The Hermits of Perlis

A NOTE

by

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In the summer of 1961 villagers from Kampong Kurong Batang near Kangar in Perlis came across a hitherto-unknown cave in a limestone outcrop near their village. The floor of the cave was covered with lumps of yellow clay which, on closer inspection, proved to have stamped on one side a representation of some deity. The news of this discovery soon reached Kangar, the site was visited by many souvenir hunters, and by the time I came to Kangar to investigate as a result of a report in the press, the cave had been much disturbed. In November 1961 Lord Medway and I carried out a search of the neighbourhood to see if there were any other caves with these strange stamped lumps of clay; and we were fortunate to discover one such cave which filled in many of the gaps in our knowledge resulting from the disturbance of the original cave by careless visitors.

These lumps of clay are in fact Mahayana Buddhist votive tablets, offerings left at a sacred place by worshippers. The practice of leaving such offerings is still common in Thailand, where the tablets are known as pra-bimh. The Perlis tablets, round or oval lumps of sun-dried clay between 3 and six inches in diameter, are not, however, recent Thai votive offerings. They bear on their stamped side a representation of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara or some other member of the Mahayana pantheon in a style which relates very closely to the Pala Dynasty of Bengal, and which must surely date from between the 10th and 12th centuries A.D. This relationship is also confirmed by the scraps of Buddhist writing which are also stamped on to the tablets. This writing is in a variety of north Indian script, and also seems to date from the 10th to 12th centuries A.D. Only in South Thailand, in a small area between the Perlis border on the south and the Isthmus of Kra on the north, have tablets of this particular type been found before, and they have always

Reverse of No. 1. Note the brief inscription stamped on to the back of the tablet. This contains, in a north Indian script, a short phrase from a Buddhist prayer.
The Author in the Second Cave.
been described as being in some way related to the kingdom of Srivijaya. Unfortunately, nowhere in South Thailand have the caves producing these tablets been examined by competent scholars; and in fact we know very little about them.

Here is an important feature of the Perlis discoveries, that it was possible in one case (and would have been in the other had it not been for the vandalism of souvenir seekers) to study the tablets in their original situation; and from this investigation a number of interesting points have emerged. Firstly, in the two caves in Perlis which were investigated the tablets were made from local clay, and the clay used in the first cave was quite different from that used in the second.

*Large tablet with inscribed prayer, from the 2nd tablet cave. This is an important find, one of the longest pre-Muslim inscriptions to have been found in Malaya.*
The Village Headman from Kampong Kurong Batang wrapping tablets from the 2nd Cave for removal.
The implication seemed to be that the tablets were actually made in the immediate neighbourhood of the caves in which they were found. Secondly, each cave contained a very small variety of tablets, indicating the existence of a limited number of stamps for putting the impressions on the clay. The general idea which I derived from my investigation of these tablet caves was that the tablets had been made by some hermit living in the cave, who perhaps sold them to the faithful in return for offerings of food and the like. These hermits, as there must have been at least one in each of the two caves we examined, must have belonged to a culture which seems to have been limited, as far as the Malay Peninsula is concerned, to a very small area of what is now northern Malaya and southern Thailand. How these hermits, or monks, got where they were, and who ruled over them, we do not know. We have from the style of the tablets some idea of the period when they were made, and of the religion of the makers, but a great many mysteries remain to be solved.

*Seated Bodhisattva from the Kurong Batang Cave.*