Austroasiatic dispersal: sea levels and estuarine environments in late Neolithic Mainland SEAsia.

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The paper discusses a radical reinterpretation of Austroasiatic (AA) prehistory in the light of sea level changes in Mainland Southeast Asian during the late Neolithic revolution there (circa 4kyBP).

How and when the Austroasiatic language phylum dispersed has been a contensious and difficult problem for a century. Nonetheless, in the past decade a consensus has begun to emerge based on a synthesis of linguistics, archaeology, and genetics called the "two layer hypothesis". The model holds that AA emerged in northern Indo-China from the fusion of indigenous neolithic forager-farmers with East Asian cereal farmers attracted to the delta environments that faciltate intensive rice cropping.

Historically scholars have proposed the AA homeland in diverse locations (Indo-China, Gangetic India, Eastern India, Cental China, Southwest China, etc.), all conceptualizing the dispersal as a problem of determining which overland or down-river routes were taken. Recent proposals (Sidwell 2022, 2020, Rau & Sidwell 2019, etc.) have argued that early AA speakers dispersed out of Northern Vietnam and around the Indo-Chinese coast and beyond to India by coastal navigation.

In this context, we need to consider how conditions differed from the present day. We know that Holocene sea levels peaked at around 2m higher than present some 7kyBP, gradually dropped by 3 metres, and rose again to almost the same peak from 4ky to 3.5kyBP. Many present day delta environments that are intensively cultivated for rice were very different: coastlines were further inland and low islands, coastal marshes and mangroves existed in places where paddy fields dominate today.

It is proposed that early Austroasiatic speakers ventured to seek new favourable estuarine environments rich in opportunities for hunting, fishing, vegeculture and cereal production. However, areas available for paddy farming were much more limited than today and this motivated growing populations to migrate ever further, eventually settling in the Malay peninsula, the Nicobar islands, and the Mahanadi River Delta in Eastern India. As sea levels declined larger delta areas formed, faciltiating the rise of more organised societies such as the Davaravati Mon and pre-Angkorian Khmer states. In some areas the attactive coastal areas were overtaken by newer migrants, such that the Aslians in Malaysia and Mundas in India moved inland to rely more on shifting cultivation. The Nicobarese larely abandoned cereal farming in their adopted island home, assimilating culturally to some extent with Austronesians.

While today the greater diversity of AA speakers appears to be reflected in upland and shifting cultivators, this is a reflection of later diversification of those who moved inland. Environmental, cultural and societal change along the coasts and near inland favoured state formation and linguistic assimilation as sea levels fell and stabilised around present values.

References

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