

## WANDERING ISLANDS

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Ibn Tufayl's Hayy ibn Yaqzan. Exemplary island that exists out of culture, in which a man needs with no parents needs to learn everything from nature, even language. When he is banished, it is to travel to another island where there are, in fact, men and women who talk, with whom he debates and presents the observations from his island, and that in the end cause a terrible depression in Hayy, who needs to come back to his not so desert island.

Many years ago a friend offered me a booklet with a very short story by Jose Saramago in which a man requests from a king to give him a boat. What for? To sail to the unknown island. So there is an unknown island? Yes. In that case, how is it unknown? Good question. The ship is given to the man, who recruits a crew of one person, a woman. Once the crew and the boat are ready, the Unknown Island can finally sail to wander around the world looking for itself.

I had completely forgotten about this short story, or rather fable. In my mind I had even attributed it to António Lobo Antunes, one of the Dukes of the Island of Redonda -a literary island whose king is Javier Marias—and the author of *O Arquipélago da Insónia*, a novel taking place in a set of islands in the Portuguese hinterlands, *nas herdades do Alentejo*.

But I ended up remembering well with the help of my finger tirelessly wandering around my bookshelves in search

of a *plaque* no longer than 25 pages printed in a big font.

This sailing unknown island is unknown not necessarily because nobody knows about it, but because its location is uncertain. The wandering islands are those 7548 (7549 according to Marco Polo) islands that float Eastwards nearby the Taprobana Island and towards the end of the manuscript, on the Atlas prepared by Jafuda and Abraham Cresques, the Majorcan cartographers. The cartographers ascertain the number of islands, while, at the time, confess that "dels quals no podem rrespondre", since they hold too many wonders, and too much riches. It's as if they wanted people to follow their complex *marteloio* just to get there, overcome the two kinds of sirens that wait near the beaches, subdue the men who do not use reason in the Island of Taprobana, and get ahold of the infinite riches of those wandering islands.

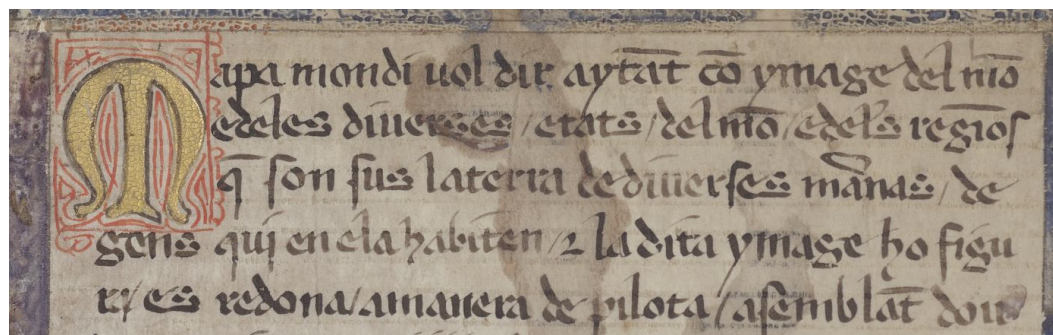
On top of the map, these islands are depicted in gold leaf and other equally rich colors, just like Corsica, and Sardinia, and Sicily, those other islands whose shape and location is perfectly known, but whose property is in dispute since the Catalan Company decided to sail across the Mediterranean from 1282 onwards in search of itself. As a matter of fact, they look like coins, small, rounded, that one could pile up like one does with a number of scattered pieces of twenty five cents, before putting them in a pocket.

Et quoniam moneta -says Nicolas Oresme-est instrumentum permutandi divitias naturales... conveniens fuit, quod ad hoc tale instrumentum esset aptum: quod fit, si faciliter manibus attrectabile seu palpabile, et leviter portabile, et quod pro modica ipsius portione

habeantur divitiae naturales in quantitate majori, cum aliis conditionibus quae postea videbuntur. Oportuit igitur quod numisma fieret de materia preciosa et rara. (Oresme, De origine, natura, jure et mutationibus monetarum, cap. 2, p. XCV, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5585z/f167.image>)

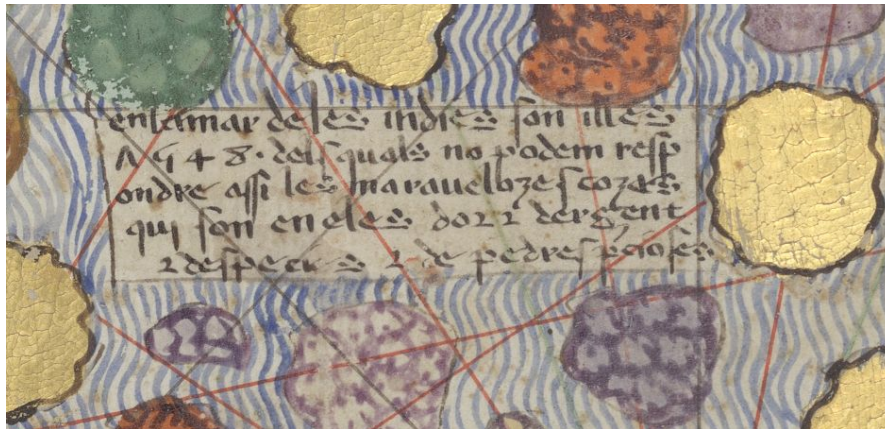
The islands are currency not only because they are there looking like particularly rich change that one cannot spare, made out "material pretiosa et rara", but also because they fluctuate, they *current* they run. A little bit like Aquiles' turtle, to say the truth. The question is whether the island-coins, that seem so attractive for the hand, so tangible, so light, *pro modica ipsius portione habeantur divitiae naturales in quantitate majori*. In other words, to what extent they produce more riches in addition to the one they represent. Beachy, coiney islands that are attractive and palpable -Nicolas Oresme dixit-- because they constitute as well a capital. Turning them into land would then create interest from that capital.

These island-coins are part of a *mapa mundi*, which the cartographers from Majorca define in the following way:



On November 14 1492, Christopher Columbus was in the middle of a myriad canals that ran across an archipelago. There, according to fray Bartolomé de las Casas, he wrote "Maravillóse [el almirante] en gran manera al ver tantas

islas y tan altas, y certifica a los Reyes que las montañas que desde anteayer ha visto por estas costas y las de estas islas que le parece que no las hay más altas en el mundo ni tan hermosas y claras, sin niebla ni nieve, y al pie de ellas grandísimo fondo; y dice que cree que estas islas son aquellas innumerables que en los mapamundos en fin de Oriente se ponen. Y dijo que creía que había grandísimas riquezas y piedras preciosas y especiería en ellas, y que duran muy mucho al Sur y se ensanchan a toda parte.” In the *Atlas Català*, the jewish cartographers Jafuda Cresques y Abraham Cresques, say



The island-coins do not have any image imprinted in their sands, or perhaps, as Foucault said, the traces of these images have all but disappeared. A coin needs to have an image of them, the sign of possession. How does one imprint an image on them? Whose image? How does one *collect* them in history, in law?

Or in other words, whose are those wandering islands that look so much like things *de nullis* and that exist in such an amazing quantity? This is the question that lawyers from the so-called *Escuela de Salamanca* will ask after reading Columbus' diaries. But it is also the question that

underlies the Catalan Atlas that belonged to Peter "el Cerimoniós" and Juan I of Aragon, and that was presented as gift to Charles VI of France, the mad king, at the beginning of his rule.

As soon as there is an island, there is also one question: how to turn its sand into land, how to pocket the piece. Or, in other words, the question is how to produce a property out of a sudden emergence in the middle of either freshwater or salt water. Sudden emergence is both a physical emergence and a finding. Like an emerging economy. In this sense, emergence is not only coming to light, becoming visible from its previous state of concealment. It is also *emergency*, a danger that needs to be addressed. The islands call for a predictable amount of different dangers that can be summarized in a war. Economies of war.

Some years before the creation of the *Atlas Català*, Bartolo de Sassoferato, one of the greatest narrators among lawyers -with the exception, of course, of Boccaccio himself, but the debate is only logical, as they were born the same year of 1313-wrote a commentary on *Digestum Novum* 41, 1, 7, 3-4:

"Insula quae in mari nascitur ( quod raro accidit) occupantis fit: nullius enim esse creditur. in flumine nata ( quod frequenter accidit), si quidem mediam partem fluminis tenet, communis est eorum, qui ab utraque parte fluminis prope ripam praedia possident, pro modo latitudinis cuiusque praedii, quae latitudo prope ripam sit: quod si alteri parti proximior sit, eorum est tantum, qui ab ea parte prope ripam praedia possident."

A good lawyer, Bartolo was also a good linguist and a good discourse analyst. He does proceed to close-read this pandect from Gaius, in order to make sense of every single

word contained in it. He obviously separates between those islands that are born in the middle of the sea -a rare event-and the islands that are born in the middle of the river -something that happens all the time. In his view, the sands from these islands present completely different problems that must be addressed in a different way. While the ownership of the river islands can be solved by way of geometry and trigonometry, along with some narratives of the three wandering characters of Bartolo's, Titius, Gaius, and Seius, the ownership of the "insula quae in mare nascitur" cannot. The sands of the river beach are coveted because of their fertility. They are part of an ecological cycle, the life of the river that poets always look at as a living being. The emergence of the island does not come up on its own or in a concealed way: the inhabitants around the river are expecting the river to beget an island, and, with it, an alluvium, or even the new dryness of the riverbed -the *alveum*-which all come accompanied by a new fertility, and new terms of exploitation, which can be public or private, depending on the proportions, situation, and measures of the emerging sands.

The islands in the middle of the sea are entirely different pieces of wandering sand. Once located and stopped, pinned down to the map with a flagpole -like the Catalan flagpole that pins down the golden leaved island of Sicily in the *Atlas Català*---, they must be considered a political problem, solvable by means of political philosophy and political law.

Bartolo begins working on his set of treatises on fluid sands in 1355, while he is spending a vacation in Perugia, looking at the meandering valley of the Tiber river from his villa. The legal consideration then comes

live, as it were, to his mind, and he thus does what all of us do: he spends his vacation writing. Finding islands in the middle of the sea did not seem a vacation activity for him, and of course, the legal *pandectae* from which his writing springs, encompasses both kinds of islands, fluvial and oceanic. However, in 1341, Niccoloso da Reccho, a Genoese sailor, is named captain of the two ships financed by the king of Portugal, Afonso IV, of the Burgundian dynasty, in which, according to some Giovanni Boccaccio,

“with people from Florence and Genoa, as well as Catalan Spanish, plus other people from Spain, they sailed away from the city of Lisbon, taking with them horses, weapons, war machines, with the purpose of forcing cities and castles, and went in search of those islands that everybody knows now that have been found.”

“con gente de' fiorentini, genovesi, et spanioli catalani, et altra gente d'Ispania sciolte le vele dalla città di Lisbona presono l'alto, conducendo con se cavalli, armi et macchine di guerra per isforzare cittadi et castella, et andaro a cercare quelle isole che volgarmente è voce essere state trovate.”

Cities and castles to force, they did not find. They found naked people and rocks, and people who were able to count, and in one island that they did not dare to set foot in, a big mountain on top of which there seemed to be a charm in the form of a huge sail. But they went there as one goes to war. For, in fact, one important thesis in Bartolo is that “the right to acquire the land is owned by the one who goes there.” However, this going there cannot

be other than a war, and, in this particular case, a naval war. The mere adventure or cavalry raid is not enough to consider that the acquisition of a right to possess has been initiated.

**6** de ver. sig. Sed ¶ qd li nō iuerit aliqs dñs cū exercitu, sed aliquam caualcatā, seu currentiā fecit fieri super illā terrā, an ex hoc videatur ius p̄occupatū? Rñ. non, sicut. n. in iudicio p̄ dationem libelli, vel rñsionē ad vnā pōnem, vbi de negotio tractatur, aliquid principiari dī, neque res dī cēpta, vt ext. de lit. p̄te. c. j. ita p̄ unā caualcatam, vel currentiā, nō dī res cēpta, & p̄occupata facta, sed cum iuerit cū exercitu quo poterat terrā acquirere, fm rei exigētiam, quod optime pbat. ff. de ver. obl. l. p̄tinuus. §. itē qui in insula. pōt er-

Turning the oceanic islands beaches into lands that can be claimed politically can only be the deed of an army, as the juridical person who is able to initiate the legal process to possess the island.

These are some of the questions that surrounded the island sands, either fluvial or oceanic, in the fourteenth century. I guess that I only wanted to get to formulate one single question: why is that turning sand to land is in an equation in which rough fertility and abundance is turned into war.