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Geographies of Salvation: How to Read Medieval Mappae Mundi

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This region is the Terrestrial Paradise, an especially lovely place. Paradise is completely surrounded by fire whose flames reach the sky. … In Paradise lies a source divided in four rivers: One is Euphrates, the second Tigris, the third Gyon, the fourth Phison…. Isidore speaks about this place saying that Paradise is situated in the middle of the Equator.¹

This is an abbreviated caption from the Catalan Estense World Map (c. 1450/1460) (Fig. 1) describing a circular garden surrounded by flames and placed in eastern Africa, from which the mentioned source springs and in which two red figures pray under a tree.² Placing Paradise in eastern Africa on medieval maps is very unusual – as will be seen in this article – and is at the same time typical for late medieval mappae mundi that were both

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¹Il Mappamondo Catalano Estense (Die Katalanische Estense Weltkarte), ed. E. Milano/ A. Battini, Zurich 1995, p.185 no. H: Aquesta ragio es p(ar)adis teranall / loquall es molt delitable loch en / loqual p(ar)adis as murat tot defoch / los quals puien trofins alcell / en lo quall es larbre deuida lofruyt / delqual arbre sediu que quin manjaua / seria in mortal deldit p(ar)adis hix vna / ffont laqual septr(ter)tex en qual(er) parts lahu / eufrates latra trigis [sic!] latra tragon latra / frixon deualam(en)t qual aygua fa tanfort / brogit que los quijnex(n) nexe sorts de aquest / loc parla ysodor(us) dient / que p(ar)adis teranall es en / mig delaquynorsciall lo quall es molt / delitable loch sens comp(ar)acio...nloquall / es p(ar)adis teranall.

bound by tradition and innovation, determined by contemplations of salvation history as well as practical spatial considerations. The Modena Map and its

Figure 1 Catalan Estense World Map (c. 1450/1460). Photo: https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1450_%C2%BF_Carta_Catalana_jpeg_copy.jpg

situation of Paradise will be, in this essay, the main example for some considerations of the realism of mappae mundi – which are very often taken as the clear opposite of modern
maps based on the measurable “reality” of geography. Medieval *mappae mundi* do not represent geographical space in a way we are used to. From a modern point of view, they show earth in an incorrect way, with distorted dimensions: they are, allegedly, not yet able to represent space in a rational and useful way. Looking at them from a medieval point of view they may not at all have been intended to fulfill expectations like these modern ones. Scholars who judge *mappae mundi* by medieval standards usually emphasize the salvific over the practical aspect. But were *mappae mundi* truly not “realistic”?

As a first step, I present the Modena Map as an example of a *mappa mundi*, define *mappae mundi* as representations of “Geographies of Salvation,” and present the principles of the Geography of Salvation, along with the demands they had to meet. My hypothesis is that *mappae mundi* as Geographies of Salvation have to be read on several levels at the same time – and that these levels can have weigh differently on different maps depending on what the mapmaker wanted to emphasize. Among these levels of understanding we find the literal sense, which demands, in principle, that the representation of physical features had to be as close to nature as possible, given the information the mapmaker had at hand. In addition to the literal content, symbolic levels – moral, allegorical, eschatological – were considered and read accordingly.

The circular Modena Map (1,130 mm in diameter) is without clear orientation, but is mostly angled to the north, which fits with most of its figures, vignettes, and map legends. In addition to the Terrestrial Paradise, we find Jerusalem (*santasepulcra*), only slightly shifted from the center of the world.³ The Red Sea is, (*Fig. 2*) following medieval tradition, painted red, but with a caption that hints at empirical knowledge: not the water, but the

³ *Mappamondo Catalano Estense*, p.182 no. 28 (cf. n.1). For David Woodward this map does not show Jerusalem in the center and thus counts among the maps of the “transitional period” in the history of cartography, teleologically defined by him: Woodward, “Medieval Mappamundi” in *HOC I* (cf. n.3), 286-370, here 317.
sea bottom is red.⁴ In the distant northeast, Gog and Magog are enclosed, the peoples of the endtime who will come out (*vindra*) to help Antichrist.⁵ The Mediterranean and Black Sea, as well as the European and large parts of the African Atlantic coast, are drawn according to Portolan measuring techniques.

**Figure 2** Detail of the Catalan Estense World Map with the Red Sea at the bottom center (c. 1450/1460), Modena Biblioteca Estense, library, Italy. Photo: https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1450_%C2%BF_Carta_Catalana_jpeg_copy.jpg

Elsewhere, the mapmaker was aware of the empirical travel knowledge of his time, be it in Asia or in Western Africa. Not only are the Portuguese discoveries up to 1445 represented, but we find the Caspian Sea only once on the map and as an inland sea with

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⁴ *Mappamondo Catalano Estense*, p.183 no. D (cf. n.1). This was noticed already by Fulcher of Chartres in the context of the first crusade: Fulcherus Carnotensis, *Historia Hierosolymitana* (1095–1127) II, 57, 1, ed. Heinrich Hagenmeyer, Heidelberg 1913, 596-597.

⁵ *Mappamondo Catalano Estense*, p.145 no. I (cf. n.1).
the names *Mar de sala* (from Sarai, the Mongol central place at the lower Volga that flows into that sea), and *de bacu* (from the city of Baku in Azerbaijan, still today on the western coast of that sea). As I have pointed out elsewhere, this clearly is a decision by the mapmaker in favor of empirical knowledge and against antique traditions, while other geographical sources chose to combine the different descriptions by putting one alongside the other.\(^6\) Twelve figures of rulers are depicted in Asia and Africa, mostly in front of their tents: in Asia Minor the anonymous sultan of the Ottomans, in the Middle East, the *rey dilli* (Delhi) and the *rey tauris* (Tabriz, c. 1300 center of the Mongol il-khanat). There are also two east Asian Mongol rulers, known, among others, from the work of Marco Polo, which was still considered useful, described by lengthy map legends.\(^7\) Further south, on the easily recognizable Arabic peninsula, we find the biblical *reyna sabba* (Queen of Sheba), characterized as a ruler from the past whose land is possessed by the Saracens; and *civitas meca* is depicted at the side of the *provincia arabia*.\(^8\) In Africa rule *rey melli*, *rey dorgana*, *rey de nubia* and *solda[n]babilonia* (the Sultan of Babilonia/Cairo), known also from earlier (mostly Catalan) maps.

In the far south of Africa, a ruler has the head of a dog (*rey benicalep*), like the Cynocephali on older maps. But the mapmaker does not refer to Latin European tradition, claiming instead that “this people are called *benicalep* in the Saracen language, in our language *fill de cha*, Son of the Dog, because their faces resemble those of dogs.”\(^9\)

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\(^7\) We should consider that Columbus still intended to fulfil the Mongol Great Khan’s wishes as Marco Polo had reported: *Scritti di Cristoforo Colombo*, ed. C. de Lollis, Rome 1894, parte I vol. II, 202.

\(^8\) *Mappamondo Catalano Estense*, pp.183-184, no. 41, [1], E (cf. n.1).

This entry clearly comes from a source – be it oral or written – that is built on information by Arabic speakers. When such information was taken from people considered eyewitnesses (and this is true also if they were describing things we may judge as not real), it was considered empirical (however much that may deviate from our understanding) but could, at the same time, be used for spiritual purposes. On the Modena Map, Christian and Muslim forces are positioned opposite each other. As the mapmaker points out, the king of Organa is continuously fighting the sarains, and the king of Nubia is constantly fighting the Nubian Christians, who are under the rule of presta iohan (Prester John), the great Latin crusade hope from the twelfth century.\(^1\) He is seated a bit west of the Terrestrial Paradise.\(^1\)

Slightly north of Prester John, two rivers flow together and then go onward, as the Nile, to Egypt and the Mediterranean. One of the rivers springs from Paradise, the other from the west, where it shares a headwater with another river that then flows to the west and into the Atlantic. The latter has five tributaries that come from the south and out of the gibelcamar. This name quotes Ptolemaic and Arabic traditions, in which it usually is the Nile that springs from the Djibal-qomr, the Mountain of the Moon.\(^1\) On Ptolemaic, Arabic, and Latin European world maps that note this version of the Nile’s sources, these rim of the map. On both maps we find numerous monstra also on the Southern rim: but these kinds of figures are always marginal. For the monsters on the maps cf. A. S. Mittman, *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England*, New York-London 2006.

\(^1\) These opposed groups are even clearer on another map from a similar time and probably also of Catalan origin, on which Africa is divided between Christians and Muslims – among them the dog-headed Abinichibel – and thus between the two main religious-political forces that would decide the fate of the world. We find it on the so-called Borgia- or Velletri-map, a circular map carved into a metal plate, between 1402 and probably 1453, cf. Felicitas Schmieder, “Anspruch auf christliche Weltherrschaft. Die Velletri/Borgia-Karte (15. Jahrhundert) in ihrem ideengeschichtlichen und politischen Kontext” in Ingrid Baumgärtner/ Martina Stercken (eds.), *Herrschaft verorten. Politische Kartographie im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit*, Zürich 2012, 253 -271.

\(^1\) *Mappamondo Catalano Estense*, p.179 no. [6], R (cf. n.1).

mountains are usually placed south of Egypt.13 Of course, the Nile’s western African source was an alternative discussed in Antiquity.14 In terms of content, we here have Paradise as source of the Nile and an alternative to Paradise as source of the Nile worked into one and the same map, but the latter is used for another river close to the Nile. Only slightly south of Paradise, a small land bridge, crossed by yet another river, connects inhabited northern Africa to the uninhabited or unknown south. These parts of the continent are mostly separated by a broad estuary reaching eastward from the Atlantic. We may see here a reminiscence of the southern continent (terra australis) found on several medieval maps, or it may reflect the great hope of Portuguese seafarers of the time that the Indian Ocean was easily accessible—even though Africa reaches out far to the south.15

If we want to situate this map in the cartographical tradition of its time, we have a mappa mundi committed to traditional elements as well as recent developments, while the mapmaker is embedding the time of the world between Creation and Apocalypse into the space of the earth. It shares this characterization with many of its contemporary maps. This kind of mappae mundi can provide, in combination with historiographical or encyclopedic works, biblical commentaries and similar writings, pictura for scriptura, the visual explanation of the written description. The Modena Map, like similar maps, speaks

13 For example, the mappa mundi by Petrus Vesconte (c. 1320). There are several copies of this map; image e.g. E. Edson/ E. Savage-Smith / A.-D. von den Brincken, Der mittelalterliche Kosmos. Karten der christlichen und islamischen Welt, Darmstadt 2005, 72-73 fig. 53, or P. Barber, “Medieval maps of the world” in P. D. A. Harvey(Ed.), The Hereford Map. Medieval World Maps and Their Context, London 2006, 1-44, here 29.

14 Hennig, Terrae Incognitae I, ch. 17, p.100/101 (cf. n.13).

for itself, because sufficient *scriptura* has been included in its *pictura*. So how do we read them?

Since the map’s affinity to God and Creation is obvious, it should also be obvious that the *mappa mundi* has been “written” and must be read like the Bible and other religious texts. That is, they can be read according to the literal and spiritual *sensus scripturae*, or in a way that recognizes their polysemous nature, that processes them on four levels: the literal-historical, the moral-tropological, the allegorical-typological, and the anagogical-eschatological. For example, the Terrestrial Paradise is regularly depicted on *mappae mundi*, if not in an explicitly eschatological way. It is mostly placed at the eastern edge of the world, clearly recognizable with Adam and Eve and the four rivers springing from it. In the historical or literal sense, represented on *mappae mundi* by the physical earth, Paradise was the first place to be created and will be decisively connected to the endtime. It was thus considered a terrestrial place unreachable by humans. In the allegorical or typological sense, which emphasizes that the history of Christianity had quotidian and future significance, Paradise is a mirror of the sins of humanity, of God’s punishment, and of the hope for his forgiveness. The moral or tropological sense is connected to this and reminded Christians of their present and future duties. This was, of course, connected to the anagogical-eschatological sense that promised eternity to good Christians.

A biblical and similar text does not work only on one of the levels and does not have only one meaning, but several of them at the same time that are inseparably woven into a text, or into an image, as on the maps – inseparable, but not without what we would perceive as contradictions. The one and only correct interpretation we are used to looking for is a concept very foreign to medieval thought (so we are talking of much more

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tolerance of ambiguity in medieval than in modern thought). A mappa mundi, thus, does not only (have to) represent the earth with its mountains, towns, peoples, animals etc., but at the same time includes the “why” of God’s creation and the history of salvation, the “where from” and “where to,” the responsibility of Christianity to fulfill the purpose of creation and more of this kind. On the spiritual level, this complex system of references can fulfill diverse needs, depending on the interpretation of the world that the author of the map wants to express.\footnote{M. Hoogvliet, “L’image légendée: théories modernes et cartes médiévales” in Qu’est-ce que nommer? L’image légendée entre monde monastique et pensée scolastique, ed. C. Heck, Turnhout 2010, 219-233, on the approach to the unfamiliar mappae mundi which in fact do not work not that differently from media with which we are familiar. Important is the ambiguity of the images which provide them with multiple readings like texts that connect it to the four senses (pp. 222-223). Cf. also M. Hoogvliet, Pictura et scriptura: Textes, images et herméneutique des Mappae mundi (XIII e–XVIe siècles), Turnhout 2007 (Terrarum Orbis. 7), esp. ch. VI, 1. Maps are complex semiotic systems, but it is doubtful whether we can actually speak of the alleged demand to represent the empirical reality (“vermeintliche[n] Vorgabe, die empirische Wirklichkeit abzubilden”): C. Herberichs, “Zur Lesbarkeit der Ebstorf Welkarte” in J. Glauser/ C. Kiening (eds.), Text, Bild, Karte. Kartographien der Vormoderne, Freiburg 2007, 201-217, here 217.}

But natural features are equally important: a mappa mundi is indebted to the literal sense as well as the spiritual ones, indebted to the reality of earth and its inhabitants. That the Modena Map’s “Saracens” own the land that was once the Queen of Sheba’s has meaning for the biblical past and for the eschatological world mission – the Queen was considered the first convert. Both rulers are and were also real humans who lived in a concrete place, as is underlined by the explicit temporality in their caption. For us, some of the rulers may be historical (although not necessarily contemporaneous to the map), others may qualify as “legendary,” “fictional,” even “fantastic.” For the mapmaker’s contemporaries, all levels of understanding were simultaneously at play on the map and equally important to it. This has to be emphasized even more, as fifteenth-century mapmakers were criticizing traditions and checking maps’ reality, as when the Modena Map did not simply incorporate the ancient dog-headed creatures, but traced them back to Arabic traditions and thus to more recent eyewitness reports. In the mid-fifteenth
century, the painter of the so-called Genoese World Map (Fig. 3) emphasized at a prominent place on his map that he would leave out *frivolae narrationes*, but among them does not count Gog and Magog or Prester John, both of whom are on the map. The Venetian mapmaker Fra Mauro did not find a concrete location for Paradise on his map. But this does not mean he rejected a geographical meaning of Paradise in principle. Against an intended rejection speaks to the fact that he did emphasize the Rivers of Paradise on his map – the only four rivers he marked in golden paint (Gyon-Nile, Euphrates, Tigris and Phison-Ganges).

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This multilevel understanding was true for the spiritual as well as the literal dimensions. As noted above, when historians of medieval cartography measured *mappae mundi* against their own standards, they usually acknowledged the maps’ spiritual dimensions, as David Woodward emphasized in 1985. He claimed that their primary function was to narrate Christian history in a geographical setting and not to communicate geographical reality structured according to a coordinate system. For Woodward, here lay the reason for mapmakers’ disinterest in exact localization: They simply wanted something entirely different. Alessandro Scafi defines *mappae mundi* by their typical temporal dimension that determined the geographical space. Since the interest of the mapmakers was to represent on the earth a continuum of world history,

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the spatial dimension was less prominent; or, as he writes, “history rules on Mappaemundi.”\(^{20}\) Patrick Gautier Dalché has repeatedly objected to these claims and has shown how much very early mappae mundi could be indebted to reality, how not only the “symbolic” level of understanding, but also the “real,” the literal interpretation could be put forward:

Toutes les mappemondes n’ont pas Jerusalém pour centre; toutes ne mettent pas en scène l’histoire de salut. Et elles n’ont pas pour fonction essentielle ou unique de présenter à des moines enfermés loin du monde, ainsi qu’à un public laïc influencé par les valeurs monastiques, une image de ce monde nécessairement fausse et dépassée (ajoutons, encore une fois, qu’elles ne montrent pas une terre plate, puisque jamais personne, au Moyen Âge latin, ne pensa que la terre est plate). Bien au contraire, l’image regardée, lu et décrite ... (par l’auteur de l’Expositio) ... était ... celle de l’espace réel et concret....\(^{21}\)


Indeed, the impression that exact localization was not of primary interest for the mapmakers means that we can more easily accept the maps’ focus on the moral and allegorical level than on the literal level, where we cannot seem to stop measuring meaning and correctness of spatial realities according to our own criteria. But as our homogeneous understanding of space is not the only one possible, metric representation
is not the only possible form of representation, nor it is any better in principle than, say, representing more meaningful items as larger than others (which we tend to see as distorted). We thus tend to implicitly assume that our idea of space is the only one possible, and that the representations on the *mappae mundi*, because they obviously do not fit our idea of a scientific survey, were inaccurate either intentionally or due to disinterest (or inability). But why should anyone choose pictorial representations if geography had not been the point? From the fifteenth century, we have the *mappemonde spirituelle* by the Burgundian scholar, Jean Germain, which is a textual description of the world only (at least no map accompanying the text has survived),22 a possible hint that for the spiritual level the text sufficed, while for a literal one, the map was considered essential. Therefore, I claim that *mappae mundi* are not presenting the spiritual history of salvation on a spatial background that is just passable (because they were not able to do it better), but the Geography of Salvation in the sense that the physical description of the earth had basically the very same weight as the generation of salvific sense.

The Geography of Salvation means that past, present, and future were represented according to their Christian meaning and that the physical, mimetic representation of the earth as God’s creation had to be as carefully and correctly laid out as possible, according to contemporary standards. Because since the twelfth century empirical knowledge became more and more important, most mapmakers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were eager to adapt their maps as soon as new information and new techniques became available.

This is even true for the representation of earth as a flat round or oval. Since medieval mapmakers knew that earth was not a disk, they probably did not imagine anyone

22 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. fr. 13235; dedication image (which shows a schematic *Mappa Mundi* and thus creates a direct link to the drawn maps) from Lyon, Bibliothèque Municipale, ms. Palais des Arts 32, fol. 1r can be seen in P. Gautier Dalché in *Das leuchtende Mittelalter*, ed. J. Dalarun, Darmstadt 2005 (French Orig. 2002), 45. Also notifications like *mundanus* possibly hint to a (virtual) separability: Gautier Dalché, *Décrire*, esp. 376 (cf. n. 22).
assuming that they represented it as a disk, just as modern mapmakers do not expect their users to misunderstand their flat representation as showing a disk. Is there a better way to project a sphere onto a flat surface if you do not know its measurements? Fra Mauro left the overall dimensions of God’s creation to the all-knowing creator himself.\textsuperscript{23} When what is on the back or the downside of the sphere is unknown, the circular map is a very useful way to represent a sphere on a flat surface.

Not only Fra Mauro, but also other fifteenth-century mapmakers tried to acquire measurements. As soon as the Portolan technique was known, it was used on \textit{mappae mundi} wherever the necessary data were available. Where the data were missing, often the number of day’s journeys was indicated as makeshift. On the Modena Map, we find the remark that the Central Asian oasis Lop (known in the west from Marco Polo’s report) is half-way between Tana (a Venetian colony at the mouth of the Don) and Cathay (Marco Polo’s northern China), since in each of the two directions merchants needed six months with their carts.\textsuperscript{24} Also those contemporaries who were very advanced in the development of the art of calculation found \textit{mappae mundi} useful, as has been shown by Patrick Gautier Dalché for the fourteenth-century Florentine, Paolo d’Abbaco.\textsuperscript{25}

Mapmakers chose the geographical facts they represented on their maps according to the overall statement they wanted to make, but basically all empirical geographical knowledge that was properly passed down was deemed presentable. This was true for Ptolemy and Pomponius Mela, Pliny, Solinus, Macrobius, and Isidore, and also for the Alexander Romance and the twelfth-century letter of Prester John. We see this also in the

\textsuperscript{23} P. Falchetta (ed.), \textit{Fra Mauro’s World Map}, Turnhout 2006 (Terrarum Orbis. 5), nr. 2828: \textit{Perhò a l’Eterno Dio lasso la mesura de la sua opera la qual lui solo intende a ponto} ...

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Mappamondo Catalano Estense}, p.145 no. L (cf. n.1).

travels of the Irish Saint Brendan who had, according to reports, reached several islands in the Atlantic Ocean that people tried to find again in the fifteenth century – and that are, in modern scholarship, very often still and wrongly termed fantasy islands.26

We can see the care mapmakers took to align the literal representation of physical places with their allegorical meaning by returning to the unusual representation of Paradise on the Modena Map. The caption quoted at the beginning of this article points us back to the seventh century and Isidore of Seville for the placement of Paradise on the equator. Isidore begins his book “on the earth and its parts,” and then, after some introductory materials, proceeds to “de Asia.” After a quick overview over its boundaries, he lists Asia’s provinces, “starting with Paradise,” which is “a place in the east whose name, transferred from Greek into Latin, means garden; in Hebrew it is called Eden, which in our language means ‘delights’ (deliciæ) … There is also the Tree of Life. There is neither cold nor heat but always a well-balanced climate. In the middle a spring originates … which divides into four rivers …; it is surrounded by a wall of fire reaching nearly up to the sky ….”27 Isidore is quoted on the Modena Map, but he seems to be the source only for part of the legend: He does not locate Paradise at the equator, but in the east. It is highly probably that the mapmaker intentionally modified his source to accommodate his diversion from the usual placing of Paradise on the maps. In his


Mapping Paradise, Alessandro Scafi searches for the reason for the emphasis on the equator in astronomical considerations. But there is another background as well: The Catalan mapmaker was very well informed about Portuguese discoveries along the Atlantic coast of Africa – probably because he created his map when the Catalan and Portuguese dynasties were very closely linked. The Portuguese prince, Henry the Navigator, in the first half of the fifteenth century, sent ship after ship to find a way to India around Africa to explore economic opportunities, but also to Christianize newly found peoples. Henry sought the shortest way to the Christian Prester John – who was thought to rule at the headwater of the Nile – in order to win him as an ally in the fight against the Muslim archenemies in Egypt and liberate Jerusalem. Such an alliance would also support the crusades of Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy, who was related to the Portuguese ruling house. In order to find the way to Prester John, Portuguese


30 It was thought that Prester John, due to his geopolitical position, could deflect the Nile and create a permanent drought in Egypt. B. Weber, Les variations d’un récit mythique : l’Éthiopie et le Nil à travers le temps et l’espace, forthcoming. The idea of the Nile being derived was so well-known, at least in the 15th century, that it also reached authors who were obviously not familiar with the actual geographical place, cf. F. Schmieder, Europa und die Fremden. Die Mongolen im Urteil des Abendlandes vom 13. bis in das 15. Jahrhundert, Sigmaringen 1994, 313.

ships were not only sent to surround Africa, but also to sail up any larger river whose mouth was found at the West African coast. Following this order, after 1445, Portuguese ships sailed up the Gambia that flows into the Atlantic a bit south of the Cape Verde archipelago, where also our mapmaker, maybe as a consequence of that endeavor, locates the mouth of the river that shares a headwater with the Nile.

However, the Nile was known to be one of the rivers flowing from Terrestrial Paradise; in the later Middle Ages, there were many theories about how the Nile could flow from Paradise in the east to Egypt, where it was known to people. The easiest solution appears on the Modena Map, where the Nile’s course is a central feature, indicating that the mapmaker tried to bring together different traditions on the course of this river. Since, according to all other traditions, the Nile was located in Africa, and since the Portuguese wanted to use the Nile to get to Prester John, the Terrestrial Paradise, its source, had to move. Moving Paradise itself to Africa, close to Prester John, aligned strategic considerations with geographical reality.

When we combine Scafi’s idea quoted above of an astronomical reason for Paradise on the Modena Map and the one just outlined, then recent astronomical considerations had allowed the relocation of Paradise contrary to all tradition to a place where it could promote contemporary geopolitical strategic planning by charging it with salvific relevance (reconquest of the Holy Land, and as ultimate goal Christianization of the whole world before the Second Coming of Christ). In both cases, it would have meant that the placement of a traditional and, in terms of salvific history, highly meaningful place on earth has been significantly adjusted, actualized, and corrected on the basis of recent considerations of practical politics.

32 As only one example we could take the pilgrim from Cologne, Arnold of Harff (Die Pilgerfahrt des Ritters Arnold von Harff, ed. Eberhard von Groote, Köln 1860, 148/50) who doubted the identity of the Nile as one of the rivers of Paradise and also relocated Paradise.
The example of the Terrestrial Paradise on the Modena Map shows how important physical geography was to the Geography of Salvation; it also shows there were no purely spiritual places: Paradise was considered a place on earth, where some travelers had purportedly even heard its waters running. On the other hand, this example illustrates how the literal level of interpretation intersected with the allegorical and moral levels. Because the position of Paradise in east Africa could lead to victory against the “Saracens,” it was the moral duty of Christian rulers to reach it. Geopolitical intentions determined the location of Paradise on the map and that location legitimized, conversely, also the geopolitics of Henry the Navigator. This meant that all elements on mappae mundi representing the Geography of Salvation were to be read on the literal and symbolic levels.

It is certainly possible to object that the idea of “real” partly defines the Geography of Salvation as being far from the modern understanding of mapping realities or of realistic maps. But when we speak of modern realistic maps as opposed to medieval ones that are full of fantasy, legends, and imaginations, we often overlook that our well-measured maps are anything but one-dimensional and far from being simple and unbent externalizations of spaces that represent objective truth or at least objective reality. Maps are suggestive and bear huge manipulative to ideological potential (which medieval mapmakers possibly knew better than we today), and also modern maps never represent reality without meaning. Considering this, we should avoid qualifications such

33 Johannes de Marignola, Relatio (= excerpts concerning his voyage to Asia from his Cronicon Boemorum), ed. in Anastasius van den Wyngaert OFM, Sinica Franciscana I: Itinera et Relationes Fratrum Minorum saeculi XIII et XIV, Quaracchi 1929, p.531; cf. Jean de Marignolli, Au jardin d’Eden, trad. C. Gadrat, Toulouse 2009, 39.

as “real” or “realistic” with all its semantic ballast for our maps in general and call them close to nature if that is exactly what we want to say.

Fifteen years ago, Evelyn Edson described mapmakers’ adaptability and characterized how they “drew together theology, science, and history in an single work” by looking at the very different functions of manuscript maps up to the fourteenth century. She rightly emphasizes the entry of Portolan measuring techniques and Ptolemaic geography as revolutionary, because lots of things quickly changed on mappae mundi after experimental science (in statu nascendi) became more accepted socially and scholarly. But at the same time, we can very well assume that those new techniques were also accepted simply as a consequence of the necessities of the literal sense: On that level, the maps had to become much closer to nature in the epoch of

![Catalan Estense World Map (c. 1450/1460) with Portolan features.](https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal/vol6/iss3/2)

**Figure 5**

experimental inspection. Mappae mundi were adapted, mapmakers experimented, but I have tried to show with examples from the Modena Map, that assessments like Edson’s “medieval mapmakers tried to do this [pull together the disparate facts on the ground with abstract ideas of the meaning of the whole] with varying degrees of success” or that

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the Atlas Catalan (1375) showed an “impressive attempt” to adapt are too hesitant. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw further adaptations that combined meaning and geographical experience, and the maps in question are not at all clearly separate from the “cartographic mainstream,” which, in Edson’s estimate, had chosen clearly different paths of developing their art of mapmaking from the fourteenth century onwards.

When Johannes Schöner in 1515 prepared one of the oldest preserved earth globes, he considered the latest nautical discoveries and accepted, among other things, the image and name of the south of the new continent Martin Waldseemüller had coined “America.” Also, on other items he dared to include interesting proposals and was very much up-to-date and intellectually acute to the exchange of opinions that took place, around 1500, with high frequency among cartographers, and he is esteemed adequately in the history of cartography. But one of his achievements was a corrected adaptation of a completely new cartographic implementation of three (instead of one) countries of origin to which the three Magi returned to become missionaries, after having visited the newborn Christ. On Schöner’s globe, the three realms form a half circle around Jerusalem. Even more, the multiplication and thus strengthening of a topic central to the history of salvation (a topic not simply kept due to respect for tradition, but elaborated further) on the globe in the very moment when the old image of the world finally broke apart makes blatantly obvious how important the Geography of Salvation still was: meaningful elements of the history of salvation put in a geographical framework as close to nature as possible created an anchor of reassurance in the fast storm of new information.36 The Geography of Salvation is not so much about time in space, but about meaning and sense

of the time in space – and thus *mappae mundi* only finally lost their function when in scientific cartography the earth as God’s creation in general was up for renegotiation.

It should be again obvious in this last example taken from a new age of cartography that *mappae mundi*, according to the Geography of Salvation (and in this I include Schöner’s globe) were anything but static products. In principle, all four levels of meaning might be present at any time and have to be considered, but each of them could be stronger or weaker in different *mappae mundi*, could be emphasized or left out. *Mappae mundi* that go beyond the simple T-O pattern were idiosyncratic products of mapmakers with different representational goals and audiences, who were also in discursive dispute with other mapmakers. The Geography of Salvation provided them with a complex semiotic web that, ideally, allowed their maps to be read on the four different levels of the *sensus scripturae*: the literal, moral, allegorical, and eschatological. That is the yardstick with which to measure western medieval *mappae mundi*. 

![Figure 6](https://etc.usf.edu/maps/pages/2400/2455/2455.htm)

**Figure 6** Johannes Schöner Globe, 1515.
Photo: [https://etc.usf.edu/maps/pages/2400/2455/2455.htm](https://etc.usf.edu/maps/pages/2400/2455/2455.htm)