

The Significance of 'Persian Context' Discoveries from Archaeological Sites in Thailand and Southeast Asia: A Concise Perspective

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The recent discovery of Persian-based coins from the Sasanian Dynasty (AD 226-651) in the Pattani area of Southern Thailand, as well as fragments of other Sasanian art products from various other Thai and Southeast Asian sites, has raised questions among art historians and specialists in Thai and Southeast Asian studies about the extent of cultural diffusions in this region from the direction of the Zoroastrian world of West and Central Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Professor Shinji Fukai, a ceramics authority in Japan, once suggested that Sasanid art techniques used in the production of pottery in Persia after Islamization of the seventh century AD., continued to remain Sasanian-based. Prof. R.E. Ettinghausen, a Western authority, also acknowledges a similar viewpoint as did another ceramics specialist, Prof. M. Yoshida, of Kyoto University. It is interesting to note that nowadays archaeologists in Southeast Asia have unearthed pottery remains whose technique has been described as 'Sasano-Islamic', here in the peninsular coasts.



Sasanian coins discovered in Southern Thai Province of Pattani on the coast at Yarang : these finds compliment other Sasanian finds in Siam, and their presence bear witness to the sphere of the Zoroastrian epoch of Partho-Sasanid Persia in this Asiatic zone.

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The 'Sasano-Islamic' was in use in the maritime ports of Southeast Asia as late as the ninth century AD, at a time when products of India and Persia were brought to Southeast Asia by ships whose original point of departure was at Siraf in the Persian Gulf. Moreover, secondary sources from literary heritage, and inscriptions of Southeast Asia can suggest that Persian cosmological notions together with other aspects of Partho-Sasanid cultures were probably transmitted in Siam, Cambodia, Champa, Myanmar, and Malayo-Indonesian zones as well as Southeast Asian-based areas of southern China as early as the latter period of the first millennium B.C..

I. Persian Elements in Southeast Asian Archaeology

The earliest known indication of a link between Persian navigation or maritime trade contacts of West-Asia with Southeast Asia can be found in the context of fifth century Sasanid coins from the Thai coast of Pattani. In addition to the coins, a Sasanian cabochon bearing Sasanian marks has been found at Oc-Eo in the Western Cochinchina in the Mekong Delta (a proximate zone to the Siamese Coast).

Various other finds include pottery shards and fragments of Sasanian wares (especially turquoise green and green alkaline glazed wares with white paste) found at sites in Phang-nga on the western coast of Thailand and at Laem Pho on the eastern coast and in Nakhon Nayok, U Thong,

and Suphanburi provinces as well as the Central zone of Lopburi and a Burmese site in Pagan. These finds are dated from the eighth and the ninth through the eleventh and thirteenth centuries of the Christian Era, and as a whole can support an argument for the existence of a rich cultural relationship between Sasanid Persia and Southeast Asian ports in pre-Islamic times and after the advent of Islam in West-Asia, which nowadays in the context of 'Sasano-Islamic', can indicate Zoroastrian-inspired art diffusions in Southeast Asia.

Indeed, in a recent study, Virginia Di Crocco has suggested that via Myanmar, art and architectural styles of West-Asian origin in the 'Persian context' was transmitted to Siam and other areas, some of which dates back to Parthian Persia (BC 259-AD 226), which also recalls the role of the Parthian world in the development of Mahayana Buddhism in Central-Asia, China, and Vietnam. It also shows the impact of Scythian peoples of the Indo-Iranian Epoch (in the age of Funan whose culture, arts and cosmology was influenced by the Zoroastrianized world).

II. Indo-Iranica Assimilations in Thai Culture

In a recent study, I have hypothesized that the 'Water Festival' of Southeast Asia (called 'Song-kran' by the Thai people) with proto-types in Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and Southern China, could have developed in relation to brahmanical impact in Southeast Asian societies whose

notions were probably under the sphere of Partho-Sasanid epochs. This is in the context of the 'Sakadvipins' of Central Asia and Northern India, and their Magian-based traditions in fusion with the Brahmans, taking into account that a 'Water Festival' prevailed in Sasanid Persia in the days of King Peroz (AD 459-84), when Persian people celebrated the end of a drought with a symbolic act of throwing water at each other in jubilation, and in consequence made these gestures into a festival called 'Abrizan', being a Persian 'jashn', or 'festival'; hence, 'Jashne-Abrizan', or 'Water throwing Festival'.

Indeed, as Sumet Jumsai has elaborated on Thailand's 'Songkran', which is the folkloric 'New Year' of Siam, people of all age groups throw water and soak each other so that "The year will be endowed with good rainfall". Jumsai adds that Songkran is "connected with rain propitiation". Likewise, the so-called Dai people of Xishuangbanna of the southwest frontier of Yunnan in China, whose ethno-cultural roots is as a kin-Thai group, celebrate 'Pi Mai-Thai', as a version of 'Songkran', being a rite that "has deep roots in Dai history". It is further described as a "Water festival that heralds the arrival of the monsoons".

The 'Water Festival' of the Dai has shamanic-animistic roots, the rudiments of which are now absorbed into the Buddhist culture and its brahmanical associations.

With reference to the Scythian peoples' impact in the context of Thai history and culture, we know that the Pallava dynasts had a strong presence in



Under the impact of Scytho-Parthians in northern India, a fusion-oriented era joined notions in sun-worship, which in the context of Indo-Scythian impact in the delta of the Mekong, and a Khmer role in pre-Thai stage of Siamese Dvaravati, may have diffused Indo-Iranian influences in the worship of the deity, Vishnu. Shrines and statue of Vishnu found in Thai sites in Surat Thani can, in the context of Pallava arts, signify an otherwise overlooked Indo-Scythian epoch in Peninsular Siam.

Southeast Asia's peninsular zones, especially at Takuapa on the western coastal area of the Isthmus of Kra, where Nandivarman III, whose court was aided by the brahmans, reigned in the ninth century AD.

In the delta of the Mekong region, peoples of the Zoroastrian world introduced new ideas to Cham and Chinese ports (as late as the time when Persia proper was suffering from Muslim conquests). Immigrants arrived in Canton and Hainan aboard Persian and Indian ships, and with their residence, intermarriages, and trades inland and in the maritime routes helped to diffuse Sasanian notions and products and their production secrets among the Sinitic peoples of Southeast Asia and China.

As early as the sixth century AD, ideas from the court of Khosrow Anushirvan, or the 'Nushirwan Adil' of the Malay Tradition, reached farther East, and Persian cosmology found motivation for assimilation in Cham and Malay literary heritage in philosophy or morale wisdom. This is attested today by the 'Sasano-Islamic' transition period of arts, when production of Persian-type ceramics bypassed that of 'Sasanian type' in ninth century Southeast Asia. Thus, the ebb and flow of cultural waves of Persian civilization was widespread in Southeast Asia, and Sasanian art remained alive after Islam. We know that Islamized Persians arrived in Siam via Malaysia and Myanmar between the ninth and tenth centuries AD as traders who imported Persian goods and

whose continued arrival in Thailand is associated with the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya periods. At this time, Persian art and architecture once again regained popularity in Thai cities, including the court of King Narai the Great, who had undergone a great metamorphosis by Persian ideas since he was a young prince.

A recent study suggests that Persian music was held in high regard in Ayuttayan courts, and we can assume that Ayuttaya monarchs were Iranophiles. Many Persian traders had immigrated to Siam, and Persian culture reigned in the court of Narai.

III. Manifestations of a Southeast Asian Acculturation of the Zoroastrian Epoch

It is my general hypothesis that during the first millennium B.C., a Scythian epoch had registered a strong impact in Southeast Asian-based zone of southern China, where a mixture of cultures prevailed among various ethno-cultural groups such as the Dian, a proto-North Vietnamese culture, where evidence in art history can support an argument for a Zoroastrianized impact there. This was in conjunction with other elements from Western Asia reaching this zone of the Far East, which were assimilated by the indigenous ethnic groups and the dynamics of the Sinitic epoch. Thus, arguments in support of external impacts in the development of the Dongsonian epoch persist.

In the context of cultural anthropology, we can argue, that a

strong acculturation occurred in the transformation of Southeast Asian cultures involving the Scythian peoples and their kin-Pallava groups, whose culture manifested the civilizational aspects of Zoroastrianism. Among the immediate beneficiaries were among the Cham-Viet, and Burmese groups, pre-Siamese inhabitants of Thailand, the Khmers, and Malayo-Indonesian and other farther groups in Southeast Asia, whose archaeology and inscriptions suggest encounters with heritage cultures of the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European family of nations, in which Indo-Scythians, and the Pallava were two significant groups. This penetration into Southeast Asia coincided with Eastward diffusion of Partho-Sasanid cultures and, thus, created a rich cosmological impact and legacy of Zarathushtrianism in the heritage of Southeast Asian civilizations.

Observation is a reasonable tool in anthropology. As a student of comparative civilizations, it is my observation that architectural patterns in Thai, Lao, Cambodian, Burmese, and other agrarian cultures of this region



Photograph : Virginia M.Di Crocco
Sasanian sherd with Turquoise glaze from Dvaravati period strata at what is now the Constantine Phoulkon compound, Lopburi 8th - 9th AD.

share structural affinities with those from the Caspian Sea coasts, especially the agricultural peoples of northern Persia in Mazandaran, and Gilan, where indigenous traditions resisted Islamization. With this idea, Thai and Southeast Asian scholars may find motivation to conduct tentative studies for discovery of other comparative elements. The ancient agricultural methods in West-Asian zone of Caspian Sea dates back to several thousand years B.C., from where many ideas reached the Indus valley, and the Duab of Turkistan. Indeed, in the Siamese context of Sanskrit usage, more often than not, we can find cognates in Persian:

<i>Persian vocabularies</i>	<i>Thai Usage</i>
Kalam : Cauliflower	Kalam-dog : Cauliflower
Nam : Wet	Nam : Water
Bam : Roof	Baan : House
Angoor : Grape	A-ngoon : Grape

A Persian author once went as far as insinuating a Zoroastrian connection to the origins of Siam, which in the context of the discovery of Sasanian cultural elements in Southeast Asia and the symbolism of the 'Water Festival' can pave the way for tentative studies which can attempt to approach Southeast Asia from the standpoint of Persia's sphere in farther East.

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