



# TOWER OF HERCULES

## Cartography

The image of the Tower has a very rich iconography that goes back to the late medieval times and reaches up to the 18th century. World maps and navigation charts are a most interesting legacy worth analysing as it provides us with a very suggestive view of this particular time. Besides, the fact that it has been used as a lighthouse for so many centuries accounts for this very noticeable presence in *portulanos* first and later in the navigation charts that were used by seamen to sail the seas.

In the High Middle Ages, the cosmographic tradition of the ancient world is lost and with it the concern for scientific rigour and a new type of map arises in Mozarabic Spain. It provides a legendary and symbolic approach to the world known. It is within this context that the world maps associated to *beatos* appear. These are codices which go back to the 10th and 13th centuries and which include the *Comentarios al Apocalipsis* attributed to Beato de Liébana. In this context, the world map illustrates the lands to evangelize and the distribution of these lands among the apostles. All the maps that have survived seem to stem from a single model, hence the coincidences among them. Following Isidore's approach, these are oriented maps, i.e., orient or the east is the cardinal point at the upper part of the map, and at the centre of it is where Paradise is located. It is clearly identifiable from the iconography used: almost invariably, Adam and Eve, the tree and the Serpent. Although this is not always so, it is often the case that the four rivers that rise from Paradise and that flow into the peripheral sea are drawn. Their names were Tigris, Euphrates, Gihon and Phison. Asia is placed on the upper part of the map and is separated from the other two continents by great courses of water from South to North: the River Nile, the River Hellespont, the Black Sea, the Sea of Azov and the Don River. At the bottom of the map, to the right is Africa and to the left is Europe, separated by tongue of water which is the Mediterranean Sea.

The most ancient representation of the lighthouse that has survived is the world map of Beato del Burgo de Osma (ca. 1085). It is, like in the case of all the other constructions shown in the map, a somehow idealised representation of the Tower. The Tower of Hercules rises on a rocky promontory and is represented as a very stylized, cylindrical building with circular plan topped by a domed rotunda when actually it was a square plan building with a marked prismatic appearance. In this representation there is no trace of the ascending helicoidal ramp which, by late 11th century - when this illuminated representation was done - must have very damaged, if it survived. In contrast to these inaccuracies, the drawer proves more accurate in the representation of the Tower with its open circled window on top the doom, which allowed the beam of light and the smoke to come out thus guide ships. It is also interesting that the lighthouse is represented with flames on top which seems to confirm that by late 11th century the Tower was still used as a lighthouse, although the lighting system might be different from that used in ancient times. But, regardless of this, the lighthouse would be used as such.

Quite relevant is the fact that the world map of Beato del Burgo de Osma only includes two lighthouses: the Tower of Hercules and the Lighthouse of Alexandria, which was at the mouth of the River Nile in Egypt and was destroyed by an earthquake that affected the whole area in 1302. The fact that the drawer, probable a Spaniard, includes the Tower of Hercules and gives it the same importance and size to the one in Alexandria may be read as evidence of the attention attracted by the monument in high medieval times as opposed to a mere remembrance of a lighthouse from ancient times, an enormous work of Roman engineering or a legend of bygone times. It is a key element with an unquestionable role in the daily lives of the people living in the north west of the Iberian Peninsula.

Yet another representation of the Tower is found in the map of Hereford (ca. 1280) from the Late Middle Ages. It is an oriented map again but this time circular and the earth is no longer represented as an oval disc, as it was so typical in the world maps made by *beatos*. It becomes instead a circle where the east remains on top while Europe and Africa are represented at the bottom and are separated by the Mediterranean Sea. In this case the image of the Tower of Hercules seems to be based on mere speculation and imagination rather than empirical observation of the work, perhaps the consequence of biased knowledge of the author of the map, who nonetheless had a very detailed knowledge of the English coast.

The Tower is represented in a prismatic form and three bodies are superimposed one on top of each other that seem to increase as they rise. On top a rotunda is shown from which violent flames erupt that seem to symbolise the light the lighthouse projected over the Atlantic Ocean.

The ancient lighthouse appears again in the navigation charts and the maps of late 16th century, which shows the growing importance that the monument took on as we move into the 17th century, when its importance goes beyond the natural borders of the kingdom as evidenced by the fact that it is shown in French and English navigation charts, potential enemies of Spain at that time. Particularly interesting at the representations of the Tower that are found in *Descripción del Reino de Galicia* (1598), *Gallaecia Regnum* (1600), *Gallicia, legio et Asturias de Oviedo* (1606) and in *Descriptio Gallaeciae y Asturias* (1608).

Some of the most surprising images of the Tower are found in:





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- **Map of La Coruña and its surroundings in Galicia, north-west Spain (1589).** This is a most interesting source, albeit not very realist. The Tower is called The Watch Tower and it is a crenellated tower on the front side of which there is an embrasure in the shape of a cross. No representation is shown of the ramp and on top of the Tower there is a conic, small roof resembling those found in bell towers.
- **Descripción de España y de las costas y puertos de sus reynos (1634).** This image is more realistic as it represents the bare body of the tower, without any trace of the ramp except for the mark of the chase and with the rotunda on top. Next to the drawing, there is a text that stresses the importance of bringing the Tower back to use as a lighthouse:

*“And on the west side, a quarter of a league from the city and rising over the sea on a hill there is a tower known as the Tower of Hercules. Its shape is as follows: over twenty “estados” high and on all four walls there are windows. The building and the antiquity of this tower reveals that was made by the Romans as it consists of dry stonework and mortar. From it, all the sea as far as the eyes can reach may be spied by reason of its great height and because it rises on the highest point there. Many a fable is told of it. And the truth is that it was built to guide seamen at night who sailing that sea wished to enter port, as it is done today in many parts by lighting a beacon at the highest point. The whole of the staircase that circled the tower on the outside was been removed to use the stone, something ill-advised as the conservation of such an antiquity should come first as it was such a noble adornment for that city...” (Pedro Texeira).*

- **Plano de A Coruña de Santáns y Tapia (1645).** It is also very interesting because the Tower of Hercules is again the object of a detailed, independent treatment although in an idealised manner. It presents it as a construction where there seem be traces of the ramp but where the rotunda with the small circled window on top survives. The caption next to the drawing identifies the building as the Tower of Hercules.
- **Plano de Manso Zúñiga (1667).** In this case the Tower is again represented together with the fortifications protecting the city but it is dealt with in space of its own, which bears witness to its importance as watchtower.
- **Plano anónimo de A Coruña (1669).** A very sketchy representation of the city which shows a map of the defences and an elevation of the Tower of Hercules stripped of its outer facades and the ramp, maintaining only its internal core and the rotunda. The walls do not show the remains of the ascending helicoidal ramp nor is reference made to any walls or access doors.