Twitter Thread by Mateusz Fafinski



Mateusz Fafinski
@Calthalas

To India! We go together with one of the most original minds of the late antique and early medieval world: Cosmas Indicopleustes. Cosmas thought that the world was a box. He thought that god resided in its lid. But he also travelled a large part of that box! 1/ #medievaltwitter

Cosmas was born at the end of the fifth or the beginning of the sixth century probably in Alexandria, the great city of Roman Egypt. We actually don't know his real name, Cosmas the India-Sailor is a monicker he got around 9th century. 2/

We know though that he became a merchant in Constantinople. From there he traveled south to Egypt and then to the kingdom of Aksum, modern day Ethiopia. He is best informed about the topography of the region and there is little doubt that he visited it in person. 3/

He is called the India-Sailor because of his description of the current-day Malabar coast and Sri Lanka. But has he made it that far? Was it even viable in the sixth century? 4/

Cosmas does mention detailed descriptions of the South Asian fauna and flora like the hog-deer which he has "seen and eaten". He also knows coconuts and pepper and seems to have understood if not witnessed how they were harvested. 5/

But it could be that he just had very good information on the region. Trade routes crisscrossed the Indian Ocean in the sixth century, connecting India, Aksum, Egypt and Constantinople. Cosmas would not have had a problem to interview someone who indeed had visited. 6/

For example he describes a Nestorian Christian community on Sri Lanka, which in his report is constituted by exiles from Persia. Cosmas might have been a Nestorian himself and might have met a member of this community. Or he could have visited. 7/

But his work is important for one more reason. It confirms that at his time an overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of the Eastern Roman Empire believed the world to be spherical, like on this map. Cosmas was convinced that this is wrong! 8/

He sought to find a solution that would *literally* correspond to what is written in the Bible. To this end he constructed a model of the world as a... box. Yes, you read that correctly. A box with a lid (where God resided) and walls and a bottom

where the land was and see. 9/

In this giant aquarium everything is perfectly still. The sun and the moon and the stars move only because of... the angels, whose main job is to keep the celestial objects moving. The night? Simple: a huge mountain in the north of the box behind which the sun is hidden. 10/

His idea was so ridiculous that he devoted the whole first book to refute the spherical theories. Most people believed in some form of a spherical world and flat-earthers like him had to go through great difficulties to convince anybody. 11/

Cosmas wrote his travels and his cosmological speculations down around 550 in Egypt. We know quite when because... he mentions a solar and a lunar eclipse from 547, two phenomena that contradicted his world-as-a-box idea. (Eclipses were widely studied in the Middle Ages) 12/

But apart from being perhaps the only proponent of purely flat Earth theory in the whole of the Middle Ages and Late Antiquity Cosmas is an amazing source. Yes, he uses his travels and information about the world to make a theological point. But at the same time... 13/

...it is striking how matter-of-fact his report about Aksum and India is. He is like, yeah, and that is the Indian nut (coconut) and this is how you harvest it. Or here I am trading in Aksum. Is he sometimes inaccurate? Sure. But nevertheless striking. 14/

Aside from his outlandish cosmological ideas Cosmas' work gives us a glimpse into the amazingly connected, curious and diverse world of late antiquity. He was surely not the only one who made those journeys and many have read his works. What a box, I mean, a world it was! 15/

Bibliography

The MSS:

Codex Sinaticus Graecus 1186 (not online)

Vat. Gr. 699 (https://t.co/UpIpKo3Fzd)

BML Plut. 9.28 (https://t.co/nizGbhgLTV)

If you want to read Cosmas there is a very old translation in EN available (https://t.co/ryaC0QFfVc) 16/

But the best one is in French by Wanda Wolska-Conus (from the 1960s).

For a great analysis of the text and its images as well as its tradition The World of Kosmas by Maja Kominko from 2013 is a great choice! (https://t.co/eFsC8vcbOU) 17/