Two Ports of Suvarṇabhūmi: A Brief Note

Peter Skilling

C/O The Siam Society

Suvarṇabhūmi—the Land of Gold, the Indian El Dorado—is frequently mentioned in Indian and Buddhist literature.1 The setting of the Supārṣaṇ Jātaka, number 14 in the Jātakamālā of Ārya-sūtra (4th century A.C.?), recently translated by Peter Khorooche,2 is a voyage from Bharukaccha (modern Broach in the Gulf of Cambay) to Suvarṇabhūmi. The ship is driven astray by bad weather; at one point Suparaga, hero of the tale, says "we have been driven far off from both ports...so try and turn back" (XIV 13, suduram-apakṛṣṭāḥ smaḥ pattanadvitayādapi...tadyatatadvan niyarivātum). An (unpublished) Sanskrit commentary, the Jātakamālā Ṭīkā, commenting on the phrase "both ports", says suvarṇabhūmi-pattanā-dvayaṃ lanḍāsobhaḥ kāṭāhādvipaṃ "the two ports of Suvarṇabhūmi, Lanḍāsobha and Kāṭāhādvipa". Khorooche notes that Lanḍāsobha must refer to Langkasuka, and Kāṭāhādvipa to Kaṭāha = Kedah.

I dare not venture far into the maze of maritime Southeast Asian history, except to note that both places are in the central Malay peninsula. Archaeological and literary evidence shows that Kedah had a long history, and retained its importance as a port up to at least the 13th century.4 Langkasuka also had a long history; although the location of its capital has not been determined, it is generally placed in the region of Pattani.5 While Kaṭāha is frequently mentioned, the present reference to Langkasuka seems to be only the second so far traced in Indian literature or inscriptions.6

All evidence suggests that Suvarṇabhūmi was a foreign (that is, Indian) and general name for the region of Southeast Asia, rather like the latter English term itself, or the earlier "Further India", "Insulinde", and "Indochina." That is, there was no kingdom or state named "Suvarṇabhūmi," although the term was sometimes used in inscriptions, such as the 9th century Nālandā inscription that mentions King Bālaputra of Suvarṇadvipa (taking Suvarṇadvipa to equal Suvarṇabhūmi) or the late 15th century Kalyāṇi-simā inscription from Pegu. The Ṭīkā is undated; Khorooche (p. xi) states that it is "probably to be assigned to the fourteenth century". Its sources could, however, be much earlier; at one point, for example, it refers to Daṇḍin (late seventh century?) as authority.7 Therefore the present passage only tells us that, at the time of the source used by the Ṭīkā, Langkasuka and Kedah were recognized in India as important Southeast Asian ports.

Notes

2. See the review of Once the Buddha was a Monkey (p. 136 this issue).
3. Quoted from Khorooche, p. 263, n. 6.
5. For Langkasuka see Wheatley 1980, pp. 252-267.
7. See Khorooche, p. 256, n. 17.