

1 Introduction: Southeast Asia in the Global Middle Ages

Throughout history, Southeast Asia has been an important region in Maritime Asia. Located between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, the region served as the maritime connection between the littoral regions of the east Pacific Rim, as well as between continental Asia and Australasia. These maritime connections were supplemented on land via connections between the northeast Indian subcontinent and south China. Land routes connected northeastern India and Bangladesh with Myanmar and thence to Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces in China. Overland routes also connected the hills of north Mainland Southeast Asia, including present-day Laos and north Vietnam, with southern China.

The result has been that, throughout history, Southeast Asia has played an integral role as the nexus of human interaction and exchange, initially across the Old World and by the sixteenth century across the globe as well. However, unlike other interstitial spaces known in world history, such as central Asia, whose urban centers served primarily as nodal points along the conduit of human movement between larger bastions of societies and economies, Southeast Asia has been an economic region in its own right. Its geographical location, and the resources that it possessed as a result of its diverse ecologies and geology, have meant that it has served as a source of diverse products that could be extracted from its natural environment.

This Element seeks to understand Southeast Asia's economic history within the broader context of a Global Middle Ages. The phrase "Global Middle Ages" may, at first glance, be regarded as somewhat anachronistic in the context of Southeast Asian historiography. The term's Eurocentric origins seem initially in complete contradiction to the trajectory of Southeast Asian scholarship, which has, since the 1960s, embodied a deep philosophical underpinning in autonomous histories as a means of repudiating centuries of colonialism and western-centrism that characterized studies of classical Southeast Asian societies and cultures (Smail, 1961). Nonetheless, the parameters of the "Middle Ages," as they have been understood and applied in European historiography, can be usefully applied to the periodization of Southeast Asian history, which has hitherto been recognized by historians as vital to our understanding of the region's societies in the early modern and modern eras, but is not yet fully elaborated for the eras before European incursion as a distinct period in its own right. For the purposes of this Element, I will refer to this precolonial period before the advent of modernity in terms of a Global Middle Ages as well as premodern time and premodernity.

As a period characterized by the decline of large transregional empires of the axial age (Mullins et al., 2018), premodernity, for Southeast Asia, began with

the demise of the Persian or Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE), Roman Empire (27 BCE–CE 476), the Han Dynasty in China (206 BCE–CE 220) and the Mauryan Empire of India (322–185 BCE). In place of these transregional empires were large political entities, or first-tier states, each substantial in their own right but not necessarily occupying geographical spaces that traversed a diversity of ecological zones that came with a diversity of locational latitude and climate and geological zones as the transregional empires did, and therefore not being able to be economically self-sufficient. The result was that these large states, while economically well-to-do, often had to reach beyond their respective borders to engage in trade in order to garner a similar richness of material culture as that witnessed in the axial age empires. The post-axial age was hence characterized by sizeable first-tier states that maintained vibrant transregional interactions with each other over both land and sea. Consequently, an increase in international commerce, material exchanges and cultural interactions occurred, as these societies and economies sought to increase their levels of affluence. This drive outward was supported by state-sponsored commercial institutions and networks, and the concomitant movement of people across regions led to cultural exchanges and transferences across spaces. First-tier states that flourished during this era included the Sassanid Dynasty and the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates in the Middle East, Levant and North Africa; the Tang (618–907 CE) and Song (960–1278 CE) Dynasties in China and east central Asia; and the Gupta (240–550 CE), Pandyan (third century BCE–fourteenth century CE) and Chola (848–1279 CE) Dynasties on the Indian subcontinent.

Additionally, an environmental consideration has to be made for this period as well. The Global Middle Ages corresponded to the Medieval Warm Period, when, between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, the Northern Hemisphere in particular experienced longer summers while, for certain regions of the world, more rainfall occurred. The result was that larger tracts of land, including areas that used to not be arable, such as the higher altitude areas of the Alps in Europe, became available for agricultural activities. Overall agricultural output by human societies throughout the Northern Hemisphere increased, leading to an expansion in the economy and the ability to sustain larger populations than before. This additional agrarian output contributed to an increase in overall disposable income, which in turn fueled international trade as the levels and degrees of sophistication of consumption by human societies across the world, and in Asia in particular, rose significantly.

During Southeast Asia's Middle Age, roughly corresponding to the mid-first to mid-second millennium CE (Figure 1), the region was marked by the rise of important regional powers that were engaged with the world. In Mainland Southeast Asia, the Khmer Empire rose in the ninth century to establish its

hold over much of present-day Cambodia, south Vietnam and northeast Thailand for the next six centuries. In the Melaka Straits region, Srivijaya (650–1275), a thalassocracy centered at the city of Palembang (present-day southeast Sumatra), extended its influence over much of the coastal regions of Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula and Isthmus of Kra, and northeast Java from the seventh to the thirteenth century. In the Indonesian archipelago, various agrarian societies, including Mataram, Singhasari and Kediri, rose in central and eastern Java, resulting in the rise of large agrarian states that maintained an economic complement of international trade both with the islands of the east Indonesian archipelago and with the other regional entities of Southeast Asia and Maritime Asia. Finally, the Pagan Kingdom extended its political rule over much of present-day Myanmar between the ninth and thirteenth centuries.

Together, these states were important players in the global economy. The vibrant economic interactions and movement of people also resulted in the exchange of cultural ideas and languages. While foreign communities were able to take root and develop at the nodal points of Southeast Asia's trade networks, some of the exogenous cultural traits were adopted and adapted to the local context. While the period prior to Southeast Asia's Middle Age was characterized predominantly by the importation and intraregional dissemination of material culture, such as beads, earthenware ceramics and bronze items (Carter, 2015 & 2016; Francis, 1990 & 1991; Higham, 1996; Miksic, 2003), the Middle Age was characterized by adoption, assimilation and exportation of not just material culture and its attendant consumption practices but also other facets of society, including religion, statecraft, social organization, architecture and aesthetics.

The vibrant economic and social interactions that characterized this period of Southeast Asian history came to an end only with the introduction of European economic mercantilism in Maritime Asia from the sixteenth century onwards, first by the Spanish crown and Portuguese Estado da India in the Philippines and Melaka respectively, followed by the Dutch in the Indonesian archipelago in the seventeenth century and the British by the nineteenth century (Irwin, 1991; Borschberg, 2004; Chaudhuri, 2006).

Several questions concerning Southeast Asia's role in the premodern period need answering. Firstly, how did this period in world history impact Southeast Asia in terms of its trade, the commercial networks that traversed the region and the products that it exported into the international economy? What was Southeast Asia's role in the transregional and global interactions that took place over this one-thousand-year period? And how did these transregional economic interactions lead to the vestiges of economic integration between the different regions of Maritime Asia and the Old World, the way that Southeast



Figure 1 Map of Southeast Asia in the first millennium CE

Asia did later in the modern age of globalization in the nineteenth to early twenty-first century?

The purpose of this Element is to provide a précis of the role that Southeast Asia, located strategically between various civilizational cultures, played during this important period of world history. This role has not been incidental or passive but deliberate, and has capitalized on the natural environment and resources, coupled with the opportunities conferred by civilizational regions and first-tier states, to prosper economically and socially in a competitive

international environment. The narrative will not only show that Southeast Asia's interactions were unique for the period in question but will also reflect recurring themes in the region's history through time.

This Element will comprise the following sections: (1) the geographical setting of Southeast Asia and its effects on international and regional interactions; (2) the shipping networks that operated across Southeast Asia; (3) the organized commercial networks that were active in the region; (4) the Southeast Asian products that were circulated in the global exchanges; and (5) the different facets of economic integration that developed as a result of Southeast Asia's role in the international commerce of this era.

2 Southeast Asia's Geography and Environment

Any study of Southeast Asia's economic history has to be firmly anchored in the importance of its geography and the role that this factor played in the development of trading networks, the products exchanged and the evolving nature of transregional economic integration in any period of history one would choose to examine.

Located at the nexus of the Bay of Bengal, Java Sea and South China Sea, Southeast Asia served, during the premodern and early modern eras, as the only maritime access for communications between the Indian Ocean littoral, Southeast Asia and East Asia. Through the Melaka Straits and Sunda Straits, the region has connected the societies and economies of East Africa, the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, the Chinese landmass and the Japanese archipelago. A second maritime route from South Africa to Australia, located at forty degrees south of the equator and relying on the westerlies to make the crossing across the Indian Ocean from the Cape of Good Hope to western Australia, and thence from New Zealand across the Pacific Ocean to Cape Horn in South America, was discovered by European mariners only in the early seventeenth century. Even this route required the use of the Sunda Straits in order for ships to have access to Island Southeast Asia.

In the Age of Sail, transregional connections across Maritime Asia were made possible by two atmospheric phenomena. The first is the continental monsoon pattern (Figure 2). Generated by the heat over the continent of Asia during the summer months of the Northern Hemisphere and the relative warmth over the Indian Ocean during the summer months of the Southern Hemisphere, the seasonal warmth over the land and sea bodies leads to hot air rising, with cool air from the opposite hemisphere being drawn into the vacuum. This oscillating seasonal warmth creates monsoon winds blowing from the northeast (i.e. continental Asia) to the southwest

(i.e. the Indian Ocean) between November and February. This is known as the northeast monsoon. Between April and September, the reverse phenomenon occurs, with the monsoon winds blowing from the southwest (i.e. the Indian Ocean) to the northeast (i.e. continental Asia). This is known as the southwest monsoon.

The annual oscillation of the monsoon winds has enabled mariners to sail back and forth across Maritime Asia throughout history. The northeast monsoon enabled vessels located in the northern areas of Maritime Asia to sail toward those located in the south, as well as laterally from east to west. As such, vessels located along the Chinese coast and Vietnamese coast of Mainland Southeast Asia, for example, would use the northeast monsoon to sail to Island Southeast Asia. Vessels located at the northern tip of Sumatra or the northwestern Malay Peninsula coastline would use the same monsoon to sail across the Bay of Bengal to the east coast of the Indian subcontinent, while those located along the west coast of India or the Arabian Sea would sail to the east coast of Africa. Vessels would sail in the opposite direction during the southwest monsoon season.

The second atmospheric phenomenon is the trade winds, or easterlies (Figure 3). These are the winds that blow year-round in a northeast to southwest direction north of the intertropical convergence zone (ITCZ), and southeast to northwest south of the ITCZ. The ITCZ, and therefore the easterlies, move north or south of the equator depending on the position of the sun vis-à-vis the equator. During the summer season of the Northern Hemisphere, the ITCZ moves north, as far as thirty degrees north in July. During the winter season of the Northern Hemisphere, the ITCZ moves south, as far as ten degrees south in January. The result is that, for Island Southeast Asia, the easterlies are an important factor for sail travel during the months of September to November. This is when the southwest trade winds, which blow in a clockwise circular pattern over this part of Southeast Asia, would enable vessels to sail in a circular direction across the region, from the eastern Indonesian archipelago to the west Java Sea, the southern end of the Melaka Straits and to North Borneo and the Sulu Archipelago.

The rhythm of the monsoons meant that passage between the west Indian Ocean and South China Sea littoral could occur predictably on an annual basis. The trade winds over Island Southeast Asia also enabled circulation within the maritime region of Southeast Asia. Consequently, Southeast Asia's location meant that, during the Age of Sail, the region was a natural convergence zone for ships utilizing the monsoons, resulting in the region's ports being the meeting places of vessels from East Asia through to the Middle East and East Africa. The trade winds in turn connected Island Southeast Asia to this

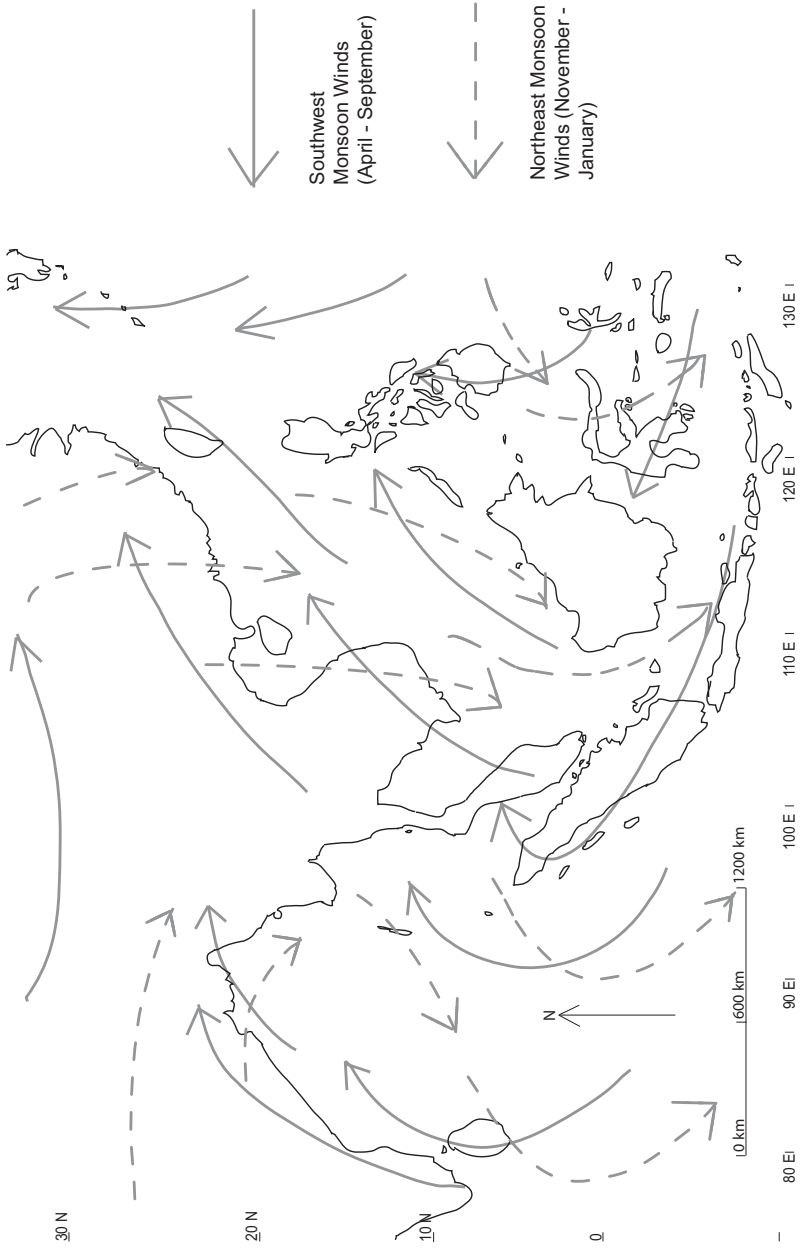


Figure 2 Monsoon patterns of the Bay of Bengal littoral, Maritime Southeast Asia and South China Sea

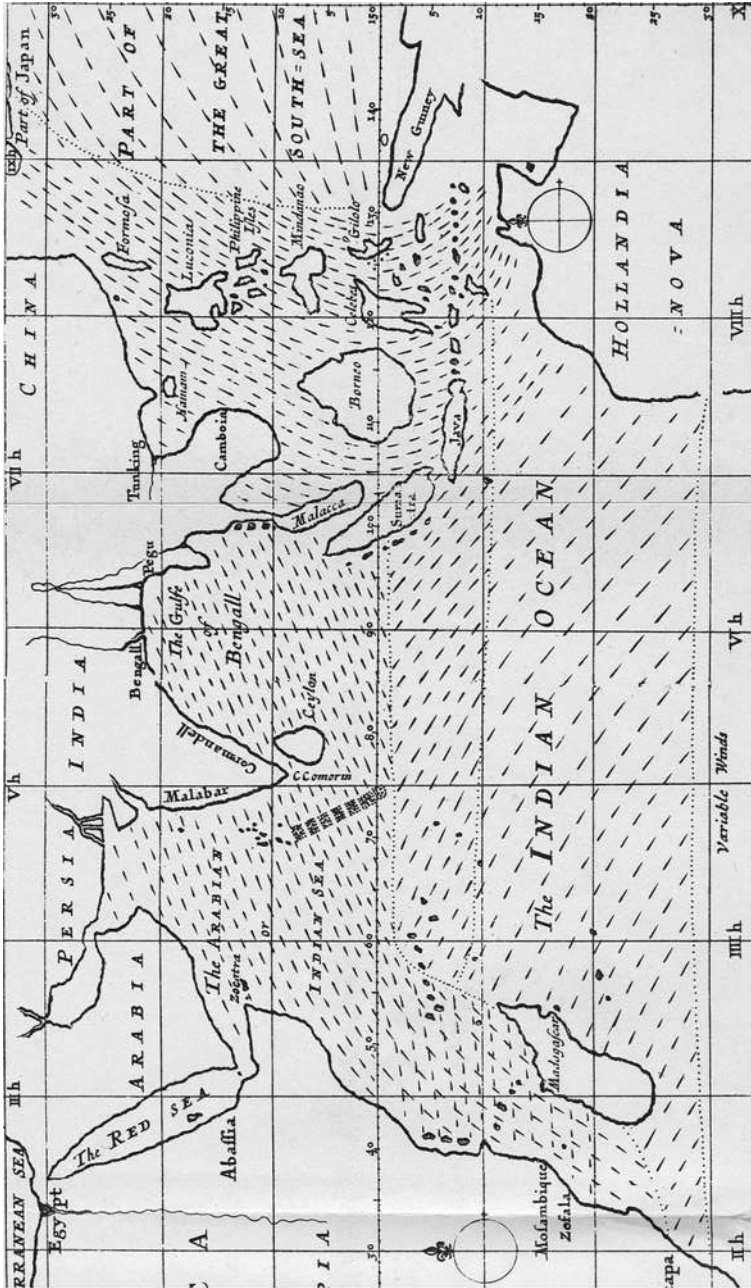


Figure 3 Section of *Map of the Trade Winds* (c.1686), by Edmond Halley, illustrating the trade winds over the Indian Ocean littoral and Maritime Southeast Asia between thirty degrees north and ten degrees south

(Source: Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edmond_Halley%27s_map_of_the_trade_winds_1686.jpg)

international maritime system of sail during the months when the monsoon winds were not occurring. These factors have made Southeast Asia the heart of communications in Maritime Asia through time.

Southeast Asia's geography also had an impact on the products that it could offer to the international economy. Bounded by the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn, Southeast Asia is a tropical zone. Coupled with its location in a maritime environment, this has resulted in the region being disposed to the rich flora and fauna resources that typically characterize tropical ecologies.

There are two main resource zones in Southeast Asia: (1) the maritime zone and (2) the land zone. Within the maritime zone, two areas may be noted. The first is the coastal areas along the seafloor. Characterized by shores, mangroves and the numerous islets, shoals and outcrops that may be found in the seas of Southeast Asia (Figure 4), the coastal areas have been the source of marine resources for which the region has been known throughout history. These include such fauna and flora products as turtle carapaces, pearls, coral and cowrie shells, as well as seafood, such as seaweed and fish, to name a few. The seas have served as the conduits for communication and transport, both within Southeast Asia and to other parts of Maritime Asia. As such, the coastal areas have also served as launch points into this maritime communication space. The familiarity with the seas resulted, very early on, in the people who inhabited this area developing navigational expertise and shipbuilding techniques that have enabled them to travel and therefore connect Southeast Asia across large distances separated by seas. The habitation sites have also tended to be seasonal and mobile, with the inhabitants of these areas primarily living on watercraft and only sojourning on land occasionally when the need arises (Sopher, 1977; Chou, 2012).

The other area of the maritime zone is the riparian areas. Consisting of the banks along the lower reaches and river mouths of riverine systems and the coastal swales between the inland region and coastline, these areas have made available the natural resources that may be found within the catchment areas of the lower riverine systems, including such minerals as tin and gold, as well as the flora and fauna that thrive in this particular ecological zone, such as the sago palm, rattan and various hardwood timbers and aromatic woods. Additionally, the flooding of the coastal swales, resulting from the annual monsoon rains, has led to the development of seasonal coastal agriculture and the production of such cereals as rice as well as fruits, including coconuts. Finally, the proximity of the riparian areas to the coastline meant that the people of these areas were intimately connected to those inhabiting the coastal areas and were also able to communicate and interact with other riparian areas of Southeast Asia. The natural environment of these areas, coupled with the activities undertaken by the inhabitants, have resulted in more permanent habitation sites (Figure 5).