Sejarah Melayu: Kings, Warriors, and Lessons for a New World

Malay political memory, heroism, legitimacy, and the rise and fall of a civilization

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Sejarah Melayu

Kings, Warriors, and Lessons for a New World

A ten-lesson micro-course through the **Sejarah Melayu** *(the "Malay Annals," Sulalatus Salatin) — the foundational chronicle of the Malay world — adapted from the Malay-language retelling* Sejarah Melayu *(Kitab Kuning Digital) by Jauhari Che Wan.*

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Before you begin

The **Sejarah Melayu** — the *Sulalatus Salatin*, "the Genealogy of Kings" — is not merely a list of rulers. It is the memory a civilization keeps of itself: how a line of kings began with a vision on a hill, built the greatest emporium of its age, and lost it in a single season. It is a book about *legitimacy* (what makes a ruler rightful), about *heroism* (and its price), about *political memory* (how a people decides what to remember), and about *civilizational change* — the long rhythm by which a people rises through openness and falls through pride.

This course follows the chronicle's arc across ten lessons, one per chapter: from the founding of Singapura and the refounding at Melaka, through the golden age of the port and the statecraft of its great bendahara, through the diplomacy that made a small state matter to Ming China, and down into the palace intrigue and the final catastrophe of 1511.

It is deliberately the **wide** history — rulers, courts, the sea-lanes, the political memory of a whole world — not the deep study of a single figure. **Hang Tuah appears here as one hero among many**, and one lesson even examines how his story was written differently in different books; a closing note points to the companion deep-dive on Hang Tuah as a complement to this wider canvas, not a repetition of it.

A word on the sources. The Sejarah Melayu mixes sober chronicle with legend — a prince who sees a lion that never lived in these islands, a fish-spirit granting strength, a mouse-deer that shames

a hunting dog. The chronicle's own narrator knew this; as one of its voices says, *"history is not fact, but interpretation."* These lessons keep that doubled quality — the marvel and the meaning together — and treat the legends as the chronicle treats them: as the deeper truths a people chose to carry.

Lesson 1 — Sang Nila Utama: A Prince, a Lion, and the Founding of Singapura

In this lesson: vision, the courage to leave a dying throne, and the birth of a dynasty.

It begins, as foundings often do, with a dream and a hunt. Around 1299, on the hills of Bintan, **Sang Nila Utama** — a prince of Palembang, descended from the kings of the old Srivijaya — is troubled by a recurring dream of a shining beast. His loyal counselor **Demang Lebar Daun** tells him a dream repeated is not chance but a summons. On the hunt that follows, a deer leads them to an open shore, and there the prince sees it: a great beast, chest broad, mane like burnished gold, eyes like two fallen stars — standing with a dignity that silences the whole forest. Demang Lebar Daun, who has heard travelers' tales, names it: a **lion**, king of beasts, whose courage is unmatched. The beast walks to the sea with the bearing of a king and vanishes into the light.

What matters in the chronicle is not the zoology — lions never lived in these islands — but the *vision*. Something changes in the prince's chest. Srivijaya is dying, he tells his counselor; the court of Palembang is a nest of intrigue, his cousin already courting Majapahit. "If I stay," he says, "I will rule over ruins, or be killed by my own kin." He would rather die at sea chasing a dream than

live on a borrowed throne. Demang Lebar Daun gives him the counsel that is the spine of the chapter: *"A great leader makes a decision while others still hesitate. They do not wait for certainty; they create it."*

He takes his leave of his dying father, Sang Sapurba, who blesses him — "Srivijaya is dead; do not die with its corpse" — and crosses the strait to the quiet island of **Temasek**, "the calm sea," a place of fishermen and mangrove. There is no welcome, no palace, only silence. But the prince climbs a small hill, looks out over forest and sea, and declares: *here* a city will rise. He names it from the beast he saw — *singa* (lion) and *pura* (city): **Singapura**, the Lion City, a name of courage. From swamp and forest he builds a port; ships come from China, India, Arabia, and Java; a civilization is born where there had been only mangrove.

For reflection: The chronicle opens its whole genealogy not with a battle but with an act of *seeing* — the capacity to perceive what is not yet there, and the nerve to act on it before anyone can confirm it. It opens, too, with a renunciation: the prince walks away from a crumbling inheritance to build something true. The lion is chosen deliberately as the emblem — not the tiger that hunts alone, nor the elephant that can be tamed, but the king that rules *with dignity*. The Malay political line begins, the Annals insist, with vision, courage, and a certain nobility of rule.

Lesson 2 — Badang: Strength, Fame, and the Price of Being Feared

In this lesson: the hero from nowhere, the uses of great power, and the danger of being too strong for a king's comfort.

Badang is a slave — the poorest of the fishermen at the mouth of the Singapura river, orphaned, hauling nets with bleeding hands, feeding a bent old mother on tears and prayer. He never complains; he believes that one day fortune will flow to him like the river. In the chronicle's telling, his patience is seen. A great fish, scales blazing like gold, rises and becomes an old man in white — the spirit of the river — who grants Badang immense strength as a reward for his years of uncomplaining endurance. But the gift comes with a warning that will shape everything: *"Great strength carries great responsibility. Never be arrogant, for arrogance is the beginning of ruin. And when the time comes, you must let go, for there is a price to be paid for fame."*

Badang's deeds make him legend. Summoned by the Raja, he lifts a stone the size of a small house that ten men could not move. He becomes the realm's champion — hurling a pirate ship's anchor into the sea, lifting the Majapahit strongman Sang Pikul together with his two elephants and setting them down gently, seizing the jaws of a marauding white tiger and sending it back to the forest

with a word. To each defeated rival he says the same thing: *"Strength is not for oppressing, but for protecting."*

But the greater his fame, the greater the Raja's unease. A minister whispers: *"Badang is too strong. If he rebels, who could stop him? Better to remove him before he becomes a thorn in our flesh."* So the king, unable to match or control such power, disguises banishment as an honor and sends him away to Siam — "go, and do not return." Badang does not resist; a slave knows his place. But at the palace gate he looks back at the great stone he once lifted, and with one kick splits it in two. *"This stone,"* he says, *"will stand as a reminder that power which is not valued destroys itself."* The split stone remains — one half standing, one half fallen: the chronicle's emblem of the double truth of every great strength, its glory and its loss together.

For reflection: Badang is the hero who rises from nothing by patience and uses his power only to protect — and is destroyed not by any enemy but by the fear of the powerful. The chapter is a meditation on a permanent problem of political life: what a ruler does with a servant too strong to control, and what a realm loses when it fears its own best people more than its enemies. "Singapura no longer needed Badang," the chronicle says, "but Singapura needed Badang." The split stone is the price of greatness that goes unvalued.

Lesson 3 — Parameswara: From Fugitive King to Maharaja of Melaka

In this lesson: exile, the brutal arithmetic of legitimacy, and the refounding of a civilization under a tree.

This is the chronicle's great story of fall and refounding. **Parameswara**, the last ruler of the Singapura line, flees a burning city — first driven from Palembang as a youth, then, as ruler of Temasek, overthrown. The chapter does not flinch from the hard parts of the founding story: granted refuge at Temasek by its ruler **Temagi**, Parameswara learns that his host has secretly promised Majapahit to hand him over, and strikes first, killing Temagi and seizing the throne — "a throne taken with blood is never safe." Majapahit's vengeance comes within the year; Singapura falls, and the king flees again, northward up the peninsula, his city burning behind him. "I have failed again," he whispers in the rain — and his old admiral, Laksamana Sakti, answers: *"Do not look back, my lord. Look ahead. We are still alive."*

The refounding is the heart of it. Exhausted, out of water, his followers begging to stop, Parameswara rests at the mouth of the **Sungai Bertam** and sees what others cannot: a deep river where great ships can anchor, the Strait of Melaka stretched before him

— the main artery of world trade. “This land is wild,” his admiral warns; “we have nothing.” *“We have courage,”* the king replies; *“that is enough.”* Then comes the omen the chronicle makes famous: a tiny **mouse-deer (pelanduk)**, cornered by a hunting dog, does not flee — it stands its ground, sidesteps the charge, and kicks the dog’s snout so that it runs yelping away. Parameswara reads the sign at once: *“A small mouse-deer dared to fight a great dog. It did not run. It stood. And it won. Here is where we stop running.”*

Resting against a *melaka* tree, he names the new state after it: **Melaka**. He has a stone raised and carves on it with his kris: *“Here begins Melaka, a kingdom that will not fall.”* And because the port is safe, the taxes low, the welcome warm, the ships come — from India, China, Arabia, Java. From a fugitive king is born the Maharaja of Melaka, and from a stand under a tree, an empire.

For reflection: Legitimacy, in the Annals, is not a clean inheritance; it is forged in exile, failure, and hard — even bloody — choices, and confirmed by the courage to stand when standing seems hopeless. The mouse-deer is the emblem: the small who refuse to flee the large can prevail. And notice what makes the refounding *succeed* where the first foundings were fragile — not conquest, but a safe harbor, a low tax, a warm welcome. The lesson the chronicle plants here will govern the golden age to come: a Malay polity rises by openness, not by force.

Lesson 4 — The Emporium: Melaka's Golden Age

In this lesson: the greatest port of its age, Malay as the language of the world, and openness as a civilizational strategy.

The fourth chapter is a portrait of Melaka at its height, under Sultan Mansur Syah — a port that never sleeps, "like a sea-dragon that never slumbers." At the stone wharves lie ships from everywhere: great junks from China with blue-and-white porcelain and flowing silk; Gujarati traders in white turbans with cotton and beads; Makassar *pinisi* heavy with clove and nutmeg; craft from Persia and Jeddah with perfume and pearls. In the peak season of the northeast monsoon the harbor becomes "an ocean of masts and sails" — cloth and pepper from Coromandel, rice and sugar from Bengal, ivory and gems from Ceylon, tin and aloeswood from Burma, the spices of the eastern islands. All of it comes, the chronicle stresses, *"not because they were forced, but because Melaka was the gateway to the world."*

Two institutions made it work, and both are the chronicle's real subject. The first is **language**. At the wharf, clerks record every sack of pepper and chest of silk in a single tongue — **Malay** — not by decree but because it was the easiest, most neutral bridge among a thousand languages. A Tamil merchant haggles with an Arab in Malay; a Chinese disputes a weight with a Javanese in Malay. Melaka trained young locals as interpreters — a

fisherman's son like Awang, fluent in Tamil, Mandarin, and Arabic by fifteen, who translated not just words but customs. Malay became a *lingua franca* of commerce, the chronicle notes, "not through war, but through economics" — a global language adopted because people wanted to trade, not because they were made to.

The second is the **free-port system** — an administrative innovation the chapter dwells on with real pride. Melaka did not tax goods at the gate. A trader could enter, store his cargo in a free warehouse, and seek a buyer; only when goods were *sold* in the market was a light tax levied. A ship merely taking on water and food paid nothing. Spices entered duty-free, because Melaka wanted to be the world's spice entrepôt. Rival ports like Pasai taxed on arrival, before a merchant had earned a coin; Melaka reversed the logic — give them room to trade, and they will come of their own accord. And beneath the system lay the thing that made it hold: **trust** — transparent law, honest judges, a guarantee that a cheated merchant would get justice, and the Laksamana's fleet patrolling the strait against pirates so that cargo was safe. "Trust," the chronicle says, "is the most valuable currency; without trust, there is no trade."

For reflection: Melaka's greatness, the Annals insist, rested on a single quality: **openness**. It closed its door to no one; it asked no one's race or religion, only that they bring goods, pay fair dues, and honor the Sultan and the law. It made its own language a *bridge, not a wall*, and its own port a platform where every nation could sit at one mat and share in the wealth. Identity, the chronicle argues, was not diminished by this but enriched — "not

rich in goods, but rich in culture," its core intact beneath the exchange. This is the civilizational memory the Malay world keeps of its own best self: prosperity flows from openness, not from isolation.

Lesson 5 — Tun Perak: The Architect of Malay Greatness

In this lesson: the great bendahara — statecraft over swordsmanship, the kingmaker who served the realm rather than himself.

If Melaka had a maker, the chronicle says, it was not a sultan but a minister: **Tun Perak**, Bendahara Paduka Raja. He was no prince — the son of a village headman on the Klang river, risen on courage and intelligence alone, which is precisely why "every layer of society honored him, from the sultan to the fisherman at the river-mouth." As a young man he destroyed a pirate fleet with a trap at the river-mouth; summoned to court in a shabby sarong, he asked the Sultan only "to be a warrior — not for rank, but to guard the seas of Melaka." He rose to panglima, to temenggung, and in 1456 to **Bendahara**, the empire's chief minister — a post he held for **forty-two years**, serving three sultans and keeping Melaka undefeated.

His genius was not the sword but the arrangement of others. When Siam threatened with a thousand war-elephants, he did not panic; he planned. "Strength is not in numbers," he told the court, "but in one heart, a sharp blade, and a calm mind." His victory at **Muar** was a three-month preparation for a three-day battle: lure the Siamese fleet into shallows where elephants could not land and great ships ran aground; send envoys to Pahang and Johor to

close the land routes; poison the wells so a thirsty army could not fight. And after the victory, the stroke that reveals the man — he ordered the enemy dead *buried with honor*: "They too are human. Show that Melaka is civilized." The surviving Siamese surrendered and went home telling of Melaka's decency; for twenty years they did not return.

Two things mark him as a true statesman. He was a **kingmaker who chose for the realm, not for faction**: gathering the nobles, feeding them first ("a full stomach, a calm mind"), he argued for the prince who could best lead rather than the eldest or the one a faction preferred — "we do not choose a king by whim; we choose a king who can take Melaka forward… the good king is the one willing to hear counsel." And he refused to found a dynasty of his own: when Hang Tuah asked why he did not marry his children into royalty, he laughed — *"I do not want my descendants to be nobles. Nobles are bound. Let them be ordinary, taste the bitterness of life. Only one who has been hungry knows the worth of food; only one who has been humbled knows the worth of dignity."* On his deathbed his counsel to Hang Tuah was the chronicle's definition of true loyalty: *"You are not a servant to the sultan; you are a servant to Melaka. If the sultan errs, you must correct him — but with courtesy."* And his final warning: *"A kingdom is not walls, but feeling. If the hearts of the people break, walls of any height will fall."*

For reflection: Tun Perak is the chronicle's model of the minister as *architect* — a man who "builds not for himself but for the generations to come," like the unseen root of a banyan on

which every branch depends. His statecraft is intelligence over force, preparation over bravado, and mercy even in victory. And his deepest teaching separates loyalty from servility: one serves the *realm*, not the ruler's whim, and the truest service is the courage to correct power. When he died, the chronicle says, all Melaka wept — "not for the loss of a noble, but for the loss of a father."

Lesson 6 — Hang Tuah and the Art of the Envoy; or, How History Is Written

In this lesson: the hero as diplomat, loyalty as wise judgment rather than blind obedience — and the discovery that the same story is told differently in different books.

This chapter turns to **Hang Tuah** not as a swordsman but as an *envoy*. He sails to China as the ambassador of the Sultan of Melaka, bearing a gold-sealed letter — a mission he calls "a battlefield without blood." He has his crew learn Chinese court manners (point with the thumb, never turn your face from an official, never speak the Emperor's name directly), and when a young sailor asks why they should follow another people's customs, he answers: *"We follow their customs because we want them to respect us — not because we are weak, but because we are wise. One who knows how to respect another's customs is respected, not despised."* At the Ming court he does not grovel; he states that Melaka is small but seeks "fair trade and protection from enemies," offers friendship "not as a beggar but as a brother," and wins it. On the way home he writes down everything he observed — China's customs, its military strength, its weaknesses — for Melaka's library. His loyalty, the chronicle notes, is "not blind; he is loyal because he understands that the

stability of Melaka depends on wise relations with the great powers."

Then the chapter does something unusual and important: it steps back to compare the sources themselves. In the courtly **Sulalatus Salatin** (the Sejarah Melayu), the hero who rebels and fights Hang Tuah is **Hang Kasturi**, a would-be usurper — and there is *no* scene of a righteous rebellion at all. In the popular **Hikayat Hang Tuah**, told by village storytellers, it is **Hang Jebat** who rebels, and he rebels *for justice* — refusing to accept his friend Hang Tuah's wrongful death sentence, running amok against a tyrant-king. Same event, two names, two meanings. Why? *"Because every story is born from the womb of its age."* The Hikayat came from the people, who wanted a hero with a sense of justice, one who would turn against an unjust ruler. The Sejarah Melayu was written in the palace, by the Bendahara, whose task was to glorify the crown — so in it, every rebellion must come from a villain, and there is no room for a beloved traitor.

The chronicle refuses to collapse the two into one "correct" version: *"Truth is not like a whole coin. It is like shards of pottery — you arrange them carefully, but gaps remain."* Each version teaches something true in its own context: Jebat's story teaches that justice sometimes demands we resist unjust power; Hang Tuah's teaches that change can be made from within, through patience and wisdom. The reader's task is not to pick the loudest voice but to hear them all — and then to ask *who told this, for whom, and to what end.*

For reflection: Two lessons braid together here. First, on heroism: the greatest Malay hero is remembered in the Annals not for his blade but for his tongue and judgment — and true loyalty is defined, as Tun Perak defined it, as "loyal to the kingdom, not to the ruler's whims," brave enough to correct power courteously. Second, on *political memory* itself: history is "not fact, but interpretation," shaped by who writes it and why. To read the Sejarah Melayu well is to read it critically — which is the first skill a people needs if it is not to be ruled by whoever controls the story.

Lesson 7 — Melaka and Ming China: Soft Power and the Cheng Ho Network

In this lesson: how a small state made itself matter to an empire — protection without subjugation, and influence without force.

When Melaka was young and fragile — "like a fledgling, not yet able to fly, already surrounded by hawks," squeezed between Siam and Majapahit — Parameswara (now styled **Megat Iskandar Shah**) made a strategic wager: he sailed to Ming China to offer friendship and seek protection. The chronicle paints the scene of a small king in the vast Forbidden City, who refuses to kowtow like other vassals and instead places his hand on his chest: *"I come from Melaka, a small land at the edge of the southern sea. I bring friendship, not to beg for pity, but to offer brotherhood."* The Emperor **Yongle**, who valued courage, answers with the chapter's key image: *"A small country can be a great friend… this friendship is not a rope that binds your neck. It is a chain that joins two hands."* He grants Melaka a golden seal of recognition and dispatches his great admiral to visit it.

That admiral is **Cheng Ho** (Zheng He) — and the chronicle takes care to tell us who he was: born Ma He to a Muslim Hui family in Yunnan, son of a man who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca,

taken into Ming service and risen to command the largest fleet the world had yet seen. He was a devout Muslim who sought out mosques and scholars in every port, kept an imam and halal food aboard, and wrote: *"If you wish to enter a person's heart, do not bring a sword. Bring bread and a holy book."* His "treasure ships" were floating cities — the greatest over a hundred meters long, his fleet of some three hundred vessels and twenty-eight thousand men carrying porcelain, silk, doctors, astronomers, and craftsmen. Its purpose, he said, was not conquest: *"We do not come to take land. We come to take hearts."*

Cheng Ho came to Melaka five times between 1409 and 1421, and each visit wove the bond tighter. He helped build Melaka's city wall and a mosque of mixed Malay-Chinese design; his craftsmen taught shipbuilding, pottery, and silk-weaving while Melakans taught herbal medicine; when he first heard the call to prayer on that foreign shore, the chronicle says, he wept. He and the Sultan prayed together — *religion a bridge, not a wall.* On his last visit, old and white-haired, he left a box of sand from Mecca, saying: *"We are all servants of God, and true friendship is worship."* And the protection was real: in 1411, when Siam moved against Melaka, Yongle sent not an army but a single letter — *"Melaka is under my protection. Who touches it, touches me."* Siam withdrew. "This is true soft power," the chronicle concludes: *"influence without violence."*

For reflection: The China-Melaka relationship is the Annals' study of **soft power** — how a small state secures itself not by matching a giant's armies but by diplomacy, friendship, and shared faith, gaining protection without becoming a possession

("a chain that joins two hands, not a rope that binds the neck"). And it is a vision of great-power conduct that the chronicle deliberately honors: an empire that projected its greatness by *taking hearts rather than land*, where a Muslim admiral made religion a bridge between civilizations. The safe, cosmopolitan Melaka of the golden age was, in part, the fruit of this network — and a model of how influence can be exercised without conquest.

Lesson 8 — Fitnah Istana: Palace Slander and the Rot Within

In this lesson: how a kingdom begins to die — not from an enemy at the gate, but from slander whispered at the throne.

Melaka's decline, the chronicle insists, began inside the palace. The villain is **Laksamana Khoja Hassan**, consumed by envy of the aged and faithful **Bendahara Tun Mutahir**, whose daughter Tun Fatimah had become queen and whose four decades of service made him the Sultan's right hand. Khoja Hassan sets out to destroy him with the oldest weapon in a court: *fitnah* — slander. He forges a letter in the Bendahara's hand "proving" treasonous dealings with the Portuguese; he plants gold as "evidence" of a bribe; he sends an agent, "golden-mouth" Pak Mat, to seed the rumor in the market — *"say you saw white men come to the Bendahara's house at midnight. No more, no less. Let them spread it themselves… people believe a story more when it is vague; they fill the empty places with their own imaginations."*

The chapter is, above all, a study of *why slander works on a weak ruler*. **Sultan Mahmud Syah** is a man who "was never taught to think for himself" — every great decision of his reign had been made by the Bendahara. Without that counsel at his side he is "a

ship without a helmsman," and Khoja Hassan, who is beside him every day, knows it. The Bendahara himself sees the mechanism with terrible clarity. When his daughter protests that surely the Sultan knows who is loyal, he answers: *"In the palace, loyalty is a cloth that can be changed every day. What matters is who whispers closest to the king's ear. The Laksamana is beside the Sultan every day… I come only when summoned. The king's affection is not for service rendered, but for presence."*

When confronted with the forged letter, Tun Mutahir does not grovel; he calmly shows that the signature is false and that he was with the Sultan, before witnesses, on its very date — but "the fire of slander had already burned the king's heart," and the Sultan will not hear. Pressed by Khoja Hassan and his allies past mere banishment to a death sentence, Mahmud, weeping but too weak to reverse himself, sends the Bendahara and his family to execution. Tun Mutahir goes without resistance, leaving a prophecy: *"This slander will not only kill me — it will kill Melaka itself. Guard this land, my lord. Do not let it fall to the enemy."*

The rot spreads exactly as he foretold. An inexperienced yes-man is made Bendahara; honest counsel vanishes; the court splits into fearful factions that speak only in whispers. Foreign traders, sensing that there is no longer certainty or justice, begin to leave — for Pasai, for Johor, for Aceh — and the customs revenue that was Melaka's lifeblood drains away. Khoja Hassan smiles at his triumph, not seeing that "when slander becomes the tool for raising oneself, the palace collapses from within" — and that in a court full of deceit, no friendship is permanent, only interest.

For reflection: Empires fall from within before they fall from without. The chronicle's anatomy of decline is precise: a ruler too weak to think for himself; a courtier who trades on *presence* rather than service; slander crafted to be vague enough that people complete it themselves; and honest counsel driven out until only flattery remains. The death of the just Bendahara is not merely a tragedy but a *cause* — the removal of the one man who held the realm together, three years before the Portuguese guns arrived. When a state kills its truth-tellers, it has already begun to lose.

Lesson 9 — The Fall of Melaka, 1511: When the World Moved and We Stood Still

In this lesson: the catastrophe — and the chronicle's unflinching verdict that it was caused less by the enemy than by a people's own pride.

On the morning of 15 August 1511, the sky over Melaka was grey "like the face of an old man who has lost a child." From the sea came a sound the city had never heard — the thunder of Portuguese cannon. **Afonso de Albuquerque** had come with only about **1,200 soldiers** against a city of tens of thousands — but with cannon that outranged anything Melaka had, matchlock guns, steel armor the kris could not pierce, and above all a *method*: disciplined formations, bombardment, burning, psychological warfare, and treachery. Melaka's own small locally-cast cannon could not even reach the Portuguese ships; its warriors, charging with kris and spear, were cut down before they closed. "They still run with a kris against a cannon," Albuquerque remarked, watching from his deck.

The chronicle stages the fatal council in the throne hall, and it is the moral center of the chapter. Faced with the Portuguese, the

court split three ways: the Laksamana's party — *fight, our kris are sharp, our spirit burns*; the Bendahara's party — *negotiate, offer tribute, save the city*; and a small third party under the Temenggung — *withdraw, preserve our strength, rebuild, and one day return*. The third was mocked as cowardice. And the Sultan, as ever, could not decide. For twelve days the Portuguese bombarded, landed, built a fort, advanced a little each day, burned, retreated — a war "not fought by Melaka's rules." On the twelfth day they breached the wall and entered from three directions; warriors fought bravely and fell, two Portuguese replacing each one, until Sultan Mahmud ordered the retreat upriver — to Muar, to Pahang — his palace burning behind him. "Forgive me, Melaka," he whispered, remembering too late the Bendahara's counsel: *"we need to learn from the Franks, not merely oppose them."* The city that had been the center of the Malay world for a century, the "Venice of the East," fell in under a month.

But the chronicle is clear about *why*, and it does not blame the cannon. Melaka fell, it says, "not because of the number of soldiers, not because of courage, but because of one disease that kills civilizations — **the arrogance born of comfort.**" In its early days Melaka had been "open like a gate," unashamed to learn — shipbuilding from the Javanese, navigation from the Indians, medicine from the Arabs, governance from the Chinese. That humility was its strength. But success is "the most intoxicating of drugs"; grown great, Melaka grew proud, mistook its old formula for permanence, and laughed off the new: *"What is a cannon? Our kris is sharper."* It kept its small cannon,

refused to upgrade, buried itself in court ritual and the scramble for power while the world outside revolutionized the art of war. It was, the chronicle says, “asleep in a moving train” — and when it woke, the train had left.

For reflection: The fall of Melaka is the Annals’ deepest warning, and it is addressed inward, not outward. A civilization is rarely destroyed by its enemies alone; it is destroyed first by the pride that makes it stop learning. The signs of that pride are named precisely: when a people begins to mock new ideas, when it stops asking questions, when it is more eager to guard the status quo than to seek renewal. Melaka’s true identity, the chronicle argues, had been the *open* one — curious, humble, willing to change; its death came when it abandoned that for the closed, proud, complacent one. “What destroyed Melaka,” the book concludes, “was a heart that refused to change.”

Lesson 10 — What the Sejarah Melayu Says to Us

In this lesson: the chronicle's own closing meditation — survival, continuity, and the choice between a civilization that falls and one that rises again.

The last chapter opens on the sea off the Johor river, in a small boat, at night. An old man sits, beard untended, eyes still bright beneath held-back tears: **Sultan Mahmud Syah**, once ruler of the greatest city in the Malay world, now "a fugitive in his own land." Around him, a few dozen loyal followers — some wounded, some who have lost their families, some with nothing left but an heirloom kris. Three days since Melaka fell; the Portuguese guns still thunder in the distance, burning the spice-warehouses and scattering ash to the sky. The city that seventy years of the heirs of Sang Sapurba had built — the *qiblah* of world trade, where Malay had become the language of nations — is in foreign hands.

But the chronicle does not end in despair, and this is its final point: *the line does not die*. The king and his followers move on — to Muar, too close and small; to Pahang, honored but not home; and then southward, to begin again in quieter country. From this flight the successor Malay states would be born; the political memory, the adat, the language, the sultanate itself would continue, refounded, as it had been refounded before under a *melaka* tree. The chronicle's whole architecture — from

Singapura to Melaka to Johor — is a story of *continuity through catastrophe*: a civilization that has fallen and risen, more than once, and might rise again.

So the Annals close by handing the reader a choice. Melaka fell, they say, not to the Portuguese but to "a heart that refused to change." The way back is "the original spirit of Melaka — not the Melaka that was proud and complacent, but the Melaka that was hungry for knowledge, humble, and brave to try." The warning that runs through every chapter — Sang Nila Utama's vision, Badang's unvalued strength, Parameswara's refusal to stop running, Tun Perak's "a kingdom is feeling, not walls," the golden age built on openness, the slander that hollowed the court, the pride that lost the city — gathers into one line the chronicle leaves with us: *do not become the Melaka that fell; become the Melaka that rises again*.

For reflection: The Sejarah Melayu is political memory in its truest sense — a people telling itself how it rose, how it fell, and what it must remember to rise once more. Its themes are permanent: that legitimacy is forged, not merely inherited; that heroism is wise judgment as much as courage; that openness is strength and pride is a slow suicide; that a realm is held together by *feeling* — trust, justice, the hearts of its people — and lost when those break. It asks us, finally, not to venerate the past but to *learn* from it: for "history is not to be remembered, but to be lived — if we forget, we repeat the mistakes; if we remember, we can build a better future."

Closing Reflection

From a lion glimpsed on a hill to a king weeping in a boat, the Sejarah Melayu carries the whole arc of a civilization — its founding vision, its golden openness, its proud blindness, and its stubborn survival. We have walked that arc deliberately along its *wide* path: not the life of one hero, but the memory of a whole world — its rulers and its risen-from-nothing warriors, its great ministers and its envoys, its courts and its sea-lanes, and the hard, honest verdict it passes on its own decline.

What the chronicle remembers, again and again, is this. That a people rises by *openness* — the humility to learn from everyone, to make its language a bridge and its port a mat where all may sit. That its throne stands on *legitimacy* forged in exile and trial, and on the *feeling* of its people more than the height of its walls. That its best servants — the Badangs and Tun Mutahirs — are lost when a court fears them, or silences them with slander. And that its ruin, when it comes, comes first from within: from the arrogance born of comfort, the heart that refuses to change.

These are not relics. They are the questions every people still faces: What makes authority rightful? What do we owe the powerful, and what do we owe the truth? When does pride in what we were become blindness to what the world has become? The Sejarah Melayu does not answer them for us. It does something better — it shows us a civilization that answered them

well and then badly, and leaves us to choose which Melaka we will be.

A Note on Scope and a Companion Course

This course is the **wide-angle** study of the Malay chronicle tradition — the kings, courts, political memory, and civilizational change of the whole Malay world as the Sejarah Melayu (Sulalatus Salatin) remembers it. It ranges across founders and warriors, ministers and envoys, golden ages and catastrophes.

Within that wider history, **Hang Tuah** appears as one figure among many — and even, in Lesson 6, as a case study in how a single hero's story was written differently in different books. He is far too large a figure to be contained by a few paragraphs. For readers who wish to go deep on that one towering life — the loyalty, the friendship with Hang Jebat, the tragedy, and the two textual traditions that fight over his memory — the companion course, a **deep-dive study of Hang Tuah**, is the complement to this one. The two are designed to fit together: this course gives you the world Hang Tuah lived in; that course gives you the man.

Both are adaptations of a living chronicle tradition and are best deepened through the primary texts — the *Sulalatus Salatin* and the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* themselves — and the scholars who study them. As the chronicle's own narrator warns: the truth is "like shards of pottery; you arrange them carefully, but gaps remain" — so read widely, ask *who wrote this and why,* and keep learning.

And God knows best. Wallahu a'lam.