Toward a Global Middle Ages
ENCOUNTERING THE WORLD
THROUGH ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS

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THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM  LOS ANGELES
6 Case Study

Mapping Global Middle Ages

In order to understand what a "global Middle Ages" might be, we need to define "global" in and relation to the "Middle Ages." To do so, I turn to medieval (Christian) maps. Their construction of the world—like most, maybe all others—was founded on inclusion and exclusion. In seeking to construct a global Middle Ages, the authors in this volume are therefore working not only against scholarly traditions of periodization but also against indigenous medieval ideas, against autochthonous ideologies. "Global Middle Ages" is a term that is gaining increasing currency as part of a welcome and much-overdue effort to acknowledge in teaching and research that the Middle Ages can encompass more geography than present-day Europe, more religions than Latin and Byzantine Christianity, and more humanity than whiteness. But what this term might mean is dependent on the lens we bring to the period, the geography, the people, and the material we study.

The map on pages 44-45, like all maps, was designed in a time and place. As the cartographic theorist Denis Wood reminds us, "There is nothing natural about [any] map. It is a cultural artifact, an accumulation of choices made among choices every one of which reveals a value." This map is the Robinson Projection Map, designed in 1963 for Rand McNally, which still uses it. The National Geographic Society, by contrast, favors an older, less overtly distorted projection. These choices matter, since we understand our vast globe not through direct observation—even the most well-traveled individuals only see infinitesimally thin ribbons and minuscule dots on the globe's surface—but through the maps by which we reduce and distort it. The maps we design determine what stories we tell about the world and our place therein. To know what global Middle Ages we are talking about, we have to think about the maps that construct that world. As Jeremy Black says, "The map is constitutive of a certain form of reality, not merely a representation of it."^{2}

Modern maps would be alien to medieval peoples. Their globe was quite different from ours. The most common medieval image of the globe is the T-O map (fig. 6.1). It is easy to dismiss these. They in no way convey to the world as we know it. However, they are thick with information and ideology. This English example—from Isidore's Etymologies, a text describing a divine plan behind the apparent chaos of our world—is a suitable subject for investigation.

This map contains few elements. In total, seven lines, three words (sixteen letters), six punctuation marks (fifteen dots), two accent marks, and one pinprick. Other medieval maps contain thousands of elements, but this little T-O speaks volumes about a medieval worldview. A quick orientation: three landmasses attested in the Bible and described in Isidore's text. East is on top, owing to the value Christians placed on Asia as the site of both Terrestrial Paradise and of the events of the Bible. The vertical Mediterranean divides Europe and Africa. The rivers are likewise divisionary: the Nile divides Africa from Asia; and the Tanais, or Don, divides Europe from Asia. The midpoint of the map is a pinprick from the mapmaker's compass. The notion that God drew the circle of the world with a compass is an Anglo-Saxon innovation, and reminds us that the image of God above many medieval maps is as much a human construct as the maps he sits atop. The pinprick might imply the holy perfection of the city of Jerusalem, seen as the spiritual and literal center of the world, rooted in passages from Psalms and Ezekiel, and interpreted by Jerome and others. That it is in the middle of the confluence of three bodies of water should not trouble us, as a more complex T-O map shows (fig. 6.2). This manuscript is a computus with several texts, charts, diagrams, and maps. There, Jerusalem again stands in the waters at the center, marked with a cross in a circle and labeled in majuscule letters, "HIERUSALEM." This location is a spiritual idea, granted geographic force through the power of the map.

6.2. T-O map, Cambridgeshire, Thorney Abbey, England, early twelfth century, Oxford, St. John’s College, MS 17, fol. 6r
The smooth geometry of the lines of the T-O map makes plain that this is conceptual mapmaking. Nobody believed these landmasses and waters were bounded by straight edges, any more than we believe the Mississippi is blue, as it appears on our maps. The three circular rings around the land are similarly abstract. The first delineates the boundary between land and water. From there to the next circle is the great ocean wrapped around the ecumene, the inhabitable world. What, then, is bound by the final circle? Everything else. A number of diagrams of the celestial spheres survive, often with zonal maps at their center. These set the Earth in the center of a series of concentric spheres containing water, air, fire, the moon, the sun and planets, the stars, and, finally, the "prime mover," that is, God. As on these diagrams, the entire T-O map describes the entire geocentric universe. That is, a global Middle Ages.

So: Jerusalem at the center, the three landmasses and two interior bodies of water, the ocean, and the rest of the universe. The texts—"Asia," "Europa," "Africa"—seem straightforwardly descriptive, but the punctuation is most interesting. Those puncti are oddly used. The two dots before each word would "mark either a full or a medial pause," and therefore suggest that there was text before each, some previous clause. The three at the end should signal an even more complete stop. This punctuation suggests that each of these words acts as a complete sentence, a complete thought, embedded within a larger discourse. And, of course, they are. They contain within them all a reader knows about each region.

This is a map constructing a divided world, a global Middle Ages riven by crisp boundaries. Such a view of the world might appear, to those of us in medieval studies, as in the wider world, all too familiar in our present moment. The old truce that we seemed to have reached in recent decades, where we all at least paid lip service to notions of diversity, equity, and access, has crumbled, and left many of us reeling. The "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 12, 2017, was a signal moment in American culture, when the marchers' tragicomic tiki torches burned the truce to ashes. The marchers were, in essence, attempting to reinscribe the T-O map's clear, straight black lines, eroded over time, that separate Europe from Asia and Africa. The fascist marchers in Charlottesville and those who sympathize with them are participating in one of the oldest of human impulses, to define themselves through the exclusion of others, to puff themselves up by attempting to stomp others down, to raise their sense of self-worth through the insult of, denunciation of, and outright assault on and murder of other individuals and groups. Reduced to its barest essence, their message is: groups of people should be separate from one another.

Indeed, the lines, the words, and the dots on the map all separate elements from one another. What hope, then, for a more positive medieval vision of a united globe? This volume contains essays that all suggest connection, communication, collaboration, and contact. On the map, there is one way to find this: the great ocean bounds and binds it all together, and the outer circle reminds us that our space is finite. We may divide ourselves from one another constantly, building borders, boundaries, and walls, but we cannot get away from one another. There are only so many places to go, this little map reminds us. We had better get used to one another.

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1 D. Wood 2010, 102.
4 Reimer 2015.
5 For more on the event and its connection to medieval studies and monstrous, see Mittman and Hensel 2018. See also P. Starkevant 2017, as well as many other posts in this excellent series.