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Journal of Southeast Asian Studies / Volume 11 / Issue 02 / September 1980, pp 235 - 250
DOI: 10.1017/S0022463400004446, Published online: 24 August 2009

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0022463400004446

How to cite this article:

Anthony Reid (1980). The Structure of Cities in Southeast Asia, Fifteenth to Seventeenth Centuries. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 11, pp 235-250 doi:10.1017/S0022463400004446

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The Structure of Cities in Southeast Asia, Fifteenth to Seventeenth Centuries

ANTHONY REID

Maritime Southeast Asia is one of those parts of the world destined by geography to be an international marketplace. Not only is it the largest of the world's archipelagos, penetrated throughout by sea and river, it also lies athwart one of the major international trading routes, between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean on the one hand and China and Japan on the other. These factors have always given to maritime Southeast Asia a role akin to the Mediterranean world, in which sea-borne trade was the vital factor in urban growth and in political power. In addition, however, Southeast Asia was the principal source of the items in greatest demand in the world's markets in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries — pepper, cloves, nutmeg, and camphor.

International trade has therefore always been a major factor in the history of Southeast Asia. Southeast Asians themselves, moreover, have always been involved in this trade, for the physical environment of the region has drawn them towards the sea. Some other arteries of trade, such as the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, suffer from a lack of suitable boat-building timbers around their shores, and poor fisheries to provide a training-ground for mariners.¹ In both these respects, Southeast Asia was well provided. The teak forests of Burma and Java, and the dipterocarps of Sumatra, Sulawesi, and the Philippines, provided timber frequently close to a river or shoreline. The warm and shallow waters of the Sunda shelf are among the world's richest fishing grounds, and have constantly drawn the peoples around its shores into their boats.

There were trading cities and trade-based kingdoms in the Southeast Asian region as far into the past as the records allow us to go. The period from the late fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, however, affords a picture of exceptionally rapid growth of trade, and of the network of indigenous cities necessary to sustain it. Since this period also offers a variety of internal and external sources, it is the logical starting point for an examination of the nature and function of the Southeast Asian city.

In the Mediterranean it was the Crusades which brought a new demand for Eastern luxuries in the West. For a time the "Mongol peace" directed most of this revived East-West trade across Central Asia and the land routes. The alternative maritime route, from the Mediterranean via the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, and China, developed rapidly only after the Mameluke Empire achieved stability in Egypt and signed a commercial treaty with Venice in 1345. By the end of the fourteenth century, the Red Sea route was flourishing while the overland "Mongol"

F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (London, 1975), pp. 138–45.

route had collapsed altogether.² This growth in seaborne trade from the West coincided with a still more remarkable development from China — the state trading expeditions of the early Ming dynasty which reached their peak during the series of missions to Southeast Asia sent out under Emperor Yung Lo (1402–24). Accompanying and following these missions came a host of private Chinese traders who played a large part in the rise of such cities as Melaka, Ayudhya, and Gresik. The ports of Southeast Asia became the centres of exchange between the primarily Muslim merchants coming from the West and the Chinese coming from the North.

Whether or not as a direct result of this increase in international traffic through the region, Southeast Asian production of “cash crops” for the international market appears to have begun in earnest at about the same period. Prior to the late fourteenth century, the major Southeast Asian exports were forest or marine products which were gathered rather than cultivated — camphor, birds’ nests, perfumes, pearls, aromatic woods, and gold. Some inferior pepper had been grown in Java for the China market, but as late as the time of Ibn Battuta, the major incursion of commercial pepper-growing from India to Southeast Asia via Sumatra had not yet begun.³ By 1416, there was pepper being carefully cultivated in northern Sumatra for export⁴ and, by the time of the Portuguese arrival, these north Sumatran fields were producing about 55 tons a year, almost as much as the older Malabar source of supply, while pepper-cultivation had in addition spread to the Malay Peninsula.⁵

The cloves of Maluku and the nutmeg of Banda must have been exported over a longer period, but here too the evidence is strong for a very rapid increase in export in the fifteenth century. When Europeans arrived in Maluku in the early sixteenth century they learnt that its people had become Muslim only in about 1406–70, and the conversion was closely linked in all Malukan accounts with the first arrival of Javanese clove-traders. As Pigafetta put it, “Those Moros have lived in Malucho for about 50 years. Heathens lived there before, but they did not care for the cloves.”⁶ We may need to extend the beginning of Javanese contact back into the fourteenth century to allow for references to Ambon and Maluku in the Nagarakertagama. Yet it is difficult to avoid the impression, apparent also from the “spice orgy” which began to affect Europe about the fourteenth century,⁷ that these spices unique to Indonesia began to be much more extensively traded in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries than previously.

The trade both within and beyond Southeast Asia was broken into a number of sectors, hinging on commercial emporia where goods could be bartered or sold while traders waited for the appropriate monsoon wind to take them either on to the next

² I.M. Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), pp. 23–28.

³ Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325–1354*, trans. H.A.R. Gibb (London, 1929), pp. 272–76.

⁴ Ma Huan, *Ying-yai Sheng-lan: “The Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shores”*, trans. Feng Chieng-chun, ed. J.V. Mills (Cambridge, 1970), p. 118.

⁵ *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires*, trans. Armano Cortesao (London, 1944), pp. 82, 139, and 144.

⁶ Antonia Pigafetta, Maximilian of Transylvania, Gaspar Correa, *Magellan’s Voyage around the World: Three Contemporary Accounts*, ed. Charles E. Nowell (Evanston, Ill., 1962), p. 226. Also *A Treatise on the Moluccas (c. 1544). Probably the Preliminary Version of Antonia Galvao’s Lost Historia das Molucas*, ed. Hubert Jacobs (Rome, 1971), pp. 83–85, 226.

⁷ F. Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400–1800*, trans. Miriam Kochan (Glasgow, 1974), p. 153.

sector or homeward to their port of origin. Traders from India and the Red Sea frequently made one of the ports on the eastern side of the Indian Ocean their eastern terminus — Pasai, Pidie, or later Aceh in Sumatra, Pegu in Burma, or Mergui, Tennasserim, Kedah, or Melaka on the Malay Peninsula. Fewer of them continued on to the ports of Java or overland to Ayudhya, mingling with the Malay, Mon, or Javanese traders on these routes. The Chinese similarly tended to sell their goods on the Southern rim of the South China sea, at Ayudhya, Patani, Brunei, Manila, Melaka, or the ports of Java — Tuban, Gresik, Surabaya, Japara, and later Banten. The trade to the eastern parts of the archipelago was overwhelmingly in Javanese and Malay hands, so that Chinese and Indian traders always bought the valuable cloves and nutmeg at second or third hand in Java or elsewhere.

The Southeast Asian cities which served this trade grew into very large urban centres by the standards of the time, peopled not only by the itinerant traders and mariners but by larger numbers of indigenous dependents of the commercial aristocracy which presided over the trading towns. Cities developed of a very different type from those of the West or China, yet with populations which appear to have been almost as great. Population estimates of this period are of course notoriously unreliable; yet by assembling all such available estimates for different cities some comparison can be gained with the similarly unreliable figures from other parts of the world. Travellers frequently made their estimates in terms of the number of houses or the number of fighting men who could be quickly raised. The estimates presented in Table 1 are therefore divided into three categories.

Uneven and unsatisfactory as these figures are, they undoubtedly suggest that populations in the area of 50,000 to 100,000 were reached by the largest Southeast Asian cities of the period. Melaka, Ayutthaya, and Demak in the early sixteenth century, and Aceh, Makasar, Surabaya, and Banten in the seventeenth — all appear likely to have reached these dimensions. For all these cities, there is considerable supporting evidence as well as a multiplicity of population estimates. For Melaka, for example, about 100 junks supplied the annual rice imports from overseas — which would mean an annual import of about 6,000 tons or enough to feed about 50,000 people, apart from whatever food came overland or in small *prahus*.⁸ In Aceh in the 1680s, retailers of imported rice sometimes made as much as 80 sterling a day (a sale of 3½ tons) selling to consumers, while the harbour seldom had fewer than ten ships at anchor bringing rice from India.⁹ For Brunei before the Spanish sack of 1578, on the other hand, we have still too few supporting trade figures to be confident about the high population estimates of Magellan's expedition.

If we compare these populations with sixteenth-century Europe, they appear very large indeed. Naples and Paris were substantially bigger than 100,000, but only a few other European cities exceeded a population of 40,000. When Tome Pires claimed that Melaka "has no equal in the world"¹⁰ he may not have been consciously exaggerating, for he had then seen only such modest cities as Lisbon, Seville, and

⁸ *The Suma Oriental*, op. cit., pp. 98, 107, and 268–69; "Carta de Rui de Araujo e de seus companheiros de cativo a D. Afonso de Albuquerque, Malaca, 6 Fevereiro 1510", in *Documentacao para a Historia das Missoes do Padroado Portugues do Oriente, Insulindia*, vol. 1, ed. A.B. de Sa (Lisbon, 1954), p. 28.

⁹ William Dampier, *Voyages and Discoveries*, ed. C. Wilkinson (London, 1931), p. 94.

¹⁰ *The Suma Oriental*, op. cit., p. 285.

TABLE 1
ESTIMATES OF URBAN POPULATION

	<i>Houses</i>	<i>Fighting Men</i>	<i>Population</i>
Pasai, 1518		3,000 royal guards (Couto III, v,ii)	
Aceh	700-800 burnt (1602, Lancaster, p. 133) 7,000-8,000 (1688, Dampier, p. 90)	40,000 (1620, Beaulieu, p. 106)	
Melaka, c. 1510	10,000 (Araujo, p. 21)	20,000 (Albuquerque, III, 99) 4,000 (Araujo, p. 21) 100,000 within 4 leagues (Pires, p. 260)	100,000 (Albuquerque, III, 84) 90,000 or 190,000 (<i>Sejarah Melayu</i> , pp. 156-57)
Johor, c. 1600		4,000 (Mandelslo, p. 108)	
Patani, c. 1600		10,000 (Mandelslo, p. 107)	
Brunei	25,000 (1521, Pigafetta, p. 189) 20,000 (1521, Maximillian, p. 301) 2,000-3,000 "on water" (1600, Van Noort, I, 126)		4,000 Manila slaves (1658, Navarrete, I, 123)
Banten			700,000 (1680, Fryke)
Jakarta	3,000 (1598, Eerste Schipvaart, I, 163)	4,000 (1606, Matelief, p. 53) 6,000-7,000 (1618, van den Broecke, I, 187)	
Demak, c. 1514	8,000-10,000 (1514, Pires, p. 184)	30,000 (1514, Pires, p. 185)	
Semarang, c. 1650	20,000-25,000 (Van Goens, p. 205)		
Tuban		30,000 "within 24 hours" (1608, Pyrdard II, i, 164)	1,000 "inside walls" (1514, Pires, p. 190)
Surabaya	over 1,000 (1413, Ma Huan, p. 90)		50,000-60,000 (1625, V.O.C. source cited by Meilink Roelofsz, p. 270)
Grisek	over 1,000 (1413, Ma Huan, p. 90) 1,000 (1601, Van Noort, I, 141)	6,000-7,000 (1514, Pires, p. 194)	30,000 (1523, Urdaneta cited by Meilink Roelofsz, p. 270)
Makasar	1,260 burnt 1614 (English factors, India Office Library, G/10/1,5)	36,000 (1615, English factors, IOL, G/10/1,9)	160,000 (1600?, Gervaise, p. 60)
Ayuthaya	10,050, burnt 1545 (W.A.R. Wood, <i>A History of Siam</i> , Bangkok, n.p., 1924, p. 104)		c. 16,000 foreigners (1687, la Loubere, p. 112)

Calicut. European cities were in fact smaller in general than Asian ones. Cairo and Constantinople were the biggest cities of the Mediterranean, with several hundred thousand inhabitants, while the real giants of the time appear to have been Peking and Edo (Tokyo) with almost a million each by some estimates.¹¹

If Southeast Asian cities were not particularly populous by Asian standards, they nevertheless represented remarkable agglomerations for a region of the world which was in general sparsely populated. The likeliest population projections would suggest a total of only about 8 million people in the Archipelago in the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, or a density of 3.7 per square kilometre, with a slightly lower population but higher density in mainland Southeast Asia. By contrast China and Europe were each thought to have had about 100 million people in that period. The population density suggested for India in this period is seven times, and for China Proper and Japan more than ten times as great.¹² This very rough statistical picture is supported by observations of Southeast Asia of the time. With the exception of a few pockets of permanent wet-rice agriculture in Central and Northeast Java, Bali, South Sulawesi, Pampanga, and the flood-plains of the great rivers of the Mainland, populations tended to exist around the fringes of tiger-infested jungle. In relation to its total population, then, Southeast Asia in this period must have been one of the most urbanized areas in the world.

Surprising as this conclusion may seem, it is not difficult to see why such a pattern developed in Southeast Asia. In the first instance, trade occupied a very large role in the total economy of the area, at least by the standards of the time. The spices of Maluku passed through many hands before they left Southeast Asia altogether, increasing in value many times over in the process. If Tome Pires' figures can be trusted,¹³ we can extrapolate the total volume of trade in Melaka in 1510 as worth about 2.4 million cruzados, in contrast with 0.56 million for Valladolid and 4 million for Seville estimated by Braudel for the end of the century when prices had risen markedly.¹⁴ Secondly, as we shall see below, the social pattern required the mercantile aristocracy of these port-towns to have the maximum number of dependents within reach for purposes of warfare or display, even if they might have been more productively employed in agriculture far from the city. Finally, the very hostility of the jungle encouraged people to huddle together for protection. Even at the limits of such cities as Banten, Batavia, and Melaka, tigers were frequently seen.¹⁵ And as Geddes has eloquently argued in relation to contemporary Sarawak, the ever-present threat of the jungle goes far beyond the objective dangers within it, however real these are.¹⁶

¹¹ Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, p. 278; John R. Hale, *Renaissance Europe, 1480-1520* (London, 1975), p. 34.

¹² Based on Colin McEvedy and Richard Jones, *Atlas of World Population History* (Harmondsworth, 1978), pp. 166-202.

¹³ *The Suma Oriental*, op. cit., p. 269 ff., summarized in M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs, *Asian Trade and European influence in the Indonesian Archipelago between 1500 and about 1630* (The Hague, 1962), pp. 87-88.

¹⁴ Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, pp. 440-41.

¹⁵ *An Account of the Diseases, Natural History, and Medicines of the East Indies*, trans. from the Latin of James Bontius (London, 1776), pp. 177-78; "A Relation of a Voyage made to the East Indies, by Christopher Fryke ... from the year 1680 to the year 1686", in *Voyages to the East Indies, Christopher Fryke and Christopher Schweizer*, ed. C. Ernest Fayle (London, 1929), pp. 76-77; Ma Huan, *Ying-yai Sheng-lan*, p. 113.

¹⁶ W.R. Geddes, *Nine Dayak Nights* (Melbourne, 1957), pp. 7-18.

In the case of the Malay and Acehnese peoples, this urban quality is especially marked. Melaka, Brunei, Pasai, Aceh, and Johor were trading centres without any substantial agricultural hinterlands at all. Ma Huan noted of Melaka that "the fields are infertile and the crops poor; the people seldom practise agriculture".¹⁷ Similarly in Aceh, successive visitors noted the dependence of the capital on imported rice and the little attention to agriculture in the vicinity.¹⁸ So dominant was the trade-based town in these cultures that it is difficult to distinguish the city from the state. The word *negeri* had to serve for both, although it derives from the Sanskrit for city and has passed into modern Malay and Indonesian in the sense of state. Similarly, it is difficult to identify in Malay (or Acehnese) a word to designate a distinct rural community. *Kampung* (Acehnese *gampong*) which is so used today, appears in the *Undang-undang Melaka* as the "compound" of a wealthy individual, a sense in which it was apparently taken into English; *Fasal* 19, for example, gives the law relating to the sale of a *kampung* where trees have been planted by a previous owner. The editor of this difficult text has rightly translated *kampung* as compound, and the word *dusun* as village,¹⁹ although it would appear that *dusun* too refers to private property outside the city and necessarily containing trees.²⁰

A survey of other Indonesian languages does not, incidentally, dispel the impression that we must look beyond the village community as the basic building block of Indonesian society. Javanese *desa* and Batak *huta* are Sanskrit terms with quite different original meaning. *Wanua/benua* is at last an Austronesian word, and its use in the relatively densely-settled rice areas of Java and South Sulawesi may suggest a different pattern here from the maritime world in general. Yet even in these agricultural areas there is a marked tendency in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century for the coastal city to so dominate the hinterland that much of the modern culture of these areas may be seen as formed in the great trading cities of the day.²¹

Having argued that the urban conglomerations of Southeast Asia were relatively large, we should not thereby expect a city pattern similar to that in the Europe or China of the time. The contrast between the Southeast Asian city and its northern counterpart could hardly be more great, so that northern visitors sometimes scarcely recognized the tropical centres as cities at all. In approaching the Southeast Asian city we may be wise to shed most of our preconceptions about how a Renaissance city ought to function.

What struck visitors from the Mediterranean and China most forcibly was the greenness of the southern cities, so that the boundary between city and countryside seemed almost non-existent. The city of Aceh, often the first Southeast Asian experience for travellers from the West, was described at its height as,

¹⁷ Ma Huan, *Ying-yai Sheng-lan*, p. 109.

¹⁸ *The Voyages of Sir James Lancaster to Brazil and the East Indies, 1591-1603*, ed. Sir William Foster (London, 1940), p. 136; "Memoires de Voyage aux Indes Orientales du General Beaulieu, dresses par luy-mesme", in Melchisedech Thevenot, *Relations de divers voyages curieux*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1666), p. 98; Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round the Bay of Bengal*, ed. Sir Richard Temple (London, 1905), p. 294.

¹⁹ Liaw Yock-fang, *Undang-undang Melaka* [The laws of Melaka] (The Hague, 1976).

²⁰ *The Suma Oriental*, op. cit., p. 260.

²¹ H.J. de Graaf and Th. G. Th. Pigeaud, *De Eerste Moslems Vorstendommen op Java* (The Hague, 1976), pp. 165-66.

very spacious, built in a Wood, so that we could not see a house till we were upon it. Neither could we go into any place, but we found houses and great concourse of people: so that I think the town spreadeth over the whole land.²²

A French Jesuit has left us a more lyrical description of the same city even in its decline almost a century later:

Imagine a forest of coconut trees, bamboos, pineapples and bananas, through the midst of which passes quite a beautiful river all covered with boats; put in this forest an incredible number of houses made of canes, reeds and bark, and arrange them in such a manner that they sometimes form streets, sometimes separate quarters: divide these various quarters by meadows and woods: spread throughout this forest as many people as you see in your towns, when they are well populated; you will form a pretty accurate idea of Achen [Aceh] and you will agree that a city of this new style can give pleasure to passing strangers....

Everything is neglected and natural, rustic and even a little wild. When one is at anchor one sees not a single vestige or appearance of a city, because the great trees along the shore hide all its houses.²³

How do we explain the liking of Southeast Asians, still evident today, for continuing a "rural" pattern of life in the city, with coconut and fruit trees surrounding an open, wooden elevated house, in contrast to the compact urban models of the Mediterranean and China? Climate was obviously one factor. The treeless, congested quarters which the Chinese built of stone or brick beside the Southeast Asian market centres, and which Europeans began to emulate in Manila after the 1583 fire and in Batavia in the mid-seventeenth century, were stuffy, exposed to the sun, and unhealthy. By building on the ground, they suffered from problems of flooding and of drainage and waste disposal from which the typical elevated pole house of maritime Southeast Asia was immune. Eventually, these alien urban models became pestilential and were abandoned to the poorest urban inhabitants.

The enormous importance of fruit trees, particularly the coconut and banana, to the domestic economy must also have made city-dwellers reluctant to abandon this valuable security against a total dependence on the market. Indeed, whether we look at the Malay law codes²⁴ or at foreign descriptions,²⁵ it is clear that fruit-bearing trees, not land or buildings, were regarded as the principal item of immovable property. Land alone was not of value in Indonesian *adat* but the improvements on it. When the ruler of Makasar measured out a plot of land for an English factory in 1613, he required the English admiral, Jourdain, to recompense the twenty families who had previously occupied it at a rate of half a *real* per coconut tree. The Makasarese houses were simply carried off to new sites by the owners, while the land itself had no intrinsic value. Jourdain was delighted with his sixty coconut trees, along with "many others of divers sorts ... very pleasant".²⁶

²² *Voyages and Works of John Davis, the Navigator*, ed. A.H. Markham (London, 1880), p. 147.

²³ Pere de Premare, S.J., to Pere de la Chaise, Canton, 17 Feb. 1699, in new edition of *Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses, ecrites des missions etrangeres (de la Compagnie de Jesus)*, vol. 16, ed. Y.M.H. de Querbeuf (Paris, 1780-83), pp. 344-45.

²⁴ Liaw, *Undang-undang Melaka*, pp. 106-9; J.M. Gullick, *Indigenous Political Systems of Western Malaya* (London, 1958), p. 28.

²⁵ *De Eerste Schipvaart der Nederlanders naar Oost-Indie onder Cornelis de Houtman (1595-97)*, vol. 1, ed. G.P. Rouffaer and J.W. Izerman (The Hague, 1915-29), p. 129.

²⁶ *The Journal of John Jourdain, 1608-1617, Describing His Experiences in Arabia, India, and the Malay Archipelago*, ed. W. Foster (Cambridge, 1905), p. 293.

Cultural preference cannot have been the whole explanation for this pattern, however. No doubt the inhabitants of Naples or Canton would also have welcomed the opportunity of having a few fruit trees had it been open to them. The spaciousness of the Southeast Asian city was made possible by the absence (typically) of a constraining wall. This made possible the continuum between town and country, so that, as Crawford put it, “a town, even when it consists of many thousand inhabitants, is no more than an aggregate of villages”.²⁷

In the Mediterranean the pattern of building towns on strategic hilltops, clustered behind stone walls, was of great antiquity. The Etruscans and the Hebrews were building in this fashion for centuries before the modern European and Islamic cities began to take shape behind their medieval walls. In maritime Southeast Asia, the tradition was quite different. River sites and valleys were preferred to hilltops, and the whole concept of defence was of a quite different nature. Frequently the palace area itself, the *kraton*, was surrounded by a wall, but as Van Goens said after describing the palace of the Javanese king, “Mataram is beyond this a completely open place, which bases its strength on the number of villages around it”.²⁸ The typical Malay-style riverine city, like Melaka, Johor, Brunei, or Aceh, had no wall at all, except when bamboo stockades were erected for temporary defence. When Cheng Ho visited Java none of the four major cities of the island (Tuban, Gresik, Surabaya, and Majapahit) was described as having walls (at least in the Chinese sense), though the king’s residence at Majapahit was surrounded by a brick wall thirty feet high.²⁹

However, by the early seventeenth century, Banten, Japara, Tuban, Pati, and Surabaya on the Javanese seaboard had built brick walls, as had Makasar and Ayutthaya (1550) — all probably influenced by the European military threat and the example of Portuguese or Chinese. These walls remained exceptions, and however extensive they were they never embraced the whole city. We are told of the stockaded “inner city” of Pahang: “Nobody lives within it except the Nobles; they keep the ordinary folk outside in the suburbs.” Even this inner stockaded area was “full of coconut and other trees, so that it gives the appearance rather of a suburb of courtyards and gardens than a populated city”.³⁰ A similar pattern obtained at Banten, Ayutthaya, and Pegu, all of which had enormous “suburbs” despite the spaciousness within their walls.

In all these cities which did eventually build walls around their aristocratic core, much of the commercial life of the town was situated outside the walls — including most of the rural newcomers, all the pig-eating foreigners, and many crafts and other urban activities. There was little sense of a specific city area which had to be defended against all enemies, and no sense at all that the city was a different world from the suburbs and the countryside, with different rights and responsibilities as in Europe. In the most typical Southeast Asian city, in fact, the unit of defense in so

²⁷ John Crawford, *History of the Indian Archipelago*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1820), p. 168.

²⁸ “Gezantschap van 1648”, in *De Vijf Gezantschapreizen van Rijklof van Goens naar het Hof van Mataram, 1648-1654* (The Hague, 1956), p. 66.

²⁹ Ma Huan, *Ying-yai Sheng-lan*, pp. 86-87.

³⁰ “Historische Verhael Vande treffelijcke Reyse, gedaen naer de Oost-Indian ende China, met elf Schepen, door den Manhasten Admiraal Cornelis Matelief de Jonge, inde jaren 1605, 1606, 1607 & 1608”, in *Begin ende Voortgang Vande Vereenigde Neederlantsche Geoctroyeerde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, ed. Isaac Commelin (Amsterdam, 1646), vol. 3 of 1974 reprint, p. 122.

far as it existed at all was not the city but the individual compound, the *kampung*, the cluster of buildings within its bamboo *pagar* (fence) belonging to one rich or powerful man.

That the Acehnese were well aware of the peculiarity of their open city within the broader world of Islam is illustrated in the seventeenth-century *Hikayat Aceh*. The author makes an Acehnese envoy to Constantinople explain the lack of walls in Aceh in terms of the bravery of the Acehnese warriors and their elephants:

All the past rulers since the original ancestors of Sri Perkasa Alam have not fortified the capital (*kota negeri*) ... because God had given them stout hearts and strong character and sound judgement in fighting all their enemies.... And this city (*negeri*) is not fortified as is the custom of other fortified cities because of the very large number of war elephants in this city.³¹

Foreign observers tend to confirm that the vigilance of Aceh's defenders served her pretty well in place of the walls of northern cities.³² Similarly in Banten the city gates were described as "wretched ... but so vigilantly guarded would be hard to approach without notice".³³ Nevertheless, we must clearly look beyond the vigilance of Southeast Asian warriors for an explanation of defensive strategy.

The major point is that manpower, not fixed capital, was regarded as the principal asset which had to be protected in the Southeast Asian city. As we have seen, the population density was very low, and urban centres tended to cluster on the edge of extensive forests. Nature was assumed to be bountiful with the building materials required for a typical house — bamboo, *nipah*, and logs for the frame. These were all available without cost to anyone who had the labour to gather them. The building of a house was therefore a labour cost only, requiring not more than sixty days' labour,³⁴ less than a week's work for a man with his circle of kin. La Loubere alleges that 300 houses burnt in Ayutthaya were rebuilt in two days.³⁵ The man who could build a more splendid home was the one who had a much larger circle of dependents, subjects, or slaves to perform the labour. Furniture too was extremely limited. The most important accumulation of capital by the rich was in the form of gold ornaments and receptacles, weapons, and various bronze items such as *betel* sets, water-carriers, and dishes. There were no inns for visiting traders, who were expected to buy or build their own houses. Except in the biggest cities life was based on the presumption of constant mobility. The really important resource of the rich and powerful was their manpower, whether we call them slaves, bondsmen, clients, or subjects.

The fundamental aim of warfare in Southeast Asia was to increase the available manpower. In the small communities of the Philippines, Celebes, Borneo, and Maluku, this was typically a case of raiding one's neighbours or enemies for slaves. "Some [slaves] are captives in wars that different villages wage against each other, for certain injuries and acts of injustice.... Some are made captives in wars waged by villages that have neither treaty or commerce with them, but go only to rob, without

³¹ Tengku Iskandar, *De Hikajat Atjeh* (The Hague, 1958), pp. 165–66.

³² *Voyages of Sir James Lancaster*, pp. 135–36.

³³ *The Voyages and Travels of J.A. de Mandelslo into the East Indies*, trans. John Davies (London, 1662), p. 113; *De Eerste Schipvaart*, vol. 1, p. 106.

³⁴ Crawford, *History of the Indian Archipelago*, vol. 1, p. 162.

³⁵ Simon de la Loubere, *A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam* (London, 1693), reprinted in Kuala Lumpur, 1969, p. 29.

any cause."³⁶ More powerful states imposed tribute in labour or in kind, but also took large numbers of captives back to their capitals after a serious war. The Goa (Makasar) chronicles tell us that Raja Tunipalangga (1548–66) “was the first raja who took away people and their belongings when he conquered a country”.³⁷ Other subject people had to send labourers to Makasar for specified duties, while from awkwardly distant Timor a tribute of fifty slaves a year was sent to Makasar.³⁸ Sultan Iskandar Muda of Aceh carried off thousands of men to his capital from the areas he conquered — reportedly as many as 11,000 from Pahang in 1618 and 7,000 from Kedah the following year.³⁹ Ayutthaya lost most of its urban population to the Burmese conquerors of 1569.

For this reason, the common reaction to the approach of a powerful foe was either submission, which entailed tribute, or flight. In the latter case the forested hinterland usually provided security for the valuable human resources which were the enemy’s objective. If the town was abandoned the enemy could sack it, burn the houses, and plunder whatever could not be carried away by the fleeing inhabitants, but this was a small loss in relation to the manpower involved. Since most attacks came by sea, the attacker would eventually run short of food and sail away, and the town could be quickly rebuilt. The most serious damage such an attacker could inflict was not in fact to burn houses but to cut down the coconut and fruit trees, which took years to grow, as in the case of the Dutch/Bugis attack on Makasar, or Senapati’s attack on Tuban.⁴⁰

Examples of this pattern of abandoning homes when attacked are everywhere in the literature. Legazpi recommended a peaceful Spanish policy in the Philippines because the Filipinos when attacked,

readily abandon their houses and towns for other places, or precipitately disperse among the mountains and uplands, and neglect to plant the fields. Consequently they die from hunger and other misfortunes.⁴¹

When Albuquerque’s Portuguese attacked Melaka the defenders put up a good fight, to be sure, but their ultimate defence once again was to abandon the capital.

The king of Melaka ... drew himself off from the city, a day’s journey, taking with him some of the Malay merchants and his captains and governors of the land ... being of the opinion that Afonso Dalboquerque simply meant to rob the city and then leave it and sail away with the spoil.⁴²

³⁶ Guido de Lavezaris, “Slavery among the Natives”, in *The Philippine Islands 1493-1803*, vol. 3, ed. Blair and Robertson, p. 286; on Maluku, see also *A Treatise on the Moluccas (c. 1544). Probably the Preliminary Version of Antonio Galvao’s Lost Historia das Molucas*, ed. Hubert Jacobs (Rome, 1971), p. 689; on South Sulawesi, see Diego de Couto, *Da Asia*, vols. 5, 7 (Lisbon, 1786), pp. ii, 87.

³⁷ G.J. Wolhoff and Abdurrahim (eds.), *Sedjarah Goa* (Makasar, n.d.), p. 25.

³⁸ Cornelis Speelman, “Notitie dienende voor Eenen Korten Tijd en tot nader last van de Hooge Regering op Batavia voor den ondercoopman Jan van Oppijnen....”, 1670, vol. 2, p. 21 (Ms., Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal- Land- en Volkenkunde, Leiden (3 sections, separately paginated); *Generale Missiven van Gouverneurs-General en Raden aan Heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, vol. 3, ed. W.Ph. Coolhaas (The Hague, 1960-71), p. 930.

³⁹ *Pieter van den Broecke in Azie*, vol. 1, ed. W.Ph. Coolhaas (The Hague, 1963), p. 177; “Memoires du Voyage...”, vol. 2, p. 83.

⁴⁰ M.C. Ricklefs, *The Kartasura Chronicle* (London, 1978), pp. 28-29.

⁴¹ Miguel Lopez de Legazpi, “Relation of the Filipinas Islands, and of the Character and Condition of Their Inhabitants”, in *The Philippine Islands*, vol. 3, ed. Blair and Robertson, p. 60.

⁴² Braz de Albuquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque*, vol. 3, ed. W. de Gray Birch (London, 1880), p. 129.

When the Malays discovered the Portuguese were playing a different game, their capital continued to shift in response to successive attacks by the Portuguese and later the Acehnese. When an English party went to buy pepper at the once-flourishing town of Indragiri six years after an Acehnese attack, they spent two days looking in vain for where the town had once been, the whole population having fled three days' journey further upstream.⁴³

Warfare and instability of this type were a constant part of life; but because of the high value put on people as against property, casualties from war itself remained very few before the European advent. Large numbers sometimes perished from hunger and disease, or from the dreadful conditions in which they were taken off in captivity, but wars themselves were seldom bitterly fought. A Spanish observer noted in almost the same breath: "These people rob and enslave one another although of the same island and even kindred", but "they do not often dare to kill one another, except by treachery or at great odds" "When attempting to coordinate his Johor allies for an attack on Portuguese Melaka, Admiral Matelief was frustrated at the reluctance of the Malays to commit troops to a serious battle. The raja explained that

for him it was not like the Admiral who gave his men upkeep and wages so that they had to do whatever he said. But here each *Orangkaya* or Nobleman had to bring a certain number of people, and each feared to lose his slaves, which are their only wealth.⁴⁵

In a similar fashion Edmund Scott said of Banten in the early 1600s,

the Javans are very loth to fight if they can chuse, the reason they say is, their wealth lyeth altogether in slaves, so that if their slaves be kild, they are beggared, wherefore they would alwaies rather come to a set feast than a pitched battaile.⁴⁶

This pattern of warfare, taken together with the environment, helps to explain the open, green, semi-rural character of the Southeast Asian city. Where walls were built for specific defensive needs they did not essentially interrupt this pattern. Houses continued to be built of wood, with one living level elevated on poles above the ground or the water, surrounded by abundant trees. There was no vertical building, perhaps because as in other parts of the Muslim world a lofty house was considered "a mark of odious pride",⁴⁷ but more immediately because there was no pressure to do so, because life was pleasanter in the traditional wooden house, and because a more substantial house might have to be abandoned anyway.

As cities grew to substantial conurbations, however, this dispersed pattern of modest wooden houses undoubtedly did create problems. The one which caused most concern to Europeans was fire, which constantly afflicted the more closely-settled parts of the big cities. Aceh reportedly lost 800 houses in 1602, Makasar

⁴³ "Consultation held in Parranap by Thomas Ivey, Samuel Boys and Geo. Goldington, 20 December 1634", India Office Library, E/3/15.

⁴⁴ Diego de Artieda, "Relation of the Western Islands Called Filipinas", in *The Philippine Islands*, vol. 3, Blair and Robertson, p. 197.

⁴⁵ "Historische Verhael Vande...", vol. 3, p. 17.

⁴⁶ Edmund Scott, "An Exact Discourse of the Subtilities, Fashions, Policies, Religion, and Ceremonies of the East Indians, as well Chynese as Javans, There Abyding and Dwelling", 1606, reprinted in *The Voyage of Sir Henry Middleton to the Moluccas, 1604-1606*, ed. Sir William Foster (London, 1943), p. 142.

⁴⁷ Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life*, pp. 394-95.

1,260 in 1614, and Ayutthaya 10,000 in 1545, while most of Patani was burnt in a slave revolt of 1613. In his usual robust style, Edmund Scott described the constant fear in which those merchants who did have large stores of goods to protect lived in Banten:

Oh this worde fire! Had it been spoken neere mee, either in English, Mallayes, Javans, or Chyna, although I had been sounde asleepe, yet I should have leaped out of my bedde; the which I have done sometimes when our men in their watch have but whispered one to another of fire.... Such was the fears wee lived in, and not without cause; for many times, when I have watched while [until] twelve a clock at night, I have been rayed up after three times before morning by alarames of fire. And I protest before God I would not sleepe so many nights in feare againe for the best shippes lading of pepper that ever came from thence.⁴⁸

In pre-European Southeast Asia, the richer merchants safeguarded their trade goods by storing them in a godown (*gedong*) or stone warehouse, partly below ground level. Such buildings were a feature of Javanese coastal cities as late as 1600, and wealthy Javanese used to sit or sleep on the roofs of their godowns.⁴⁹ The Portuguese also described such subterranean godowns in Melaka before the conquest.⁵⁰ By the seventeenth century, however, there was a widespread suspicion of anybody except the king building in permanent materials, and European factors everywhere were pleading in vain for this right. The most obvious reason for this suspicion on the part of Southeast Asians was the way the Portuguese had become impregnable since building their forts in Melaka and Maluku — a lesson driven home a century later when the ruler of Jakarta proved incapable of expelling the Dutch from his territory once they had built a stone fort.

The case of Aceh suggests that there may also have been domestic factors behind this fear of stone. According to what Beaulieu was told in 1620, the *orangkaya* (merchant-nobles) of sixteenth century Aceh,

had beautiful, large, solid houses, with cannons at their doors, and a large number of slaves, both as guards and servants.... Such great power very much diminished royal power, and even safety.⁵¹

The subsequent absolutist rulers of the early seventeenth century, culminating in Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607–37), did away with these overmighty vassals. They

forbade anyone to build in stone, to have cannon at their houses, or to make defensive trenches within or without ... [and] provided an example of how future houses should be built, which was of only one story, with matting walls, as they are today.⁵²

Although a similar rule appears to have applied in much of the Malay world and in Ayutthaya (though foreigners were there excepted), we should note that in Aceh itself, when the *orangkaya* re-established their supremacy by the early eighteenth century, the houses were again described as being of brick and stone.⁵³

⁴⁸ Scott, "An Exact Discourse...", pp. 97–98.

⁴⁹ Ma Huan, *Ying-yai Sheng-lan*, p. 87; *De Eerste Schipvaart*, vol. 1, p. 108.

⁵⁰ Godinho de Eredia, "Notices of Malacca, Meridional India, and Cathay", trans. J.V. Mills, *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 8 (1930): 32–33; Albuquerque, *The Commentaries*, vol. 3, 127.

⁵¹ "Memoires du Voyage ...", vol. 2, p. 111.

⁵² *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 112–13.

⁵³ William Marsden, *The History of Sumatra*, reprint of 3rd ed. (Kuala Lumpur, 1966), p. 455.

Another problem, by no means unique to Southeast Asia, was that of food supply for the largest cities. It is probable that the pattern of maintaining fruit trees, chickens, and even goats around the urban compound did give a greater security against the danger of famine than the poor of European and Chinese cities enjoyed. Fish was the main protein source, and most maritime cities were self-sufficient in this regard. Rice was the principal article of import. As long as the market was functioning freely, this seems to have presented few problems. Rice was the largest bulk item of Southeast Asian trade, and the cities were drawing enough wealth from international trade to make them rather indifferent to domestic rice cultivation. The system of blockades on such ports as Banten and Makasar which the Dutch introduced, however, and the uncertainties of the export market once quasi-monopolistic Europeans were the principal buyers, revealed the vulnerability of these cities which had become so dependent on the import of rice.

Finally, the social and political structure of these large cities can be only briefly touched on here. It is striking that during the period of rapid growth of each of these major cities there was a remarkable degree of political pluralism within them. New cities could only grow by attracting traders to them, and this in turn was only possible if the richer merchants believed they would enjoy reasonable security for themselves, their dependents, and their goods in their new home. The Goa Chronicle specifies the privileges which were granted to Malay traders when they came to settle in Makasar during the reign of Tunipalangga (1548-66), all of them limiting the power of the ruler to interfere with their homes, families, and dependents in the manner he did with his Makasarese subjects.⁵⁴ In most cases, however, it was impossible to maintain a clear distinction between foreign merchant and indigenous aristocrat over several generations. Intermarriage was common, the aristocracy engaged in trade, and the trader could only maintain his position by entering the life of the court and assuming a role both in warfare and in government.

The merchant aristocracy which was the dominant class in these port cities at their period of most vigorous growth was able to limit the arbitrary power of the ruler by some device, either fortuitous or designed. In Patani a succession of four queens occupied the throne during the century of greatest commercial activity; in Banten the ruler was a minor during two successive reigns (1580-1616) which covered the city's rise to major international status. In Makasar the ruler's power was limited during the same crucial period of growth by the role of successive outstanding members of the Tallo' dynasty who occupied the office of *Pabicara* (Chancellor), while a somewhat similar balance existed in Melaka between the Sultan and the powerful Bendahara dynasty. In sixteenth-century Aceh, if the Beaulieu account quoted above can be believed, there was a rapid succession of Sultans who were the virtual playthings of the overmighty *orangkaya*. Similarly the sixty years of female rule after 1641, usually described in connection with the decline of Aceh, may in reality have been the major cause for Aceh's remaining a wealthy and pluralistic commercial centre long after all the other cities we have discussed were destroyed or impoverished.

The *orangkaya*, as I label the dominant class of these pluralistic cities, derived most of their wealth from international trade. Internally, however, it was not fixed or liquid capital which gave these men their power, but their control over men. The political institutions of their states provided few safeguards against confiscation of

⁵⁴ Wolhoff and Abdurrahim (eds.), *Sedjarah Goa*, pp. 26-28.

their assets by an ambitious or suspicious ruler. We could find examples in almost every state of the wealthiest citizen being executed on some flimsy charge and his goods and slaves confiscated by the King. The well-known case of Tun Mutahir in Melaka is but the prototype of many such incidents.

This insecurity of property was one of the reasons why the *orangkaya* preferred to base their power and status on their dependent manpower. The earliest Spanish chroniclers all commented that there seemed no overarching order in the Philippines: "He who owns most slaves, and the strongest, can obtain anything he pleases".⁵⁵ In relation to all that we have learnt since about the varieties of mutual obligation between master and subject in the rural Philippines, we might be more cautious than the early Spaniards in using the term "slavery" here.

In the urban context, on the other hand, there is really no sense trying to dodge this term. In the cities of seventeenth-century Southeast Asia, as in those of fifth-century Athens or Augustan Rome, the existence of private slavery was an extremely important source of countervailing power for private citizens against the state.

It is important to note the very high cost of labour in these cities, especially in relation to the low cost of food. The first Dutch ship to reach Java, in 1598, had to pay the same wages in money terms (20 guilder cents a day) as their descendents were paying to Javanese labourers 320 years later, when money could buy only a fraction the amount. If we calculate wages in terms of prices, a day's labour could buy about ten times the daily need for food in Banten and about thirty times in Ayutthaya.⁵⁶ The point is that this was not a wage paid to the labourer, but a rental for slaves. It is gratifying to be able to quote a Persian rather than a European visitor on this point.

As in the rest of Below the Winds the natives (in Aceh) reckon high rank and wealth by the quantity of slaves a person owns. It is their custom to rent slaves. They pay the slave a sum of money, which he gives to his master, and then they use the slave that day for whatever work they wish.⁵⁷

There appears to have been virtually no free market for indigenous and Southeast Asian labour until the late nineteenth century, which helps explain both the European reliance on slaves and migrant Chinese labour, and later the cultivation system.

We could fairly say of Southeast Asia, as Bloch says of the Roman Empire, that "the slave was everywhere: in the fields, in shops, in workshops, in offices. The rich kept hundreds or thousands; and one had to be quite poor not to own at least one."⁵⁸ The basic source of a plentiful slave labour supply has always been warfare, for which there was abundant opportunity in Southeast Asia — between rival ethnic groups, between rival lineages of the same ethnic group, and between Muslim and non-Muslim. As Crawford noted, "slavery is the mildest lot of a prisoner of war".⁵⁹ In addition, debt was an important source of bondage in Southeast Asia, and the growth of money exchange appears to have extended rather than reduced the phenomenon.

⁵⁵ Legazpi, "Relation of the Filipinas Islands ...", vol. 3, p. 54.

⁵⁶ *De Eerste Schipvaart*, vol. 1, pp. 118 and 129; George Vinal Smith, "The Dutch East India Company in the Kingdom of Ayutthaya, 1604–1694" (Ph. D. diss., Northern Illinois University, 1974), p. 316.

⁵⁷ *The Ship of Sulaiman*, trans. John O'Kane (London, 1972), pp. 177–78.

⁵⁸ Marc Bloch, *Slavery and Serfdom in the Middle Ages: Selected Essays by Marc Bloch*, trans. W.R. Beer (Berkeley, Calif., 1975), p. 1.

⁵⁹ Crawford, *History of the Indian Archipelago*, vol. 1, p. 247.

The largest private slave-owners, the wealthy *orangkaya* who invariably also had a court title and function, had hundreds or thousands of men under them. Utama di Raja, the most powerful Javanese in Melaka, was said to have six to eight thousand, and the Shahbandar of late seventeenth-century Aceh a thousand.⁶⁰ One Bantenese *orangkaya* gave as a marriage portion for his daughter thirty male and sixty female slaves.⁶¹ Further down the social hierarchy, we are told of Makasar that the phrase *nya ata* (he has slaves) was used to designate a man of substance.⁶² In Aceh, “the poorer sort, who have not a slave of their own, will yet hire one to carry a *mas* (15 pence) worth of rice for them, though not 100 paces from their own homes, scorning to do it themselves”.⁶³ The Dutch conqueror of Makasar, Speelman, hoped that the rice trade would save the Makasarese from economic ruin, and enable the ordinary people to put by a little saving “which will eventually serve to buy a male or female slave in order to be free from labour themselves”.⁶⁴

In visual terms we have some idea how the pluralistic style of city appeared from a Dutch report on Banten in 1596:

The city is divided into many sections, and over each section a nobleman is placed to protect it in time of war, fire, or whatever, and each has his own jurisdiction and enclosure differing from the others....

Each nobleman has ten or twelve men watching in his house throughout the night. When you enter their houses, you first encounter a square area they call *Pacebam* (Jav. *peseban*), where they give audience to those who seek it, and there the above-mentioned guard is placed, under a hut roofed with reeds, or palm leaves, under which they also hold audience. In a corner of this square they also have their own mosque, where they perform their mid-day prayer, and beside it a well, where they wash. Going further in, one comes to a door with a narrow passage, which is strengthened with many stores and ships, in which many of their slaves live for their protection so that they cannot be attacked by their enemies at night; for they neither trust anyone, nor are faithful to them. Their houses are built upon four, eight, or ten pillars of wood, beautifully carved, being covered with palm-leaves above, and left completely open below to enjoy the coolness.... They have no upper rooms or attics on which they can lie, but only on the warehouse, which is a brick house one story high, without windows.⁶⁵

This pattern, borne out by seventeenth-century maps of Banten and Makasar, suggests the model of a segmentary state where the periphery mirrors the centre, save that the whole model was concentrated on a few square miles of urban territory. The compound of each *orangkaya* replicated the palace itself, with its own defences, its own mosque, its own *peseban* (or *alun-alun*).

Life in such a city was apt to be dangerous and short, despite the night curfew which was intended to put limits to violence. The very openness of the city, in economic and political as well as physical terms, ensured a high degree of lawless competition for advantage. Scott's account of his three years in Banten affords, as he

⁶⁰ Albuquerque, *The Commentaries ...*, vol. 3, p. 109; Lettera di Giovanni da Empoli, ed. A. Bausani (Rome, 1970), p. 140; William Dampier, *Voyages and Discoveries*, ed. C. Wilkinson (London, 1931), p. 98.

⁶¹ “A Relation of a Voyage ...”, p. 79.

⁶² Nicholas Gervaise, *An Historical Description of the Kingdom of Makasar in the East-Indies* (London, 1701), p. 82.

⁶³ Dampier, *Voyages and Discoveries*, p. 94.

⁶⁴ Speelman, “Notitie dienande ...”, vol. 3, p. 67.

⁶⁵ De Eerste Schipvaart, vol. 1, pp. 107–8.

says, "little else but murther, theft, warres, fire, and treason",⁶⁶ in which the English themselves were by no means the slowest to draw blood. The mighty Iskandar Muda portrayed a similar situation in the Aceh of his predecessors, which he claimed had been,

a haven for murderers and brigands, where the stronger trampled on the weak, and the great oppressed the small; where one had to defend oneself against armed robbers in broad daylight, and to barricade one's house at night.⁶⁷

In this respect at least there may have been similarities with the contemporary Renaissance cities of Italy.

I have argued elsewhere⁶⁸ that this pluralistic and dynamic urban pattern was not permanent. A tendency towards royal absolutism and monopoly is marked in Aceh, Banten, Makasar, and Ayudhya in the course of the seventeenth century, prior to the military defeat and commercial decline of the latter half of the century. In this paper, we can only draw attention to some of the market features of the period of growth in Southeast Asian cities, and to suggest that we look at these cities in their own terms before making any assumptions about the way in which they ought to have behaved.

⁶⁶ Scott, "An Exact Discourse ...", p. 105.

⁶⁷ "Memoires du Voyage...", vol. 2, p. 62.

⁶⁸ Anthony Reid, "Trade and the Problems of Royal Power in Aceh, c. 1550-1700", in *Pre-colonial State Systems in Southeast Asia: The Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Bali-Lombok, South Celebes*, ed. A. Reid and L. Castles (Kuala Lumpur, 1975), pp. 45-55; Anthony Reid, "Trade and Power in 16th and 17th Century Southeast Asia", *Proceedings of the 7th IAHA Conference* (Bangkok: International Association of Historians of Asia, 1979), pp. 391-419.