

Dutch forts in Sri Lanka

In 1636 the King of Kandy invited the Dutch East India Company (VOC) to help drive out the Portuguese from Sri Lanka, then called Ceylon. After the VOC had assisted in the final expulsion of the Portuguese in 1658, it established a colonial administration in the coastal areas it had occupied. As a result, the inland kingdom of Kandy remained economically excluded from the outside world and King Raja Sinha II was in fact a prisoner in his own country.

The all-powerful VOC controlled both the profitable export, mainly comprising cinnamon, elephants and areca nuts, and the import of textiles and other products from India. Kandy did not profit at all from the international trade, which also strongly applied to the coastal population. The VOC was able to maintain its position thanks to the strong chain of forts along the coast.



Map of Ceylon indicating (in red) the frontier between the VOC held territory and the interior Kingdom of Kandy, 1789

Jean du Perron, surveyor. National Archives, The Hague, 4.VEL, inv.nr. 927



Aerial view of Galle, c. 1980

From left to right one sees the three main bastions of Galle Fort: Sun, Moon and (only partly visible) Star. The Main Gate that pierces the ramparts between the Sun and Moon Bastions was built by the British in 1873 to facilitate the flow of traffic. In the Dutch Period the only entrance was the Old Gate, which runs through the ground floor of the great warehouse, constructed in 1669 (the building with the red roof at the left of the photo).

Photographer not known. Collection L.J. Wagenaar

Colophon

The banner exhibition 'Dutch forts in Sri Lanka' has been developed in cooperation with the Departement of Archaeology of Sri Lanka, the Galle Heritage Foundation and the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Colombo, with the support of the Netherlands–Sri Lanka Foundation, The Hague, and the Foundation Documentation Monuments VOC, Amsterdam.

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For images of the world of VOC see:
www.atlasofmutualheritage.nl



Ally against the Portuguese...



The conquest of Galle, 8-13 March 1640

The first landing on 9 March resulted in a dramatic failure and caused many casualties. However, after three days of heavy bombardments a new attempt on 13 March was succesful and Galle was taken. Though the Dutch East India Company then only possessed a small enclave within Portuguese held territory, that was the very first step to master the cinnamon production in the interior – and their whole enterprise was all about that.

Artist not known, c. 1650-1660. National Maritime Museum, Amsterdam, inv.nr. 2009.2158

When the Dutch Admiral Joris van Spilbergen visited the inland Kingdom of Kandy in 1602, the coastal areas were securely held by the Portuguese. Initially King Raja Sinha of Sitawaka had fiercely resisted and had managed to reverse part of the Portuguese conquest. However, after his death in 1593 Portugal became lord and master of the southwest coast. The principality of Jaffna had lost its independence shortly before. King Vimala Dharma Suriya of Kandy was completely alone. His successor Raja Sinha II concluded an alliance with the VOC in 1638, confident that the conquered areas would be handed over to him. The VOC refused so that they could keep the profitable cinnamon crop. After the conquest of respectively Batticaloa (1638) and Trincomalee (1639), successes followed in the southwest: Galle (1640), Negombo (1644), and after a truce with Portugal, Colombo (1656) and Jaffna (1658).



Gerard Pietersz. Hulft (1621-10 April 1656) c. 1655

Gerard Hulft has been depicted with a contemporary map of Colombo. During the siege of Colombo the general was hit by a Portuguese bullet and died a month before the conquest of 12 May 1656. That day was celebrated annually by the Dutch. General Hulft is still remembered by the name of Hulftsdorp (Colombo 12).

Michiel van Musscher, 1677. Amsterdam Museum, inv.nr. SA 41483

...1638 - 1658



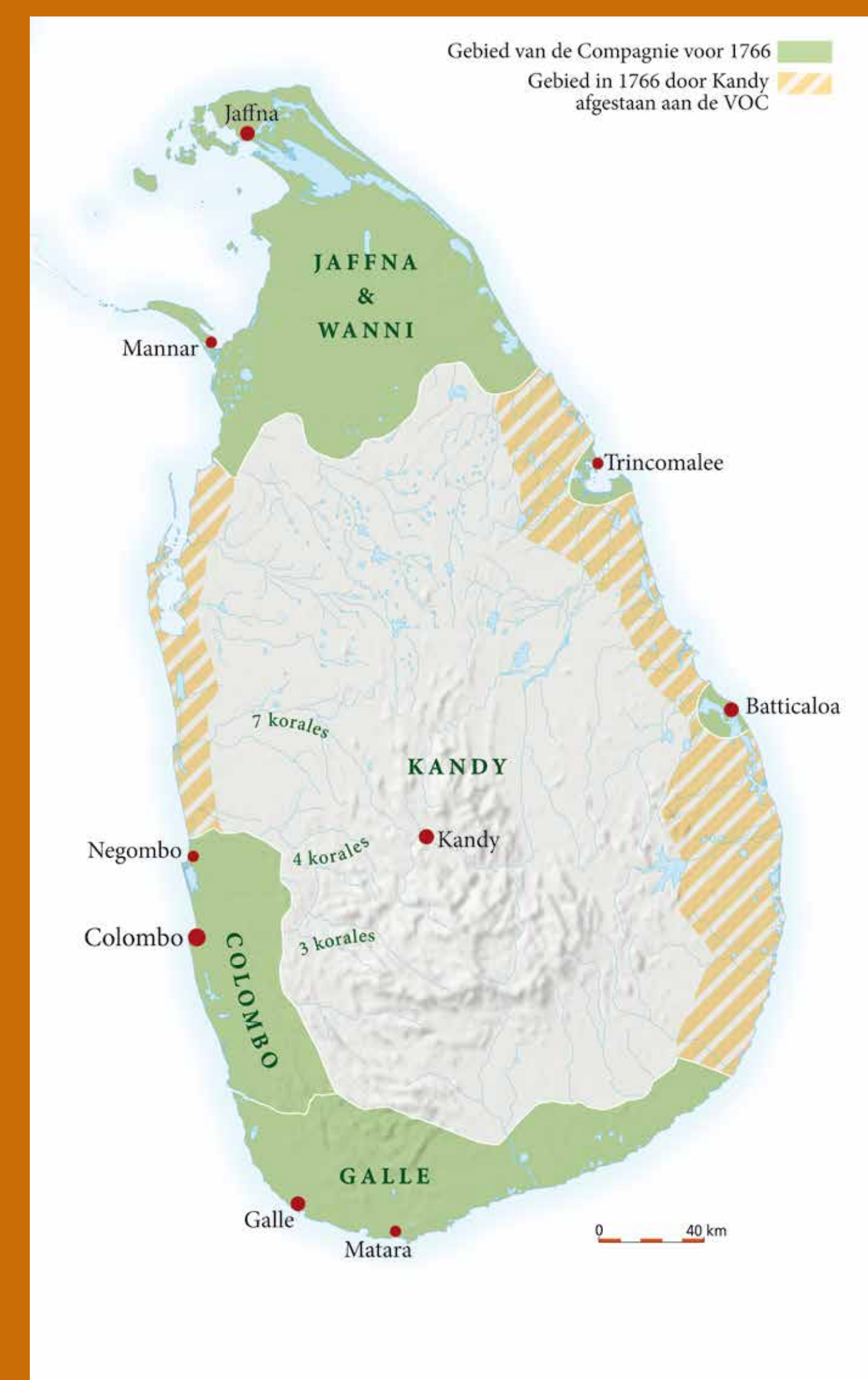
The taking of the Island of Mannar under command of general Rijcklof van Goens the Elder (1619-1682), 23 February 1658

Print in Philippus Baldaeus, Naauwkeurige beschryvinge van het machtige eyland Ceylon, 1672 ('A true and exact description of the great island of Ceylon'), p. 148. Artist not known, c. 1672. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. nr. 307-A-13 [library]



The capture of Punto Gale by Willem Jacobsz. Coster, 13 March 1640

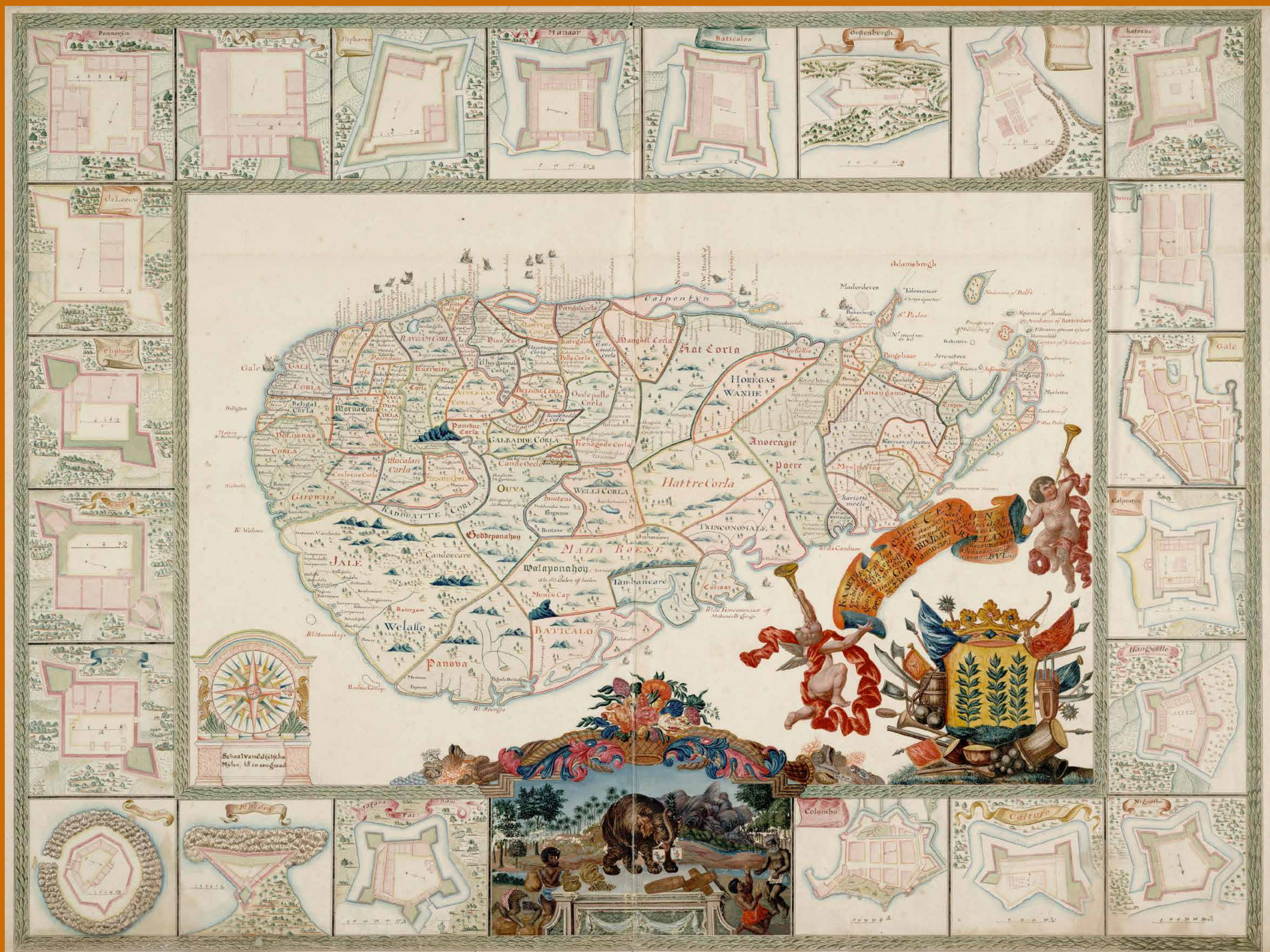
Print in Philippus Baldaeus, Naauwkeurige beschryvinge van het machtige eyland Ceylon, 1672 ('A true and exact description of the great island of Ceylon'), p. 60. Artist not known, c. 1672. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. nr. 307-A-13 [library]



The coastal territory of Sri Lanka occupied by the VOC in Ceylon before and after the Dutch-Kandyan Treaty of 1766

Armand Haye, Amsterdam

An occupied coastal area...

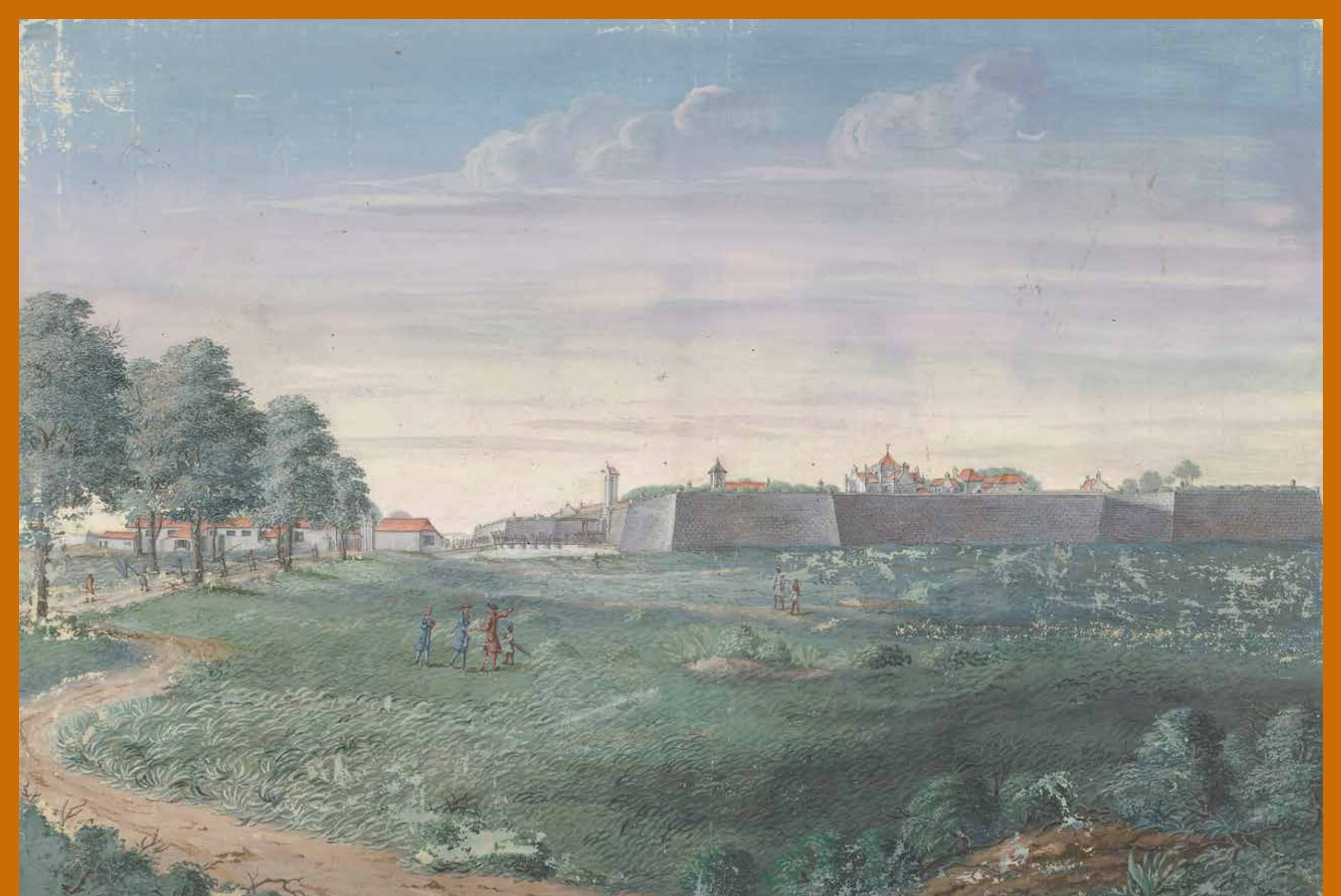
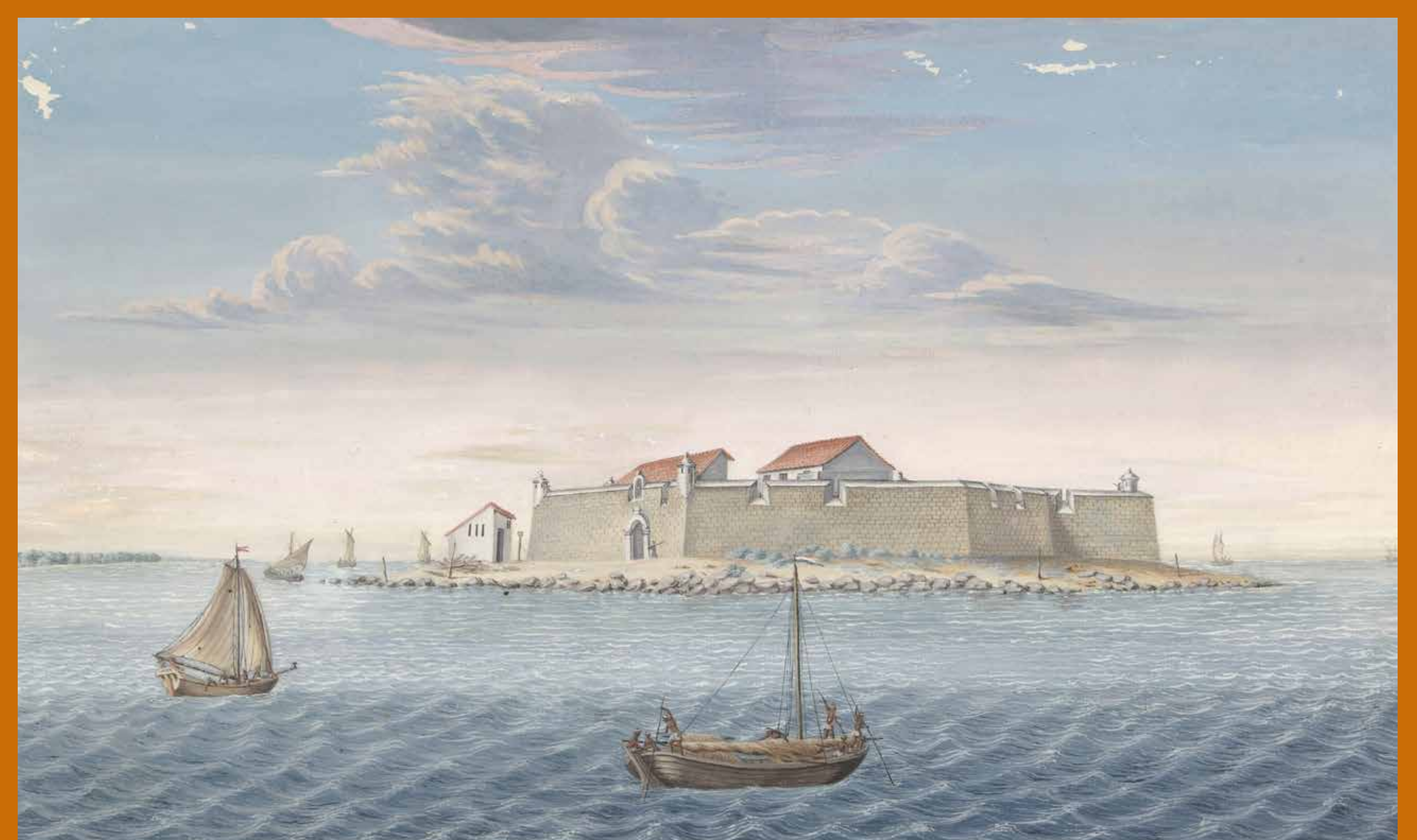


Map of Ceylon decorated with floor plans of twenty-two forts, 1751

This map was presented to the Governor of Dutch Ceylon, Gerard Joan Vreeland on the day he took office, 24 September 1751.

Baltus Jacobsz. van Lier, 1751. National Archives, The Hague, inv.nr. 4.MIKO W42

The map of Ceylon, with the plans of 22 forts on Ceylon, was presented on September 24, 1751 to Gerard Joan Vreeland, governor of Ceylon by his close associates. This remarkable gift immediately makes clear how the VOC thought it could sustain its colonial grip, namely by strong defensive power. The forts along the coast mainly served to keep rival Europeans at bay, and in the event of resistance in the interior, they proved to be a good operating base for dispatching patrols and when necessary call the local population to order. The VOC naturally also hoped that the robust forts would deter the King of Kandy from undertaking military campaigns. In 1761 that proved not to be the case when the King supported local resistance in VOC territory – the war lasted until 1766.



[above]
View of Fort Hammenhiel, c. 1710
Cornelis Steiger, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv.nr. RP-T-1902-A-4666

[below]
View of the Castle of Jaffna, c. 1710
Cornelis Steiger, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv.nr. RP-T-1902-A-4670

...with many forts



View of Jaffna Fort, 2011

Billboard showing the Dutch and Sri Lankan co-operation in financing the ‘Jaffna Ancient Dutch Fort Conservation Project’. The project was executed by the Sri Lankan Ministry of National Heritage and implemented by the Department of Archaeology. The estimated costs for the period 2009-2012 were LKR 104,5 million.

Photo Johannes Odé



[above left]
View of Galle, c. 1710

On the left one sees the former Fortalesa d’Gale, originally built by the Portuguese. The Dutch established there an impressive smithy, hence the name ‘Black Fort’–Zwarte Fort in Dutch. The bastion also housed the armory, a small prison and barracks for the Company slaves and prisoners convicted to do forced labour.

Cornelis Steiger, ca. 1710. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, inv.nr. RP-T-1902-A-4669

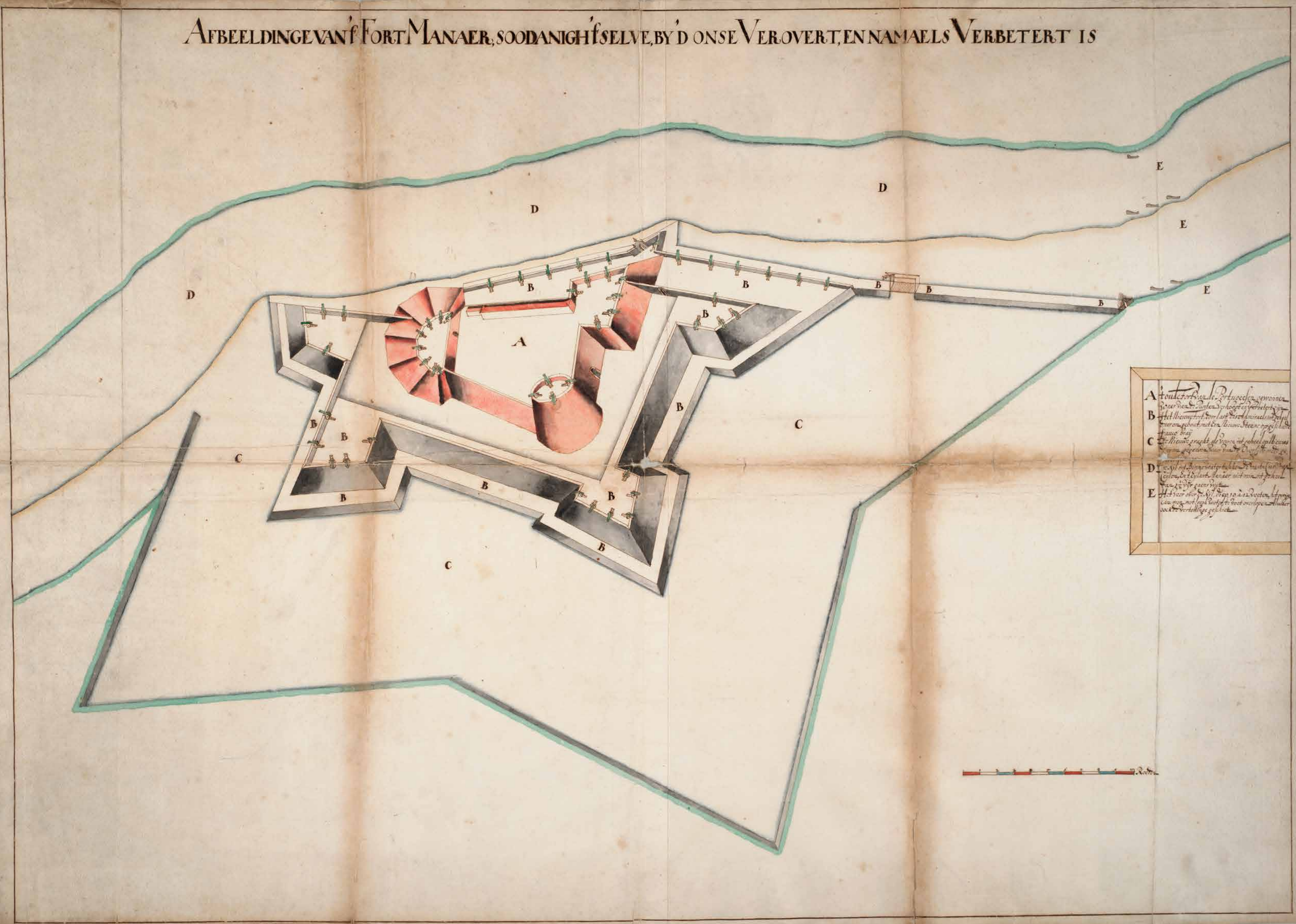
[above right]
View of Mannar fort, c. 1710

Cornelis Steiger, ca. 1710. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv.nr. RP-T-1902-A-4667

[below]
View of Fort Kalutara, c. 1710

Cornelis Steiger, ca. 1710. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv.nr. RP-T-1902-A-4668

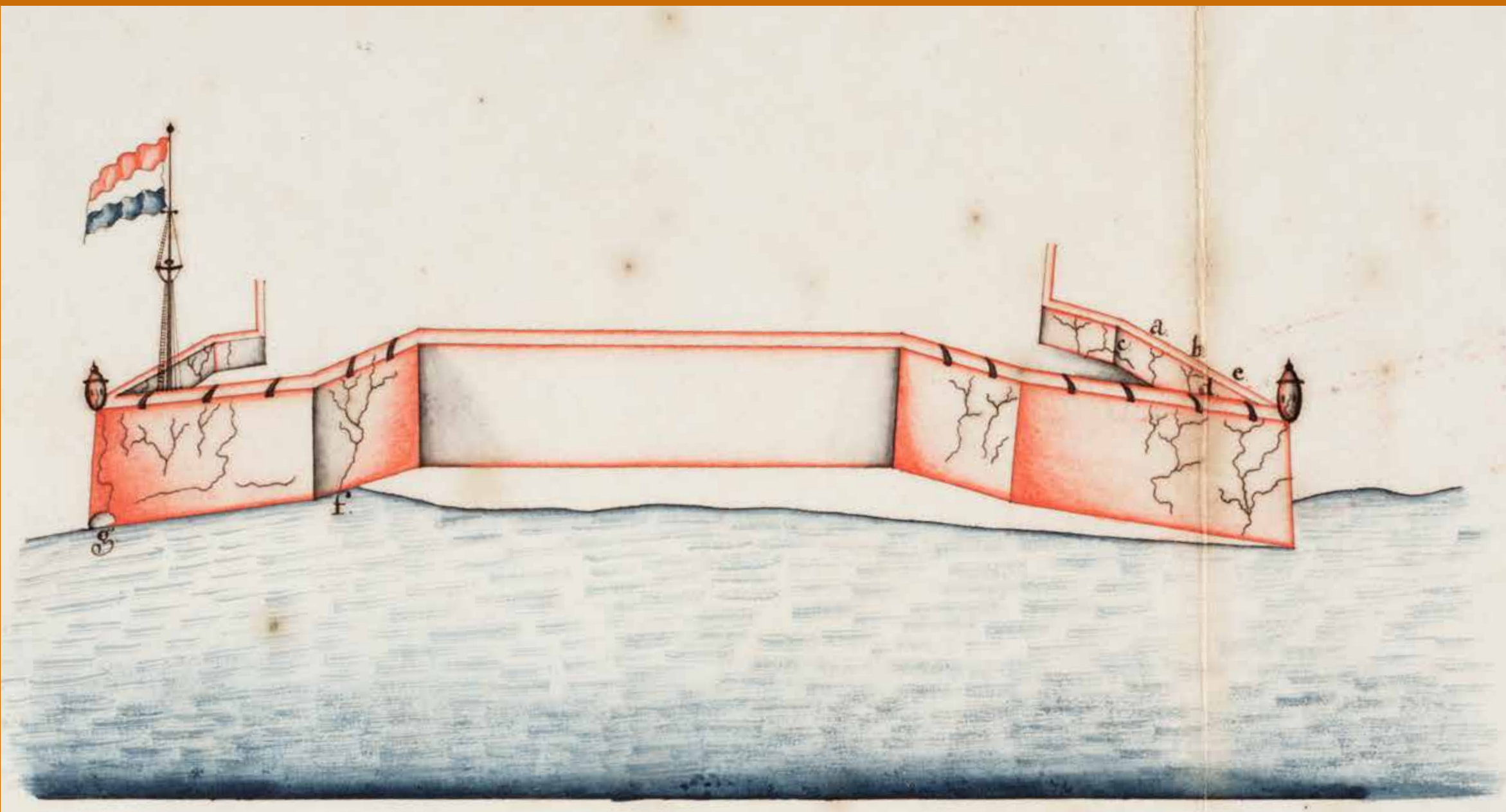
Construction and...



Plan of Fort Mannar, 'as it has been improved after our conquest', second half 17th century

Maker not known. National Archives, The Hague, 4.VEL, inv.nr. 991

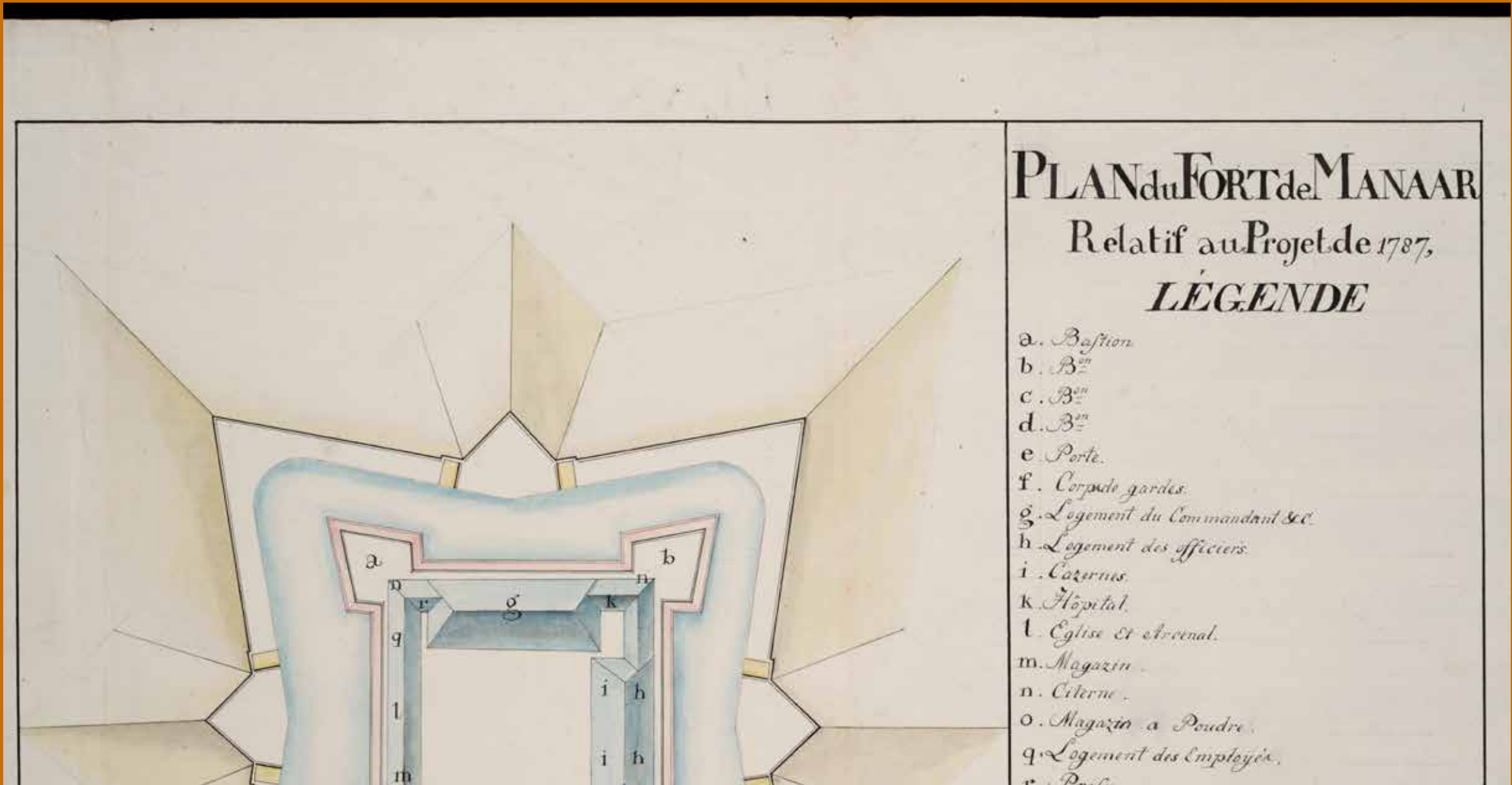
Until 1602 the Portuguese were not afraid of competition from other Europeans. Their fortifications were therefore quite simple, with the exception of Colombo. After the expulsion of the Portuguese in 1658, the VOC acquired their forts, but these had to be modified to meet the demands of modern warfare and the VOC's troop strength. A few years later the successive governors father and son Rijcklof van Goens tried to capture the cinnamon-producing areas that Kandy had retaken from the Portuguese. But even after an unofficial truce in c. 1680, the VOC decided to keep some forts in the interior of its occupied territory. Incidentally, the pictorial sources do not show that the work was done by slaves brought in from India or Indonesia, or by forced labour by the local population.



Side view of Fort Batticaloa, 1721

In 1720 Governor Isaac Augustin Rumph found during his inspection tour that the bastions Haarlem and Amsterdam had serious cracks that needed instant repair.

Livinius Stevensz and Tatik Olivierse Helt, surveyors. National Archives, The Hague, 4.VELH, inv.nr. 344.6

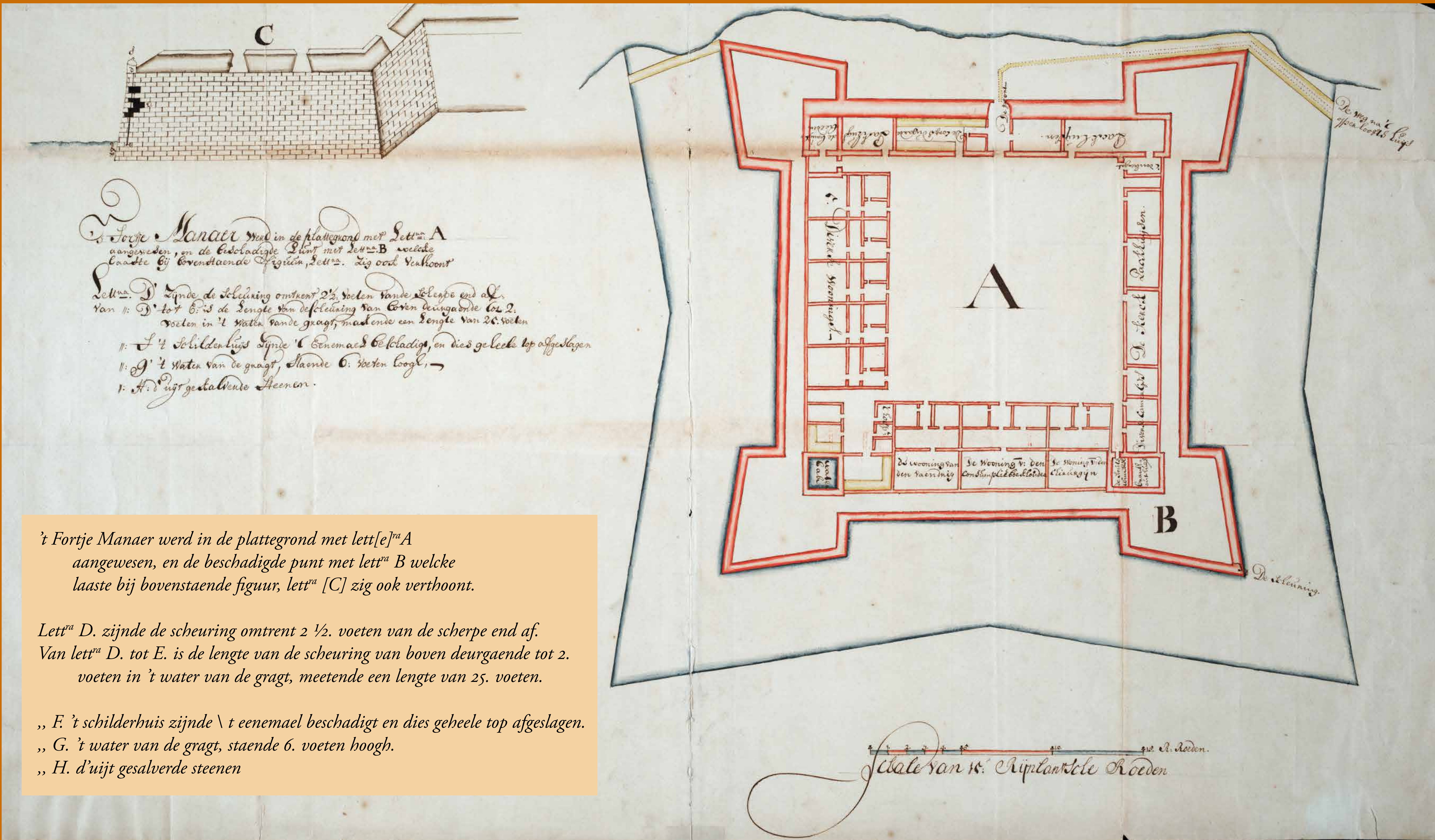


Project to improve Fort Mannar, 1787

Most projects developed after the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-1784) to improve the Dutch fortresses in Ceylon had to be canceled or postponed by lack of funds.

De la Lustière and La Goupillière, surveyors. National Archives, The Hague, 4.VEL, inv.nr. 990

...maintenance



't Fortje Manar werd in de plattegrond met lett[e]^m A aangewesen, en de beschadigde punt met lett^m B welke laaste bij bovenstaende figuur, lett^m [C] zig ook verthoont.

Lett^m D. zijnde de scheuring omtrent 2 ½. voeten van de scherpe end af. Van lett^m D. tot E. is de lengte van de scheuring van boven deurgaende tot 2. voeten in 't water van de gragt, meetende een lengte van 25. voeten.

„ E. 't schilderhuis zijnde \ t eenemaal beschadigt en dies geheele top afgeslagen.
„ G. 't water van de gragt, staende 6. voeten hoogh.
„ H. d'uijt gesalverde steenen

Floor plan of Fort Mannar with drawing showing the details of the damaged rampart, c. 1722

Maker not known. National Archives, The Hague, 4.VEL, inv.nr. 993

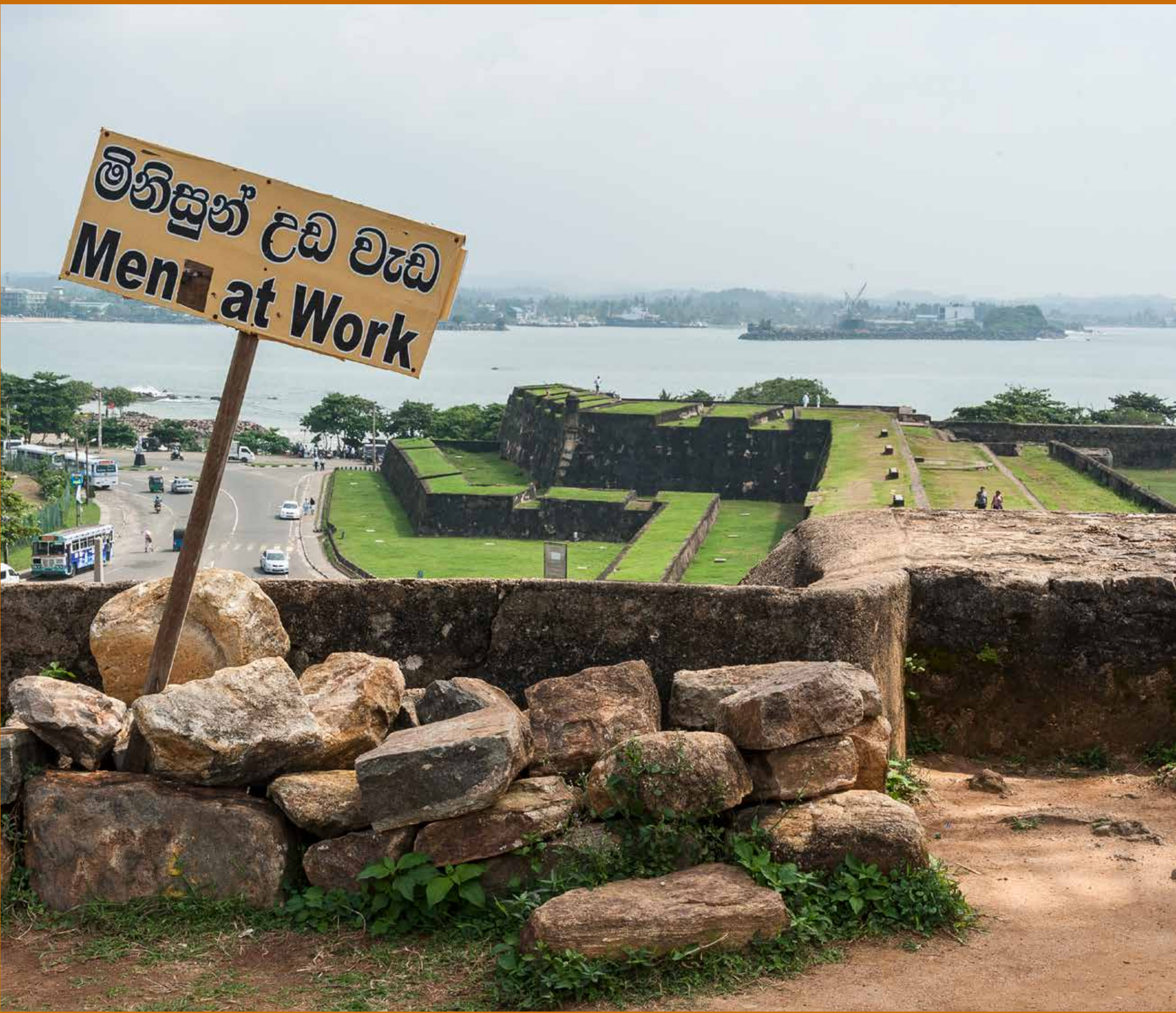
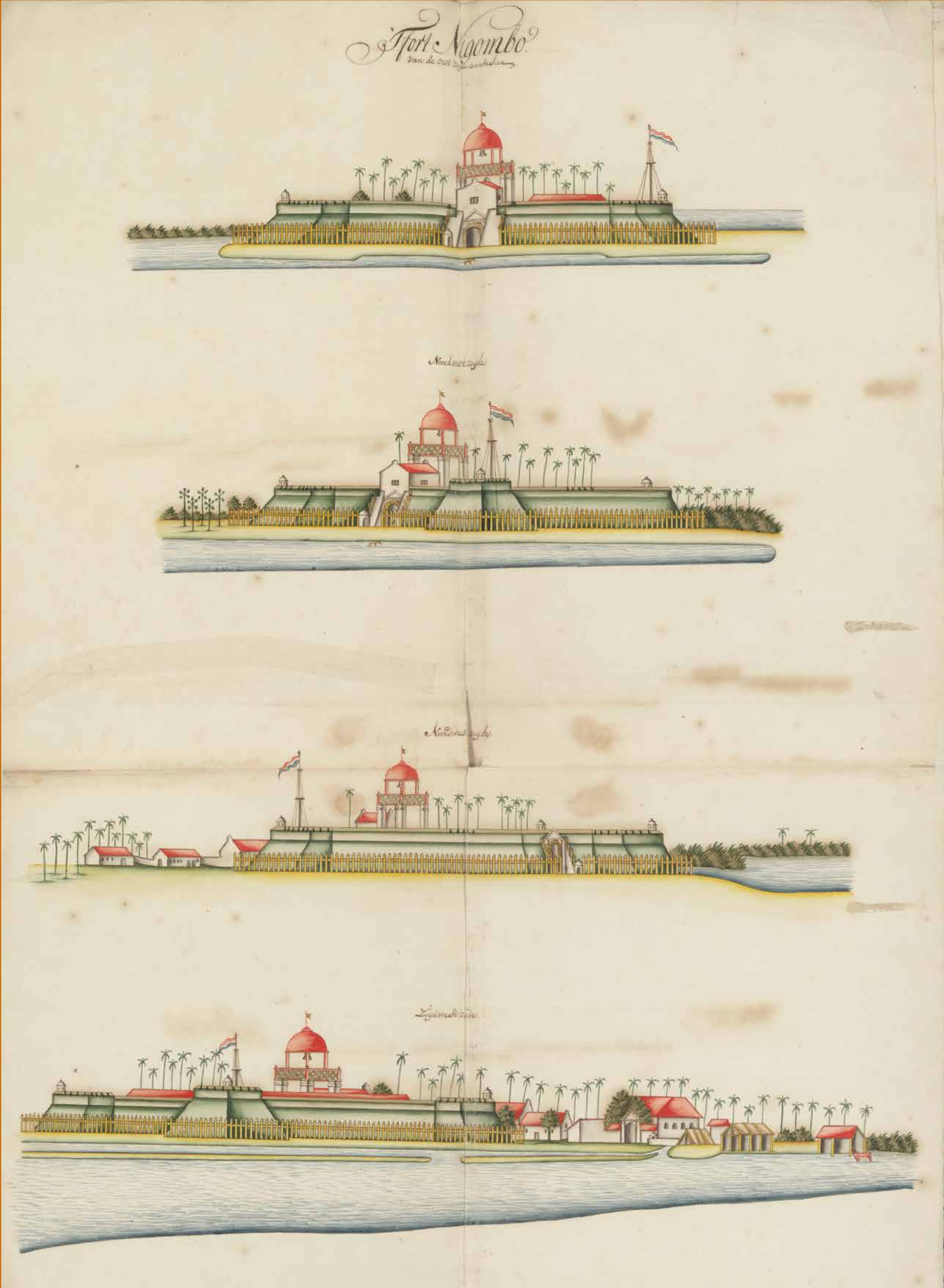
The Dutch text reads (in translation): 'The fort Mannar is indicated on the plan with letter A, and the damaged point with letter B, which is shown in detail in figure C'. The wall had deep cracks over a length of 25 feet and the top of the sentry box had completely collapsed, but happily enough lots of bricks could be re-used. Such were the details in the report sent to the directors in the Netherlands, in order to prove that its personnel had wasted costly materials... The floor plan is full of interesting details. In wing 'A' for instance are indicated a water basin, dwellings for the ensign, the forage master and the surgeon, as well as the location of the smithy and the store for firewood.

[below]

Side views of Fort Negombo, 1721

On 14 December 1720 Isaac Augustijn Rumpf (Governor 1716-1723) visited Negombo. He appreciated the efforts made by the commander, ensign Pieter Mazot, to accelerate the maintenance works. Earlier the Governor had given permission to build a new clock tower. That work, however, then was not yet completed. Bell-founders were sent from Jaffna to cast the bell on the spot.

Livinius Stevensz and Tatik Oliviere Helt. National Archives, The Hague, 4.VELH, inv.nr. 344.5



‘Men at work’, 2016

View of Moon Bastion, Galle Fort

Photo Johannes Odé

Administration and...



View of the Castle of Colombo, c. 1710

Cornelis Steiger, c. 1710. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv.nr. RP-T-1902-A-4663

[right]

Portrait of Stephanus Versluys (1694-1736), 1729

Stephanus Versluys, born in the Dutch province of Zeeland, was governor of Dutch held Ceylon between 1729 and 1732. He is depicted with his command staff resting on a map of Ceylon. Left one sees a view of Colombo, seen from the roadstead. A similar view has been made by Cornelis Steiger – see the picture at the right.

Artist not known. Zeeuws Museum, Middelburg, inv.nr. G1645

The Dutch East India Company (VOC) administered the areas it had taken from the Portuguese under the guise of representing the King of Kandy. After the war with Kirti Sri (1761-1765), the VOC thought it had acquired sovereignty over those areas, but Kandy never recognized this. The occupied areas were divided by the VOC into districts, called *commandments*. The Colombo Commandment was placed under the central administration after a short time, those of Jaffna and Galle continued to exist until 1796. The local population retained their own administrators – VOC officials only replaced the top of the establishment. The administrative units in rural areas were named *dessavony* or *korale* after the old Sri Lankan system. Inhabitants' lives were strongly influenced by VOC interests: exploiting the local labour was its priority.



Man holding a bale of cinnamon, 1994

Photo Johannes Odé

...exploitation of a colony



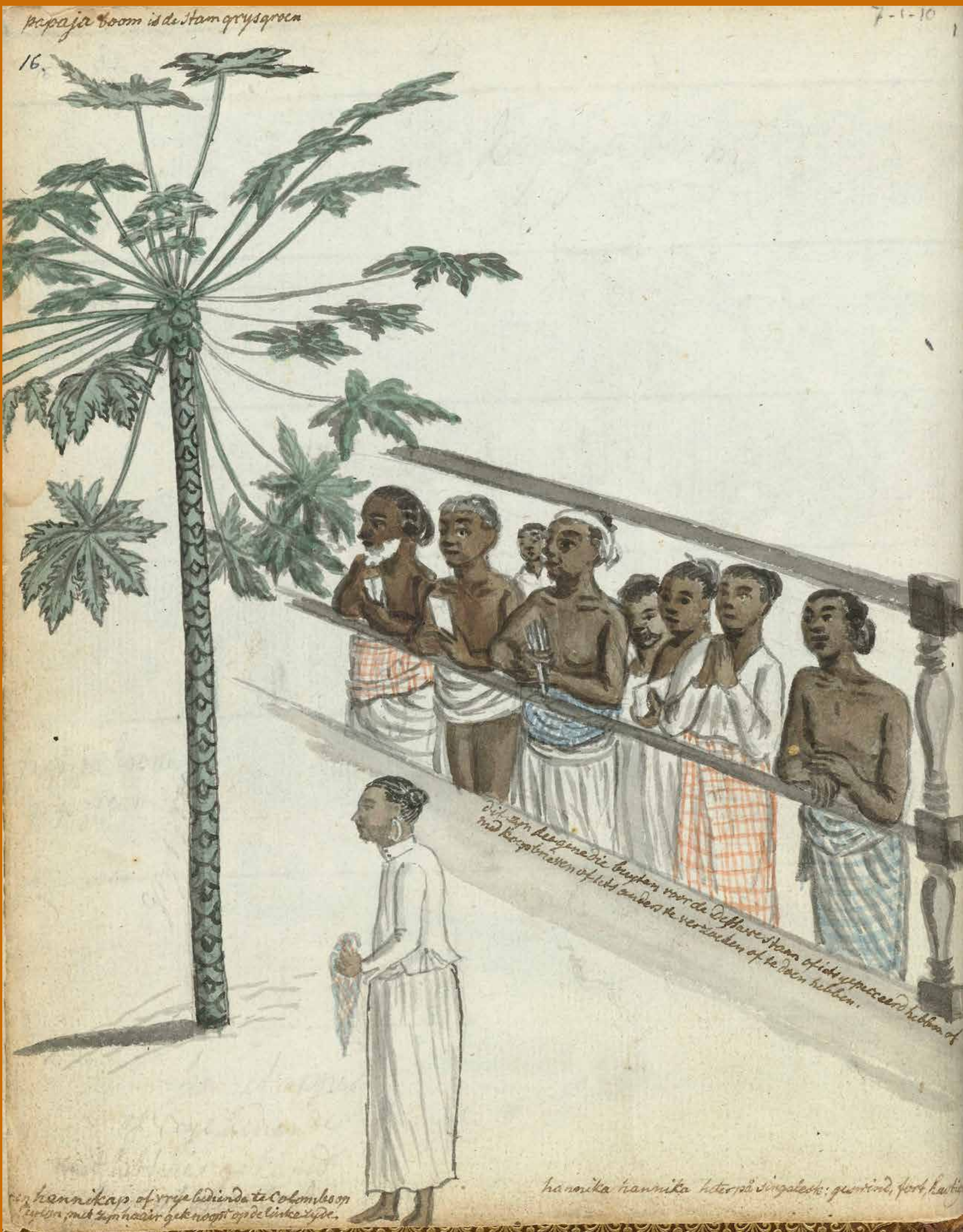
Cinnamon peelers at work, c. 1700

Artist not known, Natural History Museum, London, Herbarium Paul Hermann, Vol. 5, Icones, ff. 410-411 (edited)



Cornelis de Cock, Dessave of the Colombo District, and senior indigenous VOC officials assembled before the start of the daily audience, 1785

Jan Brandes, (1743-1808). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv.nr. NG-1985-7-1-9



Inhabitants of the Colombo District waiting for the audience given by the Dessave of Colombo, 1785

Jan Brandes, (1743-1808). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv.nr. NG-1985-7-1-10

Batteries and...

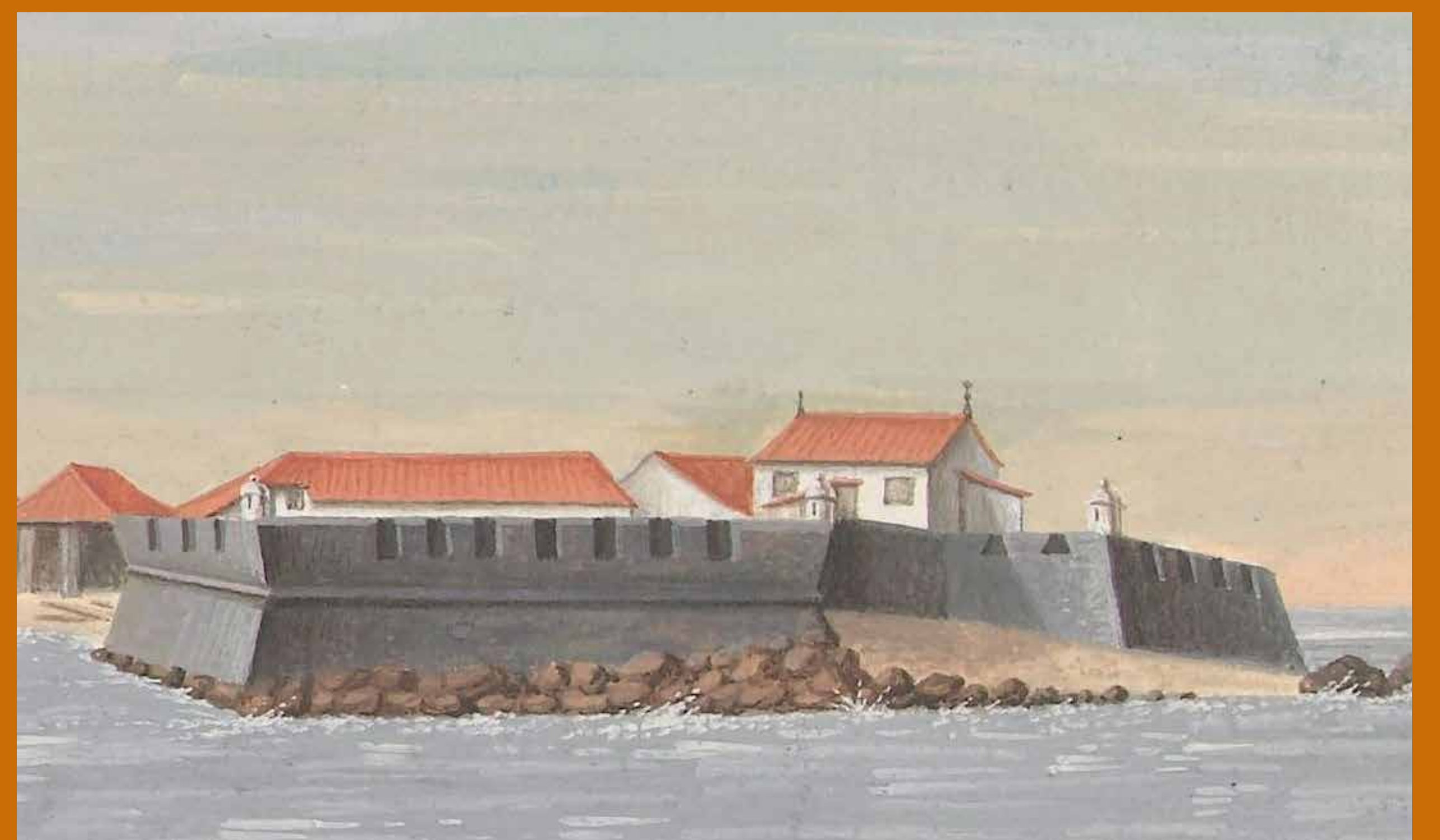


View of Fort Hammenhiel, c. 1710

Cornelis Steiger, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv.nr. RP-T-1902-A-4665

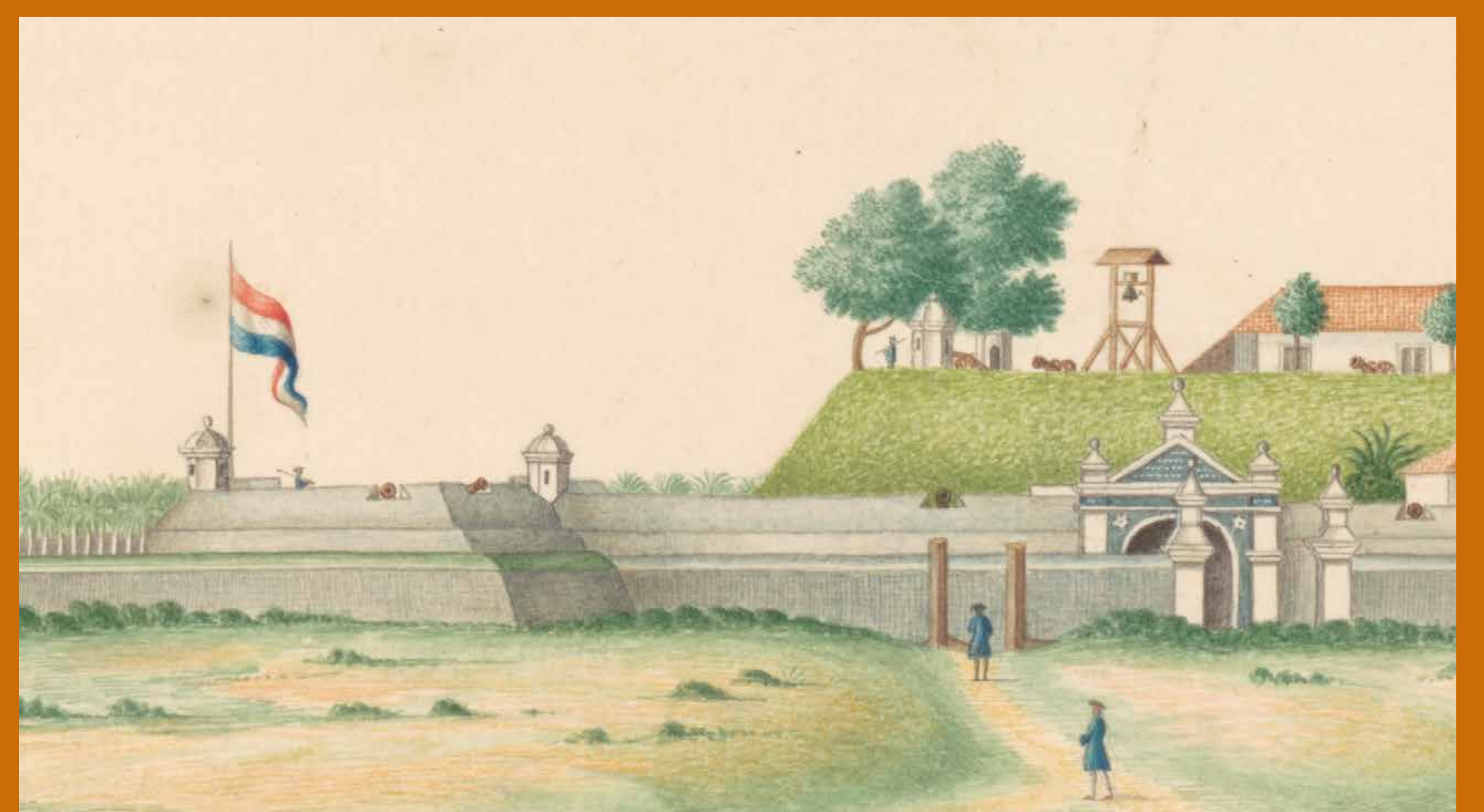
Visual materials of Sri Lankan forts comprise two groups. The one includes drawings, watercolours and prints, the other is more technical and includes ground plans, maps and profiles. Works from the first group usually show the fortresses from the outside, impressions with no military purpose, even though they were made by surveyors or military engineers – possibly by private commission from higher-ranking officials.

Sometimes a soldier on guard at his sentry box or cannons protruding through firing holes can be seen. The technical maps clearly show how the guns were positioned on the different batteries of the bastions. The maps also provide a clear picture of the layout of a fortress, with warehouses, gunpowder cellars, cisterns for storing rain water, various living quarters, a hospital and even a lock-up.



View of the Castle of Colombo, c. 1710 (detail)

Cornelis Steiger, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv.nr. RP-T-1902-A-4663



View of the fort of Kalutara, seen from the north, c. 1750 (detail)

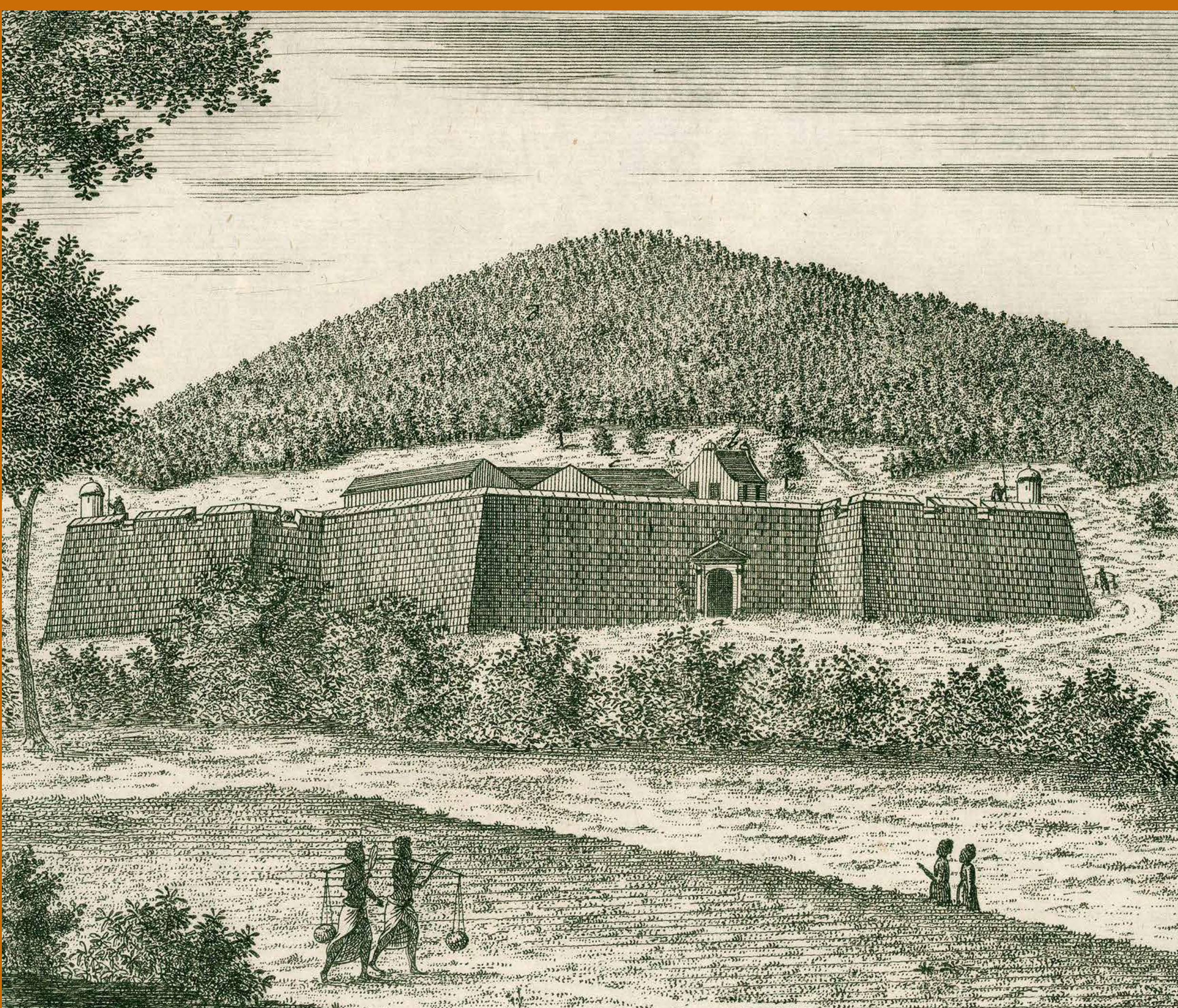
Artist not known. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv.nr. RP-T-00-32480

...sentry boxes



View from Fort Hammenhiel, 2015

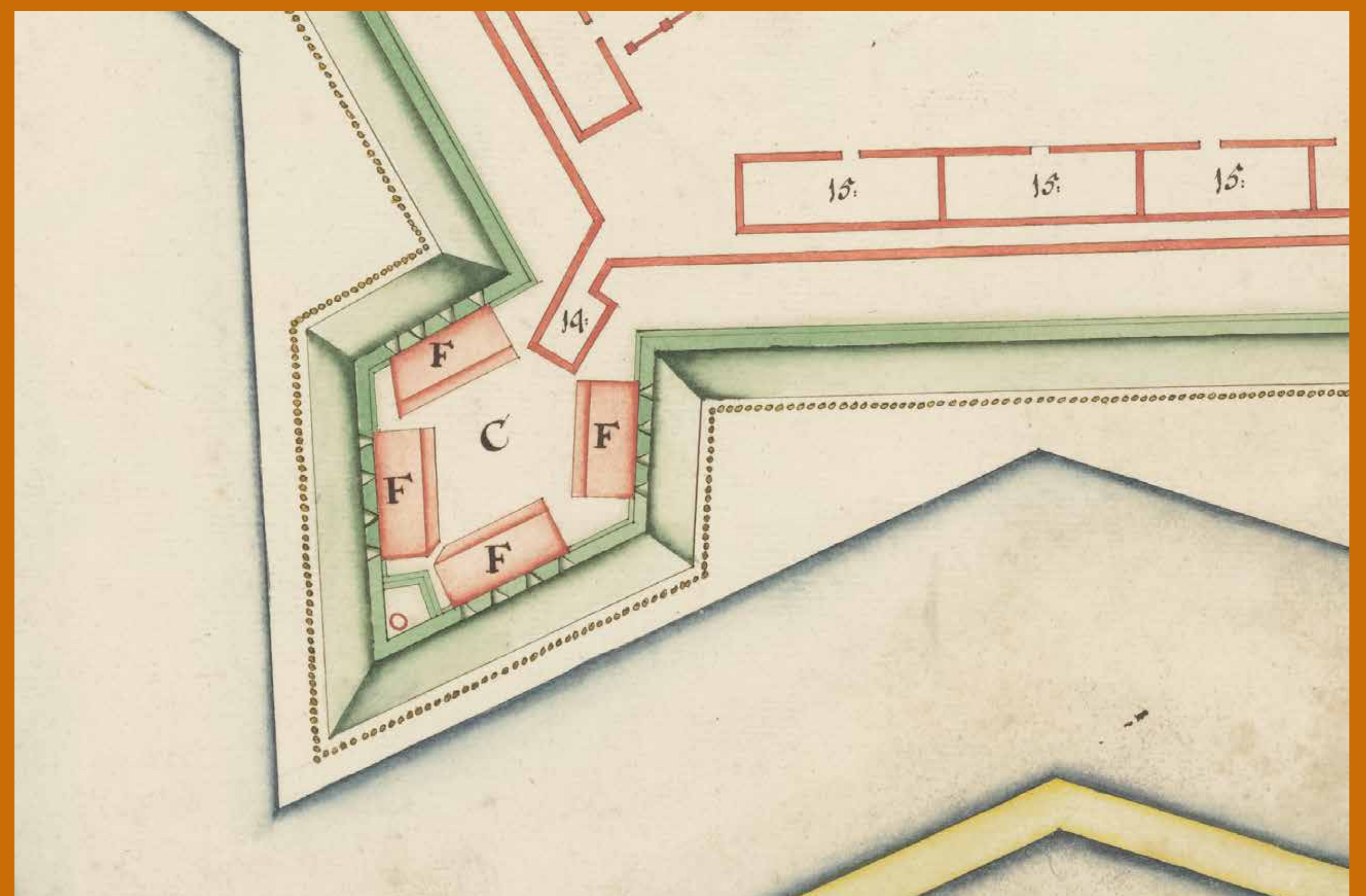
Photo Johannes Odé



View of Fort Katuwana, 1736 (detail)

Johann Wolfgang Heydt, Plate LXXIII in Johann Wolfgang Heydt, Allerneuester geographisch- und topographischer Schau-Platz von Africa und Ost-Indien, 1744.

Johann Wolfgang Heydt. Amsterdam Museum, inv.nr. LA 1905



Bastion C on the floor plan of Fort Negombo, 1720 (detail)

The location of the several batteries of cannons are indicated by the letter F. Each battery had its own team of gunners. The most drafted artillery consisted of so-called 6-pounders

Maker not known. National Archives, The Hague, 4.VEL, inv.nr. 990