



The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society, 1250-1600

By Alfred W. Crosby

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Western Europeans were among the first, if not the first, to invent mechanical clocks, geometrically precise maps, double-entry bookkeeping, precise algebraic and musical notations, and perspective painting. More people in Western Europe thought quantitatively in the sixteenth century than in any other part of the world, enabling them to become the world's leaders. With amusing detail and historical anecdote, Alfred Crosby discusses the shift from qualitative to quantitative perception that occurred during the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. Alfred W. Crosby is the author of five books, including the award-winning Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900 (Cambridge, 1986)

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

The Measure of Reality is the third book in a series in which Alfred Crosby, a noted historian, asks how it is that Western European societies could have conquered so much of the world in the space of a few generations. The answer, he finds, is in certain agricultural and technological techniques. In this volume he turns to one set of techniques in particular: the precise measurement of time, number, and distance. That precise measurement enabled European armies to march in step, enabled navigators to find faraway ports, and enabled gunsmiths and chemists to formulate the weapons of conquest. These inventions were refined over centuries, but most came heavily into play in the years between 1250 and 1300, the period Crosby examines in closest detail. *The Measure of Reality* offers a fascinating, big-picture view of the artifacts that changed history.

From Publishers Weekly

Having written such books as *Ecological Imperialism*, Crosby, a professor of American studies, history and geography at the University of Texas, Austin, wondered what it was that made Europeans such successful colonists and empire builders. In this engrossing study, he posits that it was Europeans' ability to divide the world, whether experiential or abstract, into quanta which they could then manipulate and exploit. Crosby begins by reminding readers how different the Western worldview was a millennium ago. For example, Europeans, Crosby notes, "had a system of unequal accordian-pleated hours that puffed up and deflated so as to ensure a dozen hours each for daytime and nighttime, winter and summer." This more fluid conception of reality did not change over night. Crosby first looks at the "Necessary but Insufficient Causes" like the codification of time and calendar, new strides in cartography and astronomy and the introduction of Arabic numerals, before looking at the match that set fire to the rage to quantify. This was, he says, the shift to visualization. With the printing press, large numbers of people moved from oral to literate culture; with increasingly complicated polyphony, composers found need for musical notation; painters, in an effort to bring depth to their work, applied geometry to make the third dimension visual on a flat plane; and merchants eschewed memory for the more reliable double-entry bookkeeping. Crosby's argument is, of course, much subtler (not to mention more entertaining) than this grossly simplified outline. It is a joy for anyone interested in why we think the way we think.

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From Library Journal

Crosby, who has written on the biological reasons Europeans were such successful imperialists, here expands on those reasons. He argues that even more fundamental and earlier than biology, Europeans began to think of reality in quantitative terms more than any other people in the world and thus became the world's leaders in science, technology, navigation, armaments, business, bureaucracy, music, and painting. (LJ 1/97)

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