

Integrating archaeological and historical records in Dutch East India Company research

J. B. Kist

Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Postbus 50673, 1007 DD, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

The Dutch East India Company (VOC) was founded in 1602 by the amalgamation, under government pressure, of various overseas trade companies. It was a decentralized company with branches in six important cities in the Netherlands. Each of these branches had its own administration, warehouses and shipyards. The central direction of the Company consisted of a board of 17 Directors, eight of whom were appointed by the City of Amsterdam.

The capital of the Company was provided by private investors. The financial structure of the enterprise was as complicated as its organization. Separate accounts were kept in the different branches and in Asia. These accounts were kept in four yearly cycles, while each year fleets were equipped and sent out as if each was a separate undertaking. The returning ships and their cargoes were again dealt with separately by each local branch of the Company.

The 17 Directors and the Directors of the local branches were expected to participate with a sum of fl.6000 in the Company. Later this sum was reduced to fl.3000 for the Directors of the smaller branches. Many private investors participated in the Company, but they had very little real influence in its running. Their acquiescence was assured by a yearly 12.5% dividend throughout the two centuries of its existence.

The VOC built a trade network throughout large parts of Asia, based on about 250 trading stations. Many of these were just local offices where a representative of the Company, aided by local staff, engaged in import and export trade. In some cases, as in Ceylon, Malaya and various places in the Indonesian archipelago, the Company settlements included fortifications, garrisons and territorial control. Personnel in Asia numbered about 35,000.

The connections between Europe and the Asian network were maintained by a fleet of ocean-going armed merchantmen, called *retourschepen*, while the Interasian routes were plied by a great variety of Asian craft under the Company's flag, but also by the Company's large European ships. Between Holland and Asia, a total of 5000 ship movements have been counted during two centuries, while 3300 ships undertook the return voyage. On the route between Europe and Asia, and in Asia, the Company lost about 250 ships in the two centuries of its existence.

The history of the VOC has been compiled under the influence of different prevailing ideologies. Throughout the 19th and in the 20th century the image of the VOC was stamped by an imperialistic belief, a belief in the value of colonies and dependencies. In Holland this ideology was mainly inspired by the British example. Within this imperialistic attitude there was little appreciation of the merits of the overseas trade company. Already in the second half of the 18th century, when the EEIC was increasingly moving from a trading company towards a colonial government, British propaganda helped to create a negative image of the VOC, which remained mainly a trading company. About 80% of its turnover was derived from trade and no more than 20% was revenue from rents and taxes. Subsequently a negative attitude towards the VOC as a trading company in Asia turned into the anti-colonialist vision which developed after the Second World War. In the eyes of the colonialists, the imperfections of the VOC had led directly to the establishment of colonial rule which represented, in their view, a higher stage of development. Although anti-colonialists reversed this judgement, the linear view of East

India Company and colonial history persisted for some time.

Recently, however, with the healing of post-colonial trauma, there is a tendency to look at the VOC as an early example of an inter-continental manufacturing, trade and transport company. Parallels both on a management and a technical level with modern business are obvious and how such a large organization can survive in changing technological, economic and political circumstances remains as relevant as ever.

In this climate of renewed interest, the study of the VOC was given added impetus by the development of underwater archaeology and particularly the archaeology of shipwrecks of Dutch East Indiamen. Since 1965, about 50 such wrecks have been located and excavated in Europe, Africa and Asia. Whatever the scientific standards of these various excavations have been, and they have certainly varied from excellent to near zero, they have all produced prodigious amounts of hitherto unknown material.

This material has added something entirely new to the records that have been available so far: unselected material sources of information found within the strict context of a particular ship. The material has been produced in great quantities and can be identified and classified with the aid of other historical records in the archives of the VOC.

Thus, object-oriented research in the archives has helped to identify artefacts, but has also helped to select records with particularly detailed material information, such as inventory lists, lists of victuals and book-keeping records, which hitherto could only be studied on a more abstract level by economic historians.

The further study of the administration of the Company has given a better insight into the production side of the enterprise. The Company possessed some of the largest pre-industrial complexes in the Netherlands in its shipyards in Amsterdam and Middelburg. It also employed a multitude of subcontractors for the supply of things that could be bought more cheaply on the open market. The complex relationships of the Company with its suppliers, and also with its workforce, has become an important new subject for study.

A multi-disciplinary group of historians, archivists, archaeologists and museum people

has been engaged in the study of the VOC shipyards in Amsterdam and Batavia, the present day Jakarta. The integration of the historical and archaeological record has led to some publications but also to the construction of an actual model.

The renewed interest in the ships of the VOC led to two full scale replica projects in Holland, one of a 17th-century East Indiaman, the *Batavia* in Lelystad, and one of an 18th-century East Indiaman, the *Amsterdam*, in Amsterdam. In both cases, the actual building of the replica had already started before thorough research in historical and archaeological records became possible.

A very special situation exists in present day VOC research, with the availability of detailed archival records, the ever increasing amount of archaeological data and finally the availability of material records such as contemporary ship models, draughts and non-technical images.

An example of such detailed scrutiny is the study of the *Hollandia* artefacts. The *Hollandia* was wrecked in 1743 off the Isles of Scilly. After initial efforts by the VOC to retrieve at least the treasure aboard, the wreck was forgotten until it was rediscovered by Rex Cowan in 1973. Over the years, a considerable number of objects were raised from the wreck-site and studied by archaeologists, Peter Marsden and Howard Pell, as well as by Rex and Zelide Cowan (*IJNA* 1975: 4.2: 267–300).

Many of the recovered artefacts were sold at auction and bought by museums and private collectors. The remainder, about 3000 objects, were acquired by the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam together with the archaeological records. Since the objects were spread over a large surface of the sea bottom by the sheer violence of the disaster, little could be deduced from their context. It proved useful to develop another method to bring order to the raised objects.

After analysis of the material and manufacture of the objects, they were arranged by function. This functional system was then compared with a similar functional system, this time derived from historical VOC records, in this case, the *Equipagelijst* (list of equipment issued to each vessel of the VOC, the *Lijste van victualien en ordre op de rantsoenen* (list of victuals and regulations for the distribution of victuals) and the *Ordre en Instructie voor de*

Chirurgijns (orders and instructions for the ship's surgeons). The historical records also provide the nomenclature used by the Company. These two functional systems could be compared and the attribution of contemporary terminology also enabled further reference to the Company's book-keeping to be made, providing information about the manufacturers, quantities and prices of equipment, and also the difference between equipment, goods and cargo.

This two-pronged historical-archaeological method was applied on a much larger scale in the *Amsterdam* project. The *Amsterdam* was beached during a strong southwesterly gale in 1749 near Hastings. The ship sank in deep mud in a very short time and remained more or less inaccessible until 1969. In that year the wreck was violated by a contractor, engaged in the construction of a sewage system. After an exploratory excavation by Peter Marsden in 1969, which showed the great promise of the wreck, nothing much happened until 1984, when the VOC Ship *Amsterdam* Foundation succeeded in mounting a combined Anglo-Dutch underwater excavation. Two more seasons of excavation followed in 1985 and 1986.

From the start in 1984, the *Amsterdam* research project was conceived as an historical-archaeological project. Historical hypotheses concerning shipbuilding, equipment and functional arrangements on board the ship served as a starting point for archaeological research. The differences between the model built from historical records and actual data from the archaeological excavation were further investigated in order to reach a more detailed and comprehensive reconstruction. This involved the participation of specialists in many fields, who helped to solve many problems but who also asked many new questions.

These reconstructions can first be used to write the material history of the VOC and then, because the ships were the principal tool of the

Company, it is through them that many of the procedures and practices of the Company can best be studied.

In the case of the *Amsterdam* a considerable amount of technical documentation was found in VOC archives, because the Company went through a process of technical and procedural innovation in the period 1740–50. Not only was the design of the standardized East Indiaman completely renewed by ordering a set of draughts from an English shipwright, which incorporated the latest ideas from Holland, England and France, but the sailing regulations and operational procedures were all rewritten in the light of contemporary expert opinion.

The archival material comprised draughts, reports and resolutions and could be amplified with some very detailed technical models, which were made for the Company in the course of the design process. Thus it was possible to start the excavation of the *Amsterdam*, working from a highly detailed theoretical model derived from a wide variety of sources. Almost immediately the excavation showed discrepancies between the historical and the archaeological data, which in some cases raised entirely new questions about the way the ship was actually built, questions which would never have been asked working from one category of source alone. On the level of functional and procedural matters the interaction between historical and archaeological records proved particularly fruitful. Again, in this case iconographical and written sources, such as orders and instructions for ship's officers could be combined to create a hypothetical image of a situation or a procedure on the ship, such as the treatment of the sick, or the arrangements in a given compartment of the ship for the distribution of food. Then these hypotheses could be first controlled in the archaeological situation and later very often amplified because the confrontation of the various records nearly always led to a much more detailed picture.

References

- Colenbrander, H. T., 1925, *Koloniale Geschiedenis*, The Hague.
 Cowan, R., Cowan, Z. & Marsden, P., 1975, The Dutch East Indiaman *Hollandia* wrecked on the Isles of Scilly in 1743. *IJNA* 4: 267–300.
 Bruijn, J. R., Gaastra, F. S. & Schöffer, I., 1979–87, *Dutch Asiatic Shipping*, 3 vols, The Hague.
 Blussé, L. & Gaastra, F. (eds), 1981, *Companies and Trade*, Leiden.
 Gaastra, F. S., 1982, *De Geschiedenis van de VOC*. Bussum.
 Gawronski, J. (ed), 1984–86, *Annual Reports VOC Ship Amsterdam Foundation*. Amsterdam.
 van Rooij, H. H. & Gawronski, J., 1989, *East Indiaman Amsterdam*. Amsterdam.