

Cartographic oddities

A lost meaning of maps and atlases as mnemonic devices

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Paper presented to the seminar “Books lost, fragmented and forgotten: Life and Authority of the Absent Text” – Jagiellonian University, Krakow 13-13 October 2007

In 1980, Umberto Eco, a famous Italian scholar of communication sciences, in his first novel *The Name of the Rose*, set a detective story in a medieval monastery. The solution of the story lay in the most secluded place of the building : the library , which was organized as a map of the earth.

Eco’s novel is not a literary masterpiece, but the metaphor library-map of the earth was and still is extremely interesting. It is no coincidence that Eco was, before devoting himself to semiotics , a respected medievalist.

The metaphor was more than a brilliant narrative idea, it founded its strength on one of the pivots of the function of images in the classical and medieval world: that is their ability to foster the memorization not only of ideas (*memoria ad res*), but also of words and of whole passages of a text (*memoria ad verba*).

As is well known, the old science of memory made large use of images, also of quite complicated images, to facilitate the memorization and recalling of passages and concepts of the tradition.

To this purpose, in the classical and medieval ages, maps were perceived as based on the same mechanisms , both conceptual and practical, activated by libraries. In both cases they were “machines for thinking” , which explains the organization of material according to subject matter, differently from today when an aseptic alphabetic criterion is almost generally applied. The classification system of material in an encyclopedia is still defined as a “map”.

Ancient libraries used to classify books according to subject matter, and, within the subject matter, according to the author. The *armaria* that contained the works of the same author had very often decorated doors showing his portrait. The “image” therefore, in accordance with memorization techniques, served to remind contents, thanks to mental association processes. The association could be metaphorical - the image for the concept - as in this case, or it could use an image to recall a word. For instance Cicero, in order to remember the introduction of witnesses in a famous harangue, used as a mnemonic device the image of two big bull testicles whose name is the same as that used for witnesses: *testes*.¹

In the fourteenth century the system had not changed when Thomas Bradwardine, the archbishop of Canterbury, in his treaty on the art of memory, used images and pronunciation to represent Latin pronouns and prepositions. In order to represent the sentence “Dominus Benedictus qui subiugat Scotiam per Regem Angliae Beremirum”, Bradwardine had imagined a picture showing Saint Benedict in the middle, and, on his left, a cow with a chicken at its feet. The English word *cow*, then pronounced *ki*, represented the Latin pronoun *qui* (Dominus Benedictus *qui*). The chicken (Latin: *perdix*) stood for the Latin preposition *per* (*per regem Angliae Berenitum*).² Thus the picture worked as a sort of rebus to the purpose of a memorization process whose usefulness is today completely forgotten. Indeed, while the whole thing is perceived nowadays as a complication, in the times before the age of printing, it really was

a *simplification* and a precious mnemonic device.

In any case, through metaphoric or onomastic associations, figures performed the function of “containers”, exactly in the same way as the *armaria* in libraries.

On looking at a map, an observer of the classical and medieval world would immediately apply this kind of mental associations. The map, through its images, sent back to geographical *places* but these were perceived in a rather different way from the geographical *territories* of today’s geography. As a matter of fact, they were perceived as information containers, that is as *loci* of rhetoric and mnemonic technique. The science of *loci*, that is the art of finding topics for rhetoric purposes, was in fact called *Topica* and it was considered strictly linked with *Topography*, as Quintilianus shows, who considers topography the best form of persuasive rhetoric.³

According to this logic, through the link topic/topography (which was often associated with *Topology*: the art of gardens), classical and medieval libraries revealed their origin *en plein air*, that is the use of avenues, vegetable gardens, gardens and porches -decorated with images as the stoic *stoà poikile* - in order to store and convey information.

Before the diffusion of writing (but, as is well known, also in the Middle Ages, when familiarity with writing had diminished) gardens and vegetable gardens, viewed as systems of figures made up by flowers and plants, were considered mnemonic devices. People studied in gardens and vegetable gardens, and memorized stories linked with flowers and plants (*input*) which would then become an opportunity to recall to mind those very stories when they would be needed (*output*)

In the Middle Ages many libraries were still organized as gardens. In 1250 the library of Richard de Fournival, a man of letters and a surgeon at Amiens, was organized as a garden, according to a classification system based on *flower beds* and a table of subjects in the shape of a tree.

Not by chance, ancient libraries were built in the shape of temples and thus endowed with a porch. The inner part of the building contained the documents, which were read and consulted in the porch in front. The *intercolumn* was in fact a classic mnemonic device (people memorized a passage or an idea in each of the hollows of the colonnade or of a mentally built porch), a technique based on the fragmentation of the subject to be remembered.

Indeed, the intercolumn was the place of mnemonic output, represented by reading, which, in turn, became the opportunity for a new input.

It is very likely that the analytical strategy called *reductionism* had its origin in the Greek mnemotechnic tradition.

The places for reading and memorizing, both physical and mental, were thus built in architectural forms that were identical, both real and virtual.

As Christian Jacob⁵ mentions, when Dyonisyus, called the Periegetis, a teacher in Alexandria in the second century A.D., made use of a map in his class, he did not use it to teach geography, but rather, he exploited the known sequence of geographical places - already memorized by his students or evidenced on the map- to help himself and his students to recall to mind the stories linked to the places, viewed as *loci mnemonici*, represented on the map: aitiologies, oddities, biographies of famous men somehow connected with those lands; more or less the same function tourist guides perform nowadays.

In the Middle Ages, - but the feeling is this habit had already been widely diffused in the classical world – the knowledge of geography did not consist so much in the identification of geographical names with places on the map, but rather in their recognition as *loci* of the literary and mythological tradition to which those very names of places and peoples had been mnemonically linked.

The names of places or peoples worked as images: they triggered mnemonic-meditative *chains* aimed at the recollection of a certain passage of the *Odyssey* or of classical epic. Geography, as Herodotus said, was a “question of names”.⁶

Geographical images served to recall – though by modes now impossible to understand – , the laws of memorization, -perceived as a sort of virtual journey through the various *loci* – rather than the real geographical places of a journey. For instance, a rhetorical figure of the Topica was the search for a passage or a quotation inside the available repertoires and centos. This search was perceived and defined as a *hunt* . The scholar looking for the right quotation was like a hunter in the woods (the *silva*). Thus the *silva* , a space segmented by trees and plants, became a synonym for library and encyclopedia, until when the growth of towns and cities, and the consequent deforestation, and the role towns and cities assumed in medieval culture , turned the image of woods into a negative place, one that Dante defined as *oscuo* (*obscure*) , thus developing the totally urban notion of *forest*.⁷

The mnemonic-encyclopedic function of medieval bestiaries is a mere consequence of the convergence of the idea of *hunt* and the search for a *lemma* in an encyclopedia.

Thus, real landscape became itself a *locus*.

The walls of villas, decorated with *tromp l'oeil* representing landscapes and urban views, became devices to recall to mind mythological stories chosen by the lord of the house among the wide variety available, to celebrate the virtues of the family or the deeds of the founder of the family.

Between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries this kind of images was still in use to decorate coffers, desks and beds.⁸

Public buildings and noble residences , already in the classical world, were designed as “ theatres of the world” : their floors showing mosaic representations of the world – the oldest map of Jerusalem in Mandaba was a mosaic- , their walls decorated with stories related to the building and its landlords, the ceilings starry skies with their constellations.

The very technique of the mosaic, with its neatly separated figures, because of the myriads of tassellas, seems to recall the reductionist procedure of the ancient art of memory. The clear cut separation of the figures was, and still is, a prerequisite to facilitate the mnemonic filing of topics. In the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries this very association is to be found in the art of marquetry, which was also used in places devoted to meditation-memorization such as monastic choirs and humanists' studies.

When, in the sixteenth century, Cosimo I of the Medici commissioned Ignazio Danti and the painter Stefano Buonsignori his “*guardaroba*” in Palazzo Vecchio in Florence to keep the pieces of his collection of works of art and curiosities, he recovered and drew on this system of thought. The doors of the cupboard were in fact decorated with the maps of the countries of the world where the pieces of the collection came from. The maps retained the function of information containers, they were like drawers containing documents they could be associated with by metaphor or metonymy.

What is surprising is the fact that the studies on the history of the Renaissance cartography, a part

from the recent exception of Francesca Fiorani⁹, have made constant reference to these series of images without connecting them in the slightest with the whole context and the purpose they were used for. This approach would have dangerously diverged from the traditional and academic idea of classical cartography considered as a sort of forbear of today's road maps. Art historians, on their part, have made reference to the cartographic decorations of the cupboard doors only as to an "oddy".

The loss of this function of maps, which concerned a similar function of globes, atlases and loose maps, whose "encyclopedic" function has only been rediscovered in recent years together with their relationship with the so called hypertexts, is basically due to the loss of the old mnemonic function of maps.

It is important to notice that in the Middle Ages maps and atlases were considered synoptic "plates" of knowledge in general, rather than geographical documents. Indeed, they were placed on the shelves of libraries together with perpetual calendars and computation diagrams.¹⁰

As a matter of fact, from the Enlightenment onward, this kind of documents abandoned the function of representing *loci*, developing greater attention towards the representation of geographical places and their proportions, distances, etc. Attention shifted more and more to real geographical places making maps what they still are.

This change, though, concerned not only represented places but physical places as well. Also geographical territories, originally perceived as vehicles of symbolic meanings, increasingly became quantitative, homogeneous and assessable areas, tendentially moving from "landscape" towards "no place".

To pre-modern cartography, bound to the spreading of extra-geographic information, was only left the realm of the so-called "cartographic oddities", a sort of abandoned siding track, of hunting ground for collectors, a wide continent made up by maps depicting regions in the form of heraldic animals, table games based on geography, maps of imaginary regions, or maps "of the soul", and other such curiosities.¹¹

This genre of production coexisted, however, from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, with scientific and sound cartography and the same cartographic workshops often produced and circulated both types.

This ambivalence of expressive registers of cartography is however extremely significant, since it appeared in times when national states started to coincide with their territories, settling as "envisaged communities" rather than as feudal lands.

Thus, the development of the production of national atlases – such as those by Saxton, Magini, and Bouguerreau -, instead of following the rise and stabilization of territories, went ahead of them, performing a persuasive and propagandistic function. The *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (1570) by Abraham Ortelius, which was also the first to be published, served the purpose of the pacification between European nations rather than the building up of a nation, but the operating mechanism was identical and it was in fact perceived as an instrument of persuasion and a sort of "talisman of peace".¹²

Thus, while the old geographical iconography with its function of library and aide-memoire was becoming an "oddy", oddities became in their turn a central tool for the assertion of real geographical territories, as is clear from the widespread use of heraldic images in the seventeenth century cartography,

which served the purpose to present as “natural” the territorial organizations of new states thanks to the use of well known and familiar images. A strategy that was widely and indiscriminately exploited by kingdoms, feudal empires and even republics, such as , for instance, the Seventeen Dutch Calvinist Provinces.

Geographical places lost their dimension of *locus mnemonicus* but the *locus* obtained a basic role in the building up and in the perception of the new space as identity place. Thus, albeit with new shades of meaning , maps and atlases continued to perform an ideologic function. The strong emotional impact of images, originally used as aide-memoire, shifted to a persuasive function, oriented towards the emotional funding of the legitimacy of the new national states.

Printing reinforced this trend. Indeed, in the age of printing the use of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic metaphors actually became more popular than ever.

The anthropomorphic and zoomorphic perception of the land, rather than attenuating its presence, was employed to impress the masses, but also to foster inward moral meditation. Thus, the representation of nations as “bodies” was imitated by the starting genre of pornographic and erotic literature.

As feminist geographers have pointed out, from the sixteenth century, geographical territories were perceived both as a *mother* and a *whore* , that is both as *homeland* and *buen retiro* and, at the same time, as territories ripe for conquest and colonization.¹³

Notes

1 *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, III, 33.

2 See M. Carruthers, *The book of memory. A study of memory in medieval culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 135.

3 *Institutio oratoria*, XI, 2.

4 See G. Mangani, *Cartografia morale. Geografia, persuasione, identità*, Modena, Franco Cosimo Panini Publisher, 2006, chap. II.1 “Parerga”.

5 Ch. Jacob, *La description de la terre habitée de Denys d’Alexandrie ou la leçon de géographie*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1990.

6 P. Gautier Dalché, *Principes et modes de la représentation de l’espace géographique durant le haut moyen age*, in AA.VV., *Uomo e spazio nell’alto medioevo*, Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull’alto medioevo, Spoleto, 2003, t. I, pp. 117-150.

7 A. Jalabert-Guerreau, *L’essart comme figure de la subversion de l’ordre spatial dans le romans arthuriens*, in E. Monet, ed., *Campagnes médiévale: l’homme et son espace. Etudes offertes à Robert Fossier*, Paris, 1995, pp. 59-72.

8 See G. Mangani (with B. Pasquinelli), *Città per pregare*. Relazione al convegno “Icône urbane. La rappresentazione della città come forma retorica tra Medioevo e Controriforma”, Università di Macerata, 7-8 giugno 2007, in corso di pubblicazione.

9 F. Fiorani, *The marvel of maps: art, cartography and politics in renaissance Italy*, Yale University Press, 2005.

10 A volte le carte geografiche erano legate assieme a documenti del genere, come nel Ms Vat. Lat. 6018, fol. 63v-64r della Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana. See E. Edson, *Mapping time and space: how medieval mapmakers viewed their world*, London, The British Library, 1997, chap. IX.

11 See G. Mangani, *Cartographic oddities*, in “FMR”, n.s., 3, 2004, pp. 61-76.

12 G. Mangani, *Il “mondo” di Abramo Ortelio. Misticismo, geografia e collezionismo nel Rinascimento dei Paesi Bassi*, Modena, Franco Cosimo Panini Publisher, 1998, repr. 2006.

13 G. Rose, *Feminism and geography. The limits of geographical knowledge*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp. 86-112.

14 D. Lewes, *Utopian sexual landscapes: an annotated checklist of British Somatopias*, in "Utopian Studies", 7, 2, 1996, pp. 167-195.