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Bujangga Manik: or, Java in the fifteenth century: an edition and study of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Jav. b. 3 (R)

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PART VII:

Epilogue

'In the 1690s the Dutch described inscriptions, statues, remnants of a fort, and other buildings in the Bogor area of west Java, but there is little to show how people actually lived' (Andaya and Andaya 2015:105).

'It must of course be realized that communications may have been difficult in mountainous West Java, and that the princedoms that existed there in various periods were never very powerful. In contrast, the central and eastern parts of the island were areas of lowland cultures and proud dynasties, where great power, sometimes controlling the entire Archipelago, had its seat...' (Kunst 1968:1).

Bujangga Manik is a work of fiction, one in which an ascetic dies and ascends to heaven, narrating negotiations with a supernatural door guardian in the first person. It is not an eyewitness account or an autobiography. The assumption in this thesis is that the poem nonetheless presents a realistic view of daily life in Java and Sunda in the mid-to-late fifteenth century. The text's references show remarkable correspondences with those found in texts written by foreign observers of the late Middle Ages and early sixteenth century – and I would say that it is apparent from the references to all manner of imported objects, to merchant ships, and to foreign places as far afield as Delhi and Banda – and all the rest – that Sunda should not simply be characterised as a backwater. Late-medieval Sunda had its own literary traditions, its own script(s), and links with other peoples and societies across the hemisphere. The Sunda kingdom stretched from Banten to the Cipamali, making its money from commerce in black pepper and enslaved human beings. It may have had close links with the Maldives. Sundanese elites enjoyed rosewater and Barus camphor just as contemporaneous Egyptian elites did; Sundanese mariners knew about and used gunpowder; dyestuffs used to colour cloth in Pakuan were simultaneously being used by Italian 'Renaissance' artists to make paints. The medieval world was bigger than we tend to think: By the fifteenth century, plant and animal products from Indonesia were routinely traded in the markets of Africa, Asia, and Europe. People in Java knew of East Africa and India; they had heard of Papua; they knew Chinese people and products intimately. Traders from Seram travelled in their own boats to Java, where they could have encountered Chinese communities ensconced in every town on the coast, Makassarese warriors working as guards on local shipping, Muslims from Khambhat and Cairo who had arrived to buy cubebs or sell oak galls, Latin Christian travellers like Niccolò de' Conti, and perhaps (largely unattested) travellers from the Swahili Coast – or even a Śaivist ascetic from Sunda. These

connections went back centuries if not millennia. The history of the archipelago should not, to my mind, be written as a series of diplomatic missions or as the evolution of Indian-inspired religious and political institutions. The region was an integral part of half a world of economic and cultural interconnections. Understanding that hemispheric context enhances our understanding of Indonesia and understanding Indonesia enormously enhances our understanding of the Middle Ages as a whole.

Why was *Bujangga Manik* written? It is certainly more than a guide to the geography of Java, but it does seem probable that it had a didactic function. Its structure is seemingly rather ancient, the focus on place and place names emerging from an indigenous literary motif adaptable to many different kinds of text. Its depiction of ascetic practice and spiritual aspiration is simple but profound, combining an attempt to know the world and what it holds with renunciation of it, conveying its messages not through explicit preaching but rather through the characters' deeds and the poet's selective depiction of them.

As it stands, although it is the second crack at the poem, my translation of *Bujangga Manik* can only be described as tentative and provisional. Many features of the text, and of Old Sundanese literature in general, are still mysterious, including some of the grammatical structures and vocabulary. Other questions surround the interpretation. Why, for instance, are animals mentioned so infrequently? Why is sweeping the ascetic's activity *par excellence*? Were there really *jongs* forty-six metres long? It is hoped that, as research on Old Sundanese – and on the history and archaeology of the Indo-Malaysian archipelago as a whole – continues to improve, we will be able to answer questions like these more fully than I have been able here.

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