

Knowledge of coastlines, coastlines of knowledge: Visual epistemologies and notions of spatiality in Early Modern coastal profiles, 1585–1815

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Early modern atlases abounded with coastal profiles, a highly uniform way of drawing panorama-like views of faraway coasts. Sometimes, these images make up large parts of the contents of an atlas, as is the case in the *Nieuwe beschryvinghe ende Caertboeck Vande Midlantsche Zee van Willem Barentz* (1595). More often, however, these images were included in the maps themselves or displayed as supporting elements next to these maps. Yet these images are not only a part of atlases: we find them in virtually every work of maritime navigation, in atlases, journals or mariners handbooks. From the eighteenth century onwards, this type of image becomes an important element of journals kept by sailors and non-sailors during their travels. In doing so, they become an important way for travellers and sailors alike to interact with faraway lands and exotic nature. Finally, the genre shows a surprising degree of durability: it is used from the late-sixteenth century to well into the twentieth century, although by then, photographs are starting to take over.

This paper will delve deeper into the rise, use and persistence of these coastal profiles. It will argue that these images play a much bigger role in maritime navigation than they are given credit for, and that they did so by relying on a non-cartographic mode of spatial orientation. The paper will take two approaches: the context of early modern navigation and that of the early modern history of knowledge. First of all, it will examine the role these images played in relation to maps and other ways of orientation and navigation. Secondly, it will analyse the knowledge-structure within which these images functioned, and explore its links to early modern visual culture and ‘visual epistemologies’. Both these approaches are essential to understanding the role that images – and this kind of image in particular – play in the history of maritime travel and cartography.

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