

# MAPPÆ MUNDI MEDIÆVALIS

Every point of the universe is a fixed point:  
all you have to do is to hang the pendulum from it.  
UMBERTO ECO, *Foucault's Pendulum*

The **mappæ mundi** of the middle ages carry meanings far beyond the conventional conceptions of mapping. Most importantly, the purpose of the medieval map was not primarily to communicate geographical or cosmological facts but to charter the world of thought-and-action, as always a mysterious mixture of the arts and sciences, albeit during that period more of the former than of the latter. It follows that the mappæ mundi should be interpreted “not primarily as repositories of the current geographical knowledge (although a modicum of such information may sometimes be obtained from nowhere else) but as illustrated histories or moralized, didactic displays in a geographical setting.”<sup>1</sup> Their prime function was consequently not to record exact geographical facts but to imitate in drawing the lessons of the Scriptures, to weave into the same fabric the threads of time and place, history and geography, textual narrative and pictorial representation.<sup>2</sup> In the minds of their makers these so-called maps were not primarily maps at all, but paintings, artistic creations made with the same techniques of illumination as other manuscripts, the Red Sea appropriately colored red.

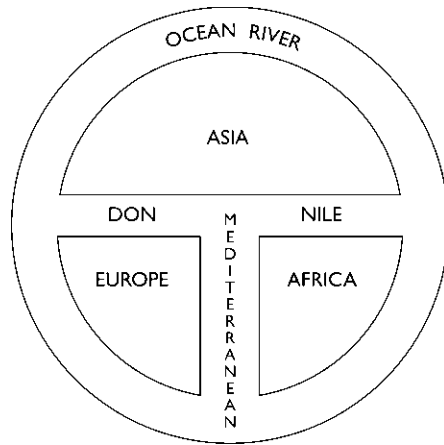
To understand a mappæ mundi (indeed to understand any map) is to approach it as a palimpsest, a parchment written on twice, the first text erased, the second covering the traces of the old. Since its rhetorical force depends on the internal coherence of the narrative, and since the spiritual world is always emphasized over the physical, the pictured scenes are positioned to fit the temporal logic of the story rather than the realities of geographical space. Thus, while it may be fair to say that the Greeks measured the earth by the stars and the Romans measured by milestones, the medieval Christians got their directions from the angels, one Heaven evidently as good as another.<sup>3</sup> Typical of its time was Saint Augustine's saying

that “a man who has faith in you . . . though he may not know the tracks of the Great Bear, is altogether better than another who measures the sky and counts the stars and weighs the elements.”<sup>4</sup> But what was the light that guided the magi to Bethlehem? A celestial body; a newborn baby; a word picked out of the Evangelist’s portmanteau? A hard fact of astronomy; a social fact of astrology; an episode from the canon of world literature?

The questions furnish the answers, for just as stars come in many forms so do the mappae mundi. The most frequent and best known are the T/O maps, so called because they look like an anagram with the letter T embraced by an O. At the edge of that world was the Ocean Sea, a conception deeply rooted in the geographies of Anaximander, Alexander and Pytheas, all of them ultimately grounded in Homer’s description of Achilles’ shield.<sup>5</sup> Surrounded by this dangerous and unnavigable water was the earth proper, by the cross-like confluence of the Don, the Nile and the Mediterranean divided into the three continents of Asia, Europe and Africa, those lands in turn settled by the families of Shem, Ham and Japheth, all descendents of Noah. Since the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, the map was oriented accordingly, the shining Orient placed at the top, the shadowy Pillars of Hercules at the bottom, Jerusalem sometimes, though not always, at the center. The symbolism of the letter T was incredibly rich, ranging from the wooden cross of Christ to the trees in the garden of Eden, from the theological debates over trinity to the geometrical techniques of triangulation.

Although the oldest T/O maps have not survived, it is generally agreed that the pattern was set by Isidore (ca. 560–636), bishop of Seville, proficient writer and compiler of the twenty volume *Etymologiae*, a highly influential encyclopedia of human and divine subjects; it was he who derived the word *homo* from *humus*, by analogy man from earth, dust from dust and back to dust again. As the world’s leading expert on Paradise, this prelate was naturally interested in the precise location of that same utopia. Paradoxical in deed, for while utopia is a *ou-topos*, a no-place, it is at the same time a *eu-topos*, a place-of-happiness,<sup>6</sup> in toto a devastating critique of the dominant ideology. After much thought Isidore set this imagination in the Far East, more exactly in an isolated place surrounded by a high wall lest it be invaded by scheming hordes of lustful sinners. The parallels to Alexander’s quest for the eastern shore of the oikumene are striking, a fact which suggests that the mappae mundi may be best treated as maps of desire, in their function closely related to the images which nowadays are projected onto millions of movie and television screens.<sup>7</sup>

For the medieval mapmakers—who shared Ptolemy’s idea of imitating in drawing but had forgotten about his longitudes and latitudes—the main goal was not to capture the mountains, rivers and cities of the physical earth but to make the incredible credible by turning the invisible visible. A remarkable advance in that direction was made by Hugh (ca. 1097–1141), influential master of the school at the abbey of St. Victor in Paris. Although



Stylized T/O map.

himself a mystic, this man readily acknowledged that the world is not only spiritual (i.e. imaginary and symbolic) but is material (i.e. real) as well. To that pre-Lacanian end, in a remark by six centuries predating Giambattista Vico, he explicitly stated that “the significance of things is far more excellent than that of words, because the latter was established by usage, but Nature dictated the former. The latter is the voice of men, the former the voice of God speaking to men.”<sup>8</sup> And in another text, in a tone worthy of the best postmodernist, he stressed that “it is not things nor the images of things but rather their meaning that we wish to show, not what things in themselves mean, but what is meant by them.”<sup>9</sup> As a pigeon-holing teacher Hugh knew from experience not only that memory is a central feature of all meaning formation but that memory without rules is like an uncatalogued library, a contradiction in terms.

Since memory has both structure and content, Hugh devoted his life to the development of better techniques of remembering, well knowing that designing rules for remembering is one thing, forming rules for forgetting quite another. In particular he stressed that we remember by means of imaginary pictures,<sup>10</sup> literally representations of spatially distributed topoi, not the least as these places are expressed in the typographical layout of the page itself. In his own words, “it is a great value for fixing a memory-image that when we read books, we study to impress on our memory through our mental-image-forming power [*per imaginationem*] not only the number and order of verses or ideas, but at the same time the color, shape, position and placement of the letters, where we have seen this or that written, in what part, in what location (at the top, the middle, or the bottom) we saw it positioned, in what color we observed the trace of the letter or the ornamented surface of the parchment. Indeed I consider nothing so useful for stimulating memory as this.”<sup>11</sup>

With these ideas constantly in mind, Hugh constructed a range of

memory aids, each one essentially a *thesaurus sapientiae*, a “storage-room” or “knowledge-container,” in which he deposited the mental pictures of whatever it was that he wanted to remember.<sup>12</sup> Although their designs varied slightly, these intellectual tools were all constructed from blueprints given by the Scriptures, especially by the chapters of Genesis in which God looked back at what he had done, saw how great man’s wickedness had become and concluded that the results were not to his liking. His heart was filled with pain, and in his wisdom the Almighty decided to do away with it all, not, however, with Noah, who he considered a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time. So God, the LORD, said to Noah:

I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. . . . Everything on earth will perish. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife and your sons’ wives with you. You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you. . . . You are to take every kind of food that is to be eaten and store it away as food for you and for them. (Gen. 6:13–21)

For Hugh the ark clearly served as God’s favorite *thesaurus sapientiae*, a container of everything worth remembering, hence of everything worth knowing and preserving. And so rich is the biblical language that the term “ark” denotes not only Noah’s rescue ship but the covenant between God and his people, these laws and regulations in turn transferred from the realm of meaning into the chest in which they are stored, the wooden coffer on the table of the tabernacle that is hidden behind the curtain which separates the Most Holy Place from the merely Holy Place, a sacred position from which it must never be removed. And so it is that neither word nor world sit still, a fact which helps explain why Moses, after having finished writing his law book, gave the following command to the Levites: “Take this Book of the Law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God. There it will remain as a witness against you. For I know how rebellious and stiff-necked you are. If you have been rebellious against the LORD while I am still alive and with you, how much more will you rebel after I die!” (Deut. 31:26–27). No wonder that Moses knew the conditions of power. He was the first to have them codified.

In a similar manner Hugh’s *arca sapientiae* may be seen as the floating metaphor of his own mnemonics, a model of memory which was inherently locational. This fascinating attempt at codification permeated also the famous map (long since lost)<sup>13</sup> in which he depicted the world as an oval-shaped vessel, its first, second and third class passengers routinely assigned their respective stations on the lower, middle and upper decks.<sup>14</sup> As

the instructions show, there is a short step from the conception of God as architect to the conception of God as geometrician.<sup>15</sup> To be precise:

The perfect ark is circumscribed with an oblong circle, which touches each of its corners, and the space which the circumference includes represents the earth. In this space, a world map is depicted in this fashion: the front of the ark faces the east, and the rear faces the west. . . . In the apex of the east formed between the circle and the head of the ark is Paradise. . . . In the other apex, which juts out to the west, is the Last Judgment with the chosen to the right, and the reprobates to the left. In the northern corner of this apex is Hell, where the damned are thrown with the apostate spirits.<sup>16</sup>

How fortunate for us that the LORD changed his mind and instead of wiping mankind off the face of the earth taught Noah—and by extension Hugh—how to escape the flood! And how striking that the oval-shaped map which was issued from the abbey of St. Victor now reappears as what it really is: a postmodernist palimpsest eight hundred and fifty years in advance of Gilles Deleuze. Thus, it is tempting to imagine how the latter, foremost critic/practitioner of cartographical reason,<sup>17</sup> rises from the table at the Bar de Mille Plateaux, folds his napkin, kisses his friend and whispers, “Oh Félix, always remember that the *mappa* of a map is a screening screen, a mirror of memories too easily forgotten. Nothing but the bottomless surface-in-between. Therefore, every map is an interface, every labyrinth a folded abyss.”

And yet. The ingenuity of Hugh’s ark—Paradise in the east, Hell in the west—easily fades in comparison with the beauty and symbolism of the *Ebstorfer Karte*, the largest *mappa mundi* to come our way, thirty sheets of goat skin sewn together (some sheets missing), a total of almost thirteen square meters.

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The *Ebstorfer Karte* is an outstanding example of invisible connections made visible, like all *mappae mundi* a thesaurus sapientiae, in this case of unsurpassed richness. In its structure a topographical rendering of the world, in its content a compendium of everything worth knowing. Not a descriptive copy of the world as it is, rather a normative interpretation of what it ought to be. Seemingly a world-picture, in reality a world-picturing. An icon in disguise, by definition a painting which is not a painting.

Although the questions of why, when, where and by whom may never be fully answered,<sup>18</sup> there is general agreement that the map stems from the thirteenth or fourteenth century, most likely from the years around 1235. Its author (almost certainly not the same as its painter) may or may not have been Gervase, originally from Tilbury, England, well-known en-

cyclopedist, for different periods student and teacher of canon law in Bologna, member of the Sicilian court, judge of the archbishop of Arles and the count of Provence, eventually in the service of the Guelphs as provost in Ebstorf.

It was in this Niedersachsen town on the Lüneburger Heide that the map most likely was put together, initially used as a teaching aid, later as a wall decoration hung in the dean's residence, later still as an altarpiece. Thereafter it was long forgotten, in 1830 rediscovered in a closet of the Benedictine nunnery, four years later moved to the historical collections in Hannover, restored, copied, photographed and carefully documented,<sup>19</sup> eventually lost in the flames of an allied air raid, thanks to the old records soon resurrected again, for financial reasons issued in four hand-colored versions, three presently in various museums including that in the Ebstorf convent, one sold to a private collector. It is these tales of tales, these copies of copies that a century of research has struggled to interpret. No end in sight.<sup>20</sup>

In its present state the map measures  $3.58 \times 3.56$  meters. However, considering that goatskin is a living material, hence liable to shrinkage and expansion, it is not unlikely that what presently is *almost* a square originally was a *perfect* square. Inscribed into that quadrant is the T/O map proper: at the edge of the world lies the circular Ocean, at the center Jerusalem surrounded by the earth itself, the latter divided into three continents by the main waterways, in this instance shaped less as a T and more like a Y. Filling the empty space between the circular earth and the square frame are some densely written marginal notes, a kind of user's manual put together for the benefit of readers and travelers alike. Even though most of these comments, unfortunately not included in Miller's reproduction, were lifted directly from Isidore's *Etymologiae*, they are highly informative, not the least because the margins were places of transformation and paradox, pun and perversity, areas reserved for the show and resolution of contradictions and conflicts.<sup>21</sup> The space located inland of the Ocean river—what to the Greeks had been the oikumene—is filled with at least 1,224 drawings, most of them supplemented with a written commentary, everything in striking (albeit not perfectly retrievable) colors. In general, the size of the pictures reflects their importance in the story rather than the physical extension of the place in which the events tied to them allegedly occurred. The picture-world is the world-picture, a spatialization of Judaic, Greek and Christian literature. James Joyce prefigured.

By all measures the Ebstorf map is a genre-transgressing work of art in which text and picture are intricately interwoven into an uncomparable encyclopedia, a forerunner of Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, a hodgepodge of biblical, classical and fabulous history mixed with the names of true places, cities and people. As already noted, its primary purpose was not to measure the earth surface but to show in pictures how all history is embedded in the particular history of Christianity.<sup>22</sup> In this remarkable conception the



*Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte.* Reproduction from Konrad Miller, *Mappae mundi: Die ältesten Weltkarten.* Vol. 5, *Die Ebstorfkarte* (Stuttgart: Jos. Rots'sche, 1896).

tales of fact and fiction are never in conflict, the imaginary road from Ebstorf to Paradise as clearly marked as the real road from Ebstorf to Rome. Walled in by monastic regulations, most monks and nuns could visit Jerusalem only in their dreams, and it was as road atlases in their spiritual rather than physical pilgrimages that the mappae mundi played a major role. In that regard there are in fact some striking parallels between Ger-

vase's *Ebstorfer Karte* and Cosmas' *Christian Topography*, for in both cases the structure of chorology and the content of chronography are so tightly interwoven that neither the weft nor the warp can be disentangled. All in all a wonder-filled dance of ontological transformations.<sup>23</sup>

Since the Ebstorf specimen is not only a literary and pictorial document but a map as well, the cardinal directions are clearly marked. Not, however, by the customary winds blowing their rhumb-lines onto the portolan charts, but by the body of Christ pointing the way to salvation. Placed at the top of the map, in the far east, is therefore a picture of the Savior's head, in the west his feet, in the south and north his left and right hands. Together these body parts serve as the mapmakers' fix-points, overriding, but not entirely erasing, the latitudes and longitudes of ordinary geography. Most noteworthy is the fact that the orientation marks are positioned neither inside nor outside the oikumene, but exactly in that limit of limits which is the Ocean itself. Rephrased, Christ's head, feet and hands are all doubly bound, partly tied to the solid ground of the *terra firma*, partly to the unknown on the other side. The abyss between certainty and ambiguity transcended, the medieval monks torn by the same fears and desires as Pytheas and Alexander fifteen centuries before them.

It is in the interweaving of Christian and Ptolemaic coordinates that the Ebstorf most profoundly differs from other medieval maps, including those in the London Psalter and Hereford Cathedral, the former in the size of 170 × 124 millimeters and hidden in a book, the latter measuring 1.58 × 1.33 meters and publicly displayed either as an altarpiece or for purely educational purposes.<sup>24</sup> Most importantly, the English maps pictured the world as a gift offered *through* Christ, while their German cousin conceived the world *as* Christ. Rephrased, the makers of the *Ebstorfer Karte* seem never to have doubted that the world *is* Christ; as they believed that Jesus is God Incarnate, so by extension they believed that the earth is Christ embodied. Strange, yet not as surprising as it might at first appear. For not only was there in Greek cartography a tradition of likening the world to the human being, but the medieval public was of course thoroughly familiar with the Christian story of how the Word turned to flesh and came to dwell among us (John 1:14). To latecomers as ourselves the associations run the other direction as well, not the least to the Here Comes Everybody of *Finnegans Wake* and to the works of Samuel Beckett, for a period Joyce's secretary, the genius who dreamed of a writing which is not *about* something, but *is* that something itself.<sup>25</sup>

And now it may finally be surmised that to the maker(s) of the Ebstorf map the overriding aim was to project an image of God's Son, not, however, in the form of a tattoo etched onto the skin of a parchment, but as the privileged vehicle of all human thought-and-action. In my imagination I hear first the soft voice of Stéphane Mallarmé, "paint not the thing, but the effect it produces," then the chants of the monks, "paint neither the thing nor its effects, but the forces which produce both the thing and its



effects.” To the critic of cartographical reason the task is self-evident: study the particular coordinate net in which the clerics simultaneously captured and shaped their universe of material and social relations.

Give me a fix-point and I shall move the world, weave me a Marduk-net and Evil will be killed! Square the circle, for it was through the proportions of Vitruvius’ *Homo quadratus* that medieval man translated number into mystical symbols.<sup>26</sup> In the succinct words of Umberto Eco:

According to the theory of *homo quadratus*, number is the principle of the universe, and numbers possess symbolical meanings which are grounded in correspondences at once numerical and aesthetic. . . . Vitruvius taught that four was the number of man, because the distance between his extended arms was the same as his height—thus giving the base and height of a square. Four was the number of moral perfection, and men experienced in the struggle for moral perfection were called “tetragonal.” However, *homo quadratus* was also pentagonal, for five was another number of arcane significance which symbolized mystical and aesthetic perfection. Five was a circular number [which] was found in man, for if the extremities of his body were joined by straight lines they formed a pentagon (an image found in Villard de Honnecourt, and also in the much better known drawing by Leonardo).<sup>27</sup>

As recalled, the main principle of Vitruvian architecture was that

without symmetry and proportion there can be no principles in the design of any temple; that is, if there is no precise relation between its members, as in the case of those of a well shaped man. . . . In the human body the central point is naturally the navel. For if a man placed flat on his back, with his hands and feet extended, and a pair of compasses centered at his navel, the fingers and toes of his two hands and feet will touch the circumference of a circle described therefrom. And just as the human body yields a circular outline, so too a square figure may be found from it. For if we measure the distance from the soles of the feet to the top of the head, and then apply that measure to the outstretched arms, the breadth will be found to be the same as the height, as in the case of plane surfaces which are perfectly square.<sup>28</sup>

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**Squaring the circle** of the *Ebstorfer Karte* is to lay bare its coordinate net, by no coincidence patterned in the same manner as the coordinate net of all other maps: up and down, right and left, an origo at the center. *Homo circularis*, *Homo quadratus*. Cartographical reason undressed. *Enuma elish* resurrected.

At the commanding top, in the spot where the ancient stargazers had



*Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte: Christ's head in the east.*

envisioned the North Pole, the medieval believers painted the head of Christ. No longer a blinking star but a shining light. No longer the fourth corner of Pytheas' constellation but an icon. Held in place by a rectangular frame, the Savior looks straight ahead, his eyes blazing the way through time and space. In the upper corners of this figure are written the two letters *A* and  $\Omega$ , in the lower corners the words *primus* and *et novissimus*, for "I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev. 1:8). And, as no monk needed to be reminded, this quotation ties back to the story of how Thomas Didymus (nicknamed "The Doubter") once asked Jesus, "we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" to which he got the answer, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father without me" (John 14:5–6).

It was exactly this passage that the Ebstorf Benedictines turned into a medieval *Baedeker*, an illustrated tour-guide designed to help the pilgrims find their way to salvation. Connecting the two poles of the accompanying map—Christ's head in the east, his feet in the west—is the zero meridian, an invisible line running from top to bottom.

While Christ's head is vaguely placed where the sun rises, his feet are

at the mythological Pillars of Hercules, the right foot partly resting on the ground, the left walking on nothing but water;<sup>29</sup> as recalled, it was at these Straits of Gibraltar that the ancient mariners believed that the oikumene changed into the anoikumene. Tied to that place, and deeply etched into the mind of every sailor, was the warning signal *non plus ultra*—HERE BUT NO FURTHER!<sup>30</sup> Yet, these forbidding words were soon to be replaced by the challenging *Plus ultra*—FURTHER STILL! Through the erasure of the *non*, Anaximander's *to apeiron* was forever transcended by the explorers of the New Age, the *finis* turning into the *novissimus*, one narrative replacing another. As every rhetorician knows, the easiest way to be believed is to tell a story. And as every cartographer knows, all stories are in essence travel stories, infinite chains of metonymies in which one wor(l)d slides into another, a postmodern narrative with multidimensional meanings.

The particular characteristic that makes the Ebstorf map so special is the tremendous skill by which its authors tell several stories at the same time, in general moving from Genesis to Revelation, Alexander serving as border guard in the east, Hercules in the west. Through the mappers' creative mixture of word and picture, they take the audience down the beaten track of the prime meridian, holy and worldly events typically rendered in parallel. Thus, shown immediately below Christ's head are the outlines of two symmetrical itineraries, one anchored in the Old Testament, the other in the Alexander legends.<sup>31</sup>

The first station along the biblical route is paradise itself, here shown in all its splendors, including a painting of Adam and Eve in their nakedness, the tree of life on one side, the snake climbing the tree of knowledge on the other. Further to the northwest, where four streams were said to come up from the earth and water the whole surface of the ground (Gen. 2:6), there is yet another Eden, this one protected by a wall of fire; in deed the mappers seem genuinely uncertain about where exactly to locate the earthly paradise, and for that reason they let it appear at different times and at different places.<sup>32</sup> However, they did not go as far as Cosmas Indicopleustes, who six centuries earlier had taken the word *ou-topia* so literally that he refused to put it on this earth at all but set it in the No-where on the other side of the unnavigable Ocean. In comparison, the Hereford map chose a middle road and had it placed on an island at the very edge of the habitable world, Adam and Eve expelled from the walled-in garden to the uncertainties of the terra firma.<sup>33</sup>

Occasionally the Ebstorfers came close to practicing the same type of ambiguity, for when they painted the "Promised Land of Saints"—the imaginary island which the legendary Saint Brendan had discovered somewhere to the west of Ireland—they gave it the form of a rectangular island off the coast of Africa. On the other hand, there is not a single trace of Presbyter Johannes, better known as Prester John. Given the popularity of this figure, and the dates of the map, the omission is quite surprising, for

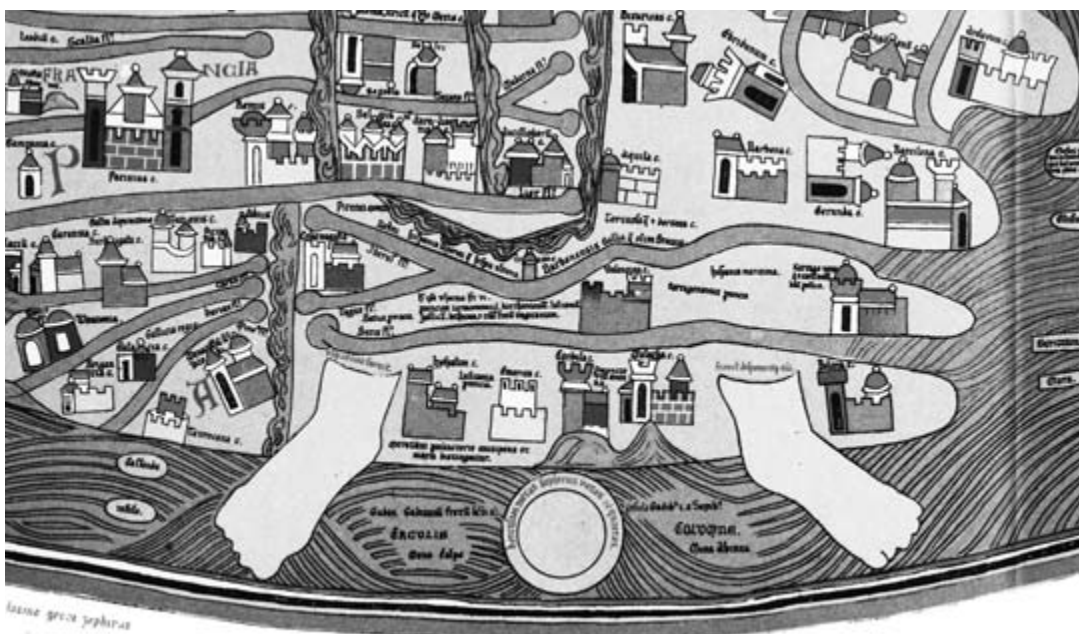
the news about his empire of milk and honey began to circulate already around 1145.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the exclusion is somehow related to the Council of 1240, at which it was officially decided that the entire idea of an earthly paradise is so ridiculous that it must be condemned. But even edicts occasionally travel slowly and when Columbus on his third voyage reached the mouth of the Orinoco, he thought he had discovered one of the paradise rivers. From that mistaken belief he then concluded that he was at the very top of the earth, the earth itself being not round but pear-shaped. In the same mood he named one of the Cuban capes “Alpha and Omega.”

At the same distance from Christ’s head as the picture of Adam and Eve, but positioned to the left rather than the right, are several illustrations which refer not to the Bible but to the Alexander legends. In a direct parallel to Genesis 2 and 3, the first of these paintings—like that of Adam and Eve put in a rectangular frame—shows the emperor standing between the two oracular trees, barefoot, bareheaded, and dressed in a red mantel. Nailed to that position, simultaneously illuminated by both the sun and the moon, he is told by the two oracles, one speaking Greek, the other “Indian,” that he will soon die. Next to this pivotal painting are several other references to the emperor’s adventures, one showing a group of Chinese behind their Great Wall, another a people so peace-loving that they live on nothing but the smell of apples. Located in the same area are the tombs of Persepolis, the place where Alexander, in a gesture of magnanimity, buried Darius, the Persian king he so decisively had defeated and whose family he so cruelly (or was it so respectfully) refused to set free. Farther away is the city of Alexandria shown with its already demolished lighthouse, earlier one of the world’s seven wonders. To be exact, Alexander is mentioned ten times, pictured about fifteen.<sup>35</sup>

Whereas illustrations of history’s most central events (including the Tower of Babel) are cluttered around the main meridian, most horror stories are relegated to the margins. Outstanding in this respect is the treatment of the apocalyptic people of Gog and Magog, in number like the sand on the seashore, a legend often tied to the Scythian invasions which via Armenia and Mesopotamia reached Syria and Palestine around 630 BCE.<sup>36</sup> Told and retold in many contexts, these ingredients are here mixed into a potent brew of psychedelic proportions.<sup>37</sup> Following convention, the mappers placed this home of Antichrist in the far northeast (more correctly eastnorth), close to Christ’s right hand, its stigmata clearly visible. There, within a rectangular frame of bricks and fire, the biblical author recalls how the Sovereign LORD once declared that “I am against you Gog. . . . I will turn you around, put hooks in your jaws and bring you out with your whole army. . . . On the mountains of Israel you will fall, you and your troops and the nations with you. I will give you as food to all kinds of carrion birds and to the wild animals” (Ezek. 38:3–4 and 39:4). The result is a scene of how they “eat the flesh of mighty men and drink the blood of the princes of the earth as if they were rams and lambs, goats and bulls—all



Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte: Christ's head surrounded by Adam and Eve in Paradise and Alexander the Great between the oracular trees.



Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte: Christ's feet at the Straits of Gibraltar.



Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte: Land of Gog and Magog.

of them fattened animals from Bashan. At the sacrifice I [the Sovereign LORD] am preparing for you, you will eat fat till you are glutted and drink blood till you are drunk. At my table you will eat your fill of horses and riders, mighty men and soldiers of every kind” (39:19–20). Seems like Hell to me. And that, of course, was the intention.

On the other side of the earth life is equally strange, albeit not equally evil. Thus, along the southern rim of the oikumene, on the outskirts of Africa, there lives a fantastic range of monsters, peculiar beings that everyone talks about but nobody has ever seen; literally the Others of the other, etymologically connected with the word *monere*, “to warn.” These symbols of human ambiguity, most of them invented already by Pliny the Elder, carry names as fanciful as the characteristics of their bearers, for to be monstrous is to be deformed. The map in fact assembles a stunning total of twenty-four of these different races, including the *Anthropophagi* (“man-eaters”), who drink from human skulls and wear human heads and scalps on their breasts; the *Blemmyae*, who lack heads and necks and have their faces on their chests; the *Cynocephali* (“dog-heads”), who have huge teeth, breathe flames, and communicate through barking; the *Panotii* (“all-ears”), very shy and with ears so big that they can be used as both blankets and wings; the *Sciopods* (“shadow-feet”), one-legged but extremely swift creatures, who spend their days lying on their back, shadowing themselves

with their enormous foot. On an island in the Nile a dwarf is riding a domesticated crocodile.<sup>38</sup>

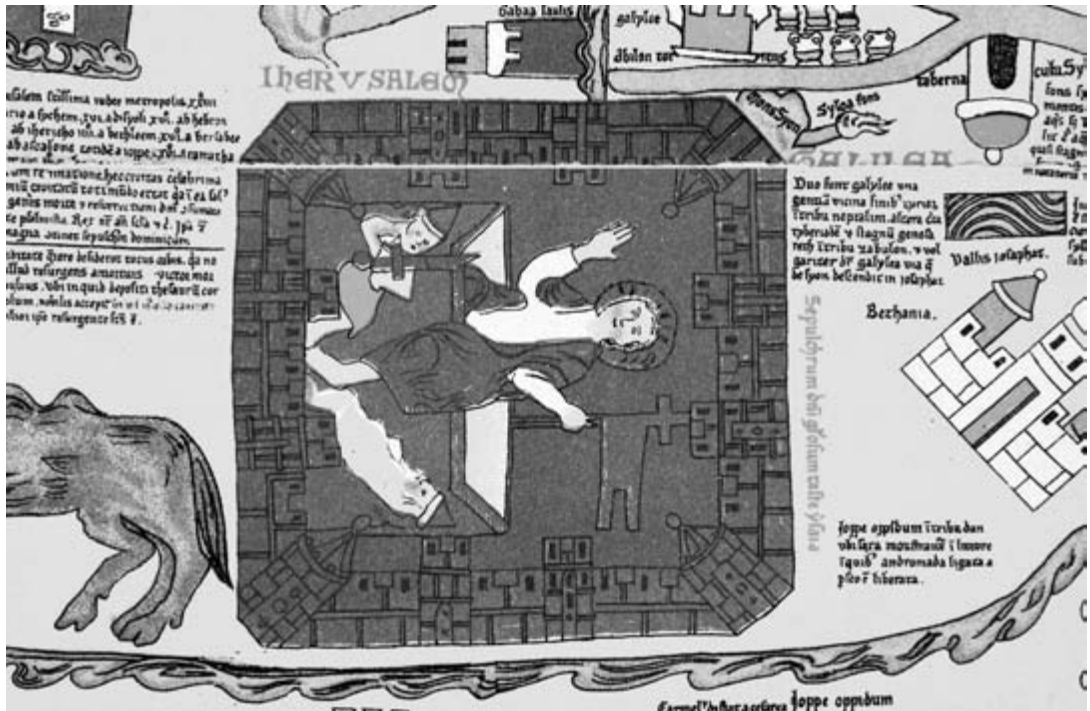
Everything monstrous is positioned in the vicinity of Christ's left hand (not stigmatized), an indication that also the unclassifiable is subject to the LORD's embrace, albeit kept at maximum distance. After all, Christianity claims to be the only major religion that welcomes not only the rich and the beautiful but also the poor and the handicapped, not only the rulers of the world but the prostitutes and the leprous as well. And therein lies the importance of the monsters, because they provided valuable input into the analyses of what it means to be human. Crucial indeed, especially as it was believed that only human souls may be admitted to paradise. The challenge was enormous, and it was considered a great missionary success when it was reported that a Dog-Head, perhaps the most monstrous of all monsters, had not only been converted but been turned into one of the most prominent saints.<sup>39</sup> Unfathomable is the magic of ontological transformations.<sup>40</sup>

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**In my interpretation,** it is exactly this power-filled question of what it means to be human that lies at the heart of the Ebstorf map. Its proposed answer is everywhere to be seen, but nowhere as clearly as in the origo of the coordinate net, the geometrical center of the circular earth and the quadratic map alike. Self-reference embodied, Christ's grave in his navel, Jesus himself a second Adam. Osiris reawakened, all winds in the same bag, all planets caught in the same geometry.

At this pivot of the four quarters the map puts the city of Jerusalem,<sup>41</sup> in the written text described as the earthly capital of Palestine,<sup>42</sup> in the painted picture shown as the heavenly capital of Christianity, the ideological rather than the geographic center of the world. Surrounded by a golden wall with twelve towers, this place is so unique that it is enclosed in a square (not merely rectangular) frame, the only painting so adorned. Filling this crucial space is an icon of the Savior himself appropriately painted *en face* in the flat perspective of the time. Newly risen from the tomb his eyes are set on the regions of the north, his fingers crossed, his hand raised in blessing.

Although the map's geometry is never perfect, the horizontal and vertical axes definitely traverse the central square, perhaps intersecting in Christ's face, possibly in the sacred point between his eyes.<sup>43</sup> Running through the same center is a fascinating diagonal, one end in the Gog and Magog area of the eastnorth, the other in the Garden of the Hesperides in the far westsouth, a peninsula guarded by a serpent with its tail in its mouth, the only picture with a frame like that.<sup>44</sup> Along the same axis, midway between the tomb of Jerusalem and the Hell of Gog is Noah's ark stranded on Mount Ararat, while in the other direction, midway between Jerusalem and the Hesperidian Garden, is the island of Sicily shaped as a

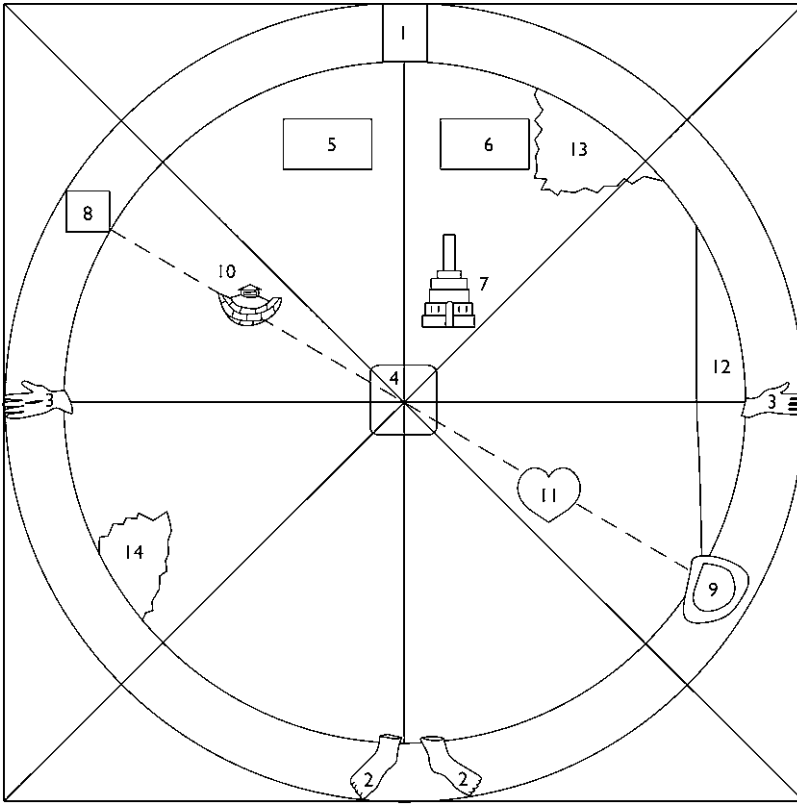


*Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte: Christ's navel in Jerusalem.*

giant heart; as recalled, Gervase spent part of his early life at the Sicilian court, and a romantic mind easily imagines how he might have enjoyed his nights. At any rate, all places along the diagonal—Gog and Magog included—are in reality topoi of salvation, the quadratic Jerusalem one with the apocalyptic Jerusalem. Relevation revealed, for like a first century Molly Bloom John had reported how he

saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city of Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying . . . “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.” [And] one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and he showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of the heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as a crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gate. (Rev. 21:1–2, 6, 10–12)





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|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Christ's head  | 8. Gog and Magog    |
| 2. Christ's feet  | 9. Hesperian Garden |
| 3. Christ's hands | 10. Noah's ark      |
| 4. Jerusalem      | 11. Sicily          |
| 5. Adam and Eve   | 12. Monstrous races |
| 6. Alexander      | 13. Missing sheets  |
| 7. Tower of Babel | 14. Missing sheets  |

*Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte. Conceptual scheme.*

Another diagonal, located more to the east but almost perpendicular to the Gog–Hesperides axis, ties together the missing goatskins in the upper right corner and the partly lost pieces in the lower left, all of them mysteriously stolen in 1888, when the original map was disassembled and sent to Berlin for restoration. The intriguing question is, of course, why these and no other sheets were taken. A possible answer is that the text in the upper right-hand corner may have contained clues to the problem of the map's provenience, while the lower left showed the area of Niedersachsen, another key to its origin. These questions are themselves directly connected to the puzzle of why it was Jerusalem, rather than Ebstorf, that was placed at the world's center; in most other maps (some prominent mappae mundi excluded) the center of the world is one with the mapmaker's own home—for

the Greeks it was Delos or Delphi, for the Alexandrians the observatory on Mount Atabyrion, for the Romans the city of Rome, Mecca for the Arabs.

Similar considerations may well have been on the Ebstorfers' mind, for in terms of geographical detail nothing on the map compares to Niedersachsen. In deed this region contains marks not only of Alexander the Great, who most likely had never heard of it much less had ever set foot there, but of numerous episcopal sees and monastic centers as well. In addition, there is the town of "Ebbekestorf" itself, here shown with the graves of three martyrs, holy figures otherwise unknown.

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**A fascinating document.** In the words of one of its most prominent commentators: "The Ebstorf World Map must be seen concurrently from various standpoints; from the point of view of geography it is a map; from that of learning generally, an encyclopedia; as a work of iconography, it is a work of God's creation; as a work of politics, a sign of lordship. And as a work of piety, it represents a means of meditation."<sup>45</sup>

Yet, perhaps even more importantly, the Ebstorf map is an outstanding, in deed astonishing, example of cartographical reason in practice. The human body—here elevated into the body of Christ himself—becomes the coordinate net of the entire universe, a merger of Vitruvius' *Homo circularis* and *Homo quadratus* two centuries before Leonardo.<sup>46</sup> A piece of art in which picture and narrative join forces in a continuous play of ontological transformations. In the words of the expert:

Does Britannia, when it sleeps, dream? Is America her dream?—in which all that cannot pass in the metropolitan Wakefulness is allow'd Expression away in the restless Slumber of these Provinces, and on West-ward, wherever 'tis not yet mapp'd, nor written down, nor ever, by the majority of Mankind, seen,—serving as a very Rubbish-tip for Subjunctive Hopes, for all that *may yet be true*,—Earthly Paradise, Fountain of Youth, Realms of Prester John, Christ's Kingdom, ever behind the sunset, safe till the next Territory to the West be seen and recorded, measur'd and tied in, back into the Net-Work of Points already known, that slowly triangulates its Way into the Continent, changing all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities to Simplicities that serve the ends of Governments,—winning away from the Sacred, its Borderlands one by one, and assuming them unto the bare mortal World that is our home, and our Despair.

"Yet must the Sensorium be nourish'd," Mason, insomniack, addresses himself in a sort of Gastrick Speech he had devis'd for Hours like these, ". . . as the Body, with its transcendent Desires, the foremost being eternal Youth,—for which, alas, one seeks in vain thro' the Enthusiasts' Fair, that defines the Philadelphia Sabbath,—the best Offer heard, being of Bodily Resurrection, which unhappily yet requires Death as a pre-condition. . . ."<sup>47</sup>

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But what do they look like, the secret maps, which serve the same functions for today's rulers as the *Ebstorfer Karte* once did for the salvation of the German monks and the Mason-Dixon line for the future of Britannia? Squaring the circle of that question is no easy feat, for the world's omphalos seems sometimes to be located in Washington, sometimes in Beijing—to say nothing about the alternative paradises of Jerusalem, Baghdad or Rome, Brussels or Stockholm, 1050 Campus Drive or Kåbo 23:7. The ideas of bodily resurrection still the best offer heard, the drawing of the right line the very shape of contempt.

Which techniques does the cartographic reasoner actually use, when (s)he weaves that Marduk-net of longitudes and latitudes, establishes the fix-points, calibrates the scales, screens the mappæe?