

*Die Welt Im Übergang: Der diskursive, subjektive und skeptische Charakter der Mappamondo des Fra Mauro.* Nikolaus Andreas Egel.

Beiträge zur Philosophie: Neue Folge. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2014. 428 pp. €54.00.

---

This is the third book-length contribution to literature on Fra Mauro's *Mappamondo* within a decade, but only the fifth since about 1450 when the Camaldolese monk created this wonderful combination of cartographic images and texts in the Venetian vernacular, which is the largest medieval map of the world still in existence. The 2006 edition by Piero Falchetta, accompanied by a high-resolution image on CD-ROM by a team headed by Caterina Balletti, has tremendously advanced Fra Mauro scholarship by providing easy access to the map; and, in 2011, Angelo Cattaneo based his book on new documentary discoveries, which helped him establish new fields in the investigation of Renaissance cartography.

The book under review provides little new archival evidence, but rather sums up a wealth of available information on the history of ideas that could be helpful in uncovering the philosophical premises behind Fra Mauro's methods of representing the world. A very brief first part reviews what we know about the date and circumstances of the map's creation and the history and significance of the monastery, San Michele di Murano, where it was created. The second part describes all identifiable traditions and sources of geographical data accessible to Fra Mauro and presents overviews of the history of medieval world maps (focusing on such highlights as the Hereford map and the Pietro Vesconte world map in the Vat. Lat. 2972 copy of Marino Sanudo's book), portolan charts, the rediscovered *Geography* of Ptolemy, literature by travelers to Asia, and the newest accounts of Portuguese expansion along the west coast of Africa. The third part discusses selected problems of fifteenth-century cartography, which include the partition of the world, the location of earthly paradise and Jerusalem, the existence of monstrous

races, and the kingdom of Prester John. Fra Mauro's approach to controversial problems consists of engaging different points of view in a polyphonic dialogue. This approach is persuasively defined by Egel as skeptical: "In the map legends, Fra Mauro all the time questions not only the authority of his informants, but also his own, and leaves for the viewers to make their own decision, also investing them with *auctoritas*" (279).

Egel describes his selected traditions, themes, and topics with considerable erudition. One finds excursuses within excursuses, such as detailed entries on Martianus Capella, Isidore of Seville, and Paulus Orosius within the excursus on the Hereford map; the book is distinguished by very long footnotes that provide plenty of additional data. Creating single-handedly an encyclopedia is a difficult task, however. Egel claims that one of the earliest detailed *mappae mundi*, in Vat. Lat. 6018, accompanies the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville (70, 332), thus perpetuating an old misidentification of the manuscript, despite being familiar with the work of Evelyn Edson, who studied the manuscript and correctly identified its contents. In the chapter about the partition of the world, his identification of the Riphei Mountains with the Carpathians (240) makes Fra Mauro's geography of Northern and Eastern Europe impossibly and unnecessarily complicated.

A modern general audience could feel challenged by long, sometimes excessively long, quotations from both published sources and modern literature, in Latin, Italian, French, and English without a German translation. There is a feeling, however, that this is motivated not only by the author's high expectations of the potential audience, but also by a somewhat relaxed understanding of his obligations to his readers, as some other Italian and all ancient Greek and Byzantine authors are quoted only in modern English or German translation without the original texts. The only exception is made for Fra Mauro himself, whom Egel, correctly, both quotes in the original and translates into German.

The book could have benefited from being more succinct, but it quite reliably describes the unique situation of transition in the mid-fifteenth century, when old truths could still participate in discourse but no longer dominate, when new knowledge had been bestowed with authority but had not yet become dogma, and when Fra Mauro's unique approach provided space for all opinions and let the users of his map make their own decisions.

LEONID S. CHEKIN, *Independent Scholar*