

EARLY CIVILIZATIONS OF SOUTHEAST ASIA¹

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It is not easy to deal with a subject like the "Early civilizations in South-East Asia," because its scope, geographically as well as chronologically, is not well defined. This enquiry, therefore, is confined to a very small part of the subject matter, *viz.*, the early Çrivijaya period in Sumatra. It was in the Southeast Asia of the early centuries, A.D., that Çrivijaya maritime power played a prominent part.

It is not the intention here to deal with results of new investigations, or with new results of former researches, if any. In viewing the studies of competent scholars of the Çrivijaya problem one is struck by the fact that they have failed to consider certain available data. The purpose of this present enquiry, therefore, is to draw attention to this neglect, and to contribute to further considerations of the problem.

Çrivijaya, indeed, has addled the brains of a great number of archaeologists, linguists and historians.² Without detracting from the merits of these experts, it must be pointed out that all of them have used only archaeological data and historical documents. The use of these is necessary and reasonable, but if other data are available, they should certainly be use also.

The geographical configuration of Sumatra during the Çrivijaya period has always been overlooked. There has never been any question that Sumatra's eastern coast line was quite different from what it is now. This has been so much taken for granted, indeed, that further consideration of the matter has been neglected.

1. From a paper read by the author at the Ninth Pacific Science Congress, November-December, 1957, Bangkok.

2. See especially K.A. Nilakanta Sastri's *History of Sri Vijaya*, University of Madras, 1949.

A good preliminary study of the problem may be found in Obdeyn's interesting articles in which he discussed the geomorphological development of Sumatra according to historical annals and other documents since about the beginning of the Christian era.³ He came to the conclusion that in those days the present alluvial lowland of Sumatra's east coast did not exist. The Malay Peninsula stretched to Bangka and Billiton, including what is now the Riau Archipelago. Sunda Strait was still unknown, and Van Bemmelen even maintains that it did not exist either.⁴ Those considerations undeniably change the whole geographical picture of the area and open up new perspectives.

In 1954, the Indonesian Government sent an archaeological team to South Sumatra.⁵ Because an air-reconnaissance study of the Palembang region was also involved, a geomorphologist was added to the team. It was then that geomorphology and hence Obdeyn's studies came onto our archaeological horizon.

The team in general achieved no spectacular results. But the air-reconnaissance, when combined with explorations on the ground, yielded surprising results. With the geological map in hand and the geomorphological findings as a guide, the Indonesian archaeologists discovered that the alluvial lowland of Sumatra's east coast is well defined from the elevated older geological formations, and that the cities of Palembang and Djambi are situated right on the border of this highland. Because these two places are situated on the coast, we may provisionably assume that the line marking the alluvial from the older formations was the Orivijaya coast line. We see, then, that Palembang lies at the very end of a narrow promontary and Djambi is situated on a deeply penetrating gulf.

3. Obdeyn, "De oude Zeehandelsweg door de Straat van Malaka in verband met de geomorfologie der Selat-eilanden." *Tijdschrift Aardrijkskundig Genootschap* 2e Reeks, vol. LIX, 1942.

4. Van Bemmelen, *The Geology of Indonesia*, vol. I, 1950, pp. 298 - 299.

5. Complete report in "Amerta," 3, 1954 (Indonesian language).

From this calculation of the land accretions by the Musi and Batanghapi rivers, Van Bemmelen has reached the conclusion that the alluvial belt may indeed have come into existence since the beginning of the Christian era.⁶ Bearing in mind that the starting point of the alluvial deposition of the Musi lies near Sekayu (roughly, as the crow flies, 100 km. inland from Palembang), and of the Batanghari near Muaratambesi (about 60 km. inland from Djambi), we may safely conclude that even in the early Çrivijaya period Palembang as well as Djambi was situated on the coast.

Which of these two places should be Çrivijaya's center or capital? The general assumption has been that it is Palembang. In the light of geomorphological reconstruction of the coast line, however, there are several factors which indicate that Djambi was the site.

Dr. Verstappen, geomorphologist for the Topographical Survey of Indonesia, who travelled with the team, told the author informally that he rejects Obdeyn's opinion concerning the expanse of the Malay Peninsula. His argument is that it stretched only as far south as the island of Sinkep. Judging from the hydrographical map, one has to accept this thesis as the more plausible, and that Bangka and Billiton were separate islands. If this is true the ancient route from India separated into two forks off the Gulf of Djambi; one turned north to the left toward China and the other continued southward to Java. From this it is only logical to assume that Djambi must have been the principal port along the Strait of Malacca, the only sea route.

Another fact which favours Djambi as the site is the existence of three islands, as indicated on the geological map, at the entrance of the Gulf of Djambi. On one of those islands lies the present village of Muara Sabak. Muara means "mouth of a river," but a river named Sabak does not exist. We are left, therefore, with the name Sabak, which suggests to us the three Sabadeibai islands in Ptolemy's itinerary, which Krom has located on Sumatra's southeast coast,⁷ Deibai may be identified with *divipa*,

6. Van Bemmelen, *The Geology of Indonesia*, vol. I, 1950, pp. 299 - 300.

7. Krom, N.J., *Hindoe Javaansche Geschiedenis*, 2nd. ed. 1931 p. 60.

(or three); leaving us with *subarom*. Can this saba with its three islands, which formed an anchorage for ships before they moved on to Djambi, to Java or to China, be identified with our present Sabak?

The scarce epigraphical material does not, in the opinion of the author, favour Palembang as the site of Çrivijaya's capital. The Telaga Batu inscription found in the city of Palembang "consists of a long imprecation directed toward the perpetrators of all possible crimes against the king and the state of Çrivijaya."⁸ It is scarcely plausible that such a monument would have been erected in the actual capital of the state. The monument must, rather, have been the safeguard of a victorious king who had conquered Palembang. It is equally probable that the inscriptions found at Kotakapur and Karangbrahi, which contain similar inscriptions, have the same meaning. Kotakapur, situated on the northwestern coast of Bangka and opposite Palembang, had complete control of the sea route, while Karangbrahi controlled the land route from Djambi to the west and the north. Up to the present, large quantities of gold dust have been found in the Upper Djambi region. With a view to the name Suvarnadvipa or Suvarnabhumi, this fact may support the above presumption.⁹

Further pursuit of the interesting Çrivijaya problem may be found in reading Moens' *Çrivijaya, Yava en Kataha*¹⁰ and Roland Braddell's intriguing series of articles entitled "An introduction to the studies of Ancient Times in the Malay Peninsula and the Straits of Malacca."¹¹ These studies, when placed under the new light of the palaeogeographical configurations discovered by the archaeological team, may well help us to obtain the true answers to the problem of the location Çrivijaya's capital.

8. de Casparis, J.G., "Selected inscriptions from the 7th to the 9th, A.D.," *Prasasti Indonesia*, vol. II, 1956.

9. See also *The Geology of Indonesia*, vol. I, 1950, p. 299.

10. *Tijdschrift Bataviaasch Genootschap*, vol. LXXVII, 1937.

11. In several volumes of the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Malayan Branch*.