

# The Dynamism of Classical Nusantara Historiography

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## ABSTRACT

Indonesian historiography has entered a new era. Narratives of the past, set within the spatial boundaries of Indonesia, have undergone significant transformations over time. Temporal reconstructions extend back to ancient or classical periods, eras marked by the rise and fall of kingdoms across the archipelago. This study critically examines how well classical Nusantara historiography is understood and appreciated by contemporary Indonesian society. The methodology employed in this article is literature review, drawing on historical sources to explore interpretations and narratives of the classical Nusantara era that can be reconstructed and understood by present-day readers. It is essential for Indonesians to develop a more critical understanding of classical historiography, which relies heavily on scarce sources and the interpretive creativity of its authors. Today, studies on the classical period with various themes are flourishing like mushrooms in the rainy season. This dynamic historical writing represents a rich intellectual heritage. The diversity of perspectives on the classical era opens a fascinating space for discussion, as this exotic land straddling the equator has cultivated a society with a romantic spirit, evoking a vibrant and illustrious image of the past.

**Keywords:** Historiography, Dynamic, Classical, Archipelago

## INTRODUCTION

Who hasn't heard of Borobudur and Prambanan? Who isn't familiar with Sriwijaya and Majapahit? Contemporary Indonesians recognize Borobudur and Prambanan as historical relics in the form of temple structures. Beyond this, the public might be less familiar with the distinct integration of Buddhism seen in Borobudur's architecture, reliefs, and statues, which reflects a synthesis of Mahayana and Tantrayana teachings (Magetsari, 2016: 85-110). Sriwijaya and Majapahit, meanwhile, are known as kingdoms that once existed and wielded influence over parts of the Nusantara archipelago. How, then, do Indonesians acquire this knowledge? The answer is that the majority of Indonesians are consumers of historiography. For instance, the works of Wolters, O.W. (2017: 1-18) and Coedes, et al. (2023: 1-44) discuss the debates and existence of Sriwijaya as a political power, while Muljana, S. (2005: 187-268) and Munandar, A.A. (2008: 1-32) narrate the empire of Majapahit. They engage with historical works produced by researchers, writers, and historians who successfully reconstruct past events in their narratives. For most Indonesians, history is introduced either by parents or, more commonly, through formal education. School serves as the primary medium for Indonesian children to learn about their nation's past. Long before the establishment of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, this equatorial region was known by various names, one of which was Nusantara.

Let us agree upon the temporal and spatial scope of this article, focusing on the classical era in Nusantara. This period spans from the discovery of ancient life sources—such as inscriptions, temples, and relics indicating an advanced culture—up until the establishment of the Demak Kingdom. Historians have generally agreed to label this era as the Hindu-Buddhist period. Using a religious term to define such a lengthy historical timeframe is indeed a well-considered choice. The cultural patterns and monarchical systems of the time were closely associated with, or readily identifiable with, particular religious traditions. According to the 1957 Historical Seminar Report, later published in book form (2017: 187-276), historian Sartono Kartodirdjo referred to this era as the post-prehistoric period and pre-modern age. The ancient era itself is divided into three categories: the earliest kingdoms, the Sriwijaya period, and the Majapahit period. Indonesians are well aware that the following period represents the Islamic era, which began to take a central role in Indonesian historiography.

The formalization of historical periods is one of the outcomes of Indonesian historiography. The strategy of naming chronological phases in history aims to simplify comprehension for Indonesians across generations. The timeline of Indonesian history is generally divided into the prehistoric period, the Hindu-Buddhist period, the Islamic period, the Colonial period, the Independence period, the National Revolution, and the Reform period. For academics, especially those actively engaged in the field of history, each era can be viewed as considerably more complex. Indonesian archaeology is divided into three specializations based on these periods: prehistoric, classical, and Islamic (Faizaliskandiar in Sedyawati, Pojoh, and Rahardjo, 1990: 10-11). The classical period itself can be further categorized according to the kingdoms that existed within specific timeframes. Within each kingdom, there were various dynasties and rulers who governed at different times (Hannigan, 2015: 37-59). Even the cultures developed and fostered by each king could vary significantly from one to another.

The historiography of Nusantara's classical era leaves behind both a legacy of grandeur and fragility. Various theories have been developed to facilitate explanations of this period, one marked by limited sources, which have since become mainstream in Indonesian historiography. New discoveries by researchers in archaeology, philology, paleontology, and history occasionally challenge but rarely displace the grand, monumental narratives of the classical period. The creativity and innovative spirit of the current generation are essential for advancing these fields. Emerging Indonesian researchers are expected to bring fresh perspectives to the writing of their nation's history, utilizing both old and newly unearthed historical sources. These sources may come from excavations at specific sites or from previously overlooked archaeological reports housed in libraries. Rather than simply expanding upon or following the dominant trends in classical historiography, which often generalize the era as one of pure glory, future researchers can develop alternative perspectives for viewing this classical period.

The glorification of the Hindu-Buddhist era in Nusantara, with all its cultural masterpieces, invites critical examination. It is important to remember that historiography is inherently influenced by the subjectivity of its authors. Historiographers freely construct narratives for specific purposes based on the sources available to them. Similarly, the figures of Mpu and royal scribes during the Hindu-Buddhist period were tasked with recording the history of their kingdoms according to the desires and commands of their rulers, using media such as stone, palm leaves, and other materials. In this context, history served as a medium for glorifying power and instilling pride in future generations. These narratives provided a foundation of knowledge about the past, urging future generations to recognize that their homeland was once the seat of a great civilization, one that advanced scientific knowledge and produced remarkable cultural achievements. This narrative continues into the period of European arrival, in which Europeans are often portrayed as antagonists in Indonesian national historiography. Purwanto (2006: 11) reminds us that, theoretically and philosophically, national historiography is inseparable from the need to establish a national identity through the lens of historical narrative.

However, if we return to the idealism of studying history as a discipline, we observe a transformation in historiographical narratives over time. As a field of study, history provides a framework for explaining events of the past. Although it is inevitably influenced by the subjectivity of its authors, Indonesian historiography has evolved dynamically. Historians and researchers, through contemplation and scholarly discourse, introduce specific interpretive frameworks to understand historical sources. As researchers, historians are expected to possess a foundational knowledge base to present their findings comprehensively. Writers are sometimes also confronted with changing market demands, closely linked to ideological, psychological, and economic factors. Despite these dynamics, historians strive to create their work for the advancement of knowledge, as long as it adheres to methodological principles. Sedyawati (2007: 9) emphasizes that each researcher holds the authority to choose theories, approaches, and methods that are appropriate to their specific topic of study.

There is no doubt that digital technology provides a platform to showcase the work of academics. Indonesians can easily access research journals online to stay updated on the latest studies and developments on historical topics. Often, these studies offer alternative perspectives on events that have previously been explored. The novelty of such research is crucial in demonstrating the dynamic nature of studies on Nusantara's classical period. Beyond research journals, the general public, eager for information, is presented with unique and engaging historical content on social media platforms. Academics are increasingly turning to social media to

fulfill their academic responsibility to inform the public. They analyze the extent to which the public seeks information on historical topics and make specific adaptations to ensure that knowledge is accessible and easily understood by the current generation.

This study employs a literature study method, drawing data from previous studies and research. This system is a structured set of methods designed for collecting, inputting, processing, and storing data, as well as for storing, managing, controlling, and presenting information. This system is organized in such a way that enables an organization to achieve its established objectives (Agus, A.I, et al, 2023: 39-49). The literature gathered is all relevant to the history and culture of society, specifically during the classical Nusantara period. Primary sources, such as *babad* (chronicles) and *kakawin* (poetic works), are also utilized to understand the most fundamental and concrete sources. Although only a few primary sources are referenced without in-depth analysis due to language proficiency limitations, secondary sources are extensively used to provide a comprehensive explanation. Books and scholarly articles related to the temporal research of the classical period and historical methodology serve as references to present the dynamic historiography narrative of the classical Nusantara era.

Furthermore, this article is written to gain a renewed understanding of the dynamism of Indonesia's classical historiography and its reconstruction in the present day. The discussions, concepts, and elements of the classical period presented here aim to inspire the socio-cultural aspects of Indonesian society. The article examines the extent to which society can absorb or accept historical information on the classical Nusantara era, with the goal of encouraging individuals to think more critically and rely on intellectual reasoning (using concrete research methods and methodologies). Additionally, this article seeks to reflect upon and equip society with a more discerning perspective in evaluating representations of the classical Nusantara period in the digital age. This dynamic classical historiography is intended to help shape the nation's true identity, encouraging all members of society to imagine this complex era comprehensively and objectively. This approach is designed to prevent the recurring issue of historical generalizations highlighted by Gottschalk (1983: 186). Ultimately, our collective hope lies in fostering awareness to preserve the cultural heritage of the classical period for the benefit of both current and future generations.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historiography is a product of the intellectual community, particularly those engaged in historical studies. Historical writing, which follows structured steps or guidelines, requires specific approaches to reconstruct historical narratives according to the theme under examination. Various historical sources are employed to establish a chronology of past events. Even classical period events necessitate a comprehensive reconstruction, despite the limitations of available historical sources. To date, society has largely been presented with political historiography for the classical era, where the achievements of past kings and figures have been highlighted to shape the identity of a great Indonesian nation. This perspective aligned with the needs of a young Indonesia, which required history to build its national identity. However, it is now essential to adopt a more critical foundational approach in reexamining the reconstruction of the classical period. The following provides the basic concepts for understanding and reinterpreting this era, renowned for its stories of grandeur and glory.

### Kings and Kingdoms

Revisiting the historiography of the classical Nusantara period inevitably brings to mind the existence and hegemony of ancient kingdoms. In simple terms, the monarchical system of that era presented the figure of the king as the ruler over territorial domains. As in the broader history of humanity, the king initially emerged as a strong individual wielding influence within his colony. With superior capabilities compared to others in the colony, the concept of a king evolved into that of a protector for his people. He organized the colony to fulfill basic economic needs and defended it against attacks from other groups. As this role advanced, the king established himself as the ruler of a specific territory with increasingly complex supporting elements. He oversaw various sectors, particularly in economic, political, and socio-cultural domains. Additionally, there existed a fundamental religious aspect that served as the backbone of the kingdom's governance. Toynbee (2014: 73) further notes that the role of rulers in the classical era was to administer communities with an urban nucleus more developed than the Neolithic village communities of earlier times.

The supporting elements of royal power in the classical period successfully gave rise to the concept of the *dewa-raja* (god-king). As a distinctive feature of the political system, a king asserted himself as the ruler of the world and the entire universe. In the case of the classical Nusantara, gods from Hindu teachings became central figures in shaping royal authority. The king was seen as the embodiment of a revered deity, idolized by his subjects. He was perceived as a divine figure possessing power and authority beyond that of ordinary humans. With this paradigm, the people submitted to the commands of the ruling king. In the *kakawin* Bharatayudha (canto VIII.2), Hariwangsa (canto XLII.3), and Bhomakawya (canto CVIII.8), the supreme deity is named as Vishnu. However, generally, Shiva is considered the highest of all gods. Shiva is often depicted as a formidable figure, as seen in Smaradahana (canto XIII.7-11), Ramayana (canto XXII.43-47), and Bharatayudha (canto XXIII.7).

We can interpret that the king, along with his cronies and relatives, formed a royal elite group. This group was seen as powerful and capable of administering the government during the classical period. The agrarian economic sector became the main foundation of the kingdom's administration, strengthening and expanding its hegemony over regions beyond the palace center. Fertile land and a tropical climate supported the creation of an agrarian ecosystem. The king, as ruler, claimed ownership of all lands within the kingdom and its conquered territories for use and exploitation. He, together with other elites, implemented a feudal system (Mulya, 2012: 32), which eventually led the classical Nusantara kingdoms to their golden age.

The feudal system here refers to the hierarchical structure of classical-era royal society, governed by a minority of elite nobles within a family-based hierarchy. This system also encompassed the distinct attitudes and lifestyles of the royal elites within the kingdom, which differed from those of the common people. The royal elite, led by the king—likely along with his chief minister—organized the economy within the kingdom's territories. Regions beyond the central seat of power also had their own local elites, who served as subordinates or extensions of the king's authority. These outer regions were often brought under control through conquest or by means of seemingly imbalanced agreements. The king, however, aimed to expand his sphere of influence. He could issue threats of war against territories that rebelled or disregarded royal regulations, such as refusing to pay tribute at designated times. Concerning laws and governance, Machiavelli (2015: 4-5) notes that a ruler is cautious in inspiring loyalty among his people, especially the kingdom's soldiers, to ensure unwavering allegiance to the king. In this way, the king could leverage that loyalty to mobilize for battle.

This system could function smoothly if the people accepted their status as commoners who dutifully fulfilled obligations to the king with sincerity and loyalty. Mentally and spiritually, the populace was expected to internalize the palace-sanctioned paradigm. Education became the primary foundation supporting the continuity of the *dewa-raja* concept. The education that emerged during the classical era focused on reinforcing the sustainability of such a system. Religious knowledge regarding deities, rituals, and ceremonial offerings became daily activities alongside fulfilling one's duties as a subject. The people were granted certain rights, including housing and protection, although these rights, when viewed through a modern lens, may seem limited. In the classical period, kings frequently required their subjects to work diligently to meet the palace's primary needs. They were also occasionally tasked with constructing public facilities, palaces, and even religious structures for worshipping deities. As Coedes (2015: 133-134) recounts, Maharaja Panangkaran, at the request of his spiritual teachers, built a shrine dedicated to the Buddhist goddess Tara and granted the village of Kalasan to support it.

Gradually, the *dewa-raja* concept shaped the image of a kingdom rooted in religious teachings. A king could embody the representation of a chosen deity, adopting the deity's traits and characteristics to reinforce his image before his subjects. Although projecting divine qualities, one might borrow the philosophical expression of Ankersmit (1987: 48) that humans are inherently self-interested, including the king himself. Like any mortal, the king is not eternal; he will leave the earthly realm, passing his authority to the next generation. Such transitions mark a period of change for the kingdom, with the new ruler setting the direction for the legacy of his predecessors. Classical historiography often narrates how kingdoms gradually declined due to internal strife, defeats in battles with other kingdoms, or natural disasters. This cycle reflects the broader pattern of civilization, which inevitably undergoes regeneration. In brief, a kingdom is created, grows and flourishes, reaches its zenith, and ultimately faces its decline.



Our understanding of kingship and the kingdom with a religious foundation stems largely from identified artifacts that reflect certain religious teachings. Classical historiography further reinforces the notion that kingdoms were closely tied to specific beliefs and faiths. The king, as the central figure of his kingdom, shaped the way of life within it, embodying a political elite whose image was legitimized by religious elements. Toynbee (2014: 73) emphasizes that the authority of the ruler was supported by supernatural sanction. However, the historical sources depicting the classical period also open the door to alternative perspectives. By aligning with the spirit of the times and utilizing available literature and observations, we can explore aspects of the classical era beyond religious elements. This approach allows us to analyze the mindset of society beyond the royal elite, assessing to what extent the people could drive the economy for the kingdom's sustainability.

The classical era of Nusantara can be viewed as far more complex than previous periods. Colonies had developed the capacity to create high cultures. Several theories support the notion that classical culture initially emerged through the clash of civilizations. The concepts of influence and being influenced are closely tied to this period. Huntington (2017: 46) notes that scholars generally agree on the significance of major civilizations that have developed throughout history. At that time, the cultural beacon was the Indian subcontinent, with its advanced culture, as evidenced by historical chronology and similarities in cultural artifacts. Yet, does this mean that our society was merely a consumer of culture? It is worth debating that the classical culture of Nusantara also achieved a substantial level of development, as evidenced by its historical remnants.

### **Artifacts as Historical Sources**

The classical period holds a wealth of remarkable artifacts, ranging from small beads to grand, complex temple structures. These works, identified as existing in the classical era, serve as historical evidence and as foundational data for constructing historiographical narratives. Material sources are essential in uncovering events from the classical period, as these artifacts often contain ancient inscriptions. Many inscriptions, written in Sanskrit, are found on the surfaces of stone stelae. Boechari (2018: 4) describes inscriptions as historical sources from the past, carved on stone or metal, mostly issued by ruling kings since the 5th century. Stone inscriptions provide early evidence of a cultured existence in the past. Initially, the visible symbols on these stones appeared as unidentified codes and symbols. Through research and advances in knowledge, these symbols were eventually deciphered. Beyond merely recognizing Sanskrit or Old Javanese characters from the past, researchers have deepened their understanding of these inscriptions. In addition to stone inscriptions, the reliefs on ruins within temple complexes provide fundamental evidence that early civilizations were capable of creating a high culture. Today, classical-era artifacts stand as some of the most valuable historical sources.

The inscriptions found throughout the Nusantara region clearly indicate that the culture of writing had been adopted in this land. The writing on these inscriptions signifies an advanced civilization. This form of written historical source contains implicit meanings that can be continually reinterpreted by researchers. As Boechari (2018: 21) noted, sections of these inscriptions indirectly reveal information about trade activities and craft enterprises. Questions such as why andesite stone was chosen to carve Sanskrit characters, why royal lineages are recounted, why kings granted honors to others, why rituals are narrated, and why verses are included have been partially answered by researchers. However, in the future, it is entirely possible that scientific knowledge will evolve, offering new perspectives that may reinterpret these questions. Nevertheless, debate will always circulate in the academic realm, with various theories and methodologies adding to the richness and diversity of our knowledge.

Another form of evidence is found in statues depicting human figures or combinations of human and animal forms, which are often believed to represent mythical beings. Advances in knowledge have enabled us to identify these discovered statues. Most represent deities (except for Buddha statues) once revered and worshiped by people in the classical era. Statues that remain unidentified are sometimes interpreted as representing kings who ruled in the past. Each statue possesses distinct characteristics and postures. Based on features such as appearance, accessories, weapons, and body positions, one can identify certain statues as representations of specific deities. Stutterheim W.F. (1956: 105-146) mentions that statues commonly found in temple complexes have also been identified as figures from Javanese mythology, like Bima. Although these statues primarily depict deities and certain mythological figures, future researchers may interpret the behaviors

of the communities who worshiped them during the classical era. The deities worshiped often symbolized the daily activities of their communities. For example, Dewi Sri was venerated by farmers, who believed that honoring her would bring blessings of fertility to their fields, ensuring a bountiful harvest.

In addition to stone statues, bronze sculptures, ceramic utensils, and beads have also been uncovered. These artifacts have been excavated by archaeologists or discovered by locals and subsequently reported to authorities. With the availability of these material artifacts, researchers first investigate the production origins of these relics. When findings are identified as not being locally produced within the Nusantara region, additional sources are required to establish connections. This foundational knowledge is further reinforced with new discoveries in subsequent periods. For instance, studies of Mainland Southeast Asian and Chinese cultures have revealed that China was a major producer of ceramic wares. Rangkuti (2001: 58) notes that Chinese ceramics are the most frequently found at historical sites across Indonesia, from the Hindu-Buddhist period (8th–14th centuries) to the Islamic era (15th–16th centuries).

We can imagine a king commanding royal artisans and palace sculptors to create reliefs that adorn the temple walls. Creating such reliefs during the classical period would indeed have sparked discussions for generations to come. Constructing a complex structure of such vastness and intricacy was no simple matter. A temple site project demanded meticulous planning. As Soekmono (2017: 10) indicates, the temple designer was no ordinary individual; they had to be from the Brahman class. This large-scale structure required special consideration of the resources available to the kingdom. Such a royal endeavor would undoubtedly take considerable time. Later scholars have been able to identify the functions of these temples, whether as tombs or sanctuaries (Soekmono, 2017: 1-33, 293-333).

What foundation did artists rely on to craft such intricate reliefs? Is there a storyline within the reliefs at each level of the temple walls? In which direction should these relief narratives be understood? What elements are embedded within these reliefs? Such questions, though simple, have been answered based on interpretations by researchers over time. Magetsari (2016: 114-118) notes that archaeologists have identified the stories carved into the reliefs of Borobudur Temple. Despite the narratives that have been constructed, contemporary researchers can still analyze or even reconstruct these past findings. With potentially diverse perspectives and academic backgrounds, new interpretations may emerge, as these historical sources remain standing, accessible, and open to further study.

Other sources, such as oral script characters written on palm leaf manuscripts, particularly from the Majapahit era (13th to 15th century), can still be found. Unlike epigraphic sources, these manuscripts endured after the fall of Majapahit and were hurriedly transported to Bali, as noted by Acri (2022: 5). Although incomplete, it appears that these manuscripts have been preserved through duplication, ensuring the continuity of their contents. Munandar (2015) highlights that the preserved palm leaf manuscript, *Asta Kosala-Kosali*, is still accessible today. *Asta Kosala-Kosali* contains guidelines for designing and restoring architectural structures. These historical sources, previously mentioned, are products of excavation and in-country research.

In addition to domestic sources, researchers can utilize archival collections from abroad. Foreign archives require specialized techniques, such as knowledge of foreign languages and their classical literature. Records in the form of royal reports and travel accounts written by foreigners can offer alternative perspectives or serve as comparative references in understanding the situation in the Nusantara region. Edi Triharyantoro, in the Sixth Archaeological Scientific Meeting (1992: 80), mentions that foreign cultural materials (containing knowledge about conditions in Nusantara) need to be selectively examined to contribute constructive ideas for advancing national culture. Archives written and produced by foreign societies outside Nusantara bear evidence of the cultural sophistication of a nation.

It is evident that the tradition of documenting and reporting by Chinese emperors and merchants was highly structured. Wells (2016: 75-88) explains that the Chinese empire had engaged in trade and political cooperation with foreign states during the classical period. Some notable travel records from Chinese explorers include The Geographical Record of the Han Dynasty (202 BCE – 221 CE), *The Literature of the Song Dynasty* (970 CE – 1127 CE), and The Voyages of Zheng He from the Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644 CE). European travel records, such as Odorico Mattiuzzi's account (1318-1330) and Tome Pires' *Suma Oriental*

(1513), also provide valuable sources for historical writing. However, these foreign sources require rigorous source criticism. One must consider whether the traveler was a partner or an adversary during their stay in Nusantara. Additionally, by understanding the traveler's background, we can better interpret the ideas and biases in their writings about Nusantara.

The fields of archaeology and philology have made significant contributions to the study of classical history in Nusantara. Through excavation techniques and expertise in ancient languages, these fields allow modern society to access and understand the substance of historical sources. Such discoveries provide a foundation for subsequent researchers to embark on their studies, crafting narratives based on empiricism and their scholarly expertise. Researchers are encouraged to apply relevant and focused theories in their analysis. As Magetsari (2016: 262-363) emphasizes, the purpose of theory in archaeological research is to classify, explain, and comprehend. This theoretical approach enables researchers not only to categorize artifacts and texts but also to provide deeper interpretations, connecting historical findings with the cultural and social fabric of classical Nusantara society. By grounding their work in systematic methodologies, researchers contribute to a dynamic and evolving historiography, enriching our understanding of the past.

The people of today owe a debt of gratitude to the travel accounts and reports created by foreign travelers and rulers of the classical era, which have preserved a wealth of historical knowledge to the present day. However, a sense of paranoia may arise regarding the authenticity of certain inscriptions from classical Nusantara. Questions linger—were the inscriptions we have today potentially "replacement" inscriptions made to alter or erase the content of original records? Imagine that a former ruler had created an inscription glorifying his reign, only for it to be destroyed and rewritten under a successor's rule. This is not an entirely unfounded question, as the historiography of classical Nusantara, rich with accounts of upheaval, battles, and political intrigue, could indeed lead one to speculate in this direction. Nevertheless, as academics, it is essential to refrain from overindulgent speculation. Any tangible cultural artifacts that remain observable and identifiable should be regarded as the actual sources through which we examine their respective eras. Speculations unsupported by evidence risk clouding our understanding. The integrity of historical study lies in interpreting the material that is verifiable and present, serving as a foundation for responsible scholarship.

A fundamental concept that can be proposed here is that classical society was conscious of creating a legacy for future generations. In particular, the elite likely commissioned the recording of achievements, genealogies, royal rituals, honors, and even the daily activities of the classical community through reliefs within temple complexes for this very purpose. They understood that stone was an ideal medium for conveying ideas, thoughts, or the spirit of their time. Thus, the classical era can be interpreted as a period of high culture, evidenced by its enduring artifacts that have withstood the test of time.

### **Dynamic Historiography of the Classical Period**

The Old Javanese script, written in Sanskrit and inscribed on stone surfaces, often narrates the achievements of the palace elite in relation to their kingdom. These inscriptions highlight the king's and the kingdom's accomplishments. Some inscriptions recount religious ceremonies, rituals, and honors granted to individuals, and these have also been successfully identified. The discovery of these primary sources initially provided valuable information for researchers and historiographers in Indonesia. The information about the greatness, glory, and existence of the kingdom was later dramatized into a glorification of the classical era, often presented subjectively. Such glorification served specific purposes, particularly during the colonial period. First, the greatness of the past was used to inspire a sense of independence among the indigenous people. Second, the narrative of heroism was employed as a foundation to restore faith in a figure who would save the indigenous people. Third, the masterpieces of the past were presented as evidence of cultural maturity, allowing them to be compared on equal terms with Western culture. Nonetheless, according to Poespoprodjo (1987: vii), subjectivity in historiography forms the basis for the objectivity of historical science. The richer the subjectivity of a historian, the higher the quality of objectivity in understanding the historical object.

After Indonesia gained independence and established itself with all the aspects of statehood, the historiography of classical era achievements was reconstructed with a nationalistic emphasis that continues to be preserved today. This subjectivity in historiography has taken an Indonesia-centric perspective. In essence, this grand narrative aims to shape the nation's identity. Indonesian historiography is intended to instill in the public an

awareness that Indonesia is a great nation, one that is civilized and highly cultured. However, has the mainstream narrative of classical Indonesian history been effectively embraced by the general public? The answer is yes, but with limitations. Society has accepted and adopted the classical era's nationalistic values, even though they may appear somewhat anachronistic. When narrating the history of the classical period, it would be wise to use the term "Indonesia" sparingly, acknowledging its limited applicability in this historical context.

The concept of "Indonesia" first emerged in the mid-19th century and was adopted as a notion of nationhood in the early 20th century. Munsyi (2005: 49) cites J.R. Logan, who in 1848 wrote "*Customs common to the hill tribes bordering Assam and those of the Indian archipelago,*" and Professor Adolf Bastian, who in 1884 popularized the term through his work "*Indonesia oder die insel des malayschen archipels,*" as likely the earliest instances of the term "Indonesia" being used. Applying the term "Indonesia" to the classical era brings a degree of ideological subjectivity due to the significant chronological gap. In the classical period, each kingdom had its own distinct identity and character. Regional or kingdom-centered loyalty was particularly strong, as kingdoms waged wars and expanded influence in the name of their own realms. Such details are often omitted in educational narratives, which avoid complicating the nationalistic storyline with these historical complexities.

Education serves as the primary medium for disseminating knowledge about the past, with history as its foundational subject. In schools, students are expected not only to learn Indonesian and global historiography but also to internalize the values embedded within it. In Indonesian historiography, national values are intentionally emphasized, including discussions on the classical period. The achievements of classical kingdoms are portrayed as the accomplishments of the Indonesian nation, resulting in a form of partial historiography. Purwanto (2006: xiii) describes partial historiography as being laden with political and ideological content that disregards diverse perspectives in the construction and interpretation of the past. Such a historiographical narrative certainly requires systematic evaluation. Given history's role as a source of illumination, the classical period, with its limited historical sources, inevitably contains dark areas that remain unexplored and in need of illumination. This presents a challenge for the next generation of researchers. These issues ultimately shape the work of academics in the field of history, underscoring the inherent dynamism of the discipline.

It is essential to first present an objective account of classical Indonesian history. Take, for instance, the kingdoms that once existed on the island of Java. One prominent example is the Majapahit Kingdom (13th century), which left ruins in the Trowulan area, Mojokerto, in East Java. Although Majapahit was situated inland, its maritime activities flourished, as evidenced by its connectivity with other regions and islands across the archipelago. However, the maritime network of the Indonesian archipelago had already been established well before Majapahit's rise, with evidence of trade and sea voyages by sailors from within and beyond the archipelago. The spice trade from the Indonesian archipelago and India successfully reached Europe in the medieval period (Turner, 2011: 103-150). Additionally, reliefs on the walls of Borobudur depict jung or large ships, indicating that the knowledge of sailing and navigation was present during, or even before, the construction of this Buddhist temple in the 9th century.

Figure 1. Reliëf Van Een Schip Op De Boroboedoer Bij Magelang



Source: digitalcollections.universiteitleiden.nl, 1939



The Majapahit era and the construction of Borobudur are separated by approximately four centuries. This gap allows us to speculate that, over those four centuries, connections likely expanded, shipbuilding technology advanced, and inter-regional trade flourished. Majapahit, as the ruling power in Java—a region with a notably strategic geographic position—played a central role in trade. As such, it is understandable why the *Nagara Krtagama* mentions regions such as Jambi, Palembang, Toba, Dharmasraya, Kandis, Kahwas, Minangkabau, Siak, Rokan, Tanjung, Kapuas, Katingan, Sampit, Kutalingga, Kuta Waringin, Sambas, Lawai, Madura, Bali, Sang Hyang Api, Bima, Seram, Makassar, Buton, Banggawi, Selayar, among others, as areas linked to Majapahit, primarily in terms of economic (trade) interests, with limited political influence. In addition to its influence over the Indonesian archipelago, Majapahit also maintained relations with mainland Southeast Asian kingdoms, including Siam, Ayutthaya, Darmanagari, Martaban, Cambodia, and Yawana (Riana, 2009: 36).

The *Nagara Krtagama* translation recounts stories of governance rooted in political interests. It explains that:

"Once the entire Nusantara was firmly under the command of His Majesty the King, all territories obediently paid tribute each month during auspicious times, due to His Majesty's efforts to advance the welfare of the kingdom. Poets and officials were regularly assigned to collect these tributes" (Riana, 2009: 105).

"Thus, all regions under the authority of Yawa Puri faithfully adhered to the King's commands and remained loyal. However, should any territory show signs of rebellion, it would be completely subdued by the navy, assisted by accomplished officers" (Riana, 2009: 110).

Sedyawati (2014: 175) notes that the *Nagara Krtagama* manuscript is a highly reliable literary work for reconstructing conditions in Majapahit, particularly during the reign of Hayam Wuruk. A direct interpretation of the *Nagara Krtagama* as a narrative clearly describes Majapahit's supremacy over the Nusantara archipelago. However, if we view its verses as descriptive explanations created by the ruling authority, external sources beyond the palace realm are required to verify the claims made within. Like any state, a kingdom serves as a space to establish regulations and fulfill objectives or ideals. Naturally, Majapahit's elites and intellectuals—who regarded themselves as superior due to their adoption of literacy and textual culture compared to the broader Nusantara population—would have devised plans to extend the kingdom's sphere of influence. This vision is epitomized in the legendary *Amukti Palapa/Sumpah Palapa* (Palapa Oath) associated with the renowned Prime Minister Gajah Mada.

Society should view such historiographical narratives as products of thought and ideas that warrant critical examination. Particularly, when historiography is often presented as a constructed expression of Indonesian identity, critical engagement becomes essential. Statements like "Gajah Mada was the first Indonesian to unite the Nusantara under the Palapa Oath" require reevaluation and could be reconstructed as, "Gajah Mada, the prime minister of Majapahit, declared the Palapa Oath to unify the Nusantara under Majapahit's banner." Was this oath ever fully realized? No source has yet definitively revealed the continuation, course, or ultimate success of this oath. Munandar, A.A. (2010: 47-62) comprehensively reconstructs the expansion led by the grand vizier of the Majapahit Kingdom, reinforcing the existence of the Palapa Oath as recorded in the *Pararaton*. Meanwhile, Muljana, S. (1983: 197) interprets the Palapa Oath as a declaration of Gajah Mada's leave from his duties as the grand vizier of Majapahit.

A straightforward example of Majapahit as the dominant narrative in Indonesian history should be more clearly examined. Historians and researchers need to present their sources rationally and logically, without excessive emphasis on particular values or ideologies. Such narratives are crucial for developing critical thinking skills in future generations, especially those in primary and secondary education (Latif, 2021: 146-161). History teachers, who are essential to school-based education, need a foundational understanding of both character formation and the dynamic nature of Indonesian historiography. By appreciating this dynamism, teachers can create adaptive, wise, and culturally enriched educational models. Indonesian education requires an openness, particularly in evaluating history as a subject. With such grounding, teachers can offer reasoned explanations for why classic Nusantara historiography, when viewed chronologically (by the oldest dated sites), does not show direct continuity or tends to leap between regions. This pattern is evident from Tarumanegara (Java), Kutai (Kalimantan), Medang (Java), Sriwijaya (Sumatra), Kadiri (Java), Singasari (Java), Majapahit (Java), and onward through Islamic and colonial periods.

Individual interpretations across different eras significantly shape the dynamism of historical research. Key factors influencing this include ideology, empiricism, and the writer's environment. The choice of historical methodology, which serves as a framework or scope for analysis, is equally crucial in shaping the narrative flow. Achieving purely objective historical explanations is nearly impossible, as subjectivity invariably influences Indonesian historiography. This subjectivity is also evident in excavation contexts. Magetsari (2016: 352-366) acknowledges the role of interpretation in evaluating newly discovered material sources. However, such interpretation is feasible only after the material data has been systematically organized according to various dimensions. Archaeology, as a discipline that consistently engages with the most direct material sources, plays an invaluable role in providing foundational narratives for more comprehensive studies. Archaeologists are therefore expected to supply truly novel material data that can serve as a basis for subsequent research by future generations.

The continually evolving study of the classical era has illuminated previously obscure areas of knowledge. Research in history, particularly within literature, art, and culture, has progressed significantly over the past few decades. Emphasis on socio-cultural and economic analysis has established a multidisciplinary foundation for historical research. Kartodirdjo (2014: 11-37) discusses the transformation of historiography in Indonesia since the colonial period, enriching our understanding of the classical era. Although much of the existing framework centers around the grandeur of kingdoms, specific focus and defined research scopes are essential to uncovering the micro-level events of the classical period. Research on royal infrastructure, such as canals, ponds, fortifications, and gardens, has been scientifically published. Rather than simply supporting previous mainstream historiographical narratives, these new studies provide a continuous basis for reconstructing the historiography of the classical era.

In the social realm, the general public in Indonesia primarily understands historical relics and, at most, perceives history as stories of the past. A tendency to believe in myths surrounding these relics is often more prevalent than engagement with rigorous historiographical narratives. Meanwhile, academia—rich in discourse and theoretical contemplation—tends to operate in a different, sometimes insular, space. This disparity in depth of understanding widens the gap if society is not provided with up-to-date insights from historiographical studies. However, in today's digital era, some academics have ventured into social media, striving to create engaging content on classical historiography tailored to popular demand. These academics aim to bridge historical knowledge, particularly about the classical era, with the general public. Content that is both engaging and responsive to market interest tends to capture the attention of its audience, helping make history more accessible to the broader community.

While social media allows rapid information transfer, content creators must uphold a strong moral responsibility as academics tasked with enlightening the nation. Beyond intellectual enrichment, fostering awareness and discernment is equally fundamental. The flood of digital information poses a clear challenge, and historical content is one of the most prevalent fields circulating widely. Society must be encouraged to critically analyze this content, equipping themselves with the acumen not to accept historical narratives uncritically. Given that history is often a historiography laden with values and interpretations, a lack of critical engagement may lead to significant misconceptions. Therefore, a consistent effort to communicate the dynamic nature of historiography from an early stage is essential for both society and social media content consumers.

The depth of understanding between academic circles and the general public requires strategic bridging, beyond digital media use, through partnerships involving the community and stakeholders. Activities such as seminars, discussions, and community gatherings at the village level, particularly near historical sites, can have a substantial impact. National cultural heritage institutions, as well as university and independent researchers, can present their findings and share knowledge directly with local communities. Such collaboration can raise awareness of the importance of cultural heritage preservation, allowing local residents to benefit from these sites as cultural assets. As Kuntowijoyo (2003: 21) expressed, despite all limitations, historians bear a significant social responsibility that must be fulfilled.

Current research, characterized by its comprehensive approach, must be supported to further the advancement of knowledge in Indonesia. More importantly, any historical research, regardless of its specific area, should

provide benefits to society. Emerging ideas and insights can stimulate public awareness regarding the preservation of artifacts. Furthermore, both the general public and researchers should critically engage with historiography, recognizing the interpretive elements inherent in historical narratives. Magetsari (2016: 83) reminds researchers, particularly those studying the classical Nusantara period, not to overlook the role of historiography. The assumption that epigraphy equates to ancient history—or vice versa—should not persist unchallenged. Epigraphs are historical sources that require rigorous scholarly processing. It is crucial to avoid perpetuating Foucault's (2017: 67) critique that history merely records those in power—a narrative of kings and generals—while ignoring economic processes and infrastructural history. With a rigorous scientific methodology and the distinct expertise of writers, contemporary and future historiography has the potential to be far more engaging and enlightening.

## CONCLUSION

Mainstream historiography of the classical period can be classified as an attempt to narrate political history, which later evolved to include cultural elements. It is crucial for society to develop an awareness of the distinction between the tangible data of artifacts and the historical narratives within historiography. Physical remnants at certain sites serve as historical sources, whereas historiography weaves multiple historical sources into a cohesive historical narrative or work. Multidisciplinary methodologies and approaches can enrich the scholarly value of classical historiography. The dynamic nature of Indonesian historiography across time has generated ongoing debates and academic evaluations, revealing gaps that invite future research. Successive generations of researchers must work diligently to discover or construct the right puzzle pieces that align within the historical narrative. With rigorous source criticism and rational, logical interpretations of material sources, the dynamic quality of Indonesia's classical historiography will be more widely recognized. The digital age, with its rapid information distribution, offers an efficient and effective medium for transferring knowledge, particularly in classical historiography. Society should cultivate an awareness of diverse perspectives and evaluations of historiographical work. Just as we respect differing opinions, we can foster innovation and creativity in producing historiographical works that meet accepted academic standards and ethics. For historians and scholars of the classical period, there is a need to heighten awareness of their role as producers of knowledge. As agents with a moral responsibility, we must encourage the seeds of critical thinking within society. After all, should not the study of history be approached from multiple perspectives? By understanding these differences, we can uncover and embrace our true identity—one that reflects the diverse, resilient, and tolerant spirit of the Nusantara people.

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