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Abstract

This paper situates Dutch mapmaker Willem Blaeu's *Asia noviter delineata*—part of the Stuckenberg Map Collection in the Gettysburg College Special Collections—within the larger framework of Renaissance thought and a shifting colonial balance of power. The map's pictorial marginalia expresses a Dutch quest for empirical knowledge that echoed contemporary cabinets of curiosities throughout early modern Europe. Similar to these cabinets, Blaeu's map can be seen as a cartographic teatro mundi, used to propagate Dutch hegemony through both a robust naval presence and an expanding geographic and natural knowledge of the world.

Keywords

Dutch, map, Renaissance, Cabinet of Curiosities, Willem Blaeu

Disciplines

Cultural History | Dutch Studies | European History | European Languages and Societies | Geographic Information Sciences | Geography | History | History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology | Human Geography

Comments

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Natural Knowledge in Dutch Mapmaking

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Although the seventeenth century witnessed the dawn of many global empires through colonial expansion, one empire in particular took the forefront in mapping a comprehensive world. The Dutch created an image, or an idea of the world through its maps that was marketable to all powers in early modern Europe. The focus of these maps was accuracy and geographical knowledge. Whereas in the past, mapmakers excelled in purveying their own views of distant lands and the monstrous races that inhabited them, by the dawn of the colonial empires, the focus had shifted to accurate geographic knowledge for practical means. Many of these previously distant lands, such as India and China, had been transformed from their mythical pasts to lucrative places of mercantile activity.

Willem Blaeu, arguably the leading Dutch mapmaker of the seventeenth century, espoused this transition to accuracy in publishing his *Atlas Maior* in 1662. This atlas, containing over 600 maps and 3,000 pages of text, signaled a new era of mapmaking in which objective practicality and accurate geographic knowledge were of the utmost importance.¹ Nevertheless, the Dutch found ways of expressing their power through the pictorial marginalia of their maps. One map in particular, Blaeu's *Asia noviter delineata*, or general map of Asia, illustrates this symbolic Dutch clout on two levels (Figure 1). Not only does it emphasize Dutch naval might throughout the world, but it also, through its depiction of natural animals that echo the pictorial tradition of monstrous races in distant lands, accentuates the Renaissance quest for a complete knowledge of the natural world. These two very different expressions of Dutch influence—naval might and scientific knowledge—subliminally illustrate how mapmakers such as Blaeu could reinforce Dutch power while still emphasizing geographical accuracy in their works.

¹ Jerry Brotton, *Trading Territories: Mapping the Early Modern World*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), 183.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, shipbuilding had become a prominent industry in the Netherlands. The Dutch needed a “fleet of high-speed ships with maximum storage space,” in order to successfully maintain its growing mercantile empire, particularly in the East, where the seas were rife with Portuguese, Spanish, and English competition.”² To bolster the strength of its naval force, the States-General created the Dutch East India Company, based out of Amsterdam and five smaller cities, in 1602. This company, privately funded and organized by financiers and merchants, allowed the Dutch to centralize their influence in the East into a single monopoly.³ In the midst of this naval expansion, Dutch mapmaking became prominent not only for those in the Low Countries but for all of Europe.

In tandem with an intensified shipbuilding industry, the Dutch sought to provide the world with geographically accurate maps that were objective and useful in the mercantile world of trading. The Netherlands became the transmitter of “words, images, and ideas concerning the globe.” Europeans “devoured the products of [Dutch] geography,” just as they began to “gobble up the colonial world.”⁴ This mapmaking trend developed largely out of Amsterdam, a city becoming more and more important for Dutch naval endeavors. The most famous publishing house was the Amsterdam house of Blaeu, which specialized in the production of “finely engraved maps, charts and books on navigation in various European languages.”⁵ Blaeu, whose publishing company flourished from 1620 until his death in 1673, was appointed official

² Mariët Westermann, *A Worldly Art: The Dutch Republic 1585-1718*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 25.

³ Apart from Amsterdam, the five smaller cities that ran the Dutch East India Company were Delft, Hoorn, Rotterdam, Enkhuizen, and the province of Zeeland. Albert Hyma, *A History of the Dutch in the Far East* (Ann Arbor: George Wahr Publishing Co, 1953), 65; Jerry Brotton, *Trading Territories*, 181.

⁴ Benjamin Schmidt, “Inventing Exoticism: The Project of Dutch Geography and the Marketing of the World, circa 1700,” in *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 362.

⁵ C.R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empires (1600-1800)*, (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 184.

mapmaker of the Dutch East India Company in 1638.⁶ With this commission, Blaeu produced his 1662 *Atlas Maior*, in which he compiled hundreds of his maps for European audiences.

Along with the development of geographical accuracy for widespread practical means, Blaeu had several resources in Amsterdam he could draw from to illustrate his maps. For example, Olfert Dapper published several bulky folios on Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia. These folios provided numerous maps and illustrations that ranged from the “purely fanciful to the rigorously exact.”⁷ The Reverend François Valentyn published *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indien* (“The Old and New East-Indies”), which provided 4,800 pages of text including hundreds of maps and illustrations.⁸ This rich tradition of Dutch book production and travel literature provided Blaeu with insight into information collected on the natural world in Africa and Asia through their endless supply of engravings compiled on this subject.

While Europeans sought these maps for both practical purposes and collecting purposes, mapmakers such as Blaeu were sure to highlight their Dutch heritage by illustrating not only Dutch naval might but also their knowledge of the natural world. Blaeu’s *Asia noviter delineata* map, originally issued individually in 1617 but eventually incorporated into his atlas series from 1630 to the 1660’s, shows this symbiotic relationship between naval might and natural knowledge in the East.⁹

Blaeu’s *Asia noviter delineata* depicts three ships sailing the waters of both the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. A fourth and a fifth ship are illustrated together in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, but two different copies of this map promote different messages. In the original copy from 1617, the two ships, with different colored flags, are enemies and are depicted

⁶ Jerry Brotton, *Trading Territories*, 183.

⁷ C.R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire*, 182.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 182-183.

⁹ John Goss, ed., *Blaeu’s The Grand Atlas of the 17th Century World*, (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1990), 190.

in battle. Two balls of fire are illustrated between the ships, illustrating this conflict (Figure 2). In the second map, which is a later copy created between 1643 and 1650, the two ships are flying the same color flag, and the cannon fire between the ships has been eliminated (Figure 3). Assuming the copy in which the two ships are flying the same color flag is the later of the two, the message is clear: the Dutch have created a strong naval presence in the Far East. With this second copy, four of the five ships are all flying the same color flag, reinforcing a widespread Dutch naval presence in the East.¹⁰

Apart from the five ships, there is also a depiction of the Greek god Triton in the Indian Ocean (Figure 4). This reflects the Renaissance and humanist drive to reinvigorate the Classical world in works of art and literature. Triton, who is shown as a merman and blowing his conch shell, is known as the messenger of the sea. In Greek mythology, Triton would blow his conch shell to either raise or calm the waves. In doing so, the sound was so alarming that all the surrounding giants and sea creatures would flee in terror. By adding Triton to the plethora of the Dutch ships sailing the Eastern waters, Blaeu likens the Dutch East India Company to this Greek god, warning enemy ships to beware of the ever-increasing Dutch presence in these waters.

Alongside the message of a naval presence in the Far East, there is an even more subliminal message of natural knowledge that symbiotically asserts Dutch authority in the Far East. Three naturalistically illustrated animals—an elephant, a camel, and a lion—are strategically placed in areas formerly considered to be the inaccessible, far-reaching lands that “haunted human imagination,” with their races of marvelous and monstrous creatures.¹¹

¹⁰ The differences between the five ships are the only major differences between the two copies. The only other difference is a slight variation in color. The version dated between 1643 and 1650 is part of the Stuckenberg Map Collection at Gettysburg College.

¹¹ Rudolph Wittkower, “Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters,” in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942): 159.

In Amsterdam at this time, the intellectual currents were beginning to favor natural and direct observation over the reliance on antique and medieval sources concerning flora and fauna. Dr. Nicolaes Tulp, a Dutch surgeon and mayor of Amsterdam, in his publication *Observationum Medicarum Libri Tres*, argued that either satyrs do not exist or they have been mistaken for orangutans up until this point.¹² Tulp's conclusion reflected the intellectual atmosphere running through the Netherlands that illustrated Renaissance influence. Age old myths and legends of monstrous races were finally giving way to direct observation and naturalism.

There had been a longstanding tradition of illustrating the far corners of the earth on maps with monstrous races for centuries. The Hereford map of the late thirteenth century is a prime example of this tradition. Marvels and monsters were frequently depicted in three key places: India, the lands north of India, and Ethiopia. In the Hereford map, "sciapodes, the pygmies and giants, the mouthless people... and the unicorn," lived in India. North of India there were "horse-hoofed men, people with long ears... and also the Arimaspians who fight with the griffins." Finally, Ethiopia was inhabited by "satyrs and fauns... people with their head in their shoulders and breasts [blemmyae], basilisks and gold-digging ants."¹³ For centuries, these three regions haunted European imaginations with their marvels and monsters. Blaeu, in specifically targeting these three "exotic" regions, drew from this pictorial tradition in mapmaking to make a statement about the Dutch knowledge of both geography and the natural world.

In India, Blaeu illustrated a naturalistic depiction of an elephant (Figure 5). The animal is a bluish gray, and has large ears, a long trunk, and two white tusks. Despite its small size compared to the rest of the map, it is a simple yet naturalistic depiction of a rare animal that

¹² *Ibid.*, 191.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 174.

many Europeans would not have known a great deal about. To the north of India, in Tartaria, Blaeu depicted a man walking with a camel tied to a rope (Figure 6). Like the elephant, it is a very simplified illustration due to its small size, but the camel's features are proportionally correct.¹⁴ The camel and elephant are both shown walking, with one leg in the air, adding a sense of motion to these naturalistic depictions.

In Egypt, north of Ethiopia, Blaeu depicted a larger lion (Figure 7). The lion is shown prancing through grass with its elongated tail in the air. The creature is proportional and has a detailed face, including a white nose and whiskers. The lion's mane is muted, suggesting it is not yet a fully grown adult. Although a fourth animal, depicted next to a ship in the northern Pacific Ocean, appears to be a mythical creature, it is most likely a dolphin (Figure 8). The Dutch would not likely have had much evidence of what a dolphin actually looked like. Inland Italians during the Renaissance did not catch or sell dolphins, and the ensuing depictions were consequently far-fetched. Blaeu's aquatic creature, perhaps continuing the Renaissance tradition, has a rigid snout, sharp teeth, and bodily curvature. Thus, it is likely contemporary observers considered this depiction to be much more naturalistic than it seems to a modern observer.¹⁵

The presence of these three animals in strategically located regions—India, the steppes north of India, and northeastern Africa—show that Blaeu drew from the pictorial tradition of monstrous races inhabiting these lands in previous maps. His decision to instead include natural depictions of animals that were known to exist emphasizes Dutch knowledge of geography and

¹⁴ Although Blaeu's depiction of a camel is naturalistic, he appropriates the wrong species of camel to the central steppes location on the map. The Bactrian camel (*Camelus bactrianus*) is native to the central steppes region, but it has two humps. Blaeu would most likely have been more familiar with the one-humped dromedary, or Arabian camel (*Camelus dromedarius*), which he incorrectly associates with the steppe region.

¹⁵ Lecture by Dr. Kay Etheridge, "Defining the Dolphin", Gettysburg College, September 24, 2012.

the natural world. Where there were once far-reaching, mystical lands that were only inhabited by blemmyae and satyrs, the Dutch have now explored and made accessible, showing not only that they have reached these lands but that they know the animals that inhabit them.

This ability and intentional desire illustrates that the Renaissance quest for knowledge and the growing interest in the natural world was thriving in seventeenth-century Dutch mapmaking circles. In an age when “accurate, objective and systematic mapping of strategic territory” took precedent over speculation of “geographically distant territories,” Blaeu mimicked this trend towards accuracy by including natural depictions of animals while still keeping the tradition of pictorial marginalia.¹⁶ It was his way of safeguarding a rich history of mapmaking while still keeping up with a changing world. By evolving his maps’ pictorial marginalia, as evidenced in his *Asia noviter delineata*, Blaeu also mirrored the Renaissance quest for knowledge. This symbiotic relationship of naval power and intellectual wisdom thus propagated an image of an authoritative Dutch Empire. Although other empires were just as powerful, the mapmaking tradition in the seventeenth-century Netherlands allowed the Dutch to express their might in a way no other empire could match.

¹⁶ Jerry Brotton, *Trading Territories*, 183.



Figure 1

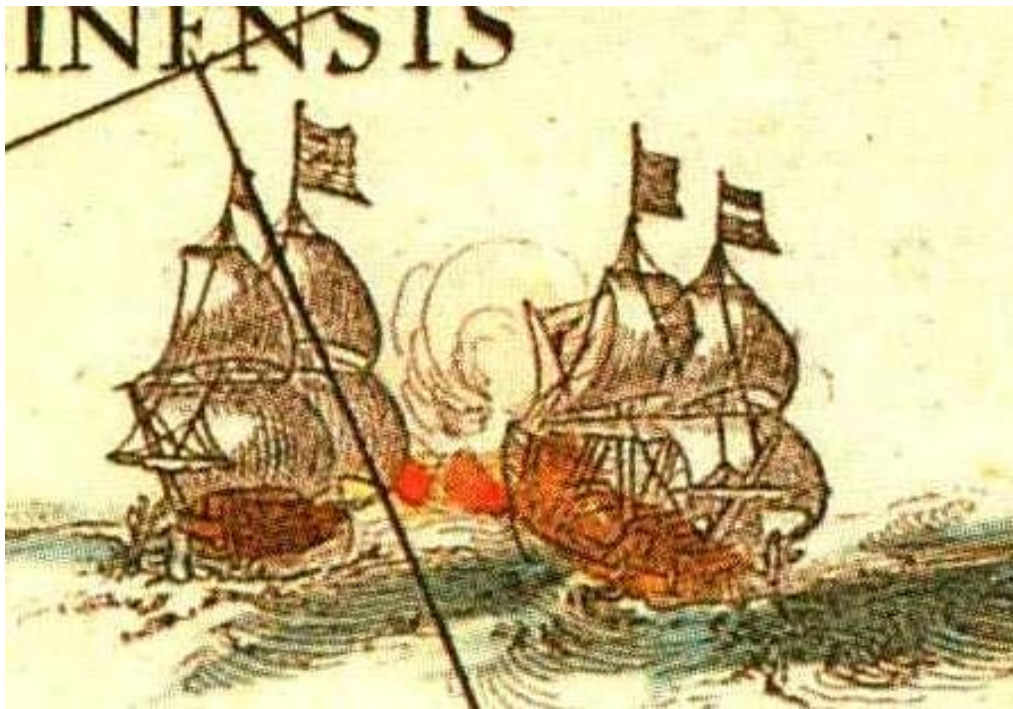


Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

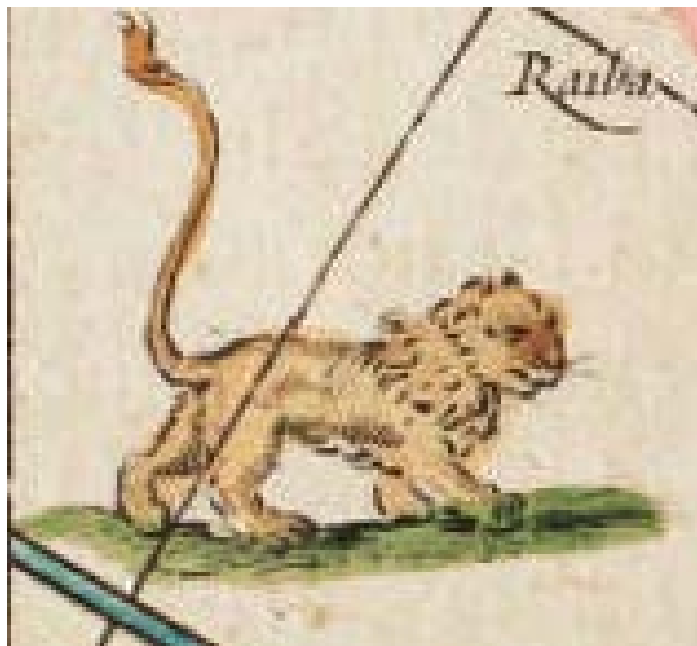


Figure 7



Figure 8

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