CHAPTER 9

The Memory of Names: Mapping Time into History

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Abstract

The article explores the practice of naming in the context of the early modern discovery and exploration of the New World. The discussion departs from an earlier observation that naming amounts in fact to renaming the New World in an attempt to inscribe the territory in the minds of Europeans. Set against the backdrop of the early modern revival of Ptolemaic geography, the article reviews the early cartographic discourse on the New World with reference to the sixteenth-century map of the world by Martin Waldseemüller.

Keywords

America – cartography – naming – cosmography – New World – terra incognita

Prologue. What’s in a Name?

As I have argued before, the early modern obsession with names in the New World starts with Columbus himself, who relocates European history, both biblical and secular, in the newly discovered territories while naming the islands he comes upon San Salvador, Santa Maria de Conception, Ferdinanda, Isabella, Juana.1 It is an act of forced remembrance that he performs to the detriment of native peoples in full awareness of the fact that San Salvador, for instance, has an Indian name. It can also be seen as a case of cultural translation of Spanish experience.

Instead of insisting on what John Brian Harley would have called the invention of “America in the European consciousness”, I wish to focus first on the practice of renaming, as these lands did have an indigenous identity of their own, from a rhetorical perspective. If we question the purpose of relocating European religious and political order in the New World, the problem of familiarity arises with reference to Columbus’s experience. His letter on 4 March 1493 is addressed to the Spanish crown, he writes for a readership that has no actual representation of these territories in familiar tropes, resorting to categories that are commonplace. Acting as a mediator between the direct experience of this world whose novelty he does not acknowledge in geographic terms and the picture he tries to create for the reader, Columbus works with familiar names to describe unfamiliar places.

Whilst aware of the challenges raised by his discovery, he reports with unabated eagerness how he “saw another island to the east, distant from this of Joanna [Juana] 54 miles, to which I immediately gave the name of Hispaña, and made for it”. It is this particular rush to name the land that is of interest since his knowledge of botany appears to be limited, hence the brevity of “it [Hispaña] abounds besides in various sorts of aromatics, in gold and metals”. Or, as Campbell would say, “the explicit passion for naming and the recording of act of naming might help to explain Columbus’s formula of regret over his ignorance of plant names”. The scarcity of native names and plant names is countered by his eagerness to name and claim a place:

On this island of Hispaña, although I had solemnly taken possession of all these islands in the name of our invincible King, I yet fixed upon a spot more advantageous than any other for commerce, and every opportunity of wealth, with a view to the erection of a metropolis, to which I have given the name of our Lord’s Nativity, and of which, in a more peculiar manner, I have taken possession for the King.

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4 *A Letter of Christopher Columbus*, p. 16.
6 *A Letter of Christopher Columbus*, p. 19.