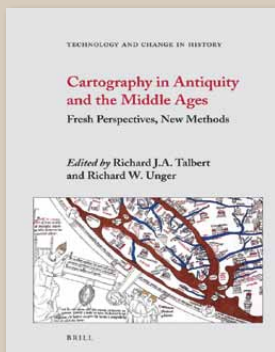


## CARTOGRAPHY IN ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES: FRESH PERSPECTIVES, NEW METHODS



By Richard Talbert and Richard Unger.

Leiden: Brill, 2008. 299 pages, 58 black and white illustrations, 14 color plates. \$147.00, hardcover.

ISBN: 978-9004166639

**Review by:** W. Wilson, Lakehead University

This book is built around a series of papers that were all originally presented at the Thirty-Fifth Medieval Workshop, held in October 2005 at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. The goal of the workshop, according to the Preface, was to bring together historians and cartographers working in both the classical and medieval periods, with the aim of sharing and building on each other's work, in the spirit of the expanded understanding of cartography so well expounded by Brian Harley and David Woodward in their early work together. Indeed, the papers, individually, and the book, as a whole, explicitly trace descent from the then groundbreaking work on classical and medieval cartography found in Vol. 1 of Harley and Woodward's *The History of Cartography: Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean*, published in 1987. The publisher of the present book, Brill, is be congratulated on producing yet another ruggedly bound volume of academic work with clear print, good black and white figures, and with virtually no typos; something that, sadly, can no longer be taken for granted from even academic publishers.

Many of the academics one would expect to find making contributions in this field are here amongst the book's 13 authors. Emily Albu provides an update on her research into the genealogy of the Peutinger Map; Evelyn Edson argues that our traditional division of mappamundi into Isidorian and Orosian groups needs to be re-examined; and Richard Talbot and Patrick Gautier Dalche both provide excellent and wide-ranging surveys of the state of classical (Talbot) and medieval (Dalche) cartography today. The book also includes contributions on newly found Islamic maps by Yossef Raopoport and Emilie Savage-Smith; on Byzantine maps by Maja Kominko; and on medieval Jewish maps by Benjamin Kedar.

Raymond Clemens and Camille Serchuk each provide chapters illustrating how the purpose and practice of cartography changed in the late medieval times; driven, as it was, by new demands in education, trade, law, and governance. Finally, the new possibilities of digital and postmodern research methods in ancient and medieval cartography are suggested by extensive overviews of two projects: new work on the Severan Marble Plan by Jennifer Trimble and, from Tom Elliott, of a project that could eventually bring us a digital, online version of the Peutinger Map.

All of the contributions reflect detailed scholarship in their specific areas, and demand a level of scholarship of the reader that is very refreshing in this day of increasing McEducation. Simply on the level of language, there is one entire chapter in French (Dalche), and a general requirement for some ability to translate words and phrases in Latin, Italian, German, Arabic, and Hebrew. One could, of course, suggest that English translations should be provided, but cartography is surely one discipline whose practitioners and students would immediately realize how much would be lost by such a transition to a single imperial language. Maps require us to seek hermeneutical understandings of the worlds of the map-makers and map-users, and surely in this day and age no professional cartographer would claim that that task can be accomplished without at least some general knowledge of the map's indigenous language. The editors of this book are to be saluted for demanding of the scholar this comfort level and flexibility in languages.

Sadly, however, the book suffers from some significant shortcomings. The easiest ones to point out are technical. In a time when publishers like the University of Chicago Press can produce scholarly, hardcover books on various sub-fields of cartography for less than US\$60, complete with large, full color, in-text illustrations of the maps being discussed, it is very difficult to justify spending US\$147 on a book with only adequate black and white illustrations in the text, many of which lack critical detail, and a traditional, quite limited section of 14 color plates all located in one section at the very end of the book. The quality and type of illustrations may be trivial in many types of books, but for cartographic books—especially books that contain arguments that ask the reader to look at and contemplate visual aspects of maps—good illustrations are vital.

In terms of content, the publisher's blurb on the back cover claims that, "In scope, this book matches *The History of Cartography* ... Now, twenty years after the appearance of that seminal work, classicists and medievalists from Europe and North America highlight, distill and reflect on the remarkably productive progress

made since in the many different areas of the study of maps. The interaction between experts ... offers a guide to the future ...". However, while several of the contributors to *Cartography in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* make interesting and important contributions, this book is not really a match to the first volume of *The History of Cartography*. Consider the issue of scope and organization: the current book feels scattered and, more explicitly, lacks the excellent internal structure so evident and important in all the volumes of the *History of Cartography*. The subtitle of the earlier work is *Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean*, and Harley and Woodward provide a very good discussion and rationale for their geographical and cultural scope. Importantly, the structure of that volume allows the reader to move through the book in a predictable way. With *Cartography in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, however, we really never get any idea of just how far afield we will be going, just whose maps we will be looking at, and just why we should be looking at those maps instead of others. In the end, this book reads a lot like a disparate set of papers, and it lacks a coherence that really is quite necessary in such a complex and evolving field.

In addition, while the book provides some good examples of how the methods of postmodernism introduced by Harley have produced new work with new perspectives, there are also some revealing examples of the shortcomings of some of these "post-modern" approaches to cartography. Jennifer Trimble, for instance, does some very interesting work exploring the cartography of the Severan Marble Plan, which is a large (18 x 13m) map of Rome that was carved in stone and hung in one of Rome's central temples. Sadly, though, she concludes her otherwise excellent contribution by stating "...the map's viewers were constructed as part of a public, collective audience with a shared experience of the city, not as individual or small groups with diverse and personal perceptions. This was by no means a democratic vision of the city. Those viewers were not constructed as collective owners of Rome, or as equals within it. This map lowered the required levels of literacy in comparison to other urban maps, but it did so to involve the viewer in a fundamentally hierarchical characterization of Rome. Viewers did not participate in naming, shaping or changing the city's space; rather, Rome was delivered to them in a particular and spectacular form, and they were visually posited in turn as collective, admiring, and reactive. In an ancient forerunner of modern fascism, this map exalted Rome in a way both populist and authoritarian." (p. 97)

It would be difficult to find a better (or worse?) example of the excesses of post-modern scholarship than this paragraph. As there are no references here to any of her previous work in the chapter, it does not read as an internally logical conclusion. More importantly, there is no discussion about issues such as why, for instance,

this large map could not have been created simply as an effort to provide a useable and publically accessible map of what was, after all, the very large and no doubt confusing central city of the empire. Granted, this may be a simplistic hypothesis, but Occam's razor still holds in many cases, and a scholar has an obligation to at least suggest why a more complex (and sinister) conclusion is necessary.

The short (13-page) chapter by Tom Elliot on creating a digital edition of the Peutinger Map is another disappointment. Yet again, the promise of software providing integrated and dynamic searching and display functions at the touch of a button (e.g., hypertext) seems to fade away in requirements for more time to perfect the system. When I visited the relevant website at the Ancient World Mapping Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (see <http://www.unc.edu/awmc>, the website URL is not provided in the book), the digital map was still not available. On a similar note, what is missing throughout the book is systematic reference to where an interested party could go to find electronic copies of most of the maps under discussion. One very positive aspect of the growth of the web is as a simple source of visual data. This has created a situation where providing such references to digital images of maps has become common practice for other publishers of cartographic books. They should have been provided here.

Finally, *Cartography in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* seems to have just too many chapters simply reiterating what had already been said in the first volume of the *History of Cartography*. In a book whose subtitle is *Fresh Perspectives, New Methods*, there were too many times when I caught myself re-reading arguments from the *History*. One contributor, Camille Serchuk, even starts her contribution with, "French medieval cartographic studies have progressed little since the first volume of Harley and Woodward's *History of Cartography* in 1987" (p. 257).

In the end, I think that this is a good book for a traditional university library with a good budget, or for the specialist cartographer or historian who needs to make sure that s/he has quick access to the text of a few excellent papers that were presented at the Thirty-Fifth Medieval Workshop. However, for the more generalist scholar, or for the library with a smaller budget, it might be a better idea to take the dollars that could be spent on this book and invest in two or three of the full-length monographs that have been written by some of the contributors.