The Fortification of Bukit China, Malacca

by

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The plan reproduced here on plate 7 was found in 1953 in a folio of old maps belonging to the Raffles Museum. The decorated area is approximately 64.5 by 45 cm, and the sheet on which it is sketched 66.5 by 46 cm. The inscription in the bottom left-hand corner reads, Geprojecteerd Fort op den berg Bouquit-China. 30 roeden in’t zuyden vande than’s geleegens Loopgraen [Projected fort on Bukit China hill, thirty poles to the south of the existing trenches]. There is no certain indication of where the sketch was made, or of how it reached its present resting place. It seems probable, however, that it is a plan, or duplicate copy of a plan, submitted to Batavia along with a request for authority to improve the defences of Malacca. The style of the work, and the nature and quality of the pigments and paper employed, indicate that it was executed in or about the second half of the eighteenth century. As we shall see below, it is clear that some form of fortifications existed on Bukit China at the close of this period and that at one point there was a scheme for extending them. What we still have to consider is whether the plan shown here represents a fort that was actually built, or one that was still only 'projected' when the British forces occupied Malacca in 1795.

If the fort were built at all, it must have been built between 1784 and 1795. Dr. Graham Irwin has kindly examined his notes on the records of the Dutch East India Company covering their activities in Malacca and the region of the Malacca Strait. These show clearly that measures to strengthen the defences of the town were contemplated in the seventeen-eighties, immediately after the close of the war with the Bugis leader Raja Haji of Riau (obit 1784). There is, nevertheless, no positive statement from this source that the work was ever put in hand. The strongest evidence in support of at least some building having existed on Bukit China occurs in a paper published in this series of journals in 1934, wherein the author says that the

1. Opp. p. 158, overleaf. The original is at present on exhibition in the gallery of maps, prints and photographs illustrating the early history of the Straits Settlements.
2. Thirty poles = 165 yards, i.e. three-quarters of a furlong.
3. Dr Graham Irwin, in epistola, 10:12:54.

The second day of the sea fight between the squadron led by Admiral Cornelis Matelief and the Portuguese fleet, off Malacca (18 August, 1606). In contrast to the custom pertaining in the majority of the early pictures of such contests, the wind is here shown standing in roughly the same quarter for both fleets, but to compensate for this the smoke from the burning vessels rises almost vertically upwards, the Straits of Malacca are very, very narrow (with the water towering above the Sumatran shore), and the portrait of Malacca itself is, to say the least, a little fanciful (cf the much homelier, and more convincing, view of the town in the plate on page 166, below). Nonetheless, it is of interest to notice that an attempt is made to depict the convent of Madre de Dios (in the top right-hand corner of the picture), though the style is on a par with that employed for the town, and it is placed a little too near to the sea.

Batavia archives then contained 'a good plan of the fort on Bukit China......dated 17864: but we are of the opinion that if Macdonald saw a plan of a stone-built fort, he saw a copy of the plan which we reproduced here on plate 7, with a note to the effect that building was approved in 1786. If this were not so, then he must surely have seen a plan of the earthworks. As we shall see, there are ample references to a defensive position on Bukit China from 1784 to 1808, but no certain indication of the existence of a stone-built fort: and, of course, any public
works planned and approved but not constructed by 1790 would almost certainly have been cancelled in the course of the economy drive of 1791.

There is no doubt that there were very good grounds for fortifying both Bukit China and St. John’s Hill; both were necessary for full protection of the north-eastern quadrant of the citadel, and it was highly desirable that the enemy should not be able to use them as bases from which to fire into the town. Moreover, according to Balthasar Bort, the well at the foot of Bukit China provided the 'best drinking water found'; and it was apparently an important contributor to the town's water supply in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; more recently the well was used as a bath. The Revd. Fr. R. Cardon in his review of the town in Portuguese times calls it 'the principal and certainly the oldest well in Malacca'. In 1677 Bort, in anticipation of an attack by

4. M. Macdonald, 'Malacca buildings', JMBRAS, 12, (2), 1934: 27-37, see p. 36, St John’s Fort. Macdonald, incidentally, was looking for information on the age of St. John’s Fort; here, again, there is apparently nothing of much value in the extant Dutch records. It had obviously not been built in 1641, when Schouten wrote his report, as he recommended the erection of a redoubt to protect the hill. Nor can it have been standing in 1678, when Bort prepared his statement on Malacca, but it is clear that there was a fort on St. John’s Hill by 1791. In the latter year, according to Macdonald, there is a reference to a fort on the Vriesche Berg, four hundred poles to the east of the castle, 'to oppose any landing on the southern beaches'; it was armed with eight 6-pounders. Possibly the instructions were sent to Malacca between 1760 and 1778, the period over which the Malacca records are deficient. In which case the fort was built circa 1760-90; it was undoubtedly in existence in 1795, but not adequately manned (see p. 119, above). It is not mentioned directly in the official records of Raja Haji’s attack on Malacca in 1783-4, though the hill was certainly defended (see Maxwell 1890: passim).


6. Revd Father R. Cardon, Société de Missions Etrangères, 'Portuguese Malacca', JMBRAS, 12, (2), 1934: 1-23, see p. 3 & 4, périgi raja, the king’s well. The Dutch admiral Cornelis Matelief the younger noted the well in his account of his voyage to the east (1605-8), and as late as 1828-29, Dr T. M. Ward wrote, 'There is a plentiful supply of water in the town [of Malacca]. Wells are attached to every house... Very pure and very excellent water, however, is obtained from the well at the foot of bukit cheenee, which is in common use among the inhabitants,

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Admiral Cornelis Matelief's attack on Malacca: detail from the plate in Johannes Issacius Pontanus's *Rerum et urbis Amstelodamensis historia* (J. Hondius, Amsterdam, 1611: 213), showing the meeting ashore of the Dutch and Johore forces at the time of the initial landing in May, 1606. This apparently took place at Ujong Pasir, though the engraving reproduced here gives the impression that it was in the suburb of Banda Hilir, unless we take it that the latter is represented by the ten coconut palms between the walls of the citadel. See text pp. 161 and 163.

Menangkabau Malays, had eight brass pedreroes mounted on 'the plank palisade round the guard-house and the well provided with a breastwork': the following year the garrison there consisted of one sergeant, two corporals and ten soldiers. Early in the eighteenth century the well at Bukit China was given stone defence-works, and a contiguous stone-built guard-house: these are shown clearly

and the carriage and sale of which give employment to a number of Chinamen and others ('Contributions to the Medical Topography of Malacca', Pinang, 1830:8).

7. Bort, loc. cit.: 20 & 31. He refers to it as 'the stone well ... near the hill Bouquet China, called St. Francisco by the Portuguese'. Cardon (loc. cit.: 3) notes that even at the time when he was writing, Bukit China was still called O monte do S. Francisco (St Francis's Hill).

8. The nearby burial chapel, erected by Capitan China Chua Su Cheong, in 1795, appeared much later, being built in gratitude for the British capture of Malacca from the Dutch company. It is a dependent chapel of the Cheng Hoon Teng, in Temple Street, Malacca, the oldest Chinese temple in Malaya (*JMBRAS*, 28, (1), 1955: 173-9). Two early pictures of the chapel are printed here on pl. 9; the middle one on the plate shows also the stone wall and guard house at the well (Sam-po-cheng); see plate 9, opp. p. 172.

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in the water-colour painting of the nearby Chinese burial chapel, executed by Capt. James George, B.N.I., in May 1811.

The well at Bukit China is the one traditionally associated with the Grand Eunuch Chêng-Ho, in whose honour the local Chinese refer to it as Sam-po-cheng. During the latter part of the Portuguese occupation of Malacca, the spur of Bukit China rising above the Sam-po-cheng was the site of the church and Franciscan convent of Madre de Dios. The house was founded in 1581 by an Italian Capuchin, Frei João Baptista Pizzaro, and transferred to the Franciscans three years later (1584). The presence of the convent is noticed in the account of the Dutch admiral Cornelis Matelief's voyage to the east, in 1605-8; in addition the engraving accompanying the description of his fight with the Portuguese fleet off Malacca shows a building on Bukit China, and the great cross which the Portuguese erected on the ridge of rocks in front of the fortress. Neither, we may add, appear in later engravings of Malacca from the sea.

The sea fight occurred in August, 1606. Earlier the Dutch had tried unsuccessfully to capture the city, in company with land forces from Johore. The initial landing was apparently carried out on 18 May, 1606, at Ujong Pasir, south-east of the citadel (see page 138, above). Thereafter the attack was maintained irregularly until the third week in July, when Matelief was compelled to withdraw his men on the receipt of news of the impending arrival of the Portuguese fleet from Goa.

On the occasion of the initial landing the combined forces overran Banda Hilir, and came within a short distance of the fort itself. Then they brought up four mortars of normal size, and placed them in such a position that they were able at one and the same time to hit both the tower and the rampart of the fortress.

9. For the establishment of the convent, see Cardon, loc. cit.; 2. According to a French edition of the voyage to the East Indies of admiral Cornelis Matelief the younger, quoting his account of Malacca,

Au-haut de la ville, c'est-à-dire presque au milieu, on voit le convent des Jésuites, nommé S. Paul d'où l'on découvrir toute la ville qui est autour, & d'où l'on peut battre du canon toute la campagne qui environne la place. Sur la plus prochaine montagne est le convent de Cordeliers, qui se nomme Madre de Deos, jusqu'à laquelle montagne un petit canon du poids de quinze-cents livres a de la peine à porter. Les autres sont fort éloignées (From ‘Recueil des Voyages qui ont servi à l'établissement et aux progres de la Compagnie des Indes Orientales, formée dans les Provinces unies des Pays-bas’, translated by R. A. de Constantin de Renneville, 7 vols, Amsterdam, 1702-07; see 3: 307-8, and plate opp. p. 277, reproduced here on p. 156, above, from a copy in the possession of the Survey Dept., Malacca).

in Malacca. But they realized that these methods were achieving inadequate result. Thereon, according to Pontanus (trans J. V. Mills, 1938: 145-6),

... at a later date these men took a bridge up a stream and laid the way open for themselves to reach a monastery situated in the neighbourhood there. From this point they laid down a path through the marshes which lay between the shore and the monastery; then a hundred and fifty of our men with four hundred African [Malays] advanced further towards the south, and, before the Lusitanians [Portuguese] were able to observe them, they set out an encampment in the part of the town which was held most weakly; they also prepared and erected defences as well as a sufficiently broad rampart midway between the shore and the city; here they even set up some mortars at a later date. . .

From which we can see that the Dutch & Malay forces advanced inland to the convent of Madre de Dios, and thence turned south-west and occupied the proximal part of the suburb of Saba (later called Banda Malacca, the modern Bunga Raya), in the neighbourhood of the church of St Lawrence. Thus this is the first notice of an attack on Malacca from the direction of Bukit China; but there is no certain indication that any use was made of the hill itself, or of the buildings of the convent.

Occupation of part of the area now known as Bunga Raya is confirmed by Valentijn (see JSBRAS, 16, 1885: 290), who says that on the siege being raised the attacking forces withdrew their artillery from Campo Klin. For some quite inexplicable reason, J. V. Mills — who seemingly also overlooks the fact that St Paul's Hill is south-west (not west) of Bukit China — equates Campo Klin with Kampong Chelin, the region of the present Heeren and Jonker Streets, to which he then transfers the name Kg Kling. For the Dutch & Malay forces to have reached this neighbourhood there would have had to have been a second unrecorded landing to the north-west of the town. Even then, while Pontanus's description of the advance agrees neatly with an encircling movement in the area east of the river, it cannot possibly be applied to one west of it. The mistake, presumably, arises from the failure to localize Kampong Kling correctly. As we have implied above, Kg Kling was not the same as Kg Chelin; it lay inland in the suburb of Saba (Banda Malacca) and not on the waterfront, where the elite lived. Thus Commissary Justus Schouten, in his report on Portuguese Malacca prepared in 1641 (JMBRAS, 14, 1, 1936: 88),

The city was enclosed by two large suburbs on the north and south and again surrounded by extensive pleasure grounds, about three times the area of the city. . . The northern suburb was usually called Bandar Malakka, with its well-known street Kampong Kling. It was

enclosed by a stout wall about 2½ fathoms high and fully one fathom thick, with a stone gate at the extreme north. The southern suburb was not enclosed and was called Bandar Ilhir. Here most of the mestics, the blacks and some Portuguese citizens lived happily under the shade of the coconut trees and surrounded by beautiful gardens and pleasure grounds.

The former was the terminal point reached by admiral Cornélie Matelief — the 'well-known street' in Banda Malacca (due north of the citadel), and not the shoreward section of the town proper (which at this period was restricted to the citadel area and the region immediately across the river, to the west of the fortress).

During the Achenese attack on Malacca in 1628/29 the Portuguese defenders were again driven back from Ujong Pasir. Ultimately the Achenese occupied St. John's Hill, where they mounted a battery with which they bombarded the town, and immediately came under fire from the garrison stationed in the convent on the Bukit China ridge. The building, which by this time constituted an important unit in the defences of the town, had been

... entrusted to the defence of Diogo Lopez de Fonseca who, after having held it against the enemy for fifty days, made a sally with 200 men and succeeded in driving back 2,000 of the enemy. After this Fonseca fell sick and was succeeded by Francisco Carvalho de Maya who continued to hold it against the Achenese forces, but ultimately it was bombarded with such severity that the place became untenable; whereupon the building was levelled with the ground and then abandoned. The enemy at once rushed in and took possession of the position where they erected fortifications out of the materials of the ruined buildings and the laksmama [the leader of the Achenese forces] established his headquarters there with a force of 3,000 men. Meanwhile a fleet arrived from Pahang to assist the Portuguese, and shortly afterwards Miguel Pereira Botelho came with five sail from S. Tomé [on the Coromandel coast]. The laksmama, after losing his position, retook it to lose it again, and finally fled to the woods where he was captured by the king of Pahang.10

The Achenese siege of Malacca in 1628/29 forms the subject of a watercolour sketch of the 'Town & Fort of Malacca' (British

10. F. C. Danvers, 'The Portuguese in India', London, 1894 (2): 231. The laksmama of Acheh, being brought before the governor of Malacca 'said to him with undaunted countenance: "Behold here the Laksmama for the first time overcome." He was treated with respect but kept a prisoner, and sent on his famous galley (the Terror of the World) to Goa, in order to be from thence conveyed to Portugal; but death deprived his enemies of their triumph' (Wm Marsden, 'History of Sumatra', London, 3rd edn, 1811: 444—quoted in Cardon, loc. cit.; 2).

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Museum, Sloane MS.197, folio 382), part of which is reproduced here as a line drawing on page 162. This portion shows the Achenese stockades running from the line of Bukit China to the river (a-b), with their guns pointing in towards the walls of the town; at (c) can be seen the Convent of Madre de Dios, already badly damaged by gunfire.

The convent on Bukit China was rebuilt after the Achenese had retired, but they had demonstrated the strategic value of the hill, and fighting again took place in this area during the successful Dutch attack on Malacca in 1640-41. The Dutch forces collected off the town in June of the former year, but it was not until 3 August that they effected a landing on the north of the city in a large field outside the range of the enemy guns. On 27 October, the governor-general in council, at

11. Probably prepared by Pierre Berthelot, circumnavigator of Borneo, to accompany the 'LIVRO do Estado da India Oriental' of Barreto do Rescende, circa 1635-8. The latter's account of Malacca, etc., has been translated by Sir George Maxwell (see JMBRAS, 60, 1911: 1-24). The line drawing reproduced here was prepared for the Hakluyt Society's edition of d'Albuquerque's Commentaries (62, 1880); it also appears, without acknowledgement of source, in the Historical Guide to Malacca, 1924; in both cases the drawing is erroneously captioned, and no indication is given of the significance of the breastwork round the town from which guns point in towards it.

12. Commissary Schouten gives a description of the convent, which presumably refers to the period shortly before the Dutch attack on Malacca.

Madre de Dios Church and the Capuchin Monastery. — This is a noble structure on the top of the hill called Bukit China within a cannon shot from the city. It has a beautiful garden (at the back and on one side) which is enclosed by an earthen wall. It is the healthiest and the most beautiful spot in Malacca. The monks here were of the order of St Francisco. The church had three altars. The high altar and the chapel were dedicated to the Mother of God, while the other two were in the names of Nossa Senhora da Conceicao and Bon Jesus. They were very elaborately decorated. There were usually seven friars in this monastery, namely, the Guardian, the Procurador, the Sacristan and two preachers, who were all priests and two lay brothers who served as Administrator and Porter. These friars had neither rents nor income but lived on the voluntary alms of the dead [sic] and the citizens of the place. They had a secular layman as administrator who had the title of Syndicus. These monks were outwardly very poor-looking, but in fact they were the richest of all denominations. (in JMBRAS, 14, (1), 1936: 91-2).

The Capuchins were a reformed order of Franciscans, established in 1528.


Batavia, wrote to Adriaen Anthonisz, the commander-in-chief in front of Malacca,14

We were immensely pleased to learn that you had consolidated your position so well for defence, and that you were almost in possession of the convent Madre de Dios, otherwise known as Bukit China. We hope that with the new reinforcements and the assistance of the Johorites you will have approached the convent and will be able to bombard the city from that important position causing much damage. Herewith a sketch of Malacca city done by Commander Cornelis Symmonz some time ago, together with his description of the citadel and fortifications. According to the sketch, two of the city’s bulwarks can be bombarded from the convent and by this means a blockade of the city can be affected...

... The Johorites, the Manicabers15 and the people from Rambou, should be well rewarded and praised so that they may remain faithful to us, and help you to carry up the guns to Madre de Dios in spite of the morass and the steep road.

Thereafter we hear nothing more of Bukit China and the Franciscan convent until after the fall of Malacca early in 1641.

At this point Commissary Justus Schouten arrived from Batavia to survey the condition of the town. In his report he says, "The beautiful monastery of St. Francisco and the great chapel of Madre de Dios are roofless and half ruined. The wall around the garden is practically intact, but the garden has become a jungle." Schouten recommended that "The best portion of this convent could be repaired and made into a residence and let out with its beautiful Court Yards as a pleasure ground, for which it is exceptionally well adapted," but the Dutch authorities found themselves short of effective manpower, and according to Casimiro Christovãº de Nazareth the ruins were ultimately razed to the ground. Certainly we hear nothing more of occupation of this area, and it is from this time on that the Chinese burials begin to spread over the hill. Schouten also

15. The Menangkabau settlers: seemingly (as they are distinguished from the people of Remban) this refers to the groups in the Ulu Muar, who gave the Dutch much trouble in the time of Governor Balthasar Bort, and later. Then an appeal to the sultan of Johore on the matter produced the reply that they were the subjects of the bêndahana of Johore, and he, the sultan, could not be held responsible for their acts.