



Autun's map and the mysteries of Roman cartography

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Abstract

We know very little about Roman cartography. There are almost no surviving artefacts, and texts mentioning maps are rare and uninformative. In this paper, I provide a brief overview of the main challenges posed by the study of Roman cartography and comment on a text written in AD 298 by Eumenius, teacher of rhetoric in Augustodunum (modern day Autun), which provides an extensive description of a map.

Keywords: Augustodunum, Eumenius, Map, Peutinger Table, Roman Antiquity

1. Introduction

My general knowledge of Antiquity is too sketchy – and my abilities in Latin are far too limited – to call myself a scholar of antique cartography. However, studying the mapping practices of past eras can help us assess exactly how maps fit into our contemporary worldviews. In this regard, Roman cartography offers some particularly interesting insights.

We know that Roman civilization was able to conquer a vast empire of continental extent, build countless towns, linked by thousands of kilometers of roads and aqueducts, and centrally manage such a huge territory for centuries. We can hardly conceive how all of that could have been achieved without the extensive use of maps, since in our modern world, maps are the perfect embodiment of strategic planning and

territorial management. However, this particular way of envisioning cartography is relatively recent. For example, even if, in Europe, the military has been producing maps of various scales since at least the 18th century, the pervasive connection between maps and the military in the iconography only appears after the Napoleonic era. The figure of Napoleon poring over a map to plot a battle is one of the most iconic depictions of the French emperor, yet it is extremely difficult to find an instance of this type of portrayal that was not made considerably later than the end of the Napoleonic empire. This example, unrelated to Roman antiquity, proves how our common views of cartography can induce us to invent anachronistic uses for maps by transposing more recent worldviews and practices to earlier periods.

I will briefly summarize the main challenges posed by the study of Roman cartography, before detailing the only extensive description of a small-scale map in the classical Latin literature, in order to suggest some possible approaches to some functions of maps in the Roman world.

2. The mysteries of Antique cartography

We know surprisingly little about the cartography of Antiquity. The principal reason for our ignorance is the scarcity of antique cartographic artefacts. No proper scale map made in either the Greek or Roman world has survived. Now that the so-called Artemidorus papyrus is no longer deemed genuine by most (or, at least, it has been declared a fake by the Italian judiciary; Giustetti, 2019), the closest thing we have to an antique map is the Tabula Peutingeriana (Figure 1).

This curious object, held by the Austrian National Library, is a band of parchment 30 cm high and nearly 7 meters long. It was made in the 13th century and is apparently a copy of a Roman original (evidence for this includes the fact that it shows the city of Pompeii, which had been forgotten at the time the copy was made). It represents most of Europe, and some parts of West Asia and North Africa, with the roads and cities of the Roman world, Rome being at the center. The shape of the area figured on the map is compressed north–south and elongated along the west–east axis, in such a way that it is at first difficult to recognize the regions depicted. This map does not belong to any known cartographic tradition, and its precise origin and purpose are unknown (Talbert, 2010).

Given the lack of actual maps, we must rely on texts. Unfortunately, throughout the whole corpus of classical Latin texts, unambiguous references to maps are extraordinarily scarce. In the Greek world, we can find quite numerous testimonials of a geographical science based on sophisticated mathematics, which could have led to the production of maps (Irby, 2012). Though the Roman world was doubtless aware of Greek geographical theory, it does not seem to have built upon it, or even made any use of it. The main body of Latin texts pertaining to the

measurement of space is by authors collectively known as *gromatici*, or *agrimensores*, and concerns the art of land survey at a local scale (Campbell, 2001).

The absence of proper theoretical geography treatises does not mean that maps were unknown in the Roman world. However, they do not seem to have been commonly used for any practical purpose, such as traveling, waging war, development planning, or administration (except, in this last case, at a very local scale). There is no mention of any practical use of cartography in the Roman world, except, maybe, a brief allusion in Vegetius (about 400 AD), who explains that generals going to war can plan the movements of their troops using *itineraria non tantum adnotata sed etiam picta* (*De Rei Militare*, III-6, “travel guides not only in texts but also in pictures”). Even there, there is no indisputable evidence that these “pictures” are indeed maps (Brodersen, 2001).

Not only can one not find any mention of the practical use of maps in the Roman world, but the mere mention of maps in a text is a rarity. Moreover, since there is no proper word in Latin to name a map without ambiguity, the exact interpretation of the texts can generate lengthy discussions. Such is the case of a few lines from Pliny the Elder (*Natural History*, III-17), quoting a geographical document that Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa had put on public display under a portico in Rome. This document, which is never described more precisely than by the expression *orbis terrarum* (“the whole Earth”), is generally known as “Agrippa’s map,” since it makes sense to assume it was of cartographic nature. Many scholars have ventured as far as reconstructing the map, either speculating it must have followed the Greek geographical tradition or assuming it must have been the original model of the Tabula Peutingeriana. Kai Brodersen (2012) compiled the numerous reconstructions of Agrippa’s map, which are so diverse and unrelated to each other in terms of supposed shape and size that their enumeration produces a comical effect. Brodersen himself doubts that this document was of graphical nature, arguing that it could as well have been a list of places and distances. This point of view, however, is not shared by many.



Figure 1. Detail of the Peutinger table. Augustodunum is in the center of the picture.
Source: Bibliotheca Augustana.

3. Some hypothesis about Rome's geography

The rarity of sources and lack of conclusive evidence are probably the reasons that Roman cartography is a field that has been overlooked by scholars until recently. The first major attempt to produce a synthesis on the subject is the first volume of the *History of Cartography, Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean* (Harley and Woodward, 1987). Oswald Dilke, known for his work on *agrimensores*, authored the chapters about the Roman world. Since then, this work has been much debated and challenged on many counts. Most notably, Dilke is said to have overstated the role of maps in Antiquity's worldview and the Romans' practical life (Talbert, 2008). We are so much accustomed to grasp geographical space through the mediation of maps that we are almost unable to understand how it could be done otherwise. Yet, there are reasons to think that geographical knowledge in

the Roman world was not primarily disseminated by means of maps.

Because accurate measuring of long distances was difficult, and correct determination of longitudes was not possible, topographical surveys of vast regions posed overwhelming challenges. Yet the geographical science of the Greeks, not unknown to the Romans, had achieved some remarkable feats. The medieval manuscripts of Ptolemy's *Geography*, originally written circa AD 150, includes a gazetteer of more than 6000 places. However, the skills necessary to make maps from these data were probably uncommon, at best. Furthermore, maps are much more difficult to copy than mere texts, and maps in the Western world only became common with the printing press (Woodward, 2007). Even if some maps did circulate in Antiquity, such as those attached to Ptolemy's *Geography* or later derivative works (Gautier Dalché, 2009), they could not have been widely disseminated. Geographical knowledge was thus

probably mainly recorded and spread through texts and lists (Arnaud, 1989).

From our modern point of view, it is difficult to understand how the Romans could envision the geography of their world. One of the most common types of geographical document is the *itineraria*, lists of waypoints between two distant cities (Salway, 2001). Since roads also feature prominently on the Tabula Peutingeriana, some scholars have suggested that the Romans had an “odological” conception of space, whereby the connection of places by roads was more important than the precise geometry of territory. This view was first supported by Pietro Janni (1984). As his work is in Italian, I have only second-hand knowledge of it, but it gained considerable popularity in the years following publication, to the point that most subsequent works about the Roman world at least allude to it. This hypothesis, however, is not entirely convincing. As Richard Talbert (2013) notes, *itineraria* are usable only by people who already have some kind of geographical knowledge that cannot be purely odological. Maybe, as Talbert (op. cit.) put it, we should admit that, for the time being, the Romans’ worldview is “beyond recovery.”

4. Augustodunum’s map

If we cannot understand the Romans’ worldview, can we at least understand the function of maps in their world? It is difficult to answer this question at a general level, but we can shed some light on the subject by studying the most detailed description of a map from Roman antiquity. The text is well known to anyone with even a cursory interest in Roman mapping, although it does not seem to have sparked the same amount of research as the few lines of Pliny cited earlier. The facts that the author was less famous and lived in the late 3rd century, later than the most celebrated Latin writers, might explain this relative obscurity. The author is Eumenius, and the text is his *Speech for the Restoration of the Schools*, written in AD 298.

Eumenius, formerly personal secretary (*magister memoriae*) to Constantius Chlorus, had been appointed in AD 297 as a teacher of

rhetoric and director of the schools of Augustodunum (modern day Autun), his hometown. These schools had been damaged in AD 269 when the Batavi of Victorinus besieged the city (Galletier, 2003). In AD 298, Eumenius addresses a speech to the governor of Gallia Lugdunensis, who is visiting Augustodunum. The director of the schools asks for permission to restore their buildings at his own expense. The text of the speech has been preserved in the collection known as the *Panegyrici Latini*. Eumenius explains at length why the schools must be repaired and how he is willing to devote to this purpose the generous emoluments he is receiving. He does not go into any detail about the exact nature of the work that needs to be done, with one notable exception: at the end of his address, he gives a very detailed description of a map (or maybe a series of maps) to be exhibited under a portico in the school grounds:

Further, in its porticoes let the young men see and contemplate daily every land and all the seas and whatever cities, peoples, nations the unconquered rulers either restore by affection or conquer by valor or restrain by fear. Since for the purpose of instructing the youth, to have them learn more clearly with their eyes what they comprehend less readily by their ears, there are pictured in that place, as I believe you have seen yourself, the sites of all locations with their names, their extent, and the distances between them, the sources and terminations of all the rivers, the curves of all the shores, and the Ocean, both where its circuit girds the earth and where its pressure breaks into it.

(XX-2; translation by Barbara Saylor Rodgers)

This introduction of the map occurs abruptly, after some apparently unrelated remark about how schools should be temples for literature in the vicinity of temples for gods. The mention of the extent of the locations and distances between them either suggests a proper scale map, or, more likely, some written information visible on or near the map. Agrippa’s map, from the little we know of it, definitely displayed this kind of information. We have no way of telling anything about the actual shape and design of the map or maps, beside noting that since there is no mention of roads and because the shape of geographical features seems recognizable, it is

highly unlikely that it was related to the *Tabula Peutingeriana*. Eumenius goes on:

Here let the most noble accomplishments of the bravest Emperors be recalled through representations of the separate regions while the twin rivers of Persia and the thirsty fields of Libya and the recurved horns of the Rhine and the many-cleft mouth of the Nile are seen again as eager messengers constantly arrive. Meanwhile the minds of the people gazing upon each of these places will imagine Egypt, its madness given over, peacefully subject to your clemency, Diocletian Augustus, or you, invincible Maximian, hurling lightning upon the smitten hordes of the Moors, or beneath your right hand, lord Constantius, Batavia and Britannia raising up their muddled heads from woods and waves, or you, Maximian Caesar [Galerius], trampling upon Persian bows and quivers.
(XXI-1-2)

Of course, one of the main purposes of this passage is to provide a pretext for the eulogy of the emperors of the tetrarchy at the end of the speech, by praising their actions both in peace and at war in various parts of the empire. However, it is also notable that the map is less a geographical document than a way to record or, more accurately, commemorate, history. Looking at the map triggers a mental operation of remembrance or imagination. It is tempting to make a link between this description of the map and the art of memory, which was part of the training of students of rhetoric. There was no practical way to have written notes when speaking in public, because parchment was too expensive and wax tablets were too cumbersome. Orators needed to memorize the entire text of their speech. Cicero, Quintilian, and the anonymous author of the *Rhetoric for Herennius* all described a way to achieve this by imagining a familiar space and putting in it certain images that would act as reminders of the

various parts of the discourse. The speaker was supposed to circulate in his imaginary space while delivering his address, and recollect his ideas by seeing the previously chosen pictures with his mind's eye (Yates, 1966). The imaginary space could be, for instance, a house, but Quintilian suggests that different parts of a town or some landmarks along a journey could work as well (*Institutio Oratoria*, XI).

Eumenius' description of the map suggests something similar, since various parts of the maps are used as reminders of the deeds of the emperors. Verbs linked to sight (see; gaze—Latin: *reviso*; *intueor*) are paired with ones related to the mind (recall; imagine—Latin: *recolo*; [*sibi animus*] *adfingo*). The order in which the regions are enumerated (Persia, North Africa, Germany, Egypt) does not seem particularly logical, but since the events associated with each one are not listed in the same order, we can assume that rhetorical considerations outweighed other rationales. As a rhetorician, Eumenius was familiar with the art of memory, and one can imagine that this use of the map would seem natural to him.

5. Conclusions

It is impossible to infer from this unique example that maps in the Roman world were commonly used as commemorative monuments. However, we cannot help noticing that the narrative dimension of the map somewhat echoes the way geography could be recorded through travel, implying a temporal succession of places in itineraries or circumnavigations. If anything, it is another reminder that our map-centric worldview is probably extremely different to the way the Ancients envisioned their geography.

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