

Royal Malay Edicts from Aceh: *Sarakata*
from the 17th to 19th Centuries
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Abstract

This study of royal edicts of Aceh or sarakata traces their development over three centuries. In the early 17th century, during the autocratic rule of Iskandar Muda (r. 1607–1636), royal decrees were legally enacted through the ceremonial pronouncement of the king's word, sabda, in the presence of court nobles. Iskandar Muda's daughter Tajul Alam (r. 1641–1675) oversaw a sea-change in chancery practice, for while royal edicts were still announced orally, a paper copy was also issued to the recipient. By the 19th century, it was the written document itself, the sarakata bearing the ninefold seal of state, that was the crucial manifestation of the royal command. These developments are reflected in the diplomatics of sarakata: the formulaic opening lines evolve from a simple protocol common to all Malay states to two iterations unique to Aceh: including, from the mid 17th to mid 18th centuries, an elaborate description of the proclamation, and from the mid 18th into the 19th century, a long litany of blessings preceding the royal order to set pen to paper. This understanding of the chronological development of the diplomatics of royal edicts is then applied to five case studies of sarakata, to examine their authenticity and value as sources for the history of Aceh.

Keywords: royal edicts; Aceh; Acehnese; Malay; *sarakata*; *tarakata*; *sabda*; diplomatics; seals; manuscripts; lithographs.