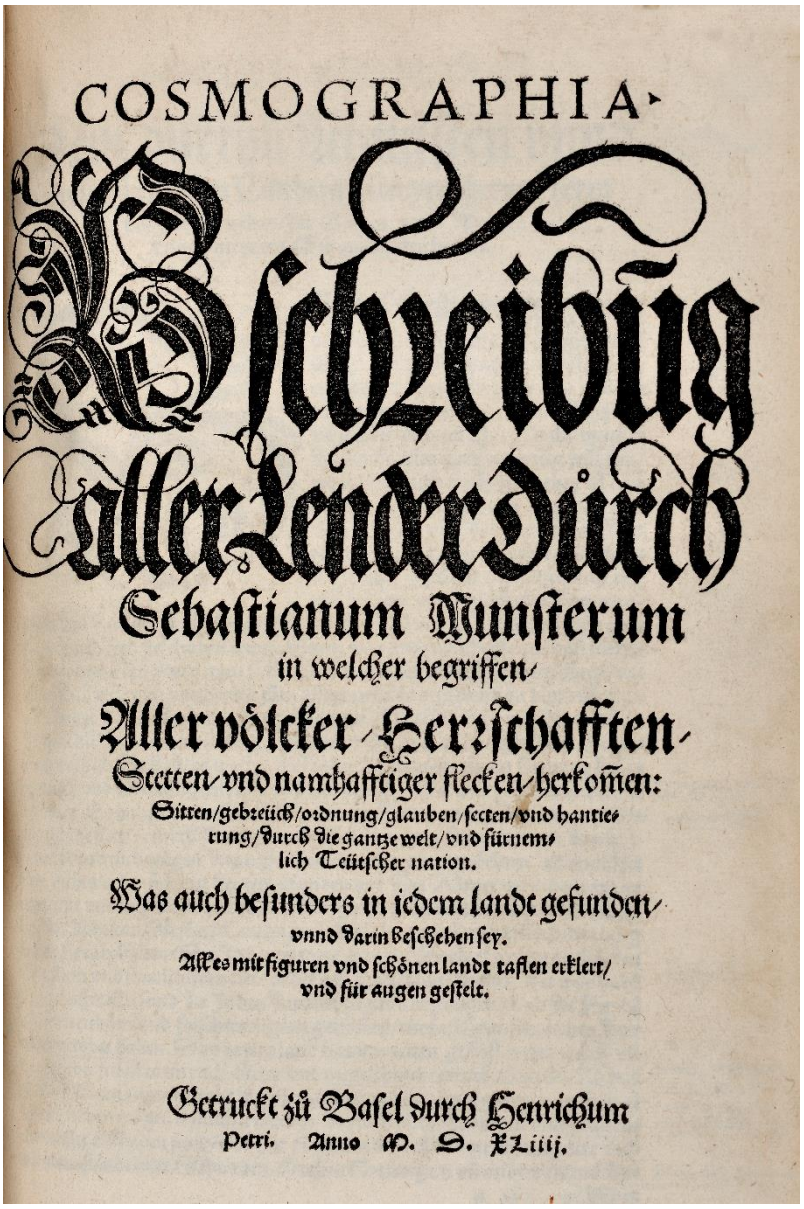
A Changing World: Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia* from 1544—BT3.187.1(2)

The library of New College, Oxford, contains a vast amount of early printed material from the sixteenth century. A particular highlight from this collection has to be Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia* from 1544. A rare first edition, the book in New College Library is the only copy in any academic library in the United Kingdom. Ambitious in scope, in this work Münster wanted to create a volume that would encompass all of human knowledge, writing in the preface that 'the art of cosmography concerns itself not only with the countries, habitations and lives of the various people of the earth, but also with . . . strange animals, trees . . . the habits, customs, laws, and governments of men'.[1] As such, the unfolding chapters lead the reader on a tour of the known world, revealing the geography, history, and theology of sixteenth-century Europe. This note will discuss its significance in terms of the European Renaissance and the history of the book, before finally investigating how it came to arrive in the college's collections.



COSMOGRAPHIA·

Beschreibung aller Lender durch Sebastianum Munsterum in welcher begriffen/ Aller völcker/ Herrschafften/ Stetten/ vnd namhafftiger flecken/ herkomen: Sitten/ gebreüch/ ordnung/ glauben/ secten/ vnd hantierung/ durch die gantze welt/ vnd fürnemlich Teütscher nation. Was auch besunders in iedem lande gefunden/ vnnd darin beschehen sey. Alles mit figuren vnd schönen landt tafelen erklert/ vnd für augen gestelt.

Getruckt zů Basel durch Henrichum Petri. Anno M. D. XLiiij.

New College Library, Oxford, BT3.187.1(2), title-page

[1] The translation is taken from Matthew McLean, *The Cosmographia of Sebastian Münster: Describing the World in the Reformation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 124.

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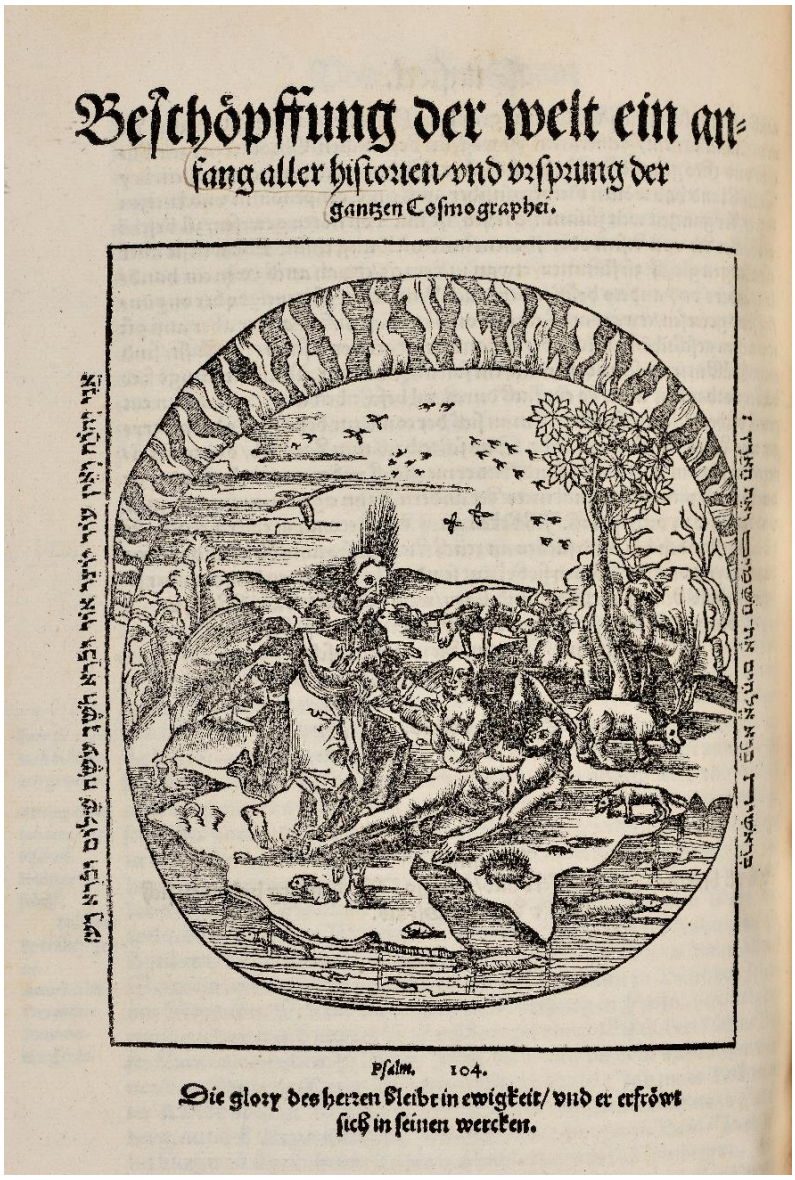
Firstly, the book's publication date of 1544 is very significant. This period was an important time of change for Germany and indeed all of Europe. Published during the Renaissance, less than fifty years after Columbus's first voyage to America, it was written when Europe was experiencing a 'profound and enduring upheaval and transformation in culture, politics, art, and society'.[2] Consequently, all areas of knowledge were in flux as established ideas were challenged. In the fifteenth century, scholars could work with a geography and ethnography that were little different from that of the eighth century. By the sixteenth century, however, new discoveries and ways of thinking had started to transform knowledge and the way it should be ordered.[3] By attempting to describe all of knowledge, the *Cosmographia* was a key part of this process.

This world in flux can be clearly seen in one of its most striking features: its series of intricate woodcuts. On the one hand, these illustrations reflect an older, traditionally medieval worldview that had not changed for centuries. Such a view is shown in the first woodcut—a beautiful depiction of the creation of the world, with Adam and Eve visible in the Garden of Eden.



New College Library, Oxford, BT3.187.1(2), woodcut of the Garden of Eden

[2] Jerry Brotton, *The Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 9.
[3] See Margaret Hodgen, 'Sebastian Muenster (1489–1552): A Sixteenth-Century Ethnographer', *Osiris* 11 (1954), 504–529, at p. 505.

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This woodcut precedes the first chapter of the *Cosmographia*. This first chapter incorporates Old Testament narratives, offering a history of the biblical flood and explaining how the descendants of Noah's sons Shem, Japhet, and Ham populated Europe, Asia, and Africa respectively.[4] Both the woodcut and initial chapter reveal that parts of a medieval worldview persisted into the sixteenth century. Detailed knowledge of scripture clearly remained paramount to any universal description of the world, with intellectuals continuing to extol the study of sacred texts. Münster subscribes to this tradition in the *Cosmographia*, demonstrating his detailed knowledge of sacred languages in this very woodcut by including Hebrew text on its left and right. Renaissance thought may have started to challenge certain Christian assumptions in the sixteenth century, but the first part of the *Cosmographia* shows that the medieval world had far from disappeared completely.

This medieval mindset can be further glimpsed in later woodcuts. The *Cosmographia* may be an attempt to describe all knowledge, but this knowledge becomes less and less exact the further one travels from Münster's German homelands. As the descriptions focus on the faraway lands of Asia and Africa, monstrous races appear.

New College Library, Oxford, BT3.187.1(2)—the monstrous races

This illustration depicts a whole range of mythical creatures: a monopod, a cyclops, dwarves, a *blemye* or man whose head grows beneath his shoulders, and finally a cynocephalus or dog-headed human. Such monstrous figures were common in medieval world maps, with perhaps the most famous example being the *Mappa Mundi* of Hereford.[5] The fact that they appear here in the *Cosmographia* demonstrates the continuing influence of medieval thought in this text. Similarly to medieval maps, Münster limits monstrous races to the unexplored peripheries—places that 'were vague to the medieval mind but whose names evoked mystery'.[6] As geographical knowledge grew throughout the Renaissance and these races were not discovered, they were shifted to regions even less well-known, such as the New World.[7] Indeed, Christopher Columbus clearly believed in these races, reporting sightings of sirens and seven-foot long serpents on his inaugural voyage to America.[8] It is clear, therefore, that aspects of a medieval worldview remain in part of the *Cosmographia*. Both its focus on theology and its depiction of monstrous races on the peripheries of the world build on earlier texts and reflect a viewpoint that had remained unchanged for centuries before its publication.

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[4] See Surekha Davies, 'America and Amerindians in Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographiae universalis libri VI* (1550)', *Renaissance Studies* 25 (3) (2011), 351–73, at p. 356.
[5] See Malcolm Letts, 'The Pictures in the Hereford Mappa Mundi', *Notes and Queries* 200 (January 1955), 2–6.
[6] John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 1.
[7] ibid, p. 1.
[8] Persephone Braham, 'The Monstrous Caribbean', in Asa Simon Mittman with Peter J. Dendle (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 17–47, at p. 19.

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On the other hand, though, a closer look at the *Cosmographia* reveals that it can by no means be described as a purely medieval text. Münster's complete description of the world may contain many gaps, but it is not completely incorrect. Instead, its detailed descriptions of the cities, states, and customs of Europe were built up over a large period of time, and contain much useful and accurate knowledge. Indeed, the *Cosmographia* was the result of eighteen years of work by Münster and the result of a long research process. To ensure its accuracy, Münster completed long trips around his native Germany to collect empirical data. Where it was not possible to collect such data, he made use of an extensive network of contacts from across Europe to both collect and clarify his sections on specific countries.[9] Münster clearly wanted to ensure that his *Cosmographia* was as accurate as possible.

New College Library, Oxford, BT3.187.1(2), a woodcut map of north-eastern Europe

The results of this more scientific research process can again be glimpsed in the woodcuts included throughout the text. The detailed, and surprisingly accurate, map shown here depicts north-eastern Europe, focusing on Lithuania, Estonia, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. The *Cosmographia* may include elements from the medieval *mappae mundi* elsewhere, but this more modern map represents a clear departure from that earlier tradition. It not only makes use of Münster's research process, but begins to set the format that would be taken for all modern maps, with the map facing north. In medieval Europe, maps had instead often 'placed Jerusalem at their centre, with little or no attempt to understand or represent the wider world'.[10] Münster therefore

[9] McLean, *Cosmographia*, p. 145.
[10] Brotton, *The Renaissance*, p. 79.

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broke away from medieval tradition in the *Cosmographia*, creating woodcut maps that are recognisably modern. Indeed, it became such a renowned geographical text upon publication that it influenced Ortelius's famed *Theatrum orbis terrarum*,[11] considered to be the first truly modern atlas.[12] Thanks to Münster's scholarship and research, the *Cosmographia* was a text that gained authority throughout Europe.

Münster, therefore, represents a world in flux. Although respecting certain medieval viewpoints, the *Cosmographia* shows that he is starting to divert from established norms. Like his contemporaries, his extensive research process shows him to be a man who was clearly insatiably curious about the world around him, refusing to take anything at face value. As such, he has been described as a 'quintessential Renaissance polymath'.[13] A closer reading of the *Cosmographia* reveals Münster to be an important member of a generation that had begun 'to accept as fact the mutability of the physical and human world',[14] one that was rapidly changing due to new discoveries. As a result of Münster's empirical research, his book represents the start of a rapidly changing Renaissance thought process—one that would move away from a viewpoint focused mainly on theology towards one that welcomed scientific, rational knowledge.

Concurrently, the fact that the *Cosmographia* reflects constantly evolving Renaissance thought makes it important for the wider history of the book. It is particularly important in terms of book production, demonstrating not only new knowledge, but also new ideas of how to order a text effectively. At first glance, New College's first edition of the *Cosmographia* has no discernible order. The different sections lead the reader on a tour of the known world in a rather idiosyncratic way. As we have seen, at some points in the text the reader is confronted with mythical creatures whilst in others, scant attention is paid to key countries of Europe. The section on the British Isles, for instance, only runs to a couple of pages. If we look closer at the text, though, we can again see the influence of the Renaissance in attempts to order this—albeit incomplete—knowledge more effectively. This first edition of the *Cosmographia*, for example, is clearly divided into six books, with each book further divided into many short chapters and sections. Likewise, the ethnography has a clear geographical order, running from west to east across the known world and starting with Britain.[15] Thanks partly to this design, the reader can therefore effectively browse through the text. If they would like to know more about a particular region, they can use the book's order to help them find the relevant section quickly and easily. In this first edition of the *Cosmographia*, therefore, the reader can see an initial attempt to order knowledge more effectively for the reader, creating what has been described as the first 'proto-encyclopaedia'.[16]

Indeed, the first edition of the *Cosmographia* represented just the start of a constantly evolving period of book production. Due in part to its popularity and the rapidly expanding knowledge of the sixteenth century, Münster's text was extensively reprinted and redesigned. Even in the author's own lifetime, it went through eight printings. After his death, revised and expanded editions continued to appear until 1628, with thirty-five editions produced in German, Latin, French, Italian, and Czech.[17] One of these later editions, from 1572, also belongs to New College Library.[18] These new printings were by no means static. Later editors continued to build on the work that Münster had started. Over time, through subsequent editions, the proto-encyclopaedia

[11] Davies, 'America and Amerindians', p. 368.
[12] This book, first published in 1570, can also be found in New College Library's extensive collections—at BT1.24.1.
[13] Davies, 'America and Amerindians', p. 355.
[14] See Hodgen, 'Sebastian Muenster', p. 510.
[15] ibid, pp. 509–510.
[16] McLean, *Cosmographia*, p. 341.
[17] Gerald Strauss, 'A Sixteenth-Century Encyclopedia: Sebastian Münster's *Cosmography* and its Editions', in Charles H. Carter (ed.), *From the Renaissance to the Counter-Reformation: Essays in Honour of Garrett Mattingly* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966), pp. 145–63.
[18] This later edition, entitled *Cosmographiae uniuersalis lib. VI*, was published in Latin in 1572. It was also donated to New College Library by John Owen, and includes several woodcuts and updated maps of the New World. Held at BT1.25.14, it is a subject worthy of further research.

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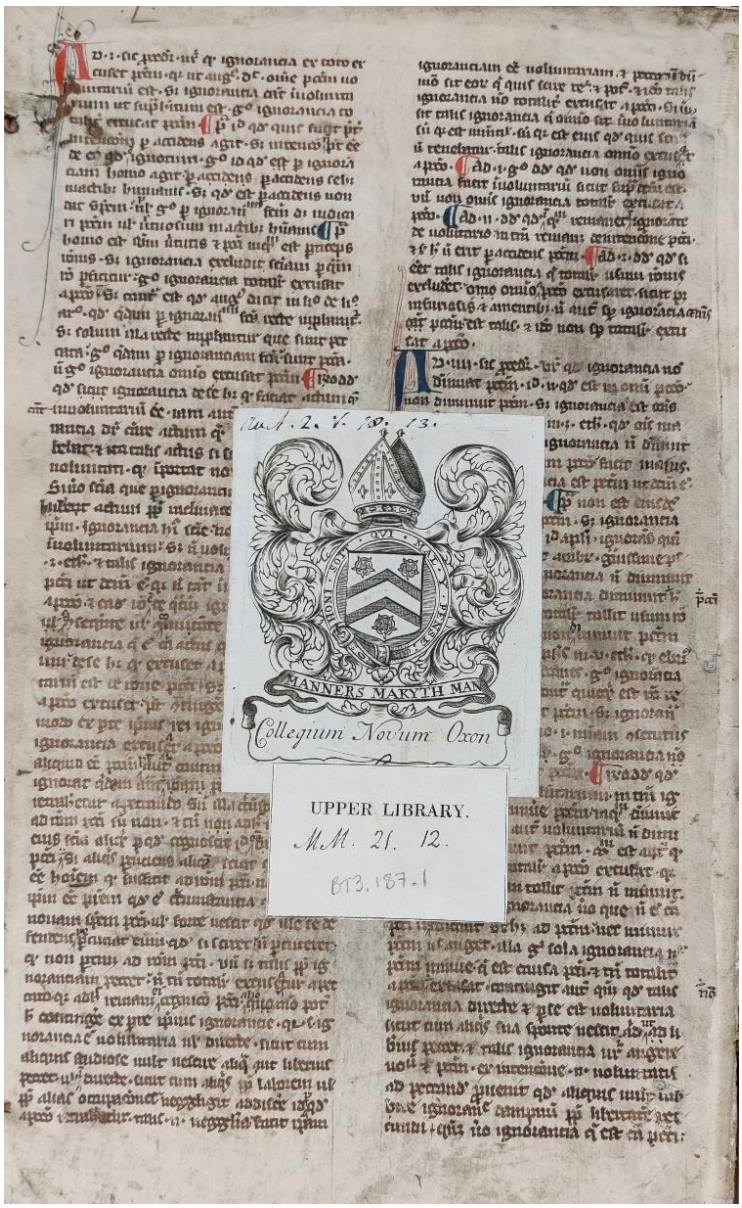
he created in the first edition became more and more recognisable to twenty-first century readers. Chapters were expanded, ever-more detailed indices were added to aid browsing, and ever-more intricate woodcuts were added to illustrate the text. As European explorers brought back increasingly accurate information about the New World, this knowledge was in turn added to the expanding editions of the *Cosmographia*. Thanks to it, Brazil and Peru, for example, 'emerged from the mists of fantasy into the light of the empirical world'.[19] The *Cosmographia*, therefore, represents a change in book production. Its subsequent editors became increasingly preoccupied with improving its design, experimenting with its order and refining the still relatively new technology of print to best lay out the knowledge and ideas born out of the Renaissance and European exploration. New College Library's copy of the first edition is particularly important in this regard, as it demonstrates the initial influence of Renaissance ideas on book production. It began a journey that would end with an encyclopaedia instantly recognisable to the twenty-first century reader.

Even the book's physical binding represents this break from the past. The New College copy of the *Cosmographia* is bound using manuscript waste from an older unwanted medieval manuscript. Although perhaps shocking to twenty-first century readers, this process was actually common in the sixteenth century. As the printing press expanded and books were printed at an ever-increasing rate, copies of nearly every type of medieval text in Europe were recycled as parts of new printed books. Leaves and partial leaves were used to support the binding as a pastedown, as in this case, but were also utilised as reinforcing strips, pasteboard pads, flyleaves, and wrappers for other books.[20] As a result of its binding, the New College Library copy of the *Cosmographia* does not just represent an initial break from medieval tradition in terms of its content and order. Even its physical properties represent a changing mindset, one that was replacing and recycling more established medieval ideas. Like its content, the very production of the *Cosmographia* straddles both the medieval and Renaissance worlds.



Manuscript waste incorporated into the binding
New College Library, Oxford, BT3.187.1

[19] Strauss, 'Sixteenth-Century Encyclopedia', p. 156.
[20] Heather Bamford, *Cultures of the Fragment: Uses of the Iberian Manuscript, 1100–1600* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), p. 50.

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The provenance note (above), and accompanying inscription in the New College Library Benefactors' Book (below)

Fortunately, the provenance of this important work is clearly documented. A note at the start of the book, pictured above left, reads 'Liber collegii santæ Mariæ Winton in Oxon, ex dono Joannis Owenii . . . socii . . . 1591 Aug:1⁰'. It is, therefore, certain that the *Cosmographia* was donated to the library by the Welshman John Owen (1563/5–1622?). This fact is further supported by the accompanying entry in the Benefactors' Book for the Library. A Fellow of New College, Owen became distinguished in his life for his perfect mastery of the Latin language and his ability to write epigrams. A staunch Puritan, in later life Owen turned his wit and criticism towards the Catholic Church. Consequently, his books of *Epigrammata* were placed on the Index Librorum Prohibitorum in 1654.[21]

Owen donated the 1544 edition of the *Cosmographia* to New College Library in 1591, during his final year as a Fellow. In this year, he decided to leave Oxford to take up a teaching position near Monmouth. This donation built on his previous generosity, as Owen had already donated New College Library's later—and much more common—Latin edition of the *Cosmographia* back in 1584.[22] As can be seen above, the *Cosmographia* is bound together with another volume: the *Dennmärkische Chronick* of Albert Krantz, printed in Strasbourg in 1545. The two items were bound together into one volume either upon donation or shortly afterwards, as the binding shows evidence of chaining on the upper board fore-edges. It is not clear why Owen decided to donate precisely these books to the library, but his Puritan faith may have guided him to publications from Protestant northern Europe. His donation of the later Latin edition and the vast amount of Latin

[21] See Susanna de Beer, et al. (eds.), *The Neo-Latin Epigram: A Learned and Witty Genre* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009), p. 276.
[22] See above, footnote 18.

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annotations in the 1544 edition, though, suggest that the text was influential to him, as these annotations may have been written in Owen's hand. Although exact attribution is not possible, the fact that the annotations are in Latin clearly points to Owen. His mastery of Latin is clear from his epigrams, so it would definitely be a language he would know better than Münster's original German. At any rate, the number of annotations shows a clear engagement with the text, demonstrating the *Cosmographia's* important role in disseminating knowledge throughout Europe.

In conclusion, Münster's *Cosmographia* perfectly encapsulates the rapidly changing Europe of the mid-sixteenth century. Although very much still influenced by the medieval world, it demonstrates how scholars attempted to reconcile new knowledge with medieval frameworks of thought. Likewise, it is a key part of book history. Due to its structure and binding, it represents a clear break from medieval book production. In its subsequent editions, its editors further expanded on its content and order, refining it to create one of the first encyclopaedias in Europe since the age of antiquity. By the late seventeenth century, the Renaissance was largely complete. The educated European outlook on the natural world had changed beyond all recognition from what it had been in 1500.[23] Books such as the *Cosmographia* played a large part in not only influencing this change, but also spreading this knowledge around Europe. New College Library is grateful for John Owen's bequest of the first edition that played a role in this very process.

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[23] Peter Dear, *Revolutionizing the Sciences: European Knowledge and its Ambitions, 1500–1700* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 164.

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