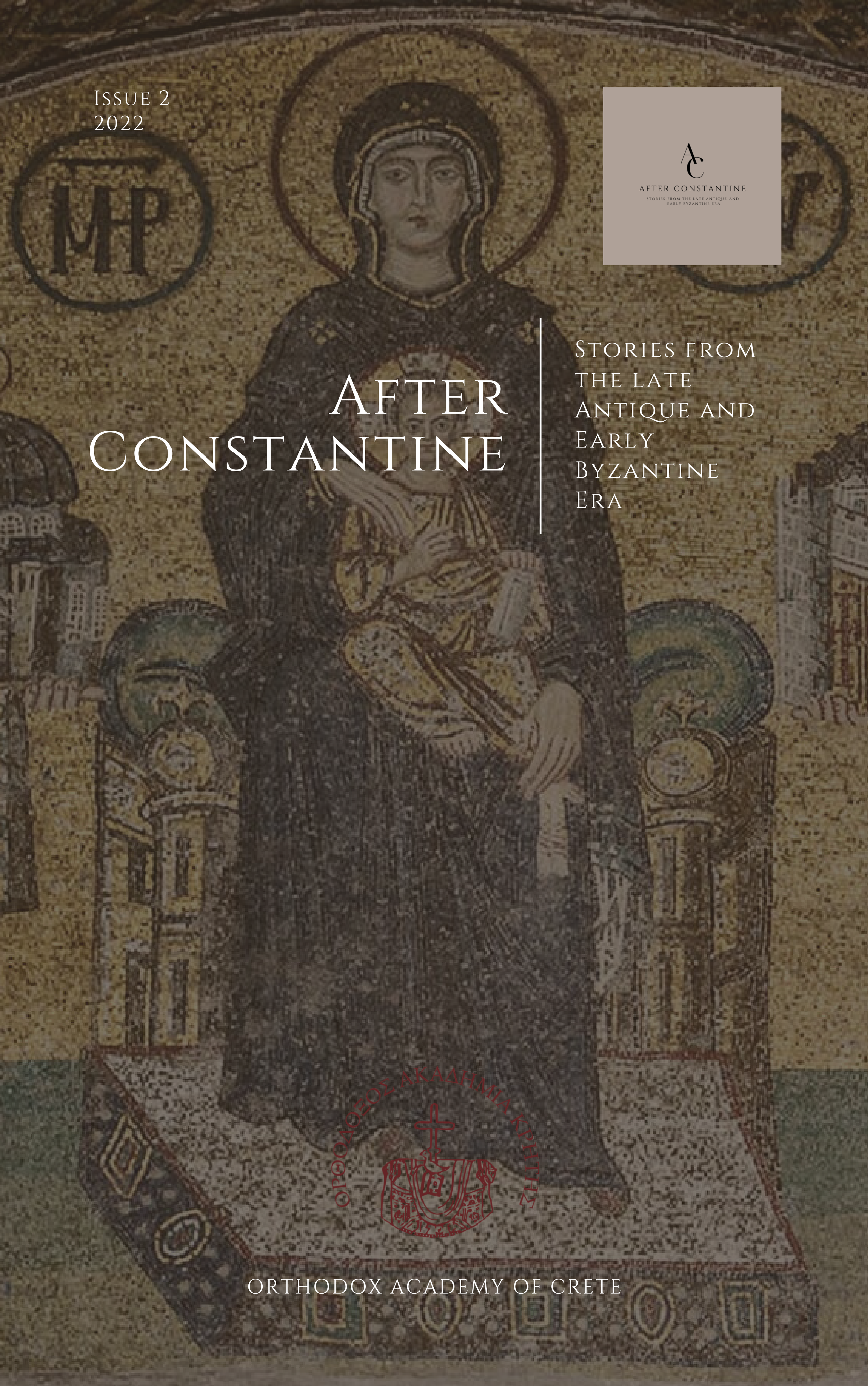

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AFTER CONSTANTINE

STORIES FROM THE LATE ANTIQUE AND EARLY BYZANTINE ERA

After Constantine

Stories from the Late Antique and Early Byzantine Era

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AFTER CONSTANTINE

STORIES FROM THE LATE ANTIQUE AND
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TEACHING GEOGRAPHY
A NEVER-ENDING DIALOGUE BETWEEN LATE ANTIQUE AND RENAISSANCE EUROPE

DAVID SALOMONI[1]

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to show how the dialogue between Antique and Renaissance geography did not happen only through the rediscovery and critical study of ancient sources by Italian and European humanists. Such a reading would leave out the contribution of the Late Antique period, namely early Christianity. It is not possible to dismiss the incorporation of theological elements in geographical disciplines as a simple anti-scientific fact. The great cartographers of the Renaissance, including Abraham Ortelius and Gerard Mercator,

[1] David Salomoni is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Lisbon. This article was supported by the ERC-funded project RUTTER: Making the Earth Global. I wish to express gratitude to all of those with whom we have had the pleasure to collaborate during this project. Each member of our research team has provided me with extensive personal and professional guidance. The RUTTER project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 833438). Financed by *Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia*, I.P./MCTES and by *fundos nacionais* (PIDDAC): UIDB/00286/2020 e UIDP/00286/2020.

just to name the most famous, considered the religious dimension an essential component of geography. In this article I would like to hint at the importance of this red thread between different epochs, underlining the importance of how the Christian thought of the first centuries must be taken into account as much as the technical-mathematical element of classicism in the emergence of modern geography between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Keywords: *Geography, Late Antiquity, Renaissance*

It is well known that the relationship between the antique world, mainly understood as the Mediterranean area and the Greek-Latin cultures, and the European Renaissance is a fundamental element of Western civilization. This relationship is well known and yetis always generous with new reflections both about the past and the present times. Among the most noteworthy cultural aspects of the continuing dialogue between the classical and post-medieval worlds is the theme of geography. The great Greco-Roman geographers were among the authors who were most read, analyzed, probed, and dissected by Italian and European humanists, perhaps more than rhetoricians and playwrights.

The importance of learning geography as part of an individual's education, especially of high social class, dates back to the classical period. Strabo stressed the importance of such discipline, stating that geography was fundamental for "political activities and for those of commanders, as well as the understanding of the heavens and things on the earth and sea (animals, plants, and fruits, whatever is to be seen in each place), assumes the same type of man as the one who considers the art of life and happiness". [2]

The canon of geographers formed in the centuries of antiquity remained the same in force in the centuries of the Renaissance and Reformation, particularly the texts of Pliny, Strabo, and Pomponius Mela, but also the reflections of philosophers such as Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle. However, the geographer who most bequeathed to the following centuries was the Greek geographer Claudius Ptolemy, who lived in Alexandria in the second century AD. For this article, the most important work produced by Ptolemy was the *Geographike Hyphegesis*, also known as *Geographia*, within which he discusses various issues of great importance to the future understanding of the world. First, he establishes the preeminence of celestial coordinates for the organization, measurement, and

[2] Roller 2015, p. 179.

conceptualization of terrestrial space. He then provides a detailed list of place names collected from other geographers (notably Marinus of Tyro), and finally provides instructions for creating planispheres based on an accurate grid of meridians and parallels; a concept of extreme modernity.

In antiquity, Ptolemy represented the highest point of geographical thinking, but his work profoundly influenced late Greco-Roman and early Christian culture. However, early Christianity also made an original contribution to the future emergence of modern geography. During the Christianization of the Roman Empire, the epistemological premises of geography as a scientific discipline certainly changed. In previous centuries the representation of the world had mainly political purposes, namely to show the extent of the Empire, but with the spread of Christianity began to include more and more theological values. The representation of the world and space became a reflection of the relationship between God and man, above and below, a mutable dimension, and an immutable one. Above all, however, representing the earth took on the meaning of a sacred act; it meant representing God's Creation.

The geographical culture was thus embraced and, in a sense, resensitized by figures such as St. Augustine. The new relationship

established with physical space after the oblivion of Euclid's Elements led to the definition of a non-homogeneous space: one human and one divine.[3] That could lead some people to doubt an aspect given until then for acquired that is the sphericity of the Earth. Examples are represented by the early Christian rhetoric Lactantius, and by Kosma Indikopleustes, a merchant of Alexandria in the sixth century AD.[4] It must be stated that none of the two was learned in cosmography. Lactanctius was purely trained in the craft of letters, in which he was an authority, and as such he would later be studied by Italian humanists like Pico Della Mirandola. While it is true that in Euclid's *Elements* there is no analysis of the sphere as a three-dimensional geometric object, the absence of this work in the cosmographic reflection of the early Christian era weakens the very concept of three-dimensional space, falling also on the way of conceptualizing the terrestrial sphere. However, it must be said that the earth's sphericity was never questioned by the overwhelming majority of the early Christian erudite establishment, as it is the case of Origen of Alexandria, Ambrose of Milan, and Augustine of Hippo, just to

[3] Sauter 2019, p. 35.

[4] Bishop 2008, p. 97-101.

mention a few. All of them had incorporated in their reflections the theories on the world elaborated by Plato and Aristotle.[5]

As mentioned, however, early Christian thought was able to provide geography and cartography with a new meaning. As a mirror of God's Creation, cartographic representation became an object of religious meditation. A religious act is performed through the contemplation of a map which allows an individual to see what can't be seen with the naked eye. On the map the unity of creation is affirmed, a concept that would not fail to have strong repercussions in the age of the Reformation. Reading the map of the world became, with Christianity, a spiritual exercise. Maps put two books concerning each other: the most sacred book, the Bible, with the book of creation.[6] In this dichotomy, we find the separation between the two spaces, sacred and profane, but also their new *trait d'union*. The exercise of cosmographic meditation was not unknown to antiquity, but with the spread of Christianity it took on a new centrality, beginning a historical path that would link it with modernity.

Starting from the centuries of the full Middle Ages and continuing into the Renaissance, a gradual rediscovery of ancient texts brought back to unity the various components of geographical

[5] Giacomotto-Charra, Nony 2021, p. 57-61.

[6] Lestrigant 2009, p. 7-16.

thought explained so far. The rediscovery in the twelfth century of Euclid's *Elements* and their gradual diffusion slowly brought back the idea of a three-dimensional, homogeneous space. This process also included the way of thinking and representing the terrestrial sphere. It is no coincidence that the oldest globes representing the world date back to the fifteenth century. It is worth repeating that the Middle Ages did not know the spread of the idea of a flat earth, which was always thought of as a sphere.[7] The point is that its sphericity had ceased to be significant for its cartographic representations.

During the Middle Ages, however, despite the efforts of Benedictine copyists, many books of ancient knowledge were lost, including Ptolemy's *Geographia*. It was thanks to the humanist intellectuals, beginning in the fourteenth century, that ancient texts were rediscovered or made accessible again. In this process, we can also include the story of the *Geographia*. The work was found around 1300 by the Byzantine Maximus Planudes and was later translated into Latin by the Italian Jacopo d' Angelo. The Latin translation made the book a real best-seller of the time. If initially, Latin scholars were more interested in the philological aspects of the work related to the names of cities, the geographical and mathematical aspects soon began to be

[7] Giacomotto-Charra, Nony 2021, p. 28.

studied as well. In fifteenth-century Italy, cartographic workshops engaged in reproducing the coordinates explained by Ptolemy for the production of maps sprang up everywhere. Editions were created for the education of princes, but school manuals were also produced for the education of the children of merchants, for whom the learning of geography was central. We can say that the educational sphere gave a great impulse to Renaissance geographic publishing.

However, it was not only humanist scholars who were interested in the coordinates of Ptolemy's *Geographia*. The book must be considered in the frame of the historical moment of geographical explorations conducted by Spain and Portugal. The new relationship with space induced by the study of Euclid had provided new intellectual tools to challenge ancient beliefs and set out to discover new worlds. This, however, was also the time of the great religious upheavals that broke the confessional unity of Europe. After 1517, with the publication of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, a series of religious conflicts began to stain Europe with blood. If we consider religion as the central and decisive element of sixteenth-century anthropology, we cannot detach the religious dimension from the scientific and geographical one. The mystical dimension that geography assumed in early Christianity was now revealed to be more vital than ever.

One cultural area where religious reflection and geography merged in an exemplary synthesis was Flanders. Flemish cartographers were particularly sensitive to this geographical-religious link. These figures were often high-profile intellectuals and were deeply involved in the religious and political events that shook Europe in the central decades of the sixteenth century. For them, the production of precise maps, for the use of navigators, also represented the creation of religious manifestos, in which the aforementioned need for spiritual meditation was expressed. Let us consider, for example, that the title of Gerard Mercator's famous atlas of the second half of the sixteenth century was *Atlas sive Cosmographicae meditationes de fabrica mundi*. It was the author himself who made explicit in the title the contemplative dimension of geography.

This is not to say that the religious meaning attributed to cartography determined, as such, the conflicts that cartographers like Mercator or Abraham Ortelius had with the Inquisition. Those problems were due to the content of their religious thought. Ortelius, for example, had joined a church named *Familia Charitatis*, which, while affirming full adherence to the precepts of the Gospel, was against every religious confession and every codified norm. Even Martin Waldseemuller, who in 1507 produced the first planisphere to name America by that name, backed off a few years later for fear of

being found to contradict Aristotelian geography. The important aspect is that cartographic meditation, as Giorgio Mangani well explains, served to rationalize, unify, and give coherence to what was not visible on the whole, an act reserved only for God, but that thanks to cartography brought man closer to the divine.[8]

In conclusion, how did the religious dimension attributed to cosmography and cartography, a category that emerged during the centuries of early Christianity, contributes to the rise of modern geography? As mentioned, the rise of homogeneous space through the rediscovery of Euclid in the twelfth century had two effects. The first was the recovery of spatial unity in which the earth and creation were increasingly conceived as an integrated and coherent system. This very modern concept was in contrast to the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic conception of a cosmos composed of concentric spheres of elements: earth, water, air, and fire. The second effect, seen from the perspective of the heterogenesis of ends, resulted in an increasingly secular and less religious conception of physical space. Adopting God's perspective on the earth through the production of increasingly accurate maps had the initial effect to bring man closer to the creator, but at the same time eliminated the distance between the two. In this way, it was the

[8] Mangani 2005, p. 23-39.

human perspective that took over. The data presented in this article represent the author's personal reflection on such a topic. However, it is very important to deepen the research on the link between early Christian and early modern religion, geography, and cartography, in order to grasp the global transformations made possible in the age of explorations. The cartographic and literary works of figures such as Ortelius and Mercator, in fact, are both scientific works and theological manifestos. It is not possible to fully understand a sixteenth-century cartographic instrument without taking into account the religious anthropology of those who produced it. In this sense, the path towards technical and scientific modernity passed through a close relationship with the antique religious mentality, which provided some intellectual tools indispensable to this process. A religious epistemology, then, is central to understanding the intellectual creation of the first global world.

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