

Reading Fra Mauro's map

Medieval maps created in Western Europe take special place among the sources of history of Kazakh statehood. They reflect not only the history of Kazakh statehood as perception of the place of Kazakh statehood in the system of political and economic relations in a complicated and intriguing era. The world map made by Venetian monk Fra Mauro in 1460 – Mappo Mondo takes a special place as one of the most detailed and large scale maps of that time. What is the value of that map to understand history of the Kazakh statehood? What can be said about that map and what secrets can it cause? What can it tell us about the history of international relations of Kazakhstan of that era?

The Kazakh statehood of early period through the study of Fra Mauro's world map from Venice (1450-1460).

Mappo Mondo as an evidence of history of Kazakh land.

Fra Mauro's Mappo Mondo map presents the world in accordance with the vision in 15 century and depicts the territory of Kazakhstan with some interesting details. The map is supposed to be created between 1450-1460 years by Venetian monk-cartographer in San Giovanni monastery (not far from Venice) and was made by the order of the king of Portugal. It is one of the most mysterious and intriguing maps of the Middle ages, which gives no piece to many researchers. Its study is interesting and important, because it can serve as a source to study history and development of Kazakh state in 15 century, particularly in the context of scientific discussion in honor of the 550th anniversary of the Kazakh khanate.

This map has an interesting history as an invaluable historical source and an important document to study Kazakh statehood in the early period for three reasons: it is based on numerous written sources including many that are not extant. It is based on many personal interviews of the travelers and diplomats of that time. Fra Mauro conducted interviews not only with Venetian and Genoese citizens, but also with merchants, travelers and ambassadors who lived in Venice, the district of Asia. Many inhabitants of that district were immigrants from Central Asian region, where the basis of the Kazakh statehood was created at that time. There probably were the representatives of Kazakh and other Turkic tribes, particularly the Kipchaks. In fact, it was that interesting document, proving close connection of that era with the Codex Cumanicus (1330) – Kipchak-Persian-Latin dictionary, which is one of the most famous monuments of Turkic writings (studied by Kazakhstani scientists Alexander Garkavets).

The content of the map is also interesting: a monumental map in size of 2,4x2,4m includes about 3000 characters, names and notes. Taking into consideration characteristics of that era they may contain special meaning: secret signs and codes, including stories of diplomatic and military relations of Venice with the states located on the territory of modern Kazakhstan. It is said in the context of Central Asia that it is the most valuable part of using medieval written documents. Fra Mauro conducted content analysis of information about political, military and cultural status in the modern term in the region. Many of those sources did not survive up to the present day.

Secrets of the scientist and cartographer Fra Mauro

We can only guess about the secrets of this historically valuable scientific-research work, because all scientific, technical archives of cartographer Fra Mauro, all records and interviews mysteriously disappeared after his death in 1464 or 1465.

What could he have? The answer lies partly in the destiny of this map – even it was made by order and paid by the King of Portugal Afonso V (Afonso V (1432 - 1481)) – researcher, doctor Piero Falchetta assumes that the first counterpart of the map was not delivered to the client. He considers that there is a second copy at Marciana library and the author is Fra Mauro. Besides, the scientist considers that many secret spy secret services and royal courts were very interested in that the world map would never leave Venice and those secrets were not declassified and reached the destination. We must remember that Fra Mauro's map was compiled with scattered location for some unknown reasons in inverted image, which gives evidence about political and cultural perception of the world by the Venetians or their attempts to make the secret meaning of the map impossible to decipher. There is possibility of the fact that diplomatic relations with representatives of Kazakh steppe were on the initial stage of development. We have to admit the fact that there are no direct documentary resources confirming this hypothesis. However, indirect resources indicate the possibility that the Venetians had a great interest in the establishment of direct diplomatic relations with state authorities in the Great Eurasian steppe. Perhaps, there are some travelers in the written references, who passed through the steppe and gave opinions to Fra Mauro by the description of this region by the scientist. And they are waiting for their appearance from the non-entity from the archives of Venice, Rome and Vatican.