

Sir Thomas More's Utopia - Glimpses of a Presence in 16th century Portuguese Chroniclers

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Abstract

In the 16th century the encounter with new spaces in Africa, Asia, or America, meant for European countries a questioning of their own conventional identities. Portugal assumed then a nuclear role in the way Europe has to know the Other - different places and different peoples. Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* fictionally mirrors the Portuguese role in the unveiling of new worlds, namely through Raphael Hythlodæus' character, the traveller who tells about his presence in an ideal land. Eventually this paper analyses the dialogue between Portuguese 16th century chroniclers and More's text.

Keywords: chroniclers; Utopia; historiography

1. Introduction

In the 16th century meeting new spaces in Africa, Asia, or America, meant for European countries a questioning of their own conventional identities. Portugal assumes then a nuclear role in the way that Europe knows the different places and peoples. This becomes clear when we analyse the changes that take place in cartography. Didactic narratives of Christian history and places give way to reality as such. Urgency of information required a rigorous worldwide configuration of oceanic expedition routes, since the sailors should follow their paths far away from the shores. This means that they needed a faithful representation of seas, oceans, and continents; besides the notion of earthly space had changed and its representation had become much more accurate (ALBUQUERQUE, 1987, 9-56).

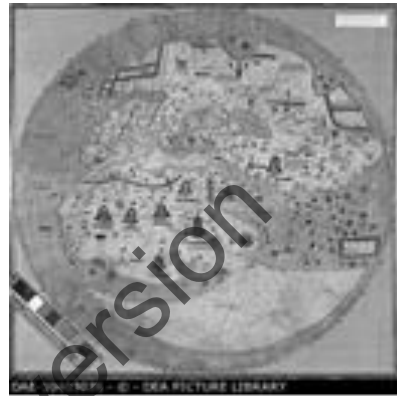


Fig. 1 - The Catalan World map.
<http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/cartography-15th-century-catalan-world-map-around-1450-news-photo/122337703>



Fig. 2 - Cantino's map.
https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Planisf%C3%A9rio_de_Cantino#/media/File:Cantino_planisphere%281502%29.jpg

The maps that represented the earthy space transmitted the novelties and followed the information arriving in Europe by the hands of the Portuguese navigators. That evolution is clearly present when we compare, for example, the 15th century Catalan world map (Fig. 1) and the 1502 Cantino's map (Fig. 2).

In the later we can clearly see the impact that the Portuguese navigations had in Europe, namely when we compare the representation of the African coast with the Indian coast.

2. The curiosity and the importance of the new spaces across European intellectual circles.



Fig. 3- Raphael Hythlodæus. Detail, *The Island of Utopia*’, woodcut by German painter Ambrosius Holbein in 1518 edition (<http://4umi.com/more/utopia/>)

They echo in Sir Thomas More’s persona Raphael (Fig. 3)“... a stranger, who seemed past the flower of his age; his face was tanned, he had a long beard, and his cloak was hanging carelessly about him, so that, by his looks and habit, I concluded he was a seaman.” (MORE, 2012, Sec 4:29) Besides, he is an educated man; as Sir Thomas More says:

...for he has not sailed as a seaman, but as a traveller, or rather a philosopher. This Raphael, who from his family carries the name of Hythlodæus, is not ignorant of the Latin tongue, but is eminently learned in the Greek, having applied himself more particularly to that than to the former, because he had given himself much to philosophy. [...] He is a Portuguese by birth, and was so desirous of seeing the world, that he divided his estate among his brothers, ran the same hazard as Americus Vesputius...”(Ibidem, Sec 4:30).

It was not only the Brazilian coast that Raphael had met. He also travelled to Indian shores; he explored Ceylon, and arrived at Calicut, where he got a passage in a Portuguese ship, using the Cape of Good Hope Route, and returning home.

Both the conflict between classics and modern thinkers, and the emerging modern knowledge flow in *Utopia*, (Fig. 4) namely when Raphael refers the new nautical techniques and compares his

sailors’ skills with the utopians:

“The first vessels that they saw were flat-bottomed, their sails were made of reeds and wicker, woven close together, only some were of leather; but afterwards, they found ships made with round keels and canvas sails, and in all respects like our ships, and the seamen understood both astronomy and navigation. He got wonderfully into their favour by showing them the use of the needle [The magnetic needle of a compass] of which until then they were utterly ignorant. They sailed before with great caution and only in summer time ...” (Ibidem, Sec 4:33)



Fig. 4-*The Island of Utopia*’, woodcut by German painter Ambrosius Holbein in 1518 edition (<http://4umi.com/more/utopia/>)

We must realize that in the 16th century Europeans considered that only the compass and the skill of European navigators and cartographers made possible the oceanic journeys, not only the rounding of Cape of Good Hope, but also the novelty of the New World “America”. Johannes Stradanus’ 1589 (Fig. 5) engraving symbolically shows the importance of the first encounters between a European citizen and a Native American: Vespucci shows an astrolabe while America is rising from sleep.

In the first half of the 16th century, Portugal and Spain control the seas; they do not control the land, the continents. The world Europe knew turned out to be only a parcel of the world; the desire to rule the world that what was missing would enhance the next move. In early 16th century, Portugal would play a significant part in the rigorous way this

new world would be described. Description was then strictly connected with quality, although a new mercantile mentality anchored in emerging techniques would provide a new quantitative approach. Some of the glimpses of this new mentality appear in the narratives of the Portuguese presence in the Eastern world.



Fig. 5-Symbolic representation of Amerigo Vespucci discovering America - Johannes Stradanus' 1589 engraving.
http://www.artchive.com/web_gallery/A/%28after%29Straet%2C-Jan-van-der-%28Giovanni-Stradano%29/Columbus-Discovering-America,-plate-2-from-Nova-Reperta-New-Discoveries-engraved-by-Theodor-Galle-1571-1633-c.1600-2.html

There was a growing need of knowing what could be seen in those new spaces and an eager desire to transmit personal experiences. This desire goes hand in hand with the emerging idea of a perfect world. Portuguese authors describing their travels to Asia reveal and mix their personal experiences with the new cosmos they meet. Both Duarte Barbosa (1996-2000) and Tomé Pires (LOUREIRO, 1996; PIRES, 1978) mention the natives' customs in the distant lands they have reached. Garcia da Orta describes various plants and their medical applications in his *Colóquio dos Simples e das Drogas...* (ORTA, 1895).

Novelty was experienced in a different way when Europeans met Western lands. The marvellous becomes a rather important element emerging in Columbus' letters (COLUMBUS, 1992) Vespucci's *Four Voyages*, (VESPUCCI, 1986) or Martyr's *Decades*.

Recent explorations in the West revealed not just a New World but also a golden one where the natives were supposed to live in a state of innocence. We also find

the marvellous in Pero Vaz de Caminha's letter to his King, where he tells of Cabral's first expedition, and of his arrival at Brazilian lands:

My Lord, this people's innocence, his ignorance of shame matches Adam's. Since they are innocent Salvation may be taught to them." (CAMINHA, 1974, 81).

As I have mentioned before European experience in the East, in the desired lands of spices, in India, was quite different. When the Portuguese narrated their presence there, they wanted to state the importance of the Portuguese Kingdom in a European political arena. Both works first describing Portuguese encounter with Asian spaces were printed in the second half of the 16th century. Their authors, Fernão Lopes de Castanheda and João de Barros, claimed priority, originality, and... their King's protection. Both actually got it. In 1551 Castanheda's first book was published under the title of *História do Descobrimento e Conquista da Índia pelos Portugueses*. In 1552 João de Barros' *Ásia, Dos feitos que os Portugueses fizeram no descobrimento e conquista dos mares e terras do Oriente*, also known as *Décadas*, was also published. (AVELAR, 1997, 83-88).

The writing of History stated that collective memory had played a significant role in the struggle for power: "oblivion and silence" versus "reference and remembering" had so far manipulated collective memories, History. The importance of memory and its social function thus becomes a relevant presence. Either in the Royal Chronicles or in the Expansion Chronicles, writing History meant building and preserving collective memory. The Royal Chronicles of those monarchs who played a significant role in the policies of Portuguese Expansion, namely D. Manuel and D. João III, mirror this strategy (AVELAR, 2003, 23-31).

In his Prologue to *Crónica do Rei D. Manuel*, Damião de Góis identifies what he considers to be the right method for those who take themselves as History writers, and denounces those who have not fully related facts as they were (GÓIS, 1949, I, 1). Writing History meant for him a careful selection of facts, an

analysis of each action reported, and of each actor involved; besides it also meant decorum (AVELAR, 2003, 117-119). All this should be present in the Prologues. An ethical issue is raised here: since History always surpasses its chronicler, facts are always more important than writing. Portuguese chroniclers mention state perpetuity since History has a pedagogical function in the education of the Princes.

According to Barros and Castanheda, perpetuity also derives from the vassals' worth. History provides examples either of the analogy between "great leaders and great vassals" - in Rome and Greece -, or of those deeds which have been forgotten because the vassals did not prove to be worth of their leaders - "barbarians, Greeks, and Latin people". Castanheda stated that this would not be a danger since the deeds of the Portuguese - of the vassals - were important enough to perpetuate the Portuguese Empire.

As we have said, recording a fact implies a dialogue with memory. Writing History was underlined then by a common methodology, whose main vectors were classical references - the Past, and facts - the Present (CASTANHEDA, 1979, 1, 3-5).

It is in this context that we must evaluate the evocation of Thomas More in Portuguese 16th century texts. Portuguese navigations impact on Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* has already been approached by historians (MORUS, 2006, 71-89) as Luis de Matos, "L'Utopia: Réalité et Fiction". The English humanist may have read Vespucci's *Quatuor Navigationes and Itinerarium Portugallensium*, a selection of narratives, first printed in 1508, describing the main Portuguese sea expeditions, namely those to India under king D. Manuel I's initiative. Having these narratives in mind Luis de Matos ponders on the distinction between fact and fiction, between reality and utopia:

Rien ne prouve que l'entrevue d'Anvers entre Thomas More et Hythlodée, à laquelle certains ont cru, ait eu lieu. Tout ce que l'auteur de l'*Utopia* fait dire au marin portugais est le résultat de sa lecture de relations authentiques,

recueillies dans les *Quatuor Navigationes et dans l'Itinerarium Portugallensium*, parus plusieurs années avant l'ouvrage de More. (MATOS, 1991, 422)

Luis de Matos provides some information on More's *Utopia* reception in Portugal. We know that in 1640 it was one of the forbidden books by the Inquisition. João de Barros mentions it in his *Espelho de Casados*, printed in 1540, by the priest Heitor Pinto, in his 1563 *Imagem da vida Cristã*. António de Gouveia wrote an epitaph about it and Damião de Góis expressed his admiration in his letters to Erasmus. In a letter, he wrote in Padua, in December 1535, he mentions Cardinal Pole's Italian report on More's death. In his answer, Erasmus says that, although he does not know how to read Italian, he will make an effort in order to translate it. In the early days of 1536, Damião de Góis thanks him the words of praise of his *Ecclesiastes* version. John More, Sir Thomas More's son, translated into English Góis' *Legatio*, a narrative of Prester John's embassy to the king D. Manuel (GÓIS, 1945).

We must also bear in mind that João de Barros mentions *Utopia* in his Prologue to *Ásia Third Book (Década)* ... (MATOS, 422). Both Góis and Barros write about what was then Portuguese recent History: the first a chronicle on king D. Manuel, and the later a chronicle of the Portuguese presence in Eastern lands.

More's *chiaroscuro* (present days England darkness and conflicts versus Utopian Ovid's *Metamorphoses* golden age of light and harmony) somehow echoes in those Portuguese texts. This strategy of binary opposition, this *chiaroscuro* also flows in Portuguese 16th century chronicles. In the first half of the 16th century, Gaspar Correia states, in his *Lendas da Índia*, that he writes about the "India golden days" which preceded "present days iron reality". (CORREIA, 1975, 1, 1-3) This metaphor may be seen as a subliminal criticism to the situation in India, which may have been the reason of his book rather late publication.

Present day events have an influence in the writing of History. Barros even supports the idea that the Portuguese narratives about Eastern lands should be

didactic. Writing History becomes part of a new modern perspective about what immortality means. As we have said before Barros mentions More's *Utopia* in *Ásia ... Third Book (Década)*. Portuguese navigations have for him part history, didactic, and moral function. In the First Book (*Década*) Prologue, he explained his discursive strategy; in the Second Book (*Década*) Preface, he developed what he thought to be the building process of Portuguese expansion; in the Third Book Prologue, he stated the main principles of History writing, namely the difference between classic and modern writers. At this moment, he stresses the importance of the fable. Picking up the historical example of classics such as Xenophon and Apuleius, he points the difference of the modern fable.

According to Barros a new paradigm emerges from More's *Utopia*, namely in its didactic function of teaching the English how they should rule themselves. In his evocation of a "dark present" which should be enlightened by the "sweetness of the fable" offering the milk of "moral doctrine" there's a subliminal criticism to his contemporaries; those who write without paying attention to History moral lessons, thus wasting their time, and the time of those who read them.

The modern fable provides the narrative means to reflect on the lessons of History. More, the humanist who revised the fable provides a living example, in the dawn of modern days.

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