

Early empires and kingdoms in Southeast Asia



Prior to 1200 C.E. the regions between India and China were developed through the emerging Indian Ocean trade lanes and the cultural diffusion from both Hinduism and Buddhism. Below are brief details about some of the important cultural adaptations of the regions shown in the above map.

Srivijaya Empire

The region developed as a connection between commerce and state building. The local economy grew due to competition for traders from the Indian Ocean that sailed through the Straits of Malacca into the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra regions. It became the dominant region between 670 to 1025 C.E. The region had a plentiful supply of gold, and spices such as cloves, nutmeg, and mace. Taxes were levied on passing ships and the government created a large army which provided safety for the traders.

Funan

The region that is now Southern Vietnam and Cambodia has had many archeological digs performed that found Roman coins, goods from Persia, Central Asia, and Arabia, evidence of the cultural diffusion due to trade.

Khmer Empire

The city of Angkor flourished between 800 and 1300 C.E. They exported exotic forest products and imported Chinese and Indian handicrafts. A large community of Chinese merchants became permanent residents due to the extensive trade networks that had developed in the region. The complex known as **Angkor Wat** was built during the 12th century. It is the largest religious structure in the premodern world. It was originally a Hindu temple dedicated to the god Vishnu that by the 12th century would later become a Buddhist sanctuary.



The temple at Angkor Wat

Champa

This was a region that is today central and southern Vietnam, famous for its rice, and merchants operated trade routes within China, Java and other regions. They became noted for their piracy during times of poor trading. Their efforts to control trade in the region provoked warfare among their commercial rivals. In the Champa kingdom, Hinduism was also worshipped. Shiva was worshipped, cows were sacred.

Other effects of trade and cultural diffusion in early Southeast Asia

Indian alphabets such as **Sanskrit** and **Pallava** were used to write a number of Southeast Asian languages. Indian sculptures and architecture were used in local buildings.

Southeast Asian rulers and the elite class saw themselves as god-kings, perhaps from reincarnations of a Buddha or the Hindu deity Shiva. Srivijayan monarchs employed Indian people as advisers, clerks, or officials and assigned Sanskrit titles to their subordinates. The capital city of Palembang was truly cosmopolitan. It was claimed that even the parrots spoke four languages!

The local rulers combined indigenous beliefs of magical powers with Indian political ideas and Buddhist religious concepts. Srivijaya became the center for Buddhist observance and teaching that attracted thousands of monks and students from around the Buddhist world.

Sailendra Kingdom

This region in central Java saw a massive building project during the eighth and tenth centuries. The highlight is the world's largest Buddhist monument in the world known as **Borobudur**. It is a mountain-shaped structure of ten levels, with a three-mile walkway full of carvings depicting the spiritual journey from ignorance to full enlightenment.



The Borobudur monument

The extensive Indian influence in Southeast Asia has been termed “**Indianization**” and is similar in scope to the earlier spread of Hellenistic culture as seen with Alexander the Great or the cultural diffusion spread during the Roman Empire.

The Role of women in Southeast Asia

Women in these regions of Southeast Asia led a different lifestyle than those of India or China. Women had fewer restrictions and they led a greater role in public life. They were allowed to own property jointly with their husbands and the laws allowed them to initiate a divorce.

Women in Angkor were involved in the commerce and trade industries as well as being able to serve as gladiators, warriors, members of the palace staff, poets, artists, and religious teachers. In neighboring Pagan, the 13th century queen Pwa Saw ruled for forty years and she even donated some of her lands and wealth to build a large Buddhist temple.