Town views for praying
The ancient way of thinking *by means of* places

by Giorgio Mangani

Giorgio Mangani teaches geography at the University of Ancona. His research interests include the history of geographic and cartographic thought. He is currently working on urban views of patron saints in the XIV and XV century and on the persuasive quality of cartography.

In 1533, a school handbook on the art of memory, J. Romberch's *Congestorium artificiosae memoriae* (Venice, 1533), suggested the use of town views, including illustrations, to help memory as a well-established and widespread teaching practice. As in children's drawings, the view **(Pl. 1)** included the main palaces and characteristic sites of a town, such as the shops of the *Barbitonsor*, the *Bellator*, the *Bibliopola*, etc. These were the so-called "palaces of memory" because they were used as images and frames of mental images to aid memorising and assembling concepts (*memoria ad res*) or whole passages (*memoria ad verba*) of the rhetoric and literary tradition in a speech.

Today, this mnemonic technique is almost incomprehensible to members of a civilisation based on the written Media, but this method has been applied since ancient times. In Aristotle's work as well as in the *Retorica ad Herennium,* attributed to Cicero, the method is explained extensively. It was a matter of imagining concepts and passages to remember in connection to the rooms of a well-known house by means of images which could be associated to these concepts and passages. Then, the rooms were distinguished in sequence, or by the order of arches in a portico. For a pleading, for example, Cicero planned a suggestive use of the witnesses at a specific point (that is in a room or an arch of the memorised sequence), by memorising the image of garish bovine testicles hold by a man in a gown. The word *testes*, indeed, referred both to testicles and witnesses, and the image was so strong that it was easily remembered; it possessed emotional energy (*energhéia*).

Aristotle wrote that the ABCDE sequence, once impressed in the imagination (the letters of the alphabet also helped the process of memorisation in case the individual was familiar with writing), provided an easy way to deduct forgotten passages. If

someone happened to forget a passage memorised in B or D but could remember any other passage of the chosen sequence, then he would deduct the forgotten one.

Hence, the sequence of the portico's *intercolumni*, or the rooms of a famous palace (today, the verses of a poem are still defined as *stanzas*), worked as a support to the mnemonic reminder because they were architecturally renowned. The mnemonic reminder was necessary to deliver a public oration, or to write a text (but, as it is commonly known, what received most interest was the oral speech, since writing was regarded as an inferior practice of a servile rank).[1]

As a consequence of the urbanisation of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the urban landscape became a new and powerful means of the social and individual imagination. The mnemonic system based on rooms was suitable for Cicero and *rhetores* and solicitors of Rome, but the new rhetoric theorised from the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, which was mostly reintroduced by personalities such as Ugo da San Vittore and the mendicant orders, had ambitions of indoctrination and was addressed to the masses, who were gathered in cities.

The mnemonic and persuasive system based on palaces of the new urban landscape was then adapted to the cities. As it was a very familiar icon, the urban image became the figurative and rhetorical means used in order to provide *energhéia* to speeches, to allow them to strike root in every individual's mind, and finally to constitute a powerful means of persuasion. The images used to memorise had to be of two kinds: either sufficiently strong to strike the imagination or familiar, since they were already rooted in the mind. Views of cities were familiar and could be used for this purpose.

Evidence of this use can be found as early as in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when the urban community stopped being, at a doctrinal and moral level, blasphemous and antithetical to the monastic retreat: a place of trade, of social and sexual promiscuity and sin. With the help of the masters of the mendicant orders, especially Dominicans and Franciscans in Italy, the city started to be represented as the realisation of the "celestial Jerusalem". As early as in the eighth century, in a few of the commentaries on the Apocalypse, such as Beatus of Liébana's *Commentary on the Apocalypse,* the construction of the celestial Jerusalem was not conceived as an event of the future but as a place the individual could reach through prayer and interior meditation. In the twelfth century, Bernard of Clairvaux clarified that this was possible even where people lived under a Moral inspired by heaven and the scriptures.

The Franciscan and Dominican projects of *renovatio* in their contemporary church, especially in the cities in Northern and Central Italy where urbanisation was more widespread, were introduced by promoting the image of Jerusalem as a city. For example, the Franciscans wanted to be represented inside a walled celestial Jerusalem, while making the Christian message into practice. These were images that only a century previously would have appeared blasphemous.

The codes of the fifteenth-century Augustine's *De civitate dei* began to represent the celestial Jerusalem in the shape of the new capitals. In illuminations of the initial letters, Augustine is portrayed in the humanistic appearance of Saint Jerome meditating in his studio, that is, Augustine imagines the celestial Jerusalem descending from the sky as a spaceship and having the realistic and easily recognisable shape of the Rome of Pope Nicholas V or fifteenth-century Florence, including Brunelleschi's dome **(Pl. 2)**.[2]

Meanwhile the confraternities had begun to represent the patron saints holding towns in their hands to strike the imagination of new believers. The urban characteristics of these towns were easily recognisable. Perhaps, it was an old iconography, but it was used in a completely new way. Instead of exemplifying the realist sense of a bourgeois society, whose interests were in trade and reality, as it was demanded in the historiographic tradition of the sixties, this had a propagandistic and rhetorical function based on the use of urban views as meditative images which were able to cement concepts and influence inner reasoning. These ways were not very different to the advertising logic of today's television.

Through these images, the inhabitants of late-mediaeval towns strengthened their belief that the Christian project, the building of a new "brotherhood" or holy "citizenship" as guaranteed by the patron saint had to be accomplished then and there; it was a duty for which they were destined, not anybody else.

It is possible that Piero della Francesca represents the urban landscape of Arezzo in the scene of the finding of Christ's cross in the cycle entitled, *Storie della vera croce* [Stories of the true cross] (Saint Francis' Church, Arezzo, 1452-1462 ca **Pl. 3**) for this reason.[3] As a matter of fact, Constantine's mother, Helen, recovered the cross in Jerusalem. The painting makes the people of Arezzo meditate by suggesting that the event concerns them closely.

The employment of this form of "mystical realism", that is, the use of familiar and recognisable images to strike the imagination of the believers, was also exercised in the rhetoric of the sermon. As Lina Bolzoni observes,[4] in this case there are no painted

images but "figurative speeches" in which quarters and landscapes of towns are employed to confer emotional strength (consequently mnemonic energy) to the words. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, preaching sought to make a speech perceptible through detailed mental images of famous sights of the town, in which the preaching took place, and to use them as "frames" for mnemonic images. St. Bernardino da Siena's preaching is a renowned example of this.

During a Lent sermon in Siena, for example, he described an image of the "squared town" and its quarters in order to place persuasive moral and exemplary figures. At the time, Siena was identified as the squared town.

In the fifteenth century, the use of urban views as a support to remember meditative images was wide spread, especially among the scholars of the so-called "Devotio Moderna", a new religious movement inclined to mysticism, which practised a form of prayer structured as meditation, and inner dialogue based on mental images. The devotional handbooks frequently refer to them. The Prayer manual, *Zardino de oration*, printed in Venice in 1494 (but written in 1454), orders the use of the views of the individual's town, either real or painted, as a support for prayer and meditation (that is to create mental figures):

> I tell this story of the Passion because, in order to impress it better in your mind and remember each action more easily, it is helpful to fix places and people in your memory. For example, you can use a city, such as Jerusalem, but you need to be familiar with it. In this city you find all the principal sites in which Christ's Passion occurred: for example, in a palace you locate the room in which Christ had the last supper with his disciples. Other examples can be Anne's house and that of Caiaphas, where Jesus was led at night. There is also the room in which Poor Jesus was brought before Caiaphas, mocked and laughed at; Pilate's residence where he talked to the Jewish people, and in the residence, the room in which Poor Jesus was bound to the column; Mount Calvary where he was put on the cross, and other similar places … .[5]

In the fifteenth century, the mystic Battista da Varano, princess of Camerino, also claimed this was the prevailing system for individual prayer. The holy Battista writes:

Lately it is initially necessary to continue imagining firmly the places of the Passion, such as the garden, the palace, the Mount Calvary, and others, or to represent them in the land in which you happen to be. If they do not exit, you must create them in your mind, then, in these imagined places, focus on being with the person at the time of the sermon, or later. Try not to depart from them for as long as you can.[6]

Ultimately, praying had become an act of imagination, a mental itinerary through geographical images, like a virtual pilgrimage. In a famous engraving, Dürer represents St. Anthony in a meditative state by drawing the saint sitting with a book in his hand and imagining an empty and deserted town **(Pl. 4).** Evidently, this did homage to the devotional orders of the time.

However, true pilgrimages apply the "palaces of memory" as well. The "Sacred Mounts" are an example. Built by the Franciscan Bernardino Caimi in Varallo, near Vercelli (in Italy) in 1481, the journey to the "Sacred Mount" was intended to reproduce the pilgrimage to the sacred places in Palestine on a smaller scale there in Varallo. It provided for a sequence of buildings in which the events of Christ's Passion were reproduced. According to the itinerary, a pilgrim had to pass through very small rooms and brush against models representing Christ on Golgotha, the death of Christ, and other sacred scenes, in order to benefit from unforgettable emotions.[7] The rooms and palaces of the Sacred Mounts worked as well as the "mental" creations.

The use of towns and palaces to aid memory was an effective mnemonic and rhetorical technique which was also employed extensively in secular contexts, in the organisation of the material of historical and geographical works. The employment of geographic images with a secular purpose had an old tradition. In the first century AD, the great geographer of the Classical world, Strabo, had written that geographical maps helped people to remember stories and other information in relation to the described localities. They were system of rhetorical *loci*, instead of being a representation of geographical places. In his and the Classical world's opinion, geography was a science of local peculiarities used as moral *exempla*. It was employed as a handbook of caution (*phrònesis*) for the art of self-disentanglement from any circumstance, designed for all people of the educated classes of the Roman world. By practising his own creative power (*diànoia*), Strabo's reader could collect the different descriptions of the world in his mind and create his own global and reliable mental image (Strabo gives the

construction of the *colossi*, such as the Colossus of Rhodes, as an example. They were built piece by piece and then assembled, *Geogr.* 1.23, 2.5.11).

Geography, the science of sight, was indeed especially based on the visualisation of places; instead of facilitating a journey, it made it unnecessary. Thus, conceived as a helpful mental image, the map was a useful means to fix in memory and "see" what geographical studies had only described. In the first century AD, Dionysius Periegetes composed in verses the *Periegésis,* a geographical poem in agreement with the Alexandrine culture (he was a school-master in Alexandria). The poem's versification and descriptive structure suggest a map of the habitable earth at a glance that reveals its nature as a work for memorisation and the school based on the power of figures to stay impressed in the mind. The places described in the poem are once again simply a pretext to create mnemonic associations to which they lend their "houses" and their purpose as *loci*. By viewing the map from above, Dionysius introduced the student to basilar information linked to towns and regions such as illustrious names, battles, mythological stories, and passages from the epic literary tradition. This was the basic knowledge that was necessary for an educated man.[8]

In the late Middle Ages, universal chronicles, such as Schedel's *Liber cronicarum*, still narrated the story of the world in agreement with this rhetorical criterion. They began with the creation, then arranged the content by town and included a wide range of images. The *Liber cronicarum* was published by Hartmann Schedel (1440-1514) in Nuremberg in 1493. It was the first printed book to be illustrated with urban views (**Pl. 5)**[9]. In it, urban sights work as rooms, as rhetorical frames for the contents but they also showed *energhéia*, an emotional strength which could help reading and memorising. Schedel clarified the purpose of the illustrations in his work in an advertising paper kept in the Library in Munich. "Dear reader," he wrote, "I promise you great pleasure in reading this book. You will not only read stories but you will also see them in front of your eyes with figures. You will not only see the portraits of emperors, popes, philosophers, poets and other famous characters in the costumes of their times, but you will also see the sights of the most famous cities of the whole world. You will have information on how they were originated and then flourished. Hence, when you turn your mind to these stories, facts and information, you will imagine them as if they were real and present in front of you." (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek).

One of the sources of Schedel's *Liber cronicarum* was Werner Rolewinck's *Fasciculus temporum* (Cologne, 1474), present in his extensive library. The latter is another

universal chronicle which had previously experimented on the same method, and provided an explanation of the meditative quality of the figures in the preface. Rolewinck was the Prior of the Carthusian convent in Cologne and the Carthusian order specialised in meditative techniques, on which the Prior himself had written other works.

In a similar way, modern geographical maps (which the scientific and historiographical literature deemed as consolidated and defined by a deep persuasive and rhetorical purpose)[10] and the town views of the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries maintained a deep "meditative" quality. Although represented with realism, they were still perceived meditatively by the public. Landscapes and town sights had often embellished illuminated Books of Hours in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They continued to decorate the succeeding printed Prayer Books. Town views were used as meditative and mnemonic tools in the accounts of pilgrimages to the Holy land. They were frequently reproduced in private and portable objects, such as in the painted screens, in the decoration of writing desks and musical instruments, cabinets and humanist *camerini*. Ultimately, the long apprenticeship explains the great success printed maps had when they invaded the European market in the XVI century.

Collected in atlases, the maps of towns and geographical regions were considered powerful means of propaganda. Abraham Ortelius' *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (Antwerp, 1570)[11], which was the first geographical atlas to be published, was held as a religious and mystical book. In its preface, the author valued the purpose of his work by using similar reasons to those developed by Schedel in the advertising paper for his *Liber*. Ortelius wrote that, thanks to the maps, the reader would see the world "as if he were there". The images would be impressed permanently in his memory.

Between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) made use of a map of the world to persuade the Chinese of the superiority of the Christian religion and try and convert them.[12]

After 1595, Ortelius started to publish an historical atlas: the *Parergon*. At the time, this expression referred to the space represented in the background of paintings, to that scene which created the setting of a portrait, a religious image, or an historical figure placed in the foreground. The title was not accidental because not only town views but also landscapes were recognised as a helpful support for remembering.

The *parergon* had already appeared in the iconography of the Virgin Mary with this same purpose. In the Marian iconography, it was distinguished by images of a garden,

specifically a rose garden, a castle, a mill, a harbour, a reservoir, a road, a city, a spring, a river, a field, a ship, or a bridge. These were all *topoi* that could easily induce the representation of a realistic landscape in the background. The appearance of these *loci* in paintings of the Virgin Mary, which were used in prayer, recalled the lauds and the Mysteries of the Rosary. (For example, the castle represented the virginal inviolability; the mill brought to mind the maceration and rise/rebirth of Christ/seed; the harbour, the reservoir, the road and the river referred to Mary's role as an intermediary between God and human beings; the town, the garden and the field were *loci* of devotions and symbols of paradise).

Eugenio Battisti[13] underlines the relationship between the elements of the Marian landscape, and the *Arma Christi* that participate in it, and the mnemonic procedures prescribed in the *Ars memoriae*, which make use of symbolic representations of space. A*rma Cristi* float, for example, in the space around the portrait of the Virgin Mary, in the manner of the late Classical perspective, as well as associations, which are used, like landscapes, to remember votive offerings connected to the worship of Mary.

In the fifteenth century, the *parergon* appearing in the background developed a decisive purpose for the comprehension of a painting in historical and liturgical arts. In sacred paintings, the background documented the past and the future of the event represented in the foreground. For example, the subject could foresee the multiplication of the figures representing the protagonist in various circumstances linked to the event represented in the painting, without keeping a unity of time or place. The precedents and consequences of the central event implied the reaction of the protagonist in various contemporaneous circumstances.

The mechanism was so essential to the mental logic of the time that it could be found in the contemporaneous spread of annotated books for the universities. From the twelfth century, notes and annotations appearing on books revealed, as well as the *parerga* of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (when the annotated codes were embellished with *tabulae*), the past and the future of the text they commented upon, that is, the sources and the observations of the *auctoritates*. They often corrected and modified the account. The geographical figures continued in their purpose of mnemonic "guidance". The *parerga*, the background landscapes, gathered the information to be remembered in order to understand the paintings and infer the moral consequences and attitudinal suggestions; specifically, they were "moral cartographies".

Finally, the deepest sensibility of the devotional sight was to be found in the new pastoral genre, which developed in German and Flemish circles. As Christopher Wood explains,[14] the painting of Albrecht Altdorfer, for example, has the features of the devotional sight, of a votive "icon". Altdorfer gave birth to the so-called "independent landscape" (this is a landscape without story or residual human figures, in which the place becomes the absolute protagonist). The new icons, reintroduced in the iconoclastic sensibility of the Protestants, come to be identified with the pure representation of the landscape from 1519-20. Although in the background, the landscape became the centre of the spiritual message in the new reformed sensibility thanks to the "mnemonic" use of pastoral images, that is, of *parerga*.

In the Roman Catholic context, especially in the circles practising the new anti-reformist spirituality, town and pastoral views were also welcomed as effective means of propaganda. Cardinal Paleotti, bishop of Bologna, suggested them to painters in his *Discorso sulle immagini sacre e profane* [Discourse on sacred and profane images] (Bologna 1582). Cardinal Federico Borromeo, bishop of Milan, decorated his own studio with "vedute de' paesi" [town views] which, he claimed, helped him to "volare" [to fly][15] in his mind and pray. He was a collector of Brueghel's paintings.

Town and pastoral views, atlases and geographical maps were important tools in the classic tradition mnemo-technique. They were not instruments to use in a journey or in a modern empirical experience. Until the Enlightenment, they worked as tools to think *by means of* places, instead of representing them.

(Translation by Claudia Capancioni)

Notes

1 After Frances Yates' study, at present the most recent and authoritative work on the art of memory is M. Carruthers' *The Craft of Thought. Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200*, Cambridge 1998.

2 See G. Mangani, 'Da icone a emblemi. Cartografia morale delle città (secoli XIV-XVI)', in C. De Seta, ed., *Tra oriente e occidente. Città e iconografia dal XIV al XIX secolo*, Naples 2004, 10-21. The view of celestial Jerusalem looking as Rome appears in the Augustine's code, *De civitate dei* (copied in 1459), which is kept in the S. Genevieve Library in Paris.

3 See E. Battisti, *Piero della Francesca*, Milan 1992, 100-215.

4 L. Bolzoni, 'Educare lo sguardo, controllare l'interiorità: usi delle immagini nella predicazione volgare del Tre e Quattrocento', in E. Castelnuovo, G. Sergi, eds., *Arti e storia nel Medioevo,* vol. III, *Del vedere: pubblici, forme e funzioni*, Turin 2004, 519-549.

5 p. X.

6 As cited in E. Battisti, *Iconologia ed ecologia del giardino e del paesaggio*, G. Saccaro Del Buffa ed., Florence 2004, p. 305.

7 Cfr. E. Battisti, 'La topografia simbolica della Terrasanta nella prima fase cronologica dei sacri monti in Italia settentrionale e centrale (1480-1525)', in Battisti, *Iconologia ecc*. cit., 291-307.

8 Cfr. C. Jacob, *La Description de la terre habitée de Denys d'Alexandrie ou la leçon de géographie*, Paris 1990.

9 P. Zahn, 'Hartmann Schedel Weltchronik. Bilanz der Jungeren Forschung', *Bibliotheksforum Bayern*, 24, 1996, 231-248.

10 Cfr. J. B. Harley, *The New Nature of Maps. Essays in the History of Cartography*, Baltimore 2001.

11 Cfr. G. Mangani, *Il "mondo" di Abramo Ortelio. Misticismo, geografia e collezionismo nel rinascimento dei Paesi bassi*, Modena 1998; G. Mangani, 'La signification providentielle du "Theatrum orbis terrarum" ', in *Abraham Ortelius (1527-1598) cartographe et humaniste*, Turnhout 1998, 93-103.

12 See G. Mangani, 'Misurare, calcolare, pregare. Il mappamondo ricciano come strumento meditativo', in F. Mignini, ed., *Padre Matteo Ricci. L'Europa alla corte dei Ming,* Milan 2003, 29-39.

13 E. Battisti, 'Le origini religiose del paesaggio veneto', in Battisti, *Iconologia ecc.,* cit., 187-208.

14 C. S. Wood, *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape*, Chicago 1993.

15 *Pro suis studiis*, Ms 1628, Ambrosiana Library, Milan. See also F. Fiorani, 'La Sala Bologna nell'appartamento di Gregorio XIII', in C. De Seta, *Tra oriente e occidente*, cit., 179-187.

Plates

Plate 1 – A standard city used for mnemonic purposes from J. Romberch's manual, *Congestorium artificiosae memoriae*, Venice 1533.

Plate 2 – Initial letter from Augustine's, *De civitate dei*, code of the New York Public Library (1467), which represents the celestial Jerusalem in the look of Florence.

Plate 3 – View of Arezzo from Piero della Francesca's *Storie della vera croce*, Arezzo, Church of Saint Francis, fresco, 1452-1462 ca.

Plate 4 – A. Dürer, *Saint Anthony*, xilography, 1519.

Plate 5 – View of Nuremberg from H. Schedel's, *Liber cronicarum*, Nuremberg 1493.