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A disastrous project: C. P. Keller and the fortification (plans) of Bimilipatnam

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A Disastrous Project: C. P. Keller and the Fortification (Plans) of Bimilipatnam



Jeroen Bos

Abstract Leiden University Libraries has two remarkable fortification plans in its collections. They depict the village of Bimilipatnam under VOC rule. After a ransack by plundering Maratha troops in 1754, the local Mughal-regent allowed the Dutch to construct a stronghold in the village. VOC-authorities commissioned military engineer Coenraad Pieter Keller to survey the plot of land allocated to them and deliver plans and a proposal how this fortification could be constructed. The eventual fort was poorly constructed and collapsed two times. Keller was scape-goated by his superiors. He did not let the allegations pass and defended himself at Batavia. His written apologia has been preserved and provides unique insights in the career of a hybrid mapmaker in colonial service. By careful archival research we can reconstruct the context in which the plans were produced, interpreted by their intended audience and circulated until it was acquired by Leiden University Libraries.

1 Introduction

‘It has been decided that Coenraad Pieter Keller and his son-in-law Godfried Friedel will be pardoned from the death penalty for the first and corporal punishment and a ten years banishment to the island of Edam for the latter. They are considered employable again for Company service.’¹

Thus the Governor-General and Council in Batavia concluded in the board meeting of March 27, 1767 concerning a prolonged case between the Dutch East India Company (abbreviated VOC, after *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*)

¹To be found in: ID-ANRI_K66a_NL, inv. nr. 1043, fol. 204. For the consultation of the VOC archives in Jakarta, see: Balk (2007). For the consultation of the VOC archives in The Hague, see: Meilink-Roelofs et al. (1992).

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and the military engineer/merchant C. P. Keller. The latter was accused of poor execution when constructing a fortress at the Indian village Bimilipatnam (present-day Bheemunipatnam). In the eyes of Batavia the costs of the fortification were exorbitant. To make things worse, the whole construction collapsed within years after completion. The engineer was scapegoated by his superiors at the Coromandel Coast, who accused him of self-enrichment while damaging the interests of the VOC. He was sent to Batavia, the main settlement of the Dutch in the East, to defend himself before the highest Dutch authorities overseas: the High Government (*Hoge Regering*), consisting of the Governor-General and his council.

When Keller was commissioned in 1756 to survey a plot in the village of Bimilipatnam and deliver a project for the construction of a VOC fortress there, he could not foresee this disastrous aftermath. The resulting two plans which he delivered that year for further decision-making by his superiors are now part of the map collections of Leiden University Libraries.²

In this contribution we will take a closer look at these two fortification plans. In doing so, this case study will be a contribution to the growing, but still small, body of literature concerning military mapping under VOC auspices.³ When it comes to the cartographic legacy of the VOC, studies about the navigational charts used by pilots are abundant.⁴ It is a logical consequence, considering the maritime character of the long-distance trading company. However, next to being a sea power and relying on accurate navigational charts to sail the routes to and from Asia, the VOC—certainly in the eighteenth century—became a territorial power. For judicial reasons, large scale maps of the lands under VOC rule were needed. Surveyors and engineers, such as Keller, were attracted to provide in this growing demand for accuracy.

An important factor in studying the cartographic legacy of the VOC is the availability of the institutional archives. In the nineteenth century, after the demise of the Company (1602–1799), many maps and their accompanying reports in the

²The two maps have the following descriptions and signatures: *Plaan van het dorp Bimelepatnam en 'SEComps. Loge* (COLLBN 002-09-034) and *'t Geprojecteerde fort te Bimlipatam* (COLLBN 002-12-040). They are available as scans via <http://www.atlasofmutualheritage.nl>. Last accessed 10 Dec 2017.

³Especially historian Kees Zandvliet explored the manuscript fortification plans in his studies, but his main focus is on seventeenth century developments. See: Zandvliet (1998, 2002). Concerning the eighteenth century historian Erik Odegard has very recently published an interesting contribution: Odegard (2017). An architectural survey of overseas Dutch heritage is provided in: Temminck Groll (2002). Lastly, the publication of a series of VOC manuscript maps should be mentioned. Between 2006 and 2010 in seven separate volumes, following geographical lines, the complete known cartographic legacy of the VOC was reproduced in a bilingual publication: van Diessen (2006–2010).

⁴Among many others, map historian Günter Schilder has for many decades devoted himself to the study of VOC navigational sea charts. For a fairly recent overview of vellum charts, see: Schilder and Kok (2010).

archives have been separated.⁵ This is also the case with the Bimilipatnam plans. By careful archival research the context in which the plans were produced and used can be restored. In doing so, we will gain insight in the decision-making process within the Company, the reliance on knowledge from mapmakers in situ, the professionalization of colonial military engineers around 1750, and the condition of the VOC where late eighteenth century military matters are concerned. Because of the disastrous aftermath of the project a unique view on the career of a Company mapmaker is provided. An important source will be the apologia (*verweerschrift*) Keller wrote to justify his actions before the High Government.

2 In Asian Waters

2.1 *The Dutch at the Coromandel Coast*

The Dutch trading posts at the long Coromandel Coast were among the earliest overseas settlements since the foundation of the VOC in 1602 (Fig. 1).⁶ Attracted by the textile-producing districts pilot Paulus van Soldt made a call at the important port city of Masulipatnam in 1605. This initial contact was followed by a permanent office at Petapoli in 1606. In 1610 the new VOC establishment in Pulicat was made the administrative center of Coromandel, first under a director, and from 1616 onwards under a governor. A relatively large fortress was erected at Pulicat to protect commercial interests in the district and repel European competitors. Next to the Portuguese, the Dutch had to tolerate Danish and British presence, followed in 1673 by the French when Pondicherry was established. Shortly after 1690 the main settlement of the Dutch at Coromandel, on the advice of commissioner-general Hendrik Adriaan van Reede tot Drakenstein (1636–1691), was moved from Pulicat to the more southern located town of Negapatnam, away from the army routes in the north. The districts in the northern part of Coromandel were frequented by military unrest in the 1680s, culminating in the complete annexation of Golkonda by the Mughal empire in 1687. Nevertheless, the unrest remained after this annexation and would occasionally paralyze the region in the eighteenth century. The Mughals had overreached and could not respond properly to several regional powers seizing their chances. In Dutch reports this unrest and the consequently continuous changing regimes with which to deal with are indicated as the main reasons for the stagnation and, ultimately, decline of the trade profits at the Coast.

⁵Archivist P.A. Leupe in 1867 published the catalogue *Buitenlandse Kaarten*, finishing a project for the National Archives of the Netherlands in which the maps of the former VOC and WIC were separated from the archives. A decision which made sense in the late nineteenth century, but regretted nowadays. Mainly because the context between map and original report is broken, and only with painstakingly archival research can be reconstructed.

⁶For an introduction in the history of the Dutch East India Company, see: Gaastra (2012). For an overview of the Dutch trade at the Coromandel Coast, see: Arasaratnam (1976).



Fig. 1 Coastal chart of Coromandel and Orissa by Gerrit de Haan, 1761 (Nationaal Archief, 4. VELH 156.2,6)

It should be noted, however, that the repeated references to internal turmoil was a proven distracting tool. The VOC servants at the Coast all too eagerly pointed to an external force to explain losses in their reports. It was taken as an established fact that the arbitrariness of the upcoming local rulers led to fluctuations in the revenues. But since this ‘explanation’ was both used in times of turmoil and more peaceful periods alike, it actually explains nothing and is a fallacy. Above all, it expresses the Orientalist view on trade in India (Gommans et al. 2010: 24). Still, recent studies indeed show the stagnation and decline of Dutch profits at Coromandel (Jacobs 2006). Especially during the last quarter of the eighteenth century the VOC was irrefutably overshadowed by the British and French competitors.

2.2 A Trading Post at Bimilipatnam

First records of a Dutch settlement in the village go back to 1652. The reason for a permanent post are still vague, but it seems that the Dutch were able to secure trading rights from the local Mughal-regent. They were keen to possess a safe anchorage along the Coromandel Coast on the route between Ceylon in the south and Bengal in the north. Their larger trading posts at Pulicat and Negapatnam on the southern Coromandel could not shelter the vessels during heavy storms. Bimilipatnam offered protection against most perils on sea. Concerning products of trade, the village was a centre of rice cultivation and provided the Dutch settlements on Ceylon and even Persia in times of drought or crop failure. In 1701 Pieter van Dam (1626–1706), the long serving head secretary (*advocaat*) of the VOC, handed his monumental manuscript *Beschryvinghe van de Oostindische Compagnie* to the Gentlemen Seventeen (*Heren XVII*)—the executive board of the VOC, residing in the Dutch Republic—to serve them as a useful manual on many important topics concerning the long-distance trading Company. On the trading post at Bimilipatnam he used few words (Stapel 1932: 162): ‘...never of any importance,

serving mainly as pantry for Ceylon. In earlier years shiploads full of rice were transported from this place.’

Still, besides providing rice, trade was conducted in modest quantities. Another trading product was textile, although it never came close to the amount of *kleedjes* traded at the southern settlements. Finally, I like to mention the trade in *lak op stokjes*, which is shellac, made from the excrement of bugs, and sold with much profit in Persia. But this commodity was really hard to get. Only small amounts were sold to the Dutch. For almost a century trade was conducted from a lodge, which was constructed to protect the commodities and house the handful of servants, although it had only minimal defenses. From accounts by Daniel Havart (1650–1718) and Francois Valentyn (1666–1727) the number of European servants was 3 to 4: the head (a junior merchant), his assistant (*secunde*), and two administrators, together with 20–30 local hands (Havart 1693; Valentyn 1724–1726).

3 An Offer Reluctantly Accepted

In 1754, Bimilipatnam suffered the consequences of the prolonged war between the Mughals and Maratha’s. The village was pillaged and the VOC lodge was looted and burnt. After this occurrence, much deliberation was given to the question whether the post should be re-established. The regent, Visia Ramarasu, feared that the permanent departure of the Dutch would ruin local economy and offered them the right to construct a fortress in the village to safeguard their commodities (s’ Jacob 2007: 172).

Initially, this offer was not taken up. Before the VOC-servants at Coromandel committed themselves, it was decided to carefully consider all options. It seems that Batavia preferred a fortification at Jaggernaikpoeram and commissioned the engineer Coenraad Pieter Keller, stationed at the island of Ceylon, to the Coromandel Coast. He was to survey and report about the possibility of constructing a fortress at Jaggernaikpoeram. In the end, the decision was made to stay at Bimilipatnam and to construct a stronghold in the village. The decisive argument was that the investments in Bimilipatnam were too high to simply withdraw, even with the looting of the goods and a burnt down lodge.

Batavia agreed to take the offer from the local Mughal-regent and commissioned Keller to survey the location and determine how a stronghold could best be constructed. The engineer was not entirely free in his judgement. He had to deal with restraints from both the regent as well as Batavia. Visia Ramarasu determined the location on which the VOC was allowed to construct this fortress; Batavia ordered to construct it in the most economical way possible (s’ Jacob 2007: 174).

Batavia and Keller already had a history. Between 1748 and 1750 the engineer constructed a fortress at Sadraspatnam, an important post at the southern part of the Coromandel Coast. The costs exceeded the estimates, and Batavia blamed Keller, stating that the Sadraspatnam fortress was ‘too beautiful, and thus too costly

(Schooneveld-Oosterling 2007: 47).’ With this experience in mind, he was urged to keep costs at a minimum in Bimilipatnam.

4 A Detailed Look at the Plans

Let us take a look at the two plans. The first offers a general overview of the town with its immediate surroundings (Fig. 2). The projected fortress can be seen drawn in on the existing situation. The square ground-plan with four corner bastions and sides measuring 40 Rijnlandse roeden, or 150 m long, was a very conservative design (Temminck Groll 2002: 238; Gommans et al 2010: 381–382). In the Explanation, Keller wrote that the design was based on the principles of the famous French engineer Vauban.⁷ The impact of this building on the village is immediately visible. For its construction, a lot of the existing infrastructure in the village needed to be demolished, among which a temple and many houses.

The map is richly annotated. Not only in the explanation, with remarks of military or architectural nature, but there are also handwritten notes all over the plan relating to everyday matters in Bimilipatnam. For example, we see the different water wells for the different groups living in the village. Wells for the different caste in Hindu society. The Fishers were to get their freshwater at the *Parraesche* well, the Brahmin caste at the *Brahminse* well, and the Dutch (who were not considered pure) were grouped together with the Hindu middle-class and had to get freshwater at the *Jentiefse* well (van der Pol 2011: 70).

Similarly, not necessarily of much importance for the intended audience of this map, the designated locations for ceremonial burning of the corpses are indicated. And, finally, Keller had much attention for the several places of worship that could be found in and around Bimilipatnam. We can only speculate about the abundance of annotations on this general map, but it has probably to do with showing expertise to his superiors. By locating and describing all these spots, Keller convinced the viewer that he was actually in situ and had measured the complete village, not only around the immediate area of construction, but in the surrounding area as well.

The second Bimilipatnam plan is truly military in nature (Fig. 3). A closer look reveals the inner buildings of the fortress, and their intended use. Every room, however large or small, is annotated. It even has affixes attached to them, revealing the usage on ground level and first floor. Besides the usual warehouses, barracks, living spaces for the head and the assistants, we see room for cattle, small gardens, and the water wells. It is gruesome to recognise the word ‘*slaafskamer*’ in a smaller room, confirming the use of enslaved people to carry out several duties for which the Company could or would not hire local hands.

⁷The fortification concepts made by military engineer Vauban (1633–1707) would dominate the education of military engineers for nearly the complete eighteenth century. His principles were imprinted in the mind of every young student of warfare. So, it does not surprise that Keller at least pays lip service to the famous French marshal and engineer.



Fig. 2 Plan of the village Bimilipatnam and the Honourable Company's lodge by C. P. Keller, 1756 (Leiden University Libraries, COLLBN 002-09-034)

Based on the plans and report by Keller, the project was eventually approved and work started in 1758. Keller did not oversee the execution for long, as he was already commissioned at Negapatnam where his services were requested. The engineer was replaced by Adam Gotlieb Henk, a man of which little to nothing is known from the records. He is mentioned as an *inlander*, a local.⁸ Henk would oversee the completion of the works at Bimilipatnam. The village was hit by strong rainfall in late 1759. First reports about the collapse of parts of the newly constructed fortress reached Batavia in 1760. With much dismay it was decided to proceed the work, but to cut even more on unnecessary spending. Keller was held responsible for the mess and a warrant to take him into custody was issued (s' Jacob 2007: 574).

⁸NL-HaNA, VOC, 1.04.17, inv.nr. 353.

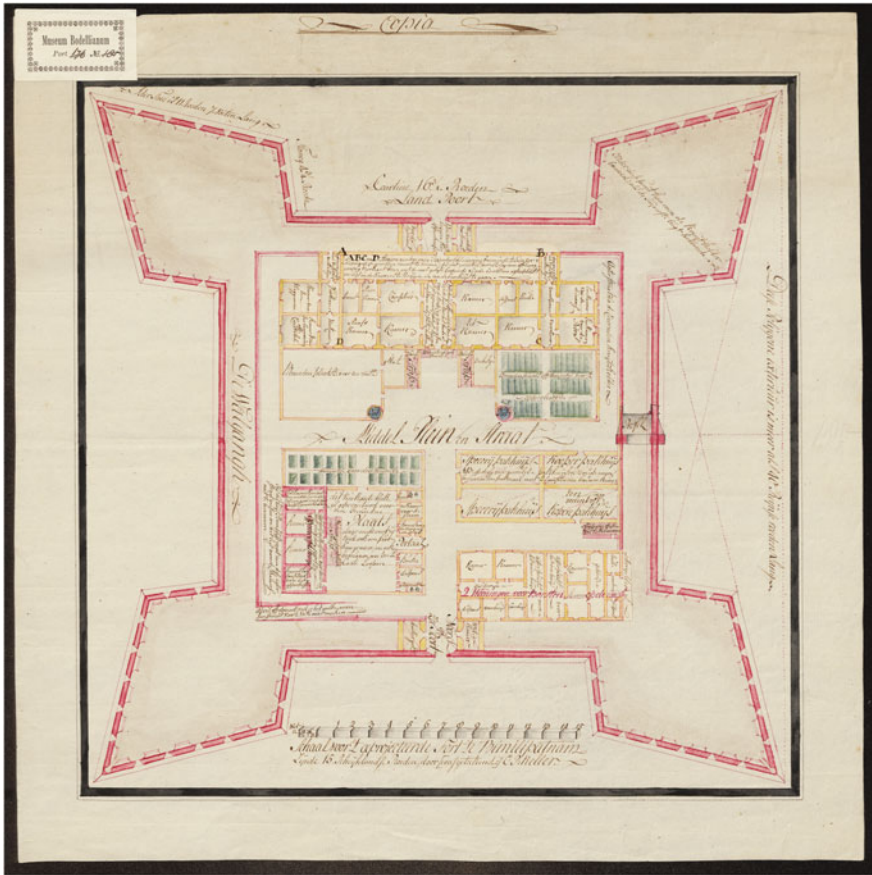


Fig. 3 The projected fort at Bimilipatnam by C. P. Keller, 1756 (Leiden University Libraries, COLLBN 002-12-040)

5 Coenraad Pieter Keller: A Hybrid Mapmaker in the Tropics

5.1 A German Soldier

Keller came from the German town of Rheinfels and enlisted with the VOC in 1735 as a *landspassaat*, which is a military position just above ordinary soldier. He was stationed at Ceylon, where he very probably was employed as a land surveyor. The first maps from his hand that have survived date from 1742/1743. He was involved in projects concerning irrigation and drainage works around Matar and the so-called Giant Tank project in the Jafnapatnam district. Land surveyors on Ceylon were mostly employed in civil surveying, because of the territorial control of the coastal

districts of the island. It does not surprise to see Keller in the rank of lieutenant-dessave at the Colombo district. As already mentioned, in the years 1748–1750, Keller was commissioned to the Coromandel Coast to plan and construct a fortification at Sadraspatnam. Because of his long service, he was promoted by the Ceylon government in 1754 to the rank of full, or senior, merchant (Schooneveld-Oosterling 2007: 471). That is exemplary for most surveyors and engineers in VOC service. They did not always conduct full-time surveying work, but acted as land administrators, town builders and architects as well. These hybrid ‘technocrats’ were in high demand in the overseas settlements (Zandvliet 2002: 82). Some even engaged in commercial ventures. Preferably in Company service, although private trading was common practice among VOC servants. Officially forbidden, many could not make ends meet with the meager Company paycheck, or simply could not resist the high profits to be gained in private trading. Keller fits the model of a hybrid technocrat in colonial service, who also conducted private trade. He owned a ship with which commodities were shipped on his personal account (Nierstrasz 2012).

Historian Roelof van Gelder has extensively studied Germans in service of the Dutch East India Company (van Gelder 1997). In earlier times, German recruits were seen as little more than riffraff filling the ship holds, because they usually enlisted in the ranks of soldier. Van Gelder showed that for most Germans, even with a good education or background, it was impossible to be directly recruited in a higher rank. They were not allowed to fill these positions, as long as capable Dutchmen were available. In practice, this meant that talented and ambitious Germans had to work their way through the ranks, enjoying patronage along the line. Keller fulfills this description. Although his birthdate could not be traced, he must have been a young man when enlisting as *landspassaat*. Stationed at Ceylon, his superiors must have noticed his talents as he was quickly employed as surveyor. He could have lived a comfortable life had he not taken the commission to project and construct the fortress at Bimilipatnam.

5.2 *The Blame Game*

After the warrant was issued to take him into custody, Keller very probably panicked. The official records speak of his flight and desertion from Company service (s’ Jacob 2018: 254). Because he did not show up at the tribunal in Negapatnam, he was convicted in absence. Keller received the ultimate penalty: a death sentence. His son-in-law had to undergo a corporal punishment, followed by a ten years banishment to and chained public works at the island of Edam. Keller went completely off-radar. Rumors even mentioned him to run away only to be killed by a local muslim regent (s’ Jacob 2018: 505). Eventually, Keller saw no other option than to face the music. The authorities allowed him safe passage to Batavia where he could defend himself against the allegations brought against him. In early 1767

his case was discussed by the High Government. In their meeting of March 27, 1767, he was fully pardoned and deemed employable again for Company service. The latter indeed occurred, since he assisted in copying maps and plans at the *kaartenwinkel* [the central cartographic workshop] in Batavia. His signature can be found on a copied map of Cochin, dated October 1767. Full recuperation followed when Keller was commissioned to Palembang on the island of Sumatra to inspect the stronghold, which was in poor condition. The High Government gave him very specific instructions on the information they wanted to receive in their meeting of May 27, 1768.⁹

Before Keller received this final assignment, the High Government received a report about the deplorable state of the fortress at Bimilipatnam. The governor and council at Negapatnam decided to send a small commission led by lieutenant-engineer Gijsbertus Zeegeler to inspect the situation. It looks like one final attempt by the Coromandel government to blame and sentence the engineer for the mess at Bimilipatnam. The report once more devastated the reputation of Keller.¹⁰ He was allowed to respond and his apologia is preserved at the archives in The Hague (Fig. 4).¹¹ It clarifies the course of events, from Kellers point of view. As he wrote, he was already in old age, serving the VOC for more than thirty years. But, even as the High Government had already pardoned and reemployed him to work in the cartographic workshop, he could not let the accusations pass.

His defence consisted mainly on two assumptions. One is the fact that Keller could not be held responsible for the work carried out by Henk, for he did not follow the design by Keller. Secondly, the extreme weather conditions and the uneven terrain on the site are cited as being unsuited for the construction of a fort according to the European principles of military architecture. Surprisingly, the devastating report had no further negative repercussions for Keller. On the contrary, as we have seen, the High Government tasked him with the inspection of Palembang. It remains uncertain whether the partially rehabilitated engineer was able to complete this new assignment. No plans or reports from Palembang are known. Coenraad Pieter Keller died in August 1768.¹²

6 Epilogue

Bimilipatnam remained a touchy subject for the VOC. The village would again be hit by heavy rainfalls and an earthquake in late 1768. This time an even harsher report was written by J. E. Kuhn. Again, renovation work was carried out. The final blow came in 1781 when the British conquered the Dutch settlements at the

⁹ID-ANRI_K66a_NL, inv. nr. 1046, fol. 433.

¹⁰NL-HaNA, VOC, 1.04.02, inv.nr. 3197, fol. 481–495.

¹¹NL-HaNA, VOC, 1.04.17, inv.nr. 353.

¹²NL-HaNA, VOC, 1.04.02, inv.nr. 6011.

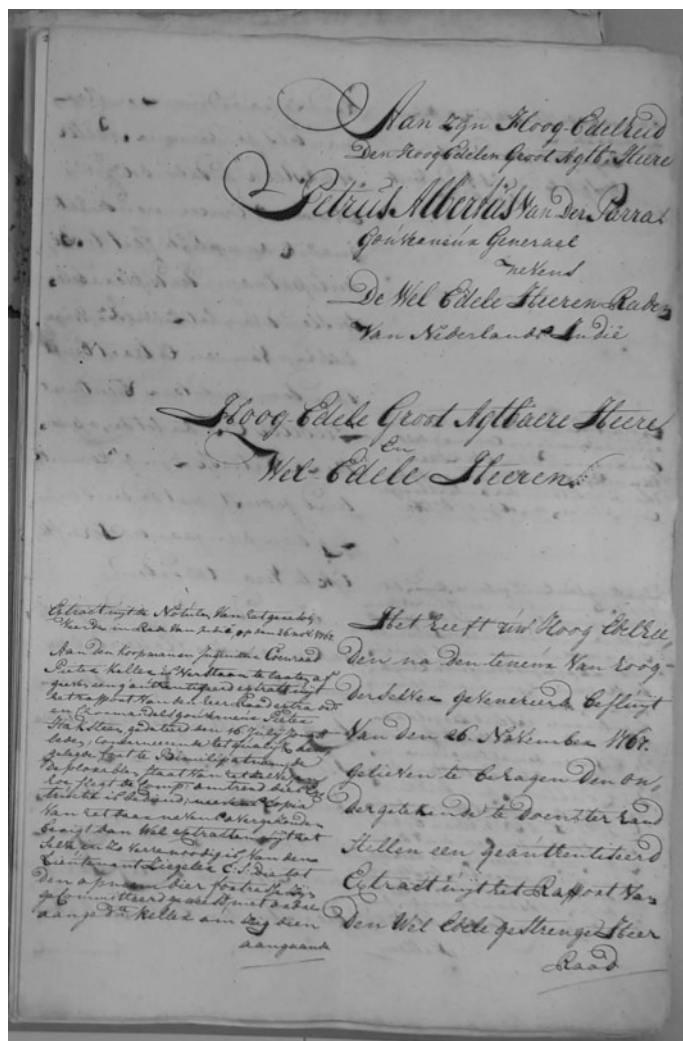


Fig. 4 Apologia by C. P. Keller, 1768 (Nationaal Archief, VOC, 1.04.17, inv.nr. 353)

Coromandel Coast during the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780–1784). The stronghold was returned in 1785, but the bastions were made indefensible (Fig. 5). In the years after the war, the directors in the Republic and the High Government in Batavia wanted to get a realistic picture of the (potential) profitability of the various settlements at the Coromandel Coast. For this purpose, the *gezaghebber* (after the British gave the posts back to the Dutch in 1785, the position of governor was no longer granted and the highest position on this Coast was that of *gezaghebber*, director) and the chief factors were urged to compile reports in which the pros and cons of a closure were to be weighed up (Gommans et al. 2010: 373). However,

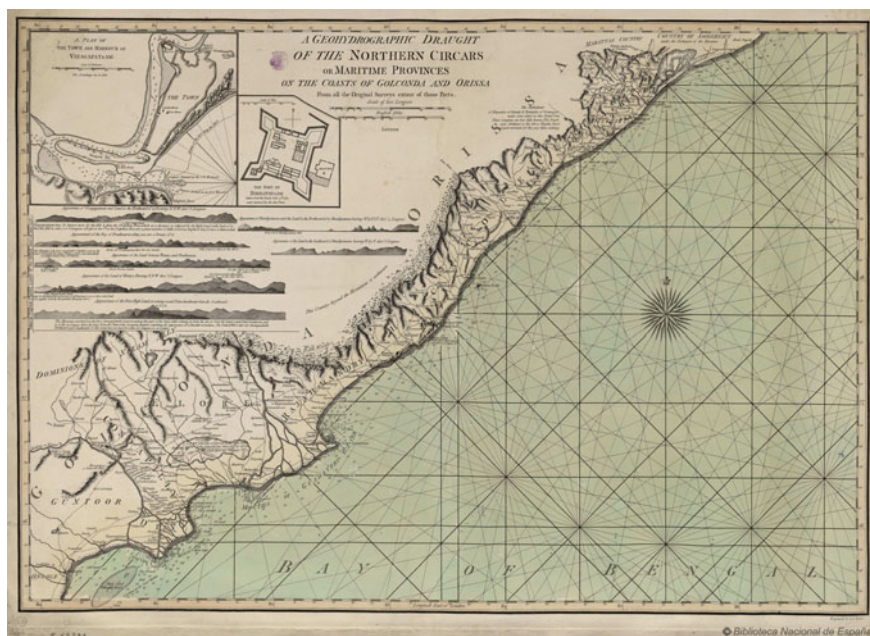


Fig. 5 A geohydrographic draught of the Northern Circars by Samuel John Neele, 1775–1781 (National Library of Spain, MR/6/I SERIE 50/289)

mainly because of the rigid attitude of the servants on the spot little came of the intended reforms. Before definite decisions were reached on the matter, the Dutch posts at the Coromandel Coast were taken again by the British in 1795, following the invasion of the Dutch Republic by the French revolutionary army. Nowadays, very little reminds of the former Dutch presence at Bheemunipatnam. Only the two remaining cemeteries with seventeenth and eighteenth century graves and tombs are in reasonable condition (Peters 2002: 149–154).

The engineer paid a heavy price for his miscalculations. Although the death penalty was never executed, for years he was on the run and lived in uncertainty. His reputation shattered and his revenues vanished, Keller was lucky to be reemployed by the Company in 1767. He undeniably made some major constructional mistakes when projecting the fortress at the spot he chose. However, he had to work with the constraints posed upon him by the local regent, as well as the VOC. Although he was pardoned by the High Government, he never regained his former standing. When the German military engineer Carl Friedrich Reimer visited Sadraspatnam in September 1790 he was very appreciative about the fortress

constructed almost half a century earlier by Keller, his fellow countryman, calling it ‘without question the most elegant and beautiful of all the Company’s possessions.’¹³

The fortification plans of Bimilipatnam were acquired by Leiden University Libraries via Johannes Tiberius Bodel Nijenhuis (1797–1872). He bequeathed his cartographic collections, called *Museum Geographicum Bodellianum*, to the Leiden library. It is estimated that the total collection consists of around 50,000 maps, 300 atlases and 22,000 topographical prints and illustrations (Storms 2008). It is very difficult to reconstruct the provenance of the VOC maps within this collection. In 1996, former map curator Dirk de Vries compiled a catalogue of the 79 sea charts in the Bodel Nijenhuis collection (de Vries 1996). He also attempted to trace the origin of the charts, maps and plans, but this search proved unfruitful. De Vries argues that it is not impossible that Bodel Nijenhuis acquired the maps when the Ministry of Colonial Affairs disposed of a portfolio of ‘abundant or obsolete’ maps in 1821. A more likely way of acquiring the maps, according to De Vries, is via auctions and selling by private collectors. Already before the demise of the VOC, the ‘secret’ maps circulated among collectors. Bodel Nijenhuis wrote annotations on maps concerning provenance. It is frustrating to note that these are missing on the VOC maps, which leaves us to speculate on their provenance. Concerning the Bimilipatnam plans specifically, the word (COPIA) on the detailed fortress plan is the only clue we have that these plans were copies sent to the Republic to accompany the reports that were to be analyzed by the Gentlemen Seventeen themselves.

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