

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### A COLLECTION OF HISTORICAL ATLASES

For the past fifteen or sixteen centuries Western civilization has been a civilization of books, and, since Gutenberg, a civilization of printed books. At this moment we are taking part in a veritable cultural mutation: at the same time as mechanical recording processes—records, magnetic tape, radio, television—are restoring to the human voice that presence, that direct impact, that leading role which it has not known since classical antiquity, the ever widening and increasingly perfected techniques of pictorial reproduction accustom us more each day to using illustrated documents as food for, and instruments of, thought.

We can no longer picture the historical past without accompanying it by its projection in space. The event does not appear to us to be rendered completely real except when situated in its location on this earth which the speed of, and familiarity with, travel have reduced for all time to the proportions of a “small planet.” On the other hand, even in the elaboration of this history, how important is the role of monuments of all kinds, illustrated or not, which help us to reconstruct the life of men of former times, the milieu of their civilization, their political and social organization, their thought, their problems!

Translated by William J. Harrison.

The attention given to this category of documents appears to me as one of the specific traits of this "new historical spirit" by which our generation does itself honor. At the time of Fustel de Coulanges it was said: "History is made with texts." We have learned, in the meantime, to add, with the school of Lucien Febvre: Yes, certainly! but also with all that can be interpreted as a sign, whether it be a landscape, a ruin, a portrait, or an artifact, even if this belonged to the most humble and familiar aspect of life.

In this new perspective one must express satisfaction at having seen the appearance, in the course of recent years, of several historical atlases, analogous as to concept and presentation, which, as distinct from our old classic atlases, are not limited to a series of maps but add to this an abundant photographic documentation of sites and monuments. The ensemble, with its discreet but skilful commentary, deserves to hold the attention, not merely of specialists, teachers, and students, but of the more general public, the ordinary man concerned with adding to and deepening his culture.

Their publication constitutes a remarkable example of international collaboration and effort to surmount the cultural isolation which results from the multiplicity of languages. Prepared by Dutch scholars on behalf of the publishing house of Elzevier by whom they were published with a care and quality in keeping with its splendid reputation, our atlases saw their Dutch edition rapidly followed by Nelson's English translation, then German and French editions by various workers, all reproducing the perfectly executed illustrations and the often ingenious page-setting of the Dutch original.

The series opened with the *Atlas of Western Civilisation* by Father F. van der Meer, professor of archeology and of art history at the Catholic University of Nijmegen. This was followed by the *Atlas of the Bible* by R. P. L. H. Grollenberg, a Dominican who was able to avail himself of the works accumulated by the Bible School of Jerusalem. This reviewer may be permitted to manifest a particular interest in the third, the *Atlas of the Early Christian World*, work of the same F. van der Meer in collaboration with his colleague at Nijmegen, the celebrated philologist Melle Christine Mehrmann. Finally the *Atlas of the Classical World*, devoted to Greek and Roman antiquity, has just appeared, by A. A. A. van der Heyden (the sigla *Hist. Drs.* which follows his name signifies *doctorandus*, future doctor of history, student prepar-

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ing his doctorate), with the collaboration of H. H. Scullard of King's College, London. This last-born is to me the least welcome in the series. It is somewhat hastily prepared, a little confused, and, as it were, overwhelmed by the wealth of its subject. The others, however, are deserving of every praise.

First of all, there are the maps. As is usual, they will serve in the first instance for the geographical locating of which we have spoken. If, as a historian of Christianity, I meet in the course of a study of the Arian heresy such personages, even of secondary importance, as Secundus of Ptolemais or Athanasius of Anazarbe, my mind will be at ease only after fixing the location of their episcopal sees on a map of Cyrenaica or Silesia. But maps can be made to tell infinitely more; thus, in his first *Atlas*, M. van der Meer has placed two maps of Central Europe side by side: that of the principal monuments of the Baroque age and that of the centers of spiritual radiance where the art of that age found its principles and its inspiration. Or again: the *Atlas of the Bible*, making use of a suggestion by P. R. de Vaux, superimposes the outline of the migrations of the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as it appears from the records of Genesis, on a map showing the distribution of rainfall in Palestine. The comparison makes evident a remarkable fact: these migrations take place in the steppe zone, between the desert proper and the region of Mediterranean cultivation; thus, these Patriarchs were breeders of small livestock, men of customs and mental categories very different both from the non-migrants and from the true camel-herding nomads: hence, all the consequences which may be drawn from this first observation.

Still concerning the *Atlas of the Bible*, I am grateful to it for having systematically chosen a representation of the relief by contour lines as background to the maps. Too frequently historical atlases are content to give an indication, sometimes inaccurate, of the watercourses and to color the background in terms of political or administrative divisions. It is not good to separate physical geography from history; the events of the latter should be situated, not in an abstract space, but on the rugged surface of our planet! The development of the wars of the Roman Republic cannot be clearly understood if one does not have the means of taking into account the twisted outline of the Apennines.

Together with the maps, we can consider the pictorial documentation. It will be recalled that Renal saw the countryside of Galilee as a fifth

Gospel, so to speak. And it is quite true that these pictures of Palestine help one to penetrate the biblical texts to which they relate (the use of aerial photography, intelligently annotated, permits an infinite broadening of perspectives). Similarly evocative is the monumental setting: the illustration allows the reader to grasp the remarkable, and, on more than one occasion, singularly dramatic, situation of the people of Israel, caught as though in pincers between the two great civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia.

The history of plastic arts is much more than a mere out-of-text illustration of history; it is an integral and essential part of it. Through the medium of iconography and plastic values a whole civilization expresses itself, with its concept of the world and of life, its *Lebens- und Weltanschauung*. If the *Atlas of Western Civilisation* and the *Atlas of the Classical World* lead the reader through a generally familiar world, the early Christian art will be a revelation for many, specialists excepted. This is an art too long neglected and often still disregarded. At first glance and for want of initiation, more than one art lover would risk leaving it at that (he need not be negligent or moved by unkind prejudices; it would be enough that he be warped by too strictly classical a training and taste); at first glance, I say, this art, that of the catacombs, basilicas, sarcophagi, and mosaics, appears to present nothing new, formally speaking. It appears, still at first glance, to be a simple heritage, impoverished and often deformed by lack of skill, of the great Hellenic art and its Hellenistic and Roman extensions. In fact, and as one gains a better understanding of it, Paleo-Christian art is revealed as a major example of that curious phenomenon described by Spengler under the rather pedantic name "pseudo-morphosis": the Christians of the earliest periods were successful in containing the new wine, the pure spirit of their young faith, in the old bottle of traditional form. Learning thus to discern original resonances in an art which at first gives a banal and crude impression of decadence is not the least profit which can be drawn from this study.

Such art is not, of course, easily accessible and one can appreciate the importance of finding these relics accompanied by an authoritative commentary. We could not have better guides than these two erudite professors of Nijmegen who are authorities in the realm of early Christianity. It is good to know that van der Meer is the author of one of the most penetrating studies ever devoted to the difficult subject of Paleo-

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Christian art. Unfortunately, the enjoyment of his fine book, *The Oldest Face of Christ*, has been available outside his own country only to those who are acquainted with the Dutch language. By these, incidentally, he is deemed among the best of living authors. It is very fortunate that the essence of his experience be brought within the grasp of the European public.

However, these two authors are not merely supremely competent scholars; they are also humanists, true heirs to the great and fertile tradition of Christian humanism. They have not been content with enabling the reader to draw the most profit from their ingeniously elaborated maps, by their annotations and by the choice, also the subject of long deliberation, of relics which follow each other before our eyes—the famous stele of Si-ngan-fou is there, on the next to last page, to remind us that the Christian upheaval, having left Palestine, had not only reached the extreme end of the Celtic world in the West but had also penetrated as far as China, across the whole breadth of Asia. Rather, at times they have willingly yielded the floor to those other great humanists, their predecessors, the Fathers of the Church. We find here an anthology, as it were, of the most significant contemporary texts, calculated to re-create that Christian world, the material traces of which are presented to us in other ways. One does not tire of turning from the pictures to the text and vice versa. To whoever glances through them, but above all to whoever uses them at length (for more than one reading is necessary to exhaust their riches), such atlases will reveal themselves as marvelous instruments of culture.