

# Several Early Maps to Our North

Ptolemy (2nd century)  
*La geografia di Claudio  
 Tolomeo Alessandrino*  
 (Venetia: Appresso Vincenzo  
 Valgrisi, 1561)  
 illustrated atlas; 22.8 cm  
 Maps Collection  
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Col Simpson investigates  
 the mapping of north Sumatra  
 in the Maps Collection

**A**ceh, north Sumatra, has been in the news headlines over the last few years for its politically related violence and the devastating tsunami of December 2004. Before these events, Aceh had been somewhat isolated, even overlooked, but in a longer historical perspective, it has been a conduit through which outside influences and groups have found their way into the East Indies archipelago.

By the end of the thirteenth century, Islam was established in north Sumatra, though no maps of this period are known. Arab, Indian, and Chinese influences were felt, but Europeans (aside from isolated travellers—Marco Polo was to set the cartographic hares running) did not arrive till the early sixteenth century, in pursuit of exotic spices.

Before that, the classical Greeks and Romans had a mythic and inaccurate understanding of South-East Asia—sketching a southern landmass which was

only theoretical. Megasthenes, a Greek who was active around the time of the death of Alexander the Great, obtained knowledge of the island Taprobana. For 1000 years this was thought to be Ceylon (Sri Lanka). The waters were muddied, however, in the latter half of the fourteenth century when Abraham Cresque's *Catalan Atlas* interpreted the island to be Sumatra.

The Greek historian and geographer Strabo (c.64 BC–AD 24) had previously confirmed Taprobana as an island situated in the high seas within a seven days' sail towards the south from the most southerly parts of India. Claudius Ptolemy (c.83–161 AD), a Greek Alexandrian, also theorised on this geography in about 150 AD. His *Geographica*, which became available in Europe (in Latin translation) by the early fifteenth century, was so revered by renaissance scholars that cartographers struggled to come to terms with contemporary explorers' reports of newly discovered lands. Some interesting

maps resulted. Fra Mauro, the Venetian monk who straddled the medieval and renaissance worlds, formally transferred the identity of Taprobana to Sumatra with his intricate *mappa mundi*, but even into the seventeenth century, Sumatra was identified on maps as 'formerly Taprobana'. The National Library's Maps Collection holds relevant maps and books from this period, and in a delightful 1561 volume of Ptolemy's *Geographica*, published in Venice, a full-page map is included showing, to the south of the Indian sub-continent, a large island labelled 'Taprobana'.

Apart from cosmographic references and some map-like reliefs on temple friezes, there is no surviving map from South-East Asia before the sixteenth century, so we must turn to European works, with some early Arabic contributions. The 'Cantino' planisphere of 1502—a large hand-coloured parchment manuscript smuggled out of Lisbon following an exchange of 12 gold ducats—has a boldly depicted Sumatra, albeit running north-east to south-west rather than the true direction. The island is called Taprobana, and a map inscription indicates that it is:

the greatest island found in the whole world and richest in gold, silver and precious stones ... very big and fine rubies and all kinds of spices and silk brocades ... and the people trade with foreigners.

By 1511 the Portuguese had captured Malacca on the Malay peninsula in pursuit of a trade empire. Though some maps survived, a large number of the early Portuguese maps of this region are unfortunately lost, largely as a result of the Lisbon earthquake and fires of 1755.

Maps and charts of the East Indies from the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century are mostly small-scale and do not show a great amount of detail. Thus, one of the very earliest large-scale maps of the area, dating from 1568, is of special interest. The map, by the Portuguese Fernão Vaz Dourado, based in Goa, is in manuscript form, with the only known copy held in a private collection in Madrid. Reproductions are rare. The map presents a three-quarter perspective view with close-up detail of the Aceh fort and defences located on the distributaries of the Krueng Aceh River in north Sumatra. Not a map, plan or view

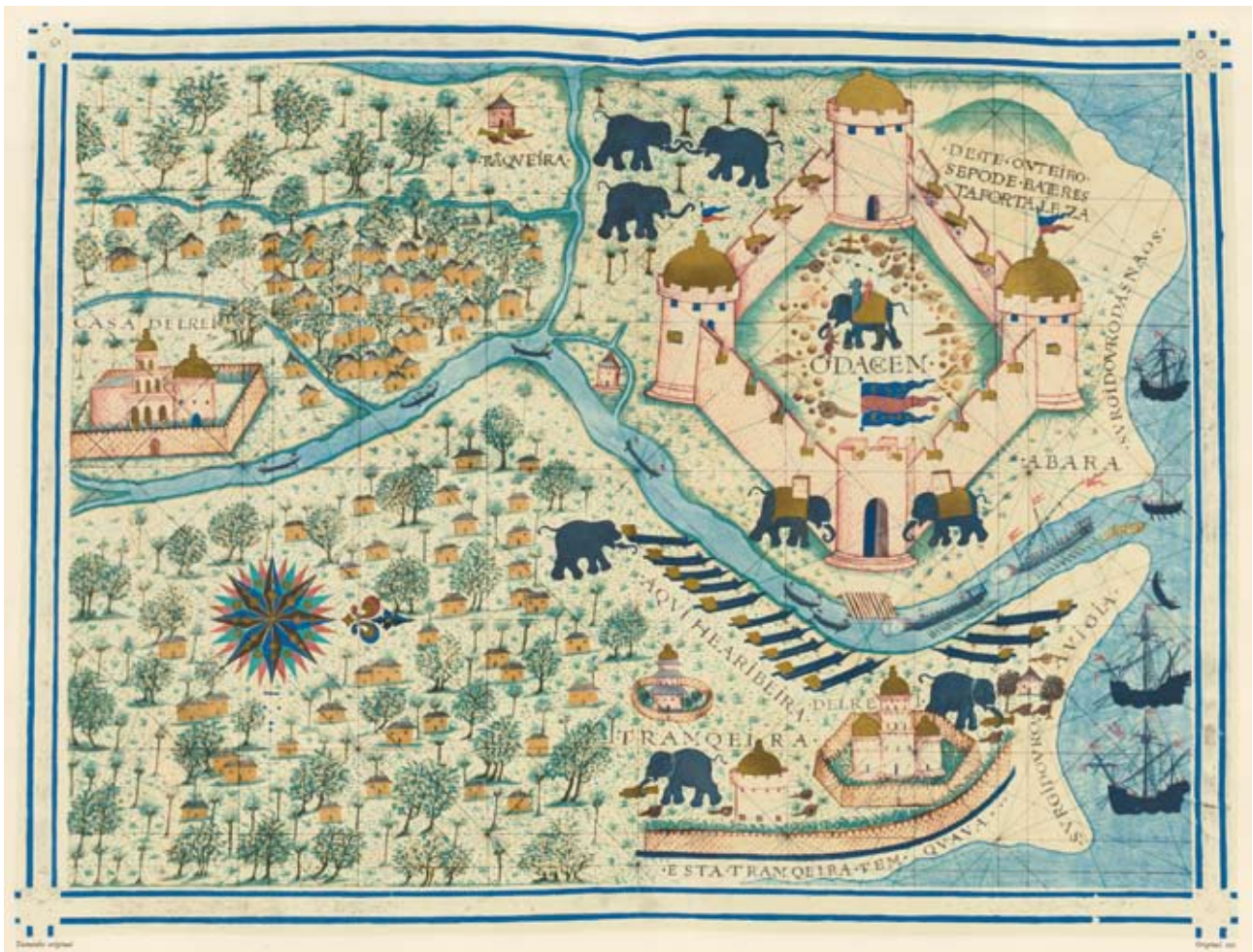
in the modern sense, its overall painterly execution has some affinity with movements in European art of the fifteenth century towards realism, the origins of which have been associated with the Van Eyck and the Limbourg brothers.

The Limbourg brothers' illuminated manuscript *Les Très Riches Heures* (for the Duc de Berry) features a calendar picture, 'View of Mont Saint-Michel' (a rocky islet off the coast of north-west France) which has stylistic and thematic congruence with the Vaz Dourado map of Aceh. The Mont Saint-Michel image shows a self-contained monastery complex with a high defensive wall fronting dry tidal flats on which a number of dark-coloured rowing boats rest. In the background is a larger ocean-going ship, and over the ecclesiastical redoubt, St Michael himself is stationed, sword poised threatening attackers, in this case the dragon. Overall, the image has a static quality, but it presents a particular and individualised location.

Vaz Dourado provides a secular version in his depiction of Aceh. His Aceh fort is protected by cannons protruding from openings in the wall; rowing boats are resting on the river banks but two larger galleys are being rowed up-river and appear to be firing bow-mounted cannons at canoes (presumably Acehnese) fleeing away from the sea, where ocean-going ships are at anchor. Around the fort, elephants

Ptolemy (2nd century)  
*India tercera nvoa tavola*  
(Venetia: Appresso Vincenco Valgrisi, 1561)  
map; 16.0 x 22.6 cm  
Maps Collection  
nla.map-nk11605





Fernão Vaz Dourado  
*Map of Aceh* 1568  
 reproduced from *Portugaliae  
 monumenta cartographica*,  
 vol. III, by Armando Cortesao  
 (Lisbon: s.n., 1960–1962)  
 Maps Collection  
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are moving and two are hefting cannons with their trunks. The image is dynamic (an Acehnese, waving his arms, is directing activities inside the fort) and depicts a would-be naval attack by the Portuguese on the fort.

Historically, the Portuguese had passed by Aceh on their way to Malacca, since which time Aceh (and several other local states) had taken the initiative, launching repeated sea-borne attacks on the commercial interlopers. Vaz Dourado's illustration is not fanciful, or a depiction of past events: his map is a call to action to his countrymen to eliminate their dangerous trade rival. He even suggests a plan of attack in case his Portuguese readers miss the point, writing across a hill beside the fort: 'From this hillock the fortress can be beaten (with artillery)'. It is clear that the map is more than just a plan of a harbour or trading port for the benefit of sailors and merchants. Maps that were just plans would become an established cartographic genre over the next couple of centuries, as in the road and town plans for Bantem or Batavia by Dutch or English chartmakers.

Ultimately, however, Vaz Dourado's Aceh map is something of an anomaly. It stands outside the cartographic mainstream: neither painting nor conventional map, having an inconsistent scale, extreme partisan point of view, and highly selective and restricted topographic information. It raises the questions of both its use and the audience for whom the map was intended.

A number of elements, including particular images from Vaz Dourado's Aceh map, were picked up by later Lusitanian cartographers. Sometime between 1615 and 1622 an anonymous cartographer—probably the somewhat idiosyncratic Manuel Godinho de Eredia—drew a map of Aceh. In 1630, Joao Teixeira drew a small sketch-map of Aceh, and in 1648 another anonymous cartographer, probably Joao Teixeira Albernaz (from the same family), drew a map of Aceh. All three maps clearly hearken back to the Vaz Dourado original, either directly or via one of these previous maps, but the subsequent renderings are in each case more schematic—stripped of emotional content or violence. A painterly aesthetic is not attempted or evident. The Dutch, or more

correctly the Dutch East India Company, who captured Malacca in 1641, had become the tough guys in town. The Portuguese no longer called the shots.

The three derived images show the Aceh area and the fort in plan, but retain a perspective sketch for the 'Casas Del Rey' structure and several other buildings as with the Vaz Dourado map. The elephants have gone, as have the cannon-firing galleys. Vaz Dourado's 13 canoes on the riverbank in 1568 are down to six in de Eredia's map; there are none in Teixeira's map in 1630, but the canoes are back to six in Albernaz's 1648 map. All four maps are oriented with north to the right, rather than to the top of the sheet as usual. Two of the three subsequent maps, significantly, are titled 'Fortaleza do Achem' and, while the original Vaz Dourado map has no title, it is by far the largest, at 52 x 39 centimetres, with the 1648 image representative at one quarter the size.

These four maps of Aceh cannot be regarded as part of the seventeenth-century efflorescence in cartography inaugurated by the Dutch. The maps do suggest, nonetheless, the fundamental connectedness or dependence of these constructed images, which is not always apparent with the



decorative, collector-oriented maps and atlases coming from the newly emerging commercial printing houses in Amsterdam. While no map is an island, its outline is shaped by time, place and intent.

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above:  
Sebastian Münster (1489–1552)  
*Sumatra Ein Grosse Insel / so von den Alten Geographen Taprobana ist / Genet Worden*  
(Basle, Switzerland: Sebastian Münster, 1580?)  
coloured map; 23.4 x 21.1 cm  
Maps Collection  
nla.map-rm3967

below left:  
Jacques Nicolas Bellin (1703–1772)  
*Carte de l'isle de Sumatra dressée sur les journaux des navigateurs ...*  
(The Hague?: s.n., c.1784)  
map; 24.2 x 26.6 cm  
Maps Collection  
nla.map-rm2509

