

The Company as Knowledge Network

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Globalization ladies and gentlemen is a fashionable word. The term refers to the increasing unification of the world's economic order. It describes the process of the integration of national economies into an international economy through trade, foreign investment, capital flows etcetera. So far globalization is closely associated with economic development. But the term can also refer to the transnational circulation of ideas, scientific knowledge, languages, or culture through acculturation. What is meant by globalization, one can understand that easily, is a question of perspective.

Not only the meaning but also the historical origins of globalization are subject of an on-going debate. Though several scholars situate the origins of globalization in the modern era, others regard it as a phenomenon with a long history which started with the European expansion in the fifteenth century. One of the most famous books of the last decade in this field is Chris Bayly's *The Birth of the Modern World*. Bayly classifies the European expansion from Columbus until the rise of the British Empire at the end of the eighteenth century as a period of 'archaic globalization'. In his view it was a period of the establishment of networks of trade from the regional to the inter-regional and finally the intercontinental level. These networks paved the way for what he called 'modern globalization'.

If we take Bayly's idea of globalization as a point of departure, then the European trading companies did play a major role in the process from archaic to modern globalization. In the seventeenth century several European countries had established companies for the trade with other continents. Among these organizations the Dutch East India Company and to a lesser extend the West India Company obtained a dominant position in the trade with Asia, Africa and parts of the Americas. The commercial networks of these companies, however, were not only important for trade but also to amass geographical, natural and anthropological knowledge of non-European regions. On the other hand a good deal of knowledge was necessary for the functioning of a

commercial network. In that sense knowledge prepared the road to Bayly's 'modern globalization'.

Now I will focus on the West India Company as a network of knowledge. Several employees of this Company as well as colonists within its realm collected anthropological, geographical and other sorts of information of different Atlantic regions. Often they passed this information on to the Company's headquarters in Amsterdam where it could be used for the production of maps, atlases or other publications. Some people, however, took the initiative to write a monograph themselves about an Atlantic region. Adriaen van der Donck for example, a Dutch colonist in North America, wrote a comprehensive *Description of New Netherland* which was published in 1655 in Amsterdam. His work is one of the earliest studies of the Dutch colony in North America. He not only pays attention to the geography, the nature and the climate of the colony, but also to the local Indians and their customs. Johan Nieuhof, a Dutch soldier who served the Company in the 1640s, delivered a description of his experiences in Dutch Brazil which was published in 1682. The most famous book of a servant of the West India Company, however, is Willem Bosman's *Description of the Coast of Guinea*. The author, a chief merchant in Elmina, the Dutch headquarters in West Africa, gives us a very detailed description of the kingdoms and cultures on the Gold Coast at the end of the seventeenth century. The first edition of his book was published in 1704 after which it was reprinted several times and translated into French, English, German and Italian.

Van der Donck, Nieuhof and Bosman had decided to publish their knowledge of overseas regions by their own, but many employees of the Company did not. The knowledge they amassed was sent to the Republic where it often ends up in the archives of the West India Company. Unfortunately a large part of the Old Company archive was destroyed at the beginning of the nineteenth century. But 7,2 meters of archival material survived the paper mill and is kept in the National Archive in The Hague. The remnants of this once large archive contain interesting documents with information of the Atlantic world in the first half of the seventeenth century. A part of it deals with geographical knowledge which was collected by sailors of the West India Company.

Dutch seamen who sailed the Atlantic at the beginning of the seventeenth century could manage with the general nautical information which was available. Moreover, their

knowledge increased with the growing Dutch shipping to Africa and America. But the need for detailed information increased after the founding of the West India Company in 1621. This Company soon revealed itself as an instrument of war against Portugal and Spain. In 1623 the board of directors of the Company worked out a master plan for attacks on Portuguese trading posts and colonies in West Africa and South America, as well as Spanish shipping in the Caribbean. The city of Salvador, centre of sugar-rich Brazil, was the main target. Also attacks were planned on Elmina and Luanda in West Africa. To execute that plan, a profound knowledge of the Spanish and Portuguese fleet movements in the Atlantic was necessary, but also of sea currents and weather conditions during the different seasons as well as specific geographical information of parts of the Atlantic.

Precisely at the moment that the directors were equipping fleets for attacks on Portuguese targets, Dierick Ruiters published a new seaman's guide on the Atlantic entitled *Toortse der Zee-Vaert*. That guide came in very handy for the Company. Ruiters had collected many topographical and nautical data on West Africa and Brazil, during his travels in the Atlantic. Apart from Ruiters' observations, also other relevant information was collected by the directors of the Company. During the years 1624 - 1625, successive attacks were made on Salvador, Luanda and Elmina. The Company only succeeded to take Salvador, but they had to give up the city a year later in a counter attack by a combined Spanish-Portuguese fleet.

After the failure of the master plan, it took until 1630 before the Company launched a second attack on Brazil. This time Dutch troops conquered Recife, the capital of the sugar producing province of Pernambuco. Initially, Recife was not more than a small Dutch enclave in enemy territory, but gradually the Dutch succeeded to conquer parts of North East Brazil. In 1636, Johan Maurits, the count of Nassau-Siegen was appointed governor of Dutch Brazil. Under his rule the colony flourished. Not only did Johan Maurits ensure relative peace and economic prosperity, he also let artists and scientists come over from Europe to investigate and describe numerous aspects of Brazil and to chart out the colony. He understood very well that to manage the colony, reliable information was a necessity. Recife, the governmental centre of Dutch Brazil since 1630, not only became the assembly point of information gathering, but also a centre where

data was processed into land and sea maps. A part of the information which was collected during the occupation of Brazil in the period 1630-1654 is still kept in the National Archive in The Hague.

One of the hidden treasures is a collection of documents related to the expedition of Hendrick Brouwer to Chile in 1643, which started in Recife. Brouwer had orders to enter into an alliance with an Indian tribe in the southern part of Chile that rebelled against the Spanish colonists. Together with them he had to expel the colonists and gain access to local gold and silver mines. During the expedition, Brouwer discovered a new passage to the Pacific south of Strait Le Maire. By acting tactlessly towards the Indians, however, the occupation of the southern part of Chile failed. The expedition had gone through territory that was mostly unknown to the Dutch. The journal and other documents of his expedition which are kept in the Company's archive in The Hague are never published. These interesting sources, which are important for researchers and deserves to be published, however, are not the only hidden treasures. My colleague Ben Teensma will tell you more about three other "forgotten" documents which were produced by the Company's knowledge network.