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A new ICA Working Group on merging cartographic heritage with digital technologies¹

In July 2005 the Executive Committee of the International Cartographic Association decided in A Coruña – Spain, to accept the proposal for the formation of a new Working Group on “Digital Technologies in Cartographic Heritage”.

The philosophy behind the proposal is simple but challenging. It is based on the foreseen that our multifaceted **Cartographic Heritage**, this very important and continuous part of the World’s overall cultural heritage could possibly offer a variety of benefits and advantages to our modern cartographic science and technology, and to its future, enriching and strengthening the interest and concern not only of experts dedicated to Cartography and Maps but also of the society and the general public.

This can and should be done today taking full advantage of all the possibilities which are profusely available by modern digital information and communication technologies. In this way, the fascinating domain of our rich and profound heritage in mapping and mapmaking (as documented in the long history of cartography and maps) acquires a new dimension and broadens considerably its audience.

Bringing together the ensemble of cartographic heritage with the digital mainstream we not only comply with the international policies on cultural issues in the conceptual and the operational sense (e.g. all projects on cultural heritage financed by the European Commission obeys the digital precondition!) but more, we offer the grounds for the attraction of young researchers who are already familiar with digital technologies and are interested in or fascinated by history.

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¹ Based on the welcome address to the participants of the First International Workshop on “Digital Approaches to Cartographic Heritage”, Thessaloniki, 18-19 May 2006.

Our new venture although sounding innovative and daring is not easy at all. The fundamental difficulty, as it stands generally in our days, is mainly of cultural nature. Here, we try to bring together two 'worlds' of cartography, on one side the historians, the learned or the literate, those dealing with its humanistic component and the 'others' who deal with the everyday cartographic practice and production, the scientists and the engineers of cartography.

Between these two worlds of cartography, the divergences and the disputes are not new at all! I just recall here, in order to show the rootage of the divergence, the conceptual difference, some centuries ago, even in the meaning of the 'new word' *cartographe* in French and *cartographer* in English, the 'historian of maps' and the 'mapmaker' respectively, or, further back in history, the different conception of the sentence 'writing the earth', *γράφειν τήν γήν* in Greek, as it was meant by Eratosthenes, Strabo or Ptolemy²).

Of course some retorts here are to be expected, not by definition unfounded, based on several negative arguments, like e.g. "the utopia in trying to bring together these two different 'worlds' of people", even if their subject is common; "the convincing power of historic examples" just mentioned before; "the different roots of cultural background conducting these two distinct groups, which obstacle a possible convergence" and some other more, relevant or irrelevant. But, even if I fully understand and, in a certain extend, appreciate the cultural stand point and the reasoning of the humanistic 'world', although I am personally coming from science and technology, I strongly believe that the dialogue and the convergence of the two 'worlds', if well prepared, will offer only gifts!

This belief is not romantic or due to a personal inclination for humanities (maybe it is also this). It is mainly based on the apprehension of the cardinal changes the digital revolution is introducing to our modern societies and cultures, and especially to the new generation's way of thinking, viewing, feeling and producing.

² In the ambiguous ancient Greek sense- *γράφειν* means both the textual and the graphical description

It is so radical the impact of the digital revolution, that Euclid's statement twenty three centuries ago, that '*...everything material on earth can be described by numbers (digits)...*' sounds more than prophetic!

On such conception, as briefly illustrated above, it is based the institution of the new ICA WG. On such ideas will plan its future work addressing to specialists and to the new generation of researchers coming from a variety of disciplines and practices related to cartography and maps. The WG was founded not only to organise a frame of work in this field, but also to contribute, with open mind, in the cartographic dialogue between humanities and sciences and technologies.

Topics like the transformation into digital of early maps, atlases, globes and affined cartographic documents with all the delicate questions related to such transformations, the cartometric and thematic research on old maps using digital tools, the digital support aiming at the preservation and restoration of old maps, atlases and globes, the digital assist helping and broadening the work of map curators and the functionality of the map libraries networking and access to cartographic heritage, the development of virtual map libraries, the digital archiving and retrieval of cartographic archives, the digital communication channels for the users of old maps in the context of modern information society, the proper use of the Internet, the enhancement of new information and communication technologies in teaching and diffusing history of cartography and maps to the general public and some more other topics, easily derivable by crossing the previous, could find a potential embedding in this WG.

The WG on "Digital Technologies in Cartographic Heritage" started its work with an originally small group of colleagues coming not only from the digital cartographic world but also from cartographic humanities. This was the best start. We look forward to enrich the participation in this direction. The first action was the development of the WG's web site and the organisation of this "First International Workshop on Digital Approaches to Cartographic Heritage" with such a promising contribution and participation³.

³ <http://web.auth.gr/xeee/ICA-Heritage/Workshop/Workshop.htm>

This Workshop will give the energy and the impulse for a solid organisation of the WG and for the diffusion of its philosophy. People working in the field who share the ideas illustrated above are invited to participate actively. The intension is to continue organising annual international workshops on the issue, either in Greece every May or hosted in other places invited by interested people and institution.

I would like to thank for their support and help during all these years we are trying to raise cartography in this country my own University, the Hellenic Cartographic Society in the name of its president prof. Myron Myridis, the participants in the "Synergy: Cartography in Cultural Heritage"⁴ and my co-operators, colleagues and students who share the same ideas.

I am also thankful to the International Cartographic Association, the Executive Committee and especially to the president Milan Konečný and the secretary general Ferjan Ormeling who first embraced the idea for the creation of the WG, supporting actively and defending with determination its introduction into the frame of IAG.

⁴ <http://cartography.web.auth.gr>