

HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN THAILAND—WHAT'S NEW?

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The name "Dvaravati" is common among students and scholars of the early history of Thailand. It generally refers to a particular Buddhist art style (ca. 6th - 11th century A.D.) that is largely found in the Central and Northeastern regions of Thailand.

In July 1989 the Muang Boran Press in Bangkok put out a new book in Thai entitled (ศรี) ทวารวดี : ประวัติศาสตร์ยุคต้นของสยามประเทศ [(*Sri Dvaravati: The Initial Phase of Siam's History*)] by Dr. Dhida Saraya, Associate Professor in the History Department of Chulalongkorn University. This publication offers a new attempt in presenting a historical view of Dvaravati. The book does not describe Dvaravati as a particular art style or art period as has generally been done in the past but looks at Dvaravati with a holistic view of interaction of people, culture and society. As a historian, the author has taken into consideration all the relevant available data and documents dealing with archaeology, history, geography, anthropology, art, and stone inscriptions, together with interest in the role of the local population. The author also delineates the economic, political and social structures of (Sri) Dvaravati that eventually led to the development of its social and cultural systems. The book offers an excellent choice of photos, illustrations and maps dealing with the history of (Sri) Dvaravati. Below is an English abstract taken from the book.

(Sri) Dvaravati : The Initial Phase of Siam's History

(ABSTRACT)

This book will examine and consider many factors pertaining to the existence of the state of Sri Dvaravati during the 6th to 11th centuries A.D.. Sri Dvaravati is considered to have played an important part in the historical development of early Siam and Southeast Asia. A study of this state reveals not only its important status, but also the heights of prominence to which it later rose. Moreover, such a study also reveals clearer insights and approaches towards the study of the history of Siam and of Southeast Asia. By using the word "clearer" in the preceding

sentence, we mean that much light is shed on facts and dimensions concerning early Thai history. These are more concise than the vague theory of migration from Southern China which has previously often been proposed. As a result, this study helps to provide new perspectives on the historical development of early Southeast Asia which, up until now, has suffered from a lack of documentation and systematic research.

Sri Dvaravati was one among a number of indigenous political entities which was able to absorb foreign cultural influences, and yet at the same time, forge its own distinct cultural identity. Previous studies on the state of Sri Dvaravati have been confined to the preconception that both its origin and existence were the direct and indirect results only of Indian influences. This Indian influence was previously seen as being a significant cause of Sri Dvaravati becoming a unified state with vast territorial power covering areas of the Central, North-eastern and Southern regions of what is now Thailand. The fact that all of these held traces of Dvaravati art seemed to support this notion. Furthermore, the idea of a unified state also extended to the belief that its citizens were all of Mon descent. But this preconception ignored the important fact that the indigenous groups already had their own political and cultural systems, albeit numerous and diverse, which were both individualistic and well developed. There must have been a wide variety of intercultural contacts and exchanges between these groups, and this resulted in the forging and establishment of a common culture well before the advent of Indian influences in the region.

New discoveries in archaeology are now shedding new light on historical development in the Chao Phya River basin. Its west bank was heavily populated and was the core of the State of Sri Dvaravati, whose radiating power extended throughout the Nakhon Pathom-U Thong-Ku Bua complex. This society and its culture needs to be described in more detail than before. It may be stated here that the development of the Sri Dvaravati State was related to another important coastal center located in the region of the Mae Khong River delta. This latter center was called Funan by the Chinese chronicles.

The growth of ancient U Thong developed along the same lines as Funan. Both had their origins in that stream of historical momentum by which the coastal peoples in their search for

experience and adventure came into contact with the seafarers of lower Southeast Asia. Both U Thong and Funan were coastal centers of trade and cultural activities during the 2nd to 6th centuries A.D..

However, recent archaeological discoveries such as the Dong Son-styled bronze drums, earrings, bracelets, and beads (which are all similar to those found in Vietnam), and a reappraisal of certain Chinese writings, now suggest that the origin of the Sri Dvaravati State had nothing at all to do with the spread of Indian influences in the region. Rather, the development of both U Thong and Funan from large villages to coastal centers was due to their economic and cultural intercourse with seafarers from the South China Sea and the Gulf of Thailand. Certainly a part of this influence derived from the expansion of China. Chinese interests began to make their presence felt along the Southeast Asian coastal regions all the way from the Vietnamese coastline to Gulf of Siam. Nevertheless the major force was the role and initiative shown by those adventurers who already inhabited the coastal areas of oceanic Southeast Asia. These peoples were expert seafarers and became the instigators of much economic and cultural intercourse. They transported both new techniques and artifacts to the various settlements in Southeast Asia. They were the main influencing force for the later development of populated centers into states.

The coastal centers along the South China Sea and the Gulf of Siam, as exemplified by U Thong and Funan, had been in contact with each other by sea since the pre-Christian Era. These coastal seafaring experts subsequently found overland routes to the Andaman Sea and Southern Burma. This in turn generated contacts with commercial travelers from India, the Middle East and the Roman Empire. Chinese records around A.D. 3 mention the towns of Lin-I, Funan, Tun Sun, Chin Lin, Tan Tan, and Pan Pan, and these records correlate with certain archaeological finds. This same route also allowed Western seafarers and traders the opportunity to reach China. In this way, lower Southeast Asia became a part of world commerce from the 2nd century onwards as may be seen in the number of Indian and Roman artifacts found, particularly in ancient cities such as U Thong, Chansen and Oc Keo.

Coastal towns such as U Thong and Funan continued to grow physically, and also to develop in terms of both their economy and culture. Intercourse with other cultures was not confined merely to the coastal dwellers and the two major foreign cultural mainstreams (from the West and the East). There is evidence that these coastal towns spread inland, where they met up with more diverse cultures which had already been through their own process of historical and cultural development. These traits seem to be the norm in the historical development of the towns of the Chao Phya River basin during the 2nd to 6th centuries A.D..

Another important characteristic which appears throughout the formation stages of the Sri Dvaravati State is "the great variety" of the ethnic groups who were to become converts and thus the builders of the great Buddhist civilization found along the Chao Phaya River plains. There was also a great variety of cultural traditions and lifestyles found among the peoples who

were to populate the Sri Dvaravati State. Migrations and population changes further helped to extend and enlarge this variety. Variety is indeed the key to the understanding of the history of this period. In a sense, the political systems which developed later partly served to resolve those differences which had evolved out of all this variety.

The state of Sri Dvaravati in particular grew out of the various early coastal centers. Its growth helped to bridge the gaps that existed between the Indianizing influences and the local or indigenous cultures. Through selective acceptance and assimilation there gradually came into existence a clearly identifiable Buddhistic culture. Buddhism, which had originated in India, was accepted and adapted, and so became the core faith of this society, linking up and unifying the various lifestyles and beliefs found in this area. Buddhism also played a part in determining the form of the political system. This political system was dominated by the concept of kingship in which the King was at once regarded as pious bodhisattava and mighty cakkavatti rāja. The Buddhist faith was recognized by both the State and its people. Thus, Sri Dvaravati has come to be regarded as a very powerful state which grew as a result of the process of developing and unifying the variety found in coastal centers.

Naturally, the evolution and development of Sri Dvaravati from "Coastal Centers" was also firmly related to the trading which linked the Eastern and Western worlds. By the 6th century A.D., mariners had learnt to use the prevailing monsoons and to navigate through the Malacca Straits, which greatly helped to shorten the journey to the Far East. This brought the Gulf of Siam mariners into direct confrontation with their rivals, the seafarers of the Java Sea, who were already trading out of several important ports. About this time the importance of Funan lessened, whereas the importance of U Thong of the Tha Chin River appeared to grow, together with the importance of new towns close to the sea such as Nakhon Pathom. The new network extended as far as Ku Bua on the Mae Klong River. The land area located between these two rivers became the agricultural and economic base for Sri Dvaravati as a riverine state.

During this formative period, there were radical changes in the local political system. The original system of "chiefdoms," each led by a chief who had special personal qualities such as skills in warfare, was changed in some centers to a system of divine kingship based on Indian models. Several new towns were established at trading centers linking the hinterland with the external world. Some became coastal cities and this meant that the ruling system became even more complex. Such changes enhanced the power of this riverine state.

Even so, the state of Sri Dvaravati was not an all-powerful empire with sovereign power over all the territories in which Dvaravati art has been found. Conversely, the political power possessed by the state of Sri Dvaravati may be divided into two distinct areas. The core or central seat of power covered the U Thong - Nakhon Pathom - Ku Bua complex, and the other area consisted of peripheral territories over which central sovereignty exercised no direct influence. The latter included areas

west of the upper Chao Phya River which consisted mainly of highlands and itinerant tribesmen, and towns in the river basins such as Ku Muang (in present Sing Buri), Bung Khok Chang (in present Uthai Thani) and U Tapao (in present Chai Nat). It can therefore be said that sovereign power was strongest at the core, but gradually lessened towards the peripheral areas. Of considerable importance is the fact that even in the Chao Phya River basin and the nearby Pa Sak River basin, there appear to be towns which received the Dvaravati artistic influences, yet were independent from the state sovereignty of Nakhon Pathom. Examples of such towns are Lawo and Srithep.

Thus Dvaravati society and culture covered an area far wider than that ruled by the State. Although the peoples of this society shared common artistic and cultural traits based on a belief in Buddhism, they differed widely in ethnic origins. The Mons, who were once believed to be the sole owners of the Dvaravati culture, were in fact only a part of the great melting pot of Dvaravati society. There were also the Tai/Sam/Sayam/Siam (as they have been variously called by different writers at different times). When we refer to the peoples of Sri Dvaravati, therefore, we refer not only to the Mons, but also to various indigenous peoples, as well as to immigrants from India. In addition, the population also consisted of coastal peoples, some mariners, the Chinese, the Vietnamese and a host of other minority groups, some of whom may have been transported to the region by force.

The results of population movements and migrations certainly affected agricultural production. A new concept was introduced which had much effect on Dvaravati culture: the water buffalo was introduced as animal motive power in place of the ox. Ploughing with water buffaloes had long been known to the Vietnamese in the Mae Khong River basin and to the ethnic groups inhabiting the Northeastern territories of Siam. Once the method was introduced to the Chao Phya River basin, which was and still is ideally suited for rice farming, paddy production increased so dramatically that rice became an economic base for the development of the community. The people became adept at rice farming. This can clearly be seen in the Tais, who were to develop their economic system based on rice until they gained economic and political power over all other groups in the Chao Phya River basin.

Dvaravati society was stratified into two classes, the rulers and the ruled. The king held sovereign power supported by the royal family. This family was drawn from descendants of both the indigenous people and the foreigners with whom they had come into contact. Next was the upper class consisting of statesmen and high officials who supervised the carrying out of state and royal duties. Some of this group comprised foreigners, many of them being Indians. There were also community leaders who interacted closely with the populace. These existed as two main groups. The first group comprised the local elite who had gained leadership status through the strength of their personalities and their seniority. The majority of the elite became elders of their communities through intermarriage. The other group consisted of monks, hermits, mendicants, brahmins etc. The brahmins enjoyed a direct relationship with the

royalty through their ceremonial duties. The Buddhist monks partook in religious duties which were more related to the needs of the ordinary people. They taught the people how to read and write, as well as giving lessons concerning the Buddhist doctrine. Most hermits and mendicants, however, took refuge in the deep jungle, although some enjoyed various degrees of influence over politically powerful persons.

The ordinary people found in Dvaravati society consisted of several groups. The farmers and planters were the main producers, while artists and craftsmen worked in both the towns and in the rural areas. Townsmen and traders emerged as a result of the state of Sri Dvaravati being located on both continental and seafaring trading routes. The fact that it was one of the most important commercial centers in Southeast Asia can clearly be seen from the multitude of archaeological evidence found: monumental structures, and artifacts such as beads, earrings, ornaments and utensils. Another group of people were the soldiers who were conscripted partly from the populace and partly from serfs and slaves. The latter consisted of prisoners of war, those who had been endowed to the temples and other religious institutions by their master, and those who were the properties of the upper classes.

Although it can be seen that much variety and stratification existed in Dvaravati society, one factor unified all into a homogeneous entity: the Buddhist religion, mainly Hinayana Buddhism. The spread of Buddhism in the area shows that foreign culture was adapted to suit the needs of the people with the result that a form of popular Buddhism emerged. This was different from state Buddhism which was the form of Buddhism upheld by the ruling class. It should be stressed that, having absorbed a variety of local and traditional beliefs and customs, Dvaravati Buddhism was transformed and subsequently became an integral part of the way of life of the ordinary people through its emphasis on the tradition of merit making as well as certain rituals and ceremonies.

It should also be noted that Buddhism did not take root only among the ordinary people of the Dvaravati society. It also played an important part in the affairs of the ruling classes, particularly in the status of the sovereign as a bodhisattava, and a cakkavatti rāja. For it was accepted in Dvaravati society that the king was not only the royal patron of Buddhism (elevating the people's religious worship by participating in state religious ceremonies and merit making), but also the dhammika rāja whose duty was to spread the Faith through following the righteous path as well as through the domination and subjugation of other peoples through the waging of warfare.

It may therefore be stated that Buddhism took strength as a result of the great Dvaravati civilization. Evidence for this can clearly be seen in the Buddhist influences found in various Dvaravati art forms, and in the spread of Dvaravati art throughout this region. Indeed the development of Buddhism during the Dvaravati period formed the basis for a Buddhist society and state in this area. Furthermore, this early state of Sri Dvaravati can be understood to provide the historical basis and origins for the later development of the state of Siam (now Thailand).