



Sean Roberts. *Printing a Mediterranean World: Florence, Constantinople, and the Renaissance of Geography.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. 336 S. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-06648-9; ISBN 978-0-674-06807-0.

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Following a Florentine Book-Object in Transit

Few authors in the history of Western cartography and geographical thought have had the same resonance and impact as Ptolemy. Since the ârediscoveryâ and Latin translation of his *Geography* (1409/10), the Alexandrian astronomer and geographer seems to have retained a sort of mythical status throughout the centuries. We find him in fifteenth-century miniatures, dressed in lavish regal garments (the result of a confusion by medieval Europeans who mistook him for a member of Egyptâs Ptolemaic dynasty), or on the walls of Florentine *studioli* portrayed as a long-bearded Byzantine wise man. We find him on the top of Waldseemüllerâs map (1507) next to Amerigo Vespucciâthe geographer of the Old World facing the explorer of the New. More recently, in the writings of human geographers, we find Ptolemy featuring as the forerunner of modern âscientificâ representations of space, or even as the forefather of quantitative geography and the geographic information system (GIS) (usually set side by side a more âhumanisticâ or âculturalâ Strabo). [1]

As it often happens, characterizations and appropriations of authors of the past are inevitably shaped by the contingencies of the present, that is, by our intellectual ambitions and ideological aspirations, or simply by disciplinary frameworks and institutional demands. Tracing the genealogy of a discipline or school of thought back to a set of ancient heroes, mapping paradigmatic breaks on specific charismatic figures, or simply, attempting to narrate the history of an idea in a legible linear way,

however, may often lead to simplification and sometimes even to distortion. Nuances and complexities may get lost in translation, and materials not fitting the narrative may be silenced or ignored; Ptolemy and his likes may become but mirror images of their painters.

Printing a Mediterranean World can be situated within a recent revisionist type of scholarship. In particular, it can be positioned within a history of cartography that emphasizes hybridity over purification, subtle continuities, and the coexistence of multiple traditions over dramatic revolutions or sudden paradigmatic shifts; in other words, a history of cartography that challenges heroic monolithic linear narratives and does not shy away from complexity, contingency, and contradiction. Examples of this history of cartography range from Matthew Edneyâs article âCartography without Progressâ to recent rereadings of Ptolemyâs *Geography* and its reception. [2] For example, in his illuminating study, Patrick Gautier Dalché© argues that many of the concepts traditionally ascribed to a Ptolemaic revolution are in reality anachronistic impositions of modern historians. He also shows that in early Renaissance humanist circles, *Geography* became initially popular for the lists of ancient place-names it provided to poets, antiquarians, and storytellers, rather than as the scientific treatise we think of today. Flavio Biondo, for instance, was said to have used a Ptolemaic table to compose his *Italia illustrata* (1453), a topographic description of the peninsula aimed at the exploration of

the Roman roots of the Renaissance world and its antiquities.[3]

Sean Roberts's book focuses on one such reappropriation of Ptolemy. Composed in the same metric form as Dante's *Divina Commedia* (fourteenth century) and printed in 1482, almost thirty years after Biondo's work, Francesco Berlinghieri's *Septe giornate della geographia* (*The Seven Days of Geography*) is an over one-hundred-folia poetic rendering of Ptolemy's *Geography* in vernacular. Berlinghieri's poetic description of the world unfolds as a week-long journey in which present and different pasts blend into each other. In the book, the hills of Fiesole, high above Florence, stand in for Dante's dark wood, while the ancient geographer replaces Virgil as muse and guide. Brought together over a distance of thirteen centuries, the Alexandrian geographer and his modern counterpart, Florentine humanist and statesman Berlinghieri, survey the world from above, discuss etymology, history, and even the proper method for mathematically producing maps (p. 2).

Copies of the text are profusely illustrated with a wealth of illuminations and hand-colored Ptolemaic tables. As with other countless premodern geographical works and maps, Berlinghieri's lyrical description of the world nonetheless fell victim to the positivist history of cartography that dominated most of the past century. Because of its hybrid nature, the work was generally overlooked, or considered an anachronistic oddity deviating from the Ptolemaic canon (and thus, in the mind of many, countering the progress of cartographic science). Indeed, the Florentine was despised by some post-World War II map historians for his very modest professional knowledge of geography (p. 10).

In reasserting the significance of the book as cultural artefact, Roberts offers much more than an analytical description of a scarcely studied work. In his fascinating study, Berlinghieri's book assumes three-dimensionality. It becomes a point of convergence between a multitude of different (and often contrasting) narratives and between a variety of textual and visual traditions. It becomes a container of the new and the old; an inexhaustible cabinet of curiosities replete with exquisite illuminations and elaborated initials, mythical allusions and religious references, topographic data, and wondrous tales. At the same time, it also becomes an insistently physical object and a traveling object to be sure. Berlinghieri's book derives much of its agency from its materiality and yet at the same time it changes its meaning and status as it moves from printer to binder, from

author to patron, from donor to recipient, from one shore of the Mediterranean to the other.

The structure of the book reflects the multiple facets of this extraordinary artefact. The first two chapters discuss respectively the reception of Ptolemy's textual tradition (in Byzantium, fifteenth-century Italy and the Ottoman Empire) and the broader context of Renaissance geography. Following Dalché, Roberts shows how the visual and material cultures of fifteenth-century Europe were profoundly conditioned by the prevalence and influence of *self-consciously* Ptolemaic maps (p. 10, my emphasis). More originally, he situates Berlinghieri's book (and Renaissance geography by large) between classical heritage and a deeply Christian tradition. Indeed, he reminds us how Renaissance geography was a quintessentially and emphatically Christian discipline (as opposed, once again, to traditional linear narratives that picture a Renaissance supplanting religion and Ptolemy as paving the way to a modern secular understanding of space). Berlinghieri thus appears as a world traveller, a divinely inspired poet, and as a kind of conduit not only between his native Florence and distant environs, but between the classical past and the fifteenth-century present (p. 47).

Roberts also shows how, in describing God's creation, works like Berlinghieri's book offered potential shared ground for Christians and Muslims. Indeed, one year after its initial publication, a copy of *Septe giornate* was donated to Sultan Bayezid II, son of Mehmed the Conqueror as a diplomatic gift. The episode inspires Roberts to explore the complex Mediterranean networks through which the book traveled, as well as the processes of book production and print culture in fifteenth-century Italy and in the Ottoman world. In chapter 3, Berlinghieri's book thus acquires its third, more-than-textual, dimension. It becomes an assemblage of technologies and techniques, a status symbol, a luxury item manufactured for the benefit of relatively small groups of likeminded intellectuals (p. 100), as well as a political artefact and medium of exchange in a Mediterranean split in two. In other words, it becomes a material object in transit.

The book's convoluted trajectories nonetheless open up to contradictions. As Roberts reminds us in the final chapter, modern narratives of cosmopolitan coexistence and exchange only provide a partial, if not idealized, picture of fifteenth-century Mediterranean culture. As with many of his compatriots, Berlinghieri embraced an anti-Islamic crusading mentality that is enshrined in the very

copies of the book destined to the Ottoman Empire and its political leaders. In exploring western European images of Ottomans, Roberts shows the limits of current scholarly narratives that link intercultural contact to tolerance (another idealized appropriation of the past, this time reflecting modern the liberal aspirations of some modern scholars). Rather than eroding boundaries, Roberts argues, early printed books had the potential ... to enforce and police national and pre-national boundariesâ (p. 13).

While focussing on a specific book, *Printing a Mediterranean World* goes well beyond it. One of the great merits of Roberts's critical enquiry is that it reminds us of the holistic value of Renaissance geography. Through the in-depth study of a fascinating multidimensional object, it offers a stimulating journey through a mode of knowledge spanning, or rather conciliating, what today may appear as disparate branches of knowledge: science and art, politics and poetry, diplomacy and theology. As calls to interdisciplinarity are becoming increasingly common rhetoric in academia, Roberts makes us rediscover a tradition that challenges and problematizes modern compartmentalized knowledge.

In a sense, Roberts's approach is itself holistic. The author confidently moves between map history and art history, between theology and philosophy, between Mediterranean studies and science studies. Critically engaging with questions of reception, geographical imagination, patronage, materiality, and print culture, the author challenges the reader to see the whole picture.

Delightfully written and meticulously researched, *Printing a Mediterranean World* includes copious foot-

notes and an extended bibliography. It also includes reproductions from Berlinghieri's *Sette giornate*, though these are sadly all in black and white and clustered in a separate section, which often makes navigation somewhat tiring, as the reader has to continuously flip back and forth from text to image. This is a shame, given the importance of the pictures to the text and their centrality to Berlinghieri's text itself. Nonetheless, this does not diminish the value of a truly outstanding book that will certainly speak to a variety of scholars across the humanities and broaden the disciplinary and intellectual horizons of many.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Franco Farinelli, *L'invenzione della Terra* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2007); and William A. Koelsch, "Squinting Back at Strabo," *The Geographical Review* 94 (2004): 502-518.

[2]. Matthew Edney, "Cartography without Progress: Reinterpreting the Nature and Historical Development of Mapmaking," *Cartographica* 30 (1993): 54-68; and Jesse Simon, "Chorography Reconsidered: An Alternative Approach to the Ptolemaic Definition," in *Mapping Medieval Geographies: Geographical Encounters in the Latin West and Beyond, 300-1600*, ed. Keith D. Lilley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 23-44.

[3]. Patrick Gautier Dalché, "The Reception of Ptolemy's Geography (End of the Fourteenth to Beginning of the Sixteenth Century)," in *The History of Cartography*, vol. 3, ed. David Woodward (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 285-364.

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