Gregorio Dati, a silk merchant who rose to Florence’s highest civil office, wrote his Sfera (The Spheres) sometime before his death in 1435, in part as a textbook of world geography directed at children of the Florentine merchant class, but clearly envisioning other audiences as well. Unique in both language and layout, this first geography primer written in the vernacular employed a complex illustration cycle that drew on several medieval maps: mappaemundi (both realistic and schematic), maps of the Holy Land, and portolan charts. Each of these maps found a new context in Dati’s work, especially the portolan charts, which were fragmented both to fit them into the margins of the work and to arrange them in a linear fashion to accompany his text. The maps in the Sfera served three interrelated purposes: education, entertainment, and commerce, demonstrating the complex relationship between knowledge and power expressed and transmitted through verbal and pictorial mapping in the fifteenth century. In addition, Dati’s Sfera reveals that those in the merchant class were not only patrons and consumers of humanist culture, but also producers, adapting existing models to new uses and creating new forms for their own vernacular production and consumption.

Gregorio Dati was neither a typical merchant nor a typical humanist. Rather, he was a member of a group of humanist merchants who viewed the humanities not simply as path for personal advancement, but as means for expressing the virtues of civic humanism that combined the study of letters with service to the state. Dati’s best known work is his History of Florence, characterized by Hans Baron as the first modern (as opposed to medieval) work of history.¹ In it, the history of Florence is recounted through the eyes of one of its own citizens. The Sfera, on the other hand, is a description of the world.

¹ Hans Baron, The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance (Princeton, 1966), 167-188.
outside of Florence seen from a global perspective in which neither Florence nor even Italy are represented. It demonstrates how Florentines visualized the exotic and distant lands that most would never travel to except in their imaginations.2

The Sfera is divided into four, equal-length books, beginning with the heavens and ending with the earth. The first book treats cosmography and astronomy, the second cosmographical phenomena such as eclipses and phases of the moon, the third compasses, timekeeping, and navigation, and the fourth maps out the Middle East and southern and southeastern Mediterranean. Each book is divided into eight equal-length stanzas of rhymed lines, a common form for educational works produced during the Renaissance.3 The marginal illustrations facilitated the understanding of the text and served as mnemonic aids and, happily, may also have saved the Sfera from destruction when its content was made obsolete by later discoveries.4 The manuscripts that survive, many with extensive illumination, may represent only a small portion of the manuscripts originally composed because, in addition to obsolescence, books intended for the classroom often saw heavy use that eventually destroyed them.

Dati’s first two books contain information available from a wide range of sources, but the source he most probably used was the Tractatus de sphaera (before 1220) by John of Holywood (often called by the Italian Sacrobosco), either in the original or through one of its many commentators. Sacrobosco’s Sphaera was intended for use as

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2 Traveling for intellectual curiosity and religious devotion was a distinguishing feature of the Renaissance, but lack of money and the dangers inherent in travel made imaginary journeys more appealing for all but the most adventurous. Although presented as a guidebook, Petrarch’s Itinerarium ad sepulchrum domini nostri Yhesu Christi took the reader to a place Petrarch had never been, allowing the reader to take an imaginary journey with him. On Petrarch’s love and fear of travel, see Petrarch’s Guide to the Holy Land. Itinerary to the Sepulcher of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Facsimile edition of Cremona, Biblioteca Statale, Deposito Libreria Civica, manuscript BB.1.2.5. With an introductory Essay, Translation, and Notes by Theodore J. Cachey Jr. (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002) 22 and 46-49 n. 93.
