



4-1-2008

How One Fourteenth-Century Venetian Remembered the Crusades: The Maps and Memories of Marino Sanuto

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Abstract

Geographic information acquired over the course of the crusades indisputably altered how most Europeans envisioned the world, yet how that information was acquired and popularized is less certain. No official cartographers accompanied the crusading armies, whose official purpose was to cleanse the Holy Land by reclaiming it for Christendom, not to study neighboring lands or the cultures that tainted it. Curious individuals whom the larger activity of the crusades had fortuitously positioned in exotic places—ambassadors, missionaries, or inhabitants of the crusader states—therefore made most geographic discoveries of the time.

HOW ONE FOURTEENTH-CENTURY VENETIAN REMEMBERED THE CRUSADES: THE MAPS AND MEMORIES OF MARINO SANUTO

Julia Harte

Author's Note: *No standard English translation of Marino Sanuto's Liber secretorum will exist until 2009, when Peter Lock will publish Histories of the Latin Empire of Constantinople: Henri De Valenciennes and Sanudo the Elder (Crusade Texts in Translation). Since I cannot read Latin, I was forced to rely on secondary sources about the Liber Secretorum for all my understanding of it (although I was able to look at facsimiles of the maps it contained). I tried to draw from a highly diverse collection of secondary sources about it, but my final product remains stunted by the fact that I have not read the original. I hope the observations I have made in this paper nevertheless prove valuable and interesting.*

Geographic information acquired over the course of the crusades indisputably altered how most Europeans envisioned the world, yet how that information was acquired and popularized is less certain. No official cartographers accompanied the crusading armies, whose official purpose was to cleanse the Holy Land by reclaiming it for Christendom, not to study neighboring lands or the cultures that tainted it. Curious individuals whom the larger activity of the crusades had fortuitously positioned in exotic places—ambassadors, missionaries, or inhabitants of the crusader states—therefore made most geographic discoveries of the time. Their findings revised many European conceptions of the world in two profound ways. First, a better understanding of the scale of Asian and African civilizations made it vividly clear how diminutive the European Christian community was. Second, the (often fictive) discovery of faraway Christian kingdoms sparked hopes of potential allies for the crusaders. Crusade revivalists in the fourteenth cen-

ture, such as the Venetian merchant Marino Sanuto and his cartographer, Pietro Vesconte, employed these popular sentiments to stir up support for another crusade after the fall of Acre in 1291. But their maps and plans displayed an overarching pragmatism, a preference for accurate information and reliable military strategy over traditional knowledge and utter piety, that signaled a new attitude toward cartography as well as past and future crusades.

Aside from the purely practical maps used by merchants, pilgrims, and soldiers, the majority of world maps, or *mappaemundi*, produced in medieval Europe, were partly imaginary and symbolic rather than totally descriptive. They hung alongside other works of art in the homes of the wealthy, reminders of—and means of reinforcing—cosmogonic legends from Scripture and antiquity.¹ Alternative sources of world geography were virtually nonexistent in Europe. European merchants were rarely allowed to travel beyond port cities into Arab territory, where they might have found more accurate geographies of Eurasia. And though an increasing number of Christians made their way from Europe to the Holy Land in the tenth and eleventh centuries, few recorded their experiences.² According to Catherine Delano-Smith, an editor of the cartographic history journal *Imago Mundi*, “for those unable to travel, the journey to Jerusalem had to be made ‘in the heart, not with the feet’, aided—for those with access to a *mappamundi*—by contemplation of the site of Jerusalem on the map.”³ In a very literal sense, *mappaemundi* were most useful to those who could not go abroad.

Most cartographers (learned men, usually historians or members of the clergy) took for granted the spherical shape of the earth. They believed one hemisphere to constitute the known world of Europe, Asia, and Africa, and the other, the ‘Antipodes,’ to be habitable but likely uninhabited, separated from their own part of the globe by a zone of scorching heat.⁴ Starting in the seventh century, European mapmakers overwhelmingly depicted that “inhabited” hemisphere with a “T-O” scheme: Europe, Asia, and Africa divided by a T composed of the Don River, the Nile, and the Mediterranean Ocean, and encircled by an O of unnamed ocean. In all T-O or zonal maps, the land masses are distorted to fit the particular scheme used and are without useable scale, again evincing their authors’ preoccupation with meaning rather than accuracy.⁵

Medieval cartographers’ unabashed predilection for spiritual import over geographic precision gives modern viewers of *mappaemundi* a sense of which locations and issues most resonated with Christians in the Middle Ages. The English Hereford map of c. 1300, for instance, portrayed many fantastic creatures and habitats in the far-off reaches of the earth but re-

remained centered on Jerusalem as the “navel” of the world, reinforcing that city’s centrality and the importance of the crusades.⁶ Not until the twelfth century did cartographers begin to consistently place Jerusalem at the center of their maps, leading some cartographic historians to speculate that the practice was a direct consequence of the crusades.⁷ Centering Jerusalem on a *mappamundi* reconciled two competing impulses that burgeoned within most medieval Europeans: pious devotion to their faith versus *curiositas*. The latter is defined by medieval travel historian Christian Zacher as “any morally excessive and suspect interest in observing the world, seeking novel experiences, or acquiring knowledge for its own sake.”⁸ By depicting exotic marvels on the periphery of the map, the Hereford cartographer acknowledged *curiositas* but kept faith central.

Of course, the ultimate medieval testament to faith—crusading—afforded its participants ample opportunities to indulge their *curiositas*. And the outcomes were, in many cases, just what the Church must have feared: a growing disillusionment with traditional sources of knowledge. What crusading individuals observed in their travels often contradicted classical Greco-Roman and Christian doctrine regarding the world. The thirteenth century Franciscan missionary William of Rubruck, for example, inquired at the Mongol Court in Karakorum “about the monsters or human freaks who are described by Isidore and Solinus, but was told that such things had never been sighted, which makes me very much doubt whether the story is true.”⁹ Isidore of Seville, a medieval scholar, in fact drew much of his own *Etymologiae* from Solinus’s fables, which were in turn derived largely from the Roman historian Pliny the Elder—the classical author of *Natural History*, which greatly influenced medieval Europeans.

Actual experience abroad also made some Christians question the supposed preeminence of their “one true faith.” When William encountered adherents to a remote sect of Christianity, the Nestorians, he found them untrustworthy: “only a tenth of what they said about him was true... they create big rumors out of nothing.”¹⁰ William himself must have been alarmed by this disappointing encounter with his supposed co-religionists, for the desire to find faraway Christian allies was growing steadily in Western Europe over the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The first crusade had alerted Europeans to the presence of various strains of Christianity in Muslim territories across the Mediterranean. In the early 1200s, moreover, reports of Christian sects as far away as Central and East Asia reached Europe. As more and more Europeans glimpsed the might of Mongol armies, the prospect of finding allies within those awesome ranks excited many hopeful crusaders.¹¹

Indeed, William of Rubruck's mission to Karakorum was originally sponsored by Louis IX, who instructed William to appraise the Khan's eagerness to ally with Christian armies. But Pope Innocent IV and Louis IX had soon corresponded with Kublai Khan enough to realize that the Khan intended to conquer the entire world for his dynasty alone. This fact was partly conveyed, no doubt, by the condition upon which Kublai Khan promised to ally with the armies of Christendom—he requested a yearly tribute from Louis, as well as Louis's own minor kingdom: France.¹²

Despite such disappointments, rumors of distant, fantastically wealthy Christian allies continued to circulate within the crusading armies and amongst ordinary Europeans. The most renowned of these was the legend of Prester John, a Christian potentate in the Far East. Made famous in Europe in c. 1165, when a fictional letter supposedly written by him circulated the continent, he was said to rule over the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, Amazons, pygmies, giants, and satyrs in a vast domain that included the Fountain of Youth—often vividly depicted on successive *mappaemundi*.¹³ As repeated expeditions into Asia failed to find his kingdom, European cartographers simply transferred him into Africa, where he was shown to reside as late as 1516, on a world map by the German cartographer Waldseemüller.¹⁴ The letter of Prester John is transparently based on the Acts of St. Thomas, the fables of Solinus, and the Alexander romance¹⁵: Christian gospel and classical literature. Its author might easily have never even left Europe.

The world travels of medieval individuals like William of Rubruck, on the other hand, were often enabled by political forces stirred up by the crusades. The narratives they produced reflected the religiously charged atmosphere back in Europe. In 1175, Emperor Frederick Barbarossa sent Burchard, Provost of Strasbourg, on an embassy to Saladin; Burchard produced a report that remarked not only on the “wild horses which hide beneath the waters” of the Nile, but also on Nubia, a “Christian land with its own king, but its people are uncivilized and the land is uncultivated.”¹⁶ Like William, Burchard was a devout Christian who encountered Christians from a different part of the world and immediately perceived them as uncouth and inferior—a common legacy of the regional and cultural hostilities engendered by the crusades.

Writing around 1212, for instance, Jacques de Vitry—Bishop of Acre and a participant in the Fifth Crusade—averred that hordes of monsters inhabited Asia: cannibals that would casually snatch sailors off their ships, the tribes of Gog and Magog that only Alexander the Great had ever imprisoned, and one-legged humanoids who shaded themselves with their giant feet on hot days. Many of these myths were not unique to Jacques and were

popular enough to appear on the Hereford world map. But it is on this map where their cumulative effect is most visible, and where it becomes evident that Jacques was a virulent crusade propagandist. In comparison to the frightening creatures that dominate the rest of the world depicted by the map, Europe seems a minor stronghold of civilization and Christianity—two attributes that Europeans increasingly conflated during the crusades. Medieval literature scholar Vincent di Marco writes that “it is undeniable that the war for the Holy Land caused an... explosion of hostile feelings against the ‘other’—the non-Christian, the heathen, the infidel.”¹⁷ Encounters between the diverse premodern cultures occupying Europe, Asia, and Africa might have been hostile no matter what their circumstances. The crusades, however, undeniably created more opportunities for them to happen at all.

By the end of the thirteenth century, enough travel narratives, rumors, and updated *mappaemundi* were circulating so that western Europeans could see a pattern in the reports. Christendom appeared tiny next to the vast Mongol realm in the east and the mysterious African kingdoms in the south, and far more unique. The T-O maps of prior centuries had cut the continents out of their circular hemisphere like rudimentary pie slices, with Asia taking up half of the circle and Europe and Africa each a neat quarter. Geographic knowledge gathered over the course of the crusades, however, changed this picture considerably—as evinced by the Hereford map, where one can see Europe beginning to recede and Africa to swell, the coastlines becoming far more elaborate than before, and a vitiated Indian Ocean creeping onto the map from the southeast.¹⁸ Hopes of powerful, distant Christian allies began to fade, although a few, like the remarkably durable myth-kingdom of Prester John, were still included in standard *mappaemundi*. Europeans had experienced enough of the actual world beyond Europe to create and demand new, more detailed depictions of it: images that represented the fearsome diversity of non-Christian cultures as well as more realistic limits to their own territory.

The concurrent advent of Portolan, or navigational, charts conflicted with this trend. The first Portolans appeared around 1300 and initially were just exact drawings of the information found in the *periplus*, or pilot books, of ancient civilizations—notebooks that listed the distances between port cities and other landmarks along coasts. Later Portolan cartographers could trace coastlines extremely precisely with the aid of compasses. Their charts are characterized by lines that emanate from multiple loci on the map and intersect each other, forming a sort of grid of compass bearings. On most Portolan charts, land masses were only decorated with perfunctory flourishes to distinguish them from the ocean.¹⁹ In other words, the entire medium was

highly pragmatic. Portolan charts were drawn with no purpose other than to assist maritime navigation—hardly the type of map that had been traditionally used to inspire piety, let alone holy war.

Yet the Venetian merchant Marino Sanuto would make unprecedented use of Portolan charts in his attempts to engineer another crusade after Mamluk forces took Acre from the crusaders in 1291. More exactly, he would employ one of the most renowned Italian cartographers of his time, Pietro Vesconte, to draw maps that fused the coastal precision of the portolan chart with the landed features and descriptions of the *mappaemundi*.²⁰ Sanuto himself wrote the main piece of crusade propaganda between 1306 and 1321, the *Liber secretorum fidelium crucis super Terrae Sanctae recuperatione et conservatione*, or *Book of secrets for faithful crusaders on the recovery and retention of the Holy Land*. He was one of a string of western European patricians who attempted, between 1270 and 1340, to revive the crusades and recover the Holy Land. The “crusades” that succeeded these ventures never actually made the Holy Land their destination.²¹ Sanuto and his like-minded contemporaries, in other words, made the last popular, sustained attempt to launch a crusade that Urban II would have recognized.

Sanuto’s proposal, though, considered sophisticated military strategy and financial backing far more integral to the success of the crusade than any of his predecessors’ plans. He had a meticulous, long-term plan for breaking down the Muslim cities around the former Latin states. It began with a several-year embargo against Egypt, followed by the deployment of a small mercenary army against the sultanate to secure Egypt, all of which would pave the way for an official crusading force to enter the Holy Land.²² Sanuto outlined the military maneuvers to be taken by the mercenary army very precisely, and he budgeted their daily costs. These considerations indicate the sort of careless planning to which Sanuto likely attributed previous crusade failures.²³

Sanuto never wavered from his original goal of reclaiming the Holy Land for Christendom, fractured as that community might be. His proposed crusade route deliberately avoided the Byzantine Empire, a target of other crusade revivalists who hoped to forcibly restore Latin Christianity in Byzantium, because he recognized that it was an uncertain enterprise that would slow down the main mission: the reoccupying of Jerusalem.²⁴ He went so far as to ban any *crucesignati* from participating in his crusade until after Egypt had been occupied, because, as he noted, “paid troops listen to and obey their captain better than crusaders.”²⁵ Sanuto may have been one more crusade revivalist in an era of such men, but he was the only one to desire the recuperation of the Holy Land so intensely that he only retained the official

crusader armies for symbolic purposes, to be “deployed” after the real fight had been won.²⁶

The Byzantine historian Angeliki Laiou avers that “Marino Sanuto, the diplomat, the spokesman of Venice, was, finally, and above all, Marino Sanuto the crusading propagandist.”²⁷ British historian Christopher Tyerman further points out that Sanuto “denied that he was employed by anybody except himself. He did not have to be. He could afford not to be.”²⁸ The one hint as to Sanuto’s personal motive for pursuing his crusade so single-mindedly is found in his will, where he concluded his orders for what should be done with his crusade works with the phrase “et haec pro anima mea faciant,” an approximate English translation of which might be: “and this is working on behalf of my soul.”²⁹ Sanuto must have felt that it was working well; he devoted the last twenty-five years of his life to realizing his crusade.

Aside from the spiritual fulfillment he achieved through attempting to revive the crusades, Sanuto had very ordinary reasons for wanting to engineer another massive, stunning display of European might. Just as Europeans had been alarmed by the intimidating, vast kingdoms that past crusaders had stumbled upon in the East and South, Sanuto was seized with anxiety at the prospect of a Turkish incursion into Europe, alone or, worse yet, aided by the Tartars of the Golden Horde. Observes Laiou, “his fear of the Turks was partly based on the geographical extent of their power.”³⁰ Sanuto’s trepidation was hardly surprising considering one of the main sources from whom he learned about the non-Christian world: Jacques de Vitry, the imaginative early-thirteenth century crusade propagandist with a penchant for exaggerating the hideous threats facing European Christendom.

Above all, Sanuto repeatedly emphasized the centrality of Vesconte’s maps in his pragmatic proposal for another crusade. Writing to King Philip IX of France in 1332, he cautioned that:

Whosoever exercises the leadership of the crusade must wholeheartedly follow the directions as proposed in the *Book of Secrets*. The crusade leader should study and pay close attention to the map of the world, and pay very careful attention to the maps showing Egypt, the Mediterranean and the Holy Land.³¹

Tyerman notes that “Sanuto’s maps, even if not drawn by him, were important... he urged their preservation by the Dominicans of SS Giovanni e Paolo in Venice in his will.”³² And then there is the poignant map of Acre that

Sanuto included with almost every crusade proposal that he submitted to European authorities: the city as it had looked before 1291, divided into crusader military orders and dotted with Christian churches and fortresses.³³ This map obviously could be of no practical use to the crusade he envisioned; it is an anomalous token of Sanuto's deep emotional commitment to the successful reoccupation of the Holy Land by Christian forces.

Cartographic historians prize Sanuto and Vesconte's maps because they appear to be the first effort to merge creative symbolic world maps of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, drawn to encourage devotion, with practical portolan charts, drawn to guide merchants and mariners. However, the synthesis of the two styles emblemizes Sanuto's entire vision of a revivalist crusade. He proposed a pragmatic and above all *successful* expedition to reclaim the Holy Land on behalf of Christianity. Yet he simultaneously seems to have envisioned it as a form of spiritual catharsis: one profound enough to merit the allocation of most of his life and fortune.

Necessary to any understanding of Sanuto's obsessive quest to revive the crusades is a sense of the "memories" he had of them: memories likely acquired from crusades-affiliated or -enabled travel narratives and *mappaemundi*, and memories manifest in the plans he wrote and in the maps he and Vesconte drew. His determination to avoid the material pitfalls of previous crusades, his anxiety about the threat of long-fabled encroaching foreign armies, and his nostalgia for a Christian-ruled Acre that he had only briefly known—such memories deeply shaped his revivalist efforts. Sanuto's beloved crusade never came to be. But the Vesconte maps, images of his memories of past crusades and his hopes for future ones, at least attest to the all-encompassing import it once held for a medieval Venetian patrician.

ENDNOTES

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³ Catherine Delano-Smith, "The intelligent pilgrim," *Eastward Bound*, 115.

⁴ John K. Wright, *The Geographical Lore of the Time of the Crusades* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1965): 156-8.

⁵ Norman Thrower, *Maps & Man* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972): 31.

⁶ Naomi R. Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2001): 195.

⁷ David Woodward, "Medieval *Mappaemundi*," *Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean*, ed. J. B. Harley & D. Woodward (Chicago:

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⁹ William of Rubruck, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck*, ed. P. Jackson with D. Morgan, The Hakluyt Society, 2nd series (London: Hakluyt Society, 1990): 201.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹¹ J. R. S. Phillips, *The Medieval Expansion of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988): 79, 82.

¹² Thomas F. Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades: Updated Edition* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005): 179.

¹³ Wright, *The Geographical Lore of the Time of the Crusades*, 283.

¹⁴ W. G. L. Randles, "South-East Africa as Shown on Selected Printed Maps of the Sixteenth Century," *Imago Mundi*, 74.

¹⁵ Hamilton, "The impact of the crusades on western geographical knowledge," 21.

¹⁶ Burchardus Argentoratensis, "De statu Egypti vel Babylonie," *Itinera Hierosolymitana Crucesignatorum (saec. xii-xiii)*, 4 vols, Pubblicazioni dello Studium Biblicum Franciscanum (Jerusalem: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, 1978-84): 402-4 (trans. by Benedict Hamilton).

¹⁷ Vincent DiMarco, "The Amazons and the End of the World," *Discovering New Worlds*, ed. S. Westrem (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1991): 81.

¹⁸ Naomi R. Kline, "Frontispiece – The Hereford Mappa Mundi," *Maps of Medieval Thought*.

¹⁹ Thrower, *Maps & Man*, 39-40.

²⁰ Evelyn Edson, "Reviving the crusade: Sanudo's schemes and Vesconte's maps," *Eastward Bound*, 138.

²¹ Norman Housley, *Contesting the Crusades* (Pondicherry: Blackwell, 2006): 122-3.

²² Edson, "Reviving the crusade," 135-6.

²³ Housley, *Contesting the Crusades*, 124.

²⁴ Angeliki Laiou, "Marino Sanudo Torsello, Byzantium and the Turks," *Speculum*, 382.

²⁵ Marino Sanuto, "Liber Secretorum fidelium crucis," *Gesta Dei per Francos*, ed. J. Bongars, 2 vols (Hanover: Typis Wechelians apud heredes Johannis Aubrii, 1611); repr. with introduction by Joshua Prawer (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1972): 74-5 (translated by Antony Leopold).

²⁶ Antony Leopold, *How to Recover the Holy Land* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2000): 65.

²⁷ Laiou, "Marino Sanudo Torsello, Byzantium and the Turks," 392.

²⁸ Christopher J. Tyerman, "Marino Sanudo Torsello and the Lost Crusade," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 71.

²⁹ Marino Sanuto, "Liber Secretorum fidelium crucis," 150-4 (translated by Tyerman).

³⁰ Laiou, "Marino Sanudo Torsello, Byzantium and the Turks," 380.

³¹ Marino Sanuto, "Liber Secretorum fidelium crucis," 794 (translated by Edson).

³² Tyerman, "Marino Sanudo Torsello and the Lost Crusade," 68.

³³ Edson, "Reviving the crusade," 134, 148.