

Book Review

Van den Broecke, Marcel, *Abraham Ortelius, 1527–1598, Life, Works, Sources and Friends*, self-published through Cartographica Neerlandica, Bilthoven, Netherlands, 2015. Hardbound, 9.6 x 12 inches, 379 pages, 293 b/w illustrations, accompanying DVD, bibliography. ISBN 978-90-90296-5. € 49.50 plus shipping. Available from www.orteliusmaps.com

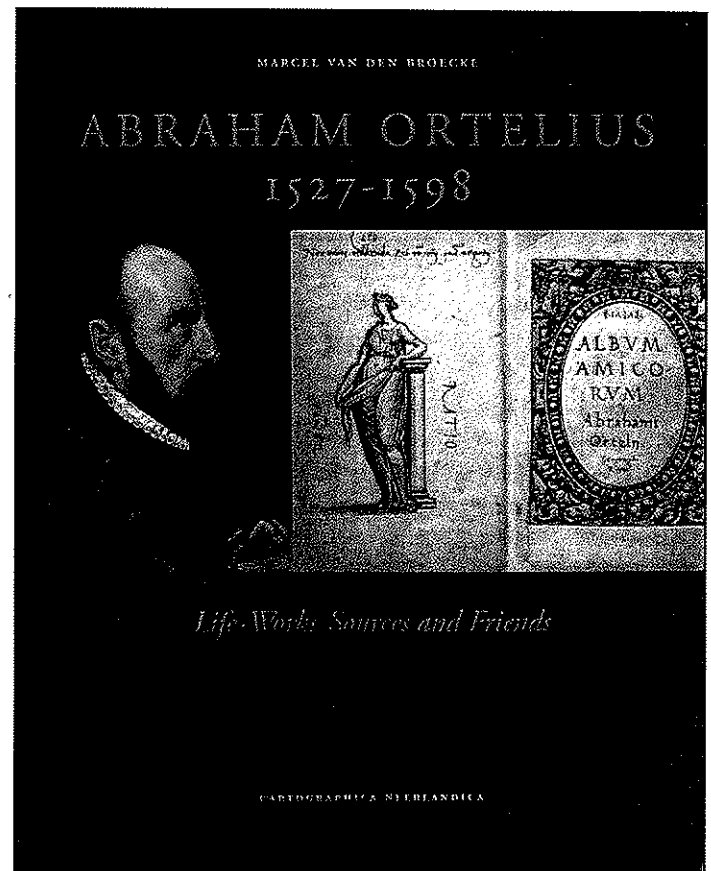
Reviewed by Fredric Shauger

Marcel van den Broecke describes his latest book as a “sort of biography” of Abraham Ortelius. More than 400 studies make up the body of literature written about Ortelius since his death in 1598. Included in that literature are several biographical works. Ortelius’ friend Franciscus Sweerts wrote the first short biography of him only a few years after his death. A translation of that work was included in the posthumous English edition of Ortelius’ atlas, the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, published in 1606. Van den Broecke includes Sweerts’ biography at length in his new book.

Over the ensuing years, various authors have explored different aspects of Ortelius and his works. In 1993, Robert W. Karrow, Jr., published *Mapmakers of the Sixteenth Century and Their Maps*. That book profiled all of the cartographers cited by Ortelius, as sources for the maps in his *Theatrum*. Karrow featured Ortelius as the subject of his first profile and commented, “There is no full-length biographical study of Ortelius.” Van den Broecke has attempted to remedy that deficiency.

Included in his substantial contribution to the Ortelius literature, Van den Broecke penned a 26 page biographical essay in 1998. His new book is an expansion of that essay. His source materials are all of Ortelius’ own writings from his map texts, on verso observations, atlases, non-geographic publications and correspondence among his family and friends. The result is not a chronological biography but a collation of comments by Ortelius categorized and discussed by Van den Broecke.

That Abraham Ortels—who Latinized his name—is worthy of a biography cannot be gainsaid. His worldview, as reflected in his writings, was shaped by living his entire life in Renaissance Antwerp. He personally experienced the Reformation, the “Age of Discovery” and the “Spanish Fury,”—the pillage, rape and looting of the Low Countries by unpaid occupying Spanish soldiers. Those events drove many into exile. Jodocus Hondius fled to England. Gerhard Mercator, after detention and interrogation by the Spanish Inquisition, relocated with his family to Duisburg, Germany, never to return. Ortelius himself endured a two-year self-imposed exile in England while



personally flourishing at home. His sister Anne continued his successful publishing business. He was named Court Cartographer to Phillip II of Spain and when rampaging Spanish soldiers ravished his home, the Spanish Crown reimbursed his losses. The story of his life is certainly worth telling.

Van den Broecke organizes all of Ortelius’ writings and assigns them to designated topics. Under the heading of “national characteristics”, Van den Broecke quotes Ortelius’ observations that the Irish have a “carefree disposition” and the French are “quarrelsome.” In Russia, “the state of women ... is most miserable.” The longer “the Brabander lives, the more fool he becomes.” Under

Van den Broecke's "travel" section, Ortelius comments about Cyprus: "The entire island has delicious things to offer, the women here are very lascivious." (There is no historical record that the unmarried Ortelius ever visited Cyprus). Categorized under "Miracles," Ortelius notes, that "near Lisbon, mares get pregnant with foals by standing in the wind."

Among the biographical details related, Van den Broecke discusses Ortelius' penchant for travel. His journey to Italy resulted in a passion for collecting ancient coins. Van den Broecke's travel section has photos of the coins in Ortelius' collection. One of Ortelius' non-geographic publications was a work about the Roman gods appearing on those coins. In 1551, Ortelius visited Oxford, England. He frequently traveled to Frankfurt to attend the semi-annual book fair. It was there, in 1554, that he first met his life-long friend Gerhard Mercator. He visited Poitiers, France where he and his companions engraved their names on a famous stone dolmen. The dolmen still exists though the engravings are practically worn away.

Ortelius' career spanned some thirty-four years. He began as a map colorist and evolved into a mapmaker and cartographic publisher. His earliest loose maps, drawn prior to the first edition of his *Theatrum* in 1570, were the beginning. An eight-sheet world map published in 1564 by Cornelius de Jode was Ortelius' initial cartographic effort. He produced eight multi-sheet loose maps and four single sheet maps. He commissioned 37 copper plates for his individual maps and 205 copper plates were produced during his lifetime for the *Theatrum*. His career ended shortly after receiving the so-called "Peutingier Map." Ortelius intended to copy the map and include it in an edition of his *Parergon*—an atlas of historical and religiously themed maps. That Roman era road map, according to Van den Broecke, is traceable to the 4th century AD. Ortelius was personally supervising the engraving of the plates when he died on June 28, 1598.

All Ortelius' maps contained his personal commentary. He closely supervised the plate engravers, one of whom was Franciscus Hogenberg, co-publisher of the *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* (1573). Pieter Bruegel, the Elder, drew some of the ships that decorate his maps. It was, however, the publication of his *Theatrum*, the first modern world atlas containing the maps of others that gained him his greatest fame and fortune. He bought a series of ever-larger houses to store his constantly growing collections

of coins, books, treatises and his own works. Van den Broecke discusses, and illustrates in detail, the items in Ortelius' ever-growing collections.

Section 2 of the book discusses the various other works published by Ortelius. An included DVD contains facsimiles of those works, for example, his *Album Amicorum* and *Deorum Deaerumque Capita*. His *Synonymia* was a study of geographic toponyms.

The book's final pages explore the relationship between Ortelius and Gerhard Mercator. Their friendship lasted until Mercator's death in 1594. Although they lived far apart subsequent to Mercator's exile, they maintained close contact. Ortelius acknowledged the influence that Mercator exerted over his own work. That relationship is detailed by Van den Broecke in Chapter 9 of his book, 'A world of Innovation, Cartography in the Time of Gerhard Mercator', reviewed in issue 95 of *The Portolan*.

Despite Van den Broecke's assertion, this work is not a biography. What he has created is a word portrait of Ortelius. The book being reviewed has a section in which Van den Broecke displays and comments on all the portraits painted of Ortelius. The first, created before 1570 by Hendrik Golzius, was engraved by Philip Galle. That portrait appeared in the *Theatrum* in 1579 and thereafter. Numerous others portraits were painted. However, the painting by Adriann Thomaszoon Key, for which Ortelius sat, became the model for the post mortem portrait by the Flemish master Peter Paul Rubens more than thirty years after Ortelius' death. Rubens refined the details of Key's painting to create a portrait of a man of wealth, dignity and introspection. Van den Broecke has done the same to create a Rubenesque word portrait of Ortelius by creating a detailed accounting of the man's senses of awe, humor, adventure and his disappointments and frustrations.

—This is the fourth book review by WMS member Fredric (Fred) Shauger in *The Portolan*. Three have been of books by Marcel van den Broecke about Ortelius and his works. Fred is President Emeritus of the New York Map Society.

