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Professor Makes Discovery at English Cathedral

March 15, 2007

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – While America was caught in the craze of Dan Brown’s thriller *The DaVinci Code*, Illinois Wesleyan University Professor of English Dan Terkla was working diligently on cracking a different type of code – one concerning a famous medieval world map, the *Hereford Mappa Mundi*, which has been housed in the Hereford Cathedral, located in western England, since around the year 1285. Though traditional knowledge of mappae mundi would suggest that the Hereford map was a part of the cathedral’s altar, nearly half a decade of research has led Terkla to challenge this conclusion.

Since the early part of 2000, Terkla has studied the *Hereford Mappa Mundi* through careful investigation of the map’s long-standing history and of the Hereford Cathedral itself. Arguing that the map is too large in dimension and too secular in content to have hung on the altar, he instead suggests that it once stood inside a triptych anchored to an East-facing wall near the tomb of St. Thomas, a Bishop of Hereford. To verify that it would have fit in this space, Terkla enlisted the help of artist Spencer Sauter, who graduated IWU with a bachelor of arts in English in 1970 and a bachelor of fine arts in art in 1973. Sauter created a graphic rendering of what such a placement would have looked like.

Terkla’s research has been published in *Imago Mundi: The International Journal for the History of Cartography*, which is printed out of London, and *Geo Tema*, an Italian publication. This coming fall, his theory will also be included in *AVISTA*, an anthology of essays dealing with medieval technology, science, and art.

Unlike modern world maps, *mappae mundi* were not used to accurately portray geographical locations; rather, the maps were a pictorial display of the history of mankind and the marvels of the natural world used to instruct the laity, many of whom were illiterate. Scholars today value *mappae mundi* for their valuable insights into the mindset of scholars in the thirteenth century. “People’s visions of the world tell us more about what people of the times thought about themselves and their place in the universe. For that reason, world maps are incredibly revealing,” said Terkla.

Integrating his interest in world maps into the courses he teaches, Terkla introduces the ideas of the medieval world to his 300-level Chaucer class and 100-level course “Travelers and Travel Liars.” “I’ve found my research niche,” said Terkla. “I love being able to integrate these findings into the classroom and toss around ideas with students.”

Terkla, who joined the IWU faculty in 1995, received a bachelor of arts in liberal studies with a concentration in comparative literature at California State University-Long Beach in 1976, a master’s in medieval studies at CSULB in 1986 and his doctorate in comparative literature with a concentration in medieval studies at the University of Southern California in 1992. He has served as a visiting scholar at Balliol College, Oxford, where he has done research and some of the writing on *mappae mundi*. His research interests include English and French literature and drama from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries, cosmology and the aesthetics of narrative space, word and image theory, and medieval travel, art, architecture, and cartography.

For questions or additional information, contact Terkla at terkla@iwu.edu.



Dan Terkla