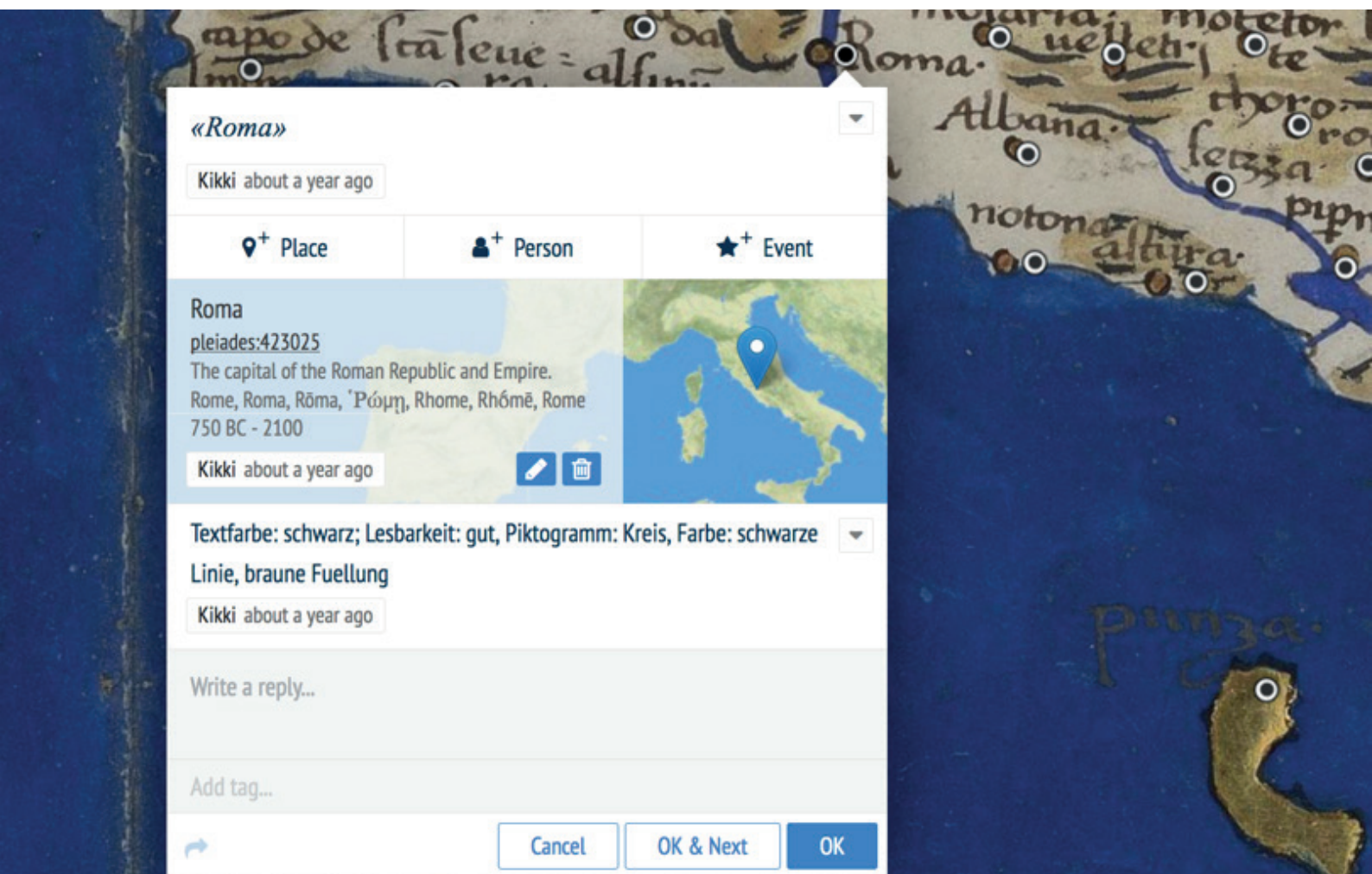


Walking Through History

An Interdisciplinary Approach to Flavio Biondo's Spaces in the "Italia illustrata"

Edited by Tanja Michalsky & Martin Thiering



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Abstract

Francis Harvey

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(Un)certainities in the Reading of *Italia Illustrata*

keywords – Cartography, Mapping, Representation,
Communication, Semiotics



Contemporary cartography faces numerous challenges to adequately account how a hodological description, here Biondo's *Italia Illustrata* (1474) could be imagined in the form of a topographical map, based on consistent spatial dimensions, but some challenges call for our attention. After centuries of refinement the topographic map may now provide a cultural representation of geography ubiquitously deployed in the humanities and sciences. It has become even second nature for many fields of science and scholarship, although we should admit we lack full comprehension of maps influence on our understanding. This chapter takes up this matter from the perspective of semiotics and contemporary critical cartography studies related to the comprehending the construction and meaning of territory made through and with maps. Taking what we know from the sociology of science about the ambiguity of knowledge representations, it seems highly relevant to commence by broadening the scope of considerations through semiotics to examine maps' representations of geographical, cultural memory as institutionalized mnemonic devices that distill complex meanings into symbolic representations. Following Umberto Eco's model of communication, these stabilize cultural and political associations of places both explicitly and implicitly and sustain themselves through the performances of creating

and reading their cartographic presentations. The chapter closes with broader considerations of these challenges and potentials regarding maps analyzed in humanities research that considers the cultural constitution of mappable knowledge.

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Challenges and Potentials in Connecting Historical Meaning and Memory in Maps: Considering Some (Un)certainities in the Reading of *Italia Illustrata*

Francis Harvey

Introduction

This contribution to the workshop on Flavio Biondo's *Italia Illustrata* sets out to take up workshop themes – spatial knowledge, its contextualization, and spatial representation – and connect them to research in the fields of cartography and Giscience. Considering a work created during an early phase in the development of modern mapmaking opens fresh perspectives and allows us to reconsider assumptions about mapping. As we read the document of Biondo's geographical description, we find ourselves leaving the certitude and exactitude of contemporary geoscience representations behind and begin to reflect on explicit as well as implicit issues and ideological claims. We are made to consider modernity's so-called 'cartographic gaze', which has over the centuries become second nature for most makers and users of maps, including in the sciences and humanities. Following Kant's epistemological critique and its methods advanced by semioticians, a semiotic study of a geographical text or cartographic presentations is able to probe these issues more thoroughly. An ensuing synthesis can consider these issues dialectically, as well as the underlying hidden issues that a semiotic approach helps reveal.

The various matters of geographical description involve geographical representation and knowledge and cut to the core of epistemological issues of societal power related to maps and meaning. The connection of a narrative trope to a particular map also needs to take up scholarly discussions about uncertainty and ambiguity in the context of an ideological framing of mapping praxis. In this chapter, I will approach these three issues through materials from *Italia Illustrata* presented at the

workshop. The grounding assertion is that the semiotic analysis that considers historical conditions can explain how Biondo's discourses constitute their validity and their value of truth for that era – through the creation of his textual geographic descriptions. Based on this critical assessment, we can reconstruct the reception of Biondo's text as a memory device. Finally, we can examine Biondo's constructions of meaning in light of our knowledge of their geographical relevance for his contemporary peers. Our own contemporary concerns with uncertainty in geocentric and egocentric mapping, especially regarding functionalist and ideological critique modes, can shed light Biondo's socio-political connotations, as well as those of his contemporaries, as grounded in ancient geographies, which form the foundation of his illustrations and are precursors of modern geography's striving for representational certitude.¹

Given the breadth of the issues and reliance on concepts from multiple fields, some terms require preliminary definition.

Maps are resources for graphically communicating complex geographical relations. They can be used alone or with other media to develop a richer understanding of these relations in terms of regions, places, topography, settlements, or other geographically distributed phenomena and to support any intervention in the interactions between such phenomena. They are not merely images that illustrate, because they rely on specific cultural and institutionalized constellations of graphic elements, tropes, and narratives to support the communication of geographical relations.

The 'cartographic gaze' has many meanings. In terms of contemporary human geography, it

¹ See Edney 2019.

applies to the study of spatial societal and environmental relations in the context of their cultural, political, economic, and social significance.² A concept arising in art historical scholarship of the 20th century,³ the cartographic gaze relates to concepts of the scopic regime⁴ and involves culturally manifest tropes of seeing and controlling the body and its use as metaphor for the political entity associated with territory.⁵

As far as the construction and reading of maps are concerned, “to illustrate” means (beyond the general definitions of the word) to explain, to clarify, and to add insight geographically (see also Laureys in this volume). The English word derives from the Latin *illustrare*, meaning to add light or brightness to something. Biondo’s use of the adjective form in his title suggests the importance of selection and highlighting in contrast to a process of engaging with the subject, which modern cartographers would wholeheartedly embrace while struggling to explain precisely what and how the selection is used methodically to elucidate cartographic communication.

These difficulties go hand in hand with the uncertainty that arises from the epistemological separation of knowledge in our minds as distinct from our experience in the world. In contemporary science, especially in physical and environmental sciences, the concept of uncertainty narrowly articulates possible differences between an actual situation and the data recorded to describe that situation.⁶ In interdisciplinary contexts, uncertainty provides emphasis for different professionally and scientifically sound approaches to mediate philosophical and scientific differences in specific cultural and institutional contexts involving a creator/writer and a reader.⁷

In the context of these definitions, the maps known to us can perhaps best be understood as the products of a graphic technology to reduce spatial ambiguity or provide geographical insights, which corresponds in significant ways – despite our visuality – to Biondo’s hodological representations in *Italia Illustrata*. Institutions

play a vital part in map production, not just by providing funds to support the complex work of creating maps, but also by co-developing and facilitating the frameworks required to understand these maps. As Alfred Korzybski puts it, the two important characteristics of maps are:

A map is not the territory it represents, but if correct, it has a similar structure to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness.⁸

In other words, maps are not linear texts consisting of words and grammar or comparable graphic elements, nor, due to their graphic nature and cartographical fidelity, can they be reduced to the purely textual. Texts that describe geographical places and spaces and maps that visualize geographical places and spaces are fundamentally both models, finite constructions that can be inconsistent, but still useful when drawn or read with a specific purpose or purposes in mind.⁹ In this sense, communication with geographical description in either map or textual form involves the creation of inferences in one context and the (often broad) interpretation of inferences in another context. Creator/author and reader require a level of competency to assure that ambiguity of signification in the communication is channeled or minimized. The creator generates a strategy, which, following Umberto Eco’s pragmatic approach, calls for the reader’s cooperation in making a series of interpretative choices from a set of multiple possibilities.¹⁰ As such, generating and attempting communication involve activity on the part of both creator and reader.

In his work *A Theory of Semiotics*, Eco examines the limits of the widespread contemporary syntactical and linear model of communication and proposes a semantic-pragmatic process and hermeneutical approach to understanding text that accounts for the reader’s interpretive abductions and potentially aberrant interpretations. The pragmatic focus of semiotic analysis following this theory lies in controlling, if not ultimately reducing, indeterminacy in communication. The author strives for an ensemble of

2 See D. Gregory 1979; see D. Gregory 1994.

3 See Bredekamp 2015.

4 See Jay 1988.

5 See Wood/Fels 1993; Hobbes (2008) 2016;

Neocleous 2003; Olsson 2010.

6 See Bodenhamer/Harris/Corrigan 2013; see I.N. Gregory/Kemp/Mostern 2001.

7 See Harvey 2013.

8 Korzybski 1948, p. 58.

9 See Eide 2014.

10 See Eco 1984.

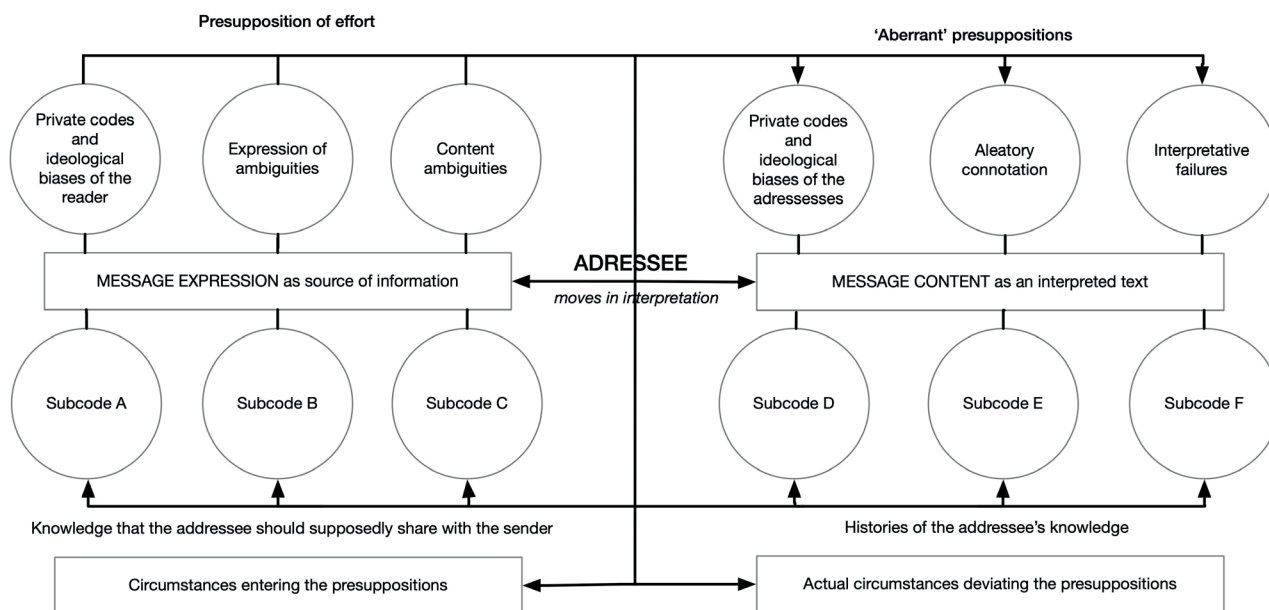


Figure 1
Umberto Eco's simplified picture of the semantico-pragmatic process. Redrawn from Eco 1984, p. 6.

codes that is the same as that of the possible reader, which assumes a particular competency on the reader's part that must come from outside the text itself. Eco develops this into a complex model (see fig. 1 for a graphic presentation) that considers the interpretation of a text and involves intensions and extensions, circumstances and content – an 'intertext' that refers to endless texts and semiotic encoding systems.

Drawing on this concept of intertext, I set out to explore how some of the intensions underlying Biondo's text and his rules of co-reference regarding the reader's actualization of the semiotic properties can be taken to identify special elements of the text as a means to disambiguate anaphoric and deictic expressions. This narrow focus removes some of Eco's better-known text analysis strategies from consideration, for example the narrative strategy, but even in this abbreviated form it permits an initial, if tentative, deepening of the interpretive process. For this I rely on workshop materials. This is, admittedly, a limitation, albeit one that future research working directly with Biondo's text and materials can overcome. I want to acknowledge both the limits and the great importance of scholarship for its analysis and synthesis, upon which this article rests. The aim of this paper is to be seen in terms of advancing semiotic approaches and related methodological concepts to aid researchers considering

geographic representations in text or map form to distinguish different kinds of spatial information in Biondo's text and to identify the textual anchors in this narrative that construct his geographical mapping. A broader reading of semiotic approaches from Roland Barthes, Karl Bühler, Jacques Derrida, Algirdas Julien Greimas, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Roman Jakobson is also a matter for future research. With this special slant, my study of Biondo's *Italia Illustrata* is conceived as a contribution to the development of modern digital tools and approaches with a narrow, and limited, theoretical framework.

Making Territory and Making Geographical Sense

The matter of writing a textual narrative to describe a geography, or, in other words, the process of territory-making, involves a framework of beliefs that together constitute an ideology, which, whether as creator (author) or viewer (reader) relates us as subjects to these objects of communication. Both author and reader have to work to comprehend the objects and make sense of the communication. When maps were scarce (as was the case at the time Biondo wrote *Italia Illustrata* and was definitely no longer the case after technical advances in the modern period significantly decreased the cost of printing maps in large editions), the text itself had to provide – due to



Figure 2
Detail from Nicolaus Germanicus, *Cosmographiam Claudii Ptolomaei Alexandrini*, (c. 1467), v.2 tab. IX, Ms. Rps BOZ 2, Warszawa, Biblioteka Ordynacji Zamojskiej (Ptolemy 1467).

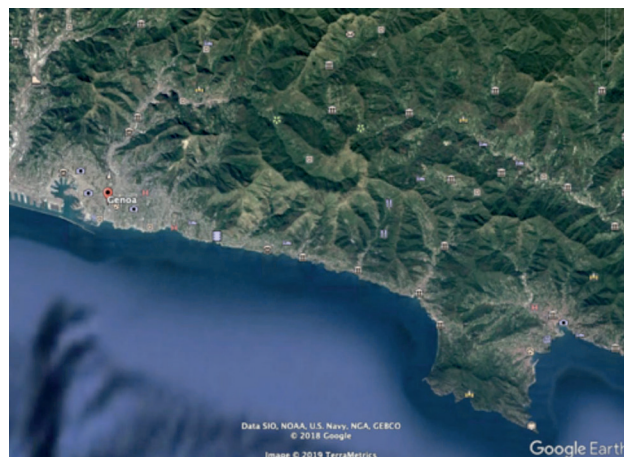


Figure 3
View of Genoa from Google Earth.

its unfamiliarity and uniqueness – much more to support a reader's interpretative abductions and avoid errant interpretations. As contemporary readers today, we struggle to gain the philological comprehension and historical contextual knowledge needed to make sense of the text's geographic illustrations. That said, however, the fact that the evolution of mapping over the last fifty years has coincided with the development of digital information technologies, as exemplified by Google Earth, and the rise of egocentric versus geocentric approaches to reading geographic representations¹¹ makes us acutely aware of the transformation of cultures of knowledge and their production. Going from institutionalized forms of knowledge and their representations to individual experiences and individual knowledge requires making sense of remote sensing images posted online and woven together in such a way that is capable of integrating various additional geographic representations, with the territory thereby depending on the actions of creator and viewer.

The distinction between egocentric and geocentric stems from media studies, research in cognitive psychology, and cognitive anthropology. As such, it refers to the emphasis on the function of a visual artifact emerging through its use by an individual. Egocentric reading extends the perspective of a viewer already submersed in the primacy of their subjectivity; its anchorage point is the human body itself,

with locations, for example, being left/right of the body (as Kant highlighted as a universal paradigm). Geocentric reading, meanwhile, requires the acquisition of institutionalized and cultural knowledge to make sense of the representation, for instance, the conventions of topographic mapping (also known in cultures with non-written traditions in which natural landmarks serve as spatial anchorage, being, for example, either down- or upriver, up- or downhill). Egocentric geovisualization is best exemplified today by Google Earth (fig. 3), which gives the person controlling the cursor the unmediated ability to move virtually at different degrees of visual detail and connect these visuals to personal experience or imagined scenes derived from other media. A topographic map is a vibrant example of geocentric geovisualization (as is the case with GeoJSON). Before use, some nominal level of understanding of the graphical representations of the map type and scale is required for a person to move about virtually and connect what they see on the screen to their physical experience or imagination. (This is also possible in virtual and augmented realities, using a VR headset.)

In consideration of professional training (the ability to acquire – explicitly or implicitly – knowledge from maps), possessing the faculty to understand specific cartographic representations is the gateway to their use in academic or scientific expository work. Due to our Western

¹¹ See Abend/Harvey 2017; Thiering 2015; Levinson/Wilkins 2006.

professional socialization and socio-cultural education and acculturation, we have different foci in our capacities to use contemporary maps or GPS systems, which often makes using traditional maps more difficult. Central to this is how a professional creates meaning through maps in a way that successfully communicates the institutional understanding of territory and significant geographical relations.

While the technologies available to mapmakers of the fifteenth and twenty-first century differ radically, the human processes of making sense of a geographic illustration through communication media continue to require socialization, education, and acculturation (and the technical prerequisites) for map communication to be successful. We need to first understand the creator and viewer to then understand how any map can communicate. Eco's writings, preceded by studies in semiology, provide an excellent theoretical framework for considering how to take on this challenging deconstruction.

The Name of the Territory

Since the modern era, the effort to understand territory from textual or graphical description has become second nature, but that is not to say that the effort and coordination involved should not be underestimated. An example from literature provides a relevant story. In the semiotician Umberto Eco's well-known fictional work *The Name of the Rose*, the semantic effort to create the text and make sense of it is presented as a medieval detective story (see Thiering 2015 for a fuller consideration of the novel). The effort of the protagonist illustrates a key aspect of Eco's theorization of the role of the reader and his/her mental models.¹² The reader, here William of Baskerville, must put considerable effort into distinguishing the author's presuppositions and messages from aberrant presuppositions and the actual circumstances to make sense of a text and the actions and situations it describes. The effort needed to transform an expression into content can be considerable. Reading is not merely the simple act of associating meaning correlated to expressions. Lexical meaning has to be interpreted in its contextual and circumstantial

compositions. The reader transforms expressions into content through semantic analysis and detection of syntactical properties at the surface level in connection to underlying subtexts. Rules of co-reference are central to the interpretations. The disambiguation of these co-references requires textual operators, such as frames, that communicate the author's intensions. The reader must first get a grasp of tentative co-textual relations. As Øyvind Eide explains, at this level, the reader undertakes every transformation from surface to the underlying semiotic structure of the single sentences. In cases of ambiguities he waits for textual clues.¹³

Through a dialectical process of abduction, the reader develops a culturally specific framework through logical inference from observations and learns to separate aberrant presuppositions and guard against interpretative failures. S/he seeks the simplest and best fitting explanation for the observation without verification.

Dialectics of Creating Cartographic Meaning

In reflections on our experiences explaining maps in a didactical context, most of us could readily note the importance of relating subjective knowledge and comprehension of geography to its institutionalized representation. Crucial to developing this understanding, is an understanding of explicit and implicit beliefs, or ideology.¹⁴

The dialectal approach in this semantic methodology relies on contradictions to advance its analysis to new insights and the synthesis of relations and interactions camouflaged by ambiguous terms and authorial diversions. Today we face the challenge of (re)constructing readers' contextual knowledge and ideology arising from their respective socialization, education, and acculturation. Taking the example presented by Nathalie Bouloux (2022) in this volume that she uses to explain how *Italia Illustrata* was map-based, the following short excerpt provides a range of co-references that facilitate interpretative abductions:

¹² See Hutchins 1996; Thiering 2015.

¹³ Eide 2014.

¹⁴ See Harley 1989; Pickles 2004; Turnbull 1989; Tversky 1993.

In sinu Lunensis sive Veneris portus intimo
Spedia est, novum oppidum ab annis
sexaginta muro circumdatum, secus quod,
inspecta Italiae descriptione ac pictura a
maioribus facta, Tigulliam fuisse conector.

(And in the innermost portion of the bay
of the harbor of Luni [or Portovenere] is La
Spezia, a new town, walled for not quite
sixty years now, near which I surmise,
from examining a survey and map of Italy
made by forebears, was Tigullia.)¹⁵

The co-references provide a set of spatial relationships (a portion of the bay/harbor of Luni) and position the contemporary town, La Spezia, on the site of Tigullia, based on a survey and map. The graphic representation in a map of that era (see fig. 2) corresponds to this text. The disambiguation of the geographic relationships is arguably neither concise nor precise in both text and map of circa 1467, but both are adequately capable of describing the geographic relationships. Without standardization of the story for modern readers, the dialectical abduction of the textual representation (in translation) is often more cumbersome than the graphic representation, as limited Latin knowledge can constitute a substantial challenge for many readers.

Another example drawn from Bouloux documents the rich geographical descriptions Biondo provides:

After the Auser come first the mouths of the Arno, and a little further on Livorno, a well-fortified stronghold which is the port of Pisa. Here a lighthouse has been set on a reef a mile from the mainland. It provides a light at a great distance to those sailing the Tyrrhenian sea at night and points the way to the harbor of Pisa from afar. Three miles from the sea, Pisa spans the Arno with her bridges and embellishes it with fine buildings. Vergil says that this ancient city with its famous history took its origin from the Alpheai. Pliny tells us that Pisa was founded between the Auser and the Arno by Pelops and the Territani, a Greek people, and Justin that Pisa in Liguria had Greek founders. And Lucan [tells us] in Book I: "On this side, Pisa,

interrupting the stretches of the Tyrrhenian sea with her shoal." Livy in Book XXI [tells us]: "This was why the consul rushed on to the Po after he arrived with his ships at Pisa."¹⁶

Describing the port of Pisa, Biondo offers numerous geographic co-references that the reader can dialectically disambiguate to gain a topological sense of the spatial relationships, of key phenomena that aided navigation, and of the classical information about the site's history, including documentation of its importance and pre-Roman origins. While a metric ("three miles") is provided, the disambiguation is limited by the lack of other metrics and an authorial ambiguity ("mouths of the Arno" and "a little further on Livorno").

These co-references also point to the challenge discussed earlier of understanding these texts with our contextual knowledge of today and lacking a more profound understanding of the connotations to guide an interpretation reflective of the audience Biondo was writing for. Without a more profound grasp of this rich understanding of the circumstances by which Biondo's readers approached his text, our current reading is prone to aberrant interpretations and failures.

Relationship between the Illustrator and Illustrated

Although the dialectical approach offers a means to gain a deeper understanding of the explicit and implicit textual elements through dialectical abduction of the co-references, consideration of philological scholarship can greatly help disambiguate contemporary circumstances and help us to gain insight into historical comprehension. In his contribution to this book, Marc Laureys provides a description of six concepts of space in Biondo and analyzes the textual strategies that allowed Biondo to connect and merge space and history:

Biondo's conception of space is (1) determined by an ancient, not a contemporary (political or ecclesiastical) geographical framework, (2) structured into modular units on various geographical (national, regional, and local)

¹⁵ Biondo 2005, 42-43 (37).

¹⁶ Biondo 2005, 54.

levels that constantly interact, (3) inspired by cultural and historical rather than political or diplomatic claims, (4) visualized by rhetorical means rather than empirical evidence, (5) underpinned by references to classical and medieval – predominantly literary – sources that serve as a commentary on the localities mentioned and described, and (6) are filled with history more than with topographical or ethnographical details.¹⁷

A more thorough philological engagement would provide a richer analysis, but in the context of this chapter's focus, the quoted passages from *Italia Illustrata* above indeed demonstrate these principles. They also point to the importance of a better comprehension of the ambiguities for modern readers, the complexities to understand the codes used by Biondo and his peers and the ideological biases that prelude contemporary knowledge with classical and medieval sources.¹⁸ The ambiguity of the text may be iteratively lessened by careful philological scholarship.

(Un)certainities

The difficulties in matching classical places to contemporary places is a problem of localization and identification, but because of the multiple variations in name, location, and geographical relations, resolving the challenges can benefit from a dialectical approach, as described above. (Over the course of history and charting by different maps, places vanish or swell their borders; the Biondo research group at the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome use the *Recogito* annotation platform to resolve exactly this problem.) The ambiguities of the text can be constructively engaged by a semantic analysis drawing on the intertext concepts advanced by Eco and other semioticians. Many of the points regarding ambiguity in a text hold the cartographic ambiguity of representing territory today inherent in the cartographic gaze. Following David Turnbull's historiographic studies of cartography,¹⁹ we can grasp some potential tensions between a proto-cartographic gaze and experiential knowledge crafted to align with classical geography rather than contemporary political or ecclesiastical perspectives.

In the context of the philological study, the dialectic approach can commence with matters of translation and transcription which can exist among various versions of the source text. The analysis of this discursive philology identifies the points which are synthesized and studied for their contradictions. Beyond the methodological issues of a dialectical approach focused on in this chapter, additional triangulation between different translations and the original passages and overarching rhetorical and ideological tendencies can help produce a synthesis that would advance the understanding of the text based on a richer comprehension of contemporary circumstances and ideology.

The matter remains of the text's or graphic image's relationship to knowledge and memory – both authorial and of the reader – not just the individual but institutional memory, as it relates to the localization of places. Today we tend to think of these matters in terms of uncertainties between description – or data – and the actual phenomena, but this is problematic in that it may reduce the relationships to the accuracy of syntactical elements and constrain or even expunge considerations of the cultural meanings and associations that guided creator and reader in their engagement with the text. Uncertainties today may indeed mask former certainties now lost on contemporary readers, but at least an analysis would sufficiently point them out and help clarify them.

Conclusion

If we take Eco's reflections (and related work by other semioticians such as Roman Jakobson, Roland Barthes, and Louis Hjelmslev), we find ways to engage with the text as a project that is only completed when the reader makes sense of it. While the author preparing the text centers on developing a strategy and means to communicate sense, for the reader 'reading' involves developing a strategy to interpret the author's intention, textual elements, and the author's strategy to make sense of the produced text. In the case of Eco, the reader's strategy involves a complex hermeneutic and dialectical approach to reading that focuses on the interpretation of

¹⁷ Laureys 2022 in this volume.

¹⁸ See Clavuot 1990.

¹⁹ Turnbull 1989.

the author's intentions. With the philological research into Biondo's text, we are in a unique position to engage with the historical relationships between text and maps as geographical representations that contemporary scholars have largely become blissfully ignorant of, thanks to the profusion of maps over the last five centuries. We can certainly better understand Biondo by taking up Eco's approach and engaging our prerogatives and assumptions of the cartographic gaze regarding, on the one hand, the relationship between geographical texts and graphics and, on the other, the reader's gaze, by considering rules of co-reference and the dialectical abduction from circumstances.

In reconstructing this geography in relationship to contemporary place names, a philological study of the original Latin text faces numerous challenges. In the scope of this contribution, the reconstruction of known places when clear classical, historical, and contemporary toponyms have been identified is relevant in considering a more dialectical approach that can connect places with toponyms reliably.

Approaching uncertainties that arise in Biondo's text for readers today, both due to polysemy and ambiguities, may be a basis for considering challenges researchers today face in understanding textual descriptions of locations, which remain quite common in the herbarium and other systematized classification

resources. Here the literature on geocoding holds further relevance for the development of robust methods in the digital humanities.²⁰ A different geocentric approach to spatialization using egocentric elements of geocoding could be easily enhanced. These methods can also be implemented in a dashboard environment and readily used to complement and evaluate philological work in the digital humanities and help support other computation approaches.

In closing, I wish to express my gratitude to the other participants of the workshop for graciously sharing their workshop materials and their discussions to a very early version of this text presented at the workshop. I acknowledge a limitation in this contribution due to limited abilities to work directly with Biondo's text and materials. I would also like to acknowledge both the limits and great importance of scholarship for its analysis and synthesis upon which this contribution rests. The aim of this contribution is to help achieve theoretical advancements and methodological concepts to aid researchers. My emphasis here lies in helping develop modern digital tools and approaches to distinguish different kinds of spatial information in Biondo's text and to identify the textual anchors in this narrative that construct his geographical mapping. Connecting historical meaning and memory in maps comes with potential benefits and challenges and I feel honored to contribute to this field.

²⁰ See Melo/Martins 2017.

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