Pengkalan Bujang
An Ancient Port in Kedah

by
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In 1960 the Museums Department of the Federation of Malaya sponsored two archaeological excavations, at Johore Lama and at Malacca. Both these sites produced huge quantities of ceramics, earthenware, stoneware and porcelain. The wares from Johore Lama were mainly of 16th and 17th century date, and among them were many pieces of Chinese export porcelain of the blue and white type. Malacca, as one would expect, produced wares of somewhat earlier date including many Chinese blue and white pieces of the middle of the 15th century, the period when the Malacca Sultanate was at the height of its power and prosperity. These Malacca finds, moreover, were supplemented by the chance discovery at Kerubong, a few miles from Malacca town, of 57 intact pieces of Chinese porcelain. In all, Malacca and Johore Lama have yielded portions of at least 8,000 items of Chinese export ceramics, along with wares from Annam, Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia; and their study will certainly throw a great deal of light on the nature and history of the Asian trade in ceramics from the 15th to the 17th centuries.

Recently this source material has been extended back in time by at least two centuries as a result of excavations at Pengkalan Bujang on the Merbok Estuary in Central Kedah. Malacca and Johore Lama produced Chinese

The West bank of the Sungai Bujang at Pengkalan Bujang, showing work in progress on the deposit of pottery and other objects. Most of the deposit lies below water level. Standing, second from the right, and pointing with his right hand, is Oswald Theseira of the Federation Museums Department. (Photo: A. Lamb.)
ceramics of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Pengkalan Bujang has revealed several thousand fragments of Chinese porcelains, mainly green glazed celadons, of Sung and Yuan Dynasty date (960–1368). These wares were mixed up with the produce of other ceramic manufacturing regions, Thailand and Indo-China, and, like the finds from Malacca and Johore Lama, they will throw much light on the history of the Asian ceramic trade and on the nature of the products which made it up.

Pengkalan Bujang is at present the highest navigable point on the Sungai Bujang, a river which rises on the southern slopes of Kedah Peak and along the banks of which lie the bulk of the sites of early Hindu and Buddhist settlement which have made Kedah of such great archaeological interest. In the immediate neighbourhood of the present kampong of Pengkalan Bujang can be seen traces of at least six ancient brick buildings, presumably all of them the remains of Hindu or Buddhist temples. One gets the impression that here was once quite a large settlement covering an area of at least half a square mile. Bricks from these old temples are scattered all over this region, and many of the kampong houses make use of them as bases for their timber supports. In the centre of kampong Pengkalan Bujang, near the new mosque, are several large stone blocks which were once door pillars and lintels of one of these temples. A trench dug anywhere within the kampong will disclose a few fragments of ceramics, earthenware, brown glazed stoneware, and green glazed celadons or imitation celadons.

The fact that much porcelain could be found at Pengkalan Bujang was appreciated by Dr. H. G. Quaritch Wales in 1936; but he does not seem to have realised quite how much, and how varied, were the wares to be discovered here. It was not until we started to investigate the bed of the Bujang itself, and were surprised to find that for nearly a hundred yards of its length the river was running over an almost solid layer of pottery sherds, that we began to see the potentials of this site and to resolve to make this one of the regions to be investigated by the Museums Department. Careful examination of the banks of the Bujang showed that in this part of its course the river was cutting through an extensive deposit of pottery fragments at least two feet thick and composed of literally hundreds of thousands of sherds.

In April, 1961, we began to dig into this deposit, and in an area of not much over 100 square feet we discovered some 10,000 fragments of porcelain, not to mention much larger quantities of earthenware and stoneware. By carefully washing each spadeful of this deposit through sieves, we found that there were other things beside ceramics in the earth here. A large number of fragments of glass came to light, parts of at least a hundred small bottles of a kind which was at one time widely exported from
A light-green celadon vase from Pengkalan Bujang. The porcelain, very white, and the glaze here are of excellent quality. The piece is certainly an example of Lung-ch'üan celadon from Chekiang Province, China, and it is very probably of Sung Dynasty date, perhaps 11th century A.D. (Photos: A. Lamb.)

Three views of a shallow bowl from Pengkalan Bujang. The glaze is a grey-green celadon and the paste is greyish and coarse. This piece may not be of Chinese manufacture. Note the lotus petal decoration around the outside. (Photos: A. Lamb.)
the Middle East, from Egypt or Syria. Also mixed up in the earth were many beads of glass, agate and terra cotta; and we have so far recovered over 500 specimens of these interesting objects, some of which seem to have originated from Kuala Selinsing in Perak and others from India and, perhaps, Java. We also found a few fragments of gold foil, a small silver lid of a jar or bottle, and a number of fragments of bracelets made from yellow, blue, white and brown glass.

Ones immediate impression of this deposit is that it contains a most cosmopolitan selection of objects. Of the ceramics, some come from China, some from Tonkin or Thailand, and some from Persia or elsewhere in the Middle East (though of this last category we have very few examples). Some of the beads are of Malayan origin, but others are certainly Indian or Indonesian. Much of the glass is Middle Eastern, though some may well be Chinese.

The implication, indeed, is that at Pengkalan Bujang there was once a very cosmopolitan trading centre. The very nature of the deposit on the bank of the Bujang suggests this, for this deposit is not what one would expect from the usual accumulation of rubbish from prolonged settlement. There are no bones or remains of edible shell fish mixed up with it. It is, in fact, just the sort of deposit one would expect to arise from a place of trade. The broken pottery is that which could have been broken on shipment and discarded on unloading. The beads could well have had a similar origin, objects which fell out of broken packets; and the same could be said for the glass. There is no reason to suppose that anything in this deposit was manufactured locally.

My feeling (and it can only be a first impression as I have had no time yet to study the material from this site) is that at Pengkalan Bujang goods were landed either for distribution to and sale in the interior, or for reloading in other ships. Perhaps this was a meeting place of vessels from the Middle East, India and China, a site where many goods were exchanged and relatively few were consumed locally. We know, especially from the Arab geographical texts, that such sites existed—Kalab is a place name that frequently occurs in this connection—and we can suspect from archaeological evidence that places like Kokhakao Island off Takuapa in South Thailand served this function. Perhaps the settlements at Kuala Selinsing at the mouth of the Perak River had a similar purpose. If further study makes it possible to sustain this interpretation of the Pengkalan Bujang deposit, then our excavation here will have thrown a great deal of light on the true nature of the settlements in the whole region of the Merbok estuary. If these settlements are to be equated with the Kataha or Kidaram of the Indian texts and
Beads from Pengkalan Bujang. The bead on the right of the top row, of dark red opaque glass and square in section, is 8mm. long. The other beads are: (top row, left to right) a slightly curved tube of translucent dark blue glass; a composite bead of red, black, green and yellow glass; (bottom row, left to right) part of a bead with foliated edge of translucent blue glass; a black glass bead with foliated edge and sides marked with a spiral; a dark red opaque glass bead with yellow glass insets round the edge. (Photo: A. Lamb.)

Beads from Pengkalan Bujang. The bead on the right, of green-tinted rock crystal, is 8mm. in diameter. The other five beads are made from glass spirals, the centre two being red and the three on the left yellow. (Photo: A. Lamb.)

Beads from Pengkalan Bujang. Three terracotta beads, each about 15mm. long. The example on the left shows traces of the glaze, probably yellow or red, which originally covered it. (Photo: A. Lamb.)
inscriptions, then they must mark a region of great importance in the history of Indianised Southeast Asia. But the archaeological remains of the Merbok region are very disappointing. The temples are small and crudely built. There is very little sculpture, and what there is is of poor artistic quality. There is nothing in Kedah, in fact, to compare with the ancient remains of sites in South Thailand like Chaya and Nakorn Srithammarat which must have been contemporary with the Merbok settlements. But remains of the type we do find in Kedah would be easy to reconcile with an important centre based on entrepôt trade. Such trade would call for no great population of the kind which constructed Angkor. It would create no demand for huge projects of public works. It would be based, essentially, on the existence of good harbours where, for a few weeks of the year, foreign vessels would gather to unload and exchange their wares. It would require a population and an agriculture no greater than needed to victual and water these ships. Some of the more recent trading centres in Southeast Asia, Patani for example, were of this type, important as centres of trade rather than centres of population.

The finds at Pengkalan Bujang provide us with the opportunity to extend our knowledge of the trade of Malaya back to the 13th century, if not earlier. They also suggest the fascinating possibility that similar sites of even earlier date may yet be found along the coasts of the Malay Peninsula. There is one such site, near Takuapa, in South Thailand, and others may well exist in Malayan territory. An outcropping of pottery fragments along a river bank is hardly likely to attract much attention by the local people, and is thus unlikely to be reported to the Museums Department in Kuala Lumpur. The only way to find such sites is by going out and looking for them systematically in likely places, and this we propose to do in the near future.