

An Inscribed Tablet from Kedah, Malaysia: Comparison with Earlier Finds

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THE MODERN VILLAGE of Kampung Sungai Mas, on the west bank of the Sungai (river) Terus in Kedah, has built up over several previously unreported early historic period sites. Both the *kampung* (village) and the sites beneath it are situated on an old *permatang*, or beach ridge, which provided relatively high, dry ground for settlement in an area dominated by low-lying coastal floodplain. This ridge is one in a series, anchored at the north end by Bukit Meriam—an isolated outcrop of sedimentary rocks 2.4 km north of the village—and extending well into the state of Seberang Perai at the southern end.

Early historic period sites also occupy *permatang* land immediately across the Sungai Terus from Kampung Sungai Mas; an additional site was recorded by Sullivan (1957; 1958) approximately 1.5 km south of the Sungai Muda, in Seberang Perai, on a sand ridge that appears to be part of the same series.

The early historic period in Malaysia includes the centuries between 1500 and 450 B.P., i.e., from A.D. 0 to 1500. Although most of the materials recovered from the Kampung Sungai Mas sites date, tentatively, to the tenth through fourteenth centuries A.D., a stone tablet discovered in the neighborhood of Site 53 (Fig. 1) could be considerably older. The find is particularly significant because two similar tablets had been found nearby in the nineteenth century: one, lost years ago, at Bukit Meriam, and the other just south of the Sungai Muda, at an unclear location in Seberang Perai.

The new tablet and the Kampung Sungai Mas sites were recorded during Ph.D. dissertation fieldwork conducted in Kedah during 1979 and 1980. Fieldwork resulted in the discovery or relocation of more than 80 early historic period sites in the Sungai Muda and Sungai Merbok estuaries and coastal drainages of south-central Kedah, and emphasized the mapping and interpretation of these sites within their environmental contexts.

Eleven sites were located through on-foot and boat surveys in Kampung Sungai Mas, and five more in Kampung Seberang Terus, immediately across the Sungai Terus, on the east bank. During the mapping in Kampung Sungai Mas, Encik

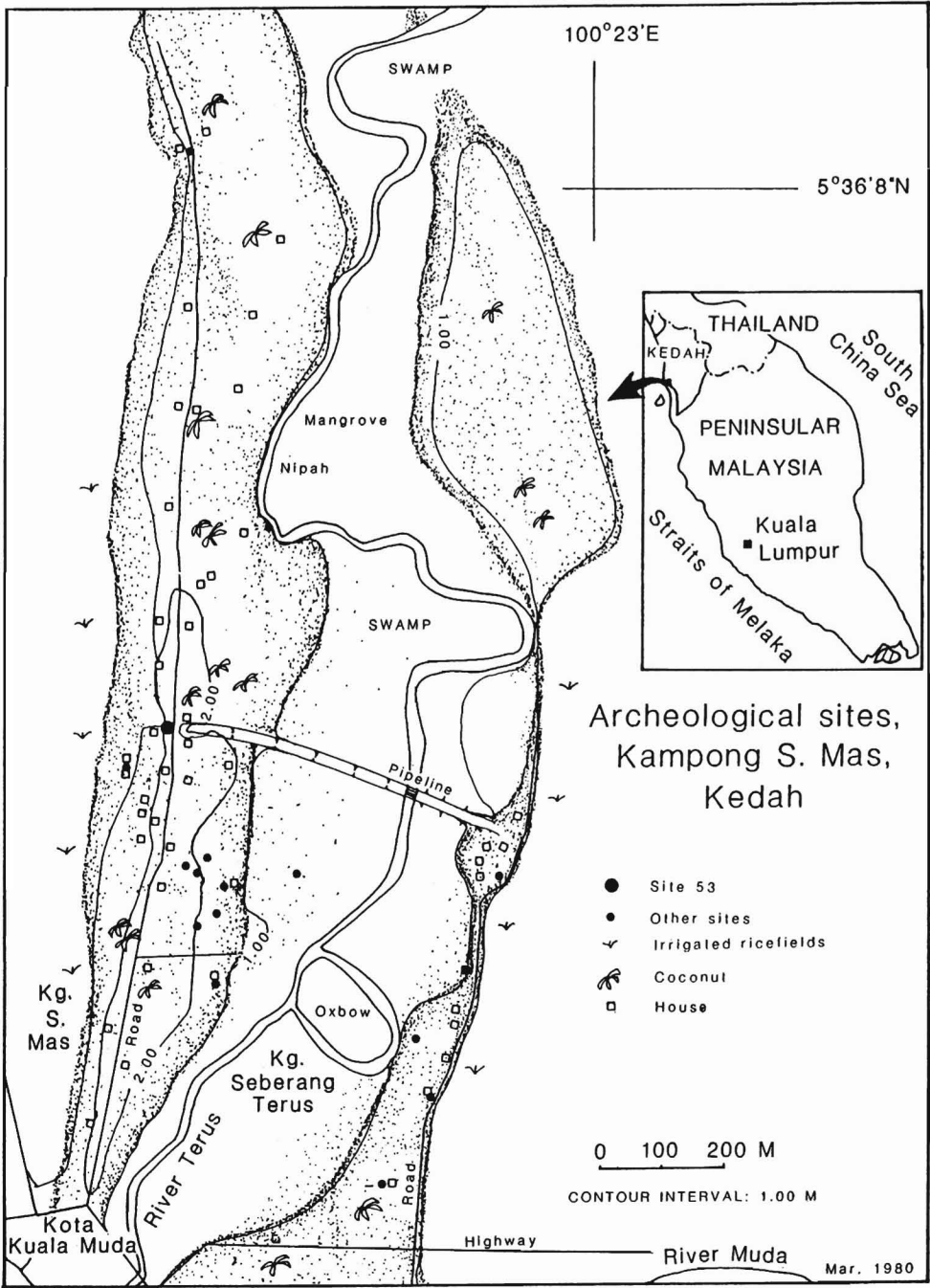


Fig. 1 Map showing archaeological site locations: Kampung Sungai Mas and Seberang Terus.

Ariffin bin Ibrahim, a resident of the village, asked us to examine a stone tablet he had recovered some time previously and had stored for safekeeping. At our request, Jan Wisseman Christie, at that time an instructor at the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Pulau Pinang, and a historian experienced in epigraphic interpretation, visited the site and was able to identify the text of the inscription on the tablet as a stanza concerned with karma. The stanza is often associated with the Buddhist credo, "Ye dhamma." Wisseman Christie believes the inscription may date from the fifth century A.D. The language is Sanskrit (Wisseman 1980; Allen-Wheeler 1980). The tablet is now stored at the Muzium Lembah Bujang in Merbok.

THE SITES AND THEIR PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Figure 1 provides an overview of the Kampung Sungai Mas sites. Briefly, the surface finds included brick and laterite block structural remnants; ceramic, glass, and bead scatters and concentrations; and rare midden exposures. Stream- and road-cuts revealed subsurface charcoal layers containing stratified cultural materials (Allen-Wheeler 1980). The extent of these subsurface deposits is not yet known, as the project did not include excavation.

The *permatang* (beach ridge) on which the sites are located, landlocked today approximately 4 km inland, was once a coastal beach. Carter (1959), Nossin (1964), and Swan (1970), among others, have discussed the processes of mangrove succession, coastal progradation, and beach ridge formation that continue to mold shoreline features along Malaysia's coasts. Batchelor (1977) discussed the implications of coastal progradation for the interpretation of an important Selangor site with both prehistoric and historic components. In Kedah itself, earlier researchers (Quaritch Wales 1940; Lamb 1961) had suggested that certain inland sites might have been coastal during their periods of occupation. Detailed analysis of geomorphic influences had, however, not been undertaken until the current project.

The beach ridge at Kampung Sungai Mas is composed primarily of quartz sand and fine, pebble-sized rock fragments, rounded through littoral and some riverine transport. It appears continuous with the ridge east of the river, where Kampung Seberang Terus is located. This set of ridges extends some distance south of the Sungai Muda as well; the Kota Aur site in Seberang Perai (Sullivan 1957; 1958) apparently occupies the same *permatang*, or one in the same set, dissected from east to west by the Sungai Muda.

Soils on higher ground around Kampung Sungai Mas are described by the Soil Survey Division, Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (1968: Sheets 1 and 2), as belonging to the Sogomana-Sitiawan-Manik Association, which occupies inter-riverine and higher terraces. This soil association apparently incorporates soils on both alluvial terraces and marine beach ridges, two rather different sources.

Low-lying land around the *permatang* is clayey and is used today for *sawah* (irrigated rice plots). This soil is assigned by the Soil Survey Division (1968) to the Keranji Series, which occupied coastal plains.

The closest exposure of bedrock in the area is the outcrop at Bukit Meriam, composed of ferruginous shale and mudstone, capped by rock types described by Bradford (1972: Geological Survey map) as sandstone and quartzite in resistant bands, cut periodically by quartz veins. Fragments of iron-rich argillite lie scattered over the ground surface in Kampung Sungai Mas, doubtless originating from Bukit

Meriam. Much of the clay and stone used in early historic period structures at the sites probably also originated there.

Nipah (*Nypa fruticans*) and mangroves of several species including *Rhizophora* and *Bruguiera* spp. characterize both banks of the Sungai Terus at the waterline here, as they do throughout most of the course of this tidal river. The coastal lowlands to the west continue to build westward as new marine beaches, spits, and ridges form, blocking drainage from backwater areas that then become stabilized through colonization by both mangroves and *nipah*.

The presence of large numbers of tradewares at sites here suggests easy accessibility during the early historic period. The possibility exists that the *permatang* may have been a still-active beach during the period. Alternatively, even if the beach had already become landlocked inland, access by boat would have been possible, as it is today, via the Sungai Muda and/or the Sungai Terus. Geoarchaeological excavations are needed in the area to clarify the geomorphic status of the sites during their period(s) of occupation and to establish a secure chronological sequence for this important early historic period complex.

THE KAMPUNG SUNGAI MAS TABLET

Archaeological Context

According to its discoverer, Encik bin Ibrahim, the tablet had been recovered during excavation of an irrigation channel in the area later designated Sites 53 c (Fig. 1). The tablet was reportedly a subsurface find, although its exact original location and depth below ground surface are not known.

Site 53 constitutes the most extensive surface concentration of ceramics, beads, and glass in the *kampung*. The porcelains and celadonic tradewares recovered probably date within a range between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries A.D., i.e., between 950 and 350 B.P. Earthenware fragments also lie scattered in large numbers over the ground surface and throughout the cuts available for inspection. Beads include seed beads and larger trade varieties including cone-formed types (cf. Beck 1930).

Physical Description

The incomplete tablet (Pl. I, Table 1) measures 41 × 22-25 cm and is 5 cm thick. Only one side shows evidence of carving; the reverse side and edges are rough, showing no clear sculptural traces.

The rock used is gray-green on the surface, but it could not be inspected beneath the weathered cortex; shales in the area often show a greenish cortex but may be red-brown beneath the surface. The surface fracture pattern and zones of previous breakage reveal a bedded and platy sedimentary structure like that of slate or shale; the rock, however, seems soft for slate. Surface examinations of color, texture, and structure suggest that the material had probably derived from Bukit Meriam. I have suggested to the Muzium that a small fragment of the rock be removed for petrographic examination in thin section, in order to identify the lithic type with certainty (Allen-Wheeler 1980). Precise identification of the rock used is important for reconstruction of the history of manufacture and use of the tablet. Earlier researchers have suggested that other tablets from the area were imported, usually from India. I



Plate I Photograph of Kampung Sungai Mas inscribed tablet.

consider it more likely that the Kampung Sungai Mas tablet was made locally from local material.

Colonel Low, who discovered the Buddhagupta and Bukit Meriam (or Kedah) inscriptions early in the nineteenth century, described the materials from which they were carved as "a sort of slate" (Tables 2 and 3; Low 1886*a*:224; 1886*b*:232). Although the Bukit Meriam tablet is lost, photographs of the Buddhagupta stone (Chhabra 1935; Lamb 1963) suggest a light color rarely found in slate, but consistent with shales from Bukit Meriam and other outcrops in central Kedah.

One of Lamb's tablets (Table 4) from Pengkalan Bujang, a few miles to the northeast, was initially described by him as "apparently of limestone" (Lamb 1961:36); in a later report the rock was identified as slate (Lamb 1963:84). Shale in the area exhibits certain characteristics intermediate between the two types. It is typically softer than slate but harder than limestone. It exhibits tabular to platy, bedded structure, as do slate and some limestones. Like most limestones, shale and other argillites are lighter in color than slate. Shales and limestones are sedimentary; slate is metamorphic. Lamb's inscription might also, therefore, prove to be cut in local shale.

One additional clue suggests that all of the tablets described as made of "slate" may actually be shale. Quaritch Wales (1940:7) described the rock type used for the tablet from Bukit Choras (see Table 5) as "slaty bedrock of the hill." According to

TABLE 1. THE KAMPUNG SUNGAI MAS TABLET

REFERENCES (IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER)	TENTATIVE DATE	PROVENIENCE, AND CULTURAL ASSOCIATIONS	CONTENTS	LANGUAGE AND SCRIPT	SIZE	MATERIAL	CONDITION; LOCATION
Allen-Wheeler 1980 and this report	Fifth-seventh century A.D.	On beach ridge in Kampung Sungai Mas; west bank of Sungai Terus. Recovered by resident from reportedly sub- surface context in area designated Site 53: ceramic and glass concen- tration	<i>Stūpa</i> relief; "karma" stanza	Indian script	Fragment: 41 × 22-25 × 5 cm	Probably local shale or mudstone	Preserved, Muzium Lembah Bujang, Merbok, Kedah
Wisseman 1980	Fifth century A.D.	Script similar to Buddhagupta inscription and to Purnavarman inscriptions from Jawa Barat	<i>Stūpa</i> relief; "karma" stanza	Sanskrit	41 × 25 × 5 cm; length incomplete	—	—
Jenner 1982	As early as the seventh century A.D.	Script bears some similarities to later Brāhmī and early Pallava scripts, as in texts from Madras and Andhra Pradesh	"Karma" text	Sanskrit; Pallava character	—	—	—

TABLE 2. THE BUDDHAGUPTA (MAHĀNĀVIKA BUDDHAGUPTA) TABLET

REFERENCES	TENTATIVE DATE	PROVENIENCE, AND CULTURAL ASSOCIATIONS	CONTENTS	LANGUAGE AND SCRIPT	SIZE	MATERIAL	CONDITION; LOCATION
Low 1886a	—	A “sandy side” in north Seberang Perai	Three faces inscribed; <i>stūpa</i> relief plus “Buddhagupta” and “karma” verses	Sanskrit	Broken	“A sort of slate”	—
Laidlay 1886	—	—	“Karma” verse plus Buddhagupta reference	—	—	—	—
Kern 1884, cited in Rost 1886	A.D. 400	—	Same	—	—	—	—
Chhabra 1935 and 1965	Fifth century A.D.	Script resembles the fifth century Purnavarman script from Jawa Barat; it is more elaborate than the “Kedah” inscription	Same; <i>stūpa</i> described briefly	—	—	—	Preserved, Indian Museum, Calcutta
Indian Museum 1883, cited in Chhabra	—	—	Back plain; <i>stūpa</i> Burmese in type	—	2'2" × 11½" 13½"; no thickness	—	Preserved here since presenta- tion by Low in 1835
Winstedt 1935	By implication, fourth–fifth century A.D.; not stated directly	As old as, or older than, the Bukit Meriam (Kedah) inscription	“Karma” plus “Buddhagupta” verses; <i>stūpa</i> , spherical in shape, with umbrellas	Pallava script	—	Possibly part of a column	—

Lamb 1961 and 1963	Possibly considerably later than the fourth century A.D.	Apparently on the south bank of the Sungai Muda, opposite Kampung Sireh	Three faces inscribed; "karma" text, "Buddhagupta" text, and <i>stūpa</i>	—	2'2" high	Slate	Preserved, Indian Museum, Calcutta
Coedès 1968	Mid-fifth century A.D.	—	—	—	—	—	—
Quaritch Wales 1970	Fifth century A.D.	—	—	—	—	—	—
de Casparis 1975 (NOTE: refers to this tablet as the Bukit Meriam inscription)	By implication, latter half of the fifth century A.D.; not stated directly	Very similar to Tarumā inscrip- tion, Jawa Barat; script like that of Jambu inscription	<i>Stūpa</i> plus text	Early Pallava script	—	—	Preserved, Calcutta—but refers to it as the Bukit Meriam tablet
Vallibhorama 1979	Fifth century A.D. <i>stūpa</i>	—	—	—	—	—	—

TABLE 3. THE BUKIT MERIAM (KEDAH) TABLET

REFERENCES	TENTATIVE DATE	PROVENIENCE, AND CULTURAL ASSOCIATIONS	CONTENTS	LANGUAGE AND SCRIPT	SIZE	MATERIAL	CONDITION; LOCATION
Low 1886 <i>b</i> , and Rost's note	—	"Under the centre of the foundation of a ruin of an ancient brick building in Keddah, near Bukit Murriam"; building 10-12 feet square; tablet coated with "carbonate of lime" from coral foundation	"Karma" and "Ye dharmma" verses	Early Sanskrit	—	"A sort of slate"	—
Kern 1884, cited in Rost 1886	A.D. 400	—	Same	—	—	—	—
Chhabra 1935 and 1965	Possibly that of the Buddhagupta, possibly slightly earlier	Mentions that the Batu Pahat inscrip- tion from Borneo includes the "karma" verse	Same	Sanskrit	—	—	Missing
Winstedt 1935	By implication, fourth-fifth century A.D.; not stated directly	Under the floor of a brick structure near Bukit Meriam	Buddhist inscription	Sanskrit; the oldest Pallava alphabet	—	—	—
Lamb 1961 and 1963	Possibly consider- ably later than the fourth century A.D.	—	"Ye dharmma" plus "karma" verses	—	—	Slate	—

Coedès 1968	Fourth century or slightly later	—	—	—	—	—	—
Quaritch Wales 1970	Fifth century A.D.	—	—	—	—	—	—
de Casparis 1975	—	—	—	—	—	—	States incorrectly that this in- scription is in Calcutta

TABLE 4. THE TABLETS FROM LAMB'S SITES IN PENGKALAN BUJANG

REFERENCES	TENTATIVE DATE	PROVENIENCE, AND CULTURAL ASSOCIATIONS	CONTENTS	LANGUAGE AND SCRIPT	SIZE	MATERIAL	CONDITION; LOCATION
Lamb 1961, with Nayagam	—	Cultural deposit on bank of Sungai Bujang	Lightly-inscribed inscription, in small letters	Identified by Nayagam as Tamil	$1'' \times \frac{1}{4}'' \times \frac{1}{4}''$	"apparently of limestone"	—
Lamb 1963	—	Among debris in swampy ground near the mouth of the Bujang	—	Tamil or imitation Tamil script	$1'' \times \frac{1}{4}'' \times \frac{1}{2}''$	Slate	—
Lamb 1963	—	Among debris in swampy ground near the mouth of the Bujang	One letter only	"ka", in a North Indian script	—	Stone	—

TABLE 5. THE TABLETS FROM QUARITCH WALES'S SITES 1 AND 2

REFERENCES	TENTATIVE DATE	PROVENIENCE, AND CULTURAL ASSOCIATIONS	CONTENTS	LANGUAGE AND SCRIPT	SIZE	MATERIAL	CONDITION; LOCATION
Quaritch Wales 1940	Fourth century A.D.—dated by J. Allan	Site 1, on summit of Bukit Choras; recovered on edge of platform, in the roots of a tree	"Ye dharma"	South Indian script	$2\frac{11}{16}'' \times \frac{3}{8}'' - \frac{9}{16}''$; no thick- ness	"slaty bed- rock of the hill"	—
Lamb 1961	Possibly considerably later than the fourth century A.D.	Not directly associated with the structure	—	—	—	—	—
and 1963	Not earlier than the ninth century A.D., according to de Casparis	—	—	—	—	—	Preserved, National (Raffles) Museum, Singapore
Quaritch Wales 1970	Date questionable, as object highly portable	—	—	—	—	—	—
Quaritch Wales 1940, with Allan, Lin, Johnston and Chakravarti	Fifth–sixth century A.D.; early sixth century, according to Chakravarti	Site 2, Kampung Bendang Dalam; recovered from basement of structure	Three Buddhist stanzas—quoted and interpreted by Allan, Lin, Johnston and Chakravarti; two lines on each of three faces	Sanskrit; Pallava script	$5\frac{1}{8}'' \times 1\frac{1}{8}'' \times 1\frac{1}{8}''$ thick	hard, sundried clay	—
de Casparis 1956	First half of the seventh century A.D.	—	Three Anustubh strophes	—	—	—	—

TABLE 5. *Continued*

REFERENCES	TENTATIVE DATE	PROVENIENCE, AND CULTURAL		LANGUAGE AND SCRIPT	SIZE	MATERIAL	CONDITION; LOCATION
		ASSOCIATIONS	CONTENTS				
Lamb 1961	Could antedate or postdate structure; date questionable, as object highly portable	Not directly associated with the structure	—	—	—	—	—
and 1963	—	—	—	—	—	—	Preserved, National (Raffles) Museum, Singapore
Coedès 1968	Fifth-sixth century	—	—	—	—	—	—
Quaritch Wales 1970	Fifth-sixth century	—	—	—	—	—	—

The text is interpreted literally by Jenner (1982):

- Line 1. Out of ignorance is heaped up karma;
of (re-)birth karma is the cause.
- Line 2. Out of knowledge karma is not heaped up;
out of karma's nonexistence one is
not (re-)born.

Wisseman Christie uses de Casparis' (1956:140) translation for the stanza:

- Line 1. From ignorance acts accumulate,
of birth, acts are the cause;
- Line 2. From knowledge no acts accumulate,
through absence of acts they are not
reborn (Wisseman 1980)

This is the Hindu/Buddhist text cited by Chhabra (1965:18–26) for the lost Kedah (Bukit Meriam) inscription, and also for the Buddhagupta stone. Each of these earlier finds also includes additional text: respectively, a reference to Buddhagupta (a person about whom little is yet known, except that he is acclaimed in the inscription as a great sea captain), and the Buddhist credo, “Ye dhamma.”

The Stūpa Relief

The *stūpa* sculpture, like the text that borders it, is incomplete. Only the lowest *chattra* (umbrella), at the base of the *yaṣṭi* (spire), is present; the remaining *chattra* are missing.

Chattra in Indian and Southeast Asian *stūpa* architecture vary in number. The Buddhagupta tablet from Seberang Perai depicts a *stūpa* with seven *chattra* (Chhabra 1935: Pl. 3). *Stūpa* in Burma and India may have *chattra* numbering from one (as at Sanchi Stupa 3) up to 11 or more. Examples of these varying numbers are to be found throughout Coomaraswamy (1965, e.g., Pls. 50, 145–146, 189), Rawson (1967, e.g., Figs. 146, 150–152), Rowland (1970: Pls. 63 and 82), and Volwahsen (1969: Pls. 21–22).

The Kampung Sungai Mas *stūpa* may have had seven *chattra*, like the Buddhagupta *stūpa*; it resembles that relief in certain other ways. In both cases the *aṇḍa* (dome) sits atop three pillars or pilasters; in the present case, these in turn are supported by a plinth of several components. The Buddhagupta tablet is broken beneath the pillars.

In each of the two cases the *aṇḍa* base is encircled by a lotus blossom whose form varies between the two. In both cases the *aṇḍa* itself appears plain. The Buddhagupta *aṇḍa* appears almost spherical; the Sungai Mas *aṇḍa* is approximately semihemispherical. The *aṇḍa* in the Sungai Mas sculpture is lower and more squat than that on the Buddhagupta tablet because of its semihemispherical shape.

A *harmikā* (railed enclosure or balcony) appears at the summit of the *aṇḍa* in each relief. Although the two appear differentially effaced today, they may have been similar as initially executed. The Buddhagupta *harmikā* resembles Indian balcony types with upright architectural members as well as the railing (cf. Rowland 1970: 79 and Fig. 27). The Sungai Mas relief is badly worn and/or damaged beneath the double railing, but may have incorporated upright posts; a suggestion of these remains visible.

The Buddhagupta *stūpa* was described in the Indian Museum catalogue (1883, cited in Chhabra 1935) as of the Burmese type. The Burmese *stūpa* known to me, however, have very attenuated *aṇḍa* and stylized *chattra*, and/or sit on characteristically elaborate and massive plinths (e.g., Rawson 1967: Figs. 141, 146–148, 150). Also, as Rawson points out (1967:174), whereas the *harmikā* on the oldest Indian *stūpa* constituted a small, railed balcony, in Burmese *stūpa* the *harmikā* is present as a large, decorated dado around the upper portion of the *aṇḍa* (e.g., Griswold 1964: Figs. 7–8, 10; Rawson 1967: Fig. 146).

The *stūpa* form that seems to resemble most closely those under discussion is not Burmese, but rather Indian. The Gupta period relief from the façade at Ajaṇṭā Cave 19 provides a close parallel (Bussagli and Sivaramamurti n.d.: Fig. 128). As in the Sungai Mas example, the *aṇḍa* at Ajaṇṭā Cave 19 is approximately semihemispherical, *āmalaka* fruits are incorporated at the heads of basal pilasters, lotus petals surround the *aṇḍa* base, and the *harmikā* is very like the Sungai Mas railing.

Two major differences exist. The Ajaṇṭā decorative elements are far more ornate than those in the Malaysian reliefs, and an actual niche occupied by a standing Buddha is incorporated underneath the *aṇḍa* in the Indian façade.

Certain elements seen in the Malaysian *stūpa* reliefs occur in other Indian shrines as well, for instance, the *āmalaka* fruit or seed capsule motif (cf. Bussagli and Sivaramamurti n.d.: Fig. 124; Majumdar 1963:88; Volwahsen 1969: Pls. 37–38). Another shared trait involves the semihemispherical *aṇḍa* and railed *harmikā*, seen in reliefs including that at the great *stūpa* at *Amarāvātī* (Coomaraswamy 1965:70; Pl. 146). Pillars or pilasters beneath the *aṇḍa* also appear at *Amarāvātī* in the same relief.

The traits discussed are apparently seen in comparable combinations only in the rock-cut Indian shrines of the Gupta period, which lasted from A.D. 320 through 647. It was during this period that Sanskrit became the official language of the court; Buddhism, both in the Theravada (so-called Hinayana) and Mahayana forms, flourished.

The *stūpa* relief on the Sungai Mas tablet, then, like the script, suggests a fourth–seventh-century date for at least the templates, or designs, used. Whether or not the tablet itself was carved that early remains uncertain.

INSCRIPTIONS FROM THE AREA: A SYNTHESIS OF THE DATA

Several inscribed tablets have been reported for Kedah and Seberang Perai over the last 150 years. The reports, however, have generally been incomplete and are to be found scattered throughout the historical, epigraphic, and archaeological literature. The actual locations, conditions, and even clear identities of the objects have often been in doubt. None of the tablets discovered thus far, including the Sungai Mas tablet, has been recovered from precise stratigraphic context.

Tables 1–6

In 1963 Alastair Lamb published an article that brought together for the first time certain information regarding the inscriptions recorded to that date from northwest Malaysia. Tables 1–6 present fuller data for the eight known stone and clay tablets from Kedah and Seberang Perai; the tables update Lamb's work and include certain earlier information that was apparently not available to him.

The data have been collected from all available sources containing original data,

revisions of the data, or original inferences concerning the inscriptions. Repeated information is omitted unless it is important as an update.

Discussion

As the tables indicate, no precise provenience information exists for any of the stones. The Cherok To'Kun boulder (Table 6) was a surface find. Excavations in the area reportedly produced no further materials (Low 1886a:223). The boulder remains in situ. The Buddhagupta stone was recovered during excavation of "some old ruins on a sandy side" in Seberang Perai (Low 1886a:224); no associated objects are reported.

The Bukit Choras (Kedah Site 1) tablet was also probably a subsurface find; it was recovered near a laterite platform, undecorated ceramics, and four iron nails (Quaritch Wales 1940:5-7). The hill, quarried today, is one of several outcrops in the north Kedah plain and, like Bukit Meriam farther south, may have been an island during earliest historic times.

The Site 2 tablet from Bendang Dalam was interpreted by Quaritch Wales (1940:8) as associated with a "basement" of decomposed laterite. Scattered laterite blocks remain visible at the site, which was excavated by Quaritch Wales.

The two tablets from Pengkalan Bujang come from extensive deposits, still visible today, containing materials including trade- and other ceramic wares. The deposits may have lined the harbor bed at one time, or may have constituted wharf sweepings (Lamb 1961:29-30, 36; 1963:84).

None of these five tablets is specifically reported as a subsurface find; excavation is mentioned, however, in each case.

The Bukit Meriam tablet lay "under the centre of the foundation of a ruin of an ancient brick building—near Bukit Murriam" (Low 1886b:232). Whether it had been buried during construction of the building or predates the structure remains uncertain. Structural traces are visible today both on the summit and at the base of the hill. Location "near Bukit Murriam" might also include sites in Kampung Sungai Mas.

The newly found Kampung Sungai Mas tablet was reportedly a subsurface find from an unknown depth; it was recovered in an area whose surface is covered with an extensive deposit at least 60 cm thick, containing tradewares, earthenwares, trade beads, and glass fragments.

The reported contexts for the tablets and inscriptions, then, include no structural ruins in the Cherok To'Kun case, an overlying brick building at Bukit Meriam, structures of laterite or other permanent materials located nearby in three cases, and trade-related dumps or scatters in three cases.

It seems likely that each of these contexts is primary: i.e., the tablets were recovered where they were originally placed or discarded by those who had used them. There is no convincing evidence that any of the objects have been removed to a secondary location since their initial placement in or on the ground.

Although the inscriptions are generally religious in subject matter, in at least half the cases there is no clear association with any structure that might be considered religious. The two small tablets at Pengkalan Bujang may have been discarded intentionally in the harbor; one is broken. The broken Sungai Mas tablet also comes from a probable refuse area. The Cherok To'Kun boulder presumably offered a

TABLE 6. THE INSCRIPTIONS IN CHEROK TO'KUN (TOKOON, TOKUN), SEBERANG PERAI

REFERENCES	TENTATIVE DATE	PROVENIENCE, AND CULTURAL ASSOCIATIONS	CONTENTS	LANGUAGE AND SCRIPT	SIZE	MATERIAL	CONDITION; LOCATION
Low 1886a	—	Near central Province Wellesley, east of Penang; no struc- tures associated	Seven inscriptions	Indian scripts	Longest in- scription: about 10' long	Weathered granite rock	In situ; site difficult to find
Laidlay 1886	—	—	One inscription refers to King Ramaunibha; two appear to be the "karma" verse	Pali	—	—	—
Winstedt 1935	By implication, fourth-fifth, or sixth century A.D.; not stated directly	One inscription resembles Pallava script of the Buddhagupta; another, sixth- century Deccan and Cambodian scripts	—	Pallava script	—	—	—
Lamb 1961	—	—	—	—	—	Boulder	"So worn and obscured by recent carvings in Chinese and English that it cannot possibly be read"; no satisfactory copy

Lamb 1963	—	—	Mentions the two “karma” verses	—	—	Granite boulder	—
Quaritch Wales 1970	—	—	Fragmentary inscrip- tions; cannot be deciphered	—	—	—	—
de Casparis 1975	By implication, latter half of the fifth century A.D.; not stated directly	Near Bukit Mertajam; inscrip- tion is roughly contemporaneous with Taruma in- scriptions	Inscriptions in “various hands”	—	—	—	—
Malaysian Historical Society 1978	—	Photographed	—	Pali	Boulder: 7–8’ long	Worn granite boulder	Now protected under roof (photograph)

large, smooth rock surface on which early passersby either ritually or opportunistically inscribed religious and other messages—as visitors continued to do until recently.

Based on stylistic evidence, most of the stones have been assigned dates ranging from the fourth through the seventh centuries A.D., an early period when contacts were developing between Malaysia and other areas including India, China, and the Middle East. The assignment of dates to these and other apparently early inscriptions from Malaysia and the rest of Southeast Asia is of obvious interest to scholars who are trying to chronicle and explain early Malayo-Indian contacts (cf. Quaritch Wales 1940, 1970, 1974; Lamb 1961, 1963; O'Connor and Harrison 1964).

Reliance on the dating of inscriptions found without contextual information, however, must be undertaken critically, since both styles and the stone tablets themselves are portable and durable and may not have reached their ultimate archaeological destinations for a considerable time after their first use. Religious objects and styles tend to be particularly durable and may reflect conservative influences already centuries old. As Jenner (1982) has pointed out, for example, Sanskrit had become a classical language well before the fifth century in India and remained in use there for several centuries after that date.

Assuming, however, that the fourth to seventh century dates applied to the Buddhagupta, Bukit Meriam, and Sungai Mas stones are correct, the area immediately surrounding the *kampung*—where all three were found—may hold other evidence from this early period. The village itself has been found to contain abundant surface evidence for exchange with China, India, and probably the Middle East during at least the tenth and eleventh centuries A.D. It therefore seems likely that sites in Kampung Sungai Mas and its vicinity may span several centuries of critical importance to our understanding regarding the nature of extraregional exchange and political contacts on the peninsula during the early historic period.

CONCLUSION

One of the main applications for analyses of inscriptions and sculptures from Southeast Asia over the last century has been as evidence for the so-called Indianization of the area during the first few centuries A.D. Based on textual and sculptural evidence, as well as early Chinese and other records, significant contacts between Southeast Asia and India had been established early in the Indian Gupta period, the period, for example, reflected by the reliefs on the Buddhagupta and Sungai Mas tablets.

The nature of Indianization and these contacts, however, remain a subject for debate. It is argued, on the one hand, that Indian culture was imposed by colonists on the native population; the other side believes that, instead of this imposition of a foreign culture, selected traits were adopted and adapted by the indigenous residents of the area.

Coedès (1968:18) refers to “petty Indian states” on the Malay Peninsula from the second century A.D. and suggests that “Indian colonization was intense [in Southeast Asia generally] in the second and third centuries of our era and came to fruition in the fourth and fifth” (Coedès 1968:19). Hall (1982:94, 96 fn.) and others explain the incorporation of Indian traits in terms of internal developments within the indigenous system.

Although the evidence is tentative, certain traits exhibited by the tablets discussed here suggest active participation in their production by local inhabitants. The inexpert carving on the Sungai Mas tablet may have been done by a local apprentice. The rock used in five of the cases is probably shale from nearby sources; if so, production required knowledge of the source areas, local collection, and transport. The possibility that the Bukit Meriam and Bukit Choras stones are among the earliest is interesting, as they were recovered at shale outcrops that may have constituted source areas for the rock used for the other inscriptions as well. Intraregional exchange of the raw material for these tablets may have developed gradually around the two hills.

Krairiksh (1979:25) suggests that "Indianized" art styles appeared early in peninsular Thailand and were later transmitted northward to central Thailand and Kampuchea. It appears likely, based on stylistic affinities between scripts in Jawa Barat and those on the peninsula, that the southern subregion, including Indonesia, Malaysia, and peninsular Thailand, may have constituted a cultural unit or sphere of some sort as early as the fourth century A.D., and that this sphere was distinct from the mainland cultures to the north.

The internal consistency of the group of three inscriptions from the neighborhood of Kampung Sungai Mas, in particular, argues for intersite relations of some cohesive and regular sort in the Sungai Muda estuary area during the period from the fourth to the seventh centuries. That the sites as a unit were in contact with sites in Jawa Barat is also suggested.

As future archaeological excavations in Malaysia permit closer controls over the contexts in which artifacts are found, stylistic dates will be tested and refined by chronometric dating. Both local contexts and broader cultural associations will undoubtedly be clarified.

In the meantime, syntheses such as the one presented here for Kedah and Seberang Perai can provide at least partial contextual interpretations for isolated tablets. I hope this report will elicit comments from other researchers in the area and that syntheses will become available for other areas on the Peninsula, so that we may attempt to piece together the fragmentary evidence for cultural developments during the early historic period in the area.

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