



'Making Bombay Island': land reclamation and geographical conceptions of Bombay, 1661–1728

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Bombay was originally — not one island — but seven separate and amorphous isles ... For many a year the Heptanesia, as old Ptolemy called them in A.D. 150, were destined to glance at one another across the intervening waters; but the Providence which decreed their original dispersion willed also that, in after time [sic], they should be once more united by the genius and energy of man.¹

Stephen M. Edwardes presents an imperial vision of Bombay's environmental transformation. He describes how the islands were originally one unit, connected to the mainland. Geological upheavals split them into seven islands, named Heptanesia by Ptolemy, until the British undertook reclamation and ensured that they became 'once more united'. This vision of seven islands morphing into a metropolis has outlived the British Raj, being picked up and made their own by modern historians and — along with the project of reclamation — by Mumbai's residents.² It is not generally noted, however, that the archipelago had never been defined as seven islands by anyone before the nineteenth century. The people carrying out the work of reclamation did not share current geographical understandings: they did not see themselves as uniting separate islands. Instead, they were recovering what they thought of as drowned land in the centre of a unitary island.

This article examines the connection between such assumptions and the beginning of reclamation in the eighteenth century. It highlights two unconsidered motivations for this reclamation, and

in so doing hopes to revise our current understanding of early modern environmental intervention. Firstly, English geographical conceptions of Bombay encouraged reclamation, allowing them to frame the project within understandings of wasteland and agricultural improvement. Secondly, political imperatives caused by long-lasting disputes with the Portuguese were a major motivation. Reclamation, it was hoped, would eliminate the Portuguese argument that Bombay consisted of distinct islands; it would also remove the colony's dependence on imported provisions.

This article contributes to studies of early modern environmental change in the Indian Ocean by adopting approaches from the study of the Americas and Europe. There is a large literature on South Asia's colonial environmental history, but forestry has been the dominant topic.³ Land reclamation is discussed as a nineteenth century urban phenomenon, particularly in relation to the port towns of Hong Kong, Singapore and Macau.⁴ The early modern period has been seen as one of passivity towards the Indian environment, with adaptation favoured to intervention.⁵ New work on the English East India Company (EIC) demonstrates that this viewpoint is changing.⁶ However, the assumption of passivity remains in the recent literature on Bombay, which focuses on European perceptions of health and climate rather than the physical transformations of Bombay's landscape.⁷

Indian Ocean historiography, therefore, tends to assume that early modern Europeans did not undertake radical environmental

³ J.V. Swami has highlighted this, arguing that 'environmental history needs to broaden its reach'; Environmental history and British colonialism in India: a prime political agenda, *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3 (2003) 128. For an overview of this literature, see J. Beattie, Recent themes in the environmental history of the British Empire, *History Compass* 10 (2012) 129–139.

⁴ R. Glaser, P. Haberzettl and R.P.D. Walsh, Land reclamation in Singapore, Hong Kong and Macau, *GeoJournal* 24 (1991) 365–373; B.J. Hudson, *Cities on the Shore: The Urban Littoral Frontier*, London, 1994.

⁵ M. Harrison, *Climates and Constitutions: Health, Race, Environment and British Imperialism in India, 1600–1850*, New Delhi, 1999, 21.

⁶ V. Damodaran, A. Winterbottom and A. Lester (Eds), *The East India Company and the Natural World*, Basingstoke, 2015.

⁷ R. Markley, 'A PUTRIDNESS IN THE AIR': monsoons and mortality in seventeenth-century Bombay, *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 10 (2010) 105–125; G.C.D. Adamson, 'The languor of the hot weather': everyday perspectives on weather and climate in colonial Bombay, 1819–1828, *Journal of Historical Geography* 38 (2012) 143–154.

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¹ S.M. Edwardes, *The Rise of Bombay: A Retrospect*, Bombay, 1902, 2–3.

² Bombay changed its name to Mumbai in 1995. To correspond to contemporary sources, I will use Bombay to refer to the colonial city and Mumbai to the post-independence city.

intervention. This is not an assumption in the historiography of Europe and the Americas, which ranges from detailed reclamation case studies to general models of colonial landscape transformation. The findings and approaches of this literature can be fruitfully applied to other contexts. In particular, this article acknowledges the importance of geographical conceptions (sometimes called geosophy). Martyn J. Bowden's discussions on how geographical myths can develop into invented traditions help us to understand the creation of geographical conceptions and their resonance over time.⁸ Others have connected this to environmental change: Hugh Prince has argued that people's interventions in the environment were informed by their mental images of the landscape, while Andrew Sluyter has emphasised conceptual changes in his model of landscape transformation.⁹ This article argues that political imperatives shaped geographical conceptions, and that both shaped environmental interventions.

Aspects of this literature can be disputed and refined. I challenge the tendency to categorise reclamation into agricultural and urban forms, arguing that the significance and purpose of landscape transformation could change over time. Additionally, most studies of reclamation in the Americas place conflicts over differing land use practices, usually between indigenous and colonial actors, at the centre of their analysis.¹⁰ This approach is best summarised by Sluyter's framework for colonial landscape transformation, which envisages a triangular relationship between native, non-native and landscape.¹¹ This article will not adopt this approach because in Bombay the chief conflict was a political and conceptual one between two colonial powers: the Portuguese State of India and the EIC. Bombay's indigenous population used seasonally inundated areas far less extensively than in the Americas. This was not agricultural land; instead, the evidence we have suggests that it was perceived as sea before the English arrival. In presenting a conflict in geographical conceptions between two European colonial powers, this article offers a new case study on early modern environmental intervention.

These events took place within a context of expanding European interest and expertise in reclamation. Certainly the growing knowledge of such practices in Britain, such as the draining of the fens which was taking place concurrently, was a factor in the EIC supporting the project.¹² Britain was at this time exporting an ideology of agrarian improvement, with colonies in Ireland and the Americas being founded on such principles.¹³ To a large extent, however, the impetus for reclamation came from the colony rather than the metropole. EIC correspondence seldom referred to similar experiences in Europe, and at no point were individuals supplied to Bombay with specific expertise in reclamation. This article, therefore, presents a localised case study, focusing on the perceptions and motivations of agents on the ground.

The first section will consider Bombay under the Portuguese,

showing that they perceived the archipelago as four islands. I will then examine the transfer of Bombay to the English in the 1660s, a process which revealed starkly different understandings of what Bombay signified. The third section continues to narrate the tense situation between the two powers throughout the rest of the seventeenth century, during which time the idea of land reclamation grew. The fourth section considers the reclamation itself, which took place between 1710 and 1728. Finally, I seek to reconcile the rest of the article with the modern assumption that Bombay was once seven islands. I examine the nineteenth-century origins of this notion and discuss the extent to which it served to glorify the colonial project of reclamation.

Bombay under the Portuguese

The area known as Bombay consisted of a small archipelago in a harbour on the west coast of India (Fig. 1). The number of distinct islands was open to interpretation since large areas were underwater at high tide and during the monsoon season (June to September), when water discharged from Thane and Panvel Creeks to raise the harbour's sea level. At other times it was possible to cross between the islands on foot. This space contained a range of ecosystems: while some areas were entirely submerged, others consisted of mangrove forests, tidal flats and artificial salt pans.

People at the time estimated that about a third of Bombay was 'eaten up' through this natural formation.¹⁴ The area today, after extensive reclamation, covers sixty-five square kilometres. The modern assumption is that seven islands existed: Colaba, Old Woman's Island, Bombay, Mazagaon, Parel, Worli and Mahim. However, in this context what constituted distinct islands was largely subjective (Fig. 2). The English interpreted the central space as land, not sea, thereby forming Bombay Island, but this was a rewriting of previous understandings. For the sake of simplicity and to correspond with contemporary sources, the archipelago will be referred to collectively as Bombay in this article.

What Bombay signified was vaguely defined prior to the English arrival. From 1534 the islands formed part of the Northern Province, a Portuguese territory along the western Indian coast. The Portuguese referred to one of the islands as Monbaim or Bombaim, and the crown rented it out to noblemen.¹⁵ Since property records are the main source on how the Portuguese divided up this territory, it is unclear whether places such as Mazagaon were considered separate islands or simply separate estates. This is complicated by the fact that Bombaim, along with Mahim, contained a custom house which levied customs duty on a wider area. This made other islands subordinate to it, or even included within the designation Bombaim.

It is likely that there was no uniform understanding of the geography of these islands during the Portuguese period. The cartographic evidence, however, suggests that the archipelago was generally thought to consist of four islands. One of the only surviving Portuguese maps of Bombay depicts four islands (Fig. 3), and similar depictions survive in two English copies of Portuguese maps.¹⁶ Crucial for later disputes with the English, Mahim is shown

⁸ M.J. Bowden, The invention of American tradition, *Journal of Historical Geography* 18 (1992), 3–26.

⁹ H. Prince, *Wetlands of the American Midwest: A Historical Geography of Changing Attitudes*, Chicago, 1997, 1, 337; A. Sluyter, *Colonialism and Landscape: Postcolonial Theory and Applications*, New York, 2002, 4–5.

¹⁰ M.G. Hatvany, *Marshlands: Four Centuries of Environmental Change on the Shores of the St. Lawrence*, Sainte-Foy, 2003, 2, 160; V.S. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land: Environmental Transformation in Colonial Mexico City*, Stanford, 2014, 309–312.

¹¹ Sluyter, *Colonialism and Landscape*, 23.

¹² R.P. Masani, *Evolution of Local Self-Government in Bombay*, London, 1929, 60–62; H.C. Darby, *The Draining of the Fens*, Cambridge, 1940.

¹³ R. Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the 'Improvement' of the World*, New Haven, 2000, 55–59.

¹⁴ Bombay to London, 15 December 1673, India Office Records, British Library, London [hereafter IOR/] G/3/6, pt. 4, 24.

¹⁵ S.M. Edwardes and J.M. Campbell, *The Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island*, volume 2, Bombay, 1909, 31–32.

¹⁶ *Bombay Harbor*, 1678, John Carter Brown Library, Providence, Blathwayt Atlas, 43; William Hack, *Bombahem*, in: *Manuscript describing the coasts of India &c.*, 1700, British Library [hereafter BL], Maps 7.Tab.125, 17v–18r. The Hack map is clearly copied due to its use of Portuguese place names. It shows three, not four islands.

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