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1 Alessandro Bonvicino, called Moretto da Brescia,
Nicholas of Bari presenting pupils of Galeazzo Rovellio to the Virgin and Child (Rovellio Altarpiece).
Brescia, Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo

Moretto's Map

James Pilgrim

Much of what is known about Moretto da Brescia's Rovellio Altarpiece (Fig. 1) comes from a Latin dedication in the lower right corner of the picture: VIRGINI DEIPARAE ET DIVO NICOLAO GALEATIVS ROVELLIVS AC DISCIPVLI D. D. MDXXXIX ("To the Virgin Mother of God and Saint Nicholas by Galeazzo Rovellio and his pupils 1539").[1] The date included in the dedication places the altarpiece at the midpoint of Moretto's career and towards the beginning of a period in which the subject matter of his paintings came into increasing alignment with the reformist, Christocentric spirituality of early and mid-sixteenth-century Brescia.[2] The text also identifies the patron of the work, one Galeazzo Rovellio, as well as its episcopal protagonist, Nicholas of Myra, the patron saint of students, who is shown presenting a group of young, book-bearing pupils to the Virgin and Child. Carlo Ridolfi's intuition that Rovellio must have been a schoolmaster was confirmed by archival research undertaken by Paolo Guerrini in the early twentieth century.[3] This has led some scholars to suppose that he may have had his likeness included in the picture in the guise of Saint Nicholas, but no other portraits of the otherwise anonymous patron have survived against which to test this supposition, and nothing else is known about the circumstances of the commission.[4]

The formal qualities of the altarpiece raise a number of other issues. As several scholars have pointed out, the diagonal arrangement of figures in the picture owes much to Titian's Pala Pesaro, a work that Moretto must have seen in the Venetian church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari.[5] While not necessarily denying the connection with Titian, others have drawn attention to the uncompromising naturalism of the picture, a quality closely associated with painting in Brescia that is sometimes treated as a sign of Moretto's stylistic independence from the Venetian tradition.[6] It is with this feature – the naturalism

1 For a summary of the literature and a bibliography on the picture, see Giuseppe Fusari, in: *Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo: catalogo delle opere. Secoli XII–XVI*, ed. by Marco Bona Castellotti/Elena Lucchesi Ragni/Roberta D'Adda, Venice 2014, pp. 235–237, no. 121.

2 That alignment is most readily visible in the increasing numbers of Eucharistic altarpieces that Moretto produced during the later stages of his career. See Valerio Guazzoni, *Moretto: il tema sacro*, Brescia 1981.

3 Carlo Ridolfi, *Le maraviglie dell'arte [...]*, Venice 1648, I, p. 247; Paolo Guerrini, "Scuole e maestri bresciani nel Cinquecento", in: *Commentari dell'Ateneo di Brescia per l'anno 1921*, 1922, pp. 73–127: 119, 126.

4 Gustavo Frizzoni, "Alessandro Bonvicino detto il Moretto pittore bresciano e le fonti storiche a lui riferentesi", in: *Giornale di erudizione artistica*, IV (1875), pp. 161–179: 172; György Gombosi, *Moretto da Brescia*, Basel 1943, p. 100; Pier Virgilio Begni Redona, *Alessandro Bonvicino: il Moretto da Brescia*, Brescia 1988, pp. 40, 316. An earlier altarpiece by the Brescian painter Paolo Caylina il Giovane for the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie (1533; Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo, Brescia) includes a portrait of the patron, a schoolmaster named Giovanni Testerio, in the guise of Saint Nicholas. See Matteo Zambolo, in: *Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo* (note 1), pp. 172–174, no. 96.

5 On Moretto and the Pala Pesaro, see Adolfo Venturi, *Storia dell'arte italiana*, IX.4, Milan 1929, p. 162; Gombosi (note 4), pp. 42, 100; Camillo Boselli, *Il Moretto, 1498–1554*, Brescia 1954, p. 102; Begni Redona (note 4), p. 39.

6 On the picture's Brescian naturalism see Roberto Longhi, "Quesiti caravaggeschi" [1928], in: *idem*, *"Me pinxit" e quesiti caravaggeschi: 1928–1934 [...]*, Florence 1968, pp. 81–143: 111; Boselli (note 5), p. 102; Gaetano Panazza, *La pinacoteca e i musei di Brescia*, Bergamo ^{2}1968, p. 128. On Moretto and the Brescian School, see Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua, "La 'Scuola Bresciana' e il Moretto", in: *Alessandro Bonvicino 'il Moretto'*, exh. cat. Brescia 1988, Bologna 1988, pp. 11–15.

2 Moretto da Brescia,
Rovellio Altarpiece
(detail of Fig. 1)

of the Rovellio Altarpiece – that the present article is ultimately concerned. Moretto's emphatic, even hyperbolic treatment of the damp, dilapidated architecture which surrounds the figures is particularly arresting. The imposing masonry of the cornice behind Saint Nicholas and his companions is chipped in several places. The marble floor is covered in mud. Water and mold stains cover the walls and weeds grow from atop the stone arch. Most striking of all, the golden mosaics have begun to peel away from the surface of the semi-dome, allowing a preparatory layer of grey plaster to show through. The decrepitude of the otherwise lavish ecclesiastical setting, typical of what one finds in northern Italian *sacra conversazione* paintings of the early sixteenth century, would have been all the more conspicuous when viewed in relation to the sumptuous architectural decoration of Santa Maria dei Miracoli, the Brescian church for which the altarpiece was made.[7]

Although often understood as a compelling example of the exactitude with which Brescian painters reproduced the reality around them, the run-down architectural mise-en-scène of the Rovellio Altarpiece has received surprisingly little sustained critical attention. When found in the background of paintings of the Virgin and Child, crumbling classical architecture is often understood to allude to the triumph of Christianity over the pagan world.[8] But the relationship between the Virgin and Child and the architectural setting of the Rovellio Altarpiece hardly seems supersessionary; instead, Moretto appears to have appropriated the trope of ruination in order to mark another, more recent turning point in European history, namely the sud-

[7] On the decoration of Santa Maria dei Miracoli, see Matteo Ceriana, "Il santuario civico della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli a Brescia", in: *Annali di architettura*, XIV (2002), pp. 73–92.

[8] The origins of this tradition can be traced to *The Golden Legend* which records that the Temple of Peace in Rome "crumbled to the ground" when the Virgin Mary gave birth to Christ (Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. by William Granger Ryan, Princeton 2012 [[1]1993], pp. 38f.; the quote is from p. 39). See Andrew Hui, "The Birth

den and profound shift in cartographic representations of the world beyond Europe's shores that took place in the early sixteenth century. That connection is suggested by a curious detail that has gone unremarked in the scholarly literature: the shapes formed by the exposed grey plaster in the semi-dome bear a surprisingly close resemblance to the principle geographic features of the northern and eastern reaches of the Indian Ocean littoral (Figs. 2, 3).[9] In other words, the gradual disintegration of the mosaic in the background of the Rovellio Altarpiece has resulted in the accidental creation of a map the contents of which are readily identifiable. Towards the right side of the semi-dome, partially obscured by Saint Nicholas's crozier, a wedge-shaped patch of grey plaster recapitulates the recognizable form of the Indian subcontinent. The sharply defined, undulating border between exposed plaster and golden mosaic closely matches the twists and turns of the coast of India; it even provides a suggestion of specific geographic features, such as the Gulf of Khambat at the upper left. Further to the left of the golden semi-dome, behind the flowers which sprout from a staff held by one of the children in the foreground, is a dark patch of exposed plaster whose curving outline recalls the Arabian Peninsula. Despite being relatively small in size and simplified in form, the grey patch of plaster and the small, fist-shaped protrusion of golden mosaic to the far left of the dome provide a rough approximation of the shape and position of the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf.

Admittedly, some of the forms resulting from the crumbling mosaic are inconsistent both with the actual geography of south Asia and with what one would expect to find in period maps of the region. The most notable detail that does not correspond to any geographic feature which was either known or hypothesized in the early sixteenth century is visible towards the upper right, where a resilient patch of gold mosaic provides a suggestion of an enormous body of water in east central Asia. The continent of Africa, the eastern edge of which one would expect to see on the left side of the semi-dome, has been entirely omitted. These peculiarities notwithstanding, the visual correspondence can hardly be accidental; and if this assumption is correct, the precision with which Moretto has rendered the principle landmasses of the Indian Ocean littoral is remarkable,

3 Satellite image
of the Indian Ocean

especially for a map completed in 1539. For while the basic geography of Arabia and the Persian Gulf had been understood by European mapmakers for some time, it was only after the first Portuguese expeditions to India at the turn of the sixteenth century that cartographic representations of the subcontinent began to assume a size and shape recognizable to modern viewers. Nevertheless, having produced a map whose geographic accuracy is notable even by today's standards, Moretto has confined it to one of the darkest passages in the painting and chosen a color scheme that blends in with the overall palette of the picture. The particular use of those colors – grey to denote the land and gold to denote the water, the opposite of what one might expect – provides an additional layer of camouflage. Obscured by the shadows which fall across the surface of the semi-dome and rendered in the same tones as the rest of the picture, the motif seems as though it was designed to be overlooked. Empirically precise and yet carefully disguised, the map is an intriguing visual paradox.

The Rovellio Altarpiece map appears to be unique in Moretto's oeuvre and rare, if not unprecedented, in Italian painting of the early sixteenth century. The enigmatic quality of the motif brings to mind Daniel Arasse's claim that some seemingly small,

of Ruins in Quattrocento Adoration Paintings", in: *I Tatti*, XVIII (2015), pp. 319–348; Susan Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson: Meaning and Material in Western Culture*, Chicago 2020, pp. 76–80.

[9] In private correspondence, Dr. Roberta D'Adda of the Fondazione Brescia Musei confirmed the generally good condition of the Rovellio Altarpiece. Conservation undertaken in advance of the 1988 Moretto da Brescia exhibition revealed only minor losses which were retouched. All of the details referred to in the present article are all original to the painting. The highly-finished preparatory drawing now in the Pierpont Morgan Library (inv. I. 72) does not include the map or other areas of architectural decay included in the final picture (see Rhoda Eitel-Porter, in: *eadem et al.*, *Italian Renaissance Drawings at the Morgan Library & Museum*, New York 2019, pp. 235–237, no. 64); and neither does Giovanni Battista Moroni's *Mystic marriage of Saint Catherine* (ca. 1560; San Bartolomeo, Almenno), which otherwise recreates the architectural setting of the Rovellio Altarpiece in remarkable detail (Barbara Maria Savy, in: *Giovan Battista Moroni: lo sguardo sulla realtà. 1560–1579*, exh. cat. Bergamo 2004/05, ed. by Simone Facchinetti, Cinisello Balsamo 2004, pp. 180f., no. 28).

4 Ptolemaic world map ('second projection'), in: Nicholas Germanus, *Claudii Ptolomei viri Alexandrini Cosmographie*, Ulm 1482. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, inv. INC 116, fol. 70v–71r

5 Diogo Ribeiro, world map. Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ms. Borgiano III

inconspicuous details in early modern European paintings are actually so incongruous, so "dislocating" that once perceived they disturb the unified visual economy of the works in which they are found, opening them up to potential new meanings and perhaps even providing their viewers with privileged glimpses of the artists' thinking.[10] Arasse's observation holds true for the Rovellio Altarpiece map; providing an adequate explanation of the detail means delving into issues that have little to do with the traditional themes that have characterized the scholarly literature on the painting and its maker. What follows is divided into two sections. The first section will begin by surveying the state of European cartography of India in the first half of the sixteenth century before proposing a potential source for Moretto's map. It will then examine the cultural significance of India in early sixteenth-century Italy in order to understand why the artist and his patron may have chosen to include the map in the background of their painting. The second section will consider the implications of the motif – a particularly clever and compelling example of both an 'image made by chance' and a 'crypto-image' – for our understanding of the work of an artist who has often been praised for his direct, unmediated representation of reality.

I.

During the early sixteenth century, European perceptions of the size and shape of the world were largely governed by Ptolemy's *Geography*. The most important text on the subject to have survived from antiquity, the *Geography*, which provided instructions for the creation of a map of the then-known world, had been reintroduced to Italy from Constantinople at the end of the fourteenth century.[11] Within a few decades, it had become the starting point for all serious geographic study; world maps produced according to Ptolemy's instructions for the so-called 'second projection' quickly became the standard.[12] These maps offered a view of the northern hemisphere stretching from Europe to Southeast Asia (*India extra Gangem*) in which the Indian subcontinent (*India intra Gangem*) features prominently (Fig. 4). Yet the newly recreated Ptolemaic image of the inhabited world was very quickly shown to be inaccurate. Spanish and Portuguese expeditions to the Americas undertaken in the 1490s revealed lands unknown to the ancient geographer. While India was hardly unfamiliar to Europeans, the voyages of Portuguese navigators like Vasco da Gama (1497–1499, 1502) and Pedro Álvares Cabral (1500/01) highlighted the inaccuracy of Ptolemaic representations of that region as well.[13]

The geographic knowledge acquired during voyages to the Americas, Africa, and Asia was quickly incorporated into a series of new maps produced in Portugal and Spain that differed from the older, Ptolemaic maps of the world.[14] The changes in the representation of India were particularly dramatic. A comparison between the world map included in Nicholas Germanus's 1482 edition of Ptolemy's *Geography* (Fig. 4) and the 1529 world map executed by the Portuguese cartographer Diogo Ribeiro (Fig. 5), the earliest extant map to record Ferdinand Magellan's recent circumnavigation of the globe, shows just how dramatically European representations of the subcontinent had changed after the initial Portuguese expeditions to the region. Whereas Germanus represents India *intra Gangem* as a relatively unarticulated promontory surrounded by a chain of small islands, Ribeiro has provided it with the pronounced peninsular form familiar to modern viewers.[15] Nevertheless, despite its obvious limitations as a practical tool the authority of Ptolemy's *Geography* remained strong, especially in Italy.[16] Italian cartography of the first half of the sixteenth century was therefore marked by an effort to incorporate the geographic knowledge of Portuguese and Spanish cartographers into the Ptolemaic worldview, making corrections and additions as needed.[17]

[10] Daniel Arasse, *Le détail: pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture*, Paris ²2008 (¹1992), p. 223.

[11] On Ptolemy and his reception in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe, see Patrick Gautier Dalché, *La géographie de Ptolémée en Occident (IVᵉ-XVIᵉ siècle)*, Turnhout 2009.

[12] *Ibidem*, pp. 215–333.

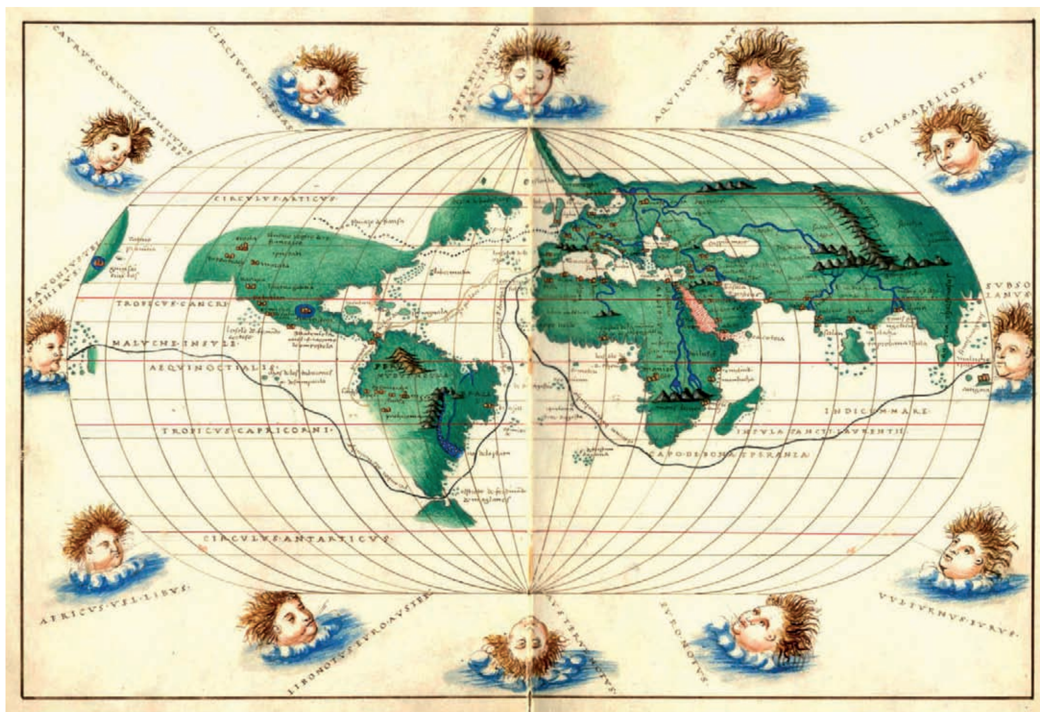
[13] On the Portuguese voyages to Asia, see Jerry Brotton, *Trading Territories: Mapping the Early Modern World*, Ithaca 2019 (¹1997). On the criticisms of Ptolemy's claims about *terra incognita* and India in the inscriptions of an anonymous 1457 world map, see Gautier Dalché (note 11), pp. 211–214.

[14] On the influence of Portuguese cartography, see Avelino Teixeira da Mota, "Influence de la cartographie portugaise sur la cartographie européenne a l'époque des découvertes", in: *Les aspects internationaux de la découverte océanique aux XVᵉ et XVIᵉ siècles*, conference proceedings Lisbon 1960, ed. by Michel Mollat/Paul Adam, Paris 1966, pp. 223–250; Maria Fernanda Alegria *et al.*, "Portuguese Cartography in the Renaissance", in: *Cartography in the European Renaissance*, ed. by David Woodward, Chicago 2007, I, pp. 975–1068.

[15] On the Ribeiro map, see Jerry Brotton, *A History of the World in Twelve Maps*, London *et al.* 2014 (¹2012), pp. 186–217, fig. 31.

[16] Donald F. Lach/Edwin J. Van Kley, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, III: *A Century of Advance*, Chicago 1993, III, p. 452. On Italian humanist and antiquarian interest in Ptolemy, see George Tolias, "Ptolemy's *Geography* and Early Modern Antiquarian Practice", in: *Ptolemy's* Geography *in the Renaissance*, ed. by Zur Shalev/Charles Burnett, London 2011, pp. 121–142.

[17] On the modification of the Ptolemaic model, see Francesc Relaño, "Cartography and Discoveries: The Re-Definition of the Ptolemaic Model in the First Quarter of the Sixteenth Century", in: *La cartografia europea tra primo Rinascimento e fine dell'illuminismo*, conference proceedings Florence 2001, ed. by Diogo Ramada Curto/Angelo Cattaneo/André Ferrand Almeida, Florence 2003, pp. 49–61.



6 Battista Agnese, world map. Brescia, Biblioteca Queriniana, inv. H.III.24, fol. 12v–13r

The work of the Venice-based Genoese cartographer Battista Agnese offers a telling example of the way in which mapmakers in Italy accommodated the latest Iberian cartography within a Ptolemaic framework.[18] Between 1514 and 1564, Agnese produced around seventy-five hand-painted manuscript atlases and ten individual maps for collectors in Italy and abroad, many of which bear the coats of arms of the families that commissioned or purchased them.[19] One such atlas, formerly in the collection of the Martinengo family of Brescia, entered the Biblioteca Queriniana in 1879.[20] Dating from the mid- to late 1530s, the atlas consists of ten maps, including a Ptolemaic world map (Fig. 6) and a more modern planispheric map of the Indian Ocean littoral (Fig. 7).[21] When it passed into the possession of the Martinengo is uncertain, but it is possible that, like many of Agnese's works, the atlas was a diplomatic gift that acknowledged close political and economic ties to the Venetian Republic.

With an appropriate date and a connection to a prominent Brescian family whose members were patrons of Moretto's, it is likely that Agnese's Brescia atlas (or something very similar) provided the inspiration for the map in the Rovellio Altarpiece.[22] Like the world map in the atlas, the overall conceit

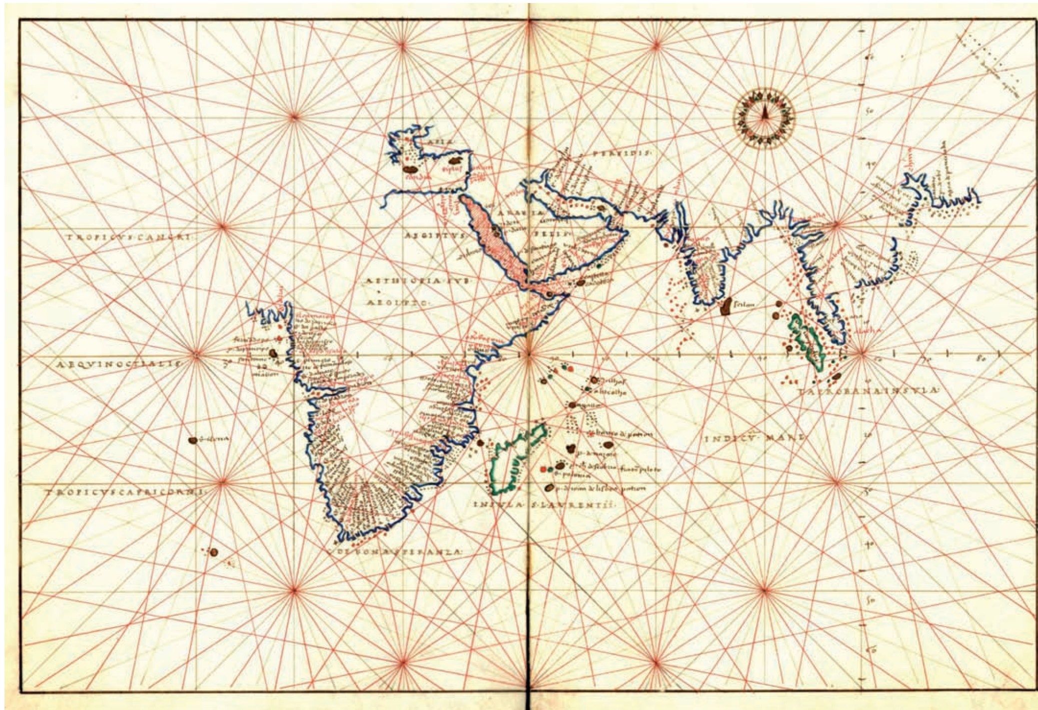
18 On Agnese, see Henry R. Wagner, "The Manuscript Atlases of Battista Agnese", in: *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, XXV (1931), pp. 1–110; Ingrid Baumgärtner, "Die Portolan-Atlanten des Battista Agnese", in: *Kartographie der Frühen Neuzeit: Weltbilder und Wirkungen*, conference proceedings Brake 2014, ed. by Michael Bischoff/Vera Lüpkes/Wolfgang Crom, Marburg 2015, pp. 19–36; *eadem*, "Battista Agnese und seine Kartenproduktion", in: *Der Portulan-Atlas des Battista Agnese: Das Kasseler Prachtexemplar von 1542*, ed. by *eadem*, Darmstadt 2017, pp. 10–54.

19 On the chronology of Agnese's production, see *ibidem*, pp. 23–26.

20 The atlas had previously been in the collection of Count Francesco Leopardo Martinengo da Barco (1815–1884). On the atlas see Nadia Compagnoni, in: *Biblioteca Queriniana, Brescia*, ed. by Aldo Pirola, Florence 2000, p. 210, pl. XCIII. On the Martinengo family, see Paolo Guerrini, *Una celebre famiglia lombarda: i Conti di Martinengo. Studi e ricerche genealogiche*, Brescia 1930.

21 Because of the rendering of the Baja California and Yucatán Peninsulas, Baumgärtner 2017 (note 18), pp. 26–28, 131, dates the atlas to around 1536. The Biblioteca Queriniana dates the atlas to 1536–1541 (Compagnoni [note 20], p. 210, pl. XCIII).

22 On Moretto's portraits of members of the Martinengo family, see Begni Redona (note 4) pp. 334f., 378–381, 448–456, nos. 73, 89, 116f. Some of the identifications are speculative.



7 Battista Agnese, map of Africa and the Indian Ocean. Brescia, Biblioteca Queriniana, inv. H.III.24, fol. 5v–6r

of Moretto's map is Ptolemaic: projected onto the surface of the hemispherical semi-dome, the map reproduces the shape and orientation of Ptolemy's second projection, albeit on the internal, concave surface of the sphere. Certain otherwise inexplicable details in Moretto's map may have also been taken from Ptolemy, including the large, isolated patch of plaster at center left, which may represent the notoriously free-floating island of Taprobana (Ceylon).[23] The semi-dome is even surmounted by a winged cherub that recalls the personifications of the winds that typically adorn Ptolemaic world maps, including Agnese's (see Figs. 4, 6).[24] At the same time, the instantly recognizable shape that Moretto has given to India must have depended upon a more up-to-date map of the Indian Ocean such as the one found in the same atlas. Once again, specific details included by Moretto can be found in Agnese, including the representation of the Gulf of Khambat at the northern most point of the western coast of India, who in turn depended upon the latest developments in Portuguese cartography.[25] This final point bears repeating. Whether or not the Brescia atlas was the immediate source for the up-to-date image of the Indian Ocean littoral that Moretto included in his painting, the origins of the motif ultimately lay in the maps and portolan charts made by Portuguese cartographers in the early decades of the sixteenth century.

While Battista Agnese's Brescia atlas provides a plausible source for the map that Moretto smuggled into the slowly disintegrating dome of the Rovellio Altarpiece, the purpose of the map is not readily apparent. Galeazzo Rovellio, a schoolmaster, may have instructed the artist to include it in order to demonstrate his knowledge of the latest developments in cartography.

[23] On the variable size and location of Taprobana in European maps, see Marie-Thérèse Gambin, "L'île Taprobane: problèmes de cartographie dans l'Océan Indien", in: *Géographie du monde au Moyen Âge et à la Renaissance*, conference proceedings Paris 1987, ed. by Monique Pelletier, Paris 1989, pp. 191–200.

[24] On the wind blowers in Agnese's maps, see Ingrid Baumgärtner, "Winds and Continents: Concepts for Structuring the World and Its Parts", in: *Maps and Travel in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period: Knowledge, Imagination, and Visual Culture*, ed. by *eadem*/Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby/Katrin Ḳogman-Appel, Berlin *et al.* 2019, pp. 91–135: 131–134.

[25] On the Spanish and Portuguese sources of Agnese's maps, see Baumgärtner 2017 (note 18), pp. 42–48.

By the early sixteenth century, Ptolemy had been a standard part of the humanist curriculum for half a century, and a more practical knowledge of recent cartography was now considered essential for young men destined for a career in trade, politics, or diplomacy.[26] But why India? The choice probably reflected the widespread interest that recent Portuguese expeditions to the subcontinent had generated throughout Venetian territory in the early sixteenth century. As early as 1502, the Venetian diarist Girolamo Priuli had lamented the havoc wrought by the "charavelle di Portogallo" on the spice trade, the central pillar of the Venetian economy.[27] The diaries of Marin Sanudo are peppered with similarly ominous accounts, including a slightly later report from Lisbon that details the successful 1502 delivery by Vasco da Gama of "35 milia quintali di specie de ogni sorte".[28] Like many Venetians, Priuli and Sanudo feared that the opening up of a new trade route around the Cape of Good Hope would undercut the Venetian monopoly on trade in the eastern Mediterranean – still the major gateway through which pepper and other spices entered Europe. By the second decade of the sixteenth century, Venetian pepper imports had indeed fallen off sharply, though they would later recover.[29] With their own economy tightly bound up with Venice's, residents of Brescia would have shared the concerns of their Venetian counterparts. Since the mid-fifteenth century, woolen textiles manufactured in Brescia had been one of the most sought-after products in Eastern ports.[30] The city also benefitted from its strategic location next to a number of important trade routes along which spices and other goods imported from the East were transported to northern Europe.[31] For this reason, the Portuguese challenge to Venetian trade had a direct effect upon the Brescian economy as well, and it is no surprise to discover that by mid-century wool production in Brescia had declined precipitously.[32]

Yet it is important to note that European interest in India was not strictly economic in nature. Because of its association with both Prester John and the Apostle Thomas, travel to India had long held out the possibility of contact with an ancient Christian community.[33] But when the first Portuguese explorers arrived in Cochin in the late fifteenth century, they found the Christian population to be quite small – and the religious practices of the rest of the local population quite mysterious.[34] Lurid descriptions of the 'pagan' beliefs of the Indians and dramatic accounts of the efforts of missionaries to convert them to Christianity were relayed to Italian readers in texts like Fracanzio da Montalboddo's *Paesi novamente retrovati* (Vicenza 1507) and Ludovico de Varthema's *Itinerario* (Rome 1510; reprinted in Venice in 1518, 1535, 1563, 1589), both of which sought to capitalize upon the explosion of interest in Indian culture and religion generated by the recent Portuguese expeditions.[35] Evidence of the reception of this new, often sensational literature in Brescia is found in the correspondence of one Giuseppe da Orzinuovi, a resident of the city, who in a 1518 letter compared the suspected heretical beliefs and lewd practices of the inhabitants of the mountain valleys that lay to the north of the city to those of the residents of "Portogallo" and "Collocuti" (Kolkata).[36]

The possibility that the Rovellio Altarpiece map reflects both economically and religiously motivated interest in recent Portuguese advances in the Indian Ocean is supported by a number of details included in the motif. To begin with, the areas represented by the map correspond with the traditional

[26] Ptolemy is included in the literary canon compiled by Tommaso Parentucelli (later Pope Nicholas V) for Cosimo de' Medici as well as in Battista Guarini's 1459 syllabus. See Cesare Vasoli, "Profilo di un papa umanista: Tommaso Parentucelli", in: *idem*, *Studi sulla cultura del Rinascimento*, Manduria 1968, pp. 69–121: 84–87; Paul F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300–1600*, Baltimore *et al.* 1991, p. 203. On cartography and education, see Lesley Cormack, "Maps as Educational Tools in the Renaissance", in: *Cartography in the European Renaissance* (note 14), I, pp. 622–636: 623–625. On education in Brescia, see Christopher Carlsmith, *A Renaissance Education: Schooling in Bergamo and the Venetian Republic, 1500–1650*, Toronto *et al.* 2010, pp. 258–267.

[27] Girolamo Priuli, *I diarii*: *AA. 1494–1512*, ed. by Arturo Segre/Roberto Cessi, Bologna 1912–1938 (Rerum italicarum scriptores, XXIV.3), II, p. 197.

[28] Marino Sanuto, *I diarii (MCCCCXCVI–MDXXXIII)*, Bologna 1969/70 (facsimile of the ed. Venice 1879–1902), V, p. 130; the quote is from a letter by Giovanni Francesco Affaitati to Pietro Pasqualigo of 20 August 1503.

[29] Frederic Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic*, Baltimore 1973, pp. 290–295; Eliyahu Ashtor, "Recent Research on Levantine Trade", in: *Journal of European Economic History*, XIV (1985), pp. 361–385: 383.

[30] *Idem*, "L'exportation de textiles occidentaux dans le Proche Orient musulman au bas Moyen Âge (1370–1517)", in: *Studi in memoria di Federigo Melis*, ed. by Luigi de Rosa, Naples 1978, II, pp. 303–377: 321–324.

[31] Stephen D. Bowd, *Venice's Most Loyal City: Civic Identity in Renaissance Brescia*, Cambridge, Mass./London 2010, p. 19.

[32] Edoardo Demo, "Industry and Production in the Venetian *Terraferma* (15th–18th Centuries)", in: *A Companion to Venetian History: 1400–1797*, ed. by Eric R. Dursteler, Leiden *et al.* 2013, pp. 291–318: 300.

[33] On India's association with Christianity, see Jacques Le Goff, "L'Occident médiéval et l'océan Indien: un horizon onirique", in: *idem*, *Pour un autre Moyen Âge: temps, travail et culture en Occident. 18 essais*, Paris 1978 ([1]1977), pp. 280–298; Jeffrey Jaynes, *Christianity Beyond Christendom: The Global Christian Experience on Medieval* Mappaemundi *and Early Modern World Maps*, Wiesbaden 2018, especially pp. 237–398.

[34] On Italian perceptions of Indian religion, see Meera Juncu, *India in the Italian Renaissance: Visions of a Contemporary Pagan World 1300–1600*, New York 2015.

[35] *Ibidem*, pp. 141–183.

[36] Giuseppe da Orzinuovi to Lodovico Querini, 1 August 1518, quoted by Sanuto (note 28), XXV, pp. 602–607: 605.

route of the spice trade. Passing from Southeast Asia to Venice via India, the Persian Gulf or the Red Sea, and Ottoman territory in Egypt or the Levant, it was precisely this route that had recently been superseded by the opening up of the new Portuguese route around the Cape of Good Hope. The decision to include the Strait of Hormuz, the site of a series of new Portuguese forts that blocked access to the Persian Gulf, is particularly telling.[37] The presence of Saint Nicholas, who was also patron saint of sailors and merchants, a role that in the Venetian context was emphasized during periods in which the republic's maritime power was threatened,[38] lends further support to this interpretation. But Moretto also seems to have acknowledged the religious flavor of contemporary discourse about India by including a clever allusion to the legend of Nicholas's proselytizing to non-Christian populations in Asia. As Pier Virgilio Begni Redona has noted, the large staff carried by one of the children in the painting is taken from an account in the *Legendea aurea* in which the saint converts a non-believer in the Anatolian city of Myra to Christianity by means of a hollow staff filled with money (Moretto has affixed the coins to the top of the staff).[39] In what seems like an acknowledgment of recent efforts to proselytize the Indian populations, one of the flowers sprouting from the staff that Nicholas used to convert non-Christians in Asia directly overlaps with the map of the region in the semi-dome.

II.

The Rovellio Altarpiece map also has much to tell us about Moretto's art – and in particular about the character and function of his much-vaunted naturalism. The altarpiece has always occupied a prominent position in the scholarly literature on the artist; for Adolfo Venturi, for instance, it represented the very apex of Moretto's achievement as a painter.[40] From the very beginning, commentators singled out the picture's striking naturalism. Ridolfi praised the work for the faithfulness with which it records reality, arguing that the remarkably naturalistic children in the foreground must have been painted from life.[41] As we have seen, similar claims have often been made for the figure of Saint Nicholas, thought to be a portrait of Rovellio himself. During the twentieth century, art historians began to identify the unflinching naturalism that previous generations had detected in the altarpiece as a defining characteristic not only of Moretto's work, but also of the school of painting that he had helped inaugurate. According to Roberto Longhi, who did much to advertise the veristic qualities of northern Italian painting, Brescian art in the wake of Moretto was characterized by "una certa calma fiducia di poter esprimere direttamente, senza mediazioni stilizzanti, la 'realtà' che sta intorno".[42] Longhi's view of the artist as the founder of a school of painting dedicated to reproducing "the unvarnished facts of everyday life" has endured,[43] and scholars have often seen the Rovellio Altarpiece in terms of this characteristically Brescian form of unmediated naturalism.[44]

While at first blush the allusion to a new, more empirical image of the world contained in the Rovellio Altarpiece might seem to confirm that Moretto was committed to the exacting representation of reality, the map actually complicates the traditional interpretation of the artist's naturalism. Indeed, certain features of the motif seem as though they were intended to suggest to the viewer that this is *not* a painting that precisely replicates the reality of her own world. To begin with, the projection of the map onto the internal, concave surface of the semi-dome and the rather paradoxical use of grey and gold have the effect of turning our world inside out. While perhaps incidental, this bizarre pictorial inversion might also have been intended to mark a central contradiction of *sacra conversazione* painting: that the scene that we are privileged enough to witness, despite being filled with naturalistic details which lure us in, takes place in a time and space entirely different from our own.[45] The map's

[37] On Portuguese Muscat and Hormuz, see Pius Malekandathil, "The Ottoman Expansion and the Portuguese Response in the Indian Ocean, 1500–1560", in: *idem*, *Maritime India: Trade, Religion and Polity in the Indian Ocean*, New Delhi 2010, pp. 109–124.

[38] Anastasia Kanellopoulou, "Venice, the Sea, and the Cult of St Nicholas", in: *Visible Exports/Imports: New Research on Medieval and Renaissance European Art and Culture*, ed. by Emily Jane Anderson/Jill Farquhar/John Richards, Newcastle 2012, pp. 181–209: 184.

[39] Begni Redona (note 4), p. 319. For the account, see Jacobus de Voragine (note 8), pp. 25f.

[40] Venturi (note 5), p. 162.

[41] Ridolfi (note 3), I, p. 247.

[42] Roberto Longhi, "Dal Moroni al Ceruti", in: *Paragone*, IV (1953), pp. 18–36: 19. See also *idem*, "Cose bresciane del Cinquecento" [1917], in: *idem*, *Scritti giovanili, 1912-1922*, I, Florence ^{2}1961, pp. 327–343.

[43] Andrea Bayer, "Brescia and Bergamo: Humble Reality in Sixteenth-Century Devotional Art and Portraiture," in: *Painters of Reality: The Legacy of Leonardo and Caravaggio in Lombardy*, exh. cat. New York 2004, ed. by *eadem*, New Haven 2004, pp. 105–112: 106.

[44] For Boselli (note 5), p. 102, who lamented what he perceived to be the picture's overdependence upon the Pala Pesaro, there was still something unmistakably and reassuringly Brescian in Moretto's realistic rendering of details like the weeds sprouting from the stone arch. In a similar vein, Panazza (note 6), p. 128, argued that the naturalistic treatment of the four little boys presaged the work of Giacomo Ceruti.

[45] According to Felix Thürlemann, "this fictional paradox – strongest possible mimetic immediacy versus radical, utopian distance – is inherent in the functional definition of the Sacra Conversazione and must be confronted by every painter who wishes to produce a work of this type" (Felix Thürlemann, "Fictionality in Mantegna's San Zeno Altarpiece: Structures of Mimesis and the History of Painting", in: *New Literary History*, XX [1988/89], pp. 747–761: 749).

8 Bernardo Zenale,
Deposition (detail),
1509. Brescia,
San Giovanni Evangelista

ambivalent status with respect to the rest of the picture also seems designed to signal that, as an avowedly artificial creation, the world of the painting is not contiguous with the world of the viewer. By virtue of its ostensibly accidental formation out of the disintegrating mosaics of the semi-dome, the map qualifies as an 'image made by chance', a recognizable form that appears fortuitously in unworked materials. The early modern discourse on chance images, to which writers like Alberti and Leonardo contributed, addressed themes like the creative capacity of nature and the power of the human imagination.[46] But of course the chance images that appeared in works by artists like Mantegna, who included a now-famous figure of a rider in the cloudy sky of his *Saint Sebastian* (ca. 1460) at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, were emphatically artificial creations through which their makers laid claim to those same capacities.[47] Another potentially useful concept with which to consider Moretto's map is that of the hidden or 'crypto-image', a term coined by Jean-Didier Urbain in order to describe a motif that oscillates between visibility and invisibility within another, larger work of art.[48] Moretto would certainly have been familiar with local examples of the phenomenon, including the faces that appear in the rock formations of Bernardo Zenale's *Deposition* (Fig. 8), a work painted for the Cappella del Sacramento in the church of San Giovanni Evangelista, Brescia, where Moretto and his colleague Girolamo Romanino would later paint a series of pictures of Old and New Testament subjects.[49] He may even have known works like Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo's *Mary Magdalene* (Fig. 9), in which the folds of the grey satin shawl over the figure's left arm assume the shape of a smiling human face, as Michael Fried has pointed out.[50] For Giacomo Berra, such details bare upon a fundamental distinction between mimetic and elective modes of artistic production, sitting somewhere between the two: artists who included such motifs were copying nature's image-making abilities rather than its forms.[51]

There are of course a number of formal and conceptual differences between the Rovellio Altarpiece map and the images hidden by Zenale and Savoldo in their works, chief among them the explicitness of the map, which corresponds much more closely with its iconic referent than do the face-like

[46] On chance images, see Horst W. Janson, "The 'Image Made by Chance' in Renaissance Thought", in: *De Artibus Opuscula XL: Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. by Millard Meiss, New York 1961, pp. 254–266; Giacomo Berra, "Immagini casuali, figure nascoste e natura antropomorfa nell'immaginario artistico rinascimentale", in: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, XLIII (1999), pp. 358–419.

[47] On the meta-pictorial quality of Mantegna's cloud rider, see Stephen J. Campbell, "Cloud-Poiesis: Perception, Allegory, Seeing the Other", in: *Senses of Sight: Towards a Multisensorial Approach of the Image. Essays in Honor of Victor I. Stoichita*, ed. by Henri de Riedmatten *et al.*, Rome 2015, pp. 7–36.

[48] Jean-Didier Urbain, "La crypto-image ou le palimpseste iconique", in: *Eidos*, V (1991), pp. 1–16; *idem*, "La crypto-image – ou les ruses de la communication figurative", in: *Degrés*, LXIX/LXX (1992), pp. 3–15. See also Berra (note 46); Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, London 2002, pp. 9–42.

[49] See Berra (note 46), p. 384.

[50] Michael Fried, *Painting with Demons: The Art of Gerolamo Savoldo*, London 2021, pp. 100f. Fried's comments on the picture are part of an extended examination of the face-like forms hidden in a number of the artist's paintings.

[51] Berra (note 46), p. 401.

forms in the San Giovanni Evangelista *Deposition* or the London *Magdalene*, and the fact that it conjures up an entirely different conception of the creative capacities of nature than a rock or even a drapery fold that assumes a suggestively anthropomorphic shape. Nevertheless, each of these motifs makes a similarly forceful claim about the creativity and imagination of its maker as well as the perceptiveness required of its implied beholder. In the case of the Rovellio Altarpiece, a number of other details included in the picture amplify that claim. Since antiquity, commentators on chance images had often focused their attention on the mimetic forms that appeared in colored stones and on dirty, mud-stained walls. In his unfinished treatise on the art of painting, Leonardo includes the following advice for the aspiring artist:

> Look at walls splashed with a number of stains or stones of various mixed colors. If you have to invent some scene, you can see there resemblances to a number of landscapes, adorned in various ways with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, great plains, valleys and hills. Moreover, you can see various battles, and rapid actions of figures, strange expressions on faces, costumes, and an infinite number of things, which you can reduce to good, integrated form. This happens thus on walls and varicolored stones, as in the sound of bells, in whose pealing you can find every name and world you can imagine.[52]

Given the prominent role accorded to such details in a centuries-old discourse on chance images, the colorful veined marbles and mud stained walls in the Rovellio Altarpiece, copious even by the standards of Moretto's oeuvre, were probably not included in the picture merely to reinforce a sense of "mimetic transparency".[53] Even if no recognizable forms emerge from these details, their presence still suggests that the altarpiece in which they are found is brimming with potential significance that can only be accessed by an attentive and imaginative viewer. As eloquent an expression of the creative power of pictorial artifice as anything in the work of either Zenale or Savoldo, Moretto's map reminds us that the world of the Rovellio Altarpiece is as much a product of the minds of its creator and beholder as it is of an empirical technique involving the precise replication of visual data.

9 Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo, *Mary Magdalene* (detail), ca. 1535-1540. London, National Gallery

[52] "se tu riguarderai in alcuni muri imbrattati di varie machie o pietre di varij misti se havai [*sic*] a mentionare qualche sito potrai lì vedere similitudini de diversi paesi, hornati di montagne, fiumi, sassi, alberi, pianure grande, valli, e colli in diversi modi anchora vi potrai vedere diverse battaglie et atti pronti di figure strane, arie di volti e abitti et infinite cose le quali tu potrai ridure in integra e bona forma, ch'interviene in simili muri, e misti, come del sono delle campane che ne' loro tocchi vi troverai ogni nome e vocabolo che tu ti 'nmaginerai" (Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting [Codex Urbinas Latinus 1270]*, ed. by Amos Philip McMahon, Princeton 1956, I, p. 50, and II, c. 35v).

[53] The term is taken from Louis Marin, *On Representation*, Stanford 2001 (first ed. Paris 1994), p. 184.

10 Brescia, Santa Maria dei Miracoli, high altar with *Madonna dei Miracoli*

By virtue of its contrived spontaneity and purposefully contingent visibility, the map complicates the traditional art historical interpretation of Moretto as the founder of a school devoted to the direct, unmediated representation of reality. The motif may even indicate a self-conscious interest in what we would call the epistemology of vision; after all, there is something undeniably ironic, even tongue-in-cheek about a map that, despite relying upon the latest first-hand knowledge of the geography of the lands that it purports to represent, is both carefully concealed and physically unstable.[54] Viewed from this perspective, the map's intentionally compromised visibility and precarious physical condition draw attention both to the potential fallibility or gullibility of human vision – the very sense responsible for gathering the information out of which the new, more empirically-grounded understanding of the world was then being constructed – and to the provisional nature of whatever knowledge it garners. After all, the detail is likely to go unobserved by most viewers and its shape, and by extension our understanding of the world, will almost certainly change as individual tesserae succumb to the damp that ravages the architecture in which they are set.

The forceful proclamations of the originative power of painters and paintings and the equally ambivalent empirical and epistemological claims offered by the map have important religious implications.[55] Indeed, the inclusion of the motif within an altarpiece raises questions about the suitability of both painting and vision as means of accessing the divine. These questions must be understood in relation to the spiritual preoccupations articulated in the devotional literature produced and consumed in Brescia between 1520 and 1550, much of which was dedicated to helping the reader to transcend the physical world and achieve spiritual union with Christ.[56] Because their

[54] We might even see the Rovellio Altarpiece as having made an early contribution to a growing early modern preoccupation with the reliability of the perceptual means through which we come to know the truth about the world around us. On that issue, see Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture*, Oxford *et al.* 2007.

[55] Moretto was not the only sixteenth-century painter who indulged in religiously motivated visual trickery. Michel Weemans and Ralph Dekoninck have argued that the carefully disguised crypto-images included by artists like Herri met de Bles and Pieter Bruegel in their works were intended to prompt the viewer to consider differences between corporeal vision and spiritual discernment (Michel Weemans, "Herri met de Bles's *Way to Calvary*: A Silenic Landscape", in: *Art History*, XXXII [2009], pp. 307–331; Ralph Dekoninck, "Falling Idols, Rising Icons: Bruegel's *Flight into Egypt* and the Embeddedness of Sacred Images in Nature", in: *Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Religion*, ed. by Bertram Kaschek/Jürgen Müller/Jessica Buskirk, Leiden/Boston 2018, pp. 226–244).

[56] See *Aspirazioni e devozioni: Brescia nel Cinquecento tra preghiera e eresia*, exh. cat. Brescia 2006, ed. by Ennio Ferraglio, Milan 2006.

goal was to help the reader move beyond physical reality, writers like Angela Merici, with whom Moretto was acquainted, and Benedetto Mantova, the author of the anonymously-published best-seller *Il beneficio di Cristo*, tended to describe the material world in quite disparaging terms.[57] Indeed Merici's entire program presupposed that union with Christ required "spiritual or inner detachment from worldly things", as Querciolo Mazzonis has noted.[58] In a similar vein, one could argue that the hyperbolic naturalism of the Rovellio Altarpiece, a quality that evokes but does not quite reproduce the material reality of this world, was intended to provide a starting point for a contemplative mode of viewing that would guide the viewer away from the physical world and towards the divine. In this interpretation, the cleverly concealed map of India would, when noticed, fracture the already strained rhetoric of mimetic transparency offered up by the picture's crumbling setting and veristic details, thereby exhorting the viewer to move beyond visual scrutiny to a higher, anagogical form of discernment. The potential rewards of such a move are suggested by the references encoded in the composition of the altarpiece. While probably derived from Titian's Pala Pesaro, the strong diagonal axis of the picture also replicates the circumstances in which early sixteenth-century visitors to Santa Maria dei Miracoli would have encountered a miraculous fifteenth-century fresco of the *Virgin and Child* (Fig. 10) which was then visible in an elevated niche on the façade of the building.[59] Through this visual rhyme, Moretto draws a mutually beneficial connection between his own work and an important miracle-working image located on the same site. While formal relationship between the two images implies that the fruits of spiritual devotion to the *Madonna dei Miracoli* are similar to the privileged experience granted to Saint Nicholas-Rovellio, the validation of the power of the miraculous fresco ultimately redounds to the benefit of the altarpiece itself, which, by virtue of its proximity to a cult image of the same subject, announces itself as an effective vehicle for spiritual devotion.

This reading of the Rovellio Altarpiece is consistent with a recent reinterpretation of Brescian naturalism offered by Stephen Campbell.[60] Recognizing the "limits of carnal vision" as well as the "perils attending on an overreliance on the sense of sight", the painters working in and around Brescia in the early and mid-sixteenth century included passages of calculated artificiality in their ostensibly naturalistic paintings in order to remind their viewer of the ultimate referentiality of their works.[61] The suggestion that in such passages Moretto and his colleagues display a reform-minded concern with the status of images and the vagaries of human vision may help us to understand why the artist concealed a map in the crumbling architectural background of the Rovellio Altarpiece. The cryptic motif may have been designed to prompt the devout viewer to consider the difference between mere corporeal sight and true spiritual discernment. The selection of a new, more empirically-grounded map of the Indian Ocean littoral that figures the waning influence of the previously authoritative Ptolemaic image of the region as the basis for such a motif is a particularly clever way of suggesting, in Campbell's words, "the always provisional and referential nature of the apparently literal".[62]

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[57] On Merici, see Querciolo Mazzonis, *Spirituality, Gender, and the Self in Renaissance Italy: Angela Merici and the Company of St. Ursula (1474–1540)*, Washington, D.C., 2007. On Moretto and the *Beneficio*, see Giuseppe Fusari, "Moretto e il *Beneficio di Cristo*", in: *Aspirazioni e devozioni* (note 56), pp. 60–71.

[58] Mazzonis (note 57), p. 169.

[59] On the original location of the cult image, which was subsequently relocated to the high altar of the church, see Ceriana (note 7), p. 75.

[60] Stephen J. Campbell, "Renaissance Naturalism and the Jewish Bible: Ferrara, Brescia, Bergamo, 1520–1540", in: *Judaism and Christian Art: Aesthetic Anxieties from the Catacombs to Colonialism*, conference proceedings Baltimore, Md., 2007, ed. by Herbert L. Kessler/David Nirenberg, Philadelphia, Pa., *et al.* 2011, pp. 291–327. See also Kirk Nickel, *Alessandro Moretto and the Decomposition of the Painter's Art in Renaissance Brescia*, PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania 2016.

[61] Campbell (note 60), p. 318.

[62] *Ibidem*, p. 320.

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