



*Materialidade arqueológica:
entre a Geografia e as
Sociedades Humanas*

**TALES FROM THE GRAVE – TWO XVIITH CENTURY
TOMBSTONES OF DUTCH MERCHANTS FROM THE
UNITED EAST INDIA’S COMPANY (VOC) – A
REDISCOVERY IN NAGULAWANCHA
(NAGELWANZEE), INDIA**

**CONTOS SOBRE SEPULTURAS - DOIS TÚMULOS DE
COMERCIANTES HOLANDESES DO SÉCULO XVI,
DA COMPANHIA DO ORIENTE UNIDA DA ÍNDIA
(VOC) - UMA REDESCOBERTA EM
NAGULAWANCHA (NAGELWANZEE), ÍNDIA**

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Resumo

A descoberta de duas lápides (Pl.2-3), durante algumas obras de construção de estradas ocorrendo em Nagulawancha (Figura 1), por um amante do património local, Sr. Matta Srinivas (Pl.1), em Setembro de 2019, e sua menção por meu estimado colega Dr. Sachin K. Tiwary foi a chama que despertou o interesse ao tentar decifrar este mistério de quase 400 anos. Através da interpretação dos escritos holandeses nessas duas lápides, pretendemos compartilhar um vislumbre sobre qual foi o papel da VOC (Companhia das Índias Holandesas) na Índia no século XVII, e qual seria o quotidiano desses dois homens da Companhia, enterrados sob essas lápides, as últimas recordações e memórias da sua passagem nesta Terra.

Palavras-chave: VOC (Companhia das Índias Holandesas), Índia, Lápides, Nagulawancha (Nagelwanzee).

Abstract

The discovery of two tombstones (Pl.2-3), during some road construction works occurring at Nagulawancha (Figure 1), by a local Heritage lover Mr. Matta Srinivas (Pl.1), on September 2019, and its mention by my colleague Dr. Sachin K. Tiwary was the flame that sparkle the interest on trying to decipher this almost 400-year-old mystery. Thru the interpretation of the Dutch writings on these two tombstones, we intend to share a glimpse on what was the VOC (United East India's Company) role in India on the XVIIth century, and how were the daily lives of these two Company men, buried under these tombstones, the last reminders and memories of their passage on this Earth.

Keywords: VOC (United East India's Company), India, Tombstones, Nagulawancha (Nagelwanzee).

1. Introductory note

The VOC Upon his appearance, the VOC became an organizational form of actions to other countries own companies, such as the English East India Company and the several French *Compagnies des Indes Orientales* (Adams, 1996, p. 13).

Its role in India has been published on hundreds of papers worldwide, generally focusing on the economics, war, and political areas of its presence. But what about the men that formed the ranks on its lines? Who were they? What were their expectations, dreams, actions, and life like during those days, namely the XVIIth Century? We expect to answer some of these questions, following the interpretation of the inscriptions present on two tombstones of these Company's men, recently found in India.

2. The VOC (East India's Company) on the XVIIth Century India

The VOC, considering all the European trading companies, was the largest (Bellarykay *etal.* 1677-80). Despite on a first decade of creation being unsuccessful, it thrived, expanding, “consolidated according to a central strategy of an inter-Asian trade network linked to the home country by a central point” (Vrenken, 2014, p. 9).

The XVIIth Century was known as the Golden Age of Dutch presence as the VOC in its colonies, namely the territories in which it had its commercial trade in India. For the spice trade the VOC needed India's textiles, to obtain the spices in the most favourable commercial conditions (Bhat2000-2001, p. 864-874). One of the factors that lead to its fall on the late XVIIIth and early XIXth century was the fact that “both principals and agents tend to act in intendedly rational fashion, and opportunistically, to advance their own individual gains (exogenously specified) (Adams, 1996, p. 14)”. Being the top VOC colonial agents both traders and rulers, as such “this duality was structural unstable, as monarch and corporate elites stove to subordinate one another (Adams, 1996, p. 14). The capacity of the Company on gathering military forces was the main reason for it success on the terrain, as well as the alliances mustered with local rulers, who opposed the competitors from other countries, such as Portugal, England and France (Sardessai, 1983, pp. 155-158). Nevertheless, “VOC servants used their middleman positions to capture some of the abundant surplus for personal advantage. (...) Private trade [contraband] also

took place at all points in the colonial network, although it was specially concentrated in some spots, such as the Bengal-Batavia link (...)” (Adams, 1996, p. 14).

The historiography of the Companies in India, until the 1990's relied more on the economic factors rather than on its social history, being as such the history of the Companies' settlements in India de-emphasized (Subrahmanyam, 2018, pp. 419-438). Until the end of the XVIIth century India, namely the Coromandel Coast was stage of conflicts between the local Mughals (Malekandathil, 2013, pp. 85-106) and Marathas, supported some by the English, others by the French and others the Dutch – depending on diplomatic alliances and changes of sides according to circumstances (Bellarykar, pp. 1677-1680).

3. The situation at Nagelwanse (Nagulavancha), on the Coromandel region, in the XVIIth Century

On the East coast of India the VOC first invested on the Coromandel Coast (Mostert 2007, p. 35). Gujarat, Bengal, and the Coromandel Coast were the main sources for Indian textiles. This VOC invested on the Coromandel because this area relatively lacked the Portuguese attention (Subrahmanyam, 2012, p. 19) – during the early 17th century, the Portuguese were the dominant European power in India. Coromandel was also of strategic importance to the Asian trade and possessed a rich hinterland, filled with cash crops, artisanal products, and an immense agricultural output.

The VOC possessed several fortified settlements and trading centres located on the Coromandel coast, some captured also from the Portuguese – such as Nagapattinam, captured in 1658 (Nisha *et al.*, 2019, p. 457). At the beginning the situation was not favourable to the VOC's aspirations (Iyer, 1938). The concurrence of the Portuguese, interferences from local rulers and famines were severely undermining trade. Nevertheless, the VOC, by the 1640's managed to open several new factories on the coast.

“Wijnaendts van Resandt's (1944) study of the men who served as supervisors of VOC colonial factories outside the Malay Archipelago shows that, in the VOC's early years, their promotions were more subject to metropolitan dictates than to Batavian influence. This situation reversed itself in the eighteenth century” (Adams, 1996, p. 22). Corruption undermined the VOC ranks wherever it was positioned. The first real effort to end it up (or at least to control it) “was made in the 1680s, when the Seventeen sent the allegedly incorruptible Hendrik Adriaan van Rhee de tot Drakestein to investigate the

Indian factories and vested him with extraordinary powers of punishment (...) from 1678 to 1686, graft and private trade by the VOC's Bengal servants had cost the Company as much as 3.8 million" (Adams, 1996, p. 25). *The Seventeen* where men nominated to overlook the trade being made by the VOC's subordinates the seventeen-member board of directors of the Dutch East India Company (Brujin, 2020; Ravichandran, 2011). These seventeen lords (*Heren XVII*) represented the six regional councils from the VOC. One of its tasks consisted of trying to control and mitigate any attempt of corruption or private trade or gains held by the Company's men (Adams, 1996, p. 25).

The Coromandel region, located on the east coast of India, was a major VOC location. This lasted until the XVIIIth century, when the battles between England and France for the rule of the Coromandel put an end to the VOC commercial domination there.

Nagelwanze (nowadays Nagulavanca), was a *comptoir* from 1669 to 1687. There the VOC purchased clay mud, emery stone, and cotton, saltpetre, iron and indigo (www.vocsite.nl). The Company also had a Gunpowder mill there, which produced 10.000 pounds per month (Mostert, 2007, p. 35). This gunpowder was of the utmost importance since it was needed for firearms and cannons which allowed the protection and attack on goods being traded or looted from their rivals. By the end of the period here under study, the Governor-General and Council also informed patria that they were experimenting with having plate iron, cannonballs, 'long ammunition' and nails being produced and sent over from the Coromandel coast, 'so as to lower the pressure on the fatherland.' The samples being sent over were all excellent and cheap, the letter informs patria, so more will be ordered" (Mostert, 2007, p. 48).

Even for the second siege of Cochin, on July 1662, the *Hoge Regering* [warship], ordered for an enormous amount of gunpowder to be produced on the Coromandel Coast, from the Company's powder mill (Mostert, 2007, p. 114).

"In Nagelwanze (now Nagulavanca), about halfway between Masulipatnam and Golconda, the VOC set up a factory in 1669 in order to better monitor the quality of the goods supplied. Precisely because Nagelwanze was not on the main road, the first chief Nicholas Faber chose this location. He did not want to open the accommodation on the main road from Masulipatnam to Golconda so that he would have few visitors.

Nagelwanze was a large village and three hamlets were included. The village had twenty plantations with mango trees, ten tanks and ten temples, five dedicated to Shiva

and five dedicated to Vishnu [*Valentine*]. The white accommodation was in the middle of the village. The lodging initially served as a residence for the chief and his second and to store the textile purchased. Later it was expanded with rooms and buildings. Until 1678, the two horses of the Company stood in the separate stable. In that year the horses were sold due to cutbacks and the stable was used as dyeing and nail forging. The VOC had two gardens in Nagelwanze, given by the regents. There was a small garden in the village, beyond the stable. *The second one was just outside the village and was considerably larger. The last garden had a gate and, after the death of Nicolaas Faber in 1676, also served as a burial place* [*Valentine*].

Nagelwanze was destroyed during the Mogul Wars in 1687. On October 12, 1687, the lodge was raided, killing most of the native merchants and soldiers (www.vocsite.nl).

But even before the destruction occurred during the Mogul Wars, the Portuguese-Dutch conflict fought on every continent (following the Portuguese Restore of their Independence on December 1st 1640 from the Spanish Philippine rule) between them and the Dutch also left its markings on the Coromandel region. Even before 1640, since the Portuguese were taken under Spanish Rule from 1580 to 1640, since the Spanish King was at war with the Dutch, who were fighting for their independence from Spanish rule, episodes of conflict were held between the Portuguese under Spanish rule and the Dutch.

After the foundation of the VOC in 1602, a series of voyages to the East gave word that the Indonesian spices were procured for trade with the Indian textiles. These textiles were abundant in the Coromandel region (Shangreiyo, 2016, p. 367). The VOC established a factory there, at Petapuli in 1606, for the trade the VOC should pay a payment of four per cent custom duty on their exports and imports (this was commuted in 1612 into a fixed payment of 3000 *pagodas* a year) (Shangreiyo, 2016, p. 369). The establishing of Dutch trading posts in India was an obstacle to Portuguese commercial interests: “For the Portuguese the coming of the Dutch was an intrusion into their area of domain. They were hostile to share the trading benefits in the region (Shangreiyo, 2016, p. 372). As soon as they managed to gather enough resources for this, the Portuguese and the *mestiços* sent several attacks on the Dutch factories in 1612. This attack originated the Dutch need to centralize efforts on the Coromandel, to prevent or resist for future attacks to come. Wemmer Van Beecham, the second commander of the Dutch VOC representatives (following Van Wesick), was able to get a favourable deal in the Coromandel, getting the right to built a fort at Pulicat “at the Raja of Chandragiri’s wife expense” (Shangreiyo, 2016, pp. 367-384). Fort Geldria. This fort allowed the Dutch to

resist a second attack in 1613, causing severe losses on the Portuguese expeditionary force. Despite of Portuguese attempts in the years to follow, they were not able to inflict any significant danger to the VOC interests (Bhat, 2000-2001, pp. 864-870). The English East India Company – established in 1600 with the aim of incorporating the Coromandel Coast with the trade from the Indonesian archipelago – also viewed the Dutch trade on the Coromandel as a danger to its own interests. The Dutch, however, seen an opportunity to join forces with another Protestant state such as the England of King James I, when menace from Catholic countries such as Portugal, Spain and France were so true. Nevertheless, the English East India Company refused this union, fearing treason on behalf of the Dutch or misuse of the British Naval strength against the Spanish, which would benefit the VOC's interests. Also, VOC and the English East India Company had a conflict regarding the Moluccas spice trade.

Despite all this, in 1621 the English and the Dutch joined forces against the Portuguese, seen as a common enemy in India. So, two naval joint forces were sent, one to the Coromandel and the second to the Malabar and Goa regions. Despite skirmishes occurring, eventually the Portuguese and the English ended up signing a Peace Treaty, since this was the only way they could beat a powerful opponent, such as the Dutch. Nevertheless, by 1622, the Dutch had expelled the Portuguese from the Coromandel Coast “[1662] In spite of the conquest of Ceylon and the complete expulsion of the Portuguese from the Coromandel Coast, we might imagine that many people in the Company ranks would be disappointed: Macao, Diu, Goa, Cochin and Mozambique were all still Portuguese, and Formosa, oh shame, had been definitively lost” (Mostert, 2007, p. 72).

The campaigns in which this region swift hand from one local ruler to another, nevertheless, did not disturb the Dutch trade there. It was well known from these rulers that economic trade with these foreign European powers also brought gain to the regions. For instance, when Shivaji had his Karnataka campaign and conquered these lands he continued to perform trading concessions to the Dutch, giving them protection from the Portuguese as well as others. The protection of his people on his dominions is what made one of the *kaul* (Commercial Agreement) terms he made with the Dutch famous for the current practices occurring on 17th century India, assuring that they would not be sold as slaves – “That people sold themselves off as slaves during economic hardships in the Coromandel is also very well known”.

The decline of the Dutch presence and trade at the Coromandel region is described by Daniel Havart in his Dutch language “*Op-enondergang van Cormandel, ‘Rise and fall of Coromandel’*”, from 1693, “as witnessed in his own time. He attributes this decline to both the Mughal conquest and the hardships it entailed, which forced the producers of the textiles sought after by the Dutch to flee, and the politics pursued by the higher ranks of the VOC hierarchy, especially the special commissioner Hendrik Adriaan van Reede” (Kreutzer, 2018, p. 503). We know, however, that the Jurisdiction in areas controlled by the Mughal – to which supposedly the Dutch should be dependent to – was a generator of conflicts, when interests between these parts came into a clash, as the Bengal case seems to prove (Thomas & Chesworth, 2018, pp. 493-504). “This overlapping legal coexistence was not a problem until conflicts broke out between the Mughal administrators or the local brokers and the Company personnel” (Byaptisur, 2018, p. 281). Also, when a Commission was established in 1684, by the *Heren XVII*, Hendrik Adriaan van Reede tot Drakenstein was the nominated as the commissioner-general of this committee. It will soon become visible that a pattern was being formed by the ones accused of such deeds. They were all connected to the Van Goens family, political adversary of Van Reede (Byaptisur, 2018, p. 281). The hostilities between these families were openly known, and family ties of political and economic control were being handed over as a common denominator: “fathers, sons, brothers, uncles, and sons-in-law were not only family members but also colleagues at work who stuck together” (Byaptisur, 2018, p. 282). In terms of Law enforcement, the VOC and the Mughal’s were separate by their religious confessions, also being conflicting parties in some cases (Narayanan, 1996, p. 512). “Exploring the legal dimensions of the VOC’s presence in Bengal highlights the ambiguities and overlaps in exercising the Company’s laws at a time and space where the Mughal jurisdiction was also simultaneously in operation” (Byaptisur, 2018, p. 282). The history of the VOC is a complex one, due to its longevity, world locations and complex interactions (Vrenken, 2014, p. 9).



Figura 1 - Nagelwanze location on the Coromandel. Source: www.vocsite.nl

4. Tales from the grave – which words from the two tombstones?

One of these tombstones has a poem from Daniel Havart, and the words he used to describe the ways of the men buried there shares how he was viewed by some of his fellow mates while he was alive, well at least the vision of the Poet by his own words.



Figura 2 - The two Tombstones. Mr. Matta Srinivas is observed next to one of them. Source: Mr. Matta Srinivas



Figura 3 - Abraham van der Voort Tombstone. Source: Mr. Matta Srinivas



Figura 4 - Nicolaes Faber Tombstone. Source: Mr. Matta Srinivas

On Pl.3 we may observe a poem dedicated to the departed Nicolaes Faber, by his countryman DH (Daniel Havart). Daniel Havart [also known and signed as Daniel Houwert, Hauwert, Havert and Havardt], probably was born in Amsterdam on December 29th 1650 and died in Rotterdam on June 2nd 1724. “In 1671, he enrolled with the Dutch East India Company (VOC) (Lent, 2015, pp. 1-20), and embarked for the company’s Asian headquarters, the city of Batavia on Java, as a ‘third barber’. He reached Batavia in 1672 and was sent to the so-called Coromandel Coast (the south-eastern shore of the Indian subcontinent). There he met Willem Carel Hartsinck, who was to be his patron until his return to the Netherlands 15 years later.” “(...) lasting friendship he made with local Dutchmen (...)” (Kreutzer, 2018, p. 493). “His practice and appreciation of poetry seem to go back to his period in Coromandel, where he started writing epitaphs, some of which were realised on actual graves, while others were merely fancies that were published in two bundles long after his return” (Kreutzer, 2018, p. 494). This is one of those poems, present at this epitaph, which was recently found by Mr. Matta Srinivas (Figura 2).

Nicolaas Faber was the constructor of the compound of the VOC in Nagelwanzee, started in 1670. Despite on the VOC site it states that the *comptoir* was operational from 1669 to 1687.

On an online forum I’ve got the following data from some of its users regarding Nicolaas Faber and Abraham van der Voort, which I quote:

From user named Peter B:

“Hi Marco,

both gentlemen are mentioned in "Op- enondergang van Cormandel, of Cormandel in zijnbinnenstegeheel open gesteld" [The Rise and Fall of Coromandel] by Daniel Havartmed.doct. Published by Jan ten Hoorn, Amsterdam 1693. There's an extensive section on Nicolaes Faber from page 27 describing his career in India from 1648 until his death 17.02.1676 in Nagelwanse, he was the first head of that *comptoir*, which he managed for 8 years, so his grave would be historically significant. (Nicolaes was succeeded by Jacob Corbisier from Utrecht). The book provides a very colorful description of the man including some commentary on his lifestyle, (illegitimate) children, satirical versions of his epitaph, etc.

A smaller section is dedicated to Abraham van der Voort, from Zeeland, number two (from page 32), who died 06.05.1676; both are buried in the same garden.”

From user named Bart:

“According to the book that Peter provided a link to, both graves should be located 'in a garden, outside the town' - in these days that is. So that should be a garden (what it is today is anybody's guess) in the proximity of the old town or village.

The book says that on the stone on Nicolaes Faber's grave the following epitaph can be read:

*Die veel met jok, enernst, versleetzijnslevensuyren,
rust in ditdonkergraf, en word der wormenspijs,
Zijnslevensvreemdigheidzalvelejarenduyren,
De zielomtfange God by hem in't Paradijs*

(Translated, and I am not a poet :)

He spend the hours of life with gravity and fun,
Forage for the grubs, resting in this murky hole.
Remember the weirdness of his life for years to come,
To be in Paradise may God receive his soul.

The grave of Abraham van der Voort (still according to the same book) should be 'opposite' of Faber's grave, and with the following epitaph:

*Een die van Imborstgoed, noyt twist, of onheylbaarde,
Rust onderdezezerk, en word tot asch, enstof.
In'tbeste van zijnjeugdverliethijons, en de aarde,
Zijnzielhierboven in den hemelzingd Gods lof.*

(Translated)

Righteous character, never causing harm or strife
Resting under this stone, ashes to ashes, dust to dust
He left the earth and us in the prime of his life
In heaven above his soul sings praise to God he must”.

There's also a list of the VOC Officials from Nagelwanzee, present on the site from the VOC:

Table 1: List of Dutch Officials from the Nagelwanzee Trading Post

	Chief		Second in Command
Nicolaas Faber	1668-1676	Abraham van der Voort	1668-1676
Jacob Corbesier	1676-1679	Abraham van der Voort	1676-1676
		Dirk Vonk	1676-1678
		Nicolaas Bolk	1678-1679
Ambrosius van der Wiel	1679-1684	Barent Houtthuyn	1679-1682
		Nicolaas Dankwaard	1682-2684
Adriaen Block	1684-1686	Nicolaas Dankwaard	1684-1686
Nicolaas Dankwaard	1686-1687	Gerard Benoorden	1686-1687

Regarding these two tombstones, we knew that there was a study and publication regarding some of the VOC's heritage in India, by Dr. Marion Peters and photographer Ferry André de la Porte, "*Written in Stone. Life and death of VOC-servants at the Coast of Coromandel in India*" and with Hans Schiebroke "*The Portuguese or Buitenkerkhof in Pulicat on the east coast of India. An old VOC cemetery restored*" (Schiebroek, 2005). On the first cited publication, the authors dealt with the disappearing VOC heritage in India, photographing and describing these monuments. In emails that we have exchanged between ourselves and Dr. Marion Peters, she claimed that these two tombstones were never observed directly by her. And so far, we believe that they were unpublished and partially unknown, or at least forgotten. Despite the information present at her site regarding VOC Heritage which states that someone had found the two gravestones. "In the meantime, the graves of the eccentric chief Nicholas Faber and his second son Abraham van der Voort have been found. A poem by Daniel Havart has been carved into the grave of Faber, with a wreath in the middle. The poem is signed with 'DH' The gravestone of Van der Voort has been broken in half [as we might see in figures 2 and 3 of the present article] by a large stone that had fallen from the adjacent wall. For Nicolaas Faber, see *Written in Stone*, p. 35, 58, 81, 172, 26 and 247; and *Van der Voort*, p. 173 and 247." Dr. Marion Peters struggled for this Dutch Heritage in India not being forgotten or destroyed, giving her best for its protection and divulge as well.

What of these tombstones now? What to do to preserve this part of India's multicultural History?

5. Conclusions

We expect that this article might also contribute to “decolonizing archives” – an expression used in 2017, on the symposium “*Rethinking the voc? Old genres, new trends in research and analysis*” that took place at the National Archives in The Hague, organized by the archive in cooperation with the Leiden University Institute for History on the “The world of the Dutch East India Company” [De Wereld van de VOC] exhibition at the National Archives. In the words of Michael Karabinos: “I view this term, decolonisation, as a journey without end, a goal that we will always strive for. Along the way there are checkpoints, actions, and events that can move us forward” (Karabinos, 2019, p. 129-141).

We [the authors] also be thriving with all our colleagues, on protecting and maintaining these tombstones for further future studies, and as examples of Cultural Heritage Preservation, for a part of India's History, that we believe must be taught and preserved for future generations to know the truth about their past as well as to respect the memories', even if of past fallen enemies.

These two tombstones were re-found on September 2019, during some road constructions works, in the middle of nowhere, not on a garden, not even on a cemetery. That's why it is so urgent to place them on a site, protected, accessible and interpreted for these and future generations also to be aware of part of their past forgotten History. Mr. Matta Srinivas, Heritage lover, was warned by local villagers of the presence of these two tombstones. Since he is not an archaeologist, he approached Dr. Sachin K. Tiwary to know a little bit more about it. And Dr. Tiwary approached me, so here we are, studying them and working on the best way to protecting them too. For the time being, the local villagers were alerted to the importance of the find, and are the ones protecting it. In the future we expect gathering enough funding for placing them in a small interpretive center, telling the story of XVIIth century India, the VOC and these two men and tombstones in particular.

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Valk, Bart and Willem H.) for all their help as well in deciphering this 400 year old mysteries.

We would have enjoyed the opportunity, if possible, to personally consult the VOC archives, held currently at the United Kingdom because these are the primarily records gained when the British conquered Dutch-controlled lands, as well as Sri Lanka, India, South Africa, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Netherlands. At the Nationalarchief, The Hague, in the Netherlands there exist a total of 14,933 volumes under the VOC reference number, having around 2.000 pages each of them. As well as other locations, but unfortunately this was not possible.

The information present of other Companies archives is also of great importance, in order to cross over information between all of these and local sources, to better obtain a more complete panoramic, for instance, of the social interactions between all actors on those scenarios: “the archives of the three great East India Companies – English, Dutch and French – were simply too rich, too large and too diverse, not to continue to tempt historians (...) interested in questions of religion, or historians of science, will still find much to delve into here. The cultural history of diplomacy is another area where these archives can prove valuable (...) (Subrahmanyam 2018, p. 436)”.

The digitisation of these documents could mean a move forward in making them available to scholars, students, and individuals worldwide. Also, the works of Arasaratnam, S. and Baldaeus, Philippus were not able to be consulted as well.

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