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IWU Professor's New Book: Maps Say More About People Than Land

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WGLT Sound Ideas interview with Dan Terkla, January 16, 2020

Charlie Schlenkar: Maps are wonderful things they tell us about the world, sure, but they also tell us about people. Dan Terkla is a retired professor from Illinois Wesleyan University, he has a new book about Mappae Mundi maps of the world. It focuses on English maps of the twelfth and thirteenth century. Terkla says those were the centuries the maps reached their peak in design, manufacturing, and presentation, and the amount of information they represent they represent how the people of that age saw the world.

Dan Terkla: They tell us quite a lot about the relationship between books and maps, and about the theology of the time because they were always made by clerics of some sort, monks or secular clerics. They tell us about the Roman heritage the Roman history that lies behind these Christian maps – they're all Christian world maps, medieval Western Europe in the middle ages was Christian.

Schlenkar: Even though the Romans left – you know – more than five centuries before.

Terkla: Right, but there are vestiges, of Roman maps and the Romans, Julius Caesar for example appears on one of the monumental world maps, the only one left that's in Hereford Cathedral. And he commissioned a survey of the known world – sent out four, they were called agrimensores men who were conducting a survey of the world. So there are references like that, and pictorial references, verbal references, references in books to Roman cartography. Not many but there are some. So, they tell us – the maps tell us, they show us the world as conceived by scholars of the middle ages.

Schlenkar: How did they change from the twelfth to the thirteenth century?

Terkla: They become more elaborate, they become more detailed. All the ones in this book the seven most important surviving medieval maps – medieval world maps, are shaped the same they're all circular they knew the world was a sphere they didn't think it was flat. They're all – maps are all circular, therefore to represent that in two dimensions. They're all encircled by what's called the ocean river. They all represent three land masses. Asia at the top, Europe on the left at the bottom, and Africa on the right at the bottom. Because these folks, no one had ever gone south –

Schlenkar: West.

Terkla: of the equator or west or east, and so they represent the three known land masses and the people's places and events that were important in human history, and geography but their main purpose isn't to be geographical.

Schlenkar: This is sound ideas, I'm Charlie Schlenkar we're talking with Dan Terkla emeritus professor at Illinois Wesleyan University, about his new book a critical companion to English Mappae Mundi of the Twelfth and Thirteen Centuries. How much change is there between these maps and pre Norman conquest maps 1066.

Terkla: Well some of these are, there is one in here that's pre-norman conquest – about 50 years maybe before the conquest? And it looks rather different from the other ones. It's almost square, and the ones – it and others are what we might call more sparse in terms of the information they convey. In part because the libraries and monasteries and abbeys weren't very well developed in 1066 or the middle of the 11th century. So as the libraries accumulated more books and more visual images of things, maps became more encyclopedic. They are sort of – they are visual encyclopedias in a way.

Schlenkar: What's the coolest thing about them for you?

Terkla: [Terkla laughs] Their idiosyncrasies, so their all – maps in this book all rely on the same set of cartographical conventions. So they're instantly recognizable as world maps, but every single one of them is completely different in what it focuses on, what it represents in images and in words. So what's fascinating for me isn't – aren't the similarities between these maps, but the differences. Cause the differences – one of my favorite quotations is from Bill Mitchell who teaches up in Chicago, and it's "Every difference makes a difference." So if you look for similarities first and you get a sense of how the things relate to each other, maybe their chronology, chronological relations, and then you start to look for the differences and those tell you an enormous amount about how the ways in which these maps were used and by whom they were used.

Schlenkar: So who were they used by?

Terkla: Hm, some of the maps from the period were royal maps. So, King Henry the third of England for example had mural maps of the world. He had one in what was the Palace of Westminster in his great chamber, which is where he would hold sort of official meeting, if parliament(??, 5:41). And it was up on the wall near his four poster bed. He had another one in Winchester at the palace of Winchester in the dining hall. And so, when he was seated at the high table he had above him an image of the wheel of fortune and then looking to the east at like in a church, over the entry door he had a map of the world. And so, those signified his royal power his royal importance, so they're royal maps, his nephew had a

map, his sons had world maps made. So they were used as displays of royal power and authority. The other ones in the book, and most of the Medieval world maps were made in and used at religious houses, so they would be paired with readings and the readers the clerical readers, would create mental maps, which became more and more complex the more they read, so they'd have a schematic map of the world in mind literally. And then, the more they read, the more they would add more information they would add to that schematic map, until it became something like one of these encyclopedic ones that we study.

Schlenkar: Why would it be important for religious houses to have maps when they are largely economic centers for different local regions, and for scholarship and relation to the nobles in that era? I mean they are power centers, their economic power centers, and their political power centers for a given region, their not global power centers, why have a world map?

Terkla: Because. . . the more —the more you know about the world the better your understanding of scripture. And they were power centers but their primary — their basic reason for existing was to either study and understand and kind of imbibe the gospel in spiritual writings, and these maps were great assist — a great help in that. And the more a powerful monastery's population knew about the world, the more authority they had? When in dealing with for example like you said they were royally endowed often. So they were — they were better able to understand spiritual history and therefore — I suppose the best way to put it is that these maps, these Christian maps really won't get you anywhere on the Earth, but they all point the way to heaven. And so if you know where heaven is literally cartographically, you know how to get to say — you know where the Garden Of Eden is, you know where the city of Jerusalem it's often at the center of these maps, literally the center of the universe. They provide you with a visual image of human history and all its faults and successes and help you understand that that history — you can't know the unimportance of that history until you know that history. And then when you understand its unimportance and its faults, then you know — the maps will show you the path to heaven so you transcend human history and move upward.

Schlenkar: This is sound ideas, I'm Charlie Schlenkar, were talking with Dan Terkla the author and editor of a critical companion(??, 9:34) to English Mappae Mundi of the Twelfth and Thirteen Centuries, he's an emeritus professor at Illinois Wesleyan University. Let's backtrack to the royal maps that you mentioned a bit ago, of course kings and rulers want to have things to display that emphasize their power as you said, but they also want to know what they can tax, and what they got under their thumb. How do these maps do that for them?

Terkla: They don't [Terkla laughs]

Schlenkar: They don't, though it's just a political statement.

Terkla: Yeah during this time there were no regional maps. So, England for example appears on all of these maps, or Britain I should say as it was called Britannia or Anglia. But, there's really no detail the largest extant the largest surviving medieval map from the period at Hereford Cathedral represents England, but it only shows London, Hereford, and a small town north of Hereford.

Schlenkar: I'll bite. Why not? Why not have more local details, since their revenue, their military power, depended on knowing the conditions?

Terkla: Because the – it just wasn't important I mean the –

Schlenkar: They had this knowledge in other ways?

Terkla: Well yeah I mean there really wasn't any after doomsday in 1066 or after 1066, when William the Conqueror had the Domesday book put together. The they had a really good sense of – it was a census of Britain, so he knew and then succeeding his successors, knew where the – I don't know, financial power houses were if you like, and roughly how many people lived in what part – on what part of the island. So they had a sense of that, these maps, they're really no good for local information.

Schlenkar: What would map lovers of today who don't necessarily have your background in medieval studies gather from these maps?

Terkla: Well apart from just the kind of fascination and thrill that comes from looking at one up close, and the mystery they present, which is fun to solve. It's important to understand that every – as I said every one of these maps is idiosyncratic, every one of these is unique in presentation, then present—in the presentation of the information, which means that every single one of them is bias. Every single one of them is rhetorical, they all – they're all propositional they're all pushing a point of view. If you understand that maps have always done that, then you have a better sense of why and how maps today all do that. There is no such thing as an accurate map. Even modern maps, even Google Earth, I mean Google Earth had my house on the wrong side of white place. I use it in class, there's no such thing as an

accurate map and every map is bias. And if you understand the ways in which these maps were bias, then you get better sense of how modern mapping is bias even digital mapping.

Schlenkar: So for instance you mentioned some of the biases of the royal maps and the religious biases of some of the clerical maps. What other biases pop out in these things?

Terkla: They're fundamentally exclusive, they present Christianity in a very favorable light and they marginalize, Jews, they marginalize what used to be called the monstrous races or the monstrous peoples. They're all pushed off into Africa, well away from the center of the Earth, some of the – on most of these maps that center is Jerusalem. So, they are intensely exclusionary.

Schlenkar: Is this an argument that all humans are solopsis? [Schlenkar chuckles]

Terkla: Well they certainly are, they're literally self-centered maps from a Christian perspective, I mean literally. If you think that, scholars during this time believed that the Earth was at the center of the universe that it was geo-centric. So, if you have the Earth at the center and you had Jerusalem at center of a map of the Earth, then Christianity is the center of the entire – of all creation. Literally geographically, and any – any people – any peoples who don't fit that mold are pushed literally, figuratively, and pictorially to the margins. They're represented because they show up in like Saint Augustine, they show up in older texts so they can't be denied a place they're just put in place on the margins.

Schlenkar: How can we consider them our objects?

Terkla: Oh they're astounding. They were made by – made by the people who made books. They're made of the same materials, they're all painted on velum, calf skin, or some kind of parchment, some kind of animal skin. The lettering is intricate the hands, the handwriting if you like. The materials use lapis lazuli to create the blue for the water.

Schlenkar: That's pretty expensive.

Terkla: It's really expensive! Gold leaf, they are – some of them – they are my favorite illustrations from the middle ages, they are the most elaborate.

Schlenkar: As a gage of economic sunk cost, what would it take to make one of these things in some reckoning of cost that we would understand today?

Terkla: I have no idea. [Schlenkar laughs] I honestly have no idea and nobody does nobody knows how much it would have cost and the problem is – the other problem is, there's no way to convert really currency from 1300 to modern currency.

Schlenkar: We're talking hundreds or thousands of hours of scholars, and calligraphers. We're talking the cost of the calf skin, which was, somewhat expensive to produce in that era. We're talking about the cost of the materials used to create it the lapis lazuli, the gold leaf. That's a lot.

Terkla: It is a lot, it is a lot. The elaborateness of the materials is a sign of the importance of the artifact, and the importance for the audience and the makers.

Schlenkar: What do you hope people get from this book?

Terkla: Well it's written for people who have some sense of map history. But I wrote a preface that hopefully makes it accessible to anybody who has even the Vegas understanding of what the middle ages were. And is interested in visual art and multimedia art. I think it's just – we hope that the book is structured in such a way that will pull people in who are both marginally interested in medieval art, medieval geography, medieval history, and then people scholars in the field.

Schlenkar: After this peak of medieval map making that you've identified here in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, how did maps continue to change and shift in purpose and in technology?

Terkla: Yeah, that's a great question. The maps in this book – the last generation of maps made before exploration, before what used to be called the age of discovery. And, so the most recent map in the book was made around 1303. Right after that, in fact right around the turn of the 14th century

exploration started, and seafarers started to make maps of coast lines, so they would draw the coast line as they sailed past it, and then they would mark places for navigation and for safety. They tended to always be in sight of land, they didn't go farther out where they couldn't see the land. There was no longitude so they could never determine how far they were from a land mass. But they made these what are called portolan charts, which are unbelievably informative and useful for navigation, which I said are no good for getting you anywhere on the Earth, to a whole new kind of map that has some elements of the Mappae Mundi but is really about getting you around the Earth. Getting you around where – so the portolan maps changed everything because accuracy became important or something like accuracy.

Schlenkar: How have modern technologies helped understand these maps?

Terkla: In enormously important ways. There is a group of people who comprised what's called the Lazarus Project, and as you might guess from the name their goal is to use digital technology multispectral imaging to resurrect artifacts and in our case texts on maps and images on maps that no one has been able to read for hundreds of years. They can scan what seemed to be erased or permanently damaged areas on maps, and then we kind of separate the layers of erasure, and over painting, and over writing and allow us to read – to see things, literally to see things on these maps that haven't been seen for hundreds of years.

Schlenkar: Illinois Wesleyan University emeritus professor Dan Terkla's new book is a critical companion to English Mappae Mundai of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries. It's just out from Boydell Press.