CHAPTER I

The south-central Javanese world
Circa 1792-1825

The ‘Versailles of Java’: Yogya in the early nineteenth century

Willem van Hogendorp (1795-1838), a Leiden trained lawyer and eldest son of Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp, was a member of Commissioner-General Du Bus de Gisignies’ inner cabinet and served as his right-hand man (De Prins 2002:112-3). On a visit to Yogyakarta in 1828 after nearly three years of warfare had laid waste many of its finest buildings, he wrote: ‘Sala [Surakarta] had already made an unusual impression on me, but Djocja [Yogyakarta] in its glory must have been the Versailles of Java. Not a tenth of it remains, but [what it once was] is visible from the massive stone ruins’.¹

In the view of a mid-nineteenth century Dutch Resident of Yogya, the sultan’s capital had reached its apogee in about 1820, some five years before the outbreak of the Java War (1825-1830):

Then Yogya was prosperous, rich and beautiful, the land fertile and fortunate, the capital clean and handsome, boasting many beautiful buildings, fine gardens and magnificent hunting lodges. Everywhere there was an abundance of food and water. Then trade, handicrafts and production flourished. Then the Javanese [of Yogyakarta] had pride in the place of [their] birth.²

Although this mid-nineteenth century official was about ten years too late in dating the sultanate’s zenith given the events of 1811-1812 (Chapter VII), it is true that as a city pre-1825 Yogya was almost unique in Java at this time because nearly a quarter of its buildings were constructed of stone brought

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from the limestone quarries at Gamping to the west of the town. Even Dipanagara’s country residence at Tegalreja was built in this fashion much to the wonderment of a post-Java War Dutch visitor. Even those houses built of bamboo and wood were kept whitewashed and clean, often being surrounded by low stone walls enclosing a yard with fruit trees and shrubs. Another perceptive traveller and high Dutch government official, Jan Izaäk van Sevenhoven, also commented on the cleanliness and orderliness of the place on a visit in 1812. At that time, the main avenue leading to the kraton was lined with tall and shady banyan trees with the residences of the princes and court officials as well as the dwellings of the ordinary Javanese inhabitants being set back at some distance on either side of the road. Further down the avenue was a row of Chinese shop-houses which to the west gave onto

3 On the limestone quarries and ovens at Gamping which were run by Chinese workers and produced some 600 pikul (1 pikul = 61.761 kgs) a month in 1820, see Carey 1981a:238 note 21. The control of these quarries and their Chinese labour force would become one of the casus belli between Dipanagara and his opponents in the Yogya court in July 1825, see Chapter IX.

4 See Chapter II.

5 Nahuys van Burgst 1852:135; KITLV H 503, Jan Izaäk van Sevenhoven, ‘Aanteekeningen gehouden op eene reis over Java van Batavia naar de Oosthoek in […] 1812’ (ed. F. de Haan), 6-4-1812 – 2-8-1812 (henceforth: Van Sevenhoven, ‘Aanteekeningen’), 107, noted that the only other towns in Java with a large proportion of stone houses were Batavia and Gresik.