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In 2015, the Albi world map (Médiathèque d’Albi MS 29, f.57v) was added to the UNESCO Memory of the World Register. This honor inspired new research about the map, including a symposium in Albi in 2016, titled “A l’échelle du monde. La carte: Objet culturel, social et politique, du Moyen Age à nos jours” (At the scale of the world. The map: Cultural, social and political object, from the Middle Ages to the present), whose proceedings were published by the Comité Français de Cartographie, which included a long essay by Anca Dan devoted to the Albi world map, and a seminar about the map itself organized by the Laboratoire de Médiévistique occidentale de Paris, in collaboration with the Médiatheque d’Albi and the Université Pierre-Amalric.[1] The volume reviewed here includes the papers presented at that seminar, with an additional three contributions by Jean-Louis Biget, Magali Coumert, and Alfred Hiatt.

The volume, in keeping with current historiographical currents in the study of the representation of space, considers the map in the context of its production, conservation, and use. After a foreword by Geneviève Bührer-Thierry, the reader is presented with a reproduction of the map, accompanied by a transcription, together with the “Indeculum quod maria vel venti sunt” (Index of seas and winds) that occupies the folio facing the map, and a list of the texts copied from the manuscript.

The extensive introduction, written by Emmanuelle Vagnon and Sandrine Victor, presents the map and reviews the most recent historiography. According to Patrick Gautier Dalché, its form was inspired by the Periegesis of Denys of Alexandria, which was translated into Latin in the sixth century by the grammarian Priscian. In it, the earth is likened to a slingshot that “extends two connected arms that open towards the West” (p. 37). In reporting on Patrick Counillon’s contribution to the seminar (which is not published in the volume), the authors point out that there is no direct connection between the text of the Periegesis and the map, and that the image of the “sling-
shot” has been interpreted differently by readers of Priscian’s translation. The fact remains, however, that the shape of the map is unique, and it corresponds closely to the image, if not of a sling-shot, at least to the description of the general shape of the orbis terrarum as Priscian described it. Most medieval world maps are round; some are oval, adapted to the rectangular format of a manuscript page; a few examples—the Cottonian map and some of the Beatus maps—are more rectangular. The map closest in shape to the Albi world map, drawn by the Byzantine Cosmas Indicopleustes in the sixth century, exerted no influence in the Latin world. The introduction then sets out the approach and conclusions of Dan’s above-mentioned article.[2] The map is said to reflect ancient chorography, serving as a kind of conservatory of Greek and Roman geography. The ancient origins of medieval cartography have long been recognized, and it is well known that these ancient models were adapted and reworked to meet the contemporary requirements of their medieval designers. For Dan, the “Indeculum quod maria vel venti sunt,” the index closely associated with the map, represents two lists. In the center, the succession of sea names, surrounded by wind names arranged in an oval shape, would constitute an “ovoid textual map” (p. 40). The errors in wind positions and names are rightly explained by corruptions originating in faulty readings of the immediate cartographic model. Finally, the symmetries visible on the map (mare Caspium/mare Indicum, Pontum/Mare Rubrum) and the Gibraltar/Sicily/Caucasus axis—the latter not shown on the map—stem from the Eratosthenian worldview. The hypothesis formulated by Dan associates the model of the Albi map with Bishop Eucher of Lyon (fifth century), casting him as the creator of the oldest maps drawn in the early Middle Ages (Albi, the Vatican map, Vatican City, BAV, Vit. Lat. 6018, f. 63v-64, and even the maps of Beatus).[3] Yet Dan’s position is based on uncertainties and hypotheses that are impossible to prove satisfactorily, so it is perhaps unfortunate that the authors take such a neutral position toward it.

Thereafter, the volume is organized into three sections: “The document and its history,” “The cultural context,” and “The map, a mark of transmissions and transfers.” Biget’s essay, “Albi des Mérovingiens aux Carolingiens” (Albi from the Merovingians to the Carolingians), opens the first part and sheds light on the regional context, offering a summary of Albi’s history between the fifth and ninth centuries. Biget situates MS 29 as a testimony to the cultural reform sought by the Carolingians and to “the enterprise of training clerics” (p. 76). Jocelyne Deschaux, who is the curator of Albi’s médiatheque and who was behind the map’s classification in the Memory of the World Register, presents the history of the manuscript up to the present day. The library of the cathedral chapter, whose origins date back to around 600, was associated with a scriptorium that was active until the eleventh century. MS 29 was used for a long time, as attested by additions from the ninth, or more likely the tenth, century, and then again in the twelfth century. Laurianne Robinet, Sylvie Heu-Thao, and Aurélie Tournié present the results of a material analysis of the manuscript, which has been examined with the latest imaging techniques. In particular, they note that the green-painted outline around Jerusalem may have been altered, perhaps even scraped away. The pigments used are consistent with an eighth-century date. Nadège Corbière’s contribution, “Le ms. 29 d’Albi: Une encyclopédie du VIIIe siècle?” (Albi ms. 29: An Eighth-century Encyclopedia?), concludes the first section by posing an essential question: is the manuscript a composite collection of texts assembled for the simple purpose of preserving them, or was it instead organized with a specific purpose? The collection of texts probably arrived in Albi as early as the ninth century and belongs to a group of ninth-century manuscripts mainly devoted to the practical and pastoral organization of the church. Within this larger group, MS 29 stands out for its interest in grammar, biblical exegesis, pastoral
care, history, and spatial description. The collection of late antique geographical texts (f. 58v-61v, the description of the world by Orosius, Historia adversus paganos, I, 2, 1-5; f. 61v-62, Polemius Silvius, Nomina provinciarum; f. 62-62v, Notitia provinciarum et civitatum galliae; f. 62v, De nominibus Gallicis), copied after the world map, all show a particular interest in these issues. The group of texts has a didactic function that responds to the essential challenge of the Carolingian reform of clerical training.

The second section opens with a provocative essay by Coumert, “En marge du monde: Les barbares” (On the margins of the world: The Barbarians), which first recalls the influence of ancient ethnography on the understanding of the Barbarian world—figured on the map by the mention of the Barbari and the Gotia—as opposed to civilization, developed around the Mediterranean. As this fundamental and long-standing opposition did not make it possible to conceive of the new Barbarian kingdoms, it was the original narratives of the peoples that made this possible, without ever being mapped. The Albi map, which preserves the features of ancient geography without any subsequent updating (as was the rule in cartography until at least the twelfth century), symbolically and arbitrarily depicts the separation of the “Barbarian regions and the inhabited world,” with the Barbarians representing the “potential instruments of divine wrath” (p. 136). The arrangement of the names of the winds in the “Indeculum quod maria vel venti sunt” serves no other purpose than to draw an ancient compass rose. Errors in the names and positions of the winds are not due to copying errors but to “disregard for their location” (p. 139). Coumert argues that since they have only a figurative role and are only graphic signs, it is enough to locate twelve of them (no matter which and how). The same applies to the position of the zephyr, the westerly wind, strangely located to the south of the map. In this way, we return to an essentially symbolic interpretation of cartography, a reflection of a vanished world, a schol-
ture, based on ancient toponyms, transmitted by Orosius and Isidore, and considered operative at the time the two maps were copied. Hiatt compares the Albi map to the Cottonian world map (London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. V (1), f. 56v, second quarter of the eleventh century), and the Vatican map, with a view to identifying the ancient elements that they preserve, showing their convergence or divergence. He pays particular attention to the Cottonian map, which is also very close to a late antique model in evidence on the map in the shape of Great Britain and its division into provinces, based on rivers. Julie Richard Dalsace, “Concevoir l'espace à l'échelle du monde dans les manuscrits saint-gallois des *Étymologies*” (Conceiving space on a global scale in the St. Gall manuscripts of the *Etymologies*) focuses on the TO diagrams illustrating Book XIV of the *Etymologies* in two manuscripts related to teaching that were used in St. Gall. In particular, she examines the associations of the parts of the world with the three sons of Noah. The book concludes with an essay by Jean-Charles Ducène (“La mappemonde d’Albi et la cartographie arabe”), which demonstrates how little influence Latin cartography had on Arab cartography. The slight resemblances that can be seen between the Albi world map and Arab maps (in particular that of Ibn Hawqal) stem from their common late antique models.

Why capitalize Mappa mundi when speaking of the Albi map? No doubt to reflect its “exceptional” and “extraordinary” character, mentioned by almost all of the authors, and on account of the map's impressive age. The extraordinary nature of the map is also due to the fact of its survival—a rare occurrence for such an ancient map, of southern European origin, preserved in a manuscript demonstrating Visigothic cultural influence—and its preservation and use in the library of a cathedral chapter, which had a remarkable collection of Carolingian-era manuscripts, mainly from northern France. One of the aims of the volume is to place the map in a broader context, by encouraging comparisons with other cartographic examples. It does this effectively and opens up a new way forward, outlined in particular by Amat. Through the comparative study of place names and graphic forms, the aim is to reconstitute connections and transmissions, from the ancient substratum to specifically medieval additions: in other words, to study the knowledge and models on which medieval cartographers worked, and how and why they chose the data they wanted to include on a map.

It is unfortunate that there is no conclusion to the volume, which would have brought together what has been learned and perhaps also acknowledged the limits of what is possible. The map is relatively limited in its detail (it includes only around fifty toponyms and ethnonyms). It bears graphic signs the meanings of which remain elusive (without being exhaustive: the curious “roundings” in certain places along the coastline, the floral motif near Babylon, the “circles” representing cities [but which ones?], the disconcerting arrangement of the winds). Its organization is also puzzling on certain points: the position of the Ganges in Ethiopia (generally interpreted as an error) or the location of Jerusalem and Judea on what a reader accustomed to representations of medieval space readily interprets as the “southern” shore of the Mediterranean (some copies of the Beatus map, such as the one from Saint-Sever, are quite similar in this respect). This is certainly due to its proximity to a late antique model, probably round in shape, largely distorted by the choice of this oblong form, and the desire to privilege the oversized Mediterranean as the organizing spatial principle. As a result, certain aspects of the map resist analysis, and it is therefore important to guard against a philological hyper-criticism that seeks to go beyond the limits of what we can understand by proposing to fill in the map's “gaps” with toponyms read in other maps or other sources, or to relate these incongruities to a symbolic perception of space without concern for “realism.” Fortunately, this volume, which opens
up new perspectives, mostly avoids these pitfalls. The editors should be congratulated for the conception and publication of this pioneering book about the Albi world map.

Notes


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