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The Transition to History in Southeast Asia: An Introduction

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Studies of the transition from prehistory to history in Southeast Asia have traditionally relied primarily on documentary sources, which tend to emphasize foreign influences, rather than on the archaeological record, which suggests a series of indigenous developments. The papers in this journal issue and the next discuss strategies for using both documentary and archaeological evidence to study the transition to history and the emergence of early states in the region. These papers investigate how political units were structured and integrated in Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and South China, and illustrate how historical and archaeological data can cross-check each other to inform on Southeast Asian sociopolitical and economic developments during the early historic period.

KEY WORDS: Southeast Asia; early historic period; states; history and archaeology.

INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia has traditionally occupied a decidedly marginal role in world archaeology. Although the region has actually played significant roles in Asian agricultural development, the establishment of interregional trade networks, and the settlement of the Pacific, most introductory textbooks overlook Southeast Asia in favor of more celebrated Old World regions like the Near East and Europe [but see Fagan (1998) for an exception]. The region fares little better in Asian archaeology, where the sheer scale

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and time depth of archaeological records in China, Japan, and India overshadow most of Southeast Asia's known prehistoric and historic sequences. Current evidence suggests that Southeast Asia has neither the earliest agriculture nor the earliest metallurgy in the region; in each case, China apparently sets the precedent.

Southeast Asia's role has also been seen as marginal during the early historic period, the first and second millennia A.D. Although the region continued to contribute importantly to agricultural developments and interregional and even worldwide trade, very few permanent historical records exist to document these contributions. Further, South Asian cultures, particularly those from various areas in India, left such deep ideological imprints on the early states of Southeast Asia that several generations of scholars argued that states arose in Southeast Asia only after Indian contact (e.g., Bayard, 1980; Coedès, 1968; Hutterer, 1982; Wheatley, 1979, 1982, 1983).

DATING THE TRANSITION TO HISTORY

Our knowledge of the archaeological record within Southeast Asia has expanded tremendously since the early 1970s (see Bellwood, 1992, 1997; Higham, 1989a, b, 1996a, b), especially for Thailand and other areas with relatively stable political regimes. For political reasons, we know far less about the archaeological record of Burma, Laos, and Cambodia. While the new wealth of archaeological research has changed our understanding of key developments during Southeast Asia's prehistory, which may have begun nearly 2 million years ago, we have learned surprisingly little about the point in the sequence that bridges the latest prehistoric period and the earliest historic period. This transition to history occurred at different times in different areas. In much of mainland Southeast Asia and in the trade states of the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia, foreign contacts began as early as the midfirst millennium B.C., and the early historic period, with written records, was well under way by A.D. 600. In some island areas like the Philippines, the transition to history is thought to have begun later, perhaps after A.D. 900; the earliest known Chinese records referring to trade with the Philippines date to the tenth century. Studying this transitional period is critical for understanding early state formation in Southeast Asia, because it is thought to coincide with the earliest full state development on the mainland and clearly coincides with an explosion of trading activity in peninsular and insular Southeast Asia. It is also "the most intractable period" (Higham, 1989a, p. 190) and the "twilight zone of history" (Hutterer, 1992, p. 562). Previous reviews (e.g., Bellwood, 1992; Christie, 1995;

Higham, 1989a, 1996a, b) demonstrate that Southeast Asia underwent dramatic changes during this transition to history.

At the eastern end of the region, the Han empire's southward expansion into what is now southern China and northern Vietnam culminated in Han political control of the region by the second century B.C. At the western end, overland trade networks linked Southeast Asia to northeastern India and Bangladesh, and maritime trade networks linked Southeast Asia with India, China, and possibly the Middle East and Venice, at approximately the same time. The region was influenced from the east by political domination and from the west by commerce and religious ideology (see, e.g., Hall, 1985). By the midfirst millennium A.D., many of Southeast Asia's coasts and major river valleys housed large populations in large "urban" centers. Whether one calls the political systems associated with these centers chiefdoms (following Wheatley, 1983), mandalas (Wolters, 1982), or states, these entities involved highly stratified and centralized economic systems, and some had full bureaucracies.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD AND PREVIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF THE TRANSITION TO HISTORY

In other parts of the world, archaeologists dominate discussions of early state formation. In Southeast Asia, however, it is primarily historians who have explained the political and social changes associated with the transition to history. Most archaeologists who have studied early historic-period sites often seek confirmation in historical accounts (e.g., Smith and Watson, 1979), and few have offered explanatory models for the development of sociopolitical complexity in these polities (Bronson, 1977; Miksic, 1990; White, 1995). Historians, on the other hand, have developed sophisticated models of sociopolitical and economic organization in Southeast Asia (e.g., Coedès, 1968; Wheatley, 1979, 1982, 1983; Wolters, 1982) that emphasize the disruptive or transformative nature of the international maritime trade by the late first millennium B.C. Few historical researchers, such as van Leur (1967), suggested that Southeast Asia, rather than being disrupted by this trade, initiated much of it. Also, archaeologists who study the transition to history recognize continuities in settlement and technology between the prehistoric and the early historic periods. When we look at long-term developmental processes in these regions, the sharp break in local tradition that many historians cite as evidence of "Indianization" disappears. In short, a disjuncture exists between the archaeological record and the dominant interpretations of the transition to history.

Several reasons may explain why early historic-period Southeast Asia has fallen through disciplinary cracks. At least two relate to recent historical developments. First, some key areas for studying this transition, areas including the southern sections of Vietnam and Cambodia, have experienced civil war and strife in conjunction with independence movements since the 1950s, precluding systematic archaeological research. Second, because of dam and construction and related projects, a perhaps disproportionate amount of archaeological research has focused on prehistoric sites in northeastern Thailand in recent decades (e.g., Solheim and Hackenberg, 1961; see summaries in Higham, 1989a, b, 1996a, b). This area also contains many sites dating to the early historic period, and historians, in particular Paul Wheatley and O. W. Wolters, have issued regular pleas for more historical archaeological work on this critical time period.

A third reason so little archaeological information is available concerning the early historic period in Southeast Asia may be that historical archaeology in the region has generally focused on studying, and often reconstructing, the same imported sites—sites such as Buddhist and Hindu monuments—that led historians and art historians to attribute state development in Southeast Asia to foreign influences. Much that is actually Southeast Asian is impermanent and can be invisible archaeologically; even early Southeast Asian texts tended to use palm leaves and other materials that do not last long in the tropical soils of the area. Further, although we know that various Southeast Asian sites were involved actively in widespread trade (e.g., Sandhu and Wheatley 1983), archaeological evidence for the actual ways in which maritime trade was organized and controlled by Southeast Asian centers—one of the most important contributions of the early historic-period Southeast Asian states to world networks—can be difficult to recognize and evaluate. Many coastal areas need additional study.

THE NATURE OF THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN DOCUMENTARY RECORD

The historical record and the importance of historiography vary from one Southeast Asian area to the next (Brown, 1988). For example, Vietnam and Burma are known to have indigenous historical traditions that date to the early first millennium A.D., although Vietnamese poetry followed a Chinese literary form (Wolters, 1982, pp. 72–94). While areas including the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, and Java probably also had indigenous writing prior to A.D. 500, none has lasted from that earliest period; the earliest

documented descriptions and inscriptions from these areas are typically in Sanskrit or Chinese. In Cambodia, where most historical records and the libraries that once existed have been destroyed, the earliest documented Cambodian inscriptions were written in Sanskrit and in Indian style; the available pre-A.D. 500 descriptions were provided by the Chinese. Khmer inscriptions appear slightly later, ca. A.D. 611.

In the near-absence of indigenous texts until later in the historic period, the best available descriptions of Southeast Asian societies undergoing the transition to history were left by foreign merchants, pilgrims, and other visitors to the region:

> Southeast Asia enjoys one particular advantage denied to all those culture realms, namely, the existence of descriptive and narrative accounts of some part of the region . . .that are contemporary with relatively early phases of state formation. As literacy is itself born both of, and with the state, a developed indigenous written record is almost invariably lacking during the early phases of state formation; but in Southeast Asia external writings, emanating principally from China but also from India, the Middle East (for the later phases only) and even the Mediterranean, occur relatively earlier in the process of state formation than, almost anywhere else in the world, and go some way toward compensating for the prevailing paucity of archaeological data that still bedevils all speculation about the protohistoric period. (Wheatley, 1982, p. 15)

The foreign accounts that have provided the basis for many historians' models of political and economic developments in Southeast Asia include accounts by Chinese emissaries, Indian brahmins, and other travelers, stone inscriptions, and ethnographic notes that focus primarily on the visible political structures, royalty and palaces, military organization, dress, and religious and economic networks (e.g., Wheatley, 1961). These accounts typically describe court and temple patterns from the viewpoints of patterns in the visitors' home countries, emphasizing introduced traits and describing, for example, all trade as "tribute" to the Chinese court. These early writers often manipulated their texts to create a particular view of the past; their goal was to "validate and glorify a historical present and thereby establish a particular dynasty or dynasty as the fulcrum of a prevailing political, social, economic, moral, and cosmic order" (Wheatley, 1982, p. 14).

Although twentieth-century research has greatly expanded the range of reconstructions that can be made from these sources (Wang Gungwu, 1986, pp. xii–xii), the early foreign accounts do not clarify the nature of everyday life, how foreign contacts were made and received, or, with a few exceptions, how various participants in the society, commoners as well as elites, contributed politically and economically to the state or other complex system represented.

THE NEED FOR NEW DIRECTIONS

Southeast Asian archaeologists and historians now need to agree on common terminology and to collaborate more effectively, to produce more powerful explanations of economy and society for the early historic period through the blending of our approaches and the combining of our databases. How, then, shall we proceed? Recent developments in historical archaeology, ethnohistory, and history suggest possible directions.

In the last 15 years, critical theorists have stimulated a prolonged period of self-critique in archaeological circles and discussions regarding the nature of our data sources. Nowhere is this attention to what Alison Wylie (1985, pp. 100–101 *et passim*) calls "source-side criticism" more evident than in ethnohistory and historical archaeology (e.g., Stahl, 1993; Trigger, 1984). Ethnohistorians and archaeologists caution against privileging documentary sources over other kinds of data for interpreting the past (Feinman, 1997; Galloway, 1991). They also emphasize the need to evaluate carefully not only the authenticity of source documents, but also the social contexts in which they were written and their intended audiences (Wood, 1989). Archaeologists need to understand not only the contexts of production for these documents, but also their contexts of recovery (see Morrison and Lycett, 1997).

This idea of source-side criticism is not foreign to historians of Southeast Asia (e.g., Christie, 1979; Jacques, 1979, 1995; Wheatley, 1983; Wolters 1982), who urge historians to use documentary sources critically. Historians have also begun to focus on the history and social contexts of intellectual thought during the early historic period of scholarship (e.g., Christie, 1995, pp. 237–243; Kulke, 1990; Reynolds, 1995).

Source-side criticism is still relatively rare in Southeast Asian historical archaeology, in part perhaps because most historical archaeology in the region focuses on historic preservation and heritage management (e.g., Comer, 1994), and many of these properties, as noted, are monuments and structures of foreign-influenced types. Where archaeological interpretation is undertaken, it is often created and used for the service of the state (Glover, 1998; Nguyen, 1995, p. 124; Tanudjiro, 1995, pp. 70–71; Thongchai, 1995, pp. 107–109; Wang Gungwu, 1979, pp. 2–5). Despite impressive advances in archaeological field and analytical techniques during the last 20 years, our ability to reconcile documentary and archaeological data remains weak. We need to develop a clearer understanding of the roles that these separate lines of evidence can play in producing comprehensive interpretations of state formation during the early historic period.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PAPERS IN THESE SPECIAL ISSUES

The papers presented in this and the next (December 1998) journal issue examine how historical *and* archaeological information has been—and can be—used to interpret the early historic period in different areas of Southeast Asia. These studies are based on the current results of archaeological research in Thailand, the Malay Peninsula, the Philippines, Cambodia, and South China a short distance north of the Laotian and Vietnamese boundaries. Each study reports on an ongoing archaeological research program in these regions.

The contributors to these two issues presented and discussed preliminary versions of their papers in a working group session entitled "Perspectives on the Transition to History in Southeast Asia" at the 1997 Society for American Archaeology conference in Nashville, Tennessee. Each author was asked to structure his or her paper to accomplish two goals: (1) to characterize the existing archaeological knowledge concerning the early historic period in the respective area of study and (2) to explore and suggest more effective methods for integrating archaeological and documentary data than have been used previously.

To achieve the first goal, contributors were asked to discuss, for example, the nature of the structure of the central political unit and how different segments of the polity were integrated with one another economically and socially. To address the second, methodological goal, contributors were asked to consider the ways in which documentary sources can inform on the political organization, economic networks, and geographic scales of these early polities. They were further asked to consider how archaeological descriptions of architecture, settlement patterns, and material culture can either confirm or challenge the information from the documentary sources. The papers and approaches were critiqued by Henry Wright and Norman Yoffee.

In this issue, Miriam Stark's study concerns an important area in southern Cambodia, where, in part because little archaeological research has been possible until recently, most models for state development have been formulated by historians and art historians. The results of two recent seasons of archaeological fieldwork at Angkor Borei, an inland center associated with the complex, early, pre-Khmer polity the Chinese described as "Funan" from the first through sixth centuries A. D., now suggest that the area was occupied many centuries before Funan was first described, and continued after references to Funan ceased in the historical record. Research here and elsewhere in the Mekong delta area suggests that the delta's inland and coastal centers may have shifted locations over the centuries and that the archaeological record reveals a richer settlement history than was previously

known using documentary records. Future research is expected to clarify coastal–interior relationships, inland political organization, and interactions between elites and the nonelites who provided subsistence.

David J. Welch examines scant archaeological and historical evidence from sites on the Khorat Plateau, northeast Thailand, for two important transitional periods: the period of transition from prehistory to historic-period, Angkor-based Khmer society (ca. A.D. 500–1000) and the period following the Angkorian Khmer collapse (ca. A.D. 1300–1600). Archaeological evidence for the period between A.D. 500 and A.D. 1000 suggests certain local trends (e.g., localized centers, increasing upland settlement) that may to have led to the development of classic Angkorian Khmer traits. After A.D. 1300, as the Khmer state collapsed under increasing attacks by the Thai, both historical and archaeological data suggest that the Khorat Plateau may have been a major zone of warfare. A gap in both types of data may reflect economic collapse and population decline prior to the development of Thai centers on the plateau.

Charles F. W. Higham evaluates evidence for the emergence in Cambodia and northeast Thailand of an entity traditionally known as Zhenla (or Chenla); this complex polity was described by the Chinese between A.D. 500 and A.D. 800 for an area where archaeological data indicate settlement had begun by ca. 1500–1000 B.C. Fragmentary Khmer and Sanskrit inscriptions provide such information as rulers' names, military campaigns, monumental construction, and donations, but were not studied in the past for information as to how the polity had developed. Reinterpretation of information contained in certain inscriptions, especially concerning nonelite segments of society, now suggests, in combination with a rapidly expanding archaeological database, that many of Zhenla's patterns (e.g., settlement distribution, rice agriculture, cattle herding, cloth spinning, and several other traits may in fact have developed locally, out of traits seen at late prehistoric sites.

In the next issue, Jane Allen reexamines, for early historic-period states including Kedah, Malaysia, early foreign visitors' claims that coastal Malay centers were controlled by India or other foreign areas. Historical and archaeological data are used to cross-check each other, to try to determine where Indian and other foreign visitors stayed and with whom they actually interacted; what they were likely to see of Malay life; and what roles they could have played in the forest product trade that drove the typical Malay state's economy. The combined evidence suggests that local, not foreign, control over both trade and the political centers, with foreign residents occupying supervised compounds. Claims for a foreign-introduced floodplain wet rice subsistence base are disputed by both historical maps and archaeological evidence, which suggest that the necessary flood plain

lands had not yet formed. Laura Lee Junker, focusing on post-A.D. 1000 sites in Tanjay, Negros, examines conflicting historical reports concerning the organization of contact-period Philippine chiefdoms and suggests how archaeological evidence may resolve certain issues. Chinese documents typically viewed host areas as tributary to China, and said little about internal Philippine political organization. Spanish reports, which focused on information needed for Spanish administration, left conflicting information regarding whether or not central leaders existed. Archaeological evidence from Tanjay is now beginning to suggest that a complex polity did exist ca. A.D. 1500, with traits including social status differences between households; two or more administrative levels above the village; a settlement hierarchy; agricultural intensification; and redistribution of both subsistence items and exotic prestige goods that may have reinforced personal alliances to elites.

Francis Allard investigates available information regarding a polity that Han Chinese conquerors described as "the kingdom of Dian," centered around Lake Dian area in Yunnan, ca. 109 B.C. The historical descriptions are brief. Dian's people are described as settled agriculturalists; although no palaces or defensive works are described, the state was large and successful in war; a defeated ruler was spared because he had previously been friendly, to the Han, and afterward enjoyed preferential treatment. Archaeological evidence has now produced, at sites around Lake Dian, Bronze Age finds that demonstrate status differences; numerous weapons; evidence for widespread trade or other foreign contacts; a complete lack of palaces or defensive works; and finally, a seal that refers to the King of Dian. The historical and archaeological data here support each other in describing what is now referred to as the Dian Culture.

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task efficiently and have produced articles we hope will be useful to both the historical and the archaeological communities. May this dialogue stimulate future research and interdisciplinary collaboration on the transition to history in Southeast Asia.

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