Java's Mongol Demon. Inscribing the Horse Archer into the Epic History of Majapahit[1]

Jos Gommans

Abstract

The temple of Panataran near Blitar in Java features a unique scene in which one of the Ramayana *demons, Indrajit, is depicted as a Mongol mounted horse-warrior. This essay explores the meaning of this representation on the basis of the multi-layered history and historiography of Java's Mongol invasion.*

> "Everything that happened in the *Ramayana* was absolutely real."
>
> Maheshvaratirtha, sixteenth century (cited in Pollock 1993: 279)

Panataran Temple

Walking anti-clockwise around the base of the main terrace at Panataran Temple, twelve kilometres north-east of Blitar in Java, the visitor is treated to the truly remarkable display of 106 relief panels carved with sequential scenes from the story of the Ramayana – the source of this particular series is the Kakawin version, which almost certainly dates from the ninth century CE, making it the earliest surviving work of Old Javanese poetry. Interestingly, the main character in this pictorial rendering is not the more customary figure of Rama, the exiled king, but instead his loyal monkey companion Hanuman. However, given the popularity of Hanuman in the Indic world in around the time the Panataran panels were made – the mid-fourteenth century – his prominence is perhaps not all that surprising after all (Lutgendorf 2007). Except for Hanuman's unusual role, the panels follow the conventional narrative, starting with the abduction of Rama's wife Sita by Ravana, the demon king of Lanka. Many of the panels depict Hanuman's heroic fights with demons (rakshasas), and the first series of battles culminates in panel 55, which shows Hanuman being attacked by Ravana's son Indrajit.

Fig. 1: Relief 55: Indrajit as Mongol Horse Archer. Panataran Temple, Blitar. Photograph by Marijke Klokke

Seated on a horse with multiple snake-heads, Indrajit draws his bow and shoots a magic snake arrow (nagapasha) that first strikes Hanuman on the thigh and then constricts him, causing him to fall to the ground. Ravana then captures Hanuman, who subsequently escapes and then unleashes a new series of fights that dominates the remainder of the reliefs.[2] But it is the scene showing the demon Indrajit shooting his bow at Hanuman that is particularly remarkable, for reasons I will explore in this essay.

The relevant text in the Kakawin *Ramayana* tells us the following about Indrajit's vehicle: 'His chariot was strikingly large, wide and fast, and it was drawn by harnessed horses. Within his chariot were many sharp arrows and rakshasa guards walked before it.' (Juynboll 1924: 11–12). On closer inspection of panel 55, however, we see that the chariot so typical of Indic epics is in fact

---

[2] For the Ramayana terrace at Panataran, see Stutterheim (1925); Klokke (2006); Kieven (2011). For a discussion of the Panataran temples as a whole, see Kinney, Klokke & Kieven (2003: 179–215).

absent. Indrajit is instead seated on a small, pony-like horse as he shoots his arrow, in a scene that clearly recalls the quintessential Mongol horse-archer who, in that same era, had conquered almost half the known world for Chinggis Khan (c. 1162–1227) and his descendants, who when the Panataran terrace was built ruled over powerful empires, from the Middle East under the Ilkhanids to China under the Yuan. Java, however, was far too distant from the Central Asian steppes to be part of this Eurasian Pax Mongolica, and as such

Fig. 2: Mongol Archer on Horseback ("Mongolischer Bogenschütze zu Pferde"). Signed (lower right): Muhammad ibn Mahmudshah al-Khayyam, Iran, early 15ᵗʰ century, Ink and gold on paper. Courtesy of Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Orientabteilung, Diez A fol. 72, 5.13; Photograph by Ellwandt

the island did not share in the legacy of the Mongol horse-archer.[3] As far as I know, this is the only depiction of Indrajit as a Mongol horse archer and perhaps the only one of any horse archer in all Indonesia. This begs the question of how we might make sense of this scene, given that it is so wildly exotic from a Javanese perspective.

The Mongol Invasion of Java

The most obvious approach to solving this intriguing mystery would be to look to the historical record for evidence of the Mongols in Java. In fact there is barely any mention of them, apart from references to incidents of an inconsequential nature,[4] despite the fact that Mongol operations had huge repercussions for the power balance on the island and even engendered the emergence of Java's most extensive and most powerful empire, Majapahit. The best historical account of the relevant events is contained in the *Yuanshi*, the official his-

---

[3] For this legacy, see Gommans (2018).
[4] See, however, Bade (2013). Much of this essay builds on Bade's discussion of the invasion.

tory of the Mongol Yuan dynasty, whose emperor Khubilai dispatched an army to Java in 1292 in retaliation for a serious diplomatic affront: Kertanagara, the ruler of the Javanese kingdom of Tumapel (r. 1268–1292), which at that time was based at the capital Singasari, had cut the face of the Mongol imperial envoy visiting Java to request tribute as recognition of Sino-Mongol suzerainty. A similar affront had previously prompted Khubilai to send a fleet to punish another recalcitrant ruler, resulting in two failed attempts to invade Japan in 1274 and 1281.

On arrival in Java the Mongols discovered that Kertanagara had been defeated already by Singasari's main rival kingdom Daha (or Kediri), which was ruled over by Jayakatwang (r. 1292–1293), who now laid claim to these two polities in the east of Java. Crucially for the purposes of our investigation, the Mongol army (comprising infantry *and* cavalry) initially campaigned against Jayakatwang with the support of Kertanagara's son-in-law, Raden Wijaya, who had offered his allegiance to the Mongols. Wijaya operated from his new base of Majapahit, which had been freshly cleared from the jungle situated between the delta and the hinterland of the Brantas River, affording easy access to the island of Madura, probably Wijaya's main area of military support and recruitment. Soon after the Mongols had routed Jayakatwang's forces, Raden Wijaya turned against the Mongols and successfully ambushed one of their detachments on their return to the fleet.[5]

The *Yuanshi* is silent on the repercussions of the Mongol invasion following their departure from Java, but we know from Javanese sources that Raden Wijaya (as King Kertarajasa, r. 1294–1309) established the Majapahit Empire that incorporated Kertanagara's and Jayakatwang's former kingdoms of Tumapel and Daha, respectively, and would flourish for almost two centuries under his descendants. Looking at the history of the Mongol invasion, it is perhaps not too farfetched to conclude that the Mongol scene at Panataran was inspired by the lived experience or memory of the military operations of the Mongol army in Java in 1293.

Javanese Histories

This brings us to the coeval Javanese sources and their take on the Mongol invasion. Do they offer us any further clues regarding the meaning of Java's Mongol demon at Panataran Temple? First of all, it is important to distinguish between various genres of Javanese history writing, each of which give meaning to the past in their own way; different genres represent different layers of

---

[5] For the Chinese account of the invasion, see Groeneveldt (1876); in a modern survey of Chinese history: Franke & Twitchet (1994).

meaning that can be attributed to historical events. At one level we can perceive the events as they really happened. Perhaps the Chinese *Yuanshi* best represents this perspective for our purposes. At another, 'higher' level, however, those documenting history may have been more interested in a deeper and fuller significance to events, one that would make much more sense in a culture where meaning lay beyond the solely visual or material experience. Read in this way, then, the narrative of an epic can convey a 'more-than-real' meaning of events, but at the same time authors or their patrons may presume that they can impact on these same events by exploiting the magical powers of an epic – or any other spoken or written text for that matter.[6]

The Javanese source that most closely approximates our idea of an accurate chronicle is the *Pararaton* (often translated as 'The Book of Kings'). Written in Middle Javanese prose, it brings together early legend-oriented material for its early part and later, more down-to-earth contemporary history for its final part. An apparently equally trustworthy work for the conventional historian is that other major contemporary source of Majapahit history, the *Nagarakertagama* (or *Desawarnana*), written at the Majapahit court in the *kakawin* poetical form of Old Javanese. Unlike in the case of the *Pararaton*, we have a date, author and location for this work: we know that it was written in 1365 by Prapanca the head of Buddhist Affairs at the Majapahit court. Despite these concrete facts, however, the book itself belongs to the mirror-for-princes genre rather than the chronicle genre, and is therefore more concerned with how kings *ought* to behave than how they actually behaved – details on the latter are exceedingly thin on the ground in coeval Javanese sources. Nonetheless, it is precisely the ethical and aesthetic nature of most if not all Javanese sources that provides the historian with such priceless information regarding the mentality of the intellects that produced them.

We uncover yet one other layer of historical understanding in *kidung*, a genre of works written in a Middle Javanese verse-form that was linked to oral transmission and intended to be sung. The two most important examples for the case at hand are the *Rangga Lawe* (specifically its first part, the *Panji Wijayakrama*) and the *Harsa-Wijaya*. The latter is certainly the more elegant literary creation of the two, but both elaborate in a romanticised manner on historical events including the Mongol invasion. Their date remains contested but they apparently build on the same material as the *Pararaton* and the *Rangga*

---

[6] In this interpretation I am inspired by the still somewhat controversial work of the late C.C. Berg, see in particular his 'Javaansche geschiedschrijving' Berg (1938). See also: Zoetmulder (1974) and for this particular era Robson (2013). This 'more than real' derives from David Shulman's recent *More than Real,* Shulman (2012).

Lawe may even be older than the *Pararaton* since it has been dated to 1334 (Damais 1958: 55–58). Although both works take a cavalier approach to what we would consider historical facts, the stories communicate a truth beyond the merely perceptual. An interesting case in point is the story of Panji, a Javanese hero who appears time and again in stories and narrative reliefs of the Majapahit period, in a tale that boils down to a rivalry between the Javanese kingdoms of Kuripan and Daha: the prince of the former kingdom and the princess of the latter become betrothed, but some mischief is then carried out that impedes their path to happiness – in many versions of the tale the princess is abducted by a foreign king, with whom the prince must then do battle to restore the happy union.[7] Javanese historians evidently exploited such narratives to give meaning to events they witnessed.

At what may be considered the highest layer of historical narration, we find the epic, the ultimate key to the meaning of the past as well as the present and future. Although epics and related mythical stories do not refer to lived historical events, they do give hidden, inner meaning to these events. Almost by definition all history follows a pattern that is revealed in the epics. Sheldon Pollock uses the term 'imaginary' for this purpose, defining it as "The construction and representation of reality through a more or less systematic historical fantasy" (Pollock 1993: 280). One such fantasy was the Old Javanese Kakawin *Ramayana* that served as the source for the Panataran reliefs. Although very different in detail from the Panji story, the Kakawin *Ramayana* also revisits the narrative of abduction, war and reunion, albeit at a different level. Given the richly layered nature of historical narratives in the Javanese context, it made and makes perfect sense to inscribe historical facts into fiction (or any other genre for that matter) and vice-versa, such that the distinction between the two forms is simply one between two genres that deploy their inherent strategies to seek historical meaning for the world in which we live.

The Mongols in Javanese Histories

The Javanese sources that concretely discuss the Mongol invasion are the *Nagarakertagama*, the *Pararaton*, the *Panji Wijayakrama* and the *Harsa-Wijaya*.[8] The *Nagarakertagama* confirms only that the Mongols fought with Kertarajasa to defeat Jayakatwang, and there is no mention whatsoever of Kertarajasa's betrayal. At varying length and in varying detail the other three sources present what seems to be the Javanese rationalisation of the Mongol invasion. The

---

[7] For the Panji stories, see Kieven (2013).
[8] For the translations of these works, see Brandes (1920 [1897]); Pigeau (1960–1963); Berg (1930); Berg (1931).

major incentive for the 'king of Tatar' – the Javanese rendering of Khubilai – to invade Java was the promise given by Raden Wijaya (or rather his main ally Wiraraja) to receive the beautiful princesses of Tumapel as war booty. And while all the Javanese sources are silent about the maltreatment of the Chinese diplomat, they all agree that the main reason for the invasion concerned the princesses.

The sources also concur on the conflict between the 'usurper' Jayakatwang of Daha and Raden Wijaya following the death of King Kertanagara (r. 1268–1292). Kertanagara was a key figure in the Rajasa dynasty that had ruled Tumapel since the beginning of the century. Although Raden Wijaya himself was a member of the Rajasa dynasty, for a successful claim to the vacant throne it was crucial that he could connect himself directly to Kertanagara by marrying this ruler's two daughters. So obviously, according to our Javanese sources, these two daughters were destined to be Raden Wijaya's wives.[9] However, during the 'civil war' between the kingdoms of Tumapel and Daha, Jayakatwang abducted the younger of the two to Daha; the older one was saved by Raden Wijaya to be taken to Madura. Some facts in the part of the *Yuanshi* story that takes place after the Mongols entered the fray is confirmed by the Javanese sources: Raden Wijaya initially fought alongside the Mongols but later turned his back on them. The Javanese authors differ from the *Yuanshi*, however, in the reason for this volte-face. They again assign a pivotal role to the princesses, who were claimed by the Mongols against the wishes of Raden Wijaya, who needed them to set up an empire of his own (which could actually be regarded as a continuation of Kertanagara's kingdom). The further details of the story are not relevant for our focus here, but it is nevertheless important to note that its storyline corresponds to a striking degree with the Panji theme and the *Ramayana* – two narratives comprising texts, songs and pictures that were very popular in fourteenth-century Majapahit. All these genres tell the same recurring story about the Mongols and the making of the Majapahit Empire, although each does so in a differently imagined epistemological form. Again, depicting Indrajit in the *Ramayana* in the guise of a Mongol horse archer makes perfect sense. Neither Hanuman nor Raden Wijaya could avoid their fate: they were compelled to fight demons in their efforts to achieve royal union.

---

[9] This follows the *Pararaton* version; other sources speak of four daughters.

Revisiting Panataran Temple

The foregoing discussion offers only one possible interpretation of Indrajit as a Mongol horse archer at Panataran Temple. Many unresolved questions remain, such as why Hanuman features so prominently at Panataran if the story should actually be about the exiled, Rama-like king Raden Wijaya. Another important issue is the dating of the reliefs to the mid-fourteenth century, more than half a century after the Mongol invasion and at least four decades after the death of Kertarajasa. Should we regard the temple, or this part of it at least, as a Javanese *lieu de mémoire* for the foundation of Majapahit? We do know that two rulers who contributed significantly to the building of Panataran Temple were the queen-regent Tribhuwana (r. 1328–1350) and her son Hayam Wuruk a.k.a. Rajasanagara (r. 1350–1389), Kertarajasa's daughter and grandson respectively. In the period from 1361 to 1363 Hayam Wuruk restored Simping Temple (at Sumberjati, south of Blitar) believed to be the commemorative temple of Kertarajasa (Krom 1931: 369, 423). It is reported that in 1363 Hayam Wuruk consecrated the statue of Kertarajasa that depicts him as Harihara, a divine form combining the attributes of Shiva and Vishnu.

Fig. 3: The statue of King Kertarajasa (r. 1293–1309) as Harihara, originally located at Simping Temple, Sumberjati, Blitar. National Museum of Indonesia, Jakarta. Photograph by Marijke Klokke

From this we can surmise that the making of the Panataran reliefs may have been part of a courtly revival that commemorated the foundation story of the Majapahit Empire. Many options remain open and should be resolved by others

with more philological expertise than the present author.[10] Nonetheless, what does emerge from the present exercise is that the Mongols were incorporated into Javanese history and as such gained meaning for Java's courtly society through the *Ramayana* as depicted in the mid-fourteenth-century Panataran Temple.

References

Bade, D. 2013. *Of Palm Wine, Women and War: The Mongolian Naval Expedition to Java in the 13ᵗʰ Century.* Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Berg, C. C. 1938. Javaansche geschiedschrijving, In F. W. Stapel (ed.) *Geschiedenis van Nederlandsch Indië, deel 2.* Amsterdam: Joost van den Vondel, pp. 13–148.

Berg, C. C. 1931. *Kidung Harsa-Wijaya: Tekst, inhoudsopgave en aanteekeningen door C.C. Berg.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Berg, C. C. 1930, *Rangga Lawe: Middeljavaansche historische roman: critisch uitgegeven.* Batavia: Verhandelingen van het Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen.

Berg, C.C. 1965. The Javanese picture of the past, In Soedjatmoko (ed.) *An Introduction to Indonesian Historiography.* Jakarta & Kuala Lumpur: Equinox Publishing, pp. 87–118.

Brandes, J. 1920 [1897]. *Pararaton (Ken Arok) of Het boek der koningen van Tumapel en van Majapahit,* edited by N. J. Krom. Batavia: Verhandelingen van het Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen.

Damais, L. C. 1958. Etudes d'epigraphie indonesienne: V. Dates de manuscrits et documents divers de Java, Bali et Lombok, *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient,* 49, pp. 55–58.

Franke, H. & D. Twitchet (eds.) 1994. *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 6: Alien Regimes and Border States, 907-1368.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gommans, J. 2018. The warband in the making of Eurasian empires, In M. v. Berkel, J. Duindam (eds.) *Prince, Pen and Sword.* Leiden: E. J. Brill Publishers, pp. 297–383.

---

[10] For a different interpretation that pays attention to the role of Kertanagara rather than of Kertarajasa, see Berg (1965: 97ff). For a possible association of Hayam Wuruk with the Krishna reliefs at Panataran, see Klokke (2000: 38).

Groeneveldt, W. P. 1876. The expedition of the Mongols against Java in 1293 A.D. *The China Review/Notes and Queries of the Far East*, 4, pp. 246–254.

Juynboll, H. H. 1924. Vertaling van Sarga IX van het Oudjavaansche Rāmāyana, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 80, pp. 11–22.

Kieven, L. 2013. *Following the Cap-Figure in Majapahit Temple Reliefs*. Leiden: KITLV Press.

Kieven, L. 2011. Hanuman, the Flying Monkey: The Symbolism of the Rāmāyaṇa Reliefs at the Main Temple of Caṇḍi Panataran. In A. Acri, H. Creese & A. Griffith (eds.) *From Laṅkā Eastward: The Rāmāyaṇa in the Literature and the Visual Arts of Indonesia.* Leiden: KITLV Press, pp. 209–233.

Kinney A. R., M. J. Klokke & L. Kieven. 2003. *Worshipping Siva and Buddha: The Temple Art of East Java.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 179–215.

Klokke, M. J. 2006. Hanuman in the Art of East Java. In T. Simanjuntak, et al. (eds.) *Archaeology: Indonesian Perspective, R.P. Soejono's Festschrift.* Jakarta: LIPI Press, pp. 391–405.

Klokke, M. J. 2000. The Ḳṛṣṇa Reliefs at Panataran: A Visual Version of the Old Javanese Ḳṛṣṇāyana. In M. J. Klokke (ed.) *Narrative Sculpture and Literary Traditions in South and Southeast Asia.* Leiden: Brill, pp. 19–41.

Krom, N. J. 1931. *Hindoe-Javaansche geschiedenis,* 2nd rev. ed. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Lutgendorf, P. 2007. *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pigeau, T. 1960–63. *Java in the 14th Century: A Study in Cultural History: The Nagara-Kertagama by Rakawi Prapanca of Majapahit, 1365 A.D.* 5 vols. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Pollock, S. 1993. Ramayana and Political Imagination in India. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 52, pp. 261–297.

Robson, S. 2013. Appendix 1: The History and Legend of the Foundation of Majapahit. In D. Bade (ed.) *Of Palm Wine, Women and War: The Mongolian Naval Expedition to Java in the 13th Century.* Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 181–205.

Shulman, D. 2012. *More than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India.* Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Stutterheim, W. F. 1925. *Rāma-Legenden und Rāma-Reliefs in Indonesien.* 2 vols. München: Müller.

Zoetmulder, P. J. 1974. *Kalangwan: A Survey of Old Javanese Literature.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.