

Clerks' Jobs for 12 Historians

Since 2000 a group of twelve young historians has been ploughing through the records of the Dutch East India Company. They are quite determined to make this important series, consisting of hundreds of content lists of heavy, back-breaking volumes of the Overgekomen Brieven en Papieren (OBP, Incoming Documents from Asia) of the Zeeland Chamber accessible via Internet, before the year draws to a close. In the very near future they intend to begin with the Amsterdam Chamber's OBP. Historians all over the world will thus soon be able to profit from their work.

Agenda >
General

By *Hendrik Niemeijer*

‘Describing historical sources is a very specialist work’, says Mark de Lannoy, a specialist on Indian history and VOC sources who works at the National Archives in The Hague. ‘The handwriting is often difficult to decipher. Registers are missing, and strange words, abbreviations, and misspellings occur frequently. Each volume may contain literally hundreds of documents.’ According to De Lannoy the question is, ‘should we describe every document, even the very short ones that were only sent for politeness sake?’ Notwithstanding such practical problems, which often force archivists into debate with each other on what to do, thanks to the capable management of Pieter Koenders (TANAP programme coordinator for the National Archives), the archivists do not waste any time.

By adding codes to the text in XML, a platform-independent language for

publishing on the Internet, it will become possible to search the contents with all kinds of search options, including searches for year, ships' names, and location.

Further funds are necessary to digitize the existing inventories of the main series of the OBP's of the Amsterdam Chamber. When all these data have been placed in a single giant database, it will be possible to reconstruct virtually all the local and regional administrations of the former VOC.

Unfortunately for historians, the Incoming Documents from Asia of both the Zeeland and Amsterdam Chambers, vast as they may still be, are only a part of the original archives once kept in Middelburg and in the Oost-Indisch Huis in Amsterdam. When six thousand of Napoleon's troops retreated to Zeeland in the cold winter of 1814, they used the Oost-Indisch Huis in Middelburg as a hospital and sold a great deal of VOC books as wastepaper

to clear the rooms. People then also used the paper in their fireplaces. During the cold winter of 1821/22, some 28,920 kilos – approximately 10,000 volumes – of mostly seventeenth-century papers of the Amsterdam Chamber were also sold to the highest bidder. Ten years later, the rest of the Amsterdam archives were brought in great disorder to the empty West-Indies Slaughterhouse in Amsterdam. Another 5,000 volumes (such as materials ledgers, bankbooks, and commercial registers) were disposed of, and a total of only 3,160 volumes and 587 letter files from the pay office were preserved. It took only a few cold winters to destroy the patient work of hundreds of VOC clerks. This makes it all the more noteworthy that, today, it only takes a few years for a small group of archivists to make worldwide access to one of the most important historical collections on Asian history possible. <

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