



The Singapore  
*Bicentennial*  
Conference

30 September to 1 October 2019

The background features a dark blue gradient with a subtle pattern of white dots. Overlaid on this are several circular and semi-circular elements in a lighter blue color. On the left side, there is a large circular scale with tick marks and numerical labels ranging from 140 to 260. Other circles of varying sizes and some dashed lines are scattered across the page, some containing curved arrows or partial arcs.

# WAR & WEALTH SINGAPORE BEFORE 1819

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## PROLOGUE

- Singapore with a focus the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries
- Series of questions
- Big picture, move inwards

Eredia, *Miscellany Atlas*, 1616-22

# SYNOPSIS

- 5 main questions:
- 1) Constants that characterize Singapore & region before 1819 --- and beyond?
- 2) What functions serve before 1819 and was Sg's potential recognized **at the time**?
- 3) How contest play out? By whom?
- 4) Why did Singapore decline in the course of the late 1600s?
- 5) What are some of the lessons from these earlier times for today?

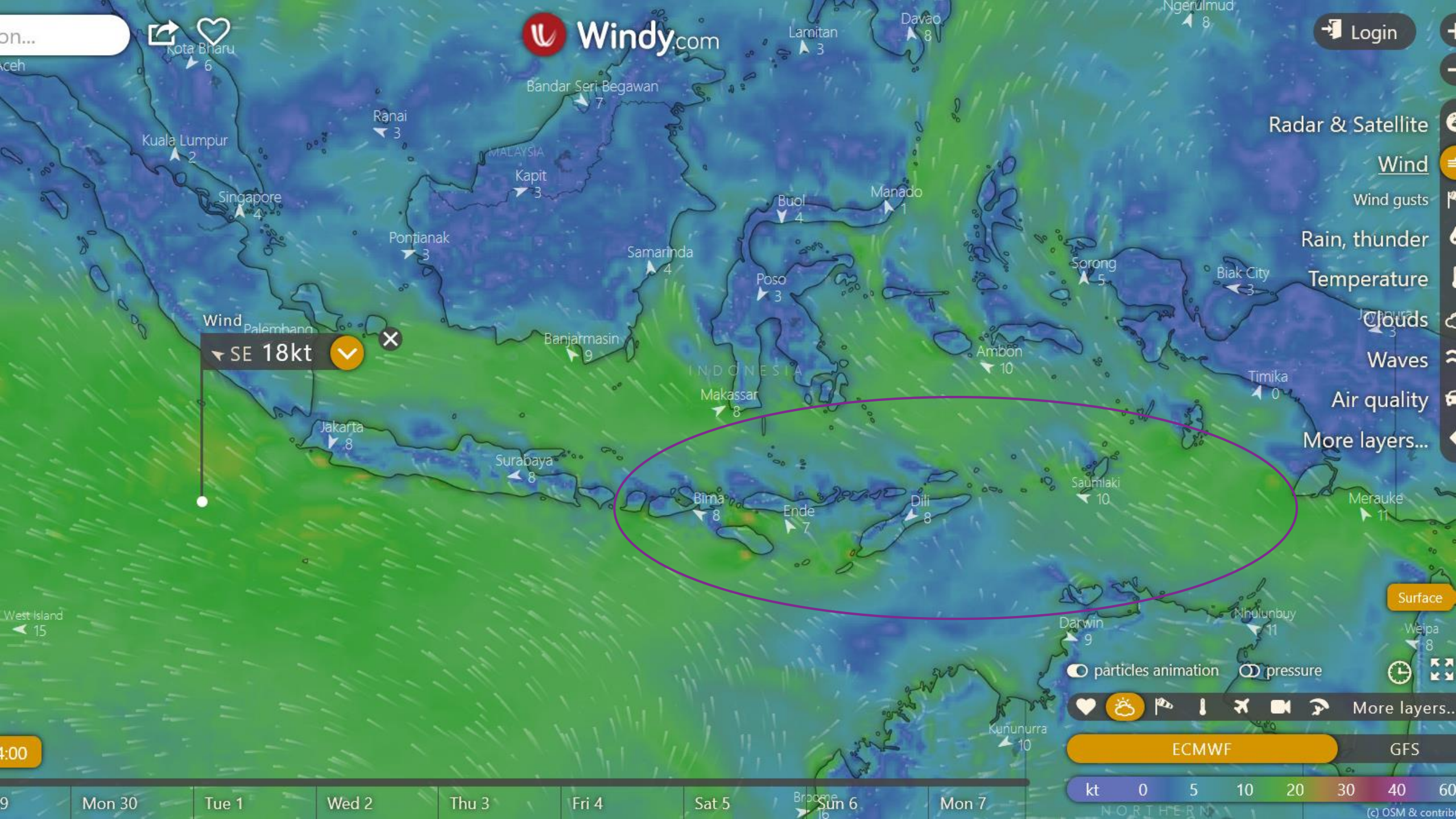


Erédia's map of Singapore and the straits, 1604, taken from his *Description of Malacca*, c.1613

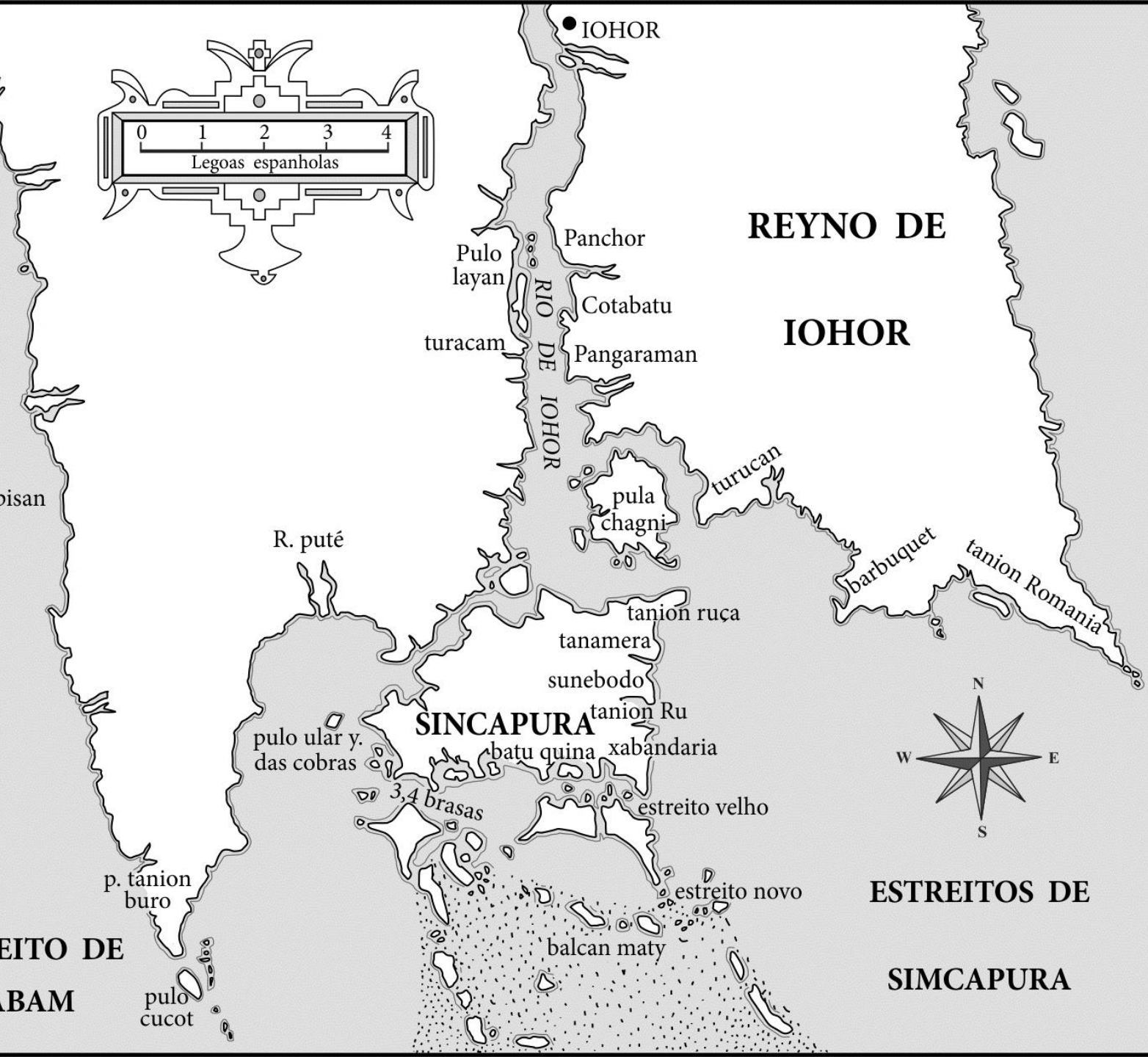


## Q1) WHICH CONSTANTS CHARACTERIZE SINGAPORE & REGION BEFORE 1819?

- **2 maritime zones separated by 3 viable passageways** between South China Sea and Bay of Bengal/Indian Ocean during the Age of Sail
- **S&M straits were most important of the 3 (and remain today)**
- **Contested (maritime) space** in history: Srivijaya, Chola, Siam, Majapahit, Portuguese, Aceh, Johor, VOC/Dutch, British, etc.: projections of power
- **Exert control, generate revenue, etc. from human activity at sea, on land**
- **Singapore's strategic location: not just militarily, but also economic**
- **Meaningful level human activity taking place: warrant presence of shahbandar (settlement: shahbandaria)**



Wind  
Palemhano  
SE 18kt



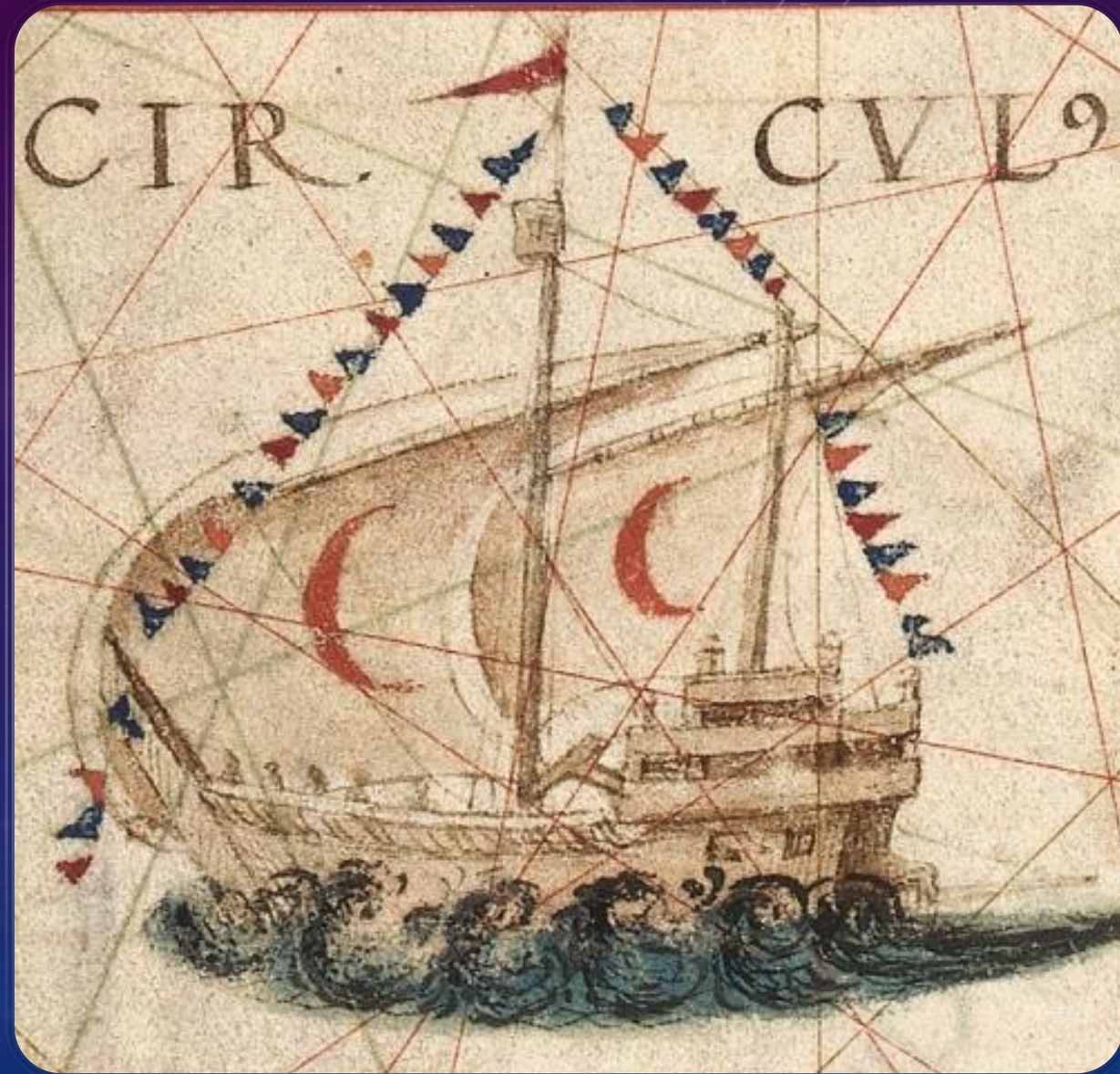
## Q2) RECOGNIZED BEFORE 1800?

- Different perspectives and agency
- Remembered as an earlier trading city/capital (Malay, Portuguese sources)
- Envisioned as Island in larger Johor River estuary (see left)
- Naval base, shahbandar: gatekeeper of upstream towns in Johor River region

Redrawn map based on Erédia's now lost *Miscellany Atlas*, 1616-22

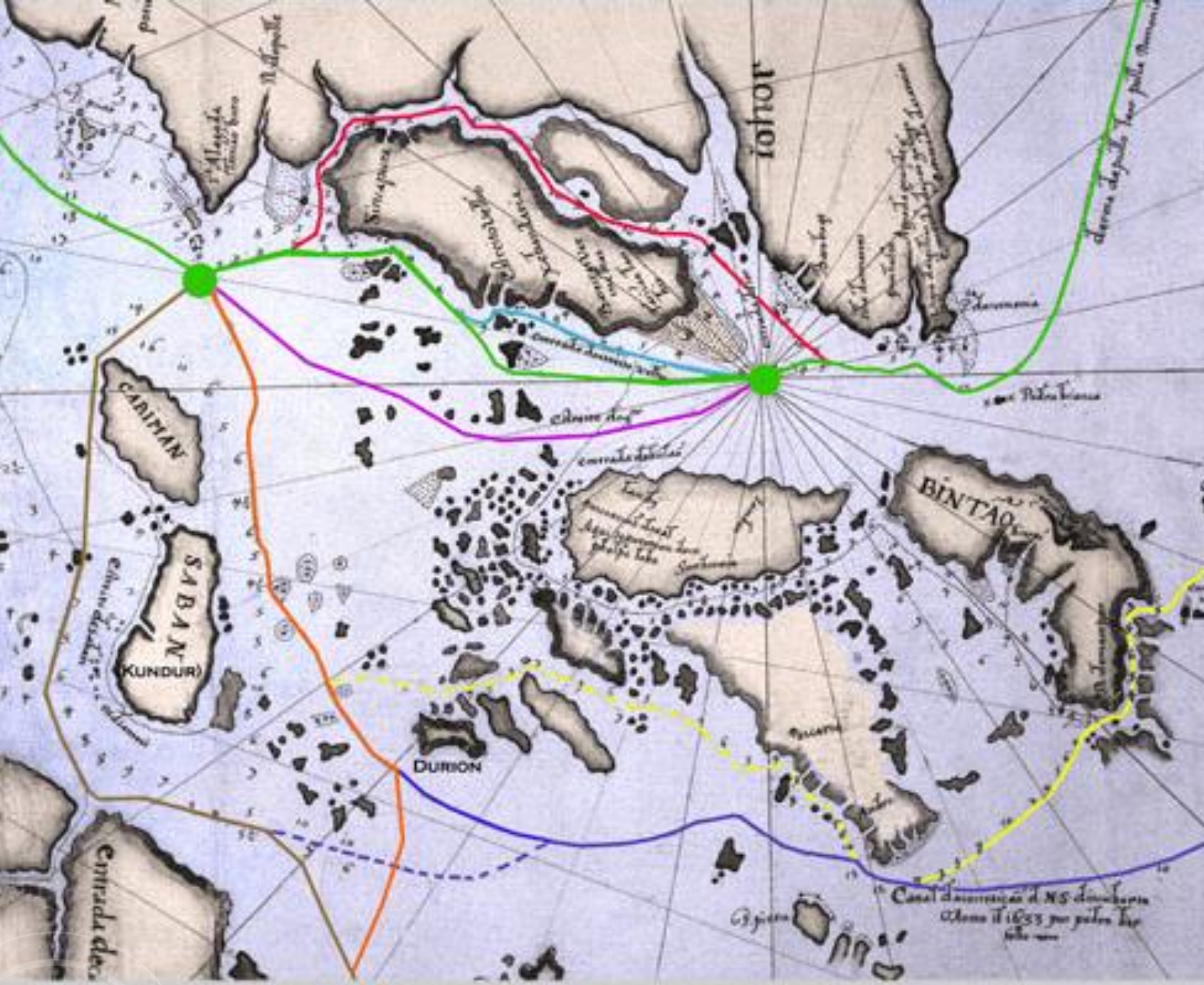
## Q2) RECOGNIZED, CTD

- Alternative port to Melaka after 1511 (laksamana, shahbandar)
- Late 1500s De Coutre: “One of the best ports”
- Fortifications: Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, etc. late 1500s to c.1650
  - (Monsoon Letters, Obelaar, De Coutre)
- Sg selected as rendezvous point for Portuguese and Spanish armadas
  - (Feb-April/May 1616: 10 large galleons + support vessels)
- Sg cruising area for VOC naval squadrons, esp. c.1606-1640, also later



Map cartouche of a Muslim trading ship, 16<sup>th</sup> century





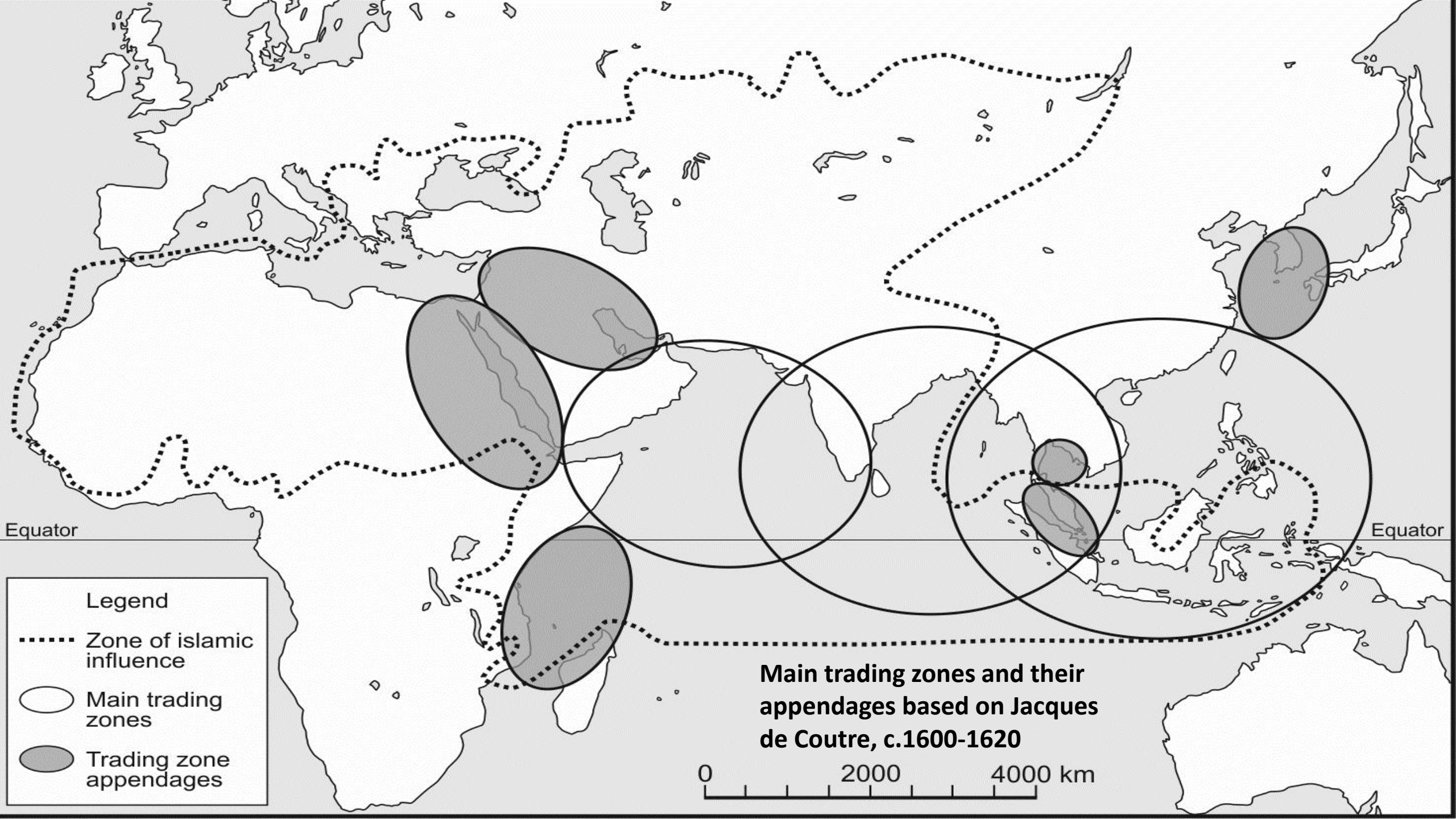
HISTORIC SAILING PASSAGES  
THROUGH THE STRAITS &  
ISLANDS ACCORDING TO  
ANDRÉ PEREIRA DOS REIS,  
C1654  
(ORIGINAL NOW AT "ON PAPER"  
EXHIBIT, NLB)

VOC/Dutch naval patrols  
cruise waters around the  
green dots where  
different maritime  
passages converge: west  
off the N. coast of  
Karimun (Kecil); east: off  
E. coast of Singapore

EBRAU STRAIT — OLD STRAIT — NEW STRAIT — GOVERNOR'S STR  
NAL DA CONCEIÇÃO — CANAL DE JAPON (ALL TO CHINA AND LOCATIONS NORTH OF EQ  
DURIAN STRAIT — SABAN STRAIT (BOTH TO LINGGA, JAVA, AND LOCATIONS SOUTH OF EQUATO

### Q3) HOW WAS SINGAPORE'S LOCATION UNDERSTOOD AND WHAT PURPOSE DID SG SERVE?

- Two aspects:
- **Functional:**
  - Sg a **naval base** of Melaka and Johor; **gatekeeper** of the upstream towns
  - **Intermediary or intermodular port** located at or near the convergence of maritime, riverine and overland trading routes (Eredia, 3 slides)
- **Geographic:**
  - **Point of transition** (“porta” [Portuguese], gateway), Chinese & W. Asian concepts about the Singapore Straits acting as a transition zone)
  - **Strategic nodal point** (e.g. Jacques de Coutre): Sg as a nodal point at intersection of 2 main trading regions (**next slide**)



Equator

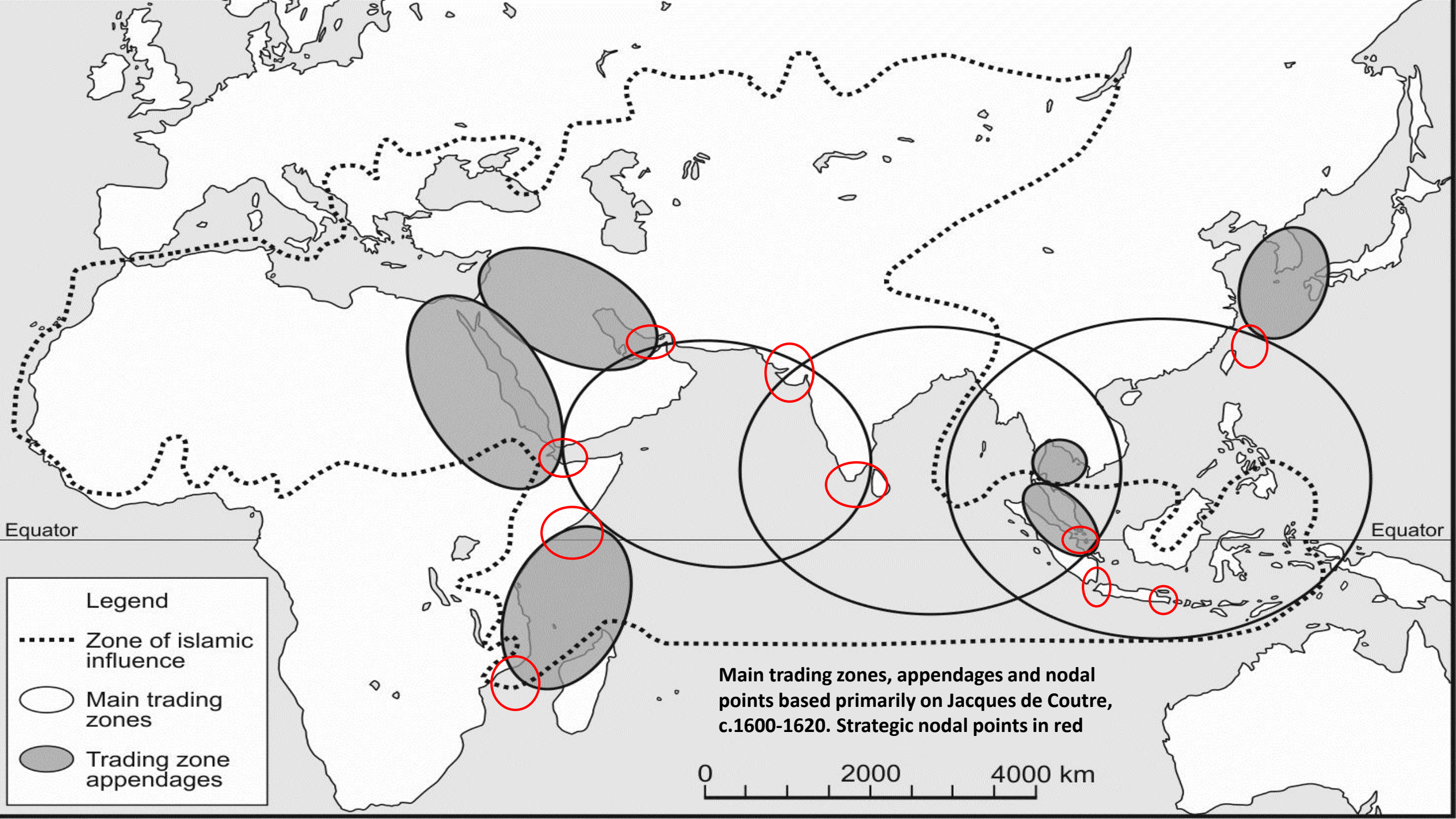
Equator

**Legend**

- ..... Zone of islamic influence
- Main trading zones
- Trading zone appendages

**Main trading zones and their appendages based on Jacques de Coutre, c.1600-1620**

0 2000 4000 km



Equator

Equator

**Legend**

- ..... Zone of islamic influence
- Main trading zones
- Trading zone appendages

**Main trading zones, appendages and nodal points based primarily on Jacques de Coutre, c.1600-1620. Strategic nodal points in red**



# Q4) WHY WAS SG A DESIRABLE TROPHY OF WAR/OCCUPATION?

- Key: **trading routes, economic function** of the region
- Where human activity (trade): opportunity for **revenue, a potential for contest/war**, as well as a **need for security**:
  - 1) **Crucial point of transition** South China Sea – greater Bay of Bengal
  - 2) **Convergence** of distance maritime, riverine/overland (**next slide**)
  - 3) Sg serves as a **collection/ redistribution** centre (shahbandar):
  - 4) Johor region (including Sg): “**always a lot of trade**”; king of Johor “**made a lot of money/revenue**” from trade/tolls
  - 5) **Trade in what? Dutch East India Company (VOC) records** from Johor; Portuguese records (late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> C):
    - Pepper (also from Indragiri, Jambi), jungle produce (tree resins), precious stones (esp. diamonds from Borneo) and bezoars, gold dust (Pahang, Minangkabau highlands, Borneo), tin (Peninsula, Sumatra), salt, dried fish, pickled fish roe, timber, shipbuilding, a type of cane (rattan or bamboo?), *minyak tanah* (filled in jars) from Sumatra (Perlak) & Peninsula



Overlay of three maps: Eredia's Peninsula, Eredia's Sumatra from the Miscellany Atlas, 1616-22 as well as contemporaneous Selden map (coming to SG soon for "On Paper" exhibit at NLB)

Maps redrawn by Mok Ly Yng



## Q4) WHY DID SINGAPORE DECLINE AFTER LATE 1600S?

- **Complex**, not a single factor
- Larger **external forces**, 2 broad categories
- **War, contest & convulsions** multiply after c.1640
  - Jambi wars late 17<sup>th</sup> century (destruction of Batu Sawar)
  - Violence unfolding after assassination of Johor ruler 1699
  - Dutch tighten commercial position in W. archipelago after 1682: focus on tin, pepper
- **Loss of its principal function as gatekeeper** to the capital city?
  - Move of the capital out of the Johor River to Bintan early 18<sup>th</sup> C.
  - Useful to think of Bintan and Singapore historically as “twin” ports: prosperity hinges on where the court has located; Singapore rose when Johor capital in the River region, declines when moved out, and vv.
  - Q: When does Sg show up again on the “radar screen” of the colonial powers? Napoleonic Wars, question of the return of Melaka to the Dutch. Abraham Couperus’ Plan of 1809



## 5) LESSONS FOR TODAY?

- The **underlying constants are still there**: Singapore and Melaka Straits remain the principal maritime artery and area is **situated in a (potentially) contested space**
- Past wars were about conflicts of regional parties, sometimes nascent colonial powers before 1819
- **Security before 1819 was multipolar**, and more fragile. May revert to that again in the future
- Singapore has played **different strategic and economic functions across time** --- that is unlikely to change in the future

# SOME CONCLUSIONS AND MORE QUESTIONS

- **Singapore always part of something** else in this period: Melaka, Johor..... For most of its history that way
- Along an historically **busy maritime artery and within contested space**: certainly not a forgotten backwater.
- Recognized and appreciated as a **strategic nodal point, a potential military base, colonial settlement** (since late 1500s at least).
- Key to unlocking history of Singapore in this period: **understanding its shifting (strategic) functions (military, economic)**. How this all fits into the greater geo-political calculations of the ascending colonial powers after c.1600