

**TITLE:** *The Albi or Merovingian Map*

**DATE:** 750 A.D.

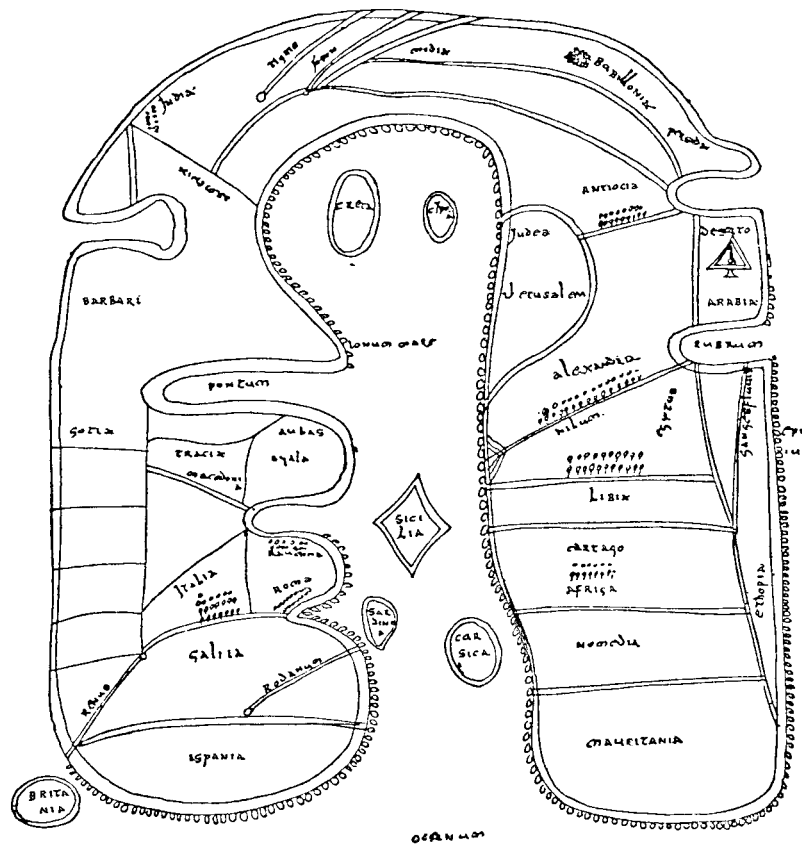
**AUTHOR:** *Unknown*

**DESCRIPTION:** In the library of Albi, in Languedoc, France exists one of the earliest *mappamundi* that has survived from the period loosely termed, the Middle Ages. It is bound in an eighth century manuscript, measures 29 x 23 cm and was designed to illustrate the cosmographies of Julius Honorius (5<sup>th</sup> century) and Paulus Orosius (375-418). This map shows the *oikoumene* [known inhabited world] as a rectangle with rounded corners, its outline broken by the massive basin of the Mediterranean in the west, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf in the south, and the Caspian in the north. The Caspian Sea and the Red Sea are identified by inscriptions, and so is the *Pontus* [Black Sea], represented as a simple bay of the Mediterranean without its distinct shape. Within the Mediterranean, two seas are identified by the inscriptions: the Ionian and the Adriatic. Few Mediterranean islands are shown, and in the northwest, beyond the *oikoumene*, Britain appears. Below the *oikoumene* the inscription '*Oceanum*' identifies the outer body of water. Within the *oikoumene* straight lanes indicate the boundaries between lands. Not all spaces between the lines are inscribed. The map has east at the top.

The geographical content is simply and curiously executed and represents a mere sketch of the known world. Some of the more obvious misrepresentations include *Judea* appearing to the south of the Mediterranean, *Antioch* to the southeast of Jerusalem, Crete to the north of Cyprus, Sardinia to the north of Corsica, and the Ganges in the south of Africa. Furthermore, the *zephyr* [west wind] is turned into a south wind; the Caspian Sea is displayed as an inlet from the Northern Ocean; Sicily is sharply four-cornered; and Britain is reduced to about the size of Corsica, and lies close off the northwest coast of Spain. Spain and France, together, form a single peninsula. The Red Sea, Persian Gulf, Black Sea, and Caspian Sea (all colored green as is the Rhine, Rhone, Nile, etc.) are made parallel, with a general direction from north to south; the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf are exactly opposite to the *Euxine* [Black Sea] and Caspian Seas.

The habitable world is pictured as an oblong, rounded at the corners, and surrounded by the ocean. The map is generally confined to the Mediterranean lands, or the area of the "Old Empire", and Asia is reduced to a fringe of land on the east of the Mediterranean. Yet, though so strictly Roman in plan, Italy is very crudely drawn. *India*, *Media* and *Babylonia* appear all together along the eastern boundary of the map, where the Tigris and *Phison* [Ganges?] suggest an Oriental *Paradise* which is not expressly indicated. The Nile joins the Red Sea and the Mediterranean; Mount Sinai is designated by a huge triangle, and all of the people of northern Europe are included in *Gothia*.

Yet, poor though it is scientifically, the *Albi* map, as it stands, is the unaltered work from the time of the Venerable Bede and Charles Martel (ca. 730 A.D.), and, accordingly, venerable as one of the oldest geographical monument of Latin or Western Europe to have survived from the Middle Ages.



This map, known as the *Albi* or *Merovingian* map was produced in Spain or in the southwest of France during the second half of the eighth century. It is found in a miscellaneous manuscript and precedes the chapter of a geographical content from the *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* by Paulus Orosius. Because of this, given that, out of the fifty place names on the map, forty-one appear in the Orosian text, and because some details, such as the depiction of the Caspian Sea, follow the description purveyed by Orosius (1, 2, 48), this map has been regarded as “Orosian”. However, the map differs from the geographical notions of this Latin author in various respects, and as Evelyn Edson points out, forty-nine of the fifty place names appear in Book XIV of the *Etymologiae* of Archbishop Isidore (#205).

The map, measuring 29 x 23 cm, fills the entire surface of the folio and shows the world in a rectangular shape with rounded corners. The Mediterranean Sea acquires a great prominence and imbues it with an unusual “horseshoe” shape. It is oriented to the east in the upper portion, although Asia receives little attention due to its geographical size being reduced and the absence of depictions typically associated with this continent, such as the *Paradise*. This absence, as well as other aspects of the map, such as the presence of dividing lines of the terrain into provinces or the representation of inlets which we mentioned earlier in the map of the *Christian Topography* of Cosmas Indicopleustes (#202), would enable us to place the *Albi* map in close conjunction with Roman geography or even Roman cartography. Based on the content of the remaining works in the manuscript, written by different hands but in the same epoch, and in Visigothic script, Evelyn Edson asserts that the *Albi* map could also have been conceived as an aid to oratory or in monastic studies. In the same way, due to the inclusion of

certain geographic elements of major importance for Christianity, such as the Red Sea [*Rubrum*], Mount Sinai [*Sind*]—shown in a triangular shape—the desert [*Deserto*], and Jerusalem [*Iherusalem*], we might postulate that perhaps the map was used for spiritual pilgrimages which enabled the monks to visit the Holy Places, and also to recreate the exodus of the people of Israel on their journey to the Promised Land. Although the map does not fully comply with Orosius' (T-O) types, it has nevertheless been inserted into a manuscript entitled *Miscellanea scilicet dictionarium glossae in Evangelia*, which contains some of the Orosius' chapters on geography, as well as other works such as Julius Honorius.

The map is oriented with East at the top and incorporates only a few biblical references. There is no depiction of *Paradise*, *Noah's Ark* or *Palestine*. The only Christian features shown on the map are the triangular *Mount Sinai*, *Judea* and *Jerusalem*. The four rivers of *Paradise* are shown flowing into the surrounding oceans. Due to the poor condition of the original, the enhanced copy shown above is a redrawing of the *Albi* map where the names of the provinces are clearer to see.

The map shows the inhabited world in an oblong and wide strip form, wrapped around the Mediterranean Sea and externally surrounded by the all-encompassing Ocean. Because of this distortion, all the continents too have been squeezed into a narrow and oblong form. The surrounding Ocean is shown with three bays. On the left of the map (north) the bay represents the Caspian Sea, which was the accepted norm during the old Greek as well as early medieval times. The remaining two bays at the right (south) of the map represent the Persian Gulf (top) and the Red Sea. The world is thus divided into the three continents by the river Nile and the Black Sea (*Pontum*).

The Mediterranean occupies the central area of the map and is shown with a number of bays and islands. There are five islands, which bear the legends of *Sicilia*, *Sardinia*, *Corsica*, *Crete* and *Cypra* (Cyprus). The bays or gulfs are located at the northern shores of the Mediterranean, the first being the *Ligurian Sea*, the second the Adriatic and the third represents the combination of the Aegean Sea and the Black Sea, here named *Pontum*. The first peninsula from the west (bottom) of the map is Italy, followed by Greece and then Asia Minor (unnamed). The eastern end of the Mediterranean bears the name of *Ionum Mare* [Ionian Sea] inscribed in the upper middle area of the sea. In the surrounding ocean *Britania* is shown as the sole island.

All the countries are divided by boundaries, itself uncharacteristic of this type of map. However, despite most of the countries in Europe remaining nameless, the cities of *Rome* and *Ravenna* are singled out. This can possibly be attributed to their political and religious importance. Rome was known as an important religious center and Ravenna was the seat of the representatives of Byzantium in Europe, hence their inclusion on the map.

Africa, located to the west of the *Nilus* includes six toponyms: *Mauritania*, *Numidia*, *city of Cartage*, *Libia*, *Ethiopia*, and *Egyptus*. The river *Nilus* is shown flowing between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, while the river Ganges is placed near *Ethiopia*. Asia includes *Armenia*, *India*, *Media*, *Babillonia*, *Persida*, *Antiocia*, *Arabia*, *Alexandria*, *Judea* and *Ierusalem*. Another unmarked double line (possibly the Euphrates) connects Armenia with the Persian Gulf. No other countries are mentioned south of the Caucasus.

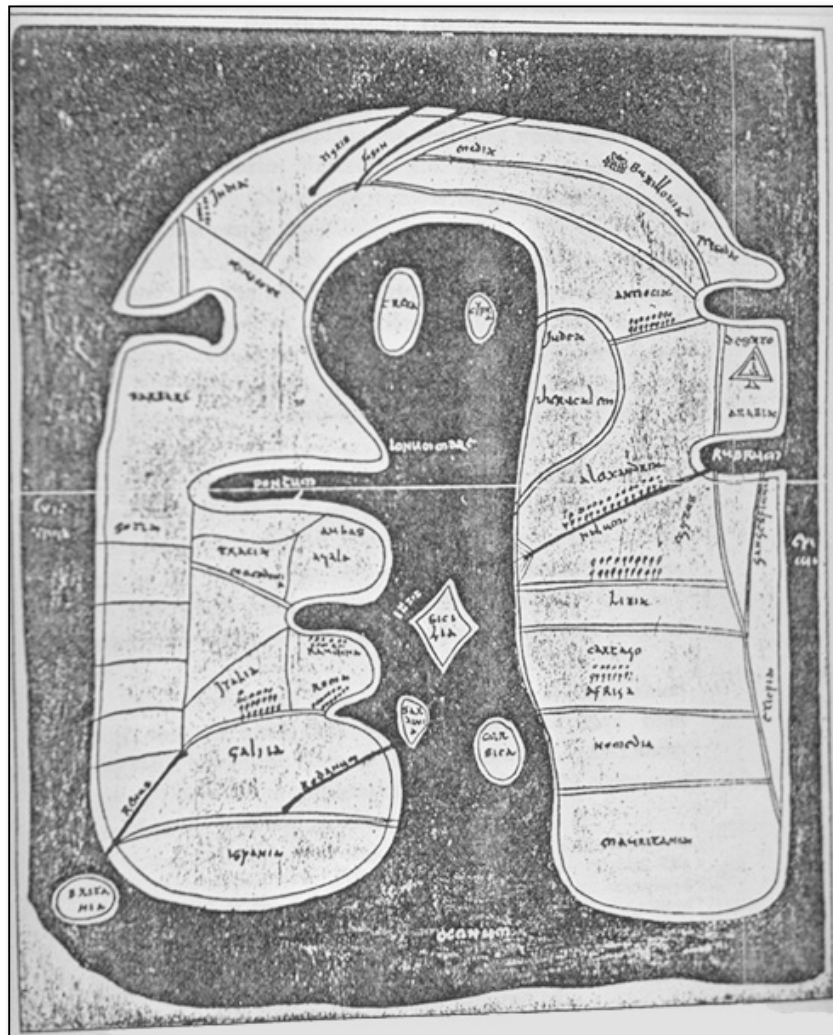
The map differs from the description of Orosius in several respects: it is not shown in tripartite division, it does not name the three continents, and the river *Tanais* (Don), which is usually shown dividing Europe from Asia, is absent.

**LOCATION:** Albi, France, Bibliotheque Municipale, in the manuscript entitled, *Miscellanea scilicet Dictionarium Glosae in Evangelia*, MS 29, f. 57.

**SIZE:** 29 x 23 cm

**REFERENCES:**

- \*Bagrow, L., *The History of Cartography*, p. 46.
- \*Barber, P., *The Map Book*, pp. 42-43.
- \*Beazley, C., *The Dawn of Modern Geography*, volume I, p. 385.
- \*Chekin, Leonid S., *Northern Eurasia in Medieval Cartography*, Brepols, 2006, p. 93.
- \*Edson, E., *Mapping Time and Space, How Medieval Mapmakers viewed their World*, p. 157.
- \*Galichian, R., *Countries South of the Caucasus in Medieval Maps: Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan*, pp. 42-44.
- \*Harley, J. B., *The History of Cartography*, Volume One, p. 347, Figure 18.56.
- \*Kominko, Maja, "The Map of Cosmas, the Albi Map, and the Tradition of Ancient Geography", *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 20:2, 163 – 186.
- \*Pérez, Sandra Sáenz-López, *The Beatus Maps, The Revelation of the World in the Middle Ages*, p. 54.
- \*Safi, A., *Mapping Paradise*, pp. 138-139.
- \*Talbert, Richard J. A., Unger, R. W., *Cartography in Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Fresh Perspectives, New Methods*, 2008, 299 pp.
- \*illustrated

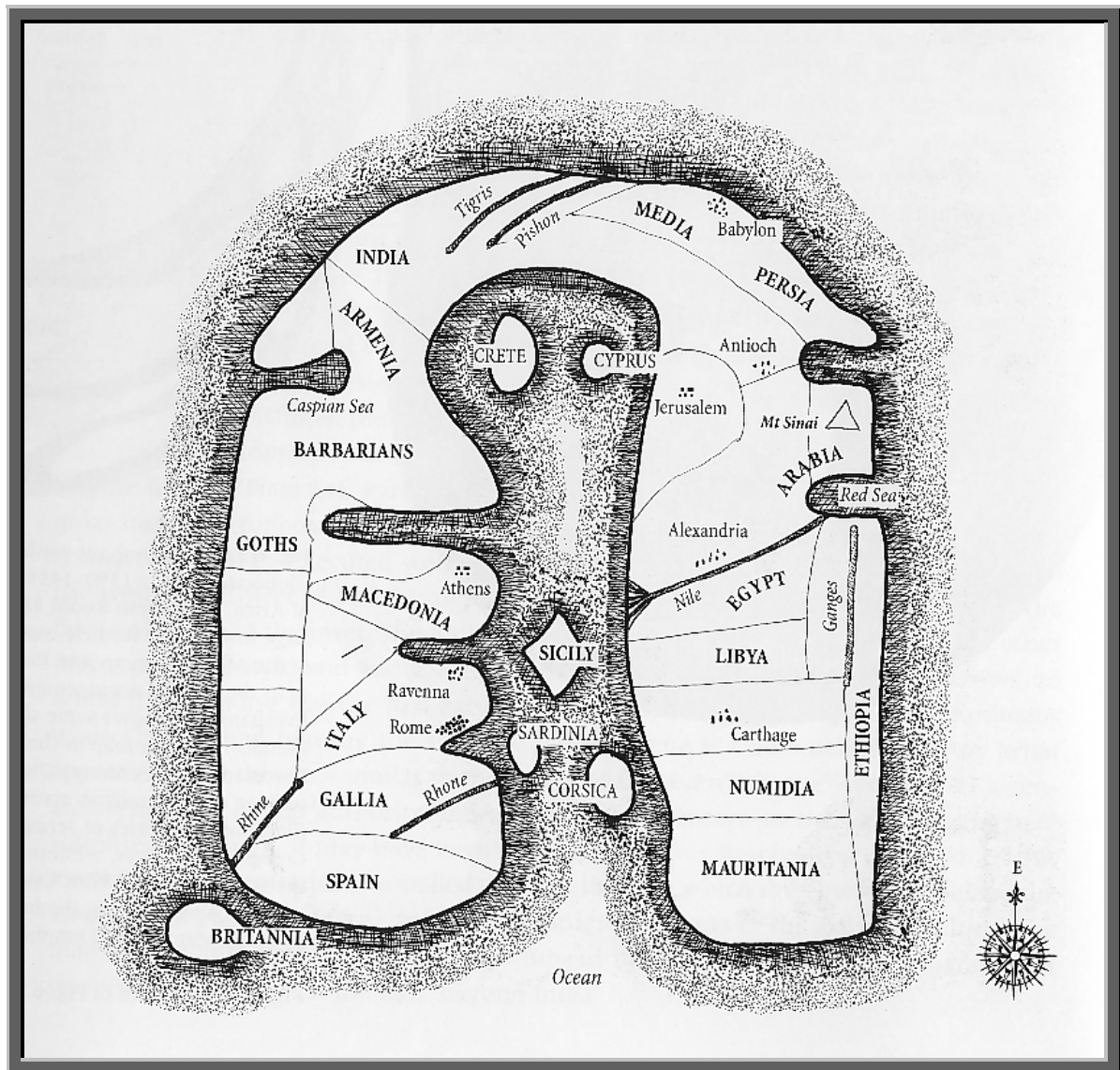






Map of Albi, 750 A.D.  
Mediatheque Pierre Amalric, Albi, France, MS 29, f.57, 29 x 23 cm





Second half of the eighth century. From Spain or Septimania. 290 x 230 mm. East is at the top. About 50 geographic names noted. The arrangement of the gulfs is similar to the maps with four gulfs in the manuscripts of the *Christian Topography* (#202) but does not provide sufficient proof that the Byzantine prototype of these maps influenced the *Albi* map, as was suggested by Wuttke. The regions of the Orient occupy much less space than on the Cosmas maps. As a result, the *Albi* map has an unusual horseshoe form. According to Edson, all names with the exception of Mount Sinai (the triangle between the two gulfs in the south) have correspondences in the *Etymologies* by Isidore of Seville (#205). Forty-one of the fifty names also occur in the introductory part to the *History against the Pagans* by Paulus Orosius, which is included in the manuscript after the map.

The map has some obvious mistakes. The Ganges is incorrectly shown south of the Nile. Ancient geographers defined Sicily as triangular, but it is diamond-shaped on the map.

The Cimmerian Sea is shown in the northern ocean, not in the Pontus. In the northeast, between the Caspian Sea, the *Pontus*, and the *Cimmerian Sea*, the map shows the barbarians and Gothia. In northern Europe, borders of several provinces are indicated, but the names are not given.

**Orosius:** Historian and theologian Paulus Orosius was born in Portugal around 385 CE and died in 420. After his studies in his homeland, in 413 - 414 he spent some time with St Augustine (354 - 430) at Hippo (situated near the present day city of Annaba in Algeria) studying theology. Later, in 415, he visited St. Jerome in Palestine and settled in Bethlehem.

His first works were concerned with religious controversies for which he gained a certain reputation, but his most important work has been the *Seven Books against the Pagans* of which some 200 copies have survived. The book, written in 416 - 417 includes the history of the world for 5,618 years of its existence. It starts with the description of the world, explaining its boundaries and describing an outline map of the world with little topographical data. The text mentions almost 300 toponyms but these names have almost no connection with the names appearing in the other parts of the book. The text of the manuscript does not directly refer to any accompanying maps, though the language is as if a map was being discussed and explained. The following are two extracts from the text of Orosius' *History*.

Our eiders divided the world into three parts,  
all the globe of this mid-earth is surrounded  
by the ocean, which we call Gercecg and  
they named the three parts by three names,  
Asia, Africa and Europe: though some say  
that there were but two parts, one Asia and  
the other Europe.

When describing the nations he says:

"...from the river of Euphrates, west to the Mediterranean and north almost to the mountains, which are called Taurus, [is] the country which they call Armenia";  
and further down the same paragraph  
"... and to the north of the mountains are the countries of Cappadocia and Armenia. Armenia is to the east of Cappadocia."

While nowhere in the text does Orosius mention a map, this does not exclude the possibility that a map was originally appended to his work or that he was consulting a map while writing it. The few attempts at reconstructing it on the basis of the text have led to somewhat different results. Scholars who emphasize the importance of the expression '*Orbis totius terrae*' at the beginning of Orosius' geographical chapter have assumed that according to him the *oikoumene* [known inhabited world] was circular. Others, however, consider this a standard expression referring to the inhabited world or even to the globe and argue that it should not be treated as indicating the shape of the *oikoumene*. Difficulties in the interpretation of some terms aside, the reconstruction of the supposed map of Orosius is precluded by the lack of any proportions or dimensions of the *oikoumene* in his text. He gives dimensions only for Britain and some of the islands of the Mediterranean.

Still, it is clear that the *Albi* map differs from the text of Orosius in a few significant respects. There are, of course, many omissions — as mentioned above, the geographical chapter of Orosius contains more than 300 place-names, whilst on the map only 50 appear. More important, however, the tripartite division of the world emphasized by Orosius is not marked, the continents are not labeled, and the *Tanais* River, which he mentions several times

as the boundary between Europe and Asia, does not appear. There are also a few other discrepancies: Spain is not a triangle as Orosius states, and Corsica and Sardinia are reversed – an error which does not occur in Orosius’ text. Interestingly, although the names of the islands are reversed on the map, their proportions are correct, the southern one being bigger than the northern. Other errors – the placing of the Cimmerian Sea north of Europe and the Ganges in Ethiopia – also cannot be blamed on Orosius, although the latter mistake may perhaps be explained by Orosius’ text: in describing West Africa he mentions the desert south of Mt. Astrix, which extends to the ocean and in which “Ethiopians Gangines roam” (*in quibus oberrant Gangines Aethiopes*). It seems possible therefore that the mapmaker has mistaken the peoples of Gangines for the River Ganges and associated the latter with Ethiopia.

The map follows Orosius in his description of the Caspian Sea as an inlet of the ocean, but, as has already been mentioned, this was a common geographical error in ancient and medieval times. The mapmaker also seems to follow in part Orosius’ confused description of the course of the Nile, showing it flowing between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean but omitting its long detour west, which is described in the text. Moreover, the representation of the Red Sea on the map does not tally with the way its location is described in Orosius’ chapter. Orosius writes that the Indus, which constitutes the western border of India, located at the eastern edge of the earth, flows to the Red Sea. Furthermore he places the Red Sea next to the Persian Gulf, south of *Arachosia*, *Parthia*, *Assyria*, *Persida*, and *Media* – regions he describes as lying between the Indus in the east and the Tigris in the west. It would therefore appear that the Red Sea is for Orosius a part of the ocean southeast of the *oikoumene*. This seems to be confirmed by a passage in which he speaks of “the Arabian Gulf, which extends southward in a long and narrow furrow abounding in rocks and islands, from the Red Sea, that is, from the Ocean”. Thus, for Orosius the Red Sea seems to be located in the south, while the gulf identified on the *Albi* map as *Mare Rubrum* he calls the *Arabian Gulf*. At the same time, since he describes the Israelites as having crossed the Red Sea and mentions the miraculous traces of the Pharaoh’s chariot on the shore of the Red Sea near Alexandria, it appears that he understands the Red Sea as a body of water made up of the Arabian Gulf, the Persian Gulf, and the stretch of ocean between them. This understanding of the Red Sea is common in ancient geography. It occurs for example in the works of Pomponius Mela (#116), one of the principal sources used by Orosius, who describes the Red Sea as having two gulfs – Persian and Arabian.

On the *Albi* map an inscription *Mare Rubrum* appears within the western of the two southern gulfs. This tallies better with Cosmas’ understanding of the Red Sea than with that of Orosius. One should perhaps not make too much of the fact that this inscription appears within the gulf, however, since effectively the Arabian Gulf was in Orosius’ opinion part of the Red Sea. Still, it is clear that the *Albi* map differs from Orosius’ text in many significant ways, and therefore it seems rather unlikely that it reflects his view of the world and refers to his original map if one ever existed. An additional argument is that there are no other examples of a similar map accompanying the text of Orosius. Only three other maps appear in the numerous medieval codices of Orosius’ *History*. The closest in date is the map preserved in the manuscript in St. Gall (Stiftsbibliothek Cod. 621, late eighth or beginning of the ninth century). Two are in much later codices (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Cod. Lat. 17543, dated to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and Tours, Bibliothèque Nationale, dated to the 15<sup>th</sup> century). The map in St. Gall is based on a tripartite division of the world, and although it is square rather than round it remains very close to the numerous *Orbis Terrarum* maps appearing throughout Middle Ages.

Only four of the surviving Orosius manuscripts include some sort of contemporary or latter day maps, most important of which is the map in the library of Albi, France shown

above, which has been appended to the chapter on Orosius' geographical work. Orosius states that "according to the ancients, the world is divided into three parts, therefore it is assumed that he was alluding to the T-O division of the earth and his maps were based on the tripartite world, divided by the Mediterranean Sea and the rivers *Tanais* [Don] and Nile.

As mentioned above, although this map is said to have been prepared for Orosius, it is not a typical T-O type map, therefore one could extrapolate, not typically Orosian. The *Albi* map contains some 50 place-names and from the designations that are mentioned in Orosius' text only 41 appear in this map. Paradoxically, 49 of the names in the book are to be found in Isidore's map of the world (#205).

The German cartographer and geographer Konrad Miller has drawn a map of the world as per the list of toponyms and descriptions given by Orosius. Below is a copy of Miller's reconstruction, typically T-O in shape, with the Mediterranean Sea rivers Nile and *Tanais* acting as the natural borders of Asia, Africa and Europe, Oriented with East at the top.

In this map *Albania* is shown to occupy the area between the *Euxinus Pontes* (the Black Sea) and the *Mare Caspium*, north of the *Caucasus Mountains*, while *Colchis* is placed south of the *Mons Caucasus* and the *Porte Caspiae*, which should be the Daryal Gorge. The Caucasus Mountains are shown as a very long ranged mountains extending from west of the Caspian to east of India.

Armenia (undefined red) straddles *Mons Taurus* and is the source of the rivers *Tigris* and *Euphrates*. Above *Armenia* the mountain range cutting into the *Taurus* has the legend *Montes Taurus* (Armenian Mountains), which should be the Armenian Chain or Range and to its south, at the junction of the two mountain ranges there is a vignette of a gate indicating Gates or the *Pillars of Armenia* [*Armenia pilae*]. The northern part of these mountains is separated from the rest by a second gate named *Portae Caspiae* [the Caspian Gates]. To the east of the gates the range is named *Mons Caspiu* and to its north, *Caucasus*. Given their location, the Caspian Gates can only be reference to the Daryal Gorge the midst of the Caucasus range.

The provinces near and south of Caucasian Mountains included in the Orosius maps are *Commagene*, *Asia Minor*, *Cappadocia*, *Colchi[s]*, *Albania*, *Mesopotamia*, *Parthia* and *Iberia*. According to Pliny *Hircania* is situated south of the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus Mountains, but here it appears northeast of the *Mare Caspium* (the Caspian Sea), which is shown as a bay connected to the *Scythicum Mare* (the Scythian Sea, part of the northern ocean).

