

Cartography of africa - history of maps



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Under the Western Eyes

One of the most popular and decorative map of all early maps of Africa, “Africae nova descriptio” allows us to picture Africa through the eyes of Europeans in the early 1600s, the golden age of Dutch mapmaking. Unlike many historical maps that remain as mysteries, the origins of this map are identified. Published in his 1630 *Atlas Novus*, this cornerstone map of Africa was produced by Willem Janszoon Blaeu, a well-regarded Dutch cartographer. Blaeu was an astronomer, an instrument maker, an engraver, and a globe manufacturer. Like many map-makers of his time, he was not an explorer himself: his maps were based from narratives of sailors, traders, travelers, and explorers. In addition to the accounts, he used earlier maps as a basic template for his own as much of geographical information is still based on the Ptolemaic maps. Influences of Ptolemy’s *Geographia*, a manual on construction and drawings of maps written around 160, continued to appear in maps across Europe until 1730, apparent in Blaeu’s map as Ptolemaic lakes of Zaire and Zaflan are shown as the sources of the Nile (Jones).

Even if the origin of this map was unknown, one could easily determine the map as Africa perceived by an outsider. The expanses of oceans, constituting a good portion of the entire map, and the prominence of the ships bearing Dutch flags on the oceans, suggest that this is a view of Africa from a maritime perspective. The majority of these ships are drawn sailing around the Cape of Good Hope, and indeed, the European interest in Africa was

largely spurred initially by a quest of finding an alternative route to Asia. Written primarily in Latin, the names of places on the map are quite interesting as they are small individual puzzles that can serve as historical markers or hints that help contextualize the map. For example, “Barbaria” would be familiar to 17th century Europeans as the pirates and slave traders of the “Barbary coast” were widely feared throughout southern Europe and northern Africa. On the other hand, “Nubia,” labeled in the region along the Nile located in what is today southern Egypt, alludes to more of a historical and anthropological picture: a reference to one of the earliest civilizations of ancient Africa.

The majority of the names represented on this map are closer approximations of indigenous names rather than names on maps that were made a century or so later. Because this 1630 map predates the full force of European colonial rule in Africa, the names are also precolonial. For instance, “Libya” is the precolonial name included in this map. When this territory was broadly incorporated into one huge territory under Italian colonial rule, it was simply called “Italian North Africa.” It was not until 1934 that the country name Libya- its current name - was reintroduced (“Libya Profile - Timeline”). And so forth, the name “Libya” chronicles the struggle of Libyans’ indigenous notions of place and space: resembling a situation in Raymond Craib’s *Cartographic Mexico*, where officials of Veracruz attempted to redefine and codify fugitive landscapes with their own conceptions of history and territory (Craib).

One of the most interesting features of the map is the cartographer’s way of labeling the places on the map. The names of the coastal towns and features

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of the map are printed inward towards the continent giving an illusion of fullness and thorough charting to the map. On closer examination, the densest areas portrayed on the map are the perimeter of the continent. In fact, several regions of interior Africa are unidentified, many of which are decorated with indigenous animals such as elephants, lions, and ostriches. Only coastal towns are named on the Cape, with the printing covering much of unknown territories. The map seems to focus on much more geographic detail in eastern Africa and the Mediterranean coast than the west or the south, a sure sign of European exploration bias. Nevertheless, the blank spaces do not accurately reflect the reality, as Africa was a thoroughly populated continent in the 1600s. Rather, they reflect the limitations of European knowledge and interests and the significance of Africa from a Eurocentric view.

The sketches of towns and the illustrations showing various indigenous costumes along the border of the map further imply the coastal perspective of the continent. The side panels, depicting ten different views of costumed natives from areas which Europeans presumably had contact with, take place in coastal towns. The oval views of major cities on the top border include Alexandria, Alger, Tunis, and Mozambique. These nine city and town plans above might have been major trading ports for the Dutch, or they might have been significant places known to Blaeu through the accounts of his various sources.

Another captivating cartographic feature is the identification of African territories and kingdoms outlined in color. However, these regions seem to reflect the nationhood of Africa through the eyes of Europeans. Contrary to <https://assignbuster.com/cartography-of-africa-history-of-maps/>

Europe, Africa was not a place that can be easily presumed and projected onto an unexplored area. In *Siam Mapped*, Thongchai examines the territorial entity of Thailand by exploring its conception of nationhood. Before the late 19th century, established boundaries were nonexistent in Siamese understanding of a territory. Overlapping or multiple sovereignties were common, while areas without any jurisdiction also existed (Thongchai).

Consequently, it is apparent that 17th century explorers and sailors in Africa misconstrued boundary delineations and the struggled to comprehend indigenous conceptions of boundary that may have very well existed in Africa. However, these identifications of territories would continue to be more accurate during the next few hundred years as more traders and explorers report on hundreds of ethnic territories and tribes.

In terms of the map's technical cartographic elements, this map is particularly striking in several ways. Surprisingly, the geographical representation is quite accurate- Africa portrayed on the map is a close depiction to the actual scale and the shape of the continent. Some of the key topographical elements of Africa, such as the Nile river and the lakes in eastern Africa, are present, though they are fairly inaccurate. The compass, sitting on top of the equator, is elaborately detailed, with a fleur-de-lis pointing the north- Europe. This is not much of a surprise as it signifies perfection, light, and life. Although the longitude and the latitude adds more specificity to the directional aspect, a scale or a distance measure is not present on the map. Common to maps of this era, the artistic elements of the map are, indeed, clearly out of scale. It is impossible to tell how large or small the nine towns are or their sizes relative to one another, and the

animals and the ships on the oceans are drawn at a size that wildly distorts the scale.

Nonetheless, the artistry of this map is absolutely stunning. The rich colors, the elaborately drawn artwork around the border, and the whimsical creatures scattered over land and sea suggest that this was as much a work of art as a map. It is very likely that this map was a costly and valuable possession and would not be accessible to many. It certainly was not a seafaring map nor a navigational map due to its lack of details or practicality. Most likely, Blaeu's readers included upper-class collectors, elites, and, perhaps, the emerging class of intellectuals who were simply curious about "exotic" places and took part in the expanding worldview of the Dutch in the following era.

Works Cited

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