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CACTUS, a Document Management System to Support the Archaeological and Historical Research of San Juan, a Plantation on Curaçao

Abstract: The CACTUS document management and analysis system was developed to aid the historical and archaeological research of San Juan, a plantation on Curaçao. The main task of the CACTUS system is providing access to more than 2000 digitized documents that belong to the “Letters and Papers” collection of the second Dutch West India Company roughly dating to the period 1700–1740. The advantage of the CACTUS system is that it is possible to query the documents on a very detailed level, as all occurring names of people, places and ships are indexed and searchable in several ways. In addition, a tool has been developed to detect the existence of relationships between the indexed subjects.

Introduction

Colonies, plantations and slavery have gained the interest of the archaeological community considerably in the decades since the 1970s. Historians had been researching these topics previously, but archaeological research was only deemed useful to fill in blank spots in history. Since then, historical or post-medieval archaeology has developed into a mature sub-discipline.

The inhabitants of the Lower Countries were important players in the overseas trading business. In the 17th century several world-wide trading companies were established, such as the Dutch East India Company (D.E.I.C.) and Dutch West India Company (D.W.I.C.). The Netherlands Antilles, conquered by the D.W.I.C., are also still part of the Kingdom of The Netherlands. Mutual heritage, above and within the ground, remains a testament to the early colonial era.

Curaçao was the main transit trade port of the D.W.I.C. in the Caribbean in the 17th and most of the 18th century. During the 17th century Curaçao developed into an important slave station. Most slaves that arrived on Curaçao were shipped to other destinations outside of Curaçao except slaves that were ill (“manquerons”), who were sold by auction to local traders and plantation owners. In 1700, there were about 30 plantations on the island, of which 20 were privately owned. 2500 slaves worked on the plantations while the whole population of Curaçao at that time numbered approximately 3500 people.

The CACTUS system was originally built to aid the archival research into the history of San Juan (Sint

Jan). Early on it was decided to extend the document database and to incorporate all governmental correspondence. Currently, the CACTUS system incorporates ten volumes of papers, each consisting of several hundred documents. In total, 8000 pages have been digitized and indexed, containing thousands of individual names of people, places and ships.

The Plantation San Juan

The plantation San Juan is approximately 657 ha in size and is situated on Bandabao, the western half of Curaçao. Its boundaries are the Caribbean Sea to the south; plantation Groot Santa Martha and the hamlet Klein Sint Jan to the west; to the north the main road and in the east the plantation Cas Abao, formerly known as Engelenberg. The plantation encompasses a large shallow inland bay. The coastline consists mainly of limestone cliffs. There are four possible landing areas that are accessible by small ships. Under water, parallel to the coast, lies a sandy platform about 6–12 m below surface, extending up to 30 m from the shore. Seawards, the platform drops down steeply. Here a coral reef has developed, providing a habitat for an abundance of corals, sponges, crustaceans, fish, shellfish, turtles, sharks and rays. Larger ships can anchor off the coastal platform. Along the coast, several places are suitable for anchoring seafaring ships. Several major drainage arroyos run through the plantation landscape. In the south the terrain is hilly; to the north it becomes flatter. Several soil types and geologic formations are present within the current plantation boundaries.

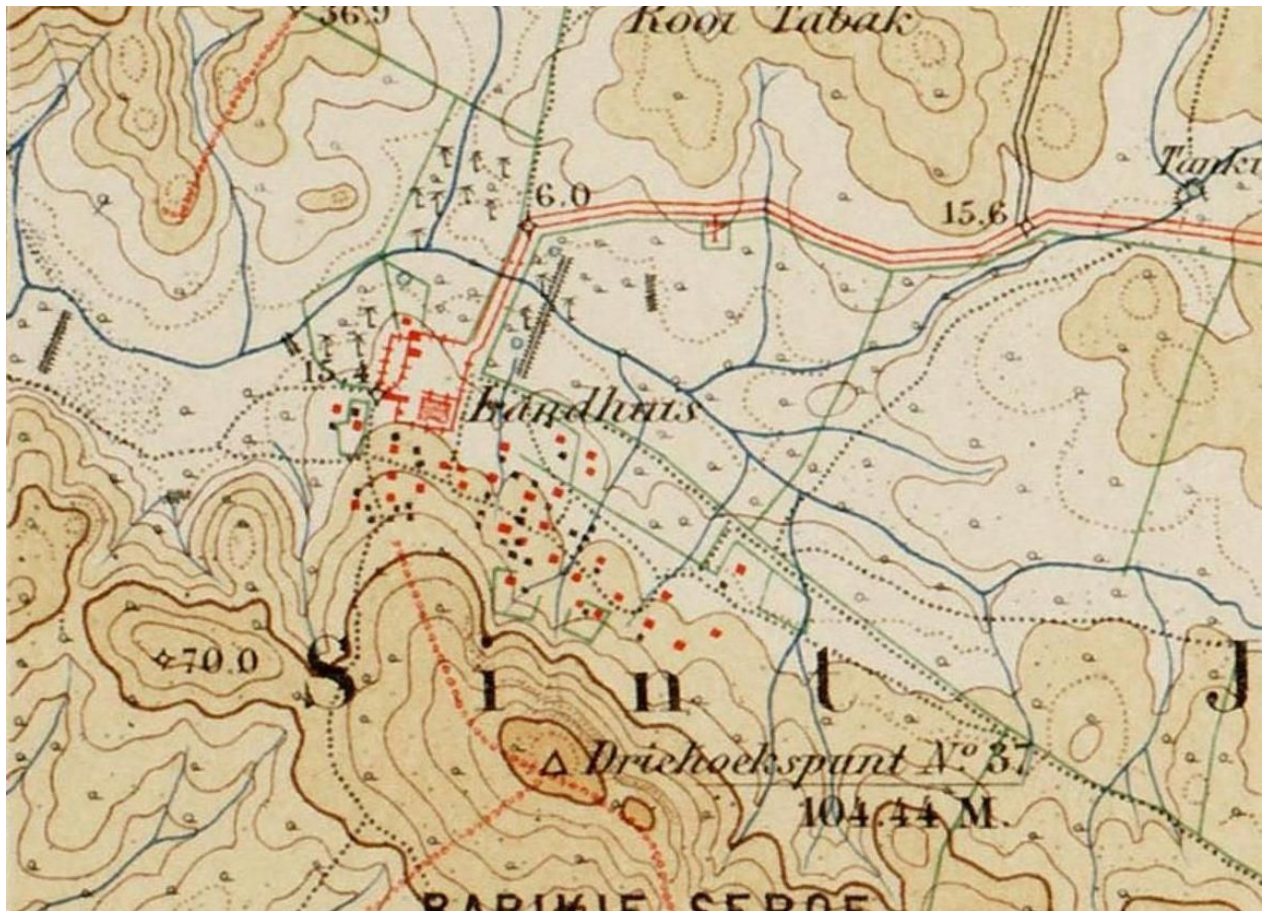


Fig. 1. The central area of plantation San Juan in the early 20th century (Werbata map (kaartblad V). Collection KITLV Leiden. Photo by author).

San Juan was one of the large privately owned plantations on Curaçao (Fig. 2). It was founded by vice-director Matthias Beck prior to 1662 (VAN GROEL 1947). Of interest is the fact that the area of the plantation San Juan was already inhabited by Amerindians prior to the arrival of the Spanish. Amerindians decorated a rockshelter with paintings. A very large Ceramic Age settlement was inhabited at Tera Pretu. After the Spanish came to Curaçao in 1499, a small village was built close to the current plantation house. This village is also mentioned in the report of Johannes van Walbeek concerning the conquest of Curaçao. A 17th century printed map shows the location of the village of San Juan: San Juan “verdestrueert” (destroyed).

Secondly, there is an abundance of archival records concerning this plantation. These include two detailed early 18th century manuscript maps, one of which was previously undiscovered. On both maps, the location of the first slave settlement is recorded. This site was previously unknown.

These maps were made to aid in a legal procedure between the Widow Apero van der Hoeven and her neighbour, Mattias Brugman of Engelenberg. The existence of these plantation maps is exceptional. Only one other manuscript map detailing plantation boundaries on Curaçao was found by us, but it is much less detailed than the San Juan maps. Maps of the whole island, especially maps showing the exact boundaries of the different estates, were not available until the late 19th or early 20th century when Werbata was commissioned with mapping the island. Plantation owners did not allow investigation into their affairs. Governor Du Fajj complains in a letter to the Board in Amsterdam that a land surveyor was stoned when trespassing on private property. Other surveyors had to flee the island.

A third aspect that makes San Juan one of the more interesting plantations on Curaçao is the fact that most of the original plantation landscape has been preserved, as well as the largest Ceramic Age settlement of Curaçao. The Spanish settlement has



Fig. 2. Early 20th century photograph of San Juan plantation (Schoolplate nr. 156 Plantage op Curaçao, by Kleynenberg & Co, Haarlem. Photo by author).

not been located yet. San Juan has been owned by members of one family, the Schotborghs, for more than 200 years and remains virtually unchanged by later developments. In 2006 and 2007, field surveys were conducted and many interesting features documented. The report of the research into plantation San Juan is forthcoming as a masters thesis.

The Archived Documents

The time period of interest stretches from the present to about 360 years ago. From approximately 1640 onwards, many documents of different nature have been produced by the owners and employees of the D.W.I.C. related to the island of Curaçao. There are also extant many letters from Spanish and French subjects complaining to their patria about their misgivings towards the privateers from the Lower Countries invading their colonies. These documents finally found their way into the national archives of Spain, France, Great Britain and the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, unfortunately, the D.W.I.C. archives have been badly preserved. In 1821, an overzealous civil servant sold more than 1000 kg of the archive as waste paper and in 1844 a fire destroyed some more. The remaining collection can be measured in metres, of which a large part consists of letters, cash registers, tax documents, inventories and legal docu-

ments. These were sent by the local government of Curaçao to Amsterdam, where the board of directors of the D.W.I.C., the Lords XIX, was established. These documents have been used in several historic studies (EMMER 2000; RENKEMA 1981; DEN HEIJER 2002).

The documents that we concentrate on are part of the archives of what is known as the *second* D.W.I.C. (1674–1794). The first D.W.I.C went into financial disrepair in 1674, and their archives are in an even more deplorable state than those of its successor.

The Carribean islands Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao were managed by the governor who was assisted by a council. The governor wrote regularly letters to the Chamber in Amsterdam and when a ship left the harbour, the governor finished his letter with an exhaustive section to pray for the good fortune and health of his masters. He added all relevant enclosures, and handed this sealed package to the captain of the departing ship. A typical letter of the governor would run to about 25 pages, and sometimes more than 20 enclosures would have been added. In addition, the council members sent out letters, especially the commissioner of the slave trade. When these packages of letters arrived in Amsterdam, they were copied at least five times and distributed to the five Chambers that ruled the D.W.I.C. It is among these packages, letters and other documents that we have been searching for information about the San Juan plantation and their owners and inhabitants.

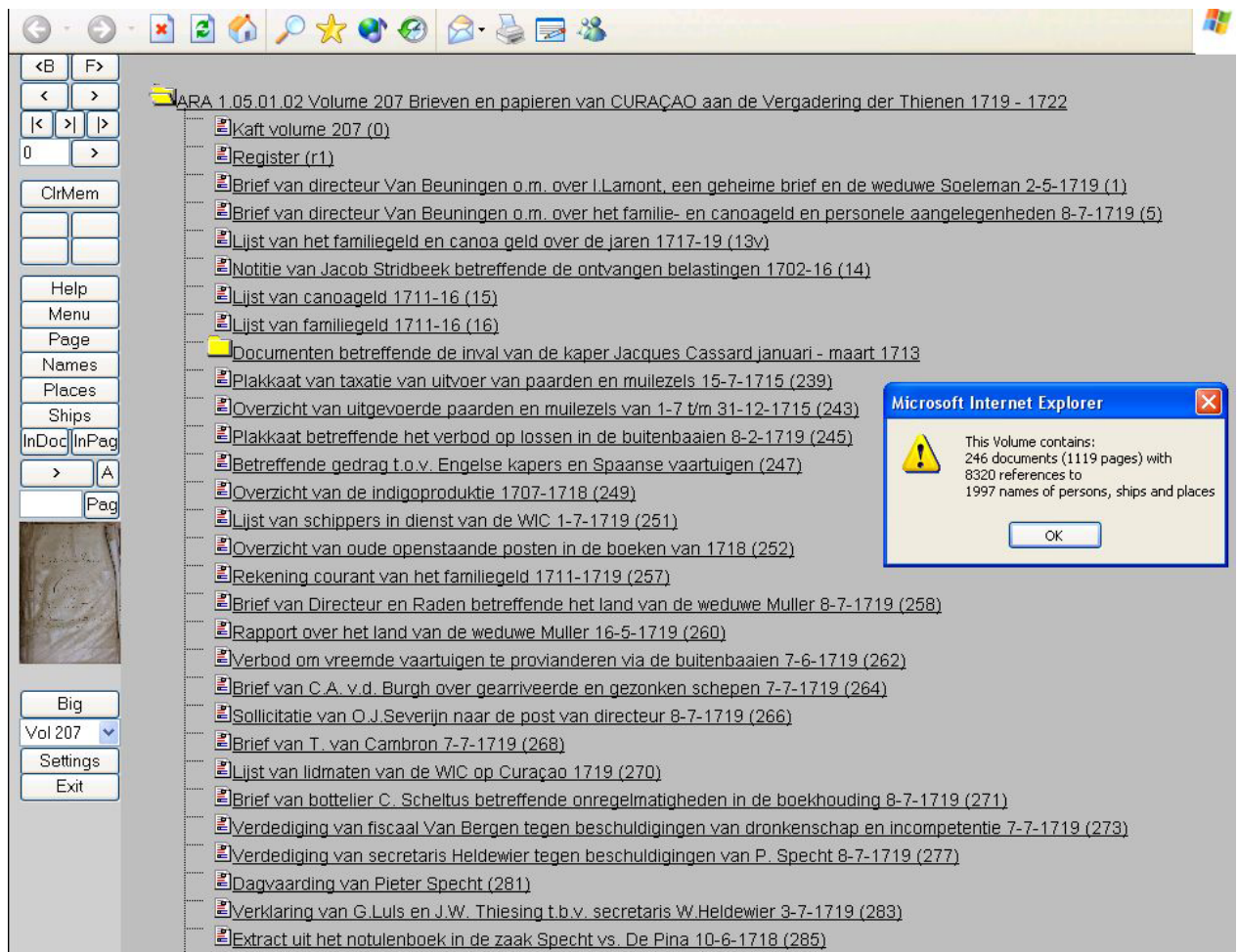


Fig. 3. The Menu page of the CACTUS system.

The CACTUS Information System

The CACTUS information system was designed to access and analyse digitized documents from the National archives (RA 1.05.02.01, volumes 200–212), related to the plantation San Juan. The conflict between its owners and their neighbours about the boundaries of their plantations and the access to waterpits is well documented. Some of the current remains in the Curaçao landscape can still be linked to the historic descriptions. Originally, the system was designed only for documents relating to San Juan. However, it soon became clear that the material had such a rich information content that it was decided to broaden the scope and to incorporate all documents from this part of the D.W.I.C. archive. Currently about 2000 documents have been added to the system (8000 pages) and the final system will contain about 2500 documents (10,000 pages).

The CACTUS system consists of an HTML user interface (Fig. 3) with embedded JavaScript (about 1200 lines of code). The data consist of greyscale .jpg files (one file/page) 800 pixels wide, and, for each individual volume, an .xml file containing the volume meta data: the titles of the documents and which pages they consist of, and all names of persons, ships and (geographical) places and on which page(s) they appear.

The left part of the screen consists mainly of buttons for the navigation, and data entry fields for page numbers and search texts. When the system is started, the main page will show the Menu, an overview of the documents in the volume. On an average there are about 240 documents in a volume. As 95 % of the documents are written in Dutch (Spanish, French, Portuguese and English also occur), it was decided that the titles of the documents would also be presented in Dutch. One can use the ^F function to search for particular keywords in the titles.

Fig. 4. Part of an index page.

As all the documents have been indexed, one may also search in the names index. The system currently contains 44,000 references to approximately 6000 names. The indexes are presented in denormalized format: not only the numbers of the pages on which a name appears are shown, but also the names of the documents (Fig. 4). A special quick jump key assists the user to jump directly from one page to another containing the selected name.

The CACTUS system also contains analysis functionality: names that co-occur in the same documents are counted, so that a relational network between people, places (e.g. specific plantations) and ships can be quickly detected. See for example Fig. 5. Here the subject of investigation is Captain Caspar Keijsbergh, whose name appears in eight documents. Highest in the list of related names is the ship Agatha which on closer inspection is revealed to be his own ship. Second in the list is Jan Noorman, his steersman. In short, this analysis function immediately shows the important links between all individuals, be it family relations, commercial relations or any other.

Further Developments

For about a year, the software has been stable and has not been developed any further. The last enhancement was an Options screen to indicate whether certain spelling variants should be ignored or not (e.g. is mr. Kok the same as mr. Cock, etc.) when doing queries. Recently, a new project in cooperation with the Curaçao Historic Archive was started to process the foreign correspondence of the Governor between 1830 and 1880, an especially interesting period because of the instabilities in South America at that time, and the important role of Curaçao in these developments.

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Keijsbergh, captn. Caspar (73)
appears in 8 documents (of 246 in total)

Overview of other names that appear in the same documents

44

ClrMem

Help
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Names
Places
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> Keijsbergh
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56 4x Agatha, schip de Lijst van kosten en leveranties t.b.v. de strijd tegen Cassard 1713 [50](#) [60](#) Volk van Capitein Keijsbergh van schip de Agatha jan/feb 1713 [76v](#) Taxatie van de burgers om een bedrag van 150.000 stukken van achten te vinden 9-3-1713 [87v](#) Overzicht van oude openstaande posten in de boeken van 1718 [256](#)

40 2x Noorman, opperstuurman Jan Lijst van kosten en leveranties t.b.v. de strijd tegen Cassard 1713 [50](#) Volk van Capitein Keijsbergh van schip de Agatha jan/feb 1713 [76v](#) [77](#)

39 2x Noorman, Theunis (Theniau) de Volk van Capitein Keijsbergh van schip de Agatha jan/feb 1713 [77](#) Debet/credit rekeningen van de getaxeerde burgers en andere partijen [172v](#)

37 1x Abrahamse, Claas Volk van Capitein Keijsbergh van schip de Agatha jan/feb 1713 [77](#)

37 1x Tuanes Volk van Capitein Keijsbergh van schip de Agatha jan/feb 1713 [76v](#)

37 1x Galls, onderstuurman Dirck Volk van Capitein Keijsbergh van schip de Agatha jan/feb 1713 [76v](#)

37 1x Jacobs, Wouter Volk van Capitein Keijsbergh van schip de Agatha jan/feb 1713 [76v](#)

37 1x Zeeman, meester Pieter Volk van Capitein Keijsbergh van schip de Agatha jan/feb 1713 [76v](#)

37 1x Orjoun, zeilmaker Jan Volk van Capitein Keijsbergh van schip de Agatha jan/feb 1713 [76v](#)

37 1x Jacobs, Barent Volk van Capitein Keijsbergh van schip de Agatha jan/feb 1713 [76v](#)

37 1x Jans, Zivert Volk van Capitein Keijsbergh van schip de Agatha jan/feb 1713 [76v](#)

37 1x Gerbrants, onderstuurman Pieter Volk van Capitein Keijsbergh van schip de Agatha jan/feb 1713 [76v](#)

37 1x Teunissen, Jan Volk van Capitein

24 6x Chaves, Abraham de Lijst van kosten en leveranties t.b.v. de strijd tegen Cassard 1713 [31v](#) [35v](#) [42](#) [47v](#) [55v](#) Lijst van kosten van de strijd tegen Cassard jan/feb 1713 [78v](#) Taxatie van de burgers om een bedrag van 150.000 stukken van achten te vinden 9-3-1713 [83](#) Debet/credit rekeningen van de getaxeerde burgers en andere partijen [101v](#) [102v](#) [109v](#) [110](#) [113v](#) [160v](#) Overzicht van de kostenposten 1713 [175v](#) Alfabetische index van getaxeerde personen en partijen 1713 [185](#)

24 6x Wilde, Hendrick de Lijst van kosten en leveranties t.b.v. de strijd tegen Cassard 1713 [52](#) [53](#) [54](#) [62](#) Lijst van kosten van de strijd tegen Cassard jan/feb 1713 [79v](#) Taxatie van de burgers om een bedrag van 150.000 stukken van achten te vinden 9-3-1713 [82v](#) Debet/credit rekeningen van de getaxeerde burgers en andere partijen [97](#) [97v](#) [99](#) [99v](#) [104](#) [105v](#) [106](#) [109v](#) [110](#) [123](#) [125](#) [133](#) [143v](#) [148v](#) [150](#) [160v](#) [166v](#) [168](#) Overzicht van de kostenposten 1713 [176v](#) Alfabetische index van getaxeerde personen en partijen 1713 [186](#)

24 6x Levij, Gabriel Lijst van kosten en leveranties t.b.v. de strijd tegen Cassard 1713 [31](#) Lijst van kosten van de strijd tegen Cassard jan/feb 1713 [78](#) Taxatie van de burgers om een bedrag van 150.000 stukken van achten te vinden 9-3-1713 [82v](#) [88](#) Debet/credit rekeningen van de getaxeerde burgers en andere partijen [97](#) [102v](#) [108](#) [112](#) [114](#) [115](#) [116](#) [119](#) [120](#) [124](#) [127](#) [135](#) [136](#) [139](#) [141](#) [142](#) [143](#) [143v](#) [144](#) [160v](#) [172](#) Overzicht van de kostenposten 1713 [175v](#) Alfabetische index van getaxeerde personen en partijen 1713 [186](#)

24 6x Gilbert, Elias Lijst van kosten en leveranties t.b.v. de strijd tegen Cassard 1713 [38](#) Lijst van kosten van de strijd tegen Cassard jan/feb 1713 [78v](#) [80v](#) Taxatie van de burgers om een bedrag van 150.000 stukken van achten te vinden 9-3-1713 [85](#) Debet/credit rekeningen van de getaxeerde burgers en andere partijen [132v](#) [147v](#) [148](#) [160v](#) Overzicht van de kostenposten 1713 [175v](#) [177v](#) Alfabetische index van getaxeerde personen en partijen 1713 [186](#)

24 6x Gomes, Manuel Lijst van kosten en leveranties t.b.v. de strijd tegen Cassard 1713 [53v](#)

24 6x Ellis, Jan Lijst van kosten en leveranties t.b.v. de strijd tegen Cassard 1713 [28](#) [29](#) [38](#) [57v](#) Lijst van kosten van de strijd tegen Cassard jan/feb 1713 [78](#) Taxatie van de burgers om een bedrag van 150.000 stukken van achten te vinden 9-3-1713 [82v](#) Debet/credit rekeningen van de getaxeerde burgers en andere partijen [100](#) [100v](#) [103v](#) [105](#) [108](#) [115](#) [116](#) [120](#) [121](#) [128](#) [129](#) [130](#) [134](#) [139](#) [140](#) [142](#) [147v](#) [160v](#) [163v](#) [172](#) Overzicht van de kostenposten 1713 [175](#) Alfabetische index van getaxeerde personen en partijen 1713 [186v](#)

24 6x Henriqs, Henriques Lijst van kosten en leveranties t.b.v. de strijd tegen Cassard 1713 [26v](#) Lijst van kosten van de strijd tegen Cassard jan/feb 1713 [78](#) Taxatie van de burgers om een bedrag van 150.000 stukken van achten te vinden 9-3-1713 [82v](#) Debet/credit rekeningen van de getaxeerde burgers en andere partijen [103v](#) [109v](#) [114v](#) [171v](#) [172](#) Overzicht van de kostenposten 1713 [175](#) Alfabetische index van getaxeerde personen en partijen 1713 [186](#)

23 5x Crastro, Elias de Lijst van kosten en leveranties t.b.v. de strijd tegen Cassard 1713 [43v](#) [44](#) Taxatie van de burgers om een bedrag van 150.000 stukken van achten te vinden 9-3-1713 [83v](#) Debet/credit rekeningen van de getaxeerde burgers en andere partijen [101v](#) [114v](#) Alfabetische index van getaxeerde personen en partijen 1713 [186](#) Overzicht van oude openstaande posten in de boeken van 1718 [252](#) [254v](#)

22 3x Vrijheijt, schip de Taxatie van de burgers om een bedrag van 150.000 stukken van achten te vinden 9-3-1713 [87v](#) Overzicht van de kostenposten 1713 [177v](#) Overzicht van oude openstaande posten in de boeken van 1718 [256](#)

21 5x Vis, Jan Lijst van kosten van de strijd tegen Cassard jan/feb 1713 [80v](#) Taxatie van de burgers om een bedrag van 150.000 stukken van achten te vinden 9-3-1713 [84](#) Debet/credit rekeningen van de getaxeerde burgers en andere partijen [120v](#) [147v](#) Overzicht van de kostenposten 1713 [177v](#) Alfabetische index van getaxeerde personen en partijen 1713 [186v](#)

21 5x Chabot, Johannes Lijst van kosten en leveranties t.b.v. de strijd tegen Cassard 1713 [27](#)

Fig. 5. Relational analysis of Captain Keijsbergh.

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