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Lost Maps of the Caliphs: Drawing the World in Eleventh-Century Cairo by Yossef Rapoport and Emilie Savage-Smith

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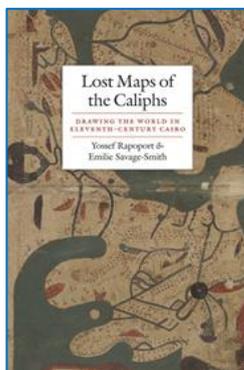
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Review of Yossef Rapoport and Emilie Savage-Smith, *Lost Maps of the Caliphs: Drawing the World in Eleventh-Century Cairo*. University of Chicago Press 2018. \$55.

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For anyone curious about the eleventh-century *Book of Curiosities*, an extraordinary Egyptian Fatimid manuscript at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, this book is required reading. The manuscript had its debut online in 2007 at the library website and was edited and translated in 2014 (*An Eleventh-Century Egyptian Guide to the Universe: The "Book of Curiosities,"* Leiden: Brill) by the authors. This volume builds on the previous effort in order to "open a window into the worldview of eleventh-century Islamic society and learning, its geographic horizons, and some of its scientific endeavors" (p. 2). The authors acknowledge a range of scholars who have contributed to the analysis of the manuscript (pp. 271-273). There are ten chapters with details on the discovery of the manuscript, its astronomy, astrology, cosmology, and the geographical knowledge in both the maps and the time period. Twenty-four full-color maps and images, most from the manuscript, are included as plates in the middle of the volume.

Had it not been for a visit by Savage-Smith to look at an Arabic manuscript that Christies was preparing for auction in 2000 and the eventual purchase of the manuscript for 400,000 British pounds by the Bodleian, this manuscript would probably have disappeared into a private collection and the wealth of its information buried. The manuscript is not from the time of the author, but appears to have been copied around the year 1200 CE. Later it was discovered that there were later copies of the text, although without the unique maps. One had been in the Bodleian since 1611. Neither the author nor the patron for the text is known, although there are clues that he may have been from the Egyptian Delta (p. 67). It seems from the text itself that the author was a mapmaker, given his comments on techniques and the unique style. There is also the question of which maps may have been added later (see pp. 25-27).

As important as the geographical maps are the details in the text on the cosmos. The first diagram in the manuscript is a representation of the zodiacal sphere, including the 28 lunar mansions with figures of their star numbers and the seven climes of the world in the middle (p. 36). Among the earlier texts quoted in the text are those of the 2nd-century Vettius Valens, the 9th-century al-Farghānī and the Hermetic writings. The emphasis on the latter is said to be due to the esoteric nature of the Ismaili sect at the time. The short appendix on star lore and astrology is a concise introduction to the terminology and theory of astrological discourse at the time of the author. Of particular importance in the manuscript are two chapters devoted to comets (pp. 46-60), a rare occurrence in astronomical texts. The emphasis on astrology and hemerology is found throughout the text. Thus, it is noted on the map of Tinnīs in the Nile Delta that because the city was founded when Pisces was in the ascendant with Venus in exaltation, “the people of the city are full of joy and happiness” (p. 68).



Figure 1 Rectangular World Map from *The Book of Curiosities* (MS Arab c. 90), c. 1200, Egypt. Photo: Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

The bulk of the volume is devoted to the maps and the geographical knowledge, starting with the unique rectangular world map, (**Fig. 1**) which is said to be “unlike any other world map known to us from any place or any time” (p. 75). The rectangular form is not the only oddity; the continents are not in any recognizable shape and it only covers what was assumed to be the inhabited world. About 400 place names are on the map and there is what may be the earliest surviving example of a calibrated scale near the map’s top, although it seems to have no relation to actual localities. Rapoport argues that this world map contains vestiges of the Late-Antique mapmaking of Ptolemy and must have had access to the earlier map (p. 100).

The main map of the Nile River (Plate 11) is a variant of a similar map by the ninth-century al-Khwārazmī (Plate 12), although the former proposes a western tributary of the Nile. It also includes some longitude and latitude figures, which is quite rare. There is a second diagram of the sources of the Nile. The map of the Mediterranean contains many place names and also indicates important inlets. The authors consider this a guide for navigation, due to the inclusion of length and width in miles and the direction indication for the bays. Incorporated here is “the most detailed list of Byzantine anchorages found in any medieval source before the appearance of the Italian portolan charts in the late thirteenth century” (p. 130). A further unique aspect of this map is the use of Greek terminology for wind navigation. The manuscript includes detailed maps of the islands of Sicily (Plate 7) and Cyprus (Plate 10). For Sicily (**fig. 2**) there is a detailed description of Palermo’s walls, gates, suburbs, markets, and water sources (p. 157).

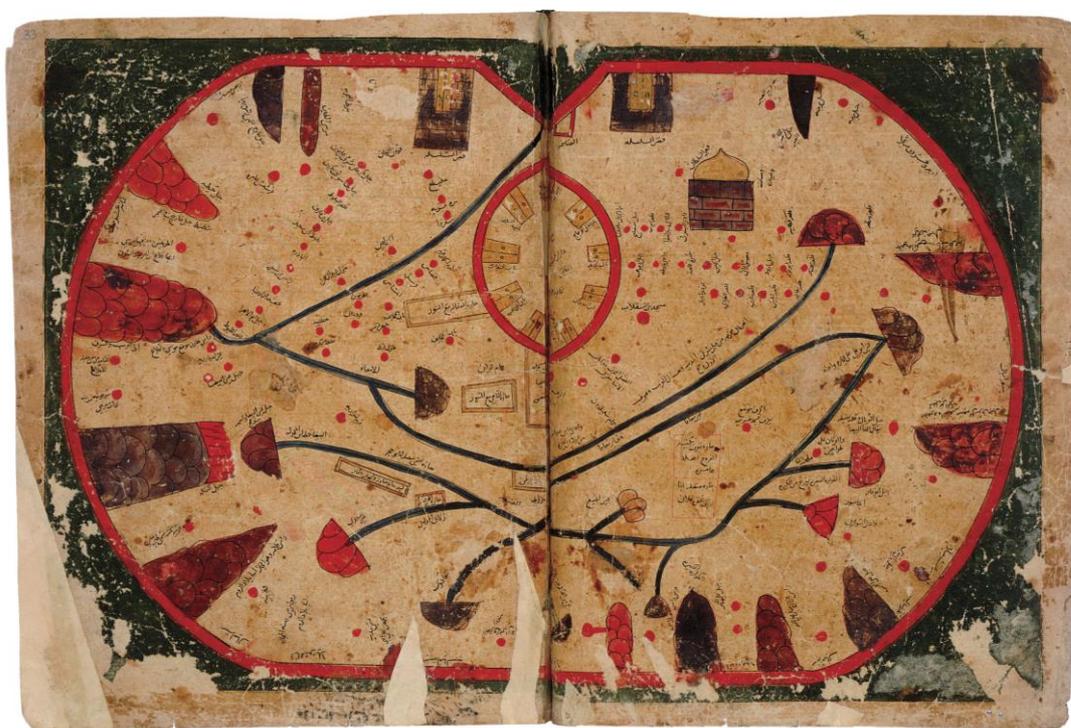


Figure 2 Map of Islands of Sicily, from *The Book of Curiosities* (MS Arab c. 90), c. 1200, Egypt. Photo: Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.



Figure 3 *Wāq Wāq* Tree from *The Book of Curiosities* (MS Arab c. 90), c. 1200, Egypt. Photo: Bodleian Library,

So that the reader will not be confused, the maps in the manuscript are no longer lost, and the caliphs are those of Fatimid Egypt and not Abbasid Iraq. This is an important point since the authors argue that the maps in this text indicate the importance of the Indian Ocean for Fatimid missionaries, including the founding of the Sulayḥid dynasty in Yemen and India. An itinerary given for Sind reflects the influence of Ismaili missionaries there by the late ninth century (p. 208). The map of the Indian Ocean (Plate 6) provides “surprisingly detailed” representation of locations in northern India, East Asia and Central Asia (p. 198). The authors believe that it may also be the first mention on a map of the Philippines. There is also a map of the Indus-Ganges River (Plate 15). The discussion of the overland route from northern India to China is said to be unique, showing a “Musk Road’ through Tibet that overshadowed the more famous Silk Route to the north” (p. 213). Like other texts dealing with the geography of exotic places, the text covers a number of marvels about sea animals and deformed humans. There is even a depiction of the famous *wāq wāq* tree with its human fruit, apparently added later by a reader (p. 16).

(Fig. 3) Some of the marvels noted are from Hellenistic and Byzantine material not quoted elsewhere.

The key port for trade going to and from the East African coast either up the Red Sea or to India was the Yemeni port of Aden, as noted in the text. Oddly, there is no mention of the Red Sea and its major ports in the surviving text. The Indian ocean map has details on the East African coastal harbors, especially for Somalia, with an itinerary that ends in Sofāla, contemporary Mozambique. The authors note that archaeological evidence supports the direct trade of the Fatimids with East African kingdoms.

The last two chapters situate the relevance of the maps in the *Book of Curiosities* with earlier and contemporary geographical knowledge in the Islamic world. A contrast is made between maps of the Balkhī school, most notably those of Ibn Ḥawqal, which focused on land itineraries, with those in the *Book of Curiosities*, which “focus on bodies of water, organized around a clear hierarchy of seas, islands, bays, lakes, and rivers” (p. 232). Thus, almost all the locations noted on the maps in the text are either coastal or islands. As a world map that did not attempt to provide a realistic portrait of geography, it is argued that the orientation of the mapmaker reflected esoteric Ismaili knowledge that divided the world in “islands” for the *da’wa* mission (p. 236).

Overall, this is a well-researched and provocative analysis of what is obviously an important text. I am surprised that there is no mention (p. 4) of the importance of the work of Karen Pinto (*Medieval Islamic Maps*, 2016), also published by the same press. The ultimate aim of this companion volume to their edition and translation is “to offer a reconsideration of the development of astronomy, astrology, geography, and cartography in the first four centuries of Islam” (p. 3). The text may be, as the authors note, “one of the greatest achievements of medieval mapmaking,” (p. 253) but given that it appears to have no influence on later texts this very uniqueness calls into question its value as representing a shared Islamic cosmology outside Fatimid Egypt in that era. As the authors rightly note, there is much new information to work with and add to our knowledge of the diversity of Islamic geography, cartography and cosmology. 🐼