



Francesca Fiorani. *The Marvel of Maps: Art, Cartography and Politics in Renaissance Italy.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. ix + 347 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10727-2.



Reviewed by Veronica Della Dora (Department of Geography, University of California, Los Angeles.)

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Towards a “3D Understanding” of Renaissance Cartography

Sixteen years have passed since Brian Harley’s influential article, “Deconstructing the Map,” appeared in *Cartographica*.^[1] While the work of the British geographer has provided Anglophone students with a powerful tool to look at cartography critically, today his Foucauldian conception of maps as mere instruments of power seems to have become much too restrictive, almost obsolete. It indeed risks obscuring other, no less important aspects of cartography. Recent work by Denis Cosgrove and Edward Casey has started to move beyond Harley’s ideological focus, incorporating other dimensions of cartography, such as the aesthetic, the moral, the phenomenological, into a perspective that ties the map and mapping to specific scientific and artistic traditions and spatial perceptions.^[2]

Francesca Fiorani’s *The Marvel of Maps* can be situated in this context. As the art historian explicitly states in the introduction, hers is a book “about the interactions of mapping with other forms of knowledge and representation in the Renaissance and Counter-Reformation” (p. 1). Spanning different domains such as mythology, natural sciences, and theology, the author offers a detailed

discussion of some of the most extraordinary works of Italian Renaissance cartography and art: Ignazio Danti’s map cycles in Cosimo I de’ Medici’s Guardaroba Nuova of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence (1575) and at the Vatican Belvedere, executed under the commission of Pope Gregory XIII (ca. 1575-83). But rather than isolating these map cycles from Renaissance culture “on the simplistic consideration that they all contain cartographic images,” Fiorani investigates the interaction between mapping as an active process and “other systems of representation and other symbolic realms” (p. 253).

The book is structured in two parts. The former examines the cycle of the Guardaroba Nuova, inserting its decorative maps in a broader context of worldly art and “collecting” in the culture of the Renaissance court. The latter deals with Danti’s “sacred cartography” at the Vatican. The mundane and sacred aspects of Danti’s map cycles reflect the complex meanings attached to the word “cosmos” in the Renaissance—as a worldly “ornament” and a reality in continuous expansion (thanks to geographical discovery), but also as an object of spiritual contemplation integrating the celestial and terrestrial orbs.

In different ways, the cosmos and its representations at Renaissance courts such as Cosimo I's and Gregory XIII's functioned as powerful emblems. Mapping's "emblematic" role is made particularly explicit in the analysis of the *Guardaroba Nuova*, initially conceived as a small-scale re-creation of the cosmos and its wonders. In Vasari's original plan this would not only include the cartographic decorations and the huge globe visitors can still see today, but also (never realized) images of plants and animals native to the mapped countries, and the Ptolemaic constellations to be depicted on the ceiling of the room (p. 24). As Fiorani convincingly shows, the Florentine duke, who had made the cosmos central to his own iconography through the motto "Cosmos Cosmoi Cosmos" (the Cosmos is Cosimo's Ornament), had a particular fascination with cosmography. "A means to universal knowledge and global control," this discipline became an increasingly appealing entertainment to Renaissance rulers and led to a close relationship between the Dominican friar and cosmographer Egnazio Danti and his Florentine patron (pp. 41-43).

The *Guardaroba Nuova* was only one of a series of microcosms at the disposal of Cosimo I. The duke could in fact wander through the self-enclosed cartographic spaces of his own botanical gardens and menageries (p. 27). The *Guardaroba Nuova* nevertheless represents an evocative example of unique epistemological resonance for Renaissance historians and cultural geographers. Intended as a "geographical cabinet of curiosities," in whose cupboards (decorated with Danti's maps) the duke could store his precious collections of exotica according to their geographical provenience, the *Guardaroba* materializes a powerful metaphor. The *Wunderkammer* as the typical form of geographical knowledge in the Renaissance has been demonstrated by various scholars.[3] Fiorani's analysis of the *Guardaroba* represents an important contribution in this sense. It provides Renaissance historians and historical geographers with a unique counter-example: not only maps, isolari, and cosmographies conceptualized as cabinets of curiosities, but a true cabinet of curiosities organized through maps. "Ptolemy's geographical order was used to organize the *Guardaroba Nuova* as an encyclopaedic collection of artefacts" (p. 89). Stored in the "mapped" cupboards, Cosimo's various exotica constituted metonyms of distant worlds brought together within the unifying microcosmic space of the *Guardaroba*, but they also served as symbols of their owner's networks of friendships, political alliances (often being diplomatic gifts), and thereby his personal prestige (p. 73).

The second part of the book takes the reader through the monumental frescoed maps Gregory XIII commissioned from Danti to decorate the Vatican Palace. The narrative sequence chosen by Fiorani (Sala Bologna-Galleria delle Mappe-Terza Loggia) is both chronological and geographical. It moves the reader from the local scale of Bologna's bird's-eye view (1575) to the regional maps of the Italian peninsula decorating the Gallery (ca. 1580) and culminates with the global scale of the two hemispheres' maps in the Terza Loggia (1583). This "crescendo" reflected the pope's escalation from a "parochial vision of power" confined to his native city, to Italy as a privileged historical theater for the affirmation of Catholic Christianity in the years following the Council of Trent, and ultimately to the world itself, intended as the arena for the Church's universal mission (p. 170). But as Fiorani observes, these maps were not supposed to make territorial claims, since the Pontifical State occupied only a small portion of the Italian peninsula, and the Catholic Church's domain on the rest of the world was an "a-territorial" one. As with Cosimo I, the Vatican maps played once again an "emblematic" role, this time intertwined with sacred and historical elements, which the author skilfully singles out through an attentive iconographic reading.

Of particular interest is Fiorani's analysis of the Maps' Gallery, that part of Danti's Vatican work best known to the public. Danti's forty monumental frescoed maps provided visitors to the Vatican Palace with a papal interpretation of Church history. As was customary in the Renaissance, Ptolemaic geography was used as a "naturalizing" link between disparate historical events reaching from Classical antiquity to the modern period, from the Church of Constantine to that of Gregory XIII (p. 176). Fiorani's true contribution to the study of these maps lies in her association with the scenes represented on the ceiling. Relating to the Eucharist, the foundation of holy buildings, or pious deeds performed by saintly figures, many of these scenes were in turn "mapped" by Danti on the Italian peninsula. In this sense, maps served Gregory XIII as a convincing instrument to respond to Protestant dogmatic controversies and proclaim once again papal spiritual authority inside and beyond the Italian peninsula (p. 183).

One of the most original aspects of the book is the reading of these "map cycles" not only as two-dimensional visual representations, but as true three-dimensional realities, embedded in very specific architectural spaces. In this sense the author responds to an increasing cross-disciplinary interest in the phenomenol-

ogy of representation.[4] The experience of walking through the Vatican Gallery and the materiality of Cosimo's collections give their respective cartographic representations a completely new flavor. The book's profuse illustrations (no less than 130 in black and white and 30 in color), including not only captions of halls and galleries, but also "geographical" pairings between some of the Guardaroba's maps and exotic objects from Cosimo's collections, are effective in conveying such phenomenological experience. Fiorani's "three-dimensional" approach also reflects recent interest in "locating science," best exemplified by Livingstone's work.[5] Not limiting herself to "maps," but rather extending her research to "mapping" as a practice, Fiorani succeeds in showing the constant "physical" (and not only theoretical) interaction between science and sacred space in the Renaissance (e.g., Danti placing an armillary sphere and an astrolabe on the façade of Santa Maria Novella, or a meridian on the floor of Saint Gregory chapel).

Readers of H-HistGeog will find in this book an innovative way to look at Renaissance cartography, in line with the most recent methodological approaches. But this is equally appealing reading for Renaissance historians and historians of science, who will certainly find interesting insights. However, if in this sense Fiorani's multidisciplinary approach proves successful, it also produces some limitations. Danti's work certainly remains a unique achievement in Renaissance cartography. But to what extent does it represent an isolated case? Can it be contextualized within a broader tradition of map cycles?

In other words, can this book speak for a broader number of similar case studies, or make broader epistemological claims beyond Danti's work? This the author does not make clear. The book nevertheless remains an important contribution and an inspiring reading for a broad multidisciplinary audience.

Notes

[1]. J.B. Harley, "Deconstructing the Map," *Cartographica*, 26 (1989): pp.1-20.

[2]. Denis Cosgrove, ed., *Mappings* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999); and Denis Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); and Edward Casey, *Representing Place: Landscape Painting and Maps* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

[3]. See for example Mary Campbell, *Wonder and Science: Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Paula Findlen, "The Formation of a Scientific Community: Natural History in 16th-century Italy," in *Natural Particulars: Nature and the Disciplines in Renaissance Europe*, ed. A. Grafton and N. Sirasi (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), pp.369-400; and Frank Lestringant, *Mapping the Renaissance World: The Geographical Imagination in the Age of Discovery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[4]. See Casey, *Representing Place*.

[5]. David Livingstone, *Putting Science in Its Place* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

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