DUTCH FORTS OF SEVENTEENTH CENTURY CEYLON AND MAURITIUS: AN HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Historical Archaeology of VOC Forts

In 1602 a number of competing Dutch trading companies merged in a new commercial enterprise: the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC). The primary goal of the VOC was to gain the trade monopoly on East Asian spices, which had been controlled by the Portuguese since the beginning of the sixteenth century. The Netherlands were at war with both Spain and Portugal, making hostilities between the newly founded VOC and these countries unavoidable. Therefore the VOC was granted the mandate to conquer land, build forts and maintain an army in order to protect trade. The VOC’s more than 350 settlements varied from small trading posts to large-scale European style fortifications, stretching between the two pivots of the Cape of Good Hope and Batavia, present day Jakarta on the isle of Java (Figure 12.1). Batavia was the VOC’s administrative centre in Asia, the counterpart of Amsterdam in the Dutch Republic.1

The aim of the East India Company was simple: to tap into Asian trading markets to make profit. The VOC’s system to achieve this became more and more elaborate and needed more organisation and personnel than was expected. After the initial visits to Asia at the end of the sixteenth century, the VOC created a network of employees who settled near the markets and ports where Asian items such as spices, porcelain, textiles and other commodities were abundant. In 1600, the ruler of Ambon, Moluccas [present Maluku, Indonesia], granted the Dutch the right to maintain a stronghold on the Hitoe peninsula, which was named the Kasteel van Verre.2 It probably consisted of a

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small stockade with a garrison of soldiers too tiny to withstand an attack of the Portuguese. From this insignificant foothold grew a large web of military compounds that in two centuries time gradually dominated the intra-Asia markets. Written sources on all kinds of subjects relating to the VOC are abundant, however, in the past few years archaeological research has provided evidence of substance and impact that has led to intriguing insights on the European impact in Asia and Africa.

Archaeological research of VOC forts seeks to get a better understanding of the Company’s settlements in a global perspective, to highlight the role of the forts as nodes in the economic strategy of the VOC, to analyse the aspects that defined the specific location and layout of the forts, to determine the nature and efficiency of adaptation to both local environment and warfare, and to draw comparisons with the military architecture of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. VOC forts were not exclusively military objects. In addition to securing the Company’s rule over the settlement, forts were contact sites where, within a limited area, a group of individuals with various backgrounds was brought together. In this paper, the archaeological research on Fort Frederik Hendrik and Katuwana Fort will be presented as case studies in colonial archaeology, illuminating the wider system of seventeenth-century VOC enterprises. These fortifications