

Moreana, no. 12 (Nov. 1966): 61-65

THE UTOPIAN ALPHABET

Volume Four of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More, *Utopia*, published in New Haven and London (Yale University Press) in 1965, gives the most handy information about the Utopian alphabet. The versions of the editions of 1516 and 1518 are compared at p.18. Notes on the page are available at p.277-8. The editors seem certain that Peter Giles provided the material. Their authority consists of the statement of Giles himself at p.23 of the same edition, where the translation reads:

"...there is nothing I can add to what he has written. There was only a poem of four lines in the Utopian vernacular which, after More's departure, Hythlodæus happened to show me. This verse, preceded by the Utopian alphabet, I have caused to be added to the book."

Now it is possible that Giles is telling the truth, namely that he and he alone was responsible for adding the alphabet as also the verse. But the verse, supposedly spoken by Utopia, the founder-king's creation, is really part and parcel of the alphabetic display, as well as an attempt to give a notion of the Utopian language. Its purport is clear enough, being a comment on Utopia by one who was acquainted with its essence and significance. Could the latter have been composed by Giles without More's knowledge and consent? The letter to Busleyden in which the sentences quoted above occur contains much humour and irony, and leaves at least one reader content that More and Giles between them concerted this 'prefatory address' as a comical method of reinforcing the plausibility of Hythlodæus's tale. That reader at any rate prefers to think that More knew in advance

that this preface would be written and that Giles' name would be put to it. The 1518 editions would hardly have appeared complete with this matter unless More had approved. And the cost of making the Utopian type would not have been negligible. It does not seem that the point of having this page has been fully grasped.

This writer has already expressed the opinion that a real traveller who had been in India was somewhere at the bottom of the Hythloday fable. The shape of the Utopian letters could be said in a way to conform to a traveller's report on the appearance of the Malayalam script, which must have been known to many Europeans at the time. In particular one is struck by the neat way in which the seven basic characters are by modifications converted into an alphabet. The letters corresponding to G to L inclusive have a distinctly South Asian appearance, and the row of modified Os at A to F inclusive recall the Malayalam script in their general appearance.

However this may be, and whether or not Giles took the initiative in making up this page, it has not been realised that a precedent for this sort of thing existed. A well-known printed work and a work circulating widely in manuscript both elaborate on the languages of foreign (in fact Asian) parts, and give facsimiles of scripts. Consequently the idea must have occurred to our learned conspirators, More and Giles, that their fairy-tale should have the usual accompaniment to a semi-fabulous adventure-story, namely a script, or alphabet, and specimens of the language.

Bernhard von Breitenbach (usually known as Breydenbach) went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1483 (1) and purported to have seen many wonders in keeping with the traditional scope of travellers' tales from Ktesias onwards. His accounts of his movements are regarded as worthy of study. Unfortunately he added what appear to be some imaginary materials; they do not however detract substantially from the value of the whole. Breydenbach had a mania for collecting foreign words and phrases and his linguistic material is not without

interest. In his *Peregrinationes in Terram Sanctam* he gives six alphabets: Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, Syriac, 'Jacobite' (Coptic), and Aethiopic. The first specimen is the interesting one. It appears at sig. B iiiij^v of the Spirae, 1502 edn. (B.M.984 g.15, p.73), which is the Latin version (incipit *Reverendissimo in xpo patri...*); at sig. H iii^v of the 1489 French version (incipit *Le saint voyage et pelerinage de la cite sainte de hierusalem...*); and at sig. K^r of the (?) 1502 German edition (incipit *Dis buch ist innhaltend die heiligē reysen gein Jherusalem...*) a redrawn version appeared at fol. 55^v of the Paris (Regnault) edition of 1517 (incipit *Le grant voyage de Jherusalem...*) The Augsburg edition of 1488 however had omitted the diagrams. At a glance it is noticeable that, if you read from left to right, as you will instinctively do if you do not realise that Arabic is read from right to left, the first five characters are modifications of the same sign; and the fact that the alphabet has developed from relatively few signs by the use of modifications (as in Utopia) is immediately recognisable. The fascination which these diagrams had, available as they were in at least three editions, one of them in Latin, prior to More's conceiving Utopia, is proved not only by their being republished in 1517, but in their partial reappearance in the *Pilgrimage* of Arnold von Harff.

Von Harff was a genuine pilgrim of 1496-1499 (2), but he was not content to write of what he saw and heard (especially in Egypt) but added extensive material from imaginary peregrinations, including what amount to repetitions of previous tales. Perhaps it is for this reason that his text was not published until as late as 1860. Ten manuscripts survive. It evidently circulated widely in manuscript shortly after it was completed. The author was a linguist of some merit, and went further in this respect than Breydenbach whose work was amongst those he utilised. Five of Breydenbach's alphabets are reproduced exactly by von Harff, and the first of them is the Arabic. These facts testify to the fascination which foreign

(in fact eastern) alphabets had for the scholarly and none-too-scholarly world of the period in which *Utopia* was written ; and to the expectation which readers would have that anyone who had visited outlandish parts which appeared to be literate would bring back with him specimens of their alphabet. That in principle the Utopian alphabet conforms to Breydenbach's Arabic diagram and to the Malayalam script then actually in use goes a little way towards fixing Utopia in its double role of fable and travelogue.

We may conclude with a question. Assuming that Breydenbach--not to speak of von Harff--was available to both More and Giles, which of them would be more likely to pore over the foreign alphabets and try to make some sense and reason out of them, to see some system or to obtain some light from the queer and not-so-unmanageable signs ? Whose curiosity is likely to have been the more vivid ? To which of them would those woodcuts have conveyed, from the mists of the still-mysterious East, some glimmerings of intellectual stimulus ? To the Fleming whose productions have been rescued from oblivion by his association with More, or to the man for whom nothing, however remote, lacked significance ?

J. Duncan M. Derrett

1) - R. Röhricht and H. Meisner, *Deutsche Pilgerreisen nach dem heiligen Lände* (Berlin, 1880), introd., and pp. 120 ff.

2) - M. Letts, *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff* (London, Hakluyt Society, 1946). He deals with the incubation of chickens in Egypt, on which see the sources given at p.110 of this translation (cf. *Utopia*, p.114).

Sarraceni lingua ⁊ littera vtunt Arabica hic inferius subimpressa

Sat	Sat	Keb	hēch	Qym	tech	Te	Be	aleph
س	س	ك	ه	ق	ت	ت	ب	ا
Qym	Daas	ta	ēchur	Sad	SQym	Qym	Qym	ke
ق	د	ت	ع	س	ق	ق	ق	ك
hēch	nūn	mym	lani	lan	aph	kabz	ffea	Saym
ح	ن	م	ل	ل	ا	ك	ف	س
malayalam m. p. 114	yo	lamahēch	Wani					
malayalam	س	خ	و					

Editor's note : Mr Derrett's remark on the cost of making the Utopian type is supported by an apologetic postscript in Abraham Veale's 1556 edition of the Robynson translation :

The Vtopian Alphabete, good Reader, whiche in the aboue written Epistle is promised, hereunto I haue not now adioyned, because I haue not as yet the true characters or fourmes of the Utopiane letters. And no marueill : seyng it is a tongue to vs muche straunger then the Indian, the Persian, the Syrian, the Arabicke, the Egyptian, the Macedonian, the Sclauonian, the ciprian, the Scythian etc. Which tongues though they be nothing so straunge among vs, as the Utopian is, yet their characters we haue not. But I trust, God willing, at the next impression hereof, to perfourme that, whiche nowe I can not : that is to saye :
to exhibite perfectly vnto thee,
the Utopian Alphabete. In the
meane time accept my good
wyl. And so fare well.