JAVA AND MADURA 1:500,000

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SCALE 1/500000

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AFKORTINGEN — ABBREVIATIONS

Malay	Dutch	English
G. Goewo	Grot	Cave
G. Goenoeng	Berg	Mountain
L. Igir		
Pk. Pasir		
W. Wagir		
Peg. Gebergte	Gebergte	Range
P. Poelau	E. Eiland	Island
Gt. Gili		
Eil. Eilanden	Eilanden	Islands
O. Oedjoeng	Kaap	Cape
Tg. Tandjoeng		
H. Hoek		Hook, point, cape

Malay	Dutch	English
D. Danau	M. Meer	Lake
Rn. Ranau		
S. Sitoe		
T. Telaga		
R. Ranjo		
W. Wadoek		
Kh. Kawah	Krater	Crater
Rw. Rawa	Moeras	Swamp
K. Kali	b. Baai	Bay
		River
	Wv. Waterval	Waterfall

REFER TO THIS MAP AS:—HIND 648 SHEET 2 SECOND EDITION

Dutch	English
Standplaats Gouverneur	Seat of Governor
Standplaats Resident en/of Assistent Resident en/of Regent	Seat of Resident and/or Assistent Resident and/or Regent
Standplaats Wedana	Seat of Native Head
Standplaats Assistant Wedana en/of Mantri Politie	Seat of Assistant Native Head and/or Sheriff
Andere plaatsen	Other places
H Hotel	Hotel
P Passanggrahan	Government Resthouse
B Badplaats	Bathing Place

Dutch	English
Hoofdwegen	Main Road
Andere autowegen	Other Motor Roads
Wegen alleen in den droogen tijd berijdbaar	Dry season roads
Wegen in aanleg en/of verbetering	Roads under construction and/or repair
Karrenwegen en paden	Cart roads and paths
Bochtige weggedeelten	Winding stretch of road
Hellende weggedeelten. De punt van de pijl geeft de richting van de stijging aan	Graded portion of road. Point of arrow indicates direction of ascent

Dutch	English
Mooi uitzicht	Beautiful view
Rivier, overvaart, geschikt voor voertuigen	River, ferry, suitable for vehicles
Rivier, geen overgangsmiddelen voor voertuigen	River, ferry not available for vehicles
Spoor of tramwegen, met tunnel	Railway or tramlines with tunnel
Provincie-en Gouvernementsgrenzen	Province and Government boundaries
Residentiegrenzen	Residency borders
Regentschapsgrenzen	Regency borders

LEGENDA LEGEND

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Repower the Harbormaster Towers: Managing Maritime Artifacts in Java's Port Cities

Rizki Dwika Aprilian, Ricky Purbaya & Miktha Farid Alkadri

Abstract
For centuries, Java played a pivotal role in the global shipping trade, connecting the spice islands with the Western world. Its northern coastline was home to three major port cities: Batavia (now Jakarta), Surabaya and Semarang, where trade was overseen by the *syahbandar* or harbormaster– a position dating from pre-colonial times. This role existed throughout the colonial era, when masonry towers with timber floors were constructed for harbormasters to manage port activities. Although revitalization efforts have emerged since the first decade of the twenty-first century, these towers have now been largely forgotten due to port relocations, land subsidence, sea-level rise and changes in ownership. Drawing on archival research and observation, this article examines how historic harbormaster towers in Java's three major port cities are being preserved amid climate change challenges.

KEYWORDS
heritage management
harbormaster
Syahbandar
Spice Route
Java

WATER VALUES

Policy Recommendations

- Encourage the Indonesian government and its subordinate municipalities to adopt a bold maritime paradigm in the development of heritage cities, by ensuring canals and water bodies become integral to the planning and revitalization of historical areas.
- Raise public awareness of maritime artifacts in urban spaces by promoting their significance through innovative educational initiatives and dynamic tourism programs.
- Promote the adaptive reuse approach to harbormaster towers, transforming them into functional spaces with modern roles while preserving their historical character for future generations as living heritage.

< Fig. 1 Java and Madura road map (Source: War Office, 1945. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons).

Introduction

Java has long played a key role in global maritime trade and has been connected to transoceanic routes through exchanges with merchants from China, India and the Middle East, as early as recorded in Indian epic Ramayana and Ptolemy's Geographia of the second century. This role grew during the spice trade period marked by Western exploration and colonialism. After European traders arrived in the sixteenth century, northern ports like Jakarta, Semarang and Surabaya became major gateways to the Western world. Over time, these cities came under colonial control, with settlements and infrastructure built to accommodate trade in valuable commodities.

The *syahbandar*, or harbormaster, played a central role in port operations, managing shipping traffic, collecting taxes, supervising cargo and regulating trade. During the colonial period, these responsibilities were supported by brick towers with timber interiors, designed for wide visibility and surveillance. After Indonesia's independence in 1945, these towers were left unused as port activities shifted to newer locations and this situation has been exacerbated in the twenty-first century by environmental challenges, e.g., land subsidence and rising sea levels.

Although these structures were once vital to the maritime economy, the port infrastructure in the heritage city, such as harbormaster towers, has been abandoned and fallen into disrepair. Since the early 2000s, the preservation of these towers has varied. Jakarta restored its tower using historical materials and integrated it with tourism functions, along with a nearby water gate to manage floods. In 2022, Semarang rebuilt its tower's silhouette in glass, creating a public gallery and office space. In contrast, Surabaya's tower remains physically intact but functionally neglected, overshadowed by warehouses and detached from its context. These different adaptation approaches raise broader questions about how postcolonial cities deal with colonial infrastructure amid rapid urbanization and environmental challenges.

By examining the history and the reutilization of the harbormaster towers, we can gain a more holistic understanding of how the maritime symbol and identity from these heritage port cities have evolved and how they can be preserved for the next generation. These case studies are also essential in supporting conservation strategies within broader revitalization plans of the three port cities, ensuring the relevance and resilience in both the present and the future. This article uses archives, literature, and fieldwork to examine how Java's major port cities are working to conserve their maritime artifacts, showing how trade shapes cultural memory and urban development while suggesting new futures for these spaces.

The *Syahbandar* and its Significance in Trading and Port Management

Syahbandar is one of the most important roles in global navigation and trade history, crucial to maritime civilizations for centuries. The term comes from the Persian *shahbandar*, meaning “king of the haven" or “harbormaster" (Moreland 1920; Kooria 2019). The title spread across Asian maritime routes, adapting to local contexts, appearing as *shahbandar* in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, *shabunder* in India and *syahbandar* or *sabendar* in Indonesia. Despite regional differences, the core duties remained focused on managing port activities, taxation and trade.

Historically, the *syahbandar* led customs at ports, overseeing domestic and foreign vessel movements, assessing taxes on goods, and managing tributes to local rulers. Their role was deeply tied to the political and economic life of port cities. In some Indian Ocean regions, the *syahbandars* served as government agents or ministers, as seen in the Sultanates of Aceh and Banten (Moreland 1920; Andaya 1978), indicating their influence beyond port tasks.

In Java, the role predates European colonization, with records from the Sunda and Majapahit Kingdoms, and later Islamic Sultanates like Demak and Banten (Masyhudi 2018; Sundari 2018; Basundoro and Nugroho 2022). They were typically stationed near harbors, in buildings for customs duties known as *pabean*. This role persisted until European trading companies, particularly the Dutch East India Company (VOC) arrived and reshaped the region's political and economic structures.

The Power Shift: From *Syahbandar* (Local), to VOC (NL) to Raffles (UK)

After gaining control over the spice trade centers in the archipelago, the VOC moved its headquarters from Amboina to Batavia (now Jakarta), a new city built on the ruins of the town of Jayakarta. This strategic move allowed the VOC to consolidate its power over the northern coast of Java, turning it into a critical trade route in the archipelago (Nas and Grijns 2007; Van Der Brug 2007; Zuhdi 2014). By the mid-eighteenth century, the VOC had gained control over the entire northern coast of Java. This dominance lasted until the VOC's bankruptcy at the end of 1799, after which the Netherlands continued colonizing its territories.

During its peak, the VOC established three main ports: Batavia in the west, Semarang in the center and Surabaya in the east, each serving as a defense base for the VOC (Ricklefs 2008).

^ Fig. 2 Archival images of harbormaster towers in Batavia, Semarang, and Surabaya (from left to right), nineteenth century (Source: KITLV Digital Collection, Leiden University Library).

When the British took control of Java in the early nineteenth century, the island's major cities were well-established centers of trade and governance. In his book *The History of Java*, Raffles noted five principal cities: Batavia, Semarang, Surabaya, Surakarta and Yogyakarta (Boomgaard 1989). The port cities (Batavia, Semarang and Surabaya) flourished as significant maritime trade hubs from the eastern archipelago and became the largest ports in Java during the colonial era (Zuhdi 2014).

Batavia (Jakarta), Surabaya, Semarang, and Their Towers: Then and Now

Batavia, a harbor city at the mouth of the Ciliwung River, was the central hub for shipping in the Dutch East Indies and was rich in historical events. Before Jan Pieterzoon Coen founded Batavia, the area was known as Kalapa, the main port of the Sunda Kingdom. Portuguese explorer Tomé Pires noted that Sunda Kelapa was a busy port, with ships from Palembang, Lawe, Tanjungpura, Malacca, Makassar, Java and Madura (Pires 2016). This role continued until the VOC conquered this city in the seventeenth century.

The Syahbandar Tower of Batavia was built by the Dutch around 1640 and renovated in 1839, serving as the customs office of the harbormaster (Directorate of History and Cultural Values 2013). To the east, Semarang is a key transit point for ships from Surabaya and the eastern archipelago bound for Batavia, also a hub for its hinterlands. In 1825, the Dutch built the harbormaster tower in Semarang known

^ Fig. 3 Conditions of the three harbormaster towers: Batavia/Jakarta (after restoration, left), Semarang (before and after restoration, center), and Surabaya (current condition, right) (Source: Ricky Purbaya, 2024).

as *Uitkijk* (watchtower) and renovated it in an *Indische* style in the 1850s. Surabaya was Java's second-largest port that was established in the Majapahit era in the thirteenth century, and continued through the Dutch East Indies period, with trading centered on the Kalimas River (Dick 2022). Surabaya also had a harbormaster tower on the bank of Kalimas River built by the Dutch in the nineteenth century. Based on a nineteenth-century photo archive in fig. 2, the original tower was initially made of an iron structure and rebuilt using brick and stone in the twentieth century.

By the end of the colonial era in 1945, Indonesian cities underwent a rapid transformation, profoundly reshaping urban landscapes, including the harbormaster towers across Java's three largest port cities.

In Jakarta, the harbormaster tower gradually tilted due to unstable ground and heavy truck traffic. Restored in the early 2000s, it became part of the Jakarta Maritime Museum and Old Town Jakarta, shifting its role to education and tourism (Soedarsono 2011). In 2022, the local government redesigned surrounding water bodies as a water catchment area and public space to protect the tower from tidal floods and land subsidence.

The harbormaster tower in Semarang underwent a similar transformation. Abandoned after the harbor moved in the late nineteenth century and partially collapsed by 2017, it was restored in 2022 by the national gas enterprise PGN using new materials alongside the original structure. The tower was repurposed as a tourist attraction, while the riverside area was redesigned, reconnecting it to the river previously blocked by kiosks for decades. In contrast, the harbormaster tower in Surabaya remains in a state of neglect. Although structurally sound, the building exhibits significant façade deterioration, and its original entrance doors have been replaced with an iron gate providing access to adjacent settlements. Despite its riverfront location, the tower's historical function and significance appear to have been largely disregarded.

Conclusion

Indonesia's maritime heritage is deeply embedded in its coastal cities, yet numerous historical sites face deterioration, neglect, and environmental threats such as flooding, sedimentation, and climate change. The harbormaster towers in Jakarta, Surabaya, and Semarang exemplify diverse strategies for integrating maritime heritage into contemporary urban contexts. After independence, these towers were abandoned for decades and became increasingly disconnected from their surrounding waterways. However, two have since been carefully revitalized to respond to contemporary needs.

Preserving maritime artifacts requires more than restoring buildings. It demands ecological and spatial reintegration. Through comprehensive preservation efforts, cities can engage historical narratives while addressing contemporary challenges, transforming these sites into dynamic spaces for the future.

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