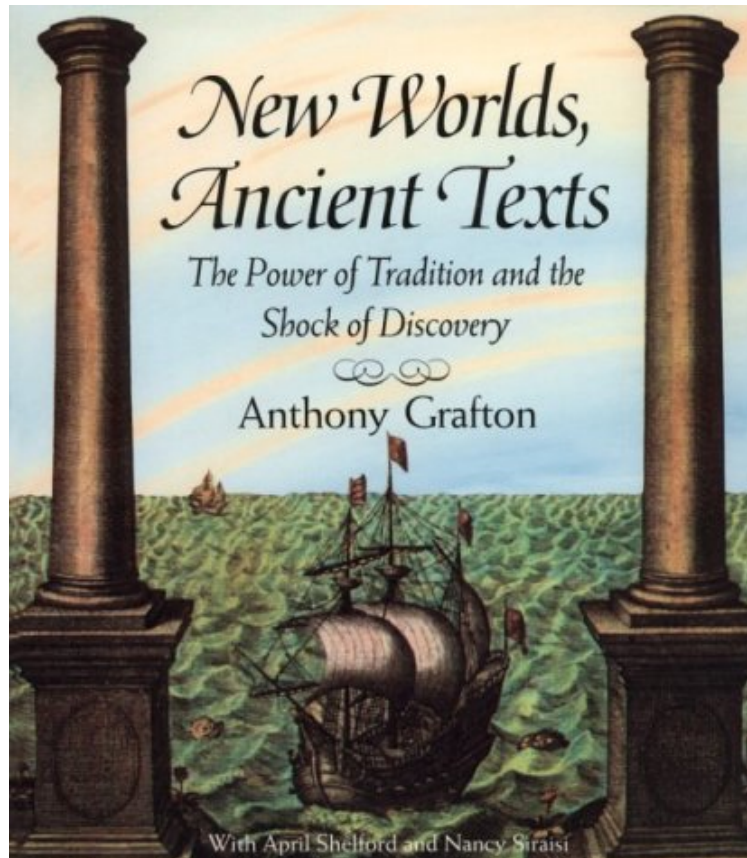


New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery

Anthony Grafton

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Anthony Grafton : New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery:

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. An Almost-Great Book By Simple Scholar The central thesis of Anthony Grafton's *New Worlds, Ancient Texts* is that, despite the psychological disorientation that occurred among Europeans with the discovery of the New World, several scholars continued to use defunct ancient and scholastic texts in order to explain various scientific, theological, and philosophical conundrums. Grafton bases this argument on a historical dichotomy: before 1500, the unquestionable authority of the ancients, preserved through books, served as the foundation of knowledge. After 1500, the experiences of practical men engineers, sailors, physicians, even clergy challenged, if not dispelled, the incorrect assertions and contradictions of these old beliefs and customs. Grafton shows convincingly that many important and modern thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth century still employed ancient texts to explain and to examine science, geography, politics, and theology. Although there is much truth to Grafton's

argument, he creates unnecessarily a medieval straw man. In order to prove that European scholars and literati relied heavily on ancient books, he downplays the philosophical and theoretical differences that existed within these books. The tension between Thomism and nominalism, the disagreement between the papacy and the conciliarists, and the friction between the followers of Plato and Aristotle provided the high middle ages with a tremendous diversity of opinion. Moreover, while Grafton is correct in acknowledging that the medieval period was more wedded to ancient texts than the early moderns, it is not true that the medieval scholars believed in scientific and philosophical positions solely because of the authority of the old texts. Like the early moderns, medieval scholars also thought that experience demonstrated what they believed to be correct (e.g. Anselm's proof of God, Thomas Aquinas five proofs of God). The proper difference between medieval and early modern scholars, then, is not that the latter emphasized experience more than the former, but that the early moderns had access to new experiences. Nevertheless, Grafton's *New Worlds, Ancient Texts* is a fine piece of scholarship. Full of pictures and blurbs on several wrongfully neglected historical figures such as John Mandeville and Garcilaso de la Vega, Grafton's book would serve as an excellent introduction to early modern history for high school and undergraduate students. 3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Well worth discovering. By reader 451 Grafton's *New Worlds, Ancient Texts* is surprisingly accessible for a book on a quintessentially cultural subject: the impact of the fifteenth-century discovery of America on the classics and their position in European scholarship. It does not require more than superficial knowledge of ancient authors. It is clearly and economically written. It has useful captions on less well-known texts. And it is beautifully illustrated. Grafton explains that a scholastic culture centring on a few authors, especially Greco-Roman ancients, and on the Bible was already under challenge, in the early sixteenth century, by the 'humanists', writers who were rediscovering the classics in fresh translations or based on hitherto unavailable copies rescued from Constantinople. The discovery of the new world added fresh and dramatic impetus to this questioning of established authority. For example Aristotle, in his *Meteorology*, had written that no one could survive in the tropical zone, which was too hot. When the first Europeans crossed the equator, this began to look ridiculous. But the discoveries' impact was much broader, including that of tobacco, for example, challenging the main botanical and medical treatises, and spawning a pamphlet war as to whether it was the devil's tool. *New Worlds, Ancient Texts* examines a whole variety of such controversies, ranging from mapping, anthropology, medicine, and astronomy to philosophy. At the same time, it argues that the classics had a longer lease of life than is sometimes presumed, and retained relevance until well into the Enlightenment and beyond. This is an exciting work with lessons on travel, writing, and books which it is well worth reading both for its historical value and its implications about the nature of knowledge in general. 13 of 15 people found the following review helpful. overseas overviews. By Alvaro Lewis. Not the most stunning or innovative of Professor Grafton's works, makes a sweeping review from the expectations held by the world of humanists received from Greek, Latin, and Arabic forerunners to the explosion and expansion of these expectations due to America's discovery. Grafton is a smooth and engaging writer, who can bind the vast realms of his study into fine sentences and clear argumentation. The text consists of five chapters, intermittent miniature biographies of more interesting or less frequently known players, and luxurious black and white reproductions of images and manuscripts of the age. The text runs its course and neither references the small biographies nor acknowledges the handsome illustrations. It is very possible that one will skip over these images as accessory to follow the sweep of the author's narrative, only to revisit them later. Sweeps and anecdotes describe the nature of the investigation rather than patient analysis of sites and sights. This book seems to share only the prettiest berries plucked from Grafton's years as a tender of the tree. This book more than adequately accounts for the changes in European thought on account of the discovery not just of new lands, but of new worlds, new diseases, drugs, and, as important, the discovery of the limitations of many ancient texts. Again, Grafton is beguiling, informative and masterful at his craft. will be equally welcome reading for those who enjoy the period and those who wish to find a compelling way to enter it.

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.

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*) 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*) 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 Fernandez-Armesto *London 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 this battle 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.