

TRADE AND EARLY STATE FORMATION IN  
MARITIME SOUTHEAST ASIA:  
KEDAH AND SRIVIJAYA

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INTRODUCTION: LATE PREHISTORY AND  
THE ORIGINS OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STATES

States in Southeast Asia appear to have developed rather later than those in neighbouring regions to the north and west. Until recently this fact was simply held to be yet another indication of the general backwardness of the region, and it was assumed that Southeast Asians were unable to organize true states before a wave of “indianization” in the first centuries A.D. brought them the necessary political and technological tools to do so. Archaeological work over the past two decades has, however, begun radically to alter the picture of the later prehistoric period in the region. It now seems clear that the early inhabitants of at least some parts of the region were no less technologically advanced than their neighbours in China and India.<sup>1</sup> Bronze metallurgy dates to at least the beginning of the second millennium B.C. on the mainland, and before the middle of the first millennium B.C. both iron metallurgy and wet-rice agriculture were widespread. Extensive regional trade networks were far older, and by the later first millennium B.C. metals and a variety of valued trade items were carried over very long distances, through a series of interlocking trade circuits encompassing both the South China Sea and the Java Sea. It appears, also, that the earliest phase of state formation in Southeast Asia may date to this iron-age period of intensifying regional trade contacts — a period during which there appears to have been no significant trade with the Indian subcontinent, and only indirect trade with metropolitan China<sup>2</sup>

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1 D.T. Bayard, “The Roots of Indochinese Civilisation”, *Pacific Affairs* 53(10), 1980, pp. 89 – 114.

2 C.F.W. Higham, and Amphan Kijngam, “Irregular Earthworks in N.E. Thailand: New Insight”, *Antiquity*, 56, 1982, pp. 102 – 110; C.F.W. Higham, “The Ban Chiang Culture in Wider Perspective” 1983, in *Proceedings of the British Academy*: Bayard, op. cit.; Pisit Charoenwongsa and D.T. Bayard, “Non Chai: New Dates on Metal Working and Trade from Northeastern Thailand”, *Current Anthropology*, 24(4), 1983, 521 – 3; J. Wisseman Christie, *Port Settlement to Trading Empire: Genesis and Growth of Coastal States in Maritime Southeast Asia*, (in press).



The coastal trading states of the peninsula and western archipelago appear to owe their origins to this late metal-age regional trading boom.<sup>3</sup> In the early centuries of the first millennium A.D., when trade networks of South and East Asia began to impinge upon those already established within Southeast Asia, opportunities for growth of trading states increased, as they were drawn into the developing Mediterranean-Asian trade system. Romano-Indian rouletted pottery,<sup>4</sup> Indian etched beads,<sup>5</sup> a variety of small Mediterranean and Indian valuables, and Han Chinese bronzes began to replace the more locally-produced Vietnamese Dong-son bronzes,<sup>6</sup> stone and shell beads and bangles, and jade jewelry<sup>7</sup> of the preceding centuries as the most favoured trade items along the coasts of Southeast Asia. While most of these more exotic goods have recently come to light in the northern portion of the peninsula, it seems clear that the "Malay" states of the southern peninsula, and Sumatra were also profoundly affected by this sudden expansion of trading horizons. In view of the key strategic position occupied by the Straits of Malacca, it must be assumed that rapid growth and change in the heretofore small, and possibly rather simply-structured, coastal states bordering the Straits must have coincided with expansion in their economic bases and size of their trade networks. If this was the case, however, it is interesting and important to note that those states which were the most likely to have been affected by stimulus from the west — that is, the peninsula and insular states directly involved in trade with South Asia — developed social and political structures that were far less influenced by Indian models than were the more distant agrarian states of the mainland. Why this should be so, and why these coastal states should have developed the form that they did, are questions with which this (admittedly rather functionalist) discussion are concerned.

#### THE LATE PREHISTORY IN THE MARITIME REGION

Classically, the early western Indonesian and Malaysian states have been divided into two major types, their forms largely determined by environmental and geographical conditions. These were the trading

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3 Christie, *Port Settlement*.

4 M.J. Walker and S. Santoso, "Romano-Indian Rouletted Pottery in Indonesia", *Mankind*, 11(1), 1977, pp. 39 – 45.

5 I.C. Glover, "Excavations at Ban Don Ta Phet, Kanchanaburi Province, Thailand, 1980 – 81", *Southeast Asian Studies Newsletter*, 10, 1983, pp. 1 – 3.

6 Christie, *op. cit.*

7 P. Bellwood, *Man's Conquest of the Pacific: the Prehistory of Southeast Asia and Oceania*, New York: OUP, 1979, p. 211.



states, best represented by the riparian and coastal states of the peninsula and Sumatra, and the rice-economy states of Java and Bali.<sup>8</sup> Recent work has not seriously brought into question either this division or the importance of trade in the political development of at least the first of these types. The differences in internal structure and approaches to relations with other states exhibited by these two types of polity, moreover, reflect not only profound differences in their economic bases, but also perhaps in their origins. This discussion will focus upon the origins and early development of states and state hierarchies of the coastal trading variety, using as examples two different states — that of Srivijaya, the most classic and fully-developed of the early major polities and that of Kedah, a smaller west Malaysian state which spent much of its history within the economic and political orbit of its more powerful Sumatran neighbour.

It is necessary at this point to backtrack a bit and examine in greater detail the period discussed above — the final phases of prehistory — in relation to the maritime region in particular, since it illuminates the singular course of state development in the peninsula and Sumatra (and later in Borneo). At much the same time that populations of the mainland were undergoing profound shifts in technology and modes of subsistence in the direction of greater dependence upon agriculture, similar developments were underway in the islands. By perhaps the second millennium B.C. distinctions were beginning to appear between inland and littoral communities on both the peninsula and the larger islands. Where soil and climatic conditions were favourable, expanding populations intensified their agriculture, converting in many areas from dry-rice to wet-rice regimes. On the peninsula suitable conditions for intensive wet-rice agriculture existed only in limited areas, largely along the lower courses of some of the west-coast rivers, particularly in Kedah and Perlis. On Sumatra, aside from some portions of North Sumatra and Aceh behind the coast, most of the arable land of any fertility is confined to the chain of highland valleys within the mountainous spine of the western side of the island, some considerable distance from the more accessible east coast of the island. Because of this uneven distribution of fertile land, the high rainfall, and consequent dense wet tropical forest cover of both Sumatra and the peninsula, the development of fixed-field agriculture and permanent settlement was less uniform in these areas than it was in the drier, more fertile, and less densely forested regions on the mainland to the north and on the islands of Java and Bali to the south.

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8 B. Schrieke, *Indonesia Sociological Studies, Part I*, The Hague: W. van Hoeve, 1955; J.C. van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society*, The Hague: W. Van Hoeve, 1955.



Even before the use of metals became widespread in the maritime region, groups within the area had begun to adapt to a variety of different environmental niches, thus forming a complex pattern of often inter-dependent communities at different levels of social and technological development, which exploited economically complementary environments.<sup>9</sup> While this complex patchwork of inter-related but distinct niches is to some extent characteristic of the whole of Southeast Asia, nowhere was it more intricate or mutually dependent than in the peninsula or on Sumatra. This mutual dependence and sharp distinction between economic niches, with complementary opportunities and constraints, was probably the major factor in the shaping of the early states bordering the Malacca Straits.

The process of adaptation to distinct niches was accompanied by increased specialization of some groups in certain sectors of manufacturing. By the second millennium B.C. the very old inland-coastal trade was supplemented by a certain amount of inland-inland trade, between specialist centres. Some items, such as polished stone and flaked obsidian implements, were produced more and more by factory sites near sources of suitable materials, and traded widely. Subspecializations in different tools emerged within the commercial manufacturing tradition.<sup>10</sup> In the less well endowed regions along the coasts, as on smaller islands in the eastern part of the archipelago, the sea provided the only opportunities for expansion. During the early portion of the first millennium B.C., if not earlier, the development of efficient deep water transport led to the appearance of highly mobile sea-faring communities which linked the coasts of the South China and Java Seas. The process of homogenization of coastal cultures the islands and the peninsula, which marks more recent periods, had begun.<sup>11</sup> From stylistic similarities in pottery on a number of coasts, and the wide distribution not only of distinctive small trade objects but also certain types of urn and stone cist burial traditions, it appears that by the latter part of the first millennium B.C. — and in some areas much earlier — the coastal communities of the maritime region

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9. I.C. Glover, "The Late Prehistoric Period in Indonesia" in R.B. Smith and W. Watson, *Early South East Asia*, London: OUP, 1979, p. 175; B.A.V. Peacock, "The Later Prehistory of the Malay Peninsula" in Smith and Watson, *Early South East Asia*, p. 213 and F.L. Dunn, "Rain Forrest Collectors and Traders," *Malaysian Branch, Royal Asiatic Society*, Monograph 5., 1975.

10 Glover, *op. cit.*, p. 178; B. Bronson, Basoeki, Machi Suhadi, and J. Wisseman, *Laporan Penelitian Arkeologi di Sumatra*, Jakarta: Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional, 1973, p. 24.

11 Glover, *op. cit.*, p. 174.



were in regular contact with each other and shared not only certain components of their material culture, but also ideological and aesthetic traditions. These communities, which have been identified as the “forerunners of the ‘Pasisir’ cultures of recent Indonesian history”<sup>12</sup> appear by this time to have developed regular trading links not only within the South China and Java Seas, but also with regions as far away as the Red River Valley in northern Vietnam and the north coast of New Guinea.<sup>13</sup> There is no evidence for any regular links at this time between the maritime region and South Asia.

During the last half of the first millennium B.C., when regional trade had become economically important, differences began to appear between the coastal communities of the peninsula and Sumatra — although they clearly both belonged within the same cultural sphere. The differences appear to have related to levels of political complexity and relations with interior communities behind the coasts. By this time the population of Sumatra formed roughly three culturally and economically distinct groups — the coastal/riparian sea-farers, the intensive rice farmers of the highlands of the far interior, and the hunter-gatherers and mobile swiddeners of the foothills and lowland swamp-forests between the coast and the Barisan Chain. The economic and cultural structure of the peninsula was rather less complex, since the peninsula lacked communities of intensive agriculturalists of the scale of those on Sumatra. The stone cist-building farmers of the Kinta region on the west coast of the peninsula — whose wealth and settlement density (and burial tradition) rival those of the Sumatran highlands, although on a much reduced scale — appear to have derived their wealth not from agriculture but from export of tin through downstream intermediaries. Unlike the highland communities of Sumatra, however, the inhabitants of the Kinta Valley had no monopoly over the mineral resources of the area. The alluvial tin deposits of the peninsula are widely scattered, many lying very close to the coast. The massive beds of the Langat region and many smaller ones could easily be controlled directly from the coast. Thus the coastal/riparian communities of the west coast of the peninsula had direct access to a much wider and more valuable range of resources than did their neighbours on the coast of Sumatra. The peninsula’s gold deposits and many of the forest resources were located much further inland, but these were never of the same economic value as the tin deposits. By contrast, the coastal communities of Sumatra not only lacked access to

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12 *Ibid.*, p. 183.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 184; Bellwood, *op. cit.*, p. 22.



the better agricultural land of the island, but also to the substantial deposits of gold, copper and other metals of the island, all of which lay in the far interior, the same region which also produced the majority of exportable forest products. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that concentrations of imported valuables should appear near the coasts of the peninsula, but only in the interior of Sumatra, during this period.

By the middle of the first millennium B.C. coastal groups both of the peninsula and Sumatra had established regular trade networks not only with other coastal communities in Southeast Asia, but also with the various groups of their own interiors. These latter trade connections were, however, established on a different footing on the peninsula and the island. On Sumatra, because of the poverty of the coastal environments, links with the interior were fundamental to the economic development of the coastal communities, who could themselves produce very little of export value. Their sea products duplicated those of other coastal communities in the region, and there is no evidence that at this time they possessed any manufacturing skills that were unique within the region. They were forced to rely then, as later, upon metals and forest produce from the interior to generate trade revenues. On the peninsula links between the coast and the interior, although useful to the coastal communities, were not a pressing economic necessity. The income provided by trade in gold and forest products from the interior was supplementary to that derived from the export of tin, the source of which many coastal groups had direct control over. This may explain the relatively slow penetration of coastal and imported goods into the peninsula's interior. Sites in the interior of the peninsula of the last centuries B.C. and first centuries A.D. have produced many fewer glass beads and metal tools than had been anticipated,<sup>14</sup> mainly from gold producing areas of the Tembeling and upper Pahang valleys. Forest products, the main exports of the majority of interior regions, were not of major importance in long-distance trade until the growth of the Chinese markets for them in the mid to late first millennium A.D. By contrast, the highland cist graves of Sumatra are rich in imported beads and metal items, evidence of regular metal trade mediated, but not controlled, by coastal communities. These Sumatran coastal groups not only had less control over export products, but apparently less internal trade leverage as well. By the end of the first millennium B.C. peninsular communities not only controlled many of their sources of export produce, but had also become manufacturing centres in their own right, pro-

14 Peacock, *op. cit.*, p. 213.



ducing metal, shell, and possibly glass ornaments, as well as a distinctive range of iron implements, all of which were traded in small numbers with interior groups. No manufactured items found in the Sumatran interior which date to the same period can be traced to any coastal manufacturing centre on the island. These differing relationships between coastal and inland communities of the peninsula and Sumatra are reflected in the process of state formation in the Straits region. The structure of internal economic relationships was as influential as geographical constraints in determining the form taken by the early coastal polities of the region, and it is clear that the economic climate on the peninsula was far more favourable for the formation of trade-economy states.

### EARLY COASTAL STATES OF SUMATRA AND THE PENINSULA

The states which did finally evolve amongst the littoral communities on both sides of the Malacca Straits were very similar in structure despite marked differences in local endowment and scale of geographical setting. This may have been due in part to broad parallels in environmental conditions and economic structures, coupled with basic background cultural similarities. Both the Malayan and Sumatran polities were organized around river — either a single large river system or, less frequently, two or more smaller systems whose mouths lie close together. In both areas the rivers provided the only easy means of access into the interior. They provided the major channels of trade and communication in the pre-modern period. The terrain of the inter-fluvial countryside was sufficiently difficult to prevent the ready use of land routes outside of very limited areas. The resulting pattern of economic and political linkages was thus both dendritic and hierarchical, conforming closely to the shape of the river system.<sup>15</sup> The capitals of these states were invariably located at the point where the river system drained into the sea, or at the closest suitably dry site upriver. Because of extensive coastal swamps on the east coast of Sumatra, these points tended often to be a number of miles from the sea. Secondary and tertiary centres, which acted as inland trading outposts of the coastal community, were located at the confluence of the major tributaries of the river.<sup>16</sup>

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15 B. Bronson, "Exchange at the Upstream and Downstream Ends: Notes towards a Functional Model of the Coastal State in Southeast Asia." in K.L. Hutterer, *Economic Exchange and Social Interaction in Southeast Asia*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia 13, 1977.

16 *Ibid.*, B. Bronson and J. Wisseman, "Palembang and Srivijaya: the Lateness of Early Cities in Southern Southeast Asia," *Asian Perspectives*, 19(2), 1978, p. 232.



On Sumatra, these early littoral states drew upon products of two distinct zones in their hinterland: the lowland forests inhabited by hunter-gatherers and swidden farmers, and the highland valleys which supported denser, more stable populations organized from the later prehistoric period onwards into village-chiefdoms of varying size, but of high levels of cultural and technological sophistication. The problem faced by Sumatran coastal states from the very beginning, as has been pointed out above, was the fact that they had no direct and certain control over either the populations of the interior zones or their products. This, added to the fact that the particular range of products that the island had to offer had a somewhat unstable overseas market even during historic times, meant that Sumatran coastal states never had direct control over the sources of their wealth, and thus, power. The lowland hunter-gatherers, although to an extent tied to definable territories<sup>17</sup> were nevertheless far too elusive to be coerced into production. Trade relations with them, as on the peninsula, appear to have developed inter-regional trade significance rather slowly, since the boom in the Chinese market for forest exotics and medicinals didn't occur until after the middle of the first millennium A.D.<sup>18</sup> Although the highland groups of Sumatra had established trade relations with the coast by the middle of the first millennium B.C. which were of significant economic importance, they were apparently even less amenable to coastal control, since they were both too powerful and too remote from the east coast. Thus neither of the interior groups was ever effectively brought directly within the coastal states' economic or political systems. Furthermore, sources of many of the major river systems on the island lie close enough together in the mountains for the main highland societies to have had access to at least two separate drainage systems; they could thus trade with more than one coastal state with the expenditure of little extra effort. At the same time, all of the coastal states of Sumatra offered to the overseas markets basically the same range and quality of interior-produced goods. Lacking the means to control the movement of products out of the mountains or to direct foreign trade to their ports to the exclusion of others, the only recourse for growing Sumatran states was to attempt either to control or to eliminate neighbouring rival port-states.<sup>19</sup> Neighbouring states on the west coast of the peninsula developed in much smaller drainage systems. They lacked powerful inland competitors, and their

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17 Dunn, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

18 O.W. Wolters, *Early Indonesian Commerce*, Ithaca; Cornell University Press, 1967, p. 102, 111.

19 Bronson, "Exchange at the Upstream and Downstream Ends," p. 47.



economies were based upon metal deposits which they exploited directly. In many other respects the Malayan states were smaller versions of their Sumatran neighbours. Differences in geographical scale and internal economics, however, clearly affected internal distributions of economic and political power, particularly during the latter half of the first millennium B.C., when the region saw a rapid expansion in trade.

By the later first millennium B.C. the peninsula ports had already been exporting tin for some centuries and possibly for more than a millennium. The balance of economic power on the peninsula had always been in the favour of the littoral groups. On Sumatra the balance of power appears to have shifted in favour of the coastal communities only in the middle of the first millennium A.D., and this balance was only maintained at the cost of constant inter-port rivalry, political intrigue, and economic blandishments. Success in maintaining this balance was rarely long-lasting,<sup>20</sup> and depended greatly upon the overall volume of export trade from the region. Against the background of these differences between the early historic states of the peninsula and Sumatra, and the pattern of internal distribution of trade goods which was nevertheless a common characteristic of developed states on both coasts, the differences in patterns of distribution of late metal age imports on the peninsula and Sumatra are significant, and they provide important clues to the origins of this type of state. In classic "Malay" — type trading states on both sides of the Straits trade normally broke down into three segments carrying three distinct (or only slightly overlapping) set of goods. Exportable produce was gathered from the interior (or on the peninsula from the interior and nearby tin sources), funnelled into the port, and sent overseas, sometimes to very distant markets. In return the overseas trading partners sent a collection of trade goods, comprising some utilitarian items and raw materials for local industries, but these items were usually of far less importance than were the manufactured valuables and prestige goods which formed the bulk of the states imports. These valuables were not, however, sent into the interior in direct exchange for the export produce. They were used largely at the port and in secondary centres attached to it. The display of, a power to dispense, prestigious imports was a major source of power in early historic trading states. Items which were sent into the interior by fully developed coastal states were largely port manufactures and

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20 *Ibid*; J. Wisseman Christie, "Patterns of Trade in Western Indonesia: Ninth through Thirteenth Centuries A.D.," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1982, p. 332, ff.



sea products — salt, fish, cloth, metal tools, beads, and other ornaments of metal or shell — as well as a small number of imported valuables.. As noted above, this distinctive distribution of trade goods appears by the later centuries B.C. on some parts of the peninsula. All of the major concentrations of valuable metal-age imports — D'ong-son bronzes, glass and stone jewelry, bronze tools and bowls from Thailand — have been found on the lower courses of rivers, principally on the west coast near major tin fields. These concentrations, the largest of which is in the Kelang-Dengkil area, downstream from the major Langat tin fields, appear to represent the remains of port-capitals of emergent trading states of the classic "Malay" type. On Sumatra, imported valuables of this period have been found so far only in the highlands of the far interior, close to the sources of exportable metals. On the basis of the data available at present, it would appear that no coastal states of the type known later on the Sumatran coast had yet formed. No concentrations of valuable imports have yet been found along the lower courses of Sumatran rivers which can be dated to a period earlier than the mid first millennium A.D. It would thus appear that the earliest states of the "Malay" coastal type were formed on the west coast of the peninsula, probably during the last centuries B.C. This state form was subsequently communicated, some centuries into the first millennium A.D., to the less well endowed east coast of Sumatra, at a period when rising overseas demand for products of the interior of the island made the formation of middle-man coastal states economically feasible.<sup>21</sup>

#### KEDAH AND SRIVIJAYA

Trading states of the peninsula and Sumatran coasts came to the attention of Chinese and Indian observers as a result of the trade boom of the middle of the first millennium A.D. Of these states Kedah and Srivijaya attracted the most attention over the longest period of time. Srivijaya figured prominently in Chinese sources of the late seventh and eighth centuries. After a period of silence a similar state, bearing the same name (but not connected by the Chinese sources with the earlier Srivijaya) appeared in reports and tribute lists of the first three centuries of the second millennium, after which it once more declined. The peninsula state of Kedah appears, on the basis of epigraphic remains, to have formed rather earlier than Srivijaya, and its career appears to have been less erratic. Located as it was on the far side of the peninsula, it rarely came to the attention of the Chinese reporters, but it played a prominent role in Indian and Middle Eastern

21 Christie, *Port Settlement to Trading Empire* (in press).



records. It was one of the main ports of call of the seventh century Chinese pilgrim I Ching on his journey by sea to India.<sup>22</sup> It is mentioned frequently in late first millennium A.D. Arab and Persian accounts as an important port, and in the tenth century it was the major port beyond India used by Omani traders.<sup>23</sup> South Indian temple endowment records mention Kedah as frequently as they do Srivijaya.<sup>24</sup> The numerous sites in the Muda and Merbok valleys of Kedah — at last count over seventy-five in number — which have produced evidence of trade with both China and the Middle East,<sup>25</sup> testify to the long and prosperous career of the ports of Kedah. The state itself never seems, however, to have been more than medium-sized, despite its role as a major interface between the Indian Ocean and South China Sea trading circuits. The availability of tin in the lower Merbok valley must have added stability to the state's economy, but it never seems to have been used as the basis for expansion. This appears to have been true of the other west coast peninsular states as well. Tin, which may have provided the economic basis for initial state formation on the coast, seems not to have financed any subsequent political expansion. It may be that there was simply too much tin available, from too many small port states, along too extensive a coast for any state to effectively corner the market and capitalize on this one major resource. Kedah's relative success seems, in fact, to have been due more to its strategic location and ease of landfall than to a dominant position in the tin trade.

Given the double advantage of location and tin that Kedah possessed, it is surprising that its sphere of political influence was so limited, and that it spend much its carrer as a client state of the economically less well endowed Srivijaya, which suffered from all of the disabilities of Sumatran coastal states. It may, in fact, have been Kedah's relatively comfortable circumstances (like those of other small

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22 J. Takakusu, *A Record of the Buddhist Religion, by I Tsing*, Paris, 1896.

23 G. Ferrand, *L' Empire Sumatranais de Crivijaya*, Paris, 1922, p. 53, 55 and G.R. Tibbetts, "The Malay Peninsula as Known to the Arab Geographers," *Malaysian Journal of Tropical Geogrphy*, 9, 1959, 24.

24 B.C. Chhabra, *Expansion of Indo-Aryan Culture during Pallava Rule, as Evidenced by Inscriptions*, Delhi: Munshi Ram Manohar Lal, 1965, p. 15.

25 H.G. Quaritch Wales, "Archeological Researches on Ancient Indian Colonisation in Malaya," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 18(1), 1940. A Lamb, "Miscellaneous Papers on Early Hindu and Buddhist Settlement in Northern Malaya and Southern Thailand", *Federation Museums Journal*, 6, 1961; Leong Sau Heng, "A Study of Ceramic Deposits from Pengkalan Bujang, Kedah," unpublished M.A thesis, University of Malaya, 1969.



states on the same coast) which prevented the state from growing beyond its immediate physical boundaries. The early coastal states of the peninsula were not forced, as were their Sumatran counterparts, to turn outwards to the sea in the later prehistoric period. Although clearly belonging to a boat-using culture, they do not appear to have carried their material culture beyond their own shores, nor do they appear to have been the major carriers involved in the early trade networks of the archipelago. The distinctive iron tools of late first millennium B.C. and early first millennium A.D. peninsula sites — the only metal items clearly made locally — were apparently only traded within the peninsula. These “*tulang mawas*” tools, with their small sockets, odd hafting angles, and often odder shapes, while common in coastal sites of the peninsula bordering the Malacca Straits, have not so far been reported from Sumatran sites, despite the fact that Sumatran bronzes must have incorporated Malayan tin. Malayan iron implements may have been used exclusively in internal trade, and may not have entered their export repertoire. Yet the fact that Malay coastal material culture had no clear impact on the Sumatran coast, at a time when Sumatran links with coasts surrounding the Java Sea appear to have been relatively strong, suggests that the Malayan ports may have been more often receivers than active carriers of sea trade. If the peninsular states of the early first millennium A.D. had played only a relatively passive role in maritime trade networks, they may well have failed to develop the naval strength necessary to defend themselves from more aggressive Sumatran neighbours, for whom trade monopolies represented the key to economic viability. Kedah’s limited riverine hinterland and relatively stable, though possibly somewhat passive, export economy appear to have assured it an enduring, but second-rank position amongst the states of the Malacca Straits, particularly in view of the fact that tin, while never losing its market altogether, must have declined in strategic importance with the advent of iron metallurgy.

Contrasts between the epigraphic and monumental remains of historic period Kedah and Srivijaya are marked. Kedah’s body of epigraphic remains is amongst the earliest in Southeast Asia. The small group of fifth century Buddhist inscriptions, from the Muda Valley and environs<sup>26</sup> tie in with non-royal traders’ cults of the period elsewhere in Southeast Asia, principally in western and northern Borneo and in central and southern Thailand. None of these wealth-oriented Buddhist merchant cults of the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. appear to have had the intimate connections with political ritual that contem-

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26 Chhabra, *op. cit.*



porary Hindu cults exhibited. Not until the late seventh century, when the cult acquired a distinct tantric flavour, did it become a royal cult. Significantly, it was in Srivijaya that this transformation of the cult took place. The Srivijaya inscriptions of the late seventh century are interesting on several counts. They bear witness to the subsumption of the older Buddhist sea-trading cult to indigenous cults of royal magic, a process through which Buddhism became a major political force in the maritime region. At the same time it is clear that this early hybrid religion, focused on a royal priest figure, was not an entirely successful political tool. The prevailing atmosphere of the inscriptions is one of paranoia, of a political system stretched beyond its structural capabilities. The fact that the majority of the stones record internal struggles or curses directed at internal political enemies, particularly in outlying centres and secondary ports under the control of Srivijaya<sup>27</sup> coupled with the fact that the Chinese ceased to mention Shih-li-fo-shih as a power in the Straits by the middle of the eighth century, would seem to indicate that this first essay at political expansion — of forming a trade monopoly based upon a hierarchy of port-centres — was ultimately unsuccessful. A second attempt, made in the early tenth century, using more sophisticated political and technological tools, and embarked upon under particularly favourable economic circumstances, was rather more successful. The second Srivijaya — known to the Chinese as San-fo-tsi, and never connected by them with the earlier Shi-li-fo-shih — was relatively more successful than the first. Nonetheless, it remained vulnerable to external economic pressures, and in the end, it too was outlasted by Kedah. In times of power Srivijaya produced grandiose royal edicts and impressive monumental architecture (as at the recently excavated site of Muara Jambi on the lower Batang Hari). Kedah has so far yielded no royal edicts, and the monumental remains of its period of greatest affluence (the ninth through early thirteenth centuries), although numerous, are all small, and quite possibly funded by merchants rather than rulers. A ruler of Kedah is mentioned in Indian temple inscriptions of the early eleventh century, but it is unclear from the wording whether this was yet another title of the ruler of Srivijaya at the time, or a separate vassal king. Since Kedah's period of greatest affluence coincided with that of vassalship or status as a secondary centre in

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27 G. Coedes, "Les Inscriptions Malaises de Crivijaya," *Bulletin de L'Ecole Française d'Extreme-Orient*, 30, 1930, pp. 29 – 80; J.G. de Casparis, *Prasasti Indonesia I*, Bandung: Masa Baru, 1956, pp. 1 – 45 and M. Boechari, "An Old Malay Inscription of Srivijaya at Palas Pasemah (South Lampong)" in *Pra Seminar Penelitian Srivijaya*, Jakarta: Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional, 1979, pp. 19 – 43.



the Srivijayan port hierarchy, it is not surprising to find that it produced no great royal edifices. Kedah's course of development between the period of the early inscriptions and that of absorption into the Srivijayan sphere is as yet unclear. No sites dating to this critical period have yet been located. When they are we may have a clearer idea of the process through which Srivijaya developed.

In the absence of evidence from the critical fifth through seventh centuries on either side of the Straits, explanations of the process of state and "empire" building must remain tentative. However, it seems clear that, given the economic and political position of the Sumatran coastal communities, which maintained uneasy and unreliable alliances with the productive groups beyond their grasp in the interior as well as with equally fickle overseas trading partners — both essentially beyond the control of any *single* port community — the eventual appearance of a monopolistic coastal empire was inevitable. Given the geography of the Straits and the states bordering it, this move was feasible. It was also profitable, since it brought some degree of order and stability in an over-competitive economic environment wherein the export potential of the port states collectively far exceeded the market demand. If each of the separate coastal states had exported at maximum capacity, all would certainly have suffered. The Srivijayan port hierarchy, with its capacity to limit exports, control and tax transit trade, and provide a favourable environment for increase in volume of trade from overseas, clearly acted to increase the collective prosperity of the Straits, at the price of limiting that of most of the individual members. Kedah, on the whole, seems to have benefited more than others from the arrangement, although it is not surprising, given the economic and environmental circumstances, that ambitious, "empire"-building moves should have been initiated from the less stable Sumatran side of the Straits.