

Malay Libraries Prior to the 19th Century

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Abstract

Two archival preservation programs implemented over the past twenty years have identified and inventoried numerous private manuscript collections in Indonesia, the vast majority of which transpire to be religious in nature. This religious character seems to contradict the image previously held of the Malay written corpus, based on manuscript collections assembled during the colonial period. In the absence of any positive data, this article uses a wide variety of clues to demonstrate that there were no substantial libraries (at least a few thousand volumes) in the Malay sultanates before the 19th century, but that there were also private and religious libraries, equally small in size. Next, the colonial libraries are examined, which, despite the inherent defects of manuscripts uprooted from their cultural background and the looting of palace collections, preserved from destruction treasures of Indonesian literatures that no preservation campaign could bring to light today.

Keywords: Indonesia; libraries; literature; Malay language; Malay sultanates.