

# *New Worlds, Ancient Texts*

*The Power of Tradition and the  
Shock of Discovery*

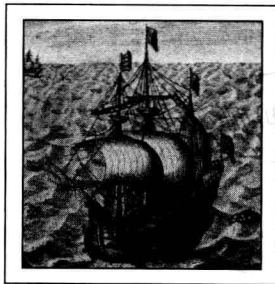


Anthony Grafton

With April Shelford and Nancy Siraisi

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## *Foreword*

THE commemoration of a historical event often engenders rhetoric, but it also demands inquiry, scholarship, and careful reflection. This volume marks the culmination of a journey begun four years ago, when The New York Public Library invited Anthony Grafton, Andrew Mellon Professor of History at Princeton University and a Renaissance scholar, to explore the collections at The New York Public Library, which contain one of the most extensive archives in the world on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European thought, and to organize an exhibition and write a book which would trace the transforming effects of the voyages of exploration upon European scholarship, learning, and culture from 1450 to 1700. The results are fresh insights into the complex and profound changes set in motion by the infusion of new knowledge into an established system of thought.

Understanding the dynamics of intellectual change is difficult at a distance of several centuries. What is dramatic or revolutionary assumes a prominence that is rapidly reduced to formulas such as the "Scientific Revolution," formulas that mask the complexity of change. It is no small achievement that Anthony Grafton has here revealed this process as a dialectical one. Older and traditional

structures were not swept away immediately by the influx of new and contradictory information, nor were those structures without internal contradiction or usefulness. For example, the traditional biblical view of the dispersion of humanity after the Flood was not immediately supplanted by information coming from the New World, because it provided a much-needed framework in which to locate intellectually peoples the Europeans had not expected to find. The printing press, it is often pointed out, made it possible to disseminate information far more rapidly and widely than ever before; but it also, in combination with the rise of publication in vernacular languages, gave old and new misinformation a second and alarmingly long life. Many of the historical figures discussed in this volume have long been familiar to us; others are less so. What is fresh in Professor Grafton's approach is that he shows us that the new is never as new as we would like to believe. Sebastian Münster's struggles with contradiction and inconsistency as he seeks to encompass within one book all the information a sixteenth-century man or woman might care to know of the world become our own. The stature of a Bartolomé de Las Casas is not diminished by our learning that he formulated his humanitarian views in the context of a traditional scholastic disputation with Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda; rather, we are left with a deeper appreciation of the versatility of an intellectual procedure that had served Europeans well for centuries. The originality of a Hobbes or a Locke is undiminished by a thoughtful reconstruction of their intellectual lineage, a lineage traceable in part to an ancient debate about the nature of humanity's distant past (primal savagery or Golden Age?), a debate given both new relevance by contacts with New World peoples and new political significance as intellectuals struggled with the disorders of their own century. Professor Grafton also places the discoveries in a wider context of



intellectual changes already under way in European life—new visions of the universe and the human body, and the rise of humanism, to mention but two. Moreover, and perhaps most important, he reveals to us that our views of the period are just as historically conditioned as those of the men who ventured past the Pillars of Hercules. There is, in all this, something of a cautionary tale. To us the distortions and errors of perception under which explorers, merchants, clerics, and scholars alike labored are obvious, often amusing, and all too often had tragic consequences; but we err if we congratulate ourselves too quickly on our cultural relativism or too naively equate more information with better judgment.

Interpreting great collections is as important as amassing them, and the Library is deeply grateful to Anthony Grafton for the gift of his scholarship, which has enriched every aspect of the Library's participation in the quincentenary commemoration. April Shelford gave valuable help as Research Curator of the exhibition and as a contributor to this volume. Thanks are also due to the advisory committee of eminent scholars who refined the intellectual content of the exhibition: Nancy Siraisi, Hunter College; John Fleming, Princeton University; Werner Gundersheimer, Folger Shakespeare Library; James Hankins, Harvard University; Donald Kelley, Rutgers University; Eugene F. Rice, Columbia University; David Ruderman, Yale University; Noel Swerdlow, University of Chicago; and J. B. Trapp, University of London.

A generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities made possible the Library's quincentenary commemoration, which includes three exhibitions at the Central Research Library, educational and public programming, and a traveling panel version of "New Worlds, Ancient Texts," which will visit twenty metropol-

itan and university libraries in the United States. Additional support has been provided by the John Ben Snow Memorial Trust. The Library is also grateful to the American Library Association for helping to organize the national tour, thereby sharing the scholarly content of the exhibition with a larger audience.

Timothy S. Healy  
President  
The New York Public Library

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# Introduction

**B**ETWEEN 1550 AND 1650 Western thinkers ceased to believe that they could find all important truths in ancient books. No meeting between text and reader epitomizes that change more sharply than one that took place—most appropriately—at sea, when the Jesuit José de Acosta, a highly educated man who wrote one of the most original histories of what he called the Indies, realized that his own experience of travel contradicted the views of the greatest of ancient philosophers:

I will describe what happened to me when I passed to the Indies. Having read what poets and philosophers write of the Torrid Zone, I persuaded myself that when I came to the Equator, I would not be able to endure the violent heat, but it turned out otherwise. For when I passed [the Equator], which was when the sun was at its zenith there, having entered the zodiacal sign of Aries, in March, I felt so cold that I was forced to go into the sun to warm myself. What could I do then but laugh at Aristotle's *Meteorology* and his philosophy? For in that place and that season, where everything, by his rules, should have been scorched by the heat, I and my companions were cold.

Acosta's scene sounds dramatic—even Oedipal. The educated European, trained from childhood to believe what his ancient books

tell him, sees them exposed as fallible. Aristotle's frightening torrid zone turns out to be not only habitable but temperate. The classics dissolve as rapidly under Acosta's laughter as the emperor's clothes in the fairy tale.

The confrontation that Acosta sketches has all the virtues: drama, vividness, a sterling moral. Above all, it provides the climax to a larger, powerful story about ancients and moderns—one that has pleased generations of Americans and won assent from a surprising number of Europeans. This runs more or less as follows: In 1492 all educated Europeans knew where powerful knowledge lay. It was contained in authoritative texts: the Bible; the philosophical, historical, and literary works of the Greeks and Romans; and a few modern works of unusually high authority. These books described the universe, from the unchanging world of the stars down to the excrementary and changeable realm of the elements and man. They traced the operation of God's hand in history and nature. The former they divided into neat ages. The latter they dissected, using tables and taxonomies to lay out its components: the elements, the seasons, the winds that governed the weather, the humors that determined the body's health or illness, the zones of the habitable world, and the development of the races of man. The varied components of the cosmos were theoretically linked by the power of the stars, which governed—or at least revealed how God governed—everything below them; multiple overlapping spiderwebs of reciprocal influences connected all beings and objects, and the conjunctions of the planets governed all great events.

The men who understood these concepts were creatures of the book, trained in the Latinate seclusion of schools and universities. Their mental world was bounded by the knowledge contained on their library shelves: knowledge produced in and largely limited to the ancient Mediterranean and Near East and medieval and modern

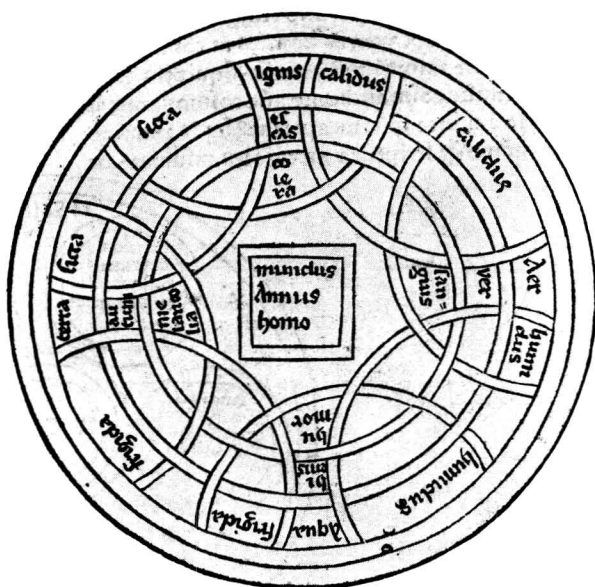


Figure I.1 A diagram of the elements and qualities (outermost circle: dry, hot, wet, and humid), the seasons (middle circle: summer, spring, winter, and autumn), and the humors (innermost circle: choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic, and melancholy) in a 1473 Strasbourg edition of the encyclopedic *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville (seventh century). The interlocking circles represent the interconnectedness as well as the hierarchical ordering of the universe, time, and man.

Europe, though occasionally penetrated by a trickle of information from more distant realms to the east or north. Only professionals, licensed by the possession of formal university degrees, could manipulate the texts and master the terms of canonical knowledge.

By the early seventeenth century knowledge had burst the bounds of the library. It now seemed as large and varied as the world itself. It resided in astronomers' reports of telescopic observations, philosophers' reports on their cogitations, mariners' reports of voyages, and physicians' reports of anatomies. Galileo Galilei, Francis Bacon, and René Descartes, who disagreed on a great many other things, agreed that practical men and keen observers were often more reliable, because less prejudiced, than books and book-trained scholars. The thinker who based his work not on the traditional heaps of quotations but on new facts and original ideas deserved more cre-

dence than the old-fashioned pedant. After all, the empirical study of the heavens and the human body had revealed large holes in ancient physical science. Even more shockingly, the discovery of the New World peoples had apparently done the same in the biblical narrative of early human history and the classical descriptions of the inhabited parts of the world. Philosophies had proliferated, each challenging the claims of others without fully establishing its own. And as ancient books lost their power and authority, their study became less central to intellectual life. The intellectual of the mid-seventeenth century was as likely to be an independent aristocrat, male or female, as a teacher, as likely to be a crafter of scientific instruments as a professional. Even a professor might well teach at a university equipped not only with books but also with a botanical garden, an anatomical theater, and an observatory—and would certainly agree that knowledge, far from being limited to what the ancients had known, could continue to increase so long as man's capacity to observe and report did not diminish.

Scientists and philosophers lived in an expanding world. They knew that the physical universe was far larger than the ancients had thought and that the inhabited part of the Earth's surface included more than the limited European, Asian, and North African *oikoumene* of Ptolemy. Readers of the Bible had at least entertained the suggestion that the human past might be far longer and more complex than the account in the Old Testament indicated. Historians and political philosophers scrutinized many civilizations when constructing a history of the world or a theory of the origins of the state.

All intellectuals, finally, knew a vital fact that their fifteenth-century predecessors could not have suspected. What men had traditionally revered as Antiquity, the age of perfect knowledge at the beginning of a history of degeneration, was really the youth of mankind, when the greatest philosophers knew far less than an ordinary modern man or woman. *Antiquitas seculi iuventus mundi*—

Francis Bacon's paradox became the motto of many intellectuals who did not share his other views. The age of a system of thought became a sign not of authority but of obsolescence, and many of those who insisted on the aesthetic superiority of classical literature admitted the substantive supremacy of modern science. Novelty became the sign not of an idea's radicalism but of its validity. Modern knowledge, unlike the older, bookish kind, could be communicated to anyone with common sense, in any language—French or Italian as well as Greek or Latin. Accordingly, the new scholars and scientists spoke to women as well as to men, and to artificers as well as to theorists. The world was no longer accessible only through learned books in Latin; it could be known directly.

This new understanding of the world grew from roots planted outside the realm of learning. And it drew much of its sustenance from one of them in particular: the movement, led by practical men rather than scholars, that Europeans called the discovery of the New World. No more tragic event, Thomas Huxley remarked, can be imagined than the collision of a beautiful theory with an inconvenient fact. After the Portuguese began to explore Africa, Western explorers and writers had to deal with lands and societies, customs and religions, men and women whose very existence they had not expected. After 1492 the problems became critical. The encounter between Europe and the Americas juxtaposed a vast number of inconvenient facts with the elegant theories embodied in previously authoritative books. The discoveries gradually stripped the books of their aura of completeness as repositories of information and their appearance of utility as tools for interpretation. The encounter with naked inhabitants of a new world, in short, enabled intellectuals to make naked experience take the place of written authority. No wonder, then, that Acosta lost his faith so suddenly and completely.

In the world of scholarship this account has been questioned and even contradicted. In pioneering, suggestive studies, John Elliott,

Giuliano Gliozzi, and Michael Ryan have argued that in fact the discoveries had very little impact on European thought. They left European notions of history and civilization intact. They did not shake but confirmed European prejudices about the superiority of white Christians to those of other breeds and creeds. The New World proved easy to reconcile with the biblical account of human history and the classical accounts of the physical world, since these were both more complex and more adaptable than the traditional accounts admitted.<sup>1</sup>

This second, revisionist line of argument has much to recommend it. It does justice to the pervasive influence of classical texts and ideas in education, scholarship, and science even after Acosta's primal experience. It allows us to look at texts like Acosta's own with less selectivity—to see that he was delighted not only that his experience contradicted Aristotle, but also that it supported the authority of other, more prescient ancients. Acosta went on to tell his readers that "the most excellent astronomer and cosmographer, Ptolemy, and the worthy philosopher and physician, Avicenna, were both of a better opinion, since both believed that there were commodious habitable regions under the tropics."

*New Worlds, Ancient Texts* tries to enlarge these modern accounts of what the New World meant to the Old, by confronting them with the record of original texts and images—or at least with that rich deposit of both which has been stored up over many decades in the New York Public Library. A revolution in the forms of knowledge and expression took place in early modern Europe. But it resulted as much from contradictions between and tensions within the texts as from their confrontation with external novelties. The ancient texts served as both tools and obstacles for the intellectual exploration of new worlds. These remained vital—and defined authors' representations and explanations of what they found as Europe

moved out to West and East—until well into the seventeenth century. This account, then, will hew fairly close to the revisionists', arguing that the actual pace of change was slower and the power of inherited authority more durable and more complex than many historians have acknowledged. Yet it will also concern itself less with strong theses than with the paradoxes and continuities that the sources themselves yield up. Still, we will try to see the new for what it was. Acosta's laughter still rings out more memorably than the qualifications with which he tried to muffle it.

This is a story of Europeans, told from a European point of view. We seek to understand the experiences and visions of European intellectuals and explorers, not to recover the ways in which the peoples they conquered understood the West—much less what sufferings those peoples certainly endured or what benefits they possibly drew from the encounter. Though a limited tale, this one seems eminently worth telling now. Those who follow the arguments and examine the images laid out here will encounter a richer, more complex version of Western culture and its boundaries than the stereotypes that dominate some scholarship and much pedagogy. Instead of one narrative drowning out all others, we will present here a multitude of voices, engaged and argumentative.

It will become clear that Europeans did not see the New World "as it really was," and that most of them did not much like what they thought they saw. Their very name for native Americans, "Indians"—which we will use throughout to stay within period assumptions—proves the grossness of their mistakes and prejudices. But this important point—much emphasized of late—can easily degenerate into triviality, especially when scholars repeat it like a mantra instead of examining individual cases. If the history of contacts between cultures has a moral, it is surely that no one likes



anybody else very much. Even al-Biruni, the great eleventh-century ethnographer of central Asia whose account of India remains a model description of a foreign culture, confessed that the Hindus about whom he wrote "differ from us [Muslims] to such a degree as to frighten their children with us, with our dress, and our ways and customs." He and his fellow Muslims felt exactly the same way about the Hindus. But he insisted that these attitudes were only natural—indeed, universal: "we must confess, in order to be just, that a similar depreciation of foreigners not only prevails among us and the Hindus, but is common to all nations towards each other." Al-Biruni set out to make sense of what seemed completely alien assumptions, values, and myths. And any serious reading of his India would surely concentrate not on the general human prejudices that link it with all other ethnographies but on the specifically classical tools and methods that both enriched his analysis and modified his perceptions. Such methods have produced remarkable results in other cases—as in Edward Schafer's *Vermilion Bird*, an exemplary evocation of the multiple failures and remarkable successes of the Chinese imagination as it confronted and tried to depict the wonders of Nam-Viet in the eighth and ninth centuries. Schafer shows how a literary tradition, employed by a wide range of individuals—high officials, unhappy exiles, proud Creoles—shaped a foreign reality both by rich and compelling descriptions and by deliberate and inadvertent exclusions. We hope that readers will be led to look at the European thinkers of the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries with similarly open eyes.<sup>2</sup>

We also hope to stimulate some reflection not only upon the European encounter with a wider world and the history of early modern European culture, but also upon the larger cultural debate that has endowed these long-past developments with a new urgency. Many American intellectuals claim that our country and our culture

can be revitalized only if our system of education is rebuilt around a core or canon of supremely vital texts. Others hold that all canonical texts are chosen to support the authority of elites, not to recognize intrinsic literary or intellectual merits (if any exist). Unfortunately, neither side has said anything substantial about how authoritative texts have actually been used in Western culture in the past: how teachers and thinkers actually tried to assemble coherent groups of texts that could satisfy a large and pressing set of cultural needs, and what fates their efforts met. Nor have they usually perceived the many cracks and tensions that inevitably run through the apparent granitic bulk of all sets of supposedly authoritative books.

In the case of relations between the West and the Rest, these polemics have had a powerful tendency to sterilize thought and research. Some have extended backward Edward Said's polemic against Orientalism, arguing that in the Renaissance, too, a monolithic body of thought and imagery imprisoned even the most original thinkers. Few of these accounts have shown Said's sensitivity to the divergent struggles and achievements of the individuals who created and worked within traditions, or to the differences between the modern colonialist world in which Said's Orientalists thought and wrote and the early modern world. And few have given due heed to the point made as powerfully, if less subtly, by Martin Bernal: that the ancient heritage of texts harbored many mutually subversive ways of defining cultural relations between the West and other cultures.<sup>3</sup>

In telling the story sketched here, we hope not to take a side in the debate but to raise its level. We want to show what it really felt like to regard books as the most powerful sources of knowledge and guides to behavior in the world—objects less like the heavy but harmless paperbacks we buy to pass the time at the beach than like