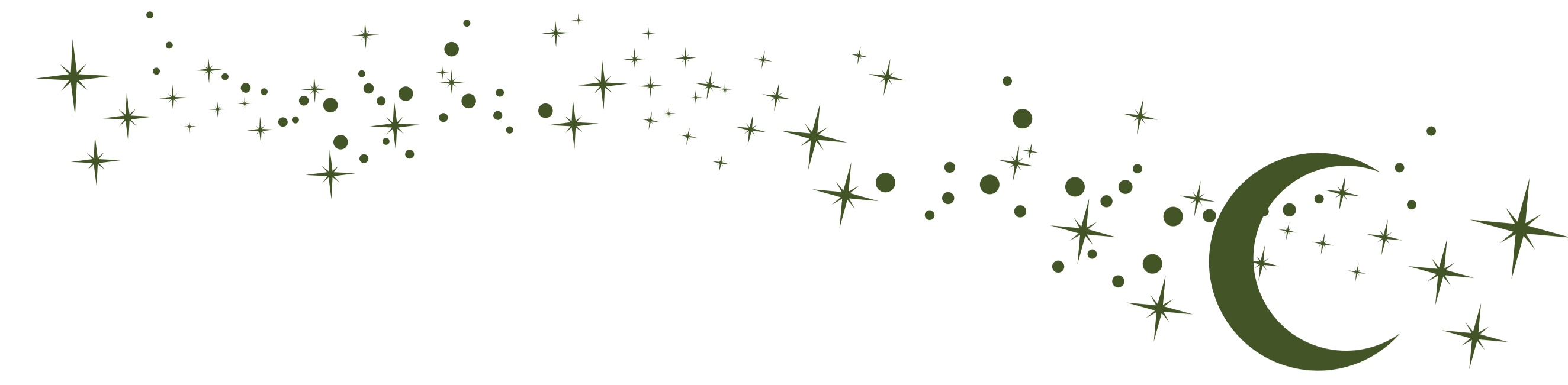


Geography and Cartography



The medieval Arab and Persian geography was based on that of the Hellenists (Greeks), but was quickly adapted throughout the years thanks to names such as Muhammad al-Idrisi (1099-1165 CE, Sicily).

From the beginning of the 8th century cartography and geography were developed. In particular by the Abbasid Caliphs of Baghdad. Several Islamic scholars made their contribution and some of these were known to be: Al-Khwarizmi, Abu Zayd al-Balkhi and Abu Rayhan Biruni. These cartographics were used by the Islamic Caliphate to travel to Europe, West Africa, China and Hindustan (India). Especially trade caravans that travelled by land and sea routes had this need. There were also books written about the characteristics and locations of various geologies, weather patterns and vegetation occurrences.

Mecca was located in the center in these Islamic world maps. Compared to cartographic maps we use now, the poles (north and south) were reversed. The Europeans used maps where Europe was in the north (top), to appear as the dominant ruling region of the world. Some maps were only for religious purpose like the "Mecca World Map". This showed every location in the direction of Mecca and the distance to the Holy City. The brass (metal) disk was created somewhere in the seventeenth century in an instrument-making workshop in Isfahan (Iran), discovered in 1989 and resurfaced in London.

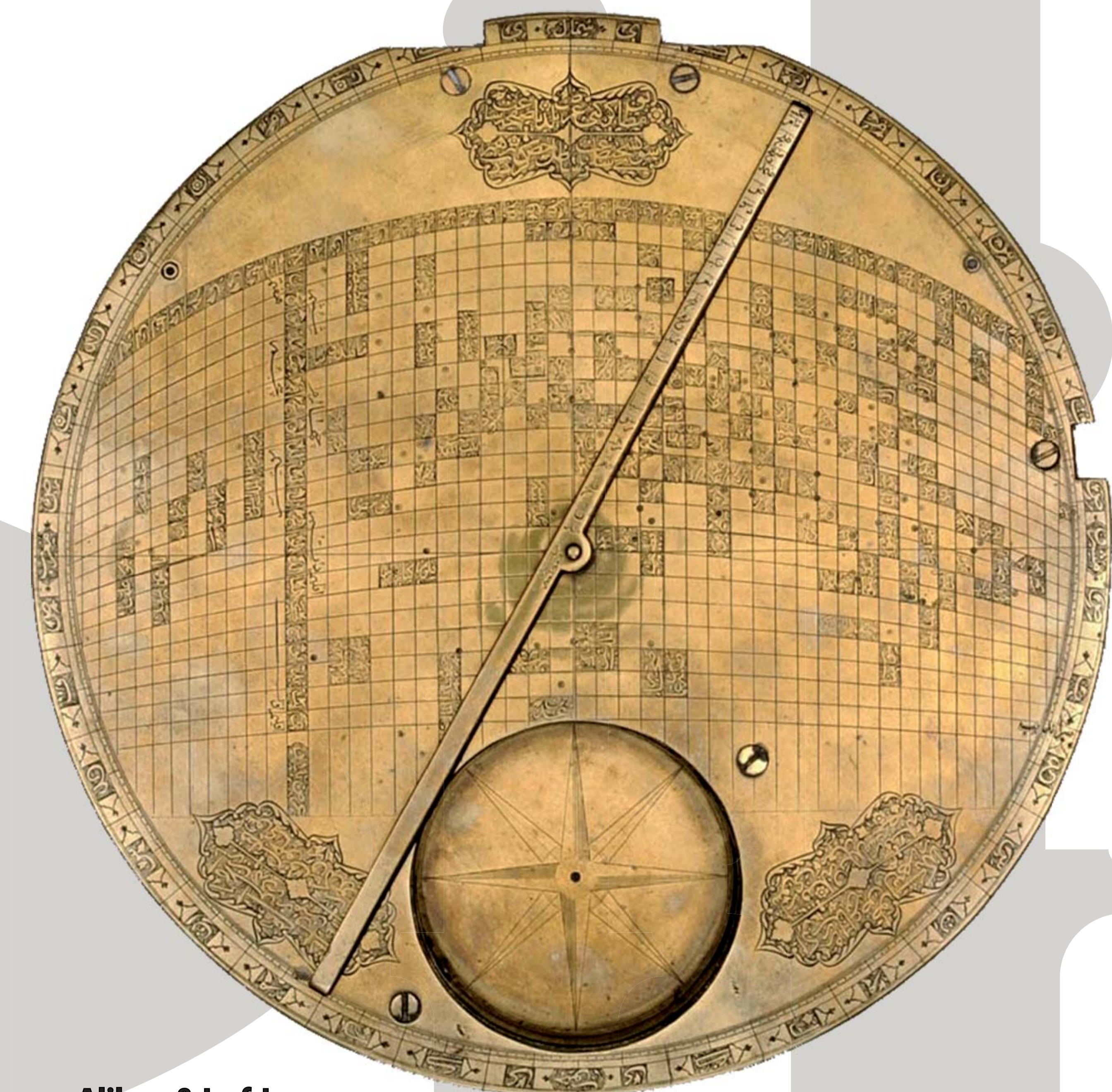
Two of these 17th-century Islamic world maps emerged out of nowhere in 1989 and 1995 proved to be very ingenious. A monumental book about this cartographic miracle has been written. One of these cartographic instruments came at an auction house in London in April 1989 and went under the hammer. This discovery made the history of the (western) cartography turn on its head. It was a circular brass plate, 22.5 cm in diameter and 1.5 mm thick, engraved with an Islamic world map. This was no ordinary map: borders, mountain ranges, rivers or seas were missing. However, there is a special grid of meridians and parallels, at intervals of two degrees, in which the locations of 141 towns/cities are marked - the coordinates can be read up to a fraction of a degree. The brass plate, with Mecca as the center and covers the area of Andalusia to Sri Lanka and from Russia to Ethiopia, with a concentration of cities in Iran.

Where did this remarkable cartographic map come from? How old was it?

Western scholars first concluded that it is an 18th century cartographic projection of Western European origin. This later proved to be entirely wrong: the cartographic disks is thoroughly Islamic. Many Western scholars tried to link the brass (metal) map to European craftsmanship and science, but their attempts turned out to be in vain. Indeed, the map indicates that much of the modern geographical knowledge did not come from the West. Geography and cartography are very important for Muslims, it provides the direction for prayer and influenced the way / direction in which a mosque's is built.



Tabula Rogeriana. World map by al-Idrisi. Europe is below-right, Africa is above it.



Mecca Centric World Map, 17th Century. Isfahan, Iran