

S. 1. 5. SMALL COMPANIES IN THE EAST INDIA TRADE

Chair: Toshiaki Tamaki
(Kyoto Sangyo University)

Discussant: Lisa Hellman
(Lund University)

Panel Abstract

The Portuguese maritime adventure in the 16th century helped the Europeans to develop their own shipping in Asia. In the long run, they succeeded to import Asian goods by their own ships. Asian waters became part of the European shipping routes in the course of the Early modern period. A considerable number of European states took part in this adventure, but most studies have focused on the Dutch and the English.

Unfortunately the trading activities of other European companies have not been studied so thoroughly. Nevertheless, many of these companies and their subsequent states participated in Asian trade. They sought specific niches and often succeeded in obtaining large benefits in doing so. Sometimes these niches played an important role in European commercial history. In this panel, we will look at the East Asian trade of other European countries. This panel is a very ambitious attempt to include Asian history in order to highlighting a significant aspect of European history.

Small companies traded actively in Asian waters. If we focus only on the English and Dutch East India Companies, we lose sight of important European commercial activities and of active participants looking for very specific niche markets. We will show in this panel the importance of these small European companies on the Asian scene and how they differed from their English and Dutch competitors.

We will refer to Ostend, Danish, and French East India Companies. We will explore how they traded and what they aimed at by their trade in Asia. Sometimes they established self-organise networks appear from states' ambitions. We will shed light on new aspects of European trade and shipping in Asia and will pave the way to further studies of European expansion in Asia. We will try to explore small companies' commercial relationship from Europe to Asia, and write a global history from small companies' perspectives.

Keywords

Asia, global history, merchant networks, small companies

Small Companies – Grand Networks - the case of the Danish East India Company, the Danish Asiatic Company and beyond

BENJAMIN ASMUSSEN (Maritime Museum of Denmark)

Abstract

In 1618, a small fleet of ships departed Copenhagen, owned by the king of Denmark and Norway and the newly formed Danish East India Company. Despite pirate attacks, scurvy, hostilities from other European powers made it to Asia and established the successful colony of Tranquebar on land rented from an Indian ruler.

The story of this expedition can be viewed in a national perspective, described a successful enterprise enforced by a strong ruler. Or it can be viewed in an international perspective of networks, where the ships, sailors and traders of the Danish East India Company becomes part of a larger network, in many ways separate from the state at home.

In 1730, the story almost repeats itself. After economic hardships and closure of the old company, a new company is started by the most influential moguls of its time in Copenhagen – the Danish Asiatic Company. A first ship sails directly to Canton in China becoming part of an even larger international network of merchants and sailors converging in the ancient trading city on the Pearl River. The result was an immense success, leading to a hundred years of highly profitable trade in China and India and a buildup of commercial networks that continued independent of the company.

In this paper a perspective of network analysis will be applied to the two Copenhagen-based trading companies in Asia from 1616 to 1840. Which networks were essential for the early success of the companies in the early 17th and 18th century and what role did networks play in the later years of the companies in both Denmark-Norway, China, India and southeast Asia in general? The paper ends with considerations of the benefits and disadvantages of trading companies from smaller nations as well with a perspective to the centuries that followed, building upon the networks established in the early modern period.

Biography

Benjamin Asmussen has been a curator of the Maritime Museum for more than ten years, making exhibitions, collecting objects, designing interactive installations and more.

He defended his PhD-thesis at Copenhagen Business School in 2018 about the traders and managers of the Danish Asiatic Company in China 1730-1840 and their networks. His primary research interests are the early modern global trade, networks across the sea as well as merchants and seamen of the Oldenburg Monarchy and their connections.

Methodologically he is inspired by Historical Network Analysis, prosopography and micro his-

tory applied to the field of maritime and global history. He is also the initiator of the Business Wiki of the Oldenburg Monarchy – an online ressource for researchers to share knowledge about mariners and merchants of the early modern age with a connection to the Oldenburg Monarchy (Denmark, Norway, Schleswig, Holstein, Iceland etc), available at <http://oldenburg-business.net/>

The relations between the French and the Danish East Indian Companies

PIERRICK POURCHASSE (University of Western Brittany, Brest)

Abstract

The “Compagnie des Indes”, like other large European companies, regularly used the services of other foreign companies, notably the danish”Asiatisk Kompany” in case of conflict or for more or less illegal business (repatriation of directors’ funds). From the Danish and French sources, my paper will try to show links between two theoretically competing companies.

Biography

Pierrick Pourchasse is a professor at the department of history at the University of Bretagne Occidentale in Brest.. His research deals with economical relations between France and Northern Europe in the 18th century. He is the author of “Le commerce du Nord. Les échanges entre la France et l’Europe septentrionale au XVIIIe siècle” (PUR, Rennes, 2006)

The Ostend Company and the Belgian maritime renewal

MICHAEL-W. SERRUYS (Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions – Individual fellow (Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique, Université de Bretagne occidentale, Brest, France).

Abstract

The East India Company and the VOC are still very present in the British and Dutch national identity. Above all, they have shaped their country's history and maritime destiny. How did the smaller East India companies, like the Danish, Swedish or Belgian, play a role in the maritime history of their respective nations. In this paper we will discuss how the Belgian East India Company, or Ostend Company, renewed the maritime destiny of the Southern Netherlands in the eighteenth century.

In the early eighteenth century, Ostend was the only port in the Southern Netherlands with free access to the sea (the Scheldt and the port of Antwerp being closed by the United Provinces). At that time, Ostend's maritime activities were mainly limited to coastal fishing and privateering. The takeover by the Austrian Habsburgs of the Southern Netherlands in 1713, radically changed Ostend's position. The arrival of Jacobite merchants with knowledge of colonial trade, i.e. the arrival of new actors with new practices, precipitated the foundation of a colonial trading company in the 1720s.

Even if the Ostend Company disappeared in 1731, under international pressure, this colonial episode left the Austrian Netherlands with maritime and commercial, but also with legal, financial and political know-how, managed by new actors and new skills. These actors worked increasingly to bring Brussels - the country's political and economic center - geopolitically closer to the sea. A sea that was still psychologically distant until then.

In the end, the unceasing activities of these multi-skilled actors brought about a real maritime renewal in the Austrian Netherlands, and particularly in Ostend, which would become a major port on the western or Atlantic European coast at the end of the 18th century. A function that was taken over by Antwerp in the early nineteenth century. The role of the Ostend Company for Belgium's maritime renewal was therefore of paramount importance.

Biography

Michael-W. Serruys studied Modern history at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium) and political sciences at the Université catholique de Louvain (Belgium) and the Institut d'études politiques in Paris (France). He worked as an archivist at the Arenberg Foundation in Enghien (Belgium) and as a researcher at Leiden University (the Netherlands) and the Vrije

Universiteit Brussel (Belgium). In 2014, he became a member of the Royal Belgian Marine Society. His main research topics are the Austrian Netherlands' transport policy (18th century), Belgian maritime geopolitical questions, the Ostend Company (18th century). Today he is a Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions – Individual fellow at the Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique at the Université de Bretagne occidentale in Brest (France). His current research is on the social impact of environmental crises – in this case the shipworm epidemic – on maritime societies in Western Europe in the eighteenth century.