

THE ROLE OF MARITIME AND COMMERCIAL PILLARS: THE GLORY OF THE MAJAPAHIT KINGDOM IN 1350-1389

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the important role of maritime power and trade in supporting the political and economic supremacy of the Majapahit Kingdom during the reign of Hayam Wuruk (1350–1389 AD). Using historical literature research methods, this study went through four stages, namely heuristics, verification, interpretation, and historiography. The results of the study show that Majapahit successfully integrated a strong maritime defense system with a structured trade network. The kingdom strategically positioned its naval forces in various maritime zones and optimized river infrastructure, particularly the Brantas and Bengawan Solo rivers, to connect inland production areas with major ports such as Canggu, Tuban, Gresik, and Surabaya. Additionally, Majapahit applied the diplomatic principle of Mitreka Satata in establishing peaceful and stable relations with regional and inter-regional kingdoms, such as China, India, and Southeast Asian nations. This approach created a safe and profitable trading environment. As a result, Majapahit emerged as a dominant maritime and commercial power in the 14th century, demonstrating that the maritime and trade sectors were the cornerstone of the kingdom's prosperity.

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INTRODUCTIONS

Maritime affairs and trade have been the main foundations of civilization development in the archipelago since ancient times. Two great kingdoms, Sriwijaya and Majapahit, demonstrated how maritime power could support political and economic glory. Sriwijaya controlled the Malacca Strait trade route at the height of its power under Balaputradewa (Brown, 2003), while Majapahit reached its golden age during the reign of Hayam Wuruk (1350–1389 AD) through the integration of maritime power and a structured trading system (Mahamid, 2023). However, history as an academic field does not merely record past events chronologically but also reflects the social and political constructions that shape it (Birsyada, 2016).

The strategic location of Majapahit was supported by major rivers such as the Brantas and Bengawan Solo, which connected the royal center in Trowulan with important ports, including Tuban, Canggu, and Surabaya

(Sulistiyono, 2018). These ports served as hubs for domestic and international trade, connecting Majapahit with traders from China, India, the Middle East, and other Southeast Asian regions (Febriana Sulistya Pratiwi., 2022). Additionally, Majapahit implemented the Mitreka Satata diplomatic principle to maintain political stability and the security of trade routes (Birsyada, 2016), which was a key factor in the success of its commercial activities.

Although many studies discuss the glory of Majapahit, research that specifically describes the relationship between maritime power and the trading system as pillars of glory during the reign of Hayam Wuruk is still limited (Pradhani, 2018). However, a deep understanding of the synergy between these two sectors is crucial for understanding the model of maritime power in the Nusantara region during the 14th century. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the role of the maritime and trade sectors in supporting Majapahit's political-economic supremacy, with a particular focus on the reign of Hayam Wuruk (1350–1389).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a literature review method with four stages of historical method according to Kuntowijoyo (2018). The first stage is heuristics (source collection), which is the search and collection of primary and secondary sources relevant to the research topic (Usmaedi, 2023). Primary sources include inscriptions (such as the Canggu Inscription and the Karang Bogem Inscription), ancient manuscripts such as Negarakertagama by Mpu Prapanca, and foreign explorers' accounts describing Majapahit's maritime activities and trade. Secondary sources include books, scientific journal articles, and previous research discussing aspects of maritime affairs, trade, and the political economy of Majapahit. The second stage is verification (source criticism), which is carried out through external criticism to assess the physical authenticity and chronology of the sources, as well as internal criticism to test the accuracy of the content and relevance of the information to the research problem (Mohd Noor, 2000). The third stage is interpretation, which involves processing facts from various sources into a coherent understanding, connecting historical data with theoretical frameworks, and drawing meaning from the findings (Birsyada et al., 2016). The final stage is historiography (writing), which involves compiling the research results into a scientific article based on the interpretation that has been carried out (Kuntowijoyo, 2013).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Social, Political, and Economic Life in Majapahit

During the reign of Hayam Wuruk, the Majapahit Kingdom demonstrated a highly organized bureaucratic system with a centralized government structure (Nurun et al., 2023). The king, as the center of power, was supported by government institutions such as the Supreme Advisory Council, Rakryan Mahamantri Kartini, Rakryan ing Pakiran-kiran, as well as judicial and religious officials such as Dharmadyaksa and Dharma Upapati. The vastness of the kingdom's territory, stretching from Java, Bali, Kalimantan, Sumatra, to the Malay Peninsula, reflects the success of this system in managing a heterogeneous and extensive region (Baidawi, 2022). However, the narrative about the effectiveness of this centralized government needs to be critically examined, given that some of the sources praising the glory of Majapahit come from the Negarakertagama, which has a political bias to legitimize the king's power. Comparison with archaeological sources and inscriptions is important to obtain a more objective picture (Munandar, 2008).

Socially, Majapahit society was divided into complex strata (Pigeaud, 1962). The elite class consisted of nobles, clergy, and soldiers, while the non-elite included commoners and slaves (Birsyada, 2020). This stratification was closely linked to Hindu-Buddhist values that shaped the political and social cosmology of Majapahit (Birsyada, 2016). The hierarchical social structure supported bureaucratic stability but also created inequalities in access to resources and power (Winsuwardana, 2017). Some sources indicate that social mobility outside the elite circle was very limited, which may have been one of the factors contributing to the fragility of internal cohesion in the final years of Majapahit.

In the economic sphere, Majapahit relied on agriculture and maritime trade as its main pillars (Rivki et al., 2009). In the agricultural sector, the kingdom built a good irrigation system, including dams and water channels, as

recorded in the Kusmala Inscription (Maharani et al., 2023). This infrastructure supported rice productivity, the main commodity of local and interregional trade (Ridwan et al., 2021). Meanwhile, in the maritime sector, ports such as Tuban, Gresik, and Surabaya functioned as regional and international trade hubs. Written evidence from the Canggu Inscription (1358 CE) indicates the establishment of 42 crossing ports along the Brantas River, which served as vital distribution points for goods from the interior to the coast (Pigeaud, 1960). The Karang Bogem Inscription (1387 AD) even records trade activities between Majapahit and foreign merchants, emphasizing the role of food commodities as the main driver of the maritime economy. The Majapahit naval fleet was not only used for military expansion but also to secure trade routes from pirate threats and foreign intervention (Adrisijanti, 2012).

Analysis of this epigraphic evidence shows that Majapahit's economic success was not solely the result of strong central policies, but also due to the efficient use of river-sea transportation networks and adaptive trade diplomacy. This pattern is relevant for Indonesia today as an archipelagic nation, where the integration of maritime infrastructure, trade route security, and the management of strategic commodities can serve as pillars of national sovereignty and prosperity.

B. Majapahit Maritime System

The Majapahit Empire reached its peak during the reign of King Hayam Wuruk, who was accompanied by Prime Minister Gajah Mada (Priswanto, 2014). Their leadership not only established political supremacy in the archipelago, but also demonstrated expertise in building maritime power and an organized trading system. The expansion of the Majapahit Empire, as recorded in the Nagarakretagama and other historical sources, shows that an expansive political approach was combined with control over trade routes and the management of strategic ports, making Majapahit the primary maritime power in Southeast Asia during the 14th century (Prameswari & Kasdi, 2013). However, although these sources describe a unified and dominant kingdom, the narrative tends to be centered on the palace and has a glorifying tone, raising questions about the extent to which political integration was truly effective in the vast maritime region. The figure of Gajah Mada with his Palapa Oath is often romanticized as a unifying symbol (Purwanto, 2023), yet archaeological findings and local records indicate that regional autonomy persisted in many areas. Similarly, the role of Mpu Nala, who is praised in Nagarakretagama pupuh LXII/3 for conquering Dompo (Riana, 2009), reflects both real maritime capabilities and the possibility of royal propaganda to strengthen legitimacy (Nugroho, 2011).

Majapahit's maritime success was also tied to its shipbuilding and naval defense strategies. Munoz's description of Majapahit ships constructed from thick wood, equipped with four masts, and layered with planks for durability (Hamid, 2013) demonstrates advanced naval engineering for its time. The strategic deployment of fleets across Sumatra, Malacca Strait, Java Sea, Sunda Strait, Maluku, and the Philippines (Nugroho, 2011) highlights a deliberate maritime security policy. Yet, critical examination is needed, while these deployments suggest effective control (Khoirul Anwar & Afifyanto, 2022), Southeast Asian maritime history also records piracy, regional dissent, and contested waters, implying that Majapahit's "control" may have been more about influence and tribute than absolute sovereignty. This invites a reevaluation of the term "maritime empire" in the context of pre-modern Southeast Asia, where flexible political arrangements and mutual benefit often outweighed direct rule.

The success of Majapahit's trade relied heavily on a tiered port system Tuban, Gresik, Surabaya, and Canggu—integrating sea and river routes (Didik Pradjoko, 2013) (Utomo, 2009). Archaeological finds like Chinese coins in Tuban (Maazi, 2024) and the Karang Bogem Inscription in Gresik (Mahfudz et al., 2024) point to vibrant international exchanges and institutionalized taxation. However, such evidence primarily reflects elite-controlled trade networks, leaving open the question of how far local communities benefited from this prosperity. The integrated logistics via the Bengawan Solo and Brantas rivers suggests a high level of coordination, but it also implies vulnerability: disruption at a single port could ripple through the entire system (Firmansyah et al., 2020). For contemporary Indonesia, Majapahit's experience underscores both the potential and fragility of maritime-based economies: strong naval capacity, strategic port integration, and regional cooperation remain essential for securing economic dominance in a competitive global trade environment.

C. Majapahit Trade

The foreign policy of Majapahit during the reign of Hayam Wuruk demonstrated a progressive and strategic approach in strengthening interregional trade networks. One of the prominent concepts was Mitreka Satata, a

diplomatic principle that placed neighboring countries as equal friends, rather than enemies or areas of military expansion (Kusmartono, 2002). This concept is outlined in the *Negarakretagama*, stanza XV, which mentions several kingdoms in Southeast Asia such as Siam, Ayodhyapura, Dharmanagari, Marutma, Campa, Cambodia, and Yawana as nations that maintained friendly relations with Majapahit (Muljana, 2006). This policy reflects that political stability and good relations between kingdoms were important foundations in supporting cross-regional trade activities.

Table. The form of Mitreka Satata Majapahit relations

No	Negara/Kerajaan	Bentuk Hubungan
1.	Siam (Thailand)	Political stability in the region
2.	Campa (Vietnam)	Diplomacy, trade, exchange of royal children
3.	Kamboja (khmer)	Cultural exchange, religion, trade
4.	Jambudwipa (India) (Darmanagari, Rajapura, Yawana)	Religion, diplomacy, trade

Sumber : (Hamid, 2013:62) (Khotimah & Yuliati, 2022:132)

The implementation of *Mitreka Satata* provided a secure and open environment for commercial activities, encompassing not only the exchange of commodities but also the transmission of culture and religious missions. Beyond the boundaries of Southeast Asia, the *Nāgarakṛtagama* poem LXXXIII records that kingdoms from outside the region, including China, Jambudwipa (India), Karnateka, and Goda, established trade relations and visited the Majapahit realm (Muljana, 2006). These delegations—comprising merchants, monks, priests, and other groups arrived aboard large vessels, reflecting both the high intensity of maritime mobility and Majapahit's openness to foreign relation (Kusmartono, 2002). Such interactions not only consolidated Majapahit's status as a regional power but also elevated its role as a prominent trading hub and port of call within the Asian maritime trade network (Wasino et al., 2021). Through an inclusive diplomatic approach, Majapahit expanded its influence not solely by military means, but by fostering a network of mutually beneficial and peaceful relations. In this regard, the *Mitreka Satata* principle functioned as a foreign policy instrument that safeguarded the stability of trade routes and facilitated the smooth flow of maritime logistics.

During the reign of Hayam Wuruk, the Majapahit Kingdom emerged as a pivotal node in the 14th-century Southeast Asian international trade network (Pinandita, 2024). The kingdom's economic vibrancy was bolstered by the influx of foreign merchants from diverse regions such as China, India, Khmer, Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka, who brought commodities including ceramics, silk, textiles, incense, and other luxury items. These goods were exchanged for Majapahit's agricultural and local products spices, rice, sugarcane, sandalwood, salt, cotton, coconuts, and sulfur which served as the kingdom's primary exports (Kartodirjo, 2013). Beyond their economic value, these exports also reinforced Majapahit's position in interregional trade. The maritime commercial network was sustained through strategically located ports that functioned as regional distribution centers, enabling both domestic and foreign trade to flourish.

In the broader context of global economic shifts, the weakening of Central Asian overland trade routes and the concurrent expansion of maritime shipping from China catalyzed a reorientation of international trade flows toward sea routes (Reid, 2014). Majapahit, strategically positioned and supported by natural infrastructure such as the Brantas and Bengawan Solo rivers (Sapitri, 2022), capitalized on these changes. The Brantas River facilitated the transportation of goods from inland agricultural areas to the port of Canggu (Fauzi, 2015), while the Bengawan Solo River extended commercial access from Java's interior to its coastal regions (Rahmawati et al., 2019). This integration of geographical advantages, proactive trade policies, and an efficient riverine transport system transformed Majapahit into a robust and influential center of maritime commerce in Southeast Asia. Its sustained prosperity underscores that commercial supremacy depended not solely on economic resources, but equally on diplomatic acumen and the capacity to maintain stable international relations factors that formed a foundational pillar of Majapahit's economic success in the 14th century.

CONCLUSION

The glory of the Majapahit Kingdom in the 14th century, especially during the reign of Hayam Wuruk, cannot be separated from the strength of the maritime sector and an organized trading system. Majapahit established a structured maritime defense system through the development of a robust fleet and the strategic deployment of maritime forces, as well as managing a hierarchical network of ports connecting inland and coastal regions via major rivers such as the Brantas and Bengawan Solo. This system enabled efficient commodity distribution and supported the kingdom's overall logistics. On the other hand, its foreign policy based on peaceful diplomacy through the concept of Mitreka Satata created political stability in the region and opened up trade access across Southeast Asia and Southeast Asia. Trade relations with kingdoms such as China, India, Champa, Cambodia, and Siam demonstrate that Majapahit was not only a regional power politically and militarily but also an active and open international trading hub. The integration of maritime military power, port networks, trade policies, and foreign diplomacy is what made maritime affairs and trade the two main pillars supporting the stability and supremacy of Majapahit in the Southeast Asian region.

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