

The Bujang Valley

In Malaysia's richest archaeological region, the Bujang Valley of South Kelah, archaeologists have unearthed evidence which proves the existence of an ancient polity from the early centuries of the Christian era. It was probably the kingdom of *Qie zha* mentioned by *Yiqing*, a 7th-century Buddhist pilgrim from China, and the same as that known to the Tamil as *Kadaram*, *Kidaram* or *Kalagam*, called *Kataha* in Sanskrit.

The evolution of the kingdom

The Bujang Valley extends from Gunung Jerai in the north, to the Sungai Muda in the south and the Strait of Melaka in the west. Its principal rivers are the Merbok and the Muda, while Gunung Jerai, at 1217 metres, is the highest land form in the area. Settlements were located on ridges and natural levees along the rivers, and on the foothill slopes, while the main temples were built on elevated land.

The discovery of prehistoric sites at Guar Kepah provides evidence that the kingdom evolved from local settlements. Presumably, these merged together under a strong leader who established a landfall port for traders from India and China. Buddhist inscriptions found in the valley are proof of Indian contacts from the 5th to the 6th century CE. As a result of increased trade in the Strait of Melaka, the Bujang Valley developed into a collecting centre for the products of the Malay Peninsula, and by the 7th century it had evolved into an entrepôt.

Sungai Mas: The original capital

Evidence for the Bujang Valley's entrepôt status is provided by trade products found in the Sungai Mas area, believed to be the centre of the kingdom from the 5th to the early 11th century. Sungai Mas was extremely suitable for a capital as this area today is one of Kelah's major rice-producing regions. In addition, it had the ability to provide shippers and traders with landfall port facilities.

Based on the evidence of religious inscriptions, statues and temples, the religion at Sungai Mas was Buddhism. Apart from the Sungai Mas area, Buddhist monumental sites were located at Bukit Pendut (Site 17), Bukit Meriam (Site 26), Bukit Cora (north of Gunung Jerai) and Sites 14 and 21/22 in Pengkalan Bujang.

Pengkalan Bujang: A later entrepôt

By the end of the 10th century, the area around Pengkalan Bujang became prominent. Evidence of this is based on the density of West Asian and Song Dynasty ceramic deposits, as well as imported glass and beads discovered in the region.

These wares were mixed with the

products of Thailand and Indochina. The very cosmopolitan nature of the deposits led archaeologists to conclude that Pengkalan Bujang was an entrepôt. Further evidence which suggests its importance from the end of the 10th century is the large number of temples, artefacts and images associated with Hinduism. The rich variety of artefacts indicates a prosperous and innovative culture during this period. Local materials were used in temple construction, and tiles, pottery and gold and silver reliquary ornaments were produced locally.

The kingdom in the Bujang Valley evolved earlier than Srivijaya, but came under Srivijaya's influence around 670 CE.

However, the kingdom was allowed to retain entrepôt status as long as it did not challenge Srivijaya. At the end of the 11th century, when Srivijaya declined, the Bujang Valley became powerful again. It was still in existence in the 14th century, as evidenced by finds of Ming Dynasty ceramics, but declined with the coming of Islam and the rise of Melaka as an entrepôt.



The most prominent Hindu temple excavated so far is the 11th-century Canal Bukit Batu Pahat (Site 8) which is made from red sandstone obtained from the adjacent Sungai Merbok basin. It was the first monument in the Bujang Valley to be contemporarily excavated and reported.



At Sungai Mas (Site 32), Chinese ceramics from the Tang Dynasty and West Asian sapphires and glassware have been found.



The Hindu temple at Site 16, Bunting Sari, has been reconstructed near the Bujang Valley Archaeological Museum.



The Hindu temple at Site 16, Pengkalan Bujang, has been reconstructed on site.

Archaeological sites of the Bujang Valley

The site numbers shown on this map's impression of the Bujang Valley follow the system established by the archaeologists H. G. and D. Quartch during the 1950s. Other prominent locations are marked as follows:

- A. Sungai Mas Archaeological Project
- B. Sungai Mas
- C. Gua Kepah
- D. Sungai Merbok
- E. Pengkalan Bujang
- F. Bujang Valley Archaeological Museum

