The Edge of the World: An Exploration of the Fringes of the Psalter World Map*

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ABSTRACT

Medieval *mappaemundi* are richly complex images that hold within them clues to improve understanding of the medieval psyche concerning the natural world and the place of medieval cultures within it. In my exploration of the Psalter World Map, I provide a brief historical context for the psalter in which this map resides, including information on its creation and provenance. I then examine aspects of the fringes of the map to display the liminality of two specific images: the winds surrounding the Earth and the fourteen "otherworldly creatures" positioned across the Nile River on the bottom right-hand corner of the Earth. In doing so, I argue that medieval people were acutely aware of their place in the world, that they recognized their own human, transformative state, and that they utilized the edges of *mappaemundi* as a safe and controlled environment to explore and better understand their anxieties about the world and their place within it.

Although there is much that medieval manuscripts can tell modern-day scholars about the ideologies and thoughts of the medieval population, there is one remarkable kind of artifact within a select few manuscripts that might hold even more clues as to how medieval people felt and interacted with the world around them. Medieval maps are deeply complex artifacts, and they remain with us today in a few different formats. From the Hereford Mappa Mundi measuring 1.59 x 1.34 meters to the smallest of maps found in Psalters, these maps are deeply significant pieces of a complex series of artifacts that we have left of the medieval period. When looking back to examine a culture, artifacts play a pivotal role in our understanding of the whole of their story. My focus is to examine some of the nuances of *mappaemundi*, or maps of the world, to attempt to peer further into the psyche of medieval England and better understand their view not only of the world around them, but of their place within it. In examining the fringes of the Psalter World Map, the rich symbolism found on the edges of the map come to life and show us how this population both used liminal edges as both a way to define themselves and to explore general anxieties not just about the world around them, but about their place within the world. I argue that particular aspects of this map, specifically the spheres surrounding the whole of the world and England's location on the map in relation to otherworldly creatures present, possess an ambiguous duality that is oftentimes found in works of medieval literature. There is much that we can infer about medieval attitudes towards the world as well as England's place within it by better understanding the intentional ambiguity and duality seen on the fringes of the Psalter World Map.

In their *Introduction to Manuscript Studies*, Raymond Clemens and Timothy Graham note that *mappaemundi* are "essentially representations of the earth as it was known from the ancient world, including Asia, Africa, and Europe as seen from a celestial perspective" (Clemens and Graham 241). With *mappa* meaning "cloth" or "chart" and *mundus* meaning "world," these maps differ quite a bit from T-O and zonal maps in the sense that they include detail that goes far beyond geographic depictions of the world. The majority of medieval *mappaemundi* were meant to be displayed on walls, though the particular *mappaemundi* that I will be focusing on resides inside a psalter and is only 14.3 x 9.5 cm in size (British Library).

Medievalists in the field each have a different opinion as to what the exact function of *mappaemundi* are, with Clemens and Graham asserting that *mappaemundi* "can be very complex, encompassing not only the known and unknown world, but also all of time, from the Garden of Eden to the Last Judgement" (Clemens & Graham, 243). P.D.A. Harvey finds that they are instead "vehicle[s] for conveying every kind of information. . . [such as] zoological, anthropological, moral, theological, historical,"

while Mirko Grčić asserts that rather than providing objectively accurate geographical information of the world, the *mappaemundi* was meant to "express biblical symbolism and medieval Christian cosmology" (Harvey 19; Grčić 25). Although each of these theories have their merits, Asa Mittman's theory on the purpose of medieval *mappaemundi* is most intriguing. Mittman believes that *mappaemundi* are about relationships, and in his book *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England* he examines the fringes of the Hereford World Map in an innovative way. He ultimately presents an opinion of how the medieval people might have not only felt about the world around them, but how they felt about their place within the world as well (42).

While Mittman's study looks at the Hereford World Map, my study instead focuses on the Psalter World Map, currently housed in the British Library under the shelf mark Add. MS 28681, f. 9r. Though it may seem a questionable decision to use a study discussing the Hereford Mappa Mundi while I will be analyzing another map entirely, medievalists who are familiar with these maps will understand their connection. The structure and content of each of these *mappaemundi* are incredibly similar, and these two examples, along with the Ebstorf *mappaemundi*, were all likely created from a singular exemplar copy that resided on the bedchamber wall of King Henry III in Westminster (Westwell). With this connection and the vast visual similarities between the Psalter World Map and the Hereford Mappa Mundi established, some of Mittman's commentary can be applied to the Psalter World Map.

It is imperative to recognize the significance of the entirety of BL Add. MS 28681 as a cultural artifact, rather than mentioning only one small portion of it. Because of this, we must also consider what else lies within the manuscript. According to the research of Chet Van Duzer, the psalter, created around c. 1262,[1] contains a mixture of prayers and psalms mixed in between a calendar, verses praising the Virgin, prayers in Anglo-Norman,[2] the Office of the Dead, and psalters with the Canticles (Van Duzer 181). Van Duzer also recognizes the inclusion of six full-page illustrations of different scenes from the New Testament, which were added at the end of the thirteenth century. As far as provenance for this manuscript is concerned, it is believed that the psalter was created somewhere around London. On f. 18r, the name "Mary Wyndham" was written

1. In the British Library blog post about the Map Psalter, Chantry Westwell comments that the psalter was created shortly after c. 1262, because it includes a depiction of Richard of Chichester as a saint in the calendar page for June. Richard was not made a saint until sometime in 1262, and Westwell dates the psalter as being created in c. 1265 instead. While this is outside of the scope of my research here, I thought this was a rather interesting discrepancy, and that it was important to include here.

2. The majority of this psalter is written in Latin, rather than the Anglo-Saxon vernacular (Van Duzer 181).

in sixteenth century hand. Eventually the book made its way to Mr. Henry D. Jones who placed a bookplate in the upper binding. He sold the psalter to the British Library in 1871, where it has remained since ("Detailed record").[3] While the scope of this study is narrow, by considering the other aspects residing within this manuscript a more holistic perspective may be applied, thus allowing for more nuanced conversations about medieval people and culture.[4]

Although many aspects of the Psalter World Map draw our gaze, I would like to draw attention to the fringes of the map, rather than examining the many geographical locations presented here. Much like the marshes and moors of *Beowulf* or the deep forest of Wirral seen in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, there is a particular type of curious nature found on the fringes of medieval society. Michael Camille in *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* finds that margins of the early English world were both dangerous and powerful places, stating:

> In folklore, betwixt and between are important zones of transformation. The edge of the water was where wisdom revealed itself; spirits were banished to spaceless places 'between the froth and the water' or 'betwixt the bark and the tree'. Similarly, temporal junctures between winter and summer, or between night and day, were also dangerous moments of intersection with the Otherworld. (16)

Like the juncture between the seasons or the liminal space between night and day, the liminal edges of medieval *mappaemundi* are powerful spaces of parchment that hold a great many things, including rich symbolism and hidden understandings of the medieval psyche. To gain a better understanding of the fringes of the Psalter World Map, and beyond that to gain a better understanding of the snapshot of time in which this artifact was created, I examined two major aspects at the edges of this *mappaemundi*. The first area I examined is the outer circle of the world, which includes multiple circular figures along the perimeter depicting twelve winds, all with humanistic faces in the center. This outer circle also includes different words that I examined. I also considered the "otherworldly

3. Unfortunately, due to a cyber-attack, this detailed record of the Psalter world map is currently unavailable at the time of publication for this article. The source I retrieved this information from cited this site, and so I too am citing the original location for this information.

4. For a more in-depth exploration of the contents in BL Add. MS 28681, see *Nigel Morgan's Early Gothic Manuscripts (II) 1250-1285* (London, 1988), pp. 82-5. Heather Wacha and Lauralee Brott also address the connection between the Psalter World Map and the other contents of the psalter in their article "Reframing the World in BL, Add. MS 28681." *Imago Mundi*, vol. 72, no. 2, 2020, pp. 148-62, https://doi.org/10.1080/03085694.2020.1748374. Accessed 30 March 2024.

humanoids"[5] beyond the Nile River, depicted at the bottom right-hand portion of the map. These aspects of the Psalter World Map are each symbolic in different ways, and they each provide insight into the medieval psyche.

FIGURE 1: PSALTER WORLD MAP. © BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD ADD. 28681, F.9R

5. "Monsters" is a deeply nuanced term that has been haphazardly tossed around in medieval scholarship. To remain sensitive to this kind of terminology, I have elected to use an alternative, more generic phrase instead.

Around the most distant circle of the earth on the Psalter World Map, there are twelve spherical shapes placed apart in equidistant fashion around the world's circumference. The spheres at the East (top), West (bottom), North (left), and South (right) are noted by their beige shade, and their slightly larger size as compared to the smaller, blue-gray spheres. Each of these spheres includes a humanoid face inside, displaying pursed lips as if they are blowing air. The four beige spheres represent both the four cardinal directions and the four primary winds of the earth, which Mirka Grčić's refers to as "windmills" (Grčić 29). There is also writing along the circumference of the outer circle that reads:

> Subsolanus (eastern); Ve[n]tus Eurus (east-southeast); Ventus Euronothus (south- southeast); Anster vel Nothus (southern); Libonothus (south-southwest); Ve[n]t[us] Aufricin[us] (west-southwest); Ventus Zaphirus (western); Vent[us] Corus (northwest); Ve[n]t[us] Circi[us] (north-northwest); Ve[n]tus Septe[n] trion[alis] (northern); Aquilo (northeast); Ve[n]t[us] Wultur[us] (east-northeast wind). (29-30)

While Grčić makes a compelling argument for the spheres being windmills, it seems there is something more to them. In her in-depth study on medieval wind diagrams and cosmology, Barbara Obrist comments on the nature of the presence of winds on medieval maps, stating "winds always remained a problem with respect to the order of nature and had, as it were, a basic dual character and role" (37). Obrist explains that the winds were viewed as both irregular and, at times, violent, and that in Western cosmology irregularity was, at times, associated with violence and irrationality, and by proxy sometimes associated with evil (37). However, these same winds are the ones that would fill sails and allow for necessary seafaring travel, and in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries the cardinal winds were the "foremost regulators of spatial and temporal cosmic order," keeping the other winds represented here as the smaller, blue-gray spheres, regulated and in order (73). What's more, around the time of the making of the Psalter World Map, the winds were seen as "direct agents of God, carrying out his will, sometimes as messengers, namely angels, sometimes as spiritual creatures subordinate to angels" (76).

In the dichotomy between the four cardinal winds and the other winds between them, there is a clear tension between control and chaos. It is a precarious balance to be held within one space upon the map, and this is only one interpretation of many possibilities. Here on the fringes of the Psalter World Map we see a symbol with multiple interpretations, each of them seeming to work together and against each other to create a complex meaning overall. These spheres can serve more than one purpose at the same time; they do not need to be confined to only windmills or only representations of the

cardinal directions. Instead, they may also represent the delicate balance between order and chaos and how those two forces might exist together in the same space within the world. These spheres might also represent irregularity and by proxy evil, while also representing elements of the natural world that may act as agents of God. As we will see with the creatures at the bottom of the *mappaemundi*, as well as the otherworldly humanoids on the other side of the Nile, this map is full of liminal elements that cannot be defined by one category. Instead, there is a duality to each of these elements, which may comment upon the mutability of human nature.

Van Duzer comments upon the "surprisingly malevolent expression" of the West Wind and notes the careful positioning of this wind in relation to the wyverns[6] directly below (181). He also notes that the darkened expression of the West Wind is juxtaposed to the East Wind, which lies closest to Christ at the top of the map. Here, the East Wind is positioned under Christ, at the top of the sphere and the West Wind is at the bottom, directly above the wyverns. Because there is great significance hidden behind these illustrations, the positionality of the figures in relation to one another and to aspects of the *mappaemundi* are important. When Mittman suggests maps are all about relationships, he means that in order for one place to have meaning, we must examine first how it is placed in relation to other areas and aspects of the map (42). What then does the positionality of these winds to Christ and the creatures at the bottom of the map tell us?

Starting first with the figure of the West Wind, or zephyr, at the bottom of the map, it is clear that the expression presented is, indeed, a much different one than those we see from all of the other spheres. The eyebrows are downturned in a sort of frightful furrowing and, while time has slightly distorted the sphere's mouth, we can tell that it is actively blowing wind by the marking on the face's cheeks. The mouth may seem upturned, but on the left corner of the mouth, it looks as though there is a marking that may resemble a fang protruding from it, which further alludes to a hellish appearance. In his study, Grčić notes that "the lower part of the painting presents an underground world dominated by two conflicting two-legged feathered dragons, as symbols of trickery and hatred" (30). The sphere's malevolence is such because of its proximity to what might be considered hell upon the map. Van Duzer also comments upon these wyverns, stating that they "allude to evil" partially because of their proximity to the malevolent West Wind. Similar wyverns can be seen in Andrea Bianco's mappae mundi of 1436 as well as Thomasin von Zirclaere's *Der welsche Gast*, which is dated to 1256, and they are designed to indicate the presence of hell (Van Duzer 181). On the Psalter List Map, the map on

6. Wyverns are the dragon-like creatures at the bottom of the map.

the verso of the Psalter World Map, Christ's feet can be seen standing upon the head of the two wyverns, likely indicating Christ's triumph over death and hell, and marking his power and superiority to these hellish creatures, and thus hell itself.

On the other side of the map, the East Wind's more benevolent and peaceful expression may be so not only because it is the direction which the sun rises from, but also because of its proximity to Christ and the heavens above. Symbolically speaking, it makes sense that the directions in which the sun, a representation of light and goodness, rises and sets is significant, and so to see a more sinister wind expression placed strategically on the lower fringes of the map tells us that the darkness that comes once the sun sets is directly correlated to the evils and dangers of the lower half of the map: a potential allusion to hell. Here, proximity and placement of specific creatures and expressions play a significant role in our understanding of the Psalter World Map as a whole.

It is interesting, then, that Grčić also comments upon the presence of many spherical shapes beyond the winds as a representation of the perfection of God's creation (29). We see the halo around Christ's head and the angel's heads, the circular shape of the world itself, the circle within the heart of the map, which is the holy city of Jerusalem, the circle representing the Garden of Eden placed "as a ladder to heaven," and finally the T-O map held within the left hand of Christ[7] all within the scope of this *mappaemundi* (Dora 292). The winds also fall into this circular category and share this continual perfection with no beginning and no end. This shape harkens back to Revelation 22:13, which states "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last" (KJV). Just as the circle, the Christian God has no beginning or ending point. He is continual, and in his nature of never having a starting or stopping point, he is perfection. In this sense, the circle is meant to also represent that same perfection that has no beginning and no end. How, then, can the circle that makes up the West Wind be perfect and somehow represent the evil that is positioned directly below it? The answer is simple: it does not have to be only one or the other. Like human nature, the sphere can represent multiple things at once, making it liminal and transitional.

Beyond the Nile River on the bottom right-hand section of the Psalter World Map, there are fourteen humanoid figures, some of which possess bizarre, otherworldly qualities. According to Mirko Grčić, Conrad Miller identified all fourteen of these creatures based on descriptions he studied from sources originating from both Pliny and Solinus. Miller's list of creatures is as follows:

> 1. [Phanesii] - Panotti, a people with huge ears with which they can cover themselves;

7. Van Duzer states that this is a "symbol of power" (181).

2. [Sine naribus] - People without noses, whose faces are weakly expressed;
3. [Gens ora concreta] - People with other mouths, who feed themselves by drinking through a reed tube;
4. [Gentes carent lingua] - People without tongues, use nodding and gestures to talk;
5. [Psambari] - People without ears;
6. [Marmini Ethiopes] - Mauritanians or maritime Ethiopians - people with four eyes, and therefore very accurate in archery;
7. [Sciapod / Monoculi] - People with one very large foot and one eye, lying on their back and use their foot as an umbrella;
8. [Amyctreae] (Gens labro prominente) - People with oversized lower lips used for face protection from solar heat;
9. [Blemmye] - People who have eyes and mouths on their chests;
10. [Oculis in humeris] - Epiphagi, people without a head with eyes on their shoulders;
11. [Trocodites] - Troglodytes, inhabitants of caves who eat wild animals and snakes;
12. [Artobatitis] - People who walks on all four legs;
13. [Anthropophagi] - Cannibals;
14. [Antropophagic Cynocephales] – Cannibals with dog heads (Grčić 42-43).

From these descriptions of the otherworldly creatures, it is impertinent to note the liminal state in which each of them finds themselves. They are not entirely beast or monster, and not entirely human either. They reside in a threshold space between man and monster, which seems to be a recurring theme in medieval literature.[8] In his study on medieval misericords, Paul Hardwick looks at depictions of the Irish "Wild Man," whose character can "manifest not only Otherness, but also potentially mutability for good or ill" (140). This figure is not only man, but it is wild and untamed as well, being both wild and man, yet not wholly one or the other. He rests in between, much like the otherworldly creatures seen on the Psalter World Map. Hardwick goes on to analyze this figure, stating in general about these creatures: "the part-human hybrids may well

8. Consider figures like Grendel, Beowulf, and Grendel's mother. In Old English, contradictory and ambiguous phrases are used to describe these figures. For example, Grendel's mother is called ides, or "lady" in a sense that she is a woman with a high social standing, yet she also displays monstrous qualities that are not considered to be the typical behavior of a "lady" of a court. In this way, Grendel's mother is a paradox of sorts, inhabiting the humanistic lady and the monstrous within her one form. She and the otherworldly creatures on the Psalter World Map, are liminal.

interrogate the very definition of the line between man and beast. When these hybrids are present in a devotional context, whether that be a misericord or a manuscript, it is surely their symbolic function which is paramount" (147). Much like the significance of the symbolism of the winds, the wyverns, and the figure of Christ both being outside and a part of the map as a whole, there is more to these otherworldly creatures than meets the eye. The significance of these creatures is in what they represent in their very nature and within their proximity to other aspects of the map.

Considering the liminality and mutable nature of these otherworldly figures, it seems as though they may have helped a medieval audience make more sense of the wide, unknown world. The fringes of the map were, as Mittman states, a place to shun the undesirable outcasts of society, especially when we examine these "undesirables" in relation to the center of the map, which stands as a holy place (41). There is a juxtaposition present between the fringes and the center of the map, where the wondrously strange and the divine reside respectively. If we follow Mittman's suggestion to read this map in stages, looking first at the inner ring and then working our way outwards, we see even clearer the distinction between the divine center and the dangerous edges. When dealing with these strange creatures, they are a mingling of human and monster, or the socially acceptable and unacceptable. It is no secret that medieval thought found a direct correlation to inner sin and outward appearance, thus furthering the idea that these otherworldly creatures were sinful in nature. This train of thought would also lend itself as further evidence to the fact that these creatures were strategically placed at the lower fringes of the map, far away from Jerusalem and Christ, and close to what might be hell. These creatures, in the end, may serve as manifestations of the anxieties of inner sin being displayed in an outward fashion and also as an exploration of the duality of human nature, which, at times, is fueled by reason and sometimes by animalistic passions.

After closely examining each of these aspects on the fringes of the Psalter World Map, their connection and their relationship with the English psyche can be addressed. In his introduction to *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England*, Asa Mittman notes that the medieval population widely defined themselves through "dependent differentiation," or defining themselves through their differences to others (5). However, understanding also that medieval *mappaemundi* are all about relationships and how certain aspects and places are set in relation to one another, medieval people also defined themselves through proximity or distance to certain locations, and thus ideas that these aspects of the map hold symbolically. In Yi-fu Tuan Topophilia, Tuan notes that humans tend to view the self as the center, which adds to a "we/they" mentality, where "we" are centrally located, and "they," or the "other," is outside of the center. As these "others" are positioned further and

further from the center, they "lose human attributes in proportion as they are removed from the center" (Tuan 30-31). On this particular map, England itself is on the lower fringes, across the way from creatures like blemmye and anthropophagi who are displaced from the center and thus gain monstrous qualities, and who are also positioned near the malevolent-looking West Wind that does not lie too far away from the wyverns on the bottom of the page. England is positioned far closer to these liminal edges and further away from the center of the map, away from the holy city of Jerusalem, from Eden, and from Christ sitting atop the entire map. This distance certainly speaks volumes on how the English felt about their distance to the holy within and beyond this world, and the physical placement of England on the Psalter World Map both allowed for an exploration of these anxieties, but also reinforced them as well.

In their book, *Maps: Finding our Place in the World*, James Akerman and Robert W. Karrow comment upon the practice of mapping the imaginary and claims that these maps are "emblems of our desire to know and possess . . . the true, the beautiful, and the good, those treasures that so often elude us in real life. Our job as readers is to recognize these maps for what they are: fantasies about . . . our quest for knowledge itself" (270). The quest for knowledge is nothing new to the human condition. Humans are designed to question, to make sense of the world around them, and to try and understand how they fit within the scheme of it all. Ultimately, it is quite plausible that the English audience that created and gazed upon the Psalter World Map, particularly those keeping a scribal tradition or those wealthy enough to commission such work and literate enough to read the extensive rubrics paired with some *mappaemundi*, were filled with questions and anxieties concerning the world at large and their place in it (Woodward 286).[9] They were acutely aware of their distance from Christ, both in the physical distance from the holy site of Jerusalem to their distance to Christ through the world and the cosmos separating them. The medieval *mappaemundi* was a safe, controlled environment where medieval people could wrestle with, and solidify, their anxieties of being placed on the fringes of the world, and it was a place to explore the liminality that is inherent to the human condition. What we ultimately see from the Map Psalter is a complex, multi-layered exploration and expression of a community's place, fears, and understanding of their relationships with the rest of the world.

9. For a more exhaustive study on medieval *mappaemundi* and their intended audience, see David Woodward's chapter in The History of Cartography, Volume 1, pp. 286-370. Much like Woodward states, the intended audience for medieval *mappaemundi* was entirely dependent upon the specific type of map in question, and an exploration of that topic is so vast and nuanced that it cannot be explored at the length that is required for this issue here.

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