

THE CONQUEST OF NATURE:

ALONSO DE OVALLE'S ARCHITECTURAL IMAGINARY

IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

As other national imaginaries, the idea of Chile as a place with a wild and hostile nature has been constructed since the first records describing the country. This text argues that the engravings made by Alonso de Ovalle in the seventeenth century depict architecture not only as an image of man conquering nature, but also as one of the first modern imaginaries inside a territory in the process of being conquered.

KEYWORDS · representation, engraving, landscape, buildings, modernity

Chronicles of Chile's conquest and colonization – written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – were strongly defined by the subject of nature, inaugurating a national identity linked both to the geographic attributes and the vegetal and animal abundance of Chilean territory. In this context, what role does architecture – traditionally interpreted as an anthropic sign in opposition to nature – play in the founding national imaginary? We will assess modes of architectural representation in one of Chile's first accounts, published in the mid-seventeenth century: *Histórica relación del Reyno de Chile* [Historical Relation of the Chilean Kingdom] by Alonso de Ovalle.

NATURE IN THE NATIONAL IMAGINARY

During the two centuries following the arrival of the first Spanish conquistadors in the mid-sixteenth century, Chilean landscape was depicted as wild and hostile. Linked to descriptions of the scarcity, poverty and remoteness of Chile, the recurrence of natural disasters (mostly earthquakes), and of the war between the Spanish and the Mapuche people, the inclemence of characterized the accounts during the first period of European settlements (Antei, 1989; Vega, 2005; Jocelyn-Holt, 2008). Since then, the presence and influence of natural forces

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in the national imaginary have marked Chilean identity up to today (Peliowski and Valdés, 2014).

Crónica y relación copiosa y verdadera de los Reinos de Chile [Chronicle and True Abundant Relation of the Kingdoms of Chile] was the first written account describing Chilean territory, completed by the writer and Spanish conquistador Gerónimo de Vivar circa 1558, only two decades after Diego de Almagro and his crew ventured south of Cuzco to conquer the territory now known as Chile. Powerful running rivers, snowy peaks, long rainy periods, frequent landslides, the Andes mountain range – tough and high as a massive wall –, large rainforests and dry deserts on both ends of the territory, salty seas and even fictitious cannibals are some of the images transmitted by Vivar in his text (Gaudin, 2014).

Other stories on this first colonial period confirm this image of nature as an intimidating element, such as Pedro Mariño de Lobera's late sixteenth-century *Crónica del Reino de Chile* [Chronicle of the Kingdom of Chile] and *Histórica relación del Reyno de Chile* [Historical Relation of the Chilean Kingdom] by the Jesuit monk Alonso de Ovalle (1646). In the latter – and unlike the chronicles preceding it – despite the fact that nature appears fierce and overwhelming it also acquires paradisiac, moving features. Nature's threatening character is in fact tempered by a nostalgic idealistic filter, given that the monk wrote the text away from his homeland. Sent to Rome in 1640 to attract new missionaries and bring them back to the country with him, Ovalle – appointed attorney representing the Jesuit vice-province of Chile – wrote *Histórica relación...* to interest, as he declared in the first page of the text, European Jesuits in this distant territory (Ovalle, 1646:i). Illustrative of the words of admiration and shock resulting from the vision of Chilean landscape is Ovalle's description of his experience crossing the Andes mountain range:

The Chilean mountain range, which we could call a wonder of nature, and without equal, because I don't know a thing in the world resembling it [...] We go through those mountains stepping on clouds, and maybe those who walking on earth see nothing preventing our view, and who looking up into the sky can't see it because it's covered by clouds; on the contrary finding ourselves at this height, the land is covered, without us being able to see it; and are shown the clear sky, and beautiful, the bright sun, and shining with no obstacle preventing us from seeing its light, and beauty. The rainbow, seen from the earth as traversing the sky; we see it from these summits lying on the ground, a footstool to our feet, when those who are on it contemplate it from its head; nor is it less astonishing, that we tread

those lean and dry rocks, while water clouds are torn off and flood the land, as I have seen many times.” (Ovalle, 1646:12,14)

Nature’s exaltation can be understood as an effect of the ‘propagandistic’ role of the text. With expressions of delight and excitement at the beauty of nature, the chronicler appeals to the senses to compose a geographical, botanical, climatic and especially a landscape description of this country. His account constitutes, in fact, the first comprehensive and scientific-like portrait of the entire Chilean scenery, inventorying its geographic elements by combining direct knowledge of the territory with other travelers’ stories and existing botanical information (Hanisch, 1976; Jocelyn-Holt, 2008).

Histórica relación... was published in Rome, in Spanish and Italian simultaneously. The book included 53 engraved plates, carefully inventoried in an index inside the volume. These plates are diverse: religious and epic scenes; conquistadors’ portraits; illustrations of indigenous customs; maps of Chile, of its capital and a number of its ports; and facades of several Jesuit colleges erected along the Chilean territory, among other images. Of the 53 engravings, it has been claimed that nine – the conquistadors’ portraits – are copies of prints by the Italian engraver Antonio Tempesta (1555-1630), likely belonging to the editor, Francesco Cavallo. Other 32 were possibly drafted by Ovalle, including seven images of religious devotion that seem to have been entrusted to a professional engraver on the basis of sketches by the Jesuit, and five other describing indigenous customs, likely drawn by Ovalle and enhanced by the editor (Hanisch, 1976). Among the drawings attributed to Ovalle we also find a corpus of nineteen plates, which, apparently, were made by the chronicler without any outside intervention. They comprise eleven images showing facades of religious houses belonging to the Compañía de Jesús, a map of Chile, and seven plans of Chilean cities and islands. The latter are probably simplified versions of engravings by the German Théodore de Bry and the Dutch Joris Van Spilbergen who portrayed American customs, ports and cities in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, respectively (Prieto, 2011; CACHEDA BARREIRO, 2013) (FIG.1). It is believed that these nineteen engravings were drawn by Ovalle, as they have a rough outline, are woodcuts instead of copper chalcographies or lithographs as the rest of the plates, and are the only stamps that bear inscriptions in Spanish (Cruz, 1986). This last group of images is of particular interest because, in the context of a narrative characterized by the subject of nature, through them the author offers – for the first time in a Chilean chronicle – an image of the country related to its urbanization and civilization. These are thus images of urban spaces and architecture that counteract with the wild imaginary associated with natural landscape.

This image of civilization is also, as in the case of nature, an idealized one. In Santiago’s plan as drawn by Ovalle, for example, the scheme is extremely regular and oversized compared to what we know the capital was like in those years (Espinoza, 2008) (FIG. 2). Moreover, the perspective view shows a cityscape evocative of images belonging to Italian Renaissance cities, with their domes and classic buildings made of brick and stone. Also, throughout the text, Ovalle cannot help praising

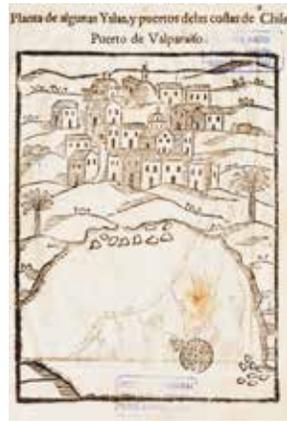


FIG 1 Puerto de Valparaíso, Chile. / *Port of Valparaíso, Chile.*
 Fuente / Source: Alonso de Ovalle: *Histórica relación del Reyno de Chile*, Roma: F. Cavallo, 1646.



FIG 2 Perspectiva y planta de la ciudad de Santiago, Chile. / *Plan and perspective of Santiago, Chile.*
 Fuente / Source: Alonso de Ovalle: *Histórica relación del Reyno de Chile*, Roma: F. Cavallo, 1646.

the Chilean capital: he describes its streets, the materials used to build temples and houses, and speaks of the beauty of its facades (Ovalle, 1646). As the historian Walter Hanisch noted, if we analyze the descriptions the chronicler made of Rome – a city where he lived for six years – it appears as if the Jesuit considered Santiago had no reason to envy the European cultural capital of the seventeenth century (Hanisch, 1976). However, it would be difficult to imagine that the Chilean capital – a city mostly composed of small adobe and wood buildings and containing no more than a thousand inhabitants – could have had the presence Ovalle sought to promote.

The eleven engraved facades of Jesuit schools are, at the same time, some of the earliest existing records of the architecture built in Chilean territory (Peliowski, 2015) (FIG.3). According to art historian Isabel Cruz, the drawings depict an ‘archaic’ image of Chile because of their rough lines and the absence of an accurate and updated application of the perspective technique in the representation of buildings. Thus, Cruz recognizes in these prints a link to a medieval graphic tradition, even suggesting that this relationship is based on the naive and primitive character of Ovalle’s strokes (Cruz, 1986).

Indeed, traces of a medieval imagery can be noticed in them: on the one hand, the outline of columns, cupolas, ornaments, tiled roofs, iron gates and steeples arrange a sort of typological inventory that can be associated with Villard de Honnecourt’s thirteenth-century architectural cadaster. Furthermore, the perspective view is flattened – given the lack of a vanishing point –, recalling medieval horariums where the background tends to blend into the foreground. All buildings are represented in a vague and ambiguous projection, which mixes a conical perspective with an orthogonal view. The engravings of the Bucalemu (FIG. 3b) probation house and the Quillota (FIG. 3c) mission house, in particular, depict this kind of rudimentary perspective; in the first, the Aconcagua river is drawn as if it was a plan view, while the building and the

FIG 3 Fuente / Source: Alonso de Ovalle: *Histórica relación del Reyno de Chile*, Roma: F. Cavallo, 1646.



FIG 3a Colegio de Santiago



FIG 3b Casa de probación de Bucalemo



FIG 3c Casa de misión de Quillota



FIG 3d Colegio de Mendoza



FIG 3e Colegio de S. Juan



FIG 3f Colegio de la Concepción



FIG 3g Colegio postulado de Chillan



FIG 3h Residencia de Buena esperanza



FIG 3i Casa de S. Christobal



FIG 3j Residencia de Arauco



FIG 3k Residencia de Chiloé

valley are shown through frontal views, and, in both plates, surrounding buildings are drawn disproportionately in relation to the main religious building. Meanwhile, the aerial view attempted in the drawing “Casa de San Cristóbal” (FIG. 3i) illustrates spatial depth in a way that resembles building facades representation in late Middle Ages maps rather than the first perspective frontal views proper of military drawings made in America in the eighteenth century.

The previous is enhanced by a context of architectural union tradition, in full existence in Chile since the mid-sixteenth century. Recipient of the Middle Ages, builders’ labor organization means in the form of craftsmanship corporations involved collective and anonymous work, where decisions were made empirically during construction. The Renaissance canon with regard to labor organization – one where project guidelines were preset by an architect or engineer, who embodied his ideas in a drawing prior to construction and only then transmitted them to builders – would not be established in Chile until much later, during the second half of the eighteenth century with the arrival of Toesca and a group of engineers sent by the Bourbon King Charles III to modernize the country’s urban, military and territorial infrastructure (Peliowski, 2015).

Despite the evidence of these medieval-origin elements, we propose here – in opposition to Isabel Cruz’s judgment – that the Jesuit’s engravings can be interpreted as expressions not of Chilean cultural delay – expressed in Ovalle’s graphic amateurism – but of a modern vision of architecture and of the equally modern project of man’s domination over nature.

THE MODERNITY OF ANTHROPOCENTRIC REPRESENTATION

A first feature of ‘modernity’ in Ovalle’s facades lies precisely in a departure from the medieval representation canon. According to the medieval conception, buildings were an expression of divinity on earth. Its representation thus could not be detached from the act of construction, as it was through men’s work that temples were erected as an expression of divinity on earth. Architecture drawn in horariums usually existed as background for a narrative scene, and took a central part in the image only when the scene recounted the construction of a building – in such cases, usually accompanied by craftsmen builders working on site (Savignat, 1980) (FIG. 4).

The Renaissance brought, however, the possibility of giving architecture – now assumed as a human rather than divine work – a central role in paintings and drawings. The development of the perspective technique since the late fourteenth century was particularly connected to architectural representation, given its pure geometric and orthogonal forms – that allowed to verify optic rules – and according to an anthropocentric ideology originated in urban centers (Perez-Gomez and Pelletier, 2000). Moreover, as it can be observed in the three paintings corresponding to La Città Ideale of Urbino, Berlin and Baltimore – all three of anonymous authorship and painted in the last

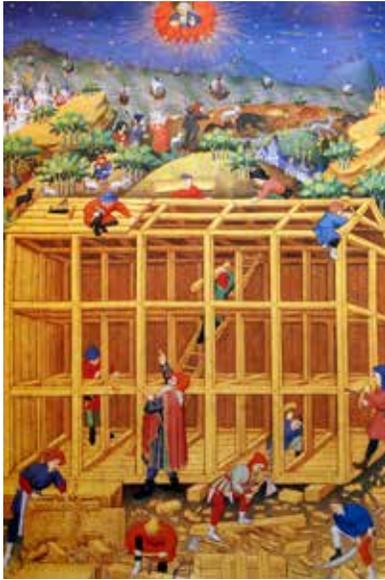


FIG 4 Sin título / *Untitled*. Iluminación del *Libro de Horas* del Duque de Bedford, maestro anónimo. Primer tercio del s. xv. / *Horarium* from the *Book of Hours of the Duke of Bedford*, anonymous master. First third of the 15th century.
Fuente / Source: Manuscrito conservado en la British Library, Londres.

decades of the fifteenth century in Italy – architecture and the city not only featured as the background of a human scene, but could also be at the center of the picture (FIG. 5).

Likewise, according to the humanist logic, whose beauty and harmony standards were inspired by those of antiquity, architecture was considered as a monument with memory. In accordance with the retrieval of ancient values in the early fifteenth century, the notion of historical monuments – and since, the idea of heritage – was born in the Renaissance. Specifically, as Françoise Choay points out, this notion emerged in Rome around the year 1420, after Martin V reinstated the seat of the papacy on this dismantled city in order to restore its power and prestige. The action inaugurated a great interest in ancient ruins that “since then, speak of history and confirm Rome’s fabulous past, whose splendor is mourned by Gian Francesco Poggio Bracciolini and his humanist friends, and whose pillage they condemn” (Choay, 2007:25). Both, the application of a rational matrix to space representation as well as the historical and anthropic attributes of architecture are essential aspects of the transition into an artistic modernity that crystallized in the Renaissance, a starting point for a philosophical, political and artistic project whose main task was to assert the rational and scientific value of all human activity (Tafari, 1981; Touraine, 1992).

The building’s historical dependence, characterized by the granting of a cultural attribute to that which is built – in detriment of its mystical origin – reminds us of the place that Ovalle’s engravings of Jesuit colleges acquire within his natural history of Chile. The facades, cleansed from any human presence and inserted into a historical narrative, constitute a sort of inventory of Jesuit heritage in the province of Chile. Although developed with the rudimentary graphic conventions of an amateur drawer, they can be understood as heirs of a humanist conception of architecture.

ARCHITECTURE AS SYMBOL OF NATURE’S CONQUEST

The way architecture is placed in contrast to a natural background in some of the engravings (on the plates depicting the religious buildings of Bucalemu, Quillota, San Cristóbal and Chiloé) can be added to the anthropocentric vocation of the images, constituting the facades’ second feature of modernity. For the Spanish, domination of the territory in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was materialized by founding cities and spreading fortifications across the land, seeking to protect conquerors from attacks while expanding the conquest towards the south of Chile (Guarda, 1978); for the religious, church architecture was also designed as a sign of conquest over the landscape. Indeed, since the introduction of the Society of Jesus in 1593 and until their expulsion in 1767, Jesuit churches and monasteries were used as centers from which the evangelizing mission radiated. In his chronicle, Ovalle describes this function of territorial occupation and doctrine expansion centralized in *collegios* and probation houses from where the clergymen departed on their missions to ranches and farms:



FIG 5 La ciudad ideal, conocida como Panel de Urbino / *The ideal city, also known as Panel Urbino*. Atribuido a / *Attributed to*: Piero della Francesca, Luciano Laurana, Francesco di Giorgio Martini, o Melozzo da Forlì, c. 1480-90. Fuente / *Source*: Galleria Nazionale delle Marche.

The area of these missions is great, because starting from the *collegio* de la Concepcion that runs from Chillán to Maule, the walking circuit would be of a hundred leagues. San Sevastian of Bucalemo probation house goes from Maule to Maypo, which is another large space and distance. The *collegio* de San Miguel in Santiago goes from Maypo to Coquimbo, which are over sixty leagues, and from there to Guasco and Copiapo another thirty, so as to have a circuit that will come to two hundred leagues [...] This is what concerns the circumference and place of these missions" (Ovalle, 1646:359).

Another form of territorial conquest through architecture was the implementation of the circular mission system, a regime that in Chile was used in Chiloé. The temples of these missions were scattered over the territory in a scheme comprising regular intervals of a distance corresponding to a one-day trip, and were built with similar materials following a regional style. They remained closed most of the year yet seasonally received visits from missionaries on tour through the territory, offering sporadic religious rituals (Montecinos, 1996). Although the church did not have enough priests at the time, it was important to install visual symbols of their evangelization through colonial possessions that were still sparsely inhabited (Modiano, 1993).

For the Jesuits, the means of spiritual conquest were intimately linked to images, and therefore to art, including architecture. In fact, the Society was a congregation particularly committed to the arts during the period extending between its founding in Rome in 1540 and the end of the eighteenth century. Their artistic work was considerably determinant for the sixteen, seventeen and eighteen-century art in Europe as well as in the American and Asian missions. Also, in addition to discussions about the existence of a Jesuit corporate identity, characteristics and scope of the so-called 'Jesuit style,' and its mode of penetration inside the missions, and the underlying aesthetic, political and philosophical criteria in the artistic production of the Ignatian during that period, are all still in force (Bailey, 1999; O'Malley et al., 1999 and 2004; Levy, 2014). Furthermore, not only were they art producers, but they also forged and disseminated a visual culture of its own, one that entailed the creation and use of images in a broad sense, using painting, sculpture and

architecture to spread their influence through the territories as well as their costumes, botanical illustrations, scientific volume covers and meditation pamphlets, which served as tools of indoctrination of the population during the missions (Levy, 2014).

We propose, therefore, that in the context of an advanced state of the colonial settlement process, architecture becomes not only a shelter against severe weather, earthquakes or war, but also a monument symbolizing a successful civilized, indoctrinated, and economically and culturally productive society. Thus, from the protective purpose of fortresses to the domesticating determination of religious buildings, the first colonial architectures can be understood as a configuration, an ordered structure amid the natural extension seeking to dominate the wilderness, but also to convert and civilize the 'natural' pagans. Besides, if we consider that the conquest and control of nature through technology has been one of the main principles of the modern era – as it has been traditionally understood in Western historiography (Touraine, 1992; Latour, 1993) – we can then attribute the buildings engraved by Ovalle the quality of a symbol of modern society. Architecture, in this context, represents the historical role of being a cultural emblem, and, consequently, an emblem of modernity (Nesbitt, 1996).

MEDIEVAL IMAGE AND MODERN IMAGINARY

The significant presence of building drawings in Ovalle's description of Chile seems to express the author's concern to show that which man has built in a landscape previously characterized as savage and hostile. The historian Gauvin Alexander Bailey emphasizes this interpretation of the Jesuit engravings by stating, in an analysis of the image of Castro's college facade in Chiloé, that:

[A]lthough the late Italian Renaissance building featured in this engraving is linked more to the artist's fantasies than to the actual building in Castro, the engraving shows, however, the fundamental civic role that the Church had within the city, understood as the basis of a ministry which extended equally both to Spanish and to Amerindians" (Bailey, 2004:216).

While the image of Castro's church, as Santiago's plan, is a graphic hyperbole created by Ovalle, the plates – as Bailey elaborates – can be interpreted as the expression of a contradiction between the shape depicted in the image and the ideology it implies. On the one hand, the engravings have the medieval appearance identified by Isabel Cruz; on the other, as noted, they express Ovalle's concern to show the kingdom's cultural products: indigenous customs, cities, architectural monuments, and so on. Thus, they present a contrast between the provincialism expressed in the chronicler's graphic technique and the image's implicit modernity of establishing a cultural practice – in this case architecture – as a symbol of overcoming the wild and hostile conditions of Chilean territory and an emblem of a civilized society. Hence, in Ovalle's images coexists a medieval appearance with the expression of a worldview centered on man and his ability both to build and to represent that which is built. These images are not, therefore, a reflection of Chilean cultural backwardness, but the manifestation of the modern imaginary of a contemporary man. **ARQ**

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