

City-States and City-State Cultures in pre-15th-Century Southeast Asia

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The maritime façade of the western part of Southeast Asia holds a key position astride the major commercial route that links the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean and, further west, to the Mediterranean. The harbours of western Southeast Asia also became the focal point of regional trade networks that fed into the major maritime route the rich productions of the area, some of them in demand in world markets from late prehistoric times: gold, tin, resins, spices, precious woods, etc. Maritime exchange and trade has therefore played a key role in the formation of local coastal political systems and urbanism. This notable dependence on markets and trade made the area extremely sensitive to the ups and downs in the economic life of the major actors in the trans-Asiatic trade route. The latter thus provided much of the rhythm of Southeast Asian history; more specifically, the cultural and economic role of the two neighbouring masses of India and China, major political forces at times, always huge markets, was invariably significant.

The study of the era of Southeast Asian history some historians would call “early modern” has seen dramatic progress in the past thirty years and Anthony Reid’s essay in this volume provides a clear overview of the city-state culture in the Malay-speaking world and its relationship with the world trade boom of the 15th to 17th centuries.

There were, however, other economic highs in Asian and Southeast Asian history, other “ages of commerce”, when marked rises in the intensity of inter-Asian maritime trade have been registered. Archaeologists and historians working on the two millennia that precede the “early modern” period (*i.e.* from ca. 500 B.C. to ca. 1500 A.D.) have identified those economic booms in the Ancient World the effects of which have now clearly been recognized in Southeast Asian contexts. As one moves back in time from the 15th-17th century era, phases of economic growth and rise of maritime trade are apparent at various periods: during the 10th to 13th centuries

(corresponding to the surge in foreign trade of both Song China and Cola India); between the 5th to 7th centuries; at the turn of the Christian Era, when Asian trade with Rome was at its peak and networks across the Bay of Bengal in full swing, with trade in tin and gold from Southeast Asia acting as one major source of revenue for Southeast Asian polities.

For the purpose of this essay, the interesting point to make is that most of these earlier periods of growth in the intensity of inter-Asian maritime trade also appear to have induced growth of settlements in coastal areas of Southeast Asia. This necessarily puts the 15th-17th century developments into a broader perspective.

However, contrary to the post-15th century period, we do not have the same set of European and locally written sources to describe the socio-economic situation. Writing appears in Southeast Asia only in the first few centuries A.D., but no local sources have survived in tropical conditions other than epigraphical (the latter only start in the 5th century A.D.). More or less at the same time, workable foreign records about the region, mainly Chinese, start appearing: these, however, have their limits and often impose their own world view on a local situation, thus distorting our own comprehension of it. For most of the first millennium A.D., the scarcity of available locally written sources to counterbalance foreign sources therefore leaves most of the burden of reconstructing this period of Southeast Asian history to archaeologists. Archaeology has made considerable progress in the past twenty years in Southeast Asia, and the periods of interest to us here have been the focus of many a study in recent times (see the general bibliography *infra* on which the present notes are based). Progress has been most dramatic in the late prehistorical and proto-historical eras, which takes us some centuries into the 1st millennium A.D. For the post-7th century period, when inscriptions become available in sufficient numbers, archaeologists and epigraphers, during these past

two decades, have also carried out intensive new research, as well as reconsidered and reinterpreted the available data within a true historian's framework. State formation, urbanization and their connection with trade and exchange have been the focus of most studies. I will summarize here, in a few pages only, the general conclusions reached in the works listed in the attached bibliography.

The states that developed in Southeast Asian history before the 15th-17th century have long been classified by modern historians as "temple building", "agrarian" or "territorial", to oppose them to those of trade-oriented city-states of "early modern" times. This may be partly valid for those two late states (11th to 14th centuries) that have attracted much of the attention of earlier scholars: the Khmer "empire", centred at Angkor, and that of Majapahit, centred in East Java. It is not true for the earlier coastal states, which appear to have been largely trade-oriented and city-centred. This urban pattern has been said to be typical only of the post-1400 period, but this, I believe, is more a reflection of the scarcity or poor interpretation of earlier written sources than of any critical argumentation.

Sriwijaya as a Malay City-State

The existence of a Malay polity that thrived between the 7th and the 13th centuries A.D. has now been pretty well established: it carried the name Sriwijaya, a term used to indicate both the polity and its major urban settlement. It is the first known large-scale state of world economic stature to have prospered in Insular Southeast Asia. The wealth and prestige of its ruler, the regional eminence of its capital and harbour-city, its role as a centre for the diffusion of Buddhism were acknowledged by the other world economies of the time, from the Arabs at Baghdad to the Tang and Song Chinese. A large and still growing body of evidence points towards the modern city of Palembang (in Southern Sumatra, Indonesia) having been its political, religious and economic centre between the 7th and the 11th centuries. Evidence suggests that some centres of activity were active there soon after the formative stages of Sriwijayan statehood in the late 7th century. The polity no doubt thrived in the 9th and 10th centuries and it appears from both the archaeological and written records that the city continued to be occupied and maritime trade carried out after the political centre of Sriwijaya was transferred to the river basin situated immediately to the north, somewhere near modern Jambi, in the late 11th century.

The long-lived polity of Sriwijaya produced relatively few inscriptions and practically all of them come from the very first phase of its foundation in the 680s. These inscriptions, however, were the first ever to be written in a vernacular language of Insular Southeast Asia, *i.e.* Old Malay (but with a strong Sanskrit lexical input), and are therefore presumed to convey a largely localized view of the situation. It so happens that a set of these inscriptions provides us with an almost graphic description of the structure of the 7th century polity that can be compared with both archaeological and other textual sources.

The sites within and in the immediate vicinity of the modern city of Palembang have by now yielded pre-14th century material evidence for settlement, manufacturing, commercial, religious and political hubs of activity at a level that can only be reconciled with a focally situated settlement, in other words with the "capital" city of the early Malay polity. The settlement pattern revealed so far in Sriwijayan archaeological sites at Palembang confirms the evidence provided by the few contemporary foreign sources available, both Arabic and Chinese. A riverine pattern, as expected, is by now clearly discernible. Multiple hubs of specialized activities have been found scattered along some 12 km on the northern bank of the Musi river and its smaller tributaries. Religious sites tend to have been located on higher, dry land. All centres of activity, though, are situated either on the Musi river bank or clearly within reach, by water, from the main river and thus from the sea, downstream from Palembang. Judging from the quantity of finds on some of the excavated sites, population density must have been high in some places. Many of these finds clearly indicate active, long-distance trade and the role of merchants and ship-masters (*vaniaga*, *puhawang*) is underscored in local inscriptions. Though no ruler's residence has been located so far, the Sebokingking inscription in East Palembang clearly must have been at the hub or close to such a political centre, at least at foundation time in the 670s and 680s (the *kadatuan*, literally the "place of the ruler [*datu*]", as mentioned in this very inscription) (Manguin [1991], [1992], [1993]).

The pattern described is precisely that used to define the structure of Malay trade-oriented harbour polities best known during the post-15th century Islamic "Age of Commerce". Considering the fact that other structural elements of "early modern" Southeast Asian harbour-cities such as military organization or religious and cultural dissemination are also prominent in Sriwijayan times, it appears that

the sites in Palembang fit nicely within the pattern defined for later Malay World city-states.

Sriwijaya, however, was more than just a harbour-centred city-state. Early historical interpretations based on an inadequate comprehension of inscriptions pronounced that Sriwijayan power encompassed a vast “kingdom” or even an “empire”. The Eurocentrist concepts that were attached to such terms (territory, frontiers, and the political domination bound to them, etc.) were misleading. Recent re-reading of the small corpus of Old Malay inscriptions produced by this polity, of Chinese sources reporting on the trading state, and on data produced by recent excavations in Palembang allows a scaled-down image to be reconstructed (Wolters [1982], [1986]; Kulke [1993]; Mangun [1993]; [in press]).

After reexamining the 7th century central Sebok-inking inscription and the copies of it that were placed at the periphery of the polity, Herman Kulke concluded that “an impressive patrimonial staff at the centre (...) should not be equated with the existence of a far-fledged empire”. The Malay (not Sanskrit) term *kadatuan* used in Sriwijayan inscriptions is now understood as referring only to the “place of the *datu*”, i.e. the politically weighty, but spatially limited sym-

bolic centre of the polity, the palace and its fenced compound (in a fashion that parallels that of the modern Central Javanese *keraton*, a Javanese term cognate to Old Malay *kadatuan*). Similarly, the term *wanua* in the same inscriptions (also from Malay linguistic stock) is now read as referring to the urban environment of the *kadatuan*, rather than to a “kingdom” or even an “empire”. This urban concentration would only have included, apart from the ruler’s residence (*kadatuan*) itself, religious buildings and parks (both alluded to in the inscriptions), markets and the semi-rural or riparian villages (the *kampung* of modern Malay cities). This first circle, or core area, would have corresponded to the urban settlement of ancient Palembang, as partially brought to light by archaeologists. It is depicted in these inscriptions as surrounded by another circle described as *samarryada*, a Sanskrit term conveying the notion of vicinity. Within this circle, one finds localities (*desa*, a term of Sanskrit origin) ruled by local leaders (“trusted with the charge of a *datu*” by the now more powerful *datu* at the centre). Archaeological research in South Sumatra – and the difficulties inherent in the identification of 7th century sites – has not yet brought to light enough data to indicate with any pre-

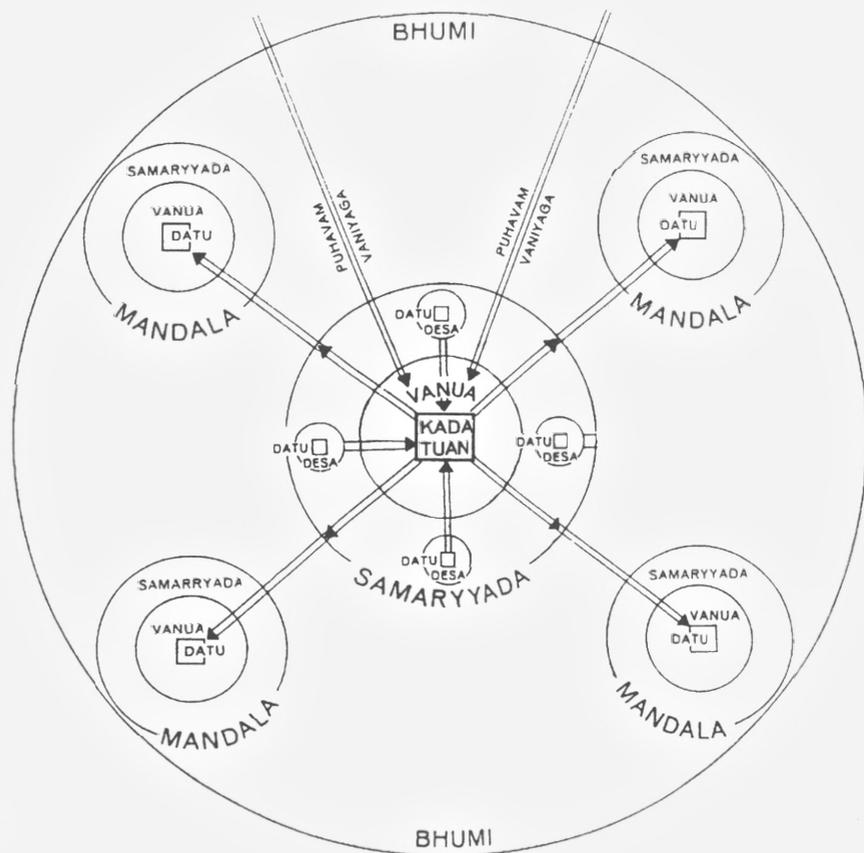


Fig. 1. Schematic representation of the polity of Sriwijaya.

cision which and where exactly were the polities incorporated into this “neighbourhood” of the *wanua*.

Still in concentric fashion, we then find the various *mandala*, under their respective *datu*, described as powerful local magnates ruling over their own *wanua* and *samaryyada*, but uneasily recognizing the authority of a *primus inter pares*, the ruler of Sriwijaya. These outlying *mandala* formed the outer reaches of the polity of Sriwijaya (referred to in the inscription as *bhumi Sriwijaya*).

This representation of space can be schematically depicted in the above diagram (Fig. 1, adapted from Kulke [1993]). Four almost identical copies of the central inscription of Sebokingking (which Kulke calls the “*mandala* inscriptions”) happen to have been found at the periphery of Southern Sumatra. These inscriptions therefore appear to indicate the spatial limits of one exterior circle of largely autonomous *mandala*, centred on second-order settlements.

The overall structure of the polity can be tackled from another angle. The urban centre of Palembang/Sriwijaya lies some 80 km upstream from the eastern coast of Sumatra, a position no different from that of later harbour-cities that grew in similar coastal environments, in Sumatra or in Kalimantan (Borneo).

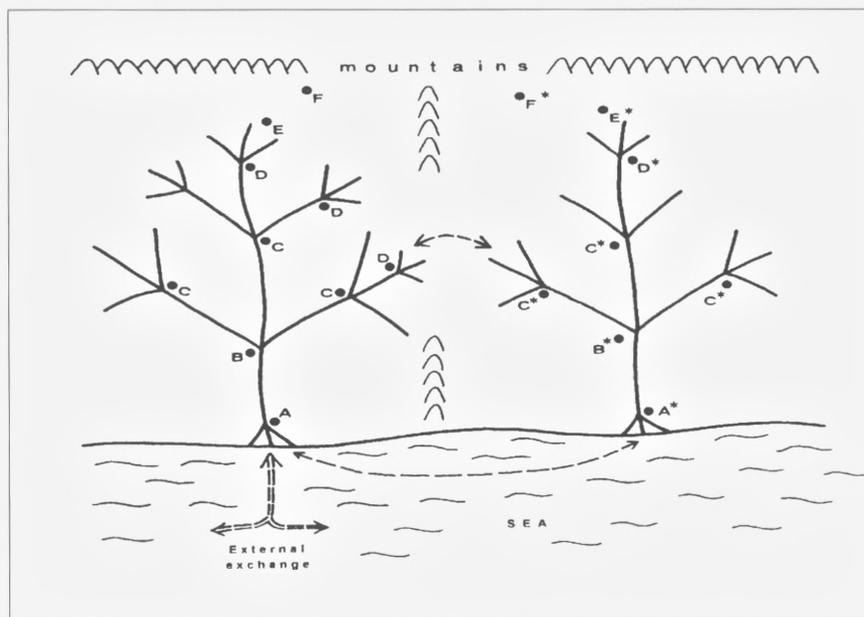
One of the models submitted by anthropologists and archaeologists to explain the functioning of such coastal Malay polities is the hierarchic upstream-downstream organization involving a primary focal urban centre downstream from one major river, and a series of upstream secondary (and tertiary, etc.) centres along the same major river basin (Bronson [1977], who adapted the model to a Southeast Asian situation). The distribution of recently discovered religious sites upstream for Palembang on the river network of the Musi River Basin, many of them in areas still known to have yielded alluvial gold, conforms nicely to this functional model (the settlement sites associated with them remain to be investigated) (Fig. 2, from Manguin [in press]; see also Manguin [1993]).

These river basin systems, when considered in isolation from neighbouring systems, already required that a complex network be constructed between the central place downstream and the multiple centres upstream. The main coastal polity (the harbour-city of urbanized systems) controlled the flow of merchandise entering or being exported from the river basin; when occupying such a site it therefore acquired a geographically dominant, key position. This meant it had to enter into a relationship with upstream societies

that had access to the hinterland productions. One must include among such upstream societies those which had thrived and benefitted from overseas contacts in areas far removed from the sea before a central place was established downstream (the upper valleys of the Musi River Basin were settled during the late prehistorical and the proto-historical period by complex societies that already had access to such foreign goods as Vietnamese bronzes and Indian Ocean beads). These upstream societies would have become dependent on the harbour-city for the acquisition of marine and overseas prestige products they had grown used to in earlier times. It is impossible, at this early stage of archaeological research in the upstream sites of Sumatra, to ascertain which mode of relationship was favoured by the Sriwijaya rulers at Palembang or later at Jambi. It probably varied depending upon the period considered and the societies involved. Forceful means may have been used to implement its dominant position, if we accept that the discourse on military operations in the 7th century inscriptions was also directed against such upstream polities, which is far from established. However, the general content of the central inscription at Sebokingking and its peripheral *mandala* inscriptions is more reminiscent of the implementation of some kind of alliance or bond that would have been renewed in oath-taking rituals comparable to those said still to have been implemented in much later times between the Sultans at Palembang and neighbouring societies. The hierarchy or ranking in such discrete river basin systems would have then been felt mainly in terms of geographical position. All the societies in the system would have been largely dependent on each other for the system to work, and the central place downstream would not have been in a position to compel the remote upstream polities to enter into such relationships by military force alone (the latter would probably have bypassed the Musi system and gained access to the neighbouring Batang Hari river basin or to the Indian Ocean shores across the mountains).

The body of Malay literature that is contemporary with the emergence and glory of the Melaka city-state system in the 15th century bears abundant confirmation of the above models (no Malay texts have been preserved in written form that are earlier than this, except inscriptions). It tells us clearly how the dwellers of these city-states perceived the polity in which they lived. In simplified terms, it can be said that they systematically referred to their polities with two phrases defining first a political centre (the *negeri Melaka* of these texts, or the *kadatuan Sriwijaya* of

Fig. 2. Schematic representation of the hierarchic upstream-downstream organization of settlements.



earlier inscriptions) and by its relationship with a periphery described, literally, as “the confluents, bends and reaches” of a river system (*anak sungei dan teluk rantau* in the Melaka texts). Taken as a whole, this metaphor clearly stands for the various settlements strewn along the rivers, creeks and inlets that constitute the river basins under the control of one centre of power. This geographical representation thus epitomizes the spatial integration of the polity in a riparian landscape. However, it does in no way convey the notion of a topographically well-defined territory. The polity is defined primarily by a centre, and by its periphery. Other similar statements in the texts make it clear that what is essential to this perception is the centre-periphery relationship, rather than the territory itself: the ruler at the centre is the pivot of the polity, the focus of centripetal forces that keep the system together. It is the maintenance of a network of relations, not the control of a territory, that is emphasized (Manguin [in press]).

This model conforms nicely with the geographical position of many harbour-cities of the Malay World, both pre-modern and modern. Oddly, the harbour city-state of Melaka, which is supposed to epitomize the Malay polity, appears at first sight not to conform to the above upstream-downstream model. Indeed, the general credo among historians of the pre-European and European periods of the history of the city-state of Melaka, is that the city functioned only as an entrepôt, without a hinterland; it produced no rice and had no up-river production to feed into the networks; it thus

had to import, among other things, most of the food and provisions to feed its large population. This general agreement is based on similar assumptions of early 16th century Portuguese authors, who were clearly unaware of the true extent of Melaka’s political and economic power. Possibly due to the fact that the small Melaka river could not possibly give access to a productive hinterland, and that the territory surrounding the harbour-city is always described in contemporary sources as uncultivated, this general assumption has rarely been questioned. Some archaeologists too have given credence to this “city without a hinterland” model and argued for its validity for the whole area, and the assumed condition of Melaka was then also brought to the rescue (Bronson and Wisseman [1976]).

However, it has been proposed to see Melaka’s hinterland as a regional trade sphere extending a few hundred miles from its centre. This “hinterland” – which was neither “behind” nor necessarily contiguous to the port-city – should rather be described as an “*Umland*” that lay “beyond the entrepôt” and was irrigated by Melaka’s network of “waterways”, both riverine and maritime. These would have been the places from which products of the sea, the forest and the mine would have been extracted, and rice produced to feed the large population of the central place (see Manguin [in press] for further references).

In the light of the textual evidence gathered above, the various river basins that constituted this *Umland* must have enclosed other polities that had then

entered into various degrees of reciprocal alliances or dyadic bonds (kinship, economic, etc.) with the rulers at Melaka: these would have included, at the turn of the 16th century, a number of places on the Malayan Peninsula but also harbour-cities such as Pasai, Pedir, Siak and Inderagiri on Sumatra, all of them polities large or small, some of them earlier central places on their own. When seen from the point of view of the then thriving central place of Melaka, they were said to be “in dependence” upon the port-city (*jajahan Melaka* or *jajahan yang takluk ke Melaka* in contemporary literature). Sriwijaya similarly kept under its “submission” (the term *bhakti* is used in the Old-Malay inscriptions), over time, a variety of polities away from its own original Musi river basin, among which the Jambi/Melayu polity, with its own Batang Hari river basin, looms large: in fact, it ended up taking over the position of political centre of Sriwijaya in the 11th century.

In the case of Sriwijaya, the picture obtained in the above pages is far removed from the “imperial” state implied by earlier historians. The structure of the Sriwijayan polity is in fact akin to that of later harbour-polities of the Straits area or the Java Sea, the “Sultanates” and harbour-cities of the 15th-17th century “age of commerce”, that had hastily been said to have developed only in such late times. In other words, Sriwijaya was a prototype of Melaka (Manguin [1993] 33-4; Christie [1995] 269, 272). The data presently available may not be as complete as that of the post-15th-century era, but it all fits into an analogous pattern. Sriwijaya is shown to present many of the characteristics of a city-state functioning within a broader city-state culture, as defined during this symposium.

Still Earlier City-States?

Oliver W. Wolters, in his trend-setting book on *Early Indonesian Commerce* (1967), tackled the problem of Sriwijaya from the angle of the economic history of the polities that thrived in the early centuries of the first millennium A.D. in the western part of Insular Southeast Asia. It established that the foundation of Sriwijaya, astride the main trans-Asian maritime route, was the logical conclusion of several centuries of a state formation process that took place among trade-oriented polities in the Straits area of Southeast Asia (encompassing the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra and west Java).

Those polities that immediately precede the formation of Sriwijaya appear to have grown in the 5th to

7th centuries; they are mainly known from very limited, mid-20th century studies, based on epigraphy and foreign records. In these sources, they are described as autonomous states, along those “favoured coasts” that control the main maritime routes passing through Southeast Asia (Wolters [1967], Wheatley [1983]). They occupied limited coastal niches similar to those of later states, carried out maritime trade as a main economic activity and were focused on urban, cosmopolitan, harbour settlements. Most of them, however, particularly those situated on both coasts of the Malay Peninsula or in Sumatra, appear to have been rather small scale polities. Only two of the latter have been investigated in systematic, albeit limited, archaeological excavations: Kuala Selinsing on the West Coast of the Malay Peninsula (in Malaysia, see Shuhaimi [1993]), and Kota Kapur on the Island of Bangka (South Sumatra, Indonesia) (Lucas, Manguin & Soeroso [1998]). The latter site is a smallish 6th-7th century settlement, with two diminutive Hindu temples complete with their stuary, a 2.5 km long earthen wall protecting it from outside attacks, and a gathering of riparian settlements. It therefore appears to display the attributes of later Malay World city-states. One of the Sriwijaya peripheral inscriptions, dated to 686 A.D., in fact indicates that it was then incorporated into the new expanding, more powerful city-state.

One single major polity appears in this 5th-7th century period to have reached a substantial size: it is described by the Chinese as the “state of Funan” and is based in the lower valley and delta of the Mekong, at the southern tip of the Indochinese Peninsula. Archaeological work started there in the 1930s and 1940s, but large-scale research is only now being carried out again on sites of two of its urban concentrations, at Angkor Borei (in Cambodia, by the University of Hawaii) and Oc Eo (in Vietnam, by the Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient), which should answer some of the questions raised: are these cities autonomous polities controlling only their immediate hinterland, with their economies based chiefly on trade and exchange (particularly at Oc Eo, only some 20 km from the sea) or do they control and exploit a substantial rural territory and depend on agricultural revenue? It is too early to answer such questions in detail, but it increasingly appears that, rather than a single, encompassing state as described by the Chinese, we are dealing with an association of centres of political power, inland as well as across the Gulf of Siam from Oc Eo, established in urban concentrations that may well be autonomous enough to qualify as city-states

(Wheatley [1983]; Vickery [1998], is based on the little epigraphical body available for the period; see Manguin & Vo Si Khai [in press] for a very preliminary presentation of the Oc Eo field results). The lack of inscriptions written in a local language prevents us from telling which was the language of the ethnic groups thus gathered in such an encompassing political system. A language of the Môn-khmer group is very probable, though, as it seems to have been used in those harbour-cities (in what is now Southern Thailand) that were absorbed by Funan in the 3rd century A.D. This raises the possibility that a city-state culture was then thriving in a non Malay-speaking area of Western Southeast Asia.

Travelling further back in time, and back into the Malay-speaking area, one is left with working hypotheses of even scantier archaeological data. However, recent interpretations of archaeological sites on the Malay Peninsula dating from the first few centuries before and after the beginning of the Christian Era would in fact push the formative period of such trade-generated settlements back another five or more centuries (Leong Sau Heng [1990]; Christie [1990]; Glover [1989], Glover *et al.* [1992]; Higham [1989], Higham & Rachani [1998]). These appear to indicate that, at least along the Western maritime façade of Southeast Asia, it is again trade and exchange rather than agriculture which paved the way for state formation and its corollary urbanization. Indeed, a variety of sites pop up after ca. 500-300 B.C. along the coasts of the Malay Peninsula, the north coast of Java and Bali, and along the coasts of the Gulf of Thailand, that have been identified as polities of growing complexity, showing a high degree of economic integration with their neighbours, both inland and overseas. They appear to have burgeoned as a consequence of the economic boom of the late 1st millennium B.C., thriving on metal production and trade.

It is too early, pending further archaeological work, to decide if these early Southeast Asian polities qualified or not as incipient city-states. Let us just give a list of their presently identified characteristics: their situation is coastal or riparian, and their geographical niches comparable to those of city-states of later times; they show a concentration of population as well as social hierarchy (as surmised mainly from burials); some of them at least appear to have carried out specialized economic activities linked to trade (iron-working, tin and gold mining); they established economic contact with their hinterland with a view to obtaining goods for export; building and sailing of large trading ships was prominent in the region in

which they thrived; artefacts indicating regional as well as long-distance trade (with both India and Southern China/Northern Vietnam) are a feature of most of these sites.

Starting from much earlier times than was previously thought, one cannot therefore escape the inference that trade-oriented polities, centred on harbour sites, together with the (then only proto-urban?) settlement patterns associated with them, have been *mutatis mutandis* a feature of the western façade of Southeast Asia.

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