

Review: Ban Chiang, Northeast Thailand, Volume 2 (2A, 2B, 2C, 2D)

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BOOK REVIEW

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White, Joyce C. and Elizabeth G. Hamilton (editors). 2018. Ban Chiang, Northeast Thailand, Volume 2A: Background to the Study of the Metal Remains. University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia. 265 pages.

White, Joyce C. and Elizabeth G. Hamilton (editors). 2018. Ban Chiang, Northeast Thailand, Volume 2B: Metals and Related Evidence from Ban Chiang, Ban Tong, Ban Phak Top, and Don Klang. University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia. 264 pages.

White, Joyce C. and Elizabeth G. Hamilton (editors). 2019. Ban Chiang, Northeast Thailand, Volume 2C: The Metal Remains in Regional Context. University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia. 218 pages.

White, Joyce C. and Elizabeth G. Hamilton (editors). 2021. Ban Chiang, Northeast Thailand, Volume 2D: Catalogs for Metals and Related Remains from Ban Chiang, Ban Tong, Ban Phak Top, and Don Klang. University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia. 312 pages.

The archaeological site of Ban Chiang is located in the Ban Chiang Subdistrict, Non Han District, Udon Thani, Northeast Thailand. It is one of the very locally, nationally, and internationally important and famous archaeological sites in Thailand. It was inscribed by UNESCO in 1992 as a Cultural World Heritage site. Archaeological research at Ban Chiang and its associated sites began over four decades ago, including a series of surveys and excavations by Thai and international teams of archaeologists and scholars. An important research project that brought Ban Chiang to the world and wider audiences was known as “The Ban Chiang Project” (hence after BCP), which was a collaboration between the Thai Fine Arts Department of Thailand and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, USA (White 1982). Excavations by Ban Chiang Project researchers over several years have unearthed a large amount and diverse kinds of archaeological remains which took subsequent decades of analysis before publications were made. The first monograph published in 2002 by the BCP is titled Ban Chiang, A Prehistoric Village Site in Northeast Thailand I: The Human Skeletal Remains by Michael Pietruszewsky and Michele

Toomay Douglas. It is about bioarchaeological studies of human remains found at Ban Chiang. The second monograph came out as a series on the study of the metal remains, referred to here as Ban Chiang Volume 2 consisting of 4 subvolumes (2A, 2B, 2C, and 2D) and my review of this monograph suite is below.

Beginning with Volume 2A (*Background to the Study of the Metal Remains*), this volume provides theoretical and methodological background, debates, and knowledge in wider perspectives on archaeometallurgy. It is a very good volume for archaeologists who are interested in overall history, roles, and importance of metals, particularly bronze, in ancient human societies. The volume is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 presents contextual details on archaeometallurgical development and site chronology, roles of bronze in a global context, as well as debates on chronology of bronze artifacts in Northeast Thailand. Chapter 2 focuses on details of discussions and debates over chronology of metal remains found in Thailand, with particular reference to bronze objects. The authors, who also serve as editors of the volume, also critically review dating methods and limitations, while in Chapters 3 and 4 the authors move on to present issues regarding new paradigms, concepts, theories, as well as modes in the study of metal objects in relation to human behaviors and societies. Chapter 5 serves as an example of a magnifier showing the significance of metals in ancient human societies, such as economic roles of metals and the metal production procedures that gave rise to metal craft specialists, as well as consequences of trade and exchange of metals. Chapter 6 is very insightful for the study of sources and locations of metal ores in Thailand and Southeast Asia. An additional important point mentioned in this chapter is that Ban Chiang is in a region rich in two important metal ores (copper and tin). In the closing chapter, Chapter 7, the authors interestingly and succinctly provide readers with the social technology concept known as “*chaîne opératoire*” of production of metal objects.

Volume 2B (*Metals and Related Evidence from Ban Chiang, Ban Tong, Ban Phak Top, and Don Klang*) concentrates on results of scientific analysis of metal remains from Ban Chiang and three related sites (Ban Tong, Ban Phak Top, and Don Klang). There are seven chapters in this volume, which has about the same number of pages as volume 2A. It abundantly documents useful data gained from various methods of analysis of the metal evidence for comparison with evidence from other sites in Thailand and Southeast Asia. Chapters 6 and 7 are particularly interesting in my point of view as they provide an excellent example of contextual information of the evidence in relation to symbolic, social, and ritual aspects of human behaviors and societies. It is unfortunate for me that the authors did not discuss or even mention the ritual practice of so-called “ritual killing” of artifacts (see Figure 3.30 in the volume showing the bended or mutilated tip of a bronze spear point), which was widely practiced during the Bronze Age and Iron Age in Thailand (Figure 1) and other parts of the world (see e.g. Driessen 2013; Knight 2017).

After the first two volumes (2A and 2B) that generally and significantly provided the context of prehistoric metal remains in Northeast Thailand and archeometallurgical research in global perspectives, then the editors move on to seemingly close the monograph suite with Volume 2C (*The Metal Remains in Regional Context*) in terms of social contextual information. The volume, which contains 6 chapters, concentrates on the placing of the metal remains from Ban Chiang and associated sites in regional context, in order for readers to “visualize” the picture and movement of metal remains and relevant evidence in wider context within and beyond Thailand. Chapter 1 by Joyce White reiterates that technology is a social practice and thus metallurgical technology is closely and significantly linked to or related with society. Chapter 2 by Vincent Pigott emphasizes

that evidence of prehistoric copper mining and smelting has been found in various parts of Southeast Asia, especially in central and northeast Thailand, and in Laos (as well as the evidence recently found in west-central Thailand—reviewer). The technological evidence at several sites is related to each other regarding method, type and form of smelting tools, indicating prehistoric inter-regional contact, exchange, and movement of technologies and people in the region. Chapter 3 by T. Oliver Pryce briefly but interestingly presents results of lead isotopic analysis of copper-based metal objects from Ban Chiang and Don Klang, showing the use of copper raw material made from a copper smelting workshop at Sepon in Laos. This finding strongly supports the argument that there were metal inter-regional networks and trade in the Mekong area. The remaining three chapters by Joyce White and Elizabeth Hamilton present an overall review and summary of evidence and information on various dimensions of metals in ancient societies of Thailand, such as type and form of metal objects, production technology, context, ritual significance of metals, and identity of metal-workers. The authors again emphasize that if we systematically and scientifically study metal remains, with a clear and updated conceptual framework, and view them as products of social activities, we will more fully understand “human societies” from “metal data” (White and Hamilton 2021).

Volume 2D (Catalogs for Metals and Related Remains from Ban Chiang, Ban Tong, Ban Phak Top, and Don Klang) that came out more recently as the last and thickest volume of this series is an amazing pictorial book of prehistoric metal remains ever published in Thailand and Southeast Asia. It not only provides a large number of photos and drawings of rarely seen of metal objects and remains, but also serves us as readers with quantitative and qualitative information that is very useful for comparative study of similar artifacts found in northeast and other regions of Thailand and Southeast Asia.



Fig. 1 An iron spear with bended point excavated from the site Ban Yang Thong Tai, Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand, now on display at Chiang Mai National Museum. Source: Photo by Thanik Lertcharnrit, 2022.

In overall in my view, this second monograph series of the BCP is outstanding in three issues. First, the volumes are well-organized, well-structured, and well-illustrated, with Volume 2A giving historical and theoretical background on the subject, Volume 2B then narrowing down or going into the “main” subject of the series, i.e. the excavated remains from four sites and how they were studied, Volume 2C opening a window to a wider world on the subject, and Volume 2D providing the visibility of the subject matter. In addition, the series is readable and accessible for both professionals or scholars of the field and general audiences, including for readers for whom English is not their first language. The glossaries alone in Volumes 2A and 2B will be particularly useful for non-native English speakers. Secondly, the series is scholarly interesting in terms of methodology that is applicable in archaeological research. Thirdly, this series is rich in comparative data for intra and inter-regional comparison with those from archaeological sites in Thailand and Southeast Asia. The series contributes greatly to the study of archaeology, history, human technological history, anthropology, and social sciences in general, beyond Thailand and even Southeast Asia. The series

stands as a good scholarly and reader-friendly publication. I strongly recommend the series to archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, and interested public audiences.

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