The expedition departed from the court of Majapahit, during the day of the full moon on 8 September 1359. The royal caravan drove in ox-carts, with dozens or possibly hundreds of followers on foot; together they covered over 950 kilometres in two months.

R.A. Kern’s overlook but nearly complete map of Hayam Wuruk’s journey (Kern 1902) provided the basic data for our venture. Consultation of 500 Dutch and Indonesian small-scale topographic sheets of the area verified and appended Kern’s work. Sixty per cent of the two hundred place names and topographical descriptions mentioned by Prapanca could be identified from maps only.

We determined a geodetical datum for Java and converted geographical coordinates from Dutch topographical maps (1915-1942) into the current standard. Finally, we entered all the geographical coordinates into a GPS satellite navigation system. A few highlights of our findings are sketched on the map below with references to Prapanca’s text Desawarnana (DW; Brandes 1902).

Places not found on the maps

A number of Prapanca’s toponyms could only be traced in the field. A place called Daleman was identified by Kern does not appear on any of the detailed maps (DW 32.1). With the help of local farmers we found Daleman – a small running spring amidst rice fields – along the road between Besuki and Binor. We also told that an ancient stone statue of a godess, said to include an offering, stood on the shore, referred to them by still existing village of Bwate Ranten pavilion in 2004, suggesting that the place may be of archaeological importance.

The village of Balerah, which was passed by the royal party to the east of the town of Pasuruan, also does not appear on our topographic sheets (DW 21.1). Neighbouring villagers, however, recognized the name and directed us to a tiny five-house settlement on one hectare amidst irrigated rice fields. After 650 years, the inhabitants still refer to the hamlet as Balerah.

Prapanca describes topographical features visible in the Javanese landscape to this day, referring to them by still familiar Javanese terms. For example, for after leaving the still-existing village of Renes, the caravan passed through a forest referred to as Jati Gumelar or ‘spread tree fields’ (DW 23.5). The Dutch topographic maps show no details of vegetation that locate the forest near the village of Tasnan which my Javanese travel companions recognized as jati ‘tree’.

Prapanca also distinguishes irrigated rice-fields (swahw) and non-irrigated fields (tirgal) which are also marked on maps. We were able to identify the road that Hayam Wuruk took to the city of Singhasari from the poet’s reference to tirgal (DW 38.1). Prapanca’s terminology may include both toponyms and geographical descriptions, and some distinctions can only be verified in the field. For example, Pakalan is the name of a river, but the Old Javanese word pakalan also denotes a ‘river-bed’. As the riverbed is itself jumbled with rocks, the royal party must have travelled along the road following the river of Pakelen (Robson 1985:115).

A second example: the Javanese understanding of the word janggur is more elaborate than just ‘rainire’. My Javanese companions showed me that it may also refer to a river running through a ravine but crossed by a bridge. Following Kern’s map, we passed over modern bridges spanning impressive ravines. The royal party must have traversed the four jangur daun or ‘deep ravines’ of the river of Sapepan (Robson 1951:112). Such crossings would have required bridges spanning 50 meters strong enough to carry ox-carts. Another such ravine is Bwate Ranten which literally means ‘mouldered and in tatters’ (DW 22.1). We identified it as the bridge crossing the river of Sawaran near the village of Jumapel, literally ‘North of the ravine’. Today, piles support the concrete bridge. There is no other road that the caravan could have taken, and descending the steep ravine is impossible. Thus, in 1359, the wooden or bamboo bridge may have been in a mouldering state but was probably entirely in tatters. Such bridges challenge our archaeological imagination. Close to this location, Prapanca’s topographical reference passageuwan or ‘area of irrigated rice fields’ suddenly appeared before us (DW 22.5). On both sides of the descending road that leads from the ravine of Bwate Running, sawaran extended into the plains as far as the eye could see.

Adjacent to the river which the King dismounted on the shore, Absorbed in looking at the rocks engulfed by waves with showers of spray resembling rain.

The unusual term bhat orbac, literally meaning ‘chopped-off’, appears on one of our Dutch topographic maps as the name of the village Gunung Bacok. We found it near a stone quarry to which several families of the village have long held the male hereditary right of exploration. The excavated boulders are sold as house foundations, offering an obvious explanation for the etymology of the village name. In the 14th century, there was a hill with a knau bacok ‘chopped-off peak’. Today, after 650 years of excavating, it has been reduced into a gunung gacok ‘chopped-off hill’. From here, it is eight kilometres to the white beaches at the cape of Tanjung Papuma, nowadays a small tourist resort. The rocks jutting up close to the beach remain as Hayam Wuruk’s hermits have seen them (see photograph).

Prapanca’s (DW 32-33) lyrical description of the Siwaite forest hermitage of Sagara is aptly expressed in the following excerpts from Robson’s translation (1951:45-47). My additional interpretations are in brackets: [ ]

When the King departed to go on, it was the forest hermitage of Sagara that he headed for...

It was splendid and extraordinary, in the midst of the wooded mountains, its layout bewilderingly beautiful...

The bhat ranten pavilion bore several paintings of stories and had a base of stone, polished and high; Flowers of the nagakusuma tree lay thick in the yard, the [shoet-jedoj] (tira) of which was [were] lined with a wall...

And all the hermits and especially the nave, young and old, were virtuous and close...

The young and pretty hermit-girls remained behind pining ever one.

The toponym Sagara is geographically associated with the area around Ranu Segaran – literally Lake of Sagara. The region comprises a total of five crater lakes with a diameter of 750 meters in a remote and wooded area that retains its poetic beauty. The yard’s wall was totally stood on the shore (tira) of a lake. Zoetmulder (1972:190) has suggested that rhe cistern might be the Old Javanese high speech form of the word ranu ‘lake’. Therefore, in combination with the current toponym ‘lake of Sagara’ and the reference to shore (tira), the Old Javanese bhat ranten probably denotes a ‘lake-pavilion’. Furthermore, the female hermits must have had access to water for drinking and sanitation purposes. Of the five lakes, we found out from villagers that only the water of the lake of Ranu Segaran is potable. Therefore, the geographical location of the hermitage may be narrowed down to the lake shore of Ranu Segaran itself. As we should interpret Prapanca’s language within the context and dimensions of traditional Javanese and Balinese architecture, the bhat ranten pavilion was likely an open verandah consisting of bamboo and wood on a base of stones with a palm-fitted roof. The hypothesis is finally supported by the existence of several big black stones worked by human hands on the southern shore of Ranu Segaran, in front of a terraced garden; this site may well indicate the location of the bhat ranten.

At the end of the journey, the royal caravan headed for the court of Majapahit. Prapanca, however, turned off for Rabut Tugu to where his own family lived in pahyungon, ‘the area of worship’ (DW 35.3). Kern’s identification of Rabut Tugu with the village of Sumbarring appears well founded. A farmer of the settlement of Sumbarring showed us a stone pillar on a venerated spot amidst the maize fields. Locals refer to the location as Prapanca’s Tugu or ‘sacred land with pillar’, which is synonymous with Rabut Tugu. We left the pillar untouched for the archaeologists.

Much remains to be done on the geographical and archaeological aspects of Hayam Wuruk’s journey. With all Dutch cartographic material of Java now freely available on the website of the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam (www.kit.nl), and because GPS technology is increasingly affordable, further fieldwork is within easy reach. Finally, archaeological research – and funding – is urgent to prevent the reduction of the subject to geographic history.

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