



# Hypnerotomachia Poliphili: Re-Discovering Antiquity Through The Dreams Of Poliphilus

*Esteban Alejandro Cruz*

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Five hundred years ago, an operatic tale of unrequited love and female erotica, launched a more available and sustaining passion in Renaissance architecture. What has remained inaccessible, however, is a complete understanding of the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, the text and haunting woodcuts that fascinated European civilization upon its publication in Venice in 1499, inspiring artists, architects, and patrons ever since. The importance of the image has always been a fundamental aspect of iconographic, human communication, and it is the vivid imagery described by the dreamer in search of his lost love and the introduction of more than 160 beautifully, haunting illustrations that has made Hypnerotomachia Poliphili as fascinating today as it was in the late fifteenth century when the Press of Aldus Manutius first published this graphically exquisite book.

The story of Poliphilus, whose lust for the indifferent Polia is rivaled only by the carnal pleasures he encounters in the incredible architecture, gardens, and landscapes of his sleeping imaginations, has inspired centuries of architects to create similar sensuality in the real-life buildings and gardens they designed. The cryptic messages, fantastic architecture, innovative graphic designs and layouts of the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili have moved and stirred western culture, prompting translators then and now to seek richer understanding of the author's (or authors') intent. It remains uncertain who wrote the book, but the writer — singular or plural — seemed to want to produce a very spatial and graphic architectural treatise. This text was too visionary for its time, and it was published during a crucial turning point in history. The late 1400s in Rome were not very safe for the intellectually and scientifically curious. Renaissance academies that once flourished under the court of Nicholas V became underground collegiate societies dispersed under the following rule of the Borgia Papacy. The Hypnerotomachia Poliphili was itself discreetly published in Venice, which at that time was an attractive city for its innovative interests and developments, far away from the Papal States. Although I am not attempting to argue as to who wrote the original manuscript, one couldn't help as to suggest that it was a group effort, an innovative way of working together that truly expresses the renaissance and humanist spirit of its time.

Since the Hypnerotomachia came about within this context, the visions and wonders described in the original Aldine manuscript are presented in an overwhelming play of philological and archeological allegories. In order to have a better understanding of what this visionary incunabulum contains, I am, with my project, proposing to use graphical and architectural forms of critical analysis instead of literary studies traditionally associated with scholarly work in the past (whose works I mention in the first chapter "methods"). For this reason, I am proposing: Formas Imaginisque Poliphili, which means "imaginary models of Poliphilus" revealed.

## MY CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF HYPNEROTOMACHIA POLIPHILI

By utilizing the technology of today with the history and traditions of the past, I hoped to develop a first series of digital, artist reconstructions of the architecture and landscapes described in this enigmatic book of the early renaissance. Since I was dealing with building and environmental design, the passages were quite

familiar to those of a basic design background: research, vignettes, scale-measurement-proportion, practical simulations, etc., while at the same time, employing experience and methods developed during my previous work with re-constructing historic Bologna. In addition to this, literary resources such as the works of Leon Battista Alberti, as well as the works of contemporary experts, were reconsidered in order to arrive at a critical and regional development of architectural vocabulary needed to realize these artist reconstructions. In the end, my artwork of Poliphilus' architecture and insight into its significance within the Antiquarian context are presented here as an attempt to share an added deciphering of this labyrinthine text, bringing to life and giving significance to its fantastic architecture and allegorical visions. With this in mind, I invite you now to witness the visions of a 500 year old dream of sublime beauty, ferocity, liberty, grace, and most important: Love.

E.A.C. Milan, 2006

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