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DISCUSSION AND DEBATE

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How Unique Was Srivijaya?

In *BKI* 151 (pp. 235-88) Jan Wisseman Christie published a substantial, admirable State-of-the-Art Review on 'State Formation in Early Maritime Southeast Asia'. In it she surveys the large volume of data on the region and the period produced by historians, archaeologists and anthropologists. Thanks to this article it has finally become possible, also for the non-specialist, to form a general idea of this complex area. The author is to be complimented on this excellent publication. If I venture to make some comments here nevertheless, this is not with the intention of detracting from the merits of the article; these comments are meant rather to stimulate further discussion of some of the interesting issues raised in Dr. Wisseman's review.

The section of the essay that interested me most is – of course – the one on State Formation and Social Science Models (pp. 237-43), as this is the field in which I have been working for quite some time. In this section Dr. Wisseman critically reviews a number of theories and models developed to distinguish the state from other forms of socio-political organization, such as chiefdoms and headmanships. She states that these more general models do not, however, provide 'a compelling description of any particular early state in maritime Southeast Asia' (1995:238). Such a description is said to be found rather in the works of regional specialists. The review of the works of scholars specializing in Southeast Asian history and anthropology that then follows shows, however, that they do not provide very convincing models, either. Neither Wittfogel's 'hydraulic society', nor Geertz's 'theatre state' or Van Naerssen's 'simple hydraulic society model' appears to be suitable for accounting for early maritime states. This is a result of the rather special structure of these states. As they were not typically territorial, or dependent on the subjection of agriculturists, it is not surprising that hydraulic or territorially oriented models fall short. These states were not characterized by urbanization, either. Their most important characteristic seems to have been trade: the maritime states of the region dominated trade over large distances. As the most important of these early maritime states, Dr. Wisseman points to Sumatra-based Srivijaya (1995:264-72). Like the good historian she is, she emphasizes the unique nature of this state, saying:

'It is this uniqueness of Srivijaya – rather than the fact that it can be classed in a general manner as an Early State or Kingdom – that makes the polity of interest, not least because of the light that it may throw

upon the process of state formation in maritime Southeast Asia' (1995:269).

The state of Srivijaya was the creation of a number of riparian and coastal communities, trading in goods produced by others. This made this type of state (there appear to have been several more or less similar trading states in maritime Southeast Asia) 'economically quite fragile and historically often ephemeral, although the political tradition itself was very resilient' (1995:270). This quotation implies that Srivijaya was not so unique after all. There moreover appear to have been two types of such state: 'the simple, single-port state and the larger, multi-port state, the latter being composed, essentially, of two or more simple states' (1995:271).

I have no problem with the description of Srivijaya as an early maritime polity (I refrain for the moment from a more precise qualification). Nor do I have any problems with the fact that there were several such maritime polities in Southeast Asia (cf. Hall 1985; Van Naerssen and De Jongh 1977). I heartily endorse the statement that these polities 'come close to the model of the polity formed by voluntary association, or at least held together more by perceived mutual benefit than by force' (1995:271), moreover. It is *not* clear to me how this kind of polity can be called a *state*, however. The Srivijaya conglomerate consisted of a number of more or less mutually cooperating, fairly independent regions scattered over a large area of the Indonesian archipelago. The control of the centre over the distant parts was at best indirect; in the overseas regions the central ruler was mainly dependent on the voluntary cooperation – or the enlightened self-interest – of the regional lords. It is true that Van Naerssen and De Jongh (1977:33) mention 'punitive expeditions' to Java, but it is not known how effective such expeditions were. If we imagine the state as a centralized political organization headed by a ruler with the legitimate power to enforce decisions, then these conglomerates of more or less mutually cooperating communities of sea nomads and regional lords dominating the mouths of rivers and ports do not qualify as states.

This statement does not imply that the Srivijaya polity lacked every form of state organization. There did exist a central ruler controlling the whole network of trade and trade alliances. This authority actually ruled only a small territory, however. Here he exercised a strong political (and ideological) influence, and his directives were strictly obeyed, sometimes perhaps under duress. These features can be extracted from Dr. Wisseman's description of the core region of Srivijaya (1995:270-1). They suggest that at least – and most probably only – the heart of the Srivijaya conglomerate was a 'normal' Early State. The criteria which I once suggested (which are quoted by Dr. Wisseman on p. 237) – a fixed territory, a minimum population of a few thousand persons, a production system (trade, in this specific case) generating a regular and reasonably stable surplus (to maintain the aristocracy), an ideology legitimizing the

political and social hierarchy, and some sort of sacral position of the ruler – are wholly met here.

There is every reason to consider the maritime, trade-based conglomerates of Southeast Asia as unique types of socio-political organization; but there is no reason to assume that the general criteria for early states are not applicable to the political core of such polities. Srivijaya was unique – but not so unique.

REFERENCES

- Hall, K.R., 1985, *Maritime trade and state development in early Southeast Asia*, Honolulu: Hawaii University Press.
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