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At the Origins of Srivijaya: The Emergence of State and Cities in Southeast Sumatra

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Archaeological research in southeast Sumatra during the past two decades has brought to light a considerable amount of new data regarding the state formation process that resulted in the late 7th century CE foundation of the Srivijaya polity. Contrary to the process illustrated in early studies, but confirming Oliver Wolters' "favoured coast" hypothesis, it is now apparent that proto-historic settlements, some of them possibly proto-urban, had developed in both the Jambi and Musi river basins centuries before the birth of Srivijaya. Sizeable settlement sites, in particular, have been identified at Karang Agung and Air Sugihan, downstream from Palembang, not far from the present day coastline, in a back mangrove environment. Some appear to have been referred to in Chinese sources in the 5th and 6th centuries and show signs of having adopted Indic religions and language.

Based on the new data, it is possible now to offer a renewed view of the birth of Srivijaya. Various factors may have contributed to shape the new polity. Geographical determinism must be taken into consideration to explain the positioning of the new capital-city at Palembang, on firmer ground, much further upstream than the earlier



Figure Balai Arkeologi Palembang Excavations at Karang Agung, 2002: 3rd–4th Century AD Wooden Poles of Settlement Houses.

coastal settlements. The spatial distribution and specialisation of excavated and surveyed sites within the modern city of Palembang also allows us to draw conclusions on the city-state status of Srivijaya's capital. Ecological factors, such as the availability at short distance of productions valued as trade commodities (benzoin) and of food staples necessary to feed a large city (sago), must also have played a role when choices of location had to be made by the new political power. Buddhism has also no doubt played a major role in bringing together these various polities together under one paramount ruler, as witnessed by the early spatial distribution of 7th–8th century Buddha and Avalokitesvara statues in the Jambi and South Sumatra provinces, not to speak of the probable destruction of an earlier Vaishnava network.

The image that emerges from these various considerations is that of a complex, long-term, multi-factor process of state formation, during which indianisation, urbanisation, religion and trade—both inland and overseas—played critical roles.

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Ideology and the State under the Early Medieval Pallavas and Colas: Puranic Religion and *Bhakti*

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Ideology has been a major concern in recent studies on the State in South India, which have raised important questions on the nature of the state under the brahmanical polities (monarchies) of the early medieval Pallavas and the Pāṇḍyas (6th to the 9th centuries AD) leading to the development of a more enduring state system under the Cōḷas of Tanjavur (to the 13th centuries AD). The debate started by the characterization of the Cōḷa state as a peasant state and society and segmentary state with a ritual sovereignty and absence of a centralized administration has led to several empirical studies on the Cōḷa period, with a computerized statistical analysis of the rich inscriptions of the period and micro level studies of the institutions which sustained the Cōḷa state. Institutions such as the Brahmadeya and the Temple, which were regarded as legitimating institutions and as superordinate integrative forces have hence been an important part of such studies, which inevitably underlines the importance of the ideological base of such institutions.



Figure Aerial View of the Tanjavur Temple Showing the Cosmic Symbolism of the Royal Temple of Rajaraja I, Built in the Early 11th Century AD. Courtesy, Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), Chennai.

This paper attempts to trace the evolution of the ideology that created these institutional bases in the formation of the medieval south Indian state under the sub-regional polities of the Pallavas and Pāṇḍyas and the more powerful regional polity/state of the Cōḷas, during the 6th to the 13th centuries AD, which coincides with the emergence of a distinctive culture region i.e. the Tamil region.

Rich in literary and epigraphic sources, the Tamil region provides evidence of three major periods of development of a pre-state to a state society from the early historical period to the early medieval period. These periods represent a tribal chiefly organization in the early stages i.e. 3rd century BC to the 3rd century AD gradually turning into a well organized Brahmanical polity in the three politico-cultural regions of Tamiḷakam in the 6th to 9th centuries AD and integration of these sub-regions into a larger state society under the Cōḷas, the most enduring among the peninsular states.

The Pallavas and Pāṇḍyas adopted the Brāhmanical tradition and built up a complex set of ideological constructs, which represented an amalgam of three major strands of the Brāhmanical tradition, i.e. the Vedic, Purāṇic-Itihāsic as the background for the evolution of a regional idiom of the Bhakti cult. Such an amalgam was imbibed by them from the northern regions like Deccan and Andhra, from which the Pallavas initially emerged as the first Brāhmanical polity to have created a territorial base in northern Tamiḷakam. Their early grants derived their format from the Ikṣvāku records, but more importantly relied on the *yajña* or sacrifice and land grants to Brāhmanas as their legitimating act, seeking a more stable territory in the Tamil country, replacing their military camps and migrations within Andhra. Gotra affiliations of the grantees were the main reference in these grants.