

## Islamic World Maps

Islamic world maps share four main characteristics. First, they are meant as general representations of the world, being drawn at such a scale that only the general picture, rather than a detail, is revealed. Second, the world is centered on what we now call the Middle East. Third, they draw heavily upon the tradition of Ptolemy, although the later 14th-century maps begin to identify new features. Fourth, while some of their stark geometry may be explained with reference to the Islamic proscription of some kinds of images and image making, they are as much inspired by mathematics as by religion.

Many Islamic world maps were built upon latitude and longitude tables of places in the known world. Both al-Battani (c. 880) and al-Khwarazmi (c. 820) constructed geographical tables listing the features, climatic zone, latitude, and longitude of known countries. While al-Battani drew upon Ptolemy measurements, al-Khwarazmi drew upon other sources. However, it was not until the 14<sup>th</sup> century that Islamic mapmakers used a grid to represent longitude and latitude on their maps, despite the fact that knowledge of these concepts had been widely known for hundreds of years.

The earliest existing Islamic world maps come from the “Balkhi School” of geographers, which takes its name from Abu Zayd Ahmad ibn Sal al-Balkhi (d. 934), a scholar who wrote a commentary on a set of maps. A number of geographers have been grouped under the name of this school including al-Istakhri (10th century), Ibn Hawqal (d. c. 977) and al-Muqaddasi (d. 1000). World maps made by al-Istakhri are typical of the style of that time: the world is presented as a sphere, surrounded by a sea, with the earth’s surface divided by two further seas, the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. These world maps are centered in the Middle East, and are projected with south at the top.

One of the best-known Islamic world maps is by al-Idrisi, a scholar who traveled throughout Europe and North Africa. Around 1140 he was employed by King Roger II of Sicily to make a world map, of which a 15th-century copy survives. It is one of the most interesting maps in the history of cartography. While drawing upon the Ptolemaic understanding of the world and being based firmly in the tradition of Islamic world maps, it is also a very fresh representation. Europe and Asia are geometrically represented and the Nile River is shown. The map combines the traditions of the East and the West, Islamic and Christian. Drawn by a Muslim for a Christian king, and drawing on Ptolemy as well as contemporary travel reports, this world map represents a highly unusual melding of cultures and traditions.



LEFT **World map. 1456, by Al-Idrisi.**

*This is a more geometric representation of the world compared to the generally religious maps produced in Europe at the time. The mountains appear ropelike while the inland Lake that is the source of the Nile looks like little boats.*

RIGHT [BELOW] **Islamic World map, 1571-2, by the al-Sharafi al-Sifaqsi family.**  
This world map was part of a portolan atlas, made in the Tunisian town of Sfax. The map is sometimes orientated with south at the top.

