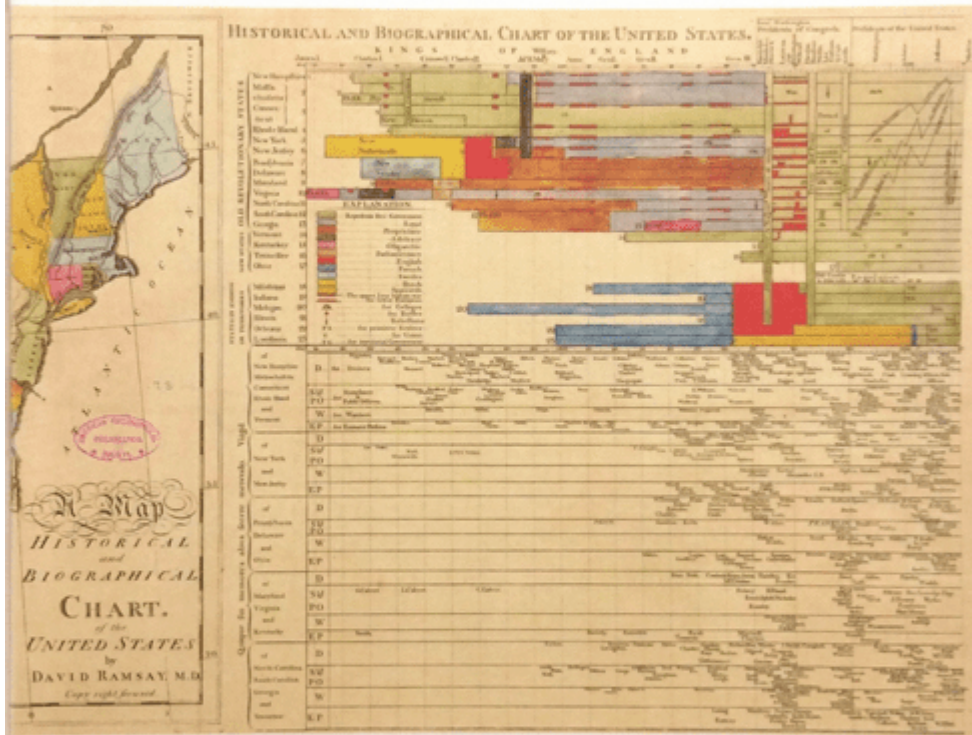


{essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the
University of Virginia

Cartographies of Time: A History of the Timeline

Cartographies of Time



A History of the Timeline

Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton

Volume 44 (2011)

Reviewed Work(s)

Cartographies of Time: A History of the Timeline. By Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010). Pp. 272. Hardcover, \$50.00

Thumb through any textbook on history or stroll through a museum that in some way stages the past: the chances are good that you will

encounter a timeline. You may even pass it over as a bit of banal tedium, for who has not seen one's fair share of dates and facts branching out from one big line into many little ones, filing dutifully from left to right? Indeed, the word "timeline" has become a basic English shorthand for imagining virtually any sequence of action. So pervasive, so unremarkable, so much a "graphic instantiation of history itself" has the timeline become that, in the judgment of Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton, "we think of [it] not as a technical achievement in graphic design, but as the bare remainder when everything else has been scraped away" (244). But as the authors of *Cartographies of Time* argue, the present ubiquity of the timeline should not be permitted to obscure its long history of sophisticated conceptual development.

Rosenberg and Grafton begin by isolating two fundamental questions that chronographers seek to answer: "What does history look like? How do you draw time?" (10). The authors follow these questions from late antiquity to the present day, examining in detail a large selection of richly-illustrated examples from Europe and North America. They locate the origins of the timeline in the works of the theologian Eusebius of Caesarea, whose *Chronicle* laid out "world" history as it anticipated the coming of the Messiah. This "dynamic hieroglyph of providential history" served for many centuries as the standard pattern for chronographers to follow (26-27). Eusebius's followers shared certain eschatological perspectives and universal intentions. The Advent was central, with the end of time forthcoming (if still unscheduled). The mission of the chronographer, therefore, was to map out the total history of the Christian world in "a single, coherent vision of the past" (44). Although not each of these chronographies was expressed as a table, the Eusebian scheme and its variants were so dominant that, Rosenberg and Grafton contend, "For many readers in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, time *looked like* a table – preferably one subdivided into squares by horizontal axes" (76).

Throughout the Renaissance, chronology and geography constituted the "two eyes of history." But geography had gained the upper hand by the eighteenth century and, with the demotion of the ancients from unsurpassable sages to quasi-barbarians, the purpose of chronology shifted from Biblical exegesis to charting human progress. Technological changes toward the beginning of the century allowed for the

compression of timelines into much smaller formats. By the century's second half, the "problem of regularization and measurement" stood as the primary challenge (112). For Rosenberg and Grafton, the most significant development in this period – and perhaps in the entire history of modern chronography – was the advent of Joseph Priestley's colorful charts of the 1760s. These "masterpieces of visual economy" introduced an ingenious new harmonization of "historical time and measured graphic space" (126). They demonstrated how the basic principles for the representation of geographic space could be employed, with elegant clarity, to give visual expression to events over time. Priestley's innovations opened the door to the kinds of graphs we are familiar with today by inspiring later designers – most notably William Playfair – to refine these forms and extend them to the representation of data in general.

Indeed, within a century, "the chart had become a symbol of historical understanding itself" (178). This development represents a kind of double-edged sword for *Cartographies of Time*. On the one hand, in its final four chapters the book seems to lose some of its previous rigor: the more popular the timeline became, the more examples were produced. With more examples, Rosenberg and Grafton appear less able to follow particular threads of its development. On the other hand, the proliferation of examples permits the authors to demonstrate amply just how much force the timeline has come to wield over Western historical imagination.

In an interesting but somewhat diversionary chapter, Rosenberg and Grafton reveal that white settlers moving westward across North America "employed [timelines] as tools for the propagation of both political and religious visions of history," particularly as aids for missionary work (150). They discuss the shifting relevance of the timeline within the profound changes in the conception of time itself brought on by industrialization and expanded technologies of measurement. Far removed from their narrowly ecclesiastical or academic habitats, timelines spread into popular material culture as the basis for board games, as well as practical reference guides and props for the memorization of historical facts. In the twentieth century, this didactic current broadened to include pieces of public art, such as the *Heilbrunn Cosmic Pathway* at the American Museum of Natural History, and

memorialization, as in the case of the monument commemorating the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Meanwhile, artists both modern and postmodern incorporated the timeline into their experimental visions: here the authors call our attention to Alfred Barr, Francis Picabia, R. Buckminster Fuller, and On Kawara, among others.

The volume often feels like an exhibition catalog supported by a robust analytical monograph. Its lush, full-color plates do more than merely illustrate the authors' text: they are the volume's source material, on parade so that readers might see for themselves the ways in which the West has illustrated time over the past seventeen centuries. Rosenberg and Grafton frame their work as a narrative that places the working-out of conceptual problems over technological ones. These concepts are emphatically graphical and aesthetic rather than abstract. In a certain sense, *Cartographies of Time* is a story about the exercise of the power of visual representation over the vastness of something both (potentially) boundless and infinitely divisible. Their concluding chapter even hints at the possibility that chronology offers comforting foundations of "reality" upon which to rest our control over "the flat and ever-extending plane of information" dominant in the mental world created by the Internet (246). Yet for Rosenberg and Grafton, chronography is not only concrete but beautiful, often ingeniously so. We are meant to appreciate its history as viewers. After all, didn't Renaissance thinkers imagine chronology as one of the "eyes of history?"

Yet for all its gazing at material culture, and for all it implies about our ability to draw time according to our will, *Cartographies of Time* has relatively little to do with the material or social bases of time as lived experience. For while at a certain remove time may wait for no one, some of us can wield greater claims on it, manipulate the tools of its representation with greater or lesser force, and even have influence over the conscious or unconscious decisions about what may stand as time worth counting. I was disappointed not to find any sustained, substantive discussion, save for an opening reference to Hayden White (11), of the philosophy of history that underlies the construction of a timeline: a discussion, that is, about the assumptions and authorities that decide what even counts as an "event" worth plotting.

These considerations lurk beneath the surface of Rosenberg and Grafton's study, of course. For one reason or another, though, the art-and-artisanal Cavalcade of Timelines approach they adopt, smooth and presentable, tends rather only to touch on them, if not obscure them entirely. Thus they approach the ingenious solutions to the "problem" of blank space in eighteenth-century chronology (most notably in the case of Priestley) with an emphasis on its technical aspect rather than its metahistorical side (126). It would have been instructive for Rosenberg and Grafton to make more connections between the history of chronology and historiography in general. What intellectual structures led chronographers to construct the events they saw fit to chart? What conceits preceded their decisions to create blank space? For blank spaces say as much about the historical imagination as much as what is made visible: they reflect the power to say "nothing happened" or "something happened."

However, one of the fascinating themes brought to light in Rosenberg and Grafton's volume does in fact play with the question of *whose* time chronographers have sought to depict. Well into the nineteenth century, they appeared to structure their timelines around a belief that, ultimately, we are all living on God's time. This conviction is most apparent in the creation of chronologies as tools for the prediction of the End Times, but the same belief remained even as chronography took on new methods and an increasingly human-centered point of view. It helps to strike a telling contrast to the human expropriation of the powers of apocalypse embodied by the infamous Doomsday Clock that haunts the cover of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. Indeed, read a certain way, *Cartographies of Time* makes for an interesting story of the tension between human and religious, or cosmic, time – the time that societies imagine they can control, on one hand, and the time that they reserve for forces supposedly greater than themselves, on the other.

The chapter featuring the timelines of missionaries operating in the western territories of the United States might remind the reader, in a subtle way, that *Cartographies of Time* is a book about a particular lineage of the chronographic vision. One of this chapter's illustrations is a reproduced lithograph of a Yanktonais buffalo robe dating from the 1870s. The robe depicts a different way of projecting time: "a series of symbols [proceeding] outward from a central point. Each represents a

distinguishing event of one year” (157). Rosenberg and Grafton admit as much (23), but it is worth remembering that their book tells a story of Western chronography, which itself has rested against certain ideas of where time is supposed to lead – that is, on ideas of “progress.” The authors, however, do not address such concepts at any length, even if they peer out from behind the charts’ alluring surfaces. There is metahistorical potential in the form of the line itself, and the buffalo robes – as might, for instance, a Mayan calendar as well – demonstrate that the time-circle may suggest a different path to the future, or to oblivion. Perhaps their understandable focus on the line explains why Rosenberg and Grafton feel comfortable setting aside a broader discussion of the philosophy of history.

These points above are less criticisms against Rosenberg and Grafton than attempts to highlight some questions that their book leaves more or less uninvestigated. Certainly they deserve credit for being among the first to argue (and argue convincingly) that chronography deserves a historiography of its own. They do us a service by rescuing timelines from the realm of the unremarkable and demonstrating the sophisticated intellectual and technical history that allowed them, ironically, to assume such a taken-for-granted place in our historical imagination. While this volume may appeal most immediately to intellectual historians or art historians, its potential value easily extends to historians of any variety. It should prompt us to consider how graphic space, temporality, and historical thinking intersect, and what power this combination offers for the representation of the past.

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