Ships on Maps: Pictures of Power in Renaissance Europe by Richard Unger (review)

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(Review)

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ing for newcomers to the subject, but also speaks clearly to the community of expert thinkers in the field of standards and infrastructure studies as a rigorous discussion of neoliberal trajectories in society.

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Ships on Maps: Pictures of Power in Renaissance Europe.


Richard Unger sets out to show why ships were, for a time, standard decoration on European maps. They first appeared on maps in the late thirteenth century; they had become commonplace by the mid-sixteenth century; and they were almost gone by the eighteenth century. Unger points out the coincidence of this chronology with the early period of European seaborne discovery, when control of the oceans was at the forefront of European political ambitions. The trajectory that he traces ends with the development of the European idea of the freedom of the seas in the late seventeenth century and with a change in attitude toward scientific illustration and aesthetics.

Unger emphasizes the onrush of data that overwhelmed Europeans—and European maps—in the sixteenth century, creating the conditions for a geographical frenzy and the rise of the map as the most powerful approach to data visualization of the time. He suggests some of the ways in which mapmakers in different parts of Europe accessed and integrated knowledge, reflecting, for example, local shipbuilding traditions and different levels of concern for accurately placing the various types of ships in the areas where they would have traveled. Although ships play a smaller role than one might expect, given Unger’s earlier work, he points out the importance of certain maps (ones that do provide highly accurate images of ships) as evidence for developments in shipbuilding and especially in rigging, which tends to be poorly documented in the archaeological record.

Although there is much interesting information along with some thoughtful interpretative ideas in this book, it falls short of its potential in a couple of ways. First, Unger is cautious in his answers to his central question, offering rather vague formulations and tentative claims. This modesty not only undersells the interesting suggestions that he does make, but also seems to excuse a certain thinness in the analysis. Unger says at the beginning that he will embrace the varied techniques required by the history of cartography, including exploring the context of a map’s production and reception. Oddly, he spends little time on what is perhaps the most impor-
tant and characteristic technique of the history of cartography, the close visual analysis of the maps themselves. This analysis can reveal a map’s rhetorical claims and a great deal about the knowledge circles of both the mapmaker and the intended audience. Lacking this type of analysis, the arguments seem less solid than they could be and the illustrations float free, acting more as visual reference points than as evidence.

A second limitation lies in the space allocated to various topics. Unger dedicates a full chapter to classical and early medieval traditions of map-making, during which time ships did not decorate maps. This is well-known material, easily available elsewhere, and a quick acknowledgement of the strong focus on the land that characterized medieval maps would have sufficed, leaving more room for complex analyses of the individual maps that Unger discusses in his core chapters (7 and 8). The book would have profited from full chapters devoted to the development of ships, the changing techniques of collecting data and making maps, and the meanings that Europeans ascribed to the oceans and oceanic navigation. Building up toward the insights in the final chapter, these themes would help to expose the thought-worlds and contexts within which ships made sense to contemporaries as decoration on maps.

Despite these caveats, this book will be of interest to historians of cartography and of European seafaring, particularly for the information that it offers about ships on individual maps and its effective survey of earlier literature on the history of cartography, while graduate students will find it a good source of potential research topics in an important area.

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Artisan/Practitioners and the Rise of the New Sciences, 1400–1600.


This book derives from a series of lectures given by the author at Oregon State University in 2010 and the tone, as well as the didactic ambition, of a lecturer survives in places. Yet much of the value of the book stems from this context. It is at once a challenging and ambitious account of the rise of the new sciences in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and an introduction for a non-specialist reader to the thesis that ascribes a pivotal role to artisanal practice. Pamela Long does not avoid addressing the contentious nature of this thesis and an early chapter is an extremely valuable account of the his-