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NICOLAES WITSEN AND GIJSBERT CUPER: TWO SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY  
DUTCH BURGOMASTERS AND THEIR GORDIAN KNOT

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The University Library of Amsterdam has 207 letters that two learned gentlemen, Nicolaes Witsen and Gijsbert Cuper, exchanged over a period of thirty-three years in the decades about 1700. Both these men enjoyed a considerable reputation in their time as amateurs of learning. With few exceptions, their letters are about matters of geography and ethnology, and accompanied with numerous drawings and reports.

Most of Nicolaes Witsen's letters were already published at the end of the nineteenth century, as curiosities appended to his biography. Subsequently they were again forgotten, although lately interest in their writer has been increasing. Cuper's letters, by contrast, are much as he left them upon his death: with the grains of sand still between the sheets. And it is Cuper's correspondence in particular which reflects the preoccupations of the learned men of his day, how they stayed in touch with each other across the length and breadth of Europe, what means they had to advance learning, and what subjects they were interested in. Cuper's letters additionally furnish us with a unique view of how a learned man of that era read accounts of travels and how he interpreted the illustrations in such works. For the history of ideas they therefore constitute a splendid illustration of the shift in the perspective, in the very world view, of the enlightened early eighteenth-century scholar.

Who were Gijsbert Cuper and Nicolaes Witsen, what made them write, and what was their relationship? These questions can be answered only if the special nature of the correspondence is also taken into account in our inquiry. Analysis of the contents of the letters will furthermore yield an answer to the question of Witsen's and Cuper's aims and methods. What were the issues they sought to clear up, what criteria did they use, and how did they organize their evidence?

To show how the two men proceeded in establishing the "truth", the present essay will

incorporate an outline of either's relation with Cornelis de Bruyn. In his day a famous traveller, painter and writer, De Bruyn was requested by Witsen to provide him from foreign parts with written accounts and reliable visual material. Several of his drawings occasioned Cuper to engage in an extensive polemic, which culminated in De Bruyn publishing a printed defence.

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Nicolaes Witsen

Nicolaes Witsen (1641-1717) was not especially creative in his scholarly views. In this respect he did not differ much from the majority of his contemporaries. But as an investigator he was unique. His high position as burgomaster of Amsterdam and board member of the Dutch East India Company furnished him with considerable power and money. At a time when the collecting of coins and all sorts of rare and curious objects was a favourite and respectable pastime for the social elite who could afford it, Witsen had the resources to go much further.

Having become intrigued at an early age by the fantastic stories the sea captains brought home from their voyages - Witsen's father had also been burgomaster of Amsterdam, and a board member of the West Indian Company - he resolved to collect such accounts for the purpose of "making a contribution to the explanation and description of the earth". We owe it to his enormous dedication and inquisitiveness, and to the happy circumstance that he was able to complete his education with a journey to Moscow, that we can now look back at Witsen as one of the first men who privately commissioned researches all over the world.

As concrete evidence of this, we still have today the four-volume auction catalogue of his collection of curiosities, a book on shipbuilding, several maps and charts designed by himself, including the most famous one of North and East Tartary, and its companion two-volume commentary. Like so many, Witsen saw his studies as a useful pastime for his vacant hours, but particularly, as he worded it in a letter to Joan van Hoorn, Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies and a relative, as something that served to refresh the mind amid his numerous duties on behalf of the nation. His many unpublished writings and notes and his correspondence with scholars and amateurs of letters, now dispersed among many libraries and archives, also show how Witsen acquitted himself of his self-imposed task.

To achieve his scholarly aims, Witsen had indeed built an extensive network of friends and relations reaching into the earth's most remote corners. Friends, in Witsen's terminology, were people whom he had once helped and who therefore felt under an obligation to him. Through his personal intercession, he enabled poor but industrious and talented young men to pursue studies that would otherwise have been beyond their means.

In exchange for this he expected them later, as employees of the VOC, to carry out investigations for him. Herbert de Jager (1636-1694) was such a person. By the lights of his age, he excelled in "all" Oriental languages, in mathematics and in botany. Witsen saw to it that De Jager could go to the East Indies to complete his linguistic studies, after first having put him in a position to study these languages at Leyden. In what way De Jager expressed his friendship for Witsen is apparent

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from a letter from Cupper to Pieter Valckenier. In this letter, Cupper writes that, visiting Witsen's home, he saw two volumes of De Jager's sketches of plants and herbs of Java. Witsen had on that occasion also told him that De Jager had been in the habit of sending him large quantities of drawings of flowers, plants, men, women, houses, implements, utensils, etc., but that the Company had seized them, as it had previously done with De Jager's Arabic manuscripts. Now everything was held at the VOC's offices, locked away in a chest.

Occasionally Witsen demanded such services of his friends that they were compelled to seek the assistance of others. Thus Lodewijk Fabritius, who was sent to Moscow as Dutch envoy en Swedish service, asked the doctor and scholar Engelbert Kaempfer (1651-1716) to take over part of his assignment. How fruitful this contact was to Witsen is shown for one thing by a map designed by Kaempfer that was reproduced in his book on Tartary, and for another by Witsen's copious extracts from Kaempfer's letters. The botanist and geologist Georgius Everhardus Rumphius, "the blind seer of Amboina", also occasionally referred to as "the Indian Plinius", likewise, and almost inevitably, was among Witsen's informants. At the request of the Director-General in Batavia, Anthonie Hurdt, he provided extensive answers to Witsen's ceaseless queries.

Several times, Witsen personally or through an intermediary organized expeditions, such as the 1696 one to the mythical Southland that Australia was then equated with. He always sent detailed instructions and lists of questions and sometimes had professional artists accompany the expedition. The instructions usually included one calling for specimens of the fauna of a given region to be caught and sent home. This could be interpreted to include the natives: anthropological researches conducted in this manner were no rarity. Besides other specimens in Witsen's famed cabinet preserved by drying, stuffing or immersion in alcohol, there consequently also was a jar holding a white (= newly born) baby of negro slaves from the plantation of his cousin in Surinam.

The old maps also bear testimony to Witsen's efforts. After him were named a river in Australia and a mountain range in South Africa, as well as "Witsen Island discovered by Captain De Vlaming on July 28th, AD 1688" near Nova Zemlya, as he records proudly on his own map and in his book. His father Cornelis had been honoured before him in the naming of a fort on Africa's Gold Coast and of an island near New Guinea.

More than a hundred years ago, in 1881, there appeared Witsen's biography, *Het Leven van Mr. Nicolaas Cornelisz. Witsen (1641-1717)*, in two volumes, written by the historian J.F. Gebhard Jr. The Provincial Utrecht Society for the Arts and Sciences awarded him a gold

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medal in recognition of his achievement. This appears to have had the additional effect of lending such an air of finality to the book that subsequently very few people felt the urge to occupy themselves with Witsen. On the rare occasions that they did write about him, it was always a matter of adding to details. Although the main emphasis of the work is on Witsen's political career, Gebhard appends to his text nearly all letters in the Library of the University of Amsterdam that Witsen exchanged with Gijsbert Cuper (1644-1716), professor and burgomaster of Deventer, who in his time enjoyed a considerable reputation as a scholar and who has sunk into oblivion almost completely. The starting point of this correspondence was their mutual hobby: geography, ethnology and related subjects. Unfortunately Gebhard did not publish Cuper's side of the correspondence. In defence of this omission he pleaded that it treated of too large a variety of subjects "including several that would probably be of little interest to the present reader". His conclusion probably still holds, if not because of the type of subject he instances: the existence or non-existence of the unicorn or of "a realm of white Moors". Present-day readers are more likely to be put off by the "learning", at first sight impenetrable and incoherent, that comes at them from the folio pages, and especially by the profusion of Latin. Whatever the reasons, Cuper's part of the correspondence was not published and therefore (and because of the above apparent impenetrability) remained practically unknown. This is a pity, for only when it is viewed in its entirety does the correspondence show how important Cuper's role was as a feedback of Witsen's material and as a guide: in several cases Cuper even determined the direction of Witsen's inquiries.

Yet the publication of Witsen's letters by themselves did not have much effect either. It gave rise to little more than the occasional observation, usually on his laments about the lack of zeal displayed by the servants of the Company in the propagation of the Christian faith and in the furtherance of scholarly inquiry in the Dutch East Indies. Although the material on Witsen's cultural efforts is abundant and readily accessible in libraries and archives, any coherent study of their significance has scarcely been attempted.

Witsen undertook the seemingly hopeless job of analysing and interpreting from his study the curiosities sent to him from all over the world. For the greater glory of God. Cuper, for whom Paris represented the extreme limit of his travels, assisted him in this task, drawing both from the *Book of Books* and the canonized wisdom of the writers of antiquity, and from the views of contemporary authors and the reflections of learned correspondents. The questions either scholar put to himself and the answers he found showed hardly any

difference, however.

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The two men could not jump across their own shadow; only within the stronghold of their reformed creed were they prepared for, and capable of, ratiocination.

"I have long speculated how the people inhabiting the distant Southern Isles and continent have come to be there, since, according to God's word, all humanity in Asia descends from Adam and since navigation in ancient times was not much developed", Witsen writes in the letter to Joan van Hoorn in Batavia that was cited above, by way of introduction to a request to Van Hoorn to consider the puzzling question of "the dispersal of nations".

Witsen's world was a miracle wrought by God, "whereof we do not know the reason". That conviction could not be questioned. Given such preconceptions, Cuper and Witsen could not advance beyond cataloguing and critically comparing the results of their investigations concerning the ten lost tribes, the location of King Solomon's gold mines, the origin of languages and the numerous proofs of the Flood.

Gijsbert Cuper

Witsen first met Gijsbert Cuper in 1683 in The Hague, where both were members of the States-General. Witsen served from 1683-1685, Cuper from 1681-1694. The first letter from Cuper to have been preserved dates from August 1683. It was written after Cuper had called on Witsen in his cabinet or, as he calls it in Latin, his "museum". The letter fairly spouts praise and learned similes, for Cuper had seen in Witsen's cabinet the draft of his map of Tartary.

Witsen felt so flattered with this letter that he printed it in full in the first edition of *Noord en Oost Tartarye* of 1692. But others were also impressed. Since Cuper occasionally contributed news and other items to the *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres*, its editor Pierre Bayle came to see it and at his instance Cuper's epistle was published quite soon after the visit to the cabinet.

Now who was this Gijsbert Cuper? For a first impression of the man a single glance in the card index of the manuscript collection of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague suffices. It shows Cuper to have been one of those obsessive writers that the seventeenth century fostered more regularly. The Koninklijke Bibliotheek possesses of him a collection of letters that runs to 146 volumes, holding correspondence in Latin, French, Dutch, German, Italian, etc., with nearly all major European scholars. Apart from this collection there are another sixteen volumes of letters and documents in the ARA. The correspondence with

Witsen extends to four volumes and reposes in the Library of the University of Amsterdam. In the aggregate, therefore Cuper's correspondence took up at least 166 volumes. In 1842, professor P. Bosscha

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of Deventer attempted a bibliographical description of Cuper's letters, but he dropped the project after 35 volumes.

Both the letters received and the letters sent have been largely preserved. This we owe to Cuper's habit of gathering information on all sorts of things and making notes and records. Cuper made copies of all his outgoing letters or, judging by the insertions and corrections, kept the drafts. As time went on, he evolved various systems to organize his letters, the management of which made heavy demands on his time.

Letters from scholars were collector's items. To make them accessible to a larger readership, volumes of letters of famous scholars were published. Cuper was therefore extremely proud of his many distinguished correspondents. In his *Merkwürdige Reisen* of 1754, Zacharias von Uffenbach sketches a pretty little vignette of this. Accompanied by his brother, Uffenbach made a tour in 1710-1711 of the principal cabinets and libraries of England, Germany and Holland. His books presents a faithful account of their observations. What adds spice to the description is that he does not mince his words when the owners of the collections come to be discussed. In the case of Cuper, whom he visited in Deventer on 9 May 1710, he mentions his vanity, although he considers him "an excellent man" whom he cannot admire sufficiently for his great industry and vast correspondence, carried on despite the heavy demands on his time arising from his office as burgomaster. When Cuper shows him his collection of coins and tells him that the Pope, who sent him a portrait from Italy, is a great lover of antiquities and that he is so charmed by Cuper's letters that even the letters Cuper wrote to other people have to be read to him, Uffenbach seems to be taken quite aback by such a blatant display of vanity: "Ob ich nun gleich dieses alles wohl glaube, so liess es doch nicht wohl, so etwas von sich, zumal auf die Manier, wie es geschahe, vorzubringen".

Cuper also showed Uffenbach his vast correspondence:

Er zeigte uns bey zwanzig Paquet Briefe, davon wohl so viel Bände oder Volumina jedes Hand-dick könnten gemacht oder gebunden werden. Sie sind nach den Landen eingetheilt, als aus Engelland, Italien, Schweiz, Teutschland, Holland selbst etc. und sind allemal seine Antworten dazu geleet. Sie handeln meistentheils von raren Nummis und andern Antiquitäten, die zum öftern entweder mit der Feder abgerissen, oder in Kupfer gestochen, oder auf andere Manier dabey liegen. Es ist gewiss ein ganz ungemeiner Vorrath, und ist fast kein gelehrter Antiquarius in der Welt, von dem nicht Briefe aus allen Landen allhier zu sehen. Wenn er viele von einem Autore bey einander hat, lässet er sie mit seinen

Antworten in einen Band binden. Wie er uns denn wohl zehen Volumina von dergleichen zeigte.

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In his correspondence with Witsen, Cuper gives us an occasional glimpse of how he acquired or lost correspondents. A marriage of the French consul with the daughter of one of Cuper's correspondents, for example, occasioned the bridegroom to write to Cuper that he was desirous of corresponding with him, particularly on the collecting of medals, inscriptions, statuary and other relics of antiquity. On the other hand, contacts painstakingly established were sometimes lost through political or religious change. When a correspondent was a consul of his country or an agent, his government could order him to return from abroad. And high Roman Catholic church officials sometimes were raised to the eminence of cardinal:

I have long been without letters from Italy, having lost two or three of my great correspondents, namely Messrs. Corradini, Buffi and Fontanini: for the first two have just become cardinals, and the latter either preceded them or was at least advanced to another high Church post; and as you, Sir, are aware, cardinals no longer corresponded with those they regard in the light of heretics, as I found in the case of the learned cardinal Noris, who, however, often sent his regards through other learned gentlemen of his and mine acquaintance. Also, the purpurati have so many affairs to attend to that they have little leisure to think of their learned friends - the Court of Rome being, as you well know, full of business and consultations extending to all parts of the world.

In addition to his collection of letters and writers, Cuper also had a considerable and varied library. (Upon his death nearly 4000 books were presented for auction.) So as not to miss anything of what took place in the Republic of Letters, he furthermore had all journals and gazettes that were available sent to him, and fully indulged his passion of collecting such inventories and auction catalogues as he could get hold of.

Cuper corresponded a great deal on ancient coins and medals. In the Latin language he issued several books on this subject. Naturally Cuper's numismatic activities are also a topic in the correspondence with Witsen, as are his reasons for publishing these reflections. But most of them remained in portfolio. Among the reasons for this, Bosscha mentions business of state, his huge correspondence, but especially "his urge to grasp and investigate everything, which caused him to read a great deal, to collect, to make notes and to attempt classification under certain categories, which gave him a considerable treasure of miscellaneous knowledge, to sort and complete which, however, he would have needed almost another lifetime, (...) despite the diligence and care that he used in completing the treatment of his themes, never bringing out

anything unless he had studied, polished and perfected it with the utmost care".

Veenendaal additionally suggests in *Het Dagboek van Gijsbert Cuper* that Cuper lacked "the gift of composition, of construction". It is true that the greater part of Cuper's publications, like the subject matter of his letters to scholars, consists in notes (additions, remarks, improvements) on the work of others.

Cuper's correspondence with all those eminent scholars was therefore an end in itself, rather than a means. Not without reason did his contemporaries call him "the oracle of the world of learning"! More than once Cuper writes to Witsen that the object of his efforts is "the advancement of learning". And, it might be added, his own greater glory. For, given the custom then prevalent among scholars to send copies of letters with interesting information to one another, it is not inconceivable that Cuper assumed that this could cause his name to shine over the whole of Europe.

In 1715, a year before his death, Cuper was elected an honorary member of the Paris Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres. Although some of his letters had been published together with those of others, it was not until 1742 before a first selection of his letters appeared by themselves.

#### Nature of the correspondence

The correspondence between Witsen and Cuper comprises 109 letters by Cuper and 98 by Witsen. Of the latter, Gebhard published 83. Whenever there was something interesting to report, the two correspondents would write - sometimes daily, sometimes once monthly. So the letters do not necessarily come in sequence. Cuper tended to state at the beginning of his letters the dates of despatch and receipt of the letters coming to his hand. This information shows us that not all of the letters are extant. Notably the series of letters in the first of the four packages covering the years 1683-1708 is far from complete. Until the end of this period, Cuper usually wrote in Latin. After 1708 we find him writing chiefly in Dutch. As Witsen is a very busy man, he writes, as he frequently notes at the bottom of his letters, "in haste" and therefore in his native language. His handwriting also betrays haste. Although bold, it does not read easily. Witsen's epistles are often short and his style is measured and official. In subject-matter, they usually boil down to a point-by-point discussion of the issues raised by Cuper. Only towards the end of his life does Witsen have more leisure and do his letters grow significantly longer.

Cuper, on the other hand, takes time to write; indeed he sometimes gives the impression that writing is compulsory to him. A four-page letter is no exception, although it is spread over

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several days rather than finished in one go. If he runs out of material a little too soon for his liking, for instance because he is at his country estate Oxen (which he fondly refers to as his "Tusculanum"), divorced from his books and notes, he fills his pages with what others communicate to him. Even on his death-bed, when he can barely hold his pen, he continues to write. Regularly, therefore, he is forced to conclude his letters with a plea for forgiveness because he has again claimed so much of Witsen's scarce leisure. The demands on his own time he seldom mentions to Witsen. It is therefore all the more striking that he often ends his letters to other correspondents with apologies for not going more deeply into a particular subject because he does not have the time. But he never fails to assure the recipient that he might easily have continued for hours... Elsewhere, the correspondence shows that Cuper was accustomed to read even when taking a walk.

Although the tone in this kind of learned correspondence remains quite formal even if the relations are good and friendly, many passages do testify to the pleasure the parties find in each other's letters. They are being read, re-read, ruminated and discussed. Often they are accompanied with gifts. Cuper's often are in the shape of game and the produce of his country estate Oxen, south of Diepenveen: fruits, lambs, cheeses, etc. Witsen mostly sends bottles of tea, as well as objects and drawings for Cuper's examination. When Cuper's dying day is near, Witsen despatches six bottles of hock to one of Cuper's daughters living at home, as a medicine for his friend, with a message saying: "thus is my heart pressed by fear on account of the sickness of him, whom I have always loved as the apple of my eye".

After Cuper had left The Hague he continued to see Witsen regularly. Because Witsen was such a busy man, it was mostly Cuper who made the calls. Writing to Pieter Valckenier, who himself possessed a fine cabinet of curiosities, he in 1709 gives an itemized account of the things Witsen had shown him during his visit to Witsen's house on the Herengracht in Amsterdam, as well as of the stories Witsen had told him apropos of them. Although Witsen had not been well at the time, he had shown him his maps, his many volumes of drawings of plants and animals of the Cape, Japan, Java, etc., and had told him about the investigators Herbert de Jager, Cornelis de Bruyn, a certain Kaempfer and a certain Rumphius. Lodewijk Fabritius, the envoy of the Czar, who had discovered colossal sepulchres in Tobol in Tartary which held the bodies of a king and a queen, both "as dry as stockfish and not at all corrupted", had also been a subject of discussion, as had the two Southlanders who were then in Amsterdam and of whom one was said to have a little tail. Witsen himself, however, did not believe it to be a tail so much as a part of the backbone. Cuper had further seen crabs which

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bore their offspring on their backs and which according to the celebrated anatomist Ruysch were without "genitals".

Another visit to Witsen was described by Cuper in an *Iter Amstelaedamense* which gives an account of a little tour of several cabinets of rich dilettanti, made in the summer of 1707. It is again characteristic of Cuper that his account does not so much deal with his encounters with the owners but rather presents a wealth of learned observations on what he had seen in their cabinets.

As is only natural in a long and intensive correspondence, an important aspect of the writer's epistolary relation was the maintenance of their friendship. But one is struck by the fact that personal affairs, let alone political ones, are only rarely touched upon and that, if this happens, it is usually done in the form of an apology, stating the reason why the writer was prevented from replying more promptly. The relationship between the two correspondents is wholly dominated by their common passion, the pursuit of learning. Indeed this passion is so absorbing that Cuper in his New Year's wishes to Witsen expresses the hope that they may live for at least another two years, because then the ships with the information they are so eagerly awaiting (about unicorns in Siam) will come home.

That there is a special type of epistola is well illustrated by the following. On 29 December 1713, Cuper records the purchase of a collection of travel accounts:

seeing that I was inclined to read the Histories of the Orient, particularly those of recent times, wherefore I purchased the 28 volumes printed several years hence by Pieter van der Aa, in which I find many remarkable things that I shall now or at some future time treat of with you.

Published in response to a great demand, this compendium contained the principal non-Dutch accounts of travels, in a chronological arrangement from 1246 until 1696. For more than a year, beginning at January 1714, Cuper's letters reflect his reading of this work. Witsen is inundated with remarkable citations, extracts and questions accompanied by ponderous commentaries:

I find in Ezquebel's Voyage to Jamaica, in volume 6 of Van der Aa's edition, that the pigs of St. Sebastian and Cartagena have their navels on their backs; this seems to me wondrous strange, and although the hatching and issuing forth of toads from the backs of these animals renders this credible, I would be greatly beholden to you if you would write to me, if you can, what truth there may be in this.

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On 12 April 1714, Cuper reaches the seventh volume ("Wherein I find a few remarkable

matters that I must amply write on"), on 3 August he has advanced as far as the twentieth volume; on 25 October he has dealt with them all. From the seventh volume onwards, Cuper begins his job in earnest. Without the customary salutation and acknowledgement of the arrival of Witsen's letters and of the courtesy of the loan of the objects sent by him for Cuper's inspection, Cuper plunges at once in *media res*; from this point onwards through to the last volume his letters consist entirely of learned comments. Witsen also possesses Van der Aa's books, "but to reread them, examine them, and reflect upon them is impossible to me, by reason of lack of time, dwindling forces through my advanced years, and my community occupations". In a letter of 18 September, Witsen nevertheless enters at length into Cuper's queries, responding to his epistles in the following manner:

Sir, I highly admire your diligence, and extremely wise observations on these travel accounts. I also read them when they first came out but failed to extract so much honey. I keep your letters on the subject as valuables, and occasionally take them out to refresh myself.

As we have seen, the very first letter from Cuper to Witsen had been so drafted that it was fit to be reproduced in a journal. On several occasions Witsen exclaims over "the beauty of the Latin, the elegance of the style and the truth of the content" of Cuper's letters, "so that I could almost fall in love with them". From time to time he also gives these letters to other amateurs to read.

Cuper's letters are largely made up of learned annotations (he himself uses the word "anecdotes") which once in a while, particularly when he writes about his own field, numismatics, expand into complete treatises. Of course Cuper did not write his learned epistles as fancy dictated. As a letter writer he was part of a genuine tradition, in which the writing took into account the possibility of later publication, or of a readership wider than the addressee alone. It is difficult to assign such epistles to definite categories, one reason being their large diversity. After all, each letter individually expresses the relationship that has arisen between two learned correspondents up to that moment. Looking at the letters exchanged between Witsen and Cuper, we find that both the relationship between the two men and the form and content of their correspondence changed with time. Furthermore the two correspondents appear to have approached the medium from different angles. These things will all be discussed below in greater detail. But in anticipation of what will emerge it is possible to conclude here that as time goes on the letters acquire a more personal note. That is to say,

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that, in corresponding, the writers made less and less allowance for a wider readership. Cuper, the antiquarian, after 1708 entirely dropped Latin, the language of learning par excellence, and in addition concentrated increasingly on Witsen's field of

interest. Even so, Cuper - who after all depended largely on his correspondence to prove himself - in many of his letters stuck to the impersonal style. One of its consequences is that the reader can tell only by the introduction and the close that this is, indeed, a letter: only the learned annotations or disquisitions, lists of recent books and journals, copies of letters and inscriptions counted. Cuper's letters therefore in many ways resemble notebooks delivered in instalments - in fact, he would often scribble additional remarks in the margins of his copies of letters already despatched.

#### Relations between scholars: Witsen's importance to Cuper

As was noted above, Cuper's correspondence with others is usually about coins and medals: about the things they depict, their inscriptions, their history, etc. Geography and ethnology were only at one remove from this. What the books about travel to distant countries described, Cuper compared with what the Greeks and Romans had to say on the subject and with the evidence of Holy Scripture. In the examination of all such eyewitness accounts and traditional myths and legends the burning issue was: where does "truth" end and where does it become fiction in these chronicles which now copy, now contradict each other?

Making the acquaintance of someone like Nicolaes Witsen - as an amateur of letters and a scholar, but especially as one who, by virtue of his boardmanship in the VOC and his relations, was in a position to discover the "truth" - was therefore invaluable to a man such as Cuper. At long last he was able to verify his findings with someone who had access to the journals, logbooks, letters, observations, etc., of the VOC and who in addition had commissioned inquiries of his own, and still did:

Forgive me, Sir, for causing you so much trouble with my letters. I confess that my desire to know much is the cause of my insistence; but the chief cause are you yourself, because you seek to discover everything that exists or has existed in the North and in the East, and because furthermore you are so generous in sharing your findings [through the letters] that I have been receiving from you these many years and that I have duly replied to

Cuper writes at the conclusion of one of his letters.

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"I am curious", "I should dearly like to know", "I am anxious to learn", or "You would much oblige me": these are some of the phrases he habitually uses in asking for information.

That Cuper did not speak solely for himself but was as it were the representative of a small army of eager scholars is shown by his numerous requests for leave to introduce amateurs of letters to Witsen, and by his begging Witsen for assistance, e.g. in the ordering

of Chinese books from Batavia, or for permission to submit the problems they could not solve between them to relations in Rome, Florence, Berlin or Paris. Always with vows of the greatest secrecy and assurances of an increase in Witsen's fame:

I shall, with your approbation, send to Rome the explanation of the mirror [a metal disk, found in Siberia, bearing a legend in Chinese characters] and this will certainly add to your fame there, if any further increase is indeed possible, because the scholars will see to what trouble you will go to understand what is hidden from all.

One of Cuper's relations was the Berlin librarian of the Elector of Brandenburg, Maturin Veyssiere de la Croze (1661-1739), "a man of great learning and much skill in Oriental languages and history". Cuper writes to Witsen about him: "I receive many letters from him and you would be diverted to read the letters we exchanged, which would make a tolerable book in quarto, as they say, full of literature, and Greek, Roman and Oriental antiquities".

Fifty-five letters to La Croze, written in the period 1708-1716, were published in Cuper's *Lettres de Critique* of 1742. The reader is struck by the difference between these letters and the ones he wrote to Witsen: they are much more like "epistolae familiares" or informal letters. They contain few learned expositions proper; the hunt for news from the Republic of Letters and the transmission of such news as is available to the correspondents predominate. The tone of these letters also seems a little more familiar. Thus, when Cuper had amused himself on his country estate with the capture of blackbirds, La Croze is inspired by the event to a fine Latin poem in which he, who in his official position is plagued by major problems, compares his own fate with that of a bird in captivity. Cuper and La Croze are both members of an almost extinct race in the world of learning, Cuper writes by way of encouragement: "Tous deux amateurs de la belle Literature, tous deux nullement opinâtres à défendre nos sentimens, si un autre rencontre mieux, tous deux ouverts, & sincères".

An important place in the correspondence is taken up by the results of Witsen's inquiries. La Croze is greatly interested and, with Witsen's permission, Cuper sends him pictures, grammars,

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extracts and citations. In 1709 he introduced La Croze to Witsen as follows:

Monsieur De la Croze, librarian to the King of Prussia, longs inexpressibly to see your Tartaria. This industrious and scholarly man writes to me that he is to render into Latin the History of the Kings of Kazan which he found in the Slavonic language in his Majesty's library; that he believes that the buried elephants in Siberia came to those parts with an Indian or Tartar army, and that he is considering a further inquiry into this matter; that he

may compare the Chinese chronologies with Herodotus and that he has a variety of notes on the subject; that in addition he has now completed a *Dictionarium Slavonicum* and that he is engaged upon an Arminian one; for, Sir, this man is highly skilled in all Oriental languages, and you would scarcely credit the extent of his learning if you were to read the letters he wrote to me in French, in which language I also reply, and sometimes from my modest store produce items about which he is greatly rejoiced and proffers many thanks.

Conversely Cuper encourages La Croze to make a contribution to Witsen's *Noord en Oost Tartarye*, although he had himself offered Witsen twenty years previously to write him a "dissertation" for inclusion in that work: "j'aurois examiné tout ce que dépend de cette belle matière; mais je ne sçai comment il est arrivé".

A letter to Witsen from Cuper a couple of years later shows that La Croze has meanwhile made considerable progress in his language studies. Through Coptic La Croze hopes to be able to decipher both Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese characters. Cuper reports this discovery in La Croze's words:

A l'Heure qu'il est, j'en suis aux Hieroglyphiques, et je cherche une clef universelle de tous ces caracteres tant Egyptiens, que Chinois. Je n'oserois vous dire ce que j'ai trouvé. J'ai en vérité fais [sic] des découvertes, dont je m'étonne moi meme, mais je n'en publierai rien, que mon Systeme ne soit tout fait. C'est la chose la plus simple du monde et la plus naturelle. Le Cophte en est la clef; si j'avois été en Hollande j'aurois taché de copier a Leyde ce qui me manque des Livres de Nouveau Testament. J'ai desja decrit de ma main les 4 Evangelistes Cophtes, les Epitres de S. Paul; j'avancerois bien ma decouverte des Hieroglijphiques. C'est un paradoxe bien surprenant, que cette langue soit la clef des Hieroglyphiques Egyptiens et même des Chinois. Cela sent la vision, si vous voulez. Cependant la chose est vraie; pour la prouver il ne manque, que du temps et des livres.

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Apparently La Croze never arrived at the point where his system was "tout fait": at any rate there is no further record of his achievements as a sinologist. [See Figure 1.]

Indeed La croze was not unique in looking for a key to the ideographically represented languages. One of his predecessors, Andreas Muller (1630-1694) is reputed actually to have discovered the key, but having been accused of heresy he was so embittered that he threw it into the fire upon his death. One of his assignments as librarian was to check in the ancient Chinese annals whether they recorded a solar eclipse coinciding with Christ's death.

Muller wrote several books on China and the Chinese language: Nicolaes Witsen cites him repeatedly in his *Noord en Oost Tartarye*. In a letter of 9 April 1713 he tells Cuper that a long time ago he had ordered "a great many Chinese books" to be sent over for Muller.

Thanks to Witsen's efforts and those of his learned correspondent in Batavia, the wealthy medical doctor Andreas Cleyer (1634-1698), the Great Elector possessed the largest collection of Chinese books in the whole of Europe.

Throughout Europe the scholars of that era were assiduously looking for connections and correspondences. Given their religious perspective, they could not but believe that all languages had the same origin. The Lord's Prayer was a favourite translation project. Andreas Muller even managed to have it printed in sixty-six different alphabets. Witsen's *Noord en Oost Tartarye* also contains many foreign-language specimens of the Lord's Prayer, including versions in Tungus, Samoyed, Muscovite, Yakutian and Mongolian. For a number of years, Witsen exchanged views on the differences and similarities between these and other languages with several correspondents, the great scholar Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz of Hanover among them. An aspiring scholar and candidate for the ministry, Willem Conijn, writes to Witsen on 20 October 1714 from Galle (Ceylon) on the progress of his linguistic inquiries:

As regards the question whether Sinhalese has any relationship with other ancient languages and preserves any remnants of Greek: I have often compared Hebrew and Sinhalese radicals but never found the least similarity between the two, nor with Greek, with this exception only that when I translated parts of the New Testament I came across eight Sinhalese words which corresponded with Greek ones not only in all their consonants, there being some difference in their vowels and hence in their pronunciation, but also in their significance: which is curious enough.

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The letter, written to show how hard Conijn is at work, and accompanied with his translation into Sinhalese of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, is also a request to Witsen for promotion:

But as nothing has so far been decided about my advancement, so that I still earn the same salary as I received in 1704 when I entered the Company's service, I very earnestly and humbly beseech Your Honour to be my Benefactor and Patron regarding my case and study and to ensure that, now the Church has not seen fit to appoint me to the ministry, my pay may be raised to the level of a minister's, in encouragement of my further efforts.

Whether Witsen complied with this request in his old age we do not know, no more than what the subsequent fate of the results of Willem Konijn's studies was. It probably went the way of so many studies of its kind, in that it was filed and forgotten. In Witsen's life's work, at any rate, it failed to secure a place.

Tartary

After his Grand Tour of Russia and Europe, Witsen's object of inquiry consistently remained "the northern and eastern parts of Asia and Europe, or the very unknown Tartary and neighbouring regions, of which one finds a singular lack of knowledge in Europe".

In 1692, five years after the first publication of the map of Tartary, Witsen obliged "all the amateurs of geographic studies" with his companion book. Among the commendations he included a letter from his friend, the burgomaster of Delft and VOC-boardman Hendrik van Bleiswyk. It had urged Witsen to make haste: the book (it said) ought to be published soon, for only with the descriptions it furnished could the map be truly satisfactory.

Let us for a while examine this, the true function of the book: that of guide and companion. Witsen here exploited a tradition that had roots both in the guide book and in the complementary texts to the very fashionable, mostly decorative maps. Of this particular map, which furnishes a mass of detail even without external assistance, Keuning says that "Not a single seventeenth century map can be compared with it". The book follows the plan of the map in adopting an organization by region. Viewed from this perspective, the book, which at first strikes the modern reader as rather chaotic, acquires a sufficiently logical coherence. The description of itineraries, the enumeration of hamlets, villages and towns with the distances separating them, as well as the description of customs and histories, the provision of word lists and the recording of prices of the merchandise typical of that region, show that it was Witsen's

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intention to provide travellers passing through those parts not only with a cartographic description but also with a practical vade-mecum. Armed with this knowledge, they could prepare for their journey and have guidance once they were on their way. The information sent to him from those parts he included verbatim so that the facts would be as fresh as possible and capable of verification. The unbalanced impression this creates by today's yardsticks is intensified by numerous interpolations and digressions. Witsen liked to use parallels there by extensively displaying the contents of his own collection of curiosities all over again. This did not mean, however, that Witsen lost track or that he had no control over his pen. Quite the contrary: by doing so he showed his erudition and at the same time demonstrated that what he was saying was verifiable and hence "true". Keuning is therefore perhaps a little harsh on Witsen when he concludes: "neither as a statesman nor as a scholar can he be reckoned among the first and greatest men of his country and of his time. [...] His voluminous work *Noord en Oost Tartarye* consists of an overwhelming quantity of accounts from numerous correspondents, but they are thrown together unarranged and not worked up. He reproduces reports as they came into his hands, often without criticism".

It is Witsen's tragedy that he could never bring his work to a conclusion. After

publication of his book in 1692, he spent the rest of his life improving and perfecting it. The editions in which we have come to know his work - both the map and the book - were meant to be provisional versions, and were probably intended for intimate friends only. Which may explain their rarity. Of the 1687 map only ten copies are known to exist and there is only one revised copy of unknown later date; something similar applies to both the first and the second edition of the book, of which just a few copies are extant.

Probably because he was too busy to make corrections in the interim, Witsen had his work printed a few pages at a time. To underpin his argument that the mammoths of Siberia must have been borne there from a warmer climate by the waters of the Flood and then swallowed up by the mus (the world at that time being one big pool of mus and water) he for instance sent Cuper on 24 July 1698 a ready-printed passage from his book on Tartary "which I have not yet been able to publish because I could not find the time". At the same time this explains why Witsen could become the victim of piracy. In early 1716 he writes that he has received a letter from the famous geographer De L'Isle from Paris, in which De L'Isle tells him that he has Witsen's writings and asks whether he can have Witsen's notes as well. De L'Isle intends

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to use them to design new maps but promises expressly to state that he has made them with the aid of Witsen's papers. Witsen comments: "I did not betray any displeasure that my unpublished printed writings were abstracted without my knowledge, for that would only have made matters worse, and replied instead that I was glad that they had fallen into such able hands as his".

But there were more barriers to the successful completion of the work. Because Witsen had dedicated both the first map and the book to Czar Peter the Great, the Czar had requested him during his historic sojourn in the Netherlands in 1697/98 to make a new map of Russia. This prevented Witsen from publishing the book before the Czar had seen it, as he wrote in a letter to Cuper of 24 September 1709. But he was hopeful that in a few months that obstacle would have been cleared away.

In the same letter he stated that, while the printing of the book was largely finished, the cartographer was also keeping him up. He had already paid him a few thousands of guilders but the man simply could not be made to mend his pace. And, Witsen added, now to give the job to someone else would mean a significant loss, not to mention the vast amount of time spent on instruction, calculation and what not.

Furthermore, from the beginning of the new century Witsen is subject to depressions. Political problems, opposition, physical weakness and disappointments make him despondent and listless. "The government so burdens me with work", he writes on 8

December 1704 to Cuper, "that I have scarcely an hour left to think of our studies, and this now so annoys me that I could wish to pass the rest of my time with Thomas a Kempis in angello cum libello, and in peace". Obviously this state of mind is reflected in his relations with Cuper, for Witsen can summon less and less energy on his magnum opus, and he is beginning to be a little careless in acknowledging and replying to Cuper's letters:

I confess my negligence in not replying to your last letter with the coins and the explanations therto; the reason is not that I have lost my appetite for studies or that I lack the time to read. No, Sir, I admire all that flows from your pen, and it gives me greater energy and much pleasure. But what shall I say, tribulations have befallen me which an old man cannot well endure and keep me from my studies. There is in me a weakness I ought not to possess, the less so as I have seen so much of the world.

#### Cuper's role in regard to Witsen

Cuper feels called upon to cheer Witsen up with his letters and to encourage him. He collects data on Tartary and everything that can be connected with it and sends them to him in the form

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of citations, extracts, books and letters from others. Countless times does he inquire fervently when that long-promised and elaborate work will be coming forth:

This is, Sir, what I felt it necessary to write to you, both to maintain our old friendship and to communicate to you such thoughts of learned people as may well find a place in your great work on Tartary. How I wish that it would be published soon, thereby fulfilling the desire of so many amateurs of learning eager to read that volume! Write to me, I beg you, when we shall have in our hands tam pulchrum et tam dedolatum opus.

In 1712 Cuper even composes a treatise on the Scythians, the draft of which he sends to Witsen with a message to the effect that he hopes to hear Witsen's early comments and particularly whether he believes it to have any relationship with Tartary. But Witsen could not so quickly digest this flood of learning. Without much enthusiasm he writes back: "I shall defer my reply until I shall have reflected upon it a little more. Meanwhile I stand amazed at your wide reading and extensive knowledge in all matters of learning. I shall in due course take advantage of it and not forget to mention your name".

Although during the thity-three years that the correspondence lasted Witsen published three books (the *Architectura Navalis* in 1690, which is a revised edition of *Aeloude en hedendaagse Scheepsbouw en Bestier* of 1671, and the two editions of *Noord en Oost Tartarye* in 1692 and "1705"), Cuper's name is nowhere mentioned, except in the 1683

letter, which, as we have seen, was reproduced in the recommendation to the first edition of the book on Tartary. Yet Witsen had promised, in a letter of 3 August 1693, to acknowledge his indebtedness to Cuper in an appendix, in recognition of a contribution from Cuper's book *Apotheosis vel consecratio Homeri* of 1683. Cuper liked to see his merit recognized - and so did Witsen. About the question why *Noord en Oost Tartarye* contains no further mention of Cuper we can only speculate. The most likely explanation is that Cuper, although a highly esteemed contact, did not furnish Witsen with the information he sought. Witsen had a network of experts at home and abroad to whom he sent materials and with whom he discussed problems. Because of his manifold official duties, the letters he exchanged with these people were quite different from the ones he wrote Cuper. Without much ado they set forth specific problems which he was looking to resolve. The correspondence with Gijsbert Cuper was important for quite different reasons. Helping him in his chronic lack of time, Cuper kept him posted on what was happening in the Republic of Letters. Cuper had his correspondents all over Europe, read all sorts of learned journals, and, what was more important, he advertised

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Witsen's scholarly projects so that everyone was informed of his progress. Witsen could thus receive warning that he ought to get on with his book on Tartary because someone else had conceived the same idea; and the same mechanism also served to guard against plagiarism.

Yet it is not possible to tell precisely what Cuper's contribution to Witsen's life work has been. Until 1708 there are significant gaps in the letters. Possibly the correspondence was not so intensive in the beginning because in those days the two men may have met more often. But several of Witsen's remarks warrant the conclusion that he allowed Cuper to cooperate actively in the production of his book: either as a proof reader and as an intermediary in Witsen's contacts with other amateurs of letters and scholars, or as the person who made his scholarly activities public through the journals. Cuper's was therefore a position in the background. And in spite of his devoted efforts, his place vis-à-vis Witsen over the years remained only that of an esteemed friend and curious amateur of letters.

Perhaps Witsen's melancholy and his advanced years have something to do with this: but howsoever this may be, the year 1708 or thereabouts appears to have been a turning point. With this date ends the first parcel of letters. From this moment on, Witsen increasingly fills his letters with answers to questions Cuper put to him. This means therefore that these letters contain the fruits of previous researches. How far Witsen himself thought by the end of his life that he had advanced in his exploration of the sublunary realm can be deduced from his reply to a letter from the "King of Tidor" reporting the washing up on his beach of a strange fish: "God knows what creature this is, for I imagine that I carry the pictures of all known animals both on land and in the sea in my head, but this fish I do not

recognize [...]. Which once again shows us the miracles of God".

Cuper acknowledged Witsen's omniscience without reservation. After an eruption of erudite similes he modestly concludes one letter with:

But why do I meddle in affairs that you are expert in? It is surely like taking water to a large river and so to waste one's time. I pray you to forgive me this liberty and to put me back in the right way, and to allow me, in Phaedrus' words, *Lucem accendere de tuo Lumine*.

The rest of the subject-matter of Witsen's letters is, broadly, about current and topical affairs. They include the transmission of news and the despatch of curiosities "to lend Cuper the sight thereof", as Witsen phrases it. But, with few exceptions, direct appeals for Cuper's assistance are limited to Cuper's true fields: the knowledge of classical antiquity and classical languages,

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and numismatics. Witsen was himself a keen collector of coins and medals, as witness the 1395 numbers in the catalogue of his collection. Yet he left learned reflections on numismatic themes to Cuper; his letters largely confined themselves to issues of geography and ethnology.

In 1708, Cuper not only abandons the use of Latin but also appears to adapt the contents of his learned epistles increasingly to Witsen's interests. Conversely, Cuper's constantly repeated demands for information and his reflections must have forced Witsen to keep his house in order and must have provided him with the inspiration to go forward with his work.

At Cuper's request or on his own initiative, Witsen writes letters for him to Siam about unicorns, to the Cape about "white moors", to Ceylon about the Sinhalese grammar and the "Adam's Peak". When someone arrives on foot in Amsterdam from Gamron in Persia and almost as a matter of course knocks on Witsen's door, Witsen forthwith writes to Cuper to see if he has any questions on Persian porcelain. For after Cuper had read Engelbert Kaempfer's *Amoenitates Exoticae* this had become a problem which never ceased to intrigue him. Other letters from Witsen are despatched to Surinam on the use of spider's webs for the manufacture of silk, to Siberia on the extent of christianization of Tartar princes, and to the island of Sombbrero to investigate claims that a local fish can change into a worm.

### Questionnaires

What were the questions that constantly occupied their minds? To get an idea of this we need not prepare an inventory of the entire correspondence, because the key questions

have a habit of recurring. Again and again, Cuper - with Witsen's concurrence - endeavours to test the findings and experiences of travellers against the scriptural and classical sources the two correspondents had so well studied. Cuper with his wide-ranging interests feels that imprecise and conflicting accounts hinder him in his attempts to achieve clarity, and he therefore quite often utters the wish that someone would undertake the task of rectifying such imprecision. This wish is invariably accompanied with his views on how such a person should go about his mission and what issues should be addressed.

Discussed below are some examples of Cuper's suggestions designed to satisfactorily test particular issues; they are followed by a specimen of the questionnaires that frequently accompanied the scholars' agents as they set forth on their missions of inquiry.

A figure which always held a particular fascination for Witsen and Cuper was the Mongol conqueror Timur Lenk (Timur the Lame) or Tamerlane (1336-1405). In Cuper's view the

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writing of his biography was typically the sort of job that Witsen ought to do, if it were not for the numerous other claims on his time. Only a bright intellect should be entrusted with the description of such a life. Tamerlane's biographer should first consult all temporary writers from the legions where Tamerlane had left his traces and then contrast these accounts with appropriate commentaries and reflections of writers of later date and of classical antiquity:

It were certainly to be wished for that a quick brain judiciously and impartially composed his life from the Turkish, Persian, Arabic, Indian and Tartar writers, in the like manner as Prideaux gave us the Life of Mahomet, which could then serve to test later writers and some of the Greek and Latin authors who occasionally touch upon his adventures and triumphs; indeed this were a fitting occupation for yourself, were it not that the Republic has almost entirely claimed you.

From 1712 onwards the investigations in Ceylon occupy an important place in the correspondence. The first letter on the subject that has been preserved is Witsen's and bears the date 1 August 1712. In it, Witsen relates the story of two ministers whom he sent to Ceylon to learn the language and the history of the Ceylonese people. One of these gentlemen "came home a wealthy man through marriage, but without any knowledge of the language of the country and ignorant of its antiquities", but the other, a young man named Conijn, is really trying hard and has both mastered the language and the history of the local people. "If you should wish to send some questions for him to answer, I shall be pleased to send everything to him. He used to correspond with me, but as this was unprofitable lately, he fell silent and so did I".

Cuper's interest in Ceylon first originated in his conjecture that this might be Tabrobane, the Gold Island of Kong Solomon. He made suggestions to Witsen with regard to the procedure that might be adopted to see whether certain ancient customs, described by a writer from antiquity, were still being extant: Witsen was first to prepare abstracts of the work in question and then to make a division into principal questions, "in order to obtain a pertinent answer and intelligence to each of these". It took Cuper as much as a year to respond to Witsen's proposal to send any questions to Willem Conijn:

Regarding the questions that you speak of, I can only say that in my humble opinion this minister ought to inquire whether there live different peoples on the island, when they got there, whether they all have the same religion or that some are islamic and the others idolators; what sort of idols they adore; whether the language is one and the same on the entire island; what chronologies they possess; and whether they preserve memories of navigation by other peoples, and particular of the time when Solomon sent his fleet there, together with that of the King of Tyre, to fetch gold and silver.

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Inspired by a postscript of Cuper of 22 March 1711 - "Seigneur de la Crose writes me that he proposes to prove that there are Jews too on Madagascar; do you perhaps have any information on this subject?" - the item Madagascar also became a feature of the correspondence. Such attempts to locate the lost tribes of Israel were then a topical issue. A year and a half later, on 13 September 1712, Cuper was sent a list of 28 questions and answers. The questions alone suffice to project a clear picture of the mental world of the scholar and amateur of letters on the turn of the seventeenth century:

First, whether he knows if there are any Jews, Muslims or Christians on Madagascar.

If there are any Jews, what language they employ.

3. Whether they are circumcised.

4. Whether they sacrifice, and from what country they came and when.

5. Whether they are polygamous.

6. What kind of people live in the interior.

7. Whether they are civilized.

8. Whether they live in towns or in villages.
9. How and whence they came to that country, and when.
10. Whether they have a King: his name, powers and government.
11. Whether they go naked or clothed.
12. What sort of money is in circulation.
13. What their religion is.
14. What faith the black people of Madagascar profess.
15. Whether there are muslims among them.
16. What trades they follow.
17. Whether they have agriculture.
18. What princes they have over them.
19. Into how many kingdoms their country is divided.
20. What power the English pirates have that have their haunts there.
21. Whether they have fortifications.
22. Whether they live in towns or in villages.
23. Whether they dwell on the main land or in the islands.
24. Whether they are numerous.
25. About the nature of the inhabitants.
26. About the fruits of the land.
27. About the animals, fish, birds, etc.
28. About the customs of the people, their economy, society, laws and habits.

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The specimen questions on Ceylon and Madagascar have in common that they seek information on both religious matters and on the countries themselves. As the examples of Tamerlane and Taprobane also show, these questions were based on the knowledge people had already acquired from literature (classical or contemporary) and the Bible. Even so the questions are quite general and undiversified, a typical instance being the last one on Madagascar: "About the customs of the people, their economy, society, laws and habits". This need scarcely surprise us, for one encounters the same approach in the subtitles of contemporary geographic and ethnological works. Although God's miracles were highly diverse and incomprehensible, people nevertheless endeavoured to chart them, even by such inadequate means as collections of curiosities and descriptions in book titles. In step with the voyages of discovery and the growing might of the Western World, the "enlightenment" of the man of learning also grew. Vexed questions, such as how the Flood had taken place, how the nations had been dispersed (and languages and customs with them), how the Christian religion had degenerated in some places or even vanished without a trace, need no longer be the object of speculation: it was now possible to investigate them.

There was another ambition behind this inquiry driven by curiosity and dominated by religion: these studies would furnish arguments to help recall with greater conviction all those erring heathen spirits to the path of light, to Christianity. This was also one of Witsen's motives. Starting from the Calvinist principle that a person ought always to be well employed in profitable work - people from other cultures who only worked as and when the need arose were therefore regarded as lazy - he was also a warm advocate of the Protestant mission. People who distinguished themselves by their industry and piety could always apply to him for a post in the Dutch East Indies. For their part, they were then supposed to study the local religion, language and customs, so as to be able to instruct the natives in the true faith, using their own language, and to report their progress to Witsen. It is characteristic of Witsen that he repeatedly brackets the pursuit of learning and the propagation of Christianity in his letters to Cuper, for example with regard to Ceylon: "Sir, I would be ashamed to tell you how indifferent people in our business are to the advancement of learning and the propagation of the religion".

A fairly typical illustration of Witsen's attitude to the Christian faith in general is furnished by the following exclamation called forth by a letter from an unnamed correspondent telling him "how on Jamaica the burnt subterranean dust changes into lice": "O depth of the mystery and of the miracles of God, whereof the reason is unknown to us".

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Miracles, to Witsen, only added to the unassailability of the Christian creed:

I have perused the work of Rudberkius and have wondered at his keen judgement, his great knowledge of languages, his wisdom and his elegant exposition, wherefore I exclaim that I am sufficiently moved to become a Christian.

In search of the truth

For amateurs of letters such as Witsen and Cuper, living in the Netherlands for most of their lives, it was particularly difficult to separate sailors' tall tales and myths from true observation. Fable, superstition, prejudice, ignorance, lack of time and lack of interest were some of the obstacles interposed between the object of the observation and a true account of that object - even disregarding for the moment the observer's own personality. In spite of this it is remarkable how often Witsen still commences a sentence with: "It is true that...". When, to him, was a thing true? The letters show that the truth of an assertion was tested by various means, including:

- Commissioned investigation:

I cannot tell what this signifies, but I do not believe it to be true, because I caused sketches to be made of all the unusual things on that hill [in Ceylon], and this is not among them, nor have I been told about it, although Governor Pijl, who was a friend of mine and the person who on my orders had the sketches made, was a very curious man who lived in the East Indies for fifty years.

- Sworn eyewitness accounts:

It is true that in the Southland bird's nests have been found on cliffs on the seashore that were so big that they could accommodate eight or ten men; and when our hands set them on fire, it was as if a farmhouse was being burnt down [...]. This I was told by eyewitnesses who would not dare to lie to me, as I have been their patron and promotor and because I commanded them sternly not to lie.

And in another letter on the identical topic we find: "The mariners affirmed to me on oath that this was true".

- What is attested by several books:

With regard to this evidence, as we have seen, Cuper's role was of great importance. In an attempt to obtain clarification of points left obscure by his study of the literature, Cuper additionally formulated questions which led to further inquiry.

- Pictorial evidence:

Pictures constituted an important class of evidence. Since the number of drawings accompanying the argument in the letters is substantial, we shall here examine them in somewhat greater detail.

Such brush and chalk drawings as have been preserved from those that accompanied the letters to Cuper can be assigned to two categories: firstly, the copies of sketches made in the field, and, secondly, the drawings Witsen ordered to be made of objects from his own collection. Witsen did not as a rule give away original drawings (though he did lend them); what we have are therefore copies produced by an artist, by himself, or by Cuper. The sketches Witsen commissioned to be made of objects from his own collection are much superior in quality to the other ones. At home, of course, he could have them made by a professional artist.

Witsen was himself produced numerous drawings, as is shown by the illustrations in his first book on naval architecture, the sketches he made on his journey to Moscow, and the etchings to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. A number of illustrations in his book *Noord en Oost Tartarye* I suspect also to be by him; contrary to his custom, however, he has not signed them. Except for the twelve effigies of Indian deities, most pictures preserved in the correspondence can be assigned to an artist employed by Cuper. They vary in size from a few centimetres to more than a metre. In all, there are forty-four of them, in addition to six representations of characters and a number of etchings. They show idols (17), pieces of sculpture from antiquity (9), ethnological subjects (5), animals (8), topographical sketches (3), a Chinese zodiac, and a drawing of an Egyptian "shabty". Several of these pictures - those that show items from Witsen's collection - are also among the illustrations of the second edition of *Noord en Oost Tartarye*.

Cuper's reaction to the pictures sent to him is quite revealing. When at Nagapatnam in South India the foundations were dug for a new fortification, five figurines of Indian gods [Figure 2] were found near a pagoda. This was in 1687; in July 1716, these figurines were shipped to Witsen with the home-bound fleet, and Witsen had sketches made of them for Cuper. Cuper writes back:

I have looked carefully at the drawings of the four brass images and I thank you for sending them, but I am curious to hear from you what peoples in those parts have such large ears, these images being ornamented or disfigured with them, and I intend to look up, as soon as I can get to my study, whether such ears are not also found among the ancient peoples, as I believe I read somewhere.

After Cuper had received, besides a number of papers, another seven drawings from Ceylon, which Witsen had had made many years previously, "for your speculation, which [drawings] I shall expect returned to me after your perusal and inspection", he writes back that he has carefully scanned the pictures of Adam and Eve and their respective children, and that it would seem that Eve did not have the same children as Adam, whence it would follow that in the beginning of the world there were more men and woman than these two, which certainly must be deemed a fable; [see Figure 3] And in a subsequent letter he adds:

But it is very remarkable that Eve, or the woman's figure, is shown sitting on a coiled snake, that this snake winds itself about the upper part of the figure [...], which appears to me to indicate that the pagans who erected these images knew of the lamentable and sad fall of our first mother.

The accompanying illustrations show that we have here, in fact, several incarnations of Buddha, of which Eve and the snake equates with the Buddha with Naga.

Cornelis de Bruyn, Witsen and Cuper

The often unclear and unreliable accounts and pictures in books of distant travels cannot but have led to the despair of the sticklers for accuracy - a class of people to whom the introductions to books of travels were wont to allude with irony. Witsen and Cuper doubtless belonged to this class. Their meeting with the artist Cornelis de Bruyn (1652-1726/7) was therefore a blessing to them for which they could only humbly thank God. In consultation with Witsen and using Witsen's letters of recommendation, De Bruyn was prepared to undertake long and perilous journeys to document them in words and pictures. Apparently De Bruyn did not apply himself to drawing and painting from an inner vocation so much as from "an insuppressible desire to visit strange lands and regions [...] inasmuch as I [...] judged nothing to be more necessary and more useful for a traveller, if he was to profit by his travels, than to possess knowledge of the art of drawing".

The first time he set out he visited "the most celebrated parts of Asia Minor" and stayed away nineteen years, from 1674 until 1693. The next journey lasted from 1701 until 1708 and took him through Russia and Persia to India. While he was away, he remained in touch with Witsen, sending him letters and curiosities. Witsen meanwhile saw to the storage of De Bruyn's growing collection of curiosities, which that traveller hoped to sell to other collectors

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once he got home. In 1698 and in 1711 he published the records of his travels, and they are still splendid books to see and read. In the first book, which has "200 plates [...] drawn

from life by the author himself", De Bruyn relates how, armed with the accounts of other travellers, he set out on his journey: "It was not only of great assistance to me to know what was remarkable in each place, but it also much helped me in making and reducing the volume of my notes". The time he so saved he spent on carefully depicting the cities, places and buildings he encountered on his way: "wherein I may without being boastful say I have done a thing that no other person had yet attempted". He found that "the pictures in most travel books, when I compared them with the shape and quality of the objects depicted often differed so much therefrom as if Rome had been the model of Constantinople". He therefore expected the approbation of the "men of letters and lovers of things exotic [...] which may encourage me to do the same upon another great journey I hope [...] to undertake". Naturally the numerous subscribers to his book included Nicolaes Witsen and Gijsbert Cuper. After Witsen's death, twenty-four paintings of Turkish costumes by De Bruyn were auctioned which occur in the book as etchings. The catalogue specially mentioned: "painted by the great traveller Cornelis de Bruin".

The book that deals with his second journey, which spanned a period of seven years, has 300 illustrations. The degree of skill that went into their execution is obviously higher. It is this book that was at the centre of a remarkable polemic between Cuper, De Bruyn and Witsen concerning the accuracy of the pictures of the ancient Persian city of Persepolis. For more than three consecutive months De Bruyn had stayed there. "No-one before or after him has ever worked with such scrupulous care and for so long in Persepolis", writes Hotz. Previously, Witsen had already received drawings and descriptions of Persepolis from Herbert de Jager: "I sent these to the [Royal] Society in London, and it published them in its Journal. This was the reason wherefore I instructed or requested Sinjeur de Bruyn to take cognizance of this work, as he did".

De Bruyn in his preface places considerable emphasis on the fact that he has seen with his own eyes what he describes and depicts, and that "the examination of these antiquities was the chief object of this second journey [...] with the immutable and inflexible object never to depart from the canon of truth, without which all labour is idle and futile". To preclude errors, he has solicited the opinion of "men experienced in antiquities [...], friends whose modesty forbids me to mention their names". As evidence for the truth of his account and to defeat "the jealousy and censure of many who are wont to decry what they cannot themselves perform" he has even gone so far as to remove some of the original rock with its carvings and inscriptions.

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He further reports that the figure appearing in his book under number 142 is in the custody of Nicolaes Witsen, while the remainder is in his own keeping. (The sculpture in Witsen's collection later was among his - Witsen's - estate.)

About Cornelis de Bruyn Witsen writes to Cuper on 1 January 1713: " I have known Master de Bruyn for a great many years. He is an honest man and I have given him recommendations as he set out on his journey and I instructed him and particularly pointed him out to use great care in depicting Persepolis. He is a painter by trade, and drawing is his forte".

The first letter from Cuper to De Bruyn to have been preserved is of 1698. De Bruyn had invoked his assistance in deciphering certain Cypriot characters. But, Cuper writes, "I have to say that I consulted various books treating of such matters but that to my regret I did not find anything serving to help me discover the meaning of this text". The next letter, now addressed to "the famous traveller Cornelis de Bruyn", is of a date exactly eleven years later. Accompanied with a friend, Cuper had visited De Bruyn in Amsterdam half a year after his return from his second journey and he now thanks him for showing them such a great many rare objects. Cuper reports that he has written to Rome, Paris and various places in Germany about the things he found in De Bruyn's home. He now asks De Bruyn whether he will let him have "3 or 4 copies of the inscriptions consisting of unknown characters, which are all very alike" so that he can submit them to the judgement of skilled people. This is followed by an exchange of several letters on the incomprehensible inscriptions De Bruyn brought home with him from Persepolis, but, De Bruyn says, "no-one is able to propose an explanation of these characters. Nor does Your Honour's letter in reply to the copies I sent mention any".

Cuper, who has been eagerly awaiting the publication of the book, reports to Witsen on 7 August 1711 that it has finally come into his possession and that he is:

engaged in reading the same, but being in the country [at Oxen] I shall carefully examine what a learned man whom I have not the honour of knowing has written about Persepolis. The book pleases me quite well, and I delight greatly in the description and drawings of many curiosities.

But when in October 1712 Cuper acquires a booklet by the Chevalier de Chardin which also deals with the ruins of Persepolis, his critical instincts truly awaken. About the differences he finds in the two books he "proposes to write to that gentleman [De Bruyn] and to send the letter open to you [Witsen], so that you can see what my thoughts and views are". This gives rise to a hectic exchange of letters, about which Cuper also keeps his other correspondents scrupulously informed. Chardin's work is compared with Engelbert Kaempfer's *Amoenitates Exoticae* and a few papers by Herbert de Jager which, Witsen writes, "no-one has ever seen except the writer and myself". He then continues: "I did offer them to Sinjeur De Bruyn, but he declined to read them because he wished to be able to say that he had borrowed from no-one. On my advice he will now prepare a full reply to the points raised by you and, I believe, cause the same to be printed".

Two-and-a-half weeks previously De Bruyn had called on Cuper armed with a

reasoned list of remarks by way of reply to Cuper's criticism and by way of commentary on the books of Chardin and Kaempfer. At the same time he had announced that he intended to publish his remarks "to show the world that my work is truthful and that what others have issued is largely fictitious and possesses nothing of the age-old quality". The outcome of the polemic is the booklet *Aenmerkingen over the printverbeeldingen van de Overblijfselen van het oude Persepolis* (Amsterdam 1714), an exceptional pamphlet against the carelessness commonly displayed in the illustration of accounts of travels. Additionally it furnishes a clear picture of how illustrations for works of that kind could be produced and what the author's responsibility in the matter was.

Why Cuper was not sent a copy by De Bruyn is not clear. With some difficulty he finally got one through his bookseller in Amsterdam so that he could return the copy meanwhile provided him by Witsen. The airy manner in which he looks back on the affair and even seems to have forgotten Witsen's share does cause a little surprise:

Master de Bruyn therein very ably defends his record of ancient Persepolis against those published by Chardin and Kaemferus. I had already read it with great pleasure, the more so as I had previously corresponded with that observant gentleman traveller on the subject of various details of said remnants, including the beasts with a horn in their forehead about which you also write in your letter, and which we have not only discussed several times but which I also believe to exist in the world. [See Figure 4]

In the remainder of the letter Cuper's thoughts centre entirely on unicorns as he loses himself in "a little but not unscholarly booklet" by some unknown author on the subject.

There is one more reference to De Bruyn after the polemic in a letter to Witsen. The occasion was a passage from Volume 17 of the accounts of travels published by Pieter van der

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Aa dealing with a town in Turkey::

It is a pity that Sinjeur De Bruyn did not visit the place; had it been otherwise, we should assuredly have had some pictures thereof if the Turks had not prevented it. I have been told that this Traveller has for the third time set out upon a journey, and you would much oblige me if you would write to me what countries he now proposes to walk through.

Witsen promises that he will inquire, but "Master De Bruyn is beginning to be old and weak; I do not believe that he will undertake any more travels". After this, Cuper's and Witsen's letters are silent about Cornelis de Bruyn. He is mentioned just once in *Noord en Oost Tartarye* and then not as a writer, artist or explorer but as a distinguished traveller who saw storks near the river Jordan. It was apparently too late to incorporate his material.

## Conclusion

Cuper occupied a special position in the Republic of Letters. He was both a busy politician and an authority in the fields of archeology and numismatics. But what particularly set him apart was his mentality. Scholars were friends, not enemies, and he repeatedly fulminated against the excesses of some who were always quarrelling. Since he sought to advance learning, he acted as a sort of information clearing centre for the learned community. Anyone could come to him for the latest news in the field of scholarship. To his contemporaries he was "the oracle of the learned world" by virtue of his immense network of correspondents. Both his publications and his learned epistles are characterized by a peculiar form of their own, which mostly consists of brief, unrelated observations. At the same time Cuper always shows considerable powers of observation.

Witsen and Cuper therefore quite well complemented each other in their ambitions. Witsen was too fully occupied in his manifold duties to be able to correspond much but he did need to keep abreast of developments. Although the correspondence of the two men covers the period from 1683 until Cuper's death in 1716, the great majority of the letters was written in the last eight years, from 1708 onwards. In that year Cuper abandoned the more official medium of Latin, and Witsen, tormented by recurring bouts of depression, tried to finish his book on Tartary. From then on, the correspondence deals chiefly with themes in Witsen's field of interest. Relative to the subject-matter of the letters exchanged between them Cuper

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therefore increasingly became the curious outsider or amateur of letters. Witsen was the one who had done the research and who provided the answers. Cuper as antiquarian, on the other hand, had to help Witsen in order to furnish the historical context of his inquiries. Either man rewarded the other for his assistance: Witsen by going through his notes and sending them to Cuper together with copies or originals and by rendering services to some of Cuper's friends and relatives, Cuper by conducting literature studies for Witsen, by reading proofs of his publications and by advertising Witsen and his work through letters and journals. Their correspondence is a genuine specimen of a correspondence between amateurs of learning. Personal matters are omitted, their studies are pre-eminent. Cuper notably recorded his views on how geographic and ethnological inquiries ought to be structured. He drew up questionnaires which the people in the field were to employ in gathering the data. These questionnaires turn out to be a combination of what the learned men of the age already knew from contemporary intelligence and of knowledge from the Bible and from the writers of classical antiquity. The interpretation of the replies is wholly governed by the christian reformed view, however. From the letters thus emerge not so much acute thinkers as energetic doctrinaires in search of their truth. The case of the artist and

traveller Cornelis de Bruyn furnishes a good example: Witsen gives him letters of introduction and so enables him to travel; Cuper then attacks him for his results because the drawings in his book do not conform to those in other volumes. Which leads to the publication of a printed defence by De Bruyn.

Epistolary communication between scholars was essential both to stay well informed and to be taken seriously. It has therefore been argued that this type of correspondence was the predecessor of the learned journal. Certainly the published works of Witsen, Cuper and De Bruyn all owe much to elaborate exchanges of letters with specialists.