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# Srivijaya

## *Trade and Connectivity in the Pre-modern Malay World*

**ABSTRACT** The Malay city state of Srivijaya, a major actor in world economy between the seventh and the thirteenth centuries, grew at the centre of a complex set of networks encompassing much of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. On the basis of a critical review of past studies and the results of recent research in the archaeology and epigraphy of south-east Sumatra and the Thai-Malay Peninsula, this chapter presents a much revised and improved representation of the state and urban formation of this elusive polity, emphasizing the role of trade networks and of accompanying cultural and religious exchange networks, as operated by both local and cosmopolitan actors.

**KEYWORDS** Cities; city states; early states; trade networks; religious networks; Buddhism; Srivijaya; Sumatra; Indian Ocean; South China Sea.

### Palembang as Srivijaya: New Paradigms

Contemporary geographers and travellers described the Malay polity of Srivijaya, after its foundation in the 670s, as a prosperous polity whose powerful rulers held sway over the wealthiest Asian maritime trade route, until its power waned in the thirteenth century, as it progressively lost its ascendancy in favour of other states, both regional and distant. To this day, despite its undeniable prominence in pre-modern Southeast Asian history and notwithstanding considerable progress made during the past decades in the fields of epigraphy and archaeology, Srivijaya remains for historians a notoriously elusive political system.

After its ‘discovery’ on paper by George Cœdès in 1918, Srivijaya nurtured for decades a considerable amount of debate and controversy, based on scholarly as well as on overtly nationalistic arguments (its activity encompassed three modern nations of Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, whose scholars claimed her centre to have been in their own region or country) (Cœdès 1918; 1930; 1964). Mainstream historians and archaeologists, following Cœdès, nevertheless always maintained that Srivijaya was founded in the late seventh century AD in south-east Sumatra, where a vast majority of inscriptions, statuary, and the remains of temples were discovered over the years, along the Musi and Batang Hari Rivers. The same scholars also maintained that Palembang, a major port city and the capital of the modern South Sumatra province, which yielded the principal seventh-century inscriptions and many contemporary statues, was where the new state was born and where it thrived during the first four centuries of its history, notwithstanding a complex and still poorly understood relationship with outlying areas on the Thai-Malay Peninsula and with parts of Java and Borneo.

The major difficulty encountered by the promoters of its location in Palembang was due to a major (but misconceived) heuristic gap: the hypothetical capital city of the Srivijaya rulers remained largely untraced by archaeologists. No urban area was discernible in South Sumatra that could compare, for example, to the city of Angkor, in neighbouring Cambodia, nor any concentrations of religious monuments built in solid materials, with which historians were then generally satisfied to locate Southeast Asian ‘kingdoms’. For a long time, research was indeed

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hampered by the obsession of earlier scholars with durable, stone-built monumental archaeology, and by their incapacity to apprehend a rich and powerful port city, of world economic stature, that would have left only a few tangible traces above ground. Moreover, a sovereign who appeared to be a key economic actor in Asia could then only be perceived as governing an 'empire', whose 'territory', 'provinces', and other administrative divisions had to be clearly circumscribed in the Southeast Asian landscape and placed under his direct control or under that of 'vassal' sovereigns. One needed therefore to escape from the exclusive narrative discourses maintained for decades by historians, philologists, and, following them, by archaeologists, all of them preoccupied by a quest for monumental buildings and urban structures believed to inscribe in the landscape the orthogonal signs of the hierarchical superiority of a strong political and economic power.<sup>1</sup>

Only in the 1980s, under the leadership of historian Oliver Wolters, did archaeologists abandon their quasi-obsessive quest for a new Angkor in Sumatra, and started reappraising Srivijaya as a Malay port city whose urban structure needed to be defined in its own terms. The better known early modern port cities of the Malay world were built using mostly perishable materials, with wooden houses erected on stilts, along the shifting banks of rivers or coastlines. They were not surrounded by permanent, walled enclosures, and grew into their natural environment without permanently modifying it, progressively merging on their periphery into 'rurban' landscapes (Wolters 1979; 1986; Reid 1980; 2000; Manguin 2000; 2001). Only a few religious monuments were built with solid materials, on prominences protected from tides and floods. Due to the lack of stones in coastal environments, the Malays usually made use of bricks for such shrines, whose ruin was fast, and the materials were constantly reused, to this day.

This particular disposition of coastal polities — some of them large urban centres — helps explain why they have not left a strong imprint on their respective environments. Rulers at Palembang in Srivijaya or in early Sultanate times, at Melaka, at Aceh, or at other sister cities have, as a rule, not deliberately acted in such a way as to alter the original landscape in which they settled. They rather seem to have adapted their urban structures and environments to the pre-existing geographic features of the site they chose as their abode. Only two size-

able groups of temples are known in the core area of Srivijaya (at Bumiayu upriver from Palembang, and at Muara Jambi, downriver from Jambi); both were built and developed, starting in the ninth century, away from urban centres and should be interpreted only as the seat of religious communities. Contrary to Angkor or to later Central Javanese cities (to speak only of Southeast Asia), the landscapes of Malay political and economic centres were not constructed as cosmic representations that physically embodied religious concepts.

The shortcomings of the epigraphic corpus of south-east Sumatra pose another set of problems. A flurry of inscriptions written in Old Malay (albeit with an important Sanskrit vocabulary) — all of them most probably engraved by the founding ruler of Srivijaya — provides us with precious local representations of the newly founded state. This is also when a significant amount of seventh- to early eighth-century Buddhist statues have been found in sites along both the Batang Hari and Musi Rivers, in line with the clear religious affiliation of the early rulers of the polity. After this inscriptional outburst, however, the Srivijaya rulers become irremediably mute for the rest of their history, leaving us only with contemporary textual sources produced by the foreign participants in maritime exchanges across the South China Sea (including the Java Sea and other regional seas) and the Indian Ocean to document some six centuries of local history: mainly Chinese and Arabic sources, and, to a lesser extent, South Asian texts. Their biases and frequent inadequacies often turn their interpretation into a form of guesswork or, as Wolters (1967, 169) once wrote, it 'exposes one to the danger of being banished to the lunatic fringes of early Indonesian studies'.

The environmental context of Palembang was otherwise fraught with difficulties for archaeologists: with obvious ups and downs, the port city survived the move of the political centre to Jambi in the eleventh century and the fall of Srivijaya two centuries later, to become the capital of a powerful sultanate in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, and the head of a petrol and charcoal-rich province whose population grew during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries from 25,000 to 1,500,000 inhabitants. Most of the archaeological sites of the early Srivijaya period, due to a shallow stratigraphy, were eradicated in the corresponding urban development process. In the 1980s, archaeologists nevertheless started unearthing in the interstices of the modern urban fabric substantial evidence of economic and religious activity during the period of Srivijaya's heyday (seventh to eleventh centuries) and for later periods, thus confirming both the local

<sup>1</sup> Manguin 2001; see McIntosh 1999a; 1999b for comparable approaches to African early urban forms where power is not reinforced by monumentality or other signposts to permanence.

epigraphic record and foreign accounts of the polity, and the existence there of the first known sizeable city and state of Island Southeast Asia.

These archaeological discoveries, in turn, prompted new readings of seventh-century inscriptions, and a reconsideration of Malay sources pertaining to comparable port cities of the Early Modern Era, some of them (such as Melaka) claiming descent from the prestigious polity they knew had thrived at Palembang. Inscriptions provided vernacular representations of the newly founded polity named Srivijaya, depicting an early form of state structure, far removed from the ‘imperial’ paradigm usually associated with mostly agrarian Southeast Asian polities such as Angkor or Majapahit. What was then brought to light was a radically different, less mature form of state, now confirmed by archaeological work: a palatial centre of power at Palembang with a direct control only over its immediate urban surroundings; a limited core area in south-east Sumatra comprising formerly autonomous polities now brought under the control of a reduced patrimonial administration, extending to both upriver and downriver hinterlands, possibly also to wider overseas ‘umlands’, along the coasts of Sumatra, or across the Melaka Strait — polities that all adjured to remain ‘loyal’ (*bhakti*) to the Srivijaya rulers (this is the Sanskrit term used in seventh-century inscriptions); finally a wider periphery only progressively being brought into a thalassocratic sphere, weaving an extensive social space. Secondary hubs were thus connected under various guises to the central place by an intricate network of economic, religious, diplomatic, and kinship ties, possibly forming a city state culture starting in the eighth century and no doubt partaking in the ninth- to tenth-century economic boom (Kulke 1993; 2016; Manguin 2000; 2002; Wade 2009).

Srivijaya, as later Malay states, was undeniably an economically efficient polity, but it was also intrinsically unstable in terms of landscape, and a shift of the political centre to alternative urban centres was always an option. Palembang remained its ‘capital’ until the late eleventh century, when the power shifted, for reasons not fully understood, to the neighbouring Batang Hari River basin, with Jambi as a main urban centre (Wolters 1966). After the eleventh century, following radical shifts in the Asian power balance — a reunited China under the Song and the expanding Cholas in southern India now competing for economic domination at sea — devolutionary processes brought about an inability of rulers in south-east Sumatra to sustain the economic supremacy of their coastal polities, allowing a variety of other regional port cities to break away from the former centre of power. Harbour sites

along both coasts of the Thai-Malay Peninsula that had developed a close cultural and economic relationship within the Srivijayan orb now recovered their full autonomy.

Only by bringing together all these sets of data can we start reconstructing a fuller, if fragmentary, image of Srivijaya. The development of functional or structural models, based on contemporary and later vernacular representations of the system, has also helped us identify the social and economic actors at work in the capital of Srivijaya.

## Archaeological and Textual Evidence

### *The Archaeology of Palembang*

For all the reasons exposed above, a satisfactory account of the urban site of Palembang will never be provided by archaeology alone, even if a finer grained approach than that used in the 1980s and 1990s is applied in the future in the few spots left available for systematic excavations. Patchy but significant results in the field of archaeology have nevertheless been obtained after the 1970s, many of them located away from the disturbed urban environment.

The main archaeological breakthrough in recent years is the unveiling of a variety of coastal sites in tidal wetlands, tens of kilometres downstream from Palembang. In what appears to be dense settlements of houses built on stilts around the third–fourth century AD, archaeologists have unearthed artefacts such as ceramic wares, tin pendants, and coins, glass, stone, and gold filigree beads, all of them common markers of long-range Indian Ocean and South China Sea exchange networks. The extent, the wealth, and the outreach of these sites prove that state formation and urbanization processes were at work long before the foundation of Srivijaya, and that long-distance trade looms large as one of their main facilitators (Agustijanto Indradjaya 2012; Manguin 2017; 2019a). During the sixth and seventh centuries AD, changing circumstances in the history of the ancient world brought about a steady increase of Asian maritime trade, to the detriment of the overland route. The reunification of China under the Sui and Tang dynasties and the demise of the Persian long-distance trade exerted a great impact on Southeast Asia’s burgeoning kingdoms. A huge Chinese market opened with empty niches for Southeast Asian traders and their goods. Indonesian commodities replaced Middle Eastern true incense, in growing demand in China for Buddhist rituals. Camphor, benzoin, and other oleoresins from Sumatra, Borneo, and the Thai-Malay Peninsula soon became standard trade articles alongside gold, tin, and spices (Wolters

1967). Nautical archaeology has moreover ascertained in recent years that Southeast Asian shippers, heirs to a mature technical tradition, had for centuries been developing skills for the construction of large trading vessels which plied routes from China to India (Flecker 2003; Manguin 1980; 1993b; 1996; Liebner 2014).

This is also the time when, according to Chinese accounts, a variety of small polities appeared in south-east Sumatra along the 'favoured coast' — a phrase coined by Wolters (1967) in his pivotal text-based study on the origins of Srivijaya — the compulsory passage between the Straits of Melaka and Singapore and the Java Sea. These early polities adopted Indian religions: Vaishnavism (a devotional, sectarian form of Brahmanism) flowered at Kota Kapur, a site facing the mouths of the Musi River on the tin-producing island of Bangka (Lucas, Manguin, and Soeroso 1998; Manguin 2019b); other polities on the Sumatran mainland adopted Buddhism.

Situated near Jambi, along the Batang Hari River, Malayu (the eponym polity of the Malays), became in the second half of the seventh century a centre of religious and Sanskrit learning frequented by Chinese Buddhist monks on their way to India in quest of canonical texts. The erudite Buddhist monk Yijing, who then spent some ten years in south-east Sumatra, tells us that, not long after 670, Malayu was absorbed by Srivijaya (*Shilifoshi*), a new city where 'there are more than a thousand Buddhist priests whose minds are bent on study and good works; their rules and ceremonies are identical with those in India'. From there on, *Shilifoshi*/Srivijaya kept sending embassies to China, and clearly became one major trading operator of Asian seas. Jayanaga, the first known Buddhist ruler and probable founder of the polity, had a dozen inscriptions engraved in Old Malay in Palembang proper and at the periphery of the core area he directly controlled, all of them dated to the 680s.<sup>2</sup> Recent archaeological surveys and excavations at Palembang have only revealed scattered evidence for this earlier phase of Srivijaya history, mainly in the form of late seventh-century inscriptions and contemporary Buddhist statues. All the available finds and their sites were plotted on an archaeological map where the ancient riparian environment of the city was reconstructed from field surveys and ancient maps. Seafaring has also been evidenced: remains of large ships dating from pre- and early Srivijaya times were found in and

around Palembang, all belonging to the Southeast Asian technical tradition, thus clearly indicating sea-borne economic activities. Archaeological research carried out far upriver along the Musi and Batang Hari Rivers also brought to light buried foundations of brick temples and related Buddhist statues dating from the seventh or early eighth century, proving that Srivijaya's core area in south-east Sumatra extended as far upriver, no doubt to better control the downstream flow of gold and forest products and supplying the upstream communities with manufactured goods, salt, and protection from potential overseas enemies.

The archaeological excavations carried out in the 1990s at a variety of sites within Palembang that remained accessible provided evidence of intensive commercial activities, starting at the beginning of the ninth century. They confirm that the port city founded in the seventh century thrived in the following phase of Srivijaya history, within the same riparian environment. By then archaeological sites are by far more easily discernible during surveys, due to the massive presence of potsherds of durable Chinese porcelain and stoneware. Starting in the last years of the eighth century, China produced vast quantities of glazed ceramics for export, which literally flooded the markets of Southeast Asia, no doubt profoundly modifying eating habits, at least in urban centres: from there on, in many such sites, several shapes long produced in earthen wares vanished, leaving only those pots used for cooking and storing water. On the sites excavated in Palembang, these Chinese ceramics then represented some 20 per cent of the total assemblages. During the ninth and tenth centuries, most of them came from kilns of Guangdong and Fujian in southern China, which produced utilitarian ceramics for everyday use. The kilns of northern China also exported, in smaller quantities, ceramics that were the object of more prestigious trade, probably aimed at courtly milieux or rich merchants (Manguin 1992a; 1992b; 1993a). Comparable assemblages of Chinese export ceramics were brought to light along maritime routes in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the African coasts, in declining proportions as one moved further and further away from Southeast Asia. Underwater archaeology has now proved that Southeast Asian ships transported large quantities of such trade ceramics. In the quasi-absence of Asian-built shipwrecks recovered in the Indian Ocean, one cannot determine if ships that loaded their main cargo of ceramics in Chinese harbours sailed all the way to destinations outside the Srivijaya sphere; various sources attest to the fact that large trading ships from Srivijaya did sail

2 Kulke 1993; see Manguin in press, for a review of the historiography and an updated presentation of the history and archaeology of Srivijaya.

into the Indian Ocean, but we have no precise information on the commodities they carried (Manguin 2016). After the tenth century, we know that Arab ships did not sail further east than Kedah, a convenient landfall for ships sailing across the Bay of Bengal along the 6° North parallel (Tibbetts 1979, 37–38). A sizeable proportion of these cargoes must then have been transhipped in ports of the Thai-Malay Peninsula under the banner of Srivijaya.

### **Trade in Regional Commodities and Entrepôt Trade**

Both the large island of Sumatra and, across the narrow Strait of Melaka, the more restricted lands along the Thai-Malay Peninsula produced a variety of metallic and organic commodities that carried a considerable value across the whole ancient world, and more specifically in South and East Asia. Alluvial gold was ubiquitous in the highlands of south-east Sumatra, in the immediate hinterland of the two main centres of Srivijaya at Palembang and Jambi. It was in such demand in India that the region became a true Eldorado for Indian merchants, who early in the first millennium AD gave it the name of 'Isles of Gold' (*Suvarnavipa*), which remained attached to Srivijaya during much of its history. Tin was (and remains to this day) a major production of the west coast of the Thai-Malay Peninsula and of the islands of Bangka and Belitung (the latter only a short distance from the Sumatran mainland, facing the estuary of the Musi River). No direct archaeological proof of its early extraction has yet been brought to light, but the archaeological wealth of sites found along its production zone and its appearance in ingot form in shipwrecks recovered in regional seas dating from the ninth to the twelfth centuries confirm its importance in regional trade (mainly for bronze casting, an essential feature of both Buddhist and Brahmanical iconography).

The odoriferous oleoresins extracted from the tropical forests of Sumatra (and to a lesser extent of the neighbouring Thai-Malay Peninsula and Borneo) also found a major place as commodities traded to both east and west of Southeast Asia. They appear to have largely contributed to the birth of Srivijaya (Wolters 1967). Benzoin was found in abundance a short distance from Palembang. It no doubt was one crucial export of the early regional polities; it was in strong demand in China, where it was increasingly used in Buddhist rituals. Camphor, also in demand worldwide, was produced more specifically in forests bordering the north-west coast of Sumatra and exported through the port settlement at Barus (the status of which vis-à-vis Srivijaya is not clear), or near Brunei. Among spices, only pepper, a plant

originating from India, appears to have already been produced in Sumatra and Java in Srivijaya times (it became a true cash-crop only in early modern times).

These local productions alone may justify the early growth of port cities in south-east Sumatra. Their strategic location astride the mandatory maritime route leading from the Straits of Singapore and Melaka to the Java Sea and to seas further east soon put them in a position of power. This gave their rulers the ability to centralize in the harbours they controlled much of the flow of commodities produced in eastern Island Southeast Asia, in China, and in India: gold, tin, and resins, as discussed above; spices and precious woods from eastern Indonesia; raw products from China (copper, mercury, etc.); manufactured goods from China (metal implements, ceramics, silk, coins) and from India (cotton textiles, raw glass, jewellery, etc.). The early political systems that appeared in south-east Sumatra were thus able to develop their entrepôt functions, further enriching their merchant communities and the tax collecting local governments.

In such a context, local development of ship-building technologies, of navigational practices, and of entrepreneurship at sea could only have played essential roles in the history of the region. Nautical archaeology has indeed ascertained in recent years that polities of western Southeast Asia were instrumental in sending to sea vessels of considerable sophistication and size at least as early as the first few centuries AD. Textual and archaeological data on ancient ships can be associated with the trade-oriented, coastal polities of south-east Sumatra, whose rulers and shipmasters operated locally built trading vessels of more than respectable size (a few hundred tons is a figure often encountered in written sources) and were active agents of the development of Asian long-distance trade networks from China to India, and no doubt further east, as Madagascar was then being settled by Austronesian-speaking peoples (Manguin 1980; 1996; 2016).

### **A Centre of Religious Teaching**

Networks of economic and cross-cultural exchange served as channels for the diffusion of religious practices. The relationship between religious, economic, and political worlds was always strong along the maritime facade of Southeast Asia. In a context where state formation and urbanization were intimately linked to the growth of long-distance trade, both Buddhism and Vaishnavism played an essential role in facilitating early historic exchange and cultural interactions (Acri 2016; Manguin 2019b). This period was one of great religious and social upheavals in India,

which brought improved economic conditions for the lower castes and the intrusion of foreigners in considerable numbers. Monks, pilgrims, missionaries, envoys, and merchants of all nationalities depended on shipmasters and their crews to sail along regular trading routes and reach their overseas destinations. In Island Southeast Asia as elsewhere in the Indian Ocean, the religious affiliations of those merchants and shipmasters who made rational, consumer-oriented choices in their doctrinal affiliations helped structure parallel Vaishnava and Buddhist networks. These served as vectors of cultural exchanges resulting in the 'Indianization' of the region during the first half of the first millennium AD, after local societies chose to adopt many features of modernity from the imposing Indian neighbour.

Until the seventh century, Vaishnavism was strong among the polities burgeoning along the isthmian tracts of the Thai-Malay Peninsula and in Funan (Mekong Delta), but this creed made only few inroads into Island Southeast Asia, where Buddhism appears to have soon taken the lead. We have seen that polities along the 'favoured coast' of south-east Sumatra had adopted Buddhism; in the 680s, Srivijaya is known to have immediately adopted this religion and appears to have eliminated the Brahmanical competition (taking over the previously Vaishnava polity of Kota Kapur in Bangka, and possibly also those areas in coastal west Java where Vaishnavism is known to have been practised).

A century after foundation times, the name Srivijaya reappeared in a 775 Sanskrit inscription found near Chaiya (in peninsular Thailand). It asserts that several Buddhist sanctuaries were founded there under the auspices of a king of Srivijaya, thus inaugurating a second phase of the polity's history, during which the sovereign's international outreach was also asserted by sponsoring religious foundations in distant associated polities. A monastery was thus erected in the ninth century in the famous Buddhist complex of Nalanda (now in Bihar), a Buddhist sanctuary at Nagapattinam in southern India in the early eleventh century, and a Taoist temple in Guangdong in 1079 (possibly for the usage of a growing community of Chinese sea merchants settled in Srivijaya). The king of Srivijaya is known to have sent Buddhist sutras written on palm leaf to the emperor of China, and he built in his own capital a temple dedicated to the Chinese ruler (Salmon 2002).

Mobility and embedding of Buddhist monks and pilgrims within the seafaring merchant community appear to have been prevalent features of early Buddhism. They contributed to the creation of a complex network of human actors, of textual sources, and of religious icons that paralleled net-

works of trade commodities and facilitated the transmission of Buddhism across Asia (Ray 1994; Sen 2010; 2014; Neelis 2011; 2014; Aciri 2016). In early Indian Buddhist literature, references to gold-producing Southeast Asia (both peninsular and insular), known interchangeably as *Suvarnabhumi* or *Suvarnavipa* (Lands or Isles of Gold) were pervasive and remained so until modern times in the Buddhist areas of the region (Lévi 1929; 1931). Buddhist icons, temple architecture, and decoration were conveyed by such travelling communities. Such interactions soon generated pan-regional art styles. Art historians still debate about the name they should give to a style shared in most port cities of the ninth- and tenth-century Srivijaya orb, which they variously qualify as 'Srivijaya style', 'Sailendra style' (from the name of the Buddhist dynasty ruling then in both Java and Sumatra), or 'Javanese style' (Suleiman 1980). Soon, monastic institutions, in Southeast Asia as in India, became economic actors in their own right, receiving considerable amounts in donations in return for expectations of religious merit. The religious devotion of Buddhist and other seafarers — in Southeast Asia as elsewhere in the world — left tangible traces along sea routes in the form of ex-voto inscriptions, rituals, pilgrimage sites, and common protective divinities.

This is particularly true of Srivijaya, where economic prosperity and surplus resources entailed rulers' and merchants' patronage of religious centres. Starting in foundation times, a strong Buddhist community was kept under the protection of rulers. In the following centuries, under Sailendra rule, Palembang and later Jambi remained major centres of learning for the Buddhist community. A few examples attest to their major role. In the early eleventh century, erudite monk Dharmakirti of the Srivijaya royal family composed major texts that have survived in Tibetan versions to this day. He had as a student the famous Indian monk Atisha, who, after moving back to Tibet, was instrumental in profoundly renovating Esoteric Buddhism. The complexities and the resilience of these entangled networks is also well illustrated in Chinese sources, which tell us that, early in the twelfth century in Canton, a Srivijaya envoy is described by a Chinese author as reciting the famous tantric text known as the 'Peacock Sutra'. He did so in a language that was not understood by the audience, familiar only with its Chinese version; the latter was first translated in the seventh century by Yijing, later revised by the monk Amoghavajra, leader of the tantric sect in China in the middle of the eighth century, whose teacher Vajrabodhi had visited Srivijaya in 717. More than three centuries after Yijing's stay at Malayu and Palembang we thus

learn that merchants sent to China by the ruler of Srivijaya were still familiar with and could recite in Sanskrit the text the same Yijing had first translated into Chinese (Skilling 1997; 2011).

Along the maritime facade of Insular Southeast Asia, religious and economic agents spread among multiple coastal hubs of prosperity. In Sumatra and south Borneo, where similar environments and settlement patterns are documented, the necessary search for firmer ground (allowing, among other social and economic activities, for the building of shrines in durable materials) entailed a shift in settlement patterns and landscapes, from downriver quaternary wetlands to the firmer ground at the edge of the tertiary peneplain further upriver. Srivijaya was thus founded at Palembang in the late seventh century. Only such new locations allowed monastic institutions to develop in these urban sites that thrived upon the strong growth of maritime trade. Buddhists also travelled upriver from major port cities, usually settling in communities where temples were built, at riparian nodes of activity, at confluents and upriver transshipment points or along interfluvial land routes leading from the Musi to the Batang Hari drainage basins, leaving material manifestations of these sacred landscapes for archaeologists to reveal.

## A World of Networks

The evidence presented above makes it clear that multiple approaches are needed beyond those usually brought into play for the study of ancient states of Southeast Asia. To write a meaningful history of Srivijaya, historians therefore need to constantly reframe such deficient archaeological and philological studies within a broader approach, taking into consideration political, cultural, and economic dynamics at both regional and global levels.

One outcome of such a wider approach brings to the fore the essential factor of seaborne and riverborne connectedness and therefore emphasizes the prominent role played by this web of land-based and maritime, regional, and long-distance networks that constituted the essence of Srivijaya: its political structure, main religion, and overall economy depended on them to survive under various guises across some seven centuries, a rare feat in troubled Southeast Asian history. For the period under consideration here, notwithstanding the dearth of quantitative data (see below), qualitative evidence allows historians to identify the centres of extraction or production of major trade commodities, the trade routes they are carried along, and the centres of transshipment

and redistribution (see Figs 6.1–6.7). Shipmasters, sailors, merchants, ambassadors, Buddhist and other pilgrims, and no doubt all other sorts of travellers from a vast array of nationalities interacted along these networks. It is through their agency that links were provided between the Sumatran and peninsular coastal city states and the vast expanse of the ancient world. Many of these actors, of various ethnic origins, appear to have based their activities in the central places of Palembang and later of Jambi, or in those port cities that were ‘loyal’ to the Srivijaya rulers. Foreign shippers and traders sailed along these same maritime routes and converged to those same ports, which commanded the mandatory passage across the straits area and linked them to hinterland networks that conveyed local productions in demand worldwide.

This evidence shows beyond doubt that the networks that are constitutive of the Srivijaya state are not to be understood only as a circulation of artefacts. They brought into play a considerable number of humans that all contributed to the creation of a social space (Manguin 2002; Hodder 2012). Social actors and traded commodities were intensely entangled at a variety of levels both in the Srivijaya sphere and overseas: local production areas (agro-forestry, mining, kilns) and their populations were connected by local actors to transit and export harbours, seats of political power, where cosmopolitan communities of shipmasters, sailors, and shipbuilders specialized in shipping these productions. Shipmasters, merchants, and members of the ruling class and religious communities are all known to have played entrepreneurial roles in trade, helping finance such capital-intensive ventures needed to send to sea very large ships and their huge and often pricey cargoes. The latter did not all belong to the core group surrounding the central power of Srivijaya, but all did congregate, at one time or another, to the port cities of the Srivijaya sphere.

Such networks were therefore a defining dynamic of local urbanization. This is so true that the foundation myth common to most coastal states of Insular Southeast Asia clearly describes a process where a local chief in a potential harbour centre can only assume authority over a successful polity after he attracts overseas exchange and the resulting wealth that cannot be dissociated from political power. As stated in the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, a much-circulated classical Malay text, the city of Palembang — ancestral to the Melaka city state where it was compiled — could only become a powerful polity after ‘many merchants came and went to trade there. And all the people from countries without a *raja* congregated there’ (quoted in Manguin 1991, 48).



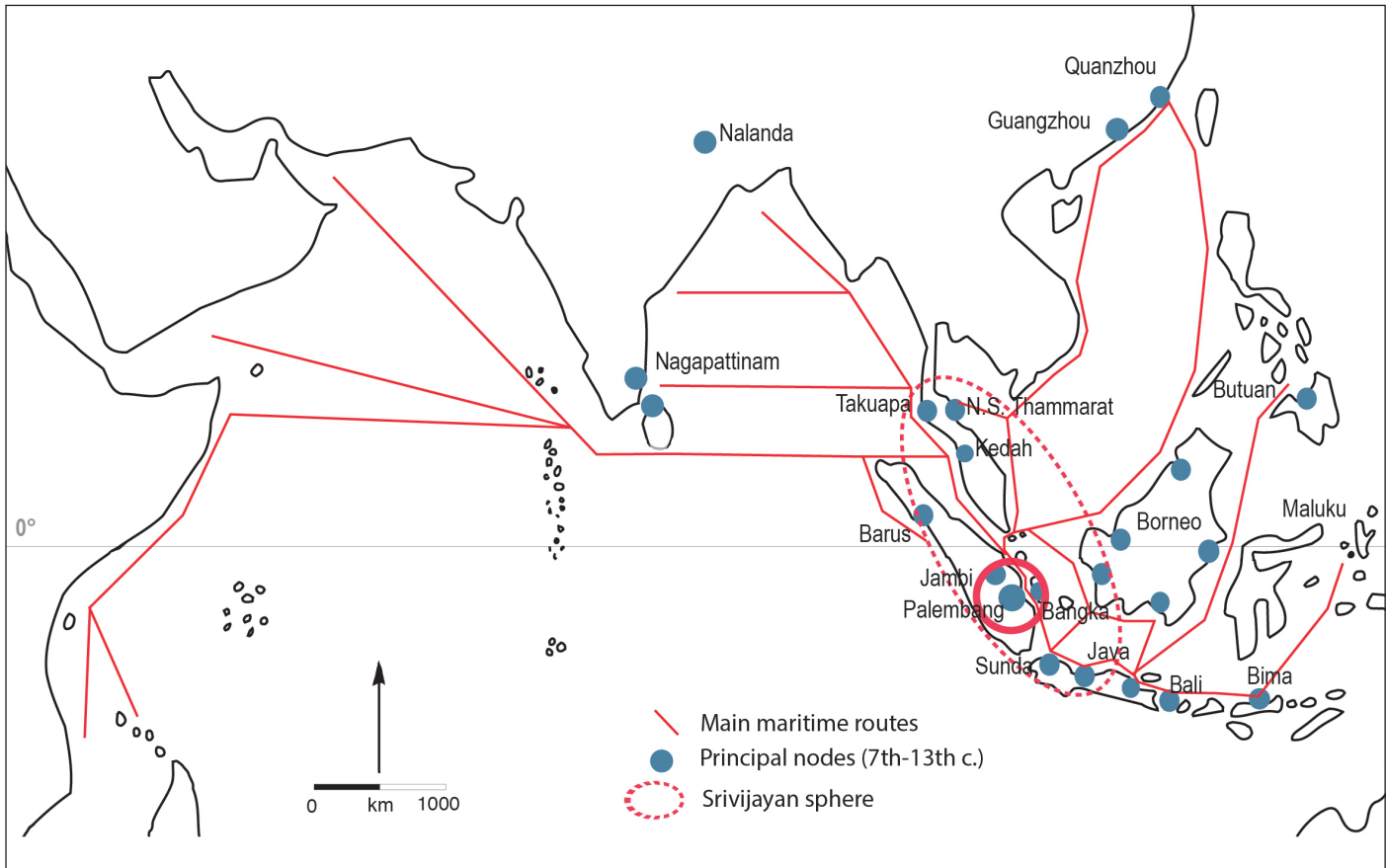


Figure 6.1. Nodes and maritime routes linked to Srivijaya networks. Map by author.

### Mapping and Analysing Srivijaya Networks

The maps that accompany this chapter, drawn in a rather crude way on the basis of data that mostly defies quantification, can only be subjective. Each of the main networks (Buddhism, spices, metals, etc.) has been represented for clarity's sake in a separate map. Some networks were most probably specialized and were operated by specific agents: among local productions, odoriferous resins are known to have been very much in the hands of the Malays of Srivijaya, who captured the former 'Persian goods' market to China (Wolters 1967), and so were probably the gold and tin export networks to India; the Javanese merchants appear to have been the main actors of the spice trade of eastern Indonesia, as they were in later times. Other networks, such as that of Buddhism, needed to piggyback on trade and diplomatic networks. The cartographic representations that are offered here should not distract us from the fact that only the sum of all these entangled individual networks would be able to represent the Srivijaya state system at work.

There are indeed considerable difficulties in drawing pertinent images of such networks (Sindbæk 2015). The first one, often debated in network analysis and mapping, is the consequence of the dearth of hard economic data, which is particularly true for the Indian Ocean region in pre-modern times, and to a lesser extent, for the South China Sea (the latter region does benefit from some rough figures on trade volumes passing through Chinese harbours, mainly during the second millennium AD). Southeast Asian economy is particularly poor in quantitative datasets before Europeans entered its maritime scene. No figures will probably ever be available for flows of gold, tin, resins, precious woods, or spices exported from Southeast Asia.

The only figures that can be harnessed in this context come from trade ceramic counts in the few systematically excavated sites, ceramic sherds being the only artefacts surviving in quantifiable amounts, all the way from production centres to exporting, transshipping, and importing harbour nodes. In Srivijaya times, Chinese export wares provide the bulk of the information only after they start being exported en masse in the first years of the ninth century, which

is also when production, transshipment, and usage sites are better known from both literary and archaeological sources. Persian Gulf and South Indian pottery sherds only appear in minimal proportions in Palembang, and that is probably not as a result of trade but of their daily use by Indian Ocean crews. Rough counts of sherdage from the mainly ninth- to tenth-century Sungai Mas site in Kedah appears to provide slightly larger figures for such wares, which is expected as western Indian Ocean ships are then known to have only rarely sailed further east and to have transhipped their cargo in Kedah and other peninsular ports. But even this unique quantitative approach remains fraught with difficulties, as reliable datasets are still largely lacking for Southeast Asian archaeological sites. Moreover, for those rare site studies that have produced detailed, precise databases, there still is a dire need for standardization of artefact descriptions that would allow us to integrate data to be used in significant network analyses.

Shipwreck cargoes have in recent decades attracted much attention in both the scholarly world and among the general public. Such underwater sites have indeed provided historians with a wealth of new data on both trade patterns and on the ships that were then being put to use in Asian seas. They have, among other conclusions, returned agency to Southeast Asian shipbuilders and shippers. However, as opposed to land-site based counts of ceramics that are part of an overall assemblage, spectacular shipwreck sites provide quantifiable data that are often misinterpreted as they cannot provide, by far, a comprehensive image of trade networks. They are, more so than any other archaeological site, the product of accidents.

The first moot point results from the fact that most if not all wreck sites that provided quantitative data were excavated within commercial operations. Some of these operations have no doubt provided remarkable, scientifically described data. They are however intrinsically limited to sites with valuable cargoes, Chinese ceramics being at the top of the list among items in high demand in today's antique markets. These same ceramics also happen to be easily identifiable by fishermen, the first informers to report such discoveries. Ships specialized in carrying textile cargoes from India or spices from the Moluccas will never appear in such commercial circuits, as their wrecks will totally lack visibility for such primary informers.<sup>3</sup>

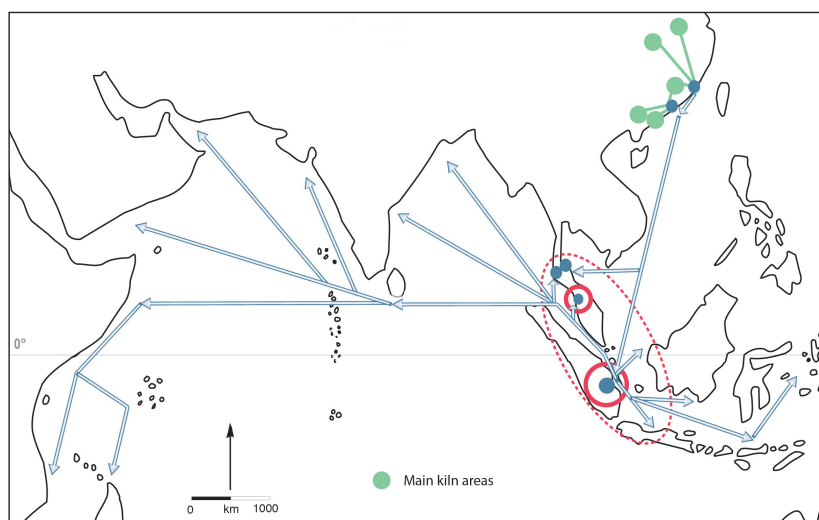


Figure 6.2. Chinese trade ceramics network. Map by author.

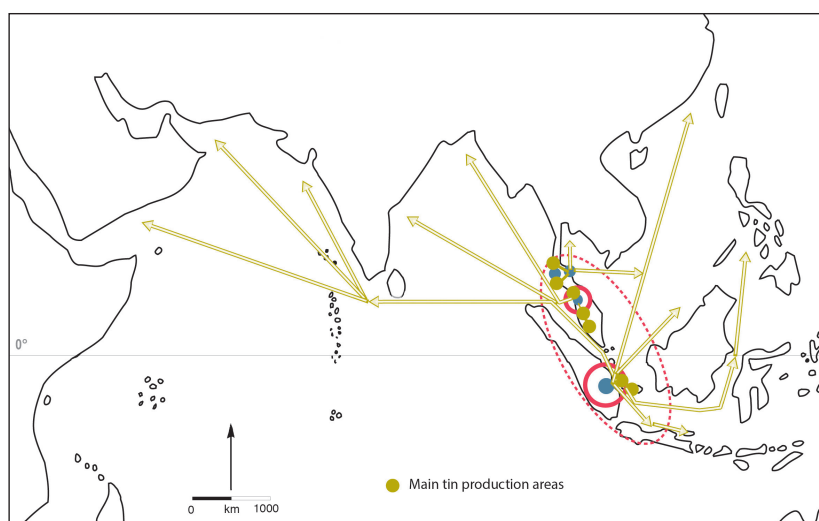


Figure 6.3. Tin production and trade network. Map by author.

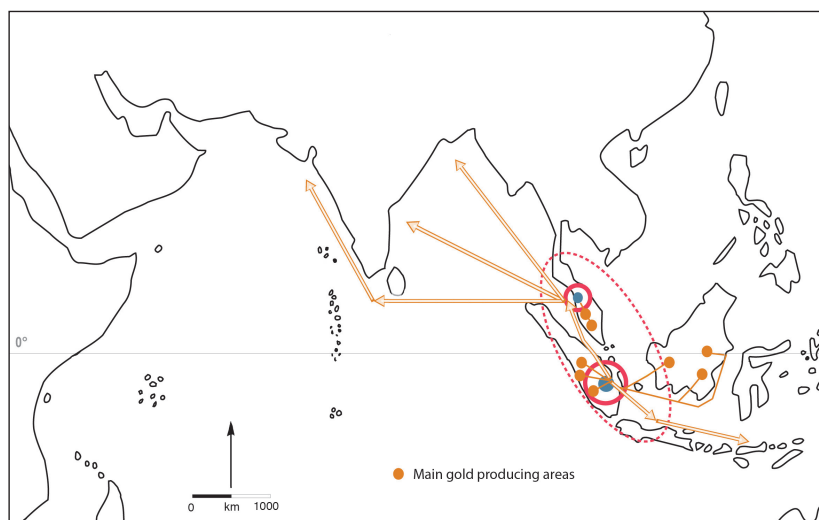


Figure 6.4. Gold production and trade network. Map by author.

<sup>3</sup> As already discussed by Michael Flecker in his 2012 work.

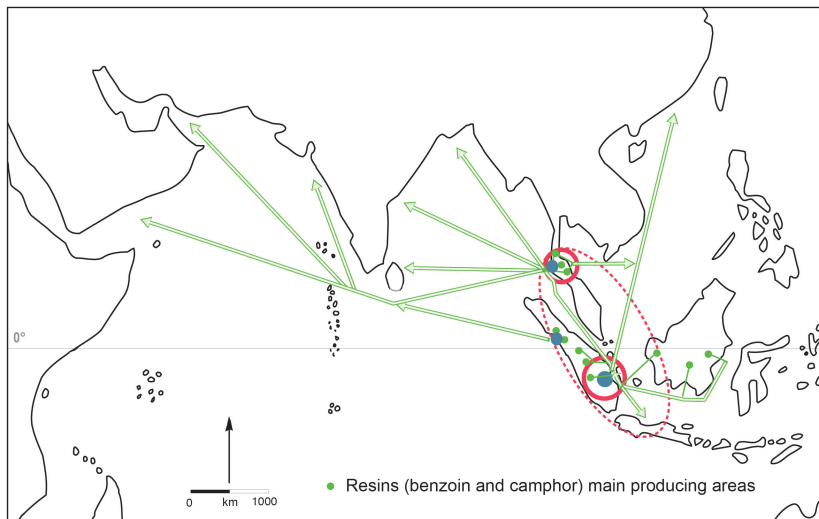


Figure 6.5. Oleoresins production and trade network. Map by author.

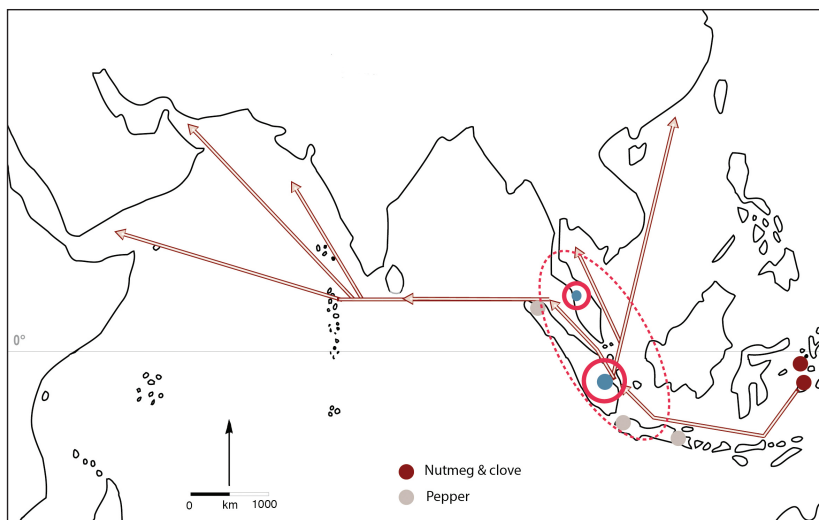


Figure 6.6. Spices production and trade network. Map by author.

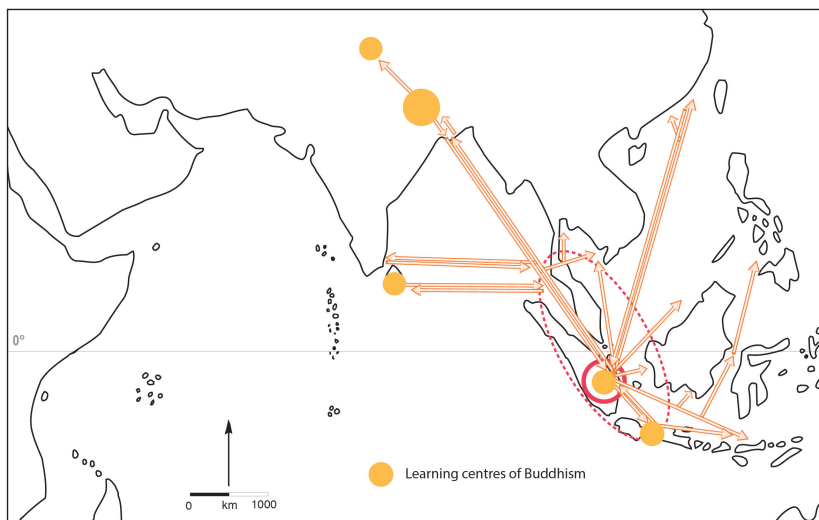


Figure 6.7. Learning centres of Buddhism. Map by author.

Even when organic material is carried aboard (as in the famous ninth-century Arabo-Indian wreck known as the Belitung), not enough attention is paid to it in publications. References to star anise of Chinese origin in the Belitung report are limited to a skimpy paragraph stating that: ‘Considerable quantities of star anise (*Illicium verum*), found inside green-glazed jars with a small spout, must have been an export item’ (Krahl and Guy 2010, 29; Chong and Murphy 2017, 32, 157). No attempt is made to elaborate on its overall trade and no hard figures are provided for this cargo. The tenth-century Cirebon wreck fares no better, as we only learn it carried, besides a huge cargo of ceramics, ‘an unquantified amount’ of drugs and aromatics (Liebner 2014, 213). Better (if barely quantifying) work could be achieved on the organic cargoes of ships sailing in Southeast Asian waters, as proved by the reports issued from other excavations: two thirteenth-century ships, one recovered in the Quanzhou harbour but returning from Island Southeast Asia, and the other from the Java Sea, and one tenth-century ship known as the Intan wreck, also from the Java Sea (Salmon and Lombard 1979; Green 1983; Flecker 2002; 2003). All carried substantial quantities of organic trade commodities and artefacts for daily use of the crew, the details of which are provided in these reports. This exaggerated visibility of ceramic trade, as against the invisibility of other exchange networks carrying organic commodities with no present-day commercial value, clearly brings in a first considerable bias in the overall appreciation of trade networks in Asian seas.

Further dangers of misinterpretations moreover abound within the analyses of the highly visible Chinese trade ceramics network. A graphically impressive play by Johannes Preiser-Kapeller (2015, 131–36) based on the limited figures provided in the first publication of the Belitung wreck (Krahl and Guy 2010) cannot be said to depict the overall situation of the trade network between the Chinese and Southeast Asian seas, a fact the author of the article is well aware of. The software-generated visualizations he obtained can only provide a snapshot of an infinitely more complex scene: this is a very specific shipwreck, and it represents a very limited moment in the maritime networks of those times. As all other known shipwrecks of the ninth and tenth centuries recovered in Southeast Asian waters, the Belitung ship carried a cargo made principally of export ceramics. This comprised a majority of good-quality ceramics from the Changsha kilns,

giving the impression that such wares were in strong demand in importing markets. Much attention was also paid in reports to isolated pieces, or to those high-quality northern China wares found in minute quantities but carrying a high value in antique markets. In the absence of published systematic counts of ceramics from this Belitung wreck, one is left with the impression in the report that the Guangdong jars that were also recovered had a purely utilitarian function, being mainly used to pack Changsha bowls and star anise seeds. This may be true for this particular ship (but needs to be further demonstrated after proceeding with systematic counts), but it was not the case in the overall circulation and usage of ceramics in Southeast Asia or further west. Most ships carrying large quantities of Chinese ceramics were for practical reasons loaded with the production of one main kiln (or a regional group of kilns). Drawing broad conclusions from such perforce-isolated shipwrecks therefore presents us with a distorted view of trade patterns. The tenth-century Cirebon wreck, *a contrario*, carried an immense majority of bowls and a few other shapes of the so-called Yue-type wares from Fujian kilns, most of them of a much coarser quality (often termed 'kitchenware'), hence destined for a different market altogether than the richer Belitung cargo.

Systematically excavated ninth-century urban sites such as those of Palembang or of the Thai-Malay Peninsula (and many more less systematic excavation and survey sites) delivered at best some 20 per cent of Changsha wares, the much coarser Guangdong wares representing the vast majority of the assemblage of Chinese wares in settlement sites, including many coarse bowls that are not present on the Belitung wreck.<sup>4</sup>

One other bias regarding the cargo of the Belitung wreck is adduced by the fact that Preiser-Kapeller follows uncritically the hypothesis of the report regarding the final destination of the ship, which is thought to be the Middle East, whereas the location of the wreck in the Gaspar Strait clearly indicates that it was on its way to Palembang or the Java Sea, not to the Indian Ocean. The ship was indeed built following an Arabo-Indian sewn-plank technical tradition, and probably manned by a crew originating from the western part of the Indian Ocean; but it had been repaired using Southeast Asian materials, and thus appears to have been operating between

Southeast Asian and Chinese harbours, at least during this tragic crossing. That such a cosmopolitan situation was commoner than expected is confirmed by the recent discovery of another ninth-century Arabo-Indian sewn ship at Phanom Surin (along the coast, south of Bangkok), which was built (or heavily repaired) locally with Southeast Asian tropical timbers and ropes.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

The structure of the ancient urban polity of Palembang, as defined by epigraphy and archaeology, may thus be seen as a prototype of the trading cities of the early modern Malay world, a continuity taken for granted by vernacular sources. Their very existence can only be apprehended if a network of maritime and riverine routes irrigates them. All the available evidence points to trade and cultural exchange networks and the connectivity they entail as vectors of social complexity and pan-Asian interdependence.

All the methodological difficulties evoked above should of course not prevent historians from further analysing and mapping the networks that are so vital to the Srivijaya polity. They should only keep in mind, as Carl Knappett (2011) has made clear, that their approach should decidedly be transdisciplinary. Representations drawn exclusively from the more than scarce quantitative sources available can only provide a partial image, cut off from the local terrain.

One should also point out here that polities like Srivijaya or later Malay harbour cities serve as good examples of the need to pay more attention to space and to man-made modification of landscapes. Little attention was paid until recently in international scholarship to pre-modern Southeast Asian urban forms (with the exception of Angkor). A better focus on such forms will help integrate them into the common paradigms and theoretical tenets of urbanism.<sup>6</sup>

4 Manguin 1987 and 1992b for Palembang; Ho Chuimei and others 1990 and Ho Chuimei 1991 for Ko Kho Khao and Laem Pho in peninsular Thailand; Shuhaimi and bin Zakaria 1993 for Sungai Mas in Kedah; van Orsoy de Flines 1941–1947, 70–71 for surveys of the north coast of Central Java.

5 A. Komoot, pers. comm.; Komoot 2014; Preeyanuch 2014. See also Guy 2017, with inaccurate technical information on the hull.

6 As set out, for instance, in Cowgill 2004, who does not consider Southeast Asian urban forms.

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