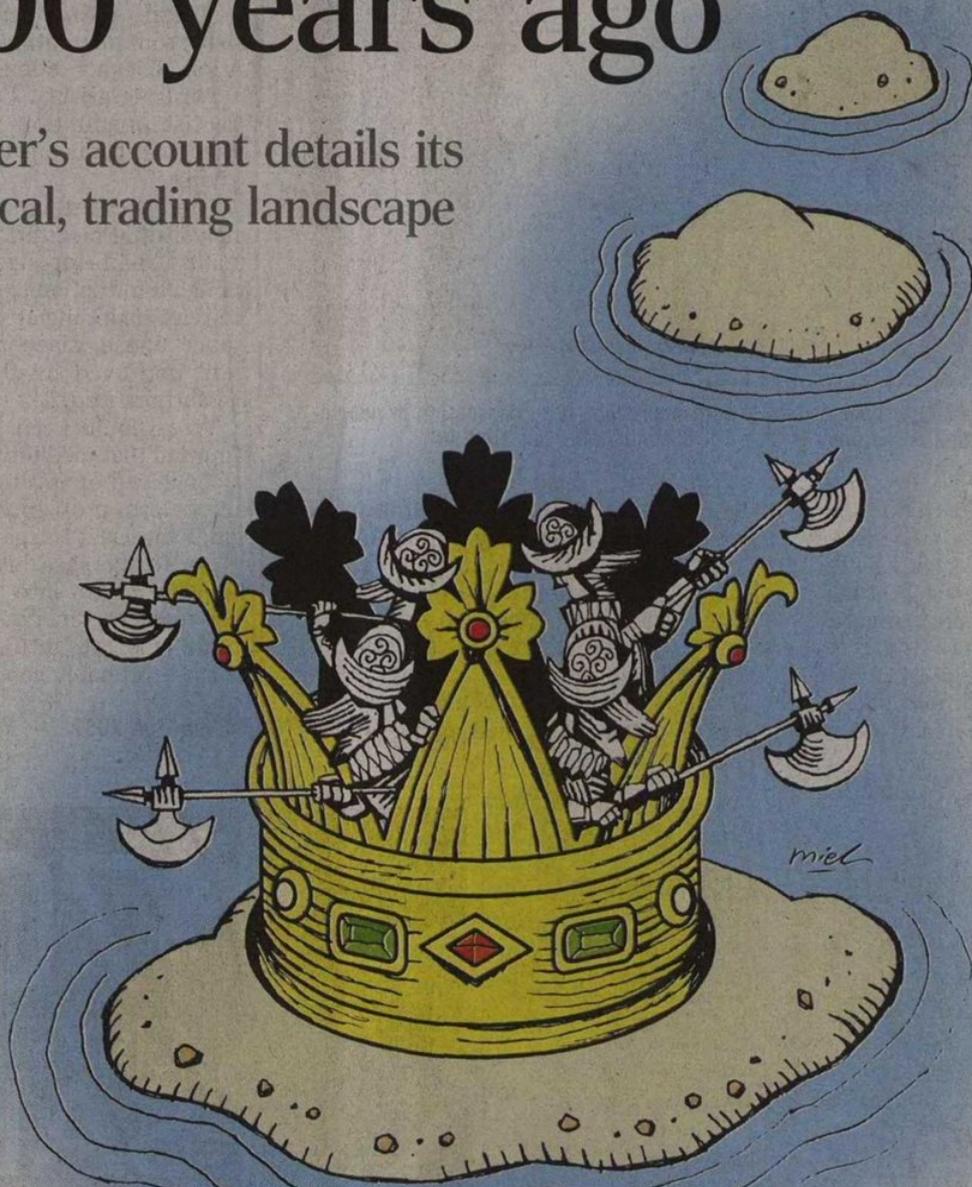


# Rare look into S-E Asia from 400 years ago

Trader's account details its  
political, trading landscape



# The Memoirs And Memorials Of Jacques De Coutre: Security, Trade And Society In 16th- And 17th-century Southeast Asia

Edited by Peter Borschberg  
Translated by Roopanjali Roy  
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TWO major powers jostle for political and economic leverage in the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea, with the occasional armed skirmish in these waters.

They find allies in the region, and try to set up bases to entrench their presence, angering a good number of locals in the process.

If this sounds like today's news, it was also true four centuries ago, as laid out in a young Flemish trader's gripping rendition.

Written in Spanish, in a style that could pass for a blog today, these accounts are now available in English under the title *The Memoirs And Memorials Of Jacques De Coutre: Security, Trade And Society In 16th- And 17th-century Southeast Asia*.

The 453-page volume is by a historian of the region in those heady days of European expansion, when explorers from Spain and Portugal – then two kingdoms under the same king – were battling the upstart Dutch, irking sultans across the Malay Peninsula and the King of Siam in the process.

The book is a rare first-hand account of the political and trading landscape of present-day Southeast Asia between 1593 and 1603.

Dr Peter Borschberg, who has taught at the National University of Singapore for almost 20 years and written about the history of international law as well as trade in Southeast Asia, supplies an introduction and detailed notes throughout the book, and includes 62 maps and drawings of the period.

Born in Bruges in what is today Belgium, Jacques de Coutre and his brother left for Lisbon and then reached Portuguese Goa in India in 1592, where they appear to have

parted ways. Barely 20 years old, he ventured to Portuguese Melaka the following year. It would be his home base for the next decade.

From there, he ventured past what is now Singapore on several occasions, visited Pahang, Johor, Pattani and Ayutthaya, was held captive by the King of Siam for eight months, and also made his way to Cambodia and Cochinchina (in today's Vietnam), as well as today's Brunei and Manila.

The first part of this book contains his memoirs and detailed observations of ports he visited, including Batavia (today's Jakarta).

On what is today Pekan, in Pahang state, de Coutre notes: "The city was entirely surrounded by wooden walls, with a good quantity of bronze artillery, which the natives themselves cast... Even though it was small, it was very fertile and verdant, and it even has gold mines."

But it is de Coutre's descriptions of Singapore in that period that are the most detailed and strengthen the case that it was already a hub for shipping more than 200 years before the British arrived.

It was, he noted, no sleepy village but a trading outpost where ships crossing farther east berthed for food, supplies and favourable winds. And its principal settlement was the Shabandaria – named after the shahbandar, or harbour master – roughly where today's Beach Road runs.

"The passage is very narrow, and there is a great deal of maritime traffic with many ships from different kingdoms," he writes of the waterway between Keppel and today's Sentosa.

The orang laut, he notes, live in boats with their "dogs, cats, even hens with their chicks", help guide passing ships, and come on board with fresh fish and water and local fruits: durians, mangosteens, ramb-

utans and duku.

But the sailors are cautious, given the occasional attack. De Coutre himself was once caught out, in 1595, when their junk was berthed while sailing from Melaka to Siam. He and three companions rowed out to Sentosa for fresh water but had to use guns to repel a group of attackers.

While his memoirs are fast-paced and full of colour, the second part of the book – shorter memoirs written to the Spanish crown – is effectively military advice.

It is here that de Coutre proposed the building of several forts on Singapore to safeguard Spanish and Portuguese interests in the region.

"Your Majesty should become the lord of this port, which is one of the best that serves the Indies," he wrote. "Your Majesty could build a city there and become the lord of this kingdom."

One fortress, he said, should be on the north-western tip of today's Sentosa – where the British later built Fort Siloso – to take advantage of its fresh water and ample supply of stone, wood and coral that could be pounded up to be used as mortar.

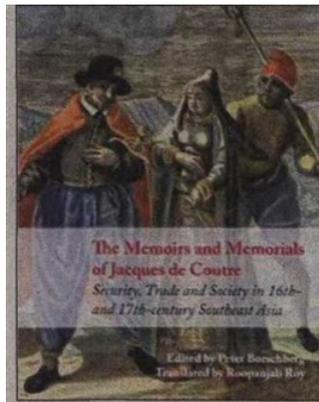
A second fort, he advised, should be roughly where Changi Point is today, while a smaller third fort could be built near Pulau Tekong. These would help monitor the Strait of Singapore and arrest the advances the Dutch were making in the East. And if the King were to send 40 galleons, he added, these would more likely "put an end to, destroy and expel the Dutch who are in the East Indies".

Alas, these were never followed up on – whether through neglect or more pressing priorities, we do not know.

But one wonders, what if those forts had been built?

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The book is available at major bookstores at \$45.



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