Cartography and pilgrimage trails. Tradition, modernity, and tourism

Cinzia Poddaa,*, Paolo Secchib, Milena Bertacchibil

a Università degli Studi di Sassari, cpodda@uniss.it, paolosecchi@ymail.com
b Università degli Studi di Modena - Reggio Emilia, milena.bertacchini@unimore.it
* Corresponding author

Abstract: This article focuses on the theme of the pilgrimage trails and their cartographic representation in two specific historical periods: the Middle Ages, during which the drawing of the world was a reminder of the places of Christian faith, and the mapped locations were those characterised by some sacred event narrated in the Bible or by the dominant theology of the time, joined together in routes that led to prominent sacred temples, as a sort of ascetic and geographical path along the ways of faith of biblical and evangelical tradition, which were evoked on the map; the contemporary world, in which pilgrimage trails have (additionally) become an opportunity to explore the territories crossed, and to activate local development processes thanks to the presence of pilgrim-tourists. In both cases, the pilgrimage has played a major role in these different types of representations, contributing to the discovery and knowledge of the world in the former and enhancing the territory’s potential through tourism in the latter.

Keywords: Cartography, Historical maps, Religious itineraries, Thematic maps

1. Introduction

This paper examines and analyses the itineraries of faith from a cartographic point of view, comparing two specific historical periods. The first takes into consideration how the world is represented during the medieval era, dominated by globes of the so-called T-O series (mappae orbis terrae), wherein the earth is designed according to Christian narratives and includes the locations of significant places of worship. Thus, Jerusalem, Rome, Santiago de Compostela and Constantinople are marked by pathways guiding pilgrims to these sacred places, where geography corresponds to the location of religious events along an itinerary that seems to trace pilgrimage routes in a symbolic context that is clearly complex and surreal. The history of cartography of this period can be analysed starting precisely from the phenomenon of pilgrimages and the important contribution the maps provided to knowledge of the world, albeit symbolically linked to faith-related events, departing from the paths pilgrims followed on their journeys to the temples of Christian faith. References to these religious centres were not lacking in the maps of subsequent eras, even though the discovery of new worlds has given a decisive thematic orientation, in a certain sense favouring trans-oceanic and Mediterranean navigation and aiming at narrating the new geographical discoveries.

The second part analyses the role of religious itineraries today, where the spiritual aspect is also accompanied by cultural exploration and/or the desire to enjoy free time for which, in addition to refreshments for pilgrims, personal services must also be guaranteed, given that religious sentiment is increasingly accompanied by the need to share in events and practises typical of cultural tourism. As we attempt to illustrate in this article, the two historic moments are two very different realities with little in common except for their emphasis on the need to wander, to journey to places considered sacred as a means of “satisfying” the spirit with the certainty that the “fatigue” of travelling by foot will bring renewal to the soul and closeness to God. Although this need has remained unchanged over time, it is framed within the socio-cultural context of each respective historical period and is united by an element that is equally affected by this framework: graphical representation, understood here as a guide to inspire, and today also to complete journeys of faith, shrouded in emotions that extend beyond the sense of religion.

2. The dawn of the “itineraries”

If it is true that travel intended as a pilgrimage, as a practise of worship, penance, moral redemption and spiritual journey, is traced back to the Tavola di Cebete (author of the 5th Century BC), who had represented a pinax (painted votive tablet) an uphill climb full of obstacles to be covered through different stages of purification in order “to reach true wisdom” (Magnaghi, 2006, p. 62). Then it is equally true that beginning from a certain period time, the paths pilgrims followed were often traced on maps in order to mark the existence of such routes, and had to be formally and symbolically established in some way. There was no lack of described itineraries, forerunners of those that were to regain momentum at the beginning of the Middle Ages, such as the Itinerarium Burdigalense, the oldest account of a holy journey written in 330 by an anonymous traveller who describes the places he visited in detail on his journey from Bordeaux to Jerusalem and back, as well as Egeria’s Itinerarium ad loca sancta, probably written before the end of same century, recounting Egeria’s journey to the Holy Land, richly
documented not just geographically (Siniscalco and Scarampi, Ried., 1985). However, the delineation of the routes, the representation of the itineraries, the tracing of these great journeys on maps, appeared much later. Following the end of the great Occidental and Oriental empires and the formation of numerous circumscribed political entities, the very concept of travel and trade changed, and therefore the great Roman road system was abandoned and fell into disuse except on a local level.

The great itineraries, with sections defining the principle spiritual routes, reappeared only after the second half of the 7th century, brought back to life by the pilgrims who travelled “toward the religious destinations of Rome, Santiago de Compostela, San Michele al Gargano and Palestine, reactivating old sections of the abandoned Roman consular roads which between the 9th and 11th were represented with names like ‘Francesca’ or ‘Francigena’” (Cantile, 2013, p. 130), while at the same time rediscovering the ancient tradition of itineraria scripta (ancient written travel guide) which resembled a rudimentary, simplified, thematic travel map of the important pilgrimage routes.

Certainly, among the most well-known itineraries is that of Matthew Paris, a monk in the English Benedictine community of the Abbey of St. Albans, just north of London, who is credited with having created a map and descriptions of pilgrimage routes. Despite the fact that the world he traced was very approximate, having produced a first detailed map of Europe and “the first graphic description, in a unitary context, of European cities” (Gallozzi, 2020, p. 51). Paris’ work is second in the genre only to the well-known Tabula Peutingeriana [Peutinger’s Tabula] which relates to the Roman road system (Wilkins, 1977). A man of great culture and acclaim, Paris was considered a cartographer, historian, chronicler, and artist hitherto unparalleled in the Latin world. He produced several works of which the most important for the purposes of this research paper is the Iter de Londinio in Terram Sanctam, an impressive work that exists in four editions replicated by hand by the same author, corrected and supplemented from time to time, and presented in the form of a book with additional foldouts on some pages as a further explanation of certain locations. The path of the (likely) pilgrimage that winds from one location to another is indicated by a fairly regular set of double lines inside which the name of the road is written along with drawings of details relating to each place reachable by the itineraries: towns, castles, churches, including characteristics of the places mentioned with their respective names written in red and blue. This work, which has been called innovative for the way it combined the idea of an itinerary with that of a map (Wilkins, 1977), is certainly the forerunner of today’s road maps (Wilford, 1981) and is worth examining in-depth in both a cartographic nature and also for historical purposes, although Cantile (2013, p. 131-134) has already conducted a respectable summary from this point of view. For the quantity of information and descriptions relating to important locations, it can also be reasonably considered a precursor of the more modern representations of cultural itineraries or religious routes, even though there is a lively debate among scholars about the true purpose of this work, whether it was intended to represent the sacred path for pilgrims to follow from London to Jerusalem, or rather if it delineated their return journey.
know for sure that he did not travel much and that his life essentially took place inside the Abbey of St. Albans with the exception of one trip he took to Norway following a missive from Pope Innocent IV. Therefore, the high level of detail of the document, including specific elements reported on geographical descriptions of the places named, leads us to suppose that in addition to manuscripts preserved in the abbey, he also drew upon the accounts of pilgrims he encountered returning from the Holy Land. Considering this hypothesis, the Iter de Londinio in Terram Sanctam could still be regarded a pilgrimage route, whether in departure or arrival, as a sort of “spiritual” pilgrimage conceived to allow monks to travel to the Holy Land without leaving the abbey (Connolly, 1999), or as “an instrument for a sort of virtual pilgrimage or even as the manifestation of a desire, of a will to undertake such a journey” (Cantile, 2013, p. 134).

3. Biblically guided “wandering”

It was in the Middle Ages, when the transmission of written culture was entirely in the hands of the clergy (Cavallo, 1994), and after the Christian doctrine, which had become “totalising”, over time had given life to cartographic models defined as ‘regressive’ (Cantile, 2013, p. 94), that the image of the world was expressed in the framework of the aforementioned T-O maps: the mappemundi (world maps). The drawing, with East at the top and often depicting the refiguration of the earthly Paradise, was divided into three sections according to the classical conception, with Asia occupying half of the Northern Hemisphere, Europe on the left and Libya (Africa) on the right side of the Southern Hemisphere, separated horizontally by the waters of the main rivers and vertically by the Mediterranean, surrounded by the ocean. This design, which can be traced back to a system framed around the centrality of God, even in literal iconography, given that the “T” symbolically evokes the holy cross of Christ’s martyrdom, dominated all the production of that long period up until the advent of nautical cartography (the oldest example is the so-called “Pisan” of the late 13th century), the great geographical discoveries and finally the invention of the printing press. Printing allowed the diffusion of the Ptolemaic vision of the world, after the translation from Greek into Latin of a copy of his famous Geography that was discovered in the Vatican archives, and also thereafter “the medieval urban revolution changing with the birth of universities and the very notion of the scholar, led to a progressive secularisation of culture between the 12th and 13th centuries when the abbeyes lost their character as being the exclusive cultural network” (Neve, 2016, p. 59). The mappemundi generated within the monastic structures had a vast production; the individual specimens, differentiated by style, type and size, whether actual drawings on walls or on paper or even miniaturised insertions within texts, appear to be unique in that they were drawn up by different authors “however only 50 examples represented the whole world while the rest were almost entirely composed of diagrams of a few centimetres in diameter” (Cantile, 2013, p. 97). All appear to be united by the vision of the sacred which was the dominant culture of the time, expressed through the hands of religious centres evidently following a religious thread throughout the whole design of the world, directly connected to creation and to biblical narratives for which the places, cities, and pathways clearly referred to specific episodes connected to Christian faith or narrated by the Holy Scriptures. Such representations, often expressed by the ideal embrace of Christ, appear in several examples with his head up (to the East) and his feet down, once again confirming the dominance of Christianity in the mappemundi.

The central theme articulated by the mappemundi is that every Christian must walk the path to reach salvation and it is that path, in some of the most well-known and best-preserved examples of world maps that have survived until today, which is represented in some way as a spiritual itinerary to reach important Christian centres of that period with the goal of leading to purification. It is in this spiritual path that we rediscover the geographical account of the world view of that time, albeit complicated by apparent simplification as seen through our modern conception of the typical canons accustomed to realism and rationalism expressed by geometric-mathematical projections, and now also ratified by real photographic images taken from space. It is evident that a modern reader would be impacted by seeing the mappemundi through today’s eyes, having to replace the vision of reality with an approximate and stylised drawing containing masterfully integrated scenographic fantasies or animals/monsters (often fantastic or mythological) drawn in the unexplored regions of the world, and expressed through the eloquent framework of medieval geographical knowledge which remained essentially fixed to that inherited from classical culture.

Therefore, the drawing of the territory was not a representation of the geographical space, but rather a reference to the “pivotal” places of the Christian faith, where the locations indicated on the diagram were those characterised by some sacred or mystical event narrated by the Bible or the then-dominant theology, joined together by a “single path” that connected the major temples of faith to Jerusalem and elsewhere. However, it should be noted that, in the last period, this apparent a-scientific nature of medieval cartography, for a long time the subject of criticism by the positivist vision of historical cartography scholars, today has been almost distorted, leading instead to the belief that it represents a cultured product able to provide “a sum of the geographical knowledge of the time and a sophisticated method of the visualisation of knowledge” (Neve, 2016, p. 83); it is precisely this degree of complexification of the representation that makes deciphering the history of world territories problematic as they are dressed in Christian mysticism. Therefore, the mappemundi are works begging re-evaluation, to be understood as pictures of incredible value and representative of knowledge when examined with this vision that realistically takes into account the historical context of their production, the experience and culture and the ways in which the cartographer who produced them.
drew on information available to him to trace the geographical picture of the world known at the time, while tucked away in his hermitage.

These works must also be perceived as personal scientific erudition of the meaning then assigned to people and things, imbued with the Christian faith, considered the matrix of everything, together with the concept of travel and the condition of journeying towards sacred places. A condition therefore emerges that leads one to observe these masterpieces of art, faith, and cartography in an almost aesthetic way, pervaded by fervent admiration, especially if confronted with two of these works of art, perhaps the most famous and admired for their quality but also their size: the Ebstorf globe and Hereford globe. The former was discovered by chance in the Benedictine nuns' convent in the town of Ebstorf in Lower Saxony before being destroyed by Allied bombings in 1943.

Figure 3. The Ebstorf Mappa Mundi (Alamy Stock Photo).

It is composed of thirty sheets of parchment, which according to some accounts was actually goat skins (Barber, 2001, p. 69) and was the largest in the world (with a diameter of 3.57 meters). It is known only thanks to a series of copies based on reproductions of detailed photos taken in 1891 on occasion of its restoration and reconstructed with polychrome a few years later. The illustration exhibits mystical significance through “the circularity of the orbis (round shape) that alludes to transubstantiation in the form of the Eucharist wafer, reiterated by the body of Christ embracing the world (or dressing it with mappa-velum), whose head, hands and feet emerge at the extremities of the orbis, coinciding with the four cardinal directions” (Neve, 2016, p. 84). The second world map example represents the largest surviving medieval planisphere, a pentagonal manuscript 158 x 133 cm in size on parchment and is preserved in Hereford Cathedral, after which it is named. Both mappemundi “address the issue of the contrast between human and divine time, underlining the centrality of Jerusalem […] and are built around itineraries” (Barber, 2001, p. 69). Therefore, they lend themselves to being examined from the point of view of the research conducted for this article, even though attention will be paid only to the second one.

4. Hereford’s Mappa Mundi: spirituality, geographical accuracy, meaning of spiritual itineraries

Oriented to the East, the central point of the map is occupied by Jerusalem surmounted by an image of the crucifixion, while the Last Judgment is depicted at the top with the Saved on the left, the Damned on the right and a Virgin with bare breasts praying for mankind (Ibid. p. 73).

Figure 4. The Hereford Mappa Mundi is an example of the classic medieval manifestation of the T-O map, oriented to the East (at the top) with Jerusalem in the centre (Alamy Stock Photo).

The regions directly facing the Mediterranean Sea are represented in an interesting way with Italy, France and Spain in the semblance of a triangle facing the centre and separated by a stretch of sea, another block corresponding to Greece to the north-west (looking at the image, not in relation to the orientation of the map) and another stretch of sea dotted with the islands of Africa, listing the regions that border it: Egiptus, with Alexandria and Nīlus, Cyrenaica, Africa Vera, Numidia and Mauritania. The concentration of islands between the shores of Italy and Africa is an unusual attribute, the largest ones almost aligned and with a myriad of smaller islands in the shape of a crown. This interpretation of the world is surprising due to the presence and accuracy of geographical information, even if linked to Christian episodes, where this fantastical vision of the known lands illustrated through graphic storytelling denotes a certain competence.
and scientific knowledge which, as observed earlier, does not confirm the a-scientific nature of this production but rather, on the contrary, denotes their high scientific, cultural, artistic and iconographic value, in addition to that of its intended mystical purpose. Moreover, “it is certain that the Hereford cartographer was familiar with the accounts of travellers, probably of some crusaders” (Wilford, 1981) since numerous itineraries are outlined, albeit in a very simplistic way, criss-crossing throughout all of Europe using simple lines uniting places or cities to the coasts and rivers that were useful for reaching the Holy Land and other notable locations. Particular emphasis seems to be assigned to the escape from Egypt of the Jews, highlighted by the interruption of the colour of the Red Sea along the route to Sinai and then to the mountains of Jerusalem.

5. The cartography of itineraries today: combining faith and tourism

In order to understand the geographical awareness of Hereford’s map for the purposes of attempted targeted analysis for this research paper, we carried out a sort of thematic georeferencing, i.e., by single continents, using the techniques of historical cartography to which the scientific community is now well accustomed, and achieving results that do not seem to be pure coincidence. Google Maps was used as a point of reference, which implements the Mercator projection modified by Plate Carrée and adapted to the WGS84 (World Geodetic System). Admittedly, the comparison is technically impractical and represents only an attempt – a divertissement, as it were – to observe whether there is a certain spatial relationship between the imagined design (the world map) and the geometric design (the Google Maps projection used as a basis for verification). As can be seen in Figure 5, there is a sort of “correspondence” between some geographic elements in a diffuse manner throughout the map and it seems even more pronounced in reference to the area of Europe. Some correspondence obviously does not mean a connection but rather that the distance between positions seems, in very broad terms, to repeat itself cyclically. In fact, the segments that join together two points appear extraordinarily similar, even though from its orientation one can deduce the "geometric randomness" of the drawing, in the sense that the strokes do not have the same orientation as they would have if the map to be georeferenced had been "stretched" in one direction only. This leads us to believe that the estimated positions between different locations were evaluated fairly correctly in relation to the measurements used for mapping, in a way considered homogeneous, even if the units of measurement employed derived from different sources: days of travel spent on foot or on horseback, period of navigation, cosmographic observations, troop marching times (in the case of crusaders), etc.

While the distance between positions in European countries appears to be somewhat contained, the distance between Asian localities positioned in the Northern Hemisphere is far more accentuated and even seems to increase as it moves further from the Mediterranean shores and from the centre of the map (Jerusalem) towards the edges of the drawing, towards the oceans. Ultimately, it can be deduced that the positions between the European localities and the borders of the other two continents facing Jerusalem are reported with greater accuracy, presumably due to the precision of the sources that the cartographer had access to at that time, which were very focused on pilgrimages towards the most important places of worship. A deeper knowledge of Christian sites could therefore only translate into greater detail in the illustrated map and greater precision in the location of the geographically described events, generally referring to locations of faith. The rarefaction of travel in territories less noteworthy to Christian spirituality could only lead to less precision in the mapping of geographical distance between locations.
pilgrimage routes acquire different but marginal roles and meanings. 

Rather than being dedicated religious itineraries, even though in city maps the location and often description of important places of worship are marked, especially if they are of a certain artistic or architectural interest, the maps of today are street maps with multiple scales and variable format, sometimes on double-sided paper, in which the desired route is to be identified within the design of the general road system according to the presence of sanctuaries or other symbolic or religious buildings of interest. In fact, the religious itinerary, generally speaking, does not have its own dedicated production, but instead falls into a category within which the pilgrim, equipped with the classic “road map,” can orient himself or herself to reach any destination thanks to the quality and richness of details of the diagram, often improved by illustrations of territorial features. Therefore, the maps are not aimed exclusively at the representation of the pilgrimage route with figures of religious sites together with a few other functionally important landmarks for the traveller clearly indicated with respect to the rest of the representation, but rather, organizing a religious journey within the framework of the map is possible thanks to the delineation of paths between spiritual locations, easily identified in relation to the network of roads. In general, this format suggests the possibility of a wide range of travel options guided by the starting position, the articulation of the road network, and by the location of the religious sites. While it must be specifically mentioned that many maps are dedicated to outlining spiritual itineraries, they have not come to represent a true category deserving of wider attention due to lack of uniformity of quality and the fact that many are only locally distributed. Thus, in the contemporary world, the printed road map has replaced the historic mappamundi as the source of geographic world understanding, even though now this same information is offered even more directly through the numerous aerial or satellite images, starting with Google Maps, which are available online and accessible by any internet user. The religious trails can be planned out directly using various search engines and tools made freely available on the internet by a number of dedicated applications. 

However, there is a particular period in (modern) history in which the religious path, understood as the theme of a specific cultural ritual linked to the territory, once again becomes the protagonist of the geographical guide with the scope of discovering the territory covered, illustrated above all in terms of its potential attractions and services on offer, wherein the pathway becomes a point of reference for pilgrims who have also added the title of “tourist” to that of wayfarer. This is the moment in which tourism, after its explosion of a mass phenomenon in last decades of the previous century and most recently, the evolution towards sustainability and escape from urbanity, began to orient itself in the practise of so-called slow living and the rural lifestyle, where emotional and cultural participation in entertainment activities is destined to represent a new territorial attraction that encourages development, especially on a local level.

Faith, and its physical representation substantiated by places of worship distributed throughout the land, became the motivation for a new form of pilgrimage, entering the circuits of cultural tourism, and improving it in a decisive way with new proposals, innovating the travel sector by means of penetrating local areas covered by the itineraries while offering everyone the opportunity to get to know and experience the territory.

6. The religious cultural itineraries

The formalisation of cultural and religious routes by Europe contributed to this phenomenon with the establishment of the European Cultural Routes promoted by the Council of Europe in 1987, and the creation of an official register, to which the subscription was necessary to maintain the multinational character of the project, with the possibility for institutions to apply for financial aid in a more structured way for the development and maintenance of religious pathways for tourism purposes throughout Europe. The first Cultural Route of the Council of Europe began with the multiple pathways that lead to Santiago de Compostela, a World Heritage Site since 1993, which connected large portions of the territory surrounding each of the many trails and attracting pilgrims embarking on the walk by providing lodging, restaurants, entertainment and as such, integrating their spiritual journey with tourism. Many European, national, regional, or local routes have been established to date thanks to this new religious-tourism trend as the traveller’s need to enhance the spiritual itinerary with representation of the territory itself has become apparent. The paths of faith thus became the object of a new category of visual representation, the theme of which is to develop a blueprint of the territory no longer as just the physical substrate of a religious journey, but as an element around which to collect the many components of travel made attractive by the cultural atmosphere, and by the transcendent experience that the pilgrim feels internally. It is evident that in the digital age these aspects find their rightful place on the internet, where various paths are illustrated, described, represented, made interactive and combined with other territorial values and offerings that add substance to the aforementioned argument regarding the relationship between knowledge and wandering. While a series of traditional printed products such as “guides” are still available, published in various folded formats and variously declined, often of a smaller regional area and generally on glossy paper, a glance at the web allows us to observe the vast number of maps related to this phenomenon, especially for the best known pilgrimages, such as the Camino de Santiago and the Via Francigena from Canterbury to Rome and to Santa
Figure 6. Map of the antique religious pilgrimage route known as Via Francigena, Francisca, or Romea, that leads from Canterbury to Rome and to Santa Maria di Leuca, created on OpenStreetMap, within the website of the European Association of the Via Francigena (https://www.viefrancigene.org/it/percorso/). A straightforward path (to travel by bike or on foot) that is also a source of territorial information by increasing the scale (zooming in) through interactive features like a drop-down menu of information to select.
Maria di Leuca, also known as Via Romea. The phenomenon has exploded in popularity in many forms, not only oriented towards personal services, but also aimed at enriching travellers by satisfying their physical as well as cultural and emotional needs. Essentially, a single common thread emerges: the map, proposed in very different versions now even interactive and dynamic, often based on OpenStreetMap or connected software (for example OpenTopoMap), with the scale of the map ranging from extreme perspective (the simple path from Canterbury to Apulia) to small details along the route such as in a small urban centre, where lodging, restaurants and a plethora of other information is visible depending on the chosen zoom visualisation selected. One final note: often, in relation to the type of site, while the map appears in a position that is not always in the foreground and behind a button to be clicked, it still serves to substantiate the connection between the traveller and his real-life experience of the paths once taken and those yet to be taken.

7. Conclusion

The research conducted sought to expand upon the relationship between religious pilgrimages and their cartographic representation, observed in two specific moments in history: when pilgrims were the ones who discovered new worlds and recounted their stories, given the cultured person the opportunity to record them, thus contributing to the delineation of world geography; and, more recently, when pilgrims imbued their faith with new travel needs linked to sustainable and responsible tourism, very much attracted by culture and exciting experiences. From two totally different cultural situations, however, emerged the close link between the map, thanks to its cartographic representation, observed in two specific versions now even interactive and dynamic, often based on OpenStreetMap or connected software (for example OpenTopoMap), with the scale of the map ranging from extreme perspective (the simple path from Canterbury to Apulia) to small details along the route such as in a small urban centre, where lodging, restaurants and a plethora of other information is visible depending on the chosen zoom visualisation selected. One final note: often, in relation to the type of site, while the map appears in a position that is not always in the foreground and behind a button to be clicked, it still serves to substantiate the connection between the traveller and his real-life experience of the paths once taken and those yet to be taken.

8. Attributions

The setting and bibliographic research are common; C. Podda edited the paragraphs n. 1, 3, 4, 6 and 7, P. Secchi n. 2, M. Bertacchini n. 5.

9. References


