

Architectural Chorography

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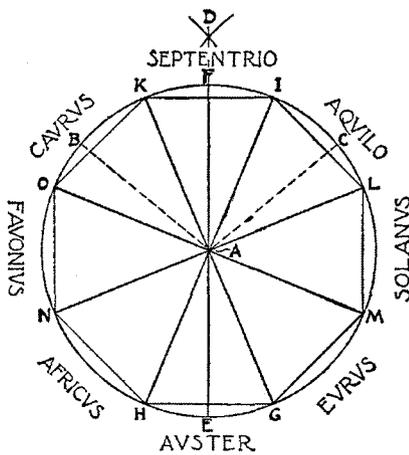


Fig. 1. Diagram of the winds. From: Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, I.VI. (New York: Dover Publications).

INTRODUCTION

This paper consists of two different parts. In the first, the author introduces the basic themes of a research proposal that he intends to execute. In the second section, a story will be told that deals with the subject from the authors Ph.D. research. Both parts of the paper are connected at a theoretical and philosophical level. The subject of the research proposal is in fact a broadening and elongation of the Ph.D. research. (1) Both relate to the questions of space, place and the environment, considered from a cultural-historical standpoint, and with an emphasis on 'meaning' in architecture and urbanity. The connection between European notions and concepts from the Near and Far East is a focus in the proposed research. Especially the intercultural influences will be studied.

DESCRIBING THE HABITABLE EARTH

The main question of this first section concerns the role of geography in the field of architecture. Both architecture and geography are ancient sciences. Their respective cores have been defined in treatises from classical antiquity. For geography we best look at Ptolemy (ca. 90-168 AD). His work was based on Hellenistic predecessors, Eratosthenes, Hipparchus and Marinus. In his influential treatise Ptolemy provides a good definition. He defined geography as: 'a representation - in picture - of the whole known world, the *oecumene*.' (2) Geography, in this view, looks at the position rather than the quality, defining the distance between

known places in order to provide a reliable map. As a science and skill it was distinguished from what Ptolemy called *chorography*. We will return to chorography after first going into geography itself.

The story of geography is a particularly fine example of how cultural traditions can be related to each other, and how ideas merged. The significance of Ptolemy's work is that he proposed a more scientific attitude. (3) Parallel to Ptolemy finishing his book on geography, a famous Chinese cartographer expressed a likewise concern. Phei Hsiu, appointed in 267 AD as Minister of Works to the first emperor of the Chin dynasty (265-420 AD) applied even older techniques to make a detailed series of maps of China. Phei Hsiu explained that it was necessary to base the map on a rectangular grid, while otherwise, 'there is no means of distinguishing what is near and what is far.' (4) His maps were to show important geographical features like mountains and lakes, the courses of rivers, slopes and marches, the limits of the provinces, prefectures and cities, and the roads and navigable rivers. In the following centuries maps like his became ever more accurate and Chinese cartography made unprecedented advances. This development was quite the opposite of how Western geography developed after Ptolemy. The scientific attitude of the Hellenistic geographers disappeared in favour of fantasy and dogma. The world maps of the Christian era were manipulated to fit scriptural texts. Jerusalem was always in the centre and depicted as a square, and the body of Christ was the guiding formal principle of the whole map. During a millennium-long period European geography seemed to suffer from a collective amnesia. The work and ideas of Ptolemy were forgotten. In fact, geography was not even counted as one of the seven liberal arts, while no common synonym for 'geography' was in use, and the word itself did not enter the English language until mid-sixteenth century. (5)

Still, there are signs of a mediation between occidental and oriental knowledge of cartographic methods. The Arabs seem to have been responsible for this mediation. They further developed the legacy of Ptolemy after the dawn of the European Christian era. From the seventh century onwards, there was a growing number of Arab travellers to the east. They also reached China and Korea, and had a Muslim community in Canton. Arab geography, undoubtedly encouraged by these travels, flourished during the long period in which European geography had virtually ceased to exist. Not only did al-Idrisi (12th century AD), al-Qazwini (14th century BC) and other Arab scientists, know the works of ancient geographers, like Ptolemy, but they also criticised and altered them. It has been suggested that the long tradition of grid maps of China had reached the Arabs in Sicily through the Arab colony at Canton. (6) The conclusion might be that the Chinese, by means of Arab mediation, played an important part in setting Western geography once again on the path of geographical knowledge inherited from Greek and Roman geographers.

Geography and chorography

Whereas Ptolemy defined geography as an essentially quantitative description of the earth, he also included qualitative representation in his treatise. Qualitative representation – chorography – had to do with the identity of places. Chorography, wrote Ptolemy, ‘treats more fully the particulars of the smallest conceivable localities, such as harbours, farms, villages, river courses, and such like.’ (7) In artistic representations of places, places to build temples, cities or gardens for instance, the connection of a culture with the earth is revealed. The way such places are represented is significant. It reflects upon the perception of the artist, and on the culture from which his or her work arises. The Chinese tradition of painting the landscape on a roll is tellingly different from, say, Persian miniatures or European landscape-paintings. To investigate further these culturally defined differences, we have to focus on Ptolemy’s category of chorography.

Ptolemy spoke of this even in terms of painting, comparing the task of chorography as if one were to paint only an eye or an ear by itself, leaving the contours of the entire head to geography. (8) In terms of method, it might be well to choose some particular case studies, to provide a comparative analysis. Further more, it may be necessary to subdivide certain levels of scale. The positioning of a single building, for instance a temple, requires another perspective from the artist and architect, than the outline of a complete city, although they should never be regarded as unconnected. From the specific knowledge and experience from Ph.D.-research, this issue will first be studied at the geographical level of the city. The city will be regarded in connection to the earth, to the territory and the cultural environment in which it originated, or in which it is imagined and represented artistically. Also, at another level, the notion of territory itself is interesting. The essence of territory lies in the quality of knowing that one is somewhere specific: knowing that you are ‘here’ rather than ‘there’. (9) The central issue of place, in other words, seems to be inextricably connected to the notions of territory and order. Vast territories are represented artistically as symbolic unities. The complete river basin of the Yangtze River in China appears as a dragon and has been painted on a sixteen meter long roll, a work of art from the Qin-dynasty. This kind of representation is significant in terms of chorography, and it seems comparable to European traditions, for instance the *Leo Belgicus*, the representation of the Netherlands and Belgium in the shape of a lion. At the same time, however, they are also very different. The ever changing face of the river, and the very experience of travelling on it is much more subtly embodied in those Chinese artistic representations.

To grasp the origination and meaning of chorographic representations and interpretations, it seems somehow that the concept of ‘order’ is of particular importance. Why? Because an artistic representation can only be made after a mental, subjective representation of the represented object has been conceived. ‘Place-making’ is a cultural activity. Before a site or building can ever be a repose for the senses, it is a work of the mind, because it has to be recognised as such. The process of recognition is related to order and ordering. In the second section of this paper this subject will be discussed with regard to its meaning in ancient Greek cities. The following elaboration is meant to achieve a notion of the city that could be deployed as a means of grasping its territorial appearance. There is not really a new theory involved here; rather, it shows the relevance of an alternative point of view. Against an attitude that seeks to define city and landscape as all too much unconnected entities, a geographical or territorial understanding of both is proposed that is based upon the notion of order by means of ‘weaving’.

The hidden order of the Greek city (*polis*)

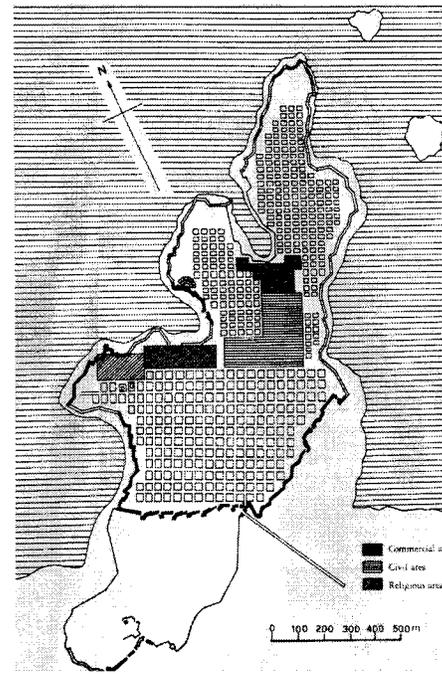


Fig. 2. Plan of Milete. From: Vincent Scully, Architecture. The Natural and the Manmade (New York: St. Martin's Press).

The city represents the ultimate result of human action. It has always been an attempt to end a primordial chaos. After the most elemental necessities were secured, people started to organise settlements – eventually cities – by defining laws and ‘all the bonds that link the parts of a city together.’ (10) Those who accepted and obeyed these laws and who knew the societal customs, were community members, citizens. Each city possessed its own laws, gods and customs, so that the urban territory marked the boundaries of the local oecumene. Outside of this space, the communal order of the city did not exist:

‘Such a country is not simply a dwelling-place for man. Let him leave its sacred walls, let him pass the sacred limits of its territory, and he no longer finds himself either a religion or a social tie of any kind. Everywhere else [...] he is outside the regular life and the law; everywhere else he is without a god, and shut out from all moral life.’ (11)

Analogous to the quotation by Fustel de Coulanges, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) typified the notion of order in his definition of Greek landscape consciousness:

‘That was the landscape in which one lived. But strange was the mountain, where the gods roamed, of inhuman identity, the headland, without a statue to be seen from afar, the abysses, never even discovered by a herdsman. They were unworthy of words, an empty stage, until man intervened and filled the decor with pleasure or tragedy. Wherever man appeared, all things stepped aside to provide mankind with the space it needed.’ (12)

A study of the colonial (Black Sea) coastal Greek city-state Chersonèse supports these observations. Archaeologists excavated a stone tablet there with an oath engraved on its surface, which had to be proclaimed by all inhabitants. One had to swear on the gods that protected the city, the territory and the fortifications, in order to guard the freedom of the city-state. (13) In a social, cultural or juridical sense, it was not relevant whether one lived within the city walls or not. What mattered were the communal values and references. The distinction

itself was a meaningless anachronism. Most citizens lived not in the central city itself, and certainly not on the acropolis, that was dedicated to the city's gods. Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian war (431-404 BC) supports this view. During the invasion of Attica, the Athenians had to transport their children, wives, and household to the city. (14) They furthermore experienced this compulsory move as hard to endure, since the majority of the people was used to live in the countryside. In a legal sense there was no difference whatsoever between the city and its surrounding land. The city consisted in essence of a political community that inhabited a space, a territory that included several political and religious centres and a certain area of land for agriculture, hunting and to bury the dead. The basic idea of this city concept has to be understood in an immaterial sense, just as Rilke did for the concept of landscape. For confirmation we shall once more consult Thucydides, who reconstructed a speech of Nicias, captain of the Athenian army, in which he reminded his soldiers of the fact that: 'men constitute the city, not the walls and ships without them. Wherever we settle, we will be a city ourselves.' (15) The city was not only a name for a physical, geographical space, but also and mainly a common political idea that was carried literally along by a group of people. Wherever they were the polis existed, even sometimes as an extension of the mother-city. The Greek polis can by no means be reduced to a mere physical object. It has to be understood as the embodiment of the notion of order and society itself.

The Greeks themselves, we may safely conclude, regarded and intended their cities as indeed the spatial expression of their political ideas. The values that were secured by this societal organisation needed to be expressed physically and spatially. The *agora* is a good example. It was an open space in the middle of the city where important political issues were raised and discussed by the people. At the *agora*, everyone had an equal vote so that the governmental power was a communal, shared power. The *agora* spatially expressed democracy. On the other hand, the legal and religious foundations of the *polis* were embodied in the *prytaneum*, a public building on the acropolis administering justice and where the ritual fireplace of the city was located to honour the *theos polieus*. (16) Yet, although the acropolis was the place where these holy things were kept and where Athena's sanctuary was to be found, it was not the only place where the city appeared as an embodied reality, where the city manifested itself. Far beyond the boundaries of the city walls the sanctuaries of Hera, Apollo, and Artemis, the most common gods of the landscape, were located. (17) These extra- or periurban sanctuaries were usually built in such a way that they were visible from the higher grounds of the acropolis, which is why they were so important as border signs. (18) Not only did they mark the physical boundaries of the urban realm, but they also indicated the end of the *terra patria*. Exactly at those places, the carefully preserved cosmos changed over to the disorganised wilderness.

The city thus consisted of a number of edifices that served as signs, and they were all erected to express the order that distinguished the *polis* from the surrounding open country. This order was an important and ever present aspect of Greek culture. (19) Vernant quotes from Plato's *Gorgias* a fragment that underlines its significance:

'And wise men tell us, Callicles, that heaven and earth and gods and men are held together by communion and friendship, by orderliness, temperance, and justice.' (20)

The community that constituted a city by worshipping communal gods and by accepting communal laws and customs, was held together by these notions. Orderliness was one of the binding factors. The word seems to suggest a certain order of a geometric nature, an order that ascribed a meaning to geometric patterns and figures. The connection of this interpretation and the often rectangular plans of Greek colonial towns has been suggested by several authors and seems plausible within the Greek realm of ideas, defined by the notions from Plato's quotation.

Although it does indeed clarify the typical organisation of the Greek cities, it does not account at all for the organisation of the city in its territorial sense. First of all, the hinterland (*chôra*), although an inextricable part of the city, was not ordered geometrically, and secondly, the *cosmos* of the city was not an order that, once installed, would remain effective on its own to secure the ordering of the world. It had instead to be re-installed and re-confirmed repeatedly. To contain the personified and unpredictable world of nature required permanent reconciliation through human interference: 'to secure,' as Pérez-Gómez stated dramatically, 'the survival of the world from one instant to the next.' (21) The act that most appropriately reflected this mediation was ritual, the repeated reconciliation of humankind with its environment. Rituals always played an important part in the mediation between order and chaos, but only from the eighth century onwards, Greek culture dedicated certain specific sites to the execution of rituals. The establishment of sanctuaries was the architectural expression of these acts, in which the sanctuary was considered to be a domain (*hieron temenon*) that was, so to speak, cut off from profane space and was dedicated to a god or local hero. (22) The building of sanctuaries and the dedication of certain sites and spots to gods and heroes resulted in a landscape that gradually became covered with symbolic markings. Whoever grasped the meaning of these respective signs was a true member of the community. Another word to indicate a meaningful and signified space is territory, and this word should be used to define the Greek city. Although the term seems to be rather anachronistic, one could speak of 'cityscape', an urban landscape or territory-city. The city could be typified by the beautiful Greek term *poikilia*, which denotes something like an affluent diversity. Since it also denoted the art of embroidery and 'being embroidered', it suits as a striking metaphor for an architectural geography of the Greek city. The ambition of the new research proposal is to expand this concept into other object categories – from garden to territory – and into other cultures as well.

NOTES

¹Marc Glaudemans, *Amsterdams Arcadia* (Nijmegen: SUN Publishers, 2000).

²Claudius Ptolemy, *The Geography* (New York: Dover Publications, 1991).

³Ptolemy furthermore rejected the ancient idea of a known world surrounded by one uninhabitable Ocean. Instead, he defined vast amounts on his maps as *terra incognita*, unknown land.

⁴Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), p. 112.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁶Joseph Needham, *Mathematics and the Sciences of the Heavens and the Earth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 587-593.

⁷Claudius Ptolemy, *The Geography*, I, p. 25.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Amos Rapoport, 'Australian Aborigines and the Definition of Place'. In: William J. Mitchel (ed.) *EDRAZ*. (Los Angeles: University of California, 1972).

¹⁰Jean-Pierre Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought*. (Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 69.

¹¹Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City. A Study on the Religion, Laws and Institutions of Greece and Rome*. (Garden City (NY): Doubleday & Company, 1955), p. 148.

¹²Rainer Maria Rilke, *Über die Landschaft*, ('s-Gravenhage: Stols, 1941).

¹³Alexandre Chtcheglov, *Polis et Chora. Cité et territoire dans le Pont-Euxin*. (Centre de Recherches d'Histoire Ancienne - Vol. 118, 1992), p. 17.

¹⁴Marcel Poëte, *Introduction à l'urbanisme. L'évolution des villes, La leçon de l'histoire: l'antiquité*. (Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1967), pp. 189-190.

¹⁵Thucydides, *De Peloponnesische oorlog*, VII.77. Translation by the author.

¹⁶Fustel de Coulanges, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

¹⁷François de Polignac, *Cults, Territory, and the Origins of the Greek City-State*. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 22.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 34 ff.; Roland Martin defends a comparable view, in: *Monde Grec. Architecture Universelle*. (Fribourg: Office du Livre, 1966), p. 9.

¹⁹Notions like equality and justice were not only the basis of political bonds within the *polis*, they also played this role in cosmology, physics, medicine and in the spatial organisation of the city. Gregory Vlastos, 'Equality and Justice in Early Greek Cosmologies'. In: *Studies in Greek Philosophy*. Vol. I. *The Presocratics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 56-88.

²⁰Vernant, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

²¹Alberto Pérez-Gómez, 'Chora: The Space of Architectural Representation'. In: *Chora. Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*. Vol. 1. (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 1994), p. 10.

²²Polignac, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

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