

**THE ROLE OF SEVERAL MAJOR HARBOURS IN SUMATERA
ON THE MARITIME SILK ROUTE
BETWEEN THE SEVENTH AND SIXTEENTH CENTURIES**

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Indonesia

**The role of several major harbours
in Sumatera on the Maritime Silk Route between the seventh and sixteenth centuries.**

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I

A subject that I have selected to discuss for the Silk Routes Seminar theme of "Harbour Cities along the Silk Road" is that of the dynamics of ancient maritime society. It is understood that seafaring or shore-dwelling peoples form the largest population group in the Indonesian archipelago, a region which comprises literally thousands of islands. Due to their open geographical situation, these maritime folk were (by nature) the first to come into contact with foreigners and foreign influences. These people were therefore (naturally) those who were the first to undergo for outside influences, both in the mode of adoption of new ideas as well as in their openness to the adoption of new cultural practices.

It is thus clear that various aspects of acculturation took place through these ancient communities. A second characteristic of these ancient peoples was their orientation to an economic way of life through trade. They traded as they sailed from one harbour to another. Due to their openness, they were a dynamic society, for each of the harbours along their various routes competed with each other to sell their local products and to obtain trade goods. To achieve these ends, it became necessary to create monopolies for both import and export commodities.

Our history gives a picture of how, in former times, those who held authority over a harbour were, at certain times, able to expand that authority for their home port to become an important centre along a trade route which; however, later vanished or, became.- of no further importance. Their supremacy had been taken over by yet another harbour, due essentially to the control of a monopoly of trade goods. This situation is the result of the dynamic role of the ruling elite of the harbour concerned and their ability to maintain hegemony in the main harbours in their sphere of influence.

In this essay, I will review the various dynamic factors in the role of various major harbours in the waters of the *Selat Melaka* (Straits of Melaka), *Selat Sunda* (Straits of Sunda) and the west coast of Sumatra from the c7 to the c16 CE. During the initial phase, between the c7 and c13 of this period, the rulers of *Sriwijaya* maintained hegemony over sailing and trade in the waters of the *Selat Melaka*, *Selat Sunda* and the Indian Ocean. During the second phase,

between c14 to c16, it was the Islamic rulers of Samudera-Pasai and *Aceh, Melaka* and *Banten* who controlled these waters.

The *Selat Melaka* occupies a key role and is of prime importance in maritime history as an important sailing and trade route for merchants travelling between the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean and south China. It became the gateway for western merchants to enter southeast and eastern Asian waters and became the thoroughfare for by the maritime Silk Route. During the above mentioned first phase of contact between east and west, from the beginnings of the Christian era until the c16, silk was an important commodity brought from China to be traded in other regions.

To review the role of various harbours of *Sumatera* and West Java (*Banten*) as ports of call for shippers and traders en route through the *Selat Melaka, Selat Sunda* and the Indian Ocean we will see the role of the rulers of *Nusantara* and how they managed to control the route through the *Selat Melaka* and *Selat Sunda* to achieve economic hegemony and to control traders who passed through the area between the c7 and c16.

II

Sriwijaya: Its role and control of harbours in the Selat Melaka and Selat Sunda.

Historical records and archaeological evidence bear witness to a steady increase in sailing and trade in the *Selat Melaka, Selat Sunda* and the Indian Ocean and the role of harbours in these areas from the first century of the Christian era onward. Archaeological evidence in the form of Romanic Rouletted ware in the *Buni* area of West Java (and the north coast of Bali) dates from the first centuries of the Christian era. This gives an indication of relations with the western world, from Europe, South and Central Asia through the archipelago of *Nusantara* as a route from west to east through the Indian Ocean and the *Selat Melaka*. The discovery of Romanic Rouletted pottery in West Java calls one's attention to the possible role of the *Selat Sunda* as a route for trade along the west coast of *Sumatera* and thence to the *Selat Melaka* and to China.

Claudius Ptolomeus during the c2 to 3 CE notes several possible Indonesian toponyms in his map *Periplous Maris Erytraea*, in particular those in the region of the *Selat Sunda*. Arab reports of the c6 to c11 and Chinese writings of the c6 to c10 are full of information regarding rulers or polities in the region of *Sumatera* and *Jawa* (Java) and more

importantly, the names of harbours where merchant shipping and travelers going to or coming from China called, such as Palembang on the Musi River in southeastern Sumatra.

Taking into account archaeological discoveries from ancient port sites in *Sumatera* and Banten, we possess comparative data for assessing reports in foreign sources, especially those of the Arabs and Chinese. If one compares records of the c10 with those of later centuries, the period of the c5 to c10 does not yet show any major expansion of trade compared with the rapid expansion in the c10 and later period.

This information is in line with archaeological discoveries from ancient sites in Sumatra and west Java relating to trade goods from China which are less frequent and less concentrated than recoveries from the second phase. It is true that there have been a few discoveries of fragments of Han period Chinese ceramics datable to the c3 CE, in particular fragments found in Kerinci in the Ulu Batang Hari area of Jambi which are now in the National Museum collection in Jakarta.

Ceramic recoveries from Palembang and the Jambi area include sherds of Chinese ceramics from the Tang period (c7-c8 CE) in relatively small numbers. This evidence from ancient port sites in Sumatra would tend to confirm Chinese written records which indicate that overseas trade expanded in the Song period (c10-c12).

With regard to the existence of Sriwijaya in historical record the question arose as to whether Sriwijaya was the name of a ruler or of a polity. Further investigation into the problem, such as the *Kedukan Bukit* inscription from Palembang, resulted in the opinion that Sriwijaya was the name of a polity. Now the existence of Sriwijaya is established not only from foreign records but by archaeological evidence, the most important of which is from *Sumatera*. The city of Palembang is one area in particular which has yielded finds of archaeological remains of Sriwijaya.

A number of inscriptions discovered in the Palembang area, including the *Kedukan Bukit* inscription found to the west of Palembang and the *Telaga Batu* or *Sabokingking* inscription from 3 Ilir in east Palembang give indications of the formation and state of Sriwijaya. The *Kedukan Bukit* inscription announces that in the year Saka 605, in a date equivalent to 16 June 682 CE, Dapunta Hyang, the *Datuk* or ruler of Sriwijaya, together with his followers established the settlement (*wanua*) of Sriwijaya. This settlement eventually expanded into a *kota* or town.

In the *Telaga Batu* inscription it is stated that high officers of the state, traders and key administrative officers such as naval captains and army commanders of the polity were present. Many offices are mentioned which would only be found at the centre of a polity and

include sons of kings, army commanders, confidants, judges, and governors of provinces and minor officials such as clerks, surveyors, palace cleaners and dhobi or washermen.

In several locations in and around Palembang are concentrations of surface finds of ceramic sherds which cover wide areas. Among these are Talang Kikim, Bukit Seguntang, Ladangsirap, Karanganyar, Lorong Jambu, Kembang Unglen and also finds from beneath the Museum Badaruddin, the former Dutch Residency of Palembang. These ceramic finds cover a wide range of material dating from the Tang period (c8-c10) to the period of the Dutch occupation (c16-c19).

The earliest of these finds from the ca and up to the c13, i.e., from the Tang to the Song periods can be related to the existence of Sriwijaya and have been found at all the above sites. At Talang Kikim, Ladangsirap, Bukit Seguntang and Karanganyar most of the recoveries relate to the Tang period. This reinforces the evidence that these sites were occupied during the period from the ca to c10.

Written evidence relating to the use of shipping as a means of transport during the Sriwijayan period is given in the *Kedukan Bukit* inscription, and in Arab and Chinese sources. More importantly, archaeological evidence of boat remains have been discovered from the period of expansion of Sriwijaya. In and around the city of Palembang have been found no less than the remains of four ancient ships at three different sites, at Kolam Pinisi (1989) and at Sungai Buah and Samirejo (1988). Based on results of research at these sites we now know that the construction techniques used for the boats at Kolam Pinisi and Samirejo was the sewn-plank and lash-lug technique. This frame construction technique developed in Southeast Asia and has been called the Southeast Asian technical tradition.

The most recent discoveries of examples in this tradition have been found at *Desa Samirejo, Kecamatan Mariana, Kabupaten Musi Banyasin*. The remains comprised nine wooden planks and a wooden *kemudi* or rudder. Based on C14 laboratory analysis, the remains of the *Perahu* at *Desa Samirejo* may be dated to the period 610-775 CE (Bambang Budi Utomo et al: 1990, 4-7).

Apart from Palembang there are other sites which can be linked with the role of an important harbour on the trade routes. One such site is Banten Girang in the Serang area of West Java which dates from ca to c15 CE. Banten was an important harbour on the *Teluk Banten* or Bay of Banten at the northeastern end of the *Selat Sunda*. Archaeological research has revealed numerous discoveries of items of trade including imported Chinese cash. Recoveries in archaeological excavations at Banten Girang between 1979 and 1990 include

recoveries of Chinese ceramics of the ca to c14, Thai ceramics of the c12-c14, Chinese coins of the c7-c14, beads and other items (Laporan Penelitian Banten Girang 1989).

Recoveries of imported goods from Banten Girang remind one of the roles of Banten as an important harbour on the route through the *Selat Sunda* during the period c7 to c14 and of the Islamic Sultanate of Banten in the c16 to c17.

Yet another ancient harbour of great importance was that of Barus on the west coast of *Sumatera*. Barus was known as an ancient harbour named Barousai by Ptolomeus during the first centuries CE. Among items of trade recovered at Barus are Chinese ceramics, beads and coins, and c12-c14 glass (probably from the Middle East] (Hasan Ambary 1979). Considering the intensity of recoveries at the Barus sites, one can no longer deny the importance of the waters of the west coast of Sumatra in the trade world of Southeast Asia. It has to be remembered, however, that the development of Barus did not take place in isolation but was due to a gradual development and the growth in importance of this sailing route in spite of the distance and the longer time taken by traders and the more difficult sailing conditions in western Sumatran waters.

As has been set out above, Barus was an extremely important harbour in the early centuries of the Christian era. To reach this particular destination was more difficult and less efficient in sailing time than to reach other harbours on the route through the *Selat Melaka*. But considering that Barus was the sole source of *kapur baros* which was *in* great demand by traders *in* ancient times, the west coast waters of Sumatra became an alternative route to the *Selat Melaka* before ships reached the *Selat Sunda*, from where they could proceed to the islands of the eastern archipelago and to China.

On the west coast of Sumatera, other important ports such as that at Singkel eventually developed in addition to Barus. As harbours, however, none of these achieved the same measure of importance as those on the southeast coast of Sumatra. This was because there was no system of continuation of authority which was actually required in an emporium. The lack of spatial or distributive archaeological data reinforces the assumption that harbours did not develop in these waters until in later centuries.

III

There are two important harbour sites on the east coast of Sumatera which date from c12 to c14. These are the riverine harbour complex below Muara Jambi on the Batang Hari in Jambi province and Kota Cina near Belawan Deli in northeastern Sumatera. At these sites there have been numerous recoveries of trade goods including ceramics and coins.

At Muara Jambi the most common finds are Chinese ceramics from the period c10-c14. At Kota Cina the most common finds are Chinese ceramics from c12 to c14 and glass from India and the Middle East.

Archaeological evidence of ceramics and other items from ancient harbour sites on the east coast of *Sumatra* such as Palembang, Jambi, Kota Cina date from the c7 to the c14. Finds at Barus date from c11 to c14, whilst at Banten Girang on the north coast of Sunda, finds date from the c8 to c16. From this we can see the role of harbours in former times as major ports of call for foreign merchants bringing exotic goods to sell or in exchange for indigenous products.

From Chinese historical geographical records of the Tang, Song and Yuan dynasties, *i.e.*, from c7 to c14, there is much information relating to trade commodities *inter alia*, damar or resins, kapur bares (camphor), dyestuffs, animals and animal products etc.

One important factor from Chinese records which was linked with those who held authority or ruled over the Selat Malaka was related to whoever sent missions to China and presented gifts to the Emperor. These records mention the ruler of Sriwijaya, (which is first mentioned as Che-li-fo-tse and later San-fo-tsi). Such missions were rewarded with gifts from the Emperor in return, comprising items such as silks, ceramics and other goods.

The Chinese records provide evidence that in acknowledging the ruler of Sriwijaya and receiving the mission, the Ruler or Raja of Sriwijaya was acknowledged as being in authority to control the trade route and monopolise trade in the *Selat Melaka*. In later times, however, according to another source, also from China, that is the information contained in the Yuan chronicles, it is mentioned that at the end of the c13 CE, *i.e.* from about 1275, it was the ruler of *Samudera-Pasai* who then sent missions to China and no longer the ruler of San-fo-tsi who was received by the Emperor.

From the end of the c14, there had been a transfer of power from the ruler of Sriwijaya to the new Islamic rulers. As is already known, from the end of the c13, the polity of *Samudera-Pasai* had already adopted Islam and from that time on, Chinese sources noted that it was no longer Sriwijaya but *Samudera-Pasai* which was sending missions to China.

The appearance of *Samudera-Pasai* at the end of the c13 marked a change in the pattern of trade on the east coast of *Sumatera* as trade in the *Selat Melaka* increased with the presence of Islamic merchants and the establishment of Muslim merchant colonies in the east coast harbour settlements. Islamic polities were located in most strategic positions, thus they were able to become gateway cities to China and the islands of the archipelago. The supremacy of *Samudera-Pasai* was overtaken by its subjugation by *Aceh Darussalam*, which,

once it had established its authority, was able to dominate several important harbours on the *Selat Melaka*.

At this time, the west coast of *Sumatera* became a sailing route for Islamic traders who were heading for the islands of the archipelago or China through the *Selat Sunda*. The *Selat Sunda* became so important in economic developments at this time that the rulers of Java, based on Demak, took over Banten and effected the subjugation of *Ban ten Girang* which, at that time, still adhered to its Hindu faith. The Javanese from Demak established the Sultanate of Banten in order to coerce trade from the harbours of *Sumatera* into Javanese waters and to the port of Banten.

IV

Most of the major harbours in the period c7 to c16 CE were located at or near the mouths of rivers which were on the major sailing routes of the trading *perahu*. As these harbours developed, so did the political system which enabled them to control both local and inter-island trade transactions as well as inter-regional trade. The appearance of major harbours on the east and west coasts of *Sumatera* transformed the *Selat Melaka* into the major Southeast Asian trade route linking China and the east with western waters. Among these were the harbours of-Sriwijaya, the riverine ports of the Batang Hari below Muara Jambi, Kota Cina, Barus and Singkel. These harbours were originally able to engage in free trade in the sale of various commodities with other regions but owing to the dynamic nature of the maritime peoples who lived predominantly from trade, it was possible for the development of competition between the various local rulers.

This development was possible due to those with greater authority being able to effect the subjugation of those harbours which were under lesser chiefs and so create a trade monopoly on certain major commodities which were required by foreign traders. With the authority of the ruler to direct the course of events, the harbour played a most important role in the rise and fall of the polity. This role was greater as a result of the monopoly established on various commodities as foreign or other regional traders were obliged to call on to that particular harbour, even though certain commodities could be obtained at other places or in smaller harbours. The development of major harbours in the *Selat Melaka*, *Selat Sunda* and the Indian Ocean during the period between the c7 to the c16 CE created a major sailing route with the trading world of the Southeast Asian region.

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