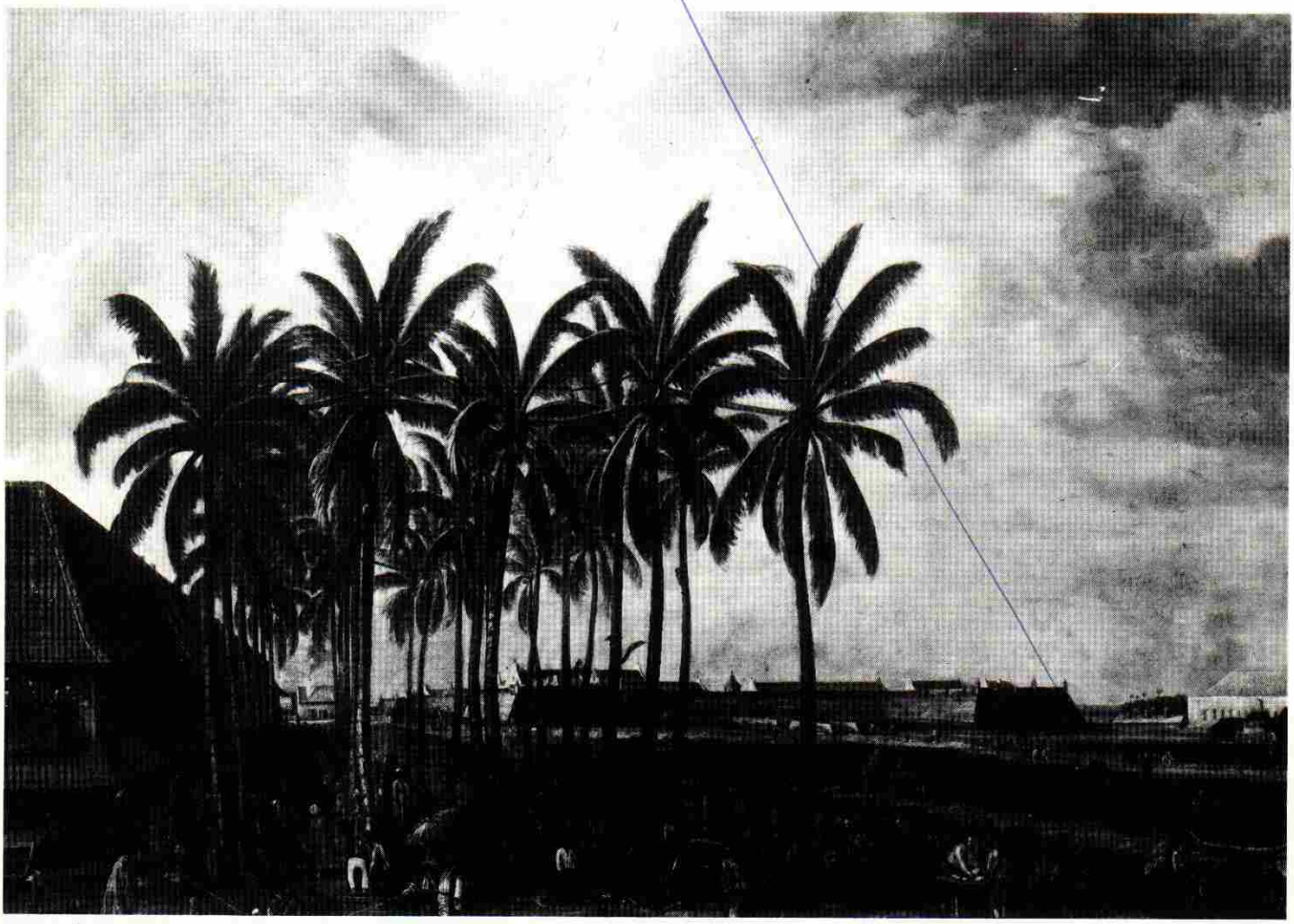
BALANCE AND MILITARY INNOVATION IN 17TH-CENTURY JAVA

Merle Ricklefs re-examines the impact of the Dutch in the East Indies and finds in the response of the Javanese a more complex story than that of technological superiority beating down a military-primitive response.

Historians of warfare in the early modern period rightly look upon Europe as the primary source of military innovations. This may, however, lead them to forget that innovations sometimes spread rapidly to non-European societies, nullifying Europe's relative military advantage. Such a tendency is evident in Geoffrey Parker's *The Military Revolution: Military Innovations and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800.* (Cambridge University Press, 1988). This impressive work is written from an essentially European frame of reference and may provoke objection from specialists in non-European history. Certainly with regard to the islands of South-East Asia, Parker's observation that 'by 1650 the West had already achieved military mastery' there (pp. 117-18) needs correction, as does his acceptance of the testimony of an early seventeenth-century English visitor, that the people of Java were 'very loath to fight'. The islands of South-East Asia offer manifold examples of the inability of Europeans to achieve military domination during the

A Dutch painting, c.1656, of 'Batavia', the name given to the Javanese port of Jakarta when the Dutch settled there in 1619.



sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, and of the pugnacious character of many of the societies found there. Indeed, in the Javanese, the Europeans encountered one of the major martial societies of the region. In the late seventeenth century, this encounter culminated tragically for the Dutch.

From the late sixteenth century to 1625, the Mataram dynasty of Central Java (which was most certainly not loath to fight) carried out a series of campaigns which established its hegemony over East and Central Java. This was a rich empire, controlling the rice granary of the Indonesian archipelago and a population the size of which is not really known, but probably numbered around one to two million. In 1619, the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, or VOC) conquered the small West Javanese port of Jayakerta (now Jakarta) and made it its headquarters for all of Asia under the new name of Batavia, thereby establishing itself as a political force on the western fringes of the Mataram empire. The Javanese dynasty responded to this with sieges of Batavia in 1628 and 1629; the first of these posed a serious threat to the VOC, the second was a fiasco. Thereafter Mataram concentrated more on internal affairs. The VOC, meanwhile, endeavoured to build its trading networks while avoiding involvement in Java's internal politics.

The great conquering monarch of Mataram, Sultan Agung (1613-46), was succeeded by the great tyrant Susuhunan (Emperor) Amangkurat I (1646-77), whose murderous excesses eventually provoked the greatest rebellion of the seventeenth century in 1675. By early 1677 the defeat of the dynasty seemed certain. As the monarch's supporters – and thus his army – defected to the rebels, Amangkurat I turned to the only force which might be able to salvage his kingdom for him: the European interlopers at Batavia. The VOC had many reservations about intervention in Java, but eventually the aggressive views of the great Admiral (and later governor-general), Cornelis Janszoon Speelman, won out. He envisaged intervention on behalf of the dynasty, in return for which Amangkurat I would repay the VOC's costs and grant it extensive trading concessions. In February 1677 a treaty was signed that promised such arrangements. Speelman thought that the war could be over by the end of July, but the military adventure upon which the VOC now embarked was to prove much costlier and more difficult than he could have imagined.

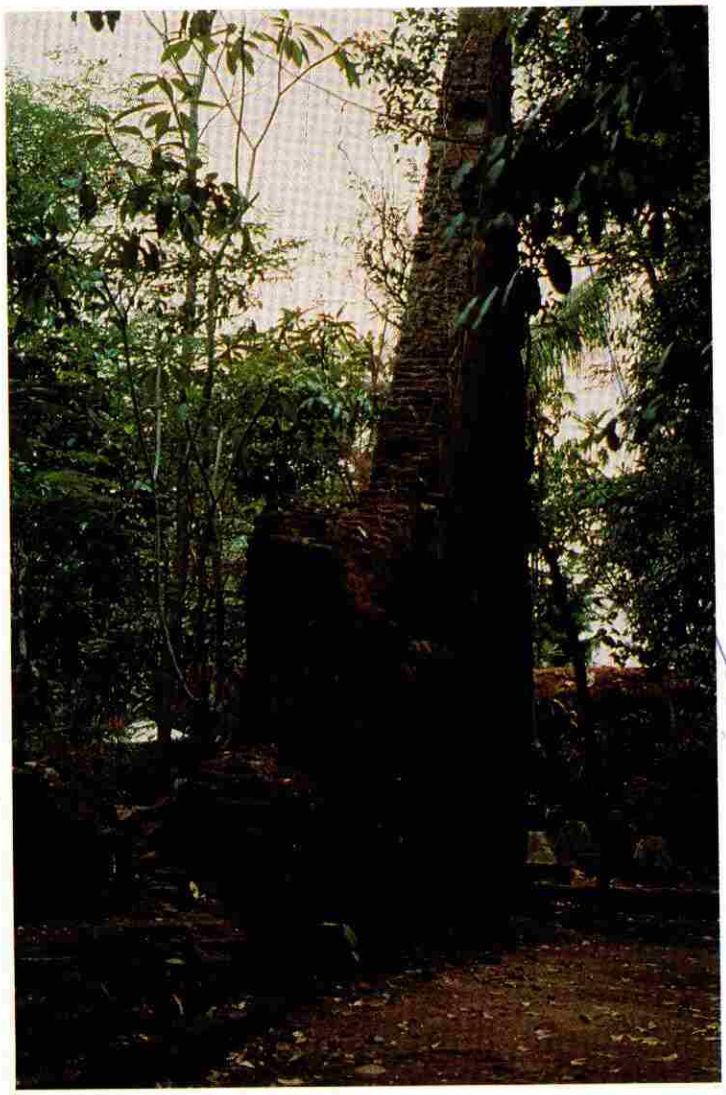
Admiral Cornelis Janszoon Speelman who supported Dutch military intervention in Java on behalf of the Mataram monarch, Amangkurat I.

The VOC intervened on the coast in May 1677 and drove the rebels from Surabaya. This intervention seems to have precipitated even greater defections to the rebel cause, which now became imbued with something of the character of a religious war: Indonesian Muslims against a discredited dynasty which had dared to call in *kafir* support. The Company's forces, in fact, included units of Indonesian Muslims as well – rather contemptuously labelled *Kumpeni Islam* in Javanese chronicles – but it was the European Christian presence that mattered.

The rebellion gathered greater pace and the court of Mataram fell to it in mid-1677. Amangkurat I fled towards the north coast but died *en route*. He was buried at Tegalarum (or Tegalwangi), one of the very few members of his dynasty not to be buried in the royal graves at Imagiri in Central Java. The Tegalarum site is rather beautiful but, in contrast to the Imagiri graves, it is a simple and lonely place, for this tyrant was not one whose grave might become a pilgrimage site for those seeking spiritual benefaction. The dead king was succeeded as Susuhunan by his son Amangkurat II (1677-1703).

In the beginning, Amangkurat II was a miserable sort of monarch: he had virtually no supporters (and hence no army), no court, no treasury (which had been carried off by the rebels) – in other words hardly a kingdom at all. Not surprisingly, he confirmed the alliance with the Dutch East India Company. But clearly he didn't trust the Europeans very much and some of his advisers were altogether opposed to their presence. Other Javanese, however, thought that the VOC looked impressive as a military force and consequently began to revive their loyalty to the Mataram dynasty.

In September 1678 a combined Amangkurat II-VOC army finally marched from the coast to tackle the rebel capital at Kediri in East Java: some 2,300 European and Indonesian soldiers of the Company plus a Javanese army which grew, by the magnetic attraction of its increasingly probable victory, from about 4,000 to over 13,000 men. The march was a dreadful one, through difficult terrain unknown to the VOC and probably to many of the Javanese, with extended and undefended lines of communication and unpredictable supplies, in the face of hostile weather and enemy harassment. Eventually Kediri was reached, but it took six more weeks before the attacking army could cross the flooding River Brantas, in the face of enemy artillery and small-arms fire, to assault the rebel



(Far left) Part of the ruins of the court of Amangkurat II at Kartasura, Central Java. (Left) Out of the shadows, the European image as interpreted by the Javanese, in the form of a shadow puppet of Captain Tack.

stronghold. By this time the king's army had dropped again to about 1,000 armed men, mainly because of disease and desertion.

When finally the rebels' citadel at Kediri was attacked in November 1678, a crucial incident ensued. One of the Dutch commanders was a flamboyant, thirty year-old captain from the Hague named François Tack – a central character in this story. He led four companies of VOC troops in a courtyard-by-courtyard conquest of the rebel leader's court. When the rebels were put to flight, the victorious VOC and Javanese troops did what was customary on such occasions: they looted the place, including all the treasure taken by the rebels from the Mataram capital the year before.

One particularly significant item that came to light in the looting was an old, golden crown, said to be from the court of Majapahit (1294-c.1527), the last and greatest of the pre-Islamic kingdoms of Java. The Majapahit crown is described in a fifteenth-century Chinese source and in Dutch and Javanese accounts of 1678, but it has since disappeared. In later times Javanese monarchs have not worn crowns and have not been crowned ceremonially, in the European fashion, upon their accession. In 1678, however, this object clearly had – or was inadvertently given by the Dutch – a crucial significance. François Tack took the crown to Amangkurat II. But rather than presenting to the Susuhunan in properly obsequious fashion what Tack, as a European, imagined to be the royal crown, he told Amangkurat II that he could have it back for 1,000 Rijksdaalders. The king agreed and subsequently took part in a sort of coronation ceremony employing this object, while the VOC fired musket and cannon salutes. This episode seems to have been interpreted by Amangkurat II not as something for which he owed gratitude to the Europeans, but as an indication of their pretentions to being his overbearing and contemptuous mentors, rather than his mercenaries. As a result Captain Tack earned himself a special place on the king's list of people he hated. Amangkurat II subsequently refused to pay the 1,000 Rijksdaalders, which the VOC finally deducted from revenues owing to him in 1681, and paid directly to the impetuous Captain.

In September 1680 Amangkurat II returned to Central Java and established a new court at Kartasura (the ruins of which may still be seen not far from the present-day city of Surakarta) amidst extraordinary stories, which reveal the dubious local perceptions of him, because of his links with the VOC. Both Dutch and Javanese records say that rumours spread to the effect that this was not truly Amangkurat II at all, but rather a son of Admiral Speelman in disguise; he had to arrange to show himself in public in order to dispel such stories. No doubt these rumours helped to strengthen Amangkurat II's instincts to rid himself of his troublesome European allies as soon as possible.

The last significant remnants of the rebellion having been crushed, or brought to submission by the end of 1681, the Company set out vainly to enjoy the concessions granted by the king and to collect the (now enor-

mous) payments for its military costs. But this was not to be. Instead the VOC encountered obstruction from Javanese officials in the implementation of its prerogatives, and no payments from the court. By 1682 the VOC calculated that the king owed it over one and a half million Spanish Reals. They had stopped increasing the figure in the hope of inducing him to pay at least some of it. Now that Amangkurat II was reasonably secure on his throne, however, he sought not only to avoid paying the VOC, but also to be rid altogether of this troublesome and motley group who thought he owed them both gratitude and money.

A Balinese adventurer named Surapati now fortuitously appeared to assist Amangkurat II in expelling the VOC from his court. Surapati was a legend in his own lifetime and long thereafter – so much so, in fact, that it is sometimes difficult to disentangle the truth from the myths surrounding him. Javanese chronicles tell tales of supernatural powers, but it seems that he was merely a Balinese slave of the VOC of such extraordinary abilities and courage that he became the Company's most hated enemy. He escaped from slavery in Batavia in the 1670s and formed a band of brigands in the wilds south of the city. In 1683 he was allowed to surrender – a Dutch ploy to 'tame' him until he and his band could be killed – and was even taken into VOC military service. But Lieutenant Surapati, as he briefly became, soon turned against the Europeans once more. In 1684 he killed twenty out of a Company force of thirty-nine Europeans and then took flight eastwards into Amangkurat II's domain. By March 1685 the Company learned that Surapati had been favourably received at the court of Kartasura, where an anti-VOC faction was forming.

It was already clear to Batavia that something special needed to be done about its relations with Kartasura. In April 1684 the king had been informed that a VOC special commissioner would be sent to deal with outstanding financial, territorial and other matters. The urgency of this embassy in VOC eyes was increased by Surapati's presence in Kartasura. His capture was now added secretly to the VOC orders for the special commissioner's trip. As the months of 1685 passed, tensions increased in Kartasura as the court anticipated a showdown with the Company. Late that year the Dutch informed Amangkurat II who the special ambassador would be. They were sending, they said, none other than Captain François Tack – the very man the king most loathed among Europeans and who most clearly symbolised the things he disliked about the Company. With the king's most hated Dutchman coming to capture the Company's most hated Indonesian enemy, the city of Kartasura was about to test the degree of military mastery commanded by the Europeans.

Tack left Batavia in November 1685 with instructions to restore Javanese respect for the Company and to recoup what he could of the VOC's expenses. The main method of achieving these objectives was to be an acceptance of the king's financial demands, in effect the abrogation of about 85 per cent of his debt. And, of course, Tack was to lay hands on Surapati by whatever means. There are some grounds for thinking that the latter aim was known to the Javanese court, but they were not aware of VOC willingness to make concessions in other matters.

A Javanese chronicle account adds a nice mythic twist to the story at this point. *Babad Kraton*, a manuscript preserved in the British Library, says that only one of the Company's warriors dared to try to capture Surapati; a captain named *Etak* (i.e. Tack), a son of Admiral Speelman. Tack was certainly not a child of Speelman – although it should perhaps be added that one of Speelman's bitterest critics, the garrulous and cantankerous Pastor Valentyn, claimed that the streets of Batavia were full of children of Speelman, whose paternity was acknowledged only in their physiognomy. But in a mythic sense Tack might appropriately be seen as the descendant of that great military hero. The real point of the *Babad* claim was probably that Tack, a son of Speelman, was now about to confront that other putative son of Speelman, Amangkurat II.

On February 4th, 1686 Tack set off from the north coast town of Semarang for Kartasura. His timing was little short of disastrous. This was not merely because February was in the middle of the rainy season, which always made travel difficult. More importantly, the greatest of the annual court festivals, *Garebeg Mulud*, in celebration of the birth of the prophet Muhammad, fell upon February 6th that year. So Tack was about to march into a gathering of all the lords of the realm and their armed entourages, a setting appropriate to grand drama but hardly to the discreet settlement of diplomatic issues.

Babad Kraton contains an account of the court conspiracy which preceded Tack's arrival. The king's brother Prince Puger (later King Pakubuwana I, 1704-19) supposedly orchestrated the court's handling of the crisis. He told Surapati that if he were prepared to take on the VOC in battle, the king would lend him support. Surapati of course accepted this challenge.

As Tack and his escort approached the court city, Amangkurat II ordered some buildings at the south of the court to be set alight and the word was spread that this was the work of Surapati. Then he organised for a sham assault to be made on Surapati's residence. All this was, of course, to deceive Tack into thinking that Surapati

The grave at Tegalwangi of the unpopular Amangkurat I, who died in 1677 as he fled rebellion.

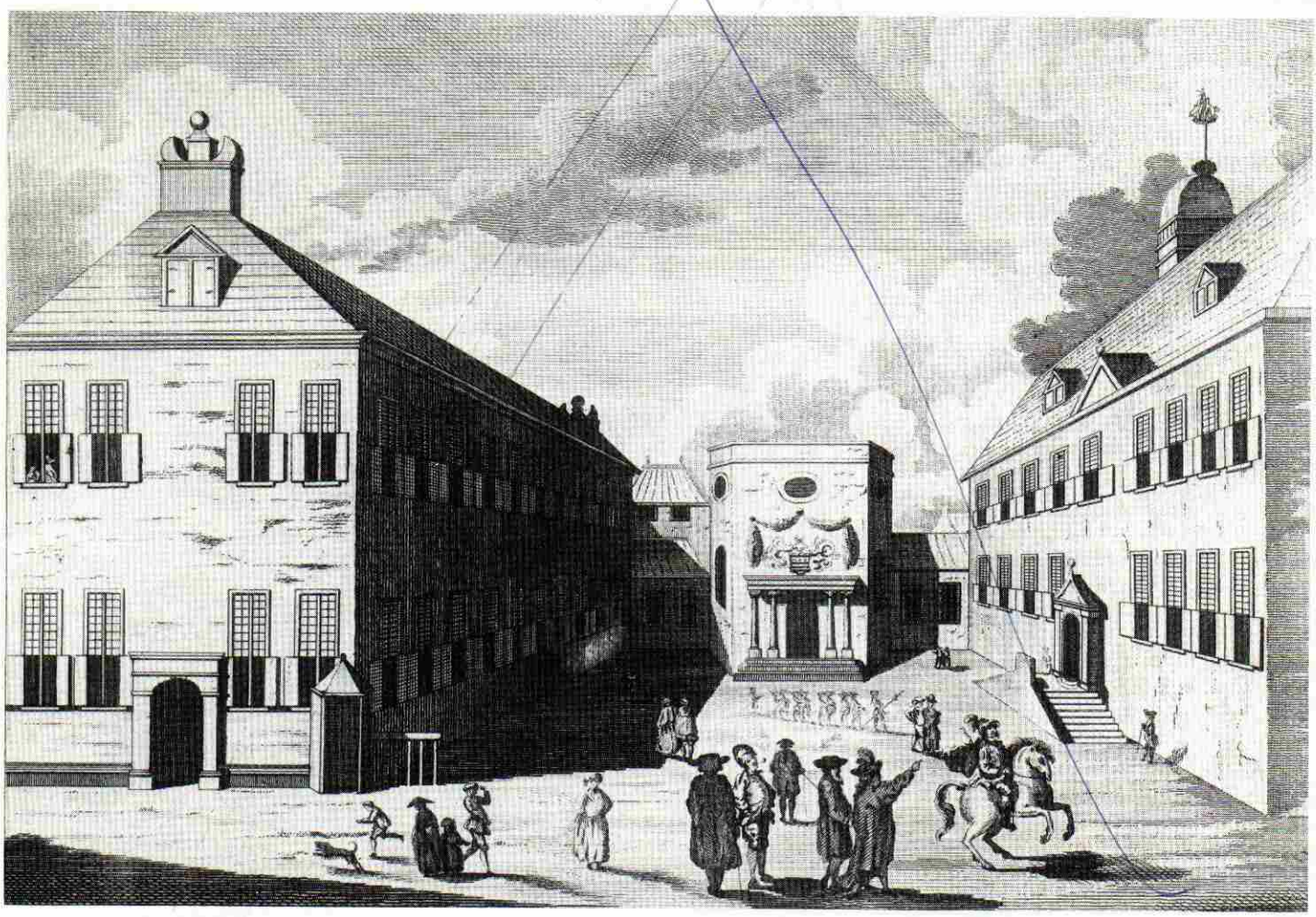
was an enemy, rather than an ally, of Amangkurat II. Meanwhile Tack marched on, in a fashion which one Javanese text (*Babad ing Sangkala* in the India Office Library) compares to the driving of stags for a royal hunt.

On February 8th, military action opened with an apparently sham attack, by some 10,000 of the king's men using unloaded matchlock muskets (the standard infantry weapon of both the Javanese and the VOC at this time), upon Surapati's residence. The latter had only about 100 Balinese warriors, yet they successfully broke through the Javanese lines around them and marched eastwards from the court. Upon hearing gunfire, the VOC garrison at the court took up defensive positions and sent two companies to meet Tack. Although the VOC records are not clear on troop numbers, it seems that the total Company force at Kartasura was now about 320 Europeans. Tack sent some men to the court to find out what was happening, left others behind to guard the VOC garrison post (foolishly including his pikemen and all but six of his grenadiers) and set off with his musketeers eastward, eager to deal with Surapati. However, when he arrived to the east of the court, he found burning buildings but no Surapati. Cannon and small-arms fire from behind him suggested that Surapati had doubled back to the court, so Tack hastened there. It appears, just as the Javanese chronicles say, that Tack had been manoeuvred into a position to provide a dramatic spectacle upon the great square in front of the court.

(Above) As others see us; a Dutch engraving of inhabants of Batavia – the man is armed with a primitive harpoon, but the Javanese were swift to deploy Western technology to effect.

When Tack reached the great square, he found men of the small VOC watch already massacred, and buildings at the front of the court ablaze. Surapati and his band took up positions behind tiger cages at the front of the palace as Tack drew up three companies (about 150 men) facing them. On Tack's flanks and rear he was joined by some of the king's soldiers, for the sham battle with Surapati had apparently turned into a real contest with real casualties, and some of the king's subjects now also wished to be rid of the Balinese warrior and his followers.

The VOC and their few allies approached the *kraton* palisade and opened fire, while Surapati withdrew into the court precincts. At this point the Dutch discovered that the rest of the lifeguard at the *kraton* had also been massacred and their wooden guardhouse set on fire with the bodies of all but one survivor inside. Surapati



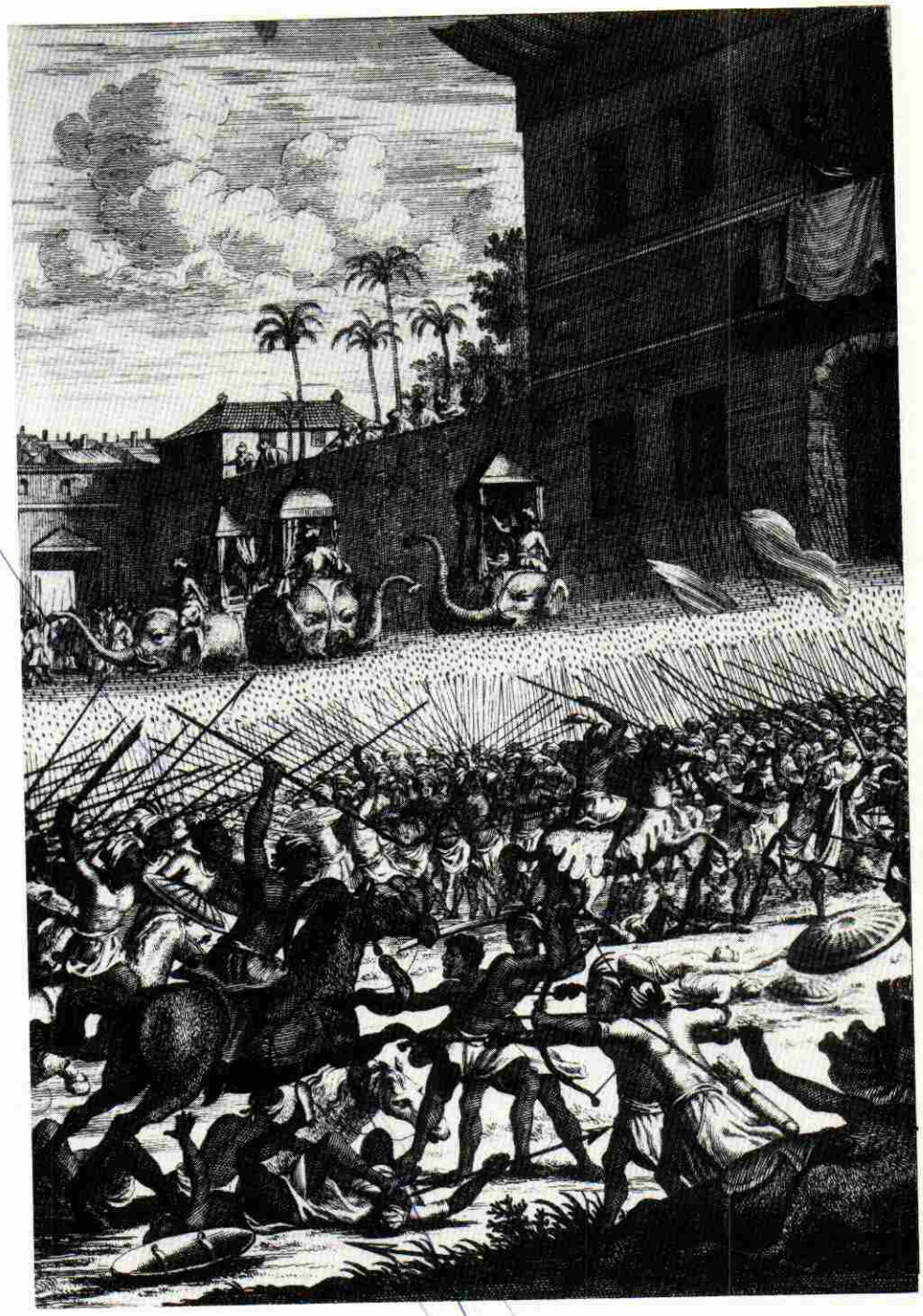
(Below) The Governor's Palace, Batavia, from where the Dutch administered their Asian colonies.

then launched an assault on Tack which was repulsed with heavy firing. In case there might be any doubt amongst *Babad Kraton*'s Javanese audience about the symbolic significance of Tack in all this, the chronicle depicts him at this point 'not [dressed] in the style of the Company, but wearing a golden crown'. This was the crown of Majapahit of course. The symbolism is as obvious as the plot into which Tack had now fallen: Amangkurat II would finally repay Tack and the VOC for the affronts of 1678 and the years thereafter.

There was a brief pause in the fighting. *Babad Kraton* says that Surapati fought 'like a wounded buffalo' and then withdrew to rest, but was ordered by the king to resume contact with the enemy. Twice he rested and was ordered back into action, according to the *babad* account. VOC records also describe three attempts by Surapati to escape the flames engulfing the court buildings behind him, by breaking through the VOC line in front.

Each pause in the fighting gave the Europeans a chance to reload their unwieldy matchlocks. The third attack was so much greater in its fury that Lieutenant A. Eygel, against whose company it was partly directed, later commented, 'God knows if it didn't take place with the help of the Susuhunan's own Balinese'. According to *Babad Kraton*, it was indeed at this point that Amangkurat II ordered Prince Puger to reinforce Surapati. In this account, Puger picks eighteen of his soldiers, dresses with them in the style of Surapati's men and joins in the fighting.

In the face of the last furious assault, VOC discipline broke. Enveloped in smoke from black powder weapons and from the burning court, so thick that visibility was reduced virtually to nil, the Europeans found themselves with neither time to reload their muskets, nor pikes to repel their attackers. If orders could be heard they were not obeyed as the Company's soldiers tried to escape the killing ground and flee to their fortress, abandoning banners and weapons in their flight. Tack was cut down as he tried to mount his horse, which was found dead beside him; on his body twenty wounds were later counted. With him fell most of his soldiers. Lieutenant Eygel was the only officer to escape and was subsequently accused of cowardice. By noon, when a heavy monsoon rain put an end to the day's brief action, seventy-five Europeans lay dead in the mud and ashes of the Susuhunan's forecourt. With the Europeans fell some forty to fifty Balinese, including all their leaders except Surapati himself; a further fifteen wounded died shortly afterwards.



Conflict at Mataram; the internecine warfare among the Javanese gave the Dutch their opportunity to intervene and tip the balance as they did here.

After the killings, the surviving VOC force of 248 men took refuge in their fortress, a structure defended only by rotting bamboo palisades and some ten cannon. For half an hour serious confusion reigned there. Meanwhile Surapati and his band made displays of bravado on the square and a Javanese *gamelan* orchestra could be heard from the court playing a celebratory melody called *Banyu Banjir* ('flooding waters'). But no one molested the European survivors as they collected their dead. Then Surapati and his men left Kartasura, reportedly with some of the Susuhunan's horses and fine firearms as royal gifts.

Amangkurat II and the VOC were both apprehensive of what might now ensue, and for nearly six weeks both sides dissembled mightily. The king visited the VOC garrison post and expressed dismay at the killings. The Company pretended that it did not blame him. Finally on March 20th the VOC survivors were allowed to withdraw to the north coast, with Javanese porters to assist them and senior lords as escorts. They took with them the body of Tack, whose grave is still pointed out to visitors by the local people of Jepara, then the site of the Company's coastal headquarters. For nearly twenty years there would be no Com-

An old Dutch grave in the ruins of the VOC fortress at Jepara, locally identified as being that of Captain Tack.

pany post at the court of Kartasura.

There are several historical messages to be derived from this bloody episode, but the central one for this article is clearly that there was no military mastery exercised by the Europeans in this context. Nor was this an isolated incident. In Perak on the Malay Peninsula, for example, a VOC ambassador and twenty-six other Dutchmen were killed in 1651. In 1679 another VOC party was attacked, in 1685 the VOC Resident and eleven others were murdered and in 1689 the VOC post on Pulau Pangkor was attacked: not surprisingly the VOC withdrew from there in 1690. Nor were such affairs limited to the seventeenth century. In 1741 the Javanese court attacked and took the VOC's fortified garrison post at Kartasura. In 1811 the Sultan of Palembang in South Sumatra slaughtered eighty-seven men of the Dutch garrison there. Nor was Dutch military supremacy any more evident in large-scale wars. Certainly VOC contingents were formidable fighting units by the standards of the day, but so were many of the local forces that fought with or against them. A series of major wars in Java in the early eighteenth century ended in 1755 in a military stalemate between the VOC and its allies on the one hand, and their enemies on the other. Indeed, to historians of Indonesia or of Dutch imperialism there, it is a commonplace that, with the exception of a few enclaves, Dutch mastery – whether military, economic or political – was an issue of the nineteenth century, often of the late nineteenth century.

In the Philippines, the other major region of Western penetration in the islands of South-East Asia before the nineteenth century, the Spanish certainly exercised greater mastery by the mid-seventeenth century than was true of the Dutch in Indonesia. Yet whether even there one can speak of 'military mastery' is open to debate. Spanish dominance was still far from complete at that time, much of what there was reflected the power of the cross and of local élites, as much as that of the sword, and in military affairs victory frequently depended upon the action of auxiliary Filipino soldiers.

Geoffrey Parker suggests that if the people of South-East Asia 'lost their independence to the Europeans because they seemed unable to *adopt* Western military technology, those of the Muslim world apparently succumbed because they could not successfully *adapt* it to their existing military system' (p. 136). Two objections arise here. The distinction is inappropriate for the peoples of Indonesia and Malaysia, who are not only South-East Asian, but have been predominantly Muslim since at least the sixteenth century. And certainly in the case of Java, the most significant archipelago state in which the Dutch intervened, European military technology was both adopted and employed effectively. Indeed the rapid transfer of European military innovations across otherwise quite impermeable, cultural boundaries was a notable feature of Javanese history in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is clearly this which explains much about the inability of the Dutch East India Company to attain mastery there. But this transfer of technology and ideas is a large subject in itself and best left for another time. The present article aims merely to suggest that military power was a matter, not of European mastery, but rather of balance between Indonesians and Europeans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Neither Captain Tack nor Surapati had any doubts that this was so.

FOR FURTHER READING:

Ann Kumar (editor and translator) *Surapati, Man and Legend: A study of three babad traditions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976). The episode and its larger context are discussed in the author's *War, Culture and Economy in Java, 1677-1726: Asian and European imperialism in the early Kartasura period*, to be published in the *Verhandelingen* of the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal, Land- en Volkenkunde in 1991. Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

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