

Interesting and Uninteresting Unknowns

Mapping Southern Africa in the Seventeenth Century

▼ **ONLINE FIRST ARTICLE**

▼ **ABSTRACT** This article explores the stark visual and epistemic contrasts between early modern representations of uncertain southern African spaces produced in the metropolitan Dutch Republic and the Cape Colony, respectively. It emphasizes the importance of metropolitan and colonial mapmakers' different material interests in shaping their disparate visual cultures. Southern Africa was a heterotopia, viewed differently through metropolitan and settler eyes, and its visualization was interest-driven. Thus, the article argues, early modern representations of uncertain southern African topographies should be analyzed neither just as verisimilar descriptions nor as emptied or exoticized fantasies. Rather, the article proposes studying the epistemic and visual cultures of mapping with the perspective-dependent categories of *interesting* and *uninteresting unknowns*. Interesting unknowns tended to be illustrated in a straightforward, ostensibly representationalist manner, whereas uninteresting unknowns became sites for mapmakers to project delocalizing fantasies. Based on their dissimilar geopolitical perspectives and material interests, metropolitan Dutch and colonial creolized Cape mapmakers viewed different geographical unknowns as interesting or uninteresting. Thus, this article contends, scholars ought to pay more attention to the unique contexts that shaped their disparate depictions of the unknown.

▼ **KEYWORDS** mapping; visual cultures; creole science; Cape Colony; Dutch colonialism; Dutch Republic

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BREPOLS

In 1666, the Amsterdam publisher Pieter Goos printed *De Zee-atlas ofte Water-Wereld*, a maritime atlas describing “all the known seacoasts” of the world.¹ Advertised as “very useful for all Shipmasters and Navigators, as well as for all Gentlemen and Merchants,” the *Zee-atlas*’s letterpress enumerates valuable resources found across disparate parts of the globe.² Its maps privilege known coastlines over uncertain interiors, depicting the world’s oceans as dominated by Dutch ships. The atlas, like so many published in the Republic’s so-called “Golden Age,” communicated an unmistakably pro-United Provinces, metropolitan, burgher worldview.³

Goos’s map of south-west Africa [**Fig. 1**] presents an Atlantic Ocean overlain by rhumb lines. In the foreground, a Europe-bound “*Oostindis Vaarder*” underscores the Dutch East India Company’s (VOC) lucrative Indies trade.⁴ Based on observations from 1651—a year before the Cape Colony’s foundation—the map shows a coastline strewn with Portuguese toponyms, while the unknown interior consists of barren but named deserts.⁵ The inset maps of the Cape of Good Hope (top left), populated by docile animals and trees, and Vleesbay (top center), literally “meat bay,” allude to the region’s extraordinary importance in repairing ships and fortifying weary sailors. From the perspective of the *Heeren XVII*—the VOC’s metropole-based executive—the colony ensured the integrity of the Company’s immensely profitable long-distance trade networks.⁶ Consequently, maps made in and for the metropole predominantly depicted the settlement as a *maritime node* connecting Europe to the Indies.⁷ To metropolitan Dutch merchants, then, the Cape was merely “the tavern of the two seas.”⁸

Dutch printed maps of the Cape emphasized coastlines and sea depths, sites with edible animals, and coastal populations open to trade.⁹ All these constituted *interesting unknowns* for VOC administrators and shareholders, who were materially invested in possessing such information. The Company’s transoceanic networks, and hence capital, depended on certain, reliable knowledge of such geographical features. Thus, by virtue of having material interests in knowing such unknowns, metropolitan shareholders found them interesting, depicting them in a verisimilar manner on maps. By contrast, they had few material stakes in knowing the southern African interior with any certainty.¹⁰ From a metropolitan perspective, then, such territories were *uninteresting unknowns*. Consequently, I suggest, uninteresting unknowns became the chief

1 Goos, *Zee-Atlas*, unpaginated contents.

2 Ibid., frontispiece.

3 Van Netten, “New World,” 52.

4 De Vries, “Luxury,” 48–50.

5 The smaller version of the map was first printed by Jodocus Hondius in 1652 in Amsterdam.

6 Harris, “Long-Distance Corporations,” 286.

7 Ward, *Networks*, 127.

8 Boxer, *Dutch Seaborne*, 273.

9 For example, *Klare Besgryving*.

10 Coetzee, *White Writing*, 1–6.

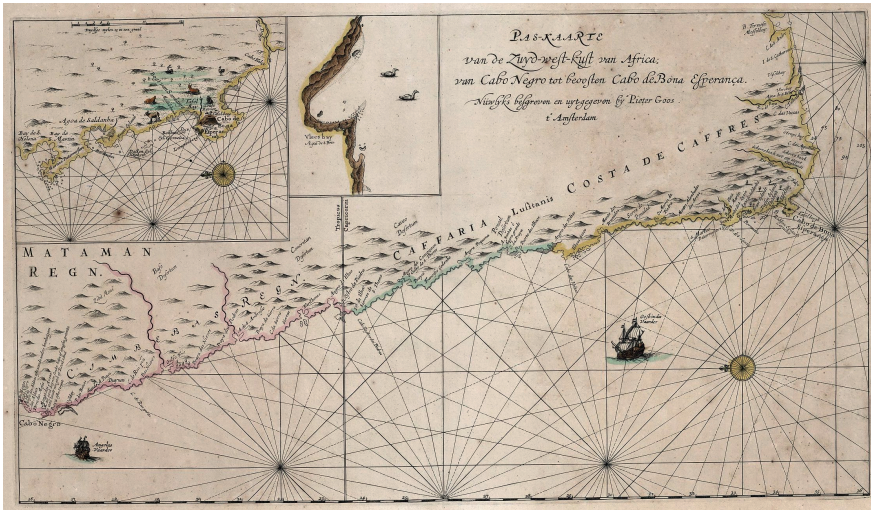


Figure 1. Pieter Goos, "Pas-Kaarte van de Zyud-west-kust van Africa" in *Zee-Atlas*. David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries.

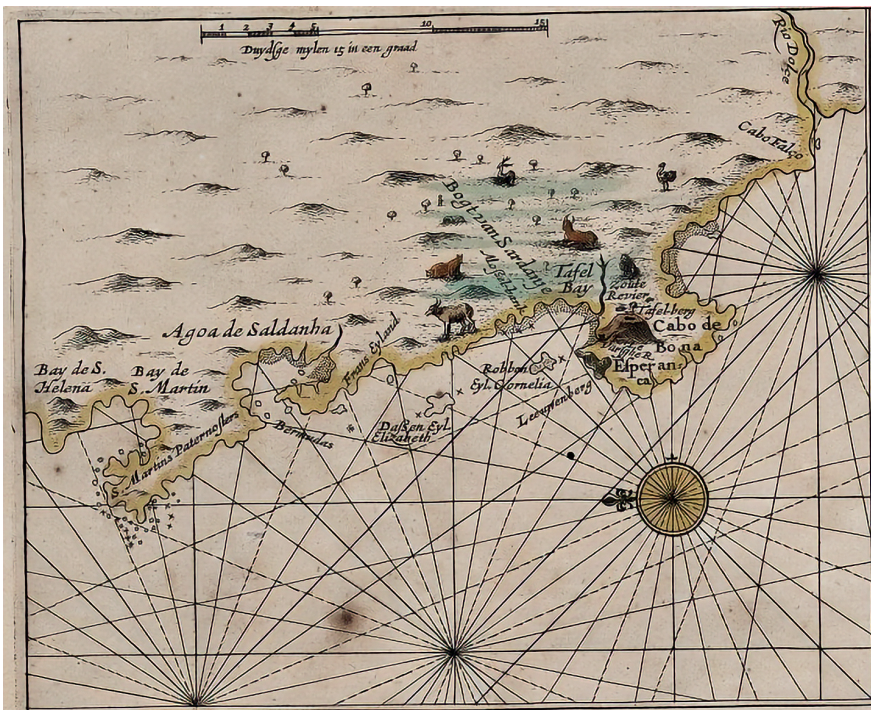


Figure 2. Inset map of Cape of Good Hope from Goos's "Pas-Kaarte." David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries.

spaces onto which mapmakers projected generic, delocalizing, emptying, and/or exoticizing imagery.

“Interest” is of course a polysemic term, and this article uses it in two senses: both as in having material stakes *and* as in finding certain things worth knowing. Indeed, the two states imbricate dialectically; the former engenders the latter and vice versa. This article draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s conception of “interests” as that which, based on actors’ distinct contexts (their *habitus*), shapes their participation in different spheres of activity (the *field*), which in turn reconditions their *habitus*.¹¹ “Unknowns” too require some elaboration. As we learn from the burgeoning field of ignorance studies, unknowns are by no means merely absences of knowledge.¹² Rather, like knowledge itself, unknowns—of which there are different kinds—are constructed and have context-dependent histories.¹³ This article contributes to this growing literature both by exploring the distinction between different kinds of interest-dependent unknowns and by examining the various strategies actors in disparate contexts pursued to visually represent them.

Metropolitan portrayals of the Cape as a nautically interesting but territorially uninteresting way-station stood in stark contrast to colonial depictions of the region made *in situ*. For example, a map of “issued lands” [Fig. 3] drawn at the Cape around 1658, shortly before being transported to the Netherlands, attentively illustrates the peninsula’s mountainous topography, clearly demarcating spaces suitable for settlement, cultivation, and construction. The map also depicts an Indigenous Khoekhoen *kraal* (pastoral encampment) at the foot of Lion’s Rump (circled), where settlers could barter goods.¹⁴ As Alette Fleischer explains, the local Cape government used such maps to legitimize their appropriation and cultivation of Khoekhoen lands.¹⁵ Knowing the interior—where such extractive practices were pursued—with certainty was important to settlers but not to metropolitans, and therefore it tended to be naturalistically “described” by the former, while being exoticized and/or emptied by the latter.

This article suggests that differences in the visual culture of maps of southern Africa made by Netherlandish cosmographers and creolized Cape officials, respectively, were shaped by the groups’ dissimilar material interests, which were in turn conditioned by the Cape’s unique geopolitical position.¹⁶ The groups’ different circumstances resulted in distinct metropolitan and colonial

11 Bourdieu, “Is a Disinterested Act Possible?” 85–86; Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 170.

12 Verburt and Burke, “Introduction”; Burke, *Ignorance*.

13 Verburt and Burke, “Introduction”; Wehling, “Why Science.”

14 On the depiction of Khoekhoen kraals on European maps, see Glatigny et al., “*Inter se nulli fines*.”

15 Fleischer, “(Ex)changing Knowledge,” 248. Glatigny et al., “*Inter se nulli fines*,” 305; Sutton, *Capitalism and Cartography*, 74; Carruthers, “Mapping,” 958; Etherington, *Mapping*, 2.

16 On creole epistemologies and identities, see Cañizares-Esguerra, *Nature, Empire, and Nation*; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 47–66; Zijlstra, *De voormoeders*. On creolization in South Africa, see Coetzee, *White Writing*.



Figure 3. Extract from Map of Issued Lands, c. 1658. © Nationaal Archief, The Hague, 4.VEL 807.

“eyes,” which in turn engendered distinct modes of visual production, privileging disparate orders of knowledge.¹⁷

Although the VOC initially planned to administer the colony as a port rather than a plantation, the fact that the Khoekhoen neither cultivated crops nor bartered enough cattle to meet settlers’ needs convinced the Company to re-evaluate its strategy.¹⁸ On April 14, 1657, the visiting commissioner Rijkloff van Goens announced that Khoekhoen land “may without delay, be at once sown with wheat, rye, rice and other grain, and be taken possession of in freehold” by European “freeburghers.”¹⁹ The freeburghers, for whom enslaved workers from East Africa, Madagascar, Mauritius, and South and Southeast Asia performed agricultural labor, were to sell provisions at low cost to the VOC and the Cape government.²⁰ With the establishment of freeburgher status—and the tax benefits and promise of enslaved labor it brought—growing numbers of Europeans migrated to the Cape and, gradually, its northern hinterlands, appropriating ever larger swathes of Indigenous land.²¹ Thus, settlers—both agricultural freeburghers and local government officials—possessed material interests in having certain knowledge of the interior, including its topographies, flora and fauna, soils, rivers, lakes, minerals, and Indigenous

¹⁷ Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, 29–108; Burke, *What is the History of Knowledge?*, 8–9.

¹⁸ Huigen, *Knowledge and Colonialism*, 10; Fleischer, “(Ex)changing Knowledge,” 254; Worden, “Space,” 73; Beinart and Dubow, *Scientific Imagination*, 32. On the different forms of governance in Dutch port and plantation colonies, see Brandon, “Plantation and the Port!”

¹⁹ Leibbrandt, *Precis*, 262–263.

²⁰ Worden, *Slavery*, 9–18.

²¹ Worden, *Slavery*, 15–18; Ward, *Networks*, 144–146.

populations and their customs. Conversely, for metropolitan investors in the VOC, what mattered was that ships and sailors survived their lengthy journeys, bringing back Asian luxuries to the Netherlands.

Ever since J.B. Harley, scholars have studied how maps legitimize colonial enterprise by promoting “vacant land” myths.²² Contesting depictions of “blankness” as value-free uncertainty, Harley proposes that cartographic “silences” constitute politically charged “performances” with consequences for land ownership.²³ Developing Harley’s insights, Mary Louise Pratt and Elizabeth Sutton suggest that emptying maps commodified land, helping prospective landowners consult, compare, and acquire “new” territories, displacing Indigenous peoples in the process.²⁴ Concomitantly, Benjamin Schmidt explains how late seventeenth-century Netherlandish printmakers developed “exotic” iconographies to market their works to burgher publics.²⁵ Exotic geography was typified by imagery that delocalized and homogenized the unfamiliar into a decidedly non-European “world of alluring, enticing, spectacular richness.”²⁶ Although emptying and exoticizing territories produced different visual forms, both involved projecting metropolitan fantasies onto uncertain spaces.²⁷

Other scholars, instead, have suggested that early modern Dutch visual and intellectual culture was characterized by the “art of describing.” Svetlana Alpers argues that, unlike their allegory-rich Italian counterparts, Dutch maps constituted verisimilar descriptions of newly surveyed lands, “*naer het leven*.”²⁸ Similarly, Hal Cook contends that Dutch science was dominated by a culture of facts that privileged simple, “objective” descriptions, facilitating commercial activity.²⁹ Challenging such totalizing accounts of Dutch visual and epistemic culture, Dániel Margócsy shows that scientific activities in the early modern Netherlands were defined by disagreement, competition, and controversy.³⁰ Consequently, he reveals how actors with disparate “vested, commercial and epistemological, interest[s]” developed different “regime[s] of representation.”³¹ Analogously, I suggest that Cape officials’ and Netherlandish mapmakers’ disparate interests engendered dissimilar visualizations of southern Africa. Thus, this article explores how creole epistemologies can unsettle commonplace assumptions in the history of knowledge.

22 Harley, “Silences and Secrecy.”

23 Harley, “Silences and Secrecy,” 58. Indeed, considerable labor was expended manufacturing empty space in early modernity. Lefebvre, *Production*; Shapin and Schaffer, *Leviathan*.

24 Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 30; Sutton, *Early Modern Dutch Prints*, 34.

25 Schmidt, *Inventing*, 262.

26 *Ibid.*

27 Sutton and Yingling, “Projections of Desire,” 794.

28 Alpers, *Art*, 135; Swan, “*Ad vivum*.”

29 Cook, *Matters*, 378–409.

30 Margócsy, *Commercial Visions*, 17–18, 214–16.

31 *Ibid.*, 18.

The Cape Colony was a *heterotopia*: a polysemous space constructed in different ways by groups with disparate interests.³² Thus, materially conditioned conflicts between metropolitan and colonial perspectives towards the Cape resulted in remarkably diverse visual representations of the region. Comparing underexplored colonial manuscript sources to printed Netherlandish maps, I argue that several seemingly self-evident analytical categories do not appropriately reflect the geopolitical complexities presented by early modern visual depictions of the Cape. Southern Africa was at once “exoticized” and “emptied” by metropolitans, who viewed the Cape as an important maritime node with little interesting or exploitable in its interior.³³ Therefore, rather than relying exclusively on commonplace but ultimately insufficient categories of visual analysis, I propose we study early modern maps in terms of the projection of actors’ relative interests and imaginaries, from varying perspectives, onto uncertain spaces. The article examines how disparate groups of actors, separated by over 7,000 nautical miles and dissimilar ways of life and material interests, produced images of southern Africa with vastly different epistemic foci, projecting divergent interests onto their maps.³⁴

Imag(in)ing the Cape from the Metropole

Early in the seventeenth century, the rapidly commercializing city of Amsterdam became Europe’s foremost center of map production.³⁵ Celebrated cosmographers, including Jodocus Hondius and Cornelis Claesz, fleeing Flanders—Europe’s previous cartographic capital—following the Spanish conquest, brought Flemish and Iberian mapmaking expertise to the northern Netherlands. In 1619, the VOC obtained a privilege from the States-General covering all maps of regions under the Company’s dominion.³⁶ Every depiction of areas between the Cape of Good Hope and Dejima thus required explicit approval from the *Heeren XVII* for publication. The VOC, whose navigators were instructed to survey the coastlines along which they traveled, employed an official mapmaker to collate data from individual voyages into charts. In 1633, the VOC appointed the prolific commercial publisher and cosmographer Willem Blaeu to the role; following his death in 1638, he was succeeded by his son Joan. While VOC mapmakers were contractually bound to secrecy, Joan Blaeu drew on confidential data to enrich his commercial atlases, making them more appealing for his burgher readership.³⁷

32 Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”; Eco, *Opera Aperta*, 27–28.

33 Mbembe, *Postcolony*, 1–4.

34 Following recent scholarship, this article underlines differences between “maps” and “charts.” Edney, *Cartography*, 31; Gaspar and Leitão, “Early Modern Nautical Charts.”

35 Prak, *Dutch Republic*, 269.

36 Zandvliet, “Mapping the Dutch World,” 1433.

37 Zandvliet, *Mapping for Money*, 118–30.



Figure 4. “Æthiopia Inferior vel Exterior,” from Willem Jansz. Blaeu’s *Theatrum orbis terrarum, sive atlas novus* (1635). © Princeton: Historic Map Division, Special Collections, Firestone Library.

Over the course of the seventeenth century, the Blaeus and their rivals published lavishly illustrated atlases for avid burgher consumers.³⁸ As Sutton shows, there was substantial overlap between the owners of these luxury atlases and Amsterdam’s flourishing merchant class, who had commercial interests in geographical knowledge.³⁹ Maps of regions under the VOC’s dominion thus served to advertise the Company’s colonial endeavors to potential investors, whether as regular *participanten* (shareholders) or managerial *bewindhebbers*.⁴⁰ Therefore, visual depictions of regions under Dutch colonial control, including the Cape, performed ideological work to sustain the VOC’s expensive overseas activities.

The VOC established the Cape Colony merely as a refreshment station between Europe and the Company’s source of raw wealth in the East Indies. Thus, metropolitan atlases’ depictions of the Cape tended to reflect the Company’s designation of the region as an interesting and important maritime node with an uninteresting, unknown interior. Therefore, despite including ostensibly verisimilar descriptions of the coastline, Dutch atlases transformed

38 Koeman, *Joan Blaeu*, 41–43; Van Netten, *Koopman*, 12.

39 Sutton, *Early Modern Dutch Prints*, 167.

40 Sutton, *Capitalism and Cartography*, 121–22; De Vries and Van der Woude, *First Modern Economy*, 385.

the uncertain southern African interior into a stage for the projection of imagined metropolitan fantasies.

Consider Willem Blaeu's "Æthiopia Inferior vel Exterior" [Fig. 4], first published in the *Theatrum orbis terrarum, sive Atlas Novus* (1635) and repurposed several times over the seventeenth century, including in his son's celebrated *Atlas Maior* (1662–1672). Although the Cape was not yet a Dutch possession when the image was first engraved, VOC sailors were already stopping at Table Bay to barter cattle from the Khoekhoen. The littoral and its resources thus constituted interesting unknowns for the VOC and its metropolitan investors. The fact that Joan reprinted the same copperplate in his *Atlas Maior*—published over a decade after the colony's foundation—suggests that Netherlandish visions of the Cape were not radically transformed by the establishment of the settlement in 1652. As in the Blaeus' representations of other extra-European parts of the world, the cartouche depicts imagined, exoticized local peoples—two nude males, one holding a bow, the other a spear—and the region's most recognizable commodity: a cowhide. The lands closest to the Cape coast are populated by cattle—welcome resources for Dutch sailors on long journeys between the "Oceanus Aethiopicus" and "Mare Orientale sive Indicum," both of which are awash with Dutch ships. The interior, instead, is occupied by nondescript hills, deserts, imagined towns (including the mythical "Vigiti Magna"), and rivers flowing into a large lake. The map labels a vast stretch of territory as "Monomotapa," just south of the "Lunae Montes," believed to be the source of the Nile at least since Ptolemy. Mozambique, already a Portuguese colony, is embellished by two elephants, simultaneously an exotic emblem for the African continent at large and a marker of the Portuguese's source of ivory.

The Blaeu map at once empties and exoticizes the southern African interior, depicting it as a space filled by text and images relaying classical narratives rather than descriptions based on contemporary observations. Even the *Atlas Maior's* letterpress pays extraordinarily little attention to new, empirical knowledges of the interior, devoting few words to the region. It repurposes old stories about Monomotapa, recounts Vasco da Gama's 1498 discovery of the ocean route to the Indies via the Cape, and briefly describes the Cape's vidual resources and Indigenous customs.⁴¹ In summary, Blaeu's *Atlas Maior* makes little effort to describe the southern African interior "naer het leven." Instead, it presents the space as riddled with learned allegorical and colonial maritime iconographies, which served to sell both atlases and the VOC's overseas activities to metropolitan burgher readers.

Another map that reveals the different ways in which interesting and uninteresting unknowns were used from a metropolitan perspective to represent uncertain southern African spaces is Jacob van Meurs's "Map of the Cape of Good Hope and its True Situation" [Fig. 5]. Van Meurs—one of the key

⁴¹ Blaeu, *Atlas Maior*, IX, Africa: 133–34.

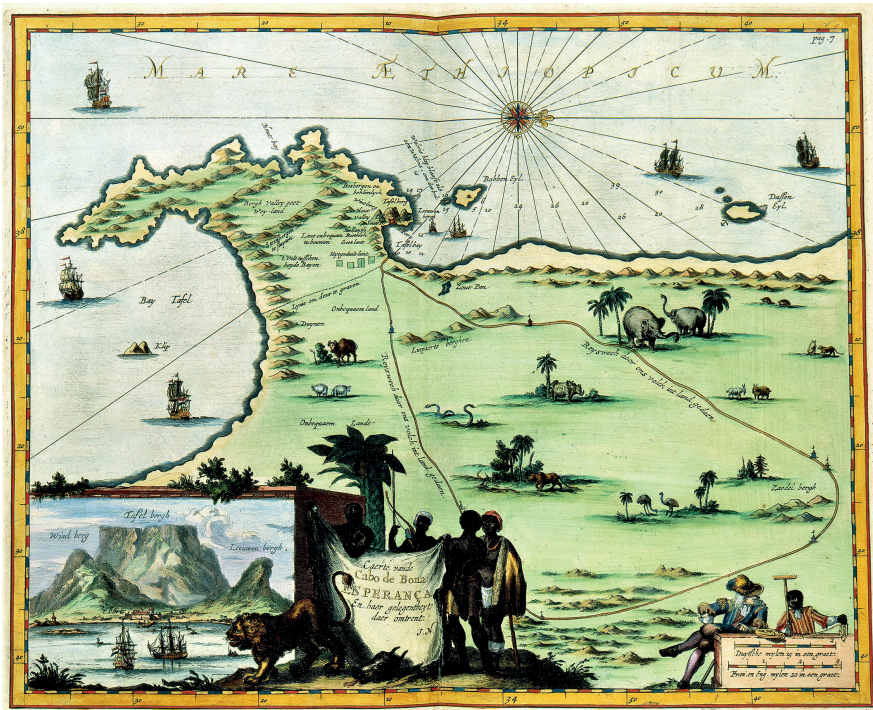


Figure 5. Jacob van Meurs, *Caerte vande Cabo de Bona Esperanca, En haer gelegenheyt daer omtrent*. © Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague, inv. Nr. 388 A 9 deel II, na p. 6. 1682.

inventors of “exotic geography” in the late seventeenth-century Dutch Republic—published the map in Johan Nieuwhof’s *Gedenkwaerdige zee en lantreise* (1682).⁴² An inset image in the lower left shows the by-then iconic view of Table Mountain from Table Bay, with several ships flying the Dutch flag in the foreground. To its right, a lion walks toward the left across the scene. Four Africans stand behind a sheet with the print’s title, with exotic vegetation in the background. In the lower right, the scale bar shows distances in “*Duytsche mylen*,” English and French miles, and degrees. Above it, van Meurs illustrates a seated European man in naval uniform surveilling an African boy clad in European clothes as the boy surveys the land using a rope. The southern African landscape varies substantially across the map. The Cape peninsula is depicted as mountainous terrain, with Dutch ships all around it, suggesting a constant flow of commodities passing through the colony. The Dutch fort is drawn at the foot of Table Mountain, as are the freeburghers’ “issued lands.” A dotted “*Lynie om deur te graven*” separates the Cape peninsula from the rest of the continent, as well as the apparently verisimilar interesting lands from the exoticized projections onto the uninteresting interior. Such is the exoticization and

42 Schmidt, *Inventing*, 27–28.

delocalization of the interior that van Meurs includes a rhinoceros based on Albrecht Dürer's famous print of the Lisbon specimen. Van Meurs chose to straightforwardly depict features that were interesting to metropolitan investors, while projecting exotic, universalizing fantasies onto an emptied, uninteresting interior landscape. Consequently, the map aptly captures the different modes of visual representation of disparate, perspective-dependent kinds of unknowns.

Between Manuscript and Print

We can better understand what visual choices were made by metropolitan publishers by examining the differences between manuscript and printed versions of the same map. Around 1695, having been commissioned by the VOC to produce an atlas of Asia and Africa (the *Atlas Amsterdam*), Isaak de Graaf drafted a meticulously detailed map of the Cape of Good Hope [Fig. 6]. Although de Graaf's map was drawn in the Netherlands for the *Heeren XVII*, it constituted a rare example of relatively unprocessed data sent by local colonists keen to expand their territory, making it something of an exception in the metropole. The map depicts an array of different landscapes, offering detailed visual and textual information about exploitable "*wynbergen en boulanden*" and the properties and locations of different forests for timber. It shows Khoekhoen *kraalen*, the positions of freshwater lakes and rivers, and the newly established "*France quartier of Drakenstein*" (present-day Franschhoek), settled by Huguenots after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Possessing certain, credible knowledge of these features and their locations—which generally did not appear on metropolitan maps—was in the interest of Cape settlers, not European armchair travelers. The inclusion of Khoekhoen *kraals* marked a new stage in settlers' efforts to control and discipline the mobility of the Cape's Indigenous population. By inscribing the nomadic-pastoralist Khoekhoen within predefined, resource-deprived areas on maps, settlers sought to limit and control their movement, destroying their seasonal migration patterns.⁴³ Indeed, just north of the "*Hottentots Hollandt*"—the mountain range east of False Bay, designated as the Khoekhoen's homeland—the map shows a series of rectangles demarcating a "*Comp^s. Bouwerijen*" (Company construction), laying bare settlers' expansive, territorial colonial project.⁴⁴ To the east of the "*Hottentots Hollandt*" lies a "*Moerassigh Weij, en Bouwlandt*" (swampy pasture and arable land)—the colony's frontier—before giving way to homogenous mountains, forests, and the occasional Khoekhoen *kraal*. In sum, de Graaf's exceptionally detailed map projected concerns and interests from the perspectives of local governors and freeburghers rather

43 Glatigny et al., "*Inter se nulli fines*," 303; Fleischer, "Company's Garden," 116–17.

44 Siegert, *Cultural Techniques*, 97–146.



Figure 6. Isaak de Graaf, Map of the Cape Lands up until the French Quarter, c. 1695.
© Nationaal Archief, The Hague, 4.VEL 809.

than of metropolitan burghers. The map depicts the interior as profoundly interesting: a space worth knowing in great detail to commodify it and facilitate its transformation into a territorial, extractive, plantation settler state.

Around two decades after de Graaf produced his map of the Cape, the commercial cartographer Pieter van der Aa recycled it in his *Nouvel Atlas* [Fig. 7], recrafting it for a very different audience.⁴⁵ Van der Aa integrated de Graaf's map into a larger area of Africa's south-west corner, along with an exoticized, illustrated cartouche. Two lions sit on either side of exotic fruit—perhaps products of the Company's ordered garden—atop a column. To the column's right, Table Mountain is shown from a Table Bay dotted with ships. To the left, instead, are *kraals* with two Khoekhoen dancing in the foreground. In the top right, van der Aa includes a key, explaining the meanings of the various symbols found on the map. He marks out sandbanks (illustrated by bands of dots), rocky coastlines (with crosses), sites of “*bon Ancrage*” (with an anchor), plantations (with empty squares), and Khoekhoen *kraals* (with circles of smaller circles). The land closest to the coast—the parts included in de Graaf's map—is dense with explanatory text, listing many (but not all) of the features depicted in the manuscript version. Nevertheless, van der Aa depicts

⁴⁵ Van der Aa often republished others' work without permission. Hoftijzer, *Pieter van der Aa*, 58.

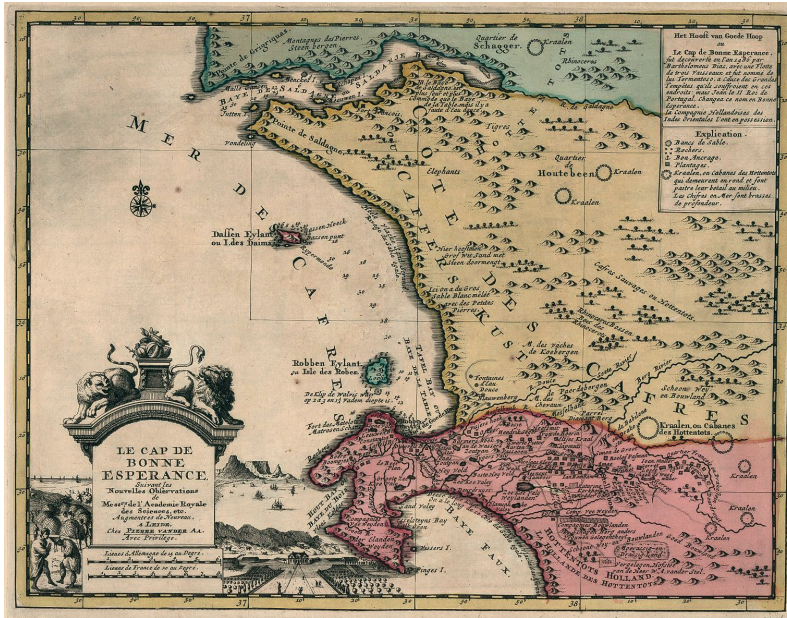


Figure 7. “The Cape of Good Hope” from Pieter van der Aa, *Nouvel Atlas* (1714). David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries.

lands all the way up to Saldanha Bay in the north, and it is there that we see the projection of metropolitan fantasies.

North of the pink-colored Dutch territory, we see homogenous, nondescript hills and trees, with the occasional *kraal*. Some parts of the interior are simply labeled “*Elephants*,” “*Tigres*,” and “*Rhinoceros*,” constituting a clear exoticization of what van der Aa’s metropolitan readers would otherwise consider an uninteresting unknown space. Keen to acquire marketable information, van der Aa’s map included “*Nouvelles Observations*” relayed by the Silesian apothecary and Company employee Heinrich Claudius to the French Jesuit Guy Tachard, a missionary traveling between France and Siam, associated with the Académie des Sciences.⁴⁶ A label on Saldanha Bay—an interesting unknown for readers with shares in the VOC—explains that it “is safer and more comfortable than Table Bay, but it lacks freshwater.” In sum, van der Aa molded his map to his readers’ interests by representing coastlines as interesting and presenting the interior as an imagined, uninteresting unknown. By contrast, as we will see, colonial mapmakers had a substantial interest in possessing certain knowledge of the interior to exploit it.

46 Tachard, *Voyage*, 65.

Mapping Southern Africa *in situ*

Much of the literature on early modern maps of the Cape focuses on the coast, mirroring the heavily maritime character of Dutch colonial activities.⁴⁷ As Kapil Raj writes, territorial “maps were not part of the European land traveller’s *vade mecum* until well into the nineteenth century.”⁴⁸ Nevertheless, as the colonial maps explored in this section reveal, creolized European settlers were deeply interested and materially invested in surveying, mapping, and knowing the uncertain southern African interior ever since the colony’s foundation. Indeed, the historiographical focus on coastal mapping commissioned by European metropolitan institutions mirrors Eurocentric assumptions about where, for whom, and for what purposes geographical knowledge was produced in early modernity. To counteract this bias, it is necessary to pay more attention to overlooked manuscript maps made at the Cape by settlers, produced for locally relevant purposes.

The first three decades of Dutch settlement at the Cape of Good Hope were plagued by material scarcity and frequent disagreements between colonists and the *Heeren XVII* over colonial strategy.⁴⁹ The earliest settlers who landed with Jan van Riebeeck in 1652 were tasked by the VOC with constructing a fort and cultivating a garden to restock passing Dutch ships with fresh fruit and vegetables.⁵⁰ The colony’s official gardener Hendrik Boom and his wife Annetje Joris, herself a farmer, successfully grew flora native to Dutch plantation colonies, including Brazilian pumpkins, melons, and bananas, and Batavian tea and camphor trees.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the settlement, seen as a financial burden by the metropolitan VOC, remained dependent on wheat and corn imports from the East Indies for over three decades, only producing its first corn surplus in 1684.⁵² Moreover, although the Cape peninsula possessed an indigenous woodland when Van Riebeeck arrived, settlers deforested much of the area by 1679, leading to expensive timber imports from Scandinavia.⁵³

As settlers were unsustainably tearing through local resources, the Khoekhoen go-between Krotoa (also known as Eva) told Van Riebeeck of the Namaquas, an Indigenous population living north of the colony.⁵⁴ She described them as a morally upright, churchgoing, and house-dwelling civilization, rich in cattle and ivory.⁵⁵ Krotoa’s account resonated with Portuguese rumors—amplified by Jan Huygen van Linschoten’s *Itinerario* (1596)—about the fabulously rich, gold-filled, agriculturalist civilization of Monomotapa

47 Koeman, *Tabulae*, 11; Liebenberg, “Unveiling,” 212.

48 Raj, “Networks,” 54.

49 Ward, *Networks*, 152–53.

50 Pooley, “Pioneering Explorer,” 8.

51 Fleischer, “(Ex)changing Knowledge,” 251–52; Strangman, *Early French Callers*, 159.

52 Huigen, “Monomotapa,” 207; Boxer, *Dutch Seaborne*, 281.

53 Grove, *Green Imperialism*, 133–45.

54 Boëseken, *Resolusies*, 182.

55 Huigen, “Monomotapa,” 216; Boëseken, *Resolusies*, 182.

north of “*Vigiti Magna*.”⁵⁶ Monomotapa, a largely fictitious, Eldoradoesque distortion of the kingdom of Mutapa in present-day Zimbabwe and Mozambique, had long been depicted in metropolitan European maps as lying deep within the southern African interior. Along with the dire material conditions at the Cape, these reports spurred Van Riebeeck and, three decades later, Simon van der Stel to launch expeditions into the unknown—but to them, deeply interesting—interior. These treks were not official VOC-sponsored expeditions, the likes of which did not take place until 1752 under the governorship of Ryk Tulbagh.⁵⁷ Thus, the cartographic outputs of these seventeenth-century voyages ought to be understood as products of creole settlers’ geographical interests and agency rather than those of the metropolitan VOC.

Traveling northward from the Cape of Good Hope, settlers initially sought to make contact with the Namaquas, whom they believed were Monomotapan exiles, to establish commercial relations with them.⁵⁸ However, Namaqua anti-colonial resistance during Van Riebeeck’s expeditions discredited earlier accounts of the population as “civilized,” gradually shifting settlers’ interests in the interior from trade to mineral extraction.⁵⁹ In 1682, a group of itinerant Namaquas, to whom “the river of *Vigiti Magna* [...] was known,” brought copper to the Dutch fort at Table Bay, rekindling settlers’ hopes of discovering a mineral resource-rich interior ripe for extraction.⁶⁰ In October 1682 and again in 1683, van der Stel ordered the Swedish ensign Olof Bergh to prospect Namaqualand for copper. Although Bergh’s expeditions did not find the elusive ore, their participants produced a map of the interior [Fig. 8], which was later included in the *Atlas Amsterdam* at the turn of the century.

The map is latitudinally graduated by intervals of ten minutes of arc, with distances in “*Duytsche mylen*” depicted on a scale bar in the ocean. The coastline shows hydrographical data (sea depths, sandbanks, and rocks) marked by numbers, dots, and crosses, most likely obtained from VOC ship logs, and sparsely labeled Dutch and Portuguese toponyms. Importantly, the map indicates the Bergh expeditions’ newly discovered sites of interest in the interior, including the locations of several freshwater lakes and rivers. The key on the left-hand side of the page lists twenty-three sources of water, describing their varying potability. A dotted line follows the 1682 expedition’s itinerary through the interior, traversing snippets of the geographical features encountered, including blue-colored lakes and river sections, as well as nondescript gray mountains. These depictions indicate how colonial mapmakers projected their interests onto visual representations of different kinds of uncertain features.

56 Huigen, “Monomotapa,” 210–11; Linschoten, *Itinerario*, 7–8.

57 Koeman, *Tabulae*, 22–24; Liebenberg, “Unveiling,” 219.

58 Dutch traders across the world were keen to emphasize their trade-oriented interactions with Indigenous groups to bolster their colonial legitimacy over that of rival European empires. Schmidt, *Innocence*, 174–84.

59 Huigen, “Monomotapa,” 208, 216.

60 Moodie, *Record*, 386.



Figure 8. Designation of the overland journey from the Cape of Good Hope to the Amacquas: as well as from the Cape Voorn to Cape Agulhas in the Year 1682. © Nationaal Archief, The Hague, 4.VEL 850.

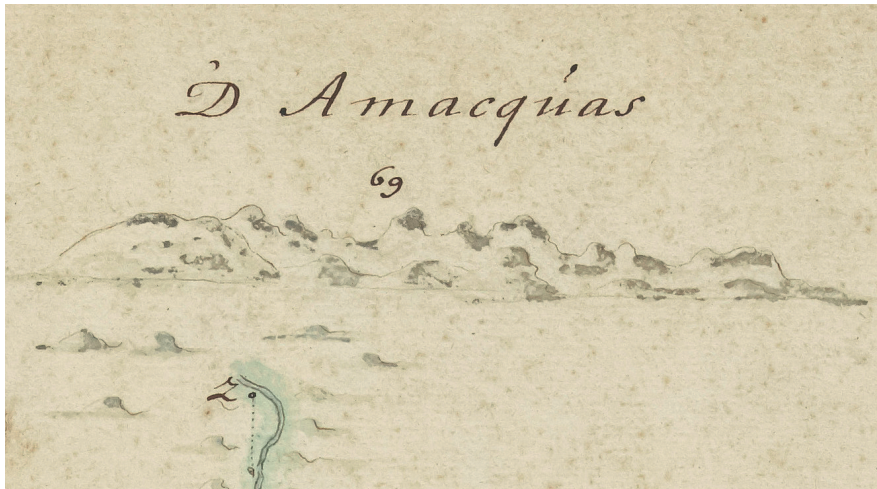


Figure 9. Detail of the Bergh expeditions' map, projecting an imagined illustration of the Namaqua copper mountains. © Nationaal Archief, The Hague, 4.VEL 850.

For example, the fragments of rivers are illustrated with distinct orientations, marking each one out as unique. Rivers were interesting unknowns to settlers, both as sources of drinking water and possible navigational routes to Monomotapa or Namaqualand. Thus, the mapmaker sought to represent interesting unknowns “*naer het leven*,” thereby manufacturing certainty and credibility.

The illustrations were complemented by detailed written descriptions of the interesting unknowns in the key. Both visual and textual representations of these interesting unknowns served to minimize uncertainty about the location and characteristics of these features, as it was indisputably in settlers’ interests to possess detailed knowledge of their properties. By contrast, the mountains drawn around the itinerary line—uninteresting unknowns—were depicted as homogenous and unremarkable, as they were not deemed to possess valuable minerals. Much like the Cape Colony itself was seen from the metropole, these mountains were seen by settlers as features on the way to the interesting without being interesting *per se*. Thus, they were depicted as visually nondescript, with little accompanying text explaining their features.

The journey ended at a site labeled “Z. The grass plain on the Doornbosch River where the Amacquas came to us.” Just north of this point, the mapmaker illustrated the still unseen, uncertain “high mountains of the Amacquas” [Fig. 9]. These peaks—the unattained objective of the Bergh expeditions—were interesting unknowns and were thus depicted differently from the unremarkable, copper-free ones en route to them, both in size and shape. Although the Bergh expeditions never did reach the Copper mountains, the mapmaker’s illustration represented them in a manner that was neither “exoticized” nor “empty.” Instead, it projected the explorers’ hopes of a bountiful, mineral-rich interior onto their representation of the still-unknown highlands.

On August 25, 1685, Simon van der Stel launched a new trek, this time comprising “57 white men, ... Dain Mangale, or prince of Maccasser [*sic*], with his servant, and also three black servants,” toward the hypothesized “Copper Mountains.”⁶¹ Although settlers remained uncertain—even after several decades of interior expeditions—of the mountains’ location (or even existence), they conceived them as interesting unknowns that could transform the material conditions of the floundering colony. The trekkers produced an intricately illustrated hand-drawn map of their itinerary [Fig. 10] and a detailed travel journal of topographic and ethnographic observations. Heinrich Claudius—accompanying the expedition—produced elaborate watercolor paintings of Namaqua people, the landscape, and local plants and animals.⁶²

61 TCD MS IE 984, f. 671r (MS translated by Gilbert Waterhouse). Godée-Molsbergen, *Reizen*, 137–211. Daeng Mangale was a Makassarian prince exiled to the Cape; he arrived in 1681. Boëseken, *Simon*, 122.

62 Scholars disagree about who drew the map. Liebenberg, “Unveiling,” 214–17 argues that it was drawn by Claudius, who accompanied the van der Stel expedition and painted watercolors of local peoples and plants in the commander’s journal. Glatigny and Maré, “A map,” 107, instead, maintain it is impossible to determine who drew the map, but suggest it must have been drafted by a professional cartographer, who left their monogram in red just to the east of the Dutch fort at Table Bay. Waterhouse, “Expedition,” 308.

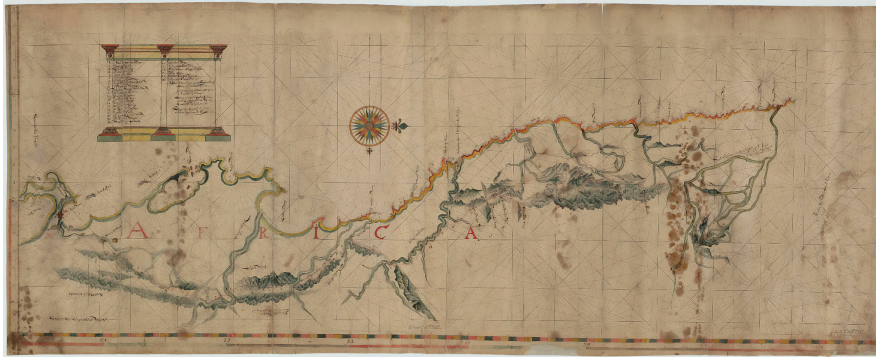


Figure 10. Map of the Land Journey, from the Cabo de Bon Esperance northwards to the Buffels River, 1685. © Nationaal Archief, The Hague, 4.VEL 851.

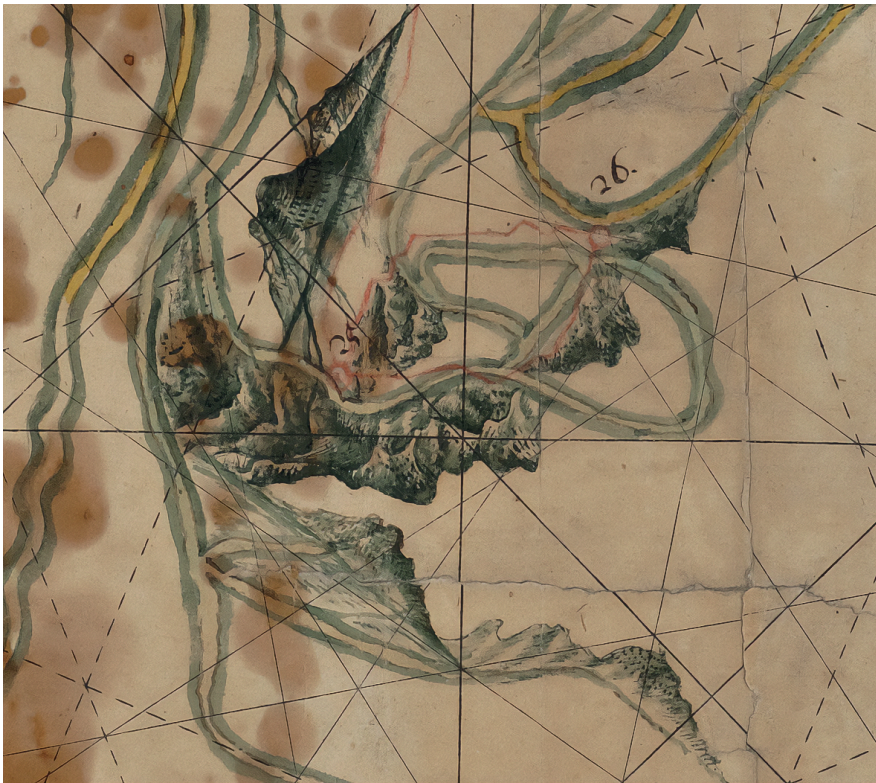


Figure 11. Detail of the 1685 map, showing the Copper Mountains. Extract from Map of the Land Journey, from the Cabo de Bon Esperance northwards to the Buffels River, 1685. © Nationaal Archief, The Hague, 4.VEL 851.

On October 11, the travelers “came to the mountains where Lieutenant Olof Bergh had to turn back in 1683,” describing them as “consisting of nothing but steep and massive rocks, apparently unscalable”—in other words, uninteresting unknowns.⁶³ The expedition’s fortunes changed three days later, when one of its members observed that the local Namaqua population possessed “some glittering sand, which was judged to be of a mineral character.”⁶⁴ They reported that the “natives declared unanimously that they obtained the sand from a river they call Eyn [...] about ten days’ journey from the Copper Mountain.”⁶⁵ Upon hearing this, van der Stel “could judge it was in the same latitude as the river Vigiti magni.”⁶⁶ On October 21, the travelers eventually reached the much-anticipated “Copper Mountains”—“*onse gedestineerde plaats*.”⁶⁷ The presence of “*Spaens groen*” (Verdigris, the blue-green marker of copper) “gave [van der Stel] and the foreman miner good hope of finding something of importance.”⁶⁸ As the journal and the Cape Colony’s Council of Policy records note, this discovery “looked remarkably promising,” indicating the unquestionable commercial interests settlers had in possessing certain, credible knowledge about the Copper Mountains.⁶⁹ This commercial interest in the mountains translated into ostensibly verisimilar visual depictions in the expedition’s accompanying map.

The map lists twenty-six geographical features the party encountered on its northward journey. Its depiction of the interior is far richer than in Goos’s “Pas-Kaarte van de Zuyd-west-kust van Africa,” or even the Bergh map. The mountainous landscape along the travelers’ route, itself marked by a red line, is drawn naturalistically, although the mountains are oriented inconsistently with respect to any direction from which they are viewed. It has been suggested that this projection may have been chosen because the map was designed to be placed on a table and examined by people standing around it [Fig. 11].⁷⁰ Along the coastline, outlined in green, yellow, and (northward from the letter “I” in the word “AFRICA”) red, we see hydrographical information marked by dots and crosses. The areas drawn in the greatest specific detail, and hence characterized as the least uncertain, are “*d’Eerste Cooperbergh*” and “*d’Tweede Cooperbergh*,” which the settlers hoped to mine for the valuable ore.

The Copper Mountains were neither “silenced” nor “exoticized” by the mapmaker, but rather depicted in as simple yet recognizable a manner as possible. The deployment of ostensibly representationalist visualizations ensured that subsequent expeditions could locate this potential source of mineral

63 TCD MS 984, f. 695v.

64 TCD MS 984, f. 696v.

65 TCD MS 984, f. 697r.

66 Ibid.

67 TCD MS 984, f. 700r.

68 TCD MS 984, f. 700v.

69 TCD MS 984, f. 702v; WCA C: 2355, ff. 90–93.

70 Glatigny and Maré, “A map,” 109.

wealth, just north of the “*Namaquas Craalen*,” as easily as possible. The depiction of interesting unknowns, in other words, resonates with Cook’s and Alpers’s accounts of descriptive imaging in early modern Dutch visual culture.⁷¹ Indeed, as Cook writes, the “greatest skill was applied to creating representations of the straightforward appearances of things in all their meticulous detail.”⁷² Such straightforward, “objective” representations projected settlers’ material interests and priorities onto the paper. The importance of these interesting unknowns for settlers was underlined by the Cape government’s efforts to keep such information from reaching European publics. Indeed, Claudius’s dissemination of sensitive information caused the governor “great perturbation,” and led to the Silesian’s expulsion from the Cape.⁷³ Settler colonists at the Cape were in dire need of locally extractable mineral commodities. This interesting unknown was believed to be in the interior—whether in Monomotapa or Namaqualand. Therefore, colonial actors favored certain, simple descriptions of the knowledge required to reach it.

Conclusion

When faced with geographical uncertainty, mapmakers’ responses were shaped by their interests in what they believed lay in the uncertain spaces. These interests, in turn, were geopolitically specific rather than general, depending on actors’ respective positionalities. Spaces such as the Cape of Good Hope—heterotopias that were seen differently depending on whether one was a metropolitan burgher or a creolized settler—are thus ideal sites for analysts to examine such contrasts in visual cultures.

A framework for studying maps based on understanding what constituted interesting and uninteresting unknowns for its producers allows us to synthesize two contrasting modes of visual analysis commonly deployed by map scholars. Interesting unknowns were features that a particular group of actors possessed uncertain knowledge about but held material interests in knowing with more certainty. Uninteresting unknowns, instead, were features that a group neither knew nor cared much about. Neither category overdetermines map analysis, as they are interchangeable depending on one’s perspective. These categories allow us to study colonial maps and their functions on their own terms rather than applying analyses developed by map scholars from an archive of predominantly printed metropolitan maps.

On their own, neither Harley’s “silencing,” Schmidt’s “exoticization,” Alpers’s “description,” nor Cook’s “simplicity” sufficiently explain the sophisticated commercial and ideological work performed by maps of the Cape

⁷¹ Cook, *Matters*, 378–409; Alpers, *Art*, 135.

⁷² Cook, *Matters*, 17.

⁷³ Leibbrandt, *Rambles*, 23; WCA C: 1381, f. 33.

Colony. As I argue, a propitious first step to study early modern maps is to identify the material interests that different classes of mapmakers had with respect to the spaces being depicted. For colonial cartographers, verisimilar descriptions of the Cape’s interior were important to help transform what had been designed as a port colony into an extractivist settler state. Possessing straightforward, naturalistic representations of the Cape Colony allowed settlers to exploit its lands and Indigenous populations, helping them become less dependent on a metropolitan VOC that did not intend to offer them much support. By contrast, for metropolitan Dutch burghers—especially those with shares in the VOC—southern Africa constituted little more than a node to ensure that wealth accumulated by the Company from the East Indies made its way smoothly to European shores. Therefore, from a metropolitan perspective, while it was valuable to have accurate descriptions of the southern African coastline and the resources it offered sailors, the interior was an uninteresting unknown to be silenced or exoticized. Thus, the article contends that before deploying commonplace categories of visual analysis—including “empty,” “exotic,” and “naturalistic”—historians ought to pay careful attention to different mapmakers’ perspectives, shaped by their disparate material interests.

About the Author

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