

H-Net Reviews

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Wil O. Dijk. *Seventeenth-Century Burma and the Dutch East India Company, 1634-1680*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006. Illustrations, maps, CD-ROM. 348 + xviii pp. \$32.00 (paper), ISBN 978-9971-69-304-6.

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Burmans and the Dutch in the Seventeenth Century

The author, Wil O. Dijk, a recent product of Leiden University, spent many years combing the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) archival material on the Company's relationship with Burma. The book, a revised version of her dissertation, represents the most complete survey of VOC material (at the Dutch National Archives in The Hague) on any mainland Southeast Asian country. The book is thus extremely well documented and much of this documentation is available in the form of a CD-ROM in the rear pocket of the book. The endnotes and the bibliography together take up fully one-third of the book (100 pages out of 304 pages before the index). Indeed, the author has put Leiden on the map of the modern field of Burma studies and Burma on the map of VOC studies.

Dijk's work sits at the overlap of two important fields of study. On the one hand, Dijk situates the VOC and its activities and servants in the western mainland of Southeast Asia and thus contributes a local study to our overall understanding of this commercial leviathan in some of its most far-reaching decades. In doing so, she contributes to the broader picture being constructed by work on the various dimensions of the VOC's involvement in the movement of people and commodities, alongside older work by George Vinal Smith on the VOC in Thailand (*The Dutch in Seventeenth-Century Thailand* [1977]) and more recent work on forced migration and the VOC by Kerry Ward (*Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* [2009]). For this audience, Dijk's attention to the details of the traders representing the company, the scale, prices, and types of commodities, and the means by which trade was handled will all be appreciated.

The present reviewer is part of another audience,

one more interested in mainland Southeast Asia and in Burma specifically. Most of this group is familiar with the many Portuguese accounts of Burma in the sixteenth century and Italian and other accounts of the same period and even earlier. Our European documentation then picks up again to a limited and inconsistent degree with English accounts in the seventeenth century, which really only become sufficiently detailed to be useful in the eighteenth century. Most of the seventeenth century and the voluminous data offered by Dutch sources sat untapped, save for work by D. G. E. Hall, the well-known School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) history professor who established modern Southeast Asian history as a field with his magnum opus *A History of South-East Asia* (1955). Years before coming to SOAS, while teaching at the University of Rangoon, Hall had published a series of short papers (all wrapped up together as a convenient single article by the *Journal of the Burma Research Society* [1936]) on the Dutch in Arakan (today, part of Burma), and another article, published in 1939, on the Dutch trade in Burma proper (the Irrawaddy Valley), both obviously of great relevance here. Since Hall was at the time far away in Rangoon, he relied on the published volumes of the *Daghregister of Batavia*, but even these he did not exploit fully as his main interest was in the intercourse between the English East India Company and Burma up to the mid-eighteenth century, a period that was the subject of his dissertation (published in 1928). For scholars of Burmese and Southeast Asian history, then, Dijk has filled a great chasm in our access to European sources on Burma during the seventeenth century, providing a wealth of data on the Restored Toungoo Dynasty during some of its most active, yet foreign-document-poor decades.

The book is divided into nine chapters (as well as a conclusion), including the introduction. Several chapters are thematic (one, of course, is historical background), focused on various aspects of seventeenth-century Burmese state and society and on the Sino-Burmese trade, subjects commented on at length in the VOC sources. In terms of the story of the VOC episode in Burmese history (or vice versa), chapters 5, 6, and 9 structure the material into three phases: the early “years of indecision,” 1634-48; the middle “golden years,” 1649-69; and the final “years of decline and departure,” 1670-80. There is also a brief discussion of rekindled VOC interest in Burma in the 1740s and 1750s, but this never amounted to very much more than requests for information on the situation in the country. Chapters are subdivided with sections on special subjects. A number of warfare-related topics, ranging from indigenous weaponry to gunpowder, are grouped together in chapter 2, and slaves and coolies are grouped together in chapter 7, to provide just two examples.

Dijk concludes with a discussion of why the VOC experience in Burma came to an end. Certainly, the Burmese court’s seeming disinterest in European trade by that time is an attractive explanation, but, as Dijk points out, the Dutch departure has to be attributed mainly to the fact that the VOC had changed by the 1680s, the inter-Asian seaborne trade having given way to direct trade between Europe and Asia. As Burma was an important part of the VOC’s inter-Asian seaborne trade, the company’s interests shifted and they brought their activities in the coun-

try to a close.

Dijk’s main criticism of the preceding historiography is the medium of scholarly access to Dutch archival sources. As Dijk reveals in detail, the published volumes of the Dagregister are full of errors, miscopied words and phrases, with confusing results for scholars who were led astray (see, for example, page 40). Among those who fall in this category, of course, is Hall, who relied so much on the published Dagregister volumes and whose conclusions, Dijk shows, were sometimes in error. Dijk fittingly ends her study with a look at Hall’s own observations on the gap in the English sources for the middle of the seventeenth century and how he had wished for a detailed study of these sources to rely on for his own work on the English East India Company (EEIC).

For the VOC scholars, the Burma box has now been checked or, perhaps if we consider Hall’s articles, rectified, expanded, or even made complete, and this work is being joined by other dissertations and research, most recently on the Dutch role in Arakan. For scholars of the dynasties of the early modern Irrawaddy Valley, the work takes us up almost to the period when English East India Company activities in the country were more substantial and detailed reports and correspondence on Burma accordingly become more useful. Given the necessary revision of Hall’s work on the Dutch role, made by Dijk here, it may now be necessary to give the broader European experience with Burma prior to the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) another look.

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