Capturing Imagination: The Buja and Medieval Islamic Mappamundi

Every medieval Islamic cartograph of the world contains a curious anomaly. Consistently located on the eastern flank of Africa is a double-territorial ethnonym for an obscure East African tribe: the Buja (marked on Figure 1 with a red circle). Mention of them in medieval Middle Eastern historiography is rare and, at best, superficial, yet no Islamic mappamundi from the 11th to the 19th century leaves them out. Not only are the Buja privileged with a permanent berth on the Islamic world map, they are also the only place on the map signified with a double territorial marking. The question that I raise in this paper is, quite simply, who were the Buja? Why are they so absent in Islamic historiography, yet so present on the mappamundi? The answer emerges from a series of droll and puzzling references that hint at the oddest reasons for the emphasis; reasons which, in turn, cause us to question our notions of how and why places make it on to maps. The query reveals surprising answers that can be relegated to the Husserlian domain of "retentions," "reproductions," and "protentions."

Out of this questioning of medieval Islamic maps, it is the temporal imagination that emerges as the dominant architect of cartographic space. It presents itself as an imagination that is triggered as much by the extreme alterity of otherness as it is by the subtle reflection of self.