The Dutch East India Company in Burma: 1634-1680

By Wil O. Dijk

Early in the seventeenth century, the Dutch arrived on the Coromandel Coast in quest of India’s fabled 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.

The VOC’s Burma trade formally began on 14 May 1654, when the Vlaanderland sailed from Masulipatnam to Pulicat, the company’s head-office on the Bay of Bengal. Together with additional funds, where there was a good market for Burmese tin, elephant tusks, cardamom, and the costliest of Burma’s fabled rubies. Considerable quantities of Burmese elephant tusks were shipped to Surat, while in Holland there was demand for the excellent Burmese lac. As for Burma’s famous Mattabang jars, there was constant demand throughout Asia for these huge, glazed pots used to store and transport a myriad of things, from potable water and rice to gunpowder and, on occasion, stowaways.

Balancing the books
One of the principal problems of the VOC’s Burma trade was that, due to a lack of sufficiently low-priced 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 there was a good market for Burmese tin, elephant tusks, cardamom, and the costliest of Burma’s fabled rubies. Considerable quantities of Burmese elephant tusks were shipped to Surat, while in Holland there was demand for the excellent Burmese lac. As for Burma’s famous Mattabang jars, there was constant demand throughout Asia for these huge, glazed pots used to store and transport a myriad of things, from potable water and rice to gunpowder and, on occasion, stowaways.

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