

Southeast Asia Readings

Sea-Based Kingdoms:

Srivijaya Empire

The Srivijaya Empire was a maritime and commercial kingdom that flourished between the 7th and the 13th centuries largely in what is now Indonesia. The kingdom originated in Palembang on the island of Sumatra and soon extended its influence and controlled the Strait of Malacca. Srivijaya's power was based on its control of international sea trade. It established trade relations not only with the states in the Malay Archipelago but also with China and India. The Srivijaya Empire controlled two major passageways between India and China: the Sunda Straits from the city of Palembang and the Strait of Malacca—to the north. It built its navy and prospered by charging fees for ships traveling between India and China. This control strengthened trade routes to China, India, and even Arabia. Some of the goods the people in the empire traded included ivory, tin, nutmeg, sandalwood, and strong-smelling camphor and aloes that were used for medicinal purposes. The empire had access to the trade network of spices from India and goods like silk and porcelain from China.

Srivijaya was also a religious center in the region. It adhered to Mahayana Buddhism and soon became the stopping point for Chinese Buddhist pilgrims on their way to India. The kings of Srivijaya even founded monasteries in southeastern India. The influence of Buddhism also affected political structures in the Srivijaya Empire. Srivijayan rulers incorporated Buddhist philosophy into their public image.

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Srivijaya-empire>

Majapahit Empire

Majapahit empire, the last Indianized kingdom in Indonesia; based in eastern Java, it existed between the 13th and 16th centuries.

Majapahit was one of the last major Hindu empires of the region and is considered to be one of the greatest and most powerful empires in the history of Indonesia and Southeast Asia, one that is sometimes seen as the precedent for Indonesia's modern boundaries. Hinduism fused with Buddhism were the primary religions. Islam was tolerated and there is evidence that Muslims worked within the court. Javanese kings rule in accordance with wahyu, the belief that some people had a divine mandate to rule. People believed if a king misruled the people had to go down with him. It collapsed in 1478 when it was sacked by Denmark and the Majapahit rulers fled, opening the way to Muslim conquest of Java.

Its reach by force was limited, as in the failed campaign in 1357 against Sunda in western Java, however, making the kingdom's economic and cultural vigor perhaps more important factors. Majapahit's ships carried bulk goods, spices, and other exotic commodities throughout the region, spread the use of Malay (not Javanese) as a lingua franca, and brought news of the kingdom's urban center at Trowulan, which covered approximately 100 square kilometers and offered its inhabitants a remarkably high standard of living. It sustained its power by controlling sea routes similar Srivijaya. The spread of Islam and the rise of the Islamic states along the northern coast of Java eventually brought the Majapahit era to an end in the late 15th or early 16th century.

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Majapahit-empire>



Land-Based Kingdoms:

Khmer Empire

The Khmer empire was a powerful state in South East Asia lasting from 802 CE to 1431 CE. At its peak, the empire covered much of what today is Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, and southern Vietnam. Their art and culture heavily influenced by India due to long established sea trade routes with that subcontinent.

There were several religious beliefs present, with Hinduism being favored (yet not exclusively) by the kings at first, and Buddhism later. The temples there show the influence of Indian culture on Southeast Asia. Hindu artwork and sculptures of deities abound. At some point the Khmer rulers became Buddhist. Starting in the 12th and 13th centuries, they added Buddhist sculptures and artwork to the temples without destroying any of the Hindu artwork.

They did not depend on maritime prowess for their power. The kingdoms' complex irrigation and drainage systems led to economic prosperity, making it one of the most prosperous kingdoms in Southeast Asia. Irrigation allowed farmers to harvest rice crops several times a year, and drainage systems reduced the impact of heavy monsoon rains.

The Khmer were great builders, filling the landscape with monumental temples, a hundred hospitals, huge reservoirs and canals, and laying an extensive road network with all sorts of bridges. The most stunning temple, Angkor Wat, is a microcosm of the Hindu universe and defies imagination as the world's largest religious complex. Its construction took 30 years and was started around 1122 CE. The city of Angkor at its apogee it was the biggest city in the world, covering an area of a thousand square kilometers, close to that of modern Los Angeles in the USA. Its population is much harder to estimate, but a figure of approximately one million is acceptable.

https://www.ancient.eu/Khmer_Empire/



Sukhothai Kingdom (Thailand)

Sukhothai kingdom, former kingdom, north-central Thailand. It was founded in the mid-13th century when a local Tai ruler led a revolt against Khmer rule. It remained only a small local power until its third ruler, Ramkhamhaeng, inherited the kingdom c. 1279. He extended its power to the south onto the Malay Peninsula, to the west into what is now Myanmar (Burma), and to the northeast into present-day Laos.

At the end of the 1300s CE, Sukhothai was one of the largest centers of Buddhism in the world. Later kings established beautiful Theravada temples and recruited Buddhist monks from afar to come and live in the city of Sukhothai. Two kinds were devout Buddhists and patrons of the arts who greatly enhanced the city's beauty through the construction of monumental architecture. During their reigns, a distinct style of Sukhothai art emerged.

Images of the Buddha, as reflected in sculpture or painting, became highly stylized and recognizable by virtue of their grace and elegance at Sukhothai. Sukhothai's temples as well delineate a certain ethereal grace with their bell-shaped stupas and lotus-bud finials. Architects and engineers came to Sukhothai to build exquisite monasteries of brick and decorated them with carved stucco.

King Ram Khamhaeng (r.c. 1275-1298 CE) additionally sent envoys to China, helping to stimulate trade and enrich Sukhothai. Sukhothai flourished over the next 150 years in large part due to its geographic location. Centered almost midway between the Khmer Empire to the southeast and the Burmese Kingdom to the northwest, cosmopolitan Sukhothai thrived on commerce and patronage. Sukhothai became centers in the production and exportation of ceramics throughout Southeast Asia. The artisans of Sukhothai produced pottery with a green-glaze ware, which attracted widespread admiration and can be found as far away as what is present-day Indonesia and the Philippines.



<https://www.ancient.eu/Sukhothai/>

South Asia Empires Readings

Vijayanagara Empire

The Vijayanagara Empire existed as a south Indian empire. Established in 1336, it lasted until 1646. The mingling of all faiths and vernaculars (languages) inspired architectural innovation of Hindu temple construction. The Vijayanagara Empire created an epoch in South Indian history by promoting Hinduism as a unifying factor.

The King stood as the ultimate authority, assisted by a cabinet of ministers headed by the prime minister. The government required all high ranking ministers and officers to have military training.

The empire's economy depended largely on agriculture and the capital city thrived as a business center. Large vessels from China made frequent visits, some captained by the Chinese Admiral Zheng He, and brought Chinese products to the empire's 300 ports. When merchant ships docked, officials took the merchandise into official custody, assessing taxes on all items sold. Traders of many nationalities settled in Calicut, drawn by the thriving trade business. Pepper, ginger, cinnamon, cardamom, tamarind timber, precious and semi-precious stones, pearls, musk, ambergris, rhubarb, aloe, cotton cloth, and porcelain constituted the empire's principal exports.

The Vijayanagara kings were tolerant of all religions and sects, as writings by foreign visitors show. The kings used titles such as Gobrahmana Pratipalanacharya (literally, "protector of cows and Brahmins") that testified to their intention of protecting Hinduism and yet at the same time adopted Islamic court ceremonies, dress, and political language. The Bhakti Movement (in Hinduism) was active during this time. This movement refers to devotion and love for a god by a devotee. The Hindu caste system prevailed. The Muslim communities had representation by their own group in coastal Karnataka. In civil life, by virtue of the caste system, Brahmins enjoyed a high level of respect. The Vijayanagara kings practiced tolerance of all religions and sects as writings by foreign visitors show.



https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Vijayanagara_Empire

Delhi Sultanate

The Delhi Sultanate ruled in India from 1210 to 1526. In the early 13th century, Islamic forces managed to conquer the city of Delhi and much of the northern portion of South Asia. Bringing Islam into India, the Delhi Sultanate reigned for 300 years.

The interaction of Islam and Hinduism in northern India dominated the political history of the era. While some Hindus converted to Islam, others resented Muslims and considered them foreigners. One factor contributing to this resentment was that the Delhi Sultanate imposed a tax, called the jizya, on all non-Muslim subjects in the empire. Relations between Hindus and Muslims were generally good although there were times when Hindu sacred sites were desecrated and Hindus were persecuted. Yet to a considerable degree, Indian Islam meshed in with the land and the culture of India, creating a pluralist society. The Sultans of Delhi enjoyed cordial, if superficial, relations with other Muslim rulers in the Near East but owed them no allegiance. The Sultans based their laws on the Qur'an and the sharia and permitted non-Muslim subjects to practice their religion only if they paid jizya or head tax. The resulting "Indo-Muslim" fusion left lasting monuments in architecture, music, literature, and religion.

Throughout the reign, the Delhi Sultanate never organized an efficient bureaucracy in the style of the Chinese. For this reason, sultans had difficulty imposing their policies in a land as vast and diverse as India. Despite the strong Islamic presence in the region, local kingdoms continued to play a major role in India's decentralized political landscape.

The sultans wanted to extend their rule southward. Before they succeeded, though, they became focused on defending themselves from an onslaught by the Mongol army from the northwest. They prevented the Mongols from conquering South Asia. This was the main achievement of the Delhi Sultanate. However, in 1526, they sultans lost power to a new empire, the Mughals, whose leaders did trace their ancestry to the Mongols.



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