

law is a tour de force that will undoubtedly influence and inspire generations of socio-legal scholars in their efforts to examine how the law continues to shape politics and vice versa across the Global South and other underexplored regions and nations.

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Khao Sam Kaeo: An early port-city between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea

Edited by BÉRÉNICE BELLINA

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This is simply a fabulous book. Bérénice Bellina and a multidisciplinary team of archaeologists and scientists from a range of allied disciplines undertook fieldwork at a rural site in southern Thailand for four years in order to be able to compile this volume. It is a labour of love. But perhaps one should emphasise the word 'labour' more than love, because anyone can sense how much grindingly-hard work must have gone into the production of this tome. The book weighs in at 675 pages, and you can feel every one of them when holding it in hand. This was not armchair work; this was labour in the heat and humidity and dust of the southeastern seaboard, astride the bakingly-hot Gulf of Thailand. Bellina's team spent their digging seasons trying to piece together the astonishing history of this place, which served as a conduit between the trade and civilisations of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. With almost nothing surviving in written form from the period when Khao Sam Kaeo thrived, this is a material history, one written in objects, and in detritus left in the land. The team have allowed us through their labours to think of how and why a small centre such as this one might have come into being, become important for a time, and eventually declined, all in the space of several centuries. There is almost nothing left in this place now, more than two millennia after the site started to become important. But its vestigial importance in whispering to us of patterns of human life in this part of the world is unmistakable.

Bellina and her researchers tell us that Khao Sam Kaeo was one of a number of small polities which experimented with increasingly complex forms of organisation during this time. Long-distance trade which criss-crossed Asia was beginning to thrive during this period: connections were being made in larger circuits than had ever previously been attempted, across both land and sea-scapes in this part of the world. Khao Sam Kaeo was strategically located in a place that took advantage of these developments. Situated on the Kra Isthmus, the narrowest point of the Malay Peninsula, it gradually became one of a number of sites that would function as portage centres for goods passing between South and East Asia, mostly via water. Sailing around the

entire peninsula was difficult; it took time, and more supplies than a cross-peninsula transshipment of commodities. The port developed due to this need, and was able to contribute to the growth of long-distance trade accordingly. The site became a locus of some importance in its own right. There would not have been a huge population there, nor an enormous amount of trade—these were small, initial steps to what eventually would become termed the ‘Maritime Silk Road’, that most imprecise of terms. But the phrase does conjure up the sort of transcontinental trade that eventually connected the world into a single conversation, though these were only baby steps at this point in places such as Khao Sam Kaeo. From those steps, however, increasingly multifunctional civilisations learned to ‘walk’, and to continue conversations with each other in art, commerce, and religion. Small sites such as this one would have been the ground-zeros of those conversations, and the process of seeding the world with human beings and their encampments; small affairs initially (to be sure) but growing larger and larger by the century.

The level of multidisciplinary research on view in this book just takes one’s breath away. Geologists have as much place in this conversation as historians, and material scientists—who deal in pottery, glass, resins, and spores, among many (many) other objects—all get their say as well. The book is lavishly illustrated, and we can see middens and also coral, beads as well as shards, all in their splendour (and in full colour). If you don’t want to be an archaeologist after perusing this volume, then something is likely wrong with you. But it’s not a collection of data thrown together willy-nilly, and just pressed together with no method to the madness. There is a rhyme and reason to the layout, and each section follows from the next, peeling another layer of meaning away from the (many) meanings of this one site. It’s an onion being peeled in front of our eyes. The scientific bits alone are worth cherishing, as these leave such a corpus of data for the rest of us to explore that it would take years to track it all down. But it is the level of synthesis, interpretation, and the attempt to explain how this place might have fit into local worlds, but also to larger contexts and structures of regional and transregional trade, which is truly remarkable. Burial zones indicate some answers; craft activities tell us other ones. Even the environmental story on show, a tale of adapting to the land and then eventually adapting that land to human purposes, is fascinating. One can see how the land was changed by Khao Sam Kaeo and how Khao Sam Kaeo was in turn changed by shifts in the land. Ever present in this discussion however was the sea, which was the lifeblood of this place. Without the sea, there would have been no Khao Sam Kaeo. And that, perhaps, is the biggest lesson of all: this shadow of a port, with only tiny remnants now extant, was ultimately fluid—and eventually, most of it dispersed, after it had lived out its time. Like history itself, Khao Sam Kaeo eventually receded into the distance, into the land around it, and into the sea, through its web of interactions, now long gone. We only hear its echo now, and that is because of the stellar work of these scholars, both Thai and French together working side by side, in the heat. Bravo.

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