

Navigating the Portolan Atlas: Study and Treatment

ABSTRACT

Among the rare books at the Newberry Library, there are a number of portolan atlases ranging in date from the middle of the fifteenth century to the seventeenth century. Portolan charts are considered to be a very important example of late medieval European cartography depicting the Mediterranean and the adjacent seas; however, little is known of their origin. Theories of the charts' beginning vary greatly; one thought bases the portolans on a no longer extant first-century chart of the Mediterranean Sea by Marinus of Tyre.

The name given to these maps, "portolan," taken from the Italian word *portolano* meaning "a collection of written sailing directions," is also a topic of some debate. The common usage of the word "portolan" has only been traced back to the 1890s, and the term still causes some confusion as to whether it refers to a chart or written directions.

Portolan charts are usually drawn with inks on vellum, one skin per chart. Common characteristics of the portolan charts are: the depictions of the winds using various colors, the intersecting rhumb lines, and the illustrations of the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, and sometimes Europe's western coast reaching as far as Denmark and Morocco.

Similar to its mysterious history and intricate illustrations, the portolan atlas has a unique binding structure. Unlike the single portolan charts, which are rolled and fastened at the neck end of a skin, the atlas is composed of vellum folios backed to one another, often with either wooden board or cardboard mounted in between each chart for additional support; no sewing is used. The bindings have front and back covers adhered to the first and last folio charts and in some cases the spine is covered. A

few of these atlases show signs of wear with flaking media, surface dirt, splitting folios, and delaminating boards. Treatments vary for each item, but generally include: surface cleaning, media consolidation, and structural repairs to support the binding while insuring that its historical significance is not compromised.

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