

# An Archaeological Study of the Hepu Port in the Han Dynasty

(Abstract)

This archaeological study, with a focus on the Hepu port, is not only based on the remains discovered in Hepu, but also carried out within the scope of the Southeast Asian and South Asian region, even in a broader area. It uses typological methods in archaeology and through multidisciplinary approaches, to restore a general picture of the Maritime Silk Road of the Han Dynasty.

After the Lingnan region's incorporation in the Han commandery-county system, Emperor Wu of Han officially opened an international maritime route, which was called the Maritime Silk Road of the Han Dynasty. Aimed at improving foreign contacts, this oversea route started from port of Hepu and port of Xuwen located on the coasts of the Beibu Gulf. Departed from Rinan's border and passed the Malay Peninsula, the official imperial delegation reached present-day India and Sri Lanka at last. Although the Maritime Silk Road of the Han dynasty was mainly used for commercial activities, it also guided a range of cultural exchanges, as well as tribute and diplomatic missions supervised by the central government. Furthermore, it would have a profound impact on the extension and development of foreign contacts between China and the West after the Han dynasty. Many important archaeological discoveries related to the Maritime Silk Road have been made in Hepu county and areas in Southeast Asia and South Asia over the years. Through the consideration of these archaeological materials the author will firstly carry out a preliminary study to determine the current geographical locations of the countries and ports mentioned in the geographical record of the Hanshu. Secondly he will attempt to "connect the dots" and create a sketch map of the routes of the Maritime Silk Road of the Han Dynasty.

Hepu is of importance because it was the departure port of the Maritime Silk Road of the Han Dynasty. Indispensable evidence of this is the discovery of a large amount of artifacts and remains through the archaeological excavations of two Han urban sites and Han tombs in Hepu. The two urban sites are located respectively at the upper and lower courses of Ximen river that empties into the South China sea, and represent two successive chronological stages. The Dalang urban site can be dated to the middle phase of the Western Han, and was probable the first county seat of Hepu. A remarkable

discovery at this site were the remains of a wharf, situated at one of the sides facing the river. The Caoxiecun Han urban site is dated from the late phase of the Western Han to the Eastern Han and the Three Kingdoms period, and is thought to have been the commandery seat of the Hepu. Based on the archaeological discoveries in Hepu and the features of Han-period settlements, we can know that the majority of the population at that time was distributed in urban areas and surrounding areas. Therefore, it seems highly unlikely that ports were separated from cities and existed independently, but instead they seem to have been connected in space. Thus, based on the location of the urban sites it is speculated that the two Hepu Han ports developed according to a process of dynamic change affected by the presence of cities and river migrations.

Until now over 1200 tombs have been excavated in Hepu. The majority of these tombs belong to the Han Dynasty period and include the following grave goods: ceramics, bronzes, and objects made from iron, gold, silver, jade and glass etc. Additionally, there is a distinctive group of artifacts related to overseas trade, which includes glass, garnet, amber, crystal, etched chalcedony, carnelian, agate, garnet, and gold beads. This study will firstly describe exported goods, includes gold and silk; and imported goods such as the bright pearls, bi liuli (glass), and precious curiosities. Next, it will discuss a third special category that includes imported goods not used for trade, such as a Persian ceramic pot and a bronze cymbal; and a group of artifacts and tomb shapes which are influenced by foreign cultural elements.

During the Han Dynasty Hepu was also an important node of Sino-Western trade. More specifically, the Hepu port was a waterway transport junction through which the Maritime Silk Road radiated into the Chinese mainland as well as into the coastal areas surrounding it. For example, to the north, the Han capital Chang'an located in northwest of today's xi'an could be reached after passing the Lingqu Canal or Xiao River, and then enter the Xiang River and the Yangtze River, and then go through the Royal Roads built by the First Qin Emperor; to the west, close contacts with China's southwest existed through the "Shu to Cochin Road" ; to the east, the coasts of South and Southeast China became connected and then through the Yangtze Delta to Central Plains, or extended north all the way to the Japanese archipelago and the Korean peninsula. Furthermore by looking at historical sources and excavated objects such as glass etc. in the previously mentioned coastal regions, we can confirm the actual existence of these seaborne routes and create a more distinct outline of them.

Finally, this study makes a concise analysis of the reasons for the rise and fall of the Hepu Han port. Hepu prospered because it was a port, but deteriorated in importance for the same reason. Hepu's tendency towards decline was of course closely related to politics and economics, but the decisive factor was the development and advancement of ship building and maritime technology. As a result of this ships would gradually steer away from the Beibu Gulf and its coasts, and eventually open-up new routes that crossed the South China Sea.