





BEFORE ANGKOR: EARLY HISTORIC COMMUNITIES IN NORTHEAST THAILAND

Sarah Talbot

But there is now one great question: who inhabited this region at the time of the invasion of Mahendravarman? (Jacques 1989, 17)

Abstract

This paper outlines the epigraphic and archaeological evidence for the Early Historic communities of Northeast Thailand immediately before 802 AD, the traditional date for the beginning of Angkor. The Early Historic period (c. 500-800 AD) followed the pre-literate Iron Age (c. 500 BC - 500 AD) and is usually described in terms of two poles of influence, the ostensibly independent states of Khmer-Hindu Chenla to the south and Mon-Buddhist Dvaravati to the west (Quaritch Wales 1969; Vallibhotama 1976; Groslier 1980; Jacques 1989; Brown 1996, 39). Yet these terms are increasingly problematic and any cultural and political distinction between Mon and Khmer in the Northeast is probably not justified until at least 1000 AD (Keyes 1974, 504; Siribhadra *et al.* 1997, 25). While the Early Historic communities of the Northeast remain little-known and little-understood there is significant evidence that they shared pan-regional traits, used elements also seen in Khmer and Dvaravati artistic styles, but also had unique characteristics which can still be seen in the epigraphic and archaeological traces that they left behind.

Early inscriptions in Northeast Thailand

Inscriptions provide some of the most important information about early polities in the wider region, as evidenced by the significant recent study of Vickery (1998) of pre-Angkorian Cambodia. A number of early inscriptions have also been found in Northeast Thailand (Aymonier 1901, 1999; Lunet de Lajonquière 1908; Seidenfaden 1922; Jacob 1979; Jacques 1989; Bauer 1991, 55; Vickery 1994, 1998). The best-known are Sanskrit records left by the sixth century Dangraek overlords from the south (Jacques 1989; Vickery 1994, 1998). Although only three or four

pre-seventh-century inscriptions have survived from the southern Mekong, sixteen are known from the area of the Dangraek Range, that is, northern Cambodia and adjacent Thailand (Briggs 1951; Coedès 1937-1954, 1964, 1966, 1968; Jacob 1978, 1979; Jacques 1979, 1990; Smith 1979; Vickery 1998).¹ These were erected by local rulers who claimed the status of overlords or even royalty, and have been referred to as the Dangraek chieftains because of their interest in the area, although, with at least one exception, they may never have actually ruled there (Vickery 1998, 71). The exception is that of a fifth century king called Devanika, whose undated inscription is probably also the earliest (K.365 of Wat Luong Kan near Wat Phu in Laos) (Vickery 1998, 73).

The other inscriptions record the dynasty of Bhavavarman and his brother Citrasena-Mahendravarman. Bhavavarman established a capital, Bhavapura, at or near Sambor Prei Kuk (Jacques and Freeman 1997, 56). Concurrently, his younger brother led exploratory expeditions far to the north beyond the Dangraek Range (Jacques and Freeman 1997, 57) that are recorded in brief inscriptions describing (temporary) successes and the placing of *lingas*. Nine inscriptions refer to Citrasena-Mahendravarman's victories beyond the Dangraek Range, including one (K.1102) recovered as far north as Ban Dong Aem, about forty kilometres north of Khon Kaen (Seidenfaden 1922, 57-60; Jacques 1989, 17; Vickery 1998, 75).

According to traditional interpretations, this evidence of activity in the north in the sixth and early seventh centuries was followed during the reign of Isanavarman (610-628 AD) by some sort of suzerainty by the kingdom of Chenla over the region (Briggs 1951, 49). However, evidence of any southern control in the northeast at this time is far from compelling. The Khmer kings do not appear again in the region's inscriptions for some centuries (Seidenfaden 1922, 32-64; Briggs 1951, 103; Brown 1996, 20; Jacques and Freeman 1997, 69). Any political or military influence by rulers from the south over the Mun River area at this time is likely to have been short-lived (Higham 1989), with each inscription a simple cry of victory not implying a permanent occupation of the country (Coedès 1928a, 118; Vickery 1998, 79).

In addition to these opportunistic overlords from the south, local leaders themselves left historical evidence. These inscriptions are carved in various Sanskrit, Khmer and Mon forms that show various degrees of contact and it is difficult to determine exactly how the languages were used (Bauer 1991).² A series of short

¹ Such inscriptions were found at Stung Treng (K.116 and K.359), Thma Kre (K.122), Khorat (K.514), Basak (K.363), Ubon (K.496, K.497, K.508 and K.509), Khon Kaen (K.1102), Phimai (K.1106), Surin (K.377), Ta Phraya (K.969), Battambang (K.213), Sri Thep (K.978) and Wat Phu (K.365) (Vickery 1998, 71-75).

² Vickery's (1998) recent work did not include many of these inscriptions, partly because their discovery and publication is ongoing and partly because they often differ considerably from those of pre-Angkorian Cambodia (1998, 95, 92*n*.31 cf. Jacob 1979, see also Jacques 1989; Bauer 1991).

Buddhist inscriptions in Sanskrit has been found in the region, most on *sema* stones and dating to the eighth century (Seidenfaden 1922; Groslier 1980; Bauer 1991, Figure H; Jacques 1989).³ In one example, a seventh-eighth century Sanskrit inscription (K.404) with Mon characteristics from Nong Hin Tan in Chaiyaphum province mentions a king called Jaya Singhavarman (Jacques 1989, 18; Brown 1996, 38). Other inscriptions refer to a polity called Sambuka (shell) (K.577 on the base of a Buddha image from Lopburi) or Sankhapura (*sankha* shell) (K.1082 found in Yasothon province). This was perhaps a polity in Yasothon province, and had leaders whose names ended, like that of Citrasena, with the suffix *-sena* (Jacques 1989, 19). Another example, an eighth century inscription (K.1000) from the Prasat Hin Phimai mentions an otherwise unknown king called Sauryavarman (*Saurya* valour, might) with Buddhist affiliations (Jacques 1989, 19).

In a better-known example, at the site of Hin Khon (stone marker) near Muang Sema were installed two Khmer and idiosyncratic Sanskrit inscriptions (K.388 and K.389) (Aymonier 1901; Bauer 1991; Brown 1996, 26; Vickery 1998, 132). The Hin Khon inscriptions use mediocre Khmer mixed with Mon (Jacques 1989, 18), and while often described as pre-Angkorian, they may instead relate to a somewhat later period and an isolated local dialect (Bauer 1991; Vickery 1998, 132; cf. Jacob 1979). Whatever the case, both were dedications by a Buddhist monk identified as King Nripendrathiphavarman, (Jacques 1989, 19; Moore 1988, 5; Brown 1996, 26). According to these texts, Nripendrathiphavarman erected four *sema* stones, founded a Buddhist temple and monastery which he granted with ten pairs of cattle, gold and silver utensils, rice-fields and a plantation of twenty betel nut trees (Higham 1989, 281). The two inscriptions also refer to otherwise unknown kings and polities, including one Soryavarman, perhaps related to a Buddhist king Sauryavarman who ruled in the Phimai region in the eighth century (K.1000) (Brown 1996, 27; Jacques 1969, 60), although the former's name is suspiciously Angkorian (Vickery 1998, 132).

The most compelling evidence for a major early polity in the region relates to an eighth century Buddhist community called Sri Canasa or Sri Canasapura (Brown 1996, 26). Canasa is meaningless in both Sanskrit and Khmer (Jacques 1989, 19). Sri Canasa was mentioned on a stela (K.400) found at the tenth century temple sanctuary of Bo Ika near Muang Sema (Higham and Thosarat 1998, 195). On one side of the stele is a Sanskrit and Khmer inscription dating to 868 AD (Bo Ika B) (Jacques 1989, 19; see also Brown 1996, 25; Vickery 1998, 132). It commemorates the foundation of a gold *linga* and a gift of slaves by one Ansadeva who

³ Such inscriptions have been recovered in Udon (K.981, K.982, K.983), Khon Kaen (K.984, K.985, K.986, KhK.25), Kalasin (K.510, K511, Ks.3, Ks.5), and Chaiyaphum provinces (K.403, K.404, K.512, K.965, K.977, Jy.8, Jy.ii, Jy.iii, Jy.10, Jy.11, Jy.12, Jy.13) (Bauer 1991).

obtained outside of Kambudesa an abandoned domain (Brown 1996, 25). On the other side an earlier seventh century Sanskrit inscription (Bo Ika A) commemorates donations of buffalo, cattle and male and female slaves to a Buddhist community (*sangha*) by the lord or ruler (*isvara*) of Sri Canasa (Brown 1996, 25–26). *Dharmacakras* or stone Wheels of the Law from nearby Muang Sema correspondingly date to this period or slightly later and Muang Sema is the most likely location for the polity of Sri Canasa (Brown 1996, 26 cf. Saraya 1984, 1985).

The name Sri Canasapura also appears on an apparently relocated Sanskrit and Khmer inscription (K.949) that was found at Ayutthaya (Brown 1996, 25; Vickery 1998, 200n). This inscription was first erected in 937 AD to the glory of a ruler called Mangalavarman and it names five of his ancestral predecessors, none of whom appear in any of the early Cambodian inscriptions (Brown 1996, 25). The earliest king mentioned was one Bhagadatta, whose name ends with a *datta* suffix, which in seventh-eighth century Cambodia was typical of a *pon* (Vickery 1998, 200), a particular, indigenous, title that deserves greater comment.

Early Khmer inscriptions reveal a complex hierarchy of Khmer—not Indic—official titles was in place by the early seventh century (Vickery 1998, 21). One of the most important titles was the matrilineally inherited male title *pon*, passed on to the sister's son, and probably the same as the Funanese *fan* (Vickery 1998; Higham 2001). In the oldest dated inscription, K.600/611 from Angkor Borei, a principal official *pon* Uy offered personnel and animals to an ancestral female deity called the *k-pon kamratan an* (Vickery 1998, 191). The Chinese visitors to Funan had recorded that several scores of families have a pond in common where they draw water, and *pon* were very likely the leaders of such large villages, associated with communal lands located near a pond or *travan* and with a clan house acting as ritual centre (Vickery 1998; see also Coedès 1968, 59). Evidence from the extensive Iron Age cemetery site at Noen U-Loke near Phimai, such as clustered burials, rich female and male graves, the intensification of grave wealth, and the construction of water features, and suggests that a proto-*pon* system of community leadership may perhaps be traced back into the Iron Age in the upper Mun region (Talbot 2002). According to Vickery (1998, 21), the first *varman* kings were *pon*, or heirs of *pon*, and the Bhagadatta-Mangalavarman inscription thus records the dynastic history of an upper Mun ruling family that had made the transition from *pon*-ship to kingship.

In addition to the Sanskrit and Khmer inscriptions, a small amount of early epigraphic evidence from Northeast Thailand is in Mon. The first Old Mon inscriptions were discovered in 1968 on votive tablets from Muang Fa Daet (Bauer 1991, 55), and since the early 1970s, over thirty others have been found in Thailand and Burma (Bauer 1991, 31; Hla 1991). It is important to note that Pali was the only known scholarly language used in the Dvaravati kingdoms to the west and the use

of Old Mon is a distinctive characteristic of early Northeastern communities (Jacques 1989, 17). Pre-ninth century Mon inscriptions have been found on *sema* standing stones (Bauer 1991, 55) and terracotta votive tablets (Brown 1996, 38) in the region. A short undated inscription in the National Museum in Khon Kaen is entirely in Mon, except for a telling Khmer phrase meaning lord of the lower surface and designating kingship (Jacques 1989, 19). Ancient remnants of Mon can still be heard today in villages such as Phra Bung, 50 kilometres south of Khorat (Hla 1991). The Nyah Kur language is spoken in approximately twenty-five villages in Khorat, Petchabun and Chaiyaphum provinces, and thought to be an offshoot of Old Mon, linked to local sixth-seventh century Dvaravati kingdoms (Hla 1991).

Early temples of the Northeast

A succession of brick temples can be linked to the political consolidation of pre-Angkorian elites in Cambodia (Parmentier 1927; Boisselier 1955, 1966; Bénisti 1970; Jacques and Freeman 1997; Siribhadra *et al.* 1997, 26). While most Khmer-style temples in Thailand postdate the tenth century, there are a few earlier examples (Vallibhotama 1976; Charernsupkul 1981; Siribhadra *et al.* 1997, 31). Thailand's oldest lintel, currently on display at Wat Supatanaram in Ubon Rachathani province, belongs to the early seventh century and is carved in a style transitional between those of Thala Borivat (early seventh century) and Sambor Prei Kuk (*c.* 600–635) (Subhadradis Diskul 1991, 14; Siribhadra *et al.* 1997, 27; Freeman 1996, 189).

The earliest significant Khmer monument in Thailand is Prasat Khao Noi, in eastern Thailand near the Cambodian border (Freeman 1996, 129; Siribhadra *et al.* 1997, 79). An inhumation burial discovered behind one structure at the site suggests a late prehistoric occupation prior to construction of the temple complex (Higham and Thosarat 1998, 193). The temple's lintels are in the Sambor Prei Kuk and Prei Kmeng (*c.* 635–700) styles and Saivite lingas and pedestals were also recovered there (Freeman 1996, 130). The leader of a polity called Jyesthapura, who had been appointed by Isanavarman of Sambor Prei Kuk, placed a Sanskrit and Khmer inscription at the site in 637 AD (K.506) (Higham and Thosarat 1998, 193; Vickery 1998). The temple was reconstructed in the eleventh century (Freeman 1996). In the northeastern province of Surin lies the Prasat Phum Pon, which is the oldest known Khmer structure in Thailand in good original condition and has a lintel from the late seventh century (Subhadradis Diskul 1991, 14; Siribhadra *et al.* 1992, 85; Krairiksh 1972, 68–69; Vallibhotama 1976). Another lintel of unknown origin is in the Kompong Preah (*c.* 706–825) style, the only such example known in Thailand, and was possibly stolen from an as-yet-undiscovered temple along the Thai-Cambodian border (Siribhadra *et al.* 1997, 44).

Two important early Khmer sites lie on the periphery of the Khorat Plateau. The mountain of Phu Kao in southern Laos is topped with a spring and a natural rock formation resembling a *linga*, and has been an important religious site for many centuries (Aymonier 1901, 188; Briggs 1951, 44, Freeman 1996, 200–205; Santoni *et al.* 1997; Vickery 1998). The existing complex of Wat Phu dates mainly to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but was founded much earlier. Associated with this complex is an ancient walled city approximately 2 km square lying 5 km to the east on the bank of the Mekong (Santoni *et al.* 1997). The surrounding plain was densely occupied, and traces of ancient irrigation channels, reservoirs, roads, monuments, walls and villages remain (Santoni *et al.* 1997). The undated K.365 inscription from nearby Wat Luong Kau named the *maharajadhiraja* Devanika who has been linked to this region, as has the city of Shrestapura, although the latter attribution is uncertain (Briggs 1951, 40; Santoni *et al.* 1997; Vickery 1998, 39, 73, 411–413). Whatever its name, the city was an important political and trading centre in the sixth and seventh centuries and the sanctuary of Wat Phu remained associated with the power of successive Khmer kings (Santoni *et al.* 1997). Nearby, on the east bank of the Mekong, the small site of Huei Thamo indicates the importance of control of trade and military access up and down the river (Freeman 1996, 198–199; Nalesini 1998).

To the north, the Mekong valley beyond the Mun confluence has been described as the area of accumulation because of its eclectic culture, including influences from as far away as Champa (Vallibhotama 1976; Brown 1996, 24–27). This is epitomized in the much-rebuilt monument of Pra That Phanom at Nakhon Phanom, still one of the most revered shrines in Northeast Thailand and a major centre of pilgrimage (Vallibhotama 1976; Subhadradis Diskul 1991, 8; Brown 1996, 28). The monument collapsed in 1975, revealing an inner core of a ninth-century Khmer Hindu shrine that had been turned into a Buddhist monument in the early thirteenth century. A tall finial was added in the seventeenth century, and another in 1940 (Subhadradis Diskul 1991, 8). Pra That Phanom has subsequently been reconstructed in a Laotian style.

In addition, several important Angkorian stone temples in the upper Mun River valley were built at the sites of earlier brick structures. A series of brick temples underlie the late twelfth century sandstone temple of the Prasat Phanom Rung, situated on an extinct volcano on the route from the Tonle Sap to Phimai, and date to the seventh or eighth centuries, contemporary with the earliest of eleven inscriptions found there (Higham and Thosarat 1998, 200). Within the temple enclosure, the remains of a small tenth century brick and sandstone tower are dwarfed by a sandstone *prang* (tower) (Siribhadra *et al.* 1997, 267). Recent excavations at the Prasat Phanom Wan revealed prehistoric remains including a number of Iron Age burials (Phongdam 1997; Higham and Thosarat 1998 Fig. 310). During resto-

ration, the monument was dismantled and a square 160 centimetre wide brick structure filled with soil was found just beneath the central tower. The bricks for this foundation would seem to have been removed from an earlier adjacent brick structure (Thosarat pers. comm.). Also at Prasat Phanom Wan lie the remains of a small red sandstone and brick tower dating from the seventh to ninth centuries (Siribhadra *et al.* 1997, 103).

Finally, while the Angkorian period occupation at the Prasat Hin Phimai is the most obvious (Briggs 1951, 178; Seidenfaden 1932; Jacques 1989), there is evidence of a significant prehistoric occupation and of considerable activity at the site in the centuries immediately before Angkor (Pichard 1976; Talbot 2000, 2001, 2002; Talbot and Janthed 2002). Citrasena-Mahendravarman felt it necessary to leave an inscription at Phimai in the sixth century, and recent excavation suggests the site was a religious centre in the eighth century, with the discovery of finger-marked bricks, probably from a religious structure, lying re-used beneath the central sanctuary of the temple (Talbot 2000, 2001, 2002; Talbot and Janthed 2002). In the temple wall lies a re-used stone engraved with an eighth century Buddhist inscription (K.1000) (Briggs 1951, 181; Jacques 1969, 1989; Jacques and Freeman 1997, 149). Jayavarman VI, responsible for the central sanctuary, came from a royal family that had been ensconced for generations at Mahidharapura, most probably Phimai itself (Jacques and Freeman 1997, 147; Briggs 1951, 178). A 1050 inscription from Phanom Rung (K.384) sets out the family history of the Mahidharapura dynasty and makes clear that this lineage had ruled the region autonomously in alliance with but not as vassals to the kings of Angkor (Briggs 1951, 178; Siribhadra *et al.* 1997, 267).⁴

⁴ Although often overlooked, Northeast Thailand was essential for the Khmers for centuries (Groslier 1985–86, 38), and many of the Angkorian kings had a strong, perhaps even personal interest in the Mun valley. In 877, Indravarman I (877–889) asserted his authority on a series of inscriptions from southern Cambodia to Northeast Thailand (Jacques and Freeman 1997, 64). Yasovarman I (889–900) was crowned in 889, the same year he founded one hundred *ashramas* in Cambodia and Northeast Thailand, including one at Prasat Phanom Rung (Jacques 1989; 1996). Traces of the reigns of Harshavarman I (912–922), Isanavarman II (925), Rajendravarman (944–968), Jayavarman V (968–1000) and Suryavarman I (1002–1049) also appear in inscriptions from Thailand (Jacques 1989, 20–22). Although Jayavarman VI's (1080–1107) consecration probably took place at Yasodharapura, no monuments there can be attributed to him and it is by no means certain that he actually ruled from Angkor. According to the Ta Phrom inscription: Having obtained the supreme royalty in the Holy city of Yasodharapura, King Jayavarmadeva [Jayavarman VI], conqueror of the mass of his enemies, planted pillars of glory in all directions, up to the sea, and fixed the residence of his race at Mahidharapura (Briggs 1951, 179). Suryavarman II (1113–1150) whose Angkor Wat was partly inspired by the Prasat Hin Phimai (Briggs 1951, 187–196), apparently spent much time in the Mun region (Briggs 1951, 189, 235). Considerable construction was undertaken in the region as part of Jayavarman VII's (1181–1219) unprecedented building programme (Briggs 1951, 209–237; Coedès 1963, 82–107; Jacques 1989; Welch 1997) and one of the famous statues of the king in meditation can still be seen in Phimai.

The Prakhon Chai hoard

Sculpture from the upper Mun provides some of the earliest evidence for contact between Southeast Asia and India. For example, a small bronze standing Buddha image found at Nakhon Ratchasima is in the southeastern Indian or Ceylonese Amaravati or Anuradhapura style (100–400 AD) (Subhadradis Diskul 1991, 3). However, the portable nature of such isolated sculptures makes their interpretation problematic, and more relevant to the current discussion is an extraordinary hoard found at Prakhon Chai in Buriram province.

In 1964, after a heavy rainstorm, local villagers accidentally discovered more than three hundred Buddhist bronzes wrapped in cloth within an underground chamber at a small, deserted, seventh century brick temple (*Illustrated London News* 1965; Boisselier 1967; Bunker 1971–2; Le Bonheur 1972; Lerner 1984; Chutiwongs 1994). Some images have been dated to the sixth century, and the bronzes are some of the earliest Mahayana Buddhist sculptures in Southeast Asia (Viriyabus 1974, 199; Lerner 1984, 100), showing a synthesis of Dvaravati and pre-Angkor styles mixed with a considerable measure of local traits (Chutiwongs 1994, 42). While a very few statuettes resembled Dvaravati-style Buddha figures from central Thailand (Bunker 1971–2, 67; Chutiwongs 1994, 39), most were reminiscent of the pre-Angkorian Cambodian styles of Prei Kmeng, Prasat Andet and Kampong Preah. Some figures resembled late seventh century bronze Mahayana Bodhisattva figures found at Ak Yum and Ban Tanot; others silver images of the Buddha, Avalokitesvara and two goddesses found at Khon Buri in Nakhon Ratchasima province and at the nearby moated site of Ban Fai (Briggs 1951, 87; Rawson 1967, Figure 7; Bunker 1971–2; Brown 1996, 89). The sculptures appear to be the products of a longstanding and mature local artistic tradition linked to a Mahayana religious belief and awarding special importance to the Bodhisattva Maitreya or Avalokitesvara (Patry Laidy 1994).

These images can also be linked to the site of Sri Thep, on the margins of the Khorat Plateau, which was once strategically located on a route linking the Mekong and Mun rivers with the Chao Phaya valley (Lunet de Lajonquière 1908, 198–200 and Figure 3; Lerner 1984; Saraya 1984, 1985; Brown 1996, 36; Higham and Thosarat 1998, 181). The site is best known for its diverse tradition of sixth to thirteenth century monuments and sculptures (Quaritch Wales 1969; Jacques 1989, 18; Brown 1996; Higham and Thosarat 1998, 165). At the nearby Thammorat Cave, related sculptures suggest nothing as much as the Prakhon Chai bronze image types translated into relief (Brown 1996, 33, 89).

Muang Fa Daet - “une civilisation de stèles”

Another early artistic tradition of Northeast Thailand is represented at Muang Fa Daet, 30 km north of Ban Chiang Hian on the northern side of the Chi River, and at 171 hectares one of the largest archaeological sites on the Khorat Plateau (Higham 1989, 282; FAD n.d.). The site is located near the confluence of the Pao and the Chi rivers in an area favourable for rice cultivation and in a strategic position to control riverine trade (Higham 1989, 282). Local tradition tells how Chao Fa Ra-ngum founded the moated and walled city of Muang Fa Daet in 621 AD and governed the town as an independent ruler owing fealty to nobody, although his power was limited to the town itself and a few outposts held for defensive purposes (Seidenfaden 1954, 645). While the earliest occupation at the site in fact dates to the Iron Age, most of the site belongs to the later first millennium AD. Muang Fa Daet was progressively enlarged over centuries, and has moats, ramparts and a rectangular 15 hectare water reservoir similar to seen at other contemporary sites such as Chansen and Sambor Prei Kuk (Higham 1989, 283). Dvaravati-style finds from the site range from brick *stupa* bases to small votive tablets (Subhadradis Diskul 1956; Quaritch Wales 1969, 113).

The most significant artefacts are the famous *sema* standing stones, representing a local “*civilisation de stèles*” apparently largely independent of Dvaravati or Khmer political influences and only slightly and lately Khmerized (Groslier 1980; see also Subhadradis Diskul 1956; Quaritch Wales 1969; Boisselier 1972; Brown 1996, 21). At Muang Fa Daet the stones are exceptional: over 1 m tall, carved with Buddhist scenes from the *Jataka* tales, and found in extraordinarily numbers. Over one hundred have been recorded, and local people told Seidenfaden (1954) that there were once over two thousand. While non-figurative *sema* appear as early as the seventh century, the pictorial *sema* from the Muang Fa Daet appear slightly later judging by the Cham and pre-Angkorian-Khmer style headdresses and costumes, and perhaps continued into the eleventh century (Krairiksh 1974, 57; Brown 1996). The most famous *sema* features an image of the Buddha flanked by Indra and Brahma in a composition also known from Nakhon Pathom (Quaritch Wales 1969, 108). Another represents the Buddha’s journey to the city of Kabilahadsu, and shows a town wall and gateway defended by soldiers (Quaritch Wales 1969, 108; Krairiksh 1972, 96–97; Higham 1989 Fig. 5:15).

The style of the *sema* carvings has typically been considered as provincial Dvaravati (Quaritch Wales 1969, 111), but they may perhaps better considered as unique objects which incorporated characteristics associated with Dvaravati, pre-Angkorian Cambodia, and Champa into an indigenous form (Boisselier 1972; Chutiwongs 1994, 36–39; Brown 1996, 29).

The Kantarawichai *ubosoth* and its silver plaques

Additional evidence of this local artistic tradition comes from the small moated and ramparted mound of Kantarawichai, just 20 km west of Muang Fa Daet (Subhadradis Diskul 1979, 364; Higham 1989, 283; Chutiwongs 1994, 39). In 1972, the Thai Fine Arts Department uncovered the brick and laterite foundations of an early Buddhist ordination hall (*ubosoth*) measuring approximately 37 by 10 m (Subhadradis Diskul 1979, 360–365). Large numbers of Dvaravati-style ceramics and terracotta votive tablets used to adorn Buddhist stupas were recovered, but the most remarkable finds were contained within a small terracotta bowl, originally enshrined under the structure's main Buddha image (Subhadradis Diskul 1979). The bowl contained sixty-six silver repoussé plaques, most measuring 5 by 10 cm, depicting Buddha images, divine or royal figures, *stupas*, and *dharmacakras*. The *stupa* types depicted are similar to those of central Thai Dvaravati sites such as Nakhon Pathom, and indicate similar examples were also present in the northeast, although only their bases remain (Subhadradis Diskul 1979, 368). The style of the images resembles the late Dvaravati style of the tenth to eleventh centuries, although the square face of one figure resembles Khmer styles and there were distinctive local elements (Subhadradis Diskul 1979, 367). The designs relate closely to those of the Muang Fa Daet *sema* (Brown 1996, 94). For example, one plaque features an image of the Buddha descending from Tavatimsa Heaven, also seen on one *sema* (Subhadradis Diskul 1979, 366).

Muang Sema

This is a moated centre similar to Muang Fa Daet, but this time in an area nodal to communication between the Mun and Chao Phaya river valleys (Higham 1989, 284). Muang Sema, the most likely location of the early Buddhist kingdom of Sri Canasapura, was walled and enlarged at least twice and has a rectangular enclosure measuring 800 by 1,800 m (Higham and Thosarat 1998, 194; Hanwong 1991). Recent excavations at Muang Sema recovered a Dvaravati cultural layer some 1 m thick between layers of Iron Age and Khmer ceramics (Thosarat pers. comm.). The Thai Fine Arts Department recorded mounds of brick, stone and laterite at the site that were apparently the remains of early religious structures (Quaritch Wales 1969, 102). Nearby, at Wat Thammachak Semaram, lies a 13 m long eighth century red sandstone reclining Buddha, the largest in Thailand, in a northeastern Dvaravati style (Hanwong 1991; Brown 1996, 30). A number of Dvaravati-style Buddha images, currently in the Maha Wirawong National Museum in Nakhon Ratchasima, were found, together with standing stones, deer statues, Bodhisattva tablets (Quaritch Wales 1969, 102; Brown 1996, 30; Higham and Thosarat 1998,

195) and a *dharmacakra*, which is the most easterly yet recovered (Brown 1996, 25, 29). Muang Sema was clearly home to an important Buddhist polity in the pre-Angkorian period. By the late tenth century, it had been joined by a Hindu neighbour, in the form of the ancient city called Muang Khorakhapura located near modern Nakhon Ratchasima city. The Khmer style temples of Prasat Muang Khaek and Prasat Non Ku formed the religious centres of this little-known community (Siribhadra *et al.* 1997, 87).

Summary: Northeast Thailand before Angkor

The story of the Angkor is often told from a perspective located to the south of the Dangreak Range. Yet, many of the important social, political and artistic changes that were associated with pre-Angkorian Cambodia, particularly the adoption of brick religious architecture, the use of inscriptions, the creation of new artistic traditions and the emergence of ruling elites, occurred at the same time in the Mun River valley. Prehistoric sites such as Noen U-Loke hint at increasingly social complexity in the late Iron Age. By the seventh century new forms of material culture were appearing, such as the temple of the Prasat Phum Phon, the sculptures of Prakhon Chai and the *sema* stones at Muang Fa Daet. While Prasat Khao Noi in eastern Thailand can plausibly be linked to Isanavarman I through the polity of Jyesthapura, independent local elites in the upper Mun region were probably also exploring new relationships between power, ritual and material culture on their own terms. There are historic traces of these polities including Sri Canasa and those ruled by Sauryavarman and Mahidharavarman.

By the eighth century, critical structural change was underway to the south under Jayavarman I and his successors. The social consolidation these rulers achieved during the eighth century in Cambodia was unique, and as such it laid the foundations for the unprecedented power and hierarchy of Angkor. The people of the upper Mun River valley must, however, have been well aware of developments occurring in the communities of their southern peers, and perhaps wished to retain as much of an equal footing as possible. They too constructed temples and sculptures in the prevailing styles, which on the Khorat Plateau often included elements shared with the Buddhist Dvaravati culture to the west and local artistic traditions.

From the late ninth century, many inscriptions from Northeast Thailand refer to the historic kings of Angkor. Much remains to be learned about the role of Northeast Thailand in the polity of Angkor. Even after 802, ties of mutual allegiance between Cambodian kings and pre-existing elites of Northeast Thailand were perhaps often more common than political domination, that is until the dynasty of Mahidharapura, when the one Mun River dynasty became the very rulers of Angkor.

References

- Aymonier, E. *Le Cambodge II Les Provinces Siamoises*. Paris: Ernst Leroux, 1901.
- Aymonier, E. *Khmer Heritage in Thailand*. Bangkok: White Lotus, 1999.
- Bauer, C. Notes on Mon epigraphy. *Journal of the Siam Society* 79/1 (1991): 31–83.
- Bénisti, M. *Rapports entre le premier art khmer et l'art indien*. Mémoire Archéologique V. Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1970.
- Boisselier, J. *La Statuaire khmère et son évolution*. Saigon: Publications de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient, 1955.
- Boisselier, J. *Le Cambodge*. Manuel d'Archaeologie d'Extrême-Orient Asie du Sud-Est 1. Paris: Picard, 1966.
- Boisselier, J. Notes sur l'art du bronze dans l'ancien cambodge. *Artibus Asiae* 2 (1967): 275–334.
- Boisselier, J. Travaux de la mission archéologique française en Thaïlande. *Arts Asiatiques* 25 (1972): 27–90.
- Briggs, L. The Ancient Khmer Empire. *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 4, no.1 (1951): 1–295.
- Brown, Robert. *The Dvaravati Wheels of the Law and the Indianization of South East Asia*. Leiden: Brill, 1996.
- Bunker, E. Pre-Angkor period bronzes from Pra Kon Chai. *Archives of Asian Art* 25(1971–2): 67–76.
- Chutiwongs, N. Southeast Asian sculptures from the seventh to ninth centuries. In *Buddha of the Future*, ed. N. Chutiwongs and D. Patry Leidy. New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1994.
- Coedès, G. Les capitales de Jayavarman II. *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* 28(1928):113–23.
- Coedès, G. *Inscriptions du Cambodge*. 7 vols. Hanoi/Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1937, 1942, 1951, 1952, 1953, 1954, 1964.
- Coedès, G. *The Making of Southeast Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.
- Coedès, G. *The Indianised States of Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1968.
- Fine Arts Department of Thailand. *Khon Kaen National Museum Guide*. Khon Kaen: Fine Arts Department, n.d.
- Freeman, M. *A Guide to Khmer Temples in Thailand and Laos*. Bangkok: River Books, 1996.
- Groslier, B. Prospection des sites Khmers du Siam. In *Coûts et Profits en Archéologie*, edited by B. Groslier. Cahier no 1. Paris: CNRS, 1980.
- Groslier, B. For a geographic history of Cambodia. *Seksa Khmer* 8-9 (1985–1986): 31–76.

- Hanwong, T. Reclining Buddha at Wat Thammachak Semaram. *Silpakorn Journal* 34/6(1991): 61–77.
- Higham, C. F. W. *The Archaeology of Mainland Southeast Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Higham, C. F. W. *The Civilization of Angkor*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Higham, C. F. W. and Thosarat, R. *Prehistoric Thailand from Early Settlement to Sukhothai*. Bangkok: River Books, 1998.
- Nai Pan Hla. The major role of the Mons in Southeast Asia. *Journal of the Siam Society* 79 (1991): 13-19.
- Illustrated London News. Unique early Cambodian sculptures discovered. *Illustrated London News*, August 28 1965, p.37.
- Jacob, J. The ecology of Angkor. In *Nature and Man in Southeast Asia*, ed. P. Stott. London: School of Oriental and Asian Studies, 1978.
- Jacob, J. Pre-Angkor Cambodia: evidence from the inscriptions in Khmer concerning the common people and their environment. In *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th Centuries*, ed. D. Marr and A. Milner. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1979.
- Jacques, C. Etudes d'épigraphie cambodgienne. *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* 56(1969): 57–74.
- Jacques, C. 'Funan', 'Zhenla': the reality concealed by these views of Indochina. In *Early South East Asia*, ed. R. Smith and W. Watson. London: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Jacques, C. The Khmer in Thailand: what the inscriptions inform us. *SPAFA Digest* 10(1989): 16–24.
- Jacques, C. and Freeman, M. *Angkor Cities and Temples*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1997.
- Keys, C. A note on the ancient towns and citadels of Northeastern Thailand. *Southeast Asia Studies* 11/4(1974): 497–506.
- Krairiksh, P. *Art Styles in Thailand*. Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1972.
- Krairiksh, P. Semas with scenes from the Mahanipata-jatakas in the National Museum at Khon Kaen. In *Art and Archaeology in Thailand*. Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1974.
- Le Bonheur, A. Un bronze d'époque préangkorienne représentant Maitreya. *Arts Asiatiques*. 25(1972):129–54.
- Lerner, M. *The Flame and the Lotus. Indian and Southeast Asian Art from the Kronos Collections*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984.
- Lunet de Lajonquière, E. *Bulletin de la commission archéologique d'Indochine. Le Domaine archéologique du Siam*. Paris: Leroux, 1908.

- Moore, E. *Moated Sites in Early Northeast Thailand*. British Archaeological Reports (International Series) 400: Oxford, 1988.
- Nalesini, O. The sanctuary of Huei Tham, and the historical problems raised by its survey. In *Southeast Asian Archaeology 1998*, ed. W. Lobo and S. Reintann, Hull: Centre for South-East Asian Studies, 1998.
- Parmentier, H. *L'Art Khmer Primitif*. Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1927.
- Patry Leidy, D. The Bodhisattva Maitreya, Prakhon Chai and the practice of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. In *Buddha of the Future*, ed. N. Chutiwongs and D. Patry Leidy. New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1994.
- Phongdam, B. Report on excavations at Prasat Phanom Wan (in Thai). *Muang Boran* 23/3(1997): 95–108.
- Pichard, P. *Pimay Etude Architecturale du Temple*. Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1976.
- Quaritch Wales, H. G. *Dvaravati: The Earliest Kingdom of Siam*. London: Bernard Quaritch, 1969.
- Rawson, P. *The Art of Southeast Asia*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1967.
- Santoni, M., Souksavatdy, V., Defente, D., Hawixbrock, C. and Liger, J-C. Excavations at Champassak and Wat Phu (Southern Laos). In *Southeast Asian Archaeology 1997*, ed. R. Ciarla and F. Rispoli. Rome: Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 1997.
- Saraya, D. The hinterland state of Sri Thep Sri Deva: a reconstruction. In *Early Metallurgy, Trade and Urban Centres in Thailand and Southeast Asia*, ed. I. Glover, P. Suchitta and J. Villiers. Bangkok: White Lotus, 1984.
- Saraya, D. Si Thep was Sricanasa. *Muang Boran* 11/1(1985): 63–76.
- Seidenfaden, E. Complément et l'inventaire descriptif des monuments du Cambodge pour les quatre provinces du Siam occidental. *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* 22(1922): 55-100.
- Seidenfaden, E. Kanok Nakon: an ancient Mon settlement in Northeast Siam (Thailand) and its treasures of art. *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* 44/2(1954): 643–647.
- Siribhadra, S., Moore, E. and Freeman, M. *Palaces of the Gods. Khmer Art and Architecture in Thailand*. Bangkok: River Books, 1997.
- Smith, R. Mainland South East Asia in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries. In *Early South East Asia*, ed. R. Smith and W. Watson. London: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Subhadradis Diskul, M. C. Muang Fa Daed: an ancient town in Northeast Thailand. *Artibus Asiae* 19(1956): 362–7.
- Subhadradis Diskul, M. C. The development of Dvaravati sculpture and recent finds from Northeast Thailand. In *Early South East Asia*, ed. R. Smith and W. Watson. London: Oxford University Press, 1979.

- Subhadradis Diskul, M. C. *Art in Thailand. A Brief History*. Bangkok: Amarin, 1991.
- Talbot, S. An excavation at a Khmer temple in Northeast Thailand. *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 2/1(2000): 162–168.
- Talbot, S. Angkorian architectural ceramics from a Khmer temple in Northeast Thailand. *Bulletin of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association* 21(2001): 114–118.
- Talbot, S. From the Iron Age to Angkor in Northeast Thailand. PhD thesis, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, 2002.
- Talbot, S. and Janthed, C. Northeast Thailand before Angkor: evidence from an archaeological excavation at the Prasat Hin Phimai. *Asian Perspectives* 40/2(2002): 179–194.
- Vallibhotama, S. The Northeast of Thailand during the 7th to 11th centuries. *Muang Boran* 3/1(1976): 35–48.
- Vickery, M. Where and what was Zhenla? In *Recherches Nouvelles sur le Cambodge. Publiées sous la Direction de François Bizot*. Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1994.
- Vickery, M. *Society, Economics and Politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia*. Tokyo: The Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies for UNESCO, 1998.
- Viriyabus, C. Notes on the statuettes found at Khonburi, Korat. In *Art and Archaeology in Thailand*. Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1974.
- Welch, D. Archaeological evidence of Khmer state political and economic organisation. *Bulletin of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association* 16 (1997): 69–78.