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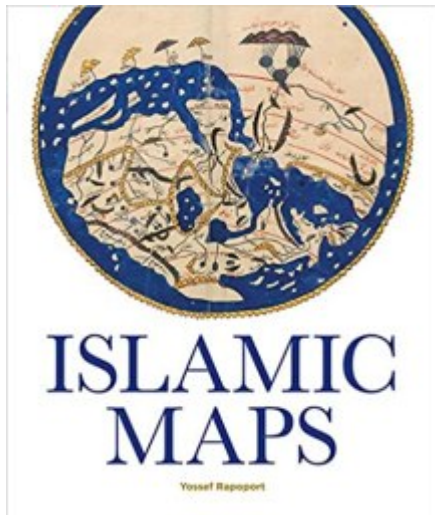


Figure 1: Islamic Maps book cover

By Yossef Rapoport, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, 2019., ISBN: 978-1851244928 distributed by University of Press, \$55.00, 192 pp.

This beautifully presented volume explores the contributions that many Muslim map makers made to Islamic cartography over ten centuries from the ninth to the nineteenth century, demonstrating the geographic and topographic details from Baghdad to Iran and the entire region of what we consider the Mid-East. These geographers and cartographers each had distinctive styles showcasing their abilities in artistry relying upon geometrical patterns and calligraphy to create cartographical techniques that blended art, science and geography. The results described and shown in this book attest to the visually attractive and intricate mathematical details that are represented in each map from a timeline spanning from 170 C.E. with the death of the Greek geography Ptolemy of Alexandria to 1765 and the end of Safavid rule in Iran.

Maps capture a lifestyle, and in this volume, a civilization, as they accompany and supplement artistic and extensive manuscripts at a time when instruments and tools, directions to Mecca via Qibla charts and other location-centric measures and variables that are mathematically computed. This book provides an elegant reading and understanding of how Muslim scholars, often mathematicians and astronomers were able to describe visually and artistically physical space, specifically telling the story of these incredible mapmakers and how they came to produce such maps



which became central to understanding more modern mapping techniques.

As major libraries and archives could share their collections digitally, a growing interest in these Muslim mapmakers resulted in this inviting and beautiful book that provides great insight into the history of such maps and fills some gaps in knowing more about the mapmakers. Cartography and mapmaking are often enjoyed by collectors who are interested in the history of the map, and in the case of Islamic maps, perhaps more broadly interested in the history of science.

The study of Islamic mapmaking centers around “a series of ingenious arguments” and Rapoport demonstrates what this means when he explores how Muslims historically viewed themselves and made sense of the world. Taking a rather expansive view of what is meant by Islam, the maps included by Rapoport were all made by men who identified themselves as Muslims who used Arabic labeling and included an equally varied sense of life and culture. The focus of the book is on the mapmakers and the purpose of their maps. With most being Sunnis, they come from the entire region and the maps indicate that “there is no purely Islamic map, only hybrid maps that show the wonderful synthetic ability of Islamic civilization.” That suggests Rapoport’s insight that “none of these maps represents Islam as a whole; none of them captures the entire tradition.” There is so much complexity and rationale behind each map.

The exquisite layout of the book is divided into the following thoughtful and engaging chapters:

1. A Mathematician’s Map of the Nile – Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarazmi from Baghdad
2. A World of Islam in Circles and Lines – Abu Ishaq al-Istakhri (al-Farisi) from Southern Iran
3. The Mysterious *Book of Curiosities* – anonymous author / creator
4. The Grid of al-Sharif al-Idrisi – al Sharif al-Idrisi
5. The Expanding Horizons of an Ottoman Admiral – Piri Re’is from Jerba and points east
6. An Astrolabe for a Shah, or Finding the Direction of Mecca in Safavid Istahan – Muhammad Muqim Yazdi – from Iran

The stories that cover ten centuries, across a large geography that was heavily influenced by trade routes, seafaring, mountains and new ports are not without the science of time-telling devices. Again, the mathematics, astronomy, physics and



general science of the day illustrate the precision and the rotations of the sun, directions to Mecca and the ritual obligations followed by Muslims, including where mosques were built and the finding of the qibla. The stories are endless, fascinating and show signs of real imagination, genius, ability to capture a moment in time and leave treasures for future generations.

If curious about whether a reader can choose a favorite map or mapmaker from this book, one would be hard pressed to probably identify one because each is from a different region, century, and has different goals yet the common elements of self-sufficiency, contributions to the civilization are well documented. Al-Idrisi made some unbelievable maps and the circular maps he created are among the best known to even the lay public and what adorns the cover of this book. Learning more about astrolabes was a special chapter that reinforced the relationships between maps, timekeeping and science within the realm of aesthetics and simple beauty. The often shared myth about how Islamic maps reverse north and south is explored due to how most of the early Muslim cultures were north of Nasa. These were fascinating times and the stories are rich with history and folklore.

Compared to other overviews of historical maps, Islamic maps have until recently not been at the forefront of such studies, outside of some recent exhibits at the British Museum, Bodleian Library, Library of Congress, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Louvre, Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, and smaller collections promoting maps and art at the Islamic Arts Museum in Kuala Lumpur, Pergamon Museum in Berlin, Museu Calouste Gulbenkian in Lisbon, Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, KAUST Museum of Science and Technology in Islam near Jeddah, to name a few; and books such as Tarek Kahlaoui's, *Creating the Mediterranean: Maps and the Islamic Imagination* (Leiden: Brill, 2018) Karen Pinto's 2016 volume, *Medieval Islamic Maps: An Exploration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016) and the foundations published in Fuat Sezgin's mammoth multivolume history of *Islam's Gold Age of Science* and specialized volumes including *Astronomy, Geography and Navigations in Islamic Civilization* (Istanbul: Boyut Yayin Grubu, 2010), in J.B. Harley and David Woodward's seminal work, *History of Cartography*, vol. 2, book 1: *Cartography in the Traditional Islamic and South Asian Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, that each chronicle the art and science of Islamic mapmaking. A digital compilation of maps curated by Cen Nizamoglu and Khaleel Shaikh, "When the World was Upside Down: Maps from Muslim Civilisation" released in 2017 also provides great insights about Islamic mapmaking (<https://muslimheritage.com/maps/>).



Yossef Rapoport takes a very different approach to Islamic maps from roughly the same time period as Karen Pinto's book (issued four years earlier) that focuses on round world maps and highlights the relationships of that cartographic history to Islamic art traditions. Both contain very high-quality images and prose that takes the reader back in the day hundreds of years ago. However, Rapoport focuses on the mapmaker and that unique content revolves in detail that shares more about the motivations, inclinations, and legacy each of these inspiring men left with plenty of rich examples that leave the reader in awe. He concludes a chapter with "But a true observation of the world can come only through a good map." Those are the sentiments of this reviewer.

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