

Map of Severian's journey on foot

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 10 Apr 1997

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Alice Turner — 10 Apr 1997, 11:41

OK, here's my contribution to Urth-mapping. Mantis was quite right when he said I hadn't even begun writing it up formally, but there may be an advantage in presenting it to you guys informally, so that you can savage it with your sharp teeth, and I can then perhaps correct some weaknesses. Those of you who purchased mantis's addenda to Lexicon Urthus have already encountered a version of this map (though it's not correct).

The map is, in the main, psychological and associative (and it may be more an indication of my psychology than Wolfe's intention). At any rate, it requires two large geological assumptions. The first is that the continent of Africa has pushed north to the point that the Mediterranean, mostly dry, has dwindled to a river, Gyll, flowing southeast from an origin somewhere in the Alps. If you squint at a current map of the area, you can make out Gyll flowing down through the Red Sea and its tributary, Acis, descending from the Black Sea through the Bosphorus and the Dardenelles to join it. The second assumption is that the entire area has migrated around the world to where South America is now.

Now lay a ruler northwest across that map from the Red Sea to Switzerland, and you'll have a rough path of Severian's journey from the Matashin Tower to the camp of the Pelerines. He starts at Alexandria (associations are the Library and St. Catherine, with the towers of the Citadel somewhat echoing the ancient Pharos). The next major stop is Crete, where the House Absolute echoes the labyrinths of Knossos, and the vaguely Louis XVI aspect of the antechamber echoes the frequent comparison of the women on Cretan vase painting to the court ladies of Versailles. Next is the Stone Town, Athens (I remind you that the Cumaeans—who may be an inhumanity—and Merry are also travelers, so it's certainly not Cumae), and here imagine that the Stone Town is at the exact latitude and longitude that Machu Picchu (or wherever—choose your own Latin-American stone town) occupied at the time of Apu-Punchau.

After this, Severian deviates from the ruler, and travels up Acis in a northeasterly direction to Thrax, the old Thrace—Istanbul, from the golden domes on the palace and the vaulted underground cistern. He then travels overland to the west, and things take on a distinctly Slavic aspect: Casdow's little cottage and the alzabo itself seem almost to come from some Slavic folktale. I placed Mount Typhon originally at Etna on Sicily, but, following Graves, I could be argued into placing it at Mount Haemus, in Thrace. This, however, would spoil my assumption that the sorcerer's village is in Albania (see below).

Still traveling overland, Severian arrives at Lake Diuturna, which covers Rome. That may seem curious to you, but in fact mantis and I together researched the real Lake Diuturna quite thoroughly, and came to the conclusion that Urth's Diuturna almost surely (in this schema) covers Rome. (Note too, that the undine, Juturna, has the same name, indicating, perhaps, that she was once the nymph of the lake before she grew so large.) Finally, Severian ends up at the Pelerine camp, in Orythia, Switzerland, where their Red Cross flag mirrors the white cross on red of the Swiss flag, as well as symbolizing neutrality and medicine. It is true that Master Ash comes from a more northern tradition (Scandinavian), but he too is a traveler from elsewhere.

Weaknesses: One of you pointed out that Holy Katharine and the Library, etc. refer only to a small district of Nessus, and that is true. When I first began to think about this mental map, I thought that Nessus was a kind of amalgamation of all the ancient and fabled cities of the eastern Mediterranean, and in a sense it is. But you have to start somewhere, and this is where I started. Hey, it works for me.

I hesitated a long time over Istanbul/Constantinople/Byzantium. The distinctly provincial nature of Thrax seemed a long way from that ancient court of emperors, and the topography of the City of Crooked Knives seemed so different from that of the Golden Horn. But everything has changed everywhere. The geography fits, and I finally decided to blame it on earthquake.

Albania: Putting the sorcerers' village in Albania is based on something I read somewhere that gave a very colorful account of how isolated and barbarous and witchy the Slavic Albanian tribes were. I thought it might have been in the 1914 Russian Baedeker, but it isn't. Lord Byron's letters (1809) are certainly colorful about Albania, but that wasn't it either, nor the Britannica. I will continue to look—if anyone has a clue, perhaps from 19th-century travel writing or from a Roman writer, I'd be grateful. The old name is Illyricum, if that helps. (And of course I know how foolish it is to assume that Wolfe has read something I can't even place and had the same reaction to it.)

-alga-

revjack at radix.net — 12 Apr 1997, 22:00 · follows Alice Turner

On Thu, 10 Apr 1997 11:41:34 -0400, Alice Turner wrote:

: OK, here's my contribution to Urth-mapping.

Say, got any five-way intersections on any of those maps there? :)

revjack at radix.net