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Achinese sackings of Johore

Date: 1613–1615

From: *Encyclopedia of Wars, vol. 1*

PRINCIPAL COMBATANTS: Aceh vs. Johore

PRINCIPAL THEATER(S): Johore and Perak in southern Malaysia

DECLARATION: None

MAJOR ISSUES AND OBJECTIVES: Aceh sought to take advantage of the Portuguese-Dutch colonial war in the East Indies to grab the mineral-rich Perak region. They thus hoped to preempt the Dutch from establishing an entrêpot at Johore, from whence they could both control the Spice Islands trade and easily threaten nearby Aceh.

OUTCOME: Aceh sacked and razed Johore and became a player in the Spice Islands trade; the Dutch set up Batavia as their entrêpot in Indonesia.

APPROXIMATE MAXIMUM NUMBER OF MEN UNDER ARMS: Possibly 100,000 Achinese troops; Johore forces, unknown

CASUALTIES: Unknown

TREATIES: None

At the dawn of the 17th century, the Dutch and the Portuguese both claimed supremacy in Indonesia and thus over trading rights to the fecund Spice Islands of Malaysia. The Dutch had begun to challenge Portugal's naval superiority as far back as 1579, almost immediately after the Netherlands had wrung independence from Spain. Dutch ships launched incursions into all of Portugal's far-flung colonies, and for more than a quarter century the two European powers battled for control of trade routes in the South China Sea, the Java Sea, and the Indian Ocean. As Portuguese sea power waned and the Dutch navy suffered growing pains, a power vacuum appeared in Indonesia.

As the Portuguese chased the Dutch out of Malacca and the Dutch did the same to the Portuguese in east Indonesia, the sultan of Aceh (or Achin)—an independent province in northern Sumatra—rushed to fill the vacuum. Iskandar Shah (1583?–1636) quickly became leader of the most powerful military force in the region and expanded Achinese trade in the Spice Islands. Iskandar knew that the Netherlands was looking for a central entrêpot at which to locate its trading capital, and he guessed correctly that Johore, capital city of Perak (an area of southern Malaysia rich in mineral deposits), was a prime candidate. Iskandar's strategy in sending the Achinese army against Johore was twofold: He wanted first to establish his dominance over Perak before either the Dutch or the Portuguese had a chance to stop him. Second, he wanted to prevent a Dutch move into Achinese Sumatra, his immediate sphere of influence. In the event, Johore was no match for the powerful Achinese army, which mercilessly sacked the Perakian capital in 1613. Two years later the Achinese returned and completely razed Johore.

Although the colonial Portuguese-Dutch Wars in the East Indies, which had begun in 1601, would not end until 1641, the Dutch actually began to exercise hegemony over the region as early as

1610. For the time being, at least, Aceh had succeeded in keeping the Dutch out of Johore. The Netherlands selected Batavia as the trading center for the Dutch United East India Company, and the Dutch onslaught would not truly vanquish Aceh for nearly three centuries.



Further Information

Richard J. Wilkinson, *History of the Peninsular Malays, with Chapters on Perak and Selangor* (1923; reprint ed., New York: AMS Press, n.d.).



Citation Information

Text Citation:

Phillips, Charles, and Alan Axelrod. "Achinese sackings of Johore." *Encyclopedia of Wars*, vol. 1. New York: Facts On File, Inc., 2005. *Modern World History Online*. Facts On File, Inc. <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE53&iPin=EWAR0009&SingleRecord=True> (accessed August 2, 2009).

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