Anonymous late 13th century map from the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford MS 274, Prefatory Map

New College Manuscript 274, a late 13th century copy of Pliny the Elder's *Historia naturalis* [Natural History]. Written in the first century, the *Historia naturalis* was a key source of knowledge about geography and natural history for the medieval world and

Renaissance. This particular copy of the *Historia* likely originated at St. Albans Abbey, an active center for textual production at that time. This point of origin is further supported by a map at the manuscript's front, one possibly modeled on a map made by Matthew Paris, a monk of the Abbey of St. Albans famous for his cartography. Regardless of its starting point, by the 15th century the manuscript found its way to Oxford and also into one of the loan chests in operation there. In the latter part of the 13th century, certainly after Matthew's death in 1259 and possibly as late l300 or so, an unknown artist designed this last known, medieval *mappa mundi* from St Albans. The map takes on the role of a frontispiece to the text that follows, the abbey's prized copy of Pliny's *Natural history*.

Compared to other contemporary medieval maps the *Oxford MS 274, Prefatory* map is somewhat unique. While it displays some of the 13th century cartographic conventions such as an eastern orientation, with a terrestrial *Paradise* (shown as a large island southeast of Asia), Jerusalem in the center, and restricted to displaying only the *oikumene* [known inhabited world]; it clearly does not give credence to the *Antipodes* or anything south of the equator, Europe is shown as an island and displays a world dominated by the ocean compared to the occupied landmasses. He may have done this because the task of illustrating Pliny's Natural history with a mappa mundi that would, in some manner, recapitulate Pliny's ideas required a conventionally formatted map, one that attempted to show the entire world, as opposed to an excerpt of it. Oddly enough, it is the one mappa mundi from St Albans that most comfortably fits its genre. In fact, it is prominently labeled '*mappa mundi*'. The following are excerpts from Daniel Connolly's essay.

Our anonymous mapmaker seems to have embraced a conflict that lies at the heart of medieval cartography, a conflict between the authority of what the ancient philosophers had handed down and what the Bible said was so. The map has East at the top and shows a spherical earth, the horizons of which are defined by curving waves of

Oceanus all around. In the midst of these waters lie the familiar landmasses of the *ecumene*, along with various islands, marine life and two sailing ships. *Paradise* is at the top of the map and is shown with the doors of its gate left open. In the southern hemisphere, there are only water, fish and a few small islands. This absence of another landmass in the southern half of the globe makes for a somewhat frustrating experience. For the purpose of a hemispheric *mappa mundi*, such as this, was precisely to theorize on the possibility of other, unknown lands and peoples. Surely, the more educated monks of St Albans were generally aware of the different, conflicting theories of the distribution of the world's landmasses; their library was one of the best equipped, and included works by Augustine, Macrobius, Bede, Isidore, William of Conches and, of course, Pliny - all of which dealt in various and sometimes incompatible ways with the layout of the world's landmasses. But here is presented a rather unique vision of the world.

Europe, Africa and Asia, the *ecumene*, comprise the northern half and within these landmasses, the major countries, ancient cities and significant, scriptural features are given labels. From the western extreme and close to the viewer's body, reading the texts progresses from the British Isles, across Europe, and southeast into Asia: '*hybernia,* '*wallia;* '*anglia*' and '*scotia*. Across the Channel in '*Europa*' appear '*hispani[a];* '*fra[n]cia,* '*g[er]mania,* '*grecia*' and '*roma*' Across the Don River in '*Asia*' are '*t[ro]ia,* '*Ier[usale]m*' and '*arab[ia].* Near the inlet is '*rubru[m] mar[is]*' (Red Sea) and above it 'in*dia*'. At the extreme eastern edge and across the water, and therefore separate from the known world, is '*paradis[us].* Moving west, back down through '*Affrica*; we find '*egypt[us],* '*ethiop[ia].* '*ca[r]ptaga*' [Carthage] and lastly, '*mauritania*.

Hemispheric, zonal maps seem to have formed the basis or model for this later, St Albans map: maps like Lambert's *(#217)* that discussed or showed the differing climates of the world, usually as parallel zones. They emphasized the sphericity of the world, but they also contained references to the other hemispheres of the globe as inhabitable regions. This anonymous mapmaker may well have turned to the very materials used by Matthew Paris, maps by Lambert of Saint-Omer; perhaps Matthew had made some sketches to bring back from his travels. However, in distinct contrast to Lambert's *mappa mundi*, which includes a great many more explanatory texts, including those that fill the southern hemisphere and, at the bottom of the page, the *Antipodes*, this St Albans map is bereft of any such geographic elaboration. Its maker chose instead to focus our attention on the known, inhabited land, the *ecumene*, avoiding then any reference, visual or textual, to other landmasses or other peoples.

This is a sparsely illustrated and labeled map, quite minimalist in its display of medieval cartographic knowledge. With its wavy coastlines and desultory emptiness, there is a sense of incompleteness, of some unfinished business that leaves the viewer to wonder why such an attempt at a *mappa mundi* would preface the prestigious text that follows. The answer, as one would reasonably suspect, must lie in the text above it: (in translation)

> This is the true geometrical likeness of the whole habitable earth to the extent of the eighth sea that Covers the whole earth except one-fourth part of it, which alone is inhabited, and is divided by the intrusion of that same sea into the arid zone from the western side and from the northern side into another, Europe and Africa, just as in the third book.

Augustine, in his *City of God*, argued stridently that, as all men are descended from Adam and the seas are impassable, there cannot be people in other parts of the world:

> As to the nonsense about there being antipodae, that is to say, men living on the far side of the earth, where the sun rises when it sets for us, men who have their

> feet facing ours when they walk - that is utterly incredible. No one pretends to have any factual information, but a hypothesis is reached by the argument that, since the earth is suspended between the celestial hemispheres and since the universe must have a similar lowest and central point, therefore the other portion of the earth which is below us cannot be without human inhabitants.
> One flaw in the argument is that, even if the universe could be proved by reasoning to be shaped like a round globe - or at least believed to be so - it does not follow that the other hemisphere of the earth must appear above the surface of the ocean; or if it does, there is no immediate necessity why it should be inhabited by men. First of all, our Scriptures never deceive us, since we can test the truth of what they have told us by the fulfillment of predictions; second, it is utterly absurd to say any men from this side of the world could sail across the immense tract of the ocean, reach the far side, and then people it with men sprung from the single father of all mankind.

Our anonymous artist was likely working from this very same worldview and, quite probably, this very passage. When he read in Augustine, as nearly every monk would have, that there is no reason to suppose that there is nothing but ocean surrounding the *ecumene*, he was thus equipped to make a map that defied cartographic tradition. But when tasked with drawing a prefatory map for Pliny's *Natural history*, he had to make another decision: which description to illustrate? And he chose the one and only passage that could coordinate with the esteemed Church Father and thereby turn back the long-standing tradition of geographic theorizing and speculation. Is this map, with its depiction of isolated, uninhabited islands in a southern hemisphere, simply one monk's vision of the world? Was he a stalwart empiricist, unaccepting of places and peoples without proper evidence? Or did our anonymous mapmaker find a way to resolve, perhaps only for himself, the enduring contradictions between the 'ancient philosophers' and Church doctrine in an otherwise humble, and quite literally, unassuming map of the world?

Reference:

Connolly, D.K., "In the Company of Matthew Paris: Mapping the World at St Albans Abbey", in Terkla, San and Nick Millea, *A Critical Companion to English Mappae Mundi of the Twelth and Thirteenth Centuries,* pp. 29, 172-177.