



History and Geography in Late Antiquity

A. H. Merrills

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The period from the fifth century to the eighth century witnessed massive political, social and religious change. Geographical and historical thought, long rooted to Roman ideologies, had to adopt the new perspectives of late antiquity. In the light of expanding Christianity and the evolution of successor kingdoms in the West, new historical discourses emerged which were seminal in the development of medieval historiography. Taking their lead from Orosius in the early fifth century, Latin historians turned increasingly to geographical description, as well as historical narrative, to examine the world around them. This book explores the interdependence of geographical and historical modes of expression in four of the most important writers of the period: Orosius, Jordanes, Isidore of Seville and the Venerable Bede. It offers important new readings of each by arguing that the long geographical passages with which the works were introduced were central to their authors' historical assumptions and arguments.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521846011

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First published in print format 2005

ISBN-13 978-0-511-12746-5 eBook (EBL)

ISBN-10 0-511-12746-4 eBook (EBL)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-84601-1 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-84601-3 hardback

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For D. H.

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PREFACE

The Geography which I had purposed is really a big undertaking . . . And really the material is hard to set out, monotonous, not so easy to embellish as it looked, and (the main point), I find any excuse good enough for doing nothing.

Cicero, Letter to Atticus II.6

When I first came across this passage in my first year of graduate study at Cambridge, it scarcely filled me with confidence; a howl of impotent rage at the complexities of classical geography is not, after all, the best sentiment to encounter when embarking on just such a ‘big undertaking’. The following months of study justified some of those fears, and allayed others. Consequently, when I included it as an epigraph to my completed doctoral dissertation it was with mixed feelings of hubris and relief. Now, as I recycle the quotation for a second time after several more years of grappling with the delights of classical geography and the thought that followed in its wake, my own feelings are rather clearer. Big undertaking as it was, if I managed to escape the anguish that Cicero pours forth in his letter to Atticus, this was due in no small part to the help offered to me by countless advisors, friends and colleagues over the course of its genesis and composition.

The doctoral thesis upon which this book is based was generously funded by a substantial grant from the British Academy Arts and Humanities Research Board, augmented by supplementary funding from Trinity College, Cambridge. In the years after its completion, I was supported first by a Rouse-Ball studentship at Trinity, which enabled me to take stock of the work, and then by a Post-Doctoral Research Associateship at King’s College, which eased its transformation into the current volume. I am also grateful to the Jebb Fund of the University of Cambridge for supporting its final stages.

The translation of Orosius' geographical introduction within Appendix 1 of the present volume is reproduced with the kind permission of the Catholic University of America Press. I am also indebted to Liverpool University Press and Ken Wolf for permission to reproduce the translation of Isidore's *Laus Spaniae* in Appendix 3, and to Oxford University Press for the right to include the text of Bede's description of Britain, as Appendix 4.

I owe a particular debt to four scholars who have selflessly provided more guidance and advice than I could possibly have deserved. Rosamond McKitterick supervised my Masters and doctoral research, and has overseen much of my post-doctoral work. Her good humour and patience have proved invaluable. Walter Pohl and Dick Whittaker provided a thorough but sensitive examination of my Ph.D., gently directed me away from some of my more spurious flights of fancy, and encouraged me in pursuit of others. Finally, Simon Loseby, who first introduced me to the historians of late Antiquity, has been an incomparable source of support ever since. His diligent reading of my work at every stage of composition has shaped it profoundly.

Katherine Clarke and Natalia Lozovsky read the original thesis in its entirety and brought to it their knowledge of very different geographies. The assembled members of the 'History and Theory of Description' group at King's offered much illuminating feedback on the introductory discussion of history and geography, and are responsible for some of the better jokes. For this, I am very grateful to Stefan Hoesel-Uhlig, Judith Greene, Mark Philips, François Furstenberg, Dan Vyleta, Tom De Wesselow, Ann Fielding and Soumhya Venkatesan. At different stages, I have also benefited greatly from the detailed feedback of Peter Sarris, Peter Garnsey, John Blair, David Rollason, Jack Niles, Immi Valtonen, Neil Wright, Mayke de Jong and Tom Kitchen on substantial sections of the work.

I must also acknowledge the advice and support of many friends and colleagues within Cambridge and beyond. Brigitte Resl, Alfred Hiatt, Carl Watkins, Helmut Reimitz, Richard Miles, Mike Clover, Miri Rubin and Keith Hopkins all listened with patience to my less structured ramblings, and quietly pointed me in the right direction where necessary. It has been a particular pleasure for much of my time at Cambridge to work alongside Mark Handley and Christina Pössel, whose enthusiasm for matters late antique and early medieval has done much to shape my own. Cedric Barnes offered support and solace throughout my time at Trinity, and helped to foster an interest in matters North African. Jane Hiddleston shared endless discussions of memory and narratives, and helped to create many more.

When the library proved too much each summer, I had the great fortune to find refuge in the world of archaeology. If Rob Watson and Faye Simpson proved particularly effective at helping me forget about the complexities of Orosius and his successors, I owe an equal debt to John Collis for ensuring that they were never too far from my mind. The inspiration for this study was found as much in discussions of Celts, Goths and Romans over Spanish beer as in the more prosaic surroundings of the library.

I also owe an enormous debt to those friends who put up with my obsession, while happily developing those of their own. Andy Bevan, George Shuffelton, John Dean and Bill Grundy have all offered support and comments throughout. When any excuse was good enough for doing nothing, many people have offered suggestions, especially Adam Squires, Becky Fell, Tom Penn, Andrew Lynn, Elana Wilson, Sarah Robinson, Soumhya Venkatesan, Eric Blaum, Dan Vyleta, François Furstenberg and Amy Dean.

I leave my greatest debts until last. My parents, John and Dariel, have been the source of constant support and encouragement. Without them, this study could never have been completed. The book, however, is respectfully dedicated to Mrs Dorothy Hall, formerly the head of History at King Edward VII School, Sheffield. For better or for worse, it was her inspirational teaching that started the whole thing off. . .

A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

The editions and available translations of the primary material used are included in the references at the end of the book. Wherever possible, I have used published English translations of all works cited. Deviations from these translations are marked in the relevant footnotes. Where published translations are unavailable, all translations are my own.

For ease of reference, full English translations of the geographical introductions of Orosius, Jordanes, Isidore and Bede are included in the appendices to the current study.

ABBREVIATIONS

ACW	Ancient Christian Writers. The Works of the Fathers in Translation
APACRS	American Philological Association. Classical Resources Series
APS	Arthurian Period Sources
BEHEH	Bibliothèque de l'École des hautes études hispaniques
Budé	Collection des universités de France publiée sous le patronage de l'association Guillaume Budé
CAHS	Clarendon Ancient History Series
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CSASE	Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
CSS	Cistercian Studies Series
EHD	English Historical Documents I, c. 500–1042
EMET	Exeter Medieval English Texts
FC	Fathers of the Church
GCS	Griechische Christliche Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte
GGM	Geographi Graeci Minores
GLM	Geographi Latini Minores
Hakluyt	The Hakluyt Society
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
AA	Auctores Antiquissimi
Ep.	Epistolae
SRL	Scriptores rerum Langobardicarum et Italicarum saec. VI–IX
SRM	Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum
NMC	Nelson's Medieval Classics
NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Second Series
OECT	Oxford Early Christian Texts

List of abbreviations

OMT	Oxford Medieval Texts
PGL	Patrologia Graeco-Latina
PL	Patrologia Latina
RCSS	Records of Civilization. Sources and Studies
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
SCBO	Scriptorum Classicorum Bibliotheca Oxoniensis
SCNC	Sources Chrétiennes. Sér. Annexe de textes non chrétiens
SEHL	Scriptores Ecclesiastici Hispano-Latini
SLH	Scriptores Latini Hiberniae
SPCK	Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge
TCL	Translations of Christian Literature
Teubner	Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana
TTH	Translated Texts for Historians

INTRODUCTION: HISTORY'S OTHER EYE

Chronology and Geography are the two eyes of History.
Samuel Purchas, *Pilgrimage*, 2nd edn, p. 613

Seven years after Alaric's sack of Rome in 410, and some five hundred miles away on the North African coast, the Spanish priest Orosius completed his *Historiarum adversus paganos libri septem*. At the very start of his piece, immediately after a brief declaration of the unprecedented chronological scope of his *Historia*, Orosius treated his audience to a long geographical passage, in a bold declaration of the spatial concerns of his ambitious work. Rattling through his chapter at some pace, the historian created nothing less than a succinct portrait of the fifth-century world, from India in the east to the Spanish provinces in the west, from the headwaters of the Nile in interior Africa to the mysterious Arctic island of Thule. The chapter is a central one within Orosius' work, and within the evolution of Latin historiography. Proudly situated at the very start of the *Historia*, the description of the world not only declared Orosius' own interests in the interaction of geographical and historical themes, it set the standard for Christian historical writing of the next half-millennium. Orosius' introduction demonstrated the extent to which Christian historians could express themselves and make sense of their world, not only through reference to the past, but through their interpretation of the physical world.

Orosius was not the first historian to grant geography so prominent a position within his historical narrative. Some five hundred years before the Spanish presbyter, Sallust had included a detailed description of Numidia at an early stage of his *Bellum Jugurthinum*, ostensibly to provide the setting for the military narrative that followed.¹ Famously, Julius Caesar opened his own *De bello Gallico* with a succinct survey of Gaul,

¹ Sallust, *Bell. Jug.* 1.17.

to reflect and accentuate the magnitude of his conquests.² In the second century, the Alexandrian historian Appian added a more detailed and comprehensive description of the Roman Empire in its entirety as an introduction to his ambitious *Historia Romana*.³ Within the vast landscape of classical historical writing, however, Sallust, Caesar and Appian stood alone as isolated champions of the geographical introduction. In the majority of classical histories, from Herodotus to Ammianus Marcellinus, geographical or ethnographic passages were scattered throughout the text, in order to illuminate individual sections, or to add points of parenthetical interest.⁴ The *discursus* certainly had an important role to fill within historical writing, but the great prominence granted to geography by Appian and the two Latin historians was not uniformly adopted within the classical world.

There can be little doubt that it was the *Historia* of Orosius which transformed the geographical introduction from an occasional literary tool to a central feature of Christian narrative history. The historians of the early medieval period looked at the world around them through Orosian-tinted spectacles. Jordanes, who wrote in Constantinople in the mid-sixth century, provided his *De origine actibusque Getarum*, or *Getica*, with a carefully plotted description of the Scandinavian origins of his eponymous group. Seventy years later, Isidore of Seville included an account of the Iberian peninsula as a preface to the longer recension of his *History of the Goths, Vandals and Sueves*, and a century after Isidore, the Venerable Bede chose to open his *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* with a justly famous description of the British Isles. These compositions comprised some of the most influential and widely read histories of the early medieval period, among modern students as well as among contemporaries. It is these texts, and the uses to which geography was put in each, that the present study is intended to examine.

These prologues vary quite dramatically in length and in content, but all display an understanding of the importance of geography to an appropriate grasp of history. Orosius' rather terse description of the whole of the known world contrasts sharply with the short encomium of the British Isles composed by Gildas as a preface to his polemical *De excidio Britanniae* in the late fifth century. Similarly, Jordanes' rather peculiar perambulation of the Oceanic islands and his meandering description of the migration route of the Goths from the frozen north to the civilized Mediterranean bears little superficial resemblance to Isidore's succinct portrait of Gothic Spain. In many ways, indeed, the geographical prefaces

² Caesar, BG 1.1–2. ³ Appian, Hist. Pref. 1–5.

⁴ Cf. Tacitus, Annals IV.30 on the importance of geographical digression to historical narrative.

are as varied as the historical works in which they appear, and often display their idiosyncratic authors at their finest. Gildas' evocation of a bucolic Britain, for example, displays a dexterity of scriptural allusion that is quite breathtaking in its sophistication, and Bede's description of the instant death of snakes upon arrival in Ireland is one of the most famous images within his *Historia Ecclesiastica*.

The focal position afforded geographical themes within early Christian historiography is striking, and yet has prompted very little comment from modern scholars. Several studies have focused upon prefaces of this kind in isolation, but no coherent survey has ever attempted to trace the evolution of this peculiar historiographical structure, or to examine the appeal of such a methodology to the medieval writer.⁵ The need for such an investigation becomes all the more apparent when it is considered that these long prefaces formed the bedrock of geographical writing during the early medieval period. Although certain dedicated geographical compositions are extant from between the fifth and the eighth centuries, and textual attestations elsewhere allow the historian to state with confidence that other productions of the kind existed, historical works indisputably supplied the most widely read descriptions of the physical world during the period.⁶ Later geographers extensively cited Orosius in particular as an authority on the physical world. Jordanes, too, provided a definitive source on Scandinavian geography, and Bede's description of England remained inviolate even into the thirteenth century. In many ways, the study of these introductions encompasses a survey not only of early medieval historiographical practice, but also of geographical thought in the same period.

Paradoxically, the very success of Orosius' initiative in including a geographical introduction to his historical narrative is partially responsible for modern neglect of his innovative structuring. Were it not for the frequency with which modern historical works employ similar introductions, it seems likely that the remarkably widespread adoption of the technique in late Antiquity would have earned more comment. In the wake of Orosius and his immediate successors, the inclusion of long prefatory spatial descriptions became almost indispensable to Latin historical writing. Paul the Deacon's eighth-century *Historia Langobardorum*, for

⁵ These studies include Janvier (1982a) on Orosius, Higham (1991) on Gildas, Rodríguez Alonso (1975), pp. 113–22 on Isidore and Kendall (1979) and Speed (1992) on Bede. I deviate substantially from the views of each of these writers in the study that follows.

⁶ On early medieval geographical writing in general, see the excellent survey of Lozovsky (2000), and her treatment of the historians at pp. 66–101. Compare Kimble (1938), pp. 19–29 and see also Staab (1976) on the identification of lost sixth-century geographers from fragmentary survivals in later works.

example, was ornamented with a long geographical opening, which alludes clearly to the fifth-century work of Orosius.⁷ The *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus, the *Historia regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and the *Historia Anglorum* of Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, to cite three further examples, all introduce their historical sections with a long discussion of the physical scope of their enquiry.⁸ Nor were these historians self-conscious about their deference to literary precedent in their exploitation of the geographical introduction. Paul and Saxo Grammaticus both made their debts to Orosius' *Historia* clear through distinct allusion within their opening chapters: a pattern of deference previously followed by Gildas, Jordanes and Isidore of Seville. Later British historians, similarly, displayed their influences proudly through candid emulation of Bede's British geography.

The geographical introduction remains a surprisingly common tool of contemporary narrative history. While it would be stretching the point to suggest that Orosius exerted a direct influence over western historical writing into the modern period, the very popularity of this structure among more recent writers has done much to obscure the originality of this approach within the fifth century. Edward Gibbon opened his magisterial survey of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* with a long account of the physical scope of Roman authority under the Antonines.⁹ Trevelyan's *England under Queen Anne* is introduced by a similar account of the landscape of seventeenth-century Britain, taken largely from the pages of Daniel Defoe's *Tour around Britain*.¹⁰ Similarly, the great *Histoire de France*, assembled by Ernest Lavisse in the early years of the twentieth century, included a substantial description of the hexagon at its outset. Indeed, the work has as its opening book the *Tableau de la géographie de la France*, constructed by Paul Vidal de la Blache for precisely this purpose, which was to prove hugely influential in the development of French historical and geographical thought.¹¹

The practice survives within contemporary historical writing. Histories of individual regions, in particular, have frequently taken as their starting point a short geographical overview, in order to establish the spatial parameters of the area under consideration. To turn briefly to the bookshelf in order to illustrate the point, and to take from it monographs virtually at random, Geoffrey Parker's *The Dutch Revolt*, Alan Bowman's *Egypt after the*

⁷ Paul, HL 1.1–6 and see also the description of Italy at II.14–24.

⁸ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gest. Dan.* Pref 6–9; Geoffrey of Monmouth, HRB 1.2; Henry of Huntingdon, HA 1.1–3.

⁹ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, pp. 3–33. ¹⁰ Trevelyan (1930), pp. 4–27.

¹¹ Vidal de la Blache (1903).

Pharaohs and Chris Wickham's *Early Medieval Italy* might be taken as representative of the considerable canon of regional histories to be introduced in this way.¹² Implicit within each of these chapters is the assumption that a primary purpose of geography is to locate and delineate the historical narrative proper, rather than to contribute to it in a meaningful sense. Indeed, the geographical introduction to R. G. Collingwood's *Roman Britain* is explicitly entitled 'The Stage of History'.¹³ The reader is reminded here of the perpetual labours of Tristram Shandy's Uncle Toby on the bowling green of Shandy Hall. Anxious to elucidate for his indifferent audience his accounts of the siege of Namur, and to make sense of his own confused memories, Uncle Toby perpetually crafts and re-crafts scale models of the city's fortifications. Through his 'hobby-horse', the veteran exemplifies the assumption that spatial context is a necessary precursor to clear historical explanation.¹⁴

As the Uncle Toby analogy reminds us, however, historians can frequently be quite shameless in the exploitation of literary references in order to lend their works a certain *gravitas*. Indeed, a second important function of the geographical introduction is as a literary construct. The modern historians discussed, exceptional writers all, chose to locate their narratives, not merely through the use of maps, but through written geographical description, with all of the opportunities for rhetorical embellishment that this affords.¹⁵ At times, these literary pretensions are easy enough to identify. Trevelyan's use of Defoe in order to provide a historical geography of seventeenth-century England displays the union of geographical and literary considerations clearly enough. Alan Bowman's introduction exploits Herodotus and Ammianus Marcellinus for similar reasons, and Parker's presentation of the Low Countries in 1549 through the eyes of the future Philip II employs obvious literary conventions. Again, however, it is Collingwood who provides the most striking, and classical, illustration of this point. Although the historian goes on to discuss the geology and ecology of Britain, and indeed creates a memorable image of the isles in so doing, his introduction begins with an obvious, and surely deliberate, pastiche of the opening geography of the *Gallic War*.¹⁶

¹² Parker (1977), pp. 19–30; Bowman (1986), pp. 12–20; Wickham (1981), pp. 9–14.

¹³ Collingwood (1936), p. 1; compare Wickham (1981), p. 9, who justifies a description of the Italian landscape at the outset of his work as 'a stage and a backcloth to what follows'.

¹⁴ Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* 1.25–11.6.

¹⁵ It might be noted here that Parker, Bowman and Wickham all augment their written geographical passages with maps.

¹⁶ Collingwood (1936), p. 1: 'The country of Britain is divided by nature into two parts, each with a character of its own, a complement and a contrast to that of the other'; compare Caesar, BG 1.1: *Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres . . . Hi omnes lingua, institutes, legibus inter se differunt*.

These trends within modern historical writing have greatly influenced the way in which the geographical introductions to fifth-, sixth- and seventh-century histories have been read. Almost without exception, modern analyses of the chapters have assumed that the passages were intended either as a straightforward declaration of the spatial stage upon which the following historical narrative was to be set, or as the opportunity for some judicious literary display on the part of the author.¹⁷ Hence, criticism of the passages has manifested itself most forcefully through the *Quellenforschung* approaches of the late nineteenth-century philologists. Each of the passages has been subject to minute scrutiny, in the hope of teasing out literary allusions, with the underlying assumption that such echoes were an end in themselves, and did not fit part of a wider rhetorical programme.¹⁸ This is not to denigrate the painstaking work that has been devoted to the literary influences behind late antique geographical writing. Indeed, the study which follows would have been impossible without the invaluable foundations laid by such scholarship. An important feature of present work, moreover, has been the identification of further literary reflections within these kaleidoscopic chapters. Yet recognition of Orosius' likely use of the Agrippa map, or of Jordanes' use of Orosius, is all but immaterial unless the impulses which shaped these appropriations can be understood.

HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

To consider fully the role which geographical passages might have within a work of historiography, the nature of the relationship between 'geographical' and 'historical' writing deserves some attention. In late Antiquity – the period of particular interest here – the disciplinary distinctions familiar to the modern schoolroom had little meaning. The term *geographia*, derived from the Greek, is known in only two Latin texts, neither of which was specifically concerned with the description of the world.¹⁹ The alternative *chorographia*, again taken from the Greek and popularized in the title of

¹⁷ Madoz (1939) and Fontaine (2001) typify the interpretation of Isidore's *Laus Spaniae* as work of isolated literary merit. Goffart (1988), pp. 250–3, Gransden (1974), pp. 23–4 and Markus (1975), p. 4 are similarly representative in their assertions that Bede's introduction was primarily intended as a spatial setting for the *Historia*. Speed (1992) provides an innovative allegorical reading of Bede's geography, but similarly considers the opening chapter independently of the remainder of the *Historia*.

¹⁸ See, for example, Braun (1909), Klotz (1930) and Zangemeister (1877) on Orosius; Friedrich (1907) and Ensslin (1949) on Jordanes and Philipp (1912) on Isidore. Further bibliography may be found in the individual chapters, below.

¹⁹ Cicero, Ep. ad Att. 2.4.3; Ammianus Marcellinus xxii.8.10. On these passages, see Lozovsky (2000), pp. 8–9 and n.4.

Pomponius Mela's first-century work, was scarcely more widespread.²⁰ Instead, descriptions of the world circulated under a variety of different titles, from the cumbersome literalism of the anonymous *totius orbis diversarumque regionis situs*, to Martianus Capella's misleading use of the personified *Geometria* to introduce his fifth-century description of the world.²¹

This confusion of nomenclature reflected the uncertain status of geographical description within late antique thought. As Natalia Lozovsky's recent study has demonstrated, geographical works could certainly exist in isolation, but investigation of the physical world was more frequently subservient to other literary forms, particularly exegesis and historiography.²² It is conspicuous that the majority of classical and post-classical writers who sought to justify the composition and study of geographical works, from Cicero to Augustine, regarded an appreciation of the physical world as a natural counterpart to the understanding of the past. Cicero suggested that each could help to explain human experience, Augustine that both could illuminate the Sacred Word of Scripture.²³ It is possible for the modern commentator to identify 'historical' or 'geographical' compositions from late Antiquity, but to do so with little thought to their conceptual interdependence is to risk anachronism. Perhaps more importantly, to do so without some consideration of the ambiguities inherent in the modern meanings of the two terms is to fail to appreciate quite why the two disciplines were so closely bound in the late antique mind.

Within the examples of modern historical writing cited, simple distinctions might seem to be drawn between 'geography' and 'history' with little difficulty, yet even here the disciplinary divisions beloved of school curricula prove misleading. On the simplest level, 'history' might be distinguished from 'geography' through reference to its temporal, rather than spatial focus. Similarly, history might be said to deal with change over time, whereas geography typically considers the state of the world within a single time period, and allows less scope for historical change. Finally, narrative would seem to provide the most natural means for historical writing, as opposed to the descriptive methods employed by the geographer.²⁴ In the baldest possible terms, therefore, we may propose three different, if interconnected, means of definition: History: time,

²⁰ On *Chorographia*, compare Romer (1998), pp. 4–9 and Lozovsky (2000), pp. 9–10.

²¹ Lozovsky (2000), pp. 9–10.

²² Lozovsky (2000) provides a detailed study of different manifestations of geographical scholarship from AD 400 to 1000. See also her discussion of Carolingian 'geography' in Lozovsky (1996).

²³ Cicero, *De oratore* II.15.63; Augustine, *De doc. Christ.* II.27–9. On these passages, compare Lozovsky (2000), pp. 10–14; O'Loughlin (1992), pp. 40–1.

²⁴ A distinction proposed by Hartshorne (1939), p. 135: 'History is narrative, geography a description.'

the past, narrative; Geography: space, the present (or a single time-frame), description.²⁵ Generally speaking, it is through a combination of these definitions that the distinction between geographical and historical writing may be drawn. Like the comparable boundaries between history and sociology, anthropology or narrative fiction, however, the frontier is scarcely an undisputed one, and its complexity reveals itself upon close examination.

Crucially, the absolute distinction between time and space, as the principal objects of historical and geographical study, only applies on the most abstract level. Distinctions can certainly be drawn on such bases between geometry and chronology, but these definitions prove valueless in the application of the same criteria to the human sciences. When a human element is introduced to the equation, as is the case with both history and geography, the separation of the temporal and spatial becomes increasingly difficult. Historical writing, it must be stressed, is concerned, not with the passage of time per se, but with the activities of humankind over time.²⁶ Geographies, similarly, are devoted not to the study of space, but to the relationship between humans and their environment. History and geography alike are concerned with the activity of humanity in time and space – ‘the basic stuff of human existence’ in the words of a prominent historical geographer.²⁷ In many ways, they are symbiotic. Deprived of spatial assumptions, historical writing would be nonsensical. Conversely, without founding their studies upon human activity over time, geographers would simply have nothing to write about.

The latter statement is, perhaps, the more contentious. While it seems self-evident that history must narrate actions in space as well as time, the temporal, or perhaps more accurately, the *historical*, aspect of geography is less immediately apparent. In fact, the point is most clearly illustrated through reference to one of the most extreme manifestations of mathematical cartography. Within the ancient world, the most striking example of abstract geographical expression was certainly the second-century *Geographia* of the Alexandrian cartographer Claudius Ptolemaeus.²⁸ While Ptolemy's work was firmly founded upon geometrical principles,

²⁵ For these definitions, and for much of the theoretical discussion which follows, I am indebted to Katherine Clarke. Her comments on precisely these issues have been extraordinarily illuminating and a detailed discussion of many of them is to be found in Clarke (1999), pp. 1–76. In the light of this work, I provide only a brief summary (with some of my own observations) here.

²⁶ A point rightly stressed by Guelke (1997), pp. 223–34 in his discussion of historical geography and the relationship between its component disciplines.

²⁷ Meinig (1978), p. 1186, cited by Clarke (1999), p. 5.

²⁸ For the intellectual and historical background to Ptolemy's work, see Dilke (1987a).

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