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**Review of Lelièvre, G. (2021) La préhistoire de la
Compagnie des Indes orientales, 1601-1622: Les
Français dans la course aux épices**

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Guillaume Lelièvre, *La préhistoire de la Compagnie des Indes orientales, 1601–1622: Les Français dans la course aux épices*. Caen: Presses universitaires de Caen, 2021. 421 pp., illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-2-3818-5005-4, €26 (pbk).

Guillaume Lelièvre's work presents an account of the earliest French expeditions to the East Indies. It is very aptly titled *La préhistoire* both because it discusses the dawn of what would later be a continuous French presence in the Indian Ocean basin and because this particular period is historiographically underdeveloped. However, as the author demonstrates, there is plenty of material to write it, quite literally, into history.

The book explores the various initiatives that were undertaken from France during the first two decades of the seventeenth century (1601–22, to be exact) to obtain a share of the rapidly developing commerce with the East Indies, particularly Indonesia and the spice trade. Three main phases of activity are to be distinguished: two privately funded expeditions from St Malo in 1601–1603, the operations of the nascent *Compagnie française des Indes orientales* from 1604 to 1615, and, lastly, the efforts of the *Compagnie des Moluques* from 1616 to 1622. These differing organizational forms, ranging from private entrepreneurial initiatives to Crown monopolies, familiarize the reader with the vast variety in the types of business organizations found in early modern colonial trade from its very early days. This book is not as much a (pre)history of the *Compagnie des Indes orientales* as the title suggests; rather, it explores the phenomenon of early French ventures to the East Indies, both within and without the company model. As such, it achieves this in two ways. First, Lelièvre cleverly embeds the French East India ventures within both local and international history. This is particularly evident in his discussion of the first private St Malo expeditions in 1601, where he carefully reconstructs the local social, political and economic circumstances that allowed a few Malouin entrepreneurs to gather sufficient resources and courage to venture into the unknown on the other side of the world. His discussion of the coming into being of the first *compagnie* around 1604 demonstrates his eye for international conjunctures, such as the shifting political and diplomatic leadership in western Europe in the early 1600s and the role that this played in Henri IV's desire to have a *compagnie* that could measure up to those of the Dutch and the English. The second way in which this book really shines in illustrating the realities and circumstances of these ventures is the level of detail present in the discussions of the actual expeditions from France to the East Indies. Routes, resources, and encounters with European and Asian notables, for example, are reconstructed extensively. The narrative in these sections, while occasionally dense, is clarified by the inclusion of maps and chronological overviews. It cannot be denied that the overall historical picture is bleak, harsh and occasionally brutal, with an abundance of death and disease, which prompts Lelièvre to poignantly quote voyages to the East Indies as being 'un voyage ordinaire en enfer' (73), 'un véritable ossuaire' (76) or 'un véritable gouffre engloutissant hommes, vaisseaux et fortunes' (97). Perhaps paradoxically, because of this, it is a vivid depiction of historical reality.

Lelièvre is able to get to the detailed heart of local, international and colonial realities through his impressive utilization of primary sources. Not only does he make use of a very wide range (ship records, diplomatic collections and notary deeds, to name but a few), but his body of sources is also ubiquitously transnational. Aside from French archives, he has also consulted English and Dutch literature and primary sources – albeit printed editions. The usage of these sources can arguably be deemed an essentiality for this work, as it demonstrates that the (early) French expeditions to the East Indies were unequivocally shaped by English and Dutch competition and cooperation. By consulting the records of these competitors and cooperators, Lelièvre has been able to bridge gaps where the French sources fall silent and, in instances of conflicting information, reflect on them in a meaningful way. The fruitfulness of this approach is most visible in the first section, on the private expeditions from St Malo. The two ships in question – the *Croissant* and the *Corbin* – encountered the same English and Dutch expeditions at various points along the way, and for both the French and these foreign ships, accounts survive. The section is structured by first describing the expeditions from the French point of view, and then through the eyes of the English and Dutch. This is an excellent premise – it deconstructs any possible machismo in the French sources and, for both sides, amends gaps in each other's operations. This enriches the overall narrative considerably. It is regrettable that the crossing of francophone and non-francophone source material in this way remains a relative rarity, as this work demonstrates the amount of complimentary data to be found.

The fact that the narrative is heavily source-driven is to be admired, and it is in many ways refreshing. However, it does arguably come at a cost in the sense that somewhat more weight could have been given to historiographical debates. Whereas it is clear that Lelièvre has made use of a vast body of (international) literature, the book could have done with more active rather than descriptive engagement with it. The new and extensive source-based content that it provides is certainly full of potential for this: for example, Lelièvre's findings on the extensive involvement of the Dutch in these early French expeditions and *compagnies* make an important contribution to recent developments in debates on the transnationality of early modern colonial exploitation, and the economic, political and social consequences of this. His findings on the multi-ethnic composition of the crews (for both outbound and return voyages) are also of significant interest to debates on early modern seafaring populations, and should be treated as such instead of as a given.

In short, whereas this book does not exploit its *historiographical* potential to the fullest, it is a shining example of engaging with *history*. Various scales of historical reality are painstakingly reconstructed through critical and original source work, and the result is a comprehensive overview of the first few decades of French expeditions to the East Indies.

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