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MAJAPAHIT EMPIRE: THE PEAK OF INDONESIAN CIVILIZATION

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Abstract: This article explores the rise, glory, and decline of the Majapahit Empire, one of the most influential and culturally significant civilizations in Indonesian history. Founded in 1293 by Raden Wijaya after his dramatic defeat and expulsion of Mongol forces from Java, Majapahit evolved into a powerful Indianized Hindu empire whose political reach and cultural influence shaped much of Southeast Asia. The study highlights the symbolic identity of Majapahit—its emblematic Surya Majapahit, architecture, religious syncretism, and artistic heritage—which together reflected a sophisticated and spiritually vibrant society.

The empire's golden age came under King Hayam Wuruk (1350–1389), supported by his legendary prime minister, Gajah Mada. Through strategic diplomacy and military campaigns, Gajah Mada pursued his Palapa Oath to unite the Nusantara, extending Majapahit's influence across modern-day Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, the Philippines, and parts of Oceania. Drawing on sources such as the *Nagarakretagama*, the article illustrates how Majapahit became a regional superpower and a beacon of Hindu-Javanese civilization. [1]

However, the empire's decline began soon after Hayam Wuruk's death. Internal strife, succession disputes, and the increasing spread of Islam—strengthened by foreign merchants and rising sultanates—fragmented Majapahit's political stability. The civil war of 1405–1406 further weakened the state, leading to its eventual collapse in the early 16th century. While Java gradually Islamized, Majapahit's cultural legacy endured as its priests and nobles transported sacred texts and traditions to Bali, preserving much of its Hindu-Javanese heritage. [2]

Keywords: Civilization, Hindu, Javanese, Identity, Empire.

Introduction

The Majapahit Empire stands as one of Indonesia's most remarkable historical civilizations—an influential Hindu-Javanese kingdom shaped by legend, warfare, and rich cultural traditions. Founded in 1293 by Raden Wijaya after his dramatic defeat of Mongol invaders, Majapahit quickly grew into a powerful regional state whose political reach extended across much of Southeast Asia. Rooted in Indian cultural influence and guided by strong rulers and strategic leadership, the empire became a center of religion, architecture, and artistic expression. Its legacy, preserved especially in Bali, continues to reflect the depth and sophistication of Indonesia's pre-Islamic heritage.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the origins and establishment of the Majapahit Empire, focusing on Raden Wijaya's rise to power and the historical context surrounding the defeat of the Mongol invasion.
2. To analyse the cultural, religious, and architectural characteristics that defined Majapahit as a major Hindu-influenced civilization in Southeast Asia. [3]
3. To explore the political and territorial expansion of Majapahit, especially during the reign of Hayam Wuruk and under the strategic leadership of Gajah Mada.

4. To identify the key factors contributing to the decline of Majapahit, including internal conflicts, succession disputes, and the growing influence of Islam and emerging sultanates.

5. To assess the lasting cultural legacy of the Majapahit Empire, particularly its preservation in Bali and its impact on modern Indonesian identity.

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the historical development of the Majapahit Empire from its foundation in 1293 to its decline in the early 16th century. It examines the political, cultural, and religious characteristics of the empire, with particular emphasis on the roles of Raden Wijaya, Hayam Wuruk, and Gajah Mada in shaping its rise and territorial expansion. The study also covers symbolic elements such as Majapahit architecture, emblems, and primary sources like the *Nagarakretagama*. In addition, it analyzes the internal conflicts, succession disputes, and external influences—especially the spread of Islam—that contributed to the empire's collapse. Finally, the scope includes the surviving legacy of Majapahit culture, particularly its preservation in Bali and its continuing influence on Indonesian identity.

Methodological Review

This study employs a qualitative, historical-analytical methodology to examine the rise, development, and decline of the Majapahit Empire. The analysis is based primarily on documentary and descriptive methods, drawing from textual evidence contained within the article as well as historical records referenced in the narrative. Key primary sources discussed in the material—such as the *Nagarakretagama* manuscript and contemporary inscriptions—serve as foundational points for interpreting Majapahit's political structure, religious identity, and territorial expansion. [4]

The study also incorporates interpretative cultural analysis, using visual and material artifacts mentioned in the document—such as the Surya Majapahit emblem, architectural remains, statues, and weaponry—to understand the symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of Majapahit civilization. These cultural elements provide context for exploring broader themes of Hindu influence, artistic expression, and state identity.

A thematic approach is used to structure the historical inquiry. The content is organized around major themes: the empire's founding narrative, the golden age under Hayam Wuruk and Gajah Mada, the political and religious factors driving expansion, and the socio-religious changes that catalysed decline. This approach supports a coherent examination of cause-and-effect relationships within Majapahit's historical trajectory.

Literature Review

Traditional studies of the Majapahit Empire often say it fell apart politically in the 1400s, becoming fragmented with a weak central power. This idea, mainly from early 1900s historians, is questioned by J. Noorduyn, who argues against inevitable collapse. By looking at Javanese writings and the Waringin Pitu inscription (1447), Noorduyn finds that claims of political failure come from misunderstanding limited source material. Instead of a total breakdown, he sees ongoing dynasties, changes in administration, and lasting royal power, which suggests Majapahit stayed politically stable despite growing challenges. [5]

Adding to this, Wahyudi and Munandar look at Majapahit through its religious practices, saying that Hindu-Buddhist ideas were the base of the state. Their work shows how kingship, land setup, building design, and social connections were based on Hindu-Buddhist beliefs, seeing the ruler as divine. They also suggest Majapahit declined as these religious values weakened, especially as other beliefs and economies grew in the 1400s.[6]

Combined, these studies change how we see Majapahit's history, moving from a simple decline story to a more complex view of political strength and changes in ideology. They show the empire's later years were shaped not just by family battles, but by a slow change in power, beliefs, and regional control.

THE RISE OF MAJAPAHIT



Figure 1 Raden Wijaya (Kertarajasa) (Founder of Majapahit Empire)

An Empire embraced with legends, culture, valour, mystery and religion. The very foundation of Majapahit Empire was setup on the defeat of Mongol Invaders by Raden Wijaya and the founder of Majapahit Empire in 1294 in east java, Indonesia. Gāyatrī Rajapatni: the Queen Mother was the wife of Wijaya. In 1292 Mongol troops came to Java to avenge an insult to the emperor of China, Kublai Khan, by Kertanagara, the king of Singhasāri, who had been replaced by Jayakatwang. Vijaya collaborated with Mongol troops in defeating Jayakatwang; Vijaya then turned against the Mongols and expelled them from Java. Therefore, Indonesia is considered to have been founded in 1293. [7] Indonesia literally means Islands of India from the very existence was under the influence of Hindu Kingdoms and India. An Indianized kingdom, The Majapahit empire was the last of the major Hindu (Believer of Hinduism Religion) empires of Dvipantara and the greatest in Indonesian history. Very Ironical isn't it as of today Indonesia has the largest population of Muslims (86.7%) in the world. The name Majapahit taken from the name of a fruit that had a bitter taste, maja is the fruit name and pahit means bitter. King Wijaya himself died in A.D. 1309 after the foundation and setting-up the Empire. It also claimed relationships

with Champa (Now Vietnam), Cambodia, Siam, southern Burma and Bhutan.

FLAG, ARCHITECTURE, EMBLEM AND SIGNIFICANCE

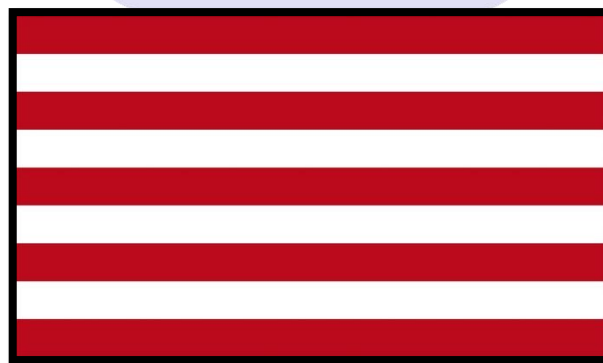


Figure 2 Flag of Majapahit Empire



Figure 3 Maja Fruit

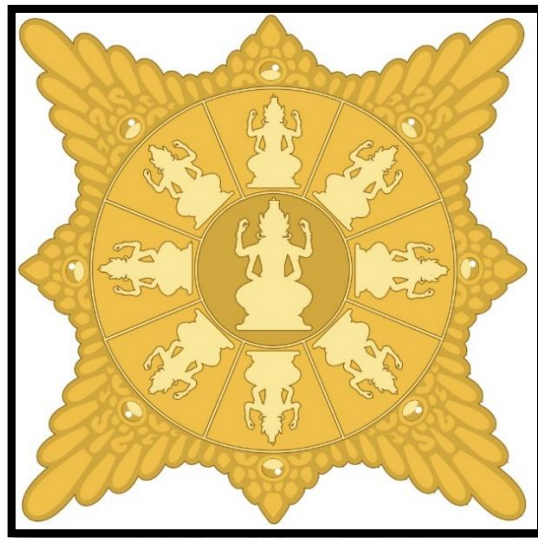


Figure 4 Surya Majapahit :Emblem of Majapahit Empire, it symbolizes 9 Hindu Gods and 8 shining sun rays



Figure 5 The graceful Bidadari Majapahit, golden celestial apsara (Spirit of cloud or water in Hinduism)



Figure 6 Remnants of Majapahit Empire



Figure 7 Bronze cannon, called cetbang, Metropolitan Museum of Arts, New York, from c. 1470–1478 Majapahit. The Surya Majapahit emblem on the bronze cannon.



Figure 8 The statue of Parvati (Hindu goddess)as mortuary deified portrayal of Tribhuanottunggadewi queen of Majapahit, mother of Hayam Wuruk

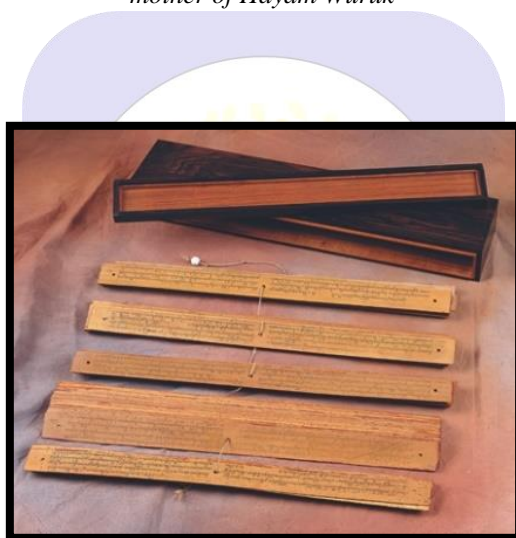


Figure 9 Nagarakretagama (an old Javanese eulogy) palm-leaf manuscript. Composed by Mpu Prapanca in 1365, it provides a primary historical account of Majapahit court during the reign of King Hayam Wuruk

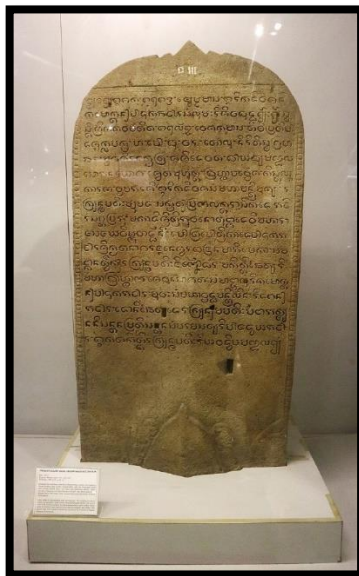


Figure 10 Gajah Mada inscription, dated 1273 Saka (1351 CE), mentioned about a sacred caitya building dedicated by Gajah Mada for the late King Kertanegara of Singhasari.

THE GOLDEN AGE: Reign of Hayam Wuruk and Gajah Mada's conquest



Figure 11 Haram Wuruk

Hayam Wuruk also known as Rajasanagara, ruled Majapahit in 1350–1389. During this period, Majapahit attained its peak and Hinduism was extensively flourished all over the Indonesia and South-East Asia with the help of highly intelligent, brave and strategic prime minister Gajah Mada. [10] His name comes from oldest language on earth- Sanskrit, Gaja- Elephant and Mada - Mother. Under Gajah Mada's command (1313–1364), Majapahit conquered more territories and became the regional power. According to the *Nagarakretagama*, XIII and XIV mentioned several states in Sumatra, Malay Peninsula, Borneo, Sulawesi, Nusa Tenggara islands, Maluku, New Guinea, Mindanao, Sulu Archipelago, Luzon and some parts of the Visayas islands as under the Majapahit realm of power. [8]

Sumpah Palapa (Indonesian) or the Palapa Oath - It was the infamous oath that was taken by the Prime Minister Gajah Madah during his inauguration as Majapahit *Amangkubhumi* (Prime Minister) that took place in 1256 Saka (1334) or 1258 Saka (1336). In this oath he mentioned about

his aims and the expansion of Majapahit Empire and he eventually succeeded in the conquer of all the regions that consists many countries of today Singapore, Malaysia, islands of Philippines, Fiji and other oceanic countries were parts of Majapahit afterwards. [9] The original words were as follows-



Figure 12 Gajah Mada: Prime Minister of Majapahit Empire (1313–1364)

Sira Gajah Madapatih Amangkubhumi tan ayun amuktia palapa, sira Gajah Mada: "Lamun huwus kalah nusantara isun amukti palapa, lamun kalah ring Gurun, ring Seran, Tañjung Pura, ring Haru, ring Pahang, Dompo, ring Bali, Sunda, Palembang, Tumasik, samana isun amukti palapa". [10]

Translation:

He, Gajah Mada Patih Amangkubumi, does not wish to cease his fasting. Gajah Mada: "If (I succeed) in defeating (conquering) Nusantara, (then) I will break my fast. If Gurun, Seram, Tanjung Pura, Haru, Pahang, Dompo, Bali, Sunda, Palembang, Temasek, are all defeated, (then) I will break my fast."



Figure 11 Map during the greatest rise of Majapahit Empire

THE DECLINE OF MAJAPAHIT

After the death of Hayam Wuruk, revolts and internal decay started spreaded at the margins of the Majapahit empire as foreign Muslim merchants became more influential. As gradual islamization progressed, eventually religious propaganda turned to armed force. A conflict over succession happened when Hayam Wuruk was succeeded by the princess Kusumawardhani, who married his relative, Prince Wikramawardhana. Hayam Wuruk also had a son from his previous marriage, prince Wirabhumi, who also claimed the throne. [11] [12] A civil war, called Paregreg, occurred from 1405 to 1406. Wikramawardhana was victorious and Wirabhumi was decapitated. This creeping Islamization hastened the deterioration in Java. The combination of political ‘jihad’ warfare with religious infighting at the level of common people in every village meant this period was one of constant strife and infighting within the Empire. The last ruler of Majapahit, Brawijaya V, turned himself Muslim in 1478 that became the last big shot for decline of Majapahit Empire. [13]

Majapahit could not contain the well-funded sultanates, and finally crumbled under the Mohammedan pressure in 1527. East Java remained Hindu until the 1700s but in 1800s was under islamization. The loyalist

nobles and priests then took all the kingdom's scriptures, historical records, and knowledge with them to Bali. It became the last refuge of Javanese culture and Hinduism. The Majapahit Kingdom had a great influence on the development of architecture in Indonesia. The Majapahit flag — still used by the Indonesian Navy today.



Figure 14 statue of Gajah Mada

One of them is the form of the Majapahit pavilion which inspired contemporary Indonesian architecture. [14]

Bali today is a survival of Java during Majapahit's golden age. Through its isolation, Bali kept the Javanese culture whole and continuously improved on it. Today, it is the world that comes to Bali to learn from the ancient Hindu-Javanese wisdom despite the fact of Indonesia is the most populous nation with Muslim Population. An amalgamation is observable even to modern date.

Conclusion

The Majapahit Empire remains a defining force in Indonesian history, remembered for its political strength, cultural richness, and far-reaching influence across Southeast Asia. From Raden Wijaya's founding victory over the Mongols to the empire's peak under Hayam Wuruk and Gajah Mada, Majapahit shaped regional identity through its administration, architecture, and Hindu-Javanese traditions. Although internal conflict and the spread of Islam eventually led to its decline, its cultural legacy endured—preserved most clearly in Bali. Majapahit's history continues to illuminate Indonesia's past and contributes to its modern national identity.

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