

**A NEWLY UNEARTHED TRAVELOGUE:  
RELATION TO SIAM IN 1685, BY JEAN BASSET**

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**ABSTRACT**—This notice introduces a newly discovered travelogue by Jean Basset, detailing his 1685 journey to Siam as part of the French embassy led by Chevalier de Chaumont. Preserved in Lyon, the manuscript offers fresh insights into the young missionary’s experiences, complementing existing accounts of 17th-century diplomatic relations. Basset’s narrative, marked by factual detail and occasional personal reflections, sheds light on the challenges of maritime travel and diplomatic encounters. Furthermore, his portrayal of Siamese culture, particularly Buddhism, invites nuanced exploration. This rediscovery not only enriches our understanding of historical maritime voyages but also offers a raw, unfiltered glimpse into the experiences of a young missionary navigating foreign cultures.

**KEYWORDS:** Diplomatic Relations; History of Siam (Thailand); Jean Basset; Missions étrangères de Paris (MEP); Travel Literature

### A Newly Discovered Manuscript

In Lyon, France, a recent discovery has brought to light the meticulous account penned by Jean Basset (1661–1707) chronicling his journey to Siam (modern Thailand) in 1685. The 98-folio manuscript, titled *Relation de ce qui s’est passé de plus remarquable dans le voyage de Mr le chevalier de Chaumont, ambassadeur de sa majesté très chrétienne vers le roy de Siam, de France à Siam et des honneurs qu’on luy a faites à Siam*, is housed at the Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon (BML, MS 817; view separate reproduction and annotated edition in the **ONLINE APPENDICES**) [FIGURE 1].<sup>2</sup> This

manuscript, a result of his participation in an embassy dispatched by King Louis XIV of France (r. 1643–1710), opens up a fresh perspective on the missionary activities of the Missions étrangères de Paris (MEP) in Siam.

The preserved diary from Lyon exclusively covers Basset’s voyage to Siam, starting with his departure from Brest in early March 1685 and concluding with the embassy’s culmination at Ayutthaya and Lopburi in December 1685. It is likely that Jean Basset entrusted the account to a fellow traveler returning to France, who, in turn, passed it on to Basset’s superior. This diary might have been intended for Gabriel de la Roquette, Bishop of Autun (1666–1702), the primary recipient of Basset’s letters, or for Louis Tronson, who oversaw the Saint-Sulpice seminary in Issy-les-Moulineaux (1676–1700), where Basset trained from 1677.

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The mystery remains regarding how this account found its way to Lyon. Gabriel de la Roquette's archives in the Côte d'Or departmental archives show no traces of Jean Basset or missions to Siam. The other letters from Basset are housed at the MEP headquarters.<sup>3</sup> The plausible hypothesis is that Gabriel de la Roquette initially received the diary, forwarding it to Jean Basset's family in Lyon. Alternatively, the account should logically have reached the MEP to aid in the training of future missionaries.

While Jean Basset's missionary endeavors in China are well-documented, thanks to the publication of his correspondence by François Barriquand and Joseph Ruellent (2012), his sojourn to Siam remains largely obscure, with minimal published sources, mostly from the 19th century, collected by Adrien Launay. Siam marked a pivotal step in the young missionary's spiritual and intellectual journey, serving as his first missionary post in Asia and the site of his ordination in January 1686 by Louis Laneau.<sup>4</sup> For MEP missionaries, Siam appeared to be a primary mission and training ground before venturing into China—a trajectory shared by other missionaries like Étienne Manuel, ordained concurrently with Jean Basset.

This previously unpublished diary offers fresh insights into the 1685 French embassy to Siam, absent from the extensively studied court accounts of Louis XIV, such as those by the Abbé de Choisy (1687) or the memoirs of Comte de Forbin published much later (1730).

Various articles in the *Mercure galant* dedicated to the 1685 embassy provide an exclusive glimpse into the event.<sup>5</sup> Analyzing Basset's perspective alongside those who received royal orders sheds light on the differing interests within the embassy. Considering this as the inaugural voyage of a young man with a worldview distinct from experienced travelers like Chevalier de Chaumont (1640–1710), we acknowledge that Basset's outlook was shaped by both reading and personal experiences. This diary, focusing on the Siamese segment of Basset's journey, complements existing studies on his later life in China (Barriquand & Ruellent 2012), presenting an alternative viewpoint from a younger and less seasoned traveler. Furthermore, the diary contributes valuable insights for the study of diplomatic relations between France and Siam in the late 17th century, offering a grassroots perspective on the rumors surrounding this embassy.

### Early Years of Jean Basset

Details about the formative years of Jean Basset remain elusive, with sparse information available about the second son among at least five siblings. Born on 2 February 1661 in Lyon son of Claude Basset (1626–1688), lawyer at the parliament and secretary of the archbishopric of Lyon, and Lady Jeanne Terrasson (?–1710), the scant details come to light through his birth certificate (*baptême*) preserved at the

<sup>3</sup> 128 rue du bac, 75007 Paris. The online database may be consulted at: <https://irfa.paris/>.

<sup>4</sup> AMEP [Archive des Missions étrangères de Paris], vol. 859, Letter from M. Manuel to M. Baudon, Bangkok, 30 September 1686, folio 409.

<sup>5</sup> Issues for June 1686, July 1686, September 1686 (Part 2), November 1686 (Part 2), December 1686 (Part 2), and January 1687 (Part 2) are exclusively dedicated to this event. See: <https://obvil.sorbonne-universite.fr/corpus/mercure-galant/>.

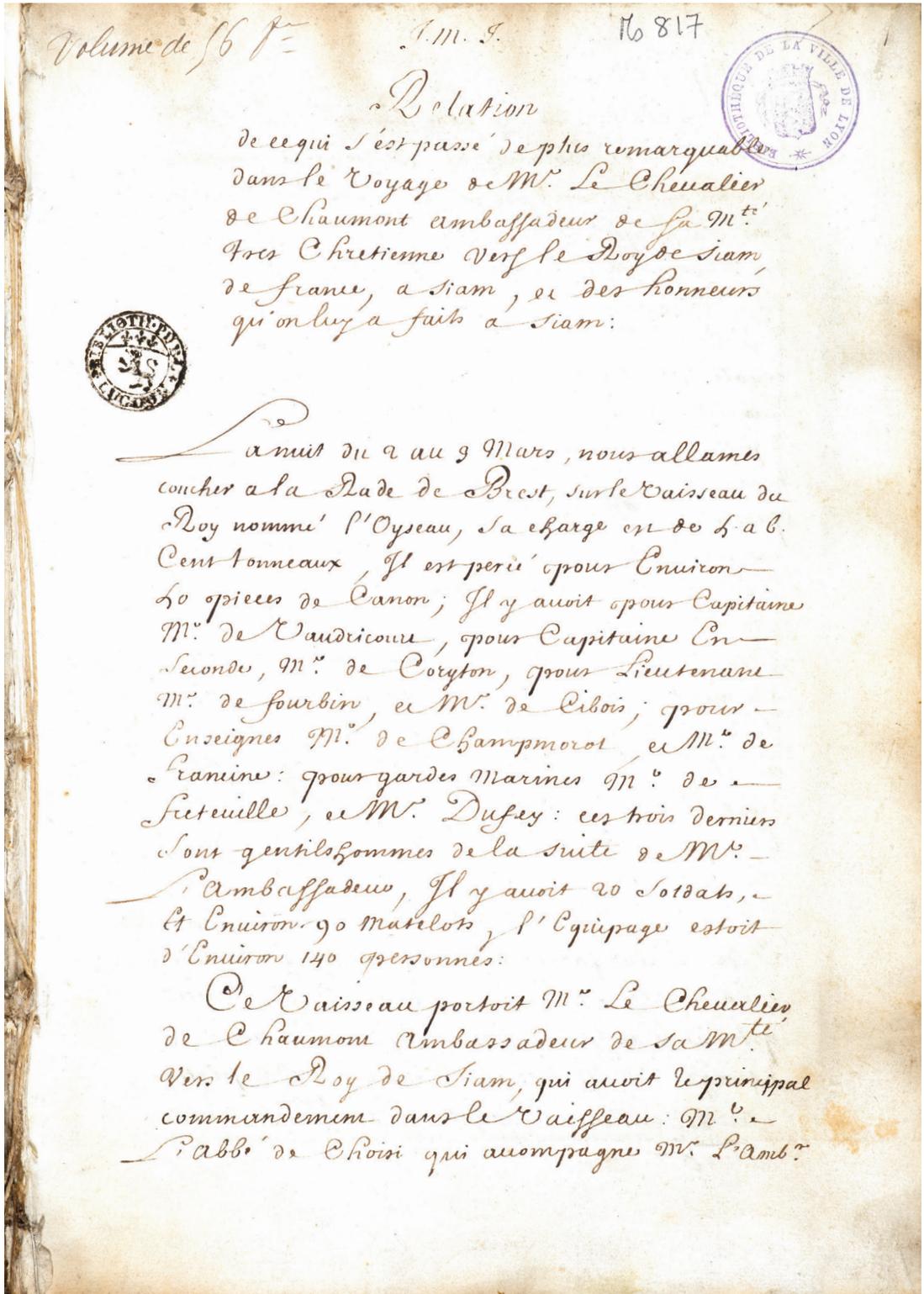
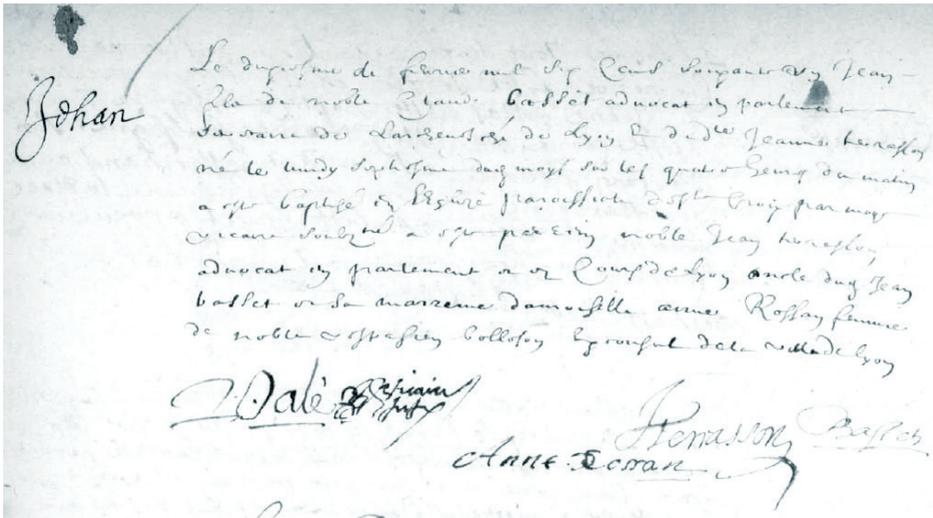


FIGURE 1: Incipit, MS 817, folio 1 © Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon



**FIGURE 2: Birth Certificate of Jean Basset. Registres paroissiaux et d'États civils de Sainte Croix, 1659–1666, cote 1GG0399, folio 41, verso**  
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Lyon municipal archives.<sup>6</sup> His godfather was Jean Henasson, also a lawyer at the parliament of Lyon and the uncle of Jean Basset, while the godmother was demoiselle Anne Rossan, the wife of noble Vespasien de Bolozon, an alderman of the city of Lyon [FIGURE 2].

His father, Claude Basset, held the esteemed position of alderman in Lyon, playing a pivotal role in organizing the city's justice system and police force. His influential standing translated into a substantial financial income, as shown by the notarized deed following his demise in 1688. Claude Basset's will, a testament to his financial affluence and civic commitment, outlined various bequests:

- 200 livres to the Récollets of the convent of Bellegrève in Lyon.
- 100 livres to the Grand-Collège of Jesuits.
- A life pension of 30 livres each to the RR. PP. Patouillet and Colonia.

- 100 pistoles to the archbishop of Lyon.
- 11,000 livres to Gabriel Basset, his eldest son, an esquire and advocate in Parliament.
- 8,000 livres or a life pension of 600 livres (at his choice) to Jean Basset, his second son, then on a missionary journey in Siam.
- 8,000 livres to Jean-Baptiste Basset, his third son.
- 4,000 livres to dame Marianne Basset, his eldest daughter, the wife of the noble Claude Duguet, an advocate at the Parliament and king's advocate at the Bailliage of Montbrison.
- 20,000 livres to Geneviève Basset, his youngest daughter.<sup>7</sup>

The early life of Jean Basset beyond this familial context is shrouded in obscurity. However, we do know that he pursued studies at Saint-Sulpice, a detail gleaned from letters he later sent from

<sup>6</sup> 1 Place des Archives, 69002 Lyon. The register may be consulted online at: <https://www.fondsenligne.archives-lyon.fr/v2/ac69/visualiseur/etatcivil.html?id=690007187>.

<sup>7</sup> Archives du Département du Rhône, cote 1E/82 Basset (Claude), lawyer at the parliament. See: <https://archives.rhone.fr/media/9a92bdb3-2656-4985-8366-1b9a2a4cbf8b.pdf>.

Siam and China. We will now delve into the defining characteristics of missionary travel accounts in the 17th century.

### Defining Features

Travel writing inherently assumes an autobiographical tone, with the author recounting their exploits and encounters. In certain narratives, like Choisy's, individuals met along the journey are elevated to hero status, creating a captivating narrative, especially during perilous ocean crossings. Chaumont and Choisy lean heavily on storytelling, intertwining numerous details and anecdotes. In contrast, Basset remains reserved about himself, prompting readers to seek insights from alternative accounts, such as Choisy's, which sheds more light on the young missionaries than Basset's own narrative.

Overall, Basset's account maintains a predominantly factual narrative, diligently describing events as they unfold [TABLE 1]. Missionary narratives, including Basset's, prioritize facts, leaving little room for emotional expression, except during critical moments like the onset of illness among sailors (folios 29–30). Basset's narrative diverges from official records like Chaumont's but aligns with travel accounts from missionaries (Wolfzettel 1996). Notably, he consistently provides the embassy's location, facilitating the reconstruction of the journey's itinerary [MAP 1]. This information was crucial for France given its lag in cartography compared to Iberian and Dutch counterparts.

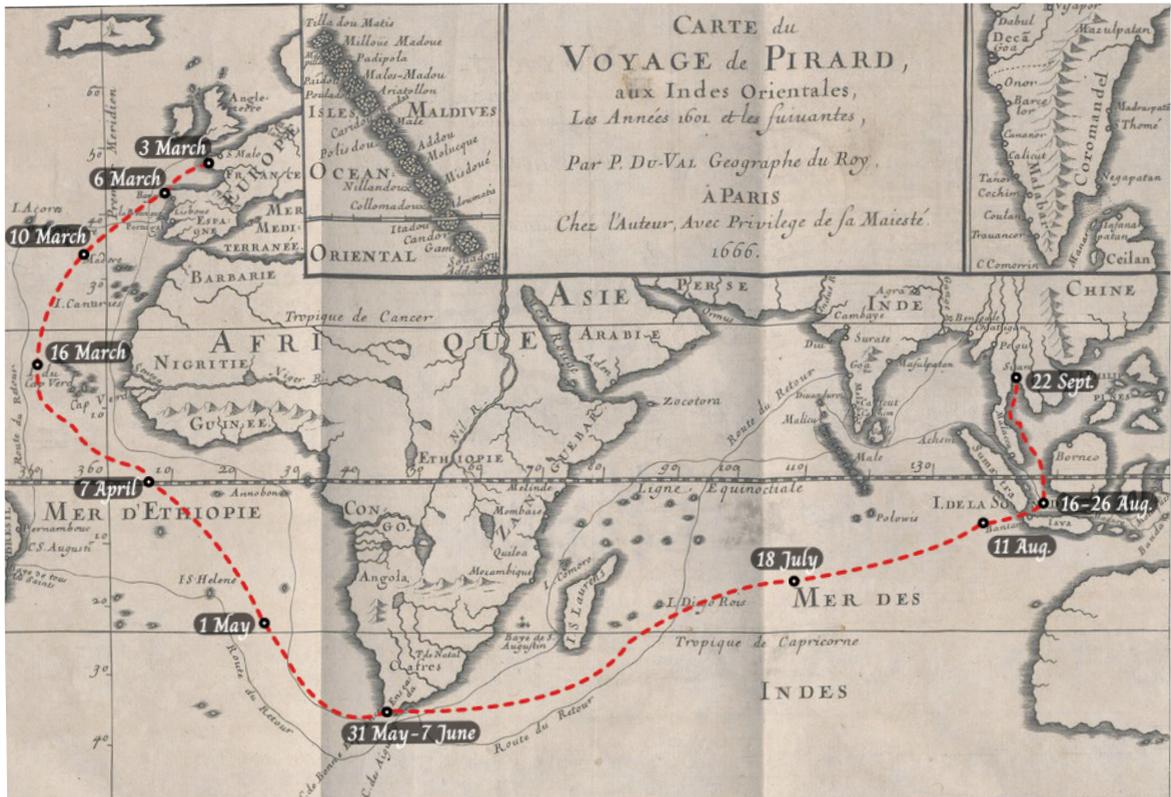
Since the 16th century, Jesuits have been mandated to send reports to the Society of Jesus in Europe, with

excerpts often published to garner support for missionary work. The Pope's instructions in *Propaganda Fide* in 1659 emphasized the need for missionaries to document local people, geography, and religion to aid their missions and those that followed (Pizzorusso 2011: 32). While not official accounts, these narratives adhered to a codified genre and served as educational tools within religious congregations. The genre's codification explains the detailed nature of missionary accounts like Jacques de Bourges' in 1666 (Smithies 1993), and Nicolas Gervaise's in 1688, the latter providing extensive insights into Siam's climate, political structure, and religion.

Basset's letter to Gabriel de la Roquette following the travel account (folios 1–7bis; **ONLINE APPENDICES**) attests to his familiarity with travel reports before departure, likely drawing from the rich repository of missionary accounts at the MEP. In this context, Basset's account stands as a typical representation of missionary narratives of the time, systematically exploring various aspects of the voyage in chronological order.

### Voyage to Siam

Jean Basset's involvement in the embassy was aboard two ships. The primary vessel, *L'Oyseau*, a relatively new ship constructed in 1671 (Dessert 1996: 308), carried the two ambassadors, Chaumont and Choisy, with Basset likely on board in a religious capacity. The second ship, *La Maligne*, slightly smaller, received less attention in Basset's account regarding accommodations and daily life. Despite limited information on where passengers



MAP 1: Itinerary of the 1685 embassy after Jean Basset, based on an earlier French map by Pierre Du Val, 1666 © Naphatsnan Revire

slept and details about food, Basset did describe fishing scenes and stops at locations like Cape Town and Batavia (modern Jakarta). Basset's daily entries during the crossing were infrequent, as he focused less on the journey and more on the embassy members.

In the 17th century, a ship represented a highly masculine, hierarchical micro-society mirroring the embassy's composition. Each member had a defined role, but personal records from officers and sailors were scarce. Naval officers left some sources, such as certificates, but few personal details were recorded. Basset mentioned a crew of around 140, including 90 sailors (folio 1; see **FIGURE 1**), with limited names provided [**TABLE 2**]. Captain de Vaudricourt and second-in-command Monsieur de Coryton were likely of

noble origin. Conflicts with the Dutch in Bantam and on-board illnesses, including scurvy, added challenges to an otherwise happy voyage for Basset.

Scurvy was a pervasive issue during long sea voyages in the 16th and 17th centuries. Basset vividly described the sailors' lives, marked by illness and death (folio 30). While the Dutch had discovered the effectiveness of lemons against scurvy in 1598, Basset highlighted the insufficient quantities of these fruits picked up in Cape Town. His account underscored the sailors' suffering as a divine judgment.

Basset's narrative also shed light on diplomatic relations in 1685. While relations with the Dutch in Cape Town were friendly, the situation in Bantam (Java) turned tense, impacting the embassy's plans (folio 28). Despite

known challenges, the request to leave Bantam, especially with numerous sick sailors, posed a significant difficulty for the embassy members.

### The Perspective of a Young Missionary

In Jean Basset's concise portrayal of Siam, we gain a glimpse into the Siamese culture of his time. Here, we delve into the intricacies of Buddhism, a pivotal consideration for French missionaries aspiring to convert the Siamese to Catholicism.

The missionaries' primary objective was to provide a comprehensive description of Buddhism, aiming to streamline the conversion process. Basset employs the term "Samanacodom" (derived from *sāmaṇera*, signifying the Recluse, and Gotama in Pali) to denote the historical Buddha, identifying three key aspects of the religion: (1) the creation of statues in homage to Samanacodom; (2) adherence to the Buddha's commandments; (3) sustaining a community of "priests", essentially monks called *talapoins* (folio 96).

Buddhism (the term had not even been coined yet), with its diverse characteristics and manifestations, may have contributed to some of the youthful traveler's misconceptions. Basset expresses profound awe at the numerous buddha statues, particularly marveling at their size and grandeur. Notably, he recounts encountering a colossal buddha standing at approximately 18 meters height (folio 78). It seems that he is talking about the giant buddha image of Ayutthaya, currently at Wat Phanan Choeng (วัดพนัญเชิง). Basset's focus lies

predominantly on material attributes, such as the gold leaf adorning the statues, while neglecting the intricate hand gestures and poses of buddha images.

### Invitation to Further Exploration

Jean Basset's recently discovered travelogue, nestled in Lyon's archives, unfolds as a captivating account interweaving personal narratives, cultural encounters, and the geopolitical landscape of the late 17th century. Beyond its role as a historical document, it serves as a portal into an era where maritime voyages teemed with both peril and promise.

The manuscript unveils a transformative period in Basset's life and the broader French missions in Asia. In contrast to the polished accounts of his contemporaries, Basset's narrative provides a raw, unfiltered look into the experiences of a young missionary navigating foreign cultures. This bottom-up perspective invites a nuanced exploration of individual experiences within grand diplomatic endeavors.

In conclusion, the rediscovery of Jean Basset's travel account is not merely a historical revelation but an invitation for scholarly exploration. The introduction to this newly discovered manuscript beckons historians and researchers to delve into Basset's experiences, the historical context, and the interplay of cultures during this enthralling journey. The manuscript stands as an echo from the past, inviting us to unravel its treasures and weave a richer tapestry around the remarkable journey of a young missionary to Siam in 1685.

**TABLE 1: Key Events in 1685 according to Jean Basset**

Date	Event
2 March	Arrival at Brest
3 March	Embassy departure
6 March	Ships reach Finistère point
10 March	Ships are at Madère
16 March	Ships enter the southern hemisphere
29 March	Description of tropical climate and local wildlife
7 April	Ceremony to welcome first-time crossers
26 April	Calm night, <i>L'Oyseau</i> loses sight of the frigate
1 May	Crossing the Tropic of Capricorn
30 May	Land in view
31 May	Arrival at Cape Bay
1 June	Chaumont requests officers to negotiate port stay at Cape [Town]
7 June	Departure from Cape [Town]
16 June	Storm puts the expedition in danger
7 July	Chaumont requests novena for favorable weather
8 July	Wind becomes favorable
18 July	Crossing the Tropic of Capricorn
4 August	Unidentified island in Java region in view
5 August	Java Island in view
9 August	Prince's Island in view
11 August	Between Java and Sumatra
12 August	Javanese bring food on board
15 August	Access to Bantam prohibited
18 August	Docking 5 miles from Batavia
19 August	Dutch general sends supplies. Sick sailors sent ashore
20 August	Basset describes religion in Batavia
24 August	Decimated Dutch ship arrives. Basset explains Batavia history
26 August	Departure for Siam with Dutch pilot
29 August	<i>L'Oyseau</i> arrives in Baka Bay (Phuket)
22 September	Arrival at Bangkok
23 September	Benigne Vachet announces French embassy's arrival
27 September	Forbin returns to ship with supplies
29 September	French chief of Siamese factory explains local history and traditions
30 September	French receive supplies from Constance Phaulkon
3 October	Frigate <i>La Maligne</i> arrives at Siam
8 October	Metellopolis's Bishop (Laneau) and de Lyonne meet embassy members Siamese boats ambassadors to land

Date	Event
9 October	Ambassadors dine with Governor of Bangkok. Description of welcome ceremony
12 October	Description of ambassador's houses
13 October	Constance Phaulkon summons representatives to welcome Louis XIV's embassy. Constance thanks Vachet for organizing ambassadors' arrival
14 October	Local missionaries and Siamese seminary members greet ambassadors
15 October	Ambassadors receive gifts from King of Siam
16–17 October	French prepare Louis XIV's gifts for King Narai of Siam
18 October	Audience of French ambassadors by King of Siam Long protocol description
19 October	Laneau, de Lionne, and Vachet translate Louis XIV's letters into Siamese in long ceremony
20 October	Chaumont visits seminary and sings prayers
22 October	Chaumont receives new precious gifts
23 October	Mr du Carpon arrives in Siam
26 October	Mr Charmot and another missionary arrive
30 October	Chaumont witnesses elephant fight. Description of Buddhist statue. Siamese cannons described. The exact origin of these cannons, which are also described by Choisy, is not known They were either European cannons or cannons built in Siam
3 November	Siamese student defends thesis in honor of Louis XIV
4 November	King Narai moves to city, triggering grand ceremony on river
15 November	Chaumont goes to Louvo (Lopburi)
19 November	Chaumont and Choisy, with Laneau and de Lionne, have private audience with the King
23 November	King Narai and French ambassadors present at elephant fight Narai offers saber to Captain de Vaudricourt
27 November	New audience with the King displeases French ambassadors
28 November	King Narai offers beautiful gifts to Choisy
2 December	14 people from Siam and Pegu (Bago) baptized in ambassador's chapel
Night of 10–11 December	Jesuit fathers observe lunar eclipse
12 December	Final reception of ambassadors by King Narai
14 December	Chaumont returns to ship. Choisy eats at seminary Description of brief history of Siam by Basset

TABLE 2: French Embassy Members to Siam in 1685 according to Jean Basset

Name	Age	Noble	Function	Official
Alexandre de Chaumont	45	Yes	Ambassador	Yes
François Timoléon de Choisy	41	Yes	Second	Yes
Billy	?	No	Maître d'hôtel	No
De Jully	?	Yes	Chaplain	No
D'Herbouville	?	No	Gentleman	No
De la Mare	?	Yes	Engineer	Yes
Jean Basset	23	No	*MEP	No
Joachim Bouvet	29	No	Jesuit	No
François du Chayla	38	Yes	Missionary	No
Jean de Fontenay	42	Yes	Jesuit	No
Jean-François Gerbillon	31	No	Jesuit	No
Louis le Comte	34	No	Jesuit	No
Étienne Manuel	23	No	*MEP	No
Guy Tachard	37	No	Jesuit	Yes
Bénigne Vachet	44	No	*MEP	No
Claude de Visdelou	29	Yes	Jesuit	No
Chevalier de Cibois	?	Yes	Officer	No
De Coriton	?	Yes	Officer	No
Claude de Forbin	39	Yes	Officer	Yes
Du Tarte	?	No	Officer	No

\*MEP: Missions étrangères de Paris

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