On the afternoon of 16 December 1828, Philipp Franz von Siebold, a handsome German surgeon in the service of the Dutch commercial factory in Nagasaki, said goodbye to his Japanese wife and locked himself in his room to shuffle papers throughout the cold of the night. He used bundles of tracing paper to copy maps of Hokkaido, Sakhalin and the Kuriles compiled by Japanese explorers. His friend the interpreter Yoshio Tsujiro had warned him that his house would be searched the next day. A few months earlier, the ship ‘Cornelius Houtman’ carrying Siebold’s belongings had been damaged by a storm in Nagasaki bay. Upon inspection the Japanese authorities had found a linen cloak with the emperor’s crest as well as maps of strategic importance. Siebold’s collaborators, chief among them the shogunate’s official geographer Takahashi Gensuke, were arrested, while Siebold was placed under house arrest and eventually expelled from Japan. This is now known as the Siebold incident, and has been used to draw conclusions on the strategic status of maps in this period.

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However, the signs of use on the maps from Siebold’s collection, now kept in the Leiden University Library, show a different perspective on the incident. The material state of these maps as cartifacts show the traces of shared topics of interest between the various actors involved in knowledge sharing. Some of these maps feature in the exhibition Mapping Japan that I am co-curating with Martijn Storms and will open in September 2017. In this short article I would like to briefly lay out the argument for reconsidering the meaning of the Siebold incident.

Cartographic conversations
Siebold arrived in Japan during a tumultuous time at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This period of Japanese history is usually described as a period of internecine warfare between 1590 and 1615, followed by the introduction of Dutch and European maps, Japanese and Chinese cartographic knowledge. By 1800 Japan was a nation of approximately 28 million people, comprising a wide range of landscapes and habitats. Among its many islands, the Tokugawa shogunate had established a network of communication known as the “sannō” system, which covered the country from north to south and east to west. The sannō system was a network of 480,000 km of roads, and consisted of a series of interconnected roads that ran from the capital, Edo (now Tokyo), to the provinces.

In this context, cartographic knowledge was at the forefront of national security. But that was theModify the argument in the context of an other period.