

Visual semiotics of nautical charts of the Adriatic Sea (13th–19th centuries): encoding power, identity and territory

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Abstract:

Nautical charts of the Adriatic Sea, produced from the late thirteenth to the nineteenth century, represent an important source for the study of maritime space, navigation, and cartographic communication. While their primary function was connected to navigation, these charts also incorporated a range of visual elements through which political authority, territorial affiliation, and cultural identity were expressed. The aim of this study is to analyse, from the perspective of visual semiotics, the communicative potential of symbolic and iconographic depictions on nautical charts of the Adriatic Sea in encoding meanings related to power, identity, and territory.

The research draws on a broader corpus of more than one hundred nautical charts of the Adriatic Sea, while the detailed analysis focuses on those containing relevant vexillological, heraldic, and allegorical elements. The methodological framework is based on a comparative qualitative approach, integrating perspectives from cultural geography, visual semiotics, imagology, and iconological analysis. Central to the approach is the deconstruction of nautical charts following J. B. Harley's theoretical framework, through which charts are interpreted as culturally and politically embedded texts rather than neutral depictions of space. This perspective enables the analysis of visual elements such as flags, heraldic devices, and allegorical figures, as carriers of power relations, territorial claims, and identity constructions. Through combined visual and spatial analysis, supported by hermeneutics, this framework allows for the identification of visual elements as carriers of culturally and politically embedded meanings, revealing their communicative potential in structuring and conveying messages within broader processes of cartographic communication. The analysis shows that flags and coats of arms functioned as visual markers of sovereignty, territorial affiliation, and cultural belonging. At the same time, elements such as the crescent moon, the cross, and depictions of patron saints reflected broader religious and cultural identity contexts. These symbols enabled users to interpret political and cultural landscapes even in the absence of explicitly defined boundaries, while also revealing processes of reinterpretation, copying, and symbolic persistence. In this sense, cartographic imagery actively contributed to the communication and stabilization of meanings attached to space.

In addition, allegorical representations, particularly personifications of Venice and depictions of the lion of Saint Mark, played a central role in constructing and reinforcing narratives of maritime dominance and political legitimacy. These elements extended beyond decorative purposes and operated as instruments of communication and persuasion, contributing to the formation of a geosymbolic landscape in which territory was defined through culturally embedded systems of meaning. Their spatial positioning and repetition further structured the perception of the Adriatic as a space of competing powers and identities.

The results indicate that nautical charts of the Adriatic Sea possessed a significant communicative potential, encoding layered meanings related to power, identity, and territory. This study contributes to a broader understanding of the history of cartography as a field in which nautical charts function not only as tools of navigation, but also as active media in the production and transmission of political, cultural, and spatial knowledge. This perspective also provides a framework for understanding how visual elements continue to shape spatial perception and cultural and political narratives in contemporary cartographic practices.

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