhine, an understandable fixation for a pacifist and patriot historian writing in a political climate of growing French and German militarism between the wars. Zeller believed that to write the history of the idea was to demystify the concept, to remove it from the realm of "journalism" and "ideology." It was a reaction shared by many others, among them Lucien Febvre, who published his own historical geography of the Rhine with Albert Demangeon in 1935.⁵ With typical erudition and impatience, Zeller demonstrated how irrelevant the "ideology" of natural frontiers was to French foreign policy objectives before 1792 and how a widespread invocation of the notion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was tied more to popular textbook constructions of national identity, and to journalistic appeals to nationalism, than to historical verisimilitude.

Taking as a point of departure the life and work of Gaston Zeller and the rich and detailed evidence he collected, this essay reopens the case of France's natural frontiers. It examines the history of the idea since the seventeenth century in the double context of French foreign policy interests and the symbolic construction of French national identity. As a model for state building, the idea of natural frontiers sometimes provided the justification, sometimes the organizing principle, of French foreign policy. As a model of French identity, it formed part of a constitutive myth of the state. Natural frontiers appeared as one element within the shifting configuration of symbols and images of an ideal unity, a unity that drew alternately on the ideas of a shared language, a common history, and a bounded, delimited territory.⁶

Statesmen, diplomats, administrators, military officials, historians, and geographers all invoked the idea of natural frontiers as a defining feature of France's geography and history. In their hands, the idea frequently played a role within a legitimating discourse that served to rationalize French claims of territorial expansion and, occasionally, actually determined short-term foreign-policy objectives. Yet the functions played by the concept do not disclose its shifting fields of meaning over three centuries. The uses (and abuses) of the idea were framed by shifting conceptions of territory, history, and nature as these took shape within French state building since the seventeenth century.

AN OFT-CITED PASSAGE FROM *Cardinal Richelieu's Political Testament* once seemed sufficient to establish the centrality of the idea of natural frontiers within his overall

Lucien Febvre reviewed the thesis favorably, while criticizing Zeller's study of Metz for containing "too many facts and parasitical details"; *Revue d'histoire moderne*, 3 (1928): 44.

⁵ Lucien Febvre and Albert Demangeon, *Le Rhin: Problèmes d'histoire et d'économie* (Paris, 1935).

⁶ The distinction between "models of" and "models for" is adapted from Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 93–94, although I do not accept his idea of a "pre-established, non-symbolic system," which cultural models render meaningful. Recent studies of the symbolic construction of France include C. Beaune, *Naissance de la nation France* (Paris, 1986), and the contributions to the collective volumes edited by P. Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire: La République* (Paris, 1984); *La Nation*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1986); and *Les France*, 3 vols. (Paris, forthcoming). Recent considerations of French space and national territory include Daniel Nordman, "Des limites d'Etat aux frontières nationales," in Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire, La Nation*, 2: 35–61; *Espace français: Vision et aménagement, XVI–XIX^e siècle*, catalogue of the exhibition at the Archives Nationales, September 1987–January 1988 (Paris, 1987); Joseph W. Konvitz, "The Nation-State, Paris, and Cartography in 18th and 19th Century France," *Journal of Historical Geography*, 16 (1990): 3–16; and Daniel Nordman and Jacques Revel, "La Formation de l'espace français," in *Histoire de la France*, Vol. 1: *L'Espace français*, Jacques Revel, ed. (Paris, 1989), 29–169.

foreign policy: "It was the goal of my ministry to restore to Gaul the limits that Nature has traced for her, to submit all the Gauls to a Gallic king, to combine Gaul with France, and everywhere the ancient Gaul had been, to restore the new one."⁷ Zeller dismissed the text because, in the tradition of Voltaire, he correctly doubted its authorship. Indeed, the apocryphal *Testamentum Christianum* (1643), from which the passage was drawn, was the work of Father Philippe Labbé, the Jesuit geographer and royal publicist. The text now attributed to Richelieu himself, "his thought although not his material realization," fails to mention Gaul or natural frontiers in the context of the Rhine, as do all of the cardinal's letters and policy directives. Zeller thus contended that the idea was at best mere propaganda done by some hanger-on at court, an isolated rhetorical flourish that played no part in the decisions of the French first minister.⁸

Yet equating contemporary France with ancient Gaul was not an isolated analogy in the France of Richelieu, nor was the invocation of the "limits that Nature has traced." History and geography formed part of a political culture that drew its language and images from the work of experts like Labbé—geographers, cartographers, and historians—most often in the service of the crown. These ideas of natural and historical frontiers constituted neither an "interest" nor an "ideology" but a belief that gave shape to an imagined national space, bounded and unified, in seventeenth-century France.

The Jesuit Jean François's *Science of Geography* (1652), like so much contemporary geographic discourse, stressed how mountains functioned "as very strong walls and ramparts between kingdoms, sufficient to stop the progress of a conqueror and the armies of an enemy. Such are the Pyrenees between France and Spain, and the Alps between France and Italy."⁹ Other geographers emphasized the role of mountains as "natural fortifications," among them Labbé, who published in 1646 his *Royal Geography Presented to Louis XIV*. Jesuit geographers and historians, supported and encouraged by the crown, diffused in their writings as in their classrooms the defensive image, elevated to a general principle, of natural frontiers.¹⁰ But they also brought forth the role of mountains and rivers in restraining and limiting the aggressive ambitions of a prince. An atlas at the time of Richelieu proclaimed that geographers study a kingdom's frontiers and teach them to the prince as "the limits of his ambition." It was not so much, as François Dainville has argued, "the idea of natural frontiers [*frontières naturelles*]" that was "anchored in the spirits" of the time but the image of limits or boundaries marked out by nature.¹¹

The linguistic distinction in French between boundaries (*limites*) and frontiers (*frontières*) in France dates from the late thirteenth century, when the French monarchy began to take account of the "frontier" of the kingdom as distinct from the jurisdictional boundaries of its suzerainty. The frontier was that which, etymologically and politically, "stood face to" an enemy. This military frontier,

⁷ Quoted in Zeller, "La Monarchie d'Ancien Régime," 311–12.

⁸ On questions of authorship and attribution, see Louis André, *Le Testament politique du Cardinal de Richelieu* (Paris, 1947), introduction; William F. Church, *Richelieu and Reason of State* (Princeton, N.J., 1972), 480–95 and *passim*; and Roland Mousnier, "Le Testament politique de Richelieu," *Revue historique*, 101 (1949): 55–71, quotation, 57.

⁹ Quoted in François Dainville, *La Géographie des humanistes* (Paris, 1940), 286.

¹⁰ See Dainville, *La Géographie des humanistes*, 185–87; and Jean Lecuir, "A la découverte de la France dans les abrégés d'histoire et de géographie des collèges jésuites du XVII^e siècle," in *La Découverte de la France au XVII^e siècle*, 9^{ème} Colloque de Marseille organisé par le Centre Méridional de Rencontres sur le XVII^e siècle, 25–28 janvier 1979 (Paris, 1980), 298–317.

¹¹ Dainville, *La Géographie des humanistes*, 377; atlas quoted on 352.

implying bellicose expansion and a zonal defense, stood opposed to the linear boundary or line of demarcation—the *limites* of two jurisdictions or territories.¹²

The appearance of France's "frontiers" signified a movement, in image and reality, away from a set of traditional boundaries, commonly known from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries as the "four rivers." Medieval chroniclers consistently invoked the Saône, Rhône, Meuse, and Escault (Schelt) as the division of the kingdom of France and the Holy Roman Empire.¹³ To the medieval imagination, functioning without maps, the four rivers conveniently described the unity, and occasionally the political claims, of the French kingdom. Into the sixteenth century, according to an anonymous contemporary description of France, "common opinion" named the four rivers as the "limits of the Empire and the kingdom" of France. Learned opinion, relying on "ancient chronicles, histories, and annales of France," frequently concurred.¹⁴

Nonetheless, from the late thirteenth century, descriptions of the French kingdom as "closed" by the four rivers came to be challenged. It is true that "common opinion" showed a remarkable reluctance to abandon the idea, even into the twentieth century.¹⁵ But "learned opinion"—erudition in the service of the crown—frequently diverged. As cessions were made and conquests accumulated, the four rivers represented an increasingly inaccurate description of the kingdom's boundaries. The submission of Dauphiné to the French king in 1343 and the incorporation of Provence in 1481 gave the crown territories well to the east of the Rhône; along France's northern frontier, the Treaty of Madrid in 1526 had given the counties of Flanders and Artois to the Habsburg emperor, thus pushing back France's boundary far south from the Escault; and in 1601, Henri IV acquired from the kingdom of Savoy the provinces of Bresse, Bugey, Valromey, and the Pays de Gex, on the left bank of the Rhône.¹⁶

With these new acquisitions and changing frontiers, the crown needed new arguments to support its claims. Not nature but history became the legitimating discourse of foreign-policy decisions. In 1537, an anonymous *mémoire* argued that the Meuse river did not separate the kingdom of France and the empire, since the French kingdom extended "in several lands and seigneuries beyond the said river."

¹² Lucien Febvre, "Frontière, Evolution of a Word and a Concept," in *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre*, P. Burke, ed. (London, 1983), 208–11; and Daniel Nordman, "Frontière e confini in Francia: evoluzione dei termini e dei concetti," in C. Ossola, C. Raffestin, and M. Ricciardi, eds., *La frontiera da stato a nazione: il caso Piemonte* (Rome, 1987), 39–55.

¹³ Chroniclers and publicists throughout the Middle Ages named the four rivers as a gloss on the Treaty of Verdun in 843, that "territorial charter of Europe"; see Bernard Guenée, "Les Limites," in Michel François, ed., *La France et les Français* (Paris, 1972), 50–54; Henri Stein and Louis Le Grand, *La Frontière d'Argonne (843–1659): Procès de Claude la Vallée (1553–1561)* (Paris, 1905), 2–5; and Roger Dion, *Les Frontières de la France* (Paris, 1947), 71–85.

¹⁴ The anonymous description may be found in MS 472, fol. 10, Collection Dupuy, Bibliothèque Nationale (hereafter, BN); see also Bernard Guenée, "Des limites féodales aux frontières politiques," in Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire, La Nation*, 2: 26. In the fifteenth century, Gilles le Bouvier, Royal Herald of Charles VII, began his *Livre de la description des pays* with an account of how France was "closed" (*farmé*) by these rivers, and went on to describe other rivers that "close" or "separate" (*départ*) other kingdoms or countries described; see the text, Jules Theodore Ernest Hamy, ed. (Paris, 1908), 32–33. In the case of Argonne, however, the Biesme river was considered the boundary of France and the empire throughout the medieval period. The idea of the Meuse and the "four rivers" only made its appearance in the sixteenth century, as part of the renaissance of historical studies and within defense of new French claims; see Stein and Le Grand, *La Frontière d'Argonne*, 26–27.

¹⁵ Guenée, "Des limites féodales," 24.

¹⁶ For a summary of these and subsequent annexations, see Léon Mirot, *Manuel de géographie historique de la France*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1947–50); and Eugene Jarry, *Provinces et pays de France*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1950), vol. 1, *La Formation de l'unité française*.

Instead, the extension of the French kingdom “must be understood and explicated by ancient titles, or by the continuous possession of rightful heirs.”¹⁷

The early modern state inherited a long-established royalist historiography that framed a specifically French national identity. In the sixteenth century, under the influence of Italian humanist philology and legal scholarship, and in the context of political upheaval during the Wars of Religion, French intellectuals construed a new image of France’s *national* past.¹⁸ But the use and abuse of history within the monarchical projects of French expansion only came into its own during the seventeenth century, when Richelieu and the crown systematically organized research into the rights and claims of France to its newly “conquered provinces.” Sometimes researched and written *ex post facto*, this work was frequently published, with the crown’s privilege and blessing, for a wider reading public. Pierre Dupuy, Jacques de Cassan, Théodore and Denys Godefroy, and other “royal historians” developed claims that rested on the idea of “fundamental law” and the prohibition against alienating the royal domain, and on dynastic claims derived from sometimes-dubious past alliances and the customary laws of the jurisdiction in question. In the service of the crown, these tracts established French claims beyond its borders within the idiom of what Herbert Rowen has called “proprietary dynasticism.”¹⁹

This discourse was appropriate, since the early modern French state was not yet, strictly speaking, territorial in nature. Its governing idiom was that of jurisdictions, including “appurtenances, dependencies, and annexes,” to use the contemporary terms. Jurisdictional sovereignty in early modern France meant that the crown accumulated rights to specific domains—fiefs, bailiwicks, bishoprics, seigneuries, boroughs, and even villages. Alongside and overlapping these “feudal” forms of dominion were administrative circumscriptions created by the crown.²⁰ As seen from the periphery, the lesson was clear: the kingdom was not a coherent territorial entity consistently “bounded” in a linear sense. It is true that many of the medieval French crown’s frontiers were boundaries, well-defined limits marked by boundary stones, rivers, trees, and sometimes trenches.²¹ But, despite the presence of delimited sectors of the boundary, most of France’s borderlands in the early modern period were riddled with incoherent “provinces” made up of overlapping

¹⁷ MS 472, fol. 22, Dupuy Collection, BN.

¹⁸ On the medieval traditions of historical writing, see Beaune, *Naissance de la nation France*, *passim*; and Bernard Guenée, “Les Grandes Chroniques de France: Le Roman aux roys (1274–1518),” in Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire, La Nation*, 1: 189–214. On sixteenth-century historiography, see Donald R. Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship: Language, Law, and History in the French Renaissance* (New York, 1970).

¹⁹ Herbert Rowen, *The King’s State: Proprietary Dynasticism in Early Modern France* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1980); Church, *Richelieu and Reason of State*, 349–71; Zeller, “La Monarchie d’Ancien Régime,” 316–18. On the monarchy’s use of learned historical research in the later seventeenth century, see Joseph Klaitis, *Absolutism and Public Opinion: Printed Propaganda under Louis XIV* (Princeton, N.J., 1976).

²⁰ Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, Calif., 1989), 28–29, 54–59. An older literature treated the jurisdictional character of sovereignty as an essentially “feudal” formation; see, for example, Paul de Lapradelle, *La Frontière* (Paris, 1928), 35–50; Armand Brette, *Les Limites et divisions territoriales de la France en 1789* (Paris, 1907); and Gustave Dupont-Ferrier, “L’Incertitude des limites territoriales en France du XIII^e au XVI^e siècle,” in *Compte rendu de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (Paris, 1942), 62–67. For a reevaluation of the problem that emphasizes the coherence of judicial and administrative circumscriptions within territorial annexations, see Nelly Girard d’Albissin, “Propos sur la frontière,” *Revue historique de droit français et étranger*, 47 (1969): 390–407; and, more recently, Paul Allières, *L’Invention du territoire* (Grenoble, 1980).

²¹ Guenée, “Des limites féodales,” *passim*; Jean François Lemarignier, *Recherches sur l’hommage en marche et les frontières féodales* (Lille, 1945); and Paul Bonenfant, “A propos des limites médiévales,” in *Hommage à Lucien Febvre: Eventail de l’histoire vivante*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1953), 1: 73–79.

and frequently disputed jurisdictions. An eighteenth-century description of Lorraine typifies the confused state of affairs throughout the early modern period. The province was “mixed, crossed, and filled with foreign territories and enclaves belonging with full sovereignty to the princes and states of Germany.”²²

Gaston Zeller insisted that, within this sad state of affairs, the image of France’s natural frontiers was “the offspring of cartography,” and an illegitimate one at that. In fact, the mental image of a kingdom bounded by natural features long antedated the cartography of state. For the monarchy, which (beginning under Henri IV) increasingly brought cartographers and military engineers under its patronage, the image of natural frontiers was not terribly useful and less frequently represented on manuscript maps of the frontier provinces. But the stylized depiction of rivers and mountains within a growing commercial cartography provided a language that lent itself to the more general political project of building an idealized representation of the state.²³

In much commercial cartography of the mid-seventeenth century, the portrayal of mountains—depicted in perspective as if “viewed from horseback” and frequently simplified into chains—suggested the ideal of political divisions marked out by nature. Mountain ranges and sometimes rivers duplicated, if they did not determine, the shape of the dotted or dashed lines that distinguished both provinces and states.²⁴ Such was the case among many seventeenth-century map makers, including Nicolas Sanson (1600–1667), “the government’s first official cartographer,” and a highly successful publisher of commercial atlases.²⁵ Sanson’s cartography of state was not devoid of scientific techniques or contributions to the history of map making. Yet, seduced by the idea of natural limits, and untroubled by a relative ignorance of topography in California as in Africa, he invented mountain ranges forming political boundaries where in fact there were none.²⁶ (See Figure 1.)

Such emphasis on mountains and rivers as political divisions was not confined to other continents; in 1627, a younger Sanson had published a map of “the Gauls” that won him Richelieu’s favor and that portrayed the extension of ancient Gaul to the Rhine river. Many such maps were produced in the 1630s, and they were

²² “Observations concernant les limites du Royaume et les différen[t]s reglemen[t]s qu’on pourroit encore faire à cet égard,” n.d., ca. 1775, *Limites* vol. 7, Archives du Ministère des Relations Extérieures (hereafter, AMRE).

²³ On cartography and statecraft in France, see Roland Mousnier, *The Institutions of France under the Absolute Monarchy, 1598–1789: Society and the State*, trans. Brian Pearce (1974; Chicago, 1979), 689–98; Louis Drapeyron, “L’Image de la France sous les derniers Valois (1525–1589) et les premiers Bourbons (1589–1682),” *Revue de géographie*, 24 (1889): 1–15; David Buisseret, “The Cartographic Definition of France’s Eastern Boundary in the Early Seventeenth Century,” *Imago Mundi*, 36 (1984): 72–80; Paul Solon, “Frontiers and Boundaries: French Cartography and the Limitation of Bourbon Ambition in Seventeenth-Century France,” in *Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* (Lawrence, Kan., 1984), 94–102; and, for the period after 1660, Joseph Konvitz, *Cartography in France, 1660–1848: Science, Engineering, and Statecraft* (Chicago, 1987), 1–31. The definitive descriptive bibliography of printed French atlases for the period is Mireille Pastoureau, *Les Atlas français, XVI–XVII^e siècle* (Paris, 1984).

²⁴ On the symbols of early modern cartography, see François Dainville, *Le Langage des géographes: Termes, signes, couleurs des cartes anciennes, 1500–1800* (Paris, 1964), esp. 271–83. For brief surveys of cartographic representations of mountains, see Jean Pierre Nardy, “Cartographies de la montagne, de l’édifice divin au bas-relief terrestre,” in *Images de la Montagne: Catalogue et essais* (Paris, 1984), 77–79; and Konvitz, *Cartography in France*, 82–102.

²⁵ Konvitz, *Cartography in France*, 2; see also Mousnier, *Institutions*, 693–95; Mireille Pastoureau, “Les Atlas imprimés en France avant 1700,” *Imago Mundi*, 32 (1980): 45–72.

²⁶ See the examples of natural frontiers on the many plates published by his son Guillaume and dedicated to Monseigneur Le Tellier, secretary of state; Nicolas Sanson, *L’Europe [L’Asie, l’Afrique, l’Amérique] en plusieurs cartes et en divers traittés de géographie et d’histoire* (Paris, 1683).

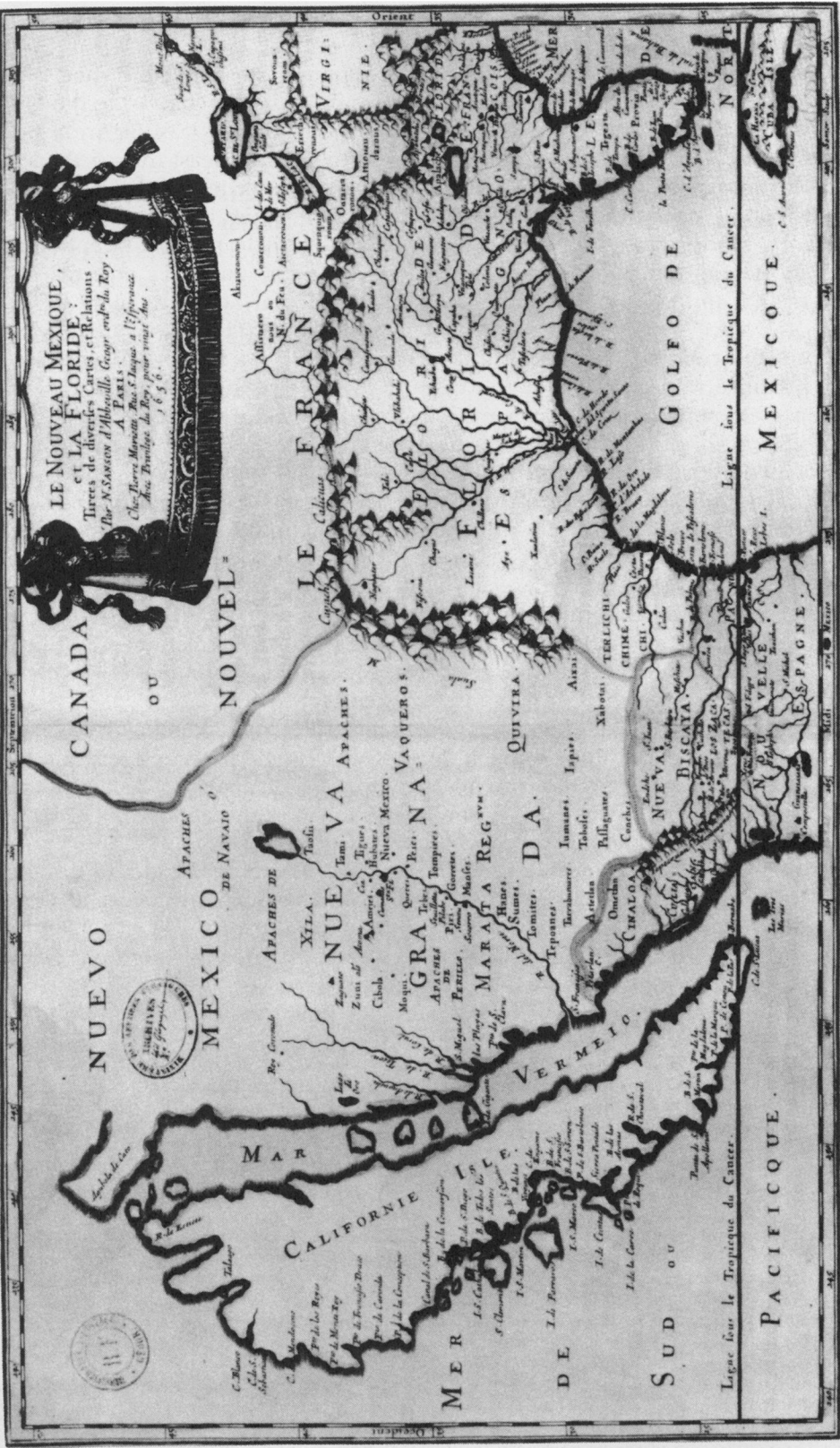


FIGURE 1: Nicolas Sanson, *Le Nouveau Mexique et la Floride: Tirées de diverses cartes, et relations* [New Mexico and Florida] (1656), showing an imagined natural frontier of New France and Spanish Florida. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

matched by the numerous published descriptions, authorized if not actively encouraged by Richelieu, that equated France and Gaul—in contrast to the Middle Ages, when “Gaul” and “Francia” remained distinct ideas.²⁷ (See Figure 2.)

As the politics of French expansion shifted to the northeast during the seventeenth century, and the image of the “four rivers” receded in the landscape of French political culture, French claims to restore the natural limits of Gaul came to the fore—and surfaced in Richelieu’s *Testament*—to help shape conceptions of a unified state.²⁸ But did the idea influence specific foreign policy objectives? The Pyrenean frontier of France and Spain, unmentioned by Zeller, is the most evident test case, since Article 42 of the Peace of the Pyrenees (1659) was unique in the seventeenth century for its explicit invocation of the “doctrine.” Giving to France the province of Roussillon in the eastern Pyrenees, Article 42 declared, “The Pyrenees Mountains which anciently separated the Gauls from the Spains, shall henceforth form the division of the two kingdoms.” Cardinal Mazarin, who negotiated the treaty, had added these words, “which I suppose will not be useless.” Indeed, the phrase was more than a mere rhetorical flourish and did not simply mask military and strategic interests. The idea of natural frontiers served to justify French expansion to the Pyrenees and created a new set of territorial claims, beyond those present in the evocation of provinces and jurisdictions ceded.²⁹ It further provided a reading public with an image of France’s acquisitions as bounded territorial entities; and, here again, Pierre Duval’s commemorative map of the Treaty of the Pyrenees depicted a nonexistent mountain range dividing France and Spain in the Cerdagne valley. (See Figure 3.)

To the north, the idea of restoring to France the “natural limits of Gaul”—and pushing toward the Rhine—made little sense: Flanders, Hainault, and the Habsburg Low Countries were less provinces to be acquired than frontiers to be made defensible, since the proximity of the Spanish armies threatened the security of Paris, less than 150 kilometers away.³⁰ To the east, however, in what took shape as the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, the case was different. The idea of expanding to the Rhine, considered to be France’s natural and historical frontier, had a certain number of partisans in the entourage of royal power during the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. None of the spokesmen were particularly high-placed in the royal council; indeed, most advocates of the “program” of the Rhine frontier were natives of the Rhineland and based there—as Zeller, whose own life and early

²⁷ Zeller, *La Réunion de Metz*, 1: 52–55; and Lecuir, “A la découverte de la France,” 308–11. This identification of France with Gaul was further encouraged by the translations and diffusion of Julius Caesar’s *Commentaries* and other classical texts describing Gaul’s natural boundaries, the Atlantic, Rhine, Alps, and Pyrenees; see Dainville, *La Géographie des humanistes*, 346–54; and Church, *Richelieu and Reason of State*, 358.

²⁸ By the 1640s, the idea of the “four rivers” was historical memory. Louis Coulon argued in his treatise on *French Rivers* (1643) that “our fathers did not think themselves French if they did not drink from the Escault, Scarpe, Lys, Meuse, Moselle, and Rhine”; quoted in Dainville, *La Géographie des humanistes*, 348. The claim is significant in suggesting a degeneration of the “classical” medieval doctrine of four rivers and, at the same time, an expansion of French claims, most notably to the Rhine.

²⁹ Mazarin to Le Tellier, October 7, 1659, vol. 61, fol. 232, *Mémoires et Documents*, Espagne, AMRE; on the negotiations and provisions of the Treaty of the Pyrenees, see Sahlins, *Boundaries*, chap. 1. In the thirteenth century, the royal counselors of Philip the Fair had defined the Pyrenees as a natural watershed of France and Aragon, arguing that “where the waters go down towards Gascony is the kingdom of France, and where they go down to Spain or Catalonia, those are the kingdoms of Spain, according to Isidore and the ancient chronicles”; Philippe Lauer, “Une Enquête au sujet de la frontière française dans le Val d’Aran sous Philippe le Bel,” *Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques: Bulletin de la section de géographie*, 35 (1920): 28–29.

³⁰ The fortification of the northeastern frontier is the subject of Zeller’s monograph, *L’Organisation défensive des frontières du Nord et de l’Est au XVII^e siècle* (Paris, 1928).

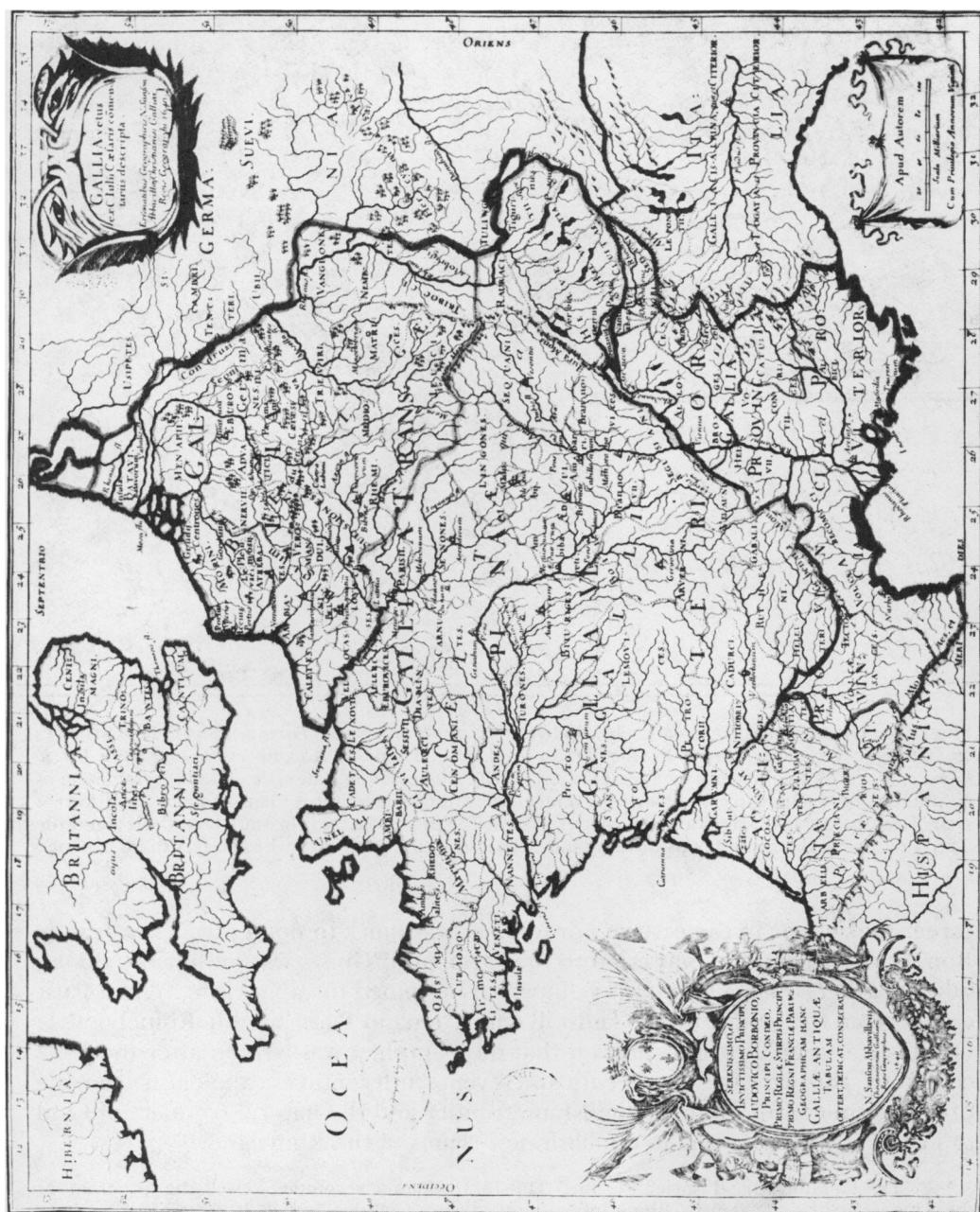


FIGURE 2: Nicolas Sanson, *Gallia antiqua* [Ancient Gaul] (1649), showing the natural frontiers of Gaul: the Pyrenees, the Alps, the Atlantic, and the Rhine. Bibliothèque Nationale.

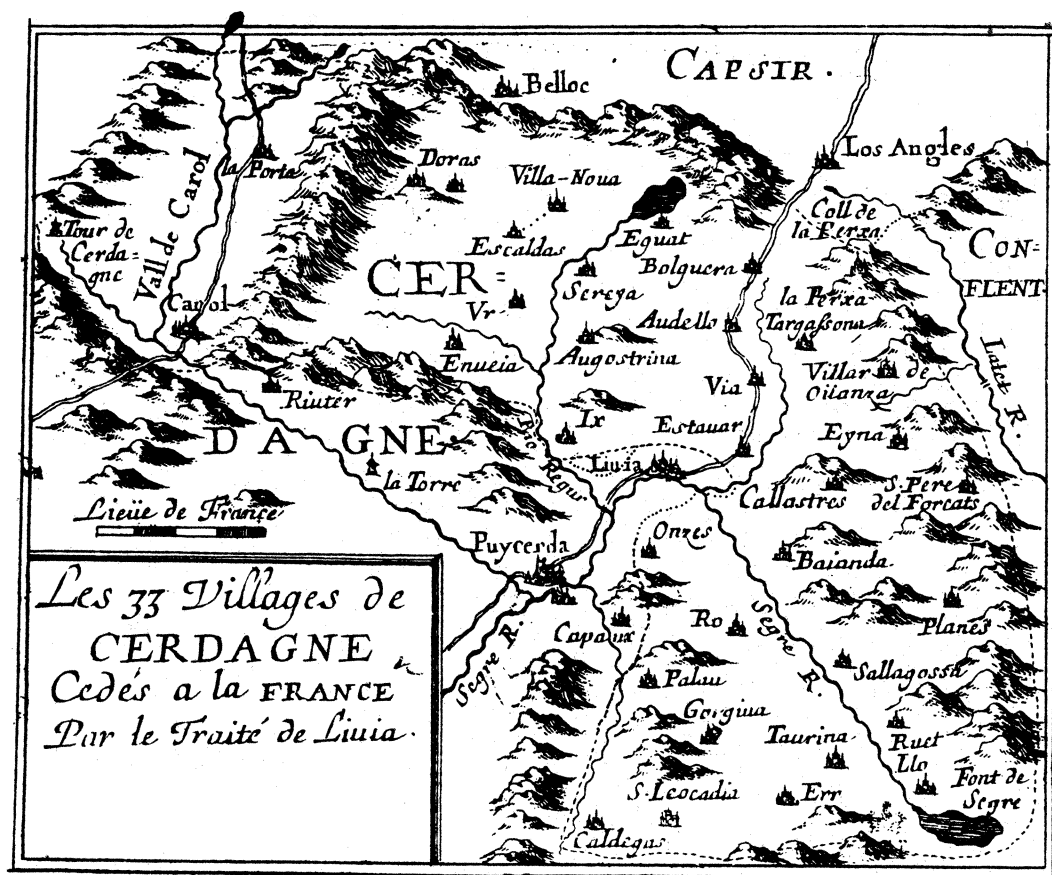


FIGURE 3: Pierre Duval, *Le 33 Villages de Cerdagne Cédés a la France Par le Traité de Llivia* [The 33 villages of Cerdagne ceded to France by the Treaty of Llivia], from his *Acquisitions de la France par la Paix . . .* [France's Acquisitions by Treaty] (Paris, 1679). Bibliothèque Nationale. The representation of natural frontiers is the typical fashion of seventeenth-century cartography: the mountains are drawn as seen "from horseback," the dotted lines are the same for provincial and for state boundaries, and the map shows a range of mountains dividing the Cerdanya in the southeast, when in fact there is none.

career took shape in the eastern borderland, was quick to point out. Thus Jean le Bon, born in Lorraine, physician to the cardinal of Guise, was author of (among other tracts) *Le Rhin au Roy* (1568), in which he coined the aphorism: "When Paris drinks from the Rhine, there Gaul will end" ("Quand Paris boira le Rhin/Toute la Gaule aura sa fin"). It is significant that the pamphlet was written after the 1552 conquests: throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, apologists from the provinces put forth claims to the Rhine frontier and the natural frontiers of Gaul to justify and occasionally to establish new claims in the Rhineland.³¹

³¹ Zeller, "La Monarchie d'Ancien Régime," 315–18. During the revolution as well, the "program" of the Rhine was first initiated by Rhinelanders loyal to the revolution (below, "32g"). The post facto character of the claim finds further evidence in the fact that, according to Zeller, the term *frontières naturelles* was first used by the royal historian Jacques-Auguste de Thou, writing in the first years of the seventeenth century, when he justified the conquest of Metz in 1552 by providing "the first proof, that of the natural frontiers of Gaul." The term became a widespread trope in historical descriptions of conquests: in 1688, Courtilz de Sandras claimed that Henri IV, at the beginning of the century, had sought "to extend the French kingdom to the shores of the Rhine, and in the south [*sic*] to the Alps"; quoted in Zeller, "La Monarchie d'Ancien Régime," 311, 314.

Zeller argued that such ideology never influenced Richelieu and his councilors, that Richelieu's foreign policy was guided by opportunism and grounded in dynastic principles—in "interests." True, in his private and public writings, Richelieu maintained that the French crown had to react to the universalist aspirations of the Habsburgs and to France's potential encirclement by their Spanish and German branches. The territorial implications of the policy were a series of "open doors to be able to enter into the neighboring states," as he put it. These frontiers thus served offensive aims as well, since Richelieu sought to assist local princes in the Rhineland and assert French presence in central Germany.³²

Not only was this foreign policy informed by the writings of "experts" who established the image of a unified, territorial state, it also gave natural frontiers an important role: the idea of natural frontiers was not, as historians as diverse as George Clark and Fernand Braudel have argued, simply the ideological mask of tactical interests.³³ Natural frontiers provided a concrete goal within Richelieu's overall policy around which specific diplomatic aspirations and military strategies were organized. Mountains and rivers were not limits that enclosed a French space, separating it from the other, but obstacles to be conquered—and passageways to be controlled—by establishing strongholds beyond them. As such, the idea of natural frontiers helped determine short and long-term policy decisions.

In the Pyrenees, this conquest of natural frontiers meant taking control of the towns and fortresses along the southern flank, as Mazarin sought to do in the 1650s, while waiting for Spain to begin peace negotiations. In the Alps, French policy throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was to maintain control over the towns and fortresses of Saluzzo and Pinerolo on the eastern side of the chain, as Zeller himself noted.³⁴ Richelieu's policy toward the Rhine involved establishing strongholds on its eastern bank: Philippsburg and Breisach, occupied in 1634 and 1639, were the principal fortified sites France sought to secure.³⁵ France emerged strengthened from the Treaty of Münster (1648), which forbade the emperor to build any fortresses on the right bank of the Rhine between Basel and Philippsburg, and gave to France Alsace (minus Strasbourg and Mulhouse) and its dependencies "on this side and the other of the Rhine."³⁶ It was an old medieval formula, but it served the military interests of the early modern state well. Natural frontiers were important to the French crown not as boundaries but as passages, and it was the plenipotentiaries of the empire who insisted on the Rhine as marking the separation of France from the empire.³⁷

Louis XIV continued and elaborated on Richelieu's Rhine policy, securing and building fortresses and strongholds on the eastern bank of the river: French armies occupied Freiburg in 1679, and the military engineer Sébastien Vauban constructed a series of fortresses (Fort-Louis, Kehl, and Juningue) on the right bank

³² Zeller, *L'Organisation défensive*, *passim*; see also H. Weber, "Richelieu et le Rhin," *Revue historique*, 239 (1968): 265–80; Richelieu is quoted in Nelly Girard d'Albissin, *Genèse de la frontière franco-belge: Les Variations des limites septentrionales de la France de 1659 à 1789* (Paris, 1970), 27–28.

³³ George Clark, *The Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1929), 148; and, more recently, Fernand Braudel, *The Identity of France*, Vol. 1: *History and Environment*, trans. Siân Reynolds (New York, 1988), 318–23.

³⁴ Sahlins, *Boundaries*, 42–43; Gaston Zeller, "Saluces, Pignerol, et Strasbourg: La Politique des frontières au temps de la prépondérance espagnole," *Revue historique*, 193 (1942): 97–110.

³⁵ Louis Battifol, "Richelieu et la question d'Alsace," *Revue historique*, 138 (1921): 161–200.

³⁶ Henri Vast, *Les Grandes traités de Louis XIV*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1894), 3: 131.

³⁷ Zeller, *L'Organisation défensive*, 71, 89; in his dismissal of the idea, Zeller returned frequently to the point that natural frontiers was more a creation of German than of French publicists: "La Monarchie d'Ancien Régime," *passim*.

during the 1680s.³⁸ But the French presence across the Rhine became a symbol of the hegemonic aspirations of Louis XIV, and, when faced with a defeat at the hands of the Augsburg League, France was forced at the Peace of Ryswick (1697) to restore most of its conquests and annexations since 1678, as well as all of its towns and dependencies on the east bank of the Rhine. Article 20 of what Vauban termed “this dishonorable peace” also ceded the fortress of Breisach to the Holy Roman emperor.³⁹ France had become “closed to the Germans,” as stated by the motto inscribed on the medal struck in commemoration of Louis XIV’s entry to Strasbourg in 1683; but, by the Treaty of Ryswick, France’s capacity to intervene in Germany was also disabled.⁴⁰

The Treaty of Ryswick instituted France’s Rhine frontier in the east, neither invoking the ancient frontier of Gaul (as had the Treaty of the Pyrenees forty years earlier) nor mentioning a general principle of states founded on natural divisions. But the Treaty of Utrecht in 1714, which ended the War of the Spanish Succession, named the “watershed of the Alps” as the separation of France and the kingdom of Savoy.⁴¹ For the first time, the principle of natural frontiers, stripped of its historical determination, was enshrined in a major peace treaty.

The idea of a unified and bounded territory, however, was not itself a novelty since it had been prepared for in the shifting politics of the frontier during the second half of Louis XIV’s reign. In 1673, Vauban first gave expression to the politics of the frontier that France was to construct over the next thirty years. “The King ought to think a little about squaring his field. This confusion of friendly and enemy fortresses mixed together does not please me at all . . . Preach the squaring, not of the circle, but of the field; it is a good and beautiful thing to be able to hold one’s accomplishment in both hands.”⁴² This vision of a bounded and unified space ultimately took shape in Vauban’s “iron frontier”—a double line of fortresses encircling France, begun after the Peace of Nijmegen in 1678 and completed by the turn of the eighteenth century. Replacing Richelieu’s policies of “open doors,” this new “politics of the barrier” came to serve similar functions: protecting France while enhancing its ability to intervene in German affairs. But the more apparently linear dimensions of Vauban’s frontier suggest that the French crown was beginning to consider its territory a bounded unity and enclosed space.

Further evidence comes from the extensive conferences of French and Habsburg commissioners, who met after each of the peace treaties of Pyrenees (1659), Aix-la-Chapelle (1668), Nijmegen (1678), and Ryswick (1697). In each case, French commissioners entered into extensive negotiations with their counterparts in Spain and the Holy Roman Empire to settle jurisdictional disputes regarding France’s northern frontier. While significantly reducing the number of enclaves and foreign jurisdictions on French territory, these treaties sometimes went so far as to

³⁸ Christopher Duffy, *The Fortress in the Age of Vauban and Frederick the Great, 1660–1789* (London, 1985), 19–20.

³⁹ The text is in Vast, *Grandes traités*, 3: 240; see Zeller, *L’Organisation défensive*, 103–06. To Vauban, the treaty was “dishonorable” even though he believed as a military engineer that France ought to give up its possessions beyond the Rhine; see Sorel, *L’Europe et la Révolution française*, 1: 312.

⁴⁰ Jacques Ancel, *Géographie des frontières* (Paris, 1938), 99; and G. Livet, “Louis XIV and the Germans,” in Ragnhild Hatton, ed., *Louis XIV and Europe* (London, 1976), 65.

⁴¹ Pierre Sopheau, “Les Variations de la frontière française des Alpes depuis le XVI^e siècle,” *Annales de géographie*, 3 (1893–94): 194–96; Paul Guichonnet, ed., *Histoire et civilisations des Alpes*, 2 vols. (Toulouse, 1980), 1: 280–82.

⁴² Quoted in Zeller, *L’Organisation défensive*, 60; more generally, see chaps. 3 and 5, and Henri Chotard, *Louis XIV, Louvois, Vauban et les fortifications du nord de la France* (Paris, 1890).

demarcate a boundary line.⁴³ To the east, the so-called Chambers of Reunion of the 1680s annexed hundreds of dependencies and jurisdictions, helping to create a unified space that served both military and economic interests—even if France was forced to restore most of these in the Treaty of Ryswick (1697).⁴⁴

The later peace treaties of the reign of Louis XIV thus appear to give institutional shape to the ideal, first put forth by geographers and cartographers under Richelieu, of a state bounded by natural frontiers. By 1714, France had acquired much of its contemporary shape—minus the provinces of Lorraine and Savoy. At the same time, that shape had gained coherence as a unified territorial domain. The movement toward a territorial state, however, was far from complete: not only did the idea of territorial sovereignty remain undeveloped, in theory as in practice, but the political boundary in the north and east was largely undelimited. France's frontiers were riddled with enclaves, exclaves, overlapping and contested jurisdictions, and other administrative nightmares. The eighteenth-century state was to rationalize its administration and to rectify its limits, shifting the orientation of its policy from natural frontiers to natural boundaries.

IN GASTON ZELLER'S ACCOUNT, the problem of France's natural frontiers jumped from Richelieu to the revolution, bypassing the historical period in which the idea of a state bounded by natural, topographical features reached its most developed expression. This was unfortunate, for, isolated from its immediate eighteenth-century antecedents, the revolutionary doctrine of natural frontiers remains unintelligible. But, unlike the uses of the idea in revolutionary discourse, natural boundaries for the Old Regime monarchy played a less ideological function. Instead, they served to define both the ends and the means of French foreign and domestic policies. The idea underwent an important linguistic mutation: the occasional invocations of France's *frontières naturelles* were replaced by more insistent claims to France's *limites naturelles*. The movement from natural frontiers to natural boundaries was grounded in a double transformation of society and the state: the enlightened emphasis on nature stripped mountains and rivers of their historical content, while the attempts to reform a politically weak French state found practical uses for the ideas of natural boundaries.

Eighteenth-century intellectuals inherited from the geographical discourse of classical humanism and seventeenth-century political culture the notion that France ought to have as its boundaries the same mountains and rivers that had limited Gaul.⁴⁵ More widespread, particularly among the *philosophes*, was the idea that mountains and rivers as such, devoid of any historical determination, formed the limits of polities. Used widely in descriptions of European nations, this idea could be found on both sides of an intellectual debate. In 1748, Montesquieu's geograph-

⁴³ Girard d'Albissin, *Genèse de la frontière franco-belge*, *passim*.

⁴⁴ On the Chambers of Reunion, see Louis André, *Louis XIV et l'Europe* (Paris, 1950), 187–215; on Vauban and the economic and military rationales for the development of a unified (and centralized) space, see Pierre Dockes, *L'Espace dans la pensée économique du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1969), 158–78.

⁴⁵ Learned historians like Dom Martin Bouquet continued to remind their readers, "Our Gaul, which is Gaul properly speaking . . . was contained between the Ocean, the Mediterranean, and the Alps, and extended from the Pyrenees mountains to the edge of the Rhine," while others wrote of France's rights to all "its previously dependent provinces, following the extension of ancient Gaul"; see Sorel, *L'Europe et la Révolution française*, 1: 319–20; see also Daniel Nordman, "L'Idée de frontière fluviale en France au XVIII^e siècle: Discours géographique et souveraineté de l'Etat," in *Frontières et contacts de civilisations*, Colloque Universitaire Franco-Suisse (Neuchâtel, 1979), 77–80.

ical determinism was commensurate with his identification of a state's "natural boundaries" (*limites naturelles*), which were both its right and a constraint on its expansion. David Hume, arguing instead for the "moral" determination of national character, still invoked the image of a natural boundary:

the same national character commonly follows the authority of government to a precise boundary; and upon crossing a river or passing a mountain, one finds a new set of manners, with a new government. The Languedocians and Gascons are the gayest people in France; but whenever you pass the Pyrenees, you are among Spaniards. Is it conceivable, that the qualities of the air should change exactly with the limits of an empire?

It was Rousseau, discussing the proper size of the state, who most emphatically underlined the natural limits of political nations: "The lie of the mountains, seas, and rivers [in Europe], which serve as boundaries of the various nations which people it, seems to have fixed forever their number and size. We may fairly say that the political order of the Continent is in some sense the work of nature."⁴⁶

Natural boundaries were the focus of much eighteenth-century geographical writing and teaching as well, a discourse that continued to serve the interests of the crown. Philippe Buache (1700–1773), royal geographer, member of the Academy of Sciences, and tutor of the royal children (the future Louis XVI, Louis XVIII, and Charles X), focused his talents on the cartographic and linguistic representation of mountains and rivers, emphasizing the linear character of mountain chains that necessarily divided watersheds. His nephew and disciple, Buache de la Neuville (1741–1825), who worked as a practicing and teaching *géographe royal*, went one step further, frequently emphasizing (both in writing and in his maps) a vision of politics divided by natural boundaries.

The natural division of the surface of the earth by mountains and rivers is one of the geographical considerations which ought to be developed . . . for it can contribute to the happiness of future nations, which will assure and defend more effectively the boundaries of their possessions by adopting constant and unchanging boundaries established by nature.⁴⁷

Within the national map survey begun by the monarchy in 1660, the natural limits of French territory remained part of the language of cartography. In the map produced by Jacques Cassini (1677–1756) when he completed an important step in France's geodetic survey in 1720—the triangulation of the Paris meridian begun in 1680—the natural boundaries of continuous mountain ranges in the south and east continued to inform his conception of French space.⁴⁸ (See Figure 4.)

The enlightened, de-historicized reinterpretation of natural boundaries coincided with a shift in the policies of state building in later eighteenth-century France. The era of annexations was over: the Treaty of Vienna in 1738 gave the province

⁴⁶ David Hume, "Of National Characters" [1748], in Peter Gay, ed., *The Enlightenment: A Comprehensive Anthology* (New York, 1973), 530; Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* [1748], D. W. Carrithers, ed. (Berkeley, Calif., 1977), bk. 14, *passim*; and 10: 9; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Extrait du projet de paix perpétuelle de l'Abbé de Saint Pierre* [1756], in C. E. Vaughn, ed., *The Political Writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau* (Cambridge, 1915), 1: 370.

⁴⁷ Daniel Nordman, "Buache de la Neuville et la 'frontière' des Pyrénées," in *Images de la montagne*, 107. On the Buache dynasty, see Louis Drapeyron, "Les Deux Buache ou l'origine de l'enseignement géographique par versants et par bassins," *Revue de géographie*, 22 (1887): 6–16; Drapeyron, "L'Éducation géographique de trois princes français au XVIII^e siècle, le duc de Berry et les comtes de Provence et d'Artois (Louis XVI, Louis XVIII, Charles X)," *Revue de géographie*, 22 (1887): 241–56; and Numa Broc, "Un Géographe dans son siècle: Philippe Buache (1700–1783)," *Dix-huitième siècle*, 3 (1971): 223–35.

⁴⁸ On the national map survey and the Cassini dynasty between 1660 and 1793, see Konvitz, *Cartography in France*, 1–31.



FIGURE 4: The Cassini map of the Paris Meridian (1720), showing its recently completed triangulation along with France's natural limits in the south and east. Bibliothèque Nationale.

of Lorraine to King Stanislas Leszczynski of Poland, and it passed to France on his death in 1766. Lorraine and Corsica (the latter bought by Louis XV in 1768) were the last of France's acquisitions under the Old Regime. As the marquis d'Argenson, foreign minister under Louis XV, wrote in his memoirs published in 1765, "This is no longer a time of conquests. France must be satisfied with its greatness and extension. It is time to start governing, after spending so much time acquiring what to govern." Indeed, France embarked on, and was to continue until the revolution, an ultimately unsuccessful administrative modernization—a bureaucratic reform program with important consequences in French foreign policy.⁴⁹

Many of the proposed administrative reforms in France involved creating a rational administration that could replace the existing chaotic and inefficient bureaucracy. Part of the problem lay in the absence of the "province" as a juridical

⁴⁹ The marquis d'Argenson is quoted in Sorel, *L'Europe et la Révolution française*, 1: 313; on administrative reform and bureaucratic modernization in eighteenth-century France, see John F. Boshier, *The Single Duty Project: A Study of the Movement for a French Customs Union in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1964); and Boshier, *French Finances, 1770–1790* (Cambridge, 1977).

and administrative entity. In territorial terms, Frenchmen divided the kingdom into anywhere from thirteen to ninety-one “provinces”: for the state, the province was a purely jurisdictional notion. Thus the Old Regime monarchy was divided into as many “provinces” as there were “political governments,” “regimes,” and “powers,” to use the contemporary terms.⁵⁰ Enlightened bureaucrats and interested geographers proposed a juridical status for the “province” that would make it the exclusive framework for the different jurisdictions of the state. But their projects languished, and, at the end of the Old Regime, the kingdom of France had neither a coherent territorial administration nor, as Armand Brette and others have long pointed out, precisely defined limits.⁵¹

Yet, if the Old Regime French state failed to reform its administrative structure, it undertook in the second half of the eighteenth century to delimit systematically and demarcate with boundary stones its territorial boundary line with its neighbors. The acquisition of an important map collection of all of France’s frontiers was essential to this task.⁵² More important, by 1775, the ministry of foreign affairs had gained jurisdiction over boundary matters from the war ministry and established its own topographical bureau for the demarcation of limits, creating permanent “commissioners” to negotiate “treaties of limits” with France’s neighbors.⁵³ During the 1770s and 1780s, the French government signed more than two dozen “treaties of limits” with the neighboring polities making up the Holy Roman Empire, the Swiss cantons, the kingdom of Savoy, and Spain.⁵⁴ (See Table 1.) This attempted “rationalization” and “purification” of the political boundary formed an essential if frequently overlooked dimension of French policy in the later eighteenth century.

The goal of the state was primarily a domestic one: to create an enclosed, unified space in order to assure the efficient administration of the realm. A royal engineer at Besançon, the chevalier de Bonneval, wrote in a *mémoire* of 1745 that the idea behind delimiting France’s boundaries was to “purge the kingdom of foreign enclaves” and to “close the state as far as the nature of the district permits.” By ridding itself of enclaves and exclaves, the state sought to repress military desertion and fiscal fraud and to create a unified economic space.⁵⁵ Less abstractly, the point was to “determine the boundaries in a manner most clear and most evident for the respective subjects, and in the most permanent way possible, so as to destroy all

⁵⁰ Sahlins, *Boundaries*, chaps. 2 and 5. In 1790, the constitution committee reported that “the kingdom is divided into as many different divisions as there are diverse kinds of regimes and powers: into *diocèses* as concerns ecclesiastical affairs; into *gouvernements* as concerns the military; into *généralités* as concerns administrative matters; and into *bailliages* as concerns the judiciary”; quoted in Gustave Dupont-Ferrier, “Sur l’emploi du mot ‘province,’ notamment dans le langage administratif de l’ancienne France,” *Revue historique*, 160 (1929): 262.

⁵¹ Armand Brette, *Les Limites et les divisions territoriales de la France en 1789* (Paris, 1907); Numa Broc, *La Géographie des philosophes* (Paris, 1978), 461; Louis Trenard, “Perception et délimitation de l’espace français au XVIII^e siècle,” *L’Information historique*, 47 (1985): 124–25.

⁵² Konvitz, *Cartography in France*, 33–41.

⁵³ “Conservateurs de limites,” including an ordinance of January 31, 1773, *Limites* vol. 7, AMRE, creating an inspector “charged with operation and affairs regarding exchanges and concessions of territory, from sovereign to sovereign, and with regulations of limits of the states and possessions of His Majesty with those of neighboring states.” On the shift of jurisdiction under the comte de Vergennes, who held both portfolios at the time, see “Mémoire sur les affaires des limites (écrit vers 1770),” 4.3.1, no. 24, Archive de l’Inspection du Génie, Château de Vincennes (hereafter, AIG).

⁵⁴ Jean-François Noël, “Les Problèmes de frontières entre la France et l’Empire dans la seconde moitié du XVIII^e siècle,” in *Revue historique*, 235 (1966): 333–46.

⁵⁵ “Mémoire sur l’opération de l’établissement des limites du royaume,” April 22, 1745, *Limites* vol. 7, no. 4, AMRE; see Alliès, *L’Invention du territoire*, 62–77.

TABLE 1
Principal Delimitation Treaties, 1738–1785

	<i>Date</i>	<i>Source</i>
Austria (Luxembourg)	March 22, 1738	Koch 1: 335–36
Republic of Geneva	August 15, 1749 December 26, 1752 (D) December 29, 1763 (D)	Limites 376, AMRE
Principality of Salm	December 21, 1751	Limites 150, AMRE
Duchy of Württemberg	February 4, 1752 (P) May 21, 1786	Koch 1: 493–96 Märtens 2: 652–64
Kingdom of Savoy	March 24, 1760 April 15, 1761 (D)	Limites 344, AMRE 4.3.1, no. 14, AIG
Prussia (Neuchâtel and Valengrin)	September 28, 1765	Koch 2: 208–22
Austria (Low Countries)	May 16, 1769 November 18, 1779	Märtens 1: 265–80 Märtens 2: 56–67
Bishopric of Liège	October 9, 1767 (P) May 24, 1772 December 9, 1773 (D) June 11, 1778	Koch 2: 265–68 Märtens 1: 292–309 Märtens 2: 499–502 Koch 2: 459–62
Electorate of Treves	October 29, 1773 (P) July 1, 1778	Koch 2: 321–33 Märtens 4: 181–89
Principality of Nassau-Saarbrücken	June 9, 1760 (P) February 15, 1766 October 26, 1770	Koch 2: 141–61 Märtens 1: 154–79 Koch 2: 289–99
Canton of Berne	November 15, 1774 (D)	Koch 2: 352–95
Principality of Nassau-Weilburg	January 24, 1776	Märtens 1: 552–71
County of Leyen	September 21, 1781	Märtens 2: 138–67
Duchy of Deux Ponts	May 10, 1766 April 3, 1783 November 15, 1786	CP Deux-Ponts suppl. 5, 122, 125, AMRE
Bishopric of Basel	December 7, 1779 June 20, 1785	Koch 2: 477–91
Spain	August 27, 1785	Koch 2: 477–91

Abbreviations:

(P): Preliminary Accord

(D): Delimitation Agreement

AMRE: Archive du Ministère des Relations Extérieures (Paris).

CP: Correspondence Politique

AIG: Archive de l'Inspection de Génie (Château de Vincennes).

SOURCES: G. F. de Märtens, *Recueil des principaux traités d'alliance, de paix, de trêve, de neutralité, de commerce, de limites, d'échange, etc., conclus par les puissances de l'Europe tant entre elles qu'avec les puissances et Etats dans d'autres parties du monde depuis 1761 jusqu'à présent*, 4 vols. (Göttingen, 1791–1801).

C. Koch, *Table des traités entre la France et les puissances étrangères depuis la paix de Westphalie jusqu'à nos jours*, 2 vols. (Basel, 1802).

objects of dispute among frontier inhabitants.”⁵⁶ Indeed, many of the delimitation treaties were drawn up in attempts to resolve specific disputes—not just between customs guards or soldiers of neighboring states but among inhabitants on opposite sides of the boundary. Pastures, waters, and usufruct rights on opposing mountain watersheds and riverbeds themselves were the objects of local quarrels: **the state believed that its failure to define its exact territorial extension led to an escalation of local conflicts.** In attempting to repress “territorial violations,” the state sought to delimit its territorial extension. **Emphasizing the territorial over the jurisdictional, the French state undertook to bound and enclose a territory by defining its limits “marked by nature.”**⁵⁷

“It is good to take streams, rivers, watersheds, or finally straight lines, when none of these [others] exist . . . as the boundaries of territories,” reads a *mémoire* sent to the foreign minister in 1772.⁵⁸ And it was commonplace to name natural boundaries, both specifically and generally, in the prefaces and major clauses of the “treaties of limits” during the 1770s and 1780s. The delimitation treaty between the kingdoms of France and Savoy on March 24, 1760, ordered “an exact, general, and definitive fixing of the boundaries which must hereafter separate their respective states and countries, which fixing, as far as the territory may permit, will be established according to riverbeds or watersheds, and assisted by a rectification or exchange of different enclaves.”⁵⁹ **The 1785 accord that delimited the French-Spanish boundary in the western Pyrenees insisted on a “dividing line which separates and divides all the lands of the two powers, the property of the valleys, and the sovereignty of the two kings,” and it reinterpreted the Treaty of the Pyrenees in terms of an enlightened conception of nature.**⁶⁰

But it was rivers that attracted the attention of statesmen and commissioners, especially those along France’s northern and eastern frontiers.⁶¹ Article 8 of the treaty between the king of France and the duke of Würtemberg (May 21, 1786) took the Doubs river as the limit of the two dominions, and further articles specified smaller streams as boundaries. The Doubs was also named the “fixed and natural limit” of France and the principality of Basel in a treaty of June 1780. The treaty between France and the electorate of Treves (July 1, 1778) named the Saar river as “the natural boundary of the two dominions.”⁶²

There is a double paradox in the French fascination with natural boundaries as

⁵⁶ “Mémoire sur les frontières du Royaume entre l’Océan et le Rhin, et sur les réglemens de limites qu’il serait avantageux d’y faire,” by M. de Grandpré, May 26, 1772, *Limites* vol. 7, AMRE.

⁵⁷ Sahlins, *Boundaries*, 92–103.

⁵⁸ “Mémoire sur les frontières du Royaume,” *Limites* vol. 7, AMRE.

⁵⁹ Treaty of March 24, 1760, *Limites* vol. 344, no. 110, AMRE.

⁶⁰ *Limites* vol. 459, nos. 91–92, AMRE; “Commission de Limites, Espagne,” *Limites* vol. 463, AMRE; and “Reflexions sommaires sur la fixation des limites,” MR 1084, no. 75, Ministère de la Guerre, Archives de l’Armée de la Terre (hereafter, MG AAT). On the reinterpretation of the Treaty of the Pyrenees, see, for example, “Première mémoire sur la frontière du Roussillon,” September 24, 1777, *Limites* 439, no. 91, AMRE.

⁶¹ Nordman, “L’Idée de frontière fluviale,” 84–88; Girard d’Albissin, “Propos sur la frontière,” 401–05.

⁶² Sources for these treaties appear in Table 1. On Lorraine, where France sought to establish a definitive regulation of the boundary such that “a portion of the Saar, Blise, Horne, and Queiche rivers serve as the limits of royal sovereignty,” see “Mémoire concernant les limites du pais de la Sarre, Lorraine Allemande, Basse-Alsace,” 4.3.1, no. 10, AIG. As Nordman has pointed out, the exact formula concerning the extension of sovereignty to rivers varied considerably in the eighteenth-century treaties: some named rivers to be held “in common” (the Saar); in some cases, both banks were held by a single sovereign (the Doubs, over which the prince-bishop of Basel maintained dominion); and, in some instances, the waterway was divided in half (the 1760 treaty concerning the Rhône, Estéron, and Var); Nordman, “L’Idée de frontière fluviale,” 87.

TABLE 2

Ratifications by the Diet of the Holy Roman Empire of Treaties with France

Nassau-Saarbrücken, 1766	February 1, 1768	Märtens 3: 241–42
Liège, 1773	April 22/May 11, 1774	Märtens 1: 502–06
Nassau-Weilburg, 1776	July 11, 1785	Märtens 2: 580–82
Basel, 1780	July 11, 1785	Märtens 2: 587–88
La Leyen, 1781	July 11, 1785	Märtens 2: 590–92

SOURCES: G. F. de Märtens, *Recueil des principaux traités d'alliance, de paix, de trêve, de neutralité, de commerce, de limites, d'échange, etc., conclus par les puissances de l'Europe tant entre elles qu'avec les puissances et Etats dans d'autres parties du monde depuis 1761 jusqu'à présent*, 4 vols. (Göttingen, 1791–1801).

the tools of state building. For one, the policy of establishing these boundaries appeared less as a function of France's reputation for international strength than as a sign of its weakness. As the geo-political arena of competition shifted to Eastern Europe, where France was increasingly excluded, and to the New World, where France was defeated, France's political boundaries became the sites of micro-political contention between the French court and its undistinguished neighbors. Ideally, the French court would have liked to deal directly with the Imperial administration, as it had after the Treaty of Vienna (1738) ordered France and the empire to regulate the boundaries of Lorraine. Commissioners met over three years, but, when Charles VI died in 1741, negotiations broke off. France hesitated to take up talks with the principalities, fearing that "the private interest would carry the public."⁶³ While the imperial court at Vienna ratified several of the "treaties of limits" signed between France and its German neighbors (see Table 2), the actual negotiations took place among the German princes and bishops. Unlike the seventeenth-century treaties, in which (the chevalier de Bonneval noted) "a victorious power dictated terms to a vanquished one," the eighteenth-century treaties of limits involved the negotiation of two formally equal powers.⁶⁴ In formally recognizing the smaller states as equals, however, the French court was constantly forced to entertain the sometimes fantastical claims of Lilliputian states. Thus France's natural boundaries were imposed on it by diminutive bishoprics and petty principalities.

The second paradox is more obvious. A political boundary marked by a natural topographical feature was much less durable, and infinitely more contested, than one drawn arbitrarily without regard to the landscape but following extant jurisdictional divisions. Such was the case even for mountains. The French-Spanish commissioners of 1784–1785 sought a political division that did not deviate from the watershed of the Pyrenees, although, in doing so, they defined a boundary of France and Spain as impractical as it was abstract. Village and valley communities on either side of the Pyrenees maintained rights of usufruct and property on opposing versants; they depended on—and frequently fought over—reciprocal rights to pasture, wood, and passage across the territory of the other. Eliminating

⁶³ "Mémoire concernant les limites," 4.3.1, no. 10, AIG. Despite such virtuous claims, the *mémoire* suggested that the French government might buy off the electors of Palatinate and the duc of Deux-Ponts, "who need a lot of money."

⁶⁴ Bonneval, in *Limites* vol. 7, no. 4, AMRE. Of course, France could still dictate terms. When the count of La Leyen refused an exchange offered by the marshal Belle-Isle, the royal courts of Lorraine ordered the seizure of the count's lands under French control, and he acquiesced; see Noël, "Les Problèmes de frontières," 339.

these in favor of a natural boundary meant denying the interests of local subjects, who, as a result, only increased their disputes, both among themselves and with their respective states.⁶⁵

The case of rivers suggests the problematic nature of natural boundaries. For example, seigneuries, parishes, and towns were frequently established on both sides of a river: the historical geography of settlement is proof that rivers tended to join more than they divided.⁶⁶ Moreover, rivers were likely to overflow their banks with some regularity. The Raour stream, for instance, divided France and Spain (though not the parish and property of Hix) in the Cerdanya. As a youthful river, the Raour was constantly subjected to flooding, just as it was manipulated by riverfront proprietors who built dikes and barrages to redirect the stream bed and protect their properties.⁶⁷ The case of the Rhine was more striking still. A military engineer from Strasbourg noted in 1814,

Everybody agrees that all boundaries should be as fixed and as invariable as possible; yet what is more variable than the middle of the Rhine, that is to say, the navigable part of the river? The Rhine changes its course every year, sometimes two or three times. With the floods, an island or a commune, which in the spring was French, is German the following winter, then becomes French again in two or three years, and by dams or dikes, the riverfront inhabitants and sometimes the contiguous states bring back an island to their respective banks. These islands, without stable and recognized masters, facilitate disorders of every kind.⁶⁸

Rivers were intrinsically subject to disputes, especially when opposing proprietors were not under the same political jurisdiction. Yet the “doctrine” was so firmly entrenched in French foreign policy that, even when faced with the obvious evidence that it did not work, the foreign ministry continued to insist on it—thus giving employment to dozens of commissioners and engineers charged with periodically “rectifying” France’s natural boundaries.⁶⁹

Why should this have been so? In part, it was because military interests had captured natural boundaries as their own. Although the foreign ministry took over the formal jurisdiction of boundary matters from the war ministry in 1772, the military establishment continued to exercise an important influence in the formulation of French policy. Military engineers and generals fully recognized that, in a state of war, the superior army “would always be master of the most advantageous positions, wherever they are situated.”⁷⁰ But, while military interests in the eighteenth century sometimes echoed seventeenth-century claims to control an opposing watershed or riverbank (as along the Rhine), the dominant position was to adopt mountain crests and middles of rivers as boundaries. Military thought was

⁶⁵ Sahlins, *Boundaries*, 98–99; Carlos Fernandez de Casadevanti Romani, *La Frontera hispano-francesa y las relaciones de vecindad (Especial referencia al sector fronterizo del país vasco)* (San Sebastian, 1986), *passim*; and Christian Desplat, “Le Parlement de Navarre et la frontière franco-navarraise à l’extrême fin du XVIII^e siècle,” in Jean-François Nail, *et al.*, *Lies et passeries dans les Pyrénées* (Tarbes, 1986), 109–20.

⁶⁶ Zeller, *La Réunion de Metz*, 1: 28–29; Girard d’Albissin, “Propos sur la frontière,” 401–03.

⁶⁷ Comte d’Argenson to Intendant of Roussillon, December 13, 1750, *Limites* vol. 459, no. 57, AMRE; “Mémoire sur le redressement du Raour,” n.d., ca. 1750, *ibid.*, no. 50; and maps and *mémoires* concerning the 1750 rectification, 4.3.2, AIG.

⁶⁸ “Observations sur les limites françaises sur le Rhin et vers le Palatinat,” by the Corps du Génie, Strasbourg, May 1814, 4.3.1, no. 28, AIG.

⁶⁹ From the 1730s to the early 1790s, the Noblat family received commissions from the ministry of foreign affairs to “rectify” and “realign” the riverbeds forming the frontiers with the Swiss cantons and the Holy Roman Empire; on Switzerland, see *Limites* vol. 361, *passim*; and “Conservateurs de Limites,” *Limites* vol. 7, AMRE.

⁷⁰ “Mémoire sur les frontières entre l’Océan et le Rhin,” May 26, 1772, *Limites* vol. 7, AMRE.

also influenced by an enlightened conception of natural boundaries, stripped of their historical determinations.⁷¹

Focusing on the idea and practice of natural boundaries, the Old Regime state implanted a largely linear, territorial boundary: by 1789, there were few enclaves left, and the final delimitation treaties of the early nineteenth century were, except for the Pyrenees, simply corrective.⁷² Both the ideal and reality of France's natural boundaries were largely in place by the time of the revolution, and it was on this foundation that the revolutionary governments built an ideology of French expansion.

THE CLAIMS OF SOREL, MATHIEZ, AND OTHERS—that the French revolutionaries merely continued the Old Regime policy of moving toward France's natural frontiers—are thus both true and false. It is true that the revolutionary state drew on an official practice and philosophical ideal of natural boundaries taking shape during the eighteenth century. But the particular political and ideological program of the Rhine frontier was a revolutionary invention—a product of the revolutionary process.

The first two years of the revolution saw few invocations of the doctrine. Buache de la Neuville wrote to the minister of foreign affairs in July 1791, urging the fixing of France's limits according to "the natural division of the Globe formed at its origin by the Creator," but neither the court nor the National Assembly was much interested in demarcating the political boundaries of France.⁷³ Such a policy had little resonance within the universalizing tendencies of the early revolution, with its focus on the abstract universals of the Rights of Man and Citizen. The famous "no conquests" formula of May 22, 1790, inscribed in the Constitution of 1791, declared, "The French nation renounces the undertaking of any war with a view toward conquests, and will never use its forces against the liberty of any people." Revolutionaries threw their moral and political support to Patriot parties across Europe. The boundaries of France—and of the revolution—were not marked by nature or by history but, as Johann Wolfgang Goethe suggested in a famous watercolor of 1790, by the invisible principle of liberty.⁷⁴ (See Figure 5.)

National boundaries, and, with them, the doctrine of natural boundaries, only became relevant as France regained its hegemonic aspirations in the revolutionary wars against the "despots" of Europe.⁷⁵ France's declaration of war on Prussia and Austria in the spring of 1792 was followed by a series of defeats during the summer that led to the fall of the monarchy. Then, after the victories of the Republic at

⁷¹ Noël, "Les Problèmes de frontières," 338–39; Nordman, "L'Idée de frontière fluviale," 85–87; Girard d'Albissin, "Propos sur la frontière," 404–05. Concerning the rectification of the Pyrenean frontier, a military engineer argued that the line occasionally "left the crest" because it had been established on the basis of "such vague antiquities as the limits of Narbonese Gaul" instead of coinciding with the watershed; see "Mémoire sur les limites de la frontière en Roussillon," 1775, 4.3.2, no. 2, AIG; and *Mémoires* on the Roussillon frontier, 1777, MR 1084, nos. 41 and 43, MG AAT.

⁷² Girard d'Albissin, *Genève*, 299–363; compare Charles Rousseau, *Les Frontières de la France* (Paris, 1957).

⁷³ *Limites* vol. 442, no. 90, AMRE; see also Nordman, "Buache de la Neuville," 105–06.

⁷⁴ Jacques Godechot, *La Grande Nation: L'Expansion révolutionnaire de la France dans le monde de 1789 à 1799*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1956), 1: 65–76.

⁷⁵ See T. C. W. Blanning, *The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars* (London and New York, 1986), esp. chap. 2, for a useful discussion of the War of the First Coalition as a continuation of Old Regime foreign policy.



FIGURE 5: Johann Wolfgang Goethe, the French boundary near the Moselle River, watercolor (1790). The inscription on the liberty tree that serves as boundary marker reads, "To passers-by: this land is free." N. Hampson, *The First European Revolution* (New York, 1969), plate 70.

Valmy and Jemappes in September and November 1792, the revolutionary armies occupied Savoy, Nice, Belgium, and part of the left bank of the Rhine.

The National Convention was deeply divided on what to do with these conquered territories, some favoring annexation, others, like Camille Desmoulins, fearful "of looking like kings by chaining Savoy to the Republic."⁷⁶ In the winter of 1792–1793, deputies from the Girondin party, urging annexation, invoked France's

⁷⁶ Quoted in Godechot, *La Grande Nation*, 1: 77.

natural boundaries as one of several arguments justifying French annexation of the occupied territories. It is important to stress that the principal arguments for these annexations lay in the doctrine of popular sovereignty and a freely expressed desire to be united to France. The argument, put forth by the abbé Henri-Baptiste Grégoire, that “[c]easelessly the Alps have pushed [Savoy] into the French domain, and the order of nature would be contradicted if their governments were not the same,” was secondary to his major claim that the “reunion” originated as “the free and solemn expression of the near totality of the communes.”⁷⁷ Both Lazare Carnot, who urged the Convention to “reunite” Monaco, Schomberg, and other “neighboring communes,” and Danton, who argued in favor of annexing Belgium, used the trope of France’s natural and historical frontiers—but only after establishing the “free consent” of the countries in question.⁷⁸

Once again, the political claims to France’s Rhine frontier came from the Rhineland itself, where interest and principle neatly coincided: minority Patriot groups mobilized “public opinion” with the slogan of France’s natural limit, urging the annexation of their jurisdictions to France. The Prussian-born but Paris-based banker and revolutionary, Anacharsis Cloots, had published in 1785 the *Wishes of a Gallophile*, arguing that “the Rhine river is the natural boundary [*limite naturelle*] of the Gauls,” and, during 1792, he became an outspoken advocate of the program to annex. In November 1792, it was an idea whose time had come.⁷⁹ The Girondins needed a justification for annexation that was based neither on “conquest” (like the Old Regime monarchy) nor exclusively on expressions of popular support (unlikely during conditions of occupation). The partisans of the Rhine boundary used the image of a natural boundary to justify the bounded and limited quality—and defensive character—of French expansion under the Republic; they invoked the Rhine as France’s *limite*, not its *frontière naturelle*.

The idea of the French expansion to the Rhine, initially linked to the Girondins and their expansionist foreign policy, became part of a revolutionary platform during the course of the wars against the European coalitions, even when the Girondins failed to maintain power in the National Convention. Robespierre and the Montagnards opposed the use of annexations to achieve France’s natural boundaries, as well as the establishment of “sister republics” beyond them, but the idea of the “fatherland in danger” brought with it claims to the defensive “barrier of the Rhine.” The idea of the Rhine thus became central in two ways. Politically, it was the certificate of republican patriotism: to deny France’s claim to the Rhine was to be identified with the Old Regime monarchy and its frontiers.⁸⁰ More dramatically, the Rhine boundary, which had been invoked indiscriminately in revolutionary speeches as a boundary “marked by nature,” and as one of the “natural boundaries of ancient Gaul,” became the Rhine “barrier,” a symbol of

⁷⁷ *Le Moniteur universel*, 14, no. 333 (November 28, 1792): 585–88.

⁷⁸ Lazare Carnot, in *Le Moniteur universel*, 15, no. 48 (February 17, 1793); Danton, in *ibid.*, 15, no. 32 (February 1, 1793). All of the annexations were, in theory, to be ratified by popular vote. None of the decrees annexing Savoy (November 27, 1792), Nice (January 31, 1793), Monaco (February 15, 1793), or Belgium and nearly a hundred communities in the Rhineland (spring, 1793) mentioned the principle of France’s natural boundaries; on these, see T. C. W. Blanning, *The French Revolution in Germany: Occupation and Resistance in the Rhineland, 1792–1802* (Oxford, 1983), 68–69; the texts of most of these decrees may be found in G. F. de Martens, *Recueil des principaux traités d’alliance, de paix, de trêve, de neutralité, de commerce, de limites, d’échange, etc., conclus par les puissances de l’Europe tant entre elles qu’avec les puissances et Etats dans d’autres parties du monde depuis 1761 jusqu’à présent*, 4 vols. (Göttingen, 1791–1801), 6: *passim*.

⁷⁹ Zeller, “La Monarchie d’Ancien Régime,” 329–31.

⁸⁰ Sorel, *L’Europe et la Révolution française*, 4: 174–86.

strategic defense against Prussian and Austrian aggression. Shorn of both historical and geographical determinations, natural boundaries in general and the Rhine in particular were valued for their perceived instrumental and functional role. That role became apparent during the summer of 1795, when a merchant from the Rhineland sponsored an essay competition on “whether it is in France’s interests to push back its boundaries to the Rhine.” Although an illustration gracing the published volume of affirmative responses invoked—in classical form—the descendants of the Gauls reclaiming their ancient limits, most of the essays made only brief allusions to Caesar and Gaul. Instead, the arguments for French annexation were founded principally on the strategic value of the Rhine for the security of the Republic (although several authors commented on the economic benefits of annexing the wealthy districts on the left bank, as well as the benefits of French citizenship that would accrue to the inhabitants themselves).⁸¹ (See Figure 6.) The perception of the Rhine as a natural barrier was the condition for the revolutionary government’s definition of its military and diplomatic goals.

The Directory made the program of the Rhine its own and worked consistently both in war and diplomatic negotiations to establish the Rhine as its boundary “marked by Nature.” Philippe-Antoine Merlin de Douai, the abbé Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, and Jean-François Reubell—the last of whom, native of Alsace, became in November 1795 one of the five members of the Directory—emerged as the spokesmen of the cause. Carnot, who had once supported the doctrine, led the opposition and advocated a set of “constitutional limits”—the territories between the boundaries of 1789 and the Meuse that could be formally annexed without revision of the constitution and in which plebiscites had expressed the will of the peoples to become part of France.⁸² But with Carnot’s exclusion from the Directory in March 1795, the partisans of France’s natural frontiers achieved a theoretical victory, however nominal in practice. The Basel Treaty of July 1795 with Spain named the “watershed of the Pyrenees Mountains” as dividing France and Spain, while the secret articles of the Basel Treaty with Prussia recognized the left bank of the Rhine as French territory. The definitive settlement of the Rhine question had to await the general peace with Austria. In 1797, the Peace of Campo Formio gave Austrian consent to French annexations, but it did not commit the Holy Roman Empire. Over the next year, a congress at Rastatt attempted to settle the compensations and indemnities of the left-bank princes, but it was unable to resolve the issues before the War of the Second Coalition had begun.⁸³ Thereafter, France’s Rhine frontier against the Batavian Republic was a boundary to be achieved, then—during the reign of Napoleon—surpassed as the limit of France.

THE FALL OF NAPOLEON and the Paris Treaty of May 1814 reduced France to its boundaries of 1792; following Napoleon’s “Hundred Days” and the defeat at Waterloo, France lost its post-1789 acquisitions (except Montbéliard, Mulhouse, the Comtat Venaissin, and Avignon). The Restoration Monarchy returned the left bank of the Rhine to the German Confederation in 1815, thus turning France’s

⁸¹ Georges-Guillaume Boehmer, ed., *La Rive gauche du Rhin: Limite de la République française, ou Recueil de plusieurs dissertations, jugées dignes des prix proposés par un négociant de la rive gauche du Rhin . . .* (Paris, an IV [1795–96]).

⁸² Albert Sorel, “Le Comité de Salut Public et la question de la rive gauche du Rhin en 1795,” *Revue historique*, 18 (1882): 318–19; Godechot, *Grande Nation*, 2: 89–92.

⁸³ Blanning, *French Revolution*, 79–80.



FIGURE 6: The descendants of the Gauls reclaiming their ancient limits. Georges-Guillaume Boehmer, *La Rive gauche du Rhin: Limites de la République française* (Paris, an IV[1795–96]).

claim to the Rhine into “a lost and infinitely desirable goal.”⁸⁴ By 1833, even a royalist like Chateaubriand could idealize the old republican frontier, recalling how Gaul had once worn the “blue scarf of Germany,” the Rhine.

Napoleon and the Republic before him had realized the dream of several of our kings and especially Louis XIV: as long as we have not occupied our natural frontiers [*frontières naturelles*], there will be war in Europe because the interest in her conservation pushes France to seize the limits necessary to her national independence. Here we have planted the trophies to reclaim at the right time and place.⁸⁵

This notion of France’s destiny reconciled opposing political regimes, a fact emerging most clearly among the historians and publicists of the July Monarchy, who formulated and disseminated the “doctrine.” The idea of natural frontiers offered a common ground to partisans of the revolution (who claimed the Rhine boundary of 1795) and those of the Restoration (who identified themselves with the monarchy’s limits of 1789). It was Augustin Thierry, writing in the 1830s, who seems to have offered the first systematic version of the concept:

One can say that even when drunk with military success, and despite the crises of ambition which peoples as well as individuals suffer, the nation firmly and consistently wanted only the maintenance of our natural boundaries [*limites naturelles*]. Whatever our fortune, good or bad, the idea of taking them back was never lost: it is profoundly national and profoundly historical.

Thierry wrote of an unchanging aspiration from the “living fountain of Gaul, independent or Roman” through Louis XIV and the revolution, which was then “unfortunately” if temporarily surpassed.⁸⁶

Zeller clearly documented that, by the middle decades of the nineteenth century, historians of all political persuasions had adopted the doctrine as a given. The idea entered into the consciousness of a wider reading and schooled public in the most popular histories and textbooks of mid-century—among them Henri Martin’s *History of France*, which Zeller called “the historical Bible of the middle classes.” And Zeller’s explanation seems, this time, exactly right. The profound continuity of French national history offered by the idea of natural frontiers provided an expanding reading public with “a lesson of sacred union,” a symbol of national unity.⁸⁷ It was this public opinion that made it possible for the government of Adolph Thiers in 1840, thwarted in its imperialist adventure in the Middle East, to put pressure on another front closer to home. Thiers and the left-wing press both sponsored a propaganda effort, which included a pamphlet by historian Edgar Quinet, to reclaim the Rhine frontier of France.⁸⁸

At the same time, Zeller did not consider the extent to which the symbolic value of natural frontiers was lessened as the ideas of nationality and self-determination, introduced by the revolution, were elaborated in nineteenth-century historical writing. Natural boundaries were not considered a meaningful framework of national identity unless they could be linked to a voluntary identification with the French nation. Fustel de Coulanges, in his oft-quoted response to the German historian Theodor Mommsen

⁸⁴ Zeller, “La Monarchie d’Ancien Régime,” 333.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Nordman, “Des limites d’Etat,” 52.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Zeller, “Histoire d’une idée fausse,” 118–19; on Thierry and contemporary historical writing, see J. Walch, *Les Maîtres de l’histoire, 1815–1850: Augustin Thierry, Mignet, Guizot, Thiers, Michelet, Edgar Quinet* (Geneva-Paris, 1986).

⁸⁷ Zeller, “Histoire d’une idée fausse,” 120, 124–27.

⁸⁸ H. A. C. Collingham, *The July Monarchy: A Political History of France, 1830–1848* (London, 1988), 231–32.

in 1870, echoed Jules Michelet in claiming that “what marks a nation is neither race nor language. Men feel it in their hearts that they are a single people when they have in common thoughts and interests, affections, remembrances, and aspirations.”⁸⁹ The developing image of national identity in nineteenth-century historical writing, as within French political culture more generally, thus retained the complexity and tension of the simultaneous claims of natural boundaries and those of nationality. It was, at least in part, a tension between the demands of a state, seeking its strategic and military goals, and those of a nation, defined by its affective bonds, past history, and voluntary self-determination.

Natural frontiers continued to be identified as the goal of military strategy, and *mémoires* written by officers and military engineers throughout the nineteenth century continued to identify the interests of French foreign policy with natural frontiers, regularly invoking the more expansionist and zonal sense of the phrase. “The natural frontier [*frontière naturelle*] is the true military frontier,” wrote General Pelet about the “frontier of Italy or of the Alps” in 1819.⁹⁰ Under Napoleon III, the “politics of nationality” and the concern with natural frontiers intersected in unexpected ways within French foreign policy in the Alps and along the Rhine. The idea of natural frontiers provided the strategic arguments presented to the minister of foreign affairs and adopted as policy by Napoleon III for France’s acquisition of Savoy. Savoy had been lost in 1815 and reincorporated into France in the treaty of March 24, 1860, between Napoleon III and the Piedmontese prime minister Count Camillo Cavour. As Paul Guichonnet has shown, Napoleon III himself never undertook the annexation based on a politics of nationality, but he did argue for the military advantages of France’s natural frontier along the Alps: “In the presence of this transformation in Northern Italy which gives to a powerful state all the passages of the Alps, it is my duty, for the security of our frontiers, to demand the French watershed.” Military strategy—and the revival of the older, seventeenth-century image of natural frontiers—determined the arguments for the acquisition of Savoy; the Romantic invocation of national self-determination served as “an ideological cover [and] a sentimental justification.”⁹¹ As for Napoleon’s German policy, the notion that France pursued its “traditional” expansion to the Rhine during the German crisis of 1865–1866 has recently been shown inadequate, since Napoleon was less concerned with France’s acquisitions of territories on the left bank of the Rhine itself than with a desire to see Germany reorganized in a way that would suit French diplomatic concerns with a balance of power. If anything, Napoleon pursued the politics of nationality “in promoting the cause of German nationalism as represented by Prussia, in the best tradition of the *Idées Napoléoniennes*.”⁹²

After the loss of Alsace in 1871, and increasingly after its recovery in 1918,

⁸⁹ Quoted in Nordman, “Des limites d’Etat,” 56. The French model of nationality in the nineteenth century stood opposed to the German model, which from the sixteenth-century cosmographer Sebastian Münster to Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s *Addresses to the German Nation* in 1807 stressed ethnocultural identity, and especially the German language, as the foundation of national character. Throughout the nineteenth century in Germany, the attempt to trace German linguistic frontiers explicitly made the Rhine into a “German stream,” a vision realized after 1871; see Norman J. G. Pounds, “France and ‘les limites naturelles,’ from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Centuries,” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 44 (1954): 57–58.

⁹⁰ “Rapport sur la frontière des Alpes,” MR 1207, no. 1, MG AAT.

⁹¹ Paul Guichonnet, “Théorie des frontières naturelles et principes des nationalités dans l’annexion de la Savoie à la France, (1858–1860),” *Revue des travaux de l’Académie des sciences morales et politiques*, 113 (1960): 23; quote on 21.

⁹² For a reconsideration of the “traditional” view, exemplified by Hermann Oncken, *Napoleon III and the Rhine*, trans. Edwin H. Zeydel (New York, 1928), see E. Ann Pottinger, *Napoleon III and the German Crisis, 1865–1866* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), quotation on 209.

natural frontiers—by then understood exclusively as France's claim to the left bank of the Rhine—gained new meaning within a coherent nationalist discourse.⁹³ The nationalism evident in the continued emphasis on France's *frontières naturelles* was grounded in the synthesis of Third Republic politicians and historians—like Sorel and Mathiez—who reconciled the political antithesis of monarchy and republic, of *ancien régime* and revolution. But the nationalization of natural frontiers had a particular significance in the 1920s and 1930s, as the ideas were increasingly implicated in the growing militarization of the Rhineland. To Zeller, the journalistic, scholarly, and textbook invocations of natural frontiers were part of a French “ideology” invented to match the German “ideology” that the Holy Roman Empire was a direct prolongation of the Roman empire. He saw this “conflict of ideologies, not interests” at the heart of French-German antagonism. That opposition had “no profound rationale, only an accidental character: if there is a lesson to learn from the long history of their relations,” Zeller concluded in his 1932 study, “it is in the first place this one.”⁹⁴

Less than a decade later, Zeller himself experienced the all-too-real consequences of the twentieth-century “doctrine.” The Maginot Line, that “impregnable” system of connected, concrete bunkers along France's northeastern boundary, owed much to Vauban and the seventeenth-century idea of an enclosed and defensible space, itself framed by an idealized notion of France's natural frontiers.⁹⁵ But, in the summer of 1940, the belief in a limited and defensible territory proved as illusory as the medieval notion of the “four rivers,” and Zeller—injured in 1916 and unable to serve at the front—left Strasbourg with the “exiled” French university to return to his hometown of Clermont-Ferrand. There he continued to lecture until censored in 1943 by the Vichy government for subversive remarks about Joan of Arc. He returned to Strasbourg in 1945 and the next year was called to Paris, where he finished his career at the Collège de France, writing extensively on French foreign policy but never explicitly returning to the project of demystifying the “false idea” of France's natural frontiers.

THE IDEA OF NATURAL FRONTIERS was a powerful, recurrent image in the shifting repertoire of French political culture. The meaning of natural frontiers—defined geographically or historically, as a bellicose *frontière* or a restrictive *limite*, as a general description or a specific political claim—changed dramatically, as did the different political functions of the idea during three centuries of state building in France.

In the seventeenth century, the idea of natural frontiers acquired a historical cast, as it helped shape a concept of a unified state; although neither Richelieu nor Louis XIV intended literally to restore France to Gaul's natural frontiers, the idea nonetheless served their policies and occasionally framed the military strategies of the emerging territorial state. In the eighteenth century, the image of natural boundaries lost its bellicose and historical resonance as the idea became part of an enlightened program of political reform, itself brought on by the international

⁹³ Jean-Marie Mayeur, “Une Mémoire-frontière: L'Alsace,” in Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire*, *La Nation*, 2: 63–95.

⁹⁴ Zeller, *La France et l'Allemagne*, 202–07. On the University of Strasbourg during the 1930s, see John E. Craig, *Scholarship and Nation Building: The Universities of Strasbourg and Alsation Society, 1870–1939* (Chicago, 1984); and Livet, “L'Institut et la chaire,” 208–09.

⁹⁵ On the Maginot Line, see Pierre Rocol, *Deux Mille Ans de fortification française*, 2 vols. (Limoges and Paris, 1973), 1: 32–43.

weakness of France. The French Revolution preserved the Enlightenment interpretation while politicizing natural frontiers and created—in the context of France's expansionist Rhineland policy—a political program and an ideological doctrine. Finally, in the nineteenth century, the idea was reinterpreted as a symbol of national unity reconciling the principles of monarchy and republic, and was widely diffused among a growing middle-class reading public, especially as it regained a militaristic connotation between the two world wars.

The image of France's natural frontiers survived Gaston Zeller's announcement of its death during the 1930s and World War II, although its power has lessened. Invocations of the "doctrine" may still be found today, but textbooks, dictionaries, and popular histories of France have shifted away from descriptions of France's natural frontiers and, in their place, offer more neutral accounts of France's hexagonal shape. The idea of France as a hexagon first appeared in French geography texts of the 1850s, during debates over imperial expansion at the expense of Piedmont; but, while history and geography textbooks of the Third Republic increasingly referred to France's hexagonal shape, it was only in the 1950s that the hexagon came into its own. Though a relative latecomer to the repertoire of symbols of national identity, the hexagon came to occupy a central place in the visions of French unity, suggesting the qualities of harmony, balance, stability, and permanence.⁹⁶ The relative neutrality of the hexagon offered a double compromise. On the one hand, the hexagon represented a conventional and a natural unity, an identity founded at once on culture and on nature. On the other hand, it balanced the claims of a national community to self-determination with those of a state seeking defensive strategies. Given its potential for multiple interpretations, it is not surprising that the hexagon became a disputed symbol within the political culture of postwar France.⁹⁷

Among historians of Old Regime and revolutionary France, Zeller's devastating critique of the "doctrine" of natural frontiers has become a commonplace—a received and unquestioned idea—while historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have yet to rediscover its role in the symbolic construction of France. Zeller was too quick to dismiss as mere ideology the variety of meanings of natural frontiers in the history of French expansion and the construction of national identity. Beyond a simple opposition of interest and ideology, the category of natural frontiers can be situated within the shifting cultural idioms of French state building. Beyond France, within German and European political cultures, and in the colonial and postcolonial worlds, the reconsideration of natural frontiers should yield new ways of talking about the construction and deconstruction of national states.

⁹⁶ For divergent interpretations on the appearance and diffusion of the hexagon, see Eugen Weber, "L'Hexagone," in Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire, La Nation*, 2: 97–116; and Nathaniel B. Smith, "The Idea of the French Hexagon," *French Historical Studies*, 6 (1979): 139–55.

⁹⁷ During France's "civilizing mission" in Algeria and Indochina during the late 1950s and early 1960s, French colonials bestowed the epithet "hexagonals" (*hexagonaux*) on those of "metropolitan France," and in the late 1960s, the right-wing Gaullist party took over the image of the hexagon in their electoral campaigns, while the left distanced itself from a symbol of nationalism and French hegemony. See Smith, "Idea of the French Hexagon," 150–51; and Stanley Hoffman, et al., *In Search of France* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 227, 346, 356.