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THE AUGUSTAN GEOGRAPHY IN THE WRITINGS OF ROBERTO ALMAGIÀ REFLECTIONS AND ANALYSIS ON THE ACTUALITY OF HIS STUDIES

On occasion of the two thousandth anniversary of the emperor's birth Augustus Octavian (1937) Roberto Almagià held at the Institute of Roman Studies in Rome the conference *L'orizzonte geografico nell'epoca di Augusto e gli studi geografici in Roma* (Almagià, 1938)¹. It was the first dedicated to the Roman Geography of a series of comprehensive contributions on the origins and evolution of geographical sciences began in 1914² and continued until 1962 with a large study devoted to the history of Geography (Almagià, 1962)³.

The scholar inherited the heuristic interest for the history of Geography and ancient Cartography from his teacher Giuseppe Dalla Vedova professor at the Faculty of Letters of Rome, President of the Italian Geographic Society and proponent of a geography characterized by a strong humanistic imprint.

Almagià cultivated the study of classical geography during his long academic career publishing a series of contributions increasingly exhaustive on the subject while showing a great interest in all areas of geography.

During the conference and in his works, Almagià reminded the Greek origin of the word *Geography*. It reached the status of a science during the Alexandrian Age (Almagià, 1938 pp. 2-3; Almagià, 1914, p. 330; Almagià, 1947, p. 183; Almagià, 1962, pp. 199-200) «because from this time date only it seems the

¹ Archivio dell'Istituto Nazionale di Studi Romani, Corsi Superiori di Studi Romani, busta 44, 1936-1937, "La figura e l'opera di Augusto", (ciclo studiosi italiani), fascicolo 4, Carteggio coi conferenzieri italiani (1936-1937): R. Almagià.

² On 1914 Almagià published on the review «La Geografia» the article «La Geografia nell'età classica» (ALMAGIÀ 1914). On 1954 he wrote a work «Fondamenti di Geografia generale (ALMAGIÀ 1954). On 1947 the article «Concetto e indirizzi della geografia attraverso i tempi» (ALMAGIÀ 1947) and on 1953 the analysis published in «Il mondo attuale» (ALMAGIÀ 1953).

³ During a research carried out in the Archive of the University "La Sapienza" of Rome, I have found the booklets of a series of lectures on the history of Greek and Roman geography taught by Almagià at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy and that of History of Sciences.

common use and the constant of the word until today perpetuated» (Almagià, 1914, p. 309; Almagià, 1947, p. 183; Almagià, 1954, p. 7).

The scholar evoked the difference between the Romans geography and the Greeks geography. He criticized the idea that Romans were only the slavish imitators of the sciences of ancient Greece because he stressed the different spirit that marked their geography.

The Greeks were inclined to general theoretical speculations while the Romans to the particular facts and the nature elements of practical value (Almagià, 1914, p. 343; Almagià, 1938, p. 4; Almagià, 1954, p. 15; Almagià, 1962, p. 199). Almagià said that if the Greeks were the founders of geography and the supporters of a great advancement of geographical science through mathematics and pure scientific investigation instead the Romans were able to develop this knowledge with explorations and conquests.

The Augustan Age represented the pinnacle of the Roman rule on the *oikoumene* and the maximum development of the geographical sciences in the ancient Rome.

Anyone before Octavian Augustus established the full control of the empire. Silla and Pompeo had succeeded in pushing their armies to the limits of the known world but both had died without having pacified the *oikoumene*.

On 27 BC the *princeps* instead gained full the empire control after years of civil wars. He continued the exploration intensifying the commercial traffic (Nicolet, 1992).

However the Roman conquests were associated with a broader vision of the known world and geographical knowledge and began in the third century BC with the retreat of the Carthaginians (206 BC) and the conquest of the Iberian Peninsula on 197 B.C. (Cordano, 2011, p. 131).

Almagià said that the turning point came with the Second and the Third Punic War because they represented the beginning of a new scientific progress never achieved before. A revolution intended to establish itself in all branches of knowledge obtained with the hegemony of Rome upon the Mediterranean countries.

The scholar reminded the conquests of Silla and Pompey in the East and later ones of Julius Caesar that formed the basis for the progressive imperial enlargement reached in the Augustan Age (Almagià 1962, p. 200). An era of military enterprises made with discoveries in distant lands as well as Arabia Felix, Nubia in the lands of Garamantes, in Germany over the Elbe until the rising of the Rhine with a fleet to reach the mouth of the River (De Romanis, 1992, p. 225).

The military campaigns gave the knowledge of Europe still little known inside the Alpine countries, Gaul, Germany, some inaccessible regions of Iberia and Britain, circumnavigated by Agricola (Almagià, 1914, p. 343 -344; Almagià, 1947, p. 23). The legions made new achievements in Britain under the empire of Claudius, Nero and Domitian (Almagià, 1953, p. 17).

The geographer recalled Julius Caesar's war against the Gauls, in Northern Europe where between 58 and 51 BC – as described in *De Bello Gallico* – Roman soldiers crossed the Loire and reached the Western Ocean crossed the Channel to arrive in Britain (Almagià, 1962, p. 200). Not satisfied of accomplished victories the legions of Rome moved in the direction of the Rhine and after crossing turned their weapons into the dark forests of Germany along still unknown regions (Almagià, 1947, p. 19; Almagià, 1953, pp. 17-18). «Caesar – stressed Almagià – did geography making war» as our general (Almagià, 1938, p. 6).

The achievements represented a fundamental advance for the geographical horizon that the Greeks had done with navigation. The Romans also obtained a knowledge of the inner regions of the known world that the Greek sailors had never reached (Almagià, 1953, p. 17; Almagià, 1954, p. 15).

The legions had widen further the horizon of geographical knowledge because the legions arrived Namibia on the edge of the ancient world in some areas that have not known to the Roman Empire and Alexandrian world (Almagià, 1947, p. 19).

A few years later the Roman legions came up in Mauretania to fight Jugurtha (Almagià, 1962, p. 201) and the poet Sallustio wrote “Jugurthine” a dense work with geographical information (Almagià, 1938, p. 15; Almagià, 1954, p. 16).

The most important war was been fought against Mithridates. On 72 BC he fled to the court of the king of Armenia Tigrone. The Roman general Lucullus with his troops had to hunt him. The general was not afraid to cross the rugged mountains of Asia (Almagià, 1953, p. 17). He surpassed the Anfitauro and advanced in lands perhaps never traveled by other legions after the Ten Thousand of Xenophon. Lucullus had the courage to climb down unknown paths for getting down himself with his legions into the horrible corridor where the eastern branch of the upper Euphrates sloped on whose shores defeated the enemy armies.

Shortly afterwards Pompey brought the war in Caucasia in some regions where troops had not dared to go. The military units penetrated inside and subdued the warlike tribes in Northern Armenia and the Caucasus (Almagià, 1953, p. 17; Almagià, 1954, p. 16), arriving in the bitter mountain valley of the Curà just three days from the Caspian See.

After the success of Julius Caesar in Northern Europe was the Roman general Drusus who first group crossed the Rhine in 12 BC and coupling between the Meuse and the Rhine in the land of the Chatti went to the tribe of the Cherusci where the river Elbe flows. Here the Romans saw for the first time the flow of the great Teutonic rivers. The immensity of these waterways Drusus decided to continue on the same path full with obstacles but also of new discoveries. On that occasion, the general ordered his legionnaires to dig a big channel (Drusian pit) between the Rhine and the lacus Flevus where Drusus through which passed a fleet to reach the North Sea (Almagià, 1953, p. 18; Almagià, 1954, p. 15) to the

mouth of the Ems (Amisia to the Romans). It was «the first time that a Roman ship plowed Europe's northern seas» (Almagià, 1938, p. 7).

In the age of the emperor Tiberius, the Romans arrived in Northern Europe (Almagià, 1954, p. 15; Almagià, 1962, p. 202) then turned their legions into the Teutoburg Forest where the Germanic tribes led by Arminius king of the Germans Cherusci defeated the Roman legions.

A few years later the army of Rome secured the exploration of the other regions of Northern European with the achievements made in Vindelicia and Noricum while maintained the commercial traffic with Northern Europe and the Teutoburg Forest (Almagià, 1962, p. 200).

It was mostly the attacks of the troops commanded by Agrippa and Tiberius to promote a better understanding of world with the military campaigns in Pannonia where the Romans saw for the first time the course of the Danube, which became the empire's border. Some years later Trajan conquered Dacia gaining dominance over the whole of the Danube basin (Almagià, 1962, p. 200) and «vague news they reached also on the endless plains beyond the Carpathians, and the peoples that lived» (Almagià 1953, p. 18). Even the Baltic was reached by the Romans, who considered it part of the ocean North «of one or more existing major islands within it designated with Scania names, Scatinavia, you were right the first news in this age» (Almagià 1953, p. 18; Almagià, 1962, p. 200).

The conquests of the imperial troops touched even Africa where the Roman legions penetrated up to all northern area (Almagià, 1914, p. 343; Almagià, 1962, p. 200). The courageous expeditions in Africa had impulse the behest of Augustus and they continued by his successors Claudius, Nero and Vespasian.

Almagià did not fail to point out that from the mid-second century. B.C. and the first century AD there was a further geographical evolution. A revolution intended to establish itself in all branches of knowledge, achieved with the hegemony of Rome on the Mediterranean countries. This new scientific revolution was an exchange between the Greek spirit prone to speculation mathematics and Roman spirit more interested in the practical aspects (Almagià, 1962, p. 199).

By this revolution came the third time of ancient geography still connected to a further expansion of the horizon of the known world favored by the Roman conquests (Almagià, 1947, p. 19).

The Julius Caesar's strategy did not end with him but continued with Octavian Augustus and his successors. The development of geographical sciences was been reached with commercial trade with far away countries.

During the Augustan Age the known world was greatly expanded especially in Northern and Central Africa (Almagià, 1962, p. 201). The progressive political and military expansion of Rome occurred an increase in trade in the world known to meet the huge demand for luxury goods of the wealthy classes, carrying ships, merchants and Roman troops from the Baltic to Somalia, from Ireland to Fezzan up to India and China (Almagià, 1962, p. 200).

In the first century AD the Roman ships started trade relations with the regions that faced on the Indian Ocean (Almagià, 1947, p. 19; Almagià, 1953 p. 17; Almagià, 1954, p. 16; Almagià, 1962, p. 200).

Around the middle of the second century AD the Augustan empire was established throughout the lost work of Marinus of Tyre and Ptolemy's *Geography*. The last it one was the highest evolution of the classical geography which it corresponds to a further expansion of the known world which it took place at the time of the Emperors Trajan and Hadrian (Almagià, 1914, p. 346; Almagià, 1953, pp. 18-19; Almagià, 1954, p. 19).

Almagià pointed out that the geographical knowledge of the Augustan empire was been improved through the creation and care of the road network (*cura viarum*) which began under the rule of Octavian Augustus around 20 BC. The results of this work were published in the routes or descriptions of streets with a list of towns and stations affected, accompanied by calculating the distances between the various stations.

The routes were developed during the Republican age, but they were expanded with the new road network so that during the reign of Octavian Augustus were the routes for all the roads of the known world both in a form of descriptive lists (*itineraria scripta*) or in a form of painted itineraries (*itineraria picta*) (Almagià, 1962, p. 201). «And the increase of geographical knowledge – Almagià remarked – is also favored by a number of works, related to the reorganization of the Empire carried out by Augustus himself and his collaborators are road and cadastral works are censuses of cities and provinces. It develops as a whole literature of routes – descriptions of the major streets with lists of all the inhabited places and stations, with the distances between the one and the other – which come in the descriptive form (*Itineraria scripta*) or in the form of painted cards (*Itineraria picta*). They shall also draw up the official catalogs of all the cities of Italy and every single province distinguished according to their legal status» (Almagià, 1954, p. 17).

Along with the expansion of their empire, the Romans wrote a series of works by minute topographic survey of the countries subject to their rule, demonstrated by the thick and perfect road network, which allowed them to develop a real official cartography.

The early empire was marked by a further expansion, codification, and upgrading of the role of the land surveyors (*agrimensores*) working for the Roman state as well as of that of surveyors on other applications of large-scale mapping in the towns and in engineering projects. As Roman influence spread, more public domains were to be divided up and more colonies founded of which has come down almost complete late copy of a road map the *Tabula Peutingeriana* which it presumably designed by a byzantine cosmographer named Castorius (IV century AD).

Now some scholars think about it come from an older prototype or «a median document that leaves open the possibility of a direct derivation or mediated *Tabula Peutingeriana* from an original archetype

resulting from the project of the Charter of Agrippa» (Cantile, 2013, pp. 75-78). The *Tabula* come down and it has collected from spurious texts made through handwritten copies of medieval compilations that have taken the name of *Corpus Agrimensorum Romanorum* (Cantile, 2013, p. 49).

In the Augustan Age the Romans also realized works for the administrative reorganization of the empire as well as census operations which led to the production of catalogs of all the cities of Italy and every single province, in which cities were distinguished according to their condition *foederatae, liberae, etc.* At the same time a knowledge of peoples with their difference in origin, customs, social habits but united by the Roman rule progressed rapidly as witnessed by the Greek geographer Strabo who lived at the court of Octavian Augustus.

The most important work of the Augustan Age was the great Roman Empire Map (*Forma Imperii*) performed by the Augustus son-in-law Agrippa and named *Orbis pictus*. In describing it in his *Naturalis Historia* (III 17) Pliny the Elder said that it was built by Agrippa because the Roman general wanted «to outline the world so that the world could contemplate» (Almagià, 1938, p. 16)⁴.

This Map was exposed in a porch (*Porticus Vipsania*) located near Via del Corso and finished by Augustus after Agrippa's death on 12 BC of which no trace remains and that Almagià believed to be engraved on marble. According recent hypothesis it was an affix panel in a porch, either a mosaic (Trousset, 1993) or a map, either a written document with a list of known sites (Brodersen, 1995; Cantile, 2013) or a mural. The geographic heritage of the Augustan Age remembered Almagià (Almagià, 1938, pp. 19-20; Almagià, 1954, pp. 17-18) survived over time. *Orbis Pictus* became a model for later works such as *Tabula Peutingeriana* realized for different purposes in the twelfth or thirteenth century AD and altered proportions (perhaps oblong or rectangular) than the original paper (Cantile, 2013, pp. 78-87). The same will apply to other cartographic works of the Middle Ages whose elements date back at the *Orbis Pictus* and where we find the subdivision of the empire built by Agrippa, as the *Divisio Orbis and Demensuratio Provinciarum* (Brodersen, 2014). All the measures of Agrippa's Map used in medieval writings such as the *Liber de mensura Orbis terrae* of an unknown monk lived in the ninth century AD.

The *Tabula* exerted an influence in the Middle Age on *mappae mundi* to represent the known world. Some scholars noticed many analogies with medieval maps both in general and in particular characteristics (Gautier Dalché, 2003, pp. 44-45).

Probably the *Tabula* is a road map only for civil use and not an official document of the empire although some doubts are yet unsolved (Cantile, 2013, p. 76). Some scholars stressed (Cantile, 2013, pp. 77-82) it

⁴ Gaio Plinio Secondo, *Storia Naturale, Cosmologia e Geografia, Libri 1-6*, traduzione e note di A. Barchiesi, R. Centi, M. Corsaro, A. Marcone, G. Ranucci, Torino, G. Einaudi Editore, 1982, I, pp. 388-389.

is a copy of a documentary series and opened the possibility of a direct derivation or median of the Peutinger also called *Codex Vindobonensis 324* based on the Charter of Agrippa.

It is worth remembering that for Almagià the map of Agrippa was the result of a non-scholarly work but practical – in the political sense – and in line with the vision that had the Romans of geography because Agrippa was not a scientist as were instead Eratosthenes, Posidonius and Artemidorus (Almagià, 1938, pp. 16-17).

The porch represented the imperial power of Rome and its ability to dominate the known world through the power of images of the emperor and his *auctoritas* (Zanker, 1989). The geographical description of the Roman Empire also represented the means by which the power of the emperor could express itself as a political tool to demonstrate and consolidate the Roman domination on the known world conquered by his legions (Nicolet, 1989, p. 70).

The *oikoumene* was been described in the mid-second century AD in the work *Geography* of Claudius Ptolemy that it handed down entirely until the Renaissance (Broc, 2007, pp. 5-15). Then Rome bequeathed to Christianity its first geographical knowledge. So even though the Greek and Roman tradition were the representation of paganism, but they provided the only geographic information available at the time, and an explanation of some Bible passages and in different geographical horizons (Brotton, 2013, p. 114).

During his lecture Almagià did not forget to point out that Augustus and Agrippa had more merit as the decision to split administratively all the provinces of the empire after having pacified the known world by long and bloody wars. Italy was divided in XI *regions* – excluding islands – so that you could get a higher administrative and fiscal control – Including the census – ensuring both respect their autonomy of ethnic difference for origin, dialects and customs both the unification of many peoples which like a mosaic were distributed throughout the territory of the peninsula under the Roman rule.

A reality, the local one, already known to the Italic peoples from the fourth century BC despite the war waged by Rome against the other ethnic groups of the Italian peninsula, which ended political-military autonomy of the Etruscans and Samnites. Rome prevailed on the different ethnic groups who surrendered or suffered defeat by his legions. Anyone Italic people dared of challenge Rome rather accepted the military superiority of the legions, and were received in all the places people under her rule (Pallottino, 1984).

The *imperium* was the undisputed symbol of power of Rome on lands and different peoples (Nicolet, 1992, p. 3) and it became the leading idea of the Romans. It granted to the Italian people the respect and protection of their linguistic, ethnic and religious traditions through the full and the strict acceptance of the Roman laws.

Before concluding, however, we cannot but make some considerations on Almagià studies on the progress achieved by geography and cartography Augustan. In his writings, the scholar proved excellent preparation in the study of ancient and modern sources of geographical sciences.

The scholar proved to have a great versatility in the knowledge of modern publications, studying the writings in Italian and in some European languages belonging to different schools of thought. His expertise is clearly visible both in the 1914's article and in the 1937's report as well as in all other contributions.

The groundwork of the scholar is clear from the 1947's study where he mentioned all the modern sources with a critical analysis of the bibliography used for the construction of the writing.

His studies has showed their validity also in the conclusions of the other scholars (Aujac, 2001; Cantile, 2013; Cordano, 2011; Prontera, 1990; Prontera, 2003; Prontera, 2011).

Prontera argued that the identification of *Vindobonensis Codex 324* with derived paper of the *Orbis terrarum* has a relationship of logic nature, even if not perfectly probative.

Cantile (Cantile, 2013) stressed some doubts on the proven existence of the Charter of Agrippa and its relationship with later copies as the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, since it is not yet certain that the work of Agrippa was a map or a description of the world in a text form. A doubt among scholars is that the Charter of Agrippa has got quantitative elements consulted and cited by Pliny.

Cantile said that this description had been the origin nor the archetype of a series of subsequent documents including the Peutinger. Yet it is not certain that the same description was a result of the will of the emperor and therefore considerable in all respects as an «official description». Perhaps it has been an initiative of a subject of a public rank but always on a personal basis (Cantile, 2013, p. 76).

Instead Prontera remembers as Polybius and Strabo tend to emphasize the aims of political geography, in line with the practical purposes of the Roman tradition, but not giving up to enhance the scientific component inherited by Eratosthenes (Prontera, 2003, p. 26).

Strabo reminded that his work was been written for Roman generals and governors to convince them of the fundamental practical use of geographical knowledge (Prontera, 1990, p. XXI).

Prontera emphasized the political and ideological value of the project of the *Porticus Vipsania* in the Campus Martius. For this and especially in view of its purposes is little sense in asking about its scientific and mathematical component both for its location and for its function of empire celebratory apparatus Augustan (Prontera, 2003, pp. 26-28). In another study Prontera marked the influence of the three main «components of Hellenistic geography which are also found in the description of Iberia Strabo: the interest for the general geography questions, a modern ethnographical expression and *archaiologia*» (Prontera, 2011, p. 225).

Prontera said that the description of greek Strabo «is a process of Romanization which has oriented on uses and observations of the indigenous communities in terms of new costumes and it has marked the old contrast between ‘savagery’ and ‘civilization’» (Prontera, 2011, p. 225).

In its contributions on the history of Geography Aujac also confirmed the importance of Strabo’s *Geography* related to a military-political vision implemented by the Romans through the conquests of *oikoumene* (Aujac, 2001).

Cantile has stressed the practical role of scientific knowledge of the ancient Romans was been driven by practical needs.

In her work on geography of the ancient world Cordano argued – as pointed out Almagià – the importance of the role played by the Roman legions in the conquest of world through military activities aimed at expanding empire and success in the evolution of geography (Cordano, 2011, pp. 131-150).

From the most recent publications is therefore clear that the Almagià contributions on geographical sciences despite the passage of time and the progress of the studies maintain unchanged the value of the analysis of the evolution of the Roman geography.

Another important thing to note about the conference of 1937 and the other writings of the teacher (Almagià, 1947, pp. 20-22) is the relationship – detected by Almagià – between the Augustan geography and the geography of his contemporary.

The scholar said that Geography was not lived in scientific cabinets but it had developed in the continuous study of vital concern to every nation. It was been the same as that had sprouted in the Imperial Rome of Augustus and it has been lived again into the fascist Italy with the colonial policy (Almagià, 1914, p. 345; Almagià, 1947, p. 21; Almagià, 1954, pp. 18-19; Almagià, 1962, p. 202).

The geographical Augustan tradition outlined in the writings of Strabo through larger map of Agrippa had returned to live again in a work of the sixteenth century *Relazioni universali* written by Giovanni Botero (Magnaghi, 1906; Broc, 2007), a Jesuit. The work has arrived until the beginning of the nineteenth through the evolution of geographical sciences (Almagià, 1914, p. 345; Almagià, 1938, p. 21) and it has opened «the way to modern anthropogeography» (Almagià, 1914, p. 345; Almagià, 1947 p. 21) in the twentieth century.

He said (Almagià, 1947, p. 21; Almagià, 1962, p. 202) that the *Geography’s* Strabo was written for an useful purpose for commanders and rulers (Almagià, 1914, p. 345; Almagià, 1947, p. 21; Almagià, 1954, pp. 18-19; Almagià, 1962, p. 202).

Almagià said that Stabo stressed «can be said to be truly happy, but only in the description field: lacking indeed the most difficult to coordinate and work processing the results of new observations and investigation of various physical phenomena of the globe. And this work in the Ancient World will not give us more now» (Almagià, 1947, p. 21; Almagià, 1954, pp. 18-19; Almagià, 1962, p. 202).

The scholar remarked that with the passing of the centuries in the great empire of Augustus came the decision of the emperor and his Agrippa advisor to perform the administrative division of the vast domain that it was an example to follow to solve some problems of Italy's future.

A solution should come from a common choice that it solves the principle of the nation and at the same time the federal regions into the framework of unity in multiplicity.

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