

# THE PSALTER MAP

A CASE STUDY IN FORMING A

CARTOGRAPHIC CANON FOR ART HISTORY

KARL WHITTINGTON

No stand-alone study has ever been published on the medieval ‘Psalter Map’, yet it has become the archetypical *mappamundi* in studies outside the field of cartography. Karl Whittington discusses this map and its place in medieval cartography, and uses it as example to illuminate the contemporary processes of canon formation. According to the author, ‘messier’ examples could prove more productive for (art) historians.

The formation of the art historical canon remains a crucial issue in the field's research and teaching, though it has been the subject of surprisingly little published discussion.<sup>1</sup> As much as visual culture studies, world art history, media studies, the anthropology of art, and particularly feminist studies have worked to broaden the canon, or in certain cases to systematically dismantle it, the idea of a core group of objects is still fundamental. Even if we reject the idea that the canon consists of established 'masterpieces' (a loaded term on many levels), art historians continue to assume a familiarity with a fundamental set of works – a group that is never completely static, but nevertheless has had remarkable staying power. As the field of art history has moved towards the study of visual culture, entire categories of representation have come under its purview: craft traditions, objects and images from popular culture, advertisements, informal drawings and sketches, and (significantly for our discussion here) maps.<sup>2</sup> In this process, paradoxically, sub-canons begin to form; categories of objects that were once (and to some degree still *are*) outside the art historical canon, become shaped by the same process of identifying a shared group of examples. For this special issue on cartography and art, I want to consider the ways in which a cartographic canon is being formed specifically within art history. As art historians begin to talk more about maps, why are we choosing particular examples? And how and why do certain examples become 'canonical'?

Trying to think anew about what exactly 'the canon' means for the field of art history in the second decade of the twenty-first century, I am struck by what I see as the existence of two canons alongside one another. One is the canon as we normally encounter it – a group of artworks that are selected because of their supposedly exceptional status. These are works made by acknowledged major artists, which in many cases were crucial for the direction of a particular style or tradition. The ways in which they came to be deemed canonical and important (i.e. how they became 'masterpieces') are of course examined and critiqued, but examples like the *Laocoön*, Abbot Suger's renovation of Saint-Denis,

Michelangelo's *Sistine Chapel*, Manet's *Olympia*, Picasso's *Demaiselles*, and Warhol's *Soup Cans* remain not just staples of introductory art history classes, but, crucially, shared reference points for the discussion of lesser known artists and movements. This is the canon as we know it, formed through conceptions of value, the market, and the museum. And in this canon we could probably even insert a few maps, which nearly everyone would agree are crucial moments in the broader history of images: Ptolemy's world map, Mercator's map projection, and the London tube map immediately come to mind.

Yet there exists another kind of canon in our field, one that I think has come to include cartographic images: not a canon of crucial 'masterpieces', but a canon of *examples*. These are works that become important because they are discussed repeatedly in both teaching and textbooks, as well as in specialist studies. Rather than necessarily being crucial turning points for a particular style or school, they are often the exact opposite – supposedly 'typical' works that help the reader/viewer understand and explain a larger phenomenon, such as an artistic technique, style, pictorial device, or genre. As a brief example, we might point to Perugino's *Delivery of the Keys*, a painting which is rarely claimed as being particularly crucial within the history of art, but which everyone knows because it is held up as a paradigmatic example of an early-Renaissance perspectival construction (and as the most frequently reproduced of the Quattrocento paintings in the Sistine Chapel).<sup>3</sup> Such canonical examples are perpetuated in textbooks and survey courses, but also, and more persistently, within art historical subfields. This formation of canonical examples is even more widespread in cases (like cartography) where art history has expanded its range to include objects from visual culture. A certain group of maps (or, in other examples, a group of emblematic anatomical images, historical pamphlets, advertisements, or television shows) becomes a shared point of reference for scholars working on a particular period. Interestingly, I think it is most often not the scholars who are working directly on these objects for whom this canon of examples is most influential, but rather for scholars studying the

same period but focusing on *other* issues, and where a map, for example, is introduced briefly to stand in for an entire cartographic tradition.

At this moment, when the study of cartographic images has found a secure home within art history, and when the findings of these cartographically-inclined art historians are increasingly used and discussed by other art historians, it is crucial to reflect on why certain maps are becoming canonical, while others remain little known. In the next section, I examine a case study of a single medieval map in order to observe this process (and, indeed, to

reflect on how I have participated in it myself). At the end of the essay, I return to these larger questions to think again about their implications for the current state of art history, and to propose a different kind of 'canonical example' for medieval cartography.

#### A CASE STUDY: THE PSALTER MAP

Historians of medieval art have embraced the study of maps with exceptional enthusiasm. In the past twenty years, a number of major studies have appeared on medieval cartographic traditions, by scholars such as Daniel Connolly,



1- 'Psalter Map', England, ca. 1260, manuscript on vellum, ca. 17 x 12,5 cm. Courtesy of The British Library Board, Add. Ms. 28681, fol. 9r.

Patrick Gautier Dalché, Evelyn Edson, and many others.<sup>4</sup> Focused primarily on the traditions of world maps (*mappaemundi*) and sea charts (*portolani*), their studies examine hundreds of examples, largely avoiding canon formation and instead focusing on establishing the contours of the surviving materials, and the possible methodological avenues in their interpretation. But their findings have in turn informed a number of broader studies of medieval visual culture, and it is in these works that the field's focus begins to narrow, making available a limited number of examples that in turn shape the perception of what a medieval map is.

Among the most frequently reproduced medieval world maps is the so-called 'Psalter Map', a small example found in an otherwise typical thirteenth-century psalter in the British Library.<sup>5</sup> The image is executed in a color wash, and was originally on the opening page of the psalter (fig. 1). At the center of the page is the circular map of the world, oriented using the T-O division, a convention stretching back to late Antiquity. In this cartographic tradition, the (known) world is represented as a circle surrounded by a ring-shaped ocean. The circular space of the earth, oriented with east at the top, is divided into three parts by a Tau-cross (itself made up of major rivers and seas), with Asia thus in the upper half, Europe in the lower left, and Africa in the lower right. Above the map, Christ is flanked by two angels. His right hand blesses while the left holds an orb, a microcosmic symbol of the world standing in contrast to the larger representation below. The map depicts cities, kingdoms, mountains, rivers, oceans, historical fables, Adam and Eve in Paradise, and representations of the winds, all encircling Jerusalem at the center. On the lower right side of the map, separated from the rest of the earth by the Nile, are the monstrous races described by Pliny, contained within their own colored compartments. The map incorporated objects from a medieval viewer's cultural database and established their position within a contained cosmic schema. Relative position is important, but not as important as the completeness and unity of the whole image, and its position within a broader picture of the universe.

Within the large corpus of surviving medieval *mappaemundi*, the Psalter Map is arguably not particularly pivotal. It is a useful example in tracing the development of a group of maps associated with the English court in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but this was only one of a number of *mappaemundi* traditions in Europe at the time. Found in a private book, the map is unlikely to have been influential – it is likely a vestige of a larger tradition, rather than an exemplar for other works. Yet it is this map, perhaps more than almost any other, which is reproduced as a typical *mappaemundi* in the broader field of medieval art history. In influential and widely-read works like Michael Camille's *Image on the Edge* and *Gothic Art: Glorious Visions*, and Susannah Biernoff's *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*, among many other examples, the Psalter Map is discussed as a classic medieval cartographic image, marrying longstanding traditions of cartographic knowledge with Christian cosmology and eschatology.<sup>6</sup> In these contexts, it is often made to stand in for the category as a whole.

For scholars focused on the history of cartographic images, such singular attention to particular works can be frustrating, for while it draws a welcome interest to the subject, it also confines and oversimplifies understandings of what medieval cartography can entail. In exploring the use of an example like the Psalter Map, it is my sincere intention not to seem too critical of scholars like Camille and Biernoff. Indeed, I became interested in exploring this process precisely because I found myself implicated in it. I first encountered the Psalter Map in Camille's *Image on the Edge*, and became so fascinated by the image that I chose to write my undergraduate art history thesis on it. As I have continued to study and publish on medieval cartography I have moved from an examination of the *mappaemundi* tradition to other topics, but the Psalter Map has remained a default example in my work and teaching, despite the fact that it is misleading in a number of ways.<sup>7</sup> In (over) using the image myself, I have come to see what is problematic about its status as a representative example, and am encouraged to reflect on the process that made it so.

No stand-alone article or book chapter on the map exists, and it receives only minor discussion in David Woodward's still-canonical survey of the genre; indeed, the map has rarely been a focus of art historians whose work centers on medieval cartography.<sup>8</sup> Several authors have made compelling arguments about the image, its sources, the reasons for its inclusion in a psalter, and the ways in which medieval viewers might have engaged with it. But why has it become a default image? Like so many 'canonical examples', I think the Psalter Map crystallizes and simplifies a much more complicated picture; specifically, it perfectly embodies several stereotypes about medieval cartography which are now in danger of becoming default understandings as a result of the map's ubiquity.

First, and perhaps most misleading, is the map's central placement of and emphasis on Jerusalem. Often, when medieval *mappaemundi* are mentioned, it is taken as a given that Jerusalem lies at their center. And indeed, on the Psalter Map, Jerusalem is not just at the physical heart of the image – its central placement is underlined and emphasized by a large red circle that marks its location like a bull's-eye. The circle mirrors and forms the center point of a series of concentric rings that structure the image; it is not just a focus, but a seismic epicenter of the image's form, and the compass point from which the whole composition was drawn. The placement of Jerusalem at the center of the world corresponds to the medieval tradition of the city as the *umbilicus mundi* (*omphalos* in Greek), itself based on ancient Jewish understandings of the city as the navel of the world.<sup>9</sup> The T-O structure that shapes this and many other medieval world maps emphasized this conception; Jerusalem occupies the juncture of the bars of the T. Yet the Psalter Map is not necessarily typical in the visual weight given to the city. On many other *mappaemundi*, (such as the Vercelli map and Matthew Paris's world map), Jerusalem occupies a position in the general – but not geometric – center of the map, while in other *mappaemundi* traditions, such as the maps in the famous Spanish 'Beatus' Apocalypse manuscripts, the city is not represented at the center at all.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Woodward pointed to entire categories of medieval world

maps (the 'zonal' and 'quadripartite' types in particular) that do not place Jerusalem at the center.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the placement of Jerusalem at the center of the Psalter Map is emphasized by the depicted world's circularity, another feature taken as a given outside of the specialist field; in fact, medieval *mappaemundi* come in many shapes, including ovals, squares, and even almond-shaped mandorlas. The circle/center model found in the Psalter Map suggests a uniformity of the medieval world image that did not in fact exist.

The Psalter Map also misleads as a 'representative example' in its religious manuscript context. The placement of the map within a book of Psalms is fascinating, but hardly typical. *Mappaemundi* were found in all sorts of contexts in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Certainly many of them were explicitly religious: maps were hung in churches, placed in biblical texts like the Apocalypse, and included in theological commentaries. Yet, while acknowledging that any separation between 'sacred' and 'secular' contexts in medieval culture is anachronistic, world maps were also found in contexts that were not explicitly religious: painted or hung in town halls and palaces, drawn in manuscripts on natural history, geography, or climatology, and kept in private collections for reference or display. When the Psalter Map is held up as a typical example, both its context in a psalter and its emphasis on Christ holding or even containing the earth within his body leads the reader/viewer to assume that such images usually have a theological or devotional function – that they operate primarily to provide an image of the order of the Christian cosmos. This is indeed their function in many contexts, but it can become too easy to underemphasize the true interest in geography and the accuracy of geographical description that is often manifested in medieval maps.

The Psalter Map's small size also leads to it being a perfect example for reproduction in publications. Larger (and more influential) examples like the Hereford or Ebstorf wall maps are nearly incomprehensible in small reproductions, since their details remain illegible. The Psalter Map, in contrast, is small

enough (less than ten centimeters in diameter), that its details, in both text and image, are easily legible. Thus we have in this image a map that is easily understood within the basic outlines of the study of medieval *mappaemundi*: it is visually accessible (both because of its size and excellent state of preservation), explicitly religious in context and content, and structured according to a paradigmatic Jerusalem-centric organization. Its inclusion of the monstrous races at the corners also conforms to, and is held up as evidence of, medieval conceptions about the center and periphery.

### AN ALTERNATE HISTORY: VESCONTE'S WORLD MAP

In many ways, the choice of such an example is automatic. With our focus fixed on something else, we often reach for a comparative example that we understand – one that we have seen elsewhere, and which sums up an entire tradition

without making things too messy. It is not so much that this has led to a real problem; after all, specialists in medieval maps remain engaged with a broad range of examples and continue to ask fascinating questions. Rather, I see it as a missed opportunity to enrich and complicate our pictures of various historical periods, and of the broader relationships that are possible between art history and cartography. As a kind of coda, I would like to propose an alternative image that I wish were as emblematic of the ‘medieval map’ as the Psalter Map has become.

For a crusading text by Marino Sanuto called the *Liber Secretorum Fidelium Crucis*, the early fourteenth-century cartographer Pietro Vesconte drew a different sort of world map, which exists in several copies (fig. 2).<sup>12</sup> In terms of its relation to established notions of medieval cartography, Vesconte's map is as messy as the Psalter Map is neat. It is a hybrid of two different types – the classic *mappaemundi* and the more empirical and practical portolan chart used by mariners to navigate the Mediterranean, Atlantic and Black Seas. Its circular form and many of its geographic features are drawn from *mappaemundi*, but

2 – Pietro Vesconte, 'Mappamundi', ca. 1321, 35 cm. Courtesy of The British Library Board, Add. Ms. 27376, fols. 187v-188r.



spread across its surface is a network of rhumb lines – a sixteen-point polygonal grid taken from the portolan charts which acted as reference points for mariners and as a kind of geometric frame announcing the map's empiricism. Additionally, the geography of Europe (in the bottom left corner) is far more accurate than the rest of the map (as well as the representation of Europe on the Psalter Map); it has clearly been copied directly from the coastal outlines of a portolan chart, while Africa and Asia were copied from a *mappamundi* like the Psalter Map. Is the image meant as a totalizing 'reference' picture like the *mappaemundi*? Or a practical tool like the portolan charts? Or is its function entirely different? Elsewhere, in a forthcoming publication, I argue that this map reveals a complex dialogue between different types of mapping in the later Middle Ages – a dialogue that can be tracked in other images, both cartographic and pictorial.<sup>33</sup> It shows that the geometric lines that cover portolan charts (and some *mappaemundi*) are as much ideological and symbolic as they are practical. In the case of Vesconte's map, they claim an accuracy – and even a modernity – which the content of the map does not actually possess. In this object, we have an example that raises questions rather than answers them. It is a clash of multiple image types, both spiritual and secular, global and local, historicizing and 'modern'. What would happen if such examples were brought more frequently into broader texts of medieval art history as comparative moments of discord and visual hybridity – as examples of a *visual operation* rather than simply of a cartographic tradition? As maps become more ubiquitous in art history, they need to be engaged in broader studies of the visual, rather than included only as thematic examples of geographical, cosmic, or cultural interests. How maps operate (or do not operate) can tell us much about the operations of other images.

For a more complete picture to emerge, both art historians specializing in cartographic practices *and* those only using cartography in the context of other art-historical inquiries must amend their practices. Specialists should continue their investigations of individual historical contexts for cartographic production

and reception, but they (we) could also do more to try to write histories that intersect with the dominant narratives of our field and, when necessary, to undo and rewrite them. Specialists in cartography can do more than flesh out and expand our histories of art; they can also change the theoretical paradigms and historical narratives that sustain them. In turn, those who use maps as examples in the context of other studies – a practice that will and should continue – could be more open to engaging maps in unexpected ways. Maps not only structure knowledge, worldview, and the position of the subject; they also reveal and influenced core practices of representation, vision and graphic design. I hope that in this brief discussion, we can begin to see what would be gained if art historians engaged maps in new and creative ways, choosing examples that complicate rather than simplify, and taking up the challenge of truly integrating these 'visual culture' objects into examinations of how works of art were made, viewed, and conceived. ●

**KARL WHITTINGTON** is Assistant Professor of History of Art at The Ohio State University. He received his PhD in 2010 from the University of California at Berkeley. His first book, *Body-Worlds: Opicinus de Canistris and the Medieval Cartographic Imagination*, is forthcoming from the Press of the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies in Toronto.

NOTES

- 1 ● Some recent exceptions, which include interesting discussions of the problem of the canon in art history, include Marlite Halbertsma, 'The Call of the Canon', in: Elizabeth Mansfield (ed.), *Making Art History. A Changing Discipline and its Institutions*, New York: Routledge, 2007, pp. 16-30; Anna Brzyski (ed.), *Partisan Canons*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007; Gill Perry and Colin Cunningham, *Academics, Museums, and Canons of Art*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999; and Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon. Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*, London: Routledge, 1999. The classic critique of the process of canon formation remains Linda Nochlin's seminal essay, originally published as Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', in: *ARTnews* 69 (January 1971), pp. 22-39.
- 2 ● Some particularly interesting recent discussions of the trend toward visual culture studies include Martin Jay (ed.), 'The State of Visual Culture Studies', in: *Journal of Visual Culture* 4 (2005) 2; James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction*, New York: Routledge, 2003; and Michael Ann Holly, Keith Moxey, *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies*, Williamstown, MA: The Clark Institute, 2003.
- 3 ● Other 'canonical examples' include using the Röttgen Pietà to discuss late-medieval devotional art, the use of Italian fifteenth-century 'ideal city' paintings to discuss perspective, and discussing postmodernism through Philip Johnson's AT&T Building, among many others.
- 4 ● See especially Patrick Gautier Dalché, *Géographie et culture. La représentation de l'espace du Vie au XIIe siècle*, Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1997; Evelyn Edson, *The World Map, 1300-1492. The Persistence of Tradition and Transformation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007; and Daniel Connelly, *The Maps of Matthew Paris. Medieval Journeys through Space, Time and Liturgy*, Suffolk, UK: Boydell, 2009. Particularly crucial in introducing this material to a larger audience was J.B. Harley and David Woodward (eds.), *The History of Cartography. Volume One. Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, which included essays on medieval world maps (David Woodward), sea charts (Tony Campbell), local and regional cartography (P.D.A. Harvey), and the relationship of all of these traditions to the maps of the classical world. This series is still the go-to reference for art historians working on maps.
- 5 ● Add. Ms. 28681, fol. 9r. For background on the manuscript and a list of relevant sources, see Nigel Morgan, 'Early Gothic Manuscripts (II) 1250-1285', in: *Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles*, Vol. 2, London: Harvey Miller, 1988, pp. 82-85. As is discussed below, there are no stand-alone published studies of the map, but it is discussed in some detail in the following publications: Evelyn Edson, 'The Medieval World View. Contemplating the Mappaemundi', in: *History Compass* 8 (2010) 6, pp. 503-17; Connelly, op. cit. (note 4), pp. 168-71; Asa Simon Mittman, *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England*, New York: Routledge, 2006; Daniel Birkholz, *The King's Two Maps. Cartography and Culture in Thirteenth-Century England*, New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 16-25, 40-42; and Evelyn Edson, *Mapping Time and Space. How Medieval Mapmakers Viewed their World*, London: British Library, 1997, pp. 135-39.
- 6 ● See Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 15; Michael Camille, *Gothic Art. Glorious Visions*, New York: Harry Abrams, 1996, p. 56; and Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*, Basingstoke, Eng.: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002, p. 19 (where the image is reproduced backwards). To give just a few other examples (out of many) of reproductions of the Psalter Map as a representative example of a type, both within art history and in other fields, see: Estella Antoaneta Ciobanu, *The Spectacle of the Body in Late Medieval England*, Iasi, Romania: Editura Lumen, 2012, pp. 150-55; Peter Whitfield, *The Image of the World*, London: British Library, 2010, pp. 18-19; Elizabeth Keen, *The Journey of a Book. Bartholomew the Englishman and the Properties of Things*, Canberra: ANU Press, 2007, p. 67; James Robert Enterline, *Erikson, Eskimos, and Columbus. Medieval European Knowledge of America*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004, p. 110; David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place. Reclaiming Human Experience*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 195; Keith D. Lilley, 'Mapping cosmopolis. moral topographies of the medieval city', in: *Environment and Planning. Society and Space* 22 (2004) 5, pp. 681-98; John Rennie Short, *The World Through Maps*, Buffalo, NY: Firefly, 2003, pp. 58-9; Alessandro Scafi, 'Mapping Eden. Cartographies of the Earthly Paradise', in: Denis E. Cosgrove (ed.), *Mappings*, London: Reaktion (1999), pp. 50-70; Gunther Krause and Matthias Tomczak, 'Do Marine Scientists Have A Scientific View Of The Earth', in: *Oceanography* 8 (1995) 1, pp. 11-16; Jon R. Stone, 'The Medieval Mappaemundi. Toward an Archaeology of Sacred Cartography', in: *Religion* 23 (1993) 3, pp. 197-216. Sometimes the map is referenced only in text and is not reproduced visually; a classic case is in Claude Alvares and Norma Alvares, 'The Christian in the Wild', in: Teotonio R. de Souza (ed.), *Discoveries, Missionary Expansion and Asian Cultures*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 1994, which states on page 21 that, 'an even better picture of standard medieval geographical thought is available in the Psalter map.'
- 7 ● See Karl Whittington, 'Devotion, Space and Monstrosity in the Map Psalter', Undergraduate Thesis, Middlebury College (2004); Karl Whittington, 'Experimenting with Opicinus de Canistris', in: *Gesta* 51 (2012) 2, pp. 147-73; and Karl Whittington, *Body-Worlds. Opicinus de Canistris and the Medieval Cartographic Imagination*, Toronto: Press of the Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies (forthcoming, 2014).
- 8 ● Interestingly, several unpublished graduate theses have focused on the image - the result, I am sure, of its repeated reproduction in important books while still being an 'open' topic with no complete examination published. See Melissa La Porte, 'A Tale of Two Mappae Mundi. The Map Psalter and its Mixed-Media Maps', M.A. Thesis, University of Guelph, 2012; and Autumn M. Muir, 'The Psalter Mappaemundi. Medieval Maps Enabling Ascension of the Soul within Christian Devotional Practices', M.A. Thesis, Bowling Green State University, 2011.
- 9 ● Jerusalem was also famously discussed as the 'umbilicus mundi' by Pope Urban II in a speech promoting the first crusade.
- 10 ● On the thirteenth-century Vercelli Map, see Woodward, op. cit. (note 4), pp. 306-9. For the world maps of Matthew Paris, see especially Connolly, op. cit. (note 4); and Woodward, op. cit. (note 4), pp. 347-9. On the so-called 'Beatus' maps, see Woodward, op. cit. (note 4), pp. 304-5; and John Williams, 'Isidore, Orosius and the Beatus Map', in: *Imago Mundi* 49 (1997), pp. 7-32.
- 11 ● Woodward, op. cit. (note 4), p. 297.
- 12 ● On Vesconte see especially Evelyn Edson, *The World Map 1300-1492. The Persistence of Tradition and Transformation*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007, pp. 64-68; Woodward, op. cit. (note 4), p. 316; and Bernhard Degenhart, Annegrit Schmitt, 'Marino Sanudo und Paolino Veneto. Zwei Literaten des 14. Jahrhunderts und ihre Wirkung auf Buchillustration und Kartographie in Venedig, Avignon und Neapel', in: *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* XIV (1973), pp. 60-73.
- 13 ● See Whittington, op. cit. (note 7), Chapter 1.