

## Transformer and Influencer

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# Transformer and Influencer Giovanni Battista Ramusio's Impact on Western European Geography

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## Abstract

In the mid-sixteenth century, the study of cosmography was in a state of upheaval in Western Europe, for the European voyages of exploration had disrupted the old ideas of the nature and structure of the world. As a consequence, cosmographers and geographers struggled to accommodate the ever-expanding influx of new empirical knowledge into their works. In the 1550s the Venetian Giovanni Battista Ramusio compiled the *Navigazioni et viaggi*, initiating a new form of geography which endeavoured to present a world cosmography through the eyes of travellers, ideally transmitting the knowledge gained from an age of exploration. In framing his work, Ramusio used both his knowledge of the classics and his humanist editorial skills, while his tests for inclusion derived from attested observation. Over seventy narratives, originally written in a variety of languages, were presented by Ramusio in vernacular Italian and skilfully woven together with intervening *Discorsi*, written by Ramusio by way of commentary. Ramusio's forensic editorial skills, mastery in acquiring texts which had hitherto seen little or no printed circulation, diligence in translating, editing and presenting them in an accessible format made his work invaluable. Proposals to republish it in French or English, however, never came to fruition; therefore, scholars had to turn to the vernacular Italian for the information. The article examines how the *Navigazioni et viaggi* became a bedrock of European geographical knowledge examining, in particular, its use by the English geographer John Dee and the French cosmographer royal, André Thevet. It shows how the travellers' tales, mediated through the hands of a sedentary Venetian, crisscrossed Europe and became fundamental in creating a new geographical understanding dependent on the words of the eyewitness.

**Keywords:** *André Thevet, Giovanni Battista Ramusio, John Dee's marginalia, Richard Hakluyt, Sebastian Münster*

## 1. Introduction

In 1550 Giovanni Battista Ramusio started a whole new geographical venture when he published the first volume of his *Delle Navigazioni et viaggi*, a work which created a world

geography through carefully selected, edited and organised travel narratives.<sup>1</sup> It was a form of geography ideally suited to an age of expanding knowledge when the very outlines of the known world were constantly changing. With the publication of this work, he became the leading exponent of geography presented through compilation and, despite travelling remarkably little himself, placed the emphasis of terrestrial and topographical knowledge on eye-witness authority. He did not expressly state that he thought geography was best imparted by first-hand testimony, but the majority of his compilation consists of autoptic reports. Although written in the Italian vernacular, *Delle Navigazioni et viaggi* was read throughout Europe and provided access to much hitherto unpublished geographical material, in particular from the Iberian Peninsula which was at the forefront of European expansion. While scholars have discussed Ramusio's importance in the history of travel compendia and compilations, the novelty and significance of his world view (in approach and scope) have been largely overlooked (van Groesen 2008; Rubiés 2012). Even those who have been enthusiastic advocates for his work have tended to under-state its innovative nature. Horodowich, for example, writes that 'Ramusio's *Navigazioni* built directly on the Venetian travel compendia that had come before him. His synthetic, textual redimensioning of the world was a product of this tradition' (2018, 63). This article argues that Ramusio's real importance was in developing a form of geography which went far beyond the existing compendia, enabling Western Europeans to see the whole world through the eyes of the onlooker, while simultaneously giving readers control over which areas of the world and which facets of geography (descriptive, mathematical or cartographical) they wished to learn about. What follows therefore concentrates on his readers and the influence Ramusio had on the way in which geographical knowledge was disseminated in the sixteenth century. As will be seen, cosmographical experts such as John Dee in England and André Thevet in France read the *Navigazioni* in significantly different ways and put their acquired knowledge to very different purposes. Yet both were heavily dependent upon Ramusio's book for their world view. Marginalia and texts from readers of the *Navigazioni* make its importance apparent. Ramusio made the non-European regions of the newly encountered world the core of his study – in strong contrast to more traditional large-scale geographical and cosmographical works which tended to focus on Europe. These gave relatively little space to the regions which had been unknown to Europeans before the late fifteenth century because they lay outside the temperate regions of Asia, Europe and North Africa, in what had been considered the *oikoumene* or inhabitable world. In foregrounding all the newly encountered regions of the world, Ramusio created one of the most important descriptive geographical works of the sixteenth century whose influence could be felt throughout Western Europe. This article therefore positions Ramusio as both transformer and influencer in the development of Western European geography, a role far more significant than his reputation as 'compiler' would suggest.

Born in Treviso around 1485 and moving as a child to Venice, Ramusio studied at the University of Padua, and then entered the Venetian civil service, thereafter rising through the ranks to become Secretary to the Venetian State in 1515 and later to the Council of Ten in 1553.<sup>2</sup> Despite an extremely arduous career as a civil servant, he collected, frequently translated,

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the Sackler Fellowship at the National Maritime Museum and the British Academy Small grant for helping to fund this research. Throughout this article, I am spelling the title as it was spelt in the original version: *Delle Navigazioni et viaggi*. The modern edition renders it as *Navigazioni*.

<sup>2</sup> The date of Ramusio's birth is contested: see Del Piero 1902, 13; Grande 1905, 95. On his membership in the Council of Ten see Giunti 1978, 8.

and edited the seventy narratives which comprise the *Navigazioni et viaggi*.<sup>3</sup> His first interest was in the classics; he edited or assisted with the editing of several Latin texts, and in so doing, as I have argued elsewhere, he gained the humanist editorial skills which stood him in good stead when collating and editing the narratives of the *Navigazioni* (Small 2012). Unlike his reader and 'disciple', Richard Hakluyt, he did not let patriotic inclination cause him to reject material from inclusion solely because they conflicted with his desire to promote Venice.<sup>4</sup> While there were propagandistic elements to Ramusio's work promoting Venetian interests in the East, the core purpose was to bring knowledge of the geography and inhabitability of the wider world to his readers.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, he created a wholly new form of world geography.

## 2. *Compiling and Creating World Geographies*

Ramusio's contacts with Venetian patrician, governmental and diplomatic communities as well as with the publishing world seem to have enabled him to obtain a vast amount of geographical material which was either previously unpublished or had only circulated marginally. In particular, through his friendship with Andrea Navagero, the Venetian ambassador to Charles V, and the contacts with which Navagero provided him in Spain, as well as diplomatic contacts made in Venice, Ramusio was able to acquire and publish a large volume of Spanish material which had not previously been disseminated in the rest of Western Europe (Parks 1955a, 132-133, 145-146 and 148). He also succeeded in obtaining a considerable number of Portuguese reports. His importance in releasing information about the Iberian voyages and encounters was significant since both Spain and Portugal heavily censored geographical and cartographical material in order to retain control over knowledge of the sources of the most valuable commodities and of the trade routes used for them (Harley 1988; see also Cortesão 1937; Portuondo 2009). Even Ramusio with all his diplomatic connections could not obtain all he wanted, or even complete uncensored versions of all the narratives which he did acquire, but he was more successful than any other non-Iberian geographer.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the Iberian material, he also included

<sup>3</sup> The *Navigazioni* were initially published anonymously. The publisher, Tommaso Giunti, only revealed the compiler posthumously (1978, 7-8).

<sup>4</sup> William Allen, for instance, points out that Hakluyt did not include the material which he had read in Ramusio about the Caspian, even though it would have furthered English knowledge of the region, because it did not highlight English contributions to knowledge and empire. As he says: 'It should be remembered ... that Hakluyt's theme was English voyages and English contributions to exploration rather than a detached and objective description of countries' (1974, 170-171).

<sup>5</sup> The leading scholar on Ramusio, Marica Milanese, argues that he wished to promote Venetian investment in overseas exploration, and he was one of the very few Venetians actively engaged in trying to find new trading ventures. Most modern scholars have made much of his interest in the potential for global trade, and more recently, Elizabeth Horodowich has shown how his selection of material (particularly in the second volume) demonstrated the splendour and achievements of Venice. It is undeniable that trade and the aggrandisement of Venice were part of his motivation, but the comprehensiveness and scope of his compilation indicate that his chief interest extended beyond the material gains for Venice into to geography for its own sake. See Milanese 1978, and 1984, Ch. 1; Horodowich 2018, Ch. 3. See also Rubiés 2007, 156-157; Veneri 2012, 162-201.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, although aware of Duarte Barbosa and Tome Pires' accounts of Asia, Ramusio was only able to obtain and publish partial accounts although he would have published them and 'non ad altro fine né per altro nostro proposito (come in piú luoghi del presente volume abbiamo detto) che per far cosa grata agli studiosi che si diletano di tal lezione' (Ramusio 1978-1988, 'Discorso sopra il Libro di Odoardo Barbosa e sopra il Sommario delle Indie orientali', II (1979), 542) (for no other purpose of our own [as we have said in several places in the present volume], than to do a kindness to students who take pleasure in such reading). Unless otherwise stated all translations from Italian are mine. All quotations from Ramusio's *Navigazioni et viaggi* are from the six-volume Italian edition by

a substantial number of classical narratives, many Italian and French documents and a few discrete reports from other parts of the world. There are no narratives which relate to voyages made by mariners from England and the Low Countries in the editions of the text published within Ramusio's lifetime, yet these were the two regions where contemporary scholars show the greatest indebtedness to Ramusio. Indeed, the only English-backed voyage mentioned in his work was Sebastian Cabot's search for a northwest passage which Ramusio referred to in his *Discorso* on his third volume. In his *Divers voyages*, Hakluyt translated into English what Ramusio had written because no English account of this venture existed (1582, 18-19).<sup>7</sup>

By the mid-sixteenth century when Ramusio was writing, European geographers were, in different ways, trying to cope with how to understand and describe a world whose physical outlines seemed to be changing almost daily as explorers brought back news of encounters with people and lands in parts of the globe long believed to be uninhabitable or in many cases entirely covered by the ocean. These changes brought a plethora of different forms of geographical publication. At the time of the publication of the *Navigazioni*, however, there were still only a few descriptive works which, like Ramusio's, tried to present whole-world geographies. A brief look at the most famous of these gives an indication of how innovative his approach was, but also of why his influence cannot be assessed simply by enumerating the editions and full translations of his work which at first sight might seem obvious indicators of its significance.

A cursory comparison of Sebastian Münster's geographical best-seller of the sixteenth century, the expanded Latin edition of his *Cosmographiae Universalis Libri VI*, with the first volume of Ramusio's *Navigazioni* which were both published in 1550, reveals how strikingly innovative Ramusio's work was in format and in subject.<sup>8</sup> Although the *Cosmographia* came to be at the centre of European geographical understanding, the nature of the work did comparatively little to enlighten people about the newly encountered lands and peoples. Very little of it is devoted to these places, and indeed the *Cosmographia* has a format which makes these regions peripheral in importance. Germany is at the core of the work, but also of Münster's understanding of the world. Age-old ideas of environmental determinism which can be traced back in European literature to Hippocrates, Herodotus and Aristotle, which promote the idea that terrain and climate shape the characteristics of those who inhabit them, are fundamental to Münster's understanding of geography (Bergevin 1992). In his theory, Germany, at the heart of Europe, had the most balanced climate and environment in the world and therefore the most balanced people. It consequently merited the most attention. It was a work very much framed by Münster's reading of Latin and Greek texts – in his own time he was called the German Strabo and his indebtedness to classical knowledge is apparent everywhere in his work (Gallois 1963, 221; Small 2011, *passim*). Although ostensibly a whole-world cosmography, this is primarily a work about Europe and its relationship to an expanding world.

Ramusio's *Navigazioni* is about as far from the *Cosmographia* in focus, form and concept as two works ostensibly on the same subject could possibly be. Where Münster devoted the bulk of his synoptic cosmography to Europe, Ramusio threw the emphasis entirely onto the

Marica Milanesi (1978-1988) and are referred hereafter by volume number, publication date of the specific volume and page numbers. Ramusio's work was first printed in Venice between 1550 and 1559.

<sup>7</sup> For the original, see Ramusio 1978-1988, V (1985), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Burmeister estimated that by 1628 there had been 50,000 copies of Münster's work printed in German alone and a further 10,000 in Latin. It was translated into Latin, French, Italian and Czech and even partially into English, undergoing more than thirty editions by the end of the century, and becoming one of the most widely circulated geographical texts in Western Europe. For more on the various editions of the *Cosmography*, see Ruland 1962; Burmeister 1964, *passim*; McLean 2007.

newly encountered lands. He carefully chose and ordered his documents to provide an image of the lesser-known regions of the world and supplement the work of Ptolemy and other ancient authorities, as he explained:

Ma la cagione che mi fece affaticar volentieri in questa opera, fu che, vedendo e considerando le tavole della «Geografia» di Tolomeo, dove si descrive l'Africa e la India, esser molto imperfette rispetto alla gran cognizione che si ha oggi di quelle regioni, ho stimato dover esser caro e forse non poco utile al mondo il mettere insieme le narrazioni degli scrittori de' nostri tempi che sono stati nelle sopradette parti del mondo e di quelle han parlato minutamente; alle quali aggiugnendo la descrizione delle carte marine portoghesi, si potrian fare altrettante tavole che sarebbero di grandissima satisfazione a quelli che si dilettono di tal cognizione, perché sarian certi dei gradi, delle larghezze e lunghezze almanco delle marine di tutte queste parti, e de' nomi de luoghi, città e signori che vi abitano al presente ... (Ramusio 1978-1988, 'All'eccellentiss. M. Hieronimo Fracastoro', I (1978), 4-5).<sup>9</sup>

Such an introduction throws the emphasis onto the regions of the world which were new features in European geographical conception. Europe is the undiscussed heart of the *Navigazioni*, but there are no narratives about it. Although we know that Ramusio had obtained material about European geography (for instance a description of Spain by Andrea Navagero), he made no attempt to publish it.<sup>10</sup> Instead his first volume focussed on Africa, the second on Asia and the third on the New World. According to Marica Milanese, he also intended to add a fourth volume on Antarctica and South America, but this was never compiled (1984, 41). These were all regions of the world which were not properly described in the ancient geographies. The effect was still on one level to emphasise Europe as a core – the part of the world so familiar that it need not be discussed, but it also brought the outlying regions into the *oikoumene*, the inhabitable world. The regions described in Ramusio's narratives were all places which had previously been little known to Europeans, but they were also ones which travellers (and predominantly European travellers) had visited, stayed in and recorded. Whereas Münster's cosmography still gave the sense that the core of the inhabitable world was Europe, Ramusio's *Navigazioni* demonstrated that the whole-world was inhabitable. He was creating a new form of publication to cope with a new geography in which Europeans were becoming convinced of the total inhabitability of the world (Small 2020).

### 3. Reception of Ramusio's Navigazioni

Although the *Navigazioni* had an extensive readership throughout Europe, these readers all relied on the various Italian editions, and no complete translation was made of the compilation.<sup>11</sup> The Englishman Richard Hakluyt proposed translating the entire work, but the project failed, and

<sup>9</sup> (But the reason which made me willingly weary myself in this work, was, seeing and considering that the maps of the Geography of Ptolemy, in which he describes Africa and India, were very imperfect in respect to the great knowledge which one has nowadays of that region, I decided that it would be valuable and perhaps not a little useful to the world to put together the narratives of the writers of our time who have been in the aforementioned parts of the world and who have spoken in minute detail about them. By adding the description of the Portuguese marine charts to these, one could make so many other maps, which would give the greatest satisfaction to those who delight in such knowledge; because they would be certain of the degrees of width and length at least of the sea and of all those regions, and of the names of the places, cities and leaders who currently live there ...).

<sup>10</sup> Ramusio's friend Andrea Navagero sent him geographical descriptions of Spain which Ramusio's son Paolo edited and published in 1563, but none of these find a place in the *Navigazioni* (see Navagero 1563).

<sup>11</sup> By 1606 the first volume had undergone five, the second, four, and the third three Italian editions.



he had to make do with translating or causing the translation of several of the narratives (Small 2012). The Frenchman Jean Temporal, who translated Ramusio's version of Leo Africanus' travels in Africa into French, also proposed whole volume translations that never came to fruition (1556). Ultimately the *Navigazioni* were never translated in full into any other language, but the number of documents which were translated from Ramusio's work throughout Western Europe shows how valuable a source he provided. His work was translated and read selectively. His versions of travels in such widely disparate areas as North Africa and the St Lawrence River became the standard sources of authority on these regions. The *Navigazioni* were the apex of the Italian contribution to written geography, but their success, and even their existence, derived from a cultural ambience in which humanist scholarship and an interest in geography and the new discoveries combined. Ramusio wrote to entertain and inform a European reading public about the nature of a world which neither they nor he were likely to see. In taking the narratives out of context, however, his selective translations produced invaluable contributions to geographical knowledge of particular regions, but they lost the sense of the whole-world cosmography and overall inhabitability of the world that the *Navigazioni* provided.

Ramusio's choices for publication, editorial skills and his own understanding of his texts, all of which were partly the result of the way in which he read his material, had repercussions for much of European geographical scholarship in the sixteenth century and even later since for many of these texts, his version became the consummate authority. His translation from Greek into Italian of the voyages of the fifth-century B.C. Carthaginian navigator Hanno down the west coast of Africa preceded even the first Latin editions and wakened Europe to the voyage. It became the basis for a hive of interpretations trying to correlate geographical realities with the Greek texts (Hair 1987, 45; Kroupa 2018). Samuel Purchas in England, for instance, writing nearly a century after Ramusio, still took his version of Hanno from Ramusio including his editorial interpretation (1625). Ramusio's edition of Barbosa's *History* remained the only one published in Western Europe until the nineteenth century (Parks 1955b, 290). Ramusio's textual choices and efforts in tracking down comparative material for his edition of Marco Polo's narratives were so important that even in the twentieth century editors of Marco Polo's *Travels* have had to take Ramusio's composite edition into account.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the range of material he provided on newly known regions, Ramusio's exacting standards and humanist approach, perfected over years of classical editorial work, were a key reason for his use by other cartographers, geographers and proponents of expansion and colonisation. The *Navigazioni* were used by those interested in ancient texts, in regional narratives, in empire building, in map-making. Ramusio put the words of the eye-witness directly into the readers' hands. The readers could trust Ramusio's editorship, knowing that his interpolations and interpretations were confined to his own *Discorsi* with which he introduced many of the texts. As a result, they were able to trust the autoptic report and turn it to their own ends, often ones which were far removed from the whole-world descriptive geography that Ramusio's organisation and selection offered. The English polymath and geographical advisor, John Dee, and the French cosmographer royal, André Thevet, provide particularly good examples of geographers who were extremely influential in their own right, but whose geographical knowledge and texts were in large part founded on Ramusio's *Navigazioni*.

<sup>12</sup> 'Di messer Giovambattista Ramusio prefazione sopra il principio del libro del magnifico messer Marco Polo', (Ramusio 1978-1988, III (1980), 34). See Davies 2012; Ross 2014, ix-xv.

#### 4. *Dee, Thevet and Ramusio*

John Dee makes a particularly interesting case study of the readership and use of the *Navigazioni* because Dee's own marginalia can be found in his copy of the work in Trinity College Dublin.<sup>13</sup> These give a clear insight into Dee's own geographical interests, but also into the way in which European armchair geographers could explore the world through reading.<sup>14</sup> Like Ramusio, Dee never travelled beyond Europe, yet through extensive reading they both became experts whose knowledge was trusted widely. Whereas Ramusio's authority was acknowledged through the material he edited and published, Dee's geographical reputation was garnered in large part through his teaching since he published very little on the subject although he wrote a series of manuscript treatises on empire which were strongly dependent on geography.<sup>15</sup> He became known as a geographer long before he wrote anything about geography, and the *Navigazioni* played a significant role in the creation of his authority. Aside from the manuscript treatises on empire, he wrote one large geographical work, *Of Famous and Rich Discoveries*, whose text is heavily dependent on the *Navigazioni*. It exists only in a partially burned manuscript in the British Library, and while it was certainly written for circulation if not publication, it is rambling and somewhat disconnected (Dee 1577, Ms. C.VII). One can see a flow of thought, but it does not come out readily and clearly on the page. There are masses of revisions throughout, and Dee seems to have had difficulty setting his words into clear and definitive form. Dee was drawn to the empirical narratives and eye-witness testimony of the *Navigazioni*, but he read the narratives not simply to gain a broad cosmographical understanding of the world – to supplement the work of Ptolemy, as Ramusio suggested (1978-1988, I (1978), 4-5) –, but rather from a desire to promote his own country's interests and to form a British empire as became evident when he synthesised and adapted material from the *Navigazioni* into his own work in the *Of Famous and Rich Discoveries*.<sup>16</sup> It was evidently one of the works Dee saw as important because despite its size, he took it with him in 1583 when he left the country.<sup>17</sup> When read in conjunction with the marginalia from his copy of the *Navigazioni*, the *Famous and Rich Discoveries* give an admirable indication of the way in which the *Navigazioni* could be read and re-used for an entirely different purpose from whole-world cosmography. Through Dee's marginalia we can witness the process of his using the *Navigazioni* to develop geographical knowledge as he read and reacted to the texts before he converted the knowledge he gleaned to more propagandistic purposes.

Dee, like Ramusio, was keen to establish the truth of the texts and did not blindly accept someone's word merely because they claimed to have eye-witness authority. Accepting Ramusio's editorial capabilities, he was interested not so much in correcting version against version, as in assessing Ramusio's judgement. On the first page of his volume, Dee wrote marginalia about 'the uncorrected bokes' when Ramusio was explaining his editorial principles and the problems he encountered with many of the texts which had come to him damaged and full of errors (DD).

<sup>13</sup> John Dee's copy of Ramusio's *Navigazioni et viaggi* (Venetia, Giunti, 1559-1565) is in Dublin, Trinity College Library, shelf mark DD. dd. 40-41; see Roberts and Watson 2009. Hereafter, Dee's marginalia are referred to by shelf mark, volume number, publication date of the specific volume and page number.

<sup>14</sup> Sherman 2009 discusses some of these marginalia.

<sup>15</sup> On Dee as a geographical educator, see Taylor 1930.

<sup>16</sup> Dee constantly referred to a British rather than an English empire. He asserted a British identity that included Wales, and emphasised claims to empire reaching back to Madoc and King Arthur. See Williams 1980, 12-13.

<sup>17</sup> Roberts and Watson 1990, entry 273. The book is marked with T for taken and with a Δ indicating Dee's ownership.



dd. 40, I (1563), aiiv). It is true that he underlined the reference to infinite errors with which Ramusio characterized his first manuscript of Ludovic of Varthema's travels in Asia (and which Ramusio had refused to publish without comparanda), noting in the margin 'the Originall Copy of Vartomommus', but accepted the version presented as the correct one (DD.dd. 40, I (1563), 147r). He did, however, compare works for knowledge where he thought it useful to do so. Throughout Ramusio's version of Oviedo's discussion of the deeds of Columbus, Dee made references to Ferdinand Columbus' *History*, comparing reports of events. He was interested in correcting inaccuracies which he saw in the text. For instance, he remarked 'that King Henry made a mark of this offer it is untrue; as you may see in the II chap of Don Fernando Columbus his historie, written of his fathers travayls translated out of the Spanish into Italian by Alfonsus Ulloa' (DD.dd. 41, III (1565), 80r). Similarly, he peppered all three volumes with references saying *vide supra* or *vide infra* and then a page reference, which seems to indicate not only that he read the *Navigazioni et viaggi* closely but also that he read it more than once.<sup>18</sup>

The volumes bear witness to such close reading that almost every page has some form of annotation or underlining. It is noticeable when these are absent as in the case of the report of Leo Africanus' *History of Africa*, and of several of Ramusio's own.<sup>19</sup> *Discorsi* were Ramusio's commentaries on the texts in which he presented his own editorial notes and theories about the geography. They were not eye-witness reports, however, and Dee, like Ramusio, was clearly more interested in autoptic authority than in material filtered through other scholars. What rapidly becomes apparent is Dee's interest in the possibilities and practicalities of colonisation; the problems of communication and his desire to create a verbal map of the world. Nearly every time that an author mentioned a number of leagues, Dee noted how many miles there were to a given author's league – either three or four.<sup>20</sup> He recorded most distances mentioned in the narratives and, at the foot of the page, he often drew these together into a sort of table indicating the distance from place to place. He also supplemented such descriptions with information from elsewhere. For instance, when recording Verazzano's voyage down the east coast of north America in 1524, he mentioned that 'from the point of Florida to Cap of Baccalaos the length of the coast is 3440 miles as Francesco Lopes de Gomara reckoned it in his *Historia Generalis* Cap. 12' (DD.dd. 41, III (1565), 420r).

From narrative to narrative and place to place he was trying to build a relative map of the world which worked on distances, positions and sailing times. It is the kind of information useful for an explorer. It is also the kind of information whose importance Ramusio was clearly aware of and knew his selected narratives to contain, even if it was not what captivated him. As he said, such narratives, when combined with marine charts, could be used to create new and more accurate maps of the world (Ramusio 1978-1988, I (1978), 4-5). Dee noted Ramusio's comments on the need to supplement Ptolemy, saying 'Ptollemy has gross imperfections' (DD. dd. 40, I (1563), aiiv). He underlined Ramusio's words about making many other maps, and then proceeded to extract the mathematical, cartographical information, using the *Navigazioni* for a

<sup>18</sup> Just one example is his comment '*the straits of Persia Goulf mouth. The land may be seen on Gulf Sides being of 8 Leagues on either side. /vide infra 265*' which can be found in DD.dd. 41, III (1565), 187r. Such evidence of close reading can be found throughout.

<sup>19</sup> Ramusio's version of Leo Africanus' *History of Africa* is one of the few parts of the *Navigazioni* entirely without any marginalia or underlining. Dee appears not to have read it, and his interest in the African sections of the *Navigazioni* are in general less than for other regions. We do not know exactly when Dee acquired his copy of *Delle Navigazioni*, but Parry argues that he was reading it about 1577-1578 at the same time as he was reading Ferdinand Columbus (2012, 96).

<sup>20</sup> E.g. DD.dd.40, I (1563), 187v.

purpose that went well beyond the superficially human geographical nature of the narratives. He not only drew out such information from travel writing in order to teach others, but carried out just such mapping based on travel reports and existent charts when he mapped the north of America.

Dee's use of the *Navigazioni* was not, however, limited to the cartographical role which had ostensibly driven Ramusio to create them, and in Dee's marginalia in the third volume in particular, we see the purpose to which it was most often put. Here Dee was not merely interested in cartography, but was also concerned with the order and manner of conquest and colonisation. He made several annotations about possession-taking, and about the order of discovery, conquest and then thirdly pacification.<sup>21</sup> He was also extremely interested in the products of various countries both for trade potential and the ways in which they might be useful or needed after conquest. Unsurprisingly, he paid particular attention to reports of gold and the manner of mining it, but he also noted cloth, fruit, trees, and other products. He wrote a whole paragraph in Latin on the use of a certain Florida tree for curing syphilis – going far beyond the actual text.<sup>22</sup> Although he sometimes broke into full paragraphs summarising a text, he did not debate with the text except occasionally to say that something was wrong with it.<sup>23</sup> The marginalia give no indication whether or not he thought the Spaniards' claim to the various lands they had discovered was legitimate, for instance. He was more interested in analysing how they made their claim.

While there is nothing overtly discussing a possible British empire or English exploration within the notes, the respect he paid to the manner, nature and success of the empires which Ramusio recorded fits in well with his role as a teacher to English explorers and as a propagandist for a British empire. There is virtually no mention of the British Isles in Dee's notes. This is not wholly astonishing since there is almost no report of British activity in Ramusio's text, but it is somewhat surprising that the only use he made of Ramusio's report of Sebastian Cabot's claim to have sailed more than 60 degrees north in search of a northwest passage was to cross out 55 degrees in the title of the excerpt and replace it with 65 degrees. There is no earlier report of this event so it might be thought that Dee would have put more emphasis on it, particularly as he was known to be interested in the possibilities of a northwest passage, but his textual amendment might indicate that he had heard the story aurally elsewhere. He did not definitely disbelieve it, but instead his commentary was once more on possession-taking. At the foot of the page, he wrote 'Sebastian Gabotto gave name to the land of Baccalaos' (DD. dd. 41, III (1565), 36r). It was more important that Cabot named and claimed territory than that he explored the sea-routes.

Dee also read a temporal importance into the geography which is not there in the original. Ramusio's geography is static, constructed without any sense of history. Classical, medieval and early modern texts all sit next to one another. Ramusio discussed what is correct and what is incorrect in the texts, but he did not give any sense of change over time. For Dee, however, history was an important dimension to his geography. His marginalia are peppered with dates.

<sup>21</sup> See for instance his marginalia on DD. dd. 41, III (1565), 2r, where he specifically talks about possession-taking but also about the places being uninhabited and in DD. dd. 41, III (1565), 169v, 170r. He is working out his ideas about the legality of empire which he then works out in his own treatises (see MacMillan 2001).

<sup>22</sup> On gold, Dee makes 61 marginal notes in volume III alone. It is by far the single most noted matter. For the description of curing syphilis see DD. dd. 41, III (1565), 421r. Dee's marginalia are in Latin, English, or Italian according to his whim and occasionally in Greek. Sherman points out that gold was the 'indirect object' of all European exploration in the period so it is unsurprising that Dee had such a focus on it (2009, 123).

<sup>23</sup> E.g. DD. dd. 41, III (1565), 370r, where he states '*Error of a degree*'.

This is partly to calculate the travel times, but it also fits in with his idea of what is significant in claiming empire. In his manuscript on 'The Limits of the British Empire' (1577-1578), the claims which he made for British rights to territory are in part based upon priority of discovery and conquest.<sup>24</sup> It was therefore necessary for him to settle the order of discovery. Dee was trying to find a means of building a British empire, and Ramusio's publications enabled him to learn the kind of geographical and natural historical details that were important for empire building. When he was reading the texts, he was looking for eye-witness authoritative information and not for interpretation.

When he did finally set pen to paper to convert his readings into a geographical text, we can see to what a different purpose he put his reading. *Of Famous and Rich Discoveries* was written in 1577 at roughly the same time as Frobisher was conducting his second voyage to northern Canada with the goal of garnering support for the search for the northern passage to Cathay either westwards as Frobisher was attempting, or eastwards to the north of Europe and Asia. At the same time, Dee promoted the colonisation of northern Canada in this work. He was already known as the great geographical authority in England at the time although this expertise was beginning to be questioned as he had by then become too closely connected with the search for northern passages. *Of Famous and Rich Discoveries* was written with the express purpose of convincing the readers of the possibilities of northern navigation to Cathay. Like Ramusio, Dee wanted a trail of authority for his geography, and he too used the format of weaving collected texts together with his own interpolations in a sort of geography of compilation to form a thesis, but whereas Ramusio's work was composed of complete narratives ordered spatially, Dee's was organised 'more like a scrapbook than a treatise' (Sherman 1995, 176). He even included information from Ramusio's *Discorsi* which he had largely ignored in his own marginalia. When writing his own geography, he was taking authority from all the most credible sources and wanted to put the emphasis onto the research. On page 125 he gives a long list of the 'principal authors' used, many of whose names, such as Marco Polo, Plano Carpini and Nicolo di Conti, can be found in Ramusio. As Sherman has pointed out, Dee's use of Marco Polo is of particular importance in the treatise, and he manifestly relied on Ramusio's version. He did not accept it blindly, however, but compared it with the Latin, using some of the same humanist skills that Ramusio had employed to develop his authoritative version (18). In one marginal note, for instance, Dee writes of the 'great imperfection' of the copy of M. Polo which has 'come to our hands' (DD.dd. 40, I (1563), 171r). Like Ramusio he included long sections verbatim from classical and contemporary authorities but juxtaposed them with one another in an attempt to extract an accurate image and information about the world and, above all, about the northern routes to China, thereby demonstrating an entirely different purpose.<sup>25</sup> Where Ramusio was seeking to create a whole world geography which certainly showcased the importance of Venice, but where the core emphasis was geographical understanding, Dee, as the last chapter to his work makes particularly explicit, was creating a work of empire-building and above all promoting northern exploration.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Dee's manuscript, edited by Ken MacMillan and Jennifer Abeles, was offered for the first time into print in 2004.

<sup>25</sup> See for instance his discussion of Strabo, Abufelda Ismael, Guillaume Postel and Carpini in close succession (Dee 1577, Ms. C.VII, 75r-78v).

<sup>26</sup> Its title reads 'that all these Northern Iles and Septentrional Parts are lawfully appropriated to the Crown of this Brytish Empire: and the terrible adventure and great loss of the Brytish people and other of King Arthur his subjects perishing about the first discovery thereof. And the placing of Colonies in the same Iles and Regions by the same King Arthur. And an entire and general Description of all the part of the world within 12 degrees of the North Pole and somewhat more' (Dee 1577, Ms. C.VII, 264v). See Taylor and Mercator 1956.

Dee was only one of the many readers of the *Navigazioni* who could be found all over Europe. He provides an excellent example of the influence of Ramusio, because one can see in his extant annotations and manuscript how he took notes on a whole world geography formed through compilation which he then recompiled to his own ends, creating a wholly different style of geography. We can then see how he affected those whom he taught in their understanding of geography so that the influence can be seen moving from compiler, to reader and educator, to explorer. Dee taught every English northern explorer in the last quarter of the sixteenth century and played a significant role in Humphrey Gilbert's colonising enterprise and its theoretical origins (Baldwin 2006; Probasco 2020, 24). In both his readings and writing his attention was drawn to different elements from those in which Ramusio demonstrated interest both in his own *Discorsi* and in his arrangement of texts. When read in the context of his other works, they are exactly the sort of matters one would expect him to look for, and exemplify the kind of geography one would expect him to construct to support his goals of British empire-building. Similarly, his interest in the mathematical geography contained within the narratives was directed towards mapping, exploring and recreating routes to empire and overseas trade.

Others throughout Europe likewise used the *Navigazioni* to their own ends. I know of no other example where the influence can be seen in both the reader and the author, but Ramusio's legacy can easily be detected in the European geographical record. His ability to obtain and publish obscure and unknown material makes it relatively straightforward to trace that influence even when readers tried to conceal it. The French cosmographer royal, André Thevet, claimed that the majority of his knowledge came from eye-witness information but in order to bolster his work against the charge of lack of scholarly knowledge, he sought assistance to augment his work with classical allusions.<sup>27</sup> In his *Cosmographie universelle* (1575), Thevet used Ramusio's classical texts as starting points for such authority. In the dedicatory epistle to the 'Treschretien Roi de France et Polonie' of his *Cosmographie* for instance, he referred to Hanno, Nearchus and Onesicritus among the sources on the Middle East whom Ramusio had brought into widespread circulation (1575, vol. I, âijr). Not much further into the work he took on Ramusio's discussion of the fertility of the Nile (32r-v). In neither case did he cite Ramusio as his source, preferring to give the impression of creating his own theories about the Nile, and of direct familiarity with Hanno and the other ancient explorers. These are small borrowings, but the indebtedness to Ramusio is evident throughout his work and for every region. As P.E. Hair and Frank Lestringant have pointed out, Thevet relied heavily (though not exclusively) on published sources for his descriptions of Guinea; many of these were to be found in the *Navigazioni*.<sup>28</sup> Most apparent was his borrowing from texts in the *Navigazioni* in his discussions of the Americas.

Ramusio's versions of Jacques Cartier's first two voyages to the New World, for instance, were the only ones known or published for centuries. While Thevet claimed to have talked at length with Cartier, his discussion of Canada was, in fact, dependent on Ramusio. Thevet, as his principal biographer, Lestringant, and others have shown, was hugely self-aggrandising (Lestringant 1991, *passim*). Like Ramusio and Dee, he was struggling with how to present the

<sup>27</sup> For his *Singularitez de la France antarctique* (1557), Thevet hired Mathurin Héret to provide such references (see Lestringant 1994, 66-67).

<sup>28</sup> Hair gives all the passages in which Thevet wrote about Africa. Many of these show clear debts to works made most widely available by Ramusio, such as the voyages of Cadamosto. See Hair 1994, 98, 102, 122 and 124. See also Lestringant who talks about Thevet pilfering the contents of Cadamosto for his *Singularitez de la France antarctique* (2003, 160).

cosmography of a constantly changing world. He began with regional geographies of the Levant and the Americas but moved towards a whole-world geographical synthesis, more in keeping with the cosmography of Sebastian Münster than with that of Ramusio or Dee, and yet the foundation of his authority was based on his claims of observation (14-15). As he began to write about regions which he had never visited, he appropriated the eye-witness authority of others, and Ramusio was an excellent source for this (181-184). Because Ramusio presented first-hand narratives, Thevet could use them in such a way as to claim to have seen regions which he had never known. Schlesinger has demonstrated in detail how large sections of Thevet's *Singularitez de la France Antartique* and his *Cosmographie* and even his vast unpublished *Grand Insulaire* were derived directly from Cartier's and other's narratives as published by Ramusio (Schlesinger 1985; Schlesinger and Stabler 1986, xvi-xviii). But Thevet endeavoured to hide his use of Ramusio from his readers, pretending to have seen the things himself. For instance, in the *Cosmographie universelle*, he used indigenous Canadian words recorded in Ramusio to create an impression of conversation between himself and King Peramich the leader of one of the peoples of Norumbega (1575, vol. II, 1009r).<sup>29</sup> Where he could not stretch to asserting his own eye-witness authority, he purported to have gained it directly from Cartier rather than from Ramusio's narratives, even claiming to have stayed for five months in the house of Cartier at St Malo (1575, vol. II, 1014v). Yet the information which he gave uses Ramusio's Italianate spellings and there is no evidence at all that Thevet was influenced by the French manuscripts of any of the material published by Ramusio (Schlesinger 1985, 4-5).<sup>30</sup> He diminished or denied outright wherever possible any reliance on the written word, and as Lestringant says, his work is 'filled with "negative authorities" used to the precise extent that they are rejected and ridiculed' (Lestringant 1994, 128). Rather than using Ramusio to authenticate his own authority as Dee had done by emphasising how his geographical knowledge was informed by the empirical, autoptic information of other travellers, Thevet wished to give the impression that his authority derived from his own claims to be that traveller. He had certainly travelled more widely than the majority of Europeans of that era, but not even he had the ability or opportunity to see the whole world. Ramusio's compilation, however, enabled him to pretend to such knowledge.

The cases of Dee and Thevet demonstrate how Ramusio's readers could use the *Navigazioni* in very different ways, relying on his textual renditions (though in Dee's case also using his own humanist skills to question them), and using them to produce their own cosmographies. His compilation of travel narratives brought a world to the reader's eyes so that a Thevet could purport to have gained eye-witness ethnographical knowledge and human geographical understanding when in fact he was relying on these reports, while a Dee employed them to construct a more mathematical and imperial geography, charting routes, but also asserting legal claims through them. More famously, other readers such as Giacomo Gastaldi and Abraham Ortelius used the narratives as the core sources of knowledge for some of their cartographical depictions.

Although Ramusio's influence can be traced throughout Western Europe (outside of Iberia), no subsequent writer adopted his form of whole-world geography. Even though Dee used some of the same humanist editorial practices as Ramusio had in his *Navigazioni*, he never attempted

<sup>29</sup> See Schlesinger and Stabler (1986, 29) and Hoffman (1961, 178-179) who discuss how the words and names in this section are clearly derived from the Ramusio version. The name of the Kinglet Peramich is dropped from Thevet's *Grand Insulaire*, but in the *Cosmographie*, Thevet discusses entering his house and seeing the carcasses of wild beasts hanging there which were being prepared as a gift for the French.

<sup>30</sup> Thevet almost certainly had access to the French manuscript of Cartier's third voyage which Ramusio did not publish (see Schlesinger 1985, 6).



the wholesale rendition of carefully edited texts, and as the absence of his annotations in the *Navigazioni* on Leo Africanus' travels indicate, there were regions of the world in which he was uninterested. The two other great geographical compilers of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Richard Hakluyt in England and Theodore de Bry in the Low Countries, were directly indebted to Ramusio both for the idea of geography through compilation and for narratives, but neither of them placed the same emphasis on tracking down multiple versions of their narrative to create the authoritative edition, and neither had the same focus on covering the whole unknown world (Sacks 2006; van Groesen 2008; Rubiés 2012). Hakluyt has even been called Ramusio's ' "English disciple" ', but neither the organisation nor the content allowed him to construct the verbal mapping of world in the way which Ramusio's collection did (Sacks 2006, 32). Hakluyt's purpose, as is well-known, was overtly nationalistic, promoting English trade and empire-building to the extent that in his first geographical compilations he included only English material. While he reframed the second edition of *Principal Navigations* to include non-English travel narratives in a way in which he had not done for the earlier edition, it still had a very English focus (as is indicated by the words in the title 'of the English Nation'). This meant that when a region lay outside English territorial claim, knowledge or interest, he did not make much attempt to go for the most complete picture. We have already seen how he overlooked key authorities on the Caspian Sea, but the case is even more evident when one looks at his provision on South America. Although he included excerpts from Jose de Acosta on El Dorado and Guiana, the region which Raleigh wished to explore for the English, he gave none of his description of Peru. Indeed, there is virtually nothing on that region, an area so firmly under Spanish control that it had little to offer the English, and what there is certainly gives no sense of the internal geography of the territory (Hakluyt 1905, 16-18).<sup>31</sup> Where Ramusio sought to inform readers and non-travellers about the geography of a world which they would not see, Hakluyt deliberately tried to emphasise the parts of the world which English explorers, merchants and colonists could see and know. To do so he went far beyond the travel narratives that formed the basis of Ramusio's compilation, and included proclamations, ordinances, and other non-narrative documents. This meant that while what it contained was vast and wide ranging, it still did not fully emulate Ramusio's *Navigazioni* in terms of world geography. It is fair to say that no compilation other than Ramusio's sought to demonstrate so clearly that the whole world lay within the realms of the *oikoumene* as a knowable, inhabitable, connected space.

## 5. Conclusion

Ramusio developed an alternative form of world geography which, unlike the best-sellers of his era, was ideally suited to an age of expansion in which the world was constantly changing. With each new voyage of encounter, eye-witness knowledge was prized, and a reading public was on the rise. As new places were encountered, new material could be added to further editions without necessitating the change or removal of previous material and interpretations. The demands on the editor were enormous, however. They required a network of contacts reaching across every region involved in exploration, and remarkable linguistic and editorial skills. Compilations of travel narratives became common, but

<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Hakluyt's interest in English trade and colonisation led him to include a much wider variety of documents from proclamations and orders to lists of traded goods and commodities. While useful for some readers in providing information on potential markets they break up the flow, leading the reader naturally to read selections and breaking up the overall geography.



not even Hakluyt, his closest heir, fully adopted his approach to whole-world geography presented through the words of travellers. Ramusio compellingly showed that the inhabitable lands extended across the whole globe to a European public who had never contemplated such an idea. Yet although it was still being consulted centuries later, no-one ever truly emulated or even translated the *Navigazioni*. For a European age of exploration, it proved an excellent but inimitable form of geography.

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