ANCIENT CARTOGRAPHY

Man’s earliest attempts to represent his world

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The remarkable Chinese maps published by Mrs. Bung in the previous article indicate that in cartography, as in so many other things, ancient China was far ahead of contemporaries in the western world. This article is an attempt to document that statement by giving a brief survey of the development of cartography in the west down to the time of the Greek geographer Strabo.

Born in about 60 B.C., Strabo had written major works on history and geography by the time of his death in A.D. 21. His most famous work is a Geography, in seventeen books, giving a description of the known world, from Britain and Gaul in the west to India in the east, giving some information on Europe and the Balkans in the north and extending as far south as Ethiopia. The knowledge of the world possessed by Strabo, represents, in some aspects, an improvement over the system of his great predecessor Eratosthenes (ca. 275-194 B.C.), a scholar whom Strabo had little respect.

The Geography of Strabo gives us the best evidence of the actual geographical knowledge of the pre-Christian world as well as being our major source of information for the geography of the world from the time of Homer onward. Strabo gives a critical evaluation of the work of his predecessors and even provides a brief description of some of the technical problems in the drawing of maps. Strabo places great emphasis upon travel and the importance of first-hand experience and remarks:

“You could not find another person among the writers on Geography who has travelled over much more of the distances just mentioned than I.”

However, there is reason to doubt that Strabo’s travels took him much farther than Rome and Alexandria, parts of Asia Minor and Egypt. His description of Greece is really more mythology than geography. Yet the world known to Strabo, depicted here in a modern reconstruction based upon the infor-
mation given by him, was accurate in its main features and presents a view of the Mediterranean and the Middle East at least recognizable in its general outline.

There are many references to maps in the surviving works of Greek and Roman authors, but few actual examples have survived to the present day. Most of our examples come from the time of the Roman Empire. Much of our knowledge of the cartography of ancient Rome is based upon a plan of the entire city, the Forum Uibus, alluded to in the walls of a building in the Imperial Forum by order of the emperor Septimius Severus about A.D. 209. Fragments of this stone map came to light in 1562 and, though some of these panels were subsequently lost again, they were first copied in a manuscript now in the Vatican Library. Even more extraordinary is the story of the most detailed map to survive from the ancient world, the Ptolemy Table (Tobularis Ptolemaicus) a third or fourth century map known only from a copy made by a monk of Colmar in the mid-thirteenth century and acquired by the German humanist Konrad Ptolemy in the sixteenth century. This map is in the form of a long narrow strip, (foe foot and 21 feet long), in twelve sections, giving a greatly elongated view of the Roman world from Britain to the mouth of the Ganges (most of Britain and all of Spain are missing in our surviving copy). This is a road map designed for travelers and, like modern guide books, it gives information on hotels, restaurants and accommodations available along the road.

There is actually much information available for the Roman road system and for what we can best call Imperial Italy (Itinerarium Antonini Augusti). Such works go back to a map of the Roman Empire set up in Rome by Agrippa during the reign of Augustus. Nothing of this map has survived, but we do have a later version of it, the so-called Antonine Itinerary (Itinerarium Provinciae Antonini Augusti) compiled in A.D. 217, during the reign of Caracalla, and giving military routes with way-stops and the distances between them. All the evidence for these ancient itineraries was compiled in the Itinerarium Römische, published by the German scholar, Konrad Miller in 1916.

All of the surviving maps described above are much later than the Chinese maps discussed by Mrs. Bung. The question of ancient Greek maps, earlier than the Chinese ones, is a complex one for we have no surviving examples. There are many references to such maps by Greek authors, and a passage in the Claudii, a comedy by Aristophanes, refers to a map of the world being brought on stage. Several of these references indicate that the concept of a map of the world, with lands drawn to scale, was familiar to the inhabitants of fifth century Greece. As always, Herodotus has the best story. It concerns the Ionian Revolt (499-494 B.C.) when the Greeks living on the Aegean coast of Turkey tried to establish their independence from the Persian Empire.

Aristogoras of Miletus, the leader of the revolt, went to Greece to persuade Sparta, the leading military power of the Greek world, to join the revolt and send an army to fight against Persia. Aristogoras brought with him a map of the world engraved on a bronze tablet, the work of the geographer Hecataeus and showing “the whole circuit of the earth, the seas and the rivers.” Aristogoras pointed out Cleomenes, the king of Sparta, the lands of the Persian Empire:

“Look, he continued, pointing to the tablet, ‘next to the Lydians here are the Jews—there is a fine country, rich in money. Then come the Phrygians; farther east, richest in cattle and crops of all the nations we know. There, adjoining them are the Cappadocians—Syrrians we Greeks call them; and next to them the Cilicians, with their territory extending to the coast—see, here is another island of Cyprus—who pay annual tribute to the Persian king of five hundred talents. Now the Armenians—they, too, have cattle in abundance; and next to them, here, the Maccabees. Again, farther east, lies Cilicia, you can see the Chersonese marked, with Susa on its banks, where the Great King lives, and keeps his treasure. Why, if you take Susa, you need not hesitate to compete with God Himself for riches.”

Cleomenes was very much interested. for he was a greedy man, but, he asked, how long would it take to go from Ephesus to Susa, following the route of the great Persian Royal Road. Here, says Herodotus, Aristogoras made his big mistake for he told the truth. When Cleomenes heard that the journey would take him more than three months he ordered Aristogoras to leave Sparta before sunset. Cleomenes was not about to commit Spartan troops to such an enterprise now, but before the relative distances on the bronze
Unfortunately we do not know exactly what areas are represented on this map; so little can be made of this document.

Out of the great current interest in Ebla, now known to be the site of Tell Mardikh, where Italian archaeologists have uncovered monumental buildings and an archive of over 17,000 tablets, comes a recent suggestion first made by Theophylact Meek in 1939 that the Ebla map mentions the city of Ebla. In the lower left corner of the map the scribe has circled the Sumerian sign reading MEGAN BAD EB LA. This, Meek suggested, might be a reference to the city of Ebla, known as an important site in the Sargonid or Old Akkadian period (2400-2200 B.C.).

If this is a reference to Ebla it is odd that the name is written without the sign KI after it, the Sumerian determinative indicating the name of a city. If not Ebla, it is difficult to suggest any alternative explanation. If it is to be accepted as Ebla this does not mean that the map shows the area around that city. Ebla is in north Syria, just south of Aleppo, while Nuzi is in northern Iraq, south of Kirkuk. As HAD means 'fortress' (Akkadian DURU) it is possible that the reference is to a garrison of troops from Ebla stationed in the vicinity of Nuzi. The exact details of the map remain enigmatic.

It is also of interest that the Nuzi map specifies its orientation by naming three of the four cardinal points (the one on the right is missing), each given by the appropriate sign. Here the west wind is one of the cardinal points of the map with east at the top and north on the left. The name of the south wind could then be restored on the missing right hand side of the map.

Some of the written information on the Nuzi map gives nothing more than the dimensions of fields, cultivated plots of land. However, the directional indications, the representation of streams and irrigation channels all indicate that this is more than an ordinary field map. Such field maps are rather well known. Shown here is an example from Kasite Nippur, dating to about 1200 B.C. It designates a number of privately owned fields, each given by the owner's name, separated by streams and irrigation channels. In the center of the map is the king's own field, described as 'field between the canals, the holding of the palace.' On either side are the fields of the king's estate.

Of much greater interest is another map from Kasite Nippur, dating to a later period than the example from Nuzi. Here we have a map showing the city of Nippur itself. It was found during excavations of the city by the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, (four long sessions between 1939 and 1940 under the direction of H. V. Hilprecht. The map is presently part of the Hilprecht Collection at the Friedrich-Schiller University in Jena, Germany. It is shown here in photograph and line drawing. The drawing has the features named on the map identified by numbers. These names, in Sumerian and Akkadian, label many elements shown on the map, including:

1. the name of the city, Nippur
2. the Ekur, most temple in the city
3. the Kita, a temple subsidiary to the Ekur
4. the Shuruppak, the 'Central Park' of Nippur
5. the Euphrates river
6. the Ishkopanna, the 'Central Canal' of Nippur
7. the twelve gates in the western wall of the city
8. the single gate in the northern wall
9. the eastern part of the city and was shown turned 90 degrees, with the Ekur at the bottom of the map. This was because such an orientation best matched the excavated remains as they were then known. Recent excavation by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, under the direction of McGuire Gibson, has shown this to be incorrect, indicating that the map is to be read as shown here and that it represents the entire city.

This raises several problems in the history and archaeology of Nippur. Now the 'Central Canal' (literally 'the canal in the heart of the city') is to be identified with the present-day Shatt al-Nil, dividing the western and eastern mounds on the present site. The Euphrates must have originally run just west of the city, whereas today Nippur is far east of the modern course of the river. Moreover, something is now wrong with our interpretation of the Euphrates, as it has now been given a different orientation which does not seem to match the archaeological evidence. Such problems can only be answered by future excavation and further study.

The map of the city seems to have been the dominant type of cartography in ancient Mesopotamia. We know a great deal about the city of Babylon during the so-called Neo-Babylonian or Chaldean period (625-539 B.C.), but not through any actual excavations. Several fragments of such maps have survived, so we do know that there did exist ancient clay maps of Babylon. Our detailed knowledge of the topography of the city as it was in the sixth...

Plan of the City of Babylon as known from excavation and from the description of the text “Topography of Babylon.” The plan indicates the areas still to be excavated. Reproduced from Jody M. (1974), p. 51.

Fig. 1: Plan of the city of Babylon, after E. Unger, Babylon, Fig. 64.
A modern reconstruction of the world as described by the geographer Eratosthenes, author of a three volume work on Geography. A scholar and poet, he tried to do too many different things and was known as Beta (the second letter of the Greek alphabet) indicating that he was second-best at everything. Reproduced from Lloyd A. Brown, The Story of Maps, New York, 1949, p. 51.

2 A modern reconstruction of the world known to Strabo. A Stoic philosopher, Strabo stressed the importance of practical experience in the study of geography and the moral value of such study. In the Middle Ages he was known as 'the Geographer', as Homer was 'the Poet'. Reproduced from Lloyd A. Brown, The Story of Maps, New York, 1949, p. 86.