

New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery

By Anthony Grafton

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Describing an era of exploration during the Renaissance that went far beyond geographic bounds, this book shows how the evidence of the New World shook the foundations of the old, upsetting the authority of the ancient texts that had guided Europeans so far afield. What Grafton recounts is a war of ideas fought by mariners, scientists, publishers, and rulers over a period of 150 years. In colorful vignettes, published debates, and copious illustrations, we see these men and their contemporaries trying to make sense of their discoveries as they sometimes confirm, sometimes contest, and finally displace traditional notions of the world beyond Europe.

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Editorial Review

Review
Grafton's book is about the identity of the Americas--an identity hewn out of intellectual conflict, just as much as military or political conflict. (David McKitterick *New York Times Book Review*)

In his eloquent disquisition...Grafton demonstrates his mastery of the world of the Renaissance text and his skills as a historian of scholarship, scholarly processes, and intellectual debates. (Larry Ceplair *Los Angeles Times Book Review*)

Beautifully presented and delightful to read. Grafton's prose has a rare combination of qualities, smooth-flowing and hard-hitting...The concentrated power, the broad erudition, the impeccable aim which characterize Grafton's vignettes are enviable. (Felipe Fernández-Armesto *London Review of Books*)

Grafton is massively erudite and scrupulous as a scholar; at the same time he has command of a relaxed narrative style: his book about the reconfiguration of knowledge in Renaissance Europe is aimed at the general reader and no doubt finds its mark. (Mary Baine Campbell *Arion*)

From the Back Cover
On encountering what he called "the Indies", the Jesuit Jose de Acosta wrote, "Having read what poets and philosophers write of the Torrid Zone, I persuaded myself that when I came to the Equator, I would not be able to endure the violent heat, but it turned out otherwise... What could I do then but laugh at Aristotle's Meteorology and his philosophy?" Acosta's experience echoes that of his fellow travelers to the New World, and it is this experience, with its profound effect on Western culture, that Anthony Grafton charts. Describing an era of exploration that went far beyond geographic bounds, this book shows how the evidence of the New World shook the foundations of the old, upsetting the authority of the ancient texts that had guided Europeans so far afield. The intellectual shift mapped out here, a movement from book learning to empirical knowledge, did not take place easily or quickly, and Grafton presents it in all its drama and complexity. What he recounts is in effect a war of ideas fought, sometimes unwittingly by mariners, scientists, publishers, scholars, and rulers over one hundred fifty years. He shows us explorers from Cortes and Columbus to Scaliger and Munster, laden with ideas gathered from ancient and medieval texts, in their encounters with the world at large. In colorful vignettes, firsthand accounts, published debates, and copious illustrations, we see these men and their contemporaries trying to make sense of their discoveries as they sometimes confirm, sometimes contest, and finally displace traditional images and notions of the world beyond Europe. The fundamental cultural revolution that Grafton documents still reverberates in our time. By taking us into thisbattle of books versus facts, a conflict that has shaped global views for centuries, Grafton allows us to re-experience and understand the Renaissance as it continues to this day.

About the Author
Anthony Grafton is Henry Putnam University Professor of History at Princeton University.

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Nancy Siraisi is Distinguished Professor of History at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

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