

*Аглядны артыкул*

## **Як еўрапейская камерцыйная і гандлёвая экспансія ў ранні Новы час сфарміравала адаптацыю мясцовага мараплаўства на паўночным узбярэжжы Явы?**

**Ali Akbar Anggara<sup>1\*</sup>, Boy Arvadino Hadisantoso<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Danareksa, Danantara, Indonesia

\* Corresponding Author: Ali Akbar Anggara, [aliakbarang@ump.ac.id](mailto:aliakbarang@ump.ac.id)

**Анотацыя.** Гэта даследаванне разглядае ўплыў еўрапейскай камерцыйнай экспансіі на суднаходства і марскі гандаль уздоўж паўночнага ўзбярэжжа Явы ў ранні Новы час. Замест таго каб паказваць поўнае знікненне мясцовай марскай дзейнасці, даследаванне сцвярджае, што мясцовыя маракі і гандляры прайшлі працэс адаптацыі ва ўмовах зменлівых палітычных, ваенных і эканамічных абставін. Аслабленне і паражэнне кіраўнікоў партовых гарадоў на паўночным узбярэжжы Явы стварылі новы ціск, які прымусіў мясцовых марскіх удзельнікаў перабудоўваць свае гандлёвыя практыкі і суднаходныя сеткі. Выкарыстоўваючы гістарычны падыход, заснаваны пераважна на другасных крыніцах, гэта даследаванне прасочвае структуру марскога гандлю ранняга Новага часу і тлумачыць, як мясцовыя гандляры рэагавалі на ўзмацненне дамінавання еўрапейскага марскога капіталізму. Вынікі паказваюць, што яванскія маракі і купцы ўсё больш гублялі магчымасць канкураваць з еўрапейскімі ўдзельнікамі ў сферы суднаходных тэхналогій і далёкай камерцыйнай дзейнасці. У выніку яны перанеслі сваю актыўнасць у эканамічныя прасторы, менш кантраляваныя еўрапейскімі гандлярамі. Гэтая адаптацыя таксама ўключала паступовае звужэнне мясцовых суднаходных сетак, паколькі мясцовыя марскія ўдзельнікі ўсё больш канцэнтраваліся на лакальных і рэгіянальных маршрутах. З цягам часу міжнародны і ўнутрыазіяцкі гандаль усё больш кантраляваўся еўрапейскімі марскімі дзяржавамі, у той час як мясцовыя мараплаўцы захоўвалі сваю ролю праз прыбярэжны і міжастраўны гандаль на карацейшых дыстанцыях.

**Ключавыя словы:** еўрапейская камерцыйная экспансія; адаптацыя мясцовага мараплаўства; паўночнае ўзбярэжжа Явы; марскія гандлёвыя сеткі; ранні Новы час; мясцовае суднаходства.

*Literature Review*

## **How Did European Commercial & Trade Expansion in the Early Modern Era? Shaping Indigenous Maritime Adjustment on Java's Northern Coast**

**Ali Akbar Anggara<sup>1\*</sup>, Boy Arvadino Hadisantoso<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Danareksa, Danantara, Indonesia

\* Corresponding Author: Ali Akbar Anggara, [aliakbarang@ump.ac.id](mailto:aliakbarang@ump.ac.id)

**Abstract.** This study explores the impact of European commercial expansion on shipping and maritime trade along Java's northern coast during the early modern period. Rather than showing the complete disappearance of local maritime activities, the study argues that indigenous sailors and traders experienced a process of adjustment under changing political, military, and economic conditions. The weakening and defeat of port-city rulers on the north coast of Java created new pressures that forced local maritime actors to reorganize their trading practices and shipping networks. Using a historical approach based mainly on secondary sources, this study traces the structure of early modern maritime trade and explains how local traders responded to the growing dominance of European maritime capitalism. The findings indicate that Javanese sailors and merchants were increasingly unable to compete with European actors in terms of shipping technology and long-distance commercial capacity. As a result, they shifted their activities toward economic spaces that were less dominated by European traders. This adaptation also involved a gradual narrowing of local shipping networks, as indigenous maritime actors became more concentrated in local and regional routes. Over time, international and intra-Asian trade became increasingly controlled by European maritime powers, while local seafarers sustained their role by focusing on shorter-distance coastal and inter-island trade.

**Keywords:** European commercial expansion; indigenous maritime adaptation; Java northern coast; maritime trade networks; early modern era; local shipping.

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### **Introduction**

This article explores the significance of port cities along Java's northern coast within Southeast Asian maritime trade networks during the early modern era, a period marked by the confrontation between Javanese maritime actors and the rising power of European seaborne expansion. The topic is important because a common historical assumption portrays Javanese society after the fall of the Demak kingdom in 1568 as predominantly feudal and agrarian. D. H. Burger, for example, argued that after Demak's naval forces failed in several campaigns against the Portuguese in

Malacca in 1511, 1554, and 1574, Javanese maritime power had already declined substantially by the time the Dutch arrived at the end of the sixteenth century.

Local Javanese historiography also tends to associate the weakening of maritime life on the north coast of Java with dynastic conflicts and the military expansion of the inland Mataram kingdom. After the collapse of Demak, Mataram, based in the interior of Central Java, launched campaigns against several major coastal trading centers in Central and East Java that resisted its authority. These included Demak in 1604, Pasuruan in 1616, Lasem in 1617, Tuban in 1617 and 1619, Gresik in 1618 and 1622, Madura in 1624, Surabaya in 1625, and Pati in 1625 and 1627. Following these conquests, Mataram took control of the rice trade, which had previously been a key source of wealth for coastal merchants. Burger further suggested that by the mid to late seventeenth century, the Javanese had lost much of their ability to conduct maritime transport independently, including the shipment of rice to Batavia. This interpretation later contributed to the image of Java as a society undergoing deep feudalization, with an agrarian economic base, hierarchical social and political structures, and limited external engagement.

Such a view also presents Java as increasingly isolated and economically self-sufficient, while maritime shipping and commerce were assumed to have fallen almost entirely under the control of the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, or VOC. As a result, the dominant historiographical narrative gives the impression that Javanese maritime power, which had once connected the commercial worlds between India and China, suddenly disappeared under VOC dominance. However, this interpretation requires reconsideration. The transformation of Javanese maritime power should not be understood simply as a sudden collapse, but rather as a gradual process of adaptation under new political and economic pressures. Even where decline occurred, it unfolded over time and did not necessarily affect all maritime sectors in the same way.

Therefore, the changes experienced by Javanese maritime society may be better interpreted as strategies of survival and adjustment rather than complete disappearance. Shipping, trade, fisheries, piracy, and other maritime activities did not all follow a single pattern of decline. This article seeks to reconstruct the continuing role of Java, particularly the northern coastal cities of Banten, Jakarta, Cirebon, Semarang, Tuban, and Surabaya, within maritime trade networks across the Indonesian archipelago and Southeast Asia during the early modern period.

## **Materials and Methods**

This study applies a literature review historical research design to explore the transformation of maritime trade networks on the north coast of Java during the early modern period. The analysis focuses on how European commercial and maritime expansion affected indigenous shipping activities, coastal trade, and local economic adaptation. Rather than treating the decline of Javanese maritime power as a sudden disappearance, this study interprets it as a gradual process of adjustment shaped by political conquest, military pressure, and changing trade relations.

The data are primarily drawn from secondary historical sources, including scholarly works on Southeast Asian maritime history, Javanese coastal cities, VOC trade, port development, and early modern commercial networks. The article itself states that it uses a historical perspective with emphasis on secondary sources to identify and analyze early modern maritime trade networks, and that its approach is closer to a literature-based reconstruction of local traders' adaptation during European capitalist expansion. These sources are used to reconstruct the role of major coastal cities such as Banten, Jakarta, Cirebon, Semarang, Tuban, and Surabaya within regional and intra-Asian trade.

The analytical procedure consists of source interpretation, historical comparison, and thematic reconstruction (Bougie and Sekaran, 2017). First, the study reviews historical narratives concerning the decline of Javanese maritime power after the fall of Demak and the expansion of Mataram and the VOC. Second, it compares these narratives with

evidence showing the continued role of local sailors, traders, and ports in coastal and inter-island shipping. Third, the study identifies patterns of adaptation, including the narrowing of indigenous shipping networks, the shift from long-distance trade to local and regional routes, and the repositioning of local maritime actors within economic spaces increasingly dominated by European shipping powers.

## Results

### *Entering the Early Modern Period*

When the Portuguese traveler Tomé Pires visited Javanese ports in the early sixteenth century, he found that memories of Majapahit's former greatness were still alive among local people. His account suggests that Java had once been remembered as a powerful island polity whose influence extended eastward to the Moluccas and across much of the western archipelago before its authority gradually weakened (Cortesao, 1944; Colless, n.d.). The decline of Majapahit was closely associated with internal struggles among royal elites, which gradually reduced the kingdom's capacity to control its territories. At the same time, Islamic influence expanded through port cities that had previously been connected to Majapahit. As central authority weakened, these coastal centers began to distance themselves from Majapahit and developed new political, religious, and commercial vitality under Islam. Thus, the fragmentation of political authority in the late fifteenth century did not stop maritime trade. Instead, decentralization encouraged the growth of wider commercial networks across the archipelago (McRoberts, 1986; Reid, 1988, 1993).

This transformation occurred during the period Reid described as the "Age of Commerce" between 1450 and 1680, when Muslim merchants became increasingly influential in Southeast Asian trade. During this period, the port cities on Java's northern coast developed rapidly and became important parts of regional and international maritime commerce. These cities were integrated into what scholars have called the Java Sea Zone or Java Sea Network, which linked northern Java with Bali, Lombok, Sumba, South Kalimantan, South Sulawesi, Sumbawa, and Timor (Reid, 1988, 1993; Hall, 1985; Sulistiyono, 2003). Although western Java was politically associated with the Sunda kingdom, while central and eastern Java were linked to Majapahit, these regions remained closely connected through trade. After Majapahit's fall, the Demak Sultanate strengthened Muslim political and commercial authority across much of Java's northern coast. However, this unity did not last permanently, as political power later became divided among Banten, Cirebon, Mataram, and several coastal city-states in central and eastern Java before the Dutch arrived at the end of the sixteenth century (Reid, 1988, 1993; Sulistiyono, 2003).

During the Age of Commerce, Java became a major supplier of rice to areas outside the island, including Maluku and Malacca. Javanese merchants also collected spices and forest products such as camphor, incense, gambier, sandalwood, and other tropical commodities. These products were not consumed mainly in Java, but were redistributed to broader markets, including China and regions west of the Malacca Strait. This shows that Java functioned not only as a producing region but also as a commercial intermediary in wider Asian trade (Frank, 1998; Parimarta, 2002).

Javanese traders also maintained regular commercial contact with eastern islands. In the fifteenth century, for example, they sailed to Timor to obtain sandalwood and beeswax, commodities that were later circulated through broader regional trade networks. Some foreign merchants visited Java directly to obtain goods collected by Javanese traders, while others waited in Malacca for merchants from Java, Bugis, Madura, Banjar, and other maritime communities who brought spices and tropical products. These exchanges often involved barter, in which local traders obtained textiles, metal goods, jewelry, and other imported items in return for regional commodities (Parimarta, 2002; Frank, 1998).

In this context, Java served as a major entrepôt connecting Maluku, Malacca, and the wider Java Sea region. Imported commodities were stored in Java before being redistributed to surrounding areas such as Palembang, Lampung, Banjarmasin, Bali, Lombok, and the Maluku Islands. Ports along Java's northern coast therefore became meeting points for local, regional, and foreign traders. Maritime commerce in the Java Sea region operated through three main channels: inter-island trade, intra-Asian trade, and international trade within the broader archipelagic economy (Frank, 1998; Sulistiyono, 2003). Commercial relations between Java's northern coastal cities and other regions of the archipelago developed alongside trade among the Javanese ports themselves. This local trade was supported by commodity specialization. Salt from central and eastern Java's north coast, shrimp paste from Juana and Cirebon, traditional cloth from Jepara, and rice from inland central and eastern Java were all important goods demanded by other ports and their hinterlands. In return, Sunda Kelapa supplied imported goods to Javanese trading centers and attracted merchants from Sumatra, Kalimantan, Malacca, Makassar, Madura, and other regions. Indian textiles were also widely available in this port (Cortesao, 1944; Frank, 1998).

A second factor behind the growth of local trade was the function of key ports as collection and distribution centers. Sunda Kelapa, in particular, became an important hub for imported and exported goods after the decline of Demak and the weakening of Cirebon. Smaller ports along Java's northern coast sent commodities such as salt, rice, and processed fish products through Sunda Kelapa, while returning fleets carried imported goods back to Javanese port cities. These smaller ports were therefore important not only as suppliers for passing ships, but also as connectors between coastal trade and inland markets that required imported commodities (Cortesao, 1944; Sulistiyono, 2003).

Reliable quantitative data on the exact trade volume of Java's northern port cities remain limited. However, Van Leur's estimates provide an important comparison of maritime activity in Southeast Asia during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. He estimated that Southeast Asian maritime trade involved about 480 vessels of different sizes, with around 330 to 340 medium-sized ships serving inter-island trade and about 115 ships involved in trade with India and China. Estimated shipping tonnage in 1622 reached around 50,000 tons for Indonesia, compared with 18,000 tons for China and Siam, 3,000 tons for Aceh, 10,000 tons for Coromandel, and 14,000 tons for the Netherlands, meaning that Dutch shipping represented less than 15 percent of the total. In 1608, a VOC ship reportedly transported about 8,440 sacks of pepper from Banten. These figures indicate that when the Dutch first entered the archipelago, they were still relatively minor actors within an already active Asian maritime trading system (Frank, 1998; Lapien, 2008).

### ***Political Alliances and Alienation in Trade Wars***

The early modern period in maritime Southeast Asia was strongly shaped by the arrival of European powers. Before their arrival, the northern coast of Java had already developed a mature commercial system in which coastal cities functioned as key nodes of the Java Sea trading network. This network connected local, inter-island, and international trade routes across the archipelago. However, the entry of European maritime actors changed the existing pattern of trade. Western seafarers introduced a militarized form of commerce, in which armed ships and coercive trade practices disrupted local commercial arrangements and forced indigenous traders to adjust to new conditions (Manguin, 1993).

The Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511 encouraged the rise of alternative Muslim trading centers in Aceh, Johor, and Brunei. At the same time, Portuguese expansion indirectly stimulated the growth of several commercial centers along Java's northern coast, including Demak, Banten, Cirebon, and Surabaya. These ports became increasingly important after the decline of the inland-based Majapahit and Sunda kingdoms. In this sense, Portuguese competition with Muslim traders contributed indirectly to the development of northern Javanese port cities after the fall of Majapahit in the late fifteenth century. Nevertheless, the prosperity of these coastal cities also attracted suspicion

from Mataram, the powerful inland kingdom of Central Java, which later began to subdue most of the north-coast city-states, except Banten (Sulistiyono, n.d.; Siddique, 1977).

Mataram's military expansion severely weakened the economic foundations of many coastal cities on Java's northern coast. The destruction of commercial resources in these ports pushed many traders to migrate to other trading centers outside Java, such as Makassar and Banjarmasin (De Graaf & Pigeaud, 1989). By the time the Dutch expanded their monopoly in the seventeenth century, most Javanese trading cities had already been weakened, with Banten remaining one of the few exceptions. The VOC captured Jayakarta in 1619 and gradually extended its influence over other port cities along the north coast of Java. By the mid-seventeenth century, Dutch power had reached many ports east of Batavia, while Banten was finally brought under VOC control in 1682 through war and divide-and-rule strategies. A similar pattern occurred elsewhere in the archipelago, including Malacca, which the Dutch seized from the Portuguese in 1641 (De Graaf & Pigeaud, 1989; Rimmelink, 2001).

The VOC, founded in 1602, was established mainly to secure profitable access to Asian commodities, especially spices, which could be sold in Europe at high margins. Long-distance maritime trade required large capital investment and involved considerable risk, so the company sought to maximize profits through aggressive commercial strategies. One of these strategies was participation in intra-Asian trade, which allowed the VOC to obtain exchange goods needed to purchase spices in producing regions. Because the company often faced local monopolies and price competition, it increasingly attempted to impose its own monopoly through military pressure, coercion, and warfare (Gaastra & Bruijn, 1993; Gaastra, 2002).

In the early phase of VOC expansion, Java's northern coast was not yet viewed primarily as a major economic zone. At that time, Java did not produce many commodities that were highly demanded in Europe, except pepper from Banten and, later in the eighteenth century, coffee from Priangan, which still had to compete with coffee from Yemen and the Caribbean. For the VOC, Java's initial importance was therefore more strategic and political than purely economic. Batavia became the central rendezvous point of the VOC's Asian shipping network and eventually the administrative core of its global operations. As a result, VOC policy in Java during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was mainly directed toward securing Batavia, a priority that affected the economy of Java's northern coast and drew the company deeper into territorial conflicts with Javanese political powers (Gaastra & Bruijn, 1993; Gaastra, 2002).

Prolonged internal conflicts within Mataram gave the VOC opportunities to expand its control over Java's northern coast. In 1705, during the succession conflict between Amangkurat III and Paku Buwana I, who was supported by the Dutch, the VOC obtained control over several important areas, including Semarang, Losari, Tegal, Donan, Cirebon, and East Madura. Later, during the reign of Paku Buwana II, the VOC gained further control after helping suppress the Chinese uprising of 1740–1743. Through the agreements of 1743 and 1746, the remaining coastal territories of Mataram were transferred to VOC authority (Rimmelink, 2001). In practice, the VOC replaced Mataram as the dominant power on Java's northern coast and imposed monopolies over key commodities such as rice. The main difference was that under Mataram, indigenous shipping and trade served the interests of the kingdom, whereas under VOC control, local maritime capacity was subordinated to Dutch commercial and political objectives (À Campo, 1999).

By the mid-eighteenth century, the VOC had gained control over almost the entire northern coast of Java and had also brought Mataram's rulers increasingly under its influence, especially after the Giyanti Agreement of 1755. From that point onward, Java's northern coast became highly significant within the VOC's wider commercial empire, while territories outside Java became relatively less central (Gaastra & Bruijn, 1993; Gaastra, 2002). Politically, the region was reintegrated under VOC authority, which deeply affected local shipping and trading activities. For administrative purposes, the north coast was divided into four main provinces: Banten, Batavia, Cirebon, and the

Northeast Coast of Java. Around 30 percent of VOC power was concentrated in these areas, showing how strategically important the region had become (Knaap, 1996).

From the mid-eighteenth century, Batavia was politically secured through VOC control over Banten and Mataram. The company's main concern then became the prosperity, stability, and development of Batavia as the center of its Asian operations. Batavia required rice to feed its population and building materials, particularly teak wood, to support urban development. Although VOC control had broken Mataram's rice monopoly on the northern coast, this did not automatically guarantee stable supplies for Batavia. Therefore, the VOC introduced policies to regulate the trade of rice and construction materials from Central and East Java. Local regents along the north coast were assigned responsibility for ensuring the availability of rice and teak wood for Batavia, and only after Batavia's needs were fulfilled could these commodities be sold to other regions (Knaap, 1996).

### ***Shipping Network***

The maritime trade network along Java's northern coast can be understood through several interconnected factors. These include the physical geography of the coastline, the rhythm of the monsoon winds, the role and condition of ports, the types of commodities exchanged, the actors involved in trade, and the vessels used in maritime activity. Together, these elements shaped how shipping and commerce operated across the Java Sea and connected Java's coastal cities with wider regional and international trade routes (Findlay, 1889; Knaap, 1996).

### ***Physical Condition of the North Coast of Java***

Until the nineteenth century, the northern coast of Java was generally characterized by flat coastal land and forested surroundings. Further inland, several mountain peaks could be seen, some reaching approximately 10,000 to 11,000 feet. These mountains were important navigational markers, especially for traditional sailors and fishermen, and were also recorded on Western maps. During the east monsoon, cloud cover often made the peaks difficult to see, while during the west monsoon some of the highest mountains could be observed from more than 80 miles away. The coastal waters were generally navigable, with depths ranging from around 8 to 15 meters depending on distance from the shore. However, many coastal areas were muddy or sandy, especially near river mouths, and several locations also contained dangerous rocks that required careful navigation (Findlay, 1889).

The Jakarta Bay area in the nineteenth century illustrates these coastal conditions clearly. Its beaches were largely composed of soft mud, although sandy seabeds and coral reefs were also present in nearby areas. The main shipping lanes had depths of approximately 15 to 20 meters, while waters of around 5 meters deep could generally be found up to about one mile from the shoreline. The Thousand Islands helped protect shipping routes from large waves during the west monsoon. Nevertheless, sandbanks and reefs near the shipping channels had to be marked by port authorities, although such markers could shift because of wave movement. The flat coastal landscape around Jakarta was complemented by visible inland mountain peaks such as Mount Gede, Pangrango, and Salak, which could be used as seamarks by vessels approaching Tanjung Priok, particularly during the west monsoon season (van Rhijn, 1851; Findlay, 1889).

Further east, smaller ports such as Cirebon, Tegal, and Pekalongan had coastal characteristics similar to those around Jakarta Bay. Cirebon was relatively safe from high waves during the west monsoon, and Mount Ceremai functioned as an important landmark for vessels entering the port. Tegal, located about 35 miles east of Cirebon, also relied on natural inland markers, particularly Mount Slamet, which helped sailors determine their position and approach the harbor more safely (Findlay, 1889; Knaap, 1996).

Around 400 kilometers east of Jakarta, Semarang emerged as the largest port in Central Java. Along the sailing route between Tegal and Semarang, mountain peaks such as Sindoro, Sumbing, and Prahau served as useful navigational references, while Mount Ungaran stood south of Semarang as another important landmark. The port of Semarang was located in Semarang Bay, where by the late nineteenth century ships could anchor in waters around 8 to 10 meters deep, approximately three to four miles from the coast. However, sedimentation from the Semarang River created a persistent problem for port access and maritime activity (Findlay, 1889; Knaap, 1996).

East of Semarang, toward Surabaya, there were several older smaller ports, including Jepara, Juana, Rembang, Lasem, and Tuban. Surabaya, located roughly 310 kilometers from Semarang, was still surrounded by swampy areas in the nineteenth century. The seabed along its approach channel consisted of very soft mud, which reduced the risk of serious damage when ships ran aground. Beyond Surabaya, other small ports such as Pasuruan, Probolinggo, and Besuki functioned as feeder ports and later became important outlets for sugar exports. Panarukan also became known as a port associated with tobacco exports. These ports show that the northern coast of Java was not a single maritime zone dominated only by major harbors, but a connected coastal system supported by many smaller ports with specific commercial functions (Findlay, 1889; Knaap, 1996).

### **Ports**

According to Knaap, ports in early modern Java were very different from modern harbor facilities. Most of them did not yet have permanent docks. A port was usually located at a river mouth or in an open roadstead, where larger ships anchored offshore while passengers and goods were transported to land by smaller boats or barges. Since many coastal areas in Java were shallow, river silting became a frequent problem for harbor activity. Around these port zones, settlements developed and were often inhabited by non-Javanese maritime communities, including Malays, Chinese, Indians, people from Sulawesi, and other seafaring groups. Most port towns were relatively small, with populations below 10,000, except for larger centers such as Batavia, Surabaya, and Semarang, whose populations ranged between about 10,000 and 30,000. These ports functioned as regional economic centers, serving both as entry points for imported goods and exit points for exported commodities through river and road networks (Knaap, 1999).

Since the pre-colonial period, Java's northern coast had been among the most active maritime regions in the Indonesian archipelago. This dynamism can be seen from the large number of ports that developed along the coast. When Tomé Pires arrived in Java in 1513, he recorded 24 ports stretching from Banten to Panarukan. The region also gave rise to maritime-oriented Islamic polities, including Banten, Cirebon, Demak, Tuban, and Gresik. These port-based kingdoms contributed significantly to economic development and the spread of Islam in Java and its surrounding regions from the fifteenth century onward. Among the most important ports were Banten, Jayakarta or Sunda Kelapa, Cirebon, Tegal, Pekalongan, Semarang, Rembang, Tuban, Gresik, and Surabaya. Before Demak took control of Banten in 1523, the port had belonged to the Sunda kingdom, whose political center was located in the interior of West Java. The conquest of Banten was associated with Sunan Gunungjati, one of the figures linked to the spread of Islam in Java, and Banten's Islamic forces later succeeded in taking Sunda Kelapa in 1530 (Cribb, 2009).

Tomé Pires described Sunda Kelapa, or Calapa, as the principal port of the Sunda kingdom, whose capital in the early sixteenth century was Dayo. The port appears to have been well organized, with not only economic administration but also judicial institutions, clerks, and written regulations. Commodities from the Sundanese hinterland were believed to have been traded through this port. Its main export products included pepper, rice, vegetables, and other foodstuffs, while imported goods consisted especially of various types of cloth. After Banten's Islamic forces took control of the port, its name was changed to Jayakarta. However, Banten's control lasted for less than a century, because in 1619 the VOC captured Jayakarta and renamed it Batavia. The VOC then gradually

expanded the port infrastructure to accommodate increasing maritime and commercial activity, and by 1770 the pier at Batavia had reached approximately 865 meters in length (Cortesao, 1944; Findlay, 1889; Knaap, 1996).

Cirebon was another important port east of Jakarta, located at the eastern edge of West Java's northern coast. Like Banten, Cirebon had originally been part of the Sunda kingdom before coming under Demak's influence. When Tomé Pires visited Cirebon in 1513, he described it as a good harbor that could accommodate several junks and was connected to the palace through a river route. The hinterland of Cirebon was fertile and rich in resources. It produced large quantities of rice and later became one of Java's major sugar-producing areas. Inland Cirebon also produced coffee, indigo, and high-quality teak wood. In 1681, the VOC gained control over Cirebon and established monopoly rights over imports such as cloth, cotton, and opium, as well as exports including pepper, timber, sugar, and rice. Pepper cultivation in the Cirebon region was also regulated by the VOC, including the determination of its price (Sulistiyono, 1994).

Semarang is believed to have emerged as a port around the ninth century when the Hindu Mataram kingdom used it as one of its maritime outlets. However, its growth was relatively slow. When Tomé Pires arrived in Semarang in 1513, he observed that the city was already ruled by Muslim authorities under the influence of the Demak Sultanate. He also noted that Semarang had around 3,000 inhabitants and did not possess a particularly good harbor, although it had several junks and lanchara vessels. Its main commodities were rice and other foodstuffs. After the fall of Demak, Semarang came under Mataram's authority. Later, during the reign of Amangkurat II, the VOC gained control of Semarang after supporting Mataram against the Trunajaya rebellion. To secure its position, the VOC built the De Vijfhoek fortification in the port area. Since Semarang was frequently affected by sedimentation from the Semarang River, the VOC attempted to improve the harbor so that it could function more effectively as a commercial center on Java's northern coast (Cortesao, 1944; Sulistiyono et al., 2018).

Surabaya was the most important port on the northern coast of East Java. The name Surabaya appeared in the fourteenth-century *Negarakertagama*, which recorded the visit of King Hayam Wuruk of Majapahit to Surabaya, then associated with the Duchy of Jenggala. The Chinese Muslim traveler Ma Huan also described Surabaya during his journeys in the early fifteenth century, noting that it was located south of Tuban and Gresik and inhabited by many wealthy people, including Chinese families. During the transition from the Hindu-Buddhist Majapahit era to the Islamic period, Surabaya became a major commercial and religious center. Trade served as one of the main channels for the spread of Islam, and an Islamic community with a mosque had already existed in the city during Majapahit's high period. The political transition from Demak to Pajang and then Mataram also shaped Surabaya's development. In the early seventeenth century, Mataram launched attacks against Surabaya, and after a long conflict, the city was defeated in 1625, while the VOC simultaneously expanded its influence over ports along Java's northern coast (Sulistiyono et al., 2018).

Although the VOC had sent trade representatives to Surabaya since the early period of its establishment, its direct intervention developed slowly. The opportunity for VOC involvement in Surabaya was shaped more by Mataram's political situation than by local Surabayan forces. From 1742, the VOC assisted Mataram in suppressing the Chinese uprising, and the 1743 agreement between Mataram and the VOC stipulated that Surabaya would be handed over to the company. Afterward, Surabaya's trade network expanded not only across inter-island routes but also into intra-Asian commerce. VOC records from 1774 to 1777 show that Surabaya's shipping connections included ports in Java, Bali, Bima, Banjarmasin, Pasir, Mempawah, Sambas, Palembang, Makassar, Mandar, Malacca, Riau, Johor, and Trengganu (Gaastra & Bruijn, 1993; Tjiptoatmodjo, 1983).

Madurese sailors also played an important role in the maritime history of eastern Indonesia. Oral traditions suggest that Madurese seafarers transmitted sailing knowledge to fishermen from Rote. Macknight's research further shows that praus from Madura sailed to Timor and even northern Australia to collect marine products such as trochus

shells, turtle shells, and sea cucumbers. This demonstrates that indigenous maritime activity was not limited to local waters but extended into wider eastern Indonesian and northern Australian maritime zones (Macknight, 1980).

The spice trade with the eastern archipelago also required large vessels and long-distance maritime capacity. Dutch reports cited by Meilink-Roelofs indicate that junks from Gresik, owned by local authorities, were involved in trade with Banda. During the west monsoon, around 1,000 medium-sized vessels from the area near Gresik reportedly sailed to the Straits of Malacca, Kalimantan, the Malay Peninsula, and Thailand. During the east monsoon, these vessels traveled toward Mindanao, Maluku, the Kei Islands, and Aru. This evidence shows that ports such as Gresik remained deeply involved in extensive maritime networks linking Java with both western and eastern trading zones (Meilink-Roelofs, 1962; Macknight, 1980).

### ***Monsoon***

Shipping activities along Java's northern coast were supported not only by favorable coastal geography, relatively protected waters, and ports connected to productive hinterlands, but also by the regular movement of monsoon winds. From May to October, the east or southeast monsoon blew from the Australian continent and helped vessels sail westward from eastern Indonesia toward Java, Sumatra, and the Malay Peninsula. This period also coincided with the dry season in Java, when rice harvests became available for circulation as one of the most important commodities in Southeast Asian maritime trade (Knaap, 1996).

From November to April, the west or northwest monsoon, originating from the Asian mainland, enabled ships from the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra to return toward Java's northern coast and continue sailing to the eastern parts of the Indonesian archipelago. The transitional periods between April and May and between October and November were often marked by storms, although sea conditions in the Java Sea were generally less dangerous than the typhoon-prone waters of the South China Sea. The seasonal wind system was therefore crucial not only for determining sailing direction but also for shaping the timing and type of commodities traded. Because of these predictable wind patterns, inter-regional, inter-island, intra-Southeast Asian, and international maritime exchange could develop, allowing the northern coastal cities of Java to become integrated into broader maritime commerce (Knaap, 1996).

### ***The Actors***

Maritime trade in the port cities of Java's northern coast involved several groups of actors, including shipowners, captains, boat leaders, merchants, sailors, and crew members. These roles were not always held by separate individuals. In many cases, a shipowner could also act as a trader who financed the voyage, while the captain and crew managed the movement of goods. In some situations, a single person could simultaneously function as owner, merchant, and captain, showing the flexible character of maritime enterprise in the premodern trading world (Knaap, 1996).

During the premodern period, maritime expertise was generally acquired through practice rather than formal education. Skills in navigation, ship handling, route selection, and commercial negotiation were learned directly through participation in voyages. Young sailors or traders usually began by working under experienced captains, where they absorbed knowledge through oral transmission and repeated practical experience. The more frequently they joined shipping and trading activities, the more opportunities they had to learn how to command crews, manage transactions, and generate profit. Trust was also central to maritime commerce, since relationships among shipowners, merchants, crews, and trading partners were built through repeated cooperation and long-term association (Knaap, 1996).

### ***Shipping Networks***

The maritime trading system of the Indonesian archipelago was organized around an east-west movement of goods, with Java playing a major role in distributing rice and other commodities. Pepper was mainly produced in Sumatra, Malaya, West Java, and Borneo, while spices such as cloves, nutmeg, and mace came from the Moluccas and Banda Islands. Java supplied rice, salt, salted fish, foodstuffs, cotton, thread, and textiles. Javanese traders and junk owners carried these goods to Sumatra to exchange them for pepper and other commodities. Pepper was then brought back to Java and moved further to Bali, where it could be exchanged for Balinese cloth that was highly demanded in the spice-producing islands. From there, Javanese vessels sailed to the Moluccas and Banda with rice, Javanese products, Balinese textiles, Indian cloth, Chinese porcelain, silk, and small coins. This pattern shows that inter-island and international trade were deeply connected in the archipelagic economy (Frank, 1998).

European expansion in Asia during the early modern period was closely linked to both commerce and political power. Europeans introduced new commercial orientations, institutional arrangements, and company-based trading systems, while also collaborating with Asian partners when it served their interests (Nierstrasz, 2012). Batavia became the VOC's headquarters and operated as a central logistical node connecting coastal ports across the archipelago (Parthesius, 2010). This strategic position became more important after the 1610s, when a more direct route between the Cape of Good Hope and Java was developed. The Sunda Strait then became a vital link between Batavia and Europe, as well as a control point for intra-Asian shipping. VOC vessels regularly sailed from Batavia to destinations such as Taiwan, Japan, and Siam. For example, the VOC ship *Nieuw Enckhuysen* transported sugar to Taiwan and then returned to Batavia before continuing to other destinations. By 1610, the VOC had also established several important routes in the archipelago, including the Sumatra route, the Malacca Strait route, and routes toward the Spice Islands, including Ambon, Ceram, Banda, and the Moluccas (Parthesius, 2010).

When the VOC first entered the Indonesian archipelago, existing maritime trade systems were already functioning. In its early dealings in Java, the VOC initially attempted to adapt to local trade patterns by building relationships with regional authorities, since these rulers controlled permission to trade in their territories. In Banten, for example, the sultan controlled the pepper trade, while Chinese merchants acted as important intermediaries who supplied pepper to the VOC in exchange for goods such as silk, porcelain, and other Chinese products. This situation pushed the VOC to participate in intra-Asian trade so that it could obtain exchange commodities needed to buy pepper for export to Europe. Thus, European traders did not only participate in global trade with Europe, but also became deeply involved in existing Asian commercial circuits (Vermeulen, 2010).

However, tensions emerged when European traders entered Java's northern coastal trade, especially in Banten. Their presence increased the bargaining position of the sultan, which contributed to rising pepper prices and reduced European profit margins. In this context, conflicts between the VOC and local authorities often became struggles over monopoly control. Local rulers attempted to maintain selling monopolies, while the VOC tried to impose buying monopolies. Although these efforts were often justified as a way to stabilize unstable prices, the VOC increasingly used armed force to secure commodities at low prices and resell them at much higher prices for profit (Vermeulen, 2010; Nierstrasz, 2012).

In the early modern period, both large and small vessels were still powered by wind or rowing. Knaap classified shipping at that time into three main categories: VOC ships, non-VOC European ships, and private vessels. Private ships could be owned by local people from various ethnic groups or by foreign-descended communities such as Chinese, Arabs, Indians, and Koja traders. These vessels operated across several major maritime zones, including Java, Maluku, Nusa Tenggara, Kalimantan, and the Malacca Strait, and were used in both VOC-controlled and private commercial networks (Knaap, 1996).

Shipping routes connected ports along Java's northern coast with one another, linked Java with other regions of the archipelago, and connected Batavia with Asian and European destinations. Between 1774 and 1777, when the VOC was still commercially active, 38.1 percent of VOC shipping from Batavia went to ports on Java's northern coast, while only around 8.4 percent went to other regions such as Maluku. The role of local and private vessels was even more significant. Around 60.9 percent of private ships departing from Batavia sailed to ports along the Javanese coast, while the highest percentage for other regions, such as Nusa Tenggara and Kalimantan, was only 6.6 percent. These figures show that indigenous traders and sailors, together with Chinese, Arab, and other Asian commercial actors, remained highly important in local shipping even under VOC dominance (Knaap, 1996).

The ports of Java's northern coast therefore continued to play an essential role in archipelagic, Southeast Asian, and international commerce during the early modern period (See Table 1). However, the roles of maritime actors gradually shifted. Private vessels, including indigenous ships, became increasingly concentrated in local and inter-island trade, while VOC and other European ships expanded their position in intra-Asian shipping. This shift was partly caused by VOC restrictions on the construction of large ships along Java's northern coast, combined with the growing presence of European vessels. Between 1774 and 1777, local shipping from Juwana and Pasuruan to Madura was particularly dominant, each accounting for about 45 percent of such movements (Knaap, 1996).

The Batavia shipping network primarily extended eastward along Java's northern coast as far as Surabaya, but its influence over private shipping became weaker beyond that point. The strongest connections within Batavia's port network were concentrated in two main groups. The first consisted of Cirebon, Pekalongan, and Tegal, which generally supplied rice to Batavia. The second included Jepara and Rembang, which mainly provided teak wood. In return, these ports received imported commodities distributed from Batavia. By contrast, Semarang's maritime network covered a broader geographical area, stretching from Batavia to Sumenep in Madura. Because of its central position on Java's northern coast, Semarang also developed as an international port, exporting rice and salt to Malacca, several ports in Sumatra, and Makassar in Sulawesi. These commodities were collected from smaller ports within Semarang's surrounding network (Knaap, 1996).

The Surabaya network also played a major role in private shipping activities. As an international port, Surabaya became the central hub for local maritime traffic linking nearby areas such as Bangkalan, Sumenep, Pasuruan, Banyuwangi, and Bali. Surabaya functioned both as a distribution point for imported goods and as a collection center for export commodities from these surrounding ports. In addition, Surabaya maintained important connections with Rembang, Juana, and Jepara, which supplied teak wood for the city's development. These smaller ports also provided other important commodities, including salt, shrimp paste, salted fish, and traditional textiles. This shows that Surabaya's maritime position was supported not only by long-distance trade but also by dense local and regional exchange networks (Knaap, 1996).

The types of vessels used by traders and sailors along Java's northern coast also reveal the strength of local maritime activity. Knaap (1996) identifies several main traditional vessels used in this period, including mayang, pancalang, gonting, chialoup, and cunea. Between 1774 and 1777, ship arrivals in fourteen ports along the north coast of Java were dominated by mayang, which accounted for about 51 percent of the total. This was followed by pancalang at 15 percent, gonting at 13 percent, chialoup at 8 percent, and cunea at 2 percent.

**Table 1.** Number of Private Sailing with Various Foreign Ports, 1774–1777

<b>Origin</b>	<b>Batavia</b>	<b>Cirebon</b>	<b>Semarang</b>	<b>Surabaya &amp; Gresik</b>
Ambon	20	-	-	-
Bali	25	-	-	96

<b>Origin</b>	<b>Batavia</b>	<b>Cirebon</b>	<b>Semarang</b>	<b>Surabaya &amp; Gresik</b>
Banjarmasin	16	2	31	81
Bima	18	-	6	9
Johor/Riau	-	2	28	23
Makassar	45	-	25	7
Mampawah	3	-	22	11
Mandar	12	-	-	-
Melaka	13	13	23	-
Padang	24	-	-	-
Palembang	43	37	58	104
Pasir	11	-	29	12
Sambas	1	-	5	18
Siam	11	-	-	1
Trengganu	-	-	15	17

### ***Trade Commodities and Private Shipping in Late Eighteenth-Century Java***

By the late eighteenth century, rice from Java had become a major export commodity, especially for trade directed toward the Straits of Malacca. Batavia imported more than 122,000 pikul of rice from Central Java, along with around 4,000 pikul of tobacco produced in both the coastal and mountainous areas of the region. Cirebon was strongly linked to this trade, with approximately 67 percent, or 7,010 pikul, of its rice exports directed to the Straits of Malacca. Other ports also contributed significantly, including Semarang at 36 percent, Gresik at 51 percent, and Surabaya at 39 percent (Knaap, 2006).

Sugar also formed an important part of Java's commercial relationship with Southeast Asia. Several ports were highly oriented toward the Malacca Strait market in the sugar trade, including Batavia at 81 percent, Semarang at 85 percent, Rembang at 100 percent, Gresik at 31 percent, and Surabaya at 63 percent. In addition, sugarcane exports were also significant from Cirebon at 99 percent, Semarang at 83 percent, Gresik at 22 percent, and Surabaya at 21 percent. Javanese textiles were another important export commodity to the Straits of Malacca, particularly from Cirebon, Semarang, Gresik, and Surabaya, which contributed 82 percent, 63 percent, 51 percent, and 64 percent respectively (Knaap, 1996).

Batavia was supplied by many smaller vessels that were initially used to support traffic between the city and larger ships anchored in the roadstead. These small craft helped move cargo and passengers between offshore vessels and the port area. Banten also maintained maritime connections with other ports in Java, although it increasingly functioned as a satellite of Batavia. Between 1774 and 1777, ship movements showed a clear contrast between VOC and private maritime activity. VOC ships accounted for only 14 movements, while private vessels recorded 825 movements, indicating the continuing vitality of non-VOC shipping in the region (Knaap, 2006).

Although the VOC remained powerful, private shipping was still strongly shaped by indigenous and Asian maritime actors. Around 44 percent of shipping volume was controlled by the VOC, while the remaining share involved indigenous traders and Chinese merchants. Knaap's later classification of private shipping by ethnic background suggests that approximately 30 to 35 percent of private vessels were Javanese, about 15 percent were Chinese, and around 50 percent belonged to Balinese, Makassarese, Malay, and other maritime groups. These figures indicate that local and regional actors continued to play an important role in handling commodities and adjusting to VOC dominance. They also show that Javanese skippers remained active within Java's economy, even though their role operated alongside Chinese and other Asian trading communities (Knaap, 2010).

## Conclusions

In the premodern period, ports along Java's northern coast occupied a strategic position in both archipelagic and international maritime trade. This importance was supported by Java's capacity to produce commodities demanded by wider markets, including rice, agricultural products, and plantation goods. The geographical position of the north coast also made it a major transit corridor within long-distance trade networks. In addition, Java's relatively large population created an attractive market for merchants. These conditions were effectively used by Javanese sailors, who had long experience in maritime routes connecting India and China. As a result, northern Javanese ports became important nodes within regional and international commercial networks (Sulistiyono, 2003; Frank, 1998).

Entering the early modern era, maritime commerce in the north-coast cities of Java began to weaken as a result of several pressures, including Javanese defeats against the Portuguese and the destruction of pantura port cities by the inland agrarian power of Mataram. European maritime expansion therefore occurred at a time when Javanese sea power was already facing decline. However, this condition should not be interpreted as the complete disappearance of Javanese maritime activity. Rather, Javanese traders and sailors continued to operate by adjusting their shipping and trading practices to the new political and economic order created by VOC expansion and the conquest of coastal trading cities (Manguin, 1993; De Graaf & Pigeaud, 1989, Anggara et al., 2025).

The expansion of the VOC and other European maritime powers gradually changed the position of indigenous shipping in Asian trade. Javanese fleets and sailors were increasingly pushed away from long-distance routes and became more concentrated on coastal, local, and inter-island trade around Java, the wider Indonesian archipelago, and the Straits of Malacca. Meanwhile, trade routes connecting the archipelago with other parts of Asia and Europe became increasingly dominated by European ships. Thus, the transformation of Javanese maritime activity is better understood as a process of adaptation, contraction, and repositioning rather than sudden collapse (Knaap, 1996; Gaastra & Bruijn, 1993).

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