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Princely Adventures in the *Sulalat al-Salatin* (The Genealogy of Kings)

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Like the Ottomans and Persians, the communities in the Malay archipelago looked up to the figure of Alexander the Great

The chronicle recounts that after the prince and his followers set sail on their adventures, they came across an island. The prince decided to settle there, founding a kingdom that the narrator claims later ‘developed into an extensive state ... famous throughout the world’.^[1]

Though the prince’s exploits may recall Brutus of Troy’s legendary founding of Britain, this particular narrative comes from quite a different archipelago. The prince in this chronicle was Seri Teri Buana (better known as Sang Nila Utama), and the island kingdom he founded was ‘Singa Pura’, known today as the Southeast Asian city-state of Singapore.^[2] The tale itself comes from the *Sulalat al-Salatin*, or *The Genealogy of Kings*, also known as the *Sejarah Melayu* or *Malay Annals*, as recorded in the version penned by Tun Seri Lanang around 1612-1614.

The *Sulalat al-Salatin* is an influential work of Malay historical literature that charts the origins and adventures of the Malay kings from ancient times up to the early seventeenth century. For anyone interested in medieval or early modern ‘Orient’, the text offers a window into another region with a strong Islamic presence, one that is connected to – yet distinct from – the Ottomans, Persians and Mughals.^[3]

Like the Ottomans and Persians, the communities in the Malay archipelago looked up to the figure of Alexander the Great (or Iskandar, to use his Arabic name), who they perceived to be Muslim.^[4] Indeed, the *Sulalat al-Salatin* traces the ancestry of the Malay kings back to Alexander himself. The very first episode recounts how ‘Alexander the Great ... journeyed to the east to observe the rising sun’, where he defeated Raja Kida Hindi, king of ‘half of India’.^[5] On the warrior’s behest, Raja Kida Hindi ‘embraced [Alexander’s religion] and ‘became

a Muslim in the religion of the Prophet Abraham'.^[6] Alexander later married Raja Kida Hindi's daughter, Princess Shar al-Bariyah, and fathered a son by her.

The text records that in later generations, Alexander's descendants migrated to Southeast Asia, spreading across present-day Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.^[7] As they did so, they developed their own unique, cosmopolitan identity, partly through diplomacy and inter-marriage with members of other Asian kingdoms. For instance, one chapter recounts how the emperor of China sought to 'forge a friendship with the Raja of Melaka', with the Chinese ruler sending his daughter to be married to the Sultan Mansur Shah, accompanied by an entourage of 'five hundred' Chinese individuals, who subsequently settled in the Malay peninsula.^[8]

The narrative ends not long after describing the Portuguese conquest of Melaka in 1511 and the resultant exile of the Melakan sultanate. The creation, augmentation, and circulation of the *Sulalat al-Salatin* itself, though, ensured that the adventures of Sang Nila Utama and many other Malay princes would live on for centuries to come.

Further reading:

Gallop, Annabel. 'Alexander/Iskandar: Ancestor of Malay Kings'. Asian and African studies blog (blog) Jan 31, 2023. Accessed Aug 25, 2023. <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2023/01/alexanderiskandar-ancestor-of-malay-kings.html>

Peacock, Andrew, and Annabel Teh Gallop, ed. *From Anatolia to Aceh: Ottomans, Turks and Southeast Asia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Ng, Su Fang. *Alexander the Great from Britain to Southeast Asia: Peripheral Empires in the Global Renaissance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Tun Seri Lanang, *The Genealogy of Kings (Sulalat al-Salatin)*, trans. Muhammad Haji Salleh (Singapore: Penguin Books, 2020).

[1] Tan Seri Lanang, *The Genealogy of Kings (Sulalat al-Salatin)*, trans. Muhammad Haji Salleh (Singapore: Penguin Books, 2020), 30.

[2] Ibid, 30.

[3] On Southeast Asia's Ottoman connections, see Andrew Peacock and Annabel Teh Gallop, ed., *From Anatolia to Aceh: Ottomans, Turks and Southeast Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[4] See further, Su Fang Ng, *Alexander the Great from Britain to Southeast Asia: Peripheral Empires in the Global Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[5] Tun Seri Lanang, *The Genealogy of Kings*, 2-3.

[6] Ibid, 3.

[7] Mohammad Haji Salleh, Introduction, in *ibid*, vi.

[8] Tun Seri Lanang, *The Genealogy of Kings*, 116, 119.

Title Image: Sang Nila Utama Garden, Fort Canning, Singapore. The garden is named after the legendary founder of 'Singa Pura', or Singapore, whose adventures are recorded in the Sulalat al-Salatin. [Image: author's own]



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