the emperor from below or from without to grasp power for themselves. If they were more ambitious, they might even attempt to dismantle the system altogether and replace it by another. Such a radical transformation, a break in the existing structure of relations, occurred when the VOC penetrated into the Sunda lands.

A treaty agreed in 1677 brought Mataram rule in Priangan to an end and the VOC now had absolute control of the region. The transfer of power was formalized in 1684, when the Priangan nobility was summoned to Cirebon to receive their new instructions. The region was parcelled out in separate units, each given in charge to a regent. This administrative demarcation underwent several changes until five units remained – Sumedang, Cianjur, Bandung, Limbangan and Sukapura. These divisions were established, abolished, split up and merged again, often more than once. One significant intervention was not to acknowledge the vassalage of the gentry in the hinterland to the ruler of Cirebon. The decision to retain the native chiefs was a result of both the low managerial capability of the VOC and the compelling need to keep administrative costs as low as possible. The exercise of power was however completely reorganized. Although the first generation of regents came from families who had previously held positions of eminence, it did not mean a continuation of the ancien régime.

Territorial demarcation and hierarchical structuring

The early style of governance excelled in arbitrariness and indifference, as can be seen in the unexpected changes in the number and size of the regencies and the refusal to treat the chiefs as anything other than convenient pawns. Even after they were appointed, the regents could not be at all sure that they would be allowed to stay and dismissal or transfer were frequent occurrences. But was this high-handedness not equally a feature of the earlier despotic rule? The same applied to the rules of succession. Whenever there was a vacancy, there was no guarantee that a successor would be designated from among the previous regent’s sons and it was not uncommon for an outsider to be chosen. The criterion for being appointed was not the length of the candidate’s lineage, but his proven or suspected loyalty and trust in representing the interests of the VOC. Who would have dared to claim that this was a new practice that violated the traditions and customs of the kingdom of Mataram, which had so recently been displaced? From 1704, the Company undertook to provide the regents with a letter of appointment, stipulating the regent’s tasks as a keeper of order and supplier
of products, but offering no great security of tenure. What seems at first sight to be a rather hasty and indifferent approach, with regents and regencies being designated haphazardly, was partly due to ignorance of the principles on which the indigenous power was exercised. If nothing else, it goes some way to explaining why the VOC found it so difficult to structure power relations to its own advantage. The regent families had no other choice than to accept the supreme right of the Company to appoint whoever it chose. After the death of the regent of Cianjur in 1707, for example, his eldest son travelled to Batavia to pay his respects (De Haan IV 1912: 346).

The advent of the VOC as the sole authority in the region represented a clear political break with the past in two respects. The first was that power was now based on territorial jurisdiction. The new regents held authority over all the inhabitants of their regencies and over them alone. This put a stop to the confusingly complex situation in which peasant households lived in a landscape with vague borders, and often had neighbours who were clients of another lord (see Breman 1979 and 1987a). It would take a long time for the new structure to materialize, but this slow impact – partly a consequence of the VOC’s strategy of not intervening in the internal affairs of the regencies – did not detract from the importance of the introduction of a form of governance based on territoriality.

The second break with the past was the imposition of a uniform hierarchy on the relationships between the new regents and their superiors in Batavia. An impression had been prematurely created that the direct predecessors of these regents owed unconditional obedience to the ultimate ruler: the emperor of Mataram, or the sultan of Cirebon or Banten. For various reasons, all the parties involved later acquiesced in this interpretation which, in my view, is incompatible with the ‘frontier’ nature of the Priangan highlands in the pre-colonial and early-colonial eras. Furthermore, large parts of the region would retain a multi-stranded character along lines of allegiance in different directions until deep into the nineteenth century.

Under the old regime, the power of individual chiefs varied considerably. Only a few were directly accountable to the far-off royal court. The others had to acknowledge them as their superiors on the basis of hierarchical gradations that were often invisible to the Company officials. As already observed, this confusing and ambiguous configuration soon came to an end. The gentry who were appointed to rule the newly formed territorial units were all given the same rank and title, that of regent. More importantly, the idea of Priangan as a region in which the exercise of power had already crystallized into a more or less fixed pattern by the time the VOC arrived requires correction. This erroneous perspective is based on a view of the
coastal hinterland not from the aft deck of a merchant ship – according to Van Leur, the perspective from which colonial history was written – but from the courtyard of the kraton, the royal palace. It was a distortion that not only had its origin in the babad, indigenous records, but also permeated the annals of the VOC. This should come as no surprise, as the Company’s chroniclers described indigenous structures on the basis of what they had been told by members of the aristocracy. It was very rare for them to make contacts beyond this received wisdom. In my view, however, the dynamics of power in Batavia’s hinterland largely focused around local heavyweights intent on improving their status despite having very little room to manoeuvre. To consolidate or extend their power bases they were forced to seek support from higher up, which often entailed them entering into temporary as well as variable alliances.

This contrasting interpretation also offers a different explanation for the stubborn resistance and continually changing coalitions that the VOC encountered during its slow penetration inland from its coastal enclave. Another development that received little attention was the change in the balance of religious power. When the Portuguese first visited the coast in 1522, they found no Muslim rulers, but this had already changed when they returned in 1526. Islam had started penetrating the hinterland from the north coast before the VOC followed suit, but its social advance is neglected in the colonial records. The explicit Islamic identity of the leaders of resistance movements that made life difficult for the VOC and its allies was an indication of shifts in the basic frame of society, the consequences of which can only be assessed from a long-term perspective. When analysing the resistance that the VOC encountered to its efforts to expand, one needs to bear in mind that the instigators did not always or automatically act on orders from above – the kraton of Mataram or the priestly dynasties in the harbour principalities – but were responding to the loss of their own room for manoeuvre and the abrogation of their local power. Furthermore, the rebels often did not belong to a well-established elite, who rightly felt their position threatened, but had simpler origins and, while attempting to gain greater prestige, found themselves caught up in a political maelstrom. Only later would it become clear whether they had chosen the right side and could claim favours from the new ruler or would be labelled ‘fanatical and mutinous zealots’ who were fair game to all comers.

In this early-colonial era, the VOC forced the Sundanese nobility to accommodate themselves to a structure of authority formed along territorial lines and with a hierarchical structure headed by a regent. Once established, the regency became in the course of time – in fact up to the moment when
indirect rule was abolished in 1871 – a much tighter straitjacket for the supra-local elite than the more fluid situation they had enjoyed during the pre-colonial era. The Priangan retained the character of a ‘frontier’ until deep into the nineteenth century. This was largely due to the fact that, when the VOC started to intrude into the highlands, the region was sparsely populated. Expeditions sent reports back of an inaccessible landscape of mountains and valleys, and of thick forests and marshes teeming with wildlife. Early travellers never failed to give special mention to tigers and rhinoceros, because of the threat they posed to people and crops. The few settlements comprised little more than a handful of peasant dwellings and a poverty-stricken habitat. Even the kota, the residence of the regent, had only a few hundred inhabitants, the majority of whom were the bupati’s family members and servants. The constant stream of guests who presented themselves at the dalem – later termed kraton – included minor chiefs who were also accompanied by their own retinues. But even with these temporary residents, the population of the settlement remained small in scale. It was a centre of political power in a rural environment from which it was hardly distinguishable. There was little or no communication between the separate regencies. Connecting roads were rare and, though simple carts were in use it was much more common for people to carry goods by buffalo or on their own head or shoulders. The simple technology limited both the volume of goods and the distance it could be transported.

The Priangan highlands as a frontier

Cultivation entitled rights to the land but, if a local lord had taken the initiative to open up the land and had perhaps help provide the means to do it – by for example, supplying food and tools while the land was being cleared and more general logistical support – he would claim a percentage of the yield. He would not take his share immediately, to give those tilling the land time to build up a reserve stock, but after some years. In addition, the lord himself owned fields – known as balubur – in the immediate vicinity of his residence, which were laid out and tilled by his clients. Sometimes such a notable figure had worked his way up through his own efforts, but the custom was for a local influential to be designated the peasant households falling under his jurisdiction by a superior. There was a long and complex chain of patronage that led right up to the highest power – the emperor or sultan, later succeeded by the VOC – and down through the regents and lower chiefs to the peasants who spent their lives in servitude. How this