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Arakan and Bengal : the rise and decline of the Mrauk U kingdom (Burma) from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century AD

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY OF THE ARAKAN-BENGAL CONTINUUM

After the collapse of the colonial empires following World War II historians have struggled to identify coherent regional spaces in Asian Studies to gain a better grasp on a variety of issues such as processes of state formation, trade, economics, and civilization. The common drive behind these efforts was the success of comparable studies in European historiography where such (supra) regional views produced remarkable gains in the understanding of the past.¹ As a result of these efforts notions of South Asia or Southeast Asia developed helping scholars to interpret historical developments in a broader context. A. Reid's theories on the 'Age of Commerce' and the 'Seventeenth century crisis in Southeast Asia' are influential examples following such a regional approach.² As a side-effect of the regionalization of Asian Studies areas such as Arakan, straddling the arguably anachronistic boundaries between South- and Southeast Asia, were marginalized in the discourse on Asian history.³

In the late 1990s a paradigm shift occurred inspired by the works of historians like K.N. Chaudhuri and D. Lombard who introduced concepts such as the 'Indian Ocean' or the 'Bay of Bengal'.⁴ Chaudhuri for example sought to construct an Asian *Méditerranée* based

¹ The most famous European construct of a so-called explanatory space remains of course Fernand Braudel's forceful exposition on the *Méditerranée* as a homogenous area of enquiry. In this and other works Braudel and the historians of the Annales school stressed the importance of the 'material infrastructure' on history and they developed notions such as *longue durée* and *civilisation matérielle*. F. Braudel, 'Histoire et sciences sociales. La longue durée', *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations* 13 (1958), pp. 725-752; Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* 2 vols. 3rd ed. (Paris, 1976), pp. 13-17; Idem, *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme XVe-XVIIIe siècle* 3 vols. (Paris, 1979) I, *Le possible et l'impossible*, pp. 7-13.

² Anthony Reid, 'An 'Age of Commerce' in Southeast Asian History', *Modern Asian Studies* 24.1 (1990); A. Reid, 'The seventeenth-century crisis in Southeast Asia', *Modern Asian Studies* 24.4 (1990), pp. 639-659; Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680* 2 vols (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993); Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era. Trade, power, and belief* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1993). Reid, *The last stand of Asian autonomies. Responses to modernity in the diverse States of Southeast Asia and Korea 1750-1900* (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1997).

³ Reid's theories have received fundamental and detailed criticism with regard to periodization and regional coherence. For a good summary see Victor Lieberman, *Strange parallels. Southeast Asia in global context, c. 800-1830. Volume 1: Integration on the mainland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 15-21. See also Niels Steensgaard, 'The seventeenth century crisis and the unity of Eurasian History', *Modern Asian Studies* 24.4 (1990), pp. 683-697; V. Lieberman, 'Was the Seventeenth Century a Watershed in Burmese History?', Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era*; Lieberman, 'An Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia? Problems of Regional coherence A review article', *Journal of Asian Studies* 54.3 (1995), pp. 796-807; Lieberman, 'Mainland Archipelagic parallels and contrasts c. 1750 1850', Reid *The last stand of Asian autonomies*. and J. van Goor, 'Review of Anthony Reid, Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce', *Bijdragen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 153 (1997), pp. 445-454.

⁴ K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean. An economic history from the rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); D. Lombard, *Le carrefour Javanais. Essai d'histoire globale* 3 vols. (Paris, 1990), pp. 1:13-19. See also S. Chandra ed., *The Indian Ocean: Explorations in History, Commerce, and Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1987).

on an analysis of trade and communication in the Indian Ocean. The idea was grounded on Braudel's interpretative trinity of region, structure, and period. Chaudhuri wanted to bring out the underlying cohesion of the Indian Ocean and the contrasting nature of its different civilizations by integrating specialized research into what he called 'a general mosaic of interpretation'.⁵ Chaudhuri showed the significant degree to which the trading networks of the Indian Ocean were integrated into a genuine regional commercial culture, which formed an *économie-monde* of its own. Following this network oriented approach Jos Gommans and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have argued that within the Indian Ocean the Bay of Bengal constituted a distinct unity before the onset of high colonialism in the nineteenth century.⁶ It is their contention that only then Western technology, shipping and communication had developed sufficiently to break up established patterns of trade that depended on the monsoon.⁷ Gommans and Subrahmanyam rightly stressed the ongoing characteristics of openness and mobility in the context of an open frontier region. The Bay of Bengal in this view should be seen as a historical entity united by the system of the monsoon.

As a result of this new focus on the Bay of Bengal studies appeared which analyzed more in detail historical developments along the shores of the Bay of Bengal.⁸ The studies which were the result of the paradigm-shift from the post-colonial Area Studies approach to a more network oriented approach clearly pointed at gaps in our historical knowledge of regions such as Arakan that had earlier been neglected. In 1999 this realization gave rise to the Amsterdam conference on Coastal Burma which sought to transgress national, disciplinary, and linguistic boundaries in order to be able to reassert Arakan's place on the historical map of the Bay of Bengal.⁹ Following a similar approach the present Chapter seeks to provide a basic understanding of Arakan's economic geography and its place in the Bay of Bengal. This understanding is essential if we are to interpret Arakan's historical development properly.

It is the focus on the Bay of Bengal which tied the various regions of the Arakanese littoral and south-eastern Bengal together and which characterized the rhythm of life in this part of the Indian Ocean. The Arakanese littoral and south-eastern Bengal in the first place formed

⁵ Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization*, p. 4.

⁶ J. Gommans, 'Trade and Civilization around the Bay of Bengal, c. 1650-1800', 19.3 *Itinerario* (1995), pp. 82-108. S. Subrahmanyam, 'Connected histories: Notes towards a reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia', *Modern Asian Studies* 31.3 (1997), pp. 735-762.

⁷ Cf. Peter Klein, 'The China Seas and the World Economy between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: The Changing Structures of Trade', Carl-Ludwig Holtfrerich ed., *Interactions in the World Economy: Perspectives from International Economic History* (New York, 1989).

⁸ Om Prakash and Denys Lombard eds., *Commerce and culture in the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1800* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1999).

⁹ The Amsterdam conference was an initiative of Jos Gommans and the present author and was sponsored by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW). The proceedings were published as: Jos Gommans and Jacques Leider eds., *The Maritime frontier of Burma. Exploring political, cultural and commercial*

an environmental continuum.¹⁰ The Arakan-Bengal continuum forms a homogenous area wound up in the trading networks of the Bay of Bengal and has a climate and geography fundamentally different from the plains of the Ganges and the Irrawaddy on the north-western and south-eastern end. Although overland travel in the Arakan-Bengal continuum was made difficult by steep and rugged mountain chains, the numerous intersecting rivers and the shallow coastal waters provided an excellent infrastructure for trade and communication. South-eastern Bengal and Arakan together are some of the rainiest places on the planet. The Arakan littoral and south-eastern Bengal share an extremely high level of rainfall, reaching on average five hundred centimetres per year, which forms a sharp contrast with the much drier plains of the Ganges and the Irrawaddy.¹¹ The heavy rainfall and the fertile river valleys also supported higher population densities and a remarkable agricultural surplus during the early modern period.

South-eastern Bengal and Arakan provide secondly a classic example of what J.C. Heesterman has termed the “inner frontier”; where tribal peoples of hunter-gatherers, shifting cultivators, fishermen, and pastoral nomads in the jungles of the delta and the forest and hill tracts were separated from sedentary rice farmers of the coastal and riverine floodplains. Control over such a frontier area would enable a warrior kingdom like Arakan to exploit the best of both worlds, the mobile manpower of the deltaic jungles and the riches of Bengal’s weavers and rice farmers.¹²

Literary activity at the Arakanese court supports the idea that Arakan and south-eastern Bengal also on a cultural level formed a continuum.¹³ At the Mrauk U court Bengali literature flourished.¹⁴ Bengali poets like Alaol and Daulat Qazi translated cosmopolitan Persian literature to the local idiom.¹⁵ It seems that this ‘vernacularisation’ aimed towards a

interaction in the Indian Ocean world, 1200-1800 (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Cf. Charney, *Jambudipa*, pp. 17-24.

¹¹ Charney, *Jambudipa*, pp. 17-24.

¹² J.C. Heesterman, ‘Two types of spatial boundaries’ in E. Cohen, M. Lissak and U. Almagor eds., *Comparative social dynamics: essays in honour of S.N. Eisenstadt* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1985), pp. 59-72; Heesterman, ‘Warrior, Peasant and Brahmin’, *Modern Asian Studies* 29.3 (1995), pp. 637-654 and Jos Gommans, ‘The Silent Frontier of South Asia, c. A.D. 1100-1800’, *Journal of World History* 9.1 (1998), pp. 1-5, 14-17, 22-23 and Gommans, ‘The Eurasian frontier after the First Millennium A.D.: Reflections along the fringe of time and space’, *The Medieval History Journal* 1.1 (1998), pp. 125-143. See also E.R. Leach, ‘The frontiers of “Burma”’, *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 3.1 (1960), pp. 49-73.

¹³ Thibaut d’Hubert, ‘The Status of Bengali Language and the Emergence of Bengal Literature in Seventeenth century Mrauk U, Capital of the Kingdom of Arakan (Myanmar)’ paper read at the 19th European Conference of Modern South Asian Studies (ECMSAS) at Leiden University, 27-30 June 2006. See also d’Hubert, ‘Alaol’s poetry as a source for Arakanese history’ Arakan conference Chulalongkorn University Bangkok 2005.

¹⁴ M.E. Haq, ‘Literary activity in the adjoining State courts, chapter 4’ in *Muslim Bengali literature* (Karachi, 1957), pp. 141-152. Satyendra Nath Ghosal, ‘Missing links in Arakan history’, E.M. Haq ed., *Abdul Karim Sahitya-Visarad commemoration volume. Essays on archaeology, art history, literature and philosophy of the Orient, dedicated to the memory of Abdul Karim Sahitya-Visarad (1869-1953)* (Dakha, 1972), pp. 255-265; Ghosal, ‘Arakan as pictured in the Bengali literature of the seventeenth century’, *Journal of the Bihar Research Society* 45 (1959), pp. 404-410.

¹⁵ S.K. Chatterji, *The origin and development of the Bengali language* (Calcutta, 1926); S. Sen, *History of Bengali literature* (Delhi, 1960).

better understanding of the cosmopolitan Persian literary culture by its patrons, mostly Muslim merchants and court officials living in Arakan. In a wider Bay of Bengal perspective this shows interesting similarities to the activities of poets in, for instance, Coromandel. According to Thibaut d'Hubert, the poet Alaol, after his (forced) move from Bengal to Arakan, shifted from north-Indian regional cultural references to more widespread Persian cultural references. As Alaol's patrons were involved in trade, this suggests the existence of a network of Muslim notables involved in trade who shared a similar interest in Persian literature. Subrahmanyam has shown that these trading networks were characterized by Persian culture that underlay the relationships between the various protagonists engaged in trade, as well as the Persianization of the protocol at the courts of Buddhist kings in Southeast Asia.¹⁶ Literary life in Aceh during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can also be seen to conform to these ideas. Alaol's translation of the 'Alexander Story' was followed by the composition of a Malay version of this story and the adoption of the name Iskandar, Iskandar Muda, Iskandar Thani, by sultans of Aceh.¹⁷ One should add to these examples linking trade and cultural history, the striking parallel between the adaptations from Persian into the local idiom of the Muslim nobility in Golkonda during the seventeenth century and the phenomenon observed in Mrauk U at the same period. Similarly the spread of the cult of Pir Badr from south-eastern Bengal to Arakan stresses the unity of the region. Pir Badr was renowned as a patron saint to sailors and a disciple from a Firdausi Sufi, who died c. 1440. Although Pir Badr was a Muslim, a large part of his following in the seventeenth century, and probably earlier, came from Buddhists and animists from south-eastern Bengal and Arakan. Symbolic tombs, *mokon*, sprang up along the Arakan-Bengal littoral and formed the centre of this cult.¹⁸ Mrauk U architecture was also influenced by Bengali architecture although Burmese influences would dominate from the middle of the seventeenth century.¹⁹

Conversely the spread of Arakanese Buddhism in the form of the Mahamuni cult to south-eastern Bengal shows that Arakanese concepts of Buddhism accompanied Arakanese expansion in south-eastern Bengal.²⁰ The revered Mahamuni image was the palladium of the

¹⁶ S. Subrahmanyam, 'Persianization and 'Mercantilism' in Bay of Bengal history, 1400-1700', S. Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History. From the Tagus to the Ganges* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 45-79.

¹⁷ P. Gaeffke, 'Alexander and the Bengali Sufis', A.W. Enwistle and F. Mallison eds. *South Asian devotional literature research papers 1988-1991* (Paris 1994).

¹⁸ Bengali: *Mokon* form the Persian *Maqam*. The shrines were thus known as *Badrmokon*. In VOC sources as *Modder Magon*. Subrahmanyam, 'Persianization', p 56. S. Dasgupta, *Obscure religious cults* 2nd ed. (Calcutta, 1962); A. Roy, *The Islamic syncretistic tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, 1983).

¹⁹ Chihara Daigoro, *Hindu-Buddhist architecture in Southeast Asia* (Leiden, 1996), pp. 254-256.

²⁰ F. Hamilton, 'An account of the frontier between Ava and the Part of Bengal adjacent to the Karnaphuli river', *Edinburgh Journal of Science* 3.4 (1825), pp. 32-44, 38. R.H.S. Hutichnson, *An account of the Chittagong HillTracts* (Calcutta, 1906), pp. 171-176; R.B. Barua, 'Some important festivals of the Buddhists in East Pakistan', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan* 10.1 (1965), pp. 15-34; R.B. Barua, 'Buddhist shrines and monasteries in Chittagong', E.M. Haq ed., *Abdul Karim Sahitya-Visarad commemoration volume. Essays on archaeology, art history, literature and philosophy of the Orient, dedicated to the memory of Abdul Karim*

Mrauk U kingdom and is still regarded as the epitome of Arakanese Buddhism. The image is in Arakan and Burma widely regarded to be the only true copy of the Buddha in existence. According to tradition the life-like image was cast during a visit to Arakan of the historical Buddha Gautama, who is said to have breathed life into the statue. The possession of the Mahamuni image afforded the Mrauk U kings great prestige in the Theravada Buddhist world. On several occasions Burmese kings invading Arakan tried to remove the Mahamuni but all failed until the conquest of Arakan in 1784.²¹

In the following pages the influence of geography and climate on trade in the Arakan-Bengal continuum will be discussed. I will first describe the impact of geography on the economic possibilities of the Arakan-Bengal continuum. In the second part of this Chapter the effects of the monsoon climate on trade in the Bay of Bengal in general and Arakan more in particular will be discussed.

1.1 Geography

In terms of geography the Arakanese littoral can be roughly divided in four zones. The central zone with the riverine planes of the Mayu, Kaladan and Lemro rivers, known by its classical name of Dhanyawati, the two larger islands Cheduba (Man Aung in Arakanese) and Ramree (Ram brè in Arakanese), classically known as Meghawati and Rammawati, and to the south Sandoway (Sam twè in Arakanese), known classically as Dwarawati.²² West of the Arakanese littoral, the areas classically known as Vanga and Harikela share many geological and climatologic characteristics with the Arakanese littoral, but were not a part of Arakan proper.²³ In the south of the littoral a mountain chain known as the Arakan Yoma reaches the shores of the Bay of Bengal. A large part of the Arakanese littoral is cut off from the Irrawaddy plain by these mountains with peaks rising up to 3,000 metres. In the north no such

Sahitya-Visarad (1869-1953) (Dhaka, 1972), pp.167-175. H. Bechert, 'Zur Geschichte des Theravada Buddhismus in Ostbengalen', H. Härtel ed., *Beiträge zur Indieforschung. Ernst Waldschmidt zum 80. Geburtstag gewidmet* (Berlin, 1977); L. Bernot, *Les paysans Arakanais du Pakistan Orientale. L'histoire, le monde végétal et l'organisation sociale des réfugiés Marma (Mog)* 2 vols. (Paris, 1967).

²¹ The Mahamuni image is now in Mandalay where it is regarded as one of the most sacred images in Burma. Pamela Gutman, *Burma's lost kingdoms: Splendours of Arakan* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2001), pp. 30-32.

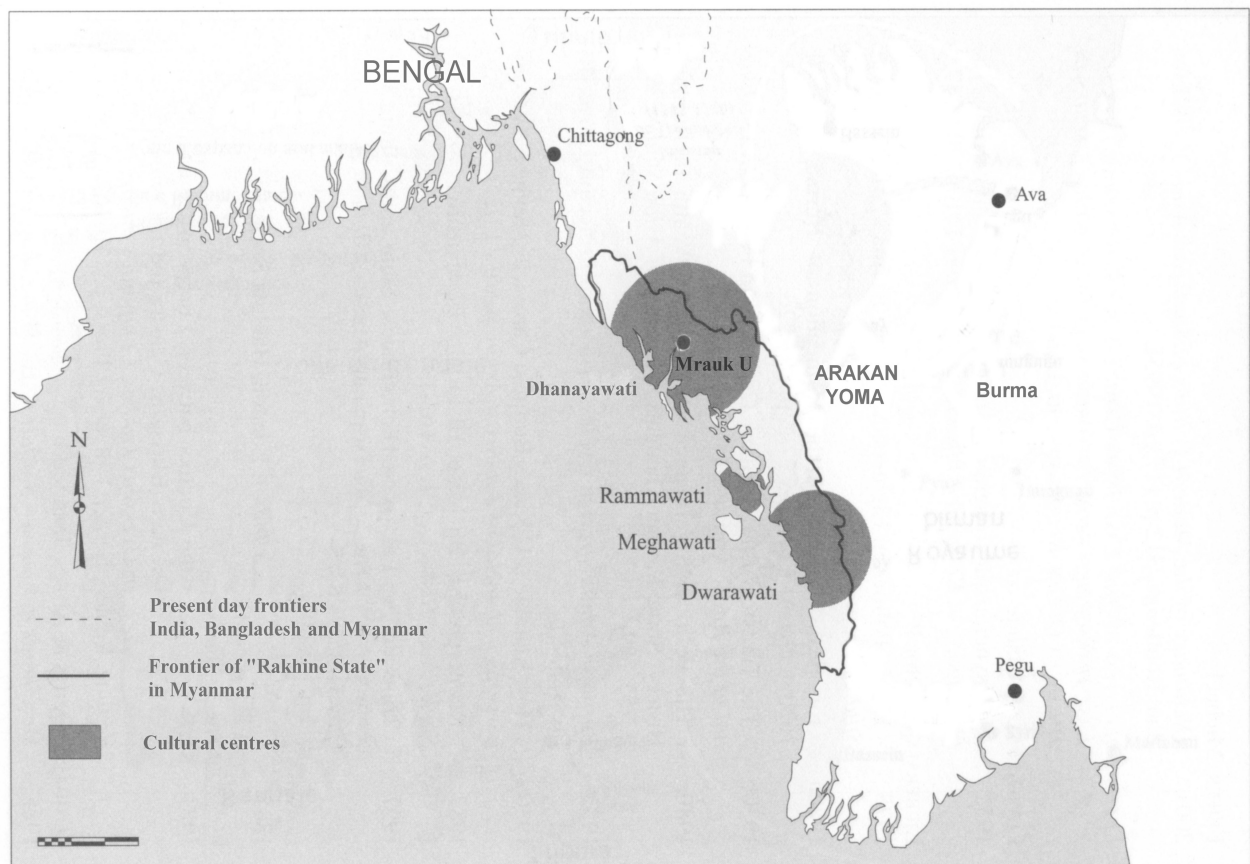
²² Charles Paton, 'Historical and statistical sketch of Aracan', *Asiatic Researches* 16 (1828). Leider, 'Taxation et groupes de service sous la royauté arakanaise. Un rapport d'enquête de 1803 dans un manuscrit birman de la Bibliothèque nationale de Paris', *Aséanie* 1 (1998), pp. 67-89, p. 75. BL OIOC, Mss. Eur. C 13, *Copy of a journal of progress and observations during the continuance of the deputation from Bengal to Ava in 1795 in the dominions of the Barma monarch by dr. F. Buchanan*, fols. 172, 176-177.

²³ The territorial names Vanga and Harikela probably refer to slightly different areas in different periods of history, but broadly it may be said that they denote the areas in the south and south-eastern part of present Bangladesh. Vanga may have extended to areas in southern West Bengal in the earlier period, but the area within the two main streams of the Ganges (from the Bhagirathi to the Padma-Meghna) formed the core of this territorial unit. A.M. Chowdhury, 'Vanga' in *Banglapedia. National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh* (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh 2006: www.banglapedia.org).

barrier with the Bengal plain exists.²⁴ The coastal strip that forms the Arakan littoral is nowhere more than a hundred kilometres wide before it reaches the Arakan Yoma, leaving the littoral with its many rivers and islands very much open to the influences of the Bay of Bengal and closed off from Burma proper.

The Chittagong Hills constitute the only significant hill system in eastern Bengal and, in effect, are the western fringe of the north-south mountain ranges of Burma and eastern India. The Chittagong Hills rise steeply to narrow ridge lines, generally no wider than thirty metres, with altitudes from six hundred to nine hundred metres above sea level. At 1,052 metres altitude, the highest elevation in the area is found at Mowdok, in the south-eastern part of the hills. Fertile valleys lie between the hills, which generally run north-south. West of the Chittagong Hills is a broad plain, cut by rivers draining into the Bay of Bengal, which rises to a final chain of low coastal hills, mostly below 200 metres, that attain a maximum elevation of 350 metres. In this wet coastal plain were located the cities of Chittagong in the north and Ramu in the south.

The Arakan littoral and Bengal²⁵



²⁴ Charney, *Jambudipa*, pp. 17-24.

²⁵ Adapted from Leider, *Le royaume d'Arakan*, p. 501.

The Arakan littoral

In Arakan agriculture centred on rice cultivation.²⁶ Rice was sown in the monsoon and reaped in winter. Dry-weather paddy cultivation did not exist in Arakan. Three types of paddy could be distinguished. *Kaukyin*, or early paddy was grown on the highest lands and reaped between c. 15 October and 15 November. This kind of rice was used for domestic consumption. *Kauklat* paddy ripened a little later and was grown on the lands of medium height. This kind was reaped between 15 November and 15 December to be sold on the market. *Kaukkyi* was the main crop and was sown on the lowest and most productive lands. *Kaukkyi* rice was mainly grown for sale on the market and was reaped between 15 December and 15 January. The harvest dates of course depended on the weather, but they represent the times during which the bulk of the harvest was made. Transplanting rice was not the custom.²⁷ In the upland tracts the lands lying in the river valleys were considerably enriched by the silt brought down from the hills. The level tracts in the upper reaches of the large rivers were enriched by the fresh water inundations which took place during the rains. The banks of the lower reaches of the large rivers were generally low and the adjoining country liable to inundations. Because the water here was brackish the floods left deposits of salt not beneficial to cultivation. Where salt water got into the fields no cultivation could take place till the land was securely protected by embankments or *bunds*. Lands protected by these *bunds* needed one or two years to wash the salt out of the ground before they could be productive.²⁸ Mrauk U is just situated at the point where the rivers turn from brackish to fresh water. The lands around Mrauk U are therefore ideally suited for rice cultivation.²⁹ Below Urittaung the soil is not suited for rice cultivation, but provides excellent grazing for cattle and is suitable for betel-vine cultivation.

In the early modern period Mrauk U functioned primarily as a central mart for locally grown rice and the cotton cultivated by hill tribes. The hinterland of the capital city Mrauk U was formed by the plains of the Mayu, Kaladan and Lemro river systems. The functioning of Mrauk U as an entrepôt in the long-distance trade of the Bay of Bengal depended more on the political situation across the Arakan Yoma than on its autonomous ability to attract long-distance trade to the Dhanyawati area. The ruby trade from Upper Burma is a good example. Only in times of war between Lower and Upper Burmese polities was it worthwhile for long-

²⁶ For a detailed discussion of the rice trade see Chapter 8.

²⁷ R.B. Smart, *Akyab District. Burma Gazetteer* (Rangoon, 1957), pp. 107-108. Smart based his conclusions on rice cultivation on settlement operations conducted in Arakan from the late nineteenth century. His observations on rice cultivation are generally in accordance with seventeenth century reports from Dutch VOC sources. Detailed information on the rice trade is provided in Chapter 8.

²⁸ Smart, *Akyab District*, pp. 109-111. Smart, *Report on the revision settlement operations in the Akyab district. Season 1913-1917* (Rangoon, 1918), pp. 79-142.

²⁹ R.B. Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India. With a Supplement by Dr Bayfield on the British Political Relations with Ava* repr. (Delhi, 1979), pp. 86-92.

distance traders to follow the hazardous and troublesome routes over the Arakan Yoma.³⁰ Ava could be reached from Mrauk U in fourteen or fifteen days by messengers. Traders would take more than a month to get their goods over the Yoma's to Upper Burma.³¹ This is illustrated by events taking place in the early seventeenth century. The aggressive monopolistic policies of Felipe de Brito, the Portuguese ruler of Thanlyin in Lower Burma, forced ruby and other long-distance traders as for example the China traders, to seek alternative routes over the Arakan Yoma. As a result in 1603 and 1609 Man Raja-kri and the Burmese kings, Nyaungyan Min (1597-1606) and Anauk-pet-lun (1606-1628) agreed to combine efforts to keep the passes across the Yomas open and construct roads suitable for commercial intercourse.³² As soon as the political situation changed with the defeat of De Brito, the recently opened passes were closed and the long distance-trade to Upper Burma and China again found its way through the Irrawaddy valley.³³

Political considerations aside, the routes over the passes were extremely troublesome. To keep the passes open required continuous maintenance. So, although the trans-Yoma routes were not impassable, long-distance commerce was in normal circumstances certainly cheaper and quicker following the Irrawaddy than crossing the Yoma. This is illustrated by a statement from Hiram Cox, the English ambassador to Ava in 1799:

But an object of much more serious import to the trade of this place [Rangoon] than the above is the communication [...] over land by way of Arakan. To which place it is only seven days from the banks of the Irrawaddy. From Arakan the merchants go by boats to Chittagong and from there to Cossimbazar and Dhaka and all the original manufacture places. Here they purchase with silver smuggled out of the country their goods. They return by nearly the same route, employing the coolies of Arakan to carry their goods. This accounts for the fact that Calcutta goods are cheaper at Ava than at

³⁰ R.A. de Bulhão Pato ed., *Documentos Remittidos da India ou Livros das Monções publicados de ordem da classe de Sciencias Moraes, Politicas e Bellas-Lettras da academia Real das Sciencias de Lisboa* 4 vols. (Lisbon, 1880-1893), pp 1 :173-178 and F. Guerreiro, *Relação anual das coisas que fizeram os Padres da Companhia de Jesus nas suas missões. Do Japão, China, Cataio, Tidore, Ternate, Ambóino, Malaca, Pegu, Bengala, Bisnagá, Maduré, Costa da Pescaria, Manar, Ceilão, Travancor, Malabar, Sodomala, Goa, Salcete, Lahor, Diu, Etiopia a alta ou Preste João, Monomotapa, Angola, Guiné, Serra Leoa, Cabo Verde e Brasil nos anos de 1600 a 1609. E do processo da conversão e cristandad daquelas partes: tirada das cartas que os missionários de la escreveram pelo padre Fernao Guerreiro* ed. Artur Viegas 3 vols. (Coimbra: Coimbra Imprensa da Universidade, 1930-1942), pp. 2:318.

³¹ NA VOC 1062 Short note on Arakan by Samuel Kindt [Informatie in't corte toucherende voyage op Arracan] c. 1615., fol. 39-39v.

³² Leider, *Le royaume d'Arakan*, p. 204.

³³ It was not Tibau's presence that ended the Arakan-Ava trade, but the outbreak of war between the two states Charney, 'Crisis and reformation', pp. 194-198. See Peter Floris to T. Aldworth, Masulipatnam 17-6-1614 in F. Danvers and W. Foster eds., *Letters received by the East India Company from its servants in the East, 1602-1615* 3 vols. (London, 1896-1898), p. 2:61; J.H. van Linschoten, *Itinerario. Voyage ofte schipvaert van Jan Huygen van Linschoten naer Oost ofte Portugaels Indien 1579-1592* 2 vols. ed. H. Kern (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1910), p.1:67; NA VOC 1059; 1062; 1065.

Rangoon, [because] along the river [Irrawaddy] there are many tolls and the duty in Rangoon is very high.³⁴

Early British reports produced for military purposes conclude that the only pass able to cope with a large number of cattle was that of Am and even this needed meticulous management to make it passable for trade.³⁵

While as an upstream port Mrauk U did not possess strategic advantages over other local Arakanese centres in Rammawati, Meghawati or Dwarawati, its large agricultural hinterland gave it a distinct advantage over these other core areas in terms of manpower and wealth. Situated at the foot of the mountains overlooking the two largest agricultural plains in Arakan, those of the Kaladan and Lemro valleys, Mrauk U provided local farmers with a central and safe marketplace to sell their produce. The Arakanese capital was not as its predecessors at Laungkrak and Vesali situated in the middle of the riverine plains, making them more prone to the attack of hill tribes. The Mrauk U rulers successfully pacified the hill tribes, thereby creating a more stable environment where agricultural surpluses could be produced and exported.³⁶

South-eastern Bengal

The Chittagong area is bounded in the north by the Feni river. Its southern boundary is the Naf river. The plains in between are connected through rugged mountain passes and rivers. The natural divisions of the district are the four main rivers, the Feni, Karnafuli, Matamuhuri and Naf. The Karnafuli river which flows from the Blue Mountains to the sea is a major highway and connects the Hill tracts with Chittagong. It is on this river that Chittagong is situated. Opposite Chittagong stood the town of Dianga. The Matamuhuri has an extensive and fertile delta, here the city of Cukkara (Chakaria or Chocoria) was situated. Further south on the banks of the Bak-khali stood the town Ramu.³⁷

The volatile environment of the Ganges-Brahmaputra delta is a major factor to be considered when we reconstruct the relationship between Arakan and Bengal. The movement of people, processes of sedentarization and state formation are all strongly influenced by the constraints imposed by nature in the Bengal delta. In this region geographical changes over time have been, and still are of momentous importance. Without wanting to promote a kind

³⁴ H. Cox, *Journal of a Residence in the Burmhan Empire* (London, 1821), pp. 187-189.

³⁵ BL OIOC, Jenkins Collection Mss. Eur. F 257 vol. 1, R.B. Pemberton. and F. Jenkins, 'Survey of Arakan (Aeng pass) 1831. J. Leider, 'La route de Am (Arakan). Contribution à l'étude d'une route terrestre entre la Birmanie et le Golfe du Bengale', *Journal Asiatique* 282.2 (1994), pp. 335-370. Manrique, *Itinerario*, pp. 1 :338-350.

³⁶ Charney, 'Rise of a mainland trading state', pp. 20-21.

³⁷ S.B. Qanungo, *A history of Chittagong vol.1 From ancient times down to 1761* (Chittagong, 1988), pp. 1-8.

of geographical determinism, it is still clear that Bengal's unique geography certainly played a central role in the economic development of the region. Eaton has argued that in the relatively brief period of c.1550-1575 this large delta saw significant changes. The western branches of the Ganges near Satgaon silted up. The river above Gaur, the capital of the Bengal sultanate, also silted up and stagnant waters caused so many diseases that the capital had to be abandoned.³⁸ According to Eaton during this period the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers converged and took the Padma-Meghna channel as their major outlet to the Bay of Bengal. Eaton has concluded that these changes linked south-eastern Bengal with northern India, and were quickly followed by political and economic integration with Mughal India. Eaton argues that because of the direct river communication that was suddenly possible between south-eastern Bengal and northern India the low costs of river transportation should have dramatically reduced prices of goods transported from the frontier to the heartlands of the empire.³⁹ It is however unlikely that the eastward displacement of the Ganges was so dramatic and happened in such a short period of time as Eaton has suggested. The maps used by Eaton to illustrate the quick eastward displacement of the Ganges are in the first place not suitable for this purpose. The map used by Eaton made by Gastaldi was printed in 1548, but was still largely based on the geography of Ptolemy (c. 150 AD). Gastaldi's maps of India were updated using modern travel accounts but are still fairly inaccurate and not suitable to determine changes in complex river systems such as the Ganges delta.⁴⁰ The 1666 'Van den Broecke map', the most detailed map used by Eaton, will be shown in Chapter 7 to have been based on a very limited survey of the area between Chittagong and Dhaka.⁴¹ The majority of the delta is even on this mid-seventeenth century map labelled as 'very dirty and therefore unknown to us'. One might wonder then how accurate the depiction of the rivers emptying in the Bay of Bengal actually was.⁴² On top of this it seems unlikely that changes in course of the main rivers would have resulted only as late as the sixteenth century in the situation which was described aptly by James Rennell for the eighteenth century:

³⁸ Eaton, *Rise of Islam*, pp. 194-197.

³⁹ Eaton, *Rise of Islam*, pp. 197-198.

⁴⁰ L.C. Wroth, *The Early Cartography of the Pacific* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Fine Books, 1944), p. 155.

⁴¹ NA VOC 1264, fol. 337-339 'Guide for a new route starting from the river of Arakan, north to Chittagong and Dhaka in Bengal and from there to the bar of Bellasor'.

⁴² Apart from this, the copy of the Van den Broecke map used by Eaton is from the early eighteenth century published by François Valentyn, *Oud en nieuw Oost-Indiën, vervattende een naaukeurige en uitvoerige verhandelinge van Nederlands mogentheyd in die gewesten, benevens eene wydlostige beschryvinge der Moluccos, Amboina, Banda, Timor, en Solor, Java en alle de eylanden onder dezelve landbestieringen behoorende : het Nederlands comptoir op Suratte, en de levens der groote Mogols; als ook een keurlyke verhandeling van 't wezentlykste, dat men behoort te weten van Choromandel, Pegu, Arracan, Bengale, Mocha, Persien, Malacca, Sumatra, Ceylon, Malabar, Celebes of Macassar, China, Japan, Tayouan of Formosa, Tonkin, Cambodia, Siam, Borneo, Bali, Kaap der Goede Hoop en van Mauritius*. 5 vols. (Dordrecht: Joannes van Braam, 1724-1726), vol. 5.1 Keurlyke beschryving van Choromandel, Pegu, Arracan, Bengale, Mocha. A late seventeenth century example of the same map more accurately depicts how little was known to European cartographers of the Bengal delta between the mouths of the Padma and Hugli rivers. Isaak de Graaf, *Atlas Amsterdam* ed. Günter Schilder (Voorburg: Asia Maior/Atlas Maior, 2006), pp. 196-198.

The Ganges and Burrampooter rivers, together with their numerous branches and adjuncts, intersect the country of Bengal ... in such a variety of directions, as to form the most complete and easy inland navigation that can be conceived. So equally and admirably diffused are those natural canals, over a country that approaches nearly to a perfect plane, that, ..., we may safely pronounce, that every other part of the country, has, even in the dry season, some navigable stream within 25 miles farthest; and more commonly, within a third part of that distance.⁴³

European maps of the sixteenth and seventeenth century do not show a dramatic change in the course of the Ganges, what is perhaps visible, is the formation of new lands at the mouth of the delta, in particular at end of the Meghna channel. The city of Chittagong situated at the south-eastern extremity of this delta gave the best access from the Bay of Bengal to the fertile lands near the most active part of the delta.⁴⁴ Its position at the entrance of this delta made control over Chittagong a major strategic objective for anyone wishing to control south-eastern Bengal. The main objective of the Ninety Years' War (c.1574 to 1666) between Arakan and the Mughals was control over the area between Dhaka and Chittagong, the economic heart of Bengal.

The function of Chittagong as one of the principal seaports for Bengal can be traced to Arab sources dating to the middle of the fifteenth century. This would contradict Eaton's view that the area became the economic centre of Bengal only in the late sixteenth century. In the navigational guides of mariners like Ibn Majid Chittagong is described as the largest port in Bengal.⁴⁵ The visit of an Imperial Chinese fleet in 1405 is further evidence of the function of Chittagong as an entrepôt earlier on.⁴⁶ The Portuguese became fully aware of the importance of Chittagong when they first ventured in this part of the Bay of Bengal. Early Portuguese sources depict the trade of Chittagong as the most important in the Bay of Bengal.⁴⁷ They called the area *Porto Grande*.⁴⁸ The importance of Chittagong has been

⁴³ J. Rennell, *Memoir of a map of Hindoostan; or the Mughal empire: with an introduction, illustrative of the geography and present division of that country: and a map of the countries situated between the heads of the Indian rivers, and the Caspian sea: also a supplementary map, containing the improved geography of the countries contiguous to the heads of the Indus* 3rd ed. (London, 1793), p. 335.

⁴⁴ As is most clearly expressed on a Mughal map that connects Hormuz, Lahor, Agra, and Patna with Chittagong as if they were all part of the Ganges delta. NA VEL 257.

⁴⁵ G.R. Tibbetts, *Arab navigation in the Indian Ocean before the coming of the Portuguese, being a translation of Kitab al-Fawa'id fi usul al bahr wa'l-qawa'id of Ahmad b. Majid al-Najdi* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1971), p. 395. Abdul Karim, 'Chittagong Coast as described by Sidi Ali Chelebi a sixteenth century Turkish navigator', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* 16.3 (1971).

⁴⁶ J. Deloche, *Transport and Communications in India prior to steam locomotion* 2 vols. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 2:12-32; 2:117-126. Cf. S.C. Das, 'A note on the antiquity of Chittagong, compiled from the Tibetan works Pagsam Jon-Zan of Sumpa Khan-po and Kahbab Dun-dan of Lama Tara-Natha', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 67 (1898), pp. 20-28.

⁴⁷ Linschoten, *Itinerario*, pp. 1.63-72 ; S.B. Qanungo, *A history of Chittagong vol.1 From ancient times down to*

overlooked in recent times because of the location of the factories of the European trading companies on the River Hugli, but Chittagong was undoubtedly one of the principal ports of Bengal before the seventeenth century. Linschoten described it as the capital of Bengal.⁴⁹ The image of Chittagong as the entrance to, and economic centre of Bengal is vividly portrayed on early European maps.⁵⁰ On these maps the entrepôt on the River Karnafuli is given a prominent place, sometimes just labelled 'Bengal'.⁵¹

The arrival of the VOC in the Bay of Bengal provides more information on the role of Chittagong as a regional entrepôt. To establish the value of the different harbours in the Bay of Bengal, the *Heeren XVII*, or Court of Directors of the Dutch Company, sent out various fact-finding missions to ports like Pegu, Mrauk U, and Chittagong. The reports written at the end of these missions all point in the same general direction: Chittagong was *the* central emporium for the long distance trade in the eastern part of the Bay of Bengal. Its location at the confluence of two of the larger transport arteries of India, namely the Ganges and the Brahmaputra, meant that merchants from all over India used Chittagong as an entrepôt.⁵²

1761 (Chittagong, 1988), pp. 110-135, 347-358.

⁴⁸ According to Johan van Leenen who made the first accurate survey of the eastern Bengal delta Porto Grande was the name given by the Portuguese to what he called the river Brahmaputra and what should be identified on the basis of his survey as the Meghna channel. If we are to follow Van Leenen, Porto Grande was an epithet not used exclusively for Chittagong. NA VOC 1264, fol. 337-339 Guide for a new route starting from the river of Arakan than north to Chittagong and Dhaka in Bengal and from there to the bar of Bellasor, fol. 337.

⁴⁹ S. Subrahmanyam, 'Notes on the sixteenth century Bengal trade', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 24 (1987), pp. 265-289; O. Prakash, *European commercial enterprise in pre-colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 18-22. Linschoten, *Itinerario*, pp. 1:63-72.

⁵⁰ The prominence of Chittagong even found its way into Portuguese poetry. The poet Louis vaz de Camoes (c. 1524-1580) described it like this *Ve Cathigao, cidade das melhores. De Bengala, provincia que se preza. De Abundante; mas olha que esta posta. Para O Austro d'aqui virada a costa*. Quoted in Qanungo, *A history of Chittagong*, pp. 345-346.

⁵¹ J. Rotz, *Book of Idrography* (1542), British Museum: Mss. Royal 20 E. ix; Anonymous (1508), *Portelano* British Museum: Mss. Egerton 2803; A. Cortesão ed., *Portugaliae Monumenta Cartographica* 6 vols. (Lisbon, 1960), p. 1:58.

⁵² Pieter Willemsz., 'Informatie van de Bochte van Bengala en de Arracan gedaen door Pieter Willemsz. in Masulipatnam desen 25 Maij Anno 1608' {Information on the Bay of Bengal and Arakan by Pieter Willemsz, 25 May 1608} in J.K.J. de Jonge ed., *De Opkomst van het Nederlandsch Gezag in Oost-Indië (1595-1610)* 16 Vols. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1862-1909), pp. 3:287-291.



Two Bengal maps based on the 1666 survey by Johan van Leenen. Top a map of the Bay of Bengal with the Arakan coast c. 1690 by Isaak de Graaf; bottom detail of the Dhaka to Chittagong area from Valentyn c. 1726.⁵³

⁵³ The map from Valentijn is conventionally known as Mattheus van den Broecke's map, to whom it was dedicated by Johan van Leenen. It was made in 1666 and 1667 by Johan van Leenen who surveyed the Arakan littoral from the river Kaladan to Dhaka in Bengal. The map was until now erroneously dated 1660. Details of the survey are recorded in NA VOC 1264, fol. 337-339 'Guide for a new route starting from the river of Arakan, north to Chittagong and Dhaka in Bengal and from there to the bar of Bellasor'. De Graaf, *Atlas Amsterdam*, pp.

In the records of the English East India Company (EIC) the importance of Chittagong is also underlined. The unfortunate war the EIC launched against the Mughal empire at the end of the seventeenth century necessitated the search for a new location for the Company's factory. The Court of Directors favoured Chittagong as a base for their Bengal trade because it was so conveniently situated for trade, having a good deep-sea harbour and efficient connections with the Indian hinterland. They certainly preferred it to Calcutta, situated at the time in what was virtually deserted marshland.⁵⁴

1.2 Climate: The Indian Ocean Monsoon and trade in the Bay of Bengal

The monsoon system was of prime importance for the connections between the lands bordering the Bay of Bengal. The predictability and reliability of the monsoon facilitated and stimulated the voyages between the different emporia in the area. The monsoon system determined the kind, quality and quantity of the agrarian production in the different areas of the system. The monsoon system was thus of prime importance for trade around the Bay of Bengal. It meant that there existed a regular and predictable disequilibrium in the different emporia bordering on the Bay. At the same time this regularity promoted business in so far as it made trading voyages more predictable. Travellers could rely on a favourable wind at the same time every year to take them from Arakan to Banten or from Sumatra to Coromandel knowing for sure that in time the wind would change and allow them to sail back again. It is this element that in accordance with the derivation of monsoon from *mawsim* is one of the dominant features of the Asian monsoon in the pre-colonial period.⁵⁵

The early Arab navigators that crisscrossed the seas of the Indian Ocean coined the term *mawsim* (monsoon: literally 'a fixed period') to describe the exact date for sailing from one harbour to another. The term did not yet have its present connotation, relating it to the time of year or the type of wind. A list of these departure dates was called *mawasim*, collectively *mawasim al-asfar*, or the seasons for travel. The navigational guides used by these early Arab merchants mainly consisted of these *mawasim*.⁵⁶

196-198 and Valentyn, *Oud en nieuw Oost-Indiën*, vol. 5.1.

⁵⁴ The fact that the English finally settled at Calcutta had more to do with Mughal policy than with free choice on the English side J. Charnock in Fort St. George to Court of Directors Oriental and India Office Collections: Original Correspondence E/3/47: folia 231-233; J. Haynes, A Copie of a Journall of our voyage from Bengal to Madras commencing on 8 November 1688, concluding on 3 March 1689 with letters received from and concerning Captain William Heath's transactions in Ye. Right Honourable Companies affaires British Museum: Mss. Egerton 283; H. Dodwell, *Records of Fort St. George. Letters from Fort St. George for 1688* (Madras: Government Press, 1918), pp. 44-45; C.M. Schmidt and H. Dodwell eds., *Records of Fort St. George. Diary and Consultation Book 1689* (Madras: Government Press, 1916), pp. 19,24. It is therefore perhaps not surprising to find Chittagong among the first areas to come under direct British administration after the battle of Plassey. K.K. Datta and H.N. Sinha eds., *Fort William-India House correspondence 1748-1759* 2 vols. (Delhi: Government of India Press, 1957-1958), pp. 2:66-67.

⁵⁵ Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization*, pp. 21-24, 98-118.

⁵⁶ G.R.P. Tibbetts, *Arab navigation in the Indian Ocean before the coming of the Portugese, being a translation*

The monsoon divided the rhythm of life in a harbour city typically into three periods; the season for sailing, the season when the fleet returned home, and the period when the harbour was closed. The closed period offered the seamen time to clean and maintain the ships.⁵⁷ The southwest monsoon started in March on the east coast of Africa and slowly spread to the east. It reached the coasts of Gujarat and Sind at the end of May or early in June and finally fell on the coast of Bengal by late June. During the months of June and July the monsoon winds were at full force and all the harbours on the coast of India remained closed. Early in August the winds slackened and could be used for sailing again. At the end of September, starting with a period of rain that lasted approximately one week, this period came to an end.⁵⁸ The northeast monsoon started early in October in Bengal and reached Ceylon about one month later. The beginning of this monsoon period was usually announced by storms and even cyclones. The periods between the monsoons, the months of February, March and April were characterized by fluctuating winds that could be used to sail in north-western and south-eastern directions, something impossible during the monsoon itself. At the south of the Bay of Bengal the winds in this period could be extremely unpredictable making the route from Ceylon to Sumatra particularly difficult.⁵⁹

At its eastern borders, where the Bay of Bengal flowed over into the Chinese seas, the monsoon system of the Bay of Bengal clashed with the Chinese monsoon. The fact that this system operated at a different pace necessitated shipping between the China seas and the Bay of Bengal to make a stop over in the ports of the Archipelago, reinforcing the importance of the two main shipping lanes, the Sunda and Melaka straits, between China and Eurasia.⁶⁰ Although this is not true on the same scale and in every instance for the division of the Arabian sea and the Bay of Bengal, similar arguments can be brought forward to argue that a trading venture between these two regions entailed a journey spanning multiple monsoon seasons, and therefore had a more supra-regional character. The Bay of Bengal should therefore be viewed as a distinct and separate space within the framework of the Indian Ocean monsoon.

*Sailing to Arakan*⁶¹

Travel from the coast of Coromandel to Arakan was possible in two seasons. The first season ran from February to May, the second consisted of a relatively short period in September. Sailings were best undertaken in February. February provided a relatively calm sea and

of *Kitab al-Fawa'id fi usul al-bahr wa l-qawa'id of Amad b. Majid al-Najdi* (London, 1971), pp. 364-367.

⁵⁷ A. Villiers, *Monsoon seas. The story of the Indian Ocean* (New York, 1952), p. 9.

⁵⁸ Tibbetts, *Arab navigation*, pp. 367-368.

⁵⁹ Tibbetts, *Arab navigation*, pp. 368-370.

⁶⁰ Chaudhuri, *Trade and civilization*, p. 133.

⁶¹ P.v.d.B[urg], *Curieuse beschrijving*, pp.1:8-149, 154, 155-156.

people would sail along the coast just as if they would be sailing to Bengal. Arriving at 19 degrees north one would set course to the east and take advantage of the southern winds blowing along the Arakanese coast at that time. If one were to sail in March from Coromandel to Arakan, a course could be set direct for the coast of Arakan with the south-eastern winds prevailing on the Arakanese coast at that time. Local ships would preferably sail in April or May to take advantage of the current and more favourable winds.⁶² Sailing in May could prove hazardous because of strengthening winds, but this time of year provided also the quickest passage.

In September only a brief slot was available for sailing to Arakan. The best days were from 8 to 10 September, setting a course for Cape Negrais, and when land was sighted following the coast to the Boronga islands. For rowing or local shipping this was the best time of the year to arrive in Arakan. The westerly monsoon winds had almost died out and the entrance of the Kaladan river was relatively easy to take with six to nine fathoms of water. It was not advisable to wait until late in September because then the north north-eastern winds would begin to blow causing ships to have to return to Coromandel half way and risk being wrecked on the Coromandel coast. The sailing season in September was thus comparatively short, running from 8 to 14 September latest.

The best time to sail from Batavia to Arakan was at the end of August, or early in September. Sailors would set a course to arrive at the Arakan coast near the Boronga islands at the mouth of the Kaladan river.

Sailings from the coast of Coromandel to Pegu should best be undertaken on 10 September or at least in within five days before or after that date. It was not advisable to sail in August.

*Sailing from Arakan*⁶³

The different winds also had their impact on departures from Arakan to other places in the Bay of Bengal. In December, with the north-eastern winds blowing, a direct course could be set for the Maldives or the coast of Coromandel. Local shipping would take advantage of the strong currents and winds early in January to make a quick voyage across the Bay of Bengal to the coast of India. Local ships wanting to cross to Bengal could sail in early January, keeping a north-westerly course. But with their ships not built to sail against the wind they preferred to sail at the end of January, or in early February with easterly winds blowing them to the Bengal coast or Coromandel. February was the best month to cross the Bay of Bengal in this direction. If one were to sail to Sri Lanka or Coromandel during this month a course

⁶² See also NA VOC 1062 Short note on Arakan by Samuel Kindt [Informatie in't corte toucherende voyage op Arracan] c. 1615., fol. 39-39v.

would be set just skirting the Andaman islands, and from there to Sri Lanka, Taganapatnam, Porto Novo or Masulipatnam. The Arakanese with their rowing vessels had to be careful not to end up north of these harbours because otherwise they would not be able to reach their destinations. Some Arakanese captains would wait until March for their departures for Coromandel and arrive in April, relying wholly on the currents at a time when there was almost no wind at all. This was a dangerous gamble because the monsoon set in around this time of year and an offshore wind started to blow on the Coromandel coast. Combined with a shift in the currents a departure in March was a great risk with the very real possibility of having to return after having reached the Andaman islands. If the journey in March was successful it took the ships about 38 to 40 days to arrive. A departure in February on the other hand meant the journey could be completed in 14 to 16 days.

From Pegu to Coromandel or Bengal would be practicable between 6 and 18 December, vessels would flow with the current, and being towed to sea. A voyage to Bengal would follow the Arakanese coast, because of the northerly wind. In January with a north-easterly or east-north-easterly wind the Arakan coast could be avoided if one wanted to sail from Cape Negrais to for example Pipli.

The effect of the monsoon on trade in Arakan

Pieter van der Burg in his 1677 book on Golconda and Pegu gave a good overview of the rhythm of travel in the Bay of Bengal in the seventeenth century.⁶⁴ Van der Burg had an experience of over 20 years serving the VOC on the Coromandel coast. The work of Van der Burg reflects for a large part his knowledge of the indigenous trade routes and sailing seasons in the Bay of Bengal. It is safe to assume that the core of his description is based on local traditions. A major argument in favour of this hypothesis is the fact that VOC ships often sailed outside the seasons of travel as described by Van der Burg. The VOC, or indeed European ships in general, were built more strongly, could sail against the wind and were built to withstand stronger winds and seas as opposed to local ships. Thus when we compare the description of the sailing season by Van der Burg with the arrival and departure dates of VOC ships it is striking how often Dutch ships sail outside the preferred season. The seasons described by Van der Burg should therefore be seen as the traditionally preferred times of travel, tailored to the limitations of local ships. The fact that European ships were able to sail 'out of season' already had a serious impact on local shipping. In Arakan the VOC could wait

⁶³ P.v.d.B[urg], *Curieuse beschrijving*, pp. 151-152, 155-156.

⁶⁴ P.v.d.B[urg], *Curieuse beschrijving van de gelegenheid, zeden, godsdienst en ommeegang, van verscheyden Oost-Indische gewesten en machtige Landschappen. En inzonderheid van Golconda en Pegu. Alsmede een pertinente aanwijzing, hoe men door heel Indien, alle plaatsen op zijn tijd moet bevaren*. (Rotterdam: Isaak Naeranus, 1677).

longer for their ships to take a full cargo and conversely arrive earlier or later than others with their merchandise, all of which could provide them with extra profit and a competitive edge.⁶⁵ It should be noted that it is mainly the trading routes relevant to the VOC which are discussed by Van der Burg's, and as such the absence of a description of for example the route between Mrauk U and Aceh should not be taken to mean that there was no commerce between these two places.

Conclusion

The influence of the monsoon on trade has been seen to be considerable, the Arab word *mawsim*, literally 'a fixed period', being used to indicate the travelling seasons even gave its name to this natural phenomenon. We have also seen that although European ships could not avoid the monsoon altogether, they were able to sail outside the traditionally perceived seasons, thus gaining a competitive edge on local shipping. Moreover, European ships were quicker and safer for crossing the Bay of Bengal, which would also entice local merchants to freight European ships in the long run.

Arakan was closely tied into the commercial and cultural networks spanning the Bay of Bengal. The difficult routes through the Arakan Yoma made contact with the Irrawaddy plains relatively difficult and fostered Arakan's orientation towards the Bay of Bengal. The Bay of Bengal in this view should be seen as a historical entity that was united by the system of the monsoon. Within the Bay of Bengal Arakan and Bengal shared many geographic and climatologic conditions and formed an environmental continuum that also fostered cultural homogenization.

In this so-called Arakan-Bengal continuum the city of Chittagong was of strategic importance. Chittagong had the best sea harbour and also the best connections with south-eastern Bengal. Chittagong provided direct access to the economic centre of Bengal. Chittagong's role as Bengal's main entrepôt seems to date from at least the fifteenth century, if not earlier. The idea that this position had come about in the late sixteenth century as a result of a sudden eastward movement of the Bengal delta seems highly unlikely. Deltaic change probably was much more gradual than has been suggested by Eaton.

In Arakan itself Mrauk U was best placed to control the large agricultural planes of the Lemro and Kaladan rivers in the Arakan littoral. Mrauk U's rather closed off position from Burma by the Yoma's limited its significance as a regional entrepôt. It provided on the other hand security from invasions from Upper Burma. The location of Mrauk U straddling

⁶⁵ An excellent overview of the effects of the monsoon on shipping in the Bay of Bengal was given by Laurens Pit in 1663 and quoted in W. Dijk, *Seventeenth century Burma*, pp. 75-81.

the hills between the Lemro and Kaladan rivers a few days sailing from the Bay of Bengal also provided secure defences against maritime invasions. At the same time this provided the Arakanese kings with a safe base from where they could operate in both Burma and Bengal.