

Book Reviews

History of Padang Lawas North Sumatra: The Site of Si Pamutung

By Daniel Perret and Heddy Surachman
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The two volumes, reporting the French-Indonesian archaeological team's findings at Padang Lawas between 2006 to 2010, showcase Si Pamutung, a site containing the largest concentration of Hindu-Buddhist archaeological remains in north Sumatra.

Such a concentration is intriguing. Overseas influences are usually more visible along coastlines, but Si Pamutung is situated in the interior of the island. However, positioned at the heart of the Barumon, the Batang Pane and the Sirumambe river systems, these waterways link it to the northeast Sumatran coast. It is noteworthy that the settlement of Binanga, the entry point to the archaeological complex, carries a name meaning 'crossroads' in the local language.

The prevalence of the Hevajra cult shows Padang Lawas' religion to be Vajrayana Buddhist. Its art and architecture reveal a melange of influences coming from Champa, Sri Lanka, China,

Bengal, Bihar, peninsular India, as well as those of Bali and Java. Such diverse strains attest to Padang Lawas' wide networks and cosmopolitan character, but make its history difficult to determine. How does one explain such vigour in an interior, somewhat isolated and sparsely populated region?

Since the information yielded by the site of Padang Lawas is so riveting, and because the issues raised by the authors are so complex deserving more discussion than a short book review allows, I confine my review to three issues: first, the unusual location of Padang Lawas; second, its networked nature with other polities, ports and adjoining production areas in Sumatra; and third, its overseas links, mainly with the Bengal-Bihar region in eastern India.

Perret's interpretation (volume 2, chapter 10) of the locational significance of Padang Lawas both as end-point and also as strategic node in various networks is a key consideration. Although an interior centre, Padang Lawas, through its port identified as P'anes or Panai, was an important gateway from interior north Sumatra into the Melaka Straits. If it is the P'anes of an early twelfth century Armenian text, then Padang Lawas apparently exported great quantities of camphor (p. 290). If it is also the Panai of the Thanajvur inscription, Padang Lawas was sufficiently important for it to be raided in 1025 by the Cholas. The raid may have been liberating for Padang Lawas, freeing it from Srivijayan reach and allowing it to trade independently with China and India.

Seen from the sea, the port of Padang Lawas functioned as gateway into the interior of north Sumatra, a region rich in natural resources. The sudden rise in its population in the thirteenth century attests a trade boom at Padang Lawas from the eleventh century. Its ceramics, glass and earthenware, iconography and architecture were cosmopolitan, testifying to Padang Lawas' position as crossroads on the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea's cultural routes.

Padang Lawas overcame its locational limitations—surprisingly, no metal deposits were found at its environs—by effective networking with the coast and neighbouring regional economies through robust upstream-downstream connectivities. Although not a production centre by itself and poor in terms of gold, Si Pamutung was situated near the adjoining camphor and benzoin producing-areas and was an exporter of the gold and silver that was mined in the deep interior. It was a mandatory place of transit where an elite controlled movement of goods from the upper reaches of the Baruman basin to the Melaka Straits (p. 303). Salt and Bengal textiles were the chief imports.

Synergies are noticeable in settlement history and urban patterns with other port polities. Not as long-lived as Barus-Lobo Tua 170 kms away, both sites emerged in the middle of the ninth century and, influenced by the Chola-generated commercial impetus, grew during the tenth-eleventh centuries. It is significant that Padang Lawas emerged around the time of the Nalanda charter of 890, testifying links forged between the Sailendras, Srivijaya and Bengal prior to the issuing of this charter. Analysis of Buddhist images demonstrates similarities with the iconographic style of eastern India (Bautze-Picron, vol. 2).

But then fortunes diverged. In the mid-twelfth century, Lobo Tua declined, Si Pamutung continued to prosper. Perhaps its interior location helped it to overcome the post-Chola interregnum. Then the reverse occurred, location playing a role once again. In the thirteenth century the Ayyavole entered into an alliance with Malayu on the Batang Hari River which worked to Lobo Tua's advantage. Si Pamutung became deserted; it would not be settled again until the twentieth century.

Compared to South Kedah, another coastal site whose history is better known, Si Pamutung's architectural styles are different, suggesting little contact: '. . . south Kedah would have stimulated the initial development of Padang Lawas. . . but each region would have retained different architectural choices. . .' (p. 337).

The two volumes show that rather than Chinese influences, those from India were dominant. Place-names often have South Asian origins: Koling, Panai, Sunggam, Linggam and Natal, the last meaning littoral or coast in the original Tamil. Lexical styles in the inscriptions go beyond the littoral and link with Newari of the Kathmandu Valley (Grifiths, vol. 2, p. 243).

The two well-produced volumes offer fascinating glimpses into a relatively minor, but well-networked, society riding the eleventh century boom in the eastern Indian Ocean, actively negotiating through waterways with production-centres and rival ports and engaging culturally and commercially with polities across seas. Three coins: two sandalwood-design coins issued tentatively from Barus and Muara Jambi and a Bukhara dirham dating to 1003-4 (Kalus, vol. 1) have been found. Padang Lawas demonstrates an independent path of growth, suggesting that interior polities were more likely to make specific choices based on their societal patterns and needs, rather than coastal polities who were more open, and therefore more vulnerable, to the winds of change from overseas. These volumes underline the fact that different centres responded differently to the eleventh century boom. Rather than seeing Southeast Asian societies as passive receptors of Indic or Sinic influences, we should instead regard these as evolving according to their own dynamics, and participating according to their own exigencies in the medieval Indian Ocean world.

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