



Illustration 1. Princely vessel at Siam (Thailand), Jan Luyken, 1687.

Letter from the Phrakhang on behalf of King Prasatthong (r. 1629-1656) to the Supreme Government in Batavia, 2 March 1641

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1 Introduction

Hendrik E. Niemeijer, “Letter from the Phrakhlang on behalf of King Prasathong (r. 1629-1656) to the Supreme Government in Batavia, 2 March 1641”. In: *Harta Karun. Hidden Treasures on Indonesian and Asian-European History from the VOC Archives in Jakarta*, document 21. Jakarta: Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2016.

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This letter from the Siamese minister of external and trading affairs, the Phrakhlang, to Governor General Antonio van Diemen (in office 1636-1645) and his Councillors in Batavia is a good example of “maritime diplomacy”: high level diplomatic correspondence between two *thalassocracies* (VOC Batavia and Siam) or maritime states to promote matters of common interest, or settle disputes concerning their maritime trading activities or spheres of influence at sea.

In 1641, the “zenith of Dutch –Siamese diplomatic exchange” was already over. The contacts between the Siamese kings and the Princes of Orange and the splendid receptions of four important Dutch embassies at the Siamese court took place during the period 1628-1641. In 1641 the last missive and gifts from the Prince of Orange to the King of Siam were received in Ayutthaya with splendour and honour, under the supervision of Dutch executive head Jeremias van Vliet.

For the Dutch, the year 1641 marked above all the final conquest of Portuguese Malacca, and subsequent control over the Straits of Malacca.

In this letter King Prasathong (via the Phrakhlang) presents himself as a ruler who stands in a long tradition of participating very actively in the intra-Asian overseas trading networks. The royal junks of Siam had been active in the South China

Sea and in the Indian Ocean for a long time. Siam had sent thirty-six tribute missions to the Ming rulers between 1371 and 1404 and twenty-two in the Yung-lo reign, 1405-33. Siamese junks could thus frequently be seen in the South China Sea. Until around 1450 Siam’s maritime power competed mainly with Java and Champa, until the rise of Malacca under Sultan Mansur Shah (r. 1459-1477), when Malacca dominated the maritime Southeast Asian scene.

The Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511 was probably favourable for Ayutthaya in the beginning. It became an alternative port for Muslim traders and others. It also became a nodal point for Chinese trade to the Philippines and Borneo, until disaster struck and Ayutthaya, the greatest port city of Southeast Asia in the middle of the sixteenth century, was conquered by the Burmese in 1569. Direct Chinese shipping to Southeast Asia and the rise of Banten contributed to Ayutthaya’s decline.

The rise of the European trading companies, in particular the Dutch United East India Company (VOC, 1602), signified another challenge for Ayutthaya during the subsequent 1600-1688 period. European cargo ships could carry more over a longer distance for a cheaper price, and soon the Europeans also monopolized crucial products in the business chain, such as fine spices (nutmeg and cloves) from the Moluccas. Dutch Batavia and Spanish Manila became two major international competitors, while the Portuguese remained active in Macao. Ayutthaya became more and more focused on the China trade, and attracted all those traders who were excluded by Dutch monopolies: the English, the Portuguese, the French, the Muslims from India, and the Malays from Malacca and the main Sumatran ports, Jam-



INTRODUCTION



Illustration 2. ‘Vessel belonging to noblemen at Siam (Thailand), Jan Luyken, 1687.

bi and Palembang. Although Ayutthaya was quite active in the export trade with Japan – consisting of deer- and cowhides, sappanwood, rayskins and elephant tusks – the Siamese participation in Siamese-Japanese shipping declined during the second quarter of the 17th century.

It is in this context of a declining trade that in 1640-41 the King permitted a Siamese governor to fit out a junk to Batavia to sell rice and lead for the King.

The letter itself contains two requests from the King: 1.) Batavia’s help to find a Siamese junk stolen by its Chinese nakhoda; and 2.) a model ship for his son to play with.

The first request delivers interesting information on the size of what seems to have been an ordinary Siamese junk, and an example of what a regular crew of such a common Siamese ship looked like. The ship itself measured 34.31 x 6.11 meters and had a mixed crew of 61 men, of whom 26 were Chinese and 22 Muslim (Indians) and Malays. The junk was not supervised by a

Siamese nakhoda but by a Muslim Malay skipper, employing a Chinese as his second man. The chief helmsman was a Muslim Chinese and also the boatswain was a Chinese. The Siamese on board were a chief trader with two assistants, and only 11 Siamese crew members. This confirms the notion of for instance Ishii Yoneo that the royal junk’s “operations at sea seem to have been exclusively in the hands of non-Siamese”, while the trade itself was left to a few Siamese traders on board. This involved a certain risk, as the letter demonstrates.

These data, as well as the data on the weaponry on board, offer us a glimpse of how Siamese junks operated. In terms of variety of crew and military hardware, these relatively small junks seem to have been much more vulnerable than the European, better armed cargo ships at that time. It is in this context that the king of Ayutthaya frequently requested the assistance of the VOC when calamities occurred.



INTRODUCTION

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2 Transcription of the Dutch text

DAGHREGISTERS VAN BATAVIA, 2 MAART 1641.¹

[fol. 421]

Deze brief komt van mij, *Oya sy Darmaradt dystsia tsiat mathia nochit phy phit radt khausa tybydy a phaya Cromma pha howa*² of bewaarder van het grootzegel van de Koning, ontvanger-generaal van een vierde van Zijne Majesteits rijke inkomsten, opper-advocaat en pleitbezorger van alle vreemdelingen, uit een zuiver hart en oprechte genegenheid, aan de Edele, genereuze, wijze, zeer gestrenge heer, de Edele heer Anthonio van Diemen, Gouverneur-Generaal over de staat van de Verenigde Nederlanden in India Oriëntalis.

Edele Heer, bij deze gelegenheid met het vertrek van Kapitein Jeremias van Vliet naar Batavia, ben ik genoodzaakt Uwe Edelheid bekend te maken, dat de Koning onze Heer, *Probat somdit Boromma bopit probu dy t'Jaco Ichau ney Crongh pramaha nac-coon boworra touwa randy srj ajudia*³, uit bijzondere overweging, namelijk zijn genegenheid tot de welvaart van zijn onderdanen en om de handel in de stad Batavia na vermogen te helpen groeien, heeft toegestemd dat *t'Jau phia ramaraet, seu Jaky bodun tra reu tsiaeay mahay soere jaky body ry soet ja na ley abaya bra Cromma ph hou thiau-phia souar Colock*⁴ een jonk krijgt van een lengte van $18\frac{1}{4}$ en breedte van $3\frac{1}{4}$ vadem⁵. Daarop heeft Zijne Majesteit tot schipper aangesteld Srj Set Ja, een Moorse Maleier als eerste persoon, en voor tweede persoon de schipper Pecca, Chinees, en voor de derde persoon of eerste koopman Cousy Sombat met twee assistenten, genaamd Moncherbit en Ney Rachuyt; tot opperstuurman [fol. 422] een Chinees die Moors van religie is genaamd Heeuqua, en voorts tot hoogbootsman ofwel *saranghy*⁶, Equo, Chinees, met elf Siamse, 26 Chinese en 22 zowel Moorse als Maleise matrozen, tesamen 61 personen.

De jonk is bewapend met vier koperen stukken, die ieder een kogel van 2 vingers dik kunnen afschieten, en een kanon dat een kogel van $1\frac{1}{2}$ vinger dik afschiet; voorts vier musketten en 15 Japanse vuurroers. Voornoemde jonk was geladen met ongeveer 200

¹ [DRK] *Dagh-Register gehouden int Casteel Batavia Anno 1640-1641*, Bataviaasch genootschap 1887, pp. 285-286

² Okya Si Thammarat Dechachat Amatyanuchit Phiphit Ratanarat Kosa Thibodi etc. (Phrakhang minister). De Siamese officiële rangen gedurende de het tijdperk van Ayutthaya waren in oplopende volgorde: *chaophraya/chaophaya; okya/phraya/phya; okphra/phra; okluang/luang; okkhun/khun; okmuen/muen; okphan/phan*.

³ Phrabat Somdet Borombophit Phra Phutthachayuhua nai Krung [Thep?] Phra Mahanakhon Bowon Thawarawadi Si Ayutthaya (King of Siam). Dit betekent bij benadering “De Edele heer en toevlucht, de heer Buddha die woont in Si Ayutthaya de grote hemelse stads” etc. Zie ook: Richard Cushman, *Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*, 2000.

⁴ Dit is een ruwe weergave van de titel van Okya Sawankhalok: Chaophaya [Okya] Kraset Songkhram Ramarat Saenya Thibodi Si Satchanalai Aphaï Phiriya Bara Krom Phahu Chaophaya [Phya] Sawankhalok (gouverneur van Sawankhalok).

⁵ In meters: 34,31 x 6,11 meter.

⁶ Betekenis onbekend.



TRANSCRIPTION OF THE DUTCH TEXT

lasten⁷ rijst en andere eetwaren; ook met 6 *bahar*⁸ lood, voor rekening van de Koning. Het is 16 maanden geleden van hier vertrokken om met genoemde koopmanschappen naar Batavia te gaan, maar door onkundigheid van de stuurman is het daar niet verschenen maar in Patani aangeland. In het terugkeren naar Siam heeft de Chinese stuurman Heeuqua de schipper met alle Siammers en Maleiers dood geslagen en is er met de jonk en het kapitaal heel schelmachtig vandoor gegaan.

Maar naar welke haven hij zijn koers heeft gezet, blijft ons onbekend. Daarom verzoeken wij vanwege de vriendschap die Uwe Edelheid met de Koning onze heer onderhoudt dat U op alle plaatsen onder UW gebied waar Nederlanders handelen of ankeren en door UW schepen worden bevaren bevel mag geven om de jonk op te zoeken, te achterhalen, aan te slaan, naar Batavia te brengen en daarover naar Uwe Edelheids beroemde discretie te handelen. Als wij van het resultaat mogen vernemen, dan zal de luister van Uwe Edelheids genegenheid en loffelijk naam onveranderd schijnen, en eeuwig bij ons blijven.

Het zou de Koning, onze heer, hoogst aangenaam zijn wanneer Uwe Edelheid voor Zijne Majesteits oudste zoon, de jonge prins van dit rijk⁹, geliefde een speelscheepje te maken, wijd vier *asta*¹⁰ en de lengte navenant, naar de Hollandse wijze, met alles wat ertoe behoort. Verder, aangezien enige Nederlanders voortreffelijk in de schilderkunst zijn, verzoeken wij of Uwe Edelheid twee olifanten, hoog twee *asta* (de modellen gaan hierbij) voor onze Koning op het kunstigste gelieve te laten schilderen en met kapitein Van Vliet (naast het speelscheepje) in haast gelieve herwaards te sturen. [fol. 423]

In de koninklijke stad Ayutthaya in het Koeienjaar, de 18e dag van de 4e brekende maan, zijnde 2 maart anno 1641.

⁷ Een last is 1250 kilogram.

⁸ Een *bahar* is 3 pikuls.

⁹ Chaofa Chai, King Prasatthong's oudste zoon; hij werd voor één dag koning na het overlijden van zijn vader in 1656.

¹⁰ Een *asta* is het equivalent van een Thaise *sok* ofwel elleboogsmaat (el). De Amsterdamse el was 68,8 cm.



3 English translation

DAILY JOURNALS OF BATAVIA, 2 MARCH 1641.

This letter comes from me, *Oya sy Darmaradt dyscia tsiat mathia nochit phy phit radt khausa tybydy a phaya Cromma pha howa*¹ or keeper of the great seal of the King, general receiver of one quarter of His Majesty's rich income, high advocate and defender of all foreigners, from a pure heart and out of sincere affection, to the Noble, generous, wise and very strict lord, the Noble lord Anthonio van Diemen, Governor-General over the state of the United Netherlands in India Oriëntalis.

Noble Lord, on this occasion with the departure of Captain Jeremias van Vliet for Batavia, I am required to inform Your Honour that the King our Lord, *Probat somdit Boromma bopit probu dy t'Jaco Ichouey ney Crongh pramaha naccoon boworra touwa randy srj ajudia*², on special consideration, namely his concern for the welfare of his subjects and in order to help the trade in the city of Batavia grow as best as he can, has consented that *t'Jau phia ramaraet, seu Jaky bodun tra reu tsaeuy mahay soere jaky body ry soet ja na ley abaya bra Cromma ph hou thiauphia souar Colock*³ should receive a junk with a length of 18 $\frac{1}{4}$ and a breadth of 3 $\frac{1}{4}$ fathoms⁴. On this His Majesty has appointed as skipper Srj Set Ja, a Moorish Malay as first person, and as second person the skipper Pecca, a Chinese, and as third person or first merchant Cousy Sombat with two assistants, named Moncherbitit and Ney Rachuyt; as first mate a Chinese of Moorish religion named Heeuqua, and further as head boatswain or *saranghy*⁵ Equo, a Chinese, with eleven Siamese, 26 Chinese and 22 both Moorish and Malay sailors, altogether 61 men.

The junk is armed with four brass cannon, which each can fire a ball of two fingers, and a cannon that shoots a ball of 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ fingers diameter; further four muskets and 15 Japanese firelocks. The aforementioned junk was laden with approximately 200 *lasten*⁶ of rice and other foodstuffs; also with 6 *bahar*⁷ of lead, for the account of the King. It left here 16 months ago in order to go to Batavia with the merchandise listed, but through

¹ Okya Si Thammarat Dechachat Amatyanuchit Phiphit Ratanarat Kosa Thibodi etc. (Phrakhlang minister). Siamese official ranks during the Ayutthaya period in order of precedence were: *chaophraya/chaophya; okya/phraya/phya; okphra/phra; okluang/luang; okkhun/khun; okmuen/muen; okphan/phan*.

² Phrabat Somdet Borombophit Phra Phutthachaoyuhua nai Krung [Thep?] Phra Mahanakhon Bowon Thawarawadi Si Ayutthaya (King of Siam). This means roughly something approximately like "The supreme lord and refuge, the lord Buddha who resides in Si Ayutthaya the great city of celestials" etc. See also: Richard Cushman, *Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*, 2000.

³ This appears to be a rather rough rendering of Okya Sawankhalok's title: Chaophya [Okya] Kraset Songkhram Ramarat Saenya Thibodi Si Satchanalai Aphai Phiriya Bara Krom Phahu Chaophya [Phya] Sawankhalok (governor of Sawankhalok).

⁴ In meters: 34,31 x 6,11 meter.

⁵ Meaning unknowns.

⁶ One *last* or load is 1250 kilograms.

⁷ One *bahar* is 3 piculs.



ENGLISH TRANSLATION

the ignorance of the helmsman it did not arrive there but landed in Patani. On the return to Siam the Chinese mate Heeuqua killed the skipper with all the Siamese and Malays and has very villainously fled with the junk and the cargo.

But for which port he has set course remains unknown to us. Therefore we request you because of the friendship that Your Honour entertains with the King our lord that in all the places within your territories where the Dutch trade or anchor and are visited by your ships orders may be given to seek out the junk, to pursue it, arrest it, take it to Batavia and deal with it according to Your Honour's famed discretion. And if we may hear of the result, then the splendour of Your Honour's affection and praiseworthy name will shine unchanged, and remain with us forever.

It would be most pleasant to the King, our lord, if Your Honour should kindly make a toy ship for His Majesty's eldest son, the young prince of this realm⁸, four *asta*⁹ wide and of corresponding length, in the Dutch manner, with everything that pertains to it. Furthermore, seeing that some Dutchmen are excellent in the art of painting, we request Your Honour to have two elephants painted for our King, two *asta* high (the designs are attached), in the most skilful way, and kindly have them sent hither (as well as the toy ship) in haste.

In the royal city of Ayutthaya in the Year of the Cow, the 18th day of the breaking moon, being 2nd March in the year 1641.

⁸ Chaofa Chai, King Prasatthong's eldest son; became king for a day following his father's death in 1656.

⁹ One *asta* is equivalent to the Thai *sok* or "elbow".



4 Colophon

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5 Folio image

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