

# Introduction: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Douce 390

Andrew Dunning

If one had to choose a single object to counter misconceptions of the Middle Ages, it might be a portolan chart. There remains a popular stereotype that medieval people thought the earth was flat, and that they made only vague maps from hearsay that aimed to plot legendary creatures rather than facilitate travel or communication. One glance at the Douce Atlas overturns these illusions.

Portolans are designed to provide directions for sailing with charts and detailed descriptions of harbours and coasts. The first surviving examples are from the mid-thirteenth century. Their creation is closely connected to the introduction of the pivoted magnetic compass needle, found on European ships by the late twelfth century, when the Oxford teacher Alexander Neckam (1157–1217) became the first writer outside China to describe it in a book for building everyday Latin vocabulary, *De utensilibus* (*On Useful Things*). Portolans assembled detailed outlines of the Mediterranean basin, establishing many of the key features of modern maritime charts. Many cartographers consider them to be one of the most important developments in the history of maps.

The artefact that now survives in the Bodleian Library in Oxford as MS. Douce 390, nicknamed the 'Douce Atlas', is the creation of an anonymous Venetian living in the early fifteenth century. It is a series of seven parchment portolan charts mounted on wooden boards, with beautifully minimalistic decoration detailing the coastlines. As they are bound, the maps move sequentially in an arc: beginning with the Black Sea in the north-east, moving across the Mediterranean (with as much attention given to northern Africa as Europe), and concluding with the British Isles in the Atlantic.

The charts are arranged on the model of a typical Italian portolan atlas. The most striking feature is the web of rhumb lines: straight rules designed to allow a ship to plot its course on a chart by cutting the earth's meridians at the same angle,  $11.25^\circ$ , with 32 rhumbs in 360 degrees. These correspond to the traditional 32-wind compass rose. Labels written perpendicular to the coasts name key locations, normally in black ink, and with the most important cities, ports, and islands in red. Small rocky areas are dotted in black, and shallow sandy areas in red. The scales are variable, with the chart of Italy and the Adriatic drawn on a larger scale than others. The volume's long, narrow format is common for such collections made before the mid-fifteenth century, after which atlases gradually became larger.

The wooden boards and case of the Douce Atlas would ostensibly protect its charts at sea. The case is a unique survival with an atlas: it appears to have been hollowed out from a single piece of wood and has a deep lid to improve its water resistance. Nonetheless, the book's rich materials and near-perfect condition suggest that it was never intended to be taken onboard. It might have been used in an administrative or ceremonial function.

The first and last openings are each a diptych of devotional miniatures. The identity of their creator is unknown. The opening depicts the Annunciation, while the collection closes with St Mark (patron of Venice) and St Paul (a shipwreck survivor). Several scholars have noted that the charts are less accurate than others from this period, as Piero Falchetta notes in his commentary. It is possible that the same artisan was responsible for both the diptychs and the charts, and that this person was chosen for artistic rather than cartographic experience.

Just as the map's creator remains anonymous, we do not know what became of it before Francis Douce (1757–1834) acquired it, an antiquary based in London. He briefly worked for the British Museum's Department of Manuscripts and was an avid collector of books, manuscripts, prints, drawings, medals, and coins. He acquired most of his collection from local booksellers and at sales. He kept a diary of his acquisitions in a series of *Collecta* from 1811–34 (now MSS. Douce e. 66–68). These show that he purchased topographic material and Italian artwork on many occasions, but it is difficult to associate his lists with surviving objects, with descriptions such as 'Another parcel of Italian drawings of [i.e. purchased from] Smith' (June 1812). No entry in these volumes obviously corresponds to MS. Douce 390. Douce also left several loose notes in the manuscript (now kept separately as MS. Douce 390\*\*). He made a rough index of the charts' contents and noted several examples of similar portolans. He may have bid for the 'Cornaro Atlas' (London, British Library, Egerton MS. 73) at the auction of the Rev. C. Yonge's library in March 1832, enclosing an annotated clipping from the sale catalogue indicating that the British Museum purchased it for £30. These notes shed no light on how Douce acquired his portolan. He aimed to showcase cultural achievements from every period but was most successful as a connoisseur of illuminated manuscripts.

Although Douce did not attend Oxford or have a strong connection to the Bodleian, he donated his collection to the library because he felt that it would have more prominence there – and bring him more fame – than it would at the British Museum, to which Sir Frederic Madden (1801–1873) had expected Douce to leave his collection. In July 1830, Douce visited Oxford with his friend Isaac D'Israeli (1766–1848), where Bodley's Librarian, Bulkeley Bandinel (1781–1861), toured him through the collections. According to D'Israeli, Douce 'observed that the collections of Rawlinson, of Tanner, and of others, had preserved their identity by their separation. This was the subject of our conversation. At this moment Douce must have decided on the locality where his precious collection was to find a perpetual abode'. The collection was on display in a 'Museum Francisci Douce' until the early twentieth century. The Douce Atlas has featured in many exhibitions since that time and is among the library's greatest treasures.

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