[page 1].

**Some Background Notes on the Dutch in Korea in the 17th Century**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The first reliable information about Korea reached the West in a book called “Journal of the Unfortunate Voyage of the Yacht the Sparrow-hawk” written by Hendrik Hamel of Gorcum. In this book Hamel tells of his shipwreck on the coast of Cheju-do on August 16, 1653, and of his subsequent adventures in Korea together with a few dozen other survivors. One of the first discoveries that they made was that they were not the first Dutchmen to arrive in Korea, but that they had been preceded by a man named Jan Jansz. Weltevree, who had also been shipwrecked on the Korean coast in 1627 and who was serving at the court in Seoul as an expert on cannon manufacture and other foreign techniques. Hamel and his men were first taken to Seoul; later, however, they were sent to Cholla Province and interned at military bases there. They were not allowed to leave the country, but in 1666 eight of the remaining crew members succeeded in escaping in a boat and in reaching the Dutch trading post (factory) in Nagasaki, Japan. Then the remaining seven were sent to Nagasaki by the Korean authorities in 1668.

The purpose of these notes is not to retell the story of Hendrik Hamel, which has been ably done by Professor Gary Ledyara in his book The Dutch Come to Korea, 1 but to explain something of the background to these events, and to try to answer questions like: Where did these men come from? What were they doing in Asia? Why did they come to Korea?

[page 2]

**THE VERENIGDE OOSTINDISCHE COMPAGNIE (UNITED EAST INDIA COMPANY)**

Although the Portuguese preceded the Dutch in most parts of Asia and the Far East by up to a century, and had sighted the shores of Korea on their journeys to Japan, they never, as far as we know, visited the country, and certainly did not publish any books about it.2

By the time Hendrik Hamel went East, the Portuguese had been replaced in most parts of Asia by the forces of the Netherlands East India Company. This organization had been established in 1602 to bring under one umbrella the various commercial undertakings by different groups of merchants since the first Dutch voyage to the Indies in 1595-1597. In the four years after that voyage, no less than 61 ships in 14 fleets had left the Netherlands in a mad rush to capture the riches of the Indies, and the Dutch merchants were competing everywhere for scarce spices and driving up prices in the Asian markets.3

To put an end to this ruinous competition and to give the commercial outposts in Asia a more solid legal basis, the companies were amalgamated, after tedious negotiations, into the United Netherlands Chartered East India Company, an organization endowed by the States General of the United Provinces not only with the monopoly of all trade between Asia and the Netherlands, but also with quasi-sovereign powers to build forts, raise armies, conclude treaties with native rulers and administer justice. The VOC, as it is known in the Dutch language, was the largest commercial organization in the world at the time and one of the earliest permanent joint-stock companies in Western history.4

By the middle of the century, the fleets of the VOC had driven the Portuguese from their most important strongholds in the Spice Islands and in Malacca. The Portuguese forts in India and Ceylon were under constant siege. Around the same time, the Portuguese and Spanish were expelled from Japan by the isolationist policy of the Tokugawa Shoguns. In 1640, sixty-one members of an embassy from Macao were beheaded for daring to enter Japan. The only link between Japan and the outside world for the next two hundred years was the Dutch factory in Nagasaki, where a few Dutchmen carried’ on their trade under strict control of the suspicious officials of the Shogunate. The English, who were nominal allies of the Dutch in their battles against the catholic empire of Spain, were actually driven out of the Spice Islands by the VOC, and were barely holding on in India. For the next half century or so, the Netherlands East India Company was the dominant maritime power throughout Asia. [page 3]

This is not to say that the VOC was a purely Dutch organization. Far from it. The number of foreigners serving the Company was quite large, especially in the lower ranks. According to a recent estimate, at the time of Hendrik Hamel’s voyage about 35% of the sailors and 2/3 of the soldiers serving in the Indies was of non-Netherlands origin.5 Among the people who survived the thirteen years, imprisonment in Korea, according to the list in Hamel’s published account, were “Jacob Jans of Norway, Anthony Ulders of Embden, and Alexander Bosquet a Scotsman.”6

**HENDRIK HAMEL’S OUTWARD VOYAGE**

In the published versions of Hendrik Hamel’s “Journal, it is stated that he sailed from Holland on the 10th of January, 1653, arrived in Batavia on June 1st, and travelled right on to Taiwan.7 This is not correct; as Ledyard points out, the publishers probably made this voyage up to make it appear Hamel had arrived in Korea straight from the Netherlands and thus to increase the appeal of the book to the Dutch reading public.8

Hendrik Hamel had actually left Holland on November 17, 1650 with the ship Vogelstruys, and had worked in the Indies for two years before he embarked on his unfortunate voyage on the Sparrow-hawk. The Vogelstruys was one of the biggest ships in use by the Company at that time, measuring about 1000 metric tons and carrying more than 300 crew and passengers. It was one of six ships that left the Netherlands for the Indies that winter. All six arrived in Batavia in the summer of 1651, which made that a very good year. The Vogelstruys arrived on July 4th, 1651 with 189 sailors, 94 soldiers and 18 passengers on board, after having lost 23 lives during the voyage9 This was a comparatively low number; sometimes the death ratio was much higher. The diet and hygienic circumstances of the crew, confined in a very small space for months on end, left much to be desired and death tolls of up to one quarter or one third of the entire crew were not uncommon.10

**BATAVIA**

Batavia (the present day city of Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia) had been the hub of the VOC network in Asia since 1619, when Jan Pietersz. Coen established his headquarters there. From Batavia, the Governor General and Councillors of India ruled a vast commercial empire with trading outposts (factories) stretching from Persia to the Spice Islands and from Ceylon to Japan. Although the main commercial goal of the Company at first had been [page 4] the cloves and nutmeg from the Spice Islands (the Moluccan archipelago in the Eastern part of Indonesia), and these articles were the most valuable part of the return cargoes from Batavia to the Netherlands, these were not the only commodities handled. Other important articles for the European market were pepper from Sumatra and Sunda, silk and porcelain from China, cinnamon from Ceylon, sugar from Formosa and China, and a great range of precious metals, gems, medicinal herbs, dyestuffs etc. from all corners of Asia.

But the importation of Asian commodities for the European market was only one aspect of the Company’s commercial operations. As the VOC penetrated deeper into Asia, and replaced, often by force, the local traders, it soon found that the intra-Asian trade was almost as profitable as the intercontinental trade. Also, the silver carried by the outgoing fleets was not nearly enough to finance the activities of the Company, and the demand for European products like woollen cloth was very limited. Asian manufacturing in many fields was more advanced than European manufacturing and there was no equivalent in Europe of Chinese porcelain and silks for instance. Indeed, the Company would have had a doubtful success if it had occupied itself only with Europe-Asia trade. A lot of its profits came from intra-Asian trade. Most of the cotton cloth bought in India, for instance went to other Asian destinations; to the Moluccan islands, to be exchanged for cloves, mace and nutmeg. Part of the spices in turn went to China; the Chinese silk was carried to Japan to be sold for Japanese copper, silver and gold... these were the operations that eventually financed the yearly return fleets setting out from Batavia to supply Amsterdam.

**TAYOUAN**

Hendrik Hamel left Batavia on June 18th, 1653, on board the Sparrow-hawk, a yacht of 540 tons, about half the size of the ship Vogelstruys, with a normal crew of about 70 men.” After a voyage of about a month, it arrived at the port of Tayouan on July 16th. Tayouan, a 17th century spelling of the modern name Taiwan, had not yet become the name for the whole island of Formosa, but referred to the bay on the south-eastern coast, at the site of the present day city of Tainan, where the Dutch had established their headquarters for the China trade in 1624. Although the settlement had been founded mostly as a commercial establishment from which the East India Company would carry on the trade with China (they had been forbidden to establish factories at the mainland ports). Actually, in the twenty-five years since its founding Tayouan had become the center of a growing colony of Chinese settlers. [page 6]

Formosa became important not only as a source of deerskins for the Japanese market, but also as an agricultural colony producing rice and sugar cane. The total number of Chinese colonists had reached some 15 to 20 thousand in the early 1650s12. To maintain order and suppress the head-hunting aborigines, there was a force of about 1000 soldiers quartered in Castle Zeelandia, the Dutch fort in Tayouan, and since the 1640s a Governor had been appointed to rule over the colony. Actually, the most important passenger on the Sparrow- hawk on this part of her journey was the Chief Merchant Cornelis Caesar, newly appointed Governor of Formosa.

**THE SPARROW-HAWK’S CARGO**

The total value of the cargo carried by the Sparrow-hawk was 38, 820 florins.13 According to the records quoted by Prof. Ledyard14 the composition of the cargo was as follows: ‘

- 20, 000 catties putchuk. This was the root of a plant (Costus Indicus) grown in Indo-China and India and sold by the Company in Cmna and Japan as an ingredient to make incense-sticks with.

- 20, 000 catties alum. This salt, usually bought from China, was used in dyeing and tanning industries.

- 3, 000 pieces Taiwanese eland skins. One of the most important products of Formosa, especially in the early period before rice and sugar cane cultivation started, was deer skins. They were sola in Japan among other things as raw material for the manufacture of shields and

armor.

- 20, 000 pieces Taiwanese deerskins.

- 3, 000 pieces goatskins.

- 92, 000 catties15 powder sugar from Taiwan.

The predominance of intra-Asian trade in the VOC’s activities is illustrated by this list. None of the articles either originated in or was destined for the Netherlands; these were all products of Indo-China, India, China or Formosa and they were destined for the Japanese market.

**NAGASAKI**

The destination of the Sparrow-hawk, and the place that Hendrik Hamel would eventually reach thirteen years later, was the Dutch factory at [page 6] Nagasaki. The first Dutch ship to reach Japan was the ship de Liefde, which landed on the coast of Kyushu in 1600, even before the founding of the VOC, with its famous English pilot, William Adams. The first Dutch factory was established at Hirado in 1609. As has been mentioned above, in the 1630s the Portuguese and Spanish were expelled, leaving the Dutch as the only Westerners allowed to trade with Japan. In 1641 the factory in Hirado was closed and the Dutch were moved to an artificial island in the harbor of Nagasaki, called Deshima, where for the next two hundred years they had a tightly regulated and at times precarious, but very profitable existence. An interesting aspect of their activities in Nagasaki was that they had to make a yearly journey to the court of the Shogun in Yedo (Tokyo), and were required to present each year a report of the events in the outside world, an annual news bulletin, as it were, for the Japanese Shogunate. Although the Japanese were strictly forbidden to travel out of their country, and contact with the West was limited to the Deshima “channel, “ there were occasional contacts between Japan and its immediate neighbours: China, the Ryukyu Islands and Korea. In the report of the Governor General and Councillors of India to the Netherlands of 19 Jan. 1654, we read about the latter: ‘The coming year there is going to be an ambassador from Korea to appear at the Imperial Court in Yedo, which happens only once every three years.”16

**THE VOYAGE OF HENDRIK HAMEL: A UNIQUE EVENT**

One striking fact about the visit of Hendrik Hamel and his compatriots to Korea is the fact that it remained a unique event. No other servants of the East India Company, as far as can be ascertained, ever visited Korea again, and the next Westerners to reach Korea were French missionaries who came overland from China more than a century later.

Why did the Dutch never come back? Of course, the attitude of the Korean government was not exactly welcoming, but that was only part of the reason. In his account, which was originally a report to the East India Company authorities, Hamel does not mention any bright commercial prospects for the Company in Korea. He is apparently not very impressed by the produce of Korea, and describes the existing international trade of Korea as very limited; essentially it was confined to an exchange with the Japanese in Pusan of local produce for pepper, sweet-wood, alum, horns and skins from the “Southern Barbarian countries, “ and the overland trade with China by the long and arduous route through the mountains of North Korea and Manchuria.17 [page 7]

To put this fact in its proper context, however, I should point out that, aside from the regular voyages between Batavia and Nagasaki, Company ships did not call on any other port in Northeast Asia. The VOC, s first priority in the early and middle seventeenth century was to expel the Spanish and Portuguese from their Asian strongholds. This effort was successful in the Spice Islands and on Formosa, where the Spanish forts were captured in the 1640s. On the other hand, despite many years of blockades and naval raids the Dutch were not able to dislodge the Spanish from the Philippines, and one or two attempts to capture Macao were equally fruitless.

Also, it was hard enough to supply the Japanese market with enough silk, deerskin, and other articles, and the capacity to start new trade routes was simply not available. Aside from one or two unsuccessful attempts to establish trading links at the ports around the mouth of the Yangzi River, the Dutch merchants kept to the regular routes they had established. If the enormous Chinese market was not tempting enough to entice the Company to new ventures, it is not surprising that no Dutch ships were ever sent to Chemulp’o. After the Dutch had been driven from Formosa by the Chinese in 1662, there was even less enthusiasm in Batavia for adventures in this part of the world.

**CONCLUSION**

The “discovery” of Korea for the Western public was not the result of a deliberate expedition, but the by-product of an accident while Hamel was engaged in the regular trading activities of the VOC, which have been illustrated in the above notes. It is doubtful if Hamel ever gave permission for the publication of his account, which started as an internal Company report; the first editions were published in Amsterdam before Hamel had even returned from the Indies. Also, Hamel was apparently never tempted by the success of the book to continue his career as an author, for he never published anything else after his return to his hometown of Gorcum.

The accidental nature of Hamel’s adventures is underscored by the fact that his journey was not followed by any more visits until some 150 years later. The Dutch, as has been explained above, were not interested, and the English, when they gradually supplanted them as masters of the sea in the 18th century, were more occupied in India. Thus it came about that Korea was left alone to continue as “the hermit Kingdom” in deeper isolation than any of its neighbours. [page 8]

**NOTES:**

1. Gary Ledyard, The Dutch Come to Korea (paperback ed.; Seoul: Seoul Computer Press, for the Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, 1984).

2. According to Boxer, the first recorded European to see the coast of Korea was one Domingos Monteiro, whose ship nearly suffered shipwreck on the Korean coast in 1578. C.R. Boxer, Fidalgoes in the Far East, 1550-1770 (reprint of the 2nd ed.; Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 39.

3. F.S. Gaastra, “De vaart buiten Europa: het Aziatisch gebied, “ Maritieme. Geschiedenis der Nederlanden Vol. 2, eds. L.M. Akveld, S. Hart and W.J. van Hoboken (Bussum: De Boer Maritiem, 1977), p. 249.

4. A standard work in English is C.R. Boxer, The Dutch Seaborne Empire (London, 1965).

5. J.R. Bruijn and J. Lucassen (eds.). Op de schepen der Oost-Indische Compagnie: Vijf Artikelen van J. de Hullu (“Historische Studies, ‘ Vol. 61: Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff& Bouma’s Boekhuis. 1980), p. 21, 139-140.

6. Ledyard, op. cit.y p. 204. As Ledyard himself points out, however, these identifications are not certain (ibid., p. 127-128).

7. Ibid., p. 173.

8. Ibid., p. 129.

9. J.R. Bruijn, F.S. Gaastra and L Schoffer (eds.), Dutch-Asiatic Shipping in the 17th and 18th Centuries Vol, 2 (“Rijks Geschiedkundige Publicaten, “ Grote Serie Vol. 166; The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), p. 104-105.

10. Ibid.

11. Dutch-Asiatic Shipping, p. 100-101.

12. Johannes Huber, “Chinese settlers against the Dutch East India Company: the rebellion led by Kuo Huai-i on Taiwan in 1652, “ in E.B. Vermeer (ed.), Development and Decline of Fukien Province in the 17th and 18th Centuries (Leiden: E.J. Brill” 1990). p. 274.

13. W. Ph. Coolhaas (ed.), Generate Missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden aan Heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie Vol. 2 (“Rijks Geschiedkundige Publicatien, “ Grote Serie Vol. 112; The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), p. 744.

14. The Dutch Come to Korea, p. 22.

15. One cattie equals about 600 g.

16. Generate Missiven, p. 709.

17. Hamel, in The Dutch in Korea, p. 223.