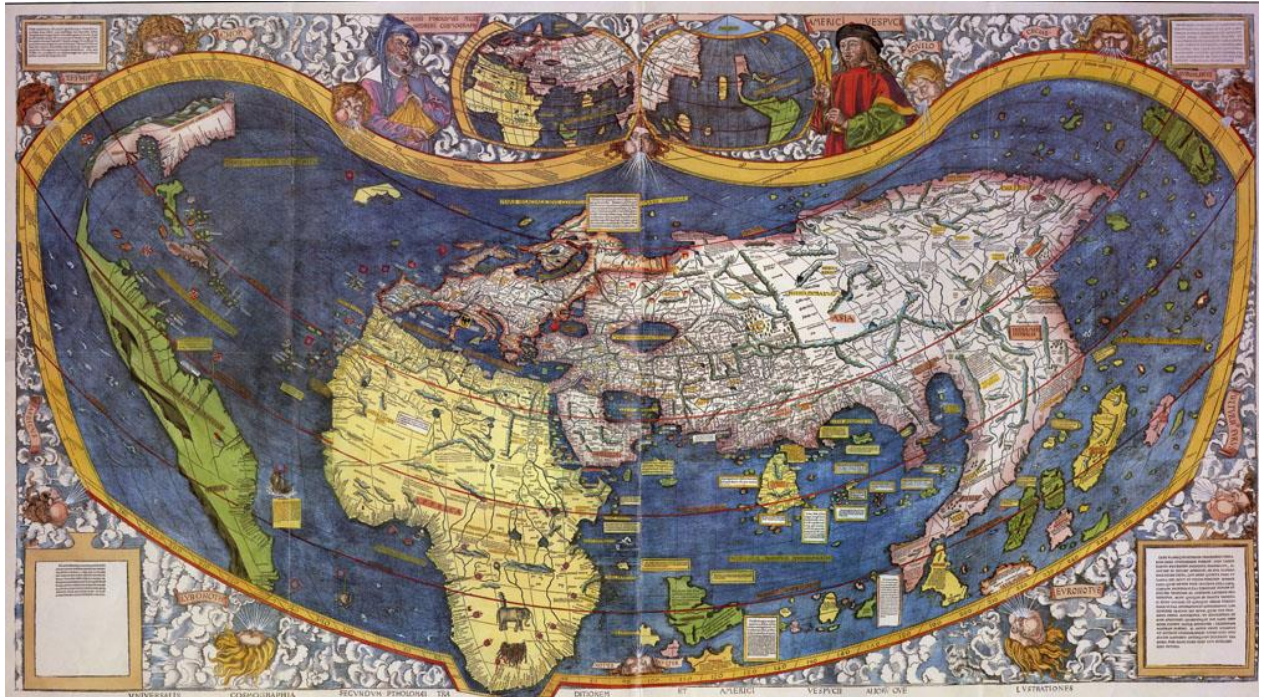


Framing the "new"

Classical reception in Amerigo Vespucci's

Mundus Novus



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Introduction

In the past few days I have told you in detail about my return from those new areas which we have explored and discovered with the fleet, at the expense and for the account of the most blessed king of Portugal, and which may be called a New World, since our classical authors had in no respect any knowledge of these regions and it is the most unknown thing for all listeners. (...) because in those southern parts I have found a continent more densely populated and abounding in animals than our Europe or Asia or Africa, and, in addition, a climate milder and more delightful than in any other region known to us, as you shall learn below, wherein we shall write down succinctly only capital matters and the things more worthy of comment and memory, which were seen or heard by me in this new world, as will appear below.¹

The Florentine merchant Amerigo Vespucci does not mince his words in his letter to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici: the scholars of classical antiquity failed in their descriptions of the world, as they had no knowledge of the newly discovered America and the strange plants, animals and people that inhabited this "New World". According to Vespucci, even Pliny the Elder, the natural philosopher of the 1st century AD, did not touch upon a "thousandth part of the parrots, and other birds" he had seen flitting about through the forests of America.²

Amerigo Vespucci claimed to have made four trips to the New World, in respectively 1497 and 1498; 1499 and 1500; 1501 and 1502; and 1503 and 1504. The descriptions of his expeditions to America have been handed down to us in several letters, namely the *Mundus Novus* letter addressed to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici (ca. 1502) quoted above and the *Quattro Viaggi* letters which were probably addressed to Piero Soderini.³ Even though Vespucci wrote his letters in Italian, they were meant to be translated and published in Latin, as mentioned at the end of the *Mundus Novus* letter.⁴ Unfortunately however, the Italian original of *Mundus Novus* was lost during Vespucci's own lifetime.

¹ Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §1, 1-5; 12-16. The translations of *Mundus Novus* and of other Latin and Greek passages are my own.

² Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §6, 16-19.

³ See Markham (2010:11). The *Mundus Novus* letter was handed down to us in twelve manuscripts, in Latin, published in various European cities between 1503 and 1505. For an analysis of the manuscripts and the possible *editio princeps*, see Omodeo (2014: 366-372). Furthermore, Omodeo (2014: 363-364) mentions that it is plausible that the Dominican and humanist Giovanni del Giocondo was the translator of *Mundus Novus*, since he adds certain remarks, as at the end of the letter, which have a firm ecclesiastical tone.

⁴ Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* 13.

In 1789 the scholar Bartolozzi discovered an Italian copy of a hitherto unknown letter from Vespucci of 1502, the addressee of which was the same as the one to whom Vespucci had sent the *Mundus Novus*, namely Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de Medici.⁵ Even though the same events are described in the Bartolozzi letter and in the *Mundus Novus* letter, they nevertheless differ on several grounds.

In his commentary on *Mundus Novus*, on the basis of these deviating elements Robert Wallisch suggests that the Bartolozzi letter could not have been the Italian original of the *Mundus Novus* letter, but rather a variation of it.⁶ Wallisch mentions five themes in which the texts differ, arguing that Vespucci deliberately phrased these elements differently in the *Mundus Novus* letter with a view to the publication of the text.

According to Wallisch, one of these deviating elements is that the criticism against the classical sciences in *Mundus Novus* is absent in the letter which Bartolozzi had found. Wallisch thus argues that Amerigo, by including this added criticism in the *Mundus Novus* letter, aimed to "reject" openly the knowledge of the ancient scholars. Wallisch concludes that the explorer, "largely detached from the ancient Roman literary taste, detached from the dominant pursuit of intertextuality by humanist texts" has opened the way to a "new genre of empirical literature" and for the first time focuses "on the value of originality, more precisely: the originality of events in an exotic, disturbing and at the same time longing new reality."⁷

In his book *New worlds, ancient texts, the power of tradition and the shock of discovery*, however, Grafton examines how during the Renaissance European scholars and explorers, such as Amerigo Vespucci, did not tend to see the contemporary discoveries in the New World as a falsification of the classical texts, but rather used these texts to understand and place the New World in a conceptual framework. A fundamental idea that runs through Grafton's theory is that the "new" can only be understood from the perspective of an existing paradigm. Therefore, despite the fact that the new discoveries in America could overturn specific classical knowledge, there was no alternative way to think about the New World other than through the old frames of thought.

Grafton briefly discusses Amerigo Vespucci's travel accounts in his research, stating that these are imbued with classical traditions.⁸ Vespucci's descriptions of America's indigenous population, for example, contain clear references to the classical Vergilian notion of the Golden Age.

⁵ See Wallisch (2002: 114).

⁶ Idem.

⁷ See Wallisch (2002: 118).

⁸ See Grafton (1995: 83-84).

Another element, in this respect, that challenges the interpretation of Wallisch and which has escaped Wallisch and Grafton's notice, is that the *Mundus Novus* letter is addressed to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, the cousin of Lorenzo il Magnifico. Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco was a well-known patron of classical literature and the arts in the humanist spheres of 15th century Florence. This De' Medici descendant had a great interest in the *De rerum natura*, a natural philosophical poem by the Roman philosopher Lucretius.⁹

Following this line of thought, we may wonder whether Vespucci truly "rejects" the classical natural science and geography admired by his patron, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, as Wallisch claims. In addition to this theme, this thesis will focus on the manner in which Amerigo Vespucci, in his *Mundus Novus*, resorts to classical knowledge and ideology in order to approach the New World and place it in a conceptual framework.

As such, this thesis participates in research on classical reception in the Renaissance. In the case of classical reception, there is no strong distinction between completely embracing classical knowledge or completely "rejecting" it, as Wallisch claims in his commentary. In fact, reception is not a process of "copy-pasting", but rather a process of transformation, in which some classical elements are omitted while others are incorporated.¹⁰ Research into the classical reception in the *Mundus Novus* letter can therefore give us an insight into the way in which Vespucci continues to use classical sources and may even "transform" and "re-invent" them to introduce his new discoveries, even though he states that certain ancient knowledge has become obsolete.

In order to examine this classical reception within the *Mundus Novus* letter, a twofold approach is required. Firstly, since *Mundus Novus* was addressed to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, Wallisch' argument that the letter was written "detached" from the "ancient Roman taste" must be examined critically. This is done in chapter one. This chapter analyses how Vespucci by means of classical reception in the design and attitude of his letter, aims to meet the taste of his humanist patron Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco.

⁹ See Brown (2010: 43). Lucretius wrote his *De rerum natura*, a poem in which he explains the philosophy of Epicureanism, in the 1st century BC. Epicureanism is a philosophical movement that is Greek from origin and supposes that the whole world consists of small indivisible particles that collide without order and thereby form matter. Since man cannot influence this arbitrariness of the elements, Epicureanism advocates a life in seclusion in order to find peace of mind and happiness.

¹⁰ See Bergemann, Dönike, Schirmeister, Toepfer, Walter and Weitbrecht (2019:9-26) for a discussion on the study of classical reception in the Renaissance and the process of transformation.

Secondly, Wallisch' statement that Vespucci rejects classical cosmology and natural philosophy is questioned. This is done in the following chapter. Here it is analysed how Vespucci used the frameworks of classical cosmology, geography and natural sciences in order to describe and introduce his new discoveries. The ideas of Ptolemy, Herodotus, Pliny, Vergil and Lucretius, among others, are reviewed. How does Vespucci's description of the "New World" relate to the knowledge of these classical authors concerning the "Old World"?

When discussing classical reception, an important question is how the transformation of the original texts can convey a certain self-reflective cultural understanding.¹¹ The choice made in the incorporation of classical texts, for example in the *Mundus Novus* letter, is inextricably linked to the historical and cultural background in which this reception process takes place. In the case of Vespucci's *Mundus Novus* it is therefore worthwhile to indicate how its classical reception can be interpreted in a broader historical context.

Taking this into account, both chapters in this thesis give hints as to how the incorporation of classical texts may relate to the role of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici as a patron of classical literature.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the framing of the "other" and its communication to a wider audience, as in Vespucci's *Mundus Novus*, go hand in hand with a sense of European hierarchal superiority towards America. Therefore, in addition, both chapters analyse how the classical reception in Vespucci's frameworks may reflect on a world in which colonisation by European powers began to take shape as a result of transatlantic voyages and explorations.

¹¹ Idem (2019: 10).

1. *Mundus Novus* and Renaissance humanism

It is well here to consider the injury and injustice which that Americo Vespuccio appears to have done to the Admiral, or that those have done who published his Four Navigations, in attributing the discovery of this continent to himself, without mentioning anyone but himself. Owing to this, all the foreigners who write of these Indies in Latin, or in their own mother-tongue, or who make charts or maps, call the continent America, as having been first discovered by Americo. For as Americo was a Latinist, and eloquent, he knew how to make use of the first voyage he undertook, and to give the credit to himself, as if he had been the principal captain of it.¹²

Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novus* was extremely popular among his contemporaries and subsequent readers; quickly, his name became anchored on the "new" continent. However, the above quote from *The History of the Indies* (ca. 1527) by the historian Bartolomé de las Casas shows the first accusations against Amerigo Vespucci: the explorer is a liar who, through his fancy writings, is wrongly considered to be the first discoverer of America. The new continent should have been called Columbia, after Christopher Columbus. Unlike Columbus, however, Vespucci managed to seduce his audience with his eloquence, according to Las Casas.

Vespucci undoubtedly owed this eloquence to his humanist training. Taught by his learned uncle Giorgio Antonio Vespucci, a well-known humanist in 15th century Florence, Vespucci learned Latin and became acquainted with classical literature and scientific scholarship. In light of Vespucci's good education and eloquence, which were already recognised by his contemporary Las Casas, it is worthwhile to continue this chapter with a central focus on the literary design of the *Mundus Novus* letter and the attitude it expresses.

1.1 A Latin letter

Considering Vespucci's literary style, the end of the letter immediately draws attention, where it is mentioned that the *Mundus Novus* must be translated from Italian to Latin, to ensure all humanists would be aware of the recent discoveries across the ocean. Subsequently, the intended use of the Latin language in the letter, the language of the ancient Romans and the humanist scholars, is emphasised, shifting the entire text into the orbit of humanist literature. In addition, the *Mundus Novus*, as a letter, belongs to the genre of epistolography,

¹² See Markham (2010: 68-69) for the english translation from the original in Spanish.

embellishing the idea that the text can be read in a humanistic context, as this was the preferred medium for Renaissance scholars to exchange ideas with each other.¹³ In the context of the patronage practices in 15th century Florence, letters by clients of the De' Medici were written to show their loyalty, to glorify their patrons and ask for favours.

Because of this importance of letter-writing in the scholarly and political circuit of Florence, the *ars epistolica* (epistolary rhetoric) was an important part of the school curriculum, in which especially the letters of Cicero, the *Ad familiares* discovered in 1345, served as an example.¹⁴

Nevertheless, Robert Wallisch argues that *Mundus Novus* expresses an "anti-humanist attitude" without consideration of the antique Roman taste.¹⁵ According to Wallisch, Vespucci expresses a critique in line with the tradition of Iberian intellectuals such as the Portuguese poet Luís de Camões (ca. 1524-1580).¹⁶ Both De Camões and Vespucci would have chosen a classical format for their works in order to "oppose classical humanist book theory on the playing field of its own language".¹⁷ However, it is unlikely that Amerigo Vespucci would adopt such an attitude regarding classical humanism directed towards his patron Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, who is known for having promoted Florentine literature and the arts within the humanist circles of Florence.¹⁸

1.2 **Imitatio et Aemulatio**

One of the reasons why Robert Wallisch assumes that Vespucci rejected the classical sciences and geography is that the explorer at the beginning of his letter mentions that the classical authors had no knowledge of the newly discovered America and thus gave false descriptions of the world image:

¹³ For more information on epistolography in the Renaissance, see Plett (2004: 31-34).

¹⁴ See Plett (2004:31).

¹⁵ See Wallisch (2002: 117).

¹⁶ Idem.

¹⁷ Idem. In his 'Pietas and the 'Other Camões' — subversive translation and allusion in The Lusiads' Gorey (2019: 109) argues that the Portuguese poet subverts the Vergilian ideal *pietas* in order to criticise the imperial colonisation by Portugal. It can therefore be argued that De Camões does not so much "reject" classical thought, but attempts to expose contemporary problems by means of classical reception.

¹⁸ For example, the paintings *La primavera* (ca. 1482) and probably *The birth of Venus* (ca. 1485) by Sandro Botticelli were commissioned by Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici. For more information on this descendant of the De' Medici and his patronage system, see Brown (1979).

Etenim hec opinionem nostrorum antiquorum excedit, cum illorum maior pars dicat ultra lineam equinoctialem et versus meridiem non esse continentem, sed mare tantum quod atlanticum vocavere. Et, si qui eorum continentem ibi esse affirmaverunt, eam esse terram habitabilem multis rationibus negaverunt. Sed hanc eorum opinionem esse falsam et veritati omnino contrariam, hec mea ultima navigatio declaravit, cum in partibus illis meridianis continentem invenerim frequentioribus populis et animalibus habitatam quam nostram europam seu asiam vel africanam, et insuper aerem magis temperatum et amenum quam in quavis alia regione a nobis cognita.¹⁹

For this exceeds the opinion of our ancients, as most of them say that there is no continent to the south beyond the equator, but only the sea which they named the Atlantic. But, if some of them did affirm that there was a continent there, they denied with many arguments that this land was habitable. But that this opinion of them is false and utterly opposed to the truth, this my last voyage has made clear, since I have found a continent in those southern parts inhabited with more people and animals than our Europe, Asia or Africa, and in addition, the climate is more temperate and lovely than in any regions known to us.

It is certainly not difficult to distill Robert Wallisch's reasoning from the above severe words: the classical world view is false (*opinionem esse falsam*) and completely opposed to the truth (*veritati omnino contrariam*).

During the time that Amerigo Vespucci wrote his *Mundus Novus*, just after the discovery of America, the world was turned upside down. All western knowledge of cosmology, natural philosophy and geography that existed until then was based on the world view of the classical authors, such as the Greek geographer Ptolemy (2nd century BC), and the biblical body of thought.²⁰ With his severe words, Vespucci seems to answer the question how the "old" knowledge relates to his own new empirical findings, in which he does not focus on the Christian, but solely on the classical wisdom.

¹⁹ Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §1, 5-14.

²⁰ See Grafton (1995: 2).

The attitude he adopts contrasts sharply with that of his contemporary Christopher Columbus, who in his travel journals had shown that the recent discoveries were in line with the ancient texts.²¹ For example, Columbus believed that his discovery of America, which he mistakenly judged to be India, proved that the earth had a spherical shape, as Ptolemy had already suggested.

In analysing the above passage of *Mundus Novus* Robert Wallisch has rightly noticed that Vespucci, unlike Columbus, deliberately ignores certain teachings of Ptolemy and Pomponius Mela, a Roman geographer from the 1st century AD.²² Mela, a popular author among 15th century scholars, had already suspected that there was a southern continent. In addition, Ptolemy had mentioned in the first book of his *Geographia* that certain areas of Asia, Europe and Africa had not yet been explored thoroughly and that much of his descriptions were based on erroneous records of negligent travellers.²³ He confessed that his work was not complete and should be reviewed. Because Vespucci, unlike his contemporaries,²⁴ ignores these self-conscious remarks of Ptolemy in *Mundus Novus*, Robert Wallisch again claims that Vespucci has thereby placed himself in an "anti-humanist" tradition.

According to Grafton, however, Vespucci was "self-consciously alert" to the classical ideas he brought with him to America and which he used to describe the New World.²⁵ Grafton argues that Amerigo's description of a world that is utterly "new" and that surpasses the "old", is in fact a classical literary technique that was already applied by the Greek geographer Herodotus (6th century BC). Grafton states that Vespucci, in the manner of Herodotus in his ethnographical descriptions of foreign people, emphasises that the old concepts fall short to describe the "barbarian" habits "so divers and strange" of the natives.²⁶

However, Vespucci does not only describe America as a New World, he also claims to have surpassed the knowledge of the Old World through his empirical observations. Contrary to what Robert Wallisch claims, this polemic nature of the *Mundus Novus* letter is not so much a harsh "rejection" of the knowledge of Vespucci's predecessors, but rather an incorporation of a rhetorical technique which was pre-eminently classical, namely the use of

²¹ The way in which Christopher Columbus approaches the "New World" is described by Grafton (1995: 75-82).

²² See Wallisch (2002: 36; 116).

²³ See Ptolemaeus, *Cosmographia* I, 5. and see Hiatt (2008: 148-153) for an extensive analysis of the impact of Ptolemy on cartography in the Renaissance.

²⁴ Within 15th century cartography it was customary to supplement or change this incomplete information in maps, thereby building on Ptolemy's classical world view, see Hiatt (2008: 149).

²⁵ See Grafton (1995: 85).

²⁶ idem.

aemulatio.²⁷ Herodotus, for example, reprimands his colleagues in the same way as Vespucci. For instance, in the following passage Herodotus states with harsh words that their opinions are ridiculous (γελῶ) in that his own world view is correct:

γελῶ δὲ ὀρέων γῆς περιόδους γράψαντας πολλοὺς ἤδη καὶ οὐδένα νοσὸν εχόντως ἐξηγησάμενον: οἱ Ὠκεανὸν τε ῥέοντα γράφουσι πέριξ τὴν γῆν ἐοῦσαν κυκλοτερέα ὡς ἀπὸ τόρνου, καὶ τὴν Ἀσίην τῇ Εὐρώπῃ ποιούντων ἴσην. ἐν ὀλίγοισι γὰρ ἐγὼ δηλώσω μέγαθός τε ἐκάστης αὐτέων καὶ οἷα τίς ἐστὶ ἐς γραφὴν ἐκάστη.²⁸

I laugh when I see all those before who have drawn world maps and that none of them has taken the lead in a reasonable way. ²⁹ *They draw the Ocean currents around the earth as if it were a circle trailed by a compass, presenting Asia as having the same size as Europe. In a few words I will indicate the extent of both of them, and how each should be drawn.*

In view of the above, it can be argued that Vespucci's use of *aemulatio* is entirely appropriate within the humanist spheres of Florence, in which scholars, in the tradition of the classical authors, not only tried to imitate them (*imitatio*), but also strived to emulate them, in order to show their familiarity with ancient texts and their own literary ingenuity.³⁰ From this point of view, the following definition of *imitatio* comes to mind, in which Petrarch, the founder of Florentine humanism, states as follows:

Firmabit, ut spero, animum ac stilum, et ex multis unum suum ac proprium conflabit, et imitationem non dicam fugiet sed celabit, sic ut nulli similis appareat sed ex veteribus novum quoddam Latium intulisse videatur.³¹

He will strengthen, I hope, his mind and style and out of many things he will fuse one thing of his very own, and he will, I shall not say flee, but conceal the imitation so that he will appear similar to no one, but will seem to have brought, from the old, something new to Latium.

²⁷ For more information on the use of *aemulatio* in antiquity and in the Renaissance, see Pigman (1980).

²⁸ Herodotus, *Historia* IV, 36.2.

²⁹ Herodotus bypasses the logographer Hekataios (6th century B.C.) who had already made improvements to this ancient world view, see Van Dolen (2007: 283).

³⁰ See Pigman (1980).

³¹ Petrarch, *Epistolae familiares* 23, 29.10.

First, what Petrarch states is that the emulative aspect of *imitatio* can be partly produced by merging several textual sources, thus creating a "new" one. Second, he mentions that the art of imitation lies in the "hidden" nature of the imitation itself, so that this "new" text appears to be something entirely original. This second aspect of *imitatio* as stated by Petrarch seems to have escaped Robert Wallisch's attention in his "anti-humanist" interpretation of *Mundus Novus*. By adopting a polemical attitude towards the classical sources and thus hiding the fact that he is actually doing the opposite, Vespucci places himself effectively in the classically oriented humanist tradition. A well-read man like Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, would certainly have appreciated Vespucci's literary playfulness. Within this humanist context of the *Mundus Novus* letter, the following passage, of which Wallisch assumes that Vespucci rebukes Pliny the Elder and the artist Policleitus, can be read in a different light:

Si singula, que ibi sunt, commemorare et de numerosis animalium generibus eorumque multitudine scribere vellem, res esset omnino prolixa et immensa. Et certe credo, quod Plinius Noster millesimam partem non attigerit generis psitacorum, reliquarum avium necnon et animalium, que in iisdem regionibus sunt cum tanta facierum atque colorum diversitate, quod consummate picture artifex policleitus in pingendis illis deficeret.³²

And if I would want to recount every single thing, which are there, and write about the numerous animal species and their great number, the matter would be all too extensive and immense. And I know for sure, that our Pliny did not touch upon a thousandth part of the species of parrots and other birds and animals, which live in those regions so diverse in appearance and colour, that the artist Policleitus, with the perfection of his painting, would have fallen short in depicting them.

Even though Vespucci indicates that Pliny and Policleitus have failed (*millesimam partem non attigerit* and *in pingendis illis deficeret*), this may not be the primary message of his reasoning. Vespucci's main objective by stressing that even classical authors with all their experience and knowledge had failed to touch upon the American miracles, may well have been to offer an image of the infinity of the diversity of plants and animals that inhabited the newly discovered continent, rather than offering a lecture on classical limitations.

³² Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §6, 13-19.

In a certain way, the fact that Vespucci names Pliny and Policleitus can thus be understood as an appreciation for their expertise. In this light, Vespucci appears to both rebuke and value Pliny's classical knowledge of nature simultaneously. Furthermore, the remarks made contribute to Vespucci's self-representation as an educated man, for he knows exactly what does and does not appear in Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*.³³

1.3 In the footsteps of Aeneas

Vespucci's self-representation as an educated man in the *Mundus Novus* letter on behalf of his patron Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco and other humanists is not only reflected in his polemical attitude towards the classical knowledge and in his direct references to Pliny and Policleitus. Vespucci appears to have cast his journey and adventures in a Vergilian form, in which he himself follows in the footsteps of the Roman hero Aeneas. In particular, Vespucci's description of a sea storm on his voyage to America runs parallel to Vergil's description of a heavy storm in the *Aeneid* in which Aeneas and his crew ended up before they landed on the coast of Carthage. Vergil's *Aeneid* revolves around the flight of the Trojan hero Aeneas, who travels from Troy to a promised land, where Rome was to be founded by his descendants.

However, according to Wallisch, Vespucci did not place himself in the classical tradition of Vergil's *Aeneid* in his description of the sea storm, but rather in that of medieval and early modern travel literature. Wallisch argues that in the classical tradition sea storms are described as a "spectacle of the waves", whereas in the medieval tradition it rather presents a "spectacle of the Heavens". Vespucci would have followed the latter.

Considering Vergil's description of the sea storm, however, it should be noted that it does in fact offer an image of a celestial spectacle, since the darkening clouds and the lightning and thunder of the flickering heavens are highlighted:

eripiunt subito nubes caelumque diemque
Teucrorum ex oculis; ponto nox incubat atra.
intonuere poli et crebris micat ignibus aether
praesentemque viris intentant omnia mortem.
extemplo Aeneae solvuntur frigore membra;
ingemit et duplices tendens ad sidera palmas

³³ It is striking that Vespucci mentions Policleitus in this passage, since this classical artist was a sculptor and not a painter. Omodeo (2014: 10) suggests that Vespucci had meant to mention Polygnotus, but that his name was erroneously changed by the translator of the *Mundus Novus* letter.

taliam voce refert: 'O terque quaterque beati,
quis ante ora patrum Troiae sub moenibus altis
contigit oppetere! [...]
unam, quae Lycios fidumque vehebat Orontem,
ipsius ante oculos ingens a vertice pontus
in puppim ferit; excutitur pronusque magister
volvitur in caput.³⁴

Suddenly, clouds take in the sky and daylight to the eyes of the Trojans: A black night lays over the sea. The heights thunder and the air flickers with one lightning after another and the entire scene presents the men their impending death. Immediately Aeneas' members weaken by a cold shiver, he sighs and, with both hands raised to heaven, speaks with the following voice: 'O three, yes fourtimes more blissful, those who in front of their parents' faces, at the foot of Troy's high walls, encountered death!' (...) And before his eyes, an enormous wave hits from above at the stern the ship that carried the Lycians and the faithful Orontes; the steersman is knocked off turned forward and rolls headlong;

In the aftermath, the sea god Neptune pacifies the turbulent sea, after which Aeneas and the remaining crew manage to reach Carthage.³⁵ Assuming that Vespucci does place himself in the classical tradition of Vergil, many similarities between the *Aeneid* and *Mundus Novus*, but also differences between the two passages become apparent:

In ea autem maris vastitate quid passi fuerimus, que naufragii pericula et que corporis incommoda sustinuerimus, quibusque anxietatibus animi laboraverimus, existimationi eorum relinquo, qui multarum rerum experientia optime norunt, quid sit incerta querere et, que an sint, ignorantes investigare. Et ut uno verbo universa perstringam: Scies, quod ex diebus sexaginta septem, quibus navigavimus, continuos quadraginta quatuor habuimus cum pluvia, tonitruis et chorscationibus ita obscuros, ut neque solem in die neque serenum celum in nocte unquam videremus. Quo factum est, ut tantus in nobis incesserit timor, quod pene iam omnem vite spem abieceramus. In his autem tot tantisque procellis maris et celi placuit altissimo nobis coram monstrare

³⁴ Vergilius, *Aeneis* I, 88-96; 113-119.

³⁵ Vergilius, *Aeneis* I, 124-158.

continentem et novas regiones ignotumque mundum. Quibus visis tanto perfusi fuimus gaudio, quantum quisque cogitare potest solere his accidere, qui ex variis calamitatibus et adversa fortuna salutem consecuti sunt.³⁶

In this wasteland of the sea, what we have experienced, what dangers of navigation and what physical discomforts we have experienced, with what anxieties of the soul we have toiled, I leave it up to the judgment of those who, through experience of many things, know very well what it is like to seek out uncertainty, and though ignorant to investigate whether those things are there at all. And so that I may summarise everything with one word: You must know that of the seventy-six days that we sailed, we had forty-four consecutive days of rain, thunder and lightning, so dark that we could see neither the sun during the day nor a clear sky at night. Which caused such great fear to creep into us that we had almost abandoned all hope for life. But during these enormous storms of sea and heaven, it pleased the most High to show us a coast, a continent and new territories and an unknown world. At sight of these things we were filled with as much joy as anyone can imagine is bound to happen to those who have gained refuge from varied calamity and hostile fortune.

An important difference between the two passages is that Vespucci sketches the sea storm much more concisely, in fact summarising Vergil's description. For example, the danger of the shipwreck (*naufragii pericula*) and the suffering and fears at sea (*quid passi fuerimus ... quibusque anxietatibus animi laboraverimus*) are dealt with extensively by Vergil. For a learned man like Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, the addressee of *Mundus Novus*, the allusion to the *Aeneid* must have been immediately clear: the rain, thunder, lightning and darkness directly evoke the image of the clouds that overshadowed Aeneas and his crew (*eripiunt subito nubes caelumque diemque // Teucrorum ex oculis*). Moreover, the fear of death and the relief after the divine intervention, of Vergil's Neptune and of Vespucci's Christian god, show a clear parallel. Vespucci's crew, however, was more fortunate; unlike Neptune, the Christian god intervened earlier and ensured that all European souls were spared. Another contrasting element between the two passages is that Vespucci does not pray to the Divine as Aeneas does. Contrary to what Wallisch claims, such contrasting elements need not to be understood as a lack of intertextuality, or as conveying a contra-classical

³⁶ Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §2, 17-26.

attitude. In view of the transformative power within classical reception the manner in which certain elements of the reference text are incorporated and others omitted is especially interesting to investigate. For example, by excluding the element of supplication to the divine in *Mundus Novus*, which made Aeneas rather appear as a victim of violence, it becomes all the more apparent how Vespucci conquers the brutality of the ocean.

Consequently, the question arises as to how we can interpret Vespucci's adaptation of Vergil's sea storm, in the letter itself and within the historical context in which it was written. In other words: how could the *transformation* of the Vergilian story of Aeneas' voyage into Vespucci's 15th century transatlantic travel account reflect on Vespucci's own identity and contemporary society?

The reference to the Aeneid certainly contributes to Vespucci's own self-image. Following in Aeneas' footsteps, he too seems to reach the promised land as a hero through divine providence. In addition, the reference to the classical passage evokes the fear and horror of the Vergilian sea storm, while Vespucci himself does not need to devote as many words to it in his letter; because anyone can imagine it, when he or she has read the story of the fate of those *qui ex variis calamitatibus et adversa fortuna salutem consecuti sunt*.

Moreover, since Vespucci presents himself as a second Aeneas, it becomes all the more interesting to investigate the way in which he views the New World. In his *Terra incognita: mapping the antipodes before 1600*, Alfred Hiatt suggests that descriptions of the *antipodes*, i.e. the unknown world, in antiquity and in the Renaissance, were inextricably linked to political power and ambition, and their limitations.³⁷ On a conceptual level, discussions on the *antipodes* could be used to express a desire for world domination, stretching the boundaries of the inhabited world, i.e. the *oecumene*, as far as possible. A similar political connotation can be found in a certain description of the *antipodes* in Vergil's *Aeneid*. In the following passage, Anchises, the father of Aeneas, predicts to his son Aeneas that the fame and glory of the future Emperor Augustus will surpass all limits:

[...] super et Garamantas et Indos
proferet imperium; iacet extra sidera tellus
extra anni solisque vias, ubi caelifer Atlas
axem umero torquet stellis ardentibus aptum.³⁸

³⁷ See Hiatt (2008: 8).

³⁸ Vergilius, *Aeneis* VI, 794-7.

*He will expand the empire beyond the Garamants and the Indians;
his land lies beyond the stars, beyond the orbits of the year and the sun,
Where Atlas the Heaven Bearer on his shoulders
revolves the dome decorated with twinkling stars*

Furthemore, although Aeneas is portrayed as a hero in Vergil's epic, his journey to Latium is inextricably linked to political power and territorial expansion. The indigenous population does not give in easily when Aeneas finally reaches his promised land: Vergil's *Aeneid* ends with the bloody combat in which Aeneas kills the chief of the Rutuli, Turnus, allowing the Trojans to colonise the land.³⁹

It is most likely that Vespucci most consciously set foot in the New World with similar expectations for the newly discovered continent in mind. After all, in the years before the discovery of America, parts of Africa had already been colonised by Europeans, with the Papal State in particular seeing it as its mission to convert as many indigenous populations to Christianity.⁴⁰ An important aspect of the papal colonialism was the desire to convert all "sons of Adam" to Christianity.⁴¹ In this light, the question what kind of people populated the newly discovered America, and if they were "worthy" of being converted, was extremely relevant. However, this question was not only interesting from a colonialist point-of-view. With the transatlantic discovery of America, a wave of fear and curiosity had washed ashore in Europe. The anxiety who or *what* inhabited the new continent was a matter of great concern: how do those people relate to us? In the next chapter we will see that Vespucci tries to answer these very questions in his *Mundus Novus* with the support of classical cosmology, geography and natural philosophy.

³⁹ Vergilius, *Aeneis* XXII, 887-952.

⁴⁰ For example, Portugal colonised parts of West Africa from 1446 and the Cape Verde islands in ca. 1460.

⁴¹ See Hiatt (2008: 159-165).

2. Cosmology, geography and natural philosophy

With the help of our Lord, we hope to make new discoveries in other lands, that there should be persons who are more expert and better instructed, and who know the things necessary for such navigation, so that those who are under them may go more safely, it is our will and pleasure, and we order that all the pilots of our kingdoms and lordships, who are now or shall hereafter be appointed as pilots in the said navigation to the islands and mainland that we possess in the parts of the Indies, and in other parts of the Ocean Sea, shall be instructed (...), and, without such knowledge, no one shall go in the said ships as pilots, nor receive pay as pilots, nor may the masters receive them on board ship, until they have first been examined by you, Amerigo Vespucci, our Chief Pilot, and they shall be given by you a certificate of examination and approval touching the knowledge of each one.⁴²

Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novus* did not fail to achieve its objectives: on 6 August 1508, a few years after *Mundus Novus* was published, Vespucci was informed in the above letter that he had been appointed by the Spanish queen as chief pilot for naval voyages in the years ahead. Based on his professional merit, but especially because of his knowledge of cosmology and geography, Vespucci was given the task of teaching and examining others. Vespucci did not so much take part in the practical matters of maritime navigation, but was more an observer and advisor on the ship.⁴³ In his *Mundus Novus* Vespucci himself states the following regarding his abilities and function:

Hinc deinceps me omnes multo sunt honore prosecuti. Ostendi enim eis, quod sine cognitione marine charte navigandi disciplinam magis callebam quam omnes naucleri totius orbis.⁴⁴

Afterwards all (crew members) followed me with great respect, because I showed them that even without the knowledge of a nautical chart⁴⁵ I understood more about navigation than any navigator in the whole world.

⁴² See Markham (2010: 61) for the English translation from the original in Spanish.

⁴³ See Wallisch (2002: 44-45).

⁴⁴ Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §3, 16-19.

⁴⁵ The new sea routes, which Vespucci and his crew were navigating, had not yet been mapped out.

2.1 A Ptolemaic worldview

Vespucci claimed he had to reinvent the wheel because of the lack of nautical charts. In their absence he relied on his cosmological and geographical knowledge which was based on the texts of the classical authors, as mentioned in chapter 1.2. In this context, Robert Wallisch acknowledges that Vespucci lived in a "Ptolemaic universe", since he records in his *Mundus Novus* what he had seen and learned *de stellis fixis viii sphere* (about the fixed stars in the eighth celestial sphere).⁴⁶ According to Ptolemy there were eight spheres in which, as seen from Earth, the following heavenly bodies were situated, in succession: the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. In the eighth sphere the stars were placed, in the modern sense of the word.⁴⁷ Furthermore, it was known to Vespucci's contemporaries that he had much in common with Ptolemy and stood in his classical tradition. For example, on the world map by the German cartographer Martin Waldseemüller from 1507, we see Vespucci at the top right of the "new world" facing Ptolemy, who is depicted at the top left with a representation of the "Old World".



Figure 1: Replica of Waldseemüller's map, titled *Universalis Cosmographia secundum Ptholomaei traditionem et Americi Vespucii aliorumque lustrationes*

⁴⁶ Zie Wallisch (2002: 64).

⁴⁷ Idem. Vespucci himself had a copy of Ptolemy's *Geographia*, see Brown (2010: 89).

As discussed in section 1.3, the question how the "old" world of Ptolemy, among others, related to the "new" world of Vespucci was a matter of great concern to Europeans: not only from a colonialist perspective, but also out of curiosity and fear: what kind of people lived in America, if they were "people" at all? In sections 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4 it is discussed how Vespucci appears to answer this question, respectively by means of Greek geometry, by classical ethnography and through the reception of natural philosophical theories on the life of primitive man.

2.2 The world upside down: Greek geometry

In his *Terra incognita: mapping the antipodes before 1600* Hiatt analyses how the world outside the *oecumene* was approached in antiquity and in the Renaissance. Hiatt argues that Vespucci tried to depict the relationship between "us" and "them" in *Mundus Novus* by means of geometry, an important aspect of classical cosmology:⁴⁸

Perpendicularis linea, que, dum recti stamus, a puncto celi imminente vertici nostro dependet in caput nostrum, illis dependet in latus et in costas. Quo fit, ut nos simus in linea recta, ipsi vero in linea transversa et species fiat trianguli orthogoni, cuius vicem linee tenemus cathete, ipsi autem basis; et hypotenusa a nostro ad illorum protenditur verticem, ut in figura patet.⁴⁹

A perpendicular line, which while we stand erect descends from the point of heaven shining above us unto our heads, to them descends in the side and ribs. By this reasoning if we are on a straight line, they are on the transverse. And if a kind of right-angled triangle is made, of which we occupy the perpendicular line, they occupy the base, and the hypotenuse stretches from our to their vertex: as appears in the figure:

⁴⁸ See Hiatt (2008: 194).

⁴⁹ Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §10, 10-15.

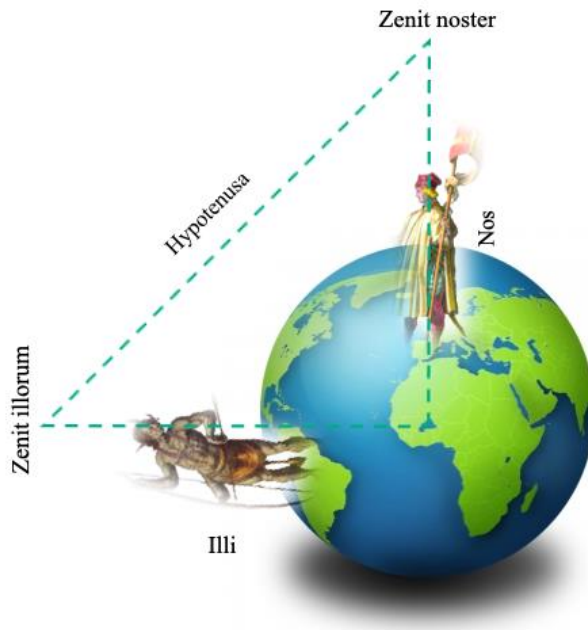


figure 2: The relationship between "us" (nos) and "them" (illi)⁵⁰

According to Hiatt, this geometric representation shows that for Vespucci, the relationship between the known and the unknown world was inextricably linked to the question where both parties are located on earth. To a certain degree, Vespucci thus participates in a classical discussion concerning the *antipodes* (unknown world) and the question where they would be situated. The concept of the *antipodes*, literally "men that have their feet against our feet", finds its origin in ancient Greek geometry, in which it was assumed that there were unknown countries and peoples on the "underside" of the spherical globe. Soon these scientific theories entered the philosophical spheres, where those who lived "at the bottom of the earth" were seen as a shadow or reflection of the own society.⁵¹

Vespucci's geometric description therefore seems to answer the classical question of the placement of the unknown world and its inhabitants on earth, implying that with the discovery of America and its people, the classical *antipodes* had been discovered as well: they do not live in a straight line (*linea recta*) "bottom up", but on a *linea transversa*, a line that is perpendicular to ours.

⁵⁰ Own composition from Jan van der Straet's *Discovery of America: Vespucci landing in America* (ca. 1587) and John White's *Guerrier Alonquin* (ca. 1590).

⁵¹ For example, Plato's myth of the island Atlantis in his *Timaeus* and *Critias* can be interpreted as a reflection of Plato's ideology on the Ideal State. See Morgan (1998) on the 4th-century ideologies that lie behind the Atlantis myth. See Hiatt (2008: 15-20) on the classical philosophical background of the *antipodes*.

2.3 Hyperboreans and monsters at the edges of the earth: Pliny and Herodotus

Having discussed in 2.2 how Vespucci interprets the relationship between the European *oecumene* and the American *antipodes* by answering the *where*-question, in the remainder of this chapter we will analyse *who* these *antipodes* were. In other words, how does Vespucci describe the nature, appearance and culture of the indigenous people of America?⁵²

Furthermore, it is argued that the explorer tries to make sense of the New World using the frames of thought of classical ethnography. Since ethnography is the product of classical geography and natural science, this means that Vespucci does not "reject" these disciplines as Robert Wallisch has claimed.⁵³

In the ethnographical descriptions of classical authors such as Herodotus, Strabo, Pliny and Mela, we see that their approaches to the *antipodes* show many similarities.⁵⁴ In their representations of the world beyond the *oecumene*, the inhabitants of these areas were either blissful people reminiscent of a Golden Age or monstrous and brutal creatures such as cannibals and dog heads (*Cynocephali*).

When we look at Vespucci's description of the American *antipodes*, we immediately notice that he begins by commenting on the heavenly nature and the loveliness of the inhabitants of the New World:

Tantum in illis regionibus gentis multitudinem invenimus, quantum nemo dinumerare poterat (ut legitur in apocalipsi) - gentem, dico, mitem atque tractabilem. (...) Vivunt annis centum quinquaginta. Raro egrotant et, si quam adversam valetudinem incurrunt, se ipsos cum quibusdam herbarum radicibus sanant. (...) Aer ibi valde temperatus et bonus est, ut ex relatione illorum cognoscere potui, numquam ibi pestis aut egrotatio aliqua, que a corrupto prodeat aere. Et, nisi morte violenta moriantur, longa vita vivunt. Credo, quia ibi semper perflant venti australes et maxime, quem nos eurum vocamus. Qui talis est illis, qualis nobis est aquilo.⁵⁵

⁵² Unlike Columbus, Vespucci does not name the indigenous people of America "Indians", because he was the first to be aware that he set foot on a different continent.

⁵³ See Wallisch (2002: 117).

⁵⁴ For example, all authors associate cannibalism with populations that live on the borders of the *oecumene*. See Herodotus, *Historia*, IV, 18 on cannibalism in Scythia; Strabo, *Geographia* IV, 5.4 on cannibals in Ierland; Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, 7.9-12 on the Arimaspi in Scythia who are said to eat human flesh and Mela, *De situ orbis* II, 14 who associates cannibalism with the Geloni in Scythia. The works of Herodotus, Pliny, Strabo and Mela were well known among scholars in the 15th century.

⁵⁵ Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §4, 1-3; 61-64; §5, 1-5.

In those regions we found such a multitude of people, as no one could enumerate (as is said in the Apocalypse)⁵⁶ - a race, I say, soft and easy to deal with.(...) They live one hundred and fifty years. They rarely fall ill, and if they run into any disease, they cure themselves with certain herbroots. (...) The climate there was very temperate and good, and as I was able to learn from their narration, there was never there any kind of pest or a certain disease, which are caused by corrupted air. And unless they die a violent death, they live a long life. I think, because the south winds are always blowing there and especially that which we call Eurus. Which is the same to them as Aquilo is to us.

A beautiful nature, healing air and robust people who could live up to 150 years old: for Vespucci America seemed to be a paradise on earth. Of course, Vespucci used his own empirical findings and the stories of the inhabitants of the continent to describe the "new" continent. Nevertheless, we can conclude from the above passage that Vespucci was influenced by classical geographers who had preceded him. Herodotus, Pliny and Mela namely all wrote about similar blissful people in paradisiacal areas outside the *oecumene*, such as the Ethiopians, who could reach an age up to 140 years old.⁵⁷ Especially the following passage from Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* about the Hyberborians corresponds strongly with Vespucci's description of the Americans. According to Pliny these people would dwell beyond the northern border of Scythia, in present-day Russia:

pone eos montes ultraque Aquilonem gens felix (si credimus), quos Hyperboreos appellavere, annoso degit aevo, fabulosis celebrata miraculis. (...) regio aprica, felici temperie, omni adflatu noxio carens. domus iis nemora lucique, et deorum cultus viritim gregatimque, discordia ignota et aegritudo omnis. mors non nisi satietate vitae epulatis delibutoque senio luxu e quadam rupe in mare salientibus: hoc genus sepulturae beatissimum. quidam eos in prima parte Asiae litorum posuere, non in Europa, quia sunt ibi simili consuetudine et situ Attacorum nomine; alii medios fecere eos inter utrumque solem, antipodum occasus exorientemque nostrum, quod fieri nullo modo potest tam vasto mari interveniente.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Brown (2010: 89) states that in Florence there was a fear that was partly fuelled by the discovery of America. In addition, the Dominican Savonarola preached about the end of time and the future hell on earth. In this light, Vespucci's reference to the "Apocalypse" can be interpreted as an answer to the question whether the inferno might have been found on the newly discovered continent.

⁵⁷ See Herodotus, *Historia* III, 17-25., Mela, *De situ orbis* III, 85-87., Pliny *Historia naturalis* I, 21.

⁵⁸ Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* IV §89, 1-3; 5-9; §90, 1-4..

Behind these mountains, and beyond the wind Aquilo, a happy race, if we believe it, which they call the Hyperboreans, lives to an extreme old age, and has been celebrated in many marvellous stories. (...) This region, warmed by the sun, with a delightful temperature, is without every harmful blast. Their homes are the woods and groves and the worship of the gods is individually or in groups and discord is utterly unknown as is sickness. Death does not come to them, unless after a life, satiated with feasting and in an old age annointed with luxury, they leap from a certain rock into the sea: and this kind of funeral is the most desirable. Some have placed these people, at the very first part of the shores of Asia, and not in Europe, because the people there with the name Attacori, are very similar in their customs and in the place they occupy. Others have placed them midway between the two suns, where it sets to the Antipodes and rises to us, a thing that cannot possibly be in consequence of the vastness of the sea which intervenes there.

In his *Mundus Novus* Vespucci seems to create the illusion that he has located Pliny's Hyperboreans in America. In this particular way he seems to respond to the classical discussion about the location of this extraordinary people, as described in the last sentences of the above passage by Pliny. As well as the Hyperboreans, the Americans live in a wonderful climate (*Aer ibi valde temperatus et bonus*) through which they can reach an advanced age (*longa vita vivunt*) and are free from diseases (*numquam ibi pestis aut egrotatio aliqua*). However, what is striking in Vespucci's description of the Americans is that he does not only describe them in positive terms, but also as monstrous and brutal creatures:

Et quos ex bello captivos ducunt, non eorum vite, sed sui victus causa occidendos servant. Nam allii alios et victores victos comedunt; et inter carnes humana est eis communis in cibis. Huius autem rei certior sis, quia iam visum est patrem comedisse filios et uxorem et ego hominem novi (quem et allocutus sum), qui plus quam ex trecentis humanis corporibus edisse vulgatur. Et item steti diebus viginti septem in urbe quadam, ubi vidi per domos humanam carnem salsam et contignationibus suspensam, uti apud nos moris est lardum suspendere et carnem suillam.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §4, 38-46.

Those whom they bring home as captives from war they spare, not for their lives, but to kill them for their own nourishment. Because they eat one another, the victors the vanquished; and among meat human flesh is common in their diet. Indeed, be more assured of this fact, because a father has already been seen to eat his children and wife, and I knew a man (whom I also spoke to) who was reported to have eaten more than three hundred human bodies. And I also remained twenty-seven days in a certain city where I have seen salted human flesh hanging from beams between the houses, just as it is the custom with us to hang bacon and pork meat.

Considering the above passage, at first sight Vespucci appears to have been guided by his own empirical observations: he himself had spoken to a cannibal who had eaten more than three hundred bodies. Nevertheless, the descriptions of the American cannibalism by Vespucci, as well as by others explorers, are magnified and generalised to such an extent that it can be assumed that they are far from objective.⁶⁰

In this light, it is particularly striking that Vespucci's description of the cannibalistic practices of the Americans presents strong parallels with Herodotus' description of the monstrous customs of the Scythians, who lived on the far northern border of the then civilised world, in present-day Russia:

τὰ δ' ἐς πόλεμον ἔχοντα ὧδέ σφι διάκεατα· ἔπεαν τὸν πρῶτον ἄνδρα καταβάλη ἀνήρ Σκύθης, τοῦ αἵματος ἐμπίνει· ὅσους δ' ἂν φονεύσῃ ἐν τῇ μάχῃ, τούτων τὰς κεφαλὰς ἀποφέρει τῷ βασιλεί· ἀπενείκας μὲν γὰρ κεφαλὴν τῆς ληΐης μεταλαμβάνει τὴν ἂν λάβωσι, μὴ ἐνείκας δὲ οὐ. (...) πολλοὶ δὲ αὐτῶν ἐκ τῶν ἀποδερμάτων καὶ χλαίνας ἐπιένυσθαι ποιεῖσι, συρράπτοντες κατὰ περ βαίτας.⁶¹

As far as war is concerned, these are their customs. When a Skyth defeats a man for the first time, he drinks his blood, and as much as he kills on the battlefield, he delivers their heads to the tribesman, for when a head has been given up, that person may share in the spoils and otherwise not. (...) Many of them also make clothes from human skin to wear, which they sew together in the same way as animal skin.

⁶⁰ Schreffler (2005: 304) suggests that Vespucci never saw the cannibalistic practices among the Americans with his own eyes, but that his magnified descriptions of these practices are part of a colonialist rhetoric in which the absence of real evidence is masked. Although cannibalism among the ancient American tribes has therefore long been considered a fantasy of European explorers, recent research has shown that some tribes may have eaten humans, See the article of Noble Wilford (2007) in The New York Times.

⁶¹ Herodotus, *Historia*, IV 64, 1; 64, 3.1-3.

What is striking about the above passage is that Herodotus clearly wants to express the contrast between the "barbarian" Scythians and the Greeks: where the Greeks make clothing from the skin of cattle, the Scythians do so in a gruesome fashion from human skin.⁶² Strangeness, or the disgracefulness of the other, thus lies at the basis of Herodotus' ethnography.⁶³ According to Herodotus, the tribes who live in the outermost regions of the earth do not only dwell on the borders of the known world, but also on the edges of civilization.

Vespucci, who through his excellent education was certainly familiar with the travel accounts of Herodotus and his ethnographical descriptions of tribes living at the edges of the world, approached the American *antipodes* with the expectation of running into similar people. His suspicions must have been fed by Christopher Columbus' *Journal*, who had already mentioned that he had heard *via via* that some inhabitants of America were cannibals.⁶⁴

Similar to Herodotus' description of the Scythians living at the edge of the world, Vespucci gives a resembling account of the native people of America in terms of their "strangeness" to his own culture: they are cruel in the way they treat their enemies and consume their rivals. Whereas the Skythians, in contrast to the Greeks, made clothes out of human skins instead of cattle skins, the Americans hang human flesh out to dry, as Europeans butchers would do with livestock.

Another repugnant characteristic that Vespucci attributes extensively to the American culture is the supposedly loose and sexual behavior among their women:

Tot uxores ducunt, quot volunt. Et filius coit cum matre et frater cum sorore et primus cum prima et obvius cum sibi obvia. Quotiens volunt, matrimonia dirimunt, et in his nullum servant ordinem. (...) Mulieres (ut dixi) etsi nude incedant et libidinosissime sint. (...) Quando se christianis iungere poterant, nimia libidine pulse omnem pudicitiam contaminabant atque prostituebant.⁶⁵

⁶² Murphy and Mallory (2000: 391-394) suggest that the idea that the Scythians ate their enemies is based on an erroneous interpretation of Scythian ritual practices.

⁶³ See Redfield (1985: 97).

⁶⁴ For an analysis of Columbus' notes on cannibalism among the American population, see Hulme (1978).

⁶⁵ Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §4, 30-33; 52; 59-61.

They have as many women as pleases them. And son makes love with mother, brother with sister and every man with the first woman he meets. They dissolve their marriages as often as they want, and they serve no law with respect to them. (...) The women as I have said walk around naked and are very libidinous; (...) When they were able to associate with Christians, stimulated by excessive lust, they defiled every modesty and prostituted themselves.

In his "Sexual Promiscuity of Non-Greeks in Herodotus' Histories" Wenghofer argues that Herodotus, by means of similar descriptions, attempted to represent non-Greek peoples as "un-manly" according to the standard of his own Greek culture.⁶⁶ For instance, Herodotus mentions how the Scythians try to imitate the female Amazons in every respect which, according to Wenghofer, would have been a clear sign of cowardice in Greek society. In addition, Herodotus claimed that certain Scythian tribes participated in "wife-swapping".

Ἀγάθουρσοι δὲ ἀβρότατοι ἄνδρες εἰσὶ καὶ χρυσοφόροι τὰ μάλιστα, ἐπικοινωνοῦν δὲ τῶν γυναικῶν τὴν μεῖξιν ποιεῦνται, ἵνα κασίγνητοὶ τε ἀλλήλων ἔωσι καὶ οἰκίηιοι ἐόντες πάντες μήτε φόβῳ μήτε ἔχθει χρέωνται ἐς ἀλλήλους.⁶⁷

Then the Agathians, who are the most refined men and who are covered with gold, and their sexual intercourse with women is disgraceful, since they go with each other as blood mates and are all related, as a result they demonstrate no hatred and envy to each other.

Again, Vespucci appears to have examined the Americans through the framework of Herodotus' ethnographic descriptions, since their disgraceful nature is highlighted, magnified even, in terms of their sexual debauchery.

In the light of the reception of Pliny's glorious Hyberboreans and Herodotus' monstrous Scythians in *Mundus Novus*, Vespucci appears to have transformed the original classical frameworks of geography and ethnography into a new one. Whereas the classical authors described the populations at the end of the world in opposites, either blissful or monstrous, Vespucci has merged these two extremities in his attempt to portray the American *antipodes*.

⁶⁶ See Wenghofer (2014: 528).

⁶⁷ Herodotus, *Historia*, IV, 104.

2.4 Back to the future: primitive man according to Vergil and Lucretius

As we have seen in the previous passages of Herodotus and Pliny in 2.3 Vespucci's image of the Americans who, on the one hand, are barbaric but, on the other hand, live in a utopian world, evokes the idea of classical discussions about the nature of the people living in the *antipodes*. However, discussions on the dual nature of man do not only occur within classical ethnography, but also in classical philosophical reflections on the nature of people far removed from the *oecumene* in time, i.e. primeval man.⁶⁸ Consequently, in his brief analysis of Vespucci's travel accounts, Grafton argues that the descriptions of America's indigenous people evoke the classical image of a "vague" Golden Age, in other words, the myth of a primitive period in prehistoric times.⁶⁹

Considering the relationship between the "old" and "new" world expressed in *Mundus Novus*, it can thus be argued that Vespucci sees both the Hyperboreans, as well as his own ancestors, reflected in the inhabitants of America. In a certain sense, Vespucci does not only travel to the land of the future, but also to the prehistoric past of his own European ancestors.

It bears mention that, from a colonial point of view, this line of thinking implies that the Americans, from a primitive stage, can continue to develop until they reach the more "sophisticated" European civilisation.

According to Lovejoy and Boas, two opposing views existed on the course of human civilisation in antiquity.⁷⁰ Firstly, the notion of *soft primitivism*, portrays how primitive man through greed and luxury, strayed further and further from a former Golden Age, in which humans, animals and gods once lived in harmony. The idea that mankind dwelled in a perfect carefree state in prehistoric times, was in alignment with stoic and platonic principles.⁷¹ These accounts of a Golden Age can be found, for example, in the works of Hesiodus, Vergil and Ovid.⁷² The beautiful landscapes of America and the *mitem atque tractabilem* (soft and easy to deal with) character that its people express, certainly matches the classical utopian image of this Golden Era.

⁶⁸ In fact, geographical and scientific descriptions show many similarities. In addition, the reflections on the primitive nature of man also touch on historiography, since they describe the history of mankind.

⁶⁹ See Grafton(1995: 84).

⁷⁰ For the terminology of "hard" and "soft" *primitivism*, see Lovejoy en Boas (1935: 10).

⁷¹ See Ryberg (1958:114).

⁷² For example, see Hesiodus, *Works and Days*, 109-130; Vergil, *Eclogue IV* and Ovid, *Metamorphoses I*, 89-112. For an analysis of the primitivist accounts in Hesiodus' *Theogonia* and Vergil's work, see Ryberg (1958).

Secondly, in contrast to *soft primitivism*, Lovejoy and Boas place the notion of a "progressive" *hard primitivism*. According to this view mankind had struggled from a brutal beginning to free itself from misery by means of technological and intellectual progress. Lucretius' philosophical ideas on primitive life strongly convey a *hard* kind of *primitivism*.⁷³ Since Vespucci pays attention to the cultural elements of the indigenous population, which are characteristic of the classical discourse on primitivism, it can be assumed that he attempts to frame the inhabitants of the "new" continent in the classical concept of prehistoric times. However, Vespucci's description of America can be typified as ambigüe, because elements of both *soft* and *hard primitivism* come into play.

In fact, the distinction between both categories is not as black and white as Lovejoy and Boas suggest, since they have certain elements in common. In Vespucci's description of the indigenous population, the following "primitive" characteristics of both *soft* and *hard primitivism* can be found: the Americans do not trade (*non sunt mercatores*), have no knowledge of metal (*nulla ibi metallorum genera habent*) except gold, which has no value for them.⁷⁴ Furthermore, in the following passage, Vergil describes a characteristic of the *soft primitivism* of the Golden Age, which Vespucci attributes to the Americans as well:

Vergil's <i>Georgica</i>	Vespucci's <i>Mundus Novus</i>
<p>ante Iovem nulli subigebant arva coloni; ne signare quidem aut partiri limite campum fas erat: in medium quaerebant, ipsaque tellus omnia liberius nullo poscente ferebat.⁷⁵</p> <p><i>Before Jove⁷⁶ no farmers subjugated the land: not even to mark or distribute the plain with a boundary, the divine law was: man strived for the common good, and Earth herself out of free will gave everything, although no one demanded it.</i></p>	<p>nec habent bona propria, sed omnia communia sunt.⁷⁷</p> <p><i>and they do not have goods of their own, but all things are held in common.</i></p>

⁷³ See Lucretius, *De rerum natura* V, 925-1010 for his account on primitive man.

⁷⁴ For the absence of maritime navigation and commerce in both *hard* and *soft primitivism*, see Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, V, 1241 and Vergil, *Eclogae* IV, 37-39; for the absence of money and metal, see *De rerum natura* V, 1013;1241 and Vergil, *Georgica* I, 143-144.

⁷⁵ Vergil, *Georgica*, I, 125-128.

⁷⁶ Also known as Jupiter.

⁷⁷ Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §4, 32-33.

Similar to man in the Golden Age, Americans have a "communist" society, since they have no goods of their own, but keep everything in common. In Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, on the other hand, there is a lack of this "prehistoric communism" in primitive society; according to the philosopher only the law of the survival of the fittest applied in those years:

Nec commune bonum poterant spectare neque ullis
moribus inter se scibant nec legibus uti.
quod cuique obtulerat praedae fortuna, ferebat
sponte sua sibi quisque valere et vivere doctus.⁷⁸

*They were incapable of looking at the common good
and had no knowledge how to use customs or laws among themselves.
That which fate had bestowed on each, each man took away of his own accord,
having learned to keep himself healthy and to survive.*

However, after Vespucci notices that the Americans have no religion, a primitive characteristic according to Epicurian thought, the explorer concludes that the Americans can best be described as "Epicureans", since they live according to nature as Lucretius had sketched it:

Preterea nullum habent templum et nullam tenent legem; neque sunt idolatre. Quid ultra dicam? Vivunt secundum naturam, et epicurei potius dici possunt quam stoici.⁷⁹

Besides that they have no temple, hold not one law, and are not idolaters. What more can I say? They live according to nature, and can rather be called Epicureans than Stoics.

While looking at the next five passages from the fifth book of *De rerum natura* by Lucretius, the similarities and differences with the passages from *Mundus Novus* immediately come to notice:

⁷⁸ Lucretius, *De rerum natura* V, 958-961.

⁷⁹ Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §4, 33-35.

Lucretius' primitive man

Vespucci's Americans

A hardier race	
<p>et genus humanum multo fuit illud in arvis durius, ut decuit, tellus quod dura creasset, et maioribus et solidis magis ossibus intus fundatum, validis aptum per viscera nervis, nec facile ex aestu nec frigore quod caperetur nec novitate cibi nec labi corporis ulla.⁸⁰</p> <p><i>And this race of people was much harder on land, as is fitting, since the hard earth had made them, and from the inside made firm with bigger and more solid bones, through their flesh attached to strong sinews, not easily mastered by heat or cold or strange food or other ailment of the body.</i></p>	<p>Corpora enim habent magna, quadrata, bene disposita ac proportionata et colore declinantia ad rubedinem. Quod eis accidere puto, quia nudi incedentes tingantur a sole. Quod eis accidere puto, quia nudi incedentes tingantur a sole. (...)Raro egrotant et, si quam adversam valetudinem incurrunt, se ipsos cum quibusdam herbarum radicibus sanant.⁸¹</p> <p><i>And they have large bodies, square-built, well formed and proportioned, with a complexion that passes into a red color. I think this has happened to them, because, walking around naked, they are colored by the sun. (...) They rarely fall ill, and if they run into any disease, they cure themselves with certain herbroots.</i></p>
unclothed and exposed	
<p>multaque per caelum solis volventia lustra vulgivago vitam tractabant more ferarum.(...) necdum res igni scibant tractare neque uti pellibus et spoliis corpus vestire ferarum⁸²</p> <p><i>Through many lustres of the sun rolling through the sky, they led their lives in the wide-wandering manner of beasts. (...) They did not know yet how to treat things with fire and to use skins and clothe their body with the strippings of wild beasts.</i></p>	<p>Omnes utriusque sexus incedunt nudi, nullam corporis partem operientes. Et uti ex ventre matris prodeunt, sic usque ad mortem vadunt.⁸³</p> <p><i>All of both sexes walk around naked, covering no part of their bodies. And just as they go forth from their mothers' womb, so each walks until their death.</i></p>

⁸⁰ Lucretius, *De rerum natura* V, 925-930.

⁸¹ Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §4, 5-7; §6, 61-63.

⁸² Lucretius, *De rerum natura* V, 931-932; 953-954.

⁸³ Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §4, 3-5.

Lawless and self-concerned	
<p>[...] neque ullis moribus inter se scibant nec legibus uti. quod cuique obtulerat praedae fortuna, ferebat sponte sua sibi quisque valere et vivere // doctus.⁸⁴</p> <p><i>They had no knowledge how to use customs or laws among themselves. That which fate had bestowed on each, each man took away of his own accord, having learned to keep himself healthy and to survive.</i></p>	<p>Vivunt simul sine rege, sine imperio, et unusquisque sibi ipsi dominus est.⁸⁵</p> <p><i>They live together without king, without government, and each is his own master.</i></p>
Lust and desire	
<p>et Venus in silvis iungebat corpora amantum conciliabat enim vel mutua quamque cupido vel violenta viri vis atque impensa libido vel pretium, glandes atque arbuta vel pira // lecta.⁸⁶</p> <p><i>And Venus joined the bodies of lovers in the woods, for either mutual desire won over the woman, or the man's violent force and vehement lust, or a bribe, acorns and arbuteberryes or choice pears.</i></p>	<p>Et filius coit cum matre et frater cum sorore et primus cum prima et obvius cum sibi obvia. (...) Mulieres (ut dixi) etsi nude incedant et libidinosissime sint. (...) Quando se christianis iungere poterant, nimia libidine pulse omnem pudicitiam contaminabant atque prostituebant.⁸⁷</p> <p><i>And son makes love with mother, brother with sister and every man with the first woman he meets. The women as I have said walk around naked and are very libidinous (...) When they were able to associate with Christians, stimulated by excessive lust, they defiled every modesty and prostituted themselves.</i></p>

⁸⁴ Lucretius, *De rerum natura* V, 959-961.

⁸⁵ Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §4, 29-30.

⁸⁶ Lucretius, *De rerum natura* V,

⁸⁷ Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §4, 30-31; 52-53; 59-61.

The fear of hunting	
<p>et manuum mira freti virtute pedumque, consectabantur silvestria saecla ferarum missilibus saxis et magno pondere clavae (...) sed magis illud erat curae, quod saecla // ferarum infestam miseris faciebant saepe quietem. eiectique domo fugiebant saxea tecta spumigeri suis adventu validique leonis⁸⁸</p> <p><i>And trusting the extraordinary power of their hands and feet, they pursued the tribes of wild animals of the woods with swinging stones and heavy clubs. (...) But this was a greater concern, that the tribes of wild animals often made the rest disturbed with misery. Driven away from their homes by the arrival of a foaming boar or mighty lion they fled from their rocky hiding places.</i></p>	<p>Non sunt venatores. Puto, quia, cum ibi sint multa animalium silvestrium genera (et maxime leonum et ursorum et innumerabilium serpentum aliarumque horridarum atque deformium bestiarum) et etiam cum ibi longe lateque pateant silve et immense magnitudines arbores, non audent nudi atque sine tegminibus et armis tantis se discriminibus exponere.⁸⁹</p> <p><i>They are no hunters. I think, because, since there are many sorts of forest animals there (and especially lions and bears and innumerable serpents and other horrid and deformed beasts) and also since in the enormous forest huge trees extend far and wide, they do not dare, being naked and without protection and arms to expose themselves, to such dangers.</i></p>

In the same way as Lucretius begins by describing the hard bodies of primitive man who do not catch cold (*maioribus et solidis magis ossibus intus*), Vespucci mentions how well-formed and strong the indigenous population is (*corpora enim habent magna*). Both are naked and live without legislation to nature like wild beasts; the Americans are even so ferocious that they devour each other. In addition, the Lucretian primitive man and the native people of America have no knowledge of marriage, but are guided through chance encounters by lust (*libido*). Vespucci's observation that the Americans do not seem to hunt, however, does not fit into the Lucretian development process, but rather into the Vergilian one. Nevertheless, Vespucci's explanation for this hunting restraint is very much in line with Epicurean thought, for they are probably afraid that they will be chased by the terrible beasts in the forests, by lions for example, similar to Lucretius' primitive humans who flee from *adventu validique leonis*.

⁸⁸ Lucretius, *De rerum natura* V, 966- 968; 982-985.

⁸⁹ Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §5, 6-11.

It bears notice that the intertextuality between the classical passages on primitive man and Vespucci's ethnographical descriptions thus lies in the choice of the specific cultural characteristics Vespucci wished to highlight. Occasionally the American culture appears to be more in line with the primitivism of the Golden Age. However, when it comes to the wild nature of the American population, it is far more reminiscent of the Epicurean primitive life style, according to Vespucci. Following this train of thought, it can be argued that Vespucci does not simply "reject" classical natural philosophy and ethnography, but rather sees America and its people as proof that certain elements of Lucretius' and Vergil's doctrine among others, when combined, were legitimate.

2.5 Piero di Cosimo's hunting panels and the American "primitive" man

In her extensive research into the influence of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* in the Italian Renaissance, Brown mentions that Vespucci's comparison between the Americans and Epicurean philosophy indicates that within the circles of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici the recent discoveries in America were interpreted in a Lucretian framework.⁹⁰ Brown argues that this framework does not only reflect Lucretian primitivism, but likewise another doctrine of Epicureanism, namely that nothing is "eternal" and all "old" things eventually perish and are rebuilt into something "new". According to Brown, the idea of a "new world", or *mundus novus*, corresponds to this supposed cycle of life. Following Brown's train of thought, it can be argued that Vespucci's harsh words towards classical authors, such as Pliny, are a way of illustrating, in the light of Lucretius' philosophy, that the Old World has passed and a New World has emerged.

The suggestion that the discoveries in America were read partially in a Lucretian light in the circles of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco is supported further by two paintings by Piero di Cosimo, *The hunt* (fig. 3) and *The return from the hunt* (fig. 4).⁹¹ These paintings have already been associated with the fifth book of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* and the travel accounts of Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci.⁹²

⁹⁰ See Brown (2010: 89).

⁹¹ Like Botticelli, Piero di Cosimo, was an important representative of the Florentine school, who became involved in the circles of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de Medici. Moreover, Di Cosimo made several paintings for the Vespucci family, including *The portrait of Simonetta Vespucci*.

⁹² Geronimus (2006: 133) suggests that the depiction of the semi-naked characters on Di Cosimo's paintings resembles prints of native Americans published at the same time as Columbus' and Vespucci's travel accounts. According to Panofsky (1937) the *Hunting*-paintings were commissioned by Francesco del Pugliese, a wool-merchant. Panofsky's assumption, however, which has been widely accepted, is solely based on a vague description in Vasari's *Le vite* vol. 4, p. 66-67 of three paintings in the house of the wool-merchant Pugliese, which Vasari could not have seen for himself. In light of the *De rerum natura* reception, the *Hunting*-paintings may therefore well have been commissioned by a member within the circles of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, possibly even by Vespucci himself.



Figure 3: *The hunt*, 1488-1505, tempera on panel, 70,5 cm x 169,5 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Figure 4: *The return from the hunt*, 1488-1505, tempera on panel, 70,5 cm x 168,9 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The hunt shows a forest scene in which primeval people, animals, satyrs and centaurs fight with each other. Sometimes, however, they come to each other's aid. In the foreground two bears are wrestling with a lion, while a human figure, who has a lion skin draped around his shoulders, tries to save the lion. In the distance some figures, on the left humans, on the right centaurs, move their "spoils" consisting of captured animals. The left tree is unharmed, and in the right one, of which the bark is beginning to peel off a small squirrel monkey (of the genus *Saimiri*) sits at the top; a species that only exists in South America. Consequently, the primeval men in the painting are positioned in the New World.



figure 5: detail from *The hunt*: the squirrel monkey

The Return of the hunt shows people and satyrs climbing off their raft with the captured spoils. The figures are scantily dressed or completely naked. On the right in the foreground a naked woman is sitting on a centaur: the couple appears to be flirting with each other. In the left tree in the foreground a golden lion tamarin (*Leontopithecus rosalia*) is observing the scene; a species found exclusively in Brazil which was not discovered until 1500.⁹³



figure 6: detail from *The return from the hunt*: the golden lion tamarin

In the background on the left an island in the water is depicted; the forest is on fire and warships are sailing towards it. Several art historians have argued that *The hunt* and *The return from the hunt* as a pair depict the development of primitive men, as described by Lucretius.⁹⁴ *The hunt* would refer to the brutal beginning, in which naked people hunted animals with clubs, and *The return of the hunt* would depict a later stage, when mankind had lost its violent behavior after social developments. Although the paintings do indeed appear to refer to *De rerum natura*, the art historian Geronimus has rightly observed that both paintings

⁹³ It is generally assumed that the paintings must be dated between 1488 and 1500. However, it bears mention that the two monkeys depicted, namely the squirrel monkey and the golden lion tamarin, cannot have been "discovered" in America until a few years after 1492 and from 1500 onwards. The identification of the monkeys is based on my own findings and the comparison between the paintings and photographs of the specific species. For a confirmation of my analysis it is therefore necessary to consult a primatologist.

⁹⁴ See Fermor (1993: 64.), Farinella (2015: 111) and Hedreen, (2018: 192.)

are not exclusively violent or soft.⁹⁵ As with the description of the Americans in *Mundus Novus*, the panels show elements of both *soft* and *hard primitivism*. As such, the brutality of *The hunt* and the lustful woman on the centaur in *The return of the hunt* can be associated with the monstrous behaviour of the Americans and the excessive lust of their women.

Furthermore, the figure with the lion skin in *The hunt* rather appears to represent a more noble person, namely the ancient hero Hercules, who was known for the many monsters he would have defeated in distant lands. Consequently, Hercules was associated with the "noble savage", i.e. the wild man who has not yet been "corrupted" by civilisation.⁹⁶ In this light, it is striking that Vespucci mentions that the Native Americans have noble features (*venusta facie*)⁹⁷ and a pleasant character.

Although in the context of the Papal colonialism the cannibalism and sexual behaviour of the Americans could have indicated that they were not "worthy" of conversion, through the frame of the noble savage the urge to expand Christianity to all distant foreign populations became legitimised. For instance, in Late Antiquity stories began to circulate around a cannibalistic noble savage from a distant country, Saint Christopher, who in an earlier life was called Reprebus ("the wicked one").⁹⁸ Christopher was converted to Christianity by the apostles and eventually sanctified, protecting the apostles by eating their enemies.⁹⁹ Whereas the classical authors were keen to preserve the boundaries between their own *oecumene* and the *antipodes*, Racine argues that in the Christopher corpus the boundaries between the "barbaric" world and the Roman empire are blurred, so that even the most cruel brute can become a pious Christian.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ See Geronimus (2006: 130). In addition, the centaurs and satyrs clearly deviate from *De rerum natura*, since Lucretius rejects the existence of hybrid creatures. Furthermore, in my Art History thesis *Piero di Cosimo en de "primitieve" mens reeks* I suggested that Piero di Cosimo's paintings may as well refer to accounts on *hard primitivism* in Plato's *Protagoras*, 322b, Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 1, 8.1-2. and Vitruvius, *De architectura* 2, 1-4.

⁹⁶ See Romm (2019: 69).

⁹⁷ Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §4, 9.

⁹⁸ Racine (2003:88) mentions that this "identity crisis" is due to the expansion of the Christian faith beyond the borders of the Roman Empire, which led to more people becoming part of the Christian *oecumene*.

⁹⁹ See Racine (2003: 59-76) for a description of the various texts in which the Christopher legend appears.

¹⁰⁰ See Racine (2003: 88).

2.6 *De rerum natura* reception and the danger to Christianity

Although Piero di Cosimo's paintings and the *Mundus Novus* letter thus show many similarities in their depiction of the Native Americans, as discussed in 2.5, they nevertheless differ in their incorporation of christian elements. An essential characteristic of the paintings and their reception of *De rerum natura* that is considered remarkable among art historians is that they are completely anti-religious. In *Mundus Novus*, on the contrary, clear references to the divine have been added.¹⁰¹ Although an affirmation of the Epicurean philosophy as we see in the *Mundus Novus* letter and in the hunting panels would have been well received by a learned man like Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, it raised the question whether this Lucretian reception was in harmony with Christian thought. In a certain sense, Lucretius sketches an "evolutionary" world view, in which the gods do not interfere with earthly existence and there is no life after death. Consequently, the reception of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* was charged with controversy in the catholic society of Florence in the 15th century.¹⁰² In 1516, 14 years after the publication of *Mundus Novus*, *De rerum natura* was even put on the "forbidden book list" by the Florentine Synod, because it was considered to be an *opera lasciva et impia*, that is, a licentious and ungodly work.¹⁰³ A warning of the threat the discovery of America could pose for Christianity is therefore clearly visible in the last paragraph of *Mundus Novus*. Here, the translator makes the following remark:

Ex Italica in latinam linguam iocundus interpres hanc epistolam vertit, ut latini omnes intelligant, quam multa miranda in dies reperiantur, et eorum comprimatur audacia, qui celum et maiestatem scrutari et plus sapere, quam liceat sapere, volunt, quando a tanto tempore, quo mundus cepit, ignota sit vastitas terre et que contineantur in ea.¹⁰⁴

Giocondo has translated this letter from Italian into Latin, so that those who are versed in Latin understand everything, how many admirable things are discovered today, and so that the overconfidence of those who wish to explore the greatness of Heaven and to know more than is permitted is restrained, since for such a long time, from the moment the world began, the immensity of the earth and what is contained in it was unknown.

¹⁰¹ An explanation for this difference may be that the paintings were commissioned for private admiration and the *Mundus Novus* was intended to be published.

¹⁰² See Geronimus (2006: 14).

¹⁰³ See Brown (2010: 14).

¹⁰⁴ Vespucci, *Mundus Novus* §13.

What is emphasised in this passage is that the audacity and recklessness of the curious must be kept in check, since certain knowledge is meant only for God Himself. Because of the discoveries, which challenged Christian thought, the warning is therefore given that one should, above all, be modest in the face of God's Creation, and not seek to know everything, which can turn the Christian world upside down. Although Vespucci explicitly mentions that the knowledge of the Classical authors has fallen short, and does not mention the biblical world view, a closer reading of *Mundus Novus* thus shows that the recent discovery of America and the Lucretian way of life of its population could pose a far greater danger to the Catholic Church than to classical book learning.

In the light of Lucretius' "anti-religious" attitude, the following passage is particularly striking in relation to the *Mundus Novus* letter. In his description of the development of mankind, Lucretius describes a sea storm in which the crew members seek refuge with the gods, but all in vain:

Summa etiam cum vis violenti per mare venti
induperatorem classis super aequora verrit
cum validis pariter legionibus atque elephantis,
non divum pacem votis adit ac prece quaesit
ventorum pavidus paces animasque secundas,
nequiquam, quoniam violento turbine saepe
correptus nilo fertur minus ad vada leti.¹⁰⁵

*When also the fierce force of furious winds upon the sea sweeps away the chief
admiral of a fleet over the waters, together with his mighty legions and elephants,
does he not approach the divine peace with vows and does he not in panic with
prayers seek the peace of the winds and favourable breezes? All in vain, since non the
less he is often, after being caught up in a violent hurricane, driven to the stream of
death.*

Assuming that Vespucci has seen this passage, it is interesting that in the description of the sea storm, dealt with in 1.3, he emphasises that God saved him and his crew. Once ashore Vespucci and his companions "thanked" God in a solemn prayer and a Mass chant" (*gratias agentes deo nostro solemni supplicatione atque unius misse cantu cum celibritate*). Even

¹⁰⁵ Lucretius, *De rerum natura* V, 1226-1230.

though for a great part Vespucci perceives the New World through a Lucretian lens, in the above passage he appears to have shopped selectively in the rendition by Lucretius and Vergil of seafarers in distress, and probably most consciously opted for the version of Vergil in which there was a clear presence of divinity. His posturing as a devout Christian must have helped him secure the backing of the powers that be in his being accepted as the true discoverer of America, which also resulted in him landing a good job with the queen of Spain a few years later, as we have seen above. Furthermore, with the naming of America after his surname, Vespucci's hopes and expectations had certainly come true. As he had mentioned as a student in his Latin workbook, it had to be through the classical path of virtuous literature, that his name was to be united with everlasting fame and honour:

I have always loved virtuous men and wished well to all who seek virtue... I want you to know how a few days ago I saw some learned and erudite young men, who in speaking had no other thought and sought nothing but the study of the letters... They were waiting for their master.

As soon as they saw him, they honored him wonderfully. Having been delighted with his words, they then accompanied him home... In such a way they have lit the fire in me for those studies, that I have left all other thoughts, to return fully to virtue... My father is eager for me to seek and know those things which can serve me to gain fame and honor. I shall conquer myself, and I shall behave in such a manner as to put aside from me all pleasures and give true signs of virtue.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ See Arciniegas (1955: 55). Own translation from the Spanish translation by Arciniegas. The original workbook of Vespucci, written in both Italian and Latin, is conserved in the Biblioteca Riccardiana in Florence.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined how Amerigo Vespucci, in his *Mundus Novus*, resorts to classical knowledge and ideology in order to approach the New World and place it in a conceptual framework.

In the first Chapter it is reasoned that Vespucci, in his literary design of *Mundus Novus*, did in fact write according to classical taste. As such, it is found that Robert Wallisch's theory - who has claimed earlier that *Mundus Novus* was written in a manner detached from ancient Roman taste and humanist book learning - is flawed. There are three main arguments for this.

Firstly, the publication of *Mundus Novus* in Latin and the fact that it was written as a letter within the patronage practices of the De' Medici family, shows that Vespucci's travel account fits into the Florentine humanist tradition.

Secondly, Vespucci used classical literary techniques that were used by Herodotus as well. Similar to Vespucci, the Greek historian framed unknown areas in terms of their newness and strangeness to the known world, severely reprimanding his predecessors for their imperfect and false testimonies. In addition, by creatively subverting specific knowledge of the classical authors, and thus transforming classical thought, Vespucci introduced the "new" to his contemporaries in a humanist tradition.

Ultimately, Vespucci did not only use literary techniques of Herodotus in his design of *Mundus Novus*, but also refers to Vergil's *Aeneid* in his description of a sea storm. As a result, he positions himself as an eloquent and learned writer who has sailed the seas as a heroic figure. In addition, the parallel evokes the association between the European colonisation of new territories that resurfaced in the 15th century and the European encounter with America, since the story of the hero Aeneas is inextricably linked to territorial expansion.

In the second Chapter it is argued that Vespucci did not see the discoveries in America as being at odds with all classical literature but rather recognised in the Americans the ideas of several ancient authors regarding the inhabitants of the *antipodes* and the prehistoric ancestors of the *oecumene*. The creative power of the transformation of these texts in *Mundus Novus* consists precisely in the fact that it fuses the classical ideas of Herodotus, Pliny, Vergil and Lucretius. For Vespucci, however, the people of the New World were most reminiscent of Lucretius' philosophy on primitive man as expressed in his *De rerum natura*, for they lived as "Epicureans", according to nature without religion and law.

Although Vespucci's empirical evidence which proved the veracity of the *De rerum natura* must have been very valuable to the initial addressee of the *Mundus Novus* letter, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, the *Mundus Novus* nevertheless contained a dangerous dimension to Christian faith. After all, Lucretius sketched an “evolutionary” world view, in which the gods do not interfere with earthly existence and in which there is no life after death. Following this line of thought, it is suggested that Vespucci must have been aware of the fact that his letter could pose a danger to Christian doctrine. It is quite possible that for this reason clear references to the Divine were included in the *Mundus Novus*.

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Images

Front page and figure 1: *Replica of Waldseemüller's map*, online image from Cornell University Library <olinuris.library.cornell.edu>. Retrieved January 14, 2020.

figure 3: Online image from *Metropolitan Museum of Art* <www.metmuseum.org>. Retrieved January 3, 2020.

figure 4: idem.

figure 5: idem.

figure 6: idem.