

## FROM RIVERSIDE HUB TO URBAN CENTER: UNDERSTANDING THE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE SULTANATE OF DELI'S CAPITAL LANDSCAPE

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### ABSTRACT

The Sultanate of Deli is a sultanate located on the east coast of Sumatra that has been colonized by the Dutch since 1862. Before colonization by the Dutch, the capital of the Sultanate of Deli was located in a riverside town called Labuhan. A few decades after colonization, the Sultan of Deli moved his capital to Sultangrond in Medan Putri. The move has led to significant changes in the role of the capital of the Sultanate of Deli. The following study aims to explain the changing role played by the capital of the Sultanate of Deli before and after the move. The results of the study are expected to contribute positively to knowledge about the history of sultanates in the archipelago. The method used in this study is the literature research method. The results of the study show that the sultanate capital in Labuhan played a more complex role than the capital in Sultangrond. Labuhan not only served as the center of the Deli Sultanate's government but also as an economic center where the Deli export and import ports were also located. Meanwhile, after the move of the capital to Sultangrond in Medan, the capital of the Sultanate of Deli no longer played the role of an economic center as before.

**Keywords:** Deli Sultanate, history of Islam, Labuhan, Sultangrond, East Coast of Sumatra

### ABSTRAK

*Kesultanan Deli adalah sebuah kesultanan yang berada di kawasan Pantai Timur Sumatera yang dikolonisasi oleh Belanda sejak Tahun 1862. Sebelum di kolonisasi oleh Belanda, ibukota Kesultanan Deli berlokasi di sebuah kota tepian sungai yang bernama Labuhan. Beberapa dekade setelah kolonisasi, Sultan Deli memindahkan ibukotanya ke Sultangrond di Medan Putri. Pemandahan tersebut telah menyebabkan perubahan yang signifikan pada peran ibukota Kesultanan Deli. Kajian berikut ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan perubahan peranan yang dimainkan oleh ibukota Kesultanan Deli sebelum dan sesudah perpindahan. Hasil kajian sendiri diharapkan dapat berkontribusi positif dalam menyumbang pengetahuan mengenai sejarah kesultanan-kesultanan di Nusantara. Adapun metode yang dipergunakan dalam kajian ini adalah metode penelitian literatur. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa ibukota Kesultanan di Labuhan memainkan peran yang lebih kompleks daripada ibukota yang berada di Sultangrond. Labuhan bukan hanya berperan sebagai pusat pemerintahan Kesultanan Deli melainkan juga pusat ekonomi dimana pelabuhan ekspor dan impor Deli juga berada disana. Sementara itu, setelah perpindahan ibukota ke Sultangrond di Medan, ibukota Kesultanan Deli tidak lagi memainkan peran sebagai pusat ekonomi seperti sebelumnya.*

**Kata kunci:** Kesultanan Deli, sejarah Islam, Labuhan, Sultangrond, Pantai Timur Sumatera

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### **INTRODUCTION**

At the end of the 19th century, the Deli Sultanate moved its capital from Labuhan to Sultangrond, which is located next to Gemeente Medan. The relocation of the capital changed many things, starting from changes in the orientation of traditional settlement arrangements to changes in the role of the sultanate's capital. Rivers are no longer the basis for traditional settlement planning because their role has been replaced by roads and railways. The new sultanate capital also did not play the same role as that played by Labuhan. So with this move, Deli has changed the character of its regional layout.

This change in role is important to study because so far, there has been no study regarding Deli that attempts to discuss the issue of the change in the role of the capital. So, there is still a space in the study of the history of the Deli Sultanate that needs to be filled. Previous studies related to Deli that discuss or intersect with Labuhan or Sultangrond have been carried out, among others, by Ratna (2006), Hutagaol (2016a), Nasution (2017), Sinar (1991), and Avan (2010). If Ratna, Hutagaol and Nasution discussed Labuhan, then Sinar and Avan brought up the history of Medan where Sultangrond was included in their discussion.

Apart from that, several other studies related to Deli have been carried out, including by Ghani (2016), Akbar (2018), Darini (2021), Sumarno (2006; et al., 2019a, 2019b), Suprayitno (2019, 2020), dan Hutagaol (2016b). Ghani, Akbar, Darini and Sumarno's studies raised themes related to plantations. Meanwhile, Suprayitno conducted two studies, each of which discussed the issue of the salt trade and the relocation of the port in Deli. Meanwhile, Hutagaol discussed the influence of the development of the Belawan port on the people of Deli.

From the studies mentioned above, it appears that discussions regarding changing the role of the capital Deli in Labuhan with the capital in Sultangrond have not yet been carried out. Therefore, the following study was carried out to analytically describe the changes in the role of the capital of the Deli Sultanate that occurred after the transfer of the sultanate's capital at the end of the 19th century. What were the changes in the roles played by the old capital and the new capital and why did these changes in roles occur? two questions asked in this study.

### **METHOD**

The method used in this study is a historical research method in which research sources are searched through literature study. Meanwhile, the approach used in this study is a geographical approach considering that changes in the role of the sultanate's capital were greatly influenced by geographical factors. It is hoped that the results of this study can contribute to knowledge of the history of the Malay sultanates which are part of the Islamic civilization of the archipelago.

### **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

#### **Labuhan as the Capital of Deli**

The history of Deli began when the Aru Kingdom was defeated by Aceh around 1612 (Djajadiningrat, 1984, p. 48). At that time, Aceh succeeded in conquering the capital Aru which was located in Deli Tua. After the conquest, Aceh placed one of its commanders to rule the region on behalf of Aceh. This warlord was known as Gocah Pahlawan who later became the founding father of the Deli Sultanate (Pelly & Ratna, 2022, p. 13). From his lineage, Deli leaders will emerge and will become rulers of the



former territory of the Aru Kingdom with a new identity called Deli. This new institution of power is considered to have been established in 1632 when Tuanku Panglima Gocah Pahlawan was considered the first ruler of Deli.

Initially, the capital of Deli was in the former center of the Aru government, known as Old Deli. Old Deli itself is located on the banks of a river known as the Deli River. This river empties into the Strait of Malacca. After Tuanku Panglima Gocah Pahlawan died around 1669, the leadership of Deli was continued by his descendant who had the title Tuanku Panglima Perunggit who then moved the capital of Deli to Padang Datar which is located at the confluence of the Deli River and the Babura River (Takari et al., 2010, p. 76).

During the reign of the third ruler of Deli, Tuanku Panglima Paderap who ruled from 1698 to 1728, the capital of Deli moved again and began to descend downstream of the Deli River to a village called Pulo Berayan (Koestoro et al., 2006, p. 21). Then during the time of the fourth ruler, Tuanku Panglima Pasutan, Deli had its capital in a town that stood downstream of the same river where Deli Tua was located. The river where Labuhan stands on the banks is known as the Deli River. This river empties into the Strait of Malacca and the distance between Labuhan and the mouth of the river is only about five kilometers. Meanwhile, the distance between Labuhan and the former center of Aru power in Deli Tua is approximately 27 kilometers. The presence of Labuhan as the capital of Deli probably began between 1728 and 1761 because Tuanku Panglima Pasutan himself was in power during that period.

Not much is known about the condition of Labuhan in its early days as the capital of Deli. William Marsden, who carried out an expedition into the interior of North Sumatra, never set foot on the East Coast region where Deli is located. However, he provided information about the conditions of the area where Deli was located based on stories from the Batak people. In his information, he said that the area was a prosperous area. Clearer information regarding the condition of Deli was only obtained in 1823. In that year, a British expedition was sent to the East Coast of Sumatra with the aim of showing how important the countries in the area were for British trade interests in the Malacca Strait (Anderson, 1840, p. 199).

The expedition was led by John Anderson who reported during his direct visit that Labuhan was the first village on the Deli river after passing the Pompong, or anchorage outside the freshwater flow, where a collection of small, miserable huts were located and occupied by the men who made up the crew. ships, and were employed in building boats (Anderson, 1826, p. 272). Anderson's description of Labuhan sounds dismissive of the place. Despite the sad diction used by Anderson, Labuhan is in fact a river port which is a port for Deli exports abroad. Its humble physical conditions are of course not like Penang, Malacca or Singapore, but it is from there that Deli's important commodities are sent to these three ports. Anderson himself admitted that Deli was important for the British because they obtained large quantities of pepper from the sultanate (Anderson, 1824, p. 13).

If you look at the geographical position of Labuhan and the previous capitals of Deli, there is one similarity that these places are located on the banks of the same river. This river has been the center of Deli civilization from time to time, where the capital of Deli and also community settlements were located on the banks of the river. Rivers are important for the Malay people on the East Coast of Sumatra. In this area, rivers are the main transportation routes that connect the waters of the South China Sea, Malacca

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Strait, Karimata Strait and Bangka Strait with the inland areas of Sumatra (Asnan, 2016, p. 101).

The move of the capital from Deli Tua to Labuhan shows that as time goes by, the geographical orientation of the capital of Deli is getting closer to the Strait of Malacca. This is closely related to Deli's economic interests which depend on maritime trade. Deli itself is a sultanate that has the authority to regulate trade flows both upstream and downstream (Barus et al., 2021, p. 46). To be able to exercise this authority, Deli needs a port which will be the exit gate for commodities produced from its territory. Labuhan's position, which is further downstream and close to the mouth of the Deli River, is very strategic as an export port because the downstream river usually has a greater width than the upstream river. This makes it easier to get in and out of ships or trade boats. Moreover, rivers are one of the best places to dock for ships, although the width of the river influences the development of river ports (Lapian, 2017, p. 95).

With its position further downstream and very close to the river mouth, Labuhan also plays a role as a gateway in and out of the Deli River, which is a traditional transportation route and center of civilization in Deli. As reported by Anderson, Labuhan is the first village or settlement that will be encountered after passing the anchorage outside the fresh water flow. After meeting Labuhan there were several other villages standing along the Deli River which Anderson identified as Kampong Ilir, Kampong Tengah, Kampong Besar and Kampong Kota Dalam. At the time of Anderson's visit, the sultan panglima Deli lived in Kampong Ilir (Anderson, 1826, p. 272).

If when Anderson visited Deli, Labuhan was still in a very simple condition, then in subsequent developments, the capital of Deli began to turn into a busy city. In the capital, not only the port is gathered, but also a market which has buildings on stilts that touch each other. The pillars supporting the stilt house stand one meter high from the ground with a low roof made of palm oil (Ratna, 2006, p. 8). However, the sultan's residence was still very simple for a ruler's palace. When the sultan's palace was visited by Jacobus Nienhuys in 1863, it still showed Malay simplicity in the form of a boarded house measuring around 27 x 9 meters. The building where the sultan lived had a front porch and a back porch, while the roof was the same as the roofs of other residents' houses which were made from nipah (Pelzer, 1985, p. 56)

However, this simplicity began to change after Deli was colonized by the Dutch. Nienhuys' arrival will be a marker of changes in Deli, including issues regarding the capital, residential layout and buildings. Providing concessions for plantation land has generated large additional income for the sultan. This was then used by the sultan to build a better palace (Ratna, 1990, pp. 56–57). Since 1876, Dutch entrepreneurs and Chinese traders also began building multi-storey buildings with walls made of brickwork in Labuhan (Ratna, 2006, p. 11). Then in 1883, Deli Spoorweg Maatschappij built a railway track approx. 16,243 kilometers long connecting Labuhan with Medan Putri (Deli Spoorweg Maatschappij, 1929, pp. 6–7). The railway line began operating connecting Labuhan with Medan Putri in 1885.

Several years after the railway connecting Labuhan with Medan Putri began operating, the sultan of Deli began construction of a new palace with mixed Malay, Indian, Persian and European style architecture located close to Medan Putri. This palace occupies a unique position because it was built on the banks of a river, road and railway at the same time. However, the river was only used as the palace's backyard



and not as the front yard. Thus, the main orientation of this palace is land transportation routes in the form of roads and railways (Avan, 2010, p. 89). The construction of the palace took about three years and was only completed in 1891. After the palace was completed, the sultan of Deli then moved his capital from Labuhan. Thus, the history of Labuhan as the capital of the Deli sultanate ended at the end of the 19th century.

### **Sultangrond and the Changing Role of the Capital City of Deli**

When the Deli sultan moved his capital close to Medan Putri, several other important moving events had already taken place. The first important event was the move of the Deli Matschappij plantation company's administrative office from Labuhan to Medan Putri in 1869. Several years later, to be precise in 1879, the East Sumatra Resident Assistant who initially had an office in Labuhan also moved to Medan Putri. Then followed the Resident of East Sumatra who moved his capital from Bengkalis to Medan Putri in 1887. These three events made Medan Putri the center of the plantation economy as well as the capital of the Dutch colonial government in the East Sumatra region. However, this has undermined Labuhan's reputation as the economic and political center of Deli. Therefore, the move of the Deli Sultanate's capital from Labuhan to nearby Medan Putri can be seen as the Deli Sultan's attempt to restore the prestige of the Deli capital.

The area that became the new capital of the Deli Sultanate became known as Sultangrond. Meanwhile, Medan Putri will become a gemeente approved by Governor General J.B. van Heutz in Buitenzorg on April 1 1909. The border between Sultangrond and Gemeente Medan itself is only a highway. So, Sultangrond and Gemeente look like one city. Moreover, these two capitals have the same regional orientation which uses land transportation routes in the form of roads and trains as their focus. So the difference is clearly visible from Labuhan which is still oriented towards the river.

Even though the new capital of the Deli Sultanate in Sultangrond did not completely abandon the river, the river no longer plays an important role in the regional planning of the sultanate's capital. Residents' houses and buildings belonging to the sultanate no longer stand on the banks of the river. Instead, residents' houses and buildings in Sultangrond stand on the edge of the main road. To provide square land for the construction of houses and buildings, the sultan built roads that were straight and intersected with each other (Avan, 2010, p. 97). The available land was then filled with residential houses which still used the typical Malay stilt house architecture. So at the start of construction, the atmosphere of traditional Malay villages was still felt in Sultangrond.

Apart from that, Sultangrond also did not abandon the customs that always existed in the capital of the Malay sultanates. This custom is the presence of a sultanate mosque as part of the sultan's palace. In the tradition of Malay sultanates, if the sultan moved palace, a new mosque would be built near the new palace (Ratna, 1990, pp. 55–56). The mosque built by the Deli sultan in Sultangrond stands not far from the sultan's palace. The construction itself began in 1906. The period of approximately fifteen years between the completion of the sultan's palace and the sultanate mosque was due to the construction of the sultan's palace being expensive, so the sultan needed quite a long time to collect the costs for building the sultanate mosque. Apart from that, a year before the sultanate mosque was built, the sultan of Deli also started construction of a

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second palace which was intended for the sultan's residence, while the first palace, known as Maimon Palace, was intended as the sultan's office and a place to hold official events of the sultanate (Affan, 2014, pp. 91–92)

The sultan's palace and the sultanate mosque later became landmark buildings of Sultangrond. Both of them compete with other buildings that are landmarks of the Gemeente, such as the Medan Stadhuis, the Javasche Bank, the Post and Telegraph Office, as well as the Harrison and Crossfield buildings which stand around the Medan Esplanade. Uniquely, all of these buildings stand on the edge of the main road that connects Sultangrond, Gemeente Medan and Labuhan. If explored further, this road also connects Sultangrond with Deli Tua, which was the first capital of the sultanate. This fact confirms that the Deli Sultanate has followed the orientation of the colonial settlement system which was towards the mainland. As a consequence, Deli abandoned their traditional settlement orientation which faced the river and headed towards the Malacca Strait. The new imperial capital was a sign that Deli had changed its character by turning its back on the center of its own traditional civilization.

The position of the capital of the Deli Sultanate, which faces its back to the Deli River and away from the Malacca Strait, is not only a geographical issue, but also a change in economic and political orientation at the same time. Before the capital was moved to Sultangrond, the old capital in Labuhan was the economic center of Deli where the city and town were located which supported the sultanate's economy. Until then, the sultanate's economic orientation was maritime trade. Labuhan's position, which is downstream and very close to the Malacca Strait, is a gateway for commodities in and out of the Malacca Strait and inland from the Deli River. The presence of the sultan's palace and sultanate mosque in Labuhan shows that the sultan's authority operated in that place to control and supervise maritime trade flows through an entreport called Labuhan. However, this is no longer found in the new capital because Sultangrond is not an entreport like Labuhan. Even though the city can still be said to be in the area of the Deli River, the river is no longer important for the new capital because the pulse of life in Sultangrond takes place through the main roads and railways.

Sultangrond, which became the new capital of the Deli Sultanate, was no longer the place where the sultan controlled and supervised maritime trade flows within his territory. Sultangrond only functions as the location of the sultan's palace and the residence of the sultan and the sultan's relatives and palace officials. The economic orientation of the sultanate has also changed where maritime trade is no longer a source of income for the sultan. In exchange, the sultan received the proceeds from land concessions for tobacco plantations within his territory. For this reason, when the sultan decided to move the sultanate's capital next to the Dutch colonial economic and political capital in East Sumatra, he understood that the new city did not need to adopt the same settlement layout as Labuhan because the new capital would play a different role to the old capital.

Thus, the move of the capital from Labuhan to Sultangrond has also changed the role of the capital of the Deli Sultanate, which was initially more complex as an economic and political center and is now only a political center. However, Sultangrond's role as the political center of Deli must also be noted separately because Deli has been a Dutch colony since 1862. So, Deli can no longer be called an independent sultanate. Likewise, the capital in Sultangrond was actually only the



administrative center of the sultanate and not a political center that could play an important role in determining strategic policies. The political role played by Sultangrond actually only complements the role already played by Gemeente Medan as the Resident capital of East Sumatra.

If Sultangrond only played a complementary role, Labuhan still played the role of an independent political center at least until 1862. Even though in the course of its history Deli was alternately a vassal of Aceh and Siak, this sultanate still had an autonomous position in politics. Deli's independence when its capital was still in Labuhan can also be seen in how Labuhan plays a complex role as an economic center, maritime trade center, social center and political center of Deli at the same time. Of course, the complex role played by Labuhan will not be found in Sultangrond because the real economic and political center is located in Gemeente Medan. Meanwhile, Sultangrond could not play its role as a maritime trade center because the new capital did not have a port for exports or imports.

The complex and strategic role of Labuhan shows that the sultan of Deli still has enormous authority so that he can regulate various important things in his capital. Without the great authority possessed by the sultan, it would be impossible for Labuhan to play such a strategic and complex role. Therefore, the change in the role of the capital of the Deli sultanate after the capital was moved from Labuhan actually shows how the sultan's power and authority has been greatly reduced from before. This was of course caused by Dutch colonialism in Deli. Thus, colonialism was the main cause of changes in the role of the capital of the Deli Sultanate. After Deli became a Dutch colony, the sultan's authority was no longer as great as before.

In the case of Deli and several other Malay sultanates on the East Coast of Sumatra, the presence of Dutch colonialism has been proven to erode traditional values in the region. This can be clearly seen in the traditional river-oriented settlement and transportation patterns that have changed to become land-oriented. In turn, the economic orientation of the people on the East Coast of Sumatra has also shifted towards the mainland so that fishing activities and maritime trade have become marginalized. In fact, long before colonialism gripped the East Coast of Sumatra, trade and shipping had contributed to building the glory of the sultanates in the region (Asnan, 2019, p. 196).

Before colonialism gripped Deli, the sultan's income came from port taxes. The Sultan also owned ships and boats used in maritime trade. Thus, the sultan was actively involved in economic activities. Different things happened after Deli became a Dutch colony, where the sultan's main income came from plantation land concessions. Although plantation land concessions provide greater income than when the sultan collects port duties, this income is actually passive income because the sultan is not active in economic activities. In turn, the sultan's economy depends on the success of the plantation business run by foreign private companies in Deli. This also meant that the new sultanate capital could no longer be used as an economic center because economic power had come under the control of the plantation masters who centralized their company offices in Gemeente Medan.

In fact, the sultan could still make the new capital act as a maritime trade center. However, the location of the new capital which is slightly upstream makes it difficult to build an adequate river port to serve as an entreport for commodities from Deli. Labuhan, which after being abandoned by the sultan, still functioned as a Deli

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entrepot, in fact did not last long because the Dutch actually built a new port at the mouth of the Belawan river. The new port is planned as a hub-port for traditional ports on the East Coast of Sumatra. The new port became a reality and began operating in 1890. Since then, trade and shipping activities that had been served by the port of Labuhan began to be transferred to the new port (Algemene Secretarie Groote Bundel Besluiten, n.d.). The port itself was built in a coastal area which is located only about 4 kilometers from Labuhan.

Even though Labuhan still operates as a port, the volume of shipping and trade activities in Labuhan has decreased considerably. The ships that visit Labuhan are only ships with small weight and tonnage. After the presence of the new port known as Belawan, Labuhan only functioned as a transit port and feeder port for Belawan Port. In subsequent developments, Labuhan, which at the beginning of the operation of the Belawan port was still a feeder port for Belawan, also ended its role apart from leaving only a market and the remains of buildings belonging to the Deli sultanate and the merchants who once prospered in that place.

### **CONCLUSION**

The description above shows that the move of the capital of the Deli Sultanate from Labuhan to Sultangrond has marked a change in the role of the capital of the Deli Sultanate. Before the move, the sultanate's capital in Labuhan still played a strategic and complex role as an economic center, maritime trade center, social and political center for the sultanate. So, after the capital was moved to Sultangrond, the sultanate's capital only played a role as the political center of the Deli Sultanate in a limited scope because Deli had become part of the Dutch colony in the archipelago. Thus, the real economic center and social and political center lies in the capital of the East Sumatra Resident in Gemeente Medan. The cause of the change in the role played by the capital of the Deli Sultanate at the end of the 19th century was Dutch colonialism. Since Deli became a Dutch colony in 1862, the sultanate's power in various practical fields has been reduced to the point that the sultan ultimately did not follow the economic, social and political orientation that had been established by the Colonial Government. The result is a shift in settlement and transportation patterns from river-based to road and railway-based. Apart from that, there has also been a shift in economic orientation from being based on maritime trade to being based on plantations. These shifts have ultimately led to changes in the role of the sultanate's capital, which is no longer as strategic and complex as before.

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