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A Multi-Layered Approach to Anglo-Dutch Relations

While scholars have delved deeply into understanding English exploitation and offenses in North America, they have often overlooked another important facet of the European colonialism: the role of the Dutch in the New World. In 1636, Dutch cartographer Johannes Janssonius created a map of the English-owned Chesapeake Bay, in which he strategically depicted the region as thoroughly settled by indigenous groups and almost completely free of English colonization. By studying this famous map of the Chesapeake Bay, we can interpret Anglo-Dutch and Dutch-native relations in eastern North America through a uniquely intricate lens. Such relations were far from uniform across time and space, but upon close examination of both the Dutch map and of various scholars, general trends regarding the motivations of Dutch explorers and merchants emerge. While the interpersonal relations of Dutch and English colonists were often cooperative, Janssonius's map contradicts historians who abridge all Anglo-Dutch contacts into a synopsis of amity. The cartographer's prioritization of indigenous denotations over English territorial claims in the Chesapeake illustrates the objective of seventeenth century Dutch leadership to gain an economic advantage over the English, which they executed by refusing to fully recognize English authority in the New England region and instead establishing trading connections with indigenous groups.

Both English and Dutch colonial settlements in North America were well established by the 1630s. The first successful English colony in North America was Jamestown, Virginia, founded in 1607 along the Chesapeake by the Virginia Company. This establishment followed many failed attempts at colonization by the English in the sixteenth century, and the early Jamestown colonists faced many hardships and challenges during their first years in North

America. Archaeologist Henry Miller further argues that this adversity was largely exacerbated by English "territorial expansion and poorly managed relations with the Chesapeake Indians" (Miller 236). The inability of colonists in Jamestown, and later Plymouth colonists in Maryland, to collaborate or even peacefully coexist with the native people living in the region forecasted the contentious future of English and indigenous relations.

While these struggles played out in the area that would become New England, the Dutch were also pursuing their exploratory interests along the North American east coast. King James I had granted English settlers the exclusive right to colonize Jamestown and Plymouth by enacting royal charters that thwarted any potential European competition in the region; however, he failed to make claims to the coast that lies between Cape Cod and the Chesapeake Bay (Meuwese 300). This allowed the Dutch, with their own desire for furs and resources to bring back to Europe, to freely explore the region. Henry Hudson of the Dutch East India Company encountered what he named the Hudson River in 1607, and was delighted to find that the natives living there were willing to trade furs for Dutch goods (Meuwese 301). His discovery proved to be a landmark for the Dutch, introducing to them the potential for rapid economic growth.

Soon after this discovery, numerous Dutch trade companies swarmed into the Hudson River region with hopes of establishing a network that might compete with the English and French fur trade (Meuwese 301). The eventual formation of New Netherland was characterized by the frequent "notarization and often formal negotiations between colonial authorities and the indigenous nation" (Klein 327). As the Dutch gradually expanded their area of domain and the English did the same further south, the two European powers were not only bound to encounter more native groups, but also intermingle with one other increasingly frequently; by the time Janssonius published his map, he and many Dutch settlers were familiar with the Chesapeake.

Historians have commonly argued that Anglo-Dutch relations were in fact generally harmonious in North America. One of their major arguments is enumerated by scholar April Lee Hatfield, who claims that English trade contracts with the Dutch, and particularly access to slave trade through New Netherland, “may have provided advantages to Dutch merchant immigrants in the Chesapeake that would help explain their easy acceptance in the region” (Hatfield 208). Given the common desires of the Dutch and English settlers to obtain personal wealth and pursue their economic interests, Hatfield and other historians conclude that settlers of both nationalities cooperated in a mutually beneficial way. She contends that financial concerns, rather than creating divisions between the two groups of colonists, effectively “weakened ethnic prejudices and significantly reduced any Chesapeake commitment to English metropolitan mercantile visions” (Hatfield 217). While reasonable if applied exclusively to the person-to-person interactions between English and Dutch settlers and merchants, Hatfield’s claim becomes questionable when generalized to state-level interactions between the economic rivals.

Scholars also take this argument of cohesiveness and solidarity beyond the realm of simply economic affairs, making claims about the social, cultural, and religious bonds that Dutch and English settlers developed. According to Christian J. Koot, the similar struggles of adjusting and assimilating to life in North America helped unite the colonists; not only were they brought together by common economic ties but also “by the vulnerabilities of colonial life” (Koot 73). Hatfield also argues that “a sense of shared religious identity and history...made the transnational (and transethnic) connections between English Chesapeake colonists and Dutch merchants and immigrants easier” (209). The common faith of these settlers, as well as the lack of a major language barrier between them, did often serve as a catalyst for more willing understanding of one another’s culture and experiences.

A third reason for cooperative colonial relations, according to Hatfield, Koot, and other scholars, was that nationalistic prejudices between the English and Dutch, while quite prevalent within the European continent, were dramatically alleviated by distance. Given the remoteness of Anglo-Dutch conflicts that were taking place an ocean away, Koot argues that colonists of both nationalities, especially those who had lived in North America their entire lives, were much “less affected by the cross-sea rivalry that sometimes tempered Anglo-Dutch relations in Europe” (73). In fact, Hatfield asserts that New England colonists objected to the English Parliament’s imposition of trade restrictions against the Dutch during the 1640s; Virginia’s governor William Berkeley, as well as others, “protested...on the grounds that Virginia had been ‘rescued’ by the Dutch” during English civil wars (Hatfield 206). This mitigation of nationalistic tensions, combined with shared Anglo-Dutch economic interests and cultural identities, engendered more supportive cross-national interactions at the person-to-person level.

Despite these smaller-scale instances of camaraderie, we cannot apply the assumption that Anglo-Dutch relations were universally harmonious to an analysis of Janssonius’s cartographic portrayal of the Chesapeake. His map, adorned with an official title and labels, exudes its legitimacy and authority to the viewer — but upon closer inspection, presents a far different Chesapeake than do English maps of the same time period. Rather than delineating the colonies of Jamestown and Plymouth with respect to their true dimensions, Janssonius includes hardly any labels of English settlement, but dozens of native ones. The five small English labels that he does feature are concentrated at the mouth of the bay and subdued by the over thirty native denotations, which are spread across the map’s pictured land. Without noting the publication date of the map, viewers would likely conclude that it depicts the Chesapeake prior to any English colonization.

If we ignore Janssonius's underlying political intentions, we might simply attribute the lack of English labels on a Dutch-made map to coincidence and contingency. However, the politics of Janssonius's mapping style cannot be downplayed, given the cartographer's prominence within the Dutch empire as well as the similar lack of English labels on other seventeenth century Dutch maps of New England. Janssonius's refusal to recognize English authority and willingness to denote indigenous settlements contradicts the assumption that Anglo-Dutch relations were generally congenial, instead reflecting the Dutch desire to undermine their economic rival. New Netherland leadership, and the trading companies that they financed, "were mapping for money" (Black 164), and they intended to obtain this money through dealings with indigenous groups; the English were simply a hindrance to these transactions.

In order to pursue their economic motives, Dutch leaders and scholars attempted to hierarchize their colonial supremacy over that of other European powers. Adriaen van der Donck, the first lawyer in the Dutch colony and a key player in the efforts to secure New Amsterdam, exemplifies this underlying economic objective. As one of the few early Dutch colonists with university education, he acted as spokesperson for the colony both verbally and on paper. Historian Sabine Klein recounts that van der Donck justified the official authority of New Amsterdam by insisting that not only did "the Dutch first set foot on it, but also [that] Dutch money, private and public, financed the discovery and possession" (330). Van der Donck and other Dutch officers "drew on multiple understandings of territory and possession" in order to "solidify the territorial rights of their own nations" (Klein 328). Essentially, by addressing their legal authority from a variety of approaches and definitions, they were able to elevate their mandate for supremacy to a higher level.

The desire for economic dominion compelled Dutch officials to not only demonstrate their colonial legitimacy, but also to subvert other empires' colonies — in particular, their New England rival. In reality, the political powers of New Amsterdam possessed a very different attitude toward the English than did individual Dutch colonists, who were largely able to overcome preconceived biases. The aggressive commercial motives of Dutch colonial leaders and businesses provoked their fear and suspicion of their English counterparts, whom they saw as a threat to trade with indigenous groups.

Dutch scholars representing New Netherland authority during this time thus attacked English colonialism from various angles. With respect to the chronological timeline of discovery and settlement, they claimed that the Dutch colonized North America before the English even began exploring (Klein 331). Using this strategy, they simultaneously validated Dutch claims to the continent and denounced those of the English, whom they portrayed as “intruders who followed the Dutch into the area after hearing about America’s advantages” (332). Descriptions of English colonists reflected these beliefs; van der Donck and other Dutch scholars argued that “because they ignored diplomatic attempts to protect Dutch territory” (337), English colonists were uncivilized invaders and thieves. The Dutch integrated their claims of superiority and authority into their physical depictions of North America, and it is within this context that the politics of mapping comes into play.

As exemplified by Janssonius’s map, the fame of Dutch cartography during the seventeenth century served as a means of exploitation by those who wished to influence colonial borders in North America. This time period was considered a golden age for Dutch mapping, and other European nations often copied their maps rather than producing their own (Klein 327). Dutch cartographers thus possessed a powerful ability to dictate borders and ownership within

the New World; the Dutch stadtholder and trading companies ordered “highly decorative charts and maps to demonstrate their new position as actors on the global stage” (Black 165). As Sabine Klein explains, many Dutch mapmakers and publishers chose to wield this leverage by ignoring and changing English names on maps of both New England and New Netherland territories (325, 334). Such maps then circulated across Europe and North America, subtly exposing their viewers to claims of both the Dutch Empire’s territorial dominance and New England’s lack of authority in the New World.

Companies in New Netherland believed that the key to successful commerce and wealth was collaboration with indigenous groups, rather than with the English. The Dutch viewed Native Americans both as vulnerable to land exploitation and as a valuable resource through which they could trade goods for coveted furs. Historian Mark Meuwese asserts that their “policy of obtaining indigenous consent for land purchases was also informed by the WIC's [Dutch West India Company’s] desire to establish trading relationships with as many Native peoples as possible” (304). Rather than adopting Koot and Hatfield’s arguments about the interdependence of English and Dutch trade, Meuwese contends that Dutch companies were more interested in trading with indigenous groups such as the Algonquians, Pequots, and Narragansetts, who possessed the fur that would allow the Dutch to compete in the North Atlantic fur trade (305). Meuwese provides sound and convincing evidence for his claims, but focuses primarily on Dutch-indigenous relations; he fails to address the complexity of Anglo-Dutch interactions beyond mentioning the blatant economically-driven frictions between Amsterdam directors and English officials.

Given their underlying economic motives, Dutch executives were committed to at least outwardly maintaining judicious relations with indigenous groups, and to compensating them for

the land they proceeded to commandeer (Schmidt 550). These groups were a commodity that could be used to attain economic prosperity, and for this reason were treated with apparent cordiality by the Dutch. As explained by Alison Games, “both the English and the Dutch proved more capable of dealing diplomatically and economically with the indigenous people of North America” than with each other (459). In reality, Dutch colonial leaders often engaged in competition with their English counterparts, recurrently accusing them of encroaching on territory to discredit them.

However, this mutual animosity did not by any means characterize every Anglo-Dutch encounter in North America. On a person-to-person level, interactions were often characterized by shared economic interests, cultural values, and disregard for state-level rivalries.

Janssonius’s map of the Chesapeake initially appears to refute this argument, but upon closer look simply compels us to delve into a different layer of Anglo-Dutch relations — specifically state and administrative level interactions. Economic ambitions prompted Dutch leaders and companies to undermine English land claims and to consort with indigenous groups. That being said, discrimination and exploitation were not one-sided practices; Klein observes that like the Dutch, the English both “carefully refused to employ Dutch names when describing North America” and condemned the actions of Dutch colonial government and citizens (Klein 339). Governmental and corporate relations were plagued by self-interest, exploitation of natives, and animosity on both sides.

In reality, as Alison Games concedes, “Dutch and English relations vacillated constantly between different extremes” (458). It is essential to recognize this ambivalence when studying Dutch representations of North American territory, given the common but flawed tendency to overlook the exploitative motives of the Dutch during this time and in this particular location.

Gaining a more comprehensive understanding of this turbulent and complex time period allows us to more clearly reflect on the circumstances that ultimately brought about the ascendancy of New England and the emergence of the United States.