

Claudius Ptolemy

c. 85–165 AD



HOW HE AFFECTED THE WORLD No one had organized information about the world's geography before Ptolemy. He put together what is considered the world's first geography book. He also wrote some of the earliest instructions for making useful maps. Ptolemy's book would become important in the 1400s—and influence Christopher Columbus.



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As you read the biography below, think about Ptolemy's inventiveness as an astronomer and a geographer during his time.

Ptolemy was a Greek astronomer and geographer. He is thought to have worked in Egypt during the second century AD. Very little is known about his early life or even what he looked like. However, his explanation for the movements of the planets, moon, and the sun—known as the Ptolemaic system—was widely accepted. The Ptolemaic system placed the earth at the center of the solar system, making it **geocentric**.

Ptolemy's influence on early geography was equally as important. He organized the findings of geographers from the Roman and Persian empires into a single book. He gave **coordinates** to eight thousand places and physical features. He placed them on a numbered grid stretching around the world. Ptolemy's coordinates were early versions of **latitude** and **longitude**.

Ptolemy also included detailed instructions in his book for making maps of the world using latitude and longitude. However, he was aware that he only knew about one-quarter of the surface of the earth.

VOCABULARY

geocentric placing Earth at the center of the solar system

coordinates sets of numbers used to specify a location

latitude a distance from the center of Earth to a point north or south of the equator

longitude a distance from the center of Earth to a point east or west of the Prime Meridian (an imaginary line that runs through Greenwich, England)

In the 1200s a monk rediscovered Ptolemy's writings. In the 1400s printers published his book about geography and included his maps. Ptolemy's book became very influential although some of its contents were inaccurate. For example, his maps showed Asia as bigger than it was and extending farther east. One of Ptolemy's readers, Christopher Columbus, likely used these maps to plan his voyage in 1492.

Ptolemy's geocentric view of the solar system was replaced in 1543. However, his system of maps based on latitude and longitude is still in use today.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Recall What was the Ptolemaic system?

2. Evaluate Why do you think Ptolemy's contributions to geography were so important?

ACTIVITY

Think about a tool related to astronomy or geography that we use today, such as a telescope or a world atlas. Imagine what it must have been like during Ptolemy's time, before the tool's invention. Write a letter to Ptolemy, explaining this science tool to him and how we use it today.