



The French East India Company Museum, Lorient, Gwen Broudic

Jon. So could I ask, Gwen, first of all, what's the origin of this museum?

Gwen Well it's ... the museum borned in more than thirty years ago. It was established here in 1984, because there were, there was three hundred, three hundred years of the city of...

Jon. Anniversary.

Gwen. Yes, anniversary of Lorient, the town. Though in the beginning for the anniversary there was association, uh, a group of people which give, gave the town about 30 objects, around the thematic of Company, India Company, French East India Company.

Jon. So private individuals donated these objects?

Gwen. Yes. It was around the anniversary of the, of the town, and then it was, it was, a first collection was given to the town.

Jon. Right, we're standing right by a display case here, showing us statue of a camel, a model of a camel. Is this one of the objects that was donated?

Gwen. No, it was more small, small objects, like most, mostly porcelains, so Chinese porcelain for exportation, for French market, a few on-board objects for navigation ...

Jon. For ships.

Gwen. For shipping.

Jon. OK. So, sorry, another question. What is the origin then of the actual company itself?

Gwen Uh, so the company, French East India Company, borned in 1664, for French East India Company. It's more than 50 years after the English one which is the EIC, which is born in 1600, and the Dutch company born in 1602.

Jon. So established by ... was it Vauban?

Gwen. Er no, Vauban is more to do with ...

Jon. With defence. So was it Colbert?

Gwen. So it's Colbert, which want to give Louis Quatorze which wants to give to French a power, a power on, on sea. And he, he wanted to established a French power on the seas.

Jon. In direct competition then to the English fleets and the Dutch?

Gwen. Yes, it is. But it's also because the French don't want to, to let only all the merchants and the goods from Asia and India to Dutch and British, or English, so they built their companies to go directly there for getting some products and make some benefits, of course it's for commercial exchange, a commercial adventure, and so.....

Jon. And it must have been very lucrative, the actual trade?

Gwen. Yeah, it was for, uh, for some, for some goods, but it was also ... it needed a lot of capitals during many years, so it was not easy to manage products like china. They only accepted silver, or, or almost silver, so products made in Europe had to exchange, for example in Africa, for some other products or the French had to, to buy silver from Spanish which has silver coming from South America, so they had to already-made exchanges to be able to buy some products in Asia. So it was a quite complete ... quite complex ...

Jon. Complicated.

Gwen. Yeah.

Jon. So which would be the products that would be most highly prized?

Gwen. So there were porcelain from China, it was ... most merchandi..., merchandise coming from there was porcelain, tea, silk and but from India, for example, it was fabrics, cotton fabrics, yes, spices also, of course. There was also coffee from Masca...I don't know , from Bourbon Island, France island which is in Maurice which is in Île Borbon, no, La Reunion, Île Maurice ...

Jon. Now we can hear in the background, there's another talk taking place here, and in fact today is the anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade, that's why the talk is taking place now. So how does slavery fit into the overall picture?

Gwen. So, uh, compa...., company wanted to make benefits, and there were some new goods to, to sell, like sugar, which was quite new for ... which was new and benefit and useful at this time, and then for making sugar for there was needed from, for people, to go to work in the sugar cane I don't know if it's like that...?

Jon. Cane sugar.

Gwen. Cane sugar, thank you.

Jon. In fact, I've just been listening to the talk, and I've learnt something new today: sugar was used not just to flavour food, but as a kind of preservative, like salt. I didn't know that.

Gwen. Yes, it was the essential of this product at that time was, was for conservation, like, yeah, making jam or something and preserve food also on board, because it was, uh, it was very difficult on board to stay healthy, and so the people on board needed some healthy food. They discover later that it was a lack of vitamin which made some disease.

So sugar was a part of it. There was salt also but it was known since a long time, and so sugar became a major point of...product for conservation.

Jon. For conservation.

Gwen. Yes, for conservation.

Jon. So how long did the transatlantic passage take, then, say from Port Louis to the Caribbean, for example?

Gwen. So it was about ... between 12 and 18 months to make the, the round trip, maybe.

Jon. The 'round trip' being where?

Gwen. From France to Africa, to take some ... to exchange goods against slaves, or what people which will became slaves, then go until the United States, America, Caribbean Sea, and, yes, and then exchange again the goods, and the, the mens which became slaves later, and then go back to Europe it was about 12 months, until eighteen.

Jon. A long time.

Gwen. Yes, it was quite a long time. For going to Asia it was even longer, because it was between 18 and took almost two years to go and back the round trip.

Jon. Okay. Finally, it's a very interesting place, the Citadel that we're in here, it's got not just this museum but I think two other museums. So could you say a little bit about the actual construction of the overall complex, the site?

Gwen. Yes, the museum take place in a citadel, which is late 16th century and it was built by Spanish, and then it was chosen by..... French East India Company to to make the, the centre of their shipbuilding here. And now it's still a Citadel ... the Citadel still exists, with Marine.... National Marine Museum, and the French East India Company Museum.

Jon. Gwen, I think that's enough for now. Thank you very much, it's a fascinating museum.

