

**TITLE:** *Vercelli Mappamundi*

**DATE:** ca. 1200

**AUTHOR:** *unknown*

**DESCRIPTION:** The English geographical culture in the 13<sup>th</sup> century is revealed in the unusual circumstance that four important 13<sup>th</sup> century *mappaemundi* - the *Vercelli*, *Dutchy of Cornwall*, *Ebstorf* and *Hereford* (see also #224, #226) - either are English or appear to have strong English connections. The *Vercelli* map, measuring 84 x 72 cm and obviously missing large portions of the map area, is the smallest of the three. It now resides in the Archivio Capitolare in Vercelli, Italy and has been dated by Carlo Capello to between 1191 and 1218. Its inspiration may well have been English. Capello believes that the map was carried to Vercelli by Cardinal Guala-Bicchieri on his return from England about 1218-19 as papal legate to Henry III. He also argues that the figure on the map of a king in Mauretania named "Phillip" is intended to represent Philip II of France (1180-1223) and not Philip III (1270-85). On stylistic grounds, he similarly places the map earlier rather than later in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and draws particular attention to the fact that, while considered part of the *Orosian-Isidorian* tradition, it is not centered on Jerusalem as were maps later in the century, like the *Hereford* and *Ebstorf* *mappaemundi*.



The medieval world map is a documentary and also a narrative authority for the historian: it reflects the knowledge as well as the view of the world. The auxiliary historical scientist has to examine internal characteristics, and also the external, if the original document survived. And though the internal features are more fascinating, they are often objects of speculation, whilst external marks are of more consequence and confront the historian with a *fait accompli*.

The 13<sup>th</sup> century left four maps of large size, which are conserved as “singles”, i.e., not in the protected binding of a book: the maps of *Ebstorf* (#224), of *Vercelli*, of *Hereford* (#226), and the *Duchy of Cornwall* fragment. There is much discussion to accurately date them because they lack text from a book which they illustrate, which could explain the map-painting. Therefore they need to be studied in isolation with regard to their content and to their appearance. Apart from *portolan* charts, which mostly can be attached to certain workshops of chart-makers, only the 13<sup>th</sup> century produced large maps that survived before the time of the Renaissance and these four maps have the character of summarizing the totality of medieval knowledge.

Of these four maps, only the author of the *Hereford* map is known. Recently there arose a vehement controversy on the *Ebstorf* map. Since the original was destroyed in the Second World War, there remains only a limited argument with regard to external characteristics. The *Duchy of Cornwall* fragment offers only a very small section of the world. But even the *Vercelli* map produces problems in establishing its origination because today it is in very bad condition, only a fragment, and it is faded by damp and partly illegible. However, since there was a good black and white copy made before 1935, this map in comparison with the *Hereford* map is a suitable object to demonstrate methodological problems of dating medieval maps in general, and especially to study external features in the way of auxiliary historical sciences. Anna-Dorthee von den Brincken in her *Imago Mundi* (42:9-25) article, “Monumental Legends on Medieval Manuscript Maps Notes on designed capital letters on maps of large size (demonstrated from the problem of dating the Vercelli Map, thirteenth century)”, explores this dating methodology, below are some highlights.

In many cases it is possible to fix a *terminus post quem*, but rarely to find a *terminus ante quem*. The style of painting and writing can be observed, though monumental elements make it survive for long periods. And as maps are documents, large maps are especially works of art, too. Therefore the legends do not always use normal script but designed capital letters, which are like epigraphic writing.

If paleographers wish to date the script of documents, there are, for instance, different ways to describe the design of Gothic letters. Especially in the later Middle Ages each generation has its own features. The way of writing is somewhat cursive and often flighty and careless, in any individual case, few obliged to the rules of scholar writing of book-hands. As most of the historical documents are dated, there is no difficulty in finding records for comparison also for the different regions, if a single piece is lacking its date.

It is much more difficult to put literary manuscripts in a chronological order. Usually they do not bear dates. Their script is careful, often monumentally executed, especially for liturgical and biblical books, and this makes them look uniform. That is the reason, why the catalogues of manuscripts note only the presumed century, half of a century, or third of a century according to the character of letters. The modern method of dating literary hands is the comparison with tables of dated and datable manuscripts

of the same time and region: the famous old libraries publish their material in editions of large scale in all European countries.

Medieval *mappaemundi* normally belong to literary manuscripts. Most of them are conserved in books as illustrations to religious texts. They are to be analyzed with analogue methods. Quite another problem are the singles, especially on sheets of large size. That refers also to *portolan* charts of the later Middle Ages, which are not dated, though they offer toponymic clues and announce their provenance.

Especially the large sums of the 13<sup>th</sup> century have been discussed in our time, if the author is unknown. The ideas expressed on the *Ebstorf* map revive the opinion that Gervase of Tilbury may be not only the ideal but the real creator of it. As the original is destroyed, it is very dangerous to work with the excellent modern reproductions. Paleographic research cannot study the ductus of the hands, only perhaps the way of painting. That is the reason that the *Vercelli* map may be preferred here as a secondary theater of dispute. Though it is also damaged, the pictures and the way of painting still may be studied in many instances. The fragment of the *Duchy of Cornwall* map is too small to give an idea of painting and writing of the whole.

The problem of dating the *Vercelli* map relates to the fact that neither the author nor sponsor nor provenance is known. The map survived at Vercelli; it was found in the 20<sup>th</sup> century only as a fragment and has been damaged by humidity. The contents and conception resemble the *Ebstorf* map.

The map on the *Rotulus* of Vercelli is much smaller than its large sisters: it measures 84 cm in height and about 70 to 72 cm in latitude; the left and right borders of the parchment, that is the south and the north of the East-orientated map, are destroyed. The *Ebstorf* map measures 358 to 356 cm, the *Hereford* map 165 to 135 cm, and the *Cornwall* map 157 to 157 cm.

Carlo Errera discovered the *Rotulus* in 1908 when organizing the archive of the Chapter of Vercelli. Nobody before had paid attention to it because it was inventoried in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as an old sketch of a synoptic picture. In 1911 Errera presented the world map, emphasized its information as regard to Spain and Italy, and dated it to the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> or the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, assisted by Romualdo Paste, and by G. C. Faccio, direttore del Archivio Comunale di Vercelli, who were both learned paleographers. Errera thought the toponymic testimony not to be older than the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Only the place of Jerusalem caused him any doubt because, since the time of the crusades, it was usually drawn as the center of the world on pictures and in texts; even the way of depicting the earthly paradise was unusual. Errera also noticed a remarkable relationship to the maps of Beatus of Liebana (#207). Moreover, his attention was attracted to a *bizarre bird* with an iron horseshoe in its beak and a riding king sitting on it, who swings a brush or flag in his hand. A legend presents him as *Philippus rex Francie*; and Errera considered this small scene to be the key for dating the map. The only problem was, whether it was Philip II (Augustus, 1180-1223), Philip III (Audax, 1270-85), or Philip IV (Le Bel/The Fair, 1285- 1314); Errera favored Philip III, as he was the only one who visited Africa, where the king is placed on the *Rotulus*. He stands on Mt. Atlas, and besides him there are some fabulous monsters.

In 1935 Anna Maria Brizio thought that the style of painting on the *Vercelli* map resembled Spanish miniatures of the Romanesque style thus favoring a painter from the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Leo Bagrow in his *History of Cartography* in 1951 published a small black and white reproduction and mentioned a larger one to be more useful. As he lost the plates of his book during the Second World War and he was to reconstruct it, the

models of his copies were only in general identified. It might be supposed that he remembered the large copy, the only one which we have today, in the publication of Youssouf Kamal, as the original map is in a bad condition. Bagrow seems to have accepted the dating of Errera, as he mentions the map together with that of *Hereford*. Leithuser also followed him.

Stimulated by the Italian historian of cartography Roberto Almagiai, a geographer of the University of Turin, Carlo Felice Capello, studied the map and its history after 1951 and proposed in 1957 at the 17<sup>th</sup> Geographical Congress at Bani to attribute the map to the contemporaries of Cardinal Guala Bicchieri (d.1227). Born at Vercelli, Bicchieri became papal legate of Innocentius III and Honorius III. He visited England in 1216-18 and is known as a donor of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts to the school of Vercelli. This made Capello to promote an English provenance of the map and for dating it to around 1200, an intelligent hypothesis but an unproved one. Though Capello announced a comprehensive study, Marcel Destombes followed his hypothesis and everybody after him, as the study of the original map was difficult. In 1976 Capello published his inquisition with detailed photographs of the manuscript map in spite of its poor condition. He commented on it carefully, tried to decipher the often illegible legends and to interpret them. As he was no medievalist, many mistakes apparently took place, which might have been corrected with the help of the reproduction in Kamal but Capello was unaware of it. Capello compared the legends with the maps of *Ebstorf* and *Hereford* as there are many similarities, and also referred to Beatus as a model. But since the *Vercelli* map was thought to be fairly illegible during the past decades, his hypothetic dating has always been accepted by recent research without criticism.

Ordinarily the *mappamundi* of the Middle Ages in Western Europe is often of summary of knowledge drawn from different sources, concentrated in a picture offering places of interest from different historic periods. Rarely did it qualify as a guide for travelers, although it might perhaps serve as a first pre-information for pilgrimage, as it instructs about places of history regarding the salvation of mankind. Therefore nobody during this time period was encouraged to offer actual or new knowledge. Only the *portolan* [nautical] charts, because of their inherent "functionality", are an exception with regard to this. Gervase of Tilbury compares the variation of the world-picture with the crime of false witness in canon law, and even Paulinus Minorita at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century cautioned against a correction of the world-picture and only permitted the texts to be modernized. The medieval world map seems to be a kind of historiography but with the loss of the chronological series - i.e., events and facts of quite different times are projected together on the surface of the picture. This effacement of chronological relations renders the dating more difficult, for instance every medieval world map testifies to the city of Troy as a famous historical place; yet as it indicates the town, but not its ruins, the *terminus post quem*, taken from this fact, is the foundation of Troy; and nobody would argue that a map was painted before the destruction, as it shows Troy alive. Therefore the medieval map is as much historical as actual.



Duchy of Cornwall map fragment, c.1283-1400, measuring 157 cm square, only the Africa segment survives, Duchy of Cornwall Office, London

An important mark for a *terminus post quem* on the Vercelli map is the city of Alessandria in Lombardy, founded in 1167 and named in honor of Pope Alexander III probably the youngest city shown on the map. It is not shown on the *Ebstorf* or *Hereford* maps: the *Hereford* map is not older than 1276; maybe it was not shown because England is far away from Alessandria. But the example also illustrates the difficulty to claim an internal argument for the *terminus post quem*. Moreover, the *Vercelli* map offers many places, of which the knowledge seems to be unusual, for instance Friesach in Austria: these chapter-houses were founded in 1187 and 1217. The handwriting of these legends

might have been added later; even in Ireland legends may have been corrected or added at a later date.

The placing of Jerusalem and of the earthly paradise on the *Vercelli* map differs from the other maps of large size. Both are placed in a striking manner. Instead of the *Garden of Eden* with *Adam and Eve* before a picturesque apple-tree, the *Rotulus* has in the eastern part a simple rectangle with frame and a cross inside, and it is filled with a didactic text explaining *Asia* and *Paradisus Terrestris*. This area is not placed at the top outside the world outline but inside Asia between countries each named *India*. Nothing of this character is known from other maps, only the rosette of the paradise on the large Vatican map of Isidore of 775 has a comparable position. But it is a mistake to think it shocking if Paradise is omitted on maps of the 13<sup>th</sup> century; Matthew Paris (#225) omitted it, just as did John of Wallingford. On the other hand, Paradise is often to be found even on *portolan*-styled maps of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and other secular maps such as the *Catalan Atlas* (#235), the maps of Andrea Bianco (#241), Andreas Walsperger (#245) and Giovanni Leardo (#242), as well as on a map in German language of Hanns Rust (#253.2) in about 1500.

In favor of an early dating of the *Vercelli* map there has often been discussed the position of Jerusalem because it is not placed in the center of the map. But this rule, first proclaimed by Saint Hieronymus when commenting on *Ezekiel 5,5*, was difficult to be executed on paintings because the model of the T-O Map had its centre in the intersection of the T-upright and the T-top stroke, and that was a place in the sea between the Don [Tanais], the Eastern Mediterranean Sea and the Nile. The painter of the so-called *Oxford map* of about 1090-1110, who first gave to Jerusalem its place, made it "swim" like an island at the meeting point of the waters on his geometrical drawing. Later on, medieval map-makers preferred to displace the T somewhat to the west - that is on east-orientated maps below - in order to secure the center for Jerusalem in Asia. But many map-makers abandoned this rule - for instance Matthew Paris (#225), Ranulf Higden (#232), the Mela map of Reims, Pirrus de Noha (#239), Andrea Bianco (#241), Fra Mauro (#249), and Jean Mansel (#205). On the *Vercelli* map it might be *Tyre*, which is recognized as the center. The same idea seems to be found on the Isidore map of Munich (CLM 10058) of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, which is of French provenance and seems to be influenced by the ideas of Hugo of St. Victor. There are other connections between the *Vercelli* map and the Victorines with regard to scholastic ideas. The dislocation of Jerusalem on the *Vercelli* map is not extraordinary and should not be used as a mark for dating. Finally the center of the map is not quite exact, as the border is missing today at the poles.

Much more interesting indeed is the depiction of the French King Philip on Mt. Atlas. The bird with a horseshoe in its beak is an "iron-eater"; it has the head of a goose, the body of a crane, the feet of a calf, and is to be identified as an ostrich. Exactly the same bird can be found on the *Hereford* map, yet it is not shown in Africa as the ostrich of the *Ebstorf* map, but in Northern Europe near the Don and the *Maeotis* at the border between Europe and Asia. The legend on the *Hereford* map explains *Ostricuis, capud anseris, corpus gruis, pedes vituli, ferrum comedit*, a legend which would also be suitable for the *Vercelli* map. The source of the legend is Alexander Neckam, who also states that the ostrich likes to ingratiate himself by deception so that he swallows even iron.

There is also the question of which "King Philip" is represented. His slashed riding habit is characteristic of the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. That would mean Philip III, who was the only one to visit Africa when he accompanied his father in 1270.

But Africa was an episode for him, nothing of importance to his reign. Philip III is called *Audax, le Hardi*, i.e., the Bold, but nobody knows the reason for this name today, neither the sources nor the historians. He was *illiteratus*, a good hunter, but unreliable, dependent on his favorites. On the *Vercelli* map the king is not represented in a profitable way, because an ostrich puts its head in the sands and neglects its eggs. Moreover it is not quite clear what he is holding in his hand, a flag, a whip, a brush, or any attribute of his boldness. Philip III is no person of glory in contrast to his father, and the connection with Africa might be a short-lived one. There remains the question whether this fact allows a *terminus ante quem*, for instance only a short time after 1270.

The *Vercelli* map-maker also had French interests. In addition to the important comparison with the maps of *Ebstorf* and *Hereford*, there is the comparison with the Isidore map of CLM 10058, a French map painted in Parisian surroundings according to the study of Gautier Dalche, and a product of the Victorine School. Though the map of Munich is a small one, 26.6 cm of diameter, and never offered the place for the material of all the legends of the *Descripti* of Hugo of St. Victor, there may have been a joint source, and the *Vercelli* map seems to belong to that tradition, even with regard to the placing of Jerusalem and Tyre. The type is an antique one, and Tyre might be found in a remarkable position on the map of Saint Hieronymus.

The contribution of art historians should also be observed: the style of painting, special characters which allow us to identify a copy; the fashion of a particular time period can be extremely helpful in dating. But there are limits too. A world map is an individual production, but it is also the sum of conventional signs, often shaped as symbols taken from heraldry. Moreover there are regional differences.

Early research on the *Vercelli* map thought that the style of painting reflected that of the Spanish miniatures. Capello, however, was looking for English links. Both are right in the idea, because Spain as well as England are countries which produced outstanding Latin maps during the Middle Ages. They exercised considerable influence on other countries, especially on the large maps of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

When the *Vercelli* map is compared with its three sisters, there are only limited water areas displayed on it. The Mediterranean and the Red Seas are filled with islands, and even the surrounding "world ocean" is populated with them: the *Ebstorf* and *Hereford* maps display much more water; the *Ebstorf* has waves like *portolan*-style maps. On the other hand, the *Vercelli* map displays waves in the sandy Sahara desert, a kind of sandhills. The painter was not interested in seas but in deserts. This is a unique characteristic of this map. Might the author have accompanied King Philip to Africa?

Mountains on the *Vercelli* map mostly are shown as three-leaved symbols, or chains, often looking like grapes. This style of painting is traditional and has been found since the 8<sup>th</sup> century *Beatus* maps (#207).

The *Vercelli* painter was fascinated by all kinds of animals. He painted lots of them and preferred heraldic forms and well composed figures. The symbols used for architecture are extremely conventional. At first sight all settlements are displayed in the style of the Castel Sant' Angelo: i.e., there is a wall and higher buildings inside surpass it like towers and on the wall the name of the place is written. The whole seems to be a collection of fortresses. This symbolic style of architecture represents the "ordinary type of town", as seen from far away. It is not a typical Spanish town, however it might have been found in Italy or in France. The symbolic representation of architecture of the famous painter Matthew Paris (d. 1259) on his *Itineraries* (#225) is of the same character. Ranulf Higden, a century later, used the same symbolic representation. Even the

architecture of the *Hereford* map resembles that of *Vercelli*: it is not English but European. In addition, the symbols are not limited to the time of Cardinal Guala Bicchieri, but these conventional map symbols are common for the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

England is scantily documented on the *Vercelli* map, a large part has been ravaged by time: it is placed in the surrounding ocean on the left side and at the edge of the inhabited world. Ireland can be seen well, and there is some toponymic evidence: *Cassel* [Cashel], *Mide* [Meath] and *Armagh* can be identified. The *Vercelli* map looks like a continental map of Mediterranean or West-European provenance, for instance Italy, France, or Spain, and a French king documents French interests. There was almost certain contact with *Beatus* (#207), for example in mentioning the tombs of the apostles distributed over the whole earth. But the way of symbolizing these places is quite different: the three *Beatus* maps (*Burgo de Osuma*, *Oña and Loroao*) preserved this information by displaying twelve heads of saints in the countries of their mission. The *Vercelli* map designates their tombs with bell-towers; the *Ebstorf* map has chapels with tombs inside; both *Vercelli* and *Ebstorf* report about places of pilgrimage, they are like itineraries. The *Vercelli* map reports the apostles Thomas in India, Bartholomew north and Philip northwest of the Ark of Noah; Simon and Judas south of the Tower of Babel and north of the Babylonian Desert; and John at the western coast of Asia Minor. The European apostles are not marked. There was no available space in countries with so many well-known towns. The more a region was actually known, there was less space free for monsters, mysteries, old and historical places. But countries faraway, or of old tradition without new information, offered possibilities to fill the picture in order to avoid blank spaces on the map.

All the figures - men, animals, and monsters alike - look slim and seem to belong to the Gothic style of painting. The slashed riding-gown of the French King Philip, as mentioned, was evidence of fashion of the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and the style of painting suggests this dating, too.

The experience of paleography should not be under-estimated when dating maps, though there are included many imponderables. The map-maker did not only change between everyday scripts and literary handwriting, he was also an artist and painter and used special monumental letters. Although a map that was connected with a book was regularly executed by the same hand, it is not necessarily a matter of fact. And a map of large size may have been developed individually, separate from the associated book. As maps of large size were set up in public places such as churches or teaching-halls, everybody who passed them was able to add something to or correct legends. Capello observed the change of majuscule and minuscule letters on the *Vercelli* map; that was really the change of monumental and common letters. Since the writing of the *Vercelli* Map is faded, it is extremely difficult to analyze the original, which also seems to have been corrected in the Middle Ages and to be completed, as the painter forgot different legends: Austria and Ireland belong to these parts of the map. Capello perceived that there was more than one hand. For dating it is necessary to know the provenance of a manuscript. The way of writing in western and southern parts of Europe precedes always that of Middle Europe. The miniscule letters of the *Vercelli* map are typical for the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and they do not show the character of the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century: There are no combined curves of different letters. The middle space of the four-lines-system is curtailed typical for the 13<sup>th</sup> century in cursive manner. But the blocks of the texts are extremely cursive. The writer did not use careful lines. Yet the

texts are divided by the chapter symbols like in literary texts: maybe the map-maker had the text as a model, not a painting of large size. Another characteristic is a light incline to the right and the unequal measure for the middle line; the writer was apparently not an artist in writing. He often uses abbreviations even for names such as Johannes, that means he was accustomed to theological texts. He rarely uses initials, proper names begin often with minuscules. With regard to corrections and additions these are only a few decades younger.

During the 13<sup>th</sup> century there was a considerable change from Gothic majuscule, developed from uncial forms, to usual Gothic minuscule, which became the regular script for epigraphy in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. This change was remarkable, and it is often used to date seals and signets. Its observation might be of importance for dating maps according to their monumental legends.

External characteristics can always be one of different arguments to date a map. The observations made with the dating of the *Vercelli* map are not definitive. But the result might be, that though the idea of an English provenance as a gift of Cardinal Guala Bicchieri is a fascinating hypothesis, there are many arguments to consolidate the old opinion of Errera, Paste, and Faccio, who found as well external characteristics for the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century as they identified King Philip of France as Philip III, who visited Africa.

In 2013 and 2014 the Lazarus Project traveled to the Archivio Capitolare in Vercelli, Italy to image several important historical texts including the *Vercelli Book* and the *Vercelli mappamundi* in side-by-side rooms. The *Vercelli Book* contains one of the most important and oldest collections of Old English. The 13<sup>th</sup> century *mappamundi* survives as one of only a few contemporary maps.

The Vercelli map had suffered serious fading aggravated in a 1970's era attempt to restore it. The Lazarus Project took a two-fold approach to its imaging, utilizing both multispectral and transmissive lights. At nearly a meter square, they were obliged to image in a series of tiles that we later stitched in processing. The combination of the transmissive and UV block filter proved particularly effective, restoring most of the map to complete legibility.

Graduate student, Helen Davies, is currently designing and implementing a digital display for the *Vercelli mappamundi* to produce a multispectral digital facsimile that will allow visitors to navigate not only multispectral layers, transcribed and multilingually translated text, but a GIS geo-rectified alternative version. She will separate out the physical, urban, mythical and temporal geographies of the document which can then be viewed separately or in conjunction with other layers. This new digital display will provide new access to the text through recovered images, transcriptions and translations of the text. Problems of scale and relationships between the broad and narrow foci, geographic and encyclopedic, and real and imaginary gain prominence in the plans for the digital display as she explores concepts of space and place.

**LOCATION:** Archivio Capitolare, Vercelli, Italy

**Size:** 84 x 72 cm

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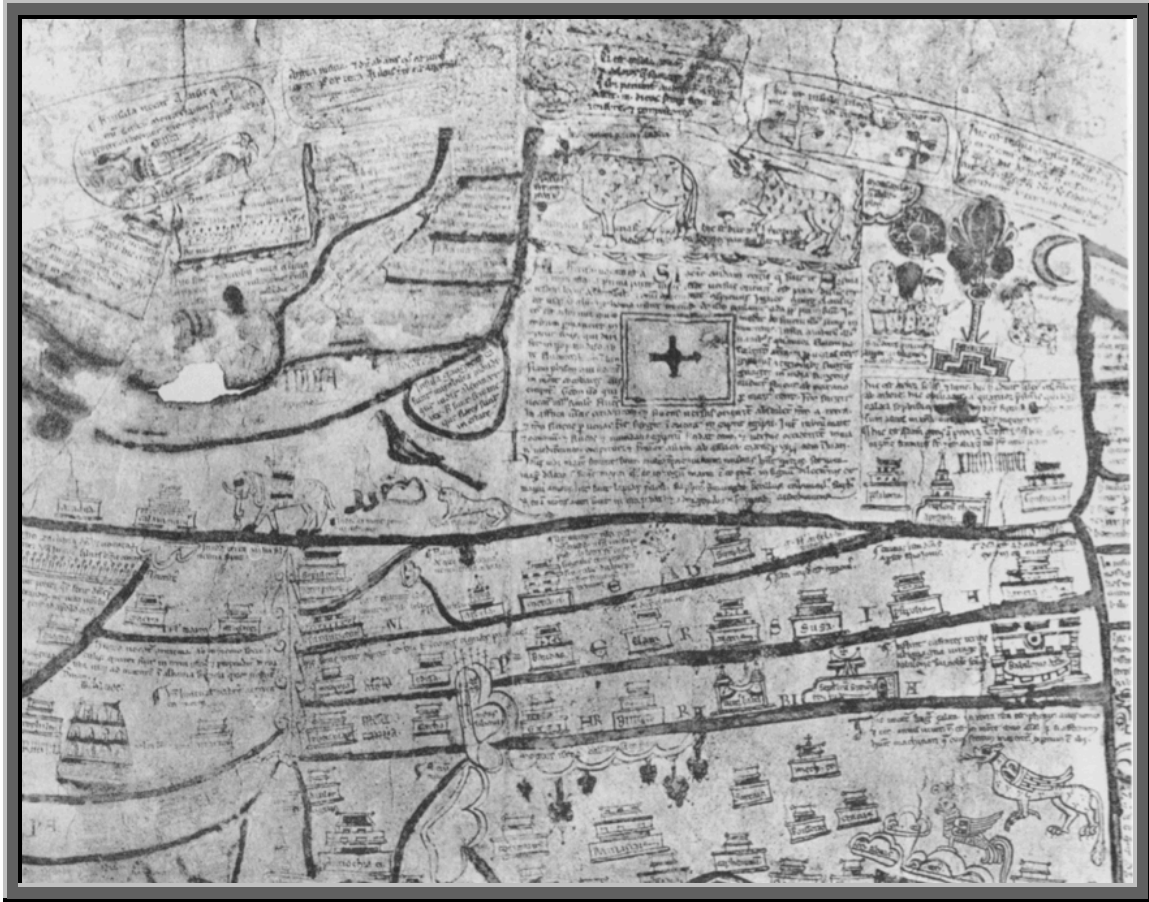
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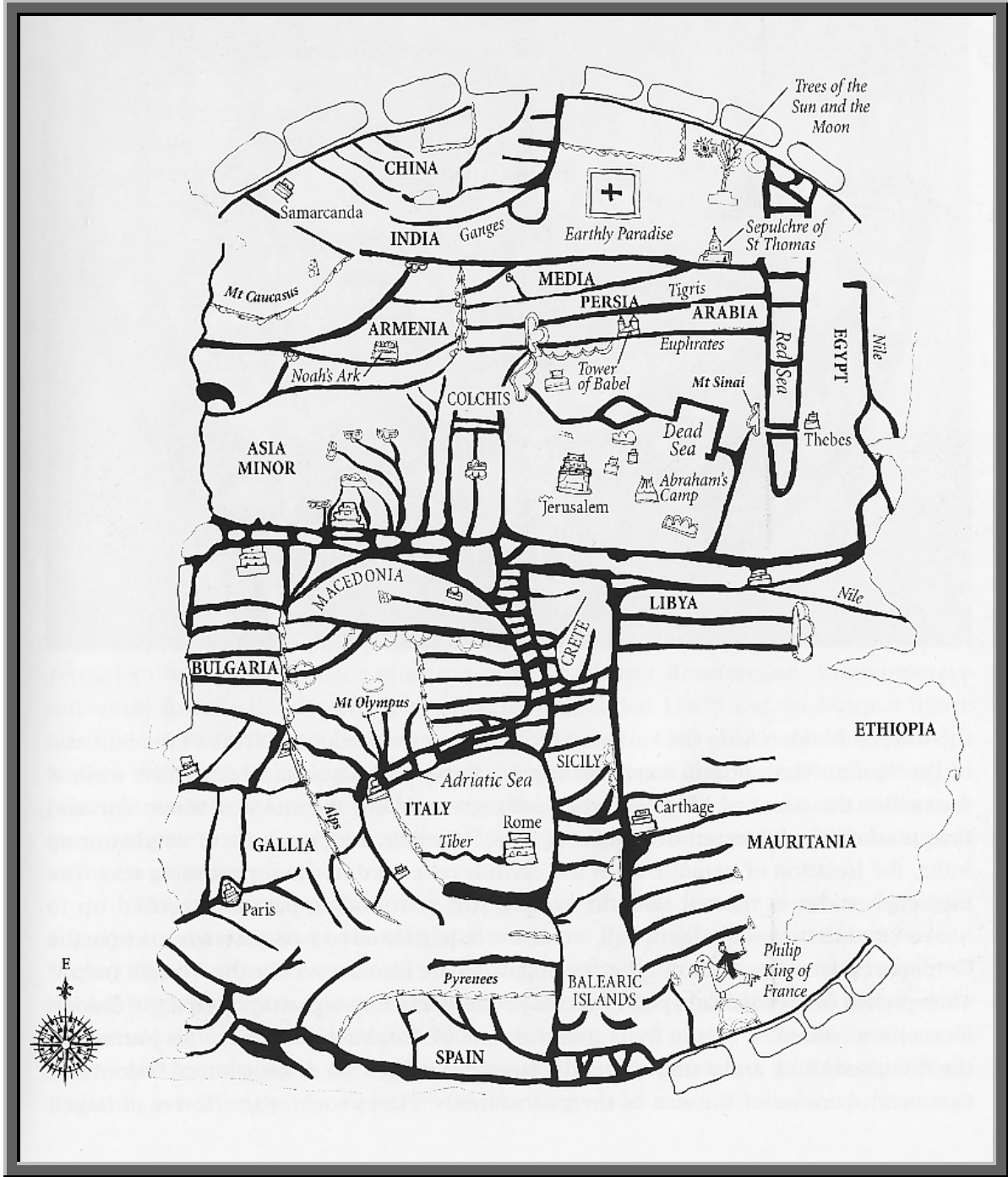
*Detail of the eastern part of the world on the Vercelli map. The earthly paradise between INDIA and INDIA MEDIA with the tomb of Thomas below: ARMENIA, Ark of Noah, MEDIA, PERSIA, ARRABIA with the tomb of Simon and Judas and the Tower of Babel.  
Reproduced from Youssouf Kamal.*



*Detail of the southwestern part of the world on the Vercelli map. On the left, the Mediterranean Sea with MARE CRETICUM and MARE mediterraneum (sic) and EBUSO insula; on the right, Africa from the legend HIC SUNT ARE PHILISTINORUM to 'Philippus rex Francie'*  
Reproduced from Youssouf Kamal.



Vercelli mappamundi, c. 1200, 84 x 72 cm



from Scafi's Mapping Paradise, pp. 132-135.