

# Everything is Somewhere



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## World's Oldest Map



**M**aps are older than writing and are possibly older than language; certainly it is easier to picture an

Australopithecine gnat scratching an arrow in the dust, pointing to good hunting grounds, than it is to imagine him giving clear verbal directions - the latter is not so common even today. And most animals (and even insects) maintain mental maps of their environment, whereas hardly any, besides humans, have language. As Michael Pollan has said, "Hunter and quarry maintain different but overlapping maps of the hunting ground, places of refuge and prospect, places of prior encounter. The hunter's aim is to have his map collide with his quarry's map ..." Given the importance of spatial location to survival, it seems reasonable that early humans would find *some* way to physically embody the maps stored between their ears.

So maps are not only old, they are ancient, nearly coeval with mankind, and the question of which is the *oldest* map is necessarily complicated and probably impossible to answer satisfactorily. But let us try.

The oldest extant *physical* map, or "cartographic artifact," may well be a section of wall unearthed in 1963 during an excavation of Çatalhöyük, a neolithic

**The Papyrus of Artemidorus, the exceptional artefact from the Ptolemaic period, re-surfaces after 2000 years of oblivion. Thanks to the Fondazione per l'Arte della Compagnia di San Paolo which has recently bought it, the papyrus has been meticulously restored and will be lent for the next 25 years to the Egyptian Museum in Torino, Italy where visitors will have the extraordinary opportunity of seeing it on display.**

village in Turkey and one of the earliest known human settlements. On the wall is a nine-foot-long painting depicting what appears to be Çatalhöyük itself. About 80 closely packed rectangular houses and an exploding volcano are shown, and James Melaart, the archaeologist who discovered it, interpreted it as a plan or map of the city. If he's correct, it would certainly be the oldest - radiocarbon dating suggests that the artifact is more than 8,000 years old. But *is* it a map? A cluster of houses with a mountain in the back could easily be just a picture, and if it *is* a map it wasn't very useful since it couldn't be carried anywhere.

Another candidate for oldest map, and perhaps a better one, is a palm-sized clay tablet excavated in 1930 at the ruined city of Ga-Sur, 200 miles south of Babylon, in Iraq. Dating this type of artifact is difficult, but authorities say it is somewhere between 4,500 and 5,800 years old. Several reasonable criteria for a map are met by the tablet: it indicates cardinal directions, is portable, shows topographic features like streams and hills (depicted as overlapping semicircles, a

drafting convention that is still used) and is even annotated - cuneiform characters identify some features and places, and the area of a field, about 29 acres, is given along with the name of its owner, Azala. With the geographic features and other details, it doesn't seem like too much of a stretch to call this a topographic map, and since ownership and acreage of a particular field are noted, it could almost be a legal description. Perhaps surveyors were involved.

China has an interesting candidate for oldest map, if by "map" we stipulate a drawing with distances marked. The 2,300 year old Zhao Yu Tu ("map of the area of the mausoleum") is a quarter-inch thick copper plate that is 37" inches long and 19" high. Seventy buildings and other features are drawn to scale, and numerals and other symbols are inlaid with gold and silver.

But even if these are all 'maps,' they are on rather a small scale - a village, a mausoleum, a single valley.

The earliest map of anything like a country or region is the Soletto Map, a postage stamp-sized piece of glazed terra



This portion of the Papyrus of Artemidorus relates the travels of an obscure Greek geographer named Artemidorus, and is the basis of the Papyrus's claim to "oldest Western map". The map cannot now be related to any particular region, but is still the oldest extant map artifact of the Greco-Roman world by a couple of centuries.

cotta about 2,500 years old. It clearly, albeit crudely, shows the 'boot heel' of Italy and labels in ancient Greek script indicate 13 cities, most of which still exist. The nearby Gulf of Taranto is also named – charmingly, waves are scratched into the map to suggest water. The (relatively) exact location of the cities is indicated by small dots near the labels, the same convention used on modern maps. Though small and crude, the Soleto Map is roughly to scale, and was likely better than nothing when it came to getting around this part of Italy.

But maps are on paper, right? Well, that's the contention of those who discovered the Papyrus of Artemidorus, a well-traveled chunk of parchment, nearly ten feet long, that contains a partial 'map-like' drawing. The history of the Papyrus is complex; it came into being in the first century B.C. as an Egyptian scribe's attempt to copy the second of 11 books by Artemidorus of Ephesus, the Greek geographer. This unknown scribe left room in his copy for reproductions of Artemidorus' maps, but apparently something went wrong when he took the papyrus to a painter. The map is incomplete, has no annotation, and does not appear to relate to the text or, indeed, to any known part of the planet. It may be that the painter began to copy the wrong map, or made some other fundamental mistake, and gave it up as a bad job. The subsequent history of the roll is interesting. Since papyrus was valuable, and this one was mostly blank,

it was kept as 'scratch papyrus' and filled with rough drafts, a catalog of animal drawings for use in frescoes (something like a wallpaper sample book), and for sketches of heads, hands and feet.

After several decades of service, it was finally sold as pulp and used to wrap a mummy! Buried in Egypt's dry soil for 1,800 years, the papyrus 'resurfaced' in the early 1900s, passed among several Egyptian and European collectors, and is now on display in Turin's Bricherasio Palace.

Though certainly valuable, historically and otherwise – the Papyrus recently sold for \$3,369,850! – calling an incomplete, incorrect, unlabeled painting of an unknown part of the world a 'map' seems more like academic puffery than good history. Still, the Papyrus of Artemidorus is evidence of the ancient world's strong interest in cartography.

There are other candidates for 'oldest map', candidates that aren't drawn on paper, copper or clay – that aren't physical at all. They are, however, eminently portable and useful. Native peoples have existed in Australia for *at least* 40,000 years – some estimates put the figure at 200,000 years. For most of that time they were the most isolated people on Earth, and developed the oldest continuously maintained culture known. A key feature of the Australian world view is the *dreamtime*, the idea that great archetypal beings like the Rainbow Serpent created Australia by singing and dreaming, and that this singing and dreaming continues and leaves physical marks in the land. This, of course, is an impossibly condensed version of a truly remarkable outlook, but the point is that the tracks of these beings are not only still recognized, but are recorded in minute detail in songs – songs that are bound up with clan lineage and passed down through family lines and, thus, have been preserved for tens of thousands of years. The songs are, in part, natural features – mountains, hills, ponds, rocks, etc. – listed in the order that they appear, and the list is so accurate that one who knows the song can use it to travel vast distances, through arid land, and never be lost . . . and isn't that the purpose of a map? True, 'song lines' can't be looked at, or held, but they are, at least partially, cartographic in nature, and they do orient humans in space. And since they have been in use many thousands of years, they are a viable candidate for that elusive title, world's oldest map. 