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Noah's Ark and Burning Sodom: Woodcuts in the PSU codex *Fasciculus temporum*

Amber L. Shrewsbury

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Introduction

The *Fasciculus temporum* is a fifteenth-century chronicle written in the medieval tradition. It is a chronicle of world history, mixing secular and religious histories from the creation of the Earth by God down to the author's present, ending, in our edition, in 1484. In these medieval chronicles, secular history was understood as an extension of biblical history, and there was little delineation between the two. For example, world chronicles of this period begin with Genesis, and the reader can see and read Old Testament stories, such as Noah's Ark and the burning of Sodom. Old Testament stories were more common than New Testament stories at the time because historical books included the history of the Israelites. In addition to this biblical history, medieval readers also learned about the Roman Empire, about Charlemagne, and even about the invention of printing, side by side, as a single chronology. This is a different way of thinking about history than we are accustomed to in the twenty-first century, but it offers a really interesting window into the way medieval people organized their world, and their place in world history. One of the best-known fifteenth-century world chronicles was Hartmann Schedel's *Nuremburg Chronicle* (published 1493), which was influenced by the *Fasciculus temporum*.

Woodcuts in the *Fasciculus temporum*

The 1490 edition of the *Fasciculus temporum* contains numerous woodcuts and illustrations. The woodcuts in the 1490 edition of the *Fasciculus* are, overall, not of the highest

quality—one could use the terms "simple," or "rustic" to describe them—particularly when compared to the images the best woodcut artists of the day were producing during the same period. Using woodcuts as opposed to hand-drawn illustrations, would have saved the printer a great deal of money when publishing the book, but the quality of woodcuts varied significantly depending on the location where the book was printed, the type of book and its intended audience, and the specific edition of the book. Two of the woodcuts in the *Fasciculus temporum* consist of images of Noah's Ark and the burning of Sodom.

Noah's Ark

Both of the woodcuts analyzed in this paper are typical of late fifteenth-century woodcut style, though when compared with other woodcuts of the period, the woodcuts in this codex seem somewhat rudimentary, even cheap. For example, parallel lines are symbolic of advanced woodcut technique and a skilled artisan. During the latter half of the fifteenth century, great advances were made in woodcut technique, usually attributed to the great Flemish artist Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). His innovative techniques, which included use of increasingly minute parallel lines and, later, crosshatching, revolutionized woodcuts, and allowed them to compete with other types of printed works entering the new consumer market for art. The more small, detailed lines in a woodcut there are, the higher degree of artistic skill (and cost) one can infer.

Noah's Ark was a popular (and oft-reproduced) image in the *Fasciculus temporum.* The story of the Ark was one of the most widely known stories in the Old Testament, and featured an important moral lesson for medieval Christians, that of divine retribution for mankind's sins. In the image of Noah's Ark from the 1490 edition (fig. 1, below), there are some parallel lines visible as detail elements—typical of German woodcuts in the 1490s ("Heavenly Craft"). Several

other elements of this woodcut reveal that it is not of the quality that one could expect from high-end books of the same time period. Although the illustration is vaguely three dimensional, the woodcut is not framed within a larger landscape, and the design of the ark in general does not seem like a realistic depiction—it barely seems like a boat, and more like a floating castle, complete with flags, turrets, and a tiled roof. Higher quality woodcuts of the period would have crisp lines, additional detail with parallel lines and broad contours, and multiple colors—whether added as part of the printing of the wood block itself, or added in by hand-painting afterward ("Heavenly Craft"). The low quality of the internal woodcuts—with the exception of the frontispiece, which reflects a higher degree of workmanship, possibly due to its elevated status as a medieval collectors' item—including the use of relatively few parallel lines, suggests that this edition was inexpensively produced.

The Noah's Ark woodcut in the 1490 edition of the *Fasciculus*, though likely inexpensive, nevertheless contains a great deal of information for the reader. The Latin text inside the ark and below reveals specific information about the ark. The top compartment (Level One) is identified as the "dwelling place of ferocious animals / dwelling of people and birds / dwelling place of mild (perhaps harmless) animals." The second level is identified as the "storeroom of fruits or foodstuff/herbs." The third level is the "dung pile." The Latin at the bottom of the ark signifies its dimensions: 300 cubits in length, 50 cubits wide, and 30 cubits high. This precise information on the dimensions and construction of the ark was given to Noah in the Bible by God, so presumably would have been familiar information to the medieval reader.

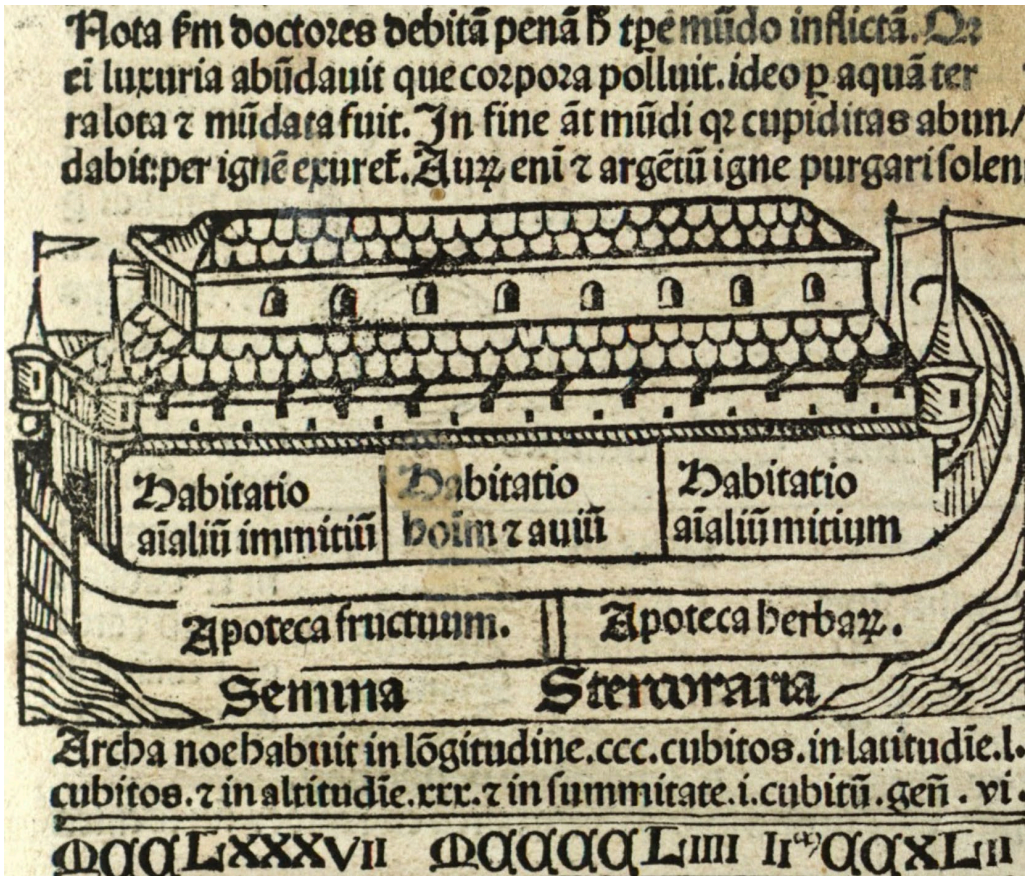


Figure 1: Noah's Ark, *Fasciculus temporum (1490)*

Woodcuts in early printed books were also frequently reused, in different editions of the same work or with completely different texts. There were no copyright laws protecting woodcut designs in Europe, and the designs were shared, sold, and at times even exported to countries which lacked a woodcut tradition, such as England (St. John's College Library). In the Strasbourg print shop of Johann Prüss, although his books were typically meant for wealthy patrons and could be expected to recoup the cost of printing and more, woodcut illustrations were used multiple times, even within the same book. Thus, the repetition of woodcuts is not necessarily a great indicator of a publication's quality, or of anything other than the way that woodcuts were used in books at the time (St John's College Library).

Other editions of the *Fasciculus temporum* show the evolution of the Noah's Ark woodcut. In a 1480 edition of the *Fasciculus,* published by Arnold Hoernen in Cologne, the image of Noah's Ark (fig. 2, below) is even more rudimentary, in this case lacking almost all of the detail included in the ark in the PSU codex. When analyzing the quality of the woodcuts in PSU's 1490 edition, it feels important to mention the possibility that this was a much *higher* quality woodcut than was used previously. One other 1480 edition, printed in Venice by Erhard Ratdolt, features the exact same woodcut of the Ark as PSU's 1490 edition, which means the woodcut in our edition is likely recycled (River Campus Libraries). As two 1480 editions of the *Fasciculus* exist with different woodcuts, the woodcuts used may give us insight into the genealogy of how different editions related to one another. It is possible, even probable, that the woodcut in our edition is "descended" from the 1480 Venice edition.

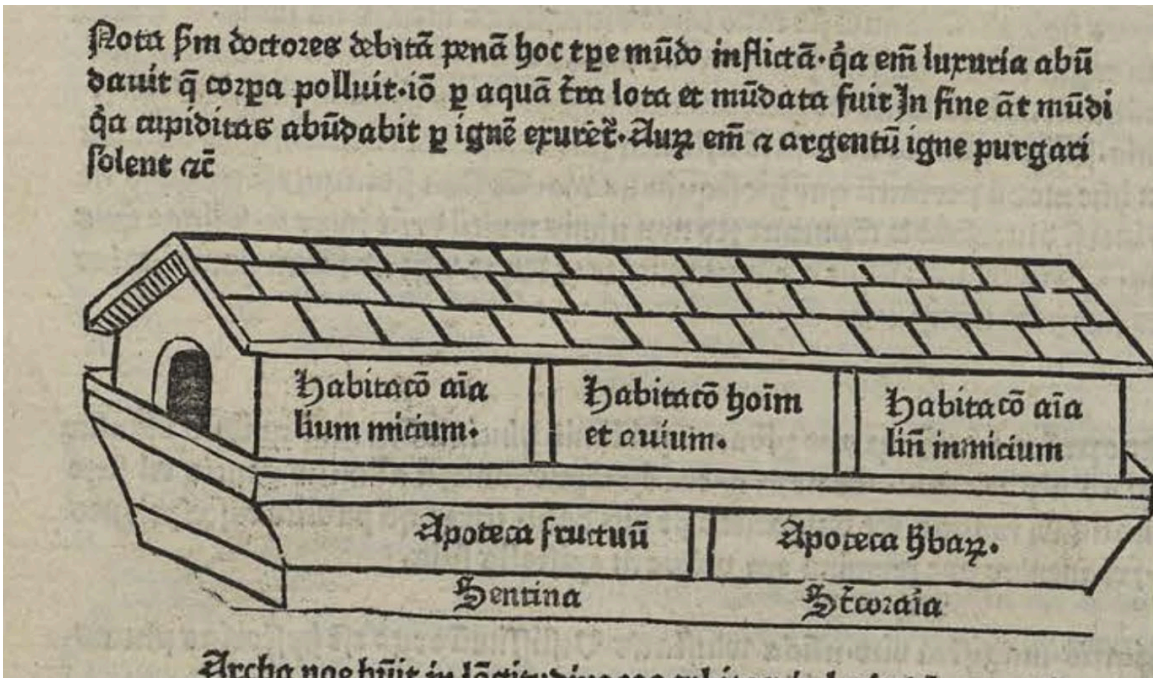


Figure 1: Noah's Ark, *Fasciculus Temporum* (1480)

Figure 2: Noah's Ark, *Fasciculus temporum* (after 1474)

In order to draw some contrast between the previous two versions of the ark, which offer a relatively similar version of the same woodcut, a third example (fig. 3), printed by Nikolaus Götz in Köln, "not before 1474"—potentially long before our edition—demonstrates how ornate and detailed a woodcut of Noah's Ark could be. Interestingly, it is likely to have been printed long before our 1490 edition and even before the 1480 edition discussed above.

Here, the ark is clearly a boat, and there are animals and people in the various windows, separated by species. The woodcut is also in color—three colors. It's unclear whether the color in the image was part of the wood block or was added later, but either way, the addition of color elevated its complexity and cost considerably (Heinrich-Heine-Universität, Düsseldorf). Additional details about the circumstances of this printing are presently unknown, but it is worth guessing that this edition was commissioned for a wealthy patron.

Burning city of Sodom

The burning city of Sodom woodcut in our codex is also fairly rudimentary—the lines are thick, and there is little room for fine detail amidst the heavy, black outlines. Like the ark, this was a popular woodcut in the *Fasciculus temporum,* representing a popular Old Testament story that everyone would know, and featuring salacious details and violent destruction. There are some parallel lines that signify a more skilled artist or the knowledge of advanced woodcut techniques, but again, the simple design of this woodcut shows that it is relatively cheap, or done by someone without a skilled hand. The city is shown on fire (fig. 4, below), and in this case the city is designed as a series of castles with turrets, some of which are toppling over as the city is destroyed. The style of the woodcut, with tiled roofs on buildings, sparse parallel detail lines, and the use of thicker black lines, is similar to that of Noah's Ark. It is not clear whether these woodcuts were carved by the same artist, but due to the similarities in style, it is possible they were. Instead of comparing depictions of the burning of Sodom between different editions of the *Fasciculus*, as was done with the Ark, a comparison was done with other woodcuts of cities in early printed books.

Figure 3: Burning of Sodom, *Fasciculus temporum* (1490)

Cities were widely depicted in early printed books, either shown as part of biblical events or illustrating stylized versions of famous cities. In terms of how cities were presented in most printed books, the woodcuts usually show castles representing the city with little detail visible. They often served as the backdrop of some Biblical event, such as Christ going to the Last Supper (Medieval Art Index). As all of history was thought to be made possible by God, each story was meant to be a moral lesson for the population. Presumably a person reading the *Fasciculus* could read Latin, but even if they could not, they would still see the woodcuts and

know instantly what story was being told, and what lesson to take from that due to their religious upbringing.

One example that does not fall neatly into the category of world chronicles is one of the most, if not the most, famous book of the era, the *Nuremburg Chronicle*. The *Nuremburg Chronicle* was a world chronicle published in 1493 by Hartmann Schedel, and indeed may have been inspired by the *Fasciculus*. It was published in Nuremburg, one of the large centers of early book printing—a place with a lot of resources. The audience for the *Nuremburg Chronicle* was mostly "middle class," which separates it from our edition of the *Fasciculus temporum* because the printer had the ability to make money from selling it to people (Schedel, Hartmann, et al), and therefore likely had a higher budget for a more expensive production.

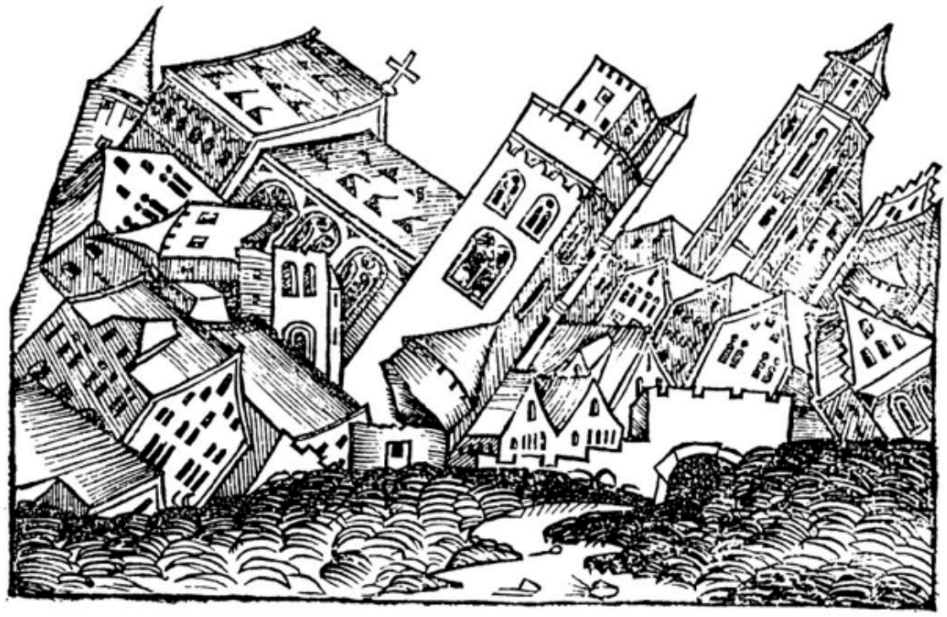
The high quality of the woodcuts of cities in the *Nuremburg Chronicle* contrast with the woodcut of the city of Sodom in our codex, and shows how detailed higher quality woodcuts could be in the latter half of the fifteenth century. It is interesting to note that Schedel's example of the destruction of the city of Babylon bears more than a passing resemblance to the PSU *Fasciculus* woodcut of the burning city of Sodom, with its exaggeratedly toppling, turreted buildings (figs. 5, 6, and 7, below).

Cologne

Figure 5: *The Nuremburg Chronicle* (1493)

Nuremberg

Figure 6: *The Nuremburg Chronicle* (1493)



Babylon

Figure 7: *The Nuremburg Chronicle* (1493)

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