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# **THE BUDDHIST-HINDU DIVIDE IN PREMODERN SOUTHEAST ASIA**



**John Miksic**

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## The Buddhist-Hindu Divide in Premodern Southeast Asia

John N. Miksic

Buddhism was founded in India as a reaction against certain aspects of pre-existing religions. Buddhism and other Indian beliefs grouped under the general term Hinduism arrived in Southeast Asia more or less simultaneously around the fourth century of the Common Era (CE). Some scholars believed that Hinduism arrived first, but recent archaeological discoveries in south Vietnam and Blandongan (West Java) have yielded radiocarbon dates for Buddhist statues and shrines which are as early as any dates attested for evidence of Hindu worship (Ferdinandus 2002).

Early Buddhists in Southeast Asia devoted considerable attention to their competition with Hinduism for devotees and resources. In China, Hinduism never made an impact, but in Southeast Asia the two religions competed on more or less equal terms for adherents for about a thousand years. This was true in India too, but whereas in India the struggle was eventually decided in favor of Hinduism, in Southeast Asia the outcome was the opposite.



[1]



[2]



[3]



[4]

*Java and Cambodia produced stupendous monuments dedicated to both Hinduism and Buddhism: Borobudur[1] and Loro Jonggrang (Prambanan)[2] in Java, Angkor Wat[3] and the Bayon in Cambodia[4].*

Some observers believe that Southeast Asian Buddhism absorbed Hindu influences, based on the use of similar artistic motifs and the depictions of Hindu deities in Buddhist art. My exploration of early Southeast Asian religion indicates that the relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism was a variable one: a spectrum of relationships between the two religions existed at different times and places. The importance attached to doctrinal purity also varied between different social and occupational classes.

Scholars who have studied the interaction of Hinduism and Buddhism in Southeast Asia have formulated two contending theories. One emphasizes the notion of syncretism between the two religions. The other argues that Buddhism was strongly influenced by Hinduism, thus explaining several characteristics of the forms of Mahayana found in most Buddhist societies of Southeast Asia before the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries when Mahayanism and Hinduism were replaced by Theravada Buddhism on the mainland, and Islam in the island realm. Jordaan and Wessing are “inclined to question the validity of some current designations [such] as ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Buddhism’ and to wonder whether these terms do full justice to the ideas of the Javanese of the times...Both early Hinduism and Buddhism were flexible enough to accommodate and utilize each other’s icons...” (Jordaan and Wessing 1996: 65). Siva and Buddha were syncretically united in the religion of East Java, especially during the Majapahit era. The *Nagarakrtagama* and *Pararaton* state that the kings of

Singasari and Majapahit were commemorated in two or more temples after their deaths. Krtarajasa was said to have been *didharmakan* (precise meaning of the word uncertain; it implies that devotion was paid to him, but does not explain the rationale for doing so) in both a temple at Simpang which was dedicated to Siva, and in another at Antahpura which was founded on the worship of Buddha. Devotion was paid to the dead King Jayanagara in the palace associated with Visnu at Sila Ptak, at Bubad in conjunction with Vishnu, and at Sukhalila which was meant for the reverence of Buddha (Hariani Santiko 1995).

Lokesh Chandra speculated that the 224 subsidiary chapels of the ninth century Buddhist complex Candi Sewu might represent the 224 universes of Saiva Siddhanta according to *Bhuvanakosha* (Jordaan and Wessing 1996: 44). Jordaan and Wessing believe that both Candi Sewu and its equally massive neighbour Loro Jonggrang, a ninth century complex dedicated to the Hindu trinity with Siva in the main temple “was conceived in Indian monasteries” (*Ibid.*: 92).

Hariani Santiko gave the most convincing argument for accepting the argument first proposed by Pigeaud (Pigeaud 1962: IV, 3-4) for the use of the term “parallelism” to describe the Hindu-Buddhist relationship in Java. The *Desawarnana* (otherwise known as *Nagarakrtagama*) can legitimately claim to be the most important Javanese literary work of the Majapahit period, since it was written as a narrative description of aspects of court life by a Buddhist. Other important texts of the same period are *kakawin*, poetic works meant as offerings to both the Buddha and (no doubt more significantly) to the king and his high nobles including *Arjunawijaya*, *Sutasoma*, and *Kunjarakarna*. Although rulers might give their patronage to more than one religious institution, the *Desawarnana* makes it clear that there were three religious bureaucracies which jealously guarded their separate identities: the Saivas, the Sogatas (Buddhists) and the *Risi*, who were probably also Siva devotees distinguished by their preference for residence in remote forest and mountain sanctuaries. Rulers also paid respect to Vishnu, but there does not seem to have been a separate Vaisnavite clergy; perhaps his cult was not popular with the common people. The three religious congregations (or four if one counts the Vaishnavites) did however share a common conception of the objective of life and of religious behaviour: to achieve a comprehension of “Absolute Reality”, usually considered to centre on the

relationship between humans and the divine. Understanding the true nature of this relationship was usually believed to confer supernatural powers.

Buddhist art in Java incorporates deities and motifs derived from Hindu mythology. These include Garuda and Angsa, divine mounts of Vishnu and Brahma; the ancient Vedic god Indra (often called Sakra or Sakka); demi-gods such as Kala, lord of time who stole the elixir of immortality, nagas or serpent deities, ganas (the lord of whom, known as Ganesha, “lord of the ganas”, became a significant Hindu deity); mythical beings such as the half-bird, half-human musicians kinnara and kinnari, apsaras (female spirits created during the churning of the elixir of immortality), and makaras, the mythical beasts comprising five different animals. The symbolism of mountains as the residences of the gods, and the wish-fulfilling tree as a feature of heaven, can be found in pre-Buddhist belief in India.

What is the significance of this artistic convergence? It has to be borne in mind that Buddhism and devotional Hinduism (as distinct from Vedic religion) evolved simultaneously. Both shared such values as respect for all living beings, whereas Vedic Hinduism lauded animal sacrifice. The production of anthropomorphic images of gods emerged in tandem. Both Hinduism and Buddhism initially derived some inspiration from the Hellenistic sculpture of the region from Gandhara to Afghanistan. Art historians (e.g. Chihara 1996: 45) have noted that during the formative period of new religious iconography around 2,000 years ago, Hindu and Buddhist art continually exchanged ideas. Both drew on pre-existing ideas about the appearance of supernatural beings and their abodes.

The examples of East Javanese rulers being commemorated in different temples indicates that it was not considered appropriate to place statues of Hinduism and Buddhism in the same temple. The only place where there is evidence that this occurred was Candi Jajawa (thought to be the temple today known as Candi Jawi), where according to an inscription a Siva image was supposed to have been installed in a cella on the lower level, while an image of Aksobhya was placed in an upper space, honouring the ruler Krtanagara, who was assassinated in 1292. Candi Jawi itself has no emblems which can be identified as either clearly Hindu or Buddhist. Although there are several other temples in east Java which do not display either stupas (an

exclusively Buddhist architectural element) or linggas (exclusively symbols of Siva), there are no ancient religious structures which combine the architectural motifs which are exclusively associated with one or the other religion. In other words, architectural motifs exist which belong unambiguously to one religion or the other.



[1]



[2]



[3]

*Artistic convergence : Indra [1], Siva[2], and Garuda[3] on Borobudur.*

In India, too, there is evidence that on one hand there was a deep antagonism between the two religions (although there is more to say about that later), but on the other hand adherents of both religions used the same substratum of artistic vocabulary to convey their philosophies.

There is thus much support in ancient documents and archaeological remains to conclude that Buddhism and Hinduism in Southeast Asia always remained quite distinct. It is quite likely that individual laymen paid homage to both Siva or Vishnu and Buddha, but this does not mean that they couldn't tell the difference between them. On the contrary, there were several religious bureaucracies, each devoted to a specific faith, which would have taken any steps they could to strengthen their

position in order to obtain royal patronage. The priests and monks would have maximized all opportunities to demonstrate the superiority of their way of visualizing Absolute Reality. Nothing less than inter-religious competition would explain the incredible achievements of the societies of Southeast Asia in the spheres of architecture and sculpture. There was a great incentive to accentuate the ability of the specific religious bureaucracy to create propitious spaces for attaining enlightenment.

The competing religions could not ignore each other; they found it necessary to refer frequently to each other, if only to demonstrate their own superiority by comparison. This rivalry is never expressed directly in the texts we possess, but one can detect clear indications of it. This rivalry seems to have been kept within strict boundaries. We do not hear of any religious wars in premodern Southeast Asia. The royalty of all the major kingdoms in this region seem to have found it advantageous to show even-handedness in their support for Hinduism and Buddhism. The Buddhists used the metaphor of Vajrapani killing Siva in order to bring him back to life, but there is not a single piece of evidence that such acts ever occurred in reality. We may think of a healthy competition which continued for a thousand years, which was mainly pursued in the realms of art and literature. Certainly there were many wars, but these were often fought between adherents of the same religion rather than between Buddhist and Hindu pretenders to thrones.

This peaceful competition was unique to Southeast Asia. In India the relationship was more tense; in China, Buddhism's serious rival was Confucianism. When we explore Southeast Asian Buddhism, we can perhaps detect a particular flavour which set it apart from all other geographical areas where local styles of Buddhism existed.

The propagation of Buddhist canonical texts was considered sufficiently important in China during the Tang Dynasty that a significant number of heroic monks were sent by the emperors on the arduous journey to Taxila and Nalanda to acquire copies of the sutras to take back to Changan for translation. The most famous of these were Xuanzang and Yijing, but we know that by the late 7<sup>th</sup> century there had already been numerous others.





*Smaller Wild Goose Pagoda, Xian, where Yijing worked after returning from Nalanda and Srivijaya to China.*

The production of texts as a general rule leads to standardization of belief and dogma. In Buddhism, this tendency was combined with a tolerance, even an enthusiasm, for disputation and constant interpretation of ontological theories. In China there were teams of scholars, both indigenous and foreign, who translated Sanskrit texts into Chinese; they evolved a highly standardized vocabulary. This is quite valuable to us, since many of the Sanskrit originals have been lost, but the reliability of Chinese versions makes it possible to reconstruct the originals with a fair degree of confidence. This consistency does not equal unquestioned repetition of the same ideas. Instead, the Buddhist realm, stretching from Afghanistan to Japan, and from Mongolia to Sulawesi, fostered numerous centres where new texts were constantly produced.

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The major collections of ancient Mahayana Buddhist texts come from the far north: China and Japan. Kumarajiva (344-413), born in Central Asia to an Indian father and a mother from Kucha was one of the earliest; he translated 74 scriptures in 384 fascicles including the highly-influential *Saddharmapundarika* or Lotus Sutra in eight fascicles. The famous Xuanzang, hero of the mythical *Journey to the West*, translated 75 scriptures in 1335 fascicles, including the *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra* consisting of 600 fascicles in 660-663. This pattern of preservation does not however precisely equal the intensity of intellectual activity. The surviving texts give us a window into the wider intellectual currents of the period from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries during which the many centres of Buddhist study and literary production in Asia were connected by frequent travellers, both monks and laymen. This constant circulation of ideas was paralleled by a universal respect for prominent teachers.

Although many texts have been lost, especially those composed in Southeast Asia, the names and some of the doctrines of the teachers from this region have survived in documents found elsewhere. We can therefore reconstruct an ancient Southeast Asian Buddhist culture which was seen as a pillar of the worldwide edifice of the religion. Parochialism was not one of the characteristics of this ecumene.

The earliest evidence of Indic religion in this realm consists of Buddhist texts dated palaeographically to the fifth century in Kedah and Province Wellesley (Christie 1990). These, the oldest known Buddhist texts carved in Southeast Asia, bear phrases from the Buddhist law of cause and effect. One also contains a prayer for safety by a Buddhist ship captain about to set off on a voyage, probably across the Bay of Bengal. They are written in Sanskrit language and Pallava script. The Chinese monk Yijing visited Kedah twice in the seventh century, on his journeys to and from Bengal.

Most Malays believe, incorrectly, that their ancestors were Hindus. This may result from the fact that history textbooks of the colonial period often termed all the inhabitants of insular Southeast Asia indiscriminately as “Malays”, and sometimes failed to differentiate between Hinduism and Buddhism. When the Malay kingdom of Srivijaya fell in 1025 to a Chola invasion from south India, a century-long period of Tamil influence ensued, during which several large Hindu sanctuaries were built in Kedah, on the Malay Peninsula.



*Candi Bukit Batu Pahat, Kedah: a Siva sanctuary from the eleventh century.*

Historical and archaeological evidence demonstrates conclusively that this was an anomaly, and that Buddhism was far more influential than Hinduism in the Malay cultural realm from the beginning of the historical period until the coming of Islam.

Roughly 90% of the artifacts of Indic religious character in the Malay realm such as statuary and temples are Buddhist, but as in much of Southeast Asia, in Malay culture, Buddhists coexisted with devotees of Siva, Vishnu, Ganesha, and Durga. There is no reliable procedure for correlating the remains with the degree of devotion which the average Malay felt for that religion. It is possible that Buddhism was more popular with the nobility than with the commoners, just as Vishnu seems to have been more popular with the Javanese and Balinese royalty than with their subjects.

The earliest written sources in Sumatra, from the late seventh century, are thoroughly Buddhist. They are connected with the foundation of the kingdom of Srivijaya. The

remains in Kedah indicate that Buddhism was well-integrated into the culture of the Straits of Melaka centuries before Srivijaya was founded. No doubt Buddhism took root in many centres where Malayu culture blended with that of other ethnic identities.

The monk Yijing left China in 671 bound for Sumatra on a ship belonging to the ruler of Srivijaya. He stayed there for six months studying Sanskrit. From Srivijaya the king sent him to another kingdom called Malayu, where he spent two more months. Next he went to Kedah, where he remained until the wind became favorable for a voyage to India. He spent the next 17 years in Nalanda, then took all the texts he had collected, which he stated contained 500,000 *slokas*, and returned to Srivijaya. He strongly advised future Chinese pilgrims to spend one or two years in Srivijaya to “practise the proper rules” before going to India. He himself spent at least four more years in Srivijaya before he returned to China for good. In Sumatra, several other Chinese monks joined him, some spending several years with him.



*Statue of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, found on Bukit Seguntang. The statue dates from the late seventh century, around the time of Yijing’s visit. He may have stayed in a monastery on this hill.*

Yijing listed the five most distinguished teachers of his day. One of them lived in Nalanda, and another was Sakyakirti who had “travelled all through the five countries

of India in order to learn, and is at present in Srivijaya.” Sakyakirti’s origin is not clear, but a Buddhist teacher from Bengal, Kumaraghosa was then living in Java.

Srivijayan inscriptions on stone were written for political rather than religious motives, and contain little information on Buddhism. We can however infer that Srivijayans were obsessed with the quest for *siddhayatra*. The word is inscribed on more than 40 stones palaeographically dated to the seventh century, found at various neighbourhoods in Palembang. The term is Sanskritic, but not specifically Buddhist. Coedes defined it as "a voyage or a pilgrimage in order to obtain supernatural powers."



*Inscription from around 680, found at Telagabatu, Palembang. The stone contains a long oath of loyalty to the ruler, combined with curses which will kill anyone who dares to commit treachery. The inscription was found on an artificial island in a pool, probably in or near a royal complex.*



*Sabukingking, where the inscription was found.*

An inscription from Talang Tuo, Palembang, dated to 684, contains a detailed account of the ruler's wish that everything in the garden, including coconuts, areca, sugar palms, sago palms, fruit trees, bamboos, ponds, dams, etc. contribute to the welfare of all beings. This inscription contains the most information on religious beliefs of any Srivijayan inscription: the wish that the thought of Bodhi will be born in all, references to the three jewels and the diamond body of the *mahasattvas*, and ends with the wish that all will attain enlightenment. These concepts can be connected with Vajrayana or Tantrayana which arose at Nalanda from the Yogacara school not long before this date (Coedes 1930).

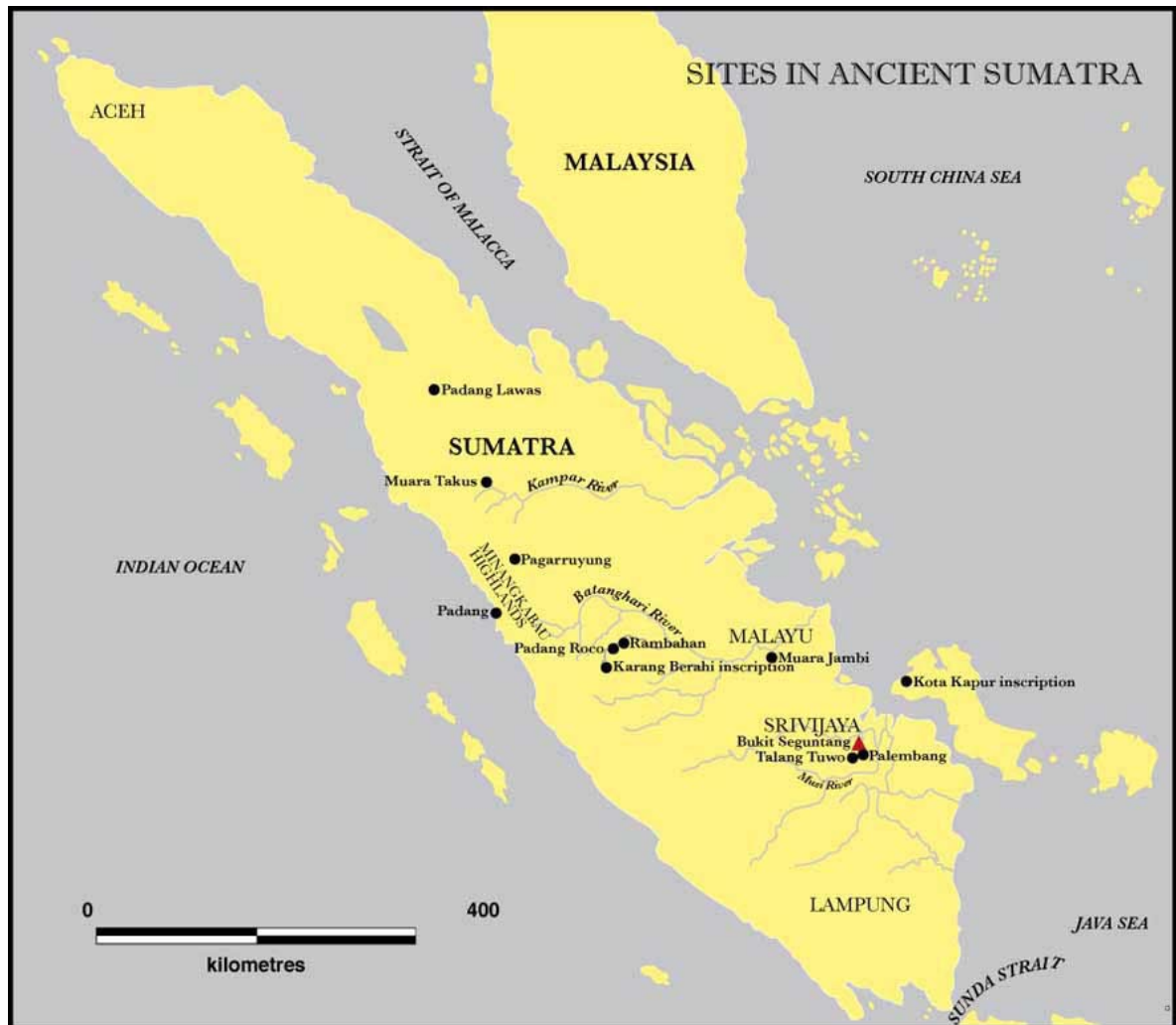
The Bukit Seguntang inscription was found during road construction. Unfortunately we only have parts of it. One fragment has only the initial portions of 21 lines. Another fragment purchased later bears the word *shiksaprajna*. *Shiksa* refers to mundane knowledge (including the rules of discipline) which is acquired from others; *prajna* refers to the highest intuitive wisdom, which in Mahayana is inseparable from the true vision of the Shunyata. The inscription may have begun with an invocation of a perfect Buddha, Manjusri, or Avalokitesvara (de Casparis 1956: 11).

In addition to Buddhist statuary, Nalanda in India has also yielded numerous images of such Hindu deities as Siva, sometimes with Parvati seated on his thigh, Ganesha, Vishnu, and Surya. It is not clear how they were integrated into the monastic life of Nalanda, but by analogy we can infer that the Hindu images found at Palembang are not necessarily indicative of Hindu temples there either.

The repertoire of images found in Indonesia overlaps but does not duplicate those of Nalanda. The eight major scenes from Buddha's life were popular in India but not in Indonesia. Indonesians concentrated on Vairocana, found in Nalanda but not predominant. The beak-like nose of the Buddha of Nalanda and Pala sites is rare in Indonesia (though it appears on an image from west Sumatra). The Pala style was much more closely followed by Tibetans and Burmese.



*Pala-style head of Buddha from West Sumatra*



*Map of Sumatran historical sites*

The National Museum of Indonesia possesses a set of eleven gold plates of two sizes: eight large and three small (de Casparis 1956: 48-78). Unfortunately the origin of the plates, and the manner in which they arrived in the Museum, is unknown. They were first recorded in an inventory of 1946. The script contains both Pallava and Old Javanese letters. J.G. de Casparis believed that the scribes copied this from a manuscript several centuries older. The plates can be dated to the period between 650 and 800. Circumstantial evidence suggests that the plates were found at Muara Takus, Sumatra, where F.M. Schnitger (Schnitger 1938) was working just before World War II broke out, and that the information on their provenance was lost in the confusion of that period.



*Mahligai Stupa at Muara Takus*

The text is written in Sanskrit, but was probably composed in Indonesia, as suggested by certain peculiarities of grammar. The first ten plates bear a text on Dependent Origin; the last plate displays diagrams consisting of terrace-like shapes, two shapes possibly representing *srivatsa* on one side, the other is engraved with a lotus beneath a *cakra* or a sun, a moon, an *ankusha*, and a *trisula*.

Two of the smaller inscribed plates both begin with a formula which is unique to sources in western Borneo and the Malay Peninsula. It states that lack of knowledge produces Karma, thus rebirth. If knowledge replaces ignorance, there will be no



Karma and no rebirth. This doctrine is found in various Indian systems of thought, including Buddhism, Vedanta, and Shangkhya. In this text, it constitutes a Buddhist discussion of Dependent Origin.

One strophe which occurs in the *Mahavastu*, and in the Pali *Dhammapada*, was probably borrowed from the Sanskrit *Dharmapada*, although it is not found in the few fragments of this work which survive. The plates also contain the term *upasampada*, which can indicate the arrival of the *bodhisattva* on different *bhumis* of the path to enlightenment.

The text on the large plates begins with the *Pratityasamutpadasutra* ("combined origination of perishable things, due to a complex of causes") which is well-known from Buddhist Pali, Prakrit, and Sanskrit literature in India, Burmese gold plates in Pali, and China. The text provides a commentary on the *Vibhanga* ("division, analysis into sets of categories") which has also been found on two bricks at Nalanda. The Chinese pilgrim and translator Xuanzang wrote a version of the *Vibhanga* dated 661 which is similar to this Indonesian and the Nalanda texts. A second variant in Sanskrit is found in Central Asia; an early fifth-century Chinese Samyukta Pali version is also known.

The Indonesian text has some unique features. These include its discussion of prakrti (de Casparis 1956: 62) and an unusual list of the three Thirsts (*trsna*). This plate represents the oldest known stage of speculation on this subject. It varies in this respect from the Nalanda version, which conforms to a Mahayana system. The Indonesian version by contrast follows the system associated with the Sarvastivadin school. Some other minor points also suggest an association of this Indonesian text with the Sarvastivadins, a Hinayana school which wrote in Sanskrit, and whose doctrine spread beyond India (de Casparis 1956: 68-69). Yijing reported that the Sarvastivada School was influential in the South Seas. The scribes who wrote this text may have worked from a version which reached Indonesia as early as the fifth century, when Gunavarman (367-431), son of a king of Kashmir, visited Java.

The *Pratityasamutpadasutra* at Nalanda was almost always found in votive stupas, analogous to a relic in Theravada sites. As at Nalanda, the Indonesian plates may also

have been inserted relic-like into a sanctuary, but the text differs from those at Nalanda in some respects, suggesting independent Indonesian (perhaps Srivijayan or Sumatran) religious speculation (de Casparis 1956: 63).

There is also evidence for a Mahayana Buddhist school in the Straits: the Madhyamika. A clay tablet found in Kedah was inscribed with three *slokas* from a text called *Sagaramatipariprccha*. The script resembles that used in more archaic portions of these gold plates, and the script used in late seventh-century Srivijaya; they may also have been copied from an earlier manuscript (de Casparis 1956: 104).

Another Srivijayan inscription in south Thailand [Ligor B] refers to worship of Buddha, Padmapani, and Vajrapani.



*Wat Boromothat, south Thailand. Local tradition, which may be accurate, attributes this temple's construction to Srivijaya.*

According to a sixteenth-century Tibetan history of Buddhism, a monk named Dharmapala served as chief abbot of Nalanda in the early seventh century, and retired just before Xuanzang arrived. He then departed for Suvarnadvipa where he undertook further study, remaining there until he died (Schoterman 1986: 6). Other senior Indian monks from Nalanda who went to Suvarnadvipa include Dipangkara Srijnana, who went to Suvarnadipa to learn tantra (Bimalendra Kumar 2008: 103; B.B. Kumar 2008: 185). The most famous of the Indian monks associated with Srivijaya, Atisha (986-1054), is described further below.

A Sanskrit inscription engraved on a large copper plate found in Nalanda in 1921 records that the king of the Pala Dynasty, Devapaladeva, allocated five villages to support a monastery established there by Maharaja Balaputradeva, lord of Suvarnadvipa (Sumatra) (H. Sastri 1942: 95). The inscription emphasizes such religious tenets as “*bodhisattvas* well-versed in *tantras*” and the copying of Buddhist texts. These were no doubt the concerns of the Sumatran Buddhists as well. The inscription employs the term *mandala* in a sense in which it was common in India: a territorial subdivision. This is contrary to Srivijaya, which referred to the whole kingdom as Srivijayamandala.<sup>1</sup>

The inscription provides important details about the ancestry of Srivijaya’s ruler at the time. It records his claim that his maternal grandfather was King Dharmasetu, his mother was named Tara. His fame is compared to that of the five Pandawa brothers of the *Mahabharata*. The inscription goes on to refer to families of Hindu deities including Siva and Parvati, Indra and Paulomi, Vishnu and Lakshmi, as well as Buddha, son of Queen Maya as analogous to the parents of Balaputra (Sastri, H. 1942: 102).

We can speculate through analogy with Java that Sumatrans combined Mahayana Buddhism with regard for ancestors. An important Javanese source, the Karangtengah inscription of the late eighth century, found near the Buddhist monumental complexes of Bubrah, Lumbung, Sewu, and Plaosan, and the Hindu complex of Prambanan, mentions the Sugatas, “who with their sons form an unbroken

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from the text include the following:

“There was a king of Yavabhumi who was the ornament of the Sailendra dynasty, whose lotus-feet bloomed by the lustre of the jewels in the row of trembling diadems on the heads of all the princes, and whose name was conformable to the illustrious crusher of brave foes.”

“He had a son, who possessed prudence, prowess, and good conduct, whose two feet fondled too much with hundreds of diadems of mighty kings. He was the foremost warrior in battle-fields and his fame was equal to that earned by Yudhishtira, Parasara, Bhisena, and Arjuna.”

“Tara was the queen consort of that king, the illustrious Balaputra, who was expert in crushing the pride of all the rulers of the world, and before whose foot-stool the groups of princes bowed.”

“With the mind attracted by the manifold excellences of Nalanda and through devotion to the son of Suddhodana (i.e. the Buddha) and having realised that riches are fickle like the waves of a mountain stream, he ... built there a monastery which was the abode of the assembly of monks of various good qualities and was white with the series of stuccoed and lofty dwellings.”

line”. The idea of a genealogical connection of the Sugatas is “a conception which in Fore-Indian Mahayana would be extremely foreign” (de Casparis 1950: 138). De Casparis concludes that Sailendra Buddhism was Mahayana, “interpreted in the spirit of royal ancestor worship, burial and worship of holy mountains (de Casparis 1950: 139).

It has been suggested that Southeast Asians made at least two original contributions to the development of esoteric Buddhist thought. One concerns a verse inscribed on a small memorial stone stupa at Nalanda, dating from about the ninth century. This verse forms part of the *Bhadracari*, dealing with Bodhisattva Samantabhadra. This text was depicted in the uppermost series of reliefs on the Buddhist monument of Borobudur, central Java, which was built in the late eighth and early ninth century (Schopen 1989; Woodward 2004: 346).



[1]



[2]

*Buddha in one of his incarnations before attaining enlightenment, this time as a deer who teaches a hunter to respect life; [4] Manjusri; [5] Sudhana's first visit to a "good friend", in this case Megasri.*

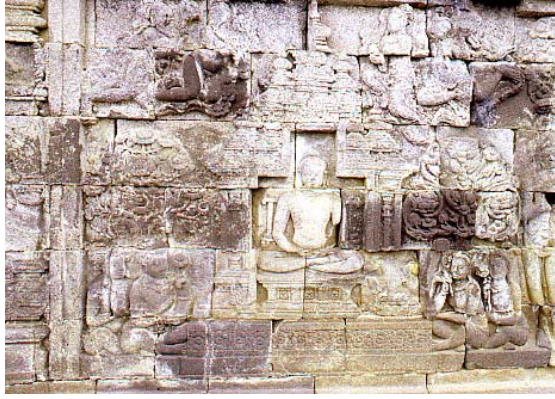


[3]



[4]

*Bas-relief from Borobudur: [1] Depiction of stupas; [2] Stupas in a lotus pond; [3]*



[5]

Another important source of data on tenth-century Buddhism in Southeast Asia is a shipwreck, known as the *Intan*, found off southeast Sumatra and dated to the first half of the tenth century; in other words, it sank during the heyday of Srivijaya.



*Vajras from the Intan*  
[Image courtesy of Dr. Michael Flecker]



*Stupika mold from the Intan*  
[Image courtesy of Dr. Michael Flecker]

This ship was on its way to Java with a cargo which included many artifacts from China and some from West Asia. The ship also carried a range of bronze items of Buddhist character, in commercial quantities. These include Buddhist statuary, many *vajras*, and architectural fittings probably meant for temples such as ornaments in the shape of *kala* heads (Flecker 2002). This raises the intriguing possibility that at least some of the bronze Buddhist artifacts found in Java and Nalanda and previously

thought to reflect the Buddhism of those areas could have been produced in Sumatra. Sumatra possesses the raw materials necessary for making bronze, and bronze statues were already being made there in the pre-Buddhist period.

The island of Karimun, 40 kilometers west of Singapore, lies within the narrow southern entrance to the Straits of Melaka.



[1]



[2]

[1] Natural indentations in a cliff on Karimun next to the Srivijaya-period inscription;

[2] The Srivijaya-period inscription

An inscription was carved here in the ninth or tenth century, in Sanskrit language and using the Nagari script known mainly from Mahayana Buddhist inscriptions of ninth-century Java. The enigmatic text (*Mahayanika Golayantritasri Gautama Sripada*) proclaims that a man named Gautama was a Mahayana Buddhist, and that he



possessed a round instrument. The likeliest surmise is that Gautama was the chief of the island; he served as an official of Srivijaya, perhaps to oversee shipping passing through the Straits; he may have received a *tantramala* or symbolic gift from Srivijaya's raja in the form of a rare object, perhaps an armillary sphere. The importance of this inscription is that it establishes the presence of Srivijaya's religious influence in the region of Singapore.

A Nepalese manuscript of the late tenth or early eleventh century mentions an important Buddhist statue at Srivijayapura (N. Sastri 1949: 77-78). In 1015 another text, the *Astahasrika Prajnaparamita*, was copied and the text was adorned with depictions of famous statues and sanctuaries. Three images from the Malay realm are mentioned: a Dipangkara from Java, a Lokanatha on Valavati Mountain in Kedah, and another Lokanatha at Srivijayapura (Schoterman 1986: 12).

At around the same time, in 1012, a learned Buddhist from northeast India went to live in Srivijaya. He was born Candragharba, renamed Dipangkara Srijnana when he entered the monkhood, and after initiation into an esoteric Buddhist order he received the title Atisha by which he is best-known today. He remained in Srivijaya for 12 years.

At this time Sumatra was known far and wide as a great centre of Buddhist practice. The "Golden Island", almost certainly denoting Sumatra is mentioned in Tibetan sources of this period such as the *Hevajra Tantra* and the *Yogaratnamala* (Schoterman 1986: 13). Northeast India was threatened by the Muslim invader Mahmud of Ghazni. Thus it is not surprising that in these circumstances the young Atisha, at the age of 29, went to study in Srivijaya, where there lived a famous teacher named Dharmakirti. He returned to Bengal in 1025 and became head of a monastery there. In 1040 he accepted an invitation to move to Tibet, and he subsequently died in a monastery at Netang, 16 kilometers from Lhasa (Schoterman 1985: 14-15).

A Tibetan source says Atisha's Srivijayan teacher Dharmakirti was the son of a king who found a Buddha image in the ground, whereupon the people reaped a rich harvest, and converted to Buddhism. The Sumatran prince travelled to India to search for the Law, remained seven years, and visited Bodhgaya. A Tibetan source also mentions

that several students went to Srivijaya to study with Dharmakirti after his return to Sumatra. There is therefore reason to believe that when Atisha went to Tibet, in order to “purify” Buddhism there (according to Tibetan sources), he replicated much of what he was taught in Sumatra.

Atisha is credited with the authorship of over 200 works, including a commentary on Kalacakra Tantra. His teachings were based on the Yogacara school and the Madhyamika system, which comprised the four tantras (*Kriyayoga*, *Caryayoga*, *Yogatantra*, and *Anuttarayoga*; Banerjee 1984: 30, 50, 61, 74). He was considered to be an incarnation of the Bodhisattva of wisdom, Manjusri (Banerjee 1984: 51). The central Tibetan monastery of Reting is believed to contain relics of three people: Atisha himself, his principal Tibetan student ‘Brom ston, and his teacher, “the Guru from the Golden Island”, whose epithet is almost certainly a reference to Sumatra (Schoterman 1986: 28-29).

A commentary on a text expounding the doctrine of the Perfection of Wisdom, a popular subject for Mahayana speculation, has been preserved in the form of a translation into Tibetan. This work was composed by Atisha’s teacher Dharmakirti, and the text states that it was “composed in the city Srivijaya of Suvarnavipa”. Other scholars have debated the possibility that concepts regarding mandalas which Atisha espoused while in Tibet were first formulated in Sumatra. Remains of a monastery at Tabo Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, contain murals which are closely parallel to those at Borobudur. Atisha visited Tabo in 1042, and may have been present at its founding. This too may be evidence for transmission of Buddhist ideas from Indonesia to India (Wayman 1981: 140-142; Nihom 1994: 72 note 192.)

An inscription from Tanjore dated 1030-31 records the conquest of Srivijaya in 1025 by a Chola armada and the capture the king of Srivijaya who was taken to India, after which he disappears from history. For the next century a Chola viceroy governed the Straits of Melaka from a base in Kedah; Srivijaya no longer existed (Miksic 1995). After 1025, the centre of Sumatran Buddhism shifted from Palembang to the central and northern parts of the island. A copy of the *Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita* produced in 1071 mentions Java among important Buddhist centres, but Srivijaya and

Kedah are no longer included. Buddhism had long existed in the northern tip of Sumatra, as indicated by a famous sculpture of a bodhisattva found in Aceh.



*Bodhisattva head found in Aceh*

In the eleventh century, esoteric Buddhist sites sprouted in several Sumatran sites, but the largest concentration of Buddhist remains are found at Muara Jambi, probably the ancient capital of Malayu, where 61 brick ruins are found along a 7.5-kilometer stretch of the Batanghari River. This may be the site recorded in the Tanjor inscription of 1030-31 as *Malaiyur*. The structures here were Buddhist shrines, including stupas.



*Candi Gudang Garam, Muara Jambi*



*Stupa, Candi Gumpung, Muara Jambi.*

Letters incised on bricks found in a brick foundation, probably deposited there as part of a ritual, can be dated to the ninth century. Gold foil sheets found in ritual deposit boxes in this ruin bear the names of the five *Tathagata*, the 16 Vajrabodhisattvas, and the 16 Vajrataras, all deities of the esoteric Buddhist Vajradhatu mandala. Another gold foil piece bears the word *vajra* (Boechari 1985; Bambang Budi Utomo and Nik Hassan Shuhaimi 2008: 64-67). Statuary found in Muara Jambi includes a Prajnaparamita in a style similar to that of 13<sup>th</sup>-century East Java.



*Statue of Prajnaparamita, Muara Jambi*

Other Buddhist statuary found here and in other nearby includes ten Buddha images and seven Avalokitesvaras. Six *makara* have been found in the lower Batanghari, one of which bears the date 1064 CE and the word *dharmavira*. A few Hindu sculptures have been found in the same region, but both numerically and aesthetically they are negligible compared to the Buddhist imagery.

The site of Kota Cina in northeast Sumatra was an important trading port from the late 11<sup>th</sup> to late 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Consistent with the site's probable cosmopolitan population, statues of Buddha, Vishnu, and a Siva linga have been found there. The Buddha images resemble those from Sri Lanka and southern India, and suggest a possible Theravada presence in the port.



*A creek at Kota Cina*



*Buddha from Kota Cina.*

Kota Cina's Buddhist may have been mainly immigrants. Theravada Buddhism does not seem to have had an major impact on Sumatra. In contrast, the Vajrayana school continued to evolve in Sumatra through the next few centuries. During this period, except for Kota Cina, all known major monasteries and temple complexes were built in the Sumatran highlands. Their remains give many indications of local evolution, though south Indian connections are indicated by Tamil inscriptions.

One region of major importance for the study of late Sumatran Buddhism is Padang Lawas. A Lokanatha bronze from here bears an inscription with Malay affinities giving the name of its maker (Suryya) and the date 1024. Statuary from here includes unusual esoteric deities such as Heruka. Inscriptions refer to such rites as meditation on cremation grounds. The frequent appearance of such motifs as vajras and reliefs of masked dancers display many similarities with Nepal and Tibet.



*Candi Si Joreng Belangah, Padang Lawas*



*Statue base with vajras, Si Joreng Belangah, Padang Lawas*



*Demonic dancing figures, Bahal I, Padang Lawas*

The last important Buddhist remains in Sumatra are found in two neighbouring regions. The first is the upper Batanghari River where a statue of Amoghapasa dated 1286 was discovered.



*Amoghapasha from Padang Roco, dated 1286*



*14<sup>th</sup>-century Bhairawa image from the upper Batanghari*



*Temple remains, Padang Roco*

This statue bears an inscription stating that it was sent from Java. The historical context suggests that it was a sign that the East Javanese kingdom of Singasari was asserting its suzerainty over this area, then apparently an important political centre. Archaeological research in this region since the early 1990s has uncovered numerous brick foundations of religious sanctuaries. Some probably date from the fourteenth century; a ruler named Adityawarman set himself up here around 1347 before moving



further north to the Tanah Datar region. His last inscription Suruaso I, dated 1375, records that Adityawarman was consecrated (*ditahbiskan*) as *ksetrajna*.



*Fourteenth-century artifacts at Batusangkar, Tanah Datar*



*Fourteenth-century inscription, Batu Basurat, Tanah Datar*

One of the last Buddhist Malay kingdoms was located in Singapore. As noted earlier, the first ruler of the Malays according to the *Malay Annals* was named Sri Tri Buana, Sanskrit for “Lord of the Three Worlds”, an allusion to the belief that the universe was divided into a heaven of gods, a world of humans, and a hell for demons. Some Southeast Asian kings used this phrase as their title.

The doctrine of the Lord of the Three Worlds was explicated in a Thai Buddhist text written around 1345, which ranks all living things on the basis of merit, thus justifying social stratification (Phraya Lithai 1982). The philosophy of the “Three Worlds” was influential when Singapore was becoming a significant commercial site in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The *Malay Annals* states that Sri Tri Buana was the first ruler of the Malays, who appeared magically on Seguntang Hill in Palembang. He was originally known as Sang Utama, but a herald appeared from the mouth of a white cow who proclaimed him to be “his Highness, the Sri Maharaja, ruler of the whole of Suvarna-bhumi” (strongly implying a tradition handed down from Srivijaya) and gave him the title of Sri Tri Buana (Brown 1970: 15).



*Singapore Stone, an inscribed stone formerly located  
at the mouth of the Singapore River*

Buddhism was the dominant religion in the Straits of Melaka for almost 1,000 years. The Malay people participated actively in the religious and economic networks which linked adherents of this faith who were spread over a huge portion of Asia. Concrete evidence of the detailed religious beliefs of this area is scarce, but enough data is available to discern the place occupied by the most important kingdoms of the island, including Srivijaya and Malayu, in the development of Buddhist belief and art.

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