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Melaka: Meeting of the Monsoons

Urban-Architectural Forms of Historic Southeast Asia: The Littoral Cities • Book Chapter • 2026 •

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Abstract

The historic core of precolonial Melaka can be understood as a foundational, layered (palimpsest) urban form, embodying a layer of pattern that has infected a form of cosmic hierarchy inherited from its past lineage in Sumatera, and which was later infused with Islamic symbolism. This chapter will attempt to summate previous discourses, discoveries, and debates, and in doing so, suggest the existence of the Indigenous layer of urbanism, which is a form of vernacular urban-aquatic urbanism, or an urbanism arising from the confluence of land and littoral conditions and trade and religious energization of a city. The Melaka of the Malay world indicates the layer of eco-urbanism, ecology and urbanity, which can be the basis of future regeneration and conservation efforts. Its strategic location between two monsoonal winds, at the mouth of a large river and delta, made it an ideal neutral port for diverse cultures. Founded by Parameswara, or Iskandar Shah, around 1402, Melaka offered year-round access for ships and was situated at the narrowest point of the Malacca Straits. © 2026 Shireen Jahn Kassim and Illyani Ibrahim.

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