

# **Colonial, Religious and Scientific Mapping. The Cartographic Practice of Charles William Meredith van de Velde**

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## **Introduction**

The Dutch naval officer, cartographer, landscape painter, and Palestine explorer Charles William Meredith van de Velde (1818–1898) was a deeply interesting figure in nineteenth-century cartography and geography as well as in modern transcultural history in general. In his biography we can find strong military, scientific, colonial, artistic, religious, and humanitarian motivations – always connected to the description, and cartographical as well as artistic visualisation of regional knowledge. Van de Velde has been in the focus several times already (primarily: Kate 1900; Rombach 1962, 1977, 1978, 1980; Schelaas 2012; Vries 1996), yet a comprehensive biographical work and a reconstruction of his lifework are still a desideratum.

As part of a larger project,<sup>1</sup> this paper aims at giving an insight into one theme within the history of geography: the non- or semi-academic, but highly scientific geography in a dynamic and multiple setting, marked by exploration, cartography, and the diffusion of scientific as well as popular knowledge in the years before the establishment of geography at the universities. The emphasis of this paper is on cartographical visualisations as a socio-historic process

and part of a multi-scaled system of knowledge production and communication, influenced by several interests and encounters. The case presented is a very interesting example to these processes and approaches within the scientific discovery of the world in the 19th century. Van de Velde was in many aspects a typical figure within his generation of scientists and explorers, starting his career in a military and colonial setting. But he can also be characterized as an outsider and freelancer within the community, with a strong desire to create an exact description of the environment, especially in the form of his paintings and maps. Consequently, some select features and cartographic elements of van de Velde's life story will be presented. But first we want to have a look at some details of the biographical background of van de Velde.

### **Military and colonial activities**

Charles William Meredith van de Velde was born on December 4, 1818 in Leeuwarden, the old capital city of the Dutch province of Friesland. Van de Velde's career started in the Dutch military in 1832, where he was trained as a naval officer. He was a cadet in the Royal Netherlands Naval College at Medemblik (Klaasen 1979) where he learnt theoretical and practical principles of seafaring and navigation, including astronomy, measurement, cartography, and drawing. Van de Velde received an excellent education as military cartographer and surveyor. He also had drawing lessons with marine painter Petrus Johannes Schotel (1808–1865), which probably had a significant influence on van de Velde's artistic work (Klaasen 1979, Loos-Haaxman 1968).

The long-standing Dutch tradition of navigation and connected to it the rich experiences in surveying and cartography are of importance to our discussion, and to the development of van de Velde as a surveyor-cartographer. The history of Dutch geography and cartography is similar to that of other European nations in various periods, in being strongly connected with imperial and colonial interests. Dutch scholars are prominently represented in recent research on geography and cartography in relation to colonialism and imperia-

lism (e.g., Aardoom and Wentholt 2004; Heslinga 1996; Pater 2001; Schilder and Kok 2010, Zandvliet 1998).

After graduating from the Naval College in 1837 van the Velde took his first position far away from home, in the Dutch colonies (Vries 1996: 15–19) – an attractive and promising challenge for a young man. On board of the corvette *Z. M. Triton*, he sailed to the Dutch East Indies, a Dutch colony from the early seventeenth century on, first under the Dutch East India Company and since 1799 under direct governmental control (Hond 2008). There he was engaged in various surveys and issued hydrographic charts (cf. Velde 1855/56, I: III) for the “Commission for the Improvement of Indian Sea Charts” and the “Sea Chart Depot” in Batavia and probably also for other organisations. He also travelled to other islands, such as Java, Borneo, and the Moluccas. In 1839 he met the French naval officer Jules Dumont d’Urville (1790–1842) (Dunmore 2007), explorer of the south and western Pacific, Australia, New Zealand, and Antarctica, who moored at the Dutch East Indies on his way to Antarctica. The young Dutch officer partly joined d’Urville’s expedition in East India, an encounter that certainly left its mark on his later activities.

Van de Velde subsequently held leading positions within different colonial departments, for instance within the Hydrographical Office at the colonial headquarter at Buitenzorg (Bogor) and as head of the Topographical Institute in Batavia. Several maps and paintings testify to his colonial activities, especially the two-sheet map “Kaart van het Eiland Java”, issued together with a comprehensive memoir (Velde 1845, 1847b), in addition to a printed collection of paintings, published in French and Dutch (Velde 1846, 1847a).

### **Religion, art, and science in the Holy Land**

In 1844, van de Velde left his military office and returned home. From now on he established himself as a private scholar and artist. His first enterprise was a long journey in 1845, again to the East Indies, and back through Ceylon and South Africa. His next voyage was to Palestine, the Holy Land, in 1851/52. Ten years later he vi-

sited the region once again in 1861/62. Van de Velde described the initial situation for his research in the Holy Land:

“In the course of my naval career it had been my lot to be in charge of the R.[oyal] Hydrographical Office at Batavia (1839–1841). Practical surveying had preceded these duties, and the construction of geographical maps had followed them. Trained as I was by these antecedents, I felt it possible, partly from the labours of others, already accomplished, and personal survey, to construct a Map of the Holy Land, which, to a certain degree at least, would satisfy the demands of Biblical science.” (Velde 1858b: 1).

This short quotation shows already van de Velde’s motivation: a new and most exact cartography of the Holy Land, with respect not so much to natural sciences, but rather to Biblical science. The Holy Scripture was the absolute and most important source for van de Velde’s Palestine exploration.

The state of research regarding the history of Palestine research and Palestine cartography is beyond the scope of this paper. A large number of works are available, many of them written by Israeli historical geographers (e. g. Ben-Arieh 1983, Goren 2003, Rubin 1999).

In spite of this, some remarks on the history of Palestine research and Palestine cartography are necessary to contextualise van de Velde’s work (cf. Goren 2003).

The geography of Palestine had been well known since ancient times, thus the existing maps (exact or not) had no blank spaces. With the exception of the exact topography of Jerusalem, only one special geographical issue was vividly discussed: the Jordan depression with its two lakes (Goren 2011).

The first modern and scientific investigations of Palestine can be identified as early as the mid-eighteenth century. The names of three German-speaking pioneers of Palestine research come to mind: Carsten Niebuhr (1733–1815), Ulrich Jasper Seetzen (1767–1811), and Johann Ludwig Burckhardt (1784–1817), all especially well-connected internationally. However, what has been termed the “re-discovery,” “recovery,” or the “pioneering exploration” of Palestine did not begin until the early nineteenth century. Napoleon’s expe-

ditions and topographical measurements in Egypt and Palestine in 1798/99 can be considered to have triggered this new stage in Palestine research. Pierre Jacotin's *Carte topographique de l'Égypte* and its 6 sheets covering Palestine were the first trigonometrically based topographic maps of the region (Godlewska 1988). The "modern" maps which soon followed had many deficiencies, mainly due to their reliance on compilation rather surveying and on partial data that was neither precise nor systematic. However, as the nineteenth century progressed, an increasing volume of material based on relatively reliable and accurate measurements was collected, and the maps improved accordingly.

We can identify two main motives for enhancing Palestine cartography:

The first was the scientifically and religiously motivated geographical enquiry, now known as Scriptural Geography. This involves an exact mapping of the Bible and cartographic visualisation of archaeological and historical results. According to this, the Bible was accepted as the most important historical-geographical source. Many maps present biblical history with increasing scientific legitimation in the nineteenth century (e.g., Goren 1998a; Aiken 2010).

The second was the growing number of topographical and trigonometric measurements and surveys, including geophysical exploration, bearings, classification of altitudes, being undertaken by European nations, but mainly by British authorities. We might mention here the British officers surveys of 1840/41 (Jones 1973; Goren 2005) and Arthur Lukis Mansell's Charting of the Coast, elaborated in 1860–1862 (Rosen 1992). The British Ordnance Survey of Jerusalem began in 1864, and the comprehensive Survey of Western Palestine was accomplished between 1871 and 1877 (Goren 2002; 2011; Hodson and Jacobson 1999; Moscrop 2000).

There are many intersections between the two approaches and the connected maps within the scene of exploring Palestine. One development is obvious: the German scholarly community played a key role in modern geographical Palestine research, within which cartography played a major role. The crucial and leading protagonists of the community were Carl Ritter (1779–1859) (Goren 1999),

Heinrich Berghaus (1797–1884), Edward Robinson (1794–1863) – though an American – (cf. Goren 1999, 2003: 83–91; Williams 1999), Heinrich Kiepert (1818–1899) (Goren 1998b), August Petermann (1822–1878) (Goren 2008b), Conrad Schick (1822–1901) (Goren 2006), Titus Tobler (1806–1877), and more – a long list of geographers, cartographers and many others, all of them very active in the mapping process.

Van de Velde pursued mainly the former cluster of motivation, the Scriptural Geography. He visited Palestine, he wrote himself, as “the study of the Holy Scriptures has made me deeply feel the want of a correct and sufficiently detailed map of the land to which they pre-eminently call our attention” (Velde 1858b: 1). In the opening comments to the memoir accompanying his map of Palestine, he wrote explicitly that “it laid beyond my power to set off for Syria with the necessary instruments, and, with the aid of competent assistants, to make what may be termed a complete triangular survey; nor was I aware of any individual who, thrown on his own resources, had ever accomplished such a work” (ibid). So he adopted the method of collecting all possible material which he could get, from various sources and directed to those regions which he thought needed a better survey, and he combined the data with his own results of the field work.

### **Production and communication of knowledge: The Map of the Holy Land**

The first fruit of van de Velde’s first Palestine journey was the travel itinerary, published with two maps, a *Map of Syria and Palestine, showing the Routes, etc* and a *Plan of Jerusalem*, once more supplemented by wonderful drawings and paintings (fig. 1). The international publishing history of this two-volume book, written in the form of letters and not without literary ambitions, is impressive and shows three editions within two years: in Dutch (Velde 1854a), in English (Velde 1854b), and in German (Velde 1855/56, 1861).

The second outcome was a milestone in the history of modern Palestine cartography, the *Map of the Holy Land* (fig. 2), published in eight sections and in a scale of 1: 315.000 in 1858, together with

a voluminous memoir (Velde 1858a; 1858b; cf. Goren 2008a; Vries 1995, 1996). Apart from Heinrich Kiepert's maps, which reflect Edward Robinson's outstanding research (Goren 1998b), van de Velde's map was the most exact to date, with much information and based on a sophisticated combination of all existing knowledge, together with his own exploration, as testified partly in its title (fig. 3), and fully in the memoir.

The map was published by the Justus Perthes Publishing House in Gotha (cf. Lenz and Ormeling 2008; Weigel 2011). Already founded in 1785, the company established itself during the 19th century as one of the leading headquarters for modern geography. It worked as an international agency for strategic knowledge communication, as an international node and a factory for producing and propagating "world views". The brilliant cartographer August Petermann, since 1854 in Gotha, was an ingenious organiser and merchandiser of geographical exploration, and engaged in Palestine exploration and cartography, too. The Perthes publishing house was certainly an excellent choice for van de Velde to publish his map in the best possible way.



Fig. 1: Jerusalem von der N.W. Seite gesehen.  
Source: VELDE 1855/56.

Looking into the mapmaking process that led to van de Velde's *Map of the Holy Land*, one should bear in mind that the technical mapmaking and the intellectual transfer of knowledge involved were both part of a very complex social discourse with a dense network of participants – and cartographic encounters. The following, of course incomplete schedule shows the most relevant members within the network:

*Network of Actors within van de Velde's Mapmaking Process*

- Palestine: explorers, local informants, guides & translators, clerical & secular “authorities”, experts (archaeologists, theologians etc.), correspondents, missionaries, ...
- Palestine/Homeland: Geographical & Missionary Societies, military, US, European & Ottoman administrations,
- Homeland (e.g. Germany) – scientific & military collections, publishing houses, editors, correctors, experts, “armchair geographers”, cartographers, drawers, map engravers, colourists, lithographers, printers, ...
- Homeland/abroad/Palestine: audience, reviewers, ...

One can read the scheme from the top down and it is connected with geographical relations. It is possible to divide the system into sub-systems, for instance field work, technical mapmaking, or map reception. But all lines are interwoven with each other. It is a dynamic and circular process (cf. Schelhaas and Wardenga 2011). Besides that, we may also identify sites or places of knowledge production and communication (Livingstone 2003), be it geographical places (Jerusalem, Berlin, Paris, London, Gotha, etc.), but also institutions (Royal Geographical Society of London, British Ordnance Survey, Justus Perthes Publishing House, etc.). Van de Velde's narrative and also the map memoir contain ample information about these encounters.

A worthwhile approach within carto-historical research is to analyse the symbiosis of text and map. In nineteenth-century cartography and already earlier, the combination of map and written text was rather natural. The special genre of map memoirs and map comments constitutes a rich pool of sources today (Schunka 2011), and van de Velde's memoir is a good example. Already the comprehensive text



Colonial, Religious and Scientific Mapping



Fig. 2: Map of the Holy Land, detail.  
Source: VELDE 1858a.

written for his “Kaart van het Eiland Java” (Velde 1847b) demonstrated van de Velde’s detailed cartographical method of working. A first glance at the title page of the memoir to the Map of the Holy Land is already significant, for the author lists there the main sources of his map production: his own surveys, the British military surveys, and some results of earlier Palestine research, including van de Velde’s contemporary Edward Robinson and his work. These map comments can be very voluminous, like van de Velde’s book of more than 350 pages, or might have only a few pages; they may have several authors: researchers, editors, and cartographers. But what is more, they contain much detailed information about the mapmaking process. In German Palestine cartography, there are quite a number of commentaries to maps, written, for instance, by Ritter (1848–55), Berghaus (1835), Kiepert (1841), and by van de Velde himself.

*The Map of the Holy Land* went through several editions in at least three languages: English (Velde 1858a, 1865b), German (Velde 1866b), and as a kind of spin-off map two maps in Dutch (Velde 1866a, 1867). Many derivatives followed in various reprints, in both scientific and popular contexts, in various formats (maps in journals, atlases, textbooks, wall maps, etc.), and published by various institutions.

A central theme in van de Velde’s cartographic work on the Holy Land were his international connections used to produce his map. In order to fulfil his mission – to construct “a correct and sufficiently detailed map” of the Holy Land (Velde 1858b: 1) – he needed to use all help available.

This is best attested, though only as one example, by his intensive use of the 1841 measurements that a group of British officers had conducted in the Holy Land and southern Syria (Jones 1973; Goren 2005). Realising that his intention of a trigonometric survey of the country and a map of the Holy Land was an impossible task for a single person, he began seeking that material. He became acquainted with the works of the British officers and made the best use of them in all his maps. At first, he regretted the fact that he could not obtain their material while going to Syria, because he expected it to be the best possible “base to work upon” (Velde 1858b: 4). But on

his return to London in 1852 he was “kindly allowed by the authorities access to these documents at the Board of Ordnance” (ibid: 5). He adds that this turned out to be an advantage, “as it had given to my own survey a perfect independent character, and its agreement with the survey of the British Engineers was now a source of much satisfaction” (ibid). Van de Velde had in his possession the three sheets of the officers’ *Map of Syria* and also their original triangulations and he made a point of mentioning this in the title of his map.

Van de Velde’s second journey to Palestine, in 1861/62, refers to another important part of his biography, the humanitarian approach. He traveled as an official observer of the international committee of the European powers in the Lebanon conflict in these years, and he used the opportunity to collect new data ten years after his original

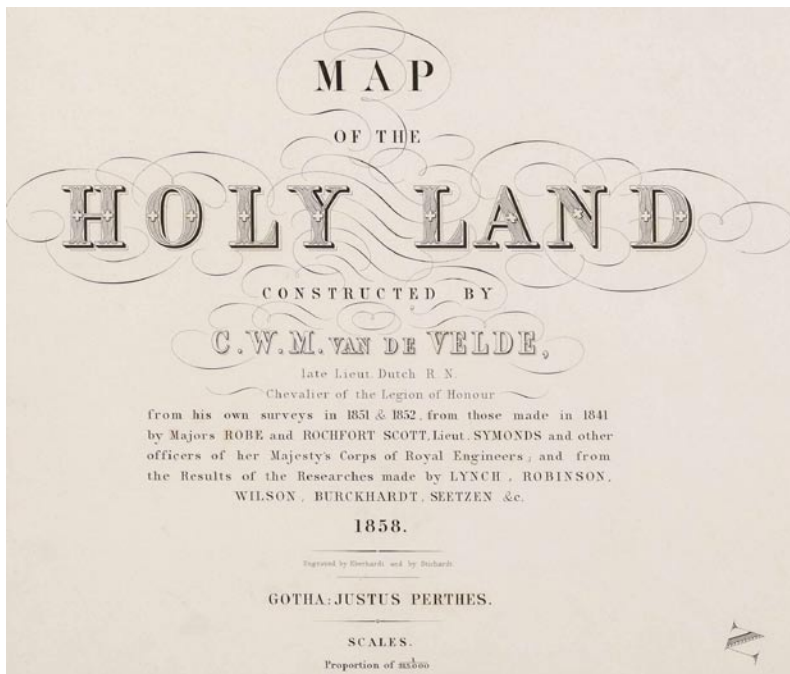


Fig. 3: Map of the holy Land, title.  
*Source:* Velde 1858a.

survey in order to publish an improved edition of his *Map of the Holy Land* (Velde 1865a–c, 1866a, b, 1867).

His humanitarian approach was especially marked by his later engagement for the Red Cross. Together with the Swiss Henry Dunant (1828–1910) and Louis Appia (1818–1898), van de Velde was a leading member of the founding committee of the International Red Cross (Rombach 1962, 1977, 1978, 1980). He was the Dutch delegate to the first international Geneva conference of the “International Committee for Relief to the Wounded” in October 1863 which soon after approved the Geneva Convention in 1864. Because of his travel experience, van de Velde was elected the very first official Red Cross observer in the German-Danish War of 1864, together with Louis Appia. He later filled the same function in the German-French War of 1870/71.

In his last years, van de Velde lived in southern France. He died on March 20, 1898, at Menton.

## Conclusion

This paper could provide only a first insight into one biography related to nineteenth-century geography, with a strong connection to visualisation, mapmaking, and the production and dissemination of geographical knowledge. We tried to show the life-historical development of one individual from military and colonial interest to religious and scientific research and mapping. Van de Velde’s paintings and maps demonstrate in connection with his comprehensive books, the detailed, sometimes obsessive method of producing, visualising and communicating. His oeuvre provides a fruitful basis for future research on the history of geography and cartography.

## Notes

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