

Mapping Medieval Geographies: Geographical Encounters in the Latin West and Beyond, 300–1600

Review Number: 1808

Publish date: Thursday, 6 August, 2015

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ISBN: 9781107036918

Date of Publication: 2013

Price: £60.00

Pages: 348pp.

Publisher: Cambridge University Press

Publisher url: <http://www.cambridge.org/asia/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9781107036918>

Place of Publication: Cambridge

Reviewer: Justin Colson

Following the many other ‘turns’ which have engulfed history, the ‘spatial turn’ can safely be regarded as well established. While few historians have formal geographical training, it is now de rigeur to ask spatial questions, and to seek to map research findings in publications. However, when it comes to the history of geography as a discipline, and the related but distinct question of pre-modern conceptions of space and place, these have received far less attention from historians. Instead, the spatial turn has often, it seems, seen historians seek to map the medieval and early modern world using modern geographies. Perhaps paradoxically popular histories have been better at addressing medieval and early modern geographic practices and mentalités in recent years; Jerry Brotton’s *History of the World in Twelve Maps* (2012) and Nicholas Crane’s *Mercator* (2002) both offer excellent insights to the history of geographical understandings. (1) This collection of essays fills an important gap in the recent scholarship of the spatiality of history by bringing together rigorous current research on medieval understandings of place, and practices of map making and geographical knowledge.

Keith Lilley is the standard-bearer for the spatial study of medieval cities: his own work has encompassed town plan analysis in the tradition of Conzen, many projects using Geographical Information Systems to reconstruct medieval cities, as well as more cultural approaches to the medieval geographical imagination. This volume, based upon a conference organised by the late Denis Cosgrove at the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, UCLA, in 2009, brings together contributions from a diverse range of geographers, historians, art historians and literary scholars. The range of contributors’ backgrounds might be broad, but the volume certainly retains a common purpose and focus, neatly summarised in Lilley’s introduction as ‘how the world was understood in the Middle Ages’ in a simultaneously chronological and spatial manner. The volume explicitly aims to describe a distinctively medieval conception of space, refuting traditional assumptions of unthinking medieval repetition of classical or inaccurate maps, and thereby lessening the stark contrast often portrayed with the ‘rediscovery’ of Ptolemy and ‘scientific’ mapping during the Renaissance. The spatial turn has engendered quite a few volumes in this genre in recent years, but this volume offers a uniquely broad geographical coverage, whereas others have tended to focus on more limited regions.(2)

The book is divided into two sections: 'Geographical traditions' and 'Geographical imaginations'. While these headings might appear a little ambiguous, Lilley's introduction also explains them as 'geographical thinking', and 'thinking geographically'. The first focuses upon the ways in which spatial knowledge was communicated – visually and, significantly, also textually – in the medieval world. The second section broadens its focus to examine the 'spatial sensibility' of medieval people: how they conceived of the world and of space, and indeed how these conceptions were influenced by geographical traditions of depiction and description.

Appropriately enough for the aims of the volume, the first essay in the 'geographical traditions' section by Jesse Simon directly challenges notions of the superiority of Ptolemaic mathematical mapping over the textual mode of geographical description known as chorography. Introducing a theme that dominates much of the volume, Simon's essay emphasizes the importance of empirical experience in medieval mapping. Rather than seeing late antique and early medieval cartographies as lacking, Simon argues that we should recognise their Roman heritage as depictions of the world's contents in a way which was comprehensible to the person on the ground, without the abstraction required by mathematical projection. The relationship of things to each other was important, not the shape that resulted.

Most of the subsequent papers in the first section focus upon literary uses and expressions of geographical knowledge in the earlier and high Middle Ages. Andy Merrill's essay on Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* pulls out four distinct sections of geographical description from the text, which amount to either a 'coherent image of the world built up only gradually, or as a bizarrely fragmented geography' (p. 54). The structure of the facts and anecdotes contained within the work was designed to aid memorisation, nonetheless employing geography as a framework for organising information. Natalia Lozovsky's study of the uses of classical history and geography examines the glosses added to manuscripts in the famous library of the abbey of St Gall in Switzerland, which included sketch maps to elucidate geographical description in classical texts, illustrating the continued intertwined nature of text and image in this medieval geographical framework which privileged the relationships as means of organising information. Similarly, Amanda Power's analysis of Roger Bacon's writings emphasizes the agency of medieval scholars, not as passive recipients of classical knowledge, but in selecting and actively interpreting classical works for their own Christian purposes. The fifth essay, by Marcia Kupfer, turns from a literary focus toward visual cartographies, in the form of the famous, although sadly lost, Ebstorf map. Analysing the map in its own terms, she relates its contents to its marginalia and to its institutional context. The world was depicted as co-extensive with Christ's body, while the three continents represent his three parts, and the radial organisation of places within it represented the dispersal of the evangelists. From this perspective, centre and periphery take a very different meaning.

Following the broad chronological sweep of the first section of the book, Ptolemy, the geographical elephant in the room, is introduced in Meg Roland's essay on 15th and early 16th-century English geographical thought and publications. Roland questions the common assumption of English scholarship as lagging behind the continent, not least in the lack of an English edition of Ptolemy's geography, through discussion of many early English printed books and poetry which discussed narrative geography. Once again we are reminded of the overlapping medieval conception of geography, cosmography and chorography. The 1503 *Kalendar of Shepherds* provides a particularly interesting case of a geographical book produced for the English market: early editions play to ideals of folk knowledge and Church calendars, but later derivatives grew more 'geographical' and slowly acquired the badges of humanism. The final essay of the first section, Margaret Small's 'Displacing Ptolemy', continues the explicit focus upon the integral place of textual description in even 16th-century geographical understanding. Ramusio's *navigazioni e viaggi* was, she argues, traditional in using words, but radical in describing whole world (p. 158). Indeed, in this age of constant discovery and evolving knowledge, text was more flexible than image: change was not incompatible with continuity in medieval geographical methods.

While the first section of the book documents medieval attempts to understand and document the world, the second focuses upon the role of geographical understanding in other aspects of medieval life. Camille

Serchuk's essay explores the ways in which the geography of France was expressed both visually and textually during the Hundred Years War, beginning with an intriguing reworking of Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars*, which emphasized unity. Daniel Birkholz also offers a surprising perspective on a familiar setting through examination of not Hereford's *mappa mundi*, but an obscure illustration in a copy of Gerald of Wales' *Topography of Ireland*, and the individuals connected with the manuscript until its donation to the cathedral in the 15th century. Thomas of Monmouth's hagiography of William of Norwich provides the subject for Kathy Lavezzo's tour of spatial meanings within 12th-century Norwich. Exploring the textual geographies of the city, Jewish and Christian spaces were described very differently, which emphasized openness around the latter group but the privacy of the former.

Karen C. Pinto's deeply analytical piece offers a perspective from outside of the Christian West in the form of Arabic maps of the Mediterranean which portray an ambiguous relationship with Iberia. Another non-western textual geography is described in Veronica della Dora's essay on Byzantine cosmographies, albeit one that she acknowledges had little impact on medieval thought. The final essay, 'Imagining the Anglo-Irish frontier' by Sara V. Torres provides a powerful example of the confluence of imaginative and physical narratives of travel from the case of Ramon de Perellós' pilgrimage from Aragon to 'St Patrick's Purgatory' at Lough Derg in Ireland. Figurative and physical geographies coincided to place 'purgatory' at the opposite side of a *mappa mundi* to paradise.

Inter-disciplinarity is clearly the major strength of this volume: current literary, art historical, historical and geographical research is brought together in a collection that undoubtedly defines the current state of scholarship on this subject. However, this gathering of essays from such diverse intellectual traditions could also be seen as a disadvantage. Several authors, including Torres, commendably make extensive efforts to compare and relate their conclusions and arguments to other essays in the volume and contribute to a unity of argument; others do not. Several of the more deeply theoretical chapters feel more firmly grounded in their respective disciplines than they do in the volume as a whole, and are consequently somewhat challenging to someone trained as a social historian. For specialists in literary depictions of space in the Middle Ages, this collection will provide an invaluable gathering of current research, as well as a stimulating and demanding read for the broader range of scholars and students who wish to progress beyond the basic understandings of the 'spatial turn' to a broader understanding of medieval geographies.

In all, this volume is a valuable collection of cutting edge interpretations of geographies *in* the Middle Ages (as opposed to geographies *of* the Middle Ages). Assembling an edited volume is a challenging task, and the editor has done an excellent job in collecting and marshalling a range of essays which is equally broad in geographical, chronological, and methodological coverage. Regardless of differences between the papers, they certainly combine to very clearly present the case for a contextual understanding of textual and visual medieval geographies in a coherent and unified manner.

Notes

1. J. Brotton, *A History of the World in Twelve Maps* (London, 2012); N. Crane, *Mercator: The Man who Mapped the Planet* (London, 2002).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Sarah Ann Milne, review of *Space in the Medieval West: Places, Territories, and Imagined Geographies*, (review no. 1724) <10.14296/RiH/2014/1724> [accessed 14 February 2015].[Back to \(2\)](#)

The editor is happy to accept this review and the positive comments made by the reviewer.

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