

Engraved chart with contemporary hand-colour in part, French text on verso.

THE FIRST PRINTED LARGE-SCALE CHART OF THE SPICE ISLANDS

Moluccae insulae Celeberrimae

Author
BLAEU, Willem Janszoon

Publication date
1635].

Publisher

Publication place
[Amsterdam,

Physical description
Engraved chart with contemporary hand-colour in part, French text on verso.

Dimensions
550 by 650mm. (21.75 by 25.5 inches).

Notes
The first large-scale printed chart of the Moluccas, or Spice, Islands, oriented with west at the top, showing the west coast of Gilolo, present-day Halmahera, and the islands of Ternate, Tidore, Moti and Makian, with an inset chart of Bacan Island. There are, in fact, hundreds of islands in the group, but only a very select group feature in the more than two-hundred years of colonial strife that was the European spice trade. Until the eighteenth century, these rain-forested islands were the only obtainable source of cloves, nutmeg, and mace.

Arab traders “introduced cloves to Europeans around the fourth century but sought to keep their sources secret. Their monopoly was broken by the Portuguese after Vasco da Gama’s voyage to India around the Cape of Good Hope in 1497. The Portuguese strengthened their stranglehold on the spice trade during the sixteenth century, when they found the central locus of the spices to be these islands. One of the native traditions was to plant a clove tree when a child was born, linking the child symbolically to the life of the tree. When the Dutch took over control of the Moluccas in the seventeenth century, they eradicated the clove trees from all the islands except Amboina (and a few adjacent islands) in order to enforce the spice’s scarcity, keeping prices high. As a result, cloves were worth more than their weight in gold. But, as one might expect, the Dutch tactic also instilled hatred and fomented rebellion among the islanders. Gradually, the spice was cultivated in other places of the world, like Brazil, the West Indies, and Zanzibar, reducing prices and making the commodity more available” (Princeton University Library online).

This chart was originally engraved by Jodocus Hondius II: “By the 1620s, the family had published a number of loose-sheets, among them a detailed chart of the Moluccas which located all five principal members of the group with reasonably accuracy. Ternate, Tidore, Motir, and Makian are still a negligible bit too far south, while Bakin is shown by an inset map without coordinates identified. In 1629, Jodocus II died and these plates – roughly 40 in number – were sold to Blaeu, a transaction that the Hondius family quickly lamented. Blaeu changed the plates’s attribution from Hondius’s name to his own, and began publishing many of the maps, including that of the Moluccas [as here], in his ‘Atlantis Appendix’ (1630)” (Suarez).

Willem Jansz. Blaeu (1571-1638) was the founder of the Blaeu cartographic dynasty, the finest mapmakers of the Golden Age of Dutch cartography. He studied astronomy and instrument making under Tycho Brahe in his tower at Uranienborg in 1594, before moving to Amsterdam and eventually established a shop in 1605, close to his contemporaries and rivals Johannes Janssonius and Jacob Colom. He was granted a privilege to print a navigational guide in 1606. Two years later, he produced a set of large carte-à-figure wall maps of the four continents and published ’Het Licht der Zeevaerdt’, a traditional oblong format pilot with coastal profiles to accompany the sailing instructions. The book was very popular, popular enough for Janssonius to publish a pirated version in 1620.

Willem’s sons joined him in the firm, with the eldest Joan (1596-1673) quickly assuming the lead. Joan went to university in Leiden, studying mathematics and astronomy. After returning to work for his father, they produced their first atlas together in 1630, the ’Atlas Appendix’. The title was deliberately chosen to position is as a supplement to the well-respected atlases of Abraham Ortelius and Gerard Mercator, and it mostly contained maps from their stock of plates. Five years later, they produced their ’Atlas Novus’ with more than twice the number of maps in the ’Appendix’, which was published in four languages. After Willem died, Joan expanded the ’Atlas Novus’ into the ’Atlas Maior’, the largest and grandest atlas of its time. An edition had between nine and twelve volumes, beautifully engraved and coloured, and cost as much as a house in Amsterdam.

Bibliography
Koeman I, Bl 11.

Provenance

Price:

Inventory reference: 17583

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