Chandi Bukit Batu Pahat

A Report on the Excavation of an Ancient Temple in Kedah

by

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SECTION 1. INTRODUCTORY

In the years immediately before the outbreak of World War II, Dr. H. G. Quaritch Wales and Mrs. Wales carried out an extensive exploration of the Kra Isthmus and northern Malaya in a quest for traces of ancient Indian, or Indianised, settlements. In Kedah and Province Wellesley, on the basis of the accounts of Lt. Col. Low in the early 19th century, and of I. H. N. Evans in the 1920s, Wales discovered and investigated over thirty sites, most of them, if not all, of temple structures. These sites were distributed over a fairly small area, the main concentration being on the north bank of the Merbok estuary which joins the sea opposite the northern tip of Penang Island.

The existence of an Indianised state in the north west of the Malay Peninsula was also suggested by non-archaeological evidence. The name Kedah has been detected in literary sources from Indian and China and in the accounts of early Muslim travellers. A number of South Indian inscriptions of the Chola period make reference to a Kataha or Kadaram which, it has been supposed, can only be Kedah. The folklore of the Kedah region and a traditional, though late, Malay history of this state also attest to the existence here of a flourishing Indianised community for some centuries before the coming of Islam. These references have given rise, in recent years, to a considerable literature in which attempts have been made to relate ancient Kedah to the history of South East Asia, and to demonstrate that ancient Kedah lay, or as some would have it, did not lie, within the boundaries of the present Kedah. Dr. Wales felt quite rightly that the attempt to locate the centres of ancient South East Asia on literary evidence alone was unsatisfactory; and his researches were aimed at checking the literary and epigraphical evidence through archaeological investigations in the field.

Dr. Wales’ researches in Kedah have been continued in recent years by the University of Malaya. In 1956 the region of the Merbok Estuary was visited by Dr. J. de Jong and Mr. K. G. Tregonning. They reported that a number of sites between the Merbok and the Muda River merited investigation, with the result that in the following year Dr. M. Sullivan and the author of this paper took a party of student members of the University of Malayan Archaeological Society to Kedah for a period of some six weeks. Four small temple sites were examined, three of which had been noted by Dr. Wales, and it was concluded that while Dr. Wales’ work here had been remarkably comprehensive, it had by no means exhausted the possibilities of this region. Fresh sites existed and much could yet be learnt from a re-examination of many of his old sites. With this in mind, Dr. Wang Gungwu, Mr. B. A. V. Peacock and the author of this paper carried out a number of surveys of the Merbok region in 1957 and 1958. Most of Wales’ sites were located and, in February 1958, one of them, his site no. 8, was cleared.
of the thick vegetation which had grown over it since Dr. Wales’ day to reveal the remains of a most intriguing stone structure. In the course of this work an intact foundation deposit came to light. In 1959 this site was excavated with some thoroughness and it was reconstructed to as great an extent as the surviving evidence would permit; and a detailed account of these operations is contained in this paper.

In his report on his excavations in Kedah, which appeared in the Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Vol. XVIII, Pt. I of 1940, (pp. 18–21), Dr. Wales described his site no. 8 in the following words:

KEDAH: SITE 8.

This temple stood on a low spur of Kedah Peak overlooking the Merbok Kechil River not far from its source. This site was actually on a small rubber estate, owned by a Sumatran, but it was close to the edge of the forest. I first became interested in it when I heard that the spur was known as Bukit Batu Pahat, "Hill of Worked Stone" and was told that there were in fact ancient remains there. The spur overlooked the Merbok Kechil at a point where it formed a pretty waterfall with a pool beneath it. It seemed certain that the beauty of the spot would have attracted Hindus who might well have seen in the waterfall a representation of the birth of Ganga from S'iva’s locks. On a dry portion of the stream bed, a little distance below the pool, were signs that here had been quarried the stone required for building the temple, one remaining as it had been left in process of extraction.

The mound which indicated the remains of the temple, stood in an enclosure whose walls of unworked boulders (such as abound on the hillside) could be traced, while slightly lower down the north-east slope of the spur were signs of a terrace reinforced with unworked boulders. In general it may be said that the temple resembled the S'iva temples on the Bujang in plan, differing from them mainly by greater elaboration and a more profound knowledge of construction in stone. All that remained of the vimana, which opened to the south-east, was its plinth and lower courses of the wall, all constructed of carefully dressed small granite blocks. These stood on a basement of rubble, paved and faced with the same type of well-dressed granite blocks forming severe mouldings. In the interior of the sanctuary, at the level of the lowest course of the plinth, was a floor of laid granite blocks which had been in great part destroyed by treasure seekers. The basement on which the vimana had stood was approached by a flight of stairs leading up from the mandapam platform which projected towards the southeast and was paved with granite blocks.
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Several of the stone socles with square mortises that had supported the timber pillars of the mandapam, were found in situ. At each corner of the plinth of the vimana, on the basement, there had stood a stone socle with square mortise intended to support a perpendicular pillar, while these corner socles were each flanked by two smaller socles with mortises so cut as to have supported each a diagonal pillar or strut. There had also been a large mortised socle on the basement, beside the centre of each face of the plinth, on which had evidently stood a pillar designed to receive the upper extremity of the two struts concerned. Most of these socles were found in situ. In each of the eight large socles there was in the centre of the bottom of the mortise a small square recess containing, or which had contained, the foundation deposits that will be described below.

The building had evidently fallen towards the north and consequently it was around the north corner of the basement that there was a large mass of fallen masonry. When this was cleared, among the débris were found a number of worked granite blocks having rather severe mouldings which had evidently ornamented the superstructure. A large curvilinear block of stone, which had been removed by the owner of the estate to his garden, though somewhat resembling a stela was perhaps the finial of the vimana. In any case it seems very likely that the upper structure was mainly, if not entirely, built of stone, though the use of the timber pillars and struts as supports strongly suggests that the builders were by no means quite accustomed to the use of a non-perishable medium.

The interior of the vimana was choked with débris, amongst which may be mentioned here a broken snana-droni with circular recess for the image base, of a style differing from those usually associated with the linga such as we have seen in the temples on the Bujang. Outside the temple were recovered the well-dressed segments of a somasutra. Of uncertain use was a square stone somewhat resembling a socle but pierced right through by a circular hole.

FINDS.

Foundation Deposits:—In the recesses in the eight chief socles around the vimana, as mentioned above, there had been deposited, presumably in each case, a small silver capsule (about 9/16th” diameter) containing one small polished sapphire and one small polished pyrope. In two cases only, at the south and west corners respectively, were the capsules and their contents actually found in situ.
**Ceramics:**—A few coarse grey or red unornamented potsherds only.

**Iron Implements:**—A few corroded nails of old type were found.

**Bronze:**—Among the debris within the sanctuary, just above snana-droni, was found the fragmentary base of an image having a beaded decoration. The diameter of the base was about 7" so that it would have fitted the circular depression of the snana-droni and may thus well have been the base of the principal image in the temple. In addition, a bronze trident of S'iva, having one outer prong missing, was also recovered. The height of the extant portion was 2 9/16", so that it probably belonged to the image of which the fragmentary bronze base was found. The trident was a find of considerable importance not only because it confirmed my belief that this temple, like those on the Bujang, was dedicated to the S'aiva cult, but because its style was clearly Pallava.

**Two Nine-Chambered Reliquaries:**—These two highly interesting quartzite receptacles had evidently been flung out of the ruined sanctuary when the temple had been pillaged, since they were found amongst the debris just outside. Each receptacle measured about 63/4" square, had a low foot at each corner and had at one time doubtless possessed a stone cover which was not found. Nine small cylindrical chambers were cut in the floor of each.

No such receptacles are to be seen in the Madras Museum and from enquiries I made there it appears that they are unknown in South India, presumably owing to lack of excavation, for undoubtedly it must be from India that this type of ritual object originated. On the other hand very similar receptacles have been quite frequently found in Java and it is here that we find the solution to the problem as to their use. Examples, larger and more elaborately carved than those under consideration and complete with their lids, are to be seen in the Batavia and Jogjakarta Museums. In Dr. W. F. Stutterheim's catalogue of the latter museum (p. 17) two receptacles, of limestone and andesite respectively, are described as follows:—

"Caskets with nine compartments and their covers. Into the central compartment a part of the ashes of a cremated king was placed; into the others, bits of precious metal and semi-precious stones. The casket was buried in a pit beneath the posthumous statute enshrined in a chandi and served as a magical depository ensuring the survival of the king's soul". Furthermore the same catalogue (p. 10) gives interesting information concerning a statue of a king and queen in the form of S'iva and his consort Parvati in the museum collection;
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"Posthumous statues of royal personages were made in the shape of images of deities. They were placed in a tomb-temple (chandi) above a pit containing a part of the dead king's ashes enclosed in a stone casket. The king was represented in the form of that god into whom his soul returned after death. A budding lotus placed in the joined hands—a symbol of the liberation of the soul—and other peculiarities, distinguished these posthumous figures from the ordinary images of gods. The upkeep of the chandi was entrusted to the village on whose ground it was built in return for exemption from taxes. The chandi and its territory became a foundation, the rights and privileges of which were set down in a charter [one in the museum is dated 880 A.D., another 902 A.D.]. The majority of the so-called temples in Java were in reality chandis (tomb-temples). They were to endure as long as the royal dynasty hoped to last in order to ensure contact with the souls of the king's predecessors. Therefore they were built of stone and not of bricks, like the ordinary temples. On the other hand, it seems that every hostile dynasty upon conquering a kingdom immediately ruined its chandis in order to prevent the restoration of the old power. The removal of the magical depository with the ashes usually must have caused the ruin of the whole structure."

This Indo-Javanese parallel provides a very satisfactory explanation of the reason for the special importance of this temple, with its use of granite as building material, and for the fact that instead of a linga we find the remains of a bronze S'iva which probably represented a deceased king. From the way in which the caskets had evidently been a special object of hostility to the destroyers of the temple it may well be that it had met its end, as in similar cases in Java, before the coming of Islam. Unfortunately no charter of the temple has been discovered so that one cannot date the Kedah chandi as closely as has in some cases been possible in Java. But the relative plainness of the ornamentation of the caskets, the early style of the bronze trident and the type of architectural details of the temple, point to an earlier date than those mentioned in the Javanese charters. Finally it is perhaps as well to emphasise that there is no question of Javanese influence, the whole temple and its associated objects being still purely Indian. It has only been necessary to call on the allied evidence from Java to explain a ritual that is undoubtedly of Indian origin, though Indian sources of information on the subject are lacking. The Kedah discoveries are therefore of interest as indicating, what would no doubt have been suspected, the Indian origin of the Javanese ritual.
CHANDI BUKIT BATU PAHAT

DATING.

Probably VIIth or early VIIIth century A.D.

This description suggested that this site on the Sungei Batu Pahat was one of exceptional interest. Its stone construction, unique in the sites of which Dr. Wales’ investigations revealed any significant traces, implied a greater durability beneath the ravages of Malaya’s climate and the destructive force of recent Malayan cultivation than one would expect in the case of a structure of brick or laterite. Dr. Wales’ brief description, and his few photographs, substantiated this implication. Thus, on the Sungei Batu Pahat there seemed to exist the possibility of deriving more information on the actual architectural style of ancient Kedah than one could glean from Dr. Wales’ reports, which gave few details of mouldings and brick shapes. Dr. Wales’ reference to “a number of worked granite blocks having rather severe mouldings which had evidently ornamented the superstructure” was tantalizing rather than informative, and his photograph was far from clear. The possibility that a re-examination of this site might yield more architectural information was all the more interesting because of the strong suggestion of some Javanese affinity in Dr. Wales’ description of the fragments of nine-chambered reliquaries which he found here.

Dr. Wales said that his site no. 8 was built by “Hindu Pallavas”1 and he was at pains throughout his report to show the strength of direct Pallava influence in ancient Kedah. The basic argument for this was architectural. Dr. Wales wrote as follows:

The Pallava temples of South India were chiefly of timber construction. They have thus disappeared or at least, if their remains exist in a similar state to their Kedah contemporaries, they have not been revealed owing to insufficient archaeological exploration in South India. Their style however, is known from the famous rathas at Mahabalipuram, the Pallava seaport south of Madras. Since the plinths and lower courses of both the rathas and the Kedah temples under discussion are so plain as to afford almost no data for comparison in regard to style, the conclusion that the Kedah temples are in fact the work of Pallava colonists rests on supplementary evidence supplied by the associated finds, especially the miniature roof to be described below.2

Of this miniature roof, the cover, so Dr. Wales described it, of a bronze shrine, (Pl. 172) Wales wrote thus:

Its style is of the greatest interest as throwing light on contemporary temple architecture in Kedah on which the remains of the temples themselves supply all too scanty information. One is immediately struck by the close resemblance of the waggon-roof of the Bhima

1. JMBRAS XVIII, Pt. I, 1940, p.3.
2. Ibid. p.12.
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and Ganesa rathas at Mahabalipuram. Like them it has a horse-shoe shaped gable-window at each end of the roof, the prototype of which is the older Buddhist chaitya window. The structure is however simpler than that represented in the rathas, there being an absence of dormer windows and other finer architectural detail. A notable point is that there is only one so-called “flower-pot” on the roof and its style is simpler than that of the many which adorn the roof ridges of the rathas. Possibly the “flower-pot” is really intended to represent a stone lamp for use on ceremonial occasions. On the other hand, the figure of a cross-legged rishi seated at each corner, betokening the S’aivite cult, is a feature never found on the roofs of Mahabalipuram. The openwork roof strongly suggests that the temples on which this miniature was modelled had roofs of carved wood or other perishable material. It also immediately calls to mind, and suggests the Indian origin of, some of the modern Malay brassware such as the miniature Sumatran houses which exhibit a similar lotus design.

Thus the miniature bronze shrine roof has much significance attributed to it in Dr. Wales’ interpretation of ancient Kedah. But does this object merit this significance? The following points are perhaps of importance in this connection:

1. The object was found in the bed of the Sungei Bujang. It cannot be described as a find associated with Dr. Wales’ site no. 4, and as an indication of Kedah architectural style it is worthless. Even were it the most clear example of Pallava architecture in miniature, this could suggest no more than that it was imported from South India; and a demonstration of the existence of commercial contacts between South India and Kedah at almost any period in the Christian era would surprise nobody and prove nothing about the indigenous art of ancient Kedah.

2. But is this object so reminiscent of the rathas of Mahabalipuram? The waggon-roof is characteristic of a number of architectural styles in India—and Greater India—; and, as Wales virtually admitted in the passage quoted above, it is only on the basis of the general chaitya type shape of this object that any parallel with Mahabalipuram can be entertained with any seriousness. The shrine roof can best be compared with the incense burner which formed part of the remarkable Sambas treasure. Of the Sambas incense burner Professor K. A. Nilakanta Sastri wrote that it is certainly a well preserved specimen of the class to which belonged a similar object of which only the upper part was placed in the hands of Dr. Q. Wales by the Tamil coolies working on the bed of the Sungai Bujang in Kedah. When we look at the complete specimen the resemblance to the waggon-roof of the Bhima and Ganesa rathas

1. JMBRAS XXII Pt. 4, 1949, p.18.