

IN SEARCH OF SUVARNABHUMI: EARLY SAILING NETWORKS IN THE BAY OF BENGAL

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A historiographical survey of writings on early contacts between South and Southeast Asia shows that long distance trade is now accepted as one of the means by which wealth may have been accumulated by a centralising bureaucracy, thus leading to social change (Webb 1975). Recent archaeological excavations in central Thailand have pushed back the date of these early sailing networks to a century or two prior to the Christian era. Traditionally, the Mauryan emperor Asoka is credited with proselytising activities in the *Suvarnabhumi* in the third century BC, and the first definite reference to commercial contacts with these countries in Southeast Asia occurs in a contemporary text, the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya (II.11.79, 81), which mentions sailing routes to the *Suvarnabhumi* (or the land of gold).

Archaeological excavations at Ban Don Ta Phet, Chansen and Oc Eo and surface finds elsewhere on the mainland of Southeast Asia have yielded etched carnelian and glass beads, knobbed vessels, intaglios and ivory objects that all show evidence of an Indian connection. In return the cargo perhaps included spices, aromatics and tin. Several scholars have tried variously to explain the beginnings of these maritime ventures to Southeast Asia. Coedès (1964:44-49) attributed this reorientation of Indian commercial interests to changing political conditions in the Mediterranean and central Asia. The Roman emperor Vespasian prohibited the export of gold to India and this led to scarcity conditions of the precious metal, especially since disturbances in central Asia had closed the trade routes through which Siberian gold had found its way into South Asia. As a result, India turned to the fabled lands of Southeast Asia in a renewed quest for gold (Wheatley 1983:271). A second explanation also lays emphasis on the role of prestige goods, though in this case it was the increased demand from the Mediterranean markets that led to the expansion of Indian maritime interests into Southeast Asia (Lamb 1975: 445).

There is, however, little agreement on the regularity or even the scope of voyages to Southeast Asia. Raschke (1978:676) and Wheeler (1955:206-7) were of the view that in the early centuries of the Christian era these voyages by Indian traders were still

infrequent. More recent writings on the subject accept the regularity of the sailing networks but doubt if it could be termed as trade:

It is unclear whether we can refer to this as trade, specifically a commercial exchange entered into for financial profit or an extension of the 'Big Man' prestige goods type of economy (Glover 1989:4).

In the last few centuries B.C. Indian trade goods became increasingly available but only to strategically placed coastal chiefdoms (Higham 1989:313).

Linked to the nature and organisation of trade is the notion that the first Indian merchants who traded with Southeast Asia came from a country with a sophisticated and mature tradition of statehood (Higham 1989:244). But before we can discuss issues like the emergence of complex societies we should first elaborate on the organisation of long distance maritime trade itself. In this paper I shall examine the evidence from the Indian subcontinent and deal primarily with two pertinent issues. One is the nature of long distance maritime trade between South and Southeast Asia and the extent of the involvement of centres in Mainland Southeast Asia. Was it reciprocal exchange limited to prestige goods? Or was it an organised network extending to the centres in Mainland Southeast Asia? Allied to this is the question of the status of traders and the role of the state in controlling trade.

In the Indian context, in addition to archaeological material there is a profusion of literary and inscriptional data that provides information on the nature and organisation of trade. There is no uniform pattern for the entire subcontinent - the antecedent cultures and the early historical manifestations vary from region to region (Ray 1989:437-57). Thus, the organisation in the north-western part of the subcontinent was controlled by a *sahaya* or association, while in Tamil Nadu it was the *paratvar* or inhabitants of the coastal tract who diversified from their traditional occupations of salt-making and fishing into long distance trade. The Tamil Brahmi inscriptions from the region around Madurai on the river Vaigai mention the *nikama* as well, this term being synonymous with the *nigama* or exchange centre known from epigraphs in the Deccan and the Ganga basin. Traders dealing with specialised commodities were organised into guilds and the inscriptions from Mathura and the Deccan refer to many of these. A majority of them dealt in agricultural products, for instance, a flour-makers guild and a corn-dealers guild. These guilds also acted as banks and money could be invested with them at interest. Trade was also carried on by individual merchants, financiers and caravaneers who sold goods over long distances, either transporting the commodities themselves or entrusting them to professional caravaneers, or else bartering them against commodities obtained from a merchant of a neighbouring region.

There are two other points that should be emphasised here. The first point is that there was a diversity of political systems in the Indian subcontinent between the second century BC and the fourth century AD. The Kusanas, Ksatrapas and the Satavahanas were dominant in the north, Gujarat and the Deccan, while power in the south was

wielded by the chiefdoms of the Colas, Ceras and Pandyas. In spite of the multiplicity of political control, the neutrality of trade routes was maintained and these transcended political boundaries. The second point is the variety and profusion of coins dated to the early historical period. These were largely of copper, lead and an alloy of copper with a high percentage of tin. Nearly 175 types of what are commonly referred to as "tribal coins" were issued by the oligarchies located in Punjab and Rajasthan (Sharma 1983:180). In spite of this variety there was no uniformity in the degree of monetisation for the entire subcontinent.

In this paper I shall restrict myself to developments in the Ganga basin, particularly in the lower Ganga delta. The Ganga formed a major artery of communication from the middle of the first millennium BC connecting the urban centres of the northwest such as Charsada and Taxila, via Mathura, Kausambi, Varanasi and Pataliputra, to centres further east such as Campa and Chandraketurgh. After the decline of the Mauryas the nature of the political system in Bengal from the second century BC to the fourth century AD is very hard to define. Remnants of the material culture unearthed during archaeological excavations at sites in Bengal display a marked similarity to those further west in the Ganga basin, but politically we know that the control of the Kusanas did not extend eastward beyond Varanasi. It has been suggested that a series of local rulers were in control at this time though the identity of many of these remains obscure (Ray 1988:20).

The focus here shall be on seals and sealings recovered from the sites in the Ganga valley, especially the delta region, as these are a category of objects which are closely associated with and indicative of the expansion and organisation of trade networks. Seals were used for marking merchandise (*Arthashastra*, II.21); they were stamped on wet clay laid over fastenings on the mouths of pots containing valuables (*Khadirangara Jataka* no.40). They were also used for securing documents and for identification. An early Buddhist text, the *Milindapanha*, refers to a custodian of seals. There is a profusion of seals at sites in the Ganga valley and these occur in a variety of materials such as stone, ivory, copper and the ubiquitous terracotta. In most cases they are inscribed with names or symbols, Buddhist symbols being frequently represented. These have been extensively documented in archaeological literature, but what is relevant to our discussion are the carnelian seals and intaglios as these have a wide distribution at sites in Southeast Asia.

The single largest collection of seals of semiprecious stones was made by Cunningham from the northwestern part of the subcontinent and is now housed in the British Museum. The seals number 121 and belong to both the Kusana and the Gupta periods. There are few duplicates among these and nearly all the specimens are pierced through showing that they were threaded on or tied with strings (Dikshit 1960:129-30). The semiprecious stones used include a wide range such as carnelian, lapis lazuli and garnet, and many of the seals are also inscribed with names written in the Brahmi script of the early centuries AD. Another region where these seals have been found is the area around Nagpur in central India, though the four specimens so far found are all dated to the fourth century AD (Mirashi 1941:99, nos.1-4). These carnelian seals inscribed with Brahmi characters are

significant in that they have been found at at least four important coastal sites in Southeast Asia: Khuan Lukpad, Kuala Selinsing, Chaiya and Oc Eo. The earliest specimen from Khuan Lukpad dates to the first century AD, though they continued until the sixth-seventh centuries AD.

Other important types of cachet are the seals with devices - a figure or pattern cut in intaglio - so that when pressed onto a soft medium the engraving is rendered in relief. The Greeks brought into vogue the art of gem-cutting and carnelian was the most commonly used stone in antiquity. These intaglios with Greek devices were being manufactured at centres in the northwestern part of the subcontinent with definite examples of locally produced gems from Taxila (Boardman 1970:318). Local manufacture is demonstrated by a quartz ringstone with a typically convex face. Bought in Beirut it is now in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford. The head of Alexander wearing the Ammon horns is deeply incised on the circular quartz and the style is similar to that which appears on the coins of his immediate successors, especially Lysimachos (Boardman 1970:371, pl.998). But what is significant here is the small Kharoshthi inscription below the truncated neck.

Some of these carnelian intaglios have been found in Khuan Lukpad, Oc Eo and Nakorn Pathom and depict Classical devices (Malleret 1959-63; Lyons 1979:354). The one identified as the goddess Tyche or Fortuna found at Khuan Lukpad deserves special mention (Glover 1989:fig.5). It bears a close resemblance to a carnelian intaglio from the northwestern part of India and now in a private collection in Calcutta. The use of Tyche was a common motif on Indo-Scythian coins: a gold coin in the British Museum portrays a female figure very similar to the earlier examples, except that the reverse has a Kharoshthi legend (Mukherjee 1969:13-4).

There is evidence to suggest that these intaglios were not merely collected as curios but were extensively used as seals, perhaps all along the Ganga valley. Positive impressions of these on clay have been found at Rajghat on the outskirts of Varanasi in second-third century AD stratified deposits. The reverses of these sealings frequently show marks of embedded cross-strings and a hole which in some case still preserves the fibre (Krishna Deva 1941:76). The Greek representations shown on these sealings include a figure of Herakles, a standing winged Nike, a helmeted Pallas and a standing Apollo. A seal from Rajghat in the Indian Museum in Calcutta depicts a standing human figure, possibly Apollo, with undecipherable Kharoshthi characters around the figure. The seal is dark grey in colour, oval in shape and has a groove at the back (Mukhopadhyaya n.d.:243). From Chandraketugarh comes another terracotta sealing stamped with a Classical motif.

The distribution of seals and sealings with Kharoshthi inscriptions is not limited to the Ganga valley, but they have been found in central Thailand as well. A seal from U Thong now displayed in the Lopburi Museum shows a seated female figure with a Kharoshthi inscription along its periphery. Dark grey in colour and oval in shape it bears a striking similarity to an intaglio from northwest India. Kharoshthi characters have also been identified on a seal-matrix of tin from Oc Eo, while the representation of a male head on another tin seal resembles the head of the Kusana ruler Miao on his coins (Mukherjee 1990:3).

These Kharoshthi seals form a part of the corpus of inscribed and uninscribed seals and sealings collected from sites in Southeast Asia. An unbaked lump of clay bearing two impressions of a circular seal reading *sangha siri* in Brahmi letters of the second century AD has also been found at Beikthano (Aung Thaw 1968:28,50). It is more difficult to date precisely seals and sealings with symbols which have been found in large numbers as surface finds, though some of these have distinctive marks such as the *srivatsa* or Kubera. In the Indian context, the use of the *srivatsa* symbol was more extensive in the early historical period.

But perhaps we should look at another distinctive symbol - the use of the boat or ship symbol on coins and sealings in India and Mainland Southeast Asia. The ship symbol first occurs on punch-marked coins from deltaic Bengal and some come from the first century AD levels at Chandraketurah (Rapson 1908:160; Sarmadhikari 1984:39). Altogether 34 pieces of this coin type are now available, most of them in private collections. The symbol has continued on cast copper coins as well, on which the motif is generally that of a large vessel with a long oar, although in one case the boatman is also shown (Sarmadhikari 1984:fn 44). The ship symbol occurs in terracotta sealings dated to the early centuries AD and as graffiti on pottery. A majority of the terracotta sealings are from the coastal sites of Bengal, although some have been found at inland centres along the Ganga. One such example comes from Vaisali and shows the representation of a boat with a prow, stern, oar and passenger decks. A female figure is seen standing in the boat (*Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report 1913-14: no 93*).

The widespread use of the ship symbol ties in with the importance of the profession of *navika* or seafarer in early historical inscriptions. A seal from Kausambi has the legend *navikasa* or "of the navika" in characters of the second century BC Brahmi script. A master mariner also figures as a donor at a Buddhist site on the Andhra coast. This adds validity to the argument that the ship symbol on sealings was linked to maritime trade. The symbol continued on coins till the third-fourth centuries AD, prominent examples being the ship-type coins of the later Satavahanas found along the Andhra coast. The use of the ship symbol in Mainland Southeast Asia certainly points to its incorporation into this maritime network. It occurs on a terracotta sealing in Lopburi and two ship-type coins with a bull on the reverse are known from Khuan Lukpad. A stone seal from Nakorn Pathom also shows a two-masted ship, but what is interesting is that it depicts a Southeast Asian vessel with an outrigger (Lyons 1979:355).

This profusion of intaglios, seals and stampings of Indian origin in Mainland Southeast Asia would suggest a much more organised network of trade than has hitherto been accepted. Finds from U Thong and Nakorn Pathom show that not all the centres were coastal. A model often adopted to explain the nature of contacts between coastal and inland centres in Southeast Asia, and external partners, is based on early trade practices in India (Miksic 1985:447-8). Great reliance is placed on Ptolemy's use of the term "emporion" and Warmington's (1974:107) description of it as "an authorised sea port (not inland) mart in the orient where non-Roman dues are levied". Confirmation of this

trading system is sought in sixteenth century European reports which characterise Asian maritime trade as follows:

Foreign traders were allowed few dealings with the indigenous population. No trading by individuals was allowed; exchanges were treated as though they were reciprocal "gifts" between the rulers of the port and the sovereigns whom the travelling merchants represented. The rates at which goods were exchanged were fixed by treaty and custom, not by negotiation, at least where items claimed as monopolies of local rulers were concerned (Leeds 1961:26-48).

These references have been taken to indicate that there were no provisions for private commerce or bargaining and that money was not used. As emphasised throughout this paper, there is no evidence for state control of trade in the Indian subcontinent in the early historical period - the state derived revenue from trade but the trade itself was in the hands of private merchants and guilds. What the state did try to monopolise in terms of price control were items of royal consumption such as horses, though here again there was a specialised group of horse traders who were responsible for their transportation and sale. This was true of foreign trade as well - gifts to rulers were a part of the protocol to establish rights to trade, but that is where the state intervention ended. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (section 49) refers to presents for the king which included expensive silver plate, musicians, pretty girls for the harem, premium wines, unlined quality clothing and choice perfumes. But in the same section it gives a long list of items imported and exported at the port of Bharuch on the west coast and refers to gold and silver money which could be exchanged profitably for local currencies.

A question that may be raised at this juncture is whether or not an organised network of long distance trade and commodity production is inconsistent with the political structure as evidenced in Mainland Southeast Asia. This has been described as "a chieftom level of societal integration...attesting the existence of a degree of political centralisation and social ranking" (Wheatley 1983:288). Anthropological studies have suitably demonstrated that gift exchange and commodity exchange are two points on a continuum of exchange relations. Gift exchange tends to be between people who are related; as the kinship distance lengthens and the transactors become strangers so commodity exchange emerges (Meillassoux 1971; Godelier 1973:128; Gregory 1982:20). Thus a single object may be exchanged as a gift within a tribal community and as a commodity outside it. We cannot assume that a state and the market process necessarily imply each other, because markets can function in the absence of states (Bohannon and Dalton 1962).

I mentioned earlier that even within the Indian context there is very little information that supports the existence of a state in Bengal in the early centuries of the Christian era, even though market towns have been identified there. For a reappraisal of the early maritime contacts, local exchange circuits in Mainland Southeast Asia need to be worked out in greater detail. However, the indications are that a long distance coastal network had developed in the latter half of the first millennium BC. So far the evidence suggests

that this exchange network included Dong Son drums of Heger I type and bronze bowls with a high tin content (Ray 1989a:48-51). By the beginning of the Christian era a distinctive ship building tradition had developed in Southeast Asia (Manguin 1987; Ray 1990). Thus a more plausible model of the organisation of trade should incorporate the expansion of local sailing networks as well as the presence of agents of Indian merchants and guilds. Here a reference to pottery found in Southeast Asia similar to that from early historical sites in India may not be out of place. Fine grey ware sprinkler necks are known from Beikthano and Chansen (Bronson 1979:324) and stamped pottery was found in the excavation at Chansen (*ibid.*). Rouletted ware sherds are known from the Buni culture sites in northwest Java and from the site of Sembiran in Bali (Ardika and Bellwood 1991).

This brings us to the question of the status of traders. Van Leur dismissed the issue by stating that, according to the Brahmanical *varna* hierarchy, traders belonged to a lower social group (1955:92) and were hence men of lesser consequence. This dismissal stems from an uncritical acceptance of the Brahmanical laws without analysing the degree of adherence to them in the early historical period. Historical writings now available stress the ambiguity of Brahmanical law books regarding the status of craftsmen and occupational groups. This ambiguity arose for two reasons. One was that the early Brahmanical law evolved from an agrarian base and by the beginning of the Christian era it had to contend with the growth of urban centres and expansion of trade networks. The other was the pecuniary need to come to terms with the prosperous position of traders and other occupational groups as is evident from the donations and gifts made by them to Buddhist monastic establishments. The location of Buddhist monastic sites along the trade routes underlines the prominent role of Buddhism both in encouraging the expansion of trade as well as providing a cohesiveness and identity to the trading groups. An analysis of early Buddhist texts reveals the use of two different schemes of categorisation - one based on the four-fold Brahmanical division of society and the other giving importance to the occupational divisions among people. In the latter a distinction is made between the high occupations and the low occupations, the former including agriculture, trade and cattle-keeping. Thus young men of *ksatriya*, *brahmana* or *gahapati* families are associated with agriculture, trade or cattle-keeping (Chakravarti 1987:102-3).

Linked to this is the question of the place of origin of the early traders and seafarers who travelled to Southeast Asia. In this paper we have concentrated on seals and intaglios and shown the linkages between Mainland and Peninsular Southeast Asia and the Ganga basin. But seals and intaglios are not the only category of objects of Indian origin found in Southeast Asia and such compartmentalisations are not possible. Between the first century BC and the third century AD the entire east coast of the Indian subcontinent was linked in a unified coastal network. Rouletted ware sherds occur extensively at sites in the Ganga delta and along the Orissa, Andhra and Tamil coasts to northern Sri Lanka. The contemporaneity of all Rouletted ware sites is not possible to determine nor is it possible to identify the production centres. A preliminary survey by Begley, however, suggests that one production centre would have been on the Tamil coast close to Arikamedu. Another centre was probably located along the Andhra coast and it was this that supplied the

inland centres of Andhra and Karnataka (Begley 1988, and see also Ardika and Bellwood 1991:224 on this matter [ed.]). The excavated finds from the delta sites of Bengal remain undocumented but perhaps form a third group. Within this mosaic of sailing circuits it is not possible to identify linkages between individual sites until much more extensive archaeological work is undertaken and firmer time brackets are available from the different port sites.

In the final analysis, it is evident that by the beginning of the Christian era contacts across the Bay of Bengal could be best described as organised trade networks. Many inland and coastal centres in Mainland and Peninsular Southeast Asia participated in these circuits. But what need to be worked out in greater detail are the maritime linkages between sites and the shifts in trade routes.

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