

Foreign Documents And The Descriptions Of

Melaka Between A.D. 1505-1511.

Yahaya Abu Bakar

Department of History

National University of Malaysia

The paper aims to highlight the impressions of Melaka as seen from selected foreign documents covering the period between 1505-1511 A. D. The paper shows that while some of the information derived from the sources confirmed the position of Melaka as an important centre of trade, they also contain certain elements which may throw new light on the study of the Malaka Sultanate. To provide the necessary background, a general survey of the Malaka Sultanate in the 15th century will also be included.

The importance and the complimentary role of the local sources to the foreign documents for the reconstruction of the Helaka history (from A.D. 1400-1511) has already been discussed elsewhere¹. Even though Melaka was not the first state to be established in the Malay Peninsula, its emergence in the early 15th century, its subsequent promotion to the position of a city and kingdom, and its role as a trading emporia were well recorded by the Malay and foreign sources. Among the most well-known sources on Melaka are the following: the Chinese sources, (Ming-Shih, Ming Shih-lu, Ying Yai Sheng-lan, Hsing-cha cheng-lan, etc.); the Arab-Persian documents including the description by Ahmad Idn Majid; the Ryukyuan sources; and, naturally; the Indian and Portuguese sources on the Sultanate.

Whereas the pre-Malakan period in Malaysian history is often marked by the obvious lack of concrete written historical data, the Melaka Sultanate, on the other hand, has plentiful recorded documents. This has made possible the reconstruction of history of the Malay Peninsula during that period with some degree of certainty. Hence, it is no exaggeration to say that the period of Melaka represents the golden age of Malay history, a landmark in the evolution of modern Malaysian history².

¹ For further discussion, see for instance, B. W. Andaya and L. Y. Adaya, *A History of Malaysia*, MacMillan Asian Histories Series, Hong Kong, 1982, pp. 5-36. Also, P. Wheatley, *The Golden Khersonese*, University Malaya Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1966.

² P. Wheatley, *The Impressions of the Malay Peninsula in Ancient Times*, Eastern University Press, Singapore, 1964, pp. 119-176.

Before we venture any further into the impressions of Melaka as seen from foreign documents (A.D. 1505-1511), perhaps it is worthwhile to consider some of the fundamental aspects of the Sultanate, especially in the 15th century A.D. The accounts at our disposal, both eastern and western source alike, have described quite vividly the position of the Sultanate as a political power of great importance with its far flung territories. Never before in the history of the Malay Peninsula, had there emerged a kingdom such as Melaka that was capable of controlling practically the whole of the Peninsula as well as many parts of the eastern coast of Sumatra, (Rokan, Siak, Kampar, Indragiri, Aru, etc.) and numerous islands in the Riau-Lingga Archipelago.³ Melaka emerged at the most opportune time in the history of the archipelago and in terms of the international scene.

The desire of the foreign traders to enjoy conducive trading conditions along the vital sea-lane across the Selat Melaka and the closure of the caravan route by Temerlane in 1398 A.D., were two major factors which contributed significantly to Melaka's importance. On the mainland of the Malay Peninsula, other ports such as Kedah, Kuala Brang (Fo-lo-an), Takuapa or even Bruas had faded into insignificance as a result of Melaka's economic and political ascendancy. In Java, Majapahit was no longer a power to be reckoned with by the third quarter of the 15th century. Samudra-Pasai, on the other hand, only temporarily enjoyed supremacy in Sumatra; its commercial interest was quickly taken over by Melaka. Accounts of Samudra-Pasai's decline have been recorded by Portuguese writers.⁴ As to the threat from the north, namely Siam, Melaka's close diplomatic and commercial interests with China served as deterrents against that Buddhist power for many decades. By the middle of the 15th century, Melaka was already strong enough to defend itself against Siamese attacks.⁵

Melaka's strategic location in the Strait destined it to receive ships from many directions. Its ability to capitalize on its conveniently placed location and on the trading experiences of the earlier kingdoms in the Malay Peninsula enabled it to control both the regional and international trade in the Malay Archipelago. Melaka was indeed the heir to the commercial power once firmly established by Srivijaya, a new centre of a cosmopolitan society, and a cultural melting pot.⁶ In short, Melaka's rapidly expanding volume of trade, effective administrative structure, safe anchorage, and reasonable taxation system, ensured

³ Ibid.

⁴ See for instance, A. Cortesao (ed.). *Suma Oriental of Tome Pires*, Vol. I and II, Hakluyt Society, London, 1944. Also, M.A.P. Meilink Roelofs, *Asian Trade and European Influences, A.D. 1500-1630*, The Hague Martinus Nijhoff, 1962.

⁵ See, Nik Hassan and Yahaya Abu Bakar, « Melaka As a Historic City », in JEBAT, Bil. No. 15, 1987, p. 106.

⁶ Ibid., p. 109

that it became a fabulously wealthy entrepot in the 15th and early 16th centuries. At the height of its commercial activity, Melaka in the words of Barbosa, was the richest port with the greatest number of wholesale merchants and with most shipping and trading activities.”⁷ In Melaka, the opposing monsoon winds met. Into the port of Melaka flowed fine and highly priced merchandise from all over East, which were exchanged with goods from the West. Melaka, Aden and Hormuz, the Portuguese were to realize in 1498 A.D., were the three principal ports for the collection and distribution of luxury goods, including spices, which were subsequently transported to Europe via the Levant.⁸

In essence, Melaka was a mercantile kingdom in which the revenue from trade, including taxes, formed the significant portion of the state income. The most important aspect of trading activity in Melaka was the exchange of Indian piece-goods, Chinese products for the spices, aromatics dyewoods, and medicinal herbs from this region. As was the common practice in Sriwijaya, the Melaka ruling family and the principal dignitaries were known to have participated actively in trade. For instance, the fortune of Sultan Alauddin Riayat Syah, who died in 1488 was estimated at 140 quintals of gold, while the Benahara Sri Manaraja was reported to have owned many bahars of gold.⁹ Apart from the Sultans, their relatives or subjects, such as the Kings of Pahang, Kampar and Indragiri, also took part in Melaka’s trade. By virtue of his position as a supreme ruler of the kingdom, the Sultan could also command the services of the rakyat through kerah on royal works. In addition, he could enslave war captives or force his vassals to pay tribute in tin or gold. The income of the Sultan was also derived from dues on licences, from sales of land and ships, and even from the fines imposed on offenders. Besides, he also claimed half of the property of deceased persons, and all of the estate, if the deceased persons left no will.

Melaka was also known to have formulated a preferential taxation system based on certain priorities. For example, the importation of foodstuffs into the state was encouraged and almost duty-free. A basic 6% import duty on foreign trade based on the volume of cargo was levied, besides an additional charge of between 1% to 2% in the form of “presents” to be paid by traders of West Asia, India, Ceylon, Pegu and Siam. South-East Asian traders, however, were required to pay a minimal sum I.E. the gifts, when importing foodstuffs to

⁷ M. L. Dames (ed.), *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, Hakluyt Society, London, 1918, p. 175.

⁸ W. D. G. Birch, (tr.), *The Commentaries of the Great Affonso Dalbouquerque*, Vol. III, No. LXII, Hakluyt Society, London, 1880, p. 75.

⁹ See, J. F. Cady, *Southeast Asia, Its Historical Development*, McGraw Publishing Company Limited, New Delhi, 1976, p. 157

Melaka. The traders from the territories East of Melaka, including China and Ryukyu, were charged about 5% duty based on the value of their cargo.¹⁰

It was also a practice in Melaka at that time to levy duties on shippers from the east to the west. Nevertheless, a 1% weightage fee was imposed by the port authority for the incoming and outgoing merchandise in Melaka. In order to encourage the population growth in Melaka, the Sultan also welcomed foreigners who wished to settle there. Foreign merchants from the regions “above the winds”, i.e. the West, who wished to settle permanently in Melaka had to pay 3% duty together with another 6% of royal tax, while the Malays from outlying areas (the Archipelago) had to pay only 3% pf royal tax.

Besides the international trade, dues were collected on domestic trade. The domestic tax was fixed at around 3%, together with the levy on local food sales. These taxes formed a substantial contribution to the royal coffer. The rulers, in turn, used their income to build palaces and mosques, to bestow the anugerah, to maintain their courts in great splendor, and of course, to upkeep the town and port of Melaka.¹¹ Besides the barter system as a mean to facilitate trade, tin coinage was circulated in Melaka. Foreign coins from Cambay, Hormuz, and Pase and possibly also Chinese cash, together with standard weights (kati, trahil bahara; etc.) and measurements (hasta, gantang, etc.) served to generate the growth of Melaka’s trade.¹²

Melaka's trading importance also attracted the influx of many foreign merchants who congregated in the town. The original Malay population and the Cellates, in due course, became mixed with a great many foreign elements, including the Arah-Persian, Klings, Bengali, Gujeratis and the Chinese. Thus, it is not surprising that even the Melakan army consisted of Malays, Javanese, Bugis, Cellates, Minangkabaus, Turks and Armenians.¹³ As depicted by the written sources, in Melaka the local population and the foreign traders lived in separate residential quarters. In this connection, Tome Pires and Eredia speak of Bazaar Jawa, Kampung Kling, Kampung Pasai, and Bukit China. In the northern region of Sungai Melaka, there was an area called Upeh which was divided into two sections. In this particular area, the

¹⁰ Meilink Roelofs, *Asian Trade*, pp. 42-45.

¹¹ J. F. Cady, *Southeast Asia*, p. 157.

¹² See, Muhd. Yusof Hashim, « Undang-Undang Pada Masa Kesultanan Melaka 1400-1511 », in *Dokumentasi Seminar Sejarah Melaka*, published by Kerajaan Negeri Melaka, 1983, pp. 58-59. Also, L. Y. Fand, “Undang-Undang Melaka” in K. S. Sandhu and P. Wheatley (eds.), *Melaka, Transformation of A MalayCapital*, Vol. I, 1980, pp. 180-194.

¹³ For a detail discussion on this issue, see, R.W. McRoberts, « The examination of the Fall of Melaka », *JMBRAS* Vol. LVII, Pt. I, p. 32.

people from northwestern Asia, the Chinese, Javanese (Tuban, Japara) and the Malays of Palembang settled themselves. On the other hand, the Javanese of Grisek lived in the district of Ilir which represented the southern part of the Melaka River. Besides Upeh and Ilir, another district known as Sabak was the area in which most of the local population concentrated while the Cellates were to be found in the coastal, marshy and swampy lowlands. So mixed and varied was the population of Melaka, that eighty-four distinctive languages (perhaps including various dialects), reportedly were spoken there.¹⁴

Among other important factors for the development of trade were Melaka's safety, features in its edicts, and its efficient administration. Since the writings on Melaka have already discussed at length these issues, they will not be repeated here.¹⁵ Suffice it to say that Melaka had a well-defined and organized government with a developed administrative hierarchy. At the apex of Melaka's political fortune, its ruler enjoyed the almost unquestionable loyalty of his subjects. His power and authority were based on the concept of genealogy (the Iskandar element) and on doctrines such as daulat, derhaka, and tulah. These concepts of state and kingship were at first influenced by the Hindu-Buddhist elements.

Nevertheless, with the arrival of Islam, new values were observed and Islam became the popular religion of the state. As a result, the Hindu-Buddhist concept of kingship (devaraja, dharma, rytha), underwent a significant erosion and was replaced by Islam. Thus, the elements of Svariah and Islamic values such as justice, equality, humanitarianism, protection, consultation, etc were certainly known, if not fully practiced. As to the day-to-day affairs of the state, state, such the Sultans were assisted by principal dignitaries, such as the Bendahara, Temenggung, Penghulu Bendahari, Svahbandar and Laksamana.¹⁶ Their duties and functions were clearly explained in the Hukum Kanun Melaka, and, to a certain extent, in the Undang-undang Laut Melaka, the earliest known codified legal system in this part of the world.

At the height of its commercial activity, Melaka is reported to have had four different Syahbandars to manage the affairs of the various foreign trading communities in the port.¹⁷ In furtherance of commercial interest, Melaka was also noted for cultivating extensive diplomatic relations with many countries in Southeast and West Asia, and with China, the

¹⁴ See, Nik Hassan and Yahaya Abu Bakar, « Melaka as a historic City », p. 107.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ P. Wheatley, *The Malay Peninsula*, pp. 155-157. Also, Zainal Abidin A. Wahid (ed.), *The Glimpses of Malaysian History*, D. B. P., Kuala Lumpur, 1970, pp. 20-21.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Ryukyu Island and, India. By the middle of the 15th century, the name of Melaka became famous and synonymous with the Malay Peninsula. Tome Pires wrote in his *Suma Oriental*, that Sultan Mudzaffar Syah was so famous “that he had messages and presents from the Kings of Aden, Ormuz and Cambay, and Bengal, and they sent many merchants from their regions to live in Melaka...”.¹⁸

The importance of Melaka in Malay history certainly did not rest solely on its elaborate political system or territorial possessions, but more so on its trade, cultural contacts, and its position as a venue for dialogues and encounters. All these factors culminated in its rise as a lasting civilization. With the rise of Melaka, the Islamic faith entered the kingdom and quickly undermined the Hindu-Buddhist elements which had become common features in many of the pre 15th Indianized States of Southeast Asia”. Melaka, in its heyday, was considered as a headquarters for the spread of Islam in the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago, a role previously assumed by Samudra-Pasai and Trengganu.¹⁹ Melaka’s trading connection and its political sphere of influence enabled Islam to spread into vast territories, covering the Malay Peninsula, Jawa, Maluku, Banda in the spices island and the Southern Philippines.²⁰

Melaka was also acknowledged for its role as a centre for the teaching of Islamic culture, literature, mysticism and law. The Istana, the mosque and the residence of the ulamaks were instrumental in disseminating the teaching of Islam. Melaka was at one time considered as the 'right Mecca'. The choice of the Malay language, a lingua franca of the day, as a medium to propagate the religion, considerably quickened the process of Islamization in the Malay World. It was Islam that introduced, in Trengganu and later in Melaka, the huruf Jawi which gave impetus to the development of Malay literature, leading to the writing of *Sejarah Melayu*, *Hukums* and the *Hikayats*. Besides the Al-Quran, and Al-Hadiths, Islam was also responsible for introducing literary work such as the *Hikayat Muhammad Ali Hanafiah*, the *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* and the *Kitab Durul Manzum*, into the Sultanate.²¹ It is equally noteworthy that Islam also promoted the use of the Muslim calendar in Melaka. Last but not least, the fact that Islam is now professed by the majority of Malaysians is strong evidence of the historical heritage bequeathed by Melaka.

¹⁸ A. Cortesao (ed.), *Suma Oriental*, p. 245.

¹⁹ Nik Hassan and Yahaya Abu Bakar, « Melaka as a historic City », p. 109.

²⁰ C. A. Majul, « Theories of the Introduction and Expansion of Islam in Malaysia », *Siliman Journal Fourth Quarter*, 1964, p. 334.

²¹ Nik Hassan and Yahaya Abu Bakar, « Melaka as a historic City », p. 110

Having discussed the basic features of the Sultanate, let us now turn our attention to the fundamental issue of this study, ie., the content and direction of the foreign documents and their descriptions of Melaka between the years A.D. 1505 to 1511. Several basic and interrelated questions need to be answered. First of all, what are these sources and what are their origins and contents? Second, to what extent do these sources help to illuminate the history of Melaka, and how do they differ significantly from the local sources, in particular the Malay Hikayat. Finally, do they shed any new elements for the study of the Melaka Sultanate? Owing to the limitations of time and space, these pressing issues will be treated as a whole rather than separately.

Among the foreign documents which are extremely useful to the description of the Melaka's history in this period are as follows: The two regimentos (ordinances) of King Manuel of Portugal dated 5th March, 1505 and another one believed to be done before 6th of April, 1506, A.D. Besides, another interesting element on Melaka, contained in the personal experience of Ludivico Varthema, who claimed to have visited the port in the year of 1506 A.D. These coupled with the accounts in the Ming-Shih, Book 325, and a series of diplomatic communications between Melaka and Ryukyu, formed the basis of our discussion. Our next important foreign element on the Melaka's past appeared also in the account of De Sequeira's Voyage to Melaka in 1509, A. D. based on the anonymous codex in the British Museum (Ederton, 20901, which the present writer had the opportunity to analyse recently. The letter of Rui Aroujo and his companions dated 6 Feb 1510, written from Melaka and addressed to Albuquerque in Goa India also became an important document for our research. Last but not least, a significant portion from the Lettera Di Giovanni da Empoli in relation to the description of the Melaka port, before the Portuguese conquest in 1511, A. D. also represented an important element to this study.²²

The contents of the foreign documents especially in relation to the importance of Melaka as a commercial centre somewhat did not differ greatly from the account in Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annal). For instance in the Sejarah Melayu, Melaka was described as follows;

“The city of Melaka at that time flourished exceedingly, and many foreigners resorted thither..... such was the greatness of Melaka at that time, in the city alone there were a

²² See Yahaya Abu Bakar, « In Search of the Flor de la Mar : An Old question, New Issues”, History Department, UKM, 1989.

hundred and ninety thousand people, to say nothing of the inhabitants of the outlying territories and coastal districts.”²³

Varthema who claimed to visit Melaka in 1506 A.D. had this to say about the port;

“truly I believed, that more ships arrived here than any other place in the world, and especially there came here all sorts of spices and an immense quantity of other merchandise”.²⁴

Two more description of Melaka’s trade based on personal observation came to light first by Rui Aroujo and the next one from Giovanni da Empoli. Aroujo’s long letter which was smuggled out from Melaka explained in detail the account on Melaka’s trade. At any time he wrote, between 90 and 100 junks (juncos), big and small, and some 150 praos (prahus) entered the port. It was also known according to him that between 30 junks and some more prahus belonged to the king of Melaka and native merchants. Nevertheless, they were in the ‘unhealthy state of maintainance’. Of the many foreign traders, who flocked to Melaka, he cited os gores (the Ryukyuan), os chins, (the Chinese), os de Jawa (the Javanese), os bengalas (the Bengalis), os de Pegu (the Peguan) and os guzerates (the Gujeratis), which were the principal parties. He also touched on the items traded and exchanged by those merchants in Melaka, as well as their time of arrival and departure.²⁵

As to the question of habitation and settlement around Melaka port, Hroujo made known to us that here, one can possibly see at least 10, 000 houses which were situated along the coast and the river of Melaka. This description of Melaka is further enhanced by Giovanni who among other things mentioned;

“the town is situated near the sea-shore and thickly strewn with houses and rooms, and it stretches for three leagues which is most beautiful to see”.²⁶

The above sources, unfortunately for us, do not provide details about the Malay houses at that time. For these details, we need to refer to the earlier Chinese documents of the 15th century which provide a glimpse into the settlements of the local inhabitants. According to these Chinese sources the Malay "houses are raised on one-storey platforms and lack a layer

²³ C. C. Brown (tr.), *Sejarah Melayu, The Malay Annals*, Oup, Hong Kong 1976, p. 151.

²⁴ See, Sir Carnac Templs, *The Itenary of Ludocivo Varthema of Bologna from 1502 to 1506*, The Arganout Press, London, 1928, p.84.

²⁵ See Yahaya Abu Bakar, “In Search of the Flor de la Mar”, pp. 22-24.

²⁶ See, A. Bausani, *Lettera di Giovanni da Empoli*, Roma, 1970, p. 132.

of planks (against the ground), but a floor of split coconut - palms is erected and lashed with rattan - exactly as if it were a sheep-pen at the height of about four-feet".²⁷

The meetings between foreign traders from far away lands in the port of Melaka also represent the next important element of Melaka's history during this period. The account of De Sequeira's voyage of 1509 has made clear to us that throughout a day many ships traded in Melaka. This Portuguese account also recorded with great interest; the story of a young Malaysian aged about twenty years old and the son of a wealthy nakhoda. This very well-dressed man (*de hua camisa azul de seda, com a botoadura douro*), who had a kris inlaid with gold and precious stones, offered to sell cloves to the Portuguese. This same source also touched on the first meeting between the Portuguese and the Chinese in the port of Melaka. The impressions of the Portuguese about the Chinese were recorded in much a detail this particular document. At one stage, the Portuguese were invited to wine and dine on board one of the Chinese junks, amidst the sound of drums and trumpets. The Portuguese subsequently recorded that they were also offered kinds of dishes, including chicken, goose, roasted and fried pork together with honey and fresh fruits.

Another matter of equal importance which should not escape our attention is the extensive diplomatic relations between Melaka and foreign countries. On the basis of the foreign documents between the years 1505 to 1511, this particular aspect emerged even clearer. The Ryukyu document, dated 2nd of September 1509, for instance, has revealed to us that its Chief Envoy Kamadu, Interpreter Ko Ken and 150 personnel and crew were sent to Melaka. They were instructed to forge a closer relationship between the two countries, and "to purchase such products as sappanwood and pepper, through mutually satisfactory arrangements".²⁸ The Chinese account in the Ming-Shih Book 325, on the other hand, has mentioned about the sending of a Melaka – envoy, Tuan Hadji, to China together with an interpreter.

For reasons of trade and commerce, Melaka, of course, was too important to escape the attention of the Portuguese monarch. By 1504 at the latest, much detailed information on Melaka had already flowed to Lisboa. In his regimento dated 5 March, 1505, the Portuguese King urged his viceroy (Almeida) in India to send an expedition to Melaka to forge Trade and diplomatic relation. From India, Almeida in turn, reported to his king about the Muslim

²⁷ See, Harry Benda and John Larkin (eds.), *The World of S. East Asia, Selected Historical Readings*, Harper and Row Limited, N. York, 1967, p. 16.

²⁸ A. Kobata, M. Matsuda, *Ryukyuan Relations with Korea and Southern Sea Countries*, 1969, p. 123.

traders who navigated in the Malay Archipelago and who bought large quantities of spices from Melaka for sale in Venice. The strategic importance of Melaka within estado da India is again highlighted in the regimento which is believed to have been written on the 6th of April, 1506. At this time, not only the Portuguese but also the Spanish were very interested in navigating to Melaka.

It was in this same document that one fundamental interesting question on Melaka was raised by the Portuguese King. Owing to the interesting element contained in this document we are obliged to quote that document in full. The Portuguese King insisted on knowing the following;

..... das cousas daguelas partes, a saber: das riquezas e proveyto della, e da grandeza da terra, e de quem he senhoreada, e de que senhoryo sam, e parte hythem os mouros, e que jeemtes outras ha na terra, e com quem tem trouto, e do que vale mais, de mercadaryas das de ca; e quaes sam os milhores mercadaryas de la, e os precos dellas, ... e como armadas, ... e se ha hy muytas naos da terra...”

The foreign documents on Melaka for the years 1505-1506, are also useful for giving us the information on the nature of the Sultanate as it approached its final five years before its fall up the Portuguese. The Malays of Melaka certainly possessed cannons and other weapons, such as “lancas, e algumas espadas, que vem de gores e outas que se fazem na terra”, e arcos e zabaratanas”. But, as Aroujo has made known to us, there occurred in Melaka a serious shortage of gunpowder, so much so that the Portuguese captives were forced to manufacture this essential commodity. He went on to say that the king of Melaka had limited support at his disposal. Only the King of Pahang whose subjects were not many would support him. Besides, Melaka in 1510 was also not on good terms with Aru and Siam. The fact that law and orders in Melaka were not fully enforced were also mentioned by Varthema as early as 1506. Even the orang-laut cellates, who were known for their loyalty to the Melaka King, threatened to leave Melaka. The descriptions in Sejarah Melayu also confirmed to a certain extent, the worsening conditions in Melaka before the Portuguese conquest.

Conclusion

The foreign documents as well as the local documents form the important basis for an understanding of Melaka's history. Throughout the 15th and early 16th centuries, Melaka played a significant role in the history both of the Malay Peninsula and of the surrounding areas, political, economic and social levels. The impressions of Melaka given by the foreign traders and visitors, especially in the years between 1505 and 1511, represent a rich source of information for our research on this port.