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

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CONCLUSION

It is clear that the rapid rise and decline of the Arakanese state between the early sixteenth and the end of the seventeenth century was closely connected to Mrauk U's ability to control large parts of south-eastern Bengal, especially the area around Chittagong. The Mrauk U kings were successful in tapping into south-eastern Bengal's resources, both human and financial. This was the key to the success of the Arakanese state. The gradual forced withdrawal of royal control over the Chittagong area from the middle of the seventeenth century led to the demise of the Mrauk U state.

Although the early years of the Mrauk U kingdom have to be told in almost mythical accounts we do know that during the fifteenth century the Arakanese kingdom gradually expanded from its nucleus in the Kaladan valley to the rest of the Arakan littoral. The backgrounds of the success of the Mrauk U kingdom are however still unclear. The strategic location of Mrauk U overlooking the two most fertile plains in the Arakan littoral could explain the success of Mrauk U in an Arakanese context. The foundation myths of the Mrauk U kingdom tell the story of the strong bonds between Arakan and Bengal. A century after the foundation of the Mrauk U dynasty it is king Man Pa who is successful in his wars against Chittagong. Man Pa in 1534 defeated a Portuguese attempt to take Mrauk U and in 1542 there is definitive proof of an Arakanese conquest of Chittagong. In 1546 when the Burmese king Tabin-shwei-hti invaded Arakan Man Pa was also able to resist the Burmese force. After the 1550s it seems Arakan again briefly lost control over the area. The conquests of Man Phalaung at the end of the sixteenth century secured Arakan's hold over Chittagong. Man Phalaung, nicknamed the 'Portuguese king', successfully built on the efforts made by Man Pa to forge an alliance with Portuguese renegades operating in the Bay of Bengal. In these same years Mughal forces approached Bengal from the West. As both parties drove their armies towards the economic centre of Bengal a Ninety Years' War over Bengal unfolded. The sixteenth century saw the continued rise to power in south-eastern Bengal of the Arakanese kingdom.

The start of Arakanese rule in Chittagong around 1590 was as we saw closely connected with the development of an Arakanese-Portuguese partnership. The involvement of Portuguese mercenaries in the Arakanese littoral has proved to be instrumental in establishing Arakanese control over south-eastern Bengal. From the late sixteenth century Man Raja-kri would continue the expansion of Arakanese rule along the shores of the Bay of Bengal. In 1598 the Arakanese played an important role in the siege of Pegu that would lead to the end of the first Toungoo dynasty in Burma. The early years of the seventeenth century also

witnessed the first confrontations between the Arakanese and the Mughals in south-eastern Bengal.

In the early seventeenth century the campaigns of Islam Khan brought the Mughals to Dhaka. The conquest of Dhaka provided them with a base from where they could control the economic centre of Bengal. The reign of the Arakanese king Man Khamaung at the same time saw several significant victories for the Arakanese in south-eastern Bengal. In the ten years of his reign Man Khamaung campaigned in Bengal practically every year. He extended Arakanese control towards Jessore and Hijli and stopped the Mughal advance at Bhalua. At the same time Man Khamaung's reign saw two Mughal attempts to invade Chittagong. Both attacks failed. The Arakanese now enjoyed considerable influence in and around Jessore and Hijli on the western side of the Brahmaputra, although it is difficult to assess the direct impact of this influence on local rulers. In the following years Sirisudhammaraja would also prove to be a serious opponent for any Mughal governor in Bengal. During his reign Arakanese fleets commanded the deltas of the Ganges and Irrawaddy. The king would actively engage in diplomacy, sending missions to all major powers in the Bay of Bengal, and fitting out his own trading mission at the same time. The mysterious death of the king would however herald the end of the expansion of Arakanese influence in Bengal. At the death of Sirisudhammaraja in the year 1000 of the Arakanese era, Arakanese power in the Bay of Bengal was at is highest point. The reigns following would see the gradual decline of Arakanese control over south-eastern Bengal and the collapse of the kingdom.

The reign of Narapati-kri was characterized by several rebellions. His initial victories over his enemies in Arakan and over the Mughals in Bengal were followed by internal struggles that tore the kingdom apart. A major result of these uprisings was the loss of control over the strategically important island Sandwip. The resistance to his rule from members of the old royal family in the Chittagong area and the threat that Chittagong posed as an independent centre of power in the Arakanese kingdom moved Narapati-kri to move against Chittagong. The resettlement of large groups from the Chittagong area to the Arakanese littoral had however not the desired effect. On the contrary Arakan's ability to control south-eastern Bengal was seriously handicapped when as a result of the resettlement several important groups deserted the Arakanese king and moved to areas outside royal control. The next king Satuidhammaraja would be able to restore royal authority to some extent, but Arakan was soon about to lose its grip on south-eastern Bengal. The reign of the next king Candasudhammaraja was long and during his reign the gradual loss of control over Chittagong would lead to the conquest of the city by the Mughals. The loss of Chittagong would eventually even result in the collapse of the Mrauk U state as a whole. In 1656 and 1657 the Mughal prince Shah Shuja moved against south-eastern Bengal and re-established Mughal control over Dhaka. The flight of Shah Shuja to Arakan following the war of

succession in the Mughal empire eventually led to the Mughal invasion of Chittagong in 1666. The substantial revenues from south-eastern Bengal and Chittagong now ceased to flow into Arakanese coffers. In the period that followed the Arakanese kingdom derived its income mainly from the rice trade. The departure of the VOC meant that the king again lost a large part of his income and redistributive powers, as with the VOC also other large merchants left, and the connection with Coromandel was also largely severed. From the reign of Ugga Balla the kingdom descended into anarchy from which it was only to recover briefly in the mid eighteenth century. At the end of the eighteenth century the country would lose its independence and be incorporated in the Burmese empire.

The generally accepted view that Mughal rule in Bengal was established around 1612 is as we saw an oversimplification of the realities on the ground. In fact from the early seventeenth century it was the Arakanese who were able to expand their influence right across south-eastern Bengal. The Arakanese exercised a fluctuating degree of control over much larger areas of Bengal than was hitherto assumed. The reasons why the Arakanese and the Mughals fought such a bitter and prolonged campaign over south-eastern Bengal have been explained from an economic point of view. South-eastern Bengal was the economic heart of the province and yielded considerable revenues, attracting the attention of both states. Throughout the Ninety Years' War it remained a contested region.

The idea of the economic supremacy of south-eastern Bengal dating back only to the sixteenth century should be revised. Changes in the Bengal delta, resulting in the eastward movement of the Ganges took much longer than was assumed by Eaton and had already happened well before the sixteenth century. Chittagong was at least from the fifteenth century the main port to Bengal, so much so that on early maps its was often identified as 'Bengal'. The changes in the delta had earlier indeed resulted in large deposits of silt in south-eastern Bengal enabling an impressive economic development that made the region the granary and centre of cloth industry already in the sixteenth century. Instead of a breakthrough to the east it is more realistic to speak of a move of the economic centre of Bengal to the west. South-eastern Bengal had indeed been the economic centre of Bengal during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but the incessant warfare between the Arakanese and the Mughals for control over this prosperous area eventually caused trade and industry to move to the West. The Hugli would become the economic centre of Bengal from the middle of the seventeenth century. The move of the economic and political centre of Bengal to the West could be further investigated using the copious materials left by the Dutch and English East India Companies. VOC material is especially promising in this respect and could be expected to yield much information on the mechanisms involved.

The Arakanese kingdom has come forward as a state that was mainly interested in the control of people. Cities like Mrauk U, Chittagong or Dhaka were located on the agrarian

frontier. Cultivation in the fertile river valleys had not yet reached levels which would make control over or access to arable land central issues. Settling and controlling people on this agrarian frontier was the principle around which the kingdom was organized. The idea that the Mrauk U kingdom was essentially a 'maritime trading state' is not borne out by the analyses of trade in the Arakan-Bengal continuum. The involvement of the king and the nobility in trade was limited. Arakanese interest in trade was seen to intensify only at moments when foreign merchants were thought to impair the king's role in the allocation of rice and people (slaves) in Arakan itself. It is also not correct to view the Mrauk U kingdom merely as a 'robber state'. Images of Arakan as a pirate's nest are based on Mughal perceptions of a kingdom that was a thorn in the flesh of the empire. In Mughal eyes imperial expansion was of course legitimate, while Arakanese expansion was characterized as robbery or piracy. This image has been compounded by late eighteenth century British imperial perspectives when the British were also confronted with 'Arakanese incursions' into 'their' newly acquired territories. It is of course true that by the end of the eighteenth century the character of the Arakanese state had changed considerably. The history of eighteenth century Arakan is however still an area that urgently needs further research which makes it difficult to ascertain in which ways eighteenth century Arakan differed from the period described in this dissertation. It is however clear that the Arakanese in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had devised a regular and highly documented system of revenue assessment and collection. This system apparently worked so well that Mughal governors of Chittagong kept on using it throughout the eighteenth century. Arakanese interests in the long term growth of agricultural production by defining landed estates and taxing them to their capacity contradicts the idea that the Mrauk U kings were only interested in quick returns on their campaigns in south-eastern Bengal. In their efforts to control the settlement of people the Arakanese also kept meticulous records of royal service troops. The Mrauk U kings distributed these *man kywan* to local lords and monastic institutions and recorded who had received which person. Each village had its own records enabling the monarch to keep track of population movements and to make sure that the balance of power remained intact. As an indication of the high level of organization of the kingdom its military expeditions to far away areas such as Lower Burma and Dhaka are illustrative of the capacity of the state to organize the complex task of feeding and supplying armies of tens of thousands of men or more. Campaigning far away from the Arakan littoral required planning ahead, stocking supplies and constructing forts along the routes to Burma and Bengal. The failed Mughal invasions of Arakan are excellent examples of how military operations could fail if not enough attention was paid to logistics. In this

respect it is not surprising that the 1666 invasion of Chittagong is explained by Talish in the *Fatiyyah-i-ibriyyah* for a large part in terms of well organized logistics.

It is hoped that the study of Mrauk U chronicles and inscriptions and the development of Arakanese archaeology will benefit from the present study and contribute further to our understanding of the development of the Mrauk U kingdom. Important new research is at present carried out in these fields, the results of which are eagerly awaited.