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A History of Surabaya

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Introduction

Surabaya, perched on the northeastern coast of Java and overlooking the Madura Strait, is more than Indonesia's formidable second city. Its history is inextricably intertwined with the movements of kingdoms, the rise and fall of empires, the swells of commerce, and the unyielding spirit of its people. Over more than a millennium, Surabaya has grown from an ancient riverside settlement into a vital southeastern Asian metropolis, carrying with it tales of power, perseverance, and transformation.

The etymology of Surabaya itself—derived from “sura” (shark or brave) and “baya” (crocodile or danger)—is emblematic of the city's capacity to face adversity with valor. Legends and historical milestones alike have infused the city with layers of meaning: from foundational battles against foreign invaders to legendary duels between mythical creatures representing eternal struggle and resilience. These threads run alongside written records and archaeological finds, anchoring Surabaya in the collective memory of Java and the broader archipelago.

As a port and trading center, Surabaya has long acted as a crossroads connecting inner Java with the Indian Ocean and Spice Islands, helping shape regional economies and social landscapes for centuries. The currents of trade brought not only goods, but also new ideas, faiths, and cultural influences, fostering a dynamic, multicultural population that is still visible today in its neighborhoods, marketplaces, and festivals.

Colonial encounters radically transformed Surabaya, as the city was drawn deeper into global networks of power and commerce. Under Dutch rule, it emerged as a major administrative and industrial hub, remarkable for its infrastructure, naval facilities, and the bustling diversity that defined its streets. These changes, however, set the stage for new struggles—both for the city's dignity and the nation's independence—culminating in Surabaya's legendary defense during the Indonesian Revolution. The sacrifices made here in 1945 became a defining symbol for the entire nation, earning the city its title as “Kota Pahlawan,” or “City of Heroes.”

The decades following independence brought rapid growth, economic diversification, and renewed urban expansion. Today, Surabaya stands not only as a testament to perseverance and adaptation but as a beacon for Indonesia's future: a vibrant center of industry, innovation, and cultural heritage. Its journey, from Hujung Galuh to the thriving metropolis of the present, illustrates the enduring importance of place, memory, and community.

This book traces the long and fascinating history of Surabaya, from its earliest days to its current role as a leading city in Southeast Asia. By weaving together the political,

economic, social, and cultural threads that have shaped its past and present, we seek to illuminate Surabaya's singular path—and offer deeper insight into the broader story of Indonesia itself.

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CHAPTER ONE: Ancient Java and the Crucible of the Brantas Delta

Before the bustling port, before the clash of empires that would forge its name, the land that would become Surabaya was simply a part of ancient Java, a verdant island crisscrossed by mighty rivers and embraced by warm seas. For centuries, sophisticated kingdoms had risen and fallen across the island, their power often rooted in their control of fertile rice lands and strategic riverine or coastal trading points. East Java, in particular, with its volcanic peaks providing rich soil and its complex river systems emptying into the Madura Strait, was a crucible where culture, power, and commerce intertwined long before any city named Surabaya appeared on the map.

Life in this ancient world revolved around the rhythm of the seasons and the flow of water. The Brantas River, one of Java's largest, snaked its way from the highlands down to the northeastern coast, branching into a delta before meeting the sea. This delta region, a mix of fertile plains, mangroves, and shifting waterways, was a natural magnet for human settlement. It offered sustenance through fishing and agriculture, and crucially, provided access to the vital maritime trade routes that connected Java to other islands in the archipelago and beyond.

Early Javanese kingdoms, such as the Mataram Kingdom (which later shifted its power base eastward, becoming known as Medang Kamulan), understood the strategic value of controlling these river mouths and coastal areas. Their wealth and influence were built not just on agricultural surplus from the interior but also on participation in the burgeoning regional trade networks. Spices, forest products, and other valuable commodities flowed down the rivers from the interior, destined for waiting ships that would carry them across the Nusantara archipelago and onwards towards distant lands like China and India.

The centuries leading up to the first millennium AD saw significant political and cultural developments in Java. Hinduism and Buddhism, arriving through these same trade routes, profoundly influenced the island's spiritual and political landscape. Grand temple complexes were erected, reflecting the power and piety of the rulers, and inscriptions etched onto stone or copper plates recorded important events, decrees, and the establishment of protected areas or trading posts. These scattered records provide tantalizing glimpses into the lives and locations of early Javanese communities.

As kingdoms like Medang Kamulan flourished and eventually underwent transformations and shifts in location within East Java, the importance of the Brantas

River delta remained constant. While specific power centers might move inland or along different river branches, the delta region, with its multiple outlets to the sea, represented potential access to wealth and control. It was a complex environment, a network of rivers, streams, and islands, making it a challenging but rewarding area for settlement and navigation.

Imagine the scene a thousand years ago: small communities of people, perhaps fishermen, farmers, and traders, navigating the delta's waterways in their outrigger canoes. They would have been acutely aware of the river's moods - its floods during the rainy season, its lower levels during the dry, and the constant change as sediment reshaped the landscape. Survival depended on a deep understanding of this dynamic environment and the ability to work with its forces, harnessing its potential for sustenance and connectivity.

These early inhabitants were likely subjects of whatever larger kingdom held sway in East Java at the time. Their lives, though locally focused, were indirectly tied to the broader political currents flowing through the region. The rise of a powerful king in the interior, or the arrival of foreign traders seeking specific goods, would have sent ripples through the delta communities, influencing their safety, prosperity, and daily routines.

The precise names these early peoples used for their settlements in the delta are largely lost to time or recorded in inscriptions that are still being deciphered. What is clear, however, is that human activity in the Brantas delta was not a late development. It was an area with a long history of habitation, adaptation, and connection to the wider Javanese world, predating the more famous kingdoms and events that would later define the region and lead to the emergence of a place eventually known as Surabaya.

The strategic advantage of the delta was twofold: it offered a gateway from the interior heartlands of Java to the sea, and it provided a sheltered location along the northern coast, relatively protected from the larger waves of the Indian Ocean but easily accessible from the Java Sea trade routes. This made it an ideal spot for goods to be transferred between river boats and seafaring vessels, a vital node in the ancient supply chain.

The political landscape of East Java in the centuries leading up to the 10th and 11th centuries was often fluid. Power struggles between rival families or branches of royal dynasties could lead to shifts in capitals and spheres of influence. This dynamic environment meant that control over key areas like the Brantas delta was a recurring theme in the region's history, though the specific players and the extent of their control varied over time.

While we might not have detailed city plans or population counts from this early

period, archaeological findings and references in later inscriptions suggest a growing complexity in settlements along the major rivers and coast. Docks, warehouses, and marketplaces would have gradually emerged at suitable locations, serving the needs of both local communities and visiting traders. These were the embryonic forms of the urban centers that would one day dominate the Javanese economy.

The people living in the delta would have possessed a rich oral tradition, passing down knowledge of the waterways, the fertile fishing grounds, and the history of their communities. Myths and legends, perhaps involving powerful creatures of the river and sea, would have explained the natural world and reinforced cultural values. These stories, though often unrecorded in formal histories, formed the bedrock of local identity in the region.

The 10th century marked a significant period in East Javanese history, characterized by the reign of figures like King Mpu Sindok, who is credited with moving the center of the Mataram Kingdom eastward to Java. This shift placed the Brantas delta region firmly within the core territory of a major Javanese kingdom, increasing its political and economic significance. While Mpu Sindok's main capital was likely further inland, the need to connect with the outside world ensured that the coastal and delta areas remained vital.

The increasing sophistication of Javanese society during this era, marked by advancements in irrigation, agriculture, and administration, would have also contributed to the potential for growth in areas like the Brantas delta. A stable and prosperous interior population provided both the goods for export and a market for imported items, driving the need for efficient ports and trading centers.

Thus, the stage was set. By the early second millennium, the Brantas delta was not an empty wilderness but a region with a history of human settlement, located in a strategically vital area within a dynamic and increasingly powerful Javanese world. It was a place where the river met the sea, where interior produce met maritime trade, and where the foundations were being laid for the eventual emergence of a major urban center. The specific events and kingdoms that would directly lead to the establishment and naming of Surabaya were yet to unfold, but the geographical and historical preconditions were firmly in place, rooted deeply in the ancient soil and flowing waters of East Java.

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