

The Dutch East India Company in Burma: 1634-1680



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Early in the seventeenth century, the Dutch arrived on the Coromandel Coast in quest of India's famed cotton textiles. On India's east coast, they stumbled upon the lucrative trade across the Bay of Bengal to Arakan, Burma, and Siam. The Dutch planted factories in Burma and remained there for close to half a century.

By Wil O. Dijk

This article highlights a little known aspect of the Dutch East India Company (VOC)'s inter-Asian trade: the trade with Burma. The vast archives of the VOC at the National Archives in The Hague have yielded a treasure trove of detailed information on seventeenth century Dutch-Burmese relations. The archives throw light on the composition of the VOC's Burma trade, and how it fit into the grand design of the Company's inter-Asian commerce, where it was not as marginal as some historians would have it. Vital statistics on shipping, imports and exports, wages and prices, and inventories of Indian textiles the Dutch shipped across the Bay of Bengal, together with purchasing and selling prices, allow us a unique glimpse into life in seventeenth century Burma.

Shifting fortunes

The VOC's Burma trade formally began on 14 May 1634, when the *Vlielandt* sailed from Masulipatnam to Syriam. The Dutch planted three trading posts: the main office at Syriam, at

from kings to governors down to the odd slave. The clientele was ethnically diverse and included Muslims, Hindus, Armenians, Portuguese, Chinese, Siamese, Turks, Peguans and, of course, Burmese. The VOC's main interest in Burma lay in its market; considerable profits from the sale of Indian textiles and red cotton yarn provided the company's factories in Coromandel and Bengal with much needed funds.

The VOC's years in Burma can be divided into three distinct periods: the early years of indecision (1634-1648), the golden middle years (1649-1669) and the final years of decline and departure (1670-1680). During the first period suggestions were made, in turn by Pulicat and Batavia (the company's head office in Asia), to close down the Burmese factories. Pulicat and Batavia, however, seemed unable to agree, with the result that trade continued half-heartedly. The second period witnessed a great improvement in conditions for trade. In the final years, a new king with little interest in trade or foreigners ascended the Burmese throne. By this time the objectives of the Dutch East

world over, the exchange of gifts played a crucial role; this ritual provides us with detailed lists of gifts exchanged between the Dutch and the Burmese Kings as well as other dignitaries. Among Burmese gifts to the Dutch were ruby rings, betel boxes, tin, lac, chillies, elephant tusks, teak, musk and, as a great favour, the odd elephant.

On occasion, Dutch gifts could be quite exotic: King Thalun was once presented with a lion and a bear. Typically, Dutch gifts consisted of luxurious and costly textiles. When comparing lists of gift and commercial textiles, it becomes apparent that these fabrics moved in different worlds. Exquisite, extremely expensive textiles were offered as gifts in the rarefied world of palaces and kings; cheap, coarse commercial textiles were traded in the dusty world of shops and marketplaces.

It is this latter, common grade of textiles that formed the backbone of the VOC's Burma trade. The textiles most in demand in Burma were of average quality and low price, such as the plain and coarse bethilles, chelas and allegias which Burmese used to make *cabayas* and *lungis*. However, it was the lowliest of textiles – chivionis, tampis, cortis, coarse chintz and narrow black taffachelas and, above all, coarse and cheap brandams, blue boulongs and single-ply taffachelas that sold best. Colourfast Indian red cotton yarn was in such great demand that the Burmese mixed it with indigenous yarns to weave cloth of their own.

Standard of living

In addition to data on imports and exports and profits and losses, we now have access to precise figures for wages and the cost of daily necessities, from which the standard of living can be determined. The average Burmese could well afford an occasional length of imported Indian cloth in the middle

Ruby rings and elephant tusks

During their time in Burma, the Dutch had dealings with four Toungoo Kings (Thalun, Pindalè, Pye and Minyèkyawdin). As with relations the

and lower price ranges. When we compare the spending power of seventeenth century labourers in Burma and Coromandel, it becomes clear that Burmese labourers enjoyed a much higher standard of living than their counterparts in India. In fact, the high wages the Burmese labour force could command was one of the main reasons the Dutch brought in gangs of slaves from India to toil in their Burmese factories.

Empire of trade

Burma offered a large assortment of export goods. Statistics indicate that the Dutch generally took what they could get. Tin was a constant as were lac, elephant tusks, chillies (long peppers) and beeswax. In the 1650s, Chinese copper coins and Burmese ganza (a metal akin to bell metal) became major exports. The Company turned large quantities of Chinese copper coins, flowing into Burma from Yunnan, into money to be used as legal tender in Batavia and Ceylon. In the final years, the Dutch also exported a great deal of gold, much of it originating in China. The VOC, through its elaborate inter-Asian network, was in a position to trade Burmese goods in the most profitable markets throughout Asia.

Their Bengal factory, always in need of additional funds, was sent valuable Burmese cargoes (including Chinese coins, ganza, and zinc). The copper extracted from Chinese coins and ganza was in great demand in Coromandel, as were gold, tin, tim-

mulated steadily, a regular cause of concern for the Company.

In the final decade of Dutch operations in Burma, the 1670s, trade deteriorated steadily, a situation aggravated by a new king said to care little for foreigners or their business. Perhaps more importantly, the company had by now come under serious threat from forces working against it both in Europe and the Far East. To understand why the Dutch decided to abandon Burma at this point in time, both aspects need to be examined. Trading with seventeenth-century Burma had never been easy. The commercial and political climate in Burma was not, in fact, any worse in the 1670s than it was in the 1630s.

Military commitments

The main points of contention – the ban on direct trade with China at Bhamo, royal monopolies, high tolls, and the disarming of ships – were exasperating but not new. Rather, the circumstances and priorities of the Company had changed. Trade was no longer its main concern; the VOC had changed into a territorial enterprise with military and political commitments and began to operate increasingly from its two power bases, Batavia and Ceylon.

More importantly, a radical shift occurred in its commercial priorities. Whereas in the early days the company's inter-Asian sea-borne traffic was a key element in its drive to create a vast

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empire of trade – with the outcome of this traffic largely determining the flow of trade between Asia and Europe – by 1680 the situation was different. The VOC's inter-Asian trade had peaked by the 1670s, and was replaced by direct trade between Asia and Europe. This is perhaps the main reason behind the Dutch decision to abandon Burma. Whereas Burma had been an integral part of the VOC's inter-Asian trade for nearly half a century, the company's new priorities now made it irrelevant. In the 1740s and 50s the Dutch made several attempts to re-enter the Burmese market. Although the reason for this belated policy change was never clearly specified, Batavia expressed hopes to trade with Burma again. By then, however, Burma was in the throes of a bloody civil war that would bring down the Restored Toungoo (1597-1752) and usher in the Kon-baung Dynasty (1752-1885), hardly the best of times to attempt a renewal of trade. This is where the VOC records on Burma finally fall silent. <

Balancing the books

One of the principal problems of the VOC's Burma trade was that, due to a lack of sufficient export goods, the Dutch experienced difficulty in transferring their money (the proceeds from the sale of Indian textiles and yarn) from Burma to Coromandel and Bengal where additional funds were desperately needed. To this end, the Dutch in Burma provided Indian ruby merchants with large loans that they had to repay after their return to India. Nonetheless, large amounts of capital remained tied up in Burma and accu-

the time the country's main port of entry, a subsidiary office in Ava, the new capital, and a small post, no more than a shop, in Pegu City, Burma's old capital. In the early years, the company also had a factory in Prome, a key market town on the Irrawaddy. The Burma office remained within the jurisdiction of Pulicat, the company's head-office on the Coromandel Coast.

The Company's accounts show that customers came from all walks of life –

India Company had altered, while forces beyond its control were working to undermine the company. In the end the Burma trade became a casualty of the company's new priorities.

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