This book traces the history of monumental printed maps, or “city portraits,” of Rome throughout the early modern period. While not neglecting the gradual professionalization and growing accuracy of the maps produced, it differs from previous publications on this topic by also focusing on the “vision” these maps offer of the city, with all her timeless and unique qualities. To this end, Maier not only analyzes the prints themselves, but also discusses their makers, their audiences, and the contexts in which they were produced and appreciated. This leads her to consider these city portraits as a separate genre that peaked in the early modern period, balancing measurement and imagination in a way that is foreign to our modern understanding of cartography.

She thus counters two widespread misunderstandings on the genre under discussion: unlike modern maps, these printed city portraits hardly served utilitarian purposes, like wayfinding. Their size alone suggests they were rather of a commemorative nature, to be displayed in the palazzi of an elite audience. Moreover, the growing level of measured accuracy of these maps does not necessarily mean a growing objectivity. For example, many of these maps present the Vatican as a visual anchor in the left lower corner, reflecting the primacy of the papacy in the early modern city.

Likewise, many maps draw a sharp distinction between the abitato and the disabitato, reflecting the comparison between old and new Rome. In addition to her analysis of these methods of representing the city itself, Maier sees the material on the margins of the maps as voicing current ideas about the political, cultural, and religious place of Rome in the world—even if they are not outright propagandistic. By stressing these aspects, Maier's book on maps fits neatly in current trends in the study of early modern antiquarian scholarship.[1]

In her ensuing narrative, Maier focuses on two aspects that appear crucial for understanding the rise and fall of the city portrait genre. The first aspect is the technical representation of the city, whether it is executed on an orthogonal plan (i.e., seeing the city exactly from above), or rather as a pictorial view (i.e., seeing the city from, e.g., a hilltop). The second aspect is the way in which the interaction between ancient and new Rome is reflected on the map. Following these two aspects—of form and content, if you will—in the period under discussion, this book shows how they were constantly debated, combined, and adapted rather flexibly. If each chapter represents a different stage in these negotiations, the story ends when the boundaries between the various options have become rigid rather than fluid.
The first chapter, “Toward a New City Image,” brings together the earliest city images from the Quattrocento and introduces the two trends of orthogonality and pictorialism in their nascent stages. While Leon Battista Alberti’s Descriptio Urbis Romae (c. 1450) explains how the city and its monuments should be measured, Francesco Rosselli published a picture (c. 1485) that, even though it is now lost, had immense influence on how people imagined the unique city of Rome.

The second chapter, “Putting Rome in Drawing,” gives us the humanist antiquarian scholars, fervently measuring and drawing the ancient city in order to preserve its memory and to serve as basis for new architectural projects. Although both goals were clearly aligned in their wish to let new Rome be reborn from the old, they did in fact elicit different approaches. Architects, like Sebastiano Serlio, favored and further developed orthogonality, whereas the pictorial mode served the memory formation of ancient Rome, as the work of Andrea Fulvio shows. Interestingly, the primary protagonist of this chapter, Raphael, seems to have gradually changed his mind with regard to this debate.

The third chapter, “Syntheses,” is devoted to Leonardo Bufalini’s Plan of Rome (1551). It is no coincidence that this map occupies the middle of Maier’s narrative, since it functions as the point toward which earlier city images develop, and the point from which later prints can be seen to both derive and diverge. Bufalini’s map is indeed remarkable, and counterintuitive if considered from a traditional teleological viewpoint. With Maier’s framework in mind it makes more sense. In the debate between orthogonality and pictorialism, Bufalini takes a radical standpoint, choosing the first without hesitation. However, with regard to Rome’s chronology, his map fuses all time layers into one map, making it an image of “sixteenth-century Roman culture, where the past is sometimes encroached on the present, and mathematics could be pressed into the service of the imagination” (p. 78).

The fourth chapter, “Antitheses,” discussing prints by Pirro Ligorio and Stefano Du Pérac among others, shows how maps printed in the century after Bufalini distance themselves from him, but still build on him. The “anachronistic” mingling of old and new Rome is put to the way-side in favor of separate images of “Roma antica” and “Roma nuova,” gradually shifting the focus to the second. Furthermore, although the purely orthogonal representation of Rome is not followed, the contours of the city measured by Bufalini are taken as the standard for pictorial plans and views. They thereby do benefit from the advances in technology, and become more lifelike as result.

The fifth chapter, “Before the Eyes of the Whole World,” continues on this note, showing what a combination of pictorialism with further exactitude in measuring and representation can amount to. Prints by Antonio Tempesta, Giovanni Maggi, Lieven Cruyl, and others represent the variation that is still possible in a genre in which topicality is ever more valued. Baroque Rome appears the sole protagonist of these maps, often by mediation of the church, and by now finds a still larger audience also outside of Rome.

Presenting Battista Falda’s Pianta grande (1676) as the ultimate peak of this development, the epilogue considers how in the eighteenth century the two trends finally and definitively grow apart, with on the one hand the orthogonal map by Giambattista Nolli (1748) and on the other the famous Prospetto by Giuseppe Vasi (1761). However, Piranesi reminds us that there always remains room for creativity and flexibility.

Each of the maps discussed in this book has already received rigorous treatment in other publications, which may be more suited for a detailed appreciation of their artistry.[2] However, this book is also adorned with fine images: the most important ones collected in a quire of color plates, and others throughout the book to support
Maier’s observations. Most importantly, this book lets us set our modern preoccupation with exactitude aside when we think of cartography. Instead, we can now consider these city portraits as an early modern genre in its own right, that is best appreciated in its interaction with other scholarly, artistic, and literary genres. To see that maps of Rome, just like antiquarian treatises, drawings, or poems, also represent a certain perspective, this book is most valuable.

Notes


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