MENTAL MAPS: SEEING LIKE A ROMAN

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Late on the evening of January 12th, 49 BC, Julius Caesar, accompanied by a few friends, jumped into a carriage in Ravenna, after borrowing some mules from a local baker, in order to travel to Rimini. It was to be a momentous journey, since by crossing the River Rubicon, where his army was awaiting his arrival, he would automatically trigger off the civil war that changed the course of history. The road he took was probably the via Popilia which joined the via Aemilia at Cesina, one of the great highways of Republican Italy. Yet somehow he lost the way and, after wandering about all night, at dawn a guide showed him the way back to the highway on foot by narrow paths.

In the dark, I suppose, anyone can get lost. But why should Caesar have needed a guide to get back on the road once it became light? The countryside north of the Rubicon is not difficult, and Caesar’s party must have travelled the road often. The road, yes. But once off the main road, they needed to know the country, and for that they needed a map. The most important march in history nearly did not happen for want of a map, and Julius Caesar nearly missed his own moment in it.

1. Geography and Chorography

I use the example to re-examine some questions about itineraries and maps in the Roman world. If even a meticulous military commander like Caesar possessed, at most, only an itinerary of his route, and if this fact passed without comment in the second century AD when Suetonius told the story, what are we to conclude about

1 A primitive, short version of this paper was tried out on an audience of medievalists in Parma. I am grateful now for the chance to improve it and to submit it to John for his approval— with the same trepidation as I felt many years ago while he was trying to turn me into a Roman historian.

2 Suetonius Caes. 31.
Roman achievements in geography and cartography? How did they perceive the world and its ordering of space? And what, if anything, might this tell us about Roman concepts of frontiers and empire?

Briefly, for the sake of completeness, I begin with some banalities about the main streams of Roman spatial representations. Surveys of lands in their cosmic context (geographia/ges periodos) were well known to the Greeks, which the Romans regularly cited but hardly developed. By contrast were detailed descriptions of regions and places (chorographia), to which Romans and Romanized writers contributed with an enthusiasm engendered by an expanding empire. To these two cultural rivers must be added the lesser stream of land survey (agrimensio). The skill of ‘gnomonics’, as Pliny calls it, also owed a debt to Greece, but developed as a peculiarly intense Roman technology to serve Roman law, administration and imperialism.

Unfortunately it is never clear when either the Greek termination -graphia or the Latin equivalents descripta or depicta meant ‘written’ as opposed to ‘pictorial’ representations, nor how much written commentary accompanied pictorial maps, nor whether the distinction between geography and chorography was always strictly maintained. Vitruvius, for example, while almost certainly looking at a ‘geographic’ pictorial representation of the world, referred to physical features, such as rivers, “which are drawn and described (picta itemque scripta) by chorographers.” It is equally impossible to be sure, when the Elder Pliny referred to situs depicti apropos of Armenia or to the forma of Ethiopia contained in a military report, whether he meant pictorial maps or written descriptions. But even if the language to describe them was ambiguous, the broad distinction between the two main categories was clear enough to Ptolemy in the second century AD—the one, he said, requiring a mathematician, the other an artist.

From all these sources, however, the only certain map, in any sense that we would recognise it, to survive from antiquity is the celebrated Peutinger Table, although preserved in a medieval copy. The

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2 Pliny NH 2.187.
3 De arch. 8.2.6.
4 Compare Plautus Poen. 1114: “formam verbis depinxiti”; or Cic. De rep. 2.29: “in sermone depinxerit”. Although forma in Plautus’s example means a woman’s looks, the word can mean a ‘shape’, or even a diagram; Campbell 2000, 34.