

Recently, D. Lombard (EFEQ and EHESS) and R. Ptak (Munich) directed an international symposium entitled 'La Méditerranée asiatique dans la longue durée'. This meeting, held at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris, was supported by the European Science Foundation. It was the second joint Franco-German effort to bring together scholars interested in the history of maritime Asia. The first conference of this kind had been held in Mainz/Germersheim in 1993

regional character as well as networks operating on a broader scale. The sequential arrangement of the seventeen papers read, thus allowed the audience to move from general to specific, from the bird's-eye perspective to the local Asian context.

The first two papers, by D. Nordman and M. Aymard, both on the Western Mediterranean, put forth a number of questions which were taken up again during the discussions of the following papers. It was asked, for example, to what extent

The Southeast Asian Mediterranean

The title of the Paris meeting (3-5 March 1997) is, of course, related to the ideas of F. Braudel and others who have tried to view the Mediterranean as a complex 'system' of exchanges between different cultures. Considerations of space, political factors, economic and other variables play a significant role in Braudel's work. Similar criteria can be applied to other regions which are largely defined by maritime trade and traffic. One such area is Southeast Asia. It was thus one of the aims of the meeting to find Mediterranean in the Braudelian sense also apply to this area. The other aim was to highlight different 'constituents' of the 'Southeast Asian Mediterranean', especially its ties to neighbouring regions, and the ways in which exchanges between these took place.

To achieve these aims, the symposium was structured in the following way: an initial - methodological - section was devoted to the European end, in particular to the concept of the Western Mediterranean. This was followed by a session on important Asian ports involved in the exchange of ideas and goods. As trade and other forms of exchange depended on merchant groups and institutions, special sections were also reserved for different kinds of networks; this included commercial and political systems with a

common notions of the Western Mediterranean were influenced by purely Eurocentric thought, and to what degree the emergence of these concepts can be linked to momentary political goals. The idea of large maritime spaces being 'units' with some kind of cultural or economic homogeneity probably became important in periods marked by symptoms of disintegration. The same may be true for Southeast Asia. Details, however, remain to be studied. When, for example, did concepts of a Southeast Asian maritime space emerge? These and other questions addressing possible comparisons between Europe and Asia were raised in the third paper, by D. Lombard.

Asian ports and networks

The second section tried to 'bridge' the enormous spatial gap between both 'Mediterraneans' and the distance between Southeast Asia and China by highlighting the role of individual ports. The initial contribution, by J. F. Salles, looked at different stations along the maritime routes from Europe to the Indian Ocean from a long *duré* perspective. Among other points, it showed that in certain periods, maritime links shifted from the Red Sea to the Gulf and back, just as insular Southeast Asia

could be approached by two routes, through the Malaka Strait, or by sailing along the west coast of Sumatra. So far, little is known about the last route. Therefore, the second paper in this section, by C. Guillot, presented recent archaeological discoveries from the Barusarea (Lobu Tua), demonstrating that Sumatra was well-connected to Java, China, India, and West Asia. The final paper of this session, by Chen Dasheng, discussed the structure of the foreign quarters in China's coastal ports, thereby also shedding light on China's links to Southeast Asia.

The three network sections following the ports section served to show how Southeast Asia - not unlike the Western Mediterranean - absorbed outside influences. A complicated system of Buddhist links existed around the Bay of Bengal, as T. Frasch was able to show. Islamic constituents also played an important role, especially in local politics. The sultanates of Malaka, Pasai, and Aceh, their policy tools and administrative organization were highlighted by J. Alves. Finally, M. Abaza, investigating archival material of more recent times, pointed out that there were countless links between the Islamic communities in Southeast Asia and Cairo.

At the northern end, China was a decisive long-term factor in shaping Southeast Asian societies. From the ninth to the twelfth century, Fukkienese merchants were of particular importance, as Chang Pin-sun tried to show. R. Ptak summarised Ming China's relations with Southeast Asia; he distinguished between different periods and trading groups, assuming that Guangdong and Fujian did not face identical conditions. L. Blusse described the role of the Chinese in the eighteenth century, thinking, with good reasons, that this was Southeast Asia's Chinese century. G. Stauth philosophized about the case of modern Singapore and its success. This paper led to a lively discussion.

A very elaborate contribution to the next section - on European networks - was that by K. Kevonian who gave a detailed analysis of an Armenian itinerary with news on medieval Southeast Asia. The Armenians were active in

Europe and Asia, therefore they can be associated with both continents. The second paper, by D. Folch i Fornesa, analysed the role of the Spanish in Manila and the views they held on China, the Philippines and the rest of Southeast Asia. Much of this study was based on a text by Loarca. The next paper, by J. van Goor, dealt with the Dutch in Indonesia. The VOC, he argued, was a hybrid body: on the one hand it acted like a business firm, on the other it was a state. The very last contribution, by S. Diller, focused on the Danes.

A. Molho and S. Subrahmanyam, reviewing the seventeen contributions in their totality - the final session - gave practical advice regarding the possible direction of future research. The dangers of Eurocentric model-making, certain weaknesses in the presentation of the 'diaspora' notion and other matters were discussed. Braudel, it was emphasized, saw the Mediterranean from a 'northern' perspective; similar defaults should be avoided when dealing with other maritime scenarios.

This meeting unequivocally pushed open several doors. In the past, a number of conferences were held on the history of maritime Asia and Asian trade, but, so far, the possibilities of comparing different maritime 'systems' have not been fully explored. Southeast Asia, it may be said, was something like a cross-roads between different worlds - without, however, losing its own identity. Finally: several scholars working on Europe attended this meeting as guests; this certainly indicates the growing popularity Southeast Asia enjoys in the Western world.

It is intended to publish the papers read at this conference in the Harrassowitz series 'South China and Maritime Asia' which also contains the proceedings of the Franco-German meeting held in 1993. The editors of the Paris volume will be C. Guillot, D. Lombard and R. Ptak. ■

By Roderich Ptak

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