Dan Terkla, Illinois Wesleyan University, interviewed by Charlie Schlenker, WGLT
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New research from a Bloomington Scholar tries to show the original place of a 700 year old map of the world in an English church. WGLT's Charlie Schlenker has more on this Mappa Mundi (moohn-dee)…

Charlie Schlenker: Since about the year 1285, Hereford Cathedral in the west of England has held a famous map of the world. In research published in the *International Journal for the History of Cartography*, Illinois Wesleyan University Professor Dan Terkla tries to prove the map originally hung on the east wall, not the altar. Terkla likes the fact and ways medieval art like the Hereford Mappa Mundi try to present the cosmological view of the map maker, the cartographer, and the time in which they were created.

Dan Terkla: It's a Christian world map, so it has at the top, which is the east, a representation, an image of the last judgment, it has Jerusalem at the literal and figurative center, and it represents also scenes and texts from Pagan mythology, Classical mythology, folklore, fantastic beasts, as well as pictographs of cities and a roughly accurate portrait of the three known land masses in the thirteenth century.

Charlie Schlenker: Why does it make a difference whether it hung on an east wall or at the altar?

Dan Terkla: Well I don't think it hung over the main alter for a few reasons, one of which has to do with its size. The direction is enormously important. For the Christian Middle Ages, east was the key direction, the key cardinal direction, because Jerusalem is in the east, that's where the Holy Land is and so all Romanesque and Gothic churches, churches built from around the eleventh to the fourteenth century, are oriented eastward.

Charlie Schlenker: What does this map show you about the artist and about the time in which it was created?

Dan Terkla: I suppose in a way it's surprisingly catholic, small "c", that is embracing. Lots of students, for example my students, find it surprising that there are so many Pagan and mythological images and texts on this thing, which has always, for 700 years and more, has hung in a church. But it shows the religious and political significance of Jerusalem, it shows the relative unimportance of Western Europe, which is also kind of surprising. You'd think that since it was created there, it would privilege that place, but it doesn't. It comes from a long line of cartography, a long line of maps, and so it's not unique, it's deeply conventional, and the convention in these kind of maps was to privilege the Holy Land.

Charlie Schlenker: Why doesn't it give Western Europe a little more pride of place? I mean, the world was starting to come alive in the 1200s again, trade was picking up, the lights were coming back on intellectually, that sort of thing.

Dan Terkla: Yeah, absolutely. Again, because it's—this world, according to the Medieval Church, was—is a transitory place, is kind of just a dress rehearsal for the real life which happens after death. In fact, the map has around its edges the Latin word for death, m-o-r-s,

so death literally encircles the map. Having said that, the most interesting and fascinating parts have always been, I'm convinced, the fantastic races and the mythological representations—the yale, the phoenix, the griffins and the sphinx, there are Scythian cannibals on the map—then those really draw our gaze toward them and away from the center, so the cartographer had to assume that the indoctrination that his viewers had undergone was strong enough to keep Jerusalem central, to know that they would have their eyes on the prize at all times while their eyes were also wandering all over the map.

Charlie Schlenker: Or is he having fun?

Dan Terkla: Oh, that could have been too. There's a huge mistake on it, which I always hope is intentional, which is that the three land masses are labeled Asia at the top and then Europe is labeled Africa and Africa is labeled Europe, so somebody either got the labels wrong or, as you say, was just having a little fun hoping that some careful reader down the road would get a chuckle out of it.

Charlie Schlenker: What kind of art today takes the place of these maps that tries to explain a certain worldview?

Dan Terkla: Well that's a great question. I don't know that contemporary art is worried about this kind of representation. I was just up in Chicago at the Art Institute and—looking at the Museum of Contemporary Art—and there's really nothing that has this kind of focus, that has this kind of imaginary concept of creation. This is all about attempting to pull things together whereas I think contemporary art is a reaction in large part to that kind of worldview, that unified, comforting worldview. The Middle Ages is a very comfortable place to be in many ways because everything supposedly has its niche.

Charlie Schlenker: Does it really?

Dan Terkla: No.

Charlie Schlenker: [Laughs]

Dan Terkla: No, and all the clever artists and poets in the Middle Ages knew that and would set up the convention of the niches only to sort of pull the rug out from under us.

Charlie Schlenker: Illinois Wesleyan University Professor Dan Terkla says he believes the map was used as part of the Hereford Cathedral's status as the number one or two tourist attraction in Britain in the 1200s. He says the grave of Saint Thomas Canteloube was a pilgrimage destination and the map probably was a display with a kind of docent present to explain the details and teach about the religious world view…for a fee. I'm Charlie Schlenker, WGLT News.