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Mapping Connections through Archaeology and Art History in Second-Millennium Southeast Asia

What do archaeology and art history tell us about Southeast Asia in the second millennium? This broad question was tackled by a webinar series convened by H el ene Njoto ( cole fran aise d'Extr me-Orient) and Noel Hidalgo Tan (Southeast Asian Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts, Bangkok) and hosted by Temasek History Research Centre at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

One of the overarching themes was connections in their varied forms among the polities in the region. Noel Hidalgo Tan highlights these connections – material, architectural, infrastructural, political – in his overview of the webinar series in the first article of this section.

The rest of the contributions are from three speakers in the series. Imran bin Tajudeen and Chotima Chaturawong

provide fascinating descriptions of religious architecture in Southeast Asia – mosque and temple, respectively. They highlight translocal transmission and creativity, and their articles provide insights into continuity and change in religious architectural forms.

Nasha Rodziadi Khaw provides a broader view of one geographical region – namely, the Sultanate of Malacca – and its varied and variegated relationships with polities near and far.

Together, these articles provide us with a compelling glimpse into a time long past but whose legacies remain in its art, architecture, and material life.

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Southeast Asia in the Second Millennium CE through Archaeology and Art History

Noel Hidalgo Tan

Among the many disruptions brought about by COVID-19 was the inability to conduct an archaeological field school which was previously conducted in Indonesia and Cambodia. In its place, and with generous support from the Temasek Foundation, H el ene Njoto (EFEO Jakarta) and I were asked to convene a webinar series around the archaeology and art history of Southeast Asia. Aimed primarily at students, the Temasek History Research Centre Archaeology and Art History Programme was designed as an introduction to aspects of Southeast Asian archaeology and art history. We had initially wanted to take a broad chronological approach – starting from deep prehistory all the way to the colonial period – but with the limited number of slots to work with, we had to narrow our focus further to Southeast Asia in the second millennium!

The webinar series, held over 2021 and 2022, was organised along the two main themes, archaeology and art history. By way of introduction, Dr. Njoto and I set the stage in an introductory lecture by pondering the question: “How well do you know your neighbours?” This provided a reminder to the predominantly Southeast Asian audience that, despite the existence of national borders, the region is connected in many ways, including its cultures, languages, and foods. Presentations on the nature of archaeology, art history, and historiography also invited the participants to think more deeply about the way the past is reconstructed in Southeast Asia.

With the stage set, we launched into webinars with archaeology lectures centred on the major kingdoms and empires extant in Southeast Asia during the second millennium CE. We began with Angkor, arguably the most famous of the Southeast Asian empires, with a discussion by Dr. Heng Piphah on infrastructures and how recent archaeological research can tell us about the agricultural ability, road management, education, and healthcare in Angkor. Elsewhere in the region, we looked at the rise of competing polities in the region, such as the Dai Viet in present-day northern Vietnam (Do Truong Giang) and Bagan in Myanmar (Ye Myat Lwin).

Representing the middle of the second millennium, we learned from the case studies of Mrauk U (Ye Myat Lwin), Ayutthaya (Dr. Phacharaphorn Phanomvan), and Malacca (Dr. Nasha Rodziadi Khaw). Such presentations explored how these kingdoms, emerging in the 15th century, carved out spaces for themselves from existing hegemonies. At the same time, their cosmopolitanism and interactions reached beyond their immediate neighbours – in the case of Ayutthaya, as far as France. In the last part of the series, we looked at the rise and prominence of the Sultanates of Ternate and Tidore (Shinatria Adhityatama) in Eastern Indonesia, kingdoms that both played an integral role in the global spice trade, and ultimately in European colonialism in Southeast Asia.

In the parallel theme of art history in Southeast Asia, we took a less chronological approach and focused on specific materials, such as ceramics (Dr. Heidi Tan), sculpture (Dr. Natalie S.Y. Ong), textiles (Dr. Sandra Sardjono), and bronzes (Dr. Mathilde Mechling and Eko Bastiawan). For a region where textual sources are hard to come by, the study of these materials fills an important gap in our knowledge and understanding of this early period. For example, almost all of our understanding of Southeast Asian textiles and dress come from representations found in sculpture, reliefs, and murals, since textiles very rarely survive to the present. Closer analysis of ceramics and bronzes found in Southeast Asia not only indicate the flow and circulation of ideas and beliefs in the region, but also how some artistic traditions were truly local expressions that persisted from antiquity to the present.

Prior to the arrival of Islam in the middle of the second millennium CE, many of the kingdoms and their resultant material expressions were religiously Indic (e.g., Buddhist and Shaivite). Dr. Chotima Chaturawong, who below writes about a Burmese-style monastery in northern Thailand, speaks about the larger Hindu-Buddhist styles found in Southeast Asian architecture. Most importantly, Chotima notes that temples in Southeast Asia were not copies of those found in India; rather, more often than not, they were variations that developed localised expressions within the region – an architectural case for being “same same, but different.”

One major challenge of convening an overarching webinar series like this was working against the constraints of time and the availability of speakers, leading to some gaps in coverage. For example, we were unable to talk about some other notable kingdoms during this period, such as Lan Xang in Laos or Majapahit in Java. Moreover, subjects from the Philippines and Indonesia were underrepresented. However,

these regions were still discussed towards the chronological and thematic end of this webinar series, where we pivoted to the coming of Islam into Southeast Asia and how this change is reflected in archaeology and art history. For example, Dr. Farouk Yahya discussed illustrated manuscripts written in Malay and showed 19th-century examples of manuscripts being used for magic and divination aside from scriptural and historical use. Elsewhere in the Malay world, Dr. Imran Bin Tajudeen looked at the diversity of mosque architecture, unveiling a larger variation than previously thought. Rounding up the impact of Islam in Southeast Asia was Noorashikin Binte Zulkifli's exploration of artefacts in the collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

Southeast Asia in the second millennium CE was marked by the rise of large states – polities that were able to exert control over large areas of the region and that, at the same time, competed with other neighbouring polities for dominance and influence. These interactions were not always hostile, and the spread and diversity of material expressions derived from these states, be they architectural or artistic objects, illuminate the wider history of contact and localisation.

The webinars attracted a wide audience, from students in Singapore and abroad, as well as interested members of the public; it was common to have an audience size of at least 100 for these webinars. In a period where many planned activities were halted, this Temasek History Research Centre webinar series provided an introductory framework for the study and discussion of Southeast Asia through the lens of archaeology and art history.

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