

**Epigraphs on seals in Southern Thailand:
Concrete evidence of the India's earliest contact
with Suvarṇabhūmi**

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Abstract:

This research article explores the significance of eleven seals and beads inscribed with Maurya Brahmi script discovered in the upper regions of southern Thailand. These artifacts, ranging from the 3rd century BCE to the 1st century CE, provide tangible evidence of early contact between India and Southeast Asia or Suvarṇabhūmi at the time. The study examines the origins and provenance of these epigraphs, highlighting their role in tracing the spread of Buddhism through trade routes. Furthermore, it investigates the influence of different castes, particularly the Vaishya and goldsmith castes, in promoting Buddhism and the intriguing presence of Brahmin-related inscriptions. By shedding light on the local artisans' errors and the abundance of uninscribed seals, this article offers insights into the active trade network and cultural exchanges that shaped the region during the earliest period.

Keywords: Maurya, Brahmi, Epigraphs, Seals, Suvarṇabhūmi

1. Introduction

The earliest contact between India and Southeast Asia can be traced back to ancient times, even before the Maurya Empire (about 321 to 185 BCE). Indian merchants, sailors, and scholars began venturing into Southeast Asia for trade, cultural exchange, and religious purposes (Ray 2010). The Maurya Empire, which was centered in the Indian subcontinent, occurred from approximately 321 to 185 BCE (Britannica: online). It is worth noting that there were significant cultural and trade connections between India and Southeast Asia during this period. Indian merchants and sailors were active in maritime trade, and Indian cultural and religious influences reached Southeast Asia through these contacts.

Suvarṇabhūmi, meaning “Land of Gold,” is an ancient term associated with mainland Southeast Asia. It refers to a legendary or mythical land that was believed to be a prosperous and wealthy region. In ancient Indian literature, particularly in Buddhist texts such as Mahāniddeśa, Mahājanaka Jātaka, and Suṣsonadi Jātaka, Suvarṇabhūmi is described as a land located outside the Indian subcontinent, encompassing parts of present-day Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. It was depicted as a region abundant in resources, particularly gold and other valuable commodities.

The exact location and boundaries of Suvarṇabhūmi have been a subject of debate among scholars, and its existence as a historical and geographical entity remains unclear. It is often associated with the Southeast Asian maritime trade routes and the economic and cultural exchanges that occurred in the region.

The concept of Suvarṇabhūmi played a significant role in the spread of Buddhism from India to Southeast Asia. According to the sources, Mahāvamsa (xii.6), Dīpavamsa (viii.12) and Samantapāsādikā (i.64), it was in Suvarṇabhūmi that the Indian Emperor Ashoka’s missionaries, led by the senior monks Sona and Uttara, arrived to propagate Buddhism in the 3rd century BCE. This event marked a significant milestone in the spread of Buddhism throughout Southeast Asia.

The study of epigraphs plays a crucial role in understanding the historical connections between different regions. Brahmi script and its variations were indeed present in Southeast Asia and had a significant impact on the region’s history and culture. The spread of Brahmi script to Southeast Asia is believed to have occurred through various means, including trade, religious exchanges, and the migration of Indian communities. The discovery of eleven seals and beads inscribed with Brahmi script in southern Thailand presents concrete evidence of early contact between India and Southeast Asia. These artifacts, dating from the 3rd century BCE to the 1st century CE, offer valuable insights into the cultural and religious exchanges that took

place along the trade routes. The aim of this research article is to discuss the origins, provenance, and significance of these epigraphs, shedding light on the spread of Buddhism and the influence of different castes in fostering its growth in the region.

This article proceeds from introductory remarks in Section 1 to a literature review in Section 2, providing a historical background for the epigraphs selected as the primary data for the present study, as described in Section 3. Further analysis of the texts inscribed in the epigraphs is conducted from several perspectives in Section 4, highlighting a multidisciplinary approach to the study of early history along with transregional and transnational contacts in Southeast Asia, as summarized in Section 5.

2. Previous studies on Suvarṇabhūmi

Through an extensive review of research conducted both inside and outside Thailand over the past century, an exploration of the existence and characteristics of Suvarṇabhūmi and Suvarṇadvīpa has emerged as a central focus. However, due to the complex nature of this topic, settling the issue of its precise location has proven challenging, as various factors must be taken into consideration. These include the availability of supporting evidence and the influence of nationalistic perspectives, which have contributed to the legendary status of this story.

The quest to unveil the elusive location of Suvarṇabhūmi has captivated scholarly attention, with key contributions shaping this exploration. Paul Wheatley's influential work, "The Golden Khersonese" (1961), spotlighted the region, drawing significant interest. Thai scholar Phasuk Indravudh further enriched the discussion with "Suvarṇabhūmi from Archaeological Evidence" (2006), providing insights from archaeological findings. The collaborative effort "Southeast Asia: From Prehistory to History," edited by Ian Glover and Peter Bellwood (2004), played a crucial role in advancing knowledge about Suvarṇabhūmi and the historical landscape of the region. Collectively, these works suggest that Suvarṇabhūmi spans or has historical ties to all countries in Southeast Asia.

In recent years, increased archaeological research and excavations across Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, as well as India and China, have yielded additional evidence supporting and classifying various types of Suvarṇabhūmi. The most recent archaeological excavations have been conducted in areas such as Khao Sam Kaew in Chumphon Province within the Thai-Malay Peninsula and its connection to southern Myanmar, as well as Sungai Batu in Kedah, both dating back to the 2nd century CE. These excavations, alongside other archaeological findings, offer compelling reasons to consider the presence of Suvarṇabhūmi in those areas.

The most recent research conducted in 2018 has provided valuable insights and evidence regarding Suvarṇabhūmi. These studies involved renowned historical and archaeological experts from Thailand and around the world, and their findings shed light on the ongoing discourse surrounding this ancient civilization. Several notable works included in the book “Suvarṇabhūmi: The Golden Land” (2019) deserve mention.

In his article titled “Suvarṇabhūmi: Myth or Reality?,” Ian C. Glover acknowledges the lack of consensus on the precise origins of Suvarṇabhūmi, a term found in ancient literary works. The article explores archaeological evidence highlighting trade and interactions between India and Southeast Asia in the early period. Discoveries include colored stone beads, semi-precious stones, and glass beads, indicative of an active trade network. Bronze containers, intricate ornaments, and steel tools further attest to this trade. Sites like Khao Sam Kaew, Kuan Lud Phu Khao, Phu Khao Thong, Kuala Selensing, and Sha Win have yielded valuable artifacts, particularly bronze bowls with high tin content depicting images resembling ancient Indian motifs. Found at sites like Ban Don Ta Phet, Khao Chamook, and Khao Sam Kaew, these bowls date back to the 2nd to 4th century CE, some displaying griffin-like shapes associated with arts from northwestern India during the Sunga and Kushana periods. This raises the possibility of their production being linked to the Sunga culture, a significant Buddhist center in northwestern South Asia during the 5th to 6th centuries CE. These discoveries offer early evidence of connections between Buddhism and present-day Thailand.

In “Sailing into Suvarṇabhūmi: View from Jatakas and Inscriptions,” Suchandra Gosh examines the elusive concept of Suvarṇabhūmi, a Southeast Asian land whose kingdom remains unidentified. Situated beyond India, specifically in the Indochina peninsula, Suvarṇabhūmi is recognized for its wealth. Discoveries include seals, stone rings, and bronze bowls with high tin composition dating from the 3rd-7th centuries, along with gold artifacts. The stone ring, a key symbol in the early history of the Ganges Basin, aligns with Buddhist accounts of journeys to Suvarṇabhūmi. Evidence of Buddhism’s spread is evident in the Andhra region of India.

The research project led by Assistant Professor Chawalit Khaokheaw and team from Silpakorn University’s Faculty of Archaeology investigates the ancient coastal landforms, port cities, trade routes, and their links to early settlements in Thailand within the Suvarṇabhūmi civilization. Combining satellite imagery, geospatial data, remote sensing, and historical sources with archaeological artifacts, the study provides comprehensive insights into settlements, trade, and the environment spanning 2,000 to 3,000 years. The focus centers on five ancient cities: Nakhon Pathom, U Thong, Lopburi, Khet Khin, and Si Mahosot.

The esteemed researcher, Brigitte Borrel, has made a significant discovery in Peninsular Thailand regarding a Roman gold coin. Through a meticulous examination of Greco-Roman literary works and Chinese Han dynasty chronicles, which consistently reference Western maritime expeditions extending beyond India into the South China Sea, additional evidence from the Mediterranean region has emerged in the Kra Isthmus area. Brigitte Borrel showcased a recently unearthed Roman gold coin found at Bang Kluai in Ranong Province. This particular coin belongs to the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian and was minted in Rome in the year 629 CE. It is believed to have been transported via Mediterranean trade routes to Alexandria, before being transferred across the desert via the Nile River to the Red Sea ports of Myos Hormos or Berenike in Egypt. Its discovery holds great significance as it serves as compelling evidence highlighting the interconnectedness and commercial exchanges facilitated through the Maritime Silk Road between the Mediterranean Sea and Southeast Asia during the 7th to 8th centuries CE.

In their scholarly work titled “Suvarṇabhūmi in the 1st century CE: The glass evidence,” James W. Lankton and Bernard Gratuze have referenced Greco-Roman documents that provide insight into the interconnectedness between the Mediterranean region, South India, and Southeast Asia during the ancient period. These documents suggest that these regions were in contact with one another, extending beyond the boundaries of the South China Sea. Additionally, it is highly probable that these interactions were regulated and facilitated by local inhabitants within the respective regions.

“Suvarṇabhūmi: Land of Gold” authored by Anna T. Bennett explores the significant role that gold played in ancient trade. The book highlights Southeast Asia as a prominent source of gold, attracting voyages from both China and India. Evidence of this can be found in various artifacts and discoveries, such as a goldsmith’s stone in the Tamil region dating back to the 3rd century CE, which was uncovered at Khlong Thom. Furthermore, the emergence of gold coins, gold scraps, stone sockets, and imitation metal pendants from the 4th to 6th centuries CE, associated with locations such as Phu Khao Thong and Khao Sam Kaew, supports the presence of a trading network established over 2,000 years ago. Anna T. Bennett concludes that this network particularly involved Indian merchants who sought gold in the rivers of Suvarṇabhūmi.

“Chinese Knowledge on Suvarṇabhūmi before the 5th Century” authored by Professor Lin Yin and Xiong Zhaoming delves into the information gathered from the Han Dynasty Chronicles (341-551 AD) regarding Chinese exploration and trade routes to Southeast Asia and India. Valuable artifacts, including jewelry, precious colored-stones, glass beads, and a substantial amount of gold, were discovered in a Han Dynasty tomb in the coastal city of Hepu.

These findings align with the trade routes established along the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.

“Khao Sam Kaeo: An Early Port-City between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea” authored by Berenice Bellina presents compelling findings derived from a comprehensive 10-year excavation and archaeological study. These findings shed light on the historical significance of Khao Sam Kaeo as one of the earliest port cities and city-states situated between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, dating back to the 3rd century BCE. Notably, Khao Sam Kaeo’s antiquity predates other cities that emerged during the 2nd to 4th centuries CE. The excavation unearthed compelling evidence across four distinct hills situated along the river. Each of these areas served as hubs for individuals from foreign nations, encompassing skilled craftsmen and individuals originating from various regions of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. These findings not only establish the multicultural nature of Khao Sam Kaeo but also emphasize its significance as a vital hub for trade and cultural exchange during early historical periods.

The previous studies discussed in this section provide the historical setting within which the eleven epigraphs investigated in the current study are situated. Subsequent to this, Section 3 will present the details of the epigraphs and elucidate their connection to the context of Suvarṇabhūmi.

3. Data and methods

The eleven seals and beads selected as primary data in the current study are written with Brahmi script. They were found in southern Thailand, dating back to the period between the 3rd century BCE and the 1st century CE. The locations of inscriptions under investigation can be found in Figure 1. For methodology, this research utilizes a multidisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis, epigraphic examination, and comparative studies (see Section 4). The epigraphs are studied using standard criteria for dating, including historical figures and events, and epigraphical dating methods. The study also draws upon the works of prominent scholars in the field to provide context and to support the findings (as previously introduced in Section 2 and linked to specific cases discussed in Section 4).

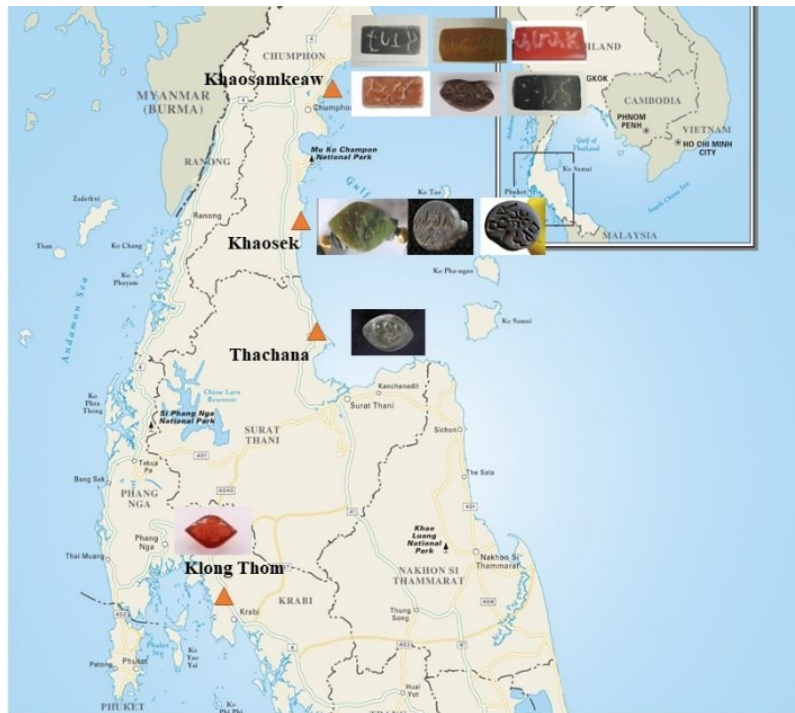


Figure 1 Map of provenance of epigraphs

Ancient seals played a significant role in trade, commerce, and cultural interactions across various civilizations and regions. Seals served multiple purposes, ranging from marking ownership and authenticity to facilitating communication and securing goods. Seals were used to mark ownership and verify the authenticity of goods and documents. Merchants and traders would affix their seals onto containers, packages, or documents to indicate their involvement and ensure the integrity of the contents during transportation. The discovery of seals in various places signifies the trade routes and networks as seals often bear inscriptions related to trade, such as the names of merchants and traders. Apart from seals, ancient sites yield stone beads, playing a crucial role in global material culture and symbolizing the shift from nomadic to settled lifestyles.







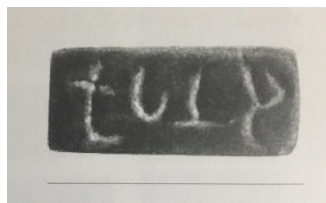
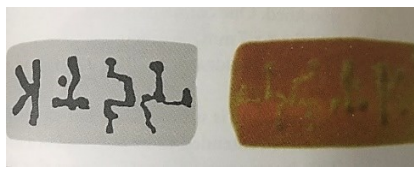


In South Asia, the earliest stone beads, initially from softer stones, evolved with human innovation, leading to the crafting of intricate ornaments from harder stones. This progression reflected aesthetic preferences, status, power, and ritual significance. Stone beads became integral to regional and external trade during the Indus Civilization (2,600-1,900 BCE) and later Indo-Gangetic Tradition (800 BCE to 400 CE), connecting resource areas to production centers and consumers across the subcontinent. In subsequent periods, India served global markets, supplying stone beads to East Asia, Africa, Europe, and even the Americas (Kenoyer 2017). These inscriptions provide valuable information about the individuals and groups involved in

trade networks. Table 1 shows details of the eight seals and three beads including readings of epigraphs, meaning of epigraphs, dating from paleographical methods, and provenance. The photographs of seals and beads with inscriptions under investigation can be found in Table 2.

Table 1 Inscriptions under investigation

No.	Epigraph	Meaning	Materiel	Date	Provenance
1.	<i>Bamhadinasa</i>	Bamhadina's seal	Carnelian	3 c. BCE	Klong Thom, Krabi province
2.	<i>Naṃdikasa</i>	Naṃdika's seal	Rock crystal	3 c. BCE	Thachana district, Surat Thani province
3.	<i>Gomitasa</i>	Gomita's seal	Greenish stone	3-1 c. BCE	Khaosamkeaw hill, Chumphon province
4.	<i>Latāya</i> <i>Sonasa</i>	Latā and Sona's stone bead	Reddish stone	3 c. BCE-1c.AD	Khaosamkeaw hill, Chumphon province
5.	<i>Bamaśamo</i>	Bamaśama's seal	Greyish stone	3 c. BCE-1c.AD	Khaosamkeaw hill, Chumphon province
6.	<i>Isidi(nasa)</i>	Isidina's stone bead	Greyish stone	3 c. BCE-1c.AD	Khaosamkeaw hill, Chumphon province
7.	<i>Kupanasa</i>	Kupana's stone bead	Greenish stone	3 c. BCE-1c.AD	Khaosamkeaw hill, Chumphon province
8.	<i>Anaṃdasa</i>	Anaṃda's seal	Carnelian	3 c. BCE-1c.AD	Khaosamkeaw hill, Chumphon province
9.	<i>Asilasa</i>	Asila's seal	Carnelian	3 c. BCE-1c.AD	Khaosamkeaw hill, Chumphon province
10.	<i>Śaghiyaśa</i>	Śaghiya's seal	Greyish stone	3 c. BCE	Khaosek hill, Chumphon province
11.	<i>Budhadevasa</i>	Budhadeva's seal	Greyish stone	3 c. BCE	Khaosek hill, Chumphon province

Table 2 Photographs of the epigraphs under investigation

<p>Seal No.1</p>  <p>Courtesy: Sudhi-Ratna Foundation</p>	<p>Seal No.2</p>  <p>Courtesy: Sudhi-Ratna Foundation</p>
<p>Seal No.3</p>  <p>Courtesy: Facebook.com/Nakhon.museum</p>	<p>Seal No.4</p>  <p>Courtesy: Sudhi-Ratna Foundation</p>
<p>Seal No.5</p>  <p>Courtesy: Sudhi-Ratna Foundation</p>	<p>Seal No.6</p>  <p>Courtesy: Bérénice Bellina 2017: 605</p>
<p>Seal No.7</p>  <p>Courtesy: Bérénice Bellina 2017: 606</p>	<p>Seal No.8</p>  <p>Courtesy: Bérénice Bellina 2017: 607</p>
<p>Seal No.9</p>  <p>Courtesy: Brigitte Borell 2019</p>	<p>Seal No.10</p>  <p>Courtesy: http://www.virtualmuseum.finearts.go.th/chumphon/360/model/15/ </p>

Seal No.11



Fig. 3. Seal 1 (photo B. Bellina – private owner).

Courtesy: Bérénice Bellina 2018: 7

The presence of Brahmi script on these seals and stone beads serves as compelling evidence of the Indian origin. This, in turn, indicates the dissemination of Indian culture through trade routes, a phenomenon dating back to at least the 3rd century BCE. The provenance of these epigraphs can be traced to both the Andaman Sea and the Thai Gulf of Kra Isthmus, a narrow land bridge located in Thailand that connects the maritime trade routes between India and China. The region has historical significance as a potential cultural crossroads and marks the spread of Buddhism to Southeast Asia through trade routes. Chumphon province emerges as a significant locale, with nine Buddhist-related epigraphs having been found in the region.

The historical background and context of the data presented in this section will be further examined in Section 4 through various approaches with both language-internal to language-external explanations.

4. Results and analysis

4.1 Orthographical & onomastic analysis

Orthographical analysis involves examining and evaluating the spelling, punctuation, and capitalization of written texts to understand their linguistic structure, historical development, and cultural context. In Table 3, the aspects of epigraphs through orthographical analysis are provided for each epigraph.

Table 3 Comments on the language forms and content of each epigraph

No.	Epigraph	Comments
1.	<i>Bamhadinasa</i>	The spelling pattern of word <i>bamha</i> for <i>brahma</i> closely resembles King Ashoka's edict found at Girna hill in Gujarat, western India. In contrast, other regions, such as Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra in present-day Pakistan, used the variant <i>bramṇa</i> while eastern regions like Uttarakhand and Orissa employed <i>bambhana</i> This regional

No.	Epigraph	Comments
		variation suggests that this merchant was from Gujarat in western India. The turtle emblem above the epigraph alludes to Kacchapāvadāna, story no. 97 of Avadānakalpalatā. The text tells the story of Bodhisattva turtle who helped 500 merchants.
2.	<i>Naṃdikasa</i>	The spelling pattern of <i>Naṃ</i> between Nandika's seal and King Ashoka's edict discovered at Nigalisagar in Nepal, dating back to 3rd century BCE, indicates that the seal and King Ashoka's edict likely originated from the same time period and probably the same area.
3.	<i>Gomitasa</i>	The resemblance of spelling epigraph with the name <i>Bhūmita</i> , on a coin of a king of Kanva Dynasty (73-28 BCE) indicates that this person was in the caste of Kṣatriya or Brahmana from Bihar region.
4.	<i>Latāya</i> <i>Sonasa</i>	The word <i>Latāya</i> is in feminine gender indicates that it is the female name. The name <i>Sona</i> is the Prakrit language word for the gold (equal to <i>Suvarṇa</i> in Sanskrit and <i>Suvaṇṇa</i> in Pali). This signifies that this person is from <i>Sona</i> (goldsmith) caste.
5.	<i>Bamaśamamo</i>	This Prakrit name corresponds to <i>Brahmaśarman</i> in Sanskrit. The - <i>śarman</i> ending is only preserved to Brahmana caste.
6.	<i>Isidi(nasa)</i>	There is another epigraph reading <i>Isada</i> on the back side of this stone-bead showing the error-engraving. This is good evidence of practicing by inscribers.
7.	<i>Kupanasa</i>	The name means 'hedge,' 'fence' or 'enclosure.' This is probably the name of an indigenous person.
8.	<i>Anaṃdasa</i>	The spelling <i>Aṇṇadasa</i> is in incorrect form of <i>Anaṃdasa</i> . The position of <i>aṇ</i> in front of consonant <i>na</i> should be after the consonant. This is the evidence of an unskilled inscriber.
9.	<i>Asilasa</i>	The Prakrit name is equal to the Pali word <i>Āsīla</i> meaning 'one who has the moral obligation.' The symbol <i>Indradhvaja</i> on the seal is found on the bead from Uttara Pradesh. Thus, this person was from that area.
10.	<i>Śaghiyaśa</i>	The name, which equals to <i>Samghiya</i> in Pali and Sanskrit, denotes to the Buddhist person. The usage of <i>śa</i> instead of <i>sa</i> in the genitive

No.	Epigraph	Comments
		case typically occurs in seals from north India. Thus, this person was from that region.
11.	<i>Budhadevasa</i>	The name signifies a Buddhist merchant.

4.2 The Influence of Vaishya Caste in Spreading Buddhism

Buddhism rejected the rigid caste system and promoted the idea that a person's social status and spiritual worth should not be determined by their birth but by their actions and moral conduct, as the Buddha said in Vasala Sutta or Discourse on Outcasts (Sn 1.7), "By birth is one not an outcaste, by birth is one not a brahmana, by action is one an outcaste, by action is one a brahmana".

Buddha's teachings emphasized the importance of the individual's efforts to attain enlightenment and liberation from the cycle of suffering and rebirth. This idea of individual agency and the possibility of attaining spiritual liberation irrespective of caste or social background was a significant departure from the traditional Hindu caste system.

The Vaishya caste played a significant role in spreading Buddhism, both within India and abroad. Vaishyas were traditionally merchants and traders, and their occupation gave them the opportunity to travel widely and meet people from all walks of life. They were also relatively well-educated and wealthy, which meant that they had the resources to support the spread of Buddhism.

One of the most famous Vaishya Buddhists was Anāthapiṇḍika, who was a wealthy merchant from Srāvasti (a town in Shravasti district in Indian State of Uttar Pradesh, India). Anāthapiṇḍika was a generous benefactor of the Buddha and his followers, and he donated land and money to build many monasteries and temples. He was also instrumental in converting many people to Buddhism, including the king of Kosala. Vaishya Buddhists also played a key role in spreading Buddhism to other countries. For example, the first Buddhist missionaries to Sri Lanka were Vaishya merchants. Vaishya merchants also played a role in spreading Buddhism to Southeast Asia and China (Sen 2014).

Certainly, the employment of these inscribed seals in trade and commerce, occupations traditionally associated with the Vaishya caste, indicates the crucial role played by Indian merchants, or Vaishyas, in the propagation of Buddhism within the Kra Isthmus during its nascent stages. Seals no. 9, no.10, and no.11 provide evidence of the Buddhist faith held by these merchants.

The Vaishya caste's role in spreading Buddhism was important for several reasons. First, their economic resources allowed them to support the spread of Buddhism providing financial support to monks and nuns. Second, their travel gave them the opportunity to meet people from all walks of life and introduce them to Buddhism. Third, their education and social status gave them credibility and influence. The Vaishya caste's role in spreading Buddhism is a testament to the fact that Buddhism was a religion that appealed to people from all walks of life. It was not just a religion for the elite or the marginalized, but it was a religion that was open to everyone.

4.3 The Goldsmith castes in promoting Buddhism

The significance of the name *Sona* in the epigraph on seal no. 4 is that it suggests the individual's affiliation with the *Sona* (goldsmith) caste. This term is commonly used to denote individuals or communities traditionally associated with goldsmithing and jewelry craftsmanship. Such names are derived from the Sanskrit *Suvarṇakāra*, a worker in gold. The goldsmith caste of ancient India possessed remarkable skills not only in crafting intricate gold ornaments but also in the art of creating exquisite bead-based jewelry. This observation aligns with the epigraph found on the stone bead, suggesting a connection between the skills of the goldsmith caste and the crafting of such ornaments, including beads. Furthermore, the location of the epigraph, Khao Sam Keo, is renowned as a significant site for bead production, as evidenced by the abundant discovery of exquisite ancient beads in the area. Dussubieux and Bellina (2017: 549-585) reported around 2,500 glass artifacts from the site of Khao Sam Kaeo including beads and bracelets dating back to the 4th century BCE onward.

It is of considerable significance to highlight that the name *Sona* also holds historical importance as it is similar to the name of *Soṇa*, a Buddhist monk who is attested as having served as the leader of the mission sent to *Suvarṇabhūmi* by King Ashoka. According to the *Mahavamsa*, the great chronicle of Sri Lanka, King Ashoka sent a Buddhist mission of two monks *Soṇa* and *Uttara* to *Suvarṇabhūmi* in the 3rd century BCE. The meaning of the name *Uttara* becomes clear, as it is a Pali word signifying 'higher,' 'high,' or 'superior.' It's intriguing to note that the name *Sona* is not a Pali word because in Pali it carries a negative meaning, denoting 'dog.' This contrast between the intended meaning and the actual connotation adds an interesting layer of significance to the name. The term *Sona* should thus rather be interpreted as a form of Prakrit word *Soṇa* which is synonymous with the Sanskrit *Suvarṇa* and Pali *Suvaṇṇa* all conveying the meaning of 'gold.'

Certainly, a linguistic analysis of the term *Sona* in Middle Indic languages can be approached by information provided by Turner (1966: 779), as given in Table 4. The term *Sona*

in Middle Indic is a variant derived from the Prakrit word *Soṇa*. In linguistic terms, it represents an evolution from the Sanskrit term *Suvarṇa* and the Pali *Suvaṇṇa*, both of which denote the concept of ‘gold.’ The linguistic connections between the term *Sona* and its cognates in three main modern Indic languages—Hindi, Marathi, and Gujarati—are evident. The widespread presence of the cognate *Sona* in a multitude of dialects spanning the Dardic group (including Kashmiri, Dameli, Dodi, Savi, and Guresi) as well as diverse Indic language groups such as North (Rambani), Northwest (Sindhi), Central (Awadhi), and Nusirtani (Gambiri), serves as compelling evidence suggesting a common ancestral descent from Shauraseni Prakrit.

Table 4 Cognate words for ‘gold’ across Indic languages

Old Indic	Middle Indic	Modern Indic
<i>suvarṇa</i> (Sanskrit)	<i>suvaṇṇa</i> (Pali) <i>soṇṇa</i> (Shauraseni Prakrit) <i>soṇa</i> (Pali/Prakrit) <i>sona</i> (Prakrit)	<i>sonā</i> (Hindi, Lahnda, Panjabi, Bengali, Bhojpuri, Maithili) <i>sone</i> (Marathi) <i>sonū</i> (Gujarati) <i>sōnu</i> (Rambani) <i>sōnu</i> (Sindhi) <i>son^u</i> (Awadhi) <i>sōn</i> (Kashmiri) <i>sōn</i> (Dameli) <i>sō’n</i> (Gambiri) <i>son</i> (Dodi) <i>son</i> (Savi, Guresi) <i>sun</i> (Nepali) <i>sunā</i> (Odia) <i>xūn</i> (Assamese)

The presence of related words in these contemporary languages further strengthens the historical continuity of the term. This assertion finds empirical support in the linguistic characteristics evident in Indic inscriptions. In early Indian inscriptions the Prakrit predominated from about the 3rd to the 1st century BCE and continued to predominate for at least two centuries more, and longer in some regions (Salomon 1998: 72). Sanskrit language began to come into epigraphic use only in the 1st century BCE (Salomon 1998, 85).

This interpretation strongly suggests the plausible presumption that the *Sona* monk was likely associated with the goldsmith caste of ancient India, given the commonality of the name

Sona in the Sonar caste, the contemporary goldsmith caste in South India (Thurston 1909: 392-394). This assumption gains further support from the goldsmith's touchstone inscription found at Wat Klong Tom, Krabi province. The inscription is written Tamil-Brahmi script in around the 3rd or 4th century based on the paleographical analysis (Karashima & Subbarayalu 2009: 283). The Tamil-Brahmi script is an ancient script used to write various South Indian languages, including Tamil, in the early centuries of the Common Era. It is a variant of the Brahmi script, which was used for writing Prakrit and Sanskrit languages. The Tamil-Brahmi script was adapted to suit the phonetics and linguistic features of the Tamil language and is one of the earliest scripts used to write Tamil. It played a crucial role in the preservation of Tamil literary and epigraphic traditions. The inscription is in the Tamil language and reads *Peruma Patan Kal*, which translates to 'the stone of the great Patan or goldsmith' (Karashima & Subbarayalu 2009, 283). This inscription serves as compelling evidence of the presence of a goldsmith community from Tamil Nadu, South India, during that historical period. The presence of this inscription reinforces the connection between the name *Sona* and the goldsmith caste.

The role of goldsmith castes in promoting Buddhism is a testament to the fact that Buddhism was a religion that appealed to people from all walks of life. It was not just a religion for the elite or the marginalized, but it was a religion that was open to everyone. Goldsmiths, with their wealth, influence, and tradition of philanthropy, played an important role in making Buddhism accessible to people from all social strata.

4.4 Further notes

The errors and lack of skill observed in the inscription of seals no.6 and no.8 by local artisans indicate the active participation of local communities in the trade network. Additionally, the presence of numerous uninscribed seals suggests their utilization by traders and merchants during the 3rd to 1st centuries BCE. The findings underline the significance of southern Thailand as a hub for cultural and trade exchanges, contributing to the region's historical development.

5. Conclusions

The current study has demonstrated that the epigraphs on seals discovered in Kra Isthmus, southern Thailand provide concrete evidence of India's early contact with Southeast Asia. The artifacts offer valuable insights into the spread of Buddhism, the influence of different castes, and the active trade network that connected the two regions, advancing the discussion on transregional and transnational contacts in the early history of Southeast Asia. These findings contribute to our understanding of the historical and cultural dynamics that shaped the peninsula

area of modern southern Thailand and highlight the importance of continued research and preservation of these significant archaeological discoveries. Methodologically, the multidisciplinary approach employed in the current study can hopefully provide a model and serve as a parallel for similar research in other parts of Asia, Northeast Asia in particular, which has been similarly involved in the Maritime Silk Road connecting South Asia to East Asia.

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