

# Book review

## CITIES OF THE WORLD STEPHAN FUSSEL, ED.

**TASCHEN GmbH, Hohenzollernring,  
Germany, 2008.**

**pp 504, £135, 9783822852729**

Google™ Earth has an ancestor, and one that for its time was just as revolutionary in reconceptualising the world. In 1572, the dean of the church *St. Maria ad Gradus* in Cologne, Georg Braun, became the editor of a series of atlases that set new standards in cartography: *Civitates Orbium Terrarum* (Cities of the World). Inspired by Sebastian Münster's widely read encyclopaedic, *Cosmographia*, he wrote the Latin cartouches and hired the artists and voyagers who contributed to the six volumes. Their travel sketches were turned into handsome copperplate engravings by the Flemish artist Franz Hogenberg, and include some exact copy by Georg Hoefnagel, son of an Antwerp diamond merchant who toured Europe in the mid-century, as well as by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Braun died in his eighties in 1622, the only one of the editorial team to see out the publication of the final volume in 1617. The editors of this new edition, Stephan Fussel and Rem Koolhaas, have had to track down the plates, which were often sold separately, and were lucky to find a well-preserved edition of the original in a Frankfurt museum. Now Taschen Verlag, one of the most successful new European publishers and perhaps not coincidentally located in the same city, has published in one massive and spectacularly beautiful volume the entire atlas of 564 cities.

In 1572, Spain was the preeminent European power, and its territories extended up to what today is Belgium. The Duke of Alba was laying siege to Haarlem: Calvinist rebels had already gained control of large tracts of Holland and Zeeland, and set up the Dutch Republic. Spanish forces in central America sacked the last remaining Inca city, Vilcabamba. John Knox died in Edinburgh. Most of Europe was still reeling from the effects of the Reformation, with the wars of religion in France causing the upheavals that would

lead to the state-power politics of the Thirty Years War and the widespread devastation of much of central Europe, including many of the cities depicted in the book: 1572 was the year of the Bartholomew's Day and other massacres in France. A large Ottoman army which had invaded Russia was decisively repulsed at the battle of Molodi. And Michel de Montaigne had just retired from public life to begin the work of reading and writing which would come down to us as his *Essays*.<sup>1</sup> It was an age in which trade and conquest were changing the world, and a new empiricism was afoot. The astronomer Tycho Brahe observed the supernova in Cassiopeia now catalogued as SN 1572; and travellers were expected not to slip capriciously into the realm of the miraculous, as so many of their predecessors had done. Montaigne was to write: 'What we need is topographers who would make detailed accounts of the places which they had actually been to.'

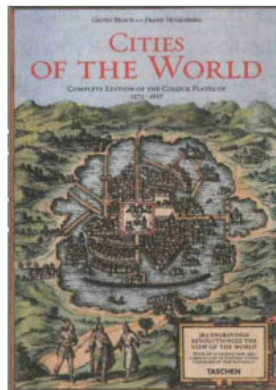
To open *Cities of the World* is to see that the former Greek Minister of Culture Melina Mercouri was inspired when she suggested, in 1985, that Europe ought to honour its cities. Vilnius and Linz are the current urban showpieces in the European City of Culture tradition, which has been one of the most successful pan-European actions. Of course, some of Europe's cities were more important in 1572 than they are now. The eternal importance of Rome and Jerusalem to a species hopelessly divided between the need for salvation on the one hand and entertainment on the other is confirmed by the detailed and beautiful fold-out maps of the two cities. The terrible fire of 1574 which ravaged the

Doge's Palace in Venice is recorded, as if by eyewitness. The Tower of London still had a moat around it, and the northern outskirts start at the Bishopsgate: the Spitalfields were grazing land. Chester and Norwich were major English cities of the time, the view of the latter indicating 'the place where men are customably burnt.' There is a rare illustration of Henry VIII's colossal Renaissance palace Nonsuch in Surrey; it was demolished by Charles II a century later to pay off royal debts. Barcelona is shown with a rainbow above it. Buda has yet to acquire Pest. Augsburg, home of the banking house of Fugger, has grown rich from the transfer of profits made from the Church's trade in indulgences. Antwerp outshines Amsterdam. With 12 000 inhabitants, Basle was a large trading city, and an important centre of the early book trade. All of the Rhine cities were important trading posts, as were Riga, Königsberg, and the cities of the Baltic. Whatever fears the primordial undifferentiated flux held for humans in the pre-modern period were overcome by the fact that nearly all trade took place by sea and canal: boat transport was vastly more reliable than conveyance on the dangerous and poorly sealed roads.

Many of these cities appear idyllic, as jewels of red-roofed decency among empty green fields — beyond is the Hobbesian state of nature. One thinks of Shakespeare's *blasted heath*, a place outside the city so desolate that Milton uses it as hellish imagery in *Paradise Lost*. Almost every city is walled, without anything resembling suburbs or even tilled land, even though most were dependent on the harvests and produce of the farmlands beyond their walls. Insofar as the cities themselves have identifiable structures, most of them are ecclesiastical and military. This was an age in which the art of fortification was still highly prized, and the typical city was apt to look like

some extrusion of nature, a star-shaped dodecagon surrounded by trenches and moats. Two hundred years later, bastions and siegecraft were still obsessing over Uncle Toby in *Tristram Shandy*, although the exigencies of strategic planning had spread by his time from the city-state to the frontiers of the nation itself. Churches are identified by the saints to whom they are dedicated. This might be a time when the good place was imagined as a city run on perfect Christian principles (like Johann Andreae's *Christianopolis*, a utopian scheme printed in 1619 in Strasburg and modelled on Calvin's admired Geneva), yet a religiously-informed suspicion of money and exchange was about to yield to a new vision of the social that accepted mercantile values and principles.

Half of all the cities in this book are part open to the blue of the sea. One of the most vivid plates is a scene showing tuna being beached, slaughtered and cured at Cadiz, an annual event which can still be seen at the famously bloody *La Mattanza* ceremony on the Egadi islands west of Sicily. Amsterdam has entered the age of the Dutch East Indies Company and its colonial expansion: a vast number of ships can be seen at anchor in the Zuiderzee. In 1550, London had a population of 60 000; within 100 years that number was to increase sixfold. Mediterranean cities are prominent: Malta, Famagusta, Rhodes and Corfu, though Athens, which was then under Ottoman control, is conspicuous by its absence. And even a good number of comptoirs and colonies are depicted: Mombasa is a village with red roofs in the European style Calicut, an important Portuguese spice centre, is fringed with a forest of palms. In



Cuzco, the former Inca capital, a colonial official is being carried in a baldaquin by four Peruvians.

Braun, like many of the Spaniards who went to Mexico, was evidently convinced of the superiority of his own religion. His was evidently a morally severe world: one plate shows an adulterous woman in Seville being punished by being stripped to the waist, coated with honey and led on a mule through the streets — a swarm of attentive bees makes up her train. Visitors to Cairo are recommended not to waste time with the 'idoltrous temples' or the pyramids, which look more like obelisks and are wildly out of proportion with the city of Cairo to the north-east. The fact that 'the Turkish archenemy' still possessed a large part of south-eastern Europe clearly rankled: crescents are seen on top of mosques, with men in kaftans directing workers. Every step in the Ottoman punishment of impalement is lovingly depicted in one plate. A Polish knight outside the Hungarian city of Gyor welcomes a lady with two Turkish arrows still projecting from the back of his tunic. The sense of these cities as nodes of concentrated knowledge and custom is enhanced by the bird's-eye perspective adopted in many plates. I was put in mind of Altdorfer's vertiginous painting *The Battle of Alexander* (1529), which shows an apocalyptic scene of two vast armies colliding in a landscape over which the viewer can look south to see the whole of the Mediterranean including Cyprus and the mouths of the Nile and Red Sea: this is thought to be the first painting to show the curvature of the earth from a great height. Centuries before air travel, Europeans were already imagining the terrestrial globe as a sphere: the world in 1572 was already *terra cognita*.

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#### REFERENCE

1. De Montaigne M. *The complete essays*. London: Allen Lane Penguin, 1991.

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