

The Benyovszky Map of 1772

The comments below refer to a map discovered by a member of the Warsaw-based Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization. An article, along with an image of the map, was published in 2013 in 'Geographia Polonica', Vol.86, Issue 2, pp.171-173, by Małgorzata Bandzo-Antkowiak ('MBA').

The article and map are available on-line at:

http://rcin.org.pl/igipz/Content/33941/WA51_51248_r2013-t86-no2_G-Polonica-Bandzo-An.pdf

The following observations concerning the map itself are based solely on the on-line image of the map; the physical map has not been viewed.

1. What is it?

This is a map, bearing the date 1772, and the signature of Morič Benyovszky, which claims to show the voyage of the ship *St Peter and St Paul* during the escape of Benyovszky and his companions from Kamchatka to Macao in 1771.

The map bears a dedication to the Duc d'Aiguillon, at that time Minister for Foreign Affairs in the French government. Benyovszky met d'Aiguillon in Paris in the summer of 1772, just after his arrival in France (July) in the company of 25 fellow-escapees; he was trying to persuade the Minister to fund a trading voyage to the Far East (or, later, to Madagascar).

According to the author of the article (MBA), the map had been discovered during a project to digitise the Polish Scientific Institutes. It was found in the library of the Polish Academy of Sciences or of the University of Warsaw.

Down in the bottom left of the map is a rubber-stamped mark; the legend is unclear, but it seems to be the stamp of the bureau or office 'des Affaires Étrangères'; there may well be a date in there as well, but the words are impossible to read on the digital image. MBA identifies this as a stamp dating from the 20th century: if that is the case then how, as MBA herself asks, did it end up in Warsaw?

The map is according to MBA printed on a type of paper that was commonly used by the Dutch firm Blaeu, map-makers since the 1670s. MBA makes the rather outlandish suggestion that Benyovszky could have made this map while still on board his ship; that he could have picked up suitable Blaue-type paper in Batavia. Leaving aside the very simple fact that Benyovszky went nowhere near Batavia (and never even claimed to have done so), the idea that the escapee spent idle days on the voyage making a map are, to say the least, a little far-fetched: or, to put it another way, Benyovszkian.

The map measures 140cms wide and 90cms tall. In the top left-hand quadrant is a dedicatory 'cartouche'. This reads (complete with spelling errors) :

*Carte de la Mer Oriental du Nord
entre les Costes de l'Amerique Occidentale
et celles de la Tartarie Orientale, avec les Isles Nouvelle
decouvert dedié á Monseigneur le duc D'aiguillon
Paire de France Ministre et Secretaire d'Etat
par M. maurice Auguste de Benjovszky*

The word '*Novelle*' is just that – but should probably be '*Novellemen*'. (Just who had recently discovered these 'islands' is not stated – but presumably one is to suppose it was Benyovszky himself?)

The printing of this dedication is of rather variable size and quality. The words following '*dedie*' in fact seem to be hand-written; certainly the final two lines are hand-written. It leaves one with the impression that the map could readily have been dedicated to someone else, if d'Aiguillon did not concede what Benyovszky wanted of him.

2. What does it show?

The map has two components. Firstly the underlying coloured geographical map of the North Pacific Ocean, stretching from North America on the right (120° west) across beyond the Philippines on the left (100° east); and from the Bering Straits (65° north) at the top, to the Mariana/Ladrones Islands (10° north) at the foot. The (French) names of islands, peninsulas and other major land-features are written by hand on the relevant parts of the map. Also marked on the map are the Tropic of Cancer and a longitudinal line denoting 180° from Paris (slightly offset from the present-day recognised 180° meridian).

The second component is a hand-drawn black line on the background map, which shows the route taken by Benyovszky's ship, between Kamchatka and Macao. The line is quite faint, compared to the coloured background. It seems to be a dotted line; it is labelled, for much of its length, with the words '*Route Suivie Par la Galliotte Saint Pier [sic] en 1771 Commandé Par maurice auguste de Benyovszky*', and towards the end '*Suite de la meme Route*'. In two places, firstly near the Aleutian Islands and then again to the east of Japan, the line is replaced by a wavy line marked with the words '*Coups de Vent*' (strong winds). At various points along the line there appear larger dots, which presumably indicates places where readings were taken with an octant or sextant to establish the ship's position. Around 72 of these dots are visible on the map; given that the ship left Kamchatka on 23 May and arrived in Macao on 22 September – 123 days in total – these dots obviously do not consistently mark daily positions.

MBA suggests that the route marked on the map was based on the co-ordinates provided by Benyovszky himself, of his daily positions. Almost certainly, that is the case.

There are two major difficulties here, however. Firstly, as with all sailors in the 18th century, Benyovszky had no accurate means of determining his longitudinal position. It was a global problem, never resolved for ordinary sailors until well into the 19th century. What ocean sailors tended to do was to attempt to establish their position relative (east or west) to the position of their last port, by using various error-prone tricks. In Benyovszky's case, the last port would have been Bolsheretsk. However, even the methods of determining this relative longitude were problematic, and rarely accurate. For the latitudinal positions, things were much easier, just as long as one had a proper instrument – sextant or octant – and the training in how to use it; Benyovszky possessed the former, but not necessarily the latter. And, as MBA notes, even the co-ordinates provided by Benyovszky himself in his memoirs do not always tie in with the co-ordinates plotted on the map: for example, he claimed to have been at 65° 20' north, which is north of St Lawrence Island – but his route drawn on this map clearly passes no further north than 61°.

The second major difficulty is that Benyovszky's own account of where he had been shifted quite dramatically across the years. Even within a couple of weeks of reaching Macao, his story varied enormously. Indeed, the story that he had sailed to Alaska appeared only at a much later date. And he had refused point-blank to share any of his ship's log with anyone else at Macao, so we have no way of verifying anything in the log.

Since we are considering difficulties, what is the meaning of the wavy lines denoting ‘strong winds’? There are two of these, both of considerable length. The first appear within the Aleutian Island chain, just before the island marked as ‘Urumusir’. According to Benyovszky’s ‘Memoirs’, the ship landed at Urumusir on 19th June 1771; there had been a strong gale for a day or two just before that. But ... according to the ‘Memoirs’, these winds were encountered only across half a degree (30’) of longitude; and at that latitude, this was barely 40 kilometres, and certainly not the distance indicated on the map. The second ‘strong wind’ appears as the ship approached the ‘Isle de Liqueur’; the ‘Memoirs’ suggest this would be 13th to 16th July – but, according to the ‘Memoirs’, the ship had encountered no winds of any great strength. Why, then, these two sets of wavy lines? It is very peculiar.

In 1904, the British historian and retired naval officer, Pasfield Oliver published an edition of Benyovszky’s ‘Memoirs’. In this edition, he included a map which had four routes marked on it, of Benyovszky’s voyage from Kamchatka as far as the seas west of Japan. These were: [1] his ‘true course’ as defined by a man named Izamilov, who described the early part of the voyage to Captain Cook in 1778; [2] the route according to Benyovszky’s longitude and latitude records; [3] the route according to Benyovszky’s own recorded ‘bearings’ in his ‘Memoirs’; and [4] his route according to his record of places visited. Leaving aside [1], which simply follows the line of the Kuril Islands south-westwards, the routes of [2], [3] and [4] are remarkably divergent. And even [2] – based on co-ordinates – does not follow the same line as that marked out on the Warsaw map. Which effectively means that there are four different versions (disregarding [1]) of Benyovszky’s own recorded voyage.

Who to believe?

3. What places are marked?

The rational solution would be to assume that none of Benyovszky’s own positional or ‘bearing’ information can be relied on; and to take as trustworthy only the route which is based on the names of places visited. However, as with all early voyages in unknown seas, the nomenclature of many different places, especially the islands, is fraught with difficulty. Probably not until the late 19th century were the names of far-flung places recorded with any consistency. On this Warsaw map, one can select almost any island at random and then puzzle over the name given to it. ‘*Isles des Castors*’ in the Aleutians? ‘*Isle des Vaches*’ just south of Bering Island? ‘*Isle des Roches*’ somewhere south-east of Japan? ‘*Isle d’Hongrie*’ is marked in amongst the Japanese islands – but it is a safe bet that the Japanese did not name it in honour of Benyovszky’s native land. Or what about the unnamed, and relatively huge, ‘*Isles decouvertes par les Russes en 1769*’ – why do these have no name? (And indeed, why is one of these islands marked solely as ‘*Terre vue en 1771*’?)

And yet sometimes places are marked with a degree of accuracy. Take for example, the ‘*Isle Sado*’ which is on the map nestled in a vast bay on the north coast of central Japan. Happily, the island of Sado exists, and is more or less just there. ‘*Nangasaki*’ is also clearly marked, in a position that makes sense for Nagasaki. ‘*Isle Kumaschir*’ is marked more or less in the position of Kunashir Island, the southernmost of the Kurils. However, the entire shape and size of Japan is wildly inaccurate.

Elsewhere, the relative positions of known places such as the Philippines, the Mariana Islands, Beijing and so on, are marked with reasonable accuracy. Even the ‘*Isles du Renard*’, the Fox Islands within the Aleutian chain are marked with some degree of plausibility. On the other hand, the west coast of North America is understandably rather vaguely outlined and labelled – for example as ‘*Terre ferme d’Amerique Nomée alaksa Par les Sauvages*’ or ‘*Coste Par les Russes decouverte depuis 1741*’.

But where there is an enormous difficulty is in the placement of the dozens of islands. These are spread out quite haphazardly across the map between the south-western tip of Alaska in the north-east down to the northernmost tip of the Mariana Islands in the south. Even allowing for Benyovszky's uncertainty as to the relative position of these islands, the sheer number is perplexing. One can allow that the many Aleutian Islands, stretching out in a narrow chain some 2,000 kms long and not more than 150 kms wide, would have caused difficulty in setting them out on a map: in the Warsaw map, they occupy a rectangle of about 3,000 kms by 2,000 kms. But then we have the problematic ones – the unnamed ones discovered by the Russians in 1769, for example; or the extraordinary archipelago of smallish islands lying south-east of Japan, including such places as '*Isle Dangereuse*', several '*Volcans*' and the '*Isles des Jardins*'. Where these are placed – scattered almost as far east as the 180° longitude – is what is actually endless blank ocean. Yes, there is a chain of volcanic islands (the Izu Islands) stretching south of Yokohama for about 250 kms; but that is not where they are placed on this map.

And finally there is the infamous '*Isle de Liqueur*', the paradise island discovered by Benyovszky and left behind with considerable regret. On the Warsaw map, this is placed east of Japan, at perhaps 150° east and at a latitude of about 33° north. Without going too much into detailed arguments on this, it is clear that this place never existed except in the pages of Benyovszky's 'Memoirs'. What it might have been, in name only, was an island in the Ryukyu archipelago, which stretches for 1,000 kms south between Kyushu and Taiwan (Formosa). Perhaps not coincidentally, in a map of 1752 by the French cartographer Nicolas Bellin, the Ryukyu islands are labelled '*Isles de Liqueur*'. Benyovszky's map does not name the archipelago, however, just three groups of islands in the relevant position – '*Isles du Japon*', '*Isles des Rois*' and '*Isles Usmaku*' – although other islands placed close to Taiwan are arguably also part of that chain.

4. Cartographical problems

If we accept that Benyovszky's map is inaccurate, as far as concerns names, distances and relative positions of islands, two more problems arise. Of the many places shown on the map, how did he know (a) where they were and (b) what they looked like cartographically?

Take, as one example, the general layout, shape and size of Japan. It does not look much like any Japan that we know of today. It looks nothing like the Japan on Bellin's map, made some 20 years earlier – even though Bellin's map is scarcely accurate in shape either. But Benyovszky must have based his map on some pre-existing one. How else to explain how he knew of the relative location, shape and name of (for example) Sado Island, or the position of Beijing, places he went nowhere near? How, in short, did he know of the names and locations of all the many places he simply did not visit?

There are some clues to what original map (or maps) he used. To begin with, we must suppose that the map was readily available in Paris in 1771; if it was not for the fact that it bears no resemblance to Bellin's map, then Bellin would be a likely candidate. Another map, which was published by Robert Sayer of London in 1778, was itself based on maps prepared by Russian explorers such as Bering in the earlier part of the century; these Russian maps might also have been available in France. Alternatively, a map might have been made available to him on the six-month voyage from Macao to France in the first half of 1771 – the captain (M. de St Hilaire) of the ship which took him would certainly have carried some charts of the Far Eastern seas.

Another clue is an annotation on the Warsaw map itself, marking a frontier line drawn east-to-west across mainland Asia; it reads: '*Limites de la Tartarie Russe 1763*'. Perhaps, then, a Russian map dated 1763? There may be other clues on the map: the names of native peoples of the Russian Far East are

placed strategically – ‘*Peuples Gilaky*’, ‘*Peuples Tungusy*’, ‘*Peuples Coukesy*’; even these [mis-]spellings of the native names could be indicative?

Until the original map or maps can be identified, it is difficult to know for sure just how wildly inaccurate – or not – was Benyovszky’s positioning of myriad island groups. That is a task for a geographer. But since the map came to light in 2013, that task has either not been undertaken, or has yielded no noteworthy results.

5. What does the map prove?

Sadly, nothing. The fact that a route is marked out on a map tells us nothing about the authenticity of the route. It may, on the other hand, tell us a little about the trustworthiness of the cartographer. Indeed, its existence raises far more questions than it answers. While the map is a fascinating antique, and worthy of careful preservation and study, it cannot be more than that. The optimism of MBA that perhaps the map could establish whether Benyovszky was a ‘maker of new discoveries’ seems – for the moment, at least – misplaced.

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