

**A TRANSLATION OF THE
QUAESTIO DE AQUA ET
TERRA: WITH A DISCUSSION
OF ITS AUTHENTICITY**

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A Translation of the Quaestio de Aqua Et Terra: With a Discussion of Its Authenticity by Alain Campbell White

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ALAIN CAMPBELL WHITE

**A TRANSLATION OF THE
QUAESTIO DE AQUA ET
TERRA: WITH A DISCUSSION
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A TRANSLATION
OF THE
QUAESTIO DE AQUA ET TERRA

De Arte Allegoriae.

WITH A DISCUSSION OF ITS AUTHENTICITY

BY
ALAIN CAMPBELL WHITE

THE LATHAM PRIZE ESSAY
1902

BOSTON
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(FOR THE DANTE SOCIETY)
1903

TO
M. W. W.

SHADY HILL, CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

March 20, 1903.

DEAR MR. WHITE:

When, now almost two years ago, I suggested to you to make a translation of the *Quaestio de Aqua et Terra* and to prepare a comment upon it, it seemed to me possible that the result of such a study of the treatise as you would have to make in doing this work might help to settle the vexed question of its authenticity. At any rate, a careful and scholarly translation would be a desirable contribution to Dantesque studies, for, though a professed English translation of the *Quaestio* already existed, it was inadequate and untrustworthy.

The task I proposed was difficult, not only because of the nature of the topic treated, which required for its clear presentation a better method of scientific inquiry than existed in the early fourteenth century, but also because of the lack of precision in the terminology of mediæval science. A still further difficulty existed in the unsatisfactory condition of the text as it has been transmitted to us. Those difficulties you have, as it seems to me, in great measure overcome. There still remain some phrases of which the exact meaning is doubtful, but your translation presents the main argument of the treatise with clearness, and renders the course of its reasoning intelligible.

The evidence afforded by the frequent correspondence of doctrine and of language with Dante's unquestionable writings which you have presented in your comment goes far toward proving the work to be what it professes, — the genuine composition of the poet. As such, it is of no small importance in its illustration of the range of his intellectual interests and scientific attainments.

I congratulate you on having thus contributed to the better acquaintance by students with Dante and his work, and I trust that what you have done is but a pledge of further good work to the same end.

With true regard, I am, very sincerely yours,

CHARLES ELIOT NORTON.

ALAIN C. WHITE, ESQ.

ANALYSIS OF THE TREATISE

- § I. *Introduction*: Author's reasons for undertaking the discussion.
- § II. *The Question*: Is Water, or the surface of the sea, anywhere higher than the Earth, or habitable dry land?
Five affirmative arguments generally accepted.
- § III. *Reason 1*. Geometrical Proof: Earth and Water are spheres with different centers; the center of the Earth's sphere is the center of the universe: consequently the surface of the Water is above that of the Earth.
- § IV. *Reason 2*. Ethical Proof: Water is a nobler element than Earth: hence it deserves a nobler, or higher, place in the scheme of the universe.
- § V. *Reason 3*. Experimental Proof: based on sailors seeing the land disappear under their horizon when at sea.
- § VI. *Reason 4*. Economical Proof: The supply of Water, namely the sea, must be higher than the Earth: otherwise, as Water flows downwards, it could not reach, as it does, the fountains, lakes, etc.
- § VII. *Reason 5*. Astronomical Proof: Since Water follows the moon's course, its sphere must be excentric, like the moon's excentric orbit; and consequently in places be higher than the sphere of Earth.
- § VIII. These Reasons unfounded.
- i. *Refutation by observation*. Water flows down to the sea from the land; hence the sea cannot be higher than the land. Cf. § VI.
- ii. *Refutation by reasoning*.
- § IX. Order of Refutation.
- I. Proof that Water cannot be higher than the dry land. §§ X-XIII.
- II. Demonstration that land is higher than the sea. §§ XIV-XV.
- III. Possible objections, and refutation thereof. §§ XVI-XIX.
- IV. Causes of the elevation of the dry land. §§ XX-XXII.
- a. Final cause.
- b. Efficient cause.
- V. Refutation of arguments in §§ III-VII. § XXIII.

- § X. I. Water could only be higher than the Earth :
1. If it were excentric, or
 2. If it were concentric, but had some excrecence.
- § XI. but since :
- A. Water naturally moves downwards, and
 - B. Water is naturally a fluid body :
- § XII. 1. cannot be true, for three impossibilities would follow :
- a. Water would move upwards as well as downwards ;
 - b. Water and Earth would move downwards in different directions ;
 - c. Gravity would be taught ambiguously of the two bodies.
- Proof of these impossibilities by a diagram.
- § XIII. 2. cannot be true, for
- a. The Water of the excrecence would be diffused, and consequently the excrecence could not exist ;
 - b. It is unnecessary, and what is unnecessary is contrary to the will of God and Nature.
- § XIV. II. It has been shown that Water is of one level, and concentric with the Earth :
- § XV. Therefore, since the shores are higher than the edges of the sea, and since the shores are the lowest portions of the land, It follows that all the land is higher than the sea.
- § XVI. III. *Possible argument* : Earth is the heaviest body ; hence it is drawn down to its own center, and lies beneath the lighter body, Water.
- § XVII. *Objection to this argument* : Earth is the heaviest body only by comparison with others ; for Earth is itself of different weights.
- § XVIII. *Refutation of this objection* : On the contrary, Earth is a simple body, and as such subject to be drawn equally in every part.
- Conclusion* : Since the objection is in itself sound, and Earth by its own Particular Nature, due to the stubbornness of matter, would be lower than the sea ; and since Universal Nature requires that the Earth project somewhere, in order that its object, the mixture of the elements, may be fulfilled :
- It follows that there must be some final and efficient cause, whereby this projection may be accomplished.
- § XIX. The form of this emerging continent has been studied, and it is that of a half-moon, extending 180 degrees longitudinally from Cadiz to the River Ganges, and 67 degrees latitudinally from the Equator to the neighborhood of the Arctic Circle.

§ XX. IV. The causes of the elevation of the land.

a. The final cause has been seen to be the purpose of Universal Nature.

b. The efficient cause cannot be (i) the Earth, (ii) the Water, (iii) the Air or Fire, (iv) the heaven of the Moon, (v) the Planets, nor (vi) the Primum Mobile: Therefore it must be ascribed to the heaven of the Fixed Stars (for this has variety in efficiency, as is seen in the various constellations), and in particular to those Stars of the Northern Hemisphere which overhang the dry land.

First objection: Why is the projecting continent then, not circular, since the motion of these stars is circular?

Answer: Because the material did not suffice for so great an elevation.

Second objection: Why is this elevation in this particular place?

Answer: Because God, whose ways are inscrutable, willed it so.

§ XXII. We should therefore desist from examining too closely the reasons, which we can never hope to fathom.

§ XXIII. V. *Refutation of the original arguments:*

Reason 1. Invalid because Earth and Water are spheres with the same center.

Reason 2. Invalid because of the external influence of Universal Nature, counteracting the internal influence of Particular Nature.

Reason 3. Invalid because it is the sphericity of the sea and not the lowness of the land which interferes with one's view at sea.

Reason 4. Invalid because Water does not flow to the tops of mountains, but ascends thither in the form of vapors.

Reason 5. Invalid because Water imitating the moon in one respect, need not imitate it in all.

§ XXIV. (*Conclusion:* Date and place of the discussion.)

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