

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN THE MALAY PENINSULA

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Abstract

The paper summarises recent archaeological research in southern Thailand and the northern part of the Malay Peninsula where the author has been investigating ports and entrepôts significant for the early trade between Western Asia, India, Southeast Asia and China. Particular attention is given to the important site of Yarang in Patani Province which has been neglected until recently.

Introduction

Since 1990 we have been interested in the early centuries of the history of the Malay Peninsula and have been attempting to reconcile old Greek, Indian, Arab and Chinese texts with the most recent results of archaeological research in the region.

Literary research on the history of the peninsula began more than a century ago and was synthesized by Paul Wheatley (1961) in a book which remains important. Archaeological research began at the beginning of the present century, notably under the initiative of the *Commission archéologique de l'Indochine*, and research continues both in Thailand and Malaysia. In recent years, in collaboration with the Fine Arts Department of Thailand, we have been making an inventory of, and conducting excavations at, some of the sites in the region of Yarang in Patani province, South Thailand, which until now have been neglected. This recent research covered the eastern part of the coast of the Kra isthmus near Nakhon Si Thammarat, and has just been completed by an investigation of the northernmost part of the isthmus, near Takuapa, Chaiya and Chumphon.

Overseas trade was at the origin of the 'Indianization' of the peninsula. Our intention is to take into account these differing civilizations in order better to understand developments along the shores of the Malay

Peninsula from the beginning of the Christian era. The preliminary results and the problems posed by this research are summarized in the paper.

Ports of trade and Indianization

Archaeological remains along the coasts of the Malay Peninsula date from between the first centuries of the Christian era and the fourteenth century AD. An extensive international trade, concerning many very different Asian spheres – the Chinese, the Indian and the Middle Eastern – was at the origin of these remains. For the needs of merchants, numerous ports of call were created along the coasts, the importance, rank and destiny of which were very different from each other. Other settlements, somewhat to the interior of the peninsula, were also created in relation to the commercial activities on the coasts, in order to furnish a supply of local products in demand and also, perhaps, to make easier the transportation of some goods brought by traders, from one coast to the other, by trans-peninsular routes.

Depending on the period, these trading places – through which an important part of Indian cultural influence first reached Southeast Asia – were more or less independent, or controlled by one of the local states, such as Funan and Śrīvijaya, which had received an Indianized social and political organization thanks to their intermediary role.

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Figure 1. Situation of the Malay Peninsula in Southeast Asia and locality of some archaeological sites.

Archaeological research, which had already started early in the century, developed further, both in Thailand and in Malaysia, after the Second World War. One of its most interesting results in recent years in Peninsular Thailand is the inventory of the sites – and the excavation of some – in the vicinity of Yarang in Patani Province, southern Thailand, sites which until now have been neglected (Yukongdi Pakpadee and Puntokowit Pornthip 1993).

Our work on this subject started in 1990 in Malaysia on the archaeological sites of South Kedah (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1992a and b) and this short paper covers only very general considerations concerning, firstly, the importance, as we see it, of geography and, secondly, the different kinds of ports of call and places of exchange which can be defined in this international trade.

The geography of the Malay Peninsula

The location of the different trading places (Figure 1) entirely depends on the physical and climatic geography of South-east Asia and, more particularly, the geographical characteristics of the peninsula.

The Malay Peninsula appears as a north-south barrier between the maritime complex of the Indian Ocean and that of the Pacific Ocean; that is to say between India and the Middle East on one side, and China on the other. It was possible to sail around the peninsula during the same expedition from the east or from the west and, in either case, to stop for a while at Palembang-Śrīvijaya, but probably early navigators considered the peninsula a place where it was more convenient to call and wait for commercial partners from the other side of Asia – or their go-betweens – and to conduct business with them.

This fitted with the rhythm of the monsoon winds blowing alternatively south-west to north-east from April to October and north-east to south-west from November to March.

All these ports of call were created on the isthmus for geographical reasons. Coming

from the west, that is to say from India or the Middle East, it was at this latitude, between 6° and 11° north, that the Peninsula was reached after the crossing of the Gulf of Bengal by the shortest route, which goes north of Sumatra. From the east, if navigators wanted to sail quickly to the peninsula after having passed Cape Camau and hugged the shores of Champa and Cambodia, they had to cross the Gulf of Thailand to reach the latitudes of the isthmus.

By coincidence this middle portion of the peninsula is also its narrowest part – an isthmus. This fact helps to explain the main location of the entrepôt ports and suggests the existence of transpeninsular routes which appeared an alternative to the transportation of goods around the peninsula by sea.

But, in fact, despite this attractive narrowness, the peninsula is not easy to cross from one coast to the other. The relief is entirely dominated by ranges of mountains which lie staggered in step formation and cut across the Peninsula on NNE-SSW lines (Figure 2). Between them possible routes are long and risky since it is necessary to go from one point to another obliquely, following the direction of the ranges. Nevertheless, the river valleys running from the line of the summits to the two coasts, and the low altitude at many points of these ranges, seem to have made possible the existence of short transpeninsular routes.

It was an attractive suggestion which was well accepted but, in our view, even the shortest of them was difficult to use due to geographical conditions (sharp relief, rivers difficult to navigate, heavy tropical forest, dangerous fauna, etc.) and we do not believe that they were much used by navigators who would prefer, in spite of the distance, to go round the Straits when they wanted to reach the other coast (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1998). Moreover, how can one explain the expansion of Śrīvijaya, at Palembang, if a large part of the international commerce avoided the circum-peninsular route? Nevertheless, these routes were parts of a dendritic network allowing

local tropical products to reach the coast in accordance with a system well described by Bronson (1977).

The emergence of important city-states on the isthmus was due to another geographic characteristic; the existence at this latitude – but only on the east coast of the Gulf of Thailand – of coastal plains broad enough to make possible the cultivation of rice on a significant scale and so to permit a substantial population to live there, with possibilities of more sophisticated social and political organization than in a chiefdom, as occurred on the west coast (Figure 2).

Different types of ports of call and places of exchange created by the international trade on the Malay Peninsula

In this short paper I can only propose a brief description of the different categories of places created by international peninsular trade.

At the top of the hierarchy are the entrepôt ports associated with the Indianized city-states. These city-states, as noted, arose only on the east coast, at the latitude of the median part of the peninsula. There, the coastal rice-growing plains allowed a significant population to thrive. Commerce, and through it the arrival of Indian cultural influences, led the local chiefs, very early, to transform traditional customs into a social, political, military and religious system based on the Indian model.

We only know three certain examples; that is to say locations which have historical confirmation (mostly through the Chinese annals) which can be linked with archaeological remains of some importance, still in existence today, or which have been studied in the past and published about. They are Panpan on the Bay of Bandon, Tambralinga in the area of Nakhon Si Thammarat, and Langkasuka in the vicinity of Patani. Our research during the last three years was mainly concerned by the forms of civilization found in these city-states (Jacq-Hergoualc'h et al. 1995, 1996 and in preparation).

One of the most interesting and the least known of these archaeological sites is that of the ancient city-state of Langkasuka, which was neglected until recently due to political problems. Many things remain to be discovered about this site but during the last few years much has been learnt thanks to the activities of the Thai archaeologists from the Fine Arts Department of Thailand. An inventory of thirty-three archaeological structures has been published. All are found in the vicinity of Yarang, linked to some remains of earth fortifications and with a complex canal network (Figure 3).

Three have now been excavated. They are brick temples of some importance (Figure 4), the date of which, estimated from the religious artefacts found in association with them (votive *stupa*, votive tablets, statuettes, ceramic shards), is as early as the sixth century AD. Nevertheless this is not so old as the supposed date of the second century AD given by the Chinese annals for the foundation of this city-state.

The style of these temples is problematic if we keep in mind their early foundation. It appears to be very close to that of Dvaravati but, in our opinion, the artistic influences came directly from Gupta and post-Gupta India, perhaps by way of South Kedah. After that, the same influences reached the Dvaravati lands which started to be formed at the same time. For this last area, of course, it was not the only source of Indian influences, but Langkasuka was certainly one at an early stage.

This city-state does not appear to have had any entrepôt ports. Our recent research with Thai archaeologists in charge of the sites and with Professor Thiva Supajanya from Chulalongkorn University, a specialist in aerial and satellite photographic interpretation, led us to express the hypothesis that these ports were situated in the western part of the city on the bank of the ancient estuary of the Patani River which went very far inland and which has now completely disappeared (Figure 5). This theory is supported by the testimony of local peasants, who speak of very numerous ceramic shards,



Figure 2. Median portion of the Malay Peninsula with archaeological sites and transpeninsular routes.

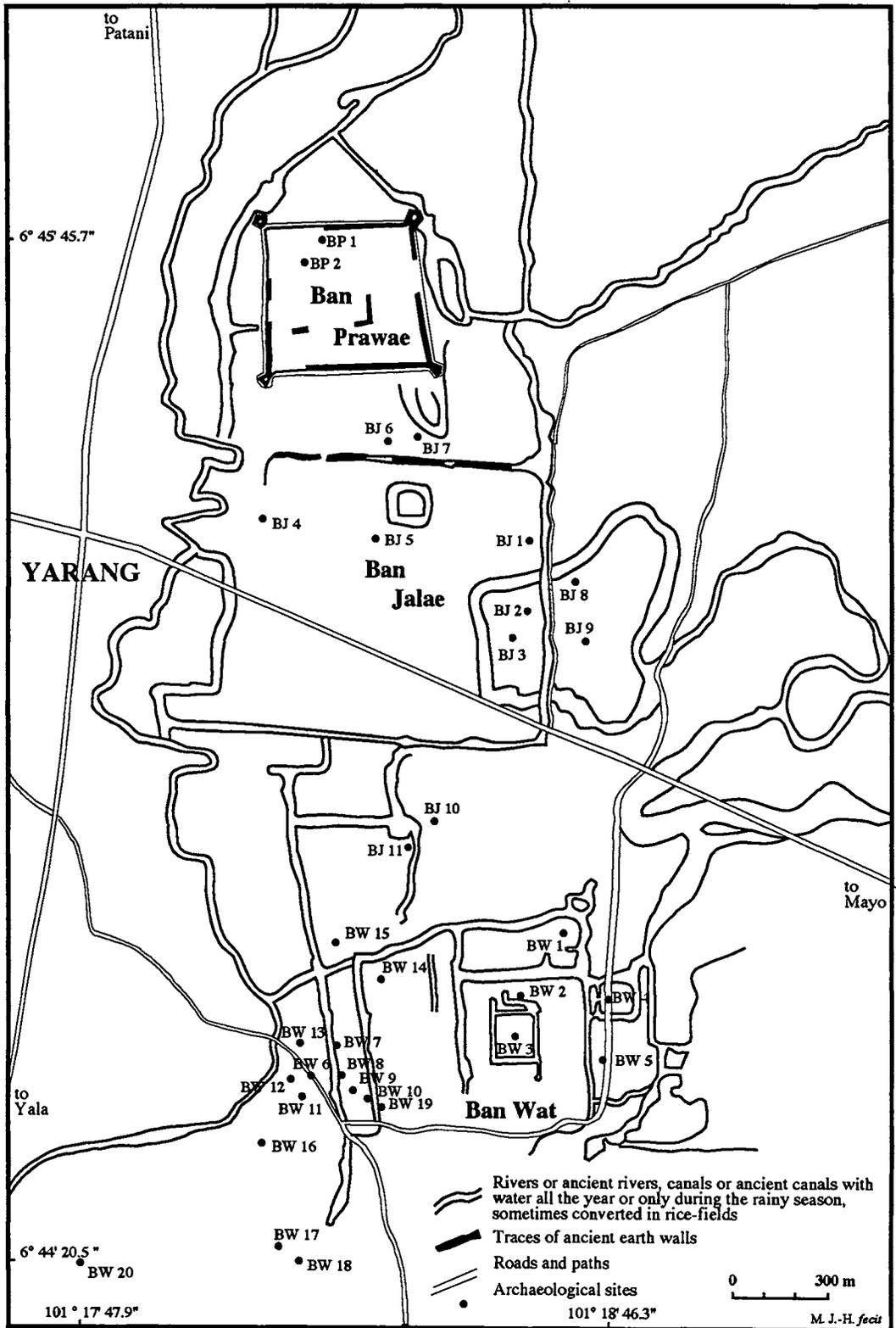


Figure 3. Archaeological sites in Yarang (Patani, South Thailand).

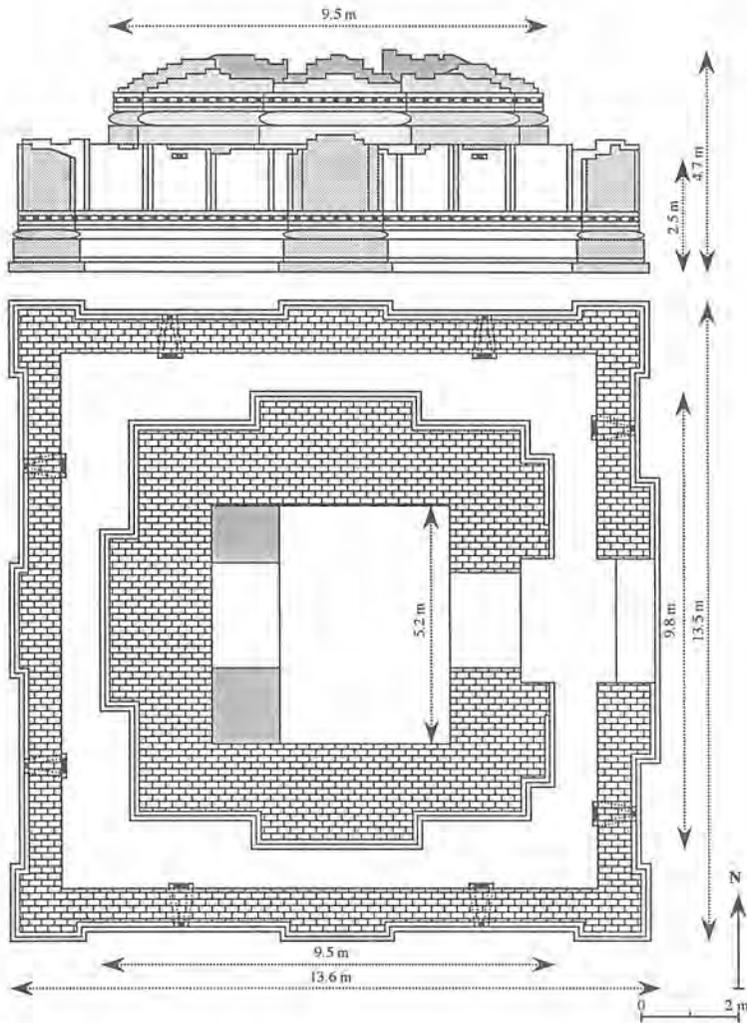


Figure 4. Plan and elevation of the Buddhist sanctuary BJ3 at Yarang (Patani, South Thailand).

including some from China and the Middle East, at a depth of less than a metre where canals, coming from the city, join the estuary. Excavations, of course, are needed to confirm this.

This kind of city-state attested to by remains of temples very close to one or several entrepôt ports, also indicated by many locations of ceramic shards, can also be found in ancient Panpan in the vicinity of the Bay of Bandon. Here Laem Pho was at first the port but, after the ninth century, this moved further to the south to Tha Rua, located near the present town of Nakhon Si Thammarat (ancient Tambralinga) – the heir of Panpan.

The commercial prosperity of these city-states depended on their capacity to receive foreign boats, thus on their port installations. These, on a coast which silted considerably, were moved several times over the centuries and when nothing could be done to overcome this the trading ships were obliged to look for a better place to shelter.

The second kind of port of call was the entrepôt port created in a non-Indianized place, probably a chiefdom. Two significant examples are in the area of South Kedah (Malaysia) and the vicinity of Takuapa (north of Phuket). The first of these locations today gives the impression of being a rice-growing area, thanks to the existence

of a rather large coastal plain. But recent studies by Jane Allen (1988) from the University of Hawaii, on the distribution of settlements in that early historic period of this part of the peninsula, have demonstrated that this plain was not in existence at that time and thence that the inhabitants living in the region were limited in number; they were nowhere near numerous enough to create a social, political, religious and military organization as in Langkasuka, for example.

Nevertheless, the primitive local organization permitted – because it was to its

advantage – the arrival of foreign merchants along its coasts during the time it was necessary to wait for favourable winds; the winds to cross the Gulf of Bengal to reach India and beyond to the Middle East, or the winds to go down the Straits of Malacca to reach Palembang-Śrīvijaya.

The location on that portion of the west coast seems to have been favoured in the *nanghai* network since the archaeological remains are as old as the fifth century AD. No entrepôt port was established at this early period but the one which succeeded it, during the ninth century AD, Kampong Sungai

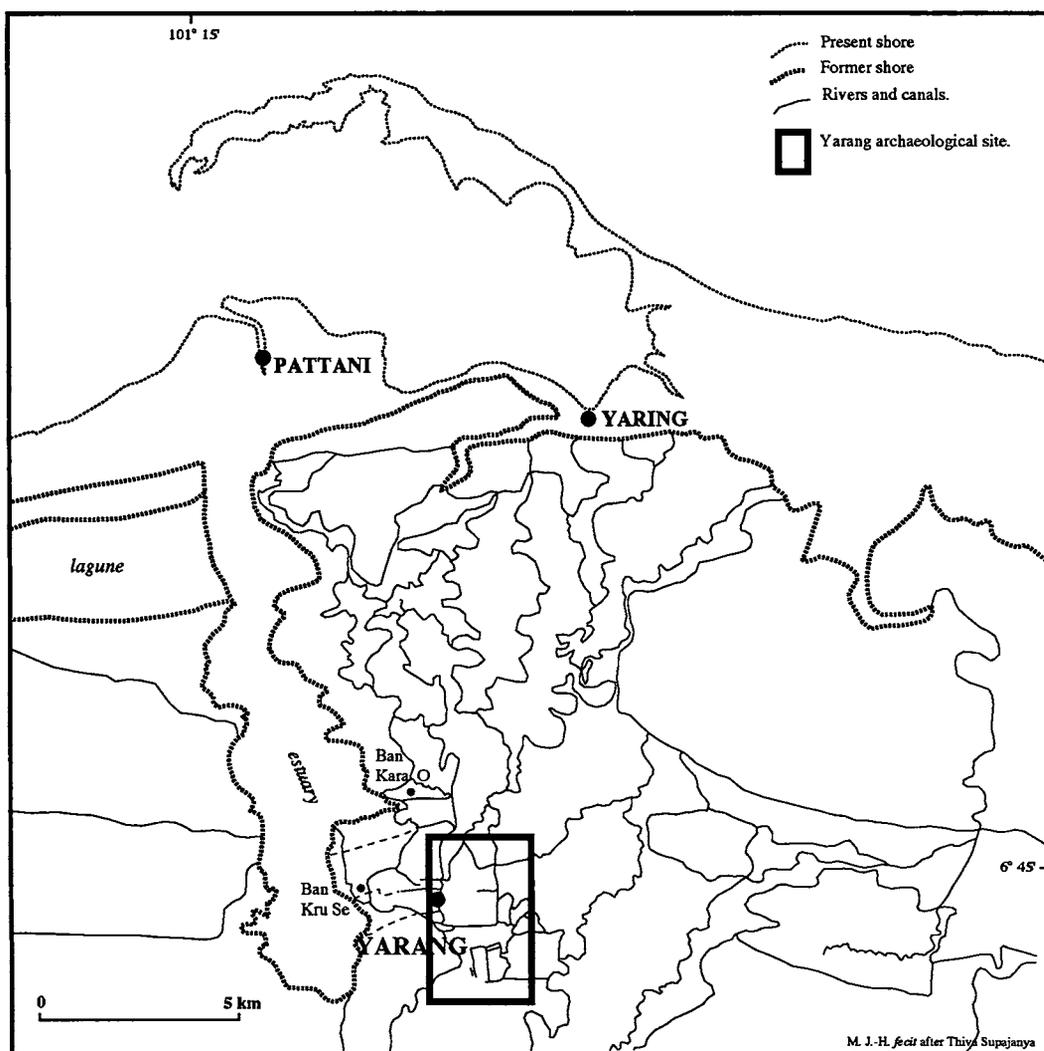


Figure 5. Geomorphological evolution of the vicinity of Yarang and probable location of its ports-entrepôts.

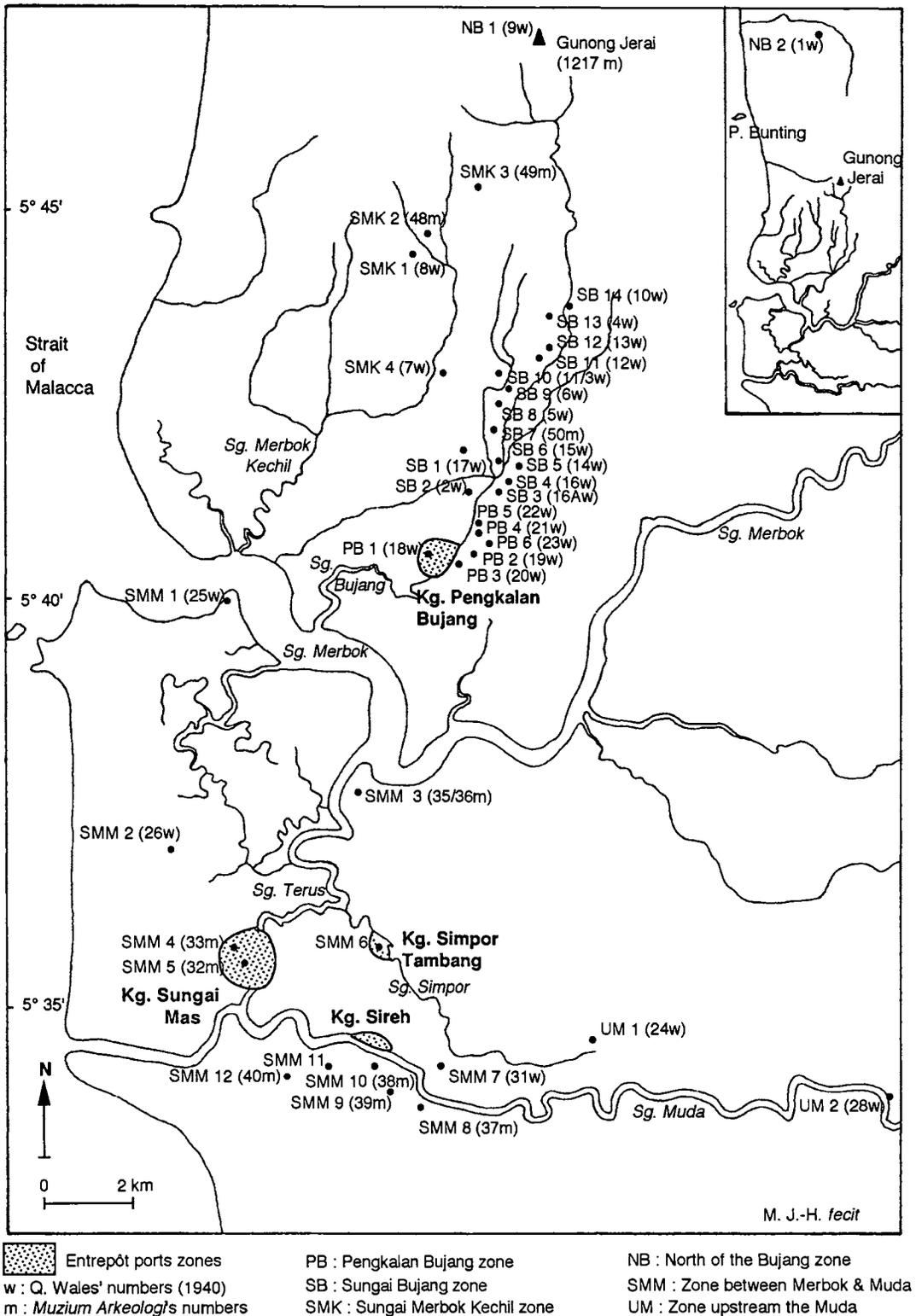


Figure 6. Archaeological sites in South Kedah.

Mas, was recently discovered and Kamaruddin bin Zakaria has excavated some places on the site during the last few years (Nik Hassan and Kamaruddin 1993).

The silting of this second entrepôt port led to the opening of a third, at Kampong Pengkalan Bujang, the fortunes of which grew from the end of the eleventh century until the fourteenth century. Finally, during the fourteenth century, a port was created briefly at Kampong Sireh before South Kedah was completely abandoned by international traders.

The location and general appearance of some forty archaeological sites (mostly temples) listed today in South Kedah confirm this interpretation (Figure 6). The archaeological sites appear to be grouped, mostly in the area of the two important entrepôt ports, Kampong Sungai Mas and Kampong Pengkalan Bujang, but, in fact, many of them were completely isolated in a countryside very different at that time from how it is now and which certainly could only be reached with the help of local inhab-

itants (we have in mind, particularly, the location of the most important of all these temples, Candi Bukit Batu Pahat). These religious sites, both Buddhist and Hindu, were not systematically linked to settlements which could be considered as cities. Their location makes them appear rather as hermitages, probably established by the piety of Indian merchants or Indian communities, as at Takuapa where a ninth century inscription has been found.

Accordingly, all these temples are small; their foundations cannot be compared to the temples in Langkasuka, for example. Furthermore, if their plans preserve Indian prototypes (Figure 7), their elevations were adapted to local construction concepts by the use of timber above the lintels of doors. These beams were supported by stone pillar bases. The solid part of the structure was always built with material available in the immediate vicinity – granite, laterite, river pebbles or bricks when no other materials were available. In fact, they appear to be constructions built with some economy be-

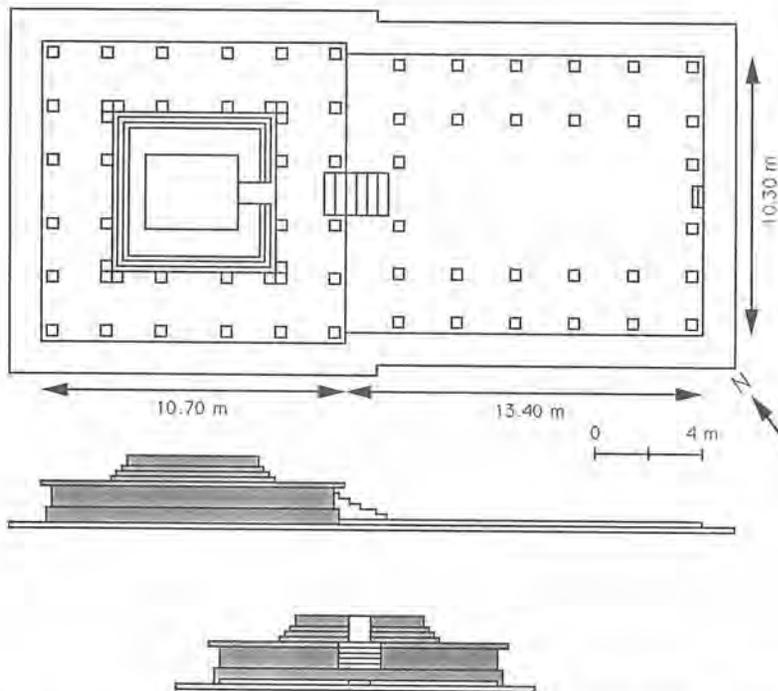


Figure 7. Plan and elevation and east profiles of the Candi Bukit Batu Pahat (SMK 1(8w), South Kedah, Malaysia).

cause their founders were not permanent residents or Indianized locals (for more information on South Kedah, see Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1992).

Takuapa, more to the north, also has archaeological remains which are less well studied than those in South Kedah. Nevertheless, what we know about them when linked to the local geographical context enables something very similar to be imagined.

Collecting Centres and Feeder Points

Besides these two types of major ports of call, there are others well described by Leong Sau Heng (1990, 1993) of the University of Malaya: she calls them the 'collecting centres' and the 'feeder points'.

The importance of the collecting centres is in their location in the country or near places from where a range of local products can be collected. They constitute departure points for such products all along the trade network using the Straits of Malacca. The best locations became busy centres which could be also places for redistributing some foreign products in demand in the surrounding country. Such products – particularly Chinese ceramics – have been discovered locally and show the former activity of the ports; perishable goods which formed the bulk of this trade, have left no discernible trace. One typical example of this kind of place is Tioman Island (Pulau Tioman) near the southeast extremity of the Peninsula.

The last category constitutes the feeder points. They form part of the trade network and act as suppliers of local products for the collecting centres and the entrepôt ports. They are not necessarily found at strategic places on the long distance international trade routes but at points where they could easily relate to resource areas or supply zones. Consequently, the most numerous locations are the confluences of rivers draining a large resource base (centres of types D, E and F in Bronson's 1977 model); but they can also be found on the coast, in the vicinity of tin mines, for example. The identifica-

tion of these feeder points is uncertain and depends on the products traded. Those, inland, which were suppliers of perishable goods, will eventually be traced thanks to the presence of some objects coming from an entrepôt port (mostly Chinese ceramics). Others on the coast could be located through traces of metallurgy (tin ingots, for example) or other activities, such as the making of glass or hard stone beads from imported materials. A typical example is Kuala Selinsing on the coast of Perak (Malaysia), studied by Evans during the 1920s and more recently by Nik Hassan Shuhaimi (1991). This centre probably had close links with South Kedah as a feeder point and its contacts with its entrepôt port are attested by the discovery of shards of Chinese ceramics and some Indian objects. Another similar centre in this category on the same west coast of the Peninsula is Khuan Luk Pad near Krabi in south Thailand (Figure 1).

Summary

In the book we are writing on this subject, we hope to clarify the history of the peninsula from the first centuries of the Christian Era to the fourteenth century by providing, as far as possible, an archaeological reality to political entities defined, up to the present, in relation to Chinese texts, and which have remained vague both geographically and culturally.

This will include the examination of the sites not mentioned, or barely touched on, in the texts but which have an archaeological importance which has recently been demonstrated (that is to say, the collecting centres and the feeder points).

This trade, as is well known, was at the origin of the 'Indianization' of the peninsula; an ambiguous term, but serving to designate the forms of civilization which developed locally. The trade was extensive and involved such far-removed worlds as the Middle East, India and China. Our intention is to take into account these differing civilizations in order better to understand the cultures

which developed along the shores of the Malay Peninsula. We also wish to determine the destiny of the peninsular entrepôt ports and the city-states in the history of Southeast Asia proper, dominated or influenced at different times by diverse political entities, including Funan, Dvaravati, Śrīvijaya, the Khmer Empire and Central Java, whose own Indianization owed much, in the first instance, to the staging posts which were con-situated on the peninsula at the beginning of the Christian era.

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