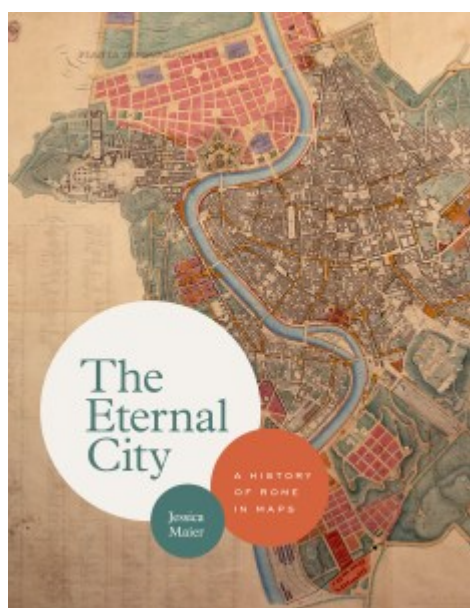




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Review by: Heather Sloan

Maier, Jessica. *The Eternal City: A History of Rome in Maps*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020. 199 p. \$40.00. LC: 2020003837. ISBN: 9780226591452.



Any author who tackles the millennia-long history of Rome and manages to keep their page count under 200 has already achieved something. Content left out no doubt lies scattered along the road to the final product like a traveler's belongings wistfully discarded on a long and arduous pilgrimage. With a subject like maps, visual representations are a necessary part of the analysis shared with the reader, and therefore images compete with text for limited space. Arriving at a final version is an iterative process in which a complex set of elements is balanced and harmonized—the same type of process that has played out in the physical space of Rome over centuries. In this sense, I imagine Jessica Maier's successive drafts of *The Eternal City* resembling the evolution of Rome in miniature: at any given moment, whether a city or a book, the reality of the thing itself represents a single manifestation, existing in continuous dialogue with many other *ideas* of what it is or could be. Unlike a city, however, a book's final chapter must ultimately be written. In this concise and beautiful volume, Maier has woven a tapestry—or “mapestry,” if you will—in which the power of maps to capture the changing essence of Rome slowly comes into focus as our temporal perspective widens.



Many eyes have seen Rome, and even more imaginations have conjured it. Maier's questions for this study are easy to ask but difficult to answer: What have people seen in Rome through the ages? How did they depict what they saw? What did they focus on in their spatio-visual representations of Rome, and equally important, what was omitted and why? What can we divine from the maps, cityscapes, and street plans of "the eternal city" generated throughout its history, and what remains unknowable? Rome's evolution over time is unique, and, more than most cities, its history is palpable in the present-day coexistence of physical markers from different epochs. Some, like the Colosseum, are freestanding and highly visible next to their modern-day counterparts. Others exist in complex vertical layers, one upon the other, and still others are a temporal patchwork, cobbled together using materials created many centuries apart.

Beyond the fascinating story of Rome itself, Maier explores these core processes of change and growth, revealing how a city's past, present, and future coexist with one another in a decidedly non-linear temporality, each shaping the physical and psychic contours of the others. She shows how geographical features such as the Tiber river and the hills of Rome have exerted their influence over human activity, acting as components of the city's sociopolitical identity rather than simple realities of the landscape. Maier outlines technological advances that influenced not only the direction and identity of the city but the ability to measure it accurately through surveying, as well as to depict it precisely using new printing, publishing, and design tools. She treated some of these same developments over a shorter span, specifically the four centuries starting in the Middle Ages, in her first book on Rome (Jessica Maier, *Rome Measured and Imagined*, The University of Chicago Press, 2015). In *The Eternal City*, she expands both the temporal framework and the fields of inquiry. As an art historian and interdisciplinary thinker, Maier is in a unique position to comment on visual depictions of Rome through time, on the fluid boundary between visions of Rome intended as art and those meant for more utilitarian purposes, both of which often contain elements of the other. Maier deftly navigates the sometimes-treacherous waters of interdisciplinary work, in which topics can easily become diffuse and sprawl out of control. With admirable discipline, she charts a focused course through a complex labyrinth, wandering through many conceptual spaces without getting lost or losing the reader.

Maier's endeavor succeeds in large part because she presents her analysis in chronological order. The introduction lays out the basic aim and scope of the work in its title, "*Rome as Idea and Reality*." Since its inception, there have been multiple



competing visions of Rome, and Maier has thoughtfully curated a selection of maps for each major period, some grand, some modest, all in one way or another emblematic of the defining forces and constructs of their time. Chronological order gives Maier a grounded framework for wrangling the considerable diversity of visual materials presented. It also allows the reader to comprehend the waves of accretion and deletion, population and desolation, and glorification and devastation that produced the Rome of today—a city still lurching uncertainly toward a future that could manifest in a number of different ways.

For cartographers and map librarians, it is important to note that the definition of “map” is quite broad here and encompasses such things as descriptive travel memoirs, illustrated timelines, both very old and very recent 3D models (including discussion of digital renderings and virtual-reality environments), and other items that might not be categorized as maps in many contexts. As such, some readers may come away with technical and practical cartography questions unanswered or may disagree with what was included and left out. They may wish the author had provided a greater level of detail for specific maps and/or dedicated more space to mapmaking practices of a given era. I think for Maier, the wide array of materials helps illuminate conceptualizations of Rome—and by extension, other dynamic urban environments—by showing how they have been represented and for whom. In the introduction, she is helpfully upfront and, to my mind, accurate about what the book is and is not.

For me, Maier is most successful when exploring specific physical objects, their visual representation, and their evolving social meaning. She launches this type of analysis in Chapter One, highlighting the role of walls as both physical and metaphorical boundaries in Rome. She notes that the fable surrounding Rome’s very beginnings in the mid-700s BCE centers on a wall: Romulus kills his brother Remus when the latter provokes him by jumping over the wall separating their territories. (p. 11) Walls have figured heavily in Roman history and visual depictions of the city ever since. But as Maier observes, walls can be a sign of strength or weakness. As the Roman Empire diminished, its foes became increasingly bold in approaching the city itself, crossing through the now-vulnerable outer territories with impunity. Where the mere threat of Roman force had long been a deterrent well beyond the city’s boundaries, its power now existed only behind city walls, in its written histories, and in the memories of its rulers. In subsequent chapters, Maier circles back to show how the Aurelian wall in particular (built and fortified between the 270s and early 400s) continued to feature prominently on maps long after its



practical function as a barrier had waned. While the influence and population of Rome ebbed and flowed over the centuries, and its fortunes rose and fell, the symbolic power of the Aurelian wall shifted as well, at times a sign of everlasting potential, at others a humbling reminder of glory gained and lost, and to this day a conceptual marker of “inside” and “outside.” The fluctuating meaning of Rome’s walls prompted new questions for me about more recent wall-building endeavors in the United States. Is erecting a physical barrier a sign of strength or weakness for the US at this moment? What does it say about our citizenry that various constituencies interpret the effort so differently? Will the unfinished wall appear on maps in the future and, if so, how might it be interpreted? Many of the questions Maier asks about Rome are relevant to today’s cities and nations as well.

Maier continues her multidisciplinary approach to Rome and its visual depiction throughout the book, relating each new period back to prior ones to reveal how urban development in the city has unfolded in fits and starts, mostly without a coherent plan and according to the whims of those in power. At critical points, Rome and its denizens had managed to reinvent and reinvigorate the city when it seemed doomed to the dustbin of history. As the empire unraveled, Christianity gained a foothold, and the city became a destination for the pious. Consequently, many maps from this period feature oversized basilicas (enormous to begin with) and are designed in part as spiritual souvenirs of the journey, oriented on the page to accommodate pilgrims arriving on foot. During the Renaissance, the development of more formal archaeological methods led to visual reconstructions of Ancient Rome, some maps more imaginative than factual, others well-researched labors of love created over a lifetime and based on spelunking adventures in buried ruins (think Indiana Jones). At the same time, surveyors were developing more accurate methods and coalescing around standard symbols for topographical features. Thus, other maps from this period point toward the future much more than the past. The scholars’ revaluation of antiquities led to elite Europeans, particularly well-bred Brits, designating Rome as a mandatory part of the “Grand Tour” for any cultured gentleman and, later, lady. This is the age of the personal travel memoir, which acted as a type of guidebook, mapping must-see art and architecture as well as places to indulge in conspicuous consumption, thereby raising one’s status back home. As travel modes improved and the industrial revolution created growing middle classes with disposable income, tourist masses spilled into Rome out of trains and steamships. Touring companies, in particular Thomas Cook’s outfit, were there to meet them with sightseeing maps and recommendations for modestly priced food and lodging. Of course, in addition to showing both elite and middle-



class tourists where to go, map- and guidebook-makers were in powerful positions to decide what was important. As Maier chronicles these and later periods up to the present day, she takes care to point out the who, how, and why behind what is emphasized and omitted on maps of a given period.

The Eternal City is an informative and entertaining read. It is also a beautiful volume. But at times, I was disappointed in the image layout choices. Some large maps are printed over two facing pages, and the seam gap between the two map pieces interferes with important features in a disturbing way. This is especially true for the image of The Peutinger Table (Fig. 18, pp. 28-9) but is a problem elsewhere in the book as well. At other times, the images are so small that their features are not easily legible, so their effect is diminished somewhat. These problems are common in books of this size (8.5 x 11 inches), and my frustration was mitigated a bit by the presence of detail enlargements. There is tantalizing beauty and variety among the maps and visual depictions, and I long to see some of them in person someday. Despite the potential for a map-oriented reader to be disappointed by image size or the amount of technical and practical detail mentioned earlier, this book makes a valuable and lovely contribution to the field, and I highly recommend it to collection managers, subject area specialists, and personal collectors alike.

Heather Sloan, MLS
Media and Maps Assistant
Herman B Wells Library
University of Bloomington
Bloomington, IN

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