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### Book Review:

Nicolas Revire and Stephen A. Murphy (eds).

## Before Siam: Essays in Art and Archaeology.

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This is no doubt a very interesting collection of essays, bundled into a volume which calls itself 'a peer-reviewed publication to present new research and rediscoveries to reconstruct the cultures, religious persuasions and artistic traditions in pre-modern Thailand and its neighboring countries.'

The volume contains an excellently edited and printed text and illustrations, good index and references – a tribute to the combined efforts of the editors, the Siam Society and River Books. Contributors are both local and foreign researchers working on Asian cultures and their interrelations with one another. The essays follow one another in four chronologically-arranged sequences, beginning with pre- and proto-history down to about the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, which marked the emergence of the Thai settlements and states in Southeast Asia. Contextually, they can be grouped into two broad categories, one presenting new discoveries and data, and the other re-examining, re-appraising or re-interpreting earlier recorded data and theories.

The prologue, 'What There Was before Siam: Traditional Views' (pp. 16-29), by **Hiram Woodward**, sums up expertly a review of the most outstanding archaeological monuments and sites in Thailand which had a pre-Thai history, referring also to inscriptional and literary data including extant local chronicles and orally transmitted tales. The

scope includes the ancient monuments of Phra That Haripunchai, Phra That Phanom, Phra Borommathat Nakhon Si Thammarat and the grand *stupas* of Nakhon Pathom.

The first essay, 'Reconsidering the Palaeo-shoreline in the Lower Central Plain of Thailand' (pp. 32-67), by **Trongjai Hutangkura**, presents a systematic and excellent record of recent surveys, new data, as well as fresh analytical results of the reconstruction of the pre-historic shorelines in lower Central Thailand, through updated scientific methods, especially phytogeography in support of standardized radio-carbon calibration. This material clearly underlines the significance of science to archaeology, in collaboration with epigraphy and literary evidence and the 'traditional' analysis of artifacts through studies of their physical features and stylistic evolution.

Next, 'The Development of Coastal Polities in the Upper Thai-Malay Peninsula' (pp. 68-89), are re-traced and adjusted by **Bérénice Bellina and her team** through studies and comparison of imported finds from India and southern China shores. The main area of excavations and analysis extends from the sites of Khao Sam Kaeo on the east coast of peninsular Thailand to the site-complex of Phu Khao Thong on the west coast. The finds included hard stone and ceramic wares, steatite wares and beads, all relating to the ancient trans-peninsular routes, settlements and the economy of peninsular Thailand from around the beginning of the Common Era. Finds of special interest to demand further study and investigations include a shard inscribed with what is referred to in the essay as a 'Tamil-Brahmi' script, a golden seal (or medallion?) bearing a Brahmi inscription and some more ancient symbols recovered from Bang Kluai Nok.

Along the same line, **Ian C. Glover and Shahnaj Husne Jahan** jointly discuss 'An Early Northwest Indian Decorated Bronze Bowl from Khao Sam Kaeo' (pp. 90-97), comparing it stylistically with products of Northwest India from the Kushana period of about the first few centuries CE. This discovery confirms the significance of ancient maritime contact and exchange networks joining ancient Thailand with India and countries further west, dating back to the period before CE.

The next essay, ‘Contacts between the Upper Thai-Malay Peninsula and the Mediterranean World’ (pp. 98-117), by **Brigitte Borell, Bérénice Bellina and Boonyarit Chaisuwan**, focuses on imported finds from the West. It also discusses ancient references to international maritime networks as recorded in Greek and Roman travelogues from the early centuries CE, in relation to Chinese records of the later Han dynasty and later. The finds under discussion include Roman *intaglios* found at Khlong Thom, Khao Sam Kaeo and Tha Chana in peninsular Thailand; fragments of Roman glass vessels, and an interesting stone mould which suggests the existence of local workshops, all assignable to the early centuries CE.

**Thanik Lertcharnrit** in his ‘Phromthin Tai: An Archaeological Perspective on Its Societal Transition’ (pp. 118-131) presents a short report of recently excavated finds from the village of Phromthin Tai in Lop Buri province, Central Thailand. The excavations, carried out from 2004 to 2011, uncovered amongst other things a moated settlement and occupational sequences going back to the Bronze Age of circa 700-500 BCE and even earlier. Some of the cultural material and radiometric determinations suggest a time span covering c. 1211 BCE – c. 73 CE, while finds from historical levels included a silver coin bearing a symbol, a carnelian bead and some interesting faunal remains, all marking Phromthin Tai as another important occupational site in Central Thailand, the history of which goes back to pre-historical times.

**Himanshu Prabha Ray** carries on her investigations on the ‘Multi-religious Maritime Linkages across the Bay of Bengal during the first Millennium CE’ (pp. 134-151), tracing back in time to the religious policy of the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka, when no hostility was apparent amongst the existing religious groups of South Asia. Sanskrit, the sacred language of India, was introduced and evidently used in Southeast Asian sacred and formal writings, while Brahmins were generally regarded and respected as legitimizers of political authority by Hindus and Buddhists alike.

The important role of merchants and seafaring communities in the transmission of Buddhist and Hindu cultures had long been

recognized, but historical and archaeological sources indicate that their practices and enterprises probably cut across religious lines. Buddhist images and symbols were apparently introduced into Southeast Asia side-by-side with Hindu imagery to become the pivots of the new faiths at the court and among the masses. In this essay, attention is once again drawn to Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh, India, whose known religious landscape was predominantly Buddhist, and yet where Hindu sites have also been located. This feature of religious tolerance has actually been recorded in all ancient Chinese pilgrims' accounts and amongst archaeological remains at a great many cultural and political centers in India.

Following this, **Paul A. Lavy** re-examines the iconic theme of 'Conch-on-hip Images in Peninsular Thailand and Early Vaisnava Sculpture in Southeast Asia' (pp. 152-173). His essay discusses the theories and suggestions made earlier by Stanley J. O'Connor and Jean Boisselier regarding the relationship of this type of icon with Mathura and Kushan India, and adding comparable material from North India, Rajasthan and Yeleswara in Andhra Pradesh. His conclusion, that the iconic feature of Vishnu with conch-on-hip was carried on in Southeast Asia only during a limited period circa 500 CE, underlines the incontestably significant role of stylistic studies. This aspect of art history mirrors the evolutionary process and relationship of art styles. Moreover, it suggests a chronological order of the concept and visual configurations of iconic and decorative themes that repeatedly appeared and continued to be portrayed throughout the long history of Indian and Southeast Asian art. The iconography or physical details of such conventional and religious themes may or may not remain consistent or unchanged, but only their variant stylistic treatments can tell us of the different manufacturing time and place of the product.

**Wannasarn Noonsuk**'s 'New Evidence of Early Brahmanical Vestiges in Pattani Province' (pp. 174-185) draws attention to archaeological finds from the excavated southern sites at Yarang and the less studied ones at Ban Bana and Khuan Mahut. Besides structures and artifacts which are identified as Buddhist, these finds include

a substantial amount of Hindu material, e.g. stone *lingas*, ablution basins, figures of a bull and several stone thresholds that point to the existence of Hindu places of worship. This is not surprising since current research and researchers today have accepted the possible co-existence of Buddhist and Hindu communities in most cultural sites of Southeast Asia as well as in India, the very cradle of these two religions. Nevertheless, this essay gratifyingly introduces and highlights many hitherto unpublished materials, inviting new investigations and interpretations of the periodization of buildings and artifacts, and a more precise sectarian determination and explanation of the cultures, beliefs and practices of the ancient communities.

The next essay, 'Pre-Angkorian Communities in the Middle Mekong Valley (Laos and Adjacent Areas)' (pp. 186-215), by **Michel Lorrillard**, contributes to the rising interests in the explorations, surveys and studies of the Mekong Valley. More and more antiquities have recently been located and brought on record, serving as tangible markers to disclose historical and cultural relations of early communities. The areas under revision covered parts of Laos and Central Thailand bordering the present-day Cambodian territories. Many stone finds, including finely carved lintels, an inscribed doorjamb and some figurative and decorative sculptures reveal their close cultural and stylistic relationship with the pre-Angkorian style and period of Cambodia, inviting further studies to relating them to the classified pre-Angkorian materials.

'Sampanago: "City of Serpents" and Muttama (Martaban)' (pp. 216-237), presented conjointly by **Elizabeth H. Moore** and **San Win**, records and analyzes recent archaeological finds from one of the ancient sites in Lower Myanmar. Situated in the Mon country at the so-called Five-River confluence and having the Salween as its eastern boundary, the uncovered walled city of Sampanago contains the remains of what is traditionally called 'the palace site' and also a number of *stupas*. The city's rectangular ground plan recalls that of certain Dvaravati sites in Thailand as well as of many other walled cities in the Mon region of Myanmar. Reported finds include examples of finger-marked

bricks and a variety of beads that are difficult to date and certainly need further investigation. The occupation time is believed to be from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Local legends trace the origins of the city back to the time of the Buddha, or else to a Khmer *naga* princess who arrived and settled down there. It is suggested that the city may have featured in some Mon chronicles as one which once had a cultural and political connection with the Haripunjaya Mon kingdom of Queen Camadevi in Thailand.

In the next chapter, **Nicolas Revire** launches his ‘Glimpses of Buddhist Practices and Rituals in Dvaravati and its Neighbouring Cultures’ (pp. 240-271), largely based on re-reading and re-interpreting Dvaravati’s major tangible remains, namely inscriptions and archaeological materials. The author’s painstaking efforts to classify and list Dvaravati inscriptions according to their contents and motivations deserve our appreciation. The lists of Mon inscriptions, nevertheless, need to be consistently updated, since more and more inscriptions written in Mon continue to turn up. A number of these have recently been located in Phetchabun province (personal communication with the National Library, Bangkok, 2014).

In ‘Dvaravati *Cakras*: Questions of Their Significance’ (pp. 272-309), **Pinna Indorf** re-explores this very well-known and widely-discussed symbol and its variant connotations in Dvaravati culture. She goes back to early India, and presents in addition comparable examples of *cakra* and *cakrastambha* from regions close to Dvaravati, namely pre-Angkor Cambodian Hanchey and Sambor Prei Kuk, as well as Rakhine in Myanmar. Her detailed analysis of the physical appearance of the *cakras* and listing of their structural and decorative features are most useful for further studies on the subject. New proposals of tentative chronological sequences largely follow the results summed up by Robert Brown in 1996, now presented in correlation and comparison with other data and theories which have been proposed and discussed in many (untranslated) works of Thai scholars.

**Wesley Clarke** discusses ‘The Skeletons of Phong Tuek: Human Remains in Dvaravati Ritual Contexts’ (pp. 310-329).

Following the studies of Coedès and Quaritch Wales, the author uses comparative inhumation data from other Dvaravati sites including Dong Mae Nang Mueang and Si Satchanalai as support to suggest a new paradigm for mortuary practices during the ‘early historic period’ of Thailand. The scarcity of information regarding early inhumation customs from Thailand and other countries of Southeast Asia should make us reluctant to accept any conclusive judgment in this matter. In general we note that much of the indigenous and pre-historic mortuary customs of Thailand and its neighbors had remained unchanged even after their acceptance of (Indic) Buddhist/Hindu way of life. Sriksetra and some other predominantly Buddhist sites in Myanmar retained much evidence of mortuary data that seems alien to Buddhist India, while similar practices of ‘bringing the ashes of the dead to be interred in the realm of the Buddha and the gods’ were also known from the Angkor period of Cambodia (personal communication with Im Sokrithy) and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Variant mortuary customs practiced in present-day Thailand and Southeast Asia may or may not be related to imported Indian/Indic or even Chinese customs. The Indians themselves, as well as the natives of China and other cultures of South, Southeast and East Asia, practiced variant methods of burial, some of which could have been indigenous to their cultures and date back to pre-historic times.

**Matthew D. Gallon**’s ‘Monuments and Identity at the Dvaravati Town of Kamphaeng Saen’ (pp. 330-351) sums up the contents of his recent doctoral dissertation, defining the urban settlement at Kamphaeng Saen through his re-examination of the site during 2009-2010 under the supervision of the Fine Arts Department of Thailand. The essay outlines the history of discovery and reviews early explorations and studies of the site from 1939 to 1992, covering the works of, among others, Pierre Dupont (1939), Jean Boisselier (1965), H.G. Quaritch Wales (1969) and Somprasong Nuamboonlue (1996). This is a good update of accumulation data and sound research that provides a new and firm step to understanding Dvaravati culture in Thailand.

Next, **Stephen A. Murphy** presents ‘Sema Stones in Lower Myanmar and Northeast Thailand: A Comparison’ (pp. 352-371). Narrative stories and their depictions on the *sema* stones from Northeast Thailand have stirred much attention from scholars of many generations. In this essay, the *sema* stones at Kalyani Sima in Pegu, and those from Thaton in the Mon country of Myanmar provide materials for discussion and comparison. Since no forerunner in time of the Thaton examples are known, it had been speculated earlier that it was the Mons from Northeast Thailand who brought this tradition to Myanmar. The present study rightly argues that while the contents of these narrative themes on the products from Northeast Thailand and Lower Myanmar are similar and at times identical, the style, composition and morphology of each group differ considerably from one another, suggesting the development of each from different traditions. To this, we may add that not only do the datings of these different sets from Myanmar and Thailand differ, the *jataka* themes that appear on them also follow different literary traditions. An amazingly large variety of *jataka* stories is found on the *sema* stones of what is now Northeast Thailand, revealing clearly that the inspiring literary sources of these depictions were definitely not confined to Pali recensions. As to the *sema* stones from Myanmar, the Pegu examples appear to have followed the Pali sources such as those found at Pagan, and the set at Kalyani Sima at Thaton made use only of the last ten *jatakas* of the Pali recensions.

**Pia Conti**, in her ‘Tantric Buddhism at Prasat Hin Phimai: A New Reading of Its Iconographic Message’ (pp. 374-395), proposes to re-identify two enigmatic deities who appeared on the set of four lintels adorning the innermost space of Prasat Hin Phimai in Northeast Thailand. This set of four figures has long been studied and variously identified. Considering the appearance of Hindu and Buddhist Tantric elements in Cambodia and neighboring Champa since the 9<sup>th</sup> century, it is, indeed, tempting to relate these multi-headed and multi-handed divinities at Prasat Hin Phimai to manifestations of Esoteric Buddhism as richly described in *Sadhanā* literature. In this essay, the author identifies two of the four enigmatic depictions as Akshobhya and

Cakrasamvara, leaving the other two unexplained, although it seems obvious that the four lintels must be taken together in content as a meaningful whole. The syncretistic and combined Hindu and Buddhist features at Prasat Hin Phimai have long been recognized, and further supported by the contents of many inscriptions of 11<sup>th</sup> century Cambodia which evoked the Hindu *Trimurti* and the Buddha as the four aspects of the Absolute. The Buddhist elements became overwhelming in the innermost space, which was quite likely dominated by the main icon depicting the Buddha. The four lintels positioned around in this innermost space were likely intended to make manifest the Buddhist perception of the Hindu *Trimurti*, evoked in the company of the fourth worshipful personage, namely the Buddha, forming together the four sublime facets of one and the same Reality.

**Hedwige Multzer O’Naghten** closes the volume with ‘The Organisation of Space in Pre-modern Thailand under Jayavarman VII’ (pp. 396-419), dividing the existing monuments of the great monarch into two categories, namely the chapels of the hospitals (*arogyasala*) and the houses of fire (*vahnigrha*), and appending these with a comprehensive list of each category of buildings, together with an inventory of the hospital edicts found in Northeast Thailand. The location of each of these buildings reveals regional disparities, reflecting the varying degrees of importance of the areas. They were very often situated on ancient settlements which predated the reign of Jayavarman VII. All were connected to the capital city of Angkor by a network of overland or fluvial communication channels which allowed control over the provinces and trade to flow through strategic accesses and contributed to the kingdom’s prosperity.

**Multzer O’Naghten** also describes characteristic features of each type of building, together with the iconic sculptures found within their boundaries. Among this last mentioned category are those of a seated deity holding a *vajra* and a *ghanta*, or two *vajras* in front of the chest. By rules of iconography, such manifestations would represent Vajradhara, the supreme Buddha of Esoteric Buddhism. This type of icon seems to have been modified by Jayavarman VII to project his own

vision of the Medicine Buddha, Bhaisajyaguru, shown seated between two crowned acolytes each holding a jar of medicine. This identical pair would represent the two constant assistants of the Medicine Buddha, Suryavairocana and Chandravairocana, referred to in iconographic treatises as well as in the hospital edicts of Jayavarman VII.

### **Concluding Remarks**

It is gratifying to observe new interests in the study of Southeast Asian art and cultures. Updated activities and fresh results obtained through scientific methods could support, counteract, or modify patterns and conclusions arrived at by 'conventional' methods in the fields of archaeology and art history. More research of this nature is to be expected through the development of more projects under the auspices of the Thailand Research Fund and other co-operative institutions in Thailand and abroad.

This volume presents combined efforts by local and foreign scholars in their genuine expectations to evaluate and integrate more information from available archaeological and art-historical materials. More collaborations by local and foreign scholars are obviously and gratifyingly increasing. Still, it has to be noted that many foreign scholars miss the advantage of obtaining data or relevant points of interest raised by local scholars in their works which were presented in their own mother tongues. Local scholars, in turn, seem reluctant to take note of the ideas and products presented by their foreign colleagues. Language barriers may explain such lack of communication which, hopefully, can be remedied by the growing world tendency towards globalization, for human interest as well as for common economic advantage.