

*Ancient Perspectives: Maps and Their Place in  
Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome*  
edited by Richard J. A. Talbert

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David Wheeler (University of Glasgow)

This volume is a collection of lectures given as part of the Sixteenth Kenneth Nebenzahl, Jr., Lectures in the History of Cartography held by the Newberry Library in November 2007. The chosen theme for this season was ancient cartography, as a comprehensive examination of the subject is sorely lacking. The last serious attempt was the first volume of *History of Cartography*, edited by Brian Harley and David Woodward (1987), which focused largely on the cartographical history of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean. The current study positions itself in relation to this seminal work and is presented as a renewal of scholarship that aims to ignite further interest and research in this topic. As such, the lectures were given in collaboration with Chicago's Festival of Maps, spanning the 2007-8 academic year, and were presented alongside a series of exhibitions organised by the Newberry Library and the Field Museum.

The primary focus of this study is the map in the ancient world, with the understanding that the term 'map' has modern connotations that ancient equivalents (assuming such sources can be seen as equivalents) do not necessarily attempt to fulfil. With this fact in mind, this study aims to examine maps within each of the areas being considered (Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome), track their evolution (where possible), and explore the roles they played in the cultures that created them. The man firmly at the rudder of this work is editor and contributor Richard J. A. Talbert, a leading scholar of ancient geography and head of the Ancient World Mapping Centre at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Apart from the preface (provided by James R. Ackerman, Curator of Maps at the Newberry Library) and introduction (written by Talbert himself), the main content of this book is divided up into seven chapters penned by Talbert and his six co-conspirators. The book opens with Francesca Rochberg's chapter summarising the extensive Mesopotamian material and explores maps which represent actual features of the landscape as well as those representing ideas of the landscape. This is followed by David O'Connor's chapter on the few traditional maps and plans that have survived from Egypt as well as map-like elements of temple art. From there the text transitions into the Greek material, beginning with Georgia L. Irby's chapter on the evolution of mapmaking from Homer to Eratosthenes and Alexander Jones's on Ptolemy's geography. This is followed by Michael Lewis's chapter on the tools and techniques of Greek and Roman surveying. Richard J. A. Talbert picks up Lewis's narrative and discusses large scale maps in ancient Rome, and the book closes with Benet Salway's chapter on mapping a Roman worldview from textual sources.

Like *History of Cartography* before it, this work is characteristically interdisciplinary due to its geographic and chronological scope. As a result, the contributors were themselves chosen from a variety of disciplines, such as Classics, Near Eastern studies, and ancient history. The text assumes a scholarly audience which will approach this text from many vantage points, and the authors have taken noticeable steps to make their chapters accessible to this diverse audience. As the main goal is to spark interest across a variety of fields, the tone is largely didactic and endeavours to introduce a solid foundation upon which future research can be built. The text's major strength is that it accomplishes this while at the same time advancing interpretation of the evidence in new and intriguing ways. In light of this, it could be possible to view *Ancient Perspectives* as a revised edition of *History of Cartography*, though this would not be entirely accurate. While both books approach the work in a similar manner and deal with much of the same content, they have very different scopes. *History of Cartography* is an expansive six volume work that endeavours to cover the history of cartography from prehistoric times to the modern age, of which only a portion of the first volume is dedicated to the evidence covered in *Ancient Perspective*. The aims of *Ancient Perspectives* are far less grand, and yet by concentrating on the ancient Mediterranean

exclusively, the content feels less like a step on the way to something else, as it does in *History of Cartography*, and more like a topic worth studying in its own right.

This is an exceptional piece of research that is certain to become a milestone in its own right, as it makes a large contribution to the field. However, the book has a clear geographical bias. Of the seven chapters included, five deal with the Classical world, while Egypt and Mesopotamia each receive one chapter. In the case of Egypt this is understandable on the surface, as few examples of what we might conservatively call ‘maps’ or ‘plans’ have survived. However, one of the great strengths of O’Connor’s chapter on Egypt is how it expands the breadth of material that can be considered map-like, meaning much more could be said about cartography in Egypt. The circumstances are very different for the Mesopotamian material, which by Talbert’s own admission is the most numerous (p.7). Yet despite the abundance of material evidence, the number of civilizations in the Near East producing the evidence, and the long span of time being covered, Mesopotamia is still only covered by one chapter. While the goal was to ignite further research and not to cover all the material extensively, it is inevitable that there will be some complaints that not enough territory was covered. Indeed, this should be taken as a compliment to the authors, as they have successfully whetted the readers’ appetite and leave us wanting more. Let us hope, then, that the scholarship that comes after this is able to cover the Egyptian and Mesopotamian material in greater detail.

### Bibliography

Harley, J.B., Woodward, D. (eds.). 1987. *The History of Cartography*. Vol.1, *Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.