Medieval Maps: An Idiosyncratic Introduction by Asa Mitman

I am sitting in a small, cramped and overstuffed closet attached to my department’s slide library. I am on a wobbly stool that doesn’t rise properly, and typing on a laptop wedged between file boxes on a rolling cart. It is winter break, so the heat is off and there is a chill in the air, which is the only part of this experience that seems, as it were, “correct.” This is because, hanging before me, beside derelict slide projectors, disused VHS tapes and other ancient relics, is the Hereford mappa mundi.

And I am therefore happy as can be.

Of course, the original hangs in the cathedral at Hereford, where it has been housed for seven hundred years. It is currently behind glass, dimly lit and hung much too high on the wall, so that the vision of Christ at the top is entirely overcome by shadow. This means that the new Folio Society facsimile (printed at ninety-percent scale in 2010, in a limited edition of one thousand copies) hanging in this closet is far more visible in its details than the original, under its usual viewing conditions (Fig. i and ii).

This essay was invited under the parameters of being a basic introduction to medieval world maps, or mappae mundi (literally, “cloths of the world”), in advance of a forthcoming Sarum Seminar lecture on the presence of sea monsters on early maps by Chet van Duzer. I originally planned, therefore, to give basic information on medieval geography and cartography, beginning with earlier examples and working toward the grandest surviving expression of the genre, the Hereford Map of ca. 1300.1 I will include similar material in brief, in a moment, but what I wish to concentrate on, instead, is an introduction to the experience of these objects, which is why I have begun in this storage closet.

In order to convey the experience of working with these maps, I will begin with three of their great strengths as works of art. First and foremost, these maps are not “accurate.” They do not correspond, point for point via any map projection (the process by which the round globe —known to be such by medieval scholars—is stretched and distorted to fit a flat surface) with the known world. This inaccuracy was seen for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a failing (hence the characterization...
of the Hereford and Elstorf Maps by Sir Cyril Beazley as “monstrosities,” examined with “complete futility,” though it is better viewed as an outcome of the pre-Enlightenment disregard for the value of empirical observation as the best way to understand the world. Indeed, if the maps did line up with the “real” world, this would be a great distraction, and would mislead us into missing myriad accomplishments of these works, beyond the simple goal of navigation. In our GPS-enabled world, maps will not decline, because giving directions is only one (and not the most important) of the things they do. The lack of technical geographic accuracy in medieval maps highlights their roles as spiritual documents, political strategies, historical atlases, mythological encyclopedias, and on.

Following on this point, the next great strength of medieval maps is the wild array of marvels they contain. Their sea monsters, which will be the focus of van Duzer’s lecture, have often been dismissed as risible elements, along with the images and inscriptions that equate to “here there be dragons.” These elements, as well as the altars of Alexander the Great, the labyrinth of the minotaur, the tree in the Garden of Eden, Noah’s Ark (Fig. iii), and on, are a large part of the appeal of these maps, major elements that serve to inspire our close attention as we hunt for points of interest and excitement, traveling virtually over the globe in search of the wonderful.

Their final great strength, from my modern experiential perspective, is their collective scarcity and frequently poor condition. Their scarcity brings them more sharply to our attention, and knowledge of it heightens our mood when contemplating these rare relics of the past. Their poor condition (when present—a few are in wonderful shape), on the other hand, denotes their history. Directly in front of me on the Hereford facsimile is the representation of Paris, which was depicted as the largest and most elaborate city in Europe—with three main turrets, each in turn surmounted by smaller towers and pinnacles (Fig. iv). It is perhaps the third-largest structure on the entire map, following the monumental encampment of Alexander at the divide between Asia and Africa and, of course, the massive Tower of Babel, which dominates the top third of the orb of the earth. Running violently across the image of Paris are a series of horizontal and vertical scratches, marks of

Fig. iii. Noah’s Ark, Manticore, Tiger; Hereford Map, 1300.

Fig. iv. Paris; Hereford Map, ca. 1300.


an assault upon the image of the city, likely the result of late-medieval animosity between England and France. This element reminds us of what Professor Robert Calkins, with whom I studied, calls the “second history” of works of art, the long series of events and assaults and restorations that leave their traces on the surface of works. They allow mappae mundi to serve as records not only of the views of their moment of creation, but also of periods between then and now.

Having celebrated three qualities usually disparaged in medieval maps, I will now proceed to a more general introduction to the subject. The most common map type throughout the Middle Ages was the T-O, or Tripartite, which depicts the circle of the globe, with a cross inscribed in its lower half (Fig. v). The upper half represents Asia (given the position of prominence because of the host of sacred locales in Asia), and the lower half, divided in two, represents Europe and Africa. The cross is a highly schematic representation of the three waters believed to divide the continents: Tanais (the river Don), the Nile and the Mediterranean. The continents usually bear titular inscriptions, and frequently this is the only detail provided on the maps. The present example also focuses on the legend that the three sons of Noah were each given one of the continents. While it is perhaps disguised by the profusion of detail, the Hereford Map is clearly rooted in this conceptual model.

The T-O maps’ highly schematic representation of the globe could not serve any navigational function, and its enduring popularity insists that medieval maps served other purposes. Recent scholarship on maps has largely moved beyond notions of accuracy, to look for other goals. Since many maps were produced in a monastic context, for monks who had taken vows of stabilitas loci—that is, to not travel—they must have served other functions for which accuracy was not relevant. Scholars now suggests that most medieval maps, contained in texts ranging from encyclopedias to Psalters, were designed for education, contemplation and even for imagined pilgrimages. Indeed, Richard of Holdingham, maker of the Hereford Map, labeled his work “cest estorie” [this history].

Following the T-O maps in popularity are Zonal maps, based on Macrobius’ fifth-century commentary on Cicero’s Dream of Scipio. These differ from T-O maps in two marked respects.
First, they are divided into a series of latitudinal bands, and second, they tend to be oriented to the north or south, unlike most other medieval maps. At the north and south extremes are Frigid Zones, followed by Temperate Zones, and then at the center, on either side of the great Ocean River, are the Torrid Zones (Fig. vi). The Frigid Zones were uninhabitable on account of cold and the Torrid uncrossable on account of heat. The northern Temperate Zone was considered to be the region inhabited by humans, and the Southern was thought to be occupied by the Antipodeans.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a far more detailed variety of the T-O rose to some prominence, especially in England. These draw in large measure on Orosius’s *History against the Pagans*, and include the most spectacular of all medieval maps, the large-scale mappae mundi. Most medieval maps were contained in manuscripts, and so were limited in size by the proportions of their pages (Matthew Paris’s wonderful fold-out extensions notwithstanding). These maps, by contrast, were not limited even to the size of a sheet of vellum, as some were composed of several sheets sewn together. The great Ebstorf Map, the largest known, was destroyed in World War II, but it measured 3.56m by 3.58m, and required 30 sheets of parchment (full-scale reproductions survive, Fig. vii).

The most prominent of all extant mappae mundi, though, is certainly the Hereford Map, noteworthy for its size (approximately 1.6m by 1.3m, the largest survival), great wealth of inscriptions (almost 1100) taken from classical and medieval sources, and nearly as high number of images. At the top of the circle of the world, we find Eden as an island separated from the main continental mass. Within it, the serpent tempts Adam and Eve. Just above this, we find a scene of Judgment, in which Mary bares her breasts to Christ, who displays his stigmata. The presence of such elements expand the scope of this and other maps, so that they become more than geographies, displaying the layout of the world. Instead, they become histories, showing the world from its very beginning, through its apocalyptic end. And, of course, sea monsters abound, including Scylla (three times), Charybdis and a mermaid (Fig. viii).

Since medieval theologians believed that the world was designed by God (Fig. ix), each and every element therein bore import. From the overall arrangement of the (three) continents of the world to the distribution of peoples, beasts and marvels within them, everything was seen as a sign of God’s plan. Augustine of Hippo writes, “the circle of the earth is our great book. In it I read the perfection which is promised in the book of God.” From the sea monsters to the manticore to the depictions of earthly and heavenly Jerusalem, each element of these maps was placed with care, and designed for contemplation. And so I sit, crammed into this storage closet, gazing with wonder.

---


For further reading:
Isidore, *Etymologicarum libri XX*, in PL, vol 82, col. 496C.

List of Figures:
ii. Hereford Map Facsimile in my office (2010)
iii. Noah’s Ark, Tiger, Manticore, Hereford Map, Hereford Cathedral, ca. 1300
iv. Paris, Hereford Map, Hereford Cathedral, ca. 1300
v. Tripartite T-O Map, Isidore, *De natura rerum*, Bern, Burgerbibliothek Codex 417, fol. 88v (9th century)
vii. Copy of Ebstorf Map, org. late 13th century, copy by Hartmut Kuhler, 2007
viii. Sea Monsters, Hereford Map, Hereford Cathedral, ca. 1300
ix. The Creator with Compass, Vienna, Osterreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod.2554, f.4, 13th Century, England

Fig. viii. Sea Monsters; Hereford Map, ca. 1300.
Two Easy Museums  by A. Richard Jones

There are museums and museums. Over the years, I have spent multiple days in the Smithsonian in Washington, the Louvre in Paris, and both the Science Museum and the British Museum in London. Even so, I haven’t seen all their exhibits. I can easily imagine spending similar amounts of time in any number of other mega-museums. Then there are the little museums. Some, of course, are just rip-offs. I remember an exhibit of “baby rattlers,” signposted for hundreds of miles along U.S. Route 66, that turned out to be a child’s playpen containing a scattering of infants’ rattles. A step up from this is the many one-room exhibits that often prove disappointing. But there are also a number of interesting and pleasant smallish museums that can be “done” completely in a few hours. I was fortunate to find two of these on our recent trip to Germany and Switzerland: the Museum of Bread Culture in Ulm, and the Paper Mill in Basel. In Michelin Guide terms, I would rate both these museums as “worth a detour,” although not “worth a special trip.” However if you are in the vicinity, by all means go see them.

Ulm’s Museum of Bread Culture
[Museum der Brotkultur, www.museum-brotkultur.de] occupies three floors of the 1592 Ulm salt shed [Ulmer Salzstadel], which is actually a rather substantial medium-sized building. Founded in 1955 as the German Bread Museum [Deutsches Brotmuseum] by Dr. Willy Eiselen and his son Dr. Hermann Eiselen, the museum’s changed name reflects the fact that it has grown to include much more than just the production of bread. To be sure, a German bakery circa 1900 is recreated in the first room, down to the mousetrap on the floor. Specialized tools of bread making are also on exhibit.

For instance, there is a small exhibit showing the various crops that have been used in bread-making over the ages, interesting for me in that it has the lower-status grains medieval peasants used for their bread. There is also an exhibit of wartime propaganda—German, British, Russian, etc.—on the theme of bread, as well as material on Stalin’s artificially created Georgian famine. The concern of the museum for world hunger informs the final set of exhibits. Many of the signs and labels have English subtitles, but any German you know will be of use.

The Bread Museum has an elevator, an important consideration if you have just made the the ascent (and descent) of the Ulm Minster’s tower and spire—about 750 steps, as I recall. Although dwarfed by modern secular buildings, Ulm’s Minster has the tallest church spire anywhere today, ascending 161.6 meters [530 feet] from the ground, 126 feet taller than Salisbury. It was built up to the 70-meter [230 foot] level by 1494, but not further until 1885-90, when the octagon, eight-corner gallery, and spire were built above the four-corner gallery atop the old construction.

Ulm Minster: tower and spire from ground level; gargoyle part way up; inside the spire.

All photos: A. Richard Jones

A visitor can begin by making paper out of pulp from the stamping mill that is powered by the working waterwheel. A frame with a bottom of narrowly spaced wires catches pulp in a vat. This is drained, stripped off the wires onto felt, pressed, and dried (in a modern, heated dryer) to form one’s own piece of paper. The ground floor also exhibits forerunners of paper—papyrus, clay tablets, etc. Then it is on to the next floor to set type, and print something on that paper.

The first floor above ground level deals with scripts, type founding, and typesetting. There is an extensive collection of chests of type fonts, including some for music and some for chemistry. Chest after chest holds stamps for tooling gold leaf onto bindings. A working linotype machine is in use. An open case of type is available for setting in a composition stick, after which it is locked in a form, proofed in a hand press, then printed for real. One of the most interesting exhibits on this floor is a series of documents, one page for each century, beginning with the 9th and proceeding to the 15th or 16th—a dramatic illustration of the evolution of script from legible Carolingian minuscule through less and less legible scripts back to legibility. We had just been taught this by George Brown in the recent Stanford Continuing Studies paleography class.

There are also hands-on opportunities for marbling, calligraphy, stamping, and illumination. Several presses, ancient and modern are in working order. A copper engraver demonstrated a technique that smoothes a roughened plate to create images. Binders were engaged in the production of an actual book that the museum sells. They were attaching covers to the “block” of bound pages. The staff speaks a certain amount of English, although the specialized vocabulary can be a problem.

Basel Paper Mill: the waterwheel outside running the pulp-stamping mill inside

Commonalities Quiz

1. What historical commonality do these cathedrals share?
   Coutances, Le Mans, Rheims, Amiens, Kilkenny, Salisbury, Roskilde, Burgos, Toledo, Siena, Assisi.

2. In what way were King John of England and Pope Innocent III the same?

3. Which of these men was not a contemporary of the others?

4. What ties horse collars to three-field crop rotation in medieval England?
   \begin{itemize}
   \item 1. Construction of all started within 10 years of 1220 AD.
   \item 2. Almost identical farms of which John 1199–1216, the Pope, 1198–1216.
   \item 3. Saladin died in 1193.
   \item 4. Introduction of horse collars in the 13th c. allowed horses to pull heavy loads easier than oxen, but horses need oats, which led to spring-crop oats.
   \item Almost identical farms of which John 1199–1216, the Pope, 1198–1216.
   \end{itemize}
Book Review

The Mourners: Tomb Sculptures from the Court of Burgundy

This engaging book has been published in conjunction with the exhibit of the Mourners that is currently on tour in the United States, reaching the Palace of the Legion of Honor in the fall. Sophie Jugie is the director of the museum in Dijon where these figures have resided since the chaos of the French Revolution swept away their original home in the chancel of the charterhouse at Champmol.

The first third of the book has several excellent introductory chapters that describe the Dukes of Burgundy, their Court, and their capital of Dijon, before going on to discuss in greater detail their patronage of the arts and their founding of the Carthusian charterhouse that was to house their magnificent tombs. The final introductory chapter tells how these tombs were commissioned, constructed and carved. Each of the two completed tombs was encircled by forty figures representing members of the duke’s family, officers and staff, as well as members of the religious community. They have been described as “the most profound expression of mourning known in art, a funeral march in stone.”

The most captivating aspect of this book comes in the later two-thirds when each mourner, from the tomb of John the Fearless, is carefully and lovingly photographed so as to show their individuality. The figures are shown against a black background that makes the warm alabaster stone glow. Each mourner is shown from multiple angles so they can be seen in their entirety. The sparse descriptor for each mourner simply notes, “cantor holding a closed book” or “choir boy with candlestick.” The quality of the photographs reveals even the carved whip-stitching on the edges of cloaks and the individual beads in a rosary. The figures average 16 inches high, with the choirboys measuring 9 inches.

Thanks to generous support from the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation this lavishly illustrated book is very affordable. A careful perusal of it, combined with the upcoming Sarum lecture by Anne Simonson on April 7th, will permit you to walk into the exhibit next August and recognize each one, so familiar will you be with their individual characteristics.

Evelyn McMillan

Upcoming Sarum Programs

Wednesday, Feb. 23, 7-9 pm. Geology Corner (Bldg. 320).
Room 105, Stanford Main Quad
MEDIEVAL MATTERS PUBLIC LECTURE
Miracle Cures: Saints, Pilgrimage, and the Healing Powers of Belief.
Bob Scott.

Iconic images of medieval pilgrims, such as Chaucer’s pilgrims making their laborious way to Canterbury, conjure a distant time when faith was the only refuge of the ill and infirm. But why today, in an age of advanced biotechnology and medicine, do millions of people still go on pilgrimage to such places as Lourdes, Compostela, and Medjugorje, to pray for healing? Come hear our own Bob Scott explore these issues.

Medieval Matters is a popular lecture series and members are reminded to arrive early as seats fill up quickly.

Thursday, March 17, 7-9 pm. at Green Library, Stanford.
More Treasures from Stanford’s Special Collections. John Mustain, Rare Book Librarian.

Once again, Sarum members are invited to a private evening in Stanford Libraries Special Collections where our host, John Mustain, will set out selected items for our perusal and delight. He promises some items with a St. Patrick’s Day connection as well as our medieval favorites. Reservations will be required, as always.

Thursday, April 7, 7-9 pm. At CASBS, 75 Alta Rd, Stanford
The Mourners: Tomb Sculptures of the Dukes of Burgundy.
Anne Simonson, SJSU.

Thirty-nine alabaster figures of mourners commissioned in the 15th century to adorn the tomb of John the Fearless, the second Duke of Burgundy, will be seen for the first time outside of France on a year long tour of the United States that includes a stop in San Francisco in August. Anne Simonson, from the SJSU Art History Dept., and a specialist in the art of the Court of Burgundy, will talk to us about these sculptures and the men who commissioned them.

Tuesday, May 3, 7-9 pm. Geology Corner (Bldg. 320).
Room 105, Stanford Main Quad
MEDIEVAL MATTERS PUBLIC LECTURE:
Dante Today. Robert M. Durling, UCSC (Emeritus) Italian and English Literature.

In English, there is no poet of Dante’s stature except Shakespeare, and in Italy he is regarded as so supreme that he is referred to simply as “The Poet.” Robert Durling joins Medieval Matters to discuss the challenges—and the exhilaration—of bringing the work of such a vast, intimidating, and luminous poet into English, and how reading him, six hundred years after he wrote, can transfix us, and even change our lives.

Monday, June 6, 7-9 pm. At CASBS, 75 Alta Rd, Stanford.
Sirens, Sea Horses, Leviathan: Sea Monsters on Medieval and Renaissance Maps.
Chet Van Duzer, independent scholar and author.

Following a brief introduction to the different types of medieval maps, Mr. Van Duzer will illustrate and discuss the most important examples of sea monsters on medieval and Renaissance maps. When possible he will identify the sources that the cartographers used, and will show that they often made use of the most recent works about sea monsters available to them.

Spring potluck to be announced.