

During the Middle Ages, in fact, there was no word for “map,” either in the everyday languages of Europe or in Latin—evidence of how different the medieval conception of geography was from our own. The *mappae mundi* were intended more to diagram history and anthropology, myth and scripture, dreams and nightmares, than to provide geometrically precise representations of the physical world. Not surprisingly, they can look bizarre to modern eyes.

The *mappa mundi* that spoke of Bland was a reproduction of a brightly colored illustration found in a thirteenth-century book of psalms. The original, housed in the British Library and widely known as the Psalter Map, is less than six inches high and four inches wide—just the right size for a napkin of the world—but a much larger version of it is thought to have hung in the residence of the English king Henry III. At the exact middle of the map, like a bull’s-eye on a dart board, is Jerusalem, the “navel of the world” in Christian teaching: “Thus saith the Lord God; This is Jerusalem: I have set it in the midst of the nation and countries that are round about her” (Ezekiel 5:5). From Jerusalem extends the known world—Europe, Africa, and Asia (with the last on top because the map is oriented to the east). The unknown world begins at the margins.

In these borderlands lie the spots that medieval Europeans had never actually seen but wanted to exist, the landmarks of their fondest hopes and darkest fears. At the top edge of the Psalter Map, for example, is the Garden of Eden, complete with the images of Adam and Eve standing by the Tree of Knowledge. On the northeastern border are the nations of Gog and

Magog, from which the dreaded servants of the Antichrist were expected to overrun Christendom on the Judgment Day. (Gog and Magog are surrounded on the map by a huge wall, which, according to legend, was built by Alexander the Great to keep those nations’ flesh-eating citizens at bay.) And on the map’s southernmost margins, standing side by side like criminals in a police lineup, are representatives of the various monstrous races: the Artibatirae, who walk on all fours; the Cynocephali, who have the heads of dogs; the Epiphagi, whose eyes are on their shoulders; the Maritimi, who have four eyes; the Sciopods, who have one giant foot; the Troglodytes, who live in caves. In the coming centuries the borders of the world would expand, and such monsters would move steadily farther from the civilized center, becoming extinct only when their natural habitat, terra incognita, finally ceased to exist.

In some very real ways, however, they are with us still, those monsters. We’ve added four new continents to our maps since the Middle Ages, subtracted Gog, Magog, and the Earthly Paradise, firmed up our ideas about sphericity, gravity, and heliocentricity. Yet, as I stared at the Psalter Map that day, I was struck not by its geographical failings but by its psychological accuracy. “Like the earth of a hundred years ago, our mind still has its darkest Africas, its unmapped Borneos and Amazonian basins,” wrote Aldous Huxley, author of *Brave New World*, in his 1956 book, *Heaven and Hell*. Huxley called these regions “the antipodes of the mind”—a reference to a mythical landmass found on the southern edges of many *mappae mundi* (though, technically, not on the Psalter Map). Just as the geographical an-



12th Century Psalter Map

Arader out of the ABAA—but in a more profound way he not only forced his way into their refined little world but took it over. It's no wonder they regard him with contempt.

Arader seems well aware of this. I once asked him: "Has map collecting changed much since you began?"

"Yeah. You've got to be richer," he said. "Stuff has gone up faster than inflation. So a little librarian in Urbana, Illinois, who ten years ago was buying twenty maps with his twenty-thousand-dollar-per-year budget, is now buying one map."

True enough. But for librarians in particular that's not the worst thing about rising prices. The worst thing about rising prices is that they have transformed libraries into gold mines, books into illicit booty, and patrons into crooks. If the librarians hate Arader, it's not because he's made it harder for them to buy books but because they're having one hell of a time holding on to the ones already on their shelves.



DRAMATIC EXAMPLE OF THE WAY IN WHICH OLD MAPS are becoming big business was about to play out at Sotheby's. Lot 599 was an edition of the ancient scholar Ptolemy's famous map book, *Geographia* (also known as *Cosmographia*), printed in Ulm in 1482. If you wanted to buy this volume in 1884, it would have set you back \$85. It went for \$350 in 1901, \$3,000 in 1933, \$5,000 in 1950, \$28,000 in 1965, and \$42,500 in 1984. Today, the catalog listed an estimated price range of between \$200,000 and \$300,000.

"On the other hand, it is an extraordinarily fine copy, it's in a

contemporary binding, and it has already received a great deal of interest," Selby Kiffer, a Sotheby's official, had told me a few days earlier. "One never knows what will happen at an auction, but I do think that this is a case where competitive bidding could push price beyond estimate range."

From the start, it was clear that Kiffer's hunch was right. The bidding began at \$100,000 but quickly moved past \$150,000, then \$200,000, then \$250,000. A sense of urgency filled the gallery, as bids came in quick succession, from the floor and over the phone.

For once not even Graham Arader was willing to keep pace with the competition. He dropped out around \$300,000.

The bidding continued to rise . . .

It was hardly the first time buyers had clamored to get their hands on a copy of *Geographia*. The work, in fact, holds a central place in the history of collecting, as well as the history of cartography. Its author, Claudius Ptolemy, was one of the ancient world's most intriguing and shadowy figures. Little is known about his life, other than that he lived in Alexandria during the second century A.D., was of Greek descent and was a Roman citizen. Nonetheless, he left behind a brilliant and wide-ranging body of work about astronomy, optics, mathematics, music, and geography. *Geographia*—a kind of empirical how-to guide for map drawing—is considered the high-water mark of ancient earth knowledge. Ptolemy systematized cartography by insisting that maps be drawn to scale and that they be oriented to the north. He was one of the first to offer a projection by which a spherical earth could be rendered on a flat surface.

He also abandoned the Homeric conception that the known world (Europe, Asia, and Africa) was surrounded by an uninhabitable ocean. This left open the theoretical possibility of further discoveries. "More than any one of the ancients," concluded the map historian Lloyd A. Brown, "Claudius Ptolemy succeeded in establishing the elements and form of scientific cartography."

But *Geographia* might not have been remembered that way if not for the efforts of some passionate collectors more than a thousand years later. It might not have been remembered at all. Like many great works of antiquity, *Geographia* simply disappeared from the European consciousness after the fall of Rome. Its concepts, meanwhile, were kept alive by Arab geographers, who translated Ptolemy's cartographic masterpiece around the ninth century and incorporated its concepts into their own maps. Then, in the thirteenth century, a Byzantine scholar and monk named Maximus Planudes found a long-forgotten copy of the work. According to Planudes' account of the discovery, the manuscript was not accompanied by maps. (Indeed, modern scholars doubt whether Ptolemy ever included maps with the work.) Nonetheless, Planudes set about drafting a series of maps designed to portray the world as Ptolemy would have drawn it himself. This was possible because Ptolemy had made the effort to include the geographical coordinates of eight thousand places throughout the world, so that someone in another place—even another century—could create maps on the basis of the text alone. I like to imagine Planudes in his little chamber, plotting coordinate after painstaking coordinate, then

at last stepping back from his work, the whole world suddenly appearing before his eyes.

. . . \$325,000.

\$350,000.

\$375,000.

\$400,000 . . .

Planudes was an omnivorous collector of ancient manuscripts, who could often be found scouring the bazaars of Constantinople for the works of great classical writers. In addition to translating many works from Latin into Greek, he put together a number of anthologies of lasting importance, including a compilation of Greek prose and poetry, a volume of Aesop's fables, and the marvelously titled *Very Useful Collection Gathered from Various Books*. In his determined pursuit of classical texts, Planudes was a spiritual and intellectual forerunner of the great scholar-collectors of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, who, through "grinding persistence . . . in the recovery, collation, criticism, and publication of texts," transformed "the study of the ancient world into a cultural force," wrote the historian John Hale in *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance*. Not the least of these men was the Italian poet Petrarch, famous for his collection of—and obsession with—ancient texts. "Please, if you love me," Petrarch wrote to a friend sometime around the year 1346, "find people who are educated and trustworthy and set them to scour Tuscany, to turn out the book-cases of the monks and all the other scholars, and see if anything comes to light which will serve to quench—or, shall I say, increase—my thirst."

... \$425,000.

\$450,000.

\$475,000.

\$500,000 . . .

Petrarch confessed that his urge to obtain books was an “insatiable desire which I so far have been quite unable to control.” Such compulsions would soon be the norm, as the Renaissance gave rise to an unprecedented culture of collecting. No longer did people seek out art and artifacts solely for their devotional purposes but for their intellectual, historical, scientific, aesthetic, nostalgic, or commercial significance. This collecting ethos—as exemplified by the “cabinets of curiosities” placed prominently in homes of the wealthy—began with an interest in ancient books, gems, coins, vases, and sculpture, then grew to encompass contemporary paintings, clocks, and scientific instruments, and, finally, expanded into what Hale described as “rare, valuable, or merely strange objects from the natural world,” from shells and fossils to stuffed toucans and mummified Egyptian cats.

... \$525,000.

\$550,000.

\$575,000.

\$600,000 . . .

Geographia was at the center of this collecting craze. Around 1400 a copy of the text was brought from Constantinople to Florence, where, translated from Greek into Latin, it “caused an immediate and enormous stir,” wrote Thomas Goldstein in *Dawn of Modern Science*. Hand-copied, hand-illustrated versions

quickly began to circulate in Western Europe, usually with maps based on those of Planudes. As Lisa Jardine observed in *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance*:

Apart from the extravagant Bibles, the ancient scientist and cartographer Ptolemy’s *Geography*, complete with coloured and illuminated maps of the known world, took pride of place in a surprisingly large number of great men’s libraries. The *Geography*, too, was an extremely expensive purchase, since some copies contained as many as sixty individual maps, each of which had to be accurately drawn and locations precisely marked before the delicate business of colouring and decorating could even be begun.

The first printed edition of *Geographia* appeared (without maps) in 1475, just two decades after the publication of Gutenberg’s Bible, and the same year that presses were being set up for the first time in places like Holland and England. Numerous illustrated editions soon followed, making *Geographia* one of history’s earliest bestsellers. The popular 1482 Ulm edition—the one on sale today at Sotheby’s—was the first to be printed outside of Italy and helped spur the widespread dissemination of the book, with profound consequences. Wrote the historian Daniel J. Boorstin:

The revival of Ptolemy . . . would mean the awakening, or the reawakening, of the empirical spirit. Now men

would use their experience to measure the whole earth, to mark off the known from the unknown, and to designate newfound places for return. The rediscovery of Ptolemy was a signal event in the revival of learning that marked the Renaissance, a prologue to the modern world.

Spain's King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella ordered their copy of *Geographia* from a Valencian bookseller. The monarchs' interest stemmed from their discussions with an ambitious Italian sailor who claimed he could reach the spice-rich Indies by heading west instead of east. Christopher Columbus had, in part, based these ideas on what would later prove to be two of Ptolemy's most famous mistakes: (1) a gross underestimate of the Earth's circumference, and (2) a gross overestimate of the eastward reach of Asia. In 1492, after much procrastination and debate, the Spanish sovereigns commissioned Columbus to sail with three caravels "toward the regions of India." He never reached his destination.

. . . \$625,000.

\$650,000.

\$675,000.

\$700,000 . . .

The Renaissance cult of acquisition had a dark side as well. Compulsive collecting could sometimes degenerate into theft—and some of the great writers and scholars of the age apparently succumbed to this urge. Giovanni Boccaccio, author of the *Decameron* and a friend of Petrarch, is thought to have pil-

laged a monastic library in his quest to obtain a previously undiscovered piece of classical literature. Poggio Bracciolini, one of the most famous bibliophiles of his time, justified his apparent theft from another monastic library by asserting that the books "were not housed according to their worth, but were lying in a most foul and obscure dungeon . . . a place into which condemned criminals would hardly have been thrust." Needless to say, those in charge of such collections had a different view—as expressed by an inscription at the library of the San Pedro monastery in Barcelona:

For him that steals, or borrows and returns not, a book from its owner, let it change into a serpent in his hand and rend him. Let him be struck with palsy, and all his members blasted. Let him languish in pain crying aloud for mercy, and let there be no surcease to his agony till he sing in dissolution. Let bookworms gnaw at his entrails in token of the Worm that dieth not. And when at last he goes to his final punishment, let the flames of Hell consume him for ever.

. . . \$725,000.

\$750,000.

\$775,000.

\$800,000 . . .

The month before the Sotheby's sale, another version of *Geographia* was to have gone on the auction block at Christie's in London. This was an even rarer edition, published in Bologna

in 1477 and considered the first-ever printed atlas. Only a few copies survive, meaning the auction would have been an extraordinary event—if it had happened. But it did not happen. It was canceled at the last minute, when Christie's conceded the volume had been stolen nearly a year earlier from France's National Library. That disappearance itself had a bizarre twist: for about three months library officials had simply failed to notice that one of the most important volumes in history was gone. Yet after the theft was discovered in November 1997, it had been widely publicized. It is hard to imagine that Christie's officials did not know about it. Nonetheless, they had apparently accepted at face value the false ownership papers of a Frenchman who brought them the book. According to press reports, the sale had not been canceled until French authorities intervened.

Reading about this debacle a few weeks before the New York auction, I had naturally wondered about the provenance of the Sotheby's *Geographia*. I checked the auction catalog. The most recent owner it listed was a man named Georg Joachim Scherer. He had possessed the book in 1713.

I asked Selby Kiffer of Sotheby's whether his firm would provide me with information about the current owner. No luck. "The confidentiality of both our purchasers and our consignors is something we take seriously," he insisted.

Kiffer, however, was reassuring: "Knowing the consignor of this book as I do, and knowing the history of his family's collecting, there's certainly no doubt in my mind that it's a privately owned copy."

In other words, I would have to take his word for it. I had ab-

solutely no reason to doubt him. But I would have had no reason to doubt Christie's, either.

. . . \$825,000

\$850,000.

\$875,000.

\$900,000 . . .

The auctioneer was speaking slowly now, leaving dramatic pauses to underscore the immensity of the bids. His voice was calibrated and quiet; it was the only sound in the room. The competition had come down to two phone bidders, and all eyes were on their respective representatives, seated on each side of the podium.

. . . \$925,000.

\$950,000.

\$975,000.

\$1,000,000.

\$1,050,000.

\$1,100,000.

\$1,150,000.

The auctioneer waited, but no new offer came. At last he slammed down his hammer. *Sold*. There was a pause, and then those in the gallery began to applaud, slowly at first and then with real enthusiasm. They had just witnessed history. Once mandatory fees were added, the sale would come to \$1,267,500—a world record for an atlas printed on paper. (In 1990, a scarce copy of the 1482 Ptolemy—printed on an animal-skin parchment known as vellum—was sold for \$1,925,000.)

If Arader was impressed, he didn't show it. I asked him if he