

Formosa's Origin and Linschoten's Rutters (1540s-1580s)

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ABSTRACT

The Dutch author and navigator Jan Huyghen van Linschoten, while being the secretary of the archbishop of Portuguese India in the 1580s, took advantage of his position to accumulate a large amount of valuable and secret Portuguese and Spanish “roteiros”/rutters, and shared this information with many in Europe through the publication of his *Reys-gheschrift vande navigatien der Portugaloyzers in Orienten* in 1595. The appearance of this book and its several European translations encouraged many Dutch and later other Europeans to venture into Asia and enter the race for trade and colonization. To some extent, it also hastened the decline of the Portuguese and Spanish overseas empires. Some rutters in the book dated between the 1540s and the 1580s recorded voyages which passed by the northern or southern tips of the main island of Taiwan, the sightings of which they often recorded as these were important landmarks along the voyages. In the interest of sorting out the different legends and the true history related to the naming of Taiwan as “Formosa/Fermosa/Fremosa/Hermosa” Island (literally “Beautiful Island” in Portuguese or Spanish, modern or archaic), these rutters constitute useful 16th-century first-hand sources. After a brief introduction on the author Linschoten and his various books on navigation issued in the 1590s, this article analyses a total of seven relevant rutters from *Reys-gheschrift* in an attempt to determine both their recording dates and their contents related to Taiwan, and, finally, examines these rutters in the contexts of Portuguese and other European maps and some other supplementary primary sources to ascertain the history of the origin and timing of the name “Formosa”. Conclusions thus put forward differ somewhat in terms of timing from the prevailing legends on the matter, and, in particular, the “revisionist” views postulated recently by some which credited the naming to the Spanish instead of the Portuguese.

Keywords: Formosa/“The Beautiful Island”/Taiwan, Jan Huyghen van Linschoten, *Reys-*

gheschrift vande navigatien der Portugaloyzers, Portuguese in Asia, Rutters/
“roteiros”, Age of Discovery