

## **Phū Phra Bāt: A Remarkable Archaeological Site in Northeastern Thailand**

The hill of Phū Phra Bāt forms part of the Phū Phān mountain-range that stretches north-south across Udon Thani Province in northeast Thailand. Its archaeological site, covering an area of about ten square kilometres, extends over a cliff of sandstone about 350 metres above sea-level. The site was declared an archaeological reserve in 1981, and has recently been developed into a National Historical Park, which was opened in 1992. The natural environment has been exceptionally well preserved, while the buildings and offices have been conceived in harmony with the rural surroundings (1).

The site is rich in rock-shelters, many of which retain traces of human activity, dating from prehistoric times to the present. The main group of archaeological remains consists largely of rocks and rock-shelters scattered around Phra Bāt Bua Bok, one of the shrines built over several 'footprints' of the Buddha, which have given the hill the name "Phū Phra Bāt" (Hill of the Sacred Footprints) (2). Local chronicles and folk literature associate the site with visits by the Buddha and his predecessors, and also with the romantic tale of Uṣā, the beautiful daughter of the demon-king Bāṇa, who fell in love with

Aniruddha, grandson of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva. These are only a few examples of the many Indian myths and legends which found their way to Southeast Asia to become retold, modified, amplified and absorbed into the folklore of local cultures.

The most characteristic features of Phū Phra Bāt are the curiously shaped rocks and rock-shelters, standing haphazardly on rough sandstone surface worn down by million years of natural erosion (3). In the rainy season the rock surface and the hollows become flowing water-courses, which form mountain streams and descend to feed the jungle, lakes and plains below, to finally flow into the Mekong river, the main artery of northeastern Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

Many rock-shelters contain paintings or sketches of themes which are common to pre- and proto-historic rock art and cave paintings all over the world. One of these depicts human figures in motion (fig.1), probably representing a hunting party, or performing a sacrificial dance. Others show animal figures, including bulls, a cow and a calf (fig.2). Some rock-shelters retain handprints in red ochre (4), while others are adorned with abstract and geometric designs,



Fig. 1. Human figures, rock painting in Man Cave (Courtesy Arunsak Kingmani, Phū Phra Bāt Historical Park)

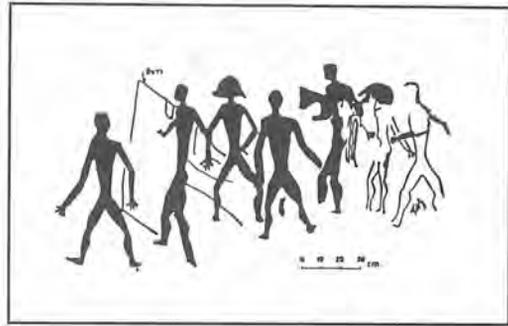
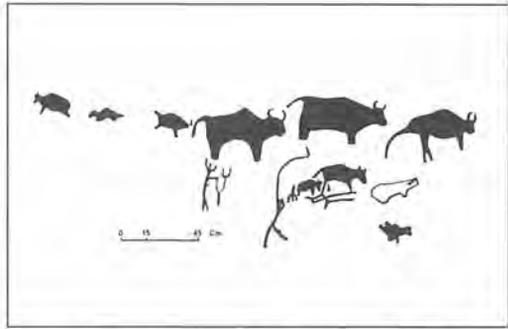


Fig. 2. Animal figures, rock painting in Bull Cave (Courtesy Arunsak Kingmani, Phū Phra Bāt Historical Park)



such as zigzag lines (5) that may represent water. Such depictions are probably not merely visual records of daily events and existing surroundings. They could very likely contain certain ritual significance, presumably in connection with the sympathetic and protective magic that would evoke and increase the well-being of the community.

The site was re-occupied during the early historical period by a Buddhist community. Caves and rock-shelters have served as natural abodes for monks and hermits for thousands of years, while mountains and high cliffs were regarded as ideal environments for meditation and to spiritual exertions. Besides, the rocks of Phū Phra Bāt are undeniably remarkable for their curious forms, being composed largely of a vertical, column-like mass supporting a broad, horizontal and spherical cap-like top (figs. 3–7). The dominant form is a mushroom-like shape that strongly reminds us of megalithic monuments, particularly the pre- and protohistoric dolmens. No traces of burials have been found at or near these rocks, which are shaped by nature. They apparently have no connection with

burials or cults of ancestors, and yet are of shapes that had been meaningful to man from the beginnings of civilization—recalling that of the megaliths erected as the seat and symbol of their ancestors and the supernatural. The rock plateau of Phū Phra Bāt, strewn with these mushroom-like rocks, had obviously been selected as a ritual site from the pre- or protohistoric times. Even in our modern age, these weird stone masses still evoke marvel, fantasies, and speculations on the hidden forces of the unknown. Standing in their midst, one senses an ambience of mystery, an intervention and presence of some powers well beyond comprehension.

The rock formations of Phū Phra Bāt seems to have been chosen by Buddhist monks during the early historic phase not because they could served as a dwelling place, but also for their mystic appeal. Mountains and mountain caves were favourite abodes of the Buddha and were the places where he often chose to expound profound sermons to supernatural beings and men (6). Sacred rocks and mountains, the dwelling places of powerful spirits in pre-and

protohistoric times, find equivalents in Buddhist and Hindu mythology that regards Mount Meru as the axis of the world, as the seat of the gods, and the womb from which Creation emerged. The Buddha himself is known to have occupied the magic seat belonging to the king of the gods, and preached to the divine assembly from the heavenly palace at the summit of the cosmic Meru (7).

The most striking rock formation at Phū Phra Bāt is locally known as Uṣā's Tower (fig.3), named after the stone chamber where the beautiful princess would have been forced to live in isolation. It is a natural rock formation, restructured into a chamber with one door and two side windows (recalling to a certain extent the restructured rocks at Udayagiri in Central India), (8) standing in the centre of an open space and marked with a circular ring of vertical stones. At present, Buddha images have been placed inside the chamber, but the interior space is large enough to serve as a monk's cell, and one may conjecture the use of a ladder of wood or bamboo to reach it. The local association of the site with the Uṣā legend probably post-dates its earliest Buddhist occupation, even if the legend, best known from the *Harivaṃśa* supplement of the Hindu epic *Mahābhārata* and many *Purāṇa*'s (9), must have been popular among the ancient Buddhists who assimilated it in their *Ghaṭa jātaka*, no. 454 of the Pāli collection. (10) In Sri Lanka, it had inspired the myth of Ummadā Cittā, the enchanting daughter of King Pāṇḍuvasudeva, who was forced by her father to live in isolation in an inaccessible single-pillared palace to dissuade suitors and thereby to defy destiny. But despite all man-made obstacles, the princess met the prince of her dreams, and the offspring of this union became the illustrious founder of the kingdom of Anurādhapura (11). In Southeast Asia, the earliest known reference to the Uṣā-Aniruddha legend appears in a Khmer inscription of the 10th century (12). A panel of 16th century narrative reliefs in the first gallery of Angkor Wat also relates this late episode from the life of Kṛṣṇa, but concentrates on the raging wars waged by the gods on the demons for the rescue of Aniruddha (13). We find more references to this romance in Thai, Laotian and other Southeast Asian literature from about the 16th



Fig.3. 'Uṣā's Tower' and one of the boundary stones (Courtesy Arunsak Kingmani, Phū Phra Bāt Historical Park)

century onwards. The earliest known Laotian version, called Phra Kūt Phra Phān, is believed to date to the beginning of this century (14). Sī Prāt, the most gifted court poet of the Thai king Nārāi (1656–1688) wrote his brilliant *Aniruddha Kham Chand* in the following century (15). A 'Royal' poetical version of *Aniruddha* was composed at the command of Rāma I of the Chakrī dynasty of Bangkok (1782–1800) soon after his coronation, by the most excellent poets of his realm (16). The tale, in its many versions, is still widely told and retold in Laos and central Thailand. Uṣā and Aniruddha remain to the present day an embodiment of an enchanting simile of eternal lovers, immortalized and constantly remembered in modern literature and in popular love songs.

The love-tale of Nāng Uṣā and Thao Bārot (the localized names of the pair), as told in the present day context in Thailand and Laos, usually ends tragically. The lovers were reunited after much hardship at the end of the long battles between their families, but Uṣā became more and more unhappy at the court of her lover who



Fig.4. 'Uṣā's Tomb' and boundary stones, Neg. N. Chutiwongs, 1998.

already had a chief queen. She returned to her own country and, unable to bear the pain of separation, died of grief. Thao Bārot followed her, but arriving too late, succumbed to sorrow and died soon after. They are believed to have been buried on Phū Phra Bāt, together with two of their loyal friends who had gone through all the vicissitudes with them (17).

The rock-formation, locally identified as Uṣā's Tomb (fig. 4), stands in an open space surrounded by eight upright stone slabs. It may have served as an open and canopied shrine sheltering an object of Buddhist faith during the early historic period. The custom of erecting upright stones is well known to the world since prehistoric times. They may stand in isolation, or in groups forming a circle and surrounding a grave or object of worship, or marking out a ritual or sacred area (18). Examples dating from pre- or protohistoric times have been located in many parts of Southeast Asia, including Thailand and Lao (19). The Buddhists, in particular the Theravāda Buddhists of Sri Lanka and in Southeast Asia, also made use of vertical stones to mark out sacred or consecrated ground, especially to define the boundary of their *uposatha* (chapter-house) where the most important religious rites were performed (20).

Buddhist boundary stones may have the form of a tall or stump pillar with a square cross-section and a rounded top, as exemplified by those standing around Uṣā's Tower (fig. 3), or that of a slab, as shown by the set surrounding Uṣā's Tomb (fig. 4). Both shapes have their antecedents in megalithic culture. Many examples of the slab type found at Phū Phra Bāt, tall and elongated, and provided with a pedestal and elegantly shaped pointed top, bearing a marking in the form of a tall tapering triangle at the centre of each broad side (see fig. 4), conform in typology to the Dvāraṇavāṭī culture that had its nucleus in central Thailand, but evidently extended its cultural influences into northeastern Thailand and even into Cambodia during the 8th to 10th centuries. Many of the specimens found at Phū Phra Bāt appear to be abstract or simplified versions of Dvāraṇavāṭī style boundary stones of the types that were common especially in northeastern Thailand during this period. These are tall and elegant slabs, engraved with a stylized depiction of a stūpa, supported by a lotus pedestal (21). In northeastern Thailand, the Buddhist culture of Dvāraṇavāṭī encountered the pre-Buddhist megalithic tradition of the area, and the local custom of erecting upright stones for ritual purposes was given a Buddhist context,



Fig.5 'Thao Bāros' Stable, Neg. N. Chutiwongs, 1998.

by the addition of Buddhist symbols (22), or scenes relating Buddhist stories (23). And yet, besides serving conventional Theravāda usage, such as to mark out Buddhist sacred areas, many of these vertical stones appear to have been erected as independent commemorative objects, for worship or even for funerary purposes—recalling the practices of pre-Buddhist times (24).

At Phū Phra Bāt, we find boundary stones of the types common to Dvāravatī culture of ca. 8th to 10th centuries, planted round such rocks which probably sheltered Buddhist objects of worship (figs. 3 and 4). Regarding the modern usage of Uṣā's Tomb (fig.4), the local inhabitants tell us that on special occasions, the head of the monk's community would occupy this natural canopied seat to deliver sermons to the congregation. Nevertheless, it is not unlikely that in the old days a symbol or an image of the Buddha would have presided over the religious gatherings in the same way it is done in the Bot and the Vihāra of living monasteries of Southeast Asia today.

Boundary stones are also found systematically grouped round other rocks that show signs of having been adapted or restructured to serve as dwelling places for monks. In some

cases, only the rock floor was perfunctorily levelled to provide for a relatively smooth sitting place. In other instances, such as in the rock-shelter locally known as Thao Bārot's Stable where he would have dismounted and lay down to sleep before a divinity carried him up to Nāng Uṣā's chamber (fig. 5). The floor was levelled and smoothed out with great care and much labour, to form a large comfortable space with a low platform at one end, and an excess of rock-mass left around as a barrier against spattering rain. The interior space is large enough for a person to stand in and to accommodate a small group of monks. The largest rock-shelter, the locally called Father-in-Law's Temple (fig. 6), with the floor and rear wall cut smoothly and with an additional wall of stone blocks built round one side for protection against heavy rain, could have accommodated more than ten monks, either sitting or lying down. Another rock-formation, known as the Little Stable (fig. 7), surrounded by a ring of boundary stones, also has a levelled floor and has enough interior space to accommodate a small group of monks. An oblong rock-mass, identified as Nāng Uṣā's Coffin by the locals (25), has been hollowed out to provide a roofed space for meditation for one or two persons. There are also other rock-shelters



Fig.6. 'Father-in Law's Temple' (Courtesy Arunsak Kingmani, Phū Phra Bāt Historical Park)

with and without man-made modifications that can accommodate small groups of monks, sitting or lying down. Among these, there is a delightful seat for meditation, smooth-floored and well protected from the sun and rain, perched on the edge of the cliff and open to the vast empty space below (26).

The site, with its residential and meditation units dispersed throughout the area, and with larger places designed for communal ritual or instructional sessions, has the hallmark of a settlement of forest-dwelling monks. These are members of the Buddhist Saṅgha who were more attracted to meditation and spiritual exertions than to regular congregational life in monasteries. Forest-dwelling practices date to the ancient times before permanent residences and monasteries were provided for monks to live within reach of lay communities. These practices still continue to the present day (27). There have always been monks who detach themselves from monasteries to seek isolation and peace in remote places, such as mountains, forests and fields. Some wandered around, taking shelter in whatever accommodation they could find, be it under the trees, in caves or under overhanging rocks. Others chose places suitable for semi-permanent living, to pass the rainy season

or a determined period of spiritual exercises, either alone or accompanied by a small group of disciples. Over time, many such semi-permanent residences became permanent and expanded into large settlements which attracted more and more followers and patrons, and eventually developed into rich and powerful monasteries such as those existing in old Thailand (28) and ancient Myanmar (29). The monastic settlement at Phū Phra Bāt shows signs of communal living and a certain permanent character, but it probably never developed into a large monastic community, such as those still found in many parts of mainland Southeast Asia. Forest monasteries, usually associated with a master who has acquired fame for spiritual achievements and sanctity, are still common in the mountainous regions of Thailand and Lao (30).

The lay-out of the Buddhist settlement at Phū Phra Bāt, as well as the mode of converting natural rocks into dwellings, recalls the general features of some small-scale monastic settlements in Sri Lanka, such as the one located at the base of the famous rock of Sigiriya in the heart of the island. A cave at Sigiriya has a similar interior, converted into a monk's residence for living, for meditation, for private devotional acts and for sleeping. Ancient Sri



Fig.7. 'Little Stable', Neg. N. Chutiwongs

Lankan cave residences, in general, show a higher degree of sophistication in that a drip-ledge was usually carved under the edge of the overhanging rock to guide rainwater away from the living space. The interiors of most Sri Lankan cave-dwellings usually reflect greater effort to create a comfortable and more functional living space.

Communal living and permanent dwellings were undoubtedly possible on Phū Phra Bāt. There were and still are, adequate shelters and natural ponds for water supply during the dry season, as well as the six-metre deep, man-made Uṣā's Well (31), which according to the local, never dries out. There also are large open spaces, marked out for gatherings and for collective rituals. The largest gathering place (fig. 8) is located within a chain of rocks and inwardly demarcated by two sets of systematically spaced boundary stones. In the centre there is a square platform, probably meant to receive a Buddha image. A number of deep holes cut into the rock suggest that there would have been an impermanent structure round this platform. There are also many small, round depressions carved in the rock (32), recalling the curious 'cup-marks' of the megalithic age, which could have been used by the Buddhists to

deposit ritual offerings, such as flowers, candles and incense.

The site of Phū Phra Bāt continued to be occupied by the Buddhists in the 11th to 13th centuries, when most parts of Thailand came under the political and cultural influence of Angkor in Cambodia. Sculptures carved on the base of a rock which originally had the form of a large tapering and pointed cone (33) show stylistic features of the art of Angkor, and also an attempt to re-carve some Buddha images into figures of divinities, or Bodhisattvas, in accordance with the Hindu and Mahāyāna trends of Angkor.

Attention was again focussed on Phū Phra Bāt around the 16th to 17th centuries. It was presumably during this period that the local tradition regarding the Buddha's visits to Southeast Asia became firmly established. The belief was probably based on the Theravāda tradition of Sri Lanka, where there had been a long-standing belief of visits by the Buddha. On two occasions he left footprints in Sri Lanka at the request of the gods of the mountains and rivers (34). Of these sacred footprints, the one left on the Sumaṇakūṭa Mountain in the centre of the island, has become a renowned centre of Buddhist worship. King Mahādhammarājā



Fig.8. Largest gathering place at the site (Courtesy of Arunsak Kingmani, Phū Phra Bāt Historical Park)

Lithai of Sukhothai had replicas of this sacred footprint made in the 14th century, and had them installed on high mountains in his kingdom, which he renamed 'Sumanakūṭa' (35). This is only one of the many instances of the well-known process of the translocation of sacred sites associated with the Buddha and Hindu mythology to places and in Southeast Asia. The chronicles *Jinakālamālīpakaraṇaṃ* and *Mūlasāsanā*, respectively assigned to the 15th and 16th centuries, surreptitiously make mention of the Buddha's visit to northern Thailand (36). By the 17th century, there evidently circulated a strong belief in Thailand and Myanmar that the Buddha himself had visited these countries and had left his footprints on local mountains and near local rivers. Of these, two were 'discovered', and their authenticity established and publicly declared by the kings of Thailand and Myanmar during the 17th century (37). A number of shallow depressions visible on the rock plateau of Phū Phra Bāt also became locally identified as sacred footprints left by the Buddha. They form part of a popular and wide spread tradition which has been written down and repeated in many chronicles and folk literature of northeastern Thailand and Lao. They relate the accounts of visits by the five Buddhas of the

present age to this blessed region bordering the Mekong river, about the conquest of the Buddha over the spirits of the rivers, about the origins of mountains, rivers and lakes, and prophecies regarding the foundation of kingdoms, cities and important monuments of faith in this region (38). The Buddha and his predecessors would have left their footprints—symbolic of their presence and authority, and of the ever-lasting predominance of the Buddhist religion, on mountains and near water courses. The spirits of the mountains, jungles and waters, feared and worshipped during the pre-Buddhist age, were then converted to Buddhism, to become staunch protectors of the Buddhist community and perpetual worshippers as well as guardians of the sacred footprints.

Fig.9 shows the Phra Bāt Lang Tao, one of the natural depressions in the rock at Phū Phra Bāt, re-carved into the shape of a human foot, and furnished with auspicious marks which, according to tradition, adorned the foot-soles of the Buddha. It is now exposed to the weather, but deep holes cut in the rock around it suggest the presence of an erstwhile shelter, probably a light structure of perishable material. Another depression in the rock, re-carved into the conventional shape of the Buddha's footprint



Fig.9. 'Phra Bāt Lang Tao', Imprint on rock surface (Courtesy of Arunsak Kingmani, Phū Phra Bāt Historical Park)

and protected with a cover on which auspicious symbols are depicted (39), is widely known as the Phra Bāt Bua Bok. A shrine has been erected over this footprint and a monastic settlement has grown up around it (40). Another rock depression, now venerated as a footprint of the Buddha known as Phra Bāt Bua Bān, is also enclosed within a shrine (41). These structures have undergone many phases of renovation, the most recent in the 20th century. The original structures may possibly date from the 16th or 17th century, to which period belongs a number of brick buildings and Buddha images found at the site (42). This last group of archaeological remains shows characteristic features of the local style of this part of Thailand, which was greatly influenced by that of neighbouring Lao from about the 16th century and after.

Phū Phra Bāt thus presents a good example of the transformation of pre- and proto-historic sites into Buddhist ecclesiastical places. Its restructured rocks and rock-shelters may have served as one of the earliest known settlements of forest-dwelling monks in Southeast Asia. It continued to give shelter to wandering monks and to villagers searching for jungle products until the area was declared a national reserve. Nowadays, it remains a site of pilgrimage as well as a place of archaeological interest, of mysteries and of tragic romance. In any case it is believed that it has been blessed by the Buddha and that it will be visited by the future Buddha Maitreya in the next age. Small communities of monks live there, largely in two monastic settlements associated with the Sacred Footprints.

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## Notes

1) *Phū Phra Bāt* 1992.

2) See *Phū Phra Bāt* 1992, especially site-plan 4-5; *Rock Art* 1990: 9-11, 17-31, 40-9; Munier 1998:53-92.

3) See *Phū Phra Bāt* 1992, pls. on 1, 8-11, 15-17

etc.; Munier 1998:54-55.

4) *Phū Phra Bāt* 1992, pl. on 76.

5) *Phū Phra Bāt* 1992, pl. on 44; *Rock Art* 1990: 21 (no. 16); 25 (no. 28); 29 (no. 40).

- 6) For examples the revelation of the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Kern 1963) and the first Avalokitasūtra (Jones 1952) on Mt. Gṛdhra-kūṭa; and the Sakkapañhāsutta at the Indasālāgūhā (Dīgha Nikāya ii, 263.89; and Hardy 1967: 288–290).
- 7) Rockhill 1907: 80–81; Hardy 1967: 298–302.
- 8) Agrawala 1968: 26–27, pls. IVa, IV b.
- 9) Dutt 1894: 402–407; Hopkins 1968: 164; Sahai 1978: 4–12.
- 10) Cowell 1958, IV: 50–57.
- 11) Mahāvamśa, chapters 8–10. Geiger 1912: 62–76; Guruge 1989: 541–551; Chutiwongs 1997: 116–126.
- 12) Cœdès 190: 208–225; Sahai 1978: 21.
- 13) Cœdès 1962: 235–244; Boisselier 1962: 244–248; Giteau 1974: 111.
- 14) Sahai 1978: 2.
- 15) Chumsai 1973: 168–169.
- 16) Chumsai 1973: 196.
- 17) Sahai 1978; Phūn Isān 1988: 79–80; Phū Phra Bāt 1992: 117–120; Munier 1998: 56–57.
- 18) See also Francke n.d., I: 12, pl.IX, b; Tucci 1973: 40–59.
- 19) Colani 1935; You-di 1959: 27–29; Solheim 1966: 8–16. For Cambodia see Ang Choulean 1993: 185–206.
- 20) Silva 1988: 184–187.
- 21) See Vallibhotama 1990, pls. on 375–376, 383, 387; Na Paknam 1981, figs. 15–18, 59.
- 22) Vallibhotama 1990; Na Paknam 1981, figs. 8, 16–18.
- 23) Diskul 1956: 362–367; Vallibhotama 1975: 89–116; 1990: 356–413; Na Paknam 1981, figs. 45, 47–49, 54–56.
- 24) Vallibhotama 1975: 113–115; Chutiwongs 1984: 217.
- 25) Phū Phra Bāt 1992, pl. on p.110; Munier 1998: 55 (no. 17).
- 26) Rock Art 1990: 23 (no. 23).
- 27) Tambiah 1984: 53–77.
- 28) Charoenwongsa & Diskul 1976: 175, 187–190, pls. 211, 217, 221; Tambiah 1984: 66–72.
- 29) Tambiah 1984: 61–66; Than Tun 1988: 85–100.
- 30) Tambiah 1984: 81–100.
- 31) Phū Phra Bāt 1992, pls. on 36, 112; Munier 1998: 55 (no. 14).
- 32) Phū Phra Bāt 1992: 88–89, 114–115.
- 33) Phū Phra Bāt 1992, pls. on 24, 37, 82, 105; Munier 1998 : 55 (no. 19); 77 (nos. 90–91).
- 34) Mahāvamśa, chapter 1, vv. 77–78. Geiger 1912: 77; Guruge 1989: 56; Hardy 1967: 210–211.
- 35) Griswold & Na Nagara 1973.
- 36) Jinakālamālipakaraṇam, see Jayawickrama 1978: 155–156; Mūlasāsanā 1987: 169–172.
- 37) Chutiwongs 1990: 67–71.

- 38) Notton 1926: 81–99; Martini 1969: 125–144; Chumsai 1973: 71–74; Sahai 1978: 82–84; Phūn Isān 1988: 103–106.
- 39) Phū Phra Bāt 1992, pls. on .53; Munier 1998 : 54 (no. 7).
- 40) Phū Phra Bāt 1992, pls. on 20, 48, 49.
- 41) Phū Phra Bāt 1992, pls. on 54.
- 42) Phū Phra Bāt 1992, pls. on 21, 43, 47.

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