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# **Stimulating Thinking In History – An Example**

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One main concern of history teachers is the need to cover the syllabus – in time for the examinations. This "annual rush" is all the more obvious at the upper secondary levels. Usually, the task is achieved because the teacher uses lecture or "teacher-talk method. Continuous application of this method often creates the famous saying of pupils taking history – "History is boring". The teacher, on the other hand, does recognize the importance of resources stimulate students' thinking and, at the same time, to add "life" to his lessons. But the fear of not being able to complete the syllabus because of the time spend in preparing and using the resources is too serious to ignore. This short article stresses the point that explanation of historical content by the teacher can be positively reinforced by the use of resources (in this case, through the use of pictures), despite the tight teaching schedule. It shows how pictures were used to generate thinking in history lessons on the topic "The Portuguese in Malacca".

## **Objectives Of Teaching Package**

The teaching package consists of photographs and pictures of the Portuguese fort in Malacca, the "A Famosa", a layout of the Malacca fort and the fort at Fort Canning Hill in Singapore. The package is a sub-topic based on the chapter "The Portuguese in Malacca".

The objective of the package is mainly to get the pupils to use their imagination to empathise with historical periods. Besides that, it is also to enable them to develop analytical skills to understand the strategic significance of the "A Famosa". At the same time, they will be able to view critically the different forms of defence, especially that of Portuguese Malacca.

## Rationale

Pictures were used because the discussions held were based on the physical structure and location of the fortress. Written documentary sources will fall short in providing a visual/pictorial image necessary to facilitate discussion.

The picture of the fort will give the students an idea of its structure and built; whereas an aerial view of the fortress will reveal its strategic location. Finally, a layout plan of the fortress will help students understand the mechanism of its defence.

## Class Profile

The pupils were from a Secondary Three Normal class. The entire group is made up of girls. They are generally not very keen on the subject, and are bored with rote-learning and "teacher-talk". They particularly enjoy classroom and group discussions.

## Teaching Procedure

The topic on "The Portuguese in Malacca" was taught over four 35-minutes periods, followed by a double-session and it ended with another single-period session. During the four single-period segment, the teacher provided the historical content on the various aspects of Portuguese rule in Malacca. The discussions on the pictorial resources took place in the second and third segment of the teaching time-frame. The strategies involved can be grouped according to the respective visual presented to the students.

- (a) Pictures of the "Santiago Gate"  
The pupils were divided into six groups. The same number of pictures were given to each group. The students were asked to study the pictures and to think of the following questions:
  - (1) How high do you think the wall is?

- (2) How do you think the Portuguese built the fort?  
(The manpower, materials and the mechanics involved).
  - (3) What is the purpose of the fort?
  - (4) How would people move in and out of the fortress?
- (b) Aerial View of the Malacca Fort  
The pupils were provided with an aerial view picture of the fort. Here, they studied the strategic location of the fort. They were told to form some relevant questions to be directed to the class. Some of the questions were:
- (1) Where was the fort located?
  - (2) Why was it located at the particular spot?
  - (3) What was the purpose of the bridge?
  - (4) Where were the bastions located and why?
- (c) Layout Plan of the Malacca Fort  
Finally, the pupils were given the layout plan of the fort. They studied carefully the defence of the fort. Features of the stronghold were noted by them and these included the moat, the bastions and the watch tower. As some of the words were not understood by them the teacher had also to explain their meanings.
- (d) A discussion to compare Fort Malacca and Fort Canning was carried out during the last one-period segment. The students were asked to comment on the similarities and differences of both fortifications. They were also encouraged to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of such fortifications in modern day warfare and technologies, thus establishing a link between the past and the present.

## Observation And Response

An analysis of the students' response revealed their critical thinking ability and reasoning power. Despite the fact that it is an all-girls class and the perception that girls are less interested in discussions on defence and strategy, the performance of the pupils proved otherwise.

Below is an excerpt of the discussion between the teacher and students, and among the students themselves.

[Looking at Picture One]

T : How high do you think the wall is?

P : 10m

P : 50m

P : 100m (class laughed)

T : Why are you laughing?

P : Too high!

T : But won't it be better to keep out the enemies?

P : Very difficult to build.

P : Enemy must be giant! (class laughed)

T : What about building it lower . . . . say 3m?  
(Pause)

P : May be a bit too low.

P : Can use ladder to enter

P : Should be above 10m.

[Students looking at Picture Two]

T : Where is the fort built?

P : Near the river.

T : Why was it built there?

P : Can guard the river.

P : Protect the traders coming by the river.

P : Can defend Malacca.

T : How?

P : Enemies can use the river to enter Malacca.

T : Yes, and if that happens Portuguese Malacca would fall.  
But take a closer look at the structure. What do you notice?  
(Pause)

P : A great part of the wall is surrounded by water.

T : Very good; and what are the advantages?  
(Pause; some irrelevant answers like "cool sea breeze",  
"good for fishing and swimming").

P : Easy loading and unloading of goods.

P : Look out for approaching enemy ships and quick preparation to  
attack and defend.

P : Better control of ships sailing in and out of Malacca.

T : Good points. The location of the fort is such that blockade of  
food and other supplies by enemies at the mouth of the river  
would not be easy. Also, the Portuguese could monitor closely  
the sea traffic by-passing or coming into Malacca.

[Students given the Layout Plan]

T : How is the fort defended?

P : High walls.

P : Guns and cannons.

T : Where are the guns and cannons found?

P : The bastions. The highest points of the surrounding wall.

T : How many of such posts or bastions can you find in the plan?

P : Five

T : In which direction can most of them be found?

P : More facing the river and sea.

T : Why do you think this is so?

P : The enemies will come from the river and sea.

P : The land side is jungle, very difficult to come in.

T : Aren't you making the same mistakes as the British did in their  
defence of Singapore?

P : Not us. The Portuguese.  
(Class laughed)

Besides the guns and cannons, how are the enemies prevented from entering the fort?

P : Moat.

T : What is a moat?

P : A wide ditch surrounding the fort.

T : How can the people and supplies move in and out of the fort?

P : By the bridge; the drawbridge.

T : How can enemies be spotted from afar if the walls are so high?

P : Watch-towers.

As the class worked through the pictures they were doing more than just looking at the pictures. What was presented to them were historical problems, and by looking at the pictures they attempted to solve them. Though they are not able to say what was definitely the case in history, they at least had a hand in experiencing what historians would face in the same situation. Thus the pupils also learned that history is only what we can make out of all that is available to us now and that there is no absolutely right or wrong answer. What we can make out of history is the information or sources we have from the past, and our interpretation of the situation.

In the lessons mentioned above, it must be reaffirmed that the provision of historical content does not suffer simply because time is "wasted" by the discussion on the pictures. On the contrary, the observation and questioning of the resources reinforce the teacher's explanation of historical facts. In other words, activities on historical sources and the teaching of historical content are complementary to one another. For example, now that the girls have a better understanding of the "A Famosa" and, hence, the Portuguese defence of Malacca, they would appreciate why it took as long as eight months of siege before the Dutch could capture Malacca in January 1641.

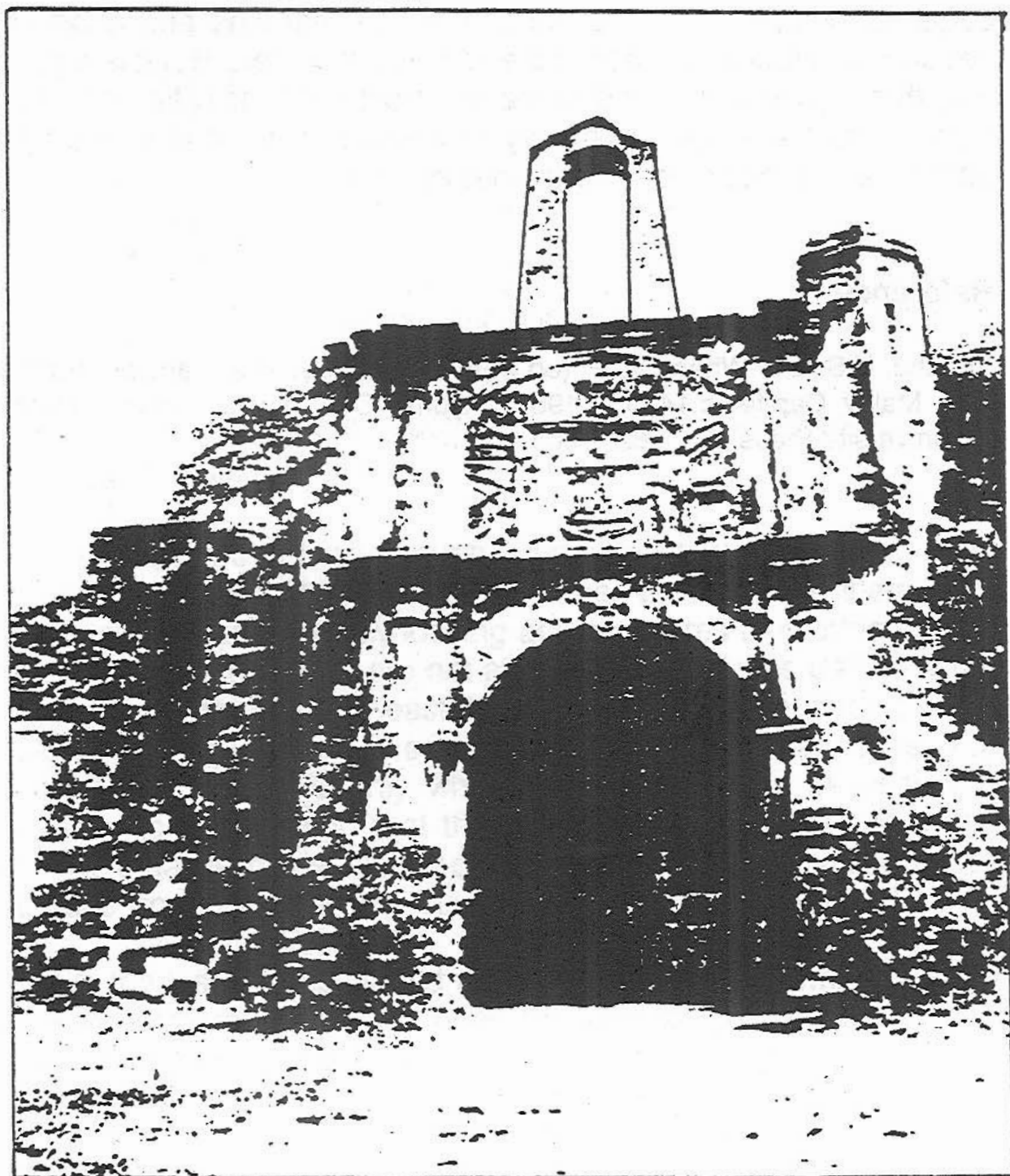
In conclusion, primary and secondary sources are important teaching aids of the history teacher who is self-motivated and always eager to inject life in his lessons. It is true that time and effort are needed to select and prepare the stimulus materials. But it is equally true that pupils who stand to benefit from such activities do know more about the subject of history as a whole than those who simply absorb and produce chunks of history notes!

## Reference

Sandhu, K.S. and Wheatley, P. (ed.) (1983) *Melaka : The Transformation of a Malay Capital c.1400 – 1980*. Volume One. Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, pp. 782 – 805.



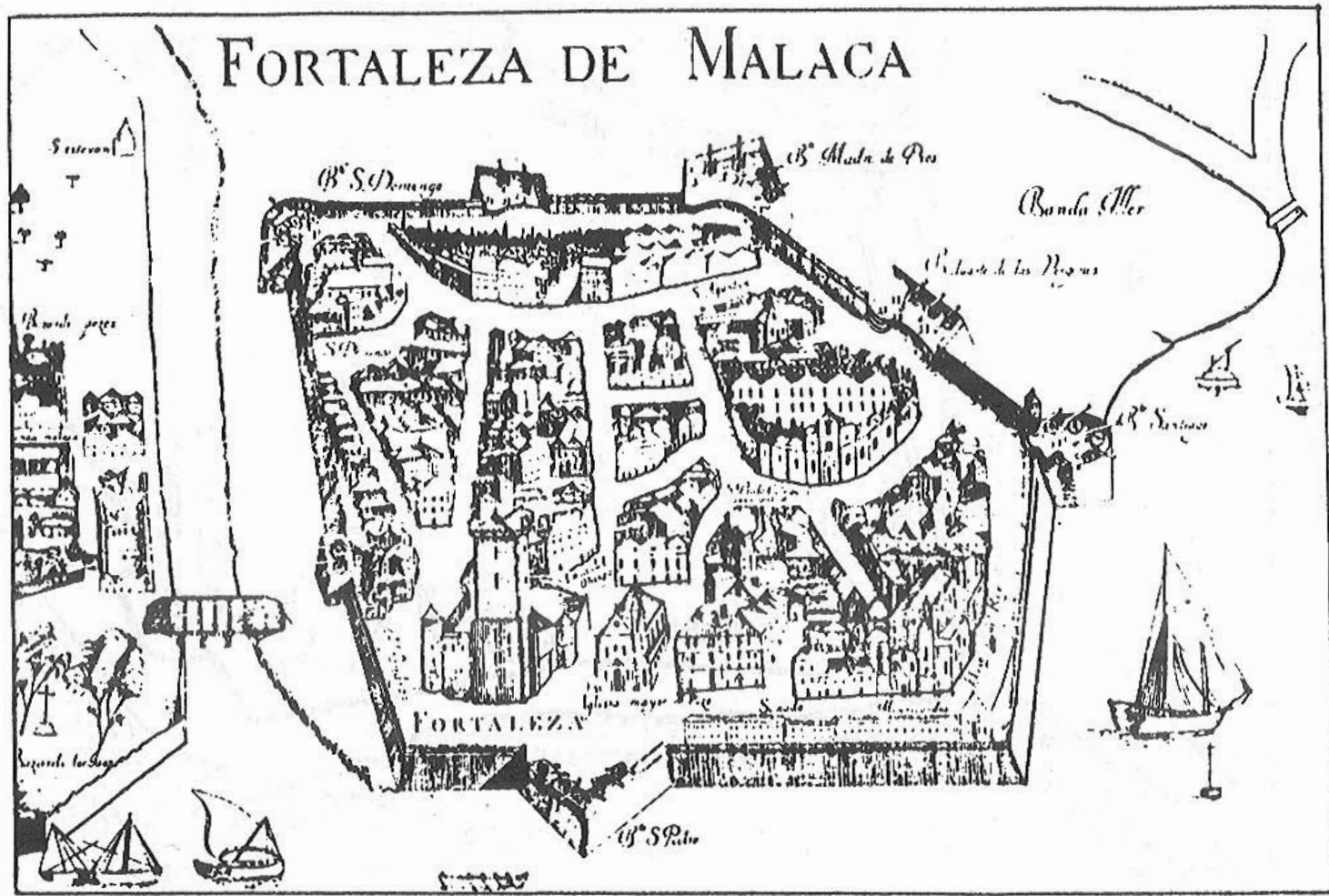
PICTURE 1



*Footnote to teachers:*

Picture shows the sole surviving feature of the Dutch fortifications. It is a gate that was built in 1669 and known as the "LAND GATE". On it the town's coat of arms was depicted, incorporating a junk, an armed man, and the seal of the Dutch East India Company. It is often referred to under the old Portuguese name of Santiago, though it is not the same gate as the one the Portuguese constructed near the bastion of that name.

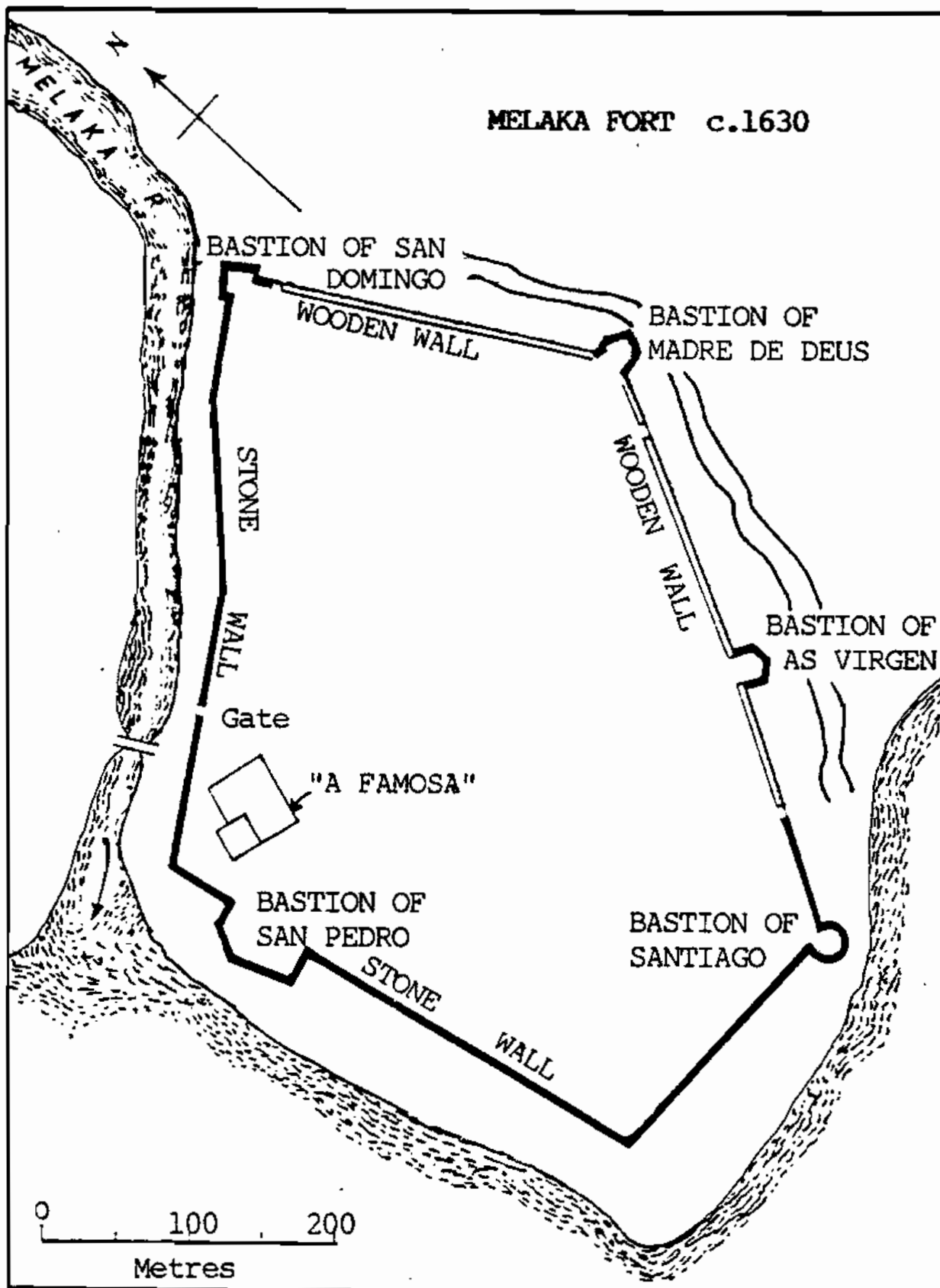
PICTURE 2



Footnote to teachers:

The drawing was completed around 1630. It depicts a wooden stockade extending all the way from the Bastion of San Domingo to the Bastion of Santiago. The small bastion between San Domingo and Madre de Deus is non-existent as no written authority anywhere refers to it. It may well just be an "architectural feature" added by the illustrator (who might have been influenced by earlier drawings of the fort).

PICTURE 3



*Footnote to teachers:*

A weakness of the fort was the wooden wall on the southern and eastern sides probably because the ground on these sides was usually waterlogged and hence formed a "natural defence". But Malacca was under constant land attack by Acheh, assisted at times by rulers of Johore, Perak and Pahang.