

There and Back Again: Writing Spaces, Mapping Places in the Medieval World

22 June 2012, Queen's College, University of Oxford

'There and Back Again: Writing Spaces, Mapping Places in the Medieval World' brought together scholars from around the world to discuss the representation of geography in medieval literature and the wider cultural milieu. Capitalizing on the growing scholarly interest in medieval geography and perceptions of the world, the conference emphasized the importance of approaching this subject from a multidisciplinary perspective, with the fifteen speakers presenting work in the fields of literature, history, art history and archaeology. Topics spanned the length and breadth of the medieval world, from the marginal islands of the North Atlantic to the spiritual heart of Europe, from exotic eastern lands to the unknown and imagined realms beyond.

Professor Judith Jesch, Director of the Centre for the Study of the Viking Age at the University of Nottingham, opened the conference with her keynote presentation, 'The Threatening Wave: Mapping North British Waters in Old Norse Poetry'. Introducing delegates to the little-known corpus of Old Norse-Icelandic poetry describing sea-voyages around Scotland and the Orkney Islands, she demonstrated the surprisingly detailed knowledge these early Scandinavian sailors had of the North Sea and the complex ways in which geography informed the imagery and figurative language of their poetry.

The rest of the day was divided into four sessions. The first of these, 'Mapping the Fringes', continued Prof Jesch's investigation into the literary depiction of northern Europe. Denis Casey opened this section with an exploration of migration myths in medieval Irish history and literature. Aisling Byrne then examined literary uses of the phrase 'orbis alter', used widely in the medieval period to describe the marginal geographic location of Britain and Ireland. Rosie Bonté drew on literary sources, material culture, genetics and onomastics to evaluate the relationship between the Faroe Islands and their British and Scandinavian neighbours. Finally, Stefan Donecker closed the sessions by discussing the role of the *Cynocephali*, or dog-headed men, in literary descriptions of northern Europe and its conversion to Christianity.

The second session, 'Literary Mapping', examined the ways in which literary texts imagine geographical spaces. Lukas Rösli discussed the striking number of correspondences between Icelandic *mappae mundi* and Old Norse mythological texts. Victoria Blud examined the depiction and function of imaginary places in *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. David Gary Shaw concluded the session by arguing that the travel writings of William Worcester, and particularly his *Itineraries*, represent a striking development in the English geographical imagination and mark a transition between medieval and the early modern conceptions of space.

The third session, 'Visual and Material Mapping', focused on medieval cartographic depictions of the world as well as the relationship between mapping and archaeology. Emily Goetsch argued that the *mappae mundi* found in illuminated manuscripts of the Beatus Commentary of northern Spain may be read as a response to the threat of Muslim invasion felt by Christian communities in the region. Dale Kedwards explored the relationship between European and Icelandic cartography, taking as a case-study a trio of maps in the late thirteenth-century Icelandic manuscript, AM 736 I 4^{to}. Andrew Reynolds and Stuart Brookes contributed an archaeological perspective, discussing how archaeologists are able to reconstruct Anglo-Saxon roads and how such studies inform our understanding of Anglo-Saxon travel.

The fourth session, 'Spiritual Mapping', examined the use of geography and travel in medieval religious practice. Anne Bailey spoke about the depiction of space in pilgrimage narratives, and in particular the relationship between nature and sin in hagiographers' use of such 'wild' places as forests, rivers and fields. Michael Lewis approached the topic of pilgrimage from the angle of material culture, looking at the distribution of pilgrimage badges in England and Wales as recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme. Conrad Rudolph concluded the day with a discussion of Hugh of Saint Victor's *Mystic Ark*, an image which maps biblical and human time onto a pictorial representation of the world. The map of *The Mystic Ark* is no longer extant, but evidence for it survives in a forty-two page description which Rudolph has used to create a stunning digital reconstruction.

Despite the fact that many parts of the globe were unknown before the early modern era, in many ways the medieval European world was as large as it is today. Travelling was a difficult and lengthy process, means of communication were more limited and the everyday lives of most people were not played out across the large distances to which we have become accustomed. Yet as this conference demonstrated, medieval people were physically and mentally engaged with the world they inhabited and the cultures and topographies that lay beyond their own sphere, including the imagined spaces beyond the bounds of medieval European knowledge and experience. For this reason perhaps the conference theme clearly spoke to a wide variety of current research projects and we were pleased that forty-six delegates were able to attend. We received very warm feedback and several requests for a second conference on a similar theme to be held next year. We are now preparing a collection of essays arising from the conference for publication.

Conference Programme

8:45-9:15 Registration

9:15-10:15 Prof Judith Jesch, University of Nottingham - The Threatening Wave: Mapping North British Waters in Old Norse Poetry (Chair: Dr Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough)

10:15-10:30 Break

10:20-12:30 Session 1: 'Mapping the Fringes' (Chair: Dr Carlyne Larrington)

Dr Denis Casey, University of Cambridge - *The Migration of Ciarraige*: Migration Myths in Medieval Irish Literature

Dr Aisling Byrne, University of Oxford - The North Atlantic 'Orbis Alter'

Ms Rosie Bonté, University of Cambridge - Kindred Colonies: Exploring Cultural Identity in Iceland and the Faroe Islands

Dr Stefan Donecker, University of Konstanz - 'Die hundes haupt do trügen': The *Cynocephali* of the North in the Medieval Imagination

12:30-1:15 Lunch

1:15-2:45 Session 2: 'Literary Mapping' (Chair: Dr Denis Casey)

Mr Lukas Rösli, University of Zurich - Space in Old Norse Mythology: How do the Presented Spatial Situations in the Prologue and Gylfaginning of the *Prose Edda* Relate to Contemporary Medieval Maps?

Dr Victoria Blud, King's College London - Imagining Lost Places in *Mandeville's Travels*

Prof David Gary Shaw, Wesleyan University - William Worcester: Mapping England from the Road (or Travelling with a Scholar's Pace)

2:45-3:00 Break

3:00-4:30 Session 3, 'Visual and Material Mapping' (Chair: Dr Stefan Donecker)

Ms Emily Goetsch, University of Edinburgh - The Tenth-Century Beatus *Mappaemundi*: Visual Promoters of a Dominant Faith and Dutiful Action

Mr Dale Kedwards, University of York - Writing Geography in Medieval Icelandic Manuscripts: The Case of AM 736 I 4to

Prof Andrew Reynolds and Dr Stuart Brookes, University College London - Archaeologies of Anglo-Saxon Roads

4:30-4:45 Break

4:45-6:15 Session 4: 'Spiritual Mapping' (Chair: Dr Erin Goeres)

Dr Anne E Bailey, University of Oxford - The Geography of Pilgrimage in Twelfth-Century Miracle Narratives

Dr Michael Lewis, British Museum - Pilgrims' Badges and Some New Insights on their Spatial Distribution

Prof Conrad Rudolph, University of California - 'In its Extraordinary Arrangement': Hugh of Saint Victor, Exegesis and the World Map of *The Mystic Ark*

7:30 Conference Dinner