

Kedwards, Dale. 2020. *The Mappae Mundi of Medieval Iceland*. Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer. 262 pages. ISBN: 978-1-84384-569-0.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvxhrjnp>.

Medieval *mappae mundi* [maps of the world]—a form of media that is at once both familiar and foreign to the modern gaze—have traditionally been studied for their insight into medieval conceptualizations of geographic and cosmologic space, often alongside contemporary texts discussing subjects of a similar theme. However, in his monograph examining the Icelandic *mappae mundi*, Dale Kedwards seeks to expand our understanding of such maps by “unfixing” (5) the map from the assumption that a “‘geographic’ framework” is the most natural way to understand this form of media (8). He aims instead to analyse the maps within their manuscript and socio-political contexts to gain insight into the mentalities and intentions that influenced and guided the makers of the Icelandic *mappae mundi*. Kedwards argues that such a reassessment is necessary because the usual approach to the Icelandic *mappae mundi*, while valuable for its insight into the intellectual environment of the time, has isolated these sources from their original contexts and created a narrow realm of interpretation based on geography alone that “can distort our thinking about [the maps’] role in medieval culture” and obscures the other possible meanings and intents behind their creation (8). By recontextualizing these maps, Kedwards reveals how Icelandic thinkers used them to explore and assert ideas about Iceland’s history, identity, and political position within Scandinavia.

In Chapter 1, “The Icelandic Hemispherical World Maps,” Kedwards discusses the two surviving versions of an Icelandic hemispherical world map (both early 14th c.), their immediate manuscript contexts, the origins of these types of maps, and the distinct features of the Icelandic iterations. In particular, Kedwards examines how these maps become a “visual exposition of tidal theory” (60) when read in conjunction with their companion texts on *computus* [the science of calculating calendar time] and the tides, and a diagram detailing the planetary orbits—layering an understanding of the physical world with the cyclical calculation of time and tide.

In his second chapter, “The Icelandic Zonal Map,” Kedwards examines a map (produced in 1315–c. 1400) that portrays the climactic zones of the world along with the cosmological diagrams and *computus* texts that accompany it. Understood within its manuscript context, the zonal map emerges as a single piece of an extensive and complex explanation of the world’s spatial arrangement and its various operations (cosmic, climatic, etc.). It is of note that Kedwards’ book is the first to provide facsimile reproductions of the

cosmological diagrams in this manuscript and that the zonal map has not been studied in their company until now. In this chapter, Kedwards also supplies a description of the Viðey Book (GkS 1812 4to) in which the zonal map and two other of the five Icelandic *mappae mundi* may be found.

Chapter 3, “The Two Maps from Viðey,” introduces the maps that are the focus of Kedwards’ discussion in the rest of the book: a paired set of maps (c. 1225–1250) from the Viðey Book that portray the relative locations of peoples and places within a T-O framework of the known world. Kedwards provides a description of each of the maps and an introduction to this genre of map and its sources. He also discusses their unusual southwards orientation, a feature they have in common with the other Icelandic maps.

Kedwards’ fourth chapter, “Iceland in Europe,” explores how the larger of the two Viðey maps, as the only map among the Icelandic *mappae mundi* to actually represent Iceland itself, provides a “unique instance of Icelandic self-portraiture” (119). While the map emphasizes Iceland’s individual place in the world, Kedwards argues that it also positions Iceland and its elites as legitimate members of the cosmopolitan European landscape, evoking their legendary origins in Central Eurasia by referencing Tanakvísl [the Tanais River] and ambiguously recalling the connection classical and medieval writers made between Iceland and the land of Thule. The map thus simultaneously places Iceland within contemporary and historical space-time, creating “an Icelandic origin myth—a mythopoesis” through cartography that at once contemplates the origins of Iceland and its place within Europe and the world (146).

In the fifth and final chapter, “Forty Icelandic Priests and a Map of the World,” Kedwards discusses the relationship between the pair of Viðey maps and their accompanying text—a register of forty highborn Icelandic priests. The unifying theme that Kedwards identifies is the construction of a conceptual frame around the world’s quaternary divisions: both maps have embedded within them references to the “natural fours” of the universe (including the four cardinal directions, four seasons, four stages of life, four humours, and so on), while the register of forty Icelandic priests refers to an Iceland divided into four quarters, which each had ten notable highborn priests. By emphasizing how Iceland’s political landscape paralleled the natural quadripartite divisions of the world, Kedwards argues that the maker of these texts was positioning Iceland as a politically and historically independent polity—a position that must be self-evident because it aligned with the natural ordering of the universe. Kedwards points out that this would have been an especially weighty argument given that the Icelandic Commonwealth’s independence at the time was under threat from growing Norwegian dominance.

The high-quality reproductions of Kedwards’ visual sources, as well as the collection of images, transcriptions, translations, and brief commentaries at the end of the book, make this an excellent reference text for others studying these maps. However, I did find that it would have been helpful to have images of the

Icelandic maps appear earlier in each of the chapters to better anchor the visual sources with Kedwards' discussion.

Kedwards' work is a comprehensive, well-argued, and elegantly written text that shows the importance of considering maps as texts that create meanings beyond the geographies and cosmologies they illustrate, providing a powerful approach that may be used beyond the study of the Icelandic *mappae mundi*. His work masterfully mixes historiography, textual analysis, and manuscript studies to create a comprehensive work that not only provides a clear and extensive commentary on the Icelandic *mappae mundi* but could also serve as an introduction to the history and tradition of medieval mapping more broadly. It is impressive to see Kedwards make use of a wide range of text genres, including the *riddarasögur*, which makes evident the extensive research conducted to produce this work and the ways in which the Icelandic *mappae mundi* do indeed "intersect more textual worlds than has previously been supposed" (9). Kedwards succeeds in demonstrating that these maps are valuable sources for Iceland's literary and cultural history as a media that "present complex visual arguments about the order of the world, its cosmic position, and humanity's place within it" (2).

Arwen Thyse 陳藹文
University of Alberta, 2022