“EDEN IN THE EAST:
THE DROWNED CONTINENT OF SOUTHEAST ASIA”

“SURGA DI TIMUR:
BENUA YANG TENGGELAM DI ASIA TENGGARA”

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Abstract

The hypothesis in ‘Eden in the East’ suggests an alternative to conventional ideas of the origins of western civilization in Mesopotamia. This alternative places Southeast Asia for the first time as the key to the first roots of civilisation. At the same time it provides scientific explanations for numerous, and previously unexplained, cultural links between early Eastern and Western cultures. Notable among these links are the hundreds of myths of a great flood, which forced people into boats and left only a few survivors. This flood can now be identified as the dramatic rise in sea level at the end of the ice age that rapidly inundated vast areas of Eurasia. In other words the Flood may really have occurred. It would have had its most disastrous effects, however, in the continent of Southeast Asia - now a lost and half-sunk Eden.

As the Ice Age ended, there were three catastrophic and rapid rises recorded in sea level. The last of these, which finished shortly before the start of civilization in Mesopotamia, may have been the one remembered in folklore. These three floods drowned the coastal cultures and all the flat continental shelves of Southeast Asia. As the sea came in, there would have been a mass emigration from the sinking continent. These flood-driven refugees may have carried their domestic animals with them in large ocean-going canoes. The networks of sea trade, created by their settlements around Island Southeast Asia, Maluku and the Nusa Tenggara, East Asia and the Indian Ocean may have fertilized the Neolithic cultures of China, India, Mesopotamia and Egypt.

The most obvious Southeast Asian contributions to the first civilizations in Mesopotamia and Egypt were domestications, which made it possible to feed large settled communities. This required new ideas and the skills of domestication of root and tree crops (e.g. taro & bananas) and animals (e.g. dogs, chickens, pigs, Sapi cattle, and swamp water buffalo), sea-faring, astronomy, navigation, trade and commerce. All these skills were necessary before even considering monumental building, the physical goal of so many ‘Atlantis’ writers. Such buildings, regarded by some as a pinnacle of civilization, would be strong evidence; but they are not the sine qua non for it. Southeast Asians may also have introduced the tools to harness and direct the labour of the farmers and artisans. These included magic, religion, and concepts of state, kingship and social hierarchy.
While most alternative prehistory is based more on speculation than fact, there is some very solid evidence; which builds on the work of specialists in many fields, to support a comprehensive new picture of Island Southeast Asia. The most solid facts come from oceanographic research of the last couple of decades. It now appears that the great rise in sea level after the last ice age, known about for many years, was not gradual; three sudden ice-melts, the last of which was only 8,400 years ago, had catastrophic effects on tropical coasts with flat continental shelves. Rapid land loss was compounded by super waves, set off by cracks in the Earth's crust as the weight of ice shifted to the seas.

Archaeology holds the most accurately dated clues to the past. All of the technological 'firsts', which signalled man's emergence from the long Palaeolithic era towards the end of the Ice Age, come from the Pacific Rim islands. These include evidence of deliberate long-distance sailing and grinding of cereal flour in the Solomon islands from 30,000 years ago. The world's first pots, 12,500 years old, come from Japan. The first evidence that swamps were drained for agriculture and bananas domesticated comes from the New Guinea Highlands 10,000 years ago. These snapshots hint at a much older history to the discovery of Neolithic skills in the East, than that signalled by pots and rice. The better archaeological preservation of the later stages of human development in Mesopotamia and Egypt, however, has given rise to the view that civilization started in the Middle East and then China.

The most dramatic new findings come out of genetic research. Our research group has shown that most of the ancestors for Indonesians, Filipinos and Polynesians arose ultimately in Southeast Asia (formerly a huge continent known as Sundaland) well over 5,000 years ago some before the last Ice Age. This degree of genetic continuity and antiquity disproves the orthodox view that Taiwanese Austronesian speaking rice farmers essentially replaced the former inhabitants of the Sunda shelf 3,500 years ago. It also forces the realisation that the Polynesians' skills of sailing, navigation, astronomy and agriculture had their origins, back in Indonesia, during the Ice Age.