

The Identity of Thailand: Tracing Back the Past

by Pisit Charoenwongsa

Understanding a country as complex as Thailand is not easy. It requires some knowledge both of the past and the present — a comprehension of all the changes and forces that have given this country a civilization unique in its cultural and physical setting. It is unfortunate that the public and scholars alike have tended to accept oversimplified images and clichés about the people and society of Thailand without realizing that such judgments often lack an empirical basis. The fact that some scholars continue to present unsupported information about Thailand suggests either a lack of critical evaluation of scientific literature among scholars or a tendency to generalize among many who have researched and written about Thailand.

Archaeological data remain incomplete, and any reconstruction of Thailand's past inevitably involves some degree of speculation. Ac-

ording to noted British archaeologist Stuart Piggott, "We interpret the evidence in terms of our own intellectual makeup, conditioned as it is by the period and culture within which we were brought up, our social and religious background, our current presumptions and presuppositions, and our age and status." I hope in this essay to approach information about Thailand's past and present from an objective yet informed perspective and to present this little-known country in a clearer, more accurate light.

A Country Called Thailand

Facts about Thailand are necessary in any introduction to the country, known in the West at least as early as the 16th century, due to a widespread lack of awareness about the country and its change of names from Thailand to Siam and back again. This misinformation about Thailand extends to scholars as well, as I discovered one evening at The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania. At the end of a talk on Ban Chiang I gave there in 1975, a member of the audience confessed to me: "I hadn't realized that Taiwan had a site that fascinating." In addition to this problem of mistaken identity, the variety of names by which Thailand is known has also caused some degree of uncertainty in the public mind. Names which Westerners use interchangeably with Thailand include Sarnau, Xarnau, Sion, Ciama, Siam, Ansean, and even Asia. The Thai or Tai call the country the vernacular

name, Muang Tai, Land of the Tai, or literally "Land of the Free." During the reign of King Mongkut in 1856, the region was known as Sayam or Siam until 1939, when the government issued its official English name as Thailand. The name was changed back to Siam in 1945 for political reasons, and Thailand was again revived in 1949 (Rong, 1973).

Land and People

Westerners, or *farangs*, view the shape of Thailand as the head of an elephant with its trunk pointing to the south. To the Thai people, however, the map of Thailand resembles the shape of an axe or a water scoop with which they were familiar thousands of years before they undertook modern agriculture. This axe-shaped country has an area of 513,000 kilometers, roughly equivalent to the size of France, Spain, or the state of California, extending from the latitude 5°37' to 20°27' N and from the longitude 97°22' to 105° 37' E. Thailand's greatest length is 1,650 kilometers, its greatest breadth 800 kilometers; and it is bounded by the neighboring countries of Malaysia, Burma, Laos, and Cambodia, and by the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea.

Geologically, some structural areas can be distinguished. The northern region is characterized by a system of folded mountains, the northeast by the uplifting of the Khorat Plateau, and the central region by the Chao Phraya Basin. In

This is a combination slightly revised of two previous papers by the author; the first bears the same title as above and was published by the Fine Arts Department in a Diary entitled "Thai Cultural Heritage" for the years of 1981 - 86 ; the second is an introductory part to the Ban Chiang Catalog put out by the Smithsonian Institution et al. in 1982.

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recent geological time, the southern region, part of the Malay Peninsula, was forcibly tilted slightly to the northwest. The western region is also characterized by hills and a high mountain range continuing from the western part of the northern region. The southeastern region, though it has flood plains of marine origin, is also rather mountainous especially in the east.

Except for the Chao Phraya Basin structural flood plains,

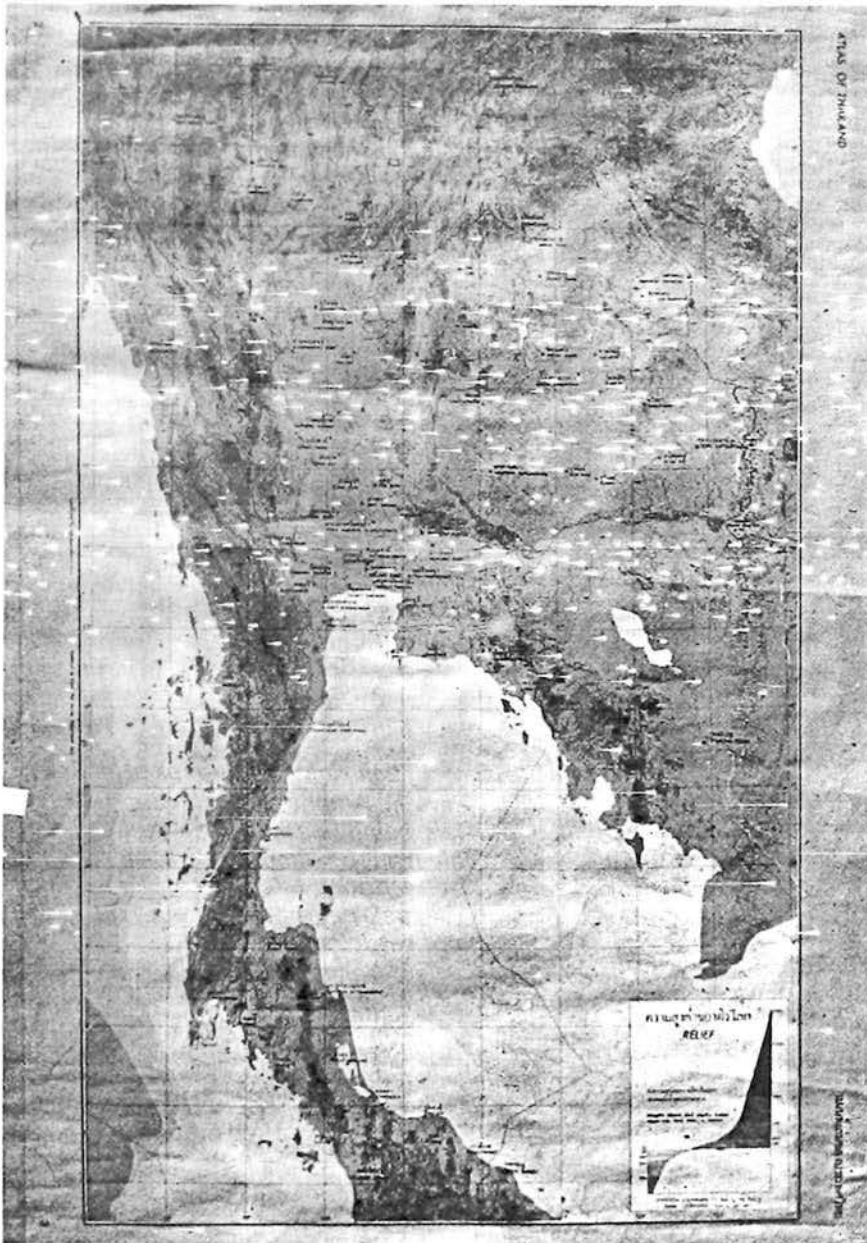
though large, are extremely narrow. There are several main rivers forming a network that offer easy communication; their flood plains and low terraces provide the option of farming as a way of life. A hundred years ago, Bangkok was known as the Venice of the East because of its elaborate canal systems. As a tropical country, Thailand was, until recently, known essentially for its rich evergreen and deciduous forests. Now, many forests are

much reduced due to unplanned expansion of agricultural lands and exploitation of lumber for building material, for illegal fuel, and of course, for export as a commodity. Upland forests no longer serve as climatic regulators or as soil and water conservators.

In general, Thailand has three seasons. The cool season, from November through February, corresponds to the northeast monsoon; in most parts of the country there is too little rainfall for agriculture during this season or the next. The hot season, from March to May, is dominated by hot winds and local storm systems that carry negligible rainfall. The rainy season lasts from May through October, corresponding to the southwest monsoon.

Thailand's population of forty-seven million people includes a variety of ethnic groups whose different cultures have been integrated harmoniously into one Thai culture. Each group has retained its identifiable regional characteristics and customs. Thailand has experienced less ethnic and racial discrimination than its many neighboring countries. Positioned centrally in Southeast Asia, Thailand has since prehistory hosted inter-regional movements and, hence, fostered interdependence among different peoples. Acceptance of obvious differences among its own people is an outstanding feature of the cultural character of Thailand. It is thus disturbing to find the conception of Thailand among scholars as of a "loosely-structured society" (Evers 1969)

If the society is that ambiguously defined, one may wonder what holds the people together, and how did they meld into a nation-state. In fact, this widespread but mistaken notion, derived from a comparative study with Japanese society and combined with generalizations about the history of Southeast Asia, constitutes an inappropriate approach to serious research. Because different people have different histories and cultures, it is unwise and even dangerous to loosely compare various institutions to one another. Moreover, the theory below, a description of the



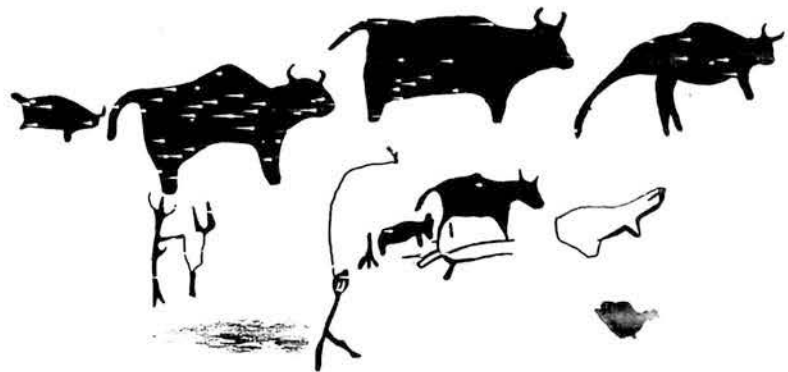
A map of Thailand showing the country's topography (from the Royal Thai Survey Department, 1976)



Thai people as viewed by yet another research team, indicates a lack of appreciation of Southeast Asian society: "Thais are better emulators than creators; better students than teachers; they have been borrowers rather than bearers of culture ... From many sources at many times the Thais borrowed cultural elements and have integrated them into their existing system, adapting them to match traits of their own character" (Moore 1984:3).

Development of Archaeology

It is true that the past does not necessarily set a precedent or predict the shape of things to come. But the past can structure perceptions of the present and expectations of the future in the minds of policymakers. King Rama V (1868-1910) wrote about his predecessor's Royal Assignments in which *Borankadi* (literally archaeology) was included as a subject which the king attended in odd hour during peaceful times (King Rama V, 1932). Archaeology in the king's sense covered everything: ethnography, history, literature, and traditions. In 1907, toward the end of his reign, he established the Archaeological Club, three years after the inception of the Siam Society, which promoted and encouraged the study of the arts and sciences of Thailand. This interest in national heritage,



Top : A prehistoric rock painting (in red) executed on a cliff next to Maholan Cave in Amphor Phu Kradung, Chan-wat Loei, showing animals being hunted by a group of men, some of which probably can be identified as gorals and bantengs; others are not identifiable due to their state of preservation. Above : A rock painting at Tham Phu, Udon Thani, depicting a scene of cattle rearing.

achievements, and artifacts was continued by successive monarchs, including the present king. It is interesting to note that the first national museum in Thailand, which celebrated its hundredth anniversary a few years ago, grew out of a royal collection housed in the Royal Grand Palace. Partly because of the encouragement and advice of His Majesty, the King of Thailand, the site of Ban Chiang has be-

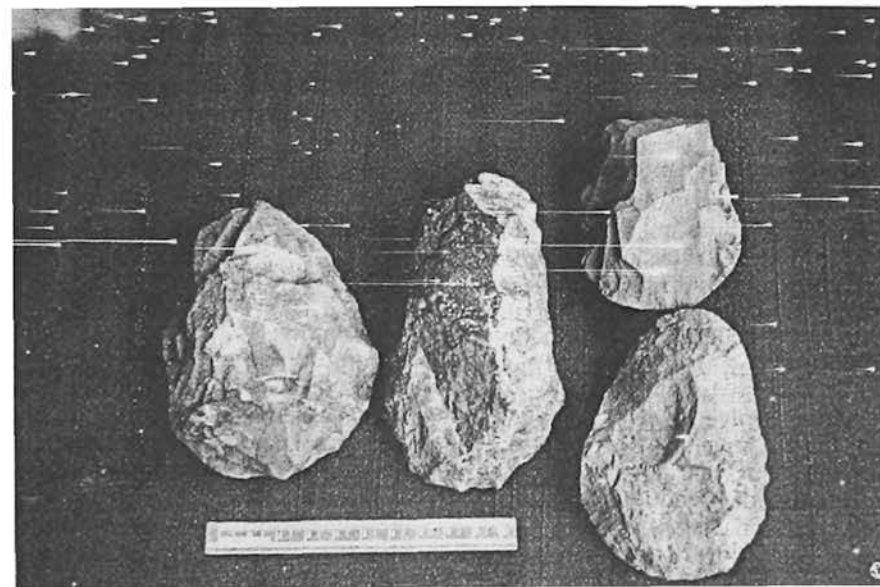
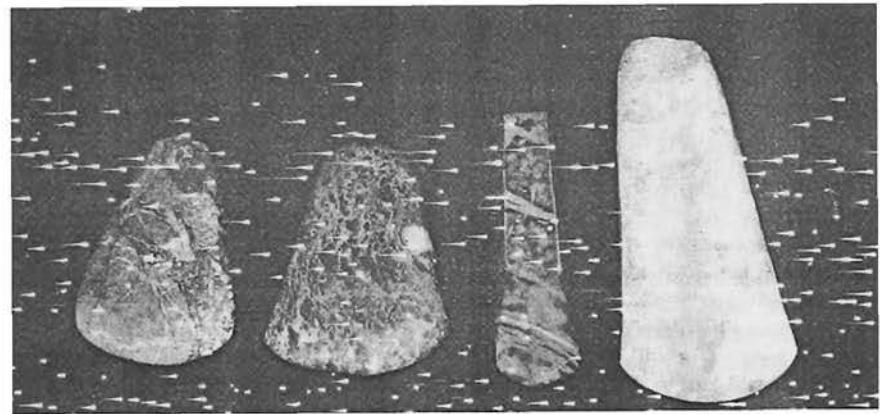
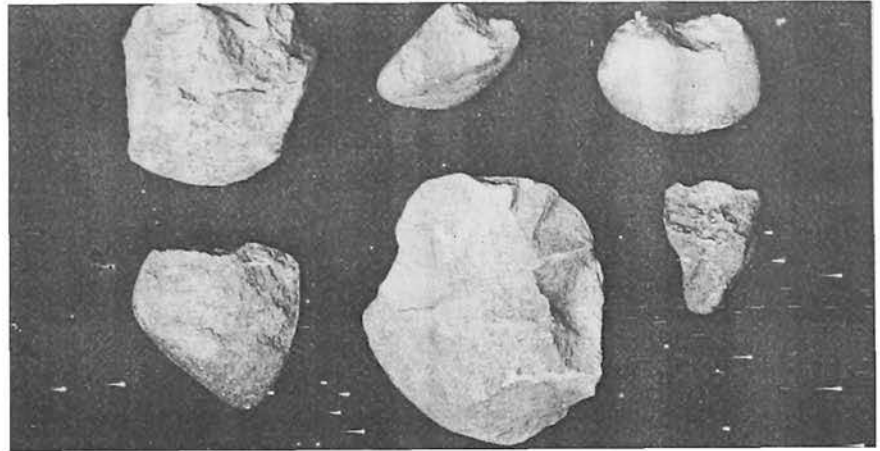
come a multidisciplinary and multinational research program.

Yet as far as archaeology in the modern sense is concerned, interest among the Thai people seems to be more toward restoration of ancient monuments which are to a great extent identified with their religion, predominantly Buddhism. Prehistory seems remote indeed; it bears no direct concern with the present-day inhabitants of Thailand.

The Thai word for prehistory is of English origin; it was first used by Prince Damrong in the letters to his half-brother, Prince Narit, beginning in 1934. Information concerning the prehistoric population of present day Thailand was first recorded by a Frenchman about seventy years ago. It described rock paintings discovered in the south. Only a handful of Europeans resided in Thailand, mainly in Bangkok; most were members of the Siam Society and wrote articles on archaeological finds from time to time in the society's journal. Some started collecting polished stone adzes and soon acquired a greater number than the Bangkok National Museum. There was no serious professional study of archaeology until 1931 when Fritz Sarasin attempted his reconnaissance and test excavations of cave sites in north and central Thailand, searching for traces of earlier periods. As the country lies geographically between China and Indonesia where fossils of early hominids were found, Dr Davidson Black of the Peking University came during 1927-1928 to explore the possibility of northward migration of the pithecanthropus from or through Thailand to China, though no such evidence was ever found.

There were still no trained prehistorians among the Thais at this time. In 1931 when Professor Pietre Vincent van Stein Callenfells, director of the National Museum in Java, wrote the secretary to the king offering to train Thai officials in the field of prehistory, the offer had to be refused because the country then faced an economic crisis.

In 1947 the prehistory of Thailand made headlines because of the writings of H.R. van Heekeren, a Dutch archaeologist who had been captured by the Japanese during World War II, and who was one of the prisoners compelled to work on the construction of the Bangkok-Moulmein Railway. Van Heekeren found stone tools near Ban Kao on a river terrace and a number of polished stone adzes in neighboring areas that he believed belonged to the Paleolithic period. His reports were both scholarly and adventurous because of the strange

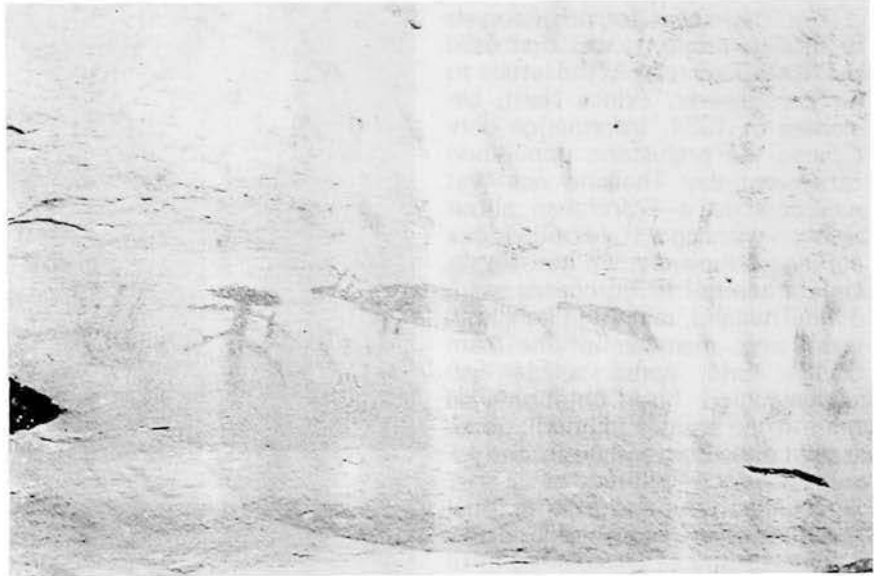


Forms of early cobble tools and polished stone adzes which are found widely distributed throughout the country.

circumstances surrounding his archaeological discoveries as a prisoner-of-war. One of his earliest reports appeared in an issue of the *Illustrated London News* in 1947, bearing the title "Stone Axes from the Railroad of Death."

The Council of National Culture met on March 4, 1953, to discuss the human skulls and stone implements recently discovered in a cave in Suratthani, Peninsular Thailand, and unanimously agreed on the importance of the finds to national heritage and toward the understanding of the history of mankind. Immediate study was postponed for lack of trained personnel. The council then recommended that the Thai Fine Arts Department be given responsibility for research and for training its staff to work in this new field of study. As a result, the Faculty of Archaeology, Silpakorn University, added prehistory to its curriculum in 1955.

At first, prehistoric information was received only through accidental discoveries and one or two preliminary surveys. Systematic research was unheard of until 1960, when a team of Danish specialists began working in Kanchanaburi in cooperation with Thai officials from the Fine Arts Department, who in turn gained considerable field experience. More familiarity with field work was gained by the Thais following subsequent joint expeditions with foreign colleagues: in 1963 with the University of Hawaii group led by Wilhelm Solheim and in 1966-1967 with a British team directed by W. Watson of London University. Now working on their own, the Thais have continued to engage in joint projects with colleagues from foreign institutions. Present projects include those with The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania; The University of London's Institute of Archaeology; The University of Otago in New Zealand; the Art Gallery of South Australia; and the Maritime Department of the Western Australian Museum. Each year foreign students have been granted permission to work and to carry out independent M.A. and Ph.D.-level



Cereal agriculture as depicted on a rock painting in Ubon Raitthani

research on Thai directed projects.

Through continued cooperation with able foreigners, a progressive increase in the quantity of research performed by Thai institutions and steady improvements in the quality of Thai researchers as measured both by publications and by advanced degrees from overseas universities, prehistory in Thailand has entered its adolescence and shows signs of future maturity. Breakthroughs appear increasingly probable as data and skills accumulate. It is likely that, before long, a better and more accurate image of the past in Thailand can be put together.

Hunting and Gathering Societies

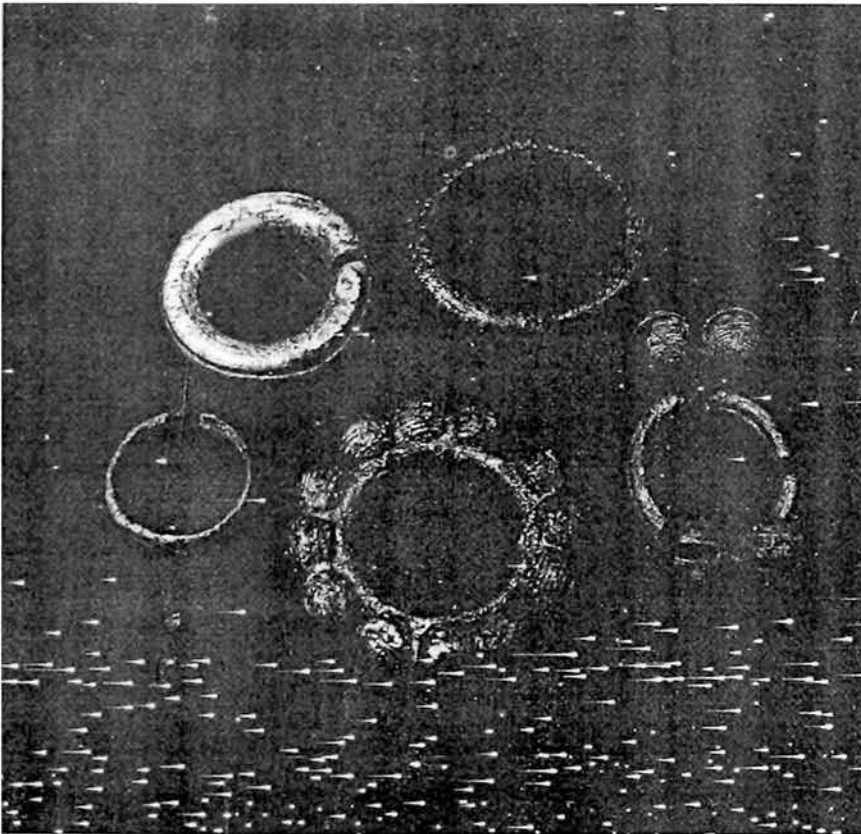
Although Thailand is economically a comparatively poor country, it is undeniably rich in antiquity. As research continues, human history in Thailand seems to have begun earlier and earlier.

At various periods of glaciation and interglaciation in regions of higher latitude, Thailand experienced hardly any change in temperature, and was affected only in the oscillation of sea level which resulted in changes of landforms and of the biosphere. That the climate in

Thailand remained fairly stable may be attributed to the fact that the glaciation took place at considerable distances from Southeast Asia. Man, however, seems to have readily adapted to these changes in geography.

During part of the Pleistocene and early Holocene, bands of hunter-gatherers were living in all regions of the country, exploiting rich natural resources in the vicinity of their camp sites and sometimes ranging far beyond them in search of certain game. This food-collecting economy was based on the hunting of game animals and the gathering of wild plant products. Ethnographic parallel suggests that such things as fruits, seeds, roots, leaves, insects, shellfish, fowl, small reptiles, rodents, etc. were gathered primarily by women and children while adult men were hunters of large game animals.

Around 12,000-8,000 years ago, some of the hunter-gatherers of Thailand began to adapt themselves to a new way of life. Chester Gorman's discoveries in Spirit Cave, Northern Thailand, throw much light upon this pre-agricultural way of life. In Layer I (12,000 to 8,000 years ago) only heavy tools of the earlier tradition were found. In Layer II (8,000 to 7,000 years ago)



Left : Certain types of bronze rings and bracelets. Right : Replicas for sale in shops at the site of Ban Chiang.

the presence of cord and netmarked pottery indicates the development of a great deal of new technology. Plant materials were apparently used to make cord and fish nets as well as to decorate pottery. We may infer that this facilitated the manufacture of fabric also. Flake blades found in this layer may have been attached to wooden handles to form sickles. Polished stone adzes appeared only in the upper layer.

Douglas Yen's list of 22 plant genera used by the Spirit Cave people includes edible fruits, vegetables, condiments, poisonous and oil bearing plants (possibly used as a source of light).

Early Farming Societies

Cereal agriculture may be safely placed between 6,000 and 7,000 years ago. Rice has been the staple food crop of Southeast Asia from that time to the present. Over a hundred species of wild rice can still be found in Thailand.

At the site in Ban Chiang, in the lowest layer (5,600 years ago), rice

chaff was used in quantity as a temper in pottery. The quantity exploited tends to signify domestication of some sort, although morphological studies may not clearly distinguish wilds from domestic forms at this phase of development. To present knowledge, the use of rice chaff and other plant stuff as deliberate inclusions in pottery is a tradition that continued into recent times.

These early farming populations were very advanced and must have evolved from a simpler and as yet unknown background. It is astonishing to find that around 2000 BC or earlier, the Ban Chiang and Non Nok Tha people had already acquired a knowledge of bronze casting techniques.

Early bronze implements and jewelry were made in forms similar to those made of stone, wood, shell and bone, whose use continued for some time after bronze was introduced. These items include arrowheads, fish-hooks, axes, rings, bracelets, hairpins, etc.

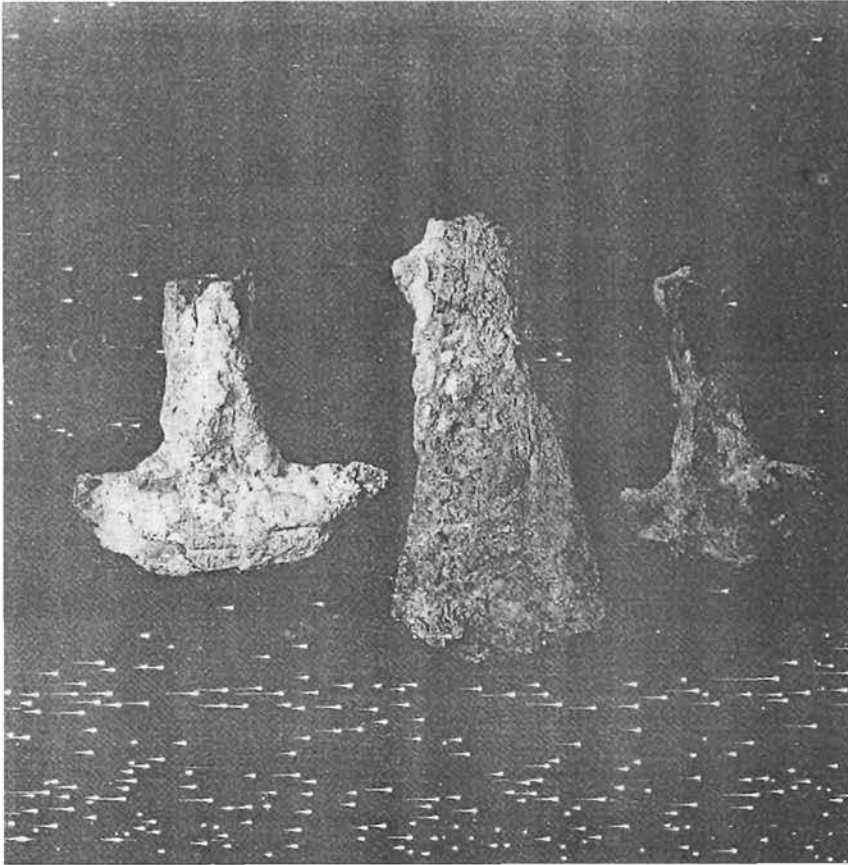
Startling as it is to discover the

development of bronze technology at such an early date, it is even more astonishing to realize that iron metallurgy also appeared here centuries before it developed in other parts of the world. Iron blades cast on bronze sockets, as well as bimetallic jewelry, were manufactured about 3,600 to 3,200 years ago.

Bronze and iron continued to be used into historic times. In quite recent times farmers were still producing their own metallic artifacts such as bells and spinning devices as well as vessels. Many of these are similar in form to their prehistoric prototypes.

The presence of post-holes uncovered at sites of this period seems to indicate that the dwellings of these peoples were not very different from those in rural communities in Southeast Asia at the present time.

Animal remains suggest that pigs, cattle, water buffaloes, fowl, and dogs were domesticated by the time that plant agriculture became dominant at most sites.



Types of iron tools found in many regions

Urbanization

A form of organization developed in Thailand at about the time of the beginning of the Christian era, possibly somewhat earlier. However, the way of life remained primarily agricultural, but with expansion of trade and communications. From 500 to 600 AD onward, defensive towns emerged as pseudo-morphic states in many parts of the country. Most were cultural, religious and trading rather than "sovereign" empires or states.

Sukhothai, Chiangrai/Chiang Mai and Phayao, not to mention legendary cities claimed to be founded much earlier, became dominant centres of government in the north, in the 13th century AD. The administrative power shifted to Ayut-taya in the 15th century, and then to Bangkok in the 18th century.

It is clear that the agrarian state of Thailand grew out of its prehistoric roots. Its civilization evolved in a continuation of the patterns established by early agriculturists. Some of these may be picked out for special attention, such as farming techniques, handicrafts (pottery, carving, basket-making, etc.), bronze and iron metallurgy, pile-dwellings, and indigenous species of domesticated plants and animals. Today, people in rural areas still eat rice with their hands. Animism is mixed well with other religions such as Brahmanism and Buddhism. Worshipping of the Rice Mother Goddess (Mae Posop), for example, has never died. To these days, still, application of herbs and charms exists side by side with medical treatment in modern hospitals throughout the country.

This is Thailand, a country in which peoples of different ethnic backgrounds have melted their own cultures into one single system.

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