

The Oxford map of Palestine in the work of Matthew Paris

Matthew Paris, or Matthew the Parisian, born about 1200, served as the chronicler of St. Albans Abbey from 1237 until his death in 1259. Unlike some other monastic chronicles, Matthew's work is anything but dull. He was long-winded, opinionated, cranky, and interested in everything. He moves from politics at court, to the abuses of ecclesiastical power, to foreign relations, to peculiar meteorological and astronomical occurrences, to uncanny incidents. A staunch Benedictine, he had a low opinion of other monastic orders, especially those of more recent foundation, and he was quick to condemn what he felt to be unwarranted impositions on his beloved abbey. While we know little about the details of his personal life, we know a great deal about what he thought. Toward the end of his life, feeling perhaps that he had been a little too outspoken, he attempted to censor some of his strongest statements.¹

He had a strong visual sense, and ornamented his text with lively drawings of Crusaders in battle, horrific martyrdoms, and perilous sea voyages. He also made copies of notable works of art,² and, most important for us, he made a series of maps unprecedented in their variety and quality. Some are diagrams, such as the wind diagrams, one showing the classical twelve winds with their ancient names along with the names used by contemporary seamen. Another diagram of the Heptarchy, the division of kingdoms in ancient Britain, is an abstract floral design,³ while a drawing of the four Roman roads⁴ is equally divorced from geography. He also made a sketch

¹ Suzanne Lewis, *The Art of Matthew Paris in the Chronica Majora* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), pp.48-49 and 207.

² Lewis, pp. 420-24.

³ "Genealogia Orbiculata," Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 26, fol. iv verso.

⁴ London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero D I, vol. 187v.

of a world map, which he says is a copy of one at Waltham Abbey, and notes that he also copied the king's map at Westminster, but the latter does not survive.⁵

His regional maps were more realistic and detailed than these sketches. He drew in multiple copies an itinerary from England to Sicily, maps of Britain, and maps of the Holy Land. These maps are all now bound with various editions of his chronicle, which accounts for their preservation.⁶ The map of the Holy Land that concerns us here was not. It was probably kept in a portfolio of his drawings,⁷ and only after his death extracted and bound with a Bible he had copied, perhaps due to the devotional paintings on the other side of the page. The map is now in the Library of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, has been removed from the Bible (MS 2) and can be consulted separately as MS 2*.

The Oxford map is oriented to the north. It is plain, unadorned with pictures or lengthy textual passages. It shows the eastern coast of the Mediterranean from Antioch to the Nile. Armenia, the Jordan River, the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea are on the right side of the page, The coast is extended to show Egypt (Damietta, Alexandria, the Nile, Cairo) as though it were south rather than southwest of the Holy Land. The map continues vaguely further east beyond the Jordan River on the facing page, showing some of the desert territory. The rest of this page has notes to himself about some geographical facts, while the upper part contains a copy of the “vexations” of the English church in 1246 (in another hand). In Paul Harvey’s opinion, this indicates that the map was drawn in 1246 or slightly later.⁸

⁵ Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 26, p. 284.

⁶ Possibly this was done after his death, which would account for the somewhat jumbled order in which they are presented. See Lewis, p. 471.

⁷ Lewis, p. 419.

⁸ Paul D. A. Harvey, *Medieval Maps of the Holy Land* (London: British Library, 2012), p. 61.

While the map shows the standard assortment of cities, many of great antiquity, such as Beirut, Tyre and Sidon, Joppa and Gaza, what is unusual is the number of modern, that is, 13th century, sites. Among the 120 names on the map, 30 are Crusader castles, some constructed by the lay orders of the Temple and the Hospital, and some conquered and reconquered several times in the course of the past century and a half--Krak des Chevaliers, Chastel Blanc, Krak of the desert, Montreal, Margat. He also indicates the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the country which was divided between the patriarchies of Jerusalem and Antioch. Some places served multiple functions, as an ancient foundation, as a holy place, as a place fortified by the Crusaders, and as the site of a monastery. Also, unusually for a medieval map, he draws in the current boundaries which divide the various sultanates of the Holy Land from Christian territory.

Another novel feature is his indication of scale, expressed in terms of days' journeys. They appear to be inconsistent, but still it's an attempt. This feature echoes the format of the itineraries, which show the length of the journey between stops on the road. Travel information like this appears in some pilgrimage texts, which may have been one of Matthew's sources.

The unique character of this map is best appreciated by comparing it to the three other maps of the Holy Land made by Matthew. These are bound with copies of the Chronicle, and, while they differ in detail among themselves, are similar in format. Paul Harvey calls them "Acre maps,"⁹ because that city occupies almost half the space with its city walls, towers and numerous interior features. In contrast, Jerusalem, described as "the most worthy city in the world," is a relatively small square in the upper right hand corner with only a few buildings within the battlements. These maps extend from the walled-in tribes of Gog and Magog in northeast Asia to

⁹ Harvey, chapter 8.

Damietta and the road to Alexandria in the south. Descriptive texts on Armenia and Africa¹⁰ extend these into world maps, rather than purely local maps of the Holy Land. Sites in the Holy Land itself are few: the cities along the coast from Sidon to Egypt, and a few scattered sites, such as Nazareth and Bethlehem. He omits the Sea of Galilee and locates Nazareth to the east and south of Jerusalem on one of the maps, and puts the coastal cities of Arsuf (Apollonia) and Gaza¹¹ far inland. The Acre maps are decorated with drawings: camels, ox carts, boats, castles and churches, Noah's ark in Armenia, and Jonah being vomited up by the whale next to Nineveh. There are lengthy passages of text, describing the annual income of the city of Acre, recounting miraculous events in the life of Christ, and warning of the looming end of the world to be brought about by the Tartars. In contrast, the Oxford map is bare of all but a few short identifying phrases, such as the characteristics of the road from Jaffa to Jerusalem. The pictures are small and few—two pitchers at Cana recall the site of the miracle at the wedding, a carrion crow is perched on Mt. Gilboa where Saul and his army were killed, and Lot's wife appears as a pillar of salt near the Dead Sea.

The Acre maps are probably later than the Oxford map. Here we find Masceir, or Mansourah, site of the disastrous defeat of Louis IX and the French army in 1250, an event covered in detail in the Chronicle. Some of the corrections he noted on the Oxford map (the course of the Jordan River, the rivers around Damascus) are made on the Chronicle maps. These maps are oriented to the east, and Egypt is tucked away at the far right. This does not seem to be an error but simply a way of fitting this important area onto the map.

¹⁰ Africa text is on London, British Library, Royal MS 14.C.VII, and Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 26.

¹¹ Gaza is also shown inland on the Oxford map.

What was the purpose of the Oxford map? Lacking the decoration and finish of the Acre maps, it looks like a working copy, from which Matthew composed his later maps. Here we see notes to himself about incorrect locations, and on the facing page are some geographical notes. Matthew made several copies of his map of Britain, making changes and improvements as he went along. Possibly the Oxford map is a first draft, or rather a spatially organized set of notes. During his stint as a chronicle-writer, the Holy Land was very much in the news. Much of the territory once held by Christians had been lost, but there was a great deal of Crusade-vowing and coming and going. Richard of Cornwall, Henry III's younger brother went on Crusade in 1239 and was able to negotiate the release of some French prisoners and to renew the treaty which gave pilgrims access to Jerusalem. Later the conquest of Jerusalem by the Khorezmian Turks in 1244 caused an outpouring of woe and led directly to the Seventh Crusade. As this news reached England, it was duly recorded in the Chronicle, and it is striking to observe that Matthew's knowledge of the geography of the distant Holy Land is almost as good as his knowledge of his own country, as witnessed by his maps of Britain.

What were his sources? Matthew tells us he had seen mappaemundi, most of which gave a prominent position to the Holy Land. Interestingly, the one he copied does not. The area of the Holy Land on the Waltham Abbey mappamundi has only Jerusalem and Tyre and the rest of the space is occupied by a lengthy text on this and other world maps he had seen. The geographical configuration of the Holy Land on world maps, such as the Hereford Cathedral map, show deep gulfs on either side. Here the Oxford map is closer to the sea chart, with its northern orientation, and its north-south alignment of the Eastern Mediterranean coast. Although the oldest surviving sea chart is dated about 1275, we now have reason to believe that sea charts existed even

earlier.¹² Comparing the coastal names on the Oxford map to an early 14th century sea chart, there is a high correspondence between them.¹³ Matthew's wind diagram, which shows the classical 12-wind system supplemented by four additional winds to make the 16-wind system used by sailors, also suggests some familiarity with sea travel. He also gives an English directional name to each wind.¹⁴

Returning pilgrims wrote up their experiences, sometimes in quite detailed fashion, but it is difficult to know which of these he might have seen. Certainly visitors to St. Alban's Abbey, Crusaders and pilgrims coming back from the Holy Land, might have added to his store of information.

Paul Harvey has suggested that the Oxford map is a copy and that Matthew had little time to copy the original correctly. While his dramatization of the process of copying is plausible, it is hard to imagine who might have made this original map. We know of no other mapmaker of this period with the skill and inventiveness of Matthew Paris. It seems more likely to me that this is an original assembly from several models that were available to him: sea chart, world map, travelers' accounts. The Oxford map can be most closely compared to the itineraries and the maps of Britain, which are also organized around a north-south itinerary, and show a similar interest in traveled, as opposed to imagined, space.

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¹² Patrick Gautier Dalché, *Carte Marine et Portulan au XIIe siècle* (Rome: Palais Farnese, 1995), pp. 5-6.

¹³ Names on Vesconte's sea chart of 1320 which correspond to the Oxford map are Antioch, Margat, Tripoli, Nessim, Gibeleta, (Jubeleth), Beirut, Sidon, Tyre (Sur), Castel Pelegrini, Cesaria, Arzuffo, Jaffa, Escallona, Gazara. Vatican City, BAV, Ms. Vat. Lat. 1960, f. 265v. Reproduced in Harvey, *Medieval Maps of the Holy Land*, p. 29.

¹⁴ London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero D.I, fol. 185v.

