

17 · Medieval Maps: An Introduction

P. D. A. HARVEY

Few maps were drawn in medieval Europe. Certainly those we have today are merely the survivors of the far larger number that must have been produced. Almost certainly too, not all the survivors have yet come to light; we probably have much more to learn about local mapping in medieval Spain, Portugal, and Italy, for instance. But the pattern of the medieval maps known to us makes it clear that maps then were simply not drawn for the multitude of everyday purposes for which they might have been used. Rather, they were confined to particular areas and to particular occasions for which their use had become established by custom. It is rare to find cartography applied outside these limits; when we do we should probably see it as a bold conceptual initiative by some particularly imaginative individual.

What in fact we have are several quite distinct traditions of medieval maps, notably the *mappaemundi*, the portolan charts, the regional and local maps, and a relatively small corpus of celestial maps. The first three form the basis of the division between the next three chapters; the treatment of the celestial maps is deferred until volume 3, where they will be described in a single essay, along with the Renaissance material. The three-fold division for the chapters in this section presents no problems; the three traditions form mainly discrete groups. It is seldom that we find contact between them: the possible use of local maps from Reichenau in the Ebstorf world map, the construction of regional maps of Italy on the basis of portolan charts, and the links between the portolan charts and the books of islands are all exceptional instances of cross-fertilization. Even within each of the three main divisions—world maps, portolan charts, and regional and local maps—we are often dealing with distinct subgroups of maps that developed in isolation from the rest. The classification of the various types of world maps points in this direction. So too does the development of portolan charts, which from the mid-fourteenth century ceased to form a single tradition, a single body of pooled information, and split up into regional schools. Among the regional and local maps, where there is any discoverable connection at all between one map and another we find isolated pockets of particular sorts of map: plans of Italian

cities, regional maps from northern Italy, local maps from coastal areas of the Low Countries, and a few others. Given that none of these sorts of maps were in widespread everyday use, it is arguable that scholars in the Middle Ages would not have recognized the products of these varying traditions, these groups and subgroups, as constituting a single class of object—that they would not have seen them, as we do, as maps distinct from diagrams on the one hand and from pictures on the other.

But if few maps were being drawn in the fifteenth century, there were even fewer in the twelfth. World maps seem to have been produced at a fairly steady rate from the eighth century onward, but most other medieval maps date from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. None of the surviving portolan charts is older than about 1300, and the earliest known reference to them is in 1270. Of the regional and local maps, few of those from Italy or England are earlier than the fourteenth century and all the maps known to us from France, the Low Countries, and Germany date from later. This cannot be explained simply by the later maps being more likely to survive; the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries clearly saw at least a modest acceptance in western Europe of the value and use of maps in some particular circumstances. How this came about is one of the many unsolved problems of medieval cartography. Another, which also stems from our lack of early medieval maps, is its relationship to the cartography of antiquity. Only in the world maps do surviving examples link medieval maps with the culture of Greece and Rome. Elsewhere, if we are to see any connection at all, we must postulate either the rediscovery of ancient maps, certainly the case with Ptolemy's *Geography* in the thirteenth century and more controversially with the coastal outline used in portolan charts in the thirteenth, or else a tenuous continuity maintained by maps mostly now lost, as may have happened in plans of Italian cities and in maps of the Holy Land. Nor, of course, did classical antiquity provide the only possible external influence on medieval mapping: there may have been some connections with Arab cartography, though this is harder to maintain now than it was once, and the possibility of

even remoter links with the cartography of China cannot be entirely ruled out.

Not only were the world maps, the portolan charts, and the regional and local maps of medieval Europe mostly produced in quite separate traditions, but each served a distinctive purpose. There was no such thing in the Middle Ages as a general map designed to be put to a wide variety of uses. Any one map was drawn with one particular purpose, even one particular occasion, in mind. It follows that if we are to evaluate a medieval map, or even understand it at all, we must first know just why it was made. The purpose of the *mappaemundi* was philosophical and didactic: a schematic representation of the earth that in the more detailed examples was extended to give a great deal of information about its inhabitants and their relationship to the deity. Many sources were drawn on in compiling these more elaborate world maps; if these sources included maps that produced on the *mappamundi* more than an approximate, diagrammatic outline of some part of the earth's surface, this was quite incidental, and it certainly does not follow that a detailed geographic outline was an aim of the compilers. This would be quite irrelevant to the map's purpose. The same point comes out again in comparing the early portolan charts with another fourteenth-century map, the Gough map of Great Britain. This, like the portolan charts, was drawn as a guide for travel, and like them it was probably based simply on measuring directions and distances over many journeys. But whereas the Gough map was for travel by land along principal roads, of which there was a fair network but still a finite number, the portolan charts were for travel by sea, on which the ship could move freely over an infinite number of routes. It follows that all that was needed for the Gough map to serve its purpose was a diagram of the road network, showing how routes interconnected, what places they passed through and, by notes of mileage, how far one place was from the next. To show directions and distances between places off these routes, to provide, that is, a complete scale map of the country, would be irrelevant to what it was trying to do. The portolan charts, on the other hand, if they were to be of any use in navigating a freely sailing ship, had to show directions and distances between an unlimited number of points, and the only way to do this was by a scale map with coastal outlines drawn as accurately as possible. The portolan chart looks like a map as we know it, the Gough map fails to meet our modern expectation of what a map should be. But each served its particular purpose with equal efficiency. In assessing medieval maps we should thus always try to discover the intention of their makers and judge how far this was achieved; to compare them with the maps of later centuries is to apply a quite inappropriate set of standards.

Some of the hardest problems in medieval cartography concern those maps that seem most like the general maps of the sixteenth century and later: maps drawn with attention to accuracy of outline and consistency of scale. The problems are those of concept and of execution: how the idea for such maps arose or was transmitted, and how the measurements underlying them were made. We have seen already that the coastal outlines of the portolan charts may or may not have descended from classical antiquity; the origins of Pietro Vesconte's maps of Italy and the Holy Land in the early fourteenth century are no less obscure. The source of inspiration of the early fifteenth-century scale map of Vienna is equally mysterious, and there is a good deal of doubt over how—and even when or by whom—the maps attributed to Nicolas of Cusa were compiled. Behind at least the last two of these problems lies the possible role of the medieval interest in scientific geography, in precisely locating places, an interest we see in compilations of geographical coordinates from the eleventh-century Toledo tables by al-Zarkali to the work of the fifteenth-century geographers of Vienna and Klosterneuburg.

Recent writers have tended to be skeptical of the role of geographical theory in medieval mapping; the criticisms of the view that Klosterneuburg produced a series of maps, now lost, are symptomatic of this. In fact very few scholars have dealt in any detail with medieval mapping in all its aspects; the general work of Joachim Lelewel, *Géographie du Moyen Age* (four volumes and epilogue, 1850–57), and the chronologically narrower study of John K. Wright, *The Geographical Lore of the Time of the Crusades* (1925), are both exceptional. Partly this reflects the natural division of medieval maps into their several quite separate groups, but the work on the individual groups has still been less than adequate. Even the systematic work under the editorship of Marcel Destombes, *Mappemondes A.D. 1200–1500* (1964), has been found in need of revision; much work on portolan charts is vitiated by a curious preoccupation with conflicting national claims to particular innovations; and there is no single monograph at all covering the whole field of medieval regional and local mapping. It is a pity that medieval maps have not been more thoroughly studied, for they probably have much to tell us about the history of cartography in general and about the development of its concepts and techniques. Many features of medieval Europe's cartography can be paralleled elsewhere: the use of maps only for particular purposes or by restricted groups of people, the growth of the idea of precise scale, and so on. Medieval Europe is a relatively well-documented society. We can, however cautiously, argue from the silences in our evidence as well as from what it actually tells us. At least some of the processes and developments it reveals to us may well

have occurred in other societies from which our evidence is scantier. Potentially the three chapters that follow have a significance in the history of cartography beyond the bounds of medieval Europe.