

Geography and Ethnography

Perceptions of the World in Pre-Modern Societies

Edited by

Kurt A. Raaflaub and Richard J. A. Talbert



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Geography and Ethnography

The Ancient World: Comparative Histories

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Series Editor's Preface

The Ancient World: Comparative Histories

The application of a comparative approach to the ancient world at large has been rare. This series, of which the current volume is the third, intends to fill this gap. It pursues important social, political, religious, economic, and intellectual issues through a wide range of ancient or early societies, occasionally covering an even broader diachronic scope. "Ancient" will here be understood broadly, encompassing not only societies that are "ancient" within the traditional chronological framework of *c.* 3000 BCE to *c.* 600 CE in East, South, and West Asia, the Mediterranean, and Europe, but also later ones that are structurally "ancient" or "early," such as those in pre-modern Japan or in Meso- and South America before the Spanish Conquest. By engaging in comparative studies of the ancient world on a truly global scale, this series hopes to throw light not only on common patterns and marked differences, but also to illustrate the remarkable variety of responses humankind developed to meet common challenges. Focusing as it does on periods that are far removed from our own time, and in which modern identities are less immediately engaged, the series contributes to enhancing our understanding and appreciation of differences among cultures of various traditions and backgrounds. Not least, it thus illuminates the continuing relevance of the study of the ancient world in helping us to cope with problems of our own multicultural world.

Earlier volumes in the series are *War and Peace in the Ancient World* (ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub, 2007) and *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity* (eds. John Bodel and Saul Olyan, 2008). Forthcoming volumes include *Epic and History* (eds. David Konstan and Kurt Raaflaub, 2009), *Highways and Byways in the Ancient World* (eds. Susan Alcock, John Bodel, and Richard Talbert), *The Roman Empire in Context* (eds. Johann Arnason and Kurt A. Raaflaub), and *Thinking, Recording, and Writing History in the Ancient World* (ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub).

Kurt A. Raaflaub

Introduction

RICHARD J. A. TALBERT AND KURT A. RAAFLAUB

It is a sad opening, but an unavoidable one, to acknowledge that this volume remains lame. Its Introduction cannot be balanced by the corresponding Conclusion that Denis Cosgrove provided with his unrivalled range, flair and insight to a workshop on this volume's topic at Brown University in March 2006. In planning this volume and the program of the workshop at which contributors had a chance to present and discuss first versions of their chapters, Kurt Raaflaub and I had been eager to include a capstone session at which some synthesis and reflection on themes in the individual contributions could be ventured, and broad lines of continuing enquiry identified for further discussion. Denis Cosgrove at the University of California, Los Angeles, seemed to us a scholar ideally suited to open such a session. We were delighted and honored when he accepted our invitation to do so, and he duly spoke with characteristic authority and enthusiasm. Tragically, however, he died two years later on March 21, 2008 from complications following cancer surgery, and in consequence he was never able to distill his words into writing for this volume.

Denis Cosgrove's death is a major loss to us all. To quote David Lowenthal in his obituary for *The Independent* (April 8, 2008): "Cosgrove's central mission was to illuminate the dynamic interplay between the world's diverse material landscapes and equally diverse modes of imagining and exploring them." At Brown, Denis formulated for us eight questions as potentially rewarding lines of comprehensive enquiry into worldview among premodern societies, and I reproduce them here as recorded in my imperfect notes scribbled on the occasion. The introductory overview which follows would hardly be the place for any attempt to do full justice to the eight, but a shared concern for many of the themes and issues raised should readily be apparent.

- 1 What counts as geographical knowledge, and how is it produced, coordinated, learned, represented?
- 2 How are the disjunctures of system and autopsy managed, if at all?
- 3 How universal/mobile/restrictive are our own contemporary metageographical concepts?
- 4 How useful, or restrictive, is our privileging of maps and our focus on vision?
- 5 How has ethnographic diversity been related to environmental diversity? And how far is the diversity of mankind related to the diversity of the environment?
- 6 How, when and where did world, earth and globe unite?
- 7 How do territorialized geographies or spatialities relate to geographies of mobility, either conceptually or representationally?
- 8 How are hybridity and diasporas, and the question of cosmopolitanism, dealt with within territorialized geographical schemes?

To determine the order in which the 19 contributions should appear in a volume as wide-ranging as this one presents a delicate fundamental challenge that its editors may postpone, but ultimately cannot evade. In the obvious absence of any natural order, we have followed our inclination not to privilege Europe, and indeed to place the most familiar theme last – that is, David Buisseret’s account of how from the fifteenth century onwards a combination of the Ptolemaic and Portolan chart traditions enabled European cartographers to record the expanding exploration of the world launched from their continent, and eventually to produce maps of all kinds according to the widely recognized norms still taken for granted today. Even in the 1570s, however (as Buisseret recounts), reliance upon any such standards was strikingly premature. Philip II of Spain had hoped that his cosmographer could be supplied with maps, or *pinturas*, by the various administrative divisions of his farflung empire, which would then form the basis for a detailed, comprehensive map of the whole. That ambition proved impossible to achieve, however, because the 200 or so *pinturas* sent adopted too wide a variety of styles, many of them reflecting not European cartographic norms, but rather those of such subject peoples as the Aztecs and the Maya.

Almost to its very end, therefore, this volume compels readers to engage with the unfamiliar. It is, as Christopher Minkowski aptly summarizes it in the opening contribution, “a project of recovering and understanding the uses of geographical and ethnographical knowledge and conceptions by the peoples who produced them, in their own times and places.” For twenty-first century Westerners, the difficulties are many and formidable. Particularly taxing for us are non-literate societies. Hence it takes special dedication and sensitivity on the part of Kathleen DuVal, Barbara Mundy and Catherine Julien to tease out the worldview of Mississippi peoples (whose own names we do not even know!), the Aztecs, and the Inca respectively. Archaeology and material objects can yield vital testimony, if only the relevant pictographs and other signs can be interpreted. Potentially valuable, too, but liable to mislead and frustrate at the same time, is the written record of Westerners whose own ingrained conceptions inevitably influenced their understanding. In the Inca

case, as Julien explains, the territory of Tawantinsuyu (Peru) survived, but it was entirely reimagined by its Spanish conquerors; the original conceptualization of the name – which seems to have combined geography, political theory, and a statement of power – resists our full comprehension in the absence of accounts by native authors in local languages.

More generally, throughout the volume it is essential to distrust any presumption – so easily made on our part – that the societies under investigation approached the world at all as we do. Mundy warns: “the insistence in modern geographic practice on vision and verisimilitude as the basis for geographic representations does not always hold in the New World, where ‘ways of knowing’ are not always based on sight.” Julien offers reason to think that the Inca system of orientation may not have relied upon the cardinal points. John Henderson, in explicating nonary cosmography in ancient China – a long-lasting and highly influential ordering of space – articulates the risk inherent in tapping Chinese texts of this type for insight into matters of prime concern to us (the Chinese concept of the world, for example). Such matters may in fact have been of marginal interest at best to these ancient authors, giving rise to the danger that our preoccupations will not only prove largely fruitless, but will also lead us to overlook the authors’ own priorities. By the same token Michael Loewe, reviewing the various types of reports to survive in Chinese documents, concludes that it is not the norm to find there a sense of space, or recognition of long distances, or appreciation for the effect of natural conditions on the growth of a community, let alone on the characteristics of its culture. Our deep-rooted intellectual categories and periodizations, moreover, may act as a positive hindrance to appreciation of premodern cultures. As Henderson cautions, the Chinese division of space according to the pattern of the square divided equally 3×3 is an ordering that falls between modern geography, cartography, even cosmography. Adam Silverstein concludes from his discussion of “the medieval Islamic worldview” that the very notion is an oxymoron. The relevant body of writing in Arabic and Persian is uniquely large. However, it is hardly accurate to describe those geographers who did form a worldview – one very dependent upon Hellenistic, Iranian and Mesopotamian ideas in fact – as genuinely medieval or Islamic. On the other hand, the geographers who were Islamic and, in chronological terms “medieval,” hardly had a *worldview*; they felt obliged to draw upon only personal observation or the testimony of eye-witnesses, and so ignored non-Muslim lands as a result.

A further assumption to be avoided is that maps or map-like images occupied an important place, indeed any place, in the premodern societies discussed. In early Mesopotamia the symbolic literary imagery examined by Piotr Michalowski is paramount. In early Greek culture, too, discussed by Susan Cole and James Romm, maps were created as aids to philosophical and geographical speculation about the world. Literary records, including geographic catalogs in Greek epic poetry, as well as itineraries, predated maps and were never superseded by them. Division of the globe by continents, climates and cultures became a topic that engaged a long succession of Greek writers, who in turn later influenced Jewish, Roman and

medieval thinking in East and West. Meantime the “colossal,” comprehensive work of narrative geography by the Greek author Strabo – the subject of Daniela Dueck’s contribution – confined itself to words and ideas, without maps. Even so, Strabo insisted that any geographer should be an experienced traveler who could claim *autopsia*, as he proudly did himself. As my own contribution recognizes, Roman culture likewise, despite its unwavering pride in territorial expansion, never enlarged the limited range of contexts and purposes for which it employed maps of various types; in part for this reason, cartographic norms failed to develop. Romans clearly came to share an extensive “mental map,” but this remains elusive, as does insight into the learning and cognitive processes underlying it. As Emilie Savage-Smith reveals, our perception of Islamic cartography in general, and of its mapping of the Mediterranean in particular, has been hugely enriched by the recovery of the *Book of Curiosities of the Sciences and Marvels for the Eyes* that only came to light in 2000. Its novel rendering of the Mediterranean forms a stark contrast to the vision conveyed by the earlier “Balkhī School” of cartography. But the contrast in turn raises questions of whether the eastern Mediterranean’s dominance (to the surprising exclusion of Muslim Spain and western Europe) merely reflects eccentricity on the part of the anonymous Egyptian mapmaker, or whether his perception was in fact one widely shared in early eleventh-century Egypt.

For early China, Agnes Hsu’s contribution makes the persuasive claim that the maps found at Mawangdui in 1973 – hitherto admired principally for their rendering of hydrology and topography – also convey a ritual and symbolic quality that should not be overlooked. The demarcation of Han-controlled territory in Changsha on one of these maps acts as a visual symbol signifying the separation between the civilized world and the landscapes of untamed peoples. In addition, once the set was placed in the tomb from which it has been recovered, the maps became a metaphor for a space that is preserved in perpetuity. In the same way, Hsu maintains, the Anping map-like mural of Eastern Han – with its axonometric, or characteristically Chinese “bird’s-eye view,” perspective – had a spiritual function in the tomb where it was painted; it, too, arrested time and space for ever.

Regardless of whether or not the societies under discussion developed maps, there emerges from the volume a persistent (and perhaps hardly surprising) tendency for them to situate themselves at the center of their world, to exaggerate the extent of their control, and at the same time to envisage one or more zones beyond. There their own exemplary level of civilization is missing, and indeed even their knowledge of the land and its peoples gradually fades – the “distance decay function,” as Cosgrove termed it. Akkad in Mesopotamia represents itself not so much as a center to be contrasted with a periphery, but more as a focal point for the whole world, with the kings of Akkad claiming to rule the four corners of the universe. Babylonian literature draws a basic distinction between “home-land” (*kalam*, further divided into cultivated and uncultivated areas) and “the Eastern mountains” (*kur*). In the Aztec empire, with its concentric spaces extending out from the island capital Tenochtitlan at the center, the equivalent contrast is between the nearby and intelligible (*nahuac*) and the distant unknown (*buehca*). Mississippian

peoples had a keen sense of self-identity and of borders, yet were inclusivist in outlook, eager to learn from outsiders. Egyptians mirrored these attitudes in the first two respects, but (as Gerald Moers illustrates from an exceptional variety of texts and images) their rejection of most foreigners was extreme – peoples viewed as disgusting, unsettled, desperate to rob Egypt of vital resources. As the living incorporation of the god Horus, Pharaoh's role in principle was to impose orderly rule upon the cosmos from its center Egypt; yet the foreigners' zone was acknowledged to be uncontrollable in practice, and a constant threat to Egypt's wellbeing unless confronted with unflinching violence. Greeks imagined three zones: themselves, with *barbaroi* beyond and, further still, horrific *agrioi* – cannibals, or lice-eaters, or people who turned into wolves once a year. The Chinese, like Egyptians and Greeks, were especially fearful of marauding nomads, above all the Xiongnu to the north; hence their "Great walls" were built as protection.

At the same time, flexibility in attitudes towards foreigners is unmistakable. Egyptians idealized the exotic, distant and near-mythical land of Punt. Once the Chinese realized the prospects for trade and settlement in such remote regions as Da Xia and Anxi (Bactria and Persia), they willingly developed friendly relations with the aliens there. Strabo, in his highly ethnographic *Geography*, remains inconsistent in his ranking of Romans. There are times when he groups them together with his fellow Greeks as "us" against "them," the rest of the world. Elsewhere, however, he insists upon the overall superiority of Greeks on cultural grounds, but in recognition of the Romans' achievement as empire-builders he is prepared to term them "refined barbarians." What remains unique in Greek geographic and ethnographic writing is the remarkable attempt of the incomplete medical treatise *Airs Waters Places* – an anonymous late fifth century BCE work, discussed by Romm – to link the earth's climates, continents and political structures into a single comprehensive system. Later Greek thinkers preferred to credit that both climate and culture were primarily determined by heat, cold and a mix of the two; none adopted the anonymous author's more intricate climatic model, with its consideration for the effects of East and West winds together with the established opposition between North and South.

It is vital to appreciate that many premodern societies attached the greatest importance to situating themselves not merely within the immediately perceived world, but also within a vaster universe, as already noted of Akkad and Egypt. To them, moreover, the teaching of sacred scripture may be held superior to scientific knowledge. India's Sanskrit texts, the Purānas, present an outstanding instance, not merely defining geography but also thereby justifying a hierarchical ordering of Aryan society by castes. This vast assemblage of mythology, legend and history is discussed by both Christopher Minkowski and Kim Plofker. In the latter's words:

It represents the earth as a flat circular disk resting in the middle of the *brahmānda* or "cosmic egg" surrounded by the primal elements. Above the disk of the earth are stacked the layers of the various heavens; below the earth are corresponding layers of the various *patālas* or underworlds, and beneath those in turn successive *narakas*

or hells. All the dimensions involved are immense: for example, the diameter of the earth's disk is said to extend for five hundred million of the units called *yojanas*, which would be approximately on the order of five billion kilometers. The great mountain Meru in the middle of the earth's disk reaches to the pole-star in the heavens, and the other stars and planets wheel around it, appearing to rise or set as they are revealed or hidden by its massive form. All the locations in this vast expanse are teeming with beings of elaborately diverse sorts. [pp. 35–6]

Despite the revered status of this Purānic vision, both Minkowski and Plofker are particularly concerned to show how attention was also still paid to real-world geography and astronomy in India, and how intersection of the two types of vision occurred. A comparable amalgam treated by James Scott is to be found in the Hebrew *Book of Jubilees*. This neglected apocalyptic text (surviving complete only in an Ethiopic translation) skillfully exploits both biblical and Hellenistic Greek conceptions of geography in order to establish the prominent place of Israel and the Jews in the world, both now and in the expected eschatological future. *Jubilees* affirms a spatial symmetry between heaven and earth and promises that, in accordance with God's original plan for his creation, blessings will radiate out from Zion to the rest of the world.

A superficially more familiar case of amalgam may be found perhaps in European ethnography, geography and cartography during the Middle Ages, the focus of Natalia Lozovsky's attention. In fact only quite recently has a serious effort been made to understand the different ways in which medieval scholars reconciled classical scholarship and Christian doctrine in order to develop their own distinctive presentation of the world and its peoples. New knowledge was incorporated where possible. Thus it is no surprise to find ninth-century scribes at St. Gall in Switzerland glossing a geographical chapter of Orosius' early fifth-century *History Against the Pagans* with up-to-date information about the encroaching Bulgars and Hungarians (the latter would eventually sack the abbey). Medieval *mappae-mundi* purposefully combined both spiritual truths and information about the material world. The image of the earth seen from above became an aid to prayer and meditation, a chance to ponder its smallness, transience and sinfulness, as in St Benedict's vision. At the same time, geographic and ethnographic texts had real-world value in education, as well as in reinforcing rulers' self-identity and sense of authority; the Roman tradition of creating maps to serve as statements of power was extended too.

Ideally this volume might have sought to include discussion of still more pre-modern societies than it does, but by its very nature it is open-ended, a work in progress. A single pathbreaking volume can only accomplish so much; if other colleagues are subsequently inspired to follow this lead, that further progress will be very welcome. The present contributions amply confirm the rewarding scope, diversity and extraordinary richness of the themes that they unlock. At the same time they underline the risks to be incurred by the all-too-common temptation to draw conclusions about a society's worldview based on inadequate knowledge

or inappropriate modern assumptions. As it happens, a memorable instance of such flawed knowledge and its misuse is recalled on the first page of the first contribution below: an unwary British scholar in Calcutta developing outlandish theories about the origins of civilizations gains over-zealous assistance from a Brahmin Sanskrit expert, and the published fraudulent testimony is later used by a British explorer in Africa to aid his (successful!) search for the headwaters of the Nile. Read on.

Richard Talbert

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After initial collaboration between editors and authors, early versions of most of the chapters in this volume were offered for discussion in a workshop that took place under the auspices of the Program in Ancient Studies at Brown University in March 2006. This workshop – preceded by three lectures on important aspects of our topic relating respectively to the Middle Ages, the early modern period, and native peoples of North America – had the purpose of enhancing a common focus in all contributions, fostering intense interaction and collaboration among contributors, and facilitating the creation of a coherent book rather than merely a volume of collected essays. To amplify the coverage, a few chapters were solicited following the workshop.

For several years a grant from the Kirk Foundation in Florida, offered through the good services of Faith Sandstrom, a Brown PhD in Archaeology and Classics, and her husband Frederick, one of the foundation's financial advisors, enabled the Program in Ancient Studies to organize a lecture series, sometimes ending with a small colloquium, that discussed an important topic from the perspectives of several ancient civilizations. For this volume's topic, we organized for the first time a workshop with stellar international participation. This event, too, was the first that the Sandstroms themselves supported with a major gift. In appreciation of their continuous enthusiastic support, this workshop bore their name: we are truly thankful to them. But thanks are owed to many others as well for their generous contributions: the Program in Medieval Studies, the Program in Renaissance and Early Modern Studies, the John Carter Brown Library, the Artemis and Martha Sharp Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology and the Ancient World, the Departments of Classics, Egyptology and Ancient Western Asian Studies, and History, the Marshall Woods Lectureships Foundation of Fine Arts, the Charles P. Sisson II Memorial Lectureship, the Bruce M. Bigelow Class of 1955 Lecture Series, and the Royce Family Fund for Teaching Excellence, all at Brown University. The publication of this volume has been facilitated by contributions from the Program in Ancient Studies and the Royce Family Fund for Teaching Excellence.

Finally, we should not forget that it is individuals who make things happen. I thank the contributors for their participation in our project, whether they were part of the initial cast or joined us afterwards, and for their valuable contributions; the

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Kurt Raaflaub

Where the Black Antelope Roam: Dharma and Human Geography in India

CHRISTOPHER MINKOWSKI

Preamble: Speke, Memory, and the Proper Use of Native Lore

In order to consider the history of geography-writing in India let us begin with the story of an intrepid British explorer of the nineteenth century, and a notorious Sanskrit forgery. The explorer was John Hanning Speke (1827–64), the discoverer of the source of the Nile, who was, at least in part, correctly guided by false information. That information came, as he thought, from archaic Indian sources.

The story of the discovery of the source of the Nile by Speke in 1862, on an expedition that was supported by the Royal Geographical Society, is well known, but this minor part of the story is not. It begins somewhat earlier, in Calcutta at the end of the eighteenth century. There, a British Sanskrit scholar called Francis Wilford (1761?–1822) hired a pandit, that is, a traditionally trained “native” Sanskrit expert, a Brahmin, to collect for him all the references that the pandit could find to two locations outside of India.¹

The literature that Wilford identified as the best source for his research was a genre of Sanskrit text called the Purāṇas, a name which means “ancient lore.” The Purāṇas are lengthy, versified compendia of mythology, cosmology, and the related knowledge traditions of what we now define as the classical form of Hinduism. At the time, Wilford and most of his contemporaries in the Asiatic Society thought that the Purāṇas were very ancient records. The Asiatic Society was founded in Calcutta in 1784 by Sir William Jones “to enhance and further the cause of Oriental research,” and Wilford had been one of its earliest and most active members.

Wilford asked his pandit to go through the Purāṇas, and to collect from them any references to Egypt, and to a place called Śveta Dvīpa, the White Island. On

the basis of the evidence that his pandit collected, Wilford published two geographical articles in *Asiatick Researches*, the journal of the Asiatick Society, in 1799 and 1805. The earlier of the articles was about Egypt, which, Wilford concluded, had known settlements of Indians from very early periods, and the ancient geography of which was preserved in the Purāṇas. The later article was about the White Island which, Wilford concluded, was England with its white cliffs, and from which much of Indian civilization had itself long ago derived.²

Whatever the truth of Wilford's claims about historical antiquity and priority, his publications had real-world effects. His first essay found its way into Speke's hands at a crucial moment, in 1860, when he was on his final Nile expedition and had arrived in Zanzibar. He was about to begin the arduous trip inland, in an attempt to reach the northern end of Lake Victoria where he suspected the Nile began, when, at the British Consulate in Zanzibar, a Colonel Rigby put a copy of Wilford's article on Egypt into his hands. The article confirmed in Speke's mind the association of the Mountains of the Moon – that is, the terrain around the lakes in East Central Africa, which Speke thought must be the headwaters of the White Nile – with Egypt, the Land of the Moon, downstream. This was a fact, Speke was now convinced, that had been known long ago to the ancient Indians, though not to the Egyptians. Speke also thought that the Indians had somehow maintained connections with both the northern and southern ends of Lake Victoria for some time. Fortified with this confirmation by ancient Indian knowledge, Speke set off inland with his company.³

However, this ancient knowledge which so fortuitously confirmed Speke's hunch, was not just ill-conceived methodologically; it was also fraudulent. On the eve of the publication of his later article, on the White Island, Wilford had discovered that his pandit had not merely gone through the Purāṇic texts as he had been requested. Rather, he had created an anthology of altered or freshly-made Sanskrit versified passages, which demonstrated the points that Wilford had told the pandit he hoped to discover. When Wilford asked the pandit to show him the original sources that he had used to make his compilation, the pandit, no doubt still trying to be obliging as he understood it, generated those as well. He scratched out words in existing manuscripts and replaced them with the needed references to Egypt or England, or created extra pages for existing manuscripts of Purāṇas, or even created lengthy texts entirely anew.

Despite the discovery of this creative enhancement of his sources, Wilford did not retract his general claims.⁴ These, he thought, were based on correct premises, even if the principal evidence that demonstrated them had lost its value. So Wilford went ahead, prefacing his publication with an acknowledgment of the forgery. As a result, his reputation was ruined, as was the reputation of the Purāṇas as factual historical sources, as was for some time the reputation of Sanskrit studies as well. Even so, the fact is that Speke did indeed find the headwaters of the Nile, at Ripon Falls, on Lake Victoria. Moreover, when he published his book about the expedition in 1863, he invoked Wilford and the ancient Hindu knowledge of the Purāṇas that had aided his planning and supported his geographical conclusions.⁵