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SURVIVORS OF THE PAPER-MILL:

Three Brazilian manuscript rutters from the Amsterdam Chamber
of the WIC. The evolution of their informative contents.

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This short lecture is about three 17th-century Dutch-Brazilian rutters. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word rutter as: "a set of instructions for finding one's course at sea: a marine guide to the routes, tides, etc." Such rutters were made by order of the Amsterdam Chamber of the West-India Company, and kept in its archives.

In the 19th-century these archives were housed in the Dutch Colonial Office in The Hague. In 1821 its Directors decided that that huge amount of old paper was rubbish and trash, and sold the documents to a ragman. Most of them ended in the paper-mill. But by chance at least three nicely bound and illustrated volumes managed to survive the disaster. They were picked away by casual onlookers, and at a later date were sold to antiquarian bookshops.

In 1901 a beautiful leather-bound Brazilian rutter, in 1629 organized by the Company's chief-cartographer Hessel Gerritsz with an extensive geographical anthology and many coastal drawings, was sold by the antiquarian bookseller Bernard Quaritch in London to the National Library of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. In 1907 its text was published in a French translation in volume 29 of the Anais da Biblioteca Nacional, under the title Journaux et Nouvelles ... de la Navigation aux Antilles et sur les Côtes du Brésil. THE ORIGINAL DUTCH TEXT OR A PORTUGUESE TRANSLATION HAVE NEVER BEEN PUBLISHED. It was composed as a guide for the commanders of the Dutch sea- and land-forces that conquered a bridge-head for the WIC in Pernambuco in March 1630.

In 1867 a parchment-bound Brazilian rutter, in 1637 arranged by the Company's director Johannes de Laet with an untitled geographical anthology, was sold by the antiquarians Frederik Muller & Martinus Nijhoff to an American customer, and resold at a later date to The John Carter Brown Library in Providence. In 2007 it was published in a Portuguese translation by Kapa Editorial from Petrópolis R.J. under the title Roteiro de um Brasil desconhecido / Descrição das costas do Brasil. And in 2009 it appeared in Dutch in the series Werken uitgegeven door de Linschoten Vereeniging under the title Suiker, verfhout & tabak. This volume was composed as a colonial handbook for the newly appointed governor-general of Dutch-Brazil, Johan Maurits van Nassau, who had arrived at Pernambuco in January, 1637. As a tool to expand and pacify his territory.

In 1845 another elegant leather-bound Brazilian manuscript rutter, about 1648 organized by the already mentioned Company's director Johannes de Laet, with an important geographical anthology and many hydrographical maps and charming coastal views, was sold by the antiquarian H. Meurs in The Hague to the director of the Dutch National Archives, mr. J. C. de Jonge. In 1858 his widow sold the volume to the National Archives. Today, November 3, 2011, it is published for the first time in Dutch by order of the National Archives in The Hague, under the title Nederlands-Brazilië in Kaart. Nederlanders in het Atlantisch Gebied 1600-1650. And at the same time, Kapa Editorial from Petrópolis R.J. presents the same text in Portuguese and English translations under the titles Breve Descrição da Costa do Brasil, and The Brief Description of the Coast of Brazil. This hydrographical atlas was ordered about 1643 by governor-general Johan Maurits van Nassau in order to facilitate the coastal navigation in his vast colonial realm.

Together these three surviving rutters from 1629, 1637 and about 1648 yield a fascinating survey of the growing knowledge of the Dutch about the economy, geography, hydrography, cartography, ethnology and natural history of their Brazilian colony.

The contents of the last rutter in this series date from the period that Johan Maurits van Nassau was the governor of Dutch Brazil. It was his task to stabilize and pacify the colony, to resume the sugar-production, to normalize the administration, and to guarantee and extend its boundaries. Those were the seven years of relative peace that lasted from 1637 to 1644, and they were brilliantly documented in the sumptuous maps and books of Caspar Barlaeus, Willem Piso and Georg Markgraf. The rebellion of the Portuguese colonists of June 1645 against the Dutch invaders had not yet exploded. This anonymous manuscript atlas, though organized and bound into a volume in Amsterdam about 1648 by Johannes de Laet, clearly belongs to the previous Nassovian period.

Though the revival of the sugar-production and the export of other commodities like leather, tobacco and brazil-wood was important to the Company's directors, the extension of knowledge about the navigability of the Brazilian coastal waters was of far greater importance to the Dutch colonial government in Recife. So the need of a general and accurate sea-chart of the region was early felt. Such a chart had been indeed already realized during Nassau's term of office, because an anonymous and undated copy of one has survived in the well-known Vingboons Atlas of the Instituto Arqueológico, Histórico e Geográfico Pernambucano in Recife, with a colophon that reads in translation:

Accurate sea-chart of the coast of the four captaincies in Brazil like Pernambuco, Itamaracá, Paraíba and Rio Grande, with all its reefs and shoals, and all the cities, villages and Indian hamlets of these captaincies. All done by order of His Excellency, Count Johan Maurits van Nassau.

Until May 1644 Johan Maurits was the supreme commander of Dutch Brazil. It is obvious that in that quality he ordered the best available cartographers to produce maps of his colony. At his disposition were admiral Jan Cornelis Lichthart, a hydrographical mapmaker; Elias Herckmans, a hydro-geographical mapmaker; and Georg Markgraf, a geographical mapmaker.

Because all the Brazilian maps in the Nassovian manuscript atlas from about 1648 are anonymous, it is presumable that those best qualified candidates to realize the said cartographical job co-ordinated their activities, in a way that the hydrographical tasks were executed by Lichthart and Herckmans, and the geographical ones by Markgraf and Herckmans. And that to-day we have to accept that the exact delimitations between their mutual tasks remain vague.

In my opinion this fine Nassovian WIC-rutter, about 1648 composed and organized by Johannes de Laet with its beautiful Brazilian maps and charming coastal views, has to be considered as one of the paramount high-lights in the WIC-collections of the National Archives in The Hague. During a visit to the Netherlands in May 2006 their high cartographical and historical quality was recognised by Mrs. Cristina Ferrão and Mr. José Paulo Monteiro Soares, Directors of the prestigious Brazilian Publishing House KAPA EDITORIAL in Petrópolis R.J. In May 2009 they took the initiative to both the Brazilian and Dutch editions of this incomparable manuscript atlas that are launched to-day. They surely deserve your warm applause for it.



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