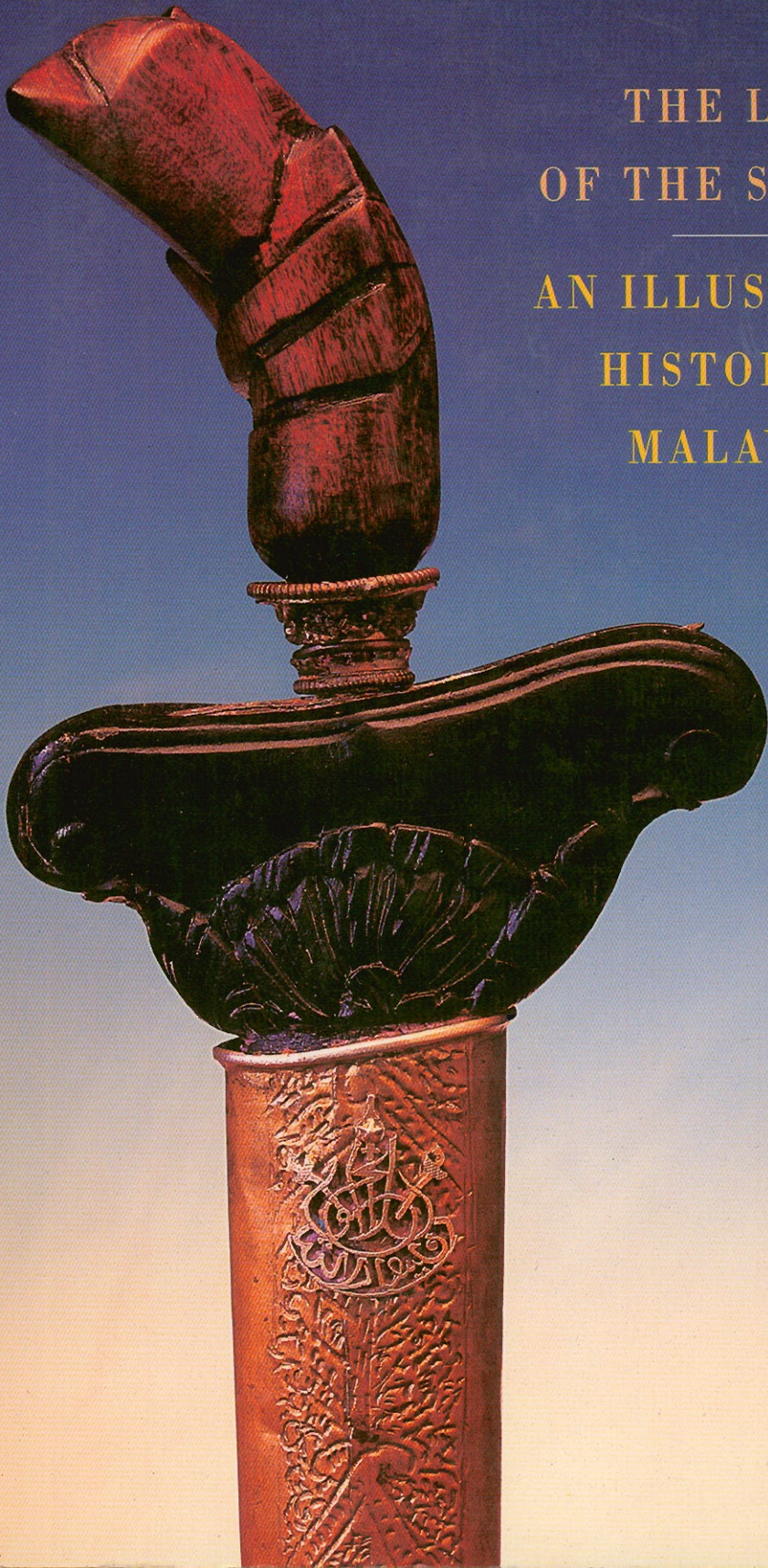


THE LAND
OF THE SULTANS

AN ILLUSTRATED
HISTORY OF
MALAYSIA



Ruud Spruit

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Introduction

Evidence of human habitation in Malaysia dates back thousands of years. Excavations on the peninsula have produced finds indicating crude stone age civilizations from between 8,000 and 2,500 BC, and early farm settlements between 2,500 and 500 BC. A bronze age civilization must have existed from the fifth century BC up to the second century AD.

It is known that in the early centuries AD there were regular contacts with the Indian sub-continent, and that there were a number of Indian states on the Malay Peninsula and the larger islands that are now part of Indonesia. The Indians introduced the Hindu and Buddhist religions to this region, and an early prominent Buddhist kingdom on the peninsula was that of Lankasuka in the north. Temple remains from this period have been discovered in the Bujang Valley in Kedah, and various other sites in Kedah and Perak.

From the seventh century, much of the peninsula probably came under some form of influence of the great Hindu-Buddhist empire of Srivijaya, which was founded in Palembang on Sumatra. At its height — in the 12th century — Srivijaya controlled all of Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, the greater part of Java, and many other islands in the region. In the 13th century the Srivijaya empire was succeeded by the kingdom of Majapahit, which had its principal seat on Java, and exerted its power over an even larger territory, including parts of Borneo. Srivijaya and Majapahit had much in common, including family links between its rulers and a form of Hindu-Buddhism which was blended with ancient South-east Asian customs and traditions, differing from region to region.

Left: Temple remains from the Hindu-Buddhist period in Bujang Valley, Kedah.



All this time South-east Asia had been increasing its economic strength, and at the time of Majapahit there was extensive trade with India, Indo-China and China. The states of the peninsula, although under the authority of the Hindu-Buddhist empires, had enjoyed a high degree of independence.

In the 14th century another powerful state emerged in the region, rivalling the might of Majapahit: Sukhotai in Siam. It may have been destined that the peninsula would succumb to either of these, but instead something else happened. The peninsula became the location of the most powerful state of its time in South-east Asia, and it is here that the story of Malaysia really begins: the Sultanate of Malacca.

Left: Drum head from the bronze age, found in Selangor.

Below: The earliest surviving mosque in Malaysia, built in Kelantan in the 16th century.

