

A Mysterious Cosmographical Map attributed to Nicolaes van Geelkercken

A Note on Historical Celestial Maps, Facsimiles and Fakes

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This paper discusses a unique Dutch cosmographical map in the National Library of Australia in Canberra. It is attributed to the Dutch surveyor and cartographer Nicolaes van Geelkercken (1585/86–1656), i.e., apparently dating from the early 17th century. However, there are indications that the map was made by a relatively modern printing technique such as offset printing or photoengraving. It is shown that the map is a composition of the original van Geelkercken world map and of star maps from the French version of the *Atlas Coelestis* by the British astronomer John Flamsteed (1645–1719).

Dieser Aufsatz untersucht eine unikale holländische kosmographische Karte in der Australischen Nationalbibliothek in Canberra. Sie wird dem holländischen Vermesser und Kartographen Nicolaes van Geelkercken (1585/86–1656) zugeschrieben, d.h. sie stammt scheinbar vom Beginn des 17. Jahrhunderts. Es gibt jedoch Anzeichen, dass diese Karte mit einer relativ modernen Drucktechnik, wie etwa Offset- oder Lichtdruck, hergestellt wurde. Es wird gezeigt, dass die Karte eine Kombination aus der originalen Weltkarte van Geelkerckens und von Sternkarten aus einer französischen Version des *Atlas Coelestis* des britischen Astronomen John Flamsteed (1645–1719) darstellt.

*All true maps were once like this,
composed by hand, tentative, alive,
describing time as well as place:
past, present, future; birth,
death, and what falls between.*

*At the four corners, the seasons tend
their year. Spring pours his seed
across a spongy landscape, Summer
dozes by the field like a virtuous king,
Autumn holds a harvest in her lap,
Winter stares at his steaming plate
and listens to the woods moan like a lover.*

*Above the hemispheres, Adam and Eve,
eyes following the snake's insinuations
toward a heavy bough, pause to marvel
like explorers at the ripe, unfallen globe.
Far below, the Day of Doom
cracks across a plain where graves
hatch their dazed inhabitants for Christ,
who beacons the saints to his right hand
and waves the astonished toward a sinister pack
of creatures well-equipped for pain.*

*Yet the eye ports to the middle world,
where light ships fly their pennants
past red-eyed serpents, lonely and real
as Barbados. Continents spread out
like pie crust being rolled. Florida
swells to fulness on the vast belly
of the New World. And the Incognitae,
pure and heathen as naked footprints,
rumor dominion to Captain Cook.*

William Trowbridge (1983)

Introduction

Since the early 1960s, there is an increase in the popularity of historical celestial maps and atlases. The artfully engraved and often boldly coloured depictions of the classical and early-modern constellations, alluding to the ancient belief that the celestial bodies possessed divine powers, were for a long time neglected as artefacts of a superstitious age but are now regarded as highly collectable items

and objects of scientific inquiry. Collectors of original celestial maps and atlases now pay dearly for rare and unique copies, but for those who do not have much to spend there are also modern reprints and facsimiles.

During the past few decades, the role of the internet has also become increasingly important as more and more websites become available on which historical star maps and atlases are viewable. However, in many cases the resolution of the digitized material is rather limited, so that the smallest details or texts remain illegible or are only readable by zooming in on a small portion of the image.

On a positive note, however, it should be noted that such websites often allow access to remarkable and very rare maps that otherwise can only be studied after making time-consuming and costly trips to far-away libraries. In addition, there is always the rare chance of finding a unique star map that was never described in the literature before.

As celestial cartography was a topic in which Hilmar Duerbeck was always very much interested, this paper is dedicated to his memory.

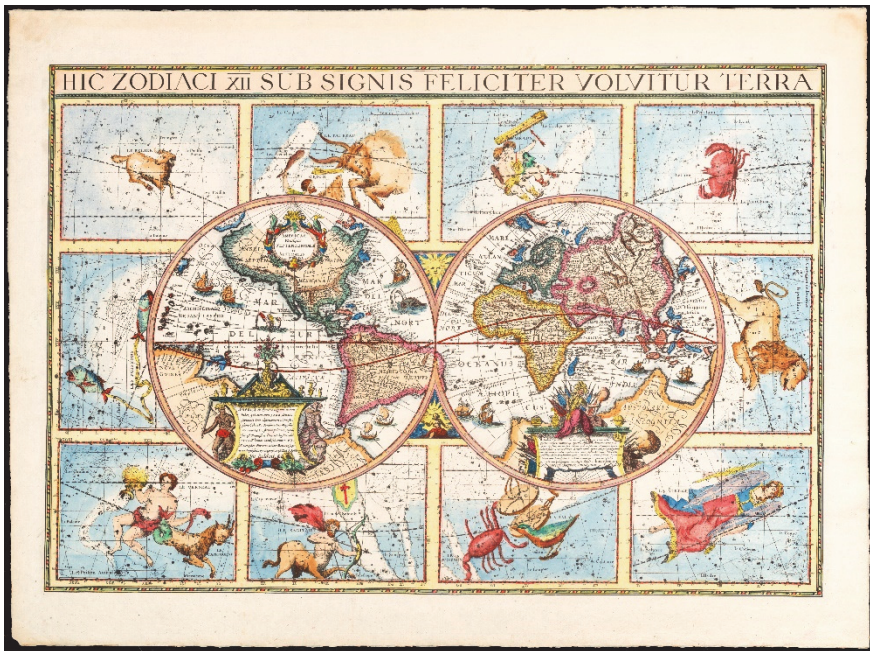


Figure 1. Cosmographical map attributed to Nicolaes van Geelkercken in the National Library of Australia. Image source: National Library of Australia (Canberra).

A ‘Cosmographical Map’ attributed to Nicolaes van Geelkercken

The National Library of Australia (NLA) in Canberra contains the largest collection of historical maps on which the discovery, cartography and exploration of Australia (marked on early maps as *Nova Hollandia* or ‘New Holland’) is documented from the late 16th century until the present age. A large portion of this important collection – mainly from the private collection of the English art collector and dealer Rex de Charembac Nan Kivell (1898–1977)¹ – is also digitally available on the NLA website.²

Amongst these maps is a remarkable and apparently unique cosmographical map³ (Figure 1) attributed to the Dutch surveyor and cartographer Nicolaes van Geelkercken (1585/86–1656)⁴ bearing the Latin title “HIC ZODIACI XII SUB SIGNIS FELICITER VOLVITUR TERRA” (“Here under the Twelve Signs of the Zodiac the Earth Revolves Favourably”). The map measures 56 by 75½ cm and was published, as stated in the cartouche below Africa, by the renowned Amsterdam cartographer and printer Johannes Janssonius (1588–1664). Each terrestrial hemisphere, drawn in stereographic projection, measures 24½ cm in diameter. According to the same cartouche, the map dates from 1615 but this cannot be correct as the Le Maire Strait (*Lameers Straet*) is clearly marked below the southern tip of South America.

The Le Maire Strait was first discovered in January 1616 by Jacob Le Maire (1585–1616) and Willem Cornelisz Schouten (c. 1575–1625), but the news of this discovery first reached Europe in July 1617. An account of the journey was published in 1618 in Amsterdam by Willem Jansz Blaeu (1571–1638) as *Journal ofte Beschryvinghe van de wonderlicke reyse, ghedaen door Willem Cornelisz Schouten van Hoorn, inde Jaren 1615, 1616, en 1617* (“Journal or Description of the Amazing Journey of Willem Cornelisz Schouten of Hoorn in the Years 1615, 1616 and 1617”) and more briefly, as an appendix to the report of the circumnavigation of the world in 1614–1617 by Joris van Spilbergen (1568–1620), in the *Oost ende West-Indische Spieghel* (“The East and West Indian Mirror”), published in 1619 in Leiden by Nicolaes van Geelkercken.⁵ A more detailed account was published in 1622 in Amsterdam by Michiel Colijn as the *Spieghel der Australische Navigatie* (“Mirror of the Australian Navigation”).⁶

This map is further remarkable because the spaces between the terrestrial hemispheres and the map border are not filled with the usual allegorical figures

¹ For a biography and several essays on his collection, see NLA (1998).

² <http://www.nla.gov.au/what-we-collect/maps>.

³ Rex Nan Kivell Collection: Map NK 9678.

⁴ On Nicolaes van Geelkercken, see Van der Meulen (1900), Keuning (1954), Doornink-Hoogenraad *et al.* (1972), Meurer (2001), Donkersloot-de Vrij (2003) and Helmers (2016).

⁵ See De Villiers (1906) and Warnsinck (1943).

⁶ See Engelbrecht & Van Herwerden (1945) and Duyker (1999).

depicting the four continents ('Europe', 'Asia', 'Africa' and 'America'), the four elements ('Earth', 'Water', 'Air' and 'Fire') or the four seasons, but with ten small star maps depicting the twelve constellations of the zodiac.⁷

Even more remarkable is the fact that the texts on the world map, as was common usage in the 17th century, are in Latin while the texts on the star maps are in French. The style and execution of the star maps also appears to be much later than the early 17th century.

Confirmation of the later date of the star maps follows from the observation that they include eleven minor constellations, first introduced in the latter half of the 17th century and at the end of the 18th century. These constellations are:

- *Scutum Sobiescianum* ('l'Ecu de Sobieski'), *Leo Minor* ('le Petit Lion'), *Lynx* ('le Lynx'), *Sextans Uraniae* ('le Sextant') and *Triangulum Minus* (the smaller of 'les Triangles'), introduced in 1684 and in 1690 by the Polish astronomer Johannes Hevelius (1611–1687).⁸
- *Microscopium* ('Microscope') and *Telescopium* ('Telescope'), first introduced in 1754 by the French astronomer Nicolas-Louis de Lacaille (1713–1762).⁹
- *Turdus Solitarius* ('le Solitaire'), first introduced in 1776 by the French astronomer Pierre-Charles le Monnier (1715–1799).¹⁰
- *Psalterium Georgianum* ('la Harpe de George'), *Tubus Herschelii Major* ('le Gr[an]d Telescope de Herschel') and *Tubus Herschelli Minor* ('Petit Telescope de Herschel'), first introduced in 1789 by the Austrian astronomer Maximilian Hell (1720–1792).¹¹

A close comparison with various star atlases published around 1800 shows that these star maps were directly copied from the 1795 edition of the *Atlas céleste de Flamstéed* (Plates 13 to 22, see Figure 2). This French version, in reduced format, of the large and influential *Atlas Coelestis* of the British astronomer John Flamsteed (1645–1719), published posthumously in 1729,¹² was first printed in 1776 by the Paris publisher Jean Nicolas Fortin (1750–1831). An updated edition, with additions by Joseph-Jérôme le Français de Lalande (1732–1807) and Pierre-

⁷ Libra/Scorpius and Capricornus/Aquarius are depicted as a pair on each map.

⁸ Warner (1979) 112–116; Ridpath (1988) 82, 86–87, 116–118 & 151; Kanas (2012) 126–127 & 162–167; Barentine (2016) 438–447. Of these constellations, the first four (Scutum, Leo Minor, Lynx and Sextans) are still in use.

⁹ Lacaille (1762); Warner (1979) 142–143; Ridpath (1988) 90 & 123; Kanas (2012) 124–125. Both constellations are still used.

¹⁰ Warner (1979) 159–162; Ridpath (1988) 151; Kanas (2012) 217–219; Barentine (2016) 449–464. This constellation is no longer used.

¹¹ Warner (1979) 110–111; Ridpath (1988) 143–144 & 149–150; Kanas (2012) 177; Barentine (2016) 401–423. These constellations are no longer used.

¹² Warner (1979) 80–82; Kanas (2012) 172–175.

François André Méchain (1744–1804), was published in 1795 by Charles-François Delamarche (1740–1811).¹³

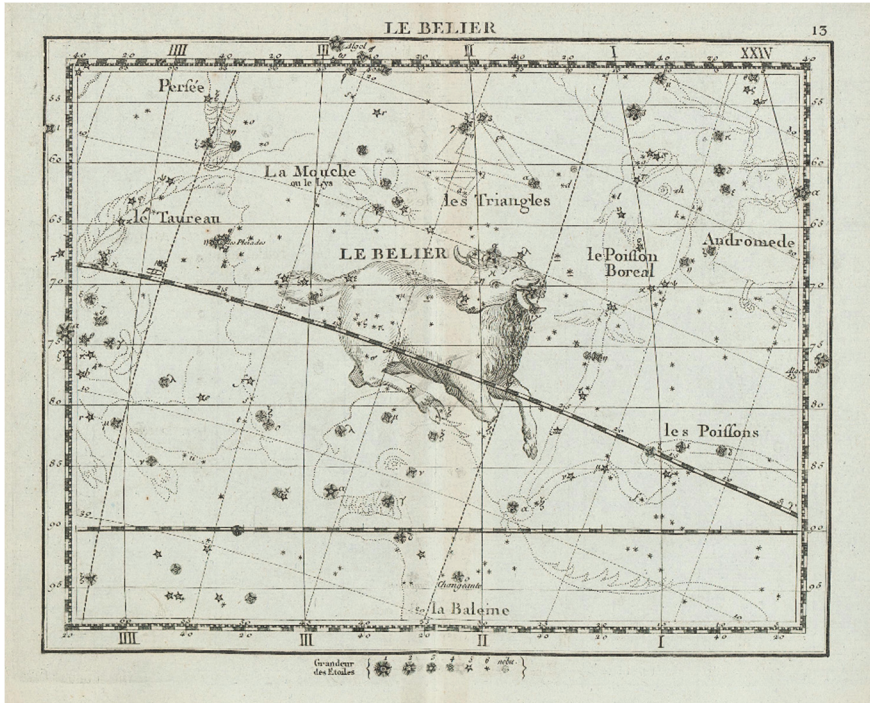


Figure 2. The zodiacal constellation Aries as depicted in Jean Nicolas Fortin’s *Atlas céleste de Flamstéed* (1795). Image source: e-rara website of the ETH Library of Zürich.

The Original World Map of Nicolaes van Geelkercken

In order to understand the origin of this remarkable pastiche of terrestrial and celestial maps it is necessary to investigate the world map in more detail.

Van Geelkercken’s original world map (Figure 3), bearing the Latin title “ORBIS TERRARUM DESCRIPTIO DUOBIS PLANIS HEMISPHERIIS COMPREHE[N]SA” (“Comprehensive Description of the World in Two Flat Hemispheres”) and measuring 41½ by 56½ cm (each hemisphere is 27½ cm in

¹³ Warner (1979) 84–85; Kanas (2012) 176.

diameter), was first published in 1617.¹⁴ Copies of several editions have been preserved in major map collections: four undated copies (Bern,¹⁵ Göttingen,¹⁶ Madrid¹⁷ and Vienna¹⁸), a copy dated 1617 (Leiden¹⁹), two copies dated 1618 (La Jolla²⁰ and Rotterdam²¹) and three copies dated 1632 (La Jolla,²² London²³ and Utrecht²⁴).²⁵

As was common practice in the 17th century, the spaces between the terrestrial hemispheres and the map border were filled with allegorical figures depicting the four seasons and, symbolizing begin and end of human life on the Earth, the Garden of Eden and the Last Judgement.

Modern Reprints of van Geelkercken's World Map

Due to its rich and often colourful decorative features, van Geelkercken's world map was in the recent past reprinted several times as a facsimile. The earliest one dates from 1957 and was printed by the Brussels publisher Office de Publicité in *Cartes anciennes: Facsimilés de cartes anciennes au format original et coloriées à la main sur papier fort*.²⁶

Around 1962 the Tamm-Vogt Company (St. Louis, Missouri) also published a facsimile of the van Geelkercken map, based on a copy dated 1618 in the private map collection of the real estate economist Roy Wenzlick (1894–1988).²⁷

Another facsimile, of the 1632 edition, was published around 1969 by Portal Publications Ltd.²⁸ This art print house, founded in 1954 in Corte Madera (California) with later addresses recorded in Sausalito and San Rafael, specializes in printing greeting cards, facsimiles of famous film posters and art prints.

¹⁴ Shirley (1983), nr. 295. The year is not marked on the original copperplate but was sometimes added manually in the bottom of the cartouche below Africa.

¹⁵ Universitätsbibliothek, Sammlung Ryhiner: Globus terrestris I, Falz 26.

¹⁶ Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, GR 2 GEOGR 214:1, 1.

¹⁷ Biblioteca Nacional de España, GMG/287 MAPA 0.

¹⁸ Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, FKB 273-40,1 – in a composite atlas.

¹⁹ Universiteitsbibliotheek, COLLBN 010-13-003 – the Le Maire Strait is not drawn.

²⁰ The Barry Lawrence Ruderman Map Collection.

²¹ Maritiem Museum, WAE846-A.

²² The Barry Lawrence Ruderman Map Collection.

²³ British Library, Maps * 920.(51.).

²⁴ Universiteitsbibliotheek, Kaart *VIII*.A.a.1 – the date (1632) is no longer visible as the result of a restoration.

²⁵ Shirley (1983), nr. 348, describes a reworked edition of Van Geelkercken's world map by Henricus Hondius (1596/97–1651) on two copperplates, dated 1639, with different border illustrations.

²⁶ Fac-similés de cartes anciennes et modernes, série III, nr. 19 – dated 1632. For a description of some of the other historical maps reproduced in this publication, see Milis-Proost (1967) nr. 370.

²⁷ His map collection was donated to the Westminster College Library in Fulton, Missouri.

²⁸ Date as given by the website of the Library of Congress (Washington).

A search in WorldCat reveals another reprint of the 1632 edition of the same map published in Madrid (1974?) and there may be several more unrecorded reprints.



Figure 3. World map of Nicolaes van Geelkercken.
Image source: Universiteitsbibliotheek Utrecht.

Who, When, Where, Why?

A casual comparison of the van Geelkercken map with the NLA map immediately reveals that the border of the latter map is significantly larger than that of the original map. This makes it very unlikely that the NLA map was printed directly from an original copperplate that somehow had survived long after it had served its usefulness and was reworked in the early 19th century to include the Flamsteed/Fortin star maps.²⁹ One should see evidence for this on the print – also significant is the fact that the NLA map shows no characteristic plate mark. This

²⁹ The online catalogue of the NLA correctly describes the item as a composite of maps from different periods, but claims that it is an early 19th-century reprint from a reworked copperplate.

indicates that the NLA map was made by a relatively modern printing technique such as offset printing or photoengraving.

From the dimensions of the original maps (the star maps in the *Atlas céleste de Flamstéed* usually measure 18 by 23 cm) it can be inferred that the NLA map was probably made by photographically reducing a set of original maps (or facsimiles) down to about 85% of the original size and skilfully joining the terrestrial and celestial components together. Of the original border decorations of van Geelkercken's world map only the figure of Christ in the Last Judgement scene still remains visible while the vegetation in the bottom of the Garden of Eden scene was replaced by the image of a radiant Sun.

Still unanswered is the question of who, and when and where, was responsible for the creation of this cartographical curiosity. Was it an intentional forgery, made with the purpose of deceiving ignorant buyers and collectors, or is it just a cartographical prank dreamt up by a graphical designer with some knowledge of old maps? For an expert on old maps it is easy to see that the different cartographical features don't add up but if you know only a little about astronomy or when certain minor constellations were first introduced in the sky a map collector can easily be fooled in believing that it is a genuine map.

Since several years, copies of this map are available from the NLA as a facsimile and as a jigsaw puzzle. Some internet sites, such as eBay, have sold in the past copies of this facsimile while claiming it to be an original map. As with all acquisitions of old maps, and especially on the internet, it is therefore always prudent to heed the old adage *caveat emptor*, or in plain English "buyer beware".

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