

Sites of The Highest Possible Priority: Targets for Archaeological Reconnaissance in Thailand

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A list of sites was developed as an aid to members of the Research Section of the Archaeology Division currently engaged in various archaeological survey projects for the Fine Arts Department of Thailand. By offering it here to a wider public, the authors hope to stimulate discussion of such matters as well as to accelerate the pace of discovery.

It is essentially a wish-list, a compilation of the kinds of sites whose discovery would, in the authors' eyes, be of the greatest present importance and would open the most significant new lines of research. Not all potential discoveries of this sort have been included. To qualify for the list, a national site has to be plausible, non-obvious, recognizable, and capable of yielding useful information within a short time after it is found. This means that we have omitted discoveries which are

abstractly possible but implausible, those which could not readily be identified without extensive excavation or by the use of instruments not currently available. Moreover it means that we have left out what many believe to be the real prizes of archaeological research in Thailand: the discovery and understanding of early states, economic networks, adaptive and social systems and the like. While we quite agree that these objectives are of great importance, we feel that they cannot be satisfactorily demonstrated by any single find or without massive long-term research and analysis.

On the other hand, we recognize that the list is still seriously incomplete in terms of even these restrictions. Criticisms and suggestions will be welcomed. The list is as follows:

1. A site with flaked stone tools or human skeletal remains and bones of extinct species of animals in primary association.

Such sites have been hard to find in Southeast Asia; Java has produced solid (though non-primary) associations between human and extinct animal remains, but it has not

yielded stone tools which are unchallengeably associated with these. In Thailand, the North seems the most logical place to look; a possible site of this kind has recently been reported in Lampang.

2. A "Hoabinhian" shell midden.

Coastal shell mounds containing human bones, sometimes pottery, and large flaked stone tools once existed in substantial numbers in Malaysia, Sumatra, and probably southern Thailand as well. The great majority have already been destroyed by persons who burn the shell for lime. Two or three are known to

survive in Sumatra, and a recently discovered mound is slated for excavation by the National Museum of Malaysia this year. Due to the controversial dating and cultural affiliations of such sites, the discovery of one in Thailand probably in the South or Southeast would be of major significance.

3. A lithic period site producing only small flake tools, anywhere north of the Kra Isthmus.

It has long been believed that Southeast Asia was in early prehistoric times divided into two provinces: core and

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large flake-tool using area on the Mainland and a small flake-tool using area in the Islands. Now, however, a site producing nothing but small flake tools has been discovered in Krabi Province, showing that the two lithic provinces overlap. If more such sites are found in areas even further north, a number of theories will have to be reevaluated.

4. A site of the "prepottery neolithic", one with overall ground and polished stone tools but without pottery.

This does not include sites with flaked tools which have ground edges. Although true "neolithic" adzes are often considered to be relatively early in Southeast Asia, they occur in Thailand in association with metal and almost always in association with pottery. The question is whether they existed at all before the ceramic period.

5. A mining site for metal ores of definite prehistoric date.

Archaeological mining areas for copper, tin, iron and perhaps zinc (but not, as yet, lead) are known in several parts of Thailand. However, proving these are prehistoric has been difficult, since most mines were also exploited in more recent times. The discovery of a reasonable number of prehistoric artifacts, and no later artifacts, within the mines would constitute moderately convincing proof of a prehistoric date. This would be strengthened by finding a smelting site near the mining areas which contained residential debris of the same period.

6. A prehistoric iron smelting site with large quantities of slag and enough associated pottery to make clear that the smelting activity does not date from later times.

None of the slag when broken into small fragments should show areas of red glass or green inclusions; if those features are present, the slag probably derives from the smelting of copper rather than iron. The presence of iron ores, incidentally, is not proof that a site was used for iron smelting for such ores were often used as fluxes in the smelting of copper. A number of possible prehistoric iron smelting sites are now known in Central and Northeast Thailand. While many will undoubtedly prove to be quite late, a few may well be prehistoric. These include Kut Ta Phet in Lopburi Province and Phu Mun Bao in Kon Kaen, etc.

7. Site with ethnic zoning, with two or more residential areas that appear to be contemporary but which show markedly different designs of pottery and other artifacts.

At least two situations could produce a pattern of this kind: a prehistoric settlement where two groups with different occupational specialties coexist, as in the case of the hunter-gatherer groups who inhabit the fringes of agricultural settlements in several parts of modern Southeast Asia or a protohistoric or historic settlement with special quarters for foreign merchants, etc., as at 16th - 17th century Ayutthya. Both situations should be recognizable archaeologically and would be of major interest if found.

8. A town or city-sized settlement of entirely prehistoric date. The site should cover at least 20 hectares and should be densely covered with habitation debris, all of it prehistoric.

Almost all of the large settlements in Thailand that have been called prehistoric ci-

ties (for instance Phimai, Non Chai and Ta Khae) also were inhabited during the protohistoric and historic periods, suggesting that they may not have become truly large and densely populated until after prehistoric times. The discovery of a site abandoned before the close of the prehistoric period would resolve such doubts and would demonstrate that urbanization in Thailand probably occurred independently of Chinese or Indian influence.

9. A stone bead-making site, with microflaked bead blanks and debitage of carnelian, agate, and other varieties of chalcedony.

The fact that certain kinds of etched carnelian beads are more common in Thailand than in India, traditionally supposed to be the source of most beads in world commerce, suggests that they might have been locally made during the protohistoric period. A site of this kind, if it exists, would be expected to be located not far from a source of suitable stone. Several sources for chalcedony have been located in Petchabun. A possible beadmaking site exists at Khao Si Vichai in Suratthani.

10. Site showing late prehistoric or protohistoric Chinese contacts in the form of bronzes, cast iron, and perhaps carved jades or ceramics.

A number of poorly provenanced bronze dagger-axes in the Bangkok National Museum appear to be definitely Chinese and of late Chou/Zhou Dynasty date, 500-250 BC. A number of jades and bronze mirrors dating to the late Chou or Han (ca. 200 BC-AD 200) periods exist in private collections which are said to have been found in Thailand, and the Indonesian

National Museum possesses a good many Han glazed ceramic pieces claimed to be from Sumatra and Borneo. Many of these examples (including, perhaps, all of the Indonesian Han pieces) represent hoaxes, having been imported from China in recent times and sold with false provenances to collectors. No site in Thailand has yet produced such objects from a secure context; reports of early Chinese finds should be investigated carefully and critically.

11. Site showing contact during the late prehistoric or early protohistoric periods with India, the Middle East, or the Mediterranean.

Possible indicators of such contact include glass vessels, polychrome "eye" beads, coins, bronze objects, and burnished black or black and red finewares.

As in the case of ancient Chinese imports, most early objects from the West said to have been found in Southeast Asia are unprovenanced and often suspect as possible hoaxes. Indian finewares of the kind found at and perhaps made near Arikamedu have now been identified at Buni in Java and Tongku Lembu in Malaysia. As these are not famous and have no commercial

value, the finds are undoubtedly genuine. Two Roman coins appeared at Oc Eo in Vietnam and were accepted by its excavator as actual finds. In Thailand, the best-known Roman find is the bronze lamp from Pong Tuk; despite the cloudy circumstances of its discovery, this too has been generally accepted as an actual find. Glass vessels and eye beads were important Roman exports. However, as these continued to be made and exported from the eastern Mediterranean area until much later times, their presence at a site should only be interpreted as showing indirect Roman contacts (probably through Indian merchants) when the site contains no material later than the 6th century AD.

12. Site north of the Kra Isthmus with T'ang Dynasty "Ch'ang-sha" and the so-called "Three-Colored" ware ceramics.

These are the only kind of Chinese glazed ceramic which, unlike the various grey-green and brown wares, can be identified easily and unambiguously as T'ang, made not later than 900 AD. Ch'ang-ware, common in Java and the Middle East but until recently not known anywhere on the Southeast Asian mainland,

has now been found at Laem Pho near Chaiya. If it can be identified at a site in Central, Northeast or Northern Thailand, a minor but interesting puzzle will be resolved. If it cannot be found there, then it may be necessary to reevaluate the importance of Dvaravati as a node in the international trade networks of the time.

13. A pre-Sukhothai period shipwreck, underwater or in a coastal site.

Because they are easy to recognize and have commercial importance, most Thai underwater sites thus far discovered by or reported to archaeologists have been of the kind that produce glazed ceramics—e.g., of the 15th century and later. An earlier shipwreck site could have even greater importance than those currently being investigated.

14. Glass making or working site*

Cullet is common; is it locally made or imported commercial glass cakes? What products were made from cullet? Stratified glass waste in addition to cullet and a furnace would answer some of our questions.

* This information has been kindly added by Peter Francis, Society of Bead Researches.

Postscript. . .

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higher ground, just over one hour above Kuala Tungkal, we discovered a few sherds of fourteenth century incised grey glazed stoneware and fragments of a brown glazed jar.

Unfortunately, we did not have time to explore the area around Kuala Tungkal itself. Like Kampung Laut and Muara Sabak on the lower reaches of the Batang Hari, there is a considerable expanse of mud exposed at low tide and a lesser

amount of dry ground at high tide. The estuary itself is lined by mangrove.

An extremely brief visit to Muara Sabak failed to reveal any traces of antiquities. This settlement is situated where several streams and at least two small rivers enter the Batang Hari. It seems that here, too, further investigations might be of use.

It now appears that Koto Kandis is far more extensive than I had thought and extends further upstream than I indicated earlier. The use of aerial photographs may well

reveal the actual extent of the site.

Late Sung and Yuan stonewares are to be found in profusion in the various ditches which cut across the site itself. A white stone *pipisan* (a grindstone used in the preparation of medicinal herbs and spices) bearing a single line inscription in Old Javanese letters and thought to date from about the tenth century², came to light just before our visit.

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