

Ortelius's *Typus Orbis Terrarum* (1570)

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I tried to examine this map according to my recent studies dedicated to Abraham Ortelius, trying to verify the deep meaning that it could have in his work of geographer and intellectual, committed in a rather wide religious and political programme.

Ortelius was considered, in the scientific and intellectual background of the XVIth century Low Countries, as a model of great morals in fact, he was one of the most famous personalities of Northern Europe; he was a scholar, a collector, a mystic, a publisher, a maps and books dealer and he was endowed with a particular charisma, which seems to have influenced the work of one of the best artist of the time, Pieter Bruegel the Elder.

Dealing with the deep meaning of Ortelius' atlas, I tried some other time to prove that the *Theatrum*, beyond its function of geographical documentation and succesfull publishing product, aimed at a political and theological project which Ortelius shared with the background of the Familist clandestine sect of Antwerp (the Family of Love).

In short, the fundamentals of the familist thought focused on three main points:

- a) an accentuated sensibility towards a mysticism close to the so called *devotio moderna*, that is to say an inner spirituality searching for a direct relation with God. This spirituality had its symbol: the human heart (pict.1). It doesn't share the deterministic thesis of Protestants and their predestination theory and, at the same time, it is far from the outward Roman Catholic and Protestant religiousness, showing itself in individualist and clandestine forms, thus outwardly respecting official religions;
- b) the ambition to reach an earthly holiness based on the inner relation with God, made possible by the "perfectionist" heresy which asserted the dual human and divine nature of man.
- c) the attempt at developing a programme of religious toleration, in a Europe divided by religious wars, aiming at the understanding of the substantial homogeneity of the different faiths (including Jewish one and Muslim one); thus bringing out the common, genuine aspiration after good and inner elevation.

The thesis of the dual nature of man was a fundamental of the Familist sect. On this thesis Familists based their attention for the value of earthly goods, which were considered as a

manifestation of the divine benevolence; this attitude reflects, somehow, Ortelius' motto *contemno et orno* (I despise the world, but, at the same time, I honour it with my historical and geographical work, which celebrates nature).

Although it was a Familist fundamental, this conviction was also shared by other forms of individual and moderate religiousness, such as the one of Mercatore, who, as a matter of fact, theorize it.

The figure of Atlas who held the globe represented on the title page of Atlas was in fact an emblematic figure of this religious conviction, which Ortelius and Mercator had in common, about which the geographer from Rupelmunde had treated in his commentary on the *Epistle to Romans*. Mercator's *Atlas* was, actually, a governor of Mauritania, who became a god, thanks to his work; so he was a man who won immortality by his earthly work, as Familists asserted as regards the value of good actions carried out during one's life.

At the times of the first elaboration of Ortelius' map, in a letter to Joannes Vivianus dated 1573, Mercator described his cosmological model which was based on the thesis of the dual human and divine nature of man; the model was called "Typus universitatis", and the word "typus" is re-used by Ortelius for his map, thus bringing out the importance of the idea of model in comparison with the idea of representation, better esemplified by the word *Imago*.

The cosmological model of Mercator was based on the mystic idea of letter Y (pict. 2-3), which represented the narrow road to salvation and the large one to perdition. Once more free will was the distance point between Mercator and Ortelius' religious ideas and the Protestant ones widespread in the XVIth century Low Countries, the latter asserting the thesis of predestination.. According to Mercator, *Typus universitatis*, that is to say the deep, ethical and cosmological structure of the world, was an enormous Y, whose long and narrow side connected earth with empyrean, whereas the shorter and large side took to nothingness. So, Y represented a sort of crossroads where man and his earthly life have to face the problem of choice, according to their free will, between good and evil, beetwen sin and salvation.

Perhaps now we can better understand the Ciceronian quotation that Ortelius introduces on his map which inaugurates the *Theatrum orbis terrarum*: the *Typus orbis terrarum*:

*Quid ei potest videri magnum in rebus humanis, cui aternitas
Omnis, totiusque mundi nota sit magnitudo.*

It is a key concept which enables us to understand the meaning of the map that, according to Ortelius' attitude, acts as a symbol (all his maps are symbols) for the following reasons:

- a) its placing at the beginning of the atlas;
- b) the interactive relation between the Ciceronian passage and the decoration of the map, that is to say the light-blue background on which earthly globe is set, filled with clouds;
- c) the clear peculiarity of "cosmographical meditation" – as Mercator called it – that comes out from a general reading of the map, according to Ortelius' culture and sensibility, as I tried to point out in some of my previous works.

First of all the image of earth is placed in a cloudy universe, presented to the spectator as a "world seen from the outside"; it is something like the idea of the stoical *theatrum mundi*, where gods looked at men's life as if they were spectators of a theatre comedy or tragedy.

On the map, however, we can also find a Ciceronian quotation that transfers man's condition

in a divine sphere, at the same level which was originally reserved to the gods of the ancient tradition.

If we compare a passage of chapter XXVI of the *Liber de sapiente* by Charles De Bovelles (1511) with the Ciceronian quotation, we notice that both the passages celebrate a "divine" idea of man which was received by North European mysticism according to the perfectionist thesis widespread among protestant movement.

God saw that there wasn't any spectator of the whole; there wasn't a universe eye irradiated by the ethereal fires shining in the sky, the sublime lights and the firmament stars; there wasn't any spectator illuminated by the sidereal thresholds of the intelligible world, full of infinite light, enriched without respite with their radiance, as if he were son of the whole world, its natural image, peace and harmony of the whole...

Man plays a divine role, even in his function of spectator, thus sanctifying the study of nature ("geography, eye of history", as Ortelius wrote in the *Paregon's* title page).

The map *Typus orbis terrarum* appears for the first time in the first edition of the *Theatrum* (1570). As everybody knows it isn't the first cartographic work by Ortelius, who has already published, between 1564 and 1565, the cordiform map of the world and the ancient Egypt map; in 1567 he made a map of Asia, probably still in cordiform projection.

The world map of 1564 probably took as a model another cordiform map by Mercator, dated 1538, the *Orbis Imago*. It was published in Antwerp, by the publisher Gerard De Jode (who continued to print it, inserting it, in another engraving, in his *Speculum orbis terrarum*, pict. 4) who became rival of Ortelius when the latter decided to publish the *Theatrum*, thus spoiling their relations.

This certainly is a good reason for justifying the presence, at the beginning of Ortelius' atlas, of another map, but probably it is also caused by the publication, in 1569, of Mercator's map, with his new projection (*ad usum navigantium*) which should have confirmed the end of the cordiform projection.

However, the map which opens the *Theatrum* continues to have its symbolic function and to represent a deep meaning very close to those that I tried, elsewhere, to attribute to Ortelius' map dated 1564. (Picture 4)

In fact, the latter, expressively heart-shaped, represented the microcosmical dimension of earth (and the heart was the symbol of the sect). In human heart good and evil were fighting a battle, such as, on earth, man won salvation by his work. (Girolamo Cardano, as John Dee pointed out, used to define earth as *Cor coeli*, because of its similarity with the function of heart in the middle of bloodstream). So, once more, the celebration of free will, of the value of good actions, of the ethical choice between the narrow road leading to good and the large one leading to sin. That is a principle which Familist iconography represented in a didactic way in a clandestine print dated 1576, in which the trip of a soul, from the expulsion from Earthly Paradise till the recovery of spiritual salvation, was inscribed in a heart-shaped world, as a symbol of charity and of the sect itself (*Familia Charitatis*, pict. 5).

Typus orbis terrarum doesn't represent any longer the heart-shaped globe, but its emblematic dimension is pointed out through different signs.

So, in the first state of the map, Ciceronian quotation draws the tradition of the *theatrum mundi*. In the third state of the map, made in about 1587 and appeared in the *Theatrum* from 1589 till 1612,4 this moral and emblematic aspect is further accentuated, by the including of

four more quotations in as many medallions set at the engraving's sides, and by a lively grotesque decoration, which replaces the light-blue background of the clouds, without losing sight of the dimension of the "world seen from the outside".

As Rodney Shirley pointed out,⁵ geographic integrations in this third state are modest; they only adopt a more correct form of South America and introduce Solomon Islands, without inserting the more recent discoveries, thus leading to the exclusion of the map from the *Principall Navigations* by Hakluyt, in 1592.

As Gillis pointed out,⁶ the revision of the map is more aesthetic than scientific, thus accentuating its nature of theological-cosmographical emblem.

About new quotations, we have to say that two are by Seneca and two are by Cicero; two of them (one by Cicero and one by Seneca, on the left side) recall the *vanitas* of human condition, the two others (one by Cicero and one by Seneca on the right side) confirm the providential function of contemplation and comprehension of creation, as we have seen in the passage by Charles de Bovelles.

Homines hac lege sunt generati, qui tuerentur illum globum, quem in hoc templo medium vides, quae terra dicitur (Cic.)

Equus vehendi causa, arandi bos, venandi et custodiendi canis, homo autem ortus ad mundum contemplandum (Cic.)

Hoc est punctum quod inter tot gentes ferro et igni dividitur, o quam ridiculi sunt mortalium termini (Sen.)

Utinam quaemadmodum universa mundi facies in conspectum venit, ita philosophia tota nobis posset occurrere (Sen.)

Both the concepts represent the dual human and divine nature of man and they symbolize his condition of intermediary between matter and spirit, according to the Christian cabalistic principles. The presence of a quotation taken from the *Somnium Scipionis* (*Homines hac lege sunt generati. Qui tuerentur illum globum, quem in hoc templo medium vides quae terra dicitur*) further points out the recall to hermetic tradition and to the *Prisca Theologia*.

But the four quotations, in groups of two, are a mere repetition of the motto which appears in Ortelius' emblem, *Contemno et orno*, which will also be engraved in his sepulchral monument, inspired from Justus Lipsius, and printed in the atlas after his death (pict. 6).

The first quotation by Seneca on the left side of the map, introduces a theological reference to the thought of the German mystic Sebastian Franck, very close to Ortelius' sensibility. Franck really influenced the thought of the Familist sect. He wrote the first German geography book, *Weltbuch*, printed in Tubing in 1534, where he asserted a prophetic idea of human history and geography, considering foolish the division of the states and the political differences, giving that man aspired to universal brotherhood. This is a very important subject for the interpretation of the deep meaning of Ortelius' collection, which aims at "collecting" the world in an organic "whole", symbolically bound in a volume, as we can see in the poems and in the introductory apparatus of the atlas (*Hoc est punctum, quod inter tot gentes ferro et igni dividitur, o quam ridiculi sunt mortalium termini*).

In the introductory chapter of the *Theatrum* Ortelius recalls, once more, the ephemeral dimension of earth (*contemno*) compared to the rest of the universe, but, at the same time, he points out its function of place where mankind must play, according to Stoical and then Christian tradition of the *Theatrum mundi*, his comedy, which means, according to him, the

conquest of salvation (*orno*): *haec est materia gloriae nostrae*.

The reference to the miserable human condition is pointed out, in turn, by the quotation which closes the passage. It is the same which is printed in the engraving, where there is 1564 Ortelius' map, inscribed on the head of a jester belonging to 1580-90 neostoical background of Antwerp (picture 7). This is very well known in the history of cartography ambient.

Hic est mundi punctus et materia gloriae nostrae, hic sedes, hic honores gerimus, hic exercemus imperia, hic opes cupimus, hic tumultuatur humanum genus, hic instauramus bella, etiam civica.

So, Ortelius' cordiform map entered moral iconographic tradition. The choice to adopt a new projection for the map of the world of the *Theatrum orbis terrarum* depended both on the legal troubles with the publisher De Jode and on a probable usury of that figure and projection which had an ethical dimension, thus becoming, especially after the new map by Mercator of 1569, inadequate for the new scientific context where it has to appear.

We have to consider that the image of heart, also symbol of the Familist sect, became a little compromising in the Low Countries territories. In fact they were under Calvinists influence, who were notoriously opposite to give a salvation value to good actions, represented by charity. The map of Flanders which appears in the Ortelius' *Theatrum*, for example, presents two different states, one with a heart-shaped decoration, stored in Leiden, and the other one without this decoration, stored in Amsterdam, one of the cities mainly governed by Protestants.

Nevertheless the *Typus orbis terrarum* remained a programmatic manifesto of Ortelius' moral geography.

In conclusion the map

a) represented Ortelius' theological, political and moral project of a reconciled world in a religious toleration system, based on a new sensibility towards man's dignity, both mystic and humanistic;

b) represented the dual enigma of human condition, compressed between the vanity of its miserable condition and the big opportunity, offered by Providence, to be uplift to Divine, through virtues and inner cultivation;

c) betrayed moral statute of Ortelius' geography (and, consequently, of his atlas), seen as the eye of history, which was a Renaissance synthesis of experimental culture and ethical-religious aspirations, whose meaning was kept and clearly communicated in the title of his work: *Theatrum orbis terrarum*.

Notes

1. G. Mangani, *Il "mondo" di Abramo Ortelio. Misticismo, geografia e collezionismo nel Rinascimento dei Paesi Bassi*, Modena, Franco Cosimo Panini, 1998; G. Mangani, *La signification providentielle du Theatrum orbis terrarum*, in *Abraham Ortelius, 1527–1598, Cartographe et humaniste*, Turnhout (Belgium), Brepols Publishers, 1998, pages 93-104.
2. C. De Bovelles, *Il libro del sapiente*, E. Garin ed., Torino, Einaudi, 1987, chapter XXVI.
3. G. Mangani, *Abraham Ortelius and the Hermetic Meaning of the Cordiform Projection*, "Imago Mundi", L, 1998, pages 59-83.
4. M.P.R. van der Broecke, *Ortelius Atlas Maps. An illustrated Guide*, Westrenen, Hes Publishers, 1996.
5. R. Shirley, *The Mapping of the World. Early Printed Maps. 1472-1700*, London, New Holland, 1993, n. 158.
6. J. Gillies, *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pages 70-84.