

Erik Odegard, *The Company Fortress: Military Engineering and the Dutch East India Company in South Asia, 1638-1795* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2020, 292 pp., ISBN 9789087283469).

In the past hundred years, historiography on the Dutch East India Company (voc) has seen a fundamental shift of paradigms, moving from a celebration of Dutch glory abroad to the critical self-examination under the premise of postcolonial studies. Concerning the subject of the company's warfare and conquest in Asia, historians have some time ago shifted their attention from recalling military feats to a more sober analysis of the function and organisation of armed forces by land and sea. An extensive literature exists on the military technology of the voc, such as weaponry and shipbuilding. Fortresses, however, until recently have been an understudied aspect. This lack of attention is unjustified, as the construction of fortifications and the efforts to neutralise them were essential parts of early modern military strategy. Prestigious, costly and at times of doubtful strategic value, fortresses played a similar role as battleships did in the age of imperialism.

*The Company Fortress: Military Engineering and the Dutch East India Company in South Asia, 1638-1795* by Erik Odegard is one of the most recent of several new publications on this subject. Odegard has made his name with a number of studies on the colonial and military history of the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. With *The Company Fortress*, he less intends to offer a general survey of military architecture in the realm of the voc and rather wants to critically reassess the role of fortifications in the voc's efforts for maritime domination in the Indian Ocean. In the introduction, Odegard directly refers to the work of the British military historian Geoffrey Parker, who in the 1980s attributed substantial importance to military engineering as an element of the so-called military revolution. This term includes a process of innovations in tactics and weaponry beginning in late sixteenth-century Europe. During the following two hundred years until the Napoleonic wars, this led not only to the emergence of the modern state, but also helped Western powers to win a dominant position over their local military and commercial adversaries in Asia. A key element of this process had been the dominance and the increasingly effective use of firearms in European land and naval warfare, accompanied by radical improvements in shipbuilding and military architecture, which Asian armed forces eventually could not counter.

Odegard queries the validity of Parker's thesis by a case study in which he examines the fundamental concepts and further development of fortress building by the voc in Southern India and Ceylon, modern-day Sri Lanka. Limiting the research to this region is a wise decision in view of the

geographical extent of, and the cultural and political differences between, the Dutch possessions in Asia and the sheer number of sources and documents related to activities and administration of the VOC in this part of the world. Due to this particular focus on the re-examination of an established view of research, Odegard's book can definitely not be benchmarked as a beginner's guide to the subject. Given his specific approach, he could not avoid to begin his narration with an extensive introductory chapter on the development of fortification architecture in early-modern Europe. His explanations on the various schools of fortress building such as the 'French', 'Dutch' or 'Prussian' may appear a bit tedious and off the point, but are essential for the understanding of the subsequent analysis, given the tactical and technological changes in fortifications from the early seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, and their impact on the development of Dutch military architecture in Asia.

Odegard's narration starts with the beginning of the VOC's efforts to expel the Portuguese from their bases in South Asia in the 1630s and concludes with the end of Dutch rule in the region in the 1790s. For his research, the author has made use of the huge corpus of VOC records from the region, but also of the correspondence of the 'men on the spot' with their superiors in Batavia. Based on this fundament, he has achieved to paint a remarkably detailed and vivid picture of the various fortifications erected on Indian and Sri Lankan soil. Odegard meticulously reconstructs the decision process on the construction and the further building history of both the important strongholds, such as Cochin, Negapatnam and Trincomalee, and of smaller fortresses, of which some are barely mentioned in literature. Pointing out the constructive similarities, but much more the particular features of each fort conditioned by the local topography and strategical significance, Odegard provides us with a somewhat paradoxical insight. He concludes that fortifications did not serve as weapons of a thoughtful program of conquest overseas, which offered to their builders a significant technological superiority over their Asian adversaries. Conversely, Odegard emphasises quite convincingly that in South Asia the construction of fortresses by the VOC has been a symptom of a long-lasting feeling of military weakness.

In his analysis, supported on the visual level by numerous maps of all the great and small fortifications and the modifications actually realised or just projected, Odegard demonstrates that the constructions ultimately failed to serve their purpose. Technically outdated, poorly designed or just too small to fulfil their function, they were taken by the VOC's European or Asian enemies, in some cases with surprisingly little efforts. This failure was, however, to a great extent a result of the particular organisational structure of the VOC in Asia. As Odegard explains, the company lacked a proper military organisation and the leaders of the VOC could never make a clear decision whether it was supposed to act as a trading enterprise or as a body politic. As the VOC never decided to appoint an engineer in chief, surveying and

planning for fortifications was generally delegated to local officers. These were often found at loggerheads with senior officers who would favour other systems of construction, thus inhibiting even the most urgent improvements. Furthermore, engineers and commanders always had to take into account the thriftiness of the government in Batavia, which led to a permanent lack of funding for repairs, reconstructions, and the maintenance of sufficient garrisons for the defence of even the most important strongholds. Similar to the field of trade politics, where the administrative structure and the mentality of its directors eventually prevented the VOC to adapt to new developments, as the shifts in markets and commodities, the company proved increasingly unable to react to new military challenges, turning the Dutch fortifications from symbols of power into emblems of crisis. In particular in the final chapters, in which Odegard analyses this process, *The Company Fortress* turns into a thrilling and stimulating reading as the scope of his narration goes far beyond the boundaries of the book's subject. It is only to be regretted that the author does offer little information on the daily routine and the living conditions of the men who were building the fortifications or who were garrisoned there, which would have allowed insights into the situation of the company subalterns.

Altogether, Odegard presents a meticulous and highly readable study on a hitherto neglected aspect of Dutch rule in Asia. It furthers our understanding of why and how the VOC, being the most powerful European protagonist around 1650, eventually lost that position in the course of the following century. His approach, combining the military aspects with questions of administration, finance and the VOC's foreign policy, can help us grasp that process of decline and to review previous doctrines on the company's history and the interaction of European and Asian powers in the early colonial period. For this reason, the book is a worthwhile read not only for those interested in the history of the VOC, but also for scholars of South Asian studies.

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