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The Sea and Seacoast in Old Javanese Court Poetry: Fishermen, Ports, Ships, and Shipwrecks in the Literary Imagination

*La mer et la côte dans la poésie de cour en vieux-javanais : pêcheurs, ports,
navires et naufrages dans l'imagination littéraire*

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LA MER DANS LA LITTÉRATURE JAVANAISE

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The Sea and Seacoast in Old Javanese Court Poetry: Fishermen, Ports, Ships, and Shipwrecks in the Literary Imagination

Introduction

It is well-known that the Malays were and still are excellent mariners. Classical Malay literature, with the earliest texts dating to the late thirteenth century, abounds in descriptions of the open seas, seacoast, communities of fishermen, ships, harbours, and life associated with the early urban environment of ports (Braginsky 2004: 465-77, 681-94).² Though it cannot be doubted that pre-Islamic Java had multiple and complex relations with its close as well as more distant neighbours, maintained long-distance shipping links with South and East Asia, the links that had played an important role in the early state formation in Java (Wisseman Christie 1995), the maritime world and its culture is only poorly reflected in Old Javanese epigraphic record, neither does it figure prominently in Old Javanese literary texts. Scholars of Old Javanese literature have often noted that the world of Java is typically represented as the domain of inland royal courts, religious communities, and peasants, with the economy based on rice agriculture rather than fishing, shipping, and trade (Zoetmulder 1974; Wiryamartana 1992; Worsley 2012). This picture is based mainly on the fragmentary textual evidence that has survived to our days,

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2. I would like to thank Pierre-Yves Manguin, who invited me in December 2019 to present some of the ideas discussed in this article at the seminar he teaches in Paris. I am also grateful to Claudine Salmon and two other reviewers for valuable comments on the first draft of this paper, which helped substantially to improve the arguments presented here.

which has been little concerned with the environment of Javanese coasts and open seas. Our views are certainly distorted for ships and shipping culture do not figure prominently in literary representations of pre-Islamic Java. Yet, there is substantial, mostly Chinese and European evidence that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and well into the seventeenth century, the Javanese were very active at the seas as shippers and traders who used large ocean-going ships serving the regional and international long-distance trade that linked Southeast Asia with other parts of the world (Manguin 1993, 2012).

In this study I collect and analyse a number of Old Javanese literary vignettes that can further our knowledge about the seacoast and people living in this environment. I will also offer an interpretation of one paradox pertaining to the literary representations of Javanese shipping: why the ships called *joñ* in Old Javanese – which were large ocean-going vessels – are in virtually all literary references predating the fifteenth century associated with shipwreck or other form of maritime mishap. As with other issues discussed in this study, the evidence available to us highly affect the questions that can be asked: the major sources about the maritime environment and the social world of the people living there are not Old Javanese inscriptions but *kakawins*, Old Javanese court poems in metrical system, a literary genre traditionally considered to be a work of fiction (Zoetmulder 1974). In the last three decades, however, scholars have found ways to appreciate the documentary value of *kakawins* as a specific historical source for the social, religious, and material aspects of Javanese pre-Islamic culture (Supomo 1995; Hoogervorst and Jákl 2020). Recently, Worsley (2012) has suggested that rather than works of literary fiction, ultimately an early-modern Western construct, Old Javanese *kakawins* should be understood as a reflection of a sort of “hyper-reality,” a complex living experience of pre-Islamic Javanese that links the world of mortals, ancestors, and divine beings in a functional web. This useful concept is also followed and upheld in this study.

Though we hear very little about the open seas and maritime life in Old Javanese *kakawins*, texts give us some glimpses into the environment of the seacoast and the life of the people drawing their livelihood from marine and coastal resources. These often charming literary vignettes are nevertheless mediated through the lens of court experience: few people at Javanese (inland) courts would have had any direct experience with the open seas, while some level of acquaintance with the coastline might have been widespread. This article develops its arguments in four sections that capture the four major contexts in which the seascape and coasts figure in Old Javanese poetry. First, it is a place where fishermen live, and where *gajamīna* (“elephant fish”) can be observed. The coast is also a place where local and foreign ships can harbour and trade their products. Now, it is striking how little we hear about harbours and port cities: there is only one description of a harbour in Old Javanese literature known to me, which is a unique, down-to-the-earth vignette, in

which we find a glimpse to the port-based prostitution, plausibly the earliest reference we have to this social phenomenon in Southeast Asia. In the second part of this study I discuss a shipping lore, and especially the muddy territory of Old Javanese boat and ship terminology. In the third part I narrow down my focus on one Old Javanese term, *joñ*, and its literary associations with the maritime mishap. In the last section, I shortly discuss the motif of the seacoast as a place of natural and divine beauty.

Socio-Cultural Environment of the Seacoast in Old Javanese *Kakawins*: Fishermen, Whales, and Ports

As a starting point, let me introduce a passage reflecting a possibly typical attitude of the Javanese court population to the environment of the seacoast and its social life. In the *Sumanasāntaka*, a *kakawin* composed around 1200 CE by Mpu Monaguna, princess Indumatī has little appreciation for the beauties of the seacoast and its egalitarian society of fishermen:

*təkwan tan hana harša ni ñhulun ataññañ pasisi huwus tama ñhulun
pora wwañ nika tan wruh in puruṣabheda hiliran amukət hanāmayan
mogherañ ñwañ isin mañambila karañ-karañan i pasurak niñ ampuhan
añhiñ ryaknya mañankul-añkul ajajar bañun asəgəh anəmbah in mañö³*

“What is more I take no pleasure in visiting the seaside. I know it well.
The common people there have no regard for difference of rank. They fish with
hiliran, *pukət*
sein-nets, and *payañ* trawl-nets.
So I am ashamed and embarrassed to collect shell-fish in the roaring surf.
Only the waves rise high in rows and appear to welcome respectful poets who are
lost in reverie.”⁴

This passage, though situated in the mythical past, reflects the values of a noble Javanese figure, accustomed to the hierarchical life at Javanese court. Helen Creese (2004) has demonstrated persuasively that for pre-modern Javanese and Balinese women of aristocratic descent, courts were places where they were sequestered, leading a life based on the strict social hierarchy. The description of rugged coast and unrefined manners of the folk living there certainly reflects something of this deep-seated mentality. At the same time, the passage seems to be a self-reference by Mpu Monaguna to his poetic skills: rolling tidal waves would welcome him in a courtly *səmbah*-gesture of humble bow. The rugged seacoast depicted in Old Javanese court poetry has typically been interpreted as a reflection of the rough south coast of Java, where the ocean is deep, the terrain can be difficult, and whales are easy to be spotted (Wiryamartana 1992; Teeuw and Robson 2005: 605). At this *locus*, poets strive

3. *Sumanasāntaka* 50.11. Old Javanese text taken from Worsley *et al.* (2013: 204).

4. Worsley *et al.* (2013: 205).

to achieve a kind of aesthetic rapture, denoted *lanö* in Old Javanese, in which they hope to reach a union with the divinity, often represented by *Kāma*, the god of love and aesthetic experience. In the state of divine rapture, Javanese *kawi* would compose poetry and leave his or her verses in the form of graffiti-like inscriptions scribbled on a rock or cliff at the seashore. Alternatively, a *kawi* would jot down verses into a note-pad he carries with him, which might have had a form of a folding notebook made from bark-paper (Jákl 2016). The breathtaking scenery in which the literary activity of Javanese *kawis* took place is depicted in the *Bhomāntaka*, an anonymous *kakawin* composed in the late twelfth century CE. In stanza 3.37, prince *Sāmba* and his military retinue of cavalymen, tasked with the protection of hermitages, follow the steep path along the cliffs at the seacoast:

*luñhā sampun adoh hulih nrəpatiputra humaliwat i deśa niñ pura
mārgägöñ ləmah aṅgəgər hawan irəgarihul i saləsək nikañ watu
təkwan koñañ ikañ pasir sabha-sabhān ikañ anapi lanö kasañhuban
tuñhā niñ parañan ləñöñ hana wuruñ-wuruñan niñ atanah karññ śilā⁵*

The prince had already left far behind him the district of the capital,
And the highway; his path rose into the hills and was bumpy because of the packed stones.

It also overlooked the shore, often frequented by people composing poetry,
covered in the mist;

The edge of the cliff was so entrancing that there were unfinished works of those
wielding the pen,
left behind on the rocks.⁶

Though the shore is depicted as a desolate place, where only a rambling poet would come to search for beauty, other passages suggest that the south coast of Java was not an uninhabited district. Quite on the contrary, almost all descriptions of the seacoast in Old Javanese literature introduce an image of simple fishermen plying their trade in the coastal waters. At another place in the *Bhomāntaka* we encounter prince *Sāmba* and his retinue standing on a high-rising cliff, a *locus* that certainly supports a view that south rather than north coast of Java served as a literary model for the anonymous author of the text. Like high-rising observation towers at Javanese courts, used in the past for distinguished guests to follow rituals and performances, the cliff offers the men a breathtaking, bird-like view. Standing high above the sea, they observe carefully innumerable canoes of fishermen dotting the seascape:

5. *Bhomāntaka* 3.37. Old Javanese text taken from Teeuw and Robson (2005: 106).

6. Teeuw and Robson (2005: 107).

*ñkāneñ lod hana ta plawā nikañ amañciñ aparahu jukuñ panuñgalan
rūpanyāputih añhulap-hulap apan lumarap i larap iñ wway iñ tasik
warñāpiñda manuñgan iñ kuda suməñka tumurun i bañət nikañ halun
mumbul pwa ñ gajamīna kāraña nikān pañəcəpuk awələh mareñ təpi⁷*

Out at sea there were the boats of fishermen, with canoes holding one man each,
They looked dazzlingly white, for they glittered in the sparkling seawater;
It looked as if they were riding horses, rising and falling on the big waves,
But then a whale surfaced, and so with much splashing they paddled for the shore.⁸

In this humorous vignette fishermen paddle quickly their *jukuñ*-boats to the safety of the shore. Old Javanese term *jukuñ* is related to Malay *jongkong*, and in modern language denotes a dugout canoe. It plausibly referred to the same or similar primitive watercraft in ancient Java, too. The motif of the whale (*gajamīna*) that surfaces represents an interesting pun, for in this passage *gajamīna* does not seem to be exclusively a well-known sea mammal. As I have shown elsewhere (Jákl 2014), Old Javanese is rich in terms for large sea mammals, and *gajamīna* (a loanword from Sanskrit that translates “elephant fish”) refers in this context rather to a mythological beast, while at the same time it is “just a whale.” In my view, the passage is actually a mockery and critique of Sāmba’s cavalymen, young sons of court notables, who are allegorically identified with fishermen in their canoes. To appreciate this narrative strategy, we must come back to stanza 2.10, where the whale (*iwak liman*) serves as a mythical carrier (*wāhana*) of Bhoma, the king of demons, and eponymous anti-hero of the *Bhomāntaka*. In stanza 2.10 we gather from the report of the venerable sage Nārada that when Bhoma set in the past on his world-conquering campaign, he was riding a huge beast, travelling across the sea.

The identification of Sāmba’s cavalymen with the fishermen, and the *gajamīna* with Bhoma’s sea-going mythical carrier, serves as a subtle critique: the moment the whale surfaces the fishermen paddle to the shore for safety, as would later do some of Sāmba’s cavalymen when facing Bhoma’s demonic warriors as their enemy.

The seacoast as a domain of fishermen is depicted in other poems, such as the *Ghaṭotkacāśraya*, a *kakawin* composed by Mpu Panuluh in the second half of the twelfth century CE. The vignette in the *Ghaṭotkacāśraya* is part of a description of a “pleasure trip” organized by King Kṛṣṇa. Courtiers and their servants marvel over the beauty of the coast:

7. *Bhomāntaka* 3.42. Old Javanese text taken from Teeuw and Robson (2005: 108).

8. Teeuw and Robson (2005: 109).

*tan tuṅgal tañ aweh ləñōñ niñ umulat nya ñ amayañ amibit hanāmukət
līlā tan hana rəsnya riñ wway i dəmit ni parahu niki lūd paḍāgaliñ
mosyan himpər aburwa-burwan anəñah sakayapu kalilī n huwus ləpas
lwir mukšeñ təpi niñ lañit kaḥiḍəpanya hilañ anusup iñ ghanāhirəñ⁹*

There were various things that enchanted the watchers: see, the people fishing with trawl-nets, with line and hook, and still others with seine-nets, At their ease, without fear of the water, seeing the slenderness of their boats, all equally unsteady, Bustling to and fro as if pursuing each other out to see, like aquatic flowers swept along by the current, for they were already well on their way, And if dissolving into the horizon, one would think, disappearing into the black clouds.¹⁰

The passage quoted above depicts fishermen in their boats, denoted *parahu* in the text, who catch fish with at least three types of fishing-tack. Mpu Panuluh marvels at the dexterity of the men: unlike a simple fishing rod and undemanding method of fishing with the line and hook, the use of seine-nets (*pukət*) and especially trawl-nets (*payañ*) requires a high degree of cooperation between several boats, and a great level of skill and experience at the side of fishermen. The poet also appreciates fearlessness the men demonstrate: at least some of them are engaged in catching lobsters and giant-crabs at the reefs, which can be even today a life-endangering business. Though paddled *jukuñ* canoes might have been the most common type of fishermen's vessels in pre-modern Java, in Old Javanese epigraphic record we also encounter boats propelled by poles. Rather surprisingly, such references are rare in extreme, at least according to the interpretations of Old Javanese boat terminology offered so far. Shallow boats propelled by poles (*galah*) are mentioned in at least one Old Javanese epigraphic document: in the Turyan inscription, issued in 929 CE by Siṅdok for the benefit of a certain Ḍaṅ Atu Pu Sāhitya.¹¹ In this inscription *parahu magalaha* ("boats propelled by poles") are mentioned (de

9. *Ghaṭotkacāsraya* 8.5. Old Javanese text taken from Robson (2016: 70).

10. Robson (2016: 71).

11. Old Javanese *galah* has a number of meanings, but the basic meaning of this term is "spear, lance." In his extensive gloss on *galah*, Zoetmulder (1982: 477-78) does not consider "pole" among its meanings, though the Turyan inscription leaves no doubt that *galah* indeed denoted pole used to propel punts, which it still does in modern language. The problem of poles used to propel boats is complex. In Malay poles are called *galah prahu*, and *galah* is also attested in this sense in Madurese and Balinese. I leave open a possibility that boats propelled by a pole or poles are covered by the Old Javanese term *masuñhāra*. Zoetmulder (1982: 1856) glosses *suihar* as "part of a boat (mast?)." But the fact that most of these crafts mentioned in Old Javanese inscriptions seem to have operated inland, either on rivers, lakes, or dams, would point at simple boats rather than sailing vessels.

Casparis 1988: 45).¹² The inland location of the inscription, found still in situ in the rice-fields of the village of Turen, some 15 kilometres southeast from Malang, indicates that such boats were used on shallow waters.¹³ Apart from fishing boats propelled by poles or paddles, we also encounter fishing vessels using sails, for example in *Ghaṭotkacāśraya* 8.6, where we find a reference to the “sails of the fishermen who use the trawl-nets” (*layar in amayan*).

While images of fishermen and fishing are not rare in Old Javanese literature, depictions of harbours and port urban sites are almost non-existent in *kakawins*. This anomaly is even more striking when we consider how common literary depictions of ports and harbour communities are in classical Malay literature (Manguin 1996; Braginsky 2004). Here I would like to introduce a rare Old Javanese literary vignette in which a harbour and some aspects of the life in port are depicted. The vignette is found in the *Bhomāntaka*, in stanzas 6.8 to 14. The harbour, denoted *palabuhan* in stanza 6.11, is called Anartha, as we gather from stanza 6.8. It is located at the river delta, and its entry point is overseen by a high-rising tower, denoted *waruga* in the text. The term has many parallels in Indonesian languages, and in the *Bhomāntaka* it seems to refer to a kind of watch-tower or lighthouse to monitor approaching ships. We gather this from stanza 6.11, where the *waruga* is called “observation tower” (*pañuñan*). Teeuw and Robson (2005: 609) have noted that in Sumatra and Sulawesi, *waruga* often refers to a kind of lodging used in the past by travelling state officials. Prince Sāmba and his military retinue pass Anartha on their march to the mountains, arriving at the port at the day of *Ləgi*, when a great market is held there. We can only guess the reason why the military party visits the port, possibly the men were in need to restock on food supplies and fodder for horses, but the text is silent on the actual cause of their visit. In the market, “they found warehouses in succession, arranged in rows, not to mention single stands” (*kambah asarik racana ni pajajarnya len təpas*), as we learn in stanza 6.11. Next, in stanzas 6.12-13, the anonymous author of the text offers us a description of female alcohol vendors, who double at the same time as prostitutes. Let me quote an excellent translation of the two stanzas by Teeuw and Robson (2005: 129):

12. Turyan A.18-19. The boat is further specified as having no *tunḍan* (*tanpa tunḍāna*), which further emphasizes a rather simple structure of this type of boat. For the meaning of Old Javanese *tunḍa*, see the discussion below.

13. The inscription informs us that part of the *bwat haji* (obligatory labour for a lord) of the villagers of Turyan was transferred to a sacred barrage, a dam which was built to hold back the waters of the stream (de Casparis 1988: 40). It is tempting to speculate that the boats propelled by poles mentioned in the text were used at the shallow waters of the dam.

*kahatur manis pəkən ikātisaya sukha datəñ nrəpātmaja
atihañ-tihañ tarima tekiñ amalija lulut paḍāhajōñ
amurah liriñnya tinawākən ika ri haliwat nrəpātmaja
irikā n katon kupa-kupañnya saha jaja sajōñnya pintaanəñ*

*masuhun-suhun səkar ikañ parawan ajaja kūñnya kañlihan
mawade hayunya ri harənya hañəñ ira sañ nrəpātmaja
mwañ apañkwa-pankwana tənahnya mañusira təwas karāsikan
lalu kāsihanya tuna kūñnya manaḍah-asiheñ kurañ wəlas¹⁴*

It happened to be the day of Ləgi, and the market was exceedingly happy at the Prince's coming:

The traders in love, equally pretty, were making ready to receive him;
Cheap were the glances they offered as the Prince passed by,
And then their *kupañ*-shells could be seen, together with their sweets and palm-wine for the asking.

Carrying flowers on their heads, the ladies paddled their love languidly,
Offering their beauty for sale, in the hope that the Prince would carry them off,
Would take them on his lap and embrace their waists in order to seek the profits of the delights of love.¹⁵

Teew and Robson (2005: 609) have noted a pun in the use of the term *kupañ*, which refers to a kind of shell, which shape is suggestive of female genitalia. Moreover, “the *kupañ* shells” of women vendors that could be seen (*katon kupa-kupañnya*) is a double allusion to sexual availability of these female vendors provided on top of selling alcohol and snacks. More precisely, the term *kupañ* denotes a class of marine molluscs or its mussel, which were put to use in some parts of pre-modern world as a weight-value unit. In pre-Islamic Java, moreover, *kupañ* denoted a type of coin. The term probably derives from the cup-shaped flan of the coin that resembles the mussel. Zoetmulder (1982: 928) claims that Old Javanese *kupañ* refers to a “shell used as money” but Wisseman Christie (1996: 260) rightly observes that the use of this term for a small currency unit does not indicate any early use of shells as currency in Java. In ancient Javanese monetary system there were four *kupañ* in one *māsa*, and each *kupañ* weighing about 0.6 gram. The *kupañ* weight was associated both with gold and silver in Old Javanese inscriptions, although Wisseman Christie (1996: 260) observes that no gold coins of this weight have as yet been reported from Java.¹⁶ To summarize, by the time *Bhomāntaka* was composed, *kupañ* denoted coins which were commonly used in market transactions. To the best of my knowledge, this twelfth-century vignette gives us, though in the form of a literary metaphor, the earliest description of port-based prostitution in Southeast Asia.

14. *Bhomāntaka* 6.12-13. Old Javanese text taken from Teeuw and Robson (2005: 128).

15. *Bhomāntaka* 6.11-13.

16. See also van Aelst (1995: 357-93) for the history of low-value coins and coinage in Java.

Boats and Ships in Old Javanese *Kakawins*: A Few Notes on a Complex Terminology

The seacoast, of course, is also the place where diverse types of boats and ships can be seen. Old and Middle Javanese language is rich in words denoting watercrafts and their structural elements, though many of these terms are not fully understood (Setianingsih 1993; Barrett Jones 1984: 39-42; Prihatmoko 2014: 162, 167-68). Unlike sea-going vessels, riverine crafts, which were certainly a common sight in pre-modern Java and are often mentioned in inscriptions, figure in Old Javanese literary texts very rarely. In the epigraphic record, in particular in the inscriptions of Siṅdok and Airlaṅga, riverine crafts are typically listed as means of taxable transport. The men who operated these vessels figure among the category of full-time professionals (*samwyawahāra*), along with other professional transporters, such as the men who hired out pack animals, carts, and wagons (Wisseman Christie 1998: 350). Frequent inscriptional references to riverine boats, especially in the context of inter-village trade, indicate that the villages concerned must have been on navigable rivers. The terminology of riverine crafts (and vessels operated in river deltas and coastal waters) mentioned in Old Javanese epigraphic corpus is complex and often difficult, but a detailed analysis of the data would certainly bring new evidence about the economic and social life of Java before 1500 CE. Barrett Jones (1984: 40) has noted the richness of boat and ship terminology in her brief discussion of the Bimalāśrama inscription, an undated charter issued for the benefit of a Buddhist monastery of Bimalāśrama.¹⁷ In a long list of water vessels she has counted staggering twenty-nine types of boats and ships. Though many of these terms refer to an “economic type” of the vessel (what kind of commodity it carried), the inscription is a treasure-trove of Javanese pre-modern boat names and shipping lore.

We have seen above that the vessels used by fishermen were sometimes provided with sails. Larger ships, such as *bahitra*, *joñ*, *palwa*, *pəlañ*, and *sampo* seem to have been equipped with one or more canted rectangular sails. Depictions of water vessels at Javanese temple monuments also indicate that larger ships were provided with two sails. Borobudur, in particular, is rightly famous for its technically sound depictions of at least eleven water crafts; apart from sails, reliefs show details of outriggers, rowing configurations, rigging elements, and rope use. These visually striking depictions have been mined by a number of scholars as a source for the history of ships and ship-building in Southeast Asia, though the debate has mostly focused on five outrigger vessels

17. The inscription has been misread and misnamed as the Dhimalāśrama inscription (Barrett Jones 1984: 44; Wisseman Christie 1998: 372; Hedwi Prihatmoko 2014). Recently, Arlo Griffiths has suggested, drawing on evidence in a short inscription from Dieng in Central Java, that the correct name of the monastery for whose favour the charter was issued is actually Bimalāśrama (personal communication).

with canted rectangular sails, bipod masts and rowing galleries (Jahan 2006; Manguin 2010). Old Javanese literary evidence, on the other hand, has been only rarely used as a source by historians. Yet, a careful reading of several passages can support visual evidence, and even provide some new insights. For example, visual evidence of temple reliefs that two sails were used on Javanese trading ships seems to be supported by a passage in *Bhomāntaka* 4.1, where we encounter the phrase *layar niñ banyāga* (“the sails of a merchant-ship”). By way of metaphor, the author likens the sails to the breasts (*anusu-nusu*) of a maiden (*kanyā*), which seems to indicate that (typical) merchant vessel was provided with two sails. The same phrase (*layar niñ banyāga*) is attested in *Sumanasāntaka* 51.2, where we learn that “the sails of a merchant ship, following the wind, head off into the distance like mist” (*layar niñ banyāgānutakən aṇin andoh kadi limut*).

Very interesting are references to ships denoted *bahitra*. The word is a loanword from an Indian source. Zoetmulder (1982: 188), for one, glosses *bahitra* rather generally as “boat, vessel,” which is the meaning of this word in Sanskrit. In my view, we can be more precise about the type of ship denoted *bahitra* in Old Javanese. Literary references indicate that *bahitra* was a large, ocean-going ship, which was probably owned and operated by foreigner mariners. In the *Smaradahana*, a *kakawin* composed by Mpu Triguna in the twelfth century CE, *bāhitra* refers to a large, ocean-going vessel that is said “to be heading to Java” (*mañajawa*).¹⁸ An interesting literary vignette in the *Sumanasāntaka* can help us to specify the type of the ship denoted *bahitra* in Old Javanese texts. It is found in stanza 33.4, which depicts the arrival of prince Aja and his retinue at the seashore. From the coastline the men can see three types of watercrafts, which are compared by way of an extent metaphor to three kinds of animals. Two of them are local birds, while the third animal is a “foreigner,” a non-native visitor:

*mambö sāgara ramya niñ lañit awarṇa tali hurut-urutnya tan pəgat
kālāñkyañnya bañun jukuñ niñ amayañ ləyəp i lari nikāmaḍəm ɖarat
kuntul mör kadi tuñɖan in banawa kəri tan ilu kajahat lanālayar
sañ hyañ candra bañun bahitra ɖatəñ in kuləm amawa śasā mare jawa*¹⁹

The beautiful sky gave the impression of the ocean: the unbroken threads of clouds were

like fishing lines [of fishermen],

The *kālāñkyañ*-bird was like a canoe of the fishermen who use the *payañ*-nets, disappearing from

view when its course headed for the shore.

The heron in flight resembled the *tuñɖa* of a *banawa*-ship that – safe from shipwreck –

18. *Smaradahana* 5.12.

19. *Sumanasāntaka* 33.4. Old Javanese text taken from Worsley *et al.* (2013: 166).

continued to sail.

The holy moon was like the ocean-going *bahitra*, coming in the night, carrying the hare as its cargo to Java.

In a brilliant metaphor, Mpu Monaguna depicts the sky and the sea as if being inverted and merged together. The world of the sky above the seacoast, with its clouds, birds, and the moon, turns into a sea-space where fishermen in small boats work their nets, and larger merchant ships ply their business. This charming vignette is one of a number of passages found in the *kakawin* poetry, which are based on an image of the inverted, topsy-turvy world, a concept that can be traced to the Tantric lore, and which is related to the Balinese esoteric practices of visualizing and embodying Ongkara Ngadag and Ongkara Sungsang. This is, however, not a place to go in details on this topic. Now, in the stanza quoted above, three types of vessels on apparently different size and type are introduced: *jukuñ* used by the fishermen, a larger *banawa*-ship, which is characterized by the presence of *tunḍa*(s), possibly some type of superstructure (or outriggers?), and an ocean-going trading vessel denoted *bahitra* in the text. Interestingly, the *jukuñ* and *banawa* are associated with the native species of birds, while the *bahitra* is not. In my view, this narrative device can be read as a meta-poetical commentary on three distinct types of watercraft. Old Javanese *jukuñ* refers to the canoe propelled by paddling, which is metaphorically associated in this passage with the *kalañkyañ*. I will demonstrate in a study that is still under preparation that Old Javanese *kalañkyañ*-bird should be identified as the White-bellied Sea Eagle, a bird native to Southeast Asia, which feeds mostly on fish and sea snakes. As fishermen catch fish with trawl-nets, the *kalañkyañ*-bird seems to be hunting for fish at the seashore. The *banawa*-ship, associated with the heron in flight, is certainly a larger watercraft than a simple canoe, as the heron would be a larger bird than the *kalañkyañ*. As for the *bahitra*, it is not associated with any native bird, but rather with a hare (*śaśa*), which it brings as its cargo to Java, as we learn in the last line of the stanza. This is, of course, a poetic trope well-known in Sanskrit literary discourse. In my view, the *bahitra*-ship would also be a “foreign species,” so to say, an ocean-going ship owned or operated by foreigner mariners, possibly Indians.

Shipwreck in Old Javanese Court Poetry: Why Junks always Wreck?

As elsewhere in the maritime world, not all ships made it safely to the port. Numerous shipwrecks found in the Indonesian waters indicate that marine mishaps were the occasional dark side of the business. Probably unsurprisingly, vignettes of marine mishaps found in Old Javanese court poetry almost always represent shipwreck in a figurative sense, as a metaphorical vehicle to illustrate some other theme. Such figurative uses of the shipwreck motif

have a very long history, stretching back to antiquity (Thompson ed., 2013). In Javanese and Malay texts, the ship is sometimes construed as a metaphor for the larger community from which it hails, and the same is true for a metaphorical description of shipwreck. One of the most interesting vignettes is found in *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa* 22.29-33, where the demon king Rāwaṇa is likened to a wrecked ocean-going *sambo*-ship, which is described in five stanzas of the text. Old Javanese *sambo* is most probably a loanword from Old Malay, where we find the form *sāmwau*, a word which may be related to modern Malay *sampan*, the term well-attested in classical Malay literature in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The origin of Old Malay *sāmwau* and Old Javanese *sambo* terms is a complex issue, and we have little idea what the actual referents of these words looked like. Boats denoted in Old Malay *sāmwau* must have been substantial ocean-going water crafts, but the Kedukan Bukit inscription is silent about the type and form of these vessels.²⁰ Cognates in a number of Southeast Asian languages seem to imply that Malay (in particular Śrīvijayan) shipping culture and Old Malay nautical lexicon must have been influential in the Indian Ocean.²¹ The ultimate origin of Old Malay and Old Javanese terms, however, may go back to the shipping lore of Funan mariners, who connected Southeast Asia with littoral China and South Asia already in the first half of the first millennium CE. Porée Maspero (1986: 80), for one, has made a link between Old Malay *sāmwau* and a very old Chinese loan - pronounced *buk* 舶 and by now *bo*, which first appeared in Chinese record in the third century CE, when it referred to large ocean-going vessels. As suggested by Claudine Salmon (2019: 25), the term may have first belonged to a language now lost to history.²²

20. Boats denoted *sāmwau* are first mentioned in the Old Malay Kedukan Bukit inscription, issued in 685 CE, where we learn that *sāmwau* carried Śrīvijayan military troops to the reaches of the Musi river. Another Old Malay epigraphic document, the Kota Kapur inscription, issued by the same ruler in 686 CE, does not mention any specific name of boat, but the finding site of this epigraph on the island of Bangka (apparently conquered by Śrīvijaya) implies that boats of some sort must have been used in the Śrīvijayan military campaign. Furthermore, the Kota Kapur inscription informs us that the army of Śrīvijaya had conducted a military expedition against Java. Of course, any army dispatched from Sumatra or Bangka island to Java could only have proceeded by sea.

21. Manguin (2012: 171, n. 12) has suggested that the broad coverage of cognates of Old Malay *sāmwau* is most probably related to Śrīvijaya's considerable outreach in the seventh to thirteenth centuries CE. Pre-modern shipping technology and maritime lore of Śrīvijaya must have been influential for cognates of *sāmwau* are found in a number of Austronesian languages, and the word even passed to Austroasiatic, Tibeto-Burman, and Thai languages. In Old Khmer it is called *saṃvau*, which becomes *sambau* in modern Khmer (Pou 1992: 488).

22. Large ships were built in China as early as in the Han dynasty, as is suggested by the find of a shipyard at Guangzhou dated to the third to second century BCE, where

The passage in the *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa*, to which we now come back, can further our knowledge about the boats denoted *sambo* in Old Javanese, and *sāmwau* in Old Malay. In the speech delivered shortly before Rāwaṇa's death, his younger brother Kumbhakarna likens him to a wrecked *sambo*. In stanzas 22.32-33, the structural elements of *sambo* are said to be defunct and/or destroyed, and likened to Rāwaṇa's bad character: a rotten keel is said to be Rāwaṇa's lack of knowledge, smashed masts are compared to his broken devotion, torn and tattered sails are his immoral behaviour, and destroyed rudders are Rāwaṇa's lack of loyalty. As I read this literary vignette, it offers a window into the construction of the *sambo*-boat as it was known to an anonymous Javanese author of the text around 900 CE. The ship had one or more masts (*tihan*) provided with sails (*layar*).²³ The meaning of *kawuntat* is unclear, but Robson (2015: 580) has interpreted it as "rudder." The keel is denoted *lunas*, which is still the term for ship's keel in modern Javanese. Now, the context of the ocean where the ship is said to be wrecked, and a reference to *bhāṇḍa* ("merchandise, cargo") in stanza 22.33, which is likened to Rāwaṇa's virtues (*dharma*), and said to be "vanished" (*lənīt*), clearly suggest that the *sambo* envisaged by the poet is a large, ocean-going merchant ship.²⁴

Javanese gentry living at inland courts, a typical audience of the *kakawin* poetry, seem to have understood well the nuances of ship terminology, and courtiers were certainly able to decode metaphors based on the ship-lore, for much of the international imports (which arrived as cargoes on ocean-going ships) were used and redistributed by the inland courts. In my view, the same method of analysis of "metaphorical marking" can be applied to another, much better known ship term: *joṅ*. Old Javanese *joṅ* is usually taken to be an Austronesian word rather than a loan from a non-Austronesian

ships up to 30 meters in length were constructed (Schottenhammer 2012: 66). The term *bo* has been used in a number of compound words to denote sea-going vessels. Claudine Salmon (2019: 25), who has recently discussed this term in some detail, notes that the compound form *bochuan*, which designates a 'sea-going vessel', occurs already in the *Huayang guozhi* 华阳国志 ("Records of the Countries to the South of Mount Hua"), a text dated to the fourth century CE.

23. *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa* 22.32. Old Javanese *layar* can be traced to its Proto-Austronesian form **layaR*, and cognates of *layar* for sail are known to have spread widely across the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, as they are found in a number of South Asian languages, the Maldives, and, of course, in Malagasy of Madagascar (Hoogervorst 2013: 202).

24. I can come up with only one solution why the author of the *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa* selected Old Malay loanword, which is very rare in Old Javanese, to refer to the ship that wrecks, and represents thus Rāwaṇa's doom: Rāwaṇa, who on the metaphorical level represents in the *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa* the Buddhist Sailendra dynasty, ousted in the mid-ninth century from their Javanese territories, is associated with the Malay-type vessel, *sambo*, and hence with the Malay Śrīvijaya kingdom, an economic and political competitor of the Javanese Sañjaya dynasty.

source. Zoetmulder (1982: 748), for one, glosses *joñ* as “(sea-going) ship.” Manguin (1980, 1993), who has analysed in detail the evidence we have for this type of ship, has demonstrated that junks were large (often very large), ocean-going ships operated by Southeast Asian mariners, especially Javanese and Malays. When the first Portuguese visitors encountered Javanese junks in Southeast Asian waters, junks were mostly used to transport high-volume commodities, such as rice and timber, among the ports of Southeast Asia and beyond (Manguin 2012). The earliest reference to Old Javanese *joñ* is attested in eleventh-century Balinese inscriptions,²⁵ and the first literary reference to *joñ* is in the *Bhomāntaka*, a court poem composed in the late twelfth century CE. Most interestingly, the *joñ* figures in all Old Javanese literary references in the context of shipwreck, which is, as we have seen above, associated in Old Javanese literature with the forces of *adharmā*. In the *Bhomāntaka* the reference occurs in the framework of a joyful celebration of gods, who arrive to congratulate King Kṛṣṇa for his victory over the demon king Bhoma. In stanza 109.3, Waruṇa, called in the text “Lord of the Waters” (*toyādhipati*), and “God of the Waves” (*sañ hyañ ryak*), is particularly elated when Bhoma is killed in the battle. Let me quote the relevant passage:

*sañ hyañ ryak rob sukhe śīrṇa musuh ira sawañ joñ asāt riñ karañ gön*²⁶

The God of the Waves was at the high tide of his happiness that his enemy had been shattered like
a *joñ* run aground on a great reef.

Another reference to *joñ* is found in the *Arjunawijaya*, a *kakawin* composed by Mpu Tantulār in the second half of the fourteenth century. In stanza 8.11, we learn that “the *joñs* and *pelañ*-boats wrecked and sank down” (*joñ pelañ tan dwa biñkas karəm*).²⁷ The third passage in which *joñ*-ships figure is found in the *Sutasoma*, another work by Mpu Tantulār, where we have a vivid description of a march of demonic troops of the cannibal-king Poruśāḍa to the battlefield. Some of his warriors move on the ground, while others fly through the air. Still other troops use the sea to reach the battlefield. The Three Worlds (*triloka*) suffer in this complex military operation, as we gather from stanza 114.11, where Mpu Tantulār depicts the havoc demonic troops cause:

25. I am grateful to Pierre-Yves Manguin for noting me that the term *joñ* is attested in the Balinese epigraphic corpus already in the eleventh century CE, while the first literary reference can be traced to the late twelfth century CE.

26. *Bhomāntaka* 109.3c. Old Javanese text taken from Teeuw and Robson (2005: 581).

27. *Arjunawijaya* 8.11. The passage is part of a long description of a havoc in the world of men caused by the war between the divine forces of *dharma* and demonic forces of *adharmā*. The sea is in tumult, and as a consequence many ships wreck.

*dudwekañ mahawan samudra malətuh tekañ mahāsāgara
mīnosah kakəbur pəjah kaliwatan joñ pəlañ akweh karəm*²⁸

Still other (troops) moved across the impure waters of the great ocean;
The fish tossed and turned, stirred violently they died, and many of the junks
and *pəlañ*-boats passing over the sea sank down.

It seems to me that Mpu Tantulār uses the motif of wrecked *joñ*(s) in two of his texts like a set phrase. Apart from Old Javanese court poetry, ships denoted *joñs* are associated with the maritime mishap also in the Middle Javanese text *Raᅅga Lawe*, a *kiduñ* that may have been composed as early as the fourteenth century CE, but which final redaction postdates 1500 CE (Zoetmulder 1974). We learn in stanza 8.37 that its broken, malfunctioning rudder (*kamodi*) is the reason why the *joñ* wrecked (*joñ kurañ kamodyanulus karəm*).²⁹ The negative associations of *joñ* with the shipwreck – what seems to have been a well-known literary cliché – calls for an explanation. I can only think about one reason why *joñ* is stigmatized in Old Javanese court poetry: ships denoted *joñs* must have been associated with the shipping of Javanese port enclaves of the north coast of Java (*pasisir*), districts which were never under the complete control of Javanese rulers, who were based at inland courts. As early as the twelfth century, *joñs* might have been associated with the growing economic and possibly political power of the *pasisir* administrators and local lords, who were approached with distrust by Javanese inland royal courts. This finding would fit the model according to which Late Kaᅅiri period (ca. 1100 to 1222 CE) was a time of increased social tensions between the well-established, inland and agriculture-based Javanese courts, and the growing power of new merchant elites, who were active in the international shipping and trade with luxurious goods, especially Indian textiles and Chinese stoneware and porcelain (Jákl and Hoogervorst 2017). We lack evidence, however, that these tensions would have developed into a full-fledged military conflict between the two zones. Recently, Victor Lieberman (2009: 780) has noted in his discussion of pre-Islamic Java that “despite tensions between mercantile coast and agrarian interior reminiscent of conflicts in Burma and Angkor, for long periods before 1500 Java succeeded in wedding the two spheres under a single authority.”

Shipwreck is a rare literary motif in Old Javanese poetry, which has been noted, but largely un-commented, by previous scholarship (Zoetmulder 1974; Wiryamartana 1992; Worsley *et al.* 2013). The motif has a narrative parallel in much more common depictions of ruined temples and monasteries. Recently, Stuart Robson (2012) has discussed the motif of architectural ruins in a stimulating study, noting that the image of collapsed temples, monasteries, and hermitages, overgrown with lush vegetation, is a literary trope that is distinctly

28. *Sutasoma* 114.11cd.

29. *Raᅅga Lawe* 8.37.

Javanese, and has no exact parallel in Sanskrit *kāvya* poetry. Interestingly, Old Javanese descriptions of wrecked ships and collapsed temples display one common feature: they are often eroticized. In my view, the motif of a wrecked ship is an allusion on a painful separation of lovers. Let me introduce a vignette in the *Sumanasāntaka*, in which collapsed masts (*tihan*) of a ship (*banawa*) remind Mpu Monaguṇa of a pair of lovers, who embrace one another, unable to part:

*banawa kajahat in lod binikas de nin alun agön
tihan ika gumalaṅgañ muṅwiñ tuṅdan ika marək
kadi ta paməkulanya n māsih tan wənañ apasah
sapati sahuripa nwañ līnanya n wruh anucapa*³⁰

A *banawa*-boat wrecked at sea had been smashed by great waves.

Its [collapsed] masts were propping one another, positioned at the fore of the *tuṅdan*;

As if being embraced, as lovers do when they are unable to part:

“In death and in life I will remain with you”, they might have said if they had known how to speak.

My understanding of this charming passage is that the image of two lovers, likened to the masts collapsed one against the other, implies that the ship depicted by Mpu Monaguṇa has two masts. Moreover, the lovers who are “unable to part” (*tan wənañ apasah*) would probably be standing rather than sitting, and the legs of standing persons whose bodies are joined in embrace would remind the poet of bipod masts, which were typical for Indonesian pre-modern ships. The verbal form *gumalaṅgañ* in the second line of the stanza quoted above is difficult. In the corpus of Old Javanese literature, the verb *gumalaṅgañ* seems to be attested only in this passage. It is derived from the root form *galaṅgañ*, which exact meaning in Old Javanese is unknown. Zoetmulder (1982: 478), for one, glosses *galaṅgañ* as “1. sharpened bamboo pole; 2. a bench or couch made of bamboo? a small pavilion of bamboo?” In the modern Javanese shipbuilding terminology, *galaṅgañ* refers to the “dock,” but its meaning in Old Javanese inscriptions seem to be “pavilion” or rather some kind of “prop”; it may be a technical word for a piece of wood or bamboo that secures some sort of a wooden construction and makes it permanent. My best guess is that *galaṅgañ* in the passage quoted above refers to the configuration of the two masts that collapsed one against the other, so that they “prop one another,” which is how I translate the verb *gumalaṅgañ* in the text. Another difficult term in this passage is *tuṅdan*. Scholars of Old Javanese typically translate *tuṅdan* as “deck,” which is, however, rather anachronistic for before 1500 CE boats were not yet provided with rigid decks.³¹ Zoetmulder (1982:

30. *Sumanasāntaka* 36.1. Old Javanese text taken from Worsley *et al.* (2013: 170).

31. The antiquity of boats with rigid decks in the Indo-Malay world is not known.

2065) glosses *tunḍan* “storeyed construction (on chariot; decks or bridge of a ship); anything done in shifts (in succession); levy to be done in shifts?” In *Sumanasāntaka* 33.4 discussed above we have seen that boats denoted in Old Javanese *banawa* were provided with one or more *tunḍan*, a superstructure of an unknown form. The finding that Mpu Monaguṇa likens a *banawa*-boat provided with a *tunḍan* to the heron in flight would suggest that one *tunḍan* (one or more of them) would be positioned crosswise to the hull of the boat.

The Seashore as a Place of Natural and Divine Beauty

By far the most common depictions pertaining to the maritime side of pre-Islamic Java are the vignettes in which the seacoast is represented as a place of sheer natural beauty to be enjoyed. In these literary vignettes, the seacoast participates in what we can call “the economy of aesthetics”: court-validated views and concepts according to which the (divinized nature) is subject to and participates in the refined court culture of show and performance of political power. The divinized nature thus takes part in a court pomp and show. At the same time, descriptions of the natural world are often eroticized, as we have seen above. Unlike in the previous sections, my treatment of this last theme must be very selective. Let us start with a charming passage in the *Bhomāntaka*, where the beauty of the seacoast is compared to the beauty of a young woman:

*sawañ kanyā lwir niñ pasisir i halilintañ nrəpasuta
lənöñ warnanyāhyas mapata-patahan tañ ryak alañö
layar niñ bañyāgānusu-nusu katon manda tan awās
limut niñ wway māwrāsəmu-səmu pupur pinhay i pipi*³²

The seashore looked like a maiden as the prince passed by;
Her appearance was enchanting, all dressed up and with the lovely waves as her headband,
The sails of a merchant-ship resembled her breasts, faintly visible, not very clear,
And the mist that spread on the water had the look of white powder on her cheeks.³³

Elsewhere in the *Sumanasāntaka*, we find another eulogy on the beauty of the sea and seacoast. Stanzas 51.1-2 is built upon a dialogue in which one of the court ladies tries to persuade Princess Indumatī about the superiority of the charms of the seacoast. We have seen above that Indumatī prefers the mountains to the *pasisir* coastal districts, which she considers dangerous

European ships were typically provided with rigid decks, but there is evidence that boats with permanent decks were known and used in Southeast Asia even before the first Europeans reached the region in the early sixteenth century. Such boats may have been denoted by the term *kapal*, a loanword from Tamil (Salmon 2019: 27).

32. *Bhomāntaka* 4.1. Old Javanese text taken from Teeuw and Robson (2005: 110).

33. Teeuw and Robson (2005: 111).

and lacking a clearly established social hierarchy. The court lady, obviously well-informed about the visual beauty of the Javanese coast, opposes boldly Indumatī's views and tries to persuade her mistress to change her evaluation of the coast and people living there. Let me quote her words:

*taham rakryan diñ parwata ləwiha sañkeñ jalanidhi
anūṣāpañdan rañkañ apasir asañhub saha kilat
muwah tan pāntyāntyāmpuhan ika bañun kārttika sadā
manuknyāliwran yan wahu mari jawuh lwir laru-laru*

*kuməmbañ tuñjuñ kāñinan uwur-uwurnyāñjrah aputih
layar niñ banyāgānutakəñ anin añdoh kadi limut
ləñəñ ryakñāñ sandhyāmīrah asəmu meghānisik iwak
lanit suñsañ lwirnya n maśaśadharamāyā makalañan³⁴*

“No my lady! How could the mountains possibly be superior to the ocean
With its islands, creeping pandanus, beaches, mist, and lightning.
And the endless surf. It is like an everlasting Kārttika.”

“Like flowering lotuses caught by the wind white jellyfish are spread in all
directions.

And the sails of ships running before the wind head off into the distance like mist.
The waves are enchanting and in the evening are red and like clouds in the form
of fish scales.

The sea with the moon's round reflection on it looks like the sky turned upside
down.”³⁵

We have seen above that the images based on the topsy-turvy world were highly appreciated by Javanese *kawis*, who seem to have based this imagery on the actual Tantric practices documented in Old Javanese Tukur texts. Though Javanese *kawi* is typically seen as a “poet,” in pre-Islamic times *kawis* were important religious figures, whose tasks are to be looked for especially in the field of warfare magic. Composing and writing *kakawins* was part of their ritual agenda. Zoetmulder speaks about “religio poetae,” a practice that entailed teaching and religious duties particular to the social group of *kawis*. Multiple associations between the *kawi*, physical destruction, ruined temples, dead bodies, and the coastline, is most prominent in *Sumanasāntaka* 33.6-7. This textual sequence, in my view, one of the most charming descriptions of the seacoast in Asian literatures, informs us how a *kawi* comes to die at the place where a river empties into the sea, to be united there with the physical elements of the divinized nature:

34. *Sumanasāntaka* 51.1-2. Old Javanese text taken from Worsley *et al.* (2013: 206).

35. Worsley *et al.* (2013: 207).

*ramya lwir siluman karañ ri mukha niñ muhara paða-paḍāñhapit bañu
alwā tiñkah I mekhalanya ri tənah pañadəg-adəgan in marāñlənən
karwānuñgul apāntaran sapañuhuh kadi gupura siwak sakeñ adoh
lwir hambal sphaṭikāñ alun turunan in kawi pəjah atuhāñhañut lañö*

*priñgā ahrit təpi niñ samudra kadi pañhinəpan i lənən in labuh kapat
lwir prāsāda pukah karañ ni parañanya hana kadi siluñluñ i kawi
airtambannya bañun wwit in truh asəwö kilat awilət alūñ awañkawa
lumrāwarña rəñit kukusnya sinawat-sawat inidəran in guruñḍaya³⁶*

The reefs, flanking the water on both sides at the river estuary, were like a vision conjured up by magic.

These stretches of reef were broad and in their midst were places where those who came in the pursuit of beauty stopped.

Both reefs, within shouting distance of each other, towered aloft, looking from afar like a split

gateway.

The sea swell resembled a flight of crystal steps, a staircase down which a poet descends when in old

age he dies and is swept away on a sea of poetic beauty.

The rugged and inaccessible terrain of the coastline was like a place to spend the night in the beauty

of the first rains of the fourth month.

The rocky cliffs there resembled a tower temple which was half tumbled down. It was like the

repository for the ashes of a poet.

Streams of water tumbling down were like the roots of misty drizzle, which put forth shoots of

lightning, twisting and reaching out, creating a luminous glow in the sky.

The spray spread out on all sides like small flies upon which the circling cliff-swallows swooped.³⁷

Conclusion

This study has discussed selected passages from a number of Old Javanese *kakawin* court poems in which the sea, seacoast, and the life associated with this environment is depicted. Unlike in the much better studied classical Malay literature, authors of *kakawins* were little interested in the theme of the open seas, but they demonstrate some interest in the natural, social, and economic life of the seacoast. In most literary vignettes analysed in this study, depictions of the seacoast are clearly based on the rugged coastline of south Java, where the sea is deep and cliffs and small islands often represent remarkable landscape features, rather than mostly flat coasts of north Java

36. *Sumanasāntaka* 33.6-7. Old Javanese text taken from Worsley *et al.* (2013: 168).

37. Worsley *et al.* (2013: 169).

bordered by the shallow Java Sea. Three topics were discussed in some detail: the fishing folk inhabiting the world of *kakawin*, boats and ships noted by ancient Javanese poets (special attention has been paid to Old Javanese terms *sambo* and *joñ*), and the natural beauty of the coastline celebrated in several texts. I have also analysed a unique passage in the *Bhomāntaka*, in which a harbour and its economy is depicted in a remarkable narrative detail. To conclude, Old Javanese audience, based mostly at inland royal and princely courts, considered the seacoast to be a dangerous, yet beautiful place, where whales can be spotted easily, and where egalitarian fishermen and mariners, little interested in court hierarchies, plied their trade. Literary vignettes discussed in this study certainly demonstrate that Javanese poets were well-aware and knowledgeable of the life in seacoast districts, and were able to depict their socio-cultural environment with a distinct charm and often surprising attention to detail. We can only regret the almost complete loss of the Old Javanese literary output of the *pasisir* districts predating 1500 CE. As a consequence, the social, economic, and religious life of Javanese pre-Islamic ports and early cities remains just little known.

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