ARABIA IN THE EARLY MODERN EUROPEAN MIND. REPRESENTATIONS OF ARABIA IN EARLY MODERN EUROPEAN MAPS

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Arabia in the Early Modern European Mind. Representations of Arabia in Early Modern European Maps

The paper sets out the graphic representations of the cultural, religious, economic and geopolitical issues regarding Arabia as a part of the Ottoman Empire of some early European cartographers and travellers from the 17th and 18th century. Thus we shall analyse the maps by Jodocus Hondius (*Asiae Nova Descriptio*, *Turcici Imperii Imago*, *Turcicum Imperium*), by John Speed (*Asia with the Islands Adjoining Described*, *The Turkish Empire Newly Augmented*), by John Speed (*The Turkish Empire*), by Willem Janszoon Blaeu (*Turcicum Imperium*), by Nicolas Sanson (*Carte des Trois Arabies*), by Pierre Du Val (*Itinéraire du Caire à la Mecque*), by Frederick De Witt (*Turcicum Imperium*), by John Seller (*A Chart of the Western Part of the East Indies*), by Herman Moll (*Arabia According to the Newest and Most Exact Observations*). We shall compare the content of the maps to each other and try to stake out a certain route of underlying sources. The study will also briefly mention the cultural, economic and political relations holding between some European countries and Arabia. The paper will spell out the Early European mindset regarding the cultural, economic and religious area called Arabia.

Key words: *maps of Arabia; cultural, religious and economic issues; trade between Europe and Asia; exploration of Otherness; European travellers; pilgrimages; mapping information; semiotics of maps*

The exploration and the subsequent cartography of Arabia, a part of the Ottoman Empire in the 17th and 18th century, reflect the slow progress of the economic and cultural interest of Early Modern Europe in the state of things of this outlandish peninsula.

For sundry reasons this exploration went at a sluggish pace. The relief of inland Arabia girded round by the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf offers little comfort to the prospective travellers: dry plateaus, waterless river beds, boundless stretches of sandy waste land, arid mountains, unbearably high temperatures and, to boot, a territory beset by endless squabbles and intestine wars waged by Bedouin tribes and other communities.

Moreover, the almighty religion in Arabia, the Islam, hindered non-Muslims from embarking on untrammelled trips into the heart of Arabia. Let us not forget that the wares were carried by autochthonous caravans to the harbours, where the European merchants took them over. All these explain why there were so many blind spots on the medieval maps that began taking shape as early as the Antiquity (Ptolemy's *Tabula Asiae Sexta*).

Whatever the map in question, we can safely say that the underlying map to all the subsequent ones of the Arabian Peninsula go back to is Ptolemy's map, *Tabula Asiae Sexta*, which represents

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the whole territory of the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf and almost the entire Red Sea. It was printed in Bologna in 1477 (Tibbets 1978: 34). Here, Ptolemy divides Arabia into three parts: *Arabia Petraea*, *Arabia Deserta* and *Arabia Felix*. This manner of splitting Arabia lived on for centuries until D'Anville's time (Tibbetts 1978: 19).

The information displayed by these early maps (portolans) refers to the shores and hinges on rough data provided by the accounts of merchants, tribesmen or rare travellers on pilgrimages, if we put it in a nutshell.

Early modern Europeans sailing round Arabia (around 1600 and shortly after) were the Dutchmen Jan Huyghen van Linschoten and the Englishmen: John Jourdain, Captain Middleton and Joseph Pitts, who actually ventured inland, too, into the southern part of the peninsula.

A French expedition followed later on, in 1710 (Tibbetts 1978: 17). The economic grounds of these expeditions are obvious, but these resulted also in an increase of information, albeit minimal, regarding the new maps of the early 18th century.

These maps represent the Arabian Peninsula in a specifically semiotic way: that is in a cartographic way. This territory borders on the Red Sea westwards, the Persian Gulf eastwards, the Arabian Sea southwards and the southernmost part of the Jordan desert northwards.

The reference time period roughly spans over the 17th and 18th centuries as mentioned. The accuracy of the maps increases with time as more information was available as time wore on due to a higher number of travellers who were able to provide correctional data for the cartographers. Naturally, western Arabia was mapped out better than the rest of it as it featured two holy cities: Mecca and Medina, highly visited on regular pilgrimages and benefiting from lots of attention[1].

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Travelling to Arabia was a sheer adventure in 18th century. The Danish expedition bit the dust in a fierce way due to the excessive heat and water dearth in inland Arabia. The sole survivor, Carsten Niebuhr, managed to take notes and draw maps and recounted his experience in a relatively widely publicized book *Travels in Arabia* which saw its first edition in German in 1772 and subsequently it was translated into English and French.

Arabia was not highly attractive from the economic point of view for many centuries and this explains why different states were reluctant to spending money on cartography expeditions until the 18th century. The staple products in southern Arabia were perfume, coffee, incense and spices in the 17th and 18th century. As for the remaining parts of Arabia we can safely say that they produced entirely for domestic consumption and this fact makes for an autarchic economy. The Arabian caravans took care of the inland transportation.

Commerce was the driving motive for explorations. Arabia of the 18th century used to offer spices, perfume, incense and coffee. Enough for Europeans to buckle down to thorough mapping and travelling work this time. The trading routes had to be charted as they had a bearing on the trade between Europe and Far East.

As the dawn of modernity had broken in the 16th century and modernity betokened the exploration of Otherness and of other territories, European nations were eager to chart new routes and territories for trade and each vied more or less for hegemony even at the risk of using military force.

The role of the harbours was to serve as incoming and outgoing gates for the foreign and

[1] See: https://www.raremaps.com/gallery/detail/43713/pilgrimage-to-mecca-itineraire-du-caire-a-la-mecque-selon-du-val by Pierre Du Val 1665.

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domestic wares and the Westerners knew them better for this reason. This is also where the contact between the Arabs and the Westerners usually occurred.

Westerners were afraid of Muslims because of their past strewn with conflicts going back to Reconquista period from Spain or to the Crusades. This daunting task of traveling to Arabia was undertaken by Europeans disguising themselves as Muslims or converting to Islam. For example, one of the first travellers was the Italian Ludovico di Varthima who took the name Haji Younes al-Masri in the early 16th century.

The Arabian Peninsula was nominally a part of the Turkish Empire, but it was riddled with intestine fighting among the tribes and political leaders like emirs. Any travel through Arabia was encumbered by enormous hindrances which made these voyages extremely perilous and thus hindered the collection of geographical data for the correction of maps. As most of Arabia was not economically attractive to the Turkish Empire or the Europeans, except for the holy sites in Mecca and Medina, which came into the limelight, this part was less known.

Let us not forget that the Red Sea and the Gulf had forfeited their importance after the discovery of the south passage round the Cape of Good Hope connecting Europe and South-East Asia. Moreover, the opaque and reluctant attitude of the Turkish Empire put potential travellers off from their plans.

Now we shall say something about the information collection for the mapping process. Maps were inaccurate due to the dearth of information and they grew more and more accurate as time went by.

Sundry information came from many sources. First there were the sailors and other travellers sailing round the sea shores girdling the Arabian Peninsula who contributed to the making of "portolan charts", i.e. primitive nautical maps. These go back to antiquity and were highly practical, but barely revealed anything in detail about inland Arabia.

More information on the inland stemmed from the intercourse of Westerners and locals at various ports along the Red Sea and the Gulf coast. In this way many errors seeped through regarding the relative position of cities and the distance between.

Arabia was the site of military expeditions, too. Strabo in *Geographia* cites Octavius sending off two armies in 25 BC to get hold of Yemen's ports which plied their trade in spices, incense and precious stones. One army sailed along the coast, the other one, a multi-ethnic one, trudged through the deserts and mountains of Arabia as far as Najran. This was also a means of gathering mapping details.

Another valuable source was offered up by the undaunted travellers, be they Christian or Muslim, who ventured inland, deep into the heart of Arabia. Di Varthima retraces the pilgrims' route from Damascus to Medina, Mecca and Jeddah as early as 1502. He had his account of this travel published in Rome in 1510. The Englishman Joseph Pitts fared to Mecca, Medina and Jeddah in 1685 and had this voyage notes including a Kaaba drawing published in 1704.

As an anecdotic fact we may mention the information supplied by the so called "traveller *malgré soi*" type, i.e. the European prisoners who had spent much time as slaves and upon their arrival home, were able to round off the picture of certain less known spots on the Arabia map.

The first wave European voyages supplied written or oral information for the mapping process and led up to the pinpointing of locations, towns and other geographical elements. The second, later wave of European voyages brought fresh maps of towns and relatively accurate descriptions and began in the latter half of the 18th century. Danish Niebuhr's expedition is a case in point.

According to Al Ankary (2001), Europeans writings were fourfold:

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1) Works by Europeans who planned their trip but wrote before travelling there, saw places in Arabia, stayed there and wrote after their journey, too. Their works veer towards anthropology and are accurately descriptive.

2) Works by so called "accidental tourists", i.e., prisoners or stranded sailors who had to travel inland about their business. The works are of amateurs and therefore suffer from superficiality, vagueness and inaccuracy.

3) Professional works by researchers drawing on oral history accounts delivered by pilgrims and other travellers visiting ports.

4) Works written by professional explorers yielding accurate details for maps such as Niebuhr's expedition.

These works encapsulated geographical, economic, military and scientific information at the respective moment.

The play of the religious factor is also linked up with the production of maps. Pilgrimages were such occasions when information was exchanged among the pilgrims who contributed unwittingly or on purpose to the collection of accurate geographical data. As far as Europeans are concerned, these gatherings could only be attended by true or fake converts stemming from Europe. The general attitude of European Christians was wary of Islam as they were afraid of Muslims.

The Vatican even egged people on towards acts of destruction against Islam. But there were also scholars who were curious to study the outlandish places which came up in the Christian texts for scientific purposes. The rise of the Wahhabite movement in 18th century Arabia raised the alarm for the Europeans who saw it as a reunification of Muslims and dreaded the resuscitation of Islam which could threaten Europe again (Lewis, 2000: 302).

Let us turn now to the places of maps production. The 17th century saw the emergence of copper plates which yielded better and more accurate maps. Map production had become almost a family business as Mercator and Hondius families in the Netherlands, Sanson in France and the Speeds in Great Britain stood out as giants of European cartography[1].

Map production marched in step with the growing fierce competition of several European states for access to the sea shores girdling the Arabian Peninsula. The first ones were the Portuguese, who had set their foot in Oman as early as 1507, but their power was already on the wane in the 17th century (Frankopan, 2015: 228). The next power in line was Holland through its VOC (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, set up in 1602) which managed to impose their hegemony in the Persian Gulf. Here they had ousted their rival, Great Britain not after military stand-offs.

Seeing the peril of another emerging world power, France through its *Compagnie française des Indes* (set up in 1664), Holland and England allied in order to counterbalance France's influence in Europe and elsewhere. The English East India Company intended to set up trading posts as far as Sochar and Muscat.

But there loomed another daunting peril: that of Oman's fleet which drove the English away from the area. The treaty from 1700 signed by Holland, Great Britain and France foresaw the navigation safety of the sea trade routes ensured by all the three powers section wise.

If the main centres of cartography lay in the Netherlands in the 17th century, they shifted to England and France in the 18th century. The Hondius family was very active and produced a map

[1] See: https://www.swaen.com/antique-map-of.php?id=13627 *Asiae Nova Descriptio* by Jodocus Hondius 1606.

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of Asia and two maps of the Ottoman Empire, a large one and a miniature one (Tibbets, 1978: 62)[1].

We see there much huddled information on the maps and sundry names for a single element (the Red Sea, the Sea of Mecca, Mare Rubrum). Jodocus Hondius maps carry different names for regions, too (Brotton, 2012: 275). Willem Janszoon Blaeu picks up the threads left by Hondius (Brotton, 2012: 270) and publishes a land atlas and divides Arabia into two equal parts: *Arabia deserta* to the north and *Arabia Felix* to the south (Tibbets, 1978: 71)[2].

John Speed, Frederic de Witt and John Seller draw accurate maps mostly based on the Dutch maps. John Seller clearly delineates regions[3].

Sanson's *Carte de trois Arabies* was the first map devoted to the Arabian Peninsula alone. Sanson mentions the stopping places on the pilgrimage to Mecca: Iahtreb, Badrahenen, Algiar, Gioffa, Caddaid, Asffan, Chaibar, Doumat al-Jandal etc. (Tibbets, 1978: 78). Nicolas Sanson was "Geographer to the King" and was held in high esteem[4].

The next French figure was Guillaume Delisle, who swayed over all the cartography market for a quarter of a century between 1700 and 1726. Delisle inaugurated mathematical methods and applied them in his prototype of a globe and his atlas (Tibbets, 1978: 135)[5].

Delisle's map of the world from 1700 removed all Ptolemy's errors from his *Geography* and based its innovations on the power of verifiable observations. Guillame Delisle's *Carte de la Turquie, de l'Arabie et de la Perse* from 1701 displays a richness of details also drawing on the previous cartographic work of Muslim scholars like Idrisi and Abu'l Feda (Tibbets, 1978: 27). According to Tibbets (1978, 28), "Delisle simplifies the political division of Arabia"[6].

Delisle's work was continued by Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon D'Anville who brought cartography to higher standards of accuracy. He worked on travel accounts, historical works and relied on previous maps[7].

The main features displayed by the end of the 18th century maps refer to the emergence of accurate nautical maps expanded to a large scale and showing the sea and straits, islands and ports. A good and accurate map of Arabia "according to the newest and most exact observations" is Herman Moll's work from 1712[8].

Reviewing all the maps shown on-line we conclude and agree with Tibbetts (1978: 29-30) that Delisle's maps became a model for the subsequent maps, especially for Moll's and D'Anville's. "It was the production of D'Anville's map which showed to the Western world its ignorance of inland Arabia. The desire to correct this ignorance led to the Danish expedition of

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[1] See: https://www.oldmapcenter.com/3432.html *Turcici Imperii Imago* by Jodocus Hondius 1606; https://www.swaen.com/item.php?id=13351 *Turcicum Imperium* by Jodocus Hondius 1607.

[2] See: https://www.swaen.com/antique-map-of.php?id=240 *Turcicum Imperium* by Willem Janszoon Blaeu 1635.

[3] See: https://www.raremaps.com/gallery/detail/38069/asia-with-the-islands-adjoining-described-the-attire-of-the-speed by John Speed 1626; https://www.raremaps.com/gallery/detail/26616/the-turkish-empire-newly-augmented-by-john-speed-1626-speed by John Speed 1626; https://www.crouchrarebooks.com/maps/view/speed-john-the-turkish-empire2 by John Speed 1626; https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8494459s *Nova Persiae, Armeniae, Natoliae et Arabiae* by Frederic de Witt 1666; https://www.swaen.com/antique-map-of.php?id=26991 A chart of the Western part of the East Indies by John Seller 1670.

[4] See: https://www.swaen.com/item.php?id=37102 *Carte des trois Arabies* by Nicolas Sanson 1654.

[5] See: https://www.swaen.com/item.php?id=19803 *Carte du royaume d'Y*emen by Guillame Delisle (spelled also as de L'Isle), 1716.

[6] See: https://www.swaen.com/item.php?id=3913 *Carte de la Turquie* by Guillame Delisle 1720.

[7] See: https://www.classicalimages.com/products/1755-d-anville-bolton-large-antique-map-of-asia-turkey-saudi-arabia-india by Jean-Baptiste Bourgouigon D'Anville 1751.

[8] See: http://www.tablespace.net/maps/mollarabia.html.

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Niebuhr in 1761-4. Thus, one may class him both as the last and most important landmark in the old era of Arabian cartography as well as the forerunner of the new era of scientific exploration." (Tibbetts 1978: 31).

Thus Early Modern Europe slowly and gradually explored new territories and dealt with outlandish people in a bid to expand their trade and, by doing so, to come by fresh information that was confined to and translated into the semiotics of maps, which evolved from raw and scant representations of Arabia to ever more detailed and accurate representations of the peninsula. Economic benefits marched in stride with the cultural progress of knowing Otherness across the vast expanses of waste land in *Arabia Deserta* and *Arabia Felix*.

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