

Piracy and the English in Japan, 1613–23

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The English East India Company was founded in 1600, and after a decade of spice-buying voyages mostly to Southeast Asia, it decided to expand and seek trade in other ports, notably in India and Japan. This began around 1610, but it was only in 1613 that a ship, the *Clove*, finally arrived in Japan.

Since their first sailings, the English found that wherever they came, Portuguese had arrived first, and that meant there was a strong Jesuit presence. The Jesuits had been expelled from England, and with the Gun Powder Plot of 1605 (the failed assassination attempt of King James in Parliament) being blamed on them, the English and the Jesuits had profound mutual hatred. This animosity went beyond that felt by the Roman Catholic missions towards “Northern Heretics,” which also included the Dutch. Thus on arrival, the English invariably found that local polities had been poisoned against them, the Jesuits preferring to explain English activities as “piracy.” Since England had fought a decades-long war with Spain and the Portuguese crown had fallen into the hands of the King of Spain, even though war had ended in 1605 a legacy of Iberian sentiment that the English merely marauded the seas was strong.

The English had to counter this evil reputation in many places, but in Japan the matter was especially acute: the Jesuit presence was very strong but the market was so lucrative that new arrivals of any sort were likely to face opposition from existing parties. The English responses were complex, and included rejecting the label of piracy and assigning it to the Dutch. The English proclaimed themselves as good as the Portuguese, having their own king and a stable state; it was the Dutch, they said, who lacked the proper trappings of nationhood. After all, they only had an elected Count (the stadtholder) and much of their country was in the grip of a foreign power (the Spanish Netherlands).

This paper will consider English strategies to enhance their standing by belittling the Dutch. Both had ample opportunity to encounter each other, since their trading stations were close on the Kyushu island of Hirado.

On arrival, the commander of the *Clove* John Saris noted, “[O]ur English nation hath beene longe knowne by reporte amonge them, but much scandalized by the Portugall Iesuites.” While this was expected, he was even more angered to find individual Dutchmen (not the Dutch East India Company itself) billing themselves as “English” to engage in piracy without sullyng their own name. Hirado mothers had taken to frightening their children with tales of capture by the English.¹

Saris left Japan after only a few months, and thereafter it was the merchant Richard Cocks

¹ All statements are in John Saris, *The First Voyage of the English to Japan*, ed. Takanobu Otsuka (Tokyo: Tōyō Bunko, 1941), 157.

who ran English affairs. Cocks' writings are peppered with anecdotes of how he worked to make the English seem superior to the Dutch in the eyes of the Japanese authorities. The issue of the Portuguese remained pressing, but there were no Jesuits in Hirado, and, indeed, around 1614 they were technically expelled from Japan (though many had remained illegally). But Cocks' first project was one of differentiation. He noted that many Japanese thought the English and Dutch were the same, but before long, thanks to his arguments, all were "fully resolved in the contrary."² Cocks' first extant letters home report he had not only differentiated the English from the Dutch, but placed them in a hierarchy so that "the Emperor of Japan doth of late take some distaste of the Dutch."³

For the English their first choice was to denigrate the Dutch. This intensely began in the 1613–1614 winter, once Saris had left. Jacques Speckx, chief of the Dutch factory, said that in Asia, "[H]e took the Graue Moris [the stadtholder, *graf* Maurits] and the Estates of Holland to be as much as the King of England, yf not more."⁴ But Cocks countered by telling Matsura Takanobu, daimyō of Hirado, that the Dutch were "natural vassals of the King of Spain" and "in open rebellion cast hym offe." He should beware, for this "might breed some alteration in the harts of his owne vasseles to doe as the Hollanders had done," with wider ramifications, to "make others as themselves are, to the overthrowe of the state of Japan."⁵

Cocks pursued a dual line. He argued that the United Provinces (aka Holland) were rightfully part of Catholic Spain, so the Dutch were rebels. Furthermore, he also asserted, contradictorily, that it was England who secured such independence as they had, and thus, in a sense, governed them. He informed the Hirado court "that all might heare" how "the King of England has vassales much greater than the prince (or county [count]) w'ch governs the Hollanders, and that their state or government was under the command of the King of England, he having garrisons of English soldiers in their cheefest fortes, or places of strength they had."⁶

Again, Cocks told another Matsura official that "it was well knowne there was no comparison to be made betwixt their small state, governd by a county, w'th the mightie & powrefull governm't of the King of England, whoe did in som sort governe them, keeping garrisons in their cheefest places."⁷

These forts were the Cautionary Towns, under English control as surety for Queen Elizabeth's enormous loans to the Dutch cause.⁸ But it was stretching a point to imply the United Provinces were under English rule in any comprehensive way. Still, on hearing a Dutchman claim "their kinge of Holland to be the greatest kinge in Christendome, and that

² Richard Cocks, *Diary Kept by the Head of the English Factory in Japan: Diary of Richard Cocks, 1613–1622*, ed. The Historiographical Institute, the University of Tokyo, 3 vols (Tokyo: The University of Tokyo, 1978–1980), 2: 208 & 340.

³ Anthony Farrington, *The English Factory in Japan, 1613–1623*, vol. 1 (London: British Library, 1991), 247–48.

⁴ Cocks, *Diary*, 1: 212.

⁵ Cocks, *Diary*, 2: 308.

⁶ Cocks, *Diary*, 1: 204

⁷ Cocks, *Diary*, 2: 106.

⁸ There were four such towns, Briel, Flushing, Ramekins, and Walcheren. See, G. R. Elton, *England Under the Tudors*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 1991), 357.

held all the others under,” Cocks weighed in, “I was not behindhand to tell him hee need not lye so loude, for that they had no kinge at all in Holland, but wer governed by a count, or rather, they governed him,” (i.e. the *stadtholder* was elected and not a king). And Cocks continued, forgetting Spain, “if they had any kinge of which they might boast, it was the Kinge mates of England, who hitherto have been their protector, otherwise they had never bragged of their states.”⁹ Speckx was indeed aware that the absence of sovereign might degrade his country in Japanese eyes.¹⁰

It was not only the Matura who were harangued about this. In spring 1616, Shimazu Iehisa, the daimyo of Satsuma (the most powerful state in Kyushu), heard Cocks expound on the superiority of England, and “took notis of my speeches.” At a reception for Iehisa, Speckx pushed forward, but Cocks demanded priority. Some days later, officials were sent to investigate the matter of who should properly take precedence, and seemingly accepted the superiority of the English king to the Dutch stadholder, agreeing that England came first. “They said I had reason,” wrote Cocks, “& that they knew it not till now.”¹¹

Iehisa was on his way to Edo, where he would hold audiences with Ieyasu and Hidetada, but he promised to stop by the English house on return, which he did, in December, saying that he “did much esteem our English nation,” though not the Dutch, and would allow the English trade in Satsuma “but would not suffer the lyke to the Hollanders.”¹² This did not come to pass, but Iehisa remained favorably disposed. Later he indeed sent word, via a retainer, that he remained, “much affectioned” to the English nation.

By dint of Cock’s repeated claims, the Japanese now “esteemed much more of our nation than of the Hollanders, esteeming them as theevs and we as true men,” the daimyo of Hirado “esteeming our nation far before the Hollanders, as he tould us, &c,” and the shogun himself, regarded the English “above all other Christian nations whatsoever.”¹³

A final dénouement occurred in summer 1616 while Cocks was in Edo. He drastically overplayed his hand. Cock’s many comments about European rivalries had caused alarm, and with Tokugawa Ieyasu dead and his son Hidetada, newly free to pursue his own desires, the latter not only re-banished the missionaries but decided to confine the English and Dutch. Cocks found himself blocked. He had carried to Edo a letter from King James, but it was refused, ostensibly on the grounds it was addressed to Ieyasu (though in fact it was not). Cocks was given no audience.¹⁴ All sub-factories were ordered closed, and trade was to be conducted thereafter only from Hirado. Cocks lamented they “might as wel banish vs right out of Japon as bynd vs to such a order.”¹⁵ He was informed this was temporary, until Japan was finally cleared

⁹ Cocks, *Diary*, 3: 302–303.

¹⁰ Quoted in Derek Massarella, *A World Elsewhere: Europe’s Encounter with Japan in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1990), 393, n. 85.

¹¹ Cocks, *Diary*, 1: 211, 216.

¹² Cocks, *Diary*, 1: 369.

¹³ Cocks, *Diary*, 2: 200, 286; Cocks, letter, reproduced in Farrington, *English Factory*, 348.

¹⁴ Cocks, *Diary*, 2: 177–178.

¹⁵ Cocks, *Diary*, 1: 318.

of priests, after which trade would be loosened.¹⁶ But no loosening came. Hidetada made large-scale alterations to Ieyasu's dispensation, and "every one complayneth," said Cocks, "that matters aer worse than in the ould mans daies, and that this man doth nothing but change offecers and displace tonos."¹⁷

After their re-banishment, the Jesuits were not supine. Those few still living in hiding leaked out damaging facts. They tried to turn the tables over the issue of the United Provinces, pointing out the King of Spain was only troubled there because of English support, and "thenglish were they w'ch gave hem [the Dutch] meanes to stand against their naturall prince."¹⁸ In a last-ditch attempt, the priests circulated pure inventions, such as the imminent reversion of England to Catholicism, with someone reporting "a blundy [bloody] crosse . . . seene in the ayre in England, against which an English preacher, speaking in the pulpit, was stricken dumn" and that King James had written to Rome asking for "cardinalls and learned men to come to England" as he "meant all England should turne Roman Catholiques."¹⁹

The English persevered in trade for some more years, then decided to withdraw to Bantam, and reconsider their position. They withdrew from Ayuthya (Siam) at the same time.

In January 1622 Cocks was received by Hidetada in Miyako, where he was with his son, Iemitsu, formalizing his retirement and the handing on of the title of shogun. Cocks gave presents, and requested permission to withdraw "temporarily" from Japan. He still found Hidetada "not soe easy to be spoken with as his father was," but Hidetada did now meet him and accept the parting gifts. Hidetada's last words to the English were conveyed to them by someone named Kakuzaemon, chief retainer of Doi Toshikatsu, whom Cocks now called "our espetiall frend." Cocks reported, "themperor did esteeme of our nation more than ever, but meanes we had soe well defended our selves and our plito [polity] against the padres."²⁰

¹⁶ Cocks, *Diary*, 1: 326.

¹⁷ Cocks, *Diary*, 1: 319.

¹⁸ Cocks, *Diary*, 2: 308.

¹⁹ Cocks, *Diary*, 3: 319.

²⁰ Cocks, *Diary*, 3: 27, 233.