Empire-building. The Case of Geography in Early Modern Britain

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An 'intellectual commodity'

At the turn of the 16th century, a wide body of scientific and quasiscientific knowledge of distant lands and peoples circulated in Britain under various titles. The widely known and used term of 'cosmography' was beginning to be replaced by metaphors or exact descriptions such as 'glass', 'mirror', 'theatre', 'atlas', 'history', all pointing out to diverse discourses about the wider world. The miscellaneous body of texts accommodating both ancient and modern authors comprised various types of geographical knowledge of the globe but, most importantly, valuable considerations on the content and role of geography with reference to its relevance for government, conquest and science. The introduction of geography in the curricula of English universities together with the great number of books on the topic which were either written or translated testifies to a process whose scope lay beyond university gates.

At the time, geography was an overarching discipline, the study of which involved both ancient and modern texts and a keen interest in was published elsewhere in Europe and not just in Britain. This was partly due to material constraints involving the process of printing and technical obstacles facing printers in Britain, the religious tensions and wars waged among Catholic and Protestant communities and the political interests pertaining to a nascent imperialism in the 16th and 17th centuries. Given these constraints, geography emerged as instrumental in what we could call a process of individuation by which nations acquired power and a new place on the world map via scientific knowledge and conquest.

The questions that arise with respect to geography at the beginning of the 17th century concern its subject matter, its authors and the ideological content of texts such as those authored by William Cunningham, Abraham Ortelius, Gerard

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Mercator, Thomas Hill, Peter Heylyn, Periegetes Dionysius and Antonio de Torquemada. To be more specific, how relevant were metaphors to the way geography was shaping up as a discipline? What kind of knowledge was circumscribed to it? Finally, what was the role of translations in redefining the scope of geography? In this respect, it seems relevant to begin by quoting on Ramesh Dikshit (Dikshit 2006: 10) who insists that "scientific knowledge about land and the peoples on the earth surface became the most sought after intellectual commodity."

Metaphors and geography

The latter half of the 16th century belonged to cosmographers who shaped an ever growing body of knowledge into books and globes (Vogel 2006: 480) and who belonged to international networks of scholars that defied political and religious boundaries. The term itself, cosmography, points to the comprehensive nature of their endeavour. Yet, at the same time contending metaphors emerge as proof of alternative ways of looking at and conceiving of the world. In this respect, we may refer to the works of William Cunningham, *The Cosmographicall Glasse* (1559), Abraham Ortelius, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1570) and Gerard Mercator, *Atlas* (1578), *Historia mundi* (1630). At the turn of the 16th century, the metaphors of the theatre and of Atlas became particularly popular, each for different reasons that are to be discussed below.

Cunningham's metaphor of the glass refers to "Cosmographie", a mirror or a "general Mappe" of knowledge (Cunningham). The work was informed by the cosmographies of Apian and Finaeus (Vogel 2006: 487) and focused mainly on the practical uses of the art: the purpose of cosmography was to help preserve and restore man's health, make and ordain laws, be an aid to the imagination, to merchants, to mariners and travellers, it was the art required for the philosopher, an aid to travel, it offered an insight into the nature of people and peoples. Cosmography was to serve physicians, travellers, governors, philosophers and common people in their attempt to know and control the world. Beyond Cunningham's practical orientation, books of cosmographies emerged as illustrated collections of historical, geographic and anthropological information which attempted a systematic organization of European knowledge of the world. Anecdotes, legends and oral accounts were recorded, maps were attached, illustrations and minute descriptions of the mores of various peoples were written with a view to create a mirror of the world which foreshadowed Francis Bacon's project to have the mind mirror human knowledge of the globe.

The metaphor of the theatre, however, was far more popular, perhaps due to its ancient origins. Ortelius's was not the only theatre. It would be fair to say that the metaphor which underpinned his atlas, or what is now claimed to be the first modern atlas, "drew from classical sources, befitting him much better" (Krogt 1998: 64) and which Ortelius disclosed from the very start in the world map, *Typus Orbis Terrarum*, the first map of the atlas. Enclosed in the cartouches of the map are quotations from Cicero and Seneca which aim to remind the viewer of the insignificance of human affairs. As a cosmographer, he represents the world from a God-like perspective, with God a spectator to the theatre of the globe. This vantage

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position also belongs to the cartographer, Gillies suggests (Gillies 1994: 81). The message of the cartouches is that a virtuous man is to do his duty and not occupy his mind with visions of conquest and earthly glory in a world of transient things that are rendered insignificant from a heavenly point of view:

> Quid Ei Potest Videri Magnum In Rebus Humanis, Cui Aeternitas Omnis, Totiusque Mundi Nota Sit Magnitudo. (For what can seem of moment in human occurences to a man who keeps all eternity before his eyes and knows the vastness of the universe?) (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*)
>
> Homines Hac Lege Sunt Generati, Qui Terentur Illum Globum, Quem in Hoc Templo Medium Vides Quae Terra Dicitur. (For man was given life, that he might inhabit that sphere called Earth, which you see in the centre of this temple.) (Cicero, *The Dream of Scipio*)
>
> Hoc Est Punctum, Quod Inter Tot Gentes Ferro Et Igni Dividitur,/ O Quam Ridiculi Sunt Mortalium Termini. (Is this that pinpoint which is divided by sword and fire among so many nations? O how ridiculous are the boundaries of mortals!) (Seneca, *Naturales Questiones I*)
>
> Equus Vehendi Causa, Arandi Bos, Venandi Et Custodieni Canis, Homo Autem Ortus Ad Mundum Contemplandum. (The horse for riding, the ox for ploughing, the dog for hunting and keeping guard, man himself however came into existence for the purpose of contemplating and imitating the world.) (Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*) (Gillies 1994: 80–84).

As stated before, Ortelius's was not the only theatre. Yet, they circulated under various names and were so diverse in their nature that they came to include anatomical theatres, theatres of curiosities, theatres of nature and theatres of the world, theatres of natural history, geographical and cartographic theatres, theatres of demons, of human passions and morality, of ordeals suffered by men. They hovered between a practical and a moral orientation, between an aesthetic and a didactic purpose. The authors of theatres such as Abraham Ortelius or Pierre Boistuau played upon the possibility to please and to teach, which leads Blair to the conclusion that:

> The metaphor of the theatre underlying these titles is multifaceted but rests primarily, I argue, on one or both of two major themes: a moral theme, which draws either on the canonical metaphor of the theatre of human life or on the association with the theatre of the ancients which combined edification with entertainment; and a formal theme, in which the book as "theatre" aims, regardless of its actual success, to provide global treatment of a large subject in the form of a "tabula," a concise, clear, and structured if not graphically tabular presentation (Blair 1997: 14).

Beyond formal and moral concerns, there remains the fact that, in his *Theatrum*, Ortelius views geography as the eye of history. The maps in his atlas are accompanied by geographic and historical information on the countries charted in his theatre, a theatre which is much indebted to his ancient sources. His preoccupation with ancient geographers leads Voet to suggest that, as Ortelius pioneered the reconstruction of historical maps, "he was a humanist obsessed by Antiquity, rather than a cosmographer" (Voet 1998: 23). The *Parergon*, the historical section of the atlas, which was gradually enriched after 1579, testifies to his antiquarian interests and to his humanist preoccupations.

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It is clear that Ortelius viewed his work as a moral, scientific, political and aesthetic project which merged geography and history to the purpose of revealing man's role in the theatre of the world. Unlike Cunningham, who showed more concern for the practical goals which cosmography could serve, the Antwerp humanist placed philosophy at the core of the worldview he promoted.

The Flemish cosmographer Mercator, who owed his knowledge of cosmography and the construction of globes to Reiner Gemma Frisius (Vogel 2006: 486), proposed yet another metaphor that joined history and geography, the atlas. According to the frontispiece:

> LEARNING the ATLAS of the world, does beare/ Earths burthen up; sustaines this lower Spheare;/ VVhich else had fall'n, and her declining light/ Had slept in shades of IGNORANCE and NIGHT.//RIOT and SLOTH, and dull OBLIVIONS head/ Our ATLAS spurnes, whose conquering feet does tread/ Vpon those slavish necks, which else would rise / (Like selfe-lewd Rebels) up and tirannize:// Grave HISTORIE, and renown'd GEOGRAPHY/ Keepe Centry here; their quickning flames doe fly/ And make a SUNNE whose more refulgent rayes/ Lightens the VVORLD, and glorifies our DAYES:// By that faire EUROPE viewes the ASIAN shore,/ And wilde AMERICK courts the Sunburnt MOORE:/ By this, th'extreme ANTIPODES doe meete/ And Earths vast bulke is lodg'd within one SHEETE (Mercator 1630).

The metaphor gained popularity not necessarily due to its ancient reference, but to the technical merits of the work. Unlike the theatre with its multiple instantiations, the atlas was mainly a work of geography, more precisely, of cartography which was not yet separated from history, hence the title of the English translation *Historia mundi: or Mercator's atlas Containing his cosmographicall description of the fabricke and figure of the world. Lately rectified in divers places, as also beautified and enlarged with new mappes and tables; by the studious industry of Iudocus Hondy. Englished by W. S. generosus, & Coll. Regin. Oxoniae* (1630). Mercator himself avowed that he had set ancient Atlas "so notable for his erudition, humaneness, and wisdom as a model for my imitation" (Crane 2003: 308). The title of the cosmography outlasted the *Theatrum* of Ortelius and the *Speculum* of de Jode due to the cartographic improvements made by Mercator. His cosmography established a metaphor which would not become a matter of oblivion.

Of the metaphors discussed here with reference to geography and its relation to history, the theatre and Atlas have been of particular interest. Yet, that is not to say that the mirror was not popular at the turn of the 16th century in England, where John Norden's *Speculum Britanniae* was published in 1596. The three metaphors, I would suggest, were contending titles of a worldview that aimed at systematization, accuracy of representation and aesthetic refinement. At this point, the place of geography is instrumental in revealing historical, political and social fact and fiction about the fabric of the world. Geography is still indebted to the Antiquity and an aid to practical, moral and aesthetic goals. Yet, the growing interest of scholars and its fate at the universities together with a nascent imperial ideology seem to have led to changes in the status of the discipline.

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Geography revisited

A corpus of texts concerned with geography and its relation to other disciples present the reader of early 17th-century works with a certain ambiguity. On the one hand, works of geography are comprehensive in their nature and still inseparable from astronomy, on the other, the distinctions made among the disciplines in such texts and the interest in geography, in its subject matter and its branches, testify to its ever more important status. Thomas Hill and Peter Heylyn's works point to the practical orientation of English authors of such texts. Relevant to this type of orientation is the context in which they were produced, namely the political implications of the study of geography. For a nation willing to claim a new position on the globe, such study was crucial. In fact, a change which takes place in cartographic representations in the latter half of the 16th century is indicative of the British ambition to occupy a new position on the world map. Namely, the change of focus from Jerusalem as the old centre of the world to Britain as the new centre (Cormack 1997: 7) points to an ideological shift marked by a growing interest in the new world which has been revealed by recent expeditions of discovery and exploration. Against the backdrop of the Black Legend of the Spanish atrocities in the New World and its threat to the old one (Hadfield 2007: 79), the British start envisioning an empire by means of which they could redefine their position on the globe as central. To this purpose, the study of geography is an important ingredient to a nascent imperialism which raised questions of identity and power. Geography is both a discipline and a tool for other disciplines: its instrumental role perhaps explains the tremendous interest and the great scope it was assigned in the early modern period.

Thomas Hill's *The schoole of skil containing two bookes: the first, of the sphere, of heauen, of the starres, of their orbes, and of the earth, &c. The second, of the spherical elements, of the celestiall circles, and of their vses, &c. Orderly set forth according to art, with apt figures and proportions in their proper places* (1599) focuses on several aspects concerning the relevance of geography: its social impact, its use as an instrument to build an empire, a nascent ideology of material progress, political power and religious salvation. In the address to the reader, it is stated that never has there been a more favourable time for students to enlarge their understanding of any profession "as well out of the universities, as in them" than the turn of the 17th century. Ancient and modern works of art and science provide men with knowledge to be used "both on Sea ad Lande" in order "to benefit these our later times" so that "*England* may compare with any Nation for number of lerned men, and for variety in professions" (Hill 1599: 3). To this end, his work will serve as an instrument to men willing to apply themselves to the study of celestial and terrestrial spheres in the hope of ruling both at sea and on land. This is a most auspicious time for students to dedicate their time to such study at English universities. Intimations of imperial ambitions and of a central role in the affairs of the world often emerge as indicative of a project according to which Britannia is to "rule the waves" (Cormack 1998: 1). John Dee's plans to persuade Elizabeth I to render support to the imperial dream appear to be echoed by many works of geography at the time.

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With Peter Heylyn's *Mikrokosmos. A little description of the great world. Augmented and reuised* (1625) we are faced with another problem raised by such works. Beginning with its misleading title, the *Mikrokosmos* announces the ambiguous nature of the work which is to be rendered clear by the author's intention to present his book as a map of the little world:

> At the first, there went to the making vp of this *Little world*, these six integrall parts, *History, Geography, Policie, Theology, Chronologie*, and *Heraldrie*. It is now enlarged in all those particulars, & in nothing is deficient which the other did afford thee, but the faults. To these I haue vpon diuerse occasions added diuerse *Philologicall* discourses; not much impertinent to the places, wherein they are inferred. At the worst, thou canst but call them *Digressions;* I am sure they are not *Extrauagancies* (Heylyn 1625: 4).

Again, the *Mikrokosmos* is a book where geography is only one among other disciplines that benefit from a growing interest among students. Moreover, the work emerges as a miscellaneous body of knowledge that still ranges within a holistic view of various disciplines. It is equally indebted to ancient and modern writers, to ancient classifications and modern challanges. Time has not come for a clear separation between geography and history, which, Heylyn suggests, "are like two sisters intirely louing each other, and not without (I had almost said impiety) great pitty to be diuided" (Heylyn 1625: 17). The practical orientation of Heylyn's little world is made clear for it is to serve trade, navigation, astronomy, governement, history "both Duine and Humane" (Heylyn 1625: 16).

Geography englished

Translation in the early modern period is indicative of a growing sciemtific, commercial and political interest in works of geography. However, translation at the time need not be taken at face value. Rather, there are instances when it would be more accurate to look at it as a matter of adaptation and plagiarism. The nature of the texts translated into English and the source languages vary from the Antiquity to early modernity. Classical works of geography circulated alongside with modern works. Yet, as pointed out by Cormack, at the turn of the 16th century, new works from the Continent and Britain were gaining popularity at English universities, proof that scholars "were beginning to experiment with new and often Continental ideas, while reducing their reliance on classical sources" (Cormack 1997: 41). The number of descriptive texts was on the rise despite the fact that cosmographies indebted to mathematical geography were highly popular in translation. Namely, at the beginning of the 17th century, the Dutch influence was deeply felt in Britain with the publication of Ortelius and Mercator's atlases. This marked a change corresponding to "a large increase in the number of mathematical geography books published in the Low Countries, as Dutch knowledge and hegemony in matters geographical and especially navigational began to emerge" and to "a later inclination toward the larger and more complete atlases, often of Dutch manufacture" (Cormack 1997: 114).

Abraham Ortelius was an Antwerp humanist, a merchant and an antiquarian, engaged in a network of scholars that included Richard Hakluyt and his nephew,

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James Cole, a silk merchant and a natural historian living on Lime Street in London (Harkness 2007: 21–37). The translation of his *Theatrum* from Latin into English was only to be expected, given the tremedous success of the Latin edition and the importance English publishers and geographers attached to his work. However, what is of relevance in the context of early modern translations is that each translation of the *Theatrum* was adapted to the political and religious circumstances of its publication. Thus, there were slight variations and important differences between the maps of Britain in the English and Italian editions of the atlas, differences which were dictated by the publication and reception of the atlas in the Protestant and Catholic communities of Britain and Italy.

Britain had close ties with yet another cosmographer, Gerad Mercator. His collaboration with the two Hakluyts in the English quest for a Northeast passage to China, as documented by Mancall (Mancall 2007: 80), is indicative of an English reliance on Dutch cosmographers in the attempt to attain hegemony and build an overseas empire. Mercator's *Historia mundi: or Mercator's atlas Containing his cosmographicall description of the fabricke and figure of the world. Lately rectified in divers places, as also beautified and enlarged with new mappes and tables; by the studious industry of Iudocus Hondy. Englished by W. S. generosus, & Coll. Regin. Oxoniae.* (1630) promotes a view of his cosmography as a "Mirrour or Looking-glass" which "doth shew the beautie and ornaments of the whole Fabricke of the world". It has an affinity with Astronomy. The atlas is a medium for "eye-travell", an instrument for trade, poetry, history, public servants, princes (Mercator 1630: 3). As such, geography is a reminder that man is lord of both the earth and the sea. As stated before, the translation of Mercator's work testifies to the interest of English scholars in mathematical geography and its possible profit for trade, conquest and a new central position in political affairs.

However, both new knowledge and old knowledge of the world circulated in translation at the beginning of the 17th century. Antonio de Torquemada's *Spanish Mandeuile of miracles. Or The garden of curious flowers VVherin are handled sundry points of humanity, philosophy, diuinitie, and geography, beautified with many strange and pleasant histories* (1600) is a miscellaneous work that maintains the old discourse of marvels, both natural and divine and which preserves the remnants of medieval legends in geography. Torquemada's avowed interest in curiosities recalls the medieval celebration of a wonderous world which is divergent from the early modern discourse on the newly discovered territories seen as a place of salvation from the plight of poverty and war in Europe:

> So mighty is Nature and diuers in her workes, and the world so great, that there are euery day new nouelties brought vnto our notice of which though I know your L. being so wise and well experimented, will make no wonder; yet you will receaue delight to finde some of them heere briefely collected together, with other singularities full of pleasure & recreation, which collection I haue taken the hardines to dedicate vnto your Lor. calling it the Garden of curious Flowers (Torquemada 1600: 4).

Torquemada's is not a work of modern descriptive geography, yet such a translation shows that the heterogenous corpus of texts the English took interest in

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was indicative of a phase in which geography was the ground of contending discourses harnassed to fuel enterprises of overseas exploration and conquest.

To build an empire

As stated at the beginning, the aim of this article has been to reveal the practical and moral scope of early modern works of geography. To continue with the remarks about translation, we may conclude that early modern translations in English can be conceived of as an incentive to imperialism. By recontextualizing foreign experience, they adapted it to the context of building an empire and engendered a discourse according to which the Protestant community in Britain could prove its superiority. Namely, set against the Black Legend in Europe, the story of the courageous Protestants promoted them as saviours both in Europe and in America. Translations also fueled the ambition to have access to and use the knowledge of the world gained by the Continent and to prove that the English were worthy of a central place in politics. Moreover, the study of geography at the English universities was empowering for it provided a better understanding of the world which would enable the country to control the newly conquered territories. The beginning of the 17th century was a time of negotiation between ancient and modern explanations in geography, a time when "early modern thinkers combined older 'poetic' geographical approaches, emphasizing connection and hidden meaning, with newer, more 'objective' accounts" (Gillies 1994: 188). The changes in the curricula of universities and the branching out of the discipline of geography are yet another argument in favour of a changing landscape as far as the knowledge of the world was concerned.

Finally, another point of interest has been the impact of geography on a new sense of identity for the English people. This crucial ideological change which took place at the turn of the 16th century involved a shift of focus on a new power translated in a new centre in cartographic representations. This new alleged centre was Britain at the beginning of its imperial history. Geography was instrumental for the success of its imperial ambitions and such awareness accounts for the great number of heterogeneous works of geography circulating in early modern Britain.

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Abstract

The paper sets out to investigate several works of geography by authors such as William Cunningham, Abraham Ortelius, Gerard Mercator, Thomas Hill, Peter Heylyn, Periegetes Dionysius and Antonio de Torquemada, at the beginning of the 17th century. I wish to explore the moral scope of this overarching discipline and the cartographic metaphor underlying early modern works of geography and their impact on travel writing in Britain.

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