Conference proceedings: Venice and the new Oikoumene: Cartography in the 15th century

Prof. Dr. Ingrid Baumgärtner, Medieval History, Kassel University; Dott. Piero Falchetta, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice

[Abstracts by Lena Thiel, Medieval History, Kassel University LThiel@uni-kassel.de (translation by Cornelia Dreer)]

October 8-9, 2013, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana/Marciana National Library; Deutsches Studienzentrum in Venedig/Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani/German study center in Venice

On October 8 and 9, 2013, an international, interdisciplinary conference funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation was held at the Marciana National Library and the German study center in Venice (DSZV). The introductions given in German and Italian by the organizers, INGRID BAUMGÄRTNER (Kassel) and PIERO FALCHETTA (Venice), and by the director of the Marciana, MAURIZIO MESSINA (Venice), emphasized as the conference’s central concern the transformation of geographic and cartographic paradigms that Ptolemy’s work provoked in the Latin West from the early 15th-century on. Apparently Venice played two roles in this context: first, as a multilateral hub of an extensive cultural and scientific network, and second, as the ideal center of an “entangled world” that stretched from the Mediterranean to Northern Europe. Venice provided space for diverse cultural phenomena that came to be of great importance for Renaissance art and thought. Crucial were especially those ideas and practices that endeavored to describe geographic space and to shape a novel perception of the world based on new paradigms. A glance at the research of recent years illustrates, according to Baumgärtner, that cartography of this period must be read, analyzed, and interpreted as dense text, in which different competences, proficiencies, traditions, and orientations are interlinked. Only in this manner is it possible to appreciate the impact of Ptolemy’s Geographia as the actual catalyst of major changes during the 15th and early 16th centuries.

The conference’s first section, under the heading ‘Definition and representation of cartographic space’, dealt with maps as well as with text-based concepts of space. After an introduction by GHERARDO ORTALLI (Venice), LAURA FEDERZONI (Bologna) discussed manuscripts and prints of Ptolemy’s Geographia from the 15th and 16th centuries. She examined the interplay between the flourishing of geography as a humanistic science, and the rediscovery and Latin translation of Ptolemy’s work in the late 14th century that granted humanists access to the original Greek text. The Geographia presented the first systematic collection of maps and confronted its audience with an absolute novelty, which was one reason why it received such great response. Among the period’s best known copies were the works by Nicolaus Germanus. Federzoni analyzed their multiple effects on the dissemination of Ptolemaic texts in the course of the 15th century. She took into account both the first mappae antiquae in manuscripts, which were reinterpreted by contemporary authors, and the mappae novae in 16th-century-prints.

Next ANGELO CATTANEO (Lisbon) presented his research on a little-known, and so far unexplored geographical compilation preserved in an anonymous 15th-century-manuscript of the Marciana library, MS It. VI, 24 = (6111). The work in eight parts, equipped with drawings and tables, reveals in content and structure clear evidence of Ptolemaic knowledge. Cattaneo’s lecture and the subsequent discussion stressed the importance of this collection. Further study will continue to illuminate the reception of cartographic knowledge in Venice.
RAMON J. PUJADES I BATALLER (Barcelona) centered his talk on a selection of Venetian mappamundi from the 15th century and their relations to portolan charts and world maps of the Genoese-Catalan tradition from before 1470. By comparing these maps, he attempted to show a change in cartographic depiction. According to Pujades, the hybrid world map, documented first around 1320 in Venetian manuscripts of Marino Sanudos’ Liber Secretorum Fidelium Crucis, represents a revolutionary new type of map. It combines the seemingly realistic designs of the latest nautical maps of the Mediterranean with the established scholarly tradition. With some significant changes, this map type is also found in the Compendium o Chronologia magna of Paolino Minorita. Based on differences between the two variants, Pujades tried to prove that the Paolino version probably came to Majorca by way of the Avignon court and was there transformed into the monumental Catalan world map by the Ligurian cartographer Angelino Dulcert. The result was supposedly a nautical map with toponymic directory that also contained information on the Asian continent, owed to Marco Polo, and displayed a spectacular iconography. Lastly, Pujades emphasized the Majorcan peculiarities of its cartographic design, toponymy, and content. In his opinion, this variation of the map came full circle with its return to Venice, where it was poorly imitated and altered to fit local traditions.

After a welcome by SABINE MEINE (DSZV), REINHOLD MUELLER (Venice) opened the second section of the conference titled ‘Bending concepts of space – cartography and navigation’. In the following lecture, PATRICK GAUTIER-DALCHÉ (Paris) discussed Giovanni Fontana (circa 1393-1455), a natural philosopher who played an important role in the history of science, and his son in law, the physician and humanist Pietro Tomasi (circa 1375-1458). Both held medical degrees from the university of Padua and showed great interest in geography and cartography. Their works are mainly preserved in Venetian libraries, most of which haven’t been studied yet and are in dire need of academic attention. Gautier-Dalché pointed out that both scientists initiated circles for scientific discussion, whose importance for the reception of Ptolemy should be further examined.

Next GIAMPIERO BELLINGERI (Venice) presented the so-called ‘map of Haji Ahmed’, a heart-shaped chart of the world with inscriptions in Arabic-Turkish that was created in 1559 in Venice. Taking this map as his example, he reconstructed the cultural relations between the Latin West and the Ottoman and Islamic East that contributed to the spread of new geographic knowledge until the late 15th century. Bellingeri was also able to discover the existence of a weak but consistent network of reciprocal influences, and validated thereby the role of Venice as a starting point for cultural contacts.

GÜNTHER GÖRZ (Erlangen), who had fortunately agreed to join the panel on short notice after George Tolias (Athens) had to cancel his talk, discussed the potential advantages of digitizing historic maps. He presented the approach and scheme used for the edition of the 1492 Behaim globe in Nuremberg, whose texts were so far only available in an outdated, incorrect version. The goal of the project is to discover the motivations behind the creation of the Nuremberg ‘Erdapfel’ as well as the influences of its scholarly environment and other map types, such as portolan charts and world maps. In his talk Görz illustrated the many uses IT-based research has to offer the humanities and cultural studies, e.g., regarding the commentary in editions and the visualization of network analyses. The project’s innovative potential is evidenced in its incorporation of cultural and scientific history. It accentuates the materiality of the object by combining the study of texts and images with the processing of the globe’s data.

Afterward CATERINA BALLETTI (Venice) talked about a local project at the University of Venice
for the digitization of historic maps. Taking some 16th-century-maps as an example, she showed how today’s computer science can be used creatively in studies on the history of cartography. Balletti illustrated her point on two practical examples: the city map of Venice (circa 1500) by Jacopo de Barbari and Fra Mauro’s map, which had, under her direction, already been digitized by the project. She presented a mobile app that provides a 3D visualization of the city map by Jacopo de Barbari as an example for interactive access to historic maps. Users are afforded an insight into Venice 500 years ago during a tour of the present-day city. This seemingly playful, lowbrow approach to cartographic sources was a controversial topic of the following discussion. Concern was caused by the potentially insufficient consideration of pre-modern ideas of space. It was noted too, however, that such technology-based solutions possess added value, as they attract the public's attention and allow public access to historic maps. Therefore their implementation might be justified.

The third and last section, 'Dynamics and control – traveling and measuring', focused, under the direction of ALBRECHT CORDES (Frankfurt), on actual experiences of travelers an their literary accounts. UWE ISRAEL (Dresden) talked about changes in the course of the Atlantic expansion around 1500 and their consequences for Venice. His starting point where concepts of space formed by action or imagination, and he posed the question how Venetian discoveries influenced these two categories. By means of a close reading of entries in the so-called Diarii, the diaries of the Venetians Marino Sanudo (1466-1536) and Girolamo Priuli (1476-1547), Israel analyzed the perception of the Venetian discoveries, coming to the conclusion, that both authors payed remarkably little attention to the Atlantic voyages of the Portuguese. He described the impact of these enterprises on the Venetians’ experience and imagination of space as such, concluding that the space of action remained unchanged while cognitive space became bigger. Evidence is, according to Israel, provided not least by contemporary maps that were hesitant to show the newly discovered, larger spaces of action. Accordingly, change can and must be understood first of all as change of the ideas about space.

The practical side of seafaring was brought into discussion by maritime archaeologist RUTHY GERTWAGEN (Haifa). Her lecture covered the types of vessels used, techniques such as navigation and nautical cartography as well as their importance for a new definition of geographical space in the 15th century. Gertwagen hypothesized that different types of ships (such as cheaply produced cargo ships), and different techniques were crucial factors in the cultural, social, and economical changes of the eastern Mediterranean because especially in Venice technical innovations were met with resistance by established parties. Thus the myth of Venice’s superiority was confronted with a decline in its supremacy. Gertwagen clarified, with the help of reconstruction drawings, that technological developments were closely linked to practical needs and experiences.

BENJAMIN SCHELLER (Duisburg-Essen) analyzed the travelogue of the Venetian Alvise Cadamosto (circa 1463) in light of the late medieval expansion towards the Atlantic and its impact on (Venetian) long-distance merchants, who became intermediaries for new knowledge. Cadamosto undertook expeditions to West Africa and as far as the Canary Islands in 1455 and 1456. He recorded distances, goods, and trade strategies as well as social and political practices of the countries he visited. Scheller stressed the interconnection between information, which was available beforehand, and practical experiences, which were made later, and the limitations of both. He elaborated on Reinhart Koselleck’s spatial metaphors “Erfahrungsraum” (space of experience) and “Erwartungshorizont” (horizon of expectation), and tried to adopt them for the study of the Middle Ages as the categories “Möglichkeits horizont” (horizon of possibility) and
“Kontingenzraum” (space of contingency). Based on several passages of the travelogue, Scheller comprehensively demonstrated how Cadamosto conducted himself in foreign countries in order to transform the local “Kontingenzraum” (space of contingency) into an “Erfahrungsraum” (space of experience).

Last DARIA PEROCCO (Venice) spoke about the importance of Ptolemy's Geographia for the literary circles of Venice and its reception there. She focused on the multitude of relations, that linked the literary milieu of Venice with geographers, cartographers, and their techniques. Thus the readership, that the Geographia gained during the 15 century, became established and expanded in the following decades. This development was primarily connected with names like Giambattista Ramusio, Giacomo Gastaldi, and Pietro Bembo, who can serve as examples for an intensive exchange of ideas between writers and explorers.

The summary and final discussion of the conference stressed once more that the rediscovery of Ptolemy’s work in the Latin West during the early 15th century caused an evolutionary leap of utmost importance for the history of geography and especially cartography. As the individual lectures made clear, Ptolemy’s cartographic method, that defined space for the first time in accordance to geometrical and mathematical guidelines of shape, dimension, and composition, met with cultural developments whose protagonists used to employ very different methods up until that point. Owing to its interdisciplinary perspective, the conference was able to highlight the ambivalence of the texts and images from that period: On the one hand, there were large-scale, encyclopaedic world maps based on religious literary traditions, while on the other hand, empiric knowledge had produced accurate descriptions of the most frequented sea lanes in the Mediterranean. The speakers discussed not only the prominent artifacts of the time, like Fra Mauro's world map or Andrea Bianco’s cartographic work, but also less well-known and nearly unheard of maps and manuscripts. In this way, crucial points were made for the analysis of the radical change caused by Ptolemy’s text and its many consequences. The successful conference yielded, to say the least, a number of starting points for further international and interdisciplinary studies on hybrid spaces of experience and knowledge in the 15th- and 16th-century Mediterranean.