

The Architecture of Srivijaya : A Review

by R. Soekmono

THE BACKGROUND

It is the general assumption, and even the belief, that Srivijaya was an extremely powerful kingdom that played a decisive role in the political forum in early Southeast Asia and the maritime trade around the Malay Peninsula for many centuries. It is supposed to arise in the last quarter of the 7th century, and decline and fall towards the end of the 14th century. Needless to say that the long seven centuries of Srivijaya's history were not all victory, success and prosperity. On the contrary, the obvious scantiness of archaeological remains and authentic historical sources suggest a doubt rather than a support towards the image of a greatness as may be expected from such a highly estimated power.

As a matter of fact, the history of Srivijaya is characterized by only a handful of loose and heterogeneous data, alternated and many a time even dominated - by gaps due to the total lack of evidence. If, therefore, the picture so far gained seems to be that of a more or less well-ordered structure, the fact is that it is only with the help of hypotheses that blank areas could be bridged over. However, one thing has to be kept in mind, that being just hypotheses these are constantly being subjected to the necessity of revisions every time a new finding is made which appears contradicting them.

With regard to the many hypotheses that have been put forward by historians, archaeologists, philologists, epigraphists, geologists, geographers, and other specialized scholars, it is striking that some proposals for revisions of the existing hypotheses do not, in all cases replace the earlier hypotheses. We are happy when a revision is able to supplement an old hypotheses with fresh views, or when it implies an improvement of existing theories leading us a step further to the most acceptable probability. Con-

sequently we could then look forward to a brighter prospect of jointly solving the many irritating problems confronting us today.

An obvious example illustrating the confusion in the reconstruction of the history of Srivijaya is the diversity of opinions with regard to the location of the centre(s) of activities or the capital cities of the kingdom. There are many places and regions that could lay claim to be the site we are looking for, each with its advantages and shortcomings, but until today the experts have not yet been provided with absolute proof.

Closely related to - maybe even inseparable from - the dispute on the site(s) of the headquarters of Srivijaya, is the problem of the territory and the extent of the realm. In general it could be said that Srivijaya was sovereign in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula. On the other hand it could not be said, however, that the kingdom extended from Java in the South to Thailand in the North. Although the administrative and the political structures in Srivijaya's time still remain obscure, the present state of affairs suggests that the kingdom rather was a confederation of smaller states headed by local chieftains. This view seems to fit in with the acceptable probability of the shifts of the capital cities of Srivijaya in connection with the shifts of power and hegemony. Moreover, such a picture is compatible with the uneven distribution of the monuments with respect to territory as well as to period. It is, therefore, only appropriate that when dealing with the Srivijaya architecture we follow the sequence of the shifts mentioned. As it turns out, this seemingly simple idea could not possibly be realized, for the simple reason that the chronology of the roles played by the different places and regions in Srivijaya's history has not yet been settled.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS IN THE PALEMBANG AREA

The favorite among the sites considered for the headquarters of Srivijaya is the present Palembang area. But even if we accepted this, the almost total absence of archaeological remains has created a mystery for which no solution was as yet forthcoming.

Prof. Dr. R. Soekmono is professor of Archaeology, Faculty of Letters, University of Indonesia.

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It is quite plausible that the absence of any trace of building activity is owing to the ignorance of the local people who were only happy to come across building material they need which is ready for use. Even today such robbery still takes place, though perhaps because of different motives, at many archaeological sites.

As far as the Palembang area was concerned, I remember very well how on an inspection tour in 1957 I was surprised to see that every single tree on the slopes of the Bukit Seguntang was labelled with a person's name. This peculiarity would not have drawn my special attention, if I had not been informed that the labelling indicated who had the right to own the plot of ground around the tree in question. At many places diggings were carried out in order to get and sell the earth which in those days was very much in demand for the filling up of low lying sites and swamps suitable for construction. I was also shown a number of crooked stone blocks, carelessly left behind. Only a superficial examination told me that I was looking at the last remains of what had once been a stupa. It was irritating that nobody would tell me the exact spot where the stones had been quarried.

The above illustration could throw some light on the problem concerning the lack of architectural remains in Palembang and its surroundings. It is, indeed, hard to believe that a series of exceptional records in stone and a number of unique stone statues are the only remains of the great empire we believe existed.

However, in order to avoid any involvement in hypothetical matters, and to take care not to get trapped in the labyrinth of historical reconstructions, I think it wise to confine myself to the architectural remains. Consequently Palembang will not be reviewed in this article.

THE ARCHITECTURAL EVIDENCE IN THE JAMBI REGION

In the Jambi region we are on firmer ground in dealing with the architectural art of Srivijaya. The two huge makaras from Solok Sipin, at the western outskirts of the present city of Jambi, now kept in the National Museum in Jakarta, are the biggest gargoyles ever found in Indonesia and their size suggests the enormous dimensions of the edifice to which the makaras once belonged. The date (equivalent to 1064 A.D.) which is inscribed at one of the two makaras undoubtedly points to a building activity in the 11th century. It is a pity that excavations at the probable site could only reveal a small part of a brick building as further activities were prevented since it was not possible to pull down several houses in the densely populated area for the sake of archaeological investigations.

More details have been gathered through surveys and preliminary excavations at Muara Jambi which is some 20 kilometers downstream on the Batanghari River from Jambi. Up to now no less than eight compounds of buildings

have either been unearthed or identified, whereas two edifices have been rebuilt.

Rebuilding implies that all the components of the monument that have fallen to ruins have been reconstructed through matching of the fragments and through scale drawings. Subsequently we expect - at least - to gain the necessary information in order to get a fair idea of how the monument originally looked. This is, however, not the case. The partially rebuilt Chandi Tinggi has created problems rather than clarifications, while the rebuilding of Chandi Gumpung could not be completed because of the diversity of opinions with regard to the reconstruction of the upper parts. In fact, the restoration of Chandi Gumpung was at the first stage aimed at reinforcing the lower parts which were for the most part still intact.

It is necessary to conduct a thorough study of all thinkable aspects of a monument before starting to rebuild. It was at Muara Jambi that we were confronted with a classic example of rebuilding without prior research; which resulted in quite another type of monument than we had been accustomed to in Java. If Chandi Gumpung - because of the uncertainties emerging from the present rebuilding efforts - is not sufficiently convincing because it differs from the conventional design of a chandi - another monument not too far away from it provides the necessary proof. This is Chandi Kedaton. This evidence leads us to the conclusion that this monument was not meant to house the statue of a deity. Its inner space was entirely filled up with gravel, intentionally transported to the site from the mountains in the Upper Jambi region, several hundred kilometres away. From the available clues it was evident that the monument was designed to be a platform, possibly to be constructed in terraces. Such was the kind of monument that should have been Chandi Gumpung, and supporting information comes from the fact that the main cella was fully built up with bricks.

Without doubt, we are dealing with a specific type of architecture at Muara Jambi. It is a great pity that we are not able to find out whether this peculiarity was true only for Chandi Kedaton and Chandi Gumpung or also for the eight compounds that have been brought to light.

In spite of the uncertainties, one thing becomes clear with respect to Chandi Gumpung. The find of a headless (beheaded?) Prajnaparamita seated statue - probably once enthroned on the uppermost platform - is an indisputable proof of the Mahayana Buddhist character of the monument. The find of gold foils as part of the temple deposit, inscribed with the names of the deities of the pantheon, supports the above conclusion in a most convincing way. With regard to dating, however, the data suggests different periods. The statue shows close affinities with the Singhasari art of the second half of the 13th century, whereas the script on the gold foils is - according to Mr. Buchari - palaeographically dated to the 9th century. Nevertheless, this discrepancy does not for certain detract from the possible association of the Muara Jambi monuments with Srivijaya.

THE MAHLIGAI STUPA AT MUARA TAKUS

One archaeological site in Mid Sumatra, which finds strong support in I-Tsing's record with respect to its location at the equator, is Muara Takus. It is a compound situated at a bend of the Kampar River which consists of 4 edifices of which only one is still erect; the three others have been reduced to shapeless mounds of bricks and rubble. The compound was arranged asymmetrically in a courtyard which was enclosed by a wall measuring 74×74 metres. An earthen dike along the bend of the river, a short distance from the compound, was apparently meant to be an embankment against floods.

The one edifice still erect is called Chandi Mahligai. Here again, we encounter another kind of structure. It was a tower, erected on a platform and crowned by a stupa. The cylindrical body of the tower was supported by a 28-sided base and a lotus cushion. The top was surmounted by a 26-sided section which served as the base of the stupa.

Chandi Mahligai was reconstructed only a few years ago. It had been slanting alarmingly and was overgrown with shrubs and other vegetation. A good deal was covered with rubble (especially the lower part), and the structure threatened to split due to a vertical crack. The restoration, therefore, was meant to save this unique edifice from total loss. It is, however, to be regretted that the dismantling and its subsequent rebuilding was not well recorded, so that one very significant evidence could no longer be traced back: this concerns the stages of construction. Before the

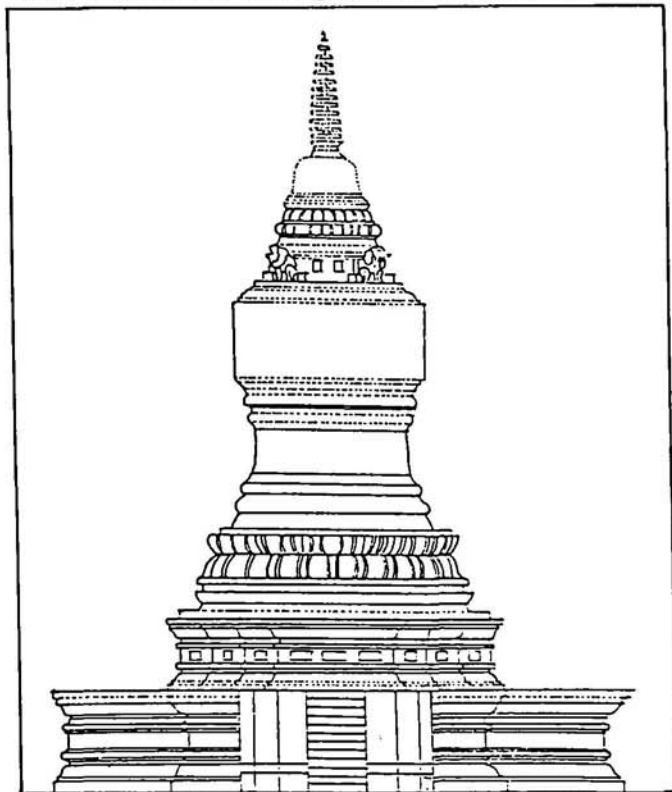


Figure 1. Chandi Mahligai (north part) Reconstructional Drawing.

restoration two structures had been discernible; one structure was enclosed by another hence the general acceptance of two different datings of the compound. The inner structure was ascribed to the 8th or 9th century while the outer one was dated to the 11th or 12th century. It would have been of great importance to have gained an idea of how the older structure looked and to what extent the younger edifice represented a modification of the former design. It is in this respect that the loss of this unique opportunity is a great shame.

Concerning the other buildings of the Muara Takus compound, it could only be noted that not the slightest evidence could be obtained with regard to their construction except that Chandi Tua, which is in fact the biggest edifice, shows an apparent additional construction. It is, however, very difficult to ascertain whether this extension was indeed meant as an additional building or as a second construction of one and the same shrine, either as an enlargement or a replacement. Additionally both constructions used different building materials, viz. stone and brick, without any indication, as to which material could be ascribed to the older and which to the younger building.

The Chandi Mahligai being a stupa was indisputably a Buddhist shrine. Scarcity of stupa-like remains among the rubble however indicate that it having met the same fate as the other archaeological remains. Scattered finds, belonging apparently to the sacred deposit of the temple, and consisting among others of gold foils inscribed with mystical syllables in pre-nagari characters and carved with mystical symbols like vajra, clearly show their close relationship with the Sailendra art in Central Java and at the same time provide us with the proof that Mahayana Buddhism was the prevailing religion at the time. All this provides strong support for the antiquity of the Muara Takus compound. The younger overlay on the other hand finds support in the striking similarities of the present shape of Chandi Mahligai with the so-called stambhas of Padang Lawas which are dealt with below.

THE BIAROS OF PADANG LAWAS

Padang Lawas, meaning literally the vast plain, is a barren area of around 1500 square kilometres covered with a brownish carpet of alang-alang grass (*Imperata Cylindrica*) alternated with trees here and there. The presumption is that in ancient times this area was not as dry as it is nowadays, and may be even fertile enough for a settlement, since it is otherwise inconceivable that our forefathers would have chosen this plain as their central place of worship. As a matter of fact, the remains of at least sixteen temple compounds are accumulated in this area, scattered along the banks of the upper course of the Barumun River and its northern tributary, the Panai River. Moreover, the name Panai - probably of a state - had appeared as early as 1030 A.D. in the Tanjore inscription of the South Indian Chola King Rajendra I who commemorated

his attack of Srivijaya by sea a few years before. The inscription further mentions that after the attack on Srivijaya in Kadaram, Panai was singled out for the next expedition. Srivijaya was indeed overrun, by the Chola King, but seemingly there was no permanent occupation of Srivijaya as a whole or even in part. As for Panai, the few inscriptions found on the Padang Lawas site indicate a temple building activity in the period between the 11th and 14th centuries.

The temple buildings at Padang Lawas are called 'biaro' by the local people, though they are not functioning as monasteries. Out of the many biaros built in the past only a few are still standing today. Not a single one, however, is intact : they are all in a deplorable condition, being built of brick and having been overgrown by wild vegetation for a considerable time. They apparently were all designed along the same model ; supported by a terraced platform of two successive stages the cubical temple body rising on a series of mouldings which ends in a more complicated series of cornices, which in their turn support an obviously elongated stupa as the top of the edifice. Of course deviations and variations are to be found here and there. Biaro Si Pamutung, for instance, should have a superstructure - according to a reconstructional drawing - of two stories the first of which was adorned by 16 stupas and the second by 12, with the structure being further surmounted by a big stupa topped by a series of umbrellas.

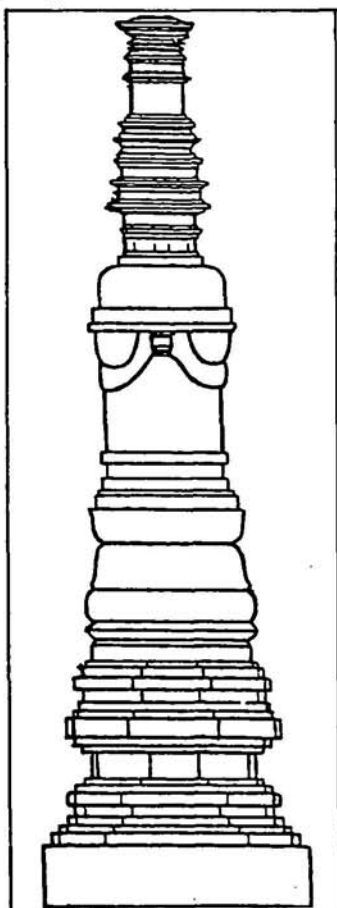


Figure 2. Padang Lawas, North Sumatra.

Another common feature of biaros is that they are all grouped in compounds, consisting of a main building surrounded several subtemples (including terraces, platforms and stupas) and occupying a considerably extensive courtyard (46 × 61 metres at Si Pamutung, and 49 × 57 metres at Biaro Bahal I). A surrounding wall of brick encloses the courtyard, leaving an access gate at the East side. It is also to the East that practically all the sanctuaries are oriented.

The best preserved biaros, in the sense that a fair idea could still be gained from the architectural details, are Bahal I, II and III (which are roughly estimated at 2 kilometres away from each other), and Si Pamutung which is situated some kilometres East of Bahal III. One of these, i.e. Biaro Bahal I, has just undergone a thorough restoration, after which the entire *alang-alang* field and the shrubs covering the courtyard were cleared away.

It is to be regretted that the restoration has not been able to clarify one matter which is as frustrating as it is important. The completely ruined top of Biaro Bahal I very much suggests an elongated stupa-body starting with a cylindrical base supported by a circular lotus cushion. This impression is further made evident by the hanging garlands all over the surface of the cylindrical structure. The big question that arises is what kind of construction could most probably be expected above the ribbon to which the garlands are attached : a bell-shaped stupa or an oppressed flattened dome. The find of several stambhas - broken to pieces but some reconstructible - enables us to get acquainted with a special type of stupa which resembles a tower rather than a dome. The term 'tower stupa' does not sound too funny (I think), though the height may only be less than two metres.

I think it is not too bold to surmise a two-fold significance in the tower-stupa in miniature. Its close affinity with the Chandi Mahligai of Muara Takus, where a bell-shaped stupa is surmounting a cylindrical tower, leads to the obvious assumption of a more or less linear development in the Buddhistic architecture tradition in the northern part of Sumatra. The presence of this features among the biaros has easily led to the supposition that the uppermost structure of Biaro Bahal I might have had its inspiration from the mini tower-stupa prototype. It is understandable, therefore, that in drawing up reconstruction drawing of Biaro Bahal I the restorers decided to follow the mini tower-stupa prototype in spite of their awareness that such an addition as conjectural.

Quite another type of sanctuary - as far as could be judged from its lay-out and ground plan - is Biaro Si Topayan situated a fair distance upstream the Panai River from the Bahal group. It is a great pity that this biaro is practically forever lost today, after the site was developed into a hamlet. According to the records published in the *Oudheidkundig Verslag* (Archaeological Report) of 1930, however, Si Topayan was layed out as a square platform of about two metres height with a *pendopo* terrace in front of it. Hollow stone blocks, obviously serving as support for wooden poles,

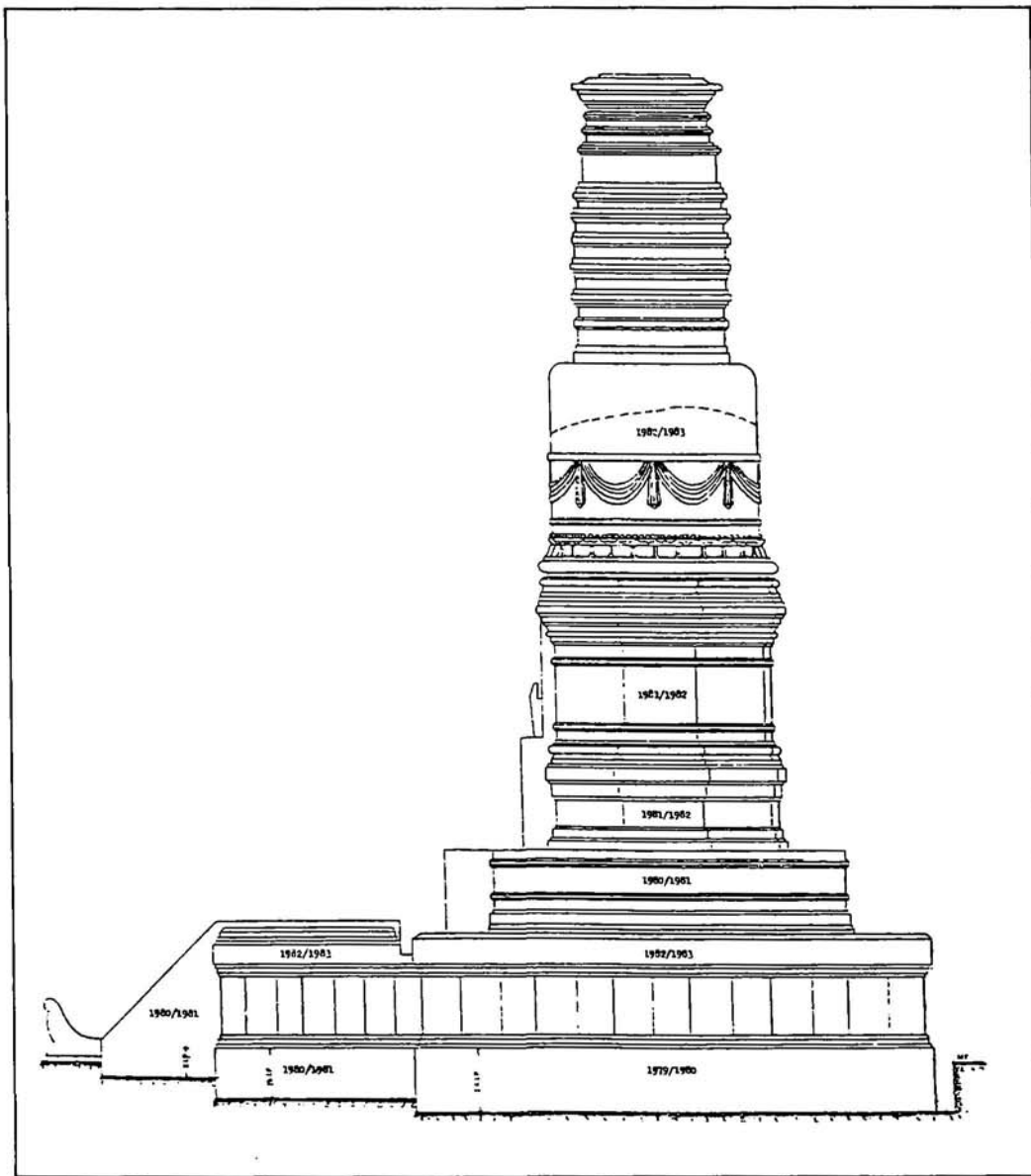


Figure 5. Biaro Bahal I (north side). *Reconstructional Drawing.*

were neatly arranged along the sides and the central parts of the squares. The platform was built of brick, and a flight of stairs - terminated by big makaras and flanked by raksasa-statues-furnished the access to it when coming from the pendopo.

The greatest importance of Si Topayan is in its similarity in lay-out and construction to Chandi Bukit Batu Pahat in Kedah, Western Malaysia.

A LOOK ACROSS THE STRAIT OF MALACCA

The similarities between Si Topayan and Chandi Bukit Batu Pahat may to a great extent, justify the denomination 'twin monuments'. It is in complete agreement with the assumption of a 'twin kingdom' comprising Kedah and Srivijaya as could be drawn from the well-known Tanjore inscription.

Malaysia could not boast of a rich endowment in archaeological monuments, but its northernmost state at the Strait of Malacca near the Thai border is remarkably strewn with more than 50 chandi buildings of relatively small size. All these sanctuaries are clustered in a limited area along the lower course of the rivers Bujang, Batu Pahat, Muda and Merbok. Except for Chandi Bukit Batu Pahat which had been thoroughly excavated and reconstructed along the method of anastylosis, all the other shrines have been only superficially surveyed. Nevertheless, most of their ground plans are of special significance owing to their close affinities with their counterparts in North Sumatra.

Regarding the period of construction, the Kedah sanctuaries are partly dated in the period between the 10th and the 12th centuries, and for partly between the 12th and the 15th centuries. Consequently it is not premature to classify the

monuments on both sides of the Strait of Malacca as being monuments of the same type and of the same period, and hence as the architecture peculiar to the later Srivijaya era.

Quite different is the case with the monuments not too far away northwards from Kedah. These southern Thai monuments were until recently identified as belonging to the 'Srivijaya art style'. They do not, however, show affinities with the Kedah-Padang Lawas architectural art. And if comparisons were to be made with contemporaneous achievements in other regions, our attention would be drawn to Central Java. This peculiarity might be connected with the fact that it is in the so-called Ligor inscription of 775 A.D. that "Sailendravamca" appears for the first time outside Java. As a matter of fact, the big brick building called Wat Kaew near Chaiya shows several common elements with the Central Javanese chandi, especially its square ground plan with protruding parts at the four sides. More Javanese is the very small but very beautiful Phra Borom That at Wat Phra Borom That compound in Chaiya.

If generally speaking we are justified in classifying the Kedah monuments as representing a later Srivijaya architecture, the sanctuaries in the Chaiya area might be considered as the earlier achievements of the Srivijaya art. It does not mean, however, that in Peninsular Thailand building activities were limited to the 8th century or stopped in the 9th century. Religious buildings, all of them Buddhist, were apparently constructed in the succeeding centuries, so that the Thai architectural art also witnessed a later development of the Srivijaya art style. Wat Si Yang at Sathing Phra, a ruinous brick structure that seemingly was the base of a stupa building, the Wat Sathing Phra stupa itself, and the ruins of Kao Noi Chedi near the city of Songkhla, would be examples of this later Srivijaya architectural style.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Having reviewed the architectural achievements that could be ascribed to the Srivijayan art style, while avoiding as much as possible any involvement in the most confusing theories regarding the headquarters and the extent of the maritime empire of Srivijaya, a few points seem to draw special attention.

In the first place it becomes evident that the seven centuries of the history of Srivijaya could not be considered and treated as one unit, in terms of time as well as in space. In terms of time, the review has shown that there was an earlier and a later period in the architectural history. This distinction was not only based on style and technique - which to a large extent could not be classified as to be exact - but was in many cases confirmed by dated epigraphical evidence.

This distinction becomes significant, when it is related to the so-called "Sailendra" and "Non-Sailendra" periods. The word 'Sailendra' appears for the first time in the inscription of Kalasan of 778 A.D., and later on in several other Central Javanese charters before the year 850 A.D.. Interesting to

note is that 'Sailendra' was also found in inscriptions outside Java : the so-called side B of the Ligor inscription, not dated but presumably not later than the middle of the 9th century, the Nalanda charter of around 860 A.D. referring to King Balaputra in Sumatra, and the Leiden copper plates of the middle of the 11th century referring once again to Sumatra. It means that the denomination 'Sailendra' ceased to be used in Central Java after the middle of the 9th century but was continued in Sumatra until the second half of the 11th century. The obvious assumption was that the earlier Srivijaya architecture that flourished from the middle of the 8th century until the middle of the 11th century was in some way connected with the reign of the Sailendras.

Central Java being the cradle of the Sailendra art - architectural as well as sculptural - inevitably left its hallmark in the earlier Srivijaya art. No wonder that we often come across close stylistical affinities in the arts of the Palembang-Jambi region and the surroundings of Chaiya with the achievements in Central Java. On the other hand we are also struck by the strong resemblances in lay-out between the biaros in North Sumatra and the monuments in Kedah as representatives of the later period of the Srivijaya art history.

The above statement does not exclude, however, the possibility of having a mixture of earlier and later elements in one monument. The discrepancy in the dating of the script and the statue of Chandi Gumpung at Muara Jambi is a good example and a good proof. Moreover the same is the case with the Mahligai stupa at Muara Takus, which shows an encasement of the older building.

Finally we have to admit that in dealing with the achievements in the field of art it is not always possible to make a clear-cut distinction between earlier and later styles. Similarly it is not possible to draw solid lines to define art style areas. Transition periods and marginal areas are again things to be taken into account, while local traditions and local developments could not be overlooked.

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