

# BUDDHIST ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

By Dr. S. Durai Raja Singam

*Dr. S. Durai Raja Singam is a celebrated historian, researcher, educator and columnist with a natural flair for writing. Born in Port Weld, Perak in 1904 Dr. Durai Raja Singam started writing at the age of 19, and has more than 35 books to his credit, with titles such as "A Hundred Years of Ceylonese in Malaysia & Singapore", "Port Weld to Kuantan", "Malayan Street Names" to name a few. He is considered excellent resource material for Malaysian history and has also written extensively for the newspapers. Ed.*

The historical connections between India and Malaysia are great and varied. Indian culture has filtered through the ages into many phases of Malay life. Its traces survive not only in language and ritual but in meagre and scattered archaeological remains. Indians disseminated Buddhism both of the southern (Hinayana) and the northern school (Mahayana) in Malaysia, as may be seen from its Buddhist images. Buddhism existed side by side with Hinduism. Both religions were introduced to Malaya at practically the same time towards the beginning of the Christian era. From the archaeological remains it is evident that for the first seven centuries, Hinayana, the earlier school of Buddhism flourished but with the rise of the Sailendras in the eighth century, the Mahayana school gained influence. From the tenth century onwards we find that Tantric Buddhism came into prominence.

The early Buddha images are in the style of Amaravati, a centre of Buddhist sculpture on the east coast of central India. Amaravati flourished in the second and third centuries and this helps one to determine the time and source of Indian contacts. Malaya became an important centre of Buddhist culture.

In 1947 several Buddhist images of archaeological interest were found in a cave at Baling, Kedah. But these are considered to be Siamese images dating not earlier than the 19th century. One could see at the Taiping Museum in Perak, seven of these Buddhist images, six fragments of gold leaf and a piece of rock crystal. It is worthwhile listing Malaya's Buddhist images for the benefit of students interested in Malaysia as a very early outpost of Indian civilisation.

The oldest Buddha from Malaysia is a small bronze image 8½ inches high. It was excavated in Kedah by Mrs Quaritch Wales and is one of the most

important archaeological finds from the state. According to Dr Quaritch Wales, it enjoys the distinction of being the only image in the round at present known to have survived the iconoclasm of the Kedah converts to Islam. Evidently it is a product of India's Gupta age, dating back to the 5th century AD and considered to provide further evidence in support of the theory that the earliest Indian colonies in Kedah came from the Krishna-Godavari region.

Another interesting find by Mrs Quaritch Wales was farther south, on an old course of the Muda river in Province Wellesley. Here the remains of the 5th century stupa were discovered at a site believed to be the one where more than a hundred years ago Colonel James Low found the 5th century Buddhagupta Mahanavika inscription, now in the Calcutta Museum. The inscribed slab is decorated with the incised outline of a stupa, evidently similar to the remains of the one brought to light.

In his *History of the Peninsular Malays* R.J. Wilkinson, mentions a little bronze image of a walking Buddha discovered in a Tanjong Rambutan mine, in Perak, some 60 feet below the surface. It is illustrated from a poor photograph in an article by the same scholar in Wright's large volume entitled *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya*. The photograph was sent to Prof Coedes, who thought the figure almost certainly to be of the Gupta school of the 6th century (*Hinayana* according to Quaritch Wales) but could not be quite certain from the photograph. It belonged to the late Mr Alma Baker and was packed away with his belongs at Batu Gajah, Perak. Where it may be now it is not possible to say.

"A jewel of mediaeval oriental art" is the description given by Van Stein Callenfels, the eminent Dutch archaeologist, to the magnificent bronze statue brought up by a dredge of the Sungei Kinta Mining Company (Pengkalan North) near Ipoh, Perak in 1931. This historical treasure was presented to the Taiping Museum by Mr Templeton, Manager of the mine. It was a bronze statue of Buddha in almost perfect condition. Callenfels was of the opinion that it belonged to the period 750 AD when a Sailendra ruler of Sri Vijaya had extended his influence over northern Malaya. Bronze statuettes of this period are

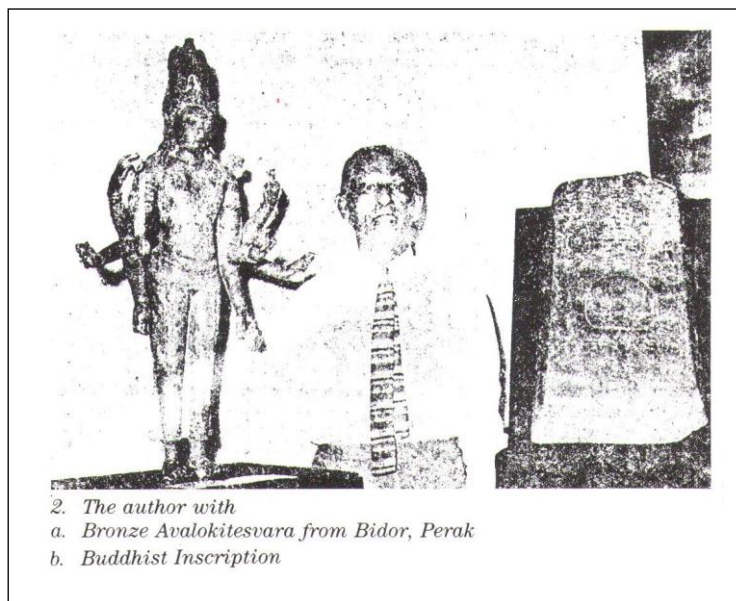


*A little bronze image apparently of a walking Buddha discovered at Tanjong Rambutan mine at a depth of some 60 feet below the surface.*

very rare, only four existing in the Yogyakarta Museum, and the Taiping statue, if it still exists, is the best example of the period yet discovered. Callenfels added that the Taiping image was one of the best specimens of the art of the Sri Vijaya period. Quaritch Wales who examined the image personally, agreed with Coedes' ascription to the Gupta school and would date it from the fifth or sixth century AD. This beautiful bronze *Hinayana* standing Buddha (18 inches high), of pure Indian Gupta style, was illustrated by Quaritch Wales in the *Illustrated London News* (July 23rd 1938), in profile in Winstedt's *History of Malaya* (page 22), and full-faced in Winstedt's *History of Perak* (JRASMB, 1934), and in Quaritch Wales' *Towards Angkor* (page 28). It was first published by I.J.N. Evans in the *Journal of the FMS Museums* Vol. XV part 3 pp. 135, 136.

There was another find at the same mine at Pengkalan, near Ipoh in Perak of a bronze lotus pedestal on which a slanting figure must have rested. This bronze throne for a figure of Buddha, height 8½ inches, which must have been in the European attitude was dredged up with the last bronze figure. It was illustrated in the same article by I.H.N. Evans. Quaritch Wales is of the opinion that in view of the style of the throne it also may be dated not later than the sixth century. It has survived the Japanese occupation and is at the Taiping Museum.

A bronze eight-armed standing figure, 31 inches high, which analysis has shown to be almost pure copper, represents a Mahayanist Avalokitesvara, according to Quaritch Wales. It was dredged up in a tin mine at Bidor in Perak and is unmistakably South Indian in appearance. It was looted from the Perak Museum, Taiping, but was recovered intact from a minehold, and when I last saw it, was at



Taiping after the Japanese occupation. It had the label "Recovered in a mining pool at Tupai". This has been illustrated in Quaritch Wales' article on page 173 of the *Illustrated London News* (July 23rd, 1935) and in his *Archaeological Researches on Ancient Indian Colonization in Malaya* (JRASMB, Vol XVIII, Plate 79 February, 1940). It is 3 feet high and weighs 125 katis and is believed to date back a thousand years. The figure had eight hands, four on each side, but one of its right hands was missing when it was dug up. The right hand

palms were holding a length of prayer beads, a trident and the third was in the attitude of reciting prayers. The left hand was holding a lotus, a palm leaf book, a noose of cord and a water vessel. On each of the wrists was a bracelet, and around the loin was a skirt. It was in a fine state of preservation. The symbols of the eight hands are as follows:-

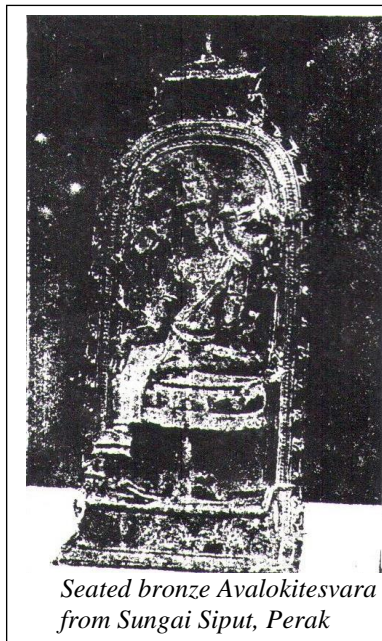
Right:

*Aksanālā* (rosary)  
*Tridanī* (trident)  
 Arm broken off, but by analogy  
 with Battacharya's illustration  
 may have been in *abhaya mudra*  
 In *varada mudra* (bestowing boons)

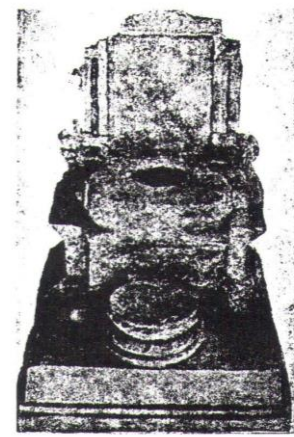
Left:

*Pustaka* (palm leaf book)  
*Pāsa* (noose)  
*Padma* (the red lotus)  
*Kalasa* (water vessel or kendi)

There are two more bronze Avalokitesvaras of the eighth or ninth century AD, with Pala characteristics, found in Perak and illustrated by Quaritch Wales in his *Archaeological Researches on Ancient Indian Colonization in Malaya* (JRASMB, Vol. XVIII Pt 1 1940). One of these, a seated bronze (9 inches high) of Avalokitesvara, seated



Seated bronze Avalokitesvara from Sungai Siput, Perak



Bronze throne for a figure of Buddha

on a lotus throne (from Hup Kin Kongsu mine near Sungei Siput) in Perak was removed to India by its private owner. Another Mahayana bronze (11 inches high), said to have come from the same mine, is a four-armed Avalokitesvara standing figure. It is the treasured possession of an Indian estate owner, V. Sundraram, of Veerasamy Estate, Sungei Siput, who regards it as a figure of Vishnu.

A Siamese Buddha head of the Ayuth'ya style, obtained at Johore Lama by Quaritch Wales (JRASMB, Vol XVIII pt. 1, p 63) is neither at Taiping nor at the museum in Singapore. Most probably it may have been lost when the Kuala Lumpur Museum was hit by a bomb meant for the railway yard nearby by Allied planes during the Japanese occupation.

Sir Richard Winstedt in his *Malaya* (Constable; page 158) refers to "another Buddha Rajadhiraja", of Siamese type of the fifteenth or sixteenth century, said to have come from Batang Padang, which is in the Perak Museum. Yet another was found in Selangor. On page 159 of this book one finds an illustration of the Batang Padang Buddha. He also makes mention of two Buddhist seals from Gos Gambar in Pahang, now at Raffles Museum. One has six figures, "short and thickest", unlike those of Trang, and the remaining ones are of Javanese type; the three on the top row are Buddhas, and in the centre of the lower row sits a large Buddha, flanked by two standing figures, with a seven-hooded snake above his head. At an excavation at Bukit Chuping, Perlis, Buddhist votive tables of clay were found by Mr H.D. Collings.

F.W. Douglas of Klang informed me that Mr. A.J. King told him (whilst they were both in an internment camp) that the Kampong Kamunting dredge, round about 1920, had brought up the head of a Buddha of beaten gold. There was no known record but an enquiry was being made. It is probable that the head was not of gold but covered by gold leaf. Nor may it have been a Buddha. That we can never know. It is important to remember that a gold ring was found by Ivor Evans at Kuala Selinsing.

Archaeological evidence shows that between 200 and 600 AD there were ancient Indian settlements in Kedah, in Province Wellesley and in Perak. The survey of these Buddhist finds has thrown light on early Indian colonisation in Malaysia. Sir Richard Winstedt has written: "The more one studies the subject, the more one realizes the immense debt Malaysia owes to India for folk-tales as well as for language, religion, custom, literature, and general culture." The earliest Dong-son bronze culture of Klang and the Tembling river belongs still to pre-history.



1a.  
The image of Buddha found by Mrs. Quaritch Wales at Kedah. It is now in the Museum of Singapore.

1b.  
Reverse of the image showing the folds of the garments in the Greek manner.



4. a & b  
Pengkalan Buddha  
Front and side views

