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Mapping the World



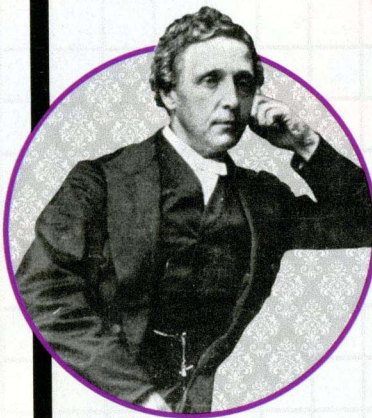
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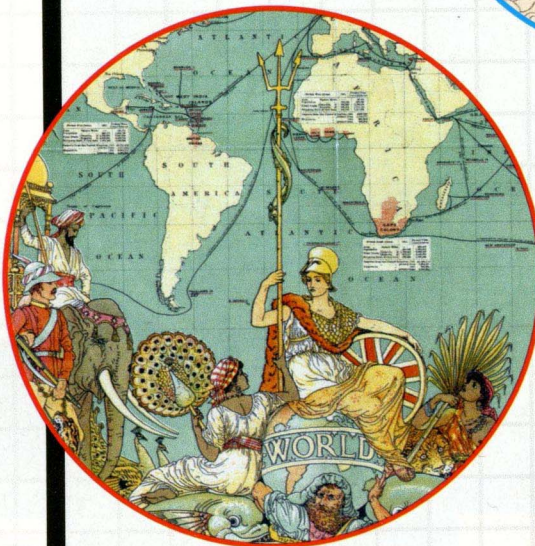
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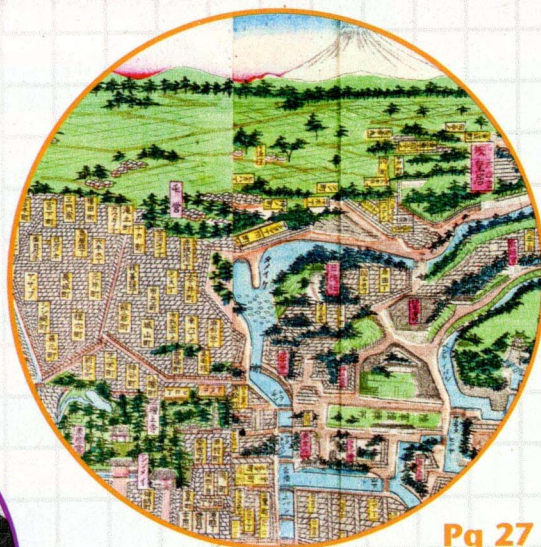
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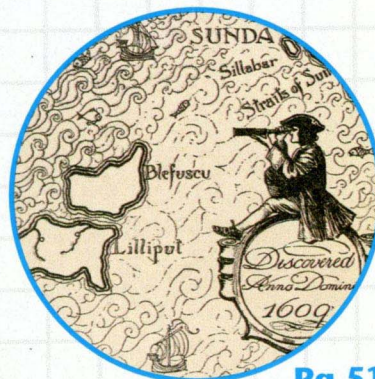
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The Wooden Atlas

by Patrick Wertmann, illustrated by Jesse Tise

In 1986, thirteen tombs were found in Fangmatan, an area that lies close to the city of Tianshui in China's northwestern Gansu Province. Most were built during the Warring States Period (475–221 B.C.E.), a time when China was ruled by seven competing warlords. The tombs were located in Gui County, which lay within the realm of the state of Qin, the state whose ruler would later conquer all his rivals and unify the country.

What the archaeologists found in one of the tombs was quite a sensation — seven maps that, through a fortunate coincidence, had survived for

more than 2,200 years. In fact, based on contemporary historical accounts and artifacts unearthed from tombs of the same period, archaeologists were able to date the maps to exactly 239 B.C.E. This early date makes them the oldest known surviving maps from China.

HOW THEY WERE MADE

After two years of meticulous, difficult work, specialists managed to restore the maps and bring all their details back to light. The seven maps were drawn with black ink on four rectangular slabs of pine wood. The pieces all measured almost the



same size. Each is about 10.5 inches long, 7.13 inches wide, and 0.43 inches thick. Because the maps partially overlap with one another, they can be pieced together to form one map that represents a total area of more than 2,700 square miles.

WHAT THEY CONTAIN

These maps offer positive proof of how advanced the art and science of mapping was in China at the time. They include information about both the administration and the geography of Gui County. They also include the longitude and latitude of the area, as well as the most characteristic elements that are marked on today's maps.

In total, there are the names of 82 settlements on the maps. The more important ones — county seats, for example — are each enclosed within lines that form a square. Less important areas are simply named and have no lines drawn around them. Also labeled on these maps are roads, mountains, and rivers. In the case of the rivers, the name of each is typically written in the direction of the flow of the water.

THE FIRST ECONOMIC MAP IN THE WORLD

When you take a closer look, you will note another fascinating feature. The forests in Gui County are also defined. Interestingly, we can even recognize markings that describe the types and sizes of the timber to be found in the respective areas. This information offers valuable insights into what the local flora looked like during that time.

But that is not all. In some cases, even the distances from the forests to the settlements are marked. Can you guess why? Well, timber was an important commodity, and it had to be transported. For practical reasons, riverways were often used as the means of transportation. The Fangmatan maps include everything that was necessary for the organization of such journeys and transactions. Taking all this into consideration, they clearly served as economic maps for traders.