






# Deconstruction of the Economic System of the Sriwijaya Kingdom: The Role of Palembang as the Economic Center

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**Abstract.** This paper is a historical study aimed at uncovering the "Economic System of the Sriwijaya Kingdom and the Role of Palembang as its Economic Center." The purpose of this paper is to provide a deeper understanding of Sriwijaya's trade system and the reasons why Palembang was chosen as its center. As the capital of the kingdom, Palembang held significant economic value due to its strategic location at the time—as a meeting point for local, archipelagoal, and international maritime and trade routes, making it a major market hub. This condition is reinforced by various archaeological findings that serve as concrete evidence of its strategic role.

**Keywords:** Deconstruction, Economic System, Economic Center, Sriwijaya Kingdom

## 1 Introduction

The debate over Palembang as the center of the Sriwijaya kingdom has been ongoing for a long time, even before the discovery of various archaeological evidence supporting this theory. This controversy stems from Coedès' theory, which posits that the capital of Sriwijaya was located in Palembang [1], [2]. As a result, many lay people have already associated Sriwijaya with the city of Palembang. Numerous local and national studies have been conducted to address this issue, and they have positively contributed to archaeological findings that support Coedès' theory, proving that the center of the Sriwijaya kingdom was indeed located in Palembang [4]. Based on the discovery of 42 inscriptions in the city of Palembang (4), the largest statue findings, thousands of ceramics along the Musi River, and the discovery of a bead-making center in Kambang Ulen, this theory has been further reinforced.

Palembang as the center of the Sriwijaya kingdom was highly advantageous both geologically and economically due to its strategically crucial position on global trade routes [2]. Dapunta Hyang's decision to establish Palembang as the capital was undoubtedly the right choice, particularly considering Sriwijaya's maritime nature, which heavily relied on trade. From an economic perspective, Palembang's location was highly beneficial as an international trading port, situated at the mouth of the Bangka Strait, one of the world's key trade routes at the time. This position allowed Palembang to control and facilitate the flow of goods between local and international

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M. Meilinda et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 6th Sriwijaya University Learning and Education International Conference 2024 (SULE-IC 2024)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 915, [https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-390-0\\_10](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-390-0_10)

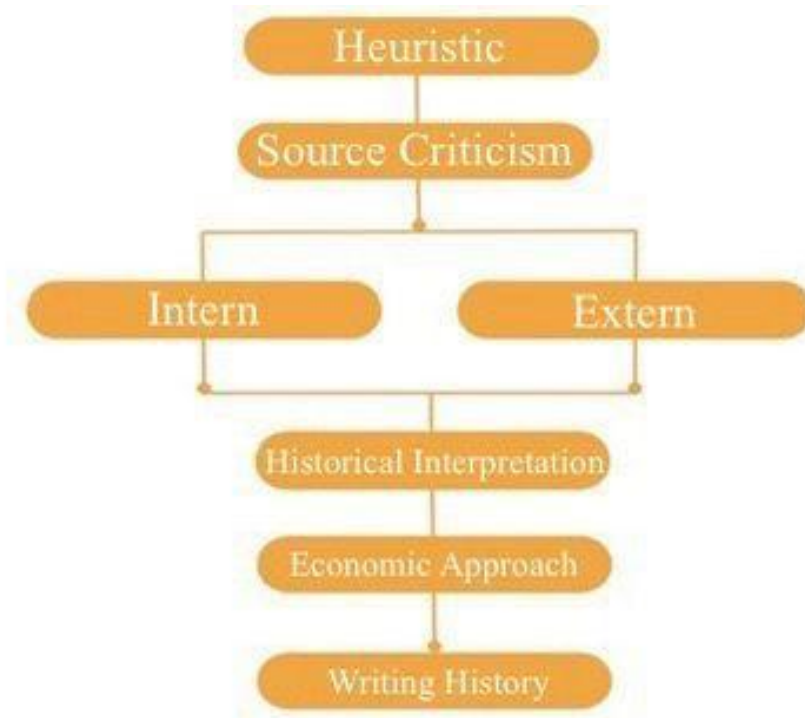
markets, making it an essential hub for economic growth and prosperity within the kingdom [5].

In line with the explanation above, this article will address two main issues: First, how the economic system of the Sriwijaya Kingdom functioned in relation to Palembang as its capital. Second, what evidence supports this claim. Numerous studies have explored the Sriwijaya Kingdom however, none have provided a more comprehensive account based on field discoveries in the city of Palembang. Therefore, what sets this paper apart from others is its focus on archaeological findings from Palembang, offering a more detailed and evidence-based analysis of the city's pivotal role in the kingdom's economic system.

The main difference in this research compared to other studies lies in the direct observation of Sriwijaya artifacts that are currently housed in museums. This approach provides primary data based on tangible artifacts, making the study more comprehensive and artifact-based. Unlike previous research that may rely heavily on secondary sources, historical texts, or theoretical frameworks, this study emphasizes direct interaction with physical remains, allowing for a more detailed and nuanced understanding of Sriwijaya's cultural and material history. By analyzing artifacts such as ceramics, beads, statues, and structural remains firsthand, this research offers a concrete and empirical basis for interpretations, contributing to a more thorough understanding of Sriwijaya's legacy.

## **2. Method**

The research method employed is the historical method, a scientific procedure used to investigate historical events. The historical method aims to reconstruct past events in a scientific manner to attain historical accuracy. Additionally, this study utilizes an economic approach to analyze historical events. The following is a flowchart of the research method used:



**Fig. 1.** Historical research method

The procedure for this research follows the historical research method, which involves several steps. First, investigation through data collection techniques (heuristics)[6], which includes visiting museums and libraries to gather data or record relevant sources. Second, the collected data undergoes source criticism, both internal (content and material critique) and external (authenticity critique), to verify the historical accuracy [7]. Third, once the data is validated, historical interpretation is conducted through analysis. This data analysis process uses an economic approach, as economic factors influence historical events, making economic interpretation a focal point in this study(8). The fourth step in the historical research method is the writing of the research report [9]. Once the historical evidence is obtained, it is reconstructed by the researcher into a historical narrative (historiography), providing a clear depiction of the research findings [10]

### 3. Result and Discussion

#### 3.1 Palembang: The Center of the Sriwijaya Kingdom

Previously, the designation of Palembang as the capital of the Sriwijaya Kingdom was based solely on inscriptions, without support from other archaeological evidence or

findings. However, with additional discoveries such as statues, ceramics, beads, settlement sites, boats, and remnants of building foundations related to the same period as the inscriptions, these findings provide a more complete picture [11]. These discoveries are relevant to the Sriwijaya Kingdom inscriptions in Palembang, dating from around 682-684 AD, and are consistent with other artifacts from the 7th-9th centuries AD. The archaeological evidence found in Palembang is convincing enough to prove that Palembang was the center of the Sriwijaya Kingdom [1], [12]. Although the cosmogonic concept applied in the capital of the Sriwijaya kingdom may not have been entirely accurate, this was due to natural environmental conditions that did not allow for the ideal implementation of this concept. Palembang, as the center of the Sriwijaya kingdom, played a significant role in both political and economic domains [13]. Strategically located along the Musi River and near the Bangka Strait, Palembang was ideally situated for controlling maritime trade routes in Southeast Asia. This position allowed Sriwijaya to dominate regional and international trade, especially between China and India, turning Palembang into a thriving commercial hub [14].

Due to the absence of construction materials such as andesite stone in Palembang, it is highly likely that residential structures during that time were constructed using wood. This is supported by the presence of stilt houses that are still utilized by residents today. Furthermore, the Western Palembang area, which consists of wetlands, likely required settlements built on water using wooden materials. In contrast, sacred buildings were constructed using bricks [15]. Evidence of brick usage can be found at Bukit Siguntang, where foundations made of bricks have been discovered. Additionally, statues of Buddha, beads, and fragments of ceramics that were likely used for ceremonial purposes have also been found at the site.

In the final report by Bambang Budi Utomo, the head of the Research Team for the Site of the Sriwijaya Kingdom, which operated from 1984 to 1989, along with experts from various disciplines and utilizing advanced equipment such as geomagnetic and geoelectric, the focus of the research shifted away from merely determining the location of the Sriwijaya Kingdom's center. Instead, the study aimed to understand the form and structure of the capital city itself. Utomo concluded that "the existence of the capital center of the Sriwijaya Kingdom in Palembang is evident, with the presumed location situated to the west of Palembang.

### **3.2 Overview of the Economic System of Palembang as the Center of the Sriwijaya Kingdom**

Palembang's status as the center of the Sriwijaya kingdom is well-supported by both historical records and archaeological evidence. This conclusion has been reinforced over time by the discovery of significant artifacts such as inscriptions, ceramics, beads, and religious statues in the region, all of which date back to the same period as Sriwijaya's peak in the 7th to 9th centuries. Research confirms that Palembang's strategic location, particularly near the Bangka Strait, made it an essential maritime hub, facilitating trade between India and China. Sriwijaya's dominance in controlling trade routes, especially along the Strait of Malacca, allowed it to thrive economically and politically [5].

Additional sources, like Coedès' work, further bolster Palembang's identification as the kingdom's capital, complemented by archaeological findings of structures such as water systems and brick foundations, particularly at Bukit Seguntang. The Buddhist monk It-Sing travels also emphasized Palembang's importance as a center of Buddhist learning, as he noted the city's role in preparing students for further studies in Nalanda, India

The development of civilization in South Sumatra was significantly influenced by the presence of the Musi River, which flows into the Bangka Strait. The Bangka Strait and the Malacca Strait have long been recognized as international trade routes since the early CE [1]. As a maritime kingdom, Sriwijaya was heavily reliant on trade and navigation, necessitating a strategic location for both economic and military purposes. Thus, the capital of Sriwijaya had to be situated at the intersection of water routes, between the sea and the river [2].

Additionally, the Musi River connects the inland areas with the eastern coast of Sumatra. The Musi River Basin encompasses several rivers, including the Ogan River, Komering River, Lematang River, Batanghari Leko River, and Rawas River along with their tributaries. This extensive river system not only facilitated trade and transportation but also supported agricultural activities, contributing to the economic prosperity of Palembang as the capital of the Sriwijaya Kingdom [16].

The selection of Palembang, particularly West Palembang, as the capital of the kingdom met important economic criteria due to its proximity to the mouths of major rivers such as Keramasan, Ogan, and Komering, as well as its location at the crossroads of maritime routes connecting India, China, and Java [17]. Although West Palembang was once a swampy area on the banks of the Musi River, the site was still considered strategic and suitable for serving as the kingdom's capital from an economic standpoint. The city of Palembang is located about 75 miles from the mouth of the Musi River, which leads to the Bangka Strait. It is situated along the Musi River, between the mouths of the Ogan River and the Komering River, two significant rivers flowing into the Musi. Palembang stretches along the Musi River, from the confluence of the Komering River to the confluence of the Ogan River [18].

Palembang's position on the banks of the Musi River established it as an active trade center, both locally and internationally. In local trade, Palembang served as a meeting point for traders from the inland regions who navigated the major rivers leading to the Musi River. This local trading activity was crucial for meeting the everyday needs of the Sriwijaya population, particularly in the provision of various agricultural products such as rice.

The Sriwijaya Kingdom exhibited characteristics of a state according to Elman Service's classification of social structures. This is evident from its centralized economic organizational structure, where bureaucracy was managed centrally under the authority of the king. The titles of bureaucratic positions acting under the orders of the Sriwijaya king are documented in the Telaga Batu inscription, which refers to their economic roles. Sriwijaya was situated at the intersection of international trade routes and inter-island commerce [19]. It served as a convergence point between the South China Sea and the Java Sea, which are major waterways of the archipelago. With this strategic position, Sriwijaya developed into an empire that controlled three main trade directions:

1. To the North: Dominating the waters from Bangka to the Malacca Strait.

2. To the South: Controlling the waters of the Bangka Strait and the Sunda Strait.
3. To the Northeast: Commanding the seas of the archipelago [20] .

The strategic conditions of Sriwijaya would have been insignificant without the support of appropriate political and economic policies. These policies enabled Sriwijaya to become a major economic center in the archipelago. One important policy was the control of the waters around Bangka Island, which served as a strategic base for overseeing the economy of the archipelago[21] . The establishment of trade bases in Bangka facilitated Sriwijaya's oversight of the Sunda Strait and the Java Sea, as recorded in the inscriptions of Kota Kapur and Palas Pasemah.

Control over the southern waters also empowered Sriwijaya to open or close maritime routes along Sumatra Island, which was a crucial part of international trade routes, as noted in the Kedukan Bukit and Karang Birahi inscriptions. Additionally, along the west coast of Malaya, there were strong naval bases of Sriwijaya that served to secure trading activities [22].

The control of Sumatra Island by Sriwijaya was crucial for managing trade routes. The maritime routes surrounding Bangka, traversing Sriwijaya, and passing through the Malacca Strait became critically important areas. Sriwijaya continuously sought to strengthen and expand its authority in these regions. The dominance of Sriwijaya over the Malacca and Sunda Straits established it as the main controller of spice trade routes and local commerce, allowing Sriwijaya to impose fees on every ship that passed through these waterways. Palembang, as a port and trade center, accumulated wealth by serving the archipelago's markets [23] .

Sriwijaya expanded its power to control the archipelago's exports by dominating the waters of Indonesia, including the Java Sea, Banda Sea, and the eastern seas of the archipelago. Bases were established in West and South Kalimantan, as well as in Java and Eastern Indonesia, to support commercial control in these areas. The maritime kingdoms of the archipelago were compelled to recognize Sriwijaya's authority, solidifying its status as the primary trade center in the region[3],[4]. Sriwijaya functioned as a distributor and hub for the exchange of goods, catering to both local and international needs. All trade routes, whether within the archipelago or globally, had to pass under the authority of Sriwijaya from the South, North, to the East, making it a key export center for the archipelago(25). All commodities intended for international sale were centralized and traded in Sriwijaya. Thus, Sriwijaya played the role of a primary seller of goods produced in the archipelago [26].

International shipping and trade had to go through Sriwijaya as a major port, and during that time, Palembang may have been considered a world market, as evidenced by the discovery of ceramics and beads. Payment of tariffs, tribute, and direct involvement in trade became sources of wealth for Sriwijaya. Additionally, many foreign merchants awaited the right seasonal winds to set sail, leading to trade transactions at the Sriwijaya port, which stimulated economic growth from the trade of agricultural products and tribute [23].

After establishing its dominance over the archipelago's economy, Sriwijaya began to expand its economic influence to control international trade that traversed the waters of the archipelago, including traders from China, Malaysia, and India. As a trading empire, Sriwijaya continuously extended its power by asserting control over

maritime routes. The kingdoms in the Malayan Peninsula were compelled to recognize Sriwijaya's authority [3].

To maintain its territorial dominance, Sriwijaya established naval bases along the western coast of Malaya to protect its international trade. When the Kra Isthmus became a trading route that shortened the trade and shipping route in Southeast Asia from China to India, Sriwijaya recognized the necessity of controlling it. Strong naval bases were established on both coasts of the region, as recorded in the inscriptions of Ligor. The mountainous region of the Kra Isthmus was occupied, and major cities on both coasts were fortified as naval bases [2].

The global trade route that passed through Sriwijaya was indeed crucial for the kingdom's dominance in Southeast Asia. Due to its strategic geographical location, all maritime trade between China, India, and the Middle East had to pass through Sriwijaya's territory, particularly through the Strait of Malacca. This position allowed Sriwijaya to control and regulate the movement of goods, ensuring that foreign traders had to pay tariffs and tributes [14]. This not only enhanced Sriwijaya's economic prosperity but also reinforced its influence and power as the region's primary trade center from the 7th to the 13th century.

As a trading empire, Sriwijaya was actively engaged in international trade. During that time, ancient trade primarily focused on luxury goods for the needs of the royal court and nobility, including jewelry, silk, carpets, porcelain, fragrant wood, perfumes, spices, as well as slaves, animals, and rice. Sriwijaya itself was only able to export items like ivory, hides, and some types of wild animals [27]. However, it successfully controlled the export of goods from across the archipelago, including rice, spices, ivory, cinnamon, frankincense, gold, and animals. Thus, Sriwijaya dominated international trade in the region.

In the realm of international trade, Sriwijaya not only acted as a collector of profits from world commerce but also as an active participant and a major source of wealth in these transactions. The empire became a global trading center by dealing in luxury items such as jewelry, silk, carpets, porcelain, fragrant wood, perfumes, spices, and even people, animals, and rice. Although Sriwijaya could only export pepper, tin, ivory, hides, and some types of wild animals, it managed to control exports from the entire archipelago, including rice, spices, ivory, cinnamon, frankincense, gold, and animals [21], [23].

Pepper was widely produced along the Kampar, Kuantan, Singingi rivers (in Riau), and Batanghari (in Jambi), while tin was imported from Kedah (Malaysia) and Tapung Petapahan upstream of the Siak River (in Riau). Gold was sourced from the Kuantan and Singingi rivers. These goods attracted traders from both the West and the East to engage in commerce with Sriwijaya, making it comparable to kings in India in terms of wealth. This abundant wealth allowed Sriwijaya to buy the loyalty of its vassals throughout Southeast Asia [28]. Another concrete piece of evidence is the presence of Arab communities during the Sriwijaya era.

### 3.3 Ceramics

Palembang boasts a wealth of ceramic finds, particularly from China, which are invaluable for interpreting historical chronology due to their origins in well-documented Chinese dynasties. In various areas of Palembang City,

concentrations of ceramic fragments are found on the surface, covering extensive regions [29]. These ceramic discoveries primarily stem from surveys and excavations conducted at the Badaruddin Museum's grounds and at sites such as Talang Kikim, Bukit Seguntang, Ladangsirap, Karanganyar, Lorong Jambu, Kambang Unglen, and Gedingsuro(30).

The ceramics discovered are primarily from the Tang Dynasty (8th-10th centuries CE) and the Song Dynasty (10th-13th centuries CE). At sites like Talang Kikim, Ladangsirap, Bukit Seguntang, and Karanganyar, most ceramics date back to the Tang Dynasty (8th-10th centuries CE) [31]. The presence of these Chinese ceramics bolsters the evidence that Palembang served as a global marketplace, as Chinese ceramics were significant commodities in international trade(32).

### 3.4 Beads

One of the significant relics from the Sriwijaya Kingdom is beads, which have been discovered in considerable numbers. In 1990, archaeologists found 838 intact beads, 26 fragments, and 27 imperfect beads in the Kambang Unglen area (West Palembang) [16]. However, this quantity does not reflect the total number of beads present at the site, as it was being used for cassava farming by local residents at the time, and the small size of the beads often made them difficult to spot.

The discovery of beads in Kambang Unglen can be linked to their various functions in society at that time. Beads were typically strung into jewelry such as necklaces, bracelets, and adornments on fabrics, and they were also used in religious practices. During the Sriwijaya Kingdom, which was known for its adherence to Buddhism, beads were frequently utilized in religious contexts. In Buddhism, strands of beads, usually with a diameter of no less than 5 millimeters and shaped round or nearly round, were employed by Buddhist priests as prayer aids [33].

The beads and glass found in Kambang Unglen generally exceed a diameter of 5 millimeters. They come in various shapes, including oblate, cylindrical, tubular, barrel, and square bicone. Except for the tubular beads, most of these beads were likely used to create "prayer necklaces" as previously described. Therefore, these items may represent remnants of the religious activities that took place in Palembang [34].

The findings of beads in the city of Palembang, which encompass diverse types and shapes, and which were commodities for import-export to India and the Middle East, indicate that Palembang had become a meeting point for traders from around the world. Additionally, the function of beads in religious contexts further supports the evidence that Palembang was a center for Buddhism.

### 3.5 Boats

To date, four boat wrecks have been discovered at three different locations: Samirejo village (1987), Sungai Buah (1988), and Kolam Pinisi (1989). Research indicates that the boat construction techniques found employed the sewn-plank and lashed-lug technique, a method that developed in Southeast Asia and is recognized as part of Southeast Asian traditional craftsmanship [35]. Laboratory analysis of carbon remains (C14) revealed that these boats date back to the period between 610 and 775 CE.

Around the year 2000, additional boat wrecks were found in the waters between Belitung Island and Bangka, laden with ceramic cargo. Boat wrecks are suspected to originate from Arab traders. This discovery indicates a trading relationship between kingdoms in the western part of the archipelago and Arab and Chinese merchants, as the ceramics found were sourced from China [36]. Additionally, fragments of a seventh-century ship were discovered in the marshes along the Kupang River, known as Air Pancur. This find supports the hypothesis that Kota Kapur was a busy port during the Sriwijaya Kingdom.

According to research by Utomo, the discovery of Sriwijaya shipwrecks in the Java Sea confirms that the people of Sriwijaya were active in trade at local, archipelagic, and international levels. The boats uncovered were utilized for various trading activities, including inter-island and international trade (37). The findings of Sriwijaya shipwrecks in the Java Sea, along with Arab boats in Bangka, further strengthen the evidence of Sriwijaya's involvement in a vast trading network [38].

### 3.6 Water Structures

The only remaining monumental structure from the former center of the Sriwijaya Kingdom is the water building located at the Karanganyar site in West Palembang. This structure consists of large artificial ditches and ponds. The longest ditch, known as Parit Suak Bujang, stretches approximately 3,300 meters from west to east, dividing the meander of the Musi River into two parts: north and south. This ditch connects one side of the Musi River to the other [39].

In addition to Parit Suak Bujang, there are other ditches running north to south and west to east, all interconnected. Based on aerial photo interpretations, besides these ditches, there are also three square ponds and four rectangular ponds extending from north to south [40]. The construction of these water structures likely served not only defensive purposes but also economic aspects, supporting Palembang as a market center by connecting the Musi River with the royal center through these ditches.

## 4. Conclusion

Based on the explanations above, there is no doubt that Palembang was the center of the Sriwijaya kingdom. As the royal center, Palembang held significant economic value as it served as the administrative hub and relied on maritime trade for its economy. Thus, Palembang played a vital role as a major marketplace in this trade. Heritage studies and archaeological findings indicate that Palembang functioned as a trading center for local, archipelagic, and international commerce. The evidence supports the idea that Palembang was not merely a geographical location but also an active center of economic activity, connecting various trade routes and facilitating interactions in Southeast Asia during the Sriwijaya period.

**Disclosure of Interests.** The author has no conflicting interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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