CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42837-8 — The Dutch Overseas Empire, 1600–1800
Pieter C. Emmer , Jos J.L. Gommans
Excerpt
More Information

Introduction

> We everywhere see violence and oppression give birth to a commerce founded on œconomy, while men are constrained to take refuge in marshes, in isles, in the shallows of the sea, and even on rocks themselves. Thus it was, that Tyre, Venice, and the cities of Holland, were founded. Fugitives found there a place of safety. It was necessary that they should subsist; they drew therefore their subsistence from all parts of the world.
>
> Montesquieu[1]

If we plot Dutch possessions on a map of the world from 1700, a quick glance would be enough to determine that in global terms the early modern Dutch overseas empire was very much a peripheral phenomenon. The Dutch had founded an immense empire that stretched like a string of pearls along the edges of the continents of Europe, Asia, America and Africa. The actual pearls consisted mostly of trading hubs, which were only partially conquered by the Dutch. Especially along the coasts of the powerful Asian empires such as Iran, India, China and Japan, and on the coast of West Africa, the Dutch had only small trading offices with no territorial rights. The Dutch Empire was therefore primarily a maritime phenomenon, with only a few 'real' colonies in the Caribbean, the Cape, Java, the Malukus, Ceylon and, for a short time, also in North America, Brazil and Taiwan. The Dutch Republic itself was also a rather marginal, maritime European phenomenon. After a long eighty-year revolt, the Rhine and Maas delta had formally shrugged off the grip of a continental European empire. The resulting Republic was one of seven equal provinces, where the sea-oriented cities of Holland and Zeeland, and Amsterdam in particular, financed the bulk of the state expenditures and had the main say in decision-making, both within the Republic and, via the trading companies, in the overseas territories.

[1] Cited from Book 20, Chapter 5 of his *The Spirit of Laws*, in volume 2 of *The Complete Works*, 6.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42837-8 — The Dutch Overseas Empire, 1600–1800
Pieter C. Emmer , Jos J.L. Gommans
Excerpt
More Information

The maritime position of the Republic on the periphery of continental Europe gave the commercial spirit of the coastal provinces free rein to develop. Historical geographer Edward Whiting Fox has pointed out that the inhabitants of coastal areas generally have more confidence in the working of the market and trade, and hence believe more in *laisser faire*. In this respect, he even observed a clear division between the France of the interior – i.e. the France of Paris, more reliant on coercion and regulation, destined to be victorious – and that 'other' France – i.e. the maritime France of Bordeaux that would ultimately lose out.[2] From this geopolitical point of view, the Dutch Republic can be regarded as that 'other' Germany, a maritime polity that managed to detach itself from the more terrestrial Holy Roman and Spanish empires under Habsburg rule, to be officially sanctioned by the 1648 Peace of Münster. In any event, if there is one thing that characterises the mentality of the reigning Dutch regents in the Republic, then it is the almost blind faith in what the market and trade could achieve. The idea gradually evolved in the Republic that there is such a thing as an economy ruled by human passions, which should be allowed to run its 'natural' course without government intervention. Poet and contemporary Joost van den Vondel summed it up quite nicely, saying that the Dutch penetrated 'as far as the sun shines', but more importantly travelled 'to all seas and coasts wherever profit leads us'.[3]

It was a happy coincidence for the Dutch that during this same period many other 'maritime peripheries' experienced a period of economic prosperity. In many parts of Asia, the period is even regarded as an Age of Commerce, a time when especially the coastal regions and its port cities flourished to an unprecedented degree. Unlike the Republic, though, the coastal regions of Asia seldom managed to make themselves independent from their hinterlands. At least in South and East Asia, the vast agricultural wealth and the sheer power of massive cavalry armies of the continental empires made a long-term coastal autonomy very difficult to achieve. It was only in those areas where there was no such imposing hinterland that independent maritime states could be created. The Dutch, too, were able to establish settlements in these very areas, in Java and Ceylon, for example, where they actually encouraged these littorals to become independent from the interior. Re-integration, when it occurred, would be instigated not from the interior, but from the coast and under Dutch authority. This

[2] Whiting Fox, *History in Geographic Perspective*.
[3] Perron, *De muze van Jan Companjie*, 22.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42837-8 — The Dutch Overseas Empire, 1600–1800
Pieter C. Emmer , Jos J.L. Gommans
Excerpt
More Information

heralded the birth of a new colonial structure of more intensive government and agrarian exploitation that was to start at the end of our period, but would not reach its peak until the nineteenth century.

Historians in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries wrestle with the question of whether we should regard the Dutch East India Company or VOC as a commercial or a political entity. Just as in the old days, this is a difficult subject on which to find common ground. It is true that the VOC did evolve to become an empire with considerable territorial power in Asia; however, it ultimately remained a trading company because it did not enable the immigrant population of its territories to put down roots there and to develop further, as happened, for example, in the Portuguese communities in Asia. A mass transfer of immigrants from Europe, as occurred in the New World, was not an option for the VOC. One of the authors in the debate favours the term 'Company State' – a term that also seems to be gaining ground in the literature on the English East India Company (EIC).[4] In our opinion, this adds little to the notion of an 'overseas empire' as applied in this book, which emphasises the maritime limitations of the Dutch Empire in geopolitical terms and at the same time encompasses the connections of the VOC with the activities of the West India Company or WIC, and other 'Dutch' players in the Atlantic world. Naturally, there was no administrative nerve centre; in practice the Dutch Empire was run by a diffuse group of regents in the province of Holland who tried to maintain their grip on the Companies via various administrative bodies. Although there was no shared institution linking East and West, many of the ruling regents of the VOC and WIC lived within walking distance of each other. They understood one another through and through, routinely exchanged functions with each other, and regularly met one another in the many administrative institutions of the companies, the city, the province and the federal government in The Hague. In the overseas regions there was a relatively clear authority structure, headed by a complex network of officials that held sway over both trade and administration and that controlled a highly diverse body of employees and subjects. In other words, our view is that this Dutch overseas empire should be regarded as a rather fluid conglomerate of overseas activities based on an amalgam of very different rights and privileges managed by a relatively small circle of Dutch regent families. Many of these families also supplied the administrative elites of the city of Amsterdam, the States (or province) of Holland and the Dutch Republic. Given the

[4] Weststeijn, 'The VOC as a Company-State', 13–34. For the English model, see Stern, *The Company-State*. See also van Meersbergen, 'Writing East India Company History', 10–36.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42837-8 — The Dutch Overseas Empire, 1600–1800
Pieter C. Emmer , Jos J.L. Gommans
Excerpt
More Information

deep entanglement of private and institutional fortunes, the prime concern of these elites was the profitability of the institutions that they administered, including that of the two Companies. For the VOC administrators, this meant that they adhered as far as possible to monopolies that could minimise the finance of territorial conquest and control. On the other side of the world, after just a brief imperialist phase, the WIC was soon written off and there, too, the Dutch Empire remained primarily a commercial enterprise and could never under any circumstances evolve to become a powerful colonial lobby as in England.

To what extent can this Empire be labelled as 'colonial' or even 'Dutch'? The Empire was 'colonial' because it entailed asymmetrical power relationships, as well as one-sided exploitation by a closed, native Dutch elite power that had its home basis far away. When we refer in this book to 'Dutch', we mean the Dutch cultural area in the broadest sense of the word. Our focus is on the most important Dutch overseas players in this period: the trading Companies established in the Republic of the United Netherlands. This does not mean that there were no 'Dutch' overseas activities outside the Republic and outside the Companies, as in the case of the numerous Dutchmen in the service of the other trading organisations or individuals such as Lambert Ruysch (1549–1611) from Culemborg who served the Jesuit mission and who arrived in Asia much earlier than the merchants from Holland.[5] Just as for the many private world travellers, the nature of their overseas activities was not specifically Dutch, and for this reason they do not receive the attention they deserve on the grounds of their individual curricula.

The question of the Empire's Dutchness is hard to answer because the term 'Dutch' is both too broad and too narrow. In terms of the ruling group of regents, it is more appropriate to talk of a Holland–Zeeland Empire since the other provinces, not to mention the 'inland colonies' of Brabant, Limburg and Drenthe, generally invested much less in overseas expansion. 'Dutch' in this sense is an anachronism that relies on the notion of a 'national' past that was constructed as such only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. An approach that looks only at the Dutch elites fails to do justice to the enormous ethnic diversity of the Dutch Empire – a characteristic of all pre-modern Eurasian empires. Initially the outbound WIC and VOC staff were largely Germans and Scandinavians, mainly sailors and soldiers. The principle was that the lower the rank, and the further on in time, the more foreigners there

[5] Jacobs, 'Een Culemborger in India', 45–54.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42837-8 — The Dutch Overseas Empire, 1600–1800
Pieter C. Emmer , Jos J.L. Gommans
Excerpt
More Information

were. Among the soldiers, more than half – and among the seamen just under half – of all those outbound were foreigners. Although around a million Europeans left the Republic for overseas destinations, the European colonists planning to settle permanently overseas represented only a fraction of the total population under Dutch rule. The 'Dutch' colonisation of Taiwan and Java, for example, would have been unthinkable without the far more numerous Chinese. In addition, there were of course the local population groups, although these had been severely thinned out in South Africa and America, as well as in Taiwan, by various infectious diseases spread at least in part by the Dutch. In the Caribbean, besides the imported African slaves, the growing group of people with a mixed ethnic background had a strong demographic presence but – unlike mestizo groups in Batavia – they were not able to acquire the status of whites.[6]

In short, although we will refer in this book to a Dutch Empire, what we are actually dealing with is an empire in which numerous peoples from Europe, Asia, America and Africa actively participated, whether of their own free will or as a result of having been coerced. Even the many artists and intellectuals in the Republic itself who drew inspiration from the overseas discoveries were often Flemish, French, German and English immigrants. In fact, the Netherlands had never been as un-Dutch as it was during its Golden Age. Having said that, throughout the book, and in particular in the concluding Coda, we will return to this issue and attempt to detect certain specific traits of the Dutch Empire as it evolved.

Anyone interested in the history of the VOC and WIC can choose from the many excellent recent overviews that detail the organisational and maritime aspects of these trading concerns. The present book is not intended to be a repetition of such works, and so we have opted for a different approach that highlights comparison with other European empires as well as the interaction between the Dutch Republic and its overseas territories in both the metropolis and the different contact zones. We make the assumption that Dutch identity evolved in a continuous interaction with the overseas world. In the first part of this work, the Netherlands is the starting point and we look at the world from that pivotal viewpoint. After taking account of the organisational and commercial aspects of the two trading companies, we will more specifically discuss the economic, social and cultural impact of the overseas empire on the metropolis as well as the religious, scientific and artistic dialogue that it engendered with Asia. The second and third

[6] Kruijtzer, 'European Migration in the Dutch Sphere', 96–122.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42837-8 — The Dutch Overseas Empire, 1600–1800
Pieter C. Emmer , Jos J.L. Gommans
Excerpt
More Information

parts of the book will discuss Dutch operations in respectively the Atlantic world and Monsoon Asia. Given the differences of the indigenous societies in these regions, the two parts follow two different approaches. Whereas we take a more comparative, intra-European perspective for the Atlantic, for Monsoon Asia we have made an effort to understand the process of Dutch expansion from the inside out, that is, from the continuously changing political and economic constellations in Asia. Hence, readers will find the Dutch vessels and trading posts incorporated into the complex dynamics of the major Asian empires, rendering them less prominent than in the more conventional historiography of the VOC. At the same time, this last part offers a unique Dutch window on the most important political and economic developments in the immense Asian hinterland. In the book's Coda, we will pull together the conclusions of the regional parts, reflecting once again, but now for the Dutch Empire as a whole, on the Empire's economic and cultural impact as well as on its specific features compared with other European empires.

Besides offering readers an overview, this book also provides an agenda for future research, in which we hope that the history of Dutch overseas expansion will become more closely integrated into world history, if only for us to be able to continue that quixotic quest to discover the unifying cord, 'hidden in silence', that the Dutch poet and novelist Jan Jacob Slauerhoff (1898–1936) so passionately longed for.

The Discoverer

He loves the land that the sea hid from him
Love, like a woman to beings who are going to be born
So was worrying and in dreams was sinking
At the top of the deck, watching the bow lift.

It seemed to him that something was moving
A mist in the distance wanting to break
While the boat, foaming, divided the waters
Against the land about to be born

When I discovered it though, he knew the betrayal
Nothing united them. Hidden in silence, no cord
Again wanted to cover it up, but it was too late:

It lay bare to the world. Only he was left
To follow the course sadly, no destination or pier
And without power – empty itself in the emptiness of the seas.[7]

[7] Translated by Maurice Venning, see https://lyricstranslate.com/fr/o-descobridor-discoverer.html (consulted 31 December 2019).

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org