

**EPISTOLARY AUTHORITY IN EARLY MODERN JAVA: A
PHILOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF
MATARAM'S ADMINISTRATIVE LETTERS TO
SOUTHERN CIREBON, LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY**

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Abstract: This study examines authority and official instruction through a philological framework, focusing on letters issued by the Sultanate of Mataram to southern Cirebon in 1687. It integrates codicology, linguistic analysis, and historical contextualization to reconstruct the manuscripts' communicative structure. The method combines close reading of orthography, formulaic diction, and material features with correlation to late seventeenth-century Javanese political contexts. Findings show that these letters function not only as administrative records but as instruments of internal diplomacy and socio-political control. They convey legal directives, reinforce hierarchical authority, and encode coercive signals toward local rulers. Linguistic registers, textual structure, and material presentation collectively project legitimacy, enforce compliance, and sustain territorial control, revealing a deliberate semiotics of power. Limitations arise from fragmentary manuscript survival, scribal variation, and linguistic inconsistency, which constrain generalization. This study reframes Mataram correspondence as a nexus of

administration, political legitimation, and social control. It contributes to Javanese historiography, colonial administrative studies, and Nusantara philology, and recommends digital philology, comparative manuscript analysis, and archival integration to advance the study of early modern Southeast Asian governance.

Keywords: Mataram Sultanate; Early Modern Java; Epistolary Governance; Philology; Political Communication

Introduction

The Mataram Sultanate (Javanese: ꦏꦩꦫꦩ꧀ꦱꦸꦠꦤꦠꦤ꧀; Pegon: متارام کسولتانان نکپاري; translit. *Nagari Kasultanan Mataram*) was a major Islamic polity in Java, established in the late sixteenth century following the coronation of Panembahan Senapati. It endured until its formal partition under the Giyanti Agreement in 1755, maintaining dynastic continuity as the principal locus of political legitimacy.

At its apogee under Sultan Agung (r. 1613–1645), Mataram consolidated hegemony over most of Java, encompassing Central Java, Yogyakarta, large parts of West Java excluding Banten, and significant areas of East Java including Madura. Its influence extended beyond Java through tributary and diplomatic networks linking Sukadana, Makassar, and parts of Sumatra such as Palembang and Jambi (Ricklefs, 2001; Andaya, 1993).

Administratively, the sultanate was structured into a hierarchical system comprising the *kutagara* as the royal core, *nagaragung* as principal territories, *mancanagara* as outer regions, and *pasisiran* as coastal zones, alongside semi-autonomous vassal polities. This configuration enabled differentiated modes of control, from direct incorporation to negotiated subordination, reflecting adaptive strategies of governance across a heterogeneous political landscape.

Mataram functioned as a sovereign state engaged in regional trade and diplomacy, including sustained interaction with the Dutch Republic through the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC). Such exchanges, conducted via envoys and official correspondence, reveal a complex negotiation between indigenous authority and expanding colonial power (Anderson, 2010). By the mid-eighteenth century, this relationship culminated in Mataram's transformation into a Dutch protectorate with *swapraja* status, signifying constrained sovereignty.

The Giyanti Agreement of 13 February 1755 marked a decisive rupture, partitioning Mataram into the Surakarta and Ngayogyakarta Sultanates, thereby institutionalizing the fragmentation of central authority (Ricklefs, 2001; Miksic, 2013). Contractual domination, as a broader colonial strategy, also underpinned the incorporation of polities such as Cirebon into VOC-controlled frameworks (Tendi, 2021).

Within this geopolitical configuration, Cirebon occupied a strategic position linking northern coastal networks with southern hinterlands. Historically extending toward Banyumas, the region is treated here as a unified analytical zone to clarify center-periphery relations under Mataram authority.

This study centers on a letter issued during the reign of Sunan Amangkurat II (r. 1677–1703), transmitted by the *priyayi* officials Kiai Astra and Astrawijaya. The document constitutes not merely an administrative record but a formal instrument of governance that mediates authority, enforces directives, and structures political relations in southern Cirebon.

Methodologically, this study adopts a philological approach as its primary analytical framework, enabling a systematic examination of the manuscript as both textual artifact and historical object (Tanselle, 1998; Baried et al.,

1985). The approach integrates codicology and textual criticism. Codicological analysis addresses the manuscript's materiality, including script, language, writing medium, provenance, scribal features, and production context, which are essential for assessing authenticity and reconstructing transmission histories (Baried et al., 1985, p. 55; Needham, 1979). Textual criticism is applied through a diplomatic edition, preserving original orthography, punctuation, and syntactic structure, an approach particularly suited to Latin script and Oud-Nederlands conventions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Tanselle, 1990).

The research procedure begins with high-resolution digital reproduction to capture palaeographic details such as letterforms, ink variation, margins, and scribal marks, followed by transcription to ensure legibility and analytical accessibility (Baried et al., 1985; Tanselle, 1998). Subsequent contextualization situates the manuscript within the political and social dynamics of Mataram under Amangkurat II, including infrastructural expansion and regional conflict in southern Cirebon. This stage draws on social and political history to embed textual analysis within its broader socio-historical framework (Howell & Prevenier, 2001; Burke, 2000).

By integrating codicology, textual criticism, and contextual historical analysis, this study advances a holistic interpretation of the manuscript, revealing its role in administrative practice, political communication, and regional governance. It also underscores the analytical value of digital philology in enhancing precision, accessibility, and interdisciplinary engagement while preserving manuscript integrity.

Previous scholarship on Mataram-era documents in West Java includes Holle (1864), Hermansoemantri (1979), Damais (1995), and Zaedin (2019). The former studies focus on the *Piyagĕm Sukapura*, a foundational text on regional

formation and post-rebellion territorial restructuring (Lasmiyati, 2016: 393), while Zaedin highlights the evidentiary significance of manuscript copies preserving seventeenth-century assertions of royal authority (Zaedin, 2019).

Building on this corpus, the present analysis of the 1687 letter of Amangkurat II advances a philologically grounded interpretation of Mataram administrative practice. It positions official correspondence as a critical interface between central authority and peripheral governance, contributing to a more precise understanding of political communication, mechanisms of control, and statecraft in early modern Java.

VOC Records and the 1687 Mataram Correspondence in Southern Cirebon

The manuscript examined in this study is catalogued under inventory number 8311, encompassing documents related to Timor (7 August–30 September 1687), Java's East Coast (29 March–13 November 1687), and Cheribon (10 April–21 November 1687). The inclusion of multiple geographically dispersed regions reflects the integrative archival logic of the VOC, in which administrative, commercial, and diplomatic records were compiled within unified bundles to document interconnected operations across Southeast Asia. This manuscript forms part of the archival collection *1.04.02 Inventaris van het archief van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC), 1602–1795 (1811)*, preserved at the Nationaal Archief in The Hague, a repository that safeguards extensive records of VOC governance, trade, and political engagement.

As part of the Nationaal Archief (NA), this collection represents the institutional consolidation of VOC records following the Company's dissolution in 1795. These archives, originating from various chambers including Amsterdam, Zeeland, Delft, Rotterdam, Hoorn, and

Enkhuizen, as well as the central governing body of the Heren XVII, constitute a comprehensive documentary corpus of early modern Dutch colonial enterprise. Established in 1602, the VOC operated as a state-backed commercial entity with monopolistic authority in Asia, producing a vast archive of administrative records, correspondence, and reports generated both in the Dutch Republic and across its Asian networks.

Within this archival system, inventory number 8311 is classified under access code 1.04.02 and organized within the E.5.a, Deel I bundle. This classification reflects a structured archival regime designed to facilitate retrieval based on region, chronology, and administrative function. The bundle contains diverse document types, including reports on trade and market conditions, financial and administrative records, official correspondence between VOC officials and local authorities, and formal orders outlining policy directives. Collectively, these materials illuminate the operational mechanisms, regional interactions, and governance strategies of the VOC in Southeast Asia.

Materially, the manuscript is written in Oud-Nederlands, employing seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch orthographic conventions. It is handwritten in cursive script (*Kurrent*) on paper measuring approximately 30 × 20 cm, a standardized format for administrative documentation. The document exhibits typical signs of age, including discoloration, fragility, creasing, and ink diffusion. As an official corporate record, it bears characteristic features such as formalized structure, authorized signatures, and, where preserved, markers of institutional authenticity. These material attributes are integral to codicological analysis, providing evidence of production context, usage, and archival transmission.

Within this archival corpus, the specific document analyzed in this study consists of Dutch translations of

original Javanese letters issued by the Mataram Sultanate and addressed to authorities in southern Cirebon in 1687. These translations, preserved within the VOC administrative framework, exemplify the Company's systematic documentation of interactions with indigenous polities, serving both bureaucratic and intelligence-gathering functions (Pigeaud, 1976; Ricklefs, 2001).

The absence of the original Javanese manuscripts presents a critical limitation. Based on prevailing administrative practices, such letters would have remained in the possession of their recipients, likely local elites in the Cirebon–Banyumas region. Their subsequent loss underscores the fragmentary nature of colonial archives and the asymmetry of source preservation. Nevertheless, the translated versions retain substantial evidentiary value, preserving the semantic content, administrative intent, and political tone of the original correspondence (Anderson, 1991).

Functionally, the Mataram letters recorded under inventory 8311 operated on multiple levels. Administratively, they conveyed formal directives from the central court; politically, they constituted instruments of authority, articulating sovereignty, regulating local governance, and signaling coercive intent in cases of resistance. Despite their mediated form as translations, these documents preserve layered meanings that can be systematically analyzed through philological, codicological, and textual approaches (Tanselle, 1998; Baried et al., 1985).

A close reading of these letters enables the reconstruction of Mataram's political communication strategies, particularly in managing center–periphery relations within contested frontier zones. This analysis also intersects with the broader context of VOC intervention in indigenous polities, as evidenced in Cirebon, where the Company actively shaped succession and governance

through contractual mechanisms such as the 1752 agreement (Tendi, 2023).

Accordingly, the 1687 Mataram letter corpus constitutes a critical entry point for examining the intersection of indigenous statecraft and colonial archival mediation. It provides insight into administrative practice, diplomatic language, and the negotiation of authority in late seventeenth-century Java, while also demonstrating the methodological potential of translated documents as proxies for lost originals (Ricklefs, 2001; Pigeaud, 1976).

The Mataram letter to the southern Cirebon leaders contained within archival code 8311 are presented as follows:

Narrative Origin Text:

Translaat van een Javaans briefedoor twee gandeex: in de bovenlanden op Java voort gesondenen dato heden van Seribon op Batavia ontfangen. dit briefje zenden de priaijs gandelx: Kiaij Astra tsjappaen Astrawijaja, voor afaan alle de negorijs volkeren, omde zelve te adviseren, dat vsij gandelx: zijn geordonneert, tothet schoon, en bruijikbaar te maken, van enige grote wegen, dievervolgens op dese plaatsen eijndigen, bewesten, eerst de Regteweg die op Banjoemaas uijt comt, van daar na adjibaran, en danverder naar Daijloer, wederom uijttet gebergte naar de strandt, en bezorgen datse op brebes (gelegen bewesten tagal) uijtquamen, zonder de passagien naar Lassarij, Gubban, en Sirribon, te vergeten, daar comende, zoo hadden zij hunne ordre volbragt, maar denegorijs volkeren, mosten over al op de wegen, daar zij gandelx: passeerden, bevorens hun aancomst, vaardig en gereet houden, 50: dragers, 10: paarden, 100: maten Reijst. 25: Hoenders, en 10: Rv. sContant tot costgeldt; dese brief moet niet opgehouden, maar gelesenzijnde, Cito werden voortgesonden, op de verbeurte van alle hunnegoederen. zoo ijmandt hier in nalatig wert bevonden.

Translation:

A translation of a Javanese letter conveyed by two envoys (*gandek*, royal couriers or messengers of authority), dispatched to the upland regions of Java and received in Batavia from Cirebon on this day. The letter is issued by the *priyayi* envoys (Javanese aristocratic officials), Kiai Astra and Astrawijaya, and addressed in advance to all inhabitants of the *nagari* (local administrative-polity units or governed communities). It serves to notify them that the envoys have been formally instructed to inspect, clear, and render passable a number of major roads. These routes are to extend westward, beginning with the principal road leading to Banyumas, continuing to Ajibarang, and further to Dayeuh Luhur. From there, the मार्ग (route) descends from the mountainous interior to the coastal zone, ensuring its termination at Brebes (situated west of Tegal), without neglecting the connecting routes to Losari, Gubban, and Cirebon. Upon completion of these trajectories, the envoys' आदेश (mandate or official आदेश) shall be considered fulfilled. All inhabitants of the *nagari* are required, along every route traversed by the envoys, to prepare in advance of their arrival the following provisions: 50 porters (*draggers*, compulsory labor units), 10 horses, 100 measures of rice (*rijst*, staple tribute commodity), 25 chickens, and 10 *rijksdaalders* (silver currency of the Dutch Republic) in cash as subsistence allowances. This letter must not be delayed. Once read, it is to be immediately forwarded (*cito*, indicating urgency in VOC administrative usage). Any individual found negligent in complying with these instructions shall be subject to total confiscation of property.

Transliteration and Functional Analysis of the 1687 Mataram Letter

To elucidate the linguistic structure, administrative register, and semantic layering of the 1687 Mataram letter, this study presents a systematic transliteration of the text preserved in the VOC manuscript. The transliteration is organized line by line and structured comparatively across three analytical levels: the original Oud-Nederlands text, its normalized form in Modern Dutch, and its translation into contemporary English, accompanied by philological annotations. This comparative framework enables a critical reconstruction of the text as both a linguistic artifact and a mediated administrative document shaped by seventeenth-century Dutch scribal conventions.

Orthographic features such as *translaat*, *ontfangen*, and *dato heden* reflect early modern Dutch usage, while abbreviations such as *gandee* for *gandeerlingen* and hybrid expressions like *priaijs gandelx* reveal the compression strategies of bureaucratic writing. At the same time, lexical elements such as *negorij* (from Javanese *nagari*) and toponyms including Banjoemaas (Banyumas), Adjibaran (Ajibarang), and Daijloer (Dayeuhluhur) demonstrate phonetic transcription practices through which VOC clerks rendered indigenous terminology into Dutch orthography.

Philologically, the document must be understood as a layered translation that simultaneously preserves and transforms the original Javanese message. The normalized Dutch text clarifies grammatical structure, while the English translation renders semantic intent; however, the philological notes reveal deeper processes of adaptation, including shifts in syntax, standardization of vocabulary, and the imposition of a formal administrative register. The pervasive use of imperative constructions, enumerative formulations, and juridical phrasing situates the document firmly within a bureaucratic discourse of command and compliance. Quantitative expressions such as “50 dragers,”

“100 maten rijst,” and “10 rijksdaalders” exemplify a highly structured administrative language oriented toward logistical precision and operational control.

Within this framework, the letter emerges not merely as a record of communication but as a performative instrument through which authority is articulated and enacted. Its content regulates the maintenance of strategic road networks linking inland and coastal regions, specifically from Banyumas through Ajibarang and Dayeuhluhur to Brebes, while also integrating auxiliary routes toward Losari, Gebang, and Cirebon. These निर्देश demonstrate a coordinated system of infrastructural governance designed to facilitate mobility, communication, and territorial integration. The requirement that local communities provide labor, transport animals, food supplies, and monetary support indicates a formalized system of resource mobilization consistent with corvée-like obligations, reflecting an advanced degree of administrative standardization within the Mataram polity (Ricklefs, 2001; Andaya, 1993).

At the same time, the text encodes a clear assertion of political authority. The deployment of *priyayi* couriers as bearers of the message signifies its origin in the central court and reinforces its legitimacy within established hierarchies of governance. The explicit sanction clause, stipulating the confiscation of property in cases of negligence, introduces a juridical dimension that underscores the coercive capacity of the state. Even in translation, the document retains markers of formal authority typical of royal correspondence, suggesting the presence of standardized formats, symbolic validation, and institutionalized procedures of communication. In the post-Trunojoyo context, when the authority of Amangkurat II required consolidation, such letters functioned as instruments of internal diplomacy,

reaffirming sovereignty while reasserting control over peripheral regions (Pigeaud, 1960; Ricklefs, 2001).

Equally significant is the document's role in structuring social relations at the local level. The obligation imposed on *nagari* communities to prepare resources prior to the arrival of royal couriers implies the existence of organized local hierarchies capable of mobilizing collective labor and coordinating compliance. The specification of quantities and the threat of sanctions contribute to the formation of normative expectations, linking obedience to material security and social order. In this sense, the letter operates as a mechanism of social regulation, shaping behavior through a combination of directive आदेश, logistical planning, and coercive enforcement.

Furthermore, by controlling routes, provisioning, and movement, the document functions as a tool of surveillance, enabling the central authority to monitor and influence regional dynamics (Andaya, 1993; Vickers, 2013). These administrative, political, and social dimensions are not discrete but mutually constitutive, forming a coherent communicative strategy embedded within the text. The letter exemplifies a sophisticated mode of governance in which infrastructural directives, assertions of legitimacy, and mechanisms of compliance are integrated into a single documentary form.

From a philological perspective, this integration is reflected in the convergence of linguistic features, including imperative syntax, formalized vocabulary, and the translation of Javanese political concepts into Dutch administrative idiom. The document thus embodies the intersection of indigenous statecraft and colonial mediation, revealing how written communication functioned as a central instrument in the consolidation of authority, the regulation of territory, and the production of social order in late seventeenth-century Java.

Conclusion

This study has sought to reinterpret a translated Javanese letter dated 1687 by situating it within the political and administrative landscape of the Mataram Sultanate during the reign of Sunan Amangkurat II (r. 1677–1703). Through the combined application of philological and codicological analysis, the research demonstrates that the document cannot be reduced to a routine administrative record. Instead, it should be understood as a complex textual construct through which authority was articulated, negotiated, and operationalized across spatial and institutional boundaries. By focusing on a single archival unit preserved in the VOC collection at the Nationaal Archief, this study foregrounds how seemingly marginal documents can illuminate broader systems of governance, particularly in frontier zones such as southern Cirebon, where the interaction between central authority and local structures was most visible and contested.

The archival positioning of the document within inventory number 8311 (access code 1.04.02) further underscores its significance. As part of a larger corpus of VOC records relating to Java, Timor, and Cirebon in 1687, the letter reflects the entangled nature of indigenous and colonial administrative systems. Its survival solely in Dutch translation highlights both the fragility and the mediation of historical sources. Nevertheless, the text retains crucial elements of its original communicative logic, including imperative formulations, structured quantification, and the incorporation of indigenous administrative categories such as *priyayi* and *negorij*. These features indicate that the translation process did not erase the underlying political semantics, but rather reframed them within a Dutch bureaucratic idiom. At the same time, codicological evidence, including script style, format, and archival organization, reveals the institutional mechanisms

through which such documents were standardized, preserved, and integrated into a wider colonial knowledge system.

Substantively, the analysis confirms that the letter operated through a convergence of administrative precision, political assertion, and social regulation. The detailed instructions concerning road maintenance and logistical provisioning point to a highly organized system of infrastructural governance, in which mobility, communication, and resource distribution were carefully coordinated. These directives were not merely technical in nature; they were embedded within a broader strategy to reinforce central authority over peripheral territories. The explicit inclusion of sanctions, particularly the threat of property confiscation, demonstrates the coercive dimension of this system, while the deployment of *priyayi* couriers signals the formalization of authority through recognized hierarchical channels. In this regard, the letter reflects a mode of governance in which written आदेश functioned simultaneously as instruction, enforcement mechanism, and symbolic assertion of sovereignty.

Equally important is the document's role in structuring local social dynamics. The requirement for communities to mobilize labor, animals, and provisions in advance of the couriers' arrival presupposes the existence of organized local leadership capable of coordinating collective action. This indicates that the effectiveness of central आदेश depended on the integration of local hierarchies into the administrative framework. The text thus reveals a reciprocal relationship between state authority and community structure, in which compliance was produced through a combination of obligation, surveillance, and normative pressure. In this sense, the letter may be read as an instrument of social discipline,

shaping behavior not only through coercion but also through the routinization of administrative expectations.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the 1687 Mataram letter exemplifies a sophisticated communicative strategy in which textual form, linguistic register, and material presentation were mobilized to sustain political order. The document illustrates how infrastructure, administration, and authority were mutually constitutive, particularly in a period marked by post-rebellion consolidation and increasing VOC intervention. Rather than viewing such texts as passive records, this study demonstrates that they actively participated in the production of governance, mediating relations between court, locality, and colonial actors (Ricklefs, 2001; Andaya, 1993; Pigeaud, 1960).

More broadly, this research reinforces the methodological value of philology in historical analysis. By engaging closely with the linguistic, material, and contextual dimensions of the text, it becomes possible to recover layers of meaning that are often obscured in translated or fragmentary sources. At the same time, the study highlights the need for critical engagement with colonial archives, which both preserve and reshape the voices they contain. Future research would benefit from expanding the comparative base of such documents, integrating digital philological tools, and exploring cross-regional archival connections to further reconstruct the dynamics of early modern Southeast Asian governance.

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Epistolary Authority in early Modern Java

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Epistolary Authority in early Modern Java

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