

MS221: A UNIQUE 17TH CENTURY SPANISH ATLAS

by Peter Barber, FSA, former Head of Maps at the British Library,
assisted by a member of our Library team, Magda Kowalczuk

Derrotero general del Mar del Sur, Desde las Californias hasta los Estrechos de Magallanes y San Vicente (MS 221) is a remarkable Spanish manuscript atlas, produced in 1669 in Panama. It covers the Western coasts of North and South America from California to the Straits of Magellan.

The 147 charts contain detailed pictorial representations of relief, towns, villages, harbours and fortifications - everything that would have been required by the authorities to assess the defence needs of some of Spain's wealthiest dominions. Also present are rivers, anchorages, shallows, navigational hazards, and - occasionally - soundings. Completed with expressions of distances and navigational notes, this information was enough to navigate the waters. This type of atlas was called a "*roteiro*" or, mangled into English, "rutter".



The provenance of MS 221 is unclear. An analysis of Library catalogues and records from the period suggests it came to the Society of Antiquaries sometime between 1816 and 1831, but no further evidence of its acquisition has been found. The only other known atlas like it is in the [Huntington Library](#) in California (MSS HM 918). Its provenance is well established. In the late 17th century, it was owned by [William Blathwayt](#) (bap. 1650, d. 1717), the influential and capable Secretary to the Committee of Plantations and Trade in the 1680s and '90s. It was sold by his descendants to the Huntington Library in the early 20th century. The Huntington volume has hitherto been assumed to be the one captured by the buccaneer [Henry Morgan](#) (c.1635-1688) during the plunder of Panama City in 1670, presented by him to the governor of Jamaica, [Sir Thomas Lynch](#) (d. 1684), and transmitted by Lynch to King [Charles II](#) before passing to [George Digby, Earl of Bristol](#) (1612-1677). Charles II, who had a lively interest in maritime charts, ordered the *roteiro* to be translated and copied. The printer and globe maker [Joseph Moxon](#) (1627-1691) produced the wonderful volume with original Spanish and English descriptions, which is now held in the Harley Collection in the [British Library](#) (Harley MS 4034).

However, comparative analysis of all three manuscripts – the Society's MS 221, Huntington's MS 918, and Harley's MS 4034 – suggests that Moxon was not copying exclusively from the Huntington atlas. Details on his maps and their characteristics imply he copied from a number of sources, or from another manuscript altogether.

Indeed, it is possible that the Society's volume was the one captured by Henry Morgan, that it subsequently passed into the hands of an old English family and that Blathwayte acquired a second copy, which was also consulted by Moxon. An alternative, and perhaps more likely, hypothesis is that the Society's *roteiro* was acquired by an enthusiastic Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries with an interest in Spanish literature in the chaos of the [Peninsular War](#), when Spanish libraries and state archives are known to have been pillaged and sold to collectors around Europe.



Regardless of the origins of the MS 221, acquisition of the information contained in the *roteiro* created in Panama in 1669 was to influence British history for the next 50 years. The text and charts provided the necessary detail to open up access for British merchants and the navigators whom they employed, to what they regarded as the most lucrative regions in the world, from which they had hitherto been barred. The chimera of wealth and profits beyond imagining from the "South Sea" (i.e. Pacific) trade subsequently prompted Britain's participation in the [Nine Years War](#) (1689-97), and the [War of the Spanish Succession](#) (1701-13), which led to Spain's official grant to Great Britain of permission to trade with its colonies - and ultimately to the speculative madness of the [South Sea Bubble](#) (1720-1).

The Huntington Library and Society of Antiquaries' versions of the *roteiro* are lavish presentation copies. It has not been possible to identify their intended recipients, though there are indications that the Society's volume may have been meant for an aristocrat who was also a Knight of Malta. The maps and charts, possibly drawn in more than one hand, are wonderfully executed in lush watercolours. There is mastery in the application of gold and silver leaf and specialist knowledge was required to

draw vessels in such a fine detail as those present in MS 221. Such drawings would quite often be executed by a separate artist, familiar with intricacies of the shipbuilding industry. Moreover, the Society's copy of the *roteiro* is executed on remarkably fine paper. All these elements bring into the picture this elusive workshop in Panama capable of such impressive productions that British draughtsmen, at the time, were not quite capable of matching.



Beautiful objects like the *roteiro* generate more questions than they answer. More work is required before there can be any rewriting of the story of the atlases and their English translations. However, inclusion of the Society's volume in the analysis opens a fresh comparative perspective. It may or may not add anything new to the story of British engagement in the area, but it will most definitely encourage many questions regarding the business of copying and interpreting the Spanish atlases that underpinned that engagement.