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TREASURE OF THE MELAKA MALAY SULTANATE: ANALYSIS OF HIDDEN TREASURE ON NANGKA ISLAND, MELAKA

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Abstract:

The Melaka Sultanate rose to prominence as a dominant maritime power, controlling the vital Strait of Melaka and serving as a pivotal center of trade and commerce. The kingdom's prosperity was fuelled by its strategic location, attracting merchants and traders from distant lands who dealt in coveted commodities like spices, precious metals, and gemstones. Nangka Island played a significant role in this bustling trade network, potentially serving as a repository for the Sultanate's accumulated wealth. Legends and folklore emerged over time, shrouding the island in mystery and sparking intrigue about the hidden treasures of the Melaka Sultanate. The objective of this study is to identify the sources of wealth in Melaka. In addition to examining the treasures left by the Sultanate of Melaka, this study also provides a detailed analysis of the treasure trove left by the Sultanate of Melaka, located on Nangka Island. This study employs a qualitative method. The data collection methods for this study are library research and documentation methods. This research also uses the observation method to gather information at the location of Nangka Island. Observations on this island were conducted for two months to obtain detailed information about the island. Meanwhile, data analysis and research information are conducted using descriptive methods. As a result, the island's strategic location near the mainland and other key islands made it an ideal site for various activities, including trade, defense, and religious gatherings. Its association with the Sultanate's riches adds to its allure, drawing interest from historians, treasure hunters, and the general public. Despite centuries having passed since the Melaka Sultanate's heyday, the allure of Nangka Island and its

rumored treasures endures, fuelling ongoing exploration efforts and captivating imaginations with the promise of uncovering secrets from one of Southeast Asia's most influential empires.

Keywords:

Treasure, Melaka Sultanate, Hidden Treasure, Nangka Island

Introduction

Melaka has become a bustling entrepot port frequented by traders and merchants from all corners of the world. Its strategic location between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea has made the port of Melaka a focal point for traders from Arabia, Persia, Champa, and the Ryukyu Islands in Japan. Muslims from various parts of the world including Egypt, Mecca, Turkey, and Persia came to trade in Melaka, alongside non-Muslims from other countries such as Gujarat, Malabar, Kalinga, Goa, Pegu, Siam, China, and Brunei. Each brought with them goods traded to predetermined destinations (Tom Pires, 1944).

Traders from Ryukyu brought goods to be exchanged for gold and copper. During this time, Melaka was also said to be a stopover or relay station for the conduct of trade activities between China and India. Its location on the shores of the Melaka Strait had the advantage and privilege of facilitating foreign traders from the east and west to meet and engage in trade. Malay history itself mentions traders from various places, whether upwind or downwind, coming to Melaka, hence it was dubbed *malakat*, a place of congregation for all trading goods. The importance of the port of Melaka at that time can be assessed through Tom Pires' statement: whoever could control Melaka would mean controlling Venice (A. Samad Ahmad, 1970).

Pasai, which originally was a major trading center in the trade routes of Southeast Asia, declined after Melaka emerged as a world trading center, successfully expanding its trading network to Gujarat, Dhabal, Bengal, and Coromandel in India, China, Persia, the Ryukyu Islands, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Ottoman Empire. According to Portuguese records, Melaka was the wealthiest country in the world because all the traders who settled in Melaka were from the wealthy class. Their wealth was assessed in terms of gold currency (Pintado, M.J., 2012).

Source of Wealth of the Malay Sultanate of Melaka

Melaka emerged as a strong kingdom after reaching its peak in the 15th century, and its prosperity spread throughout the Malay world (Leonard Y. Andaya, 2010). Melaka reached its pinnacle by possessing immense wealth, respect, and remarkable progress. The promised security to the people contributed to the increase in Melaka's population. Pintado, M.J., the translator of Portuguese records, described Melaka in the 15th century as the wealthiest city in the world with a population of thirty thousand (Pintado, M.J., 2012). In a letter sent from Ryukyu to the Sultan of Melaka, the Ryukyu government praised the greatness of the Sultan of Melaka for successfully administering Melaka to achieve extraordinary wealth and providing comfort and luxury to the people of Melaka (Hashim Musa and Rohaida Kamaruddin, 2015).

Melaka began as a small settlement, but when it was captured by the Portuguese, Melaka had become an international port visited by almost all traders from around the world due to the

efforts of successful rulers who made Melaka a recognized and wealthiest country in the world at that time. Melaka was also renowned for its security, attracting many foreign traders to settle in the country. Consequently, there was a large population residing in Melaka, living in a peaceful and harmonious environment. Melaka's success can also be measured by its control over surrounding territories (Barbosa Duarte, 1918).

Melaka's location, sheltered from the southwest monsoon winds, although these winds were essential for navigation, made it unsuitable as a stopover location due to the winds' turbulent nature. The mouth of the Melaka River also lacked sandbanks or mangrove trees that could hinder ships from docking in the port (Armando Cortesao, 1947). Through the Melaka River, people from the hinterland brought down forest products, connecting trade routes via the Muar and Pahang Rivers, leading them to the upstream of Pahang, which had natural gold resources (Syed Zulfida, 2013). The port of Melaka was described as a complete port with all the basic facilities for traders, while the state's complex and organized urban system, along with settlements close to bustling markets with trading activities not far from the port.

Based on the geography of Melaka, the central part faces the sea while the northwest stands on mountains. The Parameswara Palace was built on a hill near the bridge, which was the location for both foreign and local traders' business (Syed Zulfida, 2013).

The palace, inhabited by the sultan, showcased the luxury and grandeur of the government, and this sultan's palace was built on a hill to demonstrate the sultan's distinct position from ordinary people (Paul Wheatley, 1964). According to Syed Zulfida (2013), the palace's direction faced the sunset or inland. There was a river flowing past the palace, flowing directly into the sea, and the Melaka government built a wooden bridge over the river. On this bridge, twenty pavilions were erected for trading activities (Mills, J.V.G, 1930). The majority of the Melaka population was engaged in trading activities because the city of Melaka was very suitable for the sale of goods for trade. Chinese records mention the geographical conditions of Melaka, which were not suitable for agriculture due to its sandy and infertile soil, causing the Melaka people to be less concerned about agriculture and focused on the trade activity (Groeneveldt, W.P 1876).



Figure 1: Illustration of the Progress of the Port of Melaka During the Era of the Malay Sultanate of Melaka

(Source: Khalil Yaakob)

According to Eredia, the construction of this bridge was the result of Parameswara's efforts during the early days of his administration in Melaka. Business conducted on the bridge usually offered goods such as resin, spices, cloth, wood roots, and fruits such as rambutan, cempedak, and copper durian, which Eredia considered the most delicious fruit (J.V.G, Mills, 1930). All official government affairs and trading activities were conducted in the vicinity of the mouth and banks of the Melaka River, which later developed into a port city with entrepot status (Empayar Melaka Tradisi Agung Melaka, 2010).

The discovery of coins in the Melaka River is evidence that the river was the main artery for trading activities in Melaka. The discovery of coins in the Melaka River during the development process serves as evidence of trading activities in Melaka. The study of these coins began in 2000, and various types of coins have been successfully discovered and detected along the river and several other locations in the midst of the Melaka city. The discovery of these coins further explains the stages of trade development in Melaka, which went through three important phases: before, during, and after the fall of Melaka (Empayar Melaka Tradisi Agung Melaka, 2010).

Melaka's wealth and success in trading activities can be seen through the production of currency by ruling sultan. In addition, the production of currency was among the factors that facilitated the transactions of every trader who came to Melaka. The sultans of Melaka issued their own currency throughout their reign in the state of Melaka. According to Syed Zulfida (2013), the production of currency symbolizes the power of a king. The discovery of interesting coins in the Melaka River highlights the impact of governance from the Melaka government itself. There are two coins that clearly indicate they were produced during the time of Sultan Muzaffar Shah and Sultan Mansur Shah. The first Melaka currency found was issued by Sultan Muzaffar Shah, which had the inscription al-Sultan Muzaffar Shah on the front and Nasir al-Dunya wa'l-Din on the back, meaning "the helper of the world and religion."

The rule of Sultan Mansur Shah also showed the use of tin coins with the inscription Mansur Shah bin Muzaffar Shah al-Sultan on the front and Nasir Dunia al'l-Din on the back. Additionally, the coins of Sultan Mahmud Shah and Sultan Ahmad Shah also had their own coins during their reign. The currency during the era of the Malay Sultanate of Melaka had various forms, including animal-shaped coins, face-value coins, and coins considered as talismans besides functioning as currency (Syed Zulfida, 2013).

The development of trade in Melaka is clearly evidenced by the discovery of coins used for exchange in every trading activity in Melaka. The progress of trade in Melaka can also be seen systematically during the reign of Sultan Muzaffar Shah, based on the discovery of his coins, indicating that he was the first sultan to issue coins, followed by subsequent rulers. Melaka's wealth is not only due to its trading activities but also because of its unique characteristics such as security and prosperity promised by the government. Melaka's financial generation also came from tax collection from merchants, and these taxes were handed over to the minister in charge of the relevant shops, as the markets in Melaka could be found along the streets around the Melaka port.

The peak of Melaka's wealth can be seen during the golden era of the last Melaka Sultanate, Sultan Mahmud Shah. He inherited all the wealth accumulated by his ancestors who had worked hard to elevate Melaka in the eyes of the Portuguese, who had intentions to seize Melaka's wealth, spread Christianity, and accelerate their own fame, as documented by the Portuguese records. Alfonso once mentioned the goal of seizing Melaka, even if it meant risking his own life because of Melaka's importance as a rich trading center with goods from all over the world, especially spices (Pintado, M.J, 2012).

Alfonso also expressed significant losses for Portugal if the effort to conquer Melaka failed, as Melaka was a focal point for Muslim traders to exchange goods and supply them to other Muslim countries. Therefore, if Melaka were successfully captured, Islamic countries would be cut off from supplies because Melaka would no longer be able to facilitate this, thereby hindering the spread of Islam from Melaka. Due to Melaka's position and wealth, the Portuguese were keen to control and conquer the port of Melaka. Melaka was known as the richest city in the world because every inhabitant in the state of Melaka at that time was wealthy and prosperous. Portuguese records state that the wealth of the inhabitants in Melaka at that time was equivalent to a gold mine. One mine was equivalent to 100 gold, and each merchant owned at least 10 to 12 mines, equivalent to 1000 to 1200 kg of gold (Pintado M.J, 2012).

The wealth of the Malay Sultanate of Melaka cannot be denied at all because Melaka played a role as a world trading center and attracted all traders from all countries. The arrival of these traders was the main source of the Melaka government's economic generation through tax collection and goods traded in the port of Melaka. Melaka's wealth is also evident through the number of coins owned by each sultan and foreign traders. Furthermore, Melaka was indeed rich in gold found around the islands, hills, and coastal areas. This was stated by Eredia himself in his writings. He mentioned that Malays often sifted sand on the coast to obtain gold. Almost all the islands in Central Melaka had gold (Mills J.V.G, 1930).

Therefore, due to this wealth, the Portuguese sought to conquer Melaka to control the riches of the port. The Portuguese saw the wealth in Melaka as a great opportunity that needed to be seized to strengthen their finances, increase military strength, and procure goods for warfare (Pintado M.J, 2012). After successfully capturing Melaka, Alfonso Albuquerque ordered the

Portuguese army to burn down Sultan Mahmud Shah's palace. Before the army proceeded to burn down the palace, they discovered a vast amount of gold and silver coins filling the underground chambers of the sultan's palace. Four chests contained precious items, each valued at 600,000 cruzados, four chests contained luxurious perfumes and pearls. 60 tons of the sultan's treasures in various sizes and forms, including furniture coated in gold, the sultan's crown, gold ingots, and coins, were found in the sultan's palace. Some of the gold and coins seized belonged to traders who were robbed during the capture of Melaka (Pintado M.J, 2012). It took the Portuguese army several days to seize the treasures of Sultan Melaka.

However, the Portuguese were still dissatisfied with Sultan Mahmud Shah's actions as he had managed to hide some of his belongings in a concealed location. Since they couldn't track down some of these treasures, the Portuguese sought revenge by burning down the sultan's palace, including the houses of prominent individuals and state officials (Pintado M.J, 2012). Nevertheless, each Portuguese soldier involved in searching for treasures from Sultan Melaka's palace received around 400,000 cruzados. Additionally, the discovery of 200 boxes containing gems, diamonds, rubies, and sapphires was seized. The Portuguese also captured a ship filled with high-quality fabrics belonging to Sultan Mahmud Shah, and the value of these goods was estimated at 15,000 cruzados (Pintado M.J, 2012).

The Portuguese themselves did not expect the extraordinary wealth held by Sultan Melaka beyond their calculations. Some of the furniture found in the palace was sold, and the remainder was loaded onto Portuguese ships. The storage warehouses of the palace's goods were also searched, and all valuable items such as gemstones, lion statues, and the Shahbadar's magical bracelet were loaded onto Portuguese ships to be taken back to Lisbon (Pintado M.J, 2012). Melaka started as a small settlement, but when it was seized by the Portuguese, Melaka became an international port frequented by traders from all over the world due to the successful efforts of the government, which established Melaka as a recognized and wealthiest country in the world at that time. Melaka was also renowned for its security, attracting many foreign traders who settled in the country. Consequently, many people inhabited Melaka, living in a state of peaceful harmony. The success of Melaka can also be measured by its control over the surrounding territories (Muhammad Yusof Hashim, 2015).

The wealth seized from Melaka is said to be only one-third of the entire wealth of the Melaka kingdom, with the rest unable to be traced as it was hidden in an underground location behind strong walls (Pintado M.J, 2012). All these treasures were loaded onto a Portuguese ship called the Flor De La Mar (flower of the sea) to be taken back to Lisbon. Built in 1502, this 400-ton ship made its maiden voyage under the command of Estavao De Gama, the brother of Vasco De Gama. The ship was involved in the capture of Goa in 1510 and was used during the Battle of Diu in 1509. However, the ship is said to have sunk along with the treasure of the Malay Sultanate of Melaka in a storm while on its journey back to Lisbon (Pintado M.J, 2012). Between 1989 and 1990, a professional diver named Tony Wells conducted a treasure hunt at the bottom of the northern Sumatran Sea to search for the treasure of the Malay Sultanate of Melaka that sank with the Flor De La Mar. He estimated the value of this treasure at 80 billion USD, but it was not found on the seabed after various operations and attempts to locate it were made (Dennis De Witt, 2018).

Introduction to Nangka Island

Nangka Island, also known as Pulau Sembilan, is one of the most important islands in the waters of the Melaka Strait. It is located seventeen kilometers from the coastal area and four

kilometers from Pulau Besar. Nangka Island is the second largest island after Pulau Besar. Portuguese records mention the existence of Nangka Island since the 15th century (J.V.G, Mills. 1930). Nangka Island is a rocky island often frequented by sailors for rest and to obtain fresh water (Dennis De Witt, 2018). To visit this island, visitors need to take a boat ride for twenty minutes from the Pengkalan Umbai Pernu Jetty or the Anjung Batu Serkam Jetty. Named after its resemblance to the jackfruit fruit and covering an area of 7.3 hectares, Nangka Island is under the custodianship of the Melaka State Museum Corporation (PERZIM) since 1997. The island is surrounded by ten uninhabited islands including Pulau Besar and Pulau Undan. In the middle of the hill on this island, there is a hill that rises fifty meters above sea level. The area of Nangka Island also has clear water with sandy beaches in its attractive surroundings, as well as coral reefs that attract divers. Meanwhile, on the slope of the hill, there is a grave measuring eight meters long, claimed to belong to an unidentified hero.

There is also a large tree, estimated to be four thousand years old, considered the oldest tree on the island (Field Study, 2018). According to Wayne Stier (1996), the best location to store treasure is in a cave near the river mouth downstream. Melaka has a strategic location due to its vast land area and the bays along the west coast of the peninsula, usually overgrown with mangrove trees. This terrain is the most strategic location for trading ships to anchor and seek shelter from monsoon winds. The river routes leading to the hinterland only require one stone to reach the treasure storage area but remain a secret location for treasure storage (Wayne Stier, 1996). Orientalists dubbed the Malay Archipelago the Golden Chersonese or Golden Islands. Chersonese comes from the Greek language meaning gold.

This name was given because the Malay Archipelago was considered the largest gold-producing region in the world. There were two main locations in Melaka (before being colonized by the Portuguese) said to contain gold, first is Mount Ledang and second is Nangka Island. Mount Ledang, also known as 'Mount Ophir', which is now under the jurisdiction of the state of Johor, is said to house the treasure of Prophet Solomon or King Solomon. Prophet Solomon is famous as a wise and wealthy king of Israel. Prophet Solomon is said to be the son of King Ophir, as stated in the Quran, Bible, and Jewish Talmud (Dennis De Witt, 2018). The wealth of Prophet Solomon is said to be stored in 'Mount Ophir' as written in the Jewish Talmud. Prophet Solomon is said to ship gold, silver, sandalwood, pearls, ivory, apes, and peacocks from Mount Ophir every three years. Ancient history claims Mount Ledang or Mount Ophir as the golden mountain. Chinese sailors dubbed Melaka with the name 'Kim Sua' or golden mountain because behind Melaka, there is Mount Ledang. Buddhist sailors from India also called Melaka Suvarnabhumi, meaning the land of gold. The name Ophir was given by the British when they arrived in Melaka in 1800 (Dennis De Witt, 2018).

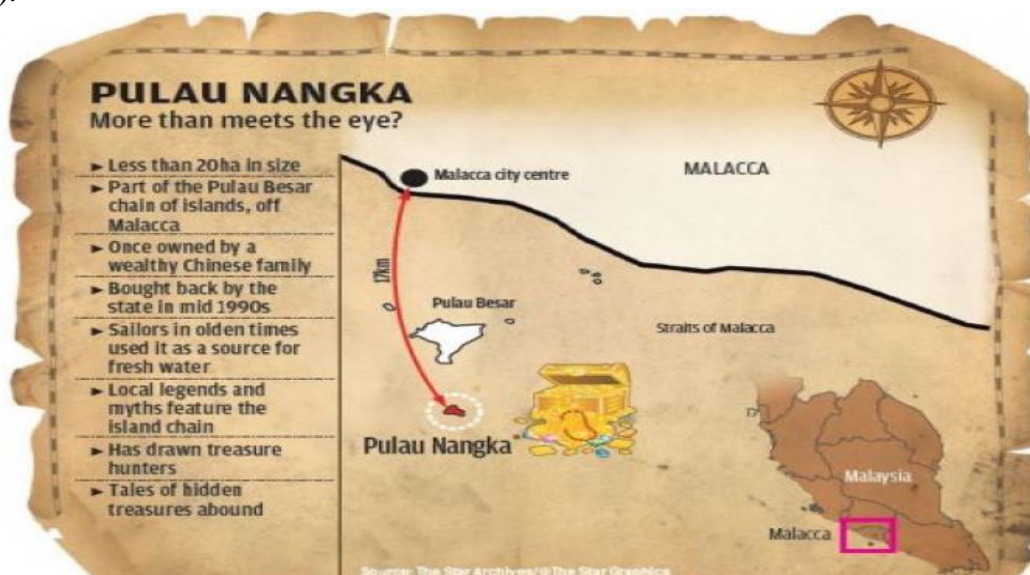
The coins or treasures said to be hidden on Nangka Island are the treasure of Sultan Mahmud Shah, concealed from the knowledge of the Portuguese when they tried to conquer Melaka. According to Fernao Lopes Castanheda's records, the Portuguese troops who successfully seized Melaka could not find any wealth of the Malay Sultanate of Melaka carefully hidden in an undiscoverable area (Pintado M.J, 2012). The selection of Nangka Island as the location to hide the treasure of the Sultan of Melaka is because of its attractive and rocky terrain surrounded by the sea. During the time of the Malay Sultanate of Melaka, Nangka Island was used as a defensive fortress to control the waters of the Melaka Strait covering the city of Melaka to Muar, Johor (Dennis De Wit, 2018).



Map 1: Location of Nangka Island

(Source: google map)

During the first Portuguese attack, Sultan Melaka ordered his treasure to be buried on the island to prevent it from being seized by the invaders. This measure was taken in preparation in case the Malay Sultanate of Melaka fell. At that time, Nangka Island was also used as a meeting place for religious leaders from across the archipelago to discuss religious issues. The island was also said to have been used as the state treasury center for the royal treasure of the Malay Sultanate of Melaka, with the stored wealth estimated to be in the billions (Dennis De Witt, 2018).



Map 2: Treasure Locations on Nangka Island

(Source: Dennis De Witt, 2018)

Treasure Hunt on Nangka Island

In mid-2014, local newspapers sparked excitement among the local community who had never heard of this island with an announcement about treasure worth billions of ringgits buried in a cave on Nangka Island (The Straits Times, 2014). This statement was followed by the issuance

of permits to two local companies to carry out the treasure hunt under the supervision of the Melaka State Museum Corporation (PERZIM). The local community believes that the treasure hidden in the cave on Nangka Island is protected by mystical powers, and for the past thirty years, many groups have tried to obtain the treasure on this island, but all of them have failed to retrieve even a single coin. They even came out dizzy and semi-conscious, claiming to have seen nearly 80 chests containing gold (Dennis De Witt, 2018: 47).

On Nangka Island, there is a cave known as Gua Batu Lidah, believed to hold the treasure of the Malay Sultanate of Melaka. According to local belief, there are large stones at each entrance to this cave, and all the entrances are protected by something mystical. The stone-covered entrances were broken to create a passage to the chamber containing the treasure of the Malay Sultanate of Melaka. These entrances were then used as the main access points to facilitate the treasure hunt on the island, carried out by the State Government of Melaka in 2014. The State Government also opened a second entrance to Gua Batu Lidah.



Figure 2: left, Gua Batu Lidah; right, Second Entrance Leading to Gua Batu Lidah
(Source: Researcher)

There is a mystical belief in the process of searching for this treasure. The treasure of the final heir of the Kingdom of Melaka Sultanate is said to be carefully hidden on Nangka Island and guarded by supernatural beings of uncertain origin. Therefore, all efforts by the government of the State of Melaka to obtain this treasure have failed due to these constraints. Most individuals who discover the treasure are said to be disturbed by these supernatural entities, making it difficult for them to move after finding the treasure (Khalil Yaakob, 2018).

There was an event where religious groups were invited to discuss with the guardian of the treasure, and during this process, the guardian requested to speak with the Sultan of Melaka. Since Melaka is a state without a sultan, the Governor of Melaka was invited to speak about the treasure. According to estimates, the treasure of the Melaka Sultanate Kingdom is worth RM 250 billion USD, with about 84 chests of gold coins, gemstones, royal clothing, royal crowns, and gold ingots still stored on the island (Khalil Yaakob, 2018).

The existence of treasure on Nangka Island is a plausible matter, given the extraordinary wealth of the Malay Sultanate of Melaka in the 15th century. However, the mystical elements woven into the narrative throughout the treasure hunt process can be reevaluated according to individual beliefs, as not everyone can accept mystical elements in a storytelling context.

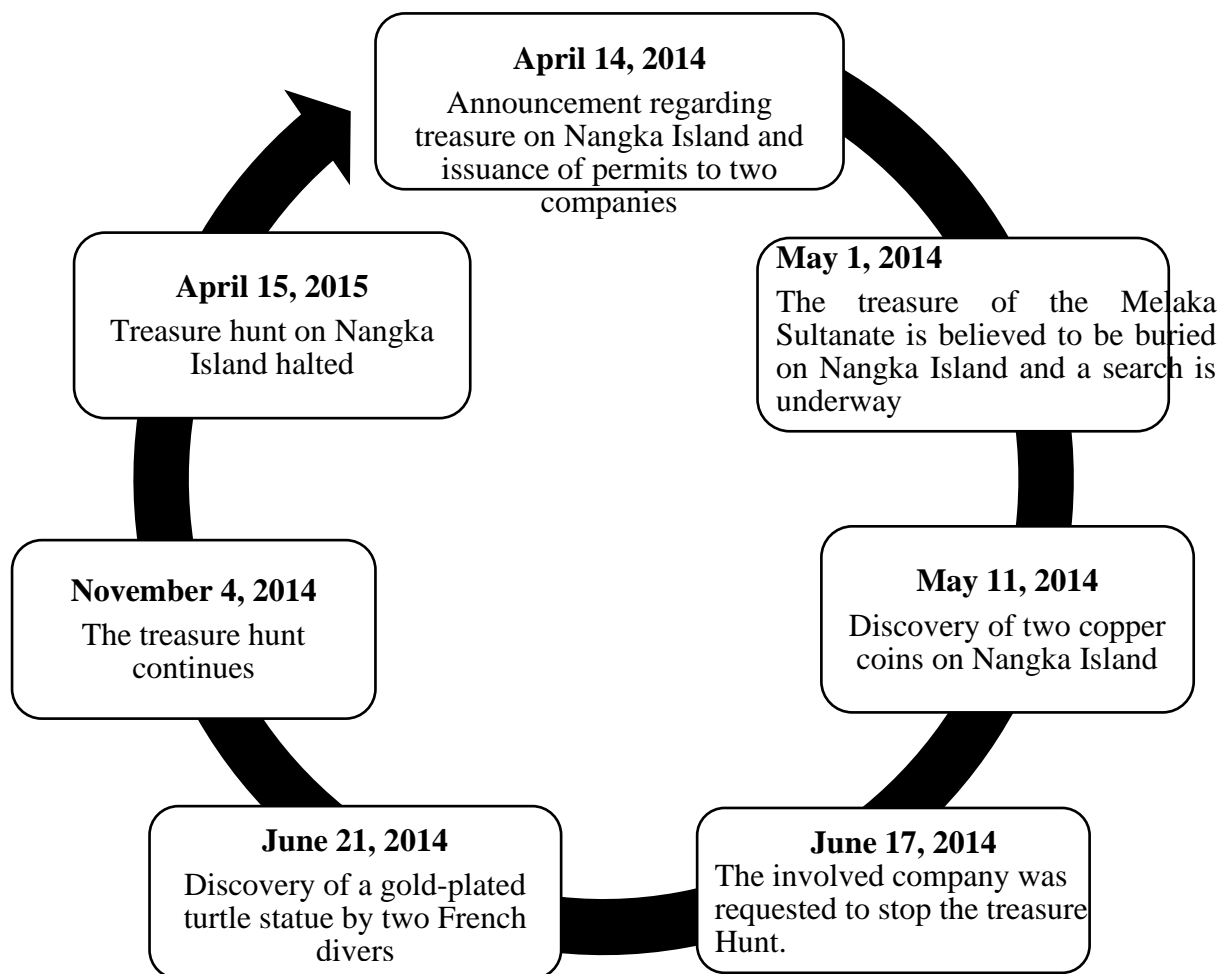
According to researchers themselves, the mystical element in this treasure hunt is not impossible because the hidden treasure has been around for almost five centuries. Every valuable thing left behind for a long period undoubtedly has its guardians.

The Dutch, who colonized Melaka from the Portuguese, also agreed that there are remnants of the treasure of the Malay Sultanate of Melaka hidden somewhere. Although the Dutch confiscated all the Portuguese remnants taken by the Malay Sultanate of Melaka, they believe there are still undiscovered treasures, possibly hidden in wells or buried underground (Dennis De Witt, 2018: 54). The wealth of the Malay Sultanate of Melaka is indeed indisputable, as every foreign document confirms the richness of this kingdom resulting from tax collections and trading activities at the port, and there are no sources of writing that doubt the greatness of the Melaka sultans. Until now, efforts to search for treasure on Nangka Island are still ongoing and receive attention from various parties. The discovery of this treasure is said to be able to settle the entire debt of the Malaysian government based on assessments conducted by the state government.

Conclusion

The Nangka Island is believed to hold treasures from the Melaka Sultanate, which was a prosperous kingdom in the 15th century. The treasure found on Nangka Island belongs to the Malay Sultanate of Melaka, left behind on the island after Melaka was attacked by the Portuguese in 1511. The wealth of the Sultan's descendants is extraordinary because Melaka was a global trading hub. This income was a significant contributor to the wealth of the Malay Melaka rulers. This wealth made the Portuguese see the port of Melaka as an important location to seize; control over this port could bring many benefits to the Portuguese in capturing Melaka's wealth, as well as making Melaka a location to spread Christian teachings. There are mystical beliefs surrounding the treasure buried on Nangka Island, adding an element of mystery to the story. The narrative describes various attempts, both historical and contemporary, to locate and retrieve the treasure hidden on Nangka Island.

Despite the efforts of different parties, including government agencies and private companies, the treasure remains elusive. The government of Melaka has been actively involved in overseeing and regulating treasure hunting activities on Nangka Island. Permits were issued to companies, and the government monitored the treasure hunting process closely. The treasure hunt faced challenges and controversies, including mystical obstacles, the involvement of multiple parties, and conflicting interests. These factors contributed to the complexities surrounding the search for the treasure. Overall, the story of the treasure hunt on Nangka Island reflects a blend of historical intrigue, mystical beliefs, government intervention, and the persistent quest for hidden riches. This article has successfully achieved the research objectives. However, further studies need to be continuously conducted to obtain accurate information about the hidden treasure locations on this island. The discovery of this treasure will benefit the country, as well as serve as evidence of the wealth of the Malacca Sultanate inherited by the Malays



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