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## Displaying Ancient Geography

ROBERTA CASAGRANDE-KIM

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ON VIEW AT THE INSTITUTE for the Study of the Ancient World (ISAW) at New York University from September 2013 to January 2014, *Measuring and Mapping Space: Geographic Knowledge in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (in its online version at <http://isaw.nyu.edu/exhibitions/space/>) explored the ways in which Greek and Roman societies perceived and represented both the known and the unknown worlds (Fig. 1)<sup>1</sup>. The show introduced the visitors to the complex world of ancient geography by displaying thirty-eight objects on loan from The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Watson Library at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The New York Public Library, The Morgan Library and Museum, The American Numismatic Society, Houghton Library at Harvard University, and the Rare Book and Manuscript Library and Butler Library at Columbia University. Additionally, a 1:1 replica of the so-called Peutinger Map (*Codex Vindobonensis* 324) was reconstructed in the galleries from high-resolution scans of the remaining parchment leafs generously provided by Prof. Richard Talbert under the auspices of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna (Fig. 2)<sup>2</sup>.

Two main factors drove the selection of objects on view at ISAW. On the one hand, as a curator I was confronted with the actual paucity of ancient material addressing

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- 1 The exhibition was curated by the author. Tom Elliott, Associate Director for Digital Programs and Senior Research Scholar at ISAW curated the dedicated website and the computer-based component of the exhibition's display. I would like to thank Dr. Jennifer Chi, Exhibitions Director and Chief Curator at ISAW, for inviting me to curate the show, all the Institutions that so generously loaned their geographic treasures, and Dr. Sarah Rey for inviting me to write about the exhibition.
  - 2 The most comprehensive study of this "map" in R.J.A. TALBERT, *Rome's World: The Peutinger Map Reconsidered*, Cambridge 2010.



Fig. 1: Overview of the exhibition in Gallery Two. Photo Courtesy ISAW, Department of Exhibitions and Public Programs



Fig. 2: Gallery One: the computers' installation. In the background, the photo-mural of the Peutinger Map. Photo Courtesy ISAW, Department of Exhibitions and Public Programs

commonly held geographic facts<sup>3</sup>. On the other, I wanted the display to reflect the basic, yet often overlooked fact that while ancient geography undoubtedly involved maps' production, it also affected many other aspects of the social and political life of the Greeks and Romans. Thus, wayfinding became only one aspect, and certainly not the most prominent, for which the works of ancient geographers and topographers were and still are kept in such high esteem.

To respond to the apparent lack of ancient maps surviving Antiquity, I introduced in the show ancient shared notions on the Universe, the Earth and its zones through their descriptions in Greek and Latin sources, as well as in their visual interpretations as found in Renaissance manuscripts. The impact of later reconstructions and reinterpretations of Greek and Roman maps became indeed one of the main components of the exhibition's narrative. The public was reminded time and again that modern understanding of ancient geography is built upon three defining moments in its history, all equally important: the ancient era, when notions of geographic knowledge were first formulated and disseminated; the rediscovery of ancient geography through Renaissance sources; and the use of modern technology in recovering and understanding these earlier periods. Most notably, the Renaissance rediscovery of ancient geographic theories and practices has enabled modern scholars to reconstruct the conceptual framework of ancient mapping. Strikingly, it was Jacopo Angeli's first Latin translation of Ptolemy's *Geographia* (on display in the exhibition with the *Codex Ebnerianus*, Fig. 3) in 1409 that commenced the revival of ancient geography in Renaissance Europe and prompted renewed interest in a subject that was before considered as merely antiquarian<sup>4</sup>.

Aside from illustrating how the Greeks and Romans perceived and mapped their world, the exhibition aimed also at highlighting the ways in which geography and topographic theories affected ancient everyday activities and, more broadly, the social, cultural, and political life of the citizens of the Empire. To better exemplify the role of geography in political propaganda, a section of the show investigated the iconography of the globe on Roman coins, explaining how the sphere became a symbol of terrestrial control and

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3 Scholarship on ancient geography, especially for the last two decades, is quite extensive. For the scope of this essay I will cite just three seminal works. The first and comprehensive study of Greek and Roman maps is O.A.W. DILKE, *Greek and Roman Maps*, Ithaca 1985. Dilke's study still constitutes the main reference for scholars in the field; however, the book's underlining argument that maps were ubiquitous in Antiquity is largely outdated. On the history of cartography, ancient and not, see J. B. HARLEY and D. WOODWARD, eds. *The History of Cartography*, Chicago 1987, especially volume I, on ancient cartography, and volume III, on Renaissance cartography and the rediscovery of ancient geography. A recent study of ancient geography in: D. DUECK, *Geography in Classical Antiquity*, New York 2012.

4 A study of this manuscript and its world map illumination, in J.J.G. ALEXANDER, J.H. MARROW, and L. FREEMAN SANDLER, *The Splendor of the Word: Medieval and Renaissance Illuminated Manuscripts at the New York Public Library*, New York 2005, n. 77, p. 340-342.

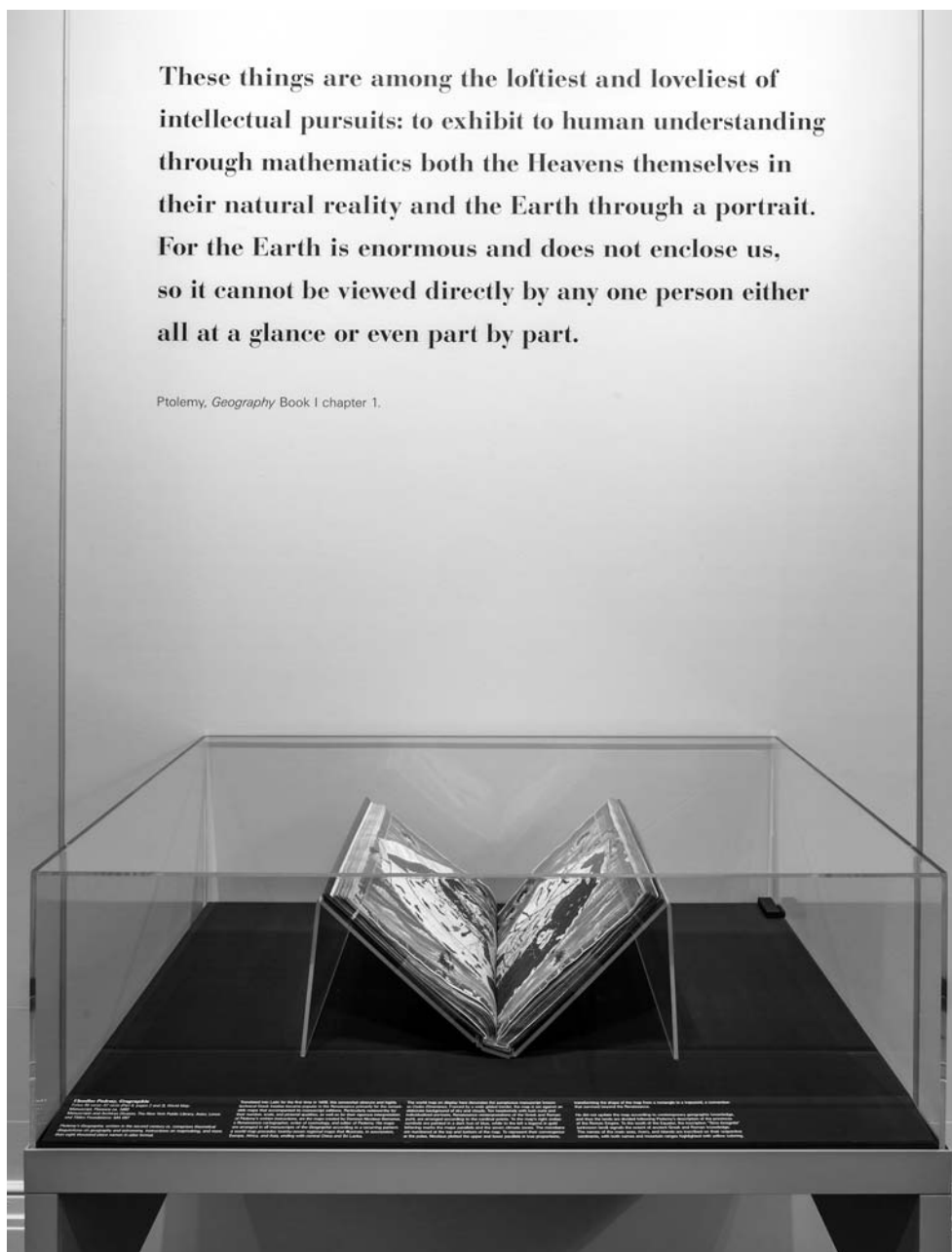


Fig. 3: Display of Claudius Ptolemy, *Geographia*, in ISAW's galleries. On Loan from the Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations: MA 097.  
Photo Courtesy ISAW, Department of Exhibitions and Public Programs

of the extent of the Roman political and military presence, ultimately contributing to the shaping of the society's shared perception of the empire's political and cultural boundaries<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, two modern facsimiles of the *Corpus Agrimensorum Romanorum* and one copy of its first 1554 printed edition addressed the primacy of surveying in the Roman world, introducing the public to issues of land taxation, planning of new settlements and roads, the role of surveyors during military campaigns, and the recording of the empire's progressive expansion<sup>6</sup>. Finally, a display of Greek and South Italian ceramic vessels and a bronze lid from Praeneste informed the viewers on the primary role of the concept of *terra incognita* in Greco-Roman cultural life. Playing on the ancient audience's familiarity with real geographic and topographic data, ancient geographers constructed invented places located beyond the *oikoumene*. These imaginary lands became symbols of highly idealized societies and of mythical civilizations, affecting the ways in which the regions at the fringes of the known world and the people living there were perceived by Rome and Athens, the two epicenters of the ancient world<sup>7</sup>.

With its innovative web presentation and interactive display in the gallery space, the exhibition also introduced the work of modern era scholars who continue to investigate and interpret the geographic legacy of the Greeks and Romans<sup>8</sup>. Spatial analysis and computing are now essential in illuminating aspects of ancient life that go beyond worldview, cartography, and the visual rhetoric of power. For example, aerial and satellite imaging is evermore becoming the tool of choice in discovering hitherto unknown archaeological remains. Additionally, three-dimensional reconstructions, increasingly reliant upon high-resolution data gathered in the field, have multiplied, as it is also the case for viewshed analyses, which determine the portions of a landscape visible from a particular location. The computers installed in the galleries familiarized the visitors with these new technologies and allowed them to interact with some online tools being developed at ISAW and other academic institutions. Among those, *Pleiades*, a historical gazetteer that gives scholars and enthusiasts worldwide the ability to use, create, share, and map historical geographic information about the ancient world, and *Pelagios*, a

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5 Still fundamental in the study of the relations between geographic conceptions and politics during the Early Empire is: C. NICOLET, *L'Inventaire du monde: Géographie et politique aux origines de l'Empire Romain*, Paris 1988.

6 A complete translation of the *Corpus* with a very thorough commentary in J.B. CAMPBELL, *The Writings of the Roman Land Surveyors: Introduction, Text, Translation and Commentary*, London 2000.

7 See, among others: J.S. ROMM, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration, and Fiction*, Princeton 1992, and, not exclusively on the ancient world: O. CALABRESE, R. GIOVANNOLI, and I. PEZZINI, eds. *Hic Sunt Leones. Geografia fantastica e viaggi straordinari*, Milano 1983.

8 This section of the exhibition was curated by Tom Elliott. Readings on the subject are: T. ELLIOTT and S. GILLIES, "Digital Geography and Classics", *Digital Humanities Quarterly*. 3.1 2009; and A. K. KNOWLES and A. HILLIER, eds., *Placing history: how maps, spatial data, and GIS are changing historical scholarship*, Redlands, CA 2008.

collective of projects that aims to usher in a new era of interconnected and collaborative historical geography online. Both projects offer the larger Internet public new and sophisticated tools in the pursuit of a full spatial appreciation of the past.

### About ISAW and the Exhibitions and Public Programs Department

Established in 2006, ISAW is an independent center for advanced scholarly research and graduate education at New York University that encourages the study of the economic, religious, political, and cultural connections among ancient civilizations. ISAW offers both doctoral and postdoctoral programs, as well as conducting an ambitious program of international loan exhibitions that engages a larger public and academic audience.

ISAW transcends academic disciplines and considers the approaches of anthropology, geography, geology, history, economics, sociology, art history, and the histories of science and technology to be as important as the study of texts and the analysis of artifacts. ISAW focuses on shared and overlapping periods in the development of cultures and civilizations around the Mediterranean basin, and across central Asia to the Pacific Ocean to embrace a truly inclusive geographical scope and maintain continuity and coherence.

ISAW's Exhibitions Program is driven by its research mission: artifacts are exhibited mainly for their ability to illuminate central questions about ancient cultures, especially issues related to connections between societies, whether religious, economic, political, artistic, or technological. The Department organizes a major exhibition and focus exhibition each year. The larger exhibition may include international loans of excavated materials and is accompanied by a scholarly catalogue. The spring 2014 exhibition, *Masters of Fire: Copper Age Art from Israel*, displayed a wide array of artifacts from recent excavations in Southern Levant that explored the cultural, social, and technological changes that characterized the Chalcolithic period. The focus exhibitions instead usually highlights one object or a topic: opening on October 8, 2014, *When the Greeks Ruled Egypt*, a show curated by the Art Institute of Chicago, partly reinterpreted by ISAW, investigates changes and continuities in Egypt during the reign of the Ptolemies. Both types of exhibitions are complemented by a wide range of public programming, from scholarly conferences and lectures, to broader cultural events that cultivate a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural heritage of the countries or regions with which the Department is working.

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