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The Roman Heritage of Medieval World Maps

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In a brief chapter of *The Medieval Peutinger Map*, I outlined the legacy that Rome bequeathed to medieval world mapping.¹ There I discussed the prevailing Roman “itinerary mind,” with Roman armies, civil servants, and civilian travelers consulting itineraries rather than maps; and I considered the cosmic (or bird’s-eye) view presented by Roman intellectuals, a perspective that would have lasting influence. Recent “Mappings” sessions at Kalamazoo and Leeds have given me the welcome opportunity to reexamine those arguments and dig a little deeper.² This closer look reveals how Greco-Roman ideas – from the conceptions of the land masses and surrounding ocean to the accumulated data of peoples and places – would have enabled the conceptualization of a world map, as we will see in the information preserved and widely transmitted in late antique works by Orosius (writing 417-418 C.E.) and Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636 C.E.). Romans repeatedly asserted that the display of such geographical knowledge affirmed

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² Warm thanks to Dan Terkla and Felicitas Schmieder for organizing three sessions on medieval mapping and to all the participants, from whom I learned a great deal. I am also grateful for the astute suggestions of Asa Mittman and Dan Terkla, who read an earlier draft of this paper, with thanks to Sarah Blick for suggesting images.
dominion over the territories surveyed, a lingering belief that led to a medieval battle of the maps between religious and secular authorities.

The Roman legacy is at once more intriguing and more profound than we might expect, given the spare and contested evidence for the existence of Roman world maps. No such maps survive, because the Romans, like the Greeks, did not really have a word for “map”; furthermore, the identification and interpretation of the evidence present a particular challenge. Not until a ninth-century catalogue of library holdings at Reichenau do we find the name for a world map, *mappamundi*, while the Roman-era terms like *descriptio mundi* (representation or description of the world) or *itinerarium pictum* (painted itinerary) may refer to geographical narratives or illustrated lists of toponyms rather than what we consider a map. Scholars have reached no consensus on this question.

**Roman Precedents**

As they found their way out into the world, Roman merchants, bureaucrats, and military commanders on campaign recorded their journeys in lists and narratives, as the surveyors of Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.E.), Diognetus and Baito, and others had done before them. These reports transmitted the one-dimensional “hodological” view

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that prevailed in antiquity, rather than the two-dimensional cartographic view in the images that we call maps today. No incident better illustrates the Roman traveler’s reliance on such itineraries than Julius Caesar’s mishap as he rode toward his momentous Rubicon crossing. Traveling by carriage, he and his companions found themselves off-road and wandered lost in the dark of night until, at daybreak, a guide took them back to the route, leading them there on footpaths. Caesar’s commentaries never mention a map, though he could surely have used one, perhaps especially then. Serious difficulties could arise when Roman armies lacked the maps and detailed reconnaissance upon which modern strategists rely. Yet, as A. C. Bertrand has reminded us, Caesar and other Roman military commanders achieved breathtaking success, using rivers, local trails, and other landmarks to construct “mental maps” to help them envision their way until Roman roads made the territory more easily imaginable. The absence of a physical map ultimately proved no insurmountable obstacle to empire.

Although we have no evidence for maps that guided legionary commanders or other Romans on the move, we have ample testimony for the Romans’ impressive ability to survey smaller parcels with the centuriation of rural plots in newly conquered lands and

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5 The hodological view shows pathways. The illustrated route maps of Matthew Paris offer a medieval example, while AAA TripTik Travel Planners present hodological aids to twenty-first-century travelers nostalgic for old-time navigational tools.


7 Bertrand, “Stumbling through Gall.” Bertrand (p. 118) quotes this classic explanation of mental mapping as “simply the process by which all humans organize and make sense of the environment around them. Cognitive, or mental, maps arise from the storage and memory of spatial information that is necessary to survive. They reflect the world as perceived, not necessarily as it is.” M. E. Downs, “Spatial Conception in the Ancient Geographers and the Mapping of Hispania Baetica,” Classical Bulletin 72 (1996): 37-49, at p. 43. For the Romans, that entailed thinking in terms of lines or route networks – or itineraries.
with the drawing of urban property lines by *agrimensores*, even precisely measuring and carving a detailed display of their principal city, the famous Marble Plan, the *Forma Urbis*.
\textit{Romae}.\textsuperscript{5} (\textbf{Fig. 1}) An instrument called the \textit{groma} enabled the surveying of “straight lines, squares, and rectangles.”\textsuperscript{9} (\textbf{Fig. 2}) These and related skills of measurement and engineering addressed pragmatic concerns of forging and maintaining their empire – distributing land, building roads, moving armies, and managing the food and water supplies that supported vast populations and sustained their imperial enterprise.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{groma.png}
\caption{Using a groma. Image: after http://legioneromana.altervista.org/content/how-use-roman-groma?language=en}
\end{figure}

For the larger space that enclosed that enterprise, and for the even grander space of the Roman imperial imagination, Romans constructed their own distinctive mental maps

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\textsuperscript{9} Dilke, “Roman Large-Scale Mapping.” 214. See pp. 213-214 for more on the \textit{groma}. 
of the world. Here, as in so many arenas, they had Greek forerunners. From the sixth century B.C.E. onward, Greek science had designed the theoretical tools and measurements for creating globes as well as two-dimensional depictions of the oikoumene, the inhabited part of the earth. None of these artifacts survive, and the best descriptions of Greek world maps come from Diogenes Laertius, writing eight centuries later. Further evidence of world mapping skills comes from Herodotus, the fifth-century B.C.E. historian, who critiqued flat-surface depictions of Europe, Asia, and Africa surrounded by ocean, while his younger contemporary, the Athenian playwright Aristophanes, presented a witty commentary on a world map in The Clouds. Literary sources demonstrate that Roman intellectuals, too, could imagine a bird’s-eye view of their world. We owe to Cicero the most enduring Roman imagining of this vision of the earth. In the Somnium Scipionis that closed his De re publica, he evoked the old contemplative tradition of the soul’s ascent to heaven. There he presented Scipio Aemilianus, the venerable Roman victor over Carthage, dreaming that he was looking down from the stars and observing from his celestial perspective the tiny extent of Roman imperium. The literary and philosophical imagination enabled this concept of world mapping. But did the Romans actually draw such maps?

Advocates of Roman world mapping invoke “Agrippa’s map” as an early imperial example. It seems impossible, though, to pin down exactly what this was. When Pliny

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10 Kai Brodersen, Terra Cognita: Studien zur römischen Raumerfassung (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1995; 2nd ed. 2003). For a synopsis of Brodersen’s theory, see Emily Albu, “Rethinking the Peutinger Map,” in Cartography in Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Fresh Perspectives, New Methods, 112.

11 Herodotus, History. The Persian Wars, tr. George Rawlinson (New York: Modern Library, 1942), 4.36-45; and Aristophanes, The Clouds, lines 200-217, in Fabulae I, ed. Nigel Guy Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007). Aristophanes presents a student in Socrates’ Thinkery showing off surveying instruments used to measure the whole earth and a map (periodos) of the entire earth, though only Greek sites are specifically pointed to here.

12 For examples, see Albu, Medieval Peutinger Map, 24-29.
the Elder mentions its site in Rome, he presents the *porticus Octaviae* in the context of Agrippa’s world survey and the distances that he had measured.\textsuperscript{13} Kai Brodersen has persuasively argued that Agrippa’s “map” was really just as Pliny suggested: a listing and measurement of places in relation to one another, throughout the inhabited world.\textsuperscript{14} The first Roman world map for which we have persuasive attestation as something we would call a map is the one described by Eumenius in Augustodunum (modern Autun) in the late 290s C.E. As we shall see, its dating and the function it shares with Agrippa’s map prove telling.

**Knowledge of the Land Conveys Authority**

Romans had long cherished the idea that knowledge of the *orbis terrarum* conveyed power over the earth and its peoples. When Cicero celebrated Caesar’s inroads into Gaul, in his speech *De Provinciis* before the senate (56 B.C.E.), he insisted that Caesar’s reconnaissance of previously unexamined lands enabled ownership of those lands and their peoples. For Cicero, as for Romans before and after him, this concept led inexorably to the assertion (despite ample evidence to the contrary) that the Roman empire and the inhabited world were coterminous: “Now at length we have reached the consummation that the limits of our Empire and those of the inhabited world are one and the same.”\textsuperscript{15}

For Cicero, the philosopher who produced the *Somnium Scipionis*, the Roman imperium might be a tiny bit of the universe, with its political and civil troubles mere


\textsuperscript{14} Kai Brodersen, *Terra Cognita*, 268-287; see also Trevor Murphy, *Pliny the Elder’s Natural History: The Empire in the Encyclopedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 157, note 57.

\textsuperscript{15} *Nunc denique est perfectum, ut imperii nostri terrarum que illarum idem esset extremum* (Prov. cons. 33); Bertrand, “Stumbling through Gaul,” 117; Christopher B. Krebs has advanced the argument that, for Romans, a display of the world conveyed pretensions of ownership: “‘Imaginary Geography’ in Caesar’s ‘Bellum Gallicum,’” *The American Journal of Philology* 127.1 (Spring 2006): 111-136, at p. 117.
cosmic trifles. But for Cicero, the consummate Roman politician and senator, Rome was the world. Domination of the oikoumene/orbis terrarum was Rome’s destiny, as Polybius, the Greek historian of Rome’s early conquests, had explained more than one hundred years earlier. By Cicero’s day, in the final gasps of the Roman republic evolving into empire, his contemporaries believed this ambition was well on its way to fruition.

Cicero’s contemporary, the poet Catullus, could imagine Romans making exotic journeys to the peoples at the far frontiers of the known world. In audacious verses, he mocked two characters who professed their willingness to accompany him and confront any strange and distant peoples, eager to travel to the Indians, Hyrcanians and Arabs, to the Sagae, Parthians, and Egyptians – to the East, where the exploits of Crassus were promising great wealth – or across the Alps with “great Caesar,” to the Gauls and farthest Britons.16 The poet threatens to test his comrades’ bravery by sending them on a dangerous embassy with a crude message to his former lover. Ultimately, then, the imagined journey across the known world, from India to Britain, is only leading the way to a bitter joke. It is Catullus’s bravura verbal display of the oikoumene, however, that dominates the poem. Such a description by a private citizen provocatively tested the bounds of permissible discourse in the volatile Roman republic. Catullus was a bold young man who dared to write a witty mockery of Julius Caesar’s intimates and of Caesar himself.17 Yet his poetic depiction of that contested world was equally daring. Under Roman emperors to come, the visual representation of the orbis terrarium would become the prerogative of the emperor himself. Near the end of the first century, the emperor Domitian is alleged to have ordered the execution of Mettius Pompusianus, who was accused of committing what Pascal Arnaud has called the “cartographic crime” of


17 Catullus 29 and 57.
painting a depiction of the world on his bedroom wall.\textsuperscript{18} Any display of the earth carried weighty, potentially dangerous, imperial implications.

Catullus tested the boundaries of allowable geo-sarcasm in his audacious verses from the late republic, and an early imperial official and natural scientist revealed how a more extended view of the world could serve imperial interests. Pliny the Elder (23 or 24–79 C.E.) was a wealthy Roman military officer and civil servant whose duties took him to much of the western Roman world – to Germany, Spain, Africa, and probably to Gaul. Counselor to the emperors Vespasian and Titus, and a man of enormous discipline and energy, he managed also to write many books on a variety of subjects. Of these, only his \textit{Natural History} survives. This large, comprehensive encyclopedia surveys the cosmos and geography of the world before going on to describe humans and other animals, insects, plants, medicines, and minerals. Four of the thirty-seven books in the \textit{Natural History} take the reader on a journey around the \textit{orbis terrarum}. Trevor Murphy has demonstrated the Roman imperial connections of a text that views its world from the proud perspective of a central imperial authority.\textsuperscript{19} Only the expansion of that authority, as Pliny saw it, made possible the scale of his massive collection. That is, Rome’s imperial enterprise enabled the collecting and comprehension of all the aggregated knowledge in Pliny’s book.

Pliny’s encyclopedic work served as more than a preserver of ancient geographical knowledge. It transmitted a view of geography as imperial domain and exercised a considerable influence on medieval mapping. But his was a world poised on the brink of revolutionary change. While governor of Bithynia-Pontus, his nephew Pliny the Younger (Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, \textit{c}. 61–\textit{c}. 112 C.E.), corresponded with the emperor Trajan about the vexing new problem of Christians challenging ancestral Roman

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\textsuperscript{19} Trevor Murphy, \textit{Pliny the Elder’s Natural History: The Empire in the Encyclopedia} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
\end{flushright}
rituals and the imperial cult. The resulting seismic conflict found apparent resolution in the strategic conversion of Constantine (senior emperor, 312-337 C.E.) and the authority of his successors, who established Christianity as the state-sanctioned religion.

The adoption of Christianity as Rome’s solely authorized religious authority led to a new kind of enduring conflict. As Christians rethought world history, imagining it from the moment of God’s creation to their own time and place, so they claimed the inhabited world for Christendom. They embraced the Hebrew Bible, putting special emphasis on the passage in Genesis 1:26-28 urging humankind to subdue the earth and giving humans domination over all the other creatures of land, air, and waters. This complemented the New Testament charge to the apostles, who were sent out to spread God’s word to all the lands, as famously announced, for instance, on the Beatus world maps (10th-13th

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centuries).\textsuperscript{20} (Fig. 3) Christian world maps, like those presented in the Beatus manuscripts or displayed in papal and episcopal palaces, were far from benign decorations. They made aggressive claims to the earth.

**Narrative Traditions**

By justifying secular geographical studies and incorporating that knowledge into their own works, Christian writers, notably Augustine and Cassiodorus, ensured the preservation of ancient learning drawn, for example, from Pliny's *Natural History*, Pomponius Mela’s *Chorography*, Julius Solinus’s *Collection of Remarkable Things*, and from late antique writers who transmitted their Greco-Roman legacy.\textsuperscript{21} As Natalia Lozovsky has noted, “This legacy included both theoretical questions (such as the spherical form of the earth, its size, its division into three continents) and detailed descriptions of regions.”\textsuperscript{22} Endorsed by Christian authorities as an essential foundation for understanding the Bible, cartographical knowledge of God’s creation entered the schools’ and university curricula. This pedagogy argued for Christianity’s central place in God’s plan, demonstrated the global impact of the new religion, and bolstered Christianity’s claims of worldwide dominion.

The most influential late antique writers in the genre of Christian geography are Orosius and Isidore of Seville. Probably born in Roman Gallaecia (northern Portugal


today), Paulus Orosius (fl. early fifth century) traveled to Hippo Regius to study with Augustine and to Jerusalem for a church council. His *Seven Books of History against the Pagans* served as a companion piece to Augustine’s *City of God*, which was written to show—despite the contrary evidence from the events of 410—that the world had improved and human miseries decreased, since the rise of Christianity. Orosius’s demonstration opens with a geographical turn around the world, beginning with an introduction to the earth’s three *partes* (Africa, Asia, and Europe) and their provinces and identifying prominent cities, rivers, and mountains. Following the pattern of late antique and Carolingian narratives, Orosius for the most part repeated geographical knowledge gained from classical sources, retaining for instance the ancient names for sites. This habit lends the narrative a timeless air, while serving the practical purpose of helping readers of both classical texts and scripture locate places and peoples on the world stage. Orosius’s rather detailed world tour introduces a sequential history of world empires leading providentially to Christian Rome and the *pax Romana* that enabled the successful spread of the new faith. This was a critical part of Orosius’s counter-argument to the troubling evidence that “pagans” had been correct in insisting that the exclusive adoption of Christianity would cause the collapse of a Roman empire sustained through

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24 For a discussion of the *partes* of the earth, see Christoph Mauntel’s “Fra Mauro’s View on the Boring Question of Continents,” in this volume.

25 Lozovsky, *The Earth Is Our Book*, 71; on the Carolingian habit of maintaining the classical image of the world, with rare updating or reliance on autopsy, see 136-52. In this, later writers were only following the practice of Roman elites, who privileged literary tradition. Susan Mattern has mustered the evidence for this Roman habit in their creation of mental maps: *Rome and the Enemy: Imperial Strategy in the Principate* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), esp. pp. 24-66. “In general,” she wrote (p. 33), “I would argue that we do not see a sharp distinction in the Roman mind between rhetoric and ‘fact.’”
the centuries by devotion and sacrifice to the imperial cult and the ancient Greco-Roman gods. So revered was Orosius’s geographical chapter that scribes also copied it on its own, disseminating it under the title *Description of the Earth or The Account of the Whole Earth, or Provinces*. Like the works of Pliny, Mela, and Solinus, Orosius’s *Seven Books of History against the Pagans* “became a school text and an authority for later geographical writings.”

Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636), bishop and scholar, was a prolific writer, best known for his encyclopedic *Etymologies*, material gathered from a broad array of Greco-Roman sources, polytheistic and Christian, organized within a Christian framework. Invoking the masterful medievalist Ernst Robert Curtius, John Henderson has concluded: “As Curtius plainly saw..., etymology is harnessed to grander, higher, purpose as Isidore construes the grammar of the universe.” Here is ancient geographical knowledge culled from a variety of sources, especially as collected by Varro (116-27 B.C.E.), a prolific scholar whose works are now largely lost, and by Pliny the Elder. While punctuating his text with sarcastic assaults on polytheism and the “fake knowledge” of the ancient world, Isidore preserved a vast array of Greco-Roman learning. Despite its formidable length, his *Etymologies* survives in nearly one thousand manuscript copies.

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26 Lozovsky, *The Earth Is Our Book*, 77-78; for the Isidorean tradition in late antique and early medieval schools, with its foundation in etymologies, see pp. 103-113.


28 Of Varro’s seventy-some known works, only his *Res Rustica* survives intact.

Repeated surveys of the world offer Isidore’s attentive reader a detailed knowledge of his world as known to Greeks and Romans. Book nine travels through the peoples of their world, surveying their linguistic diversity in a babble / Babel of seventy-three languages. Book thirteen features the earth’s waters, beginning with the surrounding ocean, identifying the seas from north to south, with the Mediterranean naturally in the center, and then the great gulfs: the Ionian, Caspian, Indian, Persian, and Arabian or Red seas. There follow tides and straits, lakes and pools, hidden waters and springs, then more than thirty of the earth’s great rivers, beginning with the four rivers flowing out of Paradise – the Geon (which the Egyptians call the Nile), the Ganges (also called Phison), the Tigris and Euphrates, – eastward to the Indus and Arar and westward to Italy’s Po and Tiber, and on to the Danube, Rhone, and Rhine. Often Isidore identifies a river’s source or tributaries and describes its course to its destination. By this point, the reader has enough information to create a simple mappamundi.

Yet book fourteen repeats the tour again, from Paradise in Asia through Mesopotamia and Arabia, across the lands to Africa, the old Roman provinces and Germany, this time by land, with a detailed siting of islands, promontories, mountains and other physical features, often with distance markers that would enable more precise mapping. Book fifteen, for one last time, retraces the path from India, here identifying famous cities from antiquity and scripture, with their origin stories, leading to Julius Caesar’s founding of Isidore’s own Seville. “With the roll-call of urbanization,” writes Henderson, “Isidore is still filling in the landscape of Planet Earth. Natural terrain had acquired borders and regional divisions, cultural limits and areas. Now terrestrial space becomes place, as humans nest in numbers . . . the building of cities now proves to organize society as physical habitat.”

In sum, Isidore has supplied the major features for a rather sophisticated map of the known world.

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Relevant sections of Orosius’s *Histories* and Isidore’s *Etymologies* found their way into Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, into exegetical works, and Carolingian geographical manuals like the ninth-century *De situ orbis*. In his *De rerum naturis*, another Carolingian writer, Hrabanus Maurus, mined Isidore’s geographical books to write a detailed description of the earth’s “seas, rivers, and regions.” Medieval mapmakers, for their part, owed a great deal to Orosius’s *Histories*, as the Hereford map (c. 1300) advertises with a prominent inscription “acknowledg[ing] Orosius . . . as its essential textual source: ‘Orosius’s account, *De Ornesta Mundi*, as is shown within.’”

Narrative traditions thus transmitted Rome’s geographical legacy, providing much of the information that enabled medieval world mapping. The narrative strands are intertwined – the secular Roman imperial (as with Pliny the Elder) and the works in service to Christianity (as with Isidore and most obviously Orosius) are all intimately tied to the power embedded in world mapping as an imperial enterprise concerned with these questions: Who owns the world? Who has authority over its peoples and natural resources? For emperors and secular officials, the answer was clear. Christians, however, vigorously contested that view.

**Battle of the Maps**


From our standpoint in the twenty-first century, we see one side of that contest, in the one thousand or so Christian *mappaemundi* that survive. Yet we also have abundant evidence for a long line of imperial maps produced in support of secular authorities. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the earliest of these to be securely identified as a world map in support of a secular authority is the one described and interpreted by Eumenius in his oration at the school in Augustodunum (modern Autun) in the late 290s. Consider the timing of that map’s creation: the restoration of the school was possible because of the restoration of Roman order at the close of the devastating third century, with its domestic troubles and threats of invasion.

Eumenius was speaking at a ceremony observing the re-establishment of the school but also, of course, celebrating the renewal of the empire. It may seem natural to us that a world map would be publicly displayed to celebrate just that. In Eumenius’s words: “Let the young people see and contemplate daily every land and all the seas and whatever cities, people, nations that the unconquered rulers either restore by affection, conquer by valor or restrain by fear.” The imperial message here is clear, and in Eumenius’ conclusion: “For now, now at last it is a delight to see a picture of the world, since we see nothing in it that is not ours.”

The long-lived Roman sentiment echoes Cicero’s some 350 years earlier; but now Eumenius can demonstrate this with “a picture of the world.”

It seems no coincidence that Roman authorities produced this map as Christianity was making inroads into the Roman consciousness and terrain, contesting secular jurisdiction over the earth. Eumenius did not mention the Christians in his oration, likely because

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they were the thorn in the side of his emperor, Diocletian. Within a couple of decades, another emperor, Constantine, would accept Christianity, and the religious landscape would take a dramatic turn. After Constantine, Christian emperors in the West often found themselves at odds with the papacy, with each claiming supreme authority over God’s creation and the secular/Christian alliance sometimes breaking down in violence. More frequent, though, were the competing displays of symbolic authority, like the orb held by a king, emperor, or pope, or the world maps that secular and religious authorities displayed in their battles for supremacy.\(^{35}\)

**Secular Maps**

Roman emperors in the Christian East found ways to exercise control over the Church and its patriarchs, often enjoying a more secure claim to be Christ’s regents on earth. The competition in the more contested West, on the other hand, produced a tradition of now-lost world maps once displayed in imperial and royal palaces. Let us briefly consider two examples that illustrate the significance of this phenomenon. The world maps of Charlemagne and those of Roger II, Norman king of Sicily, offer particularly tantalizing case studies, especially given the weighty circumstances of their destruction, described below.

Charlemagne must have seen the world map produced for Pope Zacharias (741-752) and displayed in the dining room of his Lateran Palace in Rome to proclaim papal assertions to universal power, as well as the even more provocative geographic narratives that his own contemporary, Pope Leo II (795-816), installed in his Lateran banquet halls. In Charlemagne’s palace at Aachen, the emperor exhibited four grand maps of his own, three of silver and one of gold. Charlemagne’s biographer Einhard reports that two of the silver maps depicted Rome and Constantinople. The third, “which far surpasses the

\(^{35}\) On these symbols and the battle of the maps, see Albu, *Medieval Peutinger Map*, 31-58.
others both in the beauty of its workmanship and in its heavy weight,” Einhard wrote, was “a map of the entire world, fashioned from three concentric circles and completed in exquisite detail.” The future of that grand map revealed the profound significance it held for its possessor. Though Charlemagne willed these maps to the support of the poor, his son Louis the Pious paid to keep the world map alone of all his father’s treasures. In the next generation, when Louis’s son, Lothar, found himself threatened by civil discord, he broke up his grandfather’s world map and distributed the pieces to German magnates as a sign of his willingness to share the realm with them. His act of desperation failed. The empire dissolved, and the map’s pieces went missing.

The fate of Roger’s map likewise reveals the symbolic power of a world map. (Fig. 4) In 1154, the Arab geographer, Muhammad al-Idrisi, made a great silver map of the world for Roger to display. This masterwork was a spectacular wonder, but an angry mob destroyed it when they sacked the royal palaces in 1161, imprisoning Roger and his son, William I, and assassinating his chief minister. This episode is usually seen as a rebellion against the kings’ multiculturalism, his support of Muslims and Jews, with the map broken up to confiscate the precious silver. But the map’s destruction may also have represented a violent reaction against the imperial ambitions that Roger’s map signified. A much more modest version, a manuscript illumination in a work commonly called the Kitab Rujar (Book of Roger), al-Idrisi’s geographic description of the world, survived to be frequently reproduced. Ten manuscript copies still exist, including eight with maps.

The Peutinger Map is the sole large-display piece surviving from that line of secular world maps. It is traditionally considered a copy of a Roman map. Richard Talbert has even imagined that its prototype was displayed in the apse of Diocletian’s palace aula in

36 Einhard, Vita Karoli Magni, ed. and tr. Evelyn Scherabon Firchow and Edwin H. Zeydel (Coral Gables: University of Florida Press, 1972), chap. 33. The fourth object Einhard described only as “made of gold and extraordinarily large and heavy.”
Figure 4 A Version of al-Idrisi’s World Map, 1456. Photo: Wikimedia

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Al-Idrisi%27s_world_map.JPG
Split, making it almost contemporary with the world map described by Eumenius.\textsuperscript{37} Although we have no evidence for such a map in Diocletian’s palace, this is an appealing theory and is in line with the evidence for imperial display maps of the world. The extant medieval map, made in Swabia around 1220, was, I have argued, intended to support the imperial claims of the emperor Frederick II.\textsuperscript{38} Grandson of Roger II and raised in Sicily, he would have had first-hand understanding of the authority and power a world map held. Frederick and his Hohenstaufen kin engaged in a long-standing competition with the papacy, with symbols of Roman imperium wielded as weapons. These included “ceremony, liturgy, architecture, frescoes, mosaics, statuary, and papal thrones”– and world maps.\textsuperscript{39}

\textbf{Conclusion}

Medieval popes, kings, and emperors inherited the Roman concept that knowledge of the land conveyed dominion over it. To display a world map was to demonstrate authority over the earth. As we have seen, Greco-Roman geographical information transmitted in late antique and Carolingian texts supplied sufficient data to enable the creation of medieval world maps. And yet, arguably the most powerful legacy of Rome for medieval world mapping is the impression of domination and ownership that world maps convey.


\textsuperscript{38} Albu, \textit{Medieval Peutinger Map}, 85-117.

\textsuperscript{39} Mary Stroll, \textit{Symbols as Power: The Papacy following the Investiture Contest} (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), xv.