

What is the place of the Oxford Corpus Christi College MS2* with regard to Medieval Cartography?

The map in MS.2* is one of only eight regional maps of Palestine – the Holy Land – that we have from Christendom in the period of the Crusades, the 12th and 13th centuries. It is not the oldest of the eight: it dates from the mid-13th century, whereas the Ashburnham Libri map in the Biblioteca Laurenziana in Florence and the Tournai maps, three successive maps in a volume of works by St Jerome, all date from the early 12th. This Oxford map by Matthew Paris may or may not be earlier than his other map of Palestine, his so-called Acre map, but the remaining two maps, which both take much information from Burchard of Mount Sion's detailed description of the Holy Land, cannot be earlier than the late 13th century. It survives in a single copy, like all the others except Matthew's Acre map, of which there are three versions, and the Large Burchard map of which there are fourteen.

Three earlier maps survive that show details of the region. One is the so-called Peutinger Table, a massive diagram of routes throughout the Roman Empire compressed into a strip that is some 25 feet long but little more than a foot high; it was probably composed at some point between the 2nd and the 4th centuries, but it is known to us only in a copy that dates from about 1200. Another is a 7th-century mosaic on the floor of St George's church at Madaba in Jordan, a lively pictorial map much of which is now lost but which includes a vivid scene of a deer hunt, fish in the river and a ferry across it, as well as pictures of Jerusalem and other towns that owe something to their actual appearance. The third is a page in a 9th-century manuscript of a commentary on the book of Joshua, a diagram-like representation of the areas of the twelve tribes, with the coastline and a strangely bent River Jordan. Unless very indirectly – and undetectably – none of the eight maps of the crusading period owes anything to these earlier productions.

All, however, belong to the same broad class of cartography that we may call the picture map: features above ground level mostly appear not in ground plan but as pictures, and there is no attempt at consistent scale. In the Roman period some maps had been drawn to scale, and we find lingering traces of this in a very few plans down to the 9th century, but not in the three maps that show the Holy Land. The art, the very idea, of drawing to scale had been lost, to be rediscovered, in successive contexts, in the later Middle Ages until in the

course of the 16th century it once more became an accepted and widely understood way of drawing a map.

But if the production of scale-maps failed to survive the Roman period, world maps made by the Romans seem to have had a continuing history through to early modern times. While all the medieval world maps we know appear as the merest travesties of the geographical shapes we are familiar with, it is arguable (I think likely) that the maps the Romans made of their world would (to our eyes) seem very much better – and that they (to our eyes) rapidly degenerated because mapmakers, rather than copying meaningless geographical shapes, used the outlines to demonstrate God's ordering of the world. This was argued in 2002 by Brigitte Englisch, who in early world maps saw places located in relation to an equilateral triangle (the Trinity) and segments of successive concentric circles (symbolising divine perfection). While I am not wholly convinced by her detailed reconstructions I am sure she is right in seeing what I have called theological laundering as underlying the (to our eyes) weird shapes we see in medieval world maps. We can be assured that we would find more familiar shapes in the Roman maps by their appearance on two world maps of the 11th century: Britain, Frisia and Jutland, Greece and the Aegean on the Cotton map drawn at Canterbury, Corsica and Sardinia, Italy and the Adriatic on a map from Freising in Bavaria. There is no way these realistic outlines could have originated in the 11th century; they can only be chance survivors from maps of the Roman period.

Probably all the eight maps of the crusading period started as extracts from maps of the world to which the mapmaker added information from other sources, mostly written descriptions of the Holy Land, its holy sites and other places connected with events in the Bible; while many are earlier, these descriptive accounts proliferated in the 12th and 13th centuries, as the Crusades brought crusaders and settlers, as well as pilgrims and other travellers from the West. But a few of the world maps themselves included detailed representations of this area. The world map from Ebstorf in Germany, probably copied at the end of the 13th century from a map drawn in about 1240, names 93 places there, more than any of the regional maps before the Large Burchard map. One odd detail on Matthew's Oxford map that came from a world map is the bird perched on Mount Gilboa; there is no obvious reason why a bird should be placed there – it is irrelevant to any biblical reference – but we see the same bird on the world map (of north-west European origin) now at Vercelli in Italy. Matthew's map need not have been directly related to the Vercelli map – it was just that

this particular detail must have been one of the many that recur, though not consistently, on one or other of the world maps of this period, being copied from one to another.



Bird perched (irrelevantly) on Mount Gilboa on Matthew Paris's Oxford map of the Holy Land (left) and on the Vercelli world map (right)

But, as we might expect, the Holy Land on world maps was not exempt from the misshapen geography of the rest of the world. On the Ebstorf map the Jordan flows into the Red Sea, and on the English world map of about 1300 in Hereford Cathedral we see theological laundering in action, as Jerusalem is moved north to lie some way west of the Sea of Galilee, where it occupies the exact centre of the map, a physical expression of its metaphorical position as the centre of the world. Happily, whatever world map was drawn on for Matthew Paris's Oxford map, it showed the Holy Land's coastline and the River Jordan more or less as they really are. Others of our eight regional maps were less lucky and two (the third Tournai map and the Small Burchard map) show Palestine bordered by deep gulfs of the sea to the north and south; a similar apparent gulf to the south on Matthew Paris's Acre map was probably introduced by Matthew himself to provide an extended Mediterranean coast, albeit round a non-existent corner.

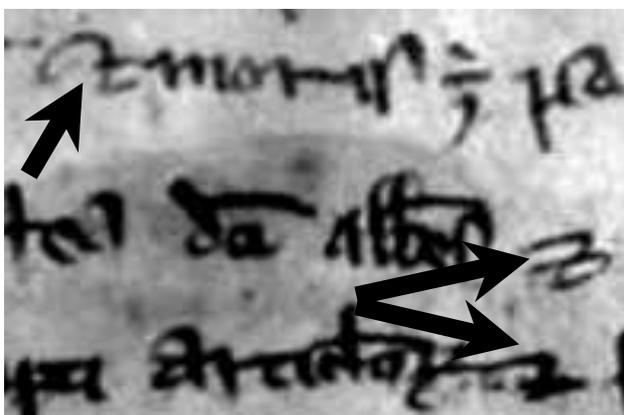
In the 12th and 13th centuries there developed in north-west Europe – in England and northern France – a genre of encyclopaedic world maps, placing geographically what came to be an enormous store of miscellaneous information: events from the Bible, and from the stories of Alexander, accounts of races of peoples, human and semi-human, descriptions of strange animals, birds and plants, and much more besides. From the late 13th century,

however, new initiatives and innovations in maps of any sort passed to Italy, and it is significant that our Holy Land maps follow this pattern. The Ashburnam Libri map probably came from north-east France, the same general area as the Tournai maps, and the two maps by Matthew Paris came from St Albans in England; however the Large and Small Burchard maps certainly originated in Italy, the Large probably in Venice. Interestingly we see the same pattern in the only other regional maps that we have from medieval Europe: several of Britain (including two by Matthew Paris, one of them in three versions) from the 12th to the 14th century, and a few of Italy, the earliest dating from the late 13th century.

Three features of Matthew Paris's Oxford map of the Holy Land are quite extraordinary and taken together distinguish it from any other surviving medieval map: (1) it is drawn on a sheet of parchment already used not only for two figure drawings on the other side but also for texts that occupy one quarter of the same side as the map, so that the map, on the other three quarters, is strangely L-shaped; (2) it markedly deteriorates from top left to bottom right in the amount of detail and in the care with which it has been entered; (3) unlike the other regional maps of the Holy Land and nearly all other medieval maps before the 14th century, it has north, not east, at the top. Taking them one at a time, they add up to a very interesting insight into the map's origin and purpose.

The piece of parchment used for the map had in the mid-12th century – about a hundred years earlier – had drawn and painted on it two uncompleted figures: Christ's deposition from the Cross and the three Marys at the sepulchre. They must have been intended as an opening in a book, perhaps at the beginning of a commentary on part of the New Testament, but were never finished and though they are now much admired by art historians their quality cannot have been recognised at the time and the parchment was seen as scrap. Though on the other side of the parchment, these drawings dominate the map because their thick dark-brown frame-lines have leached through so that it is difficult to think them away in looking at the map. They also make it difficult to read some of the inscriptions: one word, *palmarii*, was misread by two early editors simply because the initial *p* is almost (but not quite) invisible, having been written over the dark frame-line. We may speculate how far these frame-lines had leached through and were already visible when Matthew drew the map; at some points (notably Mount Carmel and the figure of Lot's wife) he seems to be aligning his drawing to the gaps in the frames, but in many others he clearly ignored them entirely.

The two texts written in the one quarter of the sheet not occupied by the map are first a letter – a list of grievances – sent to the pope from a meeting of prominent persons, lay and ecclesiastical, in London in March 1246, and second an account of discussion at this meeting. As I see it, each is in a different hand, neither being that of Matthew Paris. The analysis of Matthew's hand by Richard Vaughan in 1958 is immensely helpful here. On the left below we see a fragment of the two texts, at the point where one is followed by the other; the first line is from the first text, the other two lines from the second and the arrows point to the ampersands. On the right are the consistent shapes of Mathew Paris's ampersand, from Vaughan's article, and we see that the ampersand differs from one text to the other and that neither is at all like the shapes that Matthew used. Though the ampersand is the most obvious example, the same comparison can be made with other letters (and with the ÷ sign for *est*) and the same conclusions drawn. It follows that the pictures had already been discarded and the parchment destined for – and put to – other use before Matthew drew his map. His map had to be seriously contorted to fit in to the three quarters of the sheet and it is unthinkable that he drew it leaving one quarter blank for someone else to use. This, in turn, gives us a date for the map: it cannot have been drawn before March 1246.



Ampersands in the texts on the map



Ampersands in Matthew Paris's hand
(from Richard Vaughan, 'Handwriting of Matthew Paris', *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*, 1, part 5 (1953), plate XIV)

The map's curious deterioration from top left to bottom right – from north-west to south-east – takes various forms. First, progressively less detail is given. It is only along the coast road north of Caesaria Palestina that distances between places are entered; with one exception bishops' sees are named only along the coast north of Sidon; we are told which

order a monastery belonged to only at the Cistercian Belmont in the north-west; and the three castles whose owners are named are all in the north-west. Then the use of the two colours, black and red, wholly systematic at top left, becomes less well ordered as we move across and down the map; thus names of towns around Galilee and at Gaza are framed in black instead of red, and the use of red in regional names is less consistent in the south than in the north. Mistakes start to appear; thus Syria and Palestine are confused in the note by the river that is said to separate them, and right in the south the names of three Midianite rulers are each framed in red with the letter *c*, turning them into towns. The simplest explanation of these and other indications is that Matthew was working with increasing haste to copy a map to which he had only limited access; either some visitor to St Albans brought it with him and showed it to Matthew before leaving or, perhaps more likely, he saw it at another monastery or even at the royal court and had to get it copied, on a sheet of scrap parchment that he was given, before he left for home. Because the two figure drawings are on the parchment that Matthew used it need not follow (as some art historians have supposed) that they were drawn at St Albans,

Certainly we should see it as a copy of an existing map – there is no way that this pattern would form if Matthew had been putting the map together himself from a variety of sources – and the likelihood is that he saw it as a sketch from which he could make a fair copy, a full reproduction of the map he saw. At some points we see him practically making notes to himself. Castles, towns and villages were probably distinguished on the exemplar by different symbols, but Matthew simply noted each name as *castellum*, *civitas* or *casella* – heavily abbreviated, in the case of *civitas* to the wholly ambiguous *c*. The map was drawn for his own eyes, not for others, and whether he ever made the intended fair copy we shall probably never know.

There is no parallel to either of these two peculiarities – the map's L-shape and its deterioration from one corner to the other – on any other medieval map. There are, however, other medieval maps that have north at the top. In the mid-13th century portolan charts were probably already being drawn, though the earliest known to survive dates from the end of the century. The magnetic compass must have played a part in the construction of these navigational charts of the Mediterranean – perhaps also the Pole Star – and this explains why they all face northwards. But medieval world maps are all oriented to the east – and so too, with this one exception, are the regional maps of the Holy Land that took a world map as the

starting-point. Matthew Paris's maps of Britain have north at the top, though they too started from outlines on world maps, but on a circular world map Britain would be in the lower left corner, angled towards the north, unlike Palestine at the centre of the map which would always be viewed with east at the top. It is not easy to see why north is at the top of Matthew's Oxford map – or rather, at the top of the map he copied, for we cannot suppose that in his hasty copying he went to the trouble of altering the map's orientation. I can only suppose that this original map was drawn this way up so that it would hang better on the wall – in portrait, not landscape, format. This may seem a far-fetched guess, but I can think of no other explanation.

We may regret that we have neither the fair copy that Matthew may or may not have made, nor the exemplar that he copied, which must have been a splendid production. The fact is, though, that Matthew's hurried sketch may well tell us more about medieval mapping and even contemporary perceptions of the Holy Land than either of these finished maps. It may well have much more to tell us and certainly will repay the close study that the digitised image now makes possible.

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