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The Dutch East India Company (VOC)

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1602 - 1799

The Dutch East India Company (VOC)

Overseas expansion

Mauritius, Hollandia and Amsterdam, these were the names of the three merchant ships that set sail from Texel for “the East”, together with the small ship the Duyfken, on 2 April 1595. It proved to be an exciting adventure. Only three of the four vessels returned in August 1597 and only 87 of the 249-man crew. The revenues were modest. But still, this first Dutch sailing expedition to Asia was a success because it opened a trade route to the East.

Other expeditions followed. With their strong and heavily armed trading vessels the merchant traders from Zeeland and Holland out-performed the Portuguese who had used the route for some time, and the

English became jealous. The ships returned heavily laden with colonial goods like pepper and nutmeg. To limit internal competition, Johan van Oldenbarneveltdt took the initiative of setting up the Dutch East India Company (VOC). On 20 March 1602, the company acquired the Dutch monopoly on all trade in Asian waters from the Cape of Good Hope onwards. The company was empowered to sign treaties in the name of the Republic, to wage war and administer conquered territories.

The VOC developed into a power to be feared. ‘This can lead to something big,’ wrote Jan Pieterszoon Coen to the Heren XVII, the board of the VOC in the distant

fatherland. In 1619, he conquered the town of Jayakarta and founded Batavia there. Coen wrote that '*Jacatra*' would become 'the most important place in all the Indies' and that the reputation of the Dutch had increased through their conquests. 'Everyone will now seek to become our friend'. Parts of Java were occupied, Ambon and Ternate in the Mulluccas were subjugated and the population was forced to cultivate spices. Elsewhere in Asia too the VOC gained ground with either persuasion or violence. Forts were built in South Africa, India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Makassar in Indonesia. China was visited and when in 1641 the Shogun of Japan closed his country's borders to foreigners, the VOC alone received his permission to continue to trade from the island of Decima near Nagasaki.

Sub-topics

Primary education sector

Sea travel (life aboard a ship), Captain Bontekoe
The surprises of exotic nature and culture: herbs, flora, fauna, people, goods and customs
The Cape of Good Hope and Jan van Riebeeck (1652)

Secondary education sector

The beginnings of a world economy
The VOC and waging war
Indonesia before the arrival of the Dutch
Competition with the English and Portuguese
Exploring the world: exotic collections, botanic gardens (and the dodo)
Asian trade (India, China, Japan)

Past and Present

From a colonial economy to globalisation
Where can you still find the Dutch colonial legacy in the tropics? Should the Netherlands contribute towards preserving it?
Does the shock of the new still exist?

In the Treasure Chest

Spices
Exotic shells
Ship's biscuits
Modern Delft blue

In this way, the VOC not only stocked Dutch warehouses with colonial goods and filled the houses of the bourgeois with *curiosa* from foreign lands, but they also played an important trading role within Asia. Textiles, spices, coffee, tea, tobacco, opium, tropical wood, iron, copper, silver, gold, porcelain, dyes, shells – an endless array of goods was transported by the Dutch East India fleet.

In 1799, in the time of the French, the VOC was dissolved. Today, the archives of the VOC are regarded as world heritage, a *memory of the world*. The daily reports of the merchants who organised trade from the forts, the reports of the travels of VOC officials to royal courts of rulers with whom they traded, ships' bills of lading... together the documents are an important source of information about two centuries of Asian-European history.

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References

Places to Go

Lelystad: Batavia Shipyard
Amsterdam: Maritime Museum (replica of a VOC ship)
Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute ("*Oostwaarts*" exhibition and a relief of the first voyages)
VOC walks in Amsterdam, Delft and Middelburg
Delft: Nusantara
Leiden: Museum of Ethnology
Utrecht: Moluks Historisch Museum

Books for young people

Johan Fabricius, *De scheepsjongens van Bontekoe* (12+)
Rebecca Noldus, *Zeekoorts* (12+)
André Nuyens, *De meikoningin* (12+)
Vibeke Roeper, *Land in zicht* (10+ info)
Vibeke Roeper, *Zwarte peper, scheurbuik* (10+ info)
Annejoke Smids, *Piratenbloed* (12+)
Simone van der Vlugt, *Bloedgeld* (12+)

Background literature

Femme S. Gaastra, *De geschiedenis van de VOC*, Zutphen 2002.

Websites

www.voc-kenniscentrum.nl
voc.websilon.nl
www.vocsite.nl