

In Search of the Origins of the 'Kedah Buddha'

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

Have you ever been curious about an artefact's origin and how it made its way into a museum's collection? One of the most charming sculptures in the Asian Civilisations Museum's (ACM) collection is a small bronze standing Buddha. The showcase label that identifies this serene little (20.6 cm) figure in *tribangha* (tri-bent) pose states its origins as Kedah, so last December FOM sponsored its first Study Tour to Kedah, to the area along the banks of the Muda River north of Penang (Malaysia) known as the Bujang Valley.

Archaeological research in the Bujang Valley began in the 1840s with James Low's discovery of an ancient civilisation dated from the 5th to the 15th century. It was Low's early work that brought British archaeologist H G Quaritch Wales and his wife, Dorothy, to the site in the 1930s and 40s. It was Dorothy who discovered 'our' Buddha in 1941 as she continued excavations while her husband was on military service. The figurine was deposited in the Raffles Library and Museum, a source of the ACM's core collection.

We met up with Dr Mokhtar Saidin at the site of Sungai Batu, where he is excavating a newly discovered brick structure. Bricks from the site have been subjected to Optically Stimulated Luminescence, a method used to date heated objects. Confirmed independently by four different testing centres, the bricks date from the first century CE. This news shook the world of archaeology: it means that the Sungai Batu site is the oldest man-made structure yet found in Southeast Asia.

First identified by the bits of bricks that were poking up out of the soil of a palm oil plantation, the entire complex includes elaborate brick riverside quays, iron smelting sites and at least one ritual structure. Who built these edifices that seem to be part of a large and sophisticated trading centre? We have some clues from the Pallava inscriptions of Theravada Buddhist texts and some stone inscriptions written in Brahmi or Pallava Grantha, but until we find

a burial site where DNA testing can be performed, we can only guess.

Ancient mariners arriving by boat would have found their way to the Sungai Merbok Estuary by spotting Mount Jerai, a mountain that towers over the river estuary. The local rivers are surrounded on both sides by dense mangrove swamps and, as we discovered, colonies of monitor lizards and water birds. Sungai Batu is sited at the base of Mount Jerai (rich in magnetite, haematite and geotite which helped fuel the region's importance as an iron smelting centre). Ancient Tamil records from the Cangkam Period (200 BCE to 200 CE) specifically refer to iron imported from this area (then known as Kataram). Arabic records also confirm Kedah's importance as an iron centre.

Visitors can trek from one archaeological site to another, but the nearby Lembah Bujang Archaeology Museum has gathered many of the artefacts recovered from the region's archaeological sites. They show the existence of a Hindu/Buddhist civilisation that used the valley as a trading centre from the 3rd to the 14th century. Recent finds appear to push the date even earlier.

To date, 97 sites have been identified in the valley, but according to Dr Saidin, only 16 have been excavated. Dr Saidin has also identified a sunken ship, not far from his riverside jetty, which he hopes to excavate next year. As we look up to Mount Merai, we can only guess what may be found up there.

As we soon discovered, our Kedah Buddha is only one very small piece of the archaeological and historical puzzle that is part of the fascinating Bujang Valley archaeological area.

Patricia Bjaaland Welch is the author of *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery*, the coordinator of FOM Study Tours and FOM webmaster.

Figure of Standing Buddha, Kedah, Malaysia, 5th - 9th century, bronze; courtesy of ACM



FOM Study Tours will host another weekend study tour to the Bujang Valley in April, led by National University of Singapore professor John Miksic. Details on the FOM website's Study Tours page.