Chapter I

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EARLY MAPS

The earliest maps which can be considered maps in the modern sense are the twenty-six which are included in the manuscripts of Ptolemy’s Geography. The oldest surviving manuscripts date from the eleventh century: the maps are of two distinct types: and many scholars have argued that they are later constructions from the tables of positions given by Ptolemy. The best opinion seems now, however, to favour the view that they are descended from contemporary maps originally part of the work.

The Ptolemy maps were engraved in several editions before the end of the fifteenth century, the finest being the Rome editions of 1478 and 1490 with twenty-six maps engraved on copper. Modern maps were soon added to the original series, the Strasbourg edition of 1513 having twenty as a start.

The Portolan Charts of the Mediterranean and the Atlantic coasts form a quite distinct representation of geography. Their origin is much debated. The earliest dated examples surviving belong to the beginning of the fourteenth century, and the pattern then well established was copied with little modification, though with gradual extension, in manuscript charts and atlases of two centuries and more.

The portolan charts have the following characteristics: the outline of the coasts is very faint; the coasts are defined by the coast names written as thick as possible at regular intervals, inwards from the coast, the more important names in red; there is very little inland geography; islands and the deltas of rivers are brightly coloured or gilded; principal cities are drawn with towers and banners, gradually becoming more elaborate; the surface of the chart is covered with lines of loxodromes or compass bearings, radiating from points equally spaced on one or two circles, and later decorated with compass roses.

From these the manuscript World maps of the Catalan type were developed, with numerous large cities, banners, pavilions, and figures of emperors, animals, and occasional ships. The less
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the geography, the more numerous these decorative additions. A splendid example is the Este World map (c. 1400) preserved in the Biblioteca Estense at Modena; and the series culminates in the celebrated map of Fra Mauro (1459) in the Biblioteca Marciana—until lately in the Ducal Palace—at Venice, which embodies the geographical results of Marco Polo’s travels, but in which the representation of the Mediterranean and Atlantic has finally lost its portolan character.

The globe of Martin Behaim at Nuremberg (1492) is the last monument of pre-Columbian geography, and the large manuscript map of Juan de la Cosa (1500) at Madrid in the Naval Museum the first map that has survived showing the discoveries of Columbus in the New World. A similar map by a Portuguese cartographer was obtained for the Duke of Ferrara by his envoy Cantino at the Court of Portugal, and is now in the Este Library at Modena. The first engraved map to show the New World is the small map by Contarini recently acquired by the British Museum, and dated a year earlier than the famous World map of Waldseemüller, a large wall map that was the first of a fine series that particularly distinguishes the sixteenth century, the most famous being the great World map of Mercator (1569), the first map constructed on his celebrated projection. The map on the same projection which Wright and Molyneux constructed for Hakluyt’s Principal Navigations seems to be the first important World map made in England. Probably the finest of the whole series of large World maps is that of Hondius (1608) of which the only copy known is in the collection of the Royal Geographical Society, and has been reproduced recently in full size.

The atlases of the first half of the sixteenth century were successive editions of Ptolemy with more and more additional maps. The first really new atlas was that of Ortelius (1570), the Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, published in many editions and languages in following years. The first to use the name we now apply to such collections of maps was Mercator’s Atlas sive Cosmographicae Meditationes... first published in its complete shape in 1595, though parts had appeared earlier in 1585 and 1590. The first general atlas published in England was that of John Speed in the edition of 1631, his first edition of 1611 relating to Great Britain only.
Plate I

The British Isles on the PORTulan Chart of Nicolaus de Comitis (Venice, Biblioteca Marciana).
Plate II

Egypt: from the Rome Prolemy, 1490, plate engraved on copper for the first edition of 1478; names stamped.
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Maps of the British Isles.

The British Isles were represented crudely on the earliest portolan charts that have survived: these maps are classified and discussed in a paper by Mr Michael Andrews (Geog. Jour., December 1926). The British Isles are also shown in Ptolemy and in the Gough and Matthew Paris maps.

The earliest separate printed map of Great Britain is that of Pietro Coppo, recently found by Professor Almagia in the municipal library at Pirano in Istria, and described with a block in the Geog. Jour. LXXIX, 441, May 1927. The first large map of England is that published by Lily in Rome in 1546, the source of his information being obscure. In 1564 Mercator published a very fine large map of the British Isles, of which no copy seems to have survived in this country, and only two in all. The first was found at Breslau in 1889 and was reproduced full size by the Berlin Geographical Society in 1892, with Mercator’s large map of Europe and his World map. The material was sent to Mercator from England by a correspondent unidentified.

The most celebrated set of English county maps is that of Christopher Saxton, published between 1574 and 1579, and collected into a volume with a fine engraved title-page with portrait of Queen Elizabeth. Saxton also published a fine large general map of the country of which the first issue is unknown, though later editions are in the British Museum and the Royal Geographical Society. A little later John Norden began a description of England by counties, and completed Middlesex and Herts with maps (1593 and 1598) while maps of other counties made by him have been identified within the last few years. (See a paper by Mr Edward Heawood on “Some early County Maps”, Geog. Jour., October 1926.)

A select list of manuscript World maps.

The “Carte Pisane”. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale. 104 by 50 cm.

Undated, about 1300. Typical portolan chart with names in red and black, loxodromes in red and green, whose centres are arranged on two equal tangent circles, centred about Smyrna and west of Sardinia. Curious extensions by method of squares. No compass roses, drawings of cities, or banners.
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Dated 1311. Shows Mediterranean eastward from Corsica; centre of loxodromes Eastern Aegean. No drawings of cities or banners, but effective chevron border, and curious crossed scales. Only inland geography a vague Danube. Islands and deltas coloured conspicuously.

This is the earliest dated portolano surviving, and the four next in date are by the same author, to whom are attributed also some curious maps in various manuscripts of Marino Sanudo’s Liber Secretorum.

The map of Giovanni di Carignano. Florence, Archivio di Stato.

Undated, but first quarter of the fourteenth century, the work of a priest of Genoa. Important as not of portolano type, but for landsmen. Land coloured green, with names in red on white labels. All principal cities have large semi-heraldic town signs, not pictures except for a few outlying places. Caspian and Red Seas solid blue, the latter lined red; rivers blue. Handsome border. An original and interesting map. The reproduction in Nordensköld’s Periplus very misleading.

The map of Angellino de Dalorto. Florence, Collection of Prince Corsini. 107 by 66 cm.


The Medici sea atlas. Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana. 56 by 42 cm.

Undated, but from calendar probably 1351. Author unknown, but from internal evidence probably Genoese, though Genoa not named in the most important map, a planisphere with land coloured sepia, with names very small in white labels. Seems independent of Ptolemy, since Scotland not bent eastwards, and Nile quite different. Some figures of kings. Several other maps appear unfinished. Drawing good. Perhaps the most important early atlas.


Dated 1375. Author unknown, but legends in Catalan. In beautiful condition, drawn on paper, mounted on boards to fold in sections like a screen. Centre of portolano type with fanciful extensions. Sea lined with wavy blue lines. Islands gaudily coloured. Great Britain treated as island, hence decorated and painted purple. Splendid figures and animals in outlying parts, with many castles in regular rows flying silver banners.
Plate III

Part of Christopher Saxton’s Map of the County of Durham, reduced to half scale. Engraved by Augustine Ryther 1576.
Plate IV

*The Isle of Purbeck, from Speed's Atlas of 1611.*
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The Este World map. Modena, Biblioteca Estense. 115 cm. diameter.

Undated, but with detail (perhaps added) of fifteenth century. Circular on parchment in excellent condition. Legends mostly in Catalan. Has the same appearance of fantasy built round a portolan chart, but covers much greater extent than Paris map, showing Africa joined to great southern continent. Sea wavy blue lines, coast with coloured ribbon, rivers blue, mountains green. Cities conventional buildings with banners, kings in pavilions, mermaids, and a few ships. Colour of the whole map beautiful, and the most decorative of all early world maps.


Undated, probably end of fourteenth century. The name is that of a former owner, not of the author. Typical atlas of portolan type with four maps: Black Sea and Aegean; Central Mediterranean; Britain, France and Spain; Portugal and Moroccan coast. The date 1368 assigned in the library catalogue arises from the legend I 368 (i.e. Insulae 368) attached to the usual mass of islands in a great bay on the west of Ireland: a curious error.

World map of Fra Mauro of Murano. Venice, Biblioteca Marciana. 1459.

Thus, the most magnificent of the surviving manuscript maps of the world, is a definite departure from the portolan type. There are few names on the coasts, and those not written perpendicular to it. The rivers are drawn in a heavy blue and white rope-like symbol. There are mountains with white tops, large numbers of great cities, especially in the outlying regions, a few ships at sea; but there are no figures, no pavilions, and no loxodrome lines. What would be empty spaces are filled with long descriptive legends in blue on the land and red on the wavy-lined blue sea. The principal names are in gold, and there is no black in the map. The general effect lacks contrast, and is not so decorative, nor the colour so good, as the Este map.

The Cantino World map. Modena, Biblioteca Estense. 220 by 100 cm.

Drawn in Portugal for Cantino, the Envoy of the Duke of Ferrara, in 1502, to show the discoveries of Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci. In fine preservation and well coloured, but wanting in spirit, and not to be compared with the Catalan World maps.

The above notes on some of the more important manuscript maps were made on a journey to study the question, Which are the maps most worthy of reproduction in colour by modern processes? Such reproductions as have been made hitherto have been printed
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from colour plates prepared largely by hand, and therefore of little use for critical study. The Royal Geographical Society is publishing a series of reproductions in facsimile, beginning with the map of Angellino de Dalorto from the collection of Prince Corsini, to be followed by the Este World map.

The principal manuscript maps surviving in England are of a different kind:

The Hereford World map of Richard de Haldingham. South transept of Hereford Cathedral. c. 1280.

A diagram rather than a map, built up round Jerusalem as the centre of the world; places more or less in correct relation to their neighbours, but entirely out of scale, and no attempt at correct outline even in the Mediterranean, where the portolans are so accurate.

The Matthew Paris maps of Great Britain.

Attributed to Matthew Paris, a monk of St Albans, and found in four manuscripts (three in British Museum, one at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge) of the monastery written about the middle of the XIIIth century. Based on Ptolemy.


From the writing the date is c. 1300. Quite distinct in style with little artistic merit, but raising interesting questions of nomenclature, and scarcely improved upon for two centuries.

A select list of early engraved maps.

Waldseemüller's World map. 1507.

Known in a single copy discovered by Father Josef Fischer, S.J., in the castle of Prince Francis of Waldeburg-Wolfgang at Wolfga in Württemberg in 1901. Engraved on wood in eight sheets, based on the world map in the Ulm Ptolemy of 1486, and on the same projection. Longitudes much exaggerated so that there is room only for a narrow strip of the New World. Supposed until lately to be the first map with the name America. Reproduced full size with a learned commentary in Die Weltkarten Waldseemüllers (Placolius) 1507 und 1516. J. Fischer and F. v. Wieser, Innsbruck, 1903.

Ortelius' World map. 1564.

In eight sheets, engraved on copper. Only two copies known, of which one is in the British Museum.

Mercator's World map. Duisburg. 1569.

Engraved on copper in eighteen sheets. Handsome decorated border but no pictures. Legends and figures on face of map, and comparatively few names. Not very artistic nor so well engraved as others of the period, but