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Langkasuka The Island of Asoka

By W. LINEHAN

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Langkasuka, according to the Kedah Annals (*Hikayat Marong Mahawangsa*), was the name by which the ancient settlement at the base of Kedah Peak in Kedah was known.

In the early centuries of the Christian era, or perhaps even earlier, Indian traders resorted to the Malay Peninsula. Eventually they made settlements in Kedah among other places. The Kedah settlement was founded, at the latest, between the first and third centuries A.D.¹ Strengthened by succeeding waves of Indian colonists it developed into an important kingdom, with ramifications which reached far beyond the borders of the territory comprised in the modern State of Kedah. This kingdom was well known, not alone to Indian, but to Chinese and Arab voyagers. The names by which their chronicles describe this kingdom are mentioned below. The view here presented is that the original name of this settlement, and of the kingdom which grew out of it, was *Lanka Asoka*, "The Island of Asoka", that, in the course of centuries, the origin of the name was lost so completely that the Malay records, when they came to be written, evolved the etymological fiction regarding the name *Lanka Asoka* which is here discussed.

A romanised text of the Kedah Annals, edited by Mr. A. J. Sturrock, M.C.S. (retd.), was published in the J.R.A.S. (Straits Branch) No. 72, 1916. Long before that date, however, Colonel James Low had published his translation of the Annals in the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia* (Vol. III, No. 1, 1849). The translation was reprinted, at the instance of Prince Damrong of Siam, under the auspices of the Vajiranana National Library (Bangkok, American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1908). In the introduction to his translation, Low says that the MS. which he used had been given him by Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Halim Shah who had taken refuge in Penang during the Siamese invasion of Kedah in 1821. As to the text of the Annals he remarks (p. 91).

".....The Marong Mahawangsa was not known to the Siamese, being in the Malayan language and preserved in the private repositories of the Rajas of Kedda. It was discovered by the Raja of Ligor when he last took that province into his

¹ See Dr. Quaritch Wales, "Archaeological Researches on Ancient Indian Colonization in Malaya", J.R.A.S.M.B. Vol. XVIII, Part I, 1940.

own hands, and it is said that he destroyed it when told that a king of Siam had his origin there”.

To this, the editor of the Bangkok edition has a foot-note: “Other copies must exist. We have one.”

The Annals relate that Raja Marong Mahawangsa (the legendary founder of the settlement), after landing from his ship in the locality of the Sungei Bujang¹, proceeded to look for a favourable site for his settlement. The Annals go on to describe the event (my translation is based on the Sturrock text, pp. 45-6) :

“Now Raja Marong Mahawangsa sailed in an easterly direction in his vessel and skirted the mainland. And so he arrived at a bay with a headland. And Raja Marong Mahawangsa made enquiries of the senior pilot in his vessel, who replied ‘Your Highness, that large island that is just in the process of being united with the mainland is called *Pulau Sri*, and that small island is called *Pulau Jambul*, and the small island a little more inshore is called *Pulau Lada*.’ Raja Mahawangsa said ‘Let us then put in and anchor at the headland of the island.’ And the craft sailed to the place designated by Raja Marong Mahawangsa. And the craft arrived and anchored there. Raja Marong Mahawangsa with all his officers and warriors went ashore. And then there came in great numbers the *Gergasi* tribes (*Kaum gergasi*, “the ogres”, the aborigines of the country according to Kedah tradition), rather large in physique, into the presence of Raja Marong Mahawangsa. Raja Marong Mahawangsa knew that they were of the race of *gergasi*, and greeted them in a pleasant voice, and gained their goodwill. And all the race of *gergasi* stood in awe of Raja Marong Mahawangsa, and were amazed at his bearing which was incomparable at that time, and those who gazed on him stood in fear and trembling. And he said to the *gergasi* who had come ‘we shall stop here, if it is thought well’ And all the tribes of the *gergasi* respectfully replied, ‘It will be even a greater pleasure (*ka-sukaan*) to us, your humble servants, for we have no king here; and so it is better that Your Highness should be pleased to proceed to view the land which should be occupied.’ Raja Marong Mahawangsa then proceeded to view the clearing on which the fort, fosse, audience hall and palace were to be built. In his train were the aboriginal tribes and all his officers of State. He came upon a site magnificent in its location and in the lay of the land, wherefore he did not go (back) to his ship, so enthusiastically did he engage in the construction of the fort and the palace with its audience hall: and very large and won-

¹ *Bujang* is conjectured by Dr. Quaritch Wales to be a rendering of the Sanskrit *Bhujanga*, meaning a serpent.

derful these were. When the audience hall was completed it was named *Langkasuka* because its construction was carried out with eating and drinking and rejoicings (*ber-suka-sukaan*) and with various animals such as the sambhur, the barking-deer, the larger dwarf deer, the wild ox, and indeed all animals of the chase providing food for everyone. And great was the gladness (*ka-sukaan*) of the whole tribe, with beatings (of drums, or hands) and dancing, for they had had no king but only a head-man, and furthermore because of the affability of Raja Marong Mahawangsa. When the fort and palace were completed all the officers of State and the warriors had houses and a village, duly planned, made for themselves around the fort of their king."

The author of the Kedah Annals would thus derive the name Langkasuka from *Lanka-suka*, "The Island of Gladness". It is most improbable that this derivation is correct. That it seemed incongruous to the auditor himself is shown by the pains which he took to explain it.

The Kedah Annals make two other references to Langkasuka by that name, (1) again in the time of its legendary founder where there is mention of the "audience hall at Langkasuka", (2) during the reign of a later ruler, Raja Sri Mahawangsa, where that king "became tired of living at the fort of Langkasuka" and moved to Serokam.

Other records describe the country whose capital was situated at the base of Kedah Peak by names which are generally accepted as being renderings of *Langkasuka*. The "History of the Liang Dynasty" (502—556 A.D.)¹ mentions a country called *Langgasu* or *Langga* whose people, ardent Buddhists, said that the country had been established four hundred years earlier; one of the princes of the country had lived in India as an exile and had married the daughter of an Indian king; the exiled prince on his return became king of Langga; he died twenty years afterwards and was succeeded by his son *Pa-ka-da-to* who sent an envoy to China in 1515 A.D. with a letter extolling Buddhism. About 692 A.D., I-tsing mentions a country called *Langkasu*. The Tanjore Inscription of 1030 A.D. refers both to *Ilangasogam* and to *Kadaram* (Kedah). Chau-Ju-kua, writing about 1225 A.D. mentions *Lang-ya-si* or *Ling-ya-sseu-kiu*. The Javanese poem, *Nagarakrtagama*, composed in 1365 A.D. mentions both *Langkasuka* and *Kedah*. The Pasai Annals mention *Langkasuka* as having been destroyed about 1370 A.D.²

¹ W. P. Groenvelde's "Notes on the Malay Archipelago and Malacca" reprinted in "Miscellaneous Papers relating to Indo-China and the Indian Archipelago", Second Series, Vol. I, Trubner & Co., London, 1887 (pp. 135—8).

² R. J. Wilkinson, "Early Indian Influences in Malaysia", J.R.A.S.M.B., Vol. XIII, Pt. II, 1935, pp. 4-5.

It is significant that not one of the Arab writers—Ibn Khor-dadzhbeh (846 A.D.), Sulaiman (edited by Abu Zaid c. 920 A.D.), Ibn Muhallal (c. 941 A.D.) or Idrisi (1154 A.D.)—describes Kedah (or its capital) as *Langkasuka* (or by a variant of that name); they all use variations of the word *Kedah*. The absence of mention of *Langkasuka* by Arab writers, whose fellow-countrymen officially converted Kedah to Islam about 1474 A.D., would argue their ignorance of the name, and would go some way to explain why the author of the early part of the Annals (in which *Langkasuka* is mentioned)—Annals which were largely influenced by Arab missionaries—found such a difficulty in tracing the origin of the name *Lanka Asoka*.

Asoka (reigned c. 264—228 B.C.) was the grand-son of Chandragupta, founder of the Maurya (Peacock) dynasty, who had wrested the Indian provinces of Alexander the Great from the Seleucus. His mother was a lady from Champa. In the ninth year of his reign he invaded Kalinga and was so impressed by the horrors of warfare that he gave up the desire for conquest and devoted himself to the propagation of the Buddhist faith. During his reign Buddhism was introduced into Ceylon by his son Mahinda. Asoka's dominions included all India. He was the most powerful sovereign of his time and the most remarkable and imposing of the indigenous rulers of India. "If a man's fame", says Köpen "can be measured by the number of hearts who revere his memory, by the number of lips who have mentioned and still mention him with honour, Asoka is more famous than Charlemagne or Caesar".

Was it any wonder that these early Indian colonizers of Malaya, fervent Buddhists, should have called their first settlement, situated at the foot of Kedah Peak, by the name of the great Buddhist Emperor, Asoka, whose Wheel is symbolised to-day in the flag of free India?

The origin of the name *Lanka Asoka* was lost in the mists of time. In its Malay form *Langkasuka* the name still persists as the designation of a tributary to the Perak (Wilkinson, *loc. cit.*, says the Patani) river in its upper reaches. In the folk-lore of north Malaya is recorded a story of a fairy-land, *Negeri alang-kah suka*, "Land of all one's wishes", (Wilkinson, *loc. cit.*), a distant echo of *Lanka Asoka*.

Professor K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, who has been good enough to peruse the above note, writes:

"I have read the paper carefully and see no objection to it. But I know of no evidence, literary or epigraphical, connecting Asoka with Malaya.

Lanka means 'island' in some Indian languages, and Lanka Asoka would mean 'Island Asoka', or even 'Island of Asoka'.

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The Tamil form Ilangasokam, with long *ā* in Rajendra's inscription may be taken to support your surmise—Ilanga (Lanka) plus Asoka. The initial *i*, and *ga* (written *ka* but pronounced *ga*) are typical features in Tamil transliteration and need cause no difficulty."

While there is no direct evidence connecting Asoka with Malaya, apart from the etymological significance of the name *Langkasuka*, as here presented, there is some evidence relating that emperor to the near territory of Burma. Coedès ("Histoire Ancienne des Etats Hindouises d'Extreme Orient", Hanoi, Imprimerie d'Extreme Orient, 1944, p. 20) makes mention of "the religious mission of the Buddhist monks Sona and Uttara whom the emperor Asoka appears to have sent in the third century B.C. to Suvannabhumi, the 'country of gold', generally identified, rightly or wrongly, with the ancient Mon country and more especially with Suvannabhumi, the 'country of gold', generally identified, rightly or wrongly, with the ancient Mon country and more especially with the town of Thaton". The 'country of gold' may very well have included Malaya especially the port of Langkasuka which must have been one of the ancient harbours from which gold from the Malay Peninsula was exported. We also know that Asoka's son, Mahinda, visited Ceylon. Kedah, in the region of the Kedah Peak, was an almost inevitable landing place for the Indian Buddhist missionaries and traders of that religion and the adventurous younger sons or other near relatives of Buddhist Indian kings who followed their traders and missionaries.

That there was no incongruity in describing the earliest Indian settlement in Kedah as *Lanka* 'Island' is shown by the extract from the Kedah Annals above given and by the following quotation from Dr. Quaritch Wales (*loc. cit.*, p. 2) who relies upon Low's translation:

"The probability is that Kedah Peak was a peninsula when the Indian colonists arrived. Though the swamps bordering the Merbok had not yet formed, and much of the low lying land north and south of the Peak was still under the sea, it is difficult to believe that the comparatively high neck of land between Bedong and Gurun was beneath the sea in historical times. In the *Kedah Annals* the captain of the ship on which the legendary founder of Langkasuka, Marong Mahawangsa, arrives, is represented as saying to the adventurer "The large island we have reached (Kedah Peak) is now *becoming* attached to the main land'. Legend referring to the earliest time of which the Kedah people claim to have memory therefore refers to the process as already begun. Moreover it is well known that many ancient geographers did not distinguish between peninsulas and islands. We may therefore suppose that, at the period to which the *Kedah Annals* refer, Kedah Peak was not an island but *almost an island*."

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