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Five Renaissance Chronicles in Leopold von Ranke's Library

BY RAYMOND PAUL SCHRODT

A chronicle is essentially a "book of time", a narration of historical events.¹ Although a chronicle usually focuses on a particular city or province or dynasty, many as far back as the early Middle Ages are universal in scope in their attempt to account for the origins and future of the earth and of man. The local narrative is thus embedded in a context of world history.

Chronicles such as those of Eusebius of Caesarea (263–339?) and Orosius (385–420) were known in Christian antiquity, but it seems—inasmuch as one nineteenth-century bibliographer mentions nearly two thousand such manuscripts or parts thereof still extant—that in the Middle Ages they actually became somewhat popular.² Many of these were rhymed, such as that of Rudolf von Ems, which details Old Testament history.

Today, chronicles from the Middle Ages are most easily accessible through published reprints such as the "monumental" thirty-two folio-size volumes of the Monumenta Germaniae Historica,³ or Karl Hegel's Die Chroniken der Deutschen Städte.⁴ Yet literally thousands still exist in manuscript only, and await the efforts of ambitious researchers.

Apart from the work of bibliographers, the actual historical scholarship on chronicles from the Middle Ages or the Renaissance is meager, a fact bemoaned by the German historian Leopold von Ranke as early as 1824—and very little has changed since then.⁵

5. One such bibliographical enumeration is the earlier work of Marquard Freher
Frank L. Borchardt in *German Antiquity in Renaissance Myth* maintains that this neglect is in large part due to the modern outlook and habit of thought. We have a penchant for precision and are at sea when compelled to deal with the "truth" in terms of cultural symbols and legends. "The rising historical science of the nineteenth century made these sources available but was itself the root of many historiographic problems. One of the most unfortunate and relentless trends in medieval and Renaissance historiography has been, until most recently, the application of nineteenth- and twentieth-century standards of historical accuracy, attempted objectivity, and independence of tradition to works and authors for whom these standards were virtually meaningless."6

Ironically, this modern approach has been powerfully shaped by the critical stand of Ranke and his followers, who maintained that facts should be solidly established through trustworthy sources, and that if they could not be so established, they lacked value. So axiomatic has this attitude become that for the most part the modern historiographer assumes there to be no other possibility. But since the authors and compilers of chronologies in Renaissance Germany were ante-Ranke, their intellectual labors are better appreciated against the background of their ideological and moral beliefs and should not be measured against later standards of critical history. In fact, study reveals that the early Renaissance chroniclers were still heavily dependent for their principal sources of knowledge on the manuscript chronicles of the Middle Ages.

**HISTORICAL WRITING IN THE MIDDLE AGES**

History, as we know it today, had no place amongst the flourishing seven liberal arts of the medieval educational curriculum.7 To a large

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extent the lore of the past was preserved in school-text exercises for use in the study and practice of rhetoric. Similarly, events in the Bible were normally accepted literally by the general public and were used by the scholastics to establish the “spiritual” interpretation of the text itself. So Saint Jerome in one of his letters says: “The truth of history is fundamental to the spiritual understanding [of the sacred text]”.8

The ancient histories of Tacitus, Caesar, and Livy were looked upon in the Middle Ages as a sort of unused part of memory. Their apparent objectivity was admired, but not held up as a goal to be pursued for its own sake. The Bible had forced on the medieval consciousness its own framework of time and creation, conceived teleologically in Judaeo-Christian terms. No longer was human temporal experience imagined as being cyclical and futile, but instead, as progressing according to God’s purpose. As the pages of time turned, so human existence and all worldly material things approached dissolution.

Thus, the focus of what historical thinking there was in the Middle Ages is circumscribed by the creation and the end of all things, as popularly imagined in the apocalyptic imagery of both the Jewish Holy Writings and the Christian New Testament. This perspective centered then on the present, and past events were relevant only insofar as they contributed to the understanding of the present.9

Within this wider framework of the creation and the end of the world, historical thinking in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance was dominated by the notion of the sex aetates, or the six ages of man. Generally, this periodization of history is attributed to Augustine. In several of his works but especially in the City of God he conceives the epochs of human history as analogous to the six days of creation as described in Genesis. According to this allegorization, mankind has been living since the birth of Christ in the sixth and penultimate age. The final period will be that of the seventh day, which will terminate history. At that time mankind will be reunited with God. This division of time into periods formed the historical consciousness of those writing chronicles in the Middle Ages, and

8. Letter number 129.
eventually also became a basis for what is aptly described as the myth of the Holy Roman Empire.  

As an alternate to the six ages, some chroniclers follow the plan of the four historical empires described by the prophet Daniel: the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman—the last of which was contemporaneous and would endure until the end of time. However, this last empire, the Roman, was radically changed by its transformation into what has been called, since the time of Frederick Barbarossa, the Holy Roman Empire. It was assumed by nearly all the chroniclers that if and when this empire should end, the world itself would be on the brink of destruction, and human history at its temporal end. 

Whichever framework was followed, both the medieval and early Renaissance chroniclers saw the Holy Roman Empire as the divinely intended successor to the classical Roman empire and as a force that would endure until the dissolution of the material world. It is no wonder then that many of the early chronicles of the Middle Ages were dynastic in interest, or that they placed their own local history in this overarching context. Schematic thinking of this sort is apparent in the Renaissance chronicles to be found in the Syracuse University Library.

EARLIER RENAISSANCE EXAMPLES

With the advent of the printer’s art in the middle of the fifteenth century it was natural that some of the first imprints should also be chronicles. These were usually compiled from manuscripts at hand, normally with additions bringing the narration down to the time of the compiler. However, they demonstrated a shifted perspective, the knowledge of a wider world being opened up and charted by the great navigators. Addressing a wider audience through the medium of the printed text, they typically employed the vernacular, Latin being by then more the exception than the rule. 

The best known of such universal histories in English is the Polychronicon, printed in 1492 at Westminster by William Caxton, a man of noted business acumen and a devotee of medieval themes. This book is the compilation of several medieval chronicles by the monk

Roger of the Monastery of St. Werberg in Chester, who flourished about 1300. Some years later, Ralph (or Ranulf) Higden, a monk of the same monastery, amplified Roger's work and gave it the title Polychronicon. Caxton used the work in its English translation by Trevisa, which dates from about 1387. As editor, Caxton was obliged to update the English of Trevisa, and as usual he wrote an introduction. His final touch was one that became characteristic of many editors as they prepared the older manuscript chronicles for the new wonder of the printing press—he added to Roger's work a chapter, "Liber Ultimus", which extended the medieval history down to his own day.

The George Arents Research Library is privileged to hold among its incunabula two of the best examples of early printed chronicles. The first of these is the famous Nuremberg Chronicle, or Liber Cronicaenum, of Hartmann Schedel in the Latin edition of 1493. Schedel's work was also published in the same year in a German edition: Buch der Cronicken und gedechnis wurdigern geschichten von anbegyn der werlt bis auf diese unsere zeit. As the German title indicates, the work is much less an account of Nuremberg than a history of the world. Schedel was a physician and humanist of late-fifteenth-century Nuremberg, who counted among his acquaintances other humanists of his time. His association with the press of Anton Koberger at Nuremberg was to produce a chronicle remarkable not only for its readablleness and attractiveness, but also for its considerable success as a business venture. This prototype of successful chronicle publishing went through several editions, and possibly as many as three thousand copies were printed. To our knowledge it is the only fifteenth-century chronicle that has been photographically reproduced in folio size for twentieth-century reading.

Schedel's Liber Cronicaenum with its several thousand woodcuts is indeed a thing of beauty that has delighted studious readers for five

A woodcut of the City of Cologne, from Johann Koelhoff's chronicle. The cathedral towers were completed finally in the nineteenth century.
hundred years. True to his humanist outlook, Schedel gave place in his history to the learned figures of the past as well as to the deeds of men of power.

The second fifteenth-century chronicle at Syracuse is the Cronica van der Hilliger Stat vâ Coelle, referred to frequently as the Cologne Chronicle. It was compiled by Johann Koelhoff, an otherwise unknown citizen of Cologne, about his beloved city and was published there in 1499. Koelhoff's narrative begins with the creation of the world and mentions a few incidents from antiquity as well as certain figures from ancient Greece and Rome, who are imagined as the forebears of Europeans. For the myth of the Holy Roman Empire required that Europe, through the German emperors, be the direct heir of both the classical tradition and the imperium.

For the most part Koelhoff's work is little more than a compilation of other source materials available to him, and is, until he comes to the history of Cologne itself, without much evidence of intelligent editing or reworking of sources. Only in the period from 1446 to about 1499, corresponding to his own lifetime, does the chronicle assume some independence of expression. The author makes no claims of being on a par with his humanist contemporaries. His language is that of the common folk of Cologne, quaint to the modern ear and difficult to read. At times he even favors causes that are inimical to the power of the bishop. The woodcuts in this rare chronicle are notable for the many illustrations of coats of arms, most of which have been meticulously painted by hand.

CHRONICLES IN LEOPOLD VON RANKE'S LIBRARY

It is a truism that the sixteenth century was a time of expanding horizons. Favorite themes from antiquity as well as accounts of explorations into unknown regions of the globe provided the European humanist tradition new perspectives for changing and widening accepted views of the world and of man's place within it. In addition, the recension of ancient and medieval manuscripts, which were being collected avidly, added a certain critical aspect to the editing of sources. By then, selected narratives could be printed and easily multiplied;

response from an enlarged audience called for greater attention to exactitude.

One characteristic result of these stretched horizons was that global geography began to find a place in the writing of history. At that point the genre of chronicle writing, already well established from the Middle Ages, transcended the boundaries of a local focus in universal history to incorporate broader elements of geography. In some instances this fact is reflected in the title, where 'chronicle' is dropped in favor of 'cosmography'. From the middle of the sixteenth century, one can document a flourishing of such works—most notably from Germany, but also from France, the Lowlands, and Spain.

The literal-minded historian of today is apt to look askance at such cosmographies, chronologies, or chronicles. Although they often provide details of events close to the writer's time and the diplomatic and political developments of his region, the twentieth-century reader tends to distrust the sycophantic tone, which in a single narrative can proceed from the very story of creation, through ancient and medieval history, directly into the genealogy and political history of the current magnificent monarch, happily reigning. The etiquette of our age is certainly not that of the sixteenth century. We must conclude, therefore, that the genre of writing that we study here has something of the character of a curiosity. Nevertheless, it provides a step towards a more balanced view of world history, one which, under the influence of Ranke, is now much more concerned with objectivity and with the non-partisan character of sources.

The volumes themselves are fascinating. Several are beautiful examples of Renaissance bookbinding, and nearly all have woodcuts imaginatively depicting people and events from the past. One has watercolors added to impressions made from woodcuts. Others seem to have responded to the need for an easy-to-read picture book of local and world history, and were useful as well, as reference works. The illustrations and maps are, it is true, often dependent on fancy, yet in their own way, they are thought-provoking and delightful to behold. One can easily imagine that such chronicles were the Na-
tional Geographies of the time, in all likelihood treasured as much as the family Bible.

In any case, the five Renaissance chronicles described in the following pages are wonderful examples of the book arts of the period following that of incunabula. Although all show signs of wear from use during the four hundred years of their existence, all five are important witnesses to a significant stage in the history of printing and of the book itself. They document the mind of Renaissance man as he rewrites history in an age of invention and exploration.


This chronicle is dedicated to the “noble, strong, best, perspicacious, pious, wise, worthy and beloved gentlemen mayors” of the several cantons in Switzerland that together form what the author calls a “loblicher Eydgnoschaft”, that is, the “praiseworthy confederation” constituting the Swiss union. This folio volume of 42 centimeters in height is bound with leather on boards and has been elaborately decorated in the “Deutsche Renaissance” style. The ornamentation includes numerous geometric patterns, stamped faces of sovereigns, and a series of religious stampings portraying original sin, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. The small crucifixion bears the earlier date 1534; it must have been made for an earlier imprint. The metal clasps of the volume are lacking.

The dedication reveals a clearly delineated theological purpose:

Among all stories historical books of old tales are for men dear, encouraging, and fruitful for the reading (my dear gentlemen), not necessarily because they represent to us all types of sketches of lands and peoples, but also insofar as they contain many descriptions of good and bad persons, indeed of those performing praiseworthy and unpraiseworthy deeds, whereby we have then many examples of desirable virtues and of despicable vices. For that reason histories are strong reminders and clear examples of the wonderful works, deeds and judgments of almighty God, whereby he at every
The first ten pages of Stumpf’s book are double-paged maps of Europe, Germany, France, and Switzerland. The map of Europe is particularly interesting in that the view is from the north and towards the south. England and Ireland are to the lower right, whereas the Mediterranean is at the top. The plotting of longitude and latitude is in place on the map of the world, the “Universalis Cosmographia”, but America appears as an island, and Ethiopia is on the wrong side of Africa. Stumpf’s map construction was a matter more of imagination than of measurement.

Stumpf begins his chronicle with a first chapter on Europe, “one third of the earth”, and then proceeds to the ancient history of the Germanic peoples. The last chapter dwells on the “praiseworthy sworn association” of the Swiss nation of his time. This chronicle is especially noteworthy for its woodcuts of coats of arms, and of battle scenes that are used several times—at places where the text describes fighting.


Sebastian Münster’s Cosmographey is one of the best known of the genre. It remained popular for several hundred years and went through a variety of editions and translations. The Syracuse copy is bound in pigskin over boards, with reinforced metal corners. The clasps are lost. The book is folio size with a cover designed in a geometric “Deutsche Renaissance” style. It is a heavy volume, weighing about seven pounds. In the preface the author expresses enthusiasm over his work: “No life on earth [is] better than that of the historian”.

16. Edgerton’s essay, referenced in the previous footnote, illustrates how important the Ptolemaic grid became in the Renaissance for the visualizing of space for both geographers and painters.
Towards the end of the second page he states his purpose:

A compendium and short account of all lands of the earth I have sought to write for the common man, so that he may enjoy thereby the reading, as also to show the scholar the way a person should write German chronology, and indeed worthwhile cosmography, as I have understood and began with this work eighteen years ago, following the very learned man Straboni... To describe the whole world, as is my intention in this book, requires a heart of great fortitude and patience, as well as a toiling and informed spirit, which has read much, seen much, heard and experienced much, which however would not be enough, if a right judgment is not there also, through which a person might be able to distinguish the true from the false, and the certain from the uncertain. Except for the Divine Books there is no reading in the world more full of pleasure or useful for man than the reading of histories, where they, as should be, are written independently of this or that party. For what is history except ready-made examples through which a person can see how this or that affair has eventuated, as human device and Providence most often so uncertainly, indeed blindly, and all things so certainly have from the hand of God, who works everything in everything. Every counsel we may take goes askew, when it is not attuned to the providence of God.

Münster's book, 1469 pages long, is profusely illustrated with literally hundreds of woodcuts. They depict in some detail and accuracy individual cities of the known world, the most distant being Cusco in what is now Peru. Other themes pictured by the woodcuts include animals and insects, cannibals and misshapen men of faraway lands, such as those reputed to live in Asia. The last and fifth part of Münster's work describes Columbus's voyages to "the new world", also known as "America". His book has a map of these newly found regions, and explains that they consist of islands existing somewhere between Spain and Asia.

Münster was a Hebraist of some note as well as a humanist. His interests were universal, and even today his efforts at learning inspire
awe and the attention of bibliographers. As Gerald Strauss has written, Münster’s *Cosmographey* was “an encyclopedia in the sixteenth-century sense: universal in scope, touching on nearly all subjects, incorporating, or making use of, all pertinent sources of information as they were or became available, and aiming at completeness. . . . Though the manner in which such knowledge was conveyed to the reader was informal, often anecdotal, the amount of solid learning packed into the text makes perusal a formidable task.” One senses in Münster’s recension of textual sources that his ideas about the Empire and about Germany are well sustained by a knowledge of world history. His humanist viewpoint required that man should see himself in an accurate context of place and time.


The smallest of these chronicles in Ranke’s library is a slender volume on the history of the city of Mainz. It survives in an unimposing nineteenth-century binding needed, no doubt, to preserve the book itself. As its overly long title indicates, the scope of this work is much less ambitious than that of many of the others. Nevertheless, the work includes a title page and sixty-nine plates that have been hand-painted in watercolors and portray the coats of arms of the various bishops, archbishops, and electors of the city of Mainz. Thus, in its own way, this slender volume represents a considerable and pleasing change in the history of book illustrations from the simplicity of the monochromatic woodcuts.

The book contains a short chapter on the inception of printing at Mainz. Corthoys quotes others who believe that printing started in Strasbourg or in Holland, but ascribes its actual invention to Johann

The title page of *Cosmographie* with a woodcut portrait of Sebastian Münster.
Gutenberg at Mainz and his helpers Johann Faust, Johann Medimbach, and Peter Schöffer.


In Eberhard Happel’s work, which comprises fourteen volumes, we find a newer, more contemporary type of chronicle. The author purports to relate only the most significant happenings or the “historical kernel” of each of the years in question, beginning with 1618 and the Thirty Years’ War.

Happel’s preface bears noticing for stating the purpose of his chronicle:

> If no one from our fathers’ times had written, so would we have now not the slightest to say about their deeds and institutions, virtues and vices, happiness and unhappiness, increase and losses, victory and defeats, land and cities, building and destruction, praiseworthy and tyrannical governments, good and evil deeds, life and death, but everything would be alike with their death and passing, yes all memory of their deeds only a dream, or even more often a fable, instead of true history. . . . Therefore, it is in the world a most noteworthy thing that history, insofar as it happens here and there, at every time be described, and hereafter from time to time be preserved in writing and by the printing press, for they are and remain forever living, and give their posterity an enduring and special use, as much a warning for one against vice, as for another an inspiration towards good and worthy deeds.

Later, Happel quotes Philo as saying: “Historiam lectio prodest ad parandam virtutem, & ad curam Reipublicae” (The reading of history profits the cultivation of character, as well as the care of the republic).

This chronicle is bound in vellum together with four other later historical works also from the sixteenth century, and is 19 centimeters high. The bookplate reads “Ex libris Christiani Caroli Ludovici de Savigny”.

In his dedication to the abbot of the monastery of Fulda, Müntzer acknowledges his debt to the “Fulda Chronicle”, but mentions it as “sketchy”. His own efforts will, he hopes, fill it out and provide also a short history of the Abbey of Fulda and its abbots from its beginning to his time.

Müntzer’s work is squarely based on biblical foundations. Recalling the prophecy of Elijah, he states forthrightly that the age of the world is six thousand years, comprising two thousand spent futilely between Adam and Abraham, two thousand under the Jewish law, and two thousand as “the days of Christ”. After that, the world is expected to end.

The style of Müntzer’s work is for the most part simply to range one paragraph after another much like a diary, each entry relating an event he thought worthy of note. So, for example:

In the year one thousand and three Vuilligesius, the son of a waggoner, became bishop of Mainz, and had everywhere painted in his chambers a wheel, thereby to be ever mindful of his origin and not to exalt himself too high because of his office. For which reason since his time every bishop of Mainz carries a wheel in his coat of arms.

To Leopold von Ranke, who admired objectivity and whose proclaimed motto was “wie es eigentlich gewesen” (as it really was), the value of the cosmographies might well be questionable. As we have seen, Ranke collected a number of these volumes for his own library. However, he was reserved in his appreciation of them, preferring to draw on diplomatic and official documents for his own writing, an approach that, ironically, in recent years has been criticized for concentrating too much on the great heads of state. Nevertheless, these
early books of knowledge held a fascination for him. In discussing the extent of their worth, Ranke wrote: “The rest of the chronicles, both printed and unprinted, from every country and from every city, stemming from both recent as well as from olden times, are so numerous that I shan’t even touch upon them. If in the earliest of times they are full of fables, those from the sixteenth century, which are numerically the greatest, are more believable; yes, some of them are attractive, even beautiful.”