

The port of 'Samandar' in the Northern Bay of Bengal and its maritime and coastal linkages (c. 800CE-1500CE)

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Abstract

Contacts across the Bay of Bengal were based on the movement across sea, of objects, people, and of knowledge systems. In this context, the maritime route in particular gained primacy, as the Bay of Bengal holds the centre stage between the two regions. The Bay of Bengal network encapsulated the Myanmar, Cambodian, and Thai mainland polities, and the different kingdoms on the upper Malay Peninsula, and the northern and western coasts of Sumatra along with India's eastern seaboard, and Sri Lanka. Along with trade, it was religion as well, which also acted as one of the conduits that facilitated civilizational dialogue across the Bay. It looms large in Arabic and Persian travel accounts from the mid ninth century CE., being designated as Bahr-i-Harkand in the *Silsilat-al-Tawarikh* by Sulayman Tajir in 851 c.e.-the earliest known source referencing the Bay of Bengal as Bahr-i-Harkand. The Moroccan traveller al Idrisi, in 'The delight of those who seek to wander through the regions of the world' (*Nuzhatu-l Mushtak*) of the mid-12th century c.e., writes, "Samandar is a large town, commercial and rich, and where there are good profits to be made...it stands upon a river which comes from the country of Kashmir. Rice and various grains, especially excellent wheat are to be obtained here...Aloe wood is brought here from the country of Karmut (Kâmarûpa) 15 days distance by a river of which the waters are sweet.....one days sail from this city, there is a large island well peopled and frequented by merchants of all countries....." The descriptions point to the fact that Samandar was a premier port of southeastern Bengal at that time. Thus it can be surmised that by the mid-ninth century C.E., both the sea and its port attracted the attention of Arabic and Persian writers and became a part and parcel of the Arab geographical world. That a sea was named after a particular unit-Harikela-speaks for the region's importance and also its popularity among the seafarers of the time. This was the moment when the people of Chittagong, then Harikela, encountered a group of people, the Arab travelers, practicing a new religion called Islam. Till then they had experienced Buddhism and Brahmanical religion, Buddhism being the dominant one. However coastal networks often offer interesting insights for understanding connected histories. In this presentation I would focus on the coastal network between Southeastern Bengal to western and South-western Myanmar. Western Myanmar encompasses the Arakan region (present Rakhine) which was closely linked with

Harikela both by land and sea and in South-western Myanmar I shall privilege Martaban to other ports like Dawei. We have numismatics, art historical and textual sources to understand their connected history. This geographical continuum led to frequent movements of people between the two areas and some common cultural practices enmeshed within various direct and braided networks. The coinage tradition of Harikela was borrowed from the silver coins of the Chandra rulers of Arakan. Along with Arakan, Martaban in South-west Myanmar was perhaps linked with Harikela. We have textual support of more or less from the same period for this. Through this essay I would argue in a pronounced manner that connectivity between the regions of maritime Southeast Asia with present Bengal and Bihar post 8th century CE was possible only through the port of Samandar in present Chittagong as by then the port of Tamralipta was not in use and this deserves the attention of scholars. There was a unity of land route and sea route in this case. The sea-routes did play important role in shaping up inter-Asian connectivity.

Key words: *Samundar, Harikela, trade, sea routes.*

Introduction

"The river meets the ocean in a blaze of blue and green. No wonder people have made this spot their home for millennia: the fishing is good, the soil is fertile, and flood-free hillocks make it a safe home-site. But its greatest boon is a natural harbor, excellent for deep-water anchorage. Maritime trade goods have flowed through this location from the earliest recorded time."ⁱ(van Schendel 2015: 98). This was the description for Chittagong by Willem van Schendel in the early seventeenth century. In this essay, I would take it backwards by several centuries and apply this for the port of Samandar which was in all possible ways predecessor to the grand port of Chittagong also known as Sudkawan by Ibn Battuta and Porto Grande by the Portuguese.

The Northern Bay of Bengal is a significant maritime space connecting South and Southeast Asiaⁱⁱ(Mukherjee 2011). It looms large in Arabic and Persian travel accounts from the mid ninth century CE, being designated as Bahr-i-Harkand in the *Silsilat al-Tawa'rikh* by Sulayman Tajir in 851 CE-the earliest known source referencing the Bay of Bengal as Bahr-i- Harkand (Reinaud, 1845).ⁱⁱⁱ Harkand was obviously derived from Harikela, a sub-division of Bengal identified with the present Chittagong area^{iv}(Mukherjee 1975:115-119). Again, the Bay of Bengal was clearly defined as bahr Harkal or the sea of Harikela by the anonymous author of the *Hudud al-A'lam* (c. 982 CE)^v (Minorsky 1937:87). This refers to H.rk.nd (taken to be the same as Harikela) as a place on the sea coast together with N. Myas, Urshin, S.M.ND.R and Andras. The reference to H.rk.nd along with Samandar as places on the seacoast is significant, being either a misinterpretation on the part of the author as the port of Samandar lay within the Harikela country or by the fact that Harikela was the name of a

kingdom as well as the name of a place identifiable with present day Chittagong. Associated with Harkand or Harkal we come across a port town called Samandar located in the same area^{vi} (Chakravarti 2002:160-183).

The Moroccan traveller al Idrisi, in 'The delight of those who seek to wander through the regions of the world' (Nuzhatu-l Mushtak) of the mid-12th century CE, writes, "Samandar is a large town, commercial and rich, and where there are good profits to be made...it stands upon a river which comes from the country of Kashmir. Rice and various grains, especially excellent wheat are to be obtained here...Aloe wood is brought here from the country of Karmut (Kāmarūpa) 15 days distance by a river of which the waters are sweet.....one days sail from this city, there is a large island well peopled and frequented by merchants of all countries....." (Here talk about Sandwip as a clinching evidence for identifying Samandar)^{vii} (Elliot and Dowson 1970: 90). He based a large portion of his work on the Kitabu-l Masalik Wa-l Mamali Mamalik (Book of Roads and Kingdoms) written by Ibn Khurdadba in the late 9th century CE who also wrote about Samandar^{viii} (Elliot and Dowson 1964 :5). The descriptions point to the fact that Samandar was a premier port of southeastern Bengal at that time. Thus, it can be surmised that by the mid-ninth century CE, both the sea and its port attracted the attention of Arabic and Persian writers and became a part and parcel of the Arab geographical world. That a sea was named after a particular unit-Harikela-speaks for the region's importance and also its popularity among the seafarers of the time. This was the moment when the people of Chittagong, then Harikela, encountered a group of people, the Arab travelers, practicing a new religion called Islam^{ix}. (Ghosh 2023:296-308). Till then they had experienced Buddhism and Brahmanical religion, Buddhism being the dominant one.

Harikela was an important sub region of early Bengal and was linked to the regional maritime and Buddhist cultural network. The port of Samandar in Harikela, being the only port in the vicinity had a vast hinterland in the Ganga valley and Brahmaputra valley. People from South-east Asia visiting these areas or vice versa had the only option to use the port of Samandar for their journey across Bay of Bengal as after eighth century we have no reference to the port of Tamralipta which was once the premier port, much evidenced by the writings of Chinese Buddhist monks, from which one could embark on a journey to Southeast Asia. In the first half of the ninth century Srivijaya sent a mission to the Pāla court in Bengal in a move to expand the Srivijayan network. The friendly relation between the Pālas and Śailendras is evident from the content of the Nalanda copper-plate of Devapāladeva. The inscription talks about a grant of five villages by the Pāla king Devapāla in his 39th regnal year, at the request of Mahārāja Bālaputradeva, the Śailendra ruler of Suvaradvṇpa/Yavabhīūmi in favour of a monastery built by the latter at Nalanda^x (Majumdar 1926, 17-31). The inscription can be placed in the 9th century and the Śailendra dynasty was based in central Java. The income from the five

villages was to provide for the various needs of the bhikṣus living there, for the writing of the dharmaratnas and for the maintenance of the monastery. In the opinion of Upinder Singh, the grant fits in with the strong Buddhist element in the personal religious orientation and the patronage policy of the Pālas and the Śailendras^{xi} (Singh 2014, 47) The gift is described as the pious meritorious act (dharmmādhikāra) and kīrtti. Merit was naturally the main contention of both the rulers. It is perhaps the earliest endowment of a Southeast Asian ruler in South Asia. Western Bengal did not have any port at that time so it must have been the port of Samandar through which the network was to connect^{xii} (Ghosh 2023: 23-34). This was the only route through which the Ganga valley could connect to the sea after 8th century CE (map.1) Dudhpani inscription (8th century CE) is the last epigraphic record which mentions Tāmralipta as a port.^{xiii} (Kielhorn 1884, 345) Prior to that, undoubtedly the port of Tāmralipta was the most active port in the Bengal delta.

Coastal Networks: Southeastern Bengal to western and South-western Myanmar

While thinking of the larger maritime network we often lose sight of the coasts which also connects in a linear fashion. However coastal networks often offer interesting insights for understanding connected histories. In this presentation I would focus on the coastal network between Southeastern Bengal to western and South-western Myanmar. Western Myanmar encompasses the Arakan region (present Rakhine) which was closely linked with Harikela both by land and sea and in South-western Myanmar I shall privilege Martaban to other ports like Dawei. We have numismatics, art historical and textual sources to understand their connected history.

The earliest cities in Arakan were located on the banks of the Kaladan valley and were thus, open to interactions with India in general and in the Southeastern Bengal (Comilla and Chittagong) in particular. The two formed an environmental continuum with a climate and geography fundamentally different from the Ganga and the Irrawaddy plains on the northwest and southeast, respectively. Communication was provided by intersecting rivers facilitating coastal journeys and trade, overland travel with other areas of Myanmar being difficult as the rugged Arakan Yoma closes the Arakan from Burma proper. On the side of Chittagong, the hill tracts act as a deterrent in smooth communication. This is precisely the reason no coins have been found in the area of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and thus interactions mainly happened through coastal voyages, perhaps from Samandar to ancient Dhanyawadi (present Sittwe). The central zone of Arakan with the riverine plains of the Mayu, the Kaladan and the Lemro rivers - known as Dhānyawati its classical name - was linked to Harikela.^{xiv} (van Galen 2008: 1-32; Ghosh 2019:77-108)

This geographical continuum led to frequent movements of people between the two areas and some common cultural practices enmeshed within various direct and braided networks. The coinage

tradition of Harikela was borrowed from the silver coins of the Chandra rulers of Arakan. These coins are the only coins among the coins found in Myanmar that bear the names of kings. The earliest Chandra dynasty coin showing a recumbent bull on the obverse and a tripartite symbol on the reverse was struck by Devachandra in Dhanyawadi in about the first half of the fifth century CE (?). Again, the trident motif of the Chandra coinage resembles the *Srivatsa*, already seen on the Pyu coins. Thus, it seems to be a Pyu, Chandras of Arakan and Harikela continuity^{xv} (Mukherjee 2003:199-212).

A further observation regarding the shared coinage tradition between Harikela and Arakan relates to coin terminology: the term *taṇḍaka*, designating a coin in the inscribed metal vase issued by Devatideva (c. 715 CE) in Chittagong^{xvi} (Bhattacharya 1992:323-338). This vase records that the transaction of one *pâtaka* and three *dronāvāpas* of land with 58 *taṇḍaka* (*taṇḍakaih su kṛitah?*) and the price of 60 *dronāvapas* of land was 120 *taṇḍakas*. The context of land sales also suggested that large amount of land was bought through this coin called *tandaka*. The inscription recorded several transactions by *taṇḍaka*, implying that it was a coin or some such thing with an exchange value.

Arlo Griffiths drew my attention to the presence of this term in the *Ānandachandra praśasti* where we have the expression *prati taṇḍakân*.^{xvii} (Johnston 1944: 377-388)

(*upajāti of indravam śa/vam śastha*)
dadau praṣṭaḥ suvisuddhacetasâ?
*saddharmapūjām prati taṇḍakân vahūn**
narâdhipo dharmakathânurâgataḥ? ||

A tentative translation by Griffiths is: 'In joy and with perfectly pure thought the king, from his attachment to Dharma-narrations, gave many *taṇḍakas*, with the approval of good people, for the purpose of worshiping the true Dharma on a daily basis.' Since both the *Ānandachandra praśasti* and Devatideva's inscription belong to almost the same period (early eighth century CE), we can suggest that *taṇḍaka* as a coin name was prevalent in both Harikela and Arakan. The inscription of *Ānandachandra* found near Akyab, now called the Shittaung inscription was written in the *Siddhamatrikâ script* of eastern India and this was due to the close proximity of Arakan to Southeastern Bengal.

Along with Arakan, Martaban in South-west Myanmar was perhaps linked with Harikela. We have textual support of more or less from the same period for this. The *Mañjuśrīyamūlakalpa* datable to around the eighth century CE, in at least two slokas refer to Harikela, Karmaranga and Kalasapura together , e.g.^{xviii} (verse 20)' If there is a terrifying sound in the intermediate directions, upward, northward, the lord of Kūmarāpa will inevitably be killed by the overlord of Gauḍa; [so also] the lord of the people and dependents (*jīvin* =*upajīvin?*) beyond the Lauhitya (Brahmaputra), the ones called

Kalaśa, those of Karmaraṅga, of Samataṭa and of Vaṅga; (Verse 31) (Vaidya 1964:508; Griffiths 2015: 281-340).

A reading of these slokas bring home clearly that Kamarupa, Samatata, Vanga, Harikela, Karmaraṅga and Kalasa are connected. Kamarupa is ancient Assam. Samatata is the Comilla area of Bangladesh. Vaṅga primarily refers to Dhaka. Harikela has been identified with Chittagong and Kalasapura with Martaban. One may note that Martaban is famous for its ceramic tradition, particularly the jars known as kalasa in Sanskrit. There is confusion regarding the identification of Karmaranga. Sircar places it in lower Myanmar along with Kalaśapura (Martaban) as its capital (Sircar 1976: 211-213)^{xix}. Recently Griffiths has suggested identification of Karmaraṅga with Arakan^{xx} (Griffiths 2015:301-308). In view of Karmaraṅga's close association with Harikela and with Samataṭa, the identification seems plausible.

Linkage with Martaban

The importance of Martaban in the network of Samandar should be foregrounded. Martaban as an important port developed and the nature of the ceramics produced in the area gave the Martaban jar its name. Another site close to Muttama/Martaban was Sampanago. According to Elizabeth Moore and San Win, artefacts from ground survey in the Muttama-Sampanago area, supports a sixth to ninth century culture which include coins, beads and finger marked bricks, paralleling finds from Khu Bua, U Thong and other early sites in Kanchanaburi, Thailand^{xxi} (Moore and Win 2014:217-237)

Martaban was nominally under Sukhothai hegemony from CE 1281 to 1314. The area from Martaban to Tenasserim was under Ayudhyan control from the mid-fourteenth to soon after the mid fifteenth centuries. It is possible that the terms *Martaban* or *Maritanao* were used, during this period at least, to describe the coastal region from the Salween River to the Isthmus of Kra. It has been suggested that ports along this coastline-notably Martaban and Mergui-were important links in the China-India porcelain trade as early as the Sung dynasty^{xxii} (Ghosh 2022:11-32). Interesting to note that the place name Martaban where the pots were made finally came denoted the pots themselves. Thus in 1350 CE Ibn Battuta mentioned that a princess of Kaylukari (in Southeast Asia, not identified) gave him four "Martabans or huge jars, filled with ginger, pepper, lemons and mangoes, all of them salted, prepared for sea voyages"^{xxiii} (Gibbs 1997:280). This is narrated in the section where Ibn Batuta describes his travels from India to Sumatra and Java. Thus, the geographical setting is Southeast Asia. This evidence clearly indicates the utility of these jars for long distance trade network. If one takes into account the travels of Ibn Battuta (1340 CE) in Bengal, one notes that he undertook a long journey from Sudkawan or the port of Chittagong to Habang or Habiganj in Sylhet via Kāmarūpa. He writes that the first city in Bengal that he entered was Sudkawan, a large town on the coast of the

great sea, obviously the Bay of Bengal. Ibn Battuta then recalls that he set out from Sudkawan for the mountains of Kamaru (Kāmarūpa) which was a month's journey from the Chittagong area. He then journeyed to Habanq, identified with present Habiganj area of Sylhet, which is traversed by the Blue river, likely to be Meghna. It should be mentioned here that Ibn Battuta reached Sudkawan from Maldives by spending forty-three nights at sea^{xxiv} (Gibbs 1997:267-271). Thus the travel tale of Ibn Battuta also suggests that southeastern Bengal was connected to regions of Southeast Asia through the Bay of Bengal. It would be in order here to bring in the navigational manual of Ibn Majid, a literate navigator (muallim). Ibn Majid described the port of Martaban along with Bassein and Syriam. This is an indicator of the importance of the port of Martaban^{xxv} From the port of Martaban, the ship perhaps proceeded northwards and reached the famous port of Samandar (in present Chittagong), mentioned by the Arab geographers as well as merchants. From the port of Samandar the cargo had to be carried through a land route to the sub-region of Puṇḍravardhana (north Bengal) via Samataṭa (present Kumilla, Bangladesh) which was linked to both Nalanda and Bodhgaya. That Kalaśapura (Martaban) and Harikela (Chittagong) were linked has been discussed above. I will cite one more verse here where it is said that the goddess Târâ is venerated in Harikela (Chittagong) Karmaraṅga (Arakan), Kāmarūpa (present Assam) and [the city] called Kalaśa (Martaban) (*sidhyate catadā tārā yakṣarāṭ caiva mahābalah/harikele karmaraṅge ca kāmarūpe kalaśāhvaye* // Mmk_53.833 //) (Vaidya 1964, 508). The linkage of these regions is visible in this verse^{xxvi} (Griffiths 2015, 281-340).

Arab presence in Samandar

We have seen that the sources that reference Samandar are from either Arab geographers or travelers. None of the texts or inscriptions from India mentions the port of Samandar though they are quite vocal about Harikela from 7th century onwards. Our records suggest that the predominant religion in Harikela was Buddhism though Brahmanism was also in practice. With the arrival of the Arabs, who frequented the port of Samandar /Sudkawan, the region was also introduced to Islam. Being a port it was open to people from different regions, Arab sailors in particular, who professed Islam and were very active here from around 10th century CE. One of the authentications of the Arab traders' presence in the region was the writings of Arab geographers. Their evidence suggests that the Arab traders had arrived along the Bengal coast long before the Turkish conquest. The Arab writers also knew about the kingdoms of Kāmarūpa and Ruhmi, the latter being identified with Dharmapāla of the Pāla kingdom. Ibn Khurdadbeh (death 912 CE) refers to the Arab, Yemeni and Abyssinian merchants' presence in Samandar^{xxvii} (Ahmed 1989:6). Al-idrisi (death 1164) is another geographer who talks about the importance of Samandar in the mercantile network of Arab merchants. Paddy was an important item of trade along with aloes wood which was brought from Kāmarupa and sent through Samandar.^{xxviii}

Yak tail could be another item as it also had ritualistic significance. Sometimes the Sufi saints also accompanied the merchants in their ship. D.C.Sen mentions the transport of Arabian dervishes and pirs on board Chittagong vessels, evoking significant shipbuilding activity amid bustling trade before Portuguese arrival^{xxix}. As a result small settlements of Muslims grew up in and around Chittagong even before actual political control by Muslim rulers. The port of Samandar/ later on Chittagong port was also used as a transit trade zone for connections between countries across the Bay of Bengal. Thus when in an account of Bengal given by Marvazi (1120CE) it is stated that 'in a town called H.DKIRA (identified with Harikela) business is carried on by means of gold (coins) and cowrie shells' but the latter are more in use-' we know that these shells reached Harikela from Maldives and was naturally transferred to the hinterlands in the Pâla-Sena domain where cowry was much used as a parallel currency.^{xxx} (Minorsky 1942 :147-148). It is important to note that in Harikela there was a continuous presence of coins which was not the case with other sub regions of Bengal and it is almost certain that the early Harikela coins were struck in Harikela (Chittagong) itself. In the literature of the ballads there are good many references to country boats and ships on board of which the enterprising people of the district of Chittagong make sea-voyages for trading purposes. There is an admixture of Arabic words, idioms, and phrases in the local dialects of the Chittagong and Noakhali districts, a result of the close contacts between Arabs and the local population through the ages. While contacts with Muslims in other parts of Bengal were overland and mainly Turko-Persian, the coastal areas were influenced more by Arab contacts. That the Arab merchants settled here and found a new home is evident from the fact that the genealogical tables of some Muslim families of Chittagong said to be the descendants of Arab immigrants furnish another valuable evidence of the coming of the Arabs as settlers in Chittagong. The Arakanese Chronicles trace the Muslim contact with this region back to as early as the eighth century CE. It states : "In his (king Maha-taing Tsan-daya, 788-810 A D) time it is stated that Several Ku-la or foreign ships, were wrecked upon the island of Ranbyi, and the people in them, said to be Musulmans were sent to Arakan proper where they were settled in villages"^{xxxi} (Qanungo 1988:111). The Arab mariners often suffered shipwreck off the coast of this region and took shelter in neighbouring countries, where they established themselves to live in intimate relations with the native people. There are some places known as '*Dinga bhangar bill*', '*Dinga bhangar char*' lying scattered in the district and these, according to local tradition, commemorate the unfortunate incidents that happened to the Arab sailors. It appears from the above discussions that Islam penetrated into Harikela through the agency of the Arab merchants who ascended in the port of Samandar. The mercantile network was responsible in introducing Islam as a religion in a practically Buddhist terrain^{xxxii} (Ghosh 2023:296-308).

Conclusion

From the foregoing it may be said that prior to the grandeur of the port of Chittagong, a port in the area must have been in the making. This can be further inferred from two indirect references. First, we know that Yi jing recorded that Wu-hing sailed from *Simhala* for the northeast and "came to *Harikela*, which was the eastern limit of Eastern India [Tung T'ien (-chu)] and of *Jambudvipa*" ^{xxxiii} (Takakusu 1896: 44). At that time, in the 7th century CE, Tamralipta was active as port but Wu hing sailed to Harikela-natural perhaps since he was using the sea route from Sri Lanka. Second, when Xuan Zang mentioned Samatata's relations with Southeast Asian polities, movement obviously took place through a port in contiguous Harikela. Samandar was the most prominent northern port in a multiple networked realm that linked coastal towns in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma/ Myanmar and Bangladesh and India. Like other coastal ports, it played host to a plurality of trade groups and sojourners from across the region. Here communication routes focused on the region's many rivers, although in the mountainous areas land routes were also important. The river brought down cotton, timber, and other forest products from the Chittagong hills. But the giant Brahmaputra was much more important as we have seen in case of aloes wood.

Our limited sources do not allow us to discuss in details the nature of the port of Samandar. But from a holistic study of the direct and indirect evidences, some points may be recapitulated.

Samandar was the only port in the early medieval period for land locked Ganga valley and Kamarupa for interactions with Southeast Asia and perhaps west Asia. We cannot prepare an inventory of trading articles but from the accounts of the travellers we learn that rice, various grains, aloes wood, yak tails were important items of export. Aloes wood also known as agaru/gharu wood and eagle wood was one of the most famous of the forest products and played an important role in the economy of the region where it grew. It was a prized item as it was used in the manufacture of perfume and medicine and also as incense burnt during religious and courtly ceremonies. *Agaru* is a common aromatic in Buddhist, Brahmanical and Islamic rituals. Its medicinal value and usage as incense is well recorded. It was an important forest product which circulated across southeast Asia and reached China. Zhao-rugua in his *Zhu Fan Zhi* ^{xxxiv} takes great pain in mentioning the minute details regarding this product (Hirth and Rockhill, 1912; Ghosh 2014). Zhao speaks of the *gharu* woods imported from countries of South-East Asia and he gives an interesting classification of the best *gharu* wood based on the quality of the product. According to him the best *gharu* wood came from Cambodia. However, in one of the notices regarding this, Zhao refers to the black aloes wood and maintains that it was costlier, though the origin of the product is not mentioned. I would like to suggest that this could be the aloes wood produced in ancient Kâmarûpa, present Assam in India. It may be mentioned here that contemporary Arab sources refer to the aloes wood of Qamarun or

Kâmarûpa and rates it second to the wood of Multan. Abu'l-Fida mentions the mountains of Kamrun, a barrier between India and China, where aloes grow. Abu Dulaf Misa'r Ibn Muhallil Yanbu'i in 331 /943 CE made his land journey through Turkistan to China. He mentions the town of Qamrun on his voyage back to India^{xxxv}. (Reinaud 1994:262-265) According to him this place produced aloes wood known as *Qmari*. Description of forests abounding with black aloes tree in Kâmarûpa, also finds mention in an inscription of a Chandra ruler of south-eastern Bengal. The Paschimbhag copperplate records that Srichandra's forces in the course of their conquest of the Kâmarûpa country entered the woodlands near the Lohitya, i.e. the Brahmaputra where among other things they saw numerous black aloe trees which made the woodland dark (kâl-aguru-śyâmalah)^{xxxvi}. (Sircar, 1967-68 :289-304). In Al Idrisi's (1162 CE) opinion, perhaps the river Brahmaputra was used for transporting the aloes wood from Kamarupa to the port of Samandar^{xxxvii} (Chakravarti, 2002, 165-167). From Samandar it was shipped to China traversing through ports of Southeast Asia. Arabic work Al-Masalik wa'l Mamalik^{xxxviii} (Reinaud 1994: 262-265) records the trade between the kingdom of Kâmarûpa and south western China through Myanmar. So, one might postulate that the black aloes mentioned by Zhao could also be a product of north-east India. The long circuitous route naturally added to the price of the product. The importance of the port of Samandar has been discussed in the context of other networks. It was in great demand as a ritual item and its fragrance was much appreciated throughout the world right from Persia to China, at Rome and later at the Abbasid court at Damascus. The aloes wood network perhaps operated within the larger horse and silk networks^{xxxix}. (Mukherjee 2011, 27).

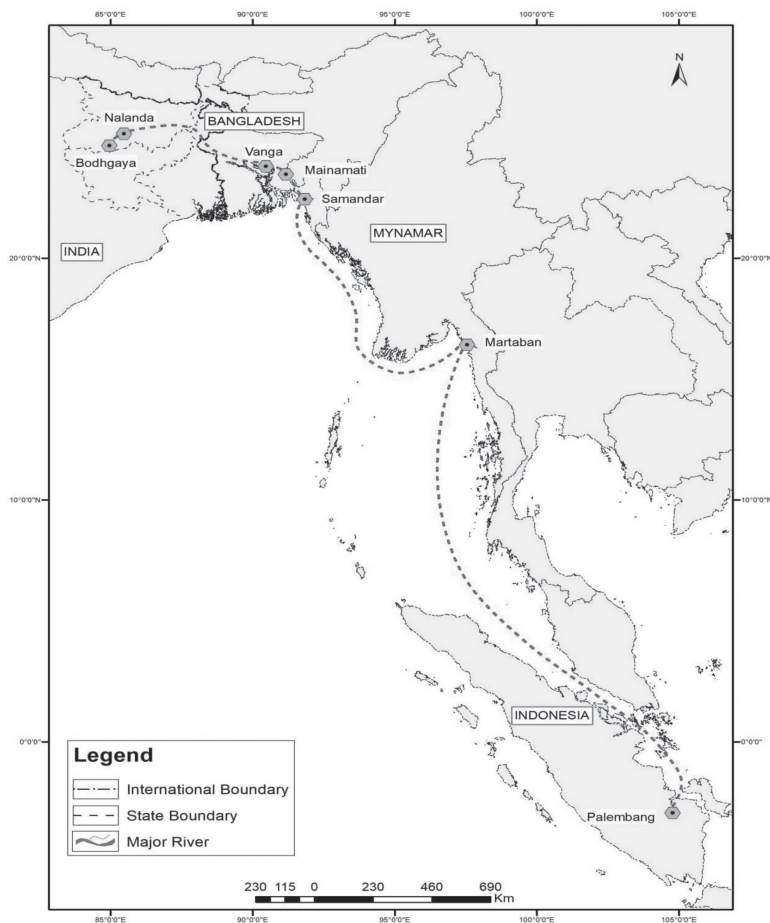
Endnotes:

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- ⁸ Ibid. p.5.
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Map 1. The coastal route. Source author

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