Southeast Asia is made up of two regions: mainland Southeast Asia, which includes present-day Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Malaysia; and island Southeast Asia, which consists of more than 20,000 islands. These islands include the present-day nations of Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, and the Philippines. Historically, sea trade between China and India had to pass through the Malacca or Sunda straits, so the islands that controlled these straits were strategically important. Women took part in the spice trade and had greater equality there than they did elsewhere in Asia. **Matrilineal** descent, or inheritance through the mother, was an accepted custom in this region.

In the early centuries A.D., Indian merchants and Hindu priests slowly spread their culture through Southeast Asia. Later, monks introduced Theravada Buddhism. Indian traders eventually carried Islam to Indonesia, and as far east as the Philippines. Trade with India brought prosperity. Merchants exchanged cotton cloth, jewels, and perfume for timber, spices, and gold.

A series of kingdoms and empires developed in Southeast Asia. The kingdom of Pagan arose in present-day Myanmar. In 1044, King Anawrahta united the region and brought Buddhism to his people. He filled his capital city with magnificent **stupas**, or dome-shaped shrines. Indian influences also shaped the Khmer empire, which reached its peak between 800 and 1350. Its greatest rulers controlled much of present-day Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia. Khmer rulers became Hindus, but most people were Buddhists. In Indonesia, the trading empire of Srivijaya flourished from the 600s to the 1200s. Both Hinduism and Buddhism reached Srivijaya.

The heart of northern Vietnam was the Red River delta. There, the river irrigated fertile rice **paddies**. In 111 B.C., Han armies conquered the region, and China remained in control for the next 1,000 years. During that time, the Vietnamese absorbed Confucian ideas. Unlike the rest of Southeast Asia, where Theravada Buddhism had the strongest impact, Vietnam adopted Mahayana Buddhism from China. In A.D. 39, two noble sisters, Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, led an uprising that briefly drove out the Chinese. Finally, in 939, Vietnam was able to break free from China.

**Review Questions**

1. Why were the islands of Southeast Asia strategically important?

2. Why was Vietnam influenced more by Confucian and Mahayana beliefs than by Hindu and Theravada beliefs?