

A MALAY QUEEN'S SIAMESE SILVER BOWL AT THE V&A

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ABSTRACT—This notice examines a nielloware silver bowl at the V&A Museum, originally from southern Thailand. Using Jawi inscriptions, the notice unravels the bowl's significance as a royal Malay heirloom. The bowl's intricate scenes depict Hindu–Buddhist mythical creatures and celestial beings. The royal seal found on the base is attributed to Queen Tengku Ambung Fatimah (r. 1883–?). Another Jawi inscription traces a lineage, identifying two other royal women, Engku Besar and Engku Lebar as previous owners. The bowl was eventually dispersed from the Riau–Lingga court, likely after the sultanate was dissolved in 1911, before reaching Singapore and London. This artifact serves as a symbol of lineage, power, and transnational movement in a 19th-century maritime court.

KEYWORDS: Jawi Inscriptions; Maritime Court; Riau–Lingga Sultanate; Silver Nielloware; Tengku Ambung Fatimah; Transnational Exchange



FIGURE 1: Bowl, Nakhon Si Thammarat and Riau–Lingga Sultanate, 19th century, Victoria & Albert Museum, H.: 12, W.: 25.5 cm, inv. no. IS.360-1950 © V&A Museum

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FIGURE 2: Detail of a praying celestial in leaf-shaped cartouche and flanked by *garuḍas* © V&A Museum

On permanent display in the Southeast Asia section of the Victoria & Albert (V&A) Museum in London is a sizable Siamese nielloware inlaid silver bowl adorned with depictions of mythical animals and celestial beings from Hindu and Buddhist mythology [FIGURE 1]. However, the bowl's distinctive status as a family heirloom is unveiled through two Jawi (بواج) script inscriptions discovered on its underside, a topic we will delve into shortly.

Upon close examination, the bowl's remarkable journey unfolds, passing through the lineage of three royal Malay women from the Riau-Lingga Sultanate (Jawi: كڠيلواير نناطلسك, Kesultanan Riau-Lingga; 1824–1911). As we explore further details, the bowl emerges

not only as a transnational artifact, illustrating the dynamic interplay of commercial and ideological exchanges that characterized maritime polities such as the Riau-Lingga court.

Contrary to a perception of a uniform court style, such cherished objects exemplify a hybrid material culture, underscoring the esteemed status attributed to imported goods in a complex network of cultural interactions.

Siamese Nielloware: Prestige Objects

The term niello derives from the Latin word *nigellus*, an indication of something “black” or “dark”, and a reference to an inlaid alloy made from copper, lead, silver, and sulphur (Choo 1984: 21;

Bromberg 2019: 50). In the case of the bowl described here, the inlay is on a silver base. Siamese nielloware is historically produced in Nakhon Si Thammarat on the east coast of the Thai–Malay Peninsula. As observed by Paul Bromberg (2019: 44), the first known literary reference to nielloware is found in the royal laws from the reign of King Boromtrailokkanat (1448–1488) of Siam which states that “the nobleman of a certain high rank with 10,000 *rai* of land at his disposal was entitled to govern a city and to demonstrate his exalted position by owning a nielloware pedestal and tray”.

From the date of this decree, the ownership and use of nielloware records a long history of noble association in Siam. This knowledge was well understood by the three royal Malay women of the Riau–Lingga court who, in succession, claimed ownership of this bowl as we shall see further below.

Mythical Animals and Celestial Beings

The V&A bowl consists of two alternating scenes. One, a *theppanom* (เทพนม), a celestial being in worshipful posture, flanked on each side by a *khрут* (ครุฑ) or *garuḍas*, identified by human bodies with heads and talons of a bird; it is also enveloped by a leaf-shaped cartouche known as *lai phum* (ลายพุ่ม) [FIGURE 2]. Two, Lord Viṣṇu, clearly recognizable by the discus or *cakra* in one of his hands. Viṣṇu stands atop his Garuḍa’s mount and is further surrounded by four *theppanoms* [FIGURE 3].

Beyond serving as an allegory for mythical creatures and celestial beings from Hindu and Buddhist mythology, the Siamese monarch’s commissioning

of *theppanoms*, for example in temple murals, goes beyond allowing celestial beings to partake in religious activities. According to Alexandra Green, this practice is pivotal in enabling the Siamese royalty to fulfill its crucial role as the “patron and protector of Buddhism” (2013: 138), establishing a connection between the divine and their rule.

The Garuḍa, representing Siamese royalty with each monarch a reincarnation of Viṣṇu, becomes a potent symbol. The aftermath of the Burmese sacking of Ayutthaya in 1767 prompted the Siamese monarchy to intensify the commissioning of Buddhist images, seeking to reclaim their status as divine rulers through Buddhism. The incorporation of royal symbolism in a prestigious object such as this silver nielloware bowl further underscores its significance in this narrative.

A Royal Seal and Inscription from the Riau–Lingga Sultanate

In 2008, Annabel Teh Gallop from the British Library, at the behest of the late John Clarke, then curator of Himalayan and Southeast Asian Art at the V&A Museum, transcribed and translated the Jawi script and ownership seals on seven silver objects, attributing their royal provenance to Malay Queen Tengku Ambung Fatimah (r. 1883–?).² Included in the V&A group of seven inscribed ves-

² This pioneering epigraphic study first appeared in Gallop’s unpublished paper, “Malay Silverware with Jawi Inscriptions”, presented at the international conference on Southeast Asian art organized by the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology, in Kraków, on 29 September–1 October 2011, and subsequently at the “Malay Silver Study Day” held at the V&A Museum on 1 November 2013.



FIGURE 3: Detail of Lord Viṣṇu mounting Garuda and flanked by four praying celestials © V&A Museum

sels was this nielloware bowl, containing both a royal seal and an inscription on its base [FIGURE 4].³

First, a rectangular seal with chamfered corners was stamped on the underside of the bowl. It contains an inscription which reads in Jawi script *Tengku Ambung yang punya*, that is, “Tengku Ambung owns this” (Gallop 2019: 43, 336) [FIGURE 5].

Tengku Ambung Fatimah was a Malay princess, and eventually regnant queen, from the Riau–Lingga Sultanate.

Gallop (2019: 10) observed that the inclusion of *tengku* in the title elements serves as an indication of royal lineage descent in Sumatra and the Malay

Peninsula. Indeed, Tengku Ambung Fatimah’s royal status is affirmed by her unique position as the only child of Sultan Mahmud Muzaffar Syah (r. 1841–1857). Further affirming her lineage, her mother and queen consort, Raja Maimunah, was the granddaughter of Sultan Husain of Singapore (Matheson 1972). The use of the title *tengku* thus serves as concrete proof of her descent from the prestigious Malay line.

Tengku Ambung’s great uncle, Sultan Sulaiman Badrul Alam Syah II (r. 1857–1883) succeeded to the throne from her father and died on 17 September 1883 without a male heir (Andaya 2003: 90). Bugis–Malay elites of the Riau–Lingga court chose Tengku Ambung Fatimah over three male contenders, “T[engku] Said, T Husin and T. Mahmud” (Hijjas

³ For a fresh study of this group of inscribed silverware, see Wang 2022.

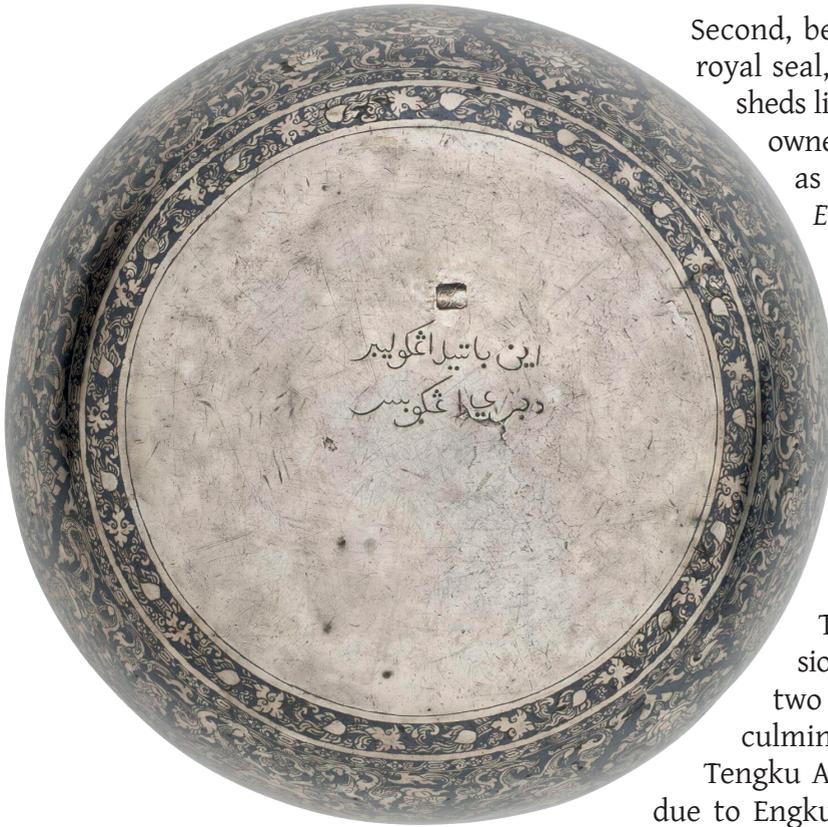


FIGURE 4: The royal seal and Jawi inscription on the underside of the nielloware bowl © V&A Museum

2011: 25), making her the first female to break the male monopoly of Malay rulership in about two centuries (Wee 1985: 214).

In the Malay world, the use of seals to indicate ownership of objects is largely absent, making Tengku Ambung's seal unusual and likely an innovation by its owner.

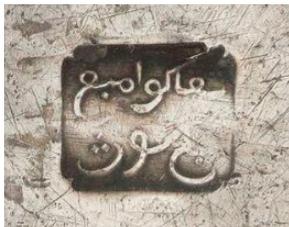


FIGURE 5: Detail of Tengku Ambung's royal seal © V&A Museum

Second, beneath Tengku Ambung's royal seal, another Jawi inscription sheds light on the bowl's previous owners. The engraving reads as *Ini batil Engku Lebar diberi Engku Besar*, "This is the bowl of Engku Lebar, given by Engku Besar" (Gallop 2019: 336) [FIGURE 6].

According to the inscription, the first known female owner of the bowl was Engku Besar Raja Siti who gifted it to her cousin and sister-in-law, Engku Lebar. The subsequent transmission of this heirloom through two subsequent generations, culminating in its possession by Tengku Ambung Fatimah, is likely due to Engku Lebar's grandson, none other than Raja Muhammad Yusuf. He held the esteemed position of the 10th Yang Dipertuan Muda or Viceroy of Riau from 1858 to 1899 and was also Tengku Ambung's husband (Gallop 2011: 2).⁴

Far from being classed as domestic artifacts, royal heirlooms carry profound symbolism in the realm of ritual and ceremonial practices. "[I]n Southeast Asia, the notion of genealogy applies as much to objects as to persons" (Bennett 2005: 50). Objects passed through generations become tangible symbols of lineage, infused with supernatural power. As a personal possession of a head of state, this bowl serves as a

⁴ Gallop identified these royal women from the *Tuhfat al-Nafis* (سيف نالاف حرت), "The Precious Gift", a historical chronicle of Malay and Bugis kings from the Riau-Lingga Sultanate, written around 1866 by Bugis scholar, Raja Ali Haji bin Raja Ahmad (fl. 1809–1873). See also Matheson & Andaya 1982.

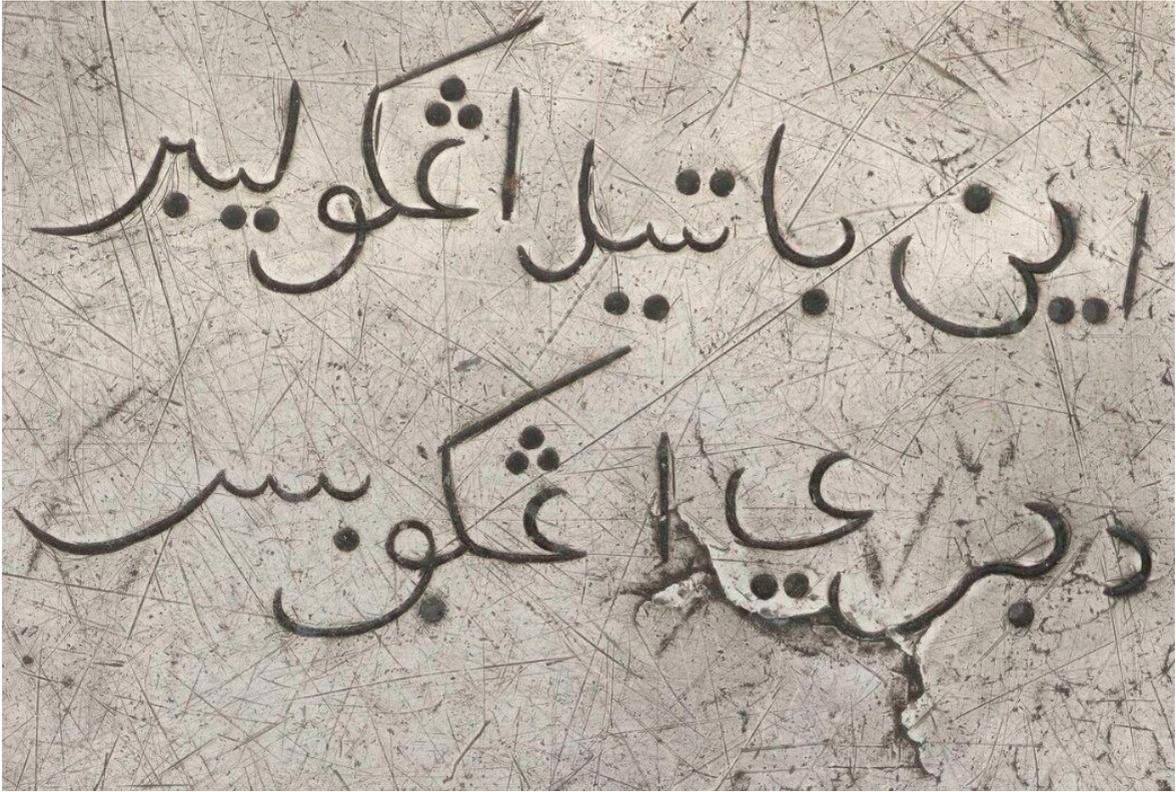


FIGURE 6: Detail of Jawi inscription identifying Engku Besar and Engku Lebar as previous owners of the bowl © V&A Museum

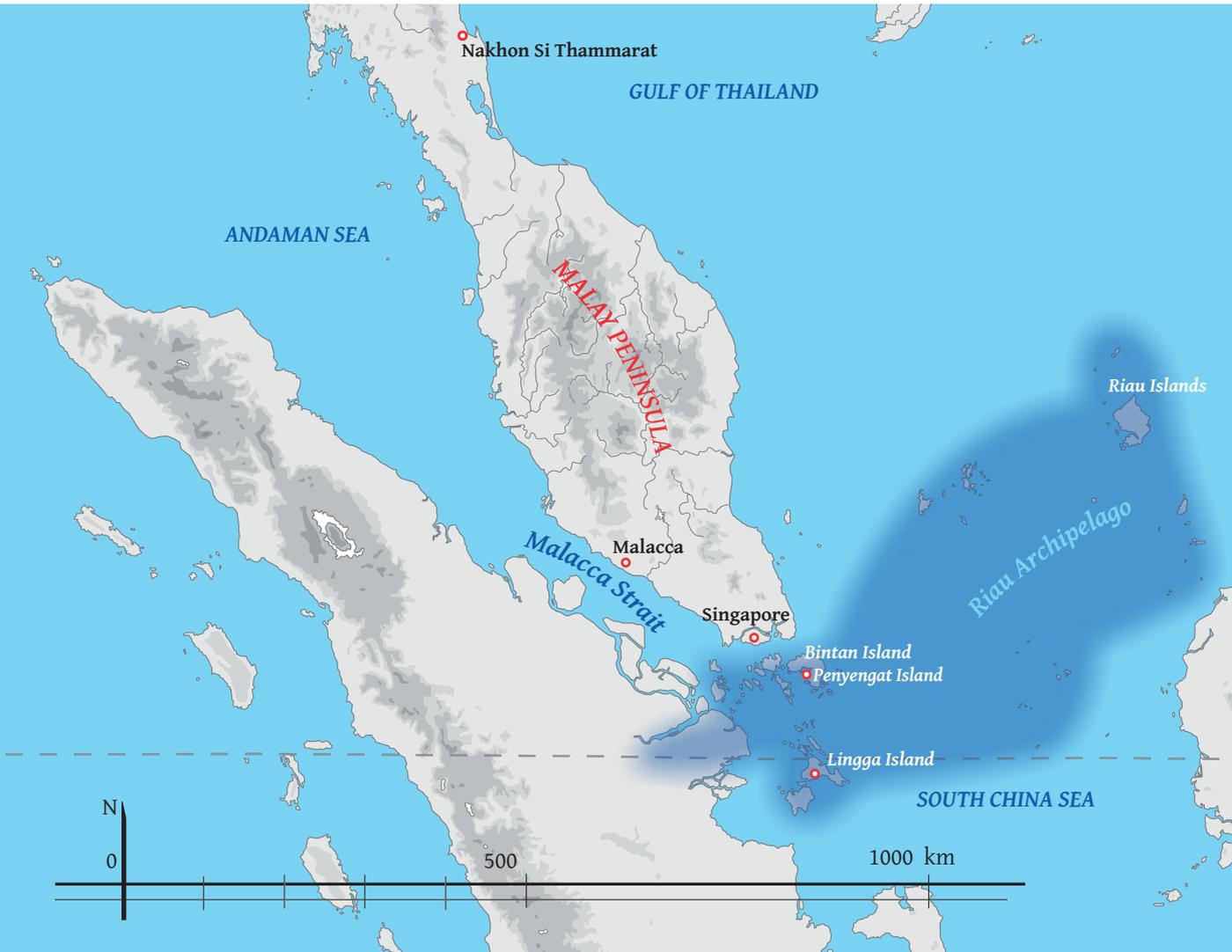
powerful emblem, publicly expressing Tengku Ambung's authority and her unmistakable claim over territories and resources under her rule.

Object in Movement: From Nakhon Si Thammarat to Riau-Lingga

Two plausible scenarios shed light on the potential journey of this bowl from its place of origin in Nakhon Si Thammarat to the court of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate situated in the South China Sea. Within the dual governance structure of the kingdom, Lingga Island served as the seat of the Malay royal court, while Penyengat Island, located off Bintan Island, fell

under the jurisdiction of the Bugis viceroys [MAP 1]. The *Tuhfat al-Nafis* recalls an account attributed to around 1778, presenting a glimpse into the material world of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate:

The decorations on the palaces of the Yang Dipertuan Besar and the Yang Dipertuan Muda were of gold and silver, even down to the chains of the lamps. Most of the trays and salvers were made from China and the betel boxes and decanters for rosewater, made in Manila, were also of gold and



MAP 1: The territories of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate in dark blue, consisting of many islands in the South China Sea and enclaves in eastern Sumatra

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silver and embossed and studded with polished diamonds. Most of the plates, bowls, coffee, and teacups had been made in China (Matheson & Andaya 1982: 160).

The emphasis on prestige goods imported from “China” and “Manila” reflects the maritime court’s consumption

of foreign goods, no doubt a reflection of the seafaring environment brought on by intensive trade and the migration of peoples. Indeed, the *Tuhfat al-Nafis* describes shipping vessels from Arabia, Bengal, China, Java, Siam, and Sulawesi so numerous in quantity that they were “crammed like sardines” on numerous occasions in the Riau River (Matheson & Andaya 1982: 90, 117, 126, 161).

In addition to trade, the potential route for the movement of this Siamese bowl could have been through royal diplomacy. The *Tuhfat al-Nafis* contains accounts that affirm the close relations between the Malay and Siamese courts. An example is found in the year 1856 when Tengku Ambung's aunt, Tengku Safiah, known in Thai as Chao Chom Tonku Subia (เจ้าจอมตงกูสุเบียบ), became a part of King Mongkut's (r. 1851–1868) harem of foreign consorts. This arrangement was made in exchange for the Siamese king's protection over Tengku Ambung's father, Sultan Mahmud, who faced a decline in favor with the Dutch (Matheson & Andaya 1982: 306, 410).

Dispersal of Courtly Possessions: From Riau–Lingga to London

According to the V&A Museum's records, the Siamese bowl was gifted to the museum in 1950 by Richard James Wilkinson (1867–1941), a British colonial administrator and Deputy Governor of the Straits Settlement between 1911 and 1916. In 1911, Tengku Ambung's son, Sultan Abdul Rahman II, was deposed by the Dutch, resulting in the displacement of Riau–Lingga royal members as they sought exile in Singapore (Gallop 2019: 303). During this period Wilkinson amassed a collection acquired in Singapore and the Federated Malay States which he first

loaned to the Indian Section of the V&A Museum on 23 June 1919. On 26 October 1950, an additional 209 objects were bequeathed to the V&A after the passing of Mrs Edith Sinclair Wilkinson, his widow.⁵

Tengku Ambung's bowl thus represents one of many royal heirlooms dispersed from the Riau–Lingga court after its dissolution in 1911. The dispersal of royal material over an extended period and undertaken by multiple parties is given further credence by an annual report excerpt from the Raffles Library and Museum in Singapore, attributing a substantial volume of silver acquisitions from Riau–Lingga:

The purchases include several valuable acquisitions, especially in silver ware, native rulers of some of the neighbouring islands in the Dutch possession bringing in consequence of political changes, such ware for sale to Singapore. There were a fine Table Service, of solid silver, consisting of 24 pieces, from Rhio; a Chutam sirih box, inlaid with gold, and a gold brooch and several smaller items of silver from the same locality (Annual report 1912).

The Jawi seal and inscription found on this Siamese silver nielloware bowl bear the indelible marks of three royal Malay women from the Riau–Lingga court, offering valuable insight into female rulership and expressions of power.

⁵ These are inventoried as IS.250 to 451-1950 and IS. 1 to 7-1952. For example, a silver betel box with a cover (IS.268&A-1950), featuring a similar Jawi inscription within a rectangular seal stamped on the base, serves as a distinctive marker of Tengku Ambung's possession. See: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O429231/betel-box-and-unknown/>.

This object symbolises gift-giving and inheritance as an expression of legitimacy through lineage. As a Siamese–Buddhist object in an Islamic court, the bowl reflects a syncretic and cosmopolitan environment where objects of different faiths and cultures not only circulated within the court but also were accorded high status. On no less than two occasions, this nielloware

bowl was significant enough to be gifted as a symbol of personal patrimony. Whether obtained through trade or royal diplomacy, the possession of this object by a Malay queen provides us with a glimpse into the transnational material world of the Riau–Lingga court and the active incorporation of hybrid objects as part of royal culture in the 19th century.

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