On the Nature of Medieval Geography

These two related but fundamentally different new books provide deeper insight into geographical thinking in the Middle Ages. They contribute to a steadily developing body of historical literature on “medieval geographies,” a subject that is by its very nature both contentious and problematic. Geographers who write of geography’s history have of late tended to avoid the medieval period altogether, preferring instead to start their enquiries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with a focus on European overseas discovery and expansion, and mapping and scientific “enlightenment.”[1] Some debate has arisen on the nature of these early modern geographies, for on the one hand it is possible to take a narrower, discipline-based definition of “geography,” which includes works which at the time were seen to be constitutive of the subject of geography, while on the other it is possible to take a more catholic approach which seeks to show how “geographical knowledge” was constructed through various discursive practices conducted by a range of individuals who may not have seen themselves as geographers, nor defined their subject as geography per se.[2] How can recent studies of “medieval geography” help here? For a start they do a great service in assisting geographers to take a longer view of the history of their subject, challenging the widely held assumptions that geography either did not exist before the “rediscovery” of Ptolemy’s Geography, or that it did exist but quite simply was “wrong.” They draw attention instead to the continuities in geographical works from the Antique to the modern world, and to the “medieval” antecedents of geographies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They also contribute to questions of how geography was understood in the Middle Ages, both as a subject or field of geographical thinking in its own right as defined by contemporary writers, as well as in a broader sense of the place and role in medieval Europe of thinking geographically. In both regards the two books under review here enlighten us on geography’s seemingly enduring slippery nature, and will especially help geography’s historians to sharpen their thoughts on their subject’s past.

Lavezzo’s book on “geography, literature, and English community” is, it might be said, to do with how “thinking geographically” was expressed in contemporary textual and visual sources in the Middle Ages, and implicated in constructing and conveying notions of identity and history. The role of geography here, Lavezzo argues, was in conceptualizing where England stood in relation to other parts of the world, especially with regard to reconciling its relationship with the perceived distant “center” of Latin Christendom and its own “peripheral” location on the edge of the world. In writing about this spacing of England and Rome, for example, the English sought to define themselves as well as others. In the pro-
cess, of course, they were also creating and conveying “geographical knowledge” in the form of the maps of the world and of Europe they drew; and in the narrative accounts and histories they wrote. Lavezzo’s interest in these sources lies more in what they reveal of the “English community” during a span of some six centuries, from the time of Ælfric to Cardinal Wolsey, and for what they say about how “thinking geographically” was mobilized in contemporary works, than in how these sources themselves represent the “geographical thinking” of particular individuals and define what may be termed a “medieval geography.” The reverse is true for the welcome new edition of The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville translated and edited by Barney et al. This is a fundamental and important text, and this is the very first translation of it into English, whereby increasing its accessibility beyond Latinists and philologists. The Etymologies was one of the most widely used and influential works of medieval Europe, a much-borrowed source by later philosophers and theologians of the Latin west, and a central text in medieval learning and education in cathedral schools and universities of the high Middle Ages. Isidore was Bishop of Seville in Visigothic Spain and wrote The Etymologies in the early seventh century. Drawing together pagan, Christian and Classical sources of knowledge on mappae mundi and theologians of the Latin west, and a central text in medieval learning and education in cathedral schools and universities of the high Middle Ages. Isidore was Bishop of Seville in Visigothic Spain and wrote The Etymologies in the early seventh century.

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The thesis Lavezzo’s book puts forward is worth reviewing here, offering some reflections on her arguments and use of evidence. Her book draws upon ideas from (post)modern social and spatial theory, similarly influential in recent geographical discourse on mapping and space which she also refers to in her introduction, including those “spatial theorists” such as Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey, and “scholar work on what is often called the new cultural geography” in which space is seen not as “a static entity possessed of universal and essential attributes,” but is “socially produced” (p. 11). In this sense Lavezzo’s book is a contribution to a growing number of medieval studies showing a more nuanced appreciation of space, recognizing how “an understanding of the constructiveness of space is equally useful as a strategy for analyzing the past” (p. 11). Other recent examples of this genre are Naomi Kline’s Maps of Medieval Thought, Daniel Birkholz’s The King’s Two Maps, and essays in edited works such as Text and Territory, and Medieval Practices of Space, emanating especially through North American literary scholarship rather than European social and economic history. This engagement with the importance of space, and with the work of modern-day geographers, is fruitful, as Lavezzo shows, in helping to deepen insight into the “medieval imaginary,” but there is an inherent risk of presentism here, in using (post)modern discourse and theorizing to elucidate medieval conceptions of space and spatiality, of “thinking geographically” in the past. While Lavezzo does not confront this issue directly, her approach is subtle in its use of the theoretical ideas and influences she prefaced in the book’s introduction, preferring to draw out by a close critical reading those “imaginative geographies” embedded in written accounts produced at the time.

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such as the Hereford map, as well as lesser-known examples such as the Evesham map, but her main focus is on textual accounts. Ælfric’s tenth-century sermon recounting pope Gregory the Great’s supposed encounter with “some attractive English slave boys” (p. 27) in Rome in the sixth century, is the focus of chapter one; Gerald of Wales’ twelfth-century accounts of Ireland and the Irish in his Topography of Ireland and Conquest of Ireland, are central in chapter two; Ranulf Higden’s Polychronicon of the fourteenth century is dealt with in chapter three; while Chaucer’s Man of Law’s Tale and Wolsey’s travels and treatises make up chapters four and five respectively. In each case, Lavezzo seeks to draw through her central thesis, and does so by reading between other cartographic and written sources contemporary with those that form a focus for each of the chapters. This intertextual blending of textual and visual geographies owes something to the influence of J.B. Harley and other cartographic historians of his ilk.[4] It is good to see when so often modern scholars view medieval maps and texts separately even though originally they were bound together, as Lavezzo herself shows in the case of Gerald’s “map” of Britain and western Europe, sandwiched between two manuscript copies of his Topography and Conquest, and in the numerous manuscript versions of Higden’s Polychronicon (pp. 66-69; 71-73). This recontextualizing of text and image answers a call made by Evelyn Edson in her book on Mapping Time and Space and is to be welcomed.[5]

Of the five main chapters, one in particular makes an interesting, if perhaps rather bold, assertion that deserves some further analysis. This concerns the second chapter which focuses on Gerald of Wales and the “geography of Ireland’s conquest.” Here Lavezzo begins her discussion by referring to twelfth- and thirteenth-century mappaemundi and observes that “at no other time and in no other place in the premodern West do we witness anything approaching the world maps created in high medieval England, in terms of both quantity and quality”; that it was “the island deemed to be beyond the world that most often made images of the world during the Middle Ages” (p. 46). These maps placed England at the edge of the world, on the margins, and yet at the same time, she asserts, they reflected a centrality. Both core and periphery had paradoxical meanings in the medieval (English) imaginary, she argues, as is evident in Gerald of Wales’ (Gerald de Barri, as she refers to him) Anglo-centric views of Ireland and the Irish in which he saw the geographically peripheral position of Ireland as a positive attribute, reinforcing its perceived purity and sanctity, but equally saw the geographical marginality of the Irish people as indicative of their subordinate social and cultural status to the English. This is a telling paradox that reveals how Gerald and others were thinking geographically, about the place of England (and themselves) in relation to Ireland and the rest of the world, and constructing identities in their relative placing of others. However, the premise from which Lavezzo starts this discussion, the apparent centrality of a peripheral England in European medieval cartography, poses some difficulties. For a start there are well-known incidences of medieval maps being lost to us but which are known to have once existed by being recorded in contemporary accounts, examples being the maps that adorned Henry III’s Painted Chamber at Westminster, the world “map” that was in the possession of his son, Edward I, and the maps referred to by Cardinal Wolsey in his palace of Hampton Court which Lavezzo herself notes (p. 116).[6] There are also continuing cases of “lost” medieval maps being (re)discovered, such as the late-fourteenth-century “Evesham map,” again referred to by Lavezzo (p. 22).[7] With such uncertain and partial knowledge of the prevalence and Providence of medieval world-maps it would seem to be unwise to read too much into their apparent geographical distribution and deduce from it that England had “an outstanding position in medieval world cartography during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries” (p. 49). Other centers of map production also existed in the Latin West (though surprisingly little is said of them in the Chicago History of Cartography volume on medieval maps), and besides, from what little is known of the practices of English map-makers, or at least those responsible for creating mappaemundi in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, they were typically well-traveled individuals with wide personal geographies.[8] They did not confine themselves to England therefore, but were learning from others elsewhere, drawing upon textual geographies taken from a wide variety of sources that were circulating through the centers of learning across Europe. Their perceptions of their world were thus informed by a geography of learning and geographical thinking that went far beyond the shores of England, and hence reflected wider and interwoven geographical imaginations.

Lavezzo is of course clear that the geographical thinking that went into producing maps derived from a variety of sources, and that these maps provide entry points into the medieval geographical imaginary, and there is no doubt that her book contributes greatly to our understanding of the ways in which conceptions of space and place were socially constructed and mediated in tex-
tual and visual "geographies." But some care is needed here, for these sources were themselves not being written as geographies, rather they simply expose, in Lavezzo’s reading, otherwise latent ideas about where things are in the world, and what these spatial relations meant to those who wrote of them. They are thus “maps” of cognition, through which geographies are constructed and articulated, and individual worlds revealed. How these cognitive geographies relate to each other is what Lavezzo’s book shows, and when it comes to the paradoxical meanings that both core and periphery had for those living in the Middle Ages some interesting parallels emerge with those of the modern world, as she herself recognizes at the start of her book in referring to the imperial geographies of the British Empire, and (more implicitly) by the value she attaches to relating the spatial theories of modern scholars to those of the medieval world. Yet there remains an underlying tension in the book between thinking geographically and geographical thinking. This is where The Etymologies, and recent academic scholarship on Isidorian “geography,” can help.

On the face of it the Cambridge translation of Isidore’s Etymologies is straightforward enough. It is not an “exploratory” work of the kind Lavezzo’s book is, but is a work of reference which will appeal (if at can be afforded) to a wide range of medievalists as well as classicists, especially those interested in medieval and Roman science and knowledge. The book is described as a “highly readable translation,” which it certainly is, and also a “complete English translation” of the original work (p. 1). Not only does it contain the twenty books of The Etymologies, it includes introductory chapters covering the historical background to the works of Isidore, as well as discussion of the sources, character, and influence of The Etymologies. This particular translation and edition is based upon a critical Latin edition of 1911 edited by Wallace Lindsay for the Scriptorum Classicorum Bibliotheca Oxoniensis series.[9] The volume’s editors give an unreserved endorsement of “Lindsay’s remarkable accuracy and good judgment” in his work (p. 27), and mention an ongoing international edition of The Etymologies in the series Auteurs Latins du Moyen Age. But since this new English text is based wholly on Lindsay’s Latin edition it might have been worth devoting just a little more space to what his approach to editing was and what manuscript and printed sources he used. There is on the other hand a thorough assessment of Isidore’s own textual sources (pp. 10-17). These included earlier etymological works of Greek and Roman provenance, a range of encyclopedic texts by both pagan and Christian authors, including Varro, Pliny, Marcellus, Martianus, and Cassiodorus, a variety “of lost school-texts and manuals treating the various arts, and of course a mass of monographs, many still extant, treating specific disciplines,” including geography, produced by late antique authors such as Boethius, Solinus, and Orosius, for example (pp. 12-13). These various influences are not exhaustively identified by the editors in the text of The Etymologies itself, although there is a useful index of citations which lists the sources directly quoted by Isidore (pp. 469-75). The reason the editors give for this is that the Auteurs Latins du Moyen Age series will, they contend, “supersede any current knowledge of sources,” and that “the positing of a source by no means indicates that it is Isidore’s immediate source” (p. 15). Indeed, The Etymologies was drawn from a variety of sources not all of which did Isidore himself identify, perhaps because he “thought of them as not worth mentioning as authorities,” including Pliny, Servius and Cassiodorus (p. 15). The complexity of the editorial task facing the modern translators of The Etymologies over the choice of which Latin text to use and which citations to provide would seem somewhat analogous to the task confronting Isidore himself when he began to compile his work. So far from this being a straightforward reference work, the text of The Etymologies creates an anxiety, for while on the one hand it appears to be authoritative, on the other there are uncertainties which undermine this authority. Whether this same anxiety was also shared by later medieval audiences of The Etymologies is open to debate.

The subsequent influence of Isidore’s Etymologies on later learning is also considered by the editors. They note “it would be hard to overestimate the influence of the Etymologies on medieval European culture, and impossible to describe it fully” (p. 24). As testimony to its widespread circulation in the Latin West they point to the survival of “nearly a thousand manuscript copies, a truly huge number,” and observe its influence in Gaul and Ireland by the early seventh century, as well as Aldhelm and Bede in England (p. 24). It is not only the widespread extant manuscript copies of the Etymologies that indicates its influence beyond Visigothic Spain but also its adoption as a prime source for later works of the Middle Ages, not least on geography. Thanks to recent detailed textual studies by Natalia Lozovsky and A. H. Merrills, Isidore’s geographical thinking and the geographical content of the Etymologies have received a thorough critical analysis in their own right, building upon previous work on Isidorian knowledge in medieval science and learning, such as William Stahl’s Roman Science.[10] Of
course, the term “geography” is itself not used by Isidore in the Etymologies. Though Books 13 and 14, and also 15, may be seen to cover geographical topics and material, this again imparts some risk of presentism. The editors suggest that, based upon their content as a group, Books 11 to 16 “might be called On the Nature of Things” (p. 20), a common theme in later medieval encyclopedic works that dealt with the physical world, such as Bartholomaeus Anglicus’ The Properties of Things of the thirteenth century, while for Book 14 in particular, on “The earth and its parts” (De terra et partibus), they think “Solinus and Paulus Orosius’ Histories of the Pagans (fifth century) provide much of the geographical material” (p. 15). This later influence of Orosius’ “geography” is explored by Merrills who has shown how, with its opening “description of the world,” the Historia “not only declared Orosius’ own interests in the interaction of historical and geographical themes, it set the standard for Christian historical writing of the next half-millennium.”[11] Isidore’s “geographical material” was thus passing on the knowledge of Orosius’ “geography” to leagues of future medieval scholars who embedded it, like Isidore, in their own work, even if they did not openly admit to it. Such was the nature of late Antique and early medieval scholarship. It was a geography that also found its way into the English visual and textual geographies that Lavezzo’s book is concerned with, and in particular the notion that Britain stood at the edge of the world. She notes, for instance, how in Book 14 “Isidore highlights Britain as a site sunned from the entire world, an insula interfuso mari toto orbe divisa” (“an island in the ocean, cut off from the whole globe,” is how Barney et al. translate this (p. 294)), and that “other writers such as Orosius and Bede give Britain a privileged placement at the start of their descriptions of islands” (p. 50). Privileged placing in texts is also what interests Merrills.[12] He reckons that one lasting influence of Orosius’ Historia was the continued placing of geographical material at the start of other, later such “histories,” including Isidore’s “Gothic histories,” and Bede’s Historia Ecclesiastica, the latter a particularly important source in later English accounts of the description of Britain, as evidenced in historical works by Gerald of Wales and Ranulf of Higden for example, the “geographies” of which Lavezzo draws upon in her analyses.

What then of the “geographical material” of The Etymologies? What does it reveal of Isidore’s geographical thinking that proved to be so influential and enduring in the later Middle Ages? Lozovsky draws attention to the paucity of the Greek term “geography,” translated as geographia in medieval writing “on the nature of things,” and instead suggests what we now see as the subject of geography was then more commonly termed orbis descriptio, and “constituted part of the knowledge about the created world, belonging to physica.”[13] This orbis descriptio of the early Middle Ages, she says, comprised recurring themes, “on the shape and size of the earth,” and “place descriptions,” for example, in later geographical works.[14] This is evident in The Etymologies in Book 14, “on the earth and its parts.” Here Isidore begins by describing the place of the earth “in the central region of the world,” its circular shape from which its name orbis (globe) derives, its tri-partite form made up by Asia, Europe and Africa, and their relative locations (p. 285). He then goes on to describe these “three parts” in turn, including their features and peoples, so we learn not only that “Gaul is so called from the whiteness of its people” but that “the mountains and the chilliness of the sky keep the heat of the sun from this region, so that the whiteness of bodies does not darken in color” (p. 291). He then treats islands, including Britain, which comes first in his list, even before the Mediterranean islands with which he was surely more familiar, and then “promontories,” “mountains and other terms for landforms,” and finally “the lower regions” of the earth, including caves and “fumeroles.” The way this geographical material was marshaled in The Etymologies, drawn from its earlier sources, “shaped the development of early medieval geographical knowledge” through “an image of the world,” notes Lozovsky.[15] This Isidorian imago mundi was projected throughout the Middle Ages by being repeated in later textual geographies as well as visualized in mappaemundi, as recently exemplified by Kline and Edson.[16] Indeed, it is clear that Isidore himself intended to have a figure in his earlier section on astronomy in Book 3 to illustrate “the shape of the world,” as he wrote, “the shape of the world is shown in this way” (p. 99), and in fact many of the earliest known so-called T-O world maps are those that accompany manuscripts of The Etymologies.[17] Lozovsky notes that “Isidore’s contributions to geographical knowledge have so far attracted less attention than the influence of his encyclopaedia on other fields of medieval learning.”[18] The new English translation of The Etymologies will no doubt help to address this by broadening its audience, thereby raising greater awareness of Isidore’s influence on later geographical thinking of the Middle Ages. While Lozovsky’s and Merrills’ recent books do much to expose Isidore’s influence on later medieval orbis descriptio texts, both in terms of the
nature of their geographical content as well as the close relationship that geography and history were conceived to have, there is of course nothing like reading Isidore’s own words on the subject, which is certainly aided by having a reliable and readable English translation of The Etymologies. The image of the world Isidore presents is an ordered and orderly one. This is evident in his treatment of the material itself. Through Books 13 to 15 he moves from “the cosmos and its parts,” to “the earth and its parts,” to “buildings and fields,” in other words moving through spatial scales, from the wider world at large down to cities, towns, and eventually buildings and fields, and from there down to “stones and metals” in Book 16. Even within these Books there is a hierarchical treatment of “the order of things,” so in Book 14 he starts with the earth as whole, then deals with its three main parts, the continents, then the smaller geographical units of islands. The spatial order of the created world was thus translated into textual order on the created page, from the largest to the smallest, and from the highest to the lowest. Not only then do we gain from The Etymologies a sense of Isidore’s geographical thinking, in terms of the geographical knowledge he conveyed about the physical and human world, we also gain a sense of his thinking geographically, evident in his hierarchical placing of subjects, and the spatial scales through which he moves within and between Books 13 to 15. It is a spatial imaginary that is repeated by later medieval authors too. Those that Lavezzo describes also used space to differentiate between what was more or less central, or peripheral, and thereby define what and who was more or less important. So the Anglo-centrism in Gerald of Wales’ descriptions of Ireland and the Irish, or the ordering of the world depicted in English mappaemundi, relate to an enduring mode of thinking geographically evident in Isidore’s geographical thinking in the orbis descriptio of The Etymologies. It is also evident in the works of those early medieval historians, identified by Merrills, who sought to place description of the world at the start of their histories, as both Isidore and Bede did, and in their successors’ similar works, such as Higden’s Polychronicon. Orbis descriptio thus had an importance above their other knowledge. Its elevated placing at the outset of their work underlines this primacy and makes clear how deeply authors’ thinking of the world and its intrinsic spatial-ordering permeated their own geographical imaginations and individual experiences. Hence thinking geographically and geographical thinking had a curious and complex reciprocity in the Middle Ages.

In the textual and visual geographies they left behind, through geographical thinking, these medieval authors demonstrate the centrality of thinking geographically in the Latin West. Thanks to ongoing contributions such as Lavezzo’s book and the new edition of The Etymologies, as well as other recent expositions on "medieval geography," the important place geography occupied in medieval learning and knowledge is at last gaining due consideration and recognition among modern scholars. This is not before time, for not only does it deepen our understanding of the Middle Ages, it also highlights the continuities that link the classical, medieval and modern worlds in Western culture. The close interrelationship that exists between past geographical texts and knowledge emphasizes the need for more interdisciplinary and cross-temporal dialogue between those who study these historical periods, not least those in the humanities interested in writing geography’s history. Perhaps this renaissance of studies of “medieval geography” will help to expose the fallacy that “modern” geography began in the early fifteenth century with the rediscovery of Ptolemy’s Geography, and help rekindle geographers’ interest in earlier histories of their subject which, in fact, were seen to be important by early-twentieth-century geographers, such as Raymond Beazley and John Kirtland Wright, when geography was gaining its own disciplinary independence and identity.[19] What ought to concern such geographers writing today is not just their oversight of precluding “medieval geographies” from their histories of the subject, but the possibility of losing an important part of the “geographical tradition” by leaving geography’s medieval history to others in the humanities—classicists, Latinists, philologists, historians—who are instead currently taking the lead. The two books reviewed here provide scope for those geographers who write of their subject’s history to engage more with its medieval past, and in so doing enter debates that are developing, as Lavezzo’s book reveals, on thinking geographically and geographical thinking in the Middle Ages: that is, on the nature of medieval geography.

Notes


[6]. On thirteenth-century *mappae regni*, see Birkholz, *The King’s Two Maps*.


[14]. Lozovsky; “The Earth is Our Book”, pp. 120-137.

[15]. Lozovsky; “The Earth is Our Book”, p. 112.


[18]. Lozovsky; “The Earth is Our Book”, p. 102.


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