

In Search of Spices and Christians: Europeans in Southeast Asia 1511-1606

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Having recently found myself in the wilds at the edge of the Known World – Singapore – I got to wondering what was happening in this part of the world while the events and culture celebrated by the SCA were going on in Europe.

Southeast Asia has its own history of cultures, civilisations, empires, kingdoms and sultanates, not to mention trade and wars between them. If you're ever in Singapore, I can recommend learning a bit about them with a visit to the Asian Civilisations Museum (<http://acm.org.sg/>, viewed 14 June 2016). But this history is far too much to cover in an article like this one, and outside of the scope of the SCA besides. So, in keeping with the SCA's focus on European history, I'm going to restrict myself to the history of European settlement in southeast Asia from the time of the earliest European visits until the end of the SCA period and the first European landing in Australia.

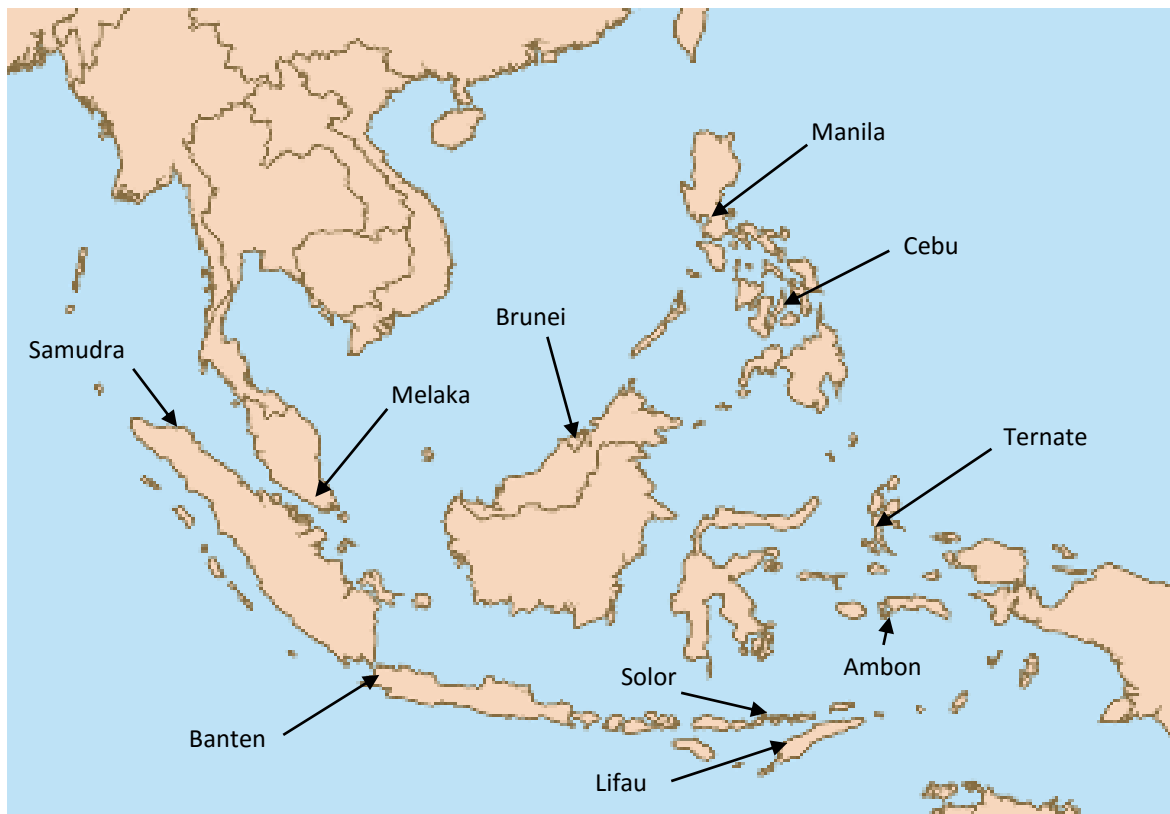


Figure 1 Southeast Asia, with the location of cities mentioned in the text. The base map is courtesy Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Se_asia_malaysia.png, viewed 23 March 2016.

Historians complain that few sources of information about southeast Asia have survived from before relatively large-scale European expeditions arrived in the early sixteenth century. However, we know that trade with India and China was well-established, and some kingdoms had become wealthy through the spice trade. The early kingdoms in the area were Hindu or Buddhist, but many parts of the Malayan peninsula and Indonesian archipelago converted to Islam during the fifteenth century after contact with Muslim traders from India.

The *Suma Oriental* of Tomé Pires is probably the most widely-cited description of what Europeans found when they arrived, which Pires wrote while living in India and Melaka over 1512-15. The *Suma Oriental* covers a vast number of lands from Egypt to Japan, including mainland southeast Asia (“Indochina”) and the Indonesian and Philippines archipelagos as far east as Maluku (formerly, the Moluccas). Pires was most interested in the trade undertaken in each place, and whether their kings are “Moors” (Muslims) or “heathens”, so that his guide is filled with lists of commodities passing from one place to the next, and not so much of the kind of thing that might appear in a modern travel guide or SCA article.

There were never great numbers of Europeans in southeast Asia; Andaya and Andaya (2015) estimate that around 7400 Christians were living in Melaka by the end of the sixteenth century, made up of Portuguese men married to local women, various adventurers, and so-called “black Portuguese”, being the offspring of the Portuguese men with local wives. Luis Francia (2010) says that the Spanish colonists in the Philippines were outnumbered by twenty thousand Chinese in Manila at the end of the same century.

D. R. SarDesai (2010) therefore argues that influence of Europeans on the area has been overstated, but Anthony Reid (1999) points out that their control of trade and major ports such as Melaka and (later) Batavia gave their relatively small numbers great importance in the region. Whichever interpretation one prefers, Europeans *did* come to southeast Asia during the SCA period and my purpose is to find out what they did there.

Early Visitors

Marco Polo reports on several kingdoms in southeast Asia in Book 3 of his famous travels. Chapter 6 describes Java, the central island of what is now Indonesia, as “subject to a great King” and of “surpassing wealth” due to the spices produced there. He goes on to describe several other kingdoms of less certain identity in Chapters 7 and 8, including the “Kingdom of Locac” from which the SCA’s Kingdom of Lochac takes its name¹.

It’s not clear how many of these kingdoms were actually visited by Marco Polo, but Chapter 10 has him waiting for five months in the kingdom of “Samara” for the monsoon winds to turn in favour of his onward to journey to India. Polo says that this is one of eight kingdoms on the island of “Java the Less”, the large island at the western end of the Indonesian archipelago now known as “Sumatra”. Marco Polo’s name is thought to be a variant of “Samudra”, a kingdom at the northern end of the island that later gave its name to whole island.

Ibn Battuta, a Moorish traveller from what is now Morocco, also stopped by Samudra for two weeks in 1345 or 1346 on his way to China, along with several other unidentified ports in southeast Asia (Dunn, 1986). Other early travellers, all Italian, include Odorico da Pordenone over 1316-1330, John Marignolli in 1342 and Niccolò de Conti in the early 1400’s. D. G. E. Hall (1981, Ch. 12) gives an accessible modern overview, or you can download the Hakluyt Society’s translations of the travellers’ own manuscripts from the Internet Archive (see the Primary Sources at the end of the article).

¹ The explanation appears, briefly, in histories written by Baroness Rowan Peregrynne (<http://history.westkingdom.org/Branches/Lochac.htm>, viewed 4 March 2016) and Hrölf Herjölfssen (<http://www.florilegium.org/files/STORIES/Lochac-Chrnls-art.html>, viewed 4 March 2016). Henry Yule’s translation argues that Marco Polo’s Locac is actually in what is now Thailand and Malaysia.

The *Estada da India*

When Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Empire in 1453, the traditional trade routes between Europe and Asia were controlled by the Ottoman Turks in Western Asia and the Mongols in Central Asia. European powers, notably Portugal and Spain, therefore looked for alternative routes by which they could access the spices and other riches of Asia. Most famously, Christopher Columbus sailed west in 1492 hoping to find a sea route to China, but instead came across a whole continent previously unknown in Europe.

In 1494, Spain and Portugal agreed to the Treaty of Tordesillas, by which the new world (as seen by Spain and Portugal) was to be divided at line of longitude 370 leagues (about 2000 km) west of Cape Verde, an archipelago off the west coast of Africa. The Spanish were to control any non-Christian lands found to the west of the line, while the Portuguese were to control the lands to the east.

Following the treaty, an eastwards expedition led by Vasco da Gama over 1497 and 1498 turned out to have more immediate importance for the European history of southeast Asia than Columbus' adventure. Da Gama sailed south from Portugal, around the Cape of Good Hope at the southern end of Africa, up the east coast and finally on to India. This route made it possible to sail between Europe and Asia, and the Portuguese set out to use it by establishing a network of settlements along the route that came to be called the *Estada da India* (State of India).

At the eastern end of the *Estada da India* was the port of Melaka (or Malacca), on the south-western coast of the Malayan peninsula. Melaka had become a significant port over the course of the fifteenth century, and had become known in Europe thanks to a visit from Ludovico di Varthema in 1505. The Portuguese arrived in 1509 and conquered the city in 1511, driving the sultan who had previously ruled the city to the island of Bintan in the Singapore Straits.

The capture of Melaka itself might not have worked out as well as the Portuguese hoped because many traders simply shifted their operations to Brunei or other ports, and the displaced sultan continued to harass the Portuguese from his new base. But Melaka did provide a base from which Portuguese expeditions could travel further into the Indonesian archipelago in search of the spices that began the adventure in the first place.



Figure 2 *Porta de Santiago*, the only remaining part of the Portuguese fort built at Melaka in 1511. Photo supplied by the author, taken 25 April 2016.

Most has been written about the island of Ternate, on which the Portuguese arrived in 1512. Ternate is a small island – basically the top of a volcano – at the eastern end of the Indonesian archipelago between Sulawesi and Papua. But Ternate was wealthy beyond its size thanks to being the home of cloves – as the Lonely Planet guide (2013) for modern travellers puts it, “money really did grow on trees”.

Leonard Andaya’s book *The World of Maluku* (1993) describes what happened in some detail. Initially, the local sultan hoped that an alliance with the Portuguese would enhance the region’s power, and he allowed them to build a fort there. Later rulers, however, came into a series of conflicts with the Portuguese, such that many of the sultans ended up imprisoned in the fort. Francis Xavier succeeded in converting one sultan to Christianity in 1546 or 1547, but later sultans reverted to Islam.

Finally, Sultan Baballuh overthrew the fort in 1575, after the Portuguese murdered his father Hairun. Babullah went on to impress Francis Drake with the island’s wealth when the latter visited in 1579, and leave Ternate (he died in 1583) in a position to resist an attack from the Spanish colony in Manila in 1585. The fort later fell to the Dutch in 1606.

Aside from the fortified colonies at Melaku and Ternate, Dominican friars established a Portuguese settlement at Lifau on Timor in 1556 with the intention of converting the population to Christianity, and other forts were built on Ambon and Solor at around the same time. Portuguese traders, missionaries and mercenaries travelled throughout southeast Asia from Burma to Papua, but historians write virtually nothing about the settlements other than Melaka and Ternate. Melaka itself was lost to the Dutch in 1641, while Portugal came to hold East Timor as a colony until it was decolonised by Portugal then rapidly annexed by Indonesia in 1974-5.

The Philippines

Ferdinand Magellan’s expedition to circumnavigate the Earth arrived at Cebu in the Philippines in 1521, after travelling across the Pacific Ocean from the straits that now bear his name. Our main record of the voyage is the *Primo Viaggio* of Antonio Pigafetta, who travelled on the voyage as an early kind of tourist. Several modern histories, including those of Andaya and Andaya (2015) and Luis Francia (2010), also give good overviews of Magellan’s adventure and subsequent Spanish activities in the archipelago.

Pigafetta tells us that Magellan’s expedition had some initial success in converting the population to Christianity. Not long afterwards, however, Magellan decided to take arms against a chief on another island who refused to submit to Spain. Magellan, along with a number of volunteers who’d gone to help him out, were killed in the battle. Another twenty-six Spaniards were murdered at a treacherous dinner set up by Magellan’s translator, a slave who’d been promised his freedom in Magellan’s will but who had had it refused by one of Magellan’s successors. What was left of the fleet made a brief stopover in Brunei before completing the circumnavigation *sans* leader.

Magellan’s route shows up an oversight in the Treaty of Tordesillas: the treaty didn’t say what would happen when the Spanish going west met the Portuguese going east. This was resolved by the Treaty of Zaragoza of 1529, which positioned another dividing line between Asia and the Pacific Ocean. Though the Philippines lie westwards of the new line, Spain sent more fleets there in 1525, 1527 and 1542. Luis Francia relates that all three were disasters, with many losses and deaths, and the remnants of all three ending up as prisoners of the Portuguese at Ternate.

Miguel López de Legazpi led another Spanish fleet westwards from New Spain in 1564. He arrived in Cebu in 1565, but a few years later determined that Manila would make a much more valuable capital due to its trade links with China and Japan.

Manila was then controlled by Muslim tribal chiefs, but the Legazpi disposed of these through one expedition that destroyed the settlements surrounding Manila in 1570, followed by a second expedition that took control of Manila itself the following year. The new Spanish capital had to fend off a Chinese attack in 1574-5, but thereafter served as a place to exchange silver shipped from the New World and silk shipped from Macau, and a base from which missionaries could convert the Philippines population to Catholicism.

Legazpi arrived with a few Augustinian missionaries in tow, and over the course of the rest of the century was joined by Franciscan, Jesuit, and Dominican missionaries as well. As Andaya and Andaya have it, each order was assigned responsibility for converting a region on the understanding that the region would be handed over to the secular authorities once the region had been Catholicised to an acceptable degree. This involved concentrating rural populations into more manageable centralised settlements with the help of the local chiefs, to be followed converting and taxing them.

The Spanish were opposed in all this by Muslim sultanates in Brunei and the southern Philippines. The Spanish made several attempts to defeat the sultans, and even occupied Brunei for a short period in 1578, but were ultimately unable to expand their influence beyond the northern part of the Philippines. A brief adventure into Cambodia in 1596, encouraged by the promise of Christianising Cambodia and Siam, also ended in failure. They held onto their colony in the Philippines, however, until defeated in the Spanish-American war of 1898.

Prelude to the VOC

The Netherlands was to become the pre-eminent power in the Indonesian archipelago in the post-SCA period, holding most of the archipelago as a colony until Indonesian independence in 1945. Jan Huygen van Linschoten published maps of the Portuguese route to the East Indies in 1595-96, and the first Dutch expedition left the Netherlands at the same time. Despite getting into several fights with Portuguese and Indonesians, sickness amongst the crew, and losing one of its ships, the expedition made a modest profit.

Five more Dutch expeditions followed in 1598, travelling both east and west, and another fourteen departed in 1601. The companies behind all of these expeditions ultimately merged to form the United East India Company, known in Dutch as the *Vereenigde-Oost-Indische Compagnie* ("VOC"), in 1602. The VOC established itself in Banten, at the western end of Java, before moving to Batavia (Jakarta) in 1619. You can read the rest in studies of the early history of Indonesia; this brief discussion is based mainly on M. C. Ricklefs' book (2008).

It was from Banten that Willem Janzsoon, an employee of the VOC, led the first recorded European expedition to land in Australia. His expedition, intended to explore New Guinea, landed on Cape York Peninsula in 1606. And though it's slightly outside the SCA period, I felt that this would be an appropriate time to end my little study.

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