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The Political Integration of Indian Ocean Ports-of-Trade

by

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1. Introduction

The Indian Ocean has recently received a lot of attention as a cultural and economic entity, with recent scholarship following mainly two different approaches to the topic. The first approach, prompted by Fernand Braudel's work on the Mediterranean as a unified space, tries to research the exchange taking place between Indian Ocean civilizations and the possibility of a distinct Indian Ocean civilization that spanned the whole region. The second approach, often connected to Immanuel Wallerstein's attempts to identify and research a historical world-system, tries to understand the economic structure of Indian Ocean trade and its position within the world.

Both strings of academic work have accorded utmost importance to port cities along the Indian Ocean. As entry and exit points of cultural, religious, and economic flows, they determined patterns and intensity of connections in the Indian Ocean.

This paper will take a look at port cities in the Indian Ocean and explain their functions, importance and connections. However, unlike most recent works, the aim is not primarily to show their significance for economic and cultural integration but to try and shed some light on the political integration of port cities in their respective region and the impact this had on the Indian Ocean. The assessment of cultural and economic integration in this paper is thus by no means a complete picture, but rather aims at showing how recent research has highlighted elements of integration over those of division.

For the purpose of this paper, a larger Indian Ocean region is looked at, including the Chinese Seas in the East and both the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea in the West. Chronologically the analysis will be limited to the time between the 7th century and the advent of the Europeans in the 15th century. At some points however, a view toward the era of European intervention will be useful.

The next chapter gives a general introduction to Indian Ocean trade and its development over time. The third chapter focuses on the nature of cities in the realm of the Indian Ocean and the characteristics most important for their understanding. It is also concerned with port cities, the relevant terminology, and their distinct features that made up the Indian Ocean trade system. In the next two parts, an overview will be given over the pivotal role both culturally and economically accorded to port-cities. The sixth chapter focuses on the nature of the political systems port cities were integrated in and indications of political integration. It also tries to classify port cities, according to their degree of political independence. By drawing on examples from the Red Sea, the Malabar Coast and the Chinese Sea, it is shown how these differences in political integration influenced the Indian Ocean as a whole. A concluding view will assess the degree of political integration of Indian Ocean port cities and how this affected the system as a whole.

2. Indian Ocean Trade from the 7th Century Onwards

Throughout time, the Indian Ocean has always been an area of trade and cultural exchange. Even before the Greco-Roman era and the establishment of the Silk Road on land, it can be assumed that there was regular and organized Indian Ocean trade. During the Bronze Age, the necessity of bringing copper and tin together to produce the eponymous alloy led to lively commercial connections from the Eastern Mediterranean to India. An impressive Roman source, the *Periplus of the Sea*, written by a Roman merchant during the 1st century AD, recorded in some detail the ports of the Western Indian Ocean and much other trade related information.[1] However, after the dissolution of the Roman Empire in the West, the East-West trade in the Indian Ocean suffered a temporary decline. Most studies concur that from the late 7th century AD onwards, trade saw a renaissance due to the economic and political resurgence on both ends of the Ocean, in Arabia and China. After the Hijra in 622 AD, the Arabian Peninsula and the eastern Mediterranean saw the unanticipated expansion of Islam, not only culturally but also politically. Within a few decades a unified Islamic empire arose that stabilized the political and economic realm after the dissolution of the Roman Empire and became a reliable and potent commercial zone. In China, the Tang dynasty came to power at roughly the same time and consolidated the Chinese Empire as both an export and import market.[2] In the following time, both Indian Ocean trade and caravan trade blossomed and with it, cultural and religious exchange intensified. As Arabian traders took from the peninsular caravan routes to the sea, they quickly navigated the entire Indian Ocean up to China. It is in this time that both the cultural formation of an Indo-Islamic World and the economic integration of an (Afro-)Eurasian system gained pace. Both these processes were primarily conducted through a system of port cities all around the Indian Ocean, with certain common characteristics.

3. Indian Ocean Port Cities

By no means a new phenomenon, port cities attained an unprecedented role after the 7th century. Before examining the relevant terminology and their historical occurrence, some general remarks about cities in the Indian Ocean area might be in order.

The concept of cities in the Indo-Islamic Indian Ocean region was quite different from the one found in Europe at the same time and differed again from that of the Chinese. The requirements for and functions of an Indo-Islamic city were much less clearly defined and differed over time and space. Despite this, Chaudhuri maintains that there was a common notion of the difference between cities and rural areas, and there was an awareness of these two different concepts, even if the delineation

[1] For a good introduction to Indian Ocean trade in the Greco-Roman period and before see McPherson (1993).
[2] cf. Chaudhuri (1985), pp. 34f.

was not always as easily made as in Europe.[3] Both in Islamic and Indian societies, there was no general legal distinction between city and countryside and also the social differentiation was not as explicit.[4] This lack of distinction was also mirrored in the physical world, as the boundaries of cities were often hard to draw. Many cities did not have a fortified enclosure, and concerning population density there was rather a gradual change between dense rural areas and marginal urban areas. There were some symbolical buildings often present in cities, like a Friday mosque, a citadel or a customs office, but none of these were as requisite as for example a cathedral in medieval Europe.[5] In addition, a dichotomy in agrarian countryside and industrial city was not generally applicable, as there were rural industrial areas and agri- or horticulture within city boundaries.[6]

Another difference to the European concept was the frequent fluctuation of importance and population of Indian Ocean cities, both over the seasons and over the course of history. Mainly due to vulnerability against environmental influences, cities would frequently become unattractive or even uninhabitable and were thus given up or shrank significantly.[7] As the populations were aware of this, cities were not generally planned or built for a longer time, causing their sometimes provisional appearance to European travelers.[8] Having said that, it must be pointed out that there were certain cities that remained of primary importance or at least inhabited for very long times, especially if they were of great religious significance. For this distinction, Chaudhuri has introduced the useful terms *ephemeral* and *perennial* cities.[9] Also, just like in Europe, cities were always centers of political, cultural or economic interaction and importance. They were, however, not always centers of all three aspects, as we shall see later in more detail.

Chinese cities were foremost places of administration pertaining to the Chinese imperial system. There was thus a much stronger distinction between city and countryside and the functions of cities were defined to such a point as they had to, in order to provide their respective level of administration.[10]

[3] cf. Chaudhuri (1990), p. 341.
[4] Ibid., p. 368.
[5] cf. Das Gupta (1994), p. 365.
[6] cf. Chaudhuri (1990), p. 368.
[7] cf. Das Gupta (1994), p. 364.
[8] cf. Wink (2004), p. 68.
[9] cf. Chaudhuri (1990), p. 361.
[10] cf. Chaudhuri (1985), p. 179.

3.1. Terminology

A special subgroup of Indian Ocean cities can be made out in those port cities actively engaged in Indian Ocean trade. The terminology used for them in research publications is quite diverse.[11] Most commonly they are simply referred to as *ports-of-trade*, but also the term *entrepôt* and *emporium* have come to be used. *Ports-of-trade* is the most general term made popular by Karl Polanyi's work mainly on the prehistoric Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. It quite generally describes pre-modern port cities that offered a secure location for the exchange of commodities, but in an administrative setting and under statutory prices, thus not providing competitive markets. Although Polanyi admits that pre-colonial Indian ports featured some forms of competitive behavior and a government which only drew on taxes and customs – but did not try to monopolize any trading business – the term remains the description of a decisively pre-modern institution.[12] Polanyi also mentions the term *emporia* as being used by some scholars for ports in prehistoric and classical Greece and Northern Europe, highlighting the impartiality and security of exchange. Referring to Polanyi's ports-of-trade, however, Chaudhuri notes that *emporia* in the Indian Ocean system were more than that, since they offered a veritable market that determined prices between a plurality of buyers, sellers and brokers.[13]

Entrepôt is the third term commonly used for the Indian Ocean port cities, a term which highlights the fact that commodities were not directly transported from their port of origin to the destination, but repeatedly changed ship, owner and possibly destination in a port city system.[14]

Even though there are differences between the terms, they are somewhat indifferently used in the literature. Most publications opt for one of them without explaining the reasons or pointing out the difference to the other terms, and only defining it for their purposes. *Ports-of-trade* still seems to be the most widely used term and is less narrowly defined than *emporia*. However, this does not seem to imply a refusal of the other terms or a strict adherence to Polanyi's concept but rather serves to keep a broad terminology. In this paper, the matter will be treated much the same with *ports-of-trade* as the general term, although when applicable coming back to *emporia*.

[11] Naturally there were diverse indigenous terms that clearly distinguished ports from other cities, differing over time and space. Since in this paper a uniform term shall be used for the purpose of analysis of the entire region, it will be refrained from an enumeration and discussion of the indigenous terms.

[12] cf. Polanyi (1963), p. 37.

[13] cf. Chaudhuri (1985), p. 224.

[14] This term also allows the connection to the European trading states in early modern trade and the question if there was or was not a general entrepôt (or the Dutch “stapelmarkt”) for Europe, through which goods entered the European market, as some scholars claim Amsterdam to have been. See e.g. Lesger (1999).

3.2. Characteristics

There are some common characteristics of ports-of-trade engaged in Indian Ocean trade that are crucial for the development of the Indian Ocean as an integrated space. Within the broader context of the characteristics of cities outlined above, most ports-of-trade were *ephemeral* cities, meaning that few of them remained primary trade centers over several centuries but that they frequently passed the torch on to another city. The causes for rise and decline of ports-of-trade were often different from those of inland cities. While they could also be struck by natural disasters[15], they were also highly dependent on shifts in the economic geography, since their fate depended on their convenient location on a trade route. They were also usually less populous than the large agrarian inland cities, but their population fluctuated over the seasons just as it did in the inland cities.[16] Unlike the cultural and political centers of the inland, ports-of-trade could do without religious conformity, owing to the presence of merchant communities of different cultures and denominations.

As for their functions, Rothermund describes these cities as "market place[s] in which a variety of goods is more or less continuously available and in which a plurality of buyers and sellers can meet without undue restraint under predictable conditions of supply and demand."[17] Economically speaking, they had to provide both the physical infrastructure and the legal institutions that allowed free and safe transactions between merchants of different provenance and culture. Chaudhuri even goes as far as to say that functioning spot markets, brokers, or both were a necessary condition for true emporia.[18] Additionally, some sort of commercial law, monetary exchange, credit system and a spirit of mutual tolerance are usually named among the characteristics.[19]

Due to the active and diverse trading communities, there was also a clear differentiation between the ports-of-trade and the littoral society surrounding them, which provided labor and supplies, but did not take part in transcultural and transoceanic activities.[20] It must also be pointed out that only such cities at the seaside are considered ports-of-trade where transoceanic trade was conducted.[21] Secondary cities that were engaged in trade, but rather served as feeder or distributive ports, are excluded in a strict definition of emporia, but often still included in studies of cultural transfer and connections.

[15] An example being the earthquake which hit Siraf in 977/8.
[16] cf. Beaujard (2005), p. 436.
[17] Rothermund (1991), p. 3.
[18] cf. Chaudhuri (1985), p.197.
[19] cf. Das Gupta (1994), p. 363.
[20] cf. Pearson (2006), p. 356.
[21] cf. Das Gupta (1994), p. 363.

Thus, functionally speaking ports-of-trade provided a stage to act for the numerous and diverse Indian Ocean trade communities, often coined diasporas, although this term is somewhat problematic.[22] These trading communities made out the system of exchange in goods, people, and ideas in the realm of the Indian Ocean, on which the focus lies in the next chapters.

4. Ports-of-trade as Knots in an Economic World-System

Quoting the famous expression of Fernand Braudel, Janet Abu-Lughod describes the ports-of-trade in the Indian Ocean as an "'archipelago' of world cities, elevated over a sea of relatively isolated rural areas and open stretches"[23]. This description stresses their importance as those connectors that essentially turned different regions into one unified world.[24] This also points out the fact that these cities are seen to depend much more on each other than on their immediate or regional hinterland. When for example Baghdad started to suffer under Turk and Mongol attacks and trade subsequently changed to the southern route via the Red Sea and on to southern India, the Gujarati ports-of-trade quickly declined.[25]

Without wanting to meticulously retrace the development of trade routes over the centuries, a short overview over the main stages shall be given. In the immediate time after the rise of Islam in the West, Arab traders serviced the entire trade route from such ports as Jeddah and Siraf in the West to Canton in China, but stopping and trading on the way at the ports-of-trade in India and Southeast Asia. Arab traders started to settle all over the Indian Ocean region. A sad but undeniable evidence of their firm establishment even in China was the well-known assault on Arab traders in Canton in 758.[26] This conflict, among other reasons, might have been a reason for the subsequent fragmentation of Indian Ocean trade in multiple subsystems, serviced by different merchants until the mid of the 10th century. It culminated in the development of three trade circles, roughly corresponding to the Western Indian Ocean between the Arabian peninsula and the Western Indian coast; the Eastern Indian Ocean between the Eastern Indian coast and the Strait of Malacca; and finally the South China Sea and insular Southeast Asia.[27] At the edges of the circles lay the most important ports-of-trade, like Aden and Hormuz, Cambay and Calicut, Malacca (earlier on Samudra Pasé) and Canton. Geo-

[22] The term "diaspora" implies a distinction between the civilization of origin and that of residence of the respective community, with the community remaining part of the home civilization. Both assumptions have been challenged. See e.g. Bhattacharya et al. (2007), p. 94.
[23] Abu-Lughod (1991), p. 353.
[24] Although it should not be forgotten that the same is valid for the caravan cities.
[25] cf. Abu-Lughod (1991), pp. 193f.
[26] cf. Chaudhuri (1985), p. 50.
[27] See a drawing of this in Chaudhuri (1985), p. 41.

graphically and meteorological, this division is quite convincing. Although somewhat generalizing it has been broadly accepted and occasionally even been further specified.[28]

4.1. Maritime Silk Road and Pluricentric System

Inspired by Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems approach, economic exchange that took place through Indian Ocean ports-of-trade has been approached as part of a pre-modern Afro-Eurasian world-system.

Indian Ocean ports-of-trade in this system provided a network for the exchange of luxury commodities and industrial goods, but also raw materials and foodstuffs. The general fact that trade might have been initially fueled by the demand for exotic luxury items, but quickly expanded to these other, lesser value goods, has come to be widely accepted in more recent research. Most of it sees the ports-of-trade network from one of two possible viewpoints: The first looks at the Indian Ocean as a highway of East-West trade, focusing on luxury items and spices coming from China, India and Southeast Asia to the West and precious metals coming from Europe, Arabia and Africa to the East. The second viewpoint focuses more on the division between multiple industrial cores and rural peripheries in a less linear system. However, both are not necessarily competing theories but different levels of the same system of economic exchange in the Indian Ocean. In any case, Indian Ocean trade is usually seen as hierarchical system with the transoceanic ports-of-trade at the top of the hierarchy and secondary ports and regional exchange centers acting as supporters.[29]

The analysis of East-West trade departs from the assumption that prior to European technological inventions and expansion in the age of modernity, China and India were not only much more populous than Europe or Western Asia, but also more productive. This is mainly due to the higher agricultural yield which led to a larger surplus and allowed for more industrial production. While Europe and to a lesser degree Western Asia and Eastern Africa did not have many complex products to offer, they could provide precious metals. Gold and silver were scarce in both India and China, but valued not only as a luxury item or adornment, but also for the monetization of economic systems. Thus precious metals served a mixed purpose somewhere between a luxury commodity and actual money, sometimes traded in bullion and sometimes in coin. There was some sort of a currency standard between the ports-of-trade so that currencies could be exchanged for each other or used as payment for goods. It is also due to this convertibility of precious metals from bullion to coin that a mint constituted an integral part of ports-of-trade.[30] The sourcing of export goods usually took place in closer

[28] See e.g. Beaujard (2005).
[29] cf. Chakravarti (2012), p. 83.
[30] cf. Das Gupta (1994), p. 363.

vicinity to the ports than the distribution of imported goods, which seems logical under the assumption that imported goods were rather worth transporting further, since they came from far away.[31] So the East-West trade largely served to drain the productive surplus of China and India in exchange for precious metals that could be used for currency.

The core-periphery trade model focuses instead on a division of labor, with core areas providing industrial products and peripheries providing raw materials, some natural luxury goods and slaves. India, China and Western Asia are consistently seen as (sometimes fragmented) industrial cores and Africa, Southeast Asia, Japan, and Europe as peripheries.[32] While the main trade route is still seen in an East-West direction, it is not considered to be a singular sea highway, but rather a network that is intersected at different nodal points, an example being the Bay of Bengal trade meeting East-West trade at Malacca.[33]

Thus although economic surplus remained a motivation for trade, this viewpoint focuses on some sort of division of labor that had already evolved.[34] In this division of labor, ports-of-trade could rely on the income they derived from taxation and customs and did not usually double as production cities or agrarian centers. Their only economic purpose was to provide services such as transport, brokerage and financing. This made ports-of-trade particularly vulnerable, since supply and demand shocks could easily lead to a temporal breakdown of trade and deprive the cities of their only source of income.

4.2. Evaluation and Critique

Research tends to stress the interdependence of ports-of-trade in a global system. For their primary economic function, the distribution of goods over long distances, they were more dependent on each other and far away markets than on their immediate surroundings. However, one should not forget that in many ways ports-of-trade were also firmly linked to their hinterland and the littoral around them. Firstly, merchants depended on both labor and suitable bulk cargo for the charging of ships. Since for risk averting purposes ships could not be fully laden with valuable luxury or industrial products, they usually filled up with foodstuffs or other medium value bulk cargo, like dates, rice or wood.[35] An additional factor that bound merchants to their home port was that they often invested their trade revenues in local or regional production ventures.[36] Since trade was a profitable but risky

[31] cf. Chaudhuri (1985), p. 109.
[32] cf. Beaujard (2005), pp.424f.
[33] cf. Hall (2010), p. 112.
[34] cf. Abu-Lughod (1991), p. 358.
[35] cf. Chaudhuri (1985), p. 184.
[36] cf. Beaujard (2005), p. 453.

venture, investors financing trade would not want to only invest in trade. On the other hand, capitalists mainly carrying investments in land or production often diversified their enterprises by also investing in trade.[37] Thus the system of trade financing did depend on regional financial systems. This dependence was intensified by the fact that stable currencies required impartial, regional economic powers as guarantors.

5. Ports-of-trade as Cultural Linkers

In the aftermath of the cultural turn, the study of pre-modern trade increasingly turned away from the discussion of different market models and tried to free the concept of ports-of-trade in the Indian Ocean from the European viewpoint.[38] Instead, emphasis was put on the questions to which extent exchange was motivated by cultural patterns and served to promote cultural contacts, possibly even contributing to the making of a common Indo-Islamic civilization. This viewpoint focuses on trading communities' function as cultural, ethnic or religious agents instead of economic networks. Opposed to the economic approach, a cultural point of view usually draws a line between the Indo-Islamic civilization, spanning from Eastern Arabia to Southeast Asia, and the Chinese civilization, comprising China and some parts of continental Southeast Asia. While by now the claim of a 'closed China' has been refuted, it is true that a cultural amalgamation only took place to a much lesser extent in China. For example, as already mentioned above, the Chinese concept of cities remained very different from the Indo-Islamic one.

For the Indo-Islamic civilization, religion and language proved to be the two most important elements of integration. The connected communities in the ports-of-trade are often described as a cosmopolis with diverse members and multiple linked centers. Apart from the economic linkage, there were also cultural aspects to this cosmopolis, as Sheldon Pollock exemplary points out in his study of a Sanskrit-speaking cosmopolis in the first millennium AD. According to Pollock, from the 3rd to the 5th century AD such a structure had been developing in South and Southeast Asia. Without the vehicle of empire formation, colonization or even the spread of a religion, Sanskrit quickly became the language of official inscriptions and texts for roughly a millennium. It spread together with cultural and political practices, but never served as a lingua franca in the area.[39] The demise of this cosmopolis in the 12th and 13th centuries AD coincides with the rise of Islam in Southeast Asia and Southern India. Very quickly after its foundation Islam had expanded over land through Persia into Sindh in the 7th century AD, but it was only half a millennium later that seaborne expansion occurred. While there were

[37] cf. Das Gupta (1991), pp. 360f.

[38] Especially concepts developed with respect to the Italian and the Dutch trading cities long prejudiced research. cf. Gommans (2010), pp. 4f.

[39] cf. Pollock (1998), pp. 10f.

Muslim Arab communities in ports-of-trade before, the shaping of an 'Arabicized cosmopolis' and the spread of cultural and political ideas to the hinterlands did not happen before.[40] Islam as the new religion of connection however became increasingly heterodox in the new areas and was much less, as it initially was, an element of political integration, but rather a cultural one. The Yemenite Rasulids' attempt to establish a Sunni patronage was bound to fail, since the Muslim trade communities were far too diverse in ethnicity and beliefs to accept the far away Yemenites as their patrons.[41] However, religion and ethnicity were important elements binding individual trade communities together.

But not only Islam was transported over the Indian Ocean, but there were also Buddhist advances, and later also the Jain traders from Gujarat became important actors in the Indian Ocean port system.[42]

In contrast to the economic system of ports-of-trade which was structured in a clear hierarchy between primary and secondary cities, cultural exchange took place on more even grounds. In fact, Hall defines the system as a heterarchy "including horizontally linked equitable urban centers that shared common goals, acknowledged the political independence of its 'members,' and included multiple networked power centers that had different levels of connectivity, and were based upon some degree of acknowledged cultural homogeneity".[43]

All these factors defined the nature of ports-of-trade in different ways. They were diverse cities, with many different communities living side by side, albeit often in different quarters.[44] For a port-of-trade to successfully keep these communities, who were crucial for the conduct of trade and thus the prosperity of the city, both a spirit of tolerance and a common denominator had to be maintained. To this end, the major communities were often given some authority over themselves and were governed by *shahbandars*, representatives of the communities who were the links between communities and city government.[45] This contributed to a general catholicity in ports-of-trade, although seldom interrupted by assaults on singular groups. Cultural diversity and independence of ports-of-trade further contributed to a division of the Indian Ocean world into the ports-of-trade system, through which trading communities stood in contact and where they were able to live freely, and the hinterlands that were culturally much more distinguishable from one another.

[40] cf. Hall (2010), p. 116.
[41] Ibid., p. 126.
[42] cf. Chaudhuri (1985), p.100.
[43] Hall (2005), p. 114.
[44] cf. Chakravarti (2012), p. 82.
[45] cf. Chaudhuri (1985), p.112.

6. The Political Dimension of Ports-of-trade

When looking at the economic and cultural scholarship on the ports-of-trade system in the Indian Ocean, one could get the impression that at least from the 13th century AD onward, one is dealing with a thoroughly integrated area. Ports-of-trade seem to be strongly dependent on each other and actually constitute a web of cities not incomparable to today's global cities. In fact, especially for East Asia, some studies that are concerned with city networks draw a straight line from the 13th to the 20th century AD.[46] Yet, if one takes a look past the cultural and economic aspects towards the political integration of ports-of-trade, it quickly becomes clear, that they were in fact very different.

Talking about the political integration of Indian Ocean ports-of-trade, at least three questions must be asked. The first question is that to the general relationship between merchant communities and local political elites. To which extent were merchant communities subject to the suzerainty of local political elites or integrated into political decision making? This question will not be further discussed in this paper, suffice it to say that in recent times, the sharp distinction into a political and economic elite has been somewhat revised and it has been acknowledged, that often merchants could participate in the shaping of more favorable policies.[47] The second question is into what kind of local political system ports-of-trade were integrated, that is if they were city states, part of an empire, or part of any other political entity. This question shall be the focus of this chapter and will be discussed in greater detail below. The third important question is whether or not there existed an overarching political Indian Ocean system, like the economic or cultural ones outlined above. This is effectively the question whether there was a concept of the Indian Ocean, or even only parts of it, as a political space or arena in its own right and not just as a passageway. To this there will be some remarks at the end.

Returning to the second question, Polanyi already wrote in 1963 that pre-modern ports could "be distinguished according to whether the port functioned as the organ of an independent small state [...], or whether it was in the possession of a hinterland empire".[48] While Polanyi's work was on ancient western Asia, the distinction also seems to be useful for ports-of-trade in the realm of the Indian Ocean.

6.1. Independent City States

Many ports-of-trade were politically independent city states. They rose to prominence because of their strategical location and because they were able to gain enough revenue from trade to stay inde-

[46] See e.g. Gipouloux (2011).
[47] See e.g. Bhattacharya et. al. (2007), pp. 99f; Gommans (2010), p.5.
[48] Polanyi (1963), p.38

pendent of inland powers even in dire times. The ideal type of such independent ports-of-trade would be a small island: accessible by ship, yet out of reach from mainland powers. Many of these ports-of-trade were indeed island cities, like Kish in the Persian Gulf or the Ryukyu islands in the East China Sea. But also cities like Aden and Samudra Pasé (and later Malacca) have to be counted among the independent city states, even if not for the entire time of their existence. All of these cities either had no hinterland, or their hinterland was not very densely populated. Additionally, it is interesting to note that these cities mainly existed at the junctions of the larger civilizations, namely at the East of the Arabian Peninsula and insular Southeastern Asia. This might be owing to the fact that in these areas control of inland empires was weaker and left city states enough freedom to pursue an independent and active maritime policy. In the case of the island of Kish, the sovereign intervention into maritime and commercial matters seem to have been so great that contemporaries accused the Kishites of piracy. However, it is interesting to note that the Kishites themselves saw their acts as completely within their sovereignty and furthermore, the term used in Arab sources for ships being held up by the Kishites is different from the one for common piracy. So, even though not shared by everyone, there seems to have been a different notion of legitimate intervention by ports-of-trade and actual piracy.[49] The Kishites also showed their aggressive maritime policy by laying siege to Aden around 1135. While it was not entirely uncommon in the Arabian Sea to use naval support for conquests, the Kishite attack was not aimed at conquering or even destroying Aden, but at deterring trade bound for Aden in order for Kish to become the dominant port-of-trade on the Arabian coast.[50] It was thus a campaign exclusively aimed at commercial, not territorial expansion. This suggests that the Kishites had a very keen sense for the ocean as a political space in itself, which could be dominated and had to be ordered.

At the other side of the Indian Ocean, the Ryukyu Islands are another island state actively engaged in the shaping of the seascape by issuing permits (so called s*hisshōs*) for ships on trade routes to China. This measure went beyond taxation of traders, which took place in many ports-of-trade to derive revenue but left traders free to choose their cargo and route. The issuing of s*hisshōs* in contrast, aimed at controlling trade and ship movements as such, thus exerting some control over the sea as a space. This practice has later been extensively used by the Portuguese, institutionalized in the *cartazes* system.[51]

[49] cf. Margariti (2008) pp. 558f.
[50] Ibid., p. 581.
[51] cf. Gipouloux (2011), p. 70.

6.2. Ports of Empires

On the other side of the spectrum of political integration were those ports-of-trade that were integrated into larger empires. The primary example is China, but also the Muslim empires of Arabia and Persia can serve as examples. The first and most important distinction between city states and imperial ports-of-trade is that the latter were in practically no case the seat of significant political power. Going by Chaudhuri's earlier cited distinction of cities as cultural, economic and political centers, imperial ports-of-trade were only the first two. This is not to imply that they did not have influence on political decisions or that their fate was decided by far away central authorities, but it remains that residences of kings, emperors of caliphs were usually inland.[52] Imperial ports-of-trade thus were subject to the general policy of the empire, which provided some guarantee of a certain volume of trade for official exit and entry points of the empire, like Basra was for a long time. Indeed some empires pursued a very active maritime policy, like the Chinese empire. In its heyday, Chinese maritime policy even resolved the dynastic warfare in Sri Lanka, thus actively meddling with the politics of faraway regions.[53] However, as Roderick Ptak insightfully points out, the view of Chinese officials was always one looking from the land out onto the sea. Ports-of-trade were always considered as being an integral part of the 'land system' even though they constituted the frontier with the sea.[54] Imperial maritime policy thus at no point became independent from general imperial policy, but always had to consider domestic political and economic issues as well. Thus this firm integration into the imperial system also left the ports-of-trade at the mercy of policy changes or the political fate of the empire, like the rigorous isolation in China during parts of the Ming reign or the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate.[55]

Of course there were also numerous ports-of-trade that were neither completely independent nor part of an empire. Especially at the Indian coast, but also in Southeast Asia these were to be found. In this region, from the 13th century onwards a movement of inland states toward the coast began which incorporated ports-of-trade and often even made them the political capital. This can be seen in Kerala, when the *Zamorin* established himself in Calicut and in response to this a similar move from the inland to the sea took place in Cochin.[56] The same can be said for the Bay of Bengal and later on for Aceh on Sumatra.[57] This led to a stronger linking of inland and maritime interests within the ports-of-trade and eventually to a stronger politicization of the Indian Ocean, breaking the dichotomy of ports-of-trade and hinterland.

[52] cf. Heestermann (1980), p. 89.
[53] It is referred to the intervention of Zheng He in Sri Lanka in 1411; For an overview see e.g. Hall (2010) p. 134.
[54] cf. Ptak (2001), p. 398.
[55] cf. Malekandathil (2010) p. 84.
[56] Ibid., p. 83.
[57] For a history of the rise of Aceh as a commercial and territorial Sultanate, see e.g. Reid (2007).

7. Conclusion

As shown above, there were different models of political integration of ports-of-trade, which brought with them significant differences in the way the sea was treated and cities interacted. This was one of the main reasons why, despite all cultural and economic integration appropriately pointed out by most recent literature, no common concept of the sea as a political sphere could be established along the Indian Ocean. Some cities very actively tried to control their trade – up to permit systems and even military actions – or saw it as a passageway to expand their terrestrial dominance. Others did not take issue with the sea as a political entity at all and saw it as an entry or exit port for their land empire. In any case, ports-of-trade remained political frontiers, even if they were economic and cultural junctions. Some few attempts to bring any kind of legal or political order to parts of the Indian Ocean were either abandoned or failed.[58]

Indeed this lack of political integration of ports-of-trade could be argued to have disadvantaged Indian Ocean trade at different times. For some time, the Chingisid Empire and its successors managed to establish a unified political system with the *pax mongolica* at its heart in Central Asia, significantly easing economic and cultural exchange. But this lack of political integration was also a factor that played into the hands of the Europeans when they appeared in the Indian Ocean in the 16th century. Not only did they bring a clear, politicized concept of the seas with them, but they could also profit from the political vacuum at hand, especially after the Chinese retreat.[59] They were very skillful at pitting not only competing political entities, but diverging concepts of the sea against each other.

In addition the Portuguese, Dutch and British also came from countries where the political capital of the territorial state was also the largest port. In this way maritime policy was inextricably linked to domestic policy, but not only as an extension of the latter, but as an integral part of it. It is hard to believe that the dominant class of a city like Amsterdam would have been able to maintain its political clout in the Netherlands without the expansive and successful maritime policy. Since the European port-capitals were also politically integrated in a European system of states, they were also used to using maritime policy as a political instrument to assert their position in a regional political system.

So when the European powers came to the Indian Ocean region, they brought a new model of ports-of-trade as dominant political actors both within territorial states and within the Indian Ocean as a political space.

[58] The aforementioned Chinese efforts and the Chola attacks on Srivijaya, but also the temporal attempt of Sri Lanka to ally with Mamluk Egypt spring to mind, for the latter see Hall (2010), p.134.

[59] cf. Abu-Lughod (1991), p. 361.

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