This book belongs to the most abundant, exotic and surprising fruits of Dutch learning in the Golden Age. Never before so much information about the vast inland parts of Eastern Europe and Asia had been brought together and presented in print. In the seventeenth century the remote areas of Inner Eurasia were still very unknown in the West and were called ‘Tartary’ or ‘Tartaria’, the lands were the ‘Tartars’, the nomadic peoples lived. Noord en Oost Tartarye (North and East Tartary) was written by the Amsterdam mayor and amateur scholar Nicolaas Witsen (1641-1717) and its first edition appeared in 1692. Five years earlier Witsen had stunned the international Republic of Letters with a large and detailed map of Tartary which for decades served as an example to other cartographers. His bulky book about the same subject was intended as a sort of explanation accompanying the map. It described the Crimea, the Caucasus, the lower and middle Volga-region, the Ural-mountains, Siberia, Mongolia, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Tibet, Manchuria, the islands and shores to the North of Japan, the Amur basin and Korea. Witsen enlarged and revised his book in 1705 and this second edition mentioned more than 9,500 different topographic objects.

Witsen, however, was not only interested in geography, he also dealt with the fauna, flora, minerals and antiquities that could be found in Inner Eurasia. He is the first writer to inform the public about such Siberian wonders like the hallucinating effects of certain mushrooms, the extinction of mammoths whose bodies had been preserved in the permafrost, indecipherable prehistoric rock inscriptions or splendid golden jewelry in ancient grave mounds. As ethnographer of Eurasian pastoralism Witsen had no match in his time. His book contained an amazing amount of details about hundreds of nomadic peoples. The written history of a number of such ethnic groups only started after Witsen had recorded their existence. By collecting samples of their vernaculars and of other totally unknown languages and scripts like Tangut (Tibetan) or Manchu he contributed to the fascinating beginnings of comparative linguistics.

Although in 1664-1665 Witsen had travelled to Moscow, he later never visited any of the countries he had put on his map or described in his book. As prominent Dutch statesman he was often overburdened with political duties and could only devote his spare leisure hours to scholarly hobbies. Nevertheless the sheer number and variety of sources he used in his research are impressive. He carefully studied classical, medieval and contemporary authors and also collected an enormous amount of unprinted and oral reports. He was a very rich man and willing to pay large sums for valuable information. His prominent position in politics and trade also enabled him to build a worldwide network of correspondents and assistants. As one of the directors of the VOC (East India Company) he could consult all important messages that came to Holland from Asia. Due to his pivotal role in Dutch-Russian relations and because of his friendship with tsar Peter the Great and other members of the Russian ruling elite Witsen received a wealth of data about Siberia and its adjacent areas that remained totally inaccessible to other geographers.

Perhaps nobody in the Western world was in a more fortunate position to acquire knowledge about Inner Eurasia. But it is not so obvious why Witsen, a privileged regent of a mercantile republic and seafaring nation, clung with such zeal and devotion to this specific task during fifty years of his life. The Dutch and other Western-Europeans had sailed all the oceans of the world, but had not penetrated into the harsh, sea locked and endless steppes of Eastern Europe and Asia. The activities of trading companies like the VOC remained limited to the opulent countries of the far more attractive Asian rim.
The author of Noord en Oost Tartarye, however, was not only driven by scientific curiosity and the desire to chart the unknown. He also tried to serve very practical purposes with his book by focusing on the relationship between empire building and economics. He described the subjugation of the nomads in Northern Asia by the Russians, the conquest of large parts of Mongolia by the Chinese and also the negotiations between Russia and China to end their border disputes. At the same time Witsen paid much attention to various groups of Inner Eurasian merchants, the products of their trade and the different itineraries they followed. Their activities seemed rather significant and proved that in the contacts between East and West the European caravel had not made the native caravan redundant. When in the future all the once so aggressive nomads had been effectively pacified, the roads would become safe for travel. Such developments might create unheard opportunities for long-distance trade over land and could have very negative consequences for the VOC.

Unfortunately, the extremely prudent and meticulous Witsen had been so aware of the preliminary and tentative character of his investigations that he had prevented the sale of Noord en Oost Tartarye in Dutch bookshops. He therefore failed to convince his contemporaries of the economic potential of Tartary and by posterity he was never properly honored for his pioneering studies. His book was not translated in German, English or French and became a bibliographic rarity. In the West, where Inner Eurasia remained a rather neglected field of study, it was only consulted by a few specialists. Also in the Netherlands hardly anybody took the pains to analyze the content and acknowledge the value of Noord en Oost Tartarye. J.F.Gebhard, who in 1881-1662 published a full scale biography of Witsen, even depicted him as a far from brilliant administrator and scholar. Although recently the versatility and the global scope of his intellectual endeavors and his amazing activities as a collector were elucidated in a number of Dutch publications, his unique position as the first great student of Inner Eurasia remained underexposed.

Only in Russia Witsen’s reputation continued to be very high. He had dedicated his map and book to Peter the Great and copies of both were available in the library of the Academy of Sciences founded by this tsar. Professors of this institution were not seldom of German descent and could read some Dutch. In the eighteenth century a luminary like Gerhard Friedrich Müller used Witsen’s work intensively for his famous history of Siberia. Historians and ethnographers of the nineteenth century discovered that Witsen had used many Russian sources that had got lost and Noord en Oost Tartarye was praised by them ‘as the most remarkable book about Asiatic Russia ever written by a foreigner’. Even in the Soviet period Witsen was seen as a trailblazer who with a sort of encyclopedic study had ‘opened up a new era in the study of Siberia’. Nowadays he is respectfully mentioned on many Russian local websites as the first who reported on their town, province, nationality or language.

In the beginning of this century Russian and Dutch historians co-operated in the so called ‘Witsen Project’ to prepare a Russian edition of Noord en Oost Tartarye. In 2010 the Amsterdam publishing house Pegasus printed the results of their work in three books. The first two included the translation of the whole text and all the illustrations from the two volume edition of 1705. A third volume (of 579 pages) contained introductory articles along with notes, indexes and other explanatory materials. Most copies of this Pegasus edition have been distributed as a present of the Dutch government to institutions and libraries in the Russian Federation and other states of the former USSR.

The enthusiast reactions of the recipients and also the positive reviews in scholarly journals proved that Witsen’s book is still considered to be a treasure-trove for historians, ethnographers, archeologists and linguists. Since only 500 copies were printed of the edition of 2010 the Russian translation is still inaccessible.
to many of its potential readers. They often live in remote parts of Siberia, Central Asia and Mongolia. For these people as well as for their colleagues in the West Russian is still the lingua franca of their profession. This digital version makes the Russian edition for the first time available to all who want to consult it.

The Dutch original of Noord en Oost Tartarye has already been presented on the internet before. However, searching the 736,406 words of Witsen’s book in a scanned or digitalized format is still a time-consuming task, because the author and his sources spelled names and concepts in the most diverse ways. Therefore the comprehensive indexes of persons, geographical names, ethnic group, sources and objects which accompany the text in this bilingual edition are indispensable tools of research. The user of this site also has access to high resolution images of Witsen’s big map of 1687 and of all the illustrations in the various editions of Noord en Oost Tartarye. It is impossible to understand this extremely complicated seventeenth-century work of scholarship without any knowledge of its Dutch back-round and the often Russian origin of its data. Therefore in the Dutch and the Russian introductions the meaning and topicality of Witsen’s object of study, the circumstances under which he collected his materials and performed his research are explained as well as the history of the reception of his map and book.

Prof. Dr. B. Naarden