

FRYKE ON SIAM IN THE 1680s

Christopher Fryke came from a medical family in Ulm, and had, he says, early on a great desire to travel the world. He satisfied this by joining the VOC, and between 1680 and 1686 acted as surgeon on various VOC vessels sailing to and in the East Indies.

He made a brief visit to Ayutthaya (“Odia”) during this period, but as he dates nothing in his account, it is not possible to pinpoint further his visit. His text was published in German in Ulm as *Christoff Frikens Ost Indienischen Räysen und Kriegs-Dienste* in 1692. A Dutch translation by S. de Vries appeared in Amsterdam in 1694, and an English translation in 1700. This, together with the less interesting account of Christopher Schweitzer of Würtenberg, another minor employee of the VOC, who did not go to Siam, was republished in 1929 in London by Cassell, with an introduction by C. Ernest Fayle, and this was again republished by Asian Educational Services in New Delhi in 1997.

Chapter XII (pp.138-9 in the 1929/1997 editions) contains the very brief account of “Odia”, which is reproduced here since its source is little known.

When we were come up to the corner of that Island¹ we took the Elevation of the Pole, and found we were to Sail more to the Northward; and in a short time we came to the River, which runs through the Kingdom of *Siam*, up which we sailed as far as the Town *Bontempia*,² and there we cast Anchor. Our Master and the Factor went straightway in the Long-Boat to the Chief City *Odia*; which is 30 Leagues³ up the River; as soon as they were come back they went to Unlading.⁴

I then went on Shore too, and visited the Dutch Factory there.⁵ The House which the Dutch Factors have there, is amazing both for its Largeness, Beauty, and Strength. Above are all the Lodgings, which are wonderful Stately both without and within: Under are the Warehouses, which are of a

¹ The last island mentioned in the previous paragraph is “Matuna”, probably Natuna.

² Fayle inserted here in the 1929 edition “[Bangkok]”, but *Bontempia* is most probably a corruption of Ban Chaophraya, which the Dutch usually called Bantiauphia. It was a Dutch warehouse close to the mouth of the Chao Phraya River. It is mentioned in Chris Baker et al *Van Vliet’s Siam* (2005) 71-4, 81-2, 177, and appears as “Amsterdam, Loge des Hollandais” in the La Loubère map of 1691.

³ A league was approximately 4 km.

⁴ That is, they discharged their cargo.

⁵ Apparently in Ayutthaya, not Bantiauphia.

vast bigness; and richly stored with all manner of commodities.⁶

The city of *Odia* is very large; but most of the houses are very low: So that all the Towers of their Temples (which are computed to be above Five thousand) being rais'd much higher, and being all easily seen by reason of the other Buildings being so low, seem altogether like a Forest in Winter. It is impossible for any one to conceive what vast numbers of People is [sic] continually moving about in that City, insomuch, that a Man who is newly come, would be apt to ask what's the matter, and take that for a gathering of the Mob, or an unusual Croud, which is but the usual Concourse of the Town. It is seated upon the River *Menam*, which is likewise filled with Ships, Praws,⁷ &c. This River is of the same Nature with the *Nile*, the *Niger*, and the *Ganges*, and like them, overflows all the Fields about *Odia*, and makes them very fruitful: spreading it self over great part of the Country, by means of several Arms or Creeks which Providence hath ordered for that purpose. And besides this Advantage which this Inundation affords to the Country, it is a mighty Fence to the city *Odia*; because the River overflowing at certain Seasons, no Enemy can Besiege it but for some Months, during which the City is always able to defend it self, being extraordinarily well Situated and Fortified.

Through most of the Streets run fine Channels, as at *Rotterdam*, so that one may go with a Boat from one part of the Town to the other, which renders it mighty Commodious for Trade; I may say, that considering all things, there is not a finer City in all *India*.⁸

Our Ships having now been in little more than a Fortnights time unladen, and taken in their full Lading, which consisted of several Commodities, as Buck and Roe-Skins,⁹ Jappan-Wood,¹⁰ &c. we fell down the River, and with a fair Northerly Wind set sail homewards again.

Though brief, this account interestingly emphasizes the populous nature of the Siamese capital and the importance of trade there.

Editor

⁶ For a fuller account, equally impressed, of the Dutch “factory”, see Gijsbert Heeck’s *Journal of 1655*.

⁷ *Prau* or native boats.

⁸ Meaning the Indies.

⁹ These deer skins were destined for the Japanese market, but the ships were going to Batavia.

¹⁰ The 1929 English text had the footnote “A mistake for Sapan wood, a wood yielding a red dye.”