

**UP AND DOWN BURMA'S IRRAWADDY RIVER:**  
**A SEVENTEENTH CENTURY DUTCH TRAVELOGUE**

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This paper deals with a seventeenth century Dutch travelogue, part of a collection of documents pertaining to the activities in Burma of the Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie or VOC).<sup>3</sup> For almost fifty years (from 1634 to 1680), the VOC maintained three factories or trading posts in Burma. The main office was in the port city of Syriam with a subsidiary in Ava and a small establishment in Pegu City. In 1634, coincidental with the arrival of the Dutch, King Thalun (1629-48) decided to transfer his court and capital from coastal Pegu City to Ava, some 540 miles (app. 864 kms) from the sea.<sup>4</sup> Consequently,

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<sup>3</sup> The Dutch East India Company's archives are housed at the National Archives, The Hague, The Netherlands. The vast collection of manuscripts that make up these archives is categorized with individual volumes simply designated "VOC" and numbered consecutively.

<sup>4</sup> See Victor B. Lieberman, "The Transfer of the Burmese Capital from Pegu to Ava." *JRAS*, 1, (1980): 64-83.

traders now found themselves having to convey their goods in flimsy open river craft up the Irrawaddy to Ava.

Still, this paper is not just about Burma's mighty Irrawaddy River. Since the theme of this workshop is "Water in Mainland Southeast Asia", I also intend to highlight the manner in which mariners and merchants often battled stormy seas and raging rivers across Monsoon Asia in the Age of Sail. Whereas in most of rural Asia, the wet monsoon means a renewal of life, a time for ploughing and transplanting rice seedlings with the promise of prosperity, for the sailing vessels of yore, the rainy season meant the waiting season in which copious rains and high winds called a virtual halt to all shipping. Violent storms often attend the change of monsoon when fierce gales and flash floods can waft ships ashore and overturn them; nowhere more so than in the Bay of Bengal - the very heart of Monsoon Asia.<sup>5</sup>

The monsoonal sailings across the Bay of Bengal between India's Choromandel Coast and Burma were from the beginning of September to the end of March. To return before the homeward sailing season ended, it was crucial to be out of the Syriam River well before the onset of the southwest monsoon. For once the attending squalls and tidal surges started buffeting Burma's shores it was not only highly dangerous but also well-nigh impossible for a vessel to exit the river, causing a delay of many months. Conversely, up and down the Choromandel Coast the hazardous months were October and November when the northeast

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<sup>5</sup> Map 1 - The Eastern Seas, showing trade routes and prevailing winds (Holden Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient 1600-1800*. Minneapolis University Press. 1976, p. 28). For a detailed contemporary discussion on the effects of both the wet and the dry monsoons on the Bay of Bengal region, together with dates, places, the flow of currents, wind directions and velocity, there is none better than the memorandum of Laurens Pit (the VOC's governor on the Choromandel Coast) to his successor Cornelis Speelman dated 25 July 1663 (VOC 1242, ff. 801-802v).

monsoon blasted the Bay's western littoral head-on. As a precaution, all VOC ships were ordered off the Choromandel Coast by October 7<sup>th</sup> and sent to Batavia or Ceylon to avoid the worst rigours of the season.<sup>6</sup>

With plain sailing all the way, the crossing to Burma took three to four weeks, but under adverse conditions these voyages could be lengthy, costly and extremely dangerous with ships frequently blown off course. With the crossing successfully completed, the next hurdle was Burma's treacherous coastline, indeed a mariner's nightmare.<sup>7</sup> If unfavourable circumstances prevented a ship from reaching the Syriam River, it made for another river [Tankogh River], some 75 miles (app. 120 kms) further west.<sup>8</sup> Under clement conditions, however, one sailed past Brago's Reef and on to Zinnebaken (Sinnebak). Numerous islets and submerged sandbanks made this a perilous stretch of water so that seamen unfamiliar with it were warned to drop anchor at dusk so as not to risk bypassing the entrance to the Syriam River.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> VOC 1242, f. 802v (memorandum from Laurens Pit to Cornelis Speelman, 25 July 1663). See also Pieter van Dam, *Beschrijvinge van de Oostindische Compagnie 1693-1701*, F.W. Stapel and C.W.Th. van Boetzelaer (eds.), 4 vols, 7 parts. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1927-54, 1977, Vol. II, part ii, p. 171.

<sup>7</sup> Map 2 - The Bay of Bengal, Arakan and Pegu (Isaac de Graaff, *Atlas VOC 1690* in 6 volumes - volume I, part III, number 26a). A detailed contemporary description of Burma's rugged coastline is in Pieter van der Burg, *Curieuse Beschrijving van de gelegenheid, zeden, godsdienst en ommegang van verscheyden Oost-Indische gewesten en machtige landschappen*, etc. 1677, pp. 148-150.

<sup>8</sup> On 27 May 1654, heavy weather and contrary winds forced a Dutch ship to put into the Tankogh from where they despatched a sloop through inland waterways to Syriam. Three weeks later, on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 25 galleasses arrived from there and carried the ship's crew and entire cargo in six days back to Syriam along the same route (VOC 1210, f. 648, Antoni Pavilioen and Elias van den Broeck in Pipli to Laurens Pit in Pulicat, 22 December 1655). Pieter van der Burg, *Curieuse Beschrijving*, 1677, p. 111.

<sup>9</sup> Pieter van der Burg, *Curieuse Beschrijving*, 1677, p. 149.

The Syriam River's mouth was fraught with dangers of its own, not least the substantial fluctuation between low and high water.<sup>10</sup> Whereas during a normal flood tide the inflow was 17 to 18 feet (app. 5 meters), at spring tide the floodwaters could rise to as much as 24 feet (over 7 meters). A distinct *advantage* of this much water was that it allowed river craft to reach even the remotest riverside hamlets. Sea-going vessels entering the river on a flood tide could effortlessly ride the incoming waters all the way to Syriam, some 20 miles (app. 32 kms) from the sea. A further advantage was that the rising waters dislodged any ship that ran aground.<sup>11</sup> Conditions were reversed when moving downstream on an outgoing tide. Still, precise timing was always of the essence. Casting off too soon, and the still strongly flowing current could thrust a loosely drifting ship up against the riverbank. But setting off at just the right moment, and the vessel would simply float down the river on slack but adequately flowing water.<sup>12</sup>

Navigating the mighty Irrawaddy River to and from Ava, however, was a different matter entirely, for the river's season-related hazards made these very daunting undertakings indeed. In the dry season, the water level is lowered considerably, increasing the threat of shoals, sandbanks, submerged pilings and other obstacles while in the rainy season, or even earlier, Burma's rivers begin to rise as melting Himalayan snows swell them in the middle of the dry season. Until the Irrawaddy begins to fall again in October, it rises in many places from forty

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<sup>10</sup> Map 3 - The Syriam River (Joris van Coulster, VOC 1313, f. 170v) and Map 4 - The Syriam and Pegu Rivers (*Atlas des Indes Orientales Holandaises*, drawn by M. Liebault 1729-39, p. 31). See also Pieter van der Burg, *Curieuse Beschrijving*, 1677, p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> Pieter van der Burg, *Curieuse Beschrijving*, 1677, p. 149.

<sup>12</sup> Pieter van der Burg, *Curieuse Beschrijving*, 1677, pp. 113, 149-151.

to one hundred feet (12 to 30 meters) replacing the dangers of submerged obstacles by increasingly rapid waters that often overflow the riverbanks.<sup>13</sup>

One of the earliest Dutch accounts of an upriver voyage to Ava in the rainy season (57 days) gives us an inkling of what it must have been like (for it says): “With all the Company’s merchandise loaded onto barques, we set off for Ava on 14 July. We arrived on 8 September after battling torrential rains and heavy weather but with our goods still intact. We made our way up the river to Ava under hazardous conditions due to exceedingly swift currents. Sometimes we were driven back with tremendous force in a single hour over a distance that would take us a full day to cover again. Shortly before, five of the King’s boats were wrecked while making their way up. This river has many bends and is fraught with reefs and shoals.”<sup>14</sup>

To reach Ava from Syriam, one traversed several smaller waterways before reaching the Irrawaddy’s main artery.<sup>15</sup> Boatmen tended to propel their craft upriver by means of poling and setting, toiling by day and resting by night upon the riverbank. Upriver to Ava could take as much as two and a half months whereas the return journey might be completed in as little as nine to ten days.<sup>16</sup> These voyages up and down the Irrawaddy were the bane of every

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<sup>13</sup> See Michael Charney, "Shallow-draft Boats, Guns, and the Aye-ra-wa-ti: Continuity and Change in Ship structure and River Warfare in Precolonial Myanma", *Oriens Extremus* 40, no. 1, 1997: 16-63, pp. 25-26.

<sup>14</sup> VOC factor Dirck Steur’s report to Batavia, Syriam, 27 December 1635 (*D.R. = Daghregister gehouden in't Casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter Plaetse als over Geheel Nederlandts-India - 1628-1682* [Daily Journal kept at Castle Batavia of all that transpired there and throughout the Dutch East Indies]). Edited by J.A. van der Chijs, et al. Published in 31 volumes, Batavia/The Hague, 1887-1931) 14 March 1636, p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> Map 5 - Inland Rivers around Syriam (J.S. Furnivall, "The History of Syriam", being a translation of a local Burmese chronicle that was discovered by the translator in a monastery in Syriam. *JBR*, V, 1915: 1-151).

<sup>16</sup> Pieter van der Burg, *Curieuse Beschrijving*, 1677, p. 111.

merchant. Sixty craft were once lost in a single year: some ran aground or capsized whereas others were destroyed by fire, not surprisingly since these boats typically had coverings of highly inflammable straw or bamboo. Losses could be tremendous, both in money and goods and occasionally even in lives. The Dutch reported in 1656 with obvious satisfaction that in 22 years of Irrawaddy voyages, the Company's goods had been spared, save for a certain amount of damage to merchandise from high humidity and ravenous rats.<sup>17</sup> Other traders had not been so fortunate, for many a heavily laden cargo barque had fallen foul of rocks, shallows and strong currents.<sup>18</sup>

Though Irrawaddy voyages were lengthy and endlessly tedious, the departure and arrival dates are not always a true indication of the duration. Weather, winds and currents were of course determining factors in the time it took to complete a journey, but so were the many stopovers along the way for official inspections and business dealings not to mention any number of major and minor mishaps along the way. Still, Burma was not just about great rivers and their deltas, but also about the country's vast network of inland waterways. There were of course thousands of miles of bullock-cart tracks as well, but mainly in areas less affected by the wet monsoon. Well into the twentieth century, the Burmese were still a riverine people with most families owning their own boat, for in those days, water transport catered fully for the country's needs.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> VOC 1214, ff. 47v-48 (original *Generale Missive (G.M.)* 4 December 1656). See also the published *Generale Missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden aan Heeren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (General Missives by the Governors-General and Councilors to the *Heeren XVII* [the Board of Directors] of the United East India Company). Edited by W. Ph. Coolhaas. Published in 7 volumes in the 1960s and 1970s by Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague) 4 December 1656, p. 100.

<sup>18</sup> Joris van Coulster (VOC 1313, f. 171v).

<sup>19</sup> D.G.E. Hall, *Burma*. London, Hutchinson's University Library, 1950, pp. 163-4.

In this waterworld, a multitude of assorted flat-bottom river craft plied the country's countless rivers, creeks, and canals. The most frequently mentioned in the VOC documents were barques of durable teak that came in all sizes. Large shallow-draft cargo barques (measuring 30 to 40 lasts)<sup>20</sup> were generally used for transporting merchandise. They were pointed at the prow and stern and wide in the middle with a bamboo walkway on either side serving as a platform for poling and setting - the principal mode of propulsion upon the Irrawaddy. At night the barques were beached.<sup>21</sup> Other Burmese river craft included ballongs, canoes, galleys, and mussoolas. But the Dutch preferred the sturdy capacious cargo barque for transporting their goods up and down the Irrawaddy. In 1667, Leendert de Lange, one of the Company's junior merchants in Syriam, undertook just such a journey.<sup>22</sup> His journal is the only such travelogue I have come across in the VOC sources on Burma. Overall, there are precious few detailed accounts of such seventeenth century Irrawaddy voyages. D.G.E. Hall, the doyen of Burma studies, mentions just one and very briefly at that: "Fleetwood<sup>23</sup> left Syriam on November 9<sup>th</sup> 1695 and arrived in Ava on December 23<sup>rd</sup> after an uneventful journey. On his return journey he left Ava on February 9<sup>th</sup>, 1696, arrived at Prome on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and at Syriam on the 28<sup>th</sup>". Hall adds pointedly: "Not until the end of the [17<sup>th</sup>] century have

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<sup>20</sup> The Dutch generally calculated a ship's capacity in 'lasts'. If we take a last to be a measure of weight equivalent to 3000 Dutch lbs, then a single cargo barque could take on an incredible 90-120,000 Dutch lbs.

<sup>21</sup> Pieter van der Burg, *Curieuse Beschrijving*, 1677, p. 118.

<sup>22</sup> VOC 1266, ff. 379-391v (Leendert de Lange to Joris van Coulster, Syriam, 11 July 1667). Leendert de Lange's journal has suffered considerable water-damage and is unfortunately not preserved on microfilm so that the transcription I made in October 1996 (and later translated into English) will most probably remain the only available one.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Fleetwood was second in command at the (EIC) English East India Company's Masulipatnam office (VOC 1274, f. 579v, Pulicat to Batavia, 24 June 1670).

we exact details of a journey from Syriam to Ava and back.”<sup>24</sup> Writing in 1927, Hall was unaware of the fact that a VOC servant had indeed recorded the precise details of just such a journey in 1667, some 30 years before Fleetwood. The Dutchman’s journey up to Ava took 48 days (2 April to 20 May 1667) and down to Syriam still a comparatively lengthy 39 days (2 June to 11 July 1667) owing to an extended business stopover in Prome and, no doubt, the monsoonal rains.<sup>25</sup> Under more favourable conditions, the return trip could easily be completed in less than a fortnight even with the mandatory stops at Longsha and Prome where every box, basket, parcel and permit, even the vessel itself, was painstakingly inspected.<sup>26</sup>

In closing I would like to read just one passage from Leendert de Lange’s journal in which he recounts an accident that befell him and his party on April 18<sup>th</sup>, just as they left Prome for Ava:

“[On] the 18th of the month of April [1667] we set off together in the Company's cargo barque destined for Ava. Having gone some six miles beyond the town of Prome, at a stone's throw from the embankment and at a fair depth, a tree lying submerged upon the riverbed was struck by our boat while being poled. The sailors tried without success to dislodge the vessel. In fact, their exertions had just the opposite effect since all that twisting and turning led to our being caught on one of the tree's branches with the stricken vessel being hit yet again. A branch, thick as a man's leg, pierced the prow whence water gushed in so rapidly and with such force that no amount of bailing could keep her afloat and she began to sink at the stern. Fortunately, not far from us, 2 or 3 boats lay upon the shore. The crew swam over to fetch them

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<sup>24</sup> D.G.E. Hall, "English Relations with Burma, 1587-1686." *JBRIS*, XVII, I, 1927: 1-79, p. 57.

<sup>25</sup> VOC 1266, ff. 379-391v (Leendert de Lange to Joris van Coulster, Syriam, 11 July 1667).

<sup>26</sup> VOC 1210, ff. 648-648v (Anthoni Pavilioen and Elias van den Broeck in Pipli to Laurens Pit in Pulicat, 22 December 1655) and Pieter van Dam, *Beschrijvinge*, Vol. II, part ii, p. 84.

and these were used to carry the textiles ashore. They then took the provisioner ashore plus a small chest containing the Company papers, while we busied ourselves with the Company's goods. Just one small package of textiles and 3 to 4 bundles of yarn were brought ashore in a dry state. The rest (which, to our annoyance, included our own chests with bedding and everything else) had to be dragged ashore through water and sludge because two boats, already laden with salt and rice, could not take on any bundles of sodden textiles. The following day, intending to hang everything out to dry, we opened all the packages and found them quite unaffected within. The spot where we had come ashore turned out to be atrocious. The crest of the high embankment was heavily forested while the riverbank was overgrown with osiers (willow used in basket-work) and the ground sandy. All the cloth could not be strung out together, therefore, to avoid any damage, there was no alternative but to spread out some pieces on mats and others simply on the bare earth. The provisioner hired a couple of coolies to put up a bamboo hut to shelter us from the cold and rain by night and by day from the heat and also to store the dried textiles. The barque was not disentangled from the tree till April 21st. On examining the rice and the salt, we found both to be thoroughly ruined. The load of rice had shrunk enormously during the bailing out of the boat. Moreover, it had turned soft as porridge and was filthy with earth oil. As for the salt, it had melted away completely. Not even a tical's weight remained. On reaching the shore, we tossed what was left of the rice and the salt overboard, so that not a tical's worth came of either. On repackaging the textiles, eight pieces were found to be missing. These must have been either stolen during the night or carried off by strong winds, landing up in the river, even though we (in twos) together with several Burmese sailors had kept watch all through the night seeing that the textiles had to be left hanging out after dark, there being nowhere to leave them but under the open skies. After the goods had dried, they were loaded once again onto

the barques and on May 2<sup>nd</sup> [after a fortnight's delay] we set off once again up the Irrawaddy to Ava.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> VOC 1266, ff. 383-383v (Leendert de Lange to Joris van Coulster, Syriam, 11 July 1667).