

only one example. ("Such findings [from Tagaung] will also be able to rebut with evidence the scoffs at Myanma history books as though what was said in them were legendary.", *New Light of Myanmar*, March 9, 2004). The author, however, carefully sifts the hard archaeological evidence and the chronicles, but readers unfamiliar with the pitfalls of the chronicles may find the close juxtaposition of archaeological descriptions with the later myths a trifle confusing. Also, some of the information cited from the chronicles is perhaps given too much weight, such as the splitting of three groups upon the legendary demise of Tagaung, known in the chronicles (p. 236). On the other hand, this valuable legendary material will be of great interest, especially for those new to the subject.

The cornucopia of newly-published discoveries, skillfully woven together with more well-known material, makes this essential reading for those interested in the early history of Burma and mainland Southeast Asia. As such, it is a landmark that one hopes will encourage similar publications.

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Wil O. Dijk, *Seventeenth-century Burma and the Dutch East India Company, 1634–1680*. Singapore, Singapore University Press, 2006, xvii + 348 pp., 12 maps (with appendices in CD-Rom).

In 1939 the renowned historian of South-East Asia, D. G. E. Hall, observed that the history of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in Burma received almost no attention. That remained true for some 60 years, before Wil Dijk undertook her doctoral research at Leiden University on this subject. Although the research is based mainly on the records written by VOC employees, this book is not merely a history of trade between Europeans and Asians in the early modern period. As those familiar with these records can confirm, in order to trade effectively the VOC merchants also became perceptive of local politics and society. Besides writing an extensive history of the VOC-Burmese relations from 1634 to 1680, the author seeks to reconsider issues relating to Burmese economic history, Burmese political and military historiography, and the history of VOC's operations in Burma.

The book begins with the historical background of seventeenth-century Burma, which was stabilized and increasingly centralized under the rule of the Restored Toungoo Dynasty (1597–1752). The Company's men-on-the-spot had the opportunity to observe and report local conditions in Burma; these included natural resources, law, military capacity, the monetary system, the Buddhist religion and ethnic ten-

sions. As in many other places in early modern Asia where the political elite also governed economic activities, the VOC had to contact the Burmese royal court for permission to trade in the kingdom, which made the observance of the court protocol essential for the survival of the Dutch.

What attracted the Dutch Company to come and settle in Burma, or the 'Kingdom of Pegu' as the Dutch often called it, was that the kingdom offered the opportunity to trade with the Bay of Bengal and China. As the author puts it, the VOC's Burma trade was textile-based, which was part of the 'ancient inter-Asian sea-borne traffic between the Coromandel Coast and Burma across the Bay of Bengal' (p. 115). Impressive details of sailing conditions between the Bay and Burma are given here. There was a long list of rivals for the Dutch in this trade: the Portuguese, the Muslims ('Moors'), the English, the Danes, and the French. Also appealing to the VOC was Burma's commercial connection to China. But, like other foreigners, the Dutch were not allowed to access the Burmese-Yunnanese border, especially at the market town of Bhamo. They had to buy Chinese goods from the Burmese court and local merchants.

Economic history of early modern Burma has to be seen in a new light. VOC sources reveal that textile imports were cheap and meant for everyday use by common people, contrary to the earlier assumptions that they were luxuries intended for the elite. This and new statistics on wages paid to Burmese labourers indicate the fairly substantial

purchasing power of the indigenous people. Interestingly, the Company records also refer to the wages of its own employees operating in Burma and those of the Indian workers on the Coromandel Coast. The author's assumption that Burma's standard of living was considerably higher than that of contemporary Coromandel must still be counterchecked with other sources (p. 142–143).

VOC records confirm the condescending attitudes of the Burmese towards the Peguans as well as the animosity between Burma and Arakan. Contrary to the existing understanding, Dijk proves that the Burmese court did not procure arms from the Dutch and other foreigners, but took them away from these people, presumably for security reasons (p. 40).

The political history of Burma from 1649 to 1669 shows a precarious situation in which the kingdom's integrity was threatened by Chinese raiders, revolts in the south, and a regicide. However, basing her argument on VOC's increased shipping activities, the author suggests that these two decades were the 'golden years' of the Company trade in Burma. Importantly, she emphasizes that, despite difficulties and setbacks, VOC's Burma trade was profitable throughout (p. 196).

The greatest strength of this book is the author's ability to make utmost use of her chosen sources. It is misleading to think that the VOC, thus the Dutch, archives are the prerogative of the historians of Indonesia. More and more research into the histories of other Asian

countries based on these sources has appeared and will come to light. Dijk's study offers a lot of unique new data on both Burma and the VOC. As the author states herself, the detailed nature of the business data allows a precise evaluation of volume of trade and profit and loss of VOC's Burma trade. Readers will benefit from both the clear structure of the analysis and the extreme details of commercial data recorded by the Company, presented as appendices in the attached CD-Rom. The data includes, among other things, Dutch imports into and exports from Burma, a listing of VOC ships plying the Burma trade, the exchange of gifts between the Company and the Burmese court, a glossary of Indian textiles for the Burmese market, textile prices in Burma and India, and the wages of the VOC employees, the Burmese, and the Indians.

As mentioned before, Dijk manages to prove that Burmese trade was flourishing despite the turbulences in the mid-century. However, I wish the author had explained more how Burma succeeded in maintaining its position, or how the Burmese court coordinated its commercial activities in the time of troubles. Dijk explains that the VOC decided to leave Burma in 1680 because of the many unfavourable conditions in the Kingdom, such as restrictions on the export of Burmese goods and the prohibition of access to Bhamo, as much as difficulties within the Company, including its financial troubles, the effect of wars in Europe, and turmoil within the Dutch Republic. But most of all, she ascribes the Company's withdrawal to

the fundamental shift in its commercial priorities, from the intra-Asian trade to direct trade between Asia and Europe, which reduced the Company's need for trade with Burma. These explanations are lucid and sensible, but not quite satisfactory. Besides suffering from similar circumstances of frustrating Thai rules and regulations and royal monopolies of goods, the VOC trade with neighbouring Ayutthaya was declining in the second half of the seventeenth century, or did not grow. Still, the Company stayed on almost until the fall of the Thai kingdom in 1767.

In sum, this book is a rewarding answer both to the personal connection of the author to Burma and to D. G. E. Hall's challenge to use Dutch sources to study Burmese history. The result of the study shows that although its political centre was set in the hinterland, early modern Burma was significantly part of the intra-Asian trade and maritime interactions, and that Europeans like those in the VOC were determined to make the most of its offerings. This book strengthens the image of Burma, which was, besides being a territorial power of mainland South-East Asia, a dynamic trading polity in Asia. It offers an insightful reading with a great deal of new information for not only economic historians of Burma and the VOC but also for those interested in historical interactions between Asia and Europe.

Bhawan Ruangsilp

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