INTRODUCTION:
HISTORY’S OTHER EYE

Chronology and Geography are the two eyes of History.
Samuel Purchas, Pilgrimage, 2nd edn, p. 613

Seven years after Alaric’s sack of Rome in 410, and some five hundred miles away on the North African coast, the Spanish priest Orosius completed his Historiarum adversus paganos libri septem. At the very start of his piece, immediately after a brief declaration of the unprecedented chronological scope of his Historia, Orosius treated his audience to a long geographical passage, in a bold declaration of the spatial concerns of his ambitious work. Rattling through his chapter at some pace, the historian created nothing less than a succinct portrait of the fifth-century world, from India in the east to the Spanish provinces in the west, from the headwaters of the Nile in interior Africa to the mysterious Arctic island of Thule. The chapter is a central one within Orosius’ work, and within the evolution of Latin historiography. Proudly situated at the very start of the Historia, the description of the world not only declared Orosius’ own interests in the interaction of geographical and historical themes, it set the standard for Christian historical writing of the next half-millennium. Orosius’ introduction demonstrated the extent to which Christian historians could express themselves and make sense of their world, not only through reference to the past, but through their interpretation of the physical world.

Orosius was not the first historian to grant geography so prominent a position within his historical narrative. Some five hundred years before the Spanish presbyter, Sallust had included a detailed description of Numidia at an early stage of his Bellum Jugurthinum, ostensibly to provide the setting for the military narrative that followed. Famously, Julius Caesar opened his own De bello Gallico with a succinct survey of Gaul,

1 Sallust, Bell. Jug. 1.17.
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to reflect and accentuate the magnitude of his conquests.² In the second century, the Alexandrian historian Appian added a more detailed and comprehensive description of the Roman Empire in its entirety as an introduction to his ambitious *Historia Romana.*³ Within the vast landscape of classical historical writing, however, Sallust, Caesar and Appian stood alone as isolated champions of the geographical introduction. In the majority of classical histories, from Herodotus to Ammianus Marcellinus, geographical or ethnographic passages were scattered throughout the text, in order to illuminate individual sections, or to add points of parenthetical interest.⁴ The *discursus* certainly had an important role to fill within historical writing, but the great prominence granted to geography by Appian and the two Latin historians was not uniformly adopted within the classical world.

There can be little doubt that it was the *Historia* of Orosius which transformed the geographical introduction from an occasional literary tool to a central feature of Christian narrative history. The historians of the early medieval period looked at the world around them through Orosian-tinted spectacles. Jordanes, who wrote in Constantinople in the mid-sixth century, provided his *De origine actibusque Getarum,* or *Getica,* with a carefully plotted description of the Scandinavian origins of his eponymous group. Seventy years later, Isidore of Seville included an account of the Iberian peninsula as a preface to the longer recension of his *History of the Goths, Vandals and Sueves,* and a century after Isidore, the Venerable Bede chose to open his *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* with a justly famous description of the British Isles. These compositions comprised some of the most influential and widely read histories of the early medieval period, among modern students as well as among contemporaries. It is these texts, and the uses to which geography was put in each, that the present study is intended to examine.

These prologues vary quite dramatically in length and in content, but all display an understanding of the importance of geography to an appropriate grasp of history. Orosius’ rather terse description of the whole of the known world contrasts sharply with the short encomium of the British Isles composed by Gildas as a preface to his polemical *De excidio Britanniae* in the late fifth century. Similarly, Jordanes’ rather peculiar perambulation of the Oceanic islands and his meandering description of the migration route of the Goths from the frozen north to the civilized Mediterranean bears little superficial resemblance to Isidore’s succinct portrait of Gothic Spain. In many ways, indeed, the geographical prefaces

² Caesar, BG 1.1–2. ³ Appian, Hist. Pref. 1–5. ⁴ Cf. Tacitus, Annals iv.30 on the importance of geographical digression to historical narrative.
are as varied as the historical works in which they appear, and often
display their idiosyncratic authors at their finest. Gildas’ evocation of a
bucolic Britain, for example, displays a dexterity of scriptural allusion that
is quite breathtaking in its sophistication, and Bede’s description of the
instant death of snakes upon arrival in Ireland is one of the most famous
images within his *Historia Ecclesiastica*.

The focal position afforded geographical themes within early Christian
historiography is striking, and yet has prompted very little comment from
modern scholars. Several studies have focused upon prefaces of this kind
in isolation, but no coherent survey has ever attempted to trace the
evolution of this peculiar historiographical structure, or to examine the
appeal of such a methodology to the medieval writer.\(^5\) The need for such
an investigation becomes all the more apparent when it is considered that
these long prefaces formed the bedrock of geographical writing during
the early medieval period. Although certain dedicated geographical com-
positions are extant from between the fifth and the eighth centuries, and
textual attestations elsewhere allow the historian to state with confidence
that other productions of the kind existed, historical works indisputably
supplied the most widely read descriptions of the physical world during
the period.\(^6\) Later geographers extensively cited Orosius in particular as an
authority on the physical world. Jordanes, too, provided a definitive
source on Scandinavian geography, and Bede’s description of England
remained inviolate even into the thirteenth century. In many ways, the
study of these introductions encompasses a survey not only of early
medieval historiographical practice, but also of geographical thought in
the same period.

Paradoxically, the very success of Orosius’ initiative in including a
geographical introduction to his historical narrative is partially responsible
for modern neglect of his innovative structuring. Were it not for the
frequency with which modern historical works employ similar introduc-
tions, it seems likely that the remarkably widespread adoption of the
technique in late Antiquity would have earned more comment. In the
wake of Orosius and his immediate successors, the inclusion of long
prefatory spatial descriptions became almost indispensable to Latin histor-
ical writing. Paul the Deacon’s eighth-century *Historia Langobardorum,* for

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\(^5\) These studies include Janvier (1982) on Orosius, Higham (1991) on Gildas, Rodrı́guez Alonso (1975), pp. 113–22 on Isidore and Kendall (1979) and Speed (1992) on Bede. I deviate substantially from the views of each of these writers in the study that follows.

\(^6\) On early medieval geographical writing in general, see the excellent survey of Lozovsky (2000), and her treatment of the historians at pp. 66–101. Compare Kimble (1938), pp. 19–29 and see also Staab (1979) on the identification of lost sixth-century geographers from fragmentary survivals in later works.
example, was ornamented with a long geographical opening, which alludes clearly to the fifth-century work of Orosius. The *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus, the *Historia regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and the *Historia Anglorum* of Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, to cite three further examples, all introduce their historical sections with a long discussion of the physical scope of their enquiry. Nor were these historians self-conscious about their deference to literary precedent in their exploitation of the geographical introduction. Paul and Saxo Grammaticus both made their debts to Orosius’ *Historia* clear through distinct allusion within their opening chapters: a pattern of deference previously followed by Gildas, Jordanes and Isidore of Seville. Later British historians, similarly, displayed their influences proudly through candid emulation of Bede’s British geography.

The geographical introduction remains a surprisingly common tool of contemporary narrative history. While it would be stretching the point to suggest that Orosius exerted a direct influence over western historical writing into the modern period, the very popularity of this structure among more recent writers has done much to obscure the originality of this approach within the fifth century. Edward Gibbon opened his magisterial survey of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* with a long account of the physical scope of Roman authority under the Antonines. Trevelyan’s *England under Queen Anne* is introduced by a similar account of the landscape of seventeenth-century Britain, taken largely from the pages of Daniel Defoe’s *Tour around Britain*. Similarly, the great Histoire de France, assembled by Ernest Lavisse in the early years of the twentieth century, included a substantial description of the hexagon at its outset. Indeed, the work has as its opening book the Tableau de la géographie de la France, constructed by Paul Vidal de la Blache for precisely this purpose, which was to prove hugely influential in the development of French historical and geographical thought.

The practice survives within contemporary historical writing. Histories of individual regions, in particular, have frequently taken as their starting point a short geographical overview, in order to establish the spatial parameters of the area under consideration. To turn briefly to the bookshelf in order to illustrate the point, and to take from it monographs virtually at random, Geoffrey Parker’s *The Dutch Revolt*, Alan Bowman’s *Egypt after the

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7. Paul, HL I.1–6 and see also the description of Italy at II.14–24.
11. Vidal de la Blache (1903).
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Pharaohs and Chris Wickham’s Early Medieval Italy might be taken as representative of the considerable canon of regional histories to be introduced in this way. Implicit within each of these chapters is the assumption that a primary purpose of geography is to locate and delineate the historical narrative proper, rather than to contribute to it in a meaningful sense. Indeed, the geographical introduction to R. G. Collingwood’s Roman Britain is explicitly entitled ‘The Stage of History’. The reader is reminded here of the perpetual labours of Tristram Shandy’s Uncle Toby on the bowling green of Shandy Hall. Anxious to elucidate for his indifferent audience his accounts of the siege of Namur, and to make sense of his own confused memories, Uncle Toby perpetually crafts and re-crafts scale models of the city’s fortifications. Through his ‘hobby-horse’, the veteran exemplifies the assumption that spatial context is a necessary precursor to clear historical explanation.

As the Uncle Toby analogy reminds us, however, historians can frequently be quite shameless in the exploitation of literary references in order to lend their works a certain gravitas. Indeed, a second important function of the geographical introduction is as a literary construct. The modern historians discussed, exceptional writers all, chose to locate their narratives, not merely through the use of maps, but through written geographical description, with all of the opportunities for rhetorical embellishment that this affords. At times, these literary pretensions are easy enough to identify. Trevelyan’s use of Defoe in order to provide a historical geography of seventeenth-century England displays the union of geographical and literary considerations clearly enough. Alan Bowman’s introduction exploits Herodotus and Ammianus Marcellinus for similar reasons, and Parker’s presentation of the Low Countries in 1549 through the eyes of the future Philip II employs obvious literary conventions. Again, however, it is Collingwood who provides the most striking, and classical, illustration of this point. Although the historian goes on to discuss the geology and ecology of Britain, and indeed creates a memorable image of the isles in so doing, his introduction begins with an obvious, and surely deliberate, pastiche of the opening geography of the Gallic War.

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13 Collingwood (1936), p. 1; compare Wickham (1981), p. 9, who justifies a description of the Italian landscape at the outset of his work as ‘a stage and a backcloth to what follows’.
14 Laurence Sterne, Tristram Shandy 1.25–1.6.
15 It might be noted here that Parker, Bowman and Wickham all augment their written geographical passages with maps.
16 Collingwood (1939), p. 1: ‘The country of Britain is divided by nature into two parts, each with a character of its own, a complement and a contrast to that of the other’; compare Caesar, BG 1.1: Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres . . . Hi omnes lingua, institutes, legibus inter se different.
These trends within modern historical writing have greatly influenced the way in which the geographical introductions to fifth-, sixth- and seventh-century histories have been read. Almost without exception, modern analyses of the chapters have assumed that the passages were intended either as a straightforward declaration of the spatial stage upon which the following historical narrative was to be set, or as the opportunity for some judicious literary display on the part of the author.\textsuperscript{17} Hence, criticism of the passages has manifested itself most forcefully through the \textit{Quellenforschung} approaches of the late nineteenth-century philologists. Each of the passages has been subject to minute scrutiny, in the hope of teasing out literary allusions, with the underlying assumption that such echoes were an end in themselves, and did not fit part of a wider rhetorical programme.\textsuperscript{18} This is not to denigrate the painstaking work that has been devoted to the literary influences behind late antique geographical writing. Indeed, the study which follows would have been impossible without the invaluable foundations laid by such scholarship. An important feature of present work, moreover, has been the identification of further literary reflections within these kaleidoscopic chapters. Yet recognition of Orosius’ likely use of the Agrippa map, or of Jordanes’ use of Orosius, is all but immaterial unless the impulses which shaped these appropriations can be understood.

**HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY**

To consider fully the role which geographical passages might have within a work of historiography, the nature of the relationship between ‘geographical’ and ‘historical’ writing deserves some attention. In late Antiquity – the period of particular interest here – the disciplinary distinctions familiar to the modern schoolroom had little meaning. The term \textit{geographia}, derived from the Greek, is known in only two Latin texts, neither of which was specifically concerned with the description of the world.\textsuperscript{19} The alternative \textit{chorographia}, again taken from the Greek and popularized in the title of

\textsuperscript{17} Madoz (1939) and Fontaine (2001) typify the interpretation of Isidore’s \textit{Laus Spaniae} as work of isolated literary merit. Goffart (1988), pp. 250–3, Gransden (1974), pp. 23–4 and Markus (1975), p. 4 are similarly representative in their assertions that Bede’s introduction was primarily intended as a spatial setting for the \textit{Historia}. Speed (1992) provides an innovative allegorical reading of Bede’s geography, but similarly considers the opening chapter independently of the remainder of the \textit{Historia}.

\textsuperscript{18} See, for example, Braun (1909), Klotz (1910) and Zangemeister (1877) on Orosius; Friedrich (1907) and Ensslin (1949) on Jordanes and Philipp (1912) on Isidore. Further bibliography may be found in the individual chapters, below.

\textsuperscript{19} Cicero, Ep. ad Att. 2.4.3; Ammianus Marcellinus xxi.8.10. On these passages, see Lozovsky (2000), pp. 8–9 and n.4.
Pomponius Mela’s first-century work, was scarcely more widespread. Instead, descriptions of the world circulated under a variety of different titles, from the cumbersome literalism of the anonymous totius orbis diversar-umque regionis situs, to Martianus Capella’s misleading use of the personified Geometria to introduce his fifth-century description of the world.

This confusion of nomenclature reflected the uncertain status of geographical description within late antique thought. As Natalia Lozovsky’s recent study has demonstrated, geographical works could certainly exist in isolation, but investigation of the physical world was more frequently subservient to other literary forms, particularly exegesis and historiography. It is conspicuous that the majority of classical and post-classical writers who sought to justify the composition and study of geographical works, from Cicero to Augustine, regarded an appreciation of the physical world as a natural counterpart to the understanding of the past. Cicero suggested that each could help to explain human experience, Augustine that both could illuminate the Sacred Word of Scripture. It is possible for the modern commentator to identify ‘historical’ or ‘geographical’ compositions from late Antiquity, but to do so with little thought to their conceptual interdependence is to risk anachronism. Perhaps more importantly, to do so without some consideration of the ambiguities inherent in the modern meanings of the two terms is to fail to appreciate quite why the two disciplines were so closely bound in the late antique mind.

Within the examples of modern historical writing cited, simple distinctions might seem to be drawn between ‘geography’ and ‘history’ with little difficulty, yet even here the disciplinary divisions beloved of school curricula prove misleading. On the simplest level, ‘history’ might be distinguished from ‘geography’ through reference to its temporal, rather than spatial focus. Similarly, history might be said to deal with change over time, whereas geography typically considers the state of the world within a single time period, and allows less scope for historical change. Finally, narrative would seem to provide the most natural means for historical writing, as opposed to the descriptive methods employed by the geographer. In the baldest possible terms, therefore, we may propose three different, if interconnected, means of definition: History: time,

\[\text{Lozovsky (2000), pp. 9–10.}\]
\[\text{Lozovsky (2000) provides a detailed study of different manifestations of geographical scholarship from AD 400 to 1000. See also her discussion of Carolingian ‘geography’ in Lozovsky (1990).}\]
\[\text{A distinction proposed by Hartshorne (1939), p.135: ‘History is narrative, geography a description.’}\]
the past, narrative; Geography: space, the present (or a single time-frame), description. Generally speaking, it is through a combination of these definitions that the distinction between geographical and historical writing may be drawn. Like the comparable boundaries between history and sociology, anthropology or narrative fiction, however, the frontier is scarcely an undisputed one, and its complexity reveals itself upon close examination.

Crucially, the absolute distinction between time and space, as the principal objects of historical and geographical study, only applies on the most abstract level. Distinctions can certainly be drawn on such bases between geometry and chronology, but these definitions prove valueless in the application of the same criteria to the human sciences. When a human element is introduced to the equation, as is the case with both history and geography, the separation of the temporal and spatial becomes increasingly difficult. Historical writing, it must be stressed, is concerned, not with the passage of time per se, but with the activities of humankind over time. Geographies, similarly, are devoted not to the study of space, but to the relationship between humans and their environment. History and geography alike are concerned with the activity of humanity in time and space – ‘the basic stuff of human existence’ in the words of a prominent historical geographer. In many ways, they are symbiotic. Deprived of spatial assumptions, historical writing would be nonsensical. Conversely, without founding their studies upon human activity over time, geographers would simply have nothing to write about.

The latter statement is, perhaps, the more contentious. While it seems self-evident that history must narrate actions in space as well as time, the temporal, or perhaps more accurately, the historical, aspect of geography is less immediately apparent. In fact, the point is most clearly illustrated through reference to one of the most extreme manifestations of mathematical cartography. Within the ancient world, the most striking example of abstract geographical expression was certainly the second-century Geographia of the Alexandrian cartographer Claudius Ptolemaeus. While Ptolemy’s work was firmly founded upon geometrical principles,
and the innumerable reference points which comprise his work in its extant form are located on an abstract co-ordinate grid, the work as a whole is imbued with countless historical assumptions. Crucially, the points identified by the cartographer as worthy of inclusion are towns, mountain ranges, river mouths and lakes – all features loaded with historical significance. As modern theoretical geographers have demonstrated at length, for such points to have any meaning – for ‘space’ to be translated into ‘place’, in other words – they must be imbued with a cultural significance. Towns are worthy of record because they are lived-in places, mountains and rivers because they are identified and named by a cultural authority. Despite its apparent abstraction, Ptolemy’s *Geographia*, like all geographical works, was ultimately founded upon human cultural responses to the physical world. In this sense, geography is not merely infused with temporal themes, but actively includes historical elements.

The centrality of human, or historical, time to geographical composition may be further illustrated through reference to some of the ‘geographical’ introductions to modern histories identified above. Bowman, Parker and Wickham all betray considerable interest in the physical landscape of Egypt, the Netherlands and Italy respectively, yet their portraits of the physical world are scarcely devoid of a human element. Bowman’s description of Egypt places particular emphasis upon the countless benefits that the Nile Valley bestowed on its inhabitants, from the papyrus on its banks, and minerals beneath its sands, to the fertility engendered by the river flood itself. Wickham, similarly, discusses the impact of the Alps and the Apennines on the social structure of early medieval Italy, and the continued importance of roads and towns within the post-Roman peninsula. It is within the treatment of urban geography that the frontiers between geographical and historical themes are at their most blurred. The description of the urbanized Low Countries at the outset of Geoffrey Parker’s work certainly has a geographical dimension, but one coloured by demographic concerns, and enlivened by discussion of themes as diverse as education, medicine and standards of cleanliness within the average Dutch household.

Given this interdependence, distinction may be drawn between geographical and historical approaches through the relative emphasis placed by a work, or indeed an individual passage within a work, upon human space and historical time. Few would argue, for example, that Ptolemy’s

Geographia is a predominantly historical composition, for all its underlying assumptions, or that Eusebius’ Chronicon is essentially geographical. By the same token, some distinction may be drawn between the opening, ‘geographical’ section of The Dutch Revolt, and the ‘historical’ emphasis of the remainder of the narrative. What must be stressed, however, is the recognition that each of these compositions, however it may be labelled, is founded upon a number of historical and geographical assumptions, whether stated or unstated. When a work juxtaposes ‘historical’ and ‘geographical’ passages, as is the case with Parker’s monograph, or with the late antique histories considered here, the conceptual interdependence of the two modes of enquiry is of particular interest.

Nor does the methodological separation of descriptive geography and narrative history make distinction between the disciplines any clearer, particularly within the late antique world. The most widespread form of historical discourse within the period was the chronicle – a predominantly non-narrative form of historical expression, which provided the superstructure for many literary compositions. Conversely, periploi and itineraries provided popular media for the transmission of geographical information, which, if not narratological in the manner of modern travel literature, retain an obvious narrative structure. Indeed, recent scholarship has argued that space was frequently conceptualized in linear terms, despite the high status afforded to descriptive geographies within the classical world. The world, in other words, may have been regarded as a series of nodal points, separated by space and joined by routes of travel, rather than as a plane of regions invested with an equal epistemological status. The position is supported most persuasively by the Tabula Peutingeriana, a thirteenth-century map apparently derived from a fourth-century original, which depicts the world in precisely these terms, and might justly be compared to the London Underground map in its representation of space.

For the texts considered in detail here, however, the distinction between historical narrative and geographical description is generally a useful one. The ‘historical’ passages of Orosius and his successors are generally imbued with a sense of linear, narrative progression, and ‘geographical’ elements with a descriptive stasis. It is along these lines that

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33 On the literary form of the chronicle, and its relationship to narrative convention, see esp. White (1980/7), who stresses that the form contains certain elements of narrative construction, yet generally contrasts the style to more familiar forms of historiography.

34 Janni (1984) and see also Bertrand (1997). Compare the important comments put forward by Nicolet (1991), pp. 70–2 who argues that spatial conceptualization in the period was a mixture of linear ‘experienced’ space and planar abstract space.