

## The Dutch Overseas Empire, 1600–1800

How did the Dutch Empire compare with other imperial enterprises? And how was it experienced by the indigenous peoples who became part of this colonial power? At the start of the seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic emerged as the centre of a global empire that stretched along the edges of continents and connected societies surrounding the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. In the Dutch Empire, ideas of religious tolerance and scientific curiosity went hand in hand with severe political and economic exploitation of the local populations through violence, monopoly and slavery. This pioneering history of the early-modern Dutch Empire, over two centuries, for the first time provides a comparative and indigenous perspective on Dutch overseas expansion. Apart from discussing the impact of the Empire on the economy and society at home in the Dutch Republic, it also offers a fascinating window into the contemporary societies of Asia, Africa and the Americas and, through their interactions, on processes of early-modern globalisation.

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## Cover Image

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Detail of an illustration from the *Dastur-i Himmat* produced in Murshidabad (Bengal, India), c. 1755–60. It narrates the story of Prince Kamrup of Awadh and Princess Kamalata of Serendip (Sri Lanka), who fall in love without having met. Kamalata sends the Brahmin Samipi to trace her mysterious lover, after which Kamrup sets sail to Serendip. Overcoming many trials and tribulations, Kamrup and Kamalata marry, and become the new king and queen of Awadh.

In this scene, we see Samipi, Kamrup and his companions at the port of Hugli-Chinsura (Bengal), preparing for embarkation to Serendip. In the background are two European ships with flags inspired by the Dutch red, white and blue. This scene that combines European naturalism (ships and porters) with Indian artistic conventions (Kamrup and his party) reveals a fascinating Indian perspective on both the material and the visual culture of the Netherlands (see Linda York Leach, *Mughal and Other Indian Paintings from the Chester Beatty Library*, Volume II (London, 1995), 623–54).

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## Maps

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## Note on Terminology

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When discussing ethnic groups, we have attempted to be as specific as possible, ideally referring to a tribe or nation, or, where necessary, using the conventional terms for a specific macro-region, such as Africans, Chinese and Europeans. When referring to the indigenous populations of the Americas in general, we have employed terms that resonate with the various peoples concerned. Thus in the case of the Americas we use the term American Indians but in the case of North America mostly Native Americans, and in the case of Brazil we use the term indigenous Brazilians. The term Indians has been used exclusively for the people of the Indian subcontinent. We have also tried to avoid anachronisms like Indonesians, preferring historical usage. This is also true with our choices of geographical terms, thus Siam instead of Thailand and Iran instead of Persia, although the latter has been used when referring to the antiquarian European interest in that region. We have chosen to use the term ‘slaves’ rather than ‘enslaved’, since ‘slaves’ serves as a conventional legal term that facilitates a comparative analysis throughout time and space. In addition, the term ‘enslaved’ might seem to refer to those slaves who had been free but were enslaved during their lifetime, whereas the term slaves also denominates slaves who had inherited their slave status from birth. Finally, we feel that the legal aspect of the term does not reduce people to that category and rightly articulates the dehumanising quality of slavery.

## Preface

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The Empire of Mataram was an Oriental despotism of the traditional kind.

Asian society, whether Indonesian, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Persian or Malay, had no wish whatever to be changed by European contacts in the 17th and 18th centuries, but wished only to retain its traditional and static forms.

Charles R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire 1600–1800*<sup>1</sup>

It was more than fifty years ago that British historian Charles R. Boxer published his masterpiece *The Dutch Seaborne Empire 1600–1800*. For anyone who does not have a command of the Dutch language, this is still the only written study of early modern Dutch colonial history. It is a very readable book, and in many ways it is far from outdated. You could even say that the book was a forerunner of what fellow historians recently started discussing in what they have called the *New Imperial History*.<sup>2</sup> Just like this new generation of historians, Boxer pays much attention to the influence of the colonial empire on the metropolis and on the various social and cultural aspects of the empire. He is also surprisingly innovative in his decision to talk of a single empire, with East and West being connected with one another via the Dutch metropolis. As a British historian, he also makes very sharp comparisons with the history of ‘his’ British Empire. Unsurprisingly, therefore, our own undertaking can but admire Boxer’s classic and attempt to build further on it.

Indeed, Boxer’s themes are also our themes. We, too, want to try to bring the Atlantic World and Monsoon Asia closer together through the mediation of the Netherlands, and in so doing we will not shy away from making sometimes bold comparisons with other overseas empires, in particular the British one. That is not to deny that there are two authors in this book, each with his own style and preferences. Although our views

<sup>1</sup> Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire*, 213, 217.

<sup>2</sup> For the specific Dutch context in comparison with the British and French cases, see the essay by Raben, ‘A New Dutch Imperial History’, 5–30.

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are unlikely to be in complete harmony, we nonetheless hope that a certain level of polyphony will shine through. Differences in tone can also be traced back to the fact that the expansion-hungry Dutch, just like other Europeans, had to adapt to the differing political and economic environments that they faced in East and West. In much of Asia, the Dutch had little option but to adjust to the existing power and trade patterns. To fully grasp the role of the Dutch in the region, the reader needs to be aware of the key historical themes at play in the different Asian societies. The exact opposite applies to the Atlantic region. Trade in the Atlantic was a European invention, and Europeans had the upper hand in the New World. In most of Africa, on the other hand, European influence was not entirely new, but it was certainly more marginal than in either the Americas or Asia.

More than fifty years after the publication of his overview, we can conclude that most of the historical developments Boxer observed are still valid, although the way they are interpreted has altered quite substantially, particularly in the light of the post-colonial and global turns that the field has experienced during recent decades. In this book we will attempt to connect the themes raised by Boxer with the latest insights in the area of intellectual and military history (in Part I), slavery and the slave trade (in Part II) and Asian societies (in Part III). The quotes above show that, at least in this last area, there is ample room for improvement of Boxer's viewpoint.

The present work is a substantially expanded version and adapted translation of the Dutch publication *Rijk aan de rand van de wereld: De geschiedenis van Nederland overzee, 1600–1800* published by Bert Bakker, Amsterdam 2012. For the translation we are most grateful, first and foremost, to our translator Marilyn Hedges, to Steven Holt for some meticulous copy-editing, but also to our Dutch publisher Mai Spijkers and to the organisations that have provided the funding: the Dutch Foundation for Literature and the Institute for History at Leiden University. We are also particularly grateful to our colleagues Henk den Heijer, Kiri Paramore and Femme Gaastra from Leiden and Peter Rietbergen from Nijmegen for the comments and suggestions they made on the first version of the Dutch manuscript. The same goes for Larissa Schulte Nordholt for her advice on ethnic terminology. Last, but certainly not least, we are indebted to more than 150 bright Asian and African students who struggled to learn the Dutch language and wrote wonderful BA, MA and PhD theses during the TANAP, ENCOMPASS and COSMOPOLIS training programmes that have been running at Leiden University since the beginning of this millennium. Their research resonates in the footnotes and in the explorative spirit of this book that is

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dedicated to them. Naturally, we ourselves remain fully responsible for the content and layout of the book. Parts of Chapters 2, 8 and 9 appeared previously in a slightly different format. We would like to express our appreciation to Atlas Maior Publishers in Voorburg and Van Wijnen in Franeker for permission to re-use these texts.

**Piet Emmer and Jos Gommans**



Fig. 1 Title page of Philip Angel, *Deex-autaers*, Batavia 1658. The drawing refers to the Hindu tradition of the thousand-headed serpent Sheshanaga that carried the world, resting on the ocean and on the back of a turtle. According to Angel, it is on these weak fundamentals that the heathens, ‘seated in deep night’ and with ‘their lost senses’, wait for the enlightenment of the true God.