

Chart fragment in pen, ink, and wash colour on vellum, signed Joan Blaeu II, later profile portrait in charcoal of a lady in early nineteenth century dress to verso, some abrasion to surface of chart.

A DUTCH EAST INDIA COMPANY (VOC) MANUSCRIPT CHART FRAGMENT OF THE ARABIAN COAST AND RED SEA SIGNED AND DATED BY JOAN BLAEU II

[Chart of the West Coast of Saudi Arabia and the Red Sea].

Author
BLAEU, Johannes [II]

Publication date
1701.

Publisher

Publication place
Amsterdam,

Physical description
Chart fragment in pen, ink, and wash colour on vellum, signed Joan Blaeu II, later profile portrait in charcoal of a lady in early nineteenth century dress to verso, some abrasion to surface of chart.

Dimensions
305 by 240mm. (12 by 9.5 inches).

Notes
A manuscript chart fragment of the West Coast of Saudi Arabia and the Red Sea, signed and dated

by Joan Blaeu II, master chartmaker to the Dutch East India Company, during the Dutch Golden Age. The chart was, at the time, the most accurate depiction of the Arabian and Egyptian coasts of the Red Sea, and is one of only seven extant charts of the area signed by Joan Blaeu II.

The chart, drawn on vellum, outlines the coast of the Red Sea from the Gulf of Suez down to the current Saudi Arabian border with Yemen, listing the principal ports and coastal towns, including Jeddah ("Sidade de Judda"). To the sea are marked numerous rocks and shoals, three of which are marked by words in red ink, denoting particular treacherous areas. To the far left is the signature of Joan Blaeu II, the chart's place of production Amsterdam, and the date 1701. Below the signature is a fine compass rose with a fleur-de-lys marking true north, and east marked by a Christian cross, which traditionally denoted the direction of Jerusalem, though, more aptly on this chart, Mecca. A latticework of rhumb lines in red and green ink, typical of sea charts produced in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and which hark back to the portolans of the sixteenth century, criss-cross the work.

The fragment was originally the upper left portion of the: 'Indische Zee gelyckgradighe, van Caep tot de Straet Sunda' [Plane chart of the India Ocean, from the Cape to Sunda Straits], which stretched from the Cape of Good Hope to the Straits of Sunda, the narrow passage of water between the islands of Sumatra and Java. The chart would be carried by all Dutch East India Company ships, on their voyage from Amsterdam to the Dutch port of Batavia, modern day Jakarta.

An inspection of the six extant charts with the current example, shows a remarkable consistency in execution, in the placement not only of the geographical information but also in the arrangement of Joan Blaeu II's signature, and the compass rose. One aspect that does change, however, is the omission of the privilege granted by the States General, which appears on his chart of 1688, but is absent on his chart of 1691, our chart of 1701, and a chart dated 1704.

Early VOC chart production

In 1602, the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC, or Dutch East India Company) was granted a charter by the States General of the Netherlands (the Dutch parliament) to conduct a monopoly in trade east of the Cape of Good Hope and west of the Strait of Magellan. Seventeen years later, in 1619, the Company's monopoly was expanded to include all geographical knowledge (i.e. charts and maps) that had been and would be acquired by the Company. From then on, the dissemination of cartographic information, be it through the publication of charts or rutters, without the express permission of the Company, could lead to a fine of 6000 guilders. This draconian amount suggests not only that the VOC were at pains to keep the latest cartographic knowledge secret, but also that a rather liberal exchange of cartographic knowledge existed before 1619.

In order to maintain their hold on the new cartographic information, the Dutch like the Spanish and Portuguese before them, decreed that all charts issued to VOC shipping would be produced by hand (i.e. not printed), and were to be returned to the relevant authorities at the end of each voyage, with substantial penalties for non-compliance. Also, in line with tradition, the charts would be drawn on vellum, a much more robust material than paper, able to withstand the ravages of a long sea voyage.

The VOC's first official map and chartmaker was Hessel Gerritsz, who held the position from 1619 until his death in 1632. The position was subsequently filled by three generations of the Blaeu family, the leading cartographic publishers and mapmakers of the seventeenth century, from 1633 until 1705.

The Blaeu Family as VOC chartmakers

Although Willem Blaeu had been mooted as chartmaker to the VOC in 1619, his rather liberal Dutch Reformist views were out of favour at the time, and the position was handed to his former assistant Gerritsz. The political and religious climate had eased by 1632, and Blaeu was confirmed as the VOC's map and chartmaker on 3rd January 1633. When Willem passed away in 1638, the position was filled by his son Joan, who, in turn, was succeeded, in 1674, by his son Joan II, who retired from the post in 1705, thus ending the Blaeu families 72 year association with the VOC.

The records that survive from Joan Blaeu's time as VOC chartmaker, shine a light on just how profitable the position was for the house of Blaeu. Not only did Joan take a rather liberal approach to

the publication of classified information, he was also paid handsomely for the charts he provided to the VOC: for the route from Amsterdam to Batavia a set of nine charts were required, with each chart costing the VOC between five and nine guilders. The captain, chief pilot, and junior pilot each received a full set, with the third watch receiving five. Thus each ship would have a total of at least 32 charts onboard, costing the VOC 228 guilders. It has been estimated that Blaeu made a profit of 164 guilders on each voyage, a margin of more than seventy percent. In 1668, for example, Blaeu submitted an invoice to the VOC for no less than 21,135 guilders!

The profits gained by Blaeu's monopoly were obviously crucial in funding his other projects, such as his magnum opus the Atlas Maior, and would go some way to explain why he never produced a printed sea atlas or pilot for the VOC, with any such undertaking undermining his lucrative manuscript chart business.

During this time, the VOC, in a renewed effort to control their cartographic secrets – not to mention defray some of Blaeu's monopolistic pricing – began to tighten the control on the charts issued to Company ships, by making the pilots sign for the charts issued to them, and doubling the fine for charts that were not returned at the end of the voyage.

On the death of Joan Blaeu in 1673, his position was taken by his son Joan Blaeu II, the author of the current work, who continued to produce manuscript charts for the VOC. In 1705, following his appointment as director of the VOC in Amsterdam, he retired from mapmaking, happy to live off his new positions substantial salary.

Survival of VOC charts

Schilder and Kok, in their monumental work on VOC manuscript charts, estimate that between the inception of the VOC, in 1602, and its demise, in 1799, somewhere in the region of 55,000 charts were produced by or for the Company. Of this number only 356 complete charts and fragments (of which 11 cover the period before the inception of the VOC chart office i.e. 1619, and eight are decorative), are known to have survived. This is approximately a survival rate of six charts in every thousand produced.

Apart from the natural ravages of time, the principal reason why these works suffered such a high mortality rate, was their very nature as working charts. These were not charts bound into an atlas, or that took pride of place on a ship owner's wall, but used by pilots to navigate the route between Amsterdam and the Spice Islands in the Far East. Voyages, in the early modern period were treacherous, with numerous ships either being wrecked or taken by enemy action. In order to avoid the wrecking, if not the plundering, the charts were constantly updated – one of the VOC navigator's principal tasks was recording any new hazards in logbooks and on charts, which would be handed into the VOC, in either Amsterdam or Batavia (Jakarta), at the end of their voyage. This drive for constant improvement meant that many of the out-of-date charts were simply destroyed or repurposed as vellum bindings, on the quite reasonable grounds that older charts would be a danger to VOC shipping.

Even after the demise of the VOC in 1799, the remaining charts would undergo a further winnowing out. In 1810, the newly installed French government in the Netherlands ordered all colonial charts to be transferred to the Depot de la marine in Paris. Following the fall of Napoleon, in 1815, the Dutch government demanded their return, unfortunately their list of charts was not comprehensive, and numerous works never made it back to The Netherlands – this is the main reason why French institutions hold over a third of the known extant examples, almost as many as The Netherlands. Alas, on their return, many of the charts were deemed to be inferior to contemporary English material, and between 1817 and 1822 a systematic effort was made to get rid of the older charts and many were simply thrown away or used for scrap. It is conceivable that the present chart met its fate in this way, as on the verso is a naive portrait, in pastel, of a lady, possibly Dutch, in early nineteenth century dress.

This spring cleaning would be repeated in the VOC offices in Batavia (Jakarta), by the Governor General Herman Willem Daendels (1807-1810), and many charts both on vellum and paper were lost.

Rarity

As discussed above, VOC charts are incredibly rare, and with over two thirds of the known examples residing in either Dutch or French institutions, they are housed in a very few institutions throughout the world. In fact of the remaining third only 11 are housed in institutions outside of Europe: four in Japan, six in Australia, and only one in the United States.

Of the 30 extant charts and fragments of the India Ocean that Schilder and Kock record in their census of VOC charts, only six bear the signature of Joan Blaeu II. Two of the charts reside in the Dutch National Archives in Den Haag, two the Bibliotheque nationale de France, one in the Paris Archives, and one in a private collection in Australia.

If VOC charts are seldom found in institutions throughout the world, they are even rarer in the open market, especially examples that bear the signature of Blaeu – one of the most famous names in the history of cartography. We are unaware of another chart bearing Blaeu's signature to appear at auction since the Second World War.

A set of 30 charts were acquired by the Dutch Maritime Museum in 2005 from Corpus Christi Cambridge, via a private treaty sale handled by Sotheby's, for a reported 2.4 million Euros. Of the 30, 21 were VOC charts, with 8 bearing the signature of Joan Blaeu I, with the remaining nine English copies of Dutch charts.

Bibliography

Shilder & Kok, Sailing for the East: History and Catalogue of manuscript charts on Vellum of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), 1602-1799, (2010); Zandvliet, Kees, Mapping the Dutch World Overseas in the Seventeenth Century, The History of Cartography, Vol. 3, part 2, pp. 1433-1462 (2007); Robert E. Gerhardt, Dutch Printer and Publisher Joan Blaeu II (1650–1712) Identified as the Subject of a Portrait by Michiel van Musscher (1645–1705), Dutch Crossing, 39:1, 74-83 (2015).

Provenance

Price:

Inventory reference: 16247

© Daniel Crouch Rare Books Ltd | 2025