The Malay Peninsula in Hindu Times

by

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PREFACE

WHILE I have devoted a number of books to the cultural history of Indianized South-east Asia, in the present volume I deal specifically with that truly fascinating region, the Malay Peninsula, of which we now begin to have a comprehensive understanding. Admittedly one reason for my giving it such special attention is that there, more than elsewhere, I have taken a considerable part in the accumulation of the archaeological evidence on which must be largely based a study of the “Hindu period”, a term here used for the Indianizing period generally.

Though writing primarily as an archaeologist I have taken due note of other sources of information that may enable the formation of well-balanced judgements. But I have not gone into the details of trade (so ably handled in recent years by others), of which the items have all too infrequently left their mark on the archaeological record; and I have stopped short of the immediately pre-Islamic period of such places as Singapore and Malacca which, for lack of archaeological material, must remain purely within the historian’s domain.

My researches in what is now Malaysia were carried out with the support of the Governments of Malaya, and in Peninsular Siam I have enjoyed the helpful co-operation of the Thai Department of Fine Arts, as previously of the Thai Royal Institute. My wife, who has throughout been associated with me in the field-work, has read the manuscript and made valuable suggestions.

H.G.Q.W.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAP.</th>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>TEXTUAL EVIDENCE</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>THE EARLY SCULPTURES</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>TAMBRALINGA</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>LANGKASUKA AND KATĀHA</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>ŚRĪVIJAYA AND RELIGION</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>ŚRĪVIJAYA AND COMMERCE</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>CANDRABHĀNU AND THE BUDDHA OF GRĀHI</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX</td>
<td>THE LATER CENTURIES</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>INDEX</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Frontispiece  The Bukit Batu Pahat temple, Kedah: restored stone basement and plinth. See also Plate 9.

PLATE

1  A  Kedah Peak, from south of the Merbok.
    B  On the trans-peninsular route, nearing the Bay of Bandon (author's 1935 expedition).

2  A  Buddha, bronze, from Kedah site 16A. Height 8½ in.
    B  Buddha, sandstone relief, from Wieng Sra. Height 6½ in.

3  A  The “aberrant” Viṣṇu from Ch’aiya, limestone. Height 27 in.
    B  Group A long-robed Viṣṇu from Wieng Sra, sandstone. Height 59½ in.
    C  Group B long-robed Viṣṇu from Śrīvijaya Hill, Surat, sandstone. Height 5 ft. 7 in.

4  A  Group C long-robed Viṣṇu from Takuapa, sandstone. Height c. 6 ft.
    B  Group C stone long-robed Viṣṇu from near Tha Sala. Height 2 ft. 3 in.

5  A  Votive stūpa, terracotta, from Yarang. Height c. 20 in.
    B  Stūpa finial, terracotta, from Yarang. Height c. 15 in.

6  A  Dharmacakra, stone, from Yarang. Height 5½ in.
    B  Buddha, stone, Yarang. Height 2 ft.

7  A  Kedah site 4: remains of Hindu vimāna from the west, showing traces of pilasters, and entrance on east with door-sills in situ.
    B  Roof of miniature bronze shrine, found near Kedah site 4.

8  Kedah site 15, from the south-east.

9  A  The Bukit Batu Pahat temple mound (site 8), before excavation, as first seen by the author in 1938.
    B  The Bukit Batu Pahat temple basement and stairs leading to vimāna (1938 excavation).
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

10  A  Wat Keu, Ch’aiya: trench showing terrace substructure.
    B  Wat P’ra That, Ch’aiya: the sanctuary.
11  Avalokiteśvara from Bidor, bronze. Height 31 in.
12  Avalokiteśvara from Ch’aiya, bronze. Height 27 in.
13  Avalokiteśvara from Ch’aiya, stone. Height 45 in.
14  The P’ra Narai group, Takuapa.
15  Arab glass lamp, from Pengkalen Bujang (site 18). Height c. 4 in.
16  Hindu temple, brick, at Pengkalen Bujang (site 19).
17  Two recently acquired small bronzes from Satingphra, now in the Songkhla Museum.
18  A  A typical Śrīvijayan Mahāyānist votive tablet from Trang. Height 4 in.
    B  Model of Śrīvijayan style sanctuary, Wat Mahāṭhāt, Nak’oṅ.
19  The Buddha of Grāhi. Height 5 ft. 6 in.
20  A  Sherds from trial excavation at Tha Rua, near Nak’oṅ.
    B  Pāṇḍyaṇ style stone bracket from Tha Rua, near Nak’oṅ.

FIG.
1  The Malay Peninsula  xii
2  The Isthmian tract  7
3  Part of Kedah, showing positions of ancient sites (see also Fig. 4)  72
4  Part of the River Bujang, Kedah, showing positions of ancient sites  74
5  Plan of Kedah, Site 5  76
6  Plan of Kedah, Site 15 sanctuary  89
7  Sketch map of Ch’aiya district  105
8  Plan of Kedah, Site 19  138
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following plates are from photographs reproduced by kind permission of the Thai Fine Arts Department: 3A, B; 4A; 12; 13; 18A; 19. The remaining plates and the figures are from my own photographs and drawings.

ABBREVIATIONS

ABIA  Annual Bibliography of Indian Archaeology.
BCAI  Bulletin de la Commission Archéologique de l'Indochine.
BEFEO  Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient.
FMJ  Federated Museums Journal (Kuala Lumpur).
I. A. & L.  Indian Art and Letters.
JASB  Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.
JGIS  Journal of the Greater India Society (Calcutta).
JRAS  Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society.
JMBRAS  Journal of the Malayan (or Malaysian) Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.
JSS  Journal of the Siam Society.
MASI  Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India.
Recueil  G. Cœdès, Recueil des Inscriptions du Siam, II, Bangkok, 1929.
INTRODUCTION

THAT the Malay Peninsula qualifies for consideration as a distinct geographical entity must be apparent when one glances at a map showing this tropical appendage stretching southwards for well-nigh a thousand miles from continental South-east Asia. The same may be said of it culturally during the well over a thousand year period that immediately preceded the coming of Islam or Ceylon Buddhism. But just as it is difficult to be precise about the beginnings of the Indianization process, opinions have differed as to where we should regard the Peninsula as beginning, at least in a cultural context. I would certainly prefer the 12°30' N. of O'Connor,¹ the latitude of Mergui, to the 14° N. of Wheatley,² latitude of Tavoy, but even more would I like to take the Isthmus at its narrowest as the northern border, that is to say at Kra, latitude 10°30' N. I do not doubt that travellers to and from China, like the Roman acrobats of A.D. 120, the Roman embassy of A.D. 166, and the Han traders noticed in the Ch'ien Han Shu, occasionally made use of a short cut considerably north of Kra. But I believe that the Three Pagodas Pass and the route down the Meklong river are better regarded as a continental route in historical times, and as such I have treated it elsewhere.³ The area around Ratburi and P'etburi, at the western end of this route, facing the Bight of Bangkok, shares the same geographical and cultural environment as

the padi growing region of central Siam, which it adjoins. Proceeding southwards the mountains close in until the Kra isthmus is reached, leaving little habitable land, with no sheltered east coast port. It is served by only one possible route, that from Mergui, which seemingly was not utilized in early times.

The Malay Peninsula is often spoken of as having constituted a barrier to communication between west and east, which once its character was known was transformed into a bridge. From the point of view of many of the early Indian adventurers, it was neither: it was their goal. One need do no more than mention the references in Jātaka stories to the voyages of Indian navigators to the Land of Gold antedating the Christian era. There is little doubt that gold, and possibly some rare forest products such as the fragrant gharu wood, were the objectives of the Indian merchants, long before they became acquainted with the ultimately more important tin. Their first need, however, was to find safe anchorages and, when later a certain proportion decided to settle, the existence of enough land in the vicinity suitable for agriculture was essential.

In their voyages across the Indian Ocean the navigators had to avoid, especially in rough weather, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, since in case of shipwreck they were likely to be eaten by the cannibal inhabitants. It was a fortunate coincidence that the two finest harbours on the west coast of the Peninsula, those of Takuapa and Kedah, happened to be nearly opposite the wide channels north and south of the Nicobars, through which the Indians, to be safe, must navigate. At the end of last century, when Takuapa was already silted up, an experienced yachtsman wrote thus of its potentialities:
"The harbour of Kopa (Takuapa) is a very fine one, consisting of a magnificent estuary protected from the sea by a series of islands, behind which vessels can lie in depths varying from four to seven fathoms. The chief entrance is to the north, round Kopa Head. The deep-water channel runs thence in a southerly direction for some twenty miles to the mouth of the Kopa River proper, where the local trading craft, which are, of course, never of very deep draft, lie in two fathoms, some fourteen miles below the town... Kopa could at trifling cost be made the first harbour of Siam, and the port of the whole of this part of the peninsula". In the middle of last century the timbers of an old ship 74 feet long were found buried in sand at Pong, at the foot of the hills near the source of the Takuapa river. I myself was shown in a Takuapa monastery the figure-head dating from 1820-30 of a European ship of about 200 tons which would have drawn ten feet of water.

As to Kedah it is evident enough that the wide Merbok estuary, sheltered behind Penang island, and the high mass of neighbouring Kedah Peak providing a welcoming landmark, must have early attracted voyagers (Pl. 1A). To the north of Kedah the Trang river would appear to have offered an attractive haven, with ample fertile land at hand. A good case has been made out for its having been the site of Ptolemy's Takola, the second-century mart. If that was so it evidently did not prosper and we shall shortly suggest a reason. South of Kedah, in the Perak river valleys, enough scattered objects of our period have been dredged up in mines to indicate that here also were the sites of one or more Indianized settlements, but

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