

Not Just a Stepping Stone:

Peninsular Thailand and the Gulf of Siam in the Maritime Silk Road

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Abstract

Peninsular Thailand occupied a strategic location between the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal and became an integral part of the Maritime Silk Road since the late centuries BCE. A Chinese account during the Han Dynasty referred to this isthmian tract as a stepping stone or a door to the west, where merchants could find goods from everywhere as well. However, archaeological evidence from Peninsular Thailand suggests that ancient communities here were themselves also major producers of goods, such as jewelry, forest products, and minerals, circulated widely in Maritime Asia, in which China was a vital market. Semi-precious stone beads and pendants, similar to those produced in Peninsular Thailand in the late centuries BCE and early centuries CE were found in the Han tombs in South China. The Chinese accounts from the same period also recorded that forest products such as aromatic woods and animal parts from this region were exported to China and other parts of the ancient world. Moreover, the historical and archaeological evidence points to the existence of a neighborhood of communities and kingdoms around the Gulf of Siam that evolved into an important market and a busy hub of trade to include the passage of people and ideas, in which Peninsular Thailand played a significant role. The Gulf network, therefore, was serving as producer, facilitator, consumer, and market for the Maritime Silk Road.

Short bio

Dr. Wannasarn Noonsuk is a lecturer for the Ph. D. Program in Asian Studies and head of the Research Unit for Archaeology at Walailak University, Thailand, and will serve as a senior lecturer in art history at SEAMEO SPAFA. In 2002, His Majesty the King of Thailand awarded him with the Anandamahidol Scholarship for his graduate studies. Dr. Wannasarn received his M.A. in Anthropology from the University of Hawaii in 2005 and his Ph.D. in History of Art and Archaeology from Cornell University in 2012. He was a post-doc at l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient and has written several books and articles on the Tambralinga Kingdom and archaeology of Peninsular Thailand.

