
Geography and Ethnography: Perceptions of the World in Pre-Modern Societies edited by Kurt A. Raaflaub and Richard J. A. Talbert

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‘The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there’ as the opening lines of L. P. Hartley’s celebrated novel *The Go-Between* [1953] rightly claim. If we want to explore the geography and ethnography of such a foreign country and to find out how differently they do things there, we will look for expert guidance.

The first expert to come to mind will be a geographer or ethnographer. She or he might tell us:

Speakers of the Australian language Guugu Yimithirr... at the Hopevale community near Cooktown, in far North Queensland, make heavy use in discourse about position and motion of inflected forms of four cardinal direction roots—similar in meaning to *north*, *south*, *east*, and *west*. The system of cardinal directions appears to involve principles for calculating horizontal position and motion strikingly different from familiar systems based on the anatomies of reference objects, including speakers and hearers themselves. Rather than calculating location relative to inherent asymmetries in local reference objects, or from the viewpoint of observers themselves characterized by such asymmetries, the Guugu Yimithirr system apparently takes as its primitives global geocentric coordinates, seemingly independent of specific local terrain and based instead on horizontal angles which are fixed, as it were, by the earth (and perhaps the sun) and not subject to the rotation of observers or reference objects. [Haviland 1998, 25]

If Guugu Yimithirr speakers want someone to move over in a car to make room, they will say *naga-naga manaayu* which means ‘move a bit to the east’. If they want to tell you

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to move a bit back from the table, they will say *guwa-gu manaayi*, ‘move a bit to the west’. It is even unusual to say only ‘move a bit that way’ in Guugu Yimithirr. Rather, one has to add the correct direction ‘move a bit that way to the south’. Instead of saying that ‘John is in front of the tree,’ they would say, ‘John is just north of the tree.’ If they want to tell you to take the next left turn, they would say, ‘Go south here.’ To tell you where exactly they left some thing in your house, they would say, ‘I left it on the southern edge of the western table.’ To tell you to turn off the camping stove, they would say, ‘turn the knob east’. [Deutscher 2010, 166]

But what if the foreign country we want to explore is a past, pre-modern world—or indeed a multitude of pre-modern worlds? What kind of guidance for our exploration of geography and ethnography can we ask for? How can such guidance be organized?

The present, very carefully edited and beautifully produced volume, which is based on contributions to a workshop at Brown University and is published as part of the valuable series *The Ancient World: Comparative Histories*, presents itself as ‘a single pathbreaking volume’ [6]. It opens up four paths. The first two are geographic, leading from India in the west round to China in the east and from the Mississippian peoples in the north to the Inca in the South. The third abolishes a geographical for a chronological approach and guides us from early Mesopotamia *via* Pharaonic Egypt, the Greek, Roman, and Islamic cultures to medieval Europe, while the fourth presents us the views of individual thinkers, from the Hellenistic *Book of Jubilees* to the 11th-century Islamic *Book of Curiosities* discovered only a decade ago. A final chapter plots the changes to presenting the world in Europe from 1500 to 1750. Sub-Saharan Africa, further northern or western areas, America, and the Australias (including the Guugu Yimithirr) remain *terra incognita*; but no guidebook can really be comprehensive.

As Christopher Minkowski states in his contribution ‘Where the Black Antelope Roam: Dharma and Human Geography in India’ [9–31],

a project of recovering and understanding the uses of geographical and ethnographical knowledge and conceptions by the peoples who produced them, in their own times and places,

is a challenge for both authors and readers [11]. First, few pre-modern societies attach huge importance to situating themselves not just within the immediately perceived world but also within a vaster universe for which the teaching of sacred scripture may be held superior to any scientific knowledge. India's Sanskrit texts, the *Puranas*, present an outstanding instance not only defining geography but also justifying a hierarchical ordering of society by castes. Both Minkowski and Kim Plofker in her short essay, 'Humans, Demons, Gods and Their Worlds: The Sacred and Scientific Cosmologies of India' [32–42], discuss this phenomenon. For early China, Agnes Hsu's study, 'Structured Perceptions of Real and Imagined Landscapes in Early China' [43–63], demonstrates that the maps found at Mawangdui in 1973—which have so far been studied mainly because of their presentation of hydrology and topography—convey an important ritual and symbolic quality. By marking the Han-controlled territory in Changsha, one of these maps presents a visual symbol signifying the separation between the civilized world and the landscapes of untamed peoples and by being placed in a tomb, the maps became a metaphor for a perpetually preserved space. Similarly, Hsu shows that the Anping map-like mural of Eastern Han—an axonometric 'bird's-eye' view—had a spiritual function in the tomb. John Henderson's short study, 'Nonary Cosmography in Ancient China' [64–73], deals with a very influential type of dividing space according to the pattern of the square divided equally 3×3 ; and in doing so, it emphasizes the risk which modern researchers incur when using Chinese texts of this type to answer questions which are of our own contemporary interest (as exemplified in this volume) while ignoring that such questions may well have been of marginal interest, if they had any, to the original authors. Equally, in his 'Knowledge of Other Cultures in China's Early Empires' [74–88], Michael Loewe shows that a sense of space or recognition of long distances is rather unusual in the preserved sources, as is an appreciation for the effect of natural conditions on the growth of a community or the characteristics of its culture. Indeed, the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.

In the Americas, Kathleen DuVal studies 'The Mississippian Peoples' Worldview' [89–107], a particular challenge as she is dealing with non-literate societies (whose indigenous name is, therefore, unknown). She concludes that they had a keen sense of self-identity

and of borders but were inclusivist in outlook and eager to learn from outsiders. Equally challenging is the understanding of 'Aztec Geography and Spatial Imagination' [108–127], explored by Barbara E. Mundy, who shows that in the Aztec empire, which extends out from the central capital Tenochtitlan on an island in Lake Texcoco in concentric spaces, a contrast can be observed between the nearby and intelligible (*nahuac*) and the distant unknown (*huehca*). As for the 'Inca Worldview' [128–146], Catherine Julien shows that the original conceptualization of Tawantinsuyu (Peru) seems to have combined geography, political theory, and a statement of power (we lack accounts by native authors in local languages), and that the Westerners' preconceptions influenced their understanding so much that the territory of Tawantinsuyu survived but was entirely re-imagined by its Spanish conquerors.

The chronological part of the book starts with an essay, 'Masters of the Four Corners of the Heavens: Views of the Universe in Early Mesopotamian Writings' [147–168], by Piotr Michalowski, who examines the symbolic literary imagery in these texts. 'The World and the Geography of Otherness in Pharaonic Egypt' [169–181] is then discussed by Gerald Moers using both images and texts. It becomes clear that most foreign peoples were rejected outright, as the Pharaoh (the living incorporation of the god Horus) would impose orderly rule upon the cosmos from its center, Egypt, while the foreigners remained a constant threat and needed to be controlled with violence. Under the title 'On Earth As in Heaven', James Scott examines 'The Apocalyptic Vision of World Geography from *Urzeit* to *Endzeit* according to the *Book of Jubilees*' [182–196], a rarely studied apocalyptic text which is likely to date to the second century BC and survives as a complete text only in an Ethiopic translation. Scott shows how the book establishes the prominent place of Israel and the Jews in the world, both now and in the expected eschatological future, by assuming a spatial symmetry between heaven and Earth. Returning to the earlier times, Susan Guettel Cole quotes the Delphic Oracle's claim that 'I Know the Number of the Sand and the Measure of the Sea' [Herodotus, *Hist.* 1.47] to study 'Geography and Difference in the Early Greek World' [197–214]; and James Romm discusses 'Continents, Climates, and Cultures: Greek Theories of Global Structure' [215–235]. As the co-editor Richard Talbert summarizes in his valuable preface, they both show that

maps were created as aids to philosophical and geographical speculation about the world. Literary records, including geographic catalogs in Greek epic poetry, as well as itineraries, predated maps and were never superseded by them. Division of the globe by continents, climates and cultures became a topic that engaged a long succession of Greek writers, who in turn later influenced Jewish, Roman and medieval thinking in East and West. [3–4]

Equally mapless was ‘The Geographical Narrative of Strabo of Asia’ [236–251] presented by Daniela Dueck. In his own contribution, ‘The Roman Worldview: Beyond Recovery?’ [252–272], Richard Talbert shows that Roman culture, while proudly celebrating territorial expansion,

never enlarged the limited range of contexts and purposes for which it employed maps of various types: in part for this reason, cartographic norms failed to develop. [4]

Still, some kind of ‘mental map’ seems to be behind artifacts as variant as milestones and sundials. A radically different approach is teased out of the evidence of the Islamic texts by Adam Silverstein in his essay, ‘The Medieval Islamic Worldview: Arabic Geography in Its Historical Context’ [273–290]. He shows that the relevant body of writing in Arabic and Persian is very large indeed but does not allow us to assume that these texts were meant to form a ‘worldview’ (a concept developed in the Ancient Near East and in the Hellenistic world): the authors used personal observation or the testimony of eyewitnesses, which made information on non-Muslim lands both unattainable and irrelevant for them. However, the *Book of Curiosities*, recovered only a decade ago and here studied by Emilie Savage-Smith in her ‘The Book of Curiosities: An Eleventh-Century Egyptian View of the Lands of the Infidels’ [291–310], presents the Mediterranean in a very different way, emphasizing the eastern Mediterranean but surprisingly excluding Muslim Spain and western Europe. And in ‘Geography and Ethnography in Medieval Europe: Classical Traditions and Contemporary Concerns’ [311–329], Natalia Lozovsky shows how medieval scholars in Europe, combining classical scholarship and Christian doctrine, and incorporating new information, developed a distinctive presentation of the world and its peoples. Thus, medieval *mappaemundi* amalgamated spiritual truths and information about the material world; and when in the ninth century scribes

at St Gall were glossing a chapter of Orosius' *History Against the Pagans* (which dates to the early fifth century), they included references to the encroaching Bulgars and Hungarians. Only in the last chapter of the book, 'Europeans Plot the Wider World, 1500–1750' [330–343] by David Buisseret, do we return to more familiar territory: a combination of the Ptolemaic and Portolan chart traditions enabled European scholars to record the exploration of the wider world and to create maps which gradually adopt the norms which we often assume to be universal today. But, as this volume amply shows, the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there!

A single pathbreaking volume can only accomplish so much; if other colleagues are subsequently inspired to follow this lead, that further progress will be very welcome,

writes Talbert in the introduction [6]. The volume succeeds not just in this, but makes following the lead of the paths presented in it no less attractive than breaking different new paths. To give one example: one of the conclusions presented in the book states,

Regardless of whether or not the societies under discussion developed maps, there emerges from the volume a persistent (and perhaps hardly surprising) tendency for them to situate themselves at the center of their world. [4]

But, if we leave the paths set out here from India in the west to China in the east and from the Mississippian peoples in the north to the Inca in the South, from Early Mesopotamia to medieval Europe, from the *Book of Jubilees* to early modern Europe, for the speakers of Guugu Yimithirr in Australia, even the seemingly universal tendency to situate oneself at the center of one's world becomes a real surprise. In the 1980s, the linguist Stephen Levinson was filming the poet Tulo telling a traditional myth. Suddenly, as Deutscher relates, Tulo

told him to stop and 'look out for that big ant just north of your foot'. In another instance, a Guugu Yimithirr speaker called Roger explained where frozen fish could be found in a shop some thirty miles away. You will find them 'far end this side', Roger said, gesturing to his right with two flicks of the hand. Levinson assumed that the movement indicated that when one entered the shop the frozen fish were to be found on the right-hand side. But no, it turned out that the fish were actually on the left when you entered the shop. So

why the gesture to the right? Roger was not gesturing to the right at all. He was pointing to the north-east, and expected his hearer to understand that when he went into the shop he should look for the fish in the north-east corner. [Deutscher 2010, 166]

In sum, the editors, and the publisher, are to be congratulated on producing a stimulating volume which provides expert guidance to many aspects of the foreign country which is the past.

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