

# Troubadourian Reconstructions:

The poetics of discovery in the Renaissance

by

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## Abstract

“Discovery is not only finding new things,” Leonardo Olschki wrote of the Renaissance voyage of exploration. This essay attempts to examine the intersection between the “old” and the “new,” the “already known” and the “other,” within the act of “discovery.” Taking as a starting point Giovanni Battista Ramusio’s seminal *Delle Navigazioni et Viaggi* of 1550-1559, the *bricolage* of “discovery” will be considered, as the elements of memory, architecture, cartography, art theory and practice constitute the materials with which the Renaissance “discovery” poetically reconstructed what had hitherto been unknown.

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## I. Introduction

*Kublai Khan realized that Marco Polo's cities resembled each other, as if the passage from one city to the next entailed not a journey, but a substitution of elements. Now, with every city that Marco described, his mind set off on its own accord, and having disassembled the city piece by piece, reassembled it in another manner, exchanging ingredients, moving them, inverting them.*

*Italo Calvino, Le città invisibili*

"The best voyage will be the one in which one learns next to nothing," Stephen Greenblatt tells us, speaking of the Renaissance traveler in his *Marvelous Possessions*.<sup>1</sup> Of course, it is here that the "voyage of discovery," the entire problematic of the so-called "age of discoveries," the issue of "discovery" itself finds its paradoxical epilogue. And yet. We cannot reject outright that which is "other," the new that must almost by definition inhabit the "discovered," that drives the *project* of discovery itself, being its vital force, for a discovery of the *same* must surely be a failure. In their own ways, Greenblatt and many of the other authors to whom I will return in the following pages, and who inform much of the discussion at the heart of this essay, have attempted to resolve this paradox, to grasp that state in which the "other" and the "same" are "locked together in an uneasy marriage in a world without ecstatic union or divorce."<sup>2</sup> Predictably, the task they set for themselves is an impossible one, something which becomes increasingly clear: that, to borrow a particularly apt phrase from Derrida, although here out of context, the most that can be hoped for is a

<sup>1</sup> GREENBLATT, STEPHEN. *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*. Oxford ; New York: Clarendon Press, 1991. 88.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 6.

gesture towards a “question about the possibility of the question;”<sup>3</sup> if one wills, a voyage of discovery towards discovery.

As faltering, tedious, expensive, erratic, and as useless as this journey towards discovery may ultimately be, the path is nonetheless strewn with the *marvelous*, the promise of which unflaggingly beckons the traveler towards travel. What does he see? This time, and more to the point, Derrida tells us that “there is too much, more than one can say.”<sup>4</sup> Marvels will never be extinguished, but “not because the infiniteness of [the] field cannot be covered by a finite glance [...] but because the nature of the field [...] is in effect that of *play* [...], a field of infinite substitutions.”<sup>5</sup> Here, of course, Derrida is talking of Lévi-Strauss’s *bricolage*, the using of “‘the means at hand,’ that is, the instruments [at one’s] disposition [...], those which are already there [...], which one tries by trial and error to adapt [...], not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, [or] several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous.”<sup>6</sup> And thus, of marvels, “there will always be more,” as the elements, the “same” and the “other,” the “already known” and the “new,” are *played* with, “as if the passage from one city to the next entailed not a journey, but a substitution of elements.”

There is a sense that Greenblatt hints at this, if elliptically, buried within an endnote, when he tells us that certainly, even if it is generally true that, quoting Tvetan Todorov, Columbus “knows in advance what he will find,”<sup>7</sup> it is also true that “on occasion Columbus was indeed able to use unexpected signs to form new hypotheses.”<sup>8</sup> Isn’t this, then, the *marvel* in “discovery,” the capacity to seize the

<sup>3</sup> DERRIDA, JACQUES. *Writing and Difference*. London: Routledge, 2005. 98.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 365.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 360.

<sup>7</sup> GREENBLATT. 1991. 88.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., n. 5 179.

unexpected, adopt it, use it, transform it, and in so doing, *possess* it? Once *possessed* in this way, it becomes, as it were, another element, to be used, adopted, transformed, another possible substitution in the discovery/creation of the next marvel. The unexpected remains so for just a brief, fleeting moment, internalized, or if its use is not at first clear, discarded and quickly forgotten for the time being. The marvel, in other words, exists only in the past or in the future. It is either marvelous no more, or still to be “discovered.” The voyage is likewise a voyage into the past or into the future. Thomas More will found his Utopia, rival to Plato’s Republic, in the Americas, somewhere in the Pacific, Bacon will find on the continent the remnants of a population that had escaped the ravages of great flood, but equally, of its cleansing powers, and Hobbes would find there the last remaining vestiges of the “state of nature.” What are described are states of humanity, our humanity. The voyage, in other words, reveals to the traveler the marvel of himself as he was or might be.

This essay intends to explore “discovery” in these terms, as a *bricolage*, a process of inscription and re-inscription, a finding, losing and finding again, of dismantling and reassembling. It is, in itself, a journey of discovery into the realm of the Renaissance, and much to the distress of the reader, no doubt, it contains all of the erratic movement of the journey that knows in advance what it wishes to find, but despite itself, is halted, stymied, driven off course as the marvels encountered necessitate a constant re-evaluation, a correction of course, an adaptation, a *bricolage* in itself. Certainly, there is no question of this essay concluding anything whatsoever. As Greenblatt recounts, quoting Antonio de Cuidad Real, “when the Spaniards discovered this land, their leader asked the Indians how it was called; as they did not understand him, they said *nic atham*, which means, what do you say or what do you speak, that we do not understand you. And then the Spaniard ordered it set down

that it be called *Yucatan*.”<sup>9</sup> The moment—for it can only be a moment—of the marvelous is such, exactly because its meaning escapes you, and you might be made a fool of in the process.

The aspirations of this essay must thus be modest, if not out of humility, certainly out of cowerdise. I will try to describe a set of elements used, and the process of *bricolage* that was the discovery of the new world. Those that I pick out for treatment might not be the most important set of elements, it is certainly not an exhaustive list of them, just a different combination of them. It is, in a sense, an agglomeration of the authors I have read and have used, and that is, in effect, the most I can aspire to do at this moment. As de Certeau would say, I am poaching on my sources, but I feel that this is not, however, necessarily a weakness, but reflects, I hope, the same discontinuities, the same uncertainties that Greenblatt can sense in the early accounts of the Americas.<sup>10</sup> Hopefully, in recognizing my own uncertainties in trying to reconstruct the repertoire of ideas that came to become America (or some version of it), using the stock of elements now at my disposal through my readings, limited as they might be, I have come closer to formulating the question of “discovery.” Paraphrasing, adopting, and not hesitating to change Lévi-Strauss for the benefit of my own ends, “it follows that this essay on discovery is itself a kind of discovery.”<sup>11</sup>

It is of course true that, bearing with Greenblatt still further, the discontinuities of the texts, “so that we cannot have the hermeneutic satisfaction of stripping away their false representations to arrive at a secure sense of reality,” is the result of the fact that the authors themselves “were liars [...], frequent and cunning

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 104.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>11</sup> The original phrase is, of course, famously, “it follows that this book on myths is itself a kind of myth.” Quoted in DERRIDA. 363.

liars [...] whose position virtually required the strategic manipulation and distortion and outright suppression of the truth.”<sup>12</sup> I think that this is much more severe than even Greenblatt intended, again, not so much to protect myself from similar criticism, which I recognize I am, following this discussion subjecting myself to, but because, as he says himself he is, in the “discovery” of the Americas, “fascinated by the move [...] from knowing nothing to imagining an absolute possession,” a move, he tells us, which is “the result of an act of interpretation.”<sup>13</sup> There is a question in this that in Greenblatt still cannot find its expression, for although he tells us that he tries not “to distinguish between true and false representations,” he is still “wary of taking anything Europeans wrote or drew as an accurate and reliable account of the nature of the New World lands and its people.”<sup>14</sup> His skepticism is unquestionably justified, but underneath it all, it seems to me, still lurks what in any case approaches the “accurate and reliable account,” the “true representation,” at least, as an unfulfilled possibility.

It is easier then to talk of “the European practice of representation,” as Greenblatt does, than to reconstruct, or attempt oneself “the accurate and reliable account.” I shall *not* be attempting one myself, of course, but I must wonder where, if anywhere, the real account exists if the passage from the marvelous to the known (and therefore to that which can be possessed) must necessarily pass through an interpretative process. Rather, I would be more inclined to think that we all are, in one way or another, inveterate liars, and conversely, always speaking the absolute truth, imaginative as that truth may be. The outcome is the same either way, a proliferation of worlds, of realities, fictitious or real as they may be. It is thus that in the Middle Ages Marco Polo would come to bear the sobriquet of “il Milione,” as in

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 7.

“of the million lies,” having described, more or less, a “reality,” whilst Mandeville, who constructed his fabulous world from the seclusion of his desk, was unquestionably regarded as the more reliable source.

What connects this infinity of worlds, fictitious or real, and the term *practice* in “practice of representation” above has suggested it, is that worlds are *inhabited*, in the sense that de Certeau would have of it in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, like a text, “like a rented apartment.” In other words, de Certeau continues, “it transforms another person’s property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient.”<sup>15</sup> I sense that here we are moving beyond Greenblatt’s *possession*, or at least, that that possession is not as tangible as it may appear, for wouldn’t the possession of an imagined realm be also an imagined possession? Certainly, as Greenblatt tells us, “the Europeans [...] shared a complex, well developed, and above all mobile technology of power,”<sup>16</sup> which returning to de Certeau, “are refined and applied without recourse to any overt ideology [transforming] space itself into an instrument that can be used to discipline, to program, and to keep under observation any social group.”<sup>17</sup> But this is only half the story, the mere surface patina, beneath which lie hidden the operations of *bricolage* and *practice*. De Certeau continues, taking issue with Foucault:

We do not yet know what to make of other, equally infinitesimal procedures that have remained unprivileged by history yet which continue to flourish in the interstices of the institutional technologies. Such techniques, which are just as operative though without locus, are rhetorical “tactics.” I suggest that these secretly reorganize Foucault’s discourse, colonize his “panoptical” text, and transform it into a “trompe-l’œil.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> DE CERTEAU, MICHEL. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. xxi.

<sup>16</sup> GREENBLATT. 1991. 9.

<sup>17</sup> DE CERTEAU, MICHEL. *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. 186.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 191.

This is of course the capacity that even the reader has in “poaching” from his sources, of “[inventing] in texts something different from what they ‘intended’ [detaching] from them their (lost or accessory) origin [combining] their fragments and [creating] something un-known in a space organized by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings.”<sup>19</sup> But the operative phrase here is that “we do not yet know what to make of these practices.” They escape us, and to try to bind them to an explanation, to reveal them, disclose them, or “discover” them *as they really are* will always be futile, a “trompe-l’œil.”

But I feel that by this we approach the sense of *marvel*, something even Greenblatt will recognize in that “what most matters takes place not ‘out there’ or along the receptive surfaces of the body where the self encounters the world, but deep within, at the vital, emotional center of the witness.” The marvel is personal, it is impossible, in other words, to be sure that a marvel can be shared, that my marvel is the same as yours, and thus, impossible to generalize on marvels.

I have tried to remain faithful to this uncertainty, to dismantle whatever constructs I was in the process of erecting which seemed to verge on the totalizing explanation, on the triumphantly monumental, and to start afresh with each new section of this essay. Hopefully I have been at least in part successful in this, in conveying some sense of the marvel which comes only with the plurality of its forms borne from a constant dis-assemblage and re-assemblage. I will not deny that there was for me much marvel in discovering that what began as just an intuition, the correct course, was, in researching this essay, borne out in the texts. But equally, the greatest marvels were revealed in discovering how very misguided I often was, how I failed to understand, how something, an element or a trace, seemed unusable in this

<sup>19</sup> DE CERTEAU. 1984. 169.



essay. Innumerable such elements have been left aside, are not treated here, and can only serve as a reminder of how I have not gotten very far at all.

What ground I have tried to cover is that suggested by me from my encounter with Giovanni Battista Ramusio, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian state secretary, erstwhile historian, geographer, and collector of travel narratives. It is this last activity for which he is best remembered, culminating as it did with the publication between 1550 and 1559 of his three volume *Delle Navigazioni e Viaggi*. Ramusio's is a text which fascinates first and foremost for its being, in George B. Parks' summation, "the first large published collection of historical documents other than collections of laws and decretals; the first large and planned collection of travel documents, and therefore the first approach to the concept of a documented history of travel and geography."<sup>20</sup> Despite this, Parks laments the fact that, unlike for those that followed closely in Ramusio's footsteps, most notably Richard Hakluyt, "what Ramusio collected and whence and why has not been established. No study of his literary life has been made. No Ramusio Society edits and elucidates his work, and indeed the work itself has not been reprinted since 1613."<sup>21</sup>

For the most part Parks' lamentation remains true today, although Parks himself had done much to rectify the dire state of Ramusio studies he describes with two essays that remain of great use to this day.<sup>22</sup> But in 1955 he could not predict the growing interest in Ramusio that would follow in the next decades, and indeed, the *Delle Navigazioni* would be republished twice since then, between 1970-71 in Amsterdam in facsimile, and between 1978 and 1986 in Torino, this time thoroughly

<sup>20</sup> PARKS. "Ramusio's Literary History." *Studies in Philology* LII (1955): 127-48., 127.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. and PARKS. "The Contents and Sources of Ramusio's Navigations." *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 59/6 (1955): 279-313.

revised, edited and annotated by Marica Milanese.<sup>23</sup> Ramusio has also received a fair amount of indirect attention having been Leo Africanus' first editor (Leo's *Descrittione dell' Affrica* is to be found in the first volume of the *Delle Navigazioni*), and certainly there has been great interest in recent years regarding this enigmatic figure among such scholars as Obelmanine Zhiri, Dietrich Rauchenberger and most recently, Natalie Zemon Davis.<sup>24</sup>

But there still is no Ramusio Society which studies his work.<sup>25</sup> There is still no biography of the man. In part, this is due to the lack of materials we have at our disposal. Antonio del Piero's *Della vita e degli studi di Gio. Battista Ramusio* of 1902 draws from Emanuele Antonio Cigogna's *Iscrizioni Veneziane* of the much earlier date of 1827, based in part on a Ramusio family chronicle.<sup>26</sup> Valuable as these sources are, they provide little information, and the resulting works are largely speculative, as even Parks has noted.<sup>27</sup> More recently of course, Marica Milanese's introduction to her edition of the *Delle Navigazioni*, and her *Tolomeo Sostituito* has shed more light on his life and the context within which he is working,<sup>28</sup> but even with this added impetus, Massimo Donattini was capable of mustering only 50 or so pages

<sup>23</sup> RAMUSIO, GIOVANNI BATTISTA. *Navigazioni Et Viaggi. Venice, 1563-1606. With an Introd. By R.a. Skelton and an Analysis of the Contents By George B. Parks.* Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terarum, 1970. and RAMUSIO, GIOVANNI BATTISTA. *Navigazioni E Viaggi.* Torino: G. Einaudi, 1978.

<sup>24</sup> ZHIRI, OUMELBANINE. *L'Afrique Au Miroir De L'Europe.* Genève: Droz, 1991. ZHIRI, OUMELBANINE. *Les Sillages De Jean Léon L'Africain, Du Xvie Au Xxe Siècle.* Casablanca: Wallada, 1995. RAUCHENBERGER, DIETRICH. *Johannes Leo Der Afrikaner: Seine Beschreibung Des Raumes Zwischen Nil Und Niger Nach Dem Urtext.* Weisbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1991. DAVIS, NATALIE ZEMON. *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds.* New York: Hill and Wang, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> In truth, a Ramusio Society which hoped to emulate the Hakluyt Society was formed in 1909, but published merely one volume during the course of its operation. MILANESI, MARICA. *Tolomeo Sostituito: Studi Di Storia Delle Conoscenze Geografiche Nel XVI Secolo.* Milano: UNICOPLI, 1984. 52.

<sup>26</sup> DEL PIERO. "Della Vita E Degli Studi Di G.B. Ramusio." *Nuovo Archivio Veneto* II (1902): 5-112. and CIGOGNA, EMANUELE ANTONIO. *Iscrizioni Veneziane.* Venezia: 1496. 315-330.

<sup>27</sup> PARKS. 1955.

<sup>28</sup> MILANESI. 1984.

of his *Ramusio: appunti per una biografia*.<sup>29</sup> There is, in other words, not much to work with if one wants to draw a portrait of Ramusio: the texts here cited, a few passing remarks in Mario Sanudo's massive *Diarii*,<sup>30</sup> letters written to him by his illustrious friends Pietro Bembo, Girolamo Fracastoro and Andrea Navagero, many published in works like Porcacchi's *Lettere di XIII uomini illustri*,<sup>31</sup> some unpublished,<sup>32</sup> and 40 or so extant manuscript letters of Ramusio himself at the Ambrosiana in Milan, all addressed to Pietro Bembo to keep the cardinal updated on the political situation in Venice.<sup>33</sup>

I have not attempted to write a biography of Ramusio. It seemed to me that it was sufficient for the purposes of this essay to keep in mind that he was a humanist as those described by the sharp minded satirist Tommaso Garzoni at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, to be found "in part among grammaticians, in part among rhetoricians, in part among historians, and lastly [...] among the ranks of poets. However, I am told that the humanist is something palpably more, or better, a composite of all of these."<sup>34</sup> It seems a most fitting description for a *bricoleur*.

The *Delle Navigazioni* is in any case not the product of the *one* author Ramusio. He was first and foremost a collector, then an editor and translator, and only thirdly an author of the short *Discorsi* that often precede the travel narratives he is presenting to his readers. Whatever authorial credit he might have afforded himself he was careful to efface, and it only in the editions published after his death in 1557 that his publisher Tommaso Giunti would append his name to the *discorsi* and the

<sup>29</sup> DONATTINI. "G.B. Ramusio E Le Sue "Navigazioni". Appunti Per Una Biografia." *Critica Storica* XVII (1980): 55-100.

<sup>30</sup> SANUDO, MARIN. *Diarii*. Venezia: 1496.

<sup>31</sup> PORCACCHI. *Lettere Di Xiii. Huomini Illustri*. Venezia: Fabio Agostino Zoppini F.lli, 1584).

<sup>32</sup> "Lettere a G.B. Ramusio, Ms. Ital. N. 143."

<sup>33</sup> *ms. Ambrosiano D. 335*. Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milano.

<sup>34</sup> GARZONI, TOMMASO. *La Piazza Universale Di Tutte Le Professioni Del Mondo*. Venezia: G. B. Somasco, 1589. 956.

work itself. Recalling Lévi-Strauss' personal experience of writing books, often enough a work is not written *by* you, but *through* you, the author being not much more than "a kind of cross-roads where things happen."<sup>35</sup>

Ramusio's *own* role in becoming this "cross-roads where something happens" is then beyond or besides the scope of this essay. What did happen is the *Delle Navigazioni*, a grandiose attempt to encapsulate the world within bookends. The sheer audacity of it is breathtaking, and indeed innumerable roads cross upon the pages of its three volumes. I have tried to follow these roads away from Ramusio, the *Delle Navigazioni* being just a point of departure. Some roads are clearly marked: Ramusio's acquaintance with Fracastoro, Navagero and Raimondo Dalla Torre lead me, in section 4, to the intersection of cosmology, astronomy and architecture, and to the Alhambra in the concluding section. Giacomo Gastaldi's maps, which embellish the *Delle Navigazioni* lead me into the world of mapmaking in sections 5 and 6. Of course, Ramusio's own *discorsi* provided a fair number of suggestions: the tension between the old and the new, the knowledge of the ancients and that of the moderns, so evident in his dedicatory passage in Vol. I being a most important suggestion in section 3.

And of course, in all this, the suggestions for how I should read these disparate traces, the capacity to see them as disparate and important traces was of course the result of a more theoretical, historiographical concern. It goes without saying that Greenblatt, along with other such luminaries as Natalie Zemon Davis, Robert Darnton and Carlo Ginzburg, have been most inspirational, embodying an acutely narrative style, at once aware of History's own narrative structure, and the narrativity of the practice of History writing. Todorov, and Roland Barthes before him, along with Lévi-Strauss, awoke in me a sense of wonder at our capacity to

<sup>35</sup> LÉVI-STRAUSS, CLAUDE. *Myth and Meaning*. New York: Schocken Books, 1979. 4.

create and use signs to decipher and operate in our world. It is here as well that the boundaries between History and fiction seem to dissolve, and we need not talk of underlying realities, stories and signs themselves have real powers, at times devastating at times liberating. If anything, we are made *more* aware, more careful, perhaps more weary of what stories we spin.

The same applies to the study of cartography and geography, another crucial element in this essay. Here, the approach that I have unambiguously adopted has been that of pioneers such as David Woodward, Brian Harley and Denis Cosgrove.<sup>36</sup> It is surprising to think that it is only with their work that the idea that cartography and geography should, as Alonso de Chaves would optimistically write in the 1540s in his unpublished textbook on navigation, be “a mirror, in which is represented the image of the world in its absence [showing the] true description and true location and forms of all its particularities,”<sup>37</sup> would finally come to be systematically questioned and transcended. This, despite the fact that even in his own time Chaves had assisted Hernando Colón (the younger son of Christopher Columbus), in his task to revise what was hoped would be a definitive map of the world, the *Padron Real*, and most certainly was aware that the *Padron* could be of no use to navigators in

<sup>36</sup> COSGROVE. "Mapping New Worlds: Culture and Cartography in Sixteenth-Century Venice." *Imago Mundi* 44 (1992): 65-89, COSGROVE, DENIS E. *The Palladian Landscape : Geographical Change and Its Cultural Representations in Sixteenth-Century Italy*. University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 1993, COSGROVE, DENIS E. *Apollo's Eye : A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, HARLEY, BRIAN. "Silences and Secrecy: The Hidden Agenda of Cartography in Early Modern Europe." *Imago Mundi* 40 (1988): 57-76, WOODWARD. "Reality, Symbolism, Time, and Space in Medieval World Maps." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 75, no. 4 (1985): 510-21, WOODWARD, DAVID. *Art and Cartography: Six Historical Essays*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, WOODWARD. "Paolo Forlani: Compiler, Engraver, Printer, Or Publisher?" *Imago Mundi* 44 (1992): 45-64, WOODWARD, DAVID. *Maps as Prints in the Italian Renaissance : Makers, Distributors & Consumers*. London: British Library, 1996.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Alison Sandman, "Mirroring the World", in SMITH, PAMELA H. AND PAULA FINDLEN. *Merchants & Marvels : Commerce, Science and Art in Early Modern Europe*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2002. 92.

their very task of navigation, and the map of choice remained one that portrayed, quite unrealistically, two equators and two poles, but which served their purposes much better.<sup>38</sup>

Certainly, Harley and Woodward's seminal *History of Cartography* has opened the door for a more nuanced, if one wills, a more narrative approach to studying maps, releasing cartography from its hermetic domain as a "mirror of the world in its true form," bringing it within a continuous realm of representational practices.<sup>39</sup> The questions that follow are no longer concerned with the accuracy of a map (the more accurate the better), but rather, with the significance of a map, the story it tells. I have tried to follow in their footsteps. If anything, these stories often, from the perspective of an academy too (or too little) steeped in Foucault, take on the semblance of monolithic discourses, even if, Foucault would probably argue, this would be an oversimplification of his meaning. I have, however, tried to avoid thinking in terms of discourses. It seems to imply that the authors with which I was dealing with in this essay either were mere unwitting instruments and mouthpieces of a system of thought that they had no power to resist, or conversely, they were willing and enthusiastic instruments of a system of thought that they had no power to resist. Either way, some grand plan seems to be at work. On the contrary, grand plans never seem to work out quite as expected, as de Certeau would teach us, and it is exactly in these failures and the makeshift reparations that must follow that the marvelous is to be found. Discourses are also *bricolage*.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 91-97.

<sup>39</sup> HARLEY, BRIAN & WOODWARD, DAVID eds. *The History of Cartography*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

2. The other must be discovered: discovery is not finding new things.

"I do not believe that one single geographical work has ever been registered in the index of forbidden books," Leonardo Olschki writes with some wonder in 1933 in his *Storia letteraria delle scoperte geografiche*. Indeed, he noted that "empirical and scientific geography imposed themselves without the dramatic events and the open and latent conflicts which, with Galileo, inaugurated the physical sciences, and with Lamarck or Darwin the biological sciences."<sup>40</sup> In this particular instance, the problem that Olschki wanted to delineate was the "tenacity with which, coexistent with the travellers' experiences, the geographical imaginations [of the middle ages] are perpetuated without substantial additions and original deviations." The answer to this, he tells us, lies in the continued existence of "an *ideological* geography that had its *raison d'être* besides that of empirical geography, even if between the two there were contradictions, contrasts, and divergences that we now find incommensurable."<sup>41</sup> In truth, what is merely a curious piece of trivia will remain just that in Olschki, for the coexistence of "ideological" and "empirical" geographies is inadequate in explaining why no geographer, ideological or empirical, seems to have ever sufficiently jarred the sensibilities of the Catholic Church to deserve a place in the Index.

This despite the fact (or perhaps because of it), that Olschki had already suggested another possible key for explaining the peaceful coexistence of alternative geographies in the Renaissance. As he observes, for the explorers of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>

<sup>40</sup> OLSCHKI, LEONARDO. *Storia Letteraria Delle Scoperte Geografiche; Studi e Ricerche*. Firenze: L. S. Olschki, 1937. 143.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 144.

centuries, “discovery does not signify only finding new things, but in the first instance to recognize in reality what the imagination and a traditional faith gave as existent. To see these marvels realized was a conquest of the spirit no less important than the utilitarian success of the enterprise.”<sup>42</sup> The intersection between the imaginary and the “directly observed” that Olschki situates in the act of “discovery” would thus seem to attenuate the net differentiation that later emerges in his analysis between the “empirical” and “ideological” variants of geography. Of course, this would be the conclusion reached by the theory and history of cartography and geography that has emerged in the last 50 or so years, particularly in the work of such scholars as David Woodward, Brian Harley, and Dennis Cosgrove. In a nutshell, the “imaginary” and the “ideological” are found to be integral parts of even the most self-consciously “empirical” geographies, and thus, the idea that in the history of cartography and geography the imaginary of the middle ages, conceived of as a hermetic entity, would give way peaceably, systematically and coherently, to an equally hermetically conceived modern, value-free, a-theoretical science, appears now as just the latest “marvel realized,” the latest “conquest of the spirit,” in a word, we might say, the latest “discovery.”

The question that must follow regarding the issue of “discovery,” that moment in which the “imaginary” and the “empirical” coincide, the moment that Tzvetan Todorov would use, in his *La conquête de l’Amérique: la question de l’autre*, to speak of the “I” finding the “Other,”<sup>43</sup> is exactly this: what is it that is “other” in the act of discovery? In fact, if Olschki can talk of discovery as “not *only* finding *new* things, but to recognize what was already given as existent,” we might rightly ask where the boundary between the “new” and “already existent” is to be located.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>43</sup> TODOROV, TZVETAN. *La Conquista Dell’america*. Torino: Einaudi, 1992. 5.



Perhaps a first clue might be found in a particular lexical usage relating to the discovery of the Americas in 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy.

One of the earliest compilations of narratives to have been published regarding possibly this most extraordinary of the Renaissance “discoveries” is indeed curiously entitled *Paesi Nuovamente Ritrovati*. The interest lies not in the “countries” or the “newly” of the title, but the “ritrovati,” or as we are usually inclined to translate it, the “found” or “discovered.” The definition of “ritrovare” does not coincide unequivocally with its most common English translation, and we find, among its various usages, certainly, the act of “discovering as a result of research or investigation,” but also, figuratively, of “recovering, recuperating,” literarily, of “inventing,” of “finding oneself at ones’ ease,” or “reacquainting oneself,” and lastly, quite predictably, and most problematically, of “finding something that has been lost,” of “finding again.” And the use of the term in the *Paesi Nuovamente Ritrovati* is not an isolated case, we find it in Ramusio’s *Delle Navigazioni* as well, for example (fig. 1). But the Italians of the 16<sup>th</sup> century certainly had, and employed with equal ease when speaking of the discovery of the Americas, the no less problematic “trovare,” which the etymological dictionary tells us means primarily, apart from “un-covering,” to “compose verse,” (as in troubadour), and thus, from this, to “invent, imagine, think, repute, judge.”<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> PIANIGIANI, OTTORINO. *Vocabolario Etimologico Della Lingua Italiana*. Firenze: F.lli Malita Editori, 1907.



Figure 1. *Universale della parte del mondo nuovamente ritrovata*. From Ramusio, *Delle Navigazioni e Viaggi*, 1556.

If “the other must be discovered,”<sup>45</sup> returning to *La conquête de l’Amérique*, Todorov is aware, when pondering the astonishing rapidity with which the *conquistadores* were able to subjugate the *Mexicas*, that the reasons are not to be found solely in the military superiority of the Spanish invaders, but in their “superiority in

<sup>45</sup> TODOROV. 1992. 299.

human communication,” in other words, their literary prowess.<sup>46</sup> It is this that allows him to differentiate between the *Mexicas* and the Spanish, both usurpers of power in their own way, but with fundamentally different approaches to language and communication. The outward signs of this are evident, Todorov suggests, in the case of the *Mexicas*, from the accounts that invariably “describe the beginning of their end as a silence that falls on them,”<sup>47</sup> whereas the Spanish, having recently published the first grammar of any modern European language in Antonio de Nebrija’s *Gramática castellana* of 1492, seem to embody a different “conscience of [language’s] practical utility,” clearly delineated in Nebrija’s introduction, in which we find words that the *conquistadores* evidently took to heart: “Language has always been the companion of Empire.”<sup>48</sup>

Thus, it is the Spanish that impose their language on Mexico, that procure the interpreters, that effect their conquest through a linguistic or communicative appropriation first of all. But none of this explains who Todorov’s “other who must be discovered” is. Rather, the discussion so far points not to an encounter with the “other” at all, but to the capacity to believe that there is really nothing at all that is “other,” that everything can be explained and incorporated in the “already known,” that, recalling Finazzi-Agrò, quoted in part above, “nothing exists which is really unthinkable, given that everything has already been conceived *in the mind of God*, there is nothing that can be really incredible unless one wants to divest the divine omniscience of any credibility; there is nothing which is completely false or

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 304.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 151.

unknown, if some trace in the scriptures, if a clue, fleeting as it may be, exists of it in tradition.”<sup>49</sup>

“The other must be discovered.” The operative word, it seems, can not be the “other,” amorphous and slippery, its pure form never to be captured, but *discovered*, a substantial part of the meaning of which we seem to quite happily discard. Certainly there is a discovery of the “other;” equally certainly, discovery does not signify only finding new things. But in both cases it is “discovery” not as in finding something that is there but hitherto unknown but, returning to our dictionaries, of “inventing, recovering and recuperating, of composing verse, of imagining.” Gonzalo Ferdinando d’Oviedo, in the dedication to Charles V of his *Historia Natural y General de las Indias* of 1535, would write:

What I write will be true, and most distanced from the fables that other writers have said of it [the New World] without having seen any of it, but with dry feet in Spain, have had the audacity of writing these things with elegant turns of phrase, in Latin and in the Vulgar, solely informed by many and different opinions. And thus they have formed their stories, which are more concerned with good style than with the truthfulness of what is written, for as the blind cannot determine colour, so the absent cannot put faith to these things as those who have seen them.<sup>50</sup>

But Oviedo—although he had indeed traveled to the New World unlike Peter Martyr, that other great early historian of the “discoveries” to whom Oviedo’s criticism is directed—will fill his *Historia General* with plenty of fables himself. And to be fair Oviedo is in reality much more a writer concerned with good style than he is an explorer who gets his feet wet. But these are pedantic points. The explorer had become, for Oviedo, the Marco Polo of Italo Calvino’s *Città invisibili*, the certifier of

<sup>49</sup> Finazzi-Agrò, “The Encantada”. *La dislocazione dell’alterità nella Carta d’Achamento*, in *Uomini Dell’altro Mondo : L’incontro Con I Popoli Americani Nella Cultura Italiana Ed Europea : Atti Del Convegno Di Siena, 11-13 Marzo 1991*. Roma: Bulzoni, 1993. 165.

<sup>50</sup> RAMUSIO. 1978. Vol V. 348.

the imagined. This is the authority that even Oviedo claims for himself above his fellow historians.

It is certainly not easy to dismiss Stephen Greenblatt when he tells us that, in the discovery of the Americas, marvel was the “decisive intellectual and emotional experience in the presence of a radical difference.”<sup>51</sup> Certainly, there was plenty that was marvelous, and plenty that was “radically different”. But the gods of the *Mexicas* reacted to the dramatic encounter with the “other” by recognizing it in the most dramatic manner, a silence in the face of it, an incomprehension. By these standards it would seem that *they*—not the Spanish—had encountered the other, the unthinkable. It was a momentary hiatus no doubt, but one that can only highlight the fact that the Spanish, and more generally the Europeans, had no hesitation in incorporating this “other” into their conceptual horizon, subduing it, and thus reducing it to an already known. The greatest “discovery,” the greatest “marvel,” was not a movement outwards (it had nothing to do with that at all), but was directed to themselves, it was finding that what *might* have been “other,” that promise never delivered, was in effect, just a momentary lapse of memory.

<sup>51</sup> Greenblatt, 1991, *Marvelous possessions : the wonder of the New World*, ix, 202 , [8] of plates

### 3. A trace

When in 1553 Giovanni Battista Ramusio penned the introduction to the third volume of his *Delle Navigazioni e Viaggi*, it was certainly with a sense of apprehension. We might imagine that he left the most arduous task of compiling and organizing materials on the New World to this last volume, the first being dedicated, roughly speaking, to Africa and the Near East and the second to Asia and Muscovy, for he recognized that whatever materials he did have at his disposal regarding this new-found fourth part of the world were either sketchy, incomplete, or simply out of date.<sup>52</sup> Ramusio took pains to point this out to his readers, especially to Girolamo Fracastoro, his close friend and fellow humanist, to whom he dedicated his work, and writes that “for the present [the New World] remains for the most part unknown. The least we can do is hope that these accounts that we have which are infinitely incorrect [shall be improved in time]. Hence would the benign readers take what little I give them happily, keeping firmly in mind that if more had come into my hands, I would have given it to them with even greater pleasure.”<sup>53</sup>

Marica Milanesi, in her introduction to the modern edition of the *Delle Navigazioni* writes, regarding Ramusio’s difficulties, and referring to the contents of Ramusio’s first two volumes, that “Asia, Africa—the Old World—had been rediscovered. Alvise da Mosto had retraced the itinerary of Hannon the Carthaginian, the Venetian galley commander had visited the coasts described by *Periplus of the*

<sup>52</sup> For a complete overview of the materials and sources of Ramusio’s *Delle Navigazioni*, see PARKS. 1955. More specifically regarding Vol. 3, MILANESI. 1984. Vol. V. “Introduzione,” xx-xxii.

<sup>53</sup> RAMUSIO. 1978. Vol. V. 17n.

*Erythraean Sea*, the spice trade, whether through the modern or ancient routes, continued to connect the extremities of Europe and Asia. In choosing and organizing his materials, Ramusio had been able to use an already existent image of the classical *eukumene*—even if just to refute or modify it. This was not so for America.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Ramusio’s method had been that juxtaposing the accounts of the moderns with those of the ancients. This he believed would result in the greatest “pleasure that all the scholars of geography would have of them,” for, as he writes in the dedication of Volume I—also to Fracastoro,

the reason that made me labour gladly on this work was that, having seen and considered Ptolemy’s geographical tables, in which Africa and India are described, to be very imperfect with respect to the great knowledge that we have today of these regions, I thought it worthy and perhaps not a little useful to the world to put together the narrations of the writers of our time that have been to these areas of the world and have talked of them minutely; by which, with the addition of the Portuguese naval charts, we shall be able to construct as many tables that will be of great satisfaction to those who are gratified by such cognition, as they shall be certain of the degrees, longitudes and latitudes of all these shores, of the names of the places, the cities and lords that are there at this time, and can then confront this with what the ancient authors have written of them.<sup>55</sup>

There could be no such pleasure in the comparison of old and new knowledge in the accounts of the Americas “discovered” just some 60 years earlier. And this was certainly cause for apprehension, for if classical geographical knowledge was quickly being replaced, Ramusio was clear to underline it first and foremost in the structure of *Delle Navigazioni*, to show in the act of comparison how “in many ways we surpass the ancients.”<sup>56</sup> But, as Marica Milanesi has noted elsewhere, Ptolemy, prime symbol of classical geography, was being replaced—but such a process required, in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century, that it be done without “tarnishing

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. xi.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. Vol. I, “Dedication.” The translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. Vol. II. “Discorso sopra il viaggio fatto dagli Spagnuoli intorno al mondo.”

it, imprudently, as a lie.”<sup>57</sup> Hence “Ramusio gathers those elements that he still finds valid in Ptolemy and the ancient geographers, and he inserts these organically within a collection of modern materials. To the latter he gives priority, because, naturally, they have the merit of being current...”<sup>58</sup>

But there is more to this than just a nagging residue of deference to the ancients. Ramusio was a punctilious scholar, he had worked on the project of the *Delle Navigazioni* for some 30 years,<sup>59</sup> and certainly, as Milanesi reminds us once again, the *Delle Navigazioni*, “despite the presence of ancient materials [...] was a work projected into the future.”<sup>60</sup> Such a future required, Ramusio thought, a solid base of knowledge, and how was it possible, with “this part of the world for the most part unknown,” and moreover, with accounts that are “infinitely incorrect,” to discriminate between reliable and unreliable accounts? The persistent comparison between the ancients and moderns that Ramusio effects was not intended merely to demonstrate how “in many ways we surpass the ancients,” but as a crucial means of operating such a discrimination. If the ancients talked of it, even if incorrectly, “if,” in Finazzi-Agrò’s words, “some trace in the scriptures, if a clue, fleeting as it may be, exists of it in tradition,”<sup>61</sup> we might believe the modern accounts when they speak of them.

We can understand then why Ramusio, in his introduction to the third and last volume of the *Delle Navigazioni*, the one dedicated to the discovery of the Americas, frames his discourse within classical citations. “Seneca,” he tells us,

<sup>57</sup> MILANESI. 1984. 17.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 47.

<sup>59</sup> PARKS. “Ramusio’s Literary History.” 128.

<sup>60</sup> MILANESI. 1984. 50.

<sup>61</sup> Finazzi-Agrò. “The Encantada.” *La dislocazione dell’alterità nella Carta d’Achemento*, in MELIS, A. (ed.). *Uomini dell’altro mondo : l’incontro con i popoli americani nella cultura italiana ed europea : atti del convegno di Siena, 11-13 marzo 1991*. Roma: Bulzoni 1993. 165.



“already 1500 years ago, moved by poetic fervor, described the whole of this enterprise [of discovery]”:

Times will come again,/after the long wait/that the great father Ocean/will relent his restraint on knowledge of worldly things/that the great terrestrial body/shall appear and show itself whole,/and Tiphys will sail from part to part/the waves vast breast,/ new lands to discover the meaning and art/that Thule shall not be of the earth the last part.<sup>62</sup>

Seneca's pre-figuration was, however, only a coda, a closing citation: for poetry, and poetic fervor are one thing, quite different from “making another world be born from this one,”<sup>63</sup> as Columbus had done. The key was rather the first, opening citation of Ramusio's, from Plato's *Timaeus*. Here we are told that

Many great and wonderful deeds are recorded of your state [Athens] in our histories. But none of them exceeds all the rest in greatness and valor. For these histories tell of a mighty power which unprovoked made an expedition against the whole of Europe and Asia, and to which your city put an end. This power came forth out of the Atlantic Ocean, for in those days the Atlantic was navigable, and there was an island situated in front of the straits which are by you called the Pillars of Heracles. The island was larger than Libya and Asia put together, and was the way to other islands, and from these you might pass to the whole of the opposite continent which surrounded the true ocean, for this sea which is within the Straights of Heracles is only a harbor, having a narrow entrance, but that other sea is a real sea, and the land surrounding it on every side may be most truly called a boundless continent... There occurred violent earthquakes and floods, and in a single day and night of misfortune [the island of Atlantis] disappeared in the depths of the sea.”<sup>64</sup>

To be sure, Ramusio continues, “the said dialogue of Timeus has been reputed fable and allegory [...] But the truth is this [...] really we are, beyond the infinity of gifts received from God, obliged to his divine Majesty in this above all other men of past centuries, that it is in our times that we have discovered this new

<sup>62</sup> RAMUSIO. 1978., 15-16.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., Vol. V 15.

<sup>64</sup> HAMILTON, EDITH & CAIRNS, HUNTINGTON ET AL. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*. New York]: Pantheon Books, 1966., 1159-1160

part of the world, of which for such a long span of time we have had no news.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, it is the duty of Ramusio’s contemporaries to bring to light what Plato had called, in the language of the Renaissance, *la fabbrica del mondo*, what Denis Cosgrove translates as “fabric of the world,”<sup>66</sup> to discover it, to make it known, for

is it not reasonable to believe that the agent of such a beautiful and perfect *fabbrica* as are the skies, the sun and moon, had not wanted that, having been made with such stupendous and marvelous order, the sun should not illuminate but a parcel of this globe we call earth, and that the rest of it should vainly sit on top of the seas, the snows and ice; but that he covered it in each of its parts with diverse animals, and above all with men, as lord and master of all, for man was the reason for which it was all fabricated, having been bestowed with that divine and celestial element which is the soul...<sup>67</sup>

The *Timeus* is, in sum, no fable, but a reasonable and most certainly true description of what appeared, most clearly to Ramusio, a *fabbrica*. I shall use the dictionary once more, for *fabric* is unsatisfactory. Ramusio himself would be unsatisfied, for indeed, the *fabbrica* is something “skillfully produced,” in his words, “with such stupendous and marvelous order,” indeed, something constructed; quite clearly, as is the case with the word *fabbrica* in the Renaissance, an “edifice.”

<sup>65</sup> RAMUSIO. 1978., Vol. V. 6-7.

<sup>66</sup> COSGROVE. 1993. 248.

<sup>67</sup> RAMUSIO. 1978., Vol. V. 8.

#### 4. Memory Recovered

*Marco meanwhile continued to report on his journey, but the emperor was no longer listening to him, interrupting him:*

*From now on I shall be the one who describes to you the cities, and you will certify whether they exist, and if they are as I imagined them.*

The recovery of memory, that studious act best suited to the capabilities of the humanist, requiring the careful perusal of ancient texts, their translation, reinterpretation and comparison was, first and foremost, achieved in the edifice of the humanist's home. In 1570, in his *Quattro libri dell'architettura*, Andrea Palladio would describe it thus:

To the gentleman, the city house must be of much splendor and comfort, having to live in it all the time necessary for the administration of the Republic, and the government of his own affairs. But it is not of minor utility, or consolation, that which he shall have from his Villas, where the rest of his time will be spent in seeing, and adorning his professions, and with industry and the art of Agriculture to increase his faculties by the exercise which in the country one can take by foot or on horseback. By which the body will be conserve more easily its health and strength, and where finally the spirit, tired of the agitations of the City, can take much restoration and consolation, and can now quietly attend to the study of letters and to contemplation, as the ancient scholars often did, retiring to similar places, where they were visited by their true friends and relatives, having there houses, gardens, fountains, and other similar pleasant spots. But above all, they will be returned their Virtue, being able to easily realize the beatific life that in the countryside can be obtained.<sup>68</sup>

It was not simply the question of form, of balance and harmony, which informed Palladio's architecture. These must coincide, he was sure, with the use of

<sup>68</sup> PALLADIO, ANDREA. *I Quattro Libri Dell'architettura*. Venice: 1570. Libro II, Ca XII.

that form, and for every space a definite function is attached. He did, as it were, transform the Venetian landscape with these ideas, but Palladio was not merely remembered for the mark he left on the canons of architecture. He was equally a brilliant businessman, deeply aware of the desires of those from whom he sought commissions, and his *Quattro libri* is a vivid articulation of those desires. What Palladio built for his patrons were not so much villas as sanctuaries. They were the means of escape, and there, away from the political and commercial troubles that hounded the mythical Venice in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, virtue, and the beatific life could finally be sought.

One of Palladio's patrons, Giovanni Battista Della Torre, certainly did not have "restoration and consolation" of his spirit.<sup>69</sup> He never saw completed the town house that Palladio was building for him when he died in 1534 (fig. 2). Indeed, he could hardly be said consoled, leaving at his bedside Girolamo Fracastoro with the cryptic words: "*nave di ermete*." To be sure, his worries were neither political nor commercial. He was thinking of Plato's *Timaeus*, and the solution to the problem of the perpetual north-south motion of the celestial equator and ecliptic. It would take a while longer to resolve these astronomical puzzles one way or another, and although Fracastoro had brushed shoulders with Nicolaus Copernicus as a student at the University of Padua, he would dedicate much of his time to developing Della Torre's strictly Platonic explanation. In 1538 he would complete his *Homocentrica*, a major work in a minor tradition, falling as it did, and then lost between, the Ptolomaic and neo-platonic astronomy of the Renaissance and the Copernican revolution.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., Libro II, ca III.

<sup>70</sup> For a discussion of the *Homocentrica*, see PERUZZI, ENRICO. *La Nave Di Ermete: La Cosmologia Di Girolamo Fracastoro*. Firenze: L.S. Olschki, 1995.

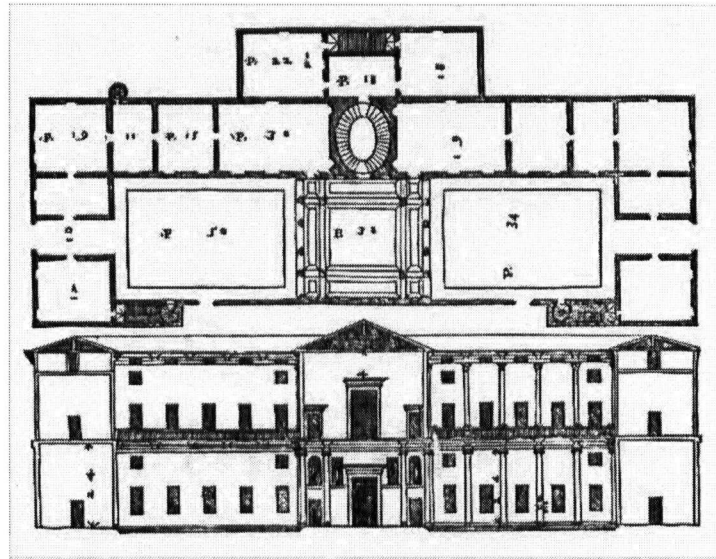


Figure 2. *Villa Della Torre*, from Palladio, *I Quattro Libri*, vol. II.

Fracastoro did however succeed in escaping the city to pursue his interest in astronomy. By profession he was in fact not an astronomer, but a medic, and a celebrated one at that, having served as physician at the Council of Trent. He gave the “French disease,” as it was known, the name syphilis with his poem *Syphilis sive de morbo gallico* in 1530, and we might say he prefigured germ theory with his *De contagione et contagiosis morbis* published in 1540. But his heart lay in those moments of liberty from professional cares, at his country villa in Incaffi, north-west of Verona, where he could dedicate himself to his interest in astronomy. He would write, in 1534, in one of these moments of *otium*, to his close friend Ramusio:

My studies are quite bizarre... you could say that I am mad, and wasted time, and that it would be better to earn a few *scudi*—to which I shall not answer as does one of our canonical Alchemists, who sends all his earnings up in smoke, and some more, but says that one should not do that, but spend one’s time better, so to speak. No time is better spent than that which is thrown away, but between him and I this

is the difference: he throws away time, and things, and I augment them, and do not throw them away. And so it shall continue, until it pleases our lord God.<sup>71</sup>

And so the letter continues, as Fracastoro responds to Ramusio's suggestion that Dante had, in Canto I of the *Purgatory*, "prophesized the [southern] cross, or had some cognition of those four stars which he writes he has seen in purgatory." "I do not know," he says, "but I can see that those four stars are in a place where the cross is not, because he [Dante] wants them beneath the Antarctic Pole."<sup>72</sup> The next two pages are thus dedicated to the astronomical calculations necessary to reach that conclusion, and Fracastoro signs off by posing another problem found in Dante's *Purgatory*: "Declare to me," he asks Ramusio, "how it can be that the night emerges from the Ganges when the Sun is in the horizon, whose meridian [according to Dante] passes by Jerusalem? [It cannot be that] Dante means to say that Jerusalem is at the center of the earth, which is false..."<sup>73</sup>

In another of Fracastoro's literary productions, the *Navagerius sive de poetica* dedicated to Ramusio, and written in honor of their deceased friend Andrea Navagero, we find Fracastoro and a group of his close intimates, Giovanni Battista Della Torre, Gian Giacomo Bardulone, and, of course, Andrea Navagero, immersed the Arcadian settings of Fracastoro's villa in Incaffi, under a leafy beech by a gurgling

<sup>71</sup> PORCACCHI. 1584. 332 v.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 332 v. The lines referred to here are "Turning towards the right, I fixed mine eyes/On the other pole, thereby four stars discerning/Ne'er by man save first in Paradise./The heaven appeared enraptured with their burning..." Translation from ALIGHIERI, DANTE. *The Divine Comedy*. New York: The Heritage Press, 1944. 141.

<sup>73</sup> PORCACCHI. 1584. 334 r. Here Fracastoro is referring to the beginning of Canto II: "The sun now by that horizon came/The arc of whose meridian is at height/Just at the point above Jerusalem:/And, circling opposite him, the Night/Was issuing forth from Ganges with the Scales/Which fail her hand when she exceeds in might..." ALIGHIERI. 1944. 145.

fount, fed by shepherds and serenaded by shepherd-boys' lutes.<sup>74</sup> Navagero himself was deeply attached to his own gardens at his villa on Murano, and would write of his yearning for their quiet pleasures to Ramusio (to whom he had entrusted their care), whilst serving as Venecian diplomat in Spain, "for I care more about that place, than anything else in the world." And he does not forget to add that Ramusio should in like manner "make sure to attend to living pleasantly, and enjoy your Villa Ramusio with some friends until I return."<sup>75</sup>

The humanist's house as the center and nurturer of humanist thought was, in itself, a recovered memory. Alessandro Rinaldi writes, in this vein, that "as the voice of the ancients reached with growing clarity and strength the consciousness of the *letterati*, [...] the intimistic desire was born for the small domestic shelter, suitable to the private and contemplative nature of the *otium*, [...] propitious to comfortable retreat to be shared with one's intellectual phantoms and closest friends." In other words, "the ideal of the house of the ancients as the elect locus of the pleasures of the spirit." Unfortunately, Rinaldi continues, "the ancients did not pronounce themselves clearly on the forms of their dwellings."<sup>76</sup> It was thus the work of humanists from the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards—culminating in Palladio, but beginning first and foremost with Leon Battista Alberti of Santa Maria Novella fame, and his *De re aedificatoria*, published only posthumously in 1485 but widely circulated since the middle of the century—to piece together the vague murmurs of the ancients and produce a coherent theory of architecture from them.

<sup>74</sup> FRACASTORO. "Il Navagero : Ovvero, Dialogo Sulla Poetica / Girolamo Fracastoro ; a Cura Di Antonino Gandolfo." Biblioteca di cultura moderna ; n. 421 (1947): 96 p ; 21 cm., 1-3.

<sup>75</sup> Letter of the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, 1525, PORCACCHI. 1584. 311r.

<sup>76</sup> Alessandro Rinaldi, "Architettura di villa tra conservazione e sperimentazione. La villa di Giovanni Ruccellai a Quaracchi e la villa di Piero del Tovaglia." In Alcidini, Cristina, and Gabriele Morolli, eds. *L'uomo Del Rinascimento: Leon Battista Alberti E Le Arti a Firenze Tra Ragione E Bellezza*. Florence: Maschietto Editore, 2006. 221.

Slowly the shapes began to take form, despite the fact that Alberti himself had taken pains to *not* equip his *De re aedificatoria* with illustrations. He was working from ancient sources, particularly Vitruvius' *De architettura* ("rediscovered" in 1414 by Poggio Bracciolini), which Alberti tells us has reached us, also without illustrations, in "such a miserable state due to adversities of all kinds," so much so that "we cannot understand it," and that the black signs on the page, often "perfumed and living buds," could also "before the eyes seem to gather themselves into scorpions."<sup>77</sup> It was thus essential, Alberti believed, to not commit the same mistake, to make sure that the words he wrote would, in Gabriele Morolli's summation, be "a translation in words of all forms and proportions [...] so that his student-readers could autonomously recompose, on their own work tables, by schemas and drawings, the notions and instructions transmitted by the text, being now free to model the accessory parts, the decorations, and the ornamentation according to their own tastes..."<sup>78</sup>

But more than a "translation in words," it was a translation into numbers: mathematics was Alberti's key. From the ever fecund *Timaeus*, Alberti knew that the Demiurge had created the world as a *fabbrica*, from mathematical principles, lodged in musical harmonics, and so, from this, and some hints from Pythagoras and Vitruvius, for example, he could work out a theory of inter-columnar spacing, based on precise ratios, reproducible without having to be drawn.<sup>79</sup> But the notion of the *fabbrica del mondo*, and the revelation that mathematics constituted the *fabric* of the *fabbrica*, revealed itself to be of much greater cosmological significance than its mere application to inter-columnar spacing and proportionality might suggest.

<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Gabriele Morolli, "Un'architettura a parole." In *Ibid.* 329.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 329.

<sup>79</sup> David Napoletano, "Delle cinque specie degli intercolumni." In *Ibid.* 367-369.



Indeed, Alberti's project did not invest merely architecture, but starting from painting—for mathematics and geometry, “from its roots in nature, let this graceful and most noble art emerge”<sup>80</sup>— it subsumed cartography and astronomy, all dependant as they are on the capacities of measurement provided by the increasingly precise instruments of the time, the astrolabe, the quadrant, the compass and others, all of which Alberti himself extensively used, if not actively developed and improved, as is the case with what Morolli calls an instrument which is “half sextant and half super-goniometer.”<sup>81</sup> It should come as no surprise then that Alberti was the first to systematize the rules of perspectival drawing with his *De pictura*, mathematical basis for the art of the Renaissance, or, armed with his “super-goniometer,” one of the first to introduce triangulation to surveying and cartography, as in his *Descriptio Urbis*, “describing” Rome textually and mathematically, as a series of co-ordinates. Again, he provides no map of his own, merely descriptions of this instruments and the methods of employing them, in order that, once again, his readers might, “at their own study tables,” reconstruct the map of Rome, or build the tools and apply the methods to map any other city.<sup>82</sup>

It was thus discernable to Alberti, through the use of this universal language of mathematics, a music in architecture, and architecture to the cosmos: indeed, a *fabbrica del mondo*. What emerges from Alberti is a universe governed by fractal-like geometry, forms that emanate and reproduce themselves from the simplest and minutest to the greatest and infinite, in a predictable and above all measurable geometric pattern, the greater mirroring the lesser, and indeed, vice-versa. Thus, in Alberti's words, “if the city (*civitas*), as the philosophers have claimed, is a large house

<sup>80</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, “Prologue of *De Pictura*,” quoted in Filippo Camerota, “Leon Battista Alberti e le scienze matematiche,” in *Ibid.* 361.

<sup>81</sup> Morolli, *Ibid.* 330.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* 330.

(*maxima dimora*), and that likewise the house itself is nothing but a small city (*minima civitas*), why might we not say that even the single parts of the house (*membra*) are in themselves small dwellings (*minima domicilia*)? Thus, even the courtyard (*atrium*), the gardens (*xistum*) or the hall (*cenaculum*) or loggia (*porticus*) should also be considered as small dwellings.”<sup>83</sup>

At the center of this fractal universe was, unequivocally, the humanist’s house. And at the center of the humanist’s house, Alberti was sure, teasing out of the uncertainties concerning Vitruvius’ text, lay the court-yard. Forgotten since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, this architectural feature, covered, or uncovered, would be the element around which the house would be built throughout the Renaissance.<sup>84</sup> Likewise the city, that Baldassare Castiglione, closely echoing Alberti, had said should be built “in the form of a palace,”<sup>85</sup> would now center not on its seats of power, Palazzo Vecchio in Florence or the Palazzo Ducale in Venice, but on its open spaces, the piazza, of San Marco and della Signoria. Again, this was a memory recovered from Vitruvius, the city not being its walls, but its mind, a theme that Alberti was concerned with making clear, never distinguishing the *urbs* from the *civitas*.<sup>86</sup> And of course, the space of the *civitas* was the *piazza*.

But the fractal-like design of the *fabbrica del mondo* does not end here. It extends beyond the villa and the city, and into the countryside. Into, following Morolli once again, “a territorial dimension constituted of concentric circles, of terrestrial ‘spheres’ made of walls, villas, gardens geometrically compartmentalized, and orderly cultivated fields, then the circle of defensive castles and the clusters of mountains on the horizon. All circular rings radically scored by broad streets which

<sup>83</sup> Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, quoted in Gabriele Morolli, “La vittoria postuma: una città niente affatto ‘ideale,’” in *Ibid.* 393.

<sup>84</sup> Baldini, *Ibid.* 221.

<sup>85</sup> Morolli, *Ibid.* 393.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

converge towards the *umbilicus urbis* [the navel of the city].”<sup>87</sup> And beyond this, to the cosmos, as Fracastoro tells us in his *Homocentrica*, following *Timeus* himself, as Alberti did. And the piazza, the *umbilicus urbis*, Denis Cosgrove reminds us, was the theatre of civic life [*civitas*], as the world was the theatre of human activity. Thus we can explain how the first atlas of the world, compiled by Abraham Ortelius in 1570, carried the otherwise curious title of *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*: Theatre of the World (fig. 3). Fittingly, the *frontespice* pays homage to architecture and perspective, a veritable stage, surmounted by celestial and terrestrial globes, and inhabited by the female figurations of the four continents (of course, Europe is enthroned above this entire scene, reigning over it), displaying their personal set of props. The theatre needed to be constructed, following the mathematical dictates of the divine *fabbrica*. Returning to Palladio, and Denis Cosgrove’s summation, “in making the Palladian landscape patricians and professionals were engaged in a practical *cosmogony*: creating a new world, the most sacred of all human acts. Such an image should mirror the image of the original creation in all its mystery and perfection and be similarly coherent in all its parts.”<sup>88</sup> For, as Ramusio himself tells us, once again referring to the *Timeus*,

The truth is this, that Plato, having described the fabric of the world [*fabbrica del mondo*], he holds man was placed therein as a divine animal in order that he might see its many ornaments of the stars in heaven and the movement of these mighty astonishing luminous objects.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 393-94.

<sup>88</sup> COSGROVE. 1993. 250.

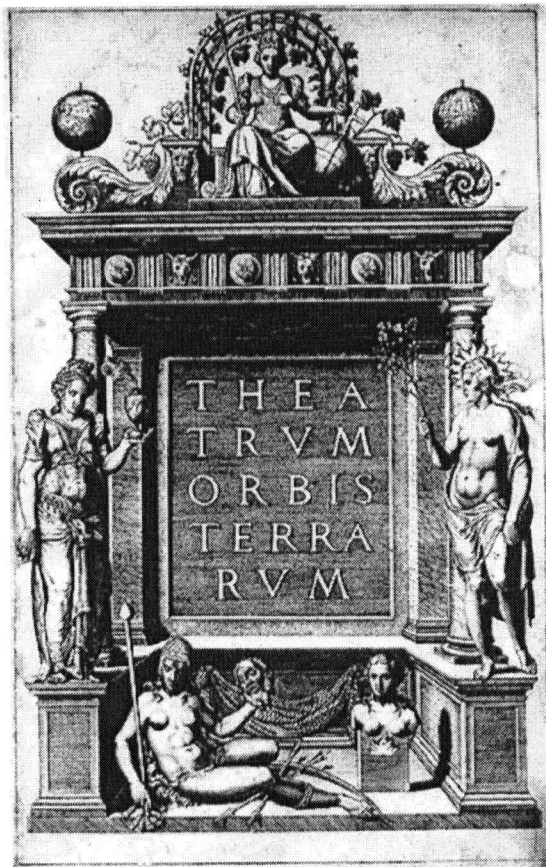


Figure 3. *Teatrvm Orbis Terrarvm*, Frontespiece, 1560.

## 5. Composing Venice

*—I will begin to ask you about a city built on stairs, exposed to the sirocco, on a crescent gulf. Now I will tell you of some of the marvels it contains: a glass container as high as a duomo so as to follow the swimming of the swallow-fish and draw from it omens; a palm which plays the harp with its leaves turned to the wind; a piazza around which there is a marble table in the shape of a horse-shoe, with a marble table cloth, laid with foods and beverages all of marble.*

*—Sire, you were distracted. I was just about to tell you of this city when you interrupted me.*

*—You know it? Where is it? What is its name?*

In 1500, Jacopo de' Barbari completed his famous birds' eye view of Venice, a remarkable woodcut map printed on 6 sheets measuring a total of 1.327 x 2.611 meters when collated (fig. 4). It was, quite unambiguously, as statement to Venetians and foreigners alike of Venice's grandeur and power, intended to elicit marvel in the viewer, for who would not remain impressed by the size and meticulous detail of the work? Indeed, Jacopo de' Barbari's was a prodigious effort, the sublimation of what were some of the most sophisticated and state-of-the art theories and techniques of the age, prominently featured in the execution: engraving, printing, surveying, perspective drawing. In the 1630's Johannes Stradanus (Jan van der Straet), one of the most highly accomplished engravers of his time (like Jacopo de' Barbari in his), compiled a pictorial backwards glance at what he considered the greatest discoveries of the modern age, and among the nineteen "inventions" he chose to depict, we find, sure enough, the printing press, the compass, the astrolabe, the measurement of longitude, and copperplate engraving.

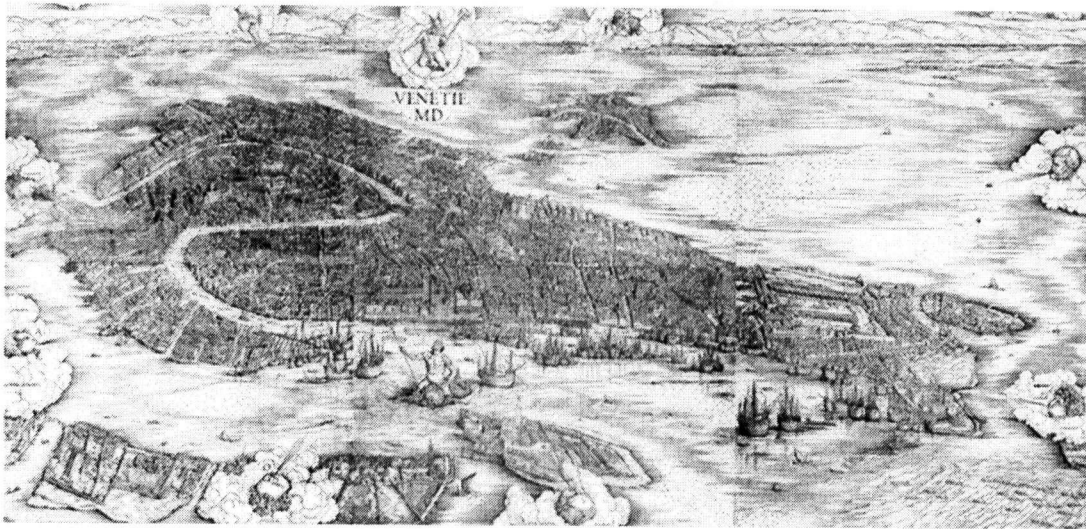


Figure 4. Jacopo de' Barbari, *Venice*, 1500.

Stradanus' *Nova Reperta* serves as a good point of entry into the world of the Renaissance, the connections between the various "inventions" being subtle but clear. The first of the engravings features Christopher Columbus encountering the New World in the figure of a semi-reclined, semi-nude "India." Another "discoverer," this time Amerigo Vespucci figures later on, in plate 18 (fig. 5), as he measures his position vis-à-vis the southern cross in the dead of the night, as his companions lie slumped in sleep, now using the astrolabe whose invention this plate was commemorating. Plate 16, "the measurement of longitude and declination from the magnetic pole" also recalls the astrolabe, but equally the compass and the mechanical clock. The first of these is featured in plate 2 in which we find Flavio Gioia Amalfitanus in his studio perfecting the sailor's compass (the attribution being of course erroneous, for the compass was invented in China). The latter, the "mechanical clock," we find in plate 5, indispensable tool in the measurement of longitude. The printing press, celebrated in plate 4, must certainly remind us of the

books stacked on Flavio Gioia's desk, of those overflowing from Vespucci's sea-chest, and those that can now be read—as is explicitly depicted—with the help of the invention of reading glasses, theme of plate 15, and an image which recurs in the brewery of plate 7, whose subject is “distillation.”



Figure 5. Stradanus, *Nova Reperta*, plate 18. Amerigo Vespucci measures his position vis-à-vis the Southern Cross using the astrolabe. Note that Stradanus makes the same connection as Ramusio does (suggested by Vespucci himself in his letters), and on the left we find the verses from Canto I of Dante's *Purgatory* believed to be proof that the poet had prefigured, or had knowledge of the existence of the constellation.

The ship, which over the past few centuries had undergone great modification, with the introduction of the stern rudder, the lanteen sail, multiple masting and the gun port, is recalled in plate 1, in the middle distance behind Columbus; in plate 2, a model caravel hanging from the ceiling in Flavio Gioia's

studio; in plate 16, "the measurement of longitude;" and in plate 15, "the astrolabe." In plate 16, in which the ship is the dominant feature of the composition (being the platform from which the measurement of longitude is effected), I can count 14 cannon peeping through the gun ports introduced only in 1501-1502, and that count is valid for only the visible side of the vessel. The forging of cannon is the subordinate subject of plate 3, "gunpowder," featuring a foundry and a battle scene in the background. The military thread leads us to plate 9, "the horse's harness," and plate 17, "polishing armor," but equally, to the swords resting against a pillar in the print-shop and the watch-maker's counter, but also those worn by a great number of the men who inhabit Stradanus' vignettes. Chief among these must be again Columbus and Vespucci, and their ships certainly brought with them to America plenty of gunpowder and cannon, horses and their harnesses, and polished armor, along with the crosses and crucifixes which feature at the top of Columbus' flagstaff, on his flag, hung on the printer's wall, on Vespucci's field-table, superimposed on the southern cross itself (fig. 5), and in one copper-plate engraving carefully being handled in plate 19.

There are of course other threads woven into the *Nova Reperta*, but I need only note that this points to how such a work as Stradanus' is, in a very palpable sense, a "thick text," rendering meaning on a number of levels, and drawing together disparate aspects of human activity through the use of recurring symbols, turning self-contained and independent vignettes into a unified tableau. In this way, Stradanus' iconography "in the narrower sense of the word," in the form of crosses, crucifixes, swords and ships, slips into what Panofsky has defined as the "deeper sense" of iconography, the "intrinsic meaning" which is arrived at "by ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a



class, a religious or philosophical persuasion — unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work.”<sup>89</sup>

If this is immediately evident in the *Nova Reperta*, it is equally true of Jacopo de’ Barbari’s birds’ eye view of Venice. For one, as we have already seen, the use of sophisticated mathematical instruments and techniques of measurement in the construction of this map was, in itself, a cosmological statement, or recalling Cosgrove’s characterization, an act of “practical cosmogony,” the seizure of responsibility which comes with being a divine animal, whose task it was to know the structures and workings of the *fabbrica del mondo*, and construct the theatre on the stage of which the human drama must unfold. But we find in Jacopo de’ Barbari’s map of Venice other features we have touched upon. As Deborah Howard notes, “the crucial and symptomatic change evident in Barbari’s view is that the emphasis of the view falls on the space of the Piazzetta di San Marco, rather than on the Palazzo Ducale, which forms the focal point in the earlier pilgrim chronicle views of Reuwich (1486) and Wolgemut (1493). This is, indeed, a shift of major significance, for it reveals a new consciousness of the role of civic space in Venice, and marks the start of the 16th century’s sustained programme to ennoble the city centre. Mauro Codussi’s placing of the stone flagpole bases in front of the basilica in 1486, and his erection of the clock tower at the focal point in the vista shortly before 1500, indicate that Venetians had already been made aware of the significance of this civic arena and its perspectival possibilities.”<sup>90</sup> (fig. 6) We find, observing the *frontispiece* of the *Paesi Nuovamente Ritrovati*, the same dynamic, as piazza S. Marco edges the Palazzo Ducale out of focus (fig. 7)

<sup>89</sup> PANOFSKY, ERWIN. *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. 55.

<sup>90</sup> HOWARD, DEBORAH. “Venice as a Dolphin: Further Investigations Into Jacopo De’ Barbari’s View.” *Artibus et Historiae* 18, no. 35 (1997): 101-11. 104.

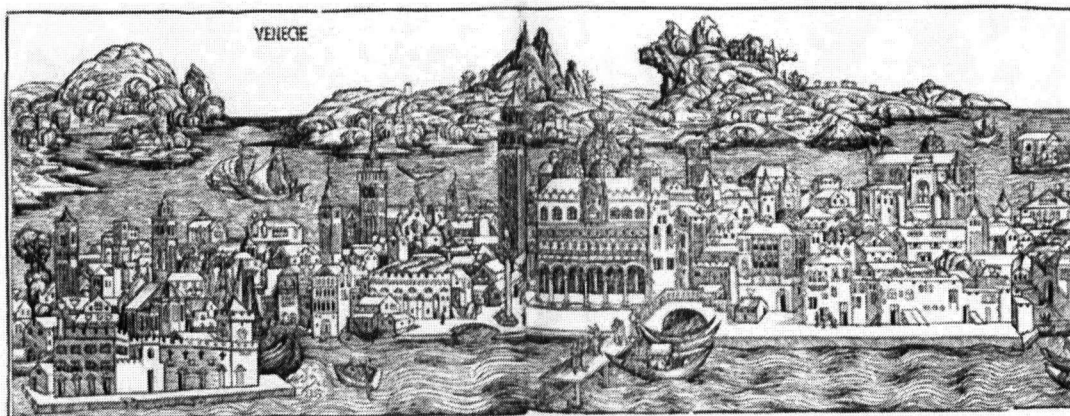


Figure 6. Michael Wolgemut, Venice, in Hartman Schedel's *Liber Chronicarum* LXIII, Nuremberg, 1493.

**Paesi nouamente ritrouati per**  
 la Navigatione di Spagna in Calicut. Et da Alberto  
 Vesputio Fiorentino intitulato Mondo  
 Nouo: Nouamente Impressa.



Figure 7. Paesi Nuovamente Ritrovati, *Vicenza*, 1507.

But if we dig deeper, we find more strata of meaning beneath Jacopo de' Barbari's *Venice*. Alberti's perspectival science had brought into focus the strict connection that existed between astronomy, geography and landscape painting. But for this to become clear to Alberti, the impact of Ptolemy's *Geography* cannot be forgotten. It had only taken about a century or so, since the "rediscovery" of the *Geographia* through Maximus Planudes' Latin translation, for the *Geographia* to become a classic, a thing of the past. We might even venture a date, 1533, the year that Erasmus of Rotterdam published in Basel an edition of Ptolemy, this time surprisingly not supplemented with any modern maps. From thence it would be, in Marica Milanesi's words "a text not to be twisted to one's needs. After a century of flexibility, the *Geografia* had become a monument. Of what? Of geography, yes: but the geography of the ancients. The moderns could think of producing one for themselves."<sup>91</sup> It was evident to the "moderns" what was wrong in Ptolemy. For one, quite to the contrary of what Ptolemy believed, Africa was circumnavigable. Secondly, his *eukomene*, the inhabited world, had not envisioned the New World. What Ptolemy had provided had merely been the method by which this new world might be described, as Giovanni Pico de la Mirandola would say, in "divinding the world in parts, and calculating its astronomical positions."<sup>92</sup> It was a new language that gave a new shape and new techniques to geography.

Central in all this is the tri-partite structure to the study of geography that Ptolemy delineates. In the first chapter of the *Geographia*, we find the distinction between "chorography" (the work of artists); "geography" (requiring mathematics, geometry, longitude and latitude, and "cosmography", the application of the cataloguing of star positions and their projection in astronomical cartography to the

<sup>91</sup> MILANESI. 1984. 18.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. 12.

terrestrial world. Geography of course stood between this “work of the artists,” and the work of the “cosmographers,” and Ptolemy regarded the term as designating a description only of the inhabited world (*oikoumene*), although it derives from *ge*, the whole world. The distinction is lost in 16<sup>th</sup> Century, and the term “Geography” becomes used for representations of areas larger than provinces but with political or physical coherence. Thus, somewhat missing Ptolemy’s own differentiations, “the sixteenth-century world map became known as a *cosmographia*,” but that is not important in itself. Rather, David Woodward reminds us that the Ptolomaic map “became a pervasive cosmographical icon for modernity, universality, and the integration of heaven and earth. Such a world picture was the Renaissance equivalent to that of the *mappamundi* which had been for the previous several centuries an icon of the main events in Christian history played out in the world.”<sup>93</sup> In other words, the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, the theatre of the world. In sum, following Woodward further, “the mapping of the entire world was the task of the cosmographer who used a framework of celestially derived circles—parallels and meridians—as a backdrop for explaining the order and creation of the world in metaphysical terms.”<sup>94</sup>

Astronomical calculations are of course the indispensable and enabling feature of Ptolemy’s revolutionary cartography based on a grid of latitude and longitude. And thus geography was, in itself, dependant on geometry, “the art of delineating solid object upon a plane surface so that the drawing produces the same impression of apparent relative positions and magnitudes, or of distance, as do the actual objects when viewed from a specific point.”<sup>95</sup> And thus, what was the art and science of viewing objects from a specific point, that “work of the artist,” other than that of perspective? This is not by coincidence, as Denis Cosgrove also notes, the

<sup>93</sup> WOODWARD. 1996. 15

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. 13. See also COSGROVE. 1992..

<sup>95</sup> Ptolemy, *Geographia*, quoted in COSGROVE. 2001. 104.

connections between Ptolemy's chorography and Alberti's theory of perspective have been widely commented.<sup>96</sup>

The revival of the Ptolemaic project of assigning the mathematical coordinates of longitude and latitude fit perfectly within the framework of the *fabbrica del mondo*, and the fractal-like geometry of the cosmos. Perhaps the ancients had known this, perhaps it had been forgotten, but now in the Renaissance that memory had been revived, and it was not to be mislaid. As we have already seen, what had become evident for Ramusio is the act of discovery as an act of appropriation, a seizing of geographical knowledge once and for all, the gratification of geography being exactly that, to "be certain of the degrees, longitudes and latitudes..." In this fixing knowledge, of making the act of discovery an unrepeatable one, Ramusio would disqualify all that had been written before: the confrontation "with what the ancient authors have written" would certainly not be a flattering one for the ancients. This is, in fact, exactly what the editor Tommaso Giunti would write in 1557 in a dedicatory passage at the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of volume I of *Delle Navigazioni*, that Ramusio's lifelong work was intended "so that it would no longer be necessary to read Ptolemy, nor Strabo, nor Pliny, nor any of the other ancient writers of geography."<sup>97</sup>

But de' Barbari was doing the same with his woodcut map, a view of Venice once and for all. In a letter to Emperor Frederick of Saxony, this is how he would describe his work: one must, he tells us, be "experts in architecture, to whom it is necessary to know music and the maxims of philosophy, to know the nature of places, the condition of winds, the influence of the air, the nature of the trees, the disposition of the rocks and their virtues..." And moreover, "first in geometry and

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 106.

<sup>97</sup> Ramusio, *Navigazioni E Viaggi*. Ibid.

mathematics, the two of which are needed in the measurement of proportion, for there can be no proportion without number, nor can there be form without geometry.”<sup>98</sup> For Cosgrove all this amounts to a will to the “Apollonian eye,” “synoptic and omniscient” which “induces desires of ordering and controlling the object of vision.”<sup>99</sup> And this applies as much to the chorographic description of a city as it does to the geographic description of the world, linked as they are geometrically and mathematically.

But we run the risk of being embarrassed. The first indication that something might be awry in this attempt to uncover a systematic thought behind the text, however “thick”—or perhaps the more “thick”—it presents itself to be, can be felt in recognizing that, despite the sophisticated techniques at de’ Barbari’s disposal, despite the tight cosmology that placed his *Bird’s eye view of Venice* strictly within a system of mathematical description, emulating Cosgrove’s “Apollonian eye,” or Woodward’s “order of creation,” inexplicable failures in the execution of the map are everywhere present. For one, there are severe perspectival discrepancies. Jürgen Schultz, having noticed this, must confess, in a detailed essay exploring this problem, that it is of course true that it was

proposed some fifty years ago that the print was prepared from survey data, like a proper plan. Recent commentators have expanded on this notion, inferring from the indication of compass points around the outside of the composition that a magnetic compass was used for the compilation of that data, and suggesting that an *equipe* of professional surveyors was employed to do the job. If this were true, the print would indeed have been a most unusual work. Mapping with a compass was not yet widely practiced around the turn of the century. Furthermore, the use of survey data to prepare a view would bespeak an uncommon rationalism of method and taste for that time. I myself have subscribed to this theory in the past. Now, I must confess, I have come to doubt it.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Letter in Weimar, Staatsarchiv, Reg. O. 156, f. 209-210, quoted in HOWARD. 103.

<sup>99</sup> COSGROVE. 2001. 2, 5.

<sup>100</sup> SCHULZ, JÜRGEN. “Jacopo De’ Barbari’s View of Venice: Map Making, City Views, and Moralized Geography Before the Year 1500.” *Art Bulletin* 60, no. 3 (1978): 425-74. 431.

In other words, de' Barbari has been given too much credit. There was little scientific rigor in his method, so much so that in Schultz's estimation the artist—for that *is*, according to him all that de' Barbari was—having started from the right hand side of the plan, ran out of space as he reached the western part of the city, thus having to squash it into the allotted space remaining. The map was thus, “neither a giant landscape drawing made in the field, nor a carefully compiled, foreshortened plan,”<sup>101</sup> and that thus “it follows that the anonymous crew of technicians, surveyors or whatever, posited under earlier explanations can be dispensed with. The view of Venice is the creation of an artist from beginning to end [...] an extraordinary representation.”<sup>102</sup> Nothing more than that.

But the demarcation that Schultz would like to introduce between art on the one hand and science on the other, in his attempt to explain the discrepancies in de' Barbari's work is one that, as we have seen, cannot subsist in the cosmology and “practical cosmogony” of the Renaissance. So we are forced, as Deborah Howard is, to go even deeper, and uncover yet another layer of meaning in the *Bird's eye view of Venice*. Rejecting Schultz's objections, the puzzle is solved, she tells us, by realizing that de' Barbari's “was a deliberate manipulation in order to achieve a specific iconographic purpose, namely to give Venice the visual imagery of the dolphin. It was precisely by pushing the south-west peninsula sharply northwards, towards the newly reclaimed projection at Santa Maria Maggiore, that Barbari [*sic*] was able to give the city's western perimeter its often noticed resemblance to the distinctive mouth of a dolphin. The so-called “common dolphin”, or as Ruskin correctly identified it, the *Delphinus delphis*, is the species most prevalent in the Mediterranean

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 439.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 441.

waters.”<sup>103</sup>

It is certainly not my intention to question Howard's hypothesis; on the contrary, I find it highly probable that she is right, although I do also recognize that in this context her claim does have a certain ring of comedy. The point is, that if she is right, if it is true that de' Barbari was trying to exalt a resemblance to the dolphin, image that was valued and prevalent in Venice at the time, as Howard argues, then we must conclude that the symbolic value of the form imagined (imposed on) Venice by de' Barbari answers to criteria of a higher or different order than the prescriptions of perspectival science and mathematical rigor—as said, inextricably linked as they are to the idea of the *fabbrica*—that Howard herself attributes to de' Barbari's method. We run into a problem: the thickness of the text has become a veritable quagmire, and once that happens, the text seems unreadable.

<sup>103</sup> HOWARD. "Venice as a Dolphin: Further Investigations Into Jacopo De' Barbari's View." *Artibus et Historiae* 18, no. 35 (1997): 101-11. 106.



## 6. Composing Tenochtitlan

Kublai Khan would like to know the name and the location of the city he insisted he was to describe to Marco Polo, for he did not know it himself. Marco Polo answers:

*—It does not have a name nor a location. I will repeat to you why I was describing it: from the number of imaginable cities it is necessary to exclude those whose elements can be summed without a thread that connects them, without an internal logic, a perspective, a discourse [...] Cities, like dreams, are constructed by desires and fears, even though the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything hides something else.*

*—I do not have desires nor fears—the Khan declared—and my dreams are composed by my mind or by chance.*

*—Cities too believe to be composed by the mind or by chance, but neither one nor the other is sufficient to keep their walls standing. Of a city one does not enjoy the seven or seventy-seven marvels, but the answer that it gives to one of your questions.*

Let us move to the New World. Hernán Cortés, in his second letter to Chales V, describes the entry of the Spanish conquistadores into the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan in 1519. First published in Nuremberg in 1524, it was accompanied by a map of that city, by an unknown draftsman (fig. 8). We see here the famed canals of Tenochtitlan, its imposing central square, in Cortés' own words "three times that of Salamanca,"<sup>104</sup> all floating, as it were, in the saltwater lake of the Valley of Mexico. We should not blame the artist for a representation of the city that might seem immediately recognizable, for it was Cortés himself that compared the Amerindian metropolis to that other great floating city, Venice.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>104</sup> MILANESI 1978. Vol. 6. "Le piazze e i mercati."

<sup>105</sup> MUNDY, *The Mapping of New Spain : Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. xiii.

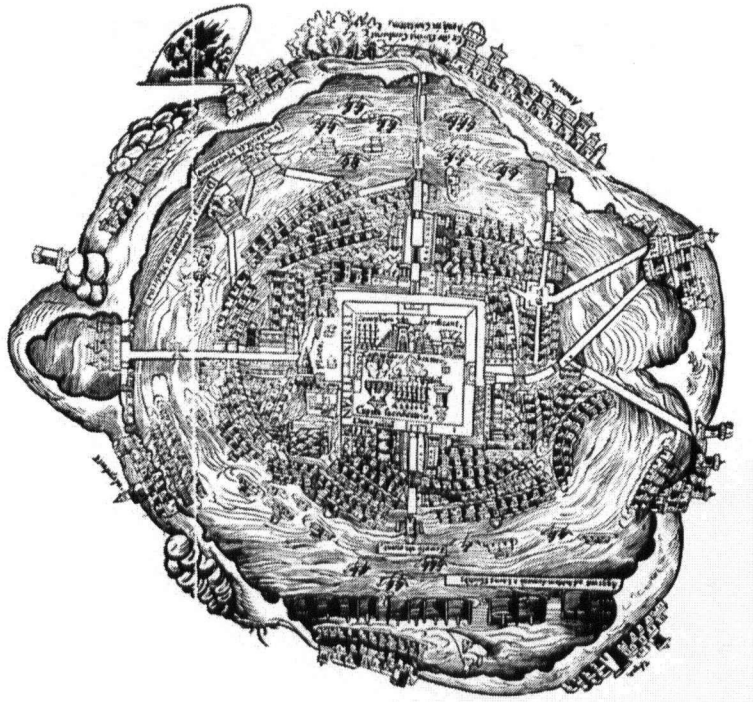


Figure 8. Cortés map of Tenochtitlan, in *Praeclara Ferdinandi de Nova Maris Oceani Hispania Narratio*, Nürnberg, 1524.

By the time Cortés' account would make its way into the third volume of Ramusio's *Delle Navigazioni* in 1559, the resemblance had become complete, and Gastaldi's interpretation of Cortes' description of the city would, for Dennis Cosgrove, undeniably "draw upon the iconography of both Venice and the Vitruvian ideal city."<sup>106</sup> Marica Milanesi likewise finds it "a modified Venice [...] the paradigm of the lagoon city."<sup>107</sup> And this is not an isolated case. In Ramusio's collection we likewise find the map of another American city, Hochelaga (Montréal) on the St. Lawrence, drawn here as the ideal city, "reconciling, on American soil, a circular plan

<sup>106</sup> COSGROVE. 1993. 248

<sup>107</sup> MILANESI. 1984. 183

with an orthogonal arrangement, the indigenous Americans with the classical Greeks, the Golden Age and Hippodamus of Miletus”<sup>108</sup>

Concentrating on Tenochtitlan for a while longer, we find that once again, this presumed superimposition of a geometric plan on the Mexican city might not be the result of an easily identifiable and rational process. For one, as we have already seen, even representations of Venice itself escaped the dictates of the Vitruvian ideal city, taking on the form, perhaps, even of a dolphin. Certainly Tenochtitlan, in neither the Nürnberg map nor in Gastaldi’s rendition, seems to resemble a dolphin at all, although the resemblance with Venice seems to have been caught by many contemporary and modern observers. Why should Tenochtilan be more ideal a city—or perhaps less ideal, for it does *not* resemble a dolphin—than Venice? Might this dissimilar-similarity between Venice and the Aztec capital just be a coincidence, that it is not the marvel of the “ideal” that is important here, but, again, recalling Calvino, the answer to a question that Tenochtitlan gives? What question? What answer?

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.



Figure 9. Giacomo Gastaldi, Tenochtitlan, in Giovanni Battista Ramusio, *Delle Navigazioni et Viaggi*, vol. 2, 1559.

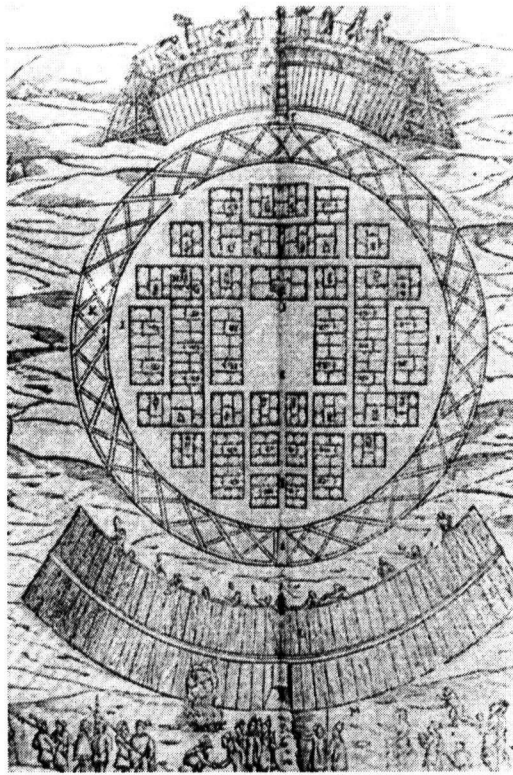


Figure 10. Giacomo Gastaldi, *Hochelaga*, in Giovanni Battista Ramusio, *Delle Navigazioni et Viaggi*, vol. 2, 1559.

Barbara Mundy goes some way in providing us with an answer, even if she cannot formulate the question. For her, “the woodcut [of the Nürnberg map] is undoubtedly carved by a European craftsman, but close examination reveals many precise details of the Amerindian city that do not appear in the long description of the city that Cortés had included in his Second letter. In short, the map is not just an illustration drawn from the letter. We are left to conclude that the picture must

derive from another source."<sup>109</sup> This other source, she must conclude, is Aztec:

While the woodcut's origins have been masked by the European style and convention (houses are rendered in perspective, Aztec towns give rise to medieval towers and Renaissance domes), other aspects of the city, particularly its centre, show the distinct imprint of a cosmic model that the Culhua-Mexica imposed on their capital, whereby the human city was patterned after the perceived order of the larger cosmos. We understand this cosmic modelling both through the nucleus of the ceremonial centre which has been excavated in the centre of present-day Mexico city, and through a number of indigenous portrayals of Tenochtitlan. These later documents present, more than the planimetry of Tenochtitlan, the idea of Tenochtitlan, wherein the intermeshing of city and cosmic model are made manifest.<sup>110</sup>

But it is more than just the city center: the circularity of the city, its waterways, its setting within a circular lake (or rather, we should say, its representation as set within a circular lake, for, as it was well known to all, the lake system within which Tenochtitlan was set, comprising lake Texcoco, Zumpango, Xaltocan, Xochimilco, and Chalco, was all but circular), can find its source, for Mundy, within the cosmology and iconographic conventions of the Mexicas, not the cosmology of the Europeans. Nonetheless, it was well accepted by the Spanish, and Cortes in particular, for, it was, Mundy explains, exactly the answer he was expecting. I quote Mundy once again at length:

...As Cortes presented it, Moteuczoma had not been unjustly usurped but had willingly abdicated both his own royal rights and those of the nation he represented in favour of the Spanish king. If we examine closely the part of the Second Letter where Moteuczoma's 'abdication' takes place, we find that the map-gift is a key moment. In what is probably Cortes's carefully scripted symbolic drama, performed only in the letter for the benefit of the king, Cortes assigns five gestures to Moteuczoma. As Cortes tells it, Moteuczoma acceded to Cortes his gold mines and then ordered that a farm be constructed for the Spanish king. On a symbolic level, Cortes is showing him giving away his source of national wealth (gold) and means for sustenance (food). And then, having signed away wealth and sustenance,

<sup>109</sup> MUNDY. "Mapping the Aztec Capital: The 1524 Nuremberg Map of Tenochtitlan, Its Sources and Meanings." *Imago Mundi* 50 (1998): 11-33. 12-13.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. 14.

Moteczoma gave Cortes the map [...] This gift proved to have a symbolic value even greater than a strategic one, becoming proof of Moteczoma's absolute submission. [...] With these actions, Moteczoma had reached the end: his fall was complete, and the death-blow that smote him after the drama had come to a close merely confirmed, rather than determined, his fate. The maps that Charles received with the letter were proof of the truth of its narrative and most importantly, proof of the willingness with which Moteczoma ceded power. When printed together to illustrate the Second Letter, they offered a similar message to a wider European audience: a nation, both civil and barbarous, was now the lawful realm of a Hapsburg king.<sup>111</sup>

Unfortunately, the *Mexica* heritage that Mundy attributes to the iconography of the map of Tenochtitlan seems to pose a problem in light of her other work. In *The Mapping of New Spain*, she tells us the story of how, in 1571, Juan López de Velasco, taking on the office of *cosmógrafo-cronista mayor*, would give his king Philip II, heir to Charles V's empire, an atlas of his domains in the new world. The method he devised for collecting the necessary information was that of sending out a questionnaire to local officials in New Spain, asking them for details on a variety of issues, ranging from the history, preconquest rulers, warfare and religion of the regions in question, details of economic interest to the crown, but primarily, details of geographical import, his primary goal being that of making accurate maps of the whole continent, "of bringing New Spain into the realm of the visible."<sup>112</sup> The questions were specific in nature, stipulating the need for astronomical positions, and accurate descriptions of the layout of streets, plazas, and important buildings. The results that trickled in over the next decades would be known as the *Relaciones Geográficas*.

He was hoping, Mundy tells us, to create maps like those executed by Pedro de Esquivel that had been commissioned by Philip II for the *Escorial Atlas* of his

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. 28.

<sup>112</sup> MUNDY, BARBARA E. *The Mapping of New Spain : Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 23.

Spanish domains. They were a clear sign of imperial authority, of a king's desire to see a kingdom too vast to be traveled, for indeed, Philip, at the end of his life, would be content to think that "traveling about one's kingdom is neither useful or decent."<sup>113</sup> Velasco would provide him with the eyes to see his domains nonetheless. The project failed, and in 1588 Velasco abandoned his post as *cosmógrafo-cronista*, and his duties thus neglected, his salary was suspended.<sup>114</sup>

Be it the overly ambitious nature of the project, the lack of technical and "scientific" competence of the officials in New Spain Velasco had hoped to engage as his informants, or a simple misunderstanding of the directive of entrusting the map-making to "people knowledgeable about the things of the land,"<sup>115</sup> the vast majority of the maps sent back to Spain, as it turned out, were drawn by "indios." Lacking projection, a standard form, filled with unrecognizable symbols and symbolism, for Velasco they were unintelligible, he could do nothing with them, and they "were folded into small rectangles, tied up in bundles, neglected in the archives."<sup>116</sup>

The problem is this. It seems that the symbolism and iconography of the *Mexicas* in the case of the Nürnberg map was sufficiently similar to that of the Europeans to enable the passage of the map from one to the other culture in ways that appeared impossible later with the *Relaciones Geográficas* maps which were, nonetheless, as Mundy tells us, "sophisticated maps marked with native iconography,"<sup>117</sup> but which the Spanish could now not interpret. The problem that then presents itself is whether the answers that the Nürnberg map had given were

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. 27.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. 62.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 213.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. 61.



now insufficient in the *Relaciones*, or whether, on the other hand, the question had changed between 1519 and 1571.

## 7. Conclusion: troubadorian reconstructions

*—From now on I shall be the one to describe the cities— the Khan had said—You in your voyages will verify whether they exist.*

*But the cities that Marco Polo visited were always different from those imagined by the emperor.*

*—And yet I have constructed in my mind a model of the city from which I can deduce all other possible cities—Kublai said—It contains within it all that answers to the norm. Given that the cities that exist are more or less removed from the norm, I need only predict the exceptions from the norm and calculate the most probable combinations.*

*—I too have thought of a model of the city from which to deduce all other cities—Marco replied—It is a city constructed only of exceptions, preclusions, contradictions, incongruence, countersense. If a city of this sort is what is most improbable, reducing the number of abnormal elements one increases the probability that the city actually exists. Thus it follows that all I need to do is subtract exceptions from my model, and, in whatever order I proceed, I will find myself before a city that, remaining an exception of sorts, exists. But I can not push this operation beyond a certain limit: I would derive a city that is too plausible to be true.*

Returning to Tzvetan Todorov, who also considers the shape of Tenochtitlan in his discussion of the Spanish conquest in *La conquête de l’Amérique*, reminds us that, apart from the act of Monteczuma’s conferral of the map of the city to Cortes, symbolically legitimizing the Spanish conquest to Charles V, another symbolic act was in process. Todorov quotes from this passage from Cortes’, which I reproduce here in full:

Having considered in which location we should establish a new colony that was close to the Lake, having a great need for one for the security and peace of all these provinces, we thought it best to establish it in the city of Temixtitán [Tenochtitlán], which was entirely destroyed, but, as we have already said, was so famous, and was greatly prized by us. [...] The reconstruction of Temixtitán, begun four or five months ago, is succeeding very well, and would your Majesty believe that with each

day the city becomes more beautiful, so that as it has in times past been the queen and capital of all these provinces, we hope it will return to be so in the future.<sup>118</sup>

For Todorov, "Cortés wants to in some way create legitimacy for himself," but *not*, he is adamant, with respect to Charles V, "not any more in the eyes of the king of Spain (which was one of his major preoccupations during the campaign), but with respect to the local population, consciously accepting the continuity with the reign of Moctezuma [...] The capital of the new state will be the same as that of the vanquished Mexico."<sup>119</sup> Evidently, the answer that Cortes was looking for had changed: no longer was it necessary to seek legitimacy in the eyes of his king, it was necessary now to seek legitimacy in the eyes of the native populations, and that, he was sure, required rebuilding the city as it was before it had been destroyed.

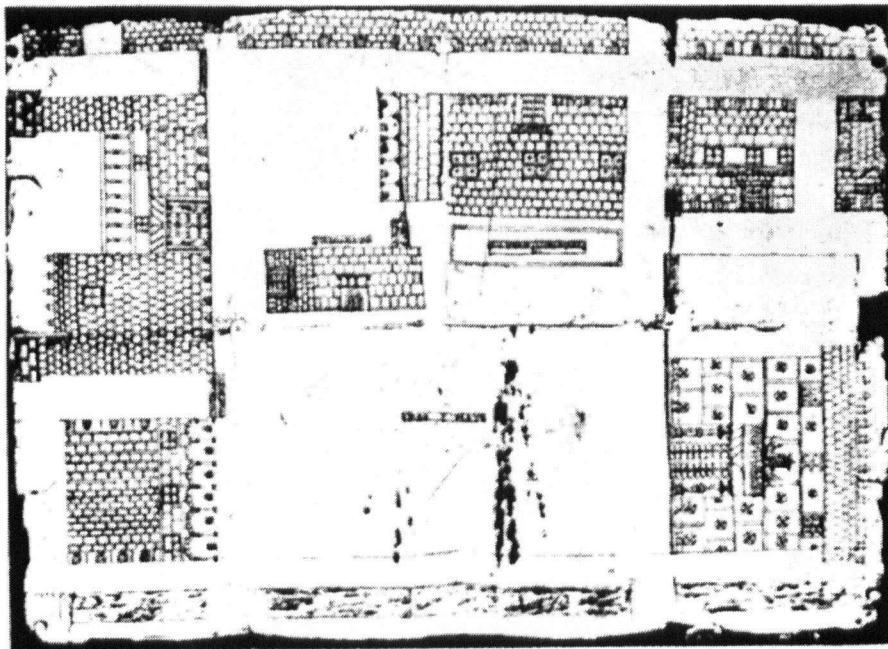
But to be sure, it was in great part a matter in which the Spanish had little choice. As George Kubler reminds us, for an entire generation after the fall of Tenochtitlan, no competent architects (by European standards) were to be found in New Spain, as one can clearly see from the plan of the *Plaza Mayor* (fig. 11), a deficiency which was eagerly felt by the governors of the new colonies.<sup>120</sup> When Cortés decided to build his capital on the ruins of the Aztec city, he would need to rely upon one of his soldiers, Alonzo Garcia Brávo to redraw the plan of the city's streets. Kubler concludes that "the most salient and singular aspect of [pre 1550's building in Mexico City] is its amateurish character. It is rather ironic," he continues, "that the greatest and most demanding task of architecture in Late Renaissance history escaped so completely from the control of professional theory. Instead, it was achieved by amateurs and handymen, with plenitude and raw vigour." Whatever

<sup>118</sup> Quoted in TODOROV. 1992. 73-4. Also, as cross-reference, and I have used this version for my translation, RAMUSIO. 1978. Vol. VI 240.

<sup>119</sup> TODOROV. 1992. 73, 74.

<sup>120</sup> KUBLER, GEORGE. "Architects and Builders in Mexico: 1521-1550." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 7 (1944): 7-19. 7.

building was done, moreover, in Kubler's estimation, would have been impossible without the collaboration of the native population, for "the complexity and magnitude of the task could not have been undertaken by any other than the missionary. He alone, among 16th-century colonists, commanded the understanding of Indian society and the affection of its members, without which no solution to the endless problems of improvised construction would have been possible."<sup>121</sup>



*Figure 11. Plaza Major, 1562-66. Archivo de Indias, Seville.*

But somehow, despite this lack of expertise, despite the almost complete lack of the theoretical underpinnings of the architecture of the new Tenochtitlan, despite

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. 19.

the very evident blend of *Mexica* and European themes, the ruse seems to have worked. Alonzo García Brávo, who had designed the new city, was certainly not acquainted with either Vitruvius or Leon Battista Alberti, but it is indicative that in his dialogues on Mexico City of 1554, the Spanish humanist Francisco Cervantes de Salazar would cite Vitruvius by name, and that, by 1773, the town planning regulations would be based on Vitruvian ideals.<sup>122</sup> But even by 1648, Thomas Gage would describe Mexico City thus:

There is nothing in Mexico wanting which may make a city happy; and certainly had those who have so much extolled with their pens the parts of Granada in Spain, Lombardy and Florence in Italy, making them the earthly paradise, had they been acquainted with the New World and with Mexico, they would have recanted their untruth.<sup>123</sup>

And perhaps to him, the city did indeed look like it did to Juan Gómez de Trasmonte already in 1628, perhaps not shaped like a dolphin, but certainly closer to Jacopo de' Barbari's Venice than the Nürnberg map (fig. 12).

<sup>122</sup> SCHWARTZ, STUART B. "Cities of Empire: Mexico and Bahia in the Sixteenth Century." *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 11, no. 4 (1969): 616-37. 623.

<sup>123</sup> THOMAS GAGE, *The English-American, A New Survey of the West Indies*, London 1648, Quoted in *Ibid.* 618.

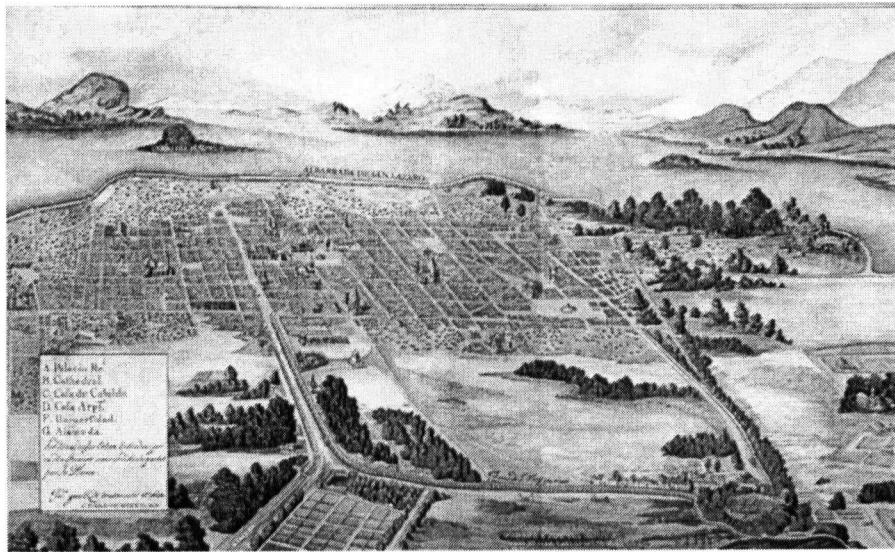


Figure 12. Juan Gómez de Trasmonte, 1628, *Museo de la Ciudad de México*

What was the question to which these cities answered? Whether Venice or Tenochtitlan, I think it must have been, quite simply: is discovery possible? Can we discover? What was known is forgotten, exactly for that memory to be recovered, dug up from the ancient texts, restored, reconstructed, the elements disassembled, reassembled in another manner, ingredients substituted, moved, inverted. The point of this exercise, it seems to me, was that of making cities, continents, the world, the *other* inhabitable, unambiguously ones own, understandable in that they conformed to a cosmology (as heterogeneous as any cosmology might be), that one did not merely assume or adopt or accept, but actively participated in constructing. The imagination, in this great act, had set off on its own accord, had not stopped at merely recovering a memory, but needed to “discover” it: to imagine it, construct it, embellish it with verse. It matters little how disparate the elements that make up a

city are. Indeed, the act of discovery is also that of “subtracting exceptions,” but of course, never too many of them. Indeed, discovery is that of the *marvelous possession*.

This sense of the marvelous possession may have been strongest in the New World, its forms and the practices by which it was constructed most fraught, but the journey to America made here in this essay might carry us back from Tenochtitlan and revisit other re-inscriptions, other discoveries, much closer at hand. It is Fernand Braudel who reminds us the “scientific” geography constituted itself not through expeditions into unoccupied territories, but through collateral conquests of territories close at hand and already occupied.<sup>124</sup> It is not by coincidence that Andrea Navagero would write to Ramusio, as was noted earlier, about his gardens in Venice. He was at the time serving on a diplomatic mission to Spain, but had taken the opportunity to explore the architectural marvels of the Iberian peninsula. One of these, unsurprisingly, was the Alhambra, and in the four letters to Ramusio that he wrote to him during his permanence in Spain, took much time to describe the pleasures of its Moorish gardens. It was just some 30 years earlier that Granada had fallen to the Spanish, and it did not escape him, being well versed in the classics, having requested Ramusio to send to him in Spain a copy of Vitruvius, that the Moors had themselves perhaps preserved the architectural canons of the Romans better than the Europeans. His lamentation is sincere, echoing Palladio:

“In sum, this place lacks nothing beautiful or pleasing, except someone to appreciate it, and enjoy it, living in quiet, and tranquil pursuit of studies, and pleasures appropriate to a man of worth, desiring nothing else.”<sup>125</sup>

Indeed, since the departure of the Moors the Alhambra had been uninhabited; *it needed to be re-inhabited*. The feeling would not escape Charles V, and sure enough, over the fireplace of his bedroom in the Alhambra, he would have a

<sup>124</sup> BRAUDEL, FERNAND. *Écrits Sur L'histoire*. Paris: Flammarion, 1969., 171.

<sup>125</sup> PORCACCHI. 322v.

new emblem placed, the imperial eagle holding a globe in its talons flanked by the pillars of Hercules, inscribed with the motto "plus oltre." But he did not stop at this. The Alhambra itself would be re-inscribed, within a new palacial complex built on the geometrical cosmology of the Renaissance with its circles, squares and octagons. "The conjunction of these three figures," it has often been noted, "symbolizes earth, eternity, and celestial life."<sup>126</sup>

Or we might travel beyond Tenochtitlan, beyond the surface of the earth altogether. Recalling Fracastoro's letter to Ramusio about the merits of Dante's prefiguration of the Southern Cross, it is indeed marvelous to peruse the *Paesi Nuovamente Ritrovati*, and find there Vespucci's own drawing of those four stars (or rather, six). What re-inscriptions, what troubadorian reconstructions, to see in it a cross like Stradanus did.

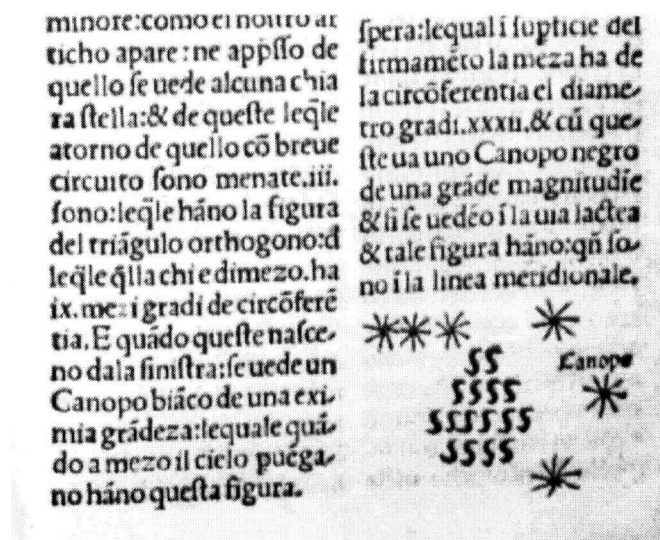


Figure 13. Vespucci's Southern Cross. From the *Paesi Nuovamente Ritrovati*, Vicenza, 1507.

<sup>126</sup> BROTHERS, CAMMY. "The Renaissance Reception of the Alhambra: The Letters of Andrea Navagero and the Palace of Charles V." *Muqarnas* 11 (1994): 79-102. 90.



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