An Early Modern Dialogue with Islam
Antonio de Sosa’s Topography of Algiers (1612)

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Introduction

*An Early Modern Dialogue with Islam: Antonio de Sosa’s Topography of Algiers (1612)* is the first English translation of a riveting chronicle of European and North African cultural contacts. Written by the Portuguese cleric Doctor Antonio de Sosa while he was held prisoner in Algiers between 1577 and 1581, and published posthumously in Spain thirty years later (1612), the *Topography* is a fascinating eyewitness account of cultural life in Algiers near the end of the sixteenth century.

No other European work takes us so deeply into the quotidian life of an Islamic city during the early modern period, a time of expansion and glory for the Ottoman Empire and its territories, especially for its farthest western province, the Turkish-Algerian Regency. In 1519, at the culmination of a seven-years’ war of conquest of the Barbary Coast, Khayr al-Din Barbarossa, the most formidable of all corsairs operating in the western Mediterranean, sought help from Sultan Selim I against the Spaniards, offering to place Algiers under the mantle of the Ottoman Empire. Algiers soon became a *sandjak*, or province, attached to the Ottoman Porte, while Barbarossa obtained the title of governor-general, as well as two thousand Turkish janissaries and artillery, a force later expanded by four thousand other Levantine Muslims and corsairs who enlisted in the Algerian militia.

During the next fifty years, the influx of Turks, Christian converts to Islam, and corsairs from all over the world turned Algiers into the greatest of the North African seaports dedicated to privateering. The arrival of thousands of Christian slaves and booty, seized each year in attacks on the coasts of Spain and Italy or its islands and on Christian ships that ventured into the Mare Nostrum, turned Algiers into the
corsair capital par excellence of the Mediterranean. Surpassing in captives and riches the powerful Christian corsair centers of Valetta (Malta) and Leghorn (Livorno) on the Tyrrenian Sea, with their *bagnios* (slave prisons), their slave markets, and their sordid transactions, Algiers became known in Europe as the “the scourge of Christendom.” By the mid 1570s, when the soldier Miguel de Cervantes and the cleric Antonio de Sosa arrived in the city as captives, Algiers had become the principal naval power of the western Mediterranean.

The *Topography of Algiers*, the first book of Sosa’s *Topographia, e Historia general de Argel* [Topography and General History of Algiers], paints a lively portrait of daily life in this prosperous Muslim city in the last years of the 1570s. A crossroads of civilizations, Algiers was a booming urban center inhabited by a sophisticated multilingual society, consisting of Turks, Arabs, Berbers, Christian captives, Jews, exiled Hispano-Muslims (Moriscos), and converts to Islam from different parts of the world. Recreating the quotidian existence of this multicultural society, the *Topography* brings to life the colorful facets that characterized its social, cultural, religious, military, and commercial activities. Sosa’s work, in effect, stands out for its complexity, its vitality, and the sharpness of the author’s ethnographic vision. Anyone who peruses this text will be fascinated by the vibrancy of its descriptions, the wealth of astounding customs presented, and the amount of historical detail that frames its chapters. In the words of a French critic, no other account of captivity in this period “offers such a complete, animated, and live tableau of Algerian society at the end of the sixteenth century.”

Sosa’s monumental *Topographia, e Historia general de Argel* is divided into five books. The first, the *Topography* proper, contains a meticulous description of the city of Algiers and of its inhabitants and their customs. The second book, *Epítome de los reyes de Argel* [History of the Kings of Algiers], chronicles in detail the history of its rulers from the foundation of the State of Algiers by the Barbarossa brothers to the last decades of the sixteenth century. The third part of the *Topographia* contains two dialogues on captivity, *De la captividad* [On Captivity] and *De los mártires de Argel* [Of the Algerian Martyrs], and one on theological disquisitions, *De los morabutos* [Of the Marabouts]. Such dialogues furnish the eloquent testimony of a writer who endured the torments
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suffered by thousands of Christian captives in Barbary. Our present English translation focuses on the first book of Sosa’s notable chronicle, the Topography of Algiers.

Complexities of the Topography of Algiers

A unique source of information on early modern Algiers, the Topography of Algiers offers numerous complexities to the literary historian. The first question that challenges the reader concerns the profoundly interdisciplinary scope of this work, which is at once an ethnographic, historical, and literary production. An anthology of its best pages would demonstrate a fine narrative gift, significant power of characterization, and a keen talent for ethnographic observation. Marvelous and sometimes even humorous anecdotes, distinguished by a conspicuous literary flavor, traverse the Topography. A noteworthy example is the story of a dwarf revered in Algiers, “who for being a dwarf was considered a marabout and a saint. They believed that anyone he cursed would be doomed by what he said and that if they prayed to him for blessings he would grant them” (chapter 35). In addition, many passages of the Topography stand out for their lucid eloquence. Yet no anthology could do the work justice. To appreciate the Topography properly, one must read it entirely, letting chapter after chapter enkindle one’s imagination through the avalanche of characters, métiers, and key aspects of Algerian culture portrayed from beginning to end.

A second difficulty of the Topography emerges from its various and at times contradictory perspectives, which give the work a kaleidoscopic quality. Indeed, one could infer now and then that we are dealing with two authors. The first decries the religious beliefs and practices of Turks and Algerians, while the second praises the piety of good Muslims. For instance, when speaking of the Qur’an, Sosa states: “the whole text consists of an infinite number of tall stories that Muhammad dreamed up, all contrary to good doctrine and repugnant to reason and all philosophy and science” (chapter 27). An ensuing passage, in turn, reveals his respect for certain admirable qualities of Muslims:
He who finally determines to live like a good Muslim is indeed a devout one, and the elders are as observant of the Law and as devout in making the salat at the proper hours, . . . fasting, and abstaining from wine and liquor. Christians, God willing, should be as devout in their holy observances of the precepts of God.” (chapter 37)

The text abounds in such ambiguities. Turkish immigrants to Algiers “are the vilest of people, stupid and villainous, and for this reason the Turks call them jackals.” Yet “some have turned out, and still turn out, to be men of worth and valor” (chapter 12). As a man of the Church, Sosa could not avoid prejudice, as we shall see, and his purpose was in part propagandist. As a result, his chronicle is marked by a radical cultural distance that separates the author’s worldviews from the customs and religious traditions of the Algerians.

Nonetheless, the Portuguese captive produced a meticulously comprehensive and methodical work. As suggested earlier, readers will be struck by the multiplicity of customs and events described in the text and by the clarity of its images and characterizations. Sosa’s views, however, fluctuate according to the topics that pique his interest. Women’s lifestyles, for instance, their quotidian activities, religious rites, marriage customs, celebrations, and fashions, attracted so much attention on Sosa’s part that he dedicated three long chapters to such issues. If his research about Algerian women and their mores is, indeed, exceptional, his curiosity for the minutiae of their daily life is astounding. In relation to women’s hair, the author affirms:

Unlike the women in Christian lands who prize their hair and try to make it blonde and golden, here on the contrary all the women—Moors, Turks, and renegades—try to make their hair as black as possible, for which they use certain products, largely oils with a good scent that the merchants of Valencia tend to bring. (chapter 32)

Not even women’s makeup escapes his keen eye:

Their makeup is different from that used by Christian women, because they use a great deal of bleaching agents and even more rouge.
And they also use a very black product made from certain materials to paint designs on their cheeks, chin, and forehead, such as marks, cloves, and rosettes. (chapter 32)

Sosa’s fascination with Algerian women, with their intricate hairdos and headdresses, their jewelry and elaborate clothing, including their footwear, is extraordinary, especially for a man of the Church: “All the women, be they Moors, Turks, or renegades, ordinarily tend to walk around their homes barefoot, although sometimes they wear some slippers of gilt leather on their feet, with open toes and some fringes or tassels of silk, not very high and always very elegant and well designed” (chapter 32). Again, this outlook does not impede the author from severely criticizing Algerian women for living a leisurely life, dedicated to continuous parties and celebrations:

The seventh activity of Algerian women is partying. They keep busy continually going to weddings and feast days that other women host throughout the year. . . . Not content to dance away the whole day, the women dance well into the night too, and a husband has to be all the time looking out that his woman returns to her home. (chapter 33)

Evaluating the author’s intricate subject positions in the twenty-first century, then, is a demanding job, first because of his oscillating views on Algerian society, and second, because our perception of the cultural frontiers across the Mediterranean differ widely from that of a Portuguese theologian brought up and educated in sixteenth-century Spain.7

“I Know Everything that Occurs in Algiers”

Sosa’s statement, repeated with variations throughout the Topographia, functions as a leitmotif for his fascinating account of life in a Muslim city in the last decades of the sixteenth century. A member of the Church hierarchies in Spanish Sicily and closely connected to Philip II’s
court in Madrid, Sosa was captured by Algerian corsairs in 1577 while traveling from Barcelona to Valetta (Malta) on his way to Sicily.\(^8\) His own allusions to his sufferings as a Barbary slave during four and a half years suggest that his captivity was one of the hardest in Algiers. If this ordeal colored his view of the Algerians, especially of Turks and renegades, it was further darkened by his being a man of the Church, influenced by early modern apologetic treatises that argued for the religious superiority of Christianity over Islam. A long history of atavistic conflicts between the peoples of East and West colored these polemics, as much as for the Christians as for the Muslims.

On the Christian side, scholars of the period emphasized a widespread belief in the perils and evils of “Islam.”\(^9\) Not only did Muslims represent a fundamental hedonism that Christians radically condemned, but also their religion was regarded as a farce created by the devil.\(^10\) Christian apologetic works characterized Muhammad as an impostor, a great heresiarch, and the creator of a false religion operating by diabolical inspiration. He was, moreover, accused of being sexually promiscuous, a man trapped in his preoccupation with the body.\(^11\) Dante’s placement of Muhammad and his son-in-law ‘Ali in that bolgia in hell into which are thrown the “sowers of scandal and schism” [seminator di scandalo e di scisma] sheds light on the Christian vision of Islam (Inferno 28.35).\(^12\) According to these views, Muslims were peculiarly treacherous, malicious, and characterized by their unbridled sexuality.\(^13\) Christian authors portrayed them as inconstant and undetermined, using such arguments to explain the disorderly ways and frequent disruptions of North African governments. Other Europeans affirmed that Muslims lacked the fundamental beliefs needed for the constitution of modern societies.\(^14\)

An erudite man, especially familiar with the Greek and Roman classics and the works of the church fathers, Sosa was determined to prove the errors of Islam and, above all, to portray the tortures inflicted by the Algerian corsairs on their white slaves. This enterprise illustrates his overt efforts to document the sufferings of Christian captives in Barbary, as confirmed by the subtitle of his five-book Topographia: “Which will Exhibit Strange Cases, Horrific Deaths, and Extraordinary Tortures that Christianity Needs to Understand.” This subtitle, probably
introduced in 1612 as a sales pitch for the whole work, should only apply to Sosa’s two Dialogues on captivity in Algiers, which constitute the third part of his monumental chronicle together with a theological debate with Islam.

From an ethnographic perspective, however, Sosa was a careful observer of Algerian customs, one who worked tirelessly to gather a massive amount of information on the history and mores of the city. He reiterates throughout his work that his informers were Christian captives and galley slaves, janissaries, Turks, Jews, and Islamicized Spaniards or Italians, that is, converts to Islam. Furthermore, the writings of both Sosa and Cervantes on Algiers suggest that captivity can be viewed as a mode of continuous eyewitnessing that transforms the captive (malgré lui) into an intimate observer of a different culture. In this sense, Sosa often presents himself as a witness who testifies about a custom or experience he has personally observed or lived through. His statement “cualdo pasa en Argel sé, y aun lo escribo todo, día por día” [I know everything that occurs in Algiers, and I even write it all down completely, day by day],15 not only draws attention to his insatiable curiosity about contemporary events occurring in this Muslim capital, but also to his interest in collecting all kinds of ethnographic information for the composition of his texts.

On various occasions, the Topography alludes to Sosa’s dialogue with Muslim, Jewish, or renegade interlocutors. For instance, speaking of the Jews in Algiers, the author states: “I can attest to this, having debated with some of them not infrequently” (chapter 28). Likewise, referring to the religious beliefs of Muslims: “I could never convince them (although I argued with them about this)” (chapter 35); and in relation to the religious “obstinacy” of the Algerians: “one can hardly find somebody who wishes to listen to reason, let alone obey” (chapter 36). Evoking a sophisticated social arena that allowed encounters, conversations, and even religious discussions among Muslims, Jews, Christians, and renegades, such phrases also speak to the fluidity of relations across the Christian-Muslim divide in Barbary. Certainly, the high levels of immigration and mobility common to a bustling seaport such as Algiers were likely to encourage a wide range of cultural exchanges among the ethnic and religious groups that inhabited the city.
Circuits of Exchange

Sosa’s chronicle particularly highlights these cultural exchanges. In this sense, his work implicitly questions facile distinctions between East and West: his reiterated mention of the “renegades,” as Christian converts to Islam were called in Europe, speaks for itself. The fact that these “Turks by profession”—Christians who decided to “turn Turk”—constituted more than half of the population of Algiers around 1580–1581 stresses the continuous crossings of religious and political boundaries in the early modern Mediterranean. Such crossings led to the creation of a new frontier society that lived in the in-between, simultaneously partaking of various cultures. Bringing with them their technical proficiencies and abilities, the renegades would often attain lucrative positions and successful lives as corsairs, soldiers, artisans, translators, or secretaries to the Ottoman rulers, both in the Maghreb and in Constantinople.

Many sections of the Topography, moreover, corroborate the particular physical and social mobility linked to the raids launched by the Barbary corsairs for the capture of slaves in the western Mediterranean. Paradoxically, the extreme geopolitical tension produced by the privateering war between western Europe and the Muslim Mediterranean intensified the flow of persons, as well as linguistic, cultural, and commercial exchanges, in a parallel way to the conflict. In effect, the expansion of both North African and European corsair activities multiplied the circulation of men and, to a lesser degree, women, from many countries and social categories. Corsair activity, Fernand Braudel reminds us, necessarily demands a circuit of exchange; it is inseparable from commerce. Algiers would not have become a great corsair center had it not been, at the same time, an active commercial center. In order to obtain provisions and victuals, as well as to resell its slaves, the city welcomed the arrival of foreign ships and caravans from all over Europe that came to ransom captives and to do business with Algerian merchants.

Some of Sosa’s chapters, in fact, shed light on the multiple passages and intensive commercial activities of these merchants, who traded in various European cities and regions, such as London, Marseille, Genoa, Naples, Sicily, Valencia, and Barcelona, as well as Constantinople and several North African seaports and capitals. The author highlights the
momentum created by the “wheels of commerce” radiating from early modern Algiers, a city famous for its privateering, its traffic in human lives, and its reputation as a land of riches for the Ottoman Turks. His chapter on the languages spoken in Algiers, especially on the lingua franca of Barbary—“a mixture of various Christian languages, largely Italian and Spanish words with some recently added Portuguese terms”—as well as his detailed discussion of the currencies used in this thriving urban center, sheds light on these issues (chapter 29).

The constant presence in the North African littoral of Iberian merchants, shipmasters, and mariners negotiating the liberty of Christian slaves demonstrates that the repeated prohibitions of the Spanish Crown regarding commerce with Barbary were always revoked in response to the pressures of the cities, merchants, or viceroys who provided new licenses for these endeavors. Certainly, the Topography’s frequent allusions to economic exchanges and relations with other countries situate both the role of privateering and commercial ventures launched by the city of Algiers in the arena of world economics. In his Diálogo de la captividad en Argel [Dialogue of Captivity in Algiers], Sosa’s spokesman and interlocutor, Antonio González de Torres, a Knight of Saint John of Malta, affirms that in Turkey, Romania, Anatolia, and Syria, “they all talk of Algiers as we [the Iberians] speak of the Indies.”

Along these lines, Braudel has suggested that the sixteenth-century Mediterranean functioned as a world economy stimulated by its commercial activities. Centered especially in Venice, Milan, Florence, Genoa, Valencia, Barcelona, and Cádiz, as well as in Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli, and Constantinople in the eastern Mediterranean, these enterprises ignored papal prohibitions against engaging in commerce with the “infidels.” Business endeavors took no notice of the limits between cultures that divided the Mediterranean at the time: the Greek civilization, controlled by the Turks; the various Muslim cultures, assembled in Constantinople and North Africa; or the Christian culture, established in Rome, Florence, and Madrid. The Topography confirms that Christians and Muslims confronted each other continuously across the North-South frontier that divided the Levant from the western Mediterranean—an imaginary line that extended from the Adriatic coasts to Sicily, and to the coastal zone of Tunis. Even so, although the battles between Christians and
Muslims were literally fought on the edge of these frontiers, merchant ships crossed these limits every day. Many of these vessels continuously arrived in, and sailed from, Algiers, as Sosa’s chronicle repeatedly demonstrates.

Urban Topographies and City Views

Sosa’s description of the city of Algiers and its inhabitants in the 1570s demonstrates an obsessive concern with detail in regard to its urban topography. The very title *Topography of Algiers* highlights the urban scope of his enterprise, centered on the description of a Muslim city with its principal landmarks, walls, buildings, and streets. Certainly, the Renaissance rediscovery of Ptolemy, whose *Cosmographia*, translated into Latin in 1410 and subsequently reprinted in many editions, appears to have inspired many writers and artists as well as multiple cartographic projects promoted by European rulers, popes, and noblemen. The discovery of the New World in the last years of the fifteenth century, moreover, produced a cartographic revolution represented in the lapse of time that stretches from Juan de la Cosa’s *Portulano* (1500), where the Americas appear first time, to the Atlas produced by Mercator in 1569, the projections of which facilitated the construction of spheres and even the development of the art of piloting. Fueled by early modern science, Atlantic navigation, and the enormous success of the printing press, this cartographic revolution created an extraordinary production of maps of all kinds, among which city views and topographies were mostly favored in Europe.

Yet the Europeans in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance also wrote about the cities where they lived. Renaissance architects privileged the notion of the city as *urbs*—that is, as a physical unity, with stone or brick houses—a concept, in turn, influenced by the Roman architect and engineer Vitruvius (ca. 80–70 BC–ca. 15 BC). His popular work *Ten Books of Architecture* not only offered precise details on how to construct an ideal city but also inspired many Renaissance architectural treatises, especially *De Rei Aedificatoria* (ca. 1450), the most important study on the city of that period, composed by the Florentine humanist Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472). Together with other contemporary
architects, Alberti helped to transmit the idea that the nobility and greatness of a city essentially depended on the quality of the urbs, which was reflected in the architecture and magnificence of its edifices, in the strength of its ramparts, and in the design of its plazas and streets.  

Such interest in the physical aspects of the city illuminates the ongoing production of urban maps and panoramic views, which created a new genre in the Renaissance, the topographic landscape. These paintings presented the city in a bird’s eye perspective that no eye had ever enjoyed. As Michel de Certeau has argued, this fiction turned the spectator into a “celestial eye. It created gods.”

The panoramic city view included plans of antique urban centers, townscapes, perspectives, and panoramas, such as those produced by Georg Braun (1541–1622) and Franz Hogenberg (1535–1590) in their Civitates orbis terrarum (1572–1616), an impressive collection of 564 large and small city maps and plans from Europe, Africa, Asia, and Spanish America, which was a bestseller in Europe. A celebration of European history and culture, the Civitates orbis terrarum was conceived as a companion to the great atlas produced by Abraham Ortelius, Theatrum orbis terrarum, published in Antwerp in 1570, as confirmed by their similar titles and the complementary nature of both works.

About the same time, an explosion of urban sceneries and topographical representations arrived in Spain with the reign of Philip II, who promoted massive projects for the drawing of city maps and sweeping views of Iberian cities and towns. Between 1562 and 1570, the Flemish painter Anton van den Wyngaerde, known in Spain as Antonio de las Viñas, traveled through the Iberian Peninsula, with orders from Philip II to produce a pictorial record of Spain’s principal cities. Distinguished by their topographical accuracy, Van den Wyngaerde’s panoramic views of sixty-two cities and towns constitute a unique visual record of sixteenth-century Spain. The artist also produced a series of paintings for Philip II’s palaces, which included panoramic views of London, Amsterdam, Ghent, Lisbon, Genoa, Naples, Milan, Rome, and Madrid, as well as of thirteen Spanish cities and Mexico City, displayed at the Alcázar, the royal palace in Madrid.

Certainly, large-scale urban vistas and bird’s-eye city views graced the palaces of kings, popes, and other statesmen in the second half of the sixteenth century. But a great revolution in mapmaking occurred
when the cities of the *Civitates orbis terrarum* appeared in print. Both Braun and Hogenberg’s *Civitates* and Ortelius’s *Theatrum* arrived at a time in which printed books, adorned with lavish illustrations, were sold at prices that were accessible to the well-to-do classes. As Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin have suggested in their classic work on the impact of printing, *L’Apparition du livre*, print-capitalism not only created a new reading public in Europe but also exploited each potential vernacular market through a veritable international chain of publishing houses that crossed national frontiers in its search for new markets. A new group of readers arose who were interested in learning about the material and political reality of their kingdoms, including novel discoveries and utopias. The birth of the travel book, then, went hand in hand with the emergence, among the European bourgeoisie, of the reader and collector of maps and urban topographies. As printers and artists connected to matters of the market, the creators of the *Civitates* understood the need for illustrated travel books and collections of printed maps. In Georg Braun’s words, “What could be more agreeable than the reading of these books and the observation of the form of the earth from the comfort of one’s own home, far away from any danger?” Braun argued that the fact that these books were “adorned with the splendor of cities and fortresses” would help readers, “through the contemplation of these figures and the reading of the accompanying texts, to acquire a knowledge that they could have only obtained, in a partial way, through the suffering caused by long and difficult journeys.”

Pedro García Martín claims that the plates of the *Civitates* already illustrated all the utilities that maps can present to the historian. To humanists these maps offered explicit knowledge of the world beyond their direct sphere of influence; to kings and rulers, the promise of future conquests. To merchants they represented novel commercial opportunities, to travelers, the way to explore exciting new worlds. The maps often allude to political regimes, such as the views of Venice, the symbol of a model republic, or the vistas of Cuzco and Mexico City (Tenochtitlan), which evoke the exoticism of the New World. Other plates highlight economic issues or shed light on specific societies, such as the drawings that show a contingent of Spanish ships docked in Seville, the gateway to Spain’s colonies in America.
Most important, “mapmaking was one of the specialized intellectual weapons by which power could be gained, administered, given legitimacy and codified.” The use of maps ranges from strategizing wars to establishing property rights or land control. Because map production is based on a specific function or intention, maps are studied for their symbolic and rhetorical nature, including their narratives. Maps such as those depicted by the Civitates may elicit the military interest of their readers, illustrating city ramparts and fortifications, as shown in the plates of Palestinian cities or in the panoramic view of Algiers, discussed below. The Civitates’s lavish map of Constantinople (1572), the lost capital of Byzantium conquered by the Turks in 1453, demonstrates the central place occupied by the Ottomans in the political and intellectual preoccupations of the period.

The Civitates also includes an extraordinary map of Algiers with Latin and Italian inscriptions, entitled *Algerii Saracenorum urbis fortissimae, in Numidia Africae Provincia structae, inucta Balearicos fluctus Mediterranei aequoris Hispaniam contra Ottomanorum Principum imperio redactae* [Image of Algiers, Powerful City of the Sarracens, Constructed in Numidia, African Province, Not Far from the Balearic Waves of the Mediterranean Sea, Facing Spain, under the Yoke of the Ottoman Princes] (1575; fig. 1). This map circulated widely throughout Europe and was reprinted several times. Its title emphasizes not only the impact produced by the “powerful” city of Algiers in the Mediterranean Sea but also the situation of this urban center under the yoke of the Ottoman Empire. The military relevance of this bird’s-eye view for European viewers lay, as we shall see, in the meticulous portrayal of the formidable Muslim city, with its impressive fortifications and gates, its well-guarded port and harbor, and the strong fortresses that surrounded it.

Helen Hills has called attention to the fact that, rather than being objective representation of places, maps and plans are complex visual representations, which “draw on cultural codes and are enmeshed in power relationships.” Along these lines, Braun and Hogenberg’s map of Algiers significantly reflects Christian Europe’s preoccupation with the expanding geopolitical world, in particular, with the aggressive presence of the corsair capital in the western Mediterranean. More important, the specific political context in which this map of Algiers is
Figure 1. Map of Algiers [Algerii Saracenorum urbis fortissimae . . .] (1575?). Reproduced from Braun and Hogenberg, Civitates orbis terrarum (1575–1612). Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

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embedded sheds light on the way that maps are constructed around power relations. Critics have stated that, as much as cannons and warships, “maps have been the weapons of imperialism.”

Ricardo Padrón has argued in this sense that maps helped in the planning of military operations, in the construction of ramparts, and in the exploration of trade routes, especially maritime courses. The panoramic vista of Algiers by Braun and Hogenberg ratifies the importance of large city maps for the exercise of power, both physical and symbolic. Aided by textual indications in both Latin and Italian, the map allowed the city of Algiers to be discovered, explored, and (literally) conquered. In effect, this urban vista of Algiers exhibits the city’s inner secrets and its potentially vulnerable military points, such as a non-occupied fortress to the left and another to the right, clearly marked as such, several bastions and fortifications with their cannons, plainly viewed, including various sites marked by their significance for European spectators, such as the site of Charles V’s disembarkation during his 1541 failed attack on Algiers. Beyond the major mosques and houses of the principal *ra'isa* (plural of *ra'is*, corsair captain) and government officials, identified with different codes and place names in Italian, this panoramic view of Algiers shows the location of various palaces, such as the “Palazzo maggiore del Ré” [Principal palace of the king], the “Palazzo del Ré alla Marina, detto il novo” [The king’s palace at the harbor, called the new palace], and the “Palazzo di Luchiali, che é al presente Ré d’Algier” [The palace of Uludj ‘Ali, who at present is king of Algiers]. This townscape depicts the janissary barracks and the bagnios, or slave-prisons, such as the Bagnio of the Christians, the Bagnio de la Bastarda, as well as the “Bagnio de Mami Arraez Napolitano” [Prison of Mami Ra’is the Neapolitan], one of five private slave prisons. Additional amenities include a public prison for criminals, the Bagnio of the Lions and Other Animals (a zoo), the Hammam, or public baths, and the “Schola dove si legge la setta Mahometana” [School where the Muslim sect is taught]. Most interesting for contemporary readers are the references and marked sites of three synagogues then existing in Algiers, to wit: the principal giudeica, or synagogue, called “the Tall One” [Giudeica maggior, ouero alta], the Giudeica bassa [Low synagogue], and the Giudeica of Bal al-Wad.
Yet beyond the military ambitions of the Spanish Empire, clearly readable in this map, the lovely panoramic vista of the city of Algiers also evokes the European fascination with the colorful features and exotic qualities of this sophisticated Muslim metropolis. Sosa’s *Topography of Algiers*, with its detailed physical description of this urban center, can be read side by side with the contemporary map depicted in the *Civitates orbis terrarum*. Both works, composed in the same decade, reveal their attraction for the city of Algiers. Although we cannot be sure that Sosa was directly acquainted with this map, we may presume that, following his liberation and return to Madrid in 1581, or even after his return to Sicily in 1584, he could have admired the magisterial production by Braun and Hogenberg, which circulated widely throughout Europe. Be that as it may, Sosa’s work falls in the realm of urban topography or chorography, as defined by Apianus and other ancient and early modern cosmographers.43

“Walking in the City”

Topography, in the Ptolemaic method, was close to chorography, whose task was “to describe the smallest details of places.”44 Petrus Apianus (1495–1552), a close follower of Ptolemy and one of Charles V’s science teachers, gives the following definition of chorography:

Chorography is the same thing as Topography, which one can define as the plan of a place that describes and considers its peculiarities in isolation, without consideration or comparison of its parts either among themselves or in relation to other places. But, at the same time, chorography carefully takes note of all particularities and properties, as small as they may be, that are worth noting in such places, such as ports, towns, villages, river courses, and all similar things, including buildings, houses, towers, walls, and the like. The aim of chorography is to depict a particular place, just as an artist paints an ear or an eye or other parts of a man’s head.45

Sosa’s *Topography* is constructed according to the medieval schema through which every city, no matter how important, was described.
This plan depicted diverse elements in a repetitive identical order: first, the systems of defense, ramparts and fortresses; second, aspects of the streets, monuments, and particular houses; third, the political regime of the urban center and its administration, including its judicial organization; and fourth, the customs (both praiseworthy and reprehensible) of the population and, especially, of princes and leaders who governed the country. Roughly following this topographical model, Sosa departs from it in his introductory historical presentation, which relates the ancient history and the founding of Algiers, including how it came under the Turks. He also separates himself from this model by placing his illustration of the fertility and richness of the countryside at the end of his Topography, instead of at the beginning, as was the custom.

The canvas portrayed above thus functioned as a frame of a vision that begins in the outer region (the walls and ramparts of the city) and enters the city, approaching first the buildings, and then, the inhabitants, in order to focus on their customs. Each of the cited elements could be more or less expanded according to the circumstances. The canvas was especially developed in the case of the capital of a great kingdom, say, a seat of political power and theater of economic expansion, such as Algiers or Constantinople. Hence, among the cities described by travelers and geographers, Constantinople occupied the first place. Multiple portraits of the city confirm the validity and permanence of such a scheme. Between the early sixteenth and the end of the seventeenth centuries, and probably beyond, the descriptions of the Ottoman capital, whether from French, Spanish, or Italian writers, always obeyed an identical model.

The first chapters of Sosa’s Topography, in particular, illustrate Michel de Certeau’s concepts on “pedestrian speech acts.” The French philosopher posits that “the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to statements uttered.” In effect, walking constitutes a “process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian.” De Certeau proposes that one can conveniently transfer to manners of inhabiting and moving across a spatial order those interpretative categories applied to manners of inhabiting and traversing a linguistic order: “the courses taken by passers-by present a series of turns and detours that can be compared to ‘turns of
phrases’ or ‘stylistic figures.’” For de Certeau, there is a rhetoric of walking. The art of “turning phrases finds an equivalent in an art of ‘diverting’ itineraries.”

Sosa’s literal walks about the city of Algiers, together with the steps he takes in one and another direction create the space, weave the urban sites. His steps, counted and measured in his text, accompany his detailed descriptions of the ramparts, gates, fortifications, moat, castles, and forts outside Algiers, as well as those of the houses and streets of the city. In the case of an urban context, moreover, Sosa’s writings somehow function like a virtual, heuristic object that traverses pre-arranged routes, everyday itineraries, social divides and prohibitions, against which his detours acquire their significance and direction. Paraphrasing de Certeau, one could say that Sosa’s walks about Algiers are not only indicative of his distinct appropriation of a Muslim urban space—and of his fundamental encounters with the other: Moors, Turks, and renegades—but also of a more profound unconscious process, significantly redoubled, as it were, by his writing about “walking in the city.”

As de Certeau claims, the operations of walking can be traced on city maps in such a way as to set down their paths and their trajectories. Nevertheless, these thick or thin traces “only refer, like words, to the absence of what has passed by.” What cannot be recovered is “the act itself of passing by.” In Sosa’s case, however, there was a will to memorize, to recuperate his itineraries and his lost steps as he wrote about them each night after returning to his prison in Muhammad’s house. Like a travel story, Sosa’s itineraries throughout the city constitute both a tour and a map of early modern Algiers, which mark the military, political, architectural, and commercial figurations of his detailed geographical plan. His movements, shortcuts, and detours through the North African metropolis at once explore and transgress intimate or sacred places, even as his trajectories “speak” in various eloquent ways. Certainly, walking about the city as a captive could not have been easy, as Sosa himself confirms when he relates his experiences with hard labor in Algiers, in 1578, when he was forced to haul rocks and sand and to mix lime, while chained, or to stagger around the city dragging his heavy chains behind. Guarded by two renegades, Sosa was
sent to work in shackles and irons, burdened with fetters, not being fed until the evening. He states that the French captive Juan Gasco [Gascon], a compassionate friend, helped him in these trying labors, aiding him to carry rocks and sand, while they both worked at a construction site owned by Sosa’s owner Muhammad. As a high-ranking member of the Hispano-Italian Church, Sosa would normally not have been destined to hard labor. This may have been a strategy devised by his master in order to pressure his slave to write to the Spanish Crown requesting his ransom. In “The Captive’s Tale,” Cervantes recounts that elite captives were usually incarcerated in the “king’s” bagnio:

The king’s slaves, when they’re going to be ransomed, don’t get sent out to work with . . . [the common slaves], unless their ransom money is late coming, in which case, to make the captives write and urge that the money be sent faster, they force them to work with the others on public jobs and gathering firewood—which is no picnic (DQ I, 40).52

Such were some of the torments to which Sosa and other captives were subjected in Algiers.

As a slave who was dispossessed of everything that had given meaning to his life, Sosa attempted to search for, or confirm, his Iberian identity by writing down, at the end of each day, his keen observations in regard to the Muslim city and the people he encountered daily. Yet there is an oniric quality in this walking/writing that goes hand-in-hand: in spite of his vicissitudes as a captive in Algiers, Sosa’s Topography reveals a tacit love affair with the multicultural metropolis, the real protagonist of his work. The houses of this Mediterranean capital, so “very pretty and polished,” its fine mansions, “all with elegant and open patios,” as well as the “very sturdy and beautiful” Bath of Hasan Pasha, among other buildings, speak to Sosa’s attraction for the Muslim city that captivated him in body and soul (chapters 10; chapter 9). His text also discloses his fascination with the fertile countryside that surrounded this urban center, with its “infinite number of farms, orchards, and vineyards,” irrigated by “the great freshness of the streams,” so charming that “nobody could desire more” (chapter 40).
Introduction

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The publication of this book at the turn of the twenty-first century comes at a vital moment in history, when both North Americans and Europeans are asking more informed questions about the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims across the globe. In the United States, the debates on ethnic minorities, already vibrant since the 1960s, have been intensified by the tragic events of September 11, 2001. The complex dimensions of the United States’ political, military, economic, and cultural engagement with Muslim countries in the Middle East has had powerful consequences for both sides. The catastrophic events of September 11, as well as the wars in the Middle East, “demonstrate that Americans cannot afford to remain as uninformed as they have generally been about the histories, politics, and cultures of that region.”53 The past decades, then, have produced a great deal of criticism of, as well as polemics on, the way in which U.S. and other Western scholars have studied the peoples and cultures of the Middle East.54 On the other hand, the increasingly multiracial and multicultural components of European societies, with their millions of immigrants from both Muslim and non-Muslim nations, have led to exacerbated conflicts in various countries of the Old World.55 Such tensions have brought about a renewed attention to the history of the relations between Islam and the West on the part of European scholars. These vital concerns perhaps account for the proliferation of important books recently published in Europe and the United States that attempt to elucidate how the encounter between Muslims and Christians was negotiated in the past.

In Spain since the 1980s, Morisco studies have come into their prime. The plight of the Moriscos—the Hispano-Muslims who were obliged to convert to Christianity after the fall of Granada in 1492—including their history during the sixteenth century and their expulsion from Spain between 1609 and 1614, became a crucial topic in the final decades of the twentieth century, both in Spain and other European countries. Multiple publications, conferences, new academic journals, translations and re-editions of extant works on the last Moors of Iberia, as well as innovative courses, have appeared in the last twenty years. Historian Mercedes García-Arenal, a worldwide authority on
Hispano-Muslim historical studies, explained in 1983 that the revival of such topics responded to the political situation of Spain, “which has elicited a new interest for local histories, for the search and recovery of the cultural and historical patrimony of each zone, for its particular characteristics and its signs of identity.” García-Arenal has published more than a dozen books on the subject, as well as on the relations between Spain and North Africa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Her research reflects the significance of the political, commercial, and cultural contacts between Spain and the Barbary countries Morocco, Algiers, and Tunisia in the period studied.

Yet these publications have not only been confined to Spain. Cutting-edge studies, coming out of France, Italy, England, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and the United States, have similarly focused on the Moriscos and the European relations with North Africa in the early modern times. Many of these works explore the poignant topic of captivity in Barbary, which affected every Mediterranean country in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including England and northern European populations. Among the more relevant books on captivity in Barbary, including the subject of converts to Islam, that have appeared in the last decades we should mention Bartolomé Bennassar and Lucile Bennassar, Les chrétiens d’Allah (1989); Ottmar Hegyi, Cervantes and the Turks (1992); Lucetta Scaraffia, Rinegatti (1993); Emilio Sola and José F. de la Peña, Cervantes y la Berbería (1995, 1996); María Antonia Garcés, Cervantes en Algiers (2002, 2005); Linda Colley, Captives (2002); Robert C. Davis, Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters (2003, 2004); and José Antonio Martínez Torres, Prisioneros de los infieles (2004). Our English edition and translation of Antonio de Sosa’s Topography of Algiers engages in a dialogue with these suggestive scholarly productions.

New trends in historiography and literary history touching on both sides of Gibraltar, moreover, have been inaugurated by critics and historians across the globe, such as Manuel Barrios Aguilera, Vincent Barletta, Luis F. Bernabé Pons, Miguel Ángel de Bunes Ibarra, Trevor J. Dadson, Benjamín Ehlers, Barbara Fuchs, Álvaro Galmés de la Fuente, L. P. Harvey, A. Katie Harris, Francisco Márquez Villanueva, María Teresa Narváez, Mary Elizabeth Perry, Bernard Vincent, and Gerard Wiegers, among others. A special mention is due to the lifework of the
late Soledad Carrasco Urgoiti, whose first-rate scholarship and passion for Morisco studies illuminated many obscure facets of Golden Age Spanish literature. Among this astounding production of books, the outstanding works by Luce López-Baralt, such as Islam in Spanish Literature, Un Kama Sutra español [A Spanish Kamasutra], and, in turn, her fundamental study, La literatura secreta de los últimos musulmanes de España [The secret literature of the last Muslims of Spain], have opened exciting new horizons, both historical and literary. Publications on Morisco topics have continued to appear with renewed vigor, as demonstrated by García-Arenal’s recent review article, “Religious Dissent and Minorities: The Morisco Age” (2009). The twelve important books appraised by García-Arenal, published in Spain, France, Italy, and the United States between 2003 and 2009, bring up questions of collective identity, particularly in regard to the multiple cultural and religious facets that fashioned Morisco character, creating either conflict or integration. Although two of these studies focus on conversos or converted Jews, often called Marranos, all of them speak to the vital need to rethink our approaches to the study of communal or individual identities in early modern Europe and Spanish America.

In addition, fresh studies on the Moroccan diplomat and traveler Leo Africanus have appeared in France and the USA, where Natalie Zemon Davis’s biography of al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan al-Fasi [the man of Fès], titled Trickster Travels (2006), became a bestseller, translated into various languages. Along these lines, it is important to underscore the work of historian Jocelyne Dakhlia, whose dazzling interdisciplinary study of the lingua franca of the Mediterranean appeared in France, in 2008. Finally, two critics in particular, Nabil Matar and Daniel Vitkus, have illuminated early modern English history and literature in their work. Matar has published an impressive trilogy about Britain and the Islamic world that focuses on the impact of Islam and the Barbary region on Elizabethan and later British culture. The period studied in these three books extends from the accession of Elizabeth I to the death of Charles II: Islam in Britain, 1558–1685 (1998); Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery (1999); and Britain and Barbary, 1589–1678 (2005). A recent study, titled Europe through Arab Eyes, also by Matar, presents a suggestive compilation of letters and travel
accounts composed by Arab travelers in Europe between 1578 and 1727. Likewise, Vitkus has edited, with an erudite introduction, *Three Turk Plays from Early Modern England* (2000) and, more recently, has put out a fine study on the manner in which Ottoman culture, especially early modern encounters between English and Turkish merchants in the Mediterranean, influenced various works by Marlowe and Shakespeare—*Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean* (2003). All of these works speak to the prescient nature of studies that explore early modern relations between Islam and the West, including the ways in which these interactions impinged on the complex fashioning and re-fashioning of identities in Spain, Britain, and other countries in Europe. Our English translation of Sosa’s *Topography of Algiers*, then, follows these preoccupations with the study of sixteenth-century European contacts with Muslim cultures in North Africa, especially with the Turkish Algerian Regency. Likewise, both my Introduction and many chapters of Sosa’s work explore a complex set of questions in regard to the crossing of cultural, political, and religious frontiers in the early modern Mediterranean.60

As noted earlier, the first book of Sosa’s magnum opus—the *Topography* proper—focuses initially on the geography and topography of Algiers and, secondly, on the portrayal of its inhabitants, their laws, religions, and ways of life. Yet this is also a work grounded in history, through constant reference to the rulers who governed the Turkish-Algerian Regency during the sixteenth century, men who participated in the construction of this impressive North African capital and in the formation of its civic, military, and naval institutions.

My critical aim is to situate the *Topography* within the corpus of early modern Spanish historiographic and ethnographic works. I approach this text—an overt and self-conscious attempt to “write culture,” as George Marcus and James Clifford have framed it—both as a form of symbolic capital and as a transcript of intercultural dialogue in the late sixteenth-century Mediterranean.61 As has been the case with colonial Spanish American texts such as the *Naufragios* [Castaways] of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca and the *Brevisima relación de la destrucción de las In-