

Moral and Religious Geography in Medieval Constructions of the World

Today, most people would probably define a map as a document that contains society's most accurate geographical information about the world and which precisely illustrates the physical layout of the Earth. In the Middle Ages, however, maps did not have such a unified or clearly-defined purpose. Due to the ways in which medieval people thought about their surroundings, their maps frequently incorporated not only physical observations of the world but also a wide variety of cultural, historical, and religious ideas and landmarks. The thirteenth-century Ebsdorf map serves as an accurate compilation of many of the common conceptions about the world at that time, which also appeared in works such as travel itineraries and other narratives. In these works, the travelers, writers, and mapmakers of the Middle Ages attempted to balance the observable geography of their surroundings against medieval people's preexisting ideas about the moral and religious construction of the world.

Efforts to combine abstract values with a concrete world often resulted in a distinct moral directionality superimposed onto a basic geographic framework. Many maps and travel accounts included multiple geographical gradients that illustrated medieval people's ideas about their own and others' values. To begin, people tended to assign a variation in morality to the North-South axis of the world. In *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, for instance, Mandeville provided his readers with an itinerary of his travels throughout the world and included many details about the people and culture of each place he saw. Near the beginning of his journey, he described several groups of people that seemed fairly similar to his own. He did not portray these people as extraordinary, but simply mentioned that "in Cyprus men hunt with papions which are like

Comment [JWG1]: Title in bold

Comment [JG2]: We still do these things, too, sometimes, don't we? Tourist maps, theme maps, etc? We do, though, make the distinction between these maps and "accurate" maps.

Comment [JG3]: This is a good, strong opening paragraph, with a nicely defined thesis.

Comment [JG4]: This is a beautiful sentence. Very elegant and informative.

Comment [JG5]: What do you mean by gradients?

leopards” or that in Stagira “men hold a solemn feast each year” in honor of Aristotle.¹ In the vicinity of Egypt, Mandeville did describe “a monstrously shaped beast [that] had the shape of a man from the navel upward, and from there downward the form of a goat.”² However, beings such as these clearly comprised the exception, not the rule. Mandeville expressed considerable surprise at encountering this creature and noted that “the head of that beast, with the horns, is still kept at Alexandria as a marvellous thing.”³ Overall, Mandeville seemed to view other people of the northern part of the world as civilized and ordinary, similar to himself. However, as he got farther and farther from his home - in particular, farther south - his stories became increasingly fantastical. Midway through his book, he crossed into a new region of the world and observed that “in this land, and many others thereabouts, the star called Polus Arcticus, cannot be seen.”⁴ Here, in the Southern Hemisphere, Mandeville’s descriptions of the local peoples became much less favorable. He told of one island “where the people are like animals lacking reason... and do not speak, but hiss to one another like adders,” and another where “men and women... have heads like dogs” and make a habit of eating their prisoners of war.⁵ In short, the farther Mandeville traveled from home, the less the people he encountered seemed to conform to his own moral standards. The stark contrast between his accounts of people in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres demonstrated that for Mandeville, a clear relationship existed between geographical direction and his opinions about his own moral superiority to people of other cultures.

Comment [JG6]: Egypt is starting to get sorta south-ish, though. Perhaps there is a gradient at play here?

Comment [JG7]: Good...key point.

Comment [JG8]: Nicely done. Well argued paragraph. You might have given some thought to whether or not there is any middle ground in Mandeville between the extremes.

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1. C. W. R. D. Moseley, trans., *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 56, 50.
 2. Moseley, 64.
 3. Moseley, 64.
 4. Moseley, 127.
 5. Moseley, 134.

The idea of a supremacy of North over South did not appear solely in Mandeville's text.

To name one of many occurrences of this bias, Marco Polo, too, described "monstrous races" on the Southern edge of his world. In Zanzibar, Polo claimed to have come across a people who were "so stout and so large-limbed that they have the appearance of giants... They have big mouths and their noses are so flattened and their lips and eyes so big that they are horrible to look at. Anyone who saw them in another country would say that they were devils."⁶ Like Mandeville, Polo largely reserved such stories to his descriptions of the South, revealing a common line of thinking between these two, and probably other, Europeans. This North-South morality made up an integral part of the way Mandeville and Polo understood their world, to the extent that they each tied it into their own descriptions of the places to which they traveled.

Comment [JG9]: awkward

Comment [JG10]: Good. Now what do you do with it?

These preexisting cultural ideas held by medieval people became intertwined with geography in other ways as well, including in mapmaking. The Ebsdorf map embodies the ideals of medieval mappaemundi by incorporating a staggering number of images and details, including, on the southern edge of the map, many figures akin to the uncivilized, southern people that Polo and Mandeville described. This portion of the map displays all sorts of disagreeable people, some with distorted limbs, others much larger than the surrounding figures, and still others with animal-like features such as horns or hooves. As in other works of the Middle Ages, these grotesque figures exist only on the southernmost part of the map, exhibiting the medieval mentality that North implied a moral superiority over South. Furthermore, the Ebsdorf map actually overlays the world onto the body of Jesus, with South oriented toward Jesus's left hand. The Latin translation names this side "sinister," a term that also suggests evil or wickedness. By

6. Ronald Latham trans., *The Travels of Marco Polo* (London: Penguin Books, 1958), 301.

orienting the map in this fashion, the map's creator further connected geographic directions with medieval people's sense of good and evil.

In addition to large-scale representations of the world such as those of Mandeville, Polo, and the creator of the Ebsdorf map, other people's smaller images of the world also included a zone of evilness around the edges. Many of these less-expansive views of the world came from peasants or other people who did not travel far beyond their homes. In her work, *A Medieval Life: Cecilia Penifader of Brigstock, c. 1295-1344*, Judith Bennett describes one such peasant as she speculates on what the life of Cecilia Penifader may have looked like. Despite the lack of documentation about Cecilia's life, Bennett discusses the possibilities for this medieval peasant who lived her entire life within a small radius of her home. While Cecilia may have had some idea that much more of the world existed beyond just her village, this knowledge likely did not inform her everyday thoughts and decisions. However, her view of her own surroundings in some ways still paralleled the way other, more traveled people saw the world. In contrast with the church and houses near the center of her village, which represented safe and familiar spaces, "to Cecilia and her family, the wooded parts of the forest were a frightening place where outlaws, fairies, and other unknowns might be encountered."⁷ Considering Cecilia's unease with regard to the woods at the far edge of her known world, her local space becomes something of a microcosm of the world as Polo and Mandeville saw it: a collection of physical places defined by their moral characteristics. Both Polo and Mandeville's expansive world and Cecilia's small one reflected the blending of geography and values that also takes shape along the North-South axis on the Ebsdorf map.

Comment [JG11]: Yes. There is a fairly long linguistic tradition in Europe, and esp. in England, of associating North with right (the direction) and South with left.

Comment [JG12]: Rather than using the terms large and small here, it might be more useful to use terms like global and local.

Comment [JG13]: Good

Comment [JG14]: Again, good. An interesting point to consider, here, is that for Cecilia's people the forest also represented opportunity...its where people carved out new places to live and work. So there's an interesting balance at play there. A frontier of fear and possibility.

Comment [JG15]: Nicely written.

7. Judith M. Bennett, *A Medieval Life: Cecilia Penifader of Brigstock, c. 1295-1344* (Boston: McGraw Hill College, 1999), 24.

Apart from a moral division between North and South, most people also assigned different values to East and West. These ideas likely stemmed from the Bible, an important text to countless medieval Christians. In the book of Genesis, the Bible described the creation of paradise, saying that “Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden.”⁸ The plethora of information in the Bible, and thus this description of the location of paradise, provided many medieval people with a basis for how they thought about the creation and structure of the world. Once again, Mandeville and his *Travels* serve as an example of the prevalence of this line of thinking. Toward the end of Mandeville’s book, as he traveled farther and farther east, he noted that “beyond these isles I have told you of... going still east, there is no inhabited land... only wastes and wilderness and great crags and mountains and a dark land... That dark land and those deserts last right to the Earthly paradise, in which Adam and Eve were put.”⁹ Even though he admitted that “Of Paradise I cannot speak properly, for I have not been there,” Mandeville still believed the Bible’s account of paradise and incorporated it into his own view of the world. Similarly, the creator of the Ebsdorf map illustrated Eden, complete with Adam and Eve eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge, on the easternmost part of the map. The map also gives paradise - and the East - an increased significance by associating it with the head of the figure of Jesus that encompasses the world. Additionally, the orientation of the map places East at the top, further emphasizing its importance and the influence of biblical ideas in the Middle Ages. All together, this preferential treatment of East in medieval representations of the world highlighted the general belief that East represented goodness and the ideal of Christian morality.

Comment [JG16]: Yes and no...most of them couldn't read it, so its important, but less as a text than as a received story.

Comment [JG17]: Good, subtle point.

Comment [JG18]: This is a good discussion of the East. What about the West?

8. Gen. 2:8 (New International Version).

9. Moseley, 183.

Apart from information about the structure of the world, the Bible also provided people with the fundamental stories of the Christian faith. In a similar manner, the medieval perspective of the world interconnected the details of the physical world with their religious significance, signifying a projection of people's religious values onto the way they understood the world. The writings of William Wey, a fifteenth-century priest and traveler, exemplified this connection between geography and religion. Wey saw and described the world from the angle of a travel itinerary. In his travels, and his subsequent writing, he focused only on the places with the most religious significance -- to him, these locations represented the most important features of the world.¹⁰ Just as Wey focused on the world's religious geography, so too did the creator of the Ebsdorf map. Religious references permeate the Ebsdorf map, from its outline to its smallest details. On its outer edges, the map includes Jesus's head, hands, and feet, as if the world itself made up Jesus's body. This image gives the map a strong connection to Christianity and indicates a somewhat blurred distinction between geographical and spiritual ideas. Additionally, the creator of the Ebsdorf map paid little attention to the physical locations of many places, opting instead to draw the map according to a more religious scale. Jerusalem, for instance, occupies the very center of the map due to its great importance to Christianity and to the medieval world, as it did on nearly all mappaemundi.¹¹ Apart from the Holy Land, the map includes numerous other Biblical places and stories, such as the toppled tower of Babel shown just east of Jerusalem.¹² In its upper left corner, the map also depicts the legend of Gog and Magog - uncivilized people trapped by a ring of mountains who will eventually become free and

Comment [JG19]: Somewhat? It makes geography subservient to faith, doesn't it?

Comment [JG20]: It might be worth noting here that Mandeville gives a rationale for this pretty early on...something about standing in the middle of the room so that everyone hears you.

10. Francis Davey, trans., *The Itineraries of William Wey* (Oxford: The Bodleian Library, 2010).

11. Evelyn Edson, *The World Map, 1300-1492: The Persistence of Tradition and Transformation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 20-21.

12. Gen. 11:1-9 (New International Version).

torment the world.¹³ Images such as these fill the map, demonstrating the significant religious component to the way medieval people understood the layout and relative importance of the spaces around them.

In addition to maps such as the Ebsdorf map, people in the Middle Ages produced numerous other representations of the world, nearly all infused with some degree of religious symbolism. A closer look at Mandeville's travel account, for example, reveals a close parallel with the ideals of mappaemundi. Like a mappamundi, Mandeville's writing did generally show the relative locations of the major continents, cities, and landmarks, but ultimately his scale came mostly from religious symbolism. Just as Jerusalem made up the center of mappaemundi, Mandeville reached the Holy Land approximately halfway through his book, illustrating his understanding of the world on a largely symbolic level. Although Mandeville represented the world in words rather than images, as a mappamundi would have, he still managed to give Jerusalem the central location in the world that he felt it deserved. Regardless of the geographic knowledge Mandeville and others may have had, they still chose to depict their world according to their preexisting ideas about religion. This integration of physical information about the world with the familiarity of religion may have reflected medieval people's desire to make their world more manageable to think about and understand. It makes sense that in order to attempt to comprehend an enormous world full of unknowns, people would have tried to translate geographic information into a more accessible context. This method of thinking appears even in very small, local perspectives of the world, such as that of the peasant Cecilia Penifader. Bennett notes that "Cecilia's religious world was strikingly homogenous" and "offered no alternative

Comment [JG21]: Good.

Comment [JG22]: There are actually a number of medieval maps, esp. early on, that are wholly written. The term "map" starts out being fairly flexible.

Comment [JG23]: This might be a good place for a paragraph. It's a bit of a sharp shift as it stands.

Comment [JG24]: Awkward. Maybe "more knowable" or more "comprehensible". Or even "more legible" if you're feeling academic-y.

Comment [JG25]: Good point.

13. Rev. 20:7-8 (New International Version).

religious practices,”¹⁴ which ultimately meant that the single church in Cecilia’s village unified the townspeople in a common religion. By following traditional rituals associated with the church, these people came to accept the church as a place of comfort and conformity. However, in addition to uniting people through worship, the church also hosted a variety of other activities such as the storing of “grain, cloth, or animals” and meetings “to debate local issues.”¹⁵ By fitting so many aspects of their lives into one small space, Cecilia and those around her used the church as a way to make their world more condensed and manageable. Just as Cecilia and her fellow townspeople created a more workable perspective of the world by centering much of it in the church, the Ebsdorf map, too, probably helped medieval people to gain an understanding of the world by associating it with already-familiar religious stories and symbolism. This use of Christianity to comprehend the world emphasizes that for people throughout the Middle Ages, religious values formed an integral part of the way people attempted to think about and describe the world around them.

Despite the wide variety of media medieval people used to portray their world, their maps, stories, and travel accounts demonstrated a clear influence of their preexisting moral and religious values on their attempts to integrate geographical information into an understandable whole. Contrary to the modern notion that geography represents a separate issue from culture and religion, people in the Middle Ages did not see this divide and instead saw the world through the lens of their own values and ideas. This complex view of the world translated into the ways people attempted to depict the world, both in their writings and on maps such as the Ebsdorf map, and reveals that medieval representations of the world grew not only from their creators’

Comment [JG26]: Citation goes at the end of the sentence.

Comment [JG27]: It might be helpful to make clear the distinction between the Church as an institution and the church as a physical structure.

Comment [JG28]: Nice parallel.

Comment [JG29]: We still do this, too... just in different ways. We think in terms of 1st world and 3rd / developing world, East and West, democracy vs. extremism, etc. It doesn’t so much affect how we see understand physical geography, but it makes a big difference in how we think about cultural and economic geographies.

14. Bennett, 44.

15. Bennett, 53.

conscious goals but also from their innate values and preconceptions about how the world should look.

Comment [JG30]: Probably not the right word here. Engrained? Learned? Received? Innate suggests these were ideas about the world that they were born with.

This is an excellent essay. Well argued and well written. You make a number of subtle, insightful observations, and you do a very good job of bringing the four main texts that you use into conversation with each other. Your paragraphs support your argument throughout, and you do a good job of keeping your lines of thought in order. Sometimes with longer essays, as you bring in more sources and try to keep more and more balls in the air, this gets harder. You've done a good job here. I greatly enjoyed reading your paper.

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I think that the next thing you want to start thinking about in writing essays like this is broader questions of importance. Why do some of these things matter (if they, in fact, do)? What are some of the broader questions and academic arguments that your analysis feeds into? You already write well, and do a good job of assessing and connecting the texts in front of you. Now you need to start to work to bring your work into conversation with other authors and thinkers. That makes life harder...it means that you aren't working inside a hermetic bubble anymore. But its also how you make your own work matter more broadly.

As I have told you, I greatly enjoyed having you in class...it was a great privilege. I wish you all the best luck in the future. If I can be of any help to you, please don't hesitate to let me know.

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References

Maps

Ebsdorf Map. 13th century. Medieval map.

Primary and Secondary Written Sources

Bennett, Judith M. *A Medieval Life: Cecilia Penifader of Brigstock, c. 1295-1344*. Boston: McGraw Hill College, 1999.

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