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AYER LELEH

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Malacca from Siamese Conquest

by

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Fig. 2

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THE *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals) relates that from ancient times all princes in the Malay peninsula were subject to Siam, but that in the middle of the fifteenth century the Sultan of Malacca refused to owe allegiance as usual. When the news reached Siam that Malacca was a great city-state loath to acknowledge its suzerainty, the King of Siam sent an envoy to Malacca to demand a "letter of obeisance". The Sultan of Malacca, Muzaffar Shah, however refused to bow to Siam and sent the envoy away empty-handed. As was to be expected the Siamese Government grew quite angry at being challenged in this way and ordered an expedition to be made ready for the invasion of Malacca. Soon a vast Siamese army ("in numbers past counting") was marching overland to Ulu Pahang, and from there on to Ulu Muar. The Malay Annals continue to relate:

"Meanwhile the men of Siam arrived, and they fought with the men of Malaka. After a long battle, in which many of the soldiers of the Raja of Siam were killed, Malaka still held out and the Siamese withdrew. On their retreat they flung down in Ulu Muar the rattans they had used for tying their baggage. These rattans took root and grew, and they are there to this day, known as the rattans of the Siamese. Similarly the wood

they used for fetters took root and is growing to this day in Ulu Muar; as are the wooden rests for the cooking-places of the Siamese." (Translation of the Malay text of the *Sejarah Melayu* by C.C. Brown, in JMBRAS 1952, Vol. XXV Parts II & III, page 66).

The phrase in the English translation: "Malacca still held out" would give the impression that a siege of sorts was laid. The Malay text, however, has only "Malaka tiada alah", meaning literally: Malacca was not vanquished. Dr. John Leyden in his 1821 translation of the Malay Annals has rendered these words as follows: "Malacca was not reduced."

The Annals go on to relate that after a time the Siamese returned to attack Malacca again but this time did not get any further than Batu Pahat (Muar). After they had lost a number of ships and were discouraged by a clever ruse of Bendahara, Tun Perak, they returned to their country for good.

A few facts stand out clearly from this story.

For their first attack the Siamese must have come from the Muar river, probably from the bend at Parit Bungah and from there they would have marched straight on to Malacca. There is, nor was, much in that coastal region to stop their advance, so the eastern slope of the hill later named St. Paul was lying open to the

attackers advancing between the two hills on the east side of Malacca, i.e. Bukit China and St. John's Hill.

An indication of a natural obstacle to the east however might be found in Valentyn's Description of Malacca (1726) in the fifth volume of his *Oud en Nieuw Oost Indiën* stating "that there is another river on the east side of Malacca."

Where is this river now? At the time of translation (1884) of the Dutch text the translator (D.F.R. Hervey) stated in a note: "no traces remain of this now, except only a large drain near Kampong Java and Banda Hilir," but even this large drain is no more to be found at the time of writing this article, some eighty years later.

The Report on Malacca of Governor Balthasar Bort of 1678 (translated by M. J. Bremmer, JMBRAS 1927, Vol. V Pt. I) goes into much detail as to the Landgate which was built in 1669 between the bastions Wilhelmus and Henriette Louise "on the land side" (east side) because the existing gate was "old, bad and inadequate." Bort, however, does not mention a river or the remnants of a river on the land side. Now I have my doubts whether the facts in Valentyn's description of Malacca are indeed fifty years later than those mentioned in Bort's report, but in any case the absence of any indication of the river in the latter is to be noted. In this connection we regret that the drawing of the Ground or Masterplan of Malacca which was annexed to the original report of Bort is not available and may have been lost.

Without doubt many more maps or plans concerning Malacca must have been lost in the course of time. In 1859 already P. A. Leupe had to state that to his regret he had searched in vain in the old colonial archives for the map of Malacca which was sent there from Batavia in 1640 as well as

the one that was sent from Malacca to Batavia during the siege (letter of Adriaen Antonisz and the Council of Malacca of 20th October 1640 to the Governor General and the Council of India at Batavia, see JMBRAS Vol. XIV, Part I p. 176). While it is well known that the seventeenth and eighteenth century Dutch were inveterate map-makers, whose maps were rated among the best at the time, there is nowadays only one map available worthy of the name from the Dutch period in Malacca.

Now it is often just a matter of chance whether one finds enough reliable material on a specific historical problem to be able to get some enlightenment about it. Even though we have to deplore the disappearance of Dutch maps, in this case we are lucky indeed to have at our disposal a series of copies of maps (preserved at the National Archives of Malaysia) reproduced with this article which to our surprise show a river on the south or east side which has been slowly disappearing in the course of time. Would it be too far fetched to assume that the river was very much in existence in the middle of the fifteenth century and has since then continually decreased in size, in any case since the date of the earliest map still in existence, dating from the sixteenth century? If so, this river might have been quite a formidable obstacle to overcome for the Siamese c.1450. In that case the prolonged battle between the Malays and the Siamese may have taken place on a field near or even along the banks of the river, on the east side of the present padang behind the present Malacca Club. This speculation is not so far fetched as it may seem because on the west side of Malacca we perceive the same phenomenon, i.e. a tributary of the Malacca river formerly flowing from its northern bend straight to the sea, passing the

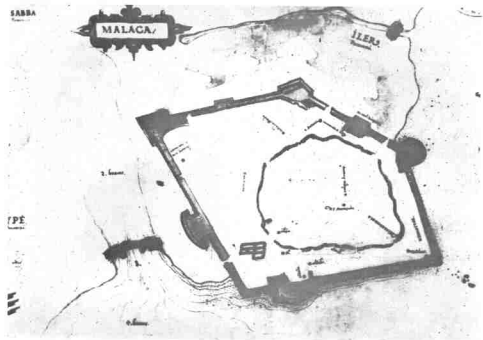


Fig. 1

Tranquerah Gate under a bridge, which is still in existence. This river was also quite a formidable obstacle on the north side of Malacca and at the same time it was reinforced by a wall (see fig. 8). Today this river has been reduced to a small *longkang* (drain) but one can still perceive its much larger original dimensions, as part of it was canalised by the Dutch and the brick walls of the canal are about ten yards apart giving an irrefutable indication of its former size.

From the point of view of archival chance it is a remarkable fact indeed that in the fifty years from about 1590 to 1640 we have some five Portuguese maps of Malacca at our disposal, while the first Dutch map dates from 1785, so that we have no cartographical information for nearly

a century and a half of Dutch government. Taking into consideration that during that long period numerous maps and plans have been made of Batavia and other places in South East Asia by Dutch cartographers, we have every reason to hope that in time more Dutch cartographical material will come to light.

The oldest Portuguese map of Malacca and surroundings at our disposal dates from the end of the sixteenth century. It is a copy kindly forwarded to the National Archives by Father Pintado of Malacca. The copy is not very clear, so the reproduction (see fig. 1) leaves much to be desired. The contours of the Fortress of Malacca however, are clearly discernible as well as a smaller river and a bridge spanning it to the East.

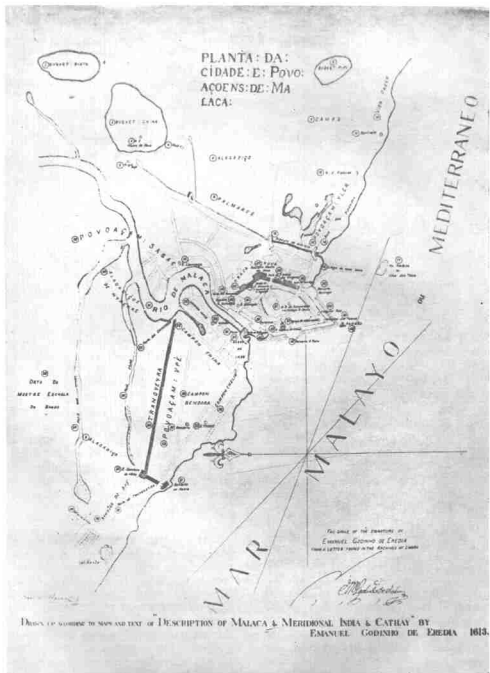


Fig. 3

The map of 1604 (see fig. 2) shows the river with its bridge quite clearly, adding a tributary of sorts, while it also mentions its name: Regato Aerlele. Now the Sejarah Melayu also mentions Ayer Leleh, in the following way: "...from Ayer Leleh (the trickling stream) to the entrance of the bay of Moar, was one uninterrupted market place." (Leyden's translation, p.323; Brown's version is: "...from Ayer Leleh to Hulu Muar there was an unbroken line of habitation," p.157). It is interesting to note the apparent absence of any break or obstacle. It may be noted also that both maps mention the word Iler or Yler, which of course is *hilir*, meaning the lower waters of a river, *leleh* means flowing gently, trickling.

The Portuguese *Desobridor* (discoverer), cosmographer and mathematician Emanuel Godinho de Eredia, born at Malacca in 1563, who stayed there during his youth and again from 1600-1605, when he founded the fortress of Muar in 1613, published his famous *Description of Malacca* (translated by J. V. Mills in JMBRAS 1930, Vol. VIII Part I). De Eredia mentions the river Aerlele three times in his Description. First he states that the suburb of Yler "lies on the same side of the river as the fortress, towards the south-east: it extends from the stream Aerlele for a distance of 600 braca's (1800 feet?; there are indications that de Eredia takes a braca to measure three feet and not six) as far as the fields of Tanjonpacer (*Tanjong Pasir*): Then he says that from the stream or rivulet Aerlele another row of wooden houses runs eastward for 500 braca's (1500 feet) to the well of Buquet China providing excellent water. Finally he mentions the island Pulo Malaca (Ilha dos Naos)

opposite "the mouth of the stream Aerlele, whence a tongue of dry land extends as far as Pulo Malaca."

The *de Eredia* map of 1613 (published in JMBRAS 1934, Vol. II Pt. II, p. 1 and reprinted here in part, see fig. 3) shows the river, named Ribeyro de Aierlele, in its full length, finding its origin to the West of Bukit China (at the well-known and still existing *Perigi Raja*) and to the southeast of Bukit China.

According to the map it had been bridged in two places indicating that it had some width. As it nears the sea, some small lakes, pools or swamps are shown on its east side. These lakes or pools may furnish an explanation for the name Yler or Iller, to this day used in Banda Hilir, the name for the main street in that section. A glance at de Eredia's map shows quite convincingly where the Siamese expeditionary force might have been forced to a halt on its march along the plain and successfully engaged. As suggested above this could have been at this Airlele river, which effectively shut off the approaches from the east. If so, the battle between the Malays and the Siamese logically should have been fought along its banks.

The De Resende map of 1646 (see fig. 4) shows only part of the river with the pools, but has the fort surrounded by a tributary of Malacca river, looking more or less like a natural moat.

The fifth Portuguese map at our disposal (from *Asia Portuguesa, 1666*, but according to the legend drawn before 1640, see fig. 5) again shows

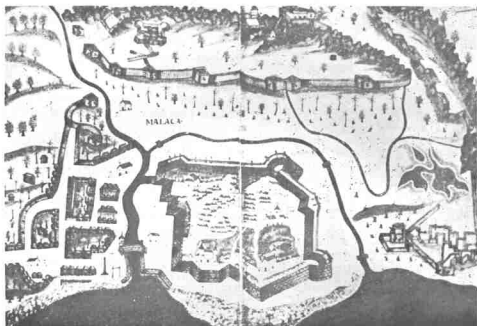


Fig. 4



Fig 5.

the river with one bridge and naming the site between the river and the eastern wall of the Fortaleza or Fortress as Banda Iller, the name still used today.

Since then we have lost trace of the Aerlele river mainly because no Dutch maps showing the site are available. The *Grondteijekeningh* (sketch) of 1656 (1663) does not show it (see fig. 6) as it does not extend far enough. According to the Portuguese maps, which coincide with this detail, the mouth of the river would have been about 220 yards from the Landgate which would locate it near the western entrance of the present Banda Hilir English School assuming that the maps are accurate as to this detail.

Recently a copy of a French map of Malacca dating from about 1690 (see fig. 7) has been obtained from the *Archives Nationales* at Paris. It does not show Aerlele river or any indication of it, but it has the river-like moat circulating the fort, in the same way as is shown in the De Resende map. In his Report on Malacca Governor Bort indeed mentions the digging of a moat in 1673/4, "from the (Malacca) river to the seashore" on the north-east flank of the fortress.

The quite accurate and detailed town plan of Malacca of 1785 by Elias and Reimers (see fig. 8) also has no trace of the river, but it shows a small natural ditch to the east of the moat of the fort. This ditch is located in the same spot as the last part of a ditch or large drain east of the Esplanade or Padang on the Smith map of Malacca of 1891, which at the time was much smaller than today (see fig. 8). This ditch however had an interesting extension pointing at Bukit China. Could this ditch or drain indeed have been the remains, since gone, of the former river called

Airlele, as has been suggested by the translator of Valentyn? In any case its name is preserved to this day in Jalan Airlele, be it that this street lies some 200 yards to the east of the location of the source of the former river on the Portuguese maps. It is difficult to trace the origin of the name-giving of this street, but it might aptly be considered as a tribute to a river, which has long since disappeared, but which apparently has played an important role in the early military history of Malacca.

During its long and interesting history Malacca has suffered quite a number of sieges. The Siamese attacks on Malacca during the fifteenth century are mentioned in detail above, but also the Portuguese siege of 1511, two Dutch sieges in 1606 and 1641, the sieges of 1756/7 and 1784 and the English attack in 1795 are described in detail elsewhere. Most of these attacks however came from the sea and only a few were delivered from the land side. Among these the Siamese attack is the only one as far as I know which has been delivered overland from the East. The Dutch attack of 1608 was delivered from the eastern seashore. This may explain why no mention has been made of the river on the east side and its role in the defence of Malacca. The possibility remains, however, that new sources can give us more and better information concerning this East river and the role it may have played in preventing the Siamese from succeeding in their plans to subdue Malacca by force.

Assuming that our historical speculation proves to be well founded it might serve as a minor example of the importance of the factor of changing landscape in the analysis of historical problems.

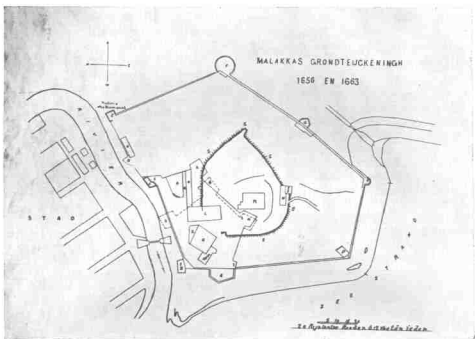


Fig. 6.

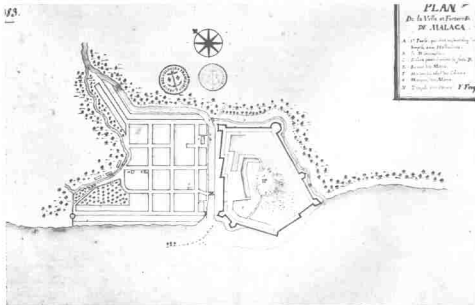


Fig. 7.

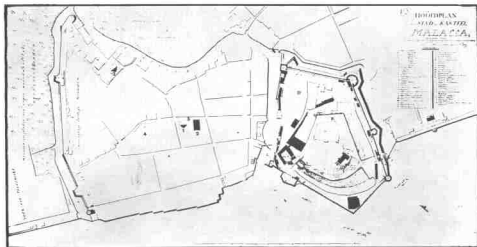


Fig. 8.

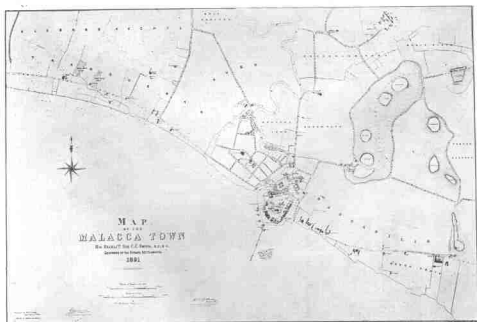


Fig. 9.

LIST OF MAPS

- Fig. 1 Plan of the Fortress of Malacca, late sixteenth century? Author and origin unknown. Photo-copy in the National Archives of Malaysia.
- Fig. 2 Plan of the City of Malacca, 1604. Photo-copy in the National Archives of Malaysia.
- Fig. 3 Plan of the City and Suburbs of Malacca by De Eredia, 1613.
- Fig. 4 Plan of Malacca from *Livro do Pedro Barreto do Resende*, 1646. Photo-copy; original in M.S. Sloane 197, British Museum.
- Fig. 5 Plan of the Fortress of Malacca, from *Asia Portuguesa*, by Manuel de Faria e Sousa, 1666. Caption on the photo-copy in the National Archives of Malaysia states that the plan is drawn before 1640.
- Fig. 6 Malakkas Grondteijckeningh, 1656 and 1663.
- Fig. 7 French plan of the Town and Fortress of Malacca by F. Froger, about 1690. Original in Archives Nationales, Paris; Photo-copy in the National Archives of Malaysia.
- Fig. 8 Master Plan of Malacca, by C.F. Reimer and P. Elias, 1785. Original in the Algemeen Rijksar-chief, The Hague; photo-copy in the National Archives of Malaysia.
- Fig. 9 Map of the Malacca Town, commissioned by Sir C.C. Smith, Governor of the Straits Settlements, 1891. Original in National Archives of Malaysia.