

Pre-fourteenth Century Settlement Patterns in the Lower Batanghari, Jambi Province, Sumatra

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ABSTRACT

Complex societies had emerged in southeast Sumatra by at least the seventh century A.D. These were Srivijaya and Melayu-Jambi, polities with centres in the lower Musi and Batanghari respectively (Fig. 1, inset). Historical and archaeological material, however, indicate that the region was already in contact with India from at least the early centuries A.D. (Bellina and Glover 2004, Wolters 1967). While the importance of maritime trade, especially with China, is relatively well discussed, we know little of the origins and nature of these societies. Archaeological research has focused mainly on: epigraphy, iconography of Hindu-Buddhist art and architecture; long-distance maritime trade; and more recently, cultural resource management concerns (see Miksic 1995). This research presents results of a full-coverage survey of the lower Batanghari basin. Its primary objective is to isolate patterns that can inform on pre-fourteenth century settlement system. A second aim is to evaluate the utility of surveys in an environment such as the lower Batanghari. Regional surveys have generally been in arid and semi-arid areas where archaeological remains tend to be highly visible, namely the American southwest and the Near East. New World archaeologists have, however, modified and applied such field techniques in heavily vegetated areas with measurable success (e.g., Lightfoot 1986). The project was also a field school for students from Universitas Udayana, Bali, and the National University of Singapore.

CONCEPTS

The evolution of complex societies is characterised by the development of symbiotic interrelationships between communities. These interactions led to distinct changes in settlement patterns within networks, including, the development of settlement hierarchies and the emergence of urban centres (Crumley 1976). Increasing interregional trade and exchange was also an important feature of the process. Regional analysis is the method most often used by archaeologists to study these phenomena; the basic premise is to gain an understanding of the spatial relationships between human entities, and between them and the physical environment (Kantner 2008:43). Surveys are the primary means of data collection.

BACKGROUND

While Srivijaya is generally regarded as the dominant polity and entrepot in the Straits of Melaka region, historical sources also mentioned Melayu and Chen-pi (Jambi) as important centres (Coedes 1968:80,179,184). The relationship between these polities is unclear. Some scholars believe it was, at particular points in time,

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the capital of Srivijaya, but it is also possible that they were rivals for control of the Straits.

Archaeological remains from this period are mainly: Hindu-Buddhist art and architecture dating between the eighth and fourteenth centuries; and ceramics, including earthenware, and Chinese stoneware and porcelain dating between the tenth and fourteenth centuries (e.g., Abu Ridho 1992; McKinnon 1985; Soekmono 1995). Material predating the seventh century, were reported in Lebakbandung, Jambi; among the finds were jar burials and glass beads, the latter probably imported from India (Lebakbandung 1996, 1997; also see Bellina 2003). Material from the early centuries A.D. were also reported in coastal sites near the Musi (Manguin 2004:287-288).

RESEARCH AREA

The research area is immediately to the west of Jambi to Muara Sabak (Fig. 1). It included both banks of the Batanghari and the Berbak, and areas along the left bank of the Kumpeh. Jambi was excluded as this was planned as the first in a series of surveys. In the case of Muara Jambi, only areas along the river banks were included. A significant portion of the research area is marshland (*rawa*). Modern settlements are on drier high ground, or built on piles in swampy areas. Vegetation in non-swampy areas is generally secondary growth (Fig. 2). Areas away from riverbanks were not surveyed, except for Lambur, Suak Kandis, Kota Kandis, and along the Kumpeh; these locations are on drier high ground.

TRADE AND SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

Ethnohistoric material, namely European descriptions of the region from before the late nineteenth century, can provide testable archaeological correlates as trade and settlement patterns were not drastically altered prior to this period (Miksic 1985:434). The largest settlement in the drainage system was the political/trading centre. Descriptions from the late-eighteenth century mentioned relatively small settlements located along rivers and lakes, primarily for the convenience of bathing and transporting of goods (Marsden 1986:55). Chao Ju Kua, writing in the thirteenth century, mentioned floating settlements (cited in McKinnon 1985:28).

The population of the lower Batanghari in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries comprised primarily Malays⁶ and *orang batin* groups; the latter are non-Muslim jungle and sea peoples (*orang laut*), and the oldest communities in the area (Andaya 1993:14). *Orang batin* groups probably pledged allegiance to the Malay ruling class, as was the case with the nomadic and semi-nomadic *orang asli* of the Peninsula during the Melaka Sultanate (Andaya and Andaya 1982:46).

⁶ See Andaya (1993) for a discussion on the complex nature of Malayness in southeast Sumatra.

In a region with relatively low population, followers rather than territory was the source of prestige, and wealth, from trade, was the means of attracting followers (Manguin 2001). Economic prosperity was dependent on the ability to maintain a regional trading centre (Andaya 1993:20). Fishing, and collecting jungle and marine produce also formed an important economic base; marine and forest products were much sought after in the long-distance trade network (Andaya 1993:17-18; Wheatley 1959). The *orang batin* probably played a major role in collecting these commodities. In general, the lowland soils of eastern Sumatra do not support large-scale agriculture; rice was imported, and sago grown in lowland marshes was also an important staple in seventeenth and eighteenth century Jambi (Andaya 1993:17, 66; Reid 1980:247).

Upstream-downstream commercial relations were quite extensive; the lowlands were a source of luxury and essential goods for highland communities who also traded their products at lowland centres (Miksic 1985). Imported material predating the seventh century have been recovered in the Kerinci Highlands, including glass beads and fragments of a bronze drum; excavations have also yielded Chinese ceramics from the eleventh to sixteenth centuries (Bellina 2003:291; Bonatz 2006:315-6; van der Hoop 1940:202). Overland communications between drainage systems was also possible, especially in highland areas where there were probably less natural impediments to movement (see Manguin 2002).

FIELD TECHNIQUES

The primary goal of the survey was establishing the spatial distribution of cultural material to determine site size. A reconnaissance survey suggested that surface scatters are visible in some areas, while subsurface probings were needed in others. Collection strategies included sampling along river banks and collecting surface scatter, and also shovel testing (Fig. 3). Sampling was by collection units that were arbitrarily determined in the field. Where possible, naturally occurring features are used as boundaries of each collection unit. However, larger areas, ca 50 x 50 m, were divided into smaller grids for greater resolution. Sites are clusters of collection units.

RESULTS

Surface collecting and shovel testing

Ceramics were the dominant finds, these included earthenware, probably locally made, and Chinese porcelain and stoneware. A significant amount of stoneware and porcelain were collected, probably due to the better state of preservation of these higher fired ceramics. Chinese ceramics from the survey date between the tenth and early twentieth centuries.

With the exception of Suak Kandis, earthenware from the Kumpeh display different traits from ceramics in other collection units. Dateable ceramics are generally modern Qing and European wares; a small number of Ming stoneware

were also recovered. This suggests that material from units along the Kumpeh date to a later period. Pre-fourteenth century Chinese ceramics were only found near where the Batanghari forks into the Kumpeh and in units around Suak Kandis. Previous research reported Chinese ceramics from between the tenth and fourteenth centuries near Solok Sakean (McKinnon 1985:26). This absence of pre-fourteenth century material is probably due to a sampling bias.

Sedimentation from seasonal floods has altered part of the landscape. In certain areas along the riverbanks, collections were made from ca 160-200 cm below the present surface. In contrast, subsurface deposits in Lambur were ca 30 cm or less below the present surface. In some areas, remains of wooden posts and ceramic scatters were also observed on the riverbed close to the banks. Ceramics on the riverbed were not collected.

There was a general absence of cultural material from just downriver of Muara Jambi to Suak Kandis, the exception being two collection units on the left bank. This may be due to a number of reasons, including: the absence of human habitation; settlements that leave little material remains; or sampling bias. The area in question is primarily marshland.

Settlement patterns

Muara Jambi (1200 ha) is the largest site in the survey area, and there are five sites between 12 and 132 ha (Fig. 4; Table 1). Of these, three are larger than 50 ha. There are fourteen sites with pre-fourteenth century material that are less than 1 ha; the twenty sites listed as of indeterminate size are from previous research. Units on the Kumpeh with no pre-fourteenth century material were excluded from this analysis.

Table 1. Site size and number of sites with pre-fourteenth century material.

Site Size (ha)	No of sites
Above 150.	1
100-150	1
50-100	2
10-50	2
1-10	0
Below 1	14
Indeterminate (from previous research)	20

Although Muara Jambi is the largest site in the survey area, the distribution of monuments suggests that it may have been primarily ritual and ceremonial in nature.⁷

⁷ While Majapahit was centred in Trowulan, east Java, it was suggested that Panataran was the ritual and ceremonial centre of the kingdom.

The three largest collection clusters are Kota Kandis, Suak Kandis, and Lambur respectively. All three are on relatively high ground. Kota Kandis (132 ha) is the largest, and was only partially investigated. It is ca 10 km north of where the Batanghari forks into the Berbak. Only a narrow strip of land along the riverbank was surveyed; villagers mentioned archaeological material distributed over a more extensive area. An earlier report also mentions the remains of a brick structure in the general area (Soekmono 1995:157).

Table 2. Pre-fourteenth century sites above 1 ha.

Site	Area (ha)	Possible site function
Muara Jambi	1200	Ritual and ceremonial
Kota Kandis	132.5	Habitation
Suak Kandis	92.1	Habitation
Lambur	54.7	Habitation
Candi Teluk Complex	27.6	Ritual and ceremonial
Jebus	12.6	Habitation

Suak Kandis (92 ha) is at the confluence of the Kumpeh and the Batanghari. This cluster comprises collection units on the right bank of the Batanghari, and on both banks of the Kumpeh; and material collected include pre-fourteenth century Chinese stoneware and porcelain, and earthenware. Suak Kandis is in a strategic location, the Dutch built a fortification on the eastern bank of the Kumpeh overlooking the Batanghari in the eighteenth century, and a trading post was opened there early in the nineteenth century (McKinnon 1984).

Lambur (55 ha) is the third largest cluster of collection units, and was also partially investigated. It is ca 15 km from the coast, and ca 8 km inland from the right bank of the Berbak. Much of the general area has been altered by recent developments which may have led to the filling in of marshes and minor tributaries. Earlier reports mentioned a number of sites within a 10 km radius of the collection area, including a brick foundation in Kotaraja, ca 8 km west of the collection units (Lambur 1996; Suaka Report 1999). The data from Lambur presents two possibilities. Firstly, there are multiple sites in the general area separated by space and/or time, or secondly, sites reported are the remains of multiple activity hubs, which in combination formed a single settlement.

The Candi Teluk Complex (27 ha) and Jebus (12.6 ha) are two clusters that are in areas with relatively large sites. Candi Teluk is directly across Muara Jambi but was not included as part of Muara Jambi in this analysis. This research classifies it as ritual and ceremonial in nature based on the archaeological remains. The construction of a sawmill in the area has obscured surface finds. Jebus is on the left bank of the Batanghari ca 5 km to the northwest of Suak Kandis.



DISCUSSION

Collection units can be assigned relative dates of between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, although it is probable that some date earlier. Caution is, however, needed as this is only a first phase, and a significant portion of the research area was not investigated. The material, however allows for some tentative inferences.

The current data suggest a primate distribution, that is, a single site disproportionately larger than any others. However, further research may lead to a shift in the pattern. Settlement patterns approximate ethnohistoric descriptions of the region as mentioned above. This also allows for the construction of a predictive model that can be tested in future research. It is probable that these sites represent the sedentary or semi-sedentary populations, primarily Malays and some *orang batin* groups, and not representative of demographics during the period in question.

While it is assumed that Jambi and Muara Jambi formed the core of the Batanghari settlement system, Lambur, Suak Kandis and Kota Kandis are areas of particular interest. These are locations that are probably significantly larger than recorded during the survey. Another location of interest is Simpang, where the Batanghari forks into the Berbak; previous research suggests that this may be the location of a reasonably large settlement.

There are a number factors, individually or in combination, that may explain the nature of these three sites. Firstly, these are sites in strategic locations, at the confluences of tributaries and the main river; such sites can control the movement of goods, serve as collection and distribution points. Lambur, although further inland, may have served a similar function, development may have obscured environmental features from an earlier period. Secondly, later sources mentioned that the sociopolitical hierarchy in Jambi also included wealthy and influential nobles (Andaya 1993:30). It is possible that these sites are fiefs of powerful members of the aristocracy.

Thirdly, European documentary sources from the sixteenth century suggest that shifting political/trading centres was not uncommon (Reid 1980:243-245). Competition to control trade networks, and campaigns to punish errant vassals were probably common causes for warfare and the destruction of royal centres. Fire was also a problem in a region where the majority of structures were of wood. The importance placed on followers over territory meant that rulers could abandon the centre and build a new one without loss of prestige, that is, if he can retain his followers. Reconstruction was not an issue in an area where material and labour were readily available (Reid 1980:244).

CONCLUSION

Environmental conditions and cultural processes are equally important in understanding settlement patterns in the lower Batanghari. Basic needs such as access to food and water, and ease of movement are factors determining settlement

locations. Building on higher ground and on stilts afforded relative safety from harsh environmental conditions posed by marshlands, and seasonal floodings.

Cultural processes, primarily the emergence of social inequality and differential access to resources, were, probably major determinants in the development of the settlement hierarchy. These developments created a need for luxury goods as a means of increasing the prestige of individuals or groups (see Clarke and Blake 1996). The evolution of trade and exchange with India is probably a reflection of this.⁸ Glass was probably a major commodity; textiles and other perishables may have also featured in the network. Trade with China can be seen as a process that allowed particular groups to strengthen their social position rather than a catalyst for the emergence of sociopolitical complexity.

These processes are also evident at the macro-regional level. While the Straits of Melaka is strategically located to control maritime trade, the location of the entrepot was not determined solely by such factors; cultural matters were equally if not more influential. The rise and demise of entrepots, for example, Srivijaya, Melayu-Jambi, Singapore and Melaka, were due to the ability, or inability, of rulers to exercise their political, and physical influence. The wordings on inscriptions from Telaga Batu and Karang Brahi are good examples of rulers trying to assert control over geographically distant areas.

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⁸ Austronesian speakers were able to navigate to Madagascar, probably in the late centuries B.C., it is assumed here that Malay traders possessed a similar technology and were venturing out of the region in search of prestige and luxury goods.

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