Pomponius Mela's World View

TITLE: Pomponius Mela's World Map
DATE: A.D. 37
AUTHOR: Pomponius Mela
DESCRIPTION: The images in this monograph show attempts at reconstruction of the world view of the earliest Roman geographer Pomponius Mela, who, although of Spanish birth, wrote a brief work which agrees in most of its views with the great Greek writers from Eratosthenes (#112) to Strabo (#115). However, Mela departs from the traditional ancient concept by asserting that in the southern temperate zone dwelt inhabitants who were inaccessible to Europeans because of the Torrid Zone that intervened. His knowledge of the characters of Western Europe and the British Isles was clearer than that of the Greek writers, and he was the first to name the Orcades [Orkney Islands]. The great Roman historian Pliny quoted Mela as an authority.

The first-century author Pomponius Mela enjoyed a long-standing reputation in geographical matters, given Pliny's praise of him in the Natural History. But no text by Mela was known until the 1330s, when Petrarch discovered his De chorographia [On Chorography, or Descriptive Geography] in Avignon. Mela did not include a map in his text, but it has been suggested that he had in mind the map of the known world that Agrippa (#118) had started and Augustus completed. Displayed in the Porticus Vipsania in Rome, this map was known as chorographia, a name possibly recalled by the title of Mela's text.

Petrarch was fascinated with Mela's brief and engaging text and had copies made for fellow humanists, including Giovanni Boccaccio, facilitating the wide circulation of the manuscript for almost a century, until it was printed in Milan in 1471. Mela conceived the earth's globe as a sphere surrounded by water and divided into five climatic zones, of which only the orbis situm [northern temperate zone] was known and inhabited, and he describes a journey across the orbis situm, which started and ended at the Pillars of Hercules. Typical of ancient authors who regarded geography and ethnography as intertwined, Mela's description includes reports on geographical features along with information on peoples, plants, animals, marvels, and legends. In addition, Mela imagines a circumnavigation of the entire globe through the outer waters surrounding the earth. Starting at the Pillars of Hercules, this sea journey proceeded along the Atlantic coast of Spain and Britain; it passed through northern Europe, northern Asia and China, reached the Indian Ocean and the Arabic Sea, circumnavigated Africa, and finally returned to Gibraltar. Mela's fictive circumnavigation captivated the imagination of Renaissance readers fascinated by the possibility of reaching the East Indies, which Marco Polo had done by land, through an alternative sea route. Such a novel route would have given direct access to spices and exotic goods, eliminating the onerous taxes of traditional land routes.

The De chorographia was written in Latin in three books under Gaius or Claudius; there is, however, no evidence that it contained any maps. According to Mela the world can be divided east and west into what he calls "two hemispheres". This is not a scientific definition, but a rough division of the known world approximating to Asia on the east and Europe and Africa on the west. From north to south he divided it into five zones: two cold, two temperate and one hot. This is a different approach from that offered by Strabo who chose to ignore, as virtually uninhabitable, everything south of the latitude of southern India. It does correspond, however, to the division in Eratosthenes' lost poem Hermes, paraphrased by Virgil, which regards the equatorial zone as 'altogether burnt up', but says that Antipodes live in the southern temperate zone.
Mela was writing before the Roman invasion of Britain, and has only a very rudimentary idea of its geography. *Thule* in his work does not sound like the Orkney or Shetland islands. He says it is opposite the *Belcæ*, the name which he uses elsewhere as a synonym for *Scythia*. One may therefore wonder whether he is thinking of an island north of Russia, or whether it is really some part of Scandinavia. This latter, however, is treated not as part of the continent but as a very large island. The Baltic is to him the *Codanus Gulf*, enormous and dotted with large and small islands. Later he adds: “In the gulf which we have called Codanus the most important island is Codanovia, still settled by Teutoni; this surpasses the others not only in fertility but also in size.” Mela’s concept of Africa is less developed than those of later authors such as the elder Pliny, but he does summarize Hanno’s *Periplus*. He came from Gibraltar, yet he believed there were no inhabitants of the central part of western Mauritania. His contribution to the disputed topography of *Tarshish* (Tarshish in the Old Testament) is to tell us that some thought that it was on the site of *Carteia*, near Algeciras. This is the kind of information that could have been entered in notes accompanying a map rather than on a map itself.

The first edition of Mela’s treatise interpretation, *Cosmographi Geographia: Prisciani quoque exdionysio Thessalonisensi de situ orbis*, was printed in Milan in 1471; this image shows the reconstructed map from the 1482 edition (Venice, Erhard Ratdolt, July 18, 1482; 8.1 x 5.75 in.; 48 leaves, Fol. A iverso: full-page woodcut map, with names and inscriptions in moveable type; the first edition to contain a map and possibly the earliest woodcut map to appear in Italy). The map is drawn on a conical projection and its configurations are based upon Ptolemy.

**LOCATION:** Walters Art Gallery (#116)

**REFERENCES:**
*Hapgood, C., *Maps of the Ancient Sea Kings*, p. 14, Figure 8.
*Nordenskiöld, A.E., Facsimile Atlas*, p. 36, Plate XXXI.

*illustrated*
Reconstruction of Pomponius Mela’s World View, 1628, Petrus Bertius

The Earth’s globe is surrounded by water and divided into five climatic zones, of which only one is inhabited. The two polar zones are too cold, the central zone is too torrid, and the southern temperate zone is unknown. The northern temperate zone corresponds to the known world and it is divided into three continents, Europe, Africa, and Asia.
Dating from the 16th century (1540) this is an English translation of, De Situ Orbis, the writings of the first century AD Roman geographer Pomponius Mela. This map shows a Ptolemaic world view, however, the medieval tradition is evident as the draughtsman has included the names of the strange races believed by the ancients to inhabit the margins of the earth: Amazones, Hyperborei and Cymerii. Despite the survival of such aspects of the medieval world view, the image of Britain shows some advancement in knowledge, notable in an embryonic outline of the Bay of Cardigan. Such advances in knowledge do not appear on printed maps until 1564. This precocious image of Britain can be dated to the earlier period of 1540-1555.
Pomponius Mela’s World View

Pomponius Mela ca 40 AD