

BOOK REVIEW

Literary Territories: Cartographical Thinking in Late Antiquity. By SCOTT FITZGERALD JOHNSON. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xiv + 202. Hardcover, \$74.00. ISBN 978-0-19-022123-2.

Natalia Lozovsky observed that “for literary historians and textual critics, early medieval geographical texts have philological rather than geographical value.”¹ Johnson attempts to fill this gap with his *Literary Territories: Cartographical Thinking in Late Antiquity* which explores a large swath of travel and pilgrimage literature (from 200–900 CE), composed in various contexts for differing purposes. Johnson observes that many texts from late (and also classical) antiquity display “cartographical thinking” whereby “the world becomes a symbolic container of many types of knowledge, and the world-as-symbol is thus made equivalent to the author’s chosen literary form” (1). Geography, therefore, and knowledge of the “inhabited world” (*oikoumenē*) are the means of organizing material and intellectual culture. Recognizing geography as a metaphor employed in many genres, Johnson argues for the concord of archive, encyclopedia, and (narrative) “maps” that represent the intersection of form and content in ancient literature. Reductive, schematic, and artistic creations whose shapes determine the limits of the world, “maps” represent a created reality, and they must be interpreted.

Oscillating between classical, late antique, and medieval material, Johnson explores five nodes of geographical thinking to show how late antique and medieval writers both preserve and transform classical geographical awareness in literature. These include “pilgrims” as archivists (especially Pausanias, the 2nd c. CE Greek travel writer, and Egeria, the wealthy Spanish matron who left a detailed record of her late 4th c. CE peregrinations through the Holy Land); the evolution of hodo-logical “texts” as archives (in particular the early 5th c. *Notitia Dignitatum*, the 6th

¹ Natalia Lozovsky, *The Earth is Our Book: Geographical Knowledge in the Latin West*. Ann Arbor: 2000, p. 2.

c. *Christian Topography* of Cosmas Indicopleustes, and the Peutinger Tablet); geography as a “structural element” in the literary poetic anthropology of the saints and apostles (with a focus on the 5th c. CE *Life of Thekla*, commemorating the life of a 1st c. CE Turkish martyr, where Johnson emphasizes “place” as a structural element in the saint’s life); the “function of the cognitive landscape of the late antique hagiographical texts” (especially with regard to both Egeria and the preeminence of the gospel in Thomas in the Syriac Church); and the enduring resonance of the Holy Land and points to the west, despite the eastward spread of Christianity along the Silk Road. Johnson includes a useful appendix of relevant primary sources, including critical texts and translations into English. Perhaps, instead of one general index, names and toponyms might have more profitably been segregated into their own indices. Although we concede that the “reconstruction” of ancient maps makes no substantive contribution to such a discussion, a map of the primary sites would have been welcome.

The book, with its clean text and lucid style, is well-researched and rigorously documented. Egeria makes for a charming lodestone, and Johnson’s generous summaries and background material render the study accessible to the non-specialist. Johnson asks interesting questions and makes salient observations throughout, especially in Chapters 3 and 4. For example, Johnson notes that Egeria’s account of Sinai leaves “her readers with only the barest sense of real space,” but her treatment of Edessa (associated with Thomas) and Seleukeia (associated with Thekla) leaves the reader “with the sense that, in their spheres of influence, these two saints abut one another’s territory” (91), although nearly 600 miles separate the two cities (a datum omitted by Johnson). Furthermore, the apostles themselves acted as an organizing principle of world geography (96).

Elsewhere, however, transitions could be smoother, disparate segments more tightly linked, and some remarks more clearly corroborated. Johnson teases his readers with claims of the “inventiveness” of Cosmas Indicopleustes in repurposing genre and tradition (58), but does elaborate. Johnson also intriguingly suggests, for example, that the Peutinger Tablet “offers a unique opportunity to explore in detail the cultural history of the period in which it was originally made” (44). No doubt he is correct, but, again, he leaves his reader wanting more. Johnson also seems to dismiss the profound symbolic importance of the Peutinger Map, which demonstrates, visually, how geography/cartography can serve as an organizing framework of knowledge.²

² See R. J. A. Talbert, *Rome’s World: The Peutinger Map Reconsidered*. Cambridge: 2010.

Johnson also rightly observes the importance of locale in mythology and the indelibility of hero/saint to a place, but his neoterism “locatedness” rankles (surely “place” or some synonym would suit?). Johnson merely hints at the correlations between Greek hero cult and the cults of saints (principally, Thekla, 96), a trajectory that could be profitably investigated to bolster his “geography as framework” argument. Johnson seems, in fact, to take a two-pronged approach to “geographical awareness,” blurring the distinction between “geography” and “cartography” (synonymous until the Renaissance, but not afterwards) and between cartography (a two-dimensional interpretation of the *oikoumenē* or some part of it) and toponym (a single point on the map). The argument may have benefited from closer engagement with Lozovsky who covers much the same time period, concentrating on the Latin West, with greater focus and translucency. Although this reviewer was expecting a different type of book (as implied by the title and introduction), there is, nonetheless, much of value in this study, which serves as a riveting introduction to travel literature in late antiquity.

GEORGIA L. IRBY

The College of William and Mary, glirby@wm.edu