

THE MELAKA SULTANATE (1401 to 1511)

The Melaka Sultanate was founded by Parameswara in 1401. He was a fugitive prince from Palembang in Sumatra, and had arrived in Melaka via Temasik, the Singapore of old. According to legend, he was so impressed by a fleeing mouse-deer that had turned to kick at his hunting dogs, he decided to build a settlement on the spot where he was leaning against a Melaka tree.

In 1414, Parameswara embraced Islam, changed his name to Megat Iskandar Shah, and married a Muslim princess from Pasai, Sumatra. The move attracted Muslim traders to the port, bringing it instant international fame. Maintaining good relations with Ming China, he sent mission after mission to Peking in 1415, 1416 and 1418. Upon his death in 1424, Megat Iskandar Shah was succeeded by his son Sri Maharaja (1424-1444) whose first mission was to visit Emperor Yung Lo of Ming China to inform of his father's death, and also to pay his respects as the new ruler of Melaka.

Sultan Muzaffar Shah (1446-1456) the son of Sri Maharaja and grandson of Megat Iskandar Shah alias Parameswara, ascended the Melaka throne in 1446 succeeding his elder brother, Raja Ibrahim. He was the first Malay ruler to use the Arabian title of "Sultan", and to formulate the Melaka Laws known as Risalah Hukum Kanun in Arabic. During his reign, he forged stronger relations with Ming China in order to protect the sovereignty and prosperity of Melaka.

From 1456 till 1498, the Melaka Sultans benefited from the services of [Tun Perak](#), a brilliant Chief Minister or Bendahara. Tun Perak served under four Sultans, namely Sultan Muzaffar Shah, [Sultan Mansor Shah](#); [Sultan Alaudin Ri'ayat Shah](#), and [Sultan Mahmud Shah](#), who suffered defeat at the hands of the Portuguese in 1511.

At its peak, Melaka became the most important port in the East, between the Mediterranean Sea and China. Over 80 languages were spoken there, and at times there were more than 4,000 traders housed in special quarters. There was the Indian quarter, the Chinese quarter, the Javanese quarter, and others. They were treated well and warehouses were made available to store their goods. The Syahbandar or the Port Authority took care of their needs, while the Melaka fleet, comprising 40 to 100 ships, guaranteed the safety of the merchants and their goods.

At one point in time, there were 4 Syahbandars to cater to the needs of merchants of different races -- one for the Gujeratis; one for the Bengalis, Tamils and other Indians; one for local merchants; and one for the Chinese and Indochinese.

Merchants from Pegu in Burma also frequented the port of Melaka. Annually, 40 to 50 ships sailed into Melaka laden with precious stones, silver and foodstuffs. The merchants would stay in Melaka for about a month to trade, sell their ships, and then return home with pottery and other items brought to Melaka by traders from India and Arabia.

Siamese merchants, too, had good trade ties with Melaka. About 30 junks carrying rice, dried fish, wine, rubies, and slaves would call upon Melaka annually. Junks from Luzon in the Philippines would bring gold, forest products and food to Melaka. Their lot was much improved when a countryman was appointed by the Sultan to serve as Temenggong, or Police Chief.

The source of food for Melaka was in Indonesia, which also had an abundant supply of spices to offer the international market at that time. Ships from Melaka regularly sailed to Demak, Grisek and Japara in Eastern Java to transport these necessary items home for use and re-sale.

The entire trading activities of Melaka was controlled by the Sultan and his courtiers. They bought and sold goods, provided capital to their agents, bought and built ships, administered the port, and levied taxes. Sultan Muzaffar Shah was directly involved in ship-building activities, while another aristocrat, Bendahara Tun Mutahir became one of the richest man in Melaka via his prominent role in the market.

The Straits of Melaka provided excellent shelter from the prevailing storms raging in the open ocean. In those days, prior to silting problems, the port could handle ocean-going vessels from all over the world. The Melaka Sultanate enjoyed a good relationship with the Ming Emperors of China, namely Emperor Yung Lo. The Chinese provided Melaka protection from the Siamese and other enemies. In this way, the area was safe and full of promise and prosperity.

The city and the port was governed by laws. At sea, the ships were considered nations complete with its own administration. The captain was as the Sultan, the navigator as Bendahara or Chief Minister, the discipline officer as Temenggong or police chief, and the crew as the people. The crew must perform their duties well, otherwise they would be fined by the captain.

The Melaka Laws were known as Risalah Hukum Kanun in Arabic. They were formulated in the mid-15th century for Sultan Muzaffar Shah. However, they were only said to be put in writing in the early 18th century in the Riau Islands by Sultan Sulaiman Shah. The Melaka laws were a combination of the Islamic Syariah and traditional Malay customs. They accorded special status and privileges to the ruling class, whereby only the ruler could wear yellow clothes and carry specially-made daggers with gold infused into the blade and handle. Rebels faced capital punishment, and petty criminals from among the people were harshly punished.

The government structure of the Melaka Sultanate was like a pyramid with the Sultan at the apex as the all- powerful Head of State. Under him, there was a council of 4 Ministers, namely the Bendahara, who controlled the military, defence, and royal customs and traditions. The Temenggong, as Chief of Police, controlled internal affairs relating to peace and order. The third key post was held by the Penghulu Bendahari who was the Sultan's Treasurer cum Secretary. The Laksamana was the Admiral who controlled the fleet.

Under the four Ministers, there were 8 senior directors, all bearing the title Sri. Under them were 16 junior directors with the title Raja. At the bottom of the hierarchy were 32 government officers whose job was to aid the Ministers in carrying out their duties. Some of them were district or regional chiefs.

This administrative system was implemented by all the states in the Malay Peninsula, which at that time were united under the Melaka Sultanate. This system came to be known as the traditional political system of the Malay states.

Following the Portuguese invasion of 1511, Sultan Mahmud Shah fled to Kota Tinggi in Johor, where he tried to establish a new capital. Initially, his vassals from amongst the Malay rulers accepted the Johor Empire as the replacement to Melaka, but that gradually declined and the empire was fragmented.