Review of: Ptolemy’s Geography: An Annotated Translation of the Theoretical Chapters translated by J. Lennart Berggren and Alexander Jones

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Ptolemy: Ptolemy’s Geography: An Annotated Translation of the Theoretical Chapters, trans. by J. Lennart Berggren and Alexander Jones,

Ptolemy’s Geography: An Annotated Translation of the Theoretical Chapters by Ptolemy; J. Lennart Berggren; Alexander Jones

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The Gifts of Athena, with its special emphasis on the centrality of the “knowledge economy,” amply testifies to his stature as a leading historian of the Industrial Revolution.

MERRITT ROE SMITH

Antiquity


The Geography of Claudius Ptolemy is the only book of cartography that has survived from classical antiquity. Like most of Ptolemy’s other works, it represents the culmination of a long tradition. Ptolemy himself mentions predecessors in cartography, such as Marinus of Tyre, whom he drew upon but also criticized and corrected. J. Lennart Berggren and Alexander Jones’s skillful and readable translation is based on the Greek text of C. F. A. Nobbe (1843–1845). It replaces the seventy-year-old translation by Edward Luther Stevenson (Geography of Claudius Ptolemy [New York Public Library, 1932]), which has been useful in some ways but never, even in its own day, met adequate standards of scholarship. It is high time that English readers had available a reliable translation of one of the culminating works of ancient science.

Or at least a portion of it—for, as the title of the book discloses, this is a translation of the theoretical chapters of the Geography. Ptolemy’s book consists of several distinct parts. By sheer size, the longest is his catalogue of places, which gives the latitudes and longitudes of cities, mountain peaks, capes, parts of rivers, and so on. A closely related part is the set of descriptive labels, or captions, for regional maps. Berggren and Jones have decided not to print the catalogue will always need, in any case, to go back to the Greek text. However, to give the reader a sense of the catalogue, they have translated a short extract covering Roman Gaul. In the same way, they have foresworn printing all the descriptive labels but give as a sample Ptolemy’s caption for the map of Gaul.

While understandable, this was a somewhat regrettable decision.

Many students of Ptolemy’s Geography have complained of its heterogeneous content, some even seeing it as a late compilation rather than the genuine work of a single author. Berggren and Jones, however, see the Geography as a well-planned and coherent guide to a single complicated task, the making of a world map. As they point out, the Greek title of the work, Geographike hyphegesis, can be translated “Guide to Drawing a World Map.” The apparently unrelated major sections of the book are then essential parts of the toolkit required for completing the project. The theoretical chapters give the mathematical background necessary for cartographic projection. The catalogue of places provides the data to be represented. And the captions are the labels to be added to the finished maps. Berggren and Jones then weigh into the old debate over whether Ptolemy actually included maps when he published his book: “There is no more reason to imagine that Ptolemy published his Geography in a form that incorporated the maps than there is to think that he provided a star globe along with the Almagest” (p. 49). I am not sure it is an apt analogy. Even on the authors’ own theory of the book, maps would have been a logical accompaniment. The Geography had the making of maps as its raison d’être. By comparison, the star catalogue is but a small part of the Almagest, which is largely devoted to planetary theory.

Whether or not Ptolemy included maps, a tradition of maps certainly grew up around his Geography in the Middle Ages. Berggren and Jones’s translation is beautifully illustrated by a selection, in color, of the maps in the Vatican codices, as well as the Ulm edition of 1482. A fifty-page introduction sets out essential technical and contextual aspects of ancient cartography. The translation is lightly and cogently annotated throughout. This book can be warmly recommended to all students of ancient science.

JAMES EVANS


Introductions to technical and learned treatises have proven a rich ground for much recent research in the history of science. Prologues, introductions, and prolegomena have been used as source material on authors’ self-representations,