



Hormuz lies on the northern side of the Strait of Hormuz which itself lies sandwiched between Iran on the north and Oman on the south at the twisted entrance to the Persian Gulf. The strait is about 55 kilometres wide at its narrowest and most of the adjacent littoral and particularly the island of Hormuz is a barren, inhospitable land with temperatures regularly over 40°C and little if any fresh water. When A.W. Stiffe of the Indian Navy visited the island of Hormuz in March 1873 he found, 'A few soldiers or armed men hold the old fort as a sort of military post for the Governor of Bandar 'Abbasi. The place is rarely visited by a European vessel.... Of the Arab city, the most important ruin is a minaret, about 70 feet high.... Of the rest of the city nothing remains except mounds strewn with broken pottery [Of the houses] They are all more or less ruinous' and estimated 200 men in the modern village.¹ Yet Hormuz, initially located on the mainland of Iran, was once a commercial centre with up to 40,000 people whose existence depended on trade by land and sea and whose wealth had eventually to be protected by moving offshore to an island.

We do not know when Hormuz began its existence but W.W. Tarn postulated the need in the second century B.C. for some trading intermediary between India and Babylonia on the Iranian or Carmanian coast suggesting that it was Omana and further that a Greek state was formed on the Gulf of Ormuz which foundered before the date of the Periplus.² D. T. Potts in his review of the location of Omana dismisses the Carmanian coast for lack of material earlier than the middle ages.³ The earliest account we have is that of Herodotus. He was aware that a Greek mariner Scylax had sailed down the Indus river and then followed the Makran coast to Hormuz on his expedition to Egypt.⁴ Alexander of Macedon had by 326 BC reached the Indus and to return to Babylon constructed a fleet of ships which set sail from the mouth of the Indus under the command of Nearchus. They reached the Persian Gulf by following the Makran coast and anchored at the mouth of the river Anamis (Minab)⁵ in a country called Harmozeia⁶ where they met up with Alexander.



We do know that the original town of Hormuz acted as seaport for Kirman in the tenth century when it was located on the mainland and its foundation has been ascribed

¹ #252 Stiffe, Captain A. W., *The Island of Hormuz (Ormuz)*, vol. 1 p 12, *The Geographical Journal*, London, P.P.3947.i ~ pp. 12 - 13

² #229 Tarn, W.W., *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, Cambridge University Press, 1951. p. 261 and pp. 481-5. Material evidence may be lacking but geographical considerations would indicate a natural selection of the area near to the mouth of the Minab river for a town.

³ #382 Potts, D.T., *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, Clarendon Press, 2 vols., 1990. pp. 305-10

⁴ #91 Herodotus, *The Histories*, Penguin Books Ltd., 1960. [Book Four, 44] p. 256

⁵ #246 Bunbury, E. H., *History of Ancient Geography* ~ p. 535-6 Anamis or Minah or Minab, a considerable stream that flows into the northern angle or bight of the bay formed by the Persian coast opposite to Cape Mussendom.

⁶ #187 Wilson, Arnold T., *The Persian Gulf*, George Allen & Unwin, Oxford, 1928, 9058.c.15 ~ p. 40

to Ardashir Papakan (AD 224-241).⁷ By the 10th century AD, Siraf and Sohar were the leading ports in the Persian Gulf for the maritime trade with India, China, South East Asia and East Africa. Over the following centuries Siraf was replaced by Qeys and then Hormuz in prominence.⁸ In another account of the origins and the kings of Hormuz by Túrun Sháh⁹ and transcribed by the Portuguese Teixeira, the kingdom of Hormuz was originally on the mainland and had been founded by Arabs who had come over from Arabia about the beginning of the 11th century.¹⁰

Ibn Hawkal wrote about AD 961-9, 'Hormuz is the emporium of the merchants in Kirman, and their chief seaport; it has mosques and market places, and the merchants reside in the suburbs.'¹¹ Another Arab geographer, al-Idrisi gives a description of Hormuz in his book completed in AD 1154: 'Hormuz is the principal market of Kirman and a large and well-built city. The climate being hot, the palm grows in abundance in its environs.' He then continues; 'cumin and indigo are also cultivated; this last is of such incomparable quality that it has become proverbial, and large quantities are exported it is a source of very considerable profit to them. Hormuz is built on the banks of a creek called Heiz, derived from the Persian Gulf. Vessels reach the town by this channel.'¹²



Many accounts of Hormuz have been embellished and have drawn on later events to that which they relate which Mary A. Campbell in *The Witness and the Other World*¹³ calls exotic or wonder travel writing. Purchas relates: '... and so the Kings of Hormuz were prosperous ... that all the trassick of Cays was passed to the Iland, which now is called Hormuz ... And so the Inhabiters of Hormuz doe say, that all the world is a ring, and Hormuz is the stone of it.'¹⁴

Jacob d'Ancona, a Jewish-Italian merchant travelling to China, who had set sail from the port of Basra in 1270 for Cormosa (old Hormuz) on the mainland states: 'Here, traders come from Chesmacorano, from Greater India and from Sinim to purchase its pearls, horses, precious stones and fruits. The town stands on a river called Minao, by which vessels reach the city from the Indian Sea and the sultan of the place is Roccan Mahomet¹⁵ ... But it is an open place for all the world, in which there are above two hundred and fifty Jews ...'¹⁶ d'Ancona sailed from old Hormuz along the Makran coast towards the end of October 1270 when Marco Polo was still in Venice. His

⁷ #6 Hawley, Donald, *The Trucial States*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1970 ~ p. 66. see also #47 Thomas, Bertram, *The Musandam Peninsula and its people the Shihuh*, vol. XVI, part I, p.71-86, *Central Asian Journal*, 1929 ~ p. 71 and 73.

⁸ #482 Badger, George Percy (trans.), *History of the Imams and Seyyids of 'Oman by Salil-ibn-Razik from A.D. 661-1856*, Darf Publishers Limited, 1986. pp. 410-20

⁹ reigned on the island from 1347 to 1378

¹⁰ #258 Teixeira, Pedro, *Travels and Kings of Harmuz*, *The Travels off Pedro Teixeira*, London, Hakluyt Society, 1902 ~ pp. 153-6

¹¹ #127 *The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian*, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd; E.P. Dutton & Co, London and Toronto; New York, 1926 ~ p. 63

¹² #187 Wilson, Arnold T., *The Persian Gulf*, George Allen & Unwin, Oxford, 1928, 9058.c.15 ~ pp. 103-4

¹³ #366 Campbell, Mary B., *The Witness and the Other World*, Cornell University Press, 1988.

¹⁴ *Peregrination of Beniamin the son of Jonas, a Jew* #239 Purchas, *His Pilgrims in five books*, William Stansby for Henry Fetherstone, London, 1625 chapter V, §5, p. 1458

¹⁵ The king of Hormuz at the time was Amir Roknadin Mahmud who reigned for 35 years till his death in 1278.

¹⁶ #480 Selbourne, David (trans.), *The City of Light by Jacob D'Ancona*, Little, Brown and Company, 1997. pp.66-9

description is not unlike that of Marco Polo's who arrived at Hormuz via Kerman¹⁷ two years later with the intention of finding a boat to China.



Marco Polo wrote 'Of the city of Ormus, situated on an island not far from the main, in the Sea of India - of its commercial importance ... At length you reach the border of the ocean, where, upon an island, at no great distance from the shore, stands a city named Ormus, whose port is frequented by traders from all parts of India, who bring spices and drugs, precious stones, pearls, gold tissues, elephants' teeth, and various other articles of merchandize. These they dispose of to a different set of traders, by whom they are dispersed throughout the world. This city, indeed, is eminently commercial, has towns and castles dependent upon it, and is esteemed the principal place in the kingdom of Kierman.'¹⁸

The island of Hormuz came into existence as a city about the end of the 13th century during the reign of Mir Bahdin Ayaz Seyfin, fifteenth king of Hormuz. The exact details are not known but either the wealth of old Hormuz attracted raids so often that the inhabitants sought refuge off the mainland or it was destroyed, either by one of the princes of the Seljuk dynasty that reigned in Kirman, or by the Mongols. They initially moved to the island of Kishm but Mir Bahdin then visited the neighbouring island of Jerun and obtained it from Neyn, King of Keys, to whom all the islands in the area belonged¹⁹ and the inhabitants moved to the smaller island.²⁰

The island of Hormuz lies 7 km. due south from the marsh coastline of mainland Persia, 19 km. to the south east from Bandar Abbas and is no more than 6.5 km deep and 8 km wide. Elliptical in shape and covering an area of about 41 sq. km., it has a triangular promontory on its northern side providing a natural anchorage to the east of it. More than 75% of the land area is steep hilly terrain rising from 40 m. to 186 m. The habitable area is no more than 9 sq. km. and most dwellings are concentrated on the promontory on the north side of the island.

The Franciscan friar Odorico da Pordenone travelling overland through Kerman in Persia embarked at Hormuz for China in 1321²¹ noted that 'Ormes, being well fortified, and having great store of merchandize and treasure therein. Here also they use a kinde of Bark or shippe called Jase, being compact together onely with hempe.'²² This form of boat construction, first mentioned by Herodotus, is another commonly repeated item in

¹⁷ about 1272/3

¹⁸ #127 The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd; E.P. Dutton & Co, London and Toronto; New York, 1926 ~ . pp. 62-9, 406-7. Marco Polo mentions that the ruler is named Rukmedin Achomak. Marco Polo gives a second account of Hormuz being on an island when passing through on his return from China by sea around 1293/5.

¹⁹ #252 Stiffe, Captain A. W., The Island of Hormuz (Ormuz), vol. 1 p 12, The Geographical Journal, London, P.P.3947.i ~ p. 14

²⁰ #127 The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd; E.P. Dutton & Co, London and Toronto; New York, 1926 ~ . p. 63. Although Marco Polo refers to the island on which was the city of Hormuz, Collis states that at that time Hormuz was on the mainland. #85. Collis, Maurice. Marco Polo. London, Faber and Faber Limited, 1959, p. 24. Risso writes: "In the eleventh century, Saljûq Persia developed at the expense of what was left of Buwayhid Mesopotamia and the Saljûqs controlled 'Umânî ports from about 1065 to 1140. Fâtimid Egypt attracted trade to the Red Sea route and away from the Gulf. These shifts in power marked the end of the Gulf's heyday, but the island ports of Qays and then the mainland port of Hurmuz (at first tributary to Persia) became renowned entrepôts. The Hurmuzî rulers developed Qalhât on the 'Umânî coast in order to control both sides of the entrance to the Gulf. Later, in 1300, the Hurmuzî merchants cast off Persian overlordship. and reorganized their entrepôt on the island also called Hurmuz and there amassed legendary wealth. The relationship. between the Nabâhina and the Hurmuzîs is obscure". #80 Risso, Patricia, Oman And Muscat: an Early Modern History, Croom Helm, London, 1986, T48213.010C ~ p. 10.

²¹ #36 Phillips, Wendell, Oman: a history, Longman; Reynal; Librairie du Liban, London; New York; Beirut, 1967;; 1971 ~ p. 23

²² #214 The Travels of Sir John Mandeville and the Journal of Friar Odoric, Heron Books, London ~ pp. 235,6

travel writing for the area. Then there is then a dearth of information for another hundred years until the arrival by sea of the Chinese.



After three successful expeditions, the fourth and largest of the seven expeditions consisting of 63 vessels and 28,560 men sailed in 1414 to Hormuz under the command of the admiral Zheng He. Ma Huan, recruited as a translator, wrote in his book that the people were 'very rich' and their dress 'handsome, distinctive, elegant' and that there were no poor people because 'if a family meets with misfortune resulting in poverty, everyone gives them clothes and food and capital, and relieves their distress.' The Chinese traded their 'porcelains and silks' for 'jewels, woolens and carpets' and received gifts of 'lions, leopards and Arabian horses' as tributes to the Chinese emperor. There is a section on the 'country of Hu-lo-mo-ssu' or Hormuz which gives details of customs and other facts not usually found in European dialogues. 'The king of the country and the people of the country all profess the Muslim religion; ... Their market-places have all kinds of shops, with articles of every description; only they have no wine-shops; [for] according to the law of the country wine-drinkers are executed.... Civil and military officials, physicians, and diviners are decidedly superior to those of other places. Experts in every kind of art and craft—all these they have.' The account is also accurate about the geology of the island which being a salt dome has been mined for various minerals including salt and red oxide up to the beginning of the twentieth century.²³

The number of accounts of Hormuz now increase substantially. Abd-er-Razzák sent on a mission by Shah Rukh to one of the kings of India in 1442 says of Hormuz²⁴ 'I arrived towards the middle of the month at the shore of the Sea of Oman, and at Bender-Ormuz. The prince of Ormuz, Melik-Fakhr-Eddin-Touranschah, having placed a vessel at my disposal, I went on board of it, and made my entry into the city of Ormuz. I had had assigned to me a house, with everything that I could require, and I was admitted to an audience of the prince. Ormuz, which is also called Djerrun, is a port situated in the middle of the sea, and which has not its equal on the surface of the globe.' The account then describes at considerable length the numerous places that traded with Hormuz; that everything that can be transported by sea is available and mentions the import taxes 'For all objects, with the exception of gold and silver, a tenth of their value is paid by way of duty ... This city is also named Dâralaman (the abode of security).'²⁵

²³ #329 Ma Huan, Ying-Yai Sheng-Lan, The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores 1433, Cambridge University Press for the Hakluyt Society, 1970. pp.165-172

²⁴ Abd-er-Razzák was sent on a mission by Shah Rukh to one of the kings of India at Vijanagar. Setting out in January 1442, by way of Kohistan and Kirman he arrived at Hormuz. #622 Major, R.H. (ed. with an introduction), India in the fifteenth century, being a collection of Narratives of Voyages to India, in the century preceeding the Portuguese discovery of the Cape of Good Hope from Latin, Persian, Russian and Italian Sources, now first translated into English, Hakluyt Society, 1857 (M.DCCC.LV11). p. lxviii-lxxiii

²⁵ #622 Major, R.H. (ed. with an introduction), India in the fifteenth century, being a collection of Narratives of Voyages to India, in the century preceeding the Portuguese discovery of the Cape of Good Hope from Latin, Persian, Russian and Italian Sources, now first translated into English, Hakluyt Society, 1857 (M.DCCC.LV11). book I pp. 5-7 also #243 Sykes, Sir Percy, A History of Persia in 2 volumes, Macmillan and Co Ltd, London, 1958, 2091.aa. ~ also #310 Gray, Albert, The Voyage of Francois Pyrard of Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas and Brazil, Hakluyt Society, London, 1888, AC.6172/63 ~ p. 468 which also refers to India in Fifteenth Century, Hakluyt Society, I, 6.



At Easter 1469, Nikitin part of a Russian delegation passed through Hormuz ²⁶ ‘... At Hormuz the sun is scorching and burns man. I stopped there a month. On the first week after the great day, I shipped my horse in a *tava*, and sailed across the Indian Sea in ten dayes to Moshkat (Muscat) ... Hormuz is a vast emporium of all the world; you find there people and goods of every description, and whatever thing is produced on earth you find it in Hormuz. But: the duties are high, one tenth of everything ...’ ²⁷

We know of the Venetian, Giosafat Barbaro, who travelled in the southern part of Persia visiting Hormuz about 1472²⁸ and we have an account of the journey of Hieronimo di Santo Stefano, a Genovese, written in a letter dated the 1st September 1499 to a Messer Giovan Jacobo Mainer. The letter states that he had brought some merchandize to Hormuz on behalf of another merchant and having paid the dues left it with his agent.²⁹

We read in the famous narrative of Ludovico di Varthema³⁰; ‘[We] went to the noble city of Ormus [Hormûz], which is extremely beautiful. It is an island and is the chief, that is, as a maritime place, and for merchandise. It is distant from the mainland ten or twelve miles. In this said island there is not sufficient water or food, but all comes from the mainland.’ There are doubts on the credibility of Varthema’s narrative and similar doubts have been raised over the authenticity of the travel writings of Marco Polo and others, some of which have been quoted here, but by the end of the 15th century the image and reputation of Hormuz had been established. Then the Portuguese arrived.

On the 25 September 1507 Afonso de Albuquerque appeared off the island of Hormuz to find between 150 and 200 vessels in the harbour and some 20,000 men ashore.³¹ Despite his inferior strength of six ships and some 400 men he demanded tribute from the regent of Hormuz. After three days of negotiations the Portuguese attacked the ships in the harbour and bombarded the city until the regent relented and promised to pay a tribute of 15,000 gold xerafins a year, to make a gift of 5,000, and to allow the construction of a Portuguese fort.³² The contemporary Portuguese historian João de Barros describes the subjugation of the city ‘....Albuquerque told him [The captain of one of these vessels] he had orders from Emanuel [King Manuel I] to take the king of Ormuz into protection, and grant him leave to trade in those seas, provided he paid a reasonable tribute; but if he refused, his orders were to make war The Moor brought an answer that the city of Ormuz used not to pay but to receive tribute.’³³

²⁶ At the beginning of the Russian expansion in 1466, Ivan the Great had received an ambassador from the Shah of Shirvan. He reciprocated this by sending Vasilii Papin accompanied by some merchants including Afanasii Nikitin. #611 Morris, A.S., The journey beyond the Three Seas, Geographical Journal, The, vol. 133, pt. 4, p. 502, 1967 (Dec). pp.502-8

²⁷ #622 Major, R.H. (ed. with an introduction), India in the fifteenth century, being a collection of Narratives of Voyages to India, in the century preceeding the Portuguese discovery of the Cape of Good Hope from Latin, Persian, Russian and Italian Sources, now first translated into English, Hakluyt Society, 1857 (M.DCCC.LV11). book III pp.8, 9, 19, 25, 30,31 #623p109

²⁸ #240 Dizionario Biografico Degli Italiane, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Fondata da Giovanni Treccani, Rome, 1963, 2096.a ~ pp. 106-109 (accompanied by Ambragio Contarini ?)

²⁹ Stefano passed through Hormuz on his return from Cambay in India. #622 Major, R.H. (ed. with an introduction), India in the fifteenth century, being a collection of Narratives of Voyages to India, in the century preceeding the Portuguese discovery of the Cape of Good Hope from Latin, Persian, Russian and Italian Sources, now first translated into English, Hakluyt Society, 1857 (M.DCCC.LV11). book IV p. 9

³⁰ #289 Varthema, Ludovici, The Travels of L. di Varthema in Egypt, Syria, Arabia Deserta, and Arabia Felix, in Persia, India, and Ethiopia, A.D. 1503 to 1508. trans. J. W. Jones, ed. G. P. Badger, Hakluyt Society, London, 1863

³¹ #72 Livermore, H. V., A History of Portugal, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, 1947 ~ p. 234

³² #72 Livermore, H. V., A History of Portugal, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, 1947 ~ p. 234

³³ #184 Castlereagh, Duncan, The Great Age of Exploration, The Reader’s Digest Association Ltd, London, 1971 ~ , p. 176-7

The city of Hormuz was no longer protected by the sea but was now subject to the Portuguese who controlled the sea around. For over 120 years the Portuguese held on to Hormuz so great a source of revenue not only for Portugal but also for the individuals that governed there. Camões, who served with the Portuguese fleet in the area, includes Hormuz in his epic poem, written about 1572:

But see yon Gerum's isle the tale unfold
of mighty things which Time can make or mar;
for of Armuza-town yon shore upon
the name and glory this her rival won.³⁴



Towards the end of the Portuguese occupation of Hormuz, François Pyrard in his book mentions the wealth of the Portuguese garrison at Hormuz and that of the Governor, 'This island after Goa is the richest, and has the largest revenues of any in the Indies possessed by the Portuguese ... In short, it is the common proverb in those lands, that if the world were an egg, Ormus would be the yolk ... But that is the place where the governors fill their pockets, inasmuch as they will for money let everything pass. These governors aspire to no other dignity than that of viceroy, and they go there solely to that end. For they enrich themselves in marvellous' wise in the three years of their office from the heavy dues and tolls they exact upon all things: to do which with impunity, they make great presents to the viceroy.... But to return to this governor of Ormus: it was said at the time that he was returning from his three years worth more than 600,000 crown. ... When these governors return they carry no large cargoes of merchandise, but only pearls, precious stones, ambergris, musk, gold, silver, and other rare and precious things.³⁵ This was not to last.

Shah Abbas wanted to remove the Portuguese and the Persians supported by the English moved on to Hormuz where the city was quickly taken but the Portuguese withdrew into the fort. Siege operations began on the 9 February 1622 and the Portuguese after an initial defence of their positions and with little hope of reinforcements from Goa entered into negotiations for their survival and the fort capitulated two months later³⁶. Although there were further battles and sieges of Hormuz, this was to be the last major sea battle involving the Portuguese in the area.³⁷

Now in much the same way that the city of Hormuz had been established on the island, the Persians moved the city to the new city of Bandar Abbas on the mainland to the west of the original Hormuz. English court minutes of 28 February 1627 record; 'that the factors in Persia should not desist from the design of acquiring Ormuz Castle, as well as to affront the Portugal as to prevent the Dutch'.³⁸ But it was not to be and in nearly all respects the island was abandoned.

³⁴ #187 Wilson, Arnold T., *The Persian Gulf*, George Allen & Unwin, Oxford, 1928, 9058.c.15 ~ p. 101 and *Os Lusíades*, Camões, x. 103 as rendered by Burton

³⁵ #310 Gray, Albert, *The Voyage of Francois Pyrard of Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas and Brazil*, Hakluyt Society, London, 1888, AC.6172/63 ~ pp. 238-45

³⁶ on the 23 April 1622

³⁷ mainly by Ruy Freyre. #341 Clowes, William Laird, *The Royal Navy - A History from the earliest times to the present in 5 volumes*, Sampson Low, Marston and Company Ltd: AMS Press Inc, London: New York, 1898: 1966 ~ pp. 40-4

³⁸ #328 *Calendar of State Papers Colonial Series, East Indies, China & Japan*, 4 vols. 1513-1616, 1617-1621, 1622-1624, 1625-1629, Longman & Co, London, 1878 ~ vol. 1625-9, pp.326-7



By the middle of the 17th century with the removal of the Portuguese dominance in the area, the position that Hormuz had held for three hundred and fifty years as one of the leading trading centres of the world was over. Although the transfer of Hormuz to the new town of Bandar Abbas included removing the old town's material fabric to build the new, it never managed to replace the old town on the island or retrieve the trade that was now dispersed between competing European powers. All that was left was the image revealed in Milton's *Paradise Lost* in 1665:

High on a throne of royal state, which far
Outshone the wealth of Ormuz and of Ind,
Or where the gorgeous East with richest hand
Showers on her kings barbaric pearl and gold.³⁹

and by the French historian Abbé T. G. F. Raynal who summed up Hormuz in his history published in 1770, 'Hormúz became the capital of an empire ... In short, universal opulence, an extensive commerce, politeness in the men and gallantry in the women, united all their attractions to make this city the seat of pleasure.'⁴⁰

The city of Hormuz had access to the sea and grew; received protection by moving to an island; increased in size and wealth when the seas were not dominated; continued to flourish even when the Portuguese controlled the sea but eventually succumbed when it was unable to survive another move and aggressive, competitive trading. It had lasted for some 350 years.

³⁹ #107 Milton, *Paradise Lost* ~ II, 1-4

⁴⁰ #252 Stiffe, Captain A. W., *The Island of Hormuz (Ormuz)*, vol. 1 p 12, *The Geographical Journal*, London, P.P.3947.i ~ p. 14