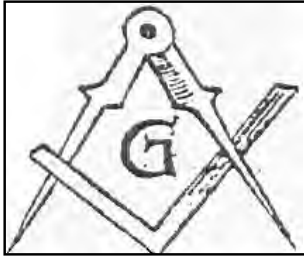


A Masonic Emblem in 1522

By Bro Chris Impens



The 1525 Strassburg edition of Ptolemy's *Geographia*

In the 1956 revised edition of the *Freemason's Guide and Compendium*, B.E. Jones writes on p. 299:

'How far back the letter 'G' was used as a symbol for geometry can only be guessed at, but we are told that Ptolemy's *Geography*, in an edition printed at Strasbourg in 1525, contains an ornamental margin which includes a pillar, a small part of the sprig of the arch above it, with foliage, cherub, and fluting decoration. On the base, in a panel, are the square and compasses with, in the centre, the letter 'G', 'believed to stand for Geometry'.

The book referred to by Jones has the title:

'CLAUDI PTOLEMAEI GEOGRAPHICAE ENARRATIONIS LIBRI OCTO, BILIBALDO PIRCKEYM HERO INTERPRETE, *Annotationes* IOANNIS DE REGIO MONTE in errores commissos a IACOBO ANGELO in translatione sua.'

Its colophon reads:

'Argentorati', *Iohannes Grieningerus, communibus Iohannis Koberger impensis excudebat. Anno a Christi Natiuitate M.D.XXV Tertio Kal'. Apriles.'*

This *Geographia* is a reissue of the Latin translation of the Greek text *Geographikè Hyphègèsis (Geographical Guide)* by Claudius Ptolemaeus (2nd century), supplemented by contemporary maps. It was printed at Strassburg by Hans Reinhard, called Grüninger or Grieninger after his birthplace Grünigen. Unlike Grüninger, the other persons involved in this edition were learned men, all from Nuremberg. The erudite humanist Wilibald Pirckheimer (1470–1530), equally versed in Greek and mathematics, delivered the text and Hans



Fig. 1.



Koberger was the editor. The third Nuremberger involved, though not explicitly mentioned, was Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528). The famous painter and woodcutter was Pirckheimer's closest friend², as well as a friend of the Koberger family. He was also well acquainted with Grüninger³. It is certain that he contributed to Grüninger's *Geographia*. We know that the large armillary sphere with wind blowing heads, contained in both the 1522 and 1525 editions, was designed jointly by Dürer and Pirckheimer⁴. This did not prevent Dürer from being very critical of the way the book was illustrated. According to Pirckheimer, he made fun of Grüninger's bad taste in illustrations, and stated his book did not contain a single decent stroke⁵. A few of the woodcuts in the *Geographia* contain the monogram or initials of the artist, but most do not. No reference to Dürer is to be found. Later commentators seem to attribute the better woodcuts – for instance, besides the armillary sphere with the winds, also the title page – to Dürer, and the lesser ones to minor artists, among whom Grüninger

himself. The latter also owned the blocks of the maps printed in previous editions of the *Geographia*. This is the very reason why Pirckheimer and Koberger, reluctantly, turned to him for their new edition.

Grüninger strongly believed that no book should appear without illustrations. Therefore, unlike his predecessors, he enclosed text blocks in his *Geographia* by woodcuts, taken from his large stock apparently without much reflection. The same illustrations appear in different places; therefore no relation should be sought with the text they accompany. In Figures 1–3 we reproduce three successive text pages of the 1525 edition of the *Geographia*⁶. Grüninger's folios are some 25 by 38 cm, and the actual height of the left marginal ornament in Figure 2 is 33 cm. Note that different copies of the same edition and by the same printer may not be identical. Illustrations may be different or lacking.

The upper woodblock in Figure 2 (printed upside down) shows the initials N.K., the lower one in Figure 3 the initials I.H. The most fascinating feature is the left





Fig. 4.

pillar in Figure 2. Its base panel has been commented on by several authors. Historians of printing and illumination see its letter G as a monogram, either of Grüninger⁷ or of some anonymous artist⁸. It is true that many anonymous masters signing with a letter G are known. Among those, one was even active in the right place, Strassburg, at the right time, 1522⁹. Among other things, these explanations fail to account for the square and compasses¹⁰, and in the sequel they will be proved wrong. According to B.E. Jones, quoted above, G is believed to stand for Geometry. We have ourselves investigated in some detail the possibility that the emblem was a tribute to geometry, designed by Dürer¹¹. Lempertz¹² claims that the pillar discussed here was among the illustrations which Grüninger omitted immediately after hearing of Dürer's criticism. This does not exclude the possibility that Dürer designed it, as the main point of criticism may have been the use of

illustrations unrelated to the text. But newly acquired material, discussed below, leads us to consider other artists as more likely. It is certain, as we shall prove in the next section, that the emblem stands for Geometry.

The 1522 Strassburg edition of Ptolemy's *Geographia*

The 1525 edition was not Grüninger's first *Geographia*. In 1522 he first had it printed entirely at his own expense, free to follow his own taste in illustration. His predecessors had treated the *Geographia* as the austere academic work it was. Thus the previous editions, also printed in Strassburg by Johann Schott in 1513 and 1520, contain no illustrations whatsoever other than the woodcut maps themselves. Grüninger's 1522 edition¹³, on the other hand, already abounds with the very illustrations that Dürer, according to Pirkheimer, was to reject as vulgar and non-fitting. Its very long title reads:

'CLAVDII PTOLEMAEI ALEXANDRINI Mathematicor[um] principis opus Geographie nouiter castigatu[m] & emaculatu[m] additio[n]ibus, raris et inuisis, necnon cu[m] tabularum in dorso iucunda explanatione (etcetera)'

and the colophon:

'IOANNES Grieninger civis Argentoraten[sis] opera et expensis proprijs id opus insigne, [a]ereis notulis exceptit, Laudabili[que] fine perfecit xii. die Marcij Anno. M.D.XXII.'

The 1522 edition already contains a print of the pillar with the G, which puzzled commentators of the 1525 edition. Surprisingly enough, and in contrast with the 1525 edition, the corresponding right pillar also occurs three times. On one page, reproduced in



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.

Figure 4, both are printed simultaneously. The base panel of the right pillar shows, under the letters A and R, a board with nine Hindu-Arabic numerals and three fractions. In Figure 5 we reproduce another page of the same 1522 copy. The upper woodcut shows an arch, flanked by the letters A and S, and two quadrant shaped astronomical instruments¹⁴. Cutting and pasting reveals that this arch fits exactly between the two pillars. Thus we are led to a reconstruction of the skeleton of the entire porch, given in Figure 6. Clearly, Grüninger possessed the woodcut of the whole porch and in the 1522 and 1525 editions he printed parts of it separately, as he thought fit. The skeleton of the porch being reconstructed, a little thought suffices to find the meaning of the letters and the illustrations that go with them. *What is represented on the porch are three of the seven liberal arts, viz. AS(tronomia), AR(ithmetica) and G(eometria), each of them reduced to one or two initial letters and some typical tools.*

Our impression is, that the porch was originally designed for the title page of the 1522

Geographia. Grüninger may have been inspired by a title page with a porch, printed one year earlier at Mainz by Johann Schöffer¹⁵. For some reason, the porch seems to have been abandoned in favour of the design, of Christian inspiration and in an entirely different style, that finally made it into both the 1522 and 1525 editions, and which has been attributed to Dürer¹⁶. With the title of the *Geographia* inside, the porch would have eloquently expressed the idea that the realm of Geography is entered through astronomy, arithmetic and geometry. We find support for this view, that the porch was designed for the title page, in the way the very first letter of the text proper, being the G of the word *Geographia*, is illuminated. Inside this G, reproduced in Figure 7, the artist wanted at any price to include the armillary sphere of Astronomy, the square and compasses of Geometry, and – squeezed in the left outer stroke of the letter – the Hindu-Arabic numerals of Arithmetic. We say ‘at any price’, because the symbols do not blend naturally with the letter; it is overloaded and the square does not fit at all. Thus this first letter of the book wants to express the same idea as the porch: *Geography embraces Astronomy, Arithmetic and Geometry*. Possibly this illuminated letter plays, in the final print, the emblematic role of the porch originally designed for the title page.

In retrospect, the explanations of the letter G, quoted above as the printer’s or the artist’s monogram, are utterly disproved. Clearly, these authors never saw the right pillar.



Fig. 7.

The 1535 Lyon edition of Ptolemy's *Geographia*

In 1535, in Lyon (France), another edition of Ptolemy's *Geographia* was printed by the brothers Melchior and Gaspar Trechsel. Its title is:

'CLAVDII PTOLEMAEI ALEXANDRINI GEOGRAPHICAE ENARRATIONIS LIBRI OCTO. EX BILIBALDI PIRCKEYMHERI *tra[ns]lacione (etcetera)*'

and its colophon:

'EXCVDEBANT LVGDVNI MELCHIOR ET GASPAR TRECHSEL FRATRES. M.D.XXXV.'

The Trechsel brothers printed their maps and ornamental margins with Grüninger's woodblocks, which they must have acquired after his death. The twin pillars occur five times, and the right pillar one more time¹⁷. The arch is not used. Lyon 1535 is the last public appearance of Grüninger's pillars. His maps were used a last time in 1541, when Gaspar Trechsel published another Geography in Vienne (France). This edition¹⁸, without illustrations or ornaments, looks like a stripped version of its predecessor. It was not reprinted, being superseded by Sebastian Münster's *Geographia*, printed at Basel in 1540¹⁹. The latter was produced from entirely new woodblocks.

Remaining questions

The porch which we have reconstructed in Figure 6 is devoted to Astronomia, Arithmetica and Geometria, three of the seven liberal arts. These are a favourite theme in Western medieval art, and usually the seven of them are met together. They are allegorically represented as ladies handling or solemnly holding typical tools. Thus Astronomy is depicted with an armillary sphere, an astronomical quadrant or an astrolabe. Arithmetic's working tool was a counting board, later a writing board containing Hindu-Arabic numerals²⁰. Of course, these are the very tools found on the porch with AS(tronomia) resp. AR(ithmetica). As for Geometry, different representations occur, some even more or less simultaneously. In the large woodcut opening *Margarita Philosophica*, the leading encyclopedia of Grüninger's days, Geometry holds square and compasses in the 1503 print²¹, square alone in 1504²², compasses alone in a 1505 manuscript version²³. Elsewhere, Geometry is seen with ruler and compasses²⁴. In *Margarita Philosophica's Typus Geometrie* (Representation of Geometry), reproduced in Figure 8, a lady, incarnating *Geometria Speculativa*, is at work with the three tools ruler, square and compasses²⁵. Around her, several instances of *Geometria Practica*²⁶ are shown. (Note the mason with apron, measuring the vault.)

In view of the diversity in Geometry representations, the question arises as to who coined the appealing combination on the porch, namely G surrounded by square and compasses, legs interlaced. It may well have been the artist who, facing the problem of reducing the traditional personifications of the liberal arts to two-dimensional abstractions, chose the best plane-filling and most symmetrical combination of tools to go with the initial letter. But how, then, did this Geometry emblem make its way from 16th century Latin Geography books, printed in Germany and France, to universal acceptance as 'the' emblem of Freemasonry²⁷? Only a very erudite founding father or early member could have provided that link. The alternative is that the artist picked up and reproduced an emblem which already existed in proto-masonic circles. If he was somehow related to Strassburg – he need not have been, as Grüninger collected woodblocks from all horizons – the historically important Lodge of Masons working at Strassburg Cathedral immediately comes to mind. In favour of the second explanation, it may be noted that in one of the rare writings of master builders, the threesome

‘geometry’, ‘compasses’ and ‘right measures’ is solemnly referred to²⁸; encoding ‘right measures’ by a square seems natural enough. Moreover, why would the artist illuminating the first letter of the book (see Fig. 7) spoil his design with an ill-positioned quadrant, if he was free to omit it (leaving compasses only) or to replace the right-angled compasses with it (leaving square only)? Clearly, he cared much less about Astronomy’s quadrants on the arch, or about Arithmetic’s writing board on the right pillar, which he simply omitted. This, too, seems to be an argument in favour of a pre-existing Geometry emblem combining square and compasses.



On the right pillar of Figure 4, about a quarter of the height below the top, the ornamentation ends in the form of a capital T, while the corresponding image on the left pillar is a flower, as some prints show more clearly than others. This letter T could be a signature left by the artist; if so, we may be dealing with the anonymous 16th century German woodcutter who signed his work by the outline of a capital letter T²⁹. Note that the compasses accompanying the capital Q in Figure 7 are of the same design as those on the left pillar, but different from those inside the large first capital G. So the artist of the porch may also have created the geometry related surrounds for the

capitals other than the extra large opening G. *Margarita Philosophica* seems to have been one of his major sources. Thus, for instance, the mason’s level and carpenter’s saw in Figure 1 (masonry and carpentry being Practical Geometry, see Figure 8), the measuring device in Figure 4 (drawn and explained in *Margarita Philosophica*’s section on Geometria Practica³⁰) and the barrel in Figure 5 (also drawn and discussed in *Margarita Philosophica*’s Geometria Practica³¹). Some details discussed in the text may not be readily visible in the reproductions.

Figures 1, 2 and 3 above are reproduced by kind permission of the University Library Ghent, Hi 3273. Figures 4, 5 and 7 are © Royal Library Brussels, Inc 200. Figure 6 is a reconstruction by C. Impens and Figure 8 is from the *Margarita Philosophica, 1517*, available on the internet.

Notes

- ¹ *Argentoratum* or *Argentina* is the Latin name of Strassburg, in the 16th century a German city.
- ² M. Thausing, *Albert Dürer, sa vie et ses œuvres*, Paris 1878, pp. 452–454.
- ³ O. Hase, *Die Koberger*, Leipzig 1885, letter 119, Grüninger to Pirckheimer.
- ⁴ *Documenta literaria varii argumenti in lucem prolata cura Iohannis Heumannii*, Altorfii 1758, pp. 279 & 281, letters of Tscherte to Pirckheimer.
- ⁵ Hase, *Koberger*, letter 118, Pirckheimer to Grüninger. Surely, Pirckheimer is exaggerating in order to impress Grüninger. After all, the book contains work by Dürer, and does not leave such a bad impression on readers unaware of Dürer's alleged criticism. Moreover, most subsequent printers of the *Geographia* seem to have imitated Grüninger's innovative style.
- ⁶ University Library Ghent, Hi 3273.
- ⁷ H. Lempertz, *Bilderhefte zur Geschichte des Bücherhandels*, 1862, Taf. III, note c.
- ⁸ C. Becker, *Ein bisher unbekannter Holzschnitt von A. Dürer*, Archiv für die zeichnende Künste, 4 (1858), p. 452.
- ⁹ G. K. Nagler, *Die Monogrammisten*, München 1860, II. Band, n° 2636. The author saw this monogram in the title page of *Christliche Verantwortung M. Matthias Zell von Keyserberg etc. durch Wolfgangum Köpffel, Strassburg, 1523*. In the copy of the University Library of Utrecht (AB F QU 293, dl. 2) no such monogram is to be seen.
- ¹⁰ After 1536 there was an anonymous German master who used a monogram consisting of a letter G and a pair of compasses. See Nagler, *Monogrammisten*, II. Band, n° 2619.
- ¹¹ Impens, C., *Het vrijmetselaarsembleem in een Geographia van 1525*, Acta Macionica 11 (2001), pp. 231–241.
- ¹² Lempertz, *Bilderhefte*, III, note 6.
- ¹³ Royal Library Brussels, Inc 200.
- ¹⁴ Also in the 1525 edition (Brussels Royal Library, Inc 201), viz. with Tabula Moderna Indiae.
- ¹⁵ See <http://rubens.anu.edu.au/htdocs/bytype/prints/ornament/bytype/display00143.html>.
- ¹⁶ Twice reproduced in P. Allen, *The Atlas of Atlases*, Marshall Editions 1992.
- ¹⁷ University Library Ghent, CL 37.
- ¹⁸ Royal Library Brussels, VH 14.179 C RP and VB 7514 C RP.
- ¹⁹ Modern reprint *Claudius Ptolemaeus, Ed. Sebastian Münster, Geographia, Basle 1540*, with an introduction by R.A. Skelton, Theatrum Orbis Terrarum ltd., Amsterdam 1967.
- ²⁰ *Margarita Philosophica* contains a woodcut showing a triumphant *algorist* and an unhappy *abacist* competing in arithmetic. (Reproduced on the cover and on p. 279 of C.B. Boyer, *A History of Mathematics*, Princeton Paperpack 1985.) Yet Arithmetic displayed 'modern' Hindu-Arabic numerals much earlier, see W. Prevenier, *Prinsen en poorters*, Mercatorfonds Antwerpen 1998, p. 63.
- ²¹ Boyer, *History*, p. 300.
- ²² Likewise in, for instance, M. Furter's 1517 edition. See Gregor Reisch, *Margarita Philosophica*, facsimile reprint by L. Geldsetzer, Stern-Verlag Düsseldorf, 1973, p. II.
- ²³ University Library Ghent, Ms. 7. Reproduced in Prevenier, *Prinsen*, p. 116.
- ²⁴ See, for instance, *Hortus Deliciarum* by Herrad von Landsberg (available on the Internet), or Prevenier, *Prinsen*, p. 63.
- ²⁵ Also the three tools held by Dame Geometry on the title page of Cuningham's *Cosmographicall Glasse* (London, 1559), used again for the title page of the first English version of Euclid's *Elements* (London, 1570), by Billingsley and Dee. Reproduced in Boyer, *History*, p. 298.
- ²⁶ Grüninger printed several editions of *Margarita Philosophica*. In his 1512 and 1515 editions (Royal Library Brussels, A 1012 resp. A 1013) the use of Jacob's staff – an example of *Geometria Practica* – is demonstrated by a mason wearing an apron, having put his hewing axe on the ground.
- ²⁷ An external rather than an internal emblem, as the combination on the porch does not, as such, occur in masonic ritual. The letter G may have remained the center of the lodge, but the compasses are shifted east and the square, besides being inverted, moved west.
- ²⁸ Matthäus Roriczer in his 1487 *Puechlen der fialen gerechtikait*, see Impens, C., *Vrijmetselaarsembleem &c...*
- ²⁹ F. Brulliot, *Dictionnaire des monogrammes, marques figurées, lettres initiales, noms abrégés etc.*, Munich 1833, vol. II, n° 2560. Nagler, *Monogrammisten*, V. Band, n° 464, considers a black filled T as probably the signature of the same master.
- ³⁰ Geldsetzer, *Margarita*, p. 229.
- ³¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 239.