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Bintan–Pagaruyung–Melaka: Reconstructing Civilizational Networks and the Formation of Political Legitimacy in the Malay Sultanate in the Early Fifteenth Century

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ABSTRACT: This paper reassesses the relationship among Bintan, Pagaruyung and Melaka as a civilizational network in the formation of Malay power from the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth century. In contrast to a linear reading that assumes the three centres formed a uniform political chain, this study adopts a qualitative historical approach through document analysis, source criticism and historiographical triangulation. The analytical corpus comprises the Sejarah Melayu/Sulalat al-Salatin tradition, studies of RAS Raffles Malay 18, modern historiography on Melaka and fifteenth-century maritime networks, and scholarship concerning Minangkabau–Pagaruyung and Bintan. Thematic analysis groups the evidence into four themes: maritime and trading networks; elite and territorial mobility; political legitimacy and genealogy; and Islamisation and symbols of power. The findings indicate that the strongest evidence concerns Melaka as an entrepôt and centre of government connected to various Asian ports, while Bintan occupied an important position within the Melaka–Johor maritime-political sphere. In the case of Pagaruyung, its relationship with the Malay world was significant, but direct evidence for a strong institutional influence on the formation of Melaka in the early fifteenth century is more limited and must be distinguished from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century evidence. The paper therefore proposes a layered network model that differentiates trade, mobility, genealogy and legitimacy according to the strength and chronology of the evidence. This approach produces a more cautious reconstruction and reduces the risks of presentism and anachronism in Malay historiography.

KEYWORDS: Bintan; Pagaruyung; Melaka; Malay Sultanate; Historiography; Maritime Networks; Political Legitimacy; Source Criticism.

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of the formation of the Melaka Malay Sultanate is commonly discussed in relation to the strategic position of the Strait of Melaka, international trade, diplomatic relations, Malay mobility and the development of Islam. The original manuscript presents Bintan, Pagaruyung and Melaka as three interconnected spaces. This proposition is valuable as a network hypothesis, but it requires stricter chronological testing and source criticism because the evidence for each space differs in nature, date and strength.

Recent research on RAS Raffles Malay 18 demonstrates that the Sejarah Melayu contains geographical data, settlements and inter-polity relationships that may be analysed both explicitly and implicitly. At the same time, scholars emphasise that the motifs of court texts are not equivalent to modern empirical reports; narratives concerning rulers, origins, journeys and power must therefore be read in conjunction with the context in which the texts were produced and with corroborating sources. In studies of fifteenth-century maritime networks, Melaka is also viewed as a centre connecting ports and trading diasporas across the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, the South China Sea and the Southeast Asian archipelago.

A central research problem is the tendency to combine evidence from different periods in order to construct a single narrative of continuity. This is particularly important in the case of Pagaruyung. Evidence concerning Pagaruyung's authority and royal correspondence becomes clearer in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources,

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whereas evidence for the early fifteenth century is more limited. Accordingly, this study does not treat all later connections as automatic evidence for the early Melaka period.

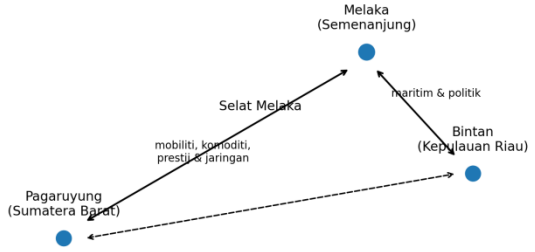

Figure 1. Conceptual Position Of Bintan, Pagaruyung And Melaka Within The Regional Space

Figure 2. Map Of The Strait Of Melaka And Sumatra Showing Melaka, Bintan, Pagaruyung And Other Regional Centres

1.1 Research Objectives

Objective	Description
O1	Identify the forms of relationship among Bintan, Pagaruyung and Melaka that can be supported by the source corpus.
O2	Assess the role of maritime networks, mobility, genealogy, custom and Islam in the formation of Malay political legitimacy.
O3	Differentiate direct evidence, indirect evidence and historiographical inference according to chronology.
O4	Develop an analytical model of civilizational networks that does not treat the three regions as a single political structure.

1.2 Research Questions

The study addresses three questions: (i) what forms of relationship can be identified among Bintan, Pagaruyung and Melaka; (ii) how are maritime, political, cultural and religious relationships used to understand political legitimacy; and (iii) to what extent does the available evidence allow these relationships to be located specifically in the early fifteenth century?

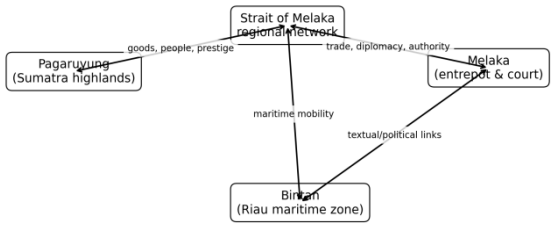

Figure 3. Analytical Model Of The Bintan–Pagaruyung–Melaka Network.
Source: Constructed By The Researcher

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Melaka as the Centre of Maritime Networks

The literature on Melaka provides a stronger evidential foundation than that available for the other two regions. Studies of Melaka's history emphasise the existence of local sources such as the Sejarah Melayu as well as early Portuguese sources, including Tomé Pires. Thomaz explains that the history of the Melaka Sultanate can be examined through a combination of local chronicles, geographical accounts and Portuguese records. More recent studies by Hall and Borschberg place Melaka within extensive networks of ports and maritime diasporas. This supports the use of the network concept, but such networks must be demonstrated through specific relationships rather than assumed.

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Mahidin, Zakaria and Kamaruddin (2025) demonstrate that RAS Raffles Malay 18 can be used to analyse geography, rivers, coastlines, settlements and places mentioned according to the reigns of particular rulers. This approach is important to the present study because locations such as Bentan and Pagar Ruyung appear within a broader narrative environment; however, the mention of a place name does not necessarily demonstrate an equally strong institutional relationship in every period.

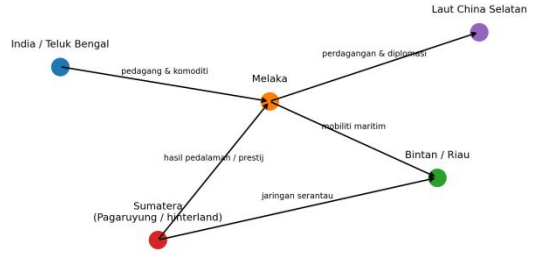
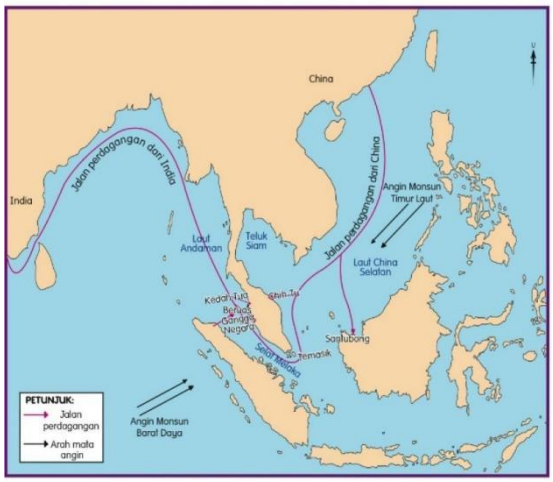


Figure 4. Maritime Network And Mobility Model Used To Interpret Melaka's Connections With Bintan, Sumatra And Wider Trading Networks.

Figure 5. Cartographic Representation Of The Territory Of The Melaka Sultanate Around The Fifteenth Century.

2.2 Bintan within the Maritime-Political Sphere

Bintan should be understood as part of the geography of the Riau archipelago and the Strait of Melaka network. Its importance became more apparent after the fall of Melaka in 1511, when centres of Malay power shifted and endured within the Johor–Riau sphere. This article therefore distinguishes two layers of evidence: Bintan's relationship with the maritime world before 1511, and its clearer position in the political continuity of Melaka after 1511. This distinction prevents post-1511 developments from being used retrospectively to prove conditions around 1400 without additional support.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Pagaruyung means that specific claims concerning Pagaruyung's influence on the formation of Melaka's institutions around 1400 must be classified as hypotheses or indirect relationships rather than established facts.

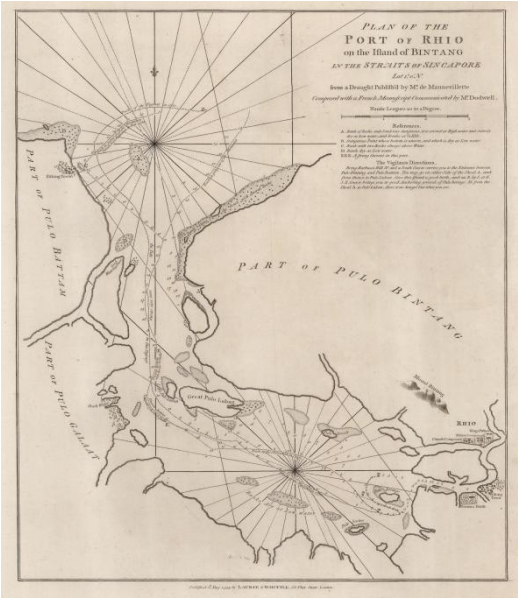

Figure 8. Historical Map Of The Port Of Riau On Bintan Island And Its Surrounding Waters.

Figure 9. The Istano Basa Pagaruyung Complex And Surrounding Landscape As An Illustration Of Pagaruyung's Cultural Space.

Figure 10. Map depicting Pagaruyung and kingdoms in Sumatra.

2.4 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework combines network history with source criticism. A 'network' is defined as a relationship that enables the movement of people, commodities, information, symbols, customary practices or claims to legitimacy between political centres. 'Legitimacy' refers to the ways in which power is recognised through genealogy, religion, custom, diplomacy, prestige and the capacity to control resources and trade routes. The framework does not assume that networks are necessarily hierarchical or that all nodes exercise equal influence.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative historical research design based on document and historiographical analysis. No surveys, interviews or statistical data are used. Accordingly, the term 'analysis' in this paper refers to historical source analysis, thematic coding, chronological comparison and triangulation rather than quantitative inferential analysis.

3.1 Source Corpus and Selection Criteria

Table 1. Classification of Historical Sources, Their Analytical Contributions, and Methodological Limitations in the Study of Melaka–Pagaruyung Relations.

Category	Examples of Sources	Function in the Analysis	Limitations
Malay Historiographical Texts	Sejarah Melayu / Sulalat al-Salatin; RAS Raffles Malay 18	Place names (toponyms), genealogies, narratives of political power, customary practices, and inter-state relations	Court-centred texts; copied in later periods; contain elements of political legitimation and literary embellishment

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Early European Sources	Tomé Pires and Portuguese records discussed in modern historiography	Trade, ports, and political developments during the early 16th century	External perspectives; some evidence dates from after 1511
Modern Maritime Studies	Hall; Borschberg; Thomaz	Examining Malacca's position within regional maritime and trading networks	Based on secondary interpretations
Minangkabau/Pagaruyung Studies	Drakard; Andaya; studies on Minangkabau migration	Political authority, regional influence, genealogical connections, and subsequent historical relationships	Much of the available evidence dates from periods later than the early 15th century
Archaeological and Epigraphic Studies	Batu Aceh gravestones, seals, and relevant material culture studies	Triangulating material-cultural evidence and examining processes of Islamisation	Chronological and geographical evidence must correspond directly to the historical claims being made

3.2 Analytical Procedure

The analysis was conducted in six stages. First, sources were identified according to type, date, provenance and relevance to the research questions. Second, external criticism was used to assess versions, dates, authors or copyists, and the temporal distance between events and texts. Third, internal criticism examined the purpose of writing, the language of legitimacy, possible court bias and mythical elements. Fourth, units of meaning were coded into the themes of maritime activity/trade, politics/diplomacy,genealogy/legitimacy, Islamisation/symbolism and mobility. Fifth, claims were compared across sources. Sixth, the findings were classified as strongly supported, moderately supported, or limited/inferential. These categories are qualitative and do not represent statistical scores.

3.3 Unit of Analysis and Coding Method

Table 2. Unit of Analysis

Theme Code	Units of Meaning Sought	Examples of Indicators
MAR	Trade and maritime geography	pelabuhan, laut, sungai, kapal, pedagang, laluan
POL	Power and political relations	naungan, perang, utusan, perjanjian, wilayah, pembesar
LEG	Legitimacy and genealogy	keturunan, daulat, gelaran, Bukit Seguntang, simbol diraja
REL	Islam and religious symbolism	sultan, ulama, Islamisasi, epigrafi, makam
MOB	Mobility and diaspora	perpindahan, merantau, penempatan, komuniti perantau

3.4 Reliability of Interpretation

The reliability of interpretation was strengthened through triangulation across source types and a 'negative evidence check'. Where a claim appears only in later sources, the study does not elevate it to the status of direct evidence for the early fifteenth century. Where different sources support the same aspect but differ in date or context, the similarity is used to explain a regional pattern rather than to impose a single chronology. This method is particularly important for claims concerning Pagaruyung.

3.5 Methodological Limitations

The study does not undertake new archaeological fieldwork and does not examine original manuscripts palaeographically. The analysis relies on accessible editions/transliterations and previous

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scholarship. The paper is therefore a historiographical reconstruction based on published sources rather than an excavation report or a critical edition of a manuscript.

IV. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Theme 1: Melaka as the Principal Node of Trade and Power

The corpus indicates that Melaka is the node most strongly supported by the evidence. Its position on the Strait of Melaka, sheltered harbour, links with the hinterland and ability to attract merchants made geography a foundation of political growth. Mahidin et al.'s analysis of RAS Raffles Malay 18 shows that the text depicts rivers, coastlines, settlements and places beyond Melaka, while maritime historiography demonstrates that Melaka functioned as a centre within networks of ports and diasporas. These findings support a relationship between political power and the capacity to manage maritime space, but they do not imply that trade alone explains Melaka's emergence.

Figure 11. Illustration of Melaka harbour with ships and trading activities.

Figure 12. Visual reconstruction of the port city of Melaka.

4.2 Theme 2: Bintan as a Connecting Space and Site of Political Continuity

Bintan emerges more convincingly as a maritime and political space within the Melaka–Johor sphere than as a direct 'founder' of Melaka. The analysis distinguishes Bintan's geographical function from its dynastic function. In Malay traditions, Bentan/Bintan lies within a political horizon associated with Malay kingdoms. After 1511, Bintan's importance in the continuity of Malay power becomes clearer. Post-1511 evidence therefore strengthens the argument for network continuity, but it cannot be transferred unconditionally to the year 1400.

4.3 Theme 3: Pagaruyung as a Source of Prestige and Regional Networks—But with Limited Early Evidence

Pagaruyung requires a more nuanced treatment than that presented in the original manuscript. The literature demonstrates Pagaruyung's moral and political influence within the Minangkabau world and the ability of central authority to connect Minangkabau regions. Connections between the Minangkabau and the Malay Peninsula are also important. However, clearer records of royal correspondence, Pagaruyung authority and regional political interaction largely date from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This study therefore does not conclude that Pagaruyung directly shaped Melaka's governing institutions around 1400. Rather, it proposes that central Sumatra and Minangkabau traditions formed part of a broader sphere of mobility, prestige and exchange, with a lower degree of chronological certainty for the early period.

4.4 Theme 4: Legitimacy—Genealogy, Islam and Network Capacity

Malay political legitimacy can be understood as a combination of several sources of authority. Genealogical traditions connected rulers to illustrious origins; Islam introduced the language of the sultanate and religious networks; trade and diplomacy provided material resources and recognition; while custom and elite relationships reinforced social acceptance. This analysis avoids mono-causal explanations. Islamisation, for example, is not treated as a single event that immediately displaced all earlier forms of legitimacy, but as a layer that interacted with existing traditions.

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4.5 Chronological Analysis

Chronology is the principal control mechanism in this reconstruction. The first phase is the late fourteenth century, when Sumatran political traditions and mobility across the Strait of Melaka provided the regional background. The second phase extends from approximately 1400 to 1511, when Melaka developed as a centre of government and an entrepôt. The third phase begins after 1511, when the continuity of Malay power shifted to other spaces, including Bintan and Johor. Distinguishing these three phases prevents evidence from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries from being read as though it were contemporary with the foundation of Melaka.

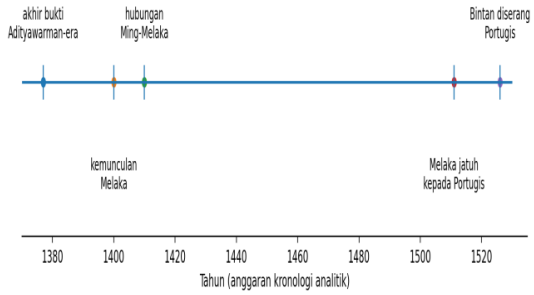
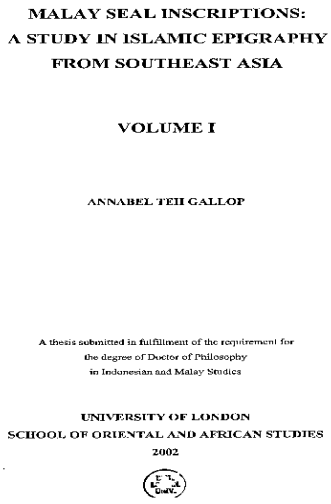


Figure 13. Analytical Chronology Distinguishing Early Evidence For Melaka From Evidence Of Post-1511 Continuity.

4.6 Analysis of Visual and Epigraphic Sources

Editorial note on visual materials: Figures D to Q were added from the images supplied with the manuscript. The visuals are used to strengthen the geographical, maritime, cultural and epigraphic contexts. For journal publication, the original source,copyright holder, date, location and provenance of each image must be verified and stated in full.

The inclusion of epigraphic images in the original manuscript is useful for demonstrating the potential of material culture, but a journal article must distinguish between 'source illustration' and 'analysed data'. Because the original manuscript does not provide detailed object catalogue information, dates, discovery locations or readings of the inscriptions, these images are not used as primary evidence for any chronological claim. They are retained with more cautious captions, together with a recommendation that future research use epigraphic objects with complete metadata.


MALAY SEAL INSCRIPTIONS:
A STUDY IN ISLAMIC EPIGRAPHY
FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA

VOLUME I

ANNABEL TEH GALLOP

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirement for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Indonesian and Malay Studies

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON
SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES
2002

Figure 14. Reference image of a Malay seal epigraphic study found in the original manuscript. The image is used to illustrate a type of epigraphic source; it does not constitute direct evidence of historical connections between Bintan, Pagaruyung, and Melaka without specific analysis of the artefact, its dating, and provenance.

The visual materials in this article serve two functions. First, geographical and network figures help explain spatial relationships without claiming precise political boundaries. Second, epigraphic images illustrate categories of material sources that may potentially be used to examine titulature, Islamic symbolism and authority. However, a visual source is treated as data only when its date, location, provenance and object context can be identified; visuals without such metadata are used solely as illustrations.

Figure 15. Example Of a Seal Impression Bearing Jawi-Arabic Inscriptions.

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Figure 16. Example Of An Inscribed Stone/Tombstone Bearing Arabic-Jawi Inscriptions.

Figure 17. Example Of a Sealed/Inscribed Object Bearing Jawi-Arabic Script, Included As Epigraphic Visual Material.

V. DISCUSSION

The principal improvement of this study is its shift from a narrative linking three centres to a layered network model. Melaka has the most direct evidence as a fifteenth-century centre of trade and government. Bintan possessed maritime significance and subsequently became highly important to political continuity after 1511. Pagaruyung, meanwhile, exercised considerable symbolic and political influence in Minangkabau history and Malay networks, but the evidence for placing its institutional influence directly in the formation of Melaka around 1400 is less robust than the evidence for later periods.

These findings do not deny connections between Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula. Rather, they specify the types of relationship involved. Connections may take the form of movements of people, commodities, origin narratives, customary practices or prestige without necessarily constituting a unified system of government. By distinguishing these forms of relationship, the concept of a 'civilizational network' becomes more analytical and less deterministic.

From a theoretical perspective, Melaka's power can be understood as nodal power: the capacity of a political centre increases when it is able to connect ports, merchant communities, hinterlands, diplomatic networks and languages of legitimacy. This model is consistent with maritime historiography that views Melaka as a network centre, while the present article adds a dimension of chronological source criticism to the relationships involving Bintan and Pagaruyung.

The study makes three contributions. First, it transforms the concept of networks from a metaphor into an analytical category differentiated according to trade, politics, mobility and legitimacy. Second, it introduces a qualitative hierarchy of certainty so that readers can distinguish direct evidence from inference. Third, it demonstrates that Malay historiography benefits when textual sources, archaeology and maritime studies are read comparatively without assuming that all forms of evidence have the same evidential status.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the Bintan–Pagaruyung–Melaka reconstruction is most convincing when understood as a layered network that changed over time. Melaka was the principal node supported by the historiographical corpus and studies of fifteenth-century maritime networks. Bintan was important within the maritime sphere and in the continuity of Malay political power, particularly after the fall of Melaka. Pagaruyung was important in Minangkabau history, regional authority and Malay networks, but its direct relationship with the formation of Melaka's institutions in the early fifteenth century must be stated cautiously because of the limitations of contemporary evidence.

The contribution of this article is therefore not to prove a single line of political descent linking Bintan, Pagaruyung and Melaka, but to demonstrate how trade, mobility, genealogy, religion and symbols of power interacted across the Strait of Melaka and Sumatra. Future research should focus on manuscript comparison, Ming records, early Portuguese sources, dated epigraphy and archaeological data with clear provenance so

that the relationships among these three spaces can be tested more precisely.

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