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## Review of "Cartographies of Time: A History of the Timeline"

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**Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton. *Cartographies of Time: A History of the Timeline*.  
New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010.**

The historical timeline seems so instinctive and commonsense that we probably do not give it much thought when it appears in textbooks, classrooms, newspapers, graphs, or any of a dozen other places. That commonplace character is probably a sign that we have forgotten an important development in the history of history itself: when, exactly, western culture first decided that a line was the best means of illustrating such a vague and non-visual concept as time. Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton note that timelines “are such a familiar part of our mental furniture that it is sometimes hard to remember that we ever acquired them in the first place.” (10) Thankfully, these two authors have provided us with a beautiful and engaging history of these furnishings that forces us to rethink the actual act of delineating time and opens up new realms of scholarship.

Rosenberg and Grafton observe that contemporary society takes for granted the idea that time is a regular, measurable phenomenon that can easily and elegantly be expressed as a straight line. We have therefore forgotten the history of the timeline and the history of chronology itself, a field that actually occupied much more scholarly attention in medieval and early modern Europe than did history or geography. Scholars struggled for centuries to locate major events on a single, universal time scale. They then struggled again with the proper means of representing that scale before finally hitting upon the timeline in the second half of the eighteenth century. In telling this story, the authors remind us that such crucial historical tools as basic chronology are actually complex historical constructions and that our idea of history itself needs to be historicized as a creation of Enlightenment thought in the North Atlantic world.

The timeline, when it appeared, solved a centuries-old challenge of information design—how to display time. Since the Roman Eusebius, chronologers had listed dates and important events in vertical columns. But the unwieldy tables of early chronologies made it difficult to compare events happening in multiple places at once and tended to obscure broad patterns in history. After centuries of trial and error and aided by improvements in astronomy and cartography, eighteenth-century chronologers such as Thomas Jefferys and especially Joseph Priestly developed the first modern timelines. By portraying time in regular intervals on a printed surface, these Enlightenment designers in effect announced that time was now regular and knowable: the experiments in defining dates could be ended and the work of historians and geographers could commence. The elegance and effectiveness of their charts made the timeline seem all at once a “natural” thing and it has ever since been western culture’s predominant method of portraying time. From that invention sprang new fields of statistical, informational, and even artistic prints in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the authors cover in the final few chapters.

Rosenberg and Grafton are to be commended for telling a lively story while avoiding the pitfall of simply presenting a timeline of timelines. While their emphasis is on cataloging rather than analyzing the numerous forms of chronography that have appeared over the centuries, the authors make clear that variety of style was not a “natural” evolution. Older forms remained



popular even after new ones appeared, and the authors are careful to note when a certain chronographer returned to an old form rather than develop a new one. What results is a beautifully illustrated book that constantly reminds us that western society has chosen how it portrays time from among numerous options—the line was never a “natural” form. Each page is filled with full-color photographs of chronological tables, charts, wheels, lines, and visual analogies of all shapes and sizes, providing both the historian and the student of information design with hours of happy poring.

To be sure, the book and its illustrations are not without their faults. While it would be unfair to hold the authors accountable for what were most likely editorial decisions, the images are occasionally too small to provide illustration for what the authors are discussing. And, since the authors’ text relies so much on the visual illustrations, a given chart’s importance is more often asserted than demonstrated. As an example, take the book’s treatment of Paulus Crusius’s sixteenth-century historical table. Referring to the work as a “literal time map... a London Underground map of time itself,” Rosenberg and Grafton assert that historical time had finally been captured in a chart that appears to be nothing more than a set of rectangles. (65) The authors neither explain how the chart actually works nor do the editors provide a large enough image for the reader to comprehend. Like Crusius’s achievements, many times in the book a significant milestone comes and goes quickly, before the reader has a chance to process exactly what has been gained and what lost.

But this seeming weakness actually bolsters the book’s greatest strength, which is its ability to inspire new research questions. Each page offers charts and prints that require more analysis than the authors can provide. Aside from a few references to such broad historical trends as the Protestant Reformation or the Enlightenment, the reader gets little sense about what historical pressures drove specific changes in the form (and the function?) of these chronographies.

It would be especially interesting to read these charts through the lens of modern cartographic scholarship which has deeply and fruitfully mined geographic representation for insights into maps’ relationship to the histories of colonialism, empire, science, and identity. Given the frequent overlap between cartographic and chronographic development there is much work to be done here. Both drew heavily on developments in astronomy and both emerged in their “modern” form in the eighteenth century. They even shared printers, since Thomas Jefferys produced both some of the era’s most significant Anglo-American maps and also a landmark chart of history. (112-113) Given the book’s title, one would expect some greater acknowledgement of these overlaps, but that, like much of the work to be done, will have to rest with future researchers. The authors are to be lauded for having done so much to illuminate the history of the timeline and to set the stage for years of productive research into the histories of chronology and chronography.

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