

# Amsterdam: The VOC warehouse at the Mouth of the Chao Phraya River

Patrick Dumon<sup>1</sup>

ABSTRACT—This article is a compilation of information on the Dutch East India Company's godown at the mouth of the Chao Phraya River near the Gulf of Thailand. This article suggests an amendment to an article regarding the warehouse published in the Siam Society newsletter of June 1987, and attempts to approximate the location of the warehouse.

In 1608, the Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, VOC) installed a permanent resident at Ayutthaya. From English sources we know that the King of Siam assigned the Dutch a brick house within the city walls.<sup>2</sup> In 1613, a VOC trading office was officially opened by Commander Hendrik Brouwer (circa 1581-1643) with the appointment of the merchant Cornelis van Nijenroode.<sup>3</sup> Besides Ayutthaya and Pattani, factories were also established at Sangora<sup>4</sup> and Ligor.<sup>5</sup>

In 1633, Joost Schouten (circa 1600-1644) obtained from King Prasat Thong (reigned 1629-1656) a stretch of land on the left bank of the Bangkok River, south of Wat Phanan Choeng and the harbour, on an island formed by the main river and the Suan Phlu Canal.<sup>6</sup> Shortly after, in 1634, under the orders of Hendrik Brouwer, the

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<sup>1</sup> With thanks to Barend Jan Terwiel and Han ten Brummelhuis.

<sup>2</sup> Kerr and Edin, *A general history and collection of voyages and travels*, Vol 8, Section 14.

<sup>3</sup> Blankwaardt, *Notes upon the Relations between Holland and Siam*, 246.

<sup>4</sup> Now Songkhla (1607 until 1623).

<sup>5</sup> Now Nakhon Si Thammarat (circa 1640–1756, with temporary closures).

<sup>6</sup> Joost Schouten, who had been head of the factory in Ayutthaya for a year, went to Batavia in early 1634 to report on his duties. In the Dag Register from Batavia of 14 May 1634, we read that Governor General Hendrik Brouwer ordered Schouten to ask King Prasat Thong for permission to build a brick godown on the land offered by the king. Thus Schouten must have obtained, prior to his visit to Batavia, a stretch of land along the river for loading and discharging, as the initial Dutch godown in Ayutthaya was far from the river and very impractical for trading and shipping. Schouten reported the offer of land from the King of Siam to Brouwer, who responded by ordering the construction of the lodge. For this purpose, Schouten arrived in Siam on 13 June 1634 with craftsmen and materials. Permission to build the lodge was given after the raid on Pattani as logged in the Dag Register of 9 November 1634. François Valentyn's work *Oud en Nieuw Oost Indiën* gives also 1633-1634 as the years of the establishment of the lodge.

eighth Governor-General of the East Indies, the construction of a brick building for the new factory was started. Schouten reported that the Dutch lodge was completed in 1636. Warehouse Amsterdam was probably built around the same time, but more research of VOC documents will be needed to identify the timing.

### The reason for constructing Warehouse Amsterdam

Nicolas Gervaise (circa 1662-1729), a young French theological student of the *Société des Missions Etrangères* residing in Ayutthaya in the late 17th century, wrote that the VOC ships usually arrived at the Bar twice a year: in the month of May for trade with Japan and in the month of October for trade with Siam.<sup>7</sup> Simon de La Loubère (1642-1729), a French diplomat heading the second French Embassy to Siam in 1687, noted “that the Ships can hardly arrive at the Bar of Siam during the Six Months of the North-winds, and that they can hardly depart thence during the Six Months of the South-winds.”<sup>8</sup> The winds, currents and spring tides were key factors with which ships had to reckon when trading with Ayutthaya.

The “Bar of Siam” was a shallow extension of land below sea level stretching about eight nautical miles into the Gulf before it reached a depth of three fathoms (see Figures 1 and 2).<sup>9</sup> Today, the old bar has largely disappeared as was predicted by de La Loubère: “Before the mouth of the Menam, there is a Bank of Owse,<sup>10</sup> which, in the Sea-phrase, is call’d the Bar, and which prohibits entrance to great Ships. ‘Tis probable that it will increase itself by little and little, and will in time make a new Shore to the firm Land.” The Bar consisted mainly of soft clay and hard sand, broken by inlets at the locations where the rivers ran into the sea.

In front of the mouth of the Chao Phraya River was a flat sand bank formed by the sediment of the river, reducing the depth to less than one fathom<sup>11</sup> at low tide, but increasing to 2.5 fathoms at high tide and reaching three fathoms or more in the flood period.

Large ships had to anchor in the roads in front of the bar at a depth of four to six fathoms in accordance with their draught. The VOC anchorage is indicated on De Graaff’s map titled “The appearance of the Bay and the high land of Siam as seen from an anchorage at 5 fathoms of water”<sup>12</sup> about four Dutch miles from the

<sup>7</sup> Gervaise, *The Natural and Political History of the Kingdom of Siam*, 48.

<sup>8</sup> De La Loubère, *Du Royaume De Siam*, 54-5.

<sup>9</sup> One standardized fathom is 1.8288 metres. The Amsterdam fathom used by the VOC was 1.698 metres or 6 Amsterdam feet.

<sup>10</sup> “Bank of Owse” refers to shelves of sand at the estuary of the Great Ouse River at King’s Lynn, England.

<sup>11</sup> Joost Schouten gives 5 or 6 feet (1.5 to 1.8 metres) at low tide and 15 to 16 feet (4.5 to 4.8 metres) at high tide.

<sup>12</sup> Original title: “Het opdoen van de Bay en het hooge land van Siam, als men sig by het ancker op 5 vadem waters bevind.”

river entry. The roads provided good anchorage, said to be safe except in a south-southwest wind.<sup>13</sup> Ships which were able to cross the mud bank at high tide could enter the river up to Bangkok without problems. North of Bangkok the river became narrower and shallow; ships with a draught of 11-12 foot<sup>14</sup> were able to reach the City of Ayutthaya, but were sometimes blocked near the city until the yearly flood period due to the restricted depth of the river.

The Dutch constructed a warehouse near the mouth of the river for logistical purposes. It was more convenient and efficient for sea-going ships to remain at the bar, and transfer goods between the warehouse and the Dutch Lodge in Ayutthaya by barge, a trip which took two days each way.<sup>15</sup> These transfers could be accomplished during the periods when no sea-going VOC East Indiamen could arrive or depart owing to the seasonal restrictions. Another advantage was that goods brought down from Ayutthaya to the warehouse could undergo customs procedures at the royal customs house in advance. In addition, more room for storage could be made available at the Dutch lodge.

Fully-laden yachts and flutes could enter the Bang Pla Kot Canal and tie up at the pier of the warehouse; we read in the diary of Gijsbert Heecq (1619-1669), a ship's surgeon in the service of the VOC, that the flute *The King of Poland*,<sup>16</sup> with a displacement of 520 tons, moored at the pier of the warehouse from 19 August to 18 October 1655, while the East-Indiaman *The Whale*,<sup>17</sup> with a displacement of 1,000 tons, remained in the roads.

### The appearance and environs of the warehouse

The warehouse was constructed from heavy beams and planks, and roofed with tiles. It was raised on posts about one metre off the ground to protect the building and its contents from the yearly flooding in the monsoon period, to guard against moisture, and to avoid the ingress of pests and animals. As the Dutch were excellent shipbuilders and robust wood was readily available, the warehouse must have been a building of good quality.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Purchas (circa 1577–1626) in a side-note on Anthony Hippon's *Dag-register van Pieter Williamson Floris, na Patane en Siam* commented that the road of Siam was safe, except in a S.S.W. wind. He referred to a four to five hour-long storm on 26 October 1612 in which the English ship *The Globe* very narrowly escaped shipwreck when it drifted with two anchors from 6 to 4 fathoms depth, and could only be secured by dropping a third anchor. In the incident five men drowned.

<sup>14</sup> Approximately 4 metres; Nicolas Gervaise expresses it in displacement, being between 300 and 400 tons.

<sup>15</sup> Heecq recorded that a barge called *Barcq Houdt* belonging to the Dutch factory was used to load and unload the ships. The barge had a displacement of 40 last (80 tons) and was commanded by a Dutch barge-master who remained on board to guard the vessel when it was empty.

<sup>16</sup> De Coninck van Polen.

<sup>17</sup> De Walvisch.

The warehouse had a pier where ships with a displacement up to 500 tons could moor for convenience in transferring goods. Beams and other wood were stored next to the warehouse in the open, while animal skins and precious woods were kept in lofts. From Kaempfer's work we can deduce that there was separate accommodation in houses on stilts, with a floor of split bamboo.<sup>18</sup> The Religious Embassy from Sri Lanka, brought from Batavia by a Dutch ship in 1751, remained in this lodging for two days.<sup>19</sup>

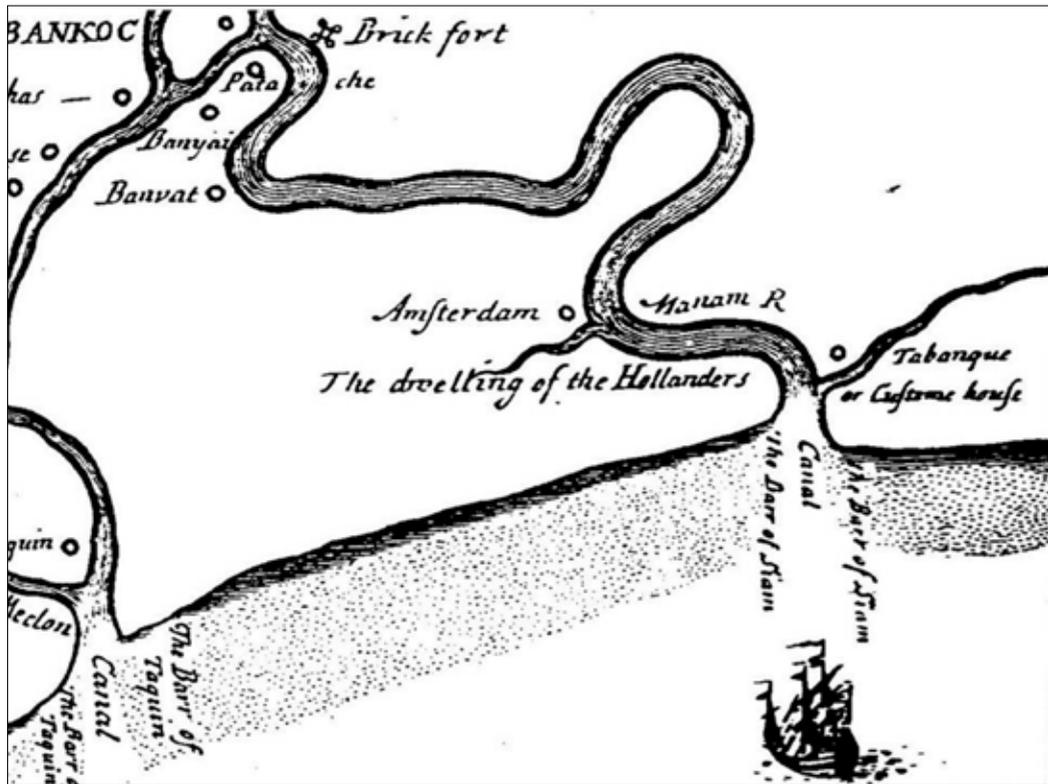


Figure 1. Detail of "A Mapp of the Course of the River Menam from Siam to the Sea" from Simon de La Loubère, published in 1691, showing the position of the warehouse.

There must also have been a burial place in the vicinity. Heecq reported that a boatswain, Gerret Kaidraij, was buried in 1655 after being killed in a Dutch-Portuguese skirmish at the Bar, and two other boatswains, Ziets Lammerts and Jan Janszen van Hasseldt, were buried about one month and two months later respectively.<sup>20</sup>

Nicolas Gervaise mentioned that the warehouse was in close proximity to a forest, and that some drunken sailors had been devoured by tigers after falling asleep.

The warehouse was next to an area for storage and ship building. According to

<sup>18</sup> Kaempfer, *The History of Japan*, 42.

<sup>19</sup> Pieris, *Religious Intercourse*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Terwiel, *A Traveler in Siam*, 32, 39, 69.

Heecq, King Ekathatsarot (reigned 1605-1610/11) asked the Dutch to build three of four yachts for him, and carpenters were especially sent from Batavia to Siam. Old ships were sent here to be repaired or given a completely new hull because the cost was cheaper and good timber was abundantly available. The yacht *Worcum*, built in the warehouse's shipyard in 1654, had a displacement of 360 tons, a crew of 100 men, and thirty-four guns.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 2. Detail of “Carte Du Cours Du Menan, Depuis Siam Jusqu'a la Mer” from Jacques-Nicolas Bellin, published circa 1750, showing the bar and the position of the warehouse.

### The warehouse on maps

Warehouse Amsterdam is indicated on various maps from the 17th and 18th centuries showing the course of the Chao Phraya River, including those of Simon de La Loubère (1691, see Figure 1), Isaac de Graaff (circa 1705, see Figure 4), François Valentyn (1724, see Figure 3), Engelbert Kaempfer (1727, see Figure 5), and Jacques-Nicolas Bellin (circa 1750, see Figure 2). All the old maps show that the warehouse was situated on the north bank of the Bang Pla Kot Canal, but French and Dutch maps differ on the position; French maps position the warehouse close to the mouth of the canal, while the Dutch maps position the warehouse deeper into the canal.

Valentyn's map, “The Great Siamese River Me-Nam or Mother of Waters depicted in her course with its tributaries”,<sup>22</sup> gives a hint of what the warehouse

<sup>21</sup> The *Worcum* was sunk during a storm six years later near Macao.

<sup>22</sup> Original title: “Groote Siamse Rievier Me-Nam Of Te Moeder Der Wateren In haren loop met de vallende Spruyten Verbeeld”.

looked like and mentions that it was situated near a temple with a “stump pyramid” (see Figure 3). Kaempfer shows the warehouse was opposite “Banbelkot” (Ban Pla Kot),<sup>23</sup> situated on the south bank of the canal (see Figure 5). Isaac De Graaff, a VOC cartographer, who drew a more navigational map titled “The River of Siam”,<sup>24</sup> indicated “Ban Becot” next to the VOC warehouse and the village (see Figure 4).



Figure 3. Detail of the map “Groote Siamse Rievier Me-Nam Of Te Moeder Der Wateren In haren loop met de vallende Spruyten Verbeeld” from François Valentyn, showing the warehouse

### Locating the site of the warehouse

In May 2013, I decided to drive down to Samut Prakan in search of the remains of Warehouse Amsterdam. I had just read Derrick Garnier’s book, *Ayutthaya, Venice of the East*, which refers to the location as follows (p. 87):

It was known locally as ‘Baang Amsterdam’ which apparently means ‘made of wood’, but on western maps it is marked simply as ‘Amsterdam’. At any rate it was later rebuilt in brick, and we know this because we can still see the remains of it on the west bank of the Chao Phraya, near Samut Prakarn, at the village of Bang Plakot. One can make out the remains of stout brick walls, half submerged; also a pit that may have been a well, and part of a ‘gate’.

<sup>23</sup> Ban Pla Kot can be translated as Village of the Catfish. The village is sometimes referred to as Bang Pla Kot, in which “Bang” means a village located near a waterway.

<sup>24</sup> Original title: “De Rivier van Siam”.

Garnier took this information from an article on the Dutch presence in Siam, published in the Siam Society Newsletter in 1987. The author, Elisabeth F.M. Bleyerveld-van't Hooft, based her account on the findings of a Dutch group, which visited the area of Bang Pla Kot in April 1987 and stumbled upon brickwork near the mouth of the canal.<sup>25</sup> Apparently, the group concluded that the brickwork must have been the remnants of Warehouse Amsterdam.<sup>26</sup>

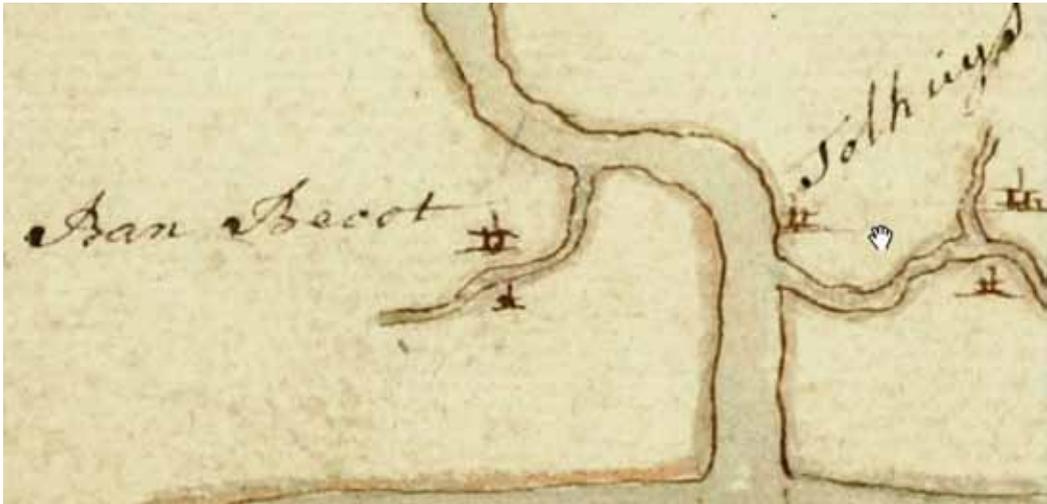


Figure 4. Detail of the map “De Rivier van Siam” from Isaac De Graaff, showing the position of the warehouse.



Figure 5. Detail of the “Mappa Meinam Fluvij Ad Orig. Eng. Kempfer delin, I.G.S.” from Engelbert Kaempfer published in 1727 showing the warehouse opposite “Banbelkot”.

After having contacted a number of local authorities, I was finally guided to the site which the Dutch group explored about twenty-five years ago. Local officials

<sup>25</sup> Bleyerveld-van 't Hooft was head of a volunteer team of surveyors from Shell in Bangkok, preparing an exposition for the Siam Society in 1987.

<sup>26</sup> Siam (Thailand) - De VOC site - <http://www.vocsite.nl/geschiedenis/handelsposten/siam.html>; data retrieved 20 February 2014.

referred to the area as a fortress. I was surprised to find walls a metre thick, and some structures still in quite good condition for a warehouse dating back to the mid-18th century; but it was undoubtedly the site which Garnier described (see Figure 6).

A local official related that guns and cannon balls had been found at this location. I recalled that the Dutch had installed two iron guns in front of the Dutch lodge at Ayutthaya, but King Prasat Thong had ordered them removed. In October 1655, Heecq logged in his dairy that the guns were taken from the warehouse and loaded on the ship *The Whale*. I concluded therefore that it was rather unlikely that there would still be guns on the site of the warehouse.



Figure 6. Remains of the Khongkraphan Fortress (photo: Patrick Dumon, 2013).

On the east bank of the Bang Pla Kot Canal, opposite the brickwork, is Wat Khae in Pak Bang Pla Kot sub-district. The abbot reported that the monastery was constructed with the surplus of bricks retrieved after the fortress opposite had been completed. He also claimed that the fortress, called *Pom Khongkraphan* (the invulnerable fortress), was built in 1834 during the reign of King Rama III as part of a series of defensive works protecting the approach to the capital, including the Narai Kangkon Fortress on the west bank of the Chao Phraya River.<sup>27</sup>

The remains at the mouth of the Bang Pla Kot Canal seen by the Dutch team in 1987 were a fortress, not Warehouse Amsterdam.

### **Tentative location of Warehouse Amsterdam**

From Valentyn's map of the Chao Phraya River, we learn that there was a stupa<sup>28</sup> nearby, to the south of the warehouse. The abbot of Wat Khae stated that an

<sup>27</sup> A claim confirmed by a document on the Khongkraphan Fortress from the Fine Arts Department.

<sup>28</sup> Dutch: "Een Stompe Piramide", presumably a *prang*, a corncob-like stupa.

Ayutthaya era temple called Wat Yai Si had once stood on the west bank of the canal just north of the Suksawat Road and north of the bridge. There is now a factory on the site.

The VOC cartographer De Graaff used the “Duijtsche Myl” as the reference scale for his maps. In the 17th century, the Dutch mile corresponded to 20,000 Amsterdam feet or 5,662 metres.<sup>29</sup> On his map “The River of Siam”, the distance from the mouth of the canal up to the warehouse is about a quarter of a Dutch mile.

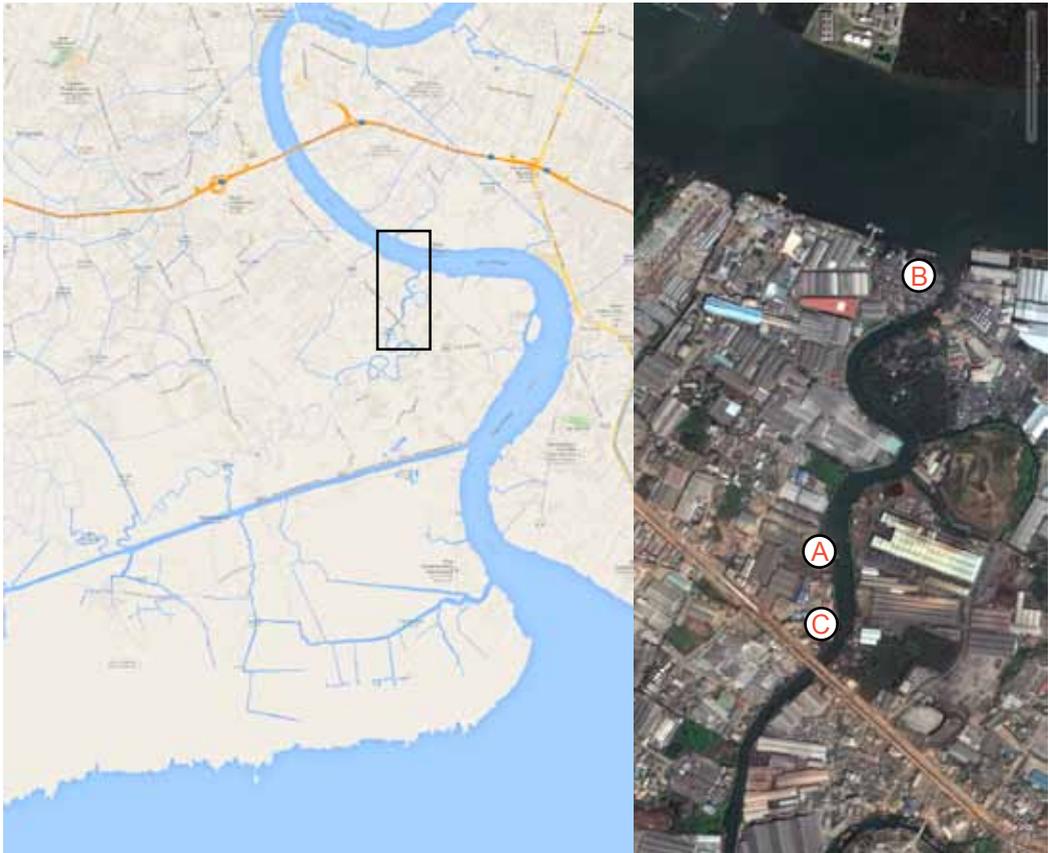


Figure 7. A = Probable site of Warehouse Amsterdam; B = Khongkraphan Fortress; C = site of Wat Yai Si. (Images from Google Maps and Google Earth)

Today, the geographical features of the area, and especially the course of the canal, have changed since the 17th century, making it difficult to pinpoint an exact location. Most likely, Warehouse Amsterdam was just north of the former site of Wat Yai Si, now a factory, along Suksawat Road on the west bank of Bang Pla Kot Canal, north of the present bridge over the canal and about 1.4 kilometres from the mouth.

<sup>29</sup> The “Amsterdam foot”, a VOC standard measurement from 1650, was 0.2831 metre.

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