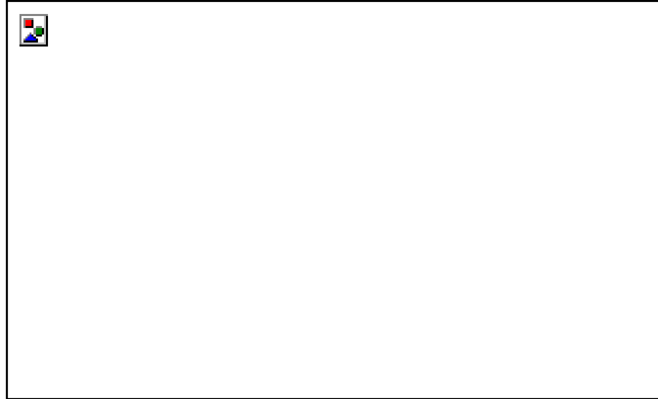

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Utopia in the Americas

Professor Tim Connell

[PIC1: TITLE PAGE]

Perhaps Voltaire should have said, If there wasn't an America it would have had to be invented. The voyages of discovery, coming at the beginning of the Renaissance, provide an impetus for the New Learning. The process of Conquest leads people to reflect on matters of governance, whilst the demographic disasters that befall many of the people of the New World, provides an object lesson in the concept of Dystopia. But the New World both challenged and defied the imagination.

[PIC2 MOCTEZUMA HEADDRESS.]

This headdress, said to have belonged to the Emperor Moctezuma, was captured on the high seas in 1523 by French privateers and eventually displayed in Paris, where it was viewed by Albrecht Dürer.[1]

The veteran Conquistador Bernal Díaz del Castillo, in his Conquest of New Spain compares the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán with the marvels of Constantinople and the myths and legends of writers such as Amadís de Gaula.[2] Pedro Mártir in his De Orbe Novo (1530) informs the Vatican at length about the wonders to be found in the New World. Andrew Marvell, of course, writes about Where the Wild Bermudas ride, and the same "vexed Bermoothes" appear in The Tempest.**[3]**

The New World also provides long-term inspiration for leading figures in English Literature. Samuel Coleridge had a plan to go to America with the poet Robert Southey in order to set up an ideal society on the banks of the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania, to be called Pantisocracy , so America may perhaps be seen not so much as a place as a frame of mind.[4]

Utopia in practice: Vasco de Quiroga, Bishop of Michoacán

In contrast perhaps with European views of the native inhabitants of North America, the Spaniards thought long and hard about the status of the peoples who inhabited their newly discovered lands. This was partly in response to the rapid population decline that tended to follow the arrival of the Europeans, either because of the introduction of hitherto unknown diseases, or more simply, because of ill-treatment and the consequences of the rapid breakdown of hierarchical societies. The first legislation to define the Indians' status and protect their rights came with the Laws of Burgos in 1512. Thanks to the work of the great missionaries, like Fray Toribio de Benavente (known to the Indians as 'Motolinía') or the Dominican Bishop Bartolomé de las Casas,[5] the debate extended well into the Sixteenth Century. In 1537, Pope Paul III issued a Papal BullVeritas Ipsa, confirming that the Indians were rational beings and therefore capable of understanding religious teaching. This put them into the category of subjects of the King of Spain and therefore had rights as well as responsibilities, and so could not be slaves.[6]

Vasco de Quiroga was a lawyer who later became a churchman. He was appointed Bishop of Michoacán, in Western Mexico, in 1537, with a brief to rectify some of the damage wrought by the first Conquistadors. He had already established one Indian community along Utopian lines outside Mexico City, and he extended the idea to the Indian communities in particular around Lake Pátzcuaro. Not only were local people taught trades of value to the Spaniards, such as agriculture and construction, but they also acquired particular skills with handicrafts, some of which have survived to this day in the form of pottery, textiles, musical instruments, copper products and lacquered wooden boxes.

The Jesuit Missions in Paraguay

This classification of the Indians as gente de razón, meant that not only were they considered to be rational in the sense that they could think and understand the faith, but they could also speak Spanish and go to Church. But it also meant that they could be trained and taught to work in ways which were economically valuable. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Jesuit Missions in Paraguay.[7] A whole range of missions were set up, mainly along the great river systems of the Paraná and Paraguay rivers. They flourished for almost 150 years. Again, the communities were run quite specifically on Utopian lines. People were taught particular skills ranging from woodcarving to watchmaking and the manufacture of musical instruments. Their lives were strictly regulated, with a six-hour working day (as in Michoacán), including work on the land and on communal projects. They also had schools and hospitals. This is neatly portrayed in the 1986 film, The Mission.**[8]**

[PIC5 FILMCLIP 1. BUCOLIC SCENES FROM THE MISSION.**]**

The workaday world of the Americas in the 17th Century, was in fact characterised by the formalisation of mining, the creation of the plantations and the founding of great cities, and although these were often regulated formally and quite efficiently, the sheer humanity of the Jesuit missions was not rarely emulated. There were, of course, exceptions: a humble Franciscan friar, the wonderfully named Fray Junípero de la Serra even walked across half of Mexico in order to found a string of mission stations on the coast of California, with names like San Francisco de Borja, Santa María de Los Angeles, San Diego de Alcalá and all the others. I am not quite sure that California forms part of Utopia but, as we shall see, Hollywood certainly does.[9]

There is little major Spanish exploration in the 17th Century, either into the Great South Sea or across the land mass of North America, where the frontier is the Adirondacks or the Appalachians rather than the Ohio, let alone the Mississippi. However, the Americas continue to be a region of migration, and some of the settlements in the North fall into the Utopian category because people cross the Atlantic in the same spirit as the Pilgrim Fathers, to live or worship in ways that are not permitted or accepted in the Old World. Of course they also leave because of the fear of persecution, a trend which continues until the 20th Century with the Spanish Republican government relocating to Mexico in 1939.[10]

Other groups settle, perhaps not with Utopian intentions in terms of idealised societies, but certainly with the intention of creating a world of their own.

The Amish of Lancaster County in Pennsylvania are perhaps the best known example, although there are also large settlements as far apart as Belize and Brazil. There are other groups including the Mennonites, the Quakers and the Shakers, who fall perhaps into this category. The Quakers became well-established and flourish to this day. The Shakers are perhaps less well-known and only exist now in the form of Shaker settlements at places like Sabbathday Lake in Maine.[11] But in their time they, too, founded orderly settlements, characterised by particular types and styles of building, and some of their handicrafts (such as coverlets and round boxes) have become part of traditional American folklore. They were reinforced by Shakers from England, but they were unlikely ever to survive in the long term, given the celibate nature of their settlements.[12]

The Shakers have had a greater influence on the formation of the American Dream than may sometimes be thought. It is instructive, for example, that the Shaker hymn "Appalachian Spring" was sung at the ceremony held in Little Rock Arkansas when Bill Clinton was re-elected president. It offers a clear Utopian ideal:

'Tis the gift to come down where you ought to be, And when we find ourselves in the place just right 'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.**[13]**

Modern Day interpretations of Utopia

In modern times, communes, communards and ideal communities are all to be found. The largest single group to migrate to Argentina in the 1870s, for example, are the French - refugees from the repression that follows the failure of the Commune in Paris. Utopia can take unlikely forms: none more so than the workers' paradise envisioned by the Wobblies - the International Workers of the World.

The younger ones among you may even remember this from 'Children's Favourites' on a Saturday morning.

[PIC 9 SOUNDCLIP OF The Big Rock Candy Mountain **by BURL IVES]**

The Big Rock Candy Mountainwas written by Harry McClintock, also known as Haywire Mac, who was an early writer of Wobbly songs. It was made famous by Burl Ives in 1949 and is a clear evocation of an earthly paradise for the workers (though cigarette trees would cause consternation on a children's radio programme today...) There are of course, lots of verses, but these will give the general idea:

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains there's a land that's fair and bright Where the handouts grow on bushes and you sleep out every night Where the boxcars are all empty and the sun shines every day On the birds and the bees and the cigarette trees Where the lemonade springs where the bluebird sings In the Big Rock Candy Mountains In the Big Rock Candy Mountains all the cops have wooden legs And the bulldogs all have rubber teeth and the hens lay soft boiled eggs The farmer's trees are full of fruit and the barns are full of hay Oh, I'm bound to go where there ain't no snow Where the rain don't fall and the wind don't blow In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.[14]

Dystopia

Regrettably it is at this point that we find a gradual switchover from Utopia to Dystopia - societies whose planning is far from ideal, and which all too often come to grief. As a concept, Dystopia emerges at the end of the long Eighteenth Century, possibly as a result of social upheaval and the long wars. it comes to the fore towards the end of the Nineteenth Century with gloomy forebodings as to the impact of industrialisation. Some go for a mechanical paradise. Others foresee a world order where things have got beyond repair - and that's not just the machines. Jack London in The Iron Heel (1908)sees the collapse of the American republic between 1912 and 1932 with the rise of 'The Oligarchy' (though he also thinks that international worker solidarity will avert a world war in 1913).

Dystopia is highly pessimistic in tone. It traces what happens when things go wrong, either in an ideal world which has gone into crisis or decline, or else is a portrayal of of a world where society has collapsed at some time in the past. It is form of writing with a moral - and a warning. The irony is that reality can be stranger than fiction.

The finale of The Mission is a case in point.

The humanitarian goals of the Jesuit Fathers ironically contained the seeds of destruction for the Missions. The presence not only of rational Indians, but Christianised ones who were highly skilled proved to be too much of a temptation for the bandeirantes, slavers who came across from Brazil and enslaved them all.

The Missions, perhaps like Utopia itself, remain enshrined in the history of both the Catholic Church and the history of Latin America as a high point which, sadly, might well have proved to be a model for a stable and economically prosperous society.

Messianic movements: Canudos, Joaseiro, Jonestown, the Davidians

Messianic movements are perhaps the strangest phenomenon of all. The emergence of a charismatic figure, either announcing the end of the world, or calling for the creation of a new one, is by no means restricted to Latin America, but there have certainly been some prime examples in modern history.

Messianic figures are associated in particular with the arid North East of Brazil, and the Sertão - the dry badlandswhere

people battle for survival, a region which gives rise to fable and legend, not least the bandit leaders like the celebrated Lampião, who is revered as a Brazilian version of Robin Hood.

Joaseiro and Canudos in the state of Bahia are the places most associated with messianic events. Joaseiro was where a miracle was seen to occur in 1889 and which led to the development of a bustling community (doubtless awaiting the New Millennium) up to the death of its leader, Padre Cícero, in 1934. More apocalyptic was the experience of Canudos, where a charismatic leader by the name of Antônio Conselheiro[15]emerged in 1893. He began wondering from town to town, building up his followers, claiming to be a prophet and foretelling the arrival of a new world order.

A sprawling settlement of some 30,000 people grew up rapidly and was perceived as a threat by the Brazilian Republic which was less than a decade old, and of course, Brazil had only recently abolished slavery. The settlers fought off no fewer than three attempts by the Brazilian army to suppress them before being massacred by machine gun and artillery fire.

There have been other cases in more recent times of religious movements led by charismatic leaders, who have come into conflict with authority, with fatal and truly apocalyptic consequences. Jonestown and Waco in particular have been added to the list of places that have gained dystopian notoriety. Jim Jones was a preacher from California who founded a religious group called the People's Temple in the mid-1950s. In the 1970s, amid some controversy, they went to Guyana to create the new settlement of Jonestown, which was to be self-sufficient and run along communal lines. In 1978, amid scenes of chaos during which an investigating Congressman, Leo J Ryan, was shot, most of its inhabitants, over 900 people, committed mass suicide.[16]

The events at Waco in 1993 are perhaps even more controversial. Another cult group, called The Branch Davidians, came into conflict firstly with the Bureau of Alcohol, Firearms and Explosives, amidst allegations of improper behaviour at the Mount Carmel ranch near Waco, Texas. An initial raid led to a number of deaths, which led to a siege by the FBI lasting 51 days, at the end of which the ranch was burnt out and 74 people, including their leader David Kuresh, were killed. As with Jonestown, there were lengthy enquiries and recriminations over what had happened.[17]

The crossover between Utopia and the New World is perhaps inevitable. From the Fountain of Eternal Youth (thought to be in Florida) and the Amazons to the Lost Tribe of Israel, there was an attempt to map Old World concepts on to the perceived realities of the New.

Starting afresh in a world untainted by the old becomes tied in with the frontier mentality, moving on in a constant search for a better life. It is surely no coincidence that in The Grapes of Wrath the families driven out of the dustbowl of Oklahoma move on to California. Yet they only find, as the original settlers did before them, that they first have to overcome obstacles like the Sierra Nevada or Death Valley - and these are nothing in comparison to the hostility they face from the people who got there before them, and who have yet to find Utopia themselves.

The West is now settled, and played out as a concept, or re-constructed as part of the environmentalist agenda. Space therefore becomes the next frontier. It is perhaps no coincidence that the American aero industry should be firmly based on the West Coast, as is Hollywood, home to celluloid utopias and wish fulfilment in the nickelodeon of the sort which led to the rise of Charlie Chaplin.[18] Film and flight combine in Science Fiction which emerges as a particularly American re-interpretation of the Utopian theme.

This perhaps reaches a high point in the 1960s in Star Trek, with its multi-racial crew in the streamlined, ultra-hygienic futuristic environment of the starship Enterprise.

This is in marked contrast to the atrocious conditions in which the early navigators explored our own world. (Only 18 of Magellan's men on board one ship got back to Spain out of the 268 who set off with five ships, for example.) [19] Utopian perceptions are all too apparent on board the Star Ship Enterprise. So questions must be asked: how come Captain Kirk never goes to the dentist? Who does the ironing on board the Star ShipEnterprise? And (the question asked by every 6th Former in the land): in a five-year space voyage, why does no-one ever manage to get off with Lt Uhura?[20]

Of course, even sex is sanitised in Science Fiction - the absence of it is actually a key theme in Barbarella, which comes out in 1968, somewhere between Star Trek and 2001 - A Space Odyssey.

Space stations, tourism in space, the possibility of life in other galaxies, all point to this longstanding idea that humanity should be on the move - and will inevitably move in the right direction. From the Moon People in Lucian to the Selenites of H.G. Wells, there has been a fascination with other worlds and other life forms in the Universe. Speculation about what could be up there mingles with imaginative ideas as to how to get there, and of course there is not shortage of material about what space worlds or colonies might be like in two thousand years' time. Some of these are based on societies that have become perfect, and others far less so. It is quite feasible that space travel will become commonplace, certainly in our children's lifetime, so perhaps the American Dream will be ready for re-interpretation in another dimension, and the all-American family will, literally, reach for the stars..

All of which must lead us into another world, the world of Isaac Asimov, Arthur C Clarke, and Ray Bradbury. But time is against us today, so that will be the theme for our next Symposium. See you all next year!

[1] It is now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and is the subject of a dispute with the Mexican Government over its return. Seehttp://www.benettontalk.com/2006/03/recovering_a_symbol_of_power.html

There is also some doubt now as to whether it really did belong to Moctezuma.

[2]Verdadera Relación de la Conquista de la Nueva España. Available in Penguin translation (1963.)

[3] Which also gives us the phrase "Brave New World", of course. Shakespeare may have drawn on the experiences of one Silvester Jourdain, a crew member of the Sea Adventure, which was wrecked on Bermuda en route to Virginia in 1609. Jourdain published a pamphlet entitled "A Discovery of the Bermudas, otherwise called the Isle of Devils." See the Dictionary of National Biography.

[4] The idea never got off the ground. Seehttp://www.bartleby.com/65/co/ColeridgST.html

[5] His seminal work, A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indiesmay be viewed at: http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/20321

[6] (The key issue was whether they could justly be enslaved, either as pagans, or as a lesser species incapable of thinking for themselves. The Valladolid Debate on the subject continued in the 1550s.)

See http://userwww.sfsu.edu/~epf/2001/hernandez.html

[7] Seehttp://academic.sun.ac.za/forlang/bergman/real/mission/h_miss.htm

[8] 1986. Screenplay by Robert Bolt, starring Jeremy Irons and Robert de Niro.

[9] Fray Junípero de la Serra is up for canonisation. I hope he gets it. Seehttp://www.catholic-church.org/serra-beth/serra-4.htm

[10] In a slightly different category, of course, a lot of Nazis fled to South America in 1945.

[11] See http://www.shaker.lib.me.us/

[12] For more on the Shakers and an interesting article on the origins of Utopias, see http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/shaker/utopias.htm

[13] The song was written in 1848 as 'Simple Gifts' and worked into the ballet 'Appalachian Spring' by the composer Miles Copland. See http://www.pbs.org/wnet/ihas/icon/shakers.html

[14] See more at http://www.bluegrasslyrics.com/all_song.cfm-recordID=s29253.htm

The Wobblies (IWW) had a red songbook. It was used at rallies and meetings to drown out other speakers - or the Salvation Army band sent to silence them: http://www.fortunecity.com/tinpan/parton/2/iww.html

[15] "The Counsellor".

[16] See http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/Jonestwn.html

[17] See http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/bran.html

[18] Two-reelers like The Immigrant and The Kid even manage to portray a land of hope in a world which still highlights the grim realities to the people who at that time were flooding in through Ellis Island.

[19] Over a dozen nationalities were represented. One of the ship's captains was an Englishman, whose wife came from Seville. See Antonio Pigafetta Magellan's Voyage, Folio Society 1975.

[20] There is actually one episode where (under the influence of hostile aliens, naturally) Lt. Uhura and Captain Kirk exchange a kiss. In reality, this was the first time a white man had been seen to kiss a black woman on prime time TV in the USA, and was not shown in the Southern States. It is perhaps worth noting that this episode was not aired in the UK for another 25 years.

See http://www.nndb.com/people/712/000023643/

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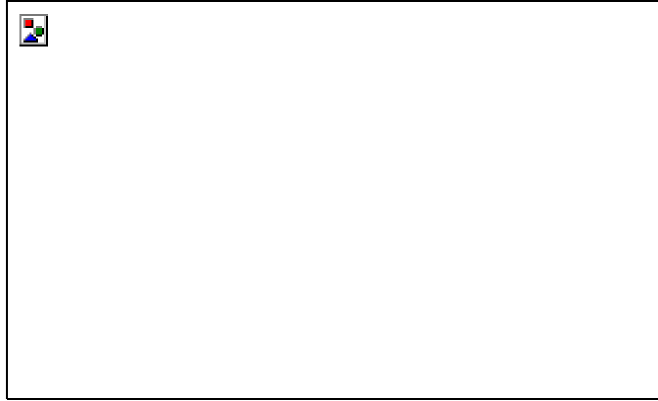

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The Symbol of Mount Athos in the West

Dr Veronica Della Dora

Edens and Utopias are both spaces of desire. They stand for different things and come in different forms. Terrestrial paradises represent the 'no longer'; utopias the 'not-yet'. Eden is a place that stands for what has been lost to corrupted mankind; utopia is a non-place for rational redemption. Biblical Eden was a God-ordained verdant garden; Renaissance utopias were man-made ideal cities.

Surrounded by oceans or deserts, encircled by walls of stone or fire, utopias and Edens have traditionally come in a self-enclosed cartographic form; as 'islands of the mind', to borrow the phrase from John Gillis. As islands of all sorts: existing and non-existing islands;invisible islands in the Atlantic, anticipating Renaissance discoveries;green Edenic islands in the arid Mesopotamian desert longed by early pilgrims and lost to mankind; urban islands in the mainland of ancient Greece; or again, monastic islands separated from the rest of the world by high brick walls.

Islands, it has been observed, are central features in western geographical imagination. They are liminal places and metaphors of the mind. They are objects for contemplation, but also instruments for knowledge-making. They are the favourite sites for loss and recovery, for visions of the past and of the future.

Islands are reassuring in that they present us with the well-defined boundaries of their coastline. Like mountains and other geographical features, islands just are. But islands can also be carved out of territory by human action and imagination.

Today I want to show how a mountain-peninsula in the north Aegean became an island of the mind and a symbol: an island conflating Edenic and utopian traditions; an island of desire transcending its physical boundaries to float in late Byzantine and western Renaissance geographical imagination through textual and cartographic representations; an island that maybe even inspired western utopian visions; and finally, an island that became an emblem.

Mount Athos is the eastern-most of the three protuberances of the Chalcidic peninsula in Northern Greece and it is the only example of monastic republic in our contemporary world. It measures about 50Km and culminates into a 2,000m-high peak, after which it is named. This has long constituted a primary node in an extensive net of Aegean mountain-landmarks, fundamental in coastal navigation.When visibility is good, it is possible to glance its majestic summit from a distance of 93 to 105 miles.

The geomorphology and vegetation of the peninsula are dramatically different from its typically Mediterranean surroundings. Its unique variety of floristic species and endemics make Athos a true botanical island.

The majesty of the peak and the secluded wilderness of the peninsula have inspired the most incredible challenges to nature, making Athos a place of contrasts and paradoxes since antiquity.

Herodotus tells us that after the famous Persian shipwreck occurred off Athos' tempestuous point in 492 BC, Xerxes, the son of Darius, decided to cut a canal on the neck of the peninsula, in order to avoid its circumnavigation and the repetition of a similar disaster. Had it ever existed, the canal soon collapsed after its excavation, probably after an earthquake, leaving no visible trace. From temporary island, Athos thus permanently returned to its peninsular status.

According to Vitruvius, because of its dramatic grandeur and inaccessibility, Athos was chosen by Dinocrates, the architect of Alexander the Great, as the site for the foundation of Alexandria. The mountain was to be carved into a giant human figure (by implication that of Alexander). In his left hand, the colossus held a very extensive city; in the right, the bowl to receive the water of all the rivers in the mountain. But Alexander refused the project on logistical grounds.

Later authors like Lucian of Samosata took Xerxes' challenge to nature as an act of arrogance, and Alexander's refusal as an example of virtue. Athos, a place most authors never visited, became a famous 'moral landmark' in Hellenistic and Latin literature; one embodying contrasting metaphors: on the one hand, barbarian foolishness; on the other 'Greek' rationality and equilibrium.

By a strange paradox, since the 8th century AD, from abode of titanic pre-Christian myths, Athos gradually became abode of humble Christian hermits escaping iconoclastic persecution. Its secluded wilderness, with its thick forests, steep slopes, caves and ravines made Athos the ideal arena for ascetic struggle. The monks envisaged the peninsula as a safe refuge - as an island geographically and spiritually removed from the temptations of the outer world.

In 963 Saint Athanasius founded the first coenobitic monastery on the peninsula (the Great Lavra). In so doing, he imported a new model of monasticism resting on a common life of work and prayer: a model in which private property did not exist.

The model imported by Athanasius implied also a new relationship with the environment. His was a titanic struggle to tame wilderness; one that paralleled the monk's inner spiritual struggle to tame passions. Carving Eden out of a fierce landscape was understood as a domestication not only of nature, but of the soul itself. Conversely, gardening was not simply a necessary source of living for the monks: it meant setting moral boundaries, mapping a spiritual landscape on the physical one.

During the last century of the Byzantine Empire, Athos' fierce wilderness became increasingly punctuated by gardened 'monastic islands', with nineteen of the twenty still-existing coenobitic foundations established or restored. The only major Byzantine monastic center that survived the Turkish conquest of Asia Minor and the Latins practically untouched, Athos itself became a true island of Orthodoxy.

Rather than an untamed arena for ascetic struggle and for the carving of garden-islands, 14th-century Athos was itself idealized as an insular utopian space presenting the visitor with a 'given', rather than negotiable boundary - that of its coastline.

Ioseph Kalothetos characterized Athos as 'mainland among the islands, and island among the mainlands'; as a space the visitor could walk or sail around, finding shelters and ports along its perimeter; a space protected by 'secure fortresses [the monasteries] encircled by walls, - disposed as to form a dance,or, as one might say, similar to armed soldiers lined up against the enemy, securing peace' to the peninsula.

In the late 1350s, Nikephoros Gregoras, the famous chronicler of Andronicus Palaeologus II, described the peninsula as one of those real and imagined pleasure gardens chanted by his Byzantine and ancient predecessors, Homer to start with.

In his ekphrasis, Gregoras' portrayed Athos as a self-sufficient agricultural institution moulded on the sample of the small, circumscribed ideal polis devised by Plato (who was himself familiar with Athos and the story of Xerxes' canal).

The Athos described by Gregoras was a true locus amoenus, a garden island in which the dramatic mountain peak found no place. The goal of Byzantine ekphraseis (or rhetorical descriptions) was to make present not the actual picture, but the spiritual reality behind it. Like sacred icons, descriptions of real and imagined loci amoeni served as windows to other worlds, as tools for inner elevation. Anticipating western Renaissance utopias, Byzantine ekphraseis served as useful fictions for self-edification.

Byzantine loci amoeni brought together the Classical and Christian tradition. They were imbued with Edenic elements, but unlike Eden, they remained within the realm of possibility. Like the utopias of the ancient world, they were associated with golden ages of the past that might yet be regenerated in the present.

In Gregoras' ekphrasis, the Edenic nature of Athos was a reflection of a perfect monastic life, and Athonite monastic life was in turn inspired by a sweet landscaped nature. Monastic virtues fused in a harmony of colors, scents, and sounds, 'as if flowing out of a treasure house'. An amiable mantle of varied woods and cultivated lands covered the peninsula during all the seasons: like Eden and the garden of Alkinoos, Athos was blessed by eternal spring.

Among its woods, in the early morning, one could hear the music of the nightingale, 'as if chanting and praising the Lord together with the monks'. Little water streams flew quietly, in harmony with the monks' silent way of life, because, the author explained, 'Mount Athos itself offers many occasions for inner quietness to those who desire to live a celestial life on earth'.

If the nature of the peninsula reflected the botanical totality of Eden, the perfect way of life of its inhabitants was that of a utopian community; a community following the 'ancient Doric way', and extraneous to commerce and slavery; an entirely male community 'naturally' protected by the evils of the world thanks to the geography of the peninsula. Its quasi-insular, secluded nature granted Athos defence from multiple perils, such as vicious gazes and women. Athos was a paradise in which one did not risk temptation, or 'the ancient discussion with the snake', as Gregoras put it.

In the fifteenth century, this vision of a real perfect monastic community travelled beyond the boundaries of the dying Byzantine Empire and was given graphic form. Athos became one of the most distinctive features in the Aegean represented on western isolari until the late seventeenth century.

Derived from the ancient tradition of the periplus, isolari (or island books) featured a map of a different island on each page, accompanied by notes about its history, geography, climate, economy, customs, antiquities, legends, and all kinds of 'curiosities'. Each island was depicted as a world on its own, onto which could be projected any of the diverse desires and fears that were being generated within Western Europe itself.

The island was the principal cognitive form in Renaissance geographical descriptions, as well as an effective mnemonic tool. Its self-enclosed spatiality allowed the compiler to blend fact and legend, personal observation and hearsay, past and present; it gave textual coherence to disparate information.

Microcosms to be explored and described, easy to grasp by the eye and imprint on memory, islands constituted narrative cabinets of curiosities delimited by their coastline. They were basic narrative units held together like precious stones, by the compiler's island-hopping journey, a journey re-iterated by the reader, as he leafed through the pages of the island book.

Athos was not an island, but, thanks to its unique status, it continued to be conceptualized and narrated as such.

In his Liber Insularum Archipelagi, the first island-book and systematic antiquarian mapping of Greece, the Florentine priest Cristoforo Buondelmonti depicted Athos in a round insular shape, a trope that became standard for the next couple of centuries. This graphic rendering reflected and reinforced the Byzantine idealization of Athos as a utopian microcosm set apart from the rest of the world.

Buondelmonti described the peninsula as 'a palace of the angels', populated by coenobitic monks dwelling in fortress-like monasteries, and by hermits, with their eyes 'set towards heaven, sighing with all their soul at the thought of Paradise, the Eternal Motherland'. 'Contemplative in his heart of hearts,' - he continues - 'the monk trains himself not to fear solitude because God is with him, but always to delight in looking at the sky without any worries about money'.

Like the citizens of Plato's ideal polis, the monks of Athos, Buondelmonti wrote, 'lead a way of life just like those who are content with little and who have no desire for what the vast majority considers to be wealth - Their life is truly peaceful and joyful, their nights are pleasant, their days busy, their meals quiet'.

Like the Athos in Gregoras' ekphrasis, that described by Buondelmonti was a perfumed landscaped garden-island, with fig trees, olives trees, and numerous bee-hives. But the Florentine priest envisaged the peninsula also as 'large-scale cabinet of

curiosities', as a container of myths and wonders.

Forefather of Greek antiquarianism, Buondelmonti boasted a solid humanistic education, reinforced by its sixteen-year wanderings through the Aegean islands, where he discovered antiquities and purchased manuscripts (of which Athos, by the way, was a major reserve).

At ease with Pliny, Buondelmonti knew that on the summit of Athos there was 'in the olden days - a fortified town whose inhabitants lived much longer than anyone else'. Having made Herodotus one of his guides, of course, he also knew that at the time of Xerxes the Athonite peninsula 'was crossed by the sea and was an island', as we read on the map in the Ravenna mss. The memory of the no-longer existing canal reinforced the insularity of Athos and its distinctiveness.

In 1480 the German miniaturist Henricus Martellus, who was then working in Florence, took Buondelmonti's project further. He created an isolariocontaining a number of islands and peninsulas beyond the Aegean plus an introductory Ptolemaic world mapwhere these could be located by the reader.

The insularity of Mount Athos was further accentuated. The isthmus turned into a thin neck of land precariously connecting Athos to the mainland. A vast gulf on the eastern coast imprinted the peninsula with a new shape (common on Ptolemaic maps).The mountain-peninsula turned into mostly flat territory, into an Edenic garden traversed by rivers and punctuated with trees and high-walled monasteries. From the six foundations on Buondelmonti's map, the monasteries increased to sixteen.

Martellus' map of Athos contained all the elements of a utopian island. Produced just a couple of decades before the first edition of Thomas More's utopia, this illustration, some scholars have argued, and especially Athos as an institution might have served as a source of inspiration for the British statesman.

In his account, More begs the philosopher-traveller Raphael Hythloday to describe the island of Utopia in terms of 'soil, rivers, towns, people, manners, constitution, laws, etc.' - in other words, he asks to provide him with all the information one generally encounters in an island book. And like island-books,More's account was illustrated with a map drawn by the artist Ambrosius Holbein for the benefit of the armchair traveller.

Raphael opens his narration with the same kind of description we usually expect to find at the beginning of island books' descriptions:

'The island of Utopia - he writes - is in the middle 200 miles broad, and holds almost at the same breadth over a great part of it; but it grows narrower toward both ends'.

Geographically, Utopia is thus bigger than Mount Athos, but has a similar shape, were we to trust Martellus' map: 'Its figure' - More says - 'is not unlike a crescent: between its horns, the sea comes in eleven miles broad, and spreads itself into a great bay'.

Like in the description of Athos by Ioseph Kalothetos, More tells us that 'on the other side of the island there are likewise many harbours; and the coast is so fortified, both by nature and art, that a small number of men can hinder the descent of a great army'. Athonite monks' fear of pirates lead them to build no less impressive fortifications.

Like Athos, cut by Xerxes from the mainland, Utopia is also an artificial island:

'They report (and there remain good marks of it to make it credible) that this was no island at first, but a part of the continent. King Utopus that conquered it - brought the rude and uncivilized inhabitants into such a good government, and to that measure of politeness, that they now far excel all the rest of mankind; having soon subdued them, he designed to separate them from the continent, and to bring the sea quite round them. To accomplish this, he ordered a deep channel to be dug fifteen miles long'.

Like Xerxes, Utopus employed a vast number of workers and brought the canal to a speedy conclusion. But while Xerxes' canal became despised by Classical authors as a symbol of barbaric foolishness and excess, Utopus' canal was looked by his neighbours with admiration and terror.

The memory of Utopia's peninsular origins was still visible on territory. On the contrary, the memory of Athos' temporary insularity was made visible only through maps and today by artificial markers.

An experienced humanist, More was well-familiar with the story of Xerxes. Few years before the publication of Utopia, he had collaborated with Erasmus of Rotterdam on a Latin translation of the works of Lucian, which was published in Paris in 1506.

In his account, More also tells us that 'there are fifty-four cities [on Utopia], all large and well built: the manners, customs, and laws of which are the same, and they are all contrived as near in the same manner as the ground on which they stand will allow'. Today there are twenty sovereign monasteries on Mount Athos, but Athos' first charter (972) was signed by representatives of 54 monasteries, sketes and cells. 54 like the towns on Utopia.

Just like the monasteries of Athos, the towns of Utopia, More tells us, 'are compassed with a high and thick wall, in which there are many towers and forts and they are so like one another, except where the situation makes some difference'.

Mount Athos and Utopia share also institutional similarities. A self-regulated monastic community, Athos is the most ancient still-existing democracy in the world, with an administrative system dating back to the 10th century. Every year on June 1st, a council formed by representatives from five different monasteries is elected in Athos' administrative capital, the village of Karyes, where it meets to discuss public administration matters.

Similarly, on Utopia, 'every city sends three of its wisest Senators once a year to Amaurot, to consult about their common concerns; for that is the chief town of the island, being situated near the centre of it, so that it is the most convenient place for their assemblies'.

As with Athonite monks, Utopians live on agriculture. We are informed that 'they cultivate their gardens with great care, so that they have vines, fruits, herbs, and flowers in them; and all is so well ordered, and so finely kept...'

But Utopians are also highly literate people. They read Plutarch and Lucian, whose writings are available in thousands of copies on the island. Were they familiar with more authors, they would have probably turned Utopia into a library hosting a literary collection no smaller than Athos' with its 16,000 precious mss., many of which of Classical authors.

Like the monks, Utopians abhor fowling and gaming as foolish occupations and they 'wear the same sort of clothes without any other distinction'. 'Their fashion never alters and it is calculated both for their summers and winters'.

The main similarity between the Utopian and the Athonite community is the lack of private property, but also the lack of desire for money, which according to More is the main cause of anxiety and mischief.

Whether Athos was a direct predecessor of Utopia, we don't know. Besides the striking parallels between the two communities, we don't have any actual proofs indicating that More constructed his non-existing island on an existing peninsula. And even if he did, it has been suggested, an acknowledgement of Orthodox Athos would have been compromising and thus very unlikely.

More's fascination with monastic life is nevertheless well documented. We know for example that before turning to politics, he lived in the Catholic monastery of Karthauser in Germany from 1499 to 1503. And maybe it is not a case that Raphael Hythloday lived on Utopia about the same amount of time.

Evaggelos Livieratos has ventured to draw a systematic comparison between Martellus' map and the 1518 map of Utopia. For example, he has looked at the disposition of the cities and the monasteries, and has even identified the tower on the eastern side of Utopia with the tower of the Amalfitans, the remains of a Catholic monastery functioning on the peninsula between the 10th and 12th century.

But Utopia and Athos are connected by more subtle ties. At the moment of his tonsure, a monk dies to the world. The life of the Athonite monks rests on the continuous remembrance of death. 'If you die before you die you will not die when you die', a popular motto on the peninsula goes.

By confining himself within the monastic walls and within the perimeter of Mount Athos, by turning his soul to life eternal, the monk also realizes the vanity, the foolishness of mundane affairs.

Raphael Hythloday came to the same realization through his encounter with the Utopians, away from the familiar world of Western Europe. His journey to a distant non-place allowed the traveller-philosopher to take a distance from the world in the best neo-Stoic tradition.

Utopia itself became an uncanny memento mori.

According to Malcolm Bishop, Erasmus of Rotterdam who oversaw the first edition of More's Utopia and worked with Holbein would have ordered the artist a reworking of the original map for this 1518 second edition, after envisioning a possible skull.

Remembrance of death was concealed behind the island of Utopia, but also behind the name of its author, Morus, gen. Mori. So by remembering death (memento mori) one would also remember Thomas More.

Bishop links this map to other anamorphic representations, such as those produced fifty years later by Giuseppe Arcimboldo,in which human heads were hidden behind dead natures.

But Holbein's map might also be located within a broader neo-Stoic Renaissance mapping tradition; a tradition in which cartographic representations acted as mnemonic devices and as moral emblems: as images representing a visible thing and also something different from it; as objects of contemplation through the assistance of which the individual could rise above the mundane in order to observe the theatre of the world.

Maps could work as emblems at various scales: at a national scale, like the Leo Belgicus, standing against the aggressor, but also at global scale.They could become, for example, emblems of universal love, such as Appian and Gemma Frisius' famous cordiform projections; emblems of 'unity in diversity' and universal tolerance at a time of bloody religious conflict, like Ortelius' world map with Stoic inscriptions; or again, emblems of human foolishness, no less disturbing than the skull hidden behind utopia.

Remembrance of death invites to self-reflection and leads to moral self-improvement. In front of a skull, our gaze wanders through its empty orbs. It wanders through a universe of emptiness in which all that is materially worthy on this earth becomes vain, meaningless. In front of this Ptolemaic map by an anonymous (1590), we look at a face, but a senseless world is reflected back to us, a world of wars, a world of greedy desires and thirst for power, a world far removed from Utopia and Mount Athos. 'Nosce te ispum': know thyself; know thy foolishness, poor mortal - the joker seems to say.

Like Utopia, Athos itself became an emblem. And unlike utopia, one it could be located on western maps. For example, in the island book by the Venetian captain Bartolomeo dalli Sonetti, it became the head of a monk kneeled in prayer with his komboschoini (prayer cord). The sanctity of the peninsula filled with monasteries in every corner and the piety of the monks were reiterated on the accompanying verses:

Da Stalimene in fin a Monte Sancto E circha mia sesanta inuer ponente Che Atos gia gli fu dito antiquamente Altissimo e divoto tuto quanto Per tuto e monasteri in ogni canto De chaloieri pieni che sovente Fano suo oration giemente Pregando Idio chi cuopri col suo manto.

Bartolomeo made 15 journeys to the Aegean, calculating, he argued, the precise location of the islands on the map. His isolario was thus explicitly conceived for practical navigational purposes, and yet, like Buondelmonti, it retained through its poetic and philological project the humanist interest in the locations and landscapes of Greek antiquity.

Two centuries later, Vincenzo Coronelli, the official cosmographer of the Serenissima, turned island books and maps into tools for political propaganda. Rather than remembering death, he seemed more concerned about the Turks. And so, from utopian quasi-island, or kneeled monk, on his Geographical Parallel of the Ancient with the Modern Archipelago (1697), Athos turned into a giant crosshelping Venice's lion chase the infidel Turk outside of the Aegean (note Athos' proportions and centrality in the Aegean). On this map, we read that:

'The Holy Mountain, or Agion Oros, called Monastir by the Turks and Athos by Ptolemy is inhabited by monks who make it famous for the quantity and quality of their monasteries'.

But Coronelli's map is more about non-presences than presences, of quotations rather than observations:

- The history of Xerxes' canal is not simply mentioned but 'mapped' back to the year 3487 of the world. - The point where the Persian fleet was shipwrecked is mapped too. 'Here Mardonius crashed with 100 vessels and lost 20,000 men in the year 3470 of the world'. - And mapped is also the shade of Mount Athos projecting, according to Apollonius Rhodius and Pliny the Elder, on the island of Lemnos (which is 34 miles away). - And if that's not enough, go to the original text: Pliny, book 4, chapt. 10.

Rather than tracing a 'parallel' with the ancient world, this map conflates ancient and modern. It brings the Classical past and the invisible back to life through its very spatialization.

Only mentioned by previous authors, Xerxes' canal here is given a prominent visual form, along with a wall 'that has been separating the peninsula from Macedonia'.

This tradition has continued to our days, as maps claimed to become less 'emblematic' and more 'scientific', as the ancient wall depicted by Coronelli was substituted by a concrete wall and multilingual signs,as monks and visitors (exclusively male visitors) to Athos are allowed to enter the peninsula only by sea (by ferry).

To conclude, utopias are by definition non-places. But even imaginary non-places are produced in space and time. In this paper I have tried to explore possible links between utopia and territory, for great utopias, it has been argued, startle and yet are recognizable and conceivable. Like Mount Athos, they are isolated from the outer world and yet they belong to the realm of possibility.

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