
Fra Mauro's Mappa Mundi and Fifteenth-Century Venice by Angelo Cattaneo

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Of all the known medieval and Renaissance maps, none is more famous than Fra Mauro's *Mappa Mundi* of 1449–1460. This large table-sized map, with beautiful and intricate illustrations, bristling with descriptive legends, is often used for illustrations in modern world-history textbooks. And yet, this is a map that defies categorization or full explanation. Historians for many generations have argued as to whether the map represented the end of medieval cartographic knowledge or the beginning of new cartographic understanding in the age of exploration; whether its use of vernacular (Venetian) was indicative of its parochial nature; and whether it was influential or ignored. Angelo Cattaneo, in his magisterial account of the life and times of this important artifact, is firmly convinced and convincing that Fra Mauro's map was embedded in his time and place, that it was more modern than medieval, that it was well appreciated and understood, and that it supplied an important step in the development of early modern cartography.

Fra Mauro, a *converso* monk in the monastery of San Michele di Murano in Venice, appears to have devoted much of his intellectual life to an understanding of world geography, with a large map of the world as its result. The map, created between 1449 and 1460 (there is some uncertainty as to the final date), depicts the whole known world (the *oecumene*), including Europe, Asia, and Africa. Cattaneo gives us a full description and understanding of Fra Mauro's work, as an image, as a text, and as a beautiful artifact.

The *Mappa Mundi* was a huge circular map designed in the first instance for hanging on the wall and it included over 300 legends, seven large ones in the four corners outside the map and many others within the map, describing places, people, and, most particularly, trade goods and potential. The outer

legends presented Fra Mauro's cosmographical world, including translations from Aquinas and a beautiful rendition of Paradise. Cattaneo traces the sources of many of these legends, which include Marco Polo and Conti, and he identifies the artist responsible for the illustration of Paradise, Leonardo Bellini. From both the map and the legends, we see an author who views the world as complex but navigable, open for trade rather than conquest. He is a Venetian, after all. The *Mappa Mundi*, according to Cattaneo, is a complex and up-to-date scientific work, popularizing important natural philosophical debates and ideas.

Cattaneo illuminates the interaction within the *Mappa Mundi* of authoritative texts and modern travel narratives. Using Asia as an example, he demonstrates that Fra Mauro has read and understood Marco Polo's work but has not slavishly copied it. (Ramusio had believed that Fra Mauro was using a lost map of Polo's but this is clearly not the case.) Rather, Fra Mauro made use of what he saw as the most up-to-date information, using both Polo and the more recent account by Poggio Brocciolini of Nicolò de' Conti's Indian Ocean voyage, and correcting them as appropriate. Cattaneo shows that Fra Mauro drew on these travel narratives in four ways: by using toponyms, by paraphrasing passages especially with regards to trade routes, by creating images based on them, and by his own narrative style. Fra Mauro reworked these sources, correcting when he knew information from other sources. Essentially, Fra Mauro read these two authors as trade guides to the global spice trade. This may tell us how Venetians in general read these two great travel accounts and certainly shows that the *Mappa Mundi* had a practical mercantile thrust.

Part of the ongoing debate about Fra Mauro has been his use of vernacular. Does this show that he was unlettered? That the *Mappa Mundi* was designed for the less scholarly? Cattaneo argues that Fra Mauro was well educated, a humanist, and yet also scholastic—in other words, a man of his time. According to Cattaneo, Camaldolese monks at the time often used vernacular in order to reach a larger audience; and Fra Mauro fits into this pattern. He also shows that Fra Mauro had read a large number of scholarly works, citing 40 different works on the *Mappa Mundi* itself. He was one of the first to cite Strabo and relied heavily on Thomas Aquinas and the commentators on Aristotle. Although Fra Mauro tried to read everything in his field, Cattaneo argues that he should not be seen as a medieval encyclopedist since he

wished to have his own view of the world, not just a complete one from the past. This can be seen, according to Cattaneo, by the many legends in which Fra Mauro states his own opinion. So, argues Cattaneo, we should view Fra Mauro as a modern man, in part a humanist (but still keen on ancient texts), not an old-fashioned encyclopedist, but someone participating in the changing intellectual world of 15th-century Venice.

Cattaneo takes on several other interesting discussions about this famous map in standalone chapters at the end of the book. He has an interesting chapter examining the cost of Fra Mauro's *Mappa Mundi* relative to similarly sized works of art of the period. His conclusion is that the *Mappa Mundi* was a luxury good but at the lower end of such goods in cost. A final chapter looks at the role played by this map in the 19th-century creation of the discipline of the history of cartography, arguing that this *Mappa Mundi* was an important artifact of study as scholars worked to develop this discipline.

Perhaps unavoidably in a book of this type, there are some problems. Cattaneo takes too defensive a position, arguing rather repetitively for the modernity of his subject. He occasionally sets up his opponents as more strident than they are and, therefore, his arguments are not always as subtle as they could be. The claim that Fra Mauro is the end of medievalism rather than the beginning of modernity is an old one and Cattaneo's more complex rendering of this 15th-century monk and his works could have stood well without the argumentative rhetoric. Further, it would have been better to have had a good concluding section rather than dissipate the argument in the final section on cost and historiography.

That said, Cattaneo's is a convincing case. Fra Mauro's work was an important contemporary intervention in the growing geographic and cartographic knowledge of the late 15th and early 16th centuries. The *Mappa Mundi* should be seen as an important dialogue between ancient and modern, humanistic care of older sources weighed with contemporary eyewitness accounts. The use of vernacular should be seen as important popularization of natural historical and philosophical ideas rather than as indicative of some monastic backwater. The world was poised for new discoveries and connections, and the lack of America on the map should not blind us to its importance for the European world of cartography and trade.