Karen C. Pinto

“Surat Bahr al-Rum” (Picture of the Sea of Byzantium): Possible Meanings Underlying the Forms

Abstract

In this paper I will display, examine, and deconstruct the “classical” medieval Islamic conception of the Mediterranean as seen through colorful, miniature maps found in medieval Arabic and Persian geographical manuscripts from the 11th to 17th centuries. In his classic book “Mohammad and Charlemagne” (1939), the Belgian scholar Henri Pirenne set forth what has since come to be known as the Pirenne thesis, expressing the dominant European view that the sudden advent of Islam on the “other” side of the Mediterranean disrupted the unity of the “Roman Lake” forever. “With Islam a new world was established on those Mediterranean shores, which had formerly known the syncretism of the Roman civilization. A complete break was made, which was to continue even to our own day. Henceforth two different and hostile civilizations existed on the shores of Mare Nostrum. The sea, which had hitherto been the center of Christianity became its frontier”. A similarly antagonistic picture is presented by some scholars of the medieval Islamic approach to the Mediterranean. (See, for instance, André Miquel’s discussion of the subject in “La géographie humaine du monde musulman”). Do the detailed maps of the Mediterranean and its surrounding littorals prepared by medieval Muslim geographers reinforce this traditional, polarized, oppositional view? If not, what kind of a vision of the sea do the maps present? What can the pictorial depictions of the sea be taken to signify? Did they mutate over time? The surprising, counter-intuitive responses to some of these questions form the core of this paper.

If one had to rely upon a single word to sum up the historiography of the Mediterranean post-the Islamic conquests, it would have to be “contentious.” Henri Pirenne set the tone of the debate with this assertion: “Henceforth two different and hostile civilizations existed on the shores of Mare Nostrum... That after the conquest of Spain, and above all Africa, the Western Mediterranean became a Muslim lake.” Conversely,
Fernand Braudel proposed that “The Mediterranean (and the accompanying Greater Mediterranean) is as man has made it. The wheel of human fortune has determined the destiny of the sea, expanding or contracting its area.”

Scholarship from the Islamic perspective has also been divided. There is the view that parallels the Pirennean one, namely that the Mediterranean was the last buttress between the Muslims and the Dar al-Harb (Abode of War). In contrast there is also the view that the Muslims did not really care much about Europe; or that, if they did care, it was only from the point of view of trade.

The Muslim geographers also paint a conflicted picture – one that vacillates between the sensational and banal. Tales of the wrath of God abound. The geographers write of a rough, out-of-control sea that takes pleasure in drowning Muslim sailors and makes a loud roar at night, particularly Thursday nights, i.e. on the eve of the Muslim day of prayer. They describe in great detail the terrible creatures that torment the sea, such as the monster “Tinnin”, whose tail rises in the Black Sea and head in the Atlantic, near the mouth of the Mediterranean. The geographer al-Muqaddasi (ca. d. late tenth century C. E.) suggests that the Mediterranean was anything but a “Muslim lake.” As he puts it: “The Romaeans [i.e. the Byzantines] are the masters here and very much dreaded; and they and the inhabitants of Sicily and al-Andalus are the most familiar with this sea, and its confines and its gulfs, because they constantly journey over it, raiding the lands on the opposite side.”

Mostly the geographers portray a banal, dispassionate view: that of a traveler going from one end of the Mediterranean to the other; passing in itinerant fashion one place after another around the littoral of the sea. This view is often coupled with technical details debating the length and width of the sea, its tides, where it narrows and where it spreads out, etc.

But what about the view through maps? Specifically medieval Islamic ones? This is the question that I propose to address from the point of view of a large corpus of maps that accompany, in atlas-like fashion, a specific series of geographical texts that are
generally known by the universal title of their most prolific copy: The *Kitab al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik (The Book of Roads and Kingdoms).* These illustrated map manuscripts first make their appearance sometime in the mid-10th century and spawn a popular copying tradition that begins in the Abbasid heartlands of Iraq and continues through the 16th century in the Ottoman Empire and the 19th century in Mughal India and Qajar Iran.

It is to be noted that not all the geographical writings in this genre are illustrated. Of those that are there is a particular iconic form that dominates every image in the pack. I will focus upon aspects of these iconic forms and their subtle variations. In particular, I will be addressing the maps of the Mediterranean as depicted in what I refer to as the “full” or “regional” view – the view that focuses on the sea itself.

Note that the Muslim maps are usually oriented with south on top. This is a significant change for viewers accustomed to seeing maps with north on top. The Mediterranean maps are, however, oriented with west at the top of the page – as if the Muslims were looking out at the Mediterranean from their vantage point in the East.

**EXAMPLES OF THE MEDITERRANEAN IN THE MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC CARTOGRAPHIC IMAGINATION**

Starting with a regional map of the Mediterranean from the earliest extant Islamic carto-geographical manuscript dated to 1086 C. E., we note that it is a surprisingly mimetic map of the Mediterranean, on which the Iberian and Italian peninsulas, the Peloponnese, and Anatolia can be made out (see Fig. 1). This manuscript’s emphasis on the Mediterranean is startling and unprecedented. Prior to this single page map of the Mediterranean there is an even larger three folio map of the Mediterranean, the likes of which are not to be found again in subsequent copies. In this triple-page mimetic spread of the Mediterranean the key islands of Cyprus, Rhodes, Crete, Sicily, Sardinia, Minorca, Mallorca, etc, are scattered throughout the sea.
This incredible mimesis is, however, short-lived. The maps are rapidly transformed in subsequent copies into a stylized geometric form that portray both sides of the Mediterranean as being almost perfect mirror images of each other. The next example comes
fig. 2: Typical Medieval Islamic Mediterranean Map (Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit, Leiden, MS. Or. 3101, fol. 33a, 589 A. H./1193 C. E.).

from a manuscript dated to the late 12th century C.E., and was likely produced in late Ayyubid Egypt (see Fig. 2). The perfectly
balanced, stylized form of the Mediterranean, that is the hallmark of most medieval Islamic map manuscripts, jumps out at us. We notice, for instance, that the small, scattered islands of the mimetic image have disappeared. Instead the three islands of Cyprus, Crete, and Sicily are enlarged and now form the prominent central backbone of the image, as if they are the crucial stepping stones in the Mediterranean or the ultimate barrier between the Christian and Muslim sides (see Fig. 3 for a translation of the place names).

Heading up these islands is a strange, triangular, mythical island, enigmatically labeled the Jabal al-Qilal (Mountain of Qilal). This island acts as a cap to the Mediterranean. With inverted crescent markings it is a formidable-looking barrier
that appears to be forbidding travel beyond the mouth of the Mediterranean. It is tempting to read into this mythical island a Muslim symbol for the Pillars of Hercules of yore—the Pillars beyond which it was said only death and danger lay. They are presented in the Islamic geographical literature as an island containing pillars inscribed with warnings to sailors not to venture past into the forbidding darkness of the Encircling Ocean, where monstrous fish and the devil and his helpers lurk. One of the medieval Islamic geographers, al-Mas'udi, without specifically naming the island, says:

“At the point of junction of the two seas, the Mediterranean and the Ocean [a reference to the Encircling Ocean], is a lighthouse of copper and stone built by the great king Hercules (Hirqil). It is covered with inscriptions and [surmounted] by statues that [appear] to say by gesture: 'There is neither road nor route behind me' for those who would want to enter from the Mediterranean into the Ocean... It is said that this light house had not originated at this spot, but on an island of the Encircling Ocean, situated near the coast.”

As our eye moves around the image, we cannot help but notice the two large islands in the Nile Delta, representing the present day land-locked city of Damietta and its mysterious sister island Tinnis. The latter has since disappeared and is still the source of much mystery on these Mediterranean maps. What is key is that these two islands are so large as to imbalance the perfectly symmetrical image of the Mediterranean to the Muslim side. They serve to highlight the main point of asymmetry in the image: the semi-circular Nile delta on one side as opposed to the rectangular mouth of the Bosphorus on the other.

By the time we arrive at a Mediterranean map from a late 13th century manuscript, also copied and illustrated in Egypt, the prominence of the Nile delta and the two islands have been greatly reduced. Instead it is the Bosphorus that dominates. The three islands still line up vertically as the backbone of the image, but the fearsome island of Jabal al-Qilal has drifted off-center. It is a drift that will continue in later maps (see Fig. 4).

As in the previous image, the three rivers on the Anatolian and Syrian fronts, identifiable by their Arabic names as the
Jaihan, Saihan, and Baradan, carve up the image at its mid-point, along the axis of the islands—reinforcing the idea of a major fault line running through the center of the image.

In Iran the trend is reversed. By the mid-15th century the carto-geographical manuscripts produced in Timurid ateliers...
fig. 5: Mediterranean Map (Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi, Istanbul, 
MS. Bagdat 334, fol. 4a, 870 A. H./1460 C. E.).
have perfected the symmetric form of the Mediterranean (see Fig. 5). The islands continue to straddle the midrif of the sea, but they no longer dominate the image in the way that they did earlier. Instead it is the three rivers dividing Syria from Anatolia that have grown in prominence in the lower half of the image. Perhaps the illustrators were suggesting that the sea no longer dominates the Islamic imagination but the Syrio-Palestinian littoral. In this version the mythical island of the Jabal al-Qilal is adorned with an elaborate peacock. This Iranian trend to produce stylized, ornamental maps continues well into the 17th century.

There are few breaks with the standard iconic form that is used to represent the Mediterranean. One of these is the image found in a mid-fifteenth century Ottoman copy (see Fig. 6). The Mediterranean is elongated and the islands break away from their strict vertical line up. The Jabal al-Qilal is demoted in importance to a tiny, brown, triangular lump that no longer commands the mouth of the Mediterranean. One is struck by the lack of ornamentation in this rendition.

THEORIZING ABOUT FORM

The surprise in this series of maps is that the Muslims were obviously more concerned with the precise shape and layout of the Mediterranean in the earlier centuries than in the later: i.e. the Muslim maps go –counter-intuitively– from being more mimetic to less.

With the passage of time a stylized geometry takes over and with it a vision that seems (at least on the surface) to suggest that the Muslims conceived of the two sides of the Mediterranean as harmonious pieces of a whole–almost like the “Mare Nostrum” of European conception. It is a motif that predominates even at the level of the world maps. In these the Mediterranean is represented as a bulging, fish-like shape floating blissfully amidst the other forms of the world.

However, as one delves beneath the veneer of this geometric harmony one can see that the image embodies a great deal of
tension. It is a tension that manifests in the stiff lining up of the islands, reinforced by the way in which the three rivers on the Syrian flank unmistakably divide the image into halves. It can be further inferred from the way in which the forbidding mythical mountain of the Jabal al-Qilal caps the Muslim vision of the Mediterranean. All these features reinforce the interpretation that this Muslim vision of the Mediterranean is not a simple representation of placid harmony, but rather one of frightening and ever-shifting conflict. This reading of the
image of the Mediterranean fits with the negative passages of the sea that are sometimes boldly asserted, and at other times vaguely hinted at in some of the geographical texts.\textsuperscript{21}

Whatever the mutations from one image to the other may imply, there is one basic form that remains prevalent: the bulbous base with a narrow neck that has been ascribed by one scholar to the shape of a vase (see Fig. 7).\textsuperscript{22} How did the Muslim cartographic illustrators come to adopt this particular iconic form as their basic stamp for the Mediterranean? Empirically one could argue that the Muslim representation of the Mediterranean was based solely upon their experience of the shape of the littoral along the Muslim end of the sea: namely the Levant and the North African coast, which is striking for its smooth coastlines and bulging base. Perhaps they took the side that they were most familiar with and created a mirror image for the other, not-so-familiar flank.

But this answer is too simple. It ignores the fact that the Muslims were exploring and conquering the northern end of the Mediterranean – in particular, al-Andalus and Fraxineteum – by the eighth century. The earliest, most mimetic map, which clearly indicates the Peloponnese and the Italian peninsula, suggests that the stylized image of the Mediterranean was one of
deliberate design. The question is, a deliberate design indicating what? Serendipity provided two possible image-related answers.

Distracted and leafing through what seemed at first to be a completely unrelated manuscript in the library of the
Archaeology Museum in Istanbul (one reason why one should always permit the mind and eye to wander in manuscript libraries!), I came upon an image that bore an uncanny resemblance to the form of the Mediterranean (see Fig. 8).

The image is taken from an 18th century Ottoman eschatological manuscript called *Nur ul-Vahhac* (The Blazing Light), which describes the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the seven stages of heaven and hell. The caption to the image tells us that it is none other than a representation of the footprint of the prophet! (Note that I have deliberately inverted this image so as to draw out the visual parallel).

This stylized form symbolizing the foot of the Prophet so closely resembles the iconic shape given to the Mediterranean that one cannot help but wonder if the simple bulging shape, masquerading on the surface as a harmonious “mirror” representation of either side of the Mediterranean, is in fact related to the eschatological rendition of the Prophet’s foot. Could it have been intended as none other than a metaphoric representation of the curse of the Prophet himself? Can we read into the typical Islamic representation of the Mediterranean Allah’s displeasure with it, such that his prophet left his footprint on its face?

A hadith (a saying of the Prophet) recorded by the previously mentioned 10th century geographer cum cartographer, al-Muqaddasi, provides additional corroboration for this bizarre find. In a dramatic flourish, comparing the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, al-Muqaddasi, says:

“I was informed of the following tradition by the jurist Abu al-Tayyib ‘Abd Allah bin Muhammad al-Jalal, at al-Rayy, who had it from Ahmad bin Muhammad bin Yazid al-Astrabadhi, who had it from ‘Abbas bin Muhammad, who had it from Abu Salama, who had it from Sa’id bin Zayd, who had it from Ibn Yasar reporting it from ‘Abd Allah bin ‘Amr. The tradition relates that when God created the Sea of al-Sham, he uttered this inspiration to it: “I have created thee and designed thee as a carrier for some of my servants, who seek my bounty, praising me, worshipping me, magnifying me, and glorifying me; so how wilt thou act towards them?” Said the sea: “My Lord, then shall I drown them.” Said the Lord: “Begone, for I
curse thee, and will diminish thy worth and thy fish.” Then the Lord inspired into the sea of al-'Iraq [the Persian Gulf/Indian Ocean] the selfsame words, and it said: “My Lord, in that case I shall carry them on my back; when they praise Thee I praise Thee with them, and when they worship Thee I worship Thee with them, when they magnify Thee I magnify Thee with them.” Said the Lord: “Go, for I have blessed thee, and will increase thy bounty and thy fish.”

This comparison is borne out at the macro level in the Muslim world maps. Reinforcing the message from the hadith, the Persian Gulf/Indian Ocean significantly outweighs the Mediterranean in the typical medieval Islamic world map.

However, this is not the only possible explanation for the curious Muslim icon of the Mediterranean. In a unique copy of
a late 16th century ms. entitled Kitab al-Bad‘ wa al-Tarikh (Book of the Beginning History), housed at the Bodleian, which also contains a number of cartographic images, I stumbled upon a stylized image of a church. Again there is a striking parallel. The form ascribed to the interior of the church bears a remarkable resemblance to the form of the Mediterranean (See Fig. 9. Invert the image to see the parallel in form). Perhaps what we are dealing with is an iconic representation of the Mediterranean as the interior of an inverted, stylized church. If this reading is correct, then it would fly in the face of Pirenne’s argument and support instead the idea that the Muslims did not see the Mediterranean as a Muslim sea, but a Christian one. The Muslim naming of the Mediterranean as the “Bahr al-Rum” –i.e. “The Sea of Byzantium”– reinforces this idea.

Perhaps these are just two sides of the same picture. The Christian sea cursed by the Muslim prophet – a sentiment confirmed by the symbolic affinity of form. To go out on a limb and take this symbolic analogy further: are we to read into this a sense that the form of the Christian church can be equated to the form of the footprint of the prophet, and all else implied therein?

There is of course always the possibility that my analysis places the cart before the horse: the form of the Mediterranean clearly predates the image of the footprint of the prophet and the one of the interior of a church. Perhaps this was the way that the form of the Mediterranean was interpreted from the 16th century onwards: as embodying a curse in symbolic form that is then linked up to the most logical source—the Prophet Muhammad.

I leave readers to ponder these possibilities assured that I have not clarified the overall picture, but added another layer of confusion to the historiographical debate about the Mediterranean via the dimension of medieval Islamic maps and the stories that they can be coaxed into telling.

Karen C. Pinto
American University of Beirut
and
University of Alberta
NOTES

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2. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, English trans. by Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper Row Publishers, 1972), 168-70. Braudel goes on to say: “Rome succeeded in converting the Mediterranean world in the strict sense into what was almost a closed system, setting up as it were locks on all the routes into and out of it, and thereby abandoning (perhaps mistakenly) the possibility of controlling the outer limits... But this policy of lock-building, which was only relatively effective in any case, has been the exception rather than the rule in Mediterranean history. The rule has been that Mediterranean civilization spreads far beyond its shores in great waves that are balanced by continual returns. What leaves the sea comes back and departs once more.”

In conversation with Richard Bulliet, Professor of Middle Eastern History at Columbia University, who believes that the Sahara was the ‘sea’ of the Muslims not the Mediterranean. On trade see, OLIVIA R. CONSTABLE, *Trade and Traders in Muslim Spain: The Commercial Realignment of the Iberian Peninsula, 900-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).


The Tinnin was said to have been “horrible and black with its tail rising out of the waters of the Mediterranean and its head stretching as far as the land of Gog and Magog.” André Miquel believes that this fantastic legend refers to the phenomenon of a tornado. See ANDRÉ MIQUEL, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu’au milieu du 11e siècle: géographie et géographie humaine dans la littérature arabe des origines à 1050* (Paris: Mouton, 1967).

AL-MUQADDASI, *op. cit.*, 16. When speaking about the Mediterranean, al-Mas'udi says that: “Supremacy here pertains to them [the Christians], and they are very much dreaded.” See ANDRÉ MIQUEL, *op. cit.*, 3: 240.


They are sometimes named *Surat al-Ard* (Picture of the Earth) or *Suwar al-Aqalim* (Pictures of the Climes/Climates).


For an analysis of the Mediterranean at the “macro” level in the world maps as well as the image of the sea at the “micro” level, particularly in the maps depicting North Africa and al-Andalus (Muslim Spain) see KAREN C. PINTO, “Surat Bahr al-Rum: The Mediterranean in the Medieval Muslim Cartographical Imagination,” Unpublished Masters Essay, Columbia University, 1992 (forthcoming Medieval Encounters), and Id., “Passion and Conflict in Medieval Islamic Views of the West” (forthcoming).
12. For further details on this manuscript see my comments in “The Geography of Lands,” Letters to the Editor, Mercator’s World 6.5 (2001): 7-9.


14. The Ayyubids are well known in the annals of western history because of the fame of one of their sultans, Salah al-Din, the famous Muslim adversary of the Crusaders.


17. The former island of Tinnis is another medieval Islamic cartographic locale that is a matter of considerable mystery. It seems that Tinnis was at one point a flourishing center for silk production and trade. No one seems to know how and why it disappeared.

18. For details on this manuscript and the cluster that it belongs to please see Karen C. Pinto, “Fatih Revisited: A View Through the Ottoman Cluster,” in Ways of Seeing, 3.

19. For an example see, Karen C. Pinto, Ways of Seeing, 3, 1; and J. B. Harley and David Woodward, HoC 2.1, 121 & Plate 7.

20. See hadith quoted in detail later.
