

SPECIAL ISSUE

Caveat from the Archive: Pieter van Dam's *Beschryvinge van de Oostindische Compagnie* and Crisis Management

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This article considers the dynamics between the ideals of good governance, crisis, introspection, and routine. It centers on the *Beschryvinge van de Oostindische Compagnie* (Description of the [Dutch] East India Company; hereafter, VOC), commissioned in 1693. Compiled by the company's secretary Pieter van Dam over the course of more than a decade, this work charted the VOC's organization, areas of operation, and internal processes. The *Beschryvinge* originated from a perception of crisis among the directors stemming from the company's decreasing profitability and illicit behavior among those in its service. The directors' sense of crisis resonated with a growing awareness throughout Europe that good governance required information on administrative actions and procedures. Their concern led to a series of initiatives aimed at providing better means of obtaining such information. Charged with synthesizing the company's sprawling archive into a more practicable compendium, the VOC's leading bureaucrat used little and large tools of knowledge to mold the company's operational practices into a coherent whole, thereby putting the perceived crisis into historical perspective. Ultimately, van Dam's *Beschryvinge* contradicted the directors' fears that the company was inefficient. In doing so, the manuscript reinforced the power and resilience of the VOC's bureaucracy.

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In 1693, the Gentlemen XVII, the board of directors of the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*; hereafter, VOC) ordered their secretary and senior lawyer Pieter van Dam (1621–1706) to put together a comprehensive description of their corporation. Compiled between 1693 and 1701/06, the five-volume *Beschryvinge van de Oostindische Compagnie* consisted of a combination of knowledge about the administrative practices the company used to manage its operations and chorographic surveys. Van Dam's *Beschryvinge* was a handwritten, single-copy manuscript designed to provide the directors immediate access to the essential information they needed to perform their duties. Nearly every historian who has examined the VOC has used van Dam's voluminous work as a rich source of information about the company's far-reaching activities. Roelof van Gelder even called it the "first Dutch company history."¹ To make sense of the *Beschryvinge*'s significance historically, however, it is paramount that we recognize it as a *descriptio*, an early modern genre of stocktaking used for informational, not historical purposes. Even though history played an important role in the text, the *Beschryvinge* was first and foremost a thorough survey of the company's actual practices.

Description has a long tradition as an epistemic genre. Since antiquity, *descriptio* was deemed a means of adequately depicting an object in rhetoric. It provided descriptions based on the observation of the external characteristics—*accidentia*—of an object. It was precisely this kind of information that early modern rulers

¹ Van Gelder, "Nederlandse bedrijfsgeschiedenis," 277–91; Stapel, "Inleiding," 1.1 also highlights the historical dimension.

and officials considered necessary to have about their operational practices, territories, and subjects.² Early modern bureaucracies developed around ideas of good governance, which included a reformulated concept of information. Information was associated with procedures for gaining empirical knowledge, such as inquiries and inquisitions. The term was also used for labeling a document, a formal procedure for obtaining information, or the epistemic process of becoming informed. Rulers and officials all over Europe called for information to support or legitimize their decisions.³ Thus, they adapted, adopted, and developed tools that could be used to acquire it.⁴

The board of directors' decision to have a description of the VOC's operations compiled was the product of a growing awareness more generally of the necessity of having a comprehensive compendium for administering the affairs of states or corporations. The *Beschryvinge* was just one of several compilatory projects the board had requested be undertaken. These company-directed initiatives have attracted little historical interest.⁵ It is important to distinguish them from undertakings carried out independently through the initiative of individuals serving the VOC. Drawing on one such initiative by director Joan Hudde, the economic historian Woodruff D. Smith described the VOC as a bureaucratic organization whose directors "gradually realized the potential business advantages in the systematic exploitation of the files by the bureaucracies."⁶ However, while Hudde's as well as some other individual initiatives undertaken to gain control over the VOC's sprawling activities were certainly part of the company's governance, they cannot be considered paradigmatic.

At the end of the seventeenth century, when several directors began noticing signs of crisis and started questioning whether the VOC's administrative structure and operative processes were sufficient to steer the company and its many branches effectively, a vigorous drive to reform the company induced a whole range of such knowledge projects. Existing research has focused on reforms in the accounting department and the aggregation of the company's maps into an atlas.⁷ Less attention has been paid, however, to the reorganization of the archive and the commissioning of the *Beschryvinge*, which is the focus of this article. None of the above measures were part of the existing administrative routine. Rather, they interrupted the day-to-day administrative procedures and required considerable additional resources to undertake.

What I will demonstrate here is that a close look at the context in which the *Beschryvinge* was produced reveals a clear dynamic between the ideals of good governance, a perception of crisis, introspection, and routine. As much as van Dam's work belongs to the growing awareness within early modern European bureaucracies that detailed information on every aspect of a corporation was crucial for its operation, it was also intimately connected to the VOC's internal discourse of crisis. The manuscript and all it took to compile it demonstrate that the discourse of crisis yielded a kind of early modern management control system. Van Dam was deeply involved in the discourse of crisis, which had considerable influence on the contents of the *Beschryvinge*. His work should be regarded as both an outcome of the VOC's internal discourse of crisis as well as a voice within it—a conservative voice that challenged the view of the company's decline. And, as such, it reinforced the power and resilience of the VOC's bureaucracy.

The Context: Directors' Anxieties and Directors' Wishes

The *Beschryvinge* depicted the VOC as a highly successful stock company that operated in Asian markets while also governing some territories as a colonial power. Founded in 1602, its monopoly, granted by the Dutch States General, gave it exclusive trading as well as governing and sovereign rights in the area between the Cape of Good Hope and the Straits of Magellan. The actions of the VOC's branches in Asia were coordinated by the High Government in Batavia (now Jakarta). Within the Netherlands, however, the governing structure was polycentric. Each of the six chambers had its own administrative body, and their deputies comprised the VOC's board of directors. Known as the "Gentlemen XVII," they met two or three

² See "Description"; Halsall, "Descriptio"; "Beschreibung"; M. Friedrich, "Chorographica," 97–99.

³ A source-based examination of medieval and early modern notions of information is given in Brendecke et al., "Information." This use of the term paved the way for our modern-day idealization of information, a development analyzed by, among others, Slack, *Invention*; Day, *Modern Invention*; Headrick, *Information*; Weller, *Information History*. For a critical discussion of this topic, see the introduction to this issue.

⁴ One example of this is Jean-Baptiste Colbert's adaption of accounting tools for record-keeping. See Soll, "Jean-Baptiste Colbert." In this issue, Sabapathy shows how practices and concepts of inquisition were adapted in different contexts.

⁵ See Bethlehem and Meijer, *VOC*; Blussé and Ooms, *Kennis*; Huigen et al., *Dutch Trading Companies*; Cook, *Matters of Exchange*; Roberts, *Centres*. Only the cartographical projects of the VOC are well known. See Zandvliet, *Mapping*; Schilder, *Sailing*.

⁶ Smith, "European-Asian Trade," 70. Smith mainly considers the papers of the VOC's director Joan Hudde (1628–1704), to which I will come back later. See also Smith, "Function," 985–1005.

⁷ Gastra, *Bewind*; Schilder, et al., *Atlas*.

times a year to deliberate over important issues and future operations. Each chamber and each branch in Asia was mandated to document its administrative processes extensively, using the same form to ensure a certain measure of uniformity across the company. Over the course of the seventeenth century, the Amsterdam chamber had increasingly become the VOC's center of power within the Dutch Republic. It commanded the most extensive and refined administrative apparatus, which was led by its *advocaat* (secretary), who also assisted the Gentlemen XVII.⁸ Pieter van Dam, a university-trained lawyer, had been the VOC's secretary since 1652.⁹

During the second half of the seventeenth century, the VOC was a very profitable trading company and a colonial power in Asia. However, since the 1670s a sense of crisis had been building among the directors. Historians have identified the years around 1680 as a period of change for the company when, after eight decades of trading, its rapid and aggressive expansion had come to an end. The trading patterns and political frameworks had altered in both Asia and in Europe, and the English East India Company had become an increasingly dangerous competitor.¹⁰ Accustomed to sales exceeding purchase prices by at least threefold, the VOC's directors became aware that they were no longer achieving this level of surplus.¹¹ These changes were grist to the mill for those who saw the company's power dwindling, reinforcing a sense of doom within the VOC. Such Cassandras were linked to two interconnecting discourses: a discourse on the disloyalty of servants and a discourse on savings.

The disloyal servant, known for his thievery, misinformation, and other misdemeanors, was an early modern stereotype that to a large extent emphasized the same issues that are today referred to as the principal-agent problem.¹² According to the company's rules and norms, private trade was a serious breach of trust and condemned as fraudulent.¹³ But since the odds of gaining from private trade made a trip to the East Indies more attractive, its prohibition was often contested, even by some of the directors themselves. Thus, to some extent, practices of self-enrichment appear to have been tolerated, even when those setting company policy viewed such permissiveness as detrimental to the VOC's interests.¹⁴ Those advocating reform focused on ending this conduct to secure substantial savings.¹⁵

Discussions on these transgressions and the necessary reforms to curtail them intensified in the late 1670s when alarming reports reached the Gentlemen XVII telling of excessive private trade in the Indian branches, the waste of money by the Council of the Indies, and the highhandedness of governors, especially in Ceylon. In response, in 1676 the Gentlemen XVII made changes to the Council of the Indies' membership and began releasing one new regulation after another to contain the problem.¹⁶ Nevertheless, returning employees continued to report a flourishing private trade in the Asian branches.¹⁷

Disappointed by the lack of success in curbing the problem, in April 1683 Coenraad van Beuningen, one of the directors of the Amsterdam chamber, requested that the chamber screen the entire company in order to propose measures to economize its operations and abolish private trade. He urged other directors to also call for internal reforms. The Amsterdam board of directors summoned a commission consisting of eleven directors and the two secretaries, van Dam and Gerbrand Elias, to make suggestions for reform.¹⁸ To overcome the harmful practices of employees abroad, a newly established commissioner general was given special powers to audit the most suspect branches in India and Ceylon. This endeavor yielded no improvements,

⁸ Gaastra, *Geschiedenis van de VOC*; Emmer and Gommans, *Rijk*, 28–33, 43–7, 280–433; the paperwork of the VOC is described in Gaastra, "Organization of the VOC."

⁹ Van Dam van Isselt, "Mr. Pieter van Dam"; Stapel, "Inleiding," 1:XIII–XVII.

¹⁰ Although they make different arguments, the following authors have noted a change during this period: Winius and Vink, *Merchant-Warrior*; Reid, *Southeast Asia*; Ota, "Transformation"; Gaastra, *Bewind*, 16–17; De Vries and Van der Woude, *Economy*, 433–40.

¹¹ De Vries and Van der Woude, *Economy*, 431–36.

¹² See Shapin, *Social History*, 393–403; Krajewski, *Diener*; Burnett, *Masters and Servants*; Klenke, *Herr und Diener*, *Hirschbiegel*, *Nahbeziehungen*, 305–23; Ziegler, "Fürstliche Beratung"; Weber, *Räte und Beamte*. A comparable case of the principal-agent problem, the "translator as traitor" in Chosŏn Korea, is discussed by Wang in this issue.

¹³ A collection of regulations and articles of employment is contained in NA, 1.04.02, no. 4928. For both, see also the documents in Van Dam, *Beschryvinge*, especially vols. 1.1, 1.2, and 3.

¹⁴ See Adams, "Principals," 21–25; for the ubiquity of the complaint, see van Goor, "God and Trade," 215. Dykstra's warning in this issue against an uncritical trust in historical sources about corruption is fully applicable to the VOC, but this is beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁵ Discussions about allowing private trade came up several times. See Colenbrander, *Jan Pietersz Coen*, 334–50; Hullu, "advies," 267–98; Weststeijn, "VOC."

¹⁶ Gaastra, *Bewind*, 121–22, 126–31; Van Dam, *Beschryvinge*, 3:132–33, 432–56. For the new regulations against private trade, see van der Chijs, *Nederlandsch-Indisch plakaatboek*, 3:8–9, 12–14, 33, 37–38.

¹⁷ Gaastra, *Bewind*, 151–55.

¹⁸ NA, 1.04.02, no. 241, Resolutions by the chamber Amsterdam, 5 and 15 April 1683.

however.¹⁹ When van Beuningen again pushed for more reforms two years later, he was met with resistance—most forcefully from Joan Hudde, one of the mayors of Amsterdam and a well-known mathematician who doubted van Beuningen’s numbers, as well as from van Dam, who challenged his assertions about the state of the company.²⁰ Van Beuningen, nevertheless, persisted in trying to convince van Dam of the merits of his reforms. In 1688, however, the Gentlemen XVII told him to stop pressing the issue.²¹

Nevertheless, the consultations about how best to improve the company’s performance continued. Hudde, in particular, argued that it was high time that the accounting procedures be overhauled, and he convinced his colleagues to tackle the problem.²² A general overview of the company’s finances had never been done before. Not only were different accounting systems used across the chambers and in Batavia, but the company’s movable assets and debts had never been factored into the balances.²³ In the process of reforming the accounting, Hudde compared the profits and costs generated by individual goods, reassessed the company’s stockpiling methods, and advocated for strengthening its focus on demand, which has made him popular among economic historians.²⁴

Hudde did not just investigate the VOC’s finances. Since taking office in 1680, he felt he knew too little about the many places where the company operated and its current modes of operation. He began compiling information about the different branches, mint values, number of personnel and ships, and so forth.²⁵ In addition, he drafted a memorandum, *De kennisse van de Compagnies Regiering* (Information about the Company’s Governance), in which he laid out “what I need to know over time to be able to serve the East India Company.”²⁶ It contained a table of contents for a description of the company. Given that it had existed for nearly a hundred years and had branches all over Asia, however, the task of compiling the information needed would be gargantuan. Hudde was well aware that an experienced hand at such endeavors was vital for its success.

At a meeting of the Amsterdam chamber on 9 July 1693, Hudde proposed that Pieter van Dam create a “comprehensive and precise description” of the company.²⁷ The chamber approved, and the Gentlemen XVII accepted the proposition the same day.²⁸ Having been the head of the company’s administration for no less than forty-one years, van Dam was the one person who possessed “ample knowledge of company matters,” including that which extended beyond the written record.²⁹ He knew which cases had been documented properly and which had not. Van Dam was not a young man, however. He had requested permission to retire five years earlier, but the directors had convinced him to stay on.³⁰ To free up the seventy-one-year-old for the job ahead, he was relieved of his daily tasks and made advisor to the directors as well as to the person who took over his post.³¹ This decision, which implied a considerable change in management, highlights the significance the description held for the directors.

What precisely the directors had hoped to achieve with the description was never made entirely clear. Hudde’s earlier statements indicate that he saw it as a collection of basic information that was required if the company was to be well served. It is not clear, however, what form the work should take: whether a handbook, a textbook, or a sound overview for initializing further reform. Van Dam called the description simply something that “the business and the benefit of the company require,” and the Gentlemen XVII adopted this wording.³² When van Dam presented his description in 1701, the directors thanked him,

¹⁹ See Gaastra, “Independent Fiscaals.” On the commissioner general Hendrik Adriaan van Reede tot Drakenstein, see Heniger, *Hendrik Adriaan van Reede*.

²⁰ Gaastra, *Bewind*, 149–51, 162–202; NA, 1.04.02, no. 242, Resolution by the chamber Amsterdam, 8 March 1685. For Hudde’s biography, see Stapel, “Johannes Hudde”; Klever, *Mannen rond Spinoza*, 53–60; Haas, “Arbeiten.”

²¹ Gaastra, *Bewind*, 194–95, 199; NA, 1.04.02, no. 7355, Resolution of the Gentlemen XVII, 5 Oct. 1688.

²² Gaastra, *Bewind*, 145–200; Stapel, “Introductie,” 1:Xf.

²³ Gaastra, *Bewind*, 203–29. On the accountancy, see de Korte, *Annual Accounting*; Funnell and Robertson, *Accounting*, 136–76. The efficiency of the VOC’s accounting has been judged differently. While Mansvelt, *Rechtsvorm*, 56, 73–76, 93–109, assesses it negatively, Glamann, *Dutch-Asiatic Trade*, 244–65, Steensgard, *Asian Trade*, 137–39 and van Goor, *Jan Pieterszoon Coen*, 195–98 are more positive.

²⁴ Smith, “European-Asian Trade,” 75, 80–81.

²⁵ See NA, 1.10.48, nos. 1–3. See Gaastra, *Bewind*, 213–36.

²⁶ NA, 1.10.48, no. 2: “Van’t geen ik metter tyd wel zal dienen te weeten om bequaam te zyn d’ Oostindische Comp^e. de bekoorlyke dienst te presteren.” For the meaning of “kennis” see Cook, *Matters*, 15–19.

²⁷ NA, 1.04.02, no. 244, Resolution by the chamber Amsterdam, 9 July 1693: “pertinente en naukeurige beschryvingh.”

²⁸ NA, 1.04.02, no. 111, Resolution by the Gentlemen XVII, 9 July 1693.

²⁹ NA, 1.04.02, no. 110, Resolution by the Gentlemen XVII, 27 Nov. 1688: “grondige kennisse van Comp^e affaires.”

³⁰ NA, 1.04.02, no. 110, Resolution by the Gentlemen XVII, 27 Nov. 1688; Van Dam van Isselt, “Mr. Pieter van Dam,” 292–94.

³¹ NA, 1.04.02, no. 111, Resolution by the Gentlemen XVII, 9 July 1693.

³² NA, 1.04.02, no. 244, Resolution of the chamber Amsterdam, 9 July 1693: “aangelegentheyt en den dienst van de Compagnie wel soude vereyschen.” See NA, 1.04.02, no. 111, Resolution by the Gentlemen XVII, 9 July 1693.

emphasizing “the benefit and the usefulness which the company receives from it, and which once in a while might originate from it.”³³ Thus, the directors saw not only an immediate but also a (possible) future benefit of having such a work.

Such references to the present and future usefulness of large cartographic or descriptive surveys were common among officials during the early modern period. It was widely believed that it was possible to govern by means of compilatory works such as the *Beschryvinge* as long as the right methods, processes, and display techniques were used when producing them. Scholars such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, William Petty, Hermann Conring, and Veit Ludwig von Seckendorff advanced such views.³⁴ They envisioned a genre designed as a general depository that was easily applicable to concrete cases by providing rulers and officials with information about the territories they oversaw. These works rendered the spaces, cultures, and polities under their rule legible and enabled them to maintain control over their resources while also revealing the administration to itself by providing overviews of all existing departments as well as their regulations and functions. They were thus meant to function as a governance tool.³⁵ Viewed against this background, van Dam’s *Beschryvinge* was part of a broader administrative movement aimed at creating well-structured reference books for the use of rulers. This also explains why the directors did not question the ambitious project and why they decided that access to the *Beschryvinge* should be restricted to the directors only.³⁶ To grasp what possible meaning this text could have had as a source of useful information for managing the company, a closer look at its contents, the paper technologies used to create it, and its relation to the archive is necessary.

Van Dam at Work: Screening the Archive(s)

On 10 March 1701, van Dam submitted the *Beschryvinge* to the Gentlemen XVII.³⁷ It was the result of years of processing information found in the archives, in the offices, and within the living archive—the secretary. The work comprised six hefty volumes, but the dedication makes clear that van Dam considered it unfinished because he promised to finalize the work in the coming years. In fact, the books we know today as the *Beschryvinge* do not represent their state in 1701. Between 1702 to 1704, van Dam added more information to them.³⁸ When he died in 1706, the fourth book was unfinished and the fifth contained nothing more than a table of contents and a draft of the first chapter.³⁹

During the long process of producing the *Beschryvinge*, it underwent a number of changes in both content and scope. Comparing Hudde’s table of contents, which is considered a pre-stage to the work,⁴⁰ a table of contents preserved in the archive, which is undated but represents an intermediary step, and the final product makes this clear. Hudde’s table of contents focuses on financial issues and accounting reform. In 1693, however, the Gentlemen XVII broadened the scope of the work to bureaucratic organization and governmental tasks. The book should elaborate the company’s “constitution, administration, and trade” since its founding; the locations in which the VOC had branches and their respective legal status in these locations; their relative position and status regarding trade, politics, religion, and the military; and all other noteworthy matters, including conflicts with Asian and European powers.⁴¹ The changes in the work’s scope are significant because they reflect the VOC’s ambivalent position between governing and trading. The

³³ NA, 1.04.02, no. 113, Resolution by the Gentlemen XVII, 10 March 1701: “den dienst en nuttigheyt die de Compe hier door staat te ontfangen, en die in tyden en wylen daer nog verder uyt soude kunnen voortkomen.”

³⁴ See Rassem, Stagl, *Statistik*; Seckendorff, *Fürstenstaat*, Additiones 17–19. Friedrich, “Zu nothdürfftiger information,” 301–2, 309–11.

³⁵ Friedrich, “Zu nothdürfftiger information”; Rutz, *Beschreibung*; for cartographical surveys, see Woodward, *Cartography*; see also the article on the Prussian *Indaganda* by Olesko in this issue.

³⁶ NA, 1.04.02, no. 113, Resolution by the Gentlemen XVII, 10 March 1701. Like the *Beschryvinge*, Van Dam’s papers were also locked away. See NA, 1.04.02, no. 114, Resolution by the Gentlemen XVII, 24 July 1706.

³⁷ NA, 1.04.02, no. 113, Resolution by the Gentlemen XVII, 10 March 1701: “ses volumina.” Compare: NA, 1.04.02, no. 246, Resolution by the chamber Amsterdam, 10 March 1701. The dedication mentions eight volumes; see Aanbiedingsbrief in Van Dam, *Beschryvinge*, 1/1:2–3. Frederik Willem Stapel suggested that the protocol refers to the five books plus the registers. See Stapel, “Inleiding,” 1:XX, note 2.

³⁸ The chapter on Japan contains letters from Deshima which date from after 1701; see Van Dam, *Beschryvinge*, 2/1:550. Amendments can be found in all volumes; see Van Dam, *Beschryvinge*, 1/1:193, 364; *Beschryvinge*, 1/2:39, 289, 630–31; *Beschryvinge*, 2/1:131, 164, 179–80; *Beschryvinge*, 2/2:395, *Beschryvinge*, 2/3:127, 155, 173; and *Beschryvinge*, 3:344, 347. The chapter on the Philippines in the second book was likely added later, as it goes beyond the original chapter count; see Stapel, “Inleiding,” 2/1:XIV. It is included in both versions of the index: NA, 1.11.01.01, no. 2115 and NA, 1.04.02, no. 4628.

³⁹ Van Boetzelaer, Introduction to *Beschryvinge*, VII–XIII.

⁴⁰ Stapel, “Inleiding,” 1:XI.

⁴¹ NA, 1.04.02, no. 111, Resolution by the Gentlemen XVII, 9 July 1693: “constitutie, regeringh en handel.”

language of “state” and “economy” was intermixed throughout the crisis discussions, although it is important to remember that neither “state” nor “economy” was a fully developed concept in the seventeenth century.⁴²

Besides a new emphasis on bureaucratic organization and governmental tasks, the changes led to a significant increase in size. Books one to three alone consisted of ninety-eight chapters—compared to Hudde’s fifteen. The two volumes of the first book contained information about the organizational structure of the company in the Netherlands, its personnel, and its relations with Dutch and other European governmental bodies. In the second book, van Dam gathered information on the Asian regions where the company maintained a branch. Book three discussed the VOC’s administrative units in Asia as well as the local governments the company ran. Book four dealt with the ecclesiastical service within the VOC and its relationship with the church.⁴³ The unfinished fifth book was intended to address the VOC’s conflicts with the English East India Company.⁴⁴ The text itself reveals that in the course of the lengthy process of compiling and writing the volumes, the structure changed constantly, further evidence of how the scope of the description grew. For instance, the comparison of the final table of contents with an undated but older version shows a shift towards a geographically focused account of governance and trade and more detailed descriptions of the VOC’s administration in Asia. Furthermore, chapters on the company’s relationship to the church and its conflicts with the English East India Company were added.⁴⁵

Van Dam obtained the substance for his work from records that were already available. Each of the six chambers had their own collection of documents, which varied in content, scope, and condition, but he focused mostly on the Amsterdam chamber’s archive. The chamber conducted half of the company’s business, and many of the company’s central offices were also based there. In addition, the Gentlemen XVII and the company’s committee charged with the annual inspection of all of the chambers’ ledgers met in Amsterdam. This meant that most of the VOC’s correspondence was kept in the archives of the Amsterdam chamber, including the incoming letters of the States General, the States of Holland, and the papers of the Haags Besogne, a commission responsible for reviewing and excerpting letters arriving from Asia.⁴⁶

When van Dam began his work, the Amsterdam archive had been growing over several decades in anything but an orderly fashion. It is questionable whether it could even be called an archive in more than a metaphorical sense. As recent studies on the history of archives have shown, every archive is the product of continually changing needs and contexts. Archives, by their nature, are closely connected with the emergence of bureaucratic operations.⁴⁷ This certainly applies to the archive of the Amsterdam chamber. The directors’ desire for sound knowledge of the company’s past and present performance went hand in hand with the reorganization of its poorly managed archive. Little is known about its history, however.⁴⁸ What we do know is that, despite attempts to bring the expanding archival records into order in the 1620s, the files continued to be stored in different locations or just in piles in various functionaries’ offices.⁴⁹ Space in the East India House itself had long since run out, and reams of documents had been stacked in numerous piles in a depot in Oostenburg near the harbor—an inconvenient location for anyone who needed access to them.⁵⁰ Thus, locating and selecting relevant documents was a daunting undertaking for van Dam.⁵¹ Two years after he had been tasked with compiling the *Beschryvinge*, the directors of the Amsterdam chamber decided to create a “charterkamer,” or record room, to bring all of the records together in one location. A commission of three directors worked with one of the secretaries (possibly van Dam) to draw up plans.⁵² The

⁴² Neither contemporaries nor current research agree as to whether the VOC should be considered a commercial or a governmental entity, as something in between, or something original. Recently, the discussion intensified with Stern’s, *Company-State*, a reinterpretation of the EIC. See Emmer and Gaastra, *Organization*; Erikson, *Capitalism*; Clulow and Mostert, *English East India Companies*.

⁴³ Van Dam, *Beschryvinge* 1.1–4.

⁴⁴ NA, 1.11.01.01, no. 2115.

⁴⁵ For the undated table of contents see: NA, 1.04.02, no. 4637.

⁴⁶ Pennings, “Origin,” 30; Slot, van Hoof, and Lequin, “Notes,” 56–57. A description of the paperwork during the years 1737–1750 provides Vriend, “An unbelievable amount of paper,” 72–76. Delmas, *Voyages de l’écrit* is concerned with the circulation of written material but not with its keeping.

⁴⁷ The history of the archives is in a boom period. To name but a few studies: Head, *Making Archives*; M. Friedrich, *Geburt des Archivs*; Yale, “History of Archives”; Corens et al., *Archives*.

⁴⁸ Pennings, “Origin.”

⁴⁹ In 1627, the directors ordered that the book “liggende boven op de Rekenkamer, int Comptoir ofte int vertreck” be sorted by geographical location. NA, 1.04.02, no. 229, Resolution by the chamber Amsterdam, 20 May 1627.

⁵⁰ See NA, 1.04.02, no. 244, Resolution by the chamber Amsterdam, 28 July 1695.

⁵¹ This confirms that an archive is not automatically a site of knowledge and can only become one when it is used as such; see M. Friedrich, *Geburt des Archivs*, 15–18.

⁵² NA, 1.04.02, no. 244, Resolution by the chamber Amsterdam, 28 July 1695. Van Dam attended the meeting, yet it is not known if he or his colleague were part of the commission.

four struck a deal with the city to convert a building near the East India House into an archive, and in 1699, a “bibliotecarius” was hired to sort the documents and create a repository.⁵³

The historian J. C. M. Pennings has suggested a direct connection between these actions and van Dam’s description.⁵⁴ This is possible, but not provable. Both projects, however, were closely intertwined, as they responded to the same need for immediate access to information that had suddenly been deemed necessary, although they did so in different ways. While the restructuring of the archive was aimed at providing access to all the preserved files, the *Beschryvinge* was intended to allow instant access to the most important information needed to manage the company effectively. In the archive, files were classified and referenced to their system location—a system that was designed to be expanded. In contrast, in the *Beschryvinge* the information considered the most important during the period in which van Dam wrote it was frozen in time as permanently valid.

Van Dam, who had built his entire career on the use of documents, believed that the company’s records held the answer to almost everything required to run it successfully. All that was needed was a suitable method of extracting information from the company’s past into a format that was easily accessible for future use. From the few files of his that have been preserved, we can reconstruct how he used the archival materials. Van Dam’s files consist of thematically related excerpts from the VOC’s stocks that had been copied by different scribes. Some were held together by threads.⁵⁵ One file contains passages from a description of the company’s affairs in a memorandum made on the occasion of a transfer of office (*memorie van overgave*); another contains twelve excerpts on Ceylon; a third, copies of contracts with the people residing in the Spice Islands, a fourth, extracts on Ternate, and a fifth, notes on cloves.⁵⁶

Van Dam and his assistants assessed the resolutions and letters of the Gentlemen XVII and the Amsterdam chamber, protocols from different committees, orders, decrees, regulations issued by the directors as well as the Governor-General and the Council of the Indies, correspondence with the offices in Batavia, which included the correspondence of the branches. They also worked through ship logbooks, account books, the *dagregister* (diary) of Batavia, and the decisions made by the States General and the provinces within the VOC’s concern.⁵⁷ Van Dam even used private letters.⁵⁸ All of these were excerpted, dated, and tagged with their sources.⁵⁹ He sifted through these excerpts, marked passages he considered useful, underlined and highlighted them, added glosses, and marked important sections with an “N” for *nota*—all standard practices at the time.⁶⁰ He placed keywords on the back of dossiers he used to file these texts to indicate their content. In some cases, he took notes on documents, summarizing several in a few lines each.⁶¹

The *Beschryvinge* was comprised of text segments copied word for word and passages van Dam compiled from various texts in his own words. A comparison of the excerpts preserved in the files with passages in the *Beschryvinge* based on them shows that he worked mainly with the underlined passages, usually not adopting them wholesale. The numerous excerpts on Ternate, for example, shrank to a few passages in Book 2.1.⁶² Van Dam sometimes rounded off the numbers he used in the book, especially when he did not trust the ones given. For example, he rounded off the number given for Christians residing in Ceylon because he found them to be in variance with what he knew.⁶³

Neither the descriptions of regions nor the passages explaining the company’s operations followed a fixed template. For the parts that traced the organizational development, van Dam reconstructed the evolution of each of the offices in chronological order. While drafting sections, he also noted the absence of important documents, such as the regulations for the office of the Directeur-Generaal (the second-in-command in

⁵³ NA, 1.04.02, no. 244, Resolution by the chamber Amsterdam, 7 May 1696 and no. 245, Resolution by the chamber Amsterdam, 6 July 1699.

⁵⁴ Pennings, “Origin,” 33.

⁵⁵ They are literally “filed up,” as the word file derives from the string (filum). See Wolfe and Stallybrass, “Material Culture,” 180–81.

⁵⁶ NA, 1.04.02, nos. 4630–4635.

⁵⁷ For a detailed list, see Stapel, “Inleiding,” 1:XXXIX.

⁵⁸ NA, 1.04.02, no. 4631: Extract uyt een brief, door den Raad Ordinaris D’ Heer Laurens Pyl geschreven ... aan d’Heer Burgermeester Witsen.

⁵⁹ E.g.: NA, 1.04.02, no. 4631, 1: “missive van de heer Rykloff van goens gez. aende gouverneur generael de heeren Raden van India uyt colombo dato 23 en October a° 1665 staende int tweede deel van batavias inkoment briefboeck overgebracht met’t schip de wassende maen a° 1666.”

⁶⁰ On note-taking, see Blair, *Too Much to Know*; Cevolini, *Forgetting Machines*; Décultot and Zedelmaier, *Exzerpt, Plagiat, Archiv*; Blair and Yeo, “Note-Taking.”

⁶¹ NA, 1.04.02, no. 4631.

⁶² Compare NA, 1.04.02, no. 4633 to Van Dam, *Beschryvinge* 2.1., 48–50.

⁶³ He juxtaposed different numbers in Van Dam, *Beschryvinge* 2.2., 314–15. For 1684 he used a rounded number for the Christians in Jaffanapatnam (314: “over de 140.000”), while his source in NA, 1.04.02, no. 4631 gave exactly 141.456.

Asia), which were nowhere to be found.⁶⁴ Incidents like this proved the importance of his work as well as that of reorganizing the archive.

When writing up the texts, the archival materials themselves often determined the presentation of the information, particularly when describing regions and locations. Van Dam often used one text as a base text with which to begin and then added passages from other texts. For the base text, he usually preferred descriptions by officials who had remained for some time in an area and tended to select ones from the last quarter of the seventeenth century. This is evident, for instance, in his reliance on the report by Daniël Havart for the Indian Coromandel Coast and Rijcklof van Goen's description of Java, both officials who were known for their knowledge of these regions.⁶⁵ His main text for the chapters on the Spice Islands of the Moluccas and Ambon, however, was a draft made from similar reports in Hudde's collection. In this case, van Dam reworked various passages and added information from other sources.⁶⁶

Although van Dam took great care to note each reference he used in his excerpts, he did not adopt this method in the *Beschryvinge*. Instead, he chose to add notes in the margins, referencing some but by far not all of the documents he consulted. In many chapters, van Dam used documents containing additional information on certain regional characteristics, botanical descriptions, lists with numbers, or memorable advice by officials to supplement the texts. The description of the Sago tree, for instance, was taken from the manuscript of Georg Eberhard Rumphius' *Amboinsche Kruid-Boek*, which was deposited in the company's archive in 1696.⁶⁷ Prescriptive writings, such as articles of employment for different ranks, oaths, regulations, and orders were added to chapters dedicated to the description of the offices. For some of these texts, the copy inserted in the *Beschryvinge* is the only existing record.⁶⁸

Documents added to the chapters as well as references in the margins functioned as evidence that increased the credibility of the material presented only insofar as they enabled the reader to read up on a given topic in more detail. Much more than archival evidence, however, van Dam wanted his readers to trust his own "proficiency and experience," which he had acquired as the company's administrator for nearly fifty years.⁶⁹ It is clear that he envisioned the *Beschryvinge* as *the* authoritative record of the company's operations, making further referencing unnecessary. In a sense, he meant it to replace the archive: as thematically sorted excerpts of the archive's essence. As such, the work was intended to provide all the knowledge needed to run the company and thereby supersede its archival record.

Lessons from the Archive: A Caveat on Crisis

Scholars have often described archives as tools of knowledge and power or as places where the world's complexities are rendered legible.⁷⁰ Van Dam's experiences in writing the *Beschryvinge*, however, suggest that an alternative reading of early modern archives as more or less disordered stacks of paper corresponds better to reality, a point that has been made repeatedly in recent research.⁷¹ To a certain extent, van Dam's *Beschryvinge* was intended to replace the unruly archive. Its making sheds light on the demands that the directors made on both the books and the archive. But it also reveals the author's deep involvement in the controversy over the perceived crisis. What should have been a faithful compilation of information and documents also became a piece of politics.

The *Beschryvinge* embodied van Dam's legacy as the company's longest-serving secretary. His legacy comprised more than his extensive knowledge of the organization: what van Dam produced was a bureaucrat's stocktaking of the company's affairs and an interpretation of its much-debated flaws. In his dedication, he elucidated how he wanted his work to be read. He devoted a substantial portion of his dedication to blaming

⁶⁴ Van Dam, *Beschryvinge* 3, 65.

⁶⁵ Van Dam used Havart's handwritten report from 1681. Later, Havart published a revised version as *Op-En Ondergang Van Cormandel*. See Stapel, "Inleiding," 2/1:XII; NA, 1.10.32, no. 13, is a handwritten copy of van Goen's "Corte Beschryvinge van't Eyland Java," Amsterdam, 25 March 1656. Van Dam added some information regarding the missing degree of longitude for Bali (*Beschryvinge*, 2/3:376, which is not correct) and altered the passage on navigating the southern coast.

⁶⁶ NA, 1.10.48, nos. 1, 2, "Sommier verhael," in comparison with Van Dam, *Beschryvinge*, 2/1 chaps. 2 and 3. Identical passages are Van Dam, 31–33 – "Sommier verhael," fol. 1v–2v, and after an addition Van Dam, 34 – "Sommier verhael," fol. 3v.

⁶⁷ Van Dam, *Beschryvinge*, 2/1:213–19. Rumphius's manuscript was published in 1741. Parallel passages are Rumphius, *Herbarium*, 1:72–7, 78–9. Passages of Rumphius's manuscript circulated among the directors before the books were printed. An extract forms part of the Hudde collection: 1.10.48 no. 1. While the extract of Rumphius's manuscript in Hudde's files and Van Dam's *Beschryvinge*, 2/1:213–19, are identical, the version edited by Johannes Burmannus and printed in the *Herbarium* differs. For Rumphius, see Buijze, *Georg Everhard Rumphius*.

⁶⁸ The only surviving copy of the articles of employment for Willem Jansz Blaeu, e.g., is inserted in Van Dam, *Beschryvinge* 1.1, 414–15.

⁶⁹ Aanbiedingsbrief, in Van Dam, *Beschryvinge*, 1/1:3, "kennisse en ervaerentheit."

⁷⁰ To name but a few examples: Richards, *Imperial Archive*; Grebe, *Akten*; Soll, *Information Master*.

⁷¹ M. Friedrich, *Geburt des Archivs*, 193–229.

the directors of being ignorant of the VOC's rules and records, which he claimed led them to make poor decisions.⁷² He argued that the information on its previous courses of action provided the best means of establishing which actions to take in administering the company, but that the directors (especially the new ones) possessed only a "superficial notion" of its history and current administration.⁷³ The *Beschryvinge* was intended to inform them of everything they needed to know to run the company. It was a handbook and a textbook on the company's self-knowledge in one.

At the same time, however, the *Beschryvinge* literally in-formed the company by giving the organization a fixed form as well as inscribing van Dam's perception and priorities into its very texture. Accounting, for example, which was so dominant in Hudde's view of the crisis, played a minor role, whereas rules and regulations were discussed in detail. Although it was compiled from source material from different times and varies in density and consistency, the *Beschryvinge* portrayed the company's areas of operation as connected and controllable. While the directors suspected that the VOC was disorganized, secretary van Dam presented it as a well-ordered business.

Van Dam, however, was not blind to things that were going wrong. But failure to him appeared to have been caused less by structures requiring reform than by agents failing to follow rules and established procedures. This reading of the situation becomes evident in the chapters on private trade and the burdens of the VOC, which were themselves remnants of the crisis discourse. Van Dam argued that private trade was not a result of an absence of proper rules and ordinances to prohibit and punish misbehavior, but of their ineffectiveness, not least because the directors themselves regularly violated them. Allowing one exception had led to allowing many others. He claimed that the rules, while "strict and precise, were never observed faithfully nor executed."⁷⁴ In his eyes, the social relationships in which the directors were involved had undermined the company's rules of conduct, as all of the directors were part of patronage and brokerage structures that had been forged before they had joined the company.⁷⁵ Since misdeeds were unavoidable, it was crucial to limit them. He went further, cautioning the directors to be careful using reports from the East Indies. These records had taught him that the lack of sound knowledge about Asian customs had led to misunderstandings.⁷⁶ But, he also warned against being fooled by reports of manipulative employees there.⁷⁷ The lesson from the archive in this case was to pay more heed to the expert advice of the Council of the Indies.

This was not all that his experience and his study of the archive had taught him, however. In his dedication, van Dam made his opinion on reform clear. He advised against making hasty changes because they often "have not only not begotten any improvement but rather have been harmful and detrimental."⁷⁸ He insisted that one should not introduce new rules when good ones already existed and stressed that he had found perfectly good rules against every offense.⁷⁹ In his view, the stringent implementation of the existing rules was more effective than any new reforms.

After years of working on the *Beschryvinge*, van Dam, the head of the VOC's administration for decades, composed a nearly Weberian image of it as a highly efficient apparatus and rebuffed the sense of crisis that had prevailed among the directors. If the company was indeed endangered, then it had become so through the actions of the people serving in all its ranks, from the lowly hireling to the directors. While his words might sound surprisingly outspoken to modern ears, van Dam's interpretation was in fact quite traditional. Refuting the reality of an apparent crisis within the VOC's structures and procedures, he presented himself as an impartial voice who let history be the judge of the matter. Relying on the VOC's archive had given him yet another key piece of evidence for rebutting calls for dramatic change: the records were replete with complaints about private trade and the disloyalty of servants, which had been voiced "from the very beginning of the company, and even before its founding," yet the company still existed.⁸⁰ By grounding the discourse of doom and disloyalty in its own long tradition of it, van Dam put the perception of crisis into historical perspective. In so doing, he took the crisis discourse to a metalevel, and, with this, created doubt

⁷² Aanbiedingsbrief, in Van Dam, *Beschryvinge*, 1/1:4.

⁷³ Van Dam, *Beschryvinge*, 2/1:14, "superficiële bevattinge."

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:371–91. Quote on 386: "wel strict en precis, maar deselve sijn noyt in diervoegen na de letter opgevolght en geëxecuteert."

⁷⁵ For patronage within the VOC, see Adams, *Familial State*; Adams, "Principals"; Brandon, *War*.

⁷⁶ Van Dam, *Beschryvinge*, 3:435, "de dingen nu end an verkeerdelijck warden opgevath."

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 2/2, chap. 27.

⁷⁸ Aanbiedingsbrief, in *Beschryvinge*, 1/1:4, "niet alleen geen verbeteringe hebben bygebraght, maar selfs schadelijck en nadeligh sijn geweest."

⁷⁹ Aanbiedingsbrief, in Van Dam, *Beschryvinge*, 1/1:3–4.

⁸⁰ Van Dam, *Beschryvinge*, 3:370, "al van den beginne van de Compagnie af, selfs vóór het opregten van dien." A similar statement can be found in: Van Dam, *Beschryvinge*, 3:135, 408.

in the need for fundamental reforms. His compilation thus manifested first and foremost the power and resilience of the VOC's bureaucracy.

Conclusion

A closer look into the complex circumstances underlying the creation of van Dam's *Beschryvinge* reveals that the production of knowledge and information has not only a material, practical, and structural dimension but also a social and political one. Both the *Beschryvinge* and the reorganization of the archive responded to two closely intertwined needs of the VOC's directors, namely the acute necessity for information due to a perception of crisis and the desire for quick access to information at a moment's notice.

The sense of crisis within the VOC was closely connected to the imagination of the past, present, and future. Whereas opinions differed as to the scope of reforms needed, all of those involved felt they lacked the knowledge of past and present transactions necessary to assess the situation accurately. This conviction provided the catalyst for reevaluating the existing records by commissioning the *Beschryvinge* and reorganizing the archive. Both projects disrupted the bureaucratic routine and provoked a close examination of operational practices. Description and history became modes of crisis management.⁸¹ In a sense, the crisis discourse served as an early modern management control system by instigating self-reflection and real action to keep the company going.

Van Dam did not deliver a history of the company; his task was to provide the directors with easily accessible information that helped them to tighten their grip on the sprawling organization. This was also an attempt at world-making, since the facts that crystallized in this process were established as *the* knowledge on the state of the VOC. However, van Dam was also involved in the politics within the company and took a stance that had an impact on the manuscript. Every historian who turns to this much-used source must consider this.

The secretary faithfully collected everything he could find about the organization of the company. The conclusions he drew may have been more timely than the directors would have liked to admit when they emphasized the *Beschryvinge's* future usefulness. Van Dam himself would have been less surprised. When he submitted his unfinished description in 1701, adorned with his admonitory words against hasty decisions and radical reforms, a host of new cases of scandalous private trade had become known just a few days earlier.⁸² Once the manuscript was in their hands, the directors deemed the weighty tomes so precious that they locked them away in their meeting room. The *Beschryvinge* was present at all their meetings until the last regular one in 1796. Even if it was never used as a handbook, it became the symbol of the well-organized company—if not for the directors, then certainly for historians.

Competing Interests

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⁸¹ In *History*, Samman has recently pointed out that history still is one mode of crisis management in financial circles.

⁸² See NA, 1.04.02, no. 113, Resolution by the Gentlemen XVII, 7 and 9 March 1701.

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