A Tibetan map of Sikkim

This map is a lithographed copy of the Tibetan original, which was twice this size and painted on cloth. The original map was seized by the British military during the 1888 conflict with Tibet over the borders of Sikkim (which the British wanted to make part of their Indian colonies). It was then lithographed at the Survey of India premises in Calcutta, where it was lithographed. The copy now held at the RGS-IBG was sent to London by the Survey of India, to be displayed at the 6th International Geographical Congress held at the RGS-IBG and the Imperial Institute in 1895. This map raises interesting questions about the hybrid form of “Indigenous” maps, especially given the fact that it is described as a “specimen of lithography” rather than a map. In its transformation from a unique Tibetan painting on cloth to a photolithographed copy on paper, overprinted with both British and Tibetan script, this map has become more readily amenable to incorporation within a Western map collection.

A Gujarati chart of the Red Sea

This chart of the Red Sea probably dates from the seventeenth century and it was used by a Gujarati pilot involved in trade and the transport of Muslim pilgrims to Jeddah during Hajj. Acquired by Alexander Burnes, an officer in the East India Company, it was presented in 1835 to the Royal Geographical Society. The chart depicts different kinds of ships, both Arabic as well as European in type, sailing along directional lines. The inscriptions on the chart are Gujarati, with some of them having been translated into English, possibly by Burnes himself.

The lithograph of the chart was produced to accompany an article written by Burnes and published in The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society, which accompanied Burnes’ donation of the chart to the RGS. Although the Red Sea chart is clearly recognisable on the lithograph, the dimensions of the chart have been drastically changed, thus making it less useful as a map. Comparing these two maps is interesting because we can insights into how non-western maps were regarded by institutions like the RGS-IBG: as curiosities, or, in this case, perhaps as works of art.

Trans-Saharan route maps

This collection of route maps was created by Arab slaves or traders and the British explorer Hugh Clapperton, who, between 1822 and 1827 took part in two expeditions to locate the source of the river Niger. Because these maps were created collaboratively, they bear witness to very particular moments of encounter and exchange, revealing the contribution of Indigenous people in a way many other maps in colonial collections do not.

A Japanese raincoat map

This is a tracing of a Japanese map, executed by Rutherford Alcock, who was the first British diplomatic representative to live in Japan. Donated to the RGS by Alcock in 1861, the map depicts the route from “Yeddo” (Tokyo) to Mount Fujiyama. Alcock used a traditional Japanese raincoat made from paper as a canvas for his tracing.
“Native” maps of Burma

These three maps belong to a collection of over 30 manuscripts and tracings donated to the RGS-IBG by John Coryton in 1875. Coryton was recorder of Moulmein at that time, and he was interested in finding the best trading route from Moulmein to western China, an area not yet surveyed in detail by the British. For this reason, he asked Burmese and Shan traders who were passing through Moulmein to draw him maps of this region, often including the routes they were travelling on themselves (we know this from an article Coryton published in the journal of the RGS-IBG, where he even mentions that some of these maps were drawn on the porch of his own house). These maps came to the RGS-IBG via the Survey of India in Calcutta, where some of them were copied onto tracing paper.

These maps bear traces of the process of their production. The different pens used and the inscriptions in both Burmese and English indicate that several people were involved in their production. The iconography includes both British and Burmese (rivers and mountains) symbols.