

# Transcript

00:00:00 Speaker 1

Our last speaker this afternoon is Dr.

00:00:04 Speaker 1

Rowena Abdelazza, who holds a PhD, a BPhil from the University of Oxford, and she's now a lecturer in Middle East History at SOAS.

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And she's also a fellow Gulf Studies scholar.

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Kind of, yeah.

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Kind of.

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Thank you so much, Pascal, for this.

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Good afternoon.

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I wish I could say I've saved the last for best, but it's really not the case.

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I've seen all the papers so far and I've just been truly, truly impressed, mind blown.

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I'm really humbled by the quality of research and the quality of the papers so far, and I realized that I now have lots to learn.

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This is particularly humbling because not only am I presenting in front of a monarch, Her Majesty Queen Azizel Kahan, but also in front of Professor Edmund Herzog, who was my internal examiner, who had a PhD, so I feel

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It's happening all over again.

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But it's still a true honor.

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And if I may just say thank you very much to St.

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Anthony's College, Professor Raihan, I think, for allowing us into your home.

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And thank you so very much and to for trusting me in a way to hold this workshop together and to have it here.

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Anyway, I'll leave the thank yous for later.

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Today, I stand before you and as you know, all good papers start with a caveat.

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Several caveats, in fact.

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One is that I'm actually coming from quite a different background.

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For a long time, I've just been focusing on Iran.

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And a few years ago, I started to pivot and to try and find some interest with my homeland, where my heart is, which is Malaysia.

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So I've been trying to look at links between Iran and Malaysia.

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And that's one caveat, so I'm coming from quite a different background.

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Another caveat is that I have no nice pictures to show you, and I'm really sorry for that because this is very much research that's at the start.

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So yeah, just to, as all of you know, that these exchanges between the Middle East and Southeast Asia go back a very, very long time.

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These links connected the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, all the way to the South China Sea by the Malacca Straits.

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And now, as we have seen in the last two days, the coast of Pahang really ties everything together in amazing ways, bringing together ideas, religions, administrative practices, languages, people's goods, and even fashion.

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So, you know, this paper provides an overview of how Pahang formed a part of this connection between the Malay world and the Persian Gulf.

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While its importance has been acknowledged by historians like, of course, the eminent Anthony Reed,

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Claude Cleo is still relatively understudied and unknown.

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The links are there, and here I will show these connections and how Farhang Self is an important midway point for travel and trade between East and West.

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Here we try to bridge the gaps in geography to highlight points of connectivity, even if direct interaction is not always as clear.

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So I'll begin a little bit and sort of sketch out the different links that help place this understudied place within the wider maritime network that connects the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean and beyond.

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Throughout history, Pahang's reverse, we have seen, have served as an important trading center and route.

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Long-distance trade between Southeast Asia and India, China, and beyond have existed since antiquity.

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And we can see that the history of Pahang is very much connected.

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to the Malay world and by extension to the Maritime Silk Road.

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A little word about terminology and definitions.

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I've made the conscious decision to use the word Persia and Persianate to not just mean the nation state of Iran or what we know it today.

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Persia and the Persianate world encompasses huge areas and did not always mean direct rule or directly, doesn't directly mean Iran or its governments, dynasties, or a country run, but we are not talking of an area

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of shared culture, religion, and language which transcends borders.

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In this case, I very much rely on the parameters and definitions laid out by scholars such as Nile Green, Majid Danishka, Arish Khazeni.

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According to Nile Green, the various frontiers of Persian in the linguistic, geographical, and social senses of the term brought diverse communities together that stretched from China to the Balkans and from Siberia to southern India.

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And I'd like to extend this term to include the Malay world.

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It's in the same way we will be able to observe how terms like Shahbanda, who we have here in the room today with us, was used in Baha and has Persian linguistic and political origins.

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So this is very important, and Shahbanda is definitely part of that legacy.

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So thank you.

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We can use you as a case study in this.

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So Baha was connected to the Persian girl through several ways.

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Firstly, through religion.

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Islam, which originated from the Arabian Peninsula, took root in the Malay world after the Malacca Sultanate adopted it formally and a little bit before that as well.

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There are scholars in the room who know much more than this, so this is just an overview.

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While some scholars have spoken of Islam arriving through India, direct Middle Eastern influence is present in religious practices, language, dress, and culture of the region.

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Arab influence is well known and proven, especially with an established narrative of the Hadramat migration to Southeast Asia.

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However, Persian influence in the Malay world was also present and deep, though in perhaps more subtle forms.

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Just a little bit of background of Persia, or modern-day Iran, was conquered by the Rashidun caliphate after a long military campaign that began under Prophet Muhammad .

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This led to the fall of the Sassanian dynasty that had ruled Persia for many years, as well as the decline of the monotheistic Zoroastrian religion, although that is still in practice today.

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Although most of the population converted to Islam, they resisted Arab culture and language.

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They preserved their own language and distinct identities spreading throughout the region and assimilating with different local populations.

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The spread of Persian culture mirrored the spread of Islam as Arab leaders employed Persian administrators and also adopted the language.

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Very soon, Persian became the language of trade, poetry, and exchange, while the Persian style was prevailing in architecture and art.

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People from the land of Iran traveled far and wide, seeking opportunities elsewhere, establishing themselves and their culture away from the disengaging lands.

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Persian culture and language became wide straight beyond the borders of Iran.

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It's prevailing in Central Asia, India, beyond.

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To the Malay world, the influence of Persia came through merchants, traders, religious figures, and adventurers.

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They arrived via land and sea.

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And this is not something that came just with Islam.

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It exists even in its pre-Islamic times, through sustained times, for example.

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Persian merchants have been traveling to China along the routes of the Indian Ocean and South China Sea.

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The first evidence of Persians inhabiting any being present on the Malay Peninsula date from the third to sixth century common era.

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Camphor, originating from Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, was already present in Persian texts written in Pahlavi, pre-Islamic form of the Persian language.

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Sobdians, the quintessential pre-Islamic Persian merchant population of the Silk Road, were known to trade this precious commodity and were not an uncommon presence in the Thai and Malay worlds.

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Nestorian Christians from Phars, for example, also settled along the coast of India and the western coast of the Malay Peninsula.

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From the 10th century common era, it is clear that Persians were familiar with the Malay world, as noted in their travelogues and writings.

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These texts were made from testimonies of sailors collected in the ports of the Persian Gulf, in particular Siraf.

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They confirm knowledge of the Malay world, noting many cities and kingdoms in the region.

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They paint an important picture of the sea route to China and showed the interest of those in the Islamic Middle East from knowledge of the wider world, especially during the Abbasid period.

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Persian ships played a key role on the main shipping and trade route between the Middle East and the Far East, well equipped with knowledge of these lands.

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In the 1960s, British archaeologist Alistair Lam did intense research on the maritime exchanges between Persia and the Malay world.

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Archaeological evidence are still fragmentary, with the hope that future excavations will reveal more.

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Nonetheless, they do reveal the presence of Persians in the region, as well as regional interest in the objects of trade from the Persian Gulf, such as glass squares and ceramics.

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The oldest Islamic inscription in Southeast Asia, and please, please do correct me if I'm wrong, dating from the 10th, 11th century common era

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have been discovered on the Lobu Tuwa site probably originates from Khorasan itself.

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Persian inscriptions are also present all over Sumatra with plenty of funerary inscriptions and tombstones.

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Persians settled in North Sumatra and South Kedah in Kala between the 9th and early 12th century as evidenced from the archaeological finds and inscriptions found in the area.

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They were clearly connected to the sea trade judging by their traces in ports and their presence in travelogues.

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including in Ibn Battuta's 14th century testimony.

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On his stop in Pasai in 1349-- there's always Ibn Battuta, right?

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On his stop in Pasai in 1349, en route to Guangzhou, he noted people he met from Persia.

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Two of the principal officials of the kingdom, one was described as a vice admiral who bore the Persian name Burus.

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The local supreme judge of Qadi was mentioned to be a Sayid from Shiraz.

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in addition to an emir from Khorasan and an ulama from Isfahan.

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Persian became an important language of trade on the shipping route to China.

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On one of his excavations, the Chinese at Lord Cheng He left a commemorative stele on present-day Sri Lanka, dated 1409, which contains a text written in Chinese, Tamil, and Persian.

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Additionally, a large Chinese cast iron bell named the Chakra Dunya bears a Chinese date with Persian text in Arabic script.

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And during the Sultanate of Malacca in the 15th, 16th centuries, it appears that Persia did not, unfortunately, at this point constitute Malacca as a particular area of interest or power.

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Although with the conversation I had with Dr.

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Amal about sources, maybe we're looking in the wrong place.

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So maybe I might just completely disregard what I'm saying at the moment.

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The Malay annals of Sajarah Melayu and the Hikayatuwa or Hantuwa work do not mention any Persians in Malacca.

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However, external texts like, for example, Tom, sorry, Jorge, I'm probably pronouncing this very badly, Tom and Pires, do note the presence of Persian merchants in Malacca.

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So again, it's about where we're looking for, what we're looking for in the sources.

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From the 16th century, chroniclers conflated India and Persia, noting the expansion of the Persian world to include people and geographical space beyond Iran proper.

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This also indicates the importance and spread of the Persian diaspora in spreading Persian language and culture.

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As we know, with the kingdom of Pahang, it established itself as a key training center on the west coast, and due to its strategic location, became a midway point for ships traveling between east and west.

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Very quickly, it gained control of the straits, very much in the same way that the Srivijaya empire had done before.

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On the east coast, we had Malacca, of course, until its fall to the Portuguese forces in 1511.

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And we do see Pahang take an important role as a power in the peninsula, very much

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confirmed by Jorge's previous presentation about this trade agreement between, a possible trade agreement between Portugal and Baha.

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So we know that Baha historically has played a very important role in international trade, especially from China onwards.

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So as we can see, Pahang's Jioman Island as well served as a very important point in the route between the Malacca Straits and the South China Sea, connecting west coast of Malay Peninsula through the Pahang River and other land routes.

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This was particularly helpful, of course, to avoid other activities, different European powers in the area, and Portuguese vessels, for example, used the river routes of Pahang to cross the peninsula to avoid the Dutch.

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So we do know that it's very important that this route

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connected the Chinsula onto the Persian Gulf, despite different Europeans in the area.

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Malay works, for example, show the influence of-- so another way that we can see Persian culture influencing the Malay wall is through literature and language.

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The work of Hamza Fansuri, for example, quotes the poet Attar, while Saadi, another very famous Persian poet, appears in the Sajarah Malayu.

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There are plenty of Malay works which were translated from Persian originals.

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Among these texts, we have the Hikayat Bayan Budiman, which can be traced back to a mid-14th century Persian compilation.

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The Malay adaptations of the Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiyah and the Hikayat Amir Hamza, produced in Pasai, were also directly translated from Persian.

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I don't know whether this is necessarily true, but there is evidence that the *Sajarah Malayi* was inspired by Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, or the Book of Kings, to see how the generosity of the Persian rulers were displayed.

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But again, this is

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Probably a bit of conjecture, but you know, why not?

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With the arrival of the European imperial powers in the Malay world, we have more written evidence of Persian presence in the region.

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A Dutch voyager to India noted a Khorasan population as well.

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In the 17th century, the king of Bantan created a fleet and sent several ships to Bandar Abbas, where Persian court life could be observed and emulated.

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So there was a lot of interest in Persian court life as well.

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In Thailand, we do know that Persians settled from the 17th century onwards and played an important political and economic role there.

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Another Persian community that settled in the region were the Armenians.

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Although a distinct population of their own, practicing Christianity and speaking Armenian, they were closely linked with Safavid Persia and became a community that settled all along the same way, connecting the Persians after China.

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They adopted to the European trading networks and became an important mercantile class.

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As my colleague, Ramon, I believe, has noted from his own work, he has found Armenians from Persia in the area present in Manila.

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Persian influence also came through the Gujaratis of the Mughal Empire, who were another important Mercatan class.

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They also settled in the Red Sea as well.

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And we do know that Malay elites were fascinated by Persian culture and aesthetics.

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Of course, the influence of Persia proper became overshadowed by the Hadrama communities from the Arabian Peninsula in the region.

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Iran itself under the Safavids and later Qajars lost interest and ability to travel with sea, and they're not terribly known as a seafaring, from this point, not very much known as a seafaring community.

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But nonetheless, Pahang and the Malay world, certainly, and Pahang maintain connections with the rest of the Persian world in the India and Indian Ocean area.

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And one of the significant connections between Pahang and this Persian world has been the office of Shahbandar.

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So, because roughly translates as harbour master, this was an important role that can be traced all along the Indian Ocean.

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In Pahang, this role was one of the most important ruling positions.

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Rudi Mati has conducted extensive research on this office throughout the Indian Ocean network, and I think we can truly add Pahang to this network as well.

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Although primarily an office associated with affairs of the sea, such as managing port affairs and collecting taxes from merchants, its holder also attended to other political and international affairs.

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in Pahang.

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The Shah Banda was a noble office known as the Orang Kaya Indra Shah Banda and served as the monarch's minister and continues to be present today.

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So Pahang and Prussia were also connected through their interactions with the Portuguese.

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Both were affected, of course, by Portugal's eastward expansion.

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In 1511, when the Portuguese defeated and conquered Malacca, Pahang made strategic allies with the Portuguese, as we've seen in Jorge's presentations.

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that this was a loose arrangement that shifted on, often depending on the geopolitics of the time, especially when the Dutch and British arrived.

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Hormuz island in the Persian Gulf, for example, was also conquered by the Portuguese and was only taken back with the help of the British.

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Again, this kind of British, Portuguese, Malaysia, Persia kind of thing going on here.

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So we do see some connections for both the Portuguese, for both Parang and

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the Iranians.

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I mean, this is something that I'm trying to sort of like try and find is how they were both kind of drawn together or had similar experience, maybe not necessarily drawn together, but had very similar experiences when it came to the Portuguese because they both had to form alliances with either the Dutch or the British to dislodge the Portuguese part of their region.

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I realized that this is just an overview and perhaps a little guide of how we can maybe

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form these links between Bahrain and the Persian Gulf and how we can sort of see Bahrain as part of this maritime sort of road and how it connects to the Middle East.

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This is not an exhaustive list, but I just hope that it kind of forms a bit of a basis for future research and maybe future conversations.

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So I take my leave now and I think that leaves us time for comments and a Q&A.

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Thank you very, very much for your time.

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Thank you, Rolina.