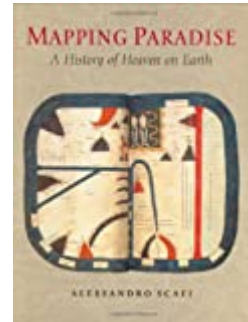


Alessandro Scafi. *Mapping Paradise: A History of Heaven on Earth.* London: University of Chicago Press, 2006. 400 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7123-4877-5; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-73559-7.



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Mapping the Unmappable

Like “sacred geography,” the phrase “mapping paradise” might sound somehow paradoxical. On the one hand, “mapping” bears a pragmatic connotation, suggesting an active engagement with physical territory, with the world “out there”; on the other, “paradise” evokes flickering images of distant, ungraspable, even immaterial utopian realms. And yet, the history of western civilization has been paralleled by a continuous search for paradise: not just metaphorically, but also in the literal sense of the word. In Judaeo-Christian tradition, Paradise was not a disembodied entity or a mere spiritual condition, but rather a real, material place located somewhere on the earth’s surface, and therefore potentially able to be pinned down on the world map. In this highly informative and profusely illustrated book, the product of fifteen years’ research, Alessandro Scafi explores the more than one-thousand-year-old quest for paradise in the Christian West.

Conceived by ancient Greeks and Romans as remote blessed islands, paradise nowadays is still promoted by travel agents in an insular form, as a dreamland in the tropical seas where to escape the stress of everyday life.

However, “long before travel agencies promised the urban masses of the West a paradise on earth, generations of Christians believed in the early existence of a pristine spot where God had placed Adam and Eve at the dawn of time, and which was supposed to have been the ideal and perfect habitat for mankind” (p. 12). Both the nature and the geographical location of paradise have shifted through the centuries. Paradise has moved on the world map from the Far to the Near East, from Africa to the North Pole, from a walled island in the desert to an island lost somewhere in the ocean, or on an equally inaccessible mountain top. Paradise has also changed in form and temporal dimension: from a terrestrial garden of Eden lost to mankind, to heavenly Jerusalem attainable in the faithful’s afterlife. Paradise can thus be envisaged as a moving horizon in western history, or maybe even as a human need: the need to move continuously forward, spiritually and intellectually. In this sense, the story narrated by Scafi sheds light on broader cognitive processes in different historical and cultural contexts. While the book focuses primarily on Medieval *mappae mundi* (the most relevant context in which the mapping of paradise originated and developed), it also includes later histor-

ical periods and a variety of cartographic media: from Renaissance atlases and Enlightenment historical maps to contemporary art mappings and the internet.

The book is structured into eleven chapters, complemented by a prologue and an epilogue. The first introductory chapter offers a survey of past scholarship on mapping paradise. There follows a detailed philological and theological discussion on Eden in the original biblical texts and early Church Fathers' debates on the allegorical versus literal understanding of paradise. Chapter 3 shows the consolidation of the literal meaning in the western Middle Ages via the influential figure of Saint Augustine. Resting on the Saint's historical interpretation of Genesis, prominent theologians such as Isidore of Seville and Bede (seventh and eighth centuries), or Peter the Lombard (twelfth century) theorized the existence of an Eden on earth yet beyond human reach.

The following five chapters explore how this Eden was graphically rendered on Medieval *mappae mundi* in all their variants: from the early T-O to the zonal and later transitional type.[1] On these cartographic representations, paradise occupied an important place. If in modern mapping "it is measurement that matters ... a millennium ago a world map was expected to reflect what was written in the Bible and not to dispute fundamental Christian doctrine.... Paradise was accepted as a place no less real than Rome or Paris" (p. 19). Medieval *mappae mundi* worked in a way and served a function radically different from that of modern maps. Resting on the contiguity and visual prominence of what Giorgio Mangani named "topoi" (icon-events), rather than on the actual distance between geographical locations, *mappae mundi* constituted powerful mnemonic tools able to imprint biblical narratives in the mind of the faithful.[2] Their function, however, was not purely didactic. Conflating different temporal dimensions (e.g. classical, Biblical, contemporary) and combining physical geographical features with intangible features of history, *mappae mundi* offered themselves as devices for meditation and moral self-improvement. The presence of Eden on the map, for example, reminded the faithful of the Fall and the consequent necessity for redemption. It thus constituted a "key station" in the spiritual path between past, present, and future traced on the map (p. 127).

This mnemonic-meditative function of the map changed with the Reformation and the popularization of coordinate-based Ptolemaic mapping. Unlike Medieval *mappae mundi*, Ptolemaic maps were not immutable containers for universal history, but rather provisional doc-

uments to be filled with data from the new geographical discoveries: they portrayed a moment in time. As such, they no longer offered a place for paradise, except in their historical variants (such as Ortelius's *Parergon*, for example). By the sixteenth century, the idea of a contemporary paradise distant in space shifted to the notion of a lost paradise distant in time and thus equally inaccessible. Theologians' growing belief that Eden had once been on earth, but had been completely destroyed by the Flood led to new and (somehow paradoxically) ever more detailed mappings of paradise. Until the eighteenth century, cartographic authority was used by reformed Biblical exegetes to defend the authority of the Scriptures against allegorical interpretation (p. 284). Chapters 9 and 10 explore this dramatic shift in the conceptualization and representation of paradise on the map in the light of the proliferation of post-Reformation paradise theories, including Luther's and Calvin's.

From the eighteenth century onwards, however, the location of paradise exited the realm of mainstream theology and became domain of non-professional enthusiasts. The last chapter of the book considers different alternative approaches: from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century mappings, paralleling the quest for the cradle of civilization, to contemporary paradise maps on the web. Further modern approaches to paradise, such as in modern art, are discussed in the epilogue.

If, in the course of the twentieth century, mapping paradise continued to be dismissed by scholars as a bizarre curiosity that flourished in the Middle Ages, today its cultural history assumes unprecedented significance on several fronts. Scafi's work is emblematic, for example, of the recent shift in the understanding of the history of cartography from simplistic "linear progression" to culturally specific set of practices advocated by Matthew Edney and Christian Jacob, among the others.[3] From this new perspective, Scafi notes, Medieval mapping becomes more approachable, as the corpus of medieval maps, until recently rejected as absurd and irrational, comes to represent an alternative and valuable cartographic system (p. 28). In this sense, the author is successful in showing how the quest for localizing paradise on the map was not obliterated by geographical discoveries and scientific progress, as one would assume, rather it was continuously renegotiated. In other words, it changed but it did not disappear.

Independently from the historical period, mapping paradise has always represented a challenge and a paradox: that of mapping a place that is out of human reach,

of making the invisible visible. The pursue of this enterprise can be read as an extreme exercise in the history of western geographical imagination, but also one not confined to paradise itself. After all, the history of exploration is full of “paradises.” As John Gilles notes, every great geographical discovery has been preceded by the creation of “islands of the mind,” utopian paradise islands onto which mainlanders projected their fears and desires, and through whose mappings they made the newly discovered lands familiar.[4] Scafi’s book shows how, even in its most extreme manifestations, mapping is first of all a cognitive practice, a typically western attitude to rationalize the unknown, to grasp the ungraspable through its localization, circumscription, and visualization. This process has been recently researched by Gilles in terms of “islanding.” In this sense, Eden’s insular nature does not come as a surprise.

Mapping Paradise can be situated within a growing body of cartographic literature aimed at re-contextualizing and re-evaluating the relationship between the map as a cultural artefact and its context of production, moving from a merely political-instrumental Harleian reading to a moral-persuasive understanding of maps and mappings.[5] *Mapping Paradise* brings an important theoretical and empirical contribution to contemporary scholarship in the history of cartography, but it is also particularly timely within broader contemporary debates fuelled by a revived interest in the geography of beliefs and the sacred.[6] Besides geographers and historians of cartography, Scafi’s book, however, will interest a broader audience of theologians, art historians, and medievalists.

Byzantinists will also find in *Mapping Paradise* an interesting “western” counterpart to Henry Maguire’s work on representations of paradise in the medieval Christian East.[7] Scafi does refer to eastern Christian tradition (i.e. Patristic writings and, briefly, to Cosmas Indicopleustes’ map), but mainly in contextual terms, in order to trace the origins and better locate the “mapping paradise saga” in the West. Insisting on the opposition between the literal understanding of Eden followed by western Medieval theologians and Eastern symbolic interpretation, he does not mention, for example, the production of Edenic “material geographies” in the Christian Orient (from the desert Fathers’ cultivated plots in the wilderness to Byzantine monastic “insular” enclosures and pleasure gardens in Constantinople), or the impact of iconoclasm on Byzantine perceptions of paradise. While going beyond the scopes of the book, a temporally broader comparison between the understanding and rep-

resentation of paradise in the eastern and western traditions would show a far more complex panorama than that hinted at by Scafi, and produce another compelling tale.

Mapping Paradise offers the reader a rich bibliography and a wealth of detailed notes and illustrations, although unfortunately most in black and white. Reproductions of *mappae mundi* are accompanied by series of unique diagrams drawn by the author. These are helpful not simply to locate paradise within their complex graphic textures, but to make sense of the maps themselves. Overall, the book makes for a compelling reading, even though it often tends to be a little repetitive, while the chapter and paragraph titles (lacking any historical indication) do not always function as effective narrative signposts. *Mapping Paradise* nevertheless remains an enjoyable book and a great scholarly achievement deserving special interdisciplinary attention.

Notes

[1]. This category division is elaborated in David Woodward and J. B. Harley, eds., *History of Cartography*, vol.1 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987).

[2]. G. Mangani, *Cartografia morale: geografia, persuasione, identità* (Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini, 2006).

[3]. See Matthew Edney, “Cartography without Progress: Reinterpreting the Nature and Historical Development of Mapmaking,” *Cartographica* 30 (1993): 54-68; and Christian Jacob, “Towards a Cultural History of Cartography,” *Imago Mundi* 48 (1996): 91-98.

[4]. John Gilles, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

[5]. See for example, Mangani, *Cartografia morale*; and Francesca Fiorani, *The Marvel of Maps: Art, Cartography and Politics in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).

[6]. See, for example, the forum section on geography and religion in the March 2006 issue of the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*.

[7]. See Henry Maguire, *Rhetoric, Nature and Magic in Byzantine Art* (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 1998); and Henry Maguire, “Paradise Withdrawn,” in *Byzantine Garden Culture*, ed. Antony Littlewood, Henry Maguire and Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research and Library Collection, 2002).

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