TITLE: Pomponius Mela's World Map
DATE: A.D. 37
AUTHOR: Pomponius Mela
DESCRIPTION: The images in this monograph show attempts at reconstruction of the world view of the earliest Roman geographer Pomponius Mela, who, although of Spanish birth, wrote a brief work which agrees in most of its views with the great Greek writers from Eratosthenes (#112) to Strabo (#115). However, Mela departs from the traditional ancient concept by asserting that in the southern temperate zone dwelt inhabitants who were inaccessible to Europeans because of the Torrid Zone that intervened. His knowledge of the characters of Western Europe and the British Isles was clearer than that of the Greek writers, and he was the first to name the Orcades [Orkney Islands]. Pliny quoted Mela as an authority.

Mela’s very simple and popular writings were entitled Chorographia, which means “regional geography” and covers the whole world region by region. It was written in Latin in three books under Gaius or Claudius; there is, however, no evidence that it contained any maps. According to Mela the world can be divided east and west into what he calls “two hemispheres”. This is not a scientific definition, but a rough division of the known world approximating to Asia on the east and Europe and Africa on the west. From north to south he divided it into five zones: two cold, two temperate and one hot. This is a different approach from that offered by Strabo who chose to ignore, as virtually uninhabitable, everything south of the latitude of southern India. It does correspond, however, to the division in Eratosthenes’ lost poem Hermes, paraphrased by Virgil, which regards the equatorial zone as ‘altogether burnt up’, but says that Antipodes live in the southern temperate zone.

Mela was writing before the Roman invasion of Britain, and has only a very rudimentary idea of its geography. Thule in his work does not sound like the Orkney or Shetland islands. He says it is opposite the Belca, the name which he uses elsewhere as a synonym for Scythia. One may therefore wonder whether he is thinking of an island north of Russia, or whether it is really some part of Scandinavia. This latter, however, is treated not as part of the continent but as a very large island. The Baltic is to him the Codanus Gulf, enormous and dotted with large and small islands. Later he adds: “In the gulf which we have called Codanus the most important island is Codanovia, still settled by Teutoni; this surpasses the others not only infertility but also in size.” Mela’s concept of Africa is less developed than those of later authors such as the elder Pliny, but he does summarize Hanno’s Periplus. He came from Gibraltar, yet he believed there were no inhabitants of the central part of western Mauritania. His contribution to the disputed topography of Tartessus (Tarshish in the Old Testament) is to tell us that some thought that it was on the site of Carteia, near Algeciras. This is the kind of information that could have been entered in notes accompanying a map rather than on a map itself.

The first edition of Mela’s treatise interpretation, Cosmographi Geographia: Prisciani quoque exdionysio Thessalonisensi de situ orbis, was printed in Milan in 1471; this image shows the reconstructed map from the 1482 edition (Venice, Erhard Ratdolt, July 18, 1482; 8.1 x 5.75 in.; 48 leaves, Fol. A iverso: full-page woodcut map, with names and inscriptions in moveable type; the first edition to contain a map and possibly the earliest woodcut map to appear in Italy). The map is drawn on a conical projection and its configurations are based upon Ptolemy.
Image #116B shows a reconstruction by Petrus Bertius in 1628 of the world view of Pomponius Mela, in his *Orbis Terrarum Pomponius Melæ Delinætus* P. Bertius.

**LOCATION:** Walters Art Gallery (#116)

**REFERENCES:**
* Hapgood, C., *Maps of the Ancient Sea Kings*, p. 14, Figure 8.
* Nordenskiöld, A.E., *Facsimile Atlas*, p. 36, Plate XXXI.

*illustrated*
Reconstruction of Pomponius Mela’s World View, 1628, Petrus Bertius