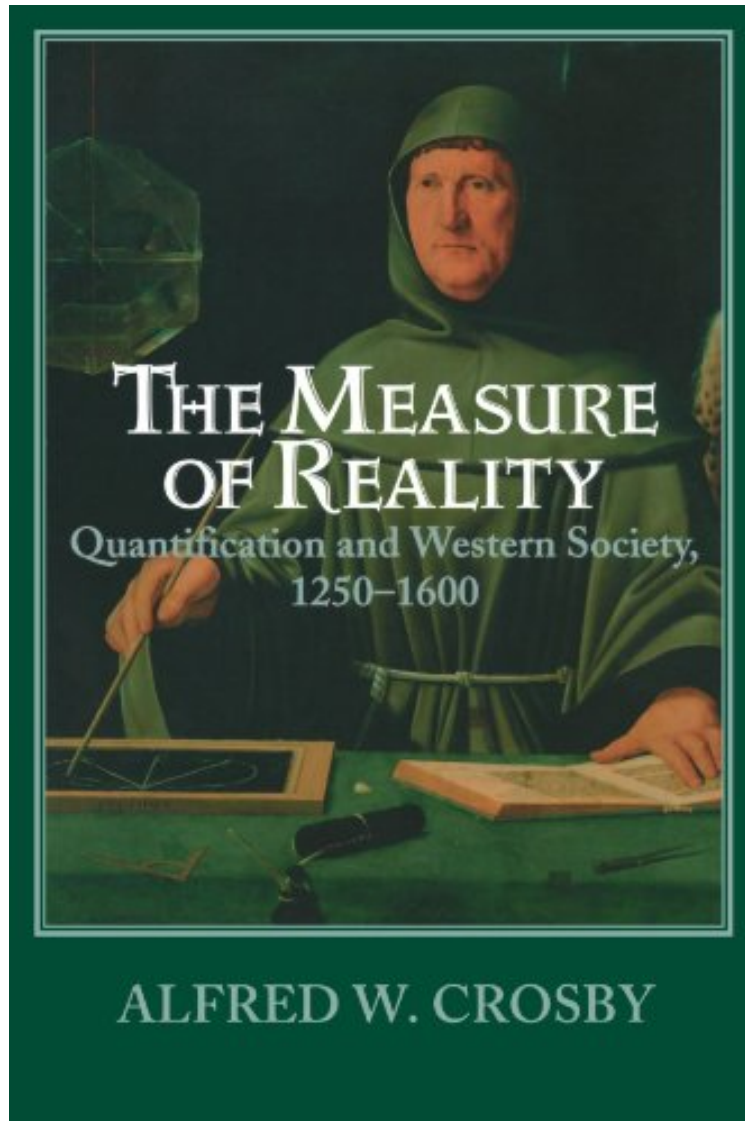


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## The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society, 1250-1600

*Alfred W. Crosby*

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**Alfred W. Crosby : The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society, 1250-1600** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society, 1250-1600:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Prometheus the Measurer: How Quantification and the Technology

of Sight Shaped the West By Bruce Lerro Bruce Lerro Author: Forging Promethean Psychology: From the Middle Ages To The End of the 19th century What does the use of Hindu-Arabic numbers, linear perspective painting, polyphonic singing and double-entry bookkeeping have in common? Some very provocative answers are provided by Alfred Crosby in his clear and ambitious book *The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society 1250-1600*. Crosby systematically compares the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period in the areas of astronomy, cartography, mathematics, painting, music, commerce, accounting, military techniques space as well as spiritual and historical time. He argues there is a direct line between an increase in measurement, mathematical symbols, logical symbols, rational analysis and universal scientific judgments as we proceed from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period. Crosby shows how so many of the scientific inventions of the early modern period-- specifically the activity of measuring-- required the use of visual technology. Everything from telescopes to microscopes; from clock-making to algebra; from shipbuilding navigation to perspective painting and musical scores involved sight. Composers, painters, astronomers and bookkeepers were committed to quantitative visual perception in the material of their craft. Essentially, he argues that the quantification of reality was one of the secrets that made the Western world different from the rest of the world for better and for worse. Crosby has a rare skill of being grounded in scientific study while being able to write for an educated lay audience. This is a wonderful book.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A feast By YOPLAIT What an intellectual feast Witty Informative challenging w. Fat What a great man Crosby is! I see that he is 86 years old May he exercise 2 hours a day Pay no attention to the lowfat vegan nonsense He ope h e eats lots of fat meat beef and pork If his doctor tries to put him on statin drugs he should fire him im on the spot and threaten him with a malpractice suit We need dr Crosby around as long as possible Viva Crosby!!

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. A symbolic system is the key By Mark S Crosby uses the metaphor of "striking a match" to describe the event, which combined with quantification, the kindling in Crosby's metaphor, to generate a revolution in the West. The match is visualization: "Visualization and quantification: together they snap the padlock - reality is fettered" (p. 229). As a type of visualization, a symbolic system allowed advancements that were not otherwise possible. In mathematics, accounting and music, having a concise and powerful symbolism freed the mind to range and to create - no longer a prisoner of memory. As Crosby notes: "Because the algebraist could concentrate on the symbols and put aside ... what they represented, he or she could perform unprecedented intellectual feats" (p. 120). Similarly in painting, perspective allowed a new way to manipulate light in order to make more accurate pictures, for the glory of God and man, thus replacing the multiple and spatially incongruous "Nows" in medieval painting with "exactness and predictability" (p. 197). Often Crosby's extended metaphors are annoying without being instructive: "Bruno was executed for heresy in 1600 - to no avail. The cat, already out of the bag was having kittens" (p. 105); "For us today, things exist in space like vegetables in an aspic salad ... the aspic was starting to stiffen" (pp. 170, 172); "The moment had arrived for a trumpet solo, and the only instrument available was a hunting horn... But let us deal first with getting from the hunting horn to the trumpet" (p. 111). It seems as if he's chuckling to himself as he's writing this. Otherwise this is a wonderful summary of how the West's development was distinct from that of other areas, such as China and the Middle East, by arguing how quantification and visualization allowed Europeans to perceive the world in a unique manner which allowed them to manipulate the world in ways not dreamt of before. Ironically, Crosby quotes Johan Huizinga (pp. 131-2), who argued that this new emphasis on sight was an indication of the decline in Western civilization because of its insistence on seeing something visible as a necessary precursor to initiate thought.

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)

.com *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 accordion-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. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. 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) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.