

Mapping Metageographies: The Cartographic Invention of Italy and the Mediterranean¹

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Introduction: Visualizing Italy and the Mediterranean

Per la verità non sappiamo neppure fin dove il Mediterraneo si estenda: quanto ampi siano i tratti della costa che occupa, fin dove si spinga nelle rientranze del territorio e dove in effetti cessi. Gli antichi greci lo videro da Phasis sul Caucaso fino alle colonne d'Ercole dello stretto di Gibilterra, andando da oriente verso occidente, sottintendendo i suoi naturali confini verso nord e trascurando qualche volta quelli a sud. La saggezza antica insegnava che il Mediterraneo arriva fin dove cresce l'ulivo.²

Italy and the Mediterranean share an ontological quality. They are metageographical objects carved out of the land and of the sea by human imagination. Italy is a peninsula. As such, it lacks the reassuring cartographic enclosure of islands. According to fifth-century-B.C. historian Antiochus of Syracuse, originally the name *Italia* did not apply to the whole peninsula, but only to modern Calabria. The Greeks gradually came to employ the name to designate a larger region, but it was not until the time of the Roman conquests that the term was expanded to cover the entire peninsula.³ Unlike the Italian Peninsula, the Mediterranean is a self-enclosed geographical entity, a “watery continent” surrounded by land along its full perimeter (with the exception of the Straits of Gibraltar and the Dardanelles). But as historian David Abulafia notes, “the Mediterranean cannot simply be defined by its edges.”⁴ And, as with the Italian Peninsula, we do not know where the so-called “Mediterranean region” ends. The boundaries of the Mediterranean region are not simply artificial, like the northern political border of modern Italy. They are far more elusive. Fernand Braudel had them correspond to the northern limits of olive trees and palm trees, Ellen Churchill Semple to the “moisture” bestowed by the sea to the surrounding lands, Paul Vidal de la Blache to specific *genres de vie*, and so on.⁵ Where the Mediterranean begins and ends and indeed what the Mediterranean “is” continue to remain objects of debate among historians, geographers, anthropologists, and social scientists alike.⁶

Whether made of water or land, metageographical objects embed a strange paradox – especially large ones. While hybrids of human imagination and earthly matter (and thus arbitrary creations), metageographical objects are often taken for granted as natural – as

¹ I would like to thank John Agnew and two anonymous referees for their valuable comments and suggestions on the first draft of this article.

² Predag Matvejevic, *Breviario mediterraneo* (Cerusco: Garzanti, 1999), 17-18.

³ Massimo Pallottino, *History of Earliest Italy*, trans. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper. Jerome Lectures, 17th Series (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 50.

⁴ David Abulafia, “What Is the Mediterranean,” in *The Mediterranean in History*, ed. David Abulafia (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003), 11.

⁵ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, vol. I (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1995[1966]), p. 232; Ellen Churchill Semple, *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region: Its Relation to Ancient History* (London: Constable and Co., 1932), 84; Paul Vidal de la Blache, *Méditerranée. Péninsules méditerranéennes* (Paris: Colin, 1934).

⁶ On such debates, see, for example, Abulafia, “What is the Mediterranean” and Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

immutable, eternal entities. Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen have shown how continents are nothing but cultural creations.⁷ The Mediterranean as a “watery continent” is also a cultural invention. “Its boundaries are not defined by space or by time. . . . They are not like those of nation-states: they rather look like a circle traced with chalk which is continuously inscribed and erased; a circle continuously enlarged and shrunk by waves, winds, enterprises, and inspirations.”⁸

Like Italy, the basin was politically united for the first time only during Roman imperial rule. Before then, the Mediterranean was understood either as an open sea, or an ensemble of seas. In the Old Testament, for example, it was called the “Western Sea,” as it lay on the western coast of the Holy Land,⁹ the “sea of the Philistines,”¹⁰ after the inhabitants of a large portion of its shores near the Israelites, the “Great Sea,”¹¹ or simply “The Sea.”¹² Herodotus referred to it with names of smaller seas and gulfs, rather than as a whole. Strabo and other ancient Greeks called it “*ἡ ἐντός και καθ’ ἡμᾶς λεγόμενη θάλασσα*” [the sea over by us], but only in a strictly limited sense. Similarly, the Romans originally envisaged the Mediterranean as a series of smaller seas, whose names most often were taken from neighboring coasts or islands – Mare Tyrrenum, Mare Balearicum, etc. The name Mare Mediterraneum seems not to have been used at all until relatively late. The geographer Solinus appears to have employed it in the second half of the third century A.D. “When the Romans wanted to talk about the whole sea, they referred to it as *Mare Magnum, Mare Internum, or Mare Nostrum* . . . With control of all the lands around the sea in Roman hands, the Mediterranean became an internal lake, ‘our sea.’ This complete political dominance and use, of the whole Mediterranean by one single power had never occurred before, nor has it happened again – in quite the same way.”¹³ Hence, the unity of the Mediterranean as a metageographical object radiated from the heart of the Italian Peninsula – itself a metageographical entity.

Coastlines are abstractions, just as boundaries are.¹⁴ As metageographical objects, Italy and the Mediterranean make sense, or rather come into being, only through the superimposition of one another and, thus, only “from above.” We can only visualize and imagine them on maps – or rather, *as* maps. Although it is not until quite recently that we have been able to fully “visualize” these two entities “from above,” Italy and the Mediterranean probably remain the most represented places in the history of Western cartography. Italy’s characteristic “boot shape” is commonly regarded as the easiest landform to identify (and thus memorize) on the map of the Mediterranean. This shape, which today we take for granted, however, came into being no earlier than the fourteenth century (and as far as we know, was compared to a boot only in 1840).¹⁵

This article discusses the emergence of Italy as a discrete metageographical object in the Mediterranean. In particular, it considers different coexisting Renaissance cartographic traditions that rested on two opposed spatial understandings and experiences of the basin: on the one hand, as a functional region and a sequence of interconnected coastal places grounded

⁷ Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁸ Matvejevic, *Breviario*, 18.

⁹ *Deut.* 11:24; *Joel* 2:20.

¹⁰ *Exod.* 22:81.

¹¹ *Num.* 34:6,7; *Josh.* 1:4, 9:1, 15:47; *Ezek.* 47:10, 15, 20.

¹² *1 Kings* 5:9; *comp.* *1 Macc.* 14:34, 15:11.

¹³ Geoffrey Rickman, “The Creation of Mare Nostrum 300BC-500AD,” in Abulafia ed., *The Mediterranean*, 133.

¹⁴ Paul Carter, “Darkness with an Excess of Bright,” in *Mappings*, ed. Denis Cosgrove (London: Reaktion, 1999).

¹⁵ Christian Jacob, *The Sovereign Map: Theoretical Approaches in Cartography Throughout History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 140, 354.

in an older Ancient and Medieval tradition; on the other, as a compact geographical area and geometrical space. These two different spatial understandings persist in contemporary debates about the nature of the Mediterranean region. The latter can be likened to the “great Mediterranean body,” or formal organic unit conceived by Braudel. The former is a vision “from the sea” in line with the “functional” approach recently proposed by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, who portray the Mediterranean as made of coastal flows and connectivities between “microregions.”¹⁶

The article falls into five parts. It opens with discussions of Italy and the Mediterranean in ancient and medieval geography, when the world and the map’s surface were experienced as a sequence of *loci* to be traversed and memorized. It then illustrates how this conceptualization of space persisted on portolan charts and how the coastlines of Italy and the Mediterranean emerged in their familiar form as a succession of places. The following part of the article analyzes the emergence of Italy as a discrete metageographical organism made possible thanks to the popularization of Ptolemaic chorographic (or regional) mappings in fifteenth-century Italy. The final section considers the transformation of this new “metageographical object” into a space for rhetorical persuasion in Abraham Ortelius and Ignazio Danti’s antiquarian mappings. As Oceanic explorations had opened to new worlds, the Mediterranean and Italy opened to a mythicized ancient past in which humanist scholars and rulers sought their roots. They became cartographic spaces for antiquarian exploration and self-identification but also spaces for re-inventing history.

1. Imperial mappings



Fig. 1: Mussolini maps of the expanding Roman Empire, photograph by “Rayced”, modified by the author; Creative Commons License; downloaded from <http://www.flickr.com/photos/rayced/152546109/>.

Any passer by in Via dei Fori Imperiali in Rome will be struck by the Fascist stone map tablets prominently displayed on the northern wall of the Basilica of Maxentius [see Fig. 1]. The tablets feature a Mediterranean surrounded by black continents, in which a “boot-shaped” Italy lies prominently at the center. Around the Mediterranean coast, a progressively expanding Roman Empire is portrayed in white: from “The beginning of Rome, 8th century B.C.” to “The territory of Rome after the Punic War in the year 146 B.C.,” “The Empire at the death of the Emperor Augustus in the year A.D. 14,” and finally “The Empire at the time of the Emperor Trajan A.D. 98-117.”¹⁷ The “Mare Nostrum” displayed on the four map tablets was a Roman invention enthusiastically reappropriated by the Duce to promote his expansionist visions. As the tablets show, territorial boundaries changed through the

¹⁶ Horden and Purcell, *Corrupting Sea*.

¹⁷ Heather Hyde Minor, “Mapping Mussolini: Ritual and Cartography in Public Art during the Second Roman Empire,” *Imago Mundi* 51 (1999): 147-62.

centuries, but the outline of Mare Nostrum and the Italian Peninsula remained the same. Familiar and effective as it might be to the contemporary viewer, this, however, was not the map of the Mediterranean the ancient Romans envisaged in their mind, nor the one they used to move around.

Ancient Greek geographers, more interested in mathematical models and in mapping the cosmos than regions of the earth, represented the Italian Peninsula in a stretched form quite distant from the boot. From the time in which the peninsula was called Esperia (land of the sunset), or Enotria (land of the calves) until the realization of Ptolemy's distorted model, no map could even distantly evoke the boot shape we know today.¹⁸ At the time of the Romans, cartographically, Italy and the Mediterranean were nothing but a sequence of places separated by days of travel. This is clearly exemplified by the Peutinger table (Codex Vindobonensis 324), [see Fig. 2] a medieval copy of the only known surviving map of the road network in the fourth-century Roman Empire.



Figure 2: Tabula Peutingeriana (a medieval reproduction of a 4th century Roman road map). Downloaded from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:TabulaPeutingerian.jpg>, public domain.

The table was based on itineraries, or lists of destinations along Roman roads, with indications of the distance between the staging posts (*mansiones*) along the routes [see Fig. 3]. Unlike Greek philosophical mapping of the cosmos, Roman mapping was more concerned with practical applications. It had to cope with the needs of a rapidly expanding empire and thus found its appliance in land survey for centuriation, town planning, and, of course, road organization.¹⁹



The vast extent the empire had reached by the fourth century encouraged the production of many itineraries. Travelers, soldiers, and pilgrims needed to know what lay ahead of them on the road and how distant. We are told by civil servant Vegetius (383-395 A.D.) that “itineraries were not merely annotated but even drawn out in color [*picta*], so that the commander who was setting out could choose his route not only with a mental map but with a constructed map to examine.”²⁰

Fig. 3: Itineraries were engraved on different materials, including silver glasses, like the so-called Vicarello of via Augusta, 1st-2nd century. Copy at the Museu d'Historia de la Ciutat in Barcelona (originals are preserved at the Museo Nazionale Romano). Photograph by the author.

The Peutinger table was originally a 675 by 34 cm parchment roll.²¹ The map represents an extensive network of routes as a series of roughly parallel lines along which destinations have been marked in order of travel. Its distinctive notches represented different stages along the routes. While based on practical wayfinding information, contemporary

¹⁸ Roberto Borri, *L'Italia nell'antica cartografia 1477-1799* (Ivrea: Priuli & Verlucca, 1999), 7.

¹⁹ G. A. W. Dilke, “Maps in the Service of the State: Roman Cartography to the End of the Augustean Era. History of Cartography,” in *The History of Cartography*, vol. I, ed. JB Harley and David Woodward (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 201.

²⁰ Quoted in G.A.W. Dilke, “Itineraries and Geographical Maps in the Early and Late Roman Empire,” in *The History of Cartography*, vol. I, 237.

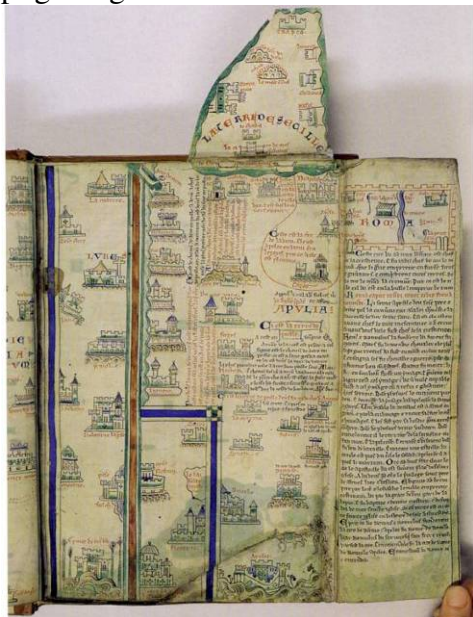
²¹ *Ibid.*, 238. On the Peutinger Table, see also Francesco Prontera's edited collection *Tabula Peutingeriana: le antiche vie del mondo* (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2003).

scholars agree that the map had a more ornamental or commemorative function.²² The Peutinger table is in fact deemed to have been inspired by a large map displayed on the walls of the Porticus Vipsania (or “Porches of the Empire”) commissioned by Agrippa to celebrate his son-in-law Octavian’s victory over Antony and Cleopatra at Actium and to display the extension of the empire *ad termini orbis terrarum* to the public.²³ On the Peutinger table, Rome, the *caput mundi*, appears as the center from which all roads depart and lead. Italy is featured in a far less dramatic (or distinguishable) form as a strip of land surrounded by a greenish river-like Mediterranean stretching as far as Antiochia.

2. Journeying, mapping, and praying

Throughout the Middle Ages, Italy (and the world) continued to be envisaged as a succession of places to be traversed, both physically and imaginatively. Travellers such as Marco Polo (1254-1324) unhurriedly moved along the Silk Road from one post to the next. As geographer Franco Farinelli notes, in Polo’s *Milione* geographical features have no length, just as directions have not yet been fixed according to the abstraction of cardinal points. Polo proceeds along his way following the winds. Space does not exist. There is no standard measure, nor spatial scale. Time is regulated by the succession of days and nights. “Places and days coincide in the experience of the journey. The ones serve as the measure of the others, and vice versa.”²⁴

Most medieval wayfarers, however, did not have to leave their places. Itineraries such as the map by Benedictine monk Matthew Paris (1250 ca.) offered the possibility of mental pilgrimages to his cloistered brethren and other faithful unable to travel to Rome and



Jerusalem. “The layout of the itinerary elicited the viewer’s and reader’s sense of bodily position before the manuscript in a co-construction of its spaces as a vehicle for movement.”²⁵ Scouring villages and cities with their hands and gazes, users of the itinerary map undertook an interior meditative journey to the Heavenly Jerusalem, their final destination, “with their hearts and not their feet.”²⁶ Places were analogous to the beads of a rosary, held together by the narrative thread of the armchair pilgrim’s journey. According to Giorgio Mangani, in the Middle Ages (and later) mapping and prayer were intrinsically connected. Mapping was first of all a mnemonic act analogous, indeed connected to, meditation, to the monastic *visio*, which rested on spiritual exercises, such as the symbolic measurement of the temple of Jerusalem.²⁷

Fig. 4: Matthew Paris’ itinerary map, 1250c., was used for mental pilgrimages. Cambridge, Corpus Christi College Library, ms. 26, fol.3. Courtesy of the Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.

²² James Ackerman, “Finding Our Way,” in *Maps: Finding Our Place in the World*, ed. James Ackerman and Robert Karrow (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 2007), 22.

²³ Dilke, “Maps in the Service of the State,” in *The History of Cartography*, vol. I, 207; Paola Presciuttini, *Coste del Mediterraneo nella cartografia europea 1500-1900* (Ivrea: Priuli e Verlucca editori, 2004), 11.

²⁴ Franco Farinelli, *Geografia: un’introduzione ai modelli del mondo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2003), 17.

²⁵ Daniel Connolly, “Imagined Pilgrimage in the Itinerary Maps of Matthew Paris,” *The Art Bulletin*, 81(1999): 606.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 598.

²⁷ Giorgio Mangani, *Cartografia morale* (Modena: Cosimo Panini, 2006), 30-31.

On Matthew Paris' itinerary map, Italy thus consisted of a vertical sequence of *loci* along the (imaginary) pilgrim's road (including cities, villages, and geographical features) and complemented by two vellum flaps at the top and side of the recto folio, which featured Rome and Sicily [see Fig. 4].

Like Matthew Paris' *itinerarium*, Christianized world images (*mappae mundi*) were not conceived as representations of territory, as much as instruments for meditation and for helping the faithful memorize sacred history through spatial visualization. Icons of *loci* (memory-places, or icon-events) were mapped on a circular world island surrounded by the river Ocean and originally divided into the three continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe) associated with Noah's sons Sem, Ham, and Japheth and separated by the river Don and a river-like Mediterranean. Centered on Jerusalem and generally east-oriented, these maps had no projection, nor were they governed by a geometry in which distance is a prime factor. Merging past (biblical scenes), present (contemporary cities), and future (Paradise and scenes connected to the Second Coming), they operated through topological principles, according to which the size of places depended on their religious and cultural-historical significance, rather than on their actual dimensions.²⁸ On the Psalter *mappa mundi* (1265), for example, the Italian Peninsula hardly features, but Rome does as a prominent city, as one of the main stops in the armchair pilgrim's visual journey [see Fig. 5].

3. The Mediterranean as a rosary

Like land journeys and visual pilgrimages, sea travel was also conceived, experienced, and represented as a sequence of places. It is from coastal navigational practice that the Mediterranean and the Italian coast took their familiar shapes on the map. In the fragmented Mediterranean of antiquity, when the open sea was feared, *cabotage* (or coastwise navigation) represented the main way of communication between what Horden and Purcell term "microregions." Cabotage remained "the basic modality for all movements of goods and people in the Mediterranean before the age of the steam."²⁹



Fig. 5: Detail from the Psalter Map, 1265. *Mappae mundi* were based on topological, rather than geometric principles. They include places of the past, present and future, such as Terrestrial Paradise, located at the top of the map, the Red Sea (painted Red), Jerusalem located at the center of the map, etc. Italy hardly features as a peninsula, but Rome appears as a prominent locus southwest of Jerusalem (east-oriented map).

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²⁸ Alessandro Scafi, 2006. *Mapping Paradise* (London: British Library, 2006).

²⁹ Horden and Purcell, *Corrupting Sea*, 365.

The surface of seas like the Aegean was “so broken up by peninsulas and islands that a ship could not go farther than forty miles from the shore.”³⁰ For Horden and Purcell, the distinctiveness of Mediterranean history results from this paradoxical coexistence of such an unusually fragmented topography of microregions and relatively easy maritime communications between them. Ancient Phoenician, Greek, and Roman coastwise navigation gave birth to the *periplus*, a manuscript document that listed in order the ports (with approximate distances in time) a sailor could expect to find along a shore – the predecessor of and “maritime analogous” to the Roman land *itinerarium*.³¹

In the Middle Ages, the ancient *periplus* developed into the *portolan*, a cartographic genre that endured until the second half of the seventeenth century. As the word suggests, portolans originated as written lists of “*porti*,” or ports, accompanied by compass bearings and sometimes even by textual descriptions.³² Since the late thirteenth century, these lists started to be translated into graphic images (portolan charts), which nevertheless continued to betray their origins, as “the characteristic listing of names follows the meandering line of coast.”³³ Portolan charts were constructed from the sea, from a mobile “shipboard perspective” and were originally meant for the practical use of seafarers. As Tony Campbell suggests, they “preserve the Mediterranean sailors’ firsthand experience of their own sea, as well as their expanding knowledge of the Atlantic Ocean.”³⁴ Not taking into account the curvature of the earth, *portolani* were nevertheless much more reliable and useful for navigation in restricted bodies of water such as the Mediterranean than for crossing oceans. The interior of the continents was initially left blank and later filled with blazons, icons of prominent mountains, and (in the case of America and Africa) with exotic, or even monstrous figures.



Fig. 6: Fernando Vaz Dourado’s chart of the Mediterranean, 1580. The basin is constructed as a sequence of coastal names (of which Italy is part), as a large rosary culminating at Jersualem (the cross). In *Regni, terre e isole: Atlante nautico di Fernando Vaz Dourado*, Marsilio Editore, 1992.

³⁰ Semple, *Geography of the Mediterranean*, 587.

³¹ Presciuttini, *Coste del Mediterraneo*, 10; Matvejevic, *Breviario*, 148-49; Denis Cosgrove, *Apollo’s Eye* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 85.

³² Tony Campbell, “Portolan Charts from the Late Thirteenth Century to 1500,” in *The History of Cartography*. See also Victor Melas, *Dyo cheiographoi Ellēnikoi portolanoi: oi kōdikes tēs Bibliothēkēs tēs Boulēs tōn Ellēnōn kai tēs Dēmosias Bibliothēkēs tēs Zagoras* (Athens: Morfōtiko Idryma Ethnikēs Trapezēs, 2003).

³³ Cosgrove, *Apollo’s Eye*, 85.

³⁴ Campbell, “Portolan Charts,” 372.

On portolan charts, the Mediterranean was portrayed as “more than a simple, unified physical site with a common climate” or with a unifying geological structure, as twentieth-century geographers and historians have taught us to imagine it. It was rather depicted as “a common locus of human activity, a unit held together by a fine weave of sea routes. And a key component was less the sea itself than the people who plied it – who . . . did not hesitate to move from one place to another if that gave them a better chance to practice their craft.”³⁵ The Mediterranean of portolan charts was a functional region made of coastal flows and connectivities. It was a region crossed by the directions of the winds, and whose core was the coast. Portolan charts exalted the continuity of the Mediterranean coastline, rather than its division among the different emerging nation-states, sometimes signalled by blazons in the mainland. On portolan charts “territoriality and boundaries [were] subordinated to mobility and circulation.”³⁶ The eye and finger of the beholder tracked the sequence of ports through a clockwise journey. Separated by microscopic embayments, place names followed one another as tiny beads of a rosary, beginning from the Pillars of Hercules, culminating in the cross of Jerusalem, to end again where the journey had started. A fine example is to be found on Fernando Vaz Dourado’s 1580 chart [see Fig. 6].

Like *itineraria* and *mappae mundi*, portolan charts were closely linked to meditative geography. Italian monk Opicino de Canistris (1296-1350 ca.), for example, regarded the calculation of Mediterranean sea routes and the “oppositions” of the continents as a logical system able to reveal the moral meaning of places. Superimposing anthropomorphic figures on actual territories, he mapped a moral geography that would help him in his spiritual struggle. On his famous Mediterranean chart drawn in reverse [see Fig. 7], for example, Africa is assigned the role of the seductress, whereas Europe literally embodies the fallen monk. Italy is the monk’s arm stretching towards Africa, and the Mediterranean the stage in which sin is consumed – the “corrupting sea.”³⁷

³⁵ Corradino Astengo, “The Renaissance Chart tradition in the Mediterranean,” in *The History of Cartography*, vol. III, 175.

³⁶ Cosgrove, *Apollo’s Eye*, 87.

³⁷ Mangani, *Cartografia morale*, 102; Horden and Purcell, *Corrupting Sea*, ii. On de Canistris’ work, see Catherine Harding, “Opening to God: The Cosmographical Diagrams of Opicinus de Canistris,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 61 (1998): 18-39.



Fig. 7: Opicino de Canistris's anthropomorphic map of the Mediterranean drawn in reverse (early 14th century). Europe embodies a fallen monk tempted by Africa. The Mediterranean basin is the stage of sin. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ms Pal. Lat. 1993, fol. 2v.



Fig. 8: Mateus Prunes. Portolan Chart of the Mediterranean World (Majorca, 1559). Library of Congress Geography and Maps Division, 112. Portolan charts were tied to the medieval meditational tradition of *ars memoriae* and in the Renaissance were often embellished with devotional figures taken from Books of Hours and *rosioni*-like compass roses. Here the Mediterranean is turned into a sacred moral space. Italy lies in between a familiar and powerful Europe and an exotic Africa (courtesy of the Library of Congress).

According to Mangani, however, in spite of their “practical” appeal, “traditional” portolan charts too were connected to meditative geography and *ars memoriae*. Their representational techniques included the use of bright colors (which Ugo di San Vittore regarded as essential mnemonic tools) and holy images from Books of Hours.³⁸ These elements became particularly prominent in late portolan charts, such as Vaz Dourado’s and Prunes’ (1559) [see Fig. 8]. By their time, the nautical charts of the Mediterranean had largely lost their main navigational function and were purchased by wealthy collectors, scholars, bibliophiles, and other armchair travellers.³⁹ Colorful compass roses (*rose dei venti*) assumed more and more sophisticated forms, not dissimilar from those of Western cathedrals’ *rosioni* (circular multicolored windows on the façade). In the sixteenth century, it became a norm to decorate portolan charts with Madonnas, crucified Christs, or saints taken from popular ex-votos. These features have been envisaged as expressions of a “typically Mediterranean exuberance in religious faith,” perhaps even “a clear and confident declaration of Catholicism, in deliberate opposition to an increasingly widespread Protestantism.”⁴⁰

Portolan charts well illustrate Horden and Purcell’s idea of connectivity between contiguous microregions and Mediterranean diversity within unity. Whether travelling on the

³⁸ Mangani, *Cartografia morale*, 104.

³⁹ See Astengo, “Renaissance Chart Tradition,” 181.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 199-200; Matvejevic, *Breviario*, 196. In these sacred features Denis Cosgrove also sees a continuity with Medieval *mappae mundi*, Christianized images of the world (see Cosgrove, *Apollo’s Eye*, 88).

map or at sea, no major difference is noted among the locations circumnavigated. On the contrary, remarkable contrasts can be still perceived crossing the basin from one coast to another. It is on portolan charts that Italy eventually emerged in its familiar shape as a boot, but only as an outline: as part of a broader coastal journey, or network. On Mediterranean portolan charts, Italy generally occupies a central position in the basin. The peninsula is located in between a familiar “normalizing” Europe and an Africa often populated by exotic creatures [see Fig. 8] – that “other” Mediterranean of the Orientalist feared by Opicino. The northern coast of the peninsula hosted Venice and Genoa, two of the most important cities and maritime powers of the Mediterranean but only as “larger beads” of the rosary the armchair traveller moved through.⁴¹

4. Ptolemaic Italy as a metageographical organism

As Farinelli notes, between 1400 and 1600 “the Italian Peninsula was the country gathering the largest number of information and models of the earth’s functioning. It was the country in which the best of ‘planetary intelligence’ was being produced.”⁴² It was in Florence that two parallel (and interconnected) spatial revolutions took place: namely, the invention of linear perspective by Brunelleschi and the rediscovery and application of Ptolemaic cartographic science. Just like the former is regarded by art historians as the main turning point in the representation of place, the latter has been traditionally identified by map historians and geographers as the beginning of modern cartography, or, again according to Farinelli, as the point of passage from a place-based to a geometrical model of the Earth.

Ptolemy was a second-century astronomer and geographer from Alexandria. His *Geography*, which offered instructions for representing the terrestrial globe on a flat surface and recording locations through a system of coordinates, was studied in the Byzantine Empire since 1300.⁴³ It was also known in the Islamic world but not in the West until Byzantine scholar Emmanuel Chrysolaras brought a manuscript to Italy in 1397 and his pupils translated it into Latin in 1409. No Ptolemaic map survived from antiquity, but twenty-six chorographic (or regional) tables and a map of the *oikoumene* (the ancient inhabited world) could be reconstructed thanks to the detailed instructions left by Ptolemy, which included a list of 8,000 coordinates.⁴⁴ Ptolemy’s use of a graticule of numbered meridians and parallels as a coordinating device allowed the mapping of an unlimited set of data onto a geometrically predetermined surface. In other words, it reduced the Earth’s surface to a set of geometrical points and the map to an “orthonormal space, a potential archiving device in which a maximal number of places can be catalogued.”⁴⁵ This gradually facilitated the emergence of a new mapping culture, as developments in art, science, and technology placed added emphasis and value on measurement.⁴⁶

⁴¹ It has been noted that their bird’s-eye views served more to convey the idea of prosperity and power and as mnemonic devices for armchair travellers, rather than having any use to sailors. In fact, Astengo notes, they are generally oblique aerial views and so do not even coincide with what one might see upon approaching from the sea” (Astengo, “Renaissance Chart Tradition,” 202).

⁴² Franco Farinelli, *L’invenzione della Terra* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2007), 74.

⁴³ For a discussion on the debates surrounding Ptolemy’s projections and linear perspective, see Vladimiro Valerio, “Cognizioni proiettive e prospettiva lineare nell’opera di Tolomeo e nella cultura tardo-ellenistica,” *Nuncius*, 13 (1998): 265-98.

⁴⁴ Cosgrove, *Apollo’s Eye*, 102-05; Leo Bagrow, *History of Cartography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 77-110; Dilke, G. A. W. “The Culmination of Greek Cartography with Ptolemy,” in *The History of Cartography*, vol. I, 177-200.

⁴⁵ Jacob, *Sovereign Map*, 120.

⁴⁶ John Pickles, *A History of Spaces: Cartographic Reason, Mapping and the Geo-coded World* (London: Routledge, 2004), 104.

Ptolemy also established a spatial hierarchy in which geography provided geometrical images of the earth’s surface and chorography pictured the form of localized regions. As he explained, “geography is the representation, by a map, of the portion of the earth known to us, together with its general features. Geography differs from chorography in that chorography concerns itself exclusively with particular regions and describes each separately, representing practically everything of the lands in question.”⁴⁷ The Ptolemaic tables reproduced in the Renaissance thus worked at both scales. The first table was geographical and featured the *oikoumene* stretching from the Pillars of Heracles to the Far East and encompassing an oblong Mediterranean, dominated by the Italian and Greek peninsulas and major islands. On fifteenth-century deluxe editions, such as Ulm (1482) [see Fig. 9], the basin was crowded with place names and generally enclosed by mountain chains on its northern and southern coasts: the coastal string of names in Mediterranean portolan charts was now backed by rock and turned into a Braudelian geo-morphological organism of water and solid land, rather than into an abstract sequence of location names. The Mediterranean served as a model for the poeticization of unfamiliar seas.⁴⁸ Ptolemy transposed its geographies on the entire globe and imagined that all the earth’s oceans were enclosed within a circuit of landmasses.⁴⁹ The error was perpetuated on Renaissance Ptolemaic world maps, in which the Mediterranean featured as a microcosmic rendering of a larger and far less familiar landlocked Indian Ocean, with its mythical island of Taprobana in the center, like Italy, and a Malay peninsula uncannily resembling the Balkan.

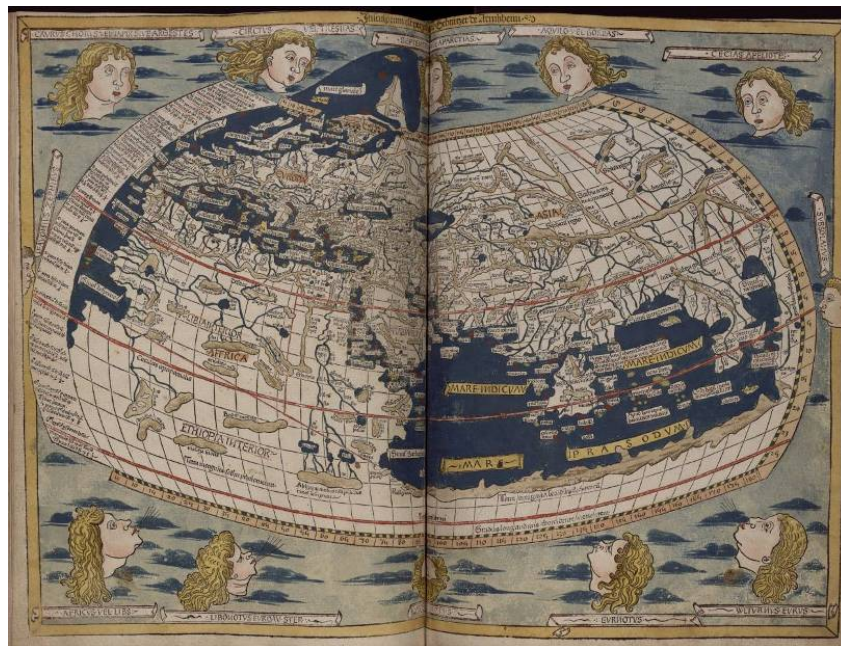


Fig. 9: Ptolemaic world map, Ulm edition (1482). The Mediterranean is represented one-third longer than its actual size and its landlocked geography serves as a model for the Indian Ocean (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Thacher Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, LOC 140-02-00).

⁴⁷ Claudius Ptolemy, *Geographikē Yphēgēsis: A Sourcebook in Greek Science*, eds. Ian Drabkin and Morris Cohen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), 162-63. The most recent edition of Ptolemy’s *Geography* is Alfred Stueckelberger and Gerd Grasshoff, eds. *Klaudios Ptolemaios Handbuch der Geographie* (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2006).

⁴⁸ “Poeticization” here is used in the Bachelardian sense; see Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

⁴⁹ Dalché, Patrick, “The Reception of Ptolemy’s *Geography* (End of the Fourteenth to Beginning of the Sixteenth Century,” in *The History of Cartography*, vol. III, 285.

The other twenty-six tables (chorographic) featured relatively small regions of the *oikoumene*, including the Italian Peninsula. If portolan charts expressed the sailor’s “view from the sea,” Ptolemaic maps were geometrical constructs which embraced what sailors could not see from their boats. As Angeli noted in his 1409 translation, “Ptolemy’s claims may regard terrestrial bodies (the *terrae situs*), but they are based on the celestial. The heavens provide the foundation of the work.”⁵⁰ On Renaissance Ptolemaic tables, Italy thus was featured no longer as a blank space solely defined by the sequence of place-names arranged along the coastline (as on portolans charts), nor as a part of the body of an anthropomorphized Europe (as on Opicino’s map), but rather as a discrete, self-contained unit [see Fig. 10]. Like the Mediterranean, the peninsula became a metageographical organism whose unity was reinforced by the Apennine mountainous backbone running from Liguria to the tip of Calabria and crossed almost perpendicularly by veins-like rivers.



Fig. 10: Ptolemaic chorographic table of Italy, Ulm edition (1482). The peninsula features as an organic entity from which Sicily is excluded and held together by the Apennine backbone (Courtesy of the Library of Congress Thacher Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, LOC 140-02-00).

Fig. 11: Niccolò Germanico’s Ptolemaic map of Italy (1508). The unity of the peninsula here is further reinforced by uniform yellow coloring and an artificial boundary before the Alps. Reprinted with permission, from *L’Italia nell’antica Cartografia* by Roberto Borri. Priuli & Verlucca, Editori, p. 30.

Ptolemaic maps of Italy encompassed the Alps, but not Sicily, an intrinsic part of the metageography of Italy in our geographical imagination, but not in Ptolemy’s. In Nicolaus



Germanicus’ 1508 version [see Fig. 11], Italy’s unity was further reinforced by uniform yellow coloring, whereas the Alps, painted in green, seem arbitrarily excluded from the Italian metageographical object. This might be read a part of a “selling technique.” Germanicus envisaged his *tabulae modernae* as an “improvement” of Ptolemy’s original work.⁵¹ To attract further customers, he made a number of arbitrary changes, such as increasing the number of modern place-names, introducing an inappropriate

⁵⁰ Quoted in *ibid*, 292.

⁵¹ Sometimes maps found in Byzantine manuscripts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were also copied. The first maps with a modern Latin nomenclature were introduced by Claudius Clavus in 1425 in his translation (Jacob, *Sovereign Map*, 61).

“trapezoidal projection” with converging meridians in regional maps, and adding frontiers.⁵² The last were supposed to make it easier to read the map by indicating in which provinces specific peoples or geographical features belonged.⁵³ Colors were probably added (either by Germanicus, or by later miniaturists) to reinforce regionalization – and thus as a further mnemonic device.

It is therefore thanks to these reappropriations and reinterpretations of Ptolemy’s work, and in particular chorographic mapping (i.e. mapping of a region at a larger scale than implied by geography or cosmography, but usually smaller than that of topography), that Italy came into being as a discrete entity, as a well-defined metageographical object. Towards the last decades of the fifteenth century, it became so well defined as to deserve a place even in island books (*isolarii*), or encyclopaedic collections of maps of Mediterranean (especially Aegean) islands accompanied by textual descriptions.⁵⁴

As a concept, chorography was not unknown in the Middle Ages. The best-known work including the word in its title was Pomponius Mela’s *De chorographia* (first century A.D.), a written description of regions of the world. This, however, had little effect on Mediterranean cartography, and regional maps at a smaller scale than maps of disputed boundary properties were better understood and appreciated in the form of itineraries.⁵⁵ On the contrary, Ptolemy’s *Geography*, in the words of its first Latin translator, had the merit to “show how to construct regional maps with proportions always in relation to the map of the world as a whole.”⁵⁶ It is thus not until the fifteenth century that we find detailed maps of Italy as a whole.⁵⁷

Unlike topological medieval *mappae mundi* and itineraries, Ptolemaic mapping rested on the idea of geography as *mimesis dia graphēs*, meaning imitation through a graphic form, or *imitatio picturae*.⁵⁸ Whether representing the whole world, or parts of it, Renaissance Ptolemaic maps embedded an organic quality, which perhaps derived from Ptolemy’s famous original bodily similitude:

The purpose of chorography is the description of the individual parts, as if one were to draw merely an ear or an eye; but the purpose of geography is to gain a view of the whole, as, for example, when one draws the whole head.⁵⁹

⁵² “The aristocratic public expected what they considered the hallmarks of Ptolemy’s work: exactitude and rigor. Nicolaus Germanus knew this, but was also aware of the scant mathematical knowledge of that same public. ... Nicolaus’ explanations betray a total incomprehension of Ptolemy’s text. Ptolemy himself had pointed out that rectangular ‘projection’ was best suited to regional maps, reserving the ‘curved and inclined lines’ . . . solely for world maps” (Dalché, “The Reception of Ptolemy,” 321).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 320.

⁵⁴ A self-enclosed cartographic space naturally detached (*chorismeno*) from the mainland, the island represented the ideal units for chorographic representation and description. On island books, see Georgios Toliás, “Isolarii, Fifteenth to Seventeenth Century,” in *The History of Cartography*, vol. III, 263–84; Frank Lestringant, “Îles,” in *Géographie du monde au Moyen Age et à la Renaissance*, ed. Monique Pelletier (Paris: CTHS, 1989), 166; Veronica della Dora, “Mapping a Holy Quasi-Island: Mount Athos on Early Renaissance *Isolarii*,” *Imago Mundi* 60 (2008): 139-65; and Theodore Cachey, “From the Mediterranean to the World: A Note on the Italian Book of Islands (*isolario*)” in this issue of *California Italian Studies*.

⁵⁵ Of course, with some rare notable exceptions, such as Paolino Veneto’s map of Italy (ca. 1320). On medieval cartographic genres, see Virginia Morse, “The Role of Maps in Later Medieval Society: Twelfth to Fourteenth Century,” in *The History of Cartography*, vol. III, 30. David Woodward, “Cartography and the Renaissance: Continuity and Change,” *The History of Cartography*, vol. III, 8.

⁵⁶ Angeli 1409, quoted in Dalché, “The Reception of Ptolemy,” 292.

⁵⁷ P. D. A Harvey, “Local and Regional Cartography in Medieval Europe,” in *The History of Cartography*, vol. I, 495.

⁵⁸ Kenneth Olwig, “Has Geography Always Been Modern?: Choros, (Non)representation, Performance, and the Landscape,” *Environment and Planning A*, 40 (2008): 1845; Lucia Nuti, “Mapping Places: Chorography and Vision in the Renaissance,” in *Mappings*, 91.

⁵⁹ Ptolemy, *Geographikē Yphēgēsis*, 163.

Among others, Ken Olwig has noted how by representing the land as a head and face the Renaissance cosmographers gave the landscape a personality and identity that could be then easily portrayed by painters.⁶⁰ The organic metaphor and its translation into practice on Ptolemaic tables such as Germanus' Italy, however, had also a mnemonic function. If "the cartographic drawing may be presented as the reproduction of pre-established forms," color, self-containment, and particular unifying features (such as the Apennine backbone) made "chōres" like Italy easier to visualize and thus imprint on memory.⁶¹ While the form of regions could be defined through reference points, it needed to be mentally constructed and de-codified through figural metaphors, especially bodily ones.⁶²

Emblematically, Italy's "Ptolemaic body" took shape alongside the Vitruvian body [see Fig. 12]. Vitruvius Pollio's *Ten Books of Architecture*, whose manuscript was discovered in Montecassino a few years after the translation of the *Geography*, had an impact in architecture similar to that of Ptolemy's work in geography. These two works reflected, and at the same time legitimized, a new spatial perception of the *kosmos* and of the human subject. Vitruvius (first century B.C.) conceptualized the human body as a "cosmos in miniature" and made it the measure of proportion in architecture. Italian commentator Cesare Cesariano enriched his *Vitruvius* (1521) with woodcut illustrations (which, as in the case of Ptolemy's *Geography*, lacked from the original Montecassino manuscript), using the methods employed by architects and surveyors in his representations of the human body. In his commentary, the use of the grid was recommended for "both drawing figures and measuring a land surface."⁶³ Among the illustrations, Cesariano included a map of Italy accompanied with a passage on chorography and cosmography [see Fig. 13]. Featuring only physical elements (seas, rivers, and especially mountains), the map represented the Italian Peninsula as an entity perhaps more organic than the human body itself.

⁶⁰ Olwig, "Has Geography Always Been Modern?" 1846; see also Nuti, "Mapping Places."

⁶¹ Jacobs, *Sovereign Map*, 139.

⁶² Mangani, *Cartografia morale*, 74. "The cartographic employment of the figure of the colossus and the anthropomorphic metaphor have a very ancient history. We find traces of it in a medical treatise in the Corpus Hippocraticum (probably gathered in the fourth century B.C.) which associated the regions of the known world to just as many parts of the human body... The superimposition of the human organism on geographical space favoured memorization, but also created interpretative associations, hierarchies, meditative derives which ended up connoting geographical regions with specific traits in relation to their geographical location – a system that will be re-codified in Ptolemy's astrological work" (ibid., 187).

⁶³ Denis Cosgrove, "Ptolemy and Vitruvius: Spatial Representation in the Sixteenth Century Texts and Commentaries," in *Architecture and the Sciences: Exchanging Metaphors*, eds. Antony Picon and Alessandra Ponte (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003), 38.

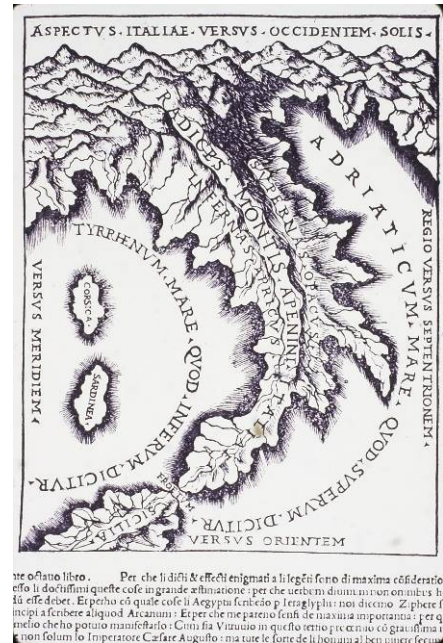
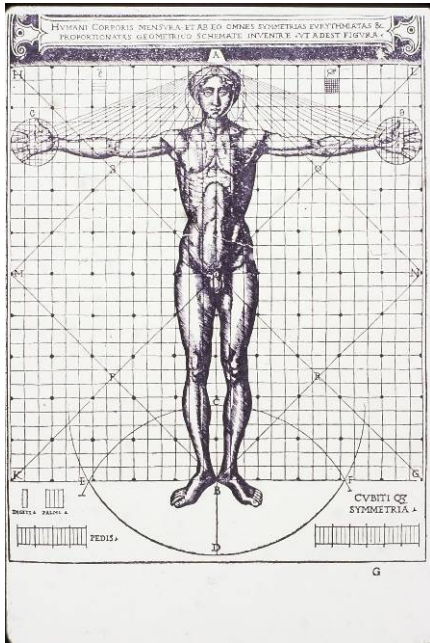


Fig. 12 and Fig. 13: Cesare Cesariano's Vitruvian man, 'surveyed' in a grid and his map of Italy (1521). The representation of the peninsula is clearly influenced by Ptolemaic mapping, both in its distorted shape and organicity, which mirrors the microcosmic human body. © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved, 60.g.4.

Cosgrove ascribed Cesariano map's westerly distortion of Calabria to Ptolemy's own inaccuracies in mapping the peninsula.⁶⁴ Ptolemaic Italy presented apparent deformations in the Ligurian coast, in the Gulf of Venice, and especially in Calabria and Puglia. The northern and central parts of the peninsula were dramatically stretched in the east-west direction and its southernmost portion presented a north-south torsion. These "anomalies" have been ascribed to the necessity of setting the peninsula at the center of a Mediterranean which was deemed to be, because of erroneous calculation, one third longer than its actual measure.⁶⁵

Ptolemaic tables, which had become particularly popular between 1477 and 1510 thanks to the invention of the printing press, continued to be reproduced until the last decades of the century in spite of their inaccuracies. Map historians have wondered about their resilience, when more "accurate" empirical models (including portolan charts) were available, especially in the case of Italy. Roberto Borri, among others, explains such resilience in terms of respect of the classical authority. As a matter of fact, by the middle of the fifteenth century "that tendency to see Ptolemy's *Geography* as an insuperable model of the world . . . was advanced in Florence with no reservations whatsoever."⁶⁶ Following a positivistic understanding of the history of cartography, Borri reads the Renaissance history of the representation of the Italian coastline as a process of progressive "scientific emancipation." The cultural history of Ptolemaic representations of Italy and their variants in the late Renaissance, however, is more complex and deserves attention.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 36.

⁶⁵ Dilke, "The Culmination of Greek Cartography with Ptolemy," 192; Borri, *L'Italia nell'antica cartografia*, 18.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 16; Dalché, "The Reception of Ptolemy," 318.

5. Italy in the Mediterranean memory theater

Ptolemy's *Geography* was just one of different starting points for spatial experimentation in Renaissance Italy. The production of Ptolemaic tables continued to be paralleled by portolan charts, island books, partly by *mappae mundi*, and other cartographic genres. These mapping traditions often influenced one another, producing new hybrids; the *carte nuove*, for example, were largely based on existing portolan charts, rather than on Ptolemaic astronomical calculations. Ptolemaic maps themselves presented continuities with the medieval art of mnemotechnics and were in many cases appreciated as antiquarian, rather than scientific tools. In humanist circles, the *Geography* became initially popular for the lists of ancient place-names it provided to poets and storytellers, rather than as a treatise in geometry/optics. Maps were from the beginning viewed as documents for historical-philological research and in a way reflected the old medieval delight in encyclopaedias.⁶⁷ Flavio Biondo, for example, is said to have used a Ptolemaic table of the peninsula to compose his *Italia illustrata* (1453), a topographic account written in the form of an itinerary describing the whole peninsula region by region and aiming to explore the Roman roots of the Renaissance world.⁶⁸ In the opening chapter of his first work *Roma restaurata* (1444-1447), Biondo described the continuity of Classical Rome into Christian Rome and the reuse of the ancient ruins in its Christian churches. In the final chapters of *Italia illustrata*, however, it was the whole peninsula that became "the most important part of the entire world."⁶⁹

Towards the last decades of the sixteenth century, Ptolemaic Italy was destined to become a monument of ancient geography and the *Geography* a starting point that was being gradually left behind.⁷⁰ Ptolemaic world maps were now used to contrast the ancient *oikoumene* to the modern world, whose surface had doubled in size within less than one and a half centuries.⁷¹ More remarkably, Ptolemaic chorographic maps of the Mediterranean and its regions were used to explore "our origins" and thus (in various ways) to justify links between modern European powers and the "classical world," whose perception and knowledge continued to remain inevitably mediated through Imperial Rome throughout the entire Renaissance.⁷²

Abraham Ortelius removed Ptolemaic maps from his *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1570), the first modern atlas, altogether. He used the Mercator projection to represent Italy and other contemporary regions but continued to portray the Mediterranean (or parts of it) in the Ptolemaic mode in his *Parergon*, a separate companion volume to the *Theatrum*. The *Parergon* grouped over forty images devoted to "sacred and Ancient Geography," including maps of the Roman Empire and its provinces, of ancient *periploi* (the journeys of Alexander the Great, Aeneas, Ulysses, Saint Paul, the Argonauts, etc.), a copy of a "regionalized" Peutinger table, and so on – in other words, maps of "antiquarian, exegetical, and humanist rather than "scientific" interest."⁷³ The *Parergon* is a clear expression of the Renaissance antiquarian relationship with the past, of the desire to show information co-synchronously, without confusing it with the present. While medieval maps showed elements from different

⁶⁷ Mangani, *Cartografia morale*, 73; Dalché, "The Reception of Ptolemy," 297-98.

⁶⁸ On Biondo's Varronian method, see Alain Schnapp, *The Discovery of the Past* (New York: Abrams, 1996), 122.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Francesca Fiorani, *The Marvel of Maps* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 189.

⁷⁰ Dalché, "The Reception of Ptolemy," 358-60.

⁷¹ See Woodward, "Cartography and the Renaissance," 3.

⁷² Schnapp, *The Discovery of the Past*; David Constantine, *Early Greek Travellers and the Hellenic Ideal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁷³ Denis Cosgrove, "Globalism and Tolerance in Early Modern Geography," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93 (2003): 36.

periods in the same map space, such Renaissance mapmakers as Ortelius, were careful to keep these elements separated and portrayed them on different maps that often featured side by side.⁷⁴

As anticipated by its title, Ortelius' atlas was conceived as a "theater," as a bird's-eye view of the earthly globe and its regions. In the Renaissance, the theater was a space charged with a deep moral meaning. By setting the spectator at a distance from the stage – the Greek term *théatron* literally means "place for seeing" – the theater helped meditation and thus the attainment of wisdom. Through its bird's-eye-view maps, Ortelius similarly presented the world as "a stage for the lives and works of its human occupants, as witnessed from an elevated point above its surface in flux."⁷⁵ Ortelius' use of the term 'theater' also reconnected the atlas and its *parergon* to the ancient and medieval art of mnemotechnics. In the Renaissance, actual theaters were often adapted into "memory theaters" in which visual associations with sequences of objects or parts of the room stimulated recollection.⁷⁶

Medieval itineraries, *mappae mundi* and portolan charts rested on the same principle: the memory of historical and mythical events was activated by means of a visual journey through stations, or *loci*.⁷⁷ Ptolemaic chorographic tables, on the other hand, owed much of their mnemonic power to well-defined, organic metageographical objects, such as the Italian Peninsula. Ortelius used a combination of both. The peninsula continued to feature as a coherent organism (initially held together by its backbone, and in later versions painted in yellow, as on sixteenth-century Ptolemaic maps) but enriched with a wealth of place names and new striking *loci memoriae*: sea vessels crossing the Adriatic, a sea monster in the Gulf of Liguria, Neptune and a siren featuring in a daring pose above the word "Mediterranean" (the "corrupting sea"), and other mythical figures sitting on the scale, or hanging from the colorful margins of the cartouche [see Figs. 14 and 15]. As Ortelius pointed out in the introduction to the *Theatrum*, his maps "being placed as it were certaine glasses before our eyes, will the longer be kept in memory and make the deeper impression in us."⁷⁸

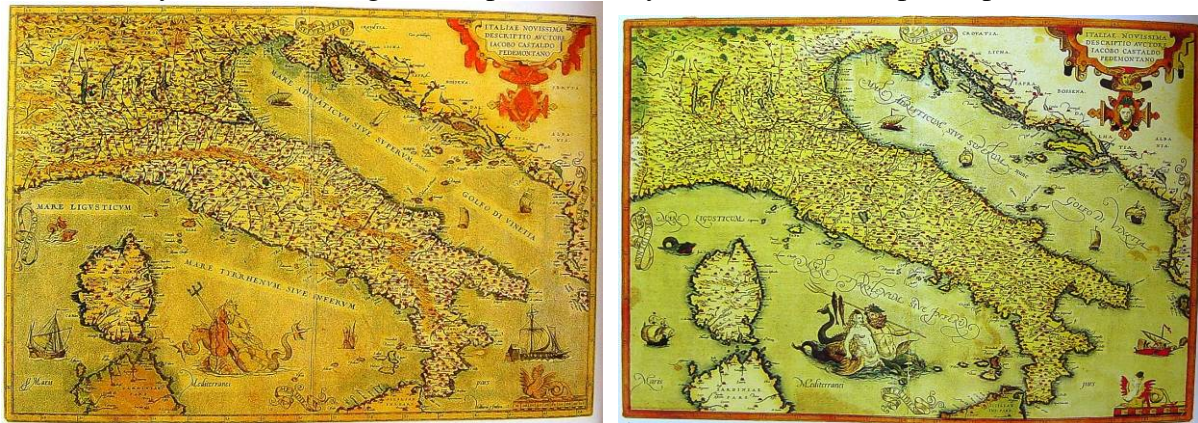


Fig. 14 and Fig. 15: Abraham Ortelius' map of modern Italy in the first edition of *Theatrum* (1570) and in a later edition. Here the Ptolemaic projection is abandoned in favor of the Mercator projection. As on Ptolemaic maps, Sicily continues to be excluded from the peninsula as a unit. The maps offer a bird's-eye view on contemporary Italy and are enriched by decorative icons of mythical creatures and ships, which serve as a mnemonic function similar to the *loci* in medieval maps. . Reprinted with permission, from *L'Italia nell'antica Cartografica* by Roberto Borri. Priuli & Verlucca, Editori, p. 50.

⁷⁴ Woodward, "Cartography and the Renaissance," 3.

⁷⁵ Cosgrove, "Globalism and Tolerance," 856.

⁷⁶ Francis Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1966), 367. See also, Mary Carruthers. *The Book of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁷⁷ Mangani, *Cartografia morale*, 25.

⁷⁸ London 1606, quoted in Svetlana Alpers, "The Mapping Impulse in Dutch Art," in *Art and Cartography: Six Historical Essays*, ed. David Woodward (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 88.

The Ptolemaic maps of the Mediterranean in the *Parergon* were perhaps even more striking “memory theaters,” for they directly activated the link with a mythicized classical past that scholars and rulers of all Europe were trying to resurrect in every aspects of their lives and often in the most material sense: recycling Roman monuments for the construction of princes and cardinals’ palaces is just one of many examples.⁷⁹ One of the main themes of the *Parergon* is obviously the history of the Roman Empire. The map of the “Image of the Roman Empire” [see Fig. 16] features a “shrunk” Ptolemaic Mediterranean centered on and largely dominated by Greece and Italy – a true “Mare Nostrum” surrounded by the provinces of the empire.



Fig. 16: Ptolemaic map of the Roman Empire in Ortelius’ *Parergon* (1606), with a genealogical tree of its seven kings (Courtesy of the British Library).

Two medallions crown the central title cartouche: on the upper left, one containing the portrait of Tibullus, who wrote the accompanying quote “Rome, your race is destined to rule the world”; on the upper right, one featuring Romulus, “the founder of the eternal city.” In later editions of the *Parergon*, a quote from Vitruvius at the top of the map exalts the geography of the empire: “The divine mind has assigned to the citizens of the Roman nation an excellent and temperate region, so that they could establish the Empire of the whole world. Vitruvius Book viii.” A genealogical tree of the seven kings of Rome taken from Livius, Dionysius, and Plutarch and topped by the *lupa* is provided on the lower right portion of the map “for the benefit of those who have an interest in Roman history” (as it is stated in the central bottom cartouche). On the left bottom part of the map, a framed account of the “origins, growth, and culmination of the Roman Empire” invites the reader to visualize the listed places on the map, as s/he goes through the text.⁸⁰ The narrative is one of continuous expansion, which culminates in a glorious ending:

⁷⁹ Schnapp, *The Discovery of the Past*, 125.

⁸⁰ “At first, under the seven kings called Romulus, Servius etc., the Roman Empire extended for 243 years no further than to Portus and Ostia within a radius of 18 miles. However, under the consuls, in some cases including dictators, groups of ten men, and military tribunes, Italy has been conquered in 447 years all the way beyond the river Po; Africa and Spain have been subdued; Gallia and Britannia have been conquered; the Illyrians, Histrians, Liburnians, and Dalmatians have been overrun; Greece has been invaded, the Macedonians have been beaten; wars have been waged against the Dardanians, the Moesians and the Thracians; the Danube

Thus, thanks to the exertions of their commanders, and through the valiant behaviour of the Roman population, and in immortal glory, they have attained the highest stage for this most elevated Empire, of which the borders in the west are the Ocean, in the north the Rhine and the Danube, in the east the Tigris, and in the south the Atlas mountain range. All this is shown on this map for the benefit of those studying history.

For Ortelius, as for Strabo and Biondo, geography made one “see” the places of history; it struck and persuaded the scholar, thanks to the power of images.⁸¹ As Ortelius insisted, his maps were thus essential to “those interested in the history of the Roman Empire,” which Augustus claimed to extend *ad termini orbis terrarum* (to the ends of the earth). The Roman Empire provided a theme of exceptional interest for antiquarians such as Ortelius. As Cosgrove suggested, it also provided Ortelius’ contemporary readers with a motif for neo-Stoic meditation on the futility of human affairs.⁸² But Augustean images of imperial rule as a cosmic unity also provided the iconographic language for rulers as diverse as Spain’s Philip II, Cosimo de Medici in Florence, and England’s Elizabeth.



Fig. 17: View of the Vatican Map Gallery (1580) frescoed by Ignazio Danti. The gallery offers an imaginative and physical journey along the Appenine and a reinterpretation of history according to Pope Gregory XIII. Italy is exalted as the material link between classical and Christian past and present, and thus as the privileged arena for the affirmation of the Roman Catholic Church. Photograph by Norman Walsh; image under Creative Commons License: <http://flickr.com/search/?q=vatican&w=24401095%40N00>.

has been reached and the Romans have made their first conquests in Asia by winning Antiochus; When Mithridates had been defeated, they occupied the kingdom of Pontus and at the same time the smaller province of Armenia, which was under his rule. The Romans proceeded to Mesopotamia and struck a treaty with the Parths. They entered into combat with the Carduanians, Saracenes and Arabs. They conquered all of Judea. They brought Cilicia and Syria under their rule. Finally, they invaded Egypt. However, when the Emperors ruled, that is to say from the time of Divine Augustus until the time of Theodosius the Great and his sons Honorius and Arcadius, they brought under their rule in the course of 440 years the Cantabrians, the Asturians, and all the rest of Spain. The coastal areas, the Alps, Coccia and Rhetia, Noricum, Pannonia and Moesia have augmented their power. The entire Danube area has been divided into provinces. The entire Pontus, Greater Armenia, Assyria, Arabia and Egypt have come under Roman law, and thus, thanks to the exertions of their commanders, and through the valiant behaviour of the Roman population, and in immortal glory, they have attained the highest stage for this most elevated Empire, of which the borders in the West are the Ocean, in the North the Rhine and the Danube, in the East the Tigris, and in the South the Atlas mountain range. All this is shown on this map for the benefit of those studying history”

(trans.<http://www.orteliusmaps.com/book/ort187.html>, retrieved on Oct. 3, 2008).

⁸¹ Mangani, *Cartografia morale*, 201.

⁸² On Ortelius and neo-Stoicism, see Cosgrove, “Globalism and Tolerance.”

Pope Gregory XIII too appropriated this iconographic language, when he commissioned his spectacular Galleria delle Mappe at the Vatican from Dominican Ignazio Danti (ca. 1580) [see Fig. 17]. The Galleria featured forty monumental maps of the Italian regions, the main islands of the Mediterranean, along with Malta, Corfu, the Tremiti, and Elba, and the county of Avignon. The vaulted ceiling was decorated with seventy-five scenes representing sacrificial subjects from the Old Testament, episodes of Church history, and legends connected with individual saints. As in Ortelius' *Theatrum*, maps and vignettes were embellished by grotesques and enclosed by sumptuous stucco frames (similar to those used by Ortelius for his cartouches). The vignettes were geographically related to the maps, which showed the location of the events depicted on the ceiling. Two comparative maps displaying the whole peninsula (*Italia antiqua* and *Italia nova*) [see Fig. 18] opened the cycle at the south entrance, proclaiming the continuity between pagan past and Christian present (a theme reinforced by the corresponding scenes on the ceiling connected with Constantine's conversion to Christianity). They were followed by a succession of regional maps as observed as if walking along the Apennine ridge from north to south.



Fig. 18: The map of *Italia antiqua* is set in front of a mirroring map of *Italia nova* in the Map Gallery. The two maps open the cycle at the south entrance, further proclaiming the continuity between pagan past and Christian present. Photograph by the author.

Danti's forty monumental frescoed maps provided visitors to the Vatican Palace with a papal interpretation of Church history, which was fundamentally meant to counter Protestant discourse. The Italian Peninsula was portrayed as a privileged historical theater for the affirmation of Catholic Christianity in the years following the Council of Trent. According to the pope's reading, classical history had placed Italy at the center of the world, and Constantine originally donated the peninsula to the Roman popes, hence the "natural" continuity between classical past and present. By walking through the gallery, cardinals, ambassadors, and other illustrious visitors to the Vatican would take a stroll through the Apennine that was at once physical and imaginative. "Thanks to their large scale, the maps registered in detail the Church's presence in each region: bishops' and archbishops' sees, monasteries, properties of the Apostolic Chamber, Papal fiefs leased in perpetuity or recently

recovered for the Church.”⁸³ As a sequence, the maps also proclaimed the Renaissance literary *topos* of the centrality of Italy in world history since the mythical foundation of Rome and the expansion of the Roman Empire. The *topos* was emphatically restated in the three inscriptions in the Vatican Gallery that defined Italy: *Regio totius orbis nobilissima, Regionum orbis primaria, Omnium terrarum alumna*. The Vitruvian praise of the peninsula as an “excellent and temperate region” destined to rule the world reported by Ortelius here was paraphrased and magnified by the scale of Danti’s geographical images:

The map of *Italia antiqua* faces *Italia nova*, and an inscription (today erased) quoted Pliny, presenting Italy as a common homeland given by God: Italy is a land which is at once the foster child and the parent of all other lands, chosen by the providence of God to make heaven itself more glorious, to unite scattered empires, to make manners gentle and to become throughout the world the single fatherland of all the peoples.⁸⁴

Ptolemaic chorography 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.⁸⁵ As Francesca Fiorani observes, however, the Italy depicted in the Vatican Gallery corresponds neither to the ancient geographical area described by Strabo and Ptolemy (both portrayed in the gallery), nor to any present or future political partition. It represents, instead, “a utopian construction of a place under the spiritual and political authority of the Papacy. This ideal, imagined Italy includes not only the regions of the peninsula and the main islands (Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica) but also the islands of Corfu and Malta, military bulwarks against the infidels, and the county of Avignon, once the papal seat and still papal territory.”⁸⁶ Having walked through the gallery, the visitor might have been ultimately led to the Terza Loggia, where monumental maps of the continents and of the world featured as the arena for the Church’s universal mission. As Fiorani observes, however, 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 purely spiritual, and thus “a-territorial.” These maps rather played an “emblematic,” or perhaps meditative, role analogous to that of the paper journey offered by Ortelius. They created a space for persuasion and self-reflection.

Conclusions

Archaeologist Alain Schnapp has argued that “memory needs the land to survive. Whether inscribed in stone, brick, or parchment or flowing in human memory by the agency of bard or poet, a foundation narrative must root itself in the land, invest itself with that reality which is sealed within the soil . . . objects must be linked to a place, to an area.”⁸⁷ Mapping does not simply designate a mode of spatial representation. It also involves ways of thinking about how that space is constituted materially, functionally, and symbolically. Gregory XIII’s vision of history participated in centering the Mediterranean on the Italian Peninsula, and the cartographic images of the Italian Peninsula and other regions of the Mediterranean in turn helped the construction of his vision. They gave substance to it; they made it persuasive.

⁸³ Francesca Fiorani, “Post-Tridentine “Geographia Sacra”. The Galleria delle Carte Geografiche in the Vatican Palace,” *Imago Mundi* 48 (1996): 135.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁸⁵ Fiorani, *Marvel of Maps*, 176.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁸⁷ Schnapp, *Discovery of the Past*, 24.

Today, Danti's maps of *Italia antiqua* and *Italia nova* proliferate on blogs, online photo albums, and travelogues. They are no longer sites for silent contemplation or for imaginative journeys to the utopian world imagined by Gregory XIII. They are rather favorite settings for family or group pictures by visitors keen on giving their Italian vacation a visual shape and sealing it in memory. Unlike the other regional maps in the gallery, those of the entire peninsula are immediately recognizable, even by the most geographically illiterate tourist. As we have seen, however, Italy's familiar cartographic outline emerged from a long and complex history made of continuities and discontinuities between different mapping traditions and conceptualizations of the Mediterranean.

This article has focused on two distinctive ways in which this process took place. The first, through Roman and Medieval itineraries and portolan charts, participated in the creation of Italy as a spatial element within a network of flows and connections that functionally formed part of a Mediterranean world; the second, through Ptolemaic maps, led to the production of Italy as a discrete, organic component of the Mediterranean basin as whole. In either case, the Mediterranean Sea provided more than a mere backdrop on which to sketch Italy. As I have tried to show, cartographic representations of the peninsula were intrinsically dependent on these two different spatial conceptualizations of the basin: the one linear and functional, the other superficial and organic. In other words, the Mediterranean provided the geographical context for defining the "nature" of Italy as expressed cartographically, but it did so in ways that were mutually exclusive. Indeed, the two modes of mapping lead to two very different historiographies of Italy and the Mediterranean: the ensemble of coastal microregions advocated by Horden and Purcell and the Braudelian organic region.

The rediscovery of Ptolemy's *Geography* is often interpreted as a turning point from a place-based to a geometric spatial system and, thus, as the beginning of modern mapping. It is also the starting point for the cartographic invention of Italy as a discrete entity. While revolutionary, Ptolemaic science (as reappropriated by Renaissance scholars) nevertheless presents continuities with the older encyclopaedic and mnemonic tradition of *loci* formalized in itineraries and portolan charts. More significantly, it was used as a link between a mythical "classical" past and the present. Ptolemy's chorographic vision helped Renaissance scholars construct metageographical objects and visualize history in a way that other mapping traditions had failed to do. In such a way, Italy became a distinguishable *locus* itself – and a starting point to reinvent the past.

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