New Light on the Ancient Settlement of Kedah and Province Wellesley

by

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The historical importance of the Hindu-Buddhist remains in Kedah and Province Wellesley has long been recognised. The first archaeological discoveries in the region were made by Colonel James Low during the nineteenth century (Low, 1908; Laidlaw), followed in the 1920s and 1930s by sporadic exploration and excavation by Mr. I.H.N. Evans of the Perak Museum, Taiping (Evans, 1926, 1930, 1931). Just before the outbreak of World War II, a major expedition to Kedah and other Malayan sites was mounted by Dr. and Mrs. H.G. Quaritch-Wales under the sponsorship of the Governments of the States of Kedah, Perak and Johor. Dr. Quaritch-Wales investigated over thirty sites in Kedah and Province Wellesley during the course of fourteen months of fieldwork. His reports are still authoritative and the major source of detailed information on the Indianised settlement of North Malaya (Quaritch-Wales, 1940, 1947).

Since the war, interest in the archaeology of the region was renewed by a series of surveys and excavations beginning in 1956 by the University of Malaya (Singapore) and the Federation Museums Department under the principal direction of Professor K.G. Tregonning, Dr. M. Sullivan, Dr. H.A. Lamb and the writer, who was at the time Curator of the Perak Museum (Sullivan, 1958; Lamb, 1959, 1960, 1961). Dr. Lamb's work has been particularly productive and is worthy of special notice. Working more intensively and with much greater technical competence than his predecessors, Dr. Lamb has added enormously to our knowledge of the early history of Southeast Asia, culminating in the complete and splendid reconstruction of the Chandi Bukit Batu Pahat which was undertaken with the cooperation of Professor B.P. Groslier and M. Louis Contant of the Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient in 1959. Dr. Lamb's articles and monographs have paved the way for a reassessment of many of the cherished traditions of Kedah archaeology.

In 1968, the Archaeological Research Unit of the University of Malaya with the Muzium Negara, Kuala Lumpur, initiated further studies of the archaeological remains in the Sungai Merbok and Sungai Muda region. Surveys and excavation carried out in the field by Mr. M. Kua under the writer's direction have considerably amplified our understanding of the subject and tend to corroborate some of the ideas put forward by Dr. Lamb. It is the purpose of this note to summarise these advances.

The main area of ancient settlement in Kedah and Province Wellesley lies on the southern slope of Gunong Jerai (Kedah Peak) and between the Sungai Merbok and Sungai Muda. Within this area the principal concentration of sites is found on the right and left banks of the middle reaches of the Sungai Bujang, a southward flowing tributary of the Sungai Merbok. The fine stone-built Chandi Bukit Batu Pahat is situated outside this concentration on a spur of Gunong Jerai overlooking the right bank of the Sungai Merbok Kechil. Other important localities, such as the Matang Pasir site and the site at Tikam Batu, lie further to the south close to the north bank of the Sungai Muda.

Based on an analysis of his archaeological findings and also to some extent on historical sources, Dr. Quaritch-Wales proposed an elaborate periodisation of the history of Indianised settlement in
Kedah and Province Wellesley. His scheme postulated four main waves of Indian cultural expansion (Quaritch-Wales, 1940: pp. 67 – 85). The first wave, dated to between the first and third centuries A.D., rests on the slender evidence of Ptolemaic toponyms and the discovery by Mr. G. B. Gardner of what were claimed to be Roman beads and "early" pottery along the Johor River. To the second wave, circa 300 to circa 550 A.D., Quaritch-Wales ascribes his Kedah sites 1 – 3 and also the Mahanavika Buddhagupta, Cherok Tokun and Bukit Meriam inscriptions recovered by Colonel James Low (Lamb, 1963). Since these inscriptions are all clearly Buddhist and sites 1 – 3 could likewise be reasonably interpreted as the remains of Buddhist stupas, Quaritch-Wales concluded that during this period the predominant influence in Kedah was Buddhist.

The third wave reflected a marked cultural and perhaps political change. During this time, from circa 550 to circa 750 A.D., Kedah came under the influence of Hindu Pallava colonists and, according to Quaritch-Wales, Kedah and its sister settlement of Takuapa in Southern Thailand formed the bridgeheads from which "... Hindu culture was transported overland to C'aiya and Ligor on the East Coast..." (Quaritch-Wales, 1940: pg. 70). This Hindu Pallava influence was superseded in Kedah during the fourth wave from circa 750 to circa 900 A.D. by Mahayanist Buddhist influence which, he maintained, came not only from South India but also from the Pala kingdom of Bengal.

A closer look at Quaritch-Wales' historical conclusions shows that they depend for a good deal of their justification on the dating and comparative typology of a handful of small finds from the Kedah sites and a study of the plans of the structures themselves. For example, he attributed Kedah sites 4 – 8, a class of chandi temples consisting of a vimana or sanctuary with an attached mandapam or platform projecting towards the east, to between the mid sixth to the mid eighth centuries, that is to say his third wave of Hindu Pallava influence. Sites 10 – 23, on the other hand, which cluster in the middle reaches of the Sungai Bujang, and also the site at Matang Pasir excavated by Mrs. Quaritch-Wales in 1941, he attributed to the fourth or Mahayanist Buddhist wave of the mid eighth to tenth centuries A.D. and later periods down to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries A.D. It is worth noting in this connexion that he considered site 11 to be not a temple but a secular building, perhaps "a royal audience hall or council chamber" on the grounds of its double-walled construction which he thought to be an unusual feature (Quaritch-Wales, 1940: pg. 25). Fig. 1.

![Plan of Kedah Site 11](image-url)
Quaritch-Wales also had difficulty with the interpretation of site 13a. He says, “If indeed the brick sanctuary had been a vimana of a S’ai’a temple similar to site 4 etc. one might have supposed that the structure 13a, which stood south-east of it facing the river, would be its connected mandapam. But in fact there is a definite space between the two structures and 13a differed from anything we had seen before” (Quaritch-Wales, 1940: pg. 29). Fig. 2. We shall return to this point later.

We now have strong evidence, the result of work carried out since the war, that many of Quaritch-Wales’ conclusions must be challenged. It may well be that the greater part of his periodisation of early Kedah history is in need of revision. In particular it has become clear in the course of the most recent work that many of his observations are at fault and based on the incomplete excavation of individual sites.

The excavation of the Matang Pasir site led Mrs. Quaritch-Wales to believe that she had uncovered the “massive laterite plinth of what appeared to have been a perched building... the main structure of laterite measuring about 19 feet square. From it on the west side projected for ten feet the ruined lower course of a brick and laterite porch” (Quaritch-Wales, 1947). This site was re-investigated by a team from the University of Malaya (Singapore) under Dr. M. Sullivan. The difficulties in its correct interpretation were not however cleared away at this time since Sullivan observed “Beyond (the main structure) are a number of scattered blocks which may represent the remains of a porch as suggested by Mrs. Quaritch-Wales, or of a separate building; but as previous excavation drove a wide, deep trench the full length of the west side and across the southwest corner all connection between these remains and the main structure has been severed and no conclusion can be reached as to their former relationship. However it should be observed that if this was a porch it was in a most unusual position, for nearly all the Indian temples, as well as these excavated in Kedah by Quaritch-Wales, are oriented to the east” (Sullivan, 1958: pg. 193)

It was not until four years later in 1961 that Dr. H.A. Lamb was able to show the true nature of the Matang Pasir site. Lamb’s more thorough excavations revealed clearly that the western structure, referred to by both Mrs. Quaritch-Wales and Sullivan as a “porch”, was in reality the remains of a vimana or sanctuary composed of an outer retaining wall of laterite blocks enclosing a rubble filling. Even more important was another fact
which emerged, namely that the vimana had always been structurally separate from the mandapam platform (the main structure excavated by Mrs. Quaritch-Wales and Sullivan) to which it had been linked only by two walls of laterite blocks two feet thick.

The problems of the Matang Pasir site now proved to be illusory for it could be shown to be very similar in plan to other chandi temples in the Kedah region. Furthermore, Lamb was able to show the mandapam was in fact facing to the east and the problem of the apparently irregular orientation of the structure, remarked on by Sullivan, was thus neatly disposed.

The reconstruction of the true plan of the Matang Pasir site called attention to yet another point of very great significance. The overall layout of the building is seen to be closely comparable to the Chandi Biaro Si Topajam, Padang Lajas, Sumatra, in which the structural separation of the vimana and mandapam, an unusual feature, is also found. (Lamb, 1961: pg. 16).

Recent field surveys, especially during 1968, have shown that this type of chandi, built in two separate structural units, is in fact common in Kedah. It is now clear that Quaritch-Wales’ site 13a, over which, as we have seen above, he confessed some misgivings, is a further example. Moreover, it is probable that site 14, included by Quaritch-Wales in the later group of porched shrines, should now be recognised as the mandapam of a chandi of this type, as its eastern orientation and western step indicate. Fig. 3. ef. site 13a.

The prevalence of this style of chandi suggested to the writer that at least some of the other so-called Mahayanist Buddhist porched shrines of Quaritch-Wales’ fourth wave and later may also have been victims of misinterpretation and incomplete excavation. Attention was first focused on site 15. Quaritch-Wales’ plan of this building suggested the remains of the vimana or sanctuary component of such a structure. Fig. 4. Unfortunately, when this site was examined in 1968 it proved to be too ruinous for further work to be profitable.

Happily, Quaritch-Wales’ site 16 was re-located on the left bank of the Sungai Bujang and complete excavation was undertaken in November and December, 1968, under the field direction of Mr. M.Kua. This work soon established that the square double structure of laterite blocks, excavated by Quaritch-Wales, was
associated with a laterite mandapam platform 10 feet 6 inches by 13 feet 6 inches, regularly oriented towards the east. Plate 1. It is therefore also an example of the category of chandi temples with separate mandapam.

Preliminary surveys indicate that other structures in the middle Bujang group may also turn out to belong to this category. Further excavations, which it is hoped will be carried out shortly, should establish this point beyond further question.

Dr. Lamb’s complete reconstruction of Chandi Bukit Batu Pahat laid bare for the first time the inner structural secrets of the building. This brought forth the surprising fact that the mandapam platform had been built according to a curious double-walled plan closely analogous to that revealed by Quaritch-Wales’ site 11. (Fig. 1). It is now clear that on the grounds of structural typology site 11 must be related to the chandi temples represented by sites 4 – 8.

In the light of the most recent discoveries, it seems that Dr. Lamb’s contention that “most of these (Kedah) sites are sufficiently similar to one another to justify their being considered as close to each other in date” (Lamb, 1960, pg. 104) has now acquired much stronger factual support. We are confronted by a structural typology consisting of two main categories. Type A, a chandi temple in which the vimana is linked to the mandapam in a single unit and comprising Kedah sites 4 – 8 and 11 and Type B, a chandi temple built in two separate parts and comprising most of the remaining Bujang sites and the site at Matang Pasir. It is not yet clear whether these two types represent changing patterns influenced by chronology or whether other factors, perhaps sociological, play a part. This remains one of the most pressing problems to which further research should be directed. However, it is now certain in the light of the similarity of the Kedah chandi of type B to the Sumatran chandi that Quaritch-Wales’ claim that “nowhere in Kedah, among remains of any period, have any sculptural, architectural or decorative motifs been recovered that are essentially Javanese or Sumatran in character” (Quaritch-Wales, 1940; pg. 74) can no longer be accepted.

Site 14. Kedah. (Quaritch Wales).
Site 15. Kedah. After excavation by Quaritch Wales.

Bibliography:


Low, J. *Kedah Annals*, Bangkok, 1908.


Figure 1...... Quaritch-Wales, 1940, Fig. 8

Figure 2...... Quaritch-Wales, 1940, Fig. 9

Figure 3...... Quaritch-Wales, 1940, Fig. 10

Figure 4...... Quaritch-Wales, 1940, Fig. 11