

Primary Sources: Utopian visions of the 15th century



Introduction

As far as historians, archeologists and architects can tell, humans living in societies have always envisioned idealized spaces that expressed their values, hopes, and aspirations. However, they have not always done this in the same ways. As we will see, the global transformations of the 16th century broadened the scope of what many humans around the world could envision was possible in the world, including their utopian thinking. To understand the nature of these changes, it's helpful to get a sense of utopian thinking taking place in the Americas, Africa, and Europe on the eve of these global transformations. To do so, in combination with the accompanying reading, these primary sources offer windows into people's utopian thinking in the 15th century. For the first two, no written sources survive. Architecture and artifacts serve as useful sources, too, however (along with oral traditions and linguistics). For the third source, we have a written document whose authenticity is dubious, but its popularity is still telling. The author and intentions of the final two sources are clearer – both come out of the humanist intellectual tradition that began in Italy during these years.

Discussion questions:

1. What are the main similarities and differences in pre-modern utopian thinking in the first three sources here?
2. What was distinct about the humanist utopian imagination emerging in 15th-century Italy – represented in the last two sources – compared to the previous examples?
3. How did Filarete and Pizan use utopian thinking to critique their society. Where can we see the limits of their ability to imagine alternatives to the social norms around them?

Primary Sources

Introduction

Primary source 1:
Pyramid C, Tula

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Image of nkisi

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Primary source 1: Pyramid C, Tula

Starting in the 14th century, the Mexica people established a powerful state in central Mexico, which grew into a powerful multiethnic empire, often called the Aztec Empire. The Mexica believed that the universe was created at Teotihuacan (also called Tollan). Later, they believe that the capital of the Toltec people, Tula (which they also called Tollan), succeeded it as a fabled utopian place of peace and order. The Mexica understood their current capital city, Tenochtitlán, as the reincarnation of Teotihuacan and Tula. Over time, stories about a heroic ruler of Tula, Topiltzín Quetzalcoatl, merged with stories about one of the Mexica's creator gods, the Feathered Serpent, Quetzalcoatl Ehecatl. Stories about Quetzalcoatl included idyllic portrayals of past rule over the utopian city, his tragic expulsion, and expectations for his return. The image below is a photo of Pyramid C at the present-day archaeological site of Tula, in the Mexican state of Hidalgo. In looking at this image, how do you think people standing before the ruins of Tula might have imagined it as an ideal world compared to the world they lived in?

Source: Pirámide de Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, en la zona arqueológica de Tula, Hidalgo, México, 2006, photograph, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pir%C3%A1mide_tula.jpg.



Primary source 2: Image of nkisi

People living in the kingdom of Kongo in the 15th century believed that ancestors and spirits lived in a utopian place of peace and purity known as the “land of the dead” (in KiKongo, *nsi a bafwa* or *Ku Mpemba*). Healers and other people with spiritual authority might use objects that were said to be inhabited by spirits – called *nkisi* – to communicate with the land of dead, when making supplications for help in the so-called “land of the living” (in KiKongo, *nza yayi* or *Ku Nseke*). That is, for Kongolese of this period, the land of the dead was not a scary place, but a place of peace, purity and power whose residents were capable of assisting the living. No *nkisi* from the 15th century are known to survive today, but we can see examples that were built later to get an idea of what they looked like. The image below, which dates to the late 19th century, is one of many surviving *nkisi* from this later period. In looking at this image, how you do think a person in the kingdom of Kongo might have imagined their connection to the more ideal “land of the dead” compared to their own land of the living?

Source: Nkisi nkondi Mangaaka 1880-1900, 2009, photograph, Wikimedia Commons, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:W-LANL_-_Ludovic_Hirlimann_-_Nkisi_nkondi_Mangaaka_1880-1900.jpg



Primary source 3: The letter of Prester John

Stories about a mythical Christian king usually known today as Prester John began circulating in Europe in the early 12th century. A more concrete story emerged in 1145, when a chronicler from lands in present-day Austria, Otto of Freising, reported a conversation with a bishop from present-day Syria who told him of a king descended from the Three Wise Men who would be an ally in the crusades to capture Jerusalem from Muslim rule. In 1165, a letter appeared claiming to have been written by Prester John, addressed to Emperor Manuel Comnenus of the Byzantine Empire. That letter described John's ideal kingdom. It was translated into many languages and was one of the most widely circulating documents in Europe of the Middle Ages. While undoubtedly a forgery produced by a monk who combined elements from other stories, the work describes an ideal society that resonated with the values and expectations of 15th-century European readers. Almost as soon as commercial printing presses were operating in the 1480s and 1490s, editions of Prester John's letter circulated ever more widely. As you read this text, ask yourself how a traveler who had read this account might feel about the prospect of finally encountering Prester John's kingdom.

Source: Keagan Brewer, *Prester John: The Legend and Its Source* (Routledge, 2015), 67–9, 71–2, 76, 78, 80.



Prester John of Africa, detail of the Mercator world map of 1569.

If you truly wish to know the magnitude and excellence of our highness, and in which lands our power dominates, understand and believe without doubt that I, Prester John, am lord of lords and exceed all kings of the entire earth in virtue, power, and all riches which are under the heaven. Seventy-two kings are tributaries to us. I am a devoted Christian, and everywhere we protect poor Christians that our clemency's authority rules over, and we sustain them with our alms...

Our magnificence dominates in the three Indias, and our land crosses from Farther India, in which rests the body of St. Thomas the apostle, through the desert, and proceeds toward the sunrise, and returns down into the Babylonian desert, next to the tower of Babel. Seventy-two provinces serve us, of which few are made up of Christians, and each one of them has its own king, who all are our tributaries to us. In our land are born and raised elephants, dromedaries, camels, hippopotami, crocodiles, *methagallianarii*, *cametheternis*, *thinsieretae*,¹ leopards, wild donkeys, white and red lions, white bears, white blackbirds, silent cicadas, griffins, tigers, jackals, hyenas, savage cows, archers²... and almost every kind of animal which is under heaven.

Our land flows with honey and abounds with milk. ... Amongst the pagans,

1. These last three animals appear to have been invented by the author.

2. This appears to mean centaurs, that is half-human/half-horse mythological creatures. This list continues with real and mythological creatures.



Late sixteenth-century image of Prester John of the Indies.

through a certain province of ours flows a river ... proceeding from paradise, extends its windings through that entire province by various paths, and in that place are found common stones, emeralds, sapphires ... and many other precious stones... In another certain province of ours, every pepper grows.... That land is also well-wooded like a willow grove and full throughout with serpents.... This forest is situated at the foot of Mount Olympus, whence a clear spring emerges, which preserves flavours of all types within it. The flavour changes every hour of the day and night, and it proceeds by a journey of three days not far from paradise, from which Adam was expelled....

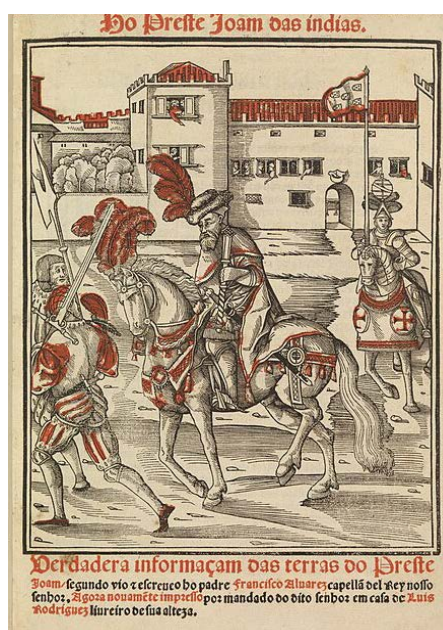
Truly, beyond the river of stones are the 10 tribes of the Jews, who although they contrive kings for themselves, they are in fact our servants and tributaries to our excellency...

Our serenity abounds in gold and silver and precious stones, elephants, dromedaries, camels, and dogs. Our gentleness takes in all foreign guests and pilgrims. There is no poor man among us. Neither thief nor robber is found among us, nor does a sycophant have a place there, and nor is there greed. No division exists among us. All men abound in riches.... We believe that no people is equal to us in riches or in numbers of peoples.

When we proceed to war against our enemies, in place of flags we make to be carried before us in separate carts thirteen great and exceptionally tall crosses made of gold and precious stones, and following each one of them are 10,000 knights and 100,000 armoured foot soldiers, besides the others who have been assigned to baggage, chariots, and carrying the army's provisions....

Amongst us no one lies, nor is anyone able to lie. And if someone begins to lie there, he immediately dies, that is, among us he is considered to be a dead man, nor is mention made of him among us, that is, he receives no further honour among us. We all follow truth and we love each other. There is no adulterer among us. No vice reigns among us.... We have many fortifications [as well as] the strongest and most diverse peoples. We also rule over the Amazons and the Braghmanni³....

We have the most beautiful women, but they do not come to us except for the sake of begetting sons four times per year, and sanctified by us in this way, like Bethsheba by David, each one returns to her place.



Depiction of the Prester John of India, 1540.

3. This means Hindus.

Primary source 4: A 15th-century Italian architect's utopian city

Antonio di Pietro Averlino (c.1400–c.1469), who preferred to be known as Filarete, was a humanist and architect in the service of the duke of Milan, Francesco Sforza (r.1450–1466). Before working for Sforza, Filarete had been a goldsmith in Rome, where he had gotten into trouble for stealing the relic of the head of St. John the Baptist from the Basilica of San Silvestro. In Milan, he worked on some of the duke's most important architectural designs and wrote his Treatise on Architecture (Trattado di architettura), a 25-volume work that offered humanist dialogue in which a fictional architect (clearly meant to be Filarete) designed an ideal city, called Sforzinda, for a fictional prince (clearly, Sforza). As you read, look for ways in which this kind of ideal thinking was distinct from the previous three examples, as well as ways that we can see how Filarete used utopian thinking to creatively critique the society he lived in as well as places you can see the limits of his imagination.

Source: *Filarete's Treatise on Architecture, Being the Treatise by Antonio di Piero Averlino, Known as Filarete*, trans. John R. Spencer, vol. 1 (Yale University Press, 1965), 4, 21–2, 65, 74–5, 125–27, 148–50, 228, 242, 244.

Once I was in a place where a noble and many others were eating. In the course of a conversation about many different things they entered on architecture...On hearing this conversation I stepped forward, because it pertained to my profession.... I said, "Perhaps you will think me presumptuous for attempting to tell you these modes and measures, since other capable men ... have written very elegant works about this discipline I beg your excellency to be attentive while he listens to my arguments to the same extent that he would if he had ordered his troops to reconquer or defend one of his dearest possessions...."



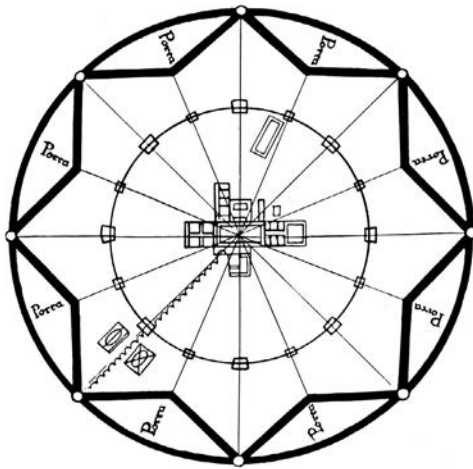
Depiction of Antonio di Pietro Averlino, or Filarete, 1648.

I have had an idea about undertaking to construct a city in which he shall erect all the buildings that belong there, each with its own suitable orders and measures ... Now I intend to begin the drawing of the city [which I will call] Sforzinda ... The site I have seen is of such a nature that I think the city will be well located in a salubrious place, that is, healthy and also fertile.... [The architect proceeds by describing the nearby mountains, running water, and fertile lands that would surround the site where Sforzinda is to be located. After that, the architect describes the building materials to be used, where those materials would be sourced, and a fictional survey the architect made of the building site. Then he purchases supplies and hires builders, who will work eight to nine hours per day, and be paid by the day, as was common in fifteenth-century Italy. After that, 102,000 workers excavate the lands for construction, and build the city's walls, towers and defensive battlements].

When the complete circuit was finished – the walls, the moats, the forward moats that paralleled each other ... my lord had the great part of his men-at-arms joust

together as a celebration... When evening came, every man returned to his own lodging.

He went for me and asked me what I wanted to do [next]. I replied that I wished to lay out the city, order the streets, squares, and the public and private buildings...



Plan for Filarete's ideal city of Sforzinda, 1457.

“Explain to me a little your layout and the buildings, how you intend first of all to do it and how you will place these masters and laborers so that no time will be lost.”

“The organization will be this. First of all I want to make a piazza in the middle of the city 150 *braccia* [arm-lengths] wide and 300 long. In order that your lordship can better understand me I will draw it here on this page.

In the northern part of the piazza I will make the merchant's piazza ... On the southern side of the piazza I will make another piazza that will be a sort of market where edibles can be sold, for example meats, fruit, vegetables, and other things ... On the northern part I will make the municipal prison. This will be directly behind the law courts. On the eastern part, at the corner of the piazza, I will make the mint, where money is made and stored, and near it the customhouse. In the merchant's piazza... will be the Palazzo del Capitano and on the other side the butcher, chicken and fish shops ... Behind this piazza toward the south will be the bordellos, the public baths, and inns, or taverns... The artists will all live around these piazzas....

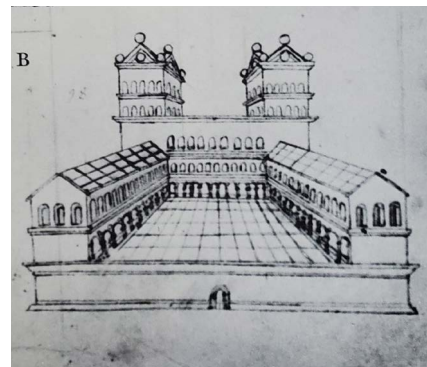
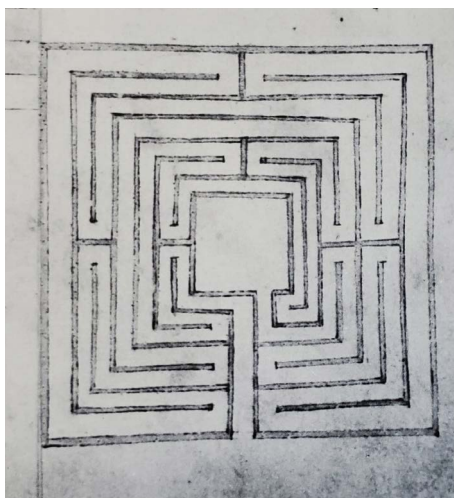


Illustration of the merchant's house in Sforzinda.



The labyrinth surrounding the princely fortress in Filarete's Sforzinda..

I speak now of the prison of the palace itself. This I will make on one of the sides under the vaults. It will correspond to upper rooms in which torture chambers can be made as they are required in such buildings ... I prefer the following plan so that it will be strong and so that anyone condemned to it cannot leave without permission. I will make an exterior square with a wall three *braccia* thick, and then five *braccia* from this another wall two *braccia* thick. There will be water in the space between the two walls.... The cells of the prisoners will be varied according to the gravity of the crime, that is, those who are imprisoned for debt will be in more open places... [Among the rest],

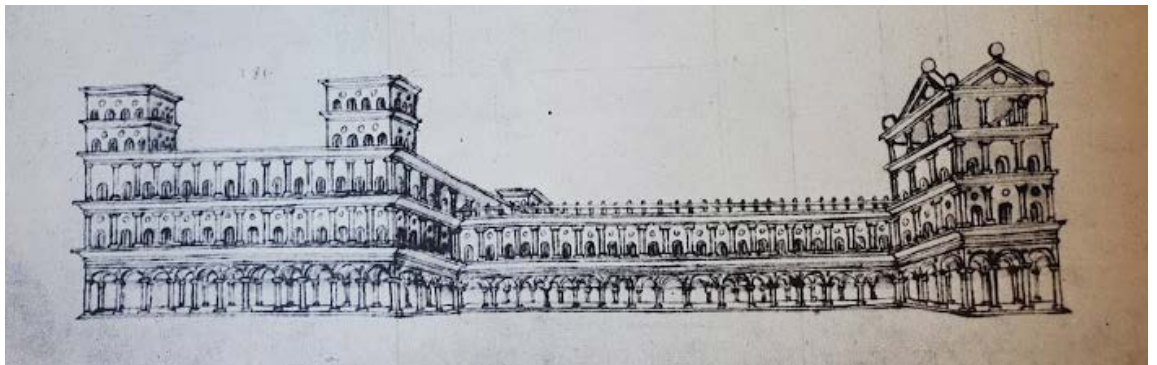
Thieves who deserve the gibbet [that is, execution by hanging] will be in one, and those who have been condemned to decapitation, that is murderers, in another. In

the next will be those who merit the stake. Traitors and similar malefactors who are to be drawn and quartered will be in another...”

“Tell me now if anything else is to be [built] around this piazza?”

“On each side of the piazza ... there will be small piazzas 40 braccia square with a small church ... In one [piazza] there will be jewelers, those who work in gold, and in the other there will be exchange banks. On the opposite side of the piazza ... there will be a palace laid out of the residence of all the minor guilds in which they can hold their council, give audience and make their rules ... On the opposite side of the piazza ... will be the audience hall of the major guilds: the merchants, wool, silk, goldsmiths, exchange, and the other nobler guilds.” ...

Without losing any time I gave orders for these houses to be laid up in this matter. I did the merchants' house in this form.... [T]o the right and the left of the entrance there will be quarters for the servants and troops, hitches, bakeries, and storerooms, or pantries, and similar things as needed.... The house also requires a stable. We built it at the end of the garden ... [There will] also be places for storing wood, fodder, and such things that are necessary to the house. All these will be in their place, as for example [places] to throw out water, latrines, fireplaces, and such conveniences. ...



A palace building in Sforzinda.

I will make the house of an artisan in this manner... [In the front] I make one [room] into a shop for his trade and place behind it a place ... to serve as his storeroom. The opposite side ... will be his dining room and bedroom. Behind this there is a little court ... [with one place] for keeping wood and chickens and the other for a kitchen This is enough for the house of the artisan ... When it is built, it will be beautiful enough for an artisan or other modest person.

A poor man cannot make his house very attractive by himself. He will build it any way he can in order to have shelter.... Because he has little money, he does not need much; only enough for spending. However, he does have to know how to lay it out so it will be most useful. Make this little house in whatever way you can....

“Let us now turn to building something noble.... First I want to make a place for jousting where people can go to watch without disturbing each other. When this is done, I want us to build another where we can have festivals, games with ships, and naval battles as they did in Rome.”...

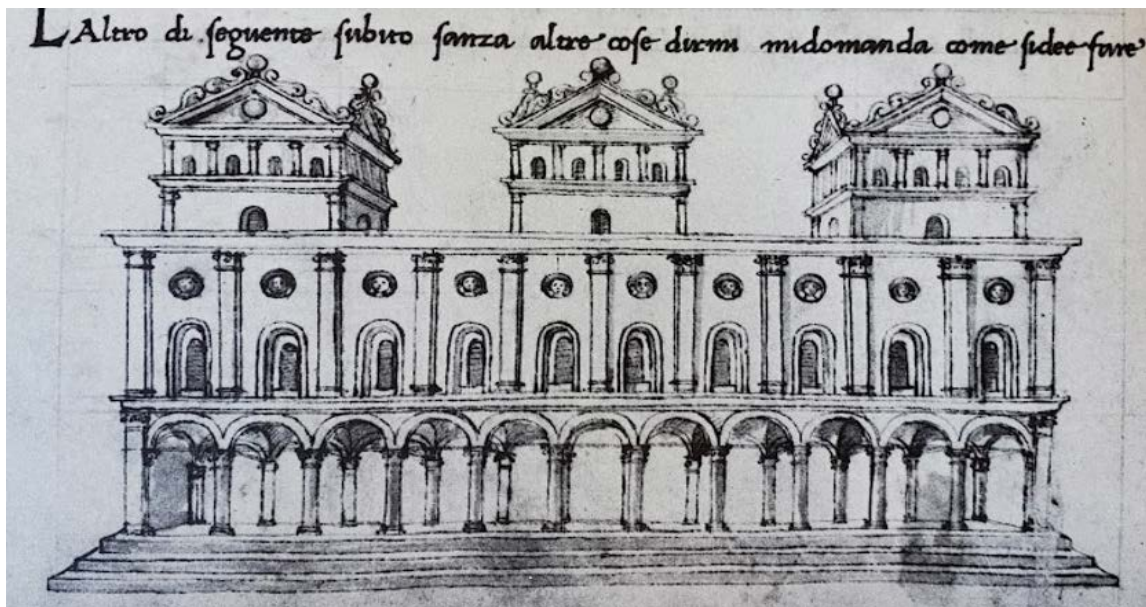
“My lord ... Among other noble things in our city there was also a place selected

for the purpose stated [education] ... A building should be built in which twenty or twenty-five [boys] can be kept.”...

“Good, this will be like a school.”

“Yes, my lord, but ... I want it to be more than a school. I say more, because there would be many faculties. Although it is not so dignified, I intend that some manual arts should be taught here by their practitioners. The following should be in this place: a master of painting, a silversmith, a master of carving of marble and one for wood, a turner, an ironsmith, a master of embroidery, a tailor, a pharmacist, a glassmaker, and a master of clay, that is, of beautiful vases. In addition to these there should be a master of fencing, singing, and instrumental music.” ...

“Very well, put everything in order. Then, when this is done, I want to build another for twenty girls.... First of all I want them taught to read. Then they should be instructed according to whatever intellect they have, either in cooking, embroidery, or weaving: in sum, all the skills that pertain to women.... Then when it comes time for them to leave, let a husband be found who is acceptable to the girl... It should also be permitted to teach these girls music, singing, and dancing so they can exercise their person and learn the things they ought in a decent fashion. As they come to the age of reason, they should be taught a skill. They should be also taught, above all, the customs of religion... I want them to have the same rules as the boys.”



A sketch of a building for Sforzinda, used to describe the way to design columns for the ideal city.

Primary source 5: A 15th-century Italian noblewoman's utopian city

*Christine de Pizan (1364–1431) was a noblewoman from a Venetian family who moved to the French court in Paris as a child, when her father accepted a position as astrologer to King Charles V. At 15, she married another member of Charles's court, Etienne du Castel. They had three children. 10 years later, du Castel died. Pizan never remarried, making her living and supporting her mother and children as an author, including penning love ballads and other popular writings. But she also wrote other works, including commentaries about women and gender like her most famous writing, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), which offered a humanist dialogue between a fictionalized version of herself and three allegorical women who described for her an idealized city populated only with virtuous women. As you read, look for ways in which this kind of ideal thinking was similar or different from Filarete's utopianism, as well as ways that we can see how Pizan used utopian thinking to creatively critique the society she lived in as well as places where you can see the limits of her imagination.*

Source: Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (Persea Books, 1982), 3–4, 6–7, 10–13, 254–56.



Depiction of Christine de Pizan, 1413.

One day as I was sitting alone in my study ... devoting myself to literary studies ... By chance a strange volume came into my hands.... When I held it open and saw its title page that it was by Matheolus, I smiled, for though I had never seen it before, I had often heard that like books it discussed respect for women.... Because the subject seemed to me not very pleasant for people who do not enjoy lies ... I put it down in order to turn my attention to more elevated and useful study. But just the sight of this book, even though it was of no authority, made me wonder how it happened that so many different men – and learned men among them – have been and are so inclined

to express ... so many wicked insults about women and their behavior....They all concur in one conclusion: that the behavior of women is inclined to and full of every vice. Thinking deeply about these matters, I began to examine my character and conduct as a natural woman and, similarly, I considered other women whose company I frequently kept, princesses, great ladies, women of the middle and lower classes, who had graciously told me of their most private and intimate thoughts, hoping that I could judge impartially and in good conscience whether the testimony of so many notable men could be true. To the best of my knowledge, no matter how long I confronted or dissected the problem, I could not see or realize how their claims could be true when compared to the natural behavior and character of women. Yet I still argued vehemently against women, saying that it would be impossible that so many famous men ... could have spoken falsely on so many occasions....

So occupied with these painful thoughts, my head bowed in shame, my eyes filled with tears ... I suddenly saw a ray of light fall on my lap, as though it were the sun.... As I lifted my head to see where this light was coming from, I saw three crowned ladies ... Then she who was the first of the three smiled and began to speak, “Dear daughter, do not be afraid, for we have not come here to harm or to trouble you, but to console you, for we have taken pity on your distress, we have come to bring you out of the ignorance which so blinds your own intellect that you shun what you know for a certainty and believe what you know not or see or recognize except by virtue of many strange opinions ...”



Illustration from The Book of the City of Ladies.

[W]e three ladies whom you see here, moved by pity, have come to you to announce a particular edifice built like a city wall, strongly constructed and well founded, which has been predestined and established by our aid and counsel for you to build, where no one will reside except all ladies of fame and women worthy of praise...”

“For the foundation and completion of this City you will draw fresh waters from us as from clear fountains, and we will bring you sufficient building stone, stronger and more durable than any marble with cement could be. Thus your City will be extremely beautiful, without equal, and of perpetual duration in the world...”

“Long ago the Amazon kingdom was begun through the arrangement and enterprise of several ladies of great courage who despised servitude, just as history books have testified. For a long time afterward they maintained it under the rule of several queens, very noble ladies whom they elected themselves, who governed them well and maintained their dominion with great strength. ... [N]evertheless, after a time, the power of this kingdom declined, so that as with all earthly kingdoms, nothing but its name has survived to the present. But the edifice erected by you in this City which you must construct will be far stronger, and for its founding I was commissioned, in the course of our common deliberation, to supply you with durable and pure mortar to lay the sturdy foundations and to raise the lofty walls all around, high and thick, with mighty towers and strong bastions, surrounded by moats with firm blockhouses, just as is fitting for a city with a strong and lasting defense....”



Depiction of Queen Penthesilea and her Amazon army, from a collection Pizan presented to the Queen of France, 1414.



Illustration of ladies watching knights jousting, from a collection that Pizan presented to the Queen of France in 1414.

[The book then provides examples of empresses, queens, and other rulers from mythology and history, and follows this by “populating” the City of Ladies by describing women of virtue, intellect, skill, courage, valor, and wisdom from mythology and history.]

My most honored ladies, may God be praise, for now our City is entirely finished and completed.... Therefore you are right, my ladies, to rejoice greatly in God and in honest mores upon seeing this new City completed, which can be not only the refuge for you all, that is, for virtuous women, but also the defense and guard against your enemies and assailants if you guard it well.... Thus, my ladies ... may this City be an occasion for you to conduct yourselves

honestly and with integrity and to be all the more virtuous and humble.

And you ladies who are married, do not scorn being subject to your husbands, for sometimes it is not the best thing for a creature to be independent ... Those women with peaceful, good and discrete husbands who are devoted to them, praise God for this boon ... And those women who have husbands neither completely good nor completely bad should still praise God for not having the worst and should strive to moderate their vices and pacify them, according to their condition. And those women who have husbands who are cruel, mean, and savage should strive to endure them while trying to overcome their vices and lead them back, if they can, to a reasonable and seemly life. And if they are so obstinate that their wives are unable to do anything, at least they will acquire great merit for their souls through the virtue of patience....

And you virgin maidens, be pure, simple, and serene, without vagueness, for the snares of evil men are set for you. Keep your eyes lowered, with few words in your mouths, and act respectfully. Be armed with your strength of virtue against the tricks of the deceptive and avoid their company.

And widows, may there be integrity in your dress, conduct, and speech; piety in your deeds and way of life; prudence in your bearing; patience (so necessary!), strength, and resistance in tribulations and difficult affairs; humility in your heart, countenance, and speech; and charity in your works.

In brief, all women – whether noble, bourgeois, or lower-class – be well-informed in all things and cautious in defending your honor and chastity against your enemies! My ladies, see how these men accuse you of so many vices in everything. Make liars of them all by showing forth your virtue.

Image Citations

Page 1:

Hernán Cortés, “Map of Tenochtitlan, Praeclara Ferdinandi Cortesii de noua maris oceani Hyspania narratio.., Impressa per F. Peypus, 1542, page 14, Public Domain, <https://collections.newberry.org/asset-management/2KXJ8ZRSNGFZ?&WS=SearchResults&Flat=FP>

Page 2:

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Gerardus Mercator, Prester John of Africa, 1569 world map detail, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mercator_1569_world_map_detail_Prester_John_of_Africa.jpg

Page 5:

Prester John of the Indies, close-up of a portolain chart, late 16th century, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, CC BY-SA 3.0, [https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/84d15601-fe05-469f-8a57-ade3304a1fb5/surfaces/84d15601-fe05-469f-8a57-ade3304a1fb5/Francisco Alvarès, “The Prester John of the India,” Lisbon, 1540, Chester Beatty Library Rare Books: AA602, Title Page, Public Domain, \[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Francisco_Alvarès_%27The_Prester_John_of_the_India%27_\\(Ho_Preste_Joam_das_Indias\\)__\\(CBL_Rare_Books_AA602,_Title_Page\\).jpg\]\(https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Francisco_Alvarès_%27The_Prester_John_of_the_India%27_\(Ho_Preste_Joam_das_Indias\)__\(CBL_Rare_Books_AA602,_Title_Page\).jpg\)](https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/84d15601-fe05-469f-8a57-ade3304a1fb5/surfaces/84d15601-fe05-469f-8a57-ade3304a1fb5/Francisco_Alvarès,_“The_Prester_John_of_the_India,”_Lisbon,_1540,_Chester_Beaty_Library_Rare_Books:_AA602,_Title_Page,_Public_Domain,_https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Francisco_Alvarès_%27The_Prester_John_of_the_India%27_(Ho_Preste_Joam_das_Indias)__(CBL_Rare_Books_AA602,_Title_Page).jpg)

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Giorgio Vasari, Antonio Filarete, 1648, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delle_vite_de%27_pi%C3%B9_eccellenti_pittori,_scultori,_et_architetti_\(1648\)__\(14799591143\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delle_vite_de%27_pi%C3%B9_eccellenti_pittori,_scultori,_et_architetti_(1648)__(14799591143).jpg)

Page 7:

Plan for the ideal city of Sforzinda, 1457, Public Domain, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Idealstadt.jpg>
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