



LOST MAPS OF THE CALIPHS: DRAWING THE WORLD IN ELEVENTH CENTURY CAIRO

By Yossef Rapoport and Emilie Savage-Smith

University of Chicago Press, 2018

349 pages

Hardcover: \$55.00, ISBN 978-0-226-54088-7

eBook: \$55.00, ISBN 978-0-226-55340-5

Review by: Barbara Harrison, Tom Harrison Maps

IN THE FALL OF 2000, a representative of Christie's auction house in London contacted Emilie Savage-Smith about an Islamic manuscript that was due to be sold, entitled *The Book of Curiosities of the Sciences and Marvels of the Eye* (romanized as *Kitāb Gharā'ib al-funūn wa-mulāh al-'uyūn*, and shortened in this book to *Book of Curiosities*). Savage-Smith, Professor of the History of Islamic Science at the University of Oxford's Faculty of Oriental Studies, examined the text, maps, drawings, and diagrams of the manuscript, and declared it authentic. It was subsequently purchased by a London dealer in rare manuscripts, who, after realizing its historical importance, sold it to Oxford's Bodleian Museum/Library at well under its fair market value. Although a few scholars had previously known of the treatise, none had apparently known about the fourteen unique maps it contained, or about its wealth of information concerning travel and communications between Byzantium and the Islamic world in eleventh century. The ancient document also, as Savage-Smith discusses in the second chapter of *Lost Maps of the Caliphs*, shows valuable evidence of the importance of both astrology and astronomy in medieval Islam.

Savage-Smith's co-author, Yossef Rapoport, is Professor in Islamic History at Queen Mary University of London. A historian of various aspects of Islamic life in the Middle Ages in the Arabic-speaking part of the Middle East, he contributes most of the detailed discussions of the maps and related geographical and trade information to be found in *Lost Maps of the Caliphs*.

I offered to review this book for *Cartographic Perspectives* for several reasons. I am not a cartographer myself—although I am married to one—but I was born with the wanderlust curiosity about the world that I have recognized in so many of the cartographers I have come to know. As a child I was always reading books about other countries and cultures, and my parents even bought me a school binder with a map of the world on the cover, a map I pored over regularly. In addition, although I have never been to Egypt—where the *The Book of Curiosities* was compiled—I have spent time around the Middle East, in Beirut, Istanbul, and Iran. It was, in part, these formative experiences that prompted me to undertake this review, and I am glad that I did, even though—despite some brief mentions of Persian cartographers—it contained less information on these places than I had hoped.

Until a few years ago, little to nothing was known about the *Book of Curiosities*, but the authors of *Lost Maps of the Caliphs* undertake to fill that gap with this detailed account of its history and the story behind how it came to be made. They find the wide range of material in the *Book of Curiosities* offers numerous insights that prompt us to reconsider our assumptions about how the structure of the cosmos and celestial phenomena were understood in the first four centuries of Islam, and how that understanding affected the development of astronomy, astrology, geography, and cartography.

The *Book of Curiosities* serves not only as a history of global communication networks, but it also provides one of the

first glimpses into how Muslim seafarers saw the world and depicted it in their maps. In addition, it shows how sailors navigated, particularly in the Mediterranean, before the invention and adoption of the compass. Based on the authors' research, the maps in the *Book of Curiosities* show evidence of the use of coordinates to plot location, despite the lack of such navigational tools. In Rapoport's view, these early cartographers were apparently drawing from the works of Ptolemy, the Greek astronomer/astrologer who was also the first known geographer/mathematician to use longitude and latitude lines based on celestial observations to specify locations.

The question is raised in the Conclusion as to who it was that authored the *Book of Curiosities*. The comprehensiveness of approach and large number of diagrams and maps in the treatise suggest to the *Lost Maps* authors that the author may have been a military man and mapmaker rather than a scholar or merchant.

Lost Maps of the Caliphs includes photographic reproductions of several maps in each chapter. Some are in color and others are in black and white. Quite a few of them—like the one on the cover—are taken from the Bodleian Library's collection in Oxford. At first glance, the maps may look, to modern-day Western eyes, more like intricate

,abstract drawings than maps, and it could, in many cases, be hard to determine what is being depicted. However, the authors provide informative notes that are interesting in themselves and a real help to anyone who cannot read Arabic.

I found the book's use of endnotes, rather than footnotes, a major drawback that distracts from the flow of reading. Some of the notes added to the narrative, but many were source citations—and I could not tell which it was until I had stopped reading to look it up. After having read several chapters while flipping back and forth, I gave up and only referred to a footnote if it seemed like it might be of particular interest.

Although the narrative of *Lost Maps of the Caliphs: Drawing the World in Eleventh Century Cairo* was a bit confusing at times, the story behind the *Book of Curiosities* was interesting and informative. The medieval maps that were included were both fascinating and unusual, perhaps especially so because they bear only a slight resemblance to modern maps. This book is worth a look for the maps alone, and scholars of medieval history, geography, or cartography may well wish to purchase it. Casual readers, as I can attest, may also find it fascinating—but may find the \$55 list price just a bit steep.

