

TITLE: *World Map of de Noha*

DATE: 1414

AUTHOR: *Pirrus de Noha*

DESCRIPTION: Claudius Ptolemy worked in Alexandria in the early and mid-second century A.D. and we know of him only through his writings on a variety of scientific subjects. Among these is the work known from the Arabic version of its title as the *Almagest*, which catalogues over a thousand stars, defining the position of each and explaining how to construct a celestial globe. His *Geographia* can be seen as a logical sequel. It gives the latitude and longitude of places, ideally from astronomical observation, as a basis for drawing maps of individual regions and of the whole world, and discusses possible ways of projecting the curved surface of the world on to the flat surface of a map. Ptolemy saw the world as a complete sphere, but the inhabited area as only a part of it, stretching south some 16 degrees beyond the Equator, north to about the Arctic Circle, east a little beyond Malaya, and bounded on the west by the Atlantic. Although his lists locate places by their geographical coordinates it is clear that these did not all come from immediate observation but were worked out from whatever information was available, such as accounts of journeys giving distances from one place to another; this means that their appearance of great accuracy is often spurious.

The oldest surviving manuscript of Ptolemy's Greek text was copied more than a thousand years after he wrote; it dates from the late 12th or early 13th century. Enough other copies survive from the 13th and 14th centuries to show that it was, perhaps had suddenly become, a popular work in the Byzantine Greek cultural world. Some, not all, of these manuscripts include maps, and of these there are two versions. In both versions there is a world map, but one has 64 regional maps while the other, following Ptolemy's text more literally, has 26. These maps may or may not have been compiled by Ptolemy himself. His book gives instructions for making the maps but does not say in so many words that he has actually drawn them. They may have been constructed from the text and added to the book by a copyist at any date between Ptolemy's own time and the earliest known manuscripts. There is also some reason to suppose that the world map was constructed separately from the regional maps of either version (*Book I, #119*).

It was a text with maps that was translated into Latin by Jacobus Angelus in about 1406 that first introduced Ptolemy's *Geographia* into Western Europe. Its impact is shown by the number of surviving 15th century manuscripts of the Latin version and by the succession of early printed editions. The first, at Vicenza in 1475, had no maps, but it was then published with maps at Bologna in 1477, Rome in 1478 (40) and 1490, Ulm in 1482 and 1486, and so on. It is shown too by the way that other world maps quickly assimilated elements from Ptolemy's. Thus the map shown herein that was copied by Pirrus de Noha in about 1414 to illustrate a quite different geographical text of the Roman period, the *Chorography* of the first century author Pomponius Mela (*Book I, #116*), takes from Ptolemy the following: its land-locked Indian Ocean, the shapes of Malaya and Sri Lanka (*Taprobana*), the Mediterranean Sea 20 degrees too long, the *Mons Lune* [Mountains of the Moon] as the source of the river Nile, no clear indication of the shape of central-southern Africa or the Far East, etc. This is an attempt to display only the *oikoumene* or known world, not an attempt to display those parts still unexplored.

Measuring 18 x 27 cm the de Noha parchment has been painted so that the oceans and seas are displayed in blue (the Red Sea is an exception and is shown in red), the mountains as symbolic sawtooths in brown on the natural colored parchment landmasses and the text is in red. There is the influence of the *portolan* [nautical] charts

with regards to familiar coastlines, particularly the outlines of the Baltic and Caspian Seas, although Scandinavia is shown as a massive peninsula with Greenland not yet joined to it, as it is in the later work of Clavus. Many of the geographical names in the countries of the interior recall Ptolemy and a total lack of adornment such as castellated towns, pictures or vignettes to occupy unknown areas.

Much later in the century we see Ptolemy's influence just as clearly in the world maps of Henricus Martellus (#256), who was working at Florence in the 1480s and 1490s. But not all world maps were affected. We see little trace of the Ptolemy in Andrea Bianco's world map of 1436 (#241) or in the *Vinland Map* (#243) which is closely related; instead we see the *portolan* charts and the tradition represented by the *Cottonian* map (*Book II*, #210).

In fact, although this will not have been apparent in the 15th century, the Ptolemy maps, while impressive in their detail and their scope, were not so very much better than those already available in Western Europe. Again, the *portolan* charts of the early 15th century had achieved a better coastal outline of Italy than the Ptolemy map. The importance of the Ptolemy maps does not lie in their accuracy, which people in the 15th century could not easily assess. Partly it lay in the detailed coverage of maps and text alike, they were systematic and comprehensive. But much more it lay in the merits of the method, irrespective of the accuracy of the information. Any of the geographical coordinates could be checked, however crudely, by actual observation and corrected. Ptolemy's text could be seen as a starting point for a process of correction and improvement. Moreover, by defining so many fixed points it provided a check on the accurate copying of the maps. Ptolemy's maps may, or may not, have been copied for a thousand years before the earliest known manuscript; but insofar as the locations of the places they name accord with the lists of coordinates we know that they differ little from their prototypes.

This map is one of the very earliest Ptolemy-style world maps, but it adds a Norwegian peninsula to the northwest, a feature not present in the *Geography* of Ptolemy.

LOCATION: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Archivio di San Pietro H. 31, fol. 8r, Rome, Italy.

Size of the original: 18 x 27 cm.

REFERENCES:

*Bagrow, L., *History of Cartography*, p. 70, Plate XLI.

*Edson, Evelyn, *The World Map, 1300-1492*, pp. 124, 138.

*Harley, J.B., *The History of Cartography*, Volume I, pp. 317, 357, 358, 379, Plate 19.

Harvey, P.D.A., *Medieval Maps*, pp. 51-52.

*illustrated

