In: Klaus Geus & Martin Thiering (eds.), *Features of Common Sense Geography*: *Implicit Knowledge Structures in Ancient Geographical Texts*. Berlin; Münster; Wien; Zürich; London: LIT Verlag, 2013, pp. 173–192.

CHAPTER 10

HIEROTOPIA[1] AND ETHNO-GEOGRAPHY: (PARA-)SCRIPTURAL TRADITIONS AND LANDSCAPE PERCEPTION

Florentina Badalanova Geller

Freie Universität Berlin

На Нинко

Abstract

The biblical narrative concerning the four Edenic rivers (Genesis 2:10–14) may actually be based upon more ancient oral tradition, the iconographic design of which can also be seen on the earliest *mappa mundi* known, on a cuneiform tablet in the British Museum (BM 92687). Its pristine paradigm was transmitted in many surviving cosmographic accounts from the Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages. In different periods and languages authors identified – in their own idiosyncratic ways and according to the mental maps of their own respective backgrounds – the names of the four rivers running from Eden. On many occasions, these were designated with toponyms/hydronyms familiar to the targeted audiences (e.g. Nile and Danube). Still, while the names of the rivers (i.e. the legends) varied, the cosmographic model of which they were part (i.e. the spatial scheme) remained the same. In a way, these accounts could be interpreted as narrative improvisations on the archetypal cosmographic template, the image of which was captured in the cuneiform tablet of the Babylonian *mappa mundi*.

1. Mapping terra (in)cognita

The present author has been arguing that biblical cosmogonies from Creation to the Flood could have been based upon a certain multifaceted proto-corpus of written (i.e. literary), iconographic, and oral sources, provisionally defined as an *Ur*-hypertext, the

[1] The term *hierotopia*, a compound of ἱερός ('sacred') and τόπος ('place', 'landscape'), is suggested here to denote narratives describing spatial concepts associated with Scriptural (Biblical and Qur'ānic) topography (existent or imagined); taken into consideration are also related para-Scriptural (Jewish, Christian and Muslim) traditions.

unfolding of which left palpable imprints upon later para-Scriptural traditions.[2] One such case among many is the description of the Garden of Eden in *Genesis* (2:10–14);[3] of particular importance in this connection is the question whether the biblical account could be related to (or, more precisely, based upon) an ancient *mappa mundi*, the earliest extant witness to which is the cuneiform tablet in the British Museum (BM 92687), depicting the universe as imagined by Babylonian scribes.[4]



Figure 1: Babylonian *mappa mundi* from the British Museum (BM 92687)

[2] See Badalanova 2008a, 2008b; ead. "Recasting The Bible, Recapturing Eden (Parascriptural Cosmologies in the Byzantine Commonwealth)", forthcoming.

[3] King James version:

> "And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads. The name of the first is Pison: that is it which compasseth the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good: there is bdellium and the onyx stone. And the name of the second river is Gihon: the same is it that compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia. And the name of the third river is Hiddekel [Tigris]: that is it which goeth toward the east of Assyria. And the fourth river is Euphrates."

[4] A recent occasion when the Babylonian *mappa mundi* was discussed was the Dahlem Seminar Series on *Common Sense Science* in the paper given by Irving Finkel ("New Light on the Babylonian Mappa Mundi", 16 April 2013).

It displays what so far has been maintained to be Babylon with the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and the bitter/salty (ocean/river) waters surrounding the imagined Universe; the design also has eight triangular projections (see the drawing below) where mythological ancestors (e.g. the Babylonian Flood-hero) resided.[5]

However, the hypothetical comparison of the Babylonian *mappa mundi* with *Genesis* 2 was considered by many to be somewhat unconvincing, since the Bible describes four rivers coming from the Garden, whereas the cuneiform tablet was conventionally thought to have displayed only two; still, the scriptural narrative does mention the Tigris (i.e. Hiddekel) and Euphrates (i.e. Perat), thus indicating that Edenic geography was envisaged as adjacent to that of Mesopotamia.

Recent reassessment of the relationship between the cosmological model explicated in Babylonian *mappa mundi* and that of *Genesis* (2:10–14) has raised a new hypothesis[6] by making the following points:

1) The legends on the Babylonian *mappa mundi* are inconsistent and incomplete. A large square area in the upper centre of the map is labeled as 'Babylon', while other major cities[7] are only shown as much smaller circles.[8] At the same time, the surrounding Mesopotamia 'bitter/salty waters', designated as *Marratu*, are actually marked as a 'river' by the ancient cartographer.

2) The obvious conclusion is that the *design* on the *mappa mundi* and the legends are completely independent of each other; furthermore the graphic template of the map could have circulated as a relatively simple pattern which was open to other interpretations. The basic map could theoretically have looked like this:[9]

[5] The fullest publication at present is by Wayne Horowitz 1998: 20–42; according to him, the map can be no older than the 9th century BC.
[6] M. J. Geller, "The Flood and Global Warming: who is responsible?", forthcoming.
[7] Such as *Assur*, also mentioned in Genesis (2:10–14), or *Susa*.
[8] Many of these sites were most probably not known to the Babylonian cartographer since they had no legends or were only labeled as 'city'; see Horowitz 1998: 20–21.
[9] Drawing made by Strahil Panayotov.

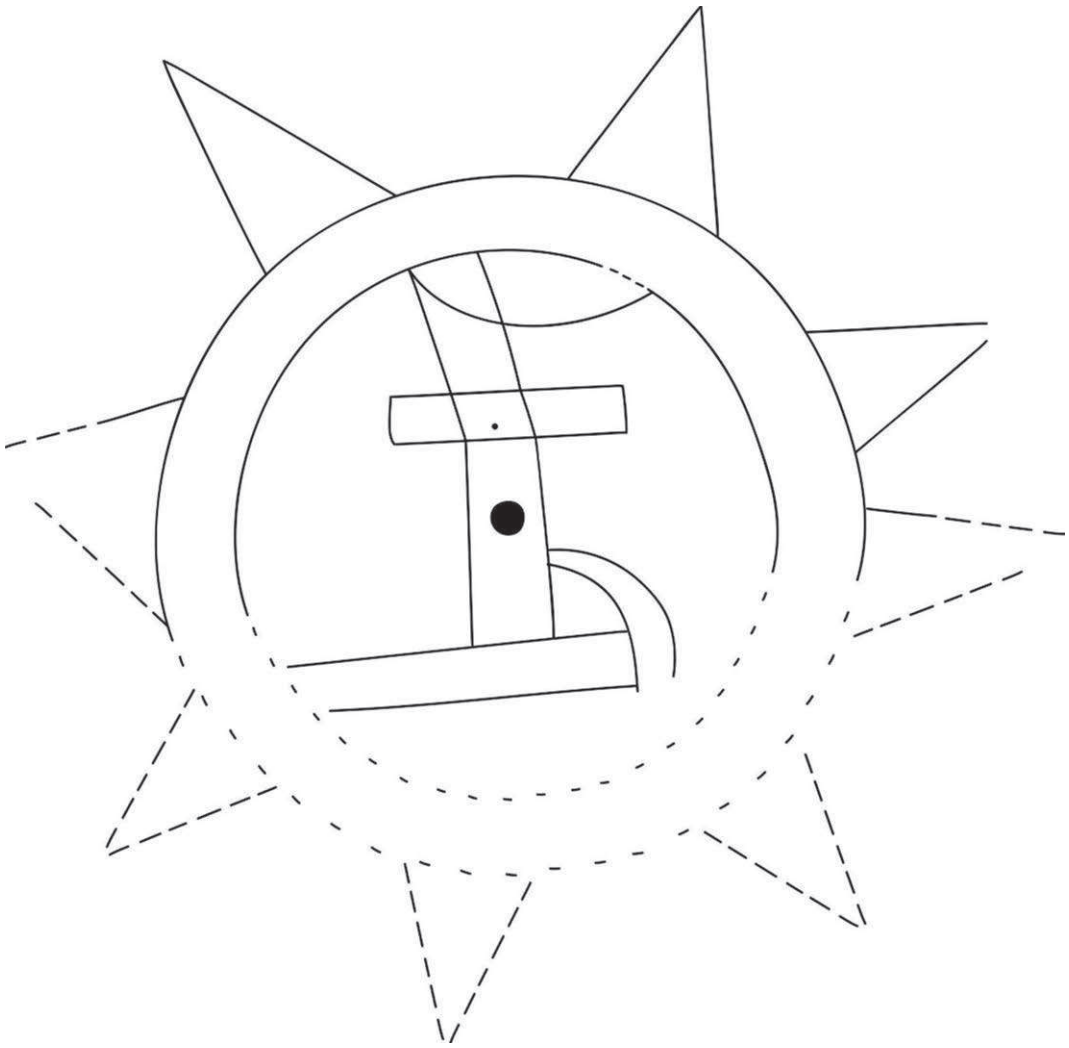


Figure 2: Design on the Babylonian *mappa mundi* without the legends

When we match up this legend-free sketch (based on the Babylonian *mappa mundi*) to *Genesis* 2:10–14, comparisons look more promising. Instead of two rivers (interpreted as the Tigris and Euphrates), we actually see four rivers coming from the large square region in the upper centre of the map.[10] In fact, two of them run upward, while the other two — downward. Moreover, two of the rivers (the ones going up) at the top join two other lines, which could be marking the bitter/salty ocean/river[11] *Marratu* surrounding the entire area. Although the Babylonian *mappa mundi* itself has nothing to do with Genesis *per se*, its *design* could have been the basis for the *Vorlage* of what we now have as a description in the Bible. The large square area in the upper centre could have been interpreted as the Garden of Eden, from which four rivers emerge, two of

[10] This was the region identified by the cartographer as Babylon, see Horowitz 1998: 20–21.
[11] See ibid., since the Babylonian cartographer labeled the *Marratu* 'ocean' as 'river'.

which surround Ethiopia and the gold region of Havilah. In other words, the description of Eden in the Bible could have been based upon a specific hierotopic notion of ancient common sense geography, as sketched in the *mappa mundi*. In fact, it can be demonstrated that its pristine paradigm was transmitted in many surviving cosmographic accounts from the Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages. As we shall see later, in different periods and languages different authors identified in their own idiosyncratic ways, according to the mental maps of their own respective backgrounds,[12] the names of the four rivers running from Eden. On many occasions, they designated them with toponyms (to be more precise, hydronyms) familiar to the targeted audiences. Still, while the names of the rivers (i.e. the legends) varied, the cosmographic model of which they were part (i.e. the spatial scheme) remained the same. In a way, these accounts could be interpreted as narrative improvisations on the archetypal cosmographic template, the image of which was captured in the cuneiform tablet of the Babylonian *mappa mundi*. Below we shall examine some of these cases.

2. The verbal mappa mundi of Flavius Josephus

In his *Judean Antiquities* (1.37–39) Flavius Josephus (37 – ca. 100) offers a fascinating cosmological narrative where the biblical landscape is defined according to the broadest extent of contemporary geographical knowledge,[13] while the names of the four rivers of Paradise are consistent with familiar spatial dimensions of the ancient world of his time:

> "He [Moyses] says that God planted a park to the East flourishing luxuriantly with every kind of plant and that among these were both the plant of life and another of the wisdom by that was distinguished what was the good and what was the evil thing, and that He, having led both Adamos and his wife into this garden, ordered them to take care of the plants. This garden is watered by one river that flows around all the earth in a circle and that is split into four branches. Pheison — the name signifies a multitude —, that is called Ganges by the Greeks and that is borne toward India, flows into the sea.

[12] On 'the sacred text as a mental map', with a special emphasis on the Hebrew Bible and its rabbinic interpretation, see Jacobs 2013: 395–417.

[13] On the Oriental traditions of *hierotopia* (with a special emphasis on the designation of the four rivers of Paradise), see the discussion in Nira Stone 2008: 227–250 and Michael Stone 2011: 245–256.

> Euphrates and Tigris go into the Erythra [Sea]. The Euphrates is called Phoras, and it signifies either scattering or flower. Tigris is called Diglath, by that is indicated by the swiftness with narrowness. Geon, flowing through Egypt, reveals that that gushes forth for us from the opposite side, that Greeks call the Neilos."[14]

As evident from the above quoted fragment, the description of the four primordial rivers by Flavius Josephus has a distinctive ethnocentric flavour; the author conveys the knowledge of the biblical hydronyms according to the geographical thesaurus of the ancient Greeks, but etymologising them in accordance with his own Semitic tongue (Aramaic or Hebrew). The Pheison river, for instance, is identified by him as the Ganges, but the name is etymologized as 'multitude'.[15] In the same way Josephus interprets the name of the Euphrates (= Phoras) as coming from 'scattering' or 'flower' and the Tigris (the Aramaic equivalent of which is Diglath)[16] as 'swiftness with narrowness'.[17] However, what is significant is that the Midrash *Genesis Rabbah* provides its own Hebrew etymologies for the river names,[18] and although not the same as the meanings suggested by Josephus, the hermeneutics run along parallel lines. In other words, Josephus is indulging in the same kind of ethno-hermeneutics as the Midrash on Genesis, and as did indeed the cartographer who applied his (idiosyncratic) legends to the *mappa mundi*.

Significantly, by identifying the Pheison with the river Ganges, known to the Greeks as being in India, while equating Geon ('flowing through Egypt') with the Nile, Josephus is describing here the limits of the world as known to the Greeks in his day;[19] at the same time he is offering an alternative cosmological account parallel to the Septuagint. Obviously, the mental model behind Josephus' description of the Garden is similar to the design of the *mappa mundi* from the cuneiform tablet in the British Museum (BM 92687) discussed above, with the four rivers emanating from the large square area in the upper centre of the map (labeled there as 'Babylon') flowing into the river which surrounds the Earth in a circle.[20] In other words, if one considers

---

[14] We follow Feldman's translation in Mason 2000: 14–15.
[15] Feldman derives the name from Hebrew *pwš* ('leap', 'spring about', 'spread', 'increase') (ibid.: 15, n. 72), although the same word exists in Aramaic; see in this connection M. Jastrow 1926: 1149.
[16] As pointed out by Feldman, the term is also attested in *Targum Onqelos* and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Gen. 2:14, *Berakot* 59b, *Qiddushin* 71b (Mason 2000: 15, n. 80).
[17] See also the discussion in Feldman (Mason 2000: 15, n. 79–81) and Ginsberg 1925: 91–92, n. 51; they both mention that the etymologies given by Josephus for these rivers correspond partly to Midrash *Gen. Rabbah* (16: 3–4).
[18] Ibid. 15, n. 72, 79, 81.
[19] Cf. Feldman (Mason 2000: 15).
[20] There is no mention in Josephus' account of the *Okeanos Potamos* or 'ocean river', nor is there any mention of Eden, but only the 'garden'. Feldman (Mason 2000: 14, n. 69) suggests that Josephus did not mention Eden because he was not certain of its location but was trying to establish the precise geographical coordinates of the ri-

the possibility of the legend/label 'Babylon' being a later interpolation of the 'original' graphic design, then by the same token one can suggest that, in fact, the large square area in the upper centre of the map might have been perceived (in the original version of the no longer extant protograph) as a marker of an archetypal *locus,* which the biblical narrative would eventually 'recognise' and describe — let me repeat, quite independently from the Babylonian cartographer — as the Garden of Eden.

Indeed, as we shall see later, Josephus is not the only one to 'verbalise' certain cosmographic concepts, which were autonomously expressed in the ideographic language of the ancient models of the Universe; actually, he was only one among many to use them as a template of his narrative. Thus, parallels to the cosmographic pattern employed in *Judean Antiquities* occur in some later Islamic exegetical writings composed in Arabic. The celebrated *History of Prophets and Kings* by Al-Tabarī (839–923) — which can be regarded as a specific Muslim counterpart of *Judean Antiquities* — represents one such case. While drafting the lay-out of the post-diluvian table of nations, Al-Tabarī in fact re-assembles Edenic sacred geography from the primordial period of human history:

> "When Noah, his offspring, and all those in the ark came down to earth, he divided the earth among his sons into three parts. To Shem, he gave the middle of the earth where Jerusalem, the Nile, the Euphrates, the Tigris, the Sayhan [unidentified], the Jayhan [Gihon], and the Fayshan [Pishon] are located. It extends from the Pishon to east of the Nile and from the region from where the southwind blows to the region from where the northwind blows. To Ham, he gave the part [of the earth] west of the Nile and regions beyond to the region from where the westwind blows. The part he gave to Japheth was located at the Pishon and regions beyond to the region from where the eastwind blows."[21]

The references to the winds here actually represent the cardinal directions north, south, east and west.[22] The interesting feature in this idiosyncratic ethno-geography, however, is the region allocated to Shem, Noah's favourite son, who is given the same area as the four rivers mentioned in Gen. 2:10–14, plus Jerusalem, which may also reflect the mental model of the *mappa mundi*, with Jerusalem replacing Babylon. In this case, the four rivers emanating from Eden describe the landscape of civilization, from the Fertile Crescent to the Nile (and maybe even India), with Jerusalem in the centre. The other two brothers were assigned marginal regions to the West and East, perhaps asso-

---

vers issuing forth from it. A better explanation for why the word 'Eden' does not appear in Josephus' account is that he had no acceptable etymology in Hebrew/Aramaic for this name, so he avoided using it.

[21] We follow Rosenthal's (1989: 370–71) translation.

[22] This is typical for common sense geography (see the chapters of Arnaud and Ilyushechkina/Görz/Thiering in this volume).

ciated with as yet unidentified areas on the *mappa mundi*. Evidently, Al-Tabarī's cosmographic thesaurus thus reproduces particular conceptual models inherent in the common sense geography of his period.

3. Locating the mysterious Pheison: ethno-geography as hierotopia

While in Josephus' *Judean Antiquities* and in the *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan,* the river Pheison was equated with the Ganges, the prevalent tradition among the rabbis, as argued by Feldman, identified it with the Nile (e.g. Midrash *Genesis Rabbah* 16) (Mason 2000: 15, n. 73). Subsequently, some cosmographic sources show interesting tendencies towards the synchronization of these two patterns. Traces of this tendency can be found in the Byzantine Commonwealth; of particular importance in this connection is the Old Church Slavonic *Hexaemeron*, composed by John the Exarch[23] (850–930) in medieval Bulgaria (during the reign of King Simeon) on the basis of an earlier (no longer extant) Greek compilation. This work contains obvious references to classical Byzantine *Hexaemeral* literature, among the most prominent representatives of which are considered to be Basil of Caesarea (St. Basil the Great, ca. 329–379), Severian of Gabala (ca. 380 – ca. 408), Anastasius Sinaïta (died after 700), etc. The writings of John the Exarch (and his *Hexaemeron* in particular) were further influenced by the famous *Cure of the Greek Maladies* (subtitled *The Truth of the Gospel proved from Hellenistic Philosophy*) by Theodoret of Cyrus or Cyrrhus (ca. 393 – ca. 457). But why do I consider the (relatively late) Slavonic material to be so important for my current analysis of ancient cosmographic models? Because, as I have argued elsewhere, the Slavonic tradition often encapsulates an intellectual heritage which may be irretrievably lost in its 'native' land and/or language of origin (e.g. Hebrew/Aramaic, Greek, etc.); at the same time, the Old Church Slavonic translations of certain writings originally composed in Hebrew (or Aramaic) and Greek preserve a much more archaic stage of the tradition than the respective contemporary Hebrew (or Aramaic) and Greek versions; and finally Old Church Slavonic tradition shows the endurance of certain intellectual models inherited from Hellenistic epistemological discourse, which have been transmitted discretely via different scribal traditions in different ethno-confessional environments. One such case is the *Hexaemeron* of John the Exarch.

It is in *The Sermon on the Sixth Day* where the issue of the imagined landscape of Paradise is discussed by him at length. While focusing on the biblical fragment, "from

[23] Further on literary heritage of John the Exarch, see Aizetmüller 1958–1971, Thompson 1991: 35–59, Barankova et al. 2001; the latter publication provides exhaustive bibliography on the subject (*ibid*., 10–12).

Eden there emerges a river which waters Paradise", he contemplates the location of the Garden and its dimensions:

> "From this [statement] you should learn that Paradise {порода} is not small and its measurements are considerable. This river is [big enough] to water it, and still from its abundance four rivers issue forth. The river emerges from Eden in order to water Paradise, and having watered it, divides into four rivers: Tigris {Тигръ}, Nile {Ѯнлъ}, Euphrates {Ефратъ}, and a river which in Scriptures is named Phison {Фисонъ}, but now called by many 'Danube' {его же мѣнѧ^{т} ныѣ мнозѣ доунава соуцѣа}."[24]

Having identified the numinous *Pheison* with the Danube, John the Exarch hastens to inform his imagined reader that the original name of the river Nile is actually Geon; in order to fortify this argument, he uses as a reference the Scriptures and quotes Jeremiah (2:18):

> "'From there, [the primeval river] divides into four sources.' It was not said, into four branches, but sources, which means 'springs', each having their names. The first one is Phison {Фисонъ}, and we already mentioned it today, then Geon {Гиѯнъ}, which is Nile {Ѯнлъ}, but Geon is its original name. There is a witness to this in Jeremiah, saying to the Jews, 'Why do you need to go to Egypt in order to drink the water of Geon?'"[25]

Thus, while in *Judean Antiquities* the list of the rivers of Paradise offered by Flavius Josephus includes Pheison (= Ganges), Euphrates (= Phoras), Tigris (= Diglath) and Geon (= Neilos), in *The Hexaemeron* account of John the Exarch this pattern is transformed and Ganges is substituted by the Danube (hence West replacing East). This substitution is, in fact, a telltale sign with obvious Eurocentric (or, rather, ethnocentric) hints. Accordingly, the Paradise topic becomes accommodated in the native landscape of the scribe, thus acquiring the features of Eden. This mythopoeic strategy could be described as *hierotopia* in the making.

Accordingly, while asking the imagined reader to pay attention to the size of the primordial river which divides into four parts thus irrigating Paradise, John the Exarch contemplates the divine purpose of its existence, since Adam was the only human being created then:

---

[24] Author's translation; it is based on the publication of the 15th century Russian recension of the *Hexaemeron* of John the Exarch (MS 145 from the palaeographic collection of Moscow Ecclesiastical Academy), fols 266a–266b (Barankova et al. 2001: 638–639).

[25] Author's translation; ibid., fols 266b–267a (Barankova et al. 2001: 639–640).

> "What was the need for Paradise to be the way it was [designed]? It was not only for the sake of him [Adam] only, but it was prepared for the end of the World for everybody: patriarchs, prophets, apostles, evangelists, martyrs, confessors, saints, virtuous, believers, those living in piety and all the righteous. The Saviour promised [Paradise] to the Brigand, who confessed and believed in Him, and told him, 'Today you will be with Me in Paradise.' Those who laboured along from childhood to old age — Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — followed after him [i.e. the Brigand], [for] the first to reach Paradise was [indeed] the Brigand. God created deeds not only for the present. Why did he create this spacious land? Because of Adam or because of those who live today?"[26]

Thus cosmographic narrative turns into a homiletic argument, and cosmogony is perceived as eschatological prophesy; quite in accord with the poetics of Christian rhetoric, the description of Paradise, as presented by John the Exarch, is combined with salvific motifs. This tendency is rather palpable in iconographic tradition; while depicting the 'Bosom of Abraham',[27] the Christian artists of the Byzantine Commonwealth conventionally follow a specific design employing iconographic language indicating that the Garden of Eden and the New/Heavenly Jerusalem are envisaged as synonymous. According to this type of artistic devices, the Patriarch Abraham, holding in his lap the souls of the righteous, is shown seated, along with Isaac and Jacob accompanied by the Brigand with the cross, in the middle of the rectangular Paradise, from the walls of which the mythical four rivers emerge (see Fig. 3, 3a, 4, 4a); furthermore this pattern is considered to be one of the most essential in the depiction of the Beyond by the icon-painters of *Slavia Orthodoxa*.[28]

---

[26] Author's translation; ibid., fol 266b (Barankova et al. 2001: 639).

[27] See Luke (16: 19–31).

[28] Following the same line of argument, I would like to point out in this connection that in the *Book of Revelation* (21: 16) the Holy City of the New/Heavenly Jerusalem, "coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband", is yet again described as a square:

> "And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal."



Figure 3: The Bosom of Abraham, mural painting from the western wall of the Rila Monastery, Bulgaria (19th century)



Fig. 3a: The Bosom of Abraham, mural painting from the western wall of the Rila Monastery, Bulgaria (19th century), detail



Figure 4: The Bosom of Abraham, mural painting from the northern wall of the Rila Monastery, Bulgaria (19th century)



Fig. 4a: The Bosom of Abraham, mural painting from the northern wall of the Rila Monastery, Bulgaria (19th century), detail

Then again, while describing the features characterising the land of Paradise, the author of the *Hexaemeron* further 'visualises' his story, as if asking the audience to look at an imagined drawing:

> "Now look carefully, imagine it is Paradise. It is better to render things in pictures than in words. There is a big river which has a lot of water and irrigates Paradise. From there it goes to the abyss and then under the Earth in a mysterious way, known only to the One who created it, that is to say, the Master. Its current is hidden in a long path and [this river] spreads to different places, emerging as one river in Ethiopia, another one to the West, and a third one to the East. In this way, via the subterranean paths, God created miraculous sources under the Earth, by means of the first river. Why is this so? Was it not for the following purpose, so that people walking along the banks of the river did not find Paradise, and that its [location] was unknown to people? If one could have reached [Paradise], nobody would have found it but the rich. However, God hid it from both poor and rich, in order for both of them to find the path to it with good deeds. How much effort and labour would patriarchs and prophets expend in order to see Paradise, but still they did not find it. It was the brigand who found this path, by not walking along it but by believing in the One who said, 'I am the path'."[29]

[29] Author's translation; op. cit., fols 267a–267b (Barankova et al. 2001: 640).

In this way biblical cosmography turns into a symbolic map of Christian ethics and moral values; at the same time, the author of *The Hexaemeron* anchors his narrative to a landscape familiar to the reader. Paradise becomes a palpable reality, as are the waters of the River Danube. Still, it remains unreachable, just as the primordial source from which it ensues. And again the Christian rhetoric encircles the argument: only those who found Christ as the Path will reach the land of their salvation.

The same tendency is conveyed in some Old Church Slavonic versions of *The Erotapokriseis of Pseudo-Caesarius,*[30] which likewise identify the biblical river Phison (Θнсонъ) with the river Danube (Доунавѧ).[31] In fact, as the scribe points out straightforwardly, it was by the Bulgarians — not just Slavs! — that the biblical river is given this name. Thus, while contemplating on the nature of the firmament, created not by the craftsmanship of mortal men, but by God's will, the author of *The Erotapokriseis of Pseudo-Caesarius* argues that it is in the tangible properties of the Danube that the divine Creation is manifested; while building his argument, he also provides the list of its 'alternative' names and stipulates that in the Hellenistic world it was designated as Istros (Оустросъ), while the Romans called it Danuvios (Даноувнѡсъ).[32]

[30] The translation of *The Erotapokriseis of Pseudo-Caesarius* into Old Church Slavonic/Bulgarian was accomplished in the 10th century during the reign of King Simeon, at the same time when John the Exarch composed his *Hexaemeron*. Like in the case with *The Hexaemeron*, the Old Bulgarian protograph of *The Erotapokriseis of Pseudo-Caesarius* did not survive; hence, all the extant Slavonic witnesses (dated to the 15th–17th centuries) are later Russian recensions copied from earlier (Old Bulgarian) sources. The purported authorship of the no longer extant Greek *Vorlage* was attributed to Caesarius Nazianzen, the brother of Gregory Nazianzen (= Gregory the Theologian). In fact, the original of this pseudepigraphic work was composed in the 6th century by a contemporary of the renowned Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea; it has been maintained that the anonymous author designated as *Pseudo-Caesarius* was a Monophysite monk whose writings betray the style of Palestinian Origenism. The earliest among the 16 surviving Greek copies are dated to the 9th–10th centuries. The text of *The Erotapokriseis of Pseudo-Caesarius* was also translated into Arabic in the 11th century. See also the discussion in Riedinger 1989 and Hilhorst 1999: 14–16.

[31] See Duichev/Kristanov 1954: 276–277; a new edition of the Slavonic version of *The Dialogues of Pseudo-Caesarius* is offered by Y. Miltenov 2006a. The first to draw attention to the evidence contained in the Greek accounts of *Pseudo-Caesarius* regarding the identification of the river Danube as Phisom/Pishon (in relation to Slavonic ethnic history) was Karl Viktor Müllenhoff 1876: 293–298; bibliography on the topic is provided by Miltenov 2004: 311–324; 2006a: 147–161.

Further on the text of *Pseudo-Caesarius* as a source containing information concerning pre-Christian (pagan) religious concepts of ancient Slavonic tribes, see Malingudis 1990: 86–91.

[32] Quoted after Duichev/Kristanov 1954: 276–277:

> Внжъ же мн нстовы оуказъ ѡ твердн, не хытростью ѵ҃вѵьскою, но божьею волею съставленоу, н іакоже оуѵенню намъ прѣдлѣжашоу, едного ѿ ѵетырь, нже нз раѧ нсточнка текоуцїамъ рѣкамъ, Θнсонъ, по нашемѳ пнсанью, елньскы же Оустросъ, рнмьскы же Даноувнѡсъ, блъгаръскый же Доунава нменоуема, знмѣ помръзающа н въ камень ѡбразъ прѣлагаемѣ мѧкцѣй воднѣй вецн, іакоже по себе прѣносntн прѣходѧщаѧ ратнкы къ гръком, Срѣмьскыѧже н фракьскыѧ прѣдѣлы преходѧцоу мнѡжествѫ. тако ѿнѣ н самоу тѫ разѫмѣтн ѿ воды съмръзшоусѧ твердь.

4. The quest for Paradise: mission (im)possible

It was at the end of the 15th century when the quest for Paradise *de facto* changed the hitherto existing cosmography of the Old World radically. It became a voyage, a *mappa mundi* in the making. In search for India — and ultimately, the location of the pristine land of Eden, of gold and precious stones — the daring Christopher Columbus set off to a challenging expedition. In 1492 he found not the promised land of India, but the New World of what we now call the Americas, thus putting in motion a new *mappa mundi* and transforming the entire geographical scheme of the Universe as known to his predecessors and contemporaries.[33] Some forty years before the discovery of the New World, however, the Old World witnessed the fall of one of its mightiest Empires — that of Byzantium. In 1453 Constantinople was no more; the city, once glorified as the 'New Rome' and 'New Jerusalem', became Istanbul. It was also in this turbulent century of mighty discoveries and vast geo-political changes when an anonymous scribe from the Balkans, most probably a monk in a desolated monastery, quietly copied a Slavonic compilation of cosmographic accounts entitled *Observation of the Universe* (Съмотрєнїє въселєннные).[34] We can only speculate whether this undertaking was just an assignment given to him by a more senior librarian, or whether it was an escape from the brutal reality of the surrounding world. As for the actual Greek *Vorlage* of our anonymous monk's compendium of common sense geography sources, it was based on some earlier writings of the Byzantine intellectual Michael Psellos (1018–1078), and in particular on his *Brief Solutions to Questions Regarding Natural World* (*Solutiones breves quaestionum naturalium*). Included in the Slavonic version of the *Observation of the Universe* were also fragments from some earlier Byzantine *Hexaemeral* writings, and in particular texts attributed to Basil the Great, the paragon of the aforementioned medieval Bulgarian intellectual John the Exarch. In fact in the opening paragraph of the *Observation of the Universe,* the author/editor points out that the ultimate western frontier of the Universe was imagined to be adjacent to the territory of Spain, whereas the Island of the Blessed (that is, Paradise) was believed to be in the Western Ocean; the suggested distance between the Island of the Blessed and the borders of Spain, according to the verbal map of the *Observation of the Universe* account, was one myriad leagues.[35] Most probably, the common sense geography from the native land of Columbus upheld the same cosmological vision.

[33] As it happens, the designation of this discovery bears no reference to his name; the New World was called after another explorer, Amerigo Vespucci — one of typical ironies we live by.
[34] The text was published by Novaković 1884: 41–56; see also the discussion in Duichev/Kristanov 1954: 336–339.
[35] See Novaković 1884: 41, as well as Duichev/Kristanov 1954: 338–339.

It is in the section designated as *Discourse Six: About the Ocean, Which Surrounds the Entire World* where the author/editor of the *Observation of the Universe* provides a fascinating cosmographic scheme, which is designed according to the familiar archetypal model of the Ocean-river surrounding the Universe:

> "Around the Earth there is a river {оукроугъ землѥ ѥсть рѣка}, which is called Ocean {глаголѥмаа Океанъ}. There is a crest {съ оубо връхъ}[36]... to the East; there are two brooks[37] {поіаса же два} flowing {протежеть} from East [of Paradise to the West], thus surrounding the entire Earth and then again converging into the Western Ocean, which contains more than any other body of water, and it is impenetrable. On the eastern side there is a furrow of dry [land], which is curt and divides it [i.e. the Ocean]. At one end of this furrow is Paradise. This [place] is called the 'Gates of Paradise', because, by running into the two brooks, the left and right, the streams flow together in sequence, tighter and tighter, and because of this narrowness it is named the 'Gates of Paradise' {дверь раю}, and its length is 20 leagues."[38]

It is rather astonishing that the verbal map from the 15th century Balkans brings about traces of cosmographic ideas similar to those displayed some two and a half millennia earlier in Babylonian *mappa mundi*; the most striking of all is the notion concerning the primeval river surrounding the imagined Universe, which in the Slavonic text (and presumably in its Greek *Vorlage*) is identified as *Ocean*. Most surprisingly, this concept is missing from Flavius Josephus' *Judean Antiquities*,[39] although it features in biblical imagery, when Jonah prays from the mouth of the whale, "you cast me from the depths, in the heart of the seas (Heb. *ymym*), and the river (*nhr*) surrounded me."[40]

Obviously, the cosmographic design displayed in the verbal *mappa mundi* from the 15th century Balkans reproduces a much more ancient archetypal image of the primordial Ocean as a mystical 'circumference fence' of the Universe; as already mentioned above, the earliest surviving witness to this pattern is the Babylonian *mappa mundi*.

Another significant — and relevant to the current discussion — spatial concept touched upon by the compiler(s) of the *Observation of the Universe* is concerned with the Edenic landscape; the chapter in which it is presented is entitled *About the Source*

---

[36] Lit. 'height', 'top'.
[37] Lit. 'belts'.
[38] Author's translation; see Novaković 1884: 44, as well as Duichev/Kristanov 1954: 344–345.
[39] See the discussion above, footnote 20.
[40] See Jonah 2:3; although often translated as 'flood', Hebrew *nhr* 'river' is confirmed by the LXX translation *potamoi*, 'rivers' (reference courtesy M. Geller). Jonah tried to escape to Tarshish, as far away as possible, and hence the ocean on the edge of civilisation was described as both 'seas' and 'river', as in the *mappa mundi*.

of Immortality. Underlined in it is the statement that Paradise is the land providing the ultimate means for everlasting eternity — the 'Water of Life':

> "It must be known that in the middle of Paradise there gushes a stream [lit. vein of water], which descends into the abyss of the Earth. It then surfaces to the Earth itself, flows to the East, and provides the sweetest water of immortality and incorruptibility."[41]

The most remarkable among the series of descriptions of Paradise provided by the author/editor of the *Observation of the Universe,* is to be found at the very end of the text, in the chapter entitled *About Eden*:

> "Edem [i.e. *Eden*] and the '[Place of the] Blessed' {Макарiны} have a church. It was [built] from a single stone *Anfrax* {оть анѳракѯа[42] юдины камѣнна} (μονόλιθον ἀπὸ ἄνθραϰος). Its length is seven leagues, its width is three. It has seven altars, and the ascend to the altars is via 62 steps. From beneath them a river issues forth, coming from Paradise and dividing into four parts. As it happens, Geon {Геон} and Phison {Фiсонь}, that is to say, the Nile {Нил}, flow to the South, whereas the Tigris {Тигръ} and Euphrates {Ефрать} to the North. When Geon reaches Egypt, one of its branches goes to Libya and the other two to Upper Ethiopia. When the waters gather and multiply, the entire Egypt is inundated in the month of August. Egyptians call this *Istapie* {Истапiє} (Ἀστάπους), which is to say 'water from the darkness'."

As for the Tigris and Euphrates, their landscape characteriscs are described as follows: having originated from Eden in Paradise, they flow under the Earth and then appear on the Taurus Moutains {по Таврѣ горѣ}.

> "The Euphrates, when flowing from the northern lands to the South, has a light current, flowing towards the Persian Gulf[43] {Пер'скомоу океаноу}, thus causing depressions and marshes[44] and disappearing into them. The Tigris emerges imperceptibly from a certain lake in the East; flowing southwards, it crosses Mt. Trikon at the Massagetae {пръсецаеть Трнконскоу гороу о Масагетѣхь} and joins the Euphrates. It divides Babylon {Вавилонь} and when it descends, it goes closer to Peridon {прибличаеть се Перидоноу} and enters at the Persian Gulf {въходить въ Пер'ско нѣдро}. Before joining with the Euphrates, while they flow separately in parallel, they create Mesopotamia {Междоурѣчiє}. The distance between the Euphrates and Tigris is 428 [miles].
> As for the Phison, which is called [both] Ist[r] {Исть[рь]} and Gaz {Газь} [by the Greeks], and Istr {Истрь} and Danube {Доунавъ} by the Thracians {отъ

[41] Author's translation; see Novaković 1884: 44, as well as Duichev/Kristanov 1954: 346–347.
[42] That is, ruby.
[43] Lit. 'ocean'.
[44] Lit. 'swamp lakes'.

> Трѧкь}, it also originates from Paradise. Having flown under the earth towards the West, it ascends towards the Peon Mountains {Пеонстѣн горѣ}, which stretch from the Sicilian Sea {Сикел'скѧаго моря} to the [land of the] Germans at the Northern Ocean. From there it runs to the East and goes to the Black Sea {проливѣеть се въ Ѧксинскоу поуѫнноу}[45] via five mouths."[46]

It is evident that the chapter *About Eden* from the *Observation of the Universe* compilation displays two conflicting cosmographic models. It begins with a schematic view of four rivers originating in Paradise — with the Euphrates and Tigris running northwards, while Geon and Pishon head southwards — in an unrealistic scenario which recalls the design of the four rivers flowing out of a large rectangular region on the *mappa mundi.* Immediately afterwards, however, the geographer reverts to a more 'realistic' view of the Euphrates and Tigris, which now flow south towards to Persian Gulf, with the origin of the Tigris seen as Lake Van, and with both rivers nearly meeting at the site of the city of Babylon: the area between the two rivers defines Mesopotamia. The contrast between the two accounts is the most convincing evidence so far encountered for the existence of different perceptions of this region: one fantastic image based on the Babylonian *mappa mundi* design, with four rivers flowing both north and south and encircling other parts of the world, and a more sober view which records a more-or-less accurate description of Mesopotamia, as inhabitants would have known it. Even when we might think common sense geography would reflect reality as we know it, in actual fact traditional concepts which clearly contradict such realities were equally powerful and appealing, and these were cited with similar authority and confidence. In essence, the design of the earliest *mappa mundi* on a Babylonian cuneiform tablet turns out to have had an enduring and profound impression on ancient and medieval cosmology, far more than has been previously realised.

References

Aizetmüller 1958–1971: Rudolf Aizetmüller*, Das Hexameron des Exarchen Johannes*, Bd. 1–7, Graz.

Badalanova 2008a: Florentina Badalanova, "The Bible in the Making: Slavonic Creation stories", *in* Markham Geller et al. (eds.), *Imagining Creation*, Leiden/Boston, 161–365.

Badalanova Geller 2008b: Florentina Badalanova Geller, *Qur'ān in vernacular: Folk Islam in the Balkans* (Max Planck Institute for the History of Science; Preprint 357), Berlin.

[45] That is, Εὔξεινος Πόντος.

[46] Author's translation; see Novaković 1884: 55, as well as Duichev/Kristanov 1954: 368–369.

Badalanova Geller 2011: Florentina Badalanova Geller, "The Sea of Tiberias: Between Apocryphal Literature and Oral Tradition", *in* Lorenzo Di Tommaso & Christfied Böttrich (eds.), *The Old Testament Apocrypha in the Slavonic Tradition*: *Continuity and Diversity*, Tübingen, 13–157.

Barankova et al. 2001: Г. С. Баранкова, В. В. Мильков, *Шестоднев Иоанна Экзарха Болгарского*, Санкт–Петербург.

Duichev/Kristanov 1954: Ив. Дуйчев, Цв. Кристанов, *Естествознанието в средновековна България: Сборник от исторически извори*, София.

Ginzberg 1909–1913, 1928, 1925, 1938: Louis Ginzberg, *The legends of the Jews*. Vols 1–7, Philadelphia, PA, 1909–1913, 1928, 1925, 1938.

Hilhorst 1999: Anton Hilhorst, "Biblical Scholarship in the Early Church", *in* J. Den Boeft & M. L. Van Poll-van de Lisdonk (eds.), *The impact of scripture in early christianit*y (Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae), Leiden, 1–19.

Horowitz 1998: Wayne Horowitz*, Mesopotamian cosmic geography*, Winona Lake.

Jacobs 2013: Martin Jacobs, "The sacred text as a mental map: Biblical and rabbinic 'place' in medieval Jewish travel writing", *in* Ra'anan S. Boustan & Klaus Herrmann & Reimund Leicht & Annette Yoshiko Reed & Giuseppe Veltri (eds.), *Envisioning Judaism: Studies in honor of Peter Schäfer on the occasion of his seventieth birthday*, Vol. 1, Tübingen, 395–417.

Jastrow 1926: M. Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic literature*, London/New York.

Malingudis 1990: Федон Малингудис, "К вопросу о раннеславянском язычестве: свидетельства Псевдо-Кесария", *Византийский временник* 51, 86-91.

Mason 2000: Steve Mason (ed.), *Flavius Josephus*: *Translation and commentary*, Vol. 3: Judean antiquities 1–4. Translation and commentary by Louis H. Feldman, Leiden/Boston.

Miltenov 2004: Yavor Miltenov, "The Segmentation of *The Erotapokriseis of Pseudo-Kaisarios* as a source for the history of Its Slavonic translation", *Scripta & e-Scripta* 2, 311–324.

Miltenov 2006a: Явор Милтенов, *Диалозите на Псевдо–Кесарий в славянската ръкописна традиция*, София.

Miltenov 2006b: Yavor Miltenov, "Omissions and mistakes in the Slavonic translation of *The Erotapokriseis of Pseudo-Kaisarios*", *Scripta & e-Scripta* 3–4 (2006), 147–161.

Müllenhoff 1876: Karl Viktor Müllenhoff, "Donau, Dunav, Dunaj", *Archiv für slavische Philologie* 1, 290–298.

Novaković 1884: Stojan Novaković, "Odlomci srednevjekovne kosmografije i geografije", *Starine* 16, 41–56.

Riedinger 1989: Rudolf Riedinger, *Pseudo-Kaisarios: Die Erotapokriseis* (Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte), Berlin.

Rosenthal 1989: Franz Rosenthal (ed. & transl.) *The History of prophets and kings* (Tarīkh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk) *by Al-Tabarī: From the creation to the flood*, Vol. 1, Albany, NY, 1989.

Stone 2008: Nira Stone "The four rivers that flowed from Eden", *in* Konrad Schmid & Christoph Riedweg (eds.), *Beyond Eden: The biblical story of Paradise (Genesis 2–3) and its reception history* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament, 2. Reihe), Tübingen, 227–250.

Stone 2011: Michael Stone, "The names of the rivers", *in* Aren M. Maeir & Jodi Magness & and Lawrence H. Schiffman (eds.), *Go out and study the land* (*Judges 18:2*): *Archaeological, historical and textual studies in honour of Hana Eshel*, Leiden, 245–256.

Thompson 1991: Francis J. Thompson, "John the Exarch's theological education and proficiency in Greek as revealed by his abridged translation of John of Damascus' *De Fide Orthodoxa*", *Palaeobulgarica* 15.1, 35–58.

List of illustrations

1: The cuneiform tablet in the British Museum (BM 92687)

2: Drawing of the cuneiform tablet in the British Museum (BM 92687) made by Strahil Panayotov

3 and 3a: The Bosom of Abraham, mural painting from the western wall of the Rila Monastery, Bulgaria (19th century)

4 and 4a: The Bosom of Abraham, mural painting from the northern wall of the Rila Monastery, Bulgaria (19th century)