

**THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ISLAMIC RULE IN THE EASTERN  
COAST OF SUMATRA AND ITS ROLE IN THE MARITIME  
SILK ROAD IN THE XIIIth - XVIIth**

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# **THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ISLAMIC RULE IN THE EASTERN COAST OF SUMATRA AND ITS ROLE IN THE MARITIME SILK ROAD IN THE XIIIth - XVIIth CENTURY**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

In this essay, I will review the various dynamic factors in the role of various major harbours, in the waters of the *Selat Malaka* (Straits of Melaka), *Selat Sunda* (Straits of Sunda) and the west coast of Sumatera from the c13 to the c17 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 Malaka*, *Selat Sunda* and the Indian Ocean. During the second phase, between c13 to c17, it was the Islamic rulers of *Samudera-Pasai* and *Aceh*, *Melak* and *Banten* who controlled these waters.

The *Selat Malaka* 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 thorough fare 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 PERIOD, 7th - 13th CENTURY**

### **(Its role and control of harbours in the Strait Melaka and Strait 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 in Sembiran, 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 route from west the 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 then to the *Selat Melaka* and to China.

Taking into account archeological 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 *Sumatera* 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 Batanghari 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 Sumatera would tend to confirm Chinese written record, which indicate that trade expanded in the Song period (c10-cl2).

With regard to the existence of Sriwijaya in historical records, 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.

In several locations in and around Palembang we found 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-cl0) to the period of the Dutch occupation (c16-cl9).

The earliest of these finds from the c8 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 c8 to c10.

Written evidence relating to the use of shipping as a means of transport during the Sriwijaya period is given in the *Kedukan Bukit* inscription, and in Arab and Chinese sources. More importantly, archeological evidence of boat remains has 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 Asia 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 x14 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).

Yet another ancient harbour of great importance was that of Barus on the west coast of Sumatera. Barus was known as 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 Ambariyah 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 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 Sumatera became an alternative route to the Selat Melaka before ships reached the Gelat Sunda, from there they could proceed to the islands of the eastern archipelago and to China.

On the west coast of Sumatera, other important port 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 Sumatera. 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 developed in these waters until in later centuries.

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 Chin 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 or 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, i.t 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.

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From the end of the c14, there had been a transfer of power from ruler of Sriwijaya to the new Islamic rulers. As is already known, from the end of the c13, the policy 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 Sumatra as trade in the Selat Melaka increased with the presence of Islamic merchants and the establishment of Muslim merchant colonies in the east coast harbor 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 Sumatra 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 in this time, that the rulers of Java, based on Demak, took over Banten and effected the subjugation of Banten 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 Sumatra into Javanese waters and to the port of Banten. 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 Batanghari 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 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 harbor 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 harbor, even through 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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