

Symbolism of the Early Modern Nautical Charts of the Adriatic Sea and the Representation of the “Other”

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Abstract:

Although relatively underresearched, cartographic design and art, particularly semiotics of maps within the broader category of aforementioned design, can offer an abundant field for a survey of presentation, representation and identity. The pursuit of the manifestations of the Other on old maps may reflect on views and perspectives of the early modern cartographers, mirrored in their images of the distant and fairly unknown lands and people. Regarding maps as a communication channel or a tool, this paper tends to offer a transdisciplinary (geographic, historic, literary, artistic) but also transgenre (including several sorts of both graphic and narrative sources); diachronic as well asynchronic insight into the content of early modern nautical charts. Apart from their controversially utilitarian purpose, they also served as graphic conceptions or imagery of the early modern Eastern Adriatic area and cartographic reflections on its people (inhabitants) (Campbell, 1987; Sheehan, 2012; 2014). After its long-lasting ancient and medieval belonging to the western (Roman and Christian) civilization and way of life, and due to its geostrategic position on the political and cultural frontiers of “Europe”, Croatian eastern Adriatic shores endured the Ottoman penetration starting from the 16th century onward. Besides being on the Bulwark of Christendom (*Antemurale Christianitatis*), and experiencing various political subjections during the times of conflict between the Christian West and the Muslim East, this borderland area was also a conflict zone of various influences, including cartographic ones.

Therefore, this qualitative comparative analysis of the selected maps (nautical charts in particular) and the corresponding narrative sources (like travelogues) aims to contextualize such physical and ideological bordering experience with several symbolic iconographic map elements that communicated the identity of the land and its population mostly from the perspective of foreign mapmakers. Since the selected sources are primarily nautical charts of the time, the importance of supplementary decorative images to these navigation tools is to be revealed. Considering these nautical charts as communication tools but also as instruments for learning about geography, as well as means of modifying perception, the European understanding of these seas and lands depended significantly on such sources.

Regardless of their artistic value, the very content of analysed decorations as supplement artistic images on nautical charts is compared within the theoretical approach of “Neo-imagology” (Leerseen, 2009; Pageaux, 1983) and the concept of the Other. While cartographic representations of the Other can testify to the transcultural (or intercultural) migration of ideas and identify communication channels, the authors follow the prevalence of particular identities of these territories /inhabitants as a specific rendition of image of the Other ascribed to them by the foreign mapmakers in the process of expressing their self-consciousness.

Among some other early modern cartographic decorative and imagological elements on nautical charts which could also carry ideological/political/cultural or any other symbolic messages, like compass roses, correlated rhumbs, scale-bars or images of patron saints, the focus of this research is on graphic descriptions of local lands (terrestrial landscape markers), landscape designs, botanic and zoological composition, and representation of people. Although unnecessary for practical navigation and orientation, these artistic graphic elements could bring out certain stereotypes but can usually describe the Other even better. Varying from partly or fully geographically accurate, to historically misinterpreted, modified by prejudices of various sources or completely inaccurate if not wrongly attributed, these characteristic have been reflected in the artistic features of Adriatic nautical chart of various origin. Either from the Venetian perspective of isolario-makers, Ottoman work of Piri Reis, or even through the eyes of French or other Western European nautical chart makers (e.g. Vallard’s atlas made by unknown author from 1547), the charts of the Adriatic were richly and vividly illustrated and decorated. A variety of comprehensive sailing or general maritime information testify to the Adriatic’s position of a picturesque cultural crossroad between the East and the West, with various influences within the framework of the early modern transcultural relations, exchange of ideas, and cultural networking. Representations reflect various influences and levels of understanding of the south-eastern European area and cognition of its people since for some authors (those more distant or unfamiliar with the area) this was to a certain extent an “orientalised” and/or “idealised” *Terra Incognita*. In

addition to other factors, its visualization is also dependent on general knowledge of physical and human geography of the South Eastern Europe. Detected symbols are mutually correlated to reveal the diversity of messages they communicate, the cultural background of the selected artistic representation, but also the traces of collaborative and shared mapmaking practices among different cartographic traditions.

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