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Origins of Civilization in West Malaysia and the Orang Asli

by
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West Malaysia boasts a strategic location on the maritime trade routes through Southeast Asia between India and China, and its hinterland possesses abundant natural resources such as tin, gold and forest produce. Hence the discussion of how the small-scale communities developed into more centralized societies, with wide-ranging economic and political connections, has focused on coastal-hinterland trade within the peninsula and, through a hierarchy of sites connected to entrepôts, long-distance trade with external polities (e.g. Leong Sau Heng, 1990, 1993). Various scholars have discussed the ethnic affiliations of the communities involved in this transformation which is currently dated to around the 1st millennium A.D. Peter Bellwood (1985:292) tentatively proposed an Austronesian or even a proto-Malay association for some of the archaeological phenomena in question, such as the slab graves of Perak and Selangor. Later (Bellwood, 1993:52) he expressed caution over even that tentative association and preferred to link any earlier Malay expansion into the peninsula with the expansion of the state of Srivijaya, towards the end of the millennium. Indeed Nik Hassan Shuhaimi bin Nik Abdul Rahman (e.g. 1990:66, 1993:73) stresses the dominance of Srivijaya over the Malay Peninsula between the 7th and 11th centuries, but argues that the local communities involved in the enterprise were coastally oriented *orang laut* who may have spoken Austronesian languages, but were apparently not Malay. Geoffrey Benjamin (e.g. 1986, 1987,

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1996) is maybe the strongest proponent of a late Malay establishment in the peninsula, well into the 2nd millennium A.D., and instead stresses linguistic evidence for Mon and/or Khmer elite influence in West Malaysia during earlier times.

No-one, it seems, has been prepared to associate the increasingly centralized societies (enjoying access to luxury goods from afar) of the first millennium A.D. with the Orang Asli, the Austroasiatic speakers who are unanimously regarded as the pre-Austronesian indigenes of West Malaysia. If there were no such association, we would expect that the recorded distribution of the Aslian languages, and the distribution of the archaeological traces in question, should tend to be mutually exclusive. The negative relationship need not be perfect, as Aslian languages may have expanded or been pushed into a few areas that were previously under early Malay, *orang laut* or Mon-Khmer supremacy, but it would be hard to explain why Aslian languages should tend to co-occur with the archaeological record of "early civilization" unless there had been a genuine association.

The distributions of Aslian languages can be reconstructed to cover approximately half of West Malaysia (Figure 1). I have followed Geoffrey Benjamin (1986) for the distributions of Central and Southern Aslian, but for Northern Aslian I follow Peter Bellwood (1993) who plots its distribution as far as Malaysia's northwest coast, even though Malay has now replaced Northern Aslian in this area. Under the hypothesis of a non-Aslian association with slab graves, Dong Son drums and so forth, less than half of them should fall within this Aslian area, while the opposite expectation would apply to the hypothesis of an Aslian association. The test could include a large sway of archaeological items, such as early iron and gold artifacts, or even mineral resources, but I have restricted the test of a few main categories.

Numbers 1 to 5 stand for major first millennium A.D. archaeological sites in West Malaysia, some of which sites continued in importance into the early second millennium. Bujang Valley, Sungai Mas, Kuala Selinsing and Jenderam Hilir are all nominated as entrepots or feeding points by Leong Lau Heng (1993:2). Gua Berhala, also called Gua Chawas, has produced the most prolific collection of Buddhist votive tablets in Malaysia (Adi Haji Taha, 1993:77-79; 1995), even though isolated examples of these tablets have been found at several sites. The distribution of slab graves, inhumation burials in wooden boats and coffins, six Dong Son drums and four "Klang bronze bells" (figured in Bellwood, 1985: Fig. 9.14) comes from Jan Wisseman Christie (1990:40, 51).

As Figure 1 shows, there is a clear spatial association between Aslian languages and the archaeological expressions under review. All five major first millennium A.D. sites fall in the Aslian area, and the slab graves are contained within the Central Aslian area. The isolate of Southern Aslian languages near the Kelang-Langat estuary contains three of the peninsula's four "Klang bells" and three of the six Dong Son drums (Wisseman Christie, 1990:51), while another of the Dong Son drums was found within the major Southern Aslian area. Two of the three sites with burials in wooden boats also occur in Aslian areas. To be sure, it would be

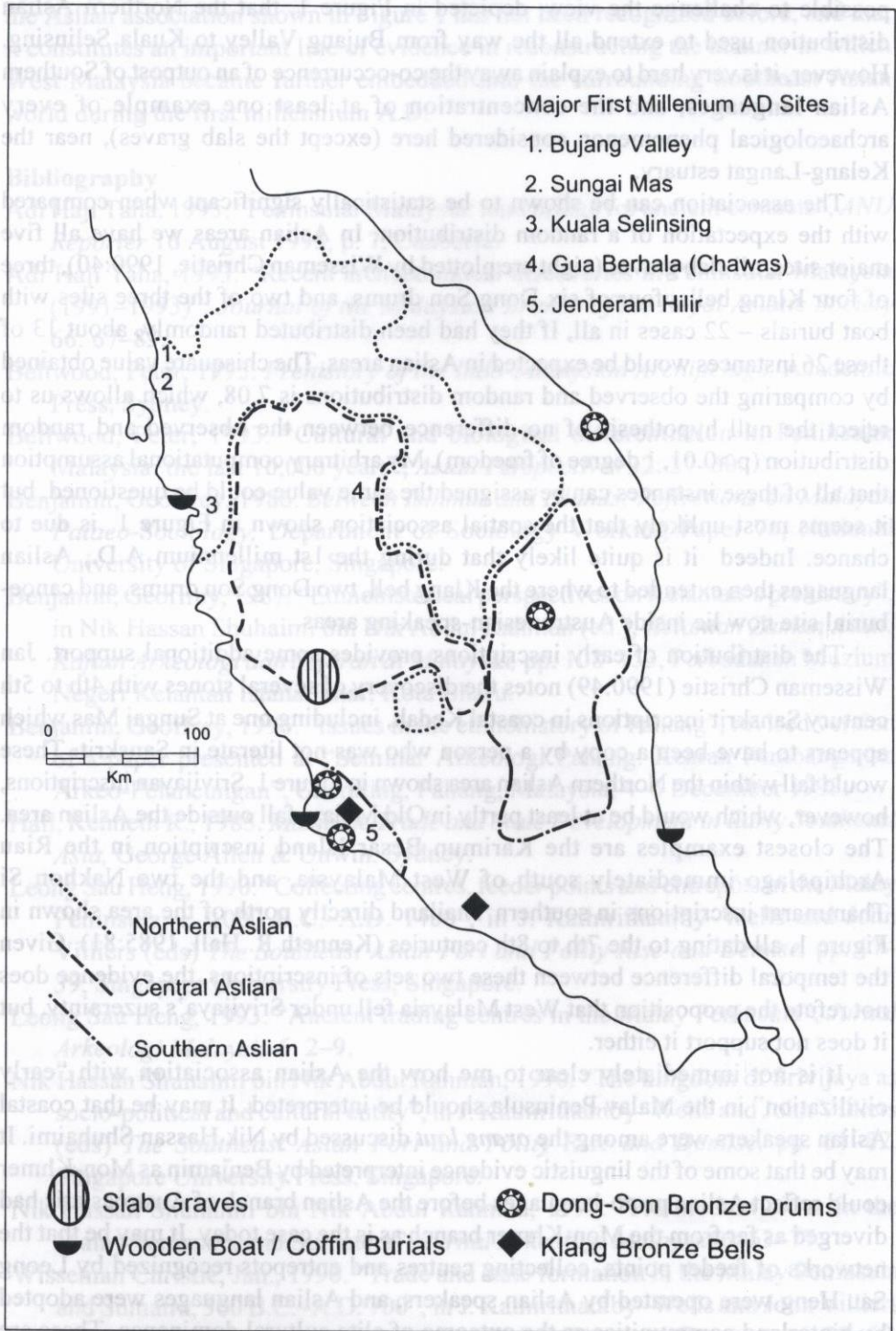


Figure 1. Bulbeck "Origins of Civilization in West Malaysia and the Orang Asli."

possible to challenge the view, depicted in Figure 1, that the Northern Aslian distribution used to extend all the way from Bujang Valley to Kuala Selinsing. However, it is very hard to explain away the co-occurrence of an outpost of Southern Aslian languages, and the concentration of at least one example of every archaeological phenomenon considered here (except the slab graves), near the Kelang-Langat estuary.

The association can be shown to be statistically significant when compared with the expectation of a random distribution. In Aslian areas we have all five major sites, all slab graves (eight are plotted by Wisseman Christie, 1990:40), three of four Klang bells, four of six Dong Son drums, and two of the three sites with boat burials – 22 cases in all. If they had been distributed randomly, about 13 of these 26 instances would be expected in Aslian areas. The chisquare value obtained by comparing the observed and random distributions is 7.08, which allows us to reject the null hypothesis of no difference between the observed and random distribution ($p > 0.01$, 1 degree of freedom). My arbitrary computational assumption that all of these instances can be assigned the same value could be questioned, but it seems most unlikely that the spatial association shown in Figure 1 is due to chance. Indeed it is quite likely that during the 1st millennium A.D., Aslian languages then extended to where the Klang bell, two Dong Son drums, and canoe-burial site now lie inside Austronesian-speaking areas.

The distribution of early inscriptions provides some additional support. Jan Wisseman Christie (1990:49) notes the discovery of several stones with 4th to 5th century Sanskrit inscriptions in coastal Kedah, including one at Sungai Mas which appears to have been a copy by a person who was not literate in Sanskrit. These would fall within the Northern Aslian area shown in Figure 1. Srivijayan inscriptions, however, which would be at least partly in Old Malay, fall outside the Aslian area. The closest examples are the Karimun Besar Island inscription in the Riau Archipelago immediately south of West Malaysia, and the two Nakhon Si Thammarat inscriptions in southern Thailand directly north of the area shown in Figure 1, all dating to the 7th to 8th centuries (Kenneth R. Hall, 1985:81). Given the temporal difference between these two sets of inscriptions, the evidence does not refute the proposition that West Malaysia fell under Srivijaya's suzerainty, but it does not support it either.

It is not immediately clear to me how the Aslian association with "early civilization" in the Malay Peninsula should be interpreted. It may be that coastal Aslian speakers were among the *orang laut* discussed by Nik Hassan Shuhaimi. It may be that some of the linguistic evidence interpreted by Benjamin as Mon-Khmer could reflect Aslian proto-languages before the Aslian branch of Austroasiatic had diverged as far from the Mon-Khmer branch as is the case today. It may be that the networks of feeder points, collecting centres and entrepôts recognized by Leong Sau Heng were operated by Aslian speakers, and Aslian languages were adopted by hinterland communities as the outcome of elite cultural dominance. These are issues which are best left to the relevant experts in their areas. However, I believe

the Aslian association shown in Figure 1 has not been recognized before, and that it constitutes an important line of evidence in reconstructing the manner in which West Malaysia became further embedded into the surrounding Southeast Asian world during the first millennium A.D.

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