Numerous objects are mentioned in the *Sejarah Melayu*, or *Malay Annals*, a semi-historical account of the Malacca sultans, their ancestors, and their descendants, first written in 1482, by a Johore prince, Raja Bongsu, also known as Tun Sri Lanang.¹ The objects include textiles, weapons, metalwork, furniture, musical instruments, tombs, vessels, buildings, gardens, and fortifications (see appendix).² The importance of these objects is twofold: first, although they are accidental to the narration of the story, they give us hints about the material culture of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Malacca and the surrounding port cities. Second, they tell us something about how artistic objects were to be understood in Malacca in those centuries.

The objects in the *Sejarah Melayu* are used like props on a stage to suggest the setting. The main thrust of the narration is on the characters moving in and out of a given scene or anecdote, but the contextual relation between a scene and an object or a series of objects which appears in it sometimes gives hints about its appearance and purpose. The kris is a royal symbol, in one instance, a gift in another, and a deadly weapon in a third, where it is used in the famous dual between Hang Tuah and Hang Kasturi. In this third instance, Hang Tuah’s secret affair with one of the palace women attendants is discovered by the sultan, who then orders Hang Tuah to be executed. Knowing that Hang Tuah is no ordinary fighter, the prime minister takes it upon himself to put Hang Tuah in fetters. This punishment enrages Hang Kasturi — Hang Tuah’s dearest friend — who revolts by running amuck in the palace. In despair the sultan invokes Hang Tuah to deal with Hang Kasturi. The prime minister releases Hang Tuah, who is given the sultan’s kris which kills Hang Kasturi. The kris performs more than just symbolic and practical functions. It conveys the deeper message that no one should ever revolt against the sultan³ because that violates the Malay ethos.

Another scene is a royal wedding. The ruler of Palembang, Demang Lebar Daun prepares for the ceremonial lustration. A series of objects are described whose presence is central to the scene; a seven-tiered bathing pavilion is built with five spires of the finest quality; when it is completed Demang Lebar Daun initiates the festivities with a wide variety of entertainments that continue for forty days and forty nights. Buffaloes, oxen, and sheep are slaughtered to feed the guests. Princes, ministers, courtiers, heralds, chieftains, and all the people feast and drink to the accompaniment of every sort of music. Then the ceremonial water in the golden vessels studded with jewels is brought in. The prince and his bride are borne in procession seven times round the pavilion, and take the purification bath on the central platform. The prince unwraps his towel and puts on his royal sarong, called *darapata darmani*, and the princess wears hers, called *burudatimani*. Both are invested with the complete insignia of sovereignty, whereupon they sit on the golden dais. They eat the ceremonial rice while everybody watches. Finally they crown themselves with the royal ornamented headdress. In the last part of the ceremony the menfolk are led by the prince onto the royal golden yacht, while the queen rides a silver one.⁴

The first six chapters of the *Sejarah Melayu* treat materials which are largely legendary; the subsequent chapters are essentially about the rise and fall of the Malacca sultanate. The legendary story traces the beginnings of the Malay kings to Alexander the Great of Macedonia. Raja Bongsu bases this lineage on the *Hikayat Iskandar*, a Malay translation of the Perso-Arabic romance about Alexander the Great, his model for writing his *Sejarah Melayu*. The *Hikayat Iskandar* confirms the nobility of the Malay rulers: Raja Bongsu asserts that the line runs from Alexander down to a succession of kings in India whose descendants had spread across the vast Malacca archipelago and Indianized the Malay rulers in Palembang, from where the founder of the Malacca sultanate had come early in the fifteenth century.⁵

Raja Bongsu was aware that there were problems with this lineage: Alexander preceded the Prophet Muhammad by many centuries, and many more centuries were to elapse between the Prophet Muhammad and the gradual Islamization of the Malays. The Malays could not be Muslims prior to the Prophet Muhammad. So Raja Bongsu adopts a textual strategy by inserting the bismillah as the opening line of his preface; he then precedes
or follows his Malay sentences with Arabic phrases and locutions. The authority of Arabic, especially the bismillah, eradicates or at least mitigates the stigma of an infidel past. He refers to himself as a fakir who is aware of his weakness and the limitation of his knowledge, mounted, as he is, “on the steed of ignorance.” At the end of most chapters, in typical Muslim self-effacing fashion, he declares the standard affirmation: “God knoweth the truth. To Him do we return.” Yet even a pagan past had its own glory, of which the Malacca kings are eager to partake. That light of glory is filtered through the prism of Islam and refracted to the material world as something pure. Purity was expressed, on the one hand, by the idea of pure blood sanctified by the Hindu caste system, or some residual form of it and, on the other, by the purity of the Arabic language, Qur’anic or otherwise, in the minds of the non-Arab Malays. The textual strategy operates through both time and faith; both are treated in a way that enhances the focus of the Sejarah Melayu which according to the preface is to chronicle the genealogy of Malay rajas, to set down in writing the ceremonies of the royal courts, and to inform the royal descendants of their history. Whenever he has to conceal or to reveal, Raja Bongsu resorts to Arabic phrases for maximum impact.

As the narrative gets closer to his own time, Raja Bongsu is constrained by other considerations. The most pressing of these is the Malay sense of propriety. It forces him to speak guardedly, especially about palace intrigues, crimes, jealousies, all aspects of seizing, using, and maintaining power. Power is expressed in terms of the objects connected with the reign of each ruler. Inevitably, these objects are made of gold: “Where there is sovereignty, there is gold.” No one but the shah is permitted to wear gold, no matter how rich he is, unless it is a present from the ruler; then he is permitted to wear it in perpetuity. This obsession with gold runs throughout the book, from the early Indianized period to the setting up of the Islamic port cities in the fifteenth century. The reader is often bemoaned by the numerous references to golden objects—a bejeweled chair of gold, golden caskets filled with precious stones, horses with gold trappings, golden yachts, a Pahang cleaver inlaid with gold, plates, bowls, trays of silver or gold and so on. The reader begins to wonder whether these references are literary conventions or statements of fact. As there are no other texts like the Sejarah Melayu from the fifteenth and sixteenth century, we have no choice but to take Raja Bongsu’s presentation at its word.

The book also lists what the commoner cannot do. It states that commoners cannot use the color yellow for cloths, curtain fringes, bolster ends, mattresses, wrappings. Strung jewels cannot adorn the houses of commoners. They cannot have closed verandas, hanging pillars, posts that reach the roofbeam. Commoners cannot have summer houses or boats with windows and cabins. White umbrellas are reserved for kings and yellow umbrellas for princes. Commoners cannot have metal casings on their kris, not even half way up the sheath. Commoners are forbidden to wear ankle bracelets of gold; silver-knobbed gold anklets are a royal privilege. Regardless of rank, no one is permitted to enter the palace without wearing his sarong in the overlapped fashion, his kris in front, and a scarf over his shoulders. Anyone who wears his kris behind will have it confiscated by the gatekeeper. The penalty for defying this order is death. Courtly etiquette and injunctions were taken seriously; there was no appeal for the offenders. Over time, however, when Malacca was overrun by the Portuguese in 1511 and the seat of Malay power moved to Johore, these injunctions were less strictly enforced.

While the tradition of courtly courtesies was still very much alive in the palaces of twentieth-century Malaysia, most of the royal treasures from earlier times were no longer extant. Most gold objects were melted down or looted; stone objects weathered away by neglect; wooden objects perished in the humidity of the tropics. We can only imagine what they looked like. Some of them are mentioned in such a way that one can visualize some approximation of them, but references to palaces, gardens, and fortifications are not often backed up by adequate description. There is a fairly good description of the fortified city of Bija Negara, but it gives an impression that Raja Bongsu may have relied either on someone else’s description or on a miniature painting; the latter is more likely because the description has a pictorial quality about it. He writes that the fort is of black stone with walls seven fathoms thick and nine fathoms high. The masons are so skilled that no space can be seen between the stones. The gate is of hammered gold, studded with jewels. The fort encompassed seven mountains. In the middle of the city was a lake as wide as the sea in which the king kept fish of every sort. In the middle of the lake was an island of great height whose summit was always wrapped in foggy mist. This island was a pleasure garden planted with fruit trees and flowers from all over the world. In the forest reserve of the island were all sorts of wild beasts. The king went there when he wished to hunt elephants. Raja Bongsu conceded that if he were to go on, he would write a book as thick as the Hikayat Ham-