Melaka in the Arabic, Persian and Turkish Sources

A.C.S. Peacock

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As the first Muslim state on the Malay peninsula, founded around 1400, the polity of Melaka has assumed a near mythical status in the historiography of Southeast Asia, and Malaysia in particular. Melaka’s crucial position on the east-west trade routes is usually thought to have brought it to prominence as a commercial emporium, while the fall of the sultanate to the Portuguese in 1511 is frequently taken to mark a watershed in the history of the region, signalling the beginnings of European penetration. However, it was perhaps primarily for its cultural and religious legacy that Melaka was remembered. It is regarded as having played a crucial role in the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia, with later states throughout the region claiming a connection to it (see, for example Hall 1981: 221–235; Andaya and Andaya 2015: 82–129). As the crucible in which a Malay-Islamic culture was forged, Melaka’s past is commemorated in the later historical work Sejarah Melayu, while one of the classics of Malay literature, the tales of the hero Hang Tuah, set in 15th-century Melaka, but probably written down later, similarly recalls the zenith of the sultanate.

However, the history of 15th-century Melaka remains in many respects obscure, even in such crucial questions as its political history and the date of its conversion to Islam. This is partly because the above mentioned Malay sources are of later date, and partly...
because they are, even the Sejarah Melayu – sometimes misleadingly titled in English the Malay Annals – predominantly literary and ethical in intent, with little interest in recording ‘facts’. As a result, Chinese sources have played a crucial role in the reconstruction of the 15th-century history of Melaka, and these have been exploited by generations of scholars (e.g. Groonevelt 1876; Wake 1964; Wade 1997; Heng 2022). Naturally, however, they concentrate on Melaka’s relations with China. A few details are added by European texts, in particular the Portuguese apothecary Tomé Pires, who wrote in Melaka in 1512–1515, shortly after its fall. As a result, despite Melaka’s reputation as a centre for Islam, we are reliant to a surprising degree on non-Islamic sources to understand it, and indeed, it is first attested in Chinese sources in 1403. Nonetheless, even non-Islamic sources insist on the importance of Melaka’s connections with the Middle East. Tomé Pires (1944, II: 240) records how Melaka itself was founded by communities of ‘rich Moorish merchants’ which included ‘Parsees’ (Persians), ‘Arabian Moors’ and Bengalis who had moved there from Pasai at the encouragement of Iskandar Syah. He also records that the population of Melaka comprised, among others, ‘Moors [i.e. Muslims] from Cairo, Mecca, Aden … Rumes [Rumis, Anatolians], Turks, Turkomans’ (Pires 1944, II: 268). The Malay sources also claim links with the Middle East are deeply embedded in the history and even the name of Melaka. According the Sejarah Melayu, when relating the foundation of the sultanate,

All the merchants from above the winds and below the winds came to Melaka; the port of Melaka was very busy in that period. It was named Malakat by all the Arabs, meaning the meeting place of all merchants, because there are many different types of commerce there. (Shellabear 2017: 78, my translation; cf. Brown 1952: 98)²

The same source boasts that Melaka’s rulers could claim descent not just from Alexander the Great, ruler of Rum, but from the Sasanian shah Anushirwan the Just (Shellabear 1975: 78; Brown 1952: 17). The Sejarah Melayu also recounts how the conversion of the sultan Muhammad Syah was effected by an Arab scholar who came by boat from Jeddah, Saiyid Abdul Aziz (Shellabear 1975: 72; Brown 1952: 53-4), while Sufism was brought by a Meccan scholar, Maulana Abu Bakar, who sailed from Jeddah to Melaka to induct its rulers into the Sufi secrets in the book written by his master, Maulana Abu Isyak (Shellabear 2017: 150–151; Brown 1952: 100). If the Sejarah Melayu is of course a semi-mythical narrative that should not be read literally – quite apart from the numerous problems of the date of the various extant versions of it, all of which were evidently compiled long after Melaka’s fall – it is nonetheless striking how these Middle Eastern connections feature at key moments in the city’s history. They are also reflected in the Hikayat Hang Tuah, which records the journey of its eponymous hero to the Hijaz, Syria, Egypt, and the land of Rum in the west, as well as his mastery of Arabic (Kassim Ahmad 2008: 495).

At least in 17th-century Johor, where these texts probably reached their current form, and which claimed to be the successor to Melaka, such links with the Middle East constituted a crucial means by which the legitimacy of their predecessors’ sultanate was realised. Yet it is hard to put much flesh on them on the basis of the indigenous Malay sources, or indeed the European or Chinese ones. The purpose of this article is

²Maka segala dagang atas angin dan bawah angin sekaliyannya datang ke Melaka; terlalu ramai banda Melaka pada zaman itu. Maka oleh segala orang Arab dinamainya Malakat, ertinya perhimpunan segala dagang, kerana banyak jenis dagangan ada di sana.
to re-examine Melaka in the period in the period of the sultanate through the evidence of Arabic, Persian and Turkish texts. To date this has scarcely been exploited by scholars, and while these texts do not offer much information on Melaka’s political history, they do provide perspectives on Melaka’s role as a commercial centre, and on Melaka’s connections with west Asia, as well as showing how Melaka was perceived from the perspective of the central Islamic lands. I also briefly survey our indigenous Arabic sources from 15th-century Melaka, comprising the epigraphic evidence of tombstones.

The Arabic geographical tradition

Before analysing our sources on Melaka, it is necessary first to consider how information about Southeast Asia entered the Arabic literary tradition. Links between the Middle East and Southeast Asia predate both the foundation of Melaka and indeed Islam, although they doubtless intensified in the early Islamic period. Since the 8th century, if not before, Middle Eastern merchants and sailors regularly made their way across the Indian Ocean. The wealth of the Abbasid Caliphate fuelled demand for a host of exotic products, and substantial communities of Muslim merchants settled in China. Southeast Asia, and the coast of the Malay peninsula, were a crucial stop on the way to China and they thus feature in the Arabic geographical works that described the routes across the Indian Ocean, one of the earliest of which is the *al-Masalik wa’l-Mamalik* (‘Routes and Realms’) by Ibn Khuradhdhibh composed in 846–847. Such works seem to have drawn on the accounts of travellers returning from the region to the Middle East, and above all from the literature of mirabilia concerning the Indian Ocean and the East that also ultimately derived from the same oral accounts, of which the most famous examples are the text now known as *Akhbar al-Sin wa’l-Hind* (‘Reports of China and India’), written in 851, and the ‘*Aja’ib al-Hind* (‘Wonders of India’) by Buzurg b. Shahriyar of Ramhurmuz, composed in the 10th century. Information derived from classical Greek and Indian sources also sometimes appears in the medieval Arabic travel accounts, although this constitutes a much lesser theme. Occasionally, we have what purport to be first hand narratives of visits to the Malay peninsula, such as that of the Abu Dulaf al-Muhalhil, writing in c.940, who describes visiting the great city of Kalah, although the authenticity of his report has been impugned (Tibbetts 1979: 9–10, 39–41).

Kalah is the principal location in the Malay peninsula discussed by these sources; it was evidently the main predecessor to Melaka on the peninsula’s west coast – a centre both for international trade between China and the Middle East and for the export of local Southeast Asia products. It is described by Abu Dulaf and others as a great emporium famed for its tin mines as well as the ships that frequented it, seeking to exchange aloeswood, camphor, sandalwood, ivory, tin, ebony, brazilwood, and spices. Like Melaka subsequently, it seems to have become the easternmost point that Arab seafarers

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3Although some of the material presented here has long since been published, starting with the study of Ferrand (1913–1914) and also the important work of Tibbetts (1971 and 1979), most discussions have concentrated on the philological and topographical difficulties presented by the texts, without trying to integrate them into a broader historical understanding of the region or the history of Melaka.

4These texts are conveniently gathered in English translation in Tibbetts (1979); see also the discussion and extracts in Wheatley (1961: 216–251); further on trade in this period see George (2015).

5See the discussion in Laffan (2009: 18–21).

6For the original text see Yaqut al-Hamawi (1957, III: 445 (Sub ‘Sin’)).
reached (al-Sirafi 2014, 88–89), probably in response to a closure of China to outside trade; indeed it seems that historically Southeast Asian ports profited from times when China was closed to outside trade, forcing Muslim merchants to relocate elsewhere (Laffan 2009: 19). Thus, patterns of trade constantly shifted, and this may be one factor that accounts for the considerable confusion in the early Arabic sources about these distant locations. The exact site of Kalah is uncertain; it seems most probably to have been in southern Kedah, but it is also likely to refer not to a single place but to a series of emporia the location of which shifted over time (Jacq-Hergoulac’h 2002: 195–196; Wheatley 1961: 216–224).

Most of the later geographers are largely reliant on the sources of the 9th to 10th centuries for their information. This may also indicate a gradual diminution of trade after the 10th century, as Tibbetts argued, or even in the wake of the Zanj rebellion in Iraq in the 9th century (Tibbetts 1979: 10; George 2015: 598–99). Certainly, there is little evidence in this period of travellers from the East Asia reaching ports like Siraf, the major terminus of the Abbasid trade routes in the Middle East, located on the Persian Gulf coast, where their oral accounts could feed into literary texts, as had been the case during the Abbasid heyday. However, such a conclusion may be premature, for the Islamic geographical tradition remained extremely conservative even in periods when dealings with the east are well attested. To give one example, an Ottoman author, Ibn Sipahizade (d.1589), wrote an Arabic compendium of world geography, the Awdah al-Masalik ila Ma’rifat al-Buldan wa’l-Mamalik. During Ibn Sipahizade’s lifetime, the Ottoman empire engaged with intense exchanges with Southeast Asia, receiving repeated embassies from Aceh, to which Istanbul supplied military aid against the Portuguese and even prepared to send an expeditionary force to the region (although in the event this plan had to be aborted). Yet of these links there is not a trace in Ibn Sipahizade’s book. Instead, our Ottoman author quotes his predecessors Ibn Khurdadhbih and Abu’l-Fida (d.1331) on the seaways to China (Ibn Sipahizade 2006: 37, 443).7

The Islamic geographical literature thus does not attempt to reflect contemporary realities, nor is it designed for practical use, and these features apply to the Turkish and Persian language textual production in this genre, which is equally in thrall to Abbasid precedents. It is for these reasons, as well as apparently a general relative lack of interest in the production of new geographical works in the 15th century, that there is no evidence concerning Melaka in the geographies, despite them being a rich source for earlier medieval Southeast Asia. Authors writing after the foundation of Melaka were largely content to emulate their predecessors. Yet on occasion we do know for sure of Middle Eastern travellers who made it to the region despite the silence of the sources. A deposition made before a court in Cairo in 1226 records the death in Kalah of an Alexandrian Jew, Abu’l-Fadl b. Mukhtar (Goitein 1973: 227–228), who was doubtless a merchant involved in the India trade, while the famous Moroccan globe-trotter Ibn Battuta visited Sumatra and possibly China (although this is disputed) in the 1340s.8 Accounts by such individual travellers are rare, and none discuss Melaka, probably because the city had yet to be come into existence. They do however suggest that trade continued.

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7On Ottoman involvement in the Indian Ocean in this period see Casale (2009); Özbaran (2009).
8On Ibn Battuta and his China visit see Waines (2010: 191–195); Ferrand (1913–1914, II: 427–433) sets out the case against its authenticity, largely based on the impossibility of the itineraries in China Ibn Battuta describes.
In fact, our prime sources for information about Melaka are, unlike the geographical works, explicitly designed for practical use. These are the Arabic navigational manuals that date from the late 15th to early 16th centuries, by the hand of two South Arabian sailors, Ahmad b. Majid (c.1432–1437 – after 1500) and Sulayman al-Mahri (active early 16th century). Both men seem to have been associated with the port of al-Shihr, which lies today in Yemen and in the medieval period was a major terminus of the trans-oceanic routes, although Ibn Majid was a native of the port of Julfar, today Ra’s al-Khaymah in the United Arab Emirates. Ahmad b. Majid has gone down in history as the pilot who showed the Portuguese how to cross the Arabian sea, on the basis of a scurrilous allegation in a 16th century Meccan source that was probably motivated by personal rivalry.  

In reality, Ahmad b. Majid seems to have been esteemed by contemporaries as the expert navigator of the Indian Ocean, and he composed some 40 works devoted to the subject, about half of which have come down to us. Ibn Majid’s works are usually in verse, such as his al-Malaqiyya or Melaka poem which gives directions for sailing to Melaka, although his al-Fawa’id fi Usul ‘ilm al-Bahr (‘Useful points on the principles of navigation’), which is a comprehensive manual of Indian Ocean navigation composed in c.1489–1490, is in prose. Verse was probably used to enable the works to be readily memorised by ship captains sailing these routes. Sulayman al-Mahri’s works, however, are in prose; the most notable of them is his al-’Umda al-Mahriyya fi’l-’ulum al-Bahriyya (‘al-Mahri’s support on navigational sciences’), composed in 1511, the year of Melaka’s fall, and represents both a revision and to some degree simplification of Ibn Majid’s Fawa’id. Although these texts have come down to us in rather few manuscripts, this probably reflects not their lack of popularity but rather the fact that they were designed for practical use, either to be memorised or if written (like the prose works), these were doubtless recorded on cheap paper for the information of captains, and probably had a fairly short shelf life (Lunde 2013b: 62).

Ibn Majid cites a number of lost sources written in the 11th or 12th centuries, but as he says, referring to the archipelago by an Arabic calque, Taht al-Rīh, of its Malay name, Di bawah angin, signifying the ‘Lands below the winds’,

Most of their knowledge was in the description of the coasts and the coastal routes mainly ‘under the wind’ and on the Chinese mainland. Now these ports and towns have disappeared, and their names are no longer known and in our day are not used.

(Tibbetts 1971: 71)

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9See the discussion in Tibbetts (1971: 9–11) and Subrahmanyan (1997: 122–125), and for the allegation, see al-Nahrawali (1967: 18–19).

10Ahmad b. Majid spells the name of Melaka in three different ways: مالاکا, ماقة, ماقة. The variation may partly be for metrical reasons, but the different forms are also found in the prose works of Sulayman al-Mahri.

11The works of Ibn Majid and Sulayman al-Mahri are listed in Tibbetts (1971: 18–22, 41–44); see also the discussion in Wheatley (1961: 233–244). They first became known to European scholars through the manuscripts in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS arabe 2292 and MS arabe 2559, which are reproduced in facsimile in Ferrand (1925). Subsequently additional manuscripts of various works by Ibn Majid have been found in Bahrain and in the Zahiriyya library in Damascus, and were used in the critical edition of the Fawa’id (Ahmad b. Majid 1971); Abdallah Yusuf al-Ghunaym draws attention to two additional manuscripts in Oxford and Kuwait, and offers a facsimile of the latter, which in places improves on the readings offered in Khuri’s edition (Ahmad b. Majid 2004). A further manuscript with a different set of works, including the Melaka poem, came to light in St Petersburg, and is published in Ahmad b. Majid (1957); more recently, some of Ibn Majid’s poems have been edited on the basis of a Muscat manuscript (MS 3561 in the collection of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture of Oman): Ahmad b. Majid (2016). In total this makes eight extant manuscripts containing works by Ibn Majid, a fairly small number. Seven manuscripts of Sulayman al-Mahri’s works appear to be known, see al-Mahri (1970).
Ibn Majid’s works are thus based on experience, not book learning, although he was evidently an educated man with a thorough knowledge of the Arabic literary tradition. Some information may have derived from his father and grandfather, who were also sailors. In keeping with his aim of giving specific and useful information, we find no more references to places famed from earlier generations of Arab geographers, such as Kalah. Thus, unlike the geographies, the navigational literature reflects the realities of the period rather than being enthralled to an earlier literary tradition.

Melaka in the works of Ibn Majid and Sulayman al-Mahri

In assessing the treatment of Melaka in the works of our two navigators, we must bear in mind the practical purpose outlined above: their aim is to allow the ship’s captain to navigate his way safely to a given destination, and they are therefore primarily concerned with describing landmarks (such as minor islands or mountains), and the principles for calculating location from the stars. There is, however, little interest in describing the final destination. As a result, the most valuable contribution these works give us is into the exact nature of the trade routes that linked Melaka to the western Islamic world before the coming of the Portuguese. Moreover, it is noteworthy that in both authors, Melaka represents the outer limits of their knowledge. The descriptions of navigation east of the straits of Melaka is vague and evidently based on hearsay rather than actual experience (Tibbetts 1971: 485). This feature may in fact reflect the 15th-century rise of Melaka to a dominant position in trade between east and west. Certainly, in the 14th century, prior to the rise of Melaka, Middle Easterners were regularly frequenting China: even if Ibn Battuta’s account is somewhat suspect, there are several references to links with China in the chronicle of the Rasulid dynasty of Yemen pertaining to the late 13th and early 14th century (al-Khazraji, 1913, IV: 209, 213, 279). We are told, for example, of a certain ‘Abd al-‘Aziz b. Mansur al-Halabi, whose name suggests he was a native of Aleppo, who reached Aden in 1329–1330 and was ‘a Cathay [bilad al-Khita] merchant who came by way of China [al-Sin]’ bringing fabulous wealth from both China and southeast Asia – silks, musk, porcelain, and incense (al-Khazraji 1913, IV: 350). We also have the hard epigraphic evidence of the gravestones of numerous Persians who migrated east and made their careers in Hangzhou (Lane 2018). Yet towards the end of the 14th century, these epitaphs stop being composed, and although al-Khazraji’s Rasulid chronicle continues down to the year 1400, there are no subsequent references to Middle Eastern merchants doing business with China. Despite the early Ming’s engagement with the outside world, as suggested by the Zheng He expeditions (which are noted in Yemeni chronicles) (Sen 2016: 619–620), China was no longer an attractive destination for Middle Eastern merchants, as the Ming dynasty banned foreign merchants and conducted trade through a tribute system. They seem to have been particularly sensitive to attempts by foreigners to gain access to their ports, although land routes through Central Asia remained open. This is demonstrated by the curious tale of an individual named Paliuwan (怕六灣, probably a sinicisation of the Persian name Pahlawan) who led an embassy – probably a commercial enterprise – to China from Samarqand in 1483. On the return, he sought to visit Melaka, a request that

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12 Al-Sin here may denote Southeast Asia, or southern China; it is clearly envisaged as a separate place from Khita.
Chinese officials refused, and which caused consternation when he nonetheless managed to do so, and return thence to Guangzhou. His actions were seen as highly irregular by Ming officials who were evidently keen to keep outsiders from the lucrative Melaka-China trade route (Kauz 2010).

The story of Pahlawan reminds us that not all the foreign Muslim merchants in Melaka were necessarily from the Middle East, and, at least on this occasion, we can document a link with Central Asia. Nonetheless, by far our most detailed descriptions of the Indian Ocean trade routes come from the 15th century Arab sources, for whom Melaka represented the easternmost horizon of their world. While Ahmad b. Majid provides very detailed descriptions of the Malay peninsula coastline, as we will discuss, the clearest information about trade routes linking the Middle East and Melaka comes from Sulayman al-Mahri’s *al-’Umda al-Mahriyya* which lists the precise dates at which weather conditions permit embarking on voyages from Arabian ports.¹³ It is clear that India was often an intermediary stop, and Sulayman lists sailing dates to Melaka along with Sumatra, Tenasserim, Martaban and Bengal starting from Gujarat, Konkan, Malabar, the Carnic coast (Barr al-Nat) and the Maldives. Although Tomé Pires states that Middle Eastern merchants could not reach Melaka in a single monsoon, forcing them to stop at Gujarat (Pires 1944, II: 269), Ahmad b. Majid’s *al-Ma’laqiyya* assumes the ship is starting from Calicut to Melaka (Ahmad b. Majid, *al-Ma’laqiyya*, fol. 97b in Ahmad b. Majid 1957). At any rate, a location on the west coast of India seems to have been a normal intermediary stop. However, Sulayman al-Mahri indicates there was also a direct route from Arabia to these Southeast Asian locations, from the ports of Aden, al-Shihr, Dhofar and Muscat (Sulayman al-Mahri 1970, 113-114, 116-117; Figure 1). Travelling in the opposite direction, monsoon dates for travelling from Melaka to Mecca, Aden and Hormuz are given (al-Mahri 1970: 118). Sulayman al-Mahri (1970: 182-185, 189-190) only gives detailed sailing instructions for two such routes, from the Gujarati port of Diu to Melaka and from Melaka back to Aden. The latter is of particular interest as it describes the direct route between Melaka and the Middle East. Leaving Melaka, the ship should follow the coast of the Malay peninsula northwards to Pulau Sembilan, which has been identified with the islands at the entrance to the Perak river (Tibbetts 1979: 238). From here the ship should cut across the open sea to the Nicobar islands and then on, keeping Ceylon to the right, to the Maldives. From there the ship should make for Cape Guardafui (in modern Somalia), whence it can head for Aden (al-Mahri 1970: 189-190).¹⁴

These voyages are probably included precisely because they were regular and much frequented routes. Yet their viability was determined by the monsoons, as well as the currents. Theoretically, ships from Arabia could make the journey eastwards with the Southwest monsoon in the spring and return with the Northeast monsoon in the autumn and winter. In between was a season known as *ghalq al-bahr* or the ‘locking up of the sea’ when the monsoon winds were strongest, preventing all travel, which in south Arabia took place in the months of July and August. It seems clear that the rigid stipulations of the navigational manuals were not always adhered to in practice, in part because

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¹³The same topic is also treated by Ahmad b. Majid, but with only passing reference to Southeast Asia (see Tibbetts 1971: 225–242).

¹⁴It is possible these Arab accounts represent a distinct simplification, for example, given the serious difficulties the route through the Maldives must have risked. On this point see Forbes (1981: 75–77).
the switch between monsoons was not entirely clear cut. It is also possible that profit motives encouraged some to risk putting to sea in dangerous weather, given how frequently Ahmad b. Majid warns of the foolishness of doing so (Tibbetts 1979: 240–242). Certainly, he makes clear that the set sailing dates could be a major inconvenience for merchants:

From Java, Sumatra, Malacca and Tanasari [Tenasserim] to Bengal sailing takes place from the 90th to 140th days [of the solar year, 20 February–11 April] and even to the 160th days. From Sanf [Champa] and China to Malacca, Java, Sumatra, Palibang [Palembang] and that area they travel in al-Tirma meaning in the spring of the year, i.e. the first hundred days of the year, and enter Malacca after the departure of the fleet for Kalikut. Thus they either coincide with it or it leaves slightly before their arrival, generally the latter unless they are in a reliable ship coming from Sanf about the New Year or slightly after. They meet the ships coming from Hormuz and Mecca in Malacca and the latest ships reach Malacca [from Sanf] on the 120th (22nd March).

(Tibbetts 1979: 233)

The above passage seems to suggest that while the arrival of ships from China and Champa in Melaka was poorly timed to coincide with ships departing for India, it in fact coincided with the arrival of Middle Eastern ships. Thus, the commodities available for trade may have been to some extent determined by the coincidence of ships in a given location according to the requirements of the monsoon, and, as we shall see, the trade in some Melaka exports to India was actually routed through the Middle East.

The passage to Melaka was thus well known to Middle Eastern merchants and sailors, and this can also be demonstrated by the exceptionally detailed instructions for sailing along the Straits of Melaka preserved in Ahmad b. Majid’s prose Fawa’id and his even more comprehensive verse al-Ma’laqiyya, or Melaka poem. To the Arabs, the Malay peninsula was known as barr al-Siyam or the ‘Siamese coast’. The place names in

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15For a useful discussion see Lunde (2013a).
these texts have already been analysed (Tibbetts 1979: 187–189, 495–497), and there is no need to repeat this work here. It is worth noting that locations such as Pulau Pinang and Kedah are all mentioned, this constituting some of the earliest references in the Islamic sources to these places. Pulau Pinang seems to have had a particular importance as a stop to allow ships to resupply with water (Ahmad b. Majid, al-Ma’laqiyya, fol. 100r, text in Ahmad b. Majid 1957). Ahmad b. Majid is rather dismissive of the challenges of piloting the straits, stating that it does not require the skill of a professional ocean-going navigator (mu’āllim), but that the skill of a tukang is sufficient. The use of this Malay word seems to suggest Middle Eastern ships were accustomed to use a local pilot to guide them through the straits, the most treacherous element of which seems to have been some sand banks named by Ibn Majid Qafasī. Nonetheless, despite Ibn Majid’s confidence, it has been noted that his description of the route from Melaka to Java (contained in his verse al-Hawiya) is largely incoherent. 16 This probably again reflects the fact that in the 15th century few Arab ships proceeded further than Melaka or the east coast of Sumatra.

In general, neither Ahmad b. Majid nor Sulayman al-Mahri provide any more than the most basic topographical information, in keeping with the strictly practical aims of their writings. One exception occurs at the end of Ibn Majid’s al-Ma’laqiyya where he describes, in highly uncomplimentary terms, the scene awaiting the ship when it arrives in Melaka:

The harbour of Malacca is between Pulau Upeh and Sabta. So enter the port successfully moving through five fathoms to four and then the harbour. The people then come out to you – and what people. They have no culture at all. The infidel marries Muslim women while the Muslim takes pagans to wife. You do not know whether they are Muslim or not. They are thieves for theft is rife among them and they do not mind. The Muslim eats dogs for meat for there are no food laws. They drink wine in the markets and do not treat divorce as a religious act. They think little of promises and presents and generally despise them. They appear liars and deceivers in trade and labour. Be careful of them for you cannot mix jewels with ordinary stones.


Ahmad b. Majid’s description of Melaka stands in sharp contrast to the picture depicted in the traditional Malay sources of 15th-century Melaka as a bastion of culture and Islam. That does not mean that Ibn Majid’s description should be taken at face value either: it clearly reflects the alienation of the Middle Easterner to what seemed to him an impossibly unfamiliar environment, and his lack of comprehension of the complex social and ethnic relations in Melaka, where the intermarriage of Chinese and local Malays (as seems to be alluded to here) might have seemed shocking to an outsider. Clearly too, the cosmopolitanism of Melaka with its merchants from every corner of China, Southeast Asia, India and the Middle East would also have created a highly competitive trading environment where the unwary were more likely to end up at the bad end of a business deal than fabulously wealthy.

While our navigational texts are invaluable for portraying the precise ways by which Melaka was connected to the Middle East, they do not however provide any information

16For the text see Ahmad b. Majid (2016: 151ff); for a discussion see Tibbetts (1971: 495–497).
about the commodities traded in the later medieval period. Our best source for commerce entering the Middle East from various points across the Indian Ocean from East Africa to China is a manual of tax administration from Yemen, composed under the reign of the Rasulid Sultan al-Nasir Ahmad (1401–1424). This text, the Mulakhkhas al-Fitan, offers a very detailed survey of goods shipped to Aden, and as one might expect, it lists both Southeast Asian and Chinese products, such as nutmeg (from Banda), cloves (from Maluku), sandalwood, which is specified as originating from Makassar, alongside Chinese bamboo, paper, camphor silk and linen (Rex Smith 2006: 42–44). It also attests a very extensive trade with India. Yet there is no mention specifically of Melaka. This might, of course, be testimony to the fact that it lists products by their place of origin whereas Melaka was primarily a port of transhipment, but it may also reflect the possibility that at the time it was written, Melaka had not yet attained the fame it was to gain during the later 15th century.

As a result, for Melaka’s trade we are largely obliged to rely on European sources, of whom Tomé Pires seems the best informed contemporary. He tells us that in Aden were traded ‘spices and drugs from Malacca, cloves, nutmeg, mace, sandalwood, cubeb, seed pearls and that sort of thing’ (Pires 1944, I: 16). Aden also ‘traded merchandise from Malacca with Bengal in return for many kinds of white cloths, it traded the merchandise from Malacca also with Pegu in exchange for lac, benzoin musk and precious stones’ (Pires 1944, I: 17). The Middle Eastern merchants in Melaka from Cairo, Aden and Mecca would sell Middle Eastern and European products on their way at Cambay in Gujarat, and would buy cloths for resale in Southeast Asia. On reaching Melaka, they would also sell some Middle Eastern products such as rosewater and opium (both specialities of the Meccan merchants), and seeds, grains, tapestries and much incense; this perhaps refers to the export of South Arabian frankincense, whereas the tapestries were most likely purchased in India, which was known for its textile production. In addition to the products listed above, the merchants would purchase porcelain, benzoin, gold, white silk, tin, white damask, coloured silks and ‘birds from Banda for plumes for the Rumes, Turks and Arabs’ (Pires 1944, II: 269–270).

What is described, then, is a highly complex system of trade that the navigational literature only hints at. The sheer range of products and complexity of the supply and distribution networks is remarkable, going far beyond the spices traditionally associated with the Indian Ocean trade. We have, for example, the export of birds of paradise from Banda in the Moluccas via Melaka for resale in the Mamluk or Ottoman lands, plus the export of silks which were presumably of Chinese manufacture. What is perhaps most striking about Tomé Pires’ evidence, however, is his remarks on the way that exports from Melaka are resold to markets in Bengal, and Pegu (in Burma) through Aden. This was doubtless connected to the fact that as, Ahmad b. Majid remarks, the ships leaving Melaka for India would usually be obliged to miss the arrival of ships from China and Champa in order to secure favourable winds. The exigencies of the monsoon thus contributed to this truly global market whereby it was easier for merchants from Bengal and Pegu to purchase such products in Aden than Melaka itself. It seems evident that these networks predated the Portuguese occupation of Melaka, and were initially little affected by the European presence. At the same time, the absence of Melaka from the Mulakhkhas al-Fitan suggests we cannot take the antiquity of these trading networks, or at least Melaka’s place in them, for granted. It may be that in
their form recorded by Tomé Pires, they are largely a creation of the Chinese promotion of Melaka as their window on the world (cf. Wade 2005: 47), and only took real effect in the later part of the 15th century and early 16th century when our navigational treatises and the *Suma Oriental* were composed.

**Arabic in Melaka**

So far, we have concentrated on Middle Eastern sources in Arabic that reflect information about Melaka. However, Arabic was also known and used in Melaka itself, as one would expect of a great trading emporium. The *Sejarah Melayu* refers to the confusion resulting from Malays’ mispronunciation of Arabic, and the mangling of Malay by the Middle Eastern scholar Sadar Jahan, teacher of Mahmud Syah (Shellabear 2017: chapter 20; Brown 1952: 153–154). Arabic texts must certainly have circulated, and the *Sejarah Melayu* seems to refer to one, the *Durr Manzum* brought by Maulana Abu Bakar, probably a Sufi text of some kind, originally written in Medina (Shellabear 2017: 50; Brown 1952: 100), while it also contains a number of hadith which are cited in the original. The compendium of local laws, the *Undang-Undang Melaka*, also seems to be based in part on Arabic legal works of the Shafi’i school such as Abu Shuja’ al-Isfahani’s (d.1194) *al-Taqrib* and its commentary by Ibn Qasim al-Ghazzi (d.1522), *al-Fath al-Qarib* (Liaw 2003: 55–56), although given the complex textual history of the *Undang-Undang*, which were rewritten and adapted repeatedly after the fall of Melaka, these parts may have been added later.

Although no Arabic manuscripts that circulated in 15th-century Melaka have come down to us, we do have a number of Arabic-inscribed tombstones from the period of the sultanate. These were discovered in the old Fort wall of Melaka in 1852, and presented to the then Raffles Museum in Singapore by the British Resident Councillor (Winstedt 1932: 7) (the current Asian Civilisations Museum). Others survive in situ belonging to rulers of Melaka who were buried elsewhere such as at the royal burial ground of Pagoh in Melaka’s southeastern hinterland. These tombstones, known as *batu Aceh*, are significant as among the very few extant remains that can be definitely associated with the Melaka sultanate, and give details of the deceased’s name, ancestry and date of death. The epithets which accompany the names of royal burials suggest they were composed by someone with a sound command of Arabic and a knowledge of stylistically appealing and apposite formulae, and the biographical information is often accompanied by Qur’anic or poetic quotations.

Great claims been made for the broader significance of the inscriptions on the tombstones as giving clues as to the process of Islamisation in the Malay peninsula. Othman Mohd Yatim (1988: 69), who wrote the most comprehensive study to date, argues that ‘from the inscribed *batu Aceh* we can deduce the effect of Islam on the Peninsular Malaysian rulers’ (see also Lambourn 2004). In particular, Othman (1988: 68, 72–74) believed that the inscriptions gave clues as to the existence, albeit sometimes in veiled form, of Sufi tendencies. In particular, he saw some of them as referring to the doctrine of the ‘perfect man’ (*al-insān al-kāmil*) developed by Ibn ‘Arabi (d.1240), which some scholars have argued particularly appealed to Southeast Asian rulers as it allowed them to maintain their pre-Islamic divine status in an Islamic environment.
If so, then, these tombstones would potentially offer an insight into the political ideology of the Melaka sultanate too.

The principal royal tombstones of the Melaka sultans to survive are those of Mansur Syah (d.1477), currently in the National Museum at Kuala Lumpur (Winstedt 1918: 47–48; Moquette 1922); of Sultan Alauddin Riayat Syah (d.1488) at Pagoh; and the grave of the latter’s brother Raja Sulaiman Syah at Kota Tinggi in Johore (Othman 1988: 112). In Othman’s view, these gravestones were probably not produced locally, but were imported from Pasai (Othman 1988: 105). This is suggested not just by their stylistic similarities to those from Pasai, but also in the use of similar or even identical quotations. Thus, the Arabic verses, ‘The world is obliteration, having no permanence; verily the world is like a house which the spider’s web has covered’, can be found on the tombs of the Melakan Mansur Syah, Raja Jamil of Pahang (d.1512), and al-Malik al-Salih of Pasai (d.1297) (Othman 1988: 71–73).17

Othman describes these verses as Sufi, but this is questionable. They are well known lines, traditionally ascribed to the fourth Caliph, ‘Ali b. ‘Ali Talib (d.661), and may be interpreted more as a general expression of fatalism. In their study of the funerary inscriptions of Pasai, Guillot and Kalus (2008: 37–39) also note the use of quotations from elegiac (marathi) and ascetic (zuhdiyyat) poetry, including excerpts from the classical Arabic poet Labid (d.660–661) and Abu'l-'Atahiya (d.825), both of whom predate the emergence of Sufism. Indeed, fatalistic sentiments are also expressed in the Qur’an, with verses such as Qur’an 55: 26–27 ‘all on earth shall pass away, but the face of your Lord shall remain in majesty and glory’ which is found on other 15th-century Melaka tombs (Winstedt 1932: 6).

Similarly, Othman has argued that the inscriptions on the grave of Alauddin Riayat Syah which describe him as ‘brilliant’ and ‘just’ are intended to qualify the Melaka sultan to be the ‘Perfect Man’ (al-insān al-kāmil).18 However, the phrases used in Arabic (hadhā al-qabr al-munawwar wa'l-mirqad al-muṭāḥār līl-sūltān al-sūltān ‘Alā [w] al-Dīn … ) are quite conventional, and do not necessarily have any Sufi meaning, still less do they contain any specific allusion to the doctrine of the ‘perfect man’ (Othman 1988: 68).19 Thus claims for the Sufi connotations of these inscriptions need to be regarded somewhat sceptically in our current state of knowledge.

Such Arabic inscribed tombs were not the exclusive preserve of royalty. We also have the tombstones of a haji’s son and a ship’s captain (nākhudā) that were found in Melaka, although both individuals were probably of Indian origin. In the first instance, this is suggested by the use of the common Indian anthroponym Lai in the deceased’s full name, Isma’il b. Hajji Nasir al-Din b. Isma’il Lai, who died in 1480. In the second case, the gravestone of Nakhuda Haji Kanbayati b. Jamal al-Din, who died in 1459 (Figure 2), clearly indicates that its possessor was from Cambay (Kanbayat) in Gujarat; as well as being a haji, he was a sea-captain, so we may conclude he was probably a

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18I can see no mention of the sultan being ‘just’ in the text of this inscription, but even if it were present, it would not indicate any connection with the doctrine of al-insān al-kāmil.

19The gravestone of Alauddin Riayat Syah is reproduced with a transcription of the inscriptions, in Appendix VIII (Winstedt 1979: 161–162); for a more recent photograph, with improved readings, see Perret et al. (2017: 68–73). The last two words of the inscription may read wali al-asfīyā’ or ‘friend of the pure’, which could be interpreted as a Sufi allusion; but this reading is very uncertain.
Figure 2. The Arabic-inscribed tombstone of the Gujarati sea-captain Nakhuda Haji Kanbayati, 1459, the earliest surviving tombstone from Melaka. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore, accession number SB-008-A_N (courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore).
wealthy merchant (Winstedt 1932). Nakhuda Haji Kanbayati’s grave is the earliest from Melaka to survive, predating any of the royal graves, and its owner’s Gujarati connections suggest another path by which the Arabic language and Islamic culture were transmitted to Melaka.

It is instructive to contrast the elaborately calligraphed, finely carved Arabic-inscribed tombstones of 15th century Melaka with one from the sultanate’s rural hinterland that has survived. At Pengkalan Kempas in Negeri Sembilan, we have the memorial stone of a holy man, Shaykh Ahmad Majanu, active during the reign of Mahmud Shah, who died in an ambush around 1463, apparently saving some Melaka princes who had been captured by local rebels. In contrast to the inscriptions from Melaka itself, where Arabic only is used, Ahmad Majanu’s memorial stone is inscribed in Malay only, using both the Arabic script (Jawi) and the old Indian-derived Kawi script (Casparis 1980). In contrast to the fine calligraphy of the Melaka Arabic inscriptions, the Jawi inscription is crudely cut, while the continuing use of the Kawi script suggests the survival of pre-Islamic traditions, an impression reinforced by the situation of the memorial stone and grave of Ahmad Majanu in an area surrounded by ancient megaliths. Thus, even if the gravestones of Melaka may not be evidence of the spread of Sufism, the use of Arabic, the Indian connection of some of the tombs, and the import of the gravestones from Pasai, do point to the deepening process of Islamisation ongoing in the late 15th century. In this period, Melaka strengthened its ties to the broader Muslim world and Pasai in particular, where there was a long tradition of the use of Arabic in both epigraphic and literary contexts (Guillot and Kalus 2008; Peacock 2016: 190); if the memorial of Ahmad Majanu is at all representative, this process was much less advanced in outlying areas of the sultanate, where evidently the state only exerted a tenuous authority as the holy man’s killing and the capture of the Melakan princes recorded by the inscription suggests. Similarly, the cultural disruption that resulted from the fall of Melaka is suggested by the sudden abandonment of the recording of biographical details and Qur’anic quotations on funerary monuments in the Malay peninsula after 1511 (Othman 1988: 74–75).

**Persian sources on Melaka and Southeast Asia**

Owing to Iran’s incorporation into the vast Mongol empire, which adjoined and sometimes penetrated Southeast Asia, Persian sources of the 14th century are rather better informed about the region than the Arabic ones, with their tendencies to imitate Abbasid predecessors (Tibbetts 1979: 12–13). Yet in the post-Mongol period, the same tendency to imitation reappears in the Persian works. Thus, Hafiz-i Abru (d.1430), writing around the time of the rise of Melaka, relies on Ibn Khurdadhbih and Abu Dulaf for his scant information about the region (Hafiz-i Abru, 1375, I: 103). Yet there certainly were direct links between Iran and Southeast Asia, which was known in Persian as Zirbad, ‘Below the winds’, a translation of the Malay Di bawah angin. Describing his journey as Timurid ambassador to India, the historian ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-Samarqandi (1372, II, book 1: 514), describes the port of Hormuz in 1442 as a place frequented by sailors from ‘the borders of China, Java, Bengal, Ceylon, the cities of Zirbad, Tenasserim, Sumatra, Shahr-i Naw [Ayutthaya] and the Maldive islands’.²⁰ It is perhaps

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²⁰I read Sumatra (Persian Shamudara) for the obviously erroneous Suqutra of the text.
surprising the Melaka does not feature by name in this list, given that we know from Sulayman al-Mahri it enjoyed connections with Hormuz, but it is likely to be disguised under the general heading of the ‘cities of Zirbad’ (shahrhā-yi Zīrbād). Its absence from specific mention may reflect the possibility that even by 1442 Melaka was not a major emporium. Persian sources only start to mention Melaka after the city’s fall, and then only briefly, as in the passing references in the manual of Mughal administration, the Ayin-i Akbari of Abu’l-Fadl ‘Allami (1551–1602) (Ferrand 1913–1914, II: 550, 553). Our best informed source on Southeast Asia in Persian, the Jami’ al-Barr wa’l-Bahr, was composed in India at the court of the Qutbshah rulers of the Deccan by an Iranian émigré, Mahmud b. ‘Abdallah Nishapuri, around the end of the 16th or early 17th century.21 From the table of contents, it appears that Nishapuri intended to insert a chapter on ‘Melaka and its islands’ but in the surviving text there is merely a brief reference. Nishapuri writes that,

Melaka, which is great and famous: It is a distance of six months’ journey by sea from the capital of China [takht-i Khītā]. Rarities, gifts and specialities of the land of China [Khītā] are brought to Melaka, as are sandalwood, amber, aloeswood, gold, silver, jewels, musk, camphor and valuable rarities from all the ports of Zirbad and the cities of China and beyond [Chin wa Machin] to be bought and sold there. The infidel Franks have occupied those ports and take most of the good-quality products for the Franks.22

Nishapuri’s text was copied by a later Persian writer of the 17th century who dealt with Southeast Asia, Mahmud b. Amir Wali Balkhi, writing in 1636, who served the Uzbek rulers (Khan 1996: 12, 14–16). An account of Southeast Asia, including Melaka, also comprised a section of the universal history entitled Rawdat al-Tahirin by the Deccani scholar Sabzavari, composed in c.1606, which was a source for later Indo-Persian writers in the 18th century (on which see Subrahmanyam 2005: 37–38; Khazeni 2020: 33–34). Another Persian text that mentions Melaka is the record of the Iranian embassy to the court of Siam in 1685, made by the embassy’s secretary, Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim. The embassy ended up stranded on a ship off the Malay peninsula on the return journey, and briefly mentions stopping in Melaka. It gives some idea of the dangers confronting travellers on the straits:

When we set out it was in the direction of a group of deserted islands. These strange islands are located near Melaka and are named Pulau Dingding. But by then the force of the winds increased and our fresh water was running very low. Although the captain was eager to find somewhere along the coast, it was never possible.

(Adapted from O’Kane 1972: 219)23

For all Ahmad b. Majid’s disparagement of the dangers of the Straits of Melaka, for an inexperienced captain it could evidently be a perilous voyage.

The Persian sources produced in India, Iran and Central Asia are thus rather limited in their information about Melaka, despite the presence of Persian merchants in Melaka attested by Tomé Pires and the commercial links with Hormuz (which was, however,

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21 On Nishapuri see Ebrahimi (2021; 2023).
22 Mahmud b. ‘Abdallah Nishapuri, Jami’ al-Barr wa’l-Bahr, edited in Ebrahimi (2021: 305; my translation). I thank Raha Ebrahimi for giving me access to the relevant portions of this text and her edition which is currently in preparation for publication.
23 On Dingding, noted as a navigational landmark in our Arabic texts, see Tibbetts (1971: 483–484); and on the embassy from Iran see Marcinkowski (2003).
somewhat isolated from the rest of Iran, being a separate polity under its own Arab
dynasty). However, one of the most important documents for the history of Melaka is
also in Persian (Figure 3). This is a petition composed in 1519, shortly after the Portu-
guese conquest, by a senior official in the financial administration of Melaka, possibly
to be identified with the Jew Khoja 'Izz al-Din. It is addressed to the Portuguese auth-
orities, soliciting the exoneration and reward of its author who had evidently fallen foul
of well connected rivals, but it also offers considerable information about the Portuguese
conquest of and administration of Melaka. The fact that it is written in Persian should not
be a surprise. Persian and Arabic were used by the Portuguese in the early days of their
dominion to communicate with the local peoples they encountered, and a number of docu-
ments in these languages survive in the Portuguese archive, the Torre do Tombo in
Lisbon, where this document is also held, under the call number Cartas Orientais 33.
Whatever the identity of the author, which cannot be established with certainty, it is
clear that he entered Portuguese service in India, and accompanied the governor
Alfonso d’Albuquerque in his expeditions against Goa in 1510 and Melaka in 1511.
After the conquest of Melaka, the author was appointed in charge of the local mint.
The contents of the petition have already been published by Alves and Nasiri-
Moghaddam, so here I shall simply summarise the main points. The petition starts by
recounting the immediate aftermath of Albuquerque’s conquest of Melaka in 1511: the
inhabitants fled, but Albuquerque rebuilt and repopulated the town by offering tax
exemptions to merchants. After Albuquerque’s departure for India however, the situ-
ation deteriorated and the author refers to constant fighting with the Malays.
Mahmud Syah, the last sultan of Melaka, set up court on the island of Bintan, whence
he sent expensive tribute to the Portuguese in return for a peace treaty, and the document
discusses in detail the relations between Mahmud Syah and the Portuguese adminis-
tration in Melaka. While Mahmud Syah paid tribute, in return the Portuguese supplied
Bintan with provisions such as rice – despite the richness of the gifts presented by Mahmud
Syah, the author claims that at Bintan there was nothing other than sago to eat. Notwith-
standing the negotiations between the two sides, there was also an unsuccessful plot by the
Malays to enter Melaka fortress presumably with a view to seizing it. With the arrival of
Jorge de Brito as governor of Melaka in 1515, the situation worsened, and the author is
extremely critical of his governorship. The Portuguese administrators knew no Malay
and were ill acquainted with local laws and customs; they confiscated merchants’ ships,
cauing the merchants to flee the town. The Portuguese also interfered with the
Melaka’s food supplies by confiscating boats carrying rice from Java. It was during this
period that our author fell foul of the local administration, and was imprisoned for
some unspecified crimes, of which the letter is intended to protest his innocence.
The document is important not just for the light it sheds on the political and social
history of Melaka as seen by its inhabitants in years immediately after the conquest,
but for some of the facts we can glean from it about the nature of the town. Clearly com-
merce was still vital to Melaka, and the same merchants who had been active before the
conquest remained important. Melaka was dependent on the import of rice, and indeed

24 For a full discussion of the letter together with edition and translation of the text Alves and Nasiri-Moghaddam (2008:
83–86).
25 For a survey of such documents see Aubin (2000).
Figure 3. The Persian petition documenting the circumstances of Melaka’s fall. Torro do Tombo, Lisbon, Cartais Orientais 33.
the document suggests more generally acute food shortages in the region during this period, with the absence of anything to eat other than sago on Bintan and the Portuguese blockade of rice shipments from Java to Melaka. However, the author also repeatedly notes the orchards of Melaka which were evidently an important revenue source, as they are referred to as the property of the Portuguese king. 26

The author mixes his Persian with non-standard terms such as kota for fort, and the letter is more generally suggestive of the way in which Persian was used as a language of diplomatic communication, and to some degree even a lingua franca in Southeast Asia, as is attested by some later examples of Persian correspondence from the region (Peacock 2018). Thus, if Southeast Asia only relatively rarely came to the attention of the Persian-language historians and geographers, it still constituted part of what has been termed the ‘Persian cosmopolis’ (Eaton 2019). Melaka, with Persian merchants attested by Tomé Pires and migrant Middle Easterners like the author of Cartas Orientais 33, thus doubtless played an important part in this broader Persianate world.

**Turkish sources on Melaka and Southeast Asia**

As the 16th century dawned, the Ottoman empire became the major Muslim power in the Indian Ocean. Even before the Ottoman occupation of the Hijaz and Yemen in 1517, giving them a direct foothold on the Indian Ocean littoral, the empire had started to involve itself in Indian Ocean affairs. In 1513 the Ottoman admiral Piri Reis compiled a world map focusing on the Indian Ocean, which has not come down to us. It is clear, however, its composition was prompted by concerns over Portuguese involvement in the Indian Ocean, as is demonstrated by the verse preface to Piri Reis’s extant *Kitab-ı Bahriye* (‘Book of Navigation’) which describes at length the Portuguese penetration of Asia and describes the maps he made based, it seems, on Portuguese sources. Piri Reis (1988, I: 113) mentions Melaka only in passing in his account of the equator, saying:

> The equator is the middle of the earth; it is rich in minerals and its climate is uniform … Night and day here always are equal. On the eastern shore there is a city and its name is Melaka. 
> This is midway between India and China and it is a great port.

With the Ottomans’ acquisition of Indian Ocean littoral territories, these concerns about Portuguese involvement intensified, and their capture of Melaka features in a report written in 1525 by the commander of the Ottoman Red Sea Fleet, Selman Reis. Advocating to his masters in Istanbul an aggressively expansionist policy, he reminded them of how the Portuguese were in control of a string of ports across India and Southeast Asia – Hormuz, Diu, Goa, Calicut, Cochin, Ceylon, and Melaka:

> They also control the great island called Sumatra, one of the famous islands known as Taht al-Rīh [Below the winds], situated beyond the aforesaid Ceylon. It is said that there they have two hundred infidels. With two hundred infidels they also captured the port of Melaka opposite Sumatra from Hindu infidels. Formerly, before the Portuguese captured these ports, there used to be a great deal of revenue from spices in Egypt and a great deal of

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26See Alves and Nasiri-Moghaddam (2008) for a more detailed discussion of these points.
goods available. It is said that the accursed Portuguese hold the afore-mentioned ports with [only] two thousand men. Therefore when our ships are ready, and, God willing, move against them, their total destruction will be inevitable, for one fortress is unable to support another and they are not able to put up a united opposition.

Evidently, Selman Reis's information was not perfect, given that he believes Melaka to have been ruled by non-Muslims. This ignorance perhaps reflects a wider perception of Melaka in other parts of the Indian Ocean, as also alluded to in the conclusion to Ahmad b. Majid's *al-Ma'laqiyya*. It may also reflect the fact that in a cosmopolitan port like this, merchants had few dealings with the elite Muslim society of the court, while the differences of, say, mosque architecture, from those of the central lands of Islam perhaps further contributed to the sense of alienation of Middle Eastern Muslims.

The ambition expressed by Selman Reis for the Ottomans to evict the Portuguese from their Indian Ocean strongholds, including Melaka, was of course never realised. Such plans, however, were frequently rumoured during the 16th century. The Acehnese assault on Melaka in 1547 was supported by Ottoman ships from the Red Sea fleet (or so the Portuguese believed), while the Acehnese embassy to Istanbul of 1562 aimed to secure support for an attack on the Portuguese in Melaka. The embassy of 1565 had the same purpose (Alves 2015: 51–53, 58). It is against this background that we should interpret the interest in Southeast Asia and Melaka in two further texts, the versified history entitled the *Seadatname* and the Turkish navigational manual, the *Kitab-ı Muhit*.

The *Seadetname* by Firaki Abdurrahman Çelebi (d.1589) was composed around 1527, and deals with the wars of the Ottoman sultans Selim (1512–1520) and Süleyman the Magnificent (1520–1566). Even though the author was a provincial religious scholar, who never seems to have left the west Anatolian town of Kütaýha, the work is distinguished from most Ottoman histories by its much wider interest in the world outside the Ottoman empire, and it includes a chapter that discusses the Portuguese conquest of Melaka and other places in Southeast Asia (Kütahyalı Firâki 2013: 325):

Chapter on the Situation of the Franks who have gone Below the Winds

Then they made for the Kingdom of China,
When they reached its harbour, they struck anchor.
The fair city’s name is Melaka,
Cardamom and hyacinth are its flowers.
After they had built a high castle over the harbour,
All of that region became theirs.
They returned, reaching Shahr-i Naw [Ayutthaya],
The region of Ava and the kingdom of Java.
They closed all their ports,
Fettered each one to the other.

Firaki is surprisingly well informed. Not only is he aware of the Portuguese building of the fort at Melaka after the conquest, which allowed them to dominate the region, but his allusions to the flowers of Melaka seems to reflect the city’s reputation for gardens, as is also suggested by Cartas Orientais 33. Firaki, who goes on to discuss archipelagic Southeast Asia, names his source as a book called *Rahmani*, which is the Persian term for a

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28 For a more detailed discussion of this work, see Peacock (2020).
29 The Şiyûbâd of the heading in the published text is an obvious misreading for Zirbad.
pilot-guide. Intriguingly, such a source is also noted by Ahmad b. Majid, who mentions seeing a Rahmani dated to 1184–1185, which he criticises for its inaccuracy, saying its authors ‘were only compilers and not genuine authors and they never rode the sea except between Siraf and the coast of Mekran … they asked questions on the every coast from the local people and made a record of it’ (Tibbetts 1971: 71). Clearly Ibn Majid’s Rahmani was not that seen by Firaki, which must have been composed shortly after the Portuguese conquest, nor was Firaki drawing on the works of Ibn Majid or Sulayman al-Mahri. Thus, Firaki indicates the existence of other sources available to him, now lost or as yet undiscovered, but suggesting that the texts we have represent the tip of the iceberg of what was produced.

The final text of the period to mention is the Kitab-ı Muhit of the Ottoman admiral Sidi Ali Çelebi, composed in 1554. Its author had command of the Ottoman Indian Ocean fleet, but as a result of Portuguese attacks and a storm, he ended up shipwrecked in Gujarat, where he spent a year before returning to Istanbul. His Muhit is essentially a translation and rearrangement of the works of Ibn Majid and Sulayman al-Mahri, in particular al-‘Umda al-Mahriyya. He may also have drawn on European sources on places, just as Piri Reis had. He does add some comments of his own, but he evidently had no experience of Southeast Asia, beyond the information taken from his Arabic models, which, it seems, he did not always understand very well (cf. Tibbetts 1979: 44–46). Its importance is mainly for demonstrating the continuing Ottoman interest in the region.

**Conclusion**

The Arabic, Persian and Turkish sources give us information about the trade routes that connected Melaka to the outside world, and offer an impression of how the city was perceived in other parts of the Muslim world. While the information they provide about Melaka cannot compare in detail to the accounts of Europeans or Chinese sources, they do offer a valuable supplement and corrective to their perspectives. The range and complexity of Melaka’s trading relations with a variety of locations in Arabia and the Gulf is striking, and the need for the composition of the numerous navigational works by our two South Arabian navigators, Ahmad b. Majid and Sulayman al-Mahri, points to the intensity of trade across the Indian Ocean in the 15th and early 16th centuries. The central place that Melaka enjoys on these trade routes is testimony to its role as the major centre for the redistribution of Southeast Asian and Chinese products to the Middle East and India. Yet the sources strongly suggest that Melaka only attained this centrality in the second half or even the final quarter of the 15th century, as the absence of earlier references in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish texts strongly suggest. The emergence of Arabic-language epigraphy on funerary monuments in Melaka itself in this same period confirms the impression that it was only at this relatively late date that Melaka became more closely integrated into the broader Islamic world.

Our sources reveal conflicting impressions of Melaka. On the one hand, its evident cosmopolitanism seems to have to some degree supplanted or overshadowed any perception of its Muslim identity, and Ibn Majid portrays in unflattering terms the realities of

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doing business in a bustling trade entrepot. On the other, we are presented by Cartas Orientais 33 and Firaki with a picture not just of a bustling port but also of city embedded in its rural hinterland, famed for its orchards that constituted another major source of its wealth. For our later Persian and Turkish sources, the theme shared by Nishapuri, Selman Çelebi and Firaki is that of the conquest of Melaka by the Portuguese. This itself is testimony to ways in which the Portuguese occupation of Melaka in 1511 reverberated around the Muslim world, finding echoes in a Deccani geography, an Ottoman intelligence report composed in Jeddah, and a verse chronicle in distant Anatolia.

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Note on contributor

A.C.S. Peacock is Bishop Wardlaw Professor of Islamic History at the University of St Andrews, UK. Email: acsp@st-andrews.ac.uk

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