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Title

(book review): Meredith F. Small, Here Begins the Dark Sea: Venice, a medieval monk, and the creation of the most accurate map of the world

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The only difficulty is in obtaining it: the copy I reviewed was donated to the National Library by the publisher, who has informed me “For now, this Atlas has a very restrictive distribution and it is not for sale. We will keep you informed if the situation changes.” Hopefully the situation *will* change, so that both libraries and individuals in the anglosphere can obtain this attractive and informative historical atlas.

Brendan Whyte

National Library of Australia

References:

MARQUES, A.H. de Oliveira & DÍAS, J. J. Alves, (2003), *Atlas histórico de Portugal e do Ultramar português*, Centro de Estudos Históricos, Lisbon.

REIS, A. do Carmo, (1996), *Atlas de Historia de Portugal*, Edições ASA, Lisbon.



The Fra Mauro map in the Museo Correr, St Mark's Square, Venice. Photograph by Jon Jablonski

Small, Meredith F., *Here Begins the Dark Sea: Venice, a medieval monk, and the creation of the most accurate map of the world*

Pegasus Books, New York, 2023. Hardback, 320 pp., ISBN 9781639364190. A\$56.

Meredith Small's new book is a close examination of the 1459 Fra Mauro map as a document, as well as a solid introduction to the history and geography of Venice and its unique place in European history. Anyone who has visited Venice's Museo Correr, been drawn into its cartographic collections, and made it all the way into the very final exhibit of the second floor, where the map was recently re-hung, will love this book.

The Fra Mauro map is a monumental *mappamundi*. It was completed in 1459 after ten years of work. It represents earth as a flat disk on a large square plane, and includes a cosmographical diagram in each of its four corners. A thick gilded frame surrounds the square as well as the disk, leaving each of the diagrams in its own frame. The map's 300 narrative legends – paragraph-length insets – are in addition to 2500 placenames that have been identified.

If you have not spent time with the map, and are at all interested in historical cartography, take a look at the map before reading this review. Two high-quality online reproductions exist. This newly created scan (<https://mostre.museogalileo.it/framauro/en/interactive-exploration/explore.html>) was done alongside a 2022 cleaning and re-hanging of the map. The second scan, created by the History Engineers (<https://engineeringhistoricalmemory.com/FraMauro.php>), whom Dr. Small cites in the book's final chapter, is of a lesser visual quality but is live-linked to transcriptions and translations of the map's texts.

Those who have not visited the map itself, or at least spent significant time with one of the pan-and-zoom versions online, might not be convinced of its monumentality. The only concrete improvement one can suggest for this book is a big QR code inside the front cover or a fold-out poster of the map so that the reader can prepare himself.

Dr. Small does not spend much time on how one would read this map as a map. Measuring almost exactly five feet (1.5 m) on each side and hung two feet (60 cm) off the ground, the uppermost reaches are not legible. However, in its restored state, and during those few seconds when the lights are all the way up (they slowly pulsate in order to elongate the life of the artifact), those uppermost annotations would be readable with a library ladder. One imagines that was how it was used as it hung in the monastery church for 300 years, before being seized by Napoleon, and then later moved to the Library. There is very little speculation in the book about how it was used by the Doge who commissioned it before it was hung in the church.

The author does an excellent describing Venice's place in late-medieval, early-modern Europe. She argues extensively that the Venetian Empire is the prototype for modern Europe. Venetians dominated many of the shores of the earlier Roman and Greek Empires. Venice simultaneously competed with, and depended on, the Islamic world for the spice trade with Asia. Marco Polo was indeed a real person, and did, it seems, go to China and Mongolia. Beyond documenting Polo's land route to the Far East, Fra Mauro's map was added argument for the increasingly obvious route around the bottom of Africa.

The Venetians were also modern in that they had created their city-state on islands that were obviously constantly in danger from climate. They understood that even in their sheltered cove, their very existence depended on human feats of engineering and mercy from the sea. One piece of material evidence that Dr. Small offers is the lack of frescoes in Venice. By the time Fra Mauro made his map, the painters of Venice were working on wood panels and canvas. All the better to move in a flood.

Who was Fra Mauro? Dr. Small devotes considerable attention to this question, but she could describe the context a bit better for the unchurched. This is an observation that this reviewer makes increasingly often as he watches early-career researchers struggle with the increasingly arcane knowledge required to understand a historical Europe where the Catholic church was such a part of daily family, economic, political, and social life. Even with this criticism, the author gives a firm grounding of the idiosyncrasies of the church in Rome versus Venice; as well as the many “orders” of men and women, some isolated, such as Fra Mauro’s brethren on San Michel Island (indeed, Fra Mauro may have been one of the few who regularly left the island), and some wandering the earth as itinerant mendicant friars (who depended on alms and served the poor) or as colonialist-explorer-scholars (like the Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci).

The author is careful to demarcate between what is speculation and what is known from the archival literature. She might have been tempted to devote many pages to the unknown man’s life; or perhaps even insert a historical short story of Fra Mauro rowing himself home across the lagoon one night after being called into a lamplit hall to receive his commission, wondering where he was going to find such a big cowskin on which to draw. However, Dr. Small restrains herself, and makes clear that the overall effort to create the map is not documented.

We have no idea whether or not the eponymous cartographer inscribed the 300 legends (they appear to be largely in the same hand – but these are monks: they are taught to write the same). Did he draw the outlines of the continents himself? If one includes cutting the quills, mixing the inks, sewing the six skins together, assembling the support and carving the intricate frame: that goes well beyond the ability of any one person to accomplish in ten years. While it might be physically possible for the map to be drawn to by one man, it’s just not the way things worked. But no matter whether the scribes who put ink on the prepared parchment were brother monks, or laborers, or Fra Mauro himself, the map was almost certainly made within the walls of the monastery on the island that was next to (and now conjoined with) Venice’s cemetery.

Regardless of whoever was on the contributing team, it is Fra Mauro’s name on the map, and therefore it is he who gets the credit. Peculiarly, about 80 of the legends use the first person singular (in Veneto, not Italian or Latin). “According to the books *I* have read. Sailors told *me* of this route.” It is possible that this is the earliest *mappamundi* with such a strong mark of authorship. Dr. Small leaves us wanting more information about the mysterious monk, but convinces us that she did thorough archival research. The map is left to speak for itself.

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