

A Traveler in Siam in the Year 1655: Extracts from the Journal of Gijsbert Heeck translated and introduced by Barend Jan Terwiel (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2008). ISBN: 978-974-9511-35-0

The Dutch physician or “medicinal specialist” Gijsbert Heeck, in the employ of the Dutch United East India Company (VOC), visited Siam during 1655, late in the reign of King Prasat Thong (r. 1629-1656). These published journal extracts take us from the author’s departure from Holland, via a naval skirmish with the Portuguese in the roadstead of Siam, a minutely-observed journey up the Chao Phraya River to the Dutch settlement in Ayutthaya and, finally, the royal city itself, with its grand gilded monasteries and myriad waterways.

Heeck was on a longer voyage, also visiting other parts of the East Indies. The translator, Barend Jan Terwiel, has chosen to translate only the parts of the journal which directly concern Heeck’s time in Siam, this volume being the first in a planned series of publications aimed at introducing hitherto unknown or unpublished VOC material on Thailand to the general public. The Heeck text, as transcribed and published in *Marineblad* by S.P. L’Honoré Naber (at least the part concerning Siam), is incomplete because L’Honoré Naber left out some substantial segments which he thought would probably not be of interest to the readership of a journal mainly concerned with maritime matters.¹ Professor Terwiel has translated these excised pages, putting all of us in his debt, because many of the omitted lines are of potential interest to scholars of Thailand. They describe, among other things, monasteries in Ayutthaya and native vegetation near the mouth of the Chao Phraya.

A major feature of the Heeck document, and one of its main assets, is its information on the Dutch settlement in Ayutthaya. Indeed, Heeck provides the most detailed account of the VOC’s Siam “comptoir” in existence. The main building, as described, was of course suitably grand as befits a VOC “lodge”, with its double staircase and high-ceilinged rooms. An equally interesting part of the journal entry concerns the Dutch cemetery, with its Siamese-style *stupa* covering the graves of former directors or *opperhoofden* of the VOC factory. Heeck mentions a broad bridge which led from the area of the VOC “lodge” to the house of the trader Chao Sut (or Osoet), followed by an explanation of why the Dutch had to deal with, or even depend upon, this Mon woman as an intermediary (and supplier of goods) in their trade in Ayutthaya. Heeck’s is also the most trenchant summary of the relationships between VOC employees and local women, which resulted in the birth of several “half-breed” children, many of whom were left behind in Ayutthaya by their fathers, who went home to Europe or on to other company postings.

In his lively and informative Introduction, Terwiel rightly points out that Heeck’s account of Siam is an amalgam of sharply observed descriptions and pious

¹ S.P. L’Honoré Naber. “Derde Voijagie van Gijsbert Heecq naar Oost Indien” in *Marineblad* 25 (1910-1911).

Protestant moralising. Although he has a strong distaste for Buddhist idol-worship (as he obviously had for papist idolatry), Heeck should nevertheless be commended for his factual descriptions of monasteries in Siam, full of vivid details. On his way upriver to Ayutthaya, Heeck related that in one wat he saw Buddha images in a posture with the left hand lying “on the thigh, the palm turned upwards and the right [hand] straight down to the right thigh near the knee.” Thanks to this plain but accurate reporting, we are able to conclude that these Buddha images were in the posture of calling the earth to witness, or subduing Mara.

Heeck could of course get it all terribly wrong, as when he misinterprets the great Buddha image known as the “Great God of Soest” as being the depiction of a Siamese Noah. Since it was said to be near the Dutch settlement, this was obviously a reference to the large Buddha image at Wat Phananchoenng. Terwiel offers an explanation that Heeck, misinformed by someone in Siam, was probably confusing the image with a version of the flooding caused by the divinity Ganga (the Earth goddess surely?) washing her hair, drowning all the forces of Mara as the Buddha was about to attain Enlightenment.

Another extremely informative aspect of the journal entries, on account of Heeck’s attention to detail, is the clear depiction of a sophisticated economy in the Chao Phraya River valley, with Chinese communities, the regular use of money in commercial transactions, and certain villages dedicated to particular occupations.

Heeck was somewhat puzzled by the deterioration in the relationship between the VOC and the court of King Prasat Thong in 1655. The answer is partly in his text. Towards the end of his stay in Siam he witnessed the departure of a fleet of armed vessels going to fight Songkhla (11 October entry). The decline in the good relations between king and company was largely to do with this very war. The Dutch had, from the mid 1640s onwards, helped Ayutthaya in its wars against Songkhla, but by the early 1650s company policy had changed to one of non-interference in the domestic affairs of native states. A misunderstanding between the two parties occurred when the Siamese court claimed that the *opperhoofd* Hendrick Craijers had promised the Ayutthayan king a fleet of twenty vessels to help attack Songkhla, which of course the next VOC chief in Siam strenuously denied.

Heeck came to Siam at a time when King Prasat Thong was nearing the end of his reign – but neither the Dutchman nor the monarch was to know that. The king seems still to have been very much in command of his court. The journal includes an anecdote about how the Okya Phrakhleng, minister in charge of foreign affairs and the treasury, was chastised by the king for allegedly “conniving with convicted criminals”, barely escaping execution by the royal elephants before he was released. The severity of King Prasat Thong’s rule was indeed a feature of many Dutch documents, from the writings of Jeremias van Vliet to the unpublished archival material written by the various *opperhoofden* in Ayutthaya.

On a matter of detail, I am not totally convinced that the monastery referred

to as the large “Abbentak” necessarily refers to Wat Chai Watthanaram. Heeck does not specify that this place was situated by the river, outside the city walls (9-12 September entry, pp. 61-62). The description could therefore easily apply to Wat Mahathat, Wat Phutthaisawan or any other large royal monastery with a presiding *stupa* of the *prang* type and surrounding galleries filled with Buddha images. A couple more minor points: “ammerac” (pp. 66, 113) was probably a misspelling or scribal error for “namrack”, a type of lacquer and a regular VOC export from Siam. It was used to make Japanese lacquer ware. Also, contrary to the claim made in the Introduction, the Heeck journal has been used by historians other than George Vinal Smith and Han ten Brummelhuis, although those two scholars were certainly the pioneers.²

Annotations are learned, detailed and at times intriguing in their speculative nature. The careful editing by Han ten Brummelhuis contributes to the finished product, a publication and translation of one of the best western sources on seventeenth century Siam. The original Dutch text of these extracts, transcribed from the original seventeenth century handwriting by Renée Hoogenraad, forms the last part of the book.

The inclusion of several well-chosen illustrations and maps, several in colour, add much visual appeal to this little book. The exquisitely drawn VOC manuscript maps of Ayutthaya and the Chao Phraya River are particularly welcome, as is the long Valentijn map showing the course of the Chao Phraya (and much beyond), with a very useful key to the place names shown on the map provided too. In sum, this is a publication which should prove to be of great value to anyone interested in Thai history, the Ayutthaya period or European “travel literature”.

Dhiravat na Pombejra

Mediums, Monks, and Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today by Pattana Kitiarsa. (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012.) ISBN: 978-616-215-049-4 (soft)

Sensationalistic accounts of Buddhist monks’ involvement in magic, fortune telling, spirit worship, protective amulets, lottery number selection, and other practices aimed at bringing worldly rewards appear daily in the Thai media. Many Thai social commentators contend that these practices are not “real Buddhism”, but examples of the degeneration of Buddhist morality in a modern, globalized

² See for example Remco Raben and Dhiravat na Pombejra (eds.). *In the King’s Trail*. Bangkok: Royal Netherlands Embassy, 1997, p.85; Alfons van der Kraan. “On Company Business: The Rijckloff van Goens Mission to Siam, 1650” in *Itinerario* Vol.XXII (2/1998), pp.59-61; Bhawan Ruangsilp. *Dutch East India Company Merchants at the Court of Ayyutthaya: Dutch Perceptions of the Thai Kingdom, c.1604-1765*. Leiden: Brill, 2007, pp. 37, 42.