We began work on *Writing the World in Early Medieval England* with the question: how did the world look to English people from about 500–1100? The answer, of course, would vary among individuals. But even a thousand years later, we can find common elements. First, they found the world fascinating. They knew best the lands closest to them, but they also wrote about more distant places and didn’t always distinguish real from imaginary lands.

They knew Earth as a sphere with three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa. While small numbers of maps survive, they preferred to describe the world in words. We have far more written sources, from travel accounts and histories to philosophical works and poetry.

The early medieval English focused more on inhabitants of a place than on boundaries or landscapes. They named kingdoms and cities, but they preferred terms that named people, such as *Angelcyn*, or English people, over those that named lands, such as *Englalond*, or England. This interest led them to construct race and ethnicity in ways that connected them with some of their closest neighbors but distinguished them from others. Their ideas don’t always match ours, but their race-making still influences Anglo-American thinking.

*Writing the World in Early Medieval England* moves from England to increasingly distant places. Chapter One argues that the English were never a single ethnicity but included Germanic peoples; Celts, who had lived there before them; and immigrants from all three Continents. Chapter Two explores how family, religion, and trade helped link the English with many in western Europe. They had weaker ties with Eastern Europe and with Iberia, whose Muslims some early English writers saw as a threat.

Chapter three shows how historical and contemporary realities overlaid each other in and around Jerusalem. The existence of contemporary Jews and Muslims troubled the Christian English and their ongoing connections to the area.

English writers had great interest in and some knowledge of Asia and Africa, as we discuss in chapter four. They highlighted physical and cultural differences and sometimes located monsters and marvels on those two continents, even while they celebrated fathers of the English church such as Theodore of Tarsus (in modern-day Turkey) and Hadrian, an abbot from Africa.

Our fifth chapter, “Imagined Lands,” ranges from Guthlac’s demon-infested wasteland in England to the eastern paradise where the phoenix lives. Interlaced depictions of gender, monstrosity, and religious difference highlight the preoccupations of the clerical writers who transmitted most surviving texts.

The final chapter, on Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory, deals more directly with religion and shows different ideas of the afterlife. Our conclusion offers a glimpse of how English models of the world played out after the Norman Conquest in 1066.

We hope you’ll enjoy reading about how the early medieval English wrote about the world.