



Tin-winners in Ron Phibun district, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand 2001

Courtesy of the author

# For the Love of Tin The VOC in Ligor

Research >  
Southeast Asia

The Southern Thai province of Nakhon Si Thammarat is heir to one of the oldest port city-states of Southeast Asia. In the early days, Dutch and other European traders knew the province by the name 'Ligor'. For more than a century, from around 1640 until 1756, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) ran a small office in the flourishing *entrepôt*, the collecting station for the region's tin.

By Supaporn Ariyasajsiskul

It is commonly believed that Nakhon Si Thammarat was already annexed to the kingdom of Ayutthaya (or Siam) to the north when the Dutch East India Company arrived to trade in the region in the early seventeenth century. Yet, control from the capital was weak. Classified as one of eight tributary kingdoms ruled by its own princes (Mueng Phaya-Mahanakhon), Nakhon Si Thammarat was granted authority to police the Malay Peninsula on behalf of Ayutthaya. The Dutch records show that at the time of the VOC's entrance, Ligor still enjoyed considerable autonomy in governance, trade, and foreign relations.

During the first three decades of the seventeenth century, the VOC had direct contact with the ruler of Ligor, annually purchasing 600-700 *bahar* of black pepper (approximately 250,000 pounds; 1 *bahar* = 375 pounds). In the best of years, the purchase could be up to 1,000-1,200 *bahar* (375,000-450,000 pounds). In 1612 the Company concluded a contract with the so-called in the Dutch records 'king of Ligor', who granted it exclusive rights to construct housing and to trade anywhere in the region, exempt from tolls and taxes. The Company was additionally allowed to build a stone warehouse in Sangora (Songkhla) to store Chinese goods intercepted at sea.

The honeymoon period between Ligor and the VOC ended in the 1630s. Behind this was a temporary but sharp decline in the European demand for pepper and the outbreak of war between King Prasatthong of Siam and his vassal states on the Peninsula, which refused to recognize his legitimacy on the Siamese throne. According to the Dutch records, the Company sided with Siam, cautiously providing military aid to King Prasatthong. Ligor and the other Thai-Malay vassal states were eventually subdued and severely punished. The Dutch records also describe how Ligor was completely destroyed. The pepper plantation was demolished and the 'king' and his wife, trapped in their ammunition-laden

palace, died when the palace was blown up.\*

The political situation changed with the dismemberment of Nakhon Si Thammarat. The provinces of 'Bordelong' (Phattalung), Sangora (Songkhla) and Tsaija (Chaiya) were henceforth ruled by governors and other high-ranking officers sent directly from the capital. The victory of Ayutthaya over Ligor in 1632 was thus a historical turning point, leading to a more complicated triangular relationship between Siam, Ligor, and the VOC. It also opened new trading opportunities for the Company.

Tin in Ligor was known to be very pure and of high quality. Tin production is estimated to have been 700-1,000 *bahar* (248,000-354,000 pounds) per annum in the mid-seventeenth century. The Company expected to secure at least 400 *bahar* of tin per year.

This target, however, could not be realized without the *tra* or seal of approval to trade tin in Ligor, and without Ayutthaya's support. The Dutch Company managed to obtain exclusive rights in 1660 by concluding a contract with King Narai of Ayutthaya. These exclusive rights allowed it to secure quotas for export and purchase tin in Ligor at less than 'market' prices. These preferential trading rights were, however, not absolute. VOC officers in Ayutthaya and Ligor had to battle continuously, both locally and in the capital, to secure their tin supply and export quotas. As a whole, the period running from 1670 to 1700 was the VOC's most successful one. In peak years, tin export from Ligor reached 1,400 *bahar* and the Company then realized profits of up to 100 per cent.

The tin affair became more complicated and less favourable to the Company in the eighteenth century. Of all the competitors, the Chinese through their networks were the best organized, and wrested control of the tin trade everywhere, and particularly on the black market. The Dutch Company in the meantime received permission to arrest tin smugglers in Ligor and to confiscate contraband. Its new role as the Ligor 'tin police' restored its tin exports between 1726 and 1735.

The trade policy launched by Ayutthaya in the reign of King Boromkot

was a blow to the Company; its exclusive rights to trade tin in Ligor, which it had enjoyed for almost a century, were lifted in 1734. As a result, it could obtain only very limited amounts of tin each year. After long negotiations, and due to the improvement in the relationship with the Royal Court in Ayutthaya, the exclusive rights were restored in the contract of 1754. It was, however, too late for the VOC to regain its position in Ligor. Ayutthaya lost control over the tin trade there. With no further prospects in sight, the Governor General and the Council in Batavia decided to close the office in Ligor for good, reporting the decision to the Board of Directors in the Republic on 31 December 1756. <

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## Note >

\* The status of the rulers of Ligor seems to have been quite ambivalent. Ayutthaya saw Ligor as a vassal state, but the Dutch records seem to suggest greater autonomy. Until 1632, the VOC records always refer to the ruler of Ligor as 'king'.

## Information >

The above article is a summary of the paper on 'The Siamese throne, the Company and the so-called tin-monopoly at Ligor; the limits of negotiating power and preferential trading rights' presented at the second TANAP (Towards A New Age of Partnership) workshop 'Asia in the Age of Partnership', Bangkok, Thailand, 24-26 October 2002. The full article will soon be published in *Itinerario*, the journal of the Institute for the History of European Expansion (IGEER).