

Viṣṇuvarman in the Golden Peninsula

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ABSTRACT—This article develops from recent numismatic studies and discoveries made at the site of Khuan Luk Pat, in Khlong Thom district, Krabi province of Peninsular Thailand. Some of the gold coins found there are inscribed on the reverse with the name Viṣuvama in Prakrit, possibly equivalent to Viṣṇuvarman in Sanskrit, and may refer to a local Indianized ruler of the first centuries CE. This would be the earliest royal title suffixed by °*varman* that we know for a king in Thailand. This Vaiṣṇava name, moreover, has, to date, not been found in the rest of mainland Southeast Asia, although there are a few epigraphic occurrences ascribed to Viṣṇuvarman known in South Asia from the late 1st century BCE to the 6th century CE. In addition, and most remarkably, an inscribed seal from the 5th–6th century discovered long ago in Peninsular Malaysia contains the same name in Sanskrit, thus giving rise to speculation regarding the identity and relationship between these two Viṣṇuvarmans uncovered in the Golden Peninsula.

“... and after he [Candrasvāmin] had spent the night, and looked about him, he made acquaintance with a merchant named Viṣṇuvarman, who was about to go to the isle of Nārikela. And with him he embarked in a ship, and went across the sea to the island, out of love for his children”.

Kathāsaritsāgara (“Ocean of Streams of Story”), Book IX, Chapter 56.

Inscribed gold coins from Khlong Thom

A significant hoard of gold coins was found in the late 1970s or early 1980s at Khlong Thom, an ancient archaeological site—also known as Khuan Luk Pat (“Bead Mound”)—located on a natural hill near to the Khlong Thom river, which gave the name of the district in Krabi province. Unfortunately, this material was not properly recorded during uncontrolled excavations, was looted over the years, and most of these coins were soon dispersed and sold to various private collectors. These hundreds of coins fall into three groups, according to Brigitte Borell’s recent study and typology published in previous issues of this journal (Borell 2017, 2019a, and 2020). Of special interest are the four coins which belong to Group A, showing a head in profile on the obverse and bearing a short legend with a few *akṣaras* or syllables on the reverse. One of these coins

was initially misidentified as Roman,¹ despite the Indic inscription appearing as the reverse legend.

Given the industrial nature of the site, Borell suggests that all these gold coins from Khlong Thom were locally produced and are unlikely to be direct imports from India, let alone Rome. I agree with the general interpretation that these coins are local products, even though they may have been purportedly imitating Indian and Roman originals, in the same manner as other jewelry pendants imitating Roman coins have also been found at Khlong Thom and elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Borell 2014).

The first, and last, preliminary excavations at Khuan Luk Pat, conducted by Mayuree Veraprasert of Silpakorn University (1992), suggested a chronology in two phases for the entire site, with an early phase spanning from the 1st century BCE to the 2nd century CE, and a later phase from the 3rd to the 5th century CE corresponding to the so-called “Funan-related” culture. Presumably, the gold coins under discussion would fall in the second phase of occupation. Robert Wicks (1992: 263, Table 5) proposed a more conservative span from about 450 to 500 CE for the Khlong Thom gold coins and regarded them, for the most part, as local copies of a series of silver coins primarily known from the Bago (Pegu) area in southern Myanmar (Burma). Michael Mitchiner (1998: 165–168) similarly dated most of these coins to 425–500 or even later to 500–575 CE. Contesting this dating, Borell (following Harry Falk’s estimation on paleographic grounds, see *infra*) sees no external evidence or reasons to follow the rather late chronology of the coins offered by Wicks and Mitchiner. She instead proposes that “the Group A coins with Brāhmī inscription might date as early as about 200 CE, the conch coins of Groups B and C as early as the 3rd century CE” (Borell 2017: 168). This new proposed dating seems too early to me and I prefer, for reasons that will become evident, to revert to the previous dating, that is, more cautiously, in the 5th–6th century.

The short inscription found on the reverse of the gold coins gives the name of an individual in the genitive singular case. Harry Falk first read the three coin legends known to him as *śr(ī) viṣuvagoda* (Borell 2017: 154). He subsequently corrected his reading to *śr(ī) viṣuvamasa* on the basis of a fourth finely preserved and previously unknown coin of the same type which surfaced recently in a private collection and bears exactly the same legend written in a circle with six *akṣaras* (Borell 2020: 158) (Figure 1). The reading of the first character is the honorific *śr(ī)* in Sanskrit (i.e. *siri* in Prakrit), followed by the personal stem name *Viṣuvama* in the genitive or possessive form, “Of Śr(ī) Viṣuvama”. According to Falk, it may represent a Prakrit version of a royal name presumably equivalent to *Viṣṇuvarma(n)* in Sanskrit.² The language of the inscription can thus be noted as slightly Sanskritized Prakrit.

¹ Genuine Roman coins are rare in Southeast Asia, especially in gold. To date, only one genuine gold coin minted in the 1st century CE has been found at Bang Kluai Nok, Ranong province, and presumably came later into Thailand during the maritime Indo-Roman trade of the early centuries CE (Borell 2019b).

² In addition to *viṣṇu* (“All-pervader”), the term *viṣu* ($\sqrt{viṣ}$) can likewise be connected with *viśva* in Sanskrit (*viṣvam* = *viṣuvam*), thus conferring two new possible interpretations for the reading of the name: 1) *Viṣuvarman*, “He who is protected on both/all sides”; 2) *Viśvavarman*, “He who is protected by the universe”. *Viśva* (as in *Viśvarūpa*, “Universal form”) can also be another name for *Viṣṇu*. I thank Emmanuel Francis for making these suggestions.

The inscription on these gold coins from Khlong Thom is in a variety of Brāhmī script. On palaeographic grounds, Falk proposes a date anywhere between the 2nd century CE, at the earliest, to not later than the 5th century, although he seems to favor a date in the 2nd–3rd century. He also remarks, in another epigraphic context, that the Prakrit genitive case ending in *-sa*, instead of the expected *-sya* in Sanskrit, generally suggests a date before 250 CE (Borell & Falk 2017: cat. 15). This assumes that all inscriptions written in Prakrit forms, that is, some Middle Indo-Aryan dialects commonly found in ancient Indian epigraphy (Salomon 1998: 72ff), should be dated earlier, as a rule, than those composed in Sanskrit. This linguistic argument, however, is tenuous since Sanskrit often coexisted with other Prakrit languages of ancient India, sometimes even as late as the 8th century CE.³



Figure 1. Gold coin “Of Śrī Viṣuvama”, found at Khlong Thom, diameter approximately 1 cm. Private collection, Krabi province (Source: Borell 2020: Figure 2)


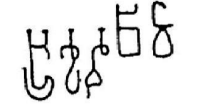
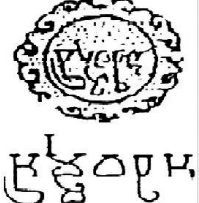
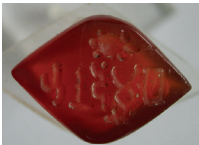

In other words, the use of one Indic language against another (e.g. Sanskrit versus Prakrit) cannot really make for a chronological argument. For example, the corpus of inscriptions from the Ikṣvāku kings of Vijayapurī (Nāgārjunakoṇḍa) in Andhra Pradesh shows that Prakrit was the language predominantly adopted in Buddhist inscriptions (Vogel 1929–30; Sircar 1963–64). But Sanskrit inscriptions also made their simultaneous appearance around the 3rd–4th centuries CE, especially in relation to the Brahmanical temples located along the Krishna River banks (Ghosh 1957: 36, pls. 58–59). I see no reason for supposing that this was not also the case in Peninsular Thailand and early Southeast Asia.⁴

Several miniature stone seals of different shapes, inscribed in the negative and often bearing personal Indic names in the genitive case in either Prakrit or Sanskrit,

³ The line between Sanskrit and Prakrit is not always clear-cut. In Indian epigraphy, there is really a spectrum of usage between “correct” or “pure” Sanskrit and the various dialects of Prakrit, not a simple differentiation. Often, a vast array of languages and dialects developed and lived side by side in constant interaction and mutual influence. On this issue of Sanskrit hybridity, see Damsteegt 1978; Salomon 1998: 81ff; and Salomon 2001.

⁴ An unpublished Buddha image discovered recently in Angkor Borei, Cambodia, dating to around the 7th century CE, is inscribed both with a dedicatory phrase in Sanskrit and a “canonical” citation in Prakrit on its base (K. 1455). I thank Bertrand Porte and Dominic Goodall for providing this information and the reading of the inscription, a detailed study of which is forthcoming.

Table 1: Inscribed seals bearing Indic names found at Khlong Thom

Figure/ Seal No.	Description/ Chronology	Script/ Language	Tentative Reading (Mirror Image)	References
Seal no. 2 	Rectangular green stone; L: 1.6 cm approx. 5th–6th c. CE	“Box- headed” Brāhmī/ Sanskrit	<i>Apralasanasya</i> or <i>Acalasanasya</i> “Of Apralasana/ Acalasana” (?)	Kongkaew 1986: 7 (Inscription no. 3); Anan 2547: 180, fig. 289
Seal no. 3 	Rectangular green stone; L: 1.6 cm approx. 5th–6th c. CE	“Box- headed” Brāhmī/ Sanskrit	<i>Virabendhurasya</i> , “Of Virabendhutra” (?)	Kongkaew 1986: 7–8 (Inscription no. 4)
Seal no. 4 	Circular gold; Diam: 1 cm approx. 6th–7th c. CE	Late southern Brāhmī/ Sanskrit	<i>Sarudharmmasya</i> , “Of Sarudharmma” (?)	Kongkaew 1986: 8 (Inscription no. 6)
Seal no. 6 	Oval red carnelian stone with depiction of a turtle; L: 1.4 cm approx. 1st c. BCE–2nd c. CE	Early Brāhmī/ Prakrit	<i>Bahmadinasa</i> , “Of Bahmadina” (?)	Anan 2547: 179, fig. 288
Seal no. 7 	Rectangular brown stone; L: 1.6 cm approx. 5th–7th c. CE	“Box- headed” Brāhmī/ Sanskrit	<i>Vīṭhītūkarsya</i> or <i>Vīṭhītūkrasya</i> “Of Vīṭhītūkar/ Vīṭhītūkra” (?)	Anan 2547: 177, fig. 286

Source: <https://db.sac.or.th/inscriptions>, adapted.

have indeed surfaced at Khuan Luk Pat/Khlong Thom and belong roughly to the same period as the earliest epigraphic records in Sanskrit from Malaysia and Indonesia circa 5th–6th century (Kongkaew 1986: 7–8).⁵ These names are otherwise unknown figures in Southeast Asian history; it is therefore likely that we are dealing here with imported objects from India where similar seals have been found in large quantity (Thaplyal 1972).⁶ In India, these private seals were generally used to identify merchandise and to seal containers of products and documents. In early Southeast Asia, however, it is not known if these portable objects were always imported and

⁵ Certain seals found in South and Southeast Asia may only contain short phrases comprising of a few auspicious words in Sanskrit, including the motto *apramāda* (i.e. “careful”, “heedful”, “aware”), almost always in the nominative case (Skilling 2015).

⁶ Two similar inscribed seals found in southern Vietnam (Oc Eo?) have been recently published (Griffiths 2014: 56–57, n. 28, figs. 43–44).

used only by Indian merchants or if they were also locally manufactured—perhaps utilizing the skills of migrant foreign artisans—and used as signs of authority or authentication.⁷ Table 1 shows a comprehensive list of seal inscriptions bearing Indic names known to date and found at the site of Khuan Luk Pat/Khlong Thom.

Of particular interest for comparative purposes is another round seal in dark stone inscribed circularly with three negative Brāhmī characters and an incised conch motif (Figure 2). It was also found at Khlong Thom and is read by Falk as *māpasa*, “Of Māpa” in Prakrit. Based on the paleography of the few *akṣaras*, this seal could probably date from the same period as the inscribed gold coins (Anan 2547: 173, figs. 281–282; Borell 2017: 167, n. 30). The symbol of the conch-shell (*śaṅkha*) is multivalent in India. It is one of Viṣṇu’s common attributes, as well as of his consort Lakṣmī. But perhaps here it may have functioned as a merchant guild emblem or as a charm insignia to keep away the dangers of the sea.



Figure 2. Inscribed seal “Of Māpa”, found at Khlong Thom. Black stone (Nephrite?); Diameter approximately 1.6 cm. Wat Khlong Thom Museum, Krabi province (Photo courtesy of Silpakorn University)

Other early inscribed seals bearing in mirror image personal names in (Sanskritized) Prakrit have been found elsewhere in Peninsular Thailand, most notably at Khao Sam Kaeo, Chumphon province (Borell & Falk 2017: cats. 3, 7, 9–12, 15), and at Bang Kluai Nok, Ranong province, with reference to *brahaspatiśarmasa nāvikaśa*, “Of the mariner Brahaspatiśarma”⁸ (Bellina *et al.* 2014: 84, fig. 7; Skilling 2015: 69–72). These seals are written in a variety of early Brāhmī scripts and are amongst the earliest imported inscriptions ever found in Southeast Asia, spanning the 1st to the 6th century CE.

Borell (2017: 169) observes that, in India, the use of *śrī* as an honorific prefix to the royal name was already in use during the Sātavāhana era up until the early 3rd century

⁷ For a recent study of the early use of seals in the Malay realm, see Gallop 2016. She cites, on p. 139, the *Songshi* 宋史, the official history of the Song dynasty (960–1279), which reports briefly on the use of a signet ring by the king of Sanfoqi 三佛齊 (*Śrīvijaya?*).

⁸ In Indian onomastic practices, names suffixed by *śarma* or *śarmaṇa* generally denote the Brahmin class. In traditional India, sea voyages were seen as offenses causing the loss of *varṇa*, but in practice many Brahmins made their way to Southeast Asia over the centuries. For example, imported clay seals that were the property of a certain Śivabṛhaspati (a Śaiva Brahmin?), dating to circa the mid-6th century CE, are known from central Thailand (Anan 2547: figs. 179, 229, 231, 279; Guy 2014: cat. 87).

CE and wonders if this could point to the involvement of individuals from Peninsular India for the local production of the Khlong Thom coinage. Early southern Indian presence at Khlong Thom is indeed already inferred by other finds, including the famous Tamil inscription found on a touchstone variously dated to the 3rd or 4th century CE which has been interpreted as belonging to an “Indian goldsmith” (*ibid.*, n. 38).

On these grounds, she concludes that the profile head shown on the obverse of the Group A coinage from Khlong Thom may represent the portrait of a local ruler and that the inscription found on the reverse must give his Indianized name. The royal status of this “Śrī Viṣṇuvama” is further corroborated by the fact that he had the power to strike his own currency locally.

In the following discussion, I pursue further the question of identification and tentative dates for this elusive historical figure, Viṣṇuvarman, in Peninsular Thailand. Indeed, a few intriguing epigraphic references to other Viṣṇuvarmans are also known in the Indian subcontinent as well as further south on the Malay Peninsula.

Viṣṇuvarman in Jambudvīpa

In the Indian subcontinent, names suffixed by °*varman* (i.e. “shield”, “defensive armor”, “protection” in Sanskrit) were historically associated, albeit not exclusively, with the *kṣatriya* social class or *varṇa*, thus naturally conveying to the owner an alleged “warriorhood” status conducive to royalty.⁹ There are countless dynastic examples found in both southern and northern India, especially popular during and after the Gupta period (4th–7th centuries CE), as for example with the Kadamba dynasty of Banavāsi (Karnataka), the Pallava kings of Kāñcī (Tamil Nadu), and the Varman dynasty of the Kāmarūpa kingdom (Assam).

However, the name Viṣṇuvarman, tentatively translated as “Armor of Viṣṇu”, or “He who has Viṣṇu as his protection”, appears rather rarely in South Asian history. It is found for the first time in epigraphy with a prince (*kumāra*) who is known from several inscriptions as a member of the kings of Apraca (or Avaca) in the area of Bajaur of ancient Gandhāra (today northwestern Pakistan) during the Indo-Scythian period. The first dedicatory inscription that refers directly to him as “Viṣṇuvarma” (Sanskrit: Viṣṇuvarman) is written on a Buddhist reliquary in the northwestern Prakrit

⁹ The example of *Guṇavarman (Chinese: 求那跋摩, *Qiunabamo*), a Kashmiri monk (367–431 CE) who was an important early translator of Buddhist materials into Chinese, relates to this. He was a prince by birth but ordained as a monk at the age of twenty and, upon his father’s death, he refused the throne and embarked on travels throughout Asia to preach Buddhism, including to Shepo (閩婆, Java?), before reaching China in 424 CE at the invitation of the dynasty of the Liu Song (劉宋) court, 420–479 CE (Pelliot 1904: 274–275). Interestingly, a Funanese prince or king Guṇavarman from the 5th to 6th century is also known in ancient Cambodia (K. 5). However, some counter examples of a few known individuals exist who, although their names were suffixed by °*varman*, did not seem to belong either to the warrior caste or to royalty, but to the mercantile caste (*vaiśya*). For such occurrences found in the *Kathāsariṣṭāgāra*, see *infra*. The same is true with other so-called dynastic names such as those suffixed by °*gupta*, °*senā*, and so on. For example, Buddhagupta sailing from or to Raktamṛttika (“Red Earth”)—recently identified with the ancient Rājbaḍḍāṅgā in Bengal—and Viṣṇusena hailing from Bhārukaccha (modern Bharuch) in Gujarat, are both known as *nāvikas*, “mariners”, outside India (Jacq-Hergoualc’h 2002: 216; Strauch 2012: 118). These figures should not be confused with the Gupta and Maitraka kings of similar names.

dialect known as Gāndhārī and Kharoṣṭhī script; it is approximately dated to the late 1st century BCE (Salomon 1995). In a later study on the Apraca kings, Richard Salomon (1996) observes that this prince “Viṣṇuvarma” may also be known from another reliquary inscription as “Viṣpavarma” (Sanskrit: Viśvavarman), father of Indravarman, and who was then entitled *stratega*, i.e. “Commander” or “Military Governor”. Perhaps, therefore, we have here an epigraphic precedent with two alternative forms of the name for the same historical figure, “a more vernacular [Viṣpavarma] and a more Sanskritized [Viṣṇuvarma] rendering, respectively” (*ibid.*, p. 445). This observation, if accepted,¹⁰ may have some bearing on the interpretation to be discussed later below over the two attested occurrences of Viṣṇuvarman spelt differently and discovered in the Thai-Malay Peninsula.

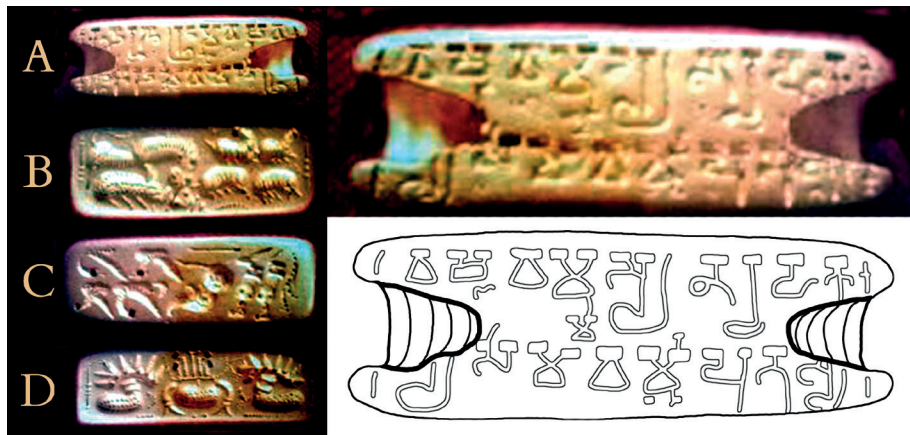


Figure 3: Gold seal “Of Viṣṇuvarma (?)”, found in Mandasaur; L: approximately 2.5 cm. Private collection, India. Left: Four inscribed faces of the object. Right: Mirror image of Face A, with hand drawing (Photograph courtesy of Devendra Handa, with drawing by Dániel Balogh)

The next few epigraphic appearances of Viṣṇuvarman, and perhaps the most relevant for this comparative study, emerge centuries later in central and southern India, around the 5th–6th century CE. These refer, firstly, to two Kadamba royalties of the collateral branch, viz. (*mahārāja*) Viṣṇuvarman I (reigned circa 445–475), son of Kṛṣṇavarman, and Viṣṇuvarman II (circa late 6th century), son of Bhogivarman. The second Viṣṇuvarman does not seem to have directly ruled the Kadamba kingdom, while the first Viṣṇuvarman is only known by a few records of land grants inscribed on copper plates.¹¹ He is said to have been installed on his throne by his overlord

¹⁰ In all fairness, the name of the Apraca Viṣṇuvarman has been treated differently by various authors. Mukherjee (1997), for example, has objected that Viṣṇuvarman was the father of Indravarman and that he ruled as king. Salomon (1996: 447, n. 77) notes the alternative possibility that “Viṣṇuvarma” and “Viṣpavarma” denote two different persons but rejects it in his study. *Contra*, see Falk 1998: 103–107.

¹¹ These are the Birūr grant of Year 3 (spurious), the Kora or Perbbaṭa grant of Year 5, and the Mūḍigere grant of Year 9 of his regnal dates (Gai 1996: 131–137, pls. 32–34). Another copper plate grant found at Taleśvara, in the Almora district of the modern-day state of Uttarakhand, is purported to have been issued by a certain “Mahārājādhirāja Śrī Viṣṇuvarman” in the Year 28 of his reign. This Viṣṇuvarman is said to belong to the legendary Paurava royal dynasty of Brahmapura in the foothills of the central Himalayas but is considered by the editor of the charter as probably fictional, and the copper plate an ancient forgery, possibly made between the late 6th and the early 8th century CE (Gupte 1915–16).

Śāntivarman, a Pallava king, and appears to have been later killed by King Ravivarman of the Kadamba main branch (Moraes 1931: 41–43; Gai 1996: 7–8, 14–15, 41–42).

Another almost contemporaneous Viṣṇuvarman is known from the Uruvupalli grant. It briefly refers to a “Commander” or “General” who built a Vaiṣṇava temple at Kaṇḍukūra (*kaṇḍukūre viṣṇuvarmmasenāpatikṛtavīṣṇuhāradevakulāya*) under a Pallava king from Andhra Pradesh, circa 450 CE (Fleet 1876: 53, pl. 4b, l. 26–27; Francis 2017: 422).

Finally, a mysterious inscribed seal in gold may have been originally in the possession of yet another Viṣṇuvarman (Figure 3). It was reportedly found in the vicinity of present-day Mandsaur, the ancient Daśapura in the western Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh, and thus possibly belongs to the epigraphic corpus of the Aulikara kings circa the 4th to the 6th century CE. The name “Viṣṇuvarma(n)” seems to be attested by the inscription on Face A which tentatively reads as follows according to Dániel Balogh (2019: 233–234):

- (l. 1) v[i]ṣ(n)[u]varmmasya (n)[?i](?rv)[?ā](haka)
 (l. 2) (sya) s(o)mavarm(m)a-put(rasya)

This alleged Viṣṇuvarman, son of Somavarman, may have been either “a court official in charge of executive matters, or a sort of building contractor”, without necessarily being a close relative of the ruling Aulikara dynasty (Balogh 2019: 234).¹² The Brāhmī characters can be defined as of a “box-headed southern style” and be dated around the 5th century CE, not excluding the possibility of dating the seal to a century later.¹³

Strikingly then, with the exception of the earlier Apracarāja of Bajaur, the few known epigraphic instances of Viṣṇuvarman in India are all written in Sanskrit and date roughly to the 5th and 6th centuries. It is therefore now with great interest that we turn to other evidence for Viṣṇuvarman in the Thai-Malay Peninsula.

Viṣṇuvarman in Suvarṇadvīpa

As early as the 5th–6th century CE many kings in Southeast Asia had adopted Sanskritized names ending with the royal suffix °varman. Famous historical figures from this period are *inter alia* Bhadravarman I, a king of Campā (Vietnam),¹⁴ Kauṇḍinya-Jayavarman, king of Funan (扶南, Mekong Delta), Mūlavarman, son of Aśvavarman, both kings of Kutei (Borneo), and Pūrṇavarman, king of Tārumā (Western Java). As we

¹² Given that the reading of the retroflex nasal phoneme /ṇ/ is not obvious on the inscription, one could alternatively offer to read the name simply as Viṣuvarman, on which see footnote 2.

¹³ Balogh also observes that the inscribed seal may have been converted later into a bead or an amulet worn on a string or a chain and may have traveled a long distance before reaching the hands of a local private collector in Mandsaur.

¹⁴ Not to be confused with *Śrī Bhadravarman (Chinese: 舍利婆羅跋摩, Shelipoluobamo or 師黎婆達陶呵羅跋摩, Shilipodatuoheluobamo), ruler of Puhuang (婆皇) or Panhuang (槃皇), and Poda (婆達) or Panda (槃達), hypothetically identified with the modern states of Pahang and Perak on the eastern and western coasts of the Malay Peninsula, who reigned in the middle of the 5th century CE, and sent envoys to the Chinese court of the Liu Song with regional products (Wade 2014: 27, fig. 30, 29, n. 90). See also the regional historical map in Figure 5.

have seen above, this suffix was also in common use during this period among royalties in central and southern Indian dynasties, including the Aulikaras, the Kadambas, the Pallavas, and so on.

The resemblance between many names for kings in India and Southeast Asia during this period of intense “Indianization” may not be accidental and was probably a conscious adoption by Southeast Asian rulers of an earlier or contemporary Indian model. One of the most striking parallels for a slightly later period consists of the two Mahendravarman kings who reigned almost simultaneously circa the late 6th–early 7th century CE. These are, on the one hand, the Pallava king who ruled the southern portion of present-day Andhra Pradesh and the northern part of Tamil Nadu (Francis 2017: 509ff), and, on the other, one of the first kings of Zhenla (真臘), previously titled Citrasena as a prince, who claimed to have ruled over part of ancient Cambodia, southern Laos, and northeast Thailand.¹⁵

Given the information presented above, it therefore comes as a complete surprise if the Viṣuvama/Viṣṇuvarman discovered at Khlong Thom was truly a local ruler of the 2nd–3rd century CE—as tentatively postulated by Borell and Falk (see *supra*). If true, it would not only precede all other known occurrences of Southeast Asian kings whose names were suffixed by °varman, but also, and perhaps most importantly, predate all Indian historical figures identified above, and known to date, who bore the same name.¹⁶ As reported previously, about four (presumably different) individuals are epigraphically known to date in India by this name in Sanskrit, all living during the 5th–6th century CE.

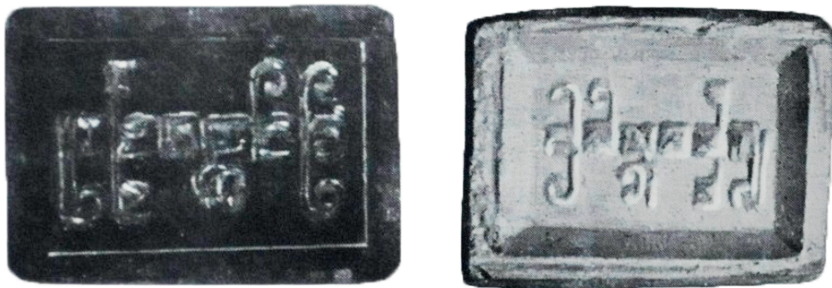


Figure 4: Inscribed seal “Of Śrī Viṣṇuvarma”, found at Kuala Selinsing, Perak, Malaysia. Red carnelian; L: approximately 4 cm. Present whereabouts unknown. Left: Original seal in mirror image. Right: Plaster cast to show inscription in positive (Source: Evans 1932: pl. 38)

Putting aside the new numismatic discovery at Khlong Thom, another Viṣṇuvarman has been well-known in neighboring Malaysia since the 1930s, following the chance discovery of an engraved carnelian seal at the shore mangrove site of Tanjung Rawa, Kuala Selinsing, in Perak state (Evans 1932: 89–90, 110–111; Braddell 1939: 168–169; Gallop 2016: 128–129) (Figure 4).

¹⁵ For a recent account of the epigraphic record of this prince/king, see Lorrillard 2014: 197–198. Four inscriptions (K. 1338–1341), still unpublished, have recently been discovered in those three countries, thus bringing to date to twenty the total known epigraphs of this monarch.

¹⁶ I am consciously ruling out the late 1st century BCE example from Bajaur as its dating and geographical location places it much too early in time and far too remote in space to have played any direct role here.

As in Khuan Luk Pat/Khlong Thom, this archaeological site yielded a large quantity of stone and glass beads manufactured locally as well as imported ceramics dating from the late centuries BCE to the 11th century CE (Jacq-Hergoualc’h 2002: 89–93). The “Perak seal”, however, is dated to the 5th–6th century on paleographic grounds and could well have been abandoned or lost there at a date long after its manufacture. It reads in negative *śrī viṣṇuvarmmasya*, “Of Śrī Viṣṇuvarma”, that is, exactly the same label as in the Khlong Thom inscribed coins, albeit this time in more common “Hybrid Sanskrit”.¹⁷ This dating and identification also strengthen the hypothesis of a more or less direct connection between this individual and his fellow contemporaries in India. Nilakanta Sastri suggested that the Perak seal was “just the signet ring of a merchant” (1936: 282) and that he was probably not a southern Indian but came from central India. However, Bahadur Chand Chhabra had earlier stated that the seal “might not have belonged to a commoner, but to a royal personage, as indicated by the use of *Śrī* and *Varman*” (1935: 27).¹⁸

While we cannot yet determine the exact status and regional origin of the Viṣṇuvarman who once possessed the Perak seal, given the highly mobile nature of this type of object we can surmise that he was probably of foreign—most likely Indian—origin. The “Pallava connection” made initially by early scholars, however, can now be largely dismissed. Indeed, we have seen above that the name Viṣṇuvarman actually occurred in India in various regional contexts as part of different dynastic histories of the late Gupta era. In light of the new evidence, the so-called “Pallava seal” of Perak may well be dubbed the “Aulikara” or “Kadamba seal”. Moreover, the squarish “box-headed style” of the seal script, a type which apparently developed originally in the eastern-central Deccan (Das 2014), is not exactly the same as the less angular Grantha-Pallava writing; however, it is somewhat similar to the script found on various inscribed seals from Khlong Thom (cf. Table 1). This brings us to our last line of inquiry concerning the possible connections between these two Viṣṇuvarmans found in Nusantara, or maritime Southeast Asia,¹⁹ and their assumed direct or indirect linkages with India.

¹⁷ Early Sanskritists argued that the seal inscription is grammatically faulty inasmuch as the stem noun *varman* should read *-varmaṇaḥ* in the genitive singular case (Chhabra 1935: 28; Sastri 1936). However, the use of the masculine suffix *-sya* for the variant stem *varma* to denote the possessive is accepted and indeed overwhelming in South and Southeast Asian epigraphy as for the example with the reading ending in *-varmmasya* found on the gold seal of Mandsaur, Face A, l. 1 (Figure 3). Grammatical “errors” of this sort are found frequently in Epigraphical Hybrid Sanskrit (see *supra*, footnote 3).

¹⁸ Chhabra (1935: 21–22, 27–28) misidentified the Viṣṇuvarman on the Perak seal with the Śailendra “King Viṣṇu” of the so-called Ligor inscription (Face A), part of which is dated much later in 775 CE (Face B).

¹⁹ Another Viṣṇuvarman has appeared in recent Sundanese historical works, presenting him as the fourth ruler of Tārumā, r. 434–455 CE, and son of the well-known King Pūrṇavarman (e.g. Iguchi 2015: 114–115, Appendix 2 on p. 136). This dubious reference is drawn from the controversial manuscripts of Prince Wangsakerta originating from Cirebon and written in Old Javanese (Ekadjati 2005). The neat and complete genealogy of the Tārumā kings presented therein, however, is questionable and not corroborated by any other primary sources, manuscripts, inscriptions, or otherwise; it has been firmly demonstrated by modern Indonesian scholars, moreover, that this textual tradition is actually based on late 20th century and apocryphal sources (Boechari 1988; Lubis 2002). It thus appears that the Wangsakerta source mentioned “Wisnuwarman” (Viṣṇuvarman) on the sole basis of earlier scholarship accompanying the discovery of the famous Perak seal in the 1930s.

One or two Viṣṇuvarman(s)?

The question I finally address is whether the “Viṣuvama” found inscribed in Sanskritized Prakrit on the reverse of some gold coins from Khlong Thom in Peninsular Thailand could be the same individual as the “Viṣṇuvarma” who appears engraved in Hybrid Sanskrit as the owner of the seal from Kuala Selinsing, further south in the Malay Peninsula. Or shall we suppose that the two Viṣṇuvarmans mentioned separately were different persons?

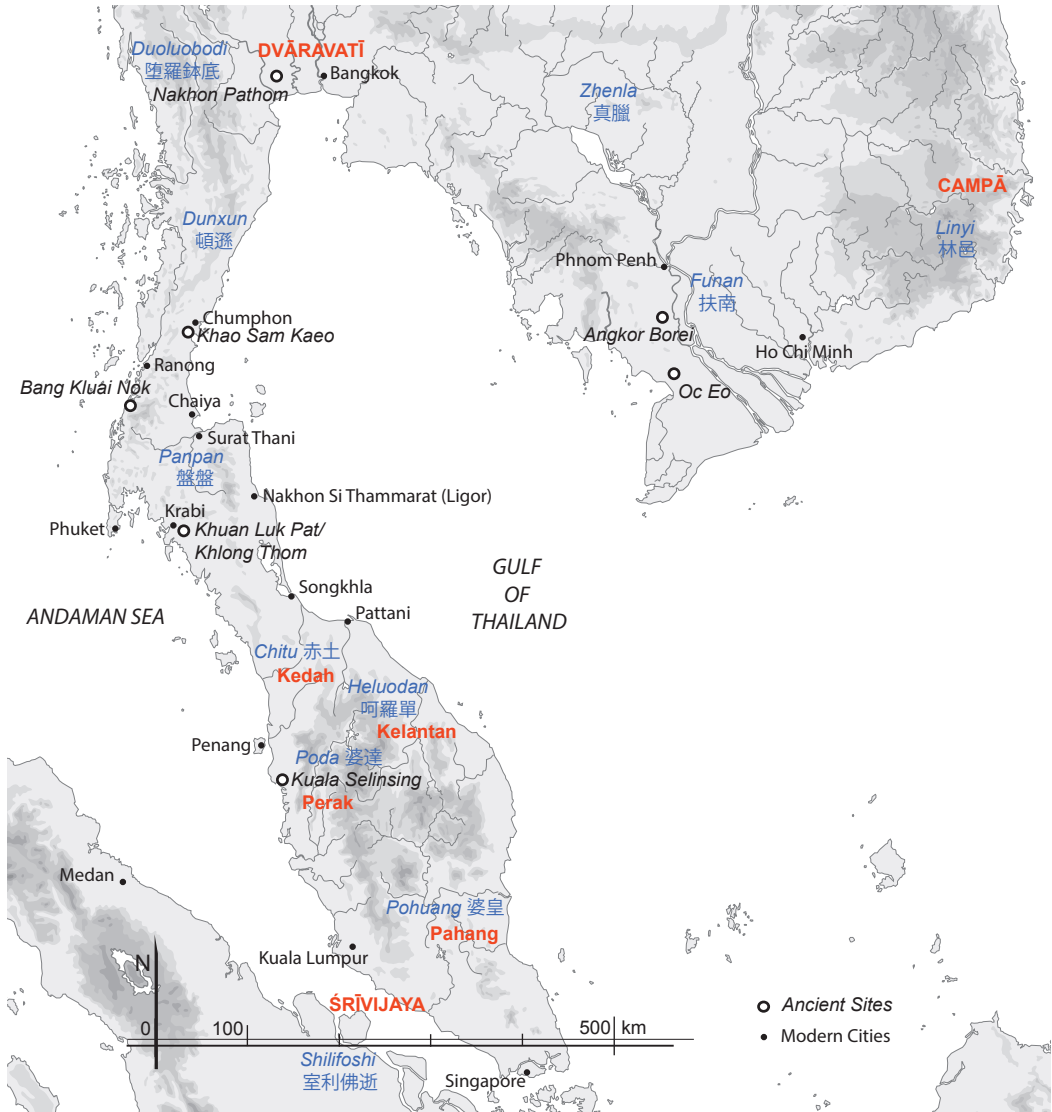


Figure 5. Ancient and modern toponyms in the Thai-Malay Peninsula (5th–7th century), conjectured from archaeological sites and Chinese textual sources (drawn by Nicolas Revire).

The geographic distance between the two sites is not an issue. Kuala Selinsing is merely situated 500 kilometers south of Khlong Thom, in a straight line, on the same western coast of the isthmus (Figure 5). Moreover, given the nature of these small

objects, we can easily imagine that they traveled, were removed, or imported later to the sites where they were found. The proposed dates for the artifacts on paleographic grounds might also correlate. While the gold coins of Khlong Thom are broadly dated anywhere between the 3rd through the 6th century CE, the seal of Perak is assigned more confidently to the 5th–6th century.

If it was the same Viṣṇuvarman who imprinted his name on the Khlong Thom coins and engraved it on the Perak seal, then it becomes noteworthy to see: 1) the regional circulation of his name both in Prakrit (on coins) and in Sanskrit (on the seal), along with 2) the coexistence of two fairly distinct styles of Brāhmī script found at two different places, naturally serving two different purposes. Conversely, we could also interpret these data as proving that there were actually two distinct individuals carrying the same name in this region, potentially separated in time by a few decades or even centuries.

Circumstantial evidence and scholarly caution suggest that we are probably dealing with two distinct historical figures on the Thai-Malay Peninsula.²⁰ On the one hand, one Indian traveler, somewhat familiar with Sanskrit, who once owned the Perak seal, journeyed to Suvarṇadvīpa or the “Golden Peninsula” in the 5th–6th century CE. On the other hand, one local Indianized ruler at Khlong Thom lived around the same period and consciously adopted the relatively “trendy” name Viṣṇuvarman, albeit this time in a more popular Prakrit idiom. At any rate, assigning both Viṣṇuvarmans a similar date range in the 5th–6th century accords fairly well with the chronological scheme, onomastic practices, and epigraphic evidence presented above from India.

If we favor the latter interpretation of two distinct Viṣṇuvarmans, the Khlong Thom ruler would even presumably postdate the foreign traveler who may have made his way first to the more southern location. It is even conceivable, albeit largely speculative, that the two individuals might have physically met at some point in time during the overseas journey of the Indian “mariner” to Suvarṇadvīpa. Given the uncertainty of the provenance of these gold coins, however, we have no idea about the presumed territory under Viṣṇuvarman’s control or his sphere of influence in the central part of the Thai-Malay Peninsula. Was his reign short or long? Was he a feudatory of Dunxun (頓遜) or a representative of Panpan (盤盤), about both of which Isthmian polities we know very little despite brief mentions made in ancient Chinese records presenting them as dependences of the Funan confederation (Wheatley 1961: 15–21, 47–51; Jacq-Hergoualc’h 2002: 102ff)? Who were his direct predecessors and successors, or his contemporaries in the Thai-Malay Peninsula? Did they also bear Indic royal titles suffixed by °varman?²¹ Inevitably, many historical questions remain and it is all the

²⁰ To the best of my knowledge, there are no other individuals whose names are given alternatively in Prakrit and in Sanskrit in the epigraphy of this region and during this period.

²¹ The *Songshu* (宋書, “Book of the [Liu] Song” dynasty) mentions an intriguing “Indianized king” who dispatched tributary missions from Heluodan (呵羅單) to the southern Chinese court in the seventh, tenth, eleventh, and thirteenth years of Yuanjia (元嘉 = 430, 433, 434, and 436 CE) and requested diplomatic and military assistance against external and internal forces (Wolters 1967: 151). In 433 and 436 the ruler’s name is recorded in Chinese as Pishabamo (毗沙跋摩). The name has been tentatively reconstructed as *Viśāṃvarman (Hall 1985: 104), which is meaningless in Sanskrit, and could otherwise be rendered as *Viśvavarman (Rolf Giebel & Jan Nattier, personal communication), already attested elsewhere in South Asian epigraphy. Indeed, Viśva is an alternative name for Viṣṇu, and Viśvavarman is also the name of a contemporary king

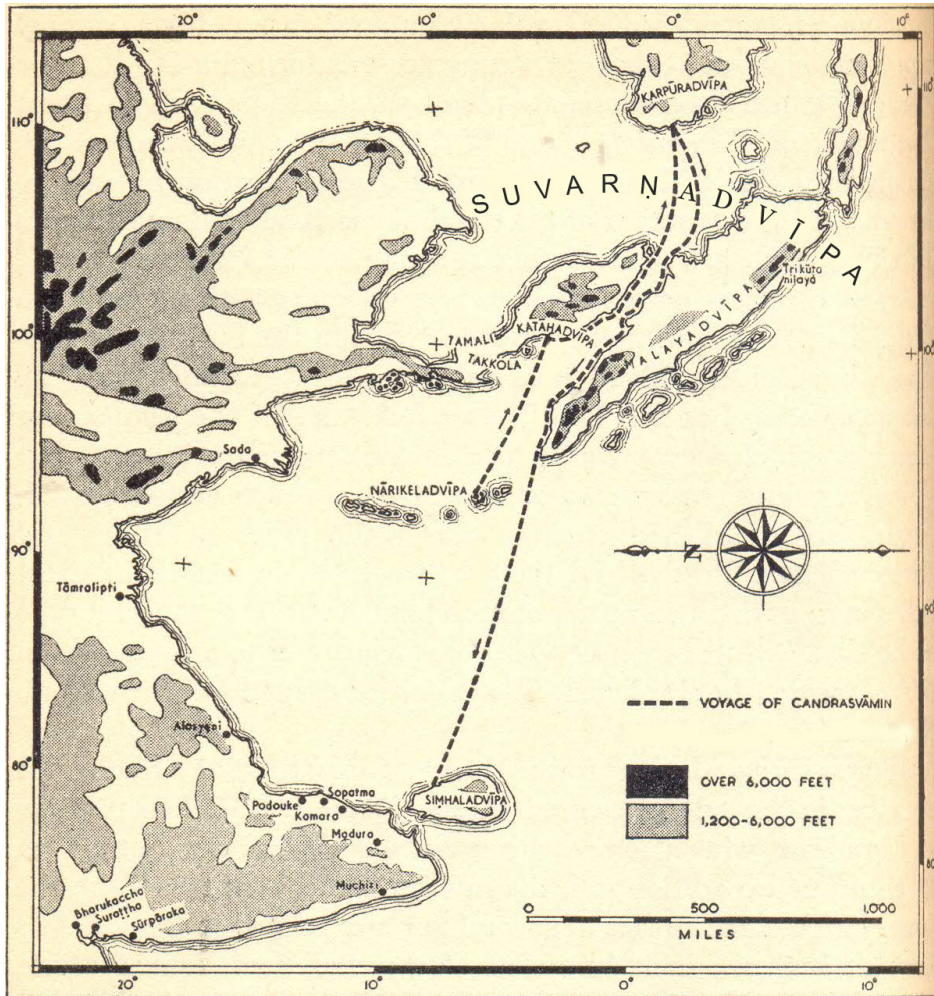


Figure 6. The Golden Peninsula as recorded in the *Kāthāsarisāgara* (Source: Wheatley 1961: fig. 34, adapted)

more regrettable that the site of Khuan Luk Pat in Khlong Thom has never been rigorously excavated to better appreciate its historical position.

In spite of this, one later Indian literary source which supports the hypothesis that a certain Viṣṇuvarman visited the region directly from India in these early days

of the early Aulikara dynasty ruling in the early 430s in India (Balogh 2019: 27–28). In addition, the later encyclopedia *Taiping Yulan* (太平御覽, Book 787) gives the name of Pishabamo's wicked son—known as Shilipizheye (尸梨毗遮耶 = *Śrī Vijayā[-varman?])—who suddenly usurped the throne circa 434 (Kao 1956: 166–168). The country of Heluodan is said to be located in, or governing over, Shepo Zhou (閩婆洲), which has often been identified with the “island of Java” by several specialists following Pelliot (1904: 271ff). Some scholars, however, have disputed this location. While Hoshino (1996: 67–68) prefers to place the polity of Heluodan somewhere in the lower Mekong Delta, others locate it near the modern state of Kelantan in Peninsular Malaysia, south of the “country of Chitu” (赤土国) (Aspell 2013: 11; Wade 2014: 29, n. 82). If the latter geographical association in the Thai-Malay Peninsula is correct, could this Pishabamo (*Viśvavarman), king of Heluodan, thus relate in any way to our Viṣuvama/Viṣuvvarman from Khlong Thom and/or Perak? We have seen above that the earlier Apraca “Viśuvarma” (= Viṣuvvarman) of Bajaur was perhaps identical to “Viśpavarma” (= Viśvavarman), thus adding strength to this hypothesis. At any rate, I am wary about the recent identification made of Pishabamo by Iguchi (2015: 114, n. 13) with the fictional Viṣuvvarman found in much later apocryphal Sundanese manuscripts and unreliably presented as fourth king of Tārumā (see above footnote 19).

may be worth considering. In the *Kathāsaritsāgara* (“Ocean of Streams of Story”), a famous 11th-century collection of Indian legends and folk tales retold in Sanskrit by the Kashmiri poet Somadeva, a brief mention is made of one Viṣṇuvarman. The tale is about the Brahmin Candrasvāmin who wandered across the Bay of Bengal, around the Golden Peninsula, and the islands of the archipelago in search of his lost son (Book IX, Chapter 56). This latter Viṣṇuvarman is presented as an Indian merchant (*vaṇij*) “who was about to go to the isle of Nārikela” (ed. Penzer 1984: IV, 223). In all likelihood, the “Coconut islands” (*nārikeladvīpa*) correspond to the Nicobar archipelago in the eastern Indian Ocean, located in maritime Southeast Asia (Griffiths 2015: 306).

Later, in the same literary account, two other sea merchants named Kanakavarman and Dānavarman (note that these names are again suffixed by °*varman*) are mentioned as traveling beyond Nicobar to Kaṭāhadvīpa, most likely a reference to Kedah located on the Malay Peninsula (ed. Penzer 1984: I, 155, n. 1). Kedah is also where the celebrated stone slab of Buddhagupta, the Great Mariner (*mahānāvika*), was found in the 19th century (Chhabra 1935: 16–20, pl. 3). While the stories in the *Kathāsaritsāgara* appear at first glance as totally fictional or secondhand, they are said to derive mainly from the lost *Bṛhatkathā*, or “Great Narrative” composed by Guṇādhyā in Prakrit, which probably existed prior to the 6th century CE (Winternitz 1985: 346ff). These tales may thus reflect a certain background of truth as far as place names and geographic locations of early Southeast Asia navigated and explored by Indian traders are concerned (Lévi 1925: 37ff). These “literary” or “fabricated” names as found in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, moreover, may resonate with “historical” names that we know from inscriptions and other records, like the *Purāṇas*, and the imaginaire of the times (Figure 6).

All in all, it is quite likely that at least one—if not several (?)—Viṣṇuvarman(s), accompanied by other Vaiṣṇava followers, traveled the sea journey from India to Peninsular Southeast Asia around the mid-1st millennium CE, possibly carrying religious icons, texts, and attributes. Echoing this high probability, we must remember that it is in the Thai-Malay Peninsula that the earliest Southeast Asian images of Viṣṇu, mitred and four-armed, appear (Lavy 2020). In addition, we have tangible evidence that the Golden Peninsula served also as a relay for the spread of Vaiṣṇavism throughout Southeast Asia precisely during the 5th and 6th centuries CE (Manguin 2019). Even if given names and titles may not always be sufficient to ascertain the religion practiced by each individual,²² we know that a strong relationship exists to this day in South and Southeast Asia between local kingship and the cult of Viṣṇu. As an embodiment of protection and the establishment of cosmic order, the god (often through his avatars) was traditionally seen as a source of both moral and physical prowess. It may not be too far-fetched to assume therefore that the local ruler we know from inscribed gold coins found at Khlong Thom as Śrī Viṣuvama, i.e. Viṣṇuvarman (“Armor of Viṣṇu” or “He who has Viṣṇu as his protection”), saw himself as a representative of the god on earth.

²² Theophoric names which embed the designation of a god, either by invoking and/or displaying the protection of that deity, are widespread in pan-Indic culture (Emeneau 1978: 114–118).

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