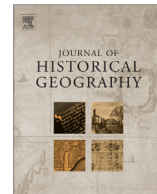


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Historical Geography at Large

Maps online: digital historical geographies<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

This essay considers two websites devoted to the display and interpretation of historical maps. *Atlases: Poetics, Politics and Performance* is an online exhibition created by researchers and librarians, with introductory texts by Veronica Della Dora and Mark Jackson. It draws from a selection of atlases spanning the four centuries from c.1570 to 1970 which are preserved in the University of Bristol Library's Special Collections and in the Library of the School of Geographical Sciences. *Mapping the Nation* is a companion site to Susan Schulten's book of the same name, published by the University of Chicago Press in 2012. It offers a comprehensive survey of over 120 national, regional and thematic maps of North America from 1811 to 1932. Together, they provide an opportunity to reflect on the digital methods by which research in historical geography may best be presented over the coming years. © 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Website; Exhibition; Atlas; Map; Nation; Digital humanities

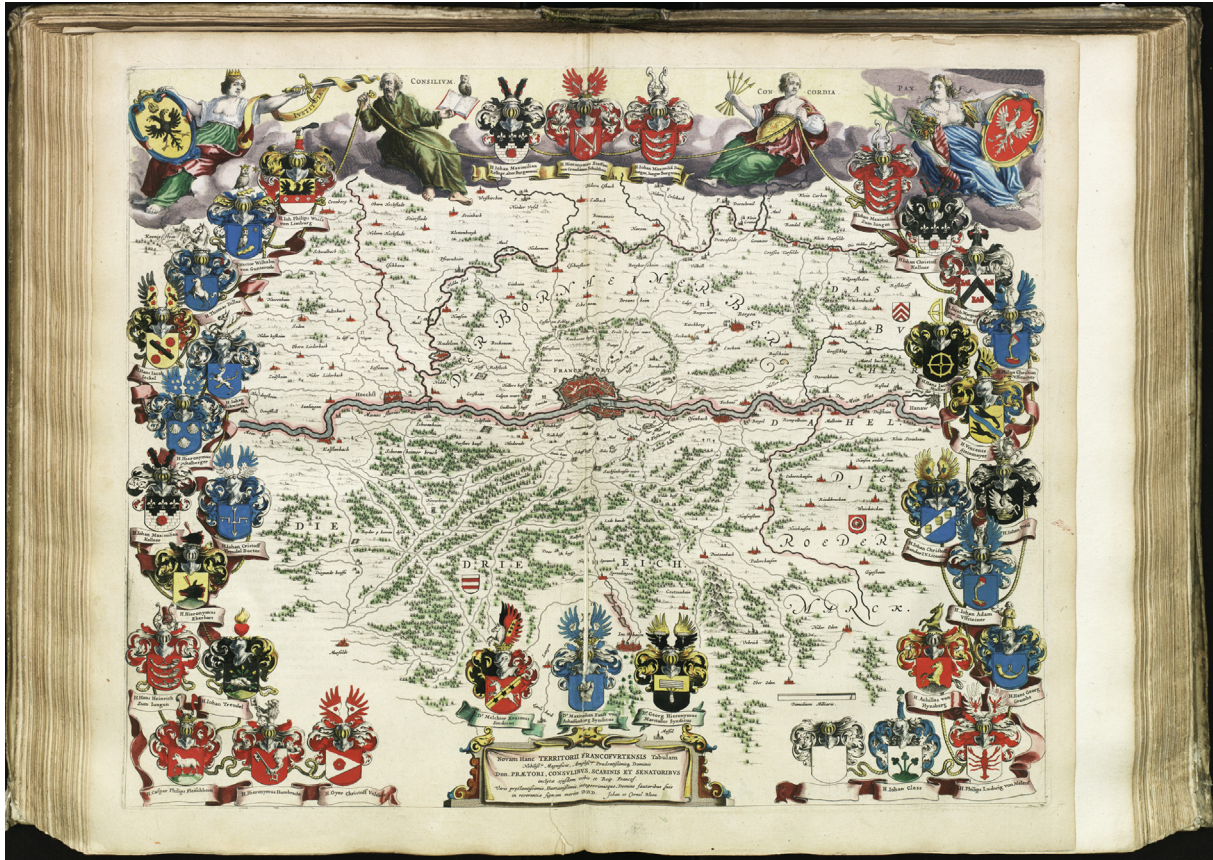
As mapping becomes ever more virtual it is salutary to watch scholars of its history respond by using digital mediation to display cartography and narrate its history in ways that supplement the traditional academic monograph and museum exhibition. Two recent web exhibitions offer some interesting responses to utilising online resources, while simultaneously pointing in very different directions. *Atlases: Poetics, Politics and Performance* is an online exhibition, accompanied by essays written by Veronica Della Dora and Mark Jackson, that draws from a selection of atlases dating from c.1570–1970 and preserved in the University of Bristol Library's Special Collections and in the Library of the School of Geographical Sciences. *Mapping the Nation* is a 'companion site' to Susan Schulten's book of the same name, published by the University of Chicago Press in 2012, and offers a comprehensive survey of over 120 national, regional and thematic maps of North America from 1811 to 1932. Like the maps (and atlases) they exhibit, both projects have agendas that go beyond their investment in digital reproduction, and which say a great deal about academic endeavour in the humanities in the UK and the US. The Bristol exhibition follows the trend for scholars to seek wider public audiences for their work in collaboration with specialists in dissemination and website design, while Schulten's site is a professional

adjunct to the promotion of a high-profile monograph supported directly by her university and indirectly by the publisher. Both, it would seem, represent what I suspect will become an increasingly prevalent phenomenon in the dissemination of research in historical geography over the coming years; and both offer lessons about what might enhance our understanding of their academic fields of enquiry.

The *Atlases* exhibition covers what could be called now the 'heyday' of the printed paper atlas—particularly ironic given the digital format of this particular exhibition—from the sixteenth to the late twentieth century, neatly sidestepping earlier manuscript or more recent online examples, for the good reasons that neither medium lends itself easily to the atlas's format. The exhibition is broken down into four sections: 'Renaissance Theatres'; 'The Rhetoric of Truth'; 'The Colonial Gaze'; and 'National Identities and Conflict'. Each section contains a short introduction, beneath which are virtual vitrines containing a selection of clickable atlases that can be examined in high resolution, and which are supplemented by further brief descriptions of their makers and other salient points identified by the team of curators (drawn primarily from members of Bristol's School of Geographical Sciences). There is a detailed bibliography which is very helpful in not only pursuing

<sup>☆</sup> This piece considers two websites: *Atlases: Poetics, Politics and Performance*, <http://uobatlasen.net/> (accessed on 28 September 2013) and *Mapping the Nation*, <http://www.mappingthenation.com/> (accessed on 28 September 2013).

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**Fig. 1.** W.J. Blaeu, Map of Frankfurt, in: *Theatrum orbis terrarum sive atlas novus*, Vol. I, 1645 (University of Bristol Library's Special Collections). Framing a bird's-eye view of the city of Frankfurt and the surrounding region with allegorical figures and coats of arms, this map turns the viewer into a spectator on the 'theater of the world'. Blaeu's four-volume *Theatrum* subsequently developed into the *Atlas Maior* (1665), one of the most beautiful and expensive books of the seventeenth century.

areas of study specific to atlases, but also revealing that, notwithstanding Walter Goffart's rich but uneven study, *Historical Atlases: the First Three Hundred Years, 1570–1870* (2003),<sup>1</sup> historians of cartography still lack an authoritative study of this particular subject.

The exhibition has some creative responses to the obvious problem of how to exhibit a physical object online which is defined so completely by its physical and sequential nature as a printed book which, as the curators write, 'unfold a history, or rather, many parallel histories'. Drilling down through the texts into the range of atlases on show is done with great skill and application. However, the exhibition also raises some issues of interpretation which are of a more traditional nature. One is simply the limitations of drawing on one archive, which, in the case of Bristol University's interesting but hardly comprehensive materials, means that it is not possible to give a truly representative picture of the development of the atlas. Abraham Ortelius is here and much is made of the use of the classical metaphor of 'theatron' in early atlases. But Mercator's work is absent, presumably because the library does not hold a copy of his *Atlas* (1595), which changed not only the language but the future direction of the genre. Blaeu's *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (1645) is given prominence (Fig. 1), although his *Atlas Maior* is absent, again, for reasons of the institution's holdings. More significant issues are raised by some of the claims made in the essays

accompanying the atlas images. Ortelius' *Theatrum* (first published in 1570, and represented here by a later 1574 edition), is thus described as introducing 'the "Golden Age of Dutch" cartography (seventeenth to eighteenth centuries) which coincides with the rise of the Dutch Republic, claimed to be the first modern super power'. All of these claims and the assumptions behind them might be questioned.

There is surprisingly little comment on the crisis of cosmography that transformed the atlas from the late sixteenth century. Instead the exhibition moves on through the Enlightenment 'Rhetoric of Truth', where 'maps are scientific statements' (Fig. 2), to the 'Colonial Gaze', concerned with 'legitimizing and rationalizing control', arriving at how 'National Identities and Conflict' show atlases 'are key tools for shaping and sustaining national identities in the same way national anthems, parades, flags, and currency are'. Bristol's eclectic collection throws up some fascinating examples of more recent atlases, including the *Atlas Nacional de Cuba* (1970) and an atlas of Romania under Ceaușescu (1978) (see also Fig. 3). Apart from a few textual glitches which may be easily corrected in the online environment and some contestable claims (for example modern atlases are said to be 'democratically open to the general public'), the website poses broader questions about the way the individual examples are tied together. The mash-up of Brian Harley's writings on deconstructing the map with Benedict Anderson's

<sup>1</sup> W. Goffart, *Historical Atlases: the First Three Hundred Years, 1570–1870*, Chicago, 2003.

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