A Fresh Interpretation of Medina and Ysarti’s Map “Nova delineatio sriptissimae, S. Didaci provinciae in Nova Hispania”

Peter William Haskin

YALE UNIVERSITY, ESTADOS UNIDOS
ORCID: HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0002-9104-2489

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Una nueva interpretación del mapa “Nova delineatio sriptissimae, S. Didaci provinciae in Nova Hispania” de Medina e Ysarti
Peninsular prohibitions against the dissemination of geographic information notwithstanding, some mapmakers in 17th and 18th-Century Spanish America managed to bring their work to press.\(^1\) Their maps were outliers in a cartographic culture dominated by the production and circulation of hand-drawn maps.\(^2\) Since the region lacks a comprehensive carto-bibliography akin to that of James Clements Wheat and Christian Brun, it is difficult to gauge the conditions that led to the engraving and publication of maps in Spanish America.\(^3\) Some printed maps were drafted by clergymen, others by laypeople. Some were bound in books, others printed in periodicals, and still others circulated as loose sheets. None can be said to have undermined

\(^1\) In addition to the map discussed in this article, examples include Samuel Fritz, “El gran río Marañón, o Amazonas”; Pedro Murillo Velarde, “Carta Hydrographica, y Chorographica delas yslas filipinas”; Joseph Antonio de Villaseñor y Sanches, “Yconismo hidro-terreo, O Mapa Geographic dela America Septentrional”; [Rafael Ignacio Coromina], “Mapa, y Tabla Geografica de Leguas comun, que ai de vnos à otros Luäares, y Ciudades principales de la America septentrional”; Manuel Sobrevelia, “Plan Del curso de] los Rios Huallaga. y Vcayali, y de la pampa del Sacramento”.


\(^3\) James Clemens Wheat and Christian F. Brun, Maps and Charts Published in America before 1800. The best available sources for Spanish America are the classic works of José Toribio Medina and Manuel Romero de Terreros. Provisionally, we could follow Matthew Edney’s conclusion about John Mitchell’s 1755 map and declare the conditions conducive to map publication idiosyncratic. A comparison of printed and manuscript maps suggests that there are few characteristics shared by—or exclusive to—maps that made it to press in Spanish America. See Matthew H. Edney, “John Mitchell’s Map of North America (1755): A Study of the Use and Publication of Official Maps in Eighteenth-Century Britain", 64.
the manuscript mapping tradition that flourished across Spanish America during the colonial period.\textsuperscript{4}

Following J.B. Harley, the latest generation of historians of cartography has sought to read maps as texts.\textsuperscript{5} Without abandoning this project, and by focusing on a particular case, I seek in this brief article to demonstrate the importance of reading maps alongside the literary texts they were designed to accompany. Here I draw inspiration from my fellow contributors to this dossier. I also heed the call of Brian Bockelman and Jeffrey A. Erbig Jr., who have recently warned cartographic historians of Latin America against “deepening the divorce between maps and their accompanying documents and contexts of production.”\textsuperscript{6}

Multiple forces have driven researchers to treat early printed maps as discrete visual sources. Just as pressure in the international market for rare maps can lead to their physical detachment from the books in which they were once bound, the 21\textsuperscript{st}-Century archival practice of digitizing rare maps can distance them from the texts they were originally meant to supplement. The motives of merchants and librarians may differ widely, but the actions of both groups have the effect of disembodying maps of interest to collectors and researchers. In our so-called “digital age”, one task of the researcher is to re-insert loose maps into the contexts of their creation.

Drawn by the Discalced Franciscan Baltasar de Medina (1634–1697) and engraved by Antonio Ysarti, “Nova delineatio strictissimae, S. Didaci provinciae in Nova Hispania” (fig 1) was originally printed to be bound between folios 229 and 230 of Medina’s Chronica de la Santa Provincia de San Diego de Mexico, de Religiosos Descalços de N.S.P.S. Francisco en la Nueva-España. The map was long held to be

\textsuperscript{4} Writing about the rise of printed maps in a more global context, Surekha Davies points to the longstanding (and ongoing) overlap of handwritten and printed forms of map production. See Surekha Davies, “Maps”, 595.

\textsuperscript{5} J.B. Harley, “Deconstructing the Map”, 1-20.

\textsuperscript{6} Brian Bockelman and Jeffrey A. Erbig Jr., “Still turning toward a cartographic history of Latin America”, 8.
“the earliest specimen of copperplate engraving done in Mexico.” The same plate was updated and used to create a second impression of the map in the second half of the 18th-Century. The first impression of the map, especially, holds a significant place in the history of map printing in the Americas: it predates Cyprian Southack’s “New chart of the English Empire in North America”, the first map to be engraved on copper in British North America, by more than three decades.

In his listing for the book, José Toribio Medina makes a brief mention of the map, quoting the engraved text that appears along its bottom edge: “Auctor invenit, Antonius Ysartii escud. Mexici. A. 1682.” Romero de Terreros elaborates, quoting the 20th-Century Mexican art historian Manuel Toussaint at length:

This map, which appears to be the first engraved one in Mexico, is a perfect example of the technical ability of Isarti. The ground is seen from a bird’s-eye view, the places represented by figures of churches and monasteries. The only effect of the scale at the bottom of the engraving is to draw attention to the consistent disproportion of this map, which was drawn more from memory rather than with accurate information. Nevertheless, despite the limitations of the time, the map fulfills its goal of illustrating Brother Baltasar’s

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7 Joseph Sabin, Biblioteca Americana. A Dictionary of Books Relating to America, from its Discovery to the Present Time, 11:557. In fact, an untitled map appears in Juan Francisco de Montemayor y Córdoba de Cuenca’s Discurso politico historico juridico del derecho y repartimiento de presas y despojos apprehendidos en justa guerra, printed by Juan Ruiz in Mexico City in 1658. The map appears between the “Indice de los principales capitulos” and its first numbered folio. José Toribio Medina describes the map in La imprenta en México (1584-1824), 2:339.

8 Copies held by the Benson Latin American Collection of the University of Texas at Austin and the Biblioteca Nacional de España include labelled monasteries in “Valladoli” (Morelia) and “Tacuballa”, which do not appear in copies held by the John Carter Brown Library or the Biblioteca Nacional de México. Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, the discalced Franciscan monastery in Morelia, did not open until 1761, so the second impression probably dates to the second half of the 18th-Century. On the Discalced Franciscans of New Spain, see Daniel Salvador Vázquez Conde, “Un acercamiento a la vida cotidiana de los ‘Dieguinos’ o Franciscanos Descalzos novohispanos”, 43-61.

9 Wheat and Brun, Maps and Charts..., 44.

10 Medina, La imprenta en México..., 3:544.
chronicle. It seems that the artist (Ysarti), after following as nearly as possible the lines of the author (Medina), had no qualms about adding details, giving the engraving the appearance of a landscape painting, thereby greatly reducing the reliability and accuracy of the map.

[Éste, al parecer el primero de los mapas grabados en México, es buena muestra de la habilidad técnica de Isarti. La tierra está vista a vuelo de pájaro, como si dijéramos, los lugares representados por templos y caseríos convencionales. La escala en leguas que va al pie sólo sirve, acaso, para notar la desproporción constante de un mapa hecho más de memoria que con datos precisos. Así y todo, con estos defectos del tiempo, el mapa cumple su objeto de ilustrar la crónica de Fray Baltasar. Como grabado, parece que el artista, después de interpretar hasta donde podí el trazo del escritor, no tuvo reparo en añadir detalles que dan al cuadro más el aspecto de un paisaje, desmejoran en mucho la seriedad y precisión del mapa.]\(^{11}\)

With a width of 26 cm and a height of 16 cm, “Nova delineatio” fits onto a standard book page, obviating the need for a foldout. Although few copies of Baltasar Medina’s Chronica still contain the map, digital copies of the map abound online.\(^{12}\) Lost, then, on many of its modern viewers, are the clear connections between Medina’s map and his text.

In an outstanding recent article, Juan Isaac Calvo Portela and Marcela Corvera Poiré draw our attention to one such connection. The two axes of monasteries crossing each other in Mexico City (the longer one from Oaxaca in the southeast to Aguascalientes in the northwest, the shorter one from Taxco in the southwest to Pachuca in the northeast) on the map are paralleled by chains of toponyms

\(^{11}\) Toussaint quoted in Romero de Terreros, “Grabados y grabadores”, 492. The translation is my own.

\(^{12}\) I consulted digitized versions of all four aforementioned copies of the map.
In a nine-folio chapter of his *Chronica* entitled “Short geographic and panegyric description of the cities, towns, and villages in which the monasteries of this province are found” [“Breve geographica, y panegyrica descripicion de las ciudades, villas, y pueblos en que están fundados los conventos de esta provincia”], Medina provides directions for travelers and information on monasteries where they could, presumably, stay overnight in the course of their journey.\(^\text{14}\)

Likewise, the text of *Chronica* sheds light on the illustrations that Toussaint claims “greatly reduce the reliability and accuracy of the map” [“desmejoran en mucho la seriedad y precisión del mapa”].\(^\text{15}\) For Medina, it is the “the sweet love of nature [that] softly wins [him] over” [“el dulce amor de la naturaleza suavemente nos arrastra”] and leads him to describe his province in the text.\(^\text{16}\) The brilliant sun, the billowing sails, and the orderly fields of wheat (or corn?) featured on the map are neither insignificant decorations nor a mere expression of cartographic *horror vacui*; indeed, they represent Medina’s rosy view of New Spain.\(^\text{17}\) Despite the appearance of longitude and latitude markings in the margins of “Nova delineatio”, Medina appears to have been less concerned with notions of geographical accuracy than he was with readers’ affective response to the map. Its blend of mathematical and pictorial qualities should not be mistaken for ambivalence between the conventions of cartography and landscape illustration. Rather, Medina uses the two visual strategies to imbue his map with authority, utility, and a sense that nature was conducive to Spanish settlement in the New World.

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\(^{13}\) Juan Isaac Calvo Portela and Marcela Corvera Poiré, “Las estampas que ilustran el libro de Baltasar de Medina, *Chronica de la Santa Provincia de San Diego de México*, en el contexto del arte gráfico novohispano, del siglo xvii”, 95.

\(^{14}\) Balthassar Medina, *Chronica de la Santa Provincia de San Diego de Mexico, de Religiosos Descalços de N.S.P.S. Francisco en la Nueva-España*, 228r–29v.

\(^{15}\) Toussaint quoted in Romero de Terreros, “Grabados y grabadores”, 492.

\(^{16}\) Medina, *Chronica . . .*, 221r.

\(^{17}\) Toussaint believed these illustrations to be the work of the engraver Antonio Ysarti, rather than Medina himself. I follow Calvo Portela and Corvera Poiré in taking Medina’s iconographic contribution to the map seriously.
Even if we refuse to take Medina at his word, his text is worth reading for the clues it holds to the development of printed map production in Spanish America. The three-page preface to his chapter on geography, which amounts to an extended excuse for having turned his thoughts to worldly things, reveals an ethos of *contemptus mundi* in Medina’s milieu: after acknowledging that “[our] conversation should continuously be on the heavens” (“nuestra conversacion deba ser… continua, y superior en los Cielos”), Medina justifies his chosen subject by explaining that even humble villages such as Nazareth have been known to bear great fruit. Whether or not Medina’s preface evinces genuine conviction, it provides historians of cartography with a new avenue for research. Could the belief that good Catholics should focus on the world to come have served to limit the number of maps reaching the press in Spanish America?

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**PETER WILLIAM HASKIN**

A current doctoral candidate in History at Yale University, Peter holds a Bachelor’s Degree from Boston College. His research in Mexico during the 2022–23 academic year is funded by a Fulbright-García Robles grant. Among his interests are 18th-Century Ibero-American geography and natural history.
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ELECTRONIC RESOURCES


MAPS

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