

Ernst van Hogenhoek and his "Observations Concerning Iapan" (1669)

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Chapter Three: Foreign Texts and Pictures

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In July 1669 Heinrich (Henry) Oldenburg, secretary of the "Royal Society of London for the Promotion of Natural Knowledge," put a short text into the *Philosophical Transactions*. These observations of travel in the Far East, he explained, were made by an "ingenious person" and communicated in French by Monsieur "I." After Japan's seclusion in 1641, Europe came to lack accurate information on that archipelago. Only three years later a German translation appeared in Christoph Arnold's "Wahrhaftige Beschreibungen dreyer mächtigen Königreiche, Japan, Siam und Corea" (A True Description of the Three Powerful Kingdoms of Japan, Siam, and Korea). This study introduces this long forgotten text, describes the background of its making, identifies the unknown Japan traveler and gives a short account of his activities in the East Indies.

Among Oldenburg's correspondence we find some letters exchanged with Henri Justel, a well-known French scholar, who in May 1778 drew Oldenburg's attention to an anonymous traveler from the Netherlands. According to Justel, that man had lived in Japan for 17 years, during which he witnessed a great fire in Edo that destroyed 60,000 houses and took 195,000 lives. He possessed some Japanese lacquer cabinets and other items of great value and had even traveled to China. In February 1669, after various attempts, Justel finally managed to receive the answers to Oldenburg's questions through the good offices of the renown Melchisedec Thevenot. The diary of the Dutch factory in Japan names four Europeans who were in Edo during the catastrophic fire of 1657. As can be shown, two of them participated in VOC missions to China: Zacharias Wagenaer and Ernst van Hogenhoek. But when Justel mentioned the unknown traveler for the first time, Wagenaer was still on his return voyage to the Netherlands where he died shortly thereafter. Thus Oldenburg's "ingenious person" must have been Van Hogenhoek.

Van Hogenhoek, born in The Hague, came to Japan in 1654 as an "assistant" at the Deshima factory. While gradually promoted to under-merchant and upper-merchant and even second in command at Deshima, he managed to stay in Japan, with only a few interruptions, for an exceptionally long period of time. Finally in 1662 he was relieved from his post by order of the Batavian governor-general under suspicion of forbidden private trade. Nevertheless, when a Dutch mission under Konstantijn Nobel sailed to the Chinese port of Fuzhou in the following year Van Hogenhoek was aboard as "Schout-bij-nacht." And after Nobel's return to Batavia in March 1664, he took over responsibility for the complex negotiations with Chinese authorities, especially the powerful regional ruler Jingnan-wang. As it has been the case in previous attempts by Wagenaer and others during the fifties and early sixties, the Dutch East Indian Company failed again to establish permanent trade relations with China. In spring 1665, Van Hoegenhoek returned to Batavia and one year later he was on his way to Europe. For unknown reasons, he did not settle down after so many years in the Far East. In 1675 we find him aboard a Danish ship on its way to Japan, where he wanted to establish trade relations with Denmark. But in December of that year he died of a disease at Bantam. Considering the extraordinary value of the Japanese cabinets Van Hogenhoek brought to the Netherlands, there is a great probability that a pair of gold-lacquered cabinets nowadays kept by the Royal Collection, Huis ten Bosch, The Hague (showing among other things Deshima and a Dutch opperhoofd in a palanquin) were once in his possession.

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