

Medieval world maps

Diagrams of a Christian universe

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It is often assumed that maps have always been accurate, scale diagrams intended primarily as a source of directions. While this is generally true of modern maps, those dating from Medieval times and earlier were frequently produced for different purposes. They were a means to help people understand the Earth and the cosmos, including information on mythology and religion as well as geography.

In the century following the introduction of the printing press in Europe in the mid-1400s, Medieval-style maps were still being produced and sold, despite the availability of more modern, scientific maps.¹ This suggests that many learned people did not see the earlier maps as entirely outdated. The University of Melbourne is fortunate to have amongst its collection of rare maps an example of Medieval cartography, the *Tabula geographica*. The university's example originates from around the 18th century, a facsimile of a Medieval creation. It is printed on paper from either a wood or metal block, and contains vertical fold marks. The map's upper, lower and left-hand edges are marked with a thin red line, possibly remnants of coloured page-edge decoration or a binding. In the upper-right corner

'Pag. 29' has been printed, slightly cut off owing to the map being printed out of alignment with the paper. The map was probably removed, with some care, from a book. The *Tabula geographica* possesses some of the essential qualities of Medieval world maps, including T-O and quadripartite designs, which are discussed below.

World maps: How they functioned then and now

The modern word 'map' is derived from the Medieval phrase for a world map, *mappa mundi*, meaning 'cloth of the world' (world maps were often painted on cloth and used as wall hangings). The phrase was subsequently abbreviated to refer to maps generally. In Medieval times, neither church Latin nor vernacular languages contained an equivalent for our modern word 'map'. Medieval images, which we would now refer to as maps, illustrated landscapes and presented information on matters such as administration and theology. These were not meant as generic sources of directions, but were intended for the needs of particular individuals, institutions and occasions.² Having relatively low literacy levels, Medieval travellers would have relied for guidance more on local people than on maps.

Maps made for providing directions would typically be local or regional, whereas world maps normally functioned as schematic diagrams.³ Written texts had the advantage of being able to contain more information than a visual map. Consequently there were circumstances under which today we would use a map, when it would have been common (for a literate traveller) to rely upon a written description instead. Travel itineraries describing journeys undertaken are examples of such descriptions. One of these is a list of churches visited by Archbishop Sigeric of Canterbury when he visited Rome in 990 to receive the pallium, a woollen vestment bestowed on archbishops by the pope.⁴

World maps were the most commonly produced Medieval maps. They presented a network of information, detailing not only geographical features but also zoological, anthropological, moral, theological and historical ideas. Until the 15th century most world maps were based on one of two designs. The first variety, influenced by astronomy, locates north at the top of the page. Horizontal lines divide the Earth into seven climate zones: frigid, temperate and torrid zones north and south of a central body of water.

Tabula geographica: Pro ut exiat COD. XCIII. d. V. 39, printed 18th century or earlier, wood or metal block print on paper, 44.0×51.0cm. Acquired c. 1964–79, Rare and Historic Maps Collection, Eastern Resource Centre, University of Melbourne.



In the second design—the T–O or tripartite map—the Earth is divided into the three known continents: Asia (typically appearing at the top of the page), Europe and Africa.⁵ In addition to these two basic designs is the quadripartite map (a variation of the tripartite map), which depicts the Earth in four parts. This also places the east (Asia) at the top of the page, but an ‘ocean river’ divides the known tripartite world from an unknown fourth part, supposedly inhabited by the Antipodeans. Our example is a quadripartite map.⁶

Most early Medieval Church leaders maintained the Classical concept of a spherical Earth. Similes of ‘apple’ and ‘ball’ in popular stories suggest that many people living before 1300 regarded the Earth as spherical.⁷ When locations distant from the main shorelines were depicted they were often marked with extending lines, bent to imply the globe’s curved shape, suggesting that many tripartite maps were meant to illustrate a spherical globe.⁸ Medieval cartographers had limited experience in representing perspective and would have had difficulty depicting a three-dimensional solid on a flat surface.⁹

Numerous extra physical features appear on quadripartite maps such as the *Tabula geographica*, the

landscapes being frequently dotted with rivers and mountains. Within oceans and rivers, islands appear as rectangles, some containing labels. For example in the European corner is a rectangle labelled ‘*Scotia Insula*’ or ‘Scottish Island’. The straight lines forming the T-shape represent the bodies of water separating continents. The horizontal line generally corresponds with the Tanais River (now known as the River Don in Russia, previously regarded as the boundary between Europe and Asia), the Black Sea and the Bosphorus to the north, while to the south it normally corresponds to the River Nile or the Red Sea, with the Mediterranean indicated by a vertical line projecting downwards. These dividing rivers and their adjacent continents were often adjusted to appear in different positions according to the cartographer’s viewpoint.¹⁰ In the *Tabula geographica* Asia appears at the top, with Europe to the left and Africa and the Antipodes to the right.

Early T–O maps appearing in manuscripts can be found accompanying the writings of Isidore of Seville (Bishop of Seville from around 600).¹¹ Early Christianity inherited numerous scientific theories from Antiquity, which scholars such as Isidore attempted to incorporate

into Christian doctrine and daily life.¹² Isidore wrote numerous works, primarily for the clergy, drawing upon both pagan and Christian authors to provide his readers with basic knowledge and skills for understanding the Bible. He included the meanings of Hebrew names, prophets’ names, what their words and deeds foretold, descriptions of biblical cities and important mountains and rivers.¹³ In Medieval times many people, such as monks and nuns who were bound to their monasteries, could not embark on pilgrimages. This constraint created a demand for maps that let the viewer go on a virtual pilgrimage instead of a physical one, reading about relics and holy places from their libraries, both in books and on maps.¹⁴

Early churchmen believed they should give instruction as well as perform ritual. Therefore they provided simplified explanations and diagrams of Christianised Classical theory. With the exception of the Book of Genesis, the Bible focuses more on human behaviour and God’s reactions to it, than on cosmology and how the world functions. Consequently Classical theories on phenomena, including planet orbits, lunar and solar cycles, eclipses and the forces behind tides and winds, were relatively easy to incorporate

into Christian doctrine. Isidore of Seville attempted in writings such as *De natura rerum* to attach meaning to these cosmological behaviours. He explained the concepts of time, the heavens, planets, Sun, Moon and stars. The sky he regarded in a spiritual sense as being the Church which, against the night-time of earthly life, shone star-like with the virtue of the saints. The Sun symbolised Christ and the Moon was the Church reflecting Christ's light.¹⁵

Besides those accompanying Isidore's writings, other maps based on a T-O scheme include the Beatus maps from the late 8th century (and much copied and adapted thereafter). The Spanish theologian Beatus of Liébana compiled his *Commentary on the Apocalypse* in 776. This work comprises the writings of many earlier writers (including Isidore) and contains a world map that draws upon several sources.¹⁶ Beatus' map illustrates the apostles' efforts to spread the gospel and includes a prominent depiction of Adam, Eve and the serpent representing Paradise.¹⁷ Later versions contained more information, including cardinal directions and the winds,¹⁸ the latter often personified with names such as *Africus* referring to the south-southwest wind.¹⁹ Our *Tabula geographica* contains many biblically



themed decorations. Near the top of the map are Adam, Eve and the serpent (above). Although a simple image, its scale dominates even the mountains. This makes very clear the significance of the map as a Christian symbol. In the corners of the map the four winds blow trumpets while riding bulbous air sacks (illustrated on page 12).

By comparing it with other Medieval map facsimiles we can see that our *Tabula geographica* is derived from one of the Beatus maps. Plate 8

of the 1849 *Atlas de Santarem* contains a map that matches every geographical detail and inscription of the *Tabula geographica*.²⁰ Our map also matches plate XIII (i) of Jomard's *Monuments de la géographie* (1842–62).²¹ Both these 19th-century facsimiles are of a 12th-century version of Beatus' 8th-century *Commentaries on the Apocalypse*, now located in the Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria in Turin. They match the exact details of the *Tabula geographica*, but are differently sized and contain extra images, suggesting our map originates from a different book. Our *Tabula geographica* makes no mention of an author or title, making its exact source difficult to ascertain.²²

Common to all the Beatus maps is the depiction of the River Nile flowing from western Africa. A description made by the Spanish geographer Orosius provided Beatus with information for depicting the Nile. Orosius described the Nile as sourced from Mount Atlas, disappearing into the sands before gushing into a lake, flowing eastward through Ethiopia to the ocean and turning left into Egypt.²³ A similar description appears in the *Tabula geographica*, located between the two water bodies extending to the right from the centre of the 'T' shape.



Detail from the *Tabula geographica*, showing a figure representing one of the four winds.

Another African geographical feature that Beatus borrowed from Orosius is two peaks near the Atlantic. The Beatus maps typically label these with the text '*Duo Calpes contrarii sibi*' which, with some spelling variation, is also found on the *Tabula geographica*.²⁴

Other Medieval world maps appear to have been used as artworks and symbols rather than for practical purposes. They may have been hung on a wall or altar as decoration or to symbolise a deity. This is apparent in the Ebstorf world map, made in the 13th century, showing Christ's head, hands and feet on the four sides of the Earth as if it were his own body.²⁵ Such maps demonstrate the perceived ability of these documents to represent core philosophical and religious ideas as well as the physical world.

Later Medieval mapmakers took an interest in interpreting biblical statements on geography, such as Ezekiel 5:5 describing Jerusalem as being situated in the centre of the lands. Some interpreted this literally, resulting in many maps locating Jerusalem at their centre.²⁶ The *Tabula geographica* is not centred on any identifiable place but on an approximate location in the Mediterranean, with Mount Sinai and Judea depicted nearby.²⁷ Early

Christian theorists suggested the T-O shape represented a crucifix, symbolising the Earth's salvation through Christ's sacrifice. But this ignores the pre-Christian existence of tripartite maps.²⁸

Isidore of Seville included diagrams to help explain his theories of how the universe functioned. These included maps containing legends, acting as a visual paragraph. For each continent Isidore provided information on etymology, history, populations and geographical position using Classical and biblical information.²⁹ In describing Asia, Isidore in *De natura rerum* comments: 'After the confusion of languages and the dispersal of people throughout the whole world, the sons of Shem lived in Asia and from his posterity descended twenty-seven people. And it is called Asia from Asia the queen, and is the third part of the world'. In Isidore's major work, the *Etymologies*, he writes about the derivation of place names, boundaries, rivers, mountains, the physical appearance of peoples and the presence of spices and special stones.³⁰ Although containing less detail, the *Tabula geographica* bears various similar inscriptions.

Commonly the Beatus maps depict a southern section on the right-hand side, behind a straight

body of water flowing between India and the Atlantic. A legend is sometimes attached, saying that this section is unknown (owing to its immense heat) but is believed to be home to the Antipodean race.³¹ Until the 15th century Europeans commonly thought the equatorial region too hot for habitation.³² In the *Etymologies* Isidore describes the fourth part of the world as existing on the other side of the '*oceanus interior*'. In addition to those parts already known, the fourth part was confirmed as part of the ecumenical whole, potentially containing residents. Beatus' text was intended to describe the apostles' missions to spread Christianity and consequently would have only produced maps depicting lands where Adam's descendants could exist, providing people for potential conversion to the faith.³³

Depicting Paradise on a map implied belief in a God who functioned within physical space, a region both chronologically remote and the site of a vital historical scene.³⁴ Isidore describes Paradise in the *Etymologies* as an Asian province. He explains why people cannot travel there: after the Fall of humanity, Paradise was blocked by a fence formed from a flaming sword encircled by a wall of fire reaching near the sky. Angels float above the

flaming sword, preventing evil spirits from approaching, making Paradise inaccessible to flesh or spiritual beings who have transgressed.³⁵ Beatus, like other Christian interpreters, believed Christ's final victory over evil as prophesied in Revelation took place with his sacrifice on the cross and the establishment of the Christian church at Pentecost. The Beatus maps illustrated the Fall and the transforming of the Earth into the Paradise of the universal church, awaiting the moment of Revelation, where the Antichrist would be defeated and God's permanent kingdom would be established.³⁶

Following the circumference of a *mappa mundi* from the western point at the bottom, to the south and then east, the viewer moves from the normal world, through the unknown and finally arrives at Paradise. To move farther southwards was to go farther from God. In a 1477 map accompanying Ptolemy's *Geographia*, the southern land mass appears unbroken, spanning from Africa to China. Even when Africa became confirmed as physically separate from *Terra Australis* (Southern Land), its cultural perception as the dangerous south, a path moving gradually further from Paradise, endured.³⁷

Medieval maps were often symbolic and decorative in purpose—

projecting an ideal Christian cosmos rather than a physical world. These early cartographers were attempting to meet the challenge of representing, in the one schema, both geographical features and an expression of faith.

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 - 22 The University of Melbourne Library acquired the map between 1964 and 1979 (Dorothy Prescott, Personal communication, March 2013), but other provenance details have unfortunately not been retained.
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