



**A. H. Merrills.** *History and Geography in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xiv + 386 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-84601-1.

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## History's Eyes

In 1621, Peter Heylyn, fellow of Oxford's Magdalen Hall, set forth in print a series of his lectures on historical geography under the title *Microcosmus*. Though ostensibly a treatise devoted to describing the various regions of the world, Heylyn also had much to say about the relationship between history and geography. Geography and history, he argued, are like "the two fire-lights *Castor* and *Pollux*." [1] Geography circumscribes the action of history, limiting it to a particular region, while history distinguishes particular places by endowing them with a unique identity by virtue of the things people have done there. And so, Heylyn concluded, "The two eyes of the body of a well compacted history, are place and time, the former belongeth to Geography, the latter is the terminus of all *Epoches* in computation." [2]

It is the mutually reinforcing dynamic between these two discursive modes that is the focus of Andrew Merrills's new and important *History and Geography in Late Antiquity*. While the geographical preface is still a common feature of some modern historical writing, as Merrills points out, the role allotted to geography in the historiography of pre-modern Europe frequently amounted to far more than simply defining the spatial parameters of a temporal enquiry. Indeed, it could be an integral component of the overall argument of the history in which it was deployed. Despite this, there has been a tendency amongst modern historians to cleave artificially what they see as temporal *explanation* from spatial *description* in such works in order to tease out the antecedents of the modern discourses of *history* and *geography*. Merrills, however, deliberately eschews such whiggery, arguing

that what such scholars have failed to appreciate in distinguishing these explanatory modes is that they were, in fact, different sides of the same coin. Indeed, because it is the action of humanity that gives shape and form to both history and geography, and not time and space as commodities in themselves, the boundary between temporal and spatial explanation is frequently construed as porous. And so, with both discursive modes premised upon the same material cause, it was wholly possible for the pre-modern historian to deploy both as part of the same account of the events of the past, constructing his presentation of space, like his presentation of time, as a function of the work's final cause. In this respect, as Merrills makes clear, the treatment of space in a pre-modern history was not a neutral activity; it was often inextricably bound up in the argument of the wider historical work in which it was contained.

The role of geography deployed in the service of historical argument can be seen quite clearly, Merrills asserts, through a comparison of the description of the Roman Empire that comprised the prefaces of Appian's second-century history of the rise of Rome, and Edward Gibbon's eighteenth-century description of its collapse. Both authors, of course, described the extent of the empire at the same historical moment, yet the place these geographies held in the overall argument of the works could not be more different. Appian, concerned with Rome's growth from its humble origins to his own day, used his geographical introduction to anticipate the conclusion of his temporal narrative. Gibbon's preface, however, performed precisely the opposite function, for it

outlined precisely what it was that Rome would lose over the subsequent generations (pp. 12-14). These geographical introductions, then, were an integral component of the construction of the histories. By extension, Merrills argues, the writing of space, just as much as the writing of time, ought to be construed as an important part of the rhetorical arsenal of the pre-modern historian (p. 14).

Despite this digression into the eighteenth century, Merrills's attention is firmly fixed on the period between the early fourth century and the middle of the eighth. For him, this period comprised a critical moment in the development of the western historical consciousness, for the adoption of Christianity in the empire necessitated a wholesale reorientation of both the structures and objectives of historiography. Instead of founding their histories upon the twin assumptions of the timelessness of Roman rule and the city's privileged position in the inhabited world, as had been the case during the imperial era, it was important for these new Christian historians to construct histories that accounted for the historicity of their faith, and which charted its development through time (pp. 20-24). But while this historiographical revolution has been thoroughly chronicled by a host of modern scholars, with spatial explanation so closely bound to temporal, Merrills argues that this reorientation of the final cause in historical thought must also have engendered a similar change in the way space was conceived. As the temporal vantage point of the historian conditions the connections he is prepared to see between past events, so the construction of space and the significance with which it is endowed must also be construed as a function of the historian's gaze.

The bulk of Merrills's text is devoted to a detailed analysis of the geographical writings of four late antique and early medieval historians: Orosius, Jordanes, Isidore of Seville, and Bede. Though these writers can hardly be construed as comprising a coherent body of historiography in terms of either subject matter or historical practice, what is important to Merrills is that because they span such a tumultuous period in European history it is possible to see precisely how they adapted and adopted geography as an essential component of their histories in response to the exigencies of their own day, and, moreover, how this resultant conception of the world came to condition the course and emplotment of their individual histories (pp. 30-34). In so doing, Merrills adds a crucial new dimension to our understanding of the historiographical revolution of late antiquity, one which has important implications for the interpretation of medieval historical writing more generally.

Despite the short shrift he received from St. Augustine after the composition of his *Historiarum adversus paganos libri septem*, Orosius was one of the most influential historians of the Middle Ages. Charged by the saint in the wake of the sack of Rome in 410 with constructing a history that made clear the eschatological ambiguity of secular history, Orosius surveyed the whole period from creation to his own day in order to show that the present Christian age was the most stable and peaceful of all time. Far from representing the cataclysm that Rome's pagan citizens construed it to be, Orosius cast Alaric's sack as a historically mild chastisement of the city wrought by God at the hands of a band of Romanophilic Christians (pp. 39-41). In contradistinction to Augustine, then, Orosius saw the coming of Christ bringing about a demonstrable, qualitative improvement in the nature of human history.

To Orosius, though, history was not just *progressing* through time towards its resolution in the final days, it also had a direction inherent to it. Building upon Daniel's interpretation of the dream of Nebuchadnezzar (Dn 2:40 and 7:17-27), Orosius saw the light of history as moving from east to west through a succession of four temporal empires. Though these empires aspired to universal dominion, each ultimately fell far short of its aspirations. Yet, Merrills suggests, implicit in this four-empire model of world history is the idea of a fifth, truly universal empire. This, of course, would be the universal empire of Christ (p. 57). In this sense, as in the case of the geography that prefaced Appian's history, Orosius's geographical introduction served to anticipate the argument of the wider *Historia*. Far from attempting to delineate the physical bounds of each of the four previous world empires, the introduction was actually intended to define the boundaries of the fifth, thereby also underscoring the extent to which the earlier empires had failed to realize their ambitions. The introduction, then, highlights the juxtaposition of secular pretensions and Christian reality (pp. 64-70). Instead of being "a moribund and barely competent regurgitator of classical truths" (p. 36), then, Merrills sees Orosius as having succeeded in developing a wholly new and innovative notion of Christian universal history, one in which history is configured as a vector, advancing both in terms of time and space towards its ultimate resolution.

In the end, Orosius's geographical introduction reflected a view of the world that was a result of the Christianisation of the Roman Empire. But by the sixth century the reality of the successor kingdoms made Rome no longer essential to historical speculation (p. 30). In

this respect, Jordanes's *De origine actibusque Getarum*, known generally as the *Getica*, marks an important watershed. Though ostensibly an epitome of the lost twelve-volume history of the Goths penned by Cassiodorus a generation earlier, the *Getica* is concerned with tracing the history of the Goths from their origins in the mysterious frozen land of Scandza and their migration to Scythia and then into Europe proper (p. 100). Here again, Merrills argues that the geographical preface is integral to the construction of the wider history it introduces, and intended to be read as a microcosm of the argument of the work as a whole (p. 114).

Unlike Orosius's geography, which surveyed the breadth of the world, Jordanes focused his attention on the Ocean Sea believed to circle the *oikoumene*, and its various islands. For Jordanes, the most important of these islands was Scandza, which, he asserts, was the place where the Gothic *gens* began, for it was from there that they emigrated to Scythia and first entered history proper. (pp. 117-118). Though it was possible that there was a Gothic tradition that placed their origins in an unnamed island of the north (p. 127), Merrills argues that this explicit association of the origins of the Goths with Scandza was wholly Jordanes's work, and not part of his debt to Cassiodorus. While Scandza did serve as an appropriately mythical stage for the pre-history of the Goths, somewhere beyond the *limites* of the old empire, the problem Jordanes faced, however, was how to give this association of people and place the smack of verisimilitude. This was achieved, Merrills suggests, through a measure of authorial sleight of hand (p. 125). Devoid of any written evidence for his controversial assertion, Jordanes sandwiched his description of Scandza between detailed and well-documented passages devoted to Britain and Scythia. Thus, by locating the unfamiliar within the context of the geographically well known, Jordanes hoped to trick his audience into assuming that the idea of Scandza as the place in which the Gothic *gens* was nurtured into existence was supported by a similar measure of literary precedent (p. 139).

Merrills's third major chapter is given over to an analysis of the longer of Isidore of Seville's two histories of the Goths. Generally familiar to modern scholars as the *History of the Goths, Vandals and Sueves*, what sets this work out from earlier histories, Merrills believes, is the confidence with which Isidore endeavored to distance himself from the traditions of classical historiography with its overt imperial strains (p. 174). Indeed, far from endeavoring to situate his material within a universal historical frame, thereby linking his subject matter to the

empire and endowing it with eschatological significance, Isidore adopted a thoroughly Iberian perspective. Merrills finds this provincialism typified by the geographical introduction that accompanies one of the recensions of this history. Known generally as the *Laus Spaniae*, this preface is "a dramatic eulogy to Isidore's homeland" (p. 174).

But, of course, the *Laus* is far more than just a flowery celebration of *Hispania*; it is intrinsic to the very fabric of the history itself. In the first place, Merrills notes, the *Laus* makes no attempt to situate Spain in the context of world geography. This, he asserts, helps create an image of the region as distinct from the rest of the world, yet curiously central (pp. 199-200). In this way, there is a sense that the *Laus* implied that Spain was the physical successor to Rome (p. 201). But second, and more profound, Merrills sees the end of the *Laus* as modelled on the epithalamium, a formalized classical style of marriage poem, in which the active, male Goths are united with the passive and feminine *Hispania*. Indeed, the pattern of the description of *Hispania* in the *Laus* seems to be closely modelled on the way classical epithalamia described the beauty of the bride. Moreover, the *Laus Gothorum* appended to the work reads as a celebration of the bride's lover (p. 207). In this sense, then, the *Laus Spaniae* foreshadows the union of the Gothic *gens* with the land of Spain (p. 187), the conclusion of the wider history itself.

For Merrills, though, it is in the work of the Venerable Bede in the early eighth century that the synthesis of Christian history and geography comes to its fruition. From the days of Eusebius forth, the idea of an ecclesiastical history implied a universal perspective. At first glance, then, Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* embodies something of a paradox, for its title proposes that the work will be a universal history of a single people (p. 234). However, for Merrills, it is by means of the geography that opens the *Historia* that Bede is able to reconcile these apparently irreconcilable perspectives, thereby giving the work both its coherence and its wider historical significance.

The key to understanding Bede's geography Merrills finds in the saint's conception of the nature and reckoning of time. Following Augustine's lead, Bede saw his own day as part of the sixth age of humanity, the age begun by Christ's passion that would run until the faith had been spread to every corner of the world. In his commentary on the Song of Songs, however, Bede went to some lengths to stress the physical isolation of Britain and the resulting ignorance of its people of the events in what

he called the first parts of the world. These he identified as India and the lands associated with the rising of the sun. To Merrills, this phrase is crucial, for it implies that the lands of the east are in some fashion chronologically prior to those of the west (p. 237); consequently, the lands of the distant west must be related to the end of history. Thus, while Britain may be removed from the heartland of the faith, the universality of Christianity's mission made its eventual conversion a prophetic inevitability. To be sure, the history of the conversion of Britain may be the story of the conversion of the peoples of a distant and obscure island, but precisely because the island is situated in the last part of the world, the story has universal resonance.

But while the story of Britain's conversion may comprise a chapter in history's final act and so be significant in and of itself, Merrills argues that the geographical introduction serves also to recast Britain as something of a medieval anyplace (p. 254). Mirroring the location of the *oikoumene* itself, the introduction stresses Britain's position in the encircling ocean, thereby helping to configure it as a world in miniature. Equally, while the island is clearly the recipient of divine favor, it is not blessed to an extent greater than anywhere else (p. 273). In this respect, Merrills suggests that the geographical introduction urges the reader to construe Britain as a microcosm of the wider world itself, and so perceive its history as that of a Christian archetype.

Throughout this excellent book, Merrills is primarily concerned with assessing how the representation and portrayal of space figured as an essential tool in the rhetorical arsenal of historians. As his four painstakingly constructed case studies make clear, the relationship between geography and history as *res scriptae* is progressively renegotiated through the period under review. However, Merrills does not examine the extent to which geography also informs the course of history as *res gestae*. Indeed, within the context of classical and early medieval environmental theory, place and location are deemed to have a fundamental role in determining the complexion of a people, and, thereby an influence on the overall course of events. While an extended consideration of the role of place in fixing the direction of events would make a weighty volume in itself, there are places

where Merrills's authors seem to be drawing upon this tradition of environmental determinism. This seems particularly the case in parts of his discussion around Jordanes. As Merrills notes, Jordanes's interest in Scandza, for instance, is as the "nurturing place of the Gothic people" (p. 118), suggesting that the frigid nature of the place may condition the general complexion of the *gens*. Merrills does later concede that the great fertility of these people may be a function of the fact that they are Hyperboreans (p. 147), but he does not follow up this suggestion.

While the complexion of a *gens* can be fixed by its location, this implies that for the writer of history the act of locating a people can also serve as an implicit explanation of their nature and, thus, help account for the course of their history. Once again, this seems to be an explanatory strategy employed by Jordanes. By singling out Britain as the geographical twin of Scandza (p. 138), he seems to be postulating a degree of ontological equivalence between the regions based upon their similar latitudes. If this supposition is correct, then a description of Britain and its inhabitants is by implication a description of Scandza and the creatures engendered there. While Merrills's point is to explore the relationship between historical and geographical *expression* (p. 34), geography, as an explanation of the nature of peoples, can also be construed as part of the rhetoric of history.

This is a scholarly work of the highest order. Constructed upon a basalt-solid foundation of primary literature and buttressed by consistent critical engagement with the modern scholarship, it is cogently argued and at times innovative and profound. Certainly, Merrills adds an important and hitherto neglected dimension to our understanding of the development of late antique and early medieval historiography, but his conclusions should have wider ramifications for those concerned with the construction of either time or space in any period.

#### Notes

[1]. Peter Heylyn, *Microcosmus or a little description of the great world* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1621), 11.

[2]. *Ibid.*, 18.

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