Malacca, Johor and the Riau archipelago

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Malacca: the port as a constitution

Malacca, founded around 1400 by the refugee prince from Singapura, became within a few decades the greatest port of Southeast Asia. Its success rested on an early and skilful use of Chinese recognition. In 1405 the Yongle Emperor sent an envoy to Malacca. Admiral Zheng He made the first of his visits in 1407, and in 1411 Parameswara travelled to the Ming court with a delegation of 540 people.[1] Ming protection shielded Malacca from Siamese claims and made it the preferred port of call for the Chinese fleets that crossed the Indian Ocean in the early fifteenth century.

The second foundation of Malacca's success was Islam. Its rulers adopted Islam in the first half of the fifteenth century, and it became firmly established under Sultan Muzaffar Shah (r. 1445–1459).[2] Conversion connected the port to the network of Muslim merchants from Gujarat, the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea who dominated the western half of the Indian Ocean trade. It gave the rulers of Malacca a

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shared legal and religious language with the most important trading communities of their time. Religion, in this setting, functioned as commercial infrastructure, much as the Geneva volume shows for the Reformed faith in early modern Geneva.

The third foundation was administration. Malacca organised its port around four harbour masters, the shahbandars, each responsible for a group of merchant communities. One served the Gujaratis, a second the merchants of southern India, Bengal, Burma and Pasai, a third the traders of maritime Southeast Asia and a fourth the traders from Annam, China and the Ryukyu Islands.[3] Each shahbandar received the ships of his communities, assigned them warehouses, arranged their audience with the ruler's officials and supervised the assessment of duties. Merchants dealt with an official who knew their language, their customs and their goods.

Malacca also had written maritime law. The *Undang-Undang Laut Melaka*, the Maritime Laws of Malacca, regulated the duties of ship masters and crews, the sharing of cargo space, the rules of navigation and the settlement of disputes at sea.[4] Together with the general legal code of the sultanate, the *Hukum Kanun Melaka*, the maritime laws gave merchants a body of rules that they could know in advance.[5]

This combination – political protection, a shared commercial culture, an administration organised around the needs of foreign merchants and written rules – amounts to what might be called the constitution of a port. It describes the institutions that made Malacca attractive to traders from across the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. The Portuguese apothecary Tomé Pires, who lived in Malacca shortly after its conquest, summed up its importance in a sentence that is still quoted: "Whoever is lord of Malacca shall have his hands on the throat of Venice."[6]

The constitution of Malacca anticipates in several respects the institutions that modern Singapore offers international business: protection by a state that is respected by the great powers, an administration that serves foreign firms in their own terms, and a reliable legal order. The continuity is one of function, which should not be exaggerated into a continuity of institutions. It shows, however, that the conditions for a successful port in the Strait were understood long before the arrival of the Europeans.

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Johor after 1511

On 15 August 1511, a Portuguese force under Afonso de Albuquerque captured Malacca.[7] After the sultan had fled, his sons founded two successor states, Perak on the west coast of the peninsula and Johor at its southern tip.[8] Johor, established in 1528 by Sultan Alauddin Riayat Shah II, claimed the inheritance of Malacca and repeatedly sought to recover the city.[9]

For more than a century, Johor fought on two fronts: against the Portuguese in Malacca and against the sultanate of Aceh in northern Sumatra, which aspired to dominate the Strait. Its capitals moved repeatedly along the Johor River and among the islands, destroyed by one enemy or another and rebuilt elsewhere. Johor's territory included the island of Singapore and the waters around it. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the mouth of the Singapore River appears to have housed an outpost of the sultanate, administered by a harbour official.

Johor found a way out of its predicament through an alliance with a new European power. In January 1641, Dutch and Johor forces, the latter led by the Bendahara, captured Malacca from the Portuguese.[10] The Dutch kept Malacca but, being more interested in their base at Batavia, used it mainly as a fortress to control the Strait. Johor, freed from the Portuguese threat, entered a period of prosperity as a trading kingdom in the second half of the seventeenth century.

The dynasty of Malacca ended in 1699 with the assassination of Sultan Mahmud II by a noble whose pregnant wife he had ordered to be killed. The Bendahara family succeeded to the throne.[11] The regicide broke the sacred legitimacy that the dynasty had derived from the Singapura legend and weakened the loyalty of the orang laut, who had served the old royal house. A political crisis followed, in which new actors entered the scene.

Riau and the Bugis

The new actors were the Bugis, seafaring traders and warriors from Sulawesi, who had settled in several parts of the Malay world. After the rebellion of Raja Kecil (1718–1722), the Bugis gained great influence in Johor.[12] A Bugis prince received the

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office of Yang Dipertuan Muda, a vice-ruler who exercised effective power, while the Malay sultan retained the formal sovereignty. The dual structure of power – a Malay sultan and a Bugis vice-ruler – would shape the politics of the region until the nineteenth century.

Under Bugis administration, the island of Bintan in the Riau archipelago, directly south of Singapore, became the centre of a new entrepôt. Ships from Cambodia, Siam, Vietnam and other parts of Asia came to Riau to trade.[13] Chinese settlers established plantations of gambier and pepper on the islands, whose products became a significant article of trade with China.[14] Riau also traded with British country traders, which brought it into conflict with the Dutch, who regarded the trade of the Strait as their preserve.

Riau's prosperity came to an abrupt end in the 1780s. A conflict between the Bugis and the Dutch led to a Dutch attack, after which the Dutch in 1784 forced a treaty on the sultanate that placed Riau under their control.[15] The Dutch presence drove away much of the private trade that had made Riau attractive. As the sultanate fragmented further, the chiefs of its various territories – among them the Temenggong, who held the mainland of Johor and the island of Singapore – acquired growing independence.

The story of Riau is instructive for the later history of Singapore in two respects. First, Riau showed that an entrepôt could flourish in the southern Strait under a ruler who kept dues low and welcomed foreign traders, including Chinese settlers and British country traders. Second, Riau showed how quickly such an entrepôt could decline when a monopolistic power imposed its control. When Raffles founded the British settlement in 1819, one of his arguments was precisely that a free port would attract the trade that the Dutch had driven away from Riau.

The orang laut

A community that the sources often mention only in passing played a central role in all these ports: the orang laut, the "sea people". They were sea-nomadic communities who lived on boats and in coastal settlements throughout the Riau-Lingga

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archipelago and the southern Strait. They provided the crews of the royal fleets, patrolled the waters, guided ships through the channels and collected sea products for trade. Their loyalty to the ruling dynasty was a condition of every Malay kingdom's control of the sea.[16]

The orang laut illustrate a feature of the pre-colonial port that modern discussion tends to overlook. Security at sea was a service, provided by people whose loyalty had to be secured. When the orang laut served the ruler, they protected merchants. When their loyalty lapsed, as after the regicide of 1699, they could turn to raiding. The line between naval force and piracy depended on the political order. In 1819, when Raffles arrived, the majority of the island's inhabitants belonged to the sea peoples.

Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Malacca Sultanate" (accessed September 2026): envoy Yin Qing sent by the Yongle Emperor in 1405, Zheng He's first visit in 1407, Parameswara's delegation of 540 persons to the Ming court in 1411. ↩
2. Wikipedia, "Malacca Sultanate" (accessed September 2026): Muhammad Shah (r. 1424–1444) adopted Islam; Islam became firmly established under Muzaffar Shah (r. 1445–1459). ↩
3. Wikipedia, "Malacca Sultanate" (accessed September 2026), on the four shahbandars and the communities for which each was responsible. ↩
4. Wikipedia, "Malacca Sultanate" (accessed September 2026): the Undang-Undang Laut Melaka governed maritime commerce during Muhammad Shah's reign. ↩
5. On the *Hukum Kanun Melaka* and its relationship to the maritime laws, see Liaw Yock Fang, *Undang-Undang Melaka: The Laws of Melaka*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1976. ↩
6. Wikipedia, "Malacca Sultanate" (accessed September 2026), quoting Tomé Pires: "Whoever is lord of Malacca shall have his hands on the throat of

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Venice." The original is in Tomé Pires, *Suma Oriental*, written between 1512 and 1515. ↩

7. Wikipedia, "Malacca Sultanate" (accessed September 2026): Afonso de Albuquerque captured Malacca on 15 August 1511. ↩
8. Wikipedia, "Malacca Sultanate" (accessed September 2026): Mahmud Shah's sons established the Johor and Perak sultanates after the fall of Malacca. ↩
9. Wikipedia, "Johor Sultanate" (accessed September 2026): established in 1528 by Alauddin Riayat Shah II; "the sultan made several attempts to retake the capital but his efforts were fruitless". ↩
10. Wikipedia, "Johor Sultanate" (accessed September 2026): in January 1641, "the Dutch and Johor forces headed by Bendahara Skudai, captured Malacca from the Portuguese". ↩
11. Wikipedia, "Johor Sultanate" (accessed September 2026), on the killing of Sultan Mahmud II in 1699 in revenge for the execution of the pregnant wife of Orang Kaya Megat Sri Rama, which ended the Malaccan dynasty. ↩
12. Wikipedia, "Johor Sultanate" (accessed September 2026): following Raja Kecil's rebellion (1718–1722), "the Bugis … had huge influence in Johor". ↩
13. Wikipedia, "Johor Sultanate" (accessed September 2026): Riau became a major trading hub where "Ships from various places such as Cambodia, Siam, Vietnam … came to trade". ↩
14. On the Chinese gambier and pepper plantations of Riau in the eighteenth century and their connection with the later plantations on Singapore island, see Carl A. Trocki, *Prince of Pirates: The Temenggongs and the Development of Johor and Singapore, 1784–1885*, Singapore, NUS Press, 2nd edition 2007. ↩
15. On the Dutch campaign against Riau and the treaty of 1784, see Carl A. Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*, chapter 2, and Leonard Y. Andaya, *The Kingdom of Johor 1641–1728*, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1975, for the earlier background. ↩

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16. On the orang laut and their role in the Malay kingdoms of the Strait, see Leonard Y. Andaya, *Leaves of the Same Tree: Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2008, chapter on the orang laut. ↩

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