

Le Petit Ptolomeo

For a long time now, **Claudius Ptolemy's Cosmography** has been considered for what it really is: **one of the most important and transcendental treatises in the history of science.**

Ptolemy lived and wrote all his work in the 2nd century, approximately between 100 and 180 AD, bequeathing to humanity an impressive body of scientific knowledge.

His life was mainly spent in Alexandria. Founded by Alexander the Great, this city would eventually become the capital of the Hellenistic civilisation, standing out for its superb library –with over 700,000 volumes– and its no-less famous museum, which would make it the most fertile breeding ground for scholars in antiquity. In that dream library, Ptolemy would spend hours and days of exciting work and passionate reading, and it was there that he would systematically build the vast structure of his cosmography.

It is astonishing to note that a text of such importance and scope was *destined to oblivion for over a thousand years*, throughout the long period of the Middle Ages. But that is exactly what happened. And so, in the early 15th century, only something as seemingly inconsequential as the simple translation into Latin of the original Greek text, would allow for its rediscovery. In that process, the translation was to bring about its extraordinary explosion and rapid spread throughout Europe, turning it into the bestseller of the Renaissance.

In this sense, we could say that if Copernicus would bring about the Copernican Revolution, **Ptolemy's geography** would also bring about a particular **Ptolemaic Revolution** that would profoundly transform the future of cartography and would end up definitively overthrowing the crude medieval image of the world.

This authentic Ptolemaic phenomenon leads us to wonder about the personality of its author, his life and works. We have very little information about him, mostly taken from his own treatises and the occasional reference gleaned from Arab and Byzantine writings. But his great work has come down to us practically in its entirety, which has allowed us to discover a versatile scholar who cultivated the most varied branches of scientific knowledge, sometimes endowing them with new and revolutionary approaches.

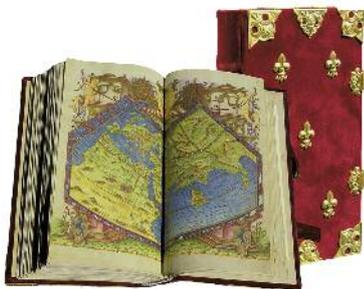
He took on and synthesised the work –now lost– of many of his predecessors, which has reached us in this way.

He cultivated mathematics like few others, he dared to violate rigid dogmas of classical astronomy which, as he would demonstrate, lacked scientific rigour. He made forays into the field of optics, even into music, harmony and philosophy. And, of course, if the Greeks had already gone further than anyone else in the development of **geography, with Ptolemy this science experienced perhaps its greatest and most powerful impetus.**

In all these fields he reveals himself to us as a true scientific personality with a broad spectrum, with an exceptional capacity for systematisation and, on many occasions, as the only witness of an ancient wisdom that has now disappeared.

But if Ptolemy is recognised and admired for anything today, it is precisely for the **geography** that concerns us here, in which he proposes a **system and cartographic principles that, almost twenty centuries later, are still fully valid.** It was in this field that he succeeded in establishing rational criteria for land measurement and in which he established units of measurement and reference coordinates based on cardinal points and wind directions that would definitively mark the subsequent development of cartography.

As has been said, **the rediscovery of geography** –or cosmography, as it also came to be called after the Latin version– **was one of the great cultural events in occidental history.** It would put an end to the rigid mental schemes maintained without foundation for centuries, and its real influence was so palpable that even Columbus himself would see his geography, atlas and cartography





idea of the sphericity of the earth reinforced and confirmed by simply reading this work. Behind Columbus' great deed undoubtedly lies the knowledge of the Ptolemaic geographical proposal in which, by the way, the error by which the Greek scholar excessively extended the length of the ecumene –the space inhabited by man– thus considerably narrowing the distance between the westernmost and easternmost ends of the terrestrial sphere, became another new and powerful incentive for the admiral's adventure, convinced as he was with these data that the East Indies should not be too far from the Iberian Peninsula.

It is important not to lose sight of the enormous gap that separates our vision of the world –precise, rigorous and scientific– from that which still prevailed at the dawn of the Renaissance, and even in the 16th and 17th centuries, still full of assumptions and guesswork. And although it is almost anecdotal, we would like to highlight here two of the many eloquent quotations that Antonio Crespo –in the volume of complementary studies to the facsimile– recalls for us in his wide-ranging and interesting work.

The first, from *Don Quixote*, will help us to realise how knowledge was going and what the precision of seafaring instruments must have been at the beginning of the 17th century:

You will know, Sancho, that the Spaniards and those who embark in Cadiz to go to the East Indies, one of the signs that they have in order to realise that they have passed the equinoctial line is that the lice of all those who are on the ship die, (...) and so you can, Sancho, run a hand along a thigh, and if you come across anything alive, we will have no doubt; and if not, we will have passed. (M. de Cervantes. *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, 1605).

The second, taken from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by G. García Márquez, is also worth reading:

The children were to remember for the rest of their lives the august solemnity with which their father sat at the head of the table, trembling with fever, devastated by prolonged wakefulness and by the festering of his imagination, and with which he revealed his discovery to them.

The earth is as round as an orange.

Ursula lost her patience. "If you must go mad, go mad by yourself, –she cried–, but don't try to inculcate your gypsy ideas into the children".



In this edition, we wanted to pay a heartfelt tribute to one of the great men of science and, at the same time, to offer to a sensitive public one of the wonders of the history of codicology. For, in fact, *Le Petit Ptolémée*, as it is known in the *National Library of France* which preserves the original –and which we have renamed for Spain as the «Petit» Ptolomeo– **is not only the smallest copy of the manuscripts of the time which contain this text, but also the most beautiful of them all.**

Moreover, these were glorious times for the dazzling *Books of Hours*, and probably Andrea Matteo Acquaviva, third Duke of Atri and Marquis of Bitonto –and commissioner of this beautiful copy– must have given clear instructions to Bernardo Silvano's workshop, in Eboli, where the manuscript was to be produced, that a treatise so much in vogue and which was proving to be decisive for the new conception of the world, **should at the same time be endowed with all the charm and enchantment of the most beautiful Book of Hours.** And he certainly succeeded in doing so.

Whoever has the privilege of contemplating the almost perfect replica that we have made of this precious codex in **Siloé**, will probably be overcome by that intimate feeling of admiration for beauty, and that profound joy at a job well done.

The Spanish Ministry of Culture also understood this, by distinguishing this facsimile edition with the **First Prize for the Best Book Published in Spain**, in the facsimile category.

