

Part I

Representations of Europe  
through the Centuries



# Mapping Britain's View of Europe

## The Theological Cartography of the Anglo-Saxon *Mappa Mundi*

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### 1. Introduction

Competing verbal and visual »imaginaries« of Britain have contributed to the acrimonious political debates among the populace preceding and following Britain's referendum decision in 2016 to withdraw from EU-membership.<sup>1</sup> Nationalist imaginaries of sovereign Britain as this »sceptred isle«, »this precious stone set in a silver sea« (*Richard II*, Act 2, scene 1),<sup>2</sup> an island set-apart, bounded by the white cliffs of Dover, have sharply contrasted with federalist imaginaries of Britain adorned in the EU stars, conjoined to its continental neighbours by the Channel Tunnel.<sup>3</sup>

This paper will reflect on the deep historical roots of this debate by considering the oldest extant map of Britain and Europe produced in the British Isles. The Anglo-Saxon map is an 11th-century AD depiction of the inhabited world (*oecumene*), often referred to as the Anglo-Saxon *mappa mundi* (British Library Cotton Tiberius B.V.1, folio 56v).<sup>4</sup> In line with the monastic

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1 For critical definitions of the imaginary, see Pezzoli-Olgiati 2015, 18–27. This article is informed by Charles Taylor's definition of the »social imaginary« as »the way ordinary people ›imagine‹ their social surroundings [...] carried in images, stories, and legends«; Taylor 2002, 106.

2 Shakespeare/Forker 2002 (1595), 245–248.

3 See Küng 2020, 199–204.

4 [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton\\_MS\\_Tiberius\\_B\\_V/1](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton_MS_Tiberius_B_V/1) (accessed August 23, 2021).

provenance of this map, to be discussed in more detail below, the reading strategy that will be used in this paper seeks to tease out multiple layers of meaning, analogous to a form of *lectio divina*, particularly attentive to the »letter« and the »spirit« of this graphic text.<sup>5</sup>

Our analysis will begin with a description of the map's pictorial design, focusing on the depiction of the island of Britannia and its spatial relationship with the continent of Europe. What insights might this provide into its Anglo-Saxon designer's ideological perspective on Britannia's relationships with Europe? The second layer of meaning builds upon the first, and centres on how an 11th-century AD Anglo-Saxon monk might have been taught to read this map. How did the map's pairing with a geographical text in this codex, Priscian's Latin translation of Dionysius of Alexandria's *Periēgēsis* (folios 57r–73r), inform how a monk was taught to read the surface level of this map (*historia*), and so interpret Britannia's spatial relationship with Europe? The third and culminating layer of meaning will centre on the »spirit« of this map, specifically its analogical sense. We will consider how this map offered its monastic reader/viewer a privileged God's-eye perspective on the created order, sensitive to Benedictine traditions of *mappae mundi* and contemplative vision, that afforded a normative, divine status to the spatial depiction of Britannia and Europe on this map.

A sensitive engagement with these multiple layers of meaning will provide insights into the rich »theological cartography« of the Anglo-Saxon *mappa mundi*.<sup>6</sup> To what extent might this map's imaginary of the relationships between Britain and Europe continue to carry normative significance in contemporary political debate?

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5 For an overview of multiple layers of meaning in patristic and medieval scriptural interpretation see de Lubac 2010 (1959); Robertson 2011, and more specifically for Anglo-Saxon exegesis, exemplified by Bede, see DeGregorio 2010, 133; Ward 1998, 41–87.

6 The term »theological cartography« is adopted from Terkla 2013, 162 (who abbreviates it to »theography«). Terkla uses the term to refer to Hugh of St Victor's pedagogical approach (12th century AD). Attentive study of the *historia* of a drawn map could serve as a starting point for a monastic student's inner mapping of the soul's ascent through succeeding layers of allegorical, tropological and analogical meaning, and ultimately to know Christ, as true wisdom (*sapientia*). In the present study »theological cartography« denotes the rich layers of theological meaning communicated by a drawn *mappa mundi* interpreted according to the letter and the spirit, *historia* and *anagogia*.

## 2. The ideology of the Anglo-Saxon *mappa mundi*

### 2.1. Date and provenance of the map

Patrick McGurk's palaeographical study of the Latin and Old English insular script in this manuscript concludes that »Tiberius [Codex Tiberius B.V.1] was written at one scriptorium and mostly by one scribe« (c. 1025–1050 AD).<sup>7</sup> Although the *mappa mundi* (folio 56v) was one of the last items to be added to the codex, he concludes that it was also likely produced by the codex's main scribe, albeit in a smaller font, so as to fit the legends onto the map.<sup>8</sup> An early-11th century date is consistent with the latest dateable portions of annalistic sections contained in the codex (e.g. the itinerary of Archbishop Sigeric's journey from Canterbury to Rome in 990 AD). In all probability this richly illustrated, deluxe codex was produced at a scriptorium in one of the prominent cathedral minsters in the south of England (Canterbury, Glastonbury, or Winchester) for use in the monastic community residing there.<sup>9</sup> The date and provenance of the map, plausibly originating from a medieval (Benedictine) monastic community, cohere closely with the reading strategies applied to the map in this paper.<sup>10</sup>

### 2.2. Drawn and written sources of the Anglo-Saxon *mappa mundi*

Dan Terkla reminds interpreters that medieval »drawn and painted maps were based on earlier drawn and painted maps and, like those earlier maps, on written texts.«<sup>11</sup> It is plausible, as suggested by Evelyn Edson, that the scribe who produced this map utilised a larger and more detailed wall map as a model, given the large amount of detail (ghostly traces of Roman provinces, rivers and islands) that are included but remain unlabelled.<sup>12</sup> Most likely

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7 McGurk/Dumville/Godden/Knock 1983, 30.

8 McGurk/Dumville/Godden/Knock 1983, 25–30.

9 See Edson 1997, 74 and Barber 2006, 4, who opt for Christ Church Canterbury, as more tentatively do McGurk/Dumville/Godden/Knock 1983, 7; Howe 2008, 157; Appleton 2018, 276–277 and Terkla 2019, 58–62.

10 Ford 2016, 60, 62–70. Ford discusses the »semiotics of reading« of Codex Tiberius B.V.1, and how monks in an 11th-century Benedictine monastic community might read its text and illustrations as »an object of non-liturgical contemplation« (67).

11 Terkla 2019, 45.

12 Edson 1997, 77.

the exemplar used by the scribe of the Anglo-Saxon map originated from a classical Roman map of the *oecumene* copied and revised by Carolingian scribes during the 9th or 10th century AD.<sup>13</sup>

One of the principal literary sources for the majority of the place names and their spatial positioning on the Anglo-Saxon map is Orosius's *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* (c. 416–417 AD), its traces even detected in the duplication of some landmarks (e. g. the Taurus mountains on either side of Noah's ark) that Orosius referred to more than once.<sup>14</sup> Orosius's apologetic history opened with a written survey of the geography of the *oecumene* (Asia, Europe, and Africa), viewed »as if from a watchtower«, to orientate the reader.<sup>15</sup> Another key literary source is the Bible, with the Anglo-Saxon map depicting a gap in the Red Sea where the Israelites crossed during the Exodus (Ex 14–15), and paying particular attention to place names in the Holy Land as well as an array of Mesopotamian toponyms, including the evocatively apocalyptic Gog and Magog (Revelation 20:7–9 echoing Ezekiel 38–39).

### 2.3. The map's ideology illustrated by its depiction of Britannia and Europe

The Anglo-Saxon map of the *oecumene* is oriented with east at the top, and depicts the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa surrounded by the Ocean, in the orientation of a simple T-O schematic map, familiar from illustrations in Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* (fig. 1).<sup>16</sup>



Fig. 1: T-O map. Schematic diagram (map) of the *oecumene* depicting Asia, Europe and Africa and the encircling Ocean.<sup>17</sup>

13 See Barber 2006, 5; Terkla 2019, 58–62 and Harvey 1991, 21.

14 See Fear 2010; Bateley 1980; Foys 2007 and Kupfer 2019, 22–23, fig. 2.

15 Fear 2010, 35.

16 See Harley/Woodward 1987, 296–297, who refer to T-O maps as a tripartite type of *map-pa mundi*; Pinto 2016, 122 counts in excess of seven hundred T-O maps extant in medieval manuscripts, often used to illustrate relevant sections in Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* and *De natura rerum*.

17 See Harley/Woodward 1987, 297. The image is taken from a printed version of Isidore of



Fig. 2: The Anglo-Saxon *mappa mundi*, British Library Codex Tiberius B.V.1, folio 56v, c. 1025–1050 AD, Canterbury?, 21 × 17 cm. © British Library Board, Cotton Tiberius B.V. Part 1, folio 56v.

On the Anglo-Saxon map, the spherical *oecumene* has been distorted by fitting it into a rectangular frame, which has also greatly reduced the depiction of the encircling Ocean. Mountains are shown in green, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Nile are drawn in red, whilst cities are named and often sketched with symbols of fortresses or castles (fig. 2).<sup>18</sup>

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Seville's work; for the source see [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:T\\_and\\_O\\_map\\_Guntherus\\_Ziner\\_1472.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:T_and_O_map_Guntherus_Ziner_1472.jpg) (accessed August 23, 2021).

18 See McGurk/Dumville/Godden/Knock 1983, 79–87.

Four aspects of this map's layout and inscriptions are particularly illuminating for an understanding of the Anglo-Saxon scribe's (implicit) ideological perspective on the relationships between Britannia and Europe.<sup>19</sup> First, despite being drawn in Britain in the 11th century AD, the spatial location of Britannia is assimilated to a Roman imperial perspective on the island, copied over from the map's exemplar. Nicholas Howe has traced this same ideological perspective in Bede (*Ecclesiastical History* I.1.14–15, c. 731 AD),<sup>20</sup> who shares this cartographic orientation of locating Britannia at the »north-west«. Howe explains:

Placing the island of Britain in the northwest – rather than referring to Rome as standing in the southeast – follows from the practice of Roman writers who used the vantage of their capital city to orient themselves in the world. Bede looks at his homeland not as the center of the world, as is so often the case with nationalist or protonationalist writers, but as the far periphery of a region mapped from Rome.<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, despite adopting a Roman-imperial perspective on Britannia's north-western peripheral location, the island's marginal status at the edges of the *oecumene* is tempered somewhat in comparison with other medieval *mappae mundi*. In particular, Britannia is enfolded closer to the continent of Europe on the Anglo-Saxon map, in part by stretching the corners of a circular map to fit a rectangular frame. This layout lessens the sense that Britannia, like »furthest Thule« (*ultima Thule*, Vergil, *Georgics* 1.25–31), is adrift from the continent in the frame of the encircling Ocean, in contrast to the depictions of the Albi and Silos Beatus maps (figs. 3–5).<sup>22</sup>

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19 See Harley 2001, 53, on reading the ideological perspective and power dynamics of maps: »Maps are never value-free images [...]. Both in the selectivity of their content and in their signs and styles of representation maps are a way of conceiving, articulating, and structuring the human world which is biased towards, promoted by, and exerts influence upon particular sets of social relations.«

20 Colgrave/Mynors 1969, 14–15.

21 Howe 2008, 105.

22 For a discussion of Greek and Roman sources on the island of Thule, often glimpsed but unreachable, as the proverbial northern limit of the *oecumene* in Greek and Roman authors since Pytheas (c. 320 BC), see Romm 1992, 156–171 and Cunliffe 2001, 116–133.



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Fig 3: *Mappa mundi d'Albi*, Médiathèque Pierre-Amalric, Rés. MS 115 (29), folio 57v, 8th century, Spain/France. Britannia is situated as a circular island cut-off from Europe in the Ocean (bottom left).<sup>23</sup>

23 Source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/1/18/Mappa\\_mundi\\_dAlbi.png/624px-Mappa\\_mundi\\_dAlbi.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/1/18/Mappa_mundi_dAlbi.png/624px-Mappa_mundi_dAlbi.png) (accessed August 23, 2021).



Fig. 4: Silos Beatus world map, BL Additional MS. 11695, folios 39v-40r, 1106 AD, Spain. Britannia is a schematised rectangle in the encircling frame of Ocean (bottom left). © British Library Board, Add MS 11695, folios 39v–40r.<sup>24</sup>

Thirdly, the implicit ideological perspective of the map's scribe can be glimpsed by the choices made in the inclusion and omission of topographical details selected from the exemplar (wall) map. Whilst a significant amount of topographical information is included on the island of Britannia, including regions (*Cantia*, *Britannia*, *Camri*, *Morenpergas*), cities (*Lundona*, *Wintonia*) and adjoining islands (*Orcades*), by contrast great swathes of European territory in Gaul, Germany and Spain are ignored, leaving glaring blank spaces and omissions in the record of named cities and geographical features (fig. 6).

24 The full, digitised manuscript of the Silos Beatus codex is accessible at [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add\\_MS\\_11695](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_11695).



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Fig. 5: Anglo-Saxon *mappa mundi* (detail), British Library Codex Tiberius B.V, folio 56v, 1025–50 AD, Canterbury?. Britannia is more accurately sketched and positioned closer to the continent of Europe. © British Library Board, Cotton Tiberius B.V. Part 1, folio 56v.



Fig. 6: Anglo-Saxon *mappa mundi* (detail), British Library Codex Tiberius B.V, folio 56v, 1025–50 AD, Canterbury? Topographical details are sparser on the continent of Europe. © British Library Board, Cotton Tiberius B.V. Part 1, folio 56v.

Furthermore, one of the few geographical indicators that is present in this region is an imperialistic reference to territory in northern Gaul (i. e. Brittany) named as *sudbryttas* or south-Britain. Martin Foys insightfully comments:

The very form of the inscription reveals much about the Anglo-Saxon attitudes behind it; *sudbryttas* contains a unique use of the Anglo-Saxon Þ [thorn], one of the only distinctive Old English characters in the text of the map. The literal meaning of the inscription »south Britain« assumes a somewhat colonialist attitude towards Brittany, and onomastically centres the perspective of the region squarely on England. [...] In this sense, the *mappamundi* eerily refuses to recognize the very regions that will directly enable the Norman conquest of Anglo-Saxon England, only decades (perhaps less) after the map was made.<sup>25</sup>

The increased scale of Britannia on the Anglo-Saxon map signals this island's importance for its scribal designer, even to the extent of denoting its territorial claims over European regions to the south under the ambit of its reign (*sudbryttas*).

Fourthly, by contrast, the richly detailed depiction of Scandinavia on the Anglo-Saxon *mappa mundi*, notably the inlets of the coastline and the shape of Jutland, plausibly reflect the political and mercantile importance of Britain's trade with Scandinavia in the 11th century AD (fig. 6).<sup>26</sup> The striking topographical detail of Britannia and Scandinavia suggest that the exemplar map may even have been supplemented by contemporary maritime knowledge based on trading routes (sea charts?),<sup>27</sup> in line with the updating of Orosius's geographical section on northern Europe in the Old English Orosius (c. 900 AD), which included additional extracts from seafaring accounts by two sailors Othere and Wulfstan, known to the English court of King Alfred (c. 890s AD).<sup>28</sup>

This initial pictorial analysis reveals tensions and ambiguities in the Anglo-Saxon scribe's ideological perspective. Whilst accepting as normative

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25 Foys 2003, 8–9.

26 See Appleton 2018, 287–305.

27 On extant sea/portolan charts of the 12th/13th centuries AD see Hiatt 2011, 146–157.

28 See Appleton 2018; Bately 1980.

the peripheral location of Britannia at the north-western edge of the *oecumene*, copied over from Roman-imperial ideology expressed in the exemplar map and imbibed from Anglo-Saxon transmission of classical geographies and histories, such marginality and insignificance is also protested against in the finer details. Britannia is not adrift in the frame of the Ocean but nestled closer to the continent where rival kingdoms in Gaul, *Germania* and *Spania* are airbrushed out of history, as Britannia asserts cartographic claim to the southern region of Brittany (*subryttas*), whilst simultaneously turning its gaze outwards, and northwards, to contemporary trading partners in Scandinavia.

### 3. *Historia*: Reading the Anglo-Saxon *mappa mundi* with an accompanying text

#### 3.1. The genre and contents of Codex Tiberius B.V.1

The Anglo-Saxon *mappa mundi* does not exist in isolation, but rather is an integral component of a rich and complex codex, whose contents were chosen to educate a monastic audience. Codex Tiberius B.V.1 is most helpfully classified as a type of *computus* manuscript.<sup>29</sup> Evelyn Edson traces the origins and development of this genre, centred on the calculation (*computus*) of time, specifically the calculation of the future dates of Easter and the moveable Christian feasts dependent upon this date.<sup>30</sup> Medieval *computus* manuscripts tend to contain a core of relevant calendrical and astronomical data, notably Easter (or *Paschal*) tables based on the alignment of solar and lunar calendars across a series of 19-year cycles, and tables relevant to this task and its correct calculation to ensure that Easter and all the Christian festivals were celebrated on the correct date and in harmony with the wider Roman Church. The calculations and tables tended to be supplemented by extracts from leading calendrical scholars, notably the Anglo-Saxon polymath Bede and his seminal works on time, »On Time« (*De temporibus*, c. 703 AD) and »On the Reckoning of Time« (*De temporum ratione*, 725 AD).<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> See Ford 2016, 60–62.

<sup>30</sup> Edson 1997, 52–71.

<sup>31</sup> Kendall/Wallis, 2010; Wallis 2004, lxxi, notes that in Bede's *The Reckoning of Time* »[t]he calculation of Easter merges into a meditation upon the last things, a spiritual exercise

Codex Tiberius B.V.1 contains an anthology of *computus* documents, including a metrical calendar illustrated with the labours of each month (folios 3r–8v), tables with various lunar and solar calculations (folios 9r–11v; 12v–13r), tables for calculating Christian feast-days including Easter over a 19-year cycle (folios 14v–15r), extracts from Bede’s *De temporibus* (folios 16v–17r), and another Anglo-Saxon treatise on chronology, astronomy and other natural phenomena by Aelfric (*De temporibus anni*, c. 995 AD, folios 24r–28v).<sup>32</sup>

This core of computistical texts has been expanded in Codex Tiberius B.V.1, in what Faith Wallis has described as a »centripetal« model of a *computus* manuscript,<sup>33</sup> which has attracted to this core of texts a wider body of texts and tables on related calendrical, astronomical, geographical, and annalistic material, also concerned with a fuller understanding of space and time in the Christian order of creation. Two of the notable additions to this codex are classic school-texts recounting astronomical knowledge in verse, with the inclusion of a Latin translation of Aratus’s *Phaenomena* (c. 276–274 BCE, folios 32v–49v), and a classic school-text of geographical knowledge in verse, a Latin translation of Dionysius’s *Periēgēsis* (c. 117–138 AD, folios 57r–73r).<sup>34</sup>

Aratus’s epic poem on the constellations had become the standard school-text for the study of astronomy since the Hellenistic and Roman eras. Codex Tiberius B.V.1 includes a richly illustrated version of Cicero’s Latin translation, with colour figures of the constellations and *scholia* (fig. 7). The codex had even originally contained a constellational star map to accompany this text, sadly lost in the transmission history of the codex.

Dionysius’s *Periēgēsis* was a similarly popular school-text depiction of the *oecumene* in verse, replete with allusions to classical literature evoking a richly literary account of the known world. Strikingly, for the purposes of our study, Priscian’s Latin version of the *Periēgēsis* included in this codex is

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whose purpose was to rise through the contemplation of time to the perception of eternity.«

32 Consult [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton\\_ms\\_tiberius\\_b\\_v1\\_f002r](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_tiberius_b_v1_f002r) (accessed 23 August 2021) to view the relevant folios in the drop-down menu of the digitised copy of Cotton MS Tiberius B V.1.

33 Wallis 1985, 18; Ford 2016, 60–62.

34 Critical editions: Greek: Aratus’ *Phaenomena* see Kidd 1997; Dionysius’s *Periēgēsis* see Lightfoot 2014; Latin versions: Cicero’s *Aratea* see Pellacani 2015; Priscian’s *Periēgēsis* see van de Woestijne 1953.





Fig. 7: British Library Codex Tiberius B.V.1, folio 38v, 1025–50 AD, Canterbury?, text and illustration of the constellation Delphinus, from Cicero's Latin translation of Aratus's *Phaenomena*. © British Library Board, Cotton Tiberius B.V. Part 1, folio 38v.

explicitly prefaced, in red ink, with a paragraph that encourages the monastic students to read the text in tandem with the accompanying map of the *oecumene* contained in this codex, the *mappa mundi* on folio 56v:<sup>35</sup>

35 See the digitised image of folio 56v at: [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton\\_ms\\_tiberius\\_b\\_v1\\_f002r](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_tiberius_b_v1_f002r) (accessed 23 August, 2021).

Here begins the book, »Periegesis« by Priscian, grammarian of the city of Rome, professor of Caesarea [Africa], that is about the situation of the earth, gathered by him from the writings on ancient world maps; and to this work of three parts, that is to say, Asia, Africa, and Europe, there is painted a suitable (aptam) map in which the location of nations, mountains, rivers, islands and also wonders are accurately arranged.<sup>36</sup>

Although the map was not produced on the basis of the verbal description of the *oecumene* set out in Dionysius's *Periēgēsis* (or Priscian's Latin version of it), but rather shows closer affinities with the content of Orosius's *History*, nonetheless, the editor(s) of the *computus* codex selected this drawn map as a suitable (*aptam*) accompaniment to the study of the *Periēgēsis* for its monastic students. This mode of teaching geography/cosmography is in line with known Christian monastic pedagogy since the time of Cassiodorus who in his *Institutes of Divine and Secular Learning* (c. 530s–550s AD) set out guidelines for theological study enriched by classical scholarship for monks at his school in Vivarium, a manual which proved hugely influential in shaping medieval monastic curricula (*Institutes* I, xxv).<sup>37</sup> The principal impetus for the monks' study of geography is as an enhancement to their study of the scriptures: »I urge you [...] that it is useful to read through geographical writings so that you know the location of each place you read of in holy books.«<sup>38</sup> Some of the resources that Cassiodorus recommends to the monks for this purpose are a short text (*libellus*) by Julius Honorius entitled the *Cosmographia* and Dionysius of Alexandria's *Periēgēsis* and an associated map (*pinax*): »learn from Dionysius' briefly sketched *Map* where you may almost see with your own eyes what you heard of in the book mentioned above [by Julius Honorius].«<sup>39</sup> Students fired with an intense zeal for the subject are encouraged to progress to the detailed book (*codex*) of Ptolemy's *Geographia* whose vivid descriptions leave the impression that he was an inhabitant of all regions. The resultant geographical studies permit monastic students to undertake »virtual travel« of the *oecumene* in their minds: »Thus although you are in

36 Translated by Edson 1997, 75–76.

37 See Kupfer 2019, 18–19; Terkla 2019, 217.

38 Halporn/Vessey 2004, 157.

39 Halporn/Vessey 2004, 157.



one place (as monks ought to be) you may traverse mentally (*animo percuratis*) what others in their travels have collected with a great deal of effort«. <sup>40</sup>

The 11th-century AD Anglo-Saxon editor(s) of Codex Tiberius B.V.1 follow, in part, the pedagogical guidelines of Cassiodorus by including as a key geographical textbook in their *computus* codex a Latin version of Dionysius's *Periēgēsis* recounting the inhabited world in verse, accompanied by a suitable drawn map (folio 56v) to be read and studied in tandem with this text. This pairing of text and image sought to enable the monastic students to visualise their own »mental map« of the inhabited world, so as to orientate their reading of scripture through virtual travel whilst stable in their monastery.

### 3.2. *Historia*: Reading the *mappa mundi* guided by Priscian's version of the *Periēgēsis*

How might an Anglo-Saxon monastic student approach a reading of the *mappa mundi* in this codex? Where might such a monk begin to traverse this densely illustrated map, and how might this impact upon his understanding of the relationship between Britannia and Europe?

On the basis of Cassiodorus's recommendation, and developed further in the 12th century AD, we have firm evidence that medieval monastic students were taught geography with the aid of written descriptions of the *oecumene* in prose or verse complemented by drawn maps, often large wall-mounted maps, copies of which have largely survived in miniaturised reproductions in codices (as is the case for the Anglo-Saxon map). Hugh of St Victor's lectures entitled *Descriptio mappa mundi* (c. 1130 AD) were taught to his monastic students in the abbey school of St Victor, near Paris, complemented by a drawn wall map, the nearest extant example of which survives in a codex miniature in a 12th-century copy of Isidore's *Etymologies*. <sup>41</sup>

A crucial aspect of such a pedagogical approach was the creation of a *ductus* or »reading road« to guide the monastic students to traverse their

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40 Halporn/Vessey 2004, 158.

41 For more detail see the text of Hugh of St Victor's *Descriptio mappa mundi* with introduction and commentary by Gautier-Dalché 1988; see also Kupfer 2019, 24–30; Terkla 2013. For a colour reproduction of the *mappa mundi* in Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 10058, fol. 154, see Gautier-Dalché 1988, plate 1; Kupfer 2019, 25.

route through the depicted *oecumene* in manageable excursions.<sup>42</sup> In Hugh of St Victor's classes, the *magister* begins the virtual tour of the inhabited world with the encircling Ocean, before shifting to the interior, the centre of the map and the boundaries between the three continents (Asia, Africa, Europe), and from there to ordered sections within each of these continents.<sup>43</sup> The broad parameters of Hugh of St Victor's approach has affinities with earlier Hellenistic and Roman geographies in prose or verse form, including Strabo's sketch of the *oecumene* at the opening of his *Geographia*, and Dionysius's *Periēgēsis*. Dionysius begins his account by circumnavigating the Ocean and the seas, with a description of the four gulfs (26–168), before tracing his movements across each of the continents: Libya and Egypt (174–269), Europe (270–446) and Asia (620–1165), often returning to a fixed point, principally the Pillars of Hercules, from which to begin new circuits.<sup>44</sup>

How might the »reading road« (*ductus*) transmitted by Priscian's Latin verse description of the *oecumene*, shape an Anglo-Saxon monk's understanding of the relative spatial positions of Britannia and Europe on the accompanying *mappa mundi*? The first point to note is the ambiguous relationship between Britannia and the continent of Europe in the structural organisation of the »reading road« set out in the *Periēgēsis*. Although Britannia is discussed in a section positioned in-between the description of Libya and Egypt (i. e. Africa, 174–269) and Asia (620–1165), it is nonetheless disconnected from the section on the continent of Europe proper (270–446), situated as it is in the passages recounting the islands (447–619): first islands of the sea/Mediterranean (447–554) and then the islands of the Ocean (555–611). Accordingly, even before Britannia's description is read, we can see that structurally it is grouped with islands of the encircling Ocean, distinct from the continent of Europe.

The description of Britain in the *Periēgēsis* highlights the scale and liminality of the territory:

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42 On the concept of a *ductus* (from the verb *duco*, to lead or conduct on a way or road) as a key medieval approach to reading works of written or visual art see Carruthers 2010, 200: »*Ductus* is the way(s) that a composition, realizing the plan set within its arrangement, guides a person to its various goals, both in its parts and overall.«

43 See Kupfer 2019, 26–27.

44 See Lightfoot 2014, 13–22.

**Dionysius, *Periēgēsis*, 565–569**

**(Greek) (trans. Lightfoot)**

By the ocean's northern fringes  
other isles –

The twin Bretanides (δισσαί

νήσοι ἕασι Βρετανίδες)

– face the Rhine's mouth.

For its last eddies issue in that sea.

Enormous is their size: of all the isles,

None could with the Bretanides

compare.<sup>45</sup>

**Priscian, *Periēgēsis*, 577–581**

**(Latin) (trans. author)**

But there are other [isles], twins  
(*geminæ*),

near the northern shores of the  
Ocean,

the Britannides (*Britannides*),

see the mouths of the Rhine.

Here Tethys breaks through with  
a weary flow.

Scarcely an island in the world  
(*orbem*) could surpass these in  
expanse.<sup>46</sup>

Britain is described, strikingly, as a *pair* of islands (*geminæ* [...] *Britannides*), comparatively vast in scale (among the islands of the Ocean). For a monastic viewer of our *mappa mundi* these twin islands are identifiable as Britannia and Hibernia (fig. 5), although on the drawn map the former dwarfs the latter.<sup>47</sup> The lack of identifying labels in *Germania* on the *mappa mundi* hampers the viewer's attempt to pinpoint the relative position of Kent (*Cantia*) at the base of the triangle of Britain, as lying directly opposite the mouth of the Rhine on the continent (see Strabo, *Geographia* 1.4.3).<sup>48</sup> The verse description of the *Periēgēsis* encourages the monastic reader to simultaneously locate the British isles (plural) with reference both to the continent of Europe – the mouth of the Rhine – and to the northern periphery of the encircling Ocean. The British isles are related to, yet distinct from, the continent of Europe as islands of the encircling Ocean.

The twin isles of the Britannides are distinguished from the ultimate peripheral territory of *Thule*, however, unlike in some of the *Periēgēsis*'s own sources, notably Pytheas, which treat the British isles as a plurality of

45 Lightfoot 2014, 228–229.

46 Van de Woestijne 1953, 70.

47 Whilst the comparatively large size of Britannia as an island in the Ocean is frequently noted by patristic and medieval authors, other Anglo-Saxon writers, notably Bede, were influenced by Irish monastic traditions of the vast scale and paradisiacal nature of Ireland, as a land of »milk and honey«, extending far beyond the limits of Britain to the south. See Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.1; Colgrave/Mynors, 1969, 18–19.

48 Lightfoot 2014, 391.

islands more closely associated with and perhaps even including *Thule*.<sup>49</sup> Instead, Dionysius separates the isles of the Britains (565–569) from *Thule* (580–586), both in terms of nautical distance («Cleaving the ocean's path *much further on*/Your well-made ship would cross to Thule's isle») and by the insertion of a reference to another group of islands, closer to the mainland of Gaul, between the two sections (570–579). This section alludes to Strabo's description (*Geographia* 4.4.6) of a small island in the estuary of the Loire, inhabited by devotees of Dionysius (the *Periëgësis* author's patron deity).<sup>50</sup> The result is that Dionysius's account, like the *mappa mundi* itself, connects the island(s) of the Britains with Brittany (a location that the *mappa mundi* describes as *sudbryttas*).

An Anglo-Saxon monastic student, traversing the »reading road« of Priscian's Latin version of the *Periëgësis*, assisted by the visual aid of the *mappa mundi*, is left with a sense of the ambiguities of Britannia's spatial relationship to Europe. The isles of the Britains (notably effacing Hibernia's name and identity) are both a peripheral northern landmass of the encircling chaos waters of the Ocean, yet also pinpointed geographically with reference to *Germania* (the mouth of the Rhine) and Gaul (islands in Brittany). The British isles are located in the poet's verse description of Europe (and not Asia or Africa) but grouped more closely with the islands of the Ocean than the continent. In sum, Britannia is both related to continental Europe, yet distinct from it, as a twin-island of the Ocean.

#### 4. *Anagogia*: Reading the Anglo-Saxon *mappa mundi* from a Benedictine theological perspective

The final layer of reading will focus on an Anglo-Saxon monastic reader's interpretation of the »spiritual sense« of the *mappa mundi*, and more specifically its anagogical sense as affording a momentary glimpse of eternity, a God's-eye perspective on the created order, ordinarily privileged as the height of a soul's contemplative ascent.<sup>51</sup>

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49 Lightfoot 2014, 391.

50 Lightfoot 2014, 392; see Roller 2020.

51 De Lubac 2000 (1959), 180–181: »The anagogical sense is that which leads the thought of

Panoramic views of the whole created order had been linked with visions of heavenly ascent since the classical tradition (e. g. Plato's *Myth of Er* [*Republic* 614a–621d]; Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* [*De re publica* VI.9–26]; Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*).<sup>52</sup> These perspectives informed their readers of the limited and transitory extent of the earthly sphere of human sovereignty. Cicero, for example, writes (*De re publica* VI, 16):

When I gazed in every direction from that point [the Milky Way (Circle)], all else appeared wonderfully beautiful. [...] The starry spheres were much larger than the earth (*globus terrae*); indeed the earth itself seemed to me so small that I was scornful of our empire, which covers only a single point, as it were, upon its surface.<sup>53</sup>

Such visions were also among the most influential in shaping the cartographic imagination of antiquity and came to function, in part, as geographical and cosmological textbooks.<sup>54</sup>

In western Christian monastic tradition this God's-eye perspective, in which the whole created order could be seen in a single moment of time, was famously ascribed to the contemplative vision of St Benedict, in Gregory the Great's *Dialogues* (II, 35, c. 593/4 AD).<sup>55</sup> From the abbot's spatial position at the top of a tower (*specula*), his vision was raised still higher to contemplate the whole created order in a moment of time. Whilst praying during the dead of night, prior to the night office, Benedict saw a flood of light more brilliant than the noonday sun, followed by an even more wonderful thing (*mira res*): »[...] the whole world (*omnis mundus*) was gathered up before his eyes in what appeared to be a single ray of light (*velut sub uno solis radio collectus*).«<sup>56</sup> The theological significance of this account (*narratio*) is then teased out more fully in the dialogue (*explanatio*) that follows between Gregory and his deacon, Peter, who asks for an explanation as to

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the exegete ›upwards‹ [...] anagogic, i. e. upward leading, namely, toward heavenly things [...] pertains to the state of the life to come.«

52 See Emlyn-Jones/Preddey 2013, 462–489; Keyes 1928, 260–283; Stahl 1990.

53 Keyes 1928, 268–269.

54 See Eastwood 2007, 31–94 on the reception of Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* as an astronomical text in the Carolingian renaissance.

55 See Courcelle 1967.

56 Zimmermann 1959, 105; McGinn 1994, 451, footnote 265.

how anyone could see the whole created world at a glance. Gregory (*Dialogue* II, 35) explains that the soul or mind (*anima/mens*) which sees even a little of the light of the Creator is expanded (*expanditur in Deo*), standing above herself and above the world (*mundus*):

That the world (*mundus*) is said to have been gathered together before his eyes is not because heaven and earth was contracted (*non caelum et terra contracta est*) but because the intellectual soul (*animus*) of the one who saw was enlarged (*dilatatus*). He who is rapt in God can see everything that is beneath God without difficulty.<sup>57</sup>

The raptured soul can perceive the created world (*mundus*) from a God's-eye perspective, in all its limitations and transience, and more significantly catch a momentary glimpse of eternity.<sup>58</sup> De Vogüé notes the similarities and differences between Benedict's vision and that of Scipio's dream-vision.<sup>59</sup> Scipio was afforded a dream-vision of the Ptolemaic cosmos, perceived from the vantage-point of the ninth sphere of the fixed stars, from which to gaze down upon the lowly position of the earth amidst the planets and the attendant political limitations of Roman imperial pretensions. By contrast, Benedict is raised far beyond this, above himself, above the whole created order – heaven and earth – to glimpse »the uncircumscribed or unencircled Light« (*lumen incircumscriptum*) of the transcendent God.<sup>60</sup>

The monastic student's glimpse of the terrestrial *oecumene* in a single moment of time, afforded by the Anglo-Saxon *mappa mundi*, places the viewer in a partially analogous position to St Benedict and other contemplatives, privileged to receive a momentary glimpse of the whole created order

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57 McGinn 1994, 72, 451, footnote 268.

58 This image of the soul dilated/enlarged in the contemplative vision of God is also developed in Gregory's exegetical homilies on Ezekiel, notably on Ezekiel 40:16, interpreting the splayed windows in the Temple that admit a chink of light; see McGinn 1995, 154; Tomkinson 2008, 346–347.

59 De Vogüé 1993, 164–173.

60 On God as the boundless or unencompassed Light (*Lumen incircumscriptum*) in Gregory's theology see Butler 2003 (1926), 77–78: »The infinite divine Light is the figure under which he conceives God's Essence: man cannot look directly on It, but may see Its ray, subdued and indistinct, as a sunbeam passing through a chink into a darkened room« (77).



Fig. 8: Giovanni del Biondo, *Vision of Saint Benedict*, c. 1360, tempera and gold leaf on panel, 35.8 × 39.3 cm, Benedict's vision of the world depicted as a T-O map, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.<sup>61</sup>

(*mundus*), heaven and earth, in the divine light of the Creator, at the height of contemplative ascent (fig. 8). This anagogical layer of meaning of medieval *mappae mundi* is glimpsed in a variety of medieval texts and images, from the use of a *mappa mundi* in Beatus's manuscripts to depict John, the seer's vision from the heavenly throne room (Rev 4–5),<sup>62</sup> to Hugh of St Victor's use of *mappae mundi* as a complex and multifaceted pedagogical tool in the 12th century, notably in his complex visual treatises on the ark of Noah.<sup>63</sup>

61 Source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/94/Vision\\_of\\_St.\\_Benedict.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/94/Vision_of_St._Benedict.jpg) (accessed August 23, 2021). See Kupfer 2016, 159–161.

62 See Kupfer 2016, 55–66.

63 See Sicard 1993; Gautier Dalché 2009; Terkla 2013; Rudolph 2014.



This anagogical layer of meaning bestows a privileged weight of divine authority on the Anglo-Saxon *mappa mundi* for monastic viewers who are richly familiar with this account of contemplative ascent, especially if they are themselves Benedictine monks of Christ Church Canterbury. The cartographic depiction of the continents on our *mappa mundi* including the spatial relationships between Britannia and Europe, would accordingly be afforded a »normative« weight, seen as offering a privileged glimpse of the divinely created order, from a God's-eye perspective.

The monastic viewer is reminded that the map offers a privileged glimpse of the *oecumene* akin to how it is perceived by the Creator, an eternal gaze encompassing space and time. As a consequence, read anagogically this map portrays the history of salvation synchronically, presented before the monastic viewer's eyes in a single moment of time. All is spatially present: Noah's ark aground on Mount Ararat, the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt across the divinely separated waters of the Red Sea, the conquest of the land of Israel, the exile in Babylon, the ministry of Jesus in Galilee and Judea, culminating in Christ's Passion in Jerusalem at Easter – the central calendrical point for this *computus* manuscript. Necessarily, therefore, the *mappa mundi* does not stop with the resurrection at Easter, but its vision flows outward from this point to include the cycles of liturgical years that have followed down the centuries, enabling its monastic viewers to chart the spread of the gospel, continuing onwards, and outwards, and westwards in the missions of the apostles in whose footsteps the Latin monks tread, from Jerusalem to »the ends of the earth« (*ad ultimum terrae*; Acts 1:8), making disciples of »all nations« (*omnes gentes*; Mt 28:19–20).<sup>64</sup>

In this way, an Anglo-Saxon monk's spatial location in Britain is re-orientated by this map. A Benedictine monastery in Canterbury is not understood to be situated in an inconsequential peripheral location but rather in a culminating eschatological position of triumph, demonstrating the missionary success of the western Church, at the impetus of Pope Gregory, at having reached the north-western goal of »the ends of the earth«.

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64 See Terkla 2019, 62–67 on monastic readers tracing the missionary activities of the apostles in Acts with the aid of a *mappa mundi*, as well as following in their footsteps through »virtual travel«.



## 5. Conclusion: The »Theological Cartography« of the Anglo-Saxon *mappa mundi*

The »theological cartography« of the Anglo-Saxon *mappa mundi* offers rich layers of interpretative insight into imaginaries that over the centuries have informed Britain's self-perception as well as views of its relationship with Europe. The ideology of the Anglo-Saxon scribe who produced it in the 11th century AD resonates with familiar tensions: there is a concerted attempt to react against normative (Roman-imperial) cartography which has relegated Britannia to the north-western margins of the *oecumene* for a millennium, adrift in the frame of the Ocean. Instead, concerted attempts are made by this map designer to draw the island in closer, literally, to the continent, allied with Scandinavian trading partners and even asserting sovereign claims over Gaulish territories to the south. Its Benedictine monastic audience, guided by the »reading road« (*ductus*) afforded by the map's paired written text, Priscian's version of the *Periēgēsis*, is led structurally and textually to maintain a familiar tension and ambiguity in its surface level reading (*historia*) of the map. Britannia is aligned with Europe, yet spatially distinct from it, as an island of the Ocean. Yet viewed from the perspective of eternity, informed by the map's anagogical sense, Britannia's peripheral status is re-valued. In the map's privileged God's-eye view, Britannia is no longer perceived to have received a demeaning position on the terrestrial globe, but rather to have been afforded a culminating vocation prior to the eschaton, as integral to the missionary goal of the divine plan for all creation, for all eternity, that the gospel is preached »to the ends of the earth«.

Britain's contested contemporary relationship with Europe in the early decades of the 21st century continues to resonate with imaginaries already inscribed on this Anglo-Saxon map: an inherent sense of ambiguity and exceptionalism, with Britain both related to continental Europe yet distinct from it as an island of the (Atlantic) Ocean; assertive demonstrations of sovereignty reacting against perceived marginalisation; realignments of its priorities in seeking trading partners beyond the European continent. Yet, the Anglo-Saxon map can offer more than a cartographic origin-story for the historical roots of »Brexit«. Nobler insights can be gained by reflecting further upon the *mappa mundi's* anagogical sense, and the snapshot it provides of a divine perspective on the whole created order (*mundus*) – Europe and

Britain included – beheld in a single gaze. Bathed in the light of eternity, the transience and mutability of the continents and islands and their political pretensions are re-ordered as they were for Scipio. Miniaturised on a single folio leaf, the viewer is encouraged to place the *oecumene* in its true, divine, perspective, and to strive for the higher virtues so as to attain to the presence of the *Lumen incircumscriptum*.

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