Book Reviews


The objective of this book is to introduce the reader to a revitalized understanding of medieval mapping both of land and sea 1300-1492. This is done through an analysis of the genres of mappa mundi, sea charts known as portolan charts in this era (and later) and the world maps which followed Ptolemaic conventions from the reception of his MS Geographia, first brought to Italy from Constantinople in 1397 by the Greek scholar Manuel Chrysoloras. Thereafter the MS was copied extensively and became the basic reference point for much later discussion, both for and against. Specifically the aim of the book is to show the continuation of traditional modes of mapping alongside the changes which occurred in each genre and how they interacted with each other in the era before Columbus.

The author describes the efforts of the medieval cartographers to accommodate new seas and lands and thus change their world views as news of Africa below the Equator, the Atlantic islands off Africa, the extent of the Indian Ocean, the countries of the Far East, of China, Japan and the East Indies, (and even knowledge of the Baltic Sea and the far north of Europe and Asia), percolated into the great commercial ports of the Mediterranean. The Church itself was also manifestly interested. At its ecclesiastical gatherings at the Council of Constance in 1414 and of Florence in 1439, when an Ethiopian delegation came bearing witness to inhabited lands to the south of the Equator, the developing world map was a subject for discussion and speculation.

Why write this book? The European discovery of the Americas has dominated how we see the history of cartography that is before and after Columbus’s arrival in the West Indies in 1492. This American-centred view (not that Columbus, of course, thought he was there) requires some re-balancing if we are to understand the changes that happened before this event and appreciate how the maps reflected them, and how they
themselves sometimes encouraged the possibility of an expanding world; one much larger than the oikoumene of the Greeks, with unknown spaces to be explored by sea. At the time of going to press the monumental *History of Cartography* volume III for the European Renaissance was not yet out, although it is now and should be consulted if you want to study the subject further. Much of the history of cartography for the medieval period had been revised since the first volume covering the medieval period had appeared in 1987 and thus it was timely to provide a succinct overview of what that research (including the author’s own research) had achieved. This book provides that overview.

In many ways Evelyn Edson has re-balanced our view of the later medieval period and in doing so has provided us with the latest scholarship in the field which she has incorporated into her wide ranging and very readable account. She places the cartographical experience in context, including accounts of travel writers like Marco Polo, the likely influence of the Catalan Jewish merchant community active in North Africa, and the works of Arab travel writers like Ibn Battutah. Of particular interest is her attempt, largely successful in my view, to integrate the history of the three genres so that is possible to see the impact one had on the other, without falling into the usual trap of only seeing the maps with the most ‘up-to-date’ information as the most important. It is critical to understand contemporaries’ own ways of making and seeing maps and thus what they expected in them if we are to appreciate their significance at the time, rather than importing anachronistic values into the past which would have had little or no meaning to contemporaries. The purpose for which a map was drawn and then used is essential to any history of maps. What a cleric may expect and what his audience may expect when he writes a history and geography of the world with an explanatory illustrative map as did Ranulph Higden (c. 1299-1364) is not going to be the same entity for the same audience as the famous Catalan chart on panels (commonly known as the Catalan atlas) for a French King (c 1375) nor again the same as a portolan chart drawn by Andrea Bianco of Venice (fl. 1436-60) for use at sea. The book brings out this diversity and the ability, sometimes not understood by earlier commentators, of the craftsmen, artists, sailors, and of clerical scholars and of map collectors at the time to recognize the necessary co-existence of these different types of maps and charts drawn for different purposes. Andrea Bianco a ship’s captain, for example, not only made portolan charts but also had copied world maps constructed after Claudius Ptolemy, and is thought to have contributed to the great mappa