

*Significance of a King in the South-East Section of the Silk Road  
in the Period Between Ancient and Medieval Times*

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The Asian Conference on Asian Studies 2022  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

Along the Silk Road, there were different nations that differed not only ethnically, politically, culturally, but also religiously. Southeast Asia was a very important, both commercial and cultural artery. The route network was connected between countries in the eastern world along the coast of the Asian continental mainland and many associated archipelagos, thus connecting this southeastern part to the west on a wider scale. At first glance, however, quite different worlds were connected culturally – by the religious sphere, by the position of the king, which eliminated differences after both the geographical and ethnic origins of the cultures. The Sacred king combined both material power and spiritual power, and was a guarantee of certainty for that particular society. This position of ruler appears in both Eastern and Western societies, across history. First, I will focus on defining the characteristic features of a sacred king. I characterize these features based on written and material sources in the various areas where this type of king has appeared, in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Subsequently, I analyze and apply these features in the Khmer Empire and the Kingdom of Funan.

Keywords: South-East Asian Studies, Silk Road, Sacred King, Khmer Empire, Kingdom of Funan

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## **Introduction**

The term Silk Road refers to the network of trails and trading posts, oases and cities that connected East Asia with the Mediterranean. The routes led to various points across the Eurasian continent, with one particularly important route, leading to Southeast Asia. The south-eastern part of the Silk Road was an important point of contact between two great civilizations, China and India, and a major channel for East-West trade.

The purpose of this contribution is to analyse the importance of the king in the south-eastern part of the Silk Road in the period between the Antiquity and the Middle Ages. I will first characterize this type of ruler and then indicate in what different cultures we can encounter this type of ruler throughout history. Next, I will draw on primary sources in the form of written records, inscriptions, and selected archaeological sites to identify some of these defined characteristics to identify this sacred king in the setting of Southeast Asia, specifically contemporary Cambodia.

## **Characteristics of the sacral king**

The history of the sacral king dates to ancient Mesopotamia, a little later this type of ruler appeared in Egypt, on the examples of these two countries, two types of ancient oriental ruler can be defined: the Egyptian and the Mesopotamian. In Egypt, the god had a human form and was incarnated in the king himself – the pharaoh. His main task was to provide crops for the whole country. In Mesopotamia, on the other hand, the king was the son of God, entrusted with the administration of the state. If he displeased the God, another human representative took over his function. The monarch played an important role in the rituals that guaranteed fertility, which is why the role of king and high priest is often combined into one person. The king was still both ruler and priest, but the ruler's duties dominated.

The sacral king should generally maintain justice in the country, and guarantee that the strong should not oppress the weak. He is often depicted fighting the forces of evil. It is his victory that is an affirmation of the good relationship the monarch has with the gods, which he is obliged to uphold to protect society from evil, disaster, and disease. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh wrestles with and defeats the Bull of Heaven; he is further depicted in the epic as the shepherd of Uruk - that is, the shepherd of the people. He was the bearer of magical ruler luck, which he transfers to his people, and there is a measure of sanctity around him. Sometimes it is something completely taboo, and even the ruler could act as a source of supernatural divine energy. According to primary sources I created a characteristics of the sacred king:

1. A) Incarnate God himself in human form; B) Son of a deity C) Descendant of a major genus
2. Religious functions to guarantee a good relationship with the gods
3. Guarantees fertility
4. He is raised/rescued by animals
5. The ruler is entrusted by the heavens to rule
6. It abounds in magical dynastic happiness
7. Maintaining justice
8. Guarantees order
9. Provides protection
10. Fighting the forces of evil

The sacral ruler was the mediator between heaven and earth. He was the guarantor of justice and responsible for the welfare and good relations with the gods. If an individual or an entire community displeased the God, punishment followed. In ancient civilizations, this punishment usually took the form of crop failures, devastating floods, disease, or the danger of enemies. Order and justice changed as societies evolved, and ancient Greece established the first laws, attributed to the 7th century BC Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus. He is credited with forming the first constitution and society of equals in Sparta. Later, this characteristic feature appeared in ancient Rome. Another example of a sacred king can be found in Alexander the Great and his father Philip of Macedon. Alexander was even supposed to be a descendant of the god Heraclius. After the conquest of Egypt, Alexander's power expanded even further and a powerful cult formed around his figure, precisely by the Egyptians, who considered him to be an incarnation of the god Amon. Another eastern nation where the sacredness of the ruler appears are the Scythians and the Wu-suns.

Certain features of the sacral ruler appeared in the Chinese dynasty as early as the first millennium BC. Hou Ji was conceived by the infertile empress Jiang Yaun and the god of heaven. This child was subsequently raised by animals in the forest, where it was also looked after by woodcutters. His mother took him in after some time and he was raised in the royal court where he worked with horses. He was very close to nature, planting beans and grain, and is credited with being the one who encouraged the spread of crop cultivation - hence ensuring fertility.<sup>1</sup>

Another trait of a sacral ruler was maintaining a good relationship with the gods and observing oracular signs. For example, among the Huns, who were closest in character to the Rouran Khaganate, Jordanes, claims that Attila interpreted omens as a sacral king when he saw storks flying away and carrying their young, which presumably meant the imminent downfall of the city. In addition to the western - ancient areas - the mighty empires of Greece and Rome, we can also find a sacral ruler in the east - in modern Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, Central Asia and China. In the following section, I would like to discuss the above points of characteristics of a sacral ruler, which I will identify based on primary material sources in a Southeast Asian setting.

### **Influence on south-eastern states**

First, however, I would like to note the influences that affected the south-eastern part of the Silk Roads in the period between the Antiquity and the Middle Ages. A great influence was exercised on the South-Eastern states by their powerful neighbours: China and India. These influences can be seen over the centuries in various ways, commercial, political, cultural, or religious. Significant changes have occurred with the spread and influence of world religions. As far as religion in the region is concerned, the 3rd century was a significant milestone, when Buddhist pilgrims travelled along the southwestern routes to and from the South Asian centres of Buddhist learning, and their numbers gradually increased. Buddhism had a profound influence on the various empires that existed in Asia, such as the Nan-chao Empire, and the Dali Kingdom.

Another important aspect of influence was the trade itself. Throughout Asia, it was linked by a network of sea and land. throughout Asia was linked by a network of sea and land. South-

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<sup>1</sup> Beckwith, Ch. (2011). *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present*. Princeton University Press. (p. 3).

eastern routes were also influenced in this sphere by India and China. However, the possibility of using internal trading channels made Southeast Asia an exceptional area for trade.

## **Funan**

The influence of India can also be seen in the field of politics, where the appointment of the king itself had an Indian influence in the ancient period, in the establishment of the kingdom of Funan. The kingdom of Funan whose size extended into the states of present-day Southeast Asia was religiously influenced by Hinduism, although the lower social classes worshipped animism and only later adopted Buddhism. An important source for research on the Funan Kingdom and the early Khmer Empire is documented in the History of the Sui. These document that before the 6th century in the Funan Kingdom, a temple dedicated to the spirit of P'o-to-li, to whom human sacrifices were made, was built on top of Ling-chia-po-p'o mountain. Here appears one point of the above characteristic features of the sacred king. The king had to regularly go every year to the temple, which was built on a hill, presumably to be thus nearer to heaven and to the God.<sup>2</sup> By this act the king was most likely to be just mediator between God and men. He went to the temple where he was to offer a human sacrifice. This would fulfil point 2. Religious functions to guarantee a good relationship with the gods. The kingdom of Funan ceased to exist in the 7th century.

## **Khmer Empire**

In the 9th century, the largest and by then most powerful empire in Southeast Asia was the Khmer Empire. There are several legends associated with the history of this empire, but one is particularly interesting. It is a legend preserved in a 10th century inscription. According to this legend, the kings were supposed to be the descendants of the hermit Kambu Svāyambhuva and the celestial nymph Merä.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the first point in the list of characteristics that can be used to identify a sacred king in the Khmer Empire is point 1b, namely that they are the descendants of the goddess celestial nymph.

Another distinctive feature emerges with the arrival of King Jayavarman II. This king is traditionally associated with the creation and unification of this powerful empire. A special ceremony took place on an elevated hill to symbolize a closer connection with the God, and the site was dedicated to Indra.<sup>4</sup> Through this initiation ceremony, the ruler was handed over his reign. The ruler was entrusted by the heavens to rule through this ceremony, thus fulfilling the characteristic of point 5. The king further became a divine king through the ceremony, i.e. point 1a. His other followers were also incarnated into God himself.

The term used for a sacred king in the Khmer Empire setting is "deravaja". Even the king's initiation ceremony may have established a divine right, as some scholars refer to it. After performing the initiation ceremony, the king was also in charge of all cult matters, thus fulfilling point 2. The historic city of Angkor, founded in the 9th century, was the capital of the Khmer Empire. The city became one of the largest and most cosmopolitan urban areas in the world and a centre of global diplomacy and trade. An important source of historical

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<sup>2</sup> Coedes, G. (1968). *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. University of Hawaii Press. (pp. 65-66).

<sup>3</sup> Coedes, G. (1968). *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. University of Hawaii Press. (p. 66).

<sup>4</sup> Diskul, M. C. Subhadradis. (1981). Ancient Kingship in Mainland Southeast Asia. *Kingship In Asia and Early America*: 30. International Congress of Human Sciences In Asia and North Africa. A. L. Basham, Colegio de Mexico. (p. 148).

information about the reign of the king is an inscription from the 11th century Sdok Kok Thom temple.

In ancient Cambodia, the king had not only a privileged position within the cult, but also a social one, in the sense that, according to ancient Chinese sources, they were also treated as archivists, i.e. the writing itself was related to the economic power of the government.<sup>5</sup> This is a similar factor to what we find in other ancient cultures. The history of the sacred king dates back to ancient Mesopotamia, a little later this type of ruler appeared in Egypt, on the examples of these two countries, two types of ancient oriental ruler can be defined: the Egyptian and the Mesopotamian. In Egypt, the god had a human form and was incarnated in the king himself - the pharaoh. His main task was to provide crops for the whole country. In Mesopotamia, on the other hand, the king was the son of God, entrusted with the administration of the state. If he displeased the God, another human representative took over his function. In the rituals that guaranteed fertility (attributes of the plow, the axe...) the ruler played an important role, which is why the role of king and high priest is often combined in one person. The priest (ensi, lugal) served as a mediator between the people and the God. The king was still both ruler and priest, but the ruler's duties dominated. The temple, which played a major role in ritual ceremonies, also collected wealth. All wealth was written down, and by a select social class who oversaw temple affairs, so economic power was important for the temple as well as for keeping the king's role firm. King Jayavarman II became the first universal ruler of Cambodia.<sup>6</sup>

Another important element of my topic is the term linga. It is a facial motif carved in stone. There may have been shrines behind the walls of these statues. It is the materialized fact of worshipping the king as a god.<sup>7</sup> This topic has been the subject of many scholars, whether it is about the origin of worship, whether it is an element of Hinduism or Buddhism, and then what other gods this cult of the king is associated with. For my research, this is important in terms of elevating Cambodian kings to the superhuman equivalent of gods.

## Conclusion

Based on the primary sources I created individual characteristics points of the sacred king that appeared in the ancient Cambodian cultures. The environment of kingdom of Funan and Khmer empire I analyzed and applied these points. Sacred king appeared in both area in the privileged religious positions, his authority was most privileged in his empire.

Analysis of sacred king's

1. The first line is the characteristics at the beginning of the contribution
2. The second line is the Funan Kingdom - the characters that are represented
3. The third line is the characters for the Khmer empire

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	✓								
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<sup>5</sup> Yoffee, Norman, and Bradley L. Crowell, eds. (2006). *Excavating Asian History: Interdisciplinary Studies in Archaeology and History*. University of Arizona Press. (p.315).

<sup>6</sup> Yoffee, Norman, and Bradley L. Crowell, eds. (2006). *Excavating Asian History: Interdisciplinary Studies in Archaeology and History*. University of Arizona Press. (p.315).

<sup>7</sup> Coedes, G. (1968). *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. University of Hawaii Press. (p. 64).

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my gratitude to my primary supervisor, doc. PhDr. Jarmila Bednařiková, CSc., who guided me throughout this project. I would also like to thank my friends and family who supported me and offered deep insight into the study.

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