

# Southeast Asia

The prehistoric, ancient, and medieval political subdivisions of the Southeast Asian subcontinent have little relation to the region's modern nations—Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar (Burma), Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Nonetheless, their names will be used to keep our geographical bearings.

## The Prehistoric Period

Little is known about the early indigenous cultures of Southeast Asia. It is unclear how and when pottery making and metalworking were first discovered in the region and whether the sites that have been excavated represent related or separate traditions. Archaeologists have investigated only a few Bronze and Iron Age sites such as Ban Chiang in Thailand (4th century B.C.–A.D. 3rd century) and Dong-son in Vietnam (7th century B.C.–A.D. 2nd century). Their discoveries, and those made accidentally by local peoples in these modern nations as well as in Indonesia, suggest that there were well-organized prehistoric cultures whose populations had the skill and technical knowledge to make fine ceramics and cast bronze objects (image 40). To what extent such finely made objects were traded or commissioned from other centers in Southeast Asia remains unclear.

*image 40*

## Initial Contacts with India

Southeast Asia came under the influence of Indian civilization toward the end of the first millennium B.C., when India, Sri Lanka, and mainland Southeast Asia became involved in the network of trade along which luxury goods were moved both east and west by sea from the eastern Roman Empire to the Han dynasty in China. These sea routes were lengthy and required stopovers that changed over time due to politics and technological development. First the Thai peninsula and Mekong Delta and later some of the Indonesian islands became important way stations.

## The Rise of Southeast Asian Kingdoms: 4th–9th century

Commercial centers flourished in these areas, which had long been governed by local chiefdoms. The founding myths of later Southeast Asian kingdoms indicate that Indian merchants settled in these centers and intermarried with local nobility, forming states ruled by divine kings according to the Indian model. Brahmins and Buddhist monks also came, bringing their religions, cosmologies, and concepts of social and political structure, the Sanskrit alphabet, and the rich religious literature of India.

India continued to be a source for Southeast Asian cultures for the next thousand years. Buddhist and Hindu devotees visited holy sites in India, returning with firsthand impressions of Indian art and architecture, religious texts, and portable images of Buddhist and Hindu deities. By the sixth century A.D., kingdoms and principalities had formed in the southern part of mainland Southeast Asia, on the Thai peninsula, and on Java and Sumatra.

Their political structure was based on the Indian concept of divine kingship, expressed in the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, Indian epics recounting the heroic deeds of gods and rulers.

Southern Cambodia and Vietnam were controlled by the Hindu rulers of the Funan kingdom (4th–6th century), later usurped by rulers, also Hindu, of the nearby kingdom of Zhenla. The earliest surviving Funan-Zhenla sculpture dates from the sixth century. By the seventh and early eighth century, stone sculpture of this combined kingdom was created with such skill and assurance that its forms must have derived from an already ancient tradition of carving in wood (image 46 and 47).

**image 46, 47**

In the eighth century, Zhenla-Funan collapsed, perhaps because the lucrative trade routes that had passed through their territories now moved by sea through the Strait of Malacca. The fleets of the Shrivijaya kingdom, which was centered on Sumatra and controlled portions of the Thai peninsula, made the sea passage safe from piracy for the first time. From 770 to 855, Central Java was ruled by kings who were most probably related to the Shrivijaya rulers of Sumatra. This Javanese kingdom was the most powerful Southeast Asian kingdom of its time. The classical style of Indonesian art flourished under its patronage, and a large number of temples, both Buddhist and Hindu, were built, including the great stupa of Borobudur (image 43, 48, and 52).

**image 43, 48, 52**

At the same time, parts of Thailand and Myanmar were controlled by the Mon peoples, who were Theravada Buddhists. Other small kingdoms in the region were also strongly influenced by India. In Burma, Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism coexisted with Theravada Buddhism until the eleventh century, when the newly established Pagan kingdom proclaimed Theravada Buddhism the state religion (image 45). After Mongols destroyed the Pagan kingdom in 1287, Burma was divided among a number of smaller kingdoms.

**image 45**

### **The Khmer Empire: 9th–13th century**

After a long stay at the Central Javanese court, a Zhenla nobleman returned to the mainland and founded the Khmer Empire of Cambodia. In 802, he gave himself the name of Jayavarman II and built a capital, which he called “the mountain of the king of the gods,” in the tradition of Central Javanese rulers who called themselves “mountain kings.” He erected a temple-mountain that mirrored the abode of the gods, and established the cult of the *devaraja*—the god-king—in Cambodia. The Khmer kings henceforth were believed to be the physical incarnation of a god, usually Shiva but sometimes Vishnu. Perhaps because of this initial connection with Java, Javanese art and architecture seem to have influenced early Khmer art.

The Khmer dynasty ruled Cambodia for the next six hundred years, expanding their empire into Thailand, to the borders of Myanmar, into northern Vietnam, and south into Malaya (image 44, 49, and 50). In the ninth century, the capital was moved to Angkor, which over the next three centuries became a vast royal city of palaces, canals, reservoirs (for rice paddy cultivation), and temple-mountains, the most famous of which is Angkor Wat, built in the twelfth century.

**image 44, 49, 50**

### **Later Kingdoms: 13th–16th century**

The Khmer Empire began a slow decline in the thirteenth century. A large part of what had been Khmer land eventually was taken over by the Thais, a tribal people from southern China who became Theravada Buddhists through their contact with the Buddhist kingdom of Pagan in Myanmar. For the next four centuries, two Thai kingdoms—one located in the north, the other in what is now central Thailand—vied for power and often fought off Buddhist neighbors from Myanmar. Thai people also ruled small provincial kingdoms in what is now Laos.

The great classical sculptural traditions of Southeast Asian art came to an end by the early sixteenth century. The Southeast Asian collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art focuses on this classical period and upon the art forms preceding it.

### **Colonization and Independence**

In the sixteenth century, Southeast Asia came under greater and greater pressure from Muslim traders and European seafaring nations. With the exception of Bali, whose population is Hindu, the peoples of Indonesia became Muslims. The Dutch gradually ousted the Muslims and the Portuguese from their trading centers. Later, the Dutch and British parried for control of Southeast Asia and were joined by the French in the nineteenth century.

Only Thailand (then called Siam) managed to remain independent. In the nineteenth century, the British took control of the Malay peninsula and gradually annexed Myanmar to British India. Indonesia became a Dutch colony, and to the French went Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. All these nations gained independence after World War II.