

‘Before Siam was Born’ Dvaravati Symposium

In conjunction with the highly-rated exhibition, ‘Dvaravati Art of Thailand’, at the National Museum Bangkok, the first international Dvaravati Symposium in Thailand was held on 3rd September 2009.

Organised by the National Museum Bangkok and the National Museum Volunteers, the engaging Symposium drew a large audience and enthusiastic attention at the Auditorium of the National Museum.

New research was presented on what is known about Dvaravati, with questions concerning its existence as a kingdom, a time period, a material culture, a geographical entity and art style.

Presentations were made by international experts, such as Dr. Laurent Hennequin (A Perspective on the History of the Archaeology of Dvaravati); Nicolas Revire (The Iconography of Nakhon Pathom Revisited); Jean-Pierre Gaston-Aubert (Naga-Buddhas in the Dvaravati Period: A possible Link between Dvaravati and Angkor); including Pimchanok Pongkasetkan, Stephen Murphy, Matthew Gallon and Dr. Guy Lubeigt.

New viewing area at Uluru

A new viewing platform at Uluru, one of Australia’s most well-known natural sites, may persuade visitors not to climb the sacred rock.

It is named Talinguru Nyakunytyaku (“a place to look from the sand dune”) in the Aboriginal Pitjantjatjara language.

The recently-opened viewing area, constructed 3km from the 348-high monolith rock in the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, cost US\$21 million.

Reported as the largest infrastructure investment in the park in nearly 15 years, the area includes 11km of roads, and 600m of walking tracks and traditional shade shelters.

It is expected to offer not only spectacular panoramic views but also new visitor experiences, and indigenous and tourism economic opportunities.

Uluru is of profound spiritual significance to the local Anangu Aborigines, who collaborate with the government to build the new viewing site.

Over 300,000 tourists are said to visit Uluru annually, and an estimated 38% climb the rock, known in the past as Ayres Rock, prompting the Australian government and traditional owners of the site to propose a ban on tourists climbing it.

Giant Statues’ hat secrets revealed

Archaeologists have solved the ancient mystery concerning the red hats on the giant statues of Easter Island.

They examined numerous evidences, including an axe, a road and an ancient volcano, to

discover how the stone statues acquired the distinctive hats.



The ancient stone statues with giant red hats

The researchers believed that the hats, created from volcanic rocks called red scoria, were made in a quarry within the crater of the volcano, and rolled by hand or on tree logs to the site of the statues by Polynesians more than 500 years ago.

Weighing many tones, the hats were placed on the heads of the statues on the coast of the island, which is the world's most remote place with human habitation.

What significance the hats hold remains unknown, but archaeologists are continuing their work on the island, and first aim to date the earliest statues.

Fossil galore in Angola

Angola is becoming a popular destination for paleontologists to hunt fossils.

Opening up after a shut-off for several years due to a long civil war, the country is drawing

scientists who described it as a “museum in the ground.”

In 2005, the ‘PaleoAngola’ project discovered five bones of a sauropod dinosaur’s leg, about 65km out of Luanda, the capital, on a cliff at Iembe.

Following that, skulls, skeletons and remains of turtles, sharks, plesiosaurs, mosasours, and a stream of new animals have been found.

Researchers working in the African country acknowledged that it is the best place in the world in terms of fossil remains.

Ancient wall in Jerusalem discovered

Archaeologists in Israel have found a 3,700-year-old wall in east Jerusalem.

They say that it was constructed to protect water supply in the city.

The wall, dated to the Middle Bronze Age, is believed to have been part of a structure that protected a passage to a spring close by.

There have been criticisms that such projects were used by Israel politically to strengthen Jewish claims to occupied Palestinian territory.

The site excavations were carried out outside the walls of Jerusalem’s old city in Palestinian area, and were partly funded by Elad, a Jewish settler organisation working to settle Jews in the region.

Recently also, the largest ever cache of rare coins were discovered in a cave near Jerusalem.

Dated to the time of the last Jewish revolt against the Romans, the coins are in fine condition.

The cache of 120 gold, silver and bronze coins includes pottery and weapons.

Ice Age fossils found at Cave

An excavation organised by the University of Durham and the University of Sheffield at a cave in Devon, England, has yielded teeth and bones of Ice Age animals such as hyenas, deer and woolly rhinos.

Another significant find from the dig is a 15,000-year-old spearpoint believed to be the first complete one discovered in the country.

Called 'Sagaie', the spearpoint is made of reindeer antler from the same era.

It is thought that the bones and teeth of the hyena may be dated over 25,000 years.

The excavation at Kents Cavern, Torquay, required prior authorisation from the UK government because Kents Cavern is the oldest recognisable human dwelling in Britain, and is a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

Programme that reads ancient languages

Researchers in Israel have designed a computer programme that deciphers ancient texts, and may further develop a sort of Google search engine for historical documents.

Applying a pattern-recognition algorithm, the programme can read Hebrew texts which could not be deciphered.

It can construct, with a great degree of accuracy, texts that are faded or indiscernible, by identifying letters, words and even handwriting.

The technology will spare liturgists and historians from hours of labour in examining manuscripts, and has the potential of working with other languages, the research team says.

Digging up the past: Saudi Arabia

An *AP* report from Riyadh reveals that there has been an "archaeology boom" in Saudi Arabia.

It says that local and foreign archaeologists are exploring ancient cities and trade routes in the desert.

In 2008, Saudi, European and American teams carried out excavations on largely unexplored sites.

A French-Saudi expedition is conducting an extensive dig at Madain Saleh, which is the kingdom's first Unesco World Heritage Site.

Also known as al-Hijr, Madain Saleh contains over 130 mountain site tombs.

A restored city wall yielded a Latin dedication to Marcus Aurelius, 2nd century Roman emperor.

The report says that the Arabian Peninsula, a rich territory for archaeologists, featured numerous small kingdoms during pre-Islamic times when caravan routes to the Mediterranean brought interactions between the Assyrians, Babylonians, Roman and Greeks, and the ancient Arabs (Nabateans, Lihyans, Thamud), who remain largely unknown.

Communities learn conservation and archaeology

A heritage conservation project in southern Thailand is attracting students and teachers to participate in archaeological workshops and excavation.

The project promotes conservation awareness in communities near significant archaeological sites on the Andaman coast.

Boonyarit Chaisuwan, an archaeologist, initiated the first project at Phu Khao Thong village in 2006 to help the locals improve protection of their heritage.

It is believed that Phu Khao Thong was a prosperous city and trading port where people from Southeast Asia, Middle East and Europe interacted along the “Southern Silk Route”.

The conservation project focuses on preventing illegal bead trading, and increasing the co-operation of the community in curbing illegal hunting.

It identifies archaeological study sites, with traces of ancient human settlement, particularly areas that had not been searched by hunters.

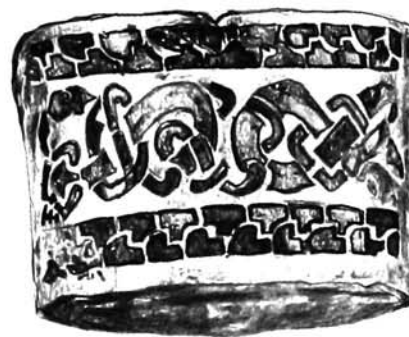
Students studied conservation and archaeological processes as they helped Chaisuwan to excavate.

Large numbers of artefacts have been unearthed, helping to boost the possibility of developing a learning centre in the area.

Huge Anglo-Saxon treasures found

An amateur treasure hunter discovered what is now hailed as the largest hoard of treasures found, and one of the most significant archaeological finds in decades.

The collection includes over 1,500 gold and silver pieces, sword decorations and dagger hilts, broken scabbards, helmet cheek pieces, Christian crosses, animal figurines and other items, probably dating from the 7th century.



A hilt fitting

Archaeologists were astounded by the intricate workmanship and historical importance of these Anglo-Saxon artefacts.

Terry Herbert stumbled upon the trove with his metal detector on a farmer friend's farm.

New York Times reported that the archaeological estimate value of the treasures is at £1 million, but could be several times that.

Mr. Herbert told the *BBC* that people laugh at metal detectorists, going “Beep, beep, he’s after pennies”. With his discovery, the unemployed metal detector hobbyist will be entitled to receive 50% of the value of the booty under British law.

He had spent 18 years prowling fields without finding anything, but in July this year he picked up traces of the treasure trove on a field in a Midlands county that was at the centre of the ancient Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Mercia.

The *Independent* said that 1,345 items were officially declared treasure trove, and will be valued by a committee of experts, and offered to British museums.

In September, the collection was displayed to the public but the event was tarnished by a reported row which soured the friendship between Mr. Herbert and his friend, the farmer in whose field the treasures were found.

Experts said that the hoard was likely to be war bounty seized by one of the 7th century Mercian kings who plundered neighbouring countries.

Many of the items appeared to have been decorative pieces torn from other objects.

Archaeologists, anthropologists and historians have participated in further excavation in the

area, but found no trace of a grave, building or indications of a plan to bury the precious items for recovery later.

China-Taiwan collaborate on exhibition

Taiwan and China held their first joint museum exhibition at the National Palace Museum, Taipei, featuring 37 items on loan from Beijing.

Titled “Harmony and Integrity: Emperor Yongzheng and His Times”, the show represents the first time any art work from Beijing’s centuries-old Chinese emperors’ collection has been loaned to Taiwan.



Most of the items in Beijing's collection have not been displayed before

The rarely seen items are being exhibited with about 200 objects from Taiwan’s collection, and include 18th century paintings, porcelain and lacquer boxes Qing Dynasty Emperor Yongzheng.

As China’s civil war wound down in 1949, an estimated 650,000 pieces of porcelain,

calligraphy, paintings, bronzes and other artworks in the emperors' collection of several thousand years, were believed to have been shipped in crates to Taiwan by the fleeing Nationalists.

China maintained that the objects were stolen, and demanded their return, but Taiwan said that the items have been saved from destruction during the chaotic Cultural Revolution in Communist China.

Search for 3rd Bamiyan Buddha

An Afghan archaeologist has been searching for what he believes is a lost Bamiyan statue.

Dr. Zemaryalai Tarzi is well-known for his knowledge of the Buddhist civilisation which thrived in the central highlands of Afghanistan centuries ago.



Hole in the wall left by the Taliban who bombed the site where the giant Buddhas stood

For 40 years, he has been mapping the Bamiyan landscape, and seeks to discover a stone Buddha statue reclining across the length of three soccer fields.

In a 7th century journal of Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang, a reference described the existence of a monastery that hosted an approximately 1,000-foot colossal figure of a Buddha in a sleeping position.

He also wrote about two magnificent Buddha statues, that guarded the valley, which were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001.

Dr. Tarzi is determined to locate the 3rd Buddha figure, even as his search has yielded several excellent artefacts of Buddhist monasteries.

Last November, a sleeping Buddha statue was found but it was about 62 feet long, and while he thought that was a remarkable find, the 70-year-old Dr. Tarzi continues to believe firmly that the fabled giant Buddha remains to be unearthed.

Fingerprint may reveal a new da Vinci

Art experts believe that they have discovered a new Leonardo da Vinci portrait after identifying a fingerprint on its canvas.

A Paris laboratory found the fingerprint "highly comparable" to another left on a da Vinci painting in the Vatican.

If the experts are correct, the portrait will be the first major work by da Vinci to be identified in close to a hundred years.



The painting may belong to the late 15th century period

Catalogued as a 19th century German painting, the portrait of a young woman was sold for US\$ 19,000 in 2007.

A London art dealer was reported by AP to have said that it could be valued at over US\$ 150 million now.

Technical, stylistic and material composition evidences indicate that the artwork is da Vinci's, and analysis also revealed that the drawing and hatching were produced by a left-handed artist, as da Vinci is known to have been.

The artwork was created with ink and chalks, and the young woman's hairstyle and costumes reflect 15th century Milanese fashion.

Fossils provide clues to dino-bird evolution

Researchers studying the fossils of 'archaeopteryx' specimen, a prototype of birds

evolved from dinosaurs, about 150 million years ago have challenged the hypothesis that archaeopteryx had already developed physiological features of modern birds.



The Archaeopteryx represents the transition between dinosaurs and birds

The scientists believed that archaeopteryx, the oldest recognised bird unearthed in Germany in 1860, was just a dinosaur with feathers, and might not have been capable of flying as birds do.

Examination of fossils belonging to feathered dinosaur species discovered recently in China was part of the research, which urged re-evaluation of theories relating to the complex evolution of dinosaur into avian creatures.

Related to the subject, dinosaur fossils that are preserved in exceptionally good condition and display the earliest known feathers have been found in north-eastern China.

The dinosaurs are all over 150 million years old, and thus existed before archaeopteryx.

In the palaeontological field, the discovery appears to represent an important species for the understanding of birds' origin and ability for flight, and therefore the evolutionary transition from dinosaurs to birds.

Scientists in China have also identified recently found fossils in the region as belonging to a new type of flying reptile which lived over 160 million years ago.

The 20 fossils bear resemblance to both primitive and more advanced flying reptiles called pterosaurs.

Inhabiting earth between 65 and 220 million years ago, pterosaurs are distinguished by two groups – the advanced short-tailed pterosaurs and the primitive long-tailed ones.



The flying reptile has primitive and more advanced traits

In between the two groups, scientists found a large gap in the fossil record.

The latest fossil finds may be the bridging link, as they indicate a creature that is a hawk-like reptile with a head and neck of an advanced pterosaurs but its skeleton is linked to more primitive forms.

China searches for stolen treasure

Chinese authorities will be sending experts to Asia, Europe and America to find treasures stolen from the Summer Palace in Beijing about 150 years ago.

China believes that 1.5 million items might have been looted from the site when the palace was destroyed and burnt down by a joint British and French force in 1860.

The first team of experts is due to look at museums, private collections and libraries in the U.S., and follow by visits to France and England as well as other parts of Europe.

Intensifying its efforts to locate looted treasures, China will also carry out a search in Asia, specifically Japan.

The site of the palace has become a park now where visitors can still view some ruined palaces and their destruction.

Many cultural relics were stolen and smuggled between 1840 and 1949 after foreign troops invaded China.

Oldest painting to feature a watch

The world's oldest painting featuring an image of a watch may have been identified.

Curators at the Science Museum are examining a 450-year-old portrait, and have requested art scientists at the Uffizi gallery in Florence to investigate.

Displayed in the Measuring Time gallery, the artwork is thought to be of the Duke of Florence, Cosimo I de Medici, holding a golden timepiece.

It was created by renaissance Maso da San Friano around 1560, and may be the oldest to feature a true watch.

The first watches were produced in Germany after 1500.

Curators made the discovery when they were researching the painting after it was taken out of storage for the show in the museum gallery.

After given by a private donor, the piece has remained in the museum collection for 33 years.

Fossils win award

The preserved teeth and molars of an elephant species, *Hoe* tusker, which lived 13 million years ago, have been awarded the Best Fossil in Thailand.

The rare *Hoe* tusker fossils were found in excellent condition by a cattle raiser on a mountain in Phayao, northern Thailand.

Organised by the Mineral Resources Department, the inaugural competition to award the best preserved fossil served to raise public awareness of fossils and the need to protect them, as well as encourage more discoveries.

It also helped to publicise a fossil protection law which came into effect in 2008, requiring fossil owners to register their collections or finds with the department.

Restoration on pyramid halted

Bolivia's culture minister recently told the *BBC* that his government had stopped restoration work on the ancient Akapana Pyramid as advised by Unesco.



Tiwanaku relief

Some experts said that the restoration could contribute to the collapse of the monument in Tiwanaku.

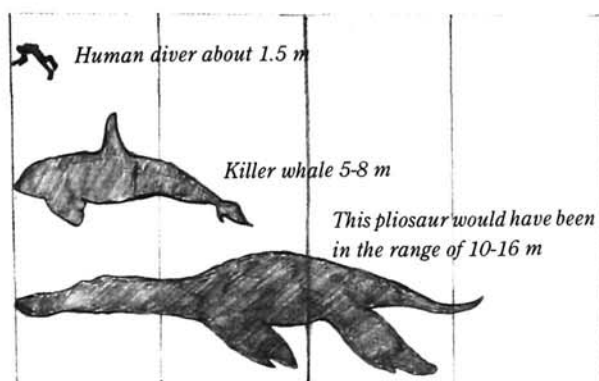
Bolivian archaeologist applied adobe, a day-based plaster, rather than stone on the structure.

The Akapana Pyramid is believed to have been constructed approximately 2,500 years ago.

Predating the Inca empire, it was of great spiritual significance for the Tiwanaku civilisation, and is one of the oldest and largest pre-hispanic monuments in South America.

Skull of sea monster unearthed

The fossil of a gigantic 'sea monster' has been discovered on the Jurassic Coast in England.



How large is the sea monster?

Scientists think the fossilised skull could belong to a pliosaur measuring 16m in length.

Pliosaurus were ferocious creatures and a type of plesiosaur, a group of huge marine reptiles that terrorised the seas about 150 million years ago when dinosaurs dominated the earth.

The skull measures 2.4m, and it is calculated to weigh between 7 and 12 tones, putting this beast in rivalry with those, found in Svalbard, known as 'The Monster' and 'Predator X', including 'The Monster of Aramberri' unearthed in Mexico, 2002.

A local collector made the discovery on the 150km stretch of coastline, Jurassic Coast (Dorset and East Devon) which spans 185 million years of geological history.

Nazca fell by logging

The sudden disappearance of a great civilisation, the Nazca of Peru, was connected to the fate of a tree, archaeologists have revealed.

Well known for drawing lines in the desert that depict interesting animals, the ancient Nazca people vanished 1,500 years ago.

In their analysis of plant remains and pollen in deep soil, archaeologists discovered that an ecological collapse was caused by the destruction of forests where the huarango tree grew.

It is a special tree that protected and was central to the ecosystem in the desert, they say.

The huarango tree was also a useful resource for the inhabitants as food, fuel and forage timber.

Previous theories include one that suggests a devastating flood caused the decline of the Nazca civilisation.

Researchers have evidence now to propose that Nazca would not have been destroyed as it was had there not been deforestation.

Despite the sophistication of the Nazca people, they contributed to their own demise by clearing the forests and cutting down the huarango species, causing an imbalance in the forests and exposing their fragility to the floods.

Terracotta warriors in Washington

The last leg of a 4-city US tour will take a group of China's terracotta soldiers to Washington for display at the National Geographic Society.

Entitled 'Terracotta Warriors: Guardians of China's First Emperor', the exhibition includes 15 of the warriors that were found in the tomb of Emperor Qin Shihuangdi (who ruled from 221 to 210 BC).

Experts believe that the faces of the 1.8m-tall statues may have been modeled on the creators of the sculptures.



Qin's buried army

Approximately a thousand terracotta warriors were found in Emperor Qin's tomb in 1974, and have been unearthed from the site near Xi'an, while another 6,000 remain to be excavated.

Also part of the show are 20 artefacts that China rates highest in terms of historical rarity and importance.

Restoring ancient murals

Conservationists are struggling to preserve rare murals in Thailand because of a lack of restorers and funds.

Most of the hundreds of ancient paintings registered with the Fine Arts Department are in Buddhist temples, with some murals dating back 700 years.

Several works have been vandalised, and some have been damaged by time while the department can only restore 10 major pieces each year.

Experts call for technological assistance to support the restoration effort on an urgent basis, and that all available means and resources should be directed to repair work on these ancient murals.

Currently, the department is planning restoration of murals in the Rat Burana temple, using the ceramic boarding method.

The technique allows precious works to be replicated to their original scale on ceramic tiles.

Imported from Japan, the technology requires professionals in various disciplines – photography, art history, archaeology, engineering – to collaborate in supervising the process, and has become a popular preservation innovation.

Fossil find of the year – Ardi the Ancestor

The discovery of a fossilised skeleton, that may be a human ancestor, has been recognised as the most significant scientific accomplishment of 2009.

Unearthed in 1994, the fossils of the 4.4 million-year-old creature took researchers 15 years to excavate and analyse.

Scientists have presented their findings in 11 scientific papers published in the Science Journal.

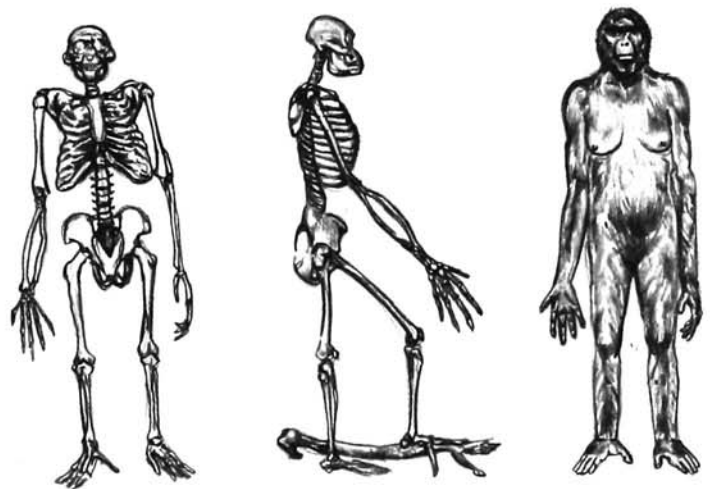
Their studies on the anatomy and habitat of *Ardipithecus ramidus*, 'Ardi', involved painstaking collection of fossils in the field as well as laboratory analysis.

They offer new information on human evolution from the common ancestor shared with chimps.

Ardi was over a million years old than the 3.2 million-year-old 'Lucy', *Australopithecus afarensis*, the previously oldest species in the lineage, which was found in 1974.

A graduate student, Gen Suwa, found Ardi in 1992 when a molar tooth gave a glint of light from a desert scrub near a village of Afar, Ethiopia.

BBC News reported that 47 scientists of diverse expertise from 9 countries have collaborated in the research.



Sketch of a BBC impression of 'Ardi' based on fossil finds

Plant fossils due to flower evolution

For a long time, the fossil record only offered the oldest fossils of flowering plants from rocks formed between 100 and 66 million years ago during the Cretaceous.

Paleontologists in the distant past found a diversity of forms but not many primitive forerunners.

New fossil finds are contributing to more insights into the early evolution of flowers.

Research indicates that flowers evolved into their amazing diversity much like eyes and limbs have through the recycling of old genes for new roles.

Researchers have in recent years reset the fossil record of flowers to approximately 136 million years ago.

The record shows that about 120 million years ago, a new branch of flowers evolved in great diversity and dominated many forests.

It is believed that that lineage includes 99% of all species of flowering plants on earth today.

Egypt waits for Rosetta Stone

The head of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities announces that the return of the Rosetta Stone will not be demanded if the British Museum loans it out.

Dr. Zahi Hawass has been calling for museums in various countries to return 6 of Egypt's most precious antiquities, including the Rosetta Stone.

Dated to 196 BC, the basalt slab stone was important for the modern deciphering of hieroglyphics.

Since 1802, it has been at the British Museum, which will consider the loan possibility soon.

The stone was found in 1799 by French troops in Egypt, and handed over to the British under the terms of the Treaty of Alexandria.

It is remarkable for containing the same text in Egyptian hieroglyphs, another ancient Egyptian script and ancient Greek, which led to the possibility of deciphering and understanding hieroglyphs.

Egyptian archaeologists visited Paris' Louvre Museum earlier this year to receive 5 ancient fresco fragments looted in the 1980s from a tomb in the Valley of the Kings.

During and after the colonial period, archaeologists, thieves and adventurers took thousands of artefacts out of Egypt.

A UN agreement in 1970 requires artefacts smuggled out of their country of origin to be returned to their rightful place.

Dr. Hawass has been lobbying for many cultural objects considered to be of significant archaeological value to his country to be returned, including the 3,500-year-old Queen Nefertiti bust on display at Berlin's Neues Museum, Germany.

Among the other items demanded to be returned are the statue of Hemiunu, architect

of the Great Pyramid at Giza (in Germany); Ramesses II statue (in the Turin Museum); bust of Ankhaf, builder of the Chepren Pyramid (in Boston); and a Zodiac piece from the Dendera temple (in the Louvre).

Museum hit by thefts

Thailand's Fine Arts Department has ordered national museums to be closed temporarily for security improvements.

The Khon Kaen National Museum was the latest to lose artefacts to a series of thefts.

More than 90 antique objects were stolen, and they include ancient Buddha images and Bodhisattva statues.

To better protect national treasures, museums have since tightened their security, including installing more surveillance cameras and steel windows, and hiring more security guards.

The *Bangkok Post* reported that national museums, historical parks and national archives may be required to close on weekends due to staff shortage.

Burial shroud from Jesus' time found

A team of researchers claim to have found pieces of a burial shroud belonging to the period when Jesus was buried.

The archaeologists and experts said that the shroud was similar to the Turin shroud, which some believe to have been Christ's burial cloth.

Discovered in a tomb near Jerusalem, fragments of the shroud were found on the body of a man, who is said to be a Jewish high priest or aristocratic member.

The tomb is part of a cemetery where Judas Iscariot is believed to have committed suicide.

Scientists think that the fragments are typical of the burial cloths used during the time of Christ, and say that they revealed a simple two-way weave which is very unlike that of the Turin Shroud's complex weave.

Egyptian temple block raised from sea

A massive stone believed to have been from a temple pillar in a sunken palace of Cleopatra has been lifted out of the waters at Alexandria.

Thought to have once formed a part of pillar in the goddess Isis temple, the 9-tonne granite block was raised by crane from the sea.

The palace of Cleopatra and other monuments have been submerged on the seabed in the harbour of Alexandria for centuries.

Recent discoveries in the sea area included dozens of sphinxes and pieces of Pharos, the Alexandria Lighthouse which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

The pillar stone is the first significant artefact excavated from the harbour since 2002 when Egyptian authorities forbid extraction of historical objects from the region to prevent damage to the site and artefacts.

Underwater training centre planned

Unesco has proposed establishing an underwater cultural heritage museum in Chanthaburi, Thailand to help the country protect its marine cultural heritage by integrating cultural preservation and tourism.

Earlier this year, Unesco and the local Fine Arts Department's Underwater Archaeology Division (UND) organised a 6-week training on underwater cultural heritage preservation.

Participating in an exploration of a shipwreck off Rayong were divers from Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

It is reported that there are more than 60 underwater archaeological sites in Thailand, and most of them are vulnerable to treasure hunters.

The trainees were guided by experts from Australia, the Netherlands and Thailand in underwater archaeology protection.

As nations in the Asia-Pacific region experience similar problems in site protection, Unesco plans to develop a regional field training centre to promote underwater conservation issues and exchange information among those involved.

Illustrations by Sakulchat Chatrakul Na Ayutthaya