

Revisiting the Battle of Macau in 1622

A Polyphonic Narrative

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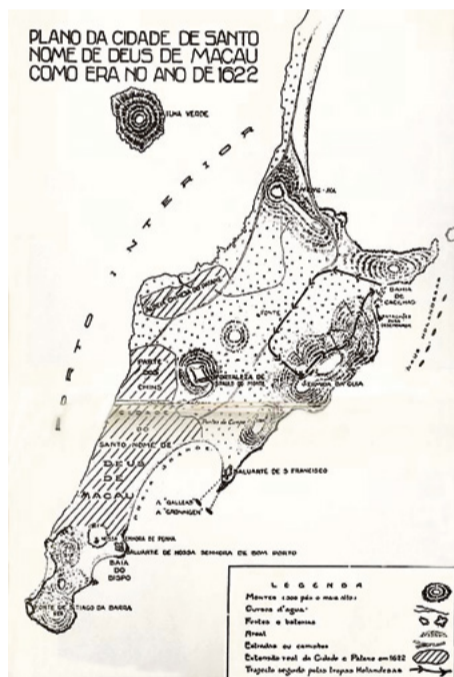
Prelude

The Portuguese first settled in Macau in 1557. It became the first diocese ever founded in the Far East, a base for Portuguese missionary work. The city also acted as an important trading post where the Portuguese could establish themselves when trading with the Chinese, the Japanese, the Malays, and other Southeast Asian communities. In addition, let us not forget that during the 60 years of the Iberian Union (1580-1640), when the Portuguese throne was assumed by the Spanish crown, Macau was the hub that linked the lucrative Lisbon-Goa-Macau and Mexico-Manilla-Macau routes together. Concurrently, the little port existed as the redistribution centre where gold, silver, silks, cotton, timbers, porcelain, spices, and precious stones were exchanged. Thus, situated as a node between the sea and the land, the South and the East, different colonial powers saw Macau as occupying a strategic spot for expanding their influence and market in Asia. Therefore, in the context of the 16th and 17th centuries, capturing Macau means possessing a significant position to scramble for wealth and power in the world. Allegedly for this reason, the Dutch tried to seize Macau from the Portuguese from as early as the 17th century. Indeed, before the Battle of Macau, the Dutch had raided the city in 1601, 1603, and 1607. But the assault in 1622 is seen as their first real – and final – attempt to capture Macau [Fig.1].

In 1621, the governor-general of the Dutch East Indies and officer of the VOC, Jan Pietersz Coen (1587-1626), started actively planning a trading monopoly with China. His proposal was to send a fleet and occupy Macau first, hoping to replace the Portuguese in their trading position with the Chinese. In the event that the plan failed, he would divert the fleet to the “Pescadores Archipelago,” now known as Penghu (澎湖 “Penghu”), situated on the Strait of Taiwan. A fort could be built there and subsequent strategies could be developed. Coen ordered his commander Cornelis Reijersen (c.1590-1632) to execute the campaign. He left Batavia with his soldiers and ships on April 10, 1622, and on June 22, his fleet appeared over the sea of Macau.¹ Over the following two days, a battle that would influence the fate of the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the city of Macau took place. Of the same battle, different individuals have given their own narratives. Depending on their own affiliations and personal backgrounds, these narrators offer us a polyphonic portrayal of the battle, where facts are blurred with fantasies. This brief article, therefore, attempts to present such a polyphony so that we can revisit this drama once again from different perspectives 400 years after the battle.

Fig. 1 (above): “Battle of Macau,” an imagined battle scene based on the recollection of the Dutch traveller Johan Nieuhof, printed in 1665.

Fig. 2 (centre): “Map of the City of the Holy Name of God of Macau As It Was in the Year of 1622,” extracted from the Bulletin of the General Agency of the Colonies in 1926. As shown, the Dutch first landed on the Eastern edge of the city at *Bahia de Cacilhas* (“Bay of Cacilhas”). The route taken by the Dutch was indicated by the arrows.



In the following paragraphs, I present four archival materials about the Battle of Macau. Some details from one may be contradicted by another, yet by comparing them, we can come closer to what indeed occurred during the battle. The first account is from the Jesuit Jerónimo Rodrigues (1567-1628), who wrote in Spanish *Relacion de la Victoria que alcanço la ciudad de Macau, em la China contra los Holandeses* (“Report about the Victory Achieved in the City of Macau in China against the Dutch”). This report was only retrieved and published in 1938 by the British historian Charles R. Boxer.² The second perspective comes from the diocese’s governor (*governador do bispado*), António do Rosário (in office: 1613-1623; 1624-1630), who wrote *Relação da vinda dos Olandezes a Macao* (“Report of the Coming of the Dutch to Macau”). In this account, he also gave his evaluation of the defence led by the captain-major (*capitão-mor*), Lopo Sarmiento de Carvalho (in office: 1617-1618; 1621-1623).³ The third comes from a Swiss mercenary, Elie Ripon (in service for VOC: 1618-1626), who fought on behalf of the Dutch VOC. His diary was first published in 1997 in French by Yves Giraud. The following analysis references the Dutch edition, published in 2016 by Leonard Blussé and Jaap de Moor.⁴ Last but not least, I consider a brief study conducted by the Swedish historian Anders Ljungstedt, who claimed to have studied the manuscript from Cornelis Reijersen and the reports at

This year marks the quadricentenary of the Battle of Macau, fought between Portugal and the Dutch VOC over the Portuguese settlement of Macau. Traces of this significant piece of history can still be seen in the names of different places in the city. However, what indeed happened on that destinate day of June 24, 1622 has remained folkloric and anecdotal, nor is there a comparative study using sources from different perspectives. Besides, the Dutch failure to capture Macau did not only allow the Portuguese to realise their precarious holding of Macau in the Far East, altering their subsequent governance of the city, but also directly influenced the diplomacy as much as the power struggle among the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch, the Chinese, and others in the following years. In order to understand more about this critical battle over the small port-city of Macau, we need to start from the beginning.

the Macau Senate’s archives. Together with other observations he had made during his stay in Macau, he issued his monograph, *A Historical Sketch of the Portuguese Settlement in China*, in 1836.⁵

The Arrival of the Dutch from the Sea

Right from the beginning of the battle, there are already different descriptions of the strength of the assaulting party. Ripon, in his diary, wrote that there were 12 ships when they left Batavia, but he did not specify if the “boats” and “sloops” that were used to attack Macau were among these 12 ships. On the other hand, Rodrigues reported that there were 13 ships, including those with three masts, seen from the harbour of Macau. Two other three-masted ships that were originally sailing to Japan also joined this battle. Rosário’s description accords with Rodrigues: he gives the details that nine of the 13 ships were battle ships with three masts. Meanwhile, Ljungstedt wrote that there were 16 ships that set sail from Batavia, while two other trading ships to Japan joined the fleet at the seas of Macau.

In any case, all the accounts describe that the Dutch fleet anchored on June 22. The Dutch immediately surveyed the geography of the port, deciding where they would land their attack. Rodrigues reports that Reijersen himself carried out the survey, and the Portuguese from the city attacked the survey team on June 23. Rosário describes a yet more dramatic scene: already on the 22nd, the Dutch attempted to land but retreated under the defending fire from the city. On the 23rd, two big battle ships with 25-30 canons approached Macau, raiding the city for four hours. He writes that “our men have accurately destroyed their ship so that it could not sail anymore, and we have yielded a huge casualty on them.”⁶ This episode, however, does not appear in other materials, including Ripon’s diary. This passionate description, as well as his vivid illustration of the battle which we will see later, may be due to his affinity with the Portuguese. To the contrary, Ripon reflects that they merely prepared everything to disembark after anchoring. He also wrote that they could not find a suitable landing spot other than the place where the Portuguese and the Spanish had built a trench and a battery. In the other three sources, the spot is recorded as Cacilhas/Cassilhas (崗狗環 “Tanggouhuan”), on the Eastern edge of Macau.

The Battle on Land

Despite all these differences, the sources are consistent in stating that 800 soldiers from the invading army landed at Cacilhas on the morning of June 24. On the defending side, both Rodrigues and Ljungstedt identified that there were 60 Portuguese and 90 Macanese. The Dutch side captured the trench and battery successfully, but according to Ripon, they succeeded at the cost of great losses. For one, their commander Cornelis Reijersen was wounded as soon as he arrived at the front and was transported back onboard immediately afterward. Rosário, in his account, speculated that the Dutch landing was mere luck. Unable to prevent the invaders from occupying the trench and battery, the defenders retreated to the city.

What happened next seems to be one of the determining moments of the battle. Nevertheless, such an incident was only recorded in Ripon’s diary through his first-person experience. After the landing, and seeing that the Portuguese had retired into the city, Captain Hans Ruffijn (d. 1622) was convinced that they would win the battle. Therefore, acknowledging that his soldiers had engaged in prolonged hours of shooting and were exhausted, he still ordered them to follow the Portuguese at once, instead of allowing them to rest or to equip themselves with ammunition. Ripon, meanwhile, foreseeing that a tragedy would happen, asked his sergeant to acquire some gunpowder and arms. Concurrently, he also asked Ruffijn to organise their supply of armaments, which he did briskly. From the descriptions of Rodrigues and Ljungstedt, 200 Dutch soldiers stayed at their landing spot to unload artillery. During this time, the defending soldiers had already regained order and prepared to continue defending. The bells in the city also rang to signal the invasion. Many citizens ran to assist the defence although without clear organisation or commands.

The Dutch force was in all likelihood advancing into the city through the valley between the Forte de Monte (大炮台 “Dapaotai”) and the Hill of Guia (東望洋山 “Dongwangyang shan”). This area was also within the firing range from the Forte de Monte [Fig.2]. Rodrigues, Rosário, and Ljungstedt all stated that once the invaders had arrived in this space, cannonballs were shot, which impeded the advance of the Dutch. In addition, in Rosário’s account, Captain-Major Carvalho understood that Ripon’s possible position on the Hill of Guia





Fig. 3 (left): "Macao," a map created by António Bocarro in 1635, watercolour on paper, Evora Public Library and Regional Archive, Evora. City walls are already seen in this depiction of the city. Around 14 years before this map was created, the Dutch should have landed at the rear side - now being separated from the sea by the red wall with a gate in the middle, on the upper left side of this map.

Fig. 4 (below): The monument at Victory Garden, at the foot of the Hill of Guia. This is but one of the examples in Macao that reminds its citizens of the battle in 1622 (Image courtesy of the The Heritage Society, Macau).

was a strategic vantage point for the Dutch, as it is the highest point on the Macau Peninsula. For this reason, "he [Carvalho] commanded his men to occupy [the hill] through the eastern part. [...] Seeing the resolution of the Portuguese, the valour and the morale with which they attacked, the enemy lost rigidity and abandoned the hill."⁷ As a matter of fact, the accounts of Rodrigues, Rosário, and Ljungstedt all show that the resolution of the Portuguese and their fierce defence halted and drove away the Dutch. Rosário even described the defending soldiers as "angry lions" (*estomagados leões*).

Yet, Ripon's narrative once again allows us to see another dimension of this counter-attack. According to him, the Portuguese were unable to have the upper hand after three to four hours of fighting. Consequently, they brought 200-300 drunken slaves into the fighting. Ripon recorded that "the slaves fought so furiously and disorderly that the earth shuddered."⁸ While the Dutch were shocked by the scene, many of these slaves were killed. Only afterwards did the ammunition arrive, and the Dutch soldiers wanted to harness it directly. It may be because of the hurry that a "clumsy" (*onhandige*) Japanese, who wanted to grab the gunpowder, set fire to it and burst into the air with the explosion. Seeing this, the Portuguese might have thought that the Dutch's supply had been lost, so they fought with even more determination, slaughtering those in Rufijn's entourage. Despite this loss, Ripon kept on fighting. Eventually, however, seeing that his fellow soldiers had no more ammunition nor hope, Ripon told his lieutenant to retreat. Finally, they came back to Cacilhas, where they had first landed.

From these descriptions, we can once again see the contrast between Rosário's account, which tends to glorify the defender's courage and disparage the

invader's action, and Ripon's diary, which asserts that both parties were equally unorganised. On the other hand, Rodrigues' and Ljungstedt's reports, until then, appear to be more distanced from the scene.

The Retreat of the Dutch to the Sea

Rodrigues and Ljungstedt reported that the Dutch attempted to re-organise themselves when those who had retreated rejoined those who were stationed at Cacilhas. However, without being able to withstand the Portuguese counter-assault, the Dutch turned to the sea, trying to swim to their ships. Many fell on the beach, while 90 were drowned in the sea. Rosário reported that only a few survived the retreat back onboard. Ripon also described that his fellow soldiers were "slaughtered like chickens" (*als kippen werden geslacht*). Simultaneously, he saw a tall priest, standing on the shore, who encouraged the Portuguese to slay his army. He then sneaked to the back of the priest and killed him with a stroke that went through his body, before jumping into the water and swimming to his fleet. He was rescued onto a boat, but he could only see a few soldiers onboard.

Ripon detailed that of the 800 men sent to the battlefield, only 250 returned, plus six captains, three lieutenants, nine sub-lieutenants, and seven sergeants. Rufijn was also killed. Rodrigues reported that the Portuguese had killed 300 invaders, while both he and Ljungstedt stated that four captains, together with 12-13 Japanese who helped on the Dutch side, were slain. There were corpses constantly being flushed onto the shore. The defending party also captured one captain and seven soldiers, in addition to seizing thousands of artilleries and weapons, standards and drums.

From there, Rodrigues conferred the victory to the help of Saint John the Baptist. He asserted that "[t]here would have been more [dead] if the kaffirs and servants had not been occupied by divesting and beheading the dead, honouring Saint John the Baptist, on whose day the heretics [the Dutch] tried to profane the many temples, monasteries and sacred altars in this city."⁹ Similarly, besides reporting that the Portuguese had killed 300 of the best Dutch soldiers and almost all of their captains, and had seized numerous swords and muskets, Rosário also expressed that if the servants and slaves had not been busy with stripping the clothes off the fallen Dutch, no one could have escaped.

On the defending side, according to Rodrigues, four Portuguese, two Castilians, and "some" (*alguns*) slaves died in the conflict, while 20 were injured. Rosário, on the other hand, did not specify any casualties at all throughout his report, other than a Macanese being killed at the beginning of the battle. Ljungstedt's number accords with Rodrigues, but stated that

"a few" slaves were killed. Although Ripon did not specify how many defenders were killed, following his overall narrative, there must be far more people who were killed by the Dutch than the numbers indicated. According to Chronicle of Macau (澳門編年史 "Aomen Biannianshi"), there were 163 Dutch killed and 162 wounded. Concurrently, there were tens of Portuguese and Spanish, together with "a great number of" (大量 "daliang") servants and slaves, killed in this battle.¹⁰ In the end, it seems that no consensus could ever be reached regarding the casualties on both sides.

Epilogue

Rodrigues recorded that on the next day (June 25), a ship bearing a white flag was sent, trying to rescue the rest of the Dutch. The city, however, responded by saying that it was not time until the King judged. Ripon, without recording this event, wrote that after they had treated the wounded in good order, they decided to continue their expedition and reached the Pescadores Archipelago on June 27. In addition, both Rodrigues and Ljungstedt reported that the admiral of sea from the Canton province, seeing the courage of the slaves and servants who fought on behalf of the Portuguese, awarded them with a considerable amount of rice. Some of the slaves were even freed by their masters right after the battle. It is also after this instance that the post of a governor – instead of a captain-major – was established in 1623, and a systematic construction of forts and walls was planned [Fig.3].

Ljungstedt's study ends here without any further evaluation. Rodrigues and Rosário praised the bravery of the Portuguese and attributed the victory to God. In particular, throughout Rosário's whole reportage, the legitimacy of the Portuguese rule of Macau and defence against the Dutch – the "heretics" – are closely linked to God's will. This portrayal may not be surprising, given their backgrounds as friars. Their affinity to the Portuguese side may also explain their manner of describing this conflict, where they used positive terms to portray the defenders and accredited the assaulters with negative attributes. In addition, Rosário glorified Carvalho in having led the Portuguese in this conflict. For example, he portrayed that Carvalho fought with calmness and intelligence like David from the Bible. Lastly, it may also be due to their allegiances that the casualties of both sides have been exaggerated, and that some of the scenes in the battle have been fantasized.

On the other hand, Ripon clearly stated that the Dutch's failure was due to the shortage of ammunition and Rufijn's lack of order. Ripon reasoned that Rufijn's desire to acquire fortune had undermined his preparation for the battle. The other captains, who were merchants or masters of ships, also did not possess enough

experience to lead in the conflict. As a result, together with all the hasty orders on land and the accidental explosion, the Dutch could not but have failed in their plan. Indeed, when this piece of news was transmitted back to Coen, he was frustrated and lamented that in this battle, some of their best men had perished and most of their weapons had been lost.¹¹ As a result, the Dutch explored further north to the island of Formosa (Taiwan), where they were successful in establishing a few forts and towns, before they finally retreated to Batavia after a few decades, abandoning altogether their plan to occupy a place on the Chinese coast.

For a long time in Macau (as well as in Portugal), this decisive battle reassured the Portuguese narrative of their rule in Macau [Fig.4]. There was even a sort of hagiography of those who had – whether truly or not – been involved in the battle. For example, since I was a child, I have been accustomed to the widespread legend that there had been a Jesuit who shot a cannonball from the Forte de Monte so accurately that it hit a gunpowder barrel of the Dutch, causing a huge explosion and desperation on the Dutch side. However, a closer look at the archives may reveal to us that such an incident may not have happened at all. Simultaneously, Ripon's diary has not only debunked such a myth, but is arguably the only source that recorded the first-person experience on the battlefield. According to Blussé and de Moor, Reijersen's premature exit from the battle, let alone his undecipherable writing due to his wounds, made his report incomplete and hard to follow.

In the end, by reading these different people's narratives, we can see the same scene through their eyes. Putting these materials together allows us to have a better look on the battle. From there, we come closer to the drama, happening 400 years ago between two colonial powers over Macau, that determined not only the fate of this tiny piece of land, but also its relationship with the surrounding areas, and even with different colonial powers during the early modern time.

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Notes

- 1 Leonard Blussé and Jaap de Moor, *Een Zwitsers Leven in de Tropen: De Lotgevallen van Kapitein Elie Ripon in Dienst van de VOC (1618-1626)* [A Swiss's Life in the Tropics: The Fate of Captain Elie Ripon in Service for the VOC (1618-1626)], (Amsterdam, Prometheus: 2016), 106, 109, 114-115.
- 2 S.J. Jerónimo Rodrigues, "Vitória de Macau contra os Holandeses, 1622 [Victory of Macau against the Dutch, 1622]," trans. Aldino Dias, *Review of Culture*, international edition, no. 12 (2004), 89-93.
- 3 O.P. António do Rosário, "Ataque dos Holandeses a Macau, 1622 [Attack from the Dutch to Macau, 1622]," trans. Rui Manuel Loureiro, *Review of Culture*, international edition, no. 12 (2004), 94-97.
- 4 Blussé and de Moor, 109-115.
- 5 Anders Ljungstedt, "Chapter IV: Foreign Relations," in *A Historical Sketch of the Portuguese Settlements in China*, (Boston: James Munroe and Co, 1836), 73-74.
- 6 Rosário, 96.
- 7 Rosário, 97.
- 8 Blussé and de Moor, 110.
- 9 Rodrigues, 92.
- 10 Zhiliang Wu 吳志良, Kaijian Tang 湯開建, and Guoping Jin 金國平, "第五部分 荷蘭爭奪澳門 (1600-1622) [Part Five: The Netherlands Scrambling for Macau (1600-1622)]," in *澳門編年史 Chronicle of Macau, vol.1* (China, Guangdong: 2009), 372.
- 11 Charles R. Boxer, *Fidalgos in the Far East, 1550-1770: Fact and Fancy in the History of Macao*. (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1948), 83.

