

## THE WORLD OF THE MORTIMERS AND THE *MAPPA MUNDI*



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*The image of the Mappa Mundi is reproduced by kind permission of the Hereford Mappa Mundi Trust and the Dean and Chapter of Hereford Cathedral.*

*To study the map in detail follow [this link](#) and then use your browser's zoom.*

During the final decade of the thirteenth century, while Edmund de Mortimer (d1304) was attending parliaments and dealing with his routine administrative and military duties in the Welsh Marches, another Mortimer, William de Mortimer, was pursuing a very different, though equally significant, career in the cathedral close at Hereford.

Not only was William a residentiary canon of Hereford Cathedral, but in the "Calendar of the Hereford Cathedral Muniments", he is recorded as acting as witness to grants of land, fulfilling the office of seneschal to Bishop Richard Swinfield and occasionally deputising for the Dean of Hereford, John de Aquablanca, during the 1290s and as late as 1317. Given even the few details we have of his career, it is hard to imagine that William can have been unaware of a major scholarly project that was almost certainly taking place almost on his doorstep - the making of a spectacular world map to rival the ones that already existed in cathedrals such as Durham and Lincoln. The Hereford *Mappa Mundi* was almost certainly the brainchild of Bishop Richard Swinfield, whose steward William was.

Although almost nothing is known for certain about the genesis of the *Mappa Mundi*, scholarly consensus has shifted in recent years to favour Hereford as its place of origin and the 1290s as the most likely date of its creation. Indeed, a very prominent Berwick-on-Tweed on the *Mappa* could conceivably reflect specific, contemporary political developments in that the town was captured and fortified by Edward I in 1296.

## What is a *Mappa Mundi*?

In his book "A Great and Terrible King: Edward I and the Forging of Britain" (Windmill Books, 2009), Marc Morris remarks that although Edward I may never have seen the Hereford *Mappa Mundi*, the genre to which it belongs would nevertheless give a very fair indication of the way in which the world was seen and understood by educated people of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries - and that would naturally include the Mortimers.

The Latin word 'mappa' actually means 'cloth' and does not carry quite the same connotations as its modern equivalent 'map'. We know what we expect of a 'map': geographical accuracy of the highest possible order. In contrast, the geographical image presented on the Hereford *Mappa* has obvious inaccuracies of scale and detail. Gibraltar, for example, is situated in Africa; Scotland appears completely cut off by water from England; Italy shows no trace of the familiar 'boot' shape; islands such as Crete and Sicily are massively out of scale.

Even as early as the thirteenth century, navigational charts were capable of much higher degrees of accuracy, so it is, perhaps, more helpful to think of *Mappa* as a large, encyclopaedic display covering a wide range of subjects rather than as a map conceived with the sole aim of geographical exactness. For us, it can act as a fascinating window into the minds of educated people right across the period of the 'middle ages'.

Built up in layers by a small and very skilful team of scribes, probably working under a leader who possessed the necessary cartographical experience to know where major features had to be placed, the *Mappa Mundi* covers a wide range of subject areas, including mythology, ancient history, Biblical narratives, natural history and anthropology.

## Didn't people think the world was flat in those days?

The answer to this perennial question has to be a decisive 'No'. One only has to look at medieval images of kings holding the orb (*not* a flat disc) to realise that educated people were perfectly well aware that the world was *not* flat, whatever the 'man in the street or field' may have thought. *Mappa*, therefore, offers us a God's-eye view, looking down on the northern hemisphere spread across the top of the globe and surrounded by ocean. Although medieval thinkers were not dogmatic about what might be hidden on the 'dark' side of the globe and speculated about a 'terra inhabitabilis', later explorers were to hope that a great ocean covered the whole of the underside of the globe, offering open sea passage from Europe to India.

## What did they think the known world was like?

Part of the initial strangeness of the *Mappa Mundi* as we look at it today is the result of its orientation. North is *not* at the top but on the left. East is at the top, where the human story begins with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Earthly Paradise; west, where the Pillars of Hercules stand on the island of Cadiz, is at the bottom. Mentally, we need to re-orientate the map ninety degrees clockwise.

For the Romans, the Mediterranean had been exactly what its name implies - the sea occupying the centre of the earth; the known world was spread out around it. On *Mappa*, the Mediterranean has been shifted down slightly because, in a Christian era, Jerusalem needs to occupy central position on a time axis of human history. This axis runs from Adam and Eve at the top of the map, through a gigantic Tower of Babel, signifying the folly and arrogance of the pre-Christian empires and theologies, on through the theologically pivotal events centred on Jerusalem (encapsulated in the image of the Crucifixion) and thence to Rome, which is described as 'caput mundi' or 'head of the world'. The axis culminates with the pillars of Hercules, which not only mark the westernmost limits of the known world, but which also indicate the threshold of death (indicated by the Latin word *MORS*, the letters of which are spaced out in gold round the perimeter of the globe). Beyond lies the Last Judgement, which is prefigured outside the limits of time and space at the top of the map.

In a world consisting of only three continents, Europe, Asia and Africa, the British Isles occupy a somewhat cramped position on the north-western edge of the known world. Asia is by far the largest continent and, by contrast, Africa the smallest. Confusingly, the expert limner who did the gold continent names confidently labelled Africa 'Europa' and Europe

'Affrica'. As he was the last person to work on the map, there was no way his mistake could be rectified without inflicting serious and unsightly damage.

### **If *Mappa* is not primarily geographical, what *does* it show and how could it be used?**

One of the most important functions of the map at the time of its creation was almost certainly educational. The Anglo-Norman French inscription in the bottom left-hand corner of the frame addresses the spectator and refers to all who see, read or *hear* its message. The idea of *hearing* the map almost certainly predicates a didactic function, presumably at the hands of a literate cleric who could read and interpret its 1,091 Latin inscriptions.

With the diverse (and, for us, possibly confusing) range of material on offer, there can have been few areas of the medieval curriculum that could not have been stimulated by study of the map. At its simplest, the map would almost certainly have brought a sense of geographical reality to stories of history, trade, pilgrimage and crusade as well as illustrating Biblical narratives such as the Exodus, which is graphically shown, right down to the land-bridge crossing the Red Sea and the forty years of wandering aimlessly in the wilderness before finally traversing the Jordan and reaching Jericho. Noah's Ark sits on a mountain ridge while Lot's wife turns to a pillar of salt as she contemplates the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah on islands in the Dead Sea. Less spectacularly, one could re-trace the missionary journeys of Paul or contemplate the origins of monasticism in the person of Zosimas or the monasteries of St Anthony and the desert fathers.

Before any of those features were added, however, the 43 different animals, birds and fishes were depicted on an almost totally empty earth. Their significance, underlined by the attention paid to bestiaries, especially in the thirteenth century, is not only in their astonishing variety (which underlines the infinite capacity for originality in their Creator), but also in their moral, spiritual and theological significance. The pelican, for example, was not only unique in reviving its young with its own blood, but, by extension, demonstrated the virtue (and, indeed, moral necessity) of parental self-sacrifice, ultimately echoing Christ's sacrifice of His blood for mankind and God's 'sacrifice' of His own son for man's salvation.

In various parts of the world, we see animals such as the tiger (notoriously vain and prepared to sacrifice its young while it contemplated its own image in a mirror) and the lynx (with its unique gift of X-ray vision but pointless selfishness in burying the pebbles into which its urine petrified, thus denying their healing properties to mankind).

There is no distinction between what we would term 'real' and 'mythical' creatures. A rhinoceros and a unicorn stand happily side by side. Conceivably, if we were to challenge a medieval observer by asking which was 'real', he or she may well have come down on the side of the unicorn, because it is a creature mentioned nine times in the Bible - unlike the rhinoceros.

The world teems with life and variety and because of their respectable origins in authorities such as Pliny the Elder and Isidore of Seville, creatures such as the phoenix, the eale (or 'yale', as incorporated in the Beaufort crest), the bonnacon and the marsok co-exist with the more familiar bear, leopard and lion.

In India, the inscription comments on the tusks of the elephant and its ability to carry a wooden tower on its back but remains silent about the animal's fabled fear of mice or its inability to stand up again if it fell over. Improbable though the elephant seems as a creature, many people would be aware that their previous king, Henry III, had had an elephant at the Tower of London in the 1250s.

The seas also teem with life - the swordfish, carrying a sword under his fin and another fish that seems to be swimming upside down. From Greek mythology, Scylla and Charybdis take their place beside the story of Jason and the Golden Fleece and the labyrinth of the Minotaur on Crete.

### **What about the people of the world?**

There are few named individuals on the map but there is a picture of St Augustine of Hippo on the coast of North Africa. Perhaps surprisingly for this 'Christian' artefact, it is Alexander the Great who figures as possibly the most pervasive human personality. It is reckoned that there are up to 69 allusions to his life and actions, nine of them being fairly specific - the

Pharos at Alexandria, for example, or his dealings with the anthropophagi and the descendants of Cain. Possibly, too, there is an implied reproach in the worldwide activities of Alexander: the apocryphal books of the Bible allude to his having visited the four corners of the earth. For Christians, the imperative to carry the Gospel to the four corners of the earth might seem too daunting to contemplate; the figure of Alexander, however, is there prove that it is not only possible but has actually already been done - and by a mere pagan from the fourth century BC.

Around the perimeters of the map numerous 'monstrous' races of people demonstrate the sheer diversity of the human race. On the southern fringes of the world can be found troglodytes, hermaphrodites and people with no heads (the Blemmyae). People with four eyes offer a counterbalance to people with only one while other tribes have no ears, no proper mouths or only one foot.

In the east, the Chinese export silk but there are also giants, pigmies, people who are ruled by women and people who can survive on the smell of apples. Northern climes, however, are more dangerous, with several images of violence or cannibalism - the Griste, with a human skin draped over a horse for a saddle or the Essedones, eating their parents as a matter of filial piety (worms would otherwise perform the same duty). People described as 'Turks' (although living a long way from Turkey) live on a diet of youths and abortions while the descendants of Cain drink blood and wait for the arrival of the Anti-Christ, when God will permit them to break out of their enclosure and wreak havoc across the world.

## Conclusion

In reading histories of national politics and dynastic struggle, it is sometimes easy to forget how different from our own was the mindset of those for whom the 'Middle Ages' were simply their everyday world. There is little or no speculation or fancy on the *Mappa Mundi*; it represents sound scholarship stretching back to Pliny the Elder and numerous subsequent authorities. Selective and limited by the size of one large calf-skin though *Mappa* is, it offers a wide-ranging compendium of information that would have been regarded as 'sound' by those who created it. As such, it is a unique and invaluable resource for anyone hoping to understand the medieval period and its people.

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The *Mappa Mundi* is on permanent exhibition, together with the Chained Library, at Hereford Cathedral. Information about times of opening is available on the Hereford Cathedral website:

<http://www.herefordcathedral.org/>

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## Further reading:

"Rare Treasures of Hereford Cathedral - Mappa Mundi, the Chained Library and Magna Carta" published by Hereford Cathedral and available from the Cathedral Bookshop.

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