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Archaeology and Immersion: Poliphilo's Staircase to Knowledge

Introduction

During the 20th century, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (hereinafter: *HP*) has attracted scholars from many different fields: experts in Roman literature, historians of the Renaissance and of art, and even archaeologists. Most of them, in spite of their diverse interests and methods of interpretation, agree in their overall view of the work. They read it as a fantastic novel into which the fruits of a devoted study of antiquity are interwoven. In his important essay of 1960, Charles Mitchell aptly entitled it an "archaeological rhapsody".[1] Since then, the *HP* has been examined primarily as an educational novel, nevertheless as a demanding testimony of an antiquarian erudition of encyclopaedic dimensions.

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[1]   Ch. Mitchell, *Archaeology and Romance in Renaissance Italy*, in: *Italian Renaissance Studies. A Tribute to the Late Cecilia M. Ady*, ed. E.F. Jacob, London, Faber & Faber, 1960, pp. 455-483, citation p. 462. For text and commentary I will refer to F. Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a cura di M. Ariani-M. Gabriele, Milano, Adelphi, 1998, 2 vols. (in the following abbreviated as: *HP* 1; *HP* 2), if not otherwise indicated.

Tamara Griggs' investigation of the antiquarian content of the novel is typical of this view:[2] on the one hand, she emphasizes, analogously to Mitchell, the confrontation with the leading antiquarians of the 15th century, Cyriac of Ancona and Giovanni Marcanova. On the other hand, she doesn't regard the transmission of antiquarian knowledge as the main intention of the author. In her view, the main character Poliphilo fulfils the function of a "resonance space", in which the author is able to unfold a certain stylistic mode of narration. The classical colouring of the text would then enable him to reflect a contemporary intellectual habit and to lend it a fashionable flair. This general view of the author's intentions has further consequences, when it comes to interpreting Poliphilo's discoveries of ancient monuments: Whenever the protagonist happens to encounter a monument naively, Griggs construes his simplicity as a sign that the author of the *HP* was not sufficiently able to deal with the overabundance of contemporary antiquarianism himself.

But is the author, probably Francesco Colonna from Treviso,[3] really insufficiently learned for his complex subject? A methodical problem grows in Griggs' argument when it equates the qualities of the novel's first-person narrator Poliphilo, e.g. his initial ignorance of the world of antiquity, with the narrative attitude of the implied author. Thus the stigma of the lack of unity marks the text, and the concept of the fantastic antiquarian novel ultimately fails to succeed. According to Griggs conclusion, the novel remains an erudite patchwork of overly lengthy classical discourses.

I would like to shift the focus in the following argument. In my opinion, it interweaves two different levels. At first sight, of course, the *HP* presents itself as a fantastic novel in the Italian vernacular tradition. But further reading conveys several educational aspects beyond that level. From page to page the reader becomes increasingly aware of being confronted with a humanist text attempting to fathom the aesthetic experience of antiquity. What type of humanist texts the *HP* predominantly refers to is an issue to be discussed further below.

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[2] T. Griggs, *Promoting the Past. The "Hypnerotomachia Poliphili" as Antiquarian Enterprise*, "Word & Image", n. 14, 1998, pp. 17-39, citation p. 39: "Poliphilo […] often strikes us as an intellectual and artistic omnivore who may have bitten off more than he can chew".

[3] In my opinion, Ariani's and Gabriele's arguments for identifying the author with the friar Francesco Colonna (1433-1527) are quite strong: see *HP* 2, pp. LXIII-XC.

Apart from the assumed two textual levels it is obvious that the systematic basis, as has been argued in some commentaries, is ancient Greek philosophy enriched with related sources on dreams. Ariani and Gabriele have indicated the references to selected Platonian Dialogues, to contemporary Neo-Platonism, and to Apuleius' novel *The Golden Ass*.[4]

Aristotle's Doctrine of Dream and Memory

The discussion regarding the extent to which Aristotelian philosophy has influenced the framework of the *HP*, is less prominent in the extant commentaries. However, I would consider Aristotle's *Parva naturalia* as crucial to the understanding of the text, above all his doctrines of perception, dream and memory.[5] Following this thought, I will focus less on possible Neo-Platonic influences of Northern Italian origin and more on the novel's direct confrontation with Aristotelian concepts and their later transformations in the Second Sophistic. As in the second half of the 15th century, when a consistent theory of imagination and creation in the arts was still missing, it was most likely Aristotelian psychology that could provide an orientation in this field. We have to keep in mind that the *HP* was written more than 50 years before Giorgio Vasari published one of the earliest definitions of the artist's mind, which he understood as a mental space for an internal design (*disegno interno*).[6] Aristotle offers a clear concept of the interaction between the observing subject and the object of his increased interest, here and there also exemplified with case studies of the visual arts.[7] Furthermore, the writings of Philostratus, already well known among humanists before they were printed in

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[4]   Ivi, pp. IX-LXI.

[5]   ARISTOTLE, *Parva naturalia*, ed. G. BIEHL, Leipzig, Teubner, 1898, is the Greek text edition I will refer to below.

[6]   E. PANOFSKY, *Idea. Ein Beitrag zur Begriffsgeschichte der älteren Kunsttheorie*, Berlin, Hessling, 1960, pp. 33-38.

[7]   For example ARISTOTLE, *De anima*, 427b18-20; *Poetics*, 1448b15-19, 1454 b8-11. For Aristotle's impact on Graeco-Roman art theory see N. J. KOCH, *Paradeigma. Die antike Kunstschriftstellerei als Grundlage der frühneuzeitlichen Kunsttheorie*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2013 («Gratia. Tübinger Schriften zur Renaissanceforschung und Kulturwissenschaft», 50), pp. 26-35, 97-100.

Venice by Aldus in 1501, offered reflections on the aesthetics of reception in the broader sense. As Ariani's and Gabriele's commentary shows, the author especially used, besides Aristotle's works on psychology, one Philostratean text as a source: the *Vita Apollonii*, certainly one of the most interesting ancient models for the fantastic novel.[8] The *Imagines* and the *Lives of the Sophists* are only referred to once, and the *Heroikos* twice.[9]

The narrator of the *HP* actually follows two storylines at the same time: he expounds Poliphilo's insatiable longing for the nymph Polia on the one hand and his intellectual curiosity about classical monuments on the other. Both story lines are interwoven in such a way that the manifold interactions between the Aristotelian antagonisms *orexis* and *noésis*, desire and knowledge, are exemplarily presented. Furthermore, perhaps for the purpose of a deeper learning by heart, the protagonist's continuous mental development is visually documented in the woodcut illustrations.

As a leitmotif for our dream novel (Fig. 1, p. 20) one could perhaps choose Aristotle's definition of imagination in his treatise *On Dreams*:

Ἔστι δ᾽ ἡ φαντασία ἡ ὑπὸ τῆς κατ᾽ ἐνέργειαν αἰσθήσεως γινομένη κίνησις, τὸ δ᾽ ἐνύπνιον φάντασμά τι φαίνεται εἶναι. (Aristotle, *De insomniis*, 459a17-19).[10]

Phantasia, imagination, is the movement caused by a current sense perception, and the dream seems to be a kind of *phantasma*, i.e. mental image. (Transl. NK)

And for those devoted to learning, Aristotle's notion that knowledge requires precisely such visual impulses is of special interest:

Καὶ νοεῖν οὐκ ἔστιν ἄνευ φαντάσματος. […] Καὶ τὸ φάντασμα τῆς κοινῆς αἰσθήσεως πάθος ἐστίν. […] Ἡ δὲ μνήμη καὶ ἡ τῶν νοητῶν οὐκ ἄνευ φαντάσματος. (Aristotle, *De memoria*, 449b31-32; 450a10-13).[11]

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[8]   *HP* 2, p. 589 (Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii*, 6. 4), pp. 592-593 (ivi, 2. 11, 2. 14), p. 780 (ivi, 1. 25), p. 878 (ivi, 1. 15, 3. 26), p. 952 (ivi, 6. 17), p. 1038 (ivi, 6. 20).

[9]   *HP* 2, pp. 977, 1001, 1043, 1066. See also ivi, p. 1192, index s. v. Filostrato.

[10]   Aristotle, *Parva naturalia…*, cit., p. 64.

[11]   Ivi, pp. 37-38.

Fig. 1. Poliphilo's dream. *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a vi *v*.

> There is no thought without a mental image. […] And the mental image is an occur-
> rence of the common sense. […] There is no memory, even of thoughts, without
> mental image. (Transl. NK)

Thus, no knowledge can be acquired without having created a mental
image (*phantasma*) of the object of interest in one's mind. Aristotle calls this
kind of visualization a *pathos*, a physical-mental reaction to sensual percep-
tion. In the same passage of *De memoria* Aristotle gives the example of how
one becomes familiar with the phenomenon of the triangle: one is only able
to imagine it in concrete terms after having drawn a sketch of its shape.
Analogously, our memory, especially since it feeds on enriched knowledge,
can only function when assisted by the mental visualization of the objects we
have seen. In their commentary of the *HP*, Ariani and Gabriele have clearly
pointed out that the Aristotelian concept of *mnémé*, known as *memoria* in the
Latin rhetorical sources, plays a central role in the narration. They have ex-
plained convincingly to which extent the realm of Eleuterilyda, together with

its representatives, symbolizes the power of memory.[12] For the architecture and its surroundings represent the very topographical structure that is typical of the concept of memory known from classical rhetoric. Accordingly, knowledge acquired from literary or visual sources can easily be stored and retrieved in the treasury of *memoria*, as long as it is understood as an architectural structure. Inside one's memory any individual piece of knowledge can be stored at fixed locations of the building or outside in its topographical surroundings.

After it had been formulated in the context of the delivery of speech the rhetorical doctrine of memory influenced the entire Graeco-Roman educational culture and was therefore of high interest to the humanists of 15th century Italy.[13] The reception of this doctrine reveals one of the novel's main claims: one should not only marvel at what one has perceived, but go a step beyond towards knowledge and scholarship, which also means to systematize and preserve the ancient monuments. Furthermore, the Aristotelian origin of the memory doctrine connects the *HP* to the Aristotelian studies of Northern Italy, which had been revived by the lectures Johannes Argyropoulos held in Florence since 1457.[14]

Are there Antiquarian Novels in the Renaissance?

After having outlined the complex philosophical background of the *HP*, I would conclude that the framework 'fantastic novel' has, above all, a medial function. The dream narrative is an effective mode to present the complex psychological and epistemological implications of perception in general and

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[12]   *HP* 2, pp. 689, 696.

[13]   For an introduction into the classical concepts of memory and their Renaissance tradition see F.A. YATES, *The Art of Memory*, London, Routledge, 1966, pp. 27-49, 105-307. For the earlier monastic practise of memory see M. CARRUTHERS, *The Craft of Thought. Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

[14]   E. GARIN, *La cultura filosofica toscana e veneta nel secolo XV*, "Rinascimento", n. 2, 1962, pp. 57-75; D.J. GEANAKOPLOS, *Greek Studies in Venice. Studies in the Dissemination of Greek Learning from Byzantium to Western Europe*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1962.

especially in antiquity, since it was most popular in Italy at the end of the quattrocento.

If one examines what book types were read most frequently at that time, the novels seem to come first. As Jane Everson has shown, recurring to the loan catalogues of the Este library in Ferrara, even humanists like Pico della Mirandola apparently read the Arthurian novels just as intensively as the classical authors.[15] For the author of the *HP*, the choice of the text type 'novel' not only had the advantage over the systematic treatise or any Latin or Greek text of addressing a much wider audience. A further advantage of this text type was that extensive or even divergent aesthetic and technical discussions could still be held together in the suspense of the exciting narration. Finally, and perhaps not less important for the future reader, several ancient models were available. From the history of the Second Sophistic we know similarly broad narrative frameworks applied in the *Deipnosophistai* of Athenaeus and in the *Golden Ass* of Apuleius. In the case of Philostratus' *Imagines*, each *ekphrasis* leads such a vivid life of its own that the narrative frame basically breaks down – but this has never damaged the popularity of the work as a whole.[16] The attractiveness and reader-friendliness of the *HP* were further enhanced by the ingenious disposition of text and image at the latest fashion in typography such as woodcutting.[17]

In the following I would like to focus on some questions of the history of ideas that are unfolded in the course of Poliphilo's experience of antiquity, and limit myself to his encounter with a special genre of monuments, namely obelisks (Figs. 5, 12-16). Three issues will be considered: the narrative of description, the philosophical concept of perception, and the emerging science of archaeology.

On the narrative level, the novel deals with the main tasks of the antiquarian: the perception and recording of the monuments, the safeguarding of

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[15] J.E. EVERSON, *Read What I Say and Not What I Read. Reading and the Romance Epic in 15th Century Ferrara*, "Italian Studies", n. 58, 2003, pp. 31-47.

[16] For the tradition of the *Imagines* see PHILOSTRATOS, *Die Bilder. Griechisch-deutsch*, herausgegeben, übersetzt und erläutert von O. SCHÖNBERGER, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2004, pp. 61-83.

[17] See *HP* 2, pp. XCV-CIX for a discussion of the style of the woodcuts and the art-historical background of their masters.

the ancient finds in their state of fragmentation, destruction, and overgrowth. After having become aware of the historical alterations of the monuments, the antiquarian devotes himself to reconstructing their original condition. This task is, at least partially, understood as a mental-spiritual process. All these efforts finally enable the antiquarian to define a typology and to interpret the finds according to the historical context. In the end, the very last task is to transmit the acquired knowledge to antiquarian society, either in a written letter or manuscript, or even better, in a printed book. Until today, the readers holding the *HP* in their hands can trace all those stages of an immergence into antiquity throughout the entire book.

The series of antiquarian tasks follows certain systematic presets. The classical concept of memory, as mentioned above, is central . We will recapitulate at the end of the obelisk investigation to what extent the concept is also responsible for the remarkably enthusiastic approach to antiquity apparent in the novel. On the psychological level, one of the main subjects of the narration is to display the special nature of the contemporary antiquarian traveller. Can we pursue a reflection on the inner motivation of this type of viewer in the novel? Does it tell us a story about what actually makes him immerse himself in past constellations of time and space?

Influential scholars like Julius von Schlosser and Charles Mitchell interpreted Poliphilo's archaeological adventure as an early figuration of the romantic 'longing for antiquity' typical for Johann Joachim Winckelmann and the era of the Enlightenment.[18] And Patricia Fortini Brown interprets the novel as an exponent of a special 'Venetian sense of the past' that offers a "counter model of antiquity as a sensuous Arcadian (as opposed to a political-historical) world".[19]

In my opinion the author of the *HP* intended even more than that. The different modes of viewing classical monuments as performed by Poliphilo form a consistent concept of antiquarian judgement and are not only to be

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[18]   J. von Schlosser, *Die Kunstliteratur. Ein Handbuch zur Quellenkunde der neueren Kunstgeschichte*, Wien, Kunstverlag Anton Schroll & Co., 1924, pp. 117-120; Ch. Mitchell, *Archaeology and Romance…*, cit., pp. 461-468, also emphasizes Bocaccio's contribution to the *HP*.

[19]   P. Fortini Brown, *Venice & Antiquity. The Venetian Sense of the Past*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997, p. 210. Ivi, pp. 207-222, Fortini Brown discusses the Venetian context of the *HP* in general.

regarded as incomplete forerunners of the 18th century. The intention of the author of the *HP* is to establish a terminology for verbalizing and classifying this particular activity beyond the common level of description known from Pliny's *Natural History*. So on one level he quite often consults Pliny's encyclopedia when referring to certain subjects of ancient culture and therefore also applies Pliny's method of *descriptio*, as we will see below.[20] But on the other his intention is to offer a modern reconstruction of the past that involves the viewer's individual psychology. As we will see, the concept of *phantasia* plays a special role in this process. Furthermore, and typical for the sense of the past at that time, the author is not interested in isolating antiquity from his own age, but intends to acquire classical knowledge in order to take part in the design of a modern age. Thus, there are several descriptions of buildings and gardens in the HP which are not at all classical, but apparently at the latest fashion of architectural design and garden planning.[21] Therefore it is not surprising that this fantastic novel is now considered as one of the most important forerunners of the utopian novels from Thomas Morus' *Utopia* onwards.[22]

Distant Reading: Models and Text Types of the *HP*

In the search for the classical and early modern models of the HP many suggestions have been made. I would just like to briefly point out a few of them, as far as they could play a role for the art-theoretical or antiquarian issues. Despite the proximity of the *HP* to the vernacular novels since Boccaccio, the Greek and Latin novels of the Second Sophistic are, of course, worth

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[20]   P. Fane-Saunders, *Pliny the Elder and the Emergence of Renaissance Architecture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 128-144.

[21]   Ivi, pp. 128, 144 on the power of the dream to surpass antiquity; A. Segre, *Untangling the Knot. Garden Design in Francesco Colonna's "Hypnerotomachia Poliphili"*, "Word & Image", n. 14, 1998, pp. 82-108.

[22]   M.C. Ferrari, *Lateinische Literatur des Spätmittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit*, in: *Phantastik. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, hrsg. H.R. Brittnacher-M. May, Stuttgart-Weimar, Metzler, 2013, pp. 27-33. For a general account see P. Kuon, *Utopischer Entwurf und fiktionale Vermittlung. Studien zum Gattungswandel der literarischen Utopie zwischen Humanismus und Frühaufklärung*, Heidelberg, Winter, 1986.

considering. Even references to a late antique successor, Mousaios' epyllion *Hero and Leander*, have been detected.[23] All these sources could perhaps have been taken into account by the author of the *HP* for the external framework, without necessarily sharing all their subjects and narrative intentions.

For the central issue of visual and intellectual perception of antiquity the classical sources providing descriptions of monuments and the Greek *ekphraseis* play a role above all: At the beginning of the novel, when Poliphilo investigates the topography of ruins for the first time (Figs. 2-3), the narrator follows the well-known monument catalogues of Pliny and Vitruvius.
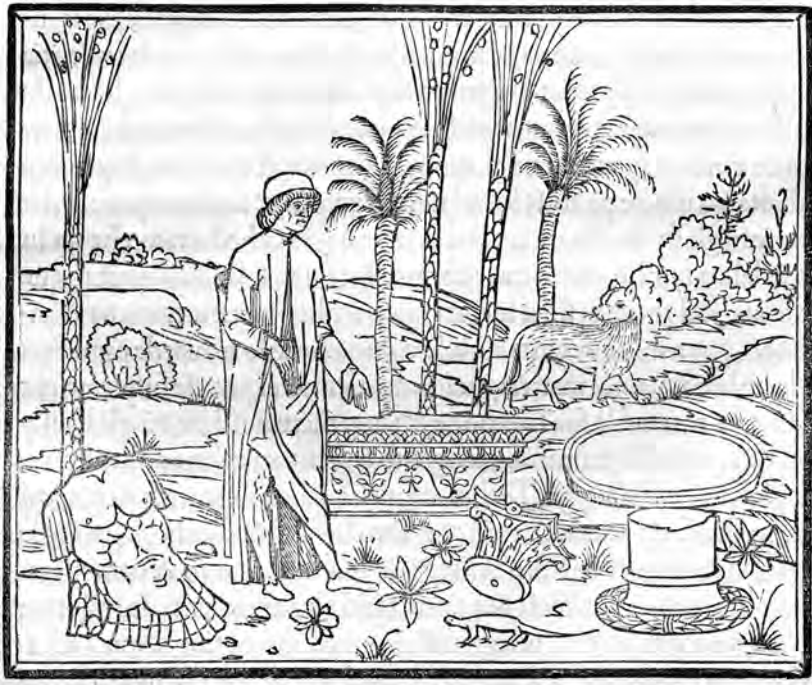
Fig. 2. Landscape with ruins. *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a vii *r*.

For example when he describes the monumental winged horse, he gives a scholarly account of its size, iconography, and material quality.

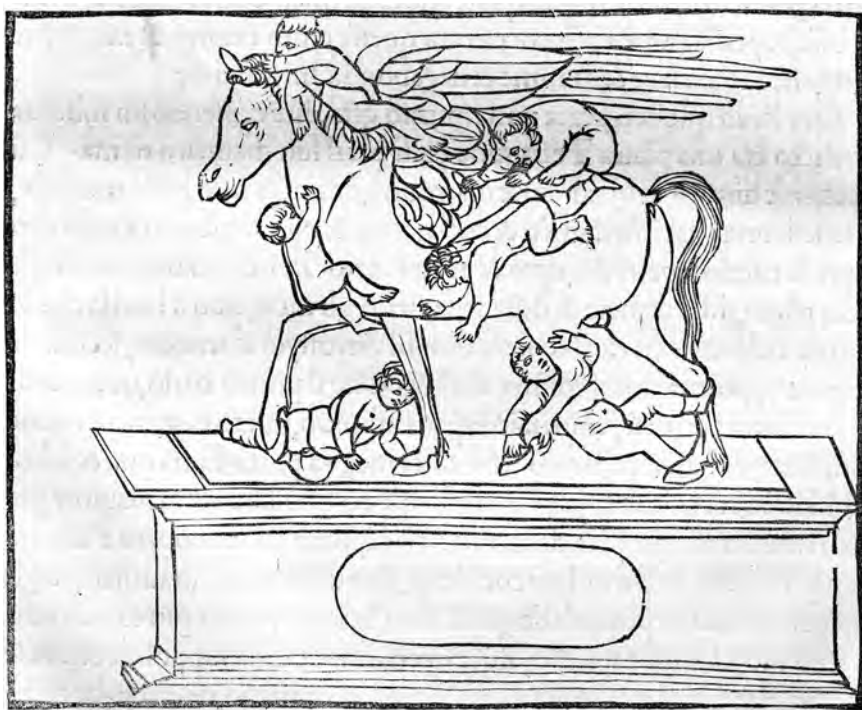[23]   See the commentary *HP* 2, pp. 511, 805 (referring to *HP* 1, pp. 11-12, 169 = a ii *v*; l *r*).

Fig. 3. Colossal horse. *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, b iiii *v*.

Sopra di questa piacia, dal initio intro verso la porta .x. passi, vidi uno prodigioso caballo & aligero Desultore, cum le ale passe di aeramento, di excessiva magnitudine. La ungula del quale occupava sopra la planicie dil basamento, nella extrema linea dilla rotundatione di uno calceo pedi .v. Et da questo extremo imo circinato di l'ungula, fina sotto il pecto, .ix. pedi per debita ragione alto io lo trovai. Cum il capo soluto & effrenato, cum due picole auricole, la una in ante porrecta, & l'altra retro contracta. Cum undiculate iube et prolixe, sopra il dextro del collo dependule. Sopra il quale molti adolescentuli a cavalcare dorsuariamente tentando. Niuno di essi fermo sopra retinerse valeva, per la sua soluta velocitate, & dura succussatura. Diqué alcuni cadevano, quali stavano praecipitabondi. Alcuni supini, & tali resupinati, & altri innixi ascendevano. Tali involtati (rapiti nelle stringente mane) li longi crini vanamente tenivansi. Erano alcuni caduchi, in acto poscia di levarsi sotto il corpo lapsi dil excusore.

Nella superficie dil basamento era infixo plumbiculatamente una plastra dilla propria materia fusile. Tanto quanto stavano gli calcei retinuti & gli praecipitati iuvenculi.

Tutta una compositione & massa conflata fue inseme, mirabile arte fusoria. (*HP* 1, p. 32-33 = b iv *v*-b v *r*)

But as soon as our model viewer Poliphilo descends into antiquity, for example into the fragmented, lying colossus (p. 35-36), the narrator goes one step further than his classical source, Pliny's description of the ruined bronze colossus of Rhodes, as a comparison of both texts shows:

Ante omnes autem in admiratione fuit Solis colossus Rhodi [...] sed iacens quoque miraculo est. Pauci pollicem eius amplectuntur, maiores sunt digiti quam pleraeque statuae. Vasti specus hiant defractis membris; spectantur intus magnae molis saxa, quorum pondere stabiliverat eum constituens. (Pliny, *Natural history* 34. 41)

Above all the colossus of Helios was admired in Rhodes [...], but even lying down it is a spectacle. Few can hold its thumb, the fingers are bigger than most statues. Empty caves yawn at the fractures; inside one can see big boulders, the weight of which (Chares) stabilized the work as he erected it. (Transl. nk)

Poliphilo's exclamation comes quite close to the Latin author:

Echo chio vedo uno Vastissimo & mirando colosso, Cum li pedi senza solea excavati & tutte le Tibie pervie & vacue. Et dindi al capo cum horrore inspectabondo venendo, Coniecturai che laura intromessa per le patorate piante, cum divino inuento, il gemito moderatamente expresso causava. Ilquale iaceva decumbendo supino di metallo mira-bile artificio conflato, di media aetate, sublevato alquanto sopra uno puluino tenendo il capo […] Per quella dunque dal curioso scrutario stimulo, senza altro consultamine impulso, nella gula per graduli introgresso & d'indi nel stomaco. (*HP* 1, pp. 35-36 = b vi r-b vi v)

Driven by fear of the groaning colossal bronze his attention is raised to the highest level of attention ("cum horror inspectabondo"). Finally, Po-liphilo faces up to the challenge of antiquity. In the following description the reader is not informed about the colossus in the usual antiquarian manner of recording its size, material and state of preservation, but through the anxious eyes of the fearful protagonist. Nevertheless, the narrator refers to Pliny's

chapters on colossal bronze statues in some characteristic points, for example he characterizes the impressiveness of the lying fragment and the views into its interior in a similar manner. But there are also significant additions typical of an emotional or even reception aesthetic approach to ancient finds. When Poliphilo describes his individual impression of the monument, he merges what he has seen and what he has felt since the first moment of discovery.

So the border between object and viewer is blurred exactly in the same way that distinguishes the descriptive mode of Pliny's monument catalogues from the Greek *ekphrasis*, for example the *Imagines* by Philostratus. Just as Poliphilo vacillates between the emotions of fear and curiosity and ventures into the interior of the colossus to gaze at its entrails, the protagonists of Philostratus' *Imagines* become an active part of what they perceive. In the chapter entitled *Islands* the visitors of the Neapolitan picture gallery are invited to board a painted ship from which they explore the pleasantly rendered volcanic islands.[24]

It is also interesting to take a closer look at the contemporary modes of presenting monuments the author of the *HP* must have been familiar with. Surprisingly, the relation between the novel and the art theoretical treatises of the 15th century has not been studied extensively. And indeed, in comparison to Leon Battista Alberti's highly systematical works on painting, sculpture and architecture there are very few similarities at first sight. Some scholars have pointed out that the terminology of classical architecture used in the *HP* owes much to Alberti's *De re aedificatoria*, which he designed after the classical Vitruvian model.[25] But the stylistic contrast between Alberti's clear structure and our fantastic novel could not be greater. So other treatises might represent the intellectual background of the novel better. Firstly, we have to keep in mind that Italian art literature was not an established genre at that time. One particularly popular text type was the dialogue on art, a common mode of presenting art theoretical problems from the middle of the 15th century

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[24]   PHILOSTRATUS, *Imagines*, 2.17. For an interpretation of Philostratus' ekphrastic method applied to the description of the islands see T. SCHIRREN, *Sophistik und Philologie. Hat das Subversive auch Methode?*, in: *Was ist eine philologische Frage?*, hrsg. J.P. SCHWINDT, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2009 («Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft», 1943), pp. 112-136.

[25]   *HP* 2, p. 500; D. LEATHERBARROW, *What Fragments Are to Desire, Elements are to Design*, "Word & Image", n. 31, 2015, pp. 119-128.

onwards. The best known contemporary works are both located in Ferrara: Angelo Decembrio's dialogues for Leonello d'Este and Pomponio Gaurico's dialogue on bronze statuary dedicated to Ercole d'Este.[26]

A text that, in my opinion, comes nearest to the framework and the issues of the *HP* is the treatise on architecture by Antonio Averlino, called Filarete (Φιλαρέτη). Since he was a friend of Francesco Filelfo's, he is apparently the writer on art with the best access to Greek thought around the middle of the 15th century. The earliest manuscript, entitled *Trattato di Architettura*, was dedicated to the duke of Milan Francesco Sforza between 1461 and 1464.[27]

The treatise was not printed until the 19th century, but must have been well known among humanists, since its text and illustrations were copied diligently several times in Italian and Latin.[28]

At first sight, one could perhaps argue that comparing the *HP* with Filarete's *Trattato* is quite a fruitless effort, since it would merely attempt to explain one enigmatic book with the help of another. Nevertheless, I would briefly like to show that the polymorph structure of both works has much in common.

Filarete's treatise consists of 25 books, of which 21 are devoted to the subject of the ideal city. In order to present his view of *ars* and *artifex* Filarete chose the framework of a narration which describes the construction of the city Sforzinda, somewhat an idealization of the Northern Italian urbanism of his time. The building process is described from the very beginning: the

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[26]   M. Baxandall, *A Dialogue on Art from the Court of Leonello d'Este. Angelo Decembrio's "De Politia Litteraria" Pars LXVIII*, "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes", n. 26, 1963, pp. 304-326; N.J. Koch, *Paradeigma…*, cit., pp. 255-274.

[27]   G.M. Müller, *Architekturtheorie im Dialog*, in: *Das Buch als Entwurf. Textgattungen in der Geschichte der Architekturtheorie. Ein Handbuch*, hrsg. D. Erben, München, Fink, 2019, pp. 58-91; for the manuscripts and editions see ivi, p. 58. For a general interpretation see P. Tigler, *Die Architekturtheorie des Filarete*, Berlin, De Gruyter («Neue Münchner Beiträge zur Architekturgeschichte», 5), for the dedication see ivi, pp. 7-8; for a comparison with Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* and the *HP* see also the general account of J. von Schlosser, *Die Kunstliteratur…*, cit., pp. 112-117.

[28]   A. Averlino detto Il Filarete, *Trattato di Architectura*, a cura di A.M. Finoli-L. Grassi, Milano, Edizione Il Polifilo, 1972, 2 vols. («Classici italiani di scienze tecniche e arti – Trattati di architettura», 2) (in the following referred to as: Filarete, *Trattato*, ed. Finoli-Grassi); J. Onians, *Alberti and ΦΙΛΑΡΕΤΗ. A Study in Their Sources*, "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes", n. 34, 1971, pp. 96-114.

selection of materials, the erection of the city walls and the establishment of public, ecclesiastical, and ducal buildings (book 2-13). In the second part (book 14-21) Filarete designs a utopian city, a plan of which is discovered in the course of an excavation. The discovery of the *Golden book* of the ancient king Zogalia once hidden in the foundations provides the key to the construction of the new city Plusiapolis (Fol. 101 *r*-102 *r*). Not surprisingly, the stone chest treasuring the *Golden book* bears Greek, Hebrew and Arabic inscriptions; these are the same ancient languages Poliphilo discovers as inscriptions above the three bronze doors when he travels in the mountains.[29]

Both cities described by Filarete are designed according to the theory explained in detail in the introduction (book 1). The architect conveys a systematic and philosophical framework that takes several classical sources on architecture and on the ideal polis into account. By taking the analogies between the human body and ideal architecture as a basis of the treatise, he presents himself as a follower of the Greek idea of *symmetria* and could actually have had Protagoras' statement "man is the measure of all things" in mind. But to what extent did an architect of that time have access to Greek sources? According to John Onians, Filarete was perhaps prompted by his friend Filelfo to compose a Greek counterpart to Alberti's famous treatise *De re aedificatoria*.[30] That would explain the philosophically educated Hellenist background of Filarete's work.

Instead of describing the participants and stages of the urbanistic project systematically, Filarete lets the involved protagonists, especially the duke and his advisors, interact in several dialogical settings or novellistic episodes.[31] This narrative frame enables Filarete to expound his rich antiquarian knowledge, for example when the architect, an *alter ego* of himself, reports to the Duke what he learned about the colosseum and the typology of theatres in general during his Roman studies (fol. 87 *r*-89 *r*). Descriptions like those

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[29]   *HP* 1, p. 135. A similar multilingually inscribed monument is the obelisk-bearing elephant Poliphilo had encountered at the beginning of his journey, *HP* 1, p. 37. According to his description it was embellished with a jewelled headdress inscribed with a motto in Greek and Arabic letters. See below Fig. 14.

[30]   J. ONIANS, *Alberti and ΦΙΛΑΡΕΤΗ…*, cit., pp. 105, 112.

[31]   For the dialogical narrative see G.M. MÜLLER, *Architekturtheorie im Dialog…*, cit., pp. 63-81.

also give room for expressing the emotional effects of art, which is probably one of the most obvious similarities to the *HP*.[32]

There are several motives that play an important role in both works. Firstly, apart from the general interest in the typology and construction of ancient monuments, the motive of excavation is crucial to both narrations: it indicates that the acquisition of knowledge relevant to the future is to be derived from ancient sources.

From this point of view, paradoxically, modernity and antiquity are two sides of the same coin. The interest Filarete and the author of the HP show in antiquity is no occupation for its own sake, but an innovative means to improve the present. Other similarities are the ancient languages: Greek, Latin, and Arabic, displayed in the manuscript and the print, also the vivid references to gardens, labyrinths, and banquets;[33] furthermore the occurrences of adventurous episodes enrichening the systematic considerations with exciting details; and finally the well composed balance of image and text on each page, drawn by hand in the treatise and printed in the novel. Comparing both works side by side, one actually has the impression that the editor Manutius faces the challenge of transferring the typical style of the architect's design book with its harmonious balance of handwriting and illustration into the modern medium.

A striking example of the similarity of some of the *HP*'s woodcuts to Filarete's illustrations is the third obelisk on Poliphilo's journey, a pyramidal construction supported by Sphinxes on a rectangular base (Figs. 4-5). It resembles Filarete's monument erected in honour of King Zogalia, which consists of a base with lions supporting a special kind of obelisk which Filarete calls "piramida".[34] On its top the set of monumental elements carries a statue of Zogalia bearing a sphere on his head.

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[32]   The relationship between emotions and perception in the *HP* has been investigated by R. Arnold, *Ansichten und Einsichten – die Rolle der visuellen Perzeption in der "Hypnerotomachia Poliphili" (1499)*, "Wolfenbütteler Renaissance-Mitteilungen", n. 35, 2014, pp. 3-20.

[33]   *HP* 1, pp. 102-116 (banquet in Eleutherilyda's palace), pp. 124-134 (its garden). To be compared with Filarete, *Trattato*, ed. Finoli-Grassi, vol. I, pp. 448-450, 600-607 (gardens of King Zogalia and the Prince); pp. 482-492 (banquet in house of Carindo).

[34]   Filarete, *Trattato*, ed. Finoli-Grassi, vol. I, pp. 389-391, fol. 102 *v*-103 *r*. For a general account of the obelisks extant in the Renaissance see (although some are confused due to the

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Fig. 4. Monument of King Zoga-
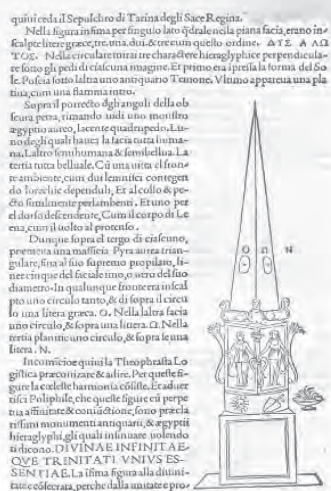lia. Filarete, *Trattato*, fol. 102 *v.*

Fig. 5. Pyramidal obelisk. *Hypne-
rotomachia Poliphili*, h v *r.*

As a drawing by Marten van Heemskerck proves, the composition of
lions bearing an obelisk was used for the Roman Matteiano obelisk, when it
was erected near the Piazza del Campidoglio in the early Renaissance.[35]

But how could Filarete's *Trattato* have reached the proposed author Fran-
cesco Colonna? In this case, there is some surprising evidence that he could
even have read the treatise quite conveniently in his Venetian monastery San
Zanipolo. For it is recorded that a Latin translation of the Italian treatise
made for king Mathias Corvinus of Hungary (1443-1490) was transferred to
Italy after his death, where it was catalogued in the Zanipolo library around
1500.[36] In any case, the high number of diligently illustrated manuscript co-
pies and Latin translations of Filarete's treatise are convincing evidence of

lack of contemporary sources) B. Curran, *The "Hypnerotomachia Poliphili" and Renaissance
Egyptology*, "Word & Image", n. 14, 1998, pp. 156-185.

[35]   The drawing was published by C. Huelsen, *Le illustrazioni della «Hypnerotomachia Po-
liphili» e le antichità di Roma*, Firenze, Olschki, 1910, p. 8, fig. 6. This obelisk, the 'twin' of the
Pantheon obelisk, is now situated in the Parco Villa Celimontana.

[36]   The manuscript, probably executed by a humanist situated in Buda, is now kept in the
Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana. M. Beltramini, *Filarete in toga. La latinizzazione del «Trattato
d'Architettura»*, Arte Lombarda, Nuova serie, n. 139, 2003, pp. 14-20. For the fortune of the ma-
nuscript after 1490 see ivi, p. 15.

its high popularity among humanist readers like Colonna and among patrons as well.

So if the *Trattato* is – despite its novellistic nature – to be taken seriously as an important contribution to Renaissance architectural theory, then, of course, the novel featuring Poliphilo's encounter with antiquity should be considered as a learned investigation of architecture and other monuments. So on an art theoretical level it can tell us much of the Northern Italian sense of monument based antiquarianism, i.e. of a practise of antiquarian studies devoted to investigating the deeper meaning of the monumental evidence. In other words, a science we would now call Classical archaeology. Whether the author of the *HP* considers this issue as a new fashion of courtly amusement, a new field of scholarship, or a mixture of both, we will see below.

The Antiquarians of the Quattrocento

Other important models for the insatiable yearning for antiquity typical of the main character Poliphilo can be found in the contemporary scholarly environment. It is above all the writings of the antiquarians Cyriac of Ancona, Felice Feliciano, and Giovanni Marcanova, who aim to grasp the psychological side effects of their encounter with the *antiquitates*: curiosity, amazement, longing, wanderlust, or even sadness about the lost past.[37]

Since Charles Mitchell's essay of 1960, it is known that antiquarian studies and the practice of sketching ancient monuments have influenced the woodcuts of the *HP*.[38] For example, in the illustration of Poliphilo's first impression of the ancient world (Fig. 2, *HP* 1, p. 21), the design of the ruins and the grass tufts growing on them owe much to the mural studies of Cyriac of Ancona.

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[37]   For their humanist network see A. Grafton, *Leon Battista Alberti. Master Builder of the Renaissance*, New York, Hill and Wang, 2000, ch. IV.

[38]   Ch. Mitchell, *Archaeology and Romance*…, cit., pp. 474-481.
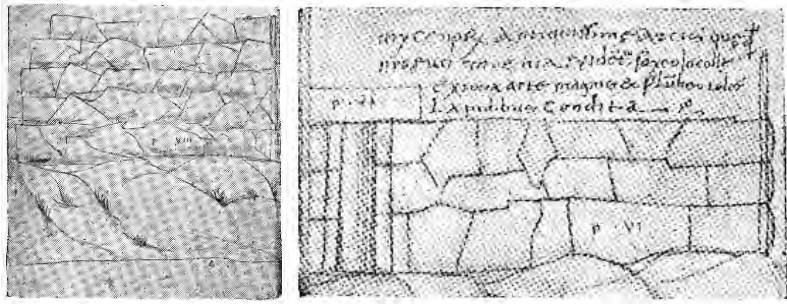
Figs. 6-7. Cyriac of Ancona, Mural studies from Peloponnesian ancient sites.

These sketches introduced a new interest in the examination of mural constructions. An anonymous humanist influenced by Filarete uses this new mode of viewing in his drawing of the *Septizonium* erected by Septimius Severus near the Palatine hill (Fig. 8).[39] Although his treatise deals with the architectural typology of Roman antiquities, he renders the fragmented mural construction of the building's wall as diligently as the composition of the columns.

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[39] It was destroyed in the end of the 16th century. A. NESSELRATH, *Monumenta antiqua romana. Ein illustrierter Rom-Traktat des Quattrocento*, in: *Antikenzeichnung und Antikenstudium in Renaissance und Frühbarock. Akten des internationalen Symposions in Coburg*, hrsg. R. HARPRATH-H. WREDE, Mainz, Philipp von Zabern, 1989, pp. 21-37, fig. 5. For the particular interest of that time in ancient mural constructions see also A. ESCH, *Mauern bei Mantegna*, "Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte", n. 47, 1984, pp. 293-319; IDEM, *Wiederverwendung von Antike im Mittelalter. Die Sicht des Archäologen und die Sicht des Historikers*, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter, 2008, pp. 39, 59-60.
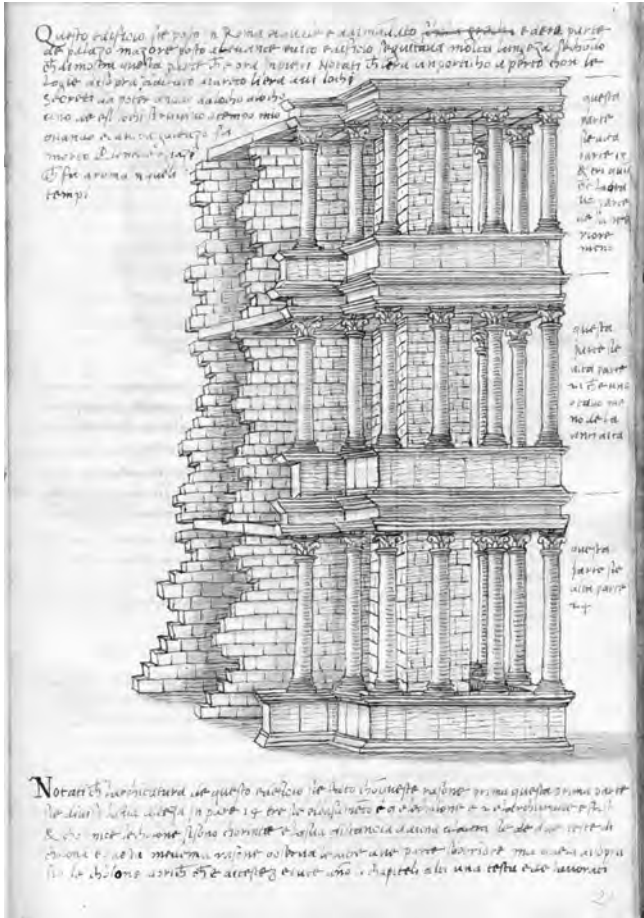
Fig. 8. *Septizonium* of Septimius Severus. *Monumenta antiqua Romana*, fol. 21 *r*.

As to the antiquarian details of the *HP*, Mitchell noted that the dancer-ornamentation on the "mysteriosa cisterna" (*HP* 1, pp. 214, 218, Fig. 9) is a quite reliable copy of a relief once sketched by Cyriac in Samothrake, of which a copy has survived.[40]

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[40]   Ch. Mitchell, *Archaeology and Romance…*, cit., p. 474, figs. 33-34. The woodcut illustration of the "mysteriosa cisterna" actually transfers the original Greek relief figures to the decoration band of a classical puteal wellhead.

Fig. 9. Relief with dancers. *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, o i *v*.

Another drawing by Cyriac himself shows a general interest in sculpted representations of dancers typical of Renaissance culture (Fig. 11).[41] And when he draws Greek stone monuments, he is particularly interested in observing the fragmentary state of preservation: many drawings depict the bruised edges and fringed contour lines typical of damaged stone slabs. The woodcuts of the *HP* take up this style. The woodcut of the tympanon (Fig. 11), for example, depicts the same fringes and even permits the cutting off of the heads of both birds. (*HP* 1, p. 246).[42]

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[41]   *Ibidem*, figs. 33-34; M. Chatzidakis, *Ciriaco d' Ancona und die Wiederentdeckung Griechenlands im 15. Jh.*, Petersberg, Michael Imhof Verlag, 2017, pp. 110-112, figs. 207-213.

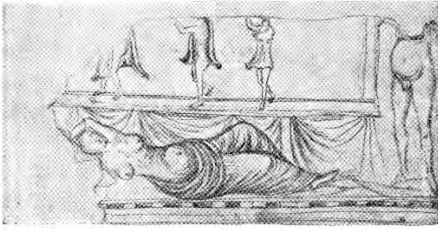[42]   For similar examples see *HP* 1, pp. 253, 257, 260-261.

Fig. 10. Cyriac of Ancona, Fragmented relief. Codex Trotti, fol. 122 *r.*

Fig. 11. Tympanon. *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, p vii *v.*

Some scholars have therefore attributed the woodcuts of the *HP* to a Venetian workshop somehow related to Gentile Bellini and his circle. Fortini Brown's investigation of the *Venetian Sense of the Past* argues that apart from stylistic issues, some Venetian painters present the same antiquarian aesthetic that is typical of the woodcut illustrations. Especially Vittore Carpaccio's view of antiquity is an interesting parallel: In his *Entombment of Christ*, Fortini brown notes, "a circumstantial rendering of the broken classical artifacts reveals Carpaccio's keen eye and his debt to the antiquarian sylloge".[43]

Other possible sources influencing the author of the *HP* and his woodcutters are the antiquarian studies of Andrea Mantegna. Many of his paintings, for example the *Triumph of Caesar* series or his *St Sebastian* in Vienna, display a profound knowledge of the typology of ancient vases and silverware and of classical architecture. Similar to Carpaccio, Mantegna is fond of placing ancient mural constructions and fragmented marbles into his background landscapes.[44] He was also acquainted with some of the leading antiquarians of his age, for example, Felice Feliciano and probably Giovanni Marcanova.[45]

The books *De re aedificatoria* by Leon Battista Alberti, on the other hand, which are so important for Poliphilo's perception of ancient buildings and his attempts to describe them, teach little about the reception-aesthetical aspects

[43]   P. Fortini Brown, *Venice & Antiquity…*, cit., p. 222.

[44]   A. Esch, *Mauern bei Mantegna…*, cit.

[45]   P. Tosetti Grandi, *Andrea Mantegna, Giovanni Marcanova e Felice Feliciano*, in: *Andrea Mantegna. Impronta del genio*. Convegno internazionale di studi Padova, Verona, Mantova 8, 9, 10 novembre 2006, a cura di R. Signorini-V. Rebonato-S. Tammaccaro, Firenze, Olschki, 2010 («Accademia Nazionale Virgiliana di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti Mantova. Miscellanea», 19), vol. I, pp. 273-361.

of the archaeological experience. Instead, since exact measurement was one of the main concerns of Alberti's art theory, the perception of three-dimensional works initially presented itself as a problem of geometry and optics to him. Nevertheless, the mode in which architecture is described in the *HP* follows the Vitruvian structure of Alberti's treatise. Like Vitruvius' *De architectura*, Alberti's treatise presents architecture as an art theoretical system. As in all classical treatises on *techné* and the arts he describes the elements of architecture according to the theory of artistic production, i.e. by recapitulating the construction of a building from the first sketch to the final execution.

The narrator of the *HP* follows this model. Therefore, in order to explore the intellectual activity of the unknown ancient architects who created the magnificent structures, he has the main character describe the stages of execution in more or less Vitruvian terminology. When the model viewer Poliphilo approaches the colossal step pyramid with obelisk (Fig. 12), for example, he visualizes the entire process step by step, beginning with the conceptual design an ending with the final detailed work in stone, at the same time reviving this activity before the inner eye of the reader. By visualizing the complex technical procedure, the narrator pays tribute to the architect's past *ingenium* which leaves the viewer in silent admiration:

> Teniva in se tanta cumulatione di miraveglia, che io di stupore insensato stava alla sua consideratione. Et ultra molto piu la immensitate dill'opera, & lo excesso dilla subtigliecia dil opulente & acutissimo ingiegnio, & dilla magna cura, & exquisita diligentia dil Architecto. Cum quale temerario dunque invento di arte? Cum quale virtute & humane forcie, & ordine, et incredibile impensa, cum coelestae aemulatione tanto nell'aire tale pondo suggesto riportare? Cum quale Ergate, & cum quale orbiculate Troclee, & cum quale Capre, o Polispasio, & altre tractorie Machine, & tramate Armature? Faci silentio quivi omni altra incredibile et maxima structura. (*HP* 1, p. 25)

What actually happens on the hidden path that connects the artist's mind with his executing hand, had already become an art theoretical issue in Alberti's *De re aedificatoria*:

Quae in rebus pulcherrimis et ornatissimis placeant: ea quidem aut ex ingenii commento et rationibus aut ex artificis manu deveniunt: aut a natura rebus ipsis inmissa sunt. (Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, 6. 4).[46]

What we like about the most beautiful and splendid things comes either from a reasonable idea of the spirit (*ingenium*) or from the artist's hand, or it is inherently innate in all things. (Transl. NK)

Contrary to the *HP*, Alberti does not yet distinguish the different kinds of emotions the interaction between *ingenium* and hand ultimately evoke in the viewer, nor does he discuss how emotional reactions might enrich the knowledge of those devoted to antiquity. From the perspective of later art theory one can conclude that Alberti hadn't yet fully integrated the systematic position of the beholder into his architectural theory. Filarete however, being a far more productive artist than Alberti, was naturally highly concerned with the theoretical and practical aspects of artistic imagination. Since Martin Kemp's terminological investigation it is clear that Filarete was actually the first artist writer to use the Italian expression *fantasia* following the Greek philosophical concept of imagination. This is perhaps the reason why Kemp discovers many similarities between the Florentine architect and Francesco Colonna, whom he considers as the author of the *HP*: "Colonna shares with Filarete, that other architectural eccentric of the Quattrocento, an infectious joy for curious inventions, marvels, oddities, conundrums and hieroglyphs; and both indulge in the kind of fantastic inventiveness disparaged by Alberti as beyond the limits of feasibility".[47]

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[46]   Citation after the print available in the later 15th century: L.B. ALBERTI, *De re aedificatoria*, Florentiae, Nicolaus Laurentius, 1485, n *v*. For the modern display of paragraphs and further notes see the editions IDEM, *Zehn Bücher über die Baukunst*, ins Deutsche übertragen, eingeleitet und mit Anmerkungen und Zeichnungen versehen durch M. THEUER, Wien-Leipzig, Heller, 1912; IDEM, *De re aedificatoria. On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. by J. RYKWERT-R. TAVERNOR-N. LEACH, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 1988.

[47]   M. KEMP, *From "Mimesis" to "Fantasia". The Quattrocento Vocabulary of Creation, Inspiration and Genius in the Visual Arts*, "Viator", n. 8, 1977, pp. 347-398. For Filarete's interpretation of the Greek term *phantasia* see ivi, pp. 369-371, citation p. 365.

Poliphilo's Archaeological Experience: The Obelisks and the Stages of Knowledge

As the comparison with Filarete's earlier treatise has shown, the archaeological adventure undertaken by Poliphilo as he uncovers an ancient world overgrown by nature has much in common with the expedition to the harbour of Plusiapolis. In a way, Poliphilo's journey can be understood as a second episode of the architect's excavation of the Golden book. As differently as the adventures turn out in each case, a certain pattern becomes clear, each time Poliphilo approaches a new monument. In most cases he acquires his knowledge of antiquity in a sequence of characteristic steps and brings them to a conclusion at the last step. I would like to present this prominent structure of learning by examining a special monument genre, the obelisks. We will see how Poliphilo reaches the highest level of antiquarian knowledge at the end of the journey, on discovering the last obelisk on the island of Cythera, completely overgrown by nature. In this case study the four characteristic stages of learning are:

1. Separating antiquity from nature
2. Describing the ancient finds by retracing the genesis of the work
3. Fragmentary reconstruction and typology
4. Combining visual and literary knowledge

So in the end, literary knowledge and visual experience have to be brought to a new synthesis. This is exactly the method German *Altertumswissenschaft* has been calling the principle of interrelative evidence (Prinzip der wechselseitigen Erhellung) since the 19th century. Therefore, not surprisingly, Poliphilo's four tasks represent the same sequence of investigation that make up today's archaeological method.

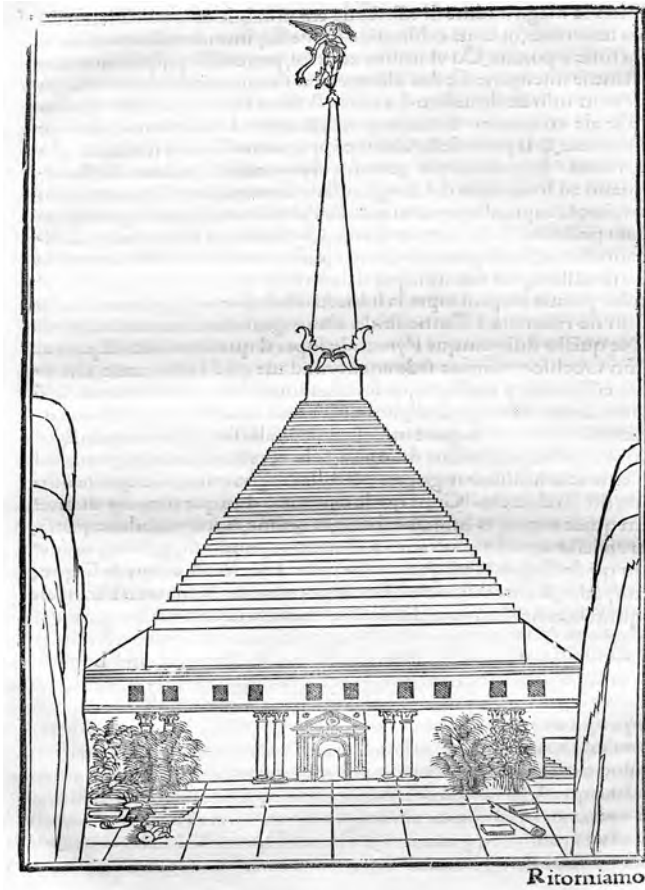## Obelisk I on Step Pyramid

Fig. 12. Obelisk mounted on step pyramid. *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili,* b i *v.*

The first obelisk on Poliphilo's journey is mounted on top of a colossal building of pyramidal construction. The woodcut (Fig. 12) illustrating the moment of discovery depicts the monument flanked by steep mountains, which is exactly the perspective of Poliphilo's approach described in the text:

Laquale fabrica vidi continua tra uno & l'altro degli monti delumba ti pendicei intersita, che poteva arbitrariamente coniecturare essere la sua dimensione di passi vinti, & stadii sei. Lo allamento dequali monti aequato era perpendicularmente dalla cima giu fina

allarea. […] Quivi dunque cum l'uno & l'altro monte questa admiranda structura, cum conscia haesione se coniungeva. (*HP* 1, p. 23)

As Huelsen pointed out a century ago, the illustration resembles the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus as it was most probably preserved until the end of the 15th century.[48] According to the excavators, the dilapidating of the Mausoleum began in 1494, when Rhodian knights used the stones for fortifications, with the result that today there are almost no visible remains extant at all.[49]

From Pliny's description of the Mausoleum it is known that the *meta*, a kind of spire, was mounted on a pyramid of 24 steps, therefore quite similar to the illustration as well. Bury suggested that it was again most likely Cyriac of Ancona who transmitted drawings of the Halicarnassus site to other Northern Italian antiquarians, who might have influenced the design of the *HP*.[50]

Entering the monument, Poliphilo notes first of all that it far surpasses the most famous specimen of the genus at that time, the Vatican obelisk. This monument had already been studied extensively by Alberti, Marcanova and other antiquarians of the 15th century and was quite often copied in manuscripts on Roman architecture, as the drawing by the Lombard Anonymous shows (Fig. 13).[51]

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[48]   C. Huelsen, *Le illustrazioni*…, cit., pp. 9-12. See also J. Bury, *Chapter III of the "Hypnerotomachia Poliphili" and the Tomb of Mausolus*, "Word & Image", n. 14, 1998, pp. 40-60.

[49]   For the history of destruction see K. Jeppesen-A. Lutrell, *The Maussolleion at Halikarnassos. Reports of the Danish Archaeological Expedition to Bodrum*, vol. II: *The Written Sources and Their Archaeological Background*, Copenhagen, In Commission at Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag, 1986, pp. 135-138; J. Bury, *Chapter III of the "Hypnerotomachia"*…, cit., pp. 40-41.

[50]   Pliny, *Naturalis historia*, 36. 30-31. J. Bury, *Chapter III of the "Hypnerotomachia"*…, cit., p. 50.

[51]   A. Nesselrath, *Monumenta antiqua romana*…, cit., p. 24, fig. 4.

Fig. 13. Vatican Obelisk. *Monumenta antiqua Romana*, fol. 21 *r.*

And as if Poliphilo had carried out Alberti's order to fathom the classical arts in all their *ornamenta* literally, he hesitantly, despite its fearsome effect, examines a colossal Medusa relief, which proves to be the entrance to an illuminated staircase in the interior of the stepped pyramid below. After Poliphilo's passions of horror ("horror", "spavento"), aesthetic desire and amazement ("stupor") have fought a battle with each other, his intellect finally defeats them all: he discovers the explanatory Greek characters revealing the architect's name Lichas and the dedicatory inscription to Sol, as is to be expected in monuments originally dedicated to the Egyptian sun god.

> Dique el volto & gli squammei serpi rixanti, erano si diffinitamente de lavoratura mentiti, che non poco horrore & spavento m'incusseron. Negli ochii di quali commodissimamente inclaustrati furono lucentissimi lapilli. In tanto che si io certificato non era, marmoro essere la materia, auso io non sarei stato si facilmente approximarme. (*HP* 1, p. 27)

These initial insights arouse in Poliphilo the desire, "libidine", to independently combine further fragments of antiquity into a whole, i.e. to produce a new reconstruction of his experience before his inner eye:

> Et dove poscia naque tanta iactantia, & tanta ardente libidine di choacervare coagmentando petre ad tanto congesto, cumulo, & fastigio. (*HP* 1, p. 29)

Here for the first time the archaeological impulse of our main character is clearly formulated.

The dedication of the monument to the sun god recalls the general knowledge of the obelisks the antiquarians of the Quattrocento had acquired. Brian Curran, who has examined the egyptological aspects of the *HP* in detail, assumes that the author must have studied some of the Roman obelisks himself and that he incorporated the results of his autopsy into the novel.[52] Although this remains possible, I would like to introduce another source that has been little considered so far: Flavio Biondo's treatise *Roma instaurata*, at that time certainly the most important catalogue of Roman topography; copies of the manuscript were used among scholars between 1446 and 1471, until it was finally printed. In the later 15th century and in the 16th century it was reprinted several times in Verona, Venice, Turin, and Basle.[53]

Biondo's inventory of Roman topography provided all the sources relevant to the study of this colossal genre. As to their general meaning, Biondo tells us that obelisks were regarded as representations of the sunrays. He

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[52]   B. CURRAN, *The "Hypnerotomachia Poliphili"*…, cit., p. 169; T. GRIGGS, *Promoting the Past*…, cit., p. 23, believes in a transmission by Alberti's treatise *De re aedificatoria*.

[53]   F. DELLA SCHIAVA-M. LAUREYS, *La «Roma instaurata» di Biondo Flavio. Censimento dei manoscritti*, "Aevum", n. 87, 2013, pp. 643-665, especially pp. 643-644; F. BIONDO, *Rome restaurée*, éd. A. RAFFARIN-DUPUIS, vol. I, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2005 («Les classiques de l'humanisme»), pp. CLX-CLXIII.

also discusses the special nature of the *figurae hierographicae*, as he calls the Egyptian characters.[54] This could be a key to understanding the special word and image relationship of our novel, which also explains why the perception of obelisks is one of the novel's repeated motives. Firstly, from our modern point of view, we have to keep in mind that the humanists were preoccupied by a general misunderstanding: they held the opinion that hieroglyphs were ideograms, i.e. pictograms that referred to only one single word. Filarete adopted this doctrine from Filelfo:

> Do, dimi quello che dicono quelle lettere." "Non vel so dire, perché non si possono interpretare: sono tutte lettere figurate, chi a uno animale e chi a un altro, e chi a uno uccello e chi a biscia; alcuna è una civetta, alcuna come dire una sega; chi come uno occhio e come dire ancora una figura, e chi in una cosa e chi in un'altra, tanto è che pochissimi sono che le possino interpretare. Vero è che 'l poeta Francesco Filelfo mi disse che quegli animali significavano chi una cosa e chi un'altra, ciascheduno ognuno per sé; l'anguilla significa la 'nvidia, e così ognuna ha sua significazione. (Filarete, *Trattato*, ed. Finoli-Grassi, vol. I, p. 335, fol. 87 *v*)

The linguistic principle that each pictogram actually represents a syllable without necessarily referring to an actual object was discovered much later, in the course of the excavation of the trilingual Rosette Stone in 1799.[55] Biondo and the scholars of his time admired the Egyptian sign system because of a falsely attested quality of *simplicitas* and *perspicuitas*, meaning that any icon represents only one object or word. Among humanists the world of hieroglyphs thus became a haven of universal knowledge and promised to be decipherable easily by any interested reader. For, referring to Ammonius Marcellinus, Biondo called the hieroglyphs authorities of ancient wisdom. What fascinated him most was that these symbols inscribed in stone were actually the most perspicuous way of conveying deep thought to the human mind.[56]

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[54]   F. Biondo, *Roma instaurata*, Verona, Boninus de Boninis, 1481, a viii *v*-a viiii *v*, 1. 61-64; idem, *Rome restaurée…*, cit., vol. I, pp. 68-77.

[55]   E. Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition*, Copenhagen, Gad, 1961, pp. 124-145.

[56]   F. Biondo, *Roma instaurata…*, cit., a viiii *r*, 1. 63: "Non enim ut nunc litterarum numerus praestitus et facilis exprimit quicquid humana mens concipere potest. Ita prisci quoque scripti-

That is perhaps the reason why a certain type of memory image became quite popular in the Renaissance that resembled hieroglyphical inscriptions: the 'visual alphabets' in which, for example, pictures of animals were composed analogously to the first letter of the animal's name.[57]

The obelisks, the most venerable of all monuments, thus stored the wisdom of the ancients in a language all readers of all ages would be able to understand because of its pictorial unambiguity. Consequently, the humanists regarded them as divine astronomical gifts on the one hand, as representations of the eternity of universal knowledge on the other. In the context of the novel, obelisks thus represent the memory of ancient times that has become stone. This also legitimizes the rich illustration of the printed work. The venerability of the *hierographicae* also elevates the sophisticated woodcuts themselves to universal epistemic media. For their innovative compositions strive for a new connection between sign and meaning.

tarunt aegyptii: sed singulae litterae singulis nominibus serviebant". See also F. Biondo, *Rome restaurée…*, cit., vol. I, p. 73; Biondo's chapters on obelisks are precise excerps or paraphrases from the extant books of the 4th century historian Ammianus Marcellinius, *Res gestae*, 17. 4.

[57]   F.A. Yates, *The Art of Memory…*, cit., pp. 118-120.

Obelisk II on Elephant
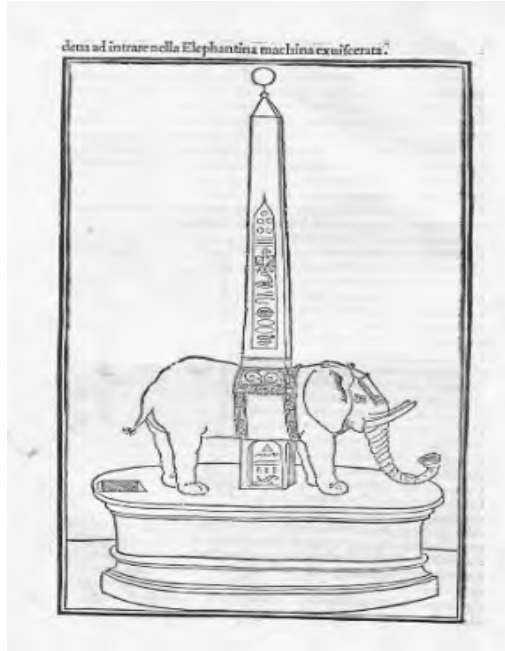
Fig. 14. Elephant with obelisk. *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, b vii *v.*

When Poliphilo discovers a second obelisk monument, an elephant on an oval stone base bearing the obelisk on its back (Fig. 14, *HP* 1, p. 38), the further examination requires a descent into the interior, similar to the colossal horse mentioned above (Fig. 3). And in the inside Poliphilo finally becomes aware that the hermeneutic key to the sculpted enigma is beyond his reach. But he knows at least that he will have to return to the inside of the elephant some other day after having calmed his mental disturbances.

In this episode the topos of immergence refers to the mental procedure of acquiring knowledge, i.e. the mind's descent into memory, where the elements of wisdom are waiting to be combined fittingly which each other by the emotionally aroused intellect. Despite the successful deciphering of some of the elephant's inscriptions, some questions remain unanswered, so that Poliphilo still has to move on under the impression of wandering through a mysterious and unfathomable ancient site ("inexcogitabile", *HP* 1, p. 42).

Obelisk III as Prism with Figures

In the realm of Eleutherilyda, Poliphilo is brought to a new level of knowledge when Logistica leads him to the rectangular base carrying a trigonal obelisk, called "triangulo" (Fig. 5, *HP* 1, pp. 128-129). Under her guidance he is introduced into the metaphysical dimensions of the monument. Contrarily to his earlier experiences though, this is not at all a process of continuous learning. Instead, in a sudden insight, he becomes aware of the immutability, indestructibility and eternity of all obelisks:

(See above Fig. 5).

Havendo quivi Logistica praestantemente gli probatissimi praecepti cum absolutissima cognitione deprompti, cum sagace solertia, dal effusissimo gremio della natura divina decerpti. Io incominciai sencia haesitamento persentire dellectatione maiore, che qualunque altra mi rabile opera, cum gli ochii mei gratiosamente conspecta, Pensante Lo obelisco di tanto mysterio, cum ineffabile aequalitate statario, & ad firmitudine et perpetuitate integro, solido, & aeterno, cum aequatione di parilitate infriabile, & incorruptibile pseuerante. (*HP* 1, pp. 130 f.)

This kind of mental reaction, related to the Platonic term *exaiphnes*, is rather new in 15th century art literature. Some similar expressions can be traced in Flavio Biondo's writings though, particularly in his *Roma triumphans*.[58] As the narration of our novel reveals, Poliphilo's deep understanding of the monument is not limited to this specimen, but now covers the genre of obelisks as such. He is therefore well prepared for the fourth and final obelisk (Fig. 15):

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[58]   F. MUECKE, *Ante oculos ponere. Vision and Imagination in Flavio Biondo's Roma Triumphans*, "Papers of the British School at Rome", n. 79, 2011, pp. 275-298. See also F. BIONDO, *Rome restaurée…*, cit., vol. I, pp. LXXXIX-XCI.