

# Repackaging East Indies Natural History in François Valentyn's *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*

SIEGFRIED HUIGEN

Siegfried Huigen is Professor of Dutch and South African Literature at Wrocław University and Visiting Professor of Dutch Literature and Cultural History in the Department of Afrikaans and Dutch at Stellenbosch University. His books and co-edited volumes include *Knowledge and Colonialism. Eighteenth-Century Travellers in South Africa* (Leiden 2009), *The Dutch Trading Companies as Knowledge Networks* (Leiden 2010), *Reshaping Remembrance. Critical Essays on Afrikaans Places of Memory* (Amsterdam 2011), and a special issue of the *European Review* about Central Europe and colonialism (2018). He is currently preparing a book on knowledge production in François Valentyn's *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*.

## Abstract

More than five hundred folio pages of François Valentyn's multivolume description of the trading empire of the Dutch East India Company, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën* (Old and New East Indies, 1724-1726, five thousand pages in toto), are devoted to the natural history of Amboina. This essay contends that Valentyn's nature description is not the work of a field naturalist, but rather of a scholar ordering and repackaging existing information, which was already available in a different textual format and in drawings. While the focus of this essay is on Valentyn's compilation strategy, which targeted a non-expert readership of 'liefhebbers', the role of indigenous knowledge in his nature description is also discussed, arguing that it was generally subordinated to a European perspective in Valentyn's book.

*Keywords:* François Valentyn, natural history, colonialism, indigenous knowledge, amateurs, compilation, paper technologies

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This essay discusses nature description in one of the most influential Dutch geographical descriptions of the East Indies, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën* (Old and New East Indies) by François Valentyn (1666-1727, fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Valentyn's work was the first and for a long time the only work in which all major settlements of the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company, henceforth VOC) and the countries with which it maintained trade relations were described, from the Cape of Good Hope to Japan. The only surviving text is the printed edition, which appeared in five volumes between 1724 and 1726 with two cooperating publishers, in Valentyn's native town of Dordrecht and in Amsterdam. Later in the eighteenth century several sections of Valentyn's work reached an international audience in the edition of the *Histoire générale des voyages* published by Pierre de Hondt in The Hague, including the section dealing with the natural history of Amboina (Ambon and neighbouring islands), which will be the focus of this essay.<sup>2</sup>

Valentyn's book is lavishly illustrated and comprises approximately five thousand folio pages. The whole work is conceived as a series of chorographies, that is: descriptions of geographical regions and countries that were important within the trade network of the VOC, such as Amboina, Java, Ceylon, and the Cape of Good Hope, and it is to a large degree a compilation of existing documents, drawings, maps, and publications which Valentyn

1 I would like to thank Maria Leuker and her team for their kind invitation to participate in the Cologne workshop on Hybridisation in Natural History, that took place in February 2018, and their willingness to support my research for this paper by providing me with publications that were not readily available in Poland and South Africa. It is difficult to refer to Valentyn's work, because the pagination does not run parallel to the total number of pages in a volume. In order to locate a reference, I use the method suggested by Fisch, *Hollands Ruhm in Asien*, 142-146: the first number refers to the volume, the second to the section in the volume, and the last to the page. In addition, I maintained the original spelling of Valentyn's surname. The spelling 'Valentijn' only became current in the nineteenth century.

2 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 153-586; Anonymous, *Histoire générale des voyages*, XVII. The *Histoire générale des voyages* was originally published between 1746 and 1759 in Paris in fifteen volumes and edited by the abbé Antoine François Prévost. Several enlarged editions were published later by different editors. The complicated publication history of the *Histoire générale* has not been mapped yet.



Fig. 1 Arnold Houbraken, Arnold Boonen, Jacob Houbraken, Gilliam van der Gouwen, Joannes van Braam, and Gerard onder de Linden, Portrait of François Valentyn, etching and engraving, in: François Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, Dordrecht and Amsterdam 1724-1726, I, Stellenbosch University Library, Africana Collection.

had adapted for incorporation in his book.<sup>3</sup> The book could be used as a reference work, as it was accompanied by finding aids such as glosses, tables of contents, and extensive alphabetical indexes. Since the author had lived in the VOC's administrative district of Amboina for the majority of his two stays in the East Indies – the first being between 1686 and 1694, the second between 1706 and 1714 – the work's core is a chorography of this region.<sup>4</sup> Even after adding descriptions of other regions in Asia and the Cape colony in South Africa, still more than a quarter of Valentyn's hefty volumes remained devoted to Amboina. Valentyn's book can be considered a foundational text in the history of Dutch colonialism in the sense that for more than a century after its publication it was considered a reference work that contained reliable information about Dutch territories in Asia, and as such it played an important role in Dutch colonial discourse up to the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

In the third volume of his work, Valentyn provides a description of the plants, 'land animals', birds, 'water animals', and shells of Amboina, in accordance with Pliny's taxonomy, explicitly renouncing contemporary taxonomical ambitions.<sup>6</sup> This section comprises 436 folio pages of text, includes almost one hundred unpaginated plates with about one thousand images of plants, shells, and animals, and stands in for the sum of East Indies nature in Valentyn's book.<sup>7</sup>

Valentyn had very little to say about nature in other parts of the VOC's realm. For example, he devoted a meagre six pages to nature description in the section on the Cape of Good Hope in the fifth volume of *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, despite the great diversity of plants and animals there, and the illustrations in this section also lack the quality of detail of those of Amboina (fig. 2).<sup>8</sup> Since Valentyn presumed nature in other places in Asia to be similar to that in Amboina, the nature descriptions of these regions are even further limited and reduced to an enumeration of a small number of plants and animals, supplemented with references to his natural history of Amboina.<sup>9</sup>

Against the background of the popularity of physico-theology in early modern Dutch natural history, it is furthermore significant that Valentyn, as a Calvinist minister, seldom assigns religious meaning to nature description.<sup>10</sup> The only instance I encountered

3 Chorography was a branch of early modern geography concerned with an encyclopaedic description of specific territories. On the genre of chorography, see particularly Friedrich, 'Chorographica als Wissenskompilation', and within a Dutch context Esser, *The Politics of Memory*; Verbaan, *De woonplaats van de faam*.

4 Valentyn did serve the indigenous inhabitants of Kota Ambon (Ambon Town) who had converted to Christianity as a Calvinist minister. For a biographical overview of his life, see Habiboe, 'Tot verheffing van mijne natie'.

5 Huigen, 'Waar is het graf van Valentijn?'.

6 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 263.

7 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 153-586. Including illustrations, around five hundred pages were devoted to natural history.

8 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, v, 6, 112-116. See for a discussion Rookmaaker, *The Zoological Exploration of Southern Africa*, 30-31.

9 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 3, 63 (Siam); IV, 1, 53 (Java); v, 1, 56 (Coromandel); v, 2, 3 (Sumatra); v, 3, 50-54 (Ceylon); and v, 4, 13 (Malabar).

10 On the popularity of Dutch physico-theology, see Bots, *Tussen Descartes en Darwin*; Vermij, 'The Formation of Newtonian Philosophy'; Van der Wall, 'Newtonianism and Religion in the Netherlands'; Jorink, *Reading the Book of Nature*.

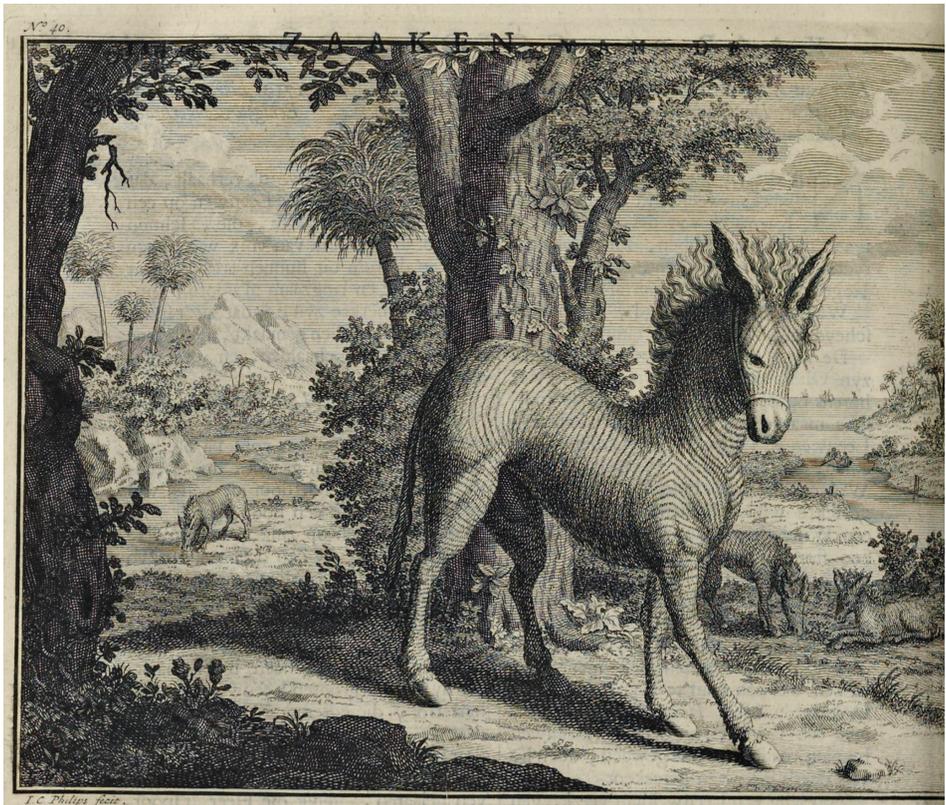


Fig. 2 I.C. Philips, Zebra, after a supposedly ad vivum drawing by Constantyn Ranst, director of the voc trade mission in Japan, engraving, in: François Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën, Dordrecht and Amsterdam 1724-1726*, volume V, 6, p. 114, Stellenbosch University Library, Africana Collection.

is his reference to the flight of birds of paradise to heaven at the end of their lives, which he understood as an emblem for the Christian's flight to his Saviour on the wings of his faith.<sup>11</sup> Valentyn had borrowed this pious emblem from Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605), whom he had criticised some pages earlier for his mistaken ideas about the anatomy of birds of paradise.<sup>12</sup> Religion is an important topic in Valentyn's book, with extended descriptions of non-European religious practices, the history of the church in the East Indies, and antiquarian speculations about ethnographic and – in two cases – of natural phenomena as a contribution to biblical exegesis, but not in the sense of nature as a

<sup>11</sup> Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 311. For a discussion, see Huigen, 'Paradijsvogels'.

<sup>12</sup> Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 306; Aldrovandi, *Vlyssis Aldrovandi philosophi ac medici Bononiensis historiam naturalem*, 806-816.

revelation of religious truth. The emblem of the flight of the birds of paradise to heaven remains an exception.<sup>13</sup>

Although Valentyn did visit the Cape of Good Hope and lived in the Indonesian archipelago, his book is primarily the work of a polymath and based on a compilation of documents from various sources, whereas autopsy played a limited role.<sup>14</sup> In all probability the composition of *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën* did not take place in Kota Ambon, the administrative centre of Amboina, but much later, after Valentyn had settled in his hometown Dordrecht. When Valentyn returned from the East Indies in 1714 he brought with him a trunk containing 'papers'.<sup>15</sup> In his house at the Brouwershaven in Dordrecht, overlooking the Merwede river, he could sift through and reassemble these papers and add material that his acquaintances provided him with later, together with publications that had appeared recently.<sup>16</sup>

As will become clear, Valentyn's nature description is not so much the work of a field naturalist, but rather of a scholar ordering and repackaging the contents of papers he had collected in a different format. Accordingly, this essay primarily discusses Valentyn's nature description in *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën* as a work of an author-compiler, who had extracted most of the information from existing accounts and who had the drawings he had acquired redesigned for book illustrations, with a public of non-expert readers in mind.<sup>17</sup>

With its focus on Valentyn's compilation strategy, this essay takes its cue from two related approaches in the history of early modern science and scholarship. On the one hand it is inspired by studies of early modern scholarly practices, such as note-taking, compiling, and composing a text in accordance with rhetorical prescription ('paper technologies'), and on the other hand discussions of the role of 'inscriptions', like drawings

13 A description of the iguana from Amboina would clarify an exegetic problem of the identity of an animal in ancient Palestine, which in early modern translations of the Bible had been rendered as a 'tortoise' (Leviticus 11:29), both in the Dutch *Statenvertaling* ('schildpad') and the King James Bible. A similar case was Calambac (*Aquilaria malaccensis*), an aromatic type of wood common in Southeast Asia, which was referred to in the Old Testament (cf. Numbers 24:6; Psalms 45:9; Proverbs 7:17; Song of Songs 4:14). Valentyn had come across this question in a manuscript of Rumphius's *Kruid-boek* (Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 205 and 207; Rumphius, *Kruid-boek*, II, 31-32).

14 In early modern empiricism autopsy (seeing with your own eyes) was regarded as an epistemological principle of scientific practice: Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution*, 69-70. The concept did, however, have a prehistory going back to Herodotus, which might have been more familiar to Valentyn as a humanist scholar than its contemporary applications. See Hartog, *Le miroir d'Hérodote*, 272-275.

15 The book was advertised some years later, in 1722: Fennema, 'François Valentijn's *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*', 12.

16 Valentyn lists the names of VOC dignitaries who had provided more 'papers' after he had settled in Dordrecht: Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 'Voorbericht'. Peter Kolb's description of the Cape of Good Hope, *Capvt Bonaë Spei Hodiernum*, had been published in 1719. It was an important source for the section on the Cape Colony in Valentyn's book: Huigen, 'Woest land'.

17 In the early modern period, before the 'birth' of the modern author, compilation was a perfectly respectable activity: Blair, *Too much to know*, 173-229; Dietz, 'Natural History as Compilation'; Friedrich, 'Chorographica als Wissenskompilation'; Gierl, 'Compilation and the Production of Knowledge'; Johns, *The Nature of the Book*, 152; Jones, 'Decompiling Dapper'; Swann, *Curiosities and Texts*.

and various written records, in knowledge transfer ('paperwork').<sup>18</sup> These analytical perspectives primarily draw attention to the scholar's endeavours in his cabinet, recombining and summarising the inscriptions he had collected into a new text for a specific audience.

First, I will discuss Valentyn identifying himself and the intended readers of his nature description as 'liefhebbers' (literally 'lovers'), as this had important implications for the manner in which he selected and communicated his material.<sup>19</sup> Although the entire account is addressed at an audience of curious ('nieuwsgierig') readers, who, according to the prospectus of Valentyn's publishers, could also have considered buying the work as an investment opportunity, his nature description addresses a more specific audience which was supposed to share the interests of the author in beautiful ('zeer aardig', 'fraai', 'schoon') natural objects. Both author and reader are inscribed in this part of Valentyn's text as 'liefhebbers'.<sup>20</sup> They shared this persona as a 'cultural identity', to borrow Daston's and Sibum's concept of 'a cultural identity that simultaneously shapes the individual in body and mind and creates a collective with a shared and recognisable physiognomy'.<sup>21</sup> The author and the intended reader of Valentyn's nature description are presumed to belong to the same type of person who was primarily interested in naturalia as a source of sensory pleasure. Secondly, I will analyse Valentyn's working method by determining to what degree he relied on existing texts and drawings. After identifying the parts that depend on sources, it should be possible to discern the sections that cannot be linked to examples and could have been the result of personal observation or based on witness accounts.

### *Liefhebbers*

Valentyn uses the term 'liefhebber' in two syntactic contexts: without a grammatical complement (just 'liefhebber') and 'liefhebber' with a grammatical complement, in the sense

<sup>18</sup> The term 'paper technologies' was coined by Anke te Heesen, 'The Notebook, a Paper Technology', while Bruno Latour invented 'paperwork' as a theoretical concept: Latour, 'Drawing things together'. See also Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*; Brendecke, Friedrich, and Friedrich (eds.), *Information in der Frühen Neuzeit*; Zedelmaier and Mulsow (eds.), *Die Praktiken der Gelehrsamkeit*; Daston, 'The Sciences of the Archive'; Décultot, 'The Art of Excerpting'; Charmantier and Müller-Wille, 'Worlds on Paper'; Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge*; Ogilvie, *The Art of Describing*; Pomata and Siraisi (eds.), *Historia*; Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*.

<sup>19</sup> Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 'Voorbericht'; III, 1, 222, 295, 333, and 347. The meanings of 'liefhebber' in *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën* are fluid and depend on context. Solving semantic problems by referring to definitions in the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* (WNT Online) will not suffice, as the dictionary does not do justice to this fluidity (cf. 'Liefhebber' in WNT Online, <http://gtb.ivdnt.org/iwDB/search?actie=article&wdb=WNT&id=Mo37144&lemmodern=liefhebber&domein=o&conc=true> [accessed 5 April 2019]).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. publisher's prospectus of *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*. The only known copy of the prospectus, which opens with a dummy of the title page of Valentyn's book, is kept in the Library of the University of Amsterdam, shelf mark KVB PPA 603:13. I am grateful to Tom de Vries for taking photographs. The subscription price of the standard edition of Valentyn's work was 90 guilders, and 117 guilders for the 'luxury' edition. Around 750-800 copies of the five-volume work were printed: Fennema, 'François Valentijns *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*'; Huigen, 'De circulatie van François Valentyns *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*'. Valentyn uses each of the cited terms, which are more or less synonymous, hundreds of times to describe naturalia.

<sup>21</sup> Daston and Sibum, 'Introduction', 2.

of a 'liefhebber van schelpen' for someone with a special fondness for shells. Moreover, in the second case the liking for shells presupposes collecting activities combined with a collector's interest in shells, particularly regarding their degree of uniqueness. The expression 'liefhebber' without a grammatical complement is used by Valentyn in the introductory parts of descriptions of a particular range of natural phenomena, when Valentyn refers to himself as a 'liefhebber', writing for an audience of 'liefhebbers'.<sup>22</sup> For Valentyn both kinds of 'liefhebbers' had the following characteristics. Firstly, the model for an author as 'liefhebber' is Pliny; it is someone who would not go into too much detail describing natural phenomena and who is not worried about systematics.<sup>23</sup> Secondly, within the field of natural history the 'liefhebber' (who could also be a woman) is differentiated from personae with a keener knowledge of natural phenomena, such as botanists, physicians, and anatomists.<sup>24</sup> And thirdly, the principal interest of 'liefhebbers' in these items was their aesthetic appeal and rarity.<sup>25</sup>

Valentyn does not give the impression of having been aware of advances in systematics. His library was short on books about natural history while comprising a great number of theological works and a decent number of books on contemporary philosophy (including the collected works of Descartes and Spinoza).<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, he at least owned the first volume of John Ray's *Historia Plantarum* (1686), generally regarded as one of the first attempts in designing a modern plant taxonomy.<sup>27</sup> Ray's work left no trace in *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, however. For arranging his descriptions Valentyn instead followed classical tradition, being well aware that he did not meet the scholarly standards of his day. The subdivision of plants in trees, shrubs, and herbs is derived from Dioscorides (via Rumphius), and with his division of animals in 'land animals', birds, insects, and 'water animals', he explicitly followed Pliny, whose work remained a model for amateur natural historians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>28</sup>

Writing as a 'liefhebber' for an audience of 'liefhebbers' also had consequences for the kinds of natural phenomena described by Valentyn and how he did so. For the execution of the rhetorical tasks of both invention and disposition, the trope of 'praeteritio' was repeatedly applied, which resulted in an abbreviated representation of items which would have deserved a more extended treatment if the audience were better educated in the subject, since a more extended discussion would have been too tedious for an audience

22 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 'Voorbericht'; III, 1, 222, 295, 333, and 347.

23 *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 154 and 263.

24 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 154, 192, 263, and 294-295. Valentyn mentions three female shell collectors, two in Ambon and one in Amsterdam: *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 560-561.

25 Ogilvie stresses aesthetics as 'a prime motivation' for the pursuit of early modern natural history: Ogilvie, *The Art of Describing*, 268.

26 For the purpose of this essay, Valentyn's library was reconstructed on the basis of his library's sales catalogue (Anonymous, *Catalogus*). However, this catalogue can only give an approximation of the books he had at his disposal, as not all titles he refers to were included in the catalogue and booksellers were in the habit of adding books to sales catalogues that had never been part of a particular library. See Huigen, 'De zaak Valentyn', nt. 11.

27 Anonymous, *Catalogus*; Ray, *Historia plantarum*.

28 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 263. See also Leuker, 'Im Buch der Natur lesen'; Leuker, 'Koloniales Wissen'.

of 'liefhebbers'.<sup>29</sup> Valentyn's lack of knowledge of certain subjects was another reason for the limited amount of information he provided. For example, although he had been the owner of a butterfly collection, he omits a description of insects entirely because of his lack of expertise.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, aesthetics played an important role both in the selection and visual presentation of *naturalia* in *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*. In Amboin Valentyn had collected colourful tropical fishes and had drawings made of them. Almost one third of his natural history of Amboina, and the greatest number of plates in this section, is devoted to these fishes in the subsection on 'ongemeene visschen' (uncommon fishes).<sup>31</sup> The plates contain 528 numbered 'na 't leven' (from life) images of tropical fishes and crustaceans.<sup>32</sup> They cover sixty-four unnumbered folio pages, most of which (fifty-four pages) contain two smaller plates. These images of fishes and crustaceans are usually placed in groups of four or more. There are roughly two primary types of plates with fish images, which were executed by at least five artists.<sup>33</sup> The existence of recurring motifs in these images, despite their being executed by different artists, suggests a common iconographic program and coordination, under the supervision of Valentyn or his publishers.

In the first series of plates the fish are depicted against a background of fantasy architecture (fig. 3). In these fictitious stone constructions, which are placed in a landscape, the fish might lie on a windowsill or even be depicted in an imaginary drawing with torn edges attached to a wall. Beyond these buildings or through the window, the reader-viewer has a view of an exotic landscape.

In the second series of images the fish are presented as a catch in a shoreline landscape (figs. 4, 5, and 8). These aquatic landscapes are composed in a similar way to fish still life paintings by Jan van Kessel I (1626-1679) and Marcus and Willem Ormea (1611-1665) and the images in *Piscium vivae icones* (Antwerp 1610) by Adriaen Collaert (ca. 1560-1618).<sup>34</sup> The fish are always depicted in the foreground with a seascape in the background, a compositional arrangement of which Adriaen Collaert seems to have been the original inventor.<sup>35</sup> Foreground and background are separated in some cases, as in work of Marcus Ormea, by a coulisse of baskets and suspended nets.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the landscapes in Valentyn's book are often more or less exoticised by incorporating scantily dressed locals

29 Lausberg, *Elemente der literarischen Rhetorik*, 136.

30 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 294-295.

31 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 347-515.

32 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 348. The expression 'naer het leven' (or 'ad vivum') had three different meanings in seventeenth-century Dutch art theory, depending on the claims that were made about an image: 'from life' (according to a living model), 'lifelike' (realising lifelikeness), and 'lively' (that the image appears to be animate). See Balfe and Woodall, 'Introduction', 1-11. When referring to the images in his book, Valentyn had the first meaning in mind. See also Felfe, 'Naer het leven'; Swan, 'Ad vivum'.

33 The following artists collaborated on the production of plates with images of 'uncommon fish' in *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*: Ottomar Elliger Jr. (1666-1732), Willem Jongman (active 1712-1744), Jan Caspar Philips (1690-1775), Jan Goeree (1670-1731), and Dirk Jongman (b. 1684/1685). However, many of the plates are anonymous.

34 For a discussion of Dutch fish still lives, see Helmus and De Jongh, *Vis*; Richter, 'Hollandse vissenboeken'; Rikken, *Dieren verbeeld*.

35 Rikken, *Dieren verbeeld*, 64-65.

36 Helmus and De Jongh, *Vis*, cat. no. 26.



Fig. 3 Anonymous, Fictitious stone construction with fish, engraving, in: François Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, Dordrecht and Amsterdam 1724-1726, volume III, 1, opposite p. 351, Stellenbosch University Library, Africana Collection.

with curly hair and palm trees into the landscape (figs. 4, 5). The purpose of the landscape representations seems to have been that the occasionally strange-looking, exotic fish become naturalised.

Several of these shoreline landscapes, which form a subtype, feature *trompe l'oeil* techniques which challenge the reader's perception. Typically, the fishes in these images, or the rods or wires from which they are hanging, extend slightly beyond the picture frame, reaching into the viewer's space (cf. fish no. 438 in fig. 4). In this way the reader's attention is drawn away from inspecting the images of the fishes and is instead left to wonder how the space inside the picture frame relates to the space outside. By crossing the borders

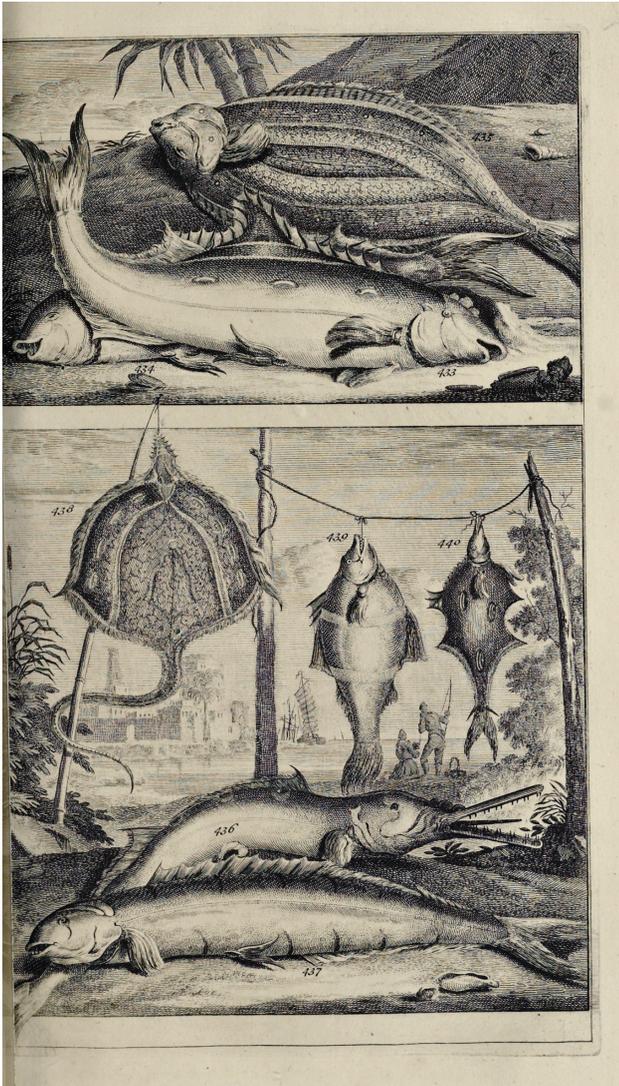


Fig. 4 Anonymous, Aquatic landscape with trompe l'oeil technique employed, engraving, in: François Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, Dordrecht and Amsterdam 1724-1726, volume III, 1, opposite p. 486, Stellenbosch University Library, Africana Collection.

between inside and outside space of the picture frame, the fishes seem to exist in two worlds at the same time: in the East Indies inside the picture frame, and outside it in the European space of the viewer. Instead of objective knowledge, the viewer of these images is confronted with a puzzle, as is typical for trompe l'oeil images.<sup>37</sup> Instead of reducing the

<sup>37</sup> Grootenboer, *The Rhetoric of Perspective*, 4; Ebert-Schifferer, *Deceptions and Illusions*, 24, 31; MacLure, 'The Bone in the Throat', 734-735; Kubovy describes the effect of trompe l'oeil as a practical joke: Kubovy, *The Psychology of Perspective and Renaissance Art*, 76.

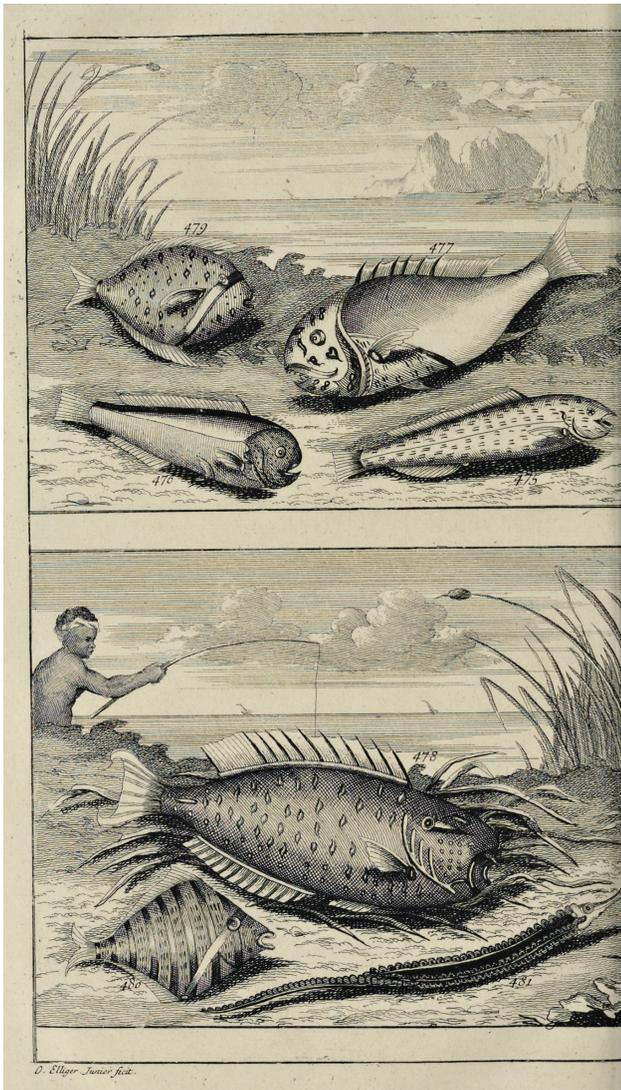


Fig. 5 Ottomar Elliger Jr, Aquatic landscape with local fisherman, engraving, in: François Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, Dordrecht and Amsterdam 1724-1726, volume III, 1, opposite p. 499, Stellenbosch University Library, Africana Collection.

cognitive effort on the part of the audience by drawing the fishes against a light and neutral background and focusing its attention on morphological features, as was usual in scholarly publications on natural history, the medium takes precedence over the message in these images, leaving the reader-viewer to marvel at these fish supposedly suspended between two disconnected spaces.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Nickelsen, *Draughtsmen, Botanists, and Nature*, 258.

This subsection on ‘uncommon fishes’ is preceded by a much shorter subsection, devoted to what Valentyn calls ‘common fishes’, that is to say fishes that are not colourful. At the same time a large part of the text in this shorter subsection is devoted to a discussion of ‘sea people’ (mermaids and mermen), as this subject would better satisfy the curiosity of ‘liefhebbers’ than the other common fishes described in this subsection, which only receive scant attention.<sup>39</sup> Both the selection of the fishes in the sections of common and uncommon fishes and their visual presentation seem to be the result of a rhetorical and iconographic program that gives preference to providing a pleasurable aesthetic experience for the intended reader/‘liefhebber’ over the offering of a full description of fish life in the waters around Amboin.

The natural history section concludes with a subsection on shells.<sup>40</sup> The core of this section is a catalogue of shells from Valentyn’s own collection (fig. 6). Rhetorically this section is characterised by excessive emphasis of the aesthetic qualities of the shells, far in excess of the other sections of Valentyn’s natural history in this regard, while keeping the descriptions as short as possible by applying the ‘refer-to-folio-and-number’ method, foremost by referring to his ‘bosom friend’ Rumphius’s *D’Amboinsche Rariteitkamer* (*The Amboinese Curiosity Cabinet*), where readers could find full descriptions of the shells that Valentyn had listed in his book.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, this section also contains specific information about the rarity of particular shells in the possession of individual collectors, including Valentyn himself, which could only have been interesting to fellow shell collectors. Valentyn was indeed an avid shell collector and owned – according to himself – exquisite specimens, particularly shells from Amboina. In 1720 he even founded the first conchological club in history, with five other Dordrecht burghers, which in 1723 was baptised the ‘Neptunus Cabinet’. Its members met on a weekly basis to share their common interest and admire each other’s collections.<sup>42</sup>

The subsection on shells sits rather awkwardly at the end of the natural history of Amboina. Under the guise of providing information about shells, their nomenclature and scarcity, shell collecting, and shell collectors, Valentyn in essence advertises his own collection, stressing both the beauty and the uniqueness of shells in his possession, of which more than one hundred *ad vivum* images are attached at the end of the section. This collection probably represented a considerable capital investment. For instance, in 1717, Valentyn sold part of his shell collection in order to honour his late wife’s bequests to his children and stepchildren.<sup>43</sup> At the same time Valentyn intended to provide a service to the Dutch community of shell collectors by adding the nomenclature that was current amongst them to the East Indies nomenclature in Rumphius’s *Rariteitkamer* and the Latin names in Bonannus’s two Latin treatises on shells, *Recreatio Mentis et oculi in observatione*

39 Huigen, ‘Paradijsvogels en zeemensen’.

40 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 517–586.

41 Rumphius, *D’Amboinsche Rariteitkamer*; Margócsy, ‘Refer to Folio and Number’. Valentyn refers to Rumphius as ‘mynen Boezem-vriend’: Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 347–348.

42 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 563.

43 Habiboe, ‘Tot verheffing van mijne natie’, 86–87. On the value of shells in mid-eighteenth-century France, see Dietz, ‘Exotische Naturalien als Statussymbol’, 36–39.

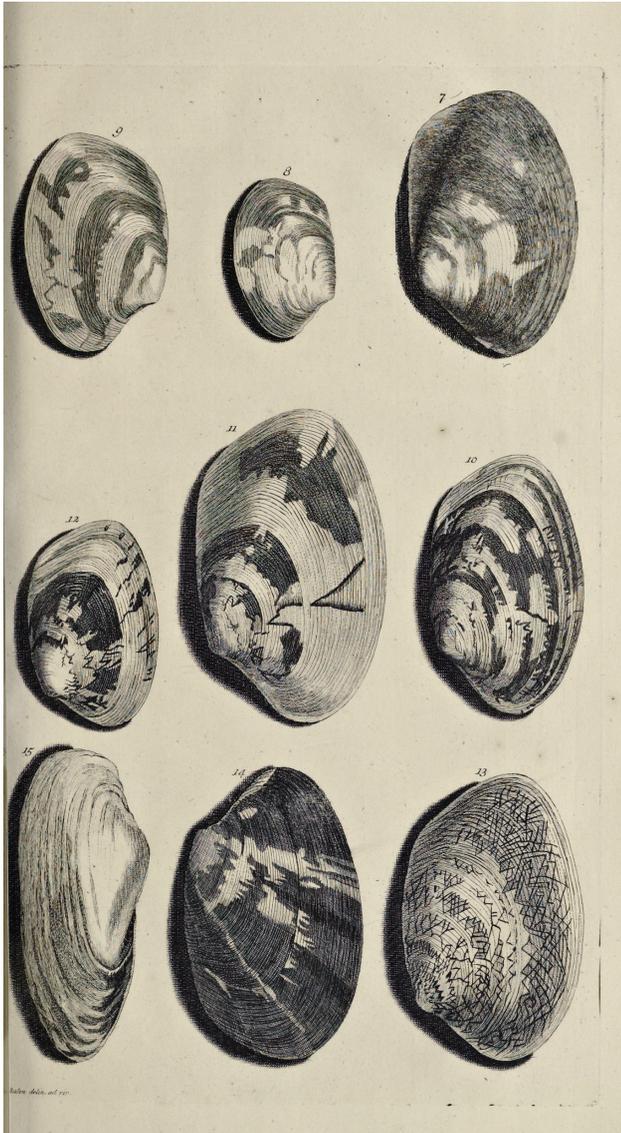


Fig. 6 Matthijs Balen, Ad vivum depiction of shells from Valentyn's collection, engraving, in: François Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, Dordrecht and Amsterdam 1724-1726, volume III, 1, opposite p. 584, Stellenbosch University Library, Africana Collection.

*animalium* (1684) and *Observationes circa viventia, quae in rebus non viventibus reperiuntur* (1691). In this way, these three treatises might be more accessible to the Dutch 'liefhebbers'.

The particularity of the information he provided suggests that Valentyn was addressing this part of his natural history to an audience of collectors he considered as potential buyers of the unique specimens in his collection rather than to a general public with a more detached interest in exotic nature. Moreover, Valentyn sometimes appears to distinguish

between two classes of collector-‘liefhebbers’, namely regular collectors with a merely aesthetic interest in shell collecting and those with special knowledge, ‘kenners’, although this did not have implications for the kind of information with which he provided his readers.<sup>44</sup>

Despite its concatenation of lists, Valentyn’s treatise of shells was surprisingly popular. The subsection of shells was reprinted separately in 1754 as *Verhandeling der Zee-Horenkens en Zee-Gewassen in en omtrent Amboina en de nabygelegene Eilanden* (Discourse of the shells and sea vegetation of Amboina and the neighbouring islands) and in 1773 a German translation of this reprint by Philipp Ludwig Stätius Müller (1725-1776), professor of natural history at Erlangen who had previously translated Rumphius’s *Rariteitkamer* into German, was published in Vienna. According to the prefaces, both editions were intended as supplements to the *Rariteitkamer*. The preface to the German edition moreover gives an inkling of the utility of Valentyn’s treatise to shell collectors. Müller states that Valentyn had listed shells that were not included in the *Rariteitkamer*, which made Valentyn’s description a valuable addition to Rumphius. Moreover, Valentyn’s Dutch nomenclature was retained by Müller in the German translation, because it could help German collectors make sense of Dutch sales catalogues. Even Valentyn advertising his own collection and including lists of collectors appeared to be helpful. The knowledge that certain shells had been in the possession of famous collectors such as Valentyn would, according to Müller, add to their value.

### *Valentyn’s Nature Description and its Sources*

Accusations of plagiarism dominate the limited amount of criticism of Valentyn’s work.<sup>45</sup> Johannes Burman (1706-1779), the eighteenth-century editor of Rumphius’s bilingual Latin and Dutch *Het Amboinsche Kruid-boek* (Ambonese Herbal), had already observed that some images and descriptions in Valentyn’s subsection on plants, ‘Korte beschrijving der boomen, planten, heesters en gewassen, In de Eilanden van Amboina vallende’ (Short description of trees, plants, shrubs and crops occurring in Amboina) resembled those in the *Kruid-boek* in several places, although he was not critical about it.<sup>46</sup> A closer inspection reveals Valentyn’s dependence on Rumphius’s *Kruid-boek* to be so great that all of his

<sup>44</sup> Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 346, 562, 564, and 570. According to Taylor, ‘kenner’ was not only an equivalent of ‘connoisseur’; the French term, which became current in the middle of the eighteenth century, would even have been derived from ‘kenners’: Taylor, ‘The Birth of the Amateur’, 510.

<sup>45</sup> Rouffaer and Muller, ‘Eerste proeve van een Rumphius-bibliographie’, 164. See also De Haan: *Priangan*, I, 2, 271; Stresemann, ‘Entdeckungsgeschichte’, 274; Stresemann, *Ornithology*, 37; Beekman, *Paradijzen van weleer*, 129-153. Buijze is not only convinced that Valentyn looted the vanished manuscript of Rumphius’s ‘Dierboek’, but even that he ‘most probably’ made the manuscript disappear: Buijze, *Leven en werk van Georg Everhard Rumphius*, 188-194. For a discussion of the shifting ideas about plagiarism around 1700, see Huigen, ‘De zaak Valentyn’.

<sup>46</sup> Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 153-262. *Het Amboinsche Kruid-boek* was published posthumously between 1741 and 1750, in six bilingual Dutch and Latin volumes, edited by Johannes Burman, with a later supplement, the *Actuarium*, appearing in 1755, also edited by Burman. For Burman’s remarks on Valentyn’s borrowing see Rumphius, *Kruid-boek*, I, 104, and II 2, 181.



Fig. 7 G. Schoute, Plants from Amboina, engraving, in: François Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, Dordrecht and Amsterdam 1724-1726, volume III, 1, opposite p. 246, Stellenbosch University Library, Africana Collection.

botanical descriptions appear to be summaries of those in the *Kruid-boek*. For example, the chapter classification of Valentyn's text runs parallel to the distribution of the Books ('Boeken' or 'Libres') 1-IX of the *Kruid-boek* of volumes 1-5 of the Burman edition. The division of the text within the chapters is also derived from Rumphius. Valentyn's chapter 'Beschryving van de Kruiden' (Description of the Herbs),<sup>47</sup> for example, is an abbreviated account of Rumphius's Book IX of the *Kruid-boek*.<sup>48</sup> When compared to the Burman edition, the plants discussed in Valentyn's chapter are far fewer in number and accompanied by minimal information, but appear in the same order. One is left with the impression that he wanted to give a synopsis of the first nine books of Rumphius's more extensive text.

This reduction can for instance also be seen in the smaller size of the images of the plants that accompany Valentyn's text (fig. 7). While in the *Kruid-boek* there are at most two detailed images to a folio page, Valentyn's book increases this number to fifteen small,

<sup>47</sup> Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 252-256.

<sup>48</sup> Rumphius, *Kruid-boek*, V, 333-492.

not always very clear images on foldout pages. The change in the format of the illustrations gives an indication of the overall reduction of Rumphius's plant descriptions under Valentyn's 'authorship' that he might satisfy his public of 'liefhebbers', which was not supposed to have the patience for digesting detailed botanical information. On the other hand, Valentyn did not make use of the Books x-xii of the *Kruid-boek* (volume six of the *Kruid-boek* in the Burman edition) and of Rumphius's separately published *Auctuarium* (also edited by Burman). In all probability Valentyn consulted an incomplete version of the manuscript of Rumphius's *Kruid-boek*. There have also been repeated allegations that Valentyn plagiarised the lost manuscript of Rumphius's 'Amboinsche dier-boek' (Ambonese book of animals), which (presumably) contained extensive descriptions of the animals of Amboina. Because this manuscript is not extant, however, there is no convincing evidence for these allegations.<sup>49</sup>

The allegations of plagiarism of Rumphius are definitely not true with regard to Valentyn's extended 'Treatise of the uncommon fishes', which relies on fish drawings by 'siekentrooster' (assistant minister) Samuel Fallours.<sup>50</sup> These drawings were both the models for the plates of the section on 'uncommon fishes', which have been discussed above, and probably also for Valentyn's descriptions of these fishes. As with his utilisation of Rumphius's plant descriptions, Valentyn does not cite Fallours as the original draughtsman of the fish images in *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, although he had declared at the request of Louis Renard, editor and publisher of *Poissons, Ecrévisses et Crabes* with fish illustrations by Fallours, that Fallours had drawn a large number of fishes from the waters around the Ambonese islands from nature.<sup>51</sup> This statement, dated 27 August 1715, was printed by Renard in his *Poissons, Ecrévisses et Crabes* in addition to other statements to reassure the reader of the veracity of the images in *Poissons*.

Little is known about Fallours. Between September 1706 and June 1712, he worked as 'siekentrooster' (assistant minister) in Ambon and returned to the Netherlands in August 1713; Valentyn lists him as such in his book.<sup>52</sup> Fallours made his fish drawings at the request of the Dutch governors of Ambon, Balthasar Coyett and Adriaen van der Stel, and of his direct superior, Valentyn. Because of the great demand for his drawings, Fallours may have hired indigenous artists to help him.<sup>53</sup>

Fallours was in any case a key figure in the production of drawings of fish from the waters around Ambon, and he suggested that Valentyn played an important role in collecting fish specimens which he brought home from his inspection journeys around Ambon.<sup>54</sup>

49 For a discussion of accusations of plagiarism against Valentyn against the background of shifting ideas about scholarly behaviour and referencing within the Republic of Letters, see Huigen, 'De zaak Valentyn'.

50 The ichthyologist Theodore Pietsch provides a thorough analysis of Fallours's role in drawing fish from the waters around Ambon and the subsequent circulation of these drawings in Europe in the introduction to a facsimile of *Poissons, Ecrévisses et Crabes* by Louis Renard: Pietsch, *Fishes, Crayfishes, and Crabs*, I. The following observations on the circulation of the Fallours drawings rely to a large degree on Pietsch.

51 Valentyn to Renard, Dordrecht, 27 August 1715, Leiden University Library, BPL 246.

52 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 152; Kooijmans and Schooneveld-Oosterling, *voc-glossarium*, 64-65.

53 Pietsch merely suggests this as a possibility: Pietsch, *Fishes, Crayfishes, and Crabs*, I, 36.

54 Fallours has confirmed Valentyn's help in obtaining specimens: Pietsch, *Fishes, Crayfishes, and Crabs*, I, 47.

Fallours made important contributions to nine related eighteenth-century portfolios with drawings of tropical fish from the waters around Ambon.<sup>55</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century the portfolio with drawings that Valentyn had used was kept in the library of Blijdorp Zoo in Rotterdam; it was described in 1902 by Rouffaer and Muller as 527 'very beautiful fish drawings in water colour, far more beautiful than the plates in Valentijn's work, with short captions in an old-Dutch hand, and a ditto old-fashioned index at the end'.<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately, these drawings were destroyed in May 1940 during the bombing of Rotterdam.<sup>57</sup>

Drawings from these portfolios were published in four different books during the eighteenth century. Hendrik Ruysch was the first to publish twenty plates with 404 figures in the first part of his *Theatrum universale omnium animalium piscium* (Universal theatre of all fishes).<sup>58</sup> The Amsterdam bookseller Louis Renard had published drawings by Fallours in 1718 in his *Poissons, Ecrévisses et Crabes*.<sup>59</sup> Valentyn's 'Verhandeling der ongemeene visschen' (Treatise of uncommon fishes) in *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, with 528 fish images, is the third publication of fish drawings from Amboina. His work was in turn the source of the fourth publication with fish illustrations in volume seventeen of the twenty-five-volume The Hague edition (1747-1780) of the *Histoire générale des voyages*, the so-called *Nouvelle Édition* of the *Histoire générale des voyages* of abbé Prévost.<sup>60</sup>

According to Theodore Pietsch, the editor of the modern reprint of Renard's work, there is a high correlation between the images in Valentyn's account and in Renard's.<sup>61</sup> As many as 452 are identical and information from Renard's concise captions also appears in the more extensive descriptions of Valentyn.<sup>62</sup> However, I did not get the impression that Valentyn's text was based on Renard's, nor on Ruysch's. This can be illustrated, for example, with reference to the descriptions of a supposedly imaginary sea animal that Valentyn calls 'De zeldzame Zonne-Visch' (The rare sun fish; fig. 8, no. 442). Renard is, as in all of his descriptions, extremely brief: 'Monster caught in the Baguawal passage close to Ambon in 1709. It measured three feet in length' (fig. 9).<sup>63</sup> Ruysch gives a somewhat more detailed

55 Pietsch, *Fishes, Crayfishes, and Crabs*, I, 39-61.

56 Rouffaer and Muller, 'Eerste proeve van een Rumphius-bibliographie', 194.

57 Pietsch, *Fishes, Crayfishes, and Crabs*, I, 51.

58 Jonstonus, Ruysch, and Castelli, *Theatrum universale*. The images were published in the section 'Collectio nova piscium, partim ibi ad vivum delineatorum, partim ex museo Henrici Ruysch M.D.' (A new collection of fish, partly drawn 'ad vivum', partly from the museum of Henricus Ruysch, MD). This book was a new edition in two volumes of Jan Jonston's *Historia Naturalis Animalium* (Natural history of animals, Frankfurt 1650). At the beginning of the first volume Ruysch added a new section with images of fish from Ambon, see Kooijmans, *De doodskunstenaar*, 280; Pietsch, *Fishes, Crayfishes, and Crabs*, I, 39-40, 172-173.

59 Renard, *Poissons, écrevisses et crabes*. A second edition of Renard's book was published in 1754 by the director of the natural history cabinet of the Dutch stadtholder, Aernout Vosmaer.

60 Anonymous, *Histoire générale des voyages*, xvii. A Dutch edition of this volume appeared in 1767 as *Historische Beschryving der Reizen*, xxi: see Pietsch, *Fishes, crayfishes, and crabs*, I, 41, 173, nt. 48.

61 Pietsch, *Fishes, Crayfishes, and Crabs*, I, 40.

62 Pietsch, *Fishes, Crayfishes, and Crabs*, I, 49-51.

63 Renard, *Poissons, Ecrévisses et Crabes*, plate XLIV, no. 185: 'Monstre qui fut pêché au passage de Baguawal près d'Amboine en 1709. Il était long de trois pieds.'

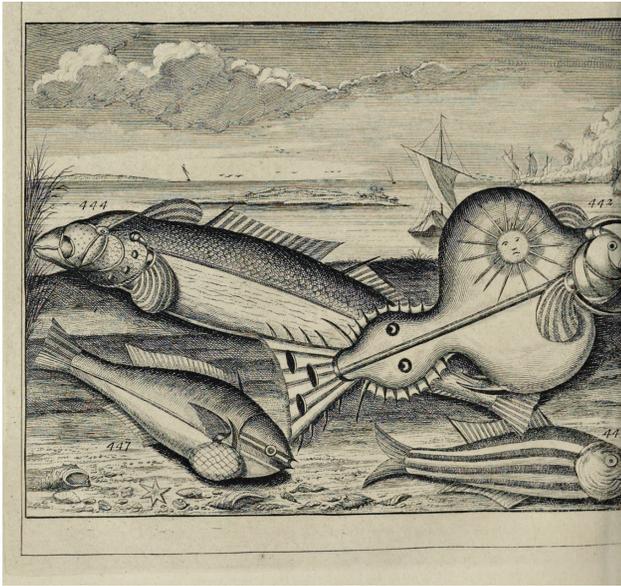


Fig. 8 Anonymous, 'De zeldzame Zonne-Visch' (The rare sun fish), engraving, in: François Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, Dordrecht and Amsterdam 1724-1726, volume III, 1, opposite p. 487, Stellenbosch University Library, Africana Collection.

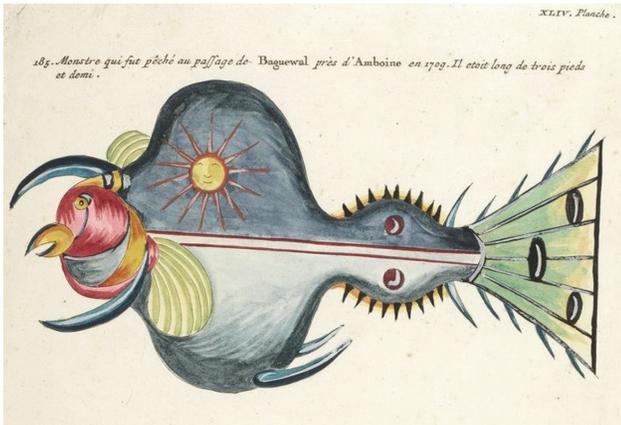


Fig. 9 Anonymous, Sunfish, coloured engraving, in: Louis Renard, *Poissons, écrevisses et crabes*, volume II, plate XLIV, no. 185, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

description of twenty lines in one column of text.<sup>64</sup> Valentyn is the only one who gives the peculiar animal a name, and he systematically describes the appearance of this fish in a passage four times as long as Ruysch's. According to Valentyn the fish was 'two and a half feet long' and had only been caught two or three times. Moreover, it is 'of a very miraculous shape and adornment'. He is the only one who describes the sun figure on the flank of

64 Jonstonus, Ruysch, and Castelli, *Theatrum universale omnium animalium piscium*, 8.

the fish in some detail.<sup>65</sup> Because the sunfish is an imaginary animal, Valentyn could only be describing Fallours's drawing of the fish.<sup>66</sup>

All Valentyn's fish descriptions refer to the numbered images of the fish, without any references to the surroundings in which they were placed in the plates, which suggests that his descriptions of other fishes are probably based on Falours's coloured drawings as well, although throughout his account he maintains the suggestion that he refers to the living specimens. He makes rudimentary remarks about the fish's anatomy and provides their Malay (or Ambonese) and Dutch names, while adding comments on their taste (the beautiful fishes also appear to be delicious). But his main objective is attempting to fill in the missing colours which could not be depicted in the engravings. Representing these colours faithfully was a difficult task, however. As an author Valentyn considered himself incapable of doing justice to the rich colour palette of the fish. Just as a painter would not have been able to depict the fishes in their full glory ('luister'), as a writer he was only able to describe them with a stammer ('stamerende'), he tells his readers.<sup>67</sup> With this admission of his inability to give an adequate description, he abandons his standard claim of representing natural phenomena in his book 'naer het leven', in order to reveal the sublime quality of the fish's colour schemes, which a painter would also have been unable to convey.

He makes a genuine effort though. The marvellous colours of the fish are translated into a language in which the elaborate use of colour terms is not only aimed at distinguishing between various hues, but also to give an impression of the joy of seeing the magnificent colour combinations by pointing out how 'extraordinary' and 'beautiful' these colours were. Additionally, comparing them with the texture of exquisite materials, he tries to give a vivid description that would place the fish before the reader's 'mental eyes' in an effort of *enargeia*.<sup>68</sup> The following extract, taken from Valentyn's description of the first fish on his list, 'Rolat' (fig. 3), should give a sense of the pains he took to describe its colours:

The head is quite large and the eyes are only fairly big, having a wide red outer circle around a fine, black [circle], which runs around a sea green eye, with a black pupil in the middle. Against the background of its black skin, this gives an extraordinary appearance. This skin is like shiny velvet and on the sides, down from the head, it is covered with a hem of beautiful sea green. On top of the body he has a sail of sharp fins, which are black in the middle and sea green and yellow on either side. The tail is also mainly black, like velvet, but also with some sea green and yellow on both sides.<sup>69</sup>

65 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 491.

66 On the sunfish being an imaginary animal, see Pietsch, *Fishes, crayfishes, and crabs*, 186, nt. 198.

67 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 347-348.

68 *Enargeia* (vivid description) was commonly practiced in early modern works on natural history: Wragge-Morley 'The work of verbal picturing'; Wragge-Morley, 'Vividness'.

69 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 348: 'De kop is vry kloek, en de oogen zyn maar redelyk groot, hebbende een breede roode buiten-kring rondom een fyne zwarte, die rondom om een Zee-groen oog loopt, in welkers midden een zwarten oog-appel slaat, dat een zeldzame vertooning op zyn zwarte huid doet, die als glimmend Fluweel, en aan de kanten, van de kop af, als met een zoom van schoon Zee-groen bezet is. Boven op 't lyf heeft hy als een zeil van scherpe vinnen, die in 't midden zwart, en aan weerzyden Zee-groen en geel zyn. De staart is ook meest schoon zwart, als Fluweel, dog aan wederzyden mede van wat Zee-groen en geel voorzien.'

### *Autopsy and Indigenous Knowledge*

Having established to what degree Valentyn's account depended on 'papers', it should hypothetically be possible to determine the role of autopsy in *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, assuming that parts of the text which were not derived from surviving sources could have been based on Valentyn's independent observations. Apart from the subsection on shells, this would chiefly concern his description of 'land animals' and birds from Amboina. One should be cautious in assuming this whole section to be the result of autopsy, however. Although there is no evidence that he borrowed from Rumphius's *Dierboek*, his descriptions of birds at the same time raise doubts about Valentyn's exclusive authorship of the whole subsection. In this part Valentyn cites several dissections, which would have been difficult to perform in tropical conditions before preservation methods using arsenic became widely available, as the small bird cadavers putrefied easily.<sup>70</sup> In the descriptions of dissections the bird's organs and intestines are referred to with Latin anatomical names, sometimes followed by an account of the contents of the bird's stomach in order to assert its eating habits. This does presume a relatively high level of anatomical expertise and one may question whether this matches Valentyn's self-representation as a non-expert 'liefhebber' and someone with a limited collection of books on natural history in his library.<sup>71</sup>

Moreover, in several instances indigenous people appear to have been an important source of information. As Valentyn is not always explicit about the extent to which he relied on native assistants and informants, it remains difficult to assess the extent of his reliance on indigenous assistance. However, his silence should not in the first place be attributed to some sort of depreciative attitude towards indigenous knowledge, because he also largely remained mute about his use of Rumphius's descriptions and Fallours's drawings. In general, early modern naturalists rarely mentioned the providers of local knowledge, also within a European context.<sup>72</sup>

First of all, Valentyn must have used local manual labour during his collecting expeditions. This is depicted in an idealised image at the end of the 'Korte beschryving der boomen, planten, heesters en gewassen' (Short description of the trees, plants, shrubs and vegetation, a section that depended largely on Rumphius's *Kruid-boek*), where four Asian labourers are digging out plants on the behest of four European gentlemen who stand to the left, while a fifth European on the right is probably an overseer, directing the labourers with an appropriate hand gesture (fig. 10).<sup>73</sup> The root in the basket seems to be a copy of

70 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 301-302, 305, 324. On preservation methods of birds, see Farber, 'The Development of Taxidermy'; Schultze-Hagen et al., 'Avian Taxidermy in Europe'. I am grateful to Shyamal Lakshminarayanan for referring me to publications on avian taxidermy.

71 Anonymous, *Catalogus*.

72 Cooper, *Inventing the Indigenous*, 64.

73 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 262. According to Bulwer, *Chirologia*, 166, the hand gesture of the European on the right would have been one of 'command and direction'. Dutch artists were familiar with these codes as knowledge about hand gestures had 'become fully absorbed in the popular sphere' in the Netherlands during the seventeenth century: Dixon, *Perilous Chastity*, 62.



Fig. 10 Anonymous, Asian labourers digging out plants, engraving, in: Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, volume III, 1, opposite p. 262, Stellenbosch University Library, Africana Collection.

the root in picture CXXII on the same page (top left). Interestingly, the image also conveys that the study of natural history *in loco* was a sociable affair.

Furthermore, Valentyn must have relied on indigenous informants for Ambonese and Malay nomenclature, while this is not made explicit in his text. At the same time the contributions by indigenous informants do not seem to be suppressed on purpose either. In several places he makes general or more specific attributions to indigenous informants. For the description of the birds of paradise he relied on knowledge possessed by

the inhabitants of New Guinea.<sup>74</sup> Elsewhere, he appears to have interviewed local inhabitants about the medical qualities of animal parts.<sup>75</sup> In some instances the contributions of informants are not only acknowledged, but they are even identified by their rank, as in the case of an indigenous schoolmaster who had informed Valentyn that a ‘Petool’ snake (*Python reticulatus*) could be killed with the branch of the sago tree.<sup>76</sup> Valentyn had more or less stumbled over this snake during one of his inspection journeys as a VOC church minister and school superintendent, when the porters of his palanquin had to ‘perform a most curious leap’. After inquiring about the cause of the incident, Valentyn exited his carriage and intended to kill the snake with a heavy stick. The schoolmaster informed Valentyn that this could better be done with the light branch of the sago tree. At first Valentyn did not believe the man, who within the organisational structure of the VOC was his subordinate, but when following the advice, the information appeared to be correct. Valentyn could not explain the incident, but surmised that the sago tree contained a substance which did not agree with the nature (‘aard’) of the snake.<sup>77</sup> In two other cases Valentyn referred to the informant as ‘a certain Orang Kaya’ (headman),<sup>78</sup> and in one more case he even mentions his informant by his title and name, as Orang Kaya ‘David de Fretis’, Pati of Soya.<sup>79</sup> De Fretis was a local headman who for several years had been a member of the church council of Valentyn’s church in Kota Ambon and as such was also listed elsewhere by Valentyn.<sup>80</sup> With his identity as a Protestant local dignitary, David de Fretis could be said to exhibit the virtues of a trustworthy Protestant gentleman, enhancing the authority of Valentyn’s text.<sup>81</sup>

The most extensive attribution to indigenous informants, which includes the incident with the schoolmaster mentioned earlier, is to be found within Valentyn’s description of Ambonese snakes (eight folio pages in total), where he stated that this particular subsection would be ‘limited’ to what the indigenous population knew about snakes, to avoid an information overload for his ‘liefhebber’ readers.<sup>82</sup> Valentyn describes about twenty snake species, providing their indigenous or Malay names with translations into Dutch, and discussing various types of snakestones (‘mistika’), which were generally regarded as antidotes against poisonous bites both in Asia and in Europe.<sup>83</sup> Valentyn too was convinced

74 Huigen, ‘Paradijsvogels en zeemensen’.

75 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 280.

76 Valentyn’s ‘Petool Slang’ or ‘Oelar Petola’ (Ular Patola) is probably the reticulated python (*Python reticulatus*, Schneider 1801). Almost half the section on snakes is devoted to this animal, which is the longest snake in the world. The snake’s Malay name is derived from its skin pattern, which is similar to textiles, called ‘petola’ or ‘patola’, imported from India. According to Valentyn, the snake had been brought to the Moluccas in Javanese and Chinese ships. I could not find confirmation of this assertion in publications on *Python reticulatus* (Auliya, ‘Review of the Reticulated Python’; How and Kitchener, ‘Biogeography of Indonesian Snakes’; Schleip and O’Shea, ‘Annotated Checklist’; Underwood and Stimson, ‘A Classification of Pythons’).

77 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 289.

78 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 288, 305.

79 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 276, 344.

80 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 144–145.

81 Shapin, *A social history of truth*.

82 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 285–292.

83 On snakestones, see: Baldwin, ‘The Snakestone Experiments’; Pymm, “‘Serpent stones’”.

of their power, referring in this section to a story he had already told in volume two of his work, about a slave who had been stung by a poisonous fish and who was healed after applying a snakestone to the wound.<sup>84</sup>

Contrary to Valentyn's assertion, the section on snakes is not entirely limited to what he had heard from indigenous people, as he also relates his own experiences with snakes and those of the European community on Ambon. Most of the herpetological knowledge he presents is short on anatomical detail and predominantly consists of anecdotes of incidents with snakes during daily activities, possibly drawn from memory: slaves cutting wood in the forest and coming across a snake hanging from a tree branch; snakes living in attics and descending the staircase, cuddling up to sleeping people without hurting them; or discovering a snake curled up like a piece of rope with its head in the middle, between the shoes and slippers in the corridor of Valentyn's house.<sup>85</sup> Apart from portraying most snakes as a potential hazard, these anecdotes also provided occasions to reveal the diverging views of snakes held by the European scholar and his indigenous informants. While the indigenous population was convinced for instance that killing a snake living in a house would result in the death of its inhabitants, as was thought to have been the cause of death of a former governor of Ambon, Valentyn dismisses this as superstition, although he did discover that killing a snake in his house resulted in an explosion of the rodent population in his attic.<sup>86</sup>

In one instance, Ambonese herpetology seems to have beaten the best available European knowledge. Relying on what the locals had told him, Valentyn could give an account of the envenomation apparatus of snakes which corresponds fairly well with modern herpetological knowledge.<sup>87</sup> Although Francesco Redi had already discovered the mechanism in the 1660s after performing a great number of experiments with vipers, and even though Valentyn owned Redi's work, he does not refer to him in this segment. Instead, he seems to have relied solely on what 'has been observed on poisonous snakes here [on Ambon]'. Valentyn relates these observations more comprehensibly than Redi in his 'Lettera [...] sopra alcune opposizioni fatte alle sue osservazioni intorno alle vipere', where the viper's envenomation apparatus was merely touched upon and, as a result, difficult to imagine for the reader. Redi had been more concerned with identifying the 'yellowish liquor' which vipers eject as the cause of fatal viper bites, to prove that the poisonous substance was not the viper's bile, as Aristotle had assumed, nor the spirits formed in the mind of the enraged reptile, as Moyse Charas (1619-1698) had argued, nor its body parts, as many others had maintained.<sup>88</sup> Relying on orally transmitted knowledge from Ambon, Valentyn's descrip-

84 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 288; II, 1, 252.

85 While Valentyn's nature descriptions are in general lavishly illustrated, no illustrations of snakes are included, which would suggest that he did not rely on visual aids while writing this section. If he would have obtained drawings of snakes, he most likely would have them included in his book, as snakes were a popular topic of polite conversation and accordingly of special interest to his audience of 'liefhebbers': Tribby, 'Cooking (with) Clio and Cleo', 423.

86 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 286, 289.

87 Tu (ed.), *Rattlesnake Venoms*, 59.

88 Redi's 'Lettera' is included, with separate pagination, in volume two of his *Opere* (1712). Valentyn owned a copy of this work (see Anonymous, *Catalogus*). For an English translation of Redi's very brief account of the

tion would have been the most lucid account of the snake's envenomation system available in Europe at the moment of its publication in 1726:

It has been observed on poisonous snakes here that the evil or envenomation not so much derives from the bite of these snakes, as from certain venom vesicles which can be observed along the teeth of these animals, and which burst while the snake is biting, and then discharge into the wound. If one is bitten by such a snake after those vesicles had burst a short time before, one would not have much to fear, nor if one would first make such a snake bite on a few pieces of cloth or rags. A thing I would rather have someone else try, and believe [in such person's findings], than investigate it myself. If one happens to come twenty-four hours later, these vesicles will be sealed again (as the investigators of these matters say), and they are filled with venom as before.<sup>89</sup>

Although Valentyn did rely to an unspecified degree on local knowledge, at an epistemological level this hardly makes his work a culturally hybrid text.<sup>90</sup> Indigenous knowledge always remained subordinate to European perspectives and, in cases of divergence, was dismissed as superstition. There were clearly different levels of authority involved, where indigenous informants were appreciated as suppliers of matters of fact, and where the European scholar was even willing to accept a correction of an error at a factual level, as in the example above, but in the end, it was the European scholar who assessed what would qualify as reliable knowledge. Even where Valentyn had stated explicitly that he would relate what the indigenous population knew about snakes, the intellectual horizon within which the anecdotes are framed does not coincide with local beliefs. Repeatedly these are dismissed as 'superstitions', mere 'Ambonese stories', or merely as 'groundless'.<sup>91</sup>

## Conclusion

In assembling his nature description, Valentyn foremost acted as a bricoleur, extracting material from the inscriptions he had collected, adding information from both his own experience and testimonies of local informants, making do with what he could obtain.<sup>92</sup> This heterogeneous material was rearranged and given some coherence by a rhetorical

snake's envenomation system, see Redi, *A letter of Francesco Redi concerning some objections*, 6. The history of herpetology in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is discussed in Hawgood, 'Abbé Felice Fontana'; Schickore, 'The Significance of Re-doing Experiments'; Schickore, *About Method*.

<sup>89</sup> Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 289: 'Men heeft hier van de Gift-Slangen aangemerkt, dat het kwaad, of de vergiftiging, niet zoo zeer van de beet dezer Slangen, als wel van zekere gift-blaasjens, die men langs de tanden dezer Dieren verneemd, voortkomt, en die, zooals de beet van de Slang gedaan werd, komen te bersten, en zich dan te gelyk in de wond ontlaten. Als men nu van zoo een Slang gebeten werd, nadat die blaasjens pas gebersten zyn, zou men zoo veel gevaar en ook 't zelve dan niet hebben, als men zoo een Slang eerst op eenige lappen of todden byten liet. Een zaak, die ik liever een ander wil laten beproeven, en gelooven, dan zelfs bezoeken. Als men nu een etmaal er na komt, zyn (zoo de onderzoekers van dien zeggen) die blaaskens weer aan een gehegt, en als bevorens met hun vergift vervuld.'

<sup>90</sup> Britt Dams reached a similar conclusion discussing Willem Piso's and Georg Markgraf's *Historia Naturalis Brasiliae* (1648): Dams, *Describing the New World*, 245.

<sup>91</sup> Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 1, 286, 288-291.

<sup>92</sup> The concept of bricolage was invented by Claude Lévi-Strauss. It refers to a practice of knowledge creation based on recycling of extant materials: Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 16-22; Johnson, 'Bricoleur and Bricolage'.

strategy aimed at an audience of 'liefhebbers'. The natural knowledge was made available in a concise and attractive format, with many illustrations, some of which, such as the fish images, were specifically aimed at amusing the reader. By presenting the exotic world as an agreeable product, ready for consumption by a public of 'liefhebbers', he was first of all commodifying natural history.<sup>93</sup> In the subsection on shells, Valentyn even went a step further, using his book as an advertising platform for putting his shell collection for sale.

At the same time Valentyn's nature descriptions in *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën* largely ignored nature beyond Amboina. In the chorographies of regions outside Amboina, nature description was included, but it was generally reduced to an enumeration of a limited number of plants and animals, supplemented by references to the natural history of Amboina and seconded by Adriaan van Reede's *Hortus Malabaricus*, at least as far as botany was concerned. The natural history of Amboina was supposed to stand in for East Indies nature in general, as Valentyn assumed nature in the East Indies to be more or less the same everywhere.<sup>94</sup> Rhetorically, the representation of Amboina's nature as a synecdoche of East Indies nature is an application of *brevitas*. The conventional motive for applying this trope was to avoid overburdening listeners or readers with information. In order for this to be convincing, the reader needed to be fairly ignorant of the regional diversities of nature in Asia. This situation gradually changed during the second half of the eighteenth century, when botanical and zoological works with planetary coverage, such as the Count de Buffon's thirty-six volume *Histoire Naturelle* (1749-1789) and Carl Linnaeus's *Species Plantarum* (1753), made their appearance. While Valentyn indeed withheld information in his description of Amboina's nature, *brevitas* in the descriptions of regions outside of Amboina rather concealed a lack of relevant 'papers'. In other words: the availability of 'inscriptions' largely determined the geographical scope of his nature descriptions.<sup>95</sup> An indication of this is Valentyn's preface to the third volume of his book, where he shows his gratitude to a succession of VOC dignitaries for providing 'papers' concerning territories he had never visited. In none of these cases did the contents of these papers concern natural history, however.<sup>96</sup> In the less likely event that he had more information than he was willing to share with his readers, his brevity could also have been motivated by the economics of the book trade, in the sense that adding extensive nature descriptions of all regions in the East Indies would have made *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën* even heftier and more expensive. For these abridged descriptions of nature to be plausible, Valentyn's reader was expected to believe his assertion that a description of Amboina's nature could represent East Indies nature in general.

93 On the commodification of knowledge within an early modern Dutch context, see Margócsy, *Commercial Visions*; Schmidt, *Inventing Exoticism*.

94 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 3, 63 (Siam); IV, 1, 53 (Java); v, 1, 56 (Coromandel); v, 2, 3 (Sumatra); v, 3, 50-54 (Ceylon), v, 4, 13 (Malabar); Van Reede tot Drakestein, *Hortus Indicus Malabaricus*.

95 Latour, 'Drawing things together'.

96 Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, III, 'Voorbericht'.

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