

Frederick de Wit's Atlas

Special Collections featured item by Fiona Melhuish,
UMASCS Librarian.

[Atlas] [cartographic material] / [chiefly by Frederick de Wit]. [S.l. : s.n., ca. 1670-1707]

Item held in RESERVE LARGE FOLIO--131, University of Reading Special Collections.



Frederick de Wit was a prolific and skilled map engraver, publisher and seller who became one of the largest publishers in Amsterdam by the end of the seventeenth century. His work included a wide range of cartographic publications, including sea and world atlases, wall maps and 'town books', which contained plans and views of Dutch and other European towns and cities.

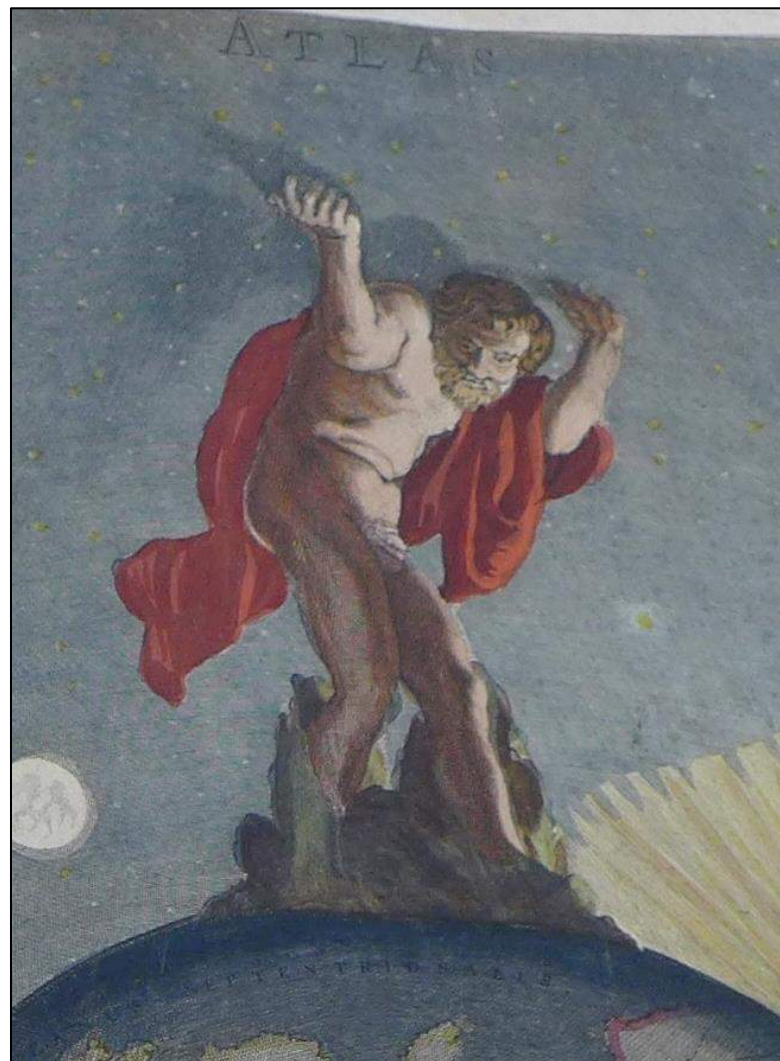
From around 1570 to 1670, the map-makers of Belgium and the Netherlands produced some of the finest maps in the world, notable for their high level of accuracy and craftsmanship, and dominated the market for maps and atlases. The production of maps became centred in the leading ports of Antwerp and Amsterdam, where members of the new wealthy merchant class provided a market for maps, atlases and globes. As R.V. Tooley observes, "for accuracy according to

the knowledge of their time, magnificence of presentation and richness of decoration, the Dutch maps of this period have never been surpassed ...". The seventeenth century Dutch map-makers were highly prolific in their production of maps and atlases, producing vast atlases which sometimes extended to ten or twelve large folio volumes, which were then reissued in multiple editions and translated into several European languages.

Frederick De Wit was born in Gouda in about 1629 or 1630, and lived and worked in Amsterdam for much of his life. His father was a knife handle maker from Amsterdam and his mother was the daughter of a merchant in Gouda. In 1661, Frederick married Maria van der Way, the daughter of a prosperous Catholic merchant. He possibly began his career as an engraver and later operated his publishing business from a premises on the Kalverstraat in Amsterdam. The earliest cartographic images he produced date from 1648, and his first world maps appeared around 1660. De Wit also acquired copperplates of 'town books' by Willem Blaeu and Johannes Janssonius from the Dutch printer Abraham Wolfgang in about 1674 and republished this material. Maria continued the publishing business after Frederick's death in 1706 until 1710 when it was sold. De Wit's son, Franciscus, a wealthy stockfish merchant, did not take over the firm, having no interest in the publishing business. Most of De Wit's plates were sold to Pieter Mortier (1661–1711), a geographer, printer and publisher from Amsterdam. After his death, the firm passed to his son, Cornelis Mortier who, with Johannes Covens I, founded Covens & Mortier, which became one of the most important cartography publishing houses of the eighteenth century.

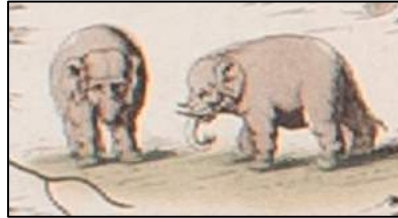


De Wit's *Atlas* (or *Atlas Maior*) dates from about 1670 to 1707, and is one of a series of world atlases compiled by De Wit in numerous editions. Copies of the *Atlas* are held in a number of map and special collections libraries and private collections, and vary in content from 17 to 190 finely coloured maps. The University of Reading copy, which is 40 centimetres in height, contains 155 hand-coloured maps, and the volume begins with a manuscript listing of the maps and the map-maker/cartographer responsible for each map [see image above], which have been numbered throughout the volume by hand, the numeral appearing at the top right of each double leaf. The volume also contains an engraved coloured frontispiece showing the figure of Atlas standing on top of the Earth and supporting the heavens [see images above and below], bound in opposite the map listing.



Some of the individual maps are dated, with most printed in either Amsterdam or Paris. As with many Dutch maps of the period, the maps in De Wit's volume feature many elaborate and beautifully coloured engraved cartouches, such as the example from De Wit's map of Europe and shown in the image at the beginning of this article. The map of Sicily [see image on page 6 of this article] features several views or plans of cities. Other decorative features include illustrations of elephants on the map

of Guinea [see image on page 8] and even a winged sea monster in the ocean off the west coast of Ireland on De Wit's map of Europe [see images below]. As well as maps by De Wit himself, the volume also contains maps by other important map-makers of the period including Nicholas Visscher I, Abraham Ortelius and Joan Blaeu (the son of Willem Blaeu), printed by De Wit from plates that he had acquired, together with some unsigned maps.



The Blaeu family from Amsterdam were one of the most famous seventeenth century cartographers and publishers of maps, atlases and globes, as well as producing volumes of poetry, theology and mathematics. Their printing presses were the largest in the world, and the family dominated the market in map production at the time. The family business flourished for more than forty years until a fire at their premises in 1672 destroyed most of their equipment, plates and stock. Joan Blaeu (1596-1673), a Dutch cartographer, is known for his *Atlas Maior*, an 11-volume work which was published between 1662 and 1672. This publication, which contained 594 maps, is well-known as the largest and most expensive book published in the seventeenth century, and is often described as the most magnificent publication of its kind ever produced.



Map of Europe by Frederick de Wit



Map of England by Nicolaes Visscher I



Detail of Berkshire from the map of England by Nicolaes Visscher I

The Visscher family from Amsterdam also developed one of the largest printing and map-making businesses of the seventeenth century. Nicolaes Visscher I (1618–1679), and his son, Nicolaes Visscher II (1649–1702) worked as map-makers in Amsterdam on the Kalverstraat (where De Wit was also working during the same period). Nicolaes Visscher I's father, Claes Janszoon Visscher (1587–1652) was a master draughtsman, engraver, map-maker and publisher who became successful with his production of illustrated Protestant bibles which featured maps and landscapes of places mentioned in the Bible.

Abraham Ortelius (1527–1598) was a Flemish cartographer and geographer. Born in Antwerp, Ortelius has been recognised as the creator of the first modern atlas, the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (Theatre of the World), produced in 1570. He is also thought to be the first to propose the theory of continental drift, suggesting that the continents were joined together before drifting to their present positions.



Map of Sicily by Frederick de Wit



Detail from the map of Sicily showing a town plan of the city of Catania with Mount Etna in the distance

Early maps and atlases have held a great deal of interest and fascination for both scholars and collectors for centuries, and often reveal hidden information about a place and its past. According to the writer and map dealer Tim Bryars, part of the appeal of maps lies in the subtle messages about the past that they convey: “There was always a political or commercial agenda. In the seventeenth century, for example, Dutch maps of the East Indies included little pictures of galleons flying the Dutch ensign, as a way of staking a claim to the territory ... Maps are pieces of living history, they tell you as much about the world view of the people of the time as they do about the place itself”.

The University of Reading Special Collections hold a number of other early atlases including Jacques Nicolas Bellin’s *Le petit atlas maritime* (Paris, 1764 - OVERSTONE--SHELF FOLIO 29J/01 VOLS. 1–5) and John Speed’s *A prospect of the most famous parts of the world ...* (London, 1631- STENTON LIBRARY--LK/10), which contains an early map of Reading.



Map of the Middle East by Frederick de Wit



Map of Guinea (unsigned)

The University of Reading Library has a collection of more than 70,000 maps and atlases. Although most of the material dates from after 1900, there are some early maps including two by the notable Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator (1512-1594) - *Scotia Regnum* (1630?) and *Karstia, Carniola, Historia et Windorum marchia* (between 1634 and 1638?), the latter printed by Willem Blaeu. Mercator is notable for his innovative depiction of a spherical world map on a flat sheet of paper.



Detail of cartouche from map of the Middle East by Frederick de Wit

References

1. Frederik de Wit: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederik_de_Wit [accessed 21.12.2016].
2. French, Josephine (ed.) *Tooley's dictionary of mapmakers*. Tring : Map Collector in association with Richard Arkway, 1999-2004.
3. Shirley, Rodney W. *Maps in the atlases of The British Library : a descriptive catalogue c. AD 850-1800*. London : British Library, 2004.
4. Tooley, R.V. *Maps and map-makers*. London : Batsford, 1952.
5. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/lifestyle/10091813/Map-collecting-how-to-put-the-world-on-your-wall.html> [accessed 19.12.2016].



Detail from map of the Middle East, showing an Arabian map-maker at work